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Nurse Writers of the Great War

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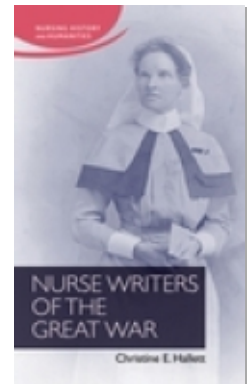
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The war nurse as free agent

Introduction: the rewards of professional nursing

In the second decade of the twentieth century, the nursing professions in both Britain and the USA had attained a level of recognition that permitted their members considerable personal and professional autonomy. During training their lives were circumscribed by the patriarchal hierarchies of early-twentieth-century hospital life; but, once they had attained the level of 'senior probationer', nurses exercised high levels of responsibility – often running wards and supervising junior staff. Their work was vital to the recovery of their patients. Although physicians and surgeons rarely expressed open admiration for nursing work, it was implicitly understood that medical and surgical interventions could not be successful without the presence of a cadre of disciplined and knowledgeable bedside carers.¹

Nurse training schools – particularly those in the prestigious hospitals of cities such as London, Philadelphia, and Baltimore – were highly disciplined environments in which survival and ultimate success depended on the ability to display obedience and compliance. Yet, once qualified, a nurse could use her certificate as a permit to enter worlds that were, mostly, denied to other women. Indeed, in the context of the First World War, it was only the wealthiest and most socially elevated (British) women who could carve out opportunities similar to those of professional nurses. Elsie Knocker and Violetta Thurstan stand as examples of women who used their nursing qualifications as a means of entering the male 'zone of the armies' – a space

within about ten kilometres of the front lines from which women were normally barred.

Heroine of Pervyse: the adventures of Elsie Knocker

There was, following the formation of the trench system on the Western Front, an absolute embargo on permitting women to work close to the front-line trenches. Hence, the largely freelance efforts of two determined women, Elsie Knocker and Mairi Chisholm, who set up their own independent dressing station in the Belgian village of Pervyse, were extraordinary. Knocker and Chisholm's 'Cellar-House' was so close to the front line that they were able to take soup and coffee into the trenches for the soldiers and carry the wounded on stretchers back to their cellar, treating them for shock, dressing their wounds, and giving them the opportunity to rest before being taken by ambulance back 'down the line' to a field hospital in Furnes.²

Elsie Knocker was a persuasive communicator. She convinced the Belgian military authorities to allow her and Chisholm to establish the only forward field dressing station run by women in the so-called 'zone of the armies'.³ Her powerful communication skills also enabled her to publicise the work of the 'Cellar-House of Pervyse' to large audiences in Britain.⁴ Well before the end of the war, she had been awarded the highest military honours available to women, by both the British and Belgian Governments. She was publicly lauded as one of the 'Heroines of Pervyse' and street artists chucked her portrait onto the pavements of London.⁵ Yet, her early life had been difficult. Having lost both parents to infectious diseases while still a small child, she had been adopted by an older couple who, she believed, had really wished for a son. Her relationship with this kind but detached couple was often tense and difficult, resulting in both tomboyish behaviour, and a refusal to recognise the boundaries set by others. It is clear that her childhood experiences also infused her with a powerful sense of self-sufficiency and a belief that she was the master of her own destiny.

Knocker's early life was one of impoverished gentility. Her adoptive father was a housemaster of a public school and, although she had

been left a small legacy by her natural father, this was not enough to support a genteel lifestyle. She attended finishing school at Lausanne and then began training as a children's nurse in Sevenoaks.⁶ In 1906 she married, and travelled with her husband – an unhappy and abusive man – to Singapore, where she realised she was pregnant. Having returned to England, where her son Kenneth was born on 1 February 1907, Knocker took the unusual and courageous step of petitioning for divorce in 1911. In the first decades of the twentieth century it was almost unheard of for a wife to sue for divorce, and she was obliged to pay all the costs of the proceedings.⁷ Realising that she must now support both herself and her son, Knocker returned to hospital work, this time training as a midwife at Queen Charlotte's Hospital, Marylebone, London. Just as she completed her training, an uncle died, leaving an inheritance that enabled her to establish a home with her brother and son in Fordingbridge. It was here that Knocker bought a Chater-Lea motorcycle, enabling her to develop the driving and mechanical skills that, along with her nursing skills, would be her entrée into war work in 1914.⁸

Elsie Knocker and Mairi Chisholm began their war service as ambulance drivers with Hector Munro's Flying Ambulance Corps, ferrying the wounded over rough terrain to hospital. They noticed that wounded men were spending very little time in forward field dressing stations. The normal practice was to dress their wounds and administer morphine, before transferring them to distant field hospitals. A trained nurse, Knocker realised that removing dangerously wounded and physiologically fragile men from the front lines, putting them straight into ambulances, and then bumping them over shell-torn Belgian pavé roads was killing more casualties than it was saving. What was needed was the opportunity to stabilise the wounded, treat them for shock, and warm and reassure them, before moving them down the line.⁹ This meant keeping a shocked casualty for several hours in a forward field dressing station. Knocker managed to persuade the Belgian military authorities to permit her to establish her 'Cellar-House' in the tiny and almost totally ruined village of Pervyse, directly behind the Belgian front-line trenches. Casualties came with problems ranging from minor injuries, such as barbed-wire grazes, to serious shrapnel- and bullet-wounds.¹⁰ During most of their three-and-a-half years in the Cellar-House, their section



Figure 8 Elsie Knocker and Mairi Chisholm attend to a patient in their Cellar-House in Pervyse

of the line was quiet, and the two women treated numerous cases of minor illness or injury. At times, though, they participated in the evacuation of serious casualties during the ‘rushes’ created by failed assaults on the front line. Knocker also became adept at tooth extraction after the British Red Cross Society sent her a complete set of dental instruments. Her fame as a dentist – by her own account – ‘spread far and wide.’¹¹ In 1916, Arthur Gleason, who had worked for five months as a volunteer for Hector Munro’s Flying Ambulance Corps, commented that the women had been warned that their sector of the line would, eventually, come under severe attack and might be ‘wiped out’. He also observed that their response was simply to ‘go on with their cool, expert work’, adding: ‘The only way to stop them is to stop the war.’¹²

During her visits to England to campaign for funds, Knocker gave lectures, describing her philosophy of shock treatment and narrating stories of Belgian soldiers who had recovered in her Cellar-House after having been given up for dead by their military and medical colleagues.¹³ In her own personal diary, she expanded on some of

these success stories. On 26 January 1915, for example, she noted the following:

One man had a burst main artery and also smashed his hand to smithereens. They took him over to the other poste where he certainly would have died – they put him on straw with his feet hanging down and his head up – whereas with such haemorrhage it naturally ought to have been the other way round – I took him in hand however and gave him a saline injection and got his feet raised and his head down and ... I was able to get him removed to my poste and to attend to him there ... I got him over to my *blessé* bed – with nice warm blankets and hot water bottles – another saline injection – water to drink – and a morphia injection. I then closed the shutters, made up the fire and left him in peace ... I refused to have him moved for at least an hour ... When a man is suffering from shock and he is taken over these roads and at once put under a serious operation he cannot withstand the shock ... I kept him until 3.30 and he was able to get nice and warm and rested and he was able to say ‘*merci*’ when he went off and he looked so much better – I was glad to see it – and hope he will recover.¹⁴

