PROFESSIONALISM, CLASS, AND THE VOLUNTARY AID DETACHMENT IN THE GREAT WAR

By

JULIE ANN DAVIES

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School of History and Cultures
University of Birmingham
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ABSTRACT

Professionalism, Class, and the Voluntary Aid Detachment in the Great War

The image of the selfless, heroic, upper middle class V.A.D. being singled out for harsh treatment by the socially inferior, yet professionally superior trained nurses has dominated popular histories and memories of the Great War since the publication of Vera Brittain's memoirs *A Testament of Youth*. Challenging this mythology, this thesis shows for the first time how the tensions between these two groups of women were more far-reaching than the result of class differences. It places the debate around the relationship between VADs and nurses within the wider politics of nursing which came to a head during the Great War. Drawing on a range of published archival material the thesis uses professional journals and institutional records to show the ways in which the British Red Cross Society and trained nurses themselves responded to these challenges. Using the correspondence of two individual V.A.D.s, this thesis then explores the key narratives of professionalism and class. The thesis demonstrates how the wider debate of professionalisation and patriotic duty was played out within the pages of the journals, and in the letters of two volunteer nurses — in public debate and private lives.

Contents

Chapter Four: Patriotism and Duty in Helen Beale's Letters

Abbreviations

BJN	The *British Journal of Nursing*
BNA	The British Nurses' Association
RRC	Royal Red Cross
TOC H	Talbot House
V.A.D.	Voluntary Aid Detachment
W.R.N.S.	Women's Royal Naval Service
YMCA	Young Men's Christian Association

Illustrations

Introduction

In an entry in her diary, *A V.A.D. In France,* first published in 1917, Voluntary Aid Detachment Nurse Olive Dent reflected on her motivation for serving as a volunteer nurse in the Great War. Olive, the daughter of a joiner, was thirty years old when she volunteered and served at a 'military hospital in France' between November 1915 and November 1917. An educated woman, Olive later worked as a journalist in London.[1] She considered that 'the New Army of men would need a New Army of nurses.' Aligning herself with the mass volunteer army that took shape in 1914 and 1915, Olive recalled asking herself the question 'why not go and learn to be a nurse while the Kitchener men were learning to be soldiers?'[2] The published memoirs and diaries of well known writers like Olive Dent, along with other women including Vera Brittain and Thekla Bowser, have made the Voluntary Aid Detachment nurse (V.A.D.) a familiar figure in contemporary and historical accounts of the Great War.[3] The prominence of such figures and their published writing in the historiography gives us a sense on the part of the (published) V.A.D.s of the day-to-day lives of the volunteers and their assumed moral and intellectual superiority.

While they have come to stand in for the experience of nursing and the Great War, however, all of these accounts tell a very particular story about the V.A.D. experience and the tensions women like Olive Dent, Vera Brittain, and Thekla Bowser encountered. These upper middle-class voices do not encapsulate the full experience of V.A.D. nurses.

1 Jane Potter, *Boys in Khaki, Girls in Print: Women's Literary Responses to the Great War 1914 - 1918*, 1. publ. in paperback, Oxford English Monographs (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2008), 230.Olive Dent Service Record. War Time Volunteers Personnel Records," British Red Cross, accessed May 2, 2019, https://vad.redcross.org.uk/Card?fname=Olive+&sname=Dent&id=60168&first=true.

2 Olive Dent, *A V.A.D. in France* (Burgess Hill: Diggory Press, 2005), 8.

3 Dent, *A V.A.D. in France*; Vera Brittain, Alan Bishop, and Terry Smart, *Chronicle of Youth: War Diary 1913–1917* (London: Gollancz, 1981); Vera Brittain and Shirley Williams, *Testament of Youth: An Autobiographical Study of the Years 1900–1925* (London: Virago Press, 1985); Thekla Bowser and Tony Ball, *The Story of British V.A.D. Work in the Great War* (London: Imperial War Museum, Dept. of Printed Books, 2003).

Moreover, they distort the ways in which we understand key historical issues around the relationship between nursing and social difference in wartime. What Olive Dent described as a 'New Army' of volunteer nurses created conflict between social groups that had previously remained apart and set up tensions around differences of class, identity, and professional status. These tensions, and the ways in which they were negotiated by individual women and institutions, including the British Red Cross and *British Journal of Nursing* (*BJN*), are the focus of this thesis.

Although popular and academic histories have identified a significant number of women who joined the Voluntary Aid Detachment in the opening months of the Great War as belonging exclusively to the upper middle class, the historiography has identified the trained nurses they would work alongside with the working class.[4] Because they earned a wage, this meant that they had more in common with paid workers than other sections of society.[5] Analysis of the social composition of the nursing profession between 1881 and 1921 undertaken by Christopher Maggs, for example, gives an overall picture of a group of women who were predominantly drawn mainly from clerical, shop, and domestic work, as well as some who had worked as untrained nurses in infirmaries or asylums.[6] The well known published accounts of women like Vera Brittain and Olive Dent have drawn attention to the tensions and antagonisms created by this mixing of different social groups. I argue in this thesis, however, that using class as the only means of defining the characteristics of the women who served as nurses in the Voluntary Aid Detachment is limiting. I will demonstrate that there is a larger and more nuanced point to be considered about the identity of the trained nurses, and the ways in which this created a distinction between the knowledge and skills acquired through professional training and the unskilled yet socially privileged

[4] Christopher Maggs, "Nurse Recrutment to Four Provincial Hospitals 1881–1921," in Celia Davies, ed. *Rewriting Nursing History* (USA: Barnes and Noble, 1980), chap. 2.
[5] Selina Todd, *The People: The Rise and Fall of the Working Class* (London: John Murray, 2015), 1–2.
[6] Maggs "Recruitment to Four Provincial Hospitals 1881–1921".

volunteers. Drawing attention to the points of conflict between professional status and volunteering, the thesis thus challenges the view that the tensions between the two groups of women were limited to the upturning of class relations. In so doing, it contributes to our wider understanding of women's wartime experiences.[7]

Pre-war History of Voluntarism and Medical Caregiving

Olive Dent's decision to volunteer at the outbreak of war was underpinned by a series of policies and organisations that emerged in the decade before 1914. In 1909, in preparation for a war with Germany that seemed increasingly likely, the British War Office issued a 'Scheme for the Organisation of Voluntary Aid in England and Wales' as a means of reinforcing the existing Territorial Medical Forces.[8] Part of this scheme saw the formation of the Voluntary Aid Detachments through local branches of the Red Cross.[9] Britain, having declared war on Germany on 7 August 1914, lacked the numbers of soldiers sufficient to match the might of Germany and, in order to supplement this and in keeping with the mood of patriotic duty, Kitchener called for 100,000 volunteers to come forward and serve. The mood of enthusiasm for war in Britain saw men volunteering at a rate of more than 1,500 a

7 For historiographical literature on women's experience of the Great War see, for example, Potter, *Boys in Khaki, Girls in Print*; Anne Summers, *Angels and Citizens: British Women as Military Nurses, 1854–1914* (London ; New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1988); Margaret R. Higonnet, ed., *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars* (New Haven, Mass.: Yale University Press, 1987); Christine E. Hallett, *Containing Trauma: Nursing Work in the First World War,* (Manchester: Manchester University Press: 2011); Alison S. Fell and Christine Hallett, eds., *First World War Nursing.* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2015); Miriam G. Cooke and Angela Woolacott, eds., Miriam G. Cooke and Angela Woollacott, eds., *Gendering War Talk* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014); Deborah Thom, *Nice Girls and Rude Girls: Women Workers in World War I* (London: New York : I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1998); Nicoletta F. Gullace, *'The Blood of Our Sons': Men, Women, and the Renegotiation of British Citizenship during the Great War* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillian, 2002); Janet S.K. Watson, *Fighting Different Wars: Experience, Memory, and the First World War in Britain*, Studies in the Social and Cultural History of Modern Warfare 16 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Susan R. Grayzel and Tammy M. Proctor, eds., *Gender and the Great War* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

8 Summers, *Angels and Citizens*; Ian Martin, "'When Needs Must' — The Acceptance of Volunteer Aids in British and Australian Military Hospitals in World War 1," *Health & History* 4/1 (2002): 88–98.

9 Caroline Moorehead, *Dunant's Dream: War, Switzerland and the History of the Red Cross* (London: HarperCollins, 1999), 213.

day, and special arrangements were needed to cope with the surge of men coming forward.[10] This wave of patriotism was reflected in the numbers of women who responded to the rhetoric of service and duty in the call for volunteer nurses.

The movement of this significant number of female volunteers into uniform meant that, from the outbreak of the First World War in August 1914 until the Spring of 1919, millions of sick and wounded soldiers were cared for by teams of health care personnel which consisted of trained nurses, volunteer Red Cross nurses (known as V.A.D.s), and orderlies. By August 1914 47,196 women had volunteered to serve in the V.A.D. and by the end of the conflict that number had risen to over 80,000.[11] The work of historians such as Rebecca Gill, Sally Frampton, Stefan Ramsden and Rosemary Cresswell has shown that voluntarism and the desire to provide voluntary aid to combatants and civilians affected by war had long been at the forefront of British society and culture.[12] Voluntarism and philanthropic work had a specific importance to elite women and by 1914 the war offered an important way for these women to move into the public sphere, and this thesis will show how this was always shaped by the privileges of class.

While pre-war British society was structured around rigid hierarchies of class, and the principles of affluence, status, and influence, upon entering the nursing hierarchy, the

[10] Martin Gilbert, *First World War* (London: HarperCollins, 1995), 38–9. Adrian Gregory, *The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 25–7, 30, 70–99; Gerard J. De Groot, *Blighty: British Society in the Era of the Great War* (London ; New York: Longman, 1996), 42–53; David Silbey, *The British Working Class and Enthusiasm for War, 1914–1916*, Military History and Policy 21 (London: Routledge, 2012).

[11] Santanu Das, "'The Impotence of Sympathy': Touch and Trauma in the Memoirs of the First World War Nurses," *Textual Practice* 19(2), 2005, 239 – 262; Henriette Donner, "Under the Cross – Why V.A.D.s Performed the Filthiest Task in the Dirtiest War: Red Cross Women Volunteers, 1914 – 1918," *Journal of Social History* Spring 1997, Vol. 30(3), 687 – 704; Arthur Marwick, *Women at War 1914 – 1918* (London: Fontana, 1977), 168.

[12] Sally Frampton, '*Amateur Surgeon or Dutiful Citizen? The First Aid Movement in the Nineteenth Century,'* Remedia Network, https://remedianetwork.net/2015/11/02/amateur-surgeon-or-dutiful-citizen-the-first-aid-movement-in-the-nineteenth-century, accessed November 30th 2019, Rebecca Gill, *Calculating Compassion: Humanity and Relief in War, Britain, 1870-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013) pp. 1-3, Stefan Ramsden and Rosemary Cresswell, *'First Aid and Voluntarism in England1945-1985'* Twentieth Century British History, Vol. 30, No. 4, 2019, pp. 504 – 530.

V.A.D.s found themselves in an unfamiliar social world which was arranged in a different way to the class structure which normally surrounded them.[13] The work of Gill and Frampton highlight the tensions around authority which existed in incorporating amateurs into already established medical organisations and how, for decades before the First World War voluntary organisations such as St. John Ambulance and the British Red Cross needed to pay close attention to the boundaries that existed between professional and amateur care giving.[14] This thesis builds on this work and demonstrates that the organisational structure of the nursing profession meant upper middle-class V.A.D.s found themselves subordinate to trained nurses of working-class origins. The result, for women like Thekla Bowser and Vera Brittain, was an alternate and unsettling experience of social relations and social hierarchy.[15]

This thesis thus argues that women's active role in war time blurred the boundaries of class relations at a time when class roles and relationships were very clearly defined. For the V.A.D.s, however, the professional society in which they found themselves challenged traditional notions of deference organised around the more familiar class system. The demands of professional identity and skill, in other words, challenged both their social status and the ideals of patriotism and philanthropic sacrifice that had prompted them to volunteer. Hospitals across France, Belgium, and Britain, I argue, thus became the site of a clash of ideals or values between trained and volunteer nurses and ongoing tensions that extended far beyond differences of class. The military hospitals became a space in which the V.A.D.s were confronted with an alternate view of how relations between people might be structured.

13 Harold Perkin, *The Rise of Professional Society: England since 1880*, reprint (London: Routledge, 1999), 116.

14 Frampton, 'Amateur Surgeon or Dutiful Citizen?' Gill, *Calculating Compassion*.pp. 2,3, 168, 169, 199.

15 Janet Lee, "FANY (First Aid Nursing Yeomanry) 'Other Spaces': Toward an Application of Foucault's Heterotopia as Alternate Spaces of Social Ordering," *Gender, Place and Culture* 16, no. 6 (December 2009): 647–64.

This thesis makes a contribution to our knowledge of the hierarchical system that was created between the V.A.D.s and the nurses in the hospital organisation.

This argument challenges existing historiographical assumptions about the relationship between trained and volunteer nurses. Taking their cue from the published writing of elite women like Vera Britain and Olive Dent, historians such as Anne Summers, Lyn Macdonald, and Christine Hallett acknowledge that the relationship that existed between the volunteer nurses and trained nurses was difficult, but attribute this to hostility based on the differing social class of the two groups and the disruption to usual class-based relationships caused by professional differences.[16] This thesis critically interrogates this assumption, as well as the wider idea that during the Great War the V.A.D. nurses were subjected to routine bullying and harsh treatment by the professional nurses.[17] Rather than simply a product of differences of class and social antagonism, I show how the fraught relationship between the two groups of women were a consequence of the social, political, and professional struggle the trained nurses were involved in to improve the status of their profession. Focused on the campaign for a State Register of nurses, this struggle began in the late nineteenth century and was intensified by the demands of modern industrial war. The V.A.D.s therefore entered the nursing hierarchy at a significant time in the history of nursing, when their very presence undermined the argument of the profession, made by organisations such as The British Nurses Association (BNA), as well as in publications such as the *BJN*, that training and registration of nursing was necessary.[18] From the perspective of trained nurses, the Great

[16] Summers, *Angels and Citizens*, chap. 9; Lyn Macdonald, *The Roses of No Man's Land* (London: Penguin, 1993), xi–xv; Jane Brooks and Christine E. Hallett, eds., *One Hundred Years of Wartime Nursing Practices, 1854-1953*, Nursing History and Humanities (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), 132; Fell, *First World War Nursing*, 3, 87–102; George Robb, *British Culture & the First World War* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 66.
[17] Macdonald, *The Roses of No Man's Land*; Macdonald; Ian Martin, "'When Needs Must' — The Acceptance of Volunteer Aids in British and Australian Military Hospitals in World War 1," *Health & History* 4/1 (2002): 88–98.
[18] Susan McGann, *The Battle of the Nurses A Study of Eight Women Who Influenced the Development of Professional Nursing, 1880–1930* (London: Scutari, 1992), 24–6.

War was both a time of national and professional crisis. Writing the experience of the professionals back into the wartime history of nursing, and placing the Great War in its longer historical context, the thesis consequently sheds new light on the relationship between V.A.D.s and trained nurses.

The experience of trained nurses during this period has been overshadowed by narratives of poor relationships and personal rivalry with the volunteers. The historiography ignores the impact that the struggle for professionalisation, in the face of strong opposition, had on the trained nurses.[19] The thesis will write the experience of professional nurses back into the history of wartime nursing. Many histories of the nursing profession have been written with a professional purpose.[20] Consequently, they have failed to consider the complexities which mark the Great War as a period of history which was significant for trained nurses as a group of women striving to become recognised as a profession against strong opposition.

Nursing and the Campaign for State Registration

As the discussion above suggests, this thesis demonstrates a weakness in an analysis of women's wartime experiences war that separates class and professionalism. Historians such as Christine Hallett have already begun to address this issue more recently, making a contribution to the knowledge of the role and contribution of trained nurses.[21] However, the shared experience of the V.A.D.s and trained nurses has still been overlooked. This is because of the privileging of V.A.D.s and their dominance as the storytellers in their

[19] Celia Davies, ed., *Rewriting Nursing History* (London, Totowa, N.J.: Croom Helm, Barnes & Noble, 1980), 2.
[20] Brian Abel-Smith, *A History of the Nursing Profession*, reprint (London: Heinemann, 1977); Robert Dingwall, Anne Marie Rafferty, and Charles Webster, *An Introduction to the Social History of Nursing*, reprint (London: Routledge, 1991); McGann, *The Battle of the Nurses*; Rafferty, *The Politics of Nursing Knowledge*.
[21] Hallett, *Containing Trauma*; Christine E. Hallett, *Nurse Writers of the Great War*, Nursing History and Humanities (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016); Christine E. Hallett, *Nurses of Passchendaele: Tending the Wounded of Ypres Campaigns 1914–1918.* (Pen & Sword, 2017); Christine E. Hallett, *Veiled Warriors: Allied Nurses of the First World War*, first edition (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Fell, *First World War Nursing*; Summers, *Angels and Citizens*.

published diaries and memoirs. This thesis will build on the work of Christine Hallett by examining the war time experience of trained nurses in the same frame as that of the V.A.D. It will do so by analysing the attitude of two such volunteers towards their trained colleagues as expressed in their private letters. More importantly the thesis is distinct from the work of Hallett in that it will use letters and articles in professional journals, in particular the *British Journal of Nursing* as a means of understanding the debates about the development of nursing as a profession and the place of the First World War as a watershed in this process.

The exclusion of trained nurses from such historical accounts has led to a distorted view and reinforced the romantic and compelling image of the V.A.D.s as 'gently nurtured girls that walked straight out of Edwardian drawing rooms and into the manifold horrors of the First World War.'[22] From this perspective, the experience of trained nurses during this period has been overshadowed by narratives of their poor relationships and personal rivalry with the volunteers. As the discussion below suggests, however, this analysis ignores the impact of their ongoing and protracted struggle for professionalisation, in the face of strong opposition, on the ways in which trained nurses encountered and responded to a new wave of volunteers.[23] Popular understandings of nursing in the First World War meant that all women who worked in hospitals were considered to be "nurses," and the volunteer nurse occupied a more prominent position in the minds of the general public. Recent scholarship by historians such as Christine Hallett and Alison Fell has sought to redress this imbalance.[24] This thesis seeks to develop this contribution through deploying a collaborative approach to the experiences of the trained nurse and the VAD as reflected in professional journals. In

[22] Macdonald, *Roses of No Man's Land*, Foreword.
[23] Davies, *Rewriting Nursing History*, 2.
[24] Alison S. Fell and Christine E. Hallett (eds.,) *First World War Nursing New Perspectives* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2013), Christine E. Hallett, *Veiled Warriors Allied Nurses of the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), Christine E. Hallett, *One Hundred Years of Wartime Nursing Practices, 1854 – 1953* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), Christine E. Hallett, *Nurse Writers Of The Great War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016)

doing so it will unearth new perspectives which show how private lives intersected with public journals.

The analysis of the combined experience of the trained nurses and V.A.D.s makes an important contribution to the wider historiography on medicine, caregiving, and the Great War by historians such as Santanu Das, Jessica Meyer, and Jeffrey Reznik.[25] Meyer's work on how male volunteers in the Friend's Ambulance Unit negotiated their pacifist principles with a desire to contribute to wartime service is a significant analysis of how caregivers navigated two conflicting ideals.[26] The thesis builds on this theory by analysing the ideals of patriotic duty and professionalism as experienced by the trained nurses.

Examining the long-term aspirations of trained nurses to become recognised as a profession, this thesis subsequently argues that the politics of nursing history, set in the context of the Great War, shaped and informed their attitude towards the volunteer nurses. Previous histories that have focused solely on the experience of the V.A.D. have failed to take into account the broader sociological theme of professionalism and focused too much on the role of class differences in shaping often antagonistic personal relationships. This was not a single issue, however, and needs to be considered within the context of the complex struggle of the trained nurses to assert their claim to professionalisation in a campaign which lasted over thirty years. As previously stated, organisations like the BNA and publications like the *BJN* gave the trained nurses a platform through which to argue that nursing should be recognised as a distinct profession with its own controlling body along the same lines as

[25] Santanu Das, *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature*, reprint (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Jessica Meyer, *An Equal Burden*, new product edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019); Jessica Meyer, *Men of War: Masculinity and the First World War in Britain*, Genders and Sexualities in History (Basingstoke, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Jessica Meyer, "Neutral Caregivers of Military Support? The British Red Cross, the Friends' Ambulance Unity, and the Problems of Voluntary Medical Aid in Wartime," *War & Society* 34, no. 2 (May 2015): 105–20; Jeffrey Stephen Reznick, *Healing the Nation: Soldiers and the Culture of Caregiving in Britain during the Great War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press : 2011).
[26] Meyer, "Neutral Caregivers of Military Support?".

medicine and law.[27] Well before the outbreak of war, many trained nurses within the profession were embroiled in a bitter argument to change the image of themselves and their work from the drunken and inept caricature of Charles Dickens' Mrs. Gamp to proficient and skilled practitioners.[28] Amongst the British population, nurses did not enjoy the professional status associated with other, predominantly male, groups in society.[29] As the BNA, founded in 1887, argued in 1888 in the *BJN*, the trained nurses wanted to 'form themselves into a profession,' so that 'as in the church, the law and medicine security is given to the public that members are in some degree qualified.'[30] Harold Perkin's work on professionalisation asserts that within a professional society, rewards and status are largely determined by the acquisition of knowledge, skills and experience acquired through ones employment. Perkin's work, focused primarily on male professions, largely ignored the issues of gender and the enduring persistence of a class based hierarchy.[31] This thesis builds on and contests Perkin's arguments and contends that, through their gender and social status, the trained nurses were doubly marginalised. Through an analysis of nursing (a predominantly female occupation in this period) to acquire professional status this thesis provides new ways of thinking about these debates. I will argue that the battle for the professionalisation of nursing was as much about self-governance and the creation of hierarchical structures of women within the organisation as it was about the acquisition of knowledge and skills through specialist and regulated training.[32] This thesis will show that

[27] "Editorial," *Nursing Record*, April 5, 1888, 2–7.
[28] Anne Summers, "The Mysterious Demise of Sarah Gamp: The Domiciliary Nurse and Her Detractors, c. 1830-1860," *Victorian Studies* 32, no. 3 (1989): 365–86.
[29] Helen Sweet, "Establishing Connections, Restoring Relationships: Exploring the Historiography of Nursing in Britain," *Gender & History* 19, no. 3 (n.d.): 565–80.
[30] "The British Nurses' Association," *Nursing Record*, April 5, 1888, 3.
[31] Perkin, *The Rise of Professional Society: England since 1880*
[32] Krista Cowman and Louise A. Jackson (ed.), *Women and Work Culture Britain c. 1850-1950* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2005) p. 16. Anne Witz, *Professions and Patriarchy* (London: Routledge, 1992) pp. 128-167

class loyalty was a crucial determinant of nursing politics and in the way that nurses were remembered after the First World War.

In order to secure this professional status, the BNA and other organisations were pushing for a parliamentary bill for the State Registration of Nursing, which would ensure an equitable and reliable standard of training for all nurses across the country.[33] The movement for the state registration of nurses which began in the late nineteenth century was not without its opponents, however. The trained nurses rallied and lobbied for change in the face of strong opposition. Challenges to their cause came from various quarters, namely hospital authorities who relied on the work of poorly paid, untrained nurses; some members of the medical profession who feared their own status and authority would be threatened; and several training hospitals who considered that the status and value of their training would be undermined by agreeing a universal syllabus to train nurses. The most notable opposition came from Florence Nightingale, who feared that an emphasis on education, theory, and examinations would weaken her argument that nursing, as a vocation, relied on practical skills and personal character.[34]

The outbreak of the Great War, however, marked the point at which this campaign for professionalisation intersected (and came into conflict) with longer traditions of philanthropic volunteering among middle- and upper-class women explored by Frank Prochaska, Seth Koven, and Ann Logan.[35] The influx of the untrained Voluntary Aid

33 Abel-Smith, *A History of the Nursing Profession*; McGann, *The Battle of the Nurses*; Davies, *Rewriting Nursing History*; Dingwall, Rafferty, and Webster, *An Introduction to the Social History of Nursing*; Vanessa Heggie, "Health Visiting and District Nursing in Victorian Manchester; Divergent and Convergent Vocations," *Women's History Review* 20, no. 3 (July 2011): 403–22; Vanessa Heggie, "Women Doctors and Lady Nurses: Class, Education and the Professional Victorian Woman," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 89, no. 2 (Summer 2015): 267–92.

34 Abel-Smith, *A History of the Nursing Profession*, 62–65.

35 F.K. Prochaska, *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century England* (Oxford, New York: Clarendon Press, Oxford University Press, 1980); Seth Koven, *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London* (Princeton, N.J., Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006); Seth Koven and Sony Michel, "Womanly Duties: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States in France, Germany, Great Britain and the United States 1880- 1920," *American Historical Review*, n.d.; Ann Logan, "Lady Bountiful or Community Activist? Amelia Scott (1860 - 1952)," *Women's History Magazine*, no. 62 (2010): 11–18.

Detachment nurses in 1914 happened against this background of great upheaval and fervent political campaigning for the trained nurses who had been striving for decades to improve the status and image of their profession. In seeking to place a distance between themselves and other untrained health workers, professional women were attempting to claim control and ownership over the title 'nurse' and gain formal control over training. The growing reliance on untrained and unqualified volunteers made necessary by the demands of war, however, questioned a central strand of the argument for state registration and professional status.

In Victorian and Edwardian hospitals, the organisational structure within the nursing profession was based around the principles of a professional society, ordered around the knowledge and expertise of its members which elevated their status beyond the common sense of a layman.[36] The trained nurses belonged to a professional society which was organised around a different principle from the old Edwardian class-based system — that of career and professional status rather than social privilege. In this structure, people found their place according to their training, expertise and the service they were able to provide. Their status was marked by the uniforms they wore, and individuals had the ability to progress through the ranks in accordance with their level of experience. Within a professional society, Harold Perkin maintains, the members lay claim to the fact that their particular service is indispensable to society, and it is by this means that they hope to raise their status.[37] Although Perkin was not writing specifically about nursing, the thesis illustrates how the concept of indispensability became a very important factor in the struggle for professional recognition and state registration. As the chapters in this thesis demonstrate, the very presence of the volunteers with little or no training challenged the claim of the

36 Harold Perkin, *The Rise of Professional Society: England since 1880*, Reprinted (London: Routledge, 1999), 2–3.
37 Perkin, 6.

trained nurses to indispensability. That anyone could enter a hospital and, with very little effort, call themselves a nurse undermined the assertion that the knowledge and skills that could only be acquired through an agreed, standardised training syllabus were necessary. If this view was accepted by wider society, nursing could not be considered a profession. The demands of the war thus exacerbated earlier challenges to the professional status of nursing by introducing a new group and, therefore, a new dynamic into medical institutions and hospitals. This thesis will show how the First World War provided an opportunity for the supporters of the professionalisation of nursing to explain and justify their argument. In doing so the thesis develops the work of Krista Cowman and Louise Jackson's edited collection on women and professional identity which examines professionalisation as a set of 'sliding categories.'[38] In doing so I will argue that at various points the trained nurses adopted the use of one category (namely patriotic duty) over the vocational and intellectual categorisation of nursing as a skilled profession, and that the use of this changing rhetoric was determined by the desire of the trained nurses to gain the support of a society which seemed to favour the volunteer nurse.

Drawing on a range of published, archival, and personal material, this thesis explores the relationship between professional nurses and members of the V.A.D. during the Great War. Rather than simply a result of class differences, I argue that tensions between the two groups were rooted in wider and longer debates over the professionalisation of nursing. The Great War became the moment at which these tensions came to a head and acquired a particular freighted resonance. In doing so, the thesis challenges the myths of popular histories which perpetuate the image of the selfless, heroic, upper middle-class V.A.D., supposedly singled out for harsh treatment by the socially inferior yet professionally superior trained nurse.

[38] Cowman, Krista and Jackson, Louise A., "Middle-class women and professional identity," *Women's History Review*, 01 June 2005, Vol.14(2), pp.165-180.

Situated within the wider and longer context of the contentious politics of nursing, we can therefore understand how volunteer nurses became the focus of the frustration of the professional nurses. Widely identified as a problem for the status and authority of the nursing profession, V.A.D.s were, as the chapters in this thesis will demonstrate, treated like any other new member who entered the profession with little or no knowledge, skills, and experience. Through an analysis of letters and articles published in the *BJN*, I illustrate how nurses used their professional journal to maintain and reiterate their argument of professionalisation using the language of patriotic duty and citizenship that became central to the rhetoric of wartime propaganda. The thesis argues that the perception held by officials in the War Office that nursing was under great strain, unable to cope with the extra demands placed upon it by war, was not accurate. The argument will show that the tensions in assimilating the volunteers into the nursing hierarchy was as a result of the poor and ill-informed management of those responsible for running the hospitals and wartime nursing care, who were from the same social class as the V.A.D.s. Tracing the tensions between the trained nurses and the volunteers, I establish how frustrations arose through a sense that professional nurses were excluded from their own self-governance — an explosive issue for organisations that had been striving for professional recognition and State Registration and training for nurses for several years before the outbreak of the war. This bitter and often exasperating battle intensified during the conflict. In the pages of their professional journal, nurses used the issues that arose in the organisation and management of the volunteers to support their argument for professional training and registration.

The outbreak of the Great War, however, had a significant negative impact on the campaign for State Registration. While pro-registrationists felt that the provision of nursing care for the sick and wounded strengthened their belief in the need for nursing to be self-governed and self-regulated, the lack of popular support for nursing as a profession was

striking. Expressed through negative and often scathing letters and articles in British newspapers, critics of the nursing profession recounted tales of the nurses' harsh treatment of the V.A.D.s and shone a spotlight on the difficulties trained nurses had in communicating their point of view. By 1918, the unpopularity of the profession made it seem unlikely that a move to improve their status via a Parliamentary Bill would be successful.

Sources and Methods

In making these arguments, this thesis draws on writing and print culture (both public and private) to explore the politics of class and professionalisation during the Great War. The professional journals of trained nurses and the British Red Cross Society, I argue, constituted a public sphere through which it is possible to trace arguments about the effects and experience of volunteering and the ways in which tensions were experienced and negotiated. It also allows us to reinstate the trained nurses at the centre of the debate about the position of the V.A.D. during the Great War.

Using familiar sources in a different way, the chapters that follow show how a professional publication, the *BJN*, provided a forum for nurses to reflect on the changes and challenges they were experiencing during Great War. Editorials, articles, and letters thus offer a rich source for historians interested in how claims to professional status were made and maintained in wartime, and how trained nurses sought to negotiate the influx of volunteers from very different social backgrounds. Newspaper archives have been used previously but few have recognised the wider significance of professional journals in both reflecting and shaping the broader debate of professionalism and patriotic duty. What the trained nurses as an organisation believed was happening to them is revealed through the journal, an instrument of mass communication to its members, and this subsequently reinforced existing beliefs and shaped the actions of the trained nurses.

The *BJN*, first published on 5 April 1888 as the *Nursing Record*, became an instrument and institution of the nursing profession through which the general views and requirements of nurses could be communicated. Published weekly, it was a 'journal for nurses, *written by nurses*' [emphasis in original] intended as a medium through which the needs and demands and general views of the nursing profession could be communicated.[39] From the late nineteenth century onwards, the journal became a significant instrument in the campaign for professionalisation, under the editorship and ownership of Ethel Bedford Fenwick, one-time Matron of St. Bartholomew's Hospital and originator of the movement for the State Registration of Nurses.[40] Drawing on articles and letters published between 1888 and 1919, I take into account the history of the politics of state registration in the context of the Great War and show how print culture became a central battleground in the struggle for professionalisation.

Like the *BJN*, the British Red Cross used its publication, *Red Cross: The Official Journal of the British Red Cross Society*, to communicate its ideals to its members and to support those in active service. First published in 1914, the monthly journal contained news of local Voluntary Aid Detachment units, articles related to specific issues pertinent to the wartime experience, and correspondence.[41] Regular editorials laid out the Society's expectations of behaviour to its members and sought to protect their public reputation and maintain good relations with professional nurses.[42] It also contained full page biographies of influential members such as Dame Rachel Crowdy, Principal Commandant in France and one of the first members to receive the Royal Red Cross (RRC), a decoration awarded to ladies who showed special devotion to nursing the sick and wounded of the Army and Navy.[43] Using

[39] "Editorial: To our Readers, Contributors, Patrons and Supporters," *Nursing Record*, April 5, 1888, 1.
[40] McGann, *The Battle of the Nurses*, 35.
[41] "The VAD and the War," *Red Cross*, April, 1915, 83.
[42] "Hospital Discipline," *Red Cross*, August, 1915, 168.
[43] "Some Experiences of a Rest Station V.A.D. in France," *Red Cross*, April, 1916, 42 - 43

articles and letters published between 1914–1918 allows us to see how the journal reinforced the rhetoric of patriotic service to influence its volunteers, maintain the public image of the heroic and selfless V.A.D., and contribute to the wider debate on the poor relationship between the trained nurses and the volunteers.

Building on this analysis, the second half of this thesis moves to explore the experience of volunteering as a nurse, and the ways in which individual women negotiated the tensions of class and profession which the war intensified. It does so by focusing on the lives and personal testimonies of two individuals — Helen Beale and Dorothy Robinson — as expressed through letters both wrote to their families. Dorothy Robinson was the middle child of an upper middle-class family, and her father and two grandfathers had distinguished military careers. She was twenty when she volunteered to serve as a V.A.D. and spent the entirety of her service at military hospitals in Britain.

The Beales were a prosperous and socially influential family. Helen was the youngest daughter, and she was thirty when, leaving her recently widowed mother, she began her service as a V.A.D. in France.[44] Helen Beale's extensive correspondence formed the basis of Janet S.K. Watson's analysis of the Beale family which explored key ways in which patriotic duty and citizenship contributed to war time service.[45] This thesis builds on Watson's work by challenging the image of the V.A.D nurse who, with very little training or experience, was able to take her place alongside her trained colleagues with ease. The close reading of Helen's letters in this thesis is distinct from Watson's work which places Helen as part of a large family for whom patriotic duty and service were significant in their approach to war-time service. I will show that, despite Helen's sense of duty, she struggled to come to terms with her feelings of inadequacy and frequently felt out of her depth

[44] Watson, *Fighting Different Wars*, chap. 4, "A Family at war: the Beales of Standen".
[45] Ibid

performing her nursing duties. This thesis demonstrates how Helen's sense of unease at being untrained and consequently unable to cope is echoed in the larger argument for training and professionalisation which appears in the *BJN*.

The presence of working class women as V.A.D nurses has been largely overlooked or ignored by historians. A study by Sue Hawkins of the data base of V.A.D records shows that a far more varied group of women from across the social classes volunteered to serve in during the First World War 'anonymously and without fuss' than might be assumed.[46] The absence of any archival collections of letters or published memoirs written by women other than those from the upper middle classes means that this thesis will continue working within this framework. The correspondence of both Helen and Dorothy were chosen because the size of the collections offer an opportunity to investigate and challenge the myth of the uncomplaining, heroic and self-sacrificial volunteer nurse. Both these substantial collections comprise the entirety of both women's time as a V.A.D and as such allow a depth of analysis which will enable themes to be explored throughout the course of their service.

The letters written during their wartime service become a place where we hear the voices of these two women and can begin to engage with subjects on their own terms.[47] A close reading of these letters draws out bigger questions about class, authority, professionalism, and social change during the Great War and shows how individual women made sense of war and its effects. By illuminating the trials and tribulations of these two individuals as they negotiated the difficulties they experienced in an unfamiliar hierarchy, this section of the thesis shows the ability of individuals to make sense of their experiences through letter writing and the maintenance of close relationships with their families. Through the personal

46 Sue Hawkins, 'First World War VAD Stories form the British Red Cross Archive: The Holmfirth Auxiliary Hospital', *Journal of War and Culture Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (November 2018), 291-303

47 For more on wartime letter writing, see: Michael Roper, *The Secret Battle: Emotional Survival in the Great War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010); Carol Acton, "Writing and Waiting: The First World War Correspondence between Vera Brittain and Roland Leighton," *Gender & History* 11, no. 1 (1 April 1999): 54–83

correspondence of these two women, we can gain not only an intimate knowledge of them as individuals but also of how wider social tensions were experienced at the level of intimate interpersonal relationships.[48] Throughout the thesis it is possible to trace the interaction of the private letters and the public debates in the professional journals. The events and emotions that both Helen and Dorothy are engaged with in their letters home demonstrate how these wider concerns had an impact on the lives and lived experience of these two individuals.

Such an experience cannot be viewed as separate from the bigger story which, crucially, includes the history and the wartime experiences of the trained nurse. This thesis will argue that the two experiences are inextricably linked and that they make a significant contribution to our wider understanding of the social and professional effects on women's wartime experience. Despite their close — if often antagonistic — relationship with the trained nurses they worked alongside, their correspondence suggests that elite women like Helen and Dorothy had little understanding of the claims for professional status that the professional nurses were making. Through a first-hand account of their experiences, the letters offer an interpretation of the V.A.D.s understanding of their relationships with the trained nurses and their subordinate place within the nursing hierarchy. By placing this within the wider context of the professional society and the politics of nursing, the thesis therefore challenges the competing constructions of reality between the V.A.D.s and the trained nurses.

While letters described the experience of wartime nursing and the fraught relationship between V.A.D.s and professionals, the thesis also argues that women like Helen and Dorothy used their correspondence to cope with the emotional demands of nursing. Writing to friends and family members, individual V.A.D.s sought to shape their experience whilst

[48] Istvan Szijarto, "Four Arguments for Microhistory," *Rethinking History* 6.2 (2002): 209–15.

trying to make sense of the external structures of the professional society they were bound up in. Concentrating on the way Dorothy and Helen interpreted their experiences and the meanings they gave to them thus allows us to understand broader historical issues and, by reading against the grain, to challenge the narrative that the V.A.D. was badly treated by the trained nurse purely because of her social status. Focusing on private correspondence, in short, challenges dominant historical accounts that have relied on the published memories of high profile V.A.D.s such as Vera Brittain.[49]

The thesis argues that entering into the restricting and often socially anomalous relationship with the trained nurses required a form of etiquette and politeness on the part of the V.A.D. which frequently led them to forgo outspokenness for the sake of good relationships.[50] The public performance required by the V.A.D.s subject to this form of social subordination may have necessitated some kind of self-misrepresentation in order to do this. This thesis will argue that the hidden transcript, as expressed in the private letters of Helen Beale and Dorothy Robinson, calls into question what may be a convincing but contrived public performance.[51] The thesis alerts us to the fact that the hidden transcript is provided for a different audience, takes place with different constraints, and may appear in the form of gossip, jokes, rumours, and innuendo which contradict what appears in the public transcript.

The thesis shows that it is only in assessing any discrepancy that occurs between the public and private transcripts that we are able to judge the impact of the authority of an alternative hierarchy on V.A.D.s, and this makes a contribution to our understanding of power and social status within the relationships. The thesis argues that in this context the

[49] Brittain and Williams, *Testament of Youth*; Bowser and Ball, *The Story of British V.A.D. Work*; Dent, *A V.A.D. in France*.
[50] Richard Sennett, *Authority* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993). Sennett adds the dimension of power to the discourse on authority. This is not a mutual bond, rather it is expressed as an emotional expression of power.
[51] James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

discourse of traditionally class-based behaviour became a territory that had to be renegotiated. The nursing hierarchy represented an alternate ordering for the V.A.D.s, and the thesis contends that the power relations and dominant social structures were negotiated by the trained nurses. The experienced, trained nurses were in a position of power and authority simply because they possessed the knowledge and skills necessary, whereas the unskilled V.A.D.s relied on the regular nurses to offer them guidance and 'on the job' training as they entered the hospitals with very little idea of what to do.

For V.A.D. Nurses like Helen Beale and Dorothy Robinson, I argue, letters written to family members provided a space for what we might understand as a hidden transcript — a discourse that takes place in a specific social site, occurs between a restricted set of people, and excludes specified others. While Scott and others treat the hidden transcript as the property of the socially marginal, in the context of the Great War, letter writing took on the same function for socially privileged, if professionally subordinate, women like Helen and Dorothy. As the discussion that follows suggests, fraught public debates over professionalisation distilled into the intimate and personal relationships between the two different groups of women working in military hospitals during the war.

Letter writing thus collapsed the space between the public and private spheres. The thesis argues that as well as fitting in to a hierarchy of status that was established within the nursing profession, the V.A.D. nurses were faced with the formal chain of command that existed within a military hospital. There they would discover the complex and unique hierarchical style of leadership that exists within the armed forces. These letters were written away from the scrutiny of those in power and authority and provided the subordinates with a safe place to speak their words of discontent and anger, criticise colleagues and superiors, and to gossip and to complain.

As this suggests, for those upper middle-class young women who volunteered to nurse, the Great War marked a time of upheaval whereby they were faced with the challenge of dealing with the power and authority of the nurses, and the dissonance between hierarchies of class and hierarchies of professional rank. Both Helen and Dorothy were prolific letter writers and thus become case studies; for these privileged, genteel girls also had to contend with the stress of communal living in a military environment which was likely to involve the sharing of sleeping, washing, and sanitation facilities. These young women who had rarely touched a dishcloth or sweeping brush found themselves performing menial tasks with their hands such as cleaning wards, scrubbing, and polishing. Both girls had privileged home lives with servants which reflected and reinforced the ideology of the class structure in which a clear distinction between the social groups was maintained.

Drawing upon this public and private material, this thesis thus demonstrates how the experience of the Great War marked a point of crisis for the nursing profession. This crisis crystallised in the institutional and interpersonal relationship between the V.A.D. and the trained nurse. It was in that context, that organisations like the Red Cross and the Supply of Nurses Committee had to manage and organise staff in order to alleviate tensions and ensure the smooth running of military hospitals and care for the wounded. The professional hierarchy that defined hospital nursing, I illustrate, offered the V.A.D.s an alternative way of being, and the war meant that they had to learn how to exist within a socially constructed 'other site'. The social order produced by the demands of professionalism exposed the constraints of traditional structures of class expectations. The thesis argues that dynamic of alternate social ordering challenged the way people thought and made it possible to begin to negotiate a discourse on class privilege. Through this, the thesis makes an important intervention in the debates around the history of the Great War and, in particular, its social

and cultural effects on modern Britain.[52] Since the war itself, and particularly after the publication of Arthur Marwick's *The Deluge,* commentators and historians have questioned the extent to which the Great War marked a turning point in modern British History.[53] Whilst some have argued that the war was a moment of transformation that altered the nature of state, society and culture, more recently historians have stressed the enduring continuities of ideas about status and social order.[54] This thesis emphasises both the challenge the war posed to ideas of class, gender and professional status but also the remarkable resilience of the ideals of social status.

Organisation

To make these arguments, the thesis is organised into four chapters. Chapter one writes the experience of trained nurses back into the history of the Voluntary Aid Detachment during the Great War. Focusing on articles and letters printed in the *BJN* between 1888 and 1919, it explores how the trained nurses responded to the professional demands of nursing the sick and wounded soldiers during the Great War whilst at the same time coping with an influx of untrained volunteers. The chapter shows how the trained nurses used their professional journal to enter the debate around the amateurism of volunteer nurses and protest against the interference of socially influential individuals in the organisation of their working environment and professional life during the conflict.

52 Martin Pugh, *We Danced All Night: A Social History of Britain between the Wars* (London: Vintage, 2009); De Groot, *Blighty*; George Robb, *British Culture & the First World War*; Gregory, *The Last Great War*.

53 Arthur Marwick, *The Deluge* (London: Macmillan, 1991).

54 For more on this debate see for example Marcus Collins, *Modern Love: An Intimate History of Men and Women in Twentieth Century Britain* (London: Atlantic Books, 2003); Marcus Collins, "The Fall of the English Gentleman: The National Character in Decline, c. 1918-70," *Historical Research* 75, 187 (2002), 90–111; De Groot, *Blighty*; Nicoletta F. Gullace, *'The Blood of Our Sons': Men, Women, and the Renegotiation of British Citizenship during the Great War* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined* (London: Pimlico 1992); Pugh, *We Danced All Night: A Social History of Britain between the Wars;* Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

As the chapter shows, trained nurses did not object to the addition of the Red Cross volunteers into the system per se, but were unhappy with the fact that it was the War Office, and a committee of people which did not include trained nurses, which decided how these volunteers should be used. In order to create a more accurate picture of the personal interactions between the trained nurses and the V.A.D.s, I argue that it is necessary to take into account the professional and political changes in nursing during this period. The chapter accordingly places the relationship between the trained nurses and the volunteers within the wider context of the struggle for state registration and professionalisation of nursing. In doing so, it takes into account the goals and aspirations of the trained nurses, both individually and as an organised, professional group. The outbreak of the war and the subsequent demands on nursing disrupted their struggle to be recognised by the state as a professional body.

Challenging the myth that the V.A.D. Nurse was singled out for harsh treatment from the qualified nurses, this first chapter thus makes the case that it was issues around skills and expertise rather than class that informed the relationship between V.A.D.s and professional nurses. It suggests that they were, in fact, treated like any other probationer (trainee) nurse of that time, and the tensions that existed were a matter of the politics of professionalism rather than the specifics of personal relations in wartime.

Chapter two shifts focus and seeks to understand how the British Red Cross Society endeavoured to exert influence over the relationship between the trained nurses and the V.A.D.s. The chapter will focus on letters, articles, and editorials published in the *Red Cross: The Official Journal of the British Red Cross Society*. It explores the journal's impact as a site in which the tensions between the two groups, centred around the conflict between ideas of professionalisation and patriotic citizenship, appeared and were negotiated. Set against the previous chapter, it shows how print culture and periodical publications provided

a focus for ongoing and often fraught debates over the politics of patriotism and professionalisation during the Great War.

The Red Cross Society placed a high value on philanthropic national service and volunteering. As a result of the Great War, the British Red Cross Society became responsible for the administration and supervision of thousands of volunteer nurses in hospitals at home and abroad who assisted in the care of the sick and wounded. While the Society acknowledged that there would be difficulties in integrating the two groups, from the very beginnings of the formation of the Voluntary Aid Detachment, they made concerted efforts to put systems in place that would overcome this. As I show, however, this discourse undermined the need for the acquisition of knowledge and skills through training that characterised moves to professionalise nursing. In the pages of the *Red Cross*, the society used the rhetoric of duty and patriotic citizenship to underpin its ideals, secure the reputation of the selfless volunteer V.A.D., and engage in the debate with the trained nurses about the organisation of medical care during war. I argue that this rhetoric shaped the identity of the V.A.D. during the Great War and contributed to the narrative of harsh treatment whilst overlooking the wider debate of professionalisation.

Chapter three approaches the letters of a privileged young woman, Dorothy Robinson, written during her time as a V.A.D. Nurse, as a detailed case study through which to explore the social challenges of life as a V.A.D. Dorothy's letters illustrate the discomfort she felt between her unfamiliar, subordinate status within the nursing hierarchy and her perceived superior social status based on her class and familial military connections. Dorothy's interpretation of her social status informed her professional and social relationships as a V.A.D. The manner in which she communicated her response to serving as a V.A.D. Nurse in her letters was influenced by her sense of privilege and entitlement. Through close reading of Dorothy's letters, the themes of authority in an unfamiliar subordinate position, class-

based prejudice, the menial nature of her tasks, and the desire to progress to a higher position within the new hierarchy emerge. The chapter argues that Dorothy's experiences during her time as a V.A.D. illustrate how many young women from the upper middle classes negotiated their new relationships and unfamiliar subordinate status within a nursing hierarchy and continued to rely on their superior social status to influence their position in that society. Dorothy's experience illustrates clearly how many V.A.D.s had no understanding of the wider issues of the nursing hierarchy which was organised around professional values and standards or the political tensions in which the trained nurses were embroiled.[55]

Building on the analysis of Dorothy Robinson's letters, chapter four moves to analyse the wartime experience of Helen Beale, the youngest daughter of an affluent upper middle-class family, during her seven years' service as a nurse with the Voluntary Aid Detachment between 1911 and 1918.[56] Helen's correspondence, particularly during her service in France, shows how the concept of patriotic duty and citizenship informed and shaped the identities of V.A.D. Nurses during the Great War. Like many V.A.D.s at that time, Helen's letters showed how she struggled to negotiate the tensions associated with her superior social status, especially when confronted with duties and activities that were more commonly associated with domestic service. The war disrupted Helen's relationship with her family by uprooting her and separating her from her familial support structures. This was true for all those who served in whatever capacity.[57] Both Helen and Dorothy experienced tensions associated with their superior social class and their subordinate position in a professional organisation and, for both girls, family relationships and ideas about home and domesticity

[55] Letters of Miss Dorothy M. Robinson, V.A.D. nurse. Letters and postcards to and from family members, 1914 –1919: British Red Cross Museum and Archives, London (hereafter BRCMA), reference number 330.
[56] Correspondence of Miss H. Beale 1914 – 1919: BRCMA, reference number 1407.
[57] Maggie Andrews, "Ideas and Ideals of Domesticity and the Home in the First World War," in *The Home Front in Britain: Images, Myths and Forgotten Experiences Since 1914*, eds. Maggie Andrews and Janis Lomas (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), chap. 1.

formed a pivotal part of their support network. During the Great War, the idea of home came to symbolise not only a physical space but a space of emotional security and belonging.[58] For Helen, this separation from her family proved to be very difficult, and this chapter will show the importance that letter writing during the Great War played in not only maintaining contact with those left behind but as a safe space through which emotions and feelings could be worked out.

By using Helen and Dorothy as case studies, the thesis develops an understanding of the meanings each individual attributed to what they experienced as part of an alternative and unfamiliar hierarchical system whilst at the same time shedding light on the wider historical influences of patriotism, class, and professionalisation. Interweaving these case studies, the thesis demonstrates how the wider debate of professionalisation and patriotic duty was played out within the pages of professional journals and in the lives of two volunteer nurses — in public debate and private lives. It shows how both organisations reflected what was happening to them and how both used the language of patriotic citizenship to support their argument. This debate had an impact on the wartime experiences of the volunteers who became caught up in a profession striving for a change in its terms and conditions whilst at the same time negotiating their own place within an unfamiliar hierarchy. The rhetoric of patriotic service associated with volunteerism came into conflict with the professional ideal of the trained nurses. Through an analysis of the shared experience of trained nurses and V.A.D.s, this thesis will show the integral part that professionalism played in the relationships between the two groups during the First World War.

58 Michael Roper, *The Secret Battle: Emotional Survival in the Great War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), chap. 1.

