

Reflections of the time – South Australian nurses bound for the Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902.

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In October 1899, war broke out between Britain and The Transvaal. The Australian colonies responded immediately, raising contingents of troops to be sent to South Africa, in support of the British Empire.¹ The first contingent of South Australian troops departed 31 October.² This paper will discuss how the recruitment of Adelaide nurses for service in the Boer war reflected their position and status in society.

Since the introduction of ‘Nightingale’ nursing into Australia by Lucy Osburn in 1868, nursing had come a long way. It was no longer the province of the untrained housekeepers, wardsmen or servants of dubious moral nature³, or of “[D]irty ‘frowsy’ looking old women, slatternly untidy young ones all greasy with their hair down their backs with ragged stuffed dresses ...” whom Osburn had first encountered in the Sydney Infirmary in 1868.⁴ According to Sioban Nelson, “[I]n 1868 the only way to reform nursing ... was to restructure the nurse as a respectable, reliable woman.”⁵ The success of this reconstruction in Australia was that in little over thirty years, nursing had become of the domain of trained, middle-class females, who operated within a discourse of benevolence and self-sacrifice. Alison Bashford suggests that at “... the end of the [nineteenth] century, nursing and middle-class femininity had come to be so closely related as to be mutually defining.”⁶

The idea of nurses being of good character, respectable and reliable, was a major plank of Nightingale style nursing, which elevated nurses from servant status and permitted them to have intimate, physical contact with patients, devoid of a sexual agenda. Concomitant with this was the notion of the nurse, as a middle class female operating from an agency of benevolence. Anne Marie Rafferty notes how the reformed, middle-class nurse was “[A]bove and beyond reproach, the new nurse’s crystalline character became a beacon of Christian piety and virtue, and her demeanor and deportment were signifiers of her class.”⁷ Accordingly, contemporary nursing

education included “instil[l]ing a rigid code of behaviour and self-discipline in the woman,” appropriate to values associated with middle-class femininity.⁸

Nothing proclaimed the acceptance of the ‘new nurse’ more than an event that occurred several weeks prior to the recruitment of trained nurses for service in the Boer War, an event which was somewhat unremarkable in itself but which serves to illustrate much of the community’s attitude to both nurses as a body and support for colonial involvement in the Boer war. On Saturday, 23 December some thirty nurses from several local hospitals, took part in collecting for the Patriotic Fund to aid the troops in South Africa.⁹ Taking the example of similar collections, in Sydney and Newcastle, Sister Hill, from the Adelaide Children’s Hospital enlisted the support of leading nurses from various organisations - Sister Foster, from the District Trained Nurses Society, Miss Tibbets (Wakefield Street Hospital) and Miss Hand (The Adelaide Hospital).¹⁰

The Advertiser reports how some nurses came straight from working a night shift. Collecting at railway stations, in the streets and even door-to-door, the nurses were successful in raising approximately £400. Convalescent children also joined the nurses in their collection drive. At Belair, in the Adelaide hills, a nurse and several children boarded trains as they entered the station, collecting from passengers in the carriages, while in the city children collected money as it was thrown out of trams for them.¹¹ The article in *The Advertiser* described in considerable detail the various responses from the public, including the old gentleman who hesitated before approaching the collector, apologising for the small amount he was able to give, the elderly lady who shared with the nurse a photograph of her son who was fighting with the South Australian contingent in the war and various children offering their pennies. There were reports of businessmen providing money and practical support and of children busking in the streets to raise funds.¹² By accident or design the article, not only highlighted the support that different sections of the community gave to the colony’s involvement in the war but also their attitude towards nurses. Nurses were seen as being trustworthy, hardworking, approachable and people in whom one could confide.

The language used to describe the nurses, in both *The Advertiser* and *The Adelaide Observer* is also worthy of further comment. *The Advertiser* described them as “self-sacrificing ladies” and remarked on their “neat and tasteful uniform”. The article later observed how “[C]ity men, although great numbers of them had already donated ... could not resist the request for a further contribution especially when the supplicant was an attractive, smiling, daintily uniformed nurse.”¹³ It is however notable, if not ironic, that even in this ‘safe’ scenario of middle-class, feminine philanthropy, there is a resonance of a previous, (and later) discourse, where nurses in their uniform are portrayed as being, if not ‘dangerous’ then at least as being beguiling – able to tempt businessmen out of a little more money.

