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**\*For special issue on First World War nursing edited by Alison S. Fell\***

## **Introduction**

### **Remembering First World War Nursing: Other Fronts, Other Spaces**

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## **Introduction**

### **Remembering First World War Nursing: Other Fronts, Other Spaces**

Keywords: First World War; nursing; VADs; images; memory

In all belligerent nations, women's participation in the First World War was highly mediatized from the outbreak of the conflict onwards. Numerous photographs, drawings, films, books and newspaper articles depicted their diverse roles, constructing new versions of national heroines: and the war heroine who was most often at the forefront was the angelic nurse, and particularly the volunteer or Red Cross nurse. Like all constructions of female identity, these idealized representations of women at war drew on familiar tropes of femininity which were adapted for the particular circumstances of 'total war'. The nurse was seen as an ideal heroine figure because it evoked a female version of service and sacrifice that drew on longer-standing stereotypes of women as nurturing, selfless and maternal carers (Grayzel, 1999; Hallett, 2014; Darrow, 2000). As a popular cultural stereotype, the First World War nurse appealed to different constituencies and could be aligned with a range of different understandings of what constituted virtuous and patriotic femininity in wartime. In Catholic nations, for example, images of the wartime nurse often connoted the divine, as transcendent and asexual. Belgian and Italian postcards depicted winged nurses dressed as 'white angels', while French memorials sculpted them caring for soldiers in poses reminiscent of the Virgin Mary (Zwerdling, 2004; Fell and Hallett, 2013). In secular contexts, however, nurses were presented as embodiments of the ideals of transnational humanitarianism, echoing the meanings invested in the symbol of the Red Cross. Or, alternatively, nurses were sometimes depicted as nationalist incarnations of

the nation itself, which can be seen in First World War postcards featuring nurses draped in national flags, for example (Zwerdling, 2004)

Alongside war heroines came their counterparts, anti-patriotic female villains – eroticized spies, selfish socialites, unfaithful wives. Similarly, nurses were not only depicted as ‘white angels’ or national heroines but were sometimes castigated as untrustworthy or ‘false’ nurses – as frivolous and selfish women who only ‘played’ at caring for their patients. These negative depictions also drew on long-standing socio-cultural constructions of women as vain or sexually treacherous (Darrow, 2000). In addition to images of nurses in postcards, posters and as characters in popular novels and films, some individual women gained iconic status during the war. Although she was executed for her role in organising an escape network for Allied soldiers, Edith Cavell embodied for many the patriotic self-sacrificing nurse, while Mata Hara tended to be cast as the model for the untrustworthy and anti-patriotic prostitute-spy (Proctor, 2003). Of course, these idealized (or demonized) cultural representations of nurses had little to do with the day-to-day lives of the thousands of women who worked as nurses in hospitals both at home and on all fighting fronts during the conflict. The patients in illustrations (and even in posed photographs) most often have neatly bandaged and aesthetically pleasing head wounds, and the nurses, wearing spotlessly clean flowing white uniforms, are sometimes pictured nursing them on the battlefield itself, or in a peaceful hospital ward. With their stylized poses and heavy symbolism, popular images of First World War nurses are reminiscent to some extent of the function of classical or religious statues, in which the female form is often used to embody in abstract form ideals, sentiments or nations.

Such stereotypes necessarily fail to account for the diversity and range of nurses’ activities, attitudes and experiences during the war. But they formed a backdrop

for any visual or textual representations of their wartime roles; photographs, postcards, films, newspaper articles and memoirs depicting ‘real’ nurses in wartime were shaped both by popular wartime stereotypes and by long-standing gender imperatives that prescribed the limits of female roles. A hundred years later, former belligerent nations are once again funding representations and re-appraisals of women’s roles during the First World War in the context of the wealth of public events, museum exhibitions, films, television dramas and documentaries and other cultural programmes designed to commemorate and reflect on the war and its legacies. And, once again, the wartime nurse is playing a prominent role, featuring in films, television programmes and museum exhibitions. However, in many cases these contemporary evocations of the wartime nurse share many characteristics with their wartime counterparts: nurses who are featured are often depicted as either loving mother-figures for their soldier-patients, or as young proto-feminists, volunteering to work close to the front, heroically caring for the wounded and ‘doing their bit’ alongside the male combatants. The diversity of backgrounds and experiences of both trained and volunteer nurses during the war, as well as the wide range of settings in which they nursed, are rarely foregrounded.

