

Imperial Sisters: Patriotism and Humanitarianism in the Letters of British, Australian and New Zealand Professional Nurses, 1914-1918

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Introduction

During the First World War thousands of professional nurses volunteered to serve in their nations' military nursing services. The British services, consisting of the Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service (QAIMNS) and the Territorial Force Nursing Service (TFNS), were mobilized rapidly in the late summer and autumn of 1914.¹ Volunteer-assistants, known as 'VADs', worked alongside them in military hospitals, and were permitted to serve in general hospitals at military bases overseas from the spring of 1915.² The Australian Army Nursing Service (AANS) was a more coherent single unit which mobilized in the later summer and autumn of 1914,³ and the New Zealand Army Nursing Service (NZANS) – also a discrete unit – formed slowly during the first nine months of the war.⁴ The first contingent of Australian nurses, accompanied by a small number of New Zealanders, sailed to Egypt in November, 1914, with the first NZANS group departing for overseas service in April 1915.⁵

Recruitment to all allied nursing services expanded rapidly – apparently in response to powerful emotional drivers, among which the most significant was patriotism.⁶ This paper

expands our understanding of the ways in which nurses gave meaning to their wartime work by viewing it as a patriotic service. It also analyses the ways in which nurses' actual experiences of war service challenged and disturbed their patriotic ideals. It considers these issues through the lens of a particular body of professional writings: the letters written by British, Australian and New Zealand nurses for publication in their professional journals. The evidence reveals significant tensions in this body of writings. Most letter-writers expressed a sense of themselves as patriots. Yet, at times, their writings suggest that their self-identification as humanitarian carers superseded these patriotic identities. As long as they were writing about their work with their own compatriots (or with the wounded of other allied nations) professional nurses were comfortable. But caring for 'enemy' prisoners of war destabilised their self-identification as patriots, breaking down a powerful – sometimes propagandist - ideology which had been fostered in them.⁷ Although their work would never return 'soldiers to the enemy' (these men would remain prisoners in Allied hands for the duration of the war) caring for soldiers of the Central Powers created a sense of dissonance, forcing nurses to question their identities as members of societies which were infused with the ideologies of nationhood. Ultimately, many appear to have reached the conclusion that they were nurses first and patriots second. We argue that their allegiance to profession superseded their loyalty to King and country.

Background and Sources

Over 17,000 professional British nurses enlisted for service during the course of the war.⁸ New Zealand and Australia sent over 500 and 2000 nurses respectively on overseas wartime service with their countries' Expeditionary Forces.⁹ They worked in casualty clearing stations near the front line, in stationary hospitals in tents or temporarily converted buildings,

on hospital ships, ambulance trains and barges, and in general and convalescent military hospitals. Collectively, these professional nurses served in Belgium, France, Samoa, India, Egypt, Greece, Serbia, Palestine, Mesopotamia, Germany, Italy and Britain. Their motivation for serving appears to have varied as much as it did for the men enlisting – a mixture of excitement, adventure, patriotism and travel.¹⁰ War service gave professional nurses the opportunity to experience new professional challenges, as well as to signpost their attention to patriotism and duty. Many fought for the right to nurse ‘their boys’.¹¹

In the later twentieth century, much of the historiography of patriotism and nursing centred on untrained nursing volunteers rather than those who served as professionally qualified nurses. Much of this work focused on the use of nursing volunteers as symbols of patriotic service, angels of mercy and maternal nurturers in visual fundraising propaganda, rather than on professional nurses’ views of patriotism.¹² In both British and French contexts, women’s historians revealed the fervour with which nurses embraced their patriotic identities. Susan Grayzel, for example, argued that women’s traditional wartime roles tapped into the powerful notion that patriotic women were the self-sacrificing mothers of the nation.¹³

During the second decade of the twenty first century the focus shifted towards trained, professional nurses, although VAD-volunteers continued to attract notable academic and public attention.¹⁴ Drawing upon historical research, Kara Vuic explored the connections between women’s gender roles and their participation in war as nurses, arguing that ‘in harnessing traditional gender norms to smooth their entrance to the masculine environs of hospital, military and war, [women] contained the radical potential of their newfound work by upholding the existing class and race ideologies that defined proper womanhood’.¹⁵ Those ideologies foregrounded the self-sacrificing, nurturing mother-figure, an ideal-type to which

nurses could easily conform; and patriotic service was a key element of this archetypal female role. And yet, although nursing was an obvious and very visible means by which women could display their loyalty to nation, they were also drawn into military service by other significant motivators. Janet Watson has argued, in the British context, that, while volunteers were motivated almost entirely by patriotism, professional nurses were frequently drawn to military service by a desire to perform work that they anticipated would be professionally challenging as well as personally rewarding.¹⁶ The lure of travel and adventure also drew them to volunteer for overseas postings.¹⁷

Nurses' letters and diaries reveal that their experiences did not always meet their expectations – and yet, they were able to enact what appears to have been one of their primary purposes: to present themselves as patriots on a world stage. In her 'Beacons of Britishness', Angela Smith illustrates how British 'medical professional women' (both doctors and nurses) viewed themselves as powerful representatives of their country, protecting the honour of the British people by acting honourably themselves in the dangerous and trying scenario of wartime Serbia.¹⁸ In Australia and New Zealand, a powerful male 'ANZAC myth', in which patriotic service and heroism were the central elements, developed during and after the war.¹⁹ Recently, new research has suggested that nurses invested emotionally in this myth, even though, as women, they were comprehensively excluded from it.²⁰

Keeping in touch with their professional colleagues was important to nurses serving overseas. They took care to maintain their subscriptions to their professional journals and relished receiving a copy, even if several months after its publication.²¹ Problems receiving mail did not deter them from sending letters home.²² Some nurses wrote directly to their professional association or journal, hoping their accounts of wartime nursing would be of interest to

readers. Journal editors also occasionally published letters passed on to them by nurses' friends and family, and sometimes reprinted others published in mainstream newspapers. Occasionally, nurses gave explicit instructions to family members, friends or professional colleagues to pass on a letter to a professional journal.²³ Nurses - British ones in particular - engaged in heated debates about issues relating to the conduct of the nursing services during the war, and some (particularly British) editors appear to have encouraged such debates. Nurses' published letters allow insight into their views about war and patriotism, views they appear to have wanted colleagues to know about.

Nurses' reflections in letters home, particularly those written for colleagues and published in professional nursing journals, allow us to interpret the meaning of patriotism in a profession that valued life and relief of suffering yet also discipline, self-sacrifice and selfless service. These values were made explicit in nursing textbooks and journal articles.²⁴ Hence, the vast majority of Australian, New Zealand and British nurses' letters to professional journals offer a rare collective record of women's occupational concerns. More specifically, they provide an insight into a fundamental challenge faced by nurses in war – how to make sense of a reality, which sometimes contrasted profoundly with their professional values and expectations, and how to provide professional nursing care to all patients whether allies or enemies. Patriotism was at the core of this challenge. This article examines the meaning of patriotism in nurses' wartime letters published in five journals: the three main British professional nursing journals: *British Journal of Nursing*; *Nursing Times*; and *Nursing Mirror and Midwives Journal*; the New Zealand nursing journal, *Kai Tiaki* ; and the Australian journal *Una* (which was published in the state of Victoria). We argue that the letters reveal the complexity of nurses' attitudes and insights, including the contradictory excitement of war, horror at its reality and impact, and powerful questioning of its purpose. Observations of nursing both

‘their boys’ and enemy prisoner-patients reveal varying depths of reflection, expressions of patriotism and a sense of the complexity of wartime nursing care.

The *British Journal of Nursing* was owned and edited by Ethel Gordon Fenwick, a powerful campaigner for nursing professionalization (including a British register for nurses),²⁵ whilst the *Nursing Mirror and Midwives Journal*, which had the largest circulation of any British professional nursing journal, was, by contrast, controlled by a powerful ‘anti-registrationist’ lobby. The *Nursing Times*, was established in 1905, and came to represent the interests of the British ‘College of Nursing’ when that organisation was founded in 1916.²⁶ Letters published in these journals linked nurses with their professional community at home.

Una was established in 1903. It was edited by a notable physician, Dr John Springthorpe, although nurses contributed to the editorial work. In contrast, *Kai Tiaki* was founded in 1908, and funded and edited by Hester Maclean, the country’s chief nurse and inaugural president of the New Zealand Trained Nurses’ Association. *Kai Tiaki* published more wartime letters from nurses than *Una*, either in complete form or as excerpts or summaries. This might have reflected Maclean’s personal involvement and interest as the first Matron-in-Chief of the New Zealand Army Nursing Service.²⁷

Such a collective record of public correspondence in a female occupational group is rare. Examination of these letters therefore contributes to epistolary history, particularly the emerging historiography of women’s correspondence. Brookes examined letters from female physicians who graduated from the same medical school in Edinburgh in the 1890s and dispersed to several countries. She noted the power of letter-writing in creating a sense of community ‘very necessary to its members. They were, in themselves, a means of countering

loneliness and isolation'.²⁸ Similarly, Dauphin's examination of women's personal correspondence in the political sphere showed that letters allowed the women a means for 'expressing and exploring their innermost feelings'.²⁹ In relation to nursing, Hallett included letters, diaries and memoirs in her consideration of authorial intention in WWI nurses' personal writing,³⁰ but use of letters to professional journals as a primary or sole historical sources is uncommon.

