

*Australian*  
**WOMEN**  
*at* **WAR**

Also by Patsy Adam-Smith and published by The Five Mile Press

*Australian Prisoners of War*

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**WOMEN**  
*at* **WAR**

PATSY ADAM-SMITH



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# Preface

In writing such a book as this, one regrets that many groups' endeavours, many stalwart individuals must be left out. No history can tell everything about its subject. And this subject had been so grossly ignored that there was a surfeit of magnificent women to select from. In 1972, when I first discussed this work with Colonel Sybil Irving (Controller of the Australian Women's Army Service in World War II), she advised me: 'Try to tell your countrymen what they don't know. Answer their unthought-of questions. Build your book on that framework.'

How did Australian women rise to the challenge – and the opportunities – presented by their country being at war? What were their feminine strengths and weaknesses? What did Australian men think of women in traditionally masculine jobs? And did our Constitution, our trade unions and, later, our Manpower Priorities Boards recognise the value of women's services, or merely use them in work uncongenial to men and as emergency shop-girls when the enemy was already hammering at the gate? Was the work of tens of thousands of young Australian girls in uniform of any significance in their country's struggle; how did civilian women react to the pressures on them? Lastly, did this tremendous upheaval and experience, this reversal of women's roles, leave us any guidance for future emergencies?

My main aim is to record the many instances of endurance, devotion, bravery and self-sacrifice while some of these women are still alive; in tapping their memories, I wish to honour them.

Most of the brave, modest, forgotten women in this book are ageing. One I visited in Western Australia is a paraplegic, another is legless. One ex-officer has cancer, some are crippled with arthritis, or near-blind, or hobbling; some are still pained in the deep well of the heart from an old bereavement. Those still fit have one thing in common with the ailing: they all deny they did anything extraordinary. But for their leaders, I would never have known what splendid years women gave to Australia, and to the army, the navy and the air-force. I knew each of the leaders, the supremos, of the three armed services in which women were enlisted in World War II, and each spoke of their 'girls' as any male commanding officer would speak of his 'boys'. 'Brave, loyal, tireless and cheerful.'

There is one group of women I have not treated with the space and detail they merit: the Australian Army Nursing Service. This service is set apart, different from any other. They know it, all mankind knows it, but in particular, the soldier knows it. Army nurses have been written and sung about, lauded, since Florence Nightingale walked among the wounded from

the Crimea in 1857. Theirs is the oldest service; their uniform honours the women in past ages who tended the sick and dying. I am writing of these women, of the years they spent in prisoner of war camps in World War II, in a later book. I wrote of them earlier in *The Anzacs*.

I have met none of the group of nurses who sailed off to the Boer War, those harbingers of the Australian Army Nursing Service, but I have known many women, including my mother, her sisters and my two grandmothers, who remembered the *men* riding off to 'give those Boers gyp'. My mother, now in her late eighties, most remembers the horsemen. 'Remounts were bought from our Gippsland farm for the Empire army in India. We supplied horses for South Africa also. When the boys came back to Gippsland, Frank O'Connor bent down from his saddle and lifted me up in front of him, and we galloped away, chasing Boers across our home paddock,' she says.

'I know it was really nothing much, but I can still remember the excitement. Seventy years later, when Rolf Harris sang the song "Two Little Boys", I wept, thinking of the stories told by the boys who came back from the veldt, about boys and their horses, "over there". All women my age have these feelings.'

Apart from the nurses, women during the 1899–1902 Australian involvement in the Boer War were scarcely noted. Women prayed in churches for victory, but the charnel-house of Bloemfontain was not mentioned in the service. It was here that sixteen nurses, the first group of Australian servicewomen to travel overseas, were sent and no nurses since have entered a more fearful scene.

The 1914–1918 war may have launched many women on the path to emancipation, but the Great Depression that greyly blanketed the country from the late twenties until the late thirties, smothered most of the advantages women had gained. World War II saw a grudging recognition of women's capabilities and their capacity for both concentrated and sustained repetitive work. In the services they drove ambulances and trucks, chauffeured officers, underwent the same training in over a hundred trades as the men; they manned anti-aircraft guns, serviced planes, were wireless-telegraphists, naval decoders – in all, there were over two hundred separately graded musterings, few of which had previously been available to women.

On the home front, life was no less charged for civilian women. Many waited until the end of the war not knowing if they were wives or widows, with their men reported *Missing, Believed Prisoner*. Housewives learned to carry their own shopping home, coped with rationing, brought up their children alone and worked ceaselessly to raise funds to help their men 'overseas'.

Those not tied to the house worked in factories, munitions' and explosives' centres; they built planes, ships and weapons' carriers; they delivered ice, milk, bread – all erstwhile tasks for men only.

