

'A very valuable fusion of classes': British professional and volunteer nurses of the First World War

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Public perceptions of the work of nurses and VAD-volunteers in the First World War have been heavily influenced by a small number of VAD-writings. The work of trained, professional nurses in supporting and supervised the work of VADs has been largely overlooked. This paper examines several of the writings of both volunteers and professionals, and emphasises the overlooked supervisory, managerial and clinical work of trained nurses. In this centenary year of the First World War's opening months, the paper also explores the ways in which the British mass-media - notably the BBC - have chosen to cling to a romantic image of the untrained nurse, whilst at the same time acknowledging the significance of trained, professional nursing.

Introduction

For more than four years, from August 1914 until the spring of 1919, teams of British nurses cared for millions of wounded and sick soldiers in military hospitals on every war front. Those who nursed the casualties of the First World War were a combination of trained, professional nurses, volunteers known as 'VADs' and military orderlies. The role of the trained professionals was to design plans of care and treatment and systems for delivering them to almost overwhelming numbers of casualties; to implement complex nursing care; and to supervise VADs and orderlies in performing many apparently more mundane tasks. In actual fact, though, what appeared to be mundane – the washing, toileting and feeding of often-helpless patients – was highly skilled work, requiring careful training and close supervision, as well as an educated understanding of human nature. The care and treatment required by soldiers many of whose wounds were extensive and traumatic was far from straightforward, and the work of nurses was a complex combination of fundamental nursing care and highly technical treatments underpinned by scientific reasoning.¹

Much of this work was invisible. It took place behind screens in hospital wards, and professional nurses rarely

wrote about it. Hence, much of what *is* known has been taken from the memoirs of VADS. Some, such as Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth* gained a large readership because of the significance of their contribution to our understanding of the war and its impact.² Yet they have also had a distorting influence on our perceptions of nursing, because they are written from the perspective of the untrained volunteer with neither authority nor responsibility in the military hospital ward. This paper exposes some of the distortions which have resulted from this somewhat skewed perspective, and explores the realities of the working relationships between nurses and VADs.

Arrogant aristocrats and diffident ladies

British cultural perceptions of nursing during the First World War are replete with contradictions. One of the most powerful of these is reflected in widely differing accounts of volunteer-nurses' behaviour. If volunteers can be categorised as 'types' (which, in itself, is highly dubious, given that their individualism was reported to be one of their most prominent features) then the two who stand out most clearly are the wealthy and powerful hospital director and the diffident, ladylike and apparently powerless young VAD. The classic archetype of the first category is Millicent, Duchess of Sutherland (Figure 1), known in her own time as 'meddlesome Millie',³ whilst the latter is usually represented in the popular consciousness by author, Vera Brittain (Figure 2).⁴ Yet a closer examination of the lives and work of both women reveals that the Duchess of Sutherland was neither so authoritarian, nor Vera Brittain so oppressed, as has been assumed.

² Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth: An Autobiographical Study of the Years 1900–1925* (Virago Press, London, 2004 [1933]). See also: Irene, Rathbone, *We That Were Young. A Novel* (New York, The Feminist Press, 1989 [1932]); Bagnold, Enid, *A Diary Without Dates*, (London, Virago, 1978 [1918]).

³ Millicent's memoir of her work in Belgium was published in 1914 as: Millicent, Duchess of Sutherland, *Six Weeks at the War* (London, The Times, 1914). See also Denis Stuart's biography: Denis Stuart, *Dear Duchess: Millicent Duchess of Sutherland (1867–1955)* (Newton Abbot, David and Charles, 1982).

⁴ Vera Brittain's memoir was published in 1933; her original diary, from which the memoir was compiled, was first published in 1981: Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth: An Autobiographical Study of the Years 1900–1925* (Virago Press, London, 2004 [1933]); Vera Brittain, *Chronicle of Youth: Great War Diary* Edited by Alan Bishop (London, Phoenix Press, 2002 [1981]).

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¹ On the work of nurses during the First World War, see: Christine E. Hallett, *Containing Trauma: Nursing Work in the First World War* (Manchester, Manchester University Press): passim.

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Figure 1. Portrait of Millicent, Duchess of Sutherland, by John Singer Sargent.

The impression that wealthy women with very little training were among the first ‘nurses’ to find their way to the ‘front lines’ of the First World War has been created largely by the exploits of units such as the Millicent Sutherland Ambulance, whose adventures in Namur during the earliest months of the war were recorded by Millicent herself in her brief memoir, *Six Weeks at the War*, a book which is part propaganda, part ‘girls-own-adventure’ story and part document of the unit’s work.⁵ The exploits of amateur units such as this one aroused much opprobrium in the nursing press of the time,⁶ but the idea that Millicent had, in fact, simply ‘swanned’ across the English Channel to the continent to lead a British unit as part of the allied war effort was somewhat misleading. Her earliest, albeit brief, nursing efforts had taken place in a French military

⁵ Millicent, Duchess of Sutherland, *Six Weeks at the War* (London, The Times, 1914): 22.

⁶ See, for example: Anonymous, ‘Is it Just?’ *British Journal of Nursing*, 53, (4 July 1914): 22; Anonymous, ‘Letters to the Editor,’ *British Journal of Nursing*, 53 (19 December, 1914): 497. These and other letters of complaint to the nursing press are cited in: Hallett, Christine E., ‘Emotional Nursing’: Involvement, Engagement, and Detachment in the Writings of First World War Nurses and VADs’, in Fell, A.S. and Hallett, C.E. (eds.), *First World War Nursing: New Perspectives* (New York, Routledge, 2013): 87–102.



Figure 2. Portrait photograph of Vera Brittain.

hospital. No British military medical unit had admitted ‘amateur nurses’ to travel overseas in the early months of the war. It was only after she had recognised the need for more trained nurses to care for French and Belgian wounded that Millicent assembled her unit, and it was not until October 1915 that her hospital was brought under the auspices of the British Red Cross and began to care for British and Dominion soldiers (Figure 3).⁷

There was something very troubling for professional nurses about wealthy volunteers, who established their own field hospitals and wrote of their nursing experiences. Such volunteers were often from aristocratic backgrounds, and had been imbued with the confidence that a ‘ladylike’ upbringing brought with it. Not only were they accustomed to giving orders to a wide-ranging staff. They also believed that their high status conferred on them a nurturing capability: they believed they were ‘natural nurses’.⁸ When Millicent established her first field hospital at Namur in the autumn of 1914, she took it for granted that she would work alongside her eight fully-trained Guy’s Hospital nurses. When the first wounded arrived, she was, initially

⁷ Millicent, Duchess of Sutherland, *Six Weeks at the War* (London, The Times, 1914): 1–7.

⁸ On female volunteer nurses of high social status, see: Summers, Anne, *Angels and Citizens: British Women as Military Nurses, 1854–1914* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1988): 237–70; Ouditt, Sharon, *Fighting Forces, Writing Women. Identity and Ideology in the First World War* (London, Routledge, 1994): 7–46; Vining, Margaret and Hacker, Barton, ‘From Camp Follower to Lady in Uniform: Women, Social Class and Military Institutions before 1920’, *Contemporary European History*, 10, 3 (2001): 353–73; Watson, Janet S. K., ‘Wars in the Wards: The Social Construction of Medical Work in First World War Britain’, *Journal of British Studies*, 41 (2002): 484–510.

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