Although WWI nurses' published letters were not always intended as reciprocal correspondence between two individuals, their publication positioned them as a communication from an individual nurse to her colleagues at home, conveying her experiences of nursing in extraordinary circumstances. Consideration of these letters therefore enables an understanding of nurses' feelings about war and patriotism that they wanted to express to colleagues. This connected professional and personal values. Nurses' responses to the purpose, reality and effects of war, especially as these raised issues of patriotism, allow insight into their struggle to make sense of their experience and deal with its emotional impact. One important consideration in this study was the roles of journal editors and owners. It is highly likely that those making selections – deciding which letters to publish and which to discard – themselves had a powerful sense of duty to nation. And they are likely to have interpreted this sense of duty in quite narrow ways. Most British editors, for example, are likely to have been heavily influenced by the propagandist tendencies of the mainstream newspapers of the day – particularly the *Times*, *Daily Mail* and *Daily Express*, which were, themselves deliberately promoting the messages of the War Propaganda Bureau.³¹ As indicated above, two of the most significant nursing journals of the early twentieth century, the *British Journal of Nursing* and *Kai Tiaki*, were edited by powerful nurse leaders, who undoubtedly had a profound influence on which letters were published.

Their major concerns are likely to have included a consideration of how published letters might have affected the reputations of their nascent profession. It was, therefore, all the more intriguing for us to find that some quite controversial debates were published alongside some milder and more unbiased expressions of patriotism.

All published letters were examined in relation to patriotism. At its simplest, patriotism is loyalty to country, but, as a motivating force, it becomes complex in time of war. One of our most important findings is that, from its beginning, the First World War challenged nurses' self-perceptions as patriots. Although their views on enlistment and their appreciation of 'their boys' were uncomplicatedly patriotic, their responses to direct experience of conflict, attempts to make sense of war and its impact on bodies and lives, and views of people from different countries (particularly 'the enemy') forced them to re-evaluate their perspectives on patriotic service.

Nursing: a patriotic duty

Nursing and patriotism

At the outbreak of war, both the *British Journal of Nursing* and the *Nursing Times* seem to have been intent upon setting a patriotic tone within their pages – as if the editors of these journals saw it as their duty to promulgate the dominant ideology of the day. The *BJN* included a somewhat stridently nationalistic poem by Henry Newbolt in its first wartime issue:

“England! What thou wert thou art!”

Gird thee with thine ancient might

Forth! And God defend the Right!³²

Such effusions are illustrative of the cultural tone in Britain at the outbreak of war. Nursing journals mirrored the activities of other culturally-influential media; the *BJN* reprinted Newbolt's poem directly from *The Times*. The *Nursing Mirror and Midwives Journal* offered an editorial reflecting on the nature of 'war spirit':

War fever has its origin in the emotions, and appeals to every passing feeling as it is swayed by popular opinion and the latest rumour. The war spirit is founded upon the bed-rock of national character; it appeals to the intellect and the deeper forces that move men to action; it is indomitable and calmly severe, enduring with a dreadful patience to the bitter end if need be.³³

Professional nurses responded to the tone that was being set by their journals. A letter written by Violetta Thurstan, from German-occupied Belgium and published in a late-September issue of the *BJN* describes both its writer's dismay that the British are not able to liberate Belgium and her pride at being able to represent her country:

Charleroi is a very sad place just now. Nearly all of it is burnt down and pillaged by the Germans. There are many streets in which every single house has been burnt down. We get no news at all, and it is most trying when the people keep saying: "Where *are* the English? Why don't they come and help us?"... Happily we do feel that we are of real use here, and the people are so grateful and so glad to have us. I am so very glad we came.³⁴

Thurstan's letter conveys her anxiety to locate the British nation as the potential saviour of the Belgian people. Other nurses went further than this, positioning themselves as key players in what was becoming a massive 'war effort'. They prided themselves in their

capacity to provide skilled attention to soldier-patients, commenting that the country owed this to men who were being wounded for its sake. They sometimes used such arguments in their protests against the use of VAD-volunteer labour in military hospital wards. In November 1914, the *BJN* reprinted a letter written by trained nurse, Beatrice Kent, to Lord Kitchener, protesting against the use of volunteer-nurses. Kent had argued that: ‘We consider as patriotic women, that nothing but considerable experience with the highest skill is good enough for men who are risking their lives for their country; more especially as the nervous and physical condition of the wounded is bound to be, in many cases, very serious’.³⁵

Reflections on the nature of patriotism

Nurses frequently commented on aspects of the war in a way that reflected their views on patriotism. It was something they could recognise in others. One Anonymous British nurse, working in a Belgian field hospital commented on the courage of the Belgian people, contrasting it with what she saw as the passivity of some British nurses:

Belgium has given her men, homes, land, her *all* to save herself and Europe. What are you doing? Come over and help us. For none of you realise the power of the enemy, the force we have to fight. If you did you would not be at home. Nothing but age or physical disability should keep you in England now. If you are to save Europe and England – it must be *now*. We owe honour to little Belgium, but above all we owe her help. The only help we can give is *ourselves* to live or die not only for Belgium, but for our country and our honour.³⁶

It is not clear whether this nurse is calling for other nurses or indeed for potential combatants to join the war effort. What *is* clear is her identification of the so-called ‘Great War’ as a ‘just war’, demanding loyalty to country and a sense of honour.

Standing, in the minds of British and Dominion people, alongside 'little Belgium' was another courageous, beleaguered small nation: Serbia. 'Sister Peter' from New Zealand described Serbs as 'nice, grateful, quiet people [who] bear their pain marvellously. They are not paid at all, just fight for their country as a natural thing ... every man or boy who could handle a gun went of their own accord. That is what I call patriotism'.³⁷ Similarly, an anonymous British nurse serving with a British nursing organisation known as the 'French Flag Nursing Corps' at a French field hospital commented on how her 'experience has been invariable kindness from one and all, touching gratitude from the patients, and an inward feeling that we are helping our brave Allies to the best of our ability'.³⁸ Often, nurses were the first to hear, at first hand, the battle-stories of their patients. A British nurse on an ambulance train wrote in early 1916 of a typical experience:

Presently the expected convoy arrives, a cheery, excited crowd, all full of high spirits, for have they not captured four lines of German trenches and taken many prisoners? Grand news this for the poor things first on the train! They have been stricken down too early in the battle to know whether it went well or ill. Many of the newcomers are carrying German helmets which they have stuck to like glue, although every stitch of their own kit has been lost... Dear, brave, patient souls, heroes all. God bless them and give them back their health and strength once more.³⁹

Nurses' own patriotism manifested in their willingness to serve and they looked for it in others. Ella Cooke wrote from London in May 1915 to her sister in New Zealand that 'trained nurses are needed very badly everywhere, and it is our duty to help all we can in this horrible and cruel war'.⁴⁰ British nurse, Edda Reid, wrote to her father from Serbia: 'The doctors gave us the option of staying with our patients, or going and sheltering in the American

hospital, but I am pleased to say we all stuck it. I am not going to say we were not afraid. I seemed to have no feelings'.⁴¹ Several months later, a nurse wrote of coming under aerial bombardment at Salonika. 'There was absolutely no panic', she wrote, taking obvious pride in the cool courage of her compatriots. Alongside her analysis of the courage of the allies, she juxtaposed what she saw as the heinous behaviour and cowardly motivations of the Central Powers: 'Our enemies are brave, are they not, to make war thus on helpless men and defenceless women?'⁴² Even later in the war, when Beatrice Mawson returned to Australia in 1917 after more than two years' service and surviving the sinking of a ship, she declared that after 'a little rest, I trust to take up military duty again'.⁴³

Although not jingoistic, early in the war some nurses rather shamefacedly admitted their enjoyment of military action. 'I must be a barbarian,' said one Australian nurse on a hospital ship bringing wounded from Gallipoli in 1915, 'as I really do not mind it, and once or twice when things got too warm ... I enjoyed the excitement.'⁴⁴ Another letter from Gallipoli noted that 'shells whistled over us from the Turks', with the sound of 'rifles, machine guns, etc, all night'. The nurse quickly added that she was 'quite safe' and loved 'being up near the front and in the thick of it even if it is trying'.⁴⁵ One nurse even expressed a wish to take up arms herself. She sometimes felt 'that all of us should go and use a rifle....One wants to do more'.⁴⁶ Failing that, she urged people to encourage enlistment. 'Get all the men you can to enlist. They are all urgently needed. Men are being killed in Gallipoli because of the want of reinforcements. Turks are being killed but it is a costly war.'⁴⁷ Another Australian nurse writing to her family in 1917 more pointedly questioned why some fought and others remained at home. 'It does seem so rankly unjust and unfair that the cream of our country should go through this vile, loathsome life, and the "skim-milk" of it enjoy itself at home.'⁴⁸

Nurses were less likely to urge enlistment as the war progressed, as they experienced and tried to make sense of its horrors and effects. Reflection, however, could be dangerous. A ‘decided lull on the Western Front, both in fighting and nursing’ did not help one nurse as ‘it does not do to have time to stop and think in this kind of work’.⁴⁹

Nevertheless, nurses enthusiastically reported events with patriotic overtones such as Christmas dinners for soldier-patients, with tables festooned with symbols of home and reminders of loyal allegiance. At a hospital in England in January 1916, Australia Day was also suitably celebrated. A nurse reported tables set with red, white and blue paper, real wattle blossom sent from France, ‘piles of fruit, patriotic serviettes, jellies, etc’ and menus decorated with a kookaburra on the front and sprigs of boronia or gum leaves inside. Bugles accompanied the troops of men arriving for dinner, and messages from the King, General Birdwood and Australian states were read out and followed by toasts. The men, this nurse wrote: ‘cheered and cheered until it was time to get back to their wards’.⁵⁰

While these events were primarily to mark festive occasions and give a measure of enjoyment to all, they served to reinforce patriotism. Nurses, however, generally focused on their boost to soldiers’ wellbeing. As one said of Christmas dinner at Harefield Hospital in England in 1916, the ‘boys’ needed ‘no pity from their home folk’. If the soldiers’ relatives had ‘seen them all on the day, their hearts would have been gladdened.’⁵¹ Even weary nurses at Wimereux would provide companionship to soldiers down from the front line for a fortnight’s rest at a nearby camp. ‘We would be glad afterwards, as so often they would go up the line and never return again.’⁵²

Nurses' pride in soldiers

Nurses' pride in 'their boys' was a consistent theme in their letters throughout the war.

