# Nurse Writers of the Great War

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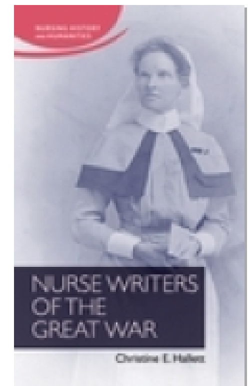


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# The British 'VAD'

## Introduction: becoming a VAD

The allied nursing workforce of the First World War was a complex, heterogeneous group of the trained, the semi-trained, and the almost completely untrained. In Britain, instruction for volunteer nurses (the so-called 'VADs') was administered by Voluntary Aid Detachments, acting under the auspices of the British Society of the Red Cross and the St John Ambulance Association, a branch of the Order of St John of Jerusalem. Most British VADs took courses, passed examinations, and obtained certificates in four aspects of nursing care: first aid and bandaging, sick-room cookery, hygiene, and home nursing. Voluntary Aid Detachments hired fully trained nurses to demonstrate skills and offer basic knowledge on these vital subjects to their volunteers.[1] In this way, fully trained professional nurses were able to ensure that the volunteers who would later act as their assistants had a good rudimentary knowledge, and were able to offer safe care to vulnerable patients.

Once they had acquired at least some relevant training certificates, most VADs underwent a further apprenticeship training – usually of about six months – in a local hospital to permit them to consolidate their skills. Most found themselves undertaking menial tasks, ranging from sweeping ward floors and cleaning out grates and ward stoves, to preparing breakfasts for whole wards of patients. The trained staff of most hospital wards treated VADs in the same way as they would treat new trainees, or probationer nurses, giving them simple, safe,

and mundane work in order to allow them a period of 'settling-in', which could last several weeks or months. After this, the volunteers were permitted to come into direct contact with the care and clinical treatment of patients. Workloads on hospital wards were high; the wartime emergency meant that civilian wards were short-staffed, while military hospitals experienced high pressures of work. Hence, most VADs found themselves providing fundamental care to their patients – albeit under the close supervision of the ward staff – within a few months of their arrival. Over time, many became highly proficient in offering such care. For Lesley Smith, the environment of the hospital was like a 'new world', and the knowledge of infectious diseases she acquired in her local hospital's isolation block left her with hands like 'raw meat from constant soaking in perchloride'.[2]

Most VADs began their brief nursing 'careers' on civilian wards, and many found this a source of frustration, because their primary motivation for undertaking nursing work had been to offer direct assistance to the 'war effort'. Some offered their services to auxiliary hospitals belonging to the Red Cross or the Order of St John of Jerusalem. From the early spring of 1915, VADs were permitted to practise in military hospitals (including those overseas) and, from this time onwards, many consolidated their brief skills-training in the arduous environment of a territorial hospital. Overseas postings were usually reserved for those who had demonstrated exemplary skill in a hospital on the 'home front'. It appears, however, that some wealthier and more socially connected women were able to gain postings to northern France before having fully consolidated their skills. Trained nurses, some of whom found that they were not able to gain release from British hospitals to serve overseas, were deeply frustrated at the knowledge that semi-trained volunteers were working in base hospitals close to the Western Front, while they themselves were effectively trapped in civilian practice.[3]

## Realising war's realities

Some works, such as Kate Finzi's *Eighteen Months in the War Zone* and Lesley Smith's *Four Years out of Life*, illustrate the extent to which, even whilst being influenced by war propaganda, volunteers

could feel compelled to give faithful accounts of their experiences that actually undermined that propaganda.[4] The overriding sense gained from Finzi's account is of the extent to which some women felt compelled to contribute to the war effort. Beginning her wartime 'career' at the very outset of the war as a volunteer nurse, Finzi later found herself ousted from her position in a Boulogne base hospital by an influx of trained nurses. Declaring that she would do anything at all to be helpful, she spent many months running a YMCA rest hut – gruelling work that resulted in her becoming seriously ill.

Finzi's descriptions of the suffering of her wounded patients have a raw edge. Yet her main concern seems to be a desire to convey a sense of their heroism and stoicism. She writes of:

> fingerless hands, lungs pierced, arms and legs perfectly well gangrenous, others already threatening tetanus (against which they are now beginning to inoculate patients), mouths swollen beyond all recognition with bullet shots, fractured femurs, shattered jaws, sightless eyes, ugly scalp wounds; yet never a murmur, never a groan except in sleep. As the men come in they fall on their pallets and doze until roused for food.[5]

*Eighteen Months in the War Zone* contains two significant themes. It bears witness to the suffering of those injured by the war. And it points out that women as well as men might be damaged as a result of their war work – not so directly and obviously, perhaps, as men on active service, but insidiously, as a direct result of their heavy exhausting work, long hours, and poor living and working conditions.[6] Finzi's writing, perhaps unwittingly, undermines the imperialist propaganda that the women of the British Empire were part of an invincible force that was fighting for the right in a simple war in which good would defeat evil.

Lesley Smith's *Four Years out of Life* offers similar insights into the pressures faced by semi-trained and inexperienced VADs:

> Hour after hour day after day we cut down stinking bandages and exposed great gaping wounds that distorted the whole original plan of the body; human figures had become mere curious abortions. One man had both buttocks blown off and lay in a misshapen heap on his stomach, one arm had been amputated at the elbow and he had a host of smaller wounds from flying metal. Another man lay propped on sphagnum moss to absorb the

> discharge from two large holes in each thigh where a bullet had cut a great furrow across his body. There were numberless buttock and shoulder cases, the result of men laying in the open on their faces. A small, wiry Scotsman had lost both legs and both arms and lay extended in iron splints as though he were crucified.[7]