Chapter 1

The *British Journal of Nursing* and the Professional Ideal

Introduction

This chapter writes the experience of the trained nurses into the history of the Voluntary Aid Detachment (V.A.D.) during the Great War. Drawing primarily on letters and articles published in the *British Journal of Nursing* (*BJN*) from the date of its first publication in 1888 until 1919, it explores how the nursing profession responded to the influx of volunteers and how the realities of class tension and the demands of modern industrial war for the qualified nurse differed from the published memories of famous volunteers such as Vera Brittain. It argues that in order to understand the wartime interactions between trained nurses and V.A.D.s it is necessary to take into account the professional changes in nursing that were occurring at the start of the twentieth century. Approached from this perspective, the Great War appears as a moment of crisis or challenge for the nursing profession.

Setting the professional and political challenges of the trained nurses against their interpersonal and working relationships with V.A.D.s consequently allows for a clearer understanding of the wartime politics of professionalism. Viewed from this perspective, we can see how the protests made by trained nurses were concerned with their own professional status, responsibility, and desire for self-governance. The arrival of the untrained volunteers into military hospitals and the nursing hierarchy threatened to undermine the battle for professionalisation. As this chapter shows, then, volunteers became the focus for the frustrations of the trained nurses. Challenging the myth that the V.A.D. nurse was singled out for particularly harsh treatment from the qualified nurses, the chapter suggests that they were in fact treated like any other probationer (trainee) nurse of that time. The tensions evoked in print by Brittain and others were underpinned by questions of professional status

rather than simply class antagonism or the specifics of personal relations during the war. This pervasive interpretation of the poor relationships between the two groups of women, I argue, is underpinned by the predominance of compelling yet misleading first-hand accounts written by former V.A.D.s. While these published memoirs have dominated accounts of nursing during the Great War because of the privileged social status of their authors, they do not do justice to the complex politics of wartime nursing.[1]

Historians such as Christine Hallett have already begun to challenge this partisan view of history by suggesting that this very general understanding of the period reflects the existence of a body of work of high profile writers like Olive Dent or Vera Brittain.[2] In focusing on such figures, historians have often largely ignored the experiences of the trained nurses who also worked in military hospitals during the Great War, and who had, since the end of the nineteenth century, been involved in an intense, public, and often strongly opposed struggle for professional reform and recognition.[3] By taking the experience of the professionals as its starting point, this chapter aims to give the opposite side of the story and, in doing so, challenges the myth that V.A.D. nurses were 'gently nurtured girls who walked straight out of Edwardian drawing rooms into the manifest horrors of the First World War.'[4] Drawing on the pages of the *BJN* and other sources, the chapter shows that volunteer nurses were treated like any other probationer nurse of that time. It was only the articulacy and privileged status of many V.A.D.s, and the enduring

[1] Olive Dent, *A V.A.D. in France* (Burgess Hill: Diggory Press, 2005); Dorothea Crewdson, *Dorothea's War: A First World War Nurse Tells Her Story* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2013); Vera Brittain and Shirley Williams, *Testament of Youth: An Autobiographical Study of the Years 1900–1925* (London: Virago Press, 1985); Vera Brittain, Alan Bishop, and Terry Smart, *Chronicle of Youth: War Diary 1913–1917* (London: Gollancz, 1981); Irene Rathbone, *We That Were Young: A Novel* (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, Distributed by Talman Co., 1989); Thekla Bowser and Tony Ball, *The Story of British V.A.D. Work in the Great War* (London: Imperial War Museum, Dept. of Printed Books, 2003).
[2] Susan McGann, *The Battle of the Nurses A Study of Eight Women Who Influenced the Development of Professional Nursing, 1880–1930* (London: Scutari, 1992), 19; Christine E. Hallett, "A Very Valuable Fusion of Classes: British Professional and Volunteer Nurses of the First World War." *Endeavour*, June 2014, Vol.38 (2), 101–10.
[3] Susan McGann, *The Battle of the Nurses*, 1–9.
[4] Lyn Macdonald. *The Roses of No Man's Land* (London: Penguin, 1993).

dominance of their first-hand accounts of war in the historical record, that makes us believe that they were treated differently. The hostility expressed by the qualified nurses cannot therefore be reduced to a simplistic explanation of a class-based resentment between two groups of women. Instead, I argue, wartime tensions reflected the broader background of debates over the professionalism of nursing and the intensification of this process in a very different historical context.

This chapter thus situates the V.A.D. experience of the Great War within the wider context of history of nursing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It takes into account the goals and aspirations of the trained nurses, both individually and as an organised professional group. The outbreak of the war and the demands on the profession took place at a crucial time in the history of nursing and disrupted their struggle to be recognised as a professional body. The influx of well-meaning but untrained volunteers into military hospitals posed profound difficulties for the trained nurses, but these difficulties were more to do with the distinct lack of knowledge, skills, and experience of the V.A.D. nurse than their social background.

The Battle for Professionalisation

The belief that trained nurses were routinely unkind to the V.A.D.s is commonplace in the popular memory and history of the Great War. This belief is rooted in the supposition that the perspective of the qualified nurses was characterised by hostility and resentment, which reflected both the class divisions of Edwardian society and the low social status of the nursing profession. Such assumptions echo contemporary analyses of the relationship between V.A.D.s and nursing professionals. In December 1914, the *Red Cross: The Official Journal of the Red Cross Society* thus reported that the trained nurses, who they considered

to be the 'salt of the earth,' had 'cast cold and enquiring eyes on the V.A.D. lady.'[5] V.A.D. nurse Olive Dent reported in her diary that before she arrived in France in 1914 she had 'heard unheeded tales of the edged tongues of women of the nursing profession.'[6] Such comments underscore how understandings of the character and behaviour of trained nurses were overdetermined by the socially privileged. The use of the language 'salt of the earth' had strong class-based connotations. References to 'cold, enquiring eyes' and 'sharp tongues,' focused on the body parts of the nurses and marginalised any sense of the feelings, emotions, and agency of that group. The trope of the unkind and harsh trained nurse, then, was constructed right from the start of the First World War.

The British Nurses' Association was formed in 1888 to organise and unite the various groups within the nursing establishment who supported the campaign for reform. Its aim was to obtain for nursing 'the recognized position and legal constitution of a profession which shall henceforth be inseparable from the profession of medicine.'[7] The nurses, who were represented by organisations such as the Professional Nurses Association, wished to undergo a process of professionalisation comparable to that undertaken by other groups during that period. To achieve this professional organisation and status there was a call amongst nurses for there to be a statutory register of those nurses who had received a thorough and systematic level of training. Those nurses who had been trained wanted to place an emphasis on the training requirements and sought to enhance their own professional status. Their desire was that the trained nurse should be clearly distinguishable from those who had received no training. In order to achieve this change, the nurses called for a central body to decide which centres were providing suitable nurse training and also for the introduction of a national standardised exam. Nurses who demonstrated that they had

[5] "Nurse," *The Red Cross: The Official Journal of the British Red Cross Society*, December 15, 1914, 389.
[6] Dent, *A V.A.D. in France*, 13.
[7] "The British Nurses' Association," *The Nursing Record*, April 5, 1888, 2.

received an adequate level of training from their own hospital by passing the national exam were to be placed on a national register of qualified nurses.[8]

As the *Nursing Record* stated in 1888, they [the trained nurses] wanted to 'form themselves into a profession,' so that, 'as in the church, the law and medicine security is given to the public that members are in some degree qualified.'[9] In order to secure this parity of status, trained nurses through organisations such as the British Nurses'Association, were pushing for a parliamentary bill for the state registration of nursing which would ensure an equitable and reliable standard of training for all nurses across the country.[10] This campaign began in the late nineteenth century as trained nurses rallied and lobbied for change in the face of opposition from the medical profession, hospital authorities and some areas of the nursing establishment. Despite this opposition and the challenges of wartime, nurses finally saw victory in 1919 with the passing of a parliamentary bill supporting the state registration of trained nurses.[11] Accounts of the negative attitude of the trained nurses failed to acknowledge the precarious position of the nursing position in the decade before the Great War and the legitimate concerns prompted by the movement of growing numbers of volunteers into military hospitals. By the start of the twentieth century, the nursing profession had endured a hard struggle to change the image of themselves and their work amongst the British population and did not enjoy the professional status associated with other groups in society.

The movement of untrained volunteers into military hospitals at the outbreak of the Great War, however, challenged a central strand of the campaign for professionalisation. Placing

[8] Brian Abel-Smith, *A History of the Nursing Profession* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1977), 58–62.
[9] The British Nurses' Association. *The Nursing Record.* April 5 1888. Vol. 1 No. 1 p. 3
[10] Abel-Smith, *A History of the Nursing Profession*; Rafferty, *The Politics of Nursing Knowledge* (London, New York: Routledge, 1996); Susan McGann, *The Battle of the Nurses A Study of Eight Women Who Influenced the Development of Professional Nursing, 1880–1930* (London: Scutari, 1992).
[11] McGann, *The Battle of the Nurses*, 1–9.

a great emphasis on rigorous, standardised education and training as the route to professionalisation, in 1888, the British Nurses' Association warned of 'inefficient, half-trained women [who] bear the same name [of nurse], and are not in any way distinct from those who have passed a thorough and careful training.'[12] The introduction of the volunteer Red Cross nurses into the wards at the outbreak of the First World War thus intensified the tensions that already existed in a group that was striving for change and was already caught up in debate surrounding their aspirations for professionalisation; a difficult and complex struggle which had stretched out for almost forty years.[13]

The background to this aspiration for professionalisation was one that was fraught with disagreements and battles surrounding a desire for reform and modernisation.[14] As well as not being considered a profession, nursing traditionally occupied a low social status. Reflecting on a recent legal case, an anonymous letter, signed 'Mother,' to the *BJN* in April 1914, registered unease that a 'Judge in the High Courts has decided that a trained nurse is a domestic servant.'[15] The writer remarked that the 'amour propre' or self-esteem of nurses was being affected by this view. This comment clearly showed how demoralised the nursing profession felt by this attitude. Their sense of worth was tested by the establishment which viewed them as having little more value than an unskilled and uneducated domestic servant.

While trained nurses were part of an emerging profession that prided itself in the skills, knowledge, and socially reputable status of its members, the arrival of the V.A.D.s from a superior social class and the popularity of the glamorous, heroic, and selfless V.A.D. in British newspapers, challenged this notion and contributed to the fractious relationships

[12] *Ibid*., 6.
[13] Rafferty, *The Politics of Nursing Knowledge*, 43.
[14] Abel-Smith, *A History of the Nursing Profession*; Robert Dingwall, Anne Marie Rafferty, and Charles Webster, *An Introduction to the Social History of Nursing*, reprint (London: Routledge, 1991); McGann, *The Battle of the Nurses*; Harold Perkin, *The Rise of Professional Society: England since 1880*, reprint (London: Routledge, 1999); Rafferty, *The Politics of Nursing Knowledge*.
[15] 'Mother', "The Status of the Trained Nurse," *British Journal of Nursing*, April 4 1914, 305.

between the two groups. Alongside their perceived humble social status, then, the uncertain professional status of nursing meant the Great War exacerbated existing tensions. The result was an increasingly intense debate between V.A.D.s, the Red Cross, and their proponents on the one hand, and the trained nurses and their professional organisations on the other, in which both sides deployed the language of patriotic duty and service to claim public support and advance their case for recognition.

From the very start of the First World War in August 1914, the trained nurses and their professional organisations expressed the wish for the nursing of the sick and wounded to be better streamlined and organised. The realisation that the potential for high numbers of casualties might allow people with social influence to interfere in the organisation of nursing care at the very highest level caused considerable concern. An editorial in the *BJN* on 19 September, 1914 stated 'personally we disapprove of encouraging women of every age and temperament to rush at nursing in time of war. With efficient organization …, there is absolutely no necessity to hand over our sick and wounded soldiers to amateurs.'[16] The use of the word 'amateur' was a key part of the trained nurses' argument that it was their knowledge, skills, and experience that should inform how the sick and wounded were nursed. Stressing the amateur status of the volunteers was a thinly veiled attempt to imply that the voluntary nurses were incompetent and inept. While amateurism was valorised in elite society, the language deployed in this editorial reflected wider tensions of class and expertise.

The conflict between ideals of class and professionalism was pervasive. The editorial continued to register an objection, in the strongest possible way, to the running of hospitals and aid detachments by 'untrained peeresses':

[16] "Nursing and The War. Discipline Must Be Maintained," *British Journal of Nursing*, September 14, 1914, 221 - 222

> the Army Medical Department should prohibit any such unprofessional arrangement. We do not find peers of the realm foisting themselves into positions of Army Medical Directors … Why, therefore should their wives and daughters be permitted by the War Office to assume serious responsibility for the nursing of sick soldiers, for which they are not qualified? This insufferable patronage of a skilled profession should be entirely eliminated ….[17]

When women of 'every age and temperament' were rushing to volunteer as nurses, the dangers were clear. The 'rush' implied that there was little organisation in their recruitment, and volunteers were unsuited for nursing because of their age, youth, and character. From this perspective, if the running of hospitals had been organised efficiently — that is to say, by nurses — there would be no need for untrained amateur nurses. This critique was shaped by a keen sense of the relationship between the politics of gender and professional status. As the editorial pointedly noted, the predominantly male medical profession did not suffer a similar indignity of being managed by peers of the realm. From this perspective, the interference of their 'wives and daughters' was considered 'insufferable' when they were 'foisted' on the nursing profession by the Medical Directors.

Such criticism aligned nursing as a skilled profession with that of medicine and questioned the class-based privilege of the women who, the *BJN* argued, assumed positions of responsibility in a way that was dangerous. The editor called for such practices to be 'entirely eliminated.'[18] As comments such as this suggested, what troubled the nursing profession was the lack of qualified nurses involved in the process of planning and administration for the provision of nursing care. The very presence of untrained women holding positions of authority, as well as those serving as volunteer nurses, challenged

[17] *ibid*
[18] *Ibid.*

established management patterns and the processes of recruitment, training, and discipline which the profession had worked so hard to build up. Set against the turbulent pre-war period in nursing history, the demands of the outbreak of war disrupted the ongoing and heated campaign for State Registration. For pro-registrationists, it was clear that their case for the need for nursing to be self-governed and self-regulated was now stronger than ever.

The trained nurses had an expectation that the unskilled and inexperienced V.A.D.s would work in a probationer's capacity before undertaking a role with any responsibility. The convention within nursing was that all untrained probationers were required to work for a full year under the supervision of a fully qualified, experienced nurse. However, the terms of service specified that the probationer could be discharged by Matron at any time for misconduct, inefficiency, or negligence.[19] Significantly, this meant that the recruit would only work on the ward under the direct supervision and scrutiny of the Sister or Matron. Only when the senior nurse was satisfied that the probationer had demonstrated competency in the skills of rudimentary nursing would she be allowed to care for a patient. The probationer was also expected to carry out the basic domestic duties of a ward maid such as cooking and cleaning.[20] The demands of this training, however, were widely thought to clash with the social background of those likely to volunteer for nursing service in wartime. The *BJN* noted, in September 1914, that 'very few women of this class wish to enter hospitals for thorough training. They are quite content with the veriest smattering of knowledge — the nurses uniform and Red Cross badge, and the sentimental excitement of "nursing the wounded." '[21] The trained nurses wanted the volunteers to have some training in the fundamentals of nursing care and work under the direct authority and supervision of senior nurses, whilst the War Office and the British Red Cross, along with the volunteers

[19] Anne Bradshaw, *The Nurse Apprentice, 1860–1977* (Ashgate Publishing: Hampshire, 2001), 9–11.
[20] Bradshaw, *The Nurse Apprentice*, 1–29.
[21] "Nursing and The War," 222.

themselves, viewed volunteering for wartime nursing as a philanthropic activity rather than one which required any level of skill or knowledge.

What followed then was a clash of ideas around how the V.A.D.s should be managed and how nursing care in military hospitals should be organised and managed. The War Office, with little or no knowledge of nursing, felt that it was enough to simply send enthusiastic volunteers on to the wards and delegated the organisation of nursing care on to the British Red Cross. Trained nurses and their professional institutions like the British Association of Nurses and the *BJN*, by contrast, wanted to ensure that nursing care of the casualties of war was properly managed by them. In a resolution and statement written to the Secretary of State for War in January 1915, the National Council of Trained Nurses reported that never before had they been 'so well prepared to fulfil [their] duties.' Commenting on the fact that nearly '3,000 thoroughly trained nurses' had already been mobilised and that 'of volunteer trained nurses several thousands were available', they went on to say that they 'looked forward with confidence to nursing the sick and wounded soldiers in the most skilled manner possible.'[22] According to this statement, had the War Office not delegated responsibility for this organisation to the British Red Cross then 'an enormous amount of disorganization and suffering might have been prevented.' In such a way the statement made that point that the system of nursing approved by the British Red Cross was 'dangerously inefficient.'[23] The language of efficiency and national service concealed the fraught politics of professional status and self-governance at a moment of crisis.

[22] "The National Council of Trained Nurses of Great Britain and Ireland and The Care of The Sick and Wounded," *British Journal Of Nursing Supplement*, January 30, 1915.
[23] *Ibid*.

Professional Societies and the Great War

As this chapter has illustrated, the influx of the untrained Voluntary Aid Detachment nurses which occurred at the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 happened at a critical time in the history of nursing. In seeking to place a distance between themselves and other untrained health workers, trained nurses were attempting to claim control and ownership rights over the title 'Nurse' and gain formal control over training. The development of nursing's professional structures and hierarchies since the late nineteenth century meant that when middle- and upper-class volunteers joined military hospitals they entered an unfamiliar social world. Hierarchies of class were replaced by hierarchies of professional status, in which their superiors were in a position of authority achieved through experience, knowledge, and trained expertise. For trained nurses, by contrast, working alongside a growing number of volunteers accustomed to their superior social status created considerable tensions. Competing ideas of authority meant privileges of class were undercut by a lack of the skills and experience necessary to assume an elevated position within nursing's institutional structures. This had a marked impact on the interrelationships between, and attitude of trained nurses towards, untrained V.A.D. as both groups of women claimed superiority for different reasons. The arrival of V.A.D. nurses into medical institutions disrupted the hard-won ideas of status and authority that governed the nursing profession. This challenge became most stark when volunteers claimed the status and title of 'Nurse,' both of which, according to trained nurses, they were simply not entitled.

By 1914, the organisational structure of nursing was based around the principles of a professional society; ordered around the knowledge and expertise of its members which elevated their status beyond the common sense of a layman.[24] The trained nurses belonged to a professional society that was not merely the old Edwardian class-based system with a

[24] Perkin, *The Rise of Professional Society*, 2–3.

new ruling class. Nursing was structured in a way in which people found their place according to their level of knowledge, skills, and expertise. The titles attached to the roles (for example, Probationer, Nurse, Sister, Matron) reflected the ranks through which nurses moved and their status within the profession. The fact that we are aware of the tensions that existed between the V.A.D. and the qualified nurses indicates that the class structure, which was part of the fabric of society at that time, had not completely disappeared, and the move towards a more professional-based hierarchy represented a gradual change rather than a clean break with the accepted norm. Within a professional society, Harold Perkin maintains, the members lay claim to the fact that their particular service is indispensable to society, and it is by this means that they hope to raise their status.[25] Although Perkin was not writing specifically about nursing, the concept of indispensability became a very important factor in the struggle that the trained nurses were facing for recognition as a profession. The very presence of the volunteers with little or no training challenged the claim to indispensability. Anyone could enter a hospital and, with very little effort, call themselves a nurse. This therefore undermined the assertion that the knowledge and skills that could only be acquired through an agreed, standardised training syllabus was necessary. If this view was accepted, nursing could not be considered a profession. The demands of the war exacerbated earlier challenges to professional status by introducing a new group and, therefore, a new and exceptionally challenging dynamic into the organisation. The V.A.D.s posed a serious problem for ideas around nursing and professionalisation.

[25] Perkin, *The Rise of Professional Society*, 6

The British Press and the Popularity of the Voluntary Aid Detachment

In 1914, it quickly became apparent that in order to provide nursing care to the casualties of war the trained nurses would need help. However, the War Office and the nursing profession were in conflict over what form this help would take. The War Office, with little understanding of the art of nursing or the running of hospitals, appealed for more volunteers who they would send to work on the wards with little or no training. As set out by organisations such as the Professional Nurses Association, by contrast, the nursing profession did not agree that this was the kind of help they needed. Always eager to secure and establish the role of the V.A.D. as a probationer as part of the nursing hierarchy and question the organisation of the recruitment campaign, a *BJN* editorial in January 1915 railed against 'a photograph [sent to the *BJN*] of a trained nurse with 27 Voluntary Aid members in full uniform who are working under her in the hospital as nurses.' For the editor, it was clear that 'one superintendent cannot supervise the work of 27 raw probationers, which is what V.A.Ds really are.'[26] From this perspective, the carefully crafted illusion of selfless V.A.D.s engaged in the work of national service concealed a more troubling reality: it was unreasonable to expect one trained nurse to supervise, train, and manage this many 'raw probationers.' Naive and unskilled, volunteers were so lacking in experience that they ranked even lower in the organisation than probationers.

Having to train and supervise recent volunteers was both a political and a practical challenge. At the simplest level, it generated more work for trained nurses. Addressing these problems, while seeking to preserve the integrity of their professional society, nursing organisations argued that the role of volunteers should be limited to acting as ward maids or

[26] "Nursing and the War," *British Journal of Nursing*, January 9, 1915, 25

working as probationers on the wards. Yet the Supply of Nurses Committee, created in 1916 by Lloyd George, Secretary of State for War, the body that advised the War Office on how nursing care should be organised and managed, did not provide a forum to articulate this position.[27] The Committee consisted of the following members: Mr. W.C. Bridgeman M.P., Viscount Knutsford (Chairman of The London Hospital), Sir Frederick Treves (Surgeon at The London Hospital), The Hon. Francis Curzon, Mrs. Katharine Furse (Commandant in Chief of the Women's Voluntary Aid Detachment), Captain Harold Boulton (member of the House Committee, The London Hospital), and Mr. E.W. Morris (Secretary The London Hospital).[28] There was not one trained nurse on the committee. For the *BJN*, this omission was 'indefensible' and 'a very serious reflection on the status of the nursing profession.'[29] Their exclusion from a wartime management committee, comprised almost entirely of male medical professionals and representatives of Britain's social and political elite, effectively and deliberately disempowered trained nurses. Membership of the Supply of Nurses Committee reinforced the notion that nurses were not considered competent or important enough to make decisions about the organisation of their own institutions and work. Even amid the demands of wartime, this was a dangerous threat to their status as a self-governing profession.

Campaigners for the state registration of nursing were right to be concerned by the composition of the Supply of Nurses Committee. Not only had the profession been overlooked but the committee contained Viscount Knutsford[30], a prominent and vocal anti-

[27] "Nursing And The War. Supply of Nurses Committee," *British Journal of Nursing*, September 23, 1916, 248.
[28] *Ibid.*
[29] *Ibid.*
[30] Syndney George Holland, Second Viscount Knutsford, was a hospital administrator and reformer. He served as chairman of the London Hospital for 35 years and was well known for fundraising and his support of the modernisation and progression of medicine. John Gore, *"Holland, Syndey George, second Viscount Knustford (1855-1931,)"* https://www-oxforddnb.com.ezproxye.bham.ac.uk/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-33943?rskey=mhXPEu&result=2, accessed February 21, 2019.

registration campaigner, as well as E.W. Morris and Sir Frederick Treves, who were members of Knutsford's board at The London Hospital, and therefore likely to share his views on the state registration of nurses. As an anti-registrationist, Lord Knutsford proved that he had no understanding of the benefits of nurse training. He was never going to advocate for the inclusion of trained nurses on the Committee or as part of the management and organisation of the care of the sick and wounded. The organisation of wartime nursing provided a platform for powerful opponents of the campaign for state registration.

The exclusion of trained nurses from the Supply of Nurses Committee reflected the difficulties organisations like the Professional Nurses Association faced in persuading political and social elites, and the wider British public, of their claims to professional status, and unique knowledge and competence, guaranteed by education, training, and experience. At the outbreak of war, however, the romantic image of the V.A.D. nurse heroine captured the public imagination. Reworking the image of the heroic male volunteer associated with the rush to the colours in autumn 1914, the British press applied those same ideals to the women volunteers. As Nicoletta Gullace has shown, the dominance of the rhetoric of national service and patriotic citizenship in the voluntary recruiting campaign for soldiers at the outbreak of war permeated the national consciousness.[31] This attitude towards voluntary service, coupled with the fear that an influx of untrained volunteers would damage or undermine their long-running campaign for professionalisation, created a situation where trained nurses were immediately on the defensive. In November 1914, the *Globe* published 'A Plea for the Untrained but Useful,' written by Katharine Patton-Bethune. In this letter, Patton-Bethune referred to her time as a volunteer nurse at the Convent Hospital, Estcourt, Natal during the Boer War. She stated that '… we had no trained nurse … and the letters

[31] Nicoletta F. Gullace, *"The Blood of our Sons." Men, Women and the Renegotiaion of British Citizenship During the Great War*. (New York: Palgrave, 2004), 7,8

that I still have from my patients go to prove that they did not suffer from our lack of knowledge.'[32] Having seen and known 'service in South Africa,' and more recently travelled to the front-line, Patton-Bethune claimed the authority of that experience to reinforce her argument.[33] It was her belief that 'the untrained nurse is doing … magnificent work at The Front … believe me; having returned from Ostend via Holland … the need of help is very, very great.' Implicitly gesturing towards the hostility of trained nurses to their new colleagues, the letter asked:

> why should we be snubbed and slighted? In many cases we ask for neither money nor help, salary nor protection, and yet we are treated with surly superciliousness … there is work for all who are strong and have a knowledge of foreign languages (the trained nurse in almost every instance has none,)...[34]

That the volunteer could work without payment and speak a foreign language encoded the privileged social status of the upper middle-class volunteer into a developing critique of the professional nurse.

The tone of this letter was important for several reasons. Patton-Bethune gave an eye-witness account of what she had seen at the Front and wrote using the language of a war veteran. This established that her opinion was valid as she spoke from experience. Drawing on this experience, Paton-Bethune emphasised how the need for voluntary help was 'very, very' great. The letter immediately placed the trained nurse in the position of villain: the volunteers were, she suggested, doing 'magnificent work' but had been snubbed and slighted simply because of their background and social status. Here was an implicit apology for the upper-class woman who was able to offer her services without any request for financial remuneration. Free from the need to work for a living and able to speak foreign languages,

[32] "Volunteer Nurses. A Plea for the Untrained but Useful," *The Globe* , November 11, 1914, 7.
[33] Carol Acton, "Diverting the Gaze: The Unseen Text in Women's War Writing," *College Literature* 31, no. 2 (Spring 2004): 53–79.
[34] "Volunteer Nurses. A Plea for the Untrained but Useful," *The Globe* , November 11, 1914, 7.

such comments presented the volunteer was more educated than her professional counterpart. In so doing, they dismissed the trained nurses who worked for a wage and, although trained in nursing, were not educated in the manner of an upper middle-class woman.

This praise for the glamorous young V.A.D. became more prominent as the war continued. In December 1914, the *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News* ran a column which spoke of 'some young ladies,' amongst them Lady Rosabelle Bingham and The Honorable Mrs. Percy Wyndham, who had both been 'widowed by the war' who were 'wearing their uniforms modestly, almost shyly. They were humble-minded women and girls, anxious only to be of use ….' The writer felt that for these women there was 'surely only reason for praise.' Widowed yet stoic in their continued national service, uniformed yet comporting themselves with dignity and discretion, these titled women were singled out for their selfless and philanthropic contribution to Britain's war effort. [35]

The reality of the tasks the trained nurses wanted the V.A.D.s to do did not fit the ideal of such accounts in some sections of the British press. In November 1914, the general feeling in the nursing establishment was that, in order to free up the nurses to carry out their skilled services, a deployment of ward maids should be made as soon as possible.[36] The profession made it quite clear that, if the more mundane tasks (those that did not require the knowledge and skills acquired by training) were taken from them by those who were used to domestic service, then they could cope with the demands of caring for the casualties. One other advantage of having ward maids in the hospitals would be that, being used to having a lower position in society, they would pose no threat to the status of the nursing staff within a professional society, and therefore the status quo (for which the trained nurses had worked

[35] "The Sportswoman," *The Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*, December 26, 1914.
[36] "Why Not Wardmaids?," *British Journal of Nursing*, November 28, 1914, 426.

so hard) could be maintained. Some newspapers preferred to ignore professional advice and opinions, and carried on printing letters and articles throughout the conflict which portrayed the V.A.D. as a heroine and continued to make urgent appeals for more recruits. A typical letter was published in the *Birmingham Gazette* on 29 July 1916. Written by Arthur Stanley, chairman of the British Red Cross, the letter spoke of 'a real and urgent necessity' that had arisen for more nurses. Stanley wrote that 'suitable women who are willing to help … may be attached to existing Voluntary Aid Detachments for immediate service in the hospitals.'[37] Stanley's letter implied a strong sense of crisis and made no reference to training. The volunteers were merely required to be 'suitable' in order to begin immediate work in hospitals. A similar appeal appeared in the *Aberdeen Daily Journal* on the same date in 1916, this time written by the secretary of the Scottish Branch of the British Red Cross, which indicated that this was a nationwide appeal. This letter stated explicitly that training was not necessary 'in this time of urgent and immediate need. Women will be accepted if otherwise suitable, even though they do not hold first aid and nursing certificates.'[38] The only 'qualification' required was that the volunteer be ready, willing, and able to give their time in order to begin work immediately. From the perspective of the nurses, this was an attack on their professional status and a dangerous threat to the ongoing claims to expertise.

The *British Journal of Nursing* and the Politics of Professional Identity

During the First World War, the nursing profession used the *BJN*, an instrument of professionalisation, as a space in which they could articulate their concerns about the organisation and management of nursing care. This included the contentious issue of the presence, role, and management of the Voluntary Aid Detachments. The *BJN* abounded with

[37] "The Need for Nurses," *The Birmingham Gazette*, July 29, 1916.
[38] "Need for More Nurses," *The Aberdeen Daily Journal*, July 29, 1916.

articles and letters that expressed the political and professional concerns of the trained nurses. It captured the feelings of a profession that saw itself dealing with the heavy demands placed on it by the First World War, whilst at the same time undergoing its own internal battles for recognition and status in a society that had traditionally not valued the contribution of nursing.

Set against the challenges explored below, many nurses became advocates for their profession and united against the perceived erosion of their status by the untrained V.A.D.. In so doing, as well as lobbying through their professional organisation, they used the nursing press, in particular the *BJN*, as a channel through which they could air their concerns about the organisation of care of the sick and wounded, and keep up the momentum for the campaign for State Registration. First published on 5 April 1888 as *The Nursing Record*, the *BJN* became an instrument and institution of the nursing profession through which the general views and requirements of nurses could be communicated.

The *Nursing Record* was described as a 'journal for nurses, *written by nurses* [emphasis in original].' As this suggests, from the start, it was intended as a medium through which the needs and demands and general views of the nursing profession could be communicated.[39] The journal was published weekly and available to buy 'at Messrs. W. H. Smith & Sons Railway Bookstalls, and of the principal newsagents in London and the Provinces.' It could also be obtained via subscription for the cost of 8 shillings a year.[40] Each edition was typically twelve pages long and consisted of an editorial, articles which contained information on professional matters, news or current affairs relating to directly to nursing, as well as reports on matters of local or personal interest. There were also official

[39] Title page, *The Nursing Record*, April 5, 1888, 1.
[40] *Ibid*.

announcements and a section for situations vacant, correspondence, book reviews, and sometimes a competitive prize essay.

The editor and owner of the *BJN* was Mrs. Ethel Bedford Fenwick, one-time Matron of St. Bartholomew's Hospital and originator of the movement for the State Registration of Nurses.[41] The child of a physician, Ethel trained as a nurse. She was appointed Sister at the London Hospital and, later, following six years as Matron at St. Bartholomew's Hospital, Ethel married Dr. Bedford Fenwick. On her marriage, Ethel Bedford Fenwick resigned her post as Matron and devoted her time to the cause which became her passion: that of the professionalisation of nursing.[42]

Ethel Bedford Fenwick's political and professional views naturally had an impact on the tone and rhetoric of the articles and letters that were published by the *BJN*. This influence was most obvious in the editorials she wrote for publication during the war. In December 1914, an editorial called for the state registration of nursing to be expedited as without it there could be no guarantee that the 'gallant wounded' would be nursed by trained nurses. War became an opportunity to further the existing cause — in this case by emphasising the risks posed to the casualties in being looked after by volunteers. The editor believed that 'no further evidence of the urgent necessity for State Registration to be advanced than the risks run by our gallant wounded at the Front,' as there was absolutely no guarantee whatever that the sick and wounded soldiers will be nursed by trained nurses at all.[43] Caring for casualties with untrained staff was dangerous, inefficient, and a 'national scandal.' The British media also came in for criticism because, according to the editorial, due to 'social influence' they had 'declined to criticise' the volunteers. From this perspective, Ethel Bedford Fenwick

[41] McGann, *The Battle of the Nurses*, 35.
[42] Susan McGann, *Fenwick (née Mason), Ethel Gordon (1857 – 1947),* Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780, accessed January 28, 2019.
[43] "State Registration of Nurses," *British Journal of Nursing*, December 19, 1914, 485.

argued, it was the duty of the state to ensure a safe level of nursing care to the men 'risking their lives for the Empire.' The *BJN* thus called on every patriotic nurse to do her bit to ensure that the bill for state registration — which had passed its first reading in the House of Commons in 1913 — was heard again in Parliament as soon as possible.[44] There was a real sense of urgency in this article which not only pointed out the dangers of unskilled care but also the perceived lack of newspaper and public support for the trained nurses. Because of this, the debate which provided the point of view of the trained nurses remained within the pages of the nursing press to be read only by the nurses themselves. There was also an implicit criticism of class privilege and the ability of people with social influence to interfere in the process which would result in the national disgrace of casualties being nursed by amateurs.

As this suggests, campaigners and representatives of the nursing profession like Ethel Bedford Fenwick used the issues and tensions exacerbated by the war to strengthen their crusade. Bedford Fenwick had no intention of suspending her fight for professional organisation and registration, using the raised stakes of wartime to press home her case for state registration; her journal was to be the instrument through which she campaigned and rallied support. In her editorial comment of December 1914, she wrote,

> it is almost incredible that we should have received letters advising that this question should be hushed up until after the war! This is not our way. Nothing could be more snobbish and unpatriotic. We are concerned with the comfort, recovery, limb and lifesaving of the sick at all times. We are doubly concerned with it in the present crisis … It is the duty of the State to guarantee a standard of safe, skilled nursing to the public just as it does a safe minimum standard of medical treatment and that by

[44] ibid

> failing to do so it shows a lamentable lack of responsibility … especially towards the men risking their lives for the Empire.[45]

In the strongest possible terms, using the language of patriotism and an explicit criticism of the attitude of the upper classes which she viewed as snobbery, Bedford Fenwick declared that it was the duty of everyone to ensure that the casualties received the best possible nursing care. To do otherwise would be unsafe and irresponsible.

A month later, these concerns were reinforced by The National Council of Trained Nurses of Great Britain and Ireland. Formed in 1904, this Council exemplified the efforts of the trained nurses to secure their professional status. With Ethel Bedford Fenwick as their president, this organisation secured her position as a formidable voice in the struggle. They passed a resolution in January 1915 in which Bedford Fenwick expressed the 'unqualified disapproval of the present organisation of the nursing of sick and wounded soldiers in military auxiliary hospitals at home and abroad.' Published by Bedford Fenwick in the *BJN*, the resolution continued:

> In the opinion of the National Council, the standard for nursing the sick and wounded should be of the highest quality that a grateful nation can provide for men who are risking their lives in defence of the Empire.
>
> The council therefore most earnestly petitions the Secretary of State for War (whose department is primarily responsible for the health and comfort of the troops) to prevent the expenditure of the munificent subscriptions of the public on inefficient nursing, and the subjection of the sick and wounded to the dangerous interference of untrained and unskilled women who have been placed in positions of responsibility

[45] "Nursing and the War," *British Journal of Nursing*, December 19, 1914, 485.

> for which they are not qualified, greatly to the detriment of the discipline in military auxiliary hospitals, and the general welfare of the sick.[46]

This statement employed strong patriotic rhetoric to argue that the involvement of volunteers in military hospitals was dangerous and a potential threat to the health and well-being of soldiers risking their lives for the Empire. Yet it made an important distinction, the objection was not to the V.A.D.s per se, but to those who felt that they should be working as nurses and their deployment as such by a body — the Committee of Supply — that did not have any understanding of the requirements of the nursing profession. From this perspective, the use of unskilled and untrained women as nurses could be seen as unpatriotic as well as harmful. The statement made an impassioned plea to the government to reconsider the organisation of the integration of volunteers into the military hospitals. The argument then was not that the trained nurses wished to do without the V.A.D.s, but rather that they needed to ensure that volunteers did not usurp the positions that had been assumed by the nurses who were there by virtue of training and experience. While making clear use of distinctions of professional training and status, the statement sought to mobilise the discourse of national service and appeal to the sentiment and patriotism of the reader.

This argument resonated with the debate which surrounded conscription and volunteering to the army and the issue raised by Lord Curzon, when he suggested that the men who had volunteered to serve might resent those who had been compelled to serve via conscription.[47] The volunteer soldier was seen to have some kind of moral superiority over the conscript, and his willingness to serve was a clear and outward sign of his character and patriotism. This argument could be applied to the V.A.D. nurses who were perceived as

[46] "Resolution and Statement sent to the Secretary of State for War," *British Journal of Nursing*, January 30, 1915, i–viii.
[47] Nicoletta F. Gullace, "*The Blood of Our Sons." Men, Women, and the Renegotiation of British Citizenship During the Great War* (New York: Palgrave, 2004), 102–4.

willingly leaving lives of comfort and privilege to put themselves in positions of hardship and difficulty, and were therefore more patriotic than the women who were there simply because it was their job. The statement in the *BJN* turned this notion on its head, arguing instead that it was in fact more patriotic to offer the sick and wounded the highest standard of care which could only be assured by education and training. Wartime representations of patriotism and heroism entered the language of nursing, profoundly reshaping how the profession viewed itself and represented itself to the British public. The nurses were arguing, through their professional journal, that patriotism could not be represented by eagerness and willingness to serve alone; patriotism was to be interpreted in the care and treatment given to the men who were prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice for their country and had become sick or wounded in the line of duty. The fact that they did not abandon this debate or cease in their efforts to campaign for state registration during wartime is significant and showed how crucial they felt this Act was for the advancement of their profession. The desire to continue the battle for professionalisation underscores how the Great War, at its outbreak at least, provided an opportunity as well as a challenge for the existing campaign.

The *BJN* returned to this argument and the problem of the V.A.D. regularly during the war. In January 1915, an article acknowledged the role of the British media which perpetuated the myth of the shortage of nurses and enthusiastically praised the virtues of the V.A.D. nurse and her role in the war effort. It said, 'we imagine the newspapers little realise what they are doing in extolling the "skilled" services of women as nurses of the wounded who have never been trained. The press is flooded daily with fulsome praise of such dangerous services.' The writer drew a parallel with women weavers in Manchester and wondered 'what the condition of the weaving machines would be in if operated by trained nurses!'[48] Even at this early stage of the conflict, the *BJN* suggested that newspapers were

[48] "Nursing and the War," *British Journal of Nursing*, January 9, 1915, 25.

being carried away by the romantic image of the V.A.D. — a breathless style of reporting that had dangerous implications. It was notable, however, that the nursing profession were so aware of the public perception (as reported in the newspapers) of them. The emerging discourse and rhetoric around the V.A.D. was both deeply troubling and had to be challenged.

In order to secure the status and importance of training, the writer noted that this enthusiastic praise was not only unwarranted (they were, after all, unskilled and therefore not competent) but harmful. The writer attempted to illustrate the point by drawing a comparison with the skill of weaving. If a trained nurse used a weaving machine, the writer wondered, what damage would she do to it if she did not know how to operate it? This led the reader to reflect on the question of how much more important the danger to a man's life would be if left in the hands of someone who does not possess the expertise of nursing. The tone of this statement expressed very clearly that people should only carry out those jobs for which they were qualified. From this perspective, the daily diet of praise and admiration that appeared in the newspapers singled out the untrained and often incompetent V.A.D.s at the expense of the nursing profession. The nurses not only had to contend with the ignorance of the War Office in the organisation of nursing care, but also that of the British media who were ill-informed.

Yet the radical disparity in the reach of national and local newspapers, and a professional periodical made it exceptionally difficult for the *BJN* to change the public perception of the trained nurse and V.A.D. This was not for want of trying, and print culture became a focus for an ongoing conflict between these two groups. That the *Spectator* could reprint comments like 'if nine months active service makes a man into an efficient soldier, may not nine months' hospital service give the V.A.D. some claim to be considered a nurse?' written by a V.A.D. who 'has been at work since November 1st [1914]' illustrated the difficulties

nurses faced in maintaining the professional structure of the hospitals, ensuring that the sick and wounded soldiers received the best possible nursing care, and protecting their own professional status.[49] Elsewhere the *BJN* took issue with an article in the *Daily Chronicle* written by Barbara Dane. Echoing the V.A.D. quoted in the *Spectator*, Dane noted 'we can make a soldier in less than six months, it seems, but it takes three years to make a nurse!' Warming to her theme, she continued to argue that all that was required was 'energy, enthusiasm and hard work' on the part of the volunteers to acquire enough experience for them to be considered suitable to 'prevent a vast amount of suffering on the battle field.'[50] Exercised by the implications of Dane's claims, the *BJN* response was strong and pointed: they defended the need for skilled, trained nurses, who were supported by volunteers working as probationers. The response to Dane insisted 'that there is no justification for employing untrained or semi-trained women, while there are plenty with full training available,' and went on to say that there was 'pain and danger to life' because of the ministrations of 'unskilled attendance.'[51]

In fact, the presence of these volunteers was seen more as a hindrance than a help by some nurses who wished that 'these excitable society girls had much better remain at home, and their parents pay towards the upkeep of an efficient domestic staff if they really wish to help the wounded.'[52] Published in the *BJN* in 1915, this letter resorted to a stereotype of the V.A.D. as a wealthy Society girl and the suggestion that they were excitable indicated that these girls were temperamental, emotional, and highly strung; the antithesis of the characteristic of a stoic and dependable trained nurse. Ideas like this, reflected how nursing training placed as much value on the character of the students as the education and

[49] The *Spectator*, August 7, 1915.
[50] "Nursing and the War," *British Journal of Nursing*, November 21, 1914, 402–3.
[51] *Ibid*.
[52] "Nursing and the War," *British Journal of Nursing*, January 9, 1915, 25.

acquisition of skills. All new recruits were required to provide a testimonial of character. Among the characteristics admired in a nurse were those of self-sacrifice, devotion to duty, truthfulness, sobriety, chastity and trustworthiness.[53] Reworked in print during the Great War, these ideas took shape as a strong rebuttal of the proposal that all that was needed to be a nurse was 'energy, enthusiasm and hard work' and an implicit defence of the need for the knowledge and skills that could only be acquired through proper training and the cultivation of good character.

It would seem from a statement such as this that, whilst the nursing staff realised that they needed to accept extra help in order to cope with the demands of the high numbers of casualties, domestic staff would be more useful. The impression was that the domestic class would be more compliant in taking orders and accepting the tasks asked of them (after all, isn't that what their natural role in society was anyway?) In contrast, the 'excitable' volunteers were presented as juvenile, immature, and hysterical women, unable to appreciate the demands of their role, the gravity of the wartime situation, and the task required of them.

As the war continued, correspondence and articles in the *BJN* suggested that such tensions continued to grow. In October 1915, the *BJN* featured an anonymous letter written by a Sister (a trained nurse) from France. The correspondent wrote about the laywomen who 'will interfere with things they know nothing about and knowing nothing of nursing etiquette are always treading on professional toes, and disturbing the discipline. It is quite hopeless.'[54] This sense of frustration not only reflected the challenges of working under the direction of the presumptuous and over-privileged 'society laywomen', but also the sense of hopelessness felt by the nursing profession as a whole in their struggle for recognition and registration. While the nursing establishment had raised concerns about the presence of

[53] Ann Bradshaw, *The Nurse Apprentice, 1860–1977* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2001), 4–7.
[54] "Nursing and the War," *British Journal of Nursing*, October 23, 1915, 330.

laywomen in the profession as early as 1888, they were still having their toes trodden on in 1915. The indication that this disrupted discipline also suggested an insult to the professional status of the trained nurses and raised a wider concern that the presence of these influential women would adversely affect the argument for professionalisation.

As well as providing a platform for serving nurses to articulate their frustration and criticism of the V.A.D., the *BJN* engaged in the wider public debate between advocates of the V.A.D.s and those who campaigned for an improvement in the professional status of nurses. In September 1916, the *BJN* reprinted a letter written to the *Evening Standard* by 'A Vice-President, Red Cross Society.' The writer spoke of the 'arrogance and incivility of the trained nurses' towards the V.A.D.s and expressed the concern that 'these little minds, clothed in brief authority have used that authority in such a way that at the end of the war the trained nurse will find herself generally discredited.' While the trained nurses were referred to as 'spiteful,' the V.A.D.s were 'at least one third of the finest women in the country.' The letter concluded that 'the trained nurse must either improve her ways or go under.'[55] Confronted with high profile criticism like this, and the ability of women from elite social backgrounds to access the corridors of power and columns of national newspapers, trained nurses realised that their reputation, along with the hard work towards state registration, was under threat. The editorial comment below the letter — 'we wonder what the trained nurse has to say in reply' — was an implicit call for a reaction.[56] Mrs. Bedford Fenwick used the opportunity to provoke debate and to keep the issue of State Registration and professionalism alive during the war years. It is curious to note that in subsequent editions of the *BJN* no response to this statement appeared.

[55] "Nursing and the War," *British Journal of Nursing*, September 16, 1916, 57.
[56] *Ibid*.

The *BJN* insisted that there was 'no justification whatsoever for employing untrained women' and that the 'country must protect the sick and wounded soldiers who have fallen in its service from the pain and danger to life from unskilled attendance.' The recommendation was very clear: those who wished to help should enter the hospitals as probationers.[57] By 1918, however, it became evident that this advice had not been taken on board by War Office, Committee of Supply, or British Red Cross. A comment in the *BJN* in March 1918 stated that the nursing profession was under threat from the 'self -satisfied young women [V.A.D.s] who meant to exploit nursing as a profession without efficient training.' It seemed as if the nurses had lost control of their profession as 'so many V.A.D.s have been permitted to assume the title of Sister, and accept responsibility … for which they are not qualified.'[58] Echoing articles that had appeared in print since the very beginning of the war, this implied that the V.A.D.s were selfish and narcissistic, and it questioned their motives for volunteering. It attempted to cast doubt on the image of the altruistic, sacrificial nature of the V.A.D.s and suggested that the profession was being exploited by their presence for personal gain. Here, again, was a direct challenge to the image of the heroic and selfless V.A.D.

On 20 July 1918, after almost four years of war, an editorial appeared in the *BJN* which underscored how the views of trained nurses had been ignored throughout the conflict. The article reported on a visit to France by Laurence Binyon, poet and author of *For The Fallen* (September 1914).[59] During his visit, Binyon was reported to have observed the skilled work of the trained nurses which was possible because of their 'hard and splendid training.' He admired not only their work but 'the training they have given to others less skilled', that is the V.A.D. probationers who worked under them. The V.A.D.s were admired as

[57] "Nursing and the War," *British Journal of Nursing*, November 21, 1914, 403.
[58] "Nursing and the War," *British Journal of Nursing*, March 2, 1918, 147.
[59] *The Nation's Favourite Poems of Remembrance* (London: BBC Books, 2008), 126.

'probationers under trained nurses in a ward.' This article attempted to secure a professional hierarchy by referring to the rigorous training received by the qualified nurses, and how the V.A.D.s worked under their command and careful tutelage. At the end of the report, the editor pointedly observed: 'we wish the V.A.D.s were always, or commonly, content with the position of probationers.'[60]

As this suggests, by 1918 a profession that had been severely challenged by the demands and challenges of war was not in the mood for self-congratulation. The absence of trained nurses from the New Year's Honours List left them with the feeling that they had been 'degraded to a pauper caste' by the establishment. The *BJN* observed that 'amongst those recognized as having done work of Imperial value are … hundreds of Red Cross Commandants … Titled women … and V.A.D.s.'[61] The tensions that existed were as a result of a conflict between the professional society of hospitals and the nursing profession and the hierarchies of class which shaped British social life in the first decades of the twentieth century. Despite their record of diligent and often heroic national service, the social status of the trained nurses meant they found themselves in a position in which they seemed to take on the status of 'outcasts' and were subjected to considerable public indignity in the aftermath of war.[62] The trained nurses had served King and Country and had now been rejected by the very establishment to which they had ministered. The reference to the caste system implied that the nurses considered that this oversight placed them in a position from which there was no escape. This article was written with the intention of provoking a reaction from the trained nurses and, as seen previously, ended with a call to arms. The final sentence read 'We wonder when the Nursing Profession will rise *en masse* against the indignity to which it is being subjected in connection with this war?'

[60] "Nursing and the War," *British Journal of Nursing*, July 20, 1918, 42.
[61] "The Order of the British Empire," *British Journal of Nursing*, January12, 1918, 27.
[62] *Ibid*.

The despondency that surrounded the exclusion of trained nurses from their professional and practice self-governance continued after the war. In February 1919, it was noted that Sir Arthur Stanley, Chairman of the Joint War Committee, had donated 'a huge sum of money for the training of V.A.D.s.'[63] The article went on to say 'the only thing which really stands out quite clearly is the demoralization which results from tampering with the organisation of professional work … through schemes of charity controlled by unprofessional people.'[64] The actions of Stanley represented all that the trained nurses had found frustrating and demoralising, not just during the conflict, but throughout the battle for professionalisation that had begun in the late nineteenth century.

These arguments continued to intensify in the aftermath of war. In August 1919, the *BJN* cited the example of the organisation of nursing in the United States to support their case for nursing care to be administered by trained qualified nurses. They published an article by Miss Sarah Parsons, chief Nurse at a base hospital in France, which quoted a paper that she presented to the Convention of the National League of Nurse Education in Chicago. In it, she said 'the nurse needs as complete an education as she can possibly have … I cannot imagine any condition [war] when more can possibly be demanded of the nurse than is demanded in these hospitals.'[65] As this suggests, the position of the trained nurses did not change during the course of the war: they were making the same argument in 1919 as they did in 1914. For the nursing profession, then, the poor organisation of nursing care during the First World War, along with the inadequate standard of care given by untrained and inadequately supervised volunteers, gave them more reason to push for registration and professionalisation of nursing. In the eyes of the trained nurse, the experience of war actually reinforced the need for a professional register and regulation of training and recruitment.