Although it was a significant feature of British nurses' writings, it appears to have been even more powerful in those of Australians and New Zealanders. A New Zealand nurse living in England in 1914 said that she was 'very proud to know so many men are coming to help us in this ghastly war'.⁵³ More specifically, however, nurses admired soldiers' capacity to deal with adversity with fortitude and humour, viewing such behavioural traits as a marks of national honour. Fortitude, and 'stiff upper lip' could involve managing difficult situations in fighting or adjusting to profound injury. Near the end of the war, Australian Sister Evaline Jones visited a former battle site at Peronne and finally understood what the men had had to contend with. She noted, 'I have always been proud of them, but since I have been up here I love them more than ever, the brave boys.'⁵⁴

Most remarks of bravery related to attributes they saw in the men as patients. New Zealand nurses liked the English 'Tommies' as they were 'brave and good, and such grateful patients',⁵⁵ and made 'so light of their wounds'.⁵⁶ And an Australian nurse remarked that it was 'great to see the brave way the boys bear pain in the hospital, and how brave they are when they've lost a limb or an eye'.⁵⁷ One British nurse wrote to the *BJN*:

The "Tommies" are simply lovely. I do like them so much. Poor things, all they want is to get better quickly, so that they can have another shot at the enemy... They are disgusted if they do not have anything to show for having been at to the Front. One poor man was quite upset because he was silly enough to have pneumonia.⁵⁸

Humour in adversity was also admired. Sylvia Brown said: 'In spite of war weariness, and, of course, it exists, cheerfulness prevails. These men here come up smiling every time (often against great odds).'⁵⁹ When an Australian nurse at the Western Front in 1917 wrote of 'a few nasty bombing raids by Fritz in September', she described how helpless patients, 'strung up to the ceiling by their arms and legs,' were 'even cracking jokes about Fritz not being satisfied with hitting them up the line, but must visit them down at the base. These, needless to say, are Australians'.⁶⁰ But British nurses, too, commented on the humour of their patients. One wrote to the *BJN*: 'It is cheery to go through the wards now and see the bright faces of most. We have, perhaps, six or eight who will probably die, but the rest have gone ahead wonderfully and begin to joke together and amuse themselves'.⁶¹ In fact, cheerful courage appears to have been viewed as an attribute of allied soldiers of all nations. One British nurse serving in a French military hospital commented that she had moved her patients out of their wards in order to take advantages of the healing powers of fresh air and sunlight, adding: 'I can't think of a happier sight than the brave French soldiers all chatting one to another in the lovely sunshine'.⁶²

Nurses' admiration for soldiers' courage and bravery in dealing with extreme adversity grew out of their understanding, as nurses, of the effects of severe injuries and their impact on patients. One British nurse commented:

I don't think anything in the way of horrors will ever turn us after this experience.

The pluck of some of these men is marvellous... One poor officer boy who came in was shot in about twenty places, absolutely shattered, and died almost at once, luckily.⁶³

Comments on cultural characteristics, such as humour, aligned admiration with patriotism. Nurses could, at times, become quite effusive in their praise for their patients. One British nurse commented that caring for them had enabled her to ‘realise the divine in human nature’. She was grateful ‘to be permitted to help to care for these wonderful men, English and French alike’, adding that ‘here under this roof seem congregated specimens of all the virtues worth having – undying courage, devoted patriotism, gratitude’.⁶⁴ The placing of ‘undying courage’ and ‘devoted patriotism’ side by side in this letter offers insight into the emphasis which was placed by nurses on what they saw as the heroism of their soldier-patients.

Questioning patriotism

Nurses’ experiences of the war

Nurses’ experience of the conflict provided a rather poignant context for their comments. Some received graphic accounts from soldier-patients. As Sister Blanche Ricketts wrote from Heliopolis to her father in Victoria, ‘I can imagine I am on the field of battle, so many patients give in their delirium such vivid descriptions of their experiences’.⁶⁵ As Ricketts was writing home about the horrors of the Gallipoli campaign, an Anonymous British nurse was composing a long narrative of her experiences in a Belgian field hospital:

Work for eight days without once stopping except to snatch a hasty meal, surrounded by mangled forms and constant pain bravely borne. You will then realise what is the aftermath of a great and historic attack. Who won and who lost? What does that matter when one looks down at the rows of white, still forms piled high in the mortuary, when one sees the overcrowded wards filled with suffering bravely and silently borne.⁶⁶

Many nurses working in casualty clearing stations near the front line, or stationary hospitals to which injured soldiers were transferred, had direct experience of bombing raids, shells and mortar fire. Sister Francis Shirtcliffe, a New Zealand nurse with a British ambulance train in France, wrote in 1917 that some evenings when the train was waiting to load patients she ‘could see the sky lit up and the star shells bursting and the smoke and the continuous rumble of guns’. It made her ‘realise more the ghastliness of it all’.⁶⁷ Another in France, Sylvia Brown, after ‘the strenuous days of the March push’ and a subsequent ‘very grim time’ of bombing, was ‘thankful to say as many patients as possible were evacuated to “Blighty” after these happenings’.⁶⁸ Men and nurses knew that wounds severe enough to require evacuation to Blighty – Britain – often meant the end of a soldier’s active service. This nurse’s relief that so many had gone indicated a sense of the need to limit any individual’s patriotic service.

From France, one New Zealand nurse wrote in June 1918 that bombs were dropped close to her hospital for ten consecutive moonlit nights, ‘near enough to make us a bit “windy”, also to make us lose much sleep’ as they had to take shelter in trenches. It was strange that ‘the moon for the first time in its life probably, is no longer welcome.... Things have changed some, eh?’ On one occasion the hospital itself was bombed. Patients who could not be taken to the trenches were wounded and one killed. Nine Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps women were killed in a trench and several others died later from wounds. ‘It seems so dreadful,’ the nurse said, ‘for they come out here to tackle work they have never done before, and they are such young things, too. If anything happens to us, it is different somehow, for we are doing our own work, and it is in the game for us.’⁶⁹ For her, the nursing values of selfless service and sacrifice positioned nurses uniquely in relation to wartime work.

'This cruel war'

Personal experience of caring for the war's wounded led some nurses to question the war itself. Some expressed the feeling that nothing could justify war's devastating effect on human lives; and these feelings, in turn, led them to question the 'patriotic service' that war demanded. It was the physical and emotional impact of war on soldiers and local people that generated the most heartfelt comment. Several saw the hardship suffered by refugees. Eileen Ferguson, an Australian nurse at a hospital in Dunkirk managed by the Duchess of Sutherland, wrote in 1915: 'Such sad sights in such beautiful country, all so green and fresh, heaps of flowers, especially lilac....Strings and strings of peasants, mostly old men, women, and children, with their little belongings, flying from this doomed town. Barrows, perambulators, cats, children carrying cats and canaries, such a pitiful sight.'⁷⁰

As Hallett noted, 'horror and pity at the levels of trauma suffered by their patients' was a consistent theme in British and Allied nurses' personal writings.⁷¹ Even early in the war, New Zealand and Australian nurses' comments in their letters were already showing a conflicting mixture of the patriotic impulse to assist men to recover and continue to fight, and dismay at the overwhelming physical effects of war. An Australian nurse in 1915, noting that 1,600 wounded soldiers had been admitted to her hospital in two days, added that 'fortunately the majority will get back and fight.'⁷² Sister Alice Kitchen, on a hospital ship at Gallipoli in June 1915, observed sadly that 'forty patients died on this trip; sometimes in a ward two or three dying at the same time....No one can realize the horrors of war until they have seen this sort of tragic result. The Mediterranean must have hundreds of our fine young Australians in it by this time'.⁷³ Sister Scott similarly noted that the 'death rate is very heavy; we often have forty a trip, and goodness knows how many Australian dead are buried in the Mediterranean,

to say nothing of all that die on the land we never hear of.' Nurses were aware of the impact a true record would have on patriotism and enlistment. As Scott added, 'I daresay the Australian public have some idea of their terrible losses by this time; many hundreds of homes must be just desolate. I suppose they notify each family, but don't publish the whole sum total.'⁷⁴ The suffering of the men was a frequent theme. British nurse, Hilda Chibnall, wrote of patients taken onto a hospital ship from Cape Helles, 'who have often been lying out for 24 or 36 hours without food, exposed to the sun, and tormented by flies... They all arrive on board in the clothes they have worn for weeks or months; these are usually quite stiff with blood and sand, alive with vermin, and almost black with flies'. She added her admiration for the men, observing that she and her colleagues were agreed that 'we have never before nursed men who suffered so much and complained so little, nor seen patients show so much unselfishness towards each other and gratitude to those who are nursing them'.⁷⁵