Smith describes her work with ward sisters in various parts of a base hospital in northern France. Her memoir indicates that she – a semi-trained volunteer – enjoyed good relationships with senior, trained staff. But her style is unusual: other writers focus on conflict. Indeed, the tension between trained, professional nurses and VADs is one of the strongest themes to emerge from women's wartime writings. It is striking that this tension appears far more frequently and forcefully in VADs' writings than in those of professionals. The latter – as in, for example, the case of Kate Luard – seem intent on recording the suffering and resilience of their patients. But whilst trained nurses were observing their patients, it seems that VADs were observing *them* – often with fascination, sometimes with admiration for their skill and efficiency, and frequently with scorn for their excessive attention to hospital etiquette and discipline. Stories of bullying nurses and victimised VADs are manifold.[8] D. M. Richards writes of her work in a large hospital in Dorset. As junior probationer she made beds, swabbed the ward floor, wiped lockers, and emptied bed pans 'whilst the Sister's steely eyes looked on'.[9] Eventually, she 'disgraced' herself by responding to an enquiry by a surgeon during a ward round:

> At the end of the round, the Surgeon spoke to me personally, he was not young, but had a compassion for his patients, and staff. I would never have dared to speak to Him [*sic*], because to look at a Doctor above his feet was unheard of familiarity.
>
> All he said to me was: 'How are you settling down nurse? Are you happy in Hospital training?' I dared to look him straight in the eye, simply saying 'Oh yes Sir. I love the work.' He had scarcely left the ward, before Sister called me to her table, in the centre of the ward, 'How dare you make yourself obvious to the Surgeon – or Doctor? Disgusting behaviour and must on no account be repeated!'[10]

The portrayal of professional nurses exhibiting ridiculous behaviour was a common motif in the writings of VADs, as was the theme of hardship and suffering endured by young women, many of whom

had never before engaged in menial work.[11] Eventually, Richards withdrew from nurse training and joined a VAD. She spent the last months of the war attached to a military hospital on Salisbury Plain, where the matron 'was just what folks dream about, as a matron commanding not demanding respect, human, perceptive, discriminating, the lot, and possessing two of the deepest blue eyes I have ever seen'.[12] This 'good' matron, unlike her 'bad' counterpart in Dorset, is not the subject of detailed description. The reader is offered no vignettes or narratives of her behaviour, and we never see her in action.

Other VADs wrote of poor living and working conditions. Few appear to have minded the hardship associated with 'active service'. Of much greater concern to them were the bureaucratic 'pettiness and red tape' that restricted their actions. One anonymous diary-writer expressed her indignation that many women who, with further training, would have made excellent nurses, were deflected into other careers.[13] She herself offered her services to the French Red Cross when, after several months of work on the 'home front', she was unable to get an overseas posting as a British VAD. After some time in a French military hospital, working with French doctors and orderlies and English volunteer nurses, she obtained a transfer to a British base hospital in northern France, 'right on top of the cliffs over looking the sea'.[14]

One of her most powerful experiences was being placed in the ward for German prisoners. Here, she experienced conflict between her patriotic hatred for 'the enemy' and her sense of pity at the suffering of her young patients:

> Although I began by hating to nurse the Germans, after some weeks of it I got to like it. True, the work was harder than in the other wards, as we had more help in the British lines, but the VADs took more responsibility and did all the dressings in the German wards, thus giving us experience and making us independent. I always found the men very plucky (with a few exceptions) and very grateful for anything one did for them, and some of them were wonderfully nice, and in spite of their nationality one couldn't help getting fond of them.[15]

She goes on to describe the obnoxious behaviour of one German officer, who complains about hospital food and shouts as he leaves the ward: 'Deutschland über Alles!'.[16] This seems to ease her sense of tension and conflict, as she decides that it is the officers, not the ordinary German soldiers, who are responsible for prolongation of the war.

Ultimately, her experience of nursing German prisoners enables her to see war itself as a disaster into which ordinary people on both sides have been unwillingly drawn.

Memoirist Henrietta Tayler recounts a similar experience of serving with the French Red Cross in Italy. Having been placed on the 'prisoners' ward' because she could speak German, she soon discovered that hardly any of her patients actually were German. She found herself nursing 'a heterogeneous medley of Austrian subjects … three Hungarians, one Bohemian, two Rumanians [*sic*] from Transylvania, two Bosnians, a Pole and the rest Croatians'.[17] Although the language she uses in describing these patients is quite patronising, she manages to convey a sense of the poignancy of her relationships with them:

> These sick men, mostly chest and heart cases, were in the lowest possible condition, almost starving, and we had great struggles to pull them through. One, who had intestinal troubles as well, had a temperature of 40 degrees Cent. (104 degrees Fahr.) for over a week … but at length he began to yield to treatment; and later he embarrassed me by announcing daily that he owed his life only to 'Bogu e Gospodina' (God and the lady) and rubbing his forehead on my hand whenever he got the chance! He was a shepherd by trade, and strangely like a sheep. None of these men impressed one as being great warriors, nor as having much stomach for the present fight. They only longed to get home.[18]

Allied nurses and volunteers expressed a mixture of emotions towards their prisoner-patients. American volunteer Shirley Millard described how some of her German patients were 'sulky and arrogant', 'insolent, cocky and rude', and how she was afraid they might injure her or her hospital colleagues.[19] Yet she also describes how she nursed a German 'boy' of sixteen who spoke good English and had visited Milwaukee: 'I'm afraid I made quite a pet of him. I wonder if he ever did get back to America. I doubt it. His right leg was gone above the knee, and his right arm was so shattered he would never use it again. His eyes were large and gentle … He … often told me, very confidentially, that he hated the War.'[20]

Offering descriptions of well-behaved, polite, and clearly vulnerable German patients appears to have been used by some nurse writers as a deliberately pacifist device. Others may simply have felt compelled to write what they saw.