The Adelaide Observer was also greatly concerned with the nurses’ uniform, commenting on how “[I]t is most appropriate that nurses, in garb so much associated with the alleviation of pain and sickness, should collect for the soldiers who are fighting so bravely”.¹⁴ Magpie’ writing in a column entitled ‘Chatter’ on *The Ladies’ Page* also invokes the sight of the nurses’ uniform as a reason to give money for the collection, “[A]ll day ... you will find them at their posts: it will not be pleasant work in the heat and crowd and dust, but their uniform should bring it home to us all, as nothing else could do, the need to help”¹⁵

A later article also observed how “[N]o trouble has been spared to appeal to the eyes and the imagination of passersby, for the red cross has been emblazoned on collecting baskets ... as well as the badges worn by the nurses.”¹⁶ The article also talked about the “... self-denial of the collectors ...” and how “...only a strong sense of patriotism and a deep feeling of sympathy for suffering could induce one to attempt it [collecting].”¹⁷ The image of the trained female nurse that is presented is one who is attractive, well turned out, friendly, patriotic, self-sacrificing, and concerned with caring for the suffering. In short it is the idealized image of the modern Nightingale nurse.

Nurses For South Africa

Although a Ladies Committee was being set up in the New Year, to assist with the Mayor’s Transvaal Fund, at the end of 1899 there was very little prospect of a group of South Australian nurses being sent to South Africa.¹⁸ Early in the new year,

however, with the departure of the second South Australian Contingent only a few weeks away, there were public calls for the need for nurses to be sent to South Africa. A correspondent writing a letter to the Editor of *The Advertiser* on 8 January stated that, "... [I]t seems a wrong thing to send off over a hundred men without even a doctor or nurse; South Australian funds should be devoted to the nursing of South Australian men."¹⁹ One generous benefactor to the Patriotic Fund, wanted his contribution to specifically fund nurses, if any were to be sent.²⁰ There were also several nurses who made direct application to the Chief Secretary, to be sent with the South Australian contingent, if possible.²¹

On 25 January, *The Advertiser* reported that the Governor, Lord Tennyson received a telegram from the Secretary of State for the Colonies advising him that "... Her Majesty's Government gladly accepts nurses. They will be under orders Imperial medical authorities [sic]."²² The receipt of this telegram prompted a flurry of activity by the government and civilians alike. Mr Jenkins, the Minister for War, arranged for six berths on the ship *Australasian*, sailing from Melbourne on 21 February and appointed Drs Hamilton and Rogers to select the six nurses from the some sixty applications that had been received. Of these, only about twenty five to thirty were trained nurses and therefore viable candidates.²³ It was suggested by the committee that some leading nurses from local hospitals assist in the selection, however it seems not to have happened.²⁴

That no nurses were included in the selection panel appears adverse to the selection of the most suitable candidates. As many of the serious applicants, had probably either trained or been employed by an Adelaide hospital, the senior nursing staff at such institutions would be in an appropriate position to consult on selection. The lack of autonomy in the selection process is resonant of the early notion of the nurse being a handmaiden to the physician and their prerogative to choose. There is no mention either, that Martha Bidmead, the future leader of the group had any input into the selection process. Sister Hill, matron of the Adelaide Children's Hospital and Miss Tibbits, matron of Wakefield Street Hospital along with Lady Tennyson, were however assigned the task of selecting the uniform.²⁵