As time went on, nurses were sometimes puzzled at soldiers' patriotism shown in their readiness to continue to fight. A New Zealand nurse, M.E. Brown, on an ambulance train in France in 1916 was surprised that 'men often tell one that this is the second or third time they have been sent home wounded and yet they seem quite willing to go back again if the necessity arises'.⁷⁶ Perhaps this related to their acute feeling of loss of comrades. A New Zealand nurse on the hospital ship *Marama* in 1916 commented that they had transported several South African men on the last trip, though 'very few are left'. 'They got terribly cut up, but though they said little about it, we could see from that little how terribly the survivors felt it.'⁷⁷

Nurses grieved at the impact of war on young soldiers. Priscilla Wardle wrote to her sister in Australia in 1915 of arrivals of wounded at a tent hospital. 'We received the convoys in the

pouring rain; men soaked through and wounded; my heart ached for them.’⁷⁸ Nurse S. McGann in Alexandria in 1915 was equally affected. She told her friend in Auckland of her sadness ‘when I am doing a big dressing (I am in the surgical wards) and you look up at a boy’s face, perhaps about 18 years, and you know he has little chance of going out with both legs. It’s truly awful the number of maimed men that will be set adrift after the war.’⁷⁹ As different forms of warfare were introduced and nurses saw their new physical effects on soldiers, their grief and anger was apparent in their writings. At a casualty clearing station in France in August 1917, Evaline Jones described how it was ‘inexpressibly sad’ to have more than 350 gassed men brought in within 24 hours. ‘If anything makes one “see red”, as the boys say, it is when we get these poor gassed men in. I think it is worse than any thing else.’⁸⁰

It was this close experience of its effect that shaped nurses’ changing response to war. In 1915, Eileen Ferguson at Dunkirk wrote that the ‘agonies of the poor fellows as they were lifted from the ambulances, and also when their wounds were being dressed, were dreadful. I have been here ten weeks now, but not till last week did I realise what war meant.’⁸¹ Sitting on the deck of a hospital ship at Gallipoli in June 1915, Alice Kitchen noted that ‘in the peaceful sunshine’ when ‘there were no guns thundering’, it was ‘a little difficult to realize that only a couple of miles away on shore so many valuable lives are being uselessly sacrificed. It is only when batches of wounded arrive, does one realize the horrors of war.’⁸² Once nurses recognised the horrors of war, they turned to this in their letters. Nurse M.E. Brown reflected that the ‘work makes one realise the enormous wastage of this terrible war; of course some of the men recover and go back, but many are too badly injured for that to be possible’.⁸³ It was particularly poignant when it was ‘their boys’ from home. Sister Bisset wrote to her father in Australia in August 1915: ‘I simply cannot write about the wounded....I thought I wanted to nurse Australians, but now I hope I never see anyone I know with these

awful wounds. One could hardly bear it.’⁸⁴ Some nurses began to long for an end to war. Bessie Young on a hospital ship taking men from Serbia in 1916 wrote: ‘Oh, Miss Maclean, it was pitiful and heart-breaking, there were over 60 deaths in a three days’ run. Oh, this cruel war, may it soon end.’⁸⁵

Some nurses questioned the war itself. Sister Grace Calder, a New Zealand nurse, told of the ‘heartbreaking’ trips bringing the wounded from Gallipoli. ‘One felt very thankful to be in the very midst of it, doing something to help, but the wounds were bad and the patients who in the short space of time it took to come to Alexandria died from them, made one wonder why such a dreadful war need be.’⁸⁶ The questioning of the war continued to the end. As a New Zealand nurse writing from Edinburgh in June 1918 said: ‘Whatever does it all mean, and what great error has our nation made to be smitten by such a dreadful war? We can but confess we do not understand. Perhaps by the time this reaches you the outlook will be brighter for all concerned.’⁸⁷

Reminders of home

The churn of tending to severely wounded patients, loss of lives and questioning of the war exacerbated Australian and New Zealand nurses’ longing to be home. This was expressed as a yearning not only for family and friends but also for a remembered country. Visual reminders had great impact. Nurse McGann told her friend in Auckland in August 1915 that she had just received an Auckland *Weekly* and ‘it delighted my soul’. The New Zealand soldiers ‘love to see a paper, particularly a picture of Auckland’.⁸⁸ Dora Gill was ‘longing for the day to come when this miserable war is over, and we can settle down again. I long to see the hills of Wellington and all my friends at home. No place like “God’s Own Country”.’⁸⁹

For soldiers, another visual connection with home was the nurses' medal or badge. As all New Zealand nurses wore the same five-pointed star medal, they could be recognised regardless of where they served. Edith Lewis, attached to Britain's Egyptian Expeditionary Force, wrote in 1917 that New Zealand soldiers hailed her when they saw her medal. 'We have quite a talk over where we each come from.' She hoped 'our boys will soon be able to return to the land they love so well, and are longing to see.' Several, however, had 'not got any further than here' and 'they now lie on a sunny hill facing the sea'.⁹⁰

Connecting with landscape was also important for Australians. Nurse E. Hargreave, at a large base hospital in France, wrote to her sister Helen in Melbourne that she had been called to a severely wounded Australian soldier from Sydney. Once they had cheerfully insulted each other about their cities, she talked to him 'about the sunshine and surf bathing of Sydney'. He kissed her hand, a gesture she returned. 'The boy died suddenly at midnight. I hope he dreamed of his beautiful sunny Sydney.'⁹¹

Nursing 'the enemy'

'Poor Miss Ormerod'

In Britain, as nurses mobilised for war service, their letters to their professional journals reflected both their determination to do their duty and their doubts and uncertainties as to what their work would entail. One issue which caused much mental stress was the nursing of enemy prisoners. One Royal Naval Reserve Nurse, Alice Ormerod, knew exactly where her loyalties lay. In early September, she wrote to *The Nursing Mirror and Midwives Journal*:

May I draw your attention to the appalling lists of German outrages on civilians, men, women, and children, which appear daily in the newspapers? Do not these atrocities furnish amply sufficient grounds for Belgian, French, and British nurses and doctors steadfastly combining in an absolute refusal to succour or assist in any shape or form wounded German soldiers? As a professional nurse who has been on the Royal Naval Reserve for about six years, and now anxiously awaiting her opportunity to prove her unflinching loyalty to her King and country, I protest with all the vigour of which I am capable against these monsters being given of our best.⁹²

Miss Ormerod's letter evoked an instant response. One Anonymous 'Sister' wrote of the 'extreme disgust' with which she read the letter, adding that 'for a doctor or a nurse, when a man is ill, however vile he may be, their vocation is to help him, not to condemn him'.⁹³

Another acknowledged that 'it is no doubt a difficult task to love our enemies when we read of the terrible outrages which have been committed'.⁹⁴ The tendency to use religious language or to cite passages from the bible was very common. 'M.J.P' enquired:

May I enter my protest against the letter of Miss K. Alice Ormerod, in which she suggests that the enemy, when wounded, should be refused of our best? Apart from that being the least a true English man or woman can give, surely we have, as Christians, our working orders. "When thine enemy hungers, feed him".⁹⁵

Others invoked the nobility and humanity of the nursing profession. 'Clara M.R.' exclaimed: 'surely if the medical and nursing profession is as noble as we believe it to be we cannot afford to turn our back on, or refuse to help and succour, a wounded and fallen enemy',⁹⁶ while the 'Matron of Sir Titus Salt's Hospital, Shipley' wrote:

Surely your correspondent, Miss Ormerod, wrote to you last week without seriously thinking what she was saying... Above all things let us as nurses avoid lowering our standard of charity to the level of brutal individuals. We are out for right, and we must see to it that, whatever cruelty we may hear of, our standard must be kept clean, and we as Englishwomen must send down the ages a record of charity during this terrible time.⁹⁷

This matron was typical of nurses who identified justice and compassion as 'British' traits, using this notion of their compatriots as essentially good and honourable to fuel their sense of patriotism. Two weeks after the publication of Ormerod's letter, nurses were still expressing their disapproval of her sentiments. 'One who still would feel it a privilege to nurse any wounded German soldier', insisted that 'in sickness and disablement all else [becomes] blotted out by the fact of the universal brotherhood of man.'⁹⁸ 'A.S.D.' advised that 'now is the time to live our noblest and our best'.⁹⁹ Another anonymous 'Hospital Sister' wrote forthrightly: 'In reply to a letter by Miss K.A. Ormerod, are these the words of an Englishwoman and a trained nurse? We blush for fear that she may be such'.¹⁰⁰ Yet, 'A Liverpool Nurse' was willing to support Ormerod's views, and to do so in forthright terms:

Re: all this nonsense about nursing the enemy, I feel very much as Miss Ormerod. The enemy, we know, are fighting for their country as our good men are for ours, but with a great difference: ours is the cause of right; theirs would be, if they had the "spunk" to finish off that reptile leader and his immediate followers. As they haven't, I have not a scrap of feeling for them, sick or well.. I should prefer nursing a beast, so away with sentiment.¹⁰¹

Two weeks' later, 'Liverpool Nurse' was retracting her statement: 'With regard to a communication of mine which appeared in your issue of September 19, I feel now very

strongly that it was a most unchristianlike letter to write. You can please yourself as to whether you publish this or not, so long as you keep my name from the paper'.¹⁰² By this time, opposition was being expressed frequently and with vehemence. 'Indignant' stated that 'shocked and pained as everyone is at the accounts of the German atrocities, would not Miss Ormerod's horrible suggestion, if carried out, put us on their exact level?'¹⁰³ A.S. Wood cited narratives published in the *Times*, of Russian peasant women distributing food to wounded Austrian prisoners, in the hope that their own wounded would be treated equally well, and commented on the 'contrast [between] the noble natural kindness of the peasant and the vindictive cold cruelty suggested by a nurse of the Royal Naval Reserve'.¹⁰⁴

By October, letters objecting to both 'Miss Ormerod' and 'Liverpool Nurse' were appearing in the journal. One Sussex Nurse opined:

I am sorry you saw fit to give space in your issue of September 19 to the callous effusion from a "Liverpool Nurse". From what class can she have sprung? And at what school has she trained if she has not been taught the great essential in true nursing, to hold sacred the sick or wounded human body... In honour, if for no other reason, we ought to do our best for the Germans, and I hope that such nurses as "Miss K.A. Ormerod and "Liverpool Nurse" will be removed from any possible contact with wounded Germans.¹⁰⁵

By mid-October the avalanche of disapprobation evoked by Ormerod's letter was abating. Some correspondents were beginning to express sympathy with Ormerod, who was seen by some as having acted impulsively. 'Old Westminster' wrote:

Poor Miss Ormerod! I wonder if she is not ready by this time to withdraw her horrible suggestion and shrink into her miserable self. Surely before this she must

feel like a little whipped puppy! I do hope the Germans will not fall into her hands, but I hope still more that she will not fall into theirs, nor even into the hands of the English nursing profession. I do not know the lady, nor do I approve of her suggestion; but it makes me sick to read the twaddle called forth by that letter, which must have been written on the impulse of a bad moment, and I should not be surprised if some of the horrified correspondents who replied to her have not thought equally shocking things in equally bad moments. I think if it came to a push, even people like Miss Ormerod would not leave a “torn mutilated, bleeding human body” to “rot and fester,” but would probably tend it as well as the rest of us, and, maybe, say less about it.¹⁰⁶

Two correspondents went further, stating that they shared Ormerod’s sentiments. “A Yorkshire Woman” frankly agreed with her proposal, adding: ‘Friends first. The very best of everything we have to give should be given to our own men first’.¹⁰⁷ “Nurse Field” went even further, suggesting that ‘after their atrocities practised on the women and innocent babies, not to speak of their destruction of Rheims, Louvain, and all they have done in France and Belgium, the Germans should simply be treated as dangerous wild animals and destroyed’.¹⁰⁸

By the end of October, the journal’s correspondents were beginning to express a more measured response to Ormerod’s original letter. It is impossible to know whether this was due to the production of a greater volume of sympathetic letters, or to deliberate selectivity on the part of the journal’s editors. “Old Londoner” stated ‘how deeply sorry I have felt for Miss Ormerod in her position of having drawn such an onslaught from her fellow-workers for what is only too obvious to us all – feeling expressed on the spur of the moment’.¹⁰⁹ She added:

I happen to know a nurse who worked for some time with Miss Ormerod, who says that she is “one of the best” and has a brave and loyal heart. Man of us feel and know that she, as well as the rest of us would, as “Old Westminster” suggests, should occasion arise, probably tend the wounded of our enemy and give out to them, as to our own dear fellows, her very best, and say nothing about it.

Meanwhile, “Sussex Nurse” suggested that ‘I think we shall find that when it comes to be sifted the atrocities attributed to the German Soldiery are very exaggerated’.¹¹⁰

Debates about the care of ‘the enemy’ in the British nursing press were not echoed in either *Una* or *Kia Tiaki*. Indeed, disputation and debate were not a prominent feature of the letters to be found in the Australian and New Zealand journals, where straightforward narratives of nurses’ experiences were a much more common form. Sometimes these narratives repeated stories of atrocities. Eileen Ferguson at Dunkirk in 1915 described them as ‘appalling’. ‘I nursed one Canadian who told me he actually saw four of his comrades crucified on barn doors, while the sufferings caused by the awful gases are dreadful.’¹¹¹ Similarly, Nurse E.K. Berry at a military hospital in Blackpool in March 1915 wrote that soldiers ‘do tell us some terrible tales of cruelty, etc.’ One sergeant spied something in dim light on the balcony of an empty house. On investigating he found “a poor little dead baby impaled on the spikes of the verandah, done by the brutal enemy!” When one hears all the tales one feels as if no retaliation was too much.’¹¹² Herein lies the key to tales of atrocities. Regardless of their veracity, they stirred hatred for the enemy and a desire to retaliate – a strong feature of wartime patriotism. Stories of impaled babies were not infrequently reported in the press and were the topic of cartoons depicting the ‘evil Hun’, serving a significant propaganda function.¹¹³

Propaganda did not always have the intended effect. As Ettie Richards reported, ‘there was nothing suggestive of the “terrible Turk” about the men we looked after’. Turkish soldier-patients were ‘gentle, docile, and always grateful for anything one did to ease their suffering’.¹¹⁴

The debate excited by Miss Ormerod’s letter continued to move readers of the *Nursing Mirror and Midwives Journal* until well into November 1914,¹¹⁵ by which time the care of German prisoners-of-war may have become a more familiar feature of wartime nursing work. ‘Atrocities’ of the kind that characterised the invading German army’s treatment of Belgian civilians largely ceased once the armies of both sides had become entrenched on the Western Front and a ‘zone of the armies’, from which civilians were excluded, had been created. At the same time, British civilians might have become more aware of the ways in which both fear and propaganda could fuel the embellishment of stories coming out of the war zone.¹¹⁶ These letters nevertheless illustrate the ways in which a highly negative perspective on the ‘other’ – the ‘enemy’ – could throw nurses’ own evocations of their sense of patriotism into high relief. Perhaps, then, the last word in the debate can be reserved for ‘Lindum’, who asserted: ‘There will be, no doubt, hundreds of nurses with hundreds of bricks ready for me when I say I do not want to nurse wounded soldiers, enemy or friendly. I want to fight’.¹¹⁷

*‘Above and beyond the sphere of politics’*¹¹⁸

Early in the war, a ‘territorial nurse’ wrote of her experiences of caring for wounded German prisoners. She and colleagues had begun to care for 14 German patients before being ordered not to participate in bedside care for these men. They were dismayed to find that orderlies were giving all such care, while nurses were relegated to menial and domestic tasks. But,

after a few days, ‘they found they could not do without us, so we are back in our ward today, with a sentry at each end of it and sentries with drawn bayonets outside, which looks very impressive’.¹¹⁹ At the end of October, a letter from a French Flag Nursing Corps nurse expressed an essentially humanitarian philosophy of wartime nursing, stating that ‘In War that is the happy way in which the trained nurse steps out and takes her part in the struggle; with politics she has nothing to do, her part is just to realise that a human being doing his duty is in pain, is shattered for the time being, is out of the fighting line, and that it is her pride and privilege to help to mend him’.¹²⁰ At around the same time, the editor of the *BJN* made clear the journal’s stance by publishing a poem entitled ‘The Nurse in War’:

The merciful high Heaven

That sees the truth of all –

The coward and the hero,

The men who rise or fall –

Has given us the duty

To staunch the wounds that bleed,

We ask not whether friend or foe,

Only – the patient’s need.¹²¹

One way in which correspondents asserted their patriotism was by linking it directly to their nursing expertise, arguing that they, more than any other group – apart from the fighting men themselves – provided an essential service to the war effort. The opposition of some to the employment of volunteer-nurses, known as ‘V.A.D.s’ came to be framed within this patriotic stance. Just as the debate evoked by Miss Ormerod’s letter in the *Nursing Mirror and Midwives Journal* was petering out, another was emerging. On 14 November, 1914, ‘Widow of Medical Officer’ wrote:

In defence of the attack on Voluntary Aid workers, may I state that I consider they are just what is required in this war? The doctors are perfectly satisfied with their nursing capabilities, their young pleasant faces helping the cure of the wounded with the sunshine they bring into the wards and their readiness and willingness to do everything asked of them. They are quite ready to rough it and go even into the trenches if so called on, while many of the hospital-trained sisters and nurses would be swallowed up by their own “red tape”.¹²²

The professional nursing response to “Widow of a Medical Officer’s” letter was rapid and scathing. “Matron of Many Years’ Experience” retorted that ‘It is a pity that the “Widow of a Medical Officer” writes on a subject of which she evidently is very ignorant’, adding: ‘I, in addition to all other hospital matrons who understand what we are talking about, strongly disapprove of any but a well trained nurse looking after our soldiers and sailors who are nobly fighting for us, and who deserve the best of nursing’.¹²³ “Indignant” insisted that the “Widow’s” letter was ‘an insult to the whole nursing profession’,¹²⁴ while “Rags” wrote:

There will probably be an avalanche of letters in reply to “The Widow of a Medical Officer”, but I cannot refrain from making a few comments. In the name of wonder, where has the writer gained her professed knowledge? She knows already that Tommy Atkins is quite satisfied with the Red Cross nurses. Poor Tommy Atkins! We would not like to deprive him of the pleasure which bright, young faces might bring; we would dearly love to let them beam round and about him; but the brightest face will not save a limb.¹²⁵

A few letters commented on the patriotism of the VAD-volunteers themselves. “Britannica” foregrounded the importance of the contribution of VADs, and their spirit of self-sacrifice:

I fail to see where the difference lies between a new probationer and a Red Cross worker, the former of whom I am sure everyone will admit to be a necessary evil. As far as I can understand a Red Cross worker does all the work of an ordinary probationer and ward maid together, entirely from patriotic motives, without the slight remuneration offered to first-year probationers, and without the prospect of eventually becoming a fully-fledged nurse; and I must say all honour is due to those ladies who offer their service in such a capacity.¹²⁶

Eventually, the debates relating to nursing ‘the enemy’ and to permitting VAD-volunteers to care for one’s own wounded became conflated, and the letters pages of the *Nursing Mirror* and *Midwives Journal* began to voice a consensus on the nature of war-nursing. Ideas of nobility, honour and patriotism are closely related in letters which emphasised the significance of duty and war-service. And the most prominent strategy used by correspondents attempting to draw a line under dispute and re-create a sense of cohesion was to convey the message that nursing was a ‘noble profession’ whose importance was above and beyond that of mere war-service. “Nurse A.J” wrote that she had ‘read with horror some of the assertions made in the *Nursing Mirror* by nurses who seem a disgrace to their name’, adding, ‘let us, as nurses, nurse our patients whatever their nationality may be. Then it will, I am sure, be a blessing to us. Or else let the noble profession alone and not nurse at all’.¹²⁷

Direct experiences of nursing ‘the enemy’

Throughout the war, nurses encountered ‘the enemy’. Sister Webster, an Australian nurse, was in Wiesbaden at the outbreak of war. Without money, she and her companions had to ‘beg credit from our enemies; angry, sullen faces glared at us, shoulders were shrugged

contemptuously in answer to questions'. Before she left in August, a thousand wounded German soldiers were brought to her hospital. Their fieldmouse-coloured uniforms and big boots had 'none of the smartness of our troops'. German soldiers had 'the look and carriage of dumb, driven cattle, snatched from familiar surroundings by a merciless system'.¹²⁸ This was a familiar thread in other nurses' comments. Several described Germans as unwilling soldiers. A New Zealand nurse at a hospital in Rouen with the French Flag Nursing Corps in November 1914 had over 100 wounded German prisoners in her ward. The Germans 'would far sooner be here than fighting, and say so openly,' she said. 'They say they only fought because they would have been shot if they refused, and a curious thing is that so many of them are wounded in the back.'¹²⁹ Whether this was a precise observation or patriotic propaganda is difficult to determine.

Perhaps the sharpest measure of the potential conflict between patriotism and nurses' professional values was their response to nursing enemy patients. Many nurses empathised with prisoners of war as they would have with any patient. Ella Cooke, a New Zealander, wrote in December 1914 of her surprise and pleasure when 30 German patients made a speech of thanks to her through an interpreter. They were longing for peace and wished her a long life, good luck, prosperity and good wishes for the New Year. She was 'quite taken aback' but thanked them in return, after which they gave three cheers for 'Nurse Anglaise'. She wrote that the Germans she had dealt with had so far been very nice – it was the 'Prussian element' that was 'much the worst'.¹³⁰ On the other hand, Mary Collins, a New Zealand nurse working in England, said that Germans 'make good patients but are great babies; they don't seem able to bear pain like our own boys. I am glad to say their food is just enough, but not too much.'¹³¹ This restrictive, perhaps almost punitive approach ran at the edge of adequate nursing care. That she even considered the quantity of food in relation to

enemy patients indicates how a sense of patriotism could affect the quality of nursing care given.¹³²

Nurses' accounts therefore showed contradictory or complex views of the enemy. This is perhaps exemplified by letters from Jessie McLeod, a New Zealand nurse working with the QAIMNS Reserve in Belgium and France. In 1914 she considered German patients 'very nice'. 'I felt sorry for the poor beggars,' she wrote to her family. 'The German soldiers don't want to fight.'¹³³ Some were in a 'ghastly condition'. After initial first aid on the battlefield, they were left lying on straw for eight days without further attention. 'Their wounds were in a shockingly septic condition, and most of them had bed sores. Of course the majority of these poor wretches hadn't the ghost of a chance of recovery.'¹³⁴ On the other hand, she also saw German soldiers in general as capable of atrocities. They would 'turn and shoot men who have just dressed their wounds' and they deliberately made 'a target of our stretcher-bearers'. New Zealand soldiers said Turks, on the other hand, were 'clean fighters' who would even dress their wounds before sending them back to their own lines. 'There's none of that chivalry in the Germans.'¹³⁵ In 1916 she was in the British hospital at Wimereux where she again found German wounded prisoners 'very good patients'. In contrast to the majority of them, the one they disliked had 'the real German military spirit' and she argued with him against his love for the Kaiser. When he died, she noted: 'none of us were very sorry, not even the other Germans, they also disliked him'.¹³⁶ Perhaps it was this 'military spirit' that reinforced her view of German soldiers' capacity for atrocities. She understood to her satisfaction why authorities had issued orders for nurses to evacuate to hospital ships if Germans broke through anywhere, so they were not 'left to the mercy of such brutes as the Germans have shown themselves'.¹³⁷ It is clear that some nurses were capable of separating

their experiences of nursing individual 'good' prisoner-patients from their views about the 'brutish' enemy.

Conclusion

Patriotism is most clearly expressed in wartime. For British, New Zealand and Australian nurses serving in WWI, it meant loyalty to both country and empire. Although patriotism was not necessarily the prime motive for nurses volunteering for overseas service, it was evident in their pride in 'their boys' and their appreciation of soldier-patients' bravery in extreme adversity. It was also seen in their longing for home and appreciation of visual reminders and ritual celebrations of Christmas and festive national days. Nurses occasionally demonstrated jingoism in their letters and, early in the war at least, some urged those at home to encourage enlistment. Early in their wartime service nurses' hope for soldier-patients to get well appears to have been related to their wish for them to return to the fighting, but as their experience of the war and its impact increased, this was more simply a wish for them to recover and survive. As they saw the devastation and were at times overwhelmed by the number of dead and severely wounded, they became more acutely aware of the horrors and wastage and some began to question the war.

Most striking is the complexity nurses sometimes displayed in their feelings of war service. This was seen particularly in their view of the enemy. In suffering bombing raids and shelling, nurses lessened the power of the unseen enemy by naming him 'Fritz'. A few nurses wrote to their professional journals in forthright terms about their opposition to the nursing of wounded 'enemies', but they were a minority and their letters were met with outspoken disapproval by their fellow professionals. German patients, while occasionally regarded as

reluctant soldiers and less brave than their own boys, were nevertheless usually regarded with empathy. The impact of war at a personal level, especially the maiming through severe wounds, affected individuals regardless of their allegiance and nurses responded to this. It was only individuals who showed a 'Prussian' or military spirit who were disliked.

This collective record of nurses' letters published in their professional journals reveals the complexity of nurses' views of patriotism. A more straightforward view was expressed by nurse-editors, Hester Maclean (of *Kai Tiaki*) and Ethel Gordon Fenwick (of *The British Journal of Nursing*), both of whom devoted the majority of their editorials between October 1914 and January 1919 to matters of war. Central to their arguments were the qualities required and displayed by nurses who volunteered to serve overseas; the heroism of Edith Cavell and of New Zealand nurses lost when the troopship *Marquette* was torpedoed; nurses' suffering and hardships; and the need to continue providing excellent care in hospitals at home. Australian and British editorials carried similarly patriotic overtones. Yet just as nurses' letters showed a shift in attitude to war as it progressed, a similar change is evident in editorials. For example, in the case of Hester Maclean, her first editorial supported the war;¹³⁸ her mid-war writing expressed a mix of pride and sadness;¹³⁹ her last looked to the needs of the future.¹⁴⁰ And typically of her style of turning a situation to her use as chief nurse, she used nurses' suffering and endurance in war to argue for better conditions in Nurses' Homes.

The letters written by trained British, Australian and New Zealand nurses to their professional journals during the First World War provide a valuable source through which we can gain an insight into the collective consciousness of the nursing professions in Britain, Australia and New Zealand. In the minds of nurses, the 'nobility' and essential humanitarianism of their professional role appears, at times, to have vied with their sense that nursing work was a

vehicle through which patriotic feminine identities could be expressed. Nurses believed that their contributions to the war effort were almost as significant as those of combatants – but they also identified themselves as witnesses-to-war and as message-bearers. Their work – taking place somewhere between the ‘front lines’ and the ‘home front’ - permitted them to witness and recount what they saw as the heroism of their soldier-patients. But this privileged position also enabled them to view, at first hand, the real horror of war: the disfiguring injuries, death and despair that were its immediate consequences. The most striking quality of their writing is, thus, its sense of conflict. As both patriots and humanitarians, professional nurses carried with them into their war-service dual identities as compassionate carers and active patriots which were difficult to reconcile.