There was another side to women at war; and if women are to be considered as having equal rights with men, we must also examine the valid stance of those women who acted in a manner not attractive to us today. During World War I, women, unable to show their loyalty and patriotism by dying on a battlefield for their country, came out in their thousands, ferociously, to support conscription. Their vicious actions and cruel speech were in total contrast to the love and labour they gave to the absent men – a





surprising dichotomy which perhaps gives us a more pertinent peep at what war really does do to non-combatants.

At the opposite pole of the womanly war effort were women such as Vida Goldstein, a noted anti-conscriptionist during that war. Vida had earlier fought for the vote for women; from 1914 to 1918 she fought for the ending of hostilities. She was tenacious, courageous, magnificent in her determination, as were the other women involved with her: for these women stepped straight out of the accepted role for females of the time. To do what they saw as their duty, they threw off the mantle of safety and protection hitherto given to women by society and the law.

There was little need to mention women in manpower regulations during World War I, as women were scarcely in the workforce. The manners of Victorian England still prevailed. The propriety of women working was clearly defined. Women had worked in factories since the industrial revolution, but not *nice* women, just *poor* women. In wartime, munitions work may just scrape by, but women must go no further. The use of women as warriors 'threatens the whole of our society'. No, there was much more 'womanly' work for those women who waited here, 10 000 miles from the scene of battle and their sons, fathers, husbands and hoped-for-husbands, in the age where spinsterhood was the 'long death' for that sex which had no money of their own.

Sydney newspapers published lists of addresses and objects of fund raising groups which included: 'Old Gold and Silver War Fund for collecting and selling in aid of the War Chest and Sheep Skin Funds; Serbia-Montenegro Relief; Soldiers' Entertainments to provide concerts and lectures in Camps; Tanned Sheepskin Clothing Committee; Blue Cross, Veterinary Association for Disabled War Horses; Central Sandbag Committee for making, receiving and despatching sandbags; Fruit and Vegetable Gift Scheme for wounded

War is mothers searching battlefields for their sons; it is also that time before battle has begun, when families fear no danger greater than measles or chicken-pox threatening their babies. The Murrell family (Vic.) in 1897 could not know that Charles, the baby curled on his mother's knee, would be dead in the mud of Ypres by his twentieth birthday

In those days of innocence before 1914 military uniforms brought no tears to beholders' eyes, only a sort of glorified pride. The military still wore British-style uniforms when Sergeant-Major Cay was buried with military honours in Melbourne, 1910



or sick soldiers or their dependents.' The list was never-ending. 'No woman need be idle,' cried the *Sydney Sun*.

The girls who grew to womanhood in the Depression went into World War II with a quite different approach from that taken by their mothers in the earlier conflict. Indeed, from September 1939, when Australia went to war, the attempts women made to serve embarrassed both the Government and the Labor Opposition, who were agreed in their fears that women, given the opportunity, would take men's jobs.

In several cases, approval was passed for temporary employment of women on men's work where vacancies occurred through men enlisting for active service. There was permission to vary the hours of work for women in textiles because it was clear that 'men are unavailable for this work and unless female employees are engaged, the result will be loss of employment for a large industry and a loss of export trade in an important commodity'. A government survey indicated a sharp decline in the first few months of war in the employment of women in domestic service – in country areas, and to a lesser degree in the cities also, the only employment open to most girls. It noted that women were replacing men in 'less essential occupations'. (A survey of census figures showed 137 000 in domestic service in 1933. This figure had fallen to 60 000 by 1947, two years after the war ended.)

Primary industry was hard-hit as farm boys escaped from drudgery into the forces, and this led to the formation of the 'Fourth Women's Army' (after the Navy, Army and Air Force), the Australian Women's Land Army.

All these women were caught up in the most passionate years the young can move through. There is no telescoping of emotions and the senses so immediate as in the days lived within the vortex of a war. There was always the chance that there would be no tomorrow. Always the urgency, always the fear there would be no forever after, no marriage, no lover.

Biros had not been invented; there were no television sets or transistors (although radio had been introduced between the wars, as had the first of the early coloured movies). There was no nylon, no plastics, no plastic bags; pantie-hose had not been made, nor had drip-dry fabrics. Wool was



It has been claimed that three generations of women up to the outbreak of World War I advanced the cause of women more than was to be achieved for another 30 years. This deputation marched to the Legislative Council (Vic.) demanding women's suffrage in September 1893

Women's emancipation in the years up to 1914 was evident in their participation in political movements such as the Socialist Party, seen here, in 1910



Massive crowds would silently stare as the young marched by in uniform, or a singer's voice rang out, then they would explode with pent-up passion, like the time when Stella Wilson sang 'Land of Hope and Glory' from the back of a truck in Swanston Street, Melbourne

sold by the skein and had to be wound into balls before being knitted. The contraceptive pill was unknown and girls did not leave home and set up house in apartments or flats of their own. The gulf between their era and that of the 1980s was as great as if they had been living in the seventeenth century.