It was only with great difficulty that Knocker obtained the permission of the Belgian authorities to set up her dressing station right on the front lines.¹⁵ The British never gave any woman such permission, and the allied forces made a decision *en masse*, early in 1915, to forbid all such initiatives.¹⁶ However, by this time the two so-called ‘Heroines of Pervyse’ had made such names for themselves in both Belgium and Britain that they were permitted to remain on the front lines. The British even came to value their presence and, early in 1915, supplied them with binoculars and asked them to ‘spot’ the movement of British planes.¹⁷ On occasions they would move deep into no man’s land with stretchers to rescue aviators who had crash-landed.¹⁸ Even after the British army took over their sector in 1917, they remained in place until actually shelled out of their cellar by German gas shells, and invalided home. They were decorated for their heroism, being made Chevaliers of the Order of St Leopold (a Belgian decoration) and awarded the Order of St John of Jerusalem and the British Military Medal.¹⁹ Romance also featured in Knocker’s story. During her time in the ‘Cellar-House of Pervyse’, she met and married the Baron Harold de T’Serclaes de Rattendael, a Belgian pilot with ‘an air of recklessness and gaiety’.²⁰

The Baroness de T’Serclaes’s memoir, *Flanders and Other Fields*, reads partly as adventure story, partly as reflection on war, and partly as a meditation on her own life – an affirmation of the meaning and

significance of her nursing knowledge and work. Her conviction that offering wounded and shocked men rest, quiet, and fluids before moving them to a hospital was, in some ways, well founded. In others, it may have been flawed. Injuries sustained in the muddy fields of Flanders were liable to contamination with anaerobic bacteria, causing infections such as gas gangrene that, if not treated quickly, could prove fatal.²¹ Although delaying the movement of a wounded man could enable his body to recover from shock, it might also allow a dangerous infection to take hold and spread. During the winter of 1914–15, it became clear to the allied military medical services that surgery to remove infected matter from wounds had to be performed as quickly as possible following an injury. Yet, it was also clear that it was fruitless to attempt to operate upon severely shocked patients until the shock itself had been alleviated. T'Serclaes was certain that her actions in keeping patients quiet in her Cellar-House, and delaying their journey to the base, saved lives. Indeed, she came to believe that she herself had the power to 'bring back' men from the brink of death:

The stress of the life we were living had begun to reveal something in me which I had never suspected and which could not, surely have been the produce of the few absurd years on earth of which I was aware. I possessed a kind of power which seemed to be able to drag men back literally from the jaws of death. I was a fully trained nurse in the technical sense, but this was something more than technical efficiency. It was the breathing back of the Life Force, a kind of spiritual resuscitation.²²

T'Serclaes was not the only nurse writer to express a sense of her power in such spiritual terms. Mary Borden, in *The Forbidden Zone*, wrote of dragging men back from the brink of death,²³ while Irene Rathbone recounted an incident in a British base hospital in which the nurse was forbidden to stay beyond her hours of duty with a dying patient, even though she believed she had the power to keep him alive.²⁴

One of the most dramatic episodes in *Flanders and Other Fields* was T'Serclaes and Chisolm's final exit from their Cellar-House in the middle of a gas-attack. Both were badly poisoned, and had to be taken by ambulance to a field hospital, where T'Serclaes discovered what it was like to be a military casualty:

I was coughing and gasping for breath, together with dozens of soldiers all around me, until I thought my lungs must burst or be torn from my body

... A nurse came and stripped off all my clothes, explaining that they were impregnated with gas and must be destroyed. At that I felt utterly miserable and helpless. A soldier somewhere to my right tried to comfort me by saying, 'Cheer up, gal, you've just got to the fifth stage. When you get to the eighth you'll be alright.' I asked him to explain, and this was the sequence. (1) The first shock. (2) The realization of what has happened and the panic. (3) The rescue – if you're lucky. (4) The dash to the casualty clearing station. (5) The nasty demoralization of being just a lump of flesh that can be stripped, injected, lugged around, and expected to have no emotions. The sixth stage was when you were lifted up and carted away, either to the mortuary or to a ward bed; the seventh was when you came to and realized that you were getting better; the eighth was when you could appreciate the warmth of your nice neat bed and fall luxuriously asleep.²⁵

T'Serclaes and Chisholm never returned to Pervyse. Between the wars, T'Serclaes undertook a range of poorly paid jobs, working variously as a housekeeper, a hotelier, and a nurse.²⁶ During the General Strike of 1926, she discovered a new opportunity for adventure when she set up a first aid post in a disused butcher's shop in Poplar High Street, one of the most volatile areas of east London. She became 'the most spectacularly unusual district nurse the borough had ever known.'²⁷ During the Second World War, she served in the Women's Royal Air Force.²⁸

In *Flanders and Other Fields* T'Serclaes maps change over time in her own perceptions of warfare. Written five decades after the First World War, with the benefits of both hindsight and a recognition of a massive shift in public opinion since 1918, it contains numerous expressions of pacifist sentiment. T'Serclaes's account of the First World War opens with a rehearsal of the numerous tales of German atrocities, current during the first months of the war. It then shifts to recount stories of occasional camaraderie between front-line troops on opposing sides, such as when, at Christmas or Easter, the German troops would hold up placards joking 'Let's All Go Home!'²⁹ It addresses the view, which was current in the 1960s, that the troops of the First World War were betrayed by their political and military leaders. T'Serclaes's 'war lords sitting round a warm fire, sipping brandy and "organizing" such a cruel mess'³⁰ were the 'donkeys' referred to by some mid-century historians.³¹

Ultimately, T'Serclaes expresses largely pacifist sentiments, writing of her hope that the world will not see another such war. Her perceptions of the First World War may well have been coloured by her later

experiences of the Second World War – the war in which her son, a bomber pilot, was killed on active service. She ends her book with her sense of the pity and anger she felt when she watched the suffering of infantrymen ‘weighted down with all their kit, but especially ... with the intolerable burden of the stupidities of statesmen’. And yet, she also honestly reflects that: ‘Only in time of war have I found any real sense of purpose and happiness. Only then have I moved with honour among the sort of people whom I regard as my sort of people.’³² The Baroness de T’Serclaes’s feelings about war were ambivalent. Horrific, and yet empowering, war had both granted her the opportunity to be the person she most wanted to be, and killed the person she most loved.

Violetta Thurstan: intrepid, travelling nurse

In a novel written towards the end of her life, Violetta Thurstan likened her heroine – who bore a remarkable similarity to herself – to a storm petrel, a tiny bird known to skim the surface of the world’s most powerful oceans, swooping repeatedly into the waves to feed on sea creatures swept to the surface.³³ For anyone reading her memoirs, the storm petrel does indeed seem to be a fitting metaphor for Thurstan – a small and apparently fragile woman, standing at a height of just under five feet, who craved the excitement and challenge of wartime nursing, and whose spirit was fed by her encounters with the storm of the most destructive war that had ever been fought.

Like Kate Luard or Julia Stimson, Thurstan chose not to judge the military or political leaders of her time. She saw war almost as a force of nature – something that would sweep over and destroy her compatriots if they did not mobilise themselves to meet it. She also saw it as something with which all must engage. Her own form of engagement was like the intermittent swooping of a tiny bird into the teeth of a gale – first in Belgium, then Russia, France, and Macedonia. Each time, danger, in the form of capture, disease, or injury, forced a withdrawal and a period of recovery, before a further re-engagement.