[63] "The Certificate of the College of Nursing," *British Journal of Nursing*, February 8, 1919, 88–89.
[64] *Ibid*.
[65] *British Journal of Nursing*, August 30, 1919, 131.

V.A.D.s and Professional Nurses

As Christine Hallett has argued, the continued popularity and public status of memoirs and diaries written by women such as Olive Dent, Thekla Bowser, and Vera Brittain has secured the romantic trope of the courageous and brave V.A.D. — ill-treated by disdainful trained nurses — in the popular and historical memory of the Great War.[66] Despite the potent antagonisms traced above, however, and the ongoing conflict between the two groups, the evidence to support the impression that the nursing staff were particularly unkind to the volunteers is limited. Indeed, the trope of the wantonly cruel or prejudiced trained nurse does not occupy a significant place in the first-hand accounts of many other V.A.D.s. Dorothea Crewdson, who volunteered in the British Red Cross as a V.A.D. nurse in 1911, was stationed in Northern France from May 1915.[67] She began a diary on 12 June 1915 and made little or no reference to the relationship she and her fellow V.A.D.s had with the trained nurses. Writing on 30 June 1915, she noted that 'things have changed since the first days here, when we V.A.D.s were looked down on. We seem to have fallen on our feet under Sister Cowie's regime. She is sweet and makes no secret of considering us fairly capable.'[68] Dorothea suggested that the V.A.D.s were given a cautious reception on their arrival but that relationships improved once they had demonstrated that they were 'capable' and therefore had an ability to do the job. Sister Cowie's relief at having volunteers on the ward who could get on with the job is tangible. Although Dorothea used a slightly patronising term to

[66] Christine E. Hallett, "'A Very Valuable Fusion of Classes': British Professional and Volunteer Nurses Of The First World War," *Endeavour* 38, no. 2 (June 2014): 101–10; For more on this see also Christine E. Hallett, *Containing Trauma: Nursing Work in the First World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011); Christine E. Hallett, *Nurse Writers of the Great War*, Nursing History and Humanities (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016); Christine E. Hallett, *Nurses of Passchendaele: Tending the Wounded of Ypres Campaigns 1914–1918.* (s.l.: Pen & Sword, 2017); Christine E. Hallett, *Veiled Warriors: Allied Nurses of the First World War*, First edition (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Dent, *A V.A.D. in France*; Bowser and Ball, *The Story of British V.A.D.*; Brittain and Williams, *Testament of Youth*.

[67] Crewdson, *Dorothea's War*, xv
Dorothea Crewdson's service record is not available.

[68] *Ibid*., 10.

describe her impression of Sister Cowie's attitude towards her, Dorothea was very much aware that it was her competence in nursing that was the reason for the positive reception rather than a judgement on her personal characteristics.

Olive Dent, whose service record shows her working as a V.A.D. nurse in military hospitals in France between November 1915 and November 1917, referred to herself as a 'Kitchener Nurse'.[69] This self-designation embodied Christine Hallett's assertion that the V.A.D. was 'in fact the female equivalent of those brave young men, the "Lions led by Donkeys".'[70] This association with the volunteer army was an important one for woman like Dent. By using that phrase to describe herself, she made a distinction between herself and the regular workforce. As a volunteer, she was giving of herself and her time selflessly and in response to the needs of the country, rather than in return for financial gain or professional status. A 'Kitchener nurse' was patriotic in her devotion to her country and her readiness to serve.[71] Dent recorded her experiences in her book *A V.A.D In France* (1917). In it, she described the 'chilly reception' she and her cohort of volunteers received from the trained nurses when they arrived a military hospital in France in November 1915. She wrote that a nursing sister told her that she had 'no idea what people were thinking about to send out such girls … girls who had not come from any "training school," girls who had "not had any hospital training," — what use could we possibly be?' Dent remarked that this reception was not entirely unexpected as she 'had heard unheeded tales of the edged tongues of women of the nursing profession ….' Despite documenting moments of tensions like this, Dent noted that she and her fellow V.A.D.s preferred to 'have faith in the knowledge of the Government than the opinion (or possibly the prejudice) of an individual nurse.'[72] The

[69] First World War Personnel Cards, https://vad.redcross.org.uk/Card?fname=Olive&sname=Dent&id=60168&first=true, accessed February 2, 2018.
[70] Hallett, *Veiled Warriors*, 4.
[71] Dent, *A V.A.D. In France*, 7.
[72] *Ibid*., 14.

complaint that Olive reported was not about the V.A.D.s as such, it was focused on their lack of training and called into question how useful somebody with no idea of what to do could be. Yet Olive, who clearly expected such a reception, declared that the opinion of a nurse was not to be heeded when it contradicted the Government. The tension is clear: the nurses have an 'opinion' based on prejudice; the Government has knowledge in which people have faith. An opinion is merely a point of view or a way of thinking not necessarily based on fact. One can have a difference of opinion, and it is open to debate. Knowledge — which comes from the Government, is a true and justified belief based on fact. The juxtaposition of opinion and knowledge underscored the sense of dismissive privilege that characterised Olive's account of her wartime experiences.

Vera Brittain, who was posted to the 1st London General Hospital in September 1915, described her reception as a volunteer as 'cheerless,' and considered the experience of her basic training to be a 'breaking-in process.'[73] In Brittain's account, it was the amateur status of the volunteers which was considered to be a problem by the nursing staff. Brittain's initial impression was that the trained nurses considered the V.A.D. members to be 'amateur intruders' into their professional world.[74] A closer reading of *Testament of Youth*, however, suggests that class and social tensions were less important than issues surrounding training and professional status as points of antagonism. There is no doubt that the volunteers were amateurs, this could not be disputed; yet Vera's choice of the word 'intruder' suggested that she felt out of place and had no right to be there. Vera's criticism of the treatment she received from the trained nurses is not explicit in her diary. Rather she wrote from her own point of view and portrayed herself and others as heroic, long suffering, and self-sacrificing women who were resolute in their determination to serve their country against a background

[73] Brittain and Williams, *Testament of Youth*, 185.
[74] *Ibid*.

of hostility and hardship. She wrote, 'we all acquired puffy hands, chapped faces, chilblains and swollen ankles, but we seldom actually went sick … it never occurred to us that we should have been happier, healthier and altogether more competent.'[75] Brittain's account of the physical discomfort experienced by herself and her fellow V.A.D. recruits also spoke of their resilience. Despite all the physical distress, she emphasised that they rarely took time off work, and they considered their health and well-being secondary to the desire to work. However, Vera also grouped their competency and ability to actually do the job in with this list. Proficiency in nursing came at the end of the list of complaints and did not appear important. The impression she gave was that the V.A.D.s were there, willing to put up with anything (even an inability to do the job) in order to serve their country, and nurse the sick and wounded. She claimed that they never criticised their 'Olympian superiors,' and worked with a 'devotional enthusiasm.'[76] This implied that the V.A.D.s had reason to complain and criticise yet were able to put this aside in their devotion to service and duty. In a letter to her fiancé, Roland Leighton, written on 19 October 1915, she described the hospital nurses rather unflatteringly as 'starved and dry.'[77] In such comments, it seemed that whilst Vera had reconciled herself to the challenges of her nursing duties she was nevertheless expressing a desire for a warmer personal relationship with her professional colleagues.

Professional Nurses and V.A.D.s

Despite the overt antagonism towards V.A.D.s in the *BJN*, trained nurses hardly make mention of the volunteers in their memoirs and diaries. Instead, their contemporary writings and publications became a site in which nurses laid claim to their professional knowledge and expertise. Trained nurses considered professional management issues more important

[75] Brittain and Williams, *Testament of Youth*, 185.
[76] *Ibid*.
[77] *Letters from a Lost Generation First World War Letters of Vera Brittain and Four Friends*, ed. Mark Bostridge (London: Little, Brown, 1998), 179.

than personal kindness, so their writings are more concerned with matters related to the actual job of nursing rather than their personal relationships with the volunteers. The mundane and everyday activities that defined a nurse as competent and professional were more important than tensions of class and encounters with social difference.

As well as a vocal proponent of the V.A.D., Olive Dent was a high profile public figure during the Great War: as well as publishing her diary, articles and letters she had written on her wartime experiences appeared in the press. Dent's version of nursing and the Great War provoked a strong reaction in the *BJN* in January 1918. Responding to an article in the *Evening News* in which Dent wrote 'V.A.D.s are liked by medical officers because they are fresh and bright … you very rarely find a dull V.A.D,'[78] the *BJN* wrote sarcastically, 'we feel sure the "soured and embittered" dullards who compose the … Nursing Service … will realise now that the "fresh and bright ones" (who step in where angels fear to tread), have their professional affairs in hand….'[79] The presence of the V.A.D.s was unwanted on the wards — they stepped in where angels fear to tread — and in the media.

Yet caustic responses like this were rare in the published memoirs and autobiographies of trained nurses. Kate Luard was a trained nurse, whose book *Diary of a Nursing Sister On The Western Front* (originally published anonymously), describes her experiences in France between 1914 and 1915. Luard painted an exceptionally vivid picture of the demands of nursing on the Front Line with heavy casualties and few resources. She did not refer directly to the Red Cross volunteers.[80] She worked on a hospital train transporting seriously wounded casualties from the clearing stations at the Front Line to hospital. After a particular heavy night when she was in charge of 141 casualties, assisted by one other trained nurse and two

[78] "What V.A.D.s Want," *The Evening News*, January 18, 1918.
[79] "Millennium Imminent," *British Journal of Nursing*, January 26, 1918, 64.
[80] Kathleen Luard, *Diary of a Nursing Sister on the Wester Anonymous, Diary of a Nursing Sister on the Western Front, 1914-1915 (Edinburgh; London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1915.) Originally published anonymously but later attributed to Kathleen Luard, a nurse who served on the Western Front 1914 - 1915*

orderlies, she made the comment 'when I think of your Red Cross practices on boy scouts, and the grim reality, it makes one wonder.'[81] This is the only reference in her diaries to the Red Cross, and in it she made a sharp contrast between the skill needed to manage such critically wounded soldiers and the lack of training the V.A.D.s would have received. This, she said, was reality, and the impression she gave was that the V.A.D.s merely played at nursing. War was grim, and nothing except the skill of a rigorously trained nurse would be adequate. Contemporaneous writing like *Diary of a Nursing Sister* was thus also an important site where the nurses made claim to professional status and expertise during wartime.

The themes that ran through *Diary of a Nursing Sister* also characterised other published and unpublished first-hand accounts of the experiences of trained nurses during the Great War. Sister Edith Appleton departed from England in 1915 and served in France and Belgium until her discharge in 1919.[82] Appleton's diary, written between April 1915 and December 1918, has been published. There is no mention of the volunteers she worked with until February 1916, and the dismissive comment: 'I have put my exasperating little VAD in a ward where there are two staff nurses — she is very happy there and I have someone older, more a woman of the world ….'[83] Edith implied that the V.A.D. was irritating and young, requiring careful supervision by two nurses, whilst Edith seemed happy that she now had someone older, and although not a trained nurse, someone with life experience who would have some common sense and a degree of competency. Later, Edith wrote about 'two tiresome little VADs in the room next to mine,' in March and in June commented on a

[81] *Ibid*.
[82] *A Nurse at the Front. The First World War Diaries of Sister Edith Appleton*, ed. Ruth Cowen (London: Simon & Schuster, 2015) 5.
[83] *Ibid*., 103.

V.A.D. who was leaving that 'she was a nice girl, but too young for this work.'[84] Later that month, she observed:

> in future VADs are to be paid only £20 a year and no allowances … and a good thing too. We trained people hardly smelt money for our three first years and worked much harder. These people have had money simply pushed at them, with the result that absolutely unsuitable ones have joined for the sake of that pay. Perhaps now each one will do what she is best at.[85]

These were the only negative entries made by Edith about the V.A.D.s, and they were focused on the VADs' age and pay — questions of professional status and remuneration — rather than social status. Edith's desire was to see the role of V.A.D. filled by more mature women with life experience who were prepared to do whatever was asked of them. Aware of the need for competent and willing volunteers, she nonetheless echoed the opinion of Violetta Thurstan, whose pejorative view of volunteers as 'damsels', suggested her desire for colleagues who would fit into the nursing hierarchy without causing disruption. Thurstan was a trained nurse who completed her training at The London Hospital in 1900.[86] She wrote about her experience of working with untrained volunteers at the outbreak of the Great War in her book, *Field Hospital and Flying Column* (1915).[87] In this book, Violetta recorded her time as a nurse in Belgium and Russia. Her opinions of the V.A.D.s are of particular interest: as a member of the Westminster 146 V.A.D. she was involved in the training of the volunteers before the war.[88] Because of this role, Violetta had an insight into the preparation volunteers received for war service. She wrote:

[84] *Ibid*., 154.
[85] *Ibid*., 158.
[86] Hallett, *Nurses of Passchendaele*, 5.
[87] Violetta Thurstan, *Field Hospital and Flying Column* (1915) (Middlesex: The Echo Library, 2006).
[88] Hallett, *Nurse Writers of the Great War*, 153.

> it is not only medical and surgical nursing that is learnt in a hospital ward, it is discipline, endurance, making the best of adverse circumstances, and above all the knowledge of mankind. These are the qualities that are needed at the front, and they cannot be imparted in a few bandaging classes or instructions in First Aid.[89]

Here, ironically, Thurstan echoed the emphasis on how experience in a military hospital might make a nurse just as effectively as professional training.

Despite this acknowledgement, Thurstan remained frustrated by what she characterised as 'an endless procession of women wanting to help' by joining the V.A.D. Whilst nurses 'untrained and trained' were eager to be sent to the front, the 'Voluntary Aid Detachment members were feverishly practising their bandaging.'[90] She decried the use of untrained women who were 'blithely undertaking to do work that taxes to its very utmost the skill, endurance, and resource of the most highly trained women who have given up the best years of their life to learning the principles that underlie this most exacting of professions.'[91] What was at stake here was the erosion of a professional ideal by volunteers 'blithely' carrying out nursing duties for which they had no training. Echoing arguments made by the *BJN*, Thurstan emphasised how hospital work required the utmost skill and taxed even those who had undergone a high level of instruction.[92] Such criticism was not directly aimed at the V.A.D.s, after all she had been instrumental in their training and preparation for war and knew better than most what a V.A.D. member could contribute to the war effort — as well as the limitations of their knowledge and skills. On arrival in Belgium in 1915, she nursed at a Red Cross Hospital and described the chaos that first greeted her:

[89] Thurstan, *Field Hospital and Flying Column*, 2.
[90] Thurstan, *Field Hospital and Flying Column*, 1–2.
[91] *Ibid*.
[92] Hallett, *Nurses of Passchendaele*, 5.

> The confusion that reigned within was indescribable. There were some girls there who had attended first-aid lectures, and they were doing their best; but there were no trained nurses and no one particularly in command … I was left alone with two or three Red Cross damsels to face the night.[93]

The choice of the word damsel conveyed a sense of the helplessness young women who had been left alone to cope with a difficult situation and who were now being rescued by Violetta: the capable, confident, and trained nurse. She did not complain about the Red Cross girls. They were, as she said 'doing their best', and she acknowledged that they had received some basic training. The criticism was directed at the organisation of care, and the fact that the volunteers had been left to fend for themselves.[94]

After she was appointed Matron of the hospital, Violetta was delighted to report that the Red Cross committee allowed her to

> keep the best of the Red Cross workers as probationers and to forbid entrance to the others. We had suffered so much at their hands before this took place, that I was truly grateful for this permission as no discipline or order was possible with a large number of young girls constantly rushing in and out, sitting on patient's beds, meddling with dressings, and doing all kinds of things they shouldn't.[95]

She was pleased to be able to impose her own command and authority on the hospital and was clear that the Red Cross nurses would act as probationers, which implied that they would carry out whatever tasks she, as Matron, considered they displayed the competence to perform.

Thurstan's observations echoed a statement issued by Beford Fenwick in the *BJN* as well as previous arguments about the makeup of the Supply of Nurses Committee. It expressed

[93] Thurstan, *Field Hospital and Flying Column*, 8 – 9.
[94] "Resolution and Statement Sent to the Secretary of State for War," *British Journal of Nursing*, January 30, 1915, i–viii.
[95] Thurstan, *Field Hospital and Flying Column*, 10.

the view that 'the present organisation of the sick and wounded soldiers … is in the opinion of The National Council of Trained Nurses defective ….' It went on to say that 'the "nursing" is provided by members of the Voluntary Aid Detachments "covered" by one or two trained nurses, under the administration of an untrained and inexperienced Commandant.' For the *BJN*, this arrangement was inadequate and unjustifiable.[96] The cause of this deficiency, Bedford Fenwick argued, was that the committee responsible for organising the nursing care of the sick and wounded had 'deliberately excluded' from its membership any trained nurse in favour of people of 'wealth and social position.' The lack of the necessary knowledge and skills of nursing was, according to the statement, both 'useless and dangerous.'[97] The Council petitioned the Secretary of State for War not to subject those in need of nursing care to 'the dangerous interference of untrained and unskilled women who have been placed in positions of authority for which they are not qualified….'[98] They called the Commandants who were in overall charge of the running of the hospitals 'absolutely ignorant,' and claimed that the system, as approved by the War Office, was 'fundamentally wrong,' and 'an outrage.'[99] The stakes of diluting the professional status of nursing were high: not only in terms of the professional hierarchy but also in terms of the safety and standard of the nursing care offered to the patients.

Across sources like this, the position of the trained nurses was clear: it was untenable that someone with no knowledge of the fundamentals of nursing care or hospital management should be in a position to make important decisions about how the sick and wounded should be looked after. While neither Thurstan nor Bedford Fenwick objected to the presence of Voluntary Aid Detachment members on the wards, they were emphatic in arguing that

[96] "Resolution and Statement Sent to the Secretary of State for War," *British Journal of Nursing*, January 30, 1915, i–viii.
[97] *Ibid*.
[98] *Ibid*.
[99] *Ibid*.

decisions about nursing and the deployment of voluntary staff should be made by nurses. Within individual wards and hospitals and at the level of national government, self-governance was a central strand of the demands made by the nurses to improve their status.

It was on this basis that, on 5 April 1915, Albinia Brodrick, herself a trained nurse, wrote to Lord Kitchener, Secretary of State for War regarding 'The Deficiency of Trained Nurses and The Means By Which it May be Met.' Brodrick's letter was later published in the *BJN* on 5 June 1915, under the heading 'Is There a Shortage of Trained Nurses or Not?'[100] Addressing Kitchener, Brodrick wrote that the problem of 'the shortage of nurses foreseen by you,' may be resolved by the appointment of 'a competent board of nursing experts.' Problems of supply, she argued, would be easily resolved through proper organisation, and empowering and trusting nurses who would be both 'competent' and 'expert.' Brodrick's remark implied that she felt that the people who currently served on the Supply of Nurses Committee were neither. The lack of proper professional organisation and the appointment of unqualified women to positions of authority and responsibility in hospitals led to many nurses not coming forward to serve. Brodrick wrote that 'we refuse to work with and under untrained women, whose actions we cannot control and who do gross injustice to our patients for which we are held responsible.'[101] Although the trained nurses were not in overall charge of the running of the hospital, Brodrick set out their concern that, if a problem occurred regarding the health and well-being of a patient, then they felt that they would be held accountable. An editorial comment at the end of this letter stated: 'we have never believed in a serious shortage [of nurses] in regard to the care of the sick and wounded, and are of the opinion that, with good organisation at the War Office the nurses needed will be forthcoming.'[102] The perpetuation of the rhetoric of a scarcity of trained nurses available to

[100] "Is There a Shortage of Nurses or Not? Correspondence Between the Hon. Albinia Brodrick and the War Office," *British Journal of Nursing*, June 5, 1915, 482–3.
[101] *Ibid*.
[102] *Ibid*.

care for the sick and wounded, communicated through the War Office, was thus at odds with the opinion of the professional body of nurses: poor and inadequate governance, not the number of nurses, was at fault for the problems confronting military hospitals. The message, however, had the effect of more unqualified volunteers coming forward and, if Brodrick was correct, trained nurses refusing to work under such conditions.

As this suggests, the absence of comment on the V.A.D.s in the writings of professional nurses suggested that the nursing establishment were more concerned with the overall running and management of the nursing care than the individual relationships and tensions which may have existed with their volunteer staff. The issue raised by the National Council of Trained Nurses in 1915, along with the observations of experienced senior nurses like Violetta Thurstan and Albina Brodrick, again highlighted the tension that existed between the principles of a professional society and the class-based principles of society. The rhetoric of a society that was structured around wealth, social status, and privilege came into conflict with the ideals of a professional society that was organised around merit, training, knowledge, and skills.[103] Traditional notions of deference were being challenged by professional ideals. It was obvious from the complaint that no trained nurse was a member of the decision making body of the committee that class rhetoric held more influence in British society than the emerging professionalisation of nursing.

Scandal in the *Spectator*

As the discussion above suggests, during the Great War, the British media and society were captivated by the romantic image of the eager young volunteer doing her bit for the country; wearing a uniform and accepting the title 'Nurse' bestowed on her by the suffering Tommy. The flurry of attention paid to the self-sacrificing V.A.D. nursing the sick and wounded

[103] Perkin, *The Rise of Professional Society*, 5–6.

meant that trained nurses saw them as usurping their role and undermining the importance of training, experience, and professional registration. It was on this basis that, in 1915, a debate erupted in the letters to the editor pages of the *Spectator*. As the arguments developed, the strength of feeling on both sides of the dispute became increasingly evident. On 3 July 1915, F.S. wrote an appeal on behalf of the V.A.D.s who, whilst being made to feel unwelcome on the wards, 'recognize that their position is a subordinate one and behave accordingly; but the common complaint is that they meet with scant civility and often gross discourtesy, from the trained and paid staff … without the help of these organizations the difficulty in nursing the wounded would be very great.'[104] This was, implicitly at least, an attack on the good character and professional conduct of the trained nurse.

Responding to this appeal, on 10 July, 'An English Woman' wrote to the paper in praise of the hundreds of 'intelligent and cultivated women' who left their comfortable and privileged lives to serve as volunteer nurses 'with as ardent a spirit of patriotism as that which inspired their civilian brothers.' Both groups of women laid claim to patriotic citizenship as a means of reinforcing their point of view; the V.A.D.s in the sacrificial way they volunteered and the trained nurse in the notion that it was a patriotic duty to give to the wounded the best, and by implication, most skilled, nursing care available. The writer suggested that the professional nurses assigning menial tasks to the V.A.D.s would be like 'taking a fine edged razor to chop wood,' but noted that the V.A.D. cheerfully accepted her tasks without complaint. Anticipating critique associated with the later published work of Vera Brittain and others, the letter writer said that the trained staff demonstrated and 'ungenerous attitude of antagonism' towards the V.A.D.s and that their 'discourteous treatment' formed a 'blot on their noble profession.'[105] The phrases used in this letter hinted

[104] F.S., "Voluntary Workers in Hospitals," The *Spectator*, July 3, 1915, 23
[105] An English Woman, "Voluntary Workers in Hospitals," The *Spectator*, July 10, 1915, 14

at connotations of the class and privilege of the V.A.D.s and suggested that the qualified nurses should treat them with courtesy and generosity.

It is clear from this correspondence that, as early as July 1915, the rhetoric of the bullying, harsh and unkind trained nurse was already well established. A further letter to the editor of the *Spectator* at the end of July 1915 from A.J. Jardine wrote a plea to the paper for 'these nurses' who, 'having a strong sense of duty' have left their luxurious homes 'to serve anywhere.' The writer appealed for 'these patriotic girls 'to receive more considerate treatment [from the trained nurses].' If this did not happen, the writer continued, 'this valuable source of hospital help will fail when it is most needed.' Using the language of patriotism, service and sacrificial duty when referring to the volunteers would appear to suggest that such qualities were not possessed by the trained nurses who were simply doing the job that they were paid for and are behaving in an unacceptable manner.[106] The statement in the letter also implicitly suggested that any failure in the provision healthcare during the Great War would be the fault of the trained nurses.

Using the language of patriotism, service, and sacrificial duty when referring to the volunteers would appear to suggest that these qualities were not possessed by the trained nurses who were simply doing the job that they were paid for and were behaving in an unacceptable manner. Here, then, is clear evidence that, as early as July 1915, public opinion was that of support for the V.A.D. and condemnation of the qualified nurses. From the perspective of trained nurses, the writers would have possessed little or no understanding of the complexities of nursing and the knowledge and skills required to nurse the sick. Despite this, they felt free to write to the media praising the patriotic service of the volunteers and ignoring the point of view of the trained nurses. More than simply overlooking the experiences of the nursing staff, the letters deployed negative language which stood in sharp

[106] A.J. Jardine, "To the Editor," The *Spectator*, July 25th, 1915, 15

contrast to their fulsome and often flowery praise of the volunteers. A struggle over self-governance and professional status was reduced to a binary argument of patriotic versus unpatriotic, cheerful and accepting versus ungrateful and bullying, intelligent and cultivated versus unthinking and discourteous.

When writers such as Vera Brittain and Thekla Bowser recorded their experiences in the aftermath of war, they also echoed a widespread mood within wartime British culture by picking up on the rhetoric of wartime volunteering often associated with the rush to colours. There was a difference in the response to those who had to be there because it was their job, such as the regular army and the trained nurses, and those who were willing to give up a life of comfort and security in order to offer their services. To the press and general public, then, the V.A.D. was anything but a probationer: she was a nurse. Little wonder that the trained nurses experienced the movement of the V.A.D. into military hospitals as a profound challenge to the foundations of a professional society. This is why the nursing press was filled with comments describing volunteering and its misuse as a dangerous and harmful practice which both put the wounded at risk and was un-patriotic. The rhetoric of patriotic duty, used in the recruitment of the volunteer nurses by the War Office, was repurposed by the trained nurses to support their argument for a system of nursing care organised and managed by nurses themselves. In January 1915, an editorial comment in the *BJN* noted:

> we imagine the newspapers little realise what harm they are doing in extolling the 'skilled' services of women as nurses of the wounded who have never been trained. The press is flooded daily with fulsome praise of such dangerous services …We sincerely hope that nothing further will be done to encourage untrained women to meddle with our long-suffering soldiers. What the country owes them is the highest nursing skill and they do not get it.[107]

[107] "Nursing and the War," *British Journal of Nursing*, January 9, 1915, 25.

Despite the *BJN*'s plea for careful reflection and realism, some newspapers like the *Spectator*, were highly critical of the nursing press. Criticisms of V.A.D.s made in the *BJN* were presented as 'regrettable.' Rather than newspaper reporting, the editor of the *Spectator* argued that it was the attitude of the trained nurses that was doing the real harm and 'putting impediments in the way of essential work.'[108] In a society where failure to serve was considered cowardly, attitudes to volunteering as the ultimate act of patriotism were deeply embedded. It is easy to see how this ideology became associated with volunteer nurses and how important it became for the trained nurses to reclaim the language of patriotic citizenship. Yet the danger of the V.A.D. was clear. In January 1916, a columnist in the *BJN* noted that the qualified nurses:

> who have worked so hard for the love of our profession and of our kind for three and four years for our certificates will prefer to remain unregistered if we are to be classed with V.A.D.s … Not that we wish to deprive the untrained helpers of credit which is their due but we prefer not to be classed with them in the public mind. We are members of a skilled profession and a distinction must be made.[109]

Insisting on the distinction between professional and amateur, the writer signified that the status of the volunteers was that of an unqualified assistant who, although worthy of acknowledgement for their contributions, did not deserve to be viewed as 'nurses' by an adoring British public.

[108] Editorial comment, The *Spectator*, July 10, 1915.
[109] "Nursing and the War," *British Journal of Nursing*, July 1, 1916, 3.

Conclusion

Focusing on the *BJN* and a range of published and unpublished personal accounts of the experience of nursing during the Great War, this chapter has argued that the tensions and anxieties between trained nurses and V.A.D.s reflected a wartime crisis of professional society and nursing. Rather than personal animosity or resentment, these tensions were underpinned by deep rooted political struggles. Again and again, the *BJN* insisted on the distinction between volunteers and trained nurses. Professional status and training was vital: how else could the press and the general public understand the difference between the skilled care given by trained nurses and the work of the volunteers?

The influx of the untrained Voluntary Aid Detachment nurses at the outbreak of the First World War happened against this background of great upheaval and fervent political campaigning for the trained nurses who had been striving for decades to improve the status and image of their profession. In seeking to place a distance between themselves and other untrained health workers, these women were attempting to claim control and ownership rights over the title 'Nurse' and gain formal control over training. A result of these measures was the existence of an institutional authority within nursing which had a marked impact on the relationship and attitude of the trained nurses towards the untrained V.A.D. For some, at least, the outbreak of the war saw an extraordinary rise in the need for nurses. This demand was met by the arrival of large numbers of partially trained and untrained volunteers into hospitals to work as part of the Voluntary Aid Detachment. Even though it was the desire of the nursing profession 'to see wounded men cared for by trained nurses from start to finish' the sheer scale of the casualties placed a great strain on the profession which meant that this ideal was just not possible.[110]

[110] "Nursing and the War," *British Journal of Nursing*, July 3, 1915, 10.

The vital sense of vocation (with all that it implied) featured in a report to the *BJN* in July 1918 on the observations of French soldiers on British nurses. The writer asked:

> who that has seen them at work [British nurses in French hospitals], has not admired their skill, their resource, their patient deftness? They have behind them a hard and splendid training, which ensures only enthusiasts for the vocation become fully trained nurses … But it is not only their own work that has been invaluable, it is the training they have given to other less skilled. For under the nurses or sisters work V.A.D. probationers.[111]

What was striking about this comment is that the nurses were being commended, in the first instance, for those skills acquired through training and, in the second instance, that it was precisely those skills that made their work both 'hard and splendid.' From this perspective, securing the qualification necessary to become a nurse was a sign of good character as well as medical competence. The writer also pointed out that these nurses trained the V.A.D.s and referred to them in the language of professional hierarchy as less skilled. The term 'probationers' deliberately made clear the distinction approved by the nursing hierarchy. Amongst the volunteers, it was noted that 'there was unlimited devotion, immense eagerness to serve, but of trained and expert help there was an inevitable deficiency … the crying need was for skill training and experience.' Here, at least, was a critical appraisal of the work of a military hospital that acknowledged the perspective and arguments of trained nurses.[112]

The arrival of the V.A.D. nurses into military hospitals across Britain, continental Europe, and beyond had a profound impact on the hierarchy of status and authority within nursing. It did so at a time when that hierarchy was itself subject to ferocious political debate by those for and against registration for professional nurses. Volunteers entered an

[111] "Nursing and the War," *British Journal of Nursing*, July 29, 1918 42.
[112] *Ibid*., 43.

unfamiliar hierarchy where their superiors were in a position of authority endorsed by training, rank, and expertise. Trained nurses, by contrast, had to negotiate the tensions that were exacerbated because at least some volunteers believed that their superior social status challenged this professional right to authority, without possessing the skills necessary to assume an elevated position within a hospital ward.

The experiences of trained nurses have been largely overlooked due in part to the fact that they did not write so prolifically or attract such a high profile as V.A.D. nurses. Writers such as Christine Hallett have begun to challenge this one-sided view of nursing history. Building on this argument, this chapter has argued that whilst writing by V.A.D.s may well have illustrated the emphasis on patriotic and selfless national service, they were reflecting the mood of a nation at war. Letters and articles in British newspapers underscore how, as early as 1915, the romantic image of the cheerful and long-suffering volunteer nurse had entered popular culture. To further validate this view, the trained nurses would be portrayed as bullies and harridans who were forever ungrateful for the sacrificial service they were being offered by the V.A.D.s.

The *BJN*, by contrast, provides us with evidence of the wartime experience from the point of view of the qualified nurses. Despite its best efforts, the *BJN* was not able to win widespread support for the argument that what the casualties needed were professional skills and knowledge. This may be due to the fact that its readership was made up of only trained nurses. While the *BJN* tried to appeal to a wider audience through the language of patriotic citizenship to support the plea for a proper and professional organisation of nursing, this strategy was also ineffective. Yet there is little evidence in the *BJN* that hostility towards the V.A.D. was based solely on class-based resentments or personal feelings. As this chapter has argued, the issues were much more complex. Whilst lack of training and experience, alongside existing class tensions, was indeed a factor, the threat to the status and

professionalisation of nursing and the ongoing and contentious politics of nursing was much more important. The writers in the *BJN* make a compelling and cogent argument based on the need for training and the acquisition of skills through experience as a requirement. The view of nursing as a skill suggested employing volunteers would be harmful to the sick and wounded. There is no doubt, however, that the presence of these often well connected young women also presented a danger to the expert status of the nursing staff. Despite this, however, an appeal for the maintenance of the professional hierarchy of trained nurses did not resonate with wartime society, when sacrifice was being made for nation and Empire. While the nursing press itself adopted the language of duty, sacrifice, and patriotism, it was ultimately unable to press the claim for self-governance and professional status.

Chapter 2

Patriotic Citizenship and Professional Status in the *Red Cross* Journal

Introduction

This chapter examines the role of the British Red Cross Society in managing the Voluntary Aid Detachment (V.A.D.) nursing members during the First World War. It explores the tensions that existed between volunteers and professionals and, in so doing, seeks to understand how the Red Cross sought to influence and manage the relationship between trained nurses and volunteers. The chapter focuses on letters, articles, and editorials published in the *Red Cross: The Official Journal of the British Red Cross Society*. Like the *British Journal of Nursing* (*BJN*), during the war, the *Red Cross* became a site in which the tensions between the two groups, particularly the conflict between ideas of professionalisation and patriotic citizenship, appeared and were negotiated. Building on the previous chapter, I thus explore how print culture provided a focus for the politics of professionalisation from a very different perspective. Drawing upon archival material such as published memoirs and diaries of well known V.A.D.s like Vera Brittain and Thekla Bowser, and an anonymous diary printed in the *Spectator*, the chapter goes on to show how the rhetoric of the *Red Cross* shaped the lived experience and identities of volunteer nurses.

Set up in the 1860s as a voluntary organisation to care for the sick and wounded of war,[1] at the outbreak of the Great War, the British Red Cross Society expanded to meet the demands of caregiving and became responsible for the administration and supervision of thousands of volunteer nurses in hospitals at home and abroad who assisted in the care of the sick and wounded. As early as 1909, there existed the impression amongst those

[1] Caroline Moorehead, *Dunant's Dream: War, Switzerland and the History of the Red Cross* (London: HarperCollins, 1999); Anne Summers, *Angels and Citizens: British Women as Military Nurses, 1854–1914* (London, New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1988), 134–42.

responsible for voluntary aid that the trained nurses were 'prone to view with disfavour the amateur nurse.'[2] In order to ameliorate any difficulties in integrating the two groups, the Red Cross made concerted efforts to put systems in place that would overcome this. From the very beginnings of the formation of the Voluntary Aid Detachment in 1909, they printed and distributed rules and regulations which clearly laid down their expectations of the volunteers' role and conduct. Historians such as Anne Summers, Lyn Macdonald, and Christine Hallett acknowledge that the relationship that existed between the volunteer nurses and trained nurses was difficult, but, as the previous chapter suggests, this has largely been attributed to hostility based on the differing social class of the two groups and their newfound wartime proximity.[3] The crisis of the war thrust two disparate groups of women together, and the speed at which this happened did not allow any opportunity to work on the deeply ingrained personal, societal, and institutional prejudices which existed. Despite the sharing of a common desire to provide nursing care for the sick and wounded, it seemed as if these women were never going to be able to manage to work alongside one another harmoniously.

As this chapter argues, the demands of a modern total war made ideas of patriotic citizenship and voluntarism central to public life and national culture. While this rhetoric provided a rich resource through which trained nurses and volunteers made their case for public support, it also contributed to the emerging tensions between the two groups of women. The selfless work of the V.A.D. came to encapsulate one of the core values on which wartime morale, and Britain's national survival, depended. At the same time, the massive expansion of volunteerism within military hospitals challenged and conflicted with

2 Summers, *Angels and Citizens*, 251.
3 Summers, *Angels and Citizens*, chap. 9; Lyn Macdonald, *The Roses of No Man's Land* (London: Penguin, 1993), xi–xv; Jane Brooks and Christine E. Hallett eds., *One Hundred Years of Wartime Nursing Practices, 1854–1953*, Nursing History and Humanities (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), 132; Alison S. Fell, *First World War Nursing* (London: Routledge, 2015), 3, 87–102; George Robb, *British Culture & the First World War* (New York; Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 66.

the growing emphasis on professional skills and expertise that had come to characterise nursing in the late Victorian and Edwardian period. Set against the importance of professional status and self-governance to trained nurses, the social backgrounds of many of the new V.A.D.s during the war only exacerbated existing tensions and conflicts rooted in the politics of professionalism and national service.

Established traditions of philanthropic service among middle- and upper-class women meant the appeal of serving as a volunteer with the British Red Cross was huge. The members of the Voluntary Aid Detachment were predominantly women; male volunteers under the age of forty were more often recruited by the Territorial Army, and most branches of the Red Cross Society reported that their recruitment did not appeal to men. Around 8,000 women had volunteered by 1910 and, by the outbreak of the war in 1914, the organisation's female membership numbered somewhere in the region of 50,000, which accounted for around two thirds of the overall membership.[4] While the Red Cross service records provide us with little information of the social composition of the V.A.D.s, the recruitment campaign for the V.A.D. scheme was aimed at the 'wives and daughters of the upper and middle classes.'[5] From its inception, this movement was a success largely due to the eagerness of women who wanted to be viewed as responsible citizens in the matter of national defence. The scheme also followed the traditions of women's voluntary work in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Working as a volunteer nurse was an attractive proposition for leisured young women who were traditionally viewed as occupying the role of carers and displayed the characteristics of compassion and self-sacrifice.[6] As part of this scheme, the Red Cross aimed their recruitment campaign at upper- and middle-class women with the intention of establishing robust organisational structures. The assumption was that the

[4] Summers, *Angels and Citizens*, 253.
[5] Summers, *Angels and Citizens*, 277–8.
[6] Gerard J. De Groot, *Blighty: British Society in the Era of the Great War* (London and New York: Longman, 1996), 69.

character and breeding evident in this group of women would enable them to overcome the difficulties they may face on active service and be better placed to represent their country in a way that women from the lower classes would not.[7] What role this huge army of unskilled female volunteers was to play during wartime, however, was by no means clear. Their very presence in the military and medical hierarchies raised several challenging questions which will be addressed in this chapter.

As the organisation responsible for the voluntary nurses, the British Red Cross maintained that the volunteers were serving their country in the best possible way. Yet their attempts to regulate the behaviour of the volunteers were complicated by the letters and articles which appeared in their official journal. As this chapter shows, the *Red Cross* provided a forum for its volunteers to set out publicly the virtues of volunteering and patriotic citizenship and reinforce the notion that such ideals were sufficient qualification for equal entry into a profession which required its members to be trained. These arguments contrasted sharply with the *BJN*, which extolled the merits of knowledge, skills, and expertise and argued that it was the patriotic duty of its members to offer the sick and wounded the best possible nursing care — that of a trained nurse. Whilst the British Red Cross were issuing regulations to maintain discipline and govern its membership to ensure cooperation between the two groups, however, the *Red Cross* published articles and correspondence which communicated negative opinions of the nursing profession and made the smooth transition of volunteers into hospitals virtually impossible. The competing visions of the Voluntary Aid Detachment nurse which ensued made a significant, negative contribution to the relationship between the Red Cross Society, professional nurses, and V.A.D.s themselves.

[7] Sharon Ouditt. *Fighting Forces, Writing Women. Identity and Ideology in the First World War* (London and New York: Routledge,1994), 20.

The History of the British Red Cross and the Voluntary Aid Detachment

To understand the tensions confronted by the Red Cross Society at the start of the Great War, we need to understand its history as an organisation and the contentious politics of professionalisation and medical care in late Victorian and Edwardian Britain. The Society's evolution was underpinned by expectations and rumours of war. In the early 1860s, Henri Dunant, a Swiss businessman, proposed that all countries should create organisations, trained in peacetime, to provide impartial help to wounded and sick soldiers during wartime.[8] This came about as a result of the devastation Dunant witnessed following the battle of Solferino in 1859 where thousands died due to the lack of adequate care. There was a desire for considered thought about what medical and nursing aid could appropriately be offered to the casualties, and governments were asked to consider how they could cooperate with voluntary agencies to provide this. In 1863, the International Committee of the Red Cross was established in Geneva. In 1870, the British National Society for Aid to the Sick and Wounded in War was formed to give aid to those involved in the Franco-Prussian war.[9]

8 *"The Beginning of the Red Cross,"* http://www.redcross.org.uk/en/About-us/Who-we-are/History-and-origin/Beginning-of-the-Movement, accessed February 16, 2018.

9 Moorehead, *Dunant's Dream*; John F. Hutchinson, "Rethinking the Origins of the Red Cross," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 63, no. 4 (1989): 557; David P. Forsythe, *The Humanitarians: The International Committee of the Red Cross* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Rebecca Gill, "The Origins of the British Red Cross Society and the Politics and Practices of Relief in War, 1870–1906," *Inicio* 66, no. 1 (2014).

The expansion of voluntary aid continued across Europe and, in 1899, a Red Cross Committee was established for the British Empire.[10] In July 1905, an inaugural meeting of the British Red Cross Society was held at Buckingham Palace with Queen Alexandra as president. Volunteers for the work of caregiving were to be recruited from 'all classes throughout the Empire' and an appeal was made to

> all the women of the Empire to assist … in carrying out this great scheme, which is essentially a women's work, and which is the one and only way in which we can assist our brave and gallant Army and Navy to perform their arduous duties in time of war.[11]

In peacetime, at least, the society was to be entirely voluntary and independent of the War Office. Initially though the response from the 'women of the Empire' was slow. In 1906, the Red Cross council agreed to form a committee to assist in the formation of local branches and invited the wives of Lord Lieutenants to take responsibility for the Red Cross in their respective counties. Building on established forms of philanthropic volunteering among elite British women, the invitation to these ladies reflected both the aristocratic social hierarchy which existed in British society and rich traditions of female volunteering in public life. Seeking to exploit these traditions and forms of elite female leadership, the role of the local branches was to enrol members, collect money, and to determine ways in which that particular branch would wish their aid to be used in the time of war. In 1908, now known as the British Red Cross, the Society was granted a Royal Charter by King Edward Vll and Queen Alexandra, who became its president.[12]

[10] Moorehead, *Dunant's Dream*, 139.
[11] Summers, *Angels and Citizens*, 246.
[12] See also Macdonald, *The Roses of No Man's Land*; Susan R. Grayzel and Tammy M. Proctor, eds., *Gender and the Great War* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); Janet S.K. Watson, "Khaki Girls, VADs, and Tommy's Sisters: Gender and Class in First World War Britain," *The International History Review* 19, no. 1 (February 1997): 1–252; Janet S.K. Watson, *Fighting Different Wars: Experience, Memory, and the First World War in Britain*, Studies in the Social and Cultural History of Modern Warfare 16 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Ouditt, *Fighting Forces, Writing Women*.

To make it clear where the mandate for such an organisation originated, the British Red Cross Society issued *Form D, Medical Organisation in Case of Invasion* in August 1909. This form opened with the statement that 'The Secretary of State for War issued … to secretaries of Territorial County Associations in England and Wales a Scheme for the Organisation of Voluntary aid for the sick and wounded in the event of war.'[13] It was clear from this that, whilst the country was dealing merely with the threat rather than the reality of war, the British Red Cross were making serious attempts, under instruction from the War Office, to prepare for war. In order to control and manage the organisation and assimilate volunteers into an existing military and medical hierarchy, the form stipulated how Voluntary Aid Detachments should be organised and laid out the required professional qualifications for those with authority:

1 Commandant (Medical man or medical woman)

1 Assistant Commandant (Medical man or medical woman)

1 Quartermaster

1 Assistant quartermaster

2 Lady Superintendents

20 women (of whom 2 should be fully trained nurses).[14]

Each detachment, as it was formed, was to be registered by the Red Cross Council and given a distinctive number by the War Office. There was a very definite recognition in the guidelines surrounding structure and registration that there was an awareness of the need to secure the place of the volunteers within the existing professional and military hierarchies, and an acknowledgment that suitably trained and qualified medical and nursing personnel would form an integral part of each detachment. The roles of Commandant and Assistant

[13] British Red Cross Society, Form D Medical Organisation in Case of Invasion: British Red Cross Museum and Archives (hereafter BRCMA), RCB 2/8/5/10.
[14] *Ibid*.

Commandant were to be filled by 'a medical man [most likely a doctor] or woman [presumably a nurse],' and, of the twenty women who were to make up the main workforce, the Society stated that two should be fully trained nurses. There was also an acknowledgment that the society's work, organisation, and training was mandated by the War Office. Here, at least, was a clear statement that training in first aid and home nursing was essential: without these basic qualifications volunteers could not be efficient in the duties required of them. Each detachment was set up with a clear hierarchical structure and chain of command which gave space for power and authority for its members.

Despite this attempt to ensure that medical, nursing, and military hierarchies would form part of each Voluntary Aid Detachment at the beginning of its formation, the Red Cross Society recognised that tensions might exist between volunteers and the qualified staff. Insisting on rigorously regulated training of volunteers was one attempt to address this issue. So, too, was a clear explanation of what the training permitted the members to do. Members were required to undergo instruction in first aid, nursing, and hygiene and sanitation. The volunteers sat an exam at the end of the training and successful candidates were awarded a certificate. The Syllabus of Lectures on Red Cross First Aid was quite detailed yet stated explicitly that it 'must be clearly understood that certificates in First Aid and Home Nursing granted by the British Red Cross Society are for the **sole purpose** [emphasis in original] of entitling the holders enrolment in a Voluntary Aid Detachment.'[15] The point made here was that this training did not qualify the participant to carry out any duties above her station and emphasised, in bold print, that the 'sole purpose' of gaining a First Aid certificate was to enrol as a volunteer.

[15] British Red Cross Society, Red Cross Voluntary Aid Detachments First Aid and Home Nursing Certificates, January, 1912: BRCMA, RCB 2/8/5/15.

To ensure rigorous training, it stipulated clearly in the syllabus on 'First Aid and Home Nursing Certificates', produced in January 1912, that 'all instruction must be carried out by a duly qualified medical practitioner or a trained nurse.' To avoid any ambiguity, the form went on to explain that what was meant by trained nurse was 'a nurse who has completed a three years' course of training in the service of a general hospital having a Nurse Training School attached ….'[16] This was an explicit attempt to secure the professional hierarchies by making a clear distinction between the level of training received by the volunteers and the trained nurses. Possession of a certificate was a requirement of the War Office as well as the Red Cross.[17] As well as insisting that the Commandant with overall charge of the detachment 'would be a person with medical qualification,' *Form D* thus recognised the importance of training. As the form itself noted: 'without instruction, training and practice in time of peace the detachments could not be immediately efficient.' In establishing this framework, the Red Cross recognised and affirmed the need for the volunteers to have knowledge and skills while establishing a clear distinction between the high level of training received by the professionals and the basic entrance course undertaken by volunteers whose role would be limited to that of assisting trained nurses.

This framework was reiterated when volunteers entered military hospitals and V.A.D.s. In order to ensure that the volunteers knew their place within the hospital hierarchy, they were referred to the *Regulations Governing the Employment of Nursing V.A.D Members in Military Hospitals*. Issued and updated every year through the war, this document stated that

> they [the V.A.D.s] will be required to work under fully trained nurses, and will be under the direct control of the Officer in charge and the Matron of the Hospital in which employed. Their duties will be similar to those carried out by probationers in

[16] *Ibid.*
[17] *Ibid.*

> Civil Hospitals. These include sweeping, dusting, polishing of brasses, cleaning of ward tables and patient's lockers, cleaning of ward sinks and ward utensils, washing of patient's crockery and sorting of linen. These and any other duties which they are considered qualified to perform, will be allotted to them by the Matron of the Hospital.[18]

Through such statements, the Red Cross set out a clear framework for the governance and position of its volunteer members: all V.A.D.s should receive some training, but would remain professionally subordinate to senior trained nurses, be treated like any other probationer training to be a nurse, and focus their activities in duties that might broadly be defined as domestic or ancillary. The probationary and subordinate position of the volunteers within the nursing hierarchy became a focus of tension amongst the trained nurses and the volunteers. At the start of the war, at least, such documents were clear in setting out the duties of the V.A.D. and defining their relationship with professional colleagues. By stating that their place in the hierarchy would be subordinate to the fully trained nurses and under the jurisdiction of the Matron, the document endeavoured to ensure that no V.A.D. would assume that her position was anything other than that of a probationer. It was also clear that any duties — including the domestic tasks — would only be allocated to them if the Matron deemed the volunteer competent to perform them. The document was explicit in communicating the structure of the hierarchy and made sure that each volunteer was aware that, even after undergoing some training, it was the hospital Matron who had overall charge and the final say over the V.A.D.s' role on the wards. Building on this framework, by 16 August 1909, the 'Scheme for the Organisation of Voluntary Aid in England and Wales' was established to address gaps in the territorial medical service. Addressing many of the

[18] British Red Cross Society, *Regulations Governing the Employment of Nursing V.A.D Members in Military Hospitals*: BRCMA, 1237 1/7.

issues of training and position within the nursing hierarchy identified above, this scheme mandated that all detachments were to receive basic training in first aid and home nursing.

As this chapter has argued, the difficulties in managing the deployment of volunteers into the professional hierarchy of nursing were thus anticipated well before the outbreak of the First World War. As early as 1909, when the War Office began its 'Scheme for the Organisation of Voluntary Aid in England and Wales,' efforts were made to ensure that trained nurses were not upset by the presence of volunteers. Those with responsibility for recruitment of volunteers acknowledged that relationships between nurses and V.A.D.s might be contentious, cautiously advising members 'to conciliate the nursing profession, prone to view with disfavour the amateur nurse.' [19] Such language underscored the importance of gaining the goodwill of the nursing profession to ensure a positive working relationship between them and the volunteers. Implicit in such comments, however, was a pejorative appraisal of the professional nurses: it suggested that they were suspicious and disrespectful towards the volunteers. The idea of the 'amateur nurse', moreover, evoked both the pretension to status of the V.A.D.s whilst constituting a radical challenge to the foundations of professional nursing.

