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## Nurse Writers of the Great War

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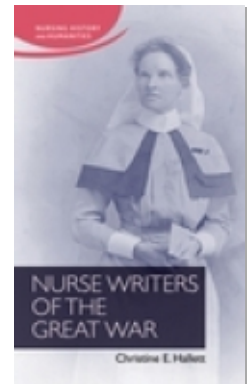
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# Introduction

## **The Great War remembered**

The First World War was known in its own time as the Great War; its protagonists believed that it would be ‘the war to end all wars.’<sup>1</sup> The earliest attempts to recapture it – either as memoir or as history – struggled to put into words a reality that was so complex that it defied expression. Later generations created their own collective cultural understandings but most of these were based on the male, combatant experience. It was not until the 1980s that the perspectives of women gained public attention; even then, the voices of trained nurses remained mostly silent.

This book offers an analysis of the published war memoirs of nurses – both trained and volunteer. It examines the ways in which the cultural and social backgrounds of nurse writers influenced the ways in which they wrote. It is both a collective biography of a small but significant group, and an exploration of a particular type of cultural output. It asks: What were the experiences of nurses who wrote war memoirs? What motivated them to write? What images of themselves and their work did they project? What meanings did they apply to their experiences of the war? And how did these meanings draw upon or challenge existing cultural norms and conventions? It considers both the significance nurses attached to their work and the ways they chose to project their understandings of the war. Many nurses perpetuated the heroic myths of war; others unconsciously challenged these; still others deliberately attacked

allied wartime propaganda and began the process of constructing new understandings.

Several nurses' memoirs were published during the First World War; yet, by the end of the 1920s, very few were widely available.<sup>2</sup> The publication of soldiers' memoirs followed a very different pattern. Very few had been produced during the war itself,<sup>3</sup> but the late 1920s and early 1930s saw an outpouring of powerful and moving memoirs, which were produced in large numbers and were widely read. Among them were Edmund Blunden's *Undertones of War*, Siegfried Sassoon's *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man*, Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, and Robert Graves's *Goodbye to All That*.<sup>4</sup> Soon after the publication of the earliest soldier memoirs, a new group of female writers – among whom Vera Brittain was probably the most successful – began to publish books about their wartime experiences.<sup>5</sup> These early memoirs ended a ten year 'silence' during which very little had been written about the war, and set the tone and content of later generations' understandings of the conflict. But, for the first post-war generation, remembrance was complicated by the looming possibility of another European conflict.

During and immediately after the Second World War, the world's focus was on a very different form of 'total war', and it was not until the 1960s that historians were able to reach back to the early years of the century to re-evaluate the war in which their grandfathers had fought. Authors such as A. J. P. Taylor deliberately placed the common soldier – variously referred to as 'the common man' or 'everyman' – into the historical record.<sup>6</sup> At around the same time, compilations of First World War poetry were published for use in schools, and the darkly satirical *Oh! What a Lovely War* was performed by the Theatre Workshop in London and then developed into a film by Richard Attenborough.<sup>7</sup> It became clear that the writings of those who emerged from the trenches of France and Flanders had changed the culture and expectations of western societies irrevocably, such that, in 1967, Stanley Cooperman could write that 'we are all creatures of the First World War'.<sup>8</sup>

In the 1970s a new genre emerged – a focus on the cultural history of the war. Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* – a remarkable exploration of the cultural significance of First World War literature – still stands as a guidepost for those approaching the subject.<sup>9</sup> Written at a time when the second and third post-war generations

were evaluating the meaning of the conflict, Fussell's book surveyed the landscape of the Great War from a vantage point beyond its most far-reaching ramifications, looking back across a historical landscape coloured by the Great Depression, the Second World War and the cultural freedom of the 1960s. Rather than attempting to recapture the mentality of the war generation, Fussell's book produced a creative and imaginative reworking of his own generation's reading of the Great War literary canon. Citing the Second World War memoirist Robert Kee, Fussell observed that 'it is those artists who re-create life rather than try to recapture it who, in one way, prove the good historians in the end'.<sup>10</sup>