The Manpower Priorities Board discovered that there were as many resolute women as there were determined men. There were vast transfers of labour, mostly considered to be a step upwards by those moving, as well as a drawing into employment of many who would not normally have entered the workforce, those girls who would have been expected to 'leave their father's household only to pass into that of their husband's'. From 1939 to 1941, women beat a path to the doors of the authorities, begging to be allowed to assist, to help win the war, to give of their talents. They were ignored. When the Japanese over-ran the Pacific islands during December 1941 and in February 1942 captured almost the whole of the Australian 8th Division at Singapore and bombed Darwin, Wyndham and Broome, the same women were needed as never before. The drear belief of centuries as recorded by Charles Kingsley was ended:

For men must work, And women must weep  
And sooner it's over, the sooner to sleep.

The women did weep, but they now worked as never before: beside men.

DROUIN RANGERS' SOCIAL CLUB  
 A GRAND MILITARY BALL  
 The Committee of the club requests the pleasure of  
 Mr. & Mrs. Kennedy & Ladies' Company to  
 WEDNESDAY, JULY 14, 1897, at MECHANICS' HALL, DROUIN.  
 Admission - Gentlemen, 2s. 6d.  
 Contributions of Refreshments will be thankfully accepted from the Ladies.  
 DANCING AT 8.30  
 J. W. SIMPSON, Sec.

3rd Squadron, 10th Australian Light Horse.  
 The Officer-Commanding, Officers, N.-E. Co.  
 and Men request the pleasure of  
 Mr. & Mrs. Kennedy's  
 company, on August 31st, in the Mechanics'  
 Hall, Drouin.  
 Dancing at 8.30 p.m.  
 Sergts. SIMPSON & OGILVY,  
 Joint Hon. Secs.  
 R.S.P.



## CHAPTER 1

# *Soldiers of the Queen*

The first of these pioneer women were the early nurses who sailed off to the Boer War. From the home front it seemed to be glorious. For the first time, a largish body of Australian men dressed in uniforms were riding their sprightly, magnificent Australian horses through the streets on their way to war. Small numbers of Australians had served in Egypt and the Sudan (1882–98) but in numbers too small to enthuse a populace.

Now, with little encouragement from Britain, we were sending men off as though the result of that most questionable campaign in another colony was dependent on us. There was much to enthuse a people who were scarcely out of one devastating drought and about to go into another, people who had experienced the first onslaught of workmen striking for reasonable conditions and, worst of all, the depression and bank crashes of the 1890s. Perhaps the songs and the music were the greatest blood-stirrers. This was the peak of that era of arm-swinging, memorable, marching-time music backed by lyrics.

Oh Britannia's the pride of the ocean!  
the home of the free and the brave  
the sign of each patriot's devotion  
no land can compare unto thee.

And we, of course, were still British to the core.

When you're born by the red, white and blue  
(white and blue!)  
When you're born by the red, white and blue  
(white and blue!)  
And so shall we proudly sing forever,  
We are born by the red, white and blue!

The Tommies were singing it in Pretoria, Australians were singing it in Sydney, Melbourne and anywhere else people gathered. (And they were still singing it through the 1930s and into the first years of the 1939–45 war.) During the Boer War even 'God Save the Queen' had great appeal, as the by-now-disgruntled little heap of an ageing queen neared her end and was still loved by her people. 'The event of the evening was the rendition of "God Save the Queen";' cried newspapers.



The first of the Bushmen's Contingents to ride away to the Boer War in 1900 brought women out to wave goodbye

But the song with the most splendid martial air was 'The Soldiers of the Queen'. The words and music were not only catchy and easy to remember, but also had the added magic of a foot-tapping score.

It's the soldiers of the Queen my lads,  
who've been, my lads, who've seen, my lads,  
in the fight for England's glory lads,  
Of its world-wide glory let us sing.

And when we say we've always won,  
And when they ask us how it's done,  
We'll proudly point to every one  
Of England's soldiers of the Queen!

'After all my other memories of Bloemfontein have passed away I think I shall continue to hear the almost chant-like singing of the "Soldiers of the Queen" by the soldiers ...' wrote an American war correspondent.

The attempted emancipation of women had begun before the nurses' departure to the Boer War. Throughout the 1890s women had been moving. Among the spontaneous interest in all states the cause of women became tied firmly to that of the men who were struggling for one man, one vote.