Women, Philanthropy, and Volunteering

When the Scheme for the Organisation of Voluntary Aid in England and Wales was introduced in 1909, many women volunteered as means of the expression of philanthropic works commonly exercised by upper middle-class women during much of the nineteenth century.[20] When war broke out in 1914, the recruitment campaign initiated by the Red Cross thus built on an existing culture of volunteering and philanthropy. The spirit of social service

[19] Summers, *Angels and Citizens*, 251.
[20] F.K. Prochaska, *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century England* (Oxford, New York: Clarendon Press, Oxford University Press, 1980).

was reworked as patriotic duty, so that the V.A.D.s were firmly located in older traditions of female philanthropy.[21] As historians such as Martha Vicinus, Katharine Bradley, and Frank Prochaska have demonstrated, philanthropic activities such as involvement with charitable organisations, sick visiting, and prison visiting were seen by many as an escape from the rigid and often enforced idleness of family life experienced by the middle classes and became a way for women to carve out new roles in public life work.[22] Perceptions of volunteering as an activity for educated, privileged women of the upper middle classes thus also presented them with a means of self-actualisation and personal fulfilment which was a far cry from the romantic trope of the self-sacrificing volunteer.[23] For such women, charitable work could offer an adventure away from the restrictions of home, provide a means of self-expression not typically found in the homes of the upper middle classes, or open up new challenges or avenues for personal development and independence. Volunteering therefore allowed women the opportunity to enjoy life without the gendered and moral constraints the middle- and upper-class families imposed upon young single women.[24]

Taking an active part in serving their country led to an increase in the self-confidence and sense of self-worth that was wrapped up in the class-bound assumptions of the nature of volunteering and service which existed amongst the educated and leisured upper middle classes at the beginning of the twentieth century. Philanthropic activities freed women from the constraints of how they were perceived by others and allowed them to explore and shape

[21] Eve Colpus, *Female Philanthropy in the Interwar World: Between Self and Other* (London, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 9; see also Keith Laybourn, "The Guild of Help and the Changing Face of Edwardian Philanthropy," *Urban History* 20, part 1 (April 1993), 43–60.
[22] Prochaska, *Women and Philanthropy*; Katharine Bradley, *Poverty, Philanthropy and the State: Charities and the Working Classes in London, 1918–79* (Manchester; Manchester University Press, 2016); Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women, 1850–1920*, Virago History (London: Virago, 1985).
[23] Eve Colpus, "Women, Service and Self Actualisation in Inter War Britain," *Past & Present*, no. 238 (February 2018), 197–232.
[24] *Ibid*., 10–11; Bradley, *Poverty, Philanthropy and the State*, 9.

their own identity away from the home and family.[25] At the start of the Great War, the recruitment campaign for V.A.D.s that emphasised this patriotic citizenship and sacrificial duty thereby echoed and intensified existing pressures on young women to volunteer. Yet volunteering as a nurse in an established institutional organisation would have meant that the women, having escaped the hierarchical and potentially suffocating regime of the home, found themselves confronted with another in the form of the nursing profession.

The Red Cross itself understood service in military hospitals as an extension of pre-war traditions of philanthropy and social service. It was on this basis that the organisation appealed directly to members to come forward in response to the War Office's appeal for volunteers. However, it wasn't only the large numbers of volunteers which caused problems for the British Red Cross. The organisation also had to manage the expectations of the volunteers. These expectations were complicated — reflecting the diverse reasons individual women volunteered to serve as a nurse in military hospitals. In the autobiographical *Testament of Youth*, Vera Brittain reflected that some of the 'elegant lady V.A.D.s' did not provide much in the way of real assistance on the wards and that they 'intermittently trotted in to "help" in the evenings after the bulk of the work was done.' Many of the V.A.D.s, she wrote, 'come to the hospital expecting to hold the patient's hands and smooth their pillows while the regular nurses fetched and carried everything that looked or smelt disagreeable.'[26]

This critical analysis was self-serving — it allowed Brittain to set her own attitude to volunteering above that of a local girl who 'thinks she would like to take up Red Cross work but does not want to … dust wards and clean up as she does not think she would like that.'[27]

[25] Seth Koven, *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London* (Princeton, N.J. Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), 222–7; Colpus, "Women, Service and Self Actualisation in Inter War Britain".
[26] Vera Brittain and Shirley Williams, *Testament of Youth: An Autobiographical Study of the Years 1900 - 1925* (London: Virago Press, 1985), 144.
[27] Brittain and Williams, *Testament of Youth*, 144.

For Brittain, at least, volunteering for a V.A.D. was a conscious response to seeing the young men in her social circle joining the rush to the colours at the start of the war. Vera's fiancé, Roland Leighton served as a second lieutenant in the 4th Norfolk and 7th Worcestershire regiments, dying as a result of his wounds in 1915.[28] Whilst serving on the Front Line, Roland described Vera's life at home and college as 'a secluded life of scholastic vegetation.' She agreed, reflecting that her life was 'too soft' and she wanted 'physical endurance' and 'wearying kinds of bodily toil.'[29] As this suggests, Brittain, like women in similar situations, wanted in some way to experience the same hardships as her fiancé and realised that her present life would not allow her to do this; more than that, it protected her from the reality of war. Brittain, then, expressed her concern that the war would come between her and Roland — 'putting a barrier of indescribable experience between men and the women they loved ….' Vera worried that his time serving on the Front Line would alter Roland and 'change his ideas and tastes utterly.' Having joined a V.A.D., she wondered, after talking to a wounded Tommy, 'would Roland … look as sad as that if I ever saw him again?'[30] Vera's writing revealed that she revelled in the masochistic and sacrificial nature of her work and, echoing the language of patriotic citizenship, she embraced the fact that she had become 'nothing but a thing that work is squeezed out of — a drudge … and I feel strangely thrilled inside.'[31] She considered the physical aches and pains she endured at work as 'satisfactory tributes to my love for Roland.' She likened the ache in her back and her sore feet to feeling as if she 'had just returned from a long route march.' [32] The reference to the route march and the pleasure she experienced in undertaking tasks she did not enjoy gave Vera a vicarious sense of being alongside Roland on the Front Line. Yet despite her

[28] *Letters from a Lost Generation: First World War Letters of Vera Brittain and Four Friends*, ed. Vera Brittain and Alan Bishop (London: Little, Brown, 1998), xviii.
[29] Brittain and Williams, *Testament of Youth*, 118, 119.
[30] *Ibid*., 122, 123.
[31] *Ibid*., 150.
[32] *Ibid*., 142.

assertions that her motivation for volunteering was sacrificial, Vera admitted that she too felt 'the excitement of really beginning at last to nurse.'[33]

For many other women, volunteering offered ways in which to expand their horizons as well as an escape from boredom. Working as a volunteer nurse in wartime offered them so much more than an opportunity to serve their country. Vera Brittain wrote that she realised 'how much vicarious excitement the War provided for frustrated women cut off from vision and opportunity in small provincial towns ….'[34] This comment acknowledged how taking part in the war effort provided excitement and opportunity, as well as the chance to engage in national service. Brittain sensed the frustration of women, whose lives before the war provided them without a concept of how their lives could be different and who were now offered the chance to spread their wings. In an age when women found so many doors closed to them, many spotted a chance to be on equal footing with men. For Sharon Ouditt, war provided 'an entrance on to the world stage and with it a chance to do as their brothers and lovers were doing.'[35] When the dreadful reality of the nature of the conflict dawned on them, women such as Brittain began to question the value of what their lives at home were like and how the physical and emotional separation from their menfolk would impact on future relationships. Volunteering to serve as a V.A.D. nurse thus provided Vera, like many others, a means of sharing the demanding experience of national service in a country at war. Aware that her life would seem trivial to someone returning from war, Vera was prepared to give it all up and search for some way of connecting with her fiancé. Volunteering offered escape, but also addressed a deeply felt need to remain connected with loved ones overseas.

Others V.A.D.s such as Thekla Bowser drew upon the rhetoric of patriotic citizenship in making sense of their experience. Bowser, who died in 1919 as a result of injuries she

[33] *Ibid*., 146.
[34] *Ibid*., 123.
[35] Ouditt, *Fighting Forces*, 7.

sustained whilst serving in France, believed that her response to the crisis of the war, volunteering 'was not a question of kindness and charity.' Instead she wrote about volunteering in terms of the honour and privilege of serving her country in *The Story of British VAD Work in the Great War*. Serving in military hospitals was her way of 'paying a debt' which could never be repaid 'to the men who have borne the horrors of the battlefield. From this perspective, then, 'the highest privilege goes to the man who may fight his country's battles … next comes the privilege of being of use to these men who are defending us and all we love.'[36] Bowser, at least, distanced wartime volunteering from the charitable and philanthropic works commonly associated with women in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Instead, her emotional comment suggested that she saw her service as a duty and an honour. Whilst the men were serving their country Bowser implied that she and her fellow V.A.D.s would be serving the men. Bowser's rhetoric had an implicit gendered element to it as well as a strong sense of patriotism.

As these examples suggest, volunteers like Bowser and Brittain were eager to become a valued part of the society in which they found themselves by carrying out duties that were beyond their capabilities. The lack of training, and the challenges of providing modern medical care under immense pressure, meant there was a genuine clash between the reality of their experiences and the reasons that led them to volunteer in the first place. Rather than simply care for the wounded and sick, volunteers were expected to work on the wards in a probationary capacity, carrying out basic housekeeping tasks even though they imagined that they would be involved in the actual nursing care. Despite a very clear directive from the Red Cross that the work they would be doing would be that of a probationer, a sense of social superiority, self-confidence, and a desire to 'nurse' rather than carry out domestic

[36] Thekla Bowser and Tony Ball, *The Story of British V.A.D. Work in the Great War* (London: Imperial War Museum, Dept. of Printed Books, 2003), 13 – 16.

tasks was a barrier that many did not overcome. As I argue further below, V.A.D.s struggled to reconcile the ideal of patriotic service and selfless heroism with the realities of the work they were expected to do — work which, moreover, was often seen as unbecoming of their social status. It was not only the V.A.D. who would have grappled with the mundane reality of war work. Scrubbing floors and domestic duties were ill suited to the popular illusions of the V.A.D. as ministering angel that were so prevalent in contemporary British society.[37]

The mismatch between the expectation of the V.A.D.s that they would be carrying out the duties of a fully trained and experienced nurse and reality of the role was stark. In autumn 1914, an anonymous Red Cross volunteer set out with her friend for a fortnight's probationary training. Her diary entries illustrated clearly how this tension played out for one individual and typified the wider experience of upper middle class V.A.D.s. Published as 'A Probationer's Diary' in the *Spectator* in October 1914, her account of this experience communicated her absolute desire to be accepted on equal terms with her professional counterparts and carry out the nursing of those in her care.[38] Even before her training began, she concluded that 'the whole duty of man lies in practicing the two O's, being that is to say, Obsequious and Observant.' The decision to be 'obsequious', whilst suggestive of submission and subservience, also alluded to the fact that she felt she would need to display flattering and toadying behaviour towards her professional colleagues and implied that she would be adopting a certain kind of attitude in order to fit in even, though it was one with which she felt uncomfortable.

Throughout this account, the tension between the expectations of volunteers and the rigorous prescriptions of professional nurses became increasingly visible. Five days into her probationary training, the V.A.D. was allowed to carry out dressings 'under the awful eye

[37] Janet S.K. Watson, *Fighting Different Wars*, 86–7.
[38] "A Probationer's Diary," *The Spectator*, October 31, 1914, 10, 11.

of Sister.' The writer acknowledged that being allowed to undertake such a skilled task as a dressing after only five days was not typical for the work of a nurse probationer and suggested that being closely observed by Sister was both awe-inspiring and terrifying in equal measure. The potential for conflict with the 'other pros' on the ward was apparent. It was for this reason that the V.A.D. told readers she 'feared that … by my sudden dizzy elevation this morning I may have earned their hatred … however they did not appear to mind a bit.' The 'other pros' referred to were most likely to be young women undertaking nurse training and who, according to this account, had already been 'in the hospital for six months.' So, despite the scrutiny of the Sister being 'awful', the Red Cross probationer was being allowed to carry out skilled duties in a matter of days; the other probationers, would have taken months to be given such a level of responsibility. The writer was well aware that this could be a source of resentment and, despite her claims that 'they did not mind a bit', she used a strong statement which spoke of hatred to describe how they may have felt towards this rapid and 'dizzy elevation' through the ranks. Resentment and tension came from two places: the awful authority of the ward Sister was not welcomed by the Red Cross probationer, who further feared that nurse probationers would take umbrage at her being asked to carry out duties beyond her range of knowledge and experience. Nevertheless, this did not stop her from not only doing these things, but also writing about them for the *Spectator*, a widely read national highbrow publication.[39]

In accounts like this, V.A.D.s set out their ambition to overcome the constraints placed on them by their status as amateur volunteers in a professional organisation. The anonymous author of the *Spectator* account patently knew and understood what her 'rightful sphere' was as a probationer — evident not least in the title of the article 'A Probationer's Diary'. The author wrote:

[39] *Ibid*.

> Sister was away all today … I am always pleased when we are short-handed as there is more to do and I can overpass my rightful sphere of probationer with more show of decency. I took temperatures instead of dusting and charted them into the bargain. I also did a good many dressings.[40]

Here she gave a clear sense that it was a shortage of trained staff that placed her in a position to carry out tasks such as taking and charting temperatures, and dressings without fear of recrimination. She was aware that this was overstepping the mark and undertaking tasks beyond her level of expertise. She relied on the absence of the authority figure to do this and was clearly 'pleased' to move out of what she knew was her rightful place within the professional hierarchy of a military hospital.

As well as documenting the frustrations of probationary training, the short diary published in the *Spectator* demonstrated the conflict between ideas of patriotic citizenship and professional competency. For the writer, at least, her strong sense of patriotism equipped her with the level of professional competency seen amongst her professional colleagues and was enough to negate any need for training in nursing. There was, of course, a fundamental flaw in this logic: her lack of the knowledge, skills, and experience necessary to be a fully functioning member of the nursing profession. Volunteers found themselves in a position whereby they were forced to negotiate between the power granted them by their class and patriotic endeavour and the subordination that followed from their voluntary status in a professional and hierarchical organisation.[41] While volunteers arrived on the wards with confidence in their own abilities to serve their country, they did not appreciate the value of training, which was superseded by their eagerness and firm belief in patriotic duty. Confident and assured after a mere two weeks of rudimentary training, the volunteer wrote:

[40] *Ibid.*
[41] *Ibid.*

> we felt that our previous Red Cross theoretical training has been invaluable … we felt that owing to it we were quite prepared after a fortnight to compete with the other pros, most of whom had been in the hospital for six months, and that on the whole we probably knew more about the actual dressings than they did. She concluded: 'our fortnight's practice has been of the greatest value in giving us confidence in ourselves….

The writer articulated her belief that after two weeks she was more knowledgeable than those who had been training for six months but realised that she, and her counterparts, were in competition with the other probationers. This competition was for a position of status usually acquired by an expertise gained by the length of time served as a trainee. There is little doubt that 'the other pros' would have minded a great deal that this confident young woman undermined their system of training and usurped their position within the nursing hierarchy. The diary was thus a direct challenge to the position and authority of trained nurses, undermining their status and controversially demeaning the value of forms of professional training and expertise for which nursing organisations had fought for many years.

As examples like this suggest, whereas the volunteer nurse longed to be viewed as a heroine, the organisation in which they now worked permitted them only an auxiliary role. There was, for the volunteer, an inevitable sense of feeling devalued by the professional system that would never be relieved without the knowledge and skills that could only be acquired through proper training. Nevertheless, with an inadequate understanding of the nursing profession and the training that was required to carry out such skilled work, the eagerness and self-confidence of the volunteer allowed her to enter into an existing hierarchical system with no regard for her own limitations. Without proper management by the British Red Cross, such relationships were never going to work without tension and

hostility. For all these reasons, it is striking that, despite the controversial and challenging tone of the diary, there was no public response in the correspondence columns of the *Spectator* or the pages of the *BJN*. October 1914 was very early on in the conflict, and this lack of reaction suggested that the trained nurses did not anticipate that they would have so little influence over the integration of the volunteers into the nursing profession and that they would be able to manage the exuberant and enthusiastic volunteers without much difficulty.

Managing the Voluntary Aid Detachments

The Great War thus intensified ongoing debates surrounding the tense relationship between professional and volunteer nurses rather than calling those tensions into being. Popular histories of the V.A.D., shaped by the high profile work of writers such as Vera Brittain and Thekla Bowser, established an enduring narrative of an enthusiastic response to the call of their country that quickly gave way to images of bullying and victimisation. If the selfless V.A.D. was the hero of their own story, the trained nurse was very much the villain.[42] As the previous chapter suggests, despite the demands of war, nurses remained keen for their professional status to be secured and not undermined by a sudden influx of keen but unskilled volunteers. At the same time, however, those young women who volunteered to serve their country at a time of national crisis were increasingly frustrated by the limitations on what forms of service they might provide. Trained nurses (and nurses in training) considered that they were devalued by a society that appeared to favour the glamour of the V.A.D. over the tireless work and hard-won experience of the nurse. The assumption that someone could enter a ward and, after two weeks, carry out skilled procedures communicated that there was a scarcity of respect which resulted in an inequality that bred

[42] Brittain and Williams, *Testament of Youth,* passim; Bowser and Ball, *The Story of British V.A.D.* passim

suspicion, mistrust, and unease.[43] As this discussion shows, both groups of women experienced tension and defensiveness but for very different reasons.

At the start of the war in 1914, the rush amongst women to volunteer as nursing members challenged the way in which the Red Cross Society carefully attempted to manage the relationship between professionals and volunteers, and exacerbated the existing tensions charted above. This was largely due to the sense of urgency in the need to recruit volunteers to assist a profession that found itself under tremendous strain. As the war progressed, moreover, the demand for help grew and the statutory requirements for the training of volunteers were relaxed in order to hasten their admission into the society as volunteers and therefore onto the wards. On 26 July 1916, a minute of the meeting of the Joint Women's V.A.D Committee recorded the decision that 'a real and very urgent necessity has arisen for more nurses,' it went on to say that at the suggestion of the Military Authorities 'the need for … women to possess First Aid and Nursing Certificates has therefore been suspended.'[44] Despite this relaxation being seen by the War Office and the British Red Cross as a necessary response to a national crisis, it was viewed with suspicion by the nursing profession, leaving the Red Cross with yet more work to do in the control of its volunteers.

It was by no means clear to the trained nurses who decided what role the volunteers were to play in the caregiving of the sick and wounded soldiers during the Great War and on whose terms was this role was to be negotiated. It also remained uncertain precisely what kind of assistance was needed by the trained nurses and how the provision of a voluntary service was to be organised. There was an immediate challenge to the relationship between the volunteers and the professionals due to the amateur status of the V.A.D.; the trained nurses needed find their own place in a military hierarchy whilst at the same time reframe

[43] Richard Sennett, *Respect: The Formation of Character in an Age of Inequality* (London: Penguin, 2004).
[44] Women's V.A.D. Committee Minutes Book From September 1915: BRCMA, JWC 5/1.

their work to accommodate the volunteers into their own professional hierarchy. The volunteers needed to reframe their status in society to become assimilated into the professional hierarchy of the nursing profession. Just a month after the outbreak of war, on 19 September 19 1914, the *BJN* published an article entitled 'Discipline Must Be Maintained' which drew attention to the new and unfamiliar hierarchies that the nursing profession needed to negotiate.[45] The writer wondered 'if nurses called up for duty in Territorial Hospitals realise that they are under military rule, and must therefore conform to it … it cannot be expected to work without a hitch at first.' The article acknowledged that 'if not carefully arranged the grading of the nursing staff may produce friction.' Writing from the perspective of a trained nurse, the writer called upon the civilian nurses for tolerance and conformity to avoid any discord between them and the military nursing hierarchy — even if, the writer cautioned, they had to work 'under the direction of others with less experience.' While the tone here was conciliatory, when it came to managing the relationship between the professional nurses and the V.A.D.s, the article shifted: 'Great pressure has been brought on hospital matrons, many of whom strongly disapprove of the system [of Voluntary Aid nurses], to have such workers admitted in some instances "to see operations and help with dressings in the wards".'[46] While qualified nurses were prepared to invest time in negotiating a place in the military hierarchy, they strongly objected to being asked to work on the same level with amateur nurses. Even though the military nurses would have, at times, less nursing experience than them, the hierarchical organisation of command took shape on terms they could understand: knowledge and skills acquired through training and formal privileges of rank. This was not the case with the volunteers. The threat felt by the trained nurses in the case of the amateur status of the V.A.D.s was bound up in issues of

[45] "Nursing and The War. Discipline Must Be Maintained," *British Journal of Nursing*, September 19, 1914, 221–2.
[46] *Ibid*.

professionalism as well as class. The unwillingness of the trained nurses to work with the volunteers made evident their need to secure the interests of their own organisation. Even though both groups shared a common purpose during the Great War — the care of the sick and wounded — for the relationship to be successful there would need to be an active participation from both groups. As this chapter will argue, there remained very real issues about the operation of power within these relationships.

Despite earlier assertions that the V.A.D.s would work under the direct control of the Matron and the trained nurses, the administration and control of volunteers was governed by a small committee of socially influential lay women. In September 1915, the Women's V.A.D. Committee was made up of the following people: 'Mrs. Charles Furse, Chairman,[47] Miss Edith Crowdy, Miss Clapham, Mrs. Tennant, The Countess of Airlie, Lady Ampthill, Miss Engleheart, the Marchioness of Tullibardine, Lady Bell, the Marchioness of Winchester, Miss Swift [Matron-in-Chief]'.[48] Significantly, and echoing the composition of the Supply of Nurses Committee, the committee had only one trained nurse, Miss Swift, as a member. The people who were going to make decisions about the deployment and control of the volunteers, and how they would best serve the nursing profession, were thus themselves volunteers from the same social class as many V.A.D.s. This only served to increase the hostility of the trained nurses, whilst reinforcing a sense of superiority and privilege within the voluntary organisation. Ironically, perhaps, V.A.D.s were given a privilege denied to the nursing profession: a say in their own governance and regulation. It was for this reason that, in 1916, the *BJN* criticised 'the present disorganisation' in the management of nursing care. The writer of this short article, most probably the editor, Mrs. Bedford Fenwick, observed that any improvement would be 'almost impossible under

[47] Kathleen Furse, later to become Commandant-in-Chief of V.A.D.
[48] British Red Cross, Women's V.A.D. Committee Minutes Book, September, 1915: BRCMA, JWC/5/1

present War Office traditions.'[49] For Bedford Fenwick, at least, these problems 'were mainly the result of dissatisfaction with a system which is highly distasteful to the rank and file.'[50] It is not surprising then, given their exclusion from any decision making body, that the nursing staff were suspicious and resentful of the volunteers.

The *Red Cross* Journal

The speed at which the large numbers of volunteer nurses were assimilated into the nursing profession, along with the rapidly changing requirements for their training meant that it was difficult for the Red Cross to communicate its values and ideals to its members quickly and efficiently. The monthly journal, *The Red Cross: The Official Journal of the Red Cross Society*, became a forum through which this communication could happen. The journal was first published in 1914 and priced at threepence, and it was created by the organisation for its members in response to the demands of the war. It contained news, correspondence, and articles of interest to those serving as volunteers. It became an instrument through which the British Red Cross aims and objectives of patriotic duty could be promoted and a means of articulating responses to criticism of the organisation published in the nursing press and journals such as the *Nursing Times* and the *BJN*. For the Red Cross as an organisation, moreover, the journal was a further mechanism through which to control the behaviour and attitude of the V.A.D. nurses. This included managing the potential for friction between them and the trained nurses. With the exception of the correspondence, the journal published material without attributing authorship. It called itself '*The Official Journal*', and the implication was that what was written was done so with authority and came from the highest sources within the organisation; therefore, it was intended to be taken with the utmost

49 "Nursing and the War," *British Journal of Nursing*, October 21, 1916, 329.
50 ibid

seriousness by its readers. As the war continued, articles, and letters published in the *Red Cross* chart both the growing tensions between volunteers and professionals, the ways in which those tensions were negotiated by volunteer nurses, and the ways in which they were discussed and addressed by the Red Cross Society itself.

The items that were printed in the *Red Cross* showed an organisation full of confidence and self-belief echoing the rhetoric of the rush to the colours and war enthusiasm seen amongst the general population in 1914 and 1915. Referred to as 'War Fever' in the *Nursing Mirror and Midwives Journal*, the declaration of war generated an enthusiasm for volunteering and conscription in some groups in society.[51] The willingness to volunteer by the upper middle classes, either for military service or nursing, could be explained by the principles of a society that placed a great emphasis on the ideals of patriotism and self-sacrifice that existed amongst a generation that did not know the realities of war.[52] Whilst the rhetoric of patriotic service suggested that men volunteered to fight to protect their women and children, a large number of women, frustrated at not having a role, volunteered to become nurses to show solidarity with their brothers in arms.[53]

In January 1915, the *Red Cross* wished to demonstrate to its readers that the British Red Cross was committed to working together with the nursing profession and to distance itself from any individual who was acting in a way that would discredit the society. It did so in an article published in response to a criticism of its members in the *Nursing Times* in December 1914 that observed that 'one detachment, or individual members of it, did actually go to Belgium to nurse the wounded.'[54] The article continued:

51 Adrian Gregory, *The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 25–9; Anonymous, "War Fever and the War Spirit," *Nursing Mirror and Midwives Journal*, August 22, 1914, 397.
52 George Lachmann Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 53, 54; De Groot, *Blighty*, 42.
53 De Groot, *Blighty*, 69; Gregory, *The Last Great War*, 99.
54 "Nurse," *The Red Cross*, January 1915, 13.

> the Society grants certificates to those who qualify for them under its rules … but it can no more say that such people shall never go to Belgium or control their actions when they get there, than a hospital which originally trained a nurse can govern her actions as a free woman … it is not reasonable to bracket the private acts of individuals who happen to hold one of the British Red Cross Society's certificates, with the work of the Society as an organization.

The article concluded in the hope that '[the *Nursing Times*] will in future seek for the answer to charges made against our work before, rather than after, they have been dealt with in their columns.' Whilst the article made it clear that the Society did not sanction the acts of private individuals, it also suggested the nursing press had behaved improperly when they published something that was inaccurate. The article highlighted a conflict about competing ideas of nursing and war that was staged in print and therefore entered the public domain. For the *Red Cross*, it was clear that the *Nursing Times* had sought to discredit the work of the organisation by printing inaccurate information. Consequently, the concern of the journal was that people reading such criticisms would be misled as to the aims of the Society and to avoid any 'real harm [that] may be done to a cause which merits the support of every patriotic Englishman.' [55] To believe what had been written in the nursing press was, from this perspective, dangerously unpatriotic. The *Nursing Times* could not be trusted to write accurately about the work of the Red Cross. The reputation of the Red Cross and its cause could be damaged, not by the work they were doing, but by the nursing profession itself. Comments such as this worked to reinforce the notion that that British Red Cross and its volunteers were in conflict with the nursing profession — exacerbating rather than easing difficulties. For the *Red Cross*, if the reputation of the V.A.D.s suffered, fault would lie with the nursing staff and its publication which was behaving in an unpatriotic way. The Red

[55] *Ibid.*

Cross took the moral high ground and stated that it was them, and their aims, that were worthy of the support of 'every patriotic Englishman.' This was a powerful statement which established an explicit link back to the ideals of patriotic national service during the Great War.

The inference that the aims of the nursing profession were not deserving of support and criticism of their behaviour towards the Red Cross continued during the war. The patriotism of the nursing profession was called into question again, in February 1915, when the *Red Cross* welcomed 'a more conciliatory attitude towards The British Red Cross Society on the part of our contemporary the *Nursing Times*.' The writer went on to say '*The Nursing Times* very properly looks after its clients' interests, that being a primary part of its business. The primary part of The British Red Cross Society's business is to render assistance in the time of war to the sick and wounded.'[56] This was deliberately inflammatory and confrontational and used emotive language which drew a clear distinction between nursing as a profession and the volunteers. The implication was that it was the volunteers who were concerned with the welfare of the sick and wounded, whereas the nursing profession were self-absorbed and interested only in the advancement of their own professional needs — the language of commerce or 'business' implied the *Nursing Times* was self-interested in contrast with the selflessness of the volunteers. It was a comment that was bound to set the two groups apart and create hostility. It secured the feeling of superiority and selfless service amongst the V.A.D.s and implied that the nurses, through their official publications, were motivated by professional ambition and not service to the sick and wounded.

Even in the very early days of the First World War, the Red Cross Society thus portrayed the nursing profession as self-serving. Contrasting it unfavourably with the altruistic, sacrificial nature of the volunteers, represented an implicit endorsement of the rhetoric of

[56] "Nurse," *The Red Cross*, February, 1915, 34, 35.

amateurism and volunteerism that was bound up with elite British culture.[57] Criticism of the nursing press for looking after its clients' needs, however, belied the fact that that was precisely what the *Red Cross* was doing for its own members. It is unsurprising that many V.A.D.s viewed their service as superior to that of the fully qualified nurses when the Society's journal was communicating such a message to them. This statement in the *Red Cross* typified and reinforced the imperious attitude of many V.A.D.s: while nurses were only concerned with nursing, the V.A.D. had the far loftier concern of the care of the sick and wounded. This binary language perpetuated and strengthened the myth that the V.A.D. was heroic and patriotic whilst the nurses were merely looking after their own interests.

Training in the British Red Cross

The women who volunteered to serve as V.A.D. nurses responded with eagerness and zeal to what was a national crisis. The influx of women who wished to serve in the early days of the war thus made the careful controls and regulations put in place by the Red Cross difficult to impose. In April 1915, the *Red Cross* acknowledged the confusion that had been caused by an unexpected deluge of women eager to become volunteer nurses.

An article on 'The V.A.D. and the War' noted

> during the first six months of the war they [the volunteers] were, in some respects like shoals of fish trying to enter a main stream through a narrow culvert. There was congestion and congestion brings misunderstanding and even some upbraiding …They saw on the one hand the average woman's feelings when men are fighting

[57] Marcus Collins, "The Fall of the English Gentleman: The National Character in Decline, c. 1918-70," *Historical Research* 75, 187 (2002), 90–111; Marcus Collins, *Modern Love: An Intimate History of Men and Women in Twentieth-Century Britain* (London: Atlantic Books, 2003; Newark DL, 2006).

> for her and falling for her country — intensely patriotic and burning with an unquenchable fever to do something to help.[58]

The article continued: 'it was all quite natural and that very fact made wise onlookers tolerant and sympathetic.' The image conveyed was one of chaos on behalf of a system (the nursing profession) that could not cope with the vast numbers of women coming forward to help. While this resulted in confusion and conflict, the article was careful to draw attention to the patriotism of the volunteers using the strongest possible language. Those who did not understand this fervour to help were unwise, intolerant, and unsympathetic. Here was an implicit criticism of the trained nurses who struggled to manage the role of the V.A.D. If mistakes had been made by the untrained volunteers it was entirely a function of 'these kindly instincts [which] led them into foolish acts … it was a fault at any rate on the right side.' Of the trained nurses, by contrast, the article said, 'if they have looked with some jealousy on any risk of being supplanted at this time of supreme test, of being undervalued or undersold, that too, is only natural and to be treated gently and sympathetically.'[59]

The V.A.D.s, according to the *Red Cross*, had right on their side. Even though there was an acknowledgement of the tensions that existed in the relationships between the volunteers and the professionals, writing like this reinforced those feelings. If the V.A.D.s were right, then by implication, the nurses were wrong; their opinions and reactions were unjustified and written off as jealousy. The suggestion that the V.A.D.s should be gentle and sympathetic towards the nurses evoked their superior social status and sought to secure that hierarchy. The article ended with the hope that

[58] "The V.A.D. and the War," *The Red Cross*, April, 1915, 83. See also Santanu Das, "'The Impotence of Sympathy': Touch and Trauma in the Memoirs of the First World War Nurses," *Textual Practice* 19(2), 2005, 239 – 262; Henriette Donner, "Under the Cross – Why V.A.D.s Performed the Filthiest Task in the Dirtiest War: Red Cross Women Volunteers, 1914 – 1918," *Journal of Social History* Spring 1997, Vol. 30(3), 687 – 704; Linda J. Quinney, '"Bravely and Loyally They Answered the Call": St. John Ambulance, the Red Cross, and the Patriotic Service of Canadian Women During the Great War**,**' *History of Intellectual Culture* 2005, Vol. 5 (1), 1 – 19.

[59] "The V.A.D. and the War," *The Red Cross*, April, 1915, 83.

> everyone will now buckle to with the single desire to be of use in whatever sphere they may be called to work; that the fully trained will be just and merciful to their humbler colleagues; and that the partly trained will abstain from any acts or airs which would give countenance to the foolish idea that a uniform makes a nurse.[60]

Eager to remind the readers of the shared common purpose of the care of the sick and wounded, this closing paragraph was nevertheless ambiguous. It drew attention to the humility of the volunteers, and the call for justice and mercy implied that they had been treated unfairly. The V.A.D.s were asked to behave in a less superior manner and were reminded that a uniform did not make a nurse. However, they were not, according to the writer of this article, raw recruits as they were partly trained. Just as merely wearing a uniform did not make them a nurse, the statement could also be applied to the trained nurses whose general attitude towards the V.A.D.s was being called into question; they would only be deemed worthy of the title 'Nurse' if they displayed the personal qualities of mercy, justice, and humility towards their new colleagues.

By the start of the Great War, The British Red Cross was quick to reject the notion that the volunteers were inadequately trained and insufficiently prepared to take their part as nurses. The *Red Cross* printed an article in December 1914 which pointed out the inconsistencies within the nursing profession and stated 'the nursing profession is a large one. It is not under any central control. Even the very title "Fully Trained Nurse" cannot be tested by the application of a legal definition.'[61] The *Red Cross* used the lack of cohesion within nursing and the fact that there was no State Register to dismiss the complaints over the use of the title 'Nurse' and implied that the trained nurses had no legal claim to the label. The article went on to say that 'the women engaged in nursing, or certainly the best class of

60 *Ibid*
61 "Nurse," *The Red Cross*, December,1914, 389, 390.

nurses, were of the salt of the earth …' nevertheless, 'Professional nurses have lately been casting cold and enquiring eyes over the V.A.D. lady with a nursing certificate.'[62] The description of the nurses as 'salt of the earth' had a working class connotation to it as opposed to the 'lady with the nursing certificate.' The sense of social superiority conveyed by this statement illustrated a belief that this was more important than any training, and social status alone equipped the volunteers to assume the office, duty, and title of 'Nurse'. The writer of this article was keenly aware of the training undergone by the nursing staff and challenged any criticism there may have been about the minimal training of the V.A.D.s. Asking 'whether some knowledge of nursing is better than none,' the article concluded that

> First Aid and emergency nursing [as provided by V.A.D.s] are exceptions to the rule that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing.' It continued 'over and over again a little knowledge of nursing has been of inestimable value to doctors when nothing better was available. In other words, an emergency. Now war is an emergency.

The article ended by stating that, despite the lack of a complete course of training, every V.A.D. member 'may be sure that, under proper direction her work will be found to be a godsend to many, and bear good fruit.'[63]

Returning to this theme in June 1915, the *Red Cross* acknowledged the high profile of their volunteers and admitted that their presence had caused some disruption to the nursing hierarchy. The V.A.D.s had, an article noted 'loomed large in the public eye from the outset of the war and have been credited with an almost frenzied desire to help in the work of nursing the wounded soldiers. They have fluttered the dovecots of professional nursing.'[64] The V.A.D.s were, in the opinion of the *Red Cross*, under scrutiny, and their wish to serve their country, whilst worthy of praise, was 'almost frenzied' which implied that there was a

62 *Ibid*
63 *Ibid*.
64 "The V.A.D. and Army Nursing," *The Red Cross*, June, 1915, 128.

danger of them being perceived as overexcited and disordered. To comment that they were 'fluttering the dovecots' insinuated that their very presence had caused a commotion amongst a group of women, and yet to phrase it in such a way seemed slightly dismissive of any disruption and implied that it was a brief and unimportant 'fluttering' that would soon settle down.

As such articles suggest, the difficulties of assimilating a large amount of untrained volunteers into the system were always acknowledged by the Red Cross and its publication. Yet this tacit acceptance of critiques of the organisation was always tempered by the use of very strong patriotic language to reassert the importance of the organisation, its volunteers, and its work during a period of national crisis. From this perspective, any problems that existed were unintentional on the part of the volunteer who could not help but respond to the call to serve her country and the men who were fighting for her. The response to this call by the volunteer nurses was lauded as a point of honour.

Alongside this defence of the V.A.D.'s motives and commitment to the national cause, the *Red Cross* also insisted that, for volunteers to become accepted into the professional organisation, it was vital that they paid careful attention to professional etiquette and present themselves in a way that was expected of probationary nurses and not young women of a higher social class; that was one of deference towards their professional superiors. The Red Cross were in a difficult position finding themselves caught between satisfying the requirements of the War Office and placating the anxiety surrounding the use of amateur nurses being expressed by the nursing profession. In August 1915, an article entitled Hospital Discipline appeared in the *Red Cross* and stated that 'no one who knows anything about nurses or nursing ever doubted that the treatment of V.A.D. members serving in hospitals by fully-trained nurses would be called into question sooner or later….'[65] The

[65] "Hospital Discipline," *The Red Cross*, August, 1915, 168.

writer commented that ‘professionals are by nature tenacious of their rights and suspicious of amateurs; and probably many trained nurses have witnessed the advent of the V.A.D. member with genuine and spontaneous feelings of doubt ….’ Nevertheless, the writer of the article believed that ‘it does not follow that they would want to bully the new-comer’ and that they were ‘doubtful whether a professional probationer fares any better.’ The article concluded: ‘We should doubt whether serenity is an outstanding quality of professional women, as a class … V.A.D. members will cheerfully take things as they find them, and be all the better for the exercise.’ Initially the article began by pointing out that the V.A.D. was not being singled out for harsh treatment by her professional superior yet then went on to say that this unsympathetic and strict attitude towards professional subordinates was as a result of their class. By contrast the V.A.D. was unruffled, cheerful and, as a consequence, the stoicism and good character derived from her social status and background rendered her superior to her fully trained colleagues and better equipped to meet the pressures of working in a military hospital. The article did nothing to ease any potential tensions and strengthened the notion that the nurses were intrinsically hostile and suspicious. Amongst the V.A.D.s, it seems, there was an emerging awareness of their challenge to the status of the professional nurses which used class-based rhetoric to reinforce the superior social position of the V.A.D.s.

The difficulties of responding appropriately to a national emergency and provide nursing care for the sick and wounded were thus challenging for the British Red Cross Society and the War Office. It was anticipated that relations between the regular nurses and the volunteers were going to be difficult and the British Red Cross did their best to ensure that, with careful instruction and the issue of rules and regulations that governed behaviour, the V.A.D. nurse would not do anything that would jeopardise a potentially fragile working relationship.

It was for this reason that, as well as rigorous and strictly regulated training, V.A.D. nurses were also instructed in the decorum and behaviour expected of them when working in hospitals. The *Red Cross* frequently wrote about the demeanour and behaviour of the V.A.D.s as a means of engagement with the trained nurses. In so doing, they echoed initiatives adopted by the Red Cross as an organisation, particularly the guidelines for good conduct introduced to ameliorate or ease this relationship. One such instruction was concerned with the correct use of professional titles. In a leaflet entitled 'Instructions to V.A.D Members Serving In Hospitals' issued in 1915, the volunteers were told that 'Correct titles should always be given, such as "Sir," "Matron," 'Sister," "Nurse" ….'[66] The titles assigned to each member of the team were an important part of the existing hierarchies and ensured that the V.A.D.s took their appropriate place in the hierarchical system. In a professional society, titles are awarded to reflect the knowledge and skills of each member of the team and often to a person on completion of training.

Despite not being welcomed by the nursing profession, the wide public approbation of the role of the volunteer nurse gave rise to an assurance and conviction amongst the V.A.D.s that made deferential relationships difficult. This was at odds with the need for the V.A.D.s to occupy the most junior position within the professional hierarchy of nursing. One result was a fractious dispute over the need for qualifications and the use of the title 'nurse' by the volunteers. The importance of a basic nursing qualification was first recognised by the British Red Cross Society in 1912. Regulations produced on 24 January of that year by the Society stated clearly that 'by the War Office requirements all candidates for the [Voluntary Aid Detachment] must be in possession of a First Aid Certificate … should they fail to do so they are liable to be removed from the detachment.'[67] The training required to achieve

[66] British Red Cross, Instructions to V.A.D Members Serving in Hospitals July, 1915: BRCMA, RCB 2/8/5/29.
[67] British Red Cross Society, Red Cross and Voluntary Aid Detachments First Aid and Home Nursing Certificate, January 24, 1912: BRCMA, RCB 2/8/5/15.

this certificate was laid down in the syllabus contained in this document and stated that 'the course of instruction was to be delivered by a duly medical practitioner or by a trained nurse,' and given in accordance with the syllabus detailed in the document. Tangible evidence that the British Red Cross was attempting to secure a place for its volunteers in both the medical and military hierarchies appeared in the form of a comment which stated that this document had been produced in accordance with 'War Office requirements.' Through these clear guidelines, the British Red Cross were making every attempt to conciliate the medical and nursing profession by ensuring not only that there was a standardised programme of training, but also that nurses would be involved in the instruction and delivery of the syllabus. In this same documentation, the Red Cross Society provided a clear explanation that a trained nurse was one who had completed three years training in a general hospital equipped with a nurse training school.[68] Clarification was needed to ensure that there would be no confusion between professional qualifications and the possession of a home nursing certificate.

This explanation of the correct use of the title 'Nurse' being the domain of those who had received full, professional training suggested that that some people were already considering the award of a first aid and home nursing certificate entitled them to assume the role and title associated with professionally qualified nurses. The need to reassert these directives that appeared in July 1915 suggested that such instructions were being ignored and the required etiquette was being breached. Among many issues that became contentious in the relationship between the V.A.D. and the qualified nurses was a continuing battle over the title 'nurse'. The article 'Nurse' in the *Red Cross* called it an 'acute controversy on the title.' The article continued:

[68] *Ibid*.

> somehow or other nursing controversies are apt to be acute … Pretension is construed out of some mere accident, such as a name wrongly used, when no harm is intended … Professional nurses have lately been casting cold and enquiring eyes on the V.A.D. lady with a nursing certificate … members of the Red Cross have done no actual harm of any kind …Some few may have given expression to exaggerated ideas about the work expected of them and by them. But, as persons under the control of the organisation, they have never translated their ideas into action.[69]

The argument over the correct use of the title 'Nurse' became a way of regulating tensions and a site of struggle for status between two groups. According to this statement, nurses were prone to be dramatic in their reactions to situations and their response to a 'name wrongly used' — the title 'Nurse' — was deemed over dramatic. It was implied that the professional nurses had misinterpreted this as pretension on the part of the volunteers — who were, the *Red Cross* insisted, blameless. Indeed, the writer of this statement reinforced the rhetoric of the harsh and unkind nurse with their 'cold and enquiring eyes' and contrasted them against the well meaning 'lady' who meant no harm. The article gave a clear sense of the differences between the two groups of women and conflated the argument of class with professionalism.

These discussions around military titles were echoed in wider efforts to regulate the interactions between trained nurses and volunteers. *Instructions to VAD members Serving in Hospitals* told V.A.D.s to stand to attention when anyone bearing a title associated with professional training and qualifications entered the ward or spoke to them, securing the notion of authority that these people naturally held over them by nature of their professional

[69] "Nurse," *The Red Cross*, December, 1914, 389, 390.

status and training.[70] The pamphlet went on to spell out in no uncertain terms the behaviour that the Society expected of its members whilst part of the organisation:

> V.A.D. members should be prepared to carry out anything that they are asked to do willingly and promptly without question. If they want to help their country they should do so in a generous and unselfish spirit wherever they are most needed and in whatever way their help is most urgently required. They must remember that they are part of a very large Organisation, for which they should be careful to win a good name.[71]

Here and elsewhere, the Red Cross set out for its members what behaviour and attitude the organisation expected from them and the importance of that to its reputation as an organisation. This invitation to loyalty and professional demeanour, on the face of it, seemed like a very reasonable request. There was, however, a tension between duty and patriotism that came into being with this call for the V.A.D.s to consider their self-presentation and demeanour in public. It was important to consider the reasons why many of these young women volunteered to serve as a volunteer nurse. The historian, Katharine Bradley has outlined a fundamental difference between patriotic citizenship and duty: patriotism and citizenship bind an individual to the nation, whereas duty binds a person to an organisation.[72] Consequently, the concept of professionalism, which was so important to the trained nurses, was at odds with the schema of patriotic citizenship seen as the motivation behind volunteerism. It was most likely that the majority of young women were moved by the call to serve out of patriotism and a desire to serve their country rather than a desire to be a nurse; that is not to say that trained nurses were not patriotic. The difference was that the qualified nurses would have been nurses whatever the situation and would carry on nursing after the

[70] British Red Cross, Instructions to V.A.D Members Serving in Hospitals July, 1915: BRCMA, RCB 2/8/5/29.
[71] *Ibid.*
[72] *Ibid.*

war was over. The V.A.D. nurse was responding to the crisis and her service would end once the war was over. The trained nurse was bound to the organisation; the V.A.D. was bound to the nation.

This conflict of interest created an immediate and obvious point of fracture between the two groups. Articles in the *Red Cross* repeatedly implied that the trained nurse, whilst providing care for the sick and wounded, would be eager to maintain and secure the needs of the organisation to which she belonged. The V.A.D., serving out of a sense of patriotic citizenship, would not necessarily share that feeling of loyalty towards either the Red Cross or the nursing profession; her loyalty was to the nation and embodied the sense of patriotic citizenship. From this perspective, the British Red Cross Society's move to issue directives to its members calling for them to consider the impact of their attitude and behaviour on the organisation was paradoxical. It is incredible that those who were giving their time willingly and freely would need to be told how to behave in certain situations, especially young women from the upper middle classes for whom etiquette and appropriate behaviour around social hierarchy would surely have been second nature. Further instructions were issued to the V.A.D. members on matters of presentation and personal hygiene.[73] They were told how to dress both on and off duty as uniform was an important part of their professional identity. They were informed that 'nails should be kept clean and short' and that 'all powder, paint, scent, earrings or other jewellery etc., should be avoided as the using of such things invites criticism, and may bring discredit on the organisation.' Volunteers were instructed to 'gargle with carbolic and Listerine' morning and evening.[74] Outward appearance as well as behaviour was considered an important part of the image of the Red Cross Society and a way of negotiating wider tensions between ideas of profession and patriotic national service.

[73] British Red Cross Society, Instructions to V.A.D Members Serving in Hospitals, July, 1915: BRCMA, RCB 2/8/5/29.
[74] *Ibid*.

The V.A.D. and the Public

The reality of war and the sense of a profession placed under great strain was picked up by prominent people involved in the organisation and provision of health care in Britain. The perception of a nursing profession unable to cope with the demands of caring for the sick and wounded was used as an argument to strengthen the position of the role of V.A.D. nurses. On 14 December 14 1914, Viscount Knutsford, chairman of The London Hospital (and also an opponent of the state registration of nurses as well as a member of the Supply of Nurses Committee), wrote a letter to *The Times* which was then reprinted in the *Red Cross* in January 1915.[75] The letter, 'Untrained Nurses', was in response to the National Council of Trained Nurses who had written to the War Office to express their concern about the organisation of nursing care. Condescending and snide, Knustford took issue with

> some ladies who are pleased to call themselves amongst other titles 'The National Council of Trained Nurses of Britain and Ireland' [who] have I see 'unanimously' (it would be interesting to see how many ladies were present other than guests) 'expressed their disapproval of the present organisation of the sick and wounded…' — pretty sweeping! — and have sent this resolution to the Secretary of State for War….

Confronted with the official intervention of a formally constituted professional organisation, Knutsford responded with insults and a patronising misogyny. He was derogatory about the National Council of Trained Nurses, dismissing their right to exist as a democratic body, let alone have or express an opinion on the organisation of nursing during war. This analysis also questioned the validity of the Council with the suggestion that they were improperly organised and were merely 'some ladies' who used that title, as well others, for their

[75] Knutford, "Untrained Nurses," *The Times*, December 14, 1914, 9; *The Red Cross*, January, 1915, 16.

gatherings. He also stated that their claim was 'sweeping' and doubted the numbers of people involved in making the complaint. He went on to say, 'when one asks for evidence of the scapegoat's [the untrained nurse] misdeeds it generally is mere hearsay.' A confirmed anti-registrationist, Knutsford felt that the volunteers were being made scapegoats for the complaints of the nursing profession and that without evidence there really was no support for this claim. He asked 'Why complain? These women are giving their services free at a time of national emergency, and they are all working under trained supervision.'[76]

Later that year, in April 1915, the *Red Cross* again reprinted something Knutsford had written in the national press. This time it was the *Daily Telegraph* in which he said:

> We foresaw the demand that would take place … There can be no doubt that the idea of nursing soldiers only by fully-trained nurses must be abandoned. Civilians in time of peace have never been so nursed. In all voluntary hospitals untrained probationers are always to be found working under trained nurses … That, of course does not mean that patients are not properly nursed, because all untrained nurses are under trained supervision … The matter is one of such urgency that we must do what is practicable. I would urge all hospital authorities to set to work at once in order to increase the nursing strength of the nation.[77]

For Knutsford, the argument appeared to be a simple one: hospitals could not cope with the demands the war had placed upon them and should be grateful for the assistance given to them by the Voluntary Aid Detachment. That this need for volunteers should have occurred should not have come as a surprise, and he called for a greater increase in the capacity of hospitals to provide nursing care. It is interesting that Knutsford questioned the argument that the casualties should only be nursed by fully trained nurses. He was at pains to point

[76] "The Nursing Question," *The Red Cross*, 16: BRCMA.
[77] "The Shortage of Nurses," *The Red Cross*, April, 1915, 89: BRCMA.

out that this simply didn't happen for civilians in peace time. In this context, he argued, provided the V.A.D. was supervised by trained nurses, he could foresee no problem in the situation. In fact, he felt that, in order to ensure that the sick and wounded were cared for, the country had been left with no option. For Knutsford, this was a very practical problem and one that did not vary a great deal from the organisation of peacetime nursing.