At a committee meeting of the newly formed Nurses Fund in the Town Hall, the preliminary details were mapped out. Preparations were made for fund raising activities. The six nurses would have an allowance for outfits and be paid 15/ a week.²⁶ It was estimated that fares, salary and outfits for twelve months would cost £100 per nurse, to be met by public donations. Unlike other Australian colonial nursing contingents bound for South Africa, it was supported solely by the community. The nurses were aware of the community support that they received and reported back to the committee for the duration of the war, giving account for their expenses and the work. Nurse Watts wrote, "I am sending you an account of the expenditure of the emergencies' money ... Please remember us kindly to all the committee. Again thanking you, dear Lady Brown, for all the trouble you are taking over us, we hope to repay the trust you have in us by doing South Australia great credit."²⁷ Extract from nurses' letters, often addressed to Lady Brown, as treasurer of the nurses' fund were also printed in the local newspapers. Frequently titled 'Our Nurses', the letters not only informed the community of the work of the nurses but also gave a sense of ownership and participation.²⁸

The six nurses chosen were announced on 10 February.²⁹ Given that selection only began in early February and that the nurses had to be in Melbourne on the 21 February, to board the ship, there was very little time for outfitting and preparation. Even those who had been considering volunteering for a while would still have had a fairly hurried preparation when they were chosen. The criteria for selection included suitable training and experience along with maturity. It seems fairly certain that each nurse would have had to have few family constraints and able to mobilize quite quickly. Lady Tennyson wrote of the chosen nurses, "I am so happy to hear that they are all over 30, & the head one, a splendid woman, so they say is 34."³⁰

The nurses to go to South Africa, were as follows: Martha Bidmead, (trained at Adelaide Children's Hospital and Miss Tibbits' Hospital, charge nurse at Burra), Amelia Stephenson, (trained at the Adelaide Hospital, worked at Miss Tibbits hospital, before returning to the Adelaide hospital where she was charge nurse in theatre), A Glennie, (trained at North Adelaide Private Hospital and at Miss Tibbits', ten years experience), Mary O'Shanahan (trained North Adelaide Hospital, charge nurse at the hospital), A Cocks, (trained at the Adelaide Hospital, nursing in

association Miss Josling's Nurses' Home) and E Watts (works at Miss Tibbits Hospital for three years as charge nurse and also in charge of outpatients).³¹

A Fine Farewell

The nurses were subject to a host of farewell parties from friends, work colleagues and civic authorities. They were also supported very generously not only in the various contributions made through the Nurses' Fund but also by various companies and businesses, such as Wendts and Wigg & Son. Items supplied included holland bags, shoes and instruments.³² Photographers, Hammer and Co provided portraits of the nurses for sale to raise funds.³³

One of the fund raising event in aid of the Nurses Fund and attended by the nurses, was a concert held at the Theatre Royal. Under the patronage of The Governor Tennyson and Lady Tennyson, and supported by leading society figures including the mayor and mayoress and influential sporting and social clubs, the entertainment included patriotic songs, poetry, music and tableaux. *The Advertiser* gives great detail about the evening, including the jingoistic fervour that was generated in the confined theatre space.³⁴ Rather than being guests for the evening, the six nurses took part in the tableaux. Reflecting the theme of the evening, the tableaux represented, "Off to the war," "War in the Transvaal", "Tommy's letter home", "Rally round the old flag", "Battle scene", "After the battle" and "Britannia and homage of the nations". The event raised over £200 for the nurses' fund.³⁵

It is easy to dismiss these depictions as patriotic entertainment, where the nurses take on the role of entertainer rather than nurse. However the nurses probably understood the value of participating in such activities in terms of fund raising and public good will. There is however a more fundamental subtext to the tableaux. While there is no way of telling what role the nurses actually played in these depictions, it is clear that they were placed, in public, even if only in a fictional way, in a foreign masculine space- the battle ground - in some of the tableaux. As well, the role of the nurse (female) is seen not only as carer but as an active patriot.

The two motifs of femininity and patriotism are once again a feature of the departure of the nurses. Both *The Advertiser* and *The Adelaide Observer* devoted considerable column space to their farewell from Adelaide.³⁶ The papers, noted how already the Adelaide public had farewelled two contingents and how this departure was markedly different. There were no columns of soldiers marching down the main street, rather there were the six nurses who “shortly before 4 o’clock attired in their pretty costumes passed into Parliament House, where afternoon tea was provided, and where each signed her agreement to serve.”³⁷ The gentility of the formalities contrasted with the boisterous farewells from the crowd outside. *The Adelaide Observer* noted how,

