Wreaths and Remembrance: Commemorating Women's War Work

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On November 11th, 2023, the author laid a wreath on behalf of Canadian First World War nurses at the Cenotaph in London, UK, the first time they were so honoured. What, though, of Canadian civilian war workers, including L.M. Montgomery? This reflective piece considers the connections between Canadian overseas nurses and women war workers in Canada, using Montgomery's writings to better illuminate those connections. Nurses' letters demonstrate that they perceived women at home as active war workers. Montgomery's writings, in turn, show the tremendous efforts women made to support those overseas—and how those at home and overseas shared and coped with many of the same emotional traumas.

A Day to Remember

On that cold, crisp morning in 2023, I listened as the chimes from London's Big Ben tolled eleven strokes to mark the anniversary of the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month, the moment the fighting ended on the Western Front during the First World War in 1918. The notes echoed across a city that was suddenly, wholly silent. Only moments before, the shouts of counter-protestors attacking the police lines mere blocks away had been unescapable, but now, even they fell silent.

The Cenotaph, the UK's best-known war memorial, rose before me, white stone draped with flags, the steps at its foot bare. Beside and behind me stood veterans of other wars, their uniforms and medals immaculate; and members of the Western Front Association, who held this service to ensure that the men and women who gave their lives were not forgotten. The Colour Guard, those representing the branches of the armed services, stood on the far side of the Cenotaph, with four soldiers, one at each corner of the memorial, bearing arms. Spectators crowded the railings, and in a special section, my sister Allison stood with her husband. Our reunion that morning, the first in four years, had been a joyous note on this solemn day.



Andrea McKenzie laying the wreath on behalf of Canadian First World War nurses at the Cenotaph, London, UK. Western Front Association, 2023. Used with permission.

For two long minutes, the silence endured. Then, the silvery, poignant notes of The Last Post rang through the air, the bugle call played at hospitals at the end of the day for four and a half years, and the call played at First World War nurses' funerals throughout the war. It was almost time. I watched as the first wreath was laid, then the second, then the beautiful wreath of yellow and white flowers laid by representatives of Belgium. Then, with a deep breath, I stepped forward to represent Canada, the circle of red poppies in my hands. In its centre was a photograph of three Canadian First World War military nurses in their light blue working uniforms, with the Canadian flag below. These three represented the many: the 2,800 Canadian military nurses who had served overseas during the First World War, and the 40 who did not return home. Together, these Canadian "Bluebirds" had cared for almost 800,000 soldiers, and because of these nurses' service, often performed in hardship conditions, many men had returned home who otherwise would not have.[1]



The Canadian wreath, showing Nursing Sisters Guilbride, McNichol, and Mowat, three Canadian First World War nurses. Image courtesy of Allison Dean. Used with permission.

Each year on November 11th, the Western Front Association organizes a ceremony of remembrance at London's Cenotaph in Whitehall. It's a smaller, more intimate service than the one held on Remembrance Sunday. The WFA is a group with international chapters dedicated to researching all aspects of the First World War and to making sure its participants are remembered. Colin Wagstaff, a WFA member since 1964, had emailed me months before to invite me to lay a wreath on behalf of Canadian war nurses. "It's more inclusive than the Remembrance Sunday service," he told me, and he was right. I could see schoolchildren waiting to lay their wreaths, and later on in the ceremony, descendants of veterans from India and descendants of members of the Chinese Labour Battalion would, for the first time, lay wreaths at the Cenotaph. It's the first time, too, that Canadian First World War nurses have been remembered in their own right. The WFA invited me to lay the wreath on behalf of these nurses because I've been telling their story at conferences and WFA chapters for years, using the women's own words and images as much as possible to recreate their wartime experiences.



Andrea, veterans, and other wreath layers in a long range view of the Cenotaph. Image Courtesy of Western Front Association, 2023. Used with permission.

L.M. Montgomery's Women at War

But where did this interest—this passion—begin? Many years before I ever thought of pursuing a career as a scholar, I read L.M. Montgomery's works, including *Rilla of Ingleside*, her account of Anne's daughter, Rilla Blythe, as she grows to maturity during the First World War. Through Montgomery, I learned that war impacted women and men alike; and I learned that women were active war workers who courageously carried on through the grief, stress, and chaos of war. Montgomery shaped my views about women's roles in wartime when I was still in high school, showing through Rilla and her community the strong connections between the men in the trenches and the women who battled at home.

It came as a shock, then, when I discovered that Canadian nurses' and Canadian women's First World War experiences were forgotten, ignored, or marginalized in official histories and by government organizations. In the UK and in the US at that time, the late 1980s and early 1990s, scholars such as Claire Tylee and Margaret Higonnet were fighting for recognition for the women writers of the First World War. British author Vera Brittain's foundational *Testament of Youth*, her autobiography of love, loss, and voluntary nursing during those years, had been reprinted, and other books by British and American female authors were being rediscovered. But the history of Canadian military nurses' experiences during the war had not yet been written,[2] while Montgomery remained unacknowledged as a Canadian war writer.

