

## REVIEW

Yvonne McEwen. *In the Company of Nurses: The History of the British Army Nursing Service in the Great War*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014. Pp. 240. ISBN: 9780748679119. CAD \$50.00.

The Great War (1914–1919) has been the subject of renewed historical interest due to the many recent centennial commemorations throughout Allied nations. The military medical services are among the neglected areas of study, especially the various nursing services that became the backbone of care giving for sick and wounded soldiers as well as civilian casualties. Like women's work in general, the nursing care of soldiers has remained relatively invisible, marginalized, and relegated to footnotes within larger war stories.

Yvonne McEwen's *In the Company of Nurses* is one of several recent contributions to the emerging international historiography on Great War nurses.<sup>1</sup> The author builds upon her earlier publication titled *It's a Long Way to Tipperary: British and Irish Nurses in the Great War* (2006). The Army Nursing Services (United Kingdom) commissioned this centennial history and as McEwen acknowledges, "This book

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<sup>1</sup> More recent histories since *In the Company of Nurses*: Jane Brooks and Christine E. Hallett, eds., *One Hundred Years of Wartime Nursing Practices, 1854–1954* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015); Christine E. Hallett, *Veiled Warriors: Allied Nurses of the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Kirsty Harris, *More than Bombs and Bandages: Australian Army Nurses at work in World War I* (Big Sky Publishing, 2011); Cynthia Toman, *Sister Soldiers of the Great War: Nurses of the Canadian Army Medical Corps* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2016).

is as much about today's nurses as it is about the military nurses who served a hundred years ago...." (p. vii) She suggests that the existing historiography at the time of her research did not "contextualise the work of nurses within the larger wartime or professional issues" (p. 3). She, therefore, focused her research on addressing this gap – the professional, personal, and political consequences of Great War nursing related to military care giving (broadly defined) as situated within the larger war contexts (p. 3). McEwen problematizes the paucity of primary sources from nurses' perspectives – concluding that "it is the unsaid that has proved to be much more interesting and worthy of further investigation" than "what was said in letters, diaries, memoirs and autobiographies...." (p. 4).

Prior to focusing on the Great War period, McEwen covers a formidable scope of time from early Greek and Roman empires, through the religious Crusades of Europe and Byzantium as well as Florence Nightingale's Crimean experience, leading up to the formation of Britain's Army Nursing Service. She then turns our attention to the hotly contested conflicts between newly-professionalizing trained nurses and unpaid women who sought to provide care to soldiers as volunteers during the Great War. These conflicts were part of larger societal debates over who could be considered a qualified "nurse." The author intersects these professional tensions with underlying class issues as well as ambivalent relationships between trained nurses and early feminists, while exposing the military medical services' chaos and slowness of response to a rapidly escalating war. McEwen's middle chapters deal more with the day-to-day nursing experiences and administration in both the European and Mediterranean theatres where nurses confronted the challenges of treating victims of new war technologies such as chlorine and mustard gas, and more. The final chapters consider the personal and professional costs of the war for nurses.

*In the Company of Nurses* achieves its goal of contextualizing the Great War nursing experience for nurses associated with the British Army whether they served as members of Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service (as regulars or as reserves), the Territorial Force Nursing Service, as Voluntary Aid Detachments, or as part of privately-funded and controlled hospital units. McEwen includes some primary sources from Australian and Canadian nursing services although the latter two cohorts were not her primary focus. More recently published, fuller histories of these two nursing services suggest that there were significant differences from the British experience, including imperial-colonial tensions.<sup>2</sup>

The author is to be commended for taking on this project, and for building on previous attempts to prepare a more comprehensive history of Great War military nursing. We all stand on the shoulders of those who came before us. *In the Company of Nurses* provides a valuable portrayal of the relationship of care-giving women to war over the centuries. It will be of particular interest to readers of medical and nursing history, women's history, and military history.

Cynthia Toman  
*University of Ottawa (retired)*

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<sup>2</sup> Harris, *More Than Bombs and Bandages*; Toman, *Sister Soldiers of the Great War*.