In the 1980s the emerging field of women's history – a movement riding the crest of second-wave feminism – addressed women's almost complete absence from the historical record of the First World War. Lyn MacDonald was one of the first to redress the imbalance, through her evocative oral history of First World War nursing, *The Roses of No Man's Land*, published in 1980.<sup>11</sup> A year later, Catherine Reilly's edited anthology of women's war poems gave women a place in the canon of war writings alongside their more famous male counterparts.<sup>12</sup> In 1983, Sandra Gilbert argued emotively that, at the same time as reducing the male combatant to a victim – damaged or destroyed by technology, bureaucracy, and an overbearing military hierarchy – the war had raised women to positions of unprecedented power.<sup>13</sup> Later writers modified Gilbert's thesis, observing, for example, that women's gains – if indeed they were gains – were relinquished after the war, when most returned to their pre-war positions in low-paid work or unpaid domesticity.<sup>14</sup> Margaret and Patrice Higonnet suggested that men's and women's positions in the labour market could be compared to a 'double helix', in which women's roles were always subordinate.<sup>15</sup> The entrenched notion that women were the 'angels of the house' – guardians of the domestic and private life – was too powerful to be overturned by the First World War,<sup>16</sup> however 'topsy-turvy' the world might have become.<sup>17</sup> Joan Scott nevertheless asserted that wars have always been seen as watersheds for women: in wartime women gained new roles and opportunities; won political rights (albeit apparently because of their wartime 'good behaviour'); and became more involved in politics, often through pacifism. In the long term, the effects of war 'revolutionized women's status'.<sup>18</sup>

In 1990, Claire Tylee wrote women irrevocably into the cultural history of the First World War. Drawing upon the work of Fussell, she examined the ways in which the war had altered the consciousness of Western society; but, where Fussell had focused on the writings of men, she highlighted the importance of women as both memoirists and commentators.<sup>19</sup> Her book was part of a growing new focus, adding to an already developing emphasis on women's roles in the First World War.<sup>20</sup> One of her significant themes was the ways in which allied governments – the British in particular – had deliberately used propaganda to promote the war.<sup>21</sup> The propagandist project consciously went well beyond the protection of the public, and Tylee asserted that most women were its 'easy victims'.<sup>22</sup> Even those who served as nurses and deplored the suffering of their patients were still often trapped within the mental straitjacket of their upbringing within a patriarchal and imperialistic society. The Defence of the Realm Act of August 1914 had outlawed the publication of anti-war texts,<sup>23</sup> but for most women such legal restraint was not even required: lack of political and educational opportunity acted as a sufficient brake on their thinking and expression.<sup>24</sup> One of the most constraining images for nurses was that of themselves as a nurturing, Madonna-like figure, reaching, perhaps, its most extreme representation in Alonzo Earl Foringer's poster of a huge Madonna cradling a helpless child-sized wounded soldier, which was published by the American Red Cross at Christmas 1918.<sup>25</sup>

In examining the writings of nurses, I have been influenced by authors such as Jane Schultz, whose work on American Civil War nursing has transformed our perceptions of the influence of female identity on nursing work;<sup>26</sup> Santanu Das, whose incisive analysis of the interplay between nurses' personal trauma and their wartime writings has deepened our understanding of the work of female modernists;<sup>27</sup> and Paul Berry and Mark Bostridge, whose meticulous research on the life of Vera Brittain has made it possible for historians to offer deeper analyses of the significance of her autobiographical writing.<sup>28</sup>

This work also owes a debt to writers such as Margaret Higonnet, Angela Smith, and Janet Watson, who explored nurses' writings among those of other women.<sup>29</sup> It extends their work by deepening the focus on nurses; it offers new insight into well-known nurse authors, and explores the work of previously neglected authors. Most of the

published writings of those who nursed the wounded during the First World War were influenced by the cultural tropes and accepted beliefs of their time. But some writers deliberately questioned those tropes and beliefs. This book explores, not only the ways in which nurse writers chose to project themselves as nurses, but also the meanings they gave to their experiences. In caring for those damaged by the First World War, nurses were the most immediate witnesses to the consequences of industrial warfare. Standing between the front lines and the 'home front', and dealing daily with the worst injuries produced by war, they were ideally placed to witness the results of early-twentieth-century modes of combat. This book examines the ways in which some nurse writers were influenced by the myths of their time; it also examines how some demolished those myths, and constructed a new mythology of war, and of war nursing.

### Memory and memoir

In 1928, Edmund Blunden wrote of the difficulties associated with remembering the First World War: 'I know that memory has her little ways, and by now she has concealed precisely that look, that word, that coincidence of nature without and nature within which I long to remember.'<sup>30</sup> Thirty-six years later, the Baroness de T'Serclaes sat down to write her own memoir: 'the past comes flooding in', she asserted; 'half-forgotten memories – like the medals in their glass case – seem to demand attention, a good dust, a new look at their significance.'<sup>31</sup> Perhaps the most telling part of her comment is her reference to the 'medals in their glass case'. In writing her memoir, she appears to be engaged in a dual process: of both recreating the past and constructing a narrative – even a myth – of her own life. But not all nurse writers set out deliberately to compose their memoirs. Julia Stimson's *Finding Themselves*, a compilation of the letters she sent home to her family during the war, was clearly written contemporaneously with the events it describes.<sup>32</sup> The letters were composed under difficult conditions in a base hospital in France, where she was sharing a large, partitioned building with her nursing staff. 'I do not know whether I can use this precious type-writer without disturbing all the other nurses on the other side of my room-wall',<sup>33</sup> she commented, and her book was clearly compiled from material written in