... a large concourse of people had assembled, and when the six nurses came out on the steps a hearty cheer went forth, Miniature Union Jacks waved over their heads ... Crowd as there was in the street it was nothing to that scene on the railway station ... A surging, struggling crowd moved to and fro In the throng women shrieked and almost fainted, for everyone was pressing for a look. ... mothers and sisters sad at the departure of their loved ones took comfort in the thought that they [the nurses] were doing their country’s work and their country was appreciating it Thus the nurses passed out of Adelaide on their way to help the sick and suffering and to do their part in Britain’s cause.”³⁸

The nurses were showered with gifts from the enthusiastic crowd. “People in their excitement climbed in through the windows [of the train] with bunches of flowers, boarded ... with letters and parcels,”³⁹ These included “a bouquet of the roses of England and violets, typical of womanly modesty - a flower which suited admirably the charming appearance of the six”, from Lady Brown and “chocolates bound up in the national colours”⁴⁰ *The Advertiser* described the mix of roses and violets, (patriotism and perceived femininity) “as being “happy combination”.”⁴¹

It is unknown what the nurses thought of the events prior to their departure and enthusiastic farewell that was attended by thousands.⁴² Nurses Watts wrote gratefully for the support given, writing, “I do not think any of us will ever forget the kindness shown us before leaving.”⁴³ Leader of the contingent, Martha Bidmead commented pragmatically, on the farewell, “It will be hard work, ... This is only play, but I trust that we shall be of service.”⁴⁴

Expression of Citizenship

The enthusiastic response towards the contingent of nurses was shaped significantly by events and attitudes in the wider community and was a reflection of contemporary discourses that were active throughout much of colonial Australia. Sioban Nelson states that “[D]ue to universal suffrage, in Australia the vote for women was not an issue that could be conflated with the development of nursing.”⁴⁵ However the development of nursing and indeed the effective use of nurses in the military, can be, if not conflated then at least usefully contextualized within the prevailing citizenship debate. Even prior to federation in 1901, at colonial level, the emerging professional female nurse and the push for female suffrage had a not insignificant relationship. Both involved emerging female groups who were striving for recognition and secondly both were often very concerned with social justice and humanitarian concerns.⁴⁶

At a time when women’s capacity to actively participate in the public sphere, in particular, the right to vote, was being negotiated, the Boer War offered women an opportunity to contribute, in a very public manner to both the national and Imperial cause. For women to operate outside the domestic sphere, would be, it was feared, “disrupting the separateness and separate functions of the domestic and public spheres [and] would derange ‘normal sexual relations’”⁴⁷ Questions surrounding gender and appropriate spheres of sexual activity, “provoked intense, often heated, debate throughout settler Australia during the last two decade of the nineteenth century and the first decade or so of the twentieth.”⁴⁸

The work of the nurses, (small in number and far away) as well as the work of the many women supporting the nurses and the troops, gives credence to the possibility of not only women operating successfully in the public sphere, as citizens, in supporting their country/empire, but also that they could do it without losing their socially prescribed femininity. The perceived definition of gender roles in times of war was spelt out clearly by ‘Magpie’, “[B]ut we can help and will help. It is for men to fight but we women may help the sick and wounded, the widows and the orphans.”⁴⁹

The nurses would also have legitimate access to operate within the military sphere; again without compromising their femininity, they did not become female soldiers. *The Adelaide Observer* wrote of the gender difference in the roles between soldiers

and nurses, yet recognized how both were involved in the same struggle in the imperial arena.

The duty of the soldier may be more dangerous ... but the task of the nurses is an onerous one ... It is courage of a high order that that takes a man to battle to fight for the Queen and country and it is true womanly sympathy, allied with courage, that includes the weaker sex [that is separate sex] to travel half the world ... to tend to the sick and wounded ... to take up their share in the fierce struggles for the freedom in the Transvaal.⁵⁰

Involvement in the war effort became an expression of citizenship, of being active in the public landscape for the benefit of the colony/state, nation and empire. This is reflected in the speech given by Mrs Ware (Lady Mayoress and president of the nurses' committee) at a farewell function for the South Australian nurses.

