

# GOWER REMEMBERS

**Emma May Reid**

(1886-1990)



*“Sister Forsey came into my room that same day between 12 and 1 o’clock. It was my day off. She called me and she said ‘Reid, what do you think of this affair?’ I said ‘What affair?’” and she said ‘Dr. Keegan has insulted Miss Southcott in my presence’. I asked her what he had said and she explained.... Then she said to me ‘Reid, don’t you consider Miss Southcott was insulted?’ and she being insulted that we were also insulted. We talked a good deal about it.... On Sunday morning I signed the protest dated March the 28<sup>th</sup>. (Emma Reid, testimony before the 1914/1915 Royal Commission of Enquiry into Matters Relating to the St. John’s General Hospital.)*



Emma May Reid was born in Old Perlican, on December 18, 1886, the daughter of Frances Burt and William John Reid. She was the second child in a family that included four other siblings, brothers, William James (b. 1884), Henry (b. 1892), William Frederick (b. 1894), and Stephen March (b. 1897). Her father was a fisherman who relocated from Old Perlican to St. John's sometime around 1890: son Henry was born in St. John's on April 10, 1892.

Once the family was settled in St. John's, John Reid, as he was commonly known, gained employment first as a labourer, possibly with J & W Stewart, a mercantile establishment involved in the import and export trade. By 1898 he was working as a cabman, a position he continued to hold well into the new century. The family lived at 2 Spencer Street, in a house also known as Bellaire Cottage.

Emma Reid may have begun her schooling while still living in Old Perlican. Once in St. John's, her father did not enroll her in the Methodist College as one would expect; instead she attended Presentation Convent School. Upon completing her course of study there, she then became a student at the Methodist College, where she undertook a one-year course in business practice, graduating in 1910.

The first school of nursing in Newfoundland was established by Mary Southcott, a trained nurse, at the General Hospital in 1903. Reid had a strong desire to become a nurse but her father was adamantly opposed, believing that nurses were nothing more than glorified maids. However, her mother championed her cause and after completing the business course at the Methodist College, Reid was accepted into the three-year nursing program at the General Hospital, beginning on June 10, 1910.

Over her three years of study, Reid was trained in four main areas of nursing: anatomy and physiology; surgical nursing; medical nursing; and

general nursing. At the end of each of these units, there was an examination. Reid did surgical and medical nursing in her final year and *The Evening Telegram* for December 13, 1913 reported that she was named to the Honours List for both.

Upon her graduation as a nurse, which took place in October 1913, Reid remained at the General Hospital working as a nurse and was eventually appointed Sister (Head Nurse) and later Night Superintendent by Southcott, who considered herself, as Head of the School of Nursing, to be in charge of all nursing at the General Hospital. That brought Southcott into conflict with the Medical Superintendent of the Hospital, Dr. Laurence Keegan, who operated on the premise that he was in charge of all of the medical and nursing staff of the hospital.

In 1914 matters came to a head. The Government had ordered a commission of enquiry into allegations that Keegan was taking food and other supplies from the hospital for his personal use. This all-male enquiry soon added the operation and management of the hospital staff to its mandate and questioned Southcott and other nurses, as well as Keegan and the doctors, on what should be the reporting structure and chain of command for the nurses at the hospital.

Matters came to a head when Keegan appointed a junior nurse, one it was later alleged he was involved with romantically, as Assistant Superintendent of Nurses. Southcott took great umbrage to this and refused to acknowledge Keegan's authority to make such an appointment. So too did Reid and her nursing colleagues Bertha Forsey and May Lloyd, who expressed their displeasure in a letter to the Colonial Secretary. When the commission and government confirmed Keegan as the person responsible for all things medical at the hospital, Reid and her two colleagues resigned in protest. Early in 1916, Southcott was asked by the

governing board, again an all-male body, to resign as Head of the School of Nursing.