Trained at the turn of the century at The London Hospital – one of the most rigorous and constraining nurse training schools of her time – she broke free of the limitations imposed by the hospital system to become one of a new, emerging breed of nurse: the professional woman who practised when and where she wished. Violetta

Thurstan's nurse training was a ticket to freedom and she used it to claim many forms of freedom: she practised nursing in at least five different countries, she interpreted the medical science behind the most advanced British nursing procedures of her day,³⁴ and she wrote her own memoir – and then rewrote it in a different form.³⁵ This was, indeed, the greatest of her freedoms: the freedom to tell and retell her own story – to create and recreate her life – in letters; journal articles; autobiographical works; and, finally, towards the end of her life, a series of highly imaginative novels.³⁶

Thurstan's life and writings were steeped in the nursing issues of her time. The London Hospital was known for both the rigidity of its discipline and the thoroughness of its training.³⁷ Thurstan transferred from the hospital's preliminary training school on 29 December 1900,³⁸ and spent the next two years acquiring a 'Certificate of Training' in which her work was said to be 'satisfactory', her conduct 'very good', and her sick-room cookery 'excellent'.³⁹ Her training clearly gave her confidence in her own abilities. Her technical writings are redolent of a sense of certainty in her knowledge and practice skills. Yet, after leaving The London, Thurstan turned against the views and values of its matron, Eva Luckes, by becoming one of the most vociferous of those nurses who campaigned openly for a state register.⁴⁰ She aligned herself with those nurse leaders of her day who were committed to making nursing an autonomous and independent profession: women such as Ethel Gordon Fenwick and Isla Stewart.⁴¹

Violetta Thurstan was born on 4 February 1879 in Hastings, Sussex, and named 'Anna Violet'.⁴² Her father, Dr Edward Paget Thurstan, travelled extensively, and appears, to have spent a large amount of his time apart from his children.⁴³ It is not clear when 'Violetta' changed her name.⁴⁴ She and her three brothers clearly had a fractured childhood, moving frequently, and spending time in Cornwall, Devon, and the Canary Islands.⁴⁵ Like the sons of the Luard family, the Thurstan boys attended private schools, and two of the three joined the armed services. Violetta obtained part of her schooling at the Ladies College in Guernsey, and appears also to have attended a school in Germany. In adulthood, she had a remarkable mastery of a number of European languages, including French, German, and Spanish.⁴⁶

In the last few years of the nineteenth century, it was still possible to 'become' a nurse simply by joining the staff of one of the lower-status

hospitals, such as a fever hospital or a hospital for children. Any young British woman with ambition soon realised, however, that it was impossible to advance a nursing career without a training from one of the prestigious voluntary hospitals – preferably in London. After obtaining experience at a ‘Home for the Incurables’ in London, the East London Hospital for Children in Shadwell, and the Fever Hospital in Guernsey,⁴⁷ Thurstan entered The London Hospital as ‘probationer Anna Violet Thurstan’ in 1900.⁴⁸ Here, she appears to have been largely successful, winning the praise and affection of the ward sisters with whom she practised.⁴⁹ In spite of this, Matron Eva Luckes appears to have taken something of a dislike to probationer Thurstan, referring to her in the London’s ‘Register of Probationers’ as ‘a well-meaning gentle [~~feeble~~] little woman with very little strength of character and very nervous and diffident as to her own powers.’⁵⁰ A later report condemned ‘Anna V. Thurstan’ as ‘young on her appointment and ... young and childish in her ways. This being so she was spoilt in many ways and did not develop as she ought to have done. She remained unpunctual and untidy to the end and was fond of being made a great deal of.’⁵¹ Like many reports written by a superior about a junior employee (which nurse probationers effectively were), this report probably gives a greater insight into the personality and prejudices of its writer than those of its subject.

Thurstan ended her career at the London as Assistant Sister at Tredegar House, caring for the hospital’s population of nurse probationers. There were rumours that she disliked the work, and was planning to leave and start her own business: a children’s convalescent home.⁵² This may have further alienated Eva Luckes, whose final report on Thurstan comments that ‘she had great ideas of her own capabilities but she was very unpractical.’⁵³ Eventually, Luckes decided to recommend Thurstan for the position of matron at a small convalescent home for children in Hythe. One of her reasons for transferring Thurstan to such an ‘easy’ position was her concern that her former probationer’s health was ‘not robust’. This is borne out by the fact that Thurstan’s probation record refers to a number of instances when her health ‘broke down.’⁵⁴ Yet Violetta Thurstan’s career went on to span two world wars, a range of gruelling experiences on several war fronts, and frequent injury and illness; and she lived to the age of ninety-nine.

Upon leaving the London Hospital, Thurstan pursued further education, enrolling on a correspondence course at St Andrews University, studying French, geography, fine art, physiology, and English, and acquiring the qualification of 'Lady Literate in Arts' in 1914.⁵⁵ In 1913 she had joined the Westminster 146 VAD, run by the British Red Cross.⁵⁶ By 1914, Thurstan, like many young people of her time, was poised for war.

Thurstan was clearly a restless spirit. Prior to her move to London, it was reported that she had undertaken temporary work in a surgical hospital in Spain; been Home Sister at the Royal Infirmary, Bristol; held the position of Matron of the Children's Invalid Home, Duxhurst; and, for two-and-a-half years, held a position as Lady Superintendent of the West Riding Nursing Association.⁵⁷ These later roles entitled her to membership of the Matrons' Council, to which she was duly elected in February 1913.⁵⁸ In that same year, she accepted the position of matron of the new Civil Hospital in La Spezia, Italy, though the building of the hospital was delayed and it is not clear whether she ever took up the position.⁵⁹ As a committed and influential member of the movement for the professionalisation of nursing, Thurstan spent much of her time touring the country giving lectures on subjects such as 'The History of Nursing' or 'Some Aspects of Women's Work in the Past'.⁶⁰ In 1913, she was just beginning a long association with the *BJN*. During and after the war years, her letters and accounts appeared frequently, along with articles about her exploits and verbatim accounts of interviews with this 'intrepid' nurse.⁶¹

In September 1914, the Order of St John of Jerusalem invited Thurstan to lead a party of nurses to Brussels to work for the Belgian Red Cross. Her party was selected by the National Union of Trained Nurses (NUTN), a nascent nurses' organisation with which she had just begun what was to be a long and fruitful collaboration.⁶² Hundreds of British nurses and volunteers travelled to Belgium in the first weeks of the war. Thurstan was one of those who refused to retreat. Her entire party remained in Brussels, where she soon found herself a prisoner, treating thousands of German soldiers for trench foot.⁶³ Finding this experience unpleasant, she responded to a request from the Burgomaster of Charleroi to run a small hospital caring for the wounded of several nations.

Thurstan's experience in Charleroi was recounted in her memoir, *Field Hospital and Flying Column*, as one of both hardship and mental stress.⁶⁴ Thurstan, with two colleagues, cared for large numbers of wounded soldiers with almost no help. Her narrative is punctuated by episodes in which she defies arrogant German officers who issue unreasonable commands; is almost captured as a spy; and uses her language skills and quick thinking to elude danger.⁶⁵ It is not clear what Thurstan's purpose was in writing this book, which, like the work of several other nurse writers, reads very much like a collection of 'girls' own adventure' stories. It may be that she merely wanted to set down an account of her extraordinary experiences. The pace and tone of the book, along with its plain, direct language, suggest that she wanted others to know the adventure of her life – an adventure of which she was the heroine. Thurstan's writing offers, perhaps, one of the clearest examples of the sense of thrill and adventure that infused the 'war fever' of the first months of the First World War and that has been characterised by later writers as the 'innocence' that made it so easy to recruit soldiers to fight on the front lines.⁶⁶ It was, perhaps, the same spirit that drove nurses and volunteers to offer their services to the wounded in such large numbers.