snatched moments. Nurses – as part of a larger group of middle-class women – appear to have written wherever and whenever they could. Fussell commented that the war coincided with a period in which an education focusing on a canon of ‘classical’ literature was being extended across social class boundaries.<sup>34</sup> It was also – more slowly – crossing gender ones. British Voluntary Aid Detachment nurse Vera Brittain, more than any other ‘nurse writer’, epitomises the way in which women embraced the early twentieth century’s opportunities for education. But she was not the only nurse writer with such aspiration. Some North American nurse memoirists held bachelor’s degrees from prestigious universities such as McGill, Montreal; and Columbia, New York City. In an era in which there was no radio or television, writing and speaking were the most common forms of amusement and entertainment. Nurses kept diaries avidly – even when to do so was in direct contravention of military regulations. They also wrote numerous letters ‘home’, always in anticipation that those letters would be passed from hand to hand and read by whole families and communities.<sup>35</sup>

Most of the texts considered here were written with publication in mind. Such ‘life writings’ present a serious challenge to historians. They almost always contain some elements of novel-writing.<sup>36</sup> The reader may even be required to ‘suspend disbelief’, a process that is alien to historical research. In this book, nurse memoirs are used as windows onto the lived experience of their authors – a lived experience that is taking place at a particular time, the First World War, and that contains embedded, often coded, and sometimes unconscious messages about what it meant to be a nurse during that conflict. Joan Scott emphasises the importance of an acknowledgement of ‘experience’ as a significant but hitherto neglected element of historical interpretation.<sup>37</sup> In nurse memoirs, the remembered experience of the individual is the lens through which the historical narrative is viewed.

Nevertheless, the problem of veracity remains. Ultimately, as Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson point out: ‘autobiographical truth resides in the intersubjective exchange between narrator and reader aimed at producing a shared understanding of the meaning of a life.’<sup>38</sup> In *Nurse Writers of the Great War*, that meaning is multi-layered. The presentation of several lives (or part-lives) chronicled by the writers themselves, interpreted by the historian, and then reinterpreted

by the reader, will produce multiple, and only partially shared, understandings.

In their ground-breaking book *Reading Autobiography*, Smith and Watson argue that 'to reduce autobiographical narration to facticity is to strip it of the densities of rhetorical, literary, ethical, political, and cultural dimensions'.<sup>39</sup> In some ways they appear to argue that the value of autobiography – certainly its 'truth value' – goes beyond that of other historical sources. However, they also identify numerous threats to historical accuracy in life writing. Memoirists often present their accounts as histories witnessed from particular perspectives, but their writings go way beyond the mere describing of a remembered past; they also perform 'rhetorical acts'.<sup>40</sup> In their war memoirs, nurses are giving voice to their own perspectives, answering their critics, and projecting desired images of themselves.

Even as they acknowledge the epistemological fragility of life writing, Smith and Watson also challenge the apparent 'truth-value' and factual basis of traditional histories. Historians are assertive in their claims to both accuracy and veracity, stressing, among other claims, that their sources have greater validity than those of other writers. Yet, to focus only on 'traditional' historical sources, such as official documents diaries and letters, is to ignore a large and significant body of evidence. The study of nurses' First World War memoirs has the potential to open a window onto the norms, perspectives, and desires of a hidden occupational and social grouping at a key historical moment. As Susan Friedman has argued, prior to the late twentieth century, autobiography was associated with the white, elite, western male.<sup>41</sup> The perspectives of early-twentieth-century nurses were dissimilar to those of this typical nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century 'individualist'.<sup>42</sup> It was difficult for military nurses, in particular, to find authentic voices. They were a social anomaly: middle-class (for the most part) and female, yet working for a salary. In the pre-war years, their strangeness not only inclined society to ignore them; it also made it more likely that they themselves would hide from view. Yet, at the outbreak of war, they found themselves suddenly acclaimed as a highly respected group: women who took on the roles of carers and nurturers, yet showed a 'toughness' hitherto associated only with men. Some of them chose to place their experiences before wide audiences.