The women's cause is man's,  
They rise or sink together,  
Dwarfed or Godlike,  
Bond or free.





War was still a game to as yet unscathed Australians when their men sailed for South Africa

So sang the New South Wales Women's Suffrage League when they first met on 22 April 1891. In Queensland, splendid Mrs Emma Miller led the struggle for the women's franchise.

Yet, one cannot say that women were in any way emancipated. It took another two world-wide conflicts to bring any change to their position in time of war.

Before the so-called 'Boer' War, few women were used in the medical corps of the nations, although forty years had passed since Florence Nightingale pioneered nursing in the field at the Crimea.

Medical Officers early in 1899 urged that women nurses be sent, but the reluctant Army Department believed that soldiers preferred to be nursed by male orderlies and that women would interfere with the wounded soldiers' freedom. South Africa was said to be 'not a proper place' for women in wartime, and that flirtations would occur. Despite these peculiar objections, before that war ended the pattern for nursing in all future wars was decided. Florence Nightingale's great work was being carried forward and the War Office had agreed to the establishment of a permanent Army Nursing

Troops marching to the wharf could scarcely push their way through the crowd



Service. For all that, the Service in South Africa sorely needed a champion such as Nightingale, 'who could have championed the cause of the sick against the prejudice and ineptitude of the controlling authorities'.

The first two Army Medical Corps sent to the conflict were from New South Wales. No nurses were with the first contingent and 'only strong, lusty men' were accepted or trained as stretcher bearers.

Lady Superintendent Ellen Julia Gould and 13 nurses accompanied the second contingent in the *Moravian* on 17 January 1900. (Of these, four remained in South Africa after the war, the Lady Superintendent and the other nurses returned to Australia. Nursing Sister Elizabeth Nixon was awarded the Royal Red Cross, and Nursing Sister Mary Annie Pocock was mentioned in despatches.)

On arrival, on 22 February 1900, the members of the New South Wales Nursing Service Reserve were sent to hospitals at Cape Town, East London and Sterkstroom. The medical corps was so urgently needed that when the *Moravian* anchored off Cape Town it was promptly despatched to sea again for East London within a few hours; when the nurses disembarked they headed inland to Sterkstroom. Miss Gould was given charge of nursing in the



The first women to enlist for war: these nurses' pristine uniforms were to be stained in the foetid wards of Bloemfontein

Orange River District which embraced Bloemfontein, considered to be the most undesirable posting in that war. 'A wretchedly dirty and out-of-repair structure,' reads the official report of the hospital there.

Bloemfontein, 'the fountain of flowers', was a pestilential city, 'a pest hole of enteric fever and other illness'. Dead horses and human sewage had infected the water and the army. Field-Marshal Lord Roberts had rested his men and horses there for seven weeks while he waited for supplies and, in this time, upwards of 1 000 men died. The carts carrying their blanket-wrapped bodies rumbled down the streets by day and night. The sick tents were crowded, the unwashed and despairing sick men lay on the floor in their stained uniforms with their one service blanket to cover them. An 'all-prevailing faecal odour' filled the makeshift hospital.

Into this setting came the fourteen Australian nursing sisters with the New South Wales Medical Corps, a most distinguished body. So well known was the corps that it was said that English soldiers sewed a scrap of material inside their uniform with a legend, 'If wounded, please take me to N.S.W.A.M.C.'

The 3rd Contingent, the 'Bushmen's', was drawn from farmers and bushmen. 'Hardy riders, straight shots, accustomed to finding their way about in difficult country and likely to make an expert figure in the vicissitudes of such a campaign' as was being conducted. 'There was an enormous number of candidates for enlistment.' They were untrained in military matters, many of them from bush farms or bush occupations and had no difficulty with 'the strict test in riding and shooting'. Preference was given to unmarried men.

Ten nursing sisters, all single, accompanied these men when the Bushmen's Contingent sailed from Melbourne in the *Euryalus* on 10 March 1900. The report states: 'They did excellent work in the hospitals, developing the best qualities of professional nurses. Sister Hines died in South Africa. Sister Rawson was awarded the Royal Red Cross. Sister Ivey was mentioned in Commander-in-Chief's despatches, 26 June 1902.'

The Bushmen fought their way to Elands River, where they were attacked

AUSTRALIAN WOMEN AT WAR



Sister Rawson



Sister Ivey



Nurse Tiddy



Nurse Langlands



Sister Walter



Sister Bernhard Smith



Nurse Anderson



Sister Thomson



Nurse Hines



Sister Dorothy Smith

Following the footsteps of Florence Nightingale, who had first introduced nurses to the battlefields in 1854

and besieged and all their horses killed. Their casualties were heavy and the hardships great for the thirteen days they were encircled and, after the garrison was relieved, they marched on foot – having no horses – to Mafeking. Here they were partially re-equipped and within a week moved off to Kimberley, the Transvaal and Pretoria, fighting most of the way.