## Vera Brittain's *Testament*

Probably the most forceful – and certainly the most famous – pacifist text of the First World War is Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth*. Brittain's life has been well documented.[21] She was born in Buxton, the daughter of wealthy middle-class parents, and enjoyed a privileged and 'ladylike' upbringing. From an early age, she longed to be well educated like her much-loved brother, Edward, and persuaded her parents to allow her to be tutored for the entrance examination to Oxford University. Brittain's story has become part of the mythology of the First World War: the narrative of a golden summer followed by four years of hell.[22] As she was poised in 1914 to follow her brother and his friend Roland Leighton – with whom she was already falling in love – to Oxford, her country entered the First World War, and the lives of her generation were, at best disrupted, at worst blotted out. Brittain did begin her Oxford education, but felt compelled to leave after completion of her first year, unable to see her brother and his friends face danger and hardship at the front, while herself remaining safe at home. For a young, well-brought-up lady, nursing was the obvious choice of war work, and Brittain offered her services to the Devonshire Hospital in her home town of Buxton, starting her career as a VAD on 27 June 1915.[23] On 18 October, she transferred to the First London General Hospital at Camberwell.[24]

Brittain's writings offer a vivid illustration of the emotional trajectory followed by an intelligent young woman who, at the outset of war, engaged enthusiastically, anticipating challenge, but found horror and despair. When she first began nursing, she exclaimed in her diary: 'Oh! I love the British Tommy! I shall get so fond of these men I know. And when I look after any one of them, it is like nursing Roland by proxy.'[25] But, after Roland's death, she found that she hated the work. Claire Tylee has commented on the 'mental flannel' – the curious combination of innate innocence and susceptibility to propaganda that encouraged women like Brittain to romanticise the war until affected personally by its consequences.[26]

At both the Devonshire and the First London General, Brittain encountered distressingly overbearing nurses, who seemed intent on bullying young VADs, and at the latter hospital she judged the behaviour of the 'Bart's Sisters' harshly, referring to their 'bright immunity

from pity'.[27] Her encounters in Malta during 'a short year of glamorous beauty and delight' were altogether friendlier.[28] But it was not until she was posted to Etaples on the Western Front, in August 1917,[29] that she experienced real friendship with a trained nurse. And it was in Etaples, too, that she began to believe that the war was nothing more than a futile waste of life – a belief that was strengthened by her experiences in the 'German Ward' – the ward reserved for wounded prisoners of war. Her first encounter with German patients was an uncomfortable one:

> it was somewhat disconcerting to be pitch-forked, all alone – since VADs went on duty half an hour before the Sisters – into the midst of thirty representatives of the nation which, as I had repeatedly been told, had crucified Canadians, cut off the hands of babies, and subjected pure and stainless females to unmentionable 'atrocities'. I didn't think I had really believed all those stories, but I wasn't quite sure.[30]

In this way, Brittain gently mocks the propaganda of war, leaving the reader uncertain of the extent to which she herself has been influenced by it. Lynne Layton has commented on the ambivalence of Brittain's attitude, arguing that 'not until war touched her personally did she begin a painful rebellion against the patriarchal values that had dominated her prewar life'.[31] In fact, as Layton argues, and as Brittain's own diaries demonstrate, Brittain was drawn to the war by a belief that it was a noble cause in which a heroic generation was sacrificing itself for the good of all.[32] It was only later that she realised that 'naïve idealism … had been both the virtue and the fatal weakness of her generation'.[33] Brittain herself commented in her later autobiography, *Testament of Experience*, that her experience in the 'German Ward' had set her on the path to pacifism and work for the League of Nations.[34] In *Testament of Youth*, she recalled the vulnerability of her German prisoner-patients, and her sense of a common humanity with them. A young Prussian lieutenant, being discharged from the hospital for transport to Britain,

> held out an emaciated hand to me as he lay on the stretcher waiting to go, and murmured: 'I tank [*sic*] you, Sister.' After barely a second's hesitation I took the pale fingers in mine, thinking how ridiculous it was that I should be holding this man's hand in friendship when perhaps, only a week or two earlier, Edward up at Ypres had been doing his best to kill him. The world was mad and we were all victims; that was the only way to look at it. These

> shattered, dying boys and I were paying alike for a situation that none of us had desired or done anything to bring about.[35]

No less surprising than Brittain's fellowship with her German patients is her friendship with a trained British nurse, to whom she gives the pseudonym 'Hope Milroy'. Brittain comments that such friendship would never have been tolerated at the First London General Hospital, but that here, in Etaples, 'the Q.A. Reserve Sisters had no such feeling of professional exclusiveness towards the girls who had helped them to fight so many forms of death'.[36] Brittain is clearly impressed by 'Hope Milroy', who is her intellectual equal: 'a highbrow in revolt against highbrows'.[37] She comments on the dedication of the staff in the 'German Ward' to their prisoner-patients. There can be no doubt that institutional prejudice was shown towards the Germans: they were given far fewer members of staff to care for them. But the effects of this prejudice were ameliorated by a dedicated staff, who worked long hours and gave up their breaks to ensure that their patients were cared for. The character of Hope Milroy is used to demonstrate this ambivalence. On one occasion, she is depicted as showing concern for a patient's exposed wound by commanding Brittain to 'get the iodoform powder and scatter it over that filthy Hun!'. Brittain describes how:

> The staff of 24 General described [Milroy] as 'mental', not realising that she used her reputation for eccentricity and the uncompromising candour which it was supposed to excuse as a means of demanding more work from her subordinates than other Sisters were able to exact. At first I detested her dark attractiveness and sarcastic, relentless youth, but when I recognised her for what she was – by far the cleverest woman in the hospital, even if potentially the most alarming, and temperamentally as fitful as a weather-cock – we became constant companions off duty.[38]

Vera Brittain wrote one of her most moving poems about the 'German Ward', giving 'Hope Milroy' a central role, referring both to her 'tenderness' and to 'her scornful energy of will'.[39]

After the armistice, Brittain struggled to pick up the threads of her studies, finding herself strangely detached from life at Somerville College, Oxford, and feeling, at times, close to psychological collapse. She fought to make sense of her wartime experience while pursuing her literary career, and went on to write a number of novels, two of which, *The Dark Tide* and *Honourable Estate*, attempted to make

sense of life for those who had committed totally to war and suffered enormous –and apparently unnoticed – loss.[40]

Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth*, published in 1933 as Europe seemed to be edging towards another war, was a deliberate challenge to the jingoistic propaganda that had led the war generation to destruction. It was also an act of feminism. In her later memoir, *Testament of Experience*, Brittain described how she had read the war memoirs of Robert Graves, Richard Aldington, Erich Maria Remarque, Ernest Hemingway, Edmund Blunden, and Siegfried Sassoon, and wondered: 'Why should these young men have the war to themselves?'.[41] Women, too, had entered war with high ideals, suffered disillusionment, and then somehow found the courage to go on. Although *Testament of Youth* was written primarily in memory of the men Brittain had lost – her fiancé, her brother, and two close friends – it was also written for those women who had served in wartime, to ensure that the female voice would be heard, and that one particular feminine perspective would be understood.