For trained nurses, by contrast, the urgency of wartime merely served to exacerbate and intensify existing tensions around their professional status and authority. The *Red Cross*, by reprinting an argument made in the national press, reinforced the belief amongst its members that not only did they have the support of some very influential people, but that these same people considered the professional nurses to be unjust in their attitude and behaviour towards the volunteers. Such journalism made a significant contribution to the tensions between the V.A.D.s and qualified nurses. The V.A.D.s were assured by such articles that theirs was the more worthy and patriotic service, and consequently they did not have to pay any heed to their professional superiors who were undermining their own cause by complaining and unpatriotic behaviour.

In the same month, the British Red Cross recognised the strain placed on the nurses and wrote in the *Red Cross* journal:

> there is to be suitable work for all able bodied women. The War Office cannot get as many trained nurses as it wants … Every trained nurse will now be employed … on the cases for which she alone is most suitable. And for the lesser cases, the half or quarter trained, whatever you please to call them will be called in.[78]

The comment underplayed the relevance of the title given to those who would assist the trained staff but made some attempt at differentiating the level of care each would be able to offer by nature of their lesser training.

[78] "The V.A.D and the War," *The Red Cross*, April, 1915, 83: BRCMA.

Dame Katherine Furse

The unease around the attitude and behaviour of the V.A.D.s, and the subsequent tensions tracked through the pages of the *Red Cross* and *BJN* coalesced in the intervention of Dame Katharine Furse in public debate about the wartime role of the V.A.D. and its implications for nursing as a profession and the Red Cross as an Organisation. Furse, as Commandant-in-Chief of the Women's V.A.D., was an extremely significant figure in the organisation. Appointed in 1916, after a career as a hospital nurse, she used her influential position in an attempt to impose discipline and control on the members through personal appeals in the *Red Cross* and through a series of personally signed, official documents and policy directives.[79] Furse's contribution to the debate allows us to focus in more depth on the issues surrounding the role of the V.A.D. and examine the revealing moment in which the tensions that have been explored came to a head within the organisation.

On entering the Voluntary Aid Detachment, all V.A.D. nurses were given a paper (untitled), written by Katharine Furse, which they were told was confidential 'and to be kept by each member in her pocket book.'[80] Here Furse exhorted volunteers to: 'remember that the honour of the V.A.D. Organisation depends on your individual conduct.' The volunteer was instructed to 'maintain the most courteous relations with those whom you are helping in this great struggle.' Furse went on to remind each of the members that 'rules and regulations are necessary in whatever formation you join', and that she should 'comply with them without grumble or criticism.' Furse used militaristic language to set out the behaviour and characteristics she expected to see in the V.A.D. nurses. They were exhorted to show 'courage,' 'energy,' 'discipline,' and 'perfect steadiness of character,' and reminded

79 V. L. Matthews *"Furse [née Symonds], Dame Katharine,"* Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, https://www-oxforddnb-com.ezproxyd.bham.ac.uk/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-33300?rskey=POCl0G&result=1, accessed July 18, 2019.
80 Katharine Furse, no. 14516: BRCMA, ACC 1237/17.

ominously ‘that sacrifices may be asked of you.’ All of the qualities Furse hoped would be apparent in the V.A.D.s were those that would also have been attributed to the British Tommy. As well as acting as a code of conduct, Furse’s directive was thus also a powerful ‘call to arms’. Furse concluded: ‘VAD’s would come out of the war triumphant’ if they complied with her wishes. Reaching again for the language of war, she touched on the hope for victory in conflict. That Furse suggested that the mottoes of the V.A.D.s should be ‘Willing to do anything’ and ‘The People gave gladly’ underscored the centrality of service and sacrifice to the organisation’s character and public image.[81]

As this suggests, Furse used a form of rhetoric associated with duty to inspire loyalty to the organisation but also carefully acknowledged the patriotic nature of the volunteers when she stated that ‘you are giving because your Country needs your help.’ Duty was at the heart of this letter, even in reminding volunteers that there would be rules and regulations which were necessary, and which should be accepted. It was significant that the rubric was to be treated as confidential and therefore not to be disclosed to the trained nurses. By seeking confidentiality for these guidelines, Furse wanted it to appear as if the V.A.D.s were able to accept their subordinate status with good grace and without the need for intervention from their commanding officers in the British Red Cross. The paper, and subsequently, their display of deference, respect, and compliance shown by the volunteers towards the trained nurses would become their little secret. In that way, the V.A.D.s would know that this was merely an act, yet by reinforcing the sense of patriotic service, one performed for King and Country.

While Furse usually deployed the rhetoric of patriotic citizenship and heroic national service in her address to V.A.D. members, over the course of the war she became increasingly troubled by the VADs’ continued lack of compliance with her expectations. As

[81] Katharine Furse, no. 14516: BRCMA, ACC 1237/17.

these concerns came to a head, in May 1916, she was prompted to write *An Open Letter to V.A.D. Officers and Members* in the *Red Cross*.[82] The letter began: 'This is not going to be a nice letter, not conciliatory, nor complimentary … it has nothing in its favour except a frank, kindly-meant wish to see the right spirit in our V.A.D. Officers and Members.' Furse addressed her letter to the 'few who seem to think that the real reason of this horrible war is to provide wounded to be nursed by V.A.Ds.' This was a very emotive statement indeed and a significant departure from the confidential nature of the previous paper and the strident public defence of V.A.D.s in the pages of the *Red Cross*. Furse questioned the motives of those volunteers who appeared opportunist, self-serving, and frivolous in their attitude to nursing the sick and wounded. She wished them to change their attitude; the war, she seemed to be saying, was not there to provide entertainment and distraction.

Furse's public letter worked in clear contrast to the frequently self-congratulatory tone of the *Red Cross*. The open nature of the criticism and the juxtaposition with the tone of the *Red Cross* was a remarkably revealing moment. As well as drawing attention to faults emerging within the Red Cross, it underscored Furse's frustration, as a senior officer in the organisation, with the attitude and conduct of some of the V.A.D.s. While it is unclear what exactly had prompted this high profile public intervention, there were clearly significant problems with the behaviour and conduct of serving V.A.D.s that Furse wanted to address, and an attitude that, in her analysis, required redress and remedy. What Furse wrote provides us with a very clear sense of the frictions that existed and undermined the dominant notion of the heroic and patriotic volunteer nurse.

The public nature of Furse's appeal to her members to conform to the organisations published standards of good conduct continued throughout the second half of the conflict. In March 1917, the Commandant returned to these themes in a pamphlet entitled *An Appeal*

[82] Katharine Furse, "An Open Letter to V.A.D. Officers and Members," *Red Cross*, May, 1916, 57: BRCMA.

to V.A.D. Officers and Members.[83] Picking up and elaborating themes from her public letter, Furse included 'a word of advice' to serving volunteers:

> Do everything in your power to win Respect for our Uniform. Never behave in such a way as may bring discredit on us even though you yourself escape notice, because your name may not be known. Taking advantage of that would be merely cowardly and selfish. Wear your uniform and bring honour to it and be proud to belong to the V.A.D.s for the V.A.D.s have paved the way for the further use of women with the Army and we must devote our whole energy to keeping the lead and setting a good example to all those who follow.[84]

The appeal was an attempt to bridge the gap between public behaviour and professionalism. The strong language of cowardice and selfishness was also important as this resonated with a society which would be used to hearing such language in relation to the forces serving on the front line. To discredit the organisation, Furse implied, would bring shame on the whole group as well as the individual responsible.

This appeal to members not to do anything that would damage the reputation of the Voluntary Aid Detachment was important because it showed that Furse, as Commandant-in-Chief, continued to try and improve relationships between her members and the professional nurses for the duration of the war. It also acknowledged once more that there was a problem with the manner in which many of the V.A.D.s had been conducting themselves and implicitly accepted wider criticisms of their behaviour. Any improvement in personal relationships would have a positive impact on public behaviour, and there was a clear sense that the social background of the volunteers challenged both the working relationships and the public appearance of professionalism of the V.A.D. In this statement,

[83] The British Red Cross Society, Appeal to V.A.D. Officers and Members, March 3, 1917: BRCMA, RCB 2/8/5/36.
[84] *Ibid*.

the language used had some resonance with the military rhetoric that was being used at that time, drawing parallels between the uniform worn by the V.A.D. and the fighting Tommy. Furse emphasised the importance of this by using capital letters for the words 'Respect' and 'Uniform.' The language of patriotic duty and citizenship used here sought to reconcile the tensions between the needs of the individual and the needs of the organisation. The appeal was aimed at those who would have been used to using their name to gain attention and privilege in society. Furse pointed out that it was the uniform that was important — and therefore, by implication, the organisation. For volunteers to forget that, and use their name to gain attention and accolade, was both selfish and cowardly. To draw attention to cowardice showed that Furse intended to convey a powerful and emotive point. At a time of total war, cowardice was a shameful act. The message was clear: being part of the Voluntary Aid Detachment was an honour and the objective was service, patriotism, and duty. This short paragraph also appealed to the women to consider the important role they are playing in advancing the rights of their gender in any future role in the army and wider post-war society. Furse was concerned with the corporate reputation of the V.A.D. which had the potential to be damaged by the behaviour of individuals who demonstrated no loyalty to the organisation and, because of their class and privileged position in society, were only interested in themselves. She also saw how this could undermine any potential for women to be accepted as equal participants in public life in future if the women did not act in a way that credited the British Red Cross.

Building on and seeking to address Furse's growing sense of frustration and her public appeals for improvement, in April 1917 only a month later, an updated version of her pamphlet *Instructions to VAD Members and Officers Service in Hospitals* was issued. The pamphlet once again talked about the attitude expected from the V.A.D. nurses in terms of any tasks they were asked to perform and the way in which they should take orders from

their superiors. V.A.D. nurses were told to 'perform all duties cheerfully and thoroughly … Spare no trouble to fit yourself for the duties you may be called upon to perform; be patient, willing and attentive when being instructed … You are bound to obey all orders given by a superior.'[85] The guidance for the expected behaviour became stronger and more public as the war progressed. Implicit in this gradual change was a sense that many V.A.D.s were not complying with requests set out by Furse and the Red Cross Society. Despite this, however, support for the V.A.D. did not wane amongst members of British society or in the media, with most of the criticism and negative language reserved for trained nurses.

As this suggests, the Red Cross did not cease in instructing its members how to behave and, notably in Furse's comment quoted above, how to take orders. It was clearly important to them that the V.A.D. members accepted any duties which they were asked to carry out without question. Documents such as the one written by Furse suggest that, at least in private, the organisation took very seriously the concerns of the nursing staff and felt that V.A.D. nurses should accept a more subservient role within the hospitals. As complaints about the treatment of V.A.D.s by the trained nurses were rife, this pamphlet went on to instruct members in the etiquette required around this potentially damaging area. They were told that 'a good V.A.D. member will always avoid trivial complaints either against a comrade or superior.'[86] Complaining was considered to have little value or importance and would lead to the V.A.D. being considered unworthy of her role. In a remarkable intervention in the ongoing debates in the British press, the Red Cross sought to tackle the more serious issue of complaints appearing in the British media and entering the public domain. The language became stronger and more strident: 'It is against all Military Discipline to write letters of complaint to the Press.' The Red Cross took

[85] Katharine Furse, Instructions to VAD Members and Officers Service in Hospitals, April, 1917: BRCMA, RCB 2/8/5/31.
[86] *Ibid*.

seriously the morale of all people involved in providing care for the sick and wounded soldiers and gave the members notice that they should 'show courtesy and consideration to others on all occasions, and avoid all talk and gossip which might lead to unhappiness in another Member of the Staff with whom you are working.' It was striking that at no point in this instruction booklet did the Red Cross acknowledge that the trained nurses may be responsible for poor treatment of the V.A.D. members. Instead, the organisation sought to invoke a sense of responsibility amongst V.A.D. members around their position in the hierarchy and the importance of respect towards their professional superiors. The Red Cross felt that members needed to be reminded of this and be told that they were required to take orders from superiors without objecting. Such unambiguous instructions to the V.A.D. nurses clearly pointed out that they were to work as probationers and were answerable to the hospital Matron, and provided a list of the duties they are expected to perform.

That the Red Cross continued to issue rules and regulations around duties and behaviour throughout the war — and that these regulations became increasingly strident and forceful — indicated that many V.A.D.s still felt that they were being asked to carry out tasks that were beneath them. Despite a plethora of instruction booklets containing such rules and regulations as well as the terms and conditions of their service, it seemed as if the V.A.D. nurse had either not read any of these, or simply ignored them completely. Despite the letters and articles that filled the pages of the *Red Cross*, as an organisation, the Red Cross were in agreement with the qualified nurses; they also felt that the volunteers should work as probationers and should be willing to carry out any task asked of them in order to ensure the smooth running of the wards. There was a significant shift during the course of the War in the strength of the language used in the terms of service issued to V.A.D. members which demonstrated a more active attempt on the part of the British Red Cross to impose discipline

on its members. In 1916, it was stated that volunteers 'must be willing to carry out whatever duties are assigned to them.'[87] By 1917, in contrast and in response to growing unease over the conduct of many V.A.D.s, the instruction was much more explicit. It now read that 'no V.A.D member should question what work she does.'[88]

Throughout the opening phase of the war, Katharine Furse did not contribute to the wave of self-congratulation that characterised the *Red Cross* journal. She was concerned that the accolades received by the V.A.D.s would distract them away from the real reason they were volunteering — to care for the sick and wounded — and towards personal gain and reputation. Furse held fast to her belief that it was necessary for the V.A.D. nurses to gain recognition for their work by adhering strictly to the military rules and regulations and showing their willingness to serve and take orders. Frequent recourse to military style language established distinctions and parallels between their service and that of the troops. In an article entitled 'Duty and Discipline', Furse wrote: 'much praise has been showered on the "Wonderful Women Who are Winning the War," — but is it deserved? … are we really doing our bit?' The answer, clearly, was not quite: Furse felt that the women were letting themselves down by their attitude and behaviour and drew some unfavourable comparisons between them and the sacrifice displayed by male servicemen. She said,

> men go where they are ordered to go and do what they are ordered to do. If a man deserts he is shot. If he refuses to obey an order he is punished. Women do what they are told to do or they refuse according to what they themselves decide is right.

For Furse, the fact that the women were not fully adopting the respect to military authority and discipline undermined the praise they had received. She was shocked by the

87 Katharine Furse, Instructions to VAD Members and Officers Service in Hospitals, April, 1916: BRCMA, RCB 2/8/5/30.

88 Katharine Furse, Instructions to VAD Members and Officers Service in Hospitals, April, 1917: BRCMA, RCB 2/8/5/31.

fact that the women were deciding what they would and would not do, and ignoring the protocols of military discipline and deference. She concluded:

> women have been pampered and petted and now they are looked on as heroines … the whole position is ridiculous. There are unlimited spheres for women in this war but they have not been allowed to take their full share even yet, and the chief reason is because they are difficult to control.[89]

Furse did not subscribe to the popular belief that the V.A.D. nurse was a selfless heroine. She was scornful of their privileged position in society which made it difficult for them to accept authority and a subordinate position in a military hierarchy. From the Commandant of the Red Cross, this was a remarkable dissenting challenge to what the *Red Cross* journal characterised as a process through which 'V.A.D members are rapidly earning golden opinions from those set in authority over them.'[90]

As this suggests, the confusion and ineffective governance of volunteers increasingly frustrated and angered Furse over the course of the war. These frustrations came to a head when, apparently discouraged by her inability to impose any change and exert discipline over the V.A.D.s and have any influence over the Red Cross Society as an organisation, Furse resigned from her post as Commandant-in-Chief in November 1917. She wrote to *The Times* to publicly explain her reasons.[91] She had, she said 'failed to receive the support necessary to ensure the proper well-being and control of all VAD members.' Furse acknowledged that some of the reforms she had suggested 'tending to better conditions and better discipline' had been introduced. Still, she was frustrated at the pace and scale of change, nothing that 'others remained urgently necessary.' Furse did not blame the V.A.D. itself, and referred to it as 'this splendid women's organisation.' Instead, she felt the fault

89 Katharine Furse, "Duty and Discipline," *Red Cross*, October, 1916, 127.
90 "V.A.D Notes and News," *Red Cross*, April, 1916, 42.
91 Katharine Furse, "VAD Organization," *The Times*, November 15, 1917, 11.

lay with a committee 'consisting mainly of men' who had the authority over the V.A.D.s but no understanding of 'women's work and conditions.' In a plea resonant of that of the trained nurses for self-governance, Furse commented that 'only lately have we succeeded in getting women's representation on this committee, but only one of these ladies is a V.A.D. officer.' The structure of the committee, in Furse's opinion, did not cater for the needs of its members. She explicitly made this point in reference to the manner in which so many V.A.D.s had signed up for service. 'The V.A.D.s' she wrote, 'have proudly answered their country's call for heroism, sacrifice and devotion and have given gladly without stint. Surely they should be allowed to look to their officers to safeguard their welfare and maintain their *esprit de corps?*' Furse praised the V.A.D.s and ensured that its nursing members and the general public were made aware that, despite her previous public criticisms of them, the problem lay with the organisation and management of the British Red Cross rather than the volunteers themselves.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that the tensions which existed between the trained nurses and the Voluntary Aid Detachment nurses were not merely a matter of class differences. It was clear from the articles and letters published in the *Red Cross* that volunteers were not always welcomed by the nursing staff. As this chapter has shown, however, the precise role and function of the V.A.D. in wartime was never clearly defined. At its inception, the British Red Cross made attempts to control the recruitment and training of its volunteers. Whilst this was manageable in a country preparing for conflict, the reality of war and the ensuing pressure on the nursing profession meant that rules and regulations needed to be relaxed in favour of crisis management. The strained relations which the V.A.D.s were part of were complex and were to be found in issues of hierarchy which have their origins in structures

of class, gender, patriotism, and professionalism. The volunteer nurses and the qualified nurses found themselves embroiled in a complicated relationship with difficulties that had existed before the war. Despite the efforts of the British Red Cross Society and Dame Katharine Furse to govern the behaviour of its members, the *Red Cross* journal played a large part in reinforcing the self-confidence and superior attitude of the V.A.D. nurses. The journal bolstered the underlying attitude amongst the volunteers that they were more patriotic in their service than the fully trained nurses and that negativity expressed by the professionals was to be ignored. This rhetoric had a bearing on the personal, working relationships between the two groups of women and the overall professional attitude of the Voluntary Aid Detachment nurses.

Chapter 3

Authority and Everyday Resistance in Dorothy Robinson's Letters

Introduction

This chapter explores the experiences of young, upper middle-class women serving as Voluntary Aid Detachment (V.A.D.) nurses during the First World War through the letters of one such woman, Dorothy Margaret Robinson.[1] Written to her mother and father between 1914 and 1919, and now held in the archives of the British Red Cross, these letters provide insight into the social and professional demands of life as a V.A.D. Dorothy's letters allow us to explore the conflict between her new, subordinate status within the nursing hierarchy and what she perceived as the superior social status derived from class and familial military connections. Dorothy's sense of her privileged status informed all her professional and social relationships as a V.A.D. and shaped the way she understood and made sense of her wartime experience. The correspondence showed that she was affronted when her status was challenged in any way, and the sense of privilege and entitlement in which she communicated her response to serving as a V.A.D. nurse. As seen through a close reading of her letters, Dorothy engaged in exactly the kinds of behaviour, (gossip, undermining authority and questioning the orders of her professional superiors,) which so exercised Katharine Furse and others involved in the organisation of the V.A.D. to issue the regulations and entreaties discussed in Chapter 2.

Building on the work of Michael Roper and others, I explore how Dorothy used her letters as a space in which to negotiate her experience as a V.A.D. and the tensions she encountered

[1] Letters of Miss Dorothy M. Robinson, V.A.D. nurse. Letters and postcards to and from family members, 1914–1919: British Red Cross Museum and Archives, London (hereafter BRCMA), reference number 330.

as part of an unfamiliar hierarchical system.17/04/2020 14:14:0017/04/2020 14:14:00[2] The correspondence allowed Dorothy to reflect, in private and in conversation with her family, on her experiences as a V.A.D. nurse. The chapter that follows analyses the letters along four interrelated and overlapping themes: first, Dorothy Robinson's reaction to authority in an unfamiliar subordinate position; second, the ways in which her judgement of the suitability of other V.A.D.s was shaped by assumptions about their social and ethnic background; third, her affront at being asked to undertake tasks deemed menial and inappropriate; and fourth, the lack of the official recognition she thought was her due because of her work in a series of military hospitals. Ranging across these themes, and full of striking expressions of anger and frustration, Dorothy's lengthy and detailed letters displayed a sense of entitlement borne out of her privileged upbringing and her willingness to manipulate her parents and their influence to improve her position within the hierarchy. Situated within the wider context of the wartime tensions between trained nurses and volunteers, Dorothy's experiences and correspondence allow us to understand how many young women from the upper middle classes negotiated their unfamiliar subordinate status within a nursing hierarchy organised around professional values rather than social class.

Dorothy's socially privileged background meant she was representative of a substantial number of V.A.D.s during the Great War. This, and her keen awareness of the military careers of her father and grandfather, make her wartime experiences and correspondence a useful case study through which to explore how women like Dorothy understood and managed their public roles and personal relationships during the war. Dorothy was born on

[2] Michael Roper, "Splitting in Unsent Letters: Writing as a Social Practice and a Psychological Activity," *Social History* 26, no. 3 (October 2017): 318–39; Michael Roper, *The Secret Battle: Emotional Survival in the Great War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010); Michael Roper, "The Unconscious Work of History," *Cultural and Social Hisory* 11, no. 2 (June 1, 2014): 169–93; Matt Houlbrook, "'A Pin to See the Peepshow': Culture, Fiction and Selfhood in Edith Thompson's Letters, 1921–1922," *Past & Present*, no. 207 (May 2010): 215–49; Carol Acton, "Writing and Waiting: The First World War Correspondence between Vera Brittain and Roland Leighton," *Gender & History* 11, no. 1 (April 1999): 54–83.

20 October 1895, the second of three children to Major General Sir Charles Walker Robinson and Margaret Frances Alison.[3] Dorothy's father and mother were also from distinguished military families: her father was son of Sir John Beverley Robinson, and her mother was daughter of General Sir Archibald Alison.[4] The 1901 census records Dorothy living in Beverley House, Mitcham in Surrey with her mother; father; older sister, Joan; younger brother, Charles; and four servants — a domestic nurse, cook, parlour maid, and nursery maid.[5] This was precisely the kind of family — aristocratic, wealthy, and with several generations of high-ranking military and imperial service — from which the British Red Cross recruited many of its voluntary nursing members. Dorothy and her sister, then, might be seen as typical of the young women who joined Voluntary Aid Detachments during the war.[6] As well as her enhanced social position, as the daughter of a Major General, Dorothy's experience and expectations of high military rank had implications for her attitude towards her service in military hospitals. As the discussion below suggests, moreover, Dorothy's attitude towards the menial household work she was asked to undertake as a V.A.D. was shaped by her own experience of domestic service — living in a household with four domestic servants.[7] The analysis of Dorothy's letters that follows thus shows how Dorothy's doubled expectations of privilege continued when she became a serving V.A.D. Characterised by a keen sense of social class and military rank, Dorothy's letters to her family demonstrate her ongoing loyalty to a particular version of social order and hierarchy,

3 'Major General Sir Charles Walker Robinson fought in the Indian Mutiny in 1858. He fought in the Ashanti War between 1873 and 1874, where he was mentioned in despatches. He fought in the First Boer War in 1879, where he was mentioned in despatches. He gained the rank of Major-General in the Rifle Brigade.' The Peerage, *"Maj.-Gen. Sir Charles Walker Robinson,"* http://thepeerage.com/p56080.htm#i560795, accessed May 20, 2017,

4 Lloyd, E. *"Alison, Sir Archibald, second baronet (1826–1907), army officer,"* Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, http://www.oxforddnb.com, accessed May 20, 2017.

5 Census Returns of England and Wales 1901, Class: RG13; Piece: 655; Folio: 103; Pages: 204–5, https://www.ancestry.co.uk/interactive/7814/SRYRG13_654_656, accessed May 20, 2017.

6 Anne Summers, *Angels and Citizens: British Women as Military Nurses, 1854–1914* (London, New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1988), 277–8.

7 Census Returns of England and Wales 1901, Class: RG13; Piece: 655; Folio: 103; Pages: 204–5, https://www.ancestry.co.uk/interactive/7814/SRYRG13_654_656, accessed March 31, 2017.

and unease when it was subverted or disrupted. Dorothy struggled to fit into the nursing hierarchy and inhabit a subordinate position within it. Her opinion of her own position of entitled privilege only added to her sense of confusion at her newly acquired lowly status.

Volunteering and Emotional Conscription

Despite already being a member of the Voluntary Aid Detachment, Dorothy did not volunteer to serve in military hospitals the moment war broke out. A letter she received from the Committee of the Chelsea division of the British Red Cross, her local division, in April 1915 expressed their disappointment 'that so few of their V.A.D. members have responded to the appeal of the War Office for volunteers to assist in Military Hospitals.' The letter continued, 'we shall be glad if you will again consider whether or not you will volunteer.' The implication was that this was not the first time Dorothy — or, at least, women in a similar position in the organisation — had been asked to volunteer to work in a military hospital: the typed letter began with the handwritten words 'Dear Miss Dorothy Robinson,' before setting out an insistent, impassioned, personal appeal to each member who had not signed up to volunteer as nurses in military hospitals.[8]

As evidence of both Dorothy's individual reluctance to serve in a military hospital and (through its nature as a standardised pro forma piece of correspondence) the wider difficulties of mobilising volunteers, the tone and nature of this letter contrasted sharply with what was being reported by the *Red Cross* journal in this period. In April 1915, exactly the same time that Dorothy received this letter, 'The V.A.D. and the War' compared the struggle of the British Red Cross to cope with the vast numbers of women eager to volunteer for military service (and the chaos that ensued) as 'shoals of fish trying to enter a main stream

[8] Committee of the Chelsea Division of the British Red Cross, letter to Dorothy Robinson, April 7, 1915: BRCMA, 330.

through a small culvert.'[9] Set against the association of enthusiastic, patriotic volunteering among British women, Dorothy appeared atypical and out of step with the national mood. In public, at least, the *Red Cross* asserted that there was to be 'suitable work for all able bodied volunteers … And so we may, with some confidence, express the hope that everyone will now buckle to with the single desire to be of some use … there is now ample room for all willing and sensible helpers.'[10] In private, by contrast, despite the impression of being overwhelmed by volunteers, the organisation desperately wanted more of its members to serve.

The Red Cross's direct appeal to Dorothy Robinson echoed themes that characterised the voluntary ethic of the rush to colours — those young men who came forward to serve at the outbreak of war, and with whose service we are more familiar through the work of historians such as Catriona Pennell, Adrian Gregory and Gerard J. DeGroot.[11] Dorothy was confronted with the language of patriotic citizenship and duty, reworked in the form of a personalised addressed letter:

> We fully appreciate that this involves some sacrifice, but this is probably the most serious war in which this country has ever been engaged and demands sacrifices on the part of us all. We would point out that hundreds of thousands of our men have given up their employments and are running the risk, not only of death but of being blinded or maimed for life. They are doing this to save the women and children of the country from the terrors of war … we shall be much obliged if you will inform

[9] "The V.A.D and the War," *Red Cross The Official Journal of the British Red Cross Society*, April, 1915, 83: BRCMA.
[10] *Ibid*.
[11] Gerard J. De Groot, *Blighty: British Society in the Era of the Great War* (London, New York: Longman, 1996), 42–53; Adrian Gregory, *The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 95–100; Catriona Pennell, *A Kingdom United: Popular Responses to the Outbreak of the First World War in Britain and Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

> Mrs. Allan (Hon. Sec.) at a very early date whether or not you will volunteer and if not will you kindly give your reasons.[12]

This long and emotive paragraph juxtaposed the safety and comfort of women like Dorothy with the risk to life and limb taken on by male volunteers giving up all to protect 'women and children' and an ideal of domestic life. In doing so, the letter communicated a change in the conceptual approach to volunteering.[13] With its direct reference to sacrifice — both of the nation and, most importantly, the men serving overseas — the appeal moved from an emphasis on volunteering that incorporated an element of free-will and personal desire to that of essential sacrificial service. The entreaty became a kind of emotional subscription which anticipated the rhetoric and practical shift from voluntary service to conscription seen in the military service over the course of 1915 and 1916. Dorothy was asked to inform the secretary whether or not she would volunteer, but most importantly, if not, she would have to explain her reasons. This request to explain the reasons for not volunteering made it almost impossible for Dorothy, and women like her, to reject the notion of service in a military hospital.

Preserved in the archives of the British Red Cross, the letter included the terms of service associated with working as a V.A.D. in wartime. The document noted that it was extremely likely that volunteers from Chelsea would be employed 'in military hospitals in the immediate neighbourhood,' and that 'this fairly may be made a condition of volunteering.' The letter continued to say that some members 'can be profitably employed in private hospitals for semi convalescent cases.'[14] This last comment was underlined in pencil, most likely by Dorothy, which signified how important it was to her that she would be able to

[12] Committee of the Chelsea Division of the British Red Cross, letter to Dorothy Robinson, April 7, 1915: BRCMA, 330.
[13] Ilana R. Bet-El, *Conscripts: Forgotten Men of the Great War* (Gloucestershire. The History Press. 2009), 27, 182, 184, 201.
[14] Committee of the Chelsea Division of the British Red Cross, letter to Dorothy Robinson, April 7, 1915: BRCMA, 330.

work in a local hospital or avoid the most challenging nursing tasks if she volunteered. The assurances made by the Chelsea Branch meant that Dorothy would have believed she would have some control over her circumstances and terms of service when she volunteered. Faced with the strong rhetoric of sacrifice and emotional pressure, Dorothy responded to the appeal she received in April 1915 and became a volunteer in military hospitals, where she served up until October 1919.[15] Curiously, perhaps, despite her initial reluctance to serve, the direct emotional appeal from the Red Cross, and having preserved the letter in her personal papers, Dorothy's letters made no reference to her final decision to volunteer to work in a military hospital.

Dorothy Robinson's War Service

Sparing in its detail, Dorothy's Red Cross Service Record contains only two entries of service: on 26 August 1916, she began work at the 1st Southern General Hospital in Birmingham, leaving there on 25 March 1918 to move to the Royal Marine Infirmary in Deal. As far as we can tell, Dorothy remained in Deal until she was discharged on 2 May 1919.[16] Because of the frustratingly limited information included in the Red Cross service records of V.A.D. nurses, we do not know what Dorothy was doing during 1914. Throughout 1915, however, she wrote to her family from several different addresses: all of these letters contained references to her work as a volunteer at The Prince of Wales Hospital in Tottenham in February 1915 and, after 4 March 1915, at an auxiliary hospital in South View, Bexhill-on-Sea. By December 1915, the letters suggest Dorothy had moved to Waverley Abbey Military Hospital, one of the many large civilian homes that were turned over to the military for use as hospital during the war. Waverley Abbey was the home of Major Rupert

[15] Dorothy Margaret Robinson Service Record. War Time Volunteers Personnel Records, https://vad.redcross.org.uk/Card?fname=Dorothy+&sname=Robinson&id=177553, accessed April 16, 2017.
[16] *Ibid*.

Anderson: his wife, Amy, became the Commandant of the Voluntary Aid Detachment there, and the new hospital provided care for up to sixty casualties at a time.[17] By July 1916, Dorothy's letters showed that she was volunteering in the Metropolitan Hospital in London;[18] she remained there until she moved to the First Southern General Hospital in August 1916.

These documents represent Dorothy's transition into an unfamiliar world — in which she had a record, service number and rank, and a clear set of responsibilities within a professional and military hierarchy. Most of Dorothy's war service was spent at the First Southern General Hospital in Birmingham. The hospital was formed as part of a scheme by the British Red Cross in 1909 to find and equip buildings that could be mobilised as hospitals within one week in the event of an invasion of the British Isles. A suitable site was the new university building in Edgbaston which could hold around 520 beds. When the order to mobilise was given on 4 August 4 1914, the building was equipped and ready to receive casualties within seven days. During the conflict, the severity of the crisis made it necessary for the hospital to expand to another site. By the end of 1917, the Southern General was a huge sprawling institution capable of accommodating 8,827 patients. The rapid expansion of the capacity of the hospital illustrates the severity of the crisis faced by the country and how under-prepared they were at the beginning of the war to cope with the influx of casualties and provide adequate medical and nursing care. To meet the needs of the wounded, there would have been a large staff. On mobilisation, there was a total of ninety-two staff belonging to the Territorial Force Nursing Service in the city. In May 1915, nurses and auxiliaries of the Voluntary Aid Detachments joined the staffs of the hospitals. By 1918,

[17] Gillian Devine, *Surrey in the Great War: A County Remembers*, https://www.surreyinthegreatwar.org.uk/story/waverley-abbey-hospital, accessed January 24, 2018.
[18] Dorothy Robinson, letters to her family from the Metropolitan Hospital London July 3, 1916 to July 29, 1916: BRCMA, 330.

there were 578 nursing staff.[19] As Dorothy moved from the smaller, personally run hospitals like Waverley Abbey to the First Southern General Hospital, she thus found herself as part of a large, complex, and anonymous hospital hierarchy.

The Problem of Authority

With such a hurried increase in the numbers of personnel serving at the hospital, it was crucial that the volunteers fitted into the organisation, accepting the rules and regulations as well as their place in the system. This created a challenge not only for the professional staff but also for volunteers such as Dorothy. Dorothy's letters cover the period in which she began work in military hospitals. As such, they provide evidence of the process of adjusting to life within a professional nursing hierarchy and the demands of caring for the wounded and sick. Like many women from similar backgrounds, Dorothy found her sense of social order challenged by the nursing hierarchy. Her correspondence suggests she clung onto familiar patterns of status and hierarchy, often in direct opposition to the professional authority she was now subject to. In the moments of privacy created by the process of writing a letter, at least, Dorothy dismissed the authority of the professional nurses when she had an opportunity to revert to a more familiar hierarchy of class. In March 1916, she wrote to her parents: 'the new night sister is horrid and has reported us all [V.A.D.s] for various imaginary offences, however Commandant said she knew it was the sister and not us so I think it is alright.'[20] V.A.D. Commandants were upper middle-class or titled women who 'through social influence were placed in positions of authority over trained nurses.'[21] Dorothy's comment illustrated a clear conflict between the hierarchies of class and

[19] Lt. Col., J.E.H. Sawyer, "History of the First Southern General Hospital," *The Southern Cross: The Journal of the 1st Southern General Hospital* 2, no. 13: 3–6: Cadbury Research Library, University of Birmingham, R31.S9; see also *"Great Hall in use as 1st Southern General Hospital, 1914-1918,"* https://www.flickr.com/photos/cadburyresearchlibrary/7254698454, accessed December 5, 2018.
[20] Dorothy Robinson, letter to her mother, March 11, 1916: BRCMA, 330.
[21] "Nursing and the War," *British Journal of Nursing*, February 17, 1917, 58.

professionalism. While the night Sister had charge of the ward and the V.A.D. nurses working on it, her complaint about the V.A.D.s was dismissed by the Commandant who, through her social status, was able to undermine the Sister's professional authority. Dorothy dismissed the night Sister's position to report the V.A.D.s as she said the offences for which they had been reported were 'imaginary'. That the Commandant also 'knew it was the sister' suggested the ongoing solidarities of class that bound V.A.D.s together during the war.[22]

As this suggests, becoming a volunteer in a military hospital meant that Dorothy had entered into an unfamiliar hierarchy constructed on professional ideals rather than social status. This conflicted with her own ingrained ideas of social superiority, power, and privilege. Dorothy had to negotiate the fact that her own sense of status now carried less weight than the professional rank, expertise, and knowledge of her nursing superiors. The letters suggest that it soon became clear that Dorothy had some contempt for the nursing hierarchy and the system in which she found herself. While she valued her work on the wards, she did not accept the need to carry out many of those duties which she felt were beneath her. In August 1916, for example, she complained in a letter to her mother that she had been asked to carry out some work in the linen room. She called it 'infuriating' that she and some of her fellow V.A.D.s were

> put into the linen room to darn and patch sheets etc. till we are wanted upstairs [on the wards] … it is very aggravating and I think insulting! Of course I know that darning and patching must be done and I am quite willing to take my turn at it if it is necessary.[23]

Dorothy was annoyed and upset that instead of working on the wards she had been 'put' in the linen room — ordered to undertake essential yet menial tasks which she clearly felt

[22] Dorothy Robinson, letter to her mother, March 11, 1916: BRCMA, 330.
[23] Dorothy Robinson, letter to her mother, August 28, 1916: BRCMA, 330.

was beneath her and understood as a personal affront. Despite the protestation that she was willing to do this if absolutely necessary, the letter suggested a very different response: the order to work in the linen room was an insult, and she did not hold back in expressing her anger at this. 'If I am kept long in the linen room,' Dorothy commented,

> I shall go to Matron and ask her when she thinks there will be a chance of my getting upstairs [to the wards]. I shall be very polite but have come to the conclusion that it is my best chance to let her see that I do not intend to be sat upon.[24]

Dorothy belonged to a class of women who would have not been used to taking orders or complying with the requests of others. She was unhappy with what she was being asked to do and therefore saw no problem with going to speak to Matron. In this instance, the professional hierarchy was superseded by Dorothy's social status. Dorothy understood the presence and implications of the professional hierarchy but did not like it. She stated in her letter that although she appreciated that certain roles needed to be fulfilled, she would 'politely' challenge her position and had no intention of accepting her assigned status.

As this example suggests, working in the linen room had a profound and striking impact on Dorothy's sense of self. Her complaint — both to her mother and the imagined conversation with her immediate superior — was not only about the practical duties she was expected to carry out. There was an emotional aspect to it that Dorothy found insulting. This was an affront to her understanding of her status which formed part of the narrative in Dorothy's life on social class and authority. The pointed observation that she did not 'intend to be sat on' indicated that she was carrying out these duties under duress and in response to what she considered to be an unreasonable request. There was something demeaning in working in the linen room that would not apply to working as a nurse on the wards. The desire to get 'upstairs' was thus for both a physical elevation as well as an advancement in

[24] Dorothy Robinson, letter to her mother, August 16, 1916: BRCMA, 330.

the professional hierarchy. Dorothy's sense of entitlement meant that she was not willing to accept the decisions of her professional superiors and tolerate her subordinate place in this hierarchy. In a later letter to her father, written on August 16,1916, she stated that she was finding it all 'very trying' and considered that it was 'not a fair test of one's suitability for the wards.' Once again, she reflected on her intention to write to the Commandant about it soon if the situation did not improve.[25] Dorothy felt that she was being treated unfairly. Ideas of suitability reflected much more than the professional attributes required to work on the wards: in challenging the demands of domestic labour, Dorothy attempted to find a higher place in the hierarchical system and carry out the more socially acceptable role of nurse.

The tone of Dorothy's letters changed and became more positive when she was working on the wards. During such periods, she was more tolerant of the nursing hierarchy and enjoyed her work. On 3 September 1916, for example, she wrote that she had been moved up onto a ward and stated that 'the sister seems quite nice and told me my work [what to do] … of course the same stringent rules apply, but that cannot be otherwise as it is the Matron's wish.'[26] In this instance, Dorothy had reconciled herself to 'being told' what to do, indeed could not see that things could be any other way, because she liked carrying out the work of a nurse and found it commensurate with her ideas of social status and volunteering. The objections came when it was a task or a role she felt was beneath her. When she was nursing, Dorothy wrote in excited detail about what was going on when she was on duty. On 25 September, for example, she said, 'I simply love the ward I am in now and I do hope I stay in it a long time … A small convoy of N. Zealanders (sic) came in last night, all stretcher cases and a large one is coming this evening for which we have to put up extra beds.'[27] Dorothy was at last nursing the wounded and expressed her desire to remain doing this for

[25] Dorothy Robinson, letter to her father, August 29, 1916: BRCMA, 330.
[26] Dorothy Robinson, letter to her mother, September 3, 1916: BRCMA, 330.
[27] Dorothy Robinson, letter to her mother and father, September 25, 1916: BRCMA, 330.

a long time. She welcomed the prospect of more casualties because this would mean, in her mind, more nursing. In early October, Dorothy's delight at being directly involved in nursing care on the wards was evident as she wrote 'that day was one of the most thrilling I have ever had. A patient got a violent haemorrhage and I had to rush down to theatre.'[28] Dorothy's excitement and sense of self-importance was noticeable in this short statement. She found the work stimulating and exhilarating and recalled the incident with a real sense of drama, placing herself at the centre of the narrative with the notion that *she* had to 'rush to theatre,' an action normally associated with surgeons and those directly involved in the patient's care.

Dorothy's feelings about her life and work as a V.A.D. in a military hospital in England became further evident in a letter written to her parents on 4 September 4 of 1916 in response to her sister Joan's desire to seek a transfer from serving as a V.A.D. in Egypt.[29] Dorothy reflected that 'unless she [Joan] is lucky I doubt her liking a military hospital in either England or France.'[30] Warming to this theme, she cautioned that 'a year's work abroad, no matter where counts for nil when you get to another hospital and you have to start off from the beginning again. Joan would not like that!' This phrase revealed the presence of the internal hierarchy Dorothy and her peers were working within. It was possible for V.A.D.s to rise through the ranks in hospitals, but that required time, hard work, and experience. Dorothy's opinion on what Joan would not like was an implicit expression of her own views. Stating that Joan would not like working in a military hospital in England (despite her experience in Egypt) seemed to be a way of Dorothy stating her own dislike of these institutions without having to take responsibility for her own feelings.

[28] Dorothy Robinson, letter to her mother, October 5, 1916: BRCMA, 330.
[29] Joan Robinson's service record holds the following details of her time as a V.A.D.: May-Aug 15 Mitchison Hospital for Officers Chelsea. Sept 1915-Sept 1917 No. 17 General Hospital Alexandria. Sept 1917-May1918 No. 70 General Hospital Cairo. June 1918-Apr 1919 University War Hospital Southampton. Apr 1919-July 1919 Queen's Hospital Sidcup, Joan Robinson Service Record. War Time Volunteers Personnel Records, https://vad.redcross.org.uk/Card?fname=Joan&sname=Robinson&id=177850&last=true, accessed August 20, 2018.
[30] Dorothy Robinson, letter to her parents, September 4, 1916: BRCMA, 330.

In this letter, Dorothy did not agree with the ways in which the nursing hierarchy was organised and transferred these feelings onto her sister. It was also possible that, if Joan came to serve in England, her previous experience on the front in Egypt would be taken into consideration and that she would occupy a more senior position than her sister. Dorothy went on to voice her opinion of the work on the wards and wrote, 'I do not think a rush brings more responsible [emphasis in original] work. If there are more patients it means more dressings certainly, but it also means more meals and more cleaning, and it is merely harder [emphasis in original] work but not different [emphasis in original] work.' As well as trying to deter her sister from leaving Egypt, Dorothy was implicitly working through her own dissatisfaction with the work she was sometimes asked to carry out. The previous day, awaiting a convoy of new patients, Dorothy was excited about the possibility of more 'responsible' work. The reality, however, was very different: more patients simply meant more of the mundane work which Dorothy resented. Nursing duties (in the form of dressings) were what she valued most of all because she considered them 'responsible.' In carrying out dressings, she felt like she was doing something of value, and which fitted with the heroic, selfless image of a nurse, whereas serving meals and cleaning (jobs typically associated with the lower, servant class) were merely hard work. In order to emphasise her attitude towards the work in this instance, Dorothy underlined the words 'responsible' and 'harder.' The choice of words emphasised in this manner divulged something about Dorothy's own attitude towards the work. She considered cleaning and serving meals 'hard' work and unrewarding. She craved the more 'responsible' and therefore more professionally valued work of actual nursing in the form of doing dressings.[31]

As this suggests, if social status was extremely important to Dorothy so too was her developing understanding of professional status in a military hospital. When she achieved

[31] *Ibid.*

what she considered a position of seniority within the nursing hierarchy, she was clearly very happy and her letters were more optimistic and full of detail of her duties. In November 1916, after she had been working on the same surgical ward for a couple of months, she wrote:

> I am enjoying myself enormously as Senior Pro … It is intensely amusing to find myself looked on as an authority on surgical matters … sister is simply ripping and is teaching me an awful lot. There are some quite interesting cases in the ward and she explains them all to me and lets me do quite a lot myself. I shall hate going into another ward, particularly as you usually have to start at the bottom again.[32]

The tone of Dorothy's letter and the fact that she was receiving some teaching from the ward Sister suggested a sense of finally advancing within a professional hierarchy. She had achieved the status as a 'Senior Pro' and was developing her knowledge of nursing. Dorothy now considered herself 'Senior' and enjoyed the fact that this position was also reflected in the attitude of others towards her. Even though she declared that she was 'amused' by this response, she noted that she was now 'an authority.' She realised that this position of seniority was precarious however, in noting how she would 'hate' moving to another ward; Dorothy saw herself as having achieved a somewhat higher status by the acquisition of knowledge and skills and did not want to jeopardise this by moving to another ward. Despite that, as she sought to make professional bonds with the trained nurses and find her place within the nursing hierarchy, Dorothy could not free herself from a view of the world shaped by her own lifelong dependence on the superior status bestowed on her by her social class.

For Dorothy, then, there was a split between functional authority held by the nursing staff in a professional setting and the personal authority she believed she possessed which existed by dint of her class and status in society. As an upper middle-class girl from a well-

[32] Dorothy Robinson, letter to her mother, November 8, 1916: BRCMA, 330.

established military family, Dorothy was careful to ensure that everyone around her in her new position knew what status she had previously held in society. Once she became a V.A.D. nurse, Dorothy found herself in an organisation that was arranged in a professional hierarchy rather than the class system with which she was more familiar. However, at times, as the above example suggested, when she was moving ahead, Dorothy reported a positive change in her relationships with and engaged well with the nursing hierarchy. Nevertheless, neither Dorothy nor her family were prepared to accept her subordinate role within the nursing hierarchy and were eager to assert their authority over those responsible for making decisions in Dorothy's life. This split in ideologies underscored the conflicting ideals of the V.A.D.s and the trained nurses. Dorothy's letters revealed her constant struggle to negotiate the tensions of class and professionalism and provide an insight into the lived experiences of upper middle-class V.A.D.s.

Gossip, Nicknames, and Everyday Resistance

During her time as a V.A.D. nurse, Dorothy frequently found herself operating within a system where she occupied a subordinate position. This position was contrary to her more familiar social status, and Dorothy used her letters to negotiate and explore the tensions she felt as a result. Throughout the correspondence, one of the recurring coping mechanisms to which Dorothy turned was the use of gossip and nicknames. The letters reveal the social and professional processes Dorothy was struggling with and her different responses to them. Initially, Dorothy's letters appeared to be full of day-to-day news. Further scrutiny, however, shows they were more than just a means of keeping in touch with her family. As well as documenting how she negotiated the tensions through her descriptions of everyday life, the letters became a safe space in which she was able to work out her feelings and frustrations towards those around her.

The power of gossip in mediating or negotiating social relationships became one focus of Dorothy's early letters home. This theme brought to light how Dorothy and her fellow V.A.D.s felt powerless and excluded from the social network which existed amongst the other staff. In July 1915, Dorothy wrote an informal and lively letter to her mother about her run-of-the-mill news: she 'had been to church … and then on to the club for lunch.' Furthermore, she wrote that 'the little canary had died the other day quite suddenly.' She went on to tell her mother that 'nothing extra special has happened at the hospital.'[33] Ostensibly, this letter was intended to just share news. A paragraph in the middle of the letter, however, was revealing of Dorothy's opinion of her colleagues. Dorothy briefly told her mother about two of her colleagues, Mrs. Burns and Miss Domvill:

> of the two I like Miss Domvill the better. She is really a very nice girl. Mrs. Burns would be alright if she would hold her tongue a little more. As it is she talks too much in an unwise way. Perhaps a little advice on the subject would do her good!!!

This short statement contained a powerful, yet implicit judgement about Mrs. Burns. Mrs. Burns had been at the hospital longer than Dorothy, and her marital status suggested that she was older. She therefore occupied a more senior position due to her age and experience. Dorothy's criticism of Mrs. Burns, however, was that she was a gossip — an attempt to discredit the character of a woman who indulged in a frivolous and trivial activity.[34] As the historian, Melanie Tebbutt has argued, the use of gossip was particularly associated with the social worlds of working-class women. Dorothy's judgement on Mrs. Burns was thus both derogatory and conveyed a sense of her colleague's inferior social status.[35] The insinuation that Mrs. Burns was a gossip and that Dorothy should be the one to point out the error of her

[33] Dorothy Robinson, letter to her mother, July 12, 1915: BRCMA, 330.
[34] Janet K.L. McKeown, "The Hens are Clucking: Women Performing Gossip in Their Leisure Lives," *Leisure Sciences* 37, no. 5 (2015) 447–51.
[35] Melanie Tebbutt, *Women's Talk?: A Social History of 'gossip' in Working-Class Neighbourhoods, 1880–1960* (Aldershot: Scolar, 1997), 2.

ways alluded to the fact that Dorothy considered herself in a somewhat superior position to Mrs. Burns.

Ironically, however, Dorothy used her letter to gossip about Mrs. Burns 'unwise' behaviour and indulge in the very activity she was criticising. To suggest that Mrs. Burns was unwise was to indicate that she behaved in a way not typically associated with her age, as wisdom is generally associated with age. The comment about gossip also suggested Dorothy's newfound and disconcerting sense of powerlessness. Gossip, as a means of conveying information can become a medium through which relationships are built and strengthened: from this perspective, it plays a crucial part in the formation of social relationships.[36] Dorothy's critical perspective on such discourse implied that she felt excluded in some way. Even though she judged Mrs. Burns harshly, Dorothy felt excluded from the social discourse: the implication that she was going to give Mrs. Burns some advice perhaps afforded Dorothy a means of gaining some power within their relationship. The excessive use of exclamation marks following the comment was an attempt to mark the suggestion as lighthearted. Nevertheless, it is clear that Dorothy was using her letter writing to work out her feelings towards her colleagues and test out possible responses to their behaviour.