... A wonderful object lesson has been shown the whole world in the sending of troops from the colonies to fight with the Imperial forces... an object lesson which shows the unity of the British Empire ... this object lesson will have an even greater significance when the world knows that our women are taking their active share in it, and are braving the perils and horrors of war in their patriotic desire to alleviate the sorrows of the sick and wounded⁵¹

It is perhaps no coincidence that so much support, by women, not only for the war effort, but also for the nurses, came from South Australia, the first colony to grant female suffrage in 1894.⁵²

Image of 'new nurse' as active citizen

There was considerable emphasis in the media on the appearance of the nurses, both the collectors and the newly formed contingent. The image became the message and, as discussed earlier, the visual image of the modern nurse was an extremely important factor in the transformation of nursing from its lowly and sometimes unsavoury past to its professional and philanthropic standing.⁵³ The visual image of the nurse who was to be representing the colony in South Africa had considerable agency.

Lady Tennyson wrote to her mother in England describing the outfits:

... each nurse is only to be allowed ten pounds for her outfit. They are to have a blue serge gown and cloak lined with red, 3 blue line gown, 6 red twill aprons for when they can't be washed, 6 white, bonnet, shady hat and helmet. ... On their arms they are to have a white band with the Red Cross, S.A.T.N - South Australian Trained Nurse, & the South Australian coat of arms.⁵⁴

Australia was soon to be federated but it was made clear, from their uniform that they were South Australian nurses. The outfits met with approval, when worn to a farewell reception and at their departure. They are seen as “pretty and striking but subdued in tone as is only fitting”.⁵⁵ *The Advertiser* observed how their “red lined coats at once proclaimed their office.”⁵⁶ When the chosen women put on the uniforms, they became distinctive, not only because the nurses’ uniforms gave the female wearers a certain legitimacy in the role they played as trained nurses but also because it marked them out as being selected to undertake an arguably privileged, but potentially dangerous task in a masculine environment.

Conclusion

The second Anglo-Boer war, at the turn of the century, provided South Australian women a unique opportunity to participate as active citizens in the public sphere. This was particularly the case with the small contingent of nurses who were sent to South African war. Their status as trained nurses afforded them a specific position in society and allowed them legitimate entry to the war zone. Others were able to contribute to the war effort by working within the community to provide for those serving overseas. Through the support of community, the small contingent of South Australian nurses worked tirelessly in conjunction with the Imperial resources, to provide nursing services in South Africa. The South Australian nurses were mainly stationed at Wynburg* (2GH) and Bloemfontein, where they worked in several different hospitals.⁵⁷ Nurses Glenie, Watts and Stephenson were also stationed in Pretoria, early in 1901.⁵⁸ Nurse Stephenson also appears to have served on a hospital ship, returning to England.⁵⁹ Like the troops, the nurses received a chocolate box from Queen Victoria and service medals from the new King. Martha Bidmead received the Royal Red Cross and Devoted Service Cross), MA Glenie (DSC and King’ Medal), and nurses Cocks, O’Shanahan, Stephenson and Watts (KM).⁶⁰ Nurses Watts need not have doubted - the nurses did indeed do South Australia great credit.

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- *Although Bidmead spells it as Winburg, she is referring to Wynburg, which according to her was "a lovely place, half an hour by train from Cape Town" (reference as above). Winburg is situated in the Orange River Colony.
- ⁵⁸ Letter from Martha Bidmead, in Bloemfontein, to Lady Brown in Adelaide, 23 March 1901, 'Our nurses in Africa', *The Adelaide Observer*, 8 June 1901, p. 6.
- ⁵⁹ Letter from Miss Stephenson in London, to Lady Brown, in New Plymouth, no date, 'Our nurses', *The Adelaide Observer*, 24 August 1901, p. 19.
- ⁶⁰ 'Nursing echoes', *Nursing Record and Hospital World*, 22 June 1901, p. 496, 'Court Circular', *The Times*, 13 March 1902, p. 6, 'Wedding bells', *The British Journal of Nursing*, 22 August 1903, p. 152 and Doddridge, Sandra, 'South Australian Transvaal nurses', *SA Genealogist*, November 1999, pp. 19-21.