## Enid Bagnold: military medicine as part of the 'war machine'

If some wartime nurse writers may be viewed as 'heretics' – as individuals who attacked the received wisdom of their day – then Enid Bagnold is perhaps one of the most skilful and least openly aggressive of these. Her soft irony and quiet observations evoke a more muted form of horrified fascination than Shirley Millard's gory descriptions or Rebecca West's clinically precise accounts and grim surgical realities. And yet, her writing claws insistently at the reader's consciousness, presenting, every so often, an image that etches itself into the memory leaving a troubling scar. Bagnold's artistry creates vivid images that – quite intentionally – disturb the complacency of those who have never encountered war injury. And yet, even as her work impresses with its honesty and openness, it repels with its detachment.

Enid Bagnold was a relatively wealthy and privileged member of British society. She was, perhaps, typical of the young, upper-middle-class women who joined VADs in their thousands, eager to participate in the war by nursing its wounded.[42] Yet, in other ways, she was atypical. As an aspiring author, she was much more

committed to writing than to nursing, and her wartime memoir, *A Diary without Dates*, appears to be designed to capture accurately, and yet also poetically, the realities of life in a military hospital. Her desire to recount her experience in an aesthetically beautiful way distorted the realities of hospital work. Many years after the war, she wrote an effusive letter to Virginia Woolf expressing both her admiration for Woolf's new novel *Orlando* and her own wish to be a better writer:

> It isn't only that I envy you, or that I admire you. Of course, I do both unstintingly. But you have found the one track that in my wildest dreams I dreamed of treading: you have found a method of spilling out all your metaphors and images … and above all, of being a poet and a novelist at the same moment … I have dreamt and lived and battled dimly towards a certain kind of writing, a sort of vase to hold poetry and prose together.[43]

In *A Diary without Dates* Bagnold seems to have wanted to capture the essence of the military hospital, rather than faithfully to chronicle its events and realities. Her desire to 'hold poetry and prose together' and to create something that transcended reality resulted in a book that is both a compelling record of her own perceptions and a highly impressionistic version of events. Ironically, Woolf's own initial reaction to *A Diary without Dates* was not favourable. She is said to have written caustically to her sister, Vanessa Bell, on 29 January 1918: 'did you ever meet a woman called Enid Bagnold – would be clever and also smart? … She has written a book, called, as you can imagine, "A Diary without Dates" all to prove that she's the most attractive and popular and exquisite of creatures.'[44]

Barbara Willard characterises Enid Bagnold as a woman who was 'fighting for a required fame' in a highly self-aware and deliberately 'bohemian' pre-war society.[45] Bagnold is said to have written for three hours a day every day, throughout her life. Her first novel, *Serena Blandish*, was published anonymously (by 'a Lady of Quality') in order to protect the sensibilities of her parents. She finally achieved the fame she desired in 1935, with the publication of her best-known book, *National Velvet*. An escapist children's novel about a butcher's daughter who wins the Grand National, the book was highly successful commercially; it made Bagnold's name on both sides of the Atlantic, and was produced as a film in 1944.[46]

Bagnold's *Diary without Dates* relates her impressions of the Royal Herbert Hospital in Woolwich, London, where she served as a volunteer nurse. Her experiences appear to have been very similar to those of other genteel volunteers, such as Vera Brittain and Irene Rathbone, differing only insofar as they did not involve the harsh 'living-in' conditions described by others.[47] In her autobiography, Bagnold writes of going on duty at the hospital and then returning to her friend Catherine's house, where she sleeps in a 'little room with gold stars on dark blue paper' and where grand parties continue throughout the war.[48] She also writes of her shock at the harshness of hospital discipline: at, for example, the way in which men are seen as 'malingerers', and beds are stripped and cleaned before the eyes of bereaved relatives.[49]

Bagnold's *Diary without Dates* emerged from this strangely disjointed lifestyle and was written as a gift for her friend, the Romanian diplomat Antoine Bibesco, who returned it with a note, saying: 'Why not keep something for yourself?'.[50] Bagnold approached William Heinemann, who agreed to publish the work and asked its author to dinner. 'We liked each other', she remarked in her autobiography,[51] and the progress of her book to and through the press illustrates the value of her social connections to her writing career.

Bagnold recounts that 'when *A Diary without Dates* was published, I was sacked from the hospital by the Matron in the first half-hour of my day'.[52] She joined the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry and went to France, where she served as an ambulance driver during the last months of the war. In the immediate post-war period she travelled through the war zone recording her impressions. Her writing from this phase of her life was very different from *A Diary without Dates*. Her novel *The Happy Foreigner* tells of a love affair between an English VAD and a French artillery captain, and is based, in part, on numbered letters, sent home to her mother.[53] Several successful novels followed.[54] In 1941 she wrote her first play, *Lottie Dundass*,[55] which was rapidly followed by others, including the highly successful *The Chalk Garden*, which ran for two years in London's West End.[56] In old age, she referred to herself as 'an old lady masking a sort of everlasting girl inside', and Nigel Nicolson describes her as 'an exhilarating companion … ebulliently communicative', yet 'too fond of the great and grand to be taken seriously by the literary establishment'.[57] Perhaps it was

not only the literary establishment that refused to take Enid Bagnold seriously. In the world of the military hospital, her insights into the experiences of her patients were seen as, at best, naive and, at worst, highly unprofessional and potentially damaging.

