

Hebridean Heroines:
Twentieth-Century Queen's Nurses (1940s-1970s)
Catherine M. Morrison
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In 2014 the Queen Victoria Jubilee Institute for Nursing (or, as it now is, the Queen's Nursing Institute Scotland) celebrated its 125th birthday. Under new management it was planned to bring back Queen's Nurses, not as a job title *per se*, but as a recognition of exceptional nursing work in the community, and with the aim of developing leadership skills among the selected nurses. The first 21st-century Queen's Nurses were presented with their awards in 2017. As a result of its rejuvenation, the QNIS has become more aware of its history and traditions, and how these can inform and publicise its present day work. This popular history is one aspect of this.

For over a century Queen's Nurses in Scotland have provided outstanding community care, particularly in isolated districts – and by the 1940s, when this account begins, the Outer Hebrides were exceptionally isolated. Roads were unmetalled, telephones were rare, while the transfer of sick patients in open boats was considered unremarkable. *Hebridean Heroines* uses interviews with retired Queen's Nurses from the Western Isles to explore the changes in healthcare provision between the end of the Second World War and the 1970s, by which time Queen's Nurse training had ended and there was more emphasis on community teams and hospital-based care. The book begins with brief histories of district and Queen's nursing, and of the creation of the Highlands and Islands Medical Service. Despite this early provision of medical and nursing care, the population and economy of the Outer Hebrides continued to decline – the nurses who left home to train in the major cities of Scotland must have been sorely tempted to stay away. However, those who did return to serve their communities had a wealth of nursing experience and awareness of change in the islands to share with their interviewer. They spoke of difficulties in housing; of problems with transport, particularly in bad weather; of difficulties in communication – both physically, and between nurse and doctor – but also of their solutions. Although midwifery was only a part of their work, until the late 1960s it was a major part, and their descriptions of their domiciliary midwifery practice are fascinating.

Nonetheless, it is these accounts which draw out the deficiencies of this book. Although *The Midwives Tale* is listed in the somewhat eclectic bibliography, there has been little attempt to link *Hebridean Heroines* with other studies of twentieth-century midwifery in Britain, for example Lindsay Reid's *Scottish Midwives*, or Tania McIntosh's case study of 1950-70s district midwifery in Nottingham and Derby, 'I'm not the tradesman.' The countries might be different, but the experience of life as a professional in a small community could be similar. While quotations from interviewees are frequently and un-necessarily explained – and often interpreted in light of current nursing theory – the interviewees themselves are identified only by their fore-name, and the events they describe are rarely dated, thus detracting from their

historical value. Similarly, no references are provided – although it is described as based on the author’s thesis, this is definitely not an academic book. Yet even if it is ultimately not the book I would like it to be, *Hebridean Heroines* is an enjoyable read attractively illustrated with a wide range of photographs, which should have a wide popular appeal – and, given the existence of Dr Morrison’s thesis, I can still live in hope of a second more substantial study.

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