What with the sick, wounded and dead they left along the way, the contingent was sadly weakened when they were ordered to march to help stop the Boer generals from invading Cape Colony. This long journey became ‘a swift and impressive march. When other columns were tired out or withdrawn the 3rd [Bushmen] were with General De Wet to the last and lost heavily on their attacks on the enemy. Only 60 men answered the roll call when the orders came for the 3rd to be withdrawn.’ They had fought on ‘short rations’ – six biscuits for six days. It was men such as these who succumbed to the diseases and fevers that filled the hospitals where the nurses worked.

All six colonies of Australia sent nurses, but the records are scanty. The Records of the Australian Military Contingents to the War in South Africa\* say of the South Australian nurses: ‘It may be mentioned that Nursing Sisters M.S. Bidmead, Glenie, and N.S. Harris, proceeded from Adelaide to South Africa at an early stage of the war. Sister Bidmead obtained the Royal Red Cross (Despatches, *London Gazette*, 10 September 1901). Sisters Bidmead and Glenie were presented with Devoted Service Crosses at the Review on Coronation Day, 26 June 1902. Sister Harris returned by the transport *Tongariro* from Cape Town, leaving on 31 March 1901. No further records of S.A. Nursing Sisters could be obtained.’ Yet other sources say at least seven women left for South Africa from South Australia.

All nurses were under command of the officer commanding the unit to which they were attached, their Lady Superintendent holding a position little different from that of an intelligent duenna, adviser, labourer and supervisor.

The Bearer Company of the Australian Army Medical Corps had for transport 1 water cart, 2 buckwagons, 1 scotch can, 2 horse ambulances, 1 ox cart and 2 mule wagons, and with this equipment followed the regiments as well as they could into battle. Often they were so busy with the wounded (searching for them in the rugged country, finding water, scavenging for food for the animals and men), they were left behind and must find the battle when they could catch up. On many occasions they had to quickly load the men they were tending on the ground and gallop back the way they had come because the Boers were fighting through them.

They were often under fire, sometimes for days at a stretch. Even the field hospitals had, on occasions, to evacuate the wounded and sick to the shelter of trees miles away when the hospital was under fire. When too many men needed attention and there was no accommodation, they bivouacked under trees and shelters made of tent flies and wagon covers. Blankets and waterproof sheets were always in short supply because of the weight involved in transporting them when on the march.

Transport was difficult. There were few made roads outside the large towns and distances were vast. The troops marched or rode overland.

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\* Published by the Government Printer, Melbourne 1911.

The single line rail tracks were over-taxed and the only way of conveying medical and surgical stores to the forward clearing stations or hospitals was by loading boxes of drugs and dressings on every supply wagon that left the western rail line for the front. Supply wagons spread with straw took the sick back to the line from the field hospitals – there were no ambulances to spare for this, as the two per brigade were insufficient for the advance and it was not possible to bring more forward, as all transport animals were needed to haul supplies to the troops. At Kimberley, on the railway from Cape Town to Bulawayo, hospitals could accommodate 380 sick men. But at times the train could not clear these, particularly when 800 sick men passed through Kimberley hospitals in one week in March 1900 (and this figure does not include those already in the hospital). Down the line at Modder River and Orange River those too ill to send on to Cape Town were off-loaded to hospitals. All the hospital trains carried smaller stores up in large quantities because of the congestion on goods traffic, but larger needs, such as beds, were always in short supply. Fourteen more sisters arrived with the second half of the New South Wales ambulance in February and were thrown into the rigorous work which the fever beginning to rage through the battle lines generated.

That ‘all-pervading faecal odour’ filled the make-shift wards, where many men lay on the floor in their clothes, covered with one blanket; ‘unfed, unwashed, unhappy men will never cease to linger in one’s memory,’ wrote a man about the ‘crowded sick tents’. There were 24 nurses in the town when the medical corps entered; by May there was a total of 56, some of whom had travelled there by carts and wagons. By the end of April there were 123 nurses in the fever-stricken wards.

The troops were unusually susceptible to disease at the time they arrived in the endemic area. Suffering from lack of good food and water, footsore, some of the English with heat exhaustion and sunstroke, they arrived to a sad town – although its name led them to believe otherwise. Two churches they say were packed with Boer prisoners suffering from fever, and each day the burial carts rattled by . . .