It is a feature of the published writings of volunteer nurses that they tended to focus on the harshness of hospital discipline, particularly as it was expressed through the actions and attitudes of trained professional nurses. The power and popularity of their writings was such that the detachment and inhumanity of some military hospital nurses has acquired the status of myth. Bagnold's own contribution to the myth is a particularly powerful one. The image she offers of the military discipline she encountered at the Royal Herbert Hospital is one that stays with the reader long after her laconic and deftly written text has been left behind. She writes of a new sister, who 'is absolutely without personality, beyond her medal. She appears to be deaf.'[58] Later she comments that '*My* Sister is afraid of death. She told me so. And not the less afraid, she said, after all she has seen of it. That is terrible. But the new Sister is afraid of life. She is shorter-sighted.'[59] By means of such terse sentences, Bagnold throws the full weight of her not-inconsiderable judgement against her professional nursing colleagues. She comments on how one sister sits by the fire with the medical officer drinking tea, 'a harmless amusement', while a patient suffers unbearable pain in a bed nearby. When she draws the patient's pain to the sister's attention, the latter merely comments 'quite decently' that 'He must stick it out.'[60] And there is the sister who has 'eternal youth, eternal fair hair, cold and ignorant judgments'.[61] Eventually, she observes:

> I shall never get to understand Sisters; they are so strange, so tricky, uncertain as collies. Deep down they have an ineradicable axiom: that any visitor, anyone in an old musquash coat, in a high-boned collar, in a spotted veil tied up at the sides, anyone with whom one shakes hands or takes tea, is more important than the most charming patient (except, of course, a warded M.O.).[62]

Yet, Angela Smith has identified a contradiction at the heart of Bagnold's text. Like many women's writings of the Great War, *A Diary without Dates* identifies the strange role reversal that permits female nurses to hold power over their male soldier-patients, and in which there is a 'constant dehumanization and infantilisation' of wounded

combatants.[63] Bagnold both dissociates herself from this power and expresses a fascination with it.

Bagnold retains her sense of compassion for her patients – but only with difficulty. Alongside her terse representations of the unintentional callousness of the medical and nursing staff, she places some of the most extraordinary evocations of suffering to be found in war literature. We read of Mr Wickes, who paid a private specialist to cure his illness, yet lies helpless in a hospital bed staring at his 'haunted bedrail'; or of 'Smiff', whose 'foot is off' and who complains at being kept 'starin' at green walls … [for] nine blessed months'.[64] Or of Corrigan, who is given an anti-tetanus injection without being asked for his consent or even informed that a needle is about to be inserted into his arm.[65] We learn as much as it is possible to learn of pain by reading about Rees, who,

> when he wakes, wakes sobbing and says, 'Don't go away nurse' … holds my hand in a fierce clutch, then releases it to point in the air, crying, 'there's the pain!' as though the pain filled the air and rose to the rafters. As he wakes it centralizes, until at last comes the moment when he says, 'Me arm aches cruel', and points to it. Then one can leave him.[66]

Fear, too, is a focus for Bagnold. She tells the story of Gayner, who is convinced he has tetanus. He is unable to keep still, and feels that his 'jaws want to close'. Bagnold's text is pervaded with both Gayner's fear and her own. As a new and inexperienced VAD, she is terrified that her patient may actually be mortally ill. When his temperature proves to be normal, she feels unable to speak to him about his fears because he is 'one of those men so pent up, so rigid with some inner indignation, one cannot tamper with the locks'. The trained junior sister meets Bagnold's news of Gayner's symptoms with equanimity and the 'gimlet-eyed' doctor pronounces the diagnosis to be 'hysteria'. Bagnold's anxiety shifts. She no longer fears that her patient may actually die of tetanus; her attention now is on his immediate suffering and her own helplessness: '"Is no one going to reassure Gayner?" I wondered. And no one did. Isn't the fear of pain next brother to pain itself? Tetanus or the fear of tetanus – a choice between twin nightmares. Don't they admit that?'[67]

Bagnold's position as a relatively powerless figure in the hospital hierarchy is, perhaps, one of the reasons for her frustration and

her latent hostility towards the qualified staff. In another episode, she promises a patient in pain that he will receive a sedative at eight o'clock. But the sister chooses not to give the drug, because 'he will want it more later in the night, and he can't have it twice'. Bagnold is honest about her own error: 'I ran back to tell him so quickly – but one cannot run back into the past'.[68]

Ultimately, Bagnold's message is that war dehumanises everyone: its victims; those who nurse them; and the civilians who remain at home, comfortable in their ignorance of its realities. Her ultimate anxiety is about her own process of dehumanisation. Her text is watchful; it logs not only what she sees, but her own reactions to those sights. We gain the impression that one of her purposes in writing her *Diary without Dates* is to prevent herself becoming hardened by her experience. And yet it is difficult not to sympathise also – at least to some extent – with the senior nursing staff of the Royal Herbert Hospital who reacted to the publication of her book by summarily dismissing her. Her observations are perhaps just a little too keen; her descriptions of her patients' lives, her recounting of their most private sayings and experiences, just a little too accurate. Her breach of confidentiality, her breaking of trust, is too obvious – obvious enough to become an act of bad faith. Her truth is just too fierce, her reality too harsh. And yet, these are also the qualities that give *A Diary without Dates* its power.

### Needed by the country: Irene Rathbone's 'novel'

One of the best known women's memoirs of the First World War is Irene Rathbone's *We That Were Young*. First published in 1932 it quickly achieved popularity and remained in press for much of the twentieth century. Hugely readable, with engaging characters and dramatic (if not melodramatic) plotlines, it contains many of the tropes of popular mid-twentieth-century women's fiction: an attractive central heroine who suffers, yet stands by her ideals; a handsome and steadfast, but somewhat distant, hero, who provides a romantic interest without distracting the reader from the heroine's adventures; a group of female friends, whose fortunes provide sub-plots, adding interest to the broader narrative; and, as backdrop, the Great War, depicted as a dreadful force and lending an epic quality to the narrative. *We That*

*Were Young* appears to have been highly valued by a post-war generation brought up on both Bessie Marchant's novels of high adventure, and myths of the hardships and challenges faced by First World War VADs.[69] It depicts female wartime action in many guises: volunteer work in YMCA rest stations; dangerous and exhausting munitions work; and, of course, that classic female contribution to the war: nursing work in military hospitals.