A further example can be found in an incident recounted in August 1917, when Dorothy struggled to accept orders from a rather brusque ward Sister. In order to cope with the negative behaviour of the Sister, Dorothy wrote that she and her colleagues had given the Sister a nickname. She wrote to her father: 'we are at present blessed with a holy terror of a nursing sister. "Firebrand Lizzie" is her name when she is absent.'[37] The nickname referred to an aspect of the Sister's behaviour that Dorothy (and possibly her fellow V.A.D.s) found

[36] Tebbutt, *Women's Talk?*, 1.
[37] Dorothy Robinson, letter to her father, August 31, 1917: BRCMA, 330.

unacceptable and revealed the nature of the social relationship between them.[38] Characterising the Sister as a 'Firebrand' suggested that she was someone who stirred up emotions and caused trouble for Dorothy and her peers. The use of a nickname suggested an imbalance of power in the relationship and was a means of rebelling against the Sister covertly. The Sister, she recalled, 'fairly blew one of the men up to the skies the other day because he called her "nurse" instead of sister by mistake and is forever flying at us for the most infinitesimal offences.'[39] In public, Dorothy was required to defer to the authority of the nursing Sister, who policed her position of superiority by insisting on the correct use of her title by patients. Dorothy reported this incident in a rather exaggerated way, which suggested that she considered the response to be over the top. The Sister, according to Dorothy, was constantly reprimanding them for misdemeanours that were insignificant. Giving the Sister a nickname and including the patients in reports of unreasonable behaviour perhaps represented an unofficial act of rebellion within Dorothy's letters. Writing became a means of controlling her natural impulse to disobey orders or blow up at the Sister for what she saw as unreasonable behaviour. By indicating that the nickname was secret, Dorothy demonstrated that she was aware of her inferior professional status and that making the soubriquet known to the Sister would jeopardise Dorothy's position. Establishing nicknames for unpopular superiors became a way to maintain the social ties between V.A.D.s, and managed the discomfort caused by having to take orders from someone they saw as socially inferior.

Gossip was again referred to in a letter in September 1917. This time, however, Dorothy was the one gossiping. Even though Dorothy had been critical of gossip when she was not involved, in this instance she was the one on the inside carrying out the gossip. The tale was

[38] Gastor Mapunda, "What do My Students Call Me? Nicknaming of Lecturers by Students at the University of Dar es Salaam," *Journal of Linguistics and Language in Education* 8, no. 1 (2014): 90–107.
[39] Dorothy Robinson, letter to her father, August 31, 1917: BRCMA, 330.

related as an amusing anecdote viewed from different perspectives: writing to her parents, Dorothy described a cosy scene where she and a friend were 'both sitting on a window ledge with our feet outside,' whilst sharing a 'huge box of peppermints.' They were, she said, 'discussing all Matron's good and bad points.'[40] Dorothy declared that 'such a funny thing just happened … when we looked up, behold, there she [Matron] was about a stone's throw away. Of course we jumped down and blinked at her somewhat sheepishly … but we had to walk away leaving those wretched peppermints under her nose!'[41] The contrast between this event and the previous negative comments on gossiping is that this time Dorothy was part of the talk; the outsider was the Matron whose characteristics were being dissected. Dorothy and her friend were sitting on a window ledge with their backs to the world seemingly unaware of anything else around them. This image suggested a strong social bond, and Dorothy viewed the fact that they had been caught as funny. Dorothy saw no reason to describe the act of gossiping about someone as wrong, and, when they were overheard, she said they were merely sheepish. This was revealing because these were not thinly veiled class prejudices, rather it was evidence of a close relationship with one of her social peers and therefore was not viewed as improper behaviour.

As these examples suggest, gossip and nicknames were both compelling responses to a situation in which there was an imbalance of power and those in a subordinate position were not able to openly challenge their superiors. Dorothy complained when gossip was used and she was not part of it because she felt excluded — something that made her more aware of her insecure position within an unfamiliar hierarchy. On the other hand, she took delight in relating a story to her parents which conveyed the strength of friendship and social ties she had with another V.A.D. when gossiping about Matron. Dorothy and her friend secured their

[40] Dorothy Robinson, letter to her mother and father, September 30, 1917: BRCMA, 330.
[41] *Ibid*.

relationship and social bond by talking about someone behind their back. In using gossip, Dorothy ironically confirmed her own marginality and lack of power in the military hospital.

The 'Wrong Sort of Girl'

It should be clear from the discussion above that Dorothy Robinson had a strong sense of superiority and the power of established hierarchies of class. In her correspondence, this was clearly articulated in her descriptions of the kind of girls that she considered to be unsuitable recruits to the Voluntary Aid Detachment. Dorothy's letters give us a way of understanding how the V.A.D. brought together volunteers and nurses from a variety of different backgrounds and the considerable tensions this created. Even though Dorothy was critical of the new hierarchies which she had to negotiate, she clung very firmly onto the familiar systems of hierarchy which existed in her life. In 1915, whilst serving in The Prince of Wales Hospital in Tottenham, Dorothy wrote that she found herself with a 'very nice set of nurses and a rummy set of Red Cross girls.' Dorothy was puzzled by the behaviour of the Red Cross girls who smoked and had 'such curious ideas about the war': one of them even intended to drive a motor car. Such behaviours did not fit in with Dorothy's ideas of what was a suitable way for girls to behave. Warming to this theme, she commented that the Scottish girl is 'awfully nice — One up for Scotland, mother!' Later she wrote home to say, 'I arrived with a Scotch and Irish girl — I am sleeping with the latter, both nice and of my own class and my own way of thinking, particularly the Scotch girl.' Dorothy described both girls by nationality and class, and her comment suggested that they shared the same values and beliefs as one another. This matter was important enough for Dorothy to include in a letter to her family. She singled out the girl from Scotland as being particularly acceptable:

Dorothy's mother was Scottish, and so in Dorothy's view the 'Scotch' girls would have fitted into the family's criteria of acceptability.[42]

Hospital records no longer exist so it is not possible to give an accurate account of the kind of women who worked as V.A.D.s at the First Southern General Hospital. Writers such as Anne Summers and Lyn MacDonald, however, tell us that many of the volunteers came from a higher social class than the trained nurses.[43] Despite the fact that she came from a similar social class, Dorothy's attitude towards her peers was not always favourable. In her letters, she made no secret of the fact that she felt that some of her co-workers were unsuitable as V.A.D. nurses; the Irish V.A.D.s and nurses were particularly prone to criticism as rough and uncouth. Dorothy's comments to her family about the Irish staff suggested that she had succumbed to the assumptions about the social and ethnic characteristics attributed to the Irish in Edwardian Britain. The overall mood in the country at this time reflected the political landscape which was caught up in the fight for Home Rule. Suspicion and fear towards the Irish population in Britain increased after the Easter Rising in 1916.[44] They were often treated with suspicion and were subject to stereotyping. As Joanna Bourke has shown, one recurrent belief during the Great War was that the Irish displayed a 'definite neurasthenic temperament' — something more prevalent than within any other ethnic group in the British Isles.[45] Mo Moulton, too, reflects that there was a deeply complicated political relationship between England and Ireland. [46] Dorothy's personal relationships with her Irish colleagues were thus informed by this wider social and

[42] Dorothy Robinson, letter to her mother, August 28, 1915: BRCMA, 330.
[43] Lyn Macdonald, *The Roses of No Man's Land* (London: Joseph, 1980); Summers, *Angels and Citizens*.
[44]Michael Wheatley, *'Conclusions.' Nationalism and the Irish Party: Provincial Ireland 1910–1916* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), Oxford Scholarship Online, 2010-01-01, accessed June 7, 2017.
[45] Joanna Bourke, "Effeminacy, Ethnicity and the End of Trauma: The Sufferings of 'Shell-Shocked' Men in Great Britain and Ireland, 1914–39," *Journal of Contemporary History* 35, no. 1 (2000): 57–69.
[46] Mo Moulton, *Ireland and the Irish in Interwar England* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 4, 5, 7.

political context. Throughout the correspondence, Irish V.A.D.s appeared as a disruptive and troublesome presence.

Dorothy first referred to the Irish contingent of V.A.D.s in a letter she sent in March 1916. Dorothy was on night duty, and she wrote to her mother with her views on the night Sister.

> Perhaps it is early to judge but I am not struck with her as a good nurse. She has woken up all the men in one of my wards with her noise already. She is Irish and terrified of seeing spooks. In fact we have to conduct her down all the passages … in case she sees one! She is also quite alarmed at one of my patients who sleep walks!!![47]

Dorothy assumed a position of superiority over that of the night Sister and communicated that when she described the patients and the wards as 'hers'. The fact that the Sister was Irish, superstitious, and of a nervous disposition became a way for Dorothy to cast doubt on her ability as a nurse.

By August of that year, Dorothy was concerned about the rumours that were circulating in the hospital about the large numbers of V.A.D.s who were being sacked. She wrote:

> about this, I am looking out for a nice steady girl who has been here some time and I shall ask her privately when I find her how much is true. I dare say a good deal is exaggerated as a lot of the girls are Irish and at present I am taking all their talk with a pinch of salt.[48]

Irish colleagues were not to be trusted, and Dorothy did not take what they said seriously. Dismissing their talk as 'exaggerated', she noted the importance of checking the truth of the situation with a 'nice steady girl' who presumably would not be Irish. Dorothy's idea of

[47] Dorothy Robinson, letter to her mother, March 2, 1916: BRCMA, 330.
[48] Dorothy Robinson, letter to her mother, August 28, 1916: BRCMA, 330.

someone ‘nice’ and ‘steady’ would have meant someone from her own social class. Although Dorothy repeated the gossip and rumours to her family, it was plain to see that she felt that she needed to maintain some sort of distance from it.

Dorothy continued to comment on the Irish girls. Indeed, this critical commentary became a major theme in her letters in this period, and was written at the time of the Easter Rising – a major national crisis in Ireland. At the beginning of September 1916, Dorothy noted that ‘half if not more are Irish girls here and I am sure they are the sole root of most of the trouble.’ She compared the Irish V.A.D.s to the other girls who served at the hospital: ‘The English and the Scots girls, of whatever class, are remarkably steady, but the Irish — with hardly an exception … are perfect little fiends without the veriest hint of dignity.’[49] Dorothy did not explain what ‘the trouble’ was but evidently found the presence of so many Irish V.A.D.s disruptive. Even though Dorothy claimed that her judgement was not class-based, the criticism was an implicit appraisal of characteristics associated with social class. That the English and Scots were ‘steady’ suggested that Dorothy considered them to be calm, balanced, and self-controlled. In contrast, the Irish girls had no dignity, which implied that Dorothy felt that they did not display any of the decorum or discretion typically associated with the upper middle class. It is hard to get a sense of the Irish women’s social class from Dorothy’s letters. Implicit in her comments was that they were from a lower social class than her, which didn’t fit with the social composition of the typical British V.A.D. However, when people in England referred to the Irish, they often reverted to a stereotypical image through which the Irish were automatically considered working-class, Catholic, and nationalist.[50] The letter went on to state that some girls who had started at the same time as her had ‘gone in with the Irish set.’ Dorothy was concerned about this because

[49] Dorothy Robinson, letter to mother and father, September 4, 1916: BRCMA, 330.
[50] Moulton, *Ireland and the Irish*, 7, 8.

associating with the Irish girls was, in her view, 'the thin end of the wedge and increases the number of undesirables.' Dorothy was very frank in her opinion that the Irish were 'undesirable' and was clearly influenced by pervasive negative contemporary attitudes. In her opinion, they were disordered and disruptive, and Dorothy felt that anyone who became friends with the Irish would acquire the same attitudes and values.

This was a strong condemnation of the Irish V.A.D.s and those who associated with them. Dorothy did not believe that those kinds of girls should be nursing and confirmed this in a letter she wrote towards the end of September 1916. Here Dorothy described a situation to her parents where 'one of the girls who came about my time has been sent off [dismissed].'[51] It was Dorothy's opinion 'that Matron was quite right, though it is desperately hard on the girl. There is nothing wrong with her personally but she is hopelessly common and vulgar, and therefore quite impossible for nursing.' Dorothy believed that 'it was the fault of the Irish Selection Board for sending such a girl as it was palpable that she could never be a nurse ….' On this basis, Dorothy felt vindicated in her previous assessment of the Irish V.A.D.s as unsuitable. This strongly implied that Dorothy's attitude was influenced by the Irish stereotype. As a result, Dorothy believed that it was social class rather than professional training that ensured that someone was suitable for nursing. As a judgement on social class, Dorothy implicitly grouped the Irish volunteers with the trained nurses who were considered inferior because they were also from a lower social class.

Dirt, Hygiene, and Social Class

Alongside the social manners and behaviour of her peers, the association between hygiene, dirt, and class was a way in which class differences were noticed and understood by Dorothy. Social class, in other words, was understood to consist in a cluster of minute gestures,

[51] Dorothy Robinson, letter to her mother and father, September 25, 1916: BRCMA, 330.

movements, mannerisms, and appearance. The unfamiliar proximity and inability to escape from the closeness of others in a claustrophobic military hospital and nursing hostel exacerbated the tensions. In her letters, Dorothy wrote about girls of a lower social class in terms of their perceived lack of cleanliness and personal hygiene. Writing to her mother in October 1916, Dorothy commented that she was 'too cross at the moment to write you a nice letter!' [52] She explained that this was because she was temporarily having to share living quarters with the night nurses. Returning to this theme later in the letter, she complained that she had 'come to the conclusion that the night nurses must live like pigs' and said that she had 'never come across such disgustingly dirty holes.' By writing about the night nurses in this way, Dorothy drew attention to the fact that the qualified nurses had much lower standards of housekeeping than she and her fellow V.A.D.s — standards reflected in their manners and social skills. Dorothy found herself living in a world where her understanding of social class had been turned on its head. The living conditions of the night nurses appalled Dorothy so much that she and her fellow V.A.D.s 'had been trying to clean out the place a bit.' Dorothy, who had servants at home to carry out the cleaning, was now the cleaner. She had become, due to a professional hierarchy, a member of a subordinate group forced to carry out menial tasks such as the housekeeping. It is clear from Dorothy's letter that there was a real tension for her between her social status and her professional status. She carried out the duties of a maid — a role she would have also fulfilled on the wards — but was not able to fully embody this new position due to her higher social status. Her remarks on the nurses' standard of hygiene served as a metaphor for class distinctions.

Seth Koven states that social anthropologists define dirt as matter out of order. From this perspective, the separation of clean and dirty is a way in which societies differentiate

[52] Dorothy Robinson, letter to her mother, October 18, 1916: BRCMA, 330.

between the sacred and the profane, the clean and unclean.[53] For Dorothy, familiarity and security lay in a sense of social ordering where everyone knew their place: to her the nurses were dirty and out of place. They were out of place because their professionalism made them superior to her, and they were also out of place because they were now having to share her living quarters. The trained nurses did not belong in the same physical space or social space as the V.A.D.s because they were, in Dorothy's pejorative characterisation, dirty and animal-like. Dorothy made no attempt to reconcile herself to the fact that hygiene was a professional prerequisite for trained nurses. Her judgement on their standards of personal hygiene was thus also a critical comment on their professional integrity and skills. 'Disgustingly dirty' living conditions questioned how someone so dirty (and, by association, so morally primitive) could be suitable to nurse and care for the sick and wounded. It is very unlikely that Dorothy's sweeping observation was accurate: nursing care involved a strict regime which was devoted to keeping patients and the environment clean. Qualified nurses spent up to an hour and a half each shift dusting and polishing, sweeping the wards, and cleaning the sluices and the bathrooms. Only once this cleaning had been completed did the staff move on to tasks such as wound dressings and taking blood pressures. High standards of personal and professional hygiene were essential in the continued battle against infection.[54]

From this perspective, the perceived untidiness and unkempt nature of the night nurses' living conditions perhaps represented a freedom in the lives of the trained nurses which Dorothy did not enjoy in her own life. An attraction towards a more emancipated life would have contrasted sharply with Dorothy's own upbringing. Up to this point in her life, all she had known were the strict rules of living and housekeeping of her own upbringing. During

[53] Seth Koven, *Slumming:Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London* (Princeton, N.J., Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004), 198.
[54] Debbie Palmer, "The Impact of the First World War on Asylum and Voluntary Nurses' Work and Health," in *One Hundred Years of Wartime Nursing Practices 1854–1953*, ed. Jane Brooks and Christine E. Hallett (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), 156.

the Great War, however, for the first time she was not only working with women of a different social class, she was living with them too; now they shared a physical space as well as a professional space — a sharp contrast to the carefully demarcated roles and spaces of domestic service in elite households. Whilst it is true that the family would have shared their home with the domestic staff, the arrangement would have been one of segregation. The servants would have entered the private space of the family to serve and carry out tasks but the personal quarters of the servants remained separated from the householders.[55] For Dorothy, shared living and sleeping quarters placed the two groups in an intimate relationship like never before. The result was a real tension which brought the differences between the two groups into sharp focus.

Picking up these themes, when Dorothy and the other V.A.D.s moved back into their own rooms, she wrote a letter to her father that described a living state which quite literally nauseated her: 'the 2 sisters left ours [bedrooms] in a perfect pigsty of a mess. I never knew that people could be such filthy creatures in their personal habits. It really nearly made me sick when I went in.'[56] This commentary on the way in which the sisters conducted their personal living standards represented something more than untidiness however and challenged Dorothy to question her own long-held system of beliefs. The nurses seemed to live by different rules, and Dorothy was being confronted by a group of women — likened to animals — displaying a lack of self-control in their personal habits alongside a sense of freedom, high spirits, and independence.[57] Once again, Dorothy found herself cleaning up after her professional superiors. Even if she had come to terms with the fact that, as a

[55] Important interventions on the debate on domestic service can be found in the following: Alison Light, *Mrs. Woolf and the Servants*, (London: Fig Tree, 2007); Alison Light, *Common People: The History of an English Family*, (London: Penguin Books, 2015); Eve Colpus, "Women, Service and Self Actualisation in Inter War Britain," *Past & Present*, 2017, Vol 238 (1), 197 - 232; Lucy Delap, *Knowing Their Place: Domestic Service in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
[56] Dorothy Robinson, letter to her father, October 28, 1916: BRCMA, 330.
[57] Koven, Slumming. 216.

professional subordinate, she would have to carry out the duties of maid, her living quarters were a place where her own social hierarchy would have felt safe and secure. Sharing domestic space and cleaning up after her social inferiors represented an unwanted intrusion into the sanctity of private life.

As this discussion suggests, Dorothy's letters showed her endlessly drawing the lines between herself and others. On the one hand, she had begun to find her place within a professional hierarchy, but on the other hand, this was not the case with personal relationships. These relationships were particularly challenged when she was forced to share a room with the night sisters. The dirt and animal-like living conditions that Dorothy described served as metaphors for class distinctions; it was the upper-class women who defined what was dirty, and it was they who had the authority, due to their status, to dictate to their inferiors the ways in which the dirt should be removed.[58] If dirt marked the boundary between classes in a social hierarchy, then knowledge, skills, and experience marked the boundaries within the professional hierarchy. Cleaning kept Dorothy in a subordinate position professionally and subverted a long-held sense of her superior social status.

Domestic Service and its Discontents

All V.A.D. nurses were required to work as probationers which involved carrying out the duties of a ward maid. The regulations set out by the British Red Cross in a document entitled 'Regulations Governing the Employment of Nursing V.A.D. Members in Military Hospitals,' issued in 1915, stated that the 'duties [of the V.A.D. nurse] will be similar to those carried out by probationers in Civil Hospitals. These include sweeping, dusting, polishing of brasses, cleaning of ward tables and patients' lockers, cleaning of ward sinks

[58] *Ibid*., 189–92.

and ward utensils, washing of patients' crockery, and sorting of linen.'[59] While what was expected of new recruits was very clear, it was also very unpopular. The frequency of references to domestic service in Dorothy's letters, and the moments of anger and crisis it prompted, underscores how the experience of the upturning of class relations and the resulting conflict illuminated the lived experience of class in wartime and the way in which this contributed to a wider sense of the changes war was bringing about in British society.

Dorothy's letters to her family repeatedly made the point that she did not think that she should be carrying out these duties because she thought that they were beneath her. Dorothy insisted that she should be carrying out the more prestigious duties of a nurse even though she did not possess the necessary knowledge and skills. The alternate social ordering within the hospital hierarchy challenged the way Dorothy thought and made it necessary for her to begin to negotiate a discourse on her class privilege. The demands of working as a V.A.D. thus marked a crisis in Dorothy's sense of identity and place. In March 1915, Dorothy began work at Waverley Abbey Military Hospital. When she wrote home about what she was expected to do she said:

> I am a housemaid worse luck. I believe another girl was to be but found the slop pails too heavy for her to carry, so it was arranged that I should be … my partner-in-arms (or rather brushes!) is of the true housemaid type being tall and angular and strong, but I should think very nice.[60]

The implication was that Dorothy did not consider herself to be 'the true housemaid type' and resented having to carry out those duties. The significance of this proximity to domestic service revealed that Dorothy's attitude towards her service was characterised by class relations and her understanding of how social position was shaped by labour. Selina Todd

[59] Katharine Furse, Regulations Governing the Employment of Nursing V.A.D. Members in Military Hospitals: BRCMA, RCB/2/8/5/33).
[60] Dorothy Robinson, letter to her mother, March 1, 1915: BRCMA, 330.

reminds us that keeping servants (and consequently the work they carried out) was widely viewed as one of the distinctions between the classes during the early part of the twentieth century.[61] Being required to carry out the labour of a housemaid challenged Dorothy's sense of social ordering. The letters thus became a space to negotiate the conflict between her superior social status and the threat posed by assuming domestic roles normally associated with the lower classes.

Dorothy belonged to a generation and class of women that was shaped by their experience of domestic service. Now, at the outbreak of war, these women faced the upheaval of alternative arrangements where they were forced to manage with fewer domestic servants at home. Those women who volunteered as V.A.D. nurses, moreover, were even required to carry out the role themselves. From Dorothy's correspondence, it is evident that she assumed the role of domestic servant was carried out by a certain type of woman who not only belonged to a different class but looked the part. Dorothy commented on the physical appearance of her colleague. The claim that this made them more suitable for the role of housemaid represented an attempt to maintain existing social distinctions. Dorothy had been deemed strong enough to carry the heavy pails, nevertheless her partner had more of the physical attributes associated with domestic labour. In this comment, Dorothy also sent a clear message to her family. She operated in what Lucy Delap calls a 'site of double consciousness.'[62] As well as her own perspective on the situation, Dorothy's writing also betrayed a keen sense of being looked at through the eyes of others: in this case, her family. Her letters thus were not only a means of working out for herself what her new life meant, but would reassure friends and family that she was capable of operating in a different and unfamiliar sphere. Her comment suggested that, even though she was carrying out domestic

[61] Selina Todd, "Domestic Service and Class Relations in Britain 1900–1950," *Past and Present* 203 (May 2009): 181.
[62] Delap, *Knowing Their Place*, 3.

duties, she was not the 'true housemaid type' as she possessed none of the physical characteristics associated with this class of woman.[63] Through such comments, Dorothy reassured her family that the divide between 'us' and 'them' had not been breached; they need not worry, she had not betrayed her class. It was merely bad luck that she had to work in this role. She was not going to become like the domestic servants — there were still deep-rooted physical differences which ensured that she would not be mistaken for a domestic worker.

Reworking these ideas for comic effect, a cartoon in the *Journal of the First Southern Cross* played with the assumption that domestic servants belonged to another species of women with distinct physical characteristics and the misunderstandings and accidents that might occur when women from different social classes were asked to undertake their work.[64]

Fig. 1. Pyecraft. Illustration to 'A Night Alarm.'[65]

The cartoon showed the slight framed V.A.D. nurse (identified by the Red Cross insignia on the front of her apron) overseeing the work of a larger and altogether more buxom, strong looking woman scrubbing the floor. The woman carrying out the work appears dirty and

63 Alison Light, *Mrs. Woolf and the Servants* (London: Fig Tree, 2007), 141.
64 *The Southern Cross. The Journal of the 1st Southern General Hospital*. Vol. 2. No.17, May 1917, p. 117
65 Pyecraft. 'A Night Alarm.' *Ibid*

required by the nature of her task to adopt an unseemly physical position on her hands and knees. The V.A.D. nurse, by contrast, is keeping a distance from the woman on the floor and can hardly bring herself to bend over: through posture and mannerism, she is maintaining a physical and social space between herself and domestic labour. Both cartoons and comments on the physical differences between the groups of women were a useful means of establishing and reinforcing social distance and 'place'. They were used to reinforce differences of class and navigate the challenges posed by the new social order of the wartime military hospital.

Dorothy's sense of hierarchy remained strong despite working as a housemaid. In order to assert her sense of status and superiority, she wrote critically about the kitchen maid who would have had an even lower status than a housemaid — finding at least one way of asserting a position of seniority within her working environment. She said, 'I could not help thinking that the kitchen maid would have all the plates cracked as they were so hot the gravy boiled [emphasis in original] on them.'[66] By drawing attention to the mistakes the kitchen maid was making, Dorothy was able to reinforce her sense of self-worth in her letters by drawing attention to the incompetence of a woman deemed socially inferior. Dorothy was used to viewing the world through the lens of a hierarchy that was ordered by social status and sought ways of doing this within her new and unfamiliar hierarchy.

Even though Dorothy complained about her role as housemaid, however, she became defensive about the doubts her family cast on her ability to carry out the duties required of her. In a letter to her mother, she made this response:

> I am to be parlour maid this week. I am rather sorry as I got attached to house work … Will you tell Joan that I am exceedingly astonished that she should insinuate that I am not doing my work properly! Of course all the white paint is cleaned &

[66] Dorothy Robinson, letter to her mother, March 1, 1915: BRCMA, 330.

> the baths are never upset. As for looking after Dr. Feys why I spend a whole hour every morning lighting his fire so that it shall burn properly. All the Belgians have been washed since I came & I think that is a record!!![67]

The comment appeared to be written as a joke but was a thinly veiled defence of her work and her sense of pride in carrying out her tasks competently. Because the duties were redolent of those of a household servant, class prejudices prevented Dorothy overtly boasting about this to her family. Nevertheless, she was eager that they should know, albeit in a lighthearted way, that she was doing 'her work properly.' The tensions that Dorothy experienced in negotiating her place in her role alongside that of her superior social status were apparent in this letter. She was sorry to leave the role that she had expressed dissatisfaction about and now boasted about how well she had carried out the duties. An awareness of her competence and the acquisition of new skills made Dorothy feel more comfortable in this hierarchy.

By August of 1916, after completing her probationary period, Dorothy's letters home revealed that she was still carrying out domestic duties and working in the linen room. She shared the timetable of her day with the family: after breakfast the V.A.D.s were sent to either the wards or the linen room. The nurses, who were represented by organisations such as the Professional Nurses Association, wished to undergo a process of professionalisation comparable to that undertaken by other groups during that period. For Dorothy, it was clear that as there was an option she should be working on the wards.[68] Whilst Dorothy continued with the drudgery of domestic labour, more V.A.D. nurses were arriving at the hospital. She complained, 'It really is laughable. There seems to be a sort of disease of them … This really

[67] Dorothy Robinson, letter to her mother, March 7, 1915: BRCMA, 330.
[68] Dorothy Robinson, letter to her mother, August 28, 1916: BRCMA, 330.

is as good as Ian Hay's Practical Joke Department.'[69] Likening the organisation of the hospital to a practical joke suggested that Dorothy, like the recipient of such a prank, felt humiliated and confused. She felt that the arrival of more V.A.D.s was pointless, especially as (in her opinion) she was more than capable of carrying out nursing duties. She likened them to a 'disease' — something unwanted, potentially harmfully, and that needed to be eradicated. Dorothy's attempt at humour implied she did not understand or respect the decision to recruit more nurses when she was working in a way that she deemed beneath her. Her attempt to make light of the situation was thus undercut by an undertone of resentment, anger, and frustration. She continued to write home and suggested that 'someone must have a bee in their bonnet about VADs!!' when three more arrived.[70] Dorothy struggled to understand her place in the hospital hierarchy. She saw herself in a senior position to the new recruits because she had been working in the hospital longer. Despite this experience and record of service, however, she was still not being asked to work on the wards. This was perceived as a direct insult to her understanding of professional hierarchy where Dorothy considered that her length of service should afford her some preferment.

Health and Emotional Well-being

Dorothy's letters home conveyed a sense of entitlement that accompanied her superior social status but did not often communicate what she really felt about her work and her relationships with her colleagues. Michael Roper suggests that, in order to delve deeper into the meanings of letters and consequently appreciate more of the writer's emotional state, we

[69] *Ibid*. Major Ian Hay wrote humorous novels during the First World War. In *The First Hundred Thousand*, he described the structure of military organisations as having 3 departments: 'A Surprise Party Department, A Practical Joke Department and a Fairy Godmother Department.' Ian Hay, *The First Hundred Thousand*, The Project Gutenburg ebook, http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/12877/pg12877-images.html, accessed March 28, 2017.
[70] Dorothy Robinson, letter to her father, August 29, 1916: BRCMA, 330.

are required to read between the lines.[71] As Roper's analysis of serviceman's letters suggests, physical ailments were often easier to write about than emotions. Dorothy's correspondence, too, exposed an obsession with her health. Reports of ill health and concern for her physical well-being were discussed freely in her letters when poor spirits were not. The importance of such a discourse makes a valuable contribution to the debate on emotional survival during the Great War. Discussions of her physical health, I argue, should be understood as a concealed way of hinting at Dorothy's true emotional state.

In February 1916, whilst still at Waverley Abbey Military Hospital, Dorothy wrote to her father that 'measles had broken out' amongst the patients and some of the staff.[72] Even though she had not been in contact with anyone who had contracted measles, Dorothy seemed eager to let her family know that, potentially, she could become ill. In this letter, she did not mention her work and did not have much news to share with her family, and, in the letters that followed, she made no mention at all of the measles. Ten days later, she wrote to her father a much longer letter full of news about the wards. She said, 'We have been very [emphasis in original] busy lately as we have been over-full and rather under-staffed owing to measles or flu. There was one bright day when I was left alone in my ward … I was charge nurse for 3 days!!!'[73] The illnesses are mentioned but only in connection to how Dorothy benefited from them. The day she was left alone was 'bright', and it is possible to sense her excitement from this statement. She underlined the word 'very' to emphasise how busy she was and used three exclamation marks when she reported that she had been charge nurse; a coveted position of seniority and importance. She did not only write when she was ill and when she was clearly relishing her role on the wards, Dorothy concluded a letter to her mother in March 1916 by saying 'I am very well [emphasis in original]; you need not feel

[71] Roper, *The Secret Battle*, 21.
[72] Dorothy Robinson, letter to her father, February 15, 1916: BRCMA, 330.
[73] Dorothy Robinson, letter to her father, February 26, 1916: BRCMA, 330.

in the least anxious on that score. I usually don't mention it because I am so well.'[74] She underlined the statement 'I am very well' and, although she did not expressly say how happy she was, it was implicit in the manner in which she reported her good health.

The senior position did not last however, as Dorothy then moved to Birmingham and a lower place in the nursing hierarchy of a massive, bureaucratic, and anonymous institution. In September 1916, with the Battle of the Somme still raging, Dorothy wrote home to her brother and said, 'I became a casualty myself a few days ago by catching my thumb on the knife of the bread machine.'[75] Given the high number of casualties sustained by those fighting in battle at the time, the choice of the word 'casualty' for such a minor injury seemed extreme.[76] Dorothy longed to be involved in what she viewed as the more important and valuable work of nursing the sick and wounded abroad, instead she was serving in a hospital in Birmingham involved in domestic duties such as cutting bread. Dorothy went on to state that the wound was 'slightly septic', and this suggested that there was a possibility that things could worsen. The next day she wrote to her mother, and this letter contained news that the ward was now busy.[77] Dorothy wrote, 'We had 7 operations, 4 of which were bad + 9 new men in two days, 3 on the danger list. However they are all pulling round very well now and we are all feeling frightfully bucked as a consequence.' She concluded the letter, 'my thumb is getting on A1.' The letter stated that they were all feeling in better spirits because the men were 'pulling round' but this also implied that Dorothy was feeling 'bucked' because she was now involved in taking care of some seriously ill men; a role she considered more useful and appropriate for her.[78]

[74] Dorothy Robinson, letter to her mother, March 2, 1916: BRCMA, 330.
[75] Dorothy Robinson, letter to her brother Charlie, September 21, 1916: BRCMA, 330.
[76] 20,000 British soldiers were killed on the first day alone: Martin Gilbert, *First World War* (London: HarperCollins, 1995), 258–72, 541.
[77] Dorothy Robinson, letter to her mother, September 22, 1916: BRCMA, 330.
[78] *Ibid*.

One month later, Dorothy wrote 'I have got a perfectly horrible piece of news for you. Namely that I have got a mild form of flu.'[79] Flu, like any form of sepsis, was serious and would have worried her family; however with the prospect of returning home for two days sick leave, she wrote 'Personally I don't think it was flu that I got, but that I ate something that disagreed with me.'[80] Once again, Dorothy wrote with news that foretold a more serious illness — a 'slightly septic' thumb and a 'mild form of flu' — but was able to retract the news within twenty-four hours. In both cases, Dorothy's initial news was very dramatic and yet proved to be nothing to worry about. This suggested a change in Dorothy's spirits. She wanted the concern of her family so tended to exaggerate the seriousness of her physical symptoms when the cause of her discontent was more likely to be low spirits.

Red and White Stripes

The idea that length of service should equate to preferment and professional advancement marked a subtle shift in Dorothy Robinson's correspondence. Over the course of her service as a V.A.D. nurse, and particularly from the second half of 1916 onwards, recognition of her position within a professional hierarchy was to become as important to Dorothy as her social status — at specific moments, at least. This reflected broader changes in the organisation of V.A.D. work and the introduction of new structures of professional advancement and recognition. It was decided at a meeting of the Joint Women's V.A.D. Committee on 26 July 1916 that 'members who had served 13 months consecutively … should be granted the White Bar [to be worn on their uniform]' and that 'it was absolutely necessary that a certificate of some sort should be issued with the bar in order to prevent members who were not entitled to do so from wearing the bar.'[81] Further service was to be

[79] Dorothy Robinson, letter to her mother and father, October 22, 1916: BRCMA, 330.
[80] Dorothy Robinson, letter to her mother, October 23, 1916: BRCMA, 330.
[81] Women's VAD Committee Minutes Book From September 1915: BRCMA, JWC/5/1.

acknowledged by the award of a 'Scarlet Efficiency Stripe.'[82] The introduction of the Red Efficiency Stripe and the White Bar for service within the V.A.D. thus created a hierarchy with an outwardly visible sign of seniority — something analogous to military rank and medals, or the organisation of professional nursing. Outward displays of experience and service would mean no one entering the wards was left in any doubt as to who was superior to whom. V.A.D. nurses did not automatically obtain these insignia, however: criteria for the award of the bar and stripe were laid down by the British Red Cross, and the V.A.D. nurses deemed eligible for such an honour had to be recommended by the hospital Matron. The *Red Cross* clarified the process for members:

> A scarlet '*Efficiency Stripe*' is given to nursing V.A.D. members and Special Service Probationers in military hospitals … if they are specially recommended for this distinction by the Matron. The scarlet Efficiency Stripe is not issued from Devonshire House [The headquarters of the British Red Cross]. It is a military award and can only be obtained from the matrons of military hospitals. A white '*War Service Bar*' is issued by the Joint Committee of the British Red Cross Society and Order of St. John of Jerusalem for length of service.[83]

This Red Cross initiative thus reinforced the professional hierarchy within military hospitals, and furthered the seniority, influence, and authority of the Matron. Recognition of service adhered strictly to a formal requirement in terms of length of service and required basic standards of competency for the skilled work of nursing that could only be endorsed by a trained and qualified nurse. As the system took shape, the scarlet stripe would become more coveted by the V.A.D.s as an outward and visible sign of their wartime role: awarded

[82] Dress Regulations for Voluntary Aid Detachments. June 1916: BRCMA, R16.
[83] "Women's V.A.D. Notes and News," *Red Cross*, March, 1918, 27.

for ‘efficiency’, it implicitly acknowledged that a level of competency, knowledge, and skills had been achieved by the V.A.D.

The introduction of these incentives represented a process through which a hierarchy was created amongst the V.A.D.s: advancement and superiority could be achieved by carrying out actual nursing duties on the wards, being posted overseas, or by length of service. By summer 1916, then, Dorothy considered that her length of service warranted more responsibility and a senior position within the Southern General hospital. Shaped by the structures introduced by the Red Cross, Dorothy’s letters thus provide a great deal of insight into her views about the nursing staff. Despite this, we know little about what trained staff and her immediate superiors thought of Dorothy. Dorothy’s ambition for formal recognition of her service, however, became a growing source of conflict within the institutions where she worked. More than this, such ambition was, perhaps, incompatible with the concept of philanthropy and sacrificial service associated with volunteering. Once again, the frustration of Dorothy’s expectations of advancement revealed the sense of entitlement created by her privileged social status.

Dorothy first expressed her desire to be awarded a stripe in January 1917, when she said she would ‘really like to get’ this visible recognition of her wartime work.[84] Six months later, however, when such recognition had not been achieved, she described ‘very bad feeling’ around the issue. Dorothy was incensed that only one of the 130 V.A.D.s in the hospital had been awarded the scarlet Efficiency Stripe — a situation she deemed ‘absurd.’ Writing to her parents, she said that, if she were an outsider and heard of this situation, she would conclude that the ‘training and tone could not be very high.’[85] Dorothy’s concern appeared to be that outsiders — maybe even her family and friends — would judge her on

[84] Dorothy Robinson, letter, January 1917: BRCMA, 330.
[85] Dorothy Robinson, letter, July 29, 1917: BRCMA, 330.

her lack of award. Dismissing this possibility as risible implied that fault lay with the nursing profession — unable to recognise the efficiency of their V.A.D.s, unwilling to recommend more for the honour, and failing in their duty to provide proper training and lead by example.

Recognition did come eventually. In September 1917, Dorothy wrote that she was 'glad to say' that her good friend Cunningham had been awarded a scarlet Efficiency Stripe and that she (Dorothy) had her white stripe. Still, these awards had only taken place amongst 'a vast amount of criticism.'[86] Gesturing towards the 'bad feeling' noted in her previous letter, this comment signified Dorothy's displeasure at having been given a white stripe and not a scarlet one. The fact that Dorothy had been awarded a stripe for length of service and her friend had been recognised for 'efficiency' must have been difficult for Dorothy: in this context, the criticism alluded to might be read as her own judgement and sense of frustration. The distinction between the awards suggested that Cunningham was better at the job than Dorothy and, therefore, professionally superior. It is significant, however, that Dorothy distanced herself from any bad feeling by not explicitly stating the source of the criticism.

Dorothy's perception of her own entitlement continued, however. Two months later she informed her family that she

> had a lengthy interview with matron on the subject of stripes two or three days ago … she really was very nice about it and frankly acknowledged that at least two of my points had not struck her before so perhaps will bear effect for the next generation, though since what is must be, it cannot very well affect the present … it seemed rather disgraceful that 40 of us should calmly sit down with white stripes when we ought to have red ones and not even ask the reason why.[87]

[86] Dorothy Robinson, letter, September 7, 1917: BRCMA, 330.
[87] Dorothy Robinson, letter, November 20, 1917: BRCMA, 330.

Dorothy continued to write about the division created by the awarding of different coloured stripes and the emergence of another hierarchy within the V.A.D. organisation. Once again occupying a lower position, this was presented as 'disgraceful.' Dorothy's sense of privilege meant that she was not prepared to accept this and went to see the Matron, and, in a discussion that she described as a 'lengthy interview', aired her displeasure.

Despite her difficulty in reconciling the contradictions between social and professional hierarchies within the military hospital, examples like this suggest that Dorothy was increasingly desperate to improve her position in the nursing hierarchy. She longed to be seen as an equal to her superiors and this resulted in a conflict between Dorothy's social status and lowly professional status. Her ambition to rise through the ranks (and sense that she was entitled to do so) created competing demands on her conduct; she complained in her letters to her family and made a direct appeal to Matron. Dorothy struggled to come to terms with contradictory feelings; her ambition to rise in a hierarchy she claimed she did not value versus her sense of entitlement. Dorothy's attempt to find herself a higher place in a new hierarchy resulted in her not obeying the rules of a professional society and in a form of punishment by being rejected by the organisation a they withheld her recommendation for an Efficiency Stripe.

Entitlement and Influence

The fact that Dorothy did not receive the recommendation for the coveted red Efficiency Stripe suggests that her sense of entitlement, the demands she made on her professional superiors, and her family's interference behind the scenes made her unpopular with the nursing hierarchy. Privilege meant Dorothy felt entitled to achieve a higher status within the nursing hierarchy and prompted her to repeatedly voice her complaints to those in authority if advancement was not forthcoming. It is clear from the correspondence that Dorothy was

aware that she could call on her family to use their influence. In this context, writing allowed her to negotiate and manipulate her position by voicing her concerns to her parents. Dorothy wrote letters to her mother which contained complaints and disquiet about her place in the nursing hierarchy — articulated with the knowledge that her mother would be able to use her influence to improve Dorothy's lot. Dorothy's letters and her mother's correspondence thus challenges the dominant assumption that the upper middle-class V.A.D. nurse cheerfully and quietly accepted her subordinate status and duties for the sake of the nation's good. Dorothy had a strong and long-held belief of her own entitlement borne out of her privileged upbringing and was not prepared to do this; she expected things to be sorted out in her favour. She was well aware of the influence her family had in society and knew that they would respond to her requests for help, be they explicit or implicit. As she acknowledged in a letter to her father: 'I never knew such a person as mother for raking up useful people!'[88] Dorothy's observations on her role and responsibilities were thus not made simply for information, but written with the expectation that, if she expressed dissatisfaction, things would change.

A good example of this occurred in January 1917, when Dorothy couldn't decide whether she wanted to remain at the 1st Southern General Hospital or ask for a transfer elsewhere. She wrote home laying out the circumstances of her dilemma on the 'all important question of signing on.' She said 'I should like to sign on because it would ensure the stripe which I really would like to get … also I am a senior and if I went anywhere else I should have to start as Junior again … On the other hand all [emphasis in original] my friends are leaving.'[89] Dorothy went on to make the case to her mother that if she did stay on without her friends then 'I do not know of any others I could room up with as they really are not my sort.'

[88] Dorothy Robinson, letter to her father, May 1, 1917: BRCMA, 330.
[89] Dorothy Robinson, letter to her mother, January 22, 1917: BRCMA, 330.

Dorothy stated specifically that out of the 150 V.A.D. nurses, she only cared for twelve. She felt that her happiness was precarious, writing that 'we have only been happy by a fluke and not because Matron or anybody else wanted us to be so.'[90] Dorothy manipulated her mother to respond to this dilemma with the notion of her potential unhappiness and the likelihood of having to share a room with the wrong sort of girl.

In letters like this, Dorothy played on the class prejudices of her family while reassuring them (and herself) that she had succeeded to obtain a higher position within her new role. Well aware that her request for a transfer would be deemed unreasonable by her superiors, Dorothy then wrote, 'I want to work a transfer somehow.'[91] It seemed that Dorothy felt that her needs were far more important and outranked the needs of the hospital or the rules and regulations of the Red Cross. Dorothy's reasons for leaving did not have anything to do with service and duty, and she was quite candid in her rationale for this. The problem she said was 'to get the transfer. Matron won't give them which makes most people furious … Devonshire House won't grant them unless you have been 12 months.' Aware that she would need the support of the hospital Matron and Devonshire House to realise her wish for a transfer, Dorothy implicitly called on her mother to intervene on her behalf.[92]

The crisis in nursing created by the war meant it was both unlikely and impossible that the whims of a V.A.D. to move to a hospital of her own choosing could be taken into account. Despite her awareness of these constraints, Dorothy persisted in the notion that it could be made to happen. She strengthened her case by telling her mother of one girl who, when she asked for a transfer 'pulled the thing off' — an anecdote tempted by caution, since she knew of another who 'did exactly the same thing at the same time and got and awful box

90 *Ibid.*
91 *Ibid.*
92 Devonshire House was the London residence of the Duke of Devonshire and became the wartime headquarters of the British Red Cross Society.

on the ears for suggesting it!!!!'[93] Dorothy appealed to her mother to tell her what to do: 'I also wonder if you were me you'd risk it and stay here.'[94] There was then, according to Dorothy, the possibility that something bad would happen if she stayed on, and she placed the responsibility for her future with her mother. If Dorothy were to be unhappy, get reprimanded, or have to spend time in the company of girls who did not hold the same beliefs and values, then it would be her mother's fault for not sorting the situation out. In this letter, Dorothy was explicit in her request for help: 'Mrs. Wolfe-Barry [Commandant of the Chelsea Division of the Voluntary Aid Detachment] may very well have some suggestions and I have no objection to her seeing this letter if you like.'

Margaret Robinson had intervened on her daughter's behalf in a letter to Mrs. Wolfe-Barry on a previous occasion in September 1916, when she informed the Commandant that 'my poor little Dorothy has had an awful time at the 1st Southern General Hospital in Birmingham.'[95] Dorothy was twenty at the time this letter was written, and Mrs. Robinson needed to make the point in her correspondence that not only was Dorothy someone of importance but also that she was a somewhat fragile and vulnerable individual. While Mrs. Robinson's letter to Mrs. Wolfe-Barry has not survived, the reply explained that 'I have written to her [Dorothy] and advised her to stay on in spite of the drawbacks. Only a few days ago I had an interview with one of the "brass hats" at Devonshire House about transfers and they are not at all [emphasis in original] in favour.'[96] In her referral to 'brass hats' — high ranking officers — Wolfe-Barry put the weight of the military as well as that of the Red Cross behind her advice, which was unequivocal; Dorothy should stay where she was and get on with it.

[93] Dorothy Robinson, letter to her mother, January 22, 1917: BRCMA, 330.
[94] *Ibid*.
[95] Margaret Robinson, letter to Mrs. Wolfe-Barry, September 5, 1916: BRCMA, 330.
[96] Mrs. Wolfe-Barry, letter to Margaret Robinson, January 25, 1917: BRCMA, 330.

Unfortunately for Dorothy, the result was not what she had hoped for. Dorothy did not accept this meekly, however, and wrote to her father. It is possible that, as a high ranking military officer himself, she thought that he would be able to take the matter further. She wrote:

> I will try Asquith's policy of 'wait and see.' If matters improve I'll sign on and if they don't I'll just resign on some score or another … I feel rather like Punch's man that if they lose the war they need not blame me, as I shall have offered my services!![97]

Dorothy's sense of superiority was brought into sharp conflict with her service. To dramatise her depth of feeling, however, Dorothy described herself as being in 'a wild fury' because leave had been cancelled.[98] Dorothy had tried to manipulate her situation by calling in favours from her family so that they could intervene on her behalf. In so doing, she showed little awareness of the needs of the hospital or the county in a time of national crises — something that crystallised in the suggestion that she would resign if she did not get her own way. Her willingness to walk away from her role demonstrated her unsuitably for the demands of service and professional competence as well as a complete lack of understanding of the concept of philanthropic volunteering. Dorothy was in fact furious with the hierarchy and her family's inability to affect change. From her perspective, if she did resign, then it would be due to no fault of her own. Dorothy felt that she was entitled to her demands even though they were not compatible with the needs of the hospital, the military, or the British Red Cross.

As this example suggests, by 1917 Dorothy had been part of the British Red Cross and served in a series of military hospitals for three years. Still, however, she remained unable

[97] Dorothy Robinson, letter to her father, February 22, 1917: BRCMA, 330.
[98] *Ibid*.

to reconcile herself to the fact that her familiar values and position of superiority no longer held any influence. She was quite prepared to walk away from her service in order to return to her old life where her own needs and desires had been paramount. The threat of leaving her duties carried with it the implications of desertion and being sent home in disgrace. It was a very strong statement of intent and one that would have been taken very seriously indeed. The punishment for desertion in the army were dire. While the consequences of Dorothy turning her back on her duties were not as serious, resigning would still have brought significant disgrace on herself and the family.[99] The rhetoric in the country around shirkers and conscientious objectors and those failing to do their duty had powerful social and cultural penalties.[100]

At moments like this, Dorothy was clearly using her letters home to provoke specific responses from her parents. Despite the exhortations to keep the contents private, on occasions Dorothy was willing for her parents to make certain things public for her, confident that their status, and social and military connections would influence things in her favour. Echoing her use of gossip and nicknames, rather than openly rebel and challenge authority, here Dorothy made use of the indirect power she possessed through her parents whilst maintaining an outward impression of consent. She required them to pull strings and mobilise their social and political influence on her behalf.

When Dorothy was about to sign on for a further six months service, she noted that the term on the form stated that the V.A.D. would serve 'home or abroad wherever was required.'[101] Dorothy did not want to commit to such an ambiguous agreement:

[99] Ilana R. Bet-El, *Conscripts: Forgotten Men of the Great War* (Gloucestershire. The History Press. 2009) 67, 151.
[100] Nicoletta F. Gullace, *'The Blood of Our Sons': Men, Women, and the Renegotiation of British Citizenship during the Great War* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillian, 2002), 181–4.
[101] Dorothy Robinson, letter to her father, April 27, 1916: BRCMA, 330.

> they can send you to Egypt or Mesopotamia of Malta or E. Africa besides France … I'll ask her [Matron] to scratch out abroad and then write to Miss Sidney Browne and tell her that although my name is only down for home service I am quite willing to go to France.[102]

Dorothy ignored the fact that a V.A.D. could be asked to serve wherever she was required; she felt that these rules should not apply to her and that she should be able to specify her own terms and conditions of service. By mentioning her intention to write to Browne, Matron-in-Chief of the Territorial Force Nursing Service, she indicated that she would like her parents to intervene on her behalf. She suggested this in a subtle way to her father when she asked him, 'do you think that this would be quite alright and sensible?' Dorothy's family were mobilised into action by this request, and Dorothy expressed her delight at her mother's response: 'How simply ripping of you to have gone and seen both Miss Amy Hughes & Miss Sidney Browne. You always do seem to be able to get hold of the right kind of information somehow.' Dorothy was not surprised that her mother had intervened on her behalf and gave a rather ringing endorsement of the action.[103]

Conclusion

As this chapter has shown, familiarity with military rank and structure did not make V.A.D.s like Dorothy Robinson more accepting of their place in the pre-existing hierarchy of the military hospitals and the nursing profession. For Dorothy, indeed, the status she imagined she had because of the high military rank of her father and grandfather should have been

[102] *Ibid.* Miss Sidney Browne was Matron-in-Chief of the Territorial Force Nursing Service 1910–1920 and was a prominent member of the standing committee which considered the conditions under which V.A.D. nurses could be employed in military hospitals. See Susan McGann, The Battle of the Nurses: A Study of Eight Women Who Influenced the Development of Professional Nursing, 1880–1930 (London: Scutari, 1992), 80–102.