The official report on the medical arrangements of that war state that 160 sick and wounded Boers who were prisoners were carried to safety from ‘the Boer Laager’ nine days after the men had been wounded. ‘Many of the wounded had received their injuries in the engagement of the 18th, and had received no attention since; naturally they were in a terrible condition. These cases were carried to the drift by a party of some 200 men of two regiments, taken across the drift by the bearer companies, and thence removed by ambulance.’

And then the true horror of that quite horrible war began. ‘It should be noted here that among the cases removed from the laager were at least 10 well marked cases of enteric fever: All these prisoners stated that [enteric] fever had been prevalent in the laager, and that a good many deaths had occurred from it there. The laager itself was indescribably filthy. The Boer force of about 4 000, with some women and children, had been confined with their horses and oxen in a limited area for 10 days in a climate alternatively hot and wet. Men, cattle and horses had died; some of the bodies had been carried down by the swollen river and stranded below the laager, others remained on the banks. The sanitary arrangements of the Boers are, at the

Sisters Hutchinson  
and Wallace  
returning to Australia,  
December 1900



best, of the most primitive description, and in this impossible situation things were even worse than usual. Hence, a condition of which our troops were sensible before seeing the laager, when the breeze blew from that foetid spot to our trenches.'

'The difficulty of dealing with these men,' wrote Surgeon General W.D. Wilson, 'was extreme, both in camp and hospital. Their disregard of elementary cleanliness made it impossible to maintain things in a satisfactory sanitary state and this was undoubtedly an important factor in the epidemic of enteric fever which developed . . . contracted while they were in the laager at Paardeberg.'

This last-mentioned town was in the region of Bloemfontein towards which the New South Wales Field Hospital was approaching with the army.

The men fought, and marched. On one day after a long, hot march, though the men survived, some of the mules died on the way. The rocky, broken ground was so difficult, and the shortage of ambulances so acute, all the wounded could not be got to the field hospital by the time the moon set at 2 a.m. Fires were lighted at dressing stations and the wounded placed around them and given Bovril. On these battlegrounds, the Royal Engineers, when possible, went on ahead to lay hoses with hand pumps to the dams; one side of the dam was reserved for men, the other for animals, but the beasts, uncontrollable through thirst, rampaged and stirred the mud and fouled the water.

Thus they fought their way to Bloemfontein. Bloemfontein, the old capital of the Orange Free State, is on latitude 28 degrees, well within the area of summer rains. Two-thirds of the annual rain falls within the five months of December to April and one-sixth of the total rain occurs in March; it was in March that the attacking force came to the old town. Cape Town was 1 000 kilometres away; the Boers, where they did not control the railway, blew up the bridges so that, for the first sixteen days after the occupation of the 'fountain of flowers', not one rail truck reached it and no train came until the last two days of the month. Outside the town boundary were no made roads. The waterworks of the town were occupied by the Boers on the night of 31 March and by 3 April the town was reduced to the supply from polluted wells. There were no large vessels, nor even enough firewood to permit the boiling of water.

Bloemfontein had had a bad reputation for the prevalence of enteric fever for some years before the war when it had appeared annually, after the first rains. In recent years, enteric fever had been increasingly prevalent in the smaller towns and farms round Bloemfontein.

Sanitary problems received very little attention. 'Among the Boer and native population no attention whatever is paid to these matters, while even in the English colonies, outside the coast ports, the conditions approximate to those obtaining in England a century ago. A water-carriage system for the removal of excreta would be very difficult to arrange. Irrigation schemes hardly exist. It is not recognised that expenditure on sanitary matters is profitable, hence, the usual method is a more-or-less unsatisfactory pail system, and this was in use in Bloemfontein.

'In addition to these well-defined sources of danger, the suspicious water supply, and the imperfect removal system, there was, as usual, a total disregard of any attempt at cleanliness in the surroundings of the houses, and, more important, of the wells. It is also important to note that whatever little may have been done in the town to improve these conditions, the small dorps and farms remained in a state of primitive filth.'

To this endemic area with impure water and bad sanitary conditions came Lord Roberts and his army of 33 954 men and 11 540 horses and all the debilitated men, exhausted and weakened from excessive exertion on a reduced diet and scanty water, many already infected by the Boer prisoners.

In the field hospitals around Bloemfontein, there were 327 cases when they arrived early in March, 110 of which were fever. By the third week in April admissions to hospitals exceeded 1 400 and continued to rise. Field hospitals are equipped to give only temporary succour and are not suited for





the continued treatment of serious cases, having neither beds nor blankets, utensils nor clothing, for the sick.