Rathbone's purpose in writing the novel was undoubtedly to record the contributions of young women to the British nation during the First World War, and to inform a post-war generation of the significance of their service. A sense of the suffering endured by the war generation – both male and female – suffuses the book. In reading it, one senses that Rathbone felt compelled to record the sadness and horror behind the experiences of those who were young at the time of the war. In this sense, her novel is a classic example of the type of female war writing that emerged in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Works by men such as Erich Maria Remarque (*All Quiet on the Western Front*), Henri Barbusse (*Le Feu*), Robert Graves (*Goodbye to All That*), and Edmund Blunden (*Undertones of War*) had sought to find a language that would enable those who had fought to make sense of their experience – an experience that could never be shared by those who had remained at home. But a handful of women began to offer their own perspectives at around the same time.[70] Published in 1932, a year before Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth*, Rathbone's novel was one of a small number of women's writings that offered witness testimony to the realities of female war service. A sense of outrage at the apparent indifference of those not directly involved in the conflict suffuses the novel, mirroring that expressed by male writers. On one occasion Rathbone's heroine, Joan, berates an uncle who claims to envy her generation, declaring: 'I think it's utterly damnable to be young at this particular time of history. The "splendid burden" as you call it will break us before we're through.'[71]

Rathbone's work, because of its rather melodramatic and often sentimental style, never became a part of the 'canon' of First World War writings. Rathbone clearly decided – for whatever reason – not to offer a straightforward memoir of her war years, writing, instead, a semi-fictionalised account, which, while safeguarding herself and friends whose experiences she may have depicted, leaves the reader

unsure about what is real and what imagined. Rathbone's purpose may have been to touch the emotions of her readers, rather than to offer a faithful record of events. And yet, much of the detail of her book seems to be offered with realism in mind – as when she describes a typical day at the First London General Hospital, in which VADs sweep floors, dust lockers, empty bedpans, 'take down' dressings, cut up food, make swabs, pad splints, and rub patients' 'backs'.[72] Rathbone's work has contradiction at its core. On the one hand, its descriptions of hospital life are vivid and arresting, and contain sufficient detail to convince the reader that they are drawn from life. On the other, the book's narrative passages are full of melodrama and romance. Over the whole is placed the subtitle: *A Novel by Irene Rathbone*.

Rathbone depicts the trained, professional nurses of the First London General Hospital as stereotypes of unfeeling, middle-aged spinsters.[73] The discipline they mete out to VADs, orderlies, and patients is often harsh and invariably meaningless. In their working lives, they exhibit a marked lack of creativity and imagination; and they appear to have no personal or social lives at all. Indeed, they live their lives in 'bunks': small, narrow rooms beside their wards, which seem to symbolise their small, narrow minds.[74] The matron is depicted as an unthinking martinet, who places hospital discipline above patient care. Rathbone's image of Rachael Cox Davies, matron of the First London General Hospital, as 'a brute of a woman'[75] contrasts with the *BJN*'s presentation of her as a fine leader, who inspires an admirable 'esprit de corps' among her trained staff, the majority of whom are 'St Bartholomew's trained, and have great pride in their identity'.[76]

The novel traces the development of the VAD nurse's skills. Its heroine, Joan, first volunteers for hospital service in 1916, having served for some time in a YMCA rest hut in northern France. She finds herself working in a small hospital in Hampstead peeling potatoes and cutting 'stacks of bread'. Eventually, she moves from the kitchens to the wards, but still finds herself 'more of a housemaid than of a nurse'.[77] It is only when convoys of wounded begin 'pouring in' from the Somme battlefields in July 1916 that Joan is finally called up to the First London General Hospital as a volunteer nurse. Her relief is evident. Here, at last, are both recognition and action: 'The middle-class,

home-sheltered girls of England felt, at last, that their existence was not wholly futile. How different from being merely "allowed to do things" was the fact of being definitely asked to come and do them. They were in the same position as their brothers now: needed by the country.'[78] Yet her pride is matched by her anxiety, as she finds work in a military hospital very different from her previous experience:

> It had been one thing to amble in and out of cosy little wards at the Hampstead hospital, carrying meals, doing housework, and even assisting at the mild dressings; it was quite another here, in Ward 33 of the 1st London General, to see limbs which shrapnel had torn about and swollen into abnormal shapes, from which yellow pus poured when the bandages were removed, which were caked with brown blood, and in whose gangrenous flesh loose bits of bone had to be sought for painfully with probes.[79]

At night, she dreams of horrific wounds. But by the end of a week, she has 'adjusted herself' and is able to face the horrors of the First London General with equanimity, pouring her energies into the task of doing her job well, infusing the mundane work with a sense of value – both practical and spiritual. Rathbone writes of the mental 'adjustments' made by Joan and other VADs in glowing terms – as a natural consequence of their endurance and fortitude. Of the adjustments made by trained, professional nurses, she is casually critical. We soon learn, for example, that the trained nurse in charge of Ward 33 is Sister Ewart, 'a gaunt, rather acid woman of few words but great efficiency'. Meanwhile, it seems an acknowledged fact that all nurses 'cringed to their superiors' and 'treated their subordinates with severity'.[80]

Alongside her deep interest in nurses and their work stands Rathbone's fascination with relationships between VADs and their patients. She comments on how she wondered, years later, why open flirtation between the two was so rare. Apart from the strict rules forbidding such flirtation, she chooses to attribute the preservation of professional distance to a combination of 'the hospital atmosphere … the decency of the men … and a certain English directness and innocence in her young self'.[81] And yet, she comments on how it gave her heroine, Joan, 'a peculiar soothing joy to take hold of a long white arm, to soap it, sponge it, and dry it; to wash a muscular young back'. She adds that, although a 'fixed and rigid' gulf existed between nurse

and patient, 'across that gulf, unrecognized and certainly unheeded by either, stretched the faint sweet fingers of sex'.[82] And Rathbone does openly break the taboos of the nurse–patient relationship by depicting a somewhat overwrought love affair between one of her characters, Pamela, and a New Zealand officer, which ends in tragedy when the officer dies in action. This episode, along with numerous others in which VADs are depicted struggling with overwork, harsh living conditions, and loss, are clearly designed to give power to Rathbone's message: that women as well as men served their country and suffered during the Great War. Perhaps the most dramatic playing-out of this theme is Joan's near-fatal injury, which begins as a septic finger and ends as a life-threatening septicaemia.[83] And at the very end of the war – after the armistice has been signed – Joan loses a beloved brother to the 'Spanish Flu' epidemic, which sweeps a weakened population. Joan, just like any front-line soldier, risks her life, suffers pain and loss, and faces life at the end of the war experiencing 'at the roots of her being … a vast indifference'.[84]