In addition to *Field Hospital and Flying Column*, which was published in the spring of 1915, Thurstan also wrote a series of articles and letters for the *BJN*, permitting the journal's readership to follow her adventures. In recounting her experiences in Charleroi, she wrote: 'The day we came there were seventy very badly wounded – French and German – sent here, and there were only our three selves with some Red Cross people from the town who had attended six lectures, and who nearly drove us quite mad.'⁶⁷

In October, Thurstan, along with a large number of other British nurses, was removed from Belgium on a locked train, and deported to neutral Denmark.⁶⁸ The Danes appear to have treated the British nurses as celebrities⁶⁹ and, while attending a dinner as a special guest, Thurstan met Prince Gustav, nephew of the Dowager Russian Empress, Marie Federovna, who was Head of the Red Cross in Russia.⁷⁰ A careful piece of dinnertime diplomacy appears to have won Thurstan and three companions an invitation to join the Russian Red Cross and transfer their services to the Eastern Front.⁷¹ Following what she describes as an exciting journey through Sweden and Finland via the

Arctic Circle in winter, Thurstan reached her first posting in Warsaw (at that time part of the Russian Empire), where she was placed in a Red Cross Hospital run by Russian Sisters of Mercy.⁷²

For Thurstan, offering British nursing expertise in regions where nurse training was considered to be underdeveloped was an adventure in itself. She found her Russian colleagues 'amiable' and the Sister Superior a kind and effective leader, who had worked with English nurses during the Russo-Japanese War.⁷³ Still, wartime conditions meant that staff were short, conditions poor, and the work hard. Two of her group returned to England within weeks, leaving only Thurstan



Figure 9 Portrait of Violetta Thurstan in her Russian Red Cross uniform

and experienced St John's Ambulance volunteer nurse Elizabeth Greg to continue the work.⁷⁴

In *Field Hospital and Flying Column*, Thurstan comments on the differences between nursing in Russia and nursing in England. At first, she was amazed at the poor staffing: twenty sisters to a thousand patients. Then she began to realise that much of the real nursing was undertaken by orderlies known as 'sanitars', with sisters supervising, performing technical procedures, and undertaking lighter work. Nevertheless, wartime conditions were harsh, with each nurse working long hours every day, and then – three times per week – remaining on duty all night. She found that 'English views on ventilation are not at all accepted in Russia', where 'the Sisters were genuinely frightened for the safety of the patients when I opened the windows of a hot, stuffy ward one night'.⁷⁵ She added that:

the art of nursing as practised in England does not exist in Russia – even the trained Sisters do things every hour that would horrify us in England. One example of this is their custom of giving strong narcotic or stimulating drugs indiscriminately, such as morphine, codeine, camphor, or ether without doctor's orders. When untrained Sisters and inexperienced dressers do this (which constantly happens) the results are sometimes very deplorable. I have myself seen a dresser give a strong hypodermic stimulant to a man with a very serious haemorrhage. The bleeding vessel was deep down and very difficult to find, and the haemorrhage became so severe after the stimulant that for a long time his life was despaired of from extreme exhaustion due to loss of blood.⁷⁶

Thurstan's observations provide insight into her own priorities as a British nurse. She clearly valued the surgical dressing technique of the Russians, and their attention to asepsis, but deplored what she saw as their failure to offer fundamental nursing care. Years after her experience in Russia, she reflected on these differences in an article for the *BJN*:

Russian sisters are extremely well trained in the matter of asepsis, and are far beyond ourselves in many ways in this respect ... Most of their training time is given up to surgical work; indeed at some of the training schools in Petrograd no medical cases are taken at all. The result is, of course, that the bandaging and dressing is exquisitely done and an example to most English nurses, while the art of nursing, as we have it in England, is – apart from the wound – entirely unknown. That is to say, if a man is admitted with a severe wound in the chest, the wound is most carefully and adequately treated and

beautifully bandaged, while the pneumonia that accompanies it is hardly nursed at all. There is little or no sponging down of feverish patients, no 'art of bedmaking' – the 'sedeilka', or ward maid, generally makes the bed – and very little idea of bringing dainty little dishes to tempt the patient's appetite; if they do not like, or do not want, what is provided, they simply leave it.⁷⁷

While still in Warsaw, Thurstan and Greg were transferred by the Red Cross to what was to prove their most adventurous posting: a flying column, or *letuchka* – a highly mobile unit that would follow the advances and retreats of the Russian army, remaining as close as possible to the front lines in order to receive the wounded from the battlefield without delay.⁷⁸ Violetta Thurstan's adventures with the Russian flying column brought her closer to the front lines than almost any woman of her time. She recounted her experiences as a series of intrepid exploits.⁷⁹ During these adventures, she wrote a rather breathless article to the honorary secretary of the National Union for Trained Nurses, which was published in the *BJN*:

Warsaw, December 9th, 1914.

I have had the most exciting time I have ever had in my life. I must tell you about it ... Shells were coming at the rate of ten a minute. There were aeroplanes just over us dropping bombs every minute. We got out without anyone being hurt. I never enjoyed anything so much in my life ... I can't describe what it was like, but it was splendid.⁸⁰

Thurstan's English companion in Russia, Elizabeth Greg, offers a very different perspective. An 'Honorary Serving Sister of the Order of St John of Jerusalem', Greg had served in Bulgaria from 1912 to 1913 during the Balkan War, as a VAD probationer with Mabel St Clair Stobart's Women's Sick and Wounded Convoy Corps. She appears to have had a considerable amount of wartime nursing experience, but little formal training. In a letter home to a friend she writes of 'Miss T' being 'in great state of excitement being so near things', adding, 'I should not be surprised if she broke down from overstress – solid, stout people who can sleep and eat everything should really come on these jobs.'⁸¹

In January 1915, Thurstan did, indeed, break down. The semi-trained Elizabeth Greg believed that she was 'altogether too delicate and highly strung and also over-trained for the work she was doing'.⁸² In fact there appears to have been much more to Thurstan's 'breakdown' than her apparent delicacy. Evidence (although much of

it from one source: the *BJN*) suggests that she had experienced a run of bad luck, having first been wounded by shrapnel while dressing a patient in a forward field hospital, then shocked by the close impact of a shell, and, finally, having contracted pleurisy.⁸³ She returned to England in April 1915. Greg wrote to her aunt that Thurstan 'was quite broken down – poor thing – She should never have been a nurse – at least being one was too much for anyone so frail – in a quiet civil hospital a matron or a head sister – where there were no shots and shells she might have kept well, but she was too highly strung for the kind of life we have been having'.⁸⁴ Greg's judgement of Thurstan is reminiscent of the London Hospital's reports of their 'frail' probationer. Yet, Thurstan went on to serve in Belgium, France, and Macedonia, and to be awarded a Military Medal for courage.

Towards the end of *Field Hospital and Flying Column*, Thurstan comments that 'War would be the most glorious game in the world if it were not for the killing and wounding. In it one tastes the joy of comradeship to the full, the taking and giving, and helping and being helped in a way that would be impossible to conceive in the ordinary world'.⁸⁵ Her perception of war as another world is characteristic of her tendency to romanticise her experience. Many decades after the war, she wrote another, somewhat revised, memoir of her experiences, which was published in 1978 just before her death. In this later account, which she titled *The Hounds of War Unleashed*, Thurstan tells of a love affair with Nicholas, an ambulance driver belonging to the flying column, who dies tragically in the early spring of 1915.⁸⁶

Had Violetta Thurstan left only one memoir of her experiences in Belgium and Russia, the directness of her writing and the certainty of her expression might have convinced most readers that her account was a full and accurate narrative of events. The existence of another account, which deviates from the first, creates uncertainty about both. It is tempting to suppose that *The Hounds of War Unleashed*, published when Thurstan was in her late nineties, is the less accurate of the two – that it may, in fact, contain fictional elements. Yet, it is also possible that it was the final confessional of a woman now facing death, writing in a more permissive era, when an element of romance might make a memoir more interesting to its readers. Thurstan's own romantic vision of life undoubtedly influenced the style of both memoirs.