The serious cases increased more rapidly than beds could be found for them in the temporary hospitals in the town, and this in spite of the evacuation of such cases as were fit to move. Because of the destruction of bridges, it was impossible at first to send any but slight cases, which were in the minority in the hospitals housed in buildings, so that though the evacuation lessened the actual number under treatment in Bloemfontein, it did little to assist with treating the more severe cases. At first, only the limited number of cases able to walk across the pontoon bridge at Norval's Pont could be sent. After the resumption of traffic, by 6 April it was possible to send about sixty at a time by the ordinary trains, which then ran across the repaired bridge. The first hospital train arrived in Bloemfontein on 5 April and left for the base two days later, while another arrived in Bloemfontein on 8 April and left on 10 April with 144 of all ranks sick and wounded. From this date the evacuation proceeded steadily.

As the April rains fell, rheumatism and bowel complaints began among the men who were not yet in tents. It is difficult to envisage any worse situation for nursing staff to encounter. As well as the men of Lord Roberts's command, the wounded and sick from the battles around the Orange Free State came into Bloemfontein, as did reinforcements which doubled the strength of men in the town. Official records declared it to be 'extremely improbable that any true estimate of the sick and wounded in the town

The clothes belie the fact that these women, sailing to war in 1900, were the most emancipated, breaking entirely new ground for their kind



Lady Superintendent  
Ellen Julia Gould

would ever be assumed'. No. 9 General Hospital treated 7 800 cases between 20 April and 27 July. As for the nurses, 'the energy and devotion of these ladies was beyond all praise; they never spared themselves while anything remained that could be done for the sick.'

Articles such as bedpans and urinals were not available in sufficient quantity until the end of May. The army was marching on Pretoria and took the field hospitals with them, leaving the general hospitals in Bloemfontein to cope as best they could. Between 16 March and 27 July there were 1 134 deaths in Bloemfontein, of which 964 were enteric fever.

The official records of 1911 give some small mention of the work the nurses did in this early, terrible theatre of war. 'Special mention must be made of the nursing Sisters from the over-seas Colonies. Sisters came from Queensland, Victoria, New South Wales, South Australia, Western Australia, Tasmania, and New Zealand, while Canada also sent Sisters.

'Most of these Sisters were originally sent free of expense to the Imperial Government, their services having been engaged either by their respective Governments or by private societies which sent them out. Others came with recommendations from their colonies, and were engaged immediately on their arrival in South Africa. All these ladies were, without exception, full of zeal and energy, and were anxious to get as far as possible to the front. Many of them served throughout the whole campaign, and all did most excellent service.

'It is impossible to say too much of the services which the nursing Sisters rendered in South Africa. Their devotion to duty, often under very trying conditions, was only exceeded by their kindness to their patients, many of whom owed their lives to the attention of these ladies. As regards the quality of their work, while the general average was very good, there were, of course, variations, and the best Sisters were undoubtedly those from the staffs of large hospitals at home. Those who had been engaged in private nursing were not so efficient as a class, and their employment is not to be recommended if Sisters can be obtained direct from the hospitals.'

Sisters Ivey and Pocock were mentioned in despatches; Sisters Nixon, Rawson and Bidmead were awarded The Royal Red Cross. Sister Hines died on active service.

After this war was ended a committee was convened to furnish a report, 'utilizing the experiences of these officers who were actually in charge of general hospitals in South Africa'. This report made the first assessment of needs for military hospitals in the twentieth century, including the nursing establishment, such as suggesting one nursing sister for every 40 patients, assisted by one staff nurse and four orderlies. As well, 'It is considered advisable that the operation theatre should be under the direct charge of a Nursing Sister, specially trained for this duty, as they are much neater, cleaner, and tidier in their methods and habits, especially in handling and care of surgical instruments and appliances. She should have an attendant as assistant for rough work, scrubbing floors, &c., and cleaning utensils and instruments, to act under her orders. Nursing Sisters held these appointments in many general hospitals during the South African Campaign with satisfaction to all concerned and credit to themselves.

'The appointment of trained masseurs to general hospitals during active service would be advisable, their services being most useful. Nursing Sisters



Superintendent  
Rawson

or nurses with masseur training and qualifications might be appointed for this special duty.’

A housekeeper to look after mess, catering and quarters was needed for the sisters. ‘The Nursing Sisters’ Camp, situated to the right front of the hospital, should consist of a hut combining mess and sitting rooms, kitchens, scullery, and pantry. If hut cannot be provided two tents large size, are necessary, also a kitchen, scullery, and pantry built as in Officers’ camp. The living tents recommended for these ladies’ use are the Indian Field Officers’ tents, with bath attachment. These would be far more comfortable and convenient for them than the double circular. Each nurse should have a tent to herself. The latrine is situated about 50 yards to the left of camp. In general hospitals at base we recommend that Nursing Sisters live in huts.’