## Conclusion: the VAD as witness

Britain's 'VADs' achieved iconic status after the First World War. Because they personified the classic feminine traits of gentleness, compassion, and kindness, and yet worked under harsh conditions and exhibited both mental and physical strength, they became invested with notions of ideal British womanhood. They acted out this ideal, demonstrating a willingness both to comfort the wounded and to undertake heavy manual labour. They exhibited courage, endurance, and fortitude – qualities seen as highly desirable in a victorious nation with an empire to preserve. In post-war mythology, the trained nurses to whose supervision they owed so much of their skill and knowledge acted as foils to their courage and humanity – tough, working women who were somehow just part of the inhumanity of the military medical machine. The injustice of some VAD representations of trained nurses has only recently been exposed.[85] And yet, because of both their powerlessness and their relative detachment from the hospital hierarchy, VADs were also able to give vivid and arresting accounts of patients' experiences. Some of their writings have acted as significant witness statements about the suffering created by the First World War,

by focusing on the realities of injury and trauma. And the focus of VADs on German prisoner-patients was, perhaps, one of the earliest and most tentative ways in which some women began to question the validity of warfare itself.

Thelka Bowser, advocate of the VAD movement, wrote in 1917: 'The Great War has revealed many national truths never even suspected before it burst upon the world, but amongst all its surprises none has been greater than that provided by the success of the Voluntary Aid Detachment movement.'[86] Each generation makes its own 'national truths', and these are modelled and moulded by the powerful writings of witnesses. The notion that the Great War was a catastrophe that 'burst upon the world' giving rise to a heroic response was only just beginning to be broken down when Irene Rathbone wrote of her heroine's sense of 'vast indifference', and Vera Brittain reflected on her encounters with the German lieutenant who held out his hand and said: 'I tank you, Sister.'[87]

## Notes

1 On the work of VADs, see: Thelka Bowser, *The Story of British VAD Work in the Great War* (London: Imperial War Museum, 2003 [1917]); Sharon Ouditt, *Fighting Forces, Writing Women: Identity and Ideology in the First World War* (London: Routledge, 1994); 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; Audrey Cruse, 'The Diary of Alice Maud Batt', *Journal of Medical Biography*, 18.4 (2010): 205–10; 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): 18–20.

2 Lesley Smith, *Four Years out of Life* (London: Philip Allan, 1931): 16–17.

3 For an exploration of their writings to professional journals on these issues, see: Hallett, 'Emotional Nursing'.

4 Kate Finzi, *Eighteen Months in the War Zone: The Record of One Woman's Work on the Western Front* (London: Cassell, 1916): *passim*; Smith, *Four Years out of Life*: *passim*. On tensions felt by these writers between patriotism and a desire to give a 'true' image of the realities of war, see: Angela Smith, *The Second Battlefield: Women, Modernism and the First World War*

(Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), Chapter 3, 'Accidental Modernisms': 70–101; Santanu Das, *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), Chapter 5, '"The Impotence of Sympathy": Service and Suffering in the Nurses' Memoirs': 175–203, and Chapter 6, 'The Operating Theatre': 204–28.

5 Finzi, *Eighteen Months in the War Zone*: 30–4.

6 For a commentary on the emotional pressures faced by nurses in military hospitals, see: Das, *Touch and Intimacy*, Part III, 'Wounds': 175–228.

7 Smith, *Four Years out of Life*: 119.

8 Such narratives are told particularly powerfully in the writings of Irene Rathbone and Enid Bagnold, and are described in more detail later in this chapter. See: Irene Rathbone, *We That Were Young: A Novel* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1989 [1932]); Enid Bagnold, *A Diary without Dates* (London: Virago, 1978 [1918]); Enid Bagnold, *Enid Bagnold's Autobiography (from 1889)*, introduction by Barbara Willard (London: Century Publishing, 1985 [1969]): 112–13.

9 D. M. Richards, *Blues and Reds*, memoir, P328, Imperial War Museum, London, unpaginated.

10 Richards, *Blues and Reds*.

11 See, for example: Dorothy Potts, MS letters, 3246 Con Shelf, Imperial War Museum, London; Joyce M. Sapwell, 'The Reminiscences of a VAD', T2SAP, Red Cross Archive, London; Mary Schiff, papers and letters, 1788/1, Red Cross Archive, London.

12 Richards, *Blues and Reds*.

13 Anon., *Twenty Months a VAD* (Sheffield: J. Northen, n.d.), 96/317, Red Cross Archive, London: 13.

14 Anon., *Twenty Months a VAD*: 24.

15 Anon., *Twenty Months a VAD*: 29–30.

16 Anon., *Twenty Months a VAD*: 30.

17 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): 75.

18 Tayler, *A Scottish Nurse at War*: 77.

19 Shirley Millard, *I Saw Them Die: Diary and Recollections of Shirley Millard*, ed. Adele Comandini (London: George G. Harrap, 1936): 37–8.

20 Millard, *I Saw Them Die*: 43.

21 The most complete and detailed biography of Vera Brittain is: Paul Berry and Mark Bostridge, *Vera Brittain: A Life* (London: Virago Press, 2001).

22 This notion of 'that last summer' is discussed by Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000 [1975]): 24.

23 Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth: An Autobiographical Study of the Years 1900–1925* (London: Virago Press, 2004 [1933]): 141.