Some nurses' memoirs were both written and published during the war itself. The intention of Violetta Thurstan's *Field Hospital and Flying Column* appears to have been to advertise and promote the work of wartime nurses. Kate Luard's *Unknown Warriors*, by comparison, seems to have been motivated by a need to bear witness to the suffering and heroism of her soldier patients.<sup>43</sup> Ellen La Motte's *The Backwash of War* was a deliberate piece of anti-war propaganda. In 1917 its publication was prohibited in the USA, having already been blocked by the British censor.<sup>44</sup>

A number of books by nurses appeared at about the same time as the most famous soldiers' memoirs, during a five-year period from 1928 to 1933. Historians have commented on the 'great silence' that followed the war: the ten years from 1918 to 1928 when very little was written – as if former combatants were overcoming their shock and assimilating their experiences.<sup>45</sup> Some of the best known nurses' writings – notably Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth* and Mary Borden's *The Forbidden Zone* – were produced as a direct response to the outpourings of male authors – works such as Robert Graves' *Goodbye to All That*, Richard Aldington's *Death of a Hero*, and Siegfried Sassoon's *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man*.<sup>46</sup> 'Why should these young men have the war to themselves?', asked Vera Brittain.<sup>47</sup> Her *Testament of Youth* gave women a voice in the memorialisation of the war dead, and offered a strong and convincing argument for pacifism. Mary Britnieva's *One Woman's Story* also appears to have been a text with a purpose, reading as a testament to the suffering of the Russian people.<sup>48</sup> Other works appear to have been drawing on the 'girl's own adventure' genre of writing, epitomised by the novels of authors such as Bessie Marchant.<sup>49</sup> Helen Dore Boylston's *'Sister': The War Diary of a Nurse* belongs to this genre; its purpose appears to have been simply to tell a good story.<sup>50</sup>

Two nurses' writings have been viewed as important contributions to the literary modernist movement. Ellen La Motte's *The Backwash of War* and Mary Borden's *The Forbidden Zone* have attracted great interest amongst literary critics. Angela Smith has argued that modernist writings emerged as a means of articulating new modes of thinking and that they were 'self-consciously avant-garde'.<sup>51</sup> And yet she also suggests that nurse writers were 'accidental modernists':<sup>52</sup> that their modernism was part of the struggle to find ways of documenting an

experience that had no precedents and was, essentially, disjointed and meaningless. Santanu Das concurs with this view, arguing that the writings of nurse modernists derived from the ‘impotence of sympathy.’<sup>53</sup> These arguments have some force; and yet, if one examines the backgrounds of both Borden and La Motte, it becomes clear that both were aspirant authors prior to the war, and that both were acquainted with the influential modernist Gertrude Stein, visiting her salon in the rue de Fleurus in Paris.<sup>54</sup> Although neither Borden nor La Motte can be accused of offering their services to the military medical effort merely to acquire material for publication, both were deeply attached to their writing careers, and Borden, in particular, saw herself primarily as an author, rather than as a nurse. For these women, their experience of nursing fuelled their creativity.

A third period of nurses’ writings, in the 1960s and 1970s, was, perhaps, a response to the desire of a new, much later generation to understand the meaning of the war. Memoirs such as the Baroness de T’Serclaes’s *Flanders and Other Fields* and Florence Farmborough’s *Nurse at the Russian Front* are presented in a very different style from many of the fragmentary diary-based outputs of the earlier periods.<sup>55</sup> Narratives with perspective – permitting us to view their authors’ lives before and after the war – these memoirs have clearly been carefully edited to present a particular image of their subjects. In them, the nurse has effectively recreated – or, in the terms of historian Penny Summerfield, ‘composed’ – herself.<sup>56</sup>

Not all memoirs were published by their authors. In fact, in some cases the author had no knowledge of her work’s publication. Agnes Warner’s *My Beloved Poilus* was published in her hometown of New Brunswick by her mother and sisters, ostensibly with the purpose of raising funds for the French Field Hospital of which she was head nurse, but possibly also in the interests of family pride.<sup>57</sup> Julia Stimson’s letters were brought together after the war and were published at the urging of her father.<sup>58</sup> Ella Mae Bongard’s personal writings were published after her death, by her son, Eric Scott, under the title *Nobody Ever Wins a War*.<sup>59</sup> And if some authors were reluctant self-publicists, others remained determinedly anonymous. The author of *A War Nurse’s Diary: Sketches from a Belgian Field Hospital* has remained resolutely so, and it is possible only to speculate about her motives for writing a vivid account of her experiences while so

effectively concealing her own identity.<sup>60</sup> Maud Mortimer's *A Green Tent in Flanders*, although probably published under her own name, carefully anonymises the details it recounts.<sup>61</sup> Enough information is provided to make it very likely that the hospital she is describing is the field hospital that was offered to the French military medical services by Mary Borden, but her writing is deliberately cryptic, offering an encoded message that is difficult to interpret. Even more mysterious is 'Corinne Andrews', the nurse whose memoir was ghost-written by the successful author Rebecca West.<sup>62</sup>

Nurses' writings of the First World War cannot be viewed as a homogeneous corpus of texts, any more than the nurses of the early twentieth century can be viewed as a homogeneous group of women. And yet, they have numerous characteristics in common. In them, their authors are both recapturing and recreating experience. All contain elements of self-composure: in every case, the nurse projects herself as a strong twentieth-century woman, aware that she is at the vanguard of social change. Most bear deliberate witness to the suffering and courage of their patients; and many offer their own philosophies – some apparently unconsciously, others in highly conscious and deliberate ways – of the nature of industrial warfare. All nurses undoubtedly viewed themselves as healers; most also 'bought into' the cultural tropes of their day, believing their participation in war to be heroic. A few stood back from those cultural tropes and offered their works as counter-arguments to political propaganda, opposing the received wisdom of their day and consciously writing a different 'truth'.

