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Nurse Writers of the Great War

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Part III

Volunteer girls

Tens of thousands of women prepared themselves for war service as nurses in the years leading up to the First World War. A minority of these were fully trained. Others attached themselves to VADs, undertook short courses in sick-nursing, bandaging, invalid cookery, and hygiene, and held themselves in readiness for war. Still others came forward at the outbreak of war with no training at all, and began developing their skills in the heat and stress of the wartime emergency. Anne Summers has shown that British and Dominion women had been preparing themselves, at least mentally, for decades to play their part in an anticipated conflict; their very preparedness had made war more likely.¹ As nurses they knew that not only would they be in an ideal position to observe the events of war; they would also be 'in the thick of the action',² and their eagerness to volunteer for overseas service can be understood as part of this desire to be an integral element of the war effort.

As nurses' memoirs began to be published during the war itself, it became evident that events were not meeting their expectations. Although war service was sometimes exciting and adventurous, it more often alternated between tedious and uncomfortable waits, and 'rushes' of overwhelming activity during which one watched men die, powerless to save them. In the first months of war, VADs served only in voluntary hospitals of the Red Cross or Order of St John of Jerusalem. In the spring of 1915, at the height of the emergency created by unsuccessful assaults on the Western Front at Ypres, Festubert, and Neuve Chapelle, the military medical services agreed to accept VADs in military hospitals both in Britain and overseas.³

The writings of VADs offer a different viewpoint from those of trained nurses. VADs had more time and less responsibility than professionals, and were therefore more able to observe and record the life of the military hospital. Their perspective was, furthermore, a simple one, undistorted by previous nursing experience. The very newness of their experience made their observations sharper and more focused – and yet more judgemental and simplistic – than those of trained nurses. In some volunteer writings, the VAD herself is the heroine, and the actions of other hospital personnel exist to create challenges for her. In others the professional nurse takes centre-stage, and the VAD is the all-seeing witness, capturing events, apparently without distortion. But such appearances are deceptive: VADs were far from dispassionate, and tensions between them and their professional supervisors resulted in a distortion of the historical record that has exaggerated the excess discipline of the military hospital and underplayed the emotional labour undertaken by nurses. A myth of wartime nursing has emerged, which places young, compassionate, and willing VADs at the centre of the action and invites audiences to watch as they grapple with the practical and emotional crises created by an inhuman military medical machine mediated by harsh and bitter spinster nurses.⁴

Romantic notions of journeying through extraordinary landscapes, of struggling, and of being tested also appear with remarkable regularity in the writings of VADs – as does the tendency to reduce the war to one enormous battle between good – represented by the British and their allies – and evil – represented by the central powers. It appears that volunteer nurses were more likely to use these old romantic literary tropes than their trained professional colleagues.⁵ This may be because they, like their middle- and upper-class brothers, were steeped in the highly romantic literary canon of the day. It may also be that their motives for nursing the wounded had more to do with their desire more to be a part of the ‘great struggle’ of war than with any wish to develop their expertise as nurses.⁶

Notes

- 1 Anne Summers, *Angels and Citizens: British Women as Military Nurses, 1854–1914*, rev. edn (Newbury: Threshold Press, 2000).
- 2 Anon., *Twenty Months a VAD* (Sheffield: J. Northen, n.d.), 96/317: 13, Red Cross Archive Library, London.

- 3 The majority of VADs served on the 'Home Front'. On VADs, see: Sue Light, 'British Military Nurses and the Great War: A Guide to the Services', *The Western Front Association Forum* (7 February 2010): 4, available at www.westernfrontassociation.com (accessed 30 October 2012).
- 4 Christine E. Hallett, "'Emotional Nursing": Involvement, Engagement, and Detachment in the Writings of First World War Nurses and VADs', in Alison S. Fell and Christine E. Hallett (eds), *First World War Nursing: New Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2013): 87–102; Christine E. Hallett, *Veiled Warriors: Allied Nurses of the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), introduction.
- 5 See, for example, the writings of Olive Dent, Mary Britnieva, and Florence Farmborough, considered later in this section: Olive Dent, *A VAD in France* (London: Grant Richards, 1917); Mary Britnieva, *One Woman's Story* (London: Arthur Baker, 1934); Florence Farmborough, *Nurse at the Russian Front: A Diary 1914–18* (London: Book Club Associates, 1974). On the 'romance pattern', see: Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000 [1975]): 130–1.
- 6 Janet S. K. Watson, 'Wars in the Wards: The Social Construction of Medical Work in First World War Britain', *Journal of British Studies*, 41(2002): 484–510. See also: Janet S. K. Watson, *Fighting Different Wars: Experience, Memory and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004): *passim*.