[103] Amy Hughes was the superintendent of the Queen Victoria's Jubilee Institute for Nurses: *Enid Fox,"Hughes, Amy Sarah (1856–1923), nursing administrator,"* Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, http://www.oxforddnb.com.ezproxyd.bham.ac.uk/view/article/61789, accessed May 31, 2017.

acknowledged by her nursing superiors and resulted in a more senior position within the hierarchy. Throughout the correspondence, it is clear that social and family status were more important than professional knowledge, skills, and experience. Dorothy's inability to secure a more senior position within the V.A.D., and her ensuing frustration, meant that the themes of superiority and status became more important to her. Dorothy was aware of the influence her parents had both in society and in the military, and she assumed that this would enable them to intervene on her behalf and sway events in her favour.

This chapter has also shown how, for Dorothy, like other V.A.D.s or servicemen during the Great War, letter writing was much more than a means of keeping in touch or a psychological activity where she poured out her own feelings; often her letters appeared to be designed to provoke specific responses from her mother and father. Dorothy's letters were intended to be read only by the recipients and were written with an immediacy in response to a particular event; they were written without the insight that is often gained after thought and reflection. What is striking in these letters is that we are allowed insight into the private thoughts and feelings of those occupying a subordinate position in a military hospital. Through this, it is possible to gain a richer picture of what it felt like for someone of superior social status to be subject to institutionalised power and domination.

Dorothy's letters have shown that she was aware of the rules of the organisation and the associated expectations of behaviour which meant compliance. Despite this, Dorothy struggled to come to terms with what she was being asked to do and felt that her privileged position meant that she was entitled to a different set of rules. While Dorothy's unfamiliar role as subordinate would have prevented her from expressing her true feelings to her superiors, the letters afforded a space in which she was able to give voice to her own opinions about those around her and the situation she was in. She was able to speak the words she

was unable to articulate towards authority figures and test out her reactions without the risk of openly rebelling.

Dorothy's social status and association with the military hierarchy meant that she enjoyed a certain amount of power and privilege in society, and she used her letters to reinforce, to herself, her superiority and improve her subordinate status within the hospital. The letters became a *cri de coeur* to her parents. Often working as a deliberate 'call to arms', by strategically sharing information with her parents, the letters contained an implicit expectation of intervention from them on her behalf. Rather than directly challenge those in authority, Dorothy adopted a safer course of action by complaining to her parents in her letters with the knowledge that they would intervene whilst at the same time shielding her from the consequences.[104] Because of her superior social status, Dorothy was representative of many women who volunteered to serve as a V.A.D. during the Great War. Close reading of Dorothy Robinson's correspondence has enabled an understanding of the wider tensions around V.A.D.s and the difficulties they found in adjusting to an alternative, professional hierarchy. Consequently, this chapter has demonstrated that Dorothy's sense of entitlement resulted in behaviour such as gossip and challenging authority figures. This together with her attempts to get her mother to intervene on her behalf, work together to challenge the myth of the selfless, uncomplaining V.A.D.

[104] James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990), 1–4.

Chapter 4

Patriotism and Duty in Helen Beale's Letters

Introduction

This chapter analyses the wartime experience of Helen Beale, the youngest daughter of a financially successful upper middle-class family, during her seven years serving as a nurse with the Voluntary Aid Detachment (V.A.D.) of the British Red Cross between 1911 and 1918. Set against the discussion of Dorothy Robinson's letters in the previous chapter, Helen Beale's time as a volunteer nurse presents a case study through which it is possible to explore the very different ways in which V.A.D. nurses negotiated their wartime experiences and the difficulties they faced finding their place within a professional hierarchy. Drawing upon Helen's correspondence with friends and family, particularly during her service in France, and a short-lived private diary, the chapter shows that despite the similarities in their voluntary role, Helen's coping mechanisms and the way she made sense other experiences differed greatly from Dorothy's.[1] Both women experienced tensions associated with their superior social class and their subordinate position in a professional organisation; for both, maintaining family relationships through correspondence formed a pivotal part of their support network, just as ideas about home and domesticity provided a rich resource through which they negotiated the emotional experience of service.

As historians like Maggie Andrews and Michael Roper have shown, during the Great War the idea of home came to symbolise not only a physical space but also a space of emotional security and belonging. The war disrupted lives and families by uprooting those

[1] Correspondence of Miss H. Beale: British Red Cross Museum and Archives, London (hereafter BRCMA), 1407.

who served in whatever capacity.[2] For Helen, this separation from her family proved to be very difficult. Prolific letter writing, especially to her mother and sister, was an essential means of maintaining contact with her family throughout her time away, as well as addressing the demands of nursing in military hospitals close to the front line. The traumatic aspect of war for these women volunteers was not only due to the risks to their health and their lives but was also attributed, in part, to what Santanu Das calls 'the agony of witnessing.'[3] This was integral to Helen's experiences and to the trauma she sought to address through writing her letters. Faced with the terrible suffering of those in her care, a nurse had to cope with feelings of anguish and helplessness; a profound, emotional response to the pain and suffering of those she nursed.

Context

Helen Beale was born into an upper middle-class family in 1885. At the outbreak of war, she lived with her mother and sister in their Sussex home, 'Standen', with a significant number of household servants. Both of Helen's parents — James and Margaret — came from influential families in Birmingham, and James worked as a solicitor in the successful family law firm, Beale & Co., which achieved great financial reward for its high profile work with the Midland Railway in the late nineteenth century. The couple moved to London in 1868 where their seven children, of whom Helen was the youngest, were born.[4] Janet Watson portrays Helen and her family as a group of people for whom the concept of patriotic duty was notable, and this is reflected in how many of them volunteered for some kind of

2 Maggie Andrews, "Ideas and Ideals of Domesticity and the Home in the First World War," in *The Home Front in Britain: Images, Myths and Forgotten Experiences since 1914*, ed. Maggie Andrews and Janis Lomas (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), chap. 1; Michael Roper, *The Secret Battle: Emotional Survival in the Great War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010)

3 Santanu Das, *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 27.

4 *Census Returns of England and Wales, 1901*: Class: RG13; Piece: 20; Folio: 152; Page: 10, https://www.ancestry.co.uk/interactive/7814/LNDRG13_19_20, accessed August 8, 2019.

service during the war.[5] As members of the upper middle class, the Beales carried out their patriotic duty in a manner which reflected society's expectations of what was deemed an appropriate response to a just war.[6]

At the outbreak of the Great War, Helen's male relatives, including cousins, who were not working in protected industries, volunteered to serve in the military.[7] Helen, her sisters, and sisters-in-law were already V.A.D.s or volunteers in YMCA canteens. In Edwardian society, it was not unusual for girls of Helen's social class to carry out some kind of voluntary work; philanthropic activities such as volunteering, according to historians such as F.K. Prochaska were 'the leisured woman's most obvious outlet for self-expression.'[8] So, like a great many young women of the upper middle class, Helen and her sister Margaret had joined the Voluntary Aid Detachment of the local branch of The Red Cross in 1911.[9] As previous chapters have shown, being nursing members of a Voluntary Aid Detachment involved a rudimentary training: the syllabus provided by the Red Cross for its volunteers consisted of classes in first aid and home nursing as well as hygiene and sanitation. At the end of this training, candidates would be expected to pass oral, written, and practical examinations in order to be awarded a certificate of competency.[10] On 11 December 1914, Helen wrote to her sister that she was taking written and practical exams and so, by the time she volunteered to work in military hospitals in 1914, Helen had acquired considerable

5 For a more detailed biography, see Janet S.K. Watson, *Fighting Different Wars: Experience, Memory, and the First World War in Britain*, Studies in the Social and Cultural History of Modern Warfare 16 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), "A Family at War: The Beales of Standen," chapter 4.
6 Watson, *Fighting Different Wars*, 147.
7 Watson, *Fighting Different Wars*, 150–51.
8 F.K. Prochaska, *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-century England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 5. See also, Eve Colpus, *Female Philanthropy in the Interwar World: Between Self and Other* (London, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018) and Seth Koven, *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London* (Princeton, N.J., Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006).
9 Watson, *Fighting Different Wars*, 148.
10 The British Red Cross Society, Form C. Red Cross Voluntary Aid Detachments. First Aid Nursing, And Hygiene and Sanitation Certificates. February 1914: BRCMA, RCB/2/8/5/4.

knowledge and experience of hospital routines as well as gaining certificates in home nursing and first aid.[11]

Despite her pre-war experience in a Voluntary Aid Detachment, Helen was apprehensive about her abilities to cope with the responsibility of nursing seriously wounded and acutely sick soldiers. Although always eager to appear patriotic, her negative feelings and self-doubt emerged in her letters through her explicit references to how taxing and difficult she found the work of a nurse. These emotions were communicated alongside a strong desire to return home and be amongst her loved ones. In this context, the discussion that follows uses Helen's experience to make a contribution to the wider historiographical debates about emotional survival in wartime — debates that have mainly focused on the experience of men.[12] Popular histories of the Great War have reinforced the claim that service and patriotic citizenship was a masculine experience.[13] Like many other women, however, Helen Beale's wartime experiences traversed the boundaries between the front line and home front. Using her as a case study, this chapter thus shows that women serving on the front line were subject to the same tensions and fears as their male counterparts. Helen's letters provide striking evidence of how the rhetoric of patriotic duty and service was more powerful than social class and privilege in shaping her understanding and experience of war, although both of these themes were always in conflict in her letters. At the same time as she wrote about missing her home and family, Helen wondered how long the war would last and when she would be able to return to England. This sense of geographical and temporal distance was expressed in the desire to recreate a representation of home in an unfamiliar setting and the

11 Helen Beale, letter to sister Margaret, December 11, 1914: BRCMA, 1407.
12 Michael Roper, *The Secret Battle: Emotional Survival in the Great War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010).
13 Kimberley Jensen, "Gender and Citizenship," in *Gender and the Great War*, ed. Susan R. Grayzel and Tammy M. Proctor (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), chap. 1.

comfort and security that home represented.[14] As the final section of the chapter demonstrates, however, Helen's attempts to manage her emotional and material experience of warfare were ultimately unsuccessful: at the end of January 1918, unable to cope with the demands of working in a military hospital, she made the difficult decision to leave her position as a V.A.D.

As this suggests, ideas of patriotic duty and family were powerful ideals in shaping Helen Beale's sense of self and wartime volunteering. An analysis of Helen's correspondence reveals how she and her family believed strongly in the rhetoric of service and citizenship, and offers new insight into ways in which young women, often away from home for the first time, coped with the anxiety of working in a tense and stressful environment for which they were often unprepared. Unlike Dorothy Robinson, Helen Beale's experience of nursing and military hospitals was not exclusively about conflict with her professional superiors, rank, hierarchy, and social privilege. Instead, as the chapter that follows shows, Helen's wartime correspondence with her family allows an exploration of how the power of ideas of family, home, patriotism, and national service enabled a privileged young woman to deal with those experiences.

Despite her strong ties to home and family, at the outbreak of the Great War Helen responded to the compelling sense of patriotic duty that characterised both her own family and the wider rhetoric of a country now at war. Together the War Office and the British Red Cross contributed towards the strong rhetoric of crisis and emergency in the nursing profession and urged existing volunteers like Helen, already in possession of some rudimentary training and with a grounding in working on the wards, to come forward to

[14] Jeffrey Stephen Reznick, *Healing the Nation: Soldiers and the Culture of Caregiving in Britain during the Great War*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press: distributed in the United States exclusively by Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), "Homes Away from Home: Rest Huts and War Weary Soldiers," chap. 2; Roper, *The Secret Battle*; Carol Acton, "Writing and Waiting: The First World War Correspondence between Vera Brittain and Roland Leighton," *Gender & History* 11, no. 1 (April 1, 1999): 54–83, https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0424.00129.

serve their country. In February 1915, concern in The War Office about the shortage of professional nursing staff was growing and the *Red Cross* journal published a letter written to the Chairman of the Voluntary Aid Detachment Committee by Sir Alfred Keogh, former director-general of the army medical service and head of the Red Cross.[15] Keogh suggested that 'members of the recognized detachments of the Voluntary Aid Detachments might be advantageously employed and so enable us [The War Office] to release a number of fully trained nurses for duty ….'[16] The *Red Cross* believed that though the intention was 'to employ in the first instance a limited number, it is practically certain that the number which will shortly be required is to be reckoned not in hundreds but thousands …' thereby exacerbating the sense of crisis.[17] The journal continued:

> this is a question of patriotism. They [V.A.D. members who are not serving in military hospitals] are now privileged to make a serious personal sacrifice; and looking at it in that light, we cannot doubt that, in every case where it is at all possible they will respond with no less alacrity than that which has distinguished the action of their brothers fighting for them at The Front.[18]

Confronted by such exhortations, this intense mood of patriotic duty became a defining emotion for Helen Beale. In April or May 1915, she wrote to Katharine Furse, Commandant in Chief of the Voluntary Aid Detachment to ask for clarification about the terms of service and, although we do not have Helen's letter, we have Furse's response.[19] Furse wrote to Helen, 'if the member has First Aid and Home Nursing Certificates, hospital training is not essential, though an advantage, should everything else be satisfactory.' Helen, who had

[15] Mark Harrison, "*Keogh, Sir Alfred (1857 – 1936) army medical officer*, http://www.oxforddnb.com.ezproxyd.bham.ac.uk/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-34296?rskey=r58wPs&result=1, accessed August 31, 2018.
[16] Alfred Keogh D.G., "The Army Medical Service and V.A.D. Members," *The Red Cross*, March, 1915, 62
[17] "Response to letter from Alfred Keogh," *The Red Cross*, March, 1915, 62.
[18] *Ibid*., 63.
[19] Katharine Furse, letter to Helen Beale, May 8, 1915: BRCMA, 1407.

volunteered as a V.A.D. for four years before she began her service and had both of the certificates Furse referred to, was therefore not typical of the image of the 'gently nurtured girls who walked straight out of Edwardian drawing rooms' into the horrors of war.[20] This might suggest that this was itself a stereotype and that the extent of female volunteering was already widespread before the Great War. Her previous experience meant that she was in the ideal position to make a more significant contribution once it became clear that nursing the sick and wounded placed the nursing profession under great strain.

It was against this background of crisis and patriotism that Helen responded to the call. Her service record showed that she served as a full-time V.A.D. nurse in military hospitals from 13 March 1915 to January 1918. During that time, she carried out her duties at King George's Military Hospital from March 1915. This hospital, near Waterloo Station in London, was considered to be the largest military hospital in the UK and, with around 2,000 staff, it had the capacity to care for 1,600 casualties.[21] She served there before going overseas in August 1915 where she spent thirteen months at Number 26 General Hospital, a base hospital situated near Etaples, in France.[22] The duties and responsibilities of the V.A.D. nurses serving in military hospitals were not specific, and it was made clear to them all that, under the authority of the Matron, they were to 'be prepared to carry out anything they were asked to do willingly and promptly without question ….'[23] V.A.D. nurses like Helen, with a basic level of training could expect to be asked to carry out practical tasks such as bandaging, care of medical equipment, and basic first aid techniques in line with the training they had received in first aid and home nursing.[24]

[20] Lyn Macdonald, *The Roses of No Man's Land* (London: Penguin 1993), 11.
[21] *The British Journal of Nursing*, May 29, 1915, 456.
[22] War Time Volunteers and Personnel records, https://vad.redcross.org.uk/Card?fname=Helen&sname=Beale&id=14464, accessed August 9, 2017,
[23] The British Red Cross Society, Instructions fo. V.A.D. Members Serving in Hospitals. July, 1915: BRCMA, RCB/ 2/8/5/29.
[24] The British Red Cross Society, First Aid, Nursing and Hygiene and Sanitation Certificates. February, 1914: BRCMA, RCB/2/8/5/4.

We do not know what duties Helen carried out as a V.A.D. nurse before she began her service in military hospitals in 1915, but they were almost certainly different and less demanding than those expected of her once she began working on the wards in a military hospital. The letters she wrote at the beginning of her wartime service in August 1915 revealed that she felt out of her depth with what she was being asked to do. These letters showed that Helen quickly realised that what she was doing was not simply an extension of the duties she had carried out as a volunteer before the war. The transition to wartime service was thus arduous and, at times, challenging. As the war continued, then, in order to cope with the pressure she was experiencing, Helen's long and informative letters were written on a daily basis. Although most of the correspondence was between Helen and her mother, she also wrote to her sister and female cousins. The letters became a site where Helen tried to make sense of her difficult transition from charitable volunteer at home during peacetime to nurse on the front line of a conflict.

Keeping in Touch

Just as keeping in touch with friends, family, and loved ones was a vital coping mechanism for the men on the Front Line, it proved to be an integral part of Helen's wartime experience too.[25] Despite three years' previous experience of being a volunteer nurse Helen wrote, in March 1914, that the first morning on duty in a military hospital was 'rather trying' and described how she 'turned green' when assisting with dressings. Later that day, she was asked to make the beds and immediately felt 'more useful.' She was more comfortable carrying out basic, domestic tasks such as bed making — the very jobs Dorothy felt were beneath her.[26] By December of that year, she described her shift as 'a perfect nightmare' and

[25] Roper, *The Secret Battle*, "Keeping In Touch," chap. 1, 47–85.
[26] Helen Beale, letter to Susan, March 11, 1914: BRCMA, 1407.

wrote that she had 'serious thoughts of giving up.' She was on duty alone and had 'two fomentations [poultices], a dressing and four 4 hourly charts to fill in.' 'Tempers' Helen recounted, 'were rather frayed.' [27] As such comments suggest, Helen experienced considerable stress and anxiety when nursing men with dreadful injuries whilst at the same time she missed the safety, support, and comfort of her family. The early correspondence, in particular, evokes the steep learning curve V.A.D. nurses like Helen faced at the outbreak of war. In sharp contrast to the letter of December 1914, where she suggested a desire to give up and come home, two months later in February 1915, Helen wrote in more prosaic tone: 'I am glad to have come but there isn't really quite enough to do to make it really exciting ….'[28] The emotional conflict Helen worked out in her letters in this period of her service was one of confusion and anxiety: if she perceived that she didn't have enough to do then it wasn't 'exciting', yet when she was given the responsibility for nursing duties she communicated an inability to cope and wanted to give up. In this context, the correspondence suggests how Helen was navigating a sense of living on the edge, where she wanted excitement without the bloody and sometimes mundane reality of the work of a nurse. Helen communicated a paradoxical image of what she thought being a V.A.D. in wartime would involve. Despite the thrill of the idea of nursing severely injured men, the reality of the responsibility of caring for these men and confronting their injuries caused great anxiety. As a result, the tensions between expectation and the harsh reality of wartime nursing were negotiated throughout her letters home.

Like Dorothy Robinson, Helen Beale used letter writing as a mechanism through which to make sense of her experiences as a wartime nurse. As the discussion above shows, Helen was confronted with feelings of anxiety and inadequacy as she struggled to cope with the

[27] Helen Beale, letter to Susan, December 21, 1914: BRCMA, 1407.
[28] Helen Beale, letter to Susan, February 5, 1915: BRCMA, 1407.

demands of nursing seriously wounded soldiers on the Front Line in France, and, away from her family for the first time, Helen struggled to cope with these emotions which were exacerbated by homesickness. In her letters, Dorothy used the privileges associated with her superior social status to improve her experiences of working in an unfamiliar hierarchy; she called on her family to use their influence in society and hoped that this would change things for her. Despite their similar social backgrounds, Helen did not attempt to use her higher social position to her advantage. Indeed, in contrast to Dorothy, her letters contained more evidence of a determination to serve her country as best she could. When Dorothy Robinson wrote to her family, she complained that she had to carry out jobs that she felt were beneath her as part of her probationary training. Helen had been a volunteer since 1911 and had passed the required examinations and was therefore no longer a probationer. This meant she was able to begin her ward duties as soon as she began working in military hospitals. Despite this experience and basic training, however, Helen's letters demonstrated that, although she was very willing and had a keen sense of patriotic duty, without the support of her family around her, she struggled to cope with the work of a wartime nurse.

Helen's decision to volunteer for work overseas met with universal approval amongst a family for whom patriotic duty seemed to be instinctive. As the historian, Janet Watson has shown, the wartime experiences of the Beale family were underpinned by unquestioning patriotism and duty to their country. As the discussion that follows suggests, however, a close reading of Helen's correspondence shows the complexities and ambiguities of Helen's own sense of patriotic citizenship, and the ways in which a sense of duty existed in constant tension with feelings of inadequacy in her role and a desire to return home. Yet, in their letters to Helen, the pride of her family was clearly articulated in what Watson characterises as the 'enormous amount of reflected glory' they felt at her efforts.[29] In 1915 Helen's mother

[29] Watson, *Fighting Different Wars*, 146–82.

Margaret, unable to actively participate in any war work herself, wrote that she felt that by 'undertaking to do without [her daughter] for six months' she had made her own patriotic sacrifice and, in doing so, transferred her own feelings of sacrificial service on to Helen.[30] Recruitment campaigns frequently focused on the appeal to mothers to 'Give Up Your Sons.'[31] The language used by Margaret in response to her daughter serving on the Front Line illustrated that the notion of patriotic motherhood was not a concept that was restricted to the relationship between mothers and their sons.

Throughout August 1915, during her first weeks in France, Helen received several letters from female family members and friends. Each affirmed her devotion to her country and the subsequent desire to serve and often expressed their envy of Helen's work overseas.[32] A letter received in January 1916 from one family member, for example, stated, 'I quite envy you sometimes, but am afraid there is no chance of me joining you.'[33] Such letters of approval and delight in Helen's work as a V.A.D. continued for some months. They not only reinforced the message that Helen was serving her country, but affirmed that she was fulfilling a sense of duty to the family. Bolstered by these comments Helen's belief in her reasons for volunteering to serve was reinforced but with the added pressure that if she did not succeed then she would be failing both her country and her family. Situated within this wider conversation, it was not surprising that Helen's letters to her family communicated a devotion to her duties and desire to be a nurse. As she wrote to her mother in October 1915: 'it's a great time to be out here and a thing to remember for always and I wouldn't be missing it for anything ….'[34] However, as time went on and Helen's desire to return home became stronger, the overwhelming expressions of support for her work from home made these

[30] *Ibid*.
[31] Nicoletta F. Gullace, *'The Blood of Our Sons': Men, Women, and the Renegotiation of British Citizenship during the Great War* (New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2002), 55–9.
[32] *Ibid*.
[33] Unknown, letter to Helen, January 3. 1916 [Signature is not legible]: BRCMA, 1407.
[34] Helen Beale, letter to mother, October 3, 1915: BRCMA, 1407.

feelings more difficult to manage. Unable to leave or to control her future, Helen found herself under considerable strain. Increasingly, the letters became a place where she was able to work out her moral dilemma — whether she should stay in France and serve or return home.

Home became an important theme in Helen's correspondence whilst she served overseas. Recreating the familiar in her living quarters and frequently revisiting her home life in her imagination was one way that Helen attempted to control her situation and the difficulties she experienced. Thoughts and memories of home were crucial not only in maintaining relationships with those left behind, but also in a very real and material sense. Like the soldiers analysed by Michael Roper, nurses like Helen Beale struggled to make sense of the challenges of unfamiliar surroundings and demanding roles. Home life and its associated comforts were a source of inspiration, hope, and support for many of those serving on the Front Line. Running through letters written by servicemen and women alike were strong references to home that formed a pervasive theme that suggested a yearning for a simpler life, free from the terror and disruption of battle.[35]

Just as nostalgic thoughts of home became a powerful coping mechanism for many soldiers during wartime, Helen's letters show how the concept of 'home' was also an important trope for all who were serving abroad and not just those involved in combat. Michael Roper refers to the psychoanalytic theories of Freud and Klein to explore how deeply the emotional responses to war were formed by the individual's relationships and communication with others.[36] It was the close attachment between the men and their mothers, and consequently their attachment to their homes that shaped their experiences. A close reading of Helen's letters raises interesting questions around how this played out in

[35] Rachel Duffett, *The Stomach For Fighting Food And The Soldiers Of The Great War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), 200; Reznik, *Healing The Nation*, chapter 2; Roper, *The Secret Battle*, 69–70, 184, 279.
[36] Roper, *The Secret Battle*, 23–7.

the relationships between women and their mothers. It is therefore impossible to examine Helen's experiences without considering the unconscious dreams and desires that she expressed in her letters through reference to her daydreams and imaginings, where she thought herself back home. Family and home life were something so important to Helen that her domestic idyll was recreated and secured through the decoration of her accommodation in France, in her writings, and in her imagination.

It was the power of these ideals that meant organisations like Talbot House, more commonly known as TOC H, the Church Army, and the YMCA recognised the importance of home life and sought to provide such care and comfort for men on the Front Line.[37] Domestic rather than military ideals were central to the vision of these organisations, which recognised the power of the rhetoric and experience of home in maintaining morale. The creation of this domestic idyll was a feminine task however and reinforced the pre-war gender stereotypes of women as carers and homemakers. There was little consideration for the fact that the women also found themselves away from home, often for the first time, in a foreign land. The aim of the Church Army Rest Huts was 'to replicate whenever and wherever possible the meaning and social experience of home away from home.'[38] As this suggests, such facilities were created to offer an alternative space away from the unfamiliar and chaotic experiences of war. YMCA huts, similarly, were decorated to specific detail and expected to offer a 'cheerful and welcoming homeliness, and everything that helps that….'[39] Helen's letters showed how important this was for her too when she wrote home to her mother whilst carrying out duties in the mess tent that she felt it 'very necessary to make things comfortable and home-like.'

[37] P.B. Clayton, *Tales of Talbot House in Poperinge & Ypres* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1919). Talbot House was a rest house for troops, founded by TOC H and located in The Ypres Salient, Poperinge, Belgium; P.B. Clayton, *Plain Tails from Flanders.* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1929); Arthur K. Yapp, *Told in the Huts The Y.M.C.A Gift Book.* (USA: Literary Licensing) Classic Reprint of 1916 edition.
[38] Reznick, *Healing the Nation,*17, 18.
[39] Reznick, *Healing the Nation,* 23.

Volunteering in a Time of War

Pre-war membership of the Voluntary Aid Detachment was shaped by ideas of philanthropy and good works popular amongst the leisured upper middle-class women of the nineteenth and early twentieth century.[40] For Helen and many like her, the war brought about a change in the rhetoric of philanthropic volunteering to that of patriotic citizenship. Before the war, volunteers were free to leave the organisation at any time but the nature of wartime volunteering changed due to its association with duty and service and became a more rigorous system similar to that of conscription.[41]

The V.A.D.s signed on to work in military hospitals overseas for a period of six months at a time. When her initial term of service was drawing to a close in January 1916, Helen's desire to come home was brought into sharp contrast with the call of patriotic duty. Writing to her mother, she commented: 'As far as signing on again goes we can't see any good or valid reason against not doing so except that of course we want to see our folks ….'[42] Given the strong rhetoric of citizenship that pervaded the correspondence with her family, Helen did not write with herself as the subject of this dilemma. Instead, she chose to convey herself as part of a collective struggle with deciding whether to sign on for a further six months. This was a clear example of a coping strategy through which Helen distanced herself from the turmoil she was feeling. Implicit in the comment that there was no good or valid reason to leave was the idea that she had tried to think of one. The struggle for Helen was very clearly identified — she wanted to see her family. The letter continued: 'the feeling seems to be pretty strong that one ought to stop … [I] broached the subject to matron the other day and she said that for the men's sake she felt very strongly … that folks should stop for the

[40] Prochaska, *Women and Philanthropy*.
[41] Ilana R Bet-El, *Conscripts.* (New York: The History Press, 2013), 27, 185–8.
[42] Helen Beale, letter to her mother, January 24, 1916: BRCMA, 1407.

second six months ….'[43] The tension between duty and a desire to leave were clearly played out in this letter. Helen used the word 'strong' to describe the sense that she ought to stay, alluding to the continued potency and power of her feeling of patriotic duty. Helen used this letter to negotiate her feelings and communicated that it was 'for the men's sake' that she would stay on for another six months as she was unable to find a compelling argument to support her wish to be with her family again.

In letters like this, it is clear that ideas of patriotism provided the overriding schema which framed Helen's response to her wartime experiences. Despite this, however, the correspondence was also shaped by social class and status. It is clear that Helen experienced a dissonance similar to that of Dorothy Robinson when confronted with situations which challenged her sense of social superiority. Despite the fact that her letters home in September 1915 communicated that she considered it a 'wonderful experience being out here at such a time,' there were aspects of being a V.A.D. that she found challenging.[44] Like Dorothy, Helen struggled with her position of subordination within the professional society and worried about how her status would appear to others. Later in September 1915, she wrote

> this is a quaint life … it was the day for [pay] the other day. I do so dislike being solemnly paid by matron as if I was a scullery-maid!! … Miss Pring and I both object to ourselves so strongly in our outdoor coats and hats and these beastly dresses with stiff collars making us look exactly as if we were out to clean the steps.[45]

The duties of nurse and the work on the wards challenged Helen's sense of place in the class system. Yet she was most unsettled by the outward and very obvious signs that signified to her, and everyone around her, that she occupied a subordinate place in the hierarchy. The

[43] *Ibid*.
[44] Helen Beale, letter to her mother, September 30, 1915: BRCMA, 1407.
[45] Helen Beale, letter to her mother, October 12, 1915: BRCMA, 1407.

public and physical act of giving and receiving money in reward for labour made her feel as if she was a scullery maid — a person who occupied the lowest rank (and was often the youngest) within the domestic household.

Even though wearing a uniform would allow Helen the opportunity to convey her patriotic identity, she intensely disliked her outdoor uniform. Wearing a uniform for work did not pose a problem — indeed, it was difficult to distinguish between the uniforms of the V.A.D.s and the professional nurses and therefore her uniform allowed her to identify with the role of nurse. Yet the uniform that V.A.D.s were required to wear outdoors when off-duty elicited very strong feelings of objection. Helen described the dresses as 'beastly' and drew particular attention to the 'stiff collars' which suggested a feeling of being choked and restricted by the outfit. The fact that the uniforms were to be worn out in public meant that she could easily be mistaken for a servant about to undertake some menial, domestic task. There was an irony in Helen's strong objection to wearing a uniform in a period when men wearing their uniform in public came to signify heroism.[46] Uniform played a significant role in the process of conveying the understanding of characteristics associated with professionalism and status. Despite the strong rhetoric of duty and patriotism in the Beale family, the physical discomfort expressed by Helen demonstrated that, with class divisions deeply embedded in society, this could not override her associations between dress and social class. It was remarkable that she should think of 'cleaning the steps', the very act of which would be carried out in public on one's hands and knees; a demeaning and servile posture which left onlookers in no doubt as to the social status of the worker. Helen felt socially out of place when seen in her uniform away from the wards in a way that she found deeply uncomfortable and this was reinforced by the fear that, if people did not know she

[46] Laura Ugolini, "War-Stained: British Combatants and Uniforms, 1914–18," *War & Society* 33, no. 3 (n.d.): 155–71.

was a V.A.D. nurse, they would mistake her for a domestic servant. While nursing, with its close association to patriotic duty, was fine, domestic service and the associated lower position in a social hierarchy was not. Strikingly, given the strength of the rhetoric of service and selfless heroism that dominated Helen's letters, this proximity to domestic service became a flashpoint on which she fixated.

France and First Impressions

Despite the difficulties of adjusting to the demands of wartime nursing and the struggle with the troubling proximity to domestic service, Helen's initial letters home conveyed an enthusiasm for nursing and reflected her eagerness to be in France. On her arrival in Etaples in August 1915, she immediately wrote her mother a letter that was full of hope and excitement for what lay ahead. She described the journey over as 'an absolutely steady one and we did it in style on account of our royalty who proved to be Princess Victoria of Schleswig Holstein on a visit of inspection of YMCA huts.'[47] This comment indicated Helen's approach to her impending service: she drew attention to the calm crossing and the fact that she shared the journey with a princess. Helen was not feeling any nervousness or doubt about her decision to go overseas. Being accompanied by royalty was a powerful sign of the noble work she was about to undertake in the service of her country.

When Helen arrived in France, she saw that there was a job to be done. From this perspective, she suggested, V.A.D.s were fulfilling an important role as they eased the strain felt by the nursing profession. While a letter of 18 August 1915 described an atmosphere that made the V.A.D.s feel 'like interlopers,' Helen noted how 'in my ward they are very pleasant and I think appreciative of one's efforts. The ward is so busy that I really can't think

[47] Helen Beale, letter to her mother, August 13, 1915: BRCMA, 1407.

how they did manage.'[48] By the end of September, Helen she said that she thought she was going to like it in France and described the ward Sister as, 'nice and human to work with.' She concluded: 'it is rather nice to feel that one is saving these folks a little for they do work hard.'[49] She told her mother that it had been 'a wonderful experience being out here through such a time.'[50] It was 'wonderful' to be in a place where she felt needed and the letters written in early August 1915 expressed a thrill and excitement as well as a sense of personal satisfaction. Helen considered her wartime duty important, and she expressed delight at the fact that she and her fellow V.A.D.s were able to ease the burden on the professional nurses in a time of crisis. In such comments, the choice of language reflected Helen's vision of the heroic and sacrificial nature of the V.A.D.s' service and echoed the official version of the V.A.D. role in wartime.

The Fight for Right

The letters that Helen Beale wrote between August 1915 and February 1916 suggest both her efforts to maintain an attitude to her duties characterised by cheerful service and sacrifice, and the difficulties this process posed. The correspondence is punctuated by expressions of intolerance of those who did not display those qualities — evidence, perhaps, of how a perceived lack of enthusiasm in others challenged Helen to confront her own negative feelings. In order to cope with any feelings of doubt, Helen often turned to the writings of wartime propagandist, Sir Francis Younghusband to boost her devotion to duty and country. Born in 1863, Younghusband was known for being an explorer, geographer, and commissioned soldier who founded the Fight for Right Movement in 1916.[51]

[48] Helen Beale, letter to her mother, August 18, 1915: BRCMA, 1407.
[49] Helen Beale, letter to Susan, August, 1915: BRCMA, 1407.
[50] Helen Beale, letter to her mother, September 30, 1915: BRCMA, 1407.
[51] David Matless, *"Younghusband, Sir Francis Edward*," Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, accessed October 2, 2018,

Membership of the movement included such prominent people as William Temple (later Archbishop of Canterbury); poet and novelist, Henry Newbolt; foreign correspondent (and later editor) of *The Times*, Henry Wickham Steed; and religious writer, Evelyn Underhill.[52] The precepts of the Fight for Right were shaped by Younghusband's deeply held imperialistic, religious, and philosophical beliefs. The preface to the book, *For The Right*, edited by Younghusband, stated: 'After the first outburst of enthusiasm there was special difficulty, in Great Britain, in maintaining keenness for the war.' He went on to say that 'there seemed, therefore, to be scope for an organization whose business it would be to continually remind the nation of the ideals and principles for which we were fighting.'[53] Younghusband recruited the services of people who he believed were 'leaders in thought and art' to inspire the nation and 'inculcate a spirit of patriotism … based on the profoundest depth of religious feeling.'[54]

As this suggests, the Fight for Right campaign encouraged people to accept the personal sacrifices necessary to bring the conflict to a satisfactory conclusion.[55] Younghusband described it as 'an organisation whose business it would be to continually remind the nation of the ideals and principles for which we were fighting.'[56] *The Spectator* published a letter in December 1915, written by Younghusband and other members of the organisation, which gave an account of the first public meeting of the movement. Using the rhetoric of patriotism and religious duty, the letter sought to 'bring home to the audience the great spiritual issues of the war and the deep personal responsibility of every citizen.' The aims of the organisation thus included its intention to 'help in rousing men and women for enthusiastic service in this

http://www.oxforddnb.com.ezproxye.bham.ac.uk/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-37084?rskey=pJF5V2&result=1

52 Francis Younghusband, ed., *For The Right. Essays and Addresses by Members of the Fight for Right Movement* (London: T. Fisher Unwin,1916). Reprint (Lightning Source: 2008)

53 *Ibid*., iii–iv.

54 *Ibid*., iv.

55 *Ibid*.

56 *Ibid*., iii.

high cause; and to aid each in finding the particular form of service best suited to him or her,' and 'sustain the spirit of those men and women who are already serving.'[57]

Helen Beale was, apparently, a committed support of the Fight for Right movement. When confronted by difficult feelings (either in herself or amongst her colleagues), the rhetoric and published material of the organisation provided renewed confidence in her devotion to duty and patriotic citizenship. In a letter to her sister Margaret in February 1916, Helen wrote at length:

> I'm so interested to see a 'Fight for Right' paper or two. It does certainly seem a fine scheme and I hope it may prosper. It would be a very good thing for us here to have Sir. F Younghusband to give us a speech I think just to shake us up and remind everybody that their own particular little … grievance … isn't all important. It's hard to keep a sense of proportion about it unless you keep on reminding yourself! I couldn't help asking one little person who was feeling dreadful ill-used and sorry for herself at lunch the other day because her particular friend couldn't get her time off to match her own whether she knew there was a big war on! She took it very nicely I must say and didn't make any more fuss.[58]

Implicit in comments like this, was Helen's need to make sense of her own experiences and contrast her own attitude towards the demands of wartime service with that of those she worked alongside. Helen made use of the ideas of Younghusband, especially the rhetoric of 'enthusiastic duty for a higher cause,' in order to understand her own life and frame her experiences of working in a military hospital. Writing in private, she criticised a colleague who did not serve with the right spirit and who dared to complain about, in Helen's opinion, a trivial matter. Younghusband believed that the right attitude was necessary to 'sustain the

[57] "The Fight for Right Movement," *The Spectator*, December, 1915, 14 – 15. (This letter was signed by Frederick Pollock, Gervase Elwes, Philip Kerr, Francis Younghusband, Evelyn Underhill, Paget J.M. Bowman and Arthur Robinson Smith.)
[58] Helen Beale, letter to her sister, February 28, 1916: BRCMA, 1407.

spirit' of men and women who were already serving, and self-pity would undermine the positive attitude of others. Taking up and reworking these ideas, Helen expressed her frustration with those around her who needed 'shaking up'. Just as Younghusband's material would 'remind the nation' of the reasons why they were fighting, so Helen wrote to her sister that 'it was hard … unless you keep on reminding yourself' to remember exactly why she had volunteered to work overseas.

By the time Helen Beale wrote this letter, she had been in France for six months. Now she had to face up to the reality of nursing on the front line as opposed to the idealistic expectations of what it would be like. Her family had bombarded her with letters in which they expressed their pride in her. Faced with such intimate familial pressures, any doubts or negative feelings Helen had were extremely difficult to acknowledge, let alone confess. It was in this context, then, that Helen drew on the ideas of Younghusband as a coping mechanism to reinforce her own feelings of sacrifice and service and as a means to understand her situation. She also used the concepts of patriotism and sacrifice promoted by the Fight for Right organisation to challenge those who, in her opinion, did not have the right attitude. Helen diminished the importance of the person she wrote about and minimised their grievance when she prefaced her mention of them with the adjective 'little' — something that stood in stark contrast to the war, which was 'big.' Dorothy Robinson's letters home were strikingly different; she did not write much about her patriotic duty and instead frequently dwelt on what Helen would have considered 'little grievances' about the nature of the work and conditions of her service.

Despite this, Helen's deep-rooted emotional investment in the Fight for Right campaign perhaps betrayed her own nagging doubts and anxieties about working in a military hospital. Implicit in Helen's insistence that it was her colleagues who needed to be reminded of the movement's objectives was a recognition that she needed to keep reminding herself of the

cause for fear of losing her sense of proportion and commitment to national service. In an attempt to remain true to her strong sense of patriotism and duty, Helen turned her protests outwards towards the people around her rather than admit to the difficulties she may have been feeling. Returning to this theme later in the same letter, Helen wrote:

> Sir. F. Younghusband's paper is going to be handed to a sister tomorrow with whom I had a great argument or rather should have had only I had to beg her to go away so that I might get on with my jobs. Her theory was that the war is brutalising us as a nation and I said it wasn't.[59]

This account of an argument with a nursing sister was contradictory. Helen's comments suggested that she felt that she had right on her side and therefore took the moral high ground. Not only did Helen believe that hers was the better attitude towards the work, she also considered herself more conscientious in carrying out her duties; she would have had an argument only she had to get on with her work and had to 'beg' the Sister to go away. She was not, however, going to let the matter rest and intended to hand the sister a copy of Francis Younghusband's paper. Helen's objection to the notion that the war was brutalising the nation is curious. The Sister's comment would have implied a kind of cruel insensitivity on the part of those involved. Helen's evident disapproval suggested that, along with other supporters of Younghusband, she continued to believe that the fight was of a more righteous and moral nature. At moments like this, Helen's correspondence sought to perpetuate the rather heroic and romantic image of the V.A.D. nurse, untouched by the brutality of war and also unchanged by living and working with others of a different social class.

[59] *Ibid.*

Writing for Different Audiences

As well as writing her many letters home, as soon as she arrived in France in August 1915, Helen began to keep a diary. The first entry began confidently: 'if I don't start this it will never be begun and a good many funny little incidents will go unrecorded.'[60] The very first sentence she wrote in this diary suggested that Helen thought that her time as a volunteer nurse would be full of 'funny little incidents', worthy of recording for posterity. At this stage, at least, Helen believed that her diary (and therefore her time spent as a nurse) would be entertaining and amusing.

Despite this confidence, it appeared that things were difficult for Helen right from the start. In the very next paragraph of the same letter, Helen described how:

> the next day, the first in the ward was trying owing to the heat and the smell of a nasty wound in an arm which I had to hold interminably. I went queer as usual and simply had to sit down outside … the rest of the morning was a nightmare but in time was got through.[61]

In an attempt to distance herself from deeply troubling feelings and emotions that felt unacceptable, Helen removed herself as the subject from the second part of this sentence and wrote in a passive voice. This vivid description of her first day on the ward, being overcome by heat and smell, and being asked to do something which seemingly would never end, left her feeling that this was a 'nightmare' — an event both frightening and unpleasant, yet which had to be endured. The contrast between expectation and reality is striking. Within twenty-four hours the anticipation of an experience that would provide endless amusing anecdotes had become a nightmare. That there were no other entries was revealing: faced with the stark reality of nursing, Helen found it impossible to continue to write a diary.

[60] Helen Beale, part of personal diary written on arrival in France, August 17, 1915: BRCMA, 1408/4.
[61] *Ibid.*

Writing that single entry forced Helen to be honest with herself and confront feelings which were unsettling and ultimately unacceptable. The act of writing a diary is more introspective, and written only for oneself rather than to be read by an audience; it is a private act rather than a public one.[62] For Helen, writing about her day-to-day life on the wards and reflecting on the feelings that resulted was too difficult. At this stage, perhaps, Helen was not able to cope with the space a diary provided to confront the emotional impact of life as a V.A.D. nurse.

This brief yet revealing entry in a private diary contrasted sharply with the public version of events Helen recounted in letters to her family. Rather than struggle with terrifying smells and sights, the correspondence portrays a process of rolling up sleeves and getting stuck in to the work of caring for the wounded. Letters written in September 1915, around the same time as the diary entry, contained such statements as 'here we really do feel in the thick of things. I do think it's real good luck to have been sent out here. Just fancy being at Manchester all this time when one might be out here or hereabouts!'[63] There was nothing in this letter that suggested that Helen was merely getting through — indeed, the spirit is upbeat and enthusiastic. The diary would not have been written to be read by others and would therefore have allowed her to be more honest in expressing her feelings. Letters, by contrast, offered a more sanitised version of events and were clearly shaped to convey the tone of enthusiasm and good fortune expected by the Beale family. Helen knew that her family would have expected such a version of events, and yet this would not necessarily have been close to the reality as her diary description of nearly fainting at the sights and smells showed.

[62] Angela K. Smith, *The Second Battlefield: Women, Modernism and the First World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), "Private to Public: The Front-Line Woman," chapter 2, 47–69.
[63] Helen Beale, letter to her mother, September 17, 1915: BRCMA, 1407.

It was perhaps Helen's own feelings about diary writing that caused her to question the legitimacy of a contemporaneous publication that was proving popular with members of her family. In July 1916 she wrote to her mother who had been reading *The Diary of a Nursing Sister on the Western Front*.[64] With some indignation, she commented: 'I don't know how the "Nursing Sister" lady managed to sit down and write her diary in the midst of her busy times! I know I haven't the strength of mind to look at a pen or collect my mind to write anything. We really have [emphasis in original] been busy.'[65] Despite Helen's claim that she did not have the capacity to write anything, she continued to write letters. The 'strength of mind' she referred to suggested that she did not have the ability to write a diary that would have necessitated an open and honest account of how she felt about herself as a nurse. Diary writing would have challenged Helen to confront her own uncomfortable feelings.

In this context, Helen's use of punctuation in this passage was equally revealing. The image conjured up was of a lady sitting and writing in the midst of a ward when all around her were going about their duties. Helen questioned both the author's professionalism and authenticity in putting the title nursing sister in quotation marks. A real nurse, focused on the demands of her duties, would not have the time or the capacity to be able to write. As if to stress the fact, Helen emphasised how busy she was herself by underlining 'have' in her sentence. From the perspective of a hectic military hospital in France, the fact that her family had all read *The Diary of a Nursing Sister* was both annoying and worrying: this was, Helen suggest, not an accurate depiction of the work undertaken by her and countless other women on the Western Front. Set against idealistic expectations of wartime nursing, the reality of hard work, and mental and physical exhaustion was very different. If someone had the time

[64] Anonymous, *Diary of a Nursing Sister on the Western Front, 1914-1915* (Edinburgh; London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1915.) Originally published anonymously but later attributed to Kathleen Luard, a nurse who served on the Western Front 1914 - 1915

[65] Helen Beale, letter to her mother, July 11, 1916: BRCMA, 1407.

and energy to write a diary whilst nursing, Helen's suggested caustically, they were either not genuine or not working hard enough.

Crisis

Helen's inability to keep a diary highlighted the tensions between her expectations and the reality of nursing. As the war continued, her letters became a place where she sought to resolve this tension by exploring her own frustrations and difficulties. An eloquent example of these tensions can be found in *Not So Quiet: Stepdaughters of War*, Helen Zenna Smith's fictional version of the life of an ambulance driver on the Western Front.[66] Although it was written over a decade after the end of the war, the novel's protagonist, Helen, imagines telling her mother and friend the truth of what she was dealing with, and she begs them to allow her to show them 'exhibits straight from the battle field.' Knowing that the people at home would not be able to cope with the horrors that she has to face every day, the narrator takes them on an imaginary tour of the battle field. 'Bloody awful isn't it?' she asks as she visualises them averting their eyes and vomiting at the sight of so many dreadfully wounded men.[67]

Like the heroine in Helen Zenna Smith's account of the Great War, Helen Beale's letters were also characterised by a resistance or reluctance towards the true nature of the experience. Yet there was little doubt that she was finding the work both physically and psychologically demanding. On 30 September 1915 she told her mother that she was 'in for a strenuous time. On Sunday last we began to be really rampantly busy ….' That day, Helen

[66] Helen Zenna Smith, *Not So Quiet: Stepdaughters of War* (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1989). There is some controversy around the authenticity of this book. However, this excerpt does provide a good example of the tensions between the public and the private discourse surrounding wartime experiences. For more on the debates, see https://greatwarfiction.word press.com/helen-zenna-smith-and-the-disguises-of-evadne-price and https://greatwarfiction.wordpress.com/2016/08/23/the-crook-who-published-helen-zenna-smith/, accessed November 15, 2016.
[67] Jane Marcus, "Afterword," in Smith, *Not So Quiet*, 90–7.

was on the wards from 7.30 am to 8.00 pm with just an hour off duty. The following day, she 'went at it hammer and tongs all day with no hour off.' The letter continued, noting how, 'the wards are rather nerve-straining just now.'[68] Twelve and a half hours on duty was a punishing schedule, especially for someone unused to physical work. Helen's suggestion that the work was 'rampant' gave a sense of things being out of control and unchecked and, despite her assertion that she worked 'hammer and tongs', a description which implied enthusiasm and energy. Helen was under pressure in her work and she admitted to feelings of tension and anxiety explicit in the use of the phrase 'nerve-straining'. This letter was written at the time of the Battle of Loos. This was the first time that the British Expeditionary Force had been involved in major action and was their biggest battle of the campaign up to that date. The battle at Loos was considered to be a failure. The British suffered heavy casualties which placed considerable pressure onto the medical services. Of the 10,000 British soldiers who went into battle at Loos, over 8,000 officers and men were either killed or wounded.[69] The sense of crisis in the war was reflected in Helen's letters as she described the stresses and strains of nursing a large influx of casualties.

Although Helen did not explicitly complain, as she continued to give details of her duties in the letters her exhaustion was evident. She wrote in October 1915 that she was 'recovering from the fatigues of the night,' following eleven and a half hours on duty, 'probably not sitting down at all or only on the end of a bed when one is cutting up dressings etc. is a pretty long spell and especially that most of the time one is working against time to the most dreadful extent.'[70] For Helen, this work was 'dreadful', an extreme choice of word that signified her unhappiness and struggle to cope. Despite this, and in keeping with her attempts to comply with the rhetoric of the Fight for the Right movement, she nonetheless

[68] Helen Beale, letter to her mother, September 30, 1915: BRCMA, 1407.
[69] Gary Sheffield, *Forgotten Victory: The First World War: Myths and Realities* (London: Headline, 2001), 86, 125, 129; Martin Gilbert, *First World War* (London: HarperCollins, 1995), 197–201.
[70] Helen Beale, letter to her mother, October 3, 1915: BRCMA, 1407.

insisted to her mother that, 'It's a great time to be out here and a thing to remember for always and I wouldn't be missing it for anything although it is rather a strain on one's nerves and temper sometimes.'[71] Contained with this one letter were contradictory versions of how Helen felt — admitting she was unhappy, yet denying those troubling feelings almost immediately. It is clear that Helen was physically and mentally exhausted, and feeling the strain of the responsibility. Still, however, she declared that she wouldn't miss it for anything. The conflict within her was perceptible, as the act of writing became a way to negotiate the turmoil of feelings she was forced to contend with and reconcile the call to serve with the desire to return home.

Fear and Anxiety

Initially, at least, Helen appeared to fit into the portrayal of the dedicated, heroic, and cheerfully sacrificial volunteer. Yet there is little scope in this narrative for the uncertainty found in her letters or the hardships and challenging experiences she tried to deal with through writing. Helen had only been in France for a month when it began to dawn on her that she was going to encounter some real difficulties. Writing to her mother in September 1915, she first raised this issue through an account of the experiences of her brother, Syd, and Kit, another family member. Reflecting on what they were experiencing became a clear indication that Helen had begun to see the reality of her own situation: 'For Syd to admit that things are beastly and uncomfortable means that they really are very much so I am sure.' Later in the same letter, she wrote, 'Poor old Kit has been off duty with a poisoned arm … she [and her friend] were evidently on the verge of being more over tired than they could stand the other day.'[72]

[71] *Ibid.*
[72] Helen Beale, letter to her mother, September 17, 1915: BRCMA, 1407.