In the Anglo-American world, scholarship on First World War nursing has also tended to focus on front-line nurses, and more often on volunteers. Most dominant in Britain’s cultural memories of war nursing has been Vera Brittain’s autobiography *Testament of Youth* (1933), which chronicles both her escape from the limitations of middle-class norms via her experience as a Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) nurse, and her disillusionment with and politicization by, the realities of war. Similarly, the majority of studies have focused on nurses who worked close to the front lines, and most often in Casualty Clearing Stations on the Western Front. It is as if nurses’ worth and historical interest can only be proven by their proximity to the combatant zone, to a

dominant War Story that revolves around the front-line soldier. This collection of articles offers a fresh appraisal of First World War nurses, taking more account of the fact that nursing work was carried out in a series of different spaces and by a diverse range of women of different backgrounds and nationalities: at hospitals at home as well as overseas, and on all fronts. Several of the articles presented here also consider the relationship between the nurses' experiences and the visual and written representation of that experience. Understanding and exploring this helps us to complicate, nuance and deepen our understanding of First World War nursing and its representation. The articles' authors are leading scholars in the history and cultural representation of First World War nursing, all of whom presented at a 2016 workshop in London supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded Gateways to the First World War Public Engagement Centre, based at the University of Kent.

In their article 'Nurse-Martyr-Heroine: Representations of Edith Cavell in Interwar Britain, France and Belgium', Alison S. Fell and Claudia Sternberg analyse a series of visual representations of the life and death of Edith Cavell. They compare and contrast a series of monuments and films, arguing that although Cavell was always depicted as a heroine, her story was used to support very different political interpretations of the war and its lessons for post-war Europe. Sue Hawkins uses new evidence in her article 'First World War VAD stories from the British Red Cross archives: The Holmfirth Auxiliary Hospital' to consider cases of British VADs who worked at home. Unlike the familiar trope of the upper-class VAD nurse seen, for example, in popular television dramas such as *Downton Abbey*, Hawkins uses as a case study a small auxiliary hospital in Holmfirth, Yorkshire, in which the VADs included mill girls as well as middle-class women. In 'Other Fronts and Conflicts in German Nursing Accounts', Margaret Higonnet turns to a group of nurses whose

writings have been much less studied: German nurses. Analysing nurse memoirs written both during and after the war, she considers the ways in which their authors present their nursing work as a series of ‘battles’: with military enemies, with antagonists within their own medical institutions, and finally within themselves. Andrea McKenzie’s ‘Picturing War: Canadian Nurses’ First World War Photography’ analyses the different ways nurses from Canada represented their work and service, considering the implications of the aesthetic choices nurses made when constructing their photo albums, which she demonstrates give a more ambiguous record of their experiences than might have been expected. Finally, Carol Acton considers the presentation of hospitals as ‘infected spaces’ in post-war British literary texts and memoirs which trouble cultural myths of nursing that tend towards heroization or hagiography in her article entitled “‘Obsessed by the obscenity of war’: Emotional and physical wounds in Mary Borden’s poetry and Lesley Smith’s *Four Years out of Life*’. She argues, rather, that the memoirs reveal the nurse’s inability to impose order or control over her environment or her emotional response to it. In focusing on less-studied aspects of First World War nursing, these articles go beyond the more familiar cultural narratives. Taken together, they reveal that while rose-tinted images of nursing were often in wartime propaganda used to connote virtuous patriotic femininity, for many women the experience of nursing often challenged rather than confirmed their beliefs and identities.

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