After spending several months in England, convalescing, working as elected Organising and General (Central) Secretary to the NUTN,⁸⁷ and touring the country to give lectures on her wartime experiences,⁸⁸ Thurstan once more embarked for Russia, this time as the NUTN's representative, to offer its support to the Russian Government in alleviating the plight of millions of refugees.⁸⁹ Her remit was to examine the possibility of staffing a maternity unit in one of the major Russian cities,⁹⁰ yet she travelled widely, examining the refugee problem in detail. The result was a book, *The People who Run*, which explores the realities of life for 'those five and a half million dazed and terrified people who fled away from their homes in the summer and autumn of 1915, before the great German advance into Russia.'⁹¹

Thurstan was obviously deeply moved by the plight of the Russian refugees, bringing her romantic perception of the Russian character to her book. For the *BJN* she recounted her memories, stating that 'the bells of Russia ... are the most beautiful in the world, deep, mellow and irresistible, incessantly calling the faithful to church.'⁹² Thurstan herself may have been experiencing a sense of homesickness for the Russia in which she had spent only a few months, but to which she appears to have grown attached. In writing of the refugees, she expanded on the subject of the romance of the Russian nation:

Romance is a rare and almost a despised quality in our materialistic world. But there are those for whom it is the breath of life, and they will know where to look for it, for it does still exist in certain places in spite of 'organization', 'standardization', 'cooperation', and other estimable and modern methods which, if we are not careful, are apt to smother and kill it. And the soil in which this rare plant flourishes is almost always to be found in those countries – such as Russia, Spain, Ireland – which have a curious instinct for suffering and a supreme indifference to the necessities of life.⁹³

Thurstan's highly romantic perspective is easy for a modern readership to condemn. A twenty-first-century audience comes to such writings through the prism – both distorting and clarifying – of later perspectives that condemned the First World War as an act of destruction perpetrated upon an innocent generation.⁹⁴ Only more recently have some academics begun to focus with greater appreciation on the attitudes of the war generation.⁹⁵ Reading Violetta Thurstan's passionate and apparently naive texts returns us to the certainties of that generation – certainties that existed in many minds before hindsight

had begun to dissolve them. One of the consequences of Thurstan's passionate support for engagement in the war was her tendency to promote what has come later to be seen as war propaganda. In her frequent lectures, in various parts of Britain, on her experiences in Belgium and Russia, she appears to have given much attention to German atrocities such as the deliberate 'firing' of Belgian towns.⁹⁶ She is also reported to have lectured for Lord Derby's appeal to men to enlist voluntarily in order to avoid conscription.⁹⁷

On 11 November 1916, Violetta Thurstan departed, once more, for Belgium. She had been invited by the Joint War Committee of the Red Cross and Order of St John of Jerusalem to take on the role of matron to the prestigious Hôpital de l'Océan at La Panne, on the narrow coastal strip of Belgium that was still in allied hands – an institution that prided itself on being at the leading edge of wartime surgical advance. Its director was the famous Belgian surgeon Dr Antoine Depage, who had previously worked closely with Edith Cavell, and whose hospital was staffed by Belgian, French, Canadian, and British trained nurses; British VADs; and Belgian 'Red Cross ladies'.⁹⁸ A column in the *BJN* referred to it as 'not only a hospital, but a university, with a cosmopolitan staff', which used 'microbe charts' to monitor wound recovery in its patients, and had its own social club.⁹⁹

It was during her time as matron at L'Hôpital de l'Océan that Thurstan wrote her technical book on nursing practice: *A Text Book of War Nursing*.¹⁰⁰ Differing in many respects from her other books, it laid down Thurstan's knowledge of wartime nursing practice – a knowledge that was built on her rigorous training at The London Hospital and on her later extensive experience on both Western and Eastern Fronts. The book is infused with Thurstan's sense of the judgement and autonomy of the trained nurse and offers an insight into her philosophy of modern nursing: that the nurse should understand the science behind her practice, and yet should also show deference and obedience to the doctor. A remarkably avant-garde piece of writing, *A Text Book of War Nursing* has received far less attention than Thurstan's other works, and yet this obscure textbook was possibly her most important work, because of its rare contribution to the nursing knowledge of its time. Written in a prosaic style – abandoning the overt romanticism of *Field Hospital and Flying Column* and *The People who Run* – it nevertheless uses rousing language to expound

the virtues of the 'fully trained nurse' who can 'go on steadily day by day though most of the excitement and novelty has worn off, teaching batch after batch of raw probationers and orderlies, expending the very best of themselves on the various people with whom they come into contact every day'.¹⁰¹

Thurstan's second serious wounding is said to have taken place while she was working at 'a very advanced post in the war zone' in September 1917.¹⁰² Evidence for the incident is sketchy. Reports state that Thurstan was injured by a falling roof, brought down by bombing from a German plane, yet 'recovered enough to help the stretcher-bearers carrying the wounded away, over fields of sugar-beet, in pouring rain, to the next line ambulance'.¹⁰³ For this action, she was awarded the Military Medal – an extremely rare accolade for a woman.¹⁰⁴

From December 1917 to June 1918, Thurstan worked under the auspices of the Scottish Women's Hospitals. Her posting was to Macedonia, where she took on the role of the matron at a hospital in Ostrovo.¹⁰⁵ Here, she is said to have acted heroically in restoring order to the field hospital, which had been 'practically blown to pieces' in a blizzard. Again, illness – this time a bout of malaria – forced her to return to England.¹⁰⁶

Immediately after the war, Thurstan enlisted in the Women's Royal Air Force, rising to the position of Deputy Assistant Commandant in 1919.¹⁰⁷ Following her demobilisation, she spent time in Egypt as Director of Bedouin Industries, assisting women in refugee camps.¹⁰⁸ Here, she appears to have acquired the weaving skills that were to be so important to her in old age, much of which she spent creating, exhibiting, and selling woven carpets, using natural dyeing techniques and becoming renowned as an expert on a range of ancient weaving and dyeing processes.¹⁰⁹ She appears not to have lost her deep romanticism, recounting for the benefit of *BJN* readers a night she spent camping in the desert, under the stars, which 'on a windless night is a foretaste of Paradise'.¹¹⁰

Thurstan was in Spain during the Civil War. It has been reported that she was offered the role of supervisor to the Universities Ambulance;¹¹¹ yet, it is also believed that she assisted prisoners to escape from Almeria during the siege, at the end of which she was expelled from Spain.¹¹² During the Second World War, now well into

her sixties (but declaring her age to be forty-seven), she joined the Women's Royal Naval Service, and worked for Naval Intelligence, boarding ships and assisting with searches for contraband.¹¹³ In later life, she worked in a variety of postings with the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Association, in Egypt, Italy, Austria, and Serbia. A fervent Catholic (having converted soon after the First World War), she worked with displaced persons on a Catholic Relief Programme. Following her eventual retirement (which came rather late in life) she returned to Cornwall, where she spent her time spinning, weaving, and writing novels.