¹ Juliet Piggott, *Queen Alexandra's Royal Army Nursing Corps* (London, Leo Cooper Ltd, 1975); Sue Light, ‘British Military Nurses’ available at: <http://www.scarletfinders.co.uk/> [last accessed 16/10/20]; Christine E. Hallett, *Veiled Warriors: Allied Nurses of the First World War* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014): 20-23

² Thelka Bowser, *The Story of British VAD Work in the Great War* (London, The Imperial War Museum, 2003 [1917]); Anne Summers, *Angels and Citizens: British Women as Military Nurses, 1854-1914* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1988): 237-70

³ Jan Bassett, *Guns and Brooches: Australian Army Nursing from the Boer War to the Gulf War* (Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1992); Ruth Rae, *Scarlet Poppies: The Army Experience of Australian Nurses during World War One* (Burwood, NSW, College of Nursing, 2004); Ruth Rae, *Veiled Lives: Threading Australian Nursing History into the Fabric of the First World War* (Burwood, NSW, College of Nursing, 2009); Kirsty Harris,

More the Bombs and Bandages: Australian Army Nurses at Work in World War One,
(Newport, NSW, Big Sky Publishing, 2011)

⁴ Sherayl Kendall and David Corbett, *New Zealand Military Nursing: A History of the Royal New Zealand Nursing Corps, Boer War to Present Day* (Auckland, Sherayl Kendall and David Corbett, 1990): 19-26; Jan Rodgers, 'Potential for Professional Profit: The Making of the New Zealand Army Nursing Service, 1914-1915', *Nursing Praxis in New Zealand*, 11, July, 1996:4-12; Anna Rogers, *While You're Away: New Zealand Nurses at War, 1899-1948* (Auckland, Auckland University Press, 2003): 43-59; Christine E. Hallett, *Veiled Warriors: Allied Nurses of the First World War* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014): 134

⁵ On the mobilization of Australian and New Zealand nurses see: Christine E. Hallett, *Veiled Warriors: Allied Nurses of the First World War* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014): 129-135

⁶ On the significance of patriotic feeling as a motivator for enlistment in the First World War, see: Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000 [1975]); Eric Leed, *No Man's Land: Combat and Identity in World War One* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities* (London, Routledge, 1994); Michael Paris, *Warrior Nation: Images of War in British Popular Culture, 1850-2000* (London, Reaktion Books, 2000): 83-109. On patriotic feeling among nurses, see: Christine E. Hallett, *Veiled Warriors: Allied Nurses of the First World War* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014): 10-16

⁷ Cate Haste, *Keep the Home Fires Burning: Propaganda in the First World War* (London, Viking, 1977); Peter Buitenhuis, *The Great War of Words: Literature as Propaganda, 1914-18 and After* (London, B.T. Batsford, 1988); Nicoletta F. Gullace, 'White Feathers and Wounded Men: Female Patriotism and the Memory of the Great War', *Journal of British*

Studies, 36, 1997: 178-206; David Monger, *Patriotism and Propaganda in First World War Britain* (Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2012)

⁸ Elizabeth Haldane, *The British Nurse in Peace and War* (London, John Murray, 1923); Sue Light, 'British Military Nurses' available at: <http://www.scarletfinders.co.uk/> [last accessed 16/10/20]; Christine E. Hallett, *Veiled Warriors: Allied Nurses of the First World War* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014): 20-23;

⁹ The precise numbers are unclear as sources differ. Harris also makes this point, showing numbers of 2139 and 2286 are both cited. Kirsty Harris, *More the Bombs and Bandages: Australian Army Nurses at Work in World War One* (Newport, NSW, Big Sky Publishing, 2011): 3. Around 140 other Australian and New Zealand nurses joined private, Red Cross, French or British services, including the QAIMNS(R)

¹⁰ Anna Rogers, *While You're Away: New Zealand Nurses at War 1899-1948* (Auckland, Auckland University Press, 2003): 2.

¹¹ This was made clear, for example, in New Zealand nurses' arguments to the government for the right to serve overseas. See for example Nurses and the war, *Kai Tiaki*, 8, 1, 1915, 1-2; Active service, *Kai Tiaki*, 8, 1, 1915, 13-15.

¹² See for example M.H. Darrow, French volunteer nursing and the myth of war experience in World War I, *American Historical Review*, 101, 1, 1996, 80-106; Christine E. Hallett, "'Emotional nursing': Involvement, Engagement and Detachment in the Writings of First World War Nurses and VADs', in Alison S. Fell and Christine Hallett (eds.) *First World War Nursing: New Perspectives* (New York, Routledge, 2013): 87-102; Linda Quiney, 'Assistant Angels: Canadian Voluntary Aid Detachment Nurses in the Great War', *Canadian Bulletin of Medical History*, 15, 1, 1998: 189-206

¹³ Susan R. Grayzel, *Women's Identities at War: Gender, Motherhood, and Politics in Britain and France during the First World War*, (Chapel Hill, NC, University of North Carolina Press): 3

¹⁴ Christine E. Hallett, *Containing Trauma: Nursing Work in the First World War* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2009); Kirsty Harris, *More the Bombs and Bandages: Australian Army Nurses at Work in World War One*, (Newport NSW, Big Sky Publishing, Newport, 2011); Christine E. Hallett, *Veiled Warriors: Allied Nurses of the First World War* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014)

¹⁵ Kara Dixon Vuic, 'Wartime Nursing and Power', in Patricia D'Antonio, Julie Fairman and Jean Whelan, *Handbook of the Global History of Nursing* (London, Routledge, 2013): 22-34; quotation on page 23

¹⁶ Janet S. K. Watson, "'Wars in the Wards: The Social Construction of Medical Work in First World War Britain', *Journal of British Studies*, 41 (4) 2002, passim. See also: Janet S.K. Watson, "'Khaki Girls, VADs, and Tommy's Sisters: Gender and Class in First World War Britain,' *International History Review*, 19 (1) 1997, pages 32-51; Sharon Ouditt, *Fighting Forces, Writing Women: Identity and Ideology in the First World War*, (London, Routledge, 1994) passim.

¹⁷ Christine E. Hallett, *Nurse Writers of the Great War* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2016)

¹⁸ Smith, Angela K. "'Beacons of Britishness": British Nurses and Female Doctors as Prisoners of War', in Fell, A.S. and Hallett, C.E. (eds) *First World War Nursing: New Perspectives* (London, Routledge, 2013): 35-50

¹⁹ On the Gallipoli Myth, see: Robin Prior, *The End of the Myth* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2010). On the Gallipoli Campaign, see: John Masefield, *Gallipoli* (London,

W. Heinemann, 1916); Edward J. Erickson, *Gallipoli: The Ottoman Campaign* (Barnsley, Pen and Sword Books, 2010); Peter Hart, *Gallipoli* (London, Profile, 2011)

²⁰ Christine E. Hallett, *Veiled Warriors: Allied Nurses of the First World War* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014): 127-59

²¹ Hallett, Christine E., "'Intelligent interest in their own affairs": The First World War, *The British Journal of Nursing* and the pursuit of nursing knowledge', in Patricia D'Antonio, Julie A. Fairman and Jean C Whelan, *Routledge Handbook on the Global History of Nursing* (London, Routledge, 2013): 95-113; quotation on p. 99. As one of many examples, New Zealander Sister Wilson in Gibraltar in 1916 sent a five shilling postal note, her year's subscription to the journal *Kai Tiaki*, and thanked the editor for sending it regularly as 'it keeps one so in touch with N.Z.'. Letters from our nurses abroad, *Kai Tiaki*, 9, 4, 1916, 189-198, quotation on p.192. An Australian nurse, Estelle Doyle, wrote to the secretary of the Victorian Trained Nurses Association saying she had not received the journal *Una* for months and wondered whether her subscription was still paid up. Correspondence, *Una*, 16, 4, June 1918, 107-8, citation p.108.

²² New Zealander Sister Grace Calder on a hospital ship went 'five months without a letter from home'. Letters from our nurses abroad, *Kai Tiaki*, 9, 4, 1916, 189-198, quotation on p.194.

²³ Estelle Doyle wrote to Miss Crocker, the secretary of the Victorian Trained Nurses Association: 'If you think this letter would interest anyone pass it on for UNA please.' Correspondence, *Una*, 16, 4, June 1918, 107-8, quotation on p.108.

²⁴ Susan Reverby, *Ordered to Care: The Dilemma of American Nursing, 1850-1945*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987; Alison Bashford, *Purity and Pollution: Gender, Embodiment and Victorian Medicine* (Houndsmill, Macmillan, 2000). As examples

of journal articles, see Clifford Barclay, Discipline and etiquette, *Kai Tiaki*, 5, 2, 1912, 21-16; Presentations, *Kai Tiaki*, 10, 3, 1917, 179.

