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## Nurse Writers of the Great War

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## Part I

# Independent ladies

Britain's entry into the First World War was accompanied by a remarkable outpouring of enthusiasm for volunteer nursing, one of the most significant features of which was the emergence of entire hospital units supplied and funded by wealthy, upper-class women. Such 'freelance' units, were partly supported by the Red Cross or Order of St John of Jerusalem and were offered to the army medical services of several allied nations. Ironically, it was often the best organised and potentially most effective of these that were rejected out-of-hand. Elsie Inglis, a doctor and the founder of the Scottish Women's Hospitals, is famously reported to have offered fully equipped and staffed hospitals to the British Army in 1914, but to have been told to 'go home and keep quiet'.<sup>1</sup> She went on to supply highly effective units to the military medical services of several countries, including France and Serbia. Several 'freelance' operations found their way to both Western and Serbian fronts during the early months of the war. But these were organised and funded by wealthy – often aristocratic – ladies and operated under the auspices of the Red Cross.

One of the most unusual hospital units of the war was l'Hôpital Chirurgical Mobile No. 1 at Rousbrugge in Belgium. Offered to the French Service de Santé des Armées by American millionaire Mary Borden Turner, it was not only one of the most successful French field hospitals of the war (in terms of survival and recovery rates) but also an extraordinarily fertile field for the development of female writing talent. Three of its nurses wrote highly acclaimed

memoirs of the war, while a fourth published a remarkably vivid, but carefully anonymised account of what appears to be the same hospital.

### Note

- 1 Claire Tylee, *The Great War and Women's Consciousness: Images of Militarism and Womanhood in Women's Writings, 1914–64* (Houndmills and London: Macmillan, 1990): 7.