24 Brittain, *Testament of Youth* (2004), 179.

25 Vera Brittain, *Chronicle of Youth* (London: Phoenix Press, 2000 [1981]): 230.
26 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). See also: Carol Acton, 'Negotiating Injury and Masculinity in First World War Nurses' Writing', in Fell and Hallett, *First World War Nursing*: 123–38.
27 Brittain, *Testament of Youth*: 187.
28 Brittain, *Testament of Youth*: 263.
29 Brittain, *Testament of Youth*: 334.
30 These three stories were particularly current during the early years of the war, and Brittain undoubtedly chose them deliberately when recounting her experience in the early 1930s. Brittain, *Testament of Youth*: 340. On the use of these particular narratives as propaganda, see: Trudi Tate, *Modernism, History and the First World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998): 43–6.
31 Lynne Layton, 'Vera Brittain's Testament(s)', 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): 70–83.
32 Vera Brittain's diaries were published in 1981: Brittain, *Chronicle of Youth*.
33 Lynne Layton, 'Vera Brittain's Testament(s)': 72.
34 Vera Brittain, *Testament of Experience: An Autobiographical Story of the Years 1925–1950* (London: Fontana, 1980 [1957]): 471.
35 Brittain, *Testament of Youth*: 343.
36 Brittain, *Testament of Youth*: 347.
37 Brittain, *Testament of Youth*: 341.
38 Brittain, *Testament of Youth*: 342. This quotation is also given in: Christine E. Hallett, ' "A very valuable fusion of classes": British Professional and Volunteer Nurses of the First World War', *Endeavour*, 38.2 (2014): 101–10.
39 Vera Brittain, *Because You Died: Poetry and Prose of the First World War and After*, ed. Mark Bostridge (London: Virago, 2008): 39.
40 Vera Brittain, *The Dark Tide* (New York: Macmillan, 1936 [1923]); Vera Brittain, *Honourable Estate: A Novel of Transition* (New York: Macmillan, 1936). See also: Layton, 'Vera Brittain's Testament(s)': 77–80; Berry and Bostridge, *Vera Brittain*: 129–52.
41 Brittain, *Testament of Experience*: 77.
42 Bagnold, *Autobiography*: *passim*. On the contribution of volunteer nurses to the war effort, see: Ouditt, *Fighting Forces, Writing Women*: 7–46.
43 Enid Jones, letter to Virginia Woolf (née Stephen), typescript copy, 1933; SxMs 18, Monks House Papers, Library of the University of Sussex, Brighton.
44 Angela Smith is here quoting: Anna Sebba, *Enid Bagnold: The Authorised Biography* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1986): 61. See: Smith, *The Second Battlefield*: 73.

45 Barbara Willard, introduction to Bagnold, *Autobiography*.
46 Enid Bagnold, *National Velvet* (London: William Heinemann, 1935). The book was reprinted in 1939, 1946, 1954, 1958, 1962, 1978, 1984, and 1992. See: Willard, introduction to Bagnold, *Autobiography*.
47 Brittain, *Testament of Youth*; Rathbone, *We That Were Young*.
48 Bagnold, *Autobiography*: 112–13.
49 Bagnold, *Autobiography*: 128.
50 Bagnold, *Autobiography*: 128. See also: Smith, *The Second Battlefield*: 73–4.
51 Bagnold, *Autobiography*: 128.
52 Bagnold, *Autobiography*: 129.
53 Enid Bagnold, *The Happy Foreigner* (London: Virago Press, 1987 [1920]).
54 Enid Bagnold's novels include: Anon., *Serena Blandish; or, The Difficulty of Getting Married: By a Lady of Quality* (London: Heinemann, 1924); Enid Bagnold, *Alice, Thomas and Jane* (London: William Heinemann, 1930); Enid Bagnold, *The Squire* (London: William Heinemann, 1938); Enid Bagnold, *The Loved and Envied* (London: William Heinemann, 1951).
55 Enid Bagnold, *Lottie Dundass* (London: William Heinemann, 1941).
56 Enid Bagnold, *The Chalk Garden* (London: Willliam Heinemann, 1956). The play was reprinted in 1957, 1959, and 1970, and was translated into French in 1979. See: Nigel Nicolson, 'Bagnold, Enid Algerine [*Married Name* Enid Algerine Jones, Lady Jones] (1889–1981), Novelist and Playwright', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
57 Nicolson, 'Bagnold, Enid Algerine'.
58 Bagnold, *A Diary without Dates*: 12.
59 Bagnold, *A Diary without Dates*: 18.
60 Bagnold, *A Diary without Dates*: 23–4.
61 Bagnold, *A Diary without Dates*: 67.
62 Bagnold, *A Diary without Dates*: 29.
63 Smith, *The Second Battlefield*: 76–7.
64 Bagnold, *A Diary without Dates*: 57, 85.
65 Bagnold, *A Diary without Dates*: 86–7.
66 Bagnold, *A Diary without Dates*: 89–90.
67 Bagnold, *A Diary without Dates*: 105–6.
68 Bagnold, *A Diary without Dates*: 112.
69 Michelle Smith, 'Adventurous Girls of the British Empire: The Pre-War Novels of Bessie Marchant', *The Lion and the Unicorn*, 33.1 (2009): 1–25.
70 The best known texts are by Vera Brittain, Mary Borden, and Irene Rathbone herself: Brittain, *Testament of Youth*; Mary Borden, *The Forbidden Zone* (London: William Heinemann, 1929); Rathbone, *We That Were Young*.
71 Rathbone, *We That Were Young*: 126.
72 Rathbone, *We That Were Young*: 208–14.
73 The one exception – who seems to prove the rule – is Sister Muir, who was 'brimming with kindliness': Rathbone, *We That Were Young*: 284.

74 Rathbone, *We That Were Young*: 196, 210, 221–3.
75 Rathbone, *We That Were Young*: 224.
76 Anon., Column, *BJN* (16 June 1917): 415.
77 Rathbone, *We That Were Young*: 123, 128.
78 Rathbone, *We That Were Young*: 194.
79 Rathbone, *We That Were Young*: 194.
80 Rathbone, *We That Were Young*: 196, 210.
81 Rathbone, *We That Were Young*: 213.
82 Rathbone, *We That Were Young*: 213.
83 Rathbone, *We That Were Young*: 237–45.
84 Rathbone, *We That Were Young*: 449.
85 Ouditt, *Fighting Forces, Writing Women*; Sharon Ouditt, *Women Writers of the First World War: An Annotated Bibliography* (London: Routledge, 2000); Watson, 'Wars in the Wards'; Christine Hallett, *Containing Trauma: Nursing Work in the First World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009); Hallett, 'Emotional Nursing'; Hallett, *Veiled Warriors*: *passim*.
86 Thelka Bowser, *The Story of British VAD Work*: Introduction.
87 Rathbone, *We That Were Young*: 449; Brittain, *Testament of Youth*: 343.