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## Nurse Writers of the Great War

Christine Hallett

Published by Manchester University Press

Hallett, Christine.

Nurse Writers of the Great War.

Manchester University Press, 2016.

Project MUSE., <https://muse.jhu.edu/>.



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# Preface

During the First World War, tens of thousands of women devoted themselves to the care of the wounded. For many, this involved putting their lives 'on hold' and permitting a military medical machine to control their movements and restrict their freedom. For others, it meant committing themselves – and, for the wealthy, their fortunes – to a 'mission' that was both humanitarian and patriotic: a commitment to saving lives *and* winning the war. A few were pacifists, and others came to embrace pacifism as a result of their wartime experiences. As a group, they made significant contributions to the care of those damaged by war.

Many wrote poignant and moving personal testimonies of their experience – letters, diaries, and narrative accounts. And among them were a few whose writings found their way into print. Some wrote with the deliberate intention of publication. Others found their experience of nursing so powerful that they became determined to publish their memoirs. Still others found themselves under pressure from family and friends to make their personal letters and journals available to a wide audience. This book analyses the published writings of First World War nurses and explores the ways in which authors' backgrounds and motivations influenced the content and style of their writing. In reading their texts and researching their lives and careers, I found that there were significant connections between their social and professional backgrounds and the ways in which they wrote.

One of the most interesting groups consisted of wealthy and well-connected women who funded and directed their own hospital units, most operating under the auspices of the French Red Cross. They adopted two distinct approaches: some wrote in highly

traditional styles, emphasising the adventurous and intrepid nature of their 'exploits'. Their writing was infused with a powerful sense of patriotism. Others wrote deliberate exposés of the horrors of war, consciously adopting modernist styles to give a jarring and disturbing feel to their accounts; their projects were almost certainly motivated by pacifist conviction.

Professional nurses were much more likely to write about their patients' sufferings than their own exploits, though their narratives do contain detail about the horrors and dangers of war. Volunteer nurses often wrote reflectively, placing themselves at the centre of their own wartime world and focusing on both their extraordinary encounters with the wounds of war and the transformative nature of their experiences. Their accounts are sometimes filled with awe and wonder; at other times they adopt a pacifist tone, relating encounters with German prisoners of war, or exploring their own feelings of dislocation when reality failed to match the myths that had fed their expectations.

In writing this book, I wanted to capture the patterns of writing within this field – the different genres, styles, and approaches – and also to offer an analysis of the ways in which nurses' and volunteers' backgrounds and pre-war experiences influenced their style. I could have adopted any one of a number of different structures – and did, indeed, experiment with some before deciding on the model here: a structure based on social and professional background. But writers do not fit neatly into categories, and I found myself compromising at times – placing, for example, the important work of professional nurse Ellen La Motte in that section of the book which focuses on the projects of 'independent ladies' who formed their own hospitals. By placing La Motte's work alongside that of Mary Borden, who created and directed the field hospital, L'Hôpital Chirurgical Mobile No. 1; Agnes Warner, who was head nurse of the hospital; and Maud Mortimer, who probably worked there as a volunteer, I hope I have been able to offer a more rounded image of that particular hospital, not only as a centre of healing, but also as a cauldron of literary creativity.

The book contains other compromises, and its content has been influenced by a number of constraints. Only English-language publications have been included, and the focus is on allied nurses, rather than on those who nursed the wounded of the Central Powers. The

space constraints of the volume meant that a decision was taken during the editing process to include only British (including one Anglo-Russian) and North American nurse writers; the book thus became a study of transatlantic, rather than global, nursing culture. This is not entirely disadvantageous. The literary outputs of significant Australian and New Zealand authors (notably May Tilton, Edna Pengelly, and Ida Willis) deserve detailed analysis in a completely separate study. The narrower focus of this study permitted a closer analysis of the ways in which British and North American women wove their wartime experiences into their life-writing. It also enabled some comparisons to be made and some distinctions to be drawn among them.

Ultimately, I hope that – for all of its compromises and constraints – this book makes a real contribution to scholarship by bringing together into one volume a detailed exploration of the connections between nurses' social and professional backgrounds and the style and content of their writings. The lengthy biographical overviews of significant nurse writers, such as Kate Luard, Violetta Thurstan, Julia Stimson, and Helen Dore Boylston, have been included to enable readers to understand the complexities and tensions inherent in the lives of female nurses in highly patriarchal and militaristic societies, and in an era well before women's liberation. I hope the combination of collective biography and textual analysis enables readers to understand the extraordinary nature of the ways in which professional and volunteer nurses met the challenges of their times and expressed their sense of the power of war nursing.