Violetta Thurstan died on 13 April 1978 in Penryn, Cornwall, at the age, most probably, of ninety-nine. Her funeral was conducted with the full rites of the Catholic Church, and she was, at her own request, buried with her eight military medals.¹¹⁴

Conclusion: intrepid nurses

The nurses of the early twentieth century have often been portrayed as a somewhat oppressed group, whose freedoms were constrained and whose opportunities for self-expression were curtailed by the masculine hierarchies of modern hospitals.¹¹⁵ The careers of Elsie Knocker and Violetta Thurstan suggest that, if an independently minded woman could survive the rigours of a two- or three-year hospital training, she might then use her skills to develop a highly independent career. For nurses as for other women, the First World War appears to have opened up hitherto undreamed-of opportunities.

Women's historians have observed that war did, indeed, permit some women to escape the constraints of patriarchal societies.¹¹⁶ Yet, they have also pointed out that the freedoms and opportunities gained during the war were not always retained after the armistice. Many women who had taken on the work of men during the war – notably those who had served in the munitions industry or 'land army' – were obliged to relinquish such work at the war's end.¹¹⁷ The fate of nurses could be very different. Their hospital training certificates, along with their wartime experience, permitted them to present themselves as highly desirable recruits for relief agencies such as the Red Cross. Hence, they were able to retain the independent

work-patterns they had carved out for themselves during wartime. The Baroness de T'Serclaes – always an adventure-seeker – worked as a district nurse in Poplar, East London, during the General Strike of 1926. Violetta Thurstan enlisted with the Women's Royal Air Force before working for a range of relief agencies, then travelling to Egypt to take up the position of 'Director of Bedouin Industries' supporting the development of the predominantly female weaving industry. Such women used their nursing qualifications to remain outside the 'cage' of patriarchal social and cultural norms that limited opportunity for most women of their times.¹¹⁸

Notes

- 1 On British nurse training, see: Ann Bradshaw, *The Nurse Apprentice, 1860–1977* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001); Christine E. Hallett, 'Nursing 1830–1920: Forging a Profession', in Anne Borsay and Billie Hunter (eds), *Nursing and Midwifery in Britain since 1700* (London: Palgrave, 2012). On American nurse training, see: Patricia D'Antonio, *American Nursing: A History of Knowledge, Authority and the Meaning of Work* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).
- 2 Baroness de T'Serclaes, *Flanders and Other Fields* (London: George G. Harrap, 1964): 52–101; G. E. Mitton (ed.), *The Cellar-House of Pervyse: A Tale of Uncommon Things from the Journals and Letters of the Baroness de T'Serclaes and Mairi Chisholm* (London: A. and E. Black, 1916): *passim*; Diane Atkinson, *Elsie and Mairi Go to War: Two Extraordinary Women on the Western Front* (London: Preface Publishing, 2009): 79–189.
- 3 Mitton, *The Cellar-House of Pervyse*: *passim*.
- 4 T'Serclaes, *Flanders and Other Fields*: 72–82.
- 5 T'Serclaes, *Flanders and Other Fields*: 17.
- 6 Atkinson, *Elsie and Mairi Go to War*: 10–15.
- 7 Atkinson, *Elsie and Mairi Go to War*: 17–19.
- 8 T'Serclaes, *Flanders and Other Fields*: 30–5.
- 9 T'Serclaes, *Flanders and Other Fields*: 62–3.
- 10 T'Serclaes, *Flanders and Other Fields*: 66–7.
- 11 T'Serclaes, *Flanders and Other Fields*: 69.
- 12 Arthur Gleason and Helen Hayes Gleason, *Golden Lads: A Thrilling Account of How the Invading War Machine Crushed Belgium* (New York: A. L. Burt, 1916).
- 13 T'Serclaes, *Flanders and Other Fields*: 78–9.
- 14 Baroness de T'Serclaes, MS diary; 9029-2, Imperial War Museum, London.
- 15 T'Serclaes, *Flanders and Other Fields*: 63–4.

- 16 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): 31.
- 17 T'Serclaes, *Flanders and Other Fields*: 70.
- 18 T'Serclaes, *Flanders and Other Fields*: 96.
- 19 T'Serclaes, *Flanders and Other Fields*: 76, 96; T'Serclaes, MS diary, entry for 27 January 1915.
- 20 T'Serclaes, *Flanders and Other Fields*: 83.
- 21 On gas gangrene and other anaerobic infections, see: Christine Hallett, *Containing Trauma: Nursing Work in the First World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009): 49–59; Mark Harrison, *The Medical War: British Military Medicine in the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010): 27–31.
- 22 T'Serclaes, *Flanders and Other Fields*.
- 23 Mary Borden, *The Forbidden Zone* (London: William Heinemann, 1929): 143–6.
- 24 Irene Rathbone, *We That Were Young: A Novel* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1989 [1932]).
- 25 T'Serclaes, *Flanders and Other Fields*: 99–100.
- 26 T'Serclaes, *Flanders and Other Fields*: 100–14. Elsie Knocker separated from her husband, the Baron de T'Serclaes, and was forced to find work to support herself and her son. On her life after the war, see: Atkinson, *Elsie and Mairi Go to War*: 201–38.
- 27 T'Serclaes, *Flanders and Other Fields*: 130.
- 28 T'Serclaes, *Flanders and Other Fields*: 144–202.
- 29 T'Serclaes, *Flanders and Other Fields*: 91.
- 30 T'Serclaes, *Flanders and Other Fields*: 49.
- 31 Alan Clark, *The Donkeys* (London: Pimlico, 1991 [1961]). See also: J. Laffin, *British Butchers and Bunglers of World War One* (Stroud: Sutton, 1988).
- 32 T'Serclaes, *Flanders and Other Fields*: 213–14.
- 33 Violetta Thurstan, *Stormy Petrel* (Falmouth: Violetta Thurstan, 1964).
- 34 Violetta Thurstan, *A Text Book of War Nursing* (London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1917).
- 35 Violetta Thurstan, *Field Hospital and Flying Column: Being the Journal of an English Nursing Sister in Belgium and Russia* (London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1915); Violetta Thurstan, *The Hounds of War Unleashed* (St Ives, Cornwall: United Writers Publications, 1978).
- 36 Thurstan, *Stormy Petrel*; Violetta Thurstan, *The Foolish Virgin* (Marazion: Wordens of Cornwall, 1966). See also the unpublished partial manuscripts held by the Hypatia Trust at the Jamieson Library, Penzance, Cornwall: *The Lucky Mary*; *The Demon*; *The Three Miss Trotts of Polperi*; *Moussa, The Snake Charmer*; *Lunch with the Sheikh*.