In these early letters, Helen did not communicate the difficulties she herself faced, but sought to displace them onto others around here. Referring to how tough the experience was for other members of the family inadvertently revealed a sense of difficulties in her own position. Helen acknowledged that there were problems and challenges but distanced herself from them: it was easier to admit to difficulties if they were attributed to others. In this letter, Helen's own feelings of tiredness and how difficult things were shifted onto Syd and Kit. In doing this, she disowned her own feelings of unhappiness that were difficult to handle and thus avoided exposing these emotions to herself or her family. Projection is a psychological process whereby an individual attributes their own unacceptable thoughts or feelings onto others.[73] As the war continued, this unconscious mechanism for coping with anxiety was something that appeared frequently in Helen's letters: the war and her work on the wards created unwelcome feelings of anxiety that needed to be addressed. Through this kind of sublimation, Helen abandoned her own feelings of anxiety and unhappiness and thus avoided admitting this part of herself to her family and herself.

Helen's preferred view of herself as the heroic, sacrificial nurse thus came under sustained threat over the course of her time in France. Helen was able to protect herself from this, thus avoiding awareness of that aspect of herself, by saying that it was Syd and Kit who were exhausted and struggling. Projecting these feelings helped reduce anxiety and conflict; it allowed Helen to avoid awareness of possession of the characteristics that she projected and helped establish a safe distance between herself and the disowned emotions.[74] For the time being, Helen did not have to face up to what she was really feeling: that she wasn't coping and that she wanted to go home. To admit this to herself and her family would have

[73] Jan Grant and Jim Crawley, *Transference and Projection: Mirrors to the Self* (Maidenhead, New York: Open University Press, 2006), 26–8.
[74] *Ibid*. 18–23.

had a close association with the concept of desertion, and, when she projected those feelings onto others, she protected herself from the shame of wanting to abandon her obligation.

Since the majority of Helen's service was in France close to the front line, fear and anxiety would have been present for her as it would not have been for Dorothy who served in military hospitals in Britain. Being closer to military action meant that Helen dealt with far more traumatic cases and many emergency situations than if she had stayed in a military hospital in Britain. In a long letter to her mother, written while she was in France in September 1915, she gave a detailed account of three cases that she had dealt with. One soldier had a bullet removed from a wound: Helen drew a picture of the size of the bullet in order to ensure that her mother could appreciate the severity of the case. It was not unusual, she said, 'for bits of shrapnel to appear or be washed out.' Another patient had experienced three fits in one day; two other casualties, both badly wounded, were aged only seventeen and fifteen — too young for fighting on the frontline.[75] A month later, in October 1915, Helen described a night duty stretch as having been 'quite easy and straightforward and not nerve-racking for me.'[76] She went on to write 'of course one always has to keep one eye skinned on the patients ….'[77] One of Helen's patients that night had had surgery on his head, and Helen admitted that she was worried that he might haemorrhage. She described the situation in a way that was both light-hearted and evasive when she wrote, 'you can guess what a time I had when I glanced at him and saw a large red patch.'[78] Helen could not bring herself to write in detail about this experience and left it to her mother to 'guess' how Helen coped. Despite her remark that the shift was not nerve-racking Helen described a situation whereby she had to closely observe the patients and deal with a post-operative emergency. The very brief reference to this situation concealed an anxiety and tension: while Helen

[75] Helen Beale, letter to her mother, September 17, 1915: BRCMA, 1407.
[76] Helen Beale, letter to her mother, October 9, 1915: BRCMA, 1407.
[77] *Ibid*.
[78] *Ibid*.

wanted to mention what had happened, she could not bring herself to write about it in any detail.

As this suggests, working in a military hospital close to the front line meant that feelings of fear, anxiety, and uncertainty were exacerbated by not knowing what was going to come through the door or what she was going to be asked to do. If the act of speaking or writing about one's fear changes the sensation of the feeling, for Helen, using her letters to speak of her anxiety (however obliquely), her nerves, and her temper, changed the sensation of her emotions.[79] Writing about her experiences thus became a means for Helen to make sense of what was happening to her. Letters were an attempt for her to deal with this emotion and make sense of her feelings, especially the fear she often felt. Writing about the casualties she had to deal with, Helen thus described a

> convoy … those men who can't stand the journey on much further … our cases are likely to be pretty bad … such a hole in his shoulder he had, poor man, and one day when they were dressing it they got out a big link of the chain that he had been wearing when he was shot … [another] is the most cheerful thing you can imagine considering he has lost his leg and part of his left hand was blown away too. He nearly made me lose countenance the other day when I was washing him.[80]

In the letter at least, Helen did not lose control, yet she implicitly admitted that there was a moment at which her composure almost broke down faced by this encounter with the realities of modern industrial war.

The casualties Helen nursed were too sick to travel, and, as she described some of the gruesome wounds and injuries she witnessed, she was keen to convey how she managed to retain an outward air of calm that aligned her with the professional nurses. Part of this

[79] Joanna Bourke, *Fear: A Cultural History* (London: Virago, 2006), 288.
[80] Helen Beale, letter to her mother, August 21, 1915: BRCMA, 1407.

association with the role of the professional nurses was the wearing of a uniform which was almost identical. While the uniform presented an outward, visible image of the wartime heroine, maintaining this impression also depended on the behaviour of the V.A.D.s in the face of trauma and their ability to carry out their duties in a competent manner. It was vital that the V.A.D.s did not show their true feelings at the sight of such extreme suffering, and this necessitated control over facial expression and countenance. In her vivid account of these wounds, Helen acknowledged how her composure almost slipped, and she nearly gave away what she was feeling. The implied message of this statement was that the soldier who had lost his leg and his left hand was so cheerful her professional demeanour almost gave way to laughter, or even tears. It seems much more likely, that given the severity of the injuries she had just described, what Helen felt was more akin to distress and that she was not going to reveal these feelings to her family, just as she did not lose her countenance in front of the patient. Writing about such experiences became an important means of finding ways in dealing with emotions and reactions that could not be expressed while at work or in a public hospital ward.

As the months went on, Helen's ability to keep her reasons for volunteering in the forefront of her mind diminished, and her letters expressed more and more unhappiness and disquiet. By July 1916, almost a year after she began nursing in France, and at the same time as the Battle of the Somme, Helen's letters revealed that her ability to cope with her situation was deeply shaken.[81] The plaintive cry of 'Oh! Such days of despair these last have been! … struggle and struggle to see to everything but it's more than one pair of hands and eyes can manage' underscored how Helen no longer spoke of her delight at being able to serve her country and her energy and enthusiasm in doing so.[82] She now appeared to be labouring

[81] Gilbert, *First World War*, chapter 14.
[82] Helen Beale, letter to her mother, July 29, 1916: BRCMA, 1407.

hopelessly against the odds and feeling increasingly unable to cope with what was expected of her. Included in a letter to her mother, this statement was a really significant cry for help and communicated how Helen felt that she could not cope with the demands of nursing. The sound of her desperation and struggle to keep on top of the work were unambiguous, and she made no attempt to hide her feelings. The mood she conveyed in this letter contrasted sharply with the attempts to control the feelings that she wrote about in her earlier correspondence and after almost ten months in France, faced with the horrific casualties from the Somme, Helen's defences and coping mechanisms seemed to have broken down.

Over the course of 1916, these feelings became increasingly acute. In a letter dated 17 August 1916, Helen's anxieties were expressed quite succinctly: 'I find it is almost impossible to settle down to anything in the night — my lurid imagination always runs riot and I think somebody must be haemorrhaging.'[83] The reality was, of course, that someone probably was haemorrhaging: the first day of the Battle of the Somme saw more than 20,000 men killed and 25,000 seriously wounded.[84] Helen's comments revealed that she was in a state of nervous anticipation of what might happen and fearful of what she might have to deal with. Her letters conveyed her real sense of inadequacy in her capabilities as a nurse and her desperation to flee from the situation. In early September 1916, she commented: 'I get horribly worried if anybody gets bad + run for an expert for all I'm worth!!'[85] Unlike her responses to earlier traumatic incidents, this time she was no longer able to control the vivid images either in her own mind or her letters home. Writing while on night duty, the letter was perhaps a classic example of an acute anxiety state. At night, alone and responsible for the well-being of around twenty badly injured men, Helen was in a state of hyper-vigilance and, at times of crisis on the ward, she literally ran away; she was unable to

[83] Helen Beale, letter to her mother, August 17, 1916: BRCMA, 1407.
[84] Gilbert, *First World War*, p. 260.
[85] Helen Beale, letter to her mother, September 9, 1916: BRCMA, 1407.

concentrate on her work as she was constantly afraid that one of the men would haemorrhage — an emergency situation — and that she would not cope.[86] Unable to allow herself to explain these feelings further, either to her family or indeed to herself, Helen ended the letter abruptly: 'there's really not much to tell you about somehow.'[87] There was, of course, plenty to tell her family but Helen, who had articulated the stress she was under, stopped short of writing any more; she either could not or would not push the feelings any further in this letter. Cautious of the professional and personal costs of admitting to any emotional struggle, Helen was unwilling to worry her family further by drawing attention to the fact that her comfort and emotional well-being had collapsed.

How Long Will the War Last?

Much attention has been given to the traumatic wartime experience of the soldiers, yet in the case of the nurses (both professional and voluntary) this has been largely ignored. According to Janet Watson, the hospitals on the front line, and consequently the staff working in them, did not face the most defining aspect of military service which was the risk of death.[88] Whilst it is true to say that the V.A.D.s did not face such high levels of danger as the men in battle, they were still working in very dangerous circumstances. As the discussion above suggests, during intense periods of fighting, the tension of waiting for a convoy followed by the flurry of action once they arrived at the hospital was exceptionally challenging. The staff were exposed to diseases such as cholera, meningitis, and typhoid, and many succumbed to sepsis due to infected wounds.[89] As well as those who died because

[86] In two letters to her mother on September 30, 1915 and March 10, 1916, Helen wrote about the numbers of wounded on each ward and how she alone was responsible for a number of beds whilst on night duty: BRCMA, 1407.
[87] Helen Beale, letter to her mother, August 17, 1916: BRCMA, 1407.
[88] Watson, *Fighting Different Wars*, 157.
[89] "V.A.D. Casualties During the First World War," redcross.org.uk/WW1, accessed August 10, 2017.

of illness and disease, 128 V.A.D. nurses were killed.[90] When news of Edith Cavell's execution in October 1915 reached Helen her anxiety increased. Helen asked her mother in a letter, written immediately after this event, if she had 'ever heard of anything more dastardly than shooting that nurse in Belgium in cold blood — they are brutes!'[91] In the same letter, she wrote, 'the G ——- s would be beastly.' Hostile feelings about the enemy were very strong; Helen was not able to even write the word German in her letter.

Like the civilian army and her fellow V.A.D. nurses, Helen had volunteered in response to a national crisis. Once the war was over, she, and others like her, would return to their normal lives; this impermanent nature of service had an impact on the way Helen experienced and coped with the war. She would do her bit, but was only there for the duration of the war. The problem was how long the war would last and consequently how long she would be expected to stay. Initially, there seemed to be a naivety about how long the war would last, and Helen, like many others, felt that the conflict would be short lived. Faced with Christmas away from home in 1915, she wrote, 'Let's hope this beastly old war will be all over by next Christmas so that we will all be home again — will it I wonder?'[92] There was a certain melancholic feel to Helen's wondering. Unable to predict the future or control events around her caused a certain degree of anxiety.

Helen's agitation at the duration of the war and the uncertainty about when she might return home increased as the months went on. As her letters continued, they were characterised by a growing sense of desperation. With no idea when she would be able to get away, in March 1916, she expressed dismay at the sight of the authorities planting oak trees along the road near the hospital. She wrote:

[90] *Ibid.*
[91] Helen Beale, letter to her mother, undated: BRCMA, 1407.
[92] Helen Beale, letter to her mother, December 18, 1915: BRCMA, 1407.

> Aren't we a funny nation! Blest if the authorities aren't planting oak [emphasis in original] trees … all along our road … How long do they expect the war to last one wonders. We see visions of ourselves so old and worn out that we have to go home and our places taken by our nieces and nephews or great nieces and nephews all before the trees come at all to their full growth.[93]

There was something symbolic for Helen in the choice of trees — she emphasised this by underlining the word 'oak' — a slow growing variety in comparison to other trees. Helen feared that this was symbolic of the view that the war was going to last a very long time and that it would be old age and exhaustion that provided her with the means to return home rather than an end to the hostilities. She feared that the war would go on for so long that she would be replaced not only by the next generation but the one after that. Moments like this indicated a change in Helen's attitude towards her service: no longer cheerful and energetic towards her duties, she now felt tied into a situation that seemingly had no end. Belief in an imminent end to hostilities was crucial in maintaining stability. There had been an acknowledgement that no matter how awful things were, this was only temporary, and this had helped her through tough times. The feeling of despair when Helen sensed longer term planning in the planting of the oak trees was tangible.

The more distant the prospect of returning home became the more despondent Helen felt. Helen saw that a temporary way out of this would be to ask for leave, which she did in May 1916. She shared this news with her family and provided them with an extract from a letter she wrote to the authorities:

> Madam, I have the honour to request that I may be granted fourteen days leave of absence on private affairs … Behold the above which I actually wrote out on a large

[93] Helen Beale, letter to her mother, March 4, 1916: BRCMA, 1407.

> sheet of government foolscap and handed in … of course one may be disappointed of going at the end … The silly old war doesn't seem to get on much does it?[94]

In order for her request to be taken more seriously, Helen had written it out on official paper. She did not, however, feel optimistic that her request would be granted. Writing later in August 1916, she commented: 'I do feel so sorry for all these poor folks out here who are hopelessly overdue for leave and have just to go on with no prospect of it at all — it is [an] extraordinarily short sighted policy on the part of the authorities to grind people down ….'[95] The implication was clear: it was Helen herself who was being ground down. It was difficult for Helen to accept that her request for leave had not been granted and to cope with the negative emotions associated with this denial.

For Helen, at least, one way of distancing herself emotionally from this complaint about the lack of leave, as well as from the fact that she felt herself in urgent need of escape from the pressures of wartime service, was to project these feelings onto others. This was a strategy she had deployed in previous letters. Helen had begun to feel exhausted and hopeless and saw no prospect of relief. The terms of service a set out by the Joint Women's V.A.D. Department stated that 'a fortnight's leave with pay will be allowed during each year's service, provided the exigencies of the service permits.'[96] The volunteer was entitled to leave but it was clearly stated that the needs of the service would take precedence over the needs of the individual. Despite how hard she worked and how much she needed leave, Helen saw that the critical and desperate situation she found herself in meant that there was little or no hope of leave being granted. Helen reflected on the hopelessness of those soldiers she saw as overdue for leave and considered that the policy for leave was lacking in its foresight as it merely served to 'grind people down.' Despite the fact that this observation

[94] Helen Beale, letter, May 19, 1916: BRCMA, 1407. This was a general letter addressed to no particular individual.
[95] Helen Beale, letter to her mother, August 29, 1916: BRCMA, 1407.
[96] Joint Women's V.A.D. Department Terms of Service (Issued 24/9/1917): BRCMA, RCB/2/8/5/33.

was made about the plight of men serving in France, Helen wrote it in the light of her own application for leave which she felt was unlikely to be granted. Helen had become aware that the requirements of the service were considered to be more important than the welfare of people as stated in the terms of service. By 1916, at least, this was a difficult concept with which to come to terms.

Homesickness and Home

Unable to predict how long she was going to be required to serve in France and without any sense of control over the events taking place around her, Helen also sought to cope by reinterpreting her domestic environment to make it less threatening. As well as maintaining her relationship with home through prolific correspondence, that is, Helen created a facsimile of home in France that made her situation appear more manageable and prevented her descending into despair.[97] This need to maintain domestic ties and reduce the sense of distance from normal family life was evident from the beginning of Helen's time in France. She found herself in an unfamiliar country where she was required to carry out duties she often felt beyond her capabilities in a society that was organised around professionalism and not status.

In her letters, Helen thus seized the opportunity to recreate, establish, and maintain social norms. Ordinary domestic life for the volunteer nurses was undramatic, and far removed from the drama of conflict (in the wards as well as the war) so often focused on by historians. Although Michael Roper and Jeffrey Reznik have both discussed these issues in the context of the experiences of the male soldiers, the importance of the domestic for these women volunteers has been underestimated.[98] The volunteer nurse existed in a domestic world as

[97] Alex Watson, "Self-Deception and Survival: Mental Coping Strategies on the Western Front, 1914–18," *Journal of Contemporary History* 41, no. 2 (April, 2006): 247–68.
[98] Reznick, *Healing the Nation*; Roper, *The Secret Battle*.

she did not have the experience of a professional organisation that the trained nurses could rely upon. Consequently, Helen's identity remained lodged within her civilian environment and therefore her home environment. Running through letters written from the front line were pervasive and recurrent references to home that betrayed a yearning for a simpler life, free from the terror, disruption, and violence of war. There was a desire to return in thought or reality to a former time in life; back to the memory of the place where she felt safest — home. Memories of home became a point of continuity amidst unfamiliar surroundings and circumstances.

When in France, Helen found herself in disturbingly unfamiliar conditions which disrupted her sense of order and identity. In this context, Helen adapted by using the seemingly mundane and domestic to connect her to a time in her life when she felt safe and secure. Her letters showed how she needed to recreate, establish, and maintain social norms through decor, clothing, and food. One example of this, was how Helen craved news of home and delighted in any information she received from her family, especially if the letters contained photographs. She replied to one letter, dated February 1916, with effusive thanks: 'your letter and the photo of the garden came last night — lots of thanks for both … you can't think how I am enjoying them.'[99] The receipt of this letter and photograph led Helen to daydream about life back home as she attempted to make a very real link between her current situation and pre-war domesticity. She said, 'I wonder if you have snow today as we have here ….'[100] She seemed comforted not only by the news and photographs from home but by the thought that the weather could even be the same. Her physical location was France but her wondering about whether or not the weather was identical suggested that, in her imagination, she had placed herself in the snowy gardens of Standen.

[99] Helen Beale, letter to her mother, February 23, 1916: BRCMA, 1407.
[100] *Ibid*.

As this suggests, Helen's sense of alienation further played out in her need to surround herself with the seemingly ordinary and mundane domestic comforts. Recreating an 'English garden' was evidence of the difficulties she experienced in assimilating herself into life away from home. There was, then, comfort and security in recreating a home away from home. The importance of home and the solace brought about by home comforts was reflected in the huts and work of the YMCA. The YMCA, in creating their rest huts, ensured that the surroundings were evocative in their familiarity and viewed with nostalgia; they had the power to link the soldiers back to home where there existed a personal and familial connection with an emotional identification and gave them 'the peace of home in the camps of war'.[101] The concept of *home* for the British soldier during the First World War was described by the historian Michael Roper as short-hand for loved ones, bricks and mortar, a garden, or a neighbourhood.[102] For Helen, nostalgic feelings of home, as expressed in her letter, and her daydreams illustrated how she used these emotions as a means of coping with her present situation. Nostalgic thoughts of home, originating in memories of a place where she and others felt safe and cared for, became a powerful emotional coping mechanism in the unfamiliar and stressful circumstances of war. Memories and thoughts of home served as a temporary escape from the horrors of the present.

In letters received by the YMCA, the themes of the comfort and support found in the organisation's huts showed that Helen's coping strategies were shared with soldiers fighting on the Front Line. In 1919, one soldier wrote about his experience of the YMCA and said, 'May I thank you for your nice Y.M. [YMCA]. It is a pleasure and one might say "Home

[101] Arthur K. Yapp, *Told in the Huts The Y.M.C.A Gift Book.* (USA: Literary Licensing) Classic Reprint of 1916 edition, p.121.
[102] Roper, *The Secret Battle*, 13.

from Home".'[103] Such comments were commonplace: Major P.W. Vaughan, a commander of the 2nd Australian Division Base Depot, France, wrote on 9 May 1916 that 'Wherever we have served we have found the YMCA performing a glorious work among the soldiers; bringing to them as near as possible their own homely surroundings'[104]

As this suggests, the ability to find a 'home away from home' wasn't merely important for the soldiers and their commanding officers: it provided a solace for families too. One mother wrote:

> My husband and I wish to thank you and the other Ladies at the Manor House, for your many kindnesses to Leslie … Les wrote to say 'It is the one bit of home life we get, and Home Meals.'… It means so much to we Mothers to hear of the kindnesses of so many people in England and Scotland to our dear lads who are so far from us.[105]

This sentiment was echoed by Helen's mother in her response to Helen's living conditions. Helen acknowledged her mother's concerns in a letter in which she wrote, 'you made all sorts of nice suggestions for what Mags calls "our cubical"! If you really would like to send me something I would love a cotton bedspread.'[106] Helen's mother and sister envisioned her living in a cubical without any home comforts and were eager to send her some nice things to improve her surroundings. Helen, by the use of quotation marks and an exclamation mark, appeared amused by this thought but then proceeded to suggest items that could be sent to her from home, as much for their benefit as her own.

This sense of homesickness and the importance of home became most acute at particular moments in the year. December 1915 was likely to have been Helen's first Christmas away

[103] Typescript extracts of letters of appreciation as testimony to the war work of the YMCA, 1914–1918: Cadbury Research Library, University of Birmingham, YMCA/K/5/1.
[104] Cadbury Research Library, University of Birmingham, YMCA/K/5/1.
[105] Cadbury Research Library, University of Birmingham, YMCA/K/5/1.
[106] Helen Beale, letter to her mother, February 3, 1916: BRCMA, 1407.

from home. In reflective mood, she wrote a letter in which she described a day full of carol singing and present opening. However, the yearning for home was never far away, and, in the last paragraph, she said 'I have been imagining to myself all the things you will have been doing at Standen.'[107] Distance from home and family was, apparently, more keenly felt at Christmas. In this rather naive and simple statement, Helen admitted to a coping mechanism where imagining home was an important strategy for keeping her spirits up. Helen did not just visualise the house on Christmas Day, but also all of the things that the people in it would have been doing — the traditions associated with a family Christmas. In doing so, she made the people seem real and used this fantasy as a means of escaping from the reality of her own existence. This strong image made the connection to home seem more vivid and was a powerful means of banishing disturbing thoughts.

Although not exposed to the same level of horrors as the men involved in combat, Helen nevertheless experienced considerable anxiety and homesickness. The letters spoke of a longing for home. The fact that this has been largely overlooked by historians of war suggests an implicit hierarchy of 'anxiety' through which women's experiences of war are undervalued or effaced — as if they were not as traumatic as military combat. But we can see from Helen's letters just how important this was for everyone, including the off-duty V.A.D. nurse, regardless of the gendered expectations that the wartime role of women was not only to be caregivers but also to create an atmosphere of home away from home.

On arrival in France in August 1915, Helen thus described her living quarters in a letter to her mother:

> We found ourselves deposited in the midst of a sandy hillside … covered with tin buildings and wooden huts on one side of the road and on the other rows on rows of funny little canvas huts which is where our quarters are … and we were faced with

[107] Helen Beale, letter to her mother, December 27, 1915: BRCMA, 1407.

> exactly one empty hut between the three of us! … Blankets here weren't numerous last night! … the hut measures something like 20 feet by 7 or 8 I suppose. We fell to work and unpacked our kits and discovered that they contained a camp bed + washstand + chair + macintosh sheet. The bed consists of folding wooden legs + across these a green canvas is stretched, then you put your macintosh sheet and there you are! It's delightfully simple but as regards sleeping on it requires getting used to! … this hut has two doors and a flap at each end which lifts up to give one air so that sleeping by a flap one is practically in the open air.[108]

There was no sense from this lengthy description that the living quarters provided any comfort or recreated a home away from home for the volunteers. In fact, the description Helen gave suggested something more basic and functional and sounded almost like an extension of the wards in which she was going to work.

War and its Effects

As well as worrying about the interminable length of war, Helen Beale's correspondence was increasingly marked by concerns that the experience of the war would have a lasting impact on her psychologically. The letters allowed her both to voice this concern and to deny any significant signs of change in her character or physical appearance. One month after her arrival in France Helen was struggling with the weather conditions: 'my theory is that we shall probably grow used to it and probably grow a double epidermis or something of that sort to keep us warm.'[109] Helen wrote about the extremely wet weather and the physical discomfort but it is interesting that she chose to use the phrase 'a double epidermis' or thick skin in order to convey how she would cope with it. One would have needed a thick

[108] Helen Beale, letter to her mother, August 13, 1915: BRCMA, 1407.
[109] Helen Beale, letter to her mother, September 5, 1915: BRCMA, 1407.

skin to cope with emotional difficulties and criticism, and it is implied here that that was what was needed for the weather. Such comments linked psychological struggle and physical discomfort — all that her new life would demand of her.

Returning to these concerns in a later letter, Helen wrote that she was 'rather tickled' at her Cousin Rosa's remark that they shall 'all return home more rigorous than ever' and disagreed with her.[110] Helen did not like the thought that she would be changed in any way by her time in France and feared that she would become hard and demanding as her cousin implied and tried to make light of the comment. However, when she met someone she had known as a GP before the war who was now a serving in France, she acknowledged: 'he has changed so that I shouldn't and didn't possible recognise him — his hair is quite short and grey instead of black and curly … he is, as most of us are, bright red in the face with sun and wind.'[111] She sounded alarmed at the fact that his appearance had altered to such a degree since he had been serving that she didn't recognise him. She then began to acknowledge that this was also likely to be the case with her and others. Later in the same letter, she wrote about her hands with their chilblains which were 'purple and hideous'. She said 'I tried though to put on my little gold signet ring yesterday just to feel as unhospitally as possible but it wouldn't go on at all'[112] Such comments prepared her family for the changes that they would see in her appearance — changes that could not be disguised with a gold signet ring. Her experiences, surroundings, and duties had become evident in her face and her hands. Red, swollen hands and ruddy complexion were a visible sign of manual labour not associated with young women of her social class.

Yet these physical changes did not only provoke a response that was indicative of class tensions: just as her face had reddened and face coarsened, so Helen was no longer able to

[110] Helen Beale, letter to her mother, March 16, 1916: BRCMA, 1407.
[111] Helen Beale, letter to her mother, May 4, 1919: BRCMA, 1407.
[112] *Ibid*.

ignore the fact that she was being affected emotionally by the war. Her body communicated the changes in her both physically and emotionally. When she wrote home two months later, she warned her mother that when she returned home she would be different: 'Oh you'll find me a dreadfully managing and slave-drivery kind of person I'm afraid ….'[113] The changes were not positive. Rather they were 'dreadful,' and something for which her family had to be prepared. The emotional and psychological effects of the war were now manifest, embodied, and undeniable.

Smell and Memory

The impact of the war on Helen's senses, particularly her sense of smell, is a point at which it was possible to understand the visceral horror of what she had to deal with. It was difficult for Helen to admit that she wasn't coping or that she found her nursing duties hard. However, evidence that she was struggling was apparent in her reference to the issues she had coping with the smells she encountered on the wards. Her fight to cope with what she witnessed was communicated through her frequent reference to smells and the contrast between the bad smells of the wards and the fresh air of the French countryside as well as those pleasant smells that served as a reminder of home. Between August and November 1915, the letters contained comments where Helen compared the two experiences. She wrote that she appreciated walking in the hills because of the fresh air and told her mother 'it does smell so good and fresh up there. The smells in the ward are the worst part ….'[114] Helen also admitted to her sister that she was struggling; 'it is dreadful I find to be so sensitive to smells,' she said. 'I really feel much sicker at them than at nasty sights. One gets used to the latter but can't in the same way to smells ….'[115] Helen wrote to her mother that she had been

[113] Helen Beale, letter to her mother, July 25, 1916: BRCMA, 1407.
[114] Helen Beale, letter to her mother, August 18, 1915: BRCMA, 1407.
[115] Helen Beale, letter to her sister, November, 1915: BRCMA, 1407.

sent ‘a little spray of rosemary’ by a relative ‘which arrived perfectly fresh.’ She went on to say, ‘I have worn it on my apron all day it smelt so good.’[116] This was a powerful statement and action on Helen’s behalf. The smell of the wards was to be counteracted with the smell of fresh rosemary but the smell of that fresh herb also transported her back home. She wore the rosemary on her apron all day as an outward and very visible sign that she had, for the time being, distanced herself from the odours. The rosemary smelt ‘good’ and also evoked memories of home, in direct contrast to the smell of the ward which was bad and a constant reminder of the horrors of war.

What Helen appeared to miss most about home was the fresh air and garden. In August 1916, she thus wrote to her mother: ‘hope you are at Standen by now enjoying the freshness, and the family and at the garden ….’[117] She continued: ‘your description of all the flowers there are out at Standen makes one’s mouth water rather,’ and wondered whether ‘the snowdrops are doing any good along my path.’ Smells were experienced and responded to by Helen with a heightened perception of bodily responses — her mouth watered at the memory — as she made much of the images of the garden and fresh air at Standen in contrast to the foul odours she struggled to cope with whilst nursing. The sense of smell, unlike touch and vision, is something that is separate from its object. Helen’s struggle with smells suggested that her encounter with them resulted in a shrinking of the sense of space between her and the wounded soldiers; existing apart from the object, the smells retained an obdurate presence from which she could not escape.[118] Particularly offensive were the odours which emanated from the body and as such would have been prevalent on the ward. What was private had become public and had become polluting and contaminating, and without the

[116] Helen Beale, letter to her mother, August 25, 1915: BRCMA, 1407.
[117] Helen Beale, letter to her mother, August 7, 1916: BRCMA, 1407.
[118] Das, *Touch and Intimacy*, 43, 84–7.

ability to eliminate or control them, smells became a constant reminder of the horrors of war. [119]

Coping with odours (and ascribing meaning to them) became an unconscious site through with Helen made sense of her surroundings. The unpleasant smells that Helen was exposed to on the wards were particularly associated with things that were unclean or bad such as war, injury, disease, and death. In contrast, the pleasant odours of the fresh air and the sprig of rosemary were associated with things that were clean and good — home and the garden. The interpretation of the odours (especially the pleasant ones) was marked by activities such as daydreaming and reminiscing about home. This chain of associations in turn evoked a physiological response in Helen: her mouth watered at the description of the flowers at Standen as the smells and the memories became intimately linked. [120]

Conclusion

The heavy demand for nursing staff brought about by the war meant that women, like Helen Beale, with knowledge of the fundamentals of first aid and home nursing were being asked to undertake duties that normally would be carried out by trained nurses, often with little or no support or supervision on the wards. As the chapter above has shown, Helen wrote about the difficulties she faced on the wards and the challenges she had to overcome in order to deal with the sights and smells that confronted her in the wards. The work was often physical and the hours were long and anti-social. Nevertheless, her belief in the duty and sacrificial nature of her work was strong and reflected the powerful rhetoric of national service and citizenship, and Helen made a huge effort to overcome these problems. However, despite her best efforts to cope with her difficulties, in January 1918, Helen made the decision to

[119] Dennis. D. Waskul and Phillip Vannini, "Smell, Odor and Somatic Work: Sense-making and Sensory Management," *Social Psychology Quarterly* 71, no. 1 (March 2008): 53–71.
[120] *Ibid*.

leave France and resign her position as a V.A.D. nurse: she applied for a position in the Women's Royal Navy Service so that she could continue with her service but at the same time return home to her family.[121]

While this was not a decision Helen made lightly, the pressure on her to stay as a V.A.D. nurse was immense: she received letters from Clare Blount, Commandant of the East Sussex branch of the Voluntary Aid Detachment and also from Devonshire House, the Headquarters of the British Red Cross in London, neither of which supported Helen's resolution to leave.[122] Blount's response was to send Helen a copy of an official letter from the County Director of the Red Cross in Sussex which contained his opinion of Helen's decision. The letter was harsh and said 'we have no absolute power to prevent Miss H. Beale if she chooses to be so very unpatriotic as to go.'[123] For someone like Helen, for whom duty was of paramount importance, the reference to her being unpatriotic was a cruel blow. It exemplified how ideas about patriotism, which sustained Helen at the beginning of the war, were still being enforced four years later, in a very different context. Helen's sense of hurt and anger at being called unpatriotic was evident in the style and structure of her reply to Blount. It was uncharacteristically full of crossings out and written in a very unclear and unsteady hand that betrayed how this was a moment of crisis for Helen in her experience of volunteering: 'In the 4th year of the war it seems to me one is bound to reconsider one's position and whether the work one took up in the emergency at the beginning of the war is still the channel where one's abilities can give most in service of the country.'[124]

121 British Red Cross Society, Form J. V.A.D 53 Joint VAD Committee Certificate of Discharge from a British Red Cross Society Detachment: BRMCA, 1407. The discharge certificate from the British Red Cross Society recorded that Helen had been a nursing member of the Voluntary Aid Detachment for a total of six and a half years by the time she left on 20 January 1918.

122 War Time Volunteers and Personnel records, https://vad.redcross.org.uk/Card?fname=Helen&sname=Beale&id=14464, accessed August 9, 2017.

123 Country Director of Red Cross, Sussex, letter to Clare Blount: BRCMA, 1407. This letter was written to Clare Blount and a copy sent to Helen. The signature is illegible but the content suggests that it is from the County Director as referred to in Clare Blount's letter. It is undated.

124 Helen Beale, letter to Clare Blount, undated: BRCMA, 1407.

Reassuring Blount that she was not acting 'unpatriotically or seeking excitement,' Helen continued: 'it is clearly for each individual to decide for themselves where they can render their best service.'[125] This statement echoed one of the objects of the Fight for the Right movement — 'each should find the particular form of service best suited to him or her.'[126] Helen's return to the precepts of this patriotic organisation thus again allowed her to seek to leave whilst remaining true to her sense of duty and patriotism. Alongside her patriotic duty, family opinion was also very important to Helen: resolute in her desire to leave France she wrote 'I may say that my brothers — whose opinion I value much — are strongly in favour — urge me to undertake this new work.'[127] Helen had crossed out the phrase 'are strongly in favour' but it was clearly legible.

The letter from Devonshire House dated 31 January 1918 told Helen that they wished to 'emphasise … most strongly how urgently members [V.A.D. nurses] were required.'[128] Helen's application for a position with the W.R.N.S. resulted in the response, 'We are writing to the W.R.N.S. Officials informing them that we would wish you to retain your service as a nursing member if possible.'[129] As this fraught exchange suggests, while ideas of patriotic duty and service had been of vital importance in shaping Helen's decision to volunteer to serve overseas, their demands were increasingly difficult to manage after three years working in a military hospital near the frontline. Encouraged by her family, she had been persuaded to take an active part in the war effort by signing up to serve as a V.A.D. in France. There, like many others, she struggled to negotiate her place in an unfamiliar hierarchical system. Yet the biggest conflict for Helen was, however, reconciling the pressures of nursing, the casualties of war, being away from home, and an overwhelming

125 *Ibid*.
126 "The Fight for Right Movement," *The Spectator*, December 18,1915, 14.
127 Helen Beale, letter to Clare Blount, undated: BRCMA, 1407.
128 Devonshire House, letter to Helen Beale, January 31, 1918: BRCMA, 1407.
129 *Ibid*.

sense of the importance of patriotic citizenship. Helen's letters illustrated how she did her utmost to overcome any negative emotions in order to remain on the Front Line and fulfil her obligation to care for the sick and wounded. On 10 January 1916, Helen wrote to her sister that it would be 'rather weak and faint hearted not to go on….'[130] Yet implicit in this comment was a developing sense that Helen herself was feeling increasingly 'weak and faint hearted' — struggling to balance her sense of duty with growing reservations about the challenges of nursing. While Helen signed on for a further period of service and remained in France on this occasion, by January 1918, she was simply unable to continue and submitted her resignation. Once again, Helen used her letters as a site through which she worked out her tension and anxiety. She drew on affirmation from outside sources — her brothers and Fight for the Right — to support her decision and to reassure herself that her actions were not unpatriotic despite the direct accusation that this was indeed the case.

As this chapter has shown, Helen Beale's letters are a rich resource through which it is possible to challenge the romantic view of the heroic and self-sacrificing V.A.D. nurse. Her correspondence spoke eloquently of the challenges, anxieties, and difficulties faced by these young women who, away from home and their familiar support network, were asked to undertake duties for which they often felt were beyond their capabilities. Home life and service remained central to Helen's life, and her letters revealed a range of coping mechanisms as she attempted to come to terms with the tensions between her desire to serve whilst missing her family. Ultimately, however, those mechanisms failed completely and with serious consequences at the start of 1918 when Helen resigned her position as a V.A.D. nurse.

[130] Helen Beale, letter to her sister Margaret, January 10, 1916: BRCMA, 1407.

Conclusion

This thesis has been significant in its discussion of the memory and the forgetting of trained nurses' wartime service and has shown that a hierarchy of war experience existed in the inter war years.[1] It has exemplified Alison Fell's point about the relationship between stories and power, and those who are best placed to be heard. Building on Fell's work the thesis has shown that some women's stories counted more than others, and has argued that it was the volunteer nurse whose social status was most likely to find a route into the public consciousness in the years following the war.[2]

Fig. 2. The Peace Procession 19 July 1919 (The V.A.D.s)[3]

As this painting by George Harcourt shows, these concerns played out after the war in the marginalisation of the trained nurses in peace celebrations. The painting depicts a procession

[1] Alison S. Fell, *Women as Veterans In Britain And France After The First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018) p. 127
[2] Ibid p. 201
[3] George Harcourt "*The Peace Procession 19 July 1919 (The V.A.D.s)* https://media.iwm.org.uk/ciim5/144/435/large_000000.jpg?_ga=2.75585493.1995295289.1565003784-1002570416.1565003784, accessed August 7, 2019

of Voluntary Aid Detachment Nurses, instantly recognisable by their uniforms, and British Army personnel. The trained nurses are not represented in this painting and this type of official recognition implicitly highlights the ways in which the socially elite V.A.D. came to stand for the experience of female caregiving during the Great War. In that sense the thesis has demonstrated the striking resilience of older forms of social hierarchy and elite power. In this study I have argued that the effects of the war on the nursing profession remained contradictory and ambiguous and their marginal position in popular memory and history of the Great War emphasises that point.

Historians such as Michael Roper and Carol Acton have used letters, diaries, and personal papers to reconstruct the experiences of individuals during the Great War.[4] Such material allows us to recover personal experience and illustrates writing as a psychological process of self-fashioning in negotiating experiences. However, this thesis in its attention to professional journals as well as private writings, has given us new ways of understanding the challenges of war for individual nurses and the nursing profession. The methodological approach to nurses' writings in this thesis is important in that it clearly demonstrates the social and political process of nurses' writing during the Great War and the relationship between writing and power, privilege and class.

Focusing on two professional journals — the *British Journal of Nursing* (*BJN*) and the *Red Cross* — and the private wartime correspondence of two members of Voluntary Aid Detachments, this thesis has explored two central research questions in the history of nursing, gender, and the Great War. Firstly, it has examined how the rhetoric of social class, patriotic duty, and volunteerism came into conflict with the ideals of professionalism

[4] Carol Acton, "Writing and Waiting: The First World War Correspondence between Vera Brittain and Roland Leighton," *Gender & History* 11, no. 1 (April 1999): 54–83, Carol Acton, "Diverting the Gaze: The Unseen Text in Women's War Writing," *College Literature* 31, no. 2 (Spring 2004): 53–79, Michael Roper, *The Secret Battle: Emotional Survival in the Great War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010)

through the pressures of war, and how both professional nurses and the British Red Cross sought to address these tensions. Secondly, it has used two detailed case studies to consider how V.A.D.s reacted to authority in an unfamiliar subordinate position. The letters written by Dorothy Robinson and Helen Beale illustrated how many young women from the upper middle classes negotiated their new relationships and subordinate status within a working environment and nursing hierarchy organised around professional values and standards rather than class. In this way, the thesis considered how wider narratives of patriotism and entitlement shaped the wartime experiences of women.

This thesis studied the relationship between Voluntary Aid Detachment nurses (V.A.D.) and trained nurses during the Great War. Through detailed case studies of two individuals (Helen Beale and Dorothy Robinson), it has taken insights previously used to explore the correspondence of male soldiers and applied them to female caregivers. In doing so, the thesis has demonstrated that previous studies have not only ignored the experience of lower-class women but have also omitted the experience of professional organisations. It is the first study to look in detail at the role of professional journals as a space in which trained nurses and the British Red Cross Society communicated their ideas around professionalisation and patriotic citizenship with their members and therefore shaped the wartime experiences of both trained and volunteer nurses.

By addressing these questions and revealing the representation and key discourses present in the professional journals, this thesis has examined the relationship between the Voluntary Aid Detachment nurses and the trained nurses. Challenging a pervasive assumption in academic and popular histories, the thesis argued that the dynamics of this relationship reflected tensions around professional hierarchy and authority and were not merely a consequence of a class conflict which arose as a result of the superior social status of volunteers. The fractious relationship between professional nurses and V.A.D.s has to be

understood within the context of a political and social failure during the war to challenge the ways in which nursing and the Great War were remembered in its aftermath. In both the *BJN* and the *Red Cross*, correspondence and articles provided a significant space in which competing identities and ideals of patriotic service, and professionalism and expertise were articulated, reinforced, and challenged. The thesis addressed the historical context of the tensions which existed as a result of the deeper historical context provided by the politics of nursing as played out in the campaign for the professionalisation and state registration. In doing so, it has demonstrated the inability of both organisations to mediate the tensions which existed between the professionals and the volunteers, and the subsequent failure of the historiography to address how nursing during the Great War was remembered.

This study has demonstrated how professional journals played a key role in shaping how the trained nurses and the volunteers understood themselves and made sense of the experiences of wartime nursing and the events unfolding around them. Examining the language and content of the *BJN* and the *Red Cross* helps us understand the complex dynamics of the tensions that characterised the relationships between the two groups. By considering the experiences of the trained nurses and the V.A.D.s within the same frame, we can better understand the significant role that the structure of a professional society played in shaping *both* the experience and representation of women's wartime service *and* the complicated working and interpersonal relationship between the volunteers and professionals. The efforts to further construct a professional society within nursing during the Great War in such a way have implications for our understanding of the relationship between the two groups of women more broadly. In exploring these relationships within this context, this thesis has highlighted the connections between the depiction of patriotic service and professionalism during the war, and the ways in which trained nurses have been marginalised or excluded from emerging narratives of the war. Any enquiry that separates

the experience of the upper middle-class V.A.D. and the lower middle-class and working-class trained nurses, the thesis has argued, is inadequate. The experience the women had was defined as much by their intimate relationships as the wider political narrative surrounding professionalisation.

In using professional journals as a central source of analysis, this study has also contributed to our knowledge of the ways in which public narratives shaped how trained nurses and volunteers alike understood and made sense of their experiences. It is clear that the *BJN* and the *Red Cross* were important spaces in which the groups depicted and debated arguments around patriotic citizenship and professionalism, and their importance in a period of national crisis. In particular, this study has shown that discourses that came to dominate the depiction of women's wartime experience was constructed as a public dialogue through readers' letters and editorials: each of these were crucial to the way in which the professional journals contributed to the identity of their readers. Professional journals were thus a public sphere through which trained nurses and volunteers (as well as those with authority over them) were able to engage in the public debate around volunteerism and professionalisation, and make their voices heard.

Combining a study of trained nurses and V.A.D.s also means that this thesis has added to the work on women's experience during the First World War in several key ways. First, by looking at the representation of both trained nurses and volunteers, it has demonstrated the importance of considering the intersection between gender and social class in shaping the image of nurses and V.A.D.S, both specifically in relation to their role in nursing the sick and wounded and in relation to the construction of class and citizenship during war in a much broader sense. Secondly, it has shown the centrality of the British media, and published memoirs and diaries in formulating public narratives about both groups of women that have persisted through the popular memory of the Great War over the past century.

Finally, by extending the analysis to include individual case studies, the thesis has also foregrounded the different ways that volunteers negotiated the tensions of their experience of military hospitals and alternative professional hierarchies through writing and correspondence with families. As a result, this thesis has contributed knowledge to the ways trained nurses during the Great War have been remembered.

An important result of this thesis has been to challenge the persistent belief that women's wartime experience — particularly that of those working alongside each other in military hospitals — was simply an issue of gender or class. The chapters above have emphasised the importance of an analysis rooted in the wider social and political realms of the ideals of a professional hierarchy. On this basis, the thesis has challenged the fundamental beliefs we have about the experiences of the V.A.D. nurses and begun to question the meaning that is derived from the relationship which exists with the trained nurses. The rhetoric used in the *Red Cross* journal, the *BJN*, and the private correspondence of two V.A.D.s has provided compelling evidence to show that that the voluntary organisations felt that the trained nurses were not serving in the same way as themselves — because the trained nurses were being paid for their work, rather than engaging in selfless and philanthropic national service. The thesis has demonstrated how misunderstandings and tensions between the trained nurses and the volunteers were derived out of social interactions which were established from within two competing ideals. The personal and professional relationships between the nurses and the V.A.D.s have previously been represented and understood as being in opposition to one another but they were in fact, as this thesis has demonstrated, mutually dependent.[5] In developing this argument, the thesis has shown how the binary language of war talk played

[5] Joan Hoff, "Gender as a Postmodern Category of Paralysis," *Women's History Review* 3, no. 2, (1994): 149–68; Margaret Higonnet, "Not So Quiet In No-Woman's Land," in *Gendering War Talk*, ed. Miriam Cooke and Angela Woolacott (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press ,1990), 205–23.

out through the developing opposition between philanthropic ideals and paid work that shaped discussion of nursing during the Great War.

Professional journals such as the *BJN* and the *Red Cross* thus informed and shaped professional identities and relationships during the Great War and were gauges of the opinion of the organisation and its members. The *Red Cross* journal played a large part in reinforcing the self-confidence and superior attitude of the V.A.D. nurses: as this thesis has demonstrated, the journal affected the ideological work of transmitting the voices of power (in this instance, the War Office and The British Red Cross) to its members.[6] The *Red Cross* bolstered the underlying attitude amongst the volunteers that they were more patriotic in their service than trained nurses and encouraged them to ignore or dismiss any negativity from the trained nurses which suggested otherwise. This rhetoric had a bearing on the interpersonal and working relationships between the two groups of women and the overall professional attitude of Voluntary Aid Detachment nurses. The thesis has argued that the British Red Cross together with the War Office conflated the ideals of philanthropic service and duty to King and Country with the realities of practice of organising and providing care for the sick and wounded. The chaos that ensued in organising the care of the sick and wounded during the Great War demonstrated (in the opinion of the trained nurses) the absolute necessity of training, and it was this lack of clarity and organisation that made the biggest contribution to the poor relationships.

By contrast, a close reading of the *BJN* showed how trained nurses used their professional journal to advance their own political and professional interests. Reworking the premises of the drawn-out struggle for professional recognition and state registration, they develop an elaborate critique of the limits and dangers of volunteerism during war. Letters and articles published in this journal thus became part of the wider debate on the political situation within

[6] Norman Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change*, reprint (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 110.

nursing. This allowed the *BJN* to play a direct role in furthering the battle for state registration and the professionalisation of nursing. In providing a forum for the trained nurses to set out their ideals, the *BJN* collapsed the space between the private and public spheres.

The second half of this thesis shifted focus away from professional journals to the private correspondence of two individual V.A.D.s. Dorothy Robinson and Helen Beale, two privileged young women engaged in volunteer nursing during the Great War, provide representative case studies through which to explore how the rhetoric of social status and influence expressed in the *Red Cross* played out in private. Their letters allow us to explore the wider understanding of the tensions around V.A.D.s and service, providing a rich resource through which it is possible to challenge the romantic view of the heroic and self-sacrificing V.A.D. An analysis of their wartime correspondence has shown how their attitude to service was influenced by the ideals of philanthropy, patriotic citizenship, and social status that echoed the rhetoric of the *Red Cross*. Using Dorothy and Helen as case studies has shed light on the fact that, as a group, the volunteer nurses had little insight into professional and political issues which were of paramount importance for the trained nurses. Through the correspondence of both women, it is possible to conclude that social and familial status were more important to the V.A.D.s than professional knowledge, skills, and experience.

Rather than simply a point of common ground, the language of patriotic service that acquired such force during the Great War could often serve as a point of antagonism between volunteers and trained nurses. This language shaped how the relationship between the two groups was portrayed in public life and how they interacted in the realms of work and private life. Through analysis of professional journals and private correspondence, the thesis has shown that the tensions between the two groups of women, working alongside each other in

military hospitals, were part of a much more complex narrative which included issues around power and status and was not merely related to the privileges and frictions of social class. By looking at the representation of these groups of women, the thesis has enabled a detailed exploration of how concepts of patriotism, duty, service, and citizenship played out for individuals and the organisations with which they were involved. In doing so, it has developed and challenged the literature, which examines these themes and their relationship to wartime class structures, by historians such as Christine Hallett, Anne Summers, and Susan McGann.[7] The thesis has demonstrated the importance of looking at how both professionalism and philanthropic volunteerism were represented during wartime, and how the complex tensions between these two concepts manifested themselves in the personal and professional relationships of the women. Forced into close proximity by the demands of modern war, volunteers and the trained nurses possessed their own powerful ideals of what society should be and how it should be organised. The interpersonal and professional conflicts that resulted occurred as a result of struggle for status and power, and the clash of these two incompatible ideals.[8]

On the surface the Great War had a positive and productive effect on the professional status of trained nurses as the bill to introduce state registration, for which they had been campaigning for decades, was passed in 1919. While nurses had made the case for professional recognition through the language of patriotic citizenship during the war, this thesis has shown that their ability to be heard was limited, and their status in public debate was always subordinate to that of the volunteer amateur.

[7] Christine E. Hallett, "'A Very Valuable Fusion of Classes': British Professional and Volunteer Nurses Of The First World War," *Endeavour* 38, no. 2 (June 2014): 101–10; Anne Summers, *Angels and Citizens: British Women as Military Nurses, 1854–1914* (London, New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1988); Alison S. Fell and Christine E. Hallett, eds., *First World War Nursing New Perspectives* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2013); Susan McGann, *The Battle of the Nurses A Study of Eight Women Who Influenced the Development of Professional Nursing, 1880 –1930* (London: Scutari, 1992).

[8] Harold Perkin, *The Rise of Professional Society: England Since 1880*, reprint (London: Routledge, 1999), 116.

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