²⁵ Winifred Hector, *The work of Mrs Bedford Fenwick and the rise of professional nursing* (London, Royal College of Nursing, 1973)

²⁶ Christine E. Hallett, "'Intelligent interest in their own affairs: The First World War, the *British Journal of Nursing* and the pursuit of nursing knowledge', in P. D'Antonio, J. Fairman and J. Whelan, *The Routledge Handbook of the Global History of Nursing* (London and New York, Routledge, 2013): 95-113

²⁷ Anna Rogers, *While You're Away: New Zealand Nurses at War 1899-1948* (Auckland, Auckland University Press, 2003)

²⁸ Barbara Brookes, A corresponding community: Dr Agnes Bennett and her friends from the Edinburgh Medical College for Women of the 1890s, *Medical History*, 52, 2008, 237-56, quotation on p.239.

²⁹ C. Dauphin, The power of writing and women, in R. Bharati, (ed.), *Women and Politics: France, India and Russia* (Calcutta, K. P. Bagchi, 2000): 56-68, quotation on p.63.

³⁰ Christine Hallett, The personal writings of First World War nurses: A study of the interplay between authorial intention and scholarly interpretation, *Nursing Inquiry*, 14, 4, 2007, 320-9.

³¹ Peter Buitenhuis, *The Great War of Words: Literature as Propaganda, 1914-18 and After* (London, B.T. Batsford, 1988); David Monger, *Patriotism and Propaganda in First World War Britain* (Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2012)

³² Reprint of 'The Vigil' by Henry Newbolt, from *The Times*, in: *The British Journal of Nursing*, Vol LIII, 8 August, 1914: 97

³³ Anonymous, Editorial, 'War Fever and the War Spirit', *The Nursing Mirror and Midwives Journal*, Vol XIX, No. 489, 8 August, 1914: 397

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- ³⁴ Violetta Thurstan, Letter, *The British Journal of Nursing*, Vol LIII, 26 September, 1914: 247
- ³⁵ Beatrice Kent, 'Copy of Letter Addressed to Lord Kitchener, Secretary of State for War', *The British Journal of Nursing*, Vol LIII, 7 November, 1914: 373
- ³⁶ Anonymous, 'The Urgency Cases Hospital', *The Nursing Times*, Vol XI, No 524, 15 May, 1915: 586
- ³⁷ Letters from our nurses abroad, *Kai Tiaki*, 9, 3, 1916, 139-48, quotation on p.147.
- ³⁸ Anonymous ["C.M.R."], 'Six Months with the French Flag Nursing Corps', *The Nursing Times*, Vol XI, No. 528, 12 June, 1915: 723
- ³⁹ Anonymous ["Train Sister"], 'Our Day', *The Nursing Times*, Vol. XII, No. 561, 29 January, 1916: 133
- ⁴⁰ Extracts from nurses' letters, *Kai Tiaki*, 8, 3, 1915, 132-8, quotation on p.135.
- ⁴¹ Edda Reid, "'We all stuck it'", *The Nursing Times*, Vol XI, No. 552, 27 November, 1915: 1464
- ⁴² Jones, M., 'At Salonika', *The Nursing Times*, Vol. XII, No. 563, 12 February, 1916: 181
- ⁴³ Experiences of an Australian nurse on active service, *Una*, 15, 7, September 1917, 208-9, quotation on p.209.
- ⁴⁴ On a hospital ship, a nurse writes, *Una*, 13, 9, November 1915, 286.
- ⁴⁵ Notes from the Mediterranean, *Una*, 13, 8, 1915, 245-6, quotation on p.246.
- ⁴⁶ To save the boys! *Una*, 13, 6, 1915, 177.
- ⁴⁷ To save the boys! *Una*, 13, 6, 1915, 177.
- ⁴⁸ Extracts from an Australian army Sister's letters, *Una*, 15, 5, July 1917, 139.
- ⁴⁹ Clare Jordan was attached to the No 11 General Hospital in Boulogne. Extracts from nurses' letters, *Kai Tiaki*, 8, 4, 1915, 170-4, quotation on p.171.
- ⁵⁰ An Australian Day in an English hospital, *Una*, 13, 2, February 1916, 380-1.

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- ⁵² Extracts from a nurse's letters en route from F---- to I----, *Una*, 16, 2, April 1918, 38.
- ⁵³ From an ex-New Zealander, *Kai Tiaki*, 8, 1, 1915, 48.
- ⁵⁴ Women's work in war, *Una*, 16, 10, December 1918, 313-4.
- ⁵⁵ Under the French Red Cross, *Kai Tiaki*, 8, 1, 1915, 15-18, quotation on p.16.
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- ⁵⁸ Anonymous [Sister A.B.], 'Nursing on a hospital ship', *The British Journal of Nursing*, Vol LIII, 19 September, 1914: 226
- ⁵⁹ News from our nurses abroad, *Kai Tiaki*, 11, 4, 1918, 171-6, quotation on p.176.
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- ⁷⁶ Life on an ambulance train in France, *Kai Tiaki*, 9, 2, 1916, 92-3, quotation on p.92.
- ⁷⁷ The hospital ships, *Kai Tiaki*, 9, 4, 1916, 201-2, quotation on p.201.
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- ⁷⁹ Extracts from nurses' letters, *Kai Tiaki*, 8, 4, 1915, 170-4, quotation on p.170.
- ⁸⁰ Australian nurses on service, *Una*, 15, 8, October 1917, 244.
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- ⁸² Extracts from letters of Sister Alice Kitchen, *Una*, 13, 6, August 1915, 178-9.
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- ⁸⁷ News from our nurses abroad, *Kai Tiaki*, 11, 4, 1918, 171-6, quotation on p.174.
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- ⁹² Ormerod, Alice K., Letter, *The Nursing Mirror and Midwives Journal*, Vol XIX, No. 493, 5 September 1914: 431
- ⁹³ Anonymous [Sister], Letter, *The Nursing Mirror and Midwives Journal*, Vol XIX, No. 494, 12 September 1914: 447
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- ¹¹³ Peter Buitenhuis, *The Great War of Words: Literature as Propaganda, 1914-18 and After* (London, B.T. Batsford, 1988); Trudi Tate, *Modernism, History and the First World War* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1998): 41-63
- ¹¹⁴ Nurse back from India. Turks as patients, *Una*, 16, 8, 1918, 243, reprinted from the *Herald*.
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- ¹¹⁷ Anonymous [“Lindum”], Letter, *The Nursing Mirror and Midwives Journal*, Vol XX, No. 499, 7 November 1914: 106
- ¹¹⁸ The comment that nurses were ‘above and beyond the sphere of politics’ appears in a *BJN* Editorial for 8th August, which went on to state: ‘Humanity demands that [nurses] shall do everything in their power to relieve [any wounded man’s] sufferings, to heal his wounds, and to lessen the burden of misery which inevitably follows in the wake of war’: Anonymous, ‘Editorial: Patriotism’, *The British Journal of Nursing*, Vol LIII, 8 August, 1914: 97
- ¹¹⁹ Anonymous, ‘A territorial nurse writes’, *The British Journal of Nursing*, Vol LIII, 19 September, 1914: 243
- ¹²⁰ Anonymous, ‘French Flag Nursing Corps’, *The British Journal of Nursing*, Vol LIII, 31 October, 1914: 348
- ¹²¹ Mollett, M. ‘The Nurse in War: Poem’, *The British Journal of Nursing*, Vol LIII, 3 October, 1914: 269
- ¹²² Anonymous [“Widow of a Medical Officer”], Letter, *The Nursing Mirror and Midwives Journal*, Vol XX, No. 499, 14 November 1914: 122
- ¹²³ Anonymous [“Matron of Many Years Experience”], Letter, *The Nursing Mirror and Midwives Journal*, Vol XX, No. 499, 14 November 1914: 138
- ¹²⁴ Anonymous [“Indignant”] Letter, *The Nursing Mirror and Midwives Journal*, Vol XX, No. 499, 28 November 1914: 157
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- ¹²⁶ Anonymous [“Britannica”] Letter, *The Nursing Mirror and Midwives Journal*, Vol XX, No. 499, 28 November 1914: 157
- ¹²⁷ Anonymous [“A.J”] Letter, *The Nursing Mirror and Midwives Journal*, Vol XX, No. 499, 14 November 1914: 158
- ¹²⁸ The war – letter by Sister Webster, *Una*, January 1915, 350-1, quotations on p.351.
- ¹²⁹ The French Flag Nursing Corps, *Kai Tiaki*, 8, 1, 1915, 32-3, quotation on p.32.
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- ¹³¹ Letters from our nurses abroad and at sea, *Kai Tiaki*, 10, 4, 1917, 193-6, quotation on p.193.
- ¹³² See also Rogers, *While You’re Away*, 130-2.
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- ¹³⁴ Letters from New Zealand nurses, *Kai Tiaki*, 8, 1, 1915, 23-5, quotation on p.24.
- ¹³⁵ Nursing in France, *Kai Tiaki*, 9, 2, 1916, 90-1, quotation on p.91.
- ¹³⁶ Nursing in France, *Kai Tiaki*, 9, 2, 1916, 90-1, quotation on p.90.
- ¹³⁷ Nursing in France, *Kai Tiaki*, 9, 2, 1916, 90-1, quotation on p.91.
- ¹³⁸ The war, *Kai Tiaki*, 7, 4, 1914, 147-8.
- ¹³⁹ See for example Editorial, *Kai Tiaki*, 9, 4, 1916, 185-6.
- ¹⁴⁰ Orthopaedics and massage training for trained nurses, *Kai Tiaki*, 11, 2, 1918, 59-60; Peace!, *Kai Tiaki*, 12, 1, 1919, 1.