- 37 On Eva Luckes's style as matron of the London Hospital, see: Susan McGann, *The Battle of the Nurses: A Study of Eight Women who Influenced the Development of Professional Nursing, 1880–1930* (London: Scutari Press, 1992): 10–20. For a broader overview of the hospital and its training school, see: Edith R. Parker and Sheila M. Collins, *Learning to Care: A History of Nursing and Midwifery Education at the Royal London Hospital, 1740–1993* (London: Royal London Hospital Archives and Museum, 1998): *passim*.
- 38 Register of Probationers, no. 7, entry for Anna Violet Thurstan, Archives of the Royal London Hospital, Aldgate, London.
- 39 Register of Probationers, no. 8, entry for Anna Violet Thurstan, Archives of the Royal London Hospital, Aldgate, London.
- 40 Violetta Thurstan, 'ABC of State Registration', *B/N* (6 May 1916): 404.
- 41 Violetta Thurstan registered as a nurse soon after the passing of the Nurses Registration Act in December 1919. She was nurse no. 8177, registered in the name Anna Violetta Thurstan on 27 October 1922. Register for Nurses, 1923, General Part, Archive of the Nursing and Midwifery Council, London.
- 42 Thurstan herself gave different accounts of her date of birth, probably habitually moving it back in order to be able to obtain positions in adulthood that would normally have been reserved for younger women. Hence, some accounts give her date of birth as 1881: Liz Walton, 'Nurse Violetta Thurstan', *Channel Islands Great War Study Group Journal*, 15 (August 2007): 6–11 (6).
- 43 Walton, 'Nurse Violetta Thurstan': 6.
- 44 Her 'correct' name, 'Anna Violet', does appear on the register of the London Hospital. Register of Probationers, no. 8.
- 45 On Violetta Thurstan, see: Melissa Hardie-Budden, 'Thurstan, Anna Violet (1879–1978)', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
- 46 On Violetta Thurstan's early life, see: Muriel Somerfield and Ann Bellingham, *Violetta Thurstan: A Celebration* (Penzance: Jamieson Library, 1993): 1–10.
- 47 Register of Probationers, no. 8.
- 48 Register of Probationers, nos 7 and 8.
- 49 See, for example, a report by the sister on 'Mellish Ward' for the week ending 1 February 1902: 'She is a nice little woman and the patients like her very much.' Register of Probationers, no. 8.
- 50 Report on 'Mellish Ward', Register of Probationers, no. 8.
- 51 Report on 'Mellish Ward', Register of Probationers, no. 8.
- 52 Report on 'Mellish Ward', Register of Probationers, no. 8.
- 53 Report on 'Mellish Ward', Register of Probationers, no. 8.
- 54 Report on 'Mellish Ward', Register of Probationers, no. 8.
- 55 Somerfield and Bellingham, *Violetta Thurstan*: 9–10; Walton, 'Nurse Violetta Thurstan': 7.
- 56 Walton, 'Nurse Violetta Thurstan': 7.

- 57 Anon., 'Nurses of Note: Miss Violetta Thurstan', *BJN* (15 February 1913): 130.
- 58 Anon., Account of a meeting of the Matrons' Council, *BJN* (8 February 1913): 106.
- 59 Anon., 'Appointments', *BJN* (8 February 1913): 108–9; Anon., Column, *BJN* (12 April 1913): 288; Anon., 'The Dublin Nursing Conference and Exhibition', *BJN* (26 April 1913): 329; Anon., 'The Spezia Hospital', *BJN* (10 May 1913): 367.
- 60 Anon., 'Nursing Echoes', *BJN* (31 January 1914): 89; Anon., 'Coming Events', *BJN* (9 May 1914): 424; Anon., 'League News', *BJN* (27 June 1914): 584. In 1915, when Thurstan took on the role of Organising Secretary of the National Union of Trained Nurses (NUTN), she supported the work of the union in campaigning for nurse registration. She also gave at least one personal donation of funds to the Society for the State Registration of Trained Nurses: Anon., Column, *BJN* (19 June 1915): 526; Anon., Column, *BJN* (11 March 1916): 224; Violetta Thurstan, 'ABC of State Registration'; Anon., 'National Union of Trained Nurses', *BJN* (17 June 1916): 525; Anon., 'National Union of Trained Nurses', *BJN* (14 October 1916): 315; Anon., 'National Union of Trained Nurses', *BJN* (21 October 1916): 335.
- 61 Anon., 'Nurses of Note: Miss Violetta Thurstan'; Violetta Thurstan, 'The British Red Cross Society', *BJN* (24 January 1914): 65–6.
- 62 Anon., 'Active Service', *BJN* (22 August 1914): 158; Anon., Column, *BJN* (19 September 1914): 224.
- 63 Thurstan, *Field Hospital and Flying Column*: 20.
- 64 Thurstan, *Field Hospital and Flying Column*: 16–52.
- 65 On these experiences, see also a series of articles Thurstan wrote for the *BJN*, among them: Violetta Thurstan, 'From Brussels', *BJN* (10 October 1914): 286–7; Violetta Thurstan, 'An International Welcome', *BJN* (24 October 1914): 322.
- 66 Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000 [1975]); Eric Leed, *No Man's Land: Combat and Identity in World War One* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Modris Ecksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1989).
- 67 Violetta Thurstan, 'Letters from the Front', *BJN* (26 September 1914): 246–7. On her continuing adventures in Belgium, see also: Thurstan, 'From Brussels'.
- 68 Thurstan, 'An International Welcome', *BJN* (24 October 1914): 322.
- 69 The Danish nurses appear to have been acting, in part, under the auspices of the Danish Council of Nurses and the International Council of Nurses; Thurstan was a member of the latter and had already met a number of prominent Danish nurses at a meeting of the council in Cologne in 1912. See: Thurstan, 'An International Welcome'. See also: Anon., 'The National Council of Trained Nurses', *BJN* (13 March 1915): 210.

- 70 Thurstan, *Field Hospital and Flying Column*: 110. See also: Somerfield and Bellingham, *Violetta Thurstan*: 15.
- 71 'Miss Thurstan, Miss Wilkinson and Mrs Nicholson, accompanied by Miss Greg, have left Copenhagen for Petrograd': Anon., Column, *BJN* (24 October 1914): 324. See also: M. B. (probably Margaret Brey), "'With a Flying Column of the Russian Red Cross": Miss Violetta Thurstan', *BJN* (13 March 1915): 207–10. One of Thurstan's companions, Sister Martin-Nicholson, later wrote a memoir of her experiences: Sister Martin-Nicholson, *My Experiences on Three Fronts* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1916). Elizabeth Greg subsequently condemned Martin-Nicholson as 'a real adventuress': Miss Elizabeth Agnes Greg, letters, 01/17/1, Imperial War Museum, London. An anonymous review of *My Experiences on Three Fronts* can be found in: *BJN* (30 December 1916): 527.
- 72 Thurstan, *Field Hospital and Flying Column*: 113.
- 73 Thurstan, *Field Hospital and Flying Column*: 114–15.
- 74 Although Thurstan refers to her English companion only as 'Sister G', corroborative evidence suggests persuasively that 'Sister G' was Elizabeth Greg, whose letters home refer to her work with 'Miss Thurstan' in Russia. See: Greg, letters.
- 75 Thurstan, *Field Hospital and Flying Column*: 117.
- 76 Thurstan, *Field Hospital and Flying Column*: 120–1.
- 77 Violetta Thurstan, 'Russian Red Cross Sisters', *BJN* (27 January 1917): 62. See also Christine E. Hallett, *Veiled Warriors: Allied Nurses of the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014): [Chapter 3](#).
- 78 Thurstan, *Field Hospital and Flying Column*: 125–7.
- 79 Thurstan, *Field Hospital and Flying Column*. See, for example: 144–60, 172.
- 80 Violetta Thurstan, 'From Warsaw', *BJN* (9 January 1915): 30.
- 81 Greg, letters.
- 82 Greg, letters.
- 83 Anon., Column, *BJN* (13 February 1915): 130–3 (132); Anon., Column, *BJN* (20 February 1915): 146; M. B., 'With a Flying Column of the Russian Red Cross'.
- 84 Greg, letters.
- 85 Thurstan, *Field Hospital and Flying Column*: 174.
- 86 Thurstan, *The Hounds of War Unleashed*.
- 87 The NUTN campaigned openly for nurse registration. See: Anon., 'National Union of Trained Nurses', *BJN* (3 April 1915): 279; Anon., Column, *BJN* (6 November 1915): 385; Anon., 'National Union of Trained Nurses' (31 July 1920); Anon., Column, *BJN* (19 June 1915).
- 88 Anon., 'Coming Events', *BJN* (17 April 1915): 330; Anon., 'Book of the Week', *BJN* (24 April 1915): 352; Anon., Column, *BJN* (1 May 1915): 371, 377; Anon., Column, *BJN* (5 June 1915): 489; Anon., Column, *BJN* (26 June 1915): 550; Anon., Column, *BJN* (27 November 1915): 445; Anon., Column, *BJN* (24 July 1915): 78; Anon., Column, *BJN* (6 October 1915): 317; Anon., Column, *BJN* (23 October 1915): 340.