### **The nurses of the First World War**

The First World War began at a time of intense campaigning both for nurses' professional rights and for women's right of political participation. In Britain, the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) had been promoting the principle of women's suffrage for decades, while its more militant counterpart, the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) – more popularly known as the 'suffragette movement' – had been launching increasingly volatile attacks on male political privilege. In the USA, similar drives for what was referred to as 'woman suffrage' were gaining momentum.<sup>63</sup> And the

suffrage campaign was only one part of a wider push for social reform. Women became involved in campaigns for the regulation of capital on both sides of the Atlantic – in America through the ‘progressive movement’ and in Britain through the campaigns of radicals, such as Sylvia Pankhurst.<sup>64</sup>

The drive for reform went beyond the political and economic spheres. As Sheila Rowbotham has demonstrated, the move towards greater freedom encompassed both the professional and the domestic spheres and included a push for sexual emancipation, which found its greatest expression in the work of American nurse Margaret Sanger and British scientist Marie Stopes. Of those women who were at the vanguard of this movement, ‘some were upper middle class and keen to cast off privilege; others were members of the growing in-between strata, educated yet not quite “ladies”, uprooted, mobile, and liable to be iconoclastic.’<sup>65</sup> Several professional nurse writers fit into the former category, with Alice Fitzgerald in the USA and Kate Luard in Britain presenting classic examples of women who recognised their privileged status and were anxious to participate in world events even if this meant enduring physical hardship and emotional challenge. Others can be seen as ‘educated, yet not quite “ladies”’ – indeed, professional nursing, by its very nature as a form of paid employment, cast doubt on the genteel status of those who practised. Large numbers of writers were from Rowbotham’s ‘in-between strata’. A somewhat impoverished lower-middle-class single mother named Elsie Knocker won fame and recognition during the war for her services on the Belgian Front, later writing a wry memoir under her married name: Baroness de T’Serclaes.<sup>66</sup> Claire Tylee has suggested that the main ‘class’ difference among women who wrote was not between middle class and working class, but between those who regarded themselves as ‘ladies’ and those who could be identified as educated ‘new women.’<sup>67</sup> Many of the former chose nursing as an acceptable means to earn a ‘genteel’ living, while the latter moved into public service professions as a way of expressing their growing sense of social responsibility.

The ambiguity and conflict that confronted American women in the years prior to the First World War are captured in Kimberly Jensen’s *Mobilizing Minerva*.<sup>68</sup> Her portrait of the 1913 woman suffrage parade reveals the level of hostility faced by those women

who fought for citizenship status in the early twentieth century. The parade – held on the day before President Woodrow Wilson’s inauguration – was sabotaged by a hostile and violent audience, at best given licence and at worst actively incited by members of the municipal police force. Jensen presents the parade, which took place on the eve of the war’s outbreak in Europe, as a powerful symbol of the patriarchal power that had kept American womanhood ‘in its place’ up to the second decade of the twentieth century.<sup>69</sup> Inspired by British campaigns for women’s suffrage, American women had also begun to argue against the assumption that male political dominance was justified by the capacity – assumed to be exclusively male – to defend the State through force of arms.

A powerfully radical strain of feminism infused the nursing profession on both sides of the Atlantic. Emma Goldman, a professional nurse, whose views were coloured by political anarchism, had an important influence on campaigner for sexual emancipation Margaret Sanger.<sup>70</sup> Goldman’s views were, in part, developed through her experiences at the Henry Street Settlement, an organisation founded and run by Lillian Wald, which offered a visiting nursing service to the impoverished families of New York’s Lower East Side.<sup>71</sup> The same influences and the same strain of radicalism can be found in the writings of influential nurses such as Lavinia Dock, head of the international office of the *American Journal of Nursing*, while the assertive determination of American nurses to make their voices heard can be read through the writings of authors such as Ellen La Motte. British feminist nurses were equally radical, but perhaps less overtly progressive, in their outlook.