Whilst this report was very advanced for its day, it gives latter-day readers a frightening insight into the conditions of the last century if the following suggestions are thought to be an advance on what had gone before:

‘Disinfecting sheds are necessary, where all clothes are steeped in chemical disinfecting solutions and wrung out. Another where the foecal [sic] soiled clothes and others requiring it are boiled, and another for Thresh’s steam disinfecting apparatus.

‘The floor of this entire shed should be of concrete, 4 inches thick. The first should have three wooden tubs, about 3 feet by 3 feet in size, with a wooden tap in each, close to the bottom, for emptying them. A small open drain, commencing at first tub each side, made in the concrete, in connection with a portable cistern, sunk at back of hut, is also necessary if main system of drainage does not exist.

‘Excreta and Slops: The second shed for disinfection and sterilisation of all infected discharges and slops from infectious division, should have a sink in one corner, drained into a cistern outside at back of hut, for washing bed-pans and urinals in after chemical disinfection. At one end of hut a large 100 gallon (or 150 gallon) ordinary boiler set in brick fireplace should be erected, for sterilising all infected discharges and slops. The walls all round should only extend 6 feet high, leaving a space of 1 foot below to allow for free circulation of air.

‘The clothes boiler, excreta steriliser, and outside cistern should be emptied by hand buckets into sanitary carts as frequently as necessity demands. All these sheds should be lime-washed inside frequently, and floors washed with disinfectants daily. An incinerator for burning used dressings, infected and worn-out clothing, and all refuse generally found in camps is a necessity.’

Thus by reading what is seen to be the ideal for the future, we understand a little what these gallant, unsung heroines had borne before this time.

There is but one reason for the paucity of records on nurses and their work at this war: nursing was not yet socially acceptable work for ladies. The conditions in which they laboured (‘that all-pervading faecal odour’) in South Africa would have been enough to have them ostracised from respectable society had it been publicly known. But most of all, female civilian nursing itself was still battling to achieve respectability. The image of women working in hospitals was viewed as ‘somewhere on a par with prostitution from a moral point of view’ as Beverly Kingston tells in her work, *My Wife, My Daughter and Poor Mary Ann*. Working women would not take



Nurse Hines



Sister Thomson

on nursing because factory conditions and pay as well as self respect, were far superior to those in hospitals.

Though professionally organised, any profession dominated by women in those days was doomed to have the lowest status and image of women in society at large. The utmost in ladylike behaviour was required before any professional work for women outside the home would be acceptable – even if this behaviour must have crippled many a spirit and crushed initiative in all but the most brave and resilient. When Florence Nightingale sent her first Nightingale nurses to Australia, Lucy Osburn described the women she found acting as nurses at Sydney Hospital as ‘... dirty, frowsy old women, slatternly, untidy young ones with their greasy hair, with ragged stuff dresses that required no washing. The doctors habitually stamped and raved at them. In the wards the patients called them to do the most menial work for them. The dirt, in spite of all the stamping and raging seemed ever increasing. The noise and prank in the wards were too dreadful.’

To remedy the public distaste for these women, the Nightingale system had to exaggerate even more acutely the unblemished, drawing-room qualities insisted on for acceptance as nurses. Miss Nightingale had an impeccable background; so must her nurses, if the profession was to succeed.

Equally important if the service was to achieve status were the conditions and remuneration. This took time and constant courage; several of the women who were matrons and senior sisters in the AANS in World War I were in the forefront of this brave march. The popular nineteenth century cartoon of a nurse was ‘Sairy Gamp’ with her red nose, straggly hair, little black bag and broilley, and this image had to be extinguished.

Everything seemed to be against these magnificent women. Hospitals were regarded as places for poor people to die; any respectable family nursed and buried their sick from home. Antiseptics were scarcely known.

Nurses’ accommodation was 10 women to a room (and they *must* live and sleep in); the nurses’ quarters of Prince Henry’s Hospital in Melbourne were known as the Buggery, presumably because of bed bugs tormenting the nurses; Melbourne Hospital was known as the Rattery. Yet these first white-collar women, middle-class girls taking advantage of the opportunity to escape from home to a profession, persisted.

It was not until World War I that they achieved the praise and acceptance they richly merited. When this war began in 1914, nurses were working longer hours for less pay and less personal freedom than any female domestic servant would tolerate.

Perhaps the catalyst was a popular song that swept the music halls and was on everyone’s lips during and after that war: ‘The Rose of No-mans Land’.

Though it’s sprayed with tears, it will live for years  
In the garden of my memory.