- 89 Anon., Column, *BJN* (11 December 1915): 481.
- 90 Anon., Column, *BJN* (8 January 1916): 29; Anon., Column, *BJN* (5 February 1916): 115–16; Anon., Column, *BJN* (4 March 1916): 214; Anon., Column, *BJN* (11 March 1916).
- 91 Violetta Thurstan, *The People who Run: Being the Tragedy of the Refugees in Russia* (London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1916): 1. See also the reviews in *BJN*: Anon., review of Violetta Thurstan, *The People who Run*, *BJN* (8 April 1916): 327–8; Anon., 'A School for Mothers in Petrograd', *BJN* (6 May 1916): 411; Anon., 'Refugees in Russia', *BJN* (27 May 1916): 462; Anon., Review of Violetta Thurstan, *The People who Run*, *BJN* (1 July 1916): 13; Anon., 'The Horrors of Deportation', *BJN* (12 August 1916): 134; Anon., Column, *BJN* (9 December 1916): 477.
- 92 Anon., Column, *BJN* (18 March 1916): 243.
- 93 Thurstan, *The People who Run*: 11–12.
- 94 Tylee, *The Great War and Women's Consciousness*.
- 95 Alan Bishop and Mark Bostridge, *Letters from a Lost Generation: First World War Letters of Vera Brittain and Four Friends* (London: Abacus, 1999); Adrian Gregory, *The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Hallett, *Veiled Warriors*.
- 96 See, for example, a report on Violetta Thurstan's speech to the Matrons' Council on 1 May 1915: Anon., Column, *BJN* (8 May 1915): 385.
- 97 Anon., 'Miss Violetta Thurstan on Active Service in Spain', *BJN* (March 1937): 79.
- 98 Anon., 'National Union of Trained Nurses', *BJN* (28 October 1916): 355; Anon., Column, *BJN* (4 November 1916): 377; Anon., Column, *BJN* (11 November 1916): 387. See also: Hallett, *Veiled Warriors*: [Chapter 1](#).
- 99 Anon., 'Nursing at La Panne', *BJN* (10 March 1917): 169. On L'Hôpital de l'Océan, see also: Anon., 'Care of the Wounded', *BJN* (14 April 1917): 253; Anon., Column, *BJN* (16 June 1917): 415; Henrietta Tayler, *A Scottish Nurse at War: Being a Record of What One Semi-Trained Nurse Has Been Privileged to See and Do during Four and a Half Years of War* (London: John Lane, 1920): 29–45.
- 100 Thurstan, *A Text Book of War Nursing*. See also the advance notice in *BJN*: Anon., Column, *BJN* (14 July 1917): 21; Anon., Column, *BJN* (15 September 1917): 165; Anon., review of Violetta Thurstan, *A Text Book of War Nursing*, *BJN* (13 October 1917): 244.
- 101 Thurstan, *A Text Book of War Nursing*: 13.
- 102 Anon., Column, *BJN* (15 September 1917): 165; Anon., Column, *BJN* (22 September 1917): 181.
- 103 Walton, 'Nurse Violetta Thurstan': 8–9. There is an account of this incident in Anon., 'Miss Violetta Thurstan on Active Service in Spain'.

- 104 Norman Gooding, *Honours and Awards to Women* (London: Savannah Publications, 2013): 149–50; Anon., ‘Nursing and the War’, *BJN* (24 November 1917): 332.
- 105 Anon., ‘Medal for a Nurse’, *BJN* (1 December 1917): 351; Anon., Column, *BJN* (19 January 1918): 47; Anon., ‘Nursing and the War’, *BJN* (7 September 1918): 151. See also: Somerfield and Bellingham, *Violetta Thurstan*: 17–18; Walton, ‘Nurse Violetta Thurstan’: 6.
- 106 Anon., ‘Miss Violetta Thurstan on Active Service in Spain’.
- 107 Walton, ‘Nurse Violetta Thurstan’: 10.
- 108 Anon., ‘National Union of Trained Nurses’ (31 July 1920); Anon., ‘Miss Violetta Thurstan on Active Service in Spain’. See also: Walton, ‘Nurse Violetta Thurstan’: 10.
- 109 Thurstan’s writings on weaving and dyeing include: Violetta Thurstan, *The Use of Vegetable Dyes for Beginners* (London: Dryad Press, 1930); Violetta Thurstan, *A Short History of Decorative Textiles and Tapestries* (Exeter: Papler and Sewell, 1934); Violetta Thurstan, *Weaving Patterns of Yesterday and Today* (London: Dryad Press, n.d.); Violetta Thurstan, *Weaving without Tears* (London: Museum Press, n.d.). See also: Anon., ‘Our Fellows: What Are They Doing?’, *BJN* (November 1927): 266; Violetta Thurstan, ‘Art and Medicine’, *BJN* (November 1927): 272; Anon., ‘What Our Fellows Are Doing’, *BJN* (April 1928): 85; Violetta Thurstan, ‘Old English Handicrafts’, *BJN* (April 1928): 101; Anon., ‘Weaving Exhibition’, *BJN* (July 1929): 179.
- 110 Violetta Thurstan, ‘A Three Weeks’ Journey in the Libyan Desert’, *BJN* (February 1925): 42.
- 111 Anon., ‘Miss Violetta Thurstan on Active Service in Spain’.
- 112 Walton, ‘Nurse Violetta Thurstan’: 10.
- 113 Walton, ‘Nurse Violetta Thurstan’: 10.
- 114 These were: the Military Medal, the Order of St George (Russia), the Ordre de la Reine Elisabeth (Belgium), the Mons Star with clasp and roses (Britain), the Allied Medal, the Companion of the Vatican, the British War Medal, and the Victory Medal: Walton, ‘Nurse Violetta Thurstan’: 11. See also: Somerfield and Bellingham, *Violetta Thurstan*: 91 (who actually list nine medals); and Gooding, *Honours and Awards to Women*: 149–50, who refers to two Russian medals.
- 115 Brian Abel-Smith, *A History of the Nursing Profession* (London: Heinemann, 1960); Eva Gamarnikow, ‘Nurse or Woman: Gender and Professionalism in Reformed Nursing, 1860–1923’, in Pat Holden and Jenny Littlewood (eds), *Anthropology and Nursing* (London: Routledge, 1991): 110–29; McGann, *The Battle of the Nurses*.
- 116 Sandra Gilbert, ‘Soldier’s Heart: Literary Men, Literary Women and the Great War’, in Margaret Randolph Higonnet, Jane Jenson, Sonya Michel, and

Margaret Collins Weitz (eds), *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987): 197–226.

- 117 Margaret Higonnet and Patrice Higonnet, 'The Double Helix', in Higonnet, Jenson, Michel, and Weitz, *Behind the Lines*: 31–47; Joan Scott, 'Rewriting History', in Higonnet, Jenson, Michel, and Weitz, *Behind the Lines*: 21–30; Susan Grayzel, *Women's Identities at War: Gender, Motherhood, and Politics in Britain and France during the First World War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).
- 118 Gail Braybon and Penny Summerfield, *Out of the Cage: Women's Experiences in Two World Wars* (London: Routledge, 2012 [1987]).

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