In 1914, the nursing profession in Britain was in turmoil – and had been so for twenty-seven years. Prestigious voluntary hospitals in London and other major cities had been turning out highly trained and disciplined ‘professional nurses’ for over four decades, and senior nurses were organising themselves through the Royal British Nurses’ Association and the Matron’s Council.<sup>72</sup> Yet, despite these recognised advances, the vast majority of nurses – particularly in Poor Law hospitals – underwent only the most cursory apprenticeship training with almost no theoretical teaching, learning their skills by mirroring the practice of more senior exemplars whilst enduring a harsh disciplinary regime. Paradoxically, the symbolic value of military

nursing as a highly regarded – even heroic – feminine pursuit meant that large numbers of wealthy, well-educated ladies took great interest in it, many even going so far as to offer their services at time of war. Indeed, their presence in South Africa during the Second Boer War had caused dismay amongst military medical personnel.<sup>73</sup>

The existence of poorly trained servant-class nurses and of untrained lady volunteers was seen as an affront to their professionalism by elite, fully trained nurses, many of whom were, themselves, well educated and of high social class backgrounds. The campaign for a state register, which would ensure the regulation of the profession and the standardisation of its training, had been simmering since 1887, the year Ethel Gordon Fenwick, a former matron of St Bartholomew's Hospital, had held – in her own drawing room at her house on Wimpole Street – the inaugural meeting of the British Nurses Association (BNA).<sup>74</sup> Although nursing was not a fully recognised profession in the second decade of the twentieth century, it was generally accepted that the term 'trained nurse' referred to a woman with three years' training in a recognised school attached to a general hospital of at least 100 beds.<sup>75</sup> The importance of fully trained nurses' clinical contributions in military contexts was only just beginning to be recognised.<sup>76</sup>

The Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service (QAIMNS) had been officially inaugurated in 1902. At the outbreak of war it had only 297 members.<sup>77</sup> It did, however, have a large 'Reserve' that was available to be 'called up' for active service at short notice. The exact numbers of the Reserve are uncertain, but it seems that approximately 800 nurses were available at the outbreak of war, with a total of 10,404 being recruited during the course of the conflict.<sup>78</sup> Thousands more nurses worked with the Territorial Force Nursing Service, in temporary hospitals,<sup>79</sup> in voluntary hospitals funded by the Red Cross or Order of St John of Jerusalem, and in 'civil hospitals and institutions where military patients were received'.<sup>80</sup>

One of the unique features of the British military nursing landscape in 1914 was the existence of the so-called Voluntary Aid Detachments (VADs), which had been formed in 1909, as part of the Haldane Reforms.<sup>81</sup> A complex and confusing system, the VAD movement ran under the auspices of two longstanding and powerful organisations: the British Red Cross and that section of the Order of St John

of Jerusalem known as the 'St John's Ambulance Association'. In the early months of the war, recognising the need to cooperate, the two organisations created a single 'Joint Committee' to oversee the work of the VADs. Large numbers of detachments had already formed, and 8,495 volunteer nurses were available for service.<sup>82</sup> These women, somewhat confusingly, took on the acronym of their detachments, becoming known as 'VADs'. Tens of thousands served during the war, mostly at home, but some overseas, and the works of powerful writers such as Vera Brittain and Irene Rathbone have ensured that their status has been enshrined in the mythology of the British war effort. For trained nurses they were a mixed blessing. Many enjoyed working with them and found them genuinely helpful; others found they had to watch these 'well-meaning girls ... like a cat watches mice, to see that no terrible accidents happen.'<sup>83</sup>

In an indignant article, published in the *BJN* in January 1914, trained nurse Violetta Thurstan observed that many Red Cross VADs paid too much attention to the 'military' side of things, adding that, 'though flagging, signalling, riding, &c., are doubtless very attractive, it certainly has given a large section of the public the idea that the members are rather "playing at soldiers" than training in first aid work.'<sup>84</sup> Power was in the hands of detachment commandants, who took on volunteer nurses from among the ranks of their own social class, hiring trained nurses to teach them a range of skills and enable them to obtain certificates in subjects such as basic hygiene, invalid cookery, wound dressing, and first aid.<sup>85</sup>

One of the ways in which some trained British nurses circumvented both the constraints of military officialdom and the vagaries of the British volunteer services was to offer their services to the French and Belgian Societies of the Red Cross. One of the most intriguing ways in which this was accomplished was through the French Flag Nursing Corps, an organisation created by a British woman, Grace Ellison, and supported by Ethel Gordon Fenwick, which, through the auspices of an 'Anglo-French Committee' of the Red Cross, offered trained nurses to French military hospitals.<sup>86</sup> Although a number of secular schools had been launched over the previous decades, much of the nursing care in France was still offered by religious orders, and most nurses received no formal training.<sup>87</sup> The French Flag Nursing Corps appears to have been a success, although much of what we

know of it is reported through the pages of that somewhat partial organ of nursing professionalization, the *BJN*. The Corps was brought under the auspices of the British Committee of the French Red Cross in March 1917.<sup>88</sup>