Following her resignation from the General Hospital, Reid undertook private nursing duty for a number of St. John's residents, which appears to have kept her quite busy. With the outbreak of the war in the late Summer of 1914, one of Reid's brothers, Henry, joined the Newfoundland Regiment on September 21, becoming one of the First Five Hundred. Another brother, Frederick enlisted in the Newfoundland Regiment on July 19, 1915 and a third, Stephen, on January 02, 1917. Reid attempted to join her brothers overseas as a military nurse, but was rejected on medical grounds.

Instead she found plenty of work in St. John's nursing injured and ill soldiers and sailors. When a severe measles epidemic broke out in the city early in 1916, Reid joined Southcott in establishing a quarantine hospital at Donovan's for those who came down with the disease. Once the epidemic began to abate, Southcott returned to work at her private hospital, while Reid remained at the Donovan's facility until all patients were released.

The measles epidemic awakened in government the need for a special facility for the treatment of soldiers and sailors who were afflicted with such diseases. Later in 1916, it acquired the building at 3 Military Road, which was converted into the Military Infectious Diseases Hospital, and Reid became its Head Nurse. She was assisted in her duties there by a number of members of the Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD). The hospital remained in operation until May 1920.

Before the Military Road hospital closed, however, Reid had already been assigned to a different position, as Matron of the Fever Hospital on Forest Road. She held that position for more than a decade, from 1919 to

1930. There is indication that she had worked there previous to 1919: in a letter from the Colonial Secretary to Dr. Robert A. Brehm, the Medical Health Officer for St. John's, dated August 15, 1917, Brehm is informed that the Executive Council (Cabinet) has approved the appointment of Emma Reid as acting Matron of the Fever Hospital during the absence of Miss Duncan.

In 1930, Reid left her position at the Fever Hospital and returned to private duty nursing. This would be her main occupation for the next 34 years. She retired from the nursing profession in 1964 after 54 years of service. Two years before her retirement, on May 02, 1962, at its annual meeting held in St. John's, the Association of Registered Nurses of Newfoundland conferred an Honorary Life Membership upon Reid for her 50+ years of service to the profession. In 1981, still active, although by now living at the Glenbrook Lodge on Torbay Road, Reid was instrumental in helping the organizers to prepare for the celebration of the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the School of Nursing.

In addition to her work as a nurse, Reid found time to be involved in community activities. She was a member of the Suffrage League, which fought for the right to vote for Newfoundland women in the early 1920s. She was also a life-long member of Gower Street Church, where the Reid family occupied pew 11 in the West Gallery for many years. She also travelled on occasion, with records of a trip to Boston in 1923 and one to New York City in 1939 extant.

Emma Reid died at the Glenbrook Lodge on January 21, 1990, 34 days after celebrating her 103<sup>rd</sup> birthday. She was buried in the General Protestant Cemetery in St. John's, the funeral being conducted by the Rev. Hubert Mercer of Gower Street United Church. It is indeed ironic that a woman who was turned down for service as a military nurse for medical

reasons should lead such a long and productive life of service to her community.

**NOTE:** Accounts of the lives of Emma Reid's three brothers will be forthcoming in this series. Thanks is due to Linda White, who has written about Emma Reid in her Master of Arts thesis at Memorial University (1992) on the establishment and early years of the General Hospital School of Nursing, and in *The Newfoundland Quarterly* in 1990.

*On Sunday, November 16, 2014, Gower Street United Church initiated a program of commemoration that will last for approximately four to five years. On roughly every second Sunday through to the end of 2018, a brief write-up on one of these individuals, similar to this one, will appear as an insert in the Bulletin and there will be a reference to that person in the service. In this way, we hope to recognize their contribution to the war effort, the many sacrifices they made, some with their very lives, and the debt of gratitude we owe to each of them.*

*We also hope to learn more about them from their descendants or other relatives, thereby fostering a link between our past and our present, as we begin our 203rd year as a faith community.*

*If you know of any relatives of these servicemen and women please contact Bert Riggs at [briggs@mun.ca](mailto:briggs@mun.ca) or at 726-6169.*