The development of the nursing professions in self-governing British dominions such as Australia, New Zealand, and Canada had been heavily influenced by that of the British nursing profession itself.<sup>89</sup> The training of nurse probationers and the conditions under which they worked were remarkably similar to those of British nurses. Their Army Nursing Services were modelled on the QAIMNS, and yet, when mobilised for war, did not incorporate large contingents of volunteer nurses. The dominions did not experience the depletion of their male orderlies in the same way as did Britain and France, where most young able-bodied men were eventually moved into active front-line service, and it was possible for Australian, New Zealand, and Canadian units to take on large contingents of military orderlies – rather than female VADs – when they travelled to Europe in 1914 and 1915.<sup>90</sup>

The US Army Nurse Corps (ANC) was established as a permanent corps of the US Army Medical Department on 2 February 1901, and pre-dated by a year the formation of the British QAIMNS.<sup>91</sup> It had, from its inception, very stringent entry criteria. Each applicant was obliged to submit a certificate of health, and a reference from the superintendent of her training school, attesting to her success in training and her good moral character. She was also obliged to pass an examination. For promotion to the rank of chief nurse, she faced an even more rigorous written examination on hygiene, medications management, and military protocol.<sup>92</sup> By 1912 there were 125 members of the Corps, with a reserve list of approximately 3,000.<sup>93</sup> By March 1914 there were 403 army nurses, with a reserve of 8,000, and by 11 November 1918 the total number of ANC members had risen to 21,480.<sup>94</sup>

In April 1916, a year before the USA declared war on Germany, George W. Crile, a professor of surgery at Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio had advocated the formation of ‘base hospitals’. Several discrete units had been created, each staffed by doctors and nurses from a single institution.<sup>95</sup> The first six units arrived in France, well before any US combat troops, and began by working with British Expeditionary Force staff in British hospitals.<sup>96</sup> By



August 1918, fifty base hospitals were in place, and in that month several more were planned.<sup>97</sup> One of the most difficult issues faced by the Committee on Nursing of the General Medical Board of the Council of National Defense, chaired by Adelaide Nutting, was whether to employ female volunteers as nurses' aides. After much debate, it was agreed that untrained nurses should not be sent to Europe. The relationship between nurses and corpsmen (orderlies drawn from the ranks of serving troops) had not been officially defined prior to the war, but a circular letter from the surgeon general's office, dated 14 April 1918, stated unequivocally that the 'head nurse is in charge.'<sup>98</sup> American nurses thus – at least in principle – found themselves in a clearer position in relation to their assistant nurses than British ones. Nevertheless, they too were subject to the vulnerabilities of a female profession operating in a distinctly male-centred world without officer status.<sup>99</sup>

Surprisingly few nurses' memoirs of the Great War were written by members of the official military nursing services. Most were authored either by female volunteers (often operating under the auspices of the Red Cross), by independent trained nurses who travelled to wherever they perceived their services were most required, or by women working under the auspices of the French Flag Nursing Corps. A number of writings relate to experiences under bombardment in Belgium during the rapid German advance of 1914, and then to subsequent service in the narrow strip of Belgium that remained in allied hands. Others describe the retreat across Albania from the Bulgar advance into Serbia, or work with Russian Red Cross flying columns on the Eastern Front. One remarkable cluster of writings relates to the work of one hospital: L'Hôpital Chirurgical Mobile No. 1 at Rousbrugge in Belgium, one of the most independent hospital units of the First World War. It would appear that those nurses who worked most independently were the ones who were also most likely to write memoirs and war narratives. Although only a minority of nurses were employed in 'freelance' or 'voluntary' units, a disproportionately large number of these chose to publish books about their experiences.

English-speaking nurses from Britain, its dominions, and the USA came from a range of social backgrounds. Some were from a wealthy social elite; others were genteel but impoverished; still others were from socially mobile and highly aspirant sections of society. All were

well educated, whether ‘at home’ by governesses or in private or public schools. Many were extremely well versed in the literary canon of their day. They chose a range of different life-writing styles – some traditional, others quite idiosyncratic – as vehicles to bring their experiences to wide readerships. While some wanted to present portraits of themselves, others were keen to bring the heroism of their patients to the world’s attention. Still others simply used autobiographical writings as an outlet, to give vent to their feelings of trauma and anxiety. In this book, their writings are presented as part of a vibrant, feminine, transatlantic culture that, during the First World War, drew on the raw immediacy of experience within the protective discipline of army nursing to convey both the realities of industrial warfare and a range of ‘truths’ about its impact on human life.

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- 3 Henri Barbusse’s *Le feu* is a notable exception: Henri Barbusse, *Under Fire* (London: Penguin Classics, 2003 [1917]).
- 4 Edmund Blunden, *Undertones of War* (London: Penguin, 2010 [1928]); Siegfried Sassoon, *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man* (London: Faber and Gwyer, 1928). See also: Siegfried Sassoon, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (London: Faber and Faber, 1930); Siegfried Sassoon, *Sherston’s Progress* (London: Faber and Faber, 1936). Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, trans. Brian Murdoch (London: Random House, 1996 [1929]); Robert Graves, *Goodbye to All That* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1929).
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- 18 Joan Scott, 'Rewriting History', in Higonnet, Jenson, Michel, and Weitz, *Behind the Lines*: 21–30. On the role of women in the war, see also: Miriam Cooke and Angela Woollacott (eds), *Gendering War Talk* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993); Sharon Ouditt, *Fighting Forces, Writing Women: Identity and Ideology in the First World War* (London: Routledge, 1994).
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- 89 On nursing in Canada, see: Kathryn McPherson, *Beside Matters: The Transformation of Canadian Nursing, 1900–1990* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003 [1996]). For insight into the work of Canadian nurses during the First World War, see 85 and 94. See also: Susan Mann, *Margaret Macdonald: Imperial Daughter* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2005). On the Australian Army Nursing Services, see: Jan Bassett, *Guns and Brooches: Australian Army Nursing from the Boer War to the Gulf War* (Melbourne and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); Ruth Rae, *Scarlet Poppies: The Army Experience of Australian Nurses during World War One* (Burwood, NSW: College of Nursing, Australia, 2004); Ruth Rae, *Veiled*

- Lives: Threading Australian Nursing History into the Fabric of the First World War* (Burwood, NSW: College of Nursing, 2009); Kirsty Harris, *More than Bombs and Bandages: Australian Army Nurses at Work in World War I* (Newport, NSW: Big Sky Publishing, 2011). On the New Zealand Army Nursing Service, see: Jan Rodgers, 'Potential for Professional Profit: The Making of the New Zealand Army Nursing Service 1914–1915', *Nursing Praxis in New Zealand*, 11.2 (1996): 4–12; Anna Rogers, *While You're Away: New Zealand Nurses at War 1899–1948* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2003).
- 90 Although, it is noteworthy that Canada did send a number of VADs. See: Linda Quiney, 'Assistant Angels: Canadian Voluntary Aid Detachment Nurses in the Great War', *Canadian Bulletin of Medical History*, 15 (1998): 189–206; Cynthia Toman, "'Help Us, Serve England": First World War Military Nursing and National Identities', *Canadian Bulletin of Medical History*, 30.1 (2013): 156–7.
- 91 Mary T. Sarnecky, *A History of the US Army Nurse Corps* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999): 1, 51–2.
- 92 Sarnecky, *A History of the US Army Nurse Corps*: 51–4.
- 93 Sarnecky, *A History of the US Army Nurse Corps*: 73.
- 94 Sarnecky, *A History of the US Army Nurse Corps*: 91–2. Kimberly Jensen observes that: 'Over the course of the war 10,660 ANC nurses served with the American Expeditionary Force in Europe': Kimberly Jensen, 'A Base Hospital Is Not a Coney Island Dance Hall: American Women Nurses, Hostile Work Environment, and Military Rank in the First World War', *Frontiers*, 26.2 (2005): 206–35 (208–9). A very small number of volunteer nurses were incorporated into the US Army Medical Services.
- 95 Kimberly Jensen, 'A Base Hospital Is Not a Coney Island Dance Hall': 211.
- 96 Sarnecky, *A History of the US Army Nurse Corps*: 80–1.
- 97 Sarnecky, *A History of the US Army Nurse Corps*: 83. Brief histories of a number of base hospitals were written shortly after the war. See, for example: Anon., *History of the Pennsylvania Hospital Unit (Base Hospital No. 10, USA) in the Great War* (New York: Paul B. Hoeber, 1921); Anon., *The University of Virginia Base Hospital Forty-One* (unpublished account, 1925); box-folder 001-001, Historical Collection, Claude Moore Health Sciences Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, USA.
- 98 Sarnecky, *A History of the US Army Nurse Corps*: 57 (quote 92–3). See also: Hallett, *Veiled Warriors*: 216.
- 99 United States military nurses were granted 'relative rank' in the 1920s: Jensen, 'A Base Hospital Is Not a Coney Island Dance Hall': 207, 212–16. British military nurses acquired officer status in 1943. See: Penny Starns, *The March of the Matrons: Military Influence on the British Civilian Nursing Profession, 1939–1969* (Peterborough, DSM: 2000): 25–52.