So began my second career, when after years of working full-time while researching First World War nurses' experiences on the weekends, I left industry and began a PhD in the mid-1990s. (Ironically, in the mid-1980s, I had wanted to write my MA thesis about L.M. Montgomery's works but was told that wasn't "academic" enough. That was the attitude back then.) Although I ended up writing my PhD dissertation about Vera Brittain's

community of wartime letter writers, I never stopped researching Canadian women's war stories.

Montgomery's journals, including her wartime journals, had been published by then, and they gave rich detail about Canadian women's wartime lives, much of which she included in *Rilla*. Montgomery does, as others have noted, include mostly traditional women's war work, such as the Red Cross work that Rilla and Anne do (Lefebvre & McKenzie, xv; Robinson, 125; Glassford, 130).3 We do not see the munitions workers, the ambulance drivers, the tram conductors, the factory workers, or the mechanics,4 though we do get a brief glimpse of women land workers when Mary Vance and Susan help to bring in the harvest. But Montgomery wrote about what she knew and experienced: she was president of her local Red Cross chapter, she recited at socials and concerts, and she helped to organize such events to raise funds for supplies. She did not write about nurses' work in *Rilla*, except to briefly mention Faith's Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) work overseas—and yet reading *Rilla* and Canadian First World War military nurses' letters and diaries side-by-side shows that they reverberate with connections.

Surviving War at Home and Abroad

How did women survive the chaos of war? Those at home, like Rilla, were constantly in suspense about the men they loved; and those nursing in hospitals had to foster resilience to cope with the constant flow of soldiers' wounds and illnesses. Humour lightens both Montgomery's war story and the nurses' lives. Who can forget Rilla's "shabby boot and gallant shoe" when she goes to Irene Howard's to ask her to sing at the concert? Or Susan trying to kick "that darned cat" with both feet (and landing on her behind on the floor) while she's baking Miranda Pryor's wedding cake? The same spirit pervades the few nursing sisters' memoirs available, from Constance Bruce's 1918 *Humour in Tragedy*, Mildred Clint's 1934 *Our Bit*, and Kate Wilson-Simmie's 1981 memoir, *Light's Out!*.5 Humour helped foster resilience, as Nursing Sister Laura Holland's letters to her mother demonstrate, even when she serves under hardship conditions—severely rationed water, scanty food, and dysentery prevalent—in Lemnos, on the Gallipoli front. She and her friend Mildred Forbes were invited to tea on one of the naval ships in harbour, and as Laura wrote home:

In a conversation with the Principal Medical Officer … we got on the subject somehow of the lack of water, & before I realized it had suggested a bath, which he promptly took up…. On the q.t. I rushed down to his bath-room … & with Mildred to protect me, had my first experience of an English tin-bath. You can picture me sitting in this little tin affair, at an afternoon tea party!!! I never even stopped to take my hat off" (McKenzie, *War-Torn Exchanges*, 65).

Such humorous incidents were necessary to relieve tension, for as Mildred Forbes wrote home later from France, "One sees so many tragedies all the time that one feels positively sick" (McKenzie, *War-Torn Exchanges*, 193). Like Rilla and Susan Baker, these nurses and their colleagues carried on courageously throughout the four years of war.

Laura, Mildred, and their fellow nurses also appreciated the work that the women at home did in raising funds, sewing and knitting hospital supplies, buying goods and arranging to have them shipped overseas, and providing nurses and their patients with comforts that could not be obtained abroad. In 1916, after receiving another shipment of boxes from home, Laura wrote home to her mother, "When I think of all you have done & are doing, I simply gasp, for I know how the house duties have to go on just the same. It seems to me the people at home do far more than we do" (McKenzie, *War-Torn Exchanges*, 132). Pyjamas, socks, shirts, towels, bandages, condensed milk, soup, powdered lemon and lime drink mixes, instant coffee, chocolate, cigarettes, games, books, and other goods arrived by the case in a steady stream over the years for the soldier-patients, while the nurses received everything from cakes to a portable organ for their unit. The nurses' local Red Cross units made special efforts at Christmas-time, too. Cairine Wilson, later to become Canada's first woman senator, rallied her

Red Cross chapter to make and fill Christmas stockings for the patients of Casualty Clearing Station No. 2 near Ypres in France, where her cousin, Mildred Forbes, was Acting Matron in 1917. “Really I have never seen children more delighted than these men were with their stockings,” wrote Mildred to Cairine. “When I went into the tent, the men were lying very dejectedly in the darkness. When the stockings appeared, they bucked right up and their pleasure was a sight to behold” (McKenzie, *War-Torn Exchanges*, 197).

Hands across the Seas

In their letters home, nurses such as Laura and Mildred perceive the women in Canada as active war workers who are essential to the war effort, while Montgomery’s book and journal confirm the strenuous efforts those women undertook. Montgomery was president of her local Red Cross chapter, which met once a week to sew and to plan fundraising. Montgomery’s journal also records a number of concerts and socials, which she either attended, participated in, or organized, throughout the war (*CJ 3*; *CJ 4*). In *Rilla*, Montgomery writes about the effort involved in a single Red Cross concert, organized by Rilla Blythe, which raises $100. Like Montgomery, Rilla trains young people to perform dialogues and songs, reaches out to potential performers to ask them to participate, sells tickets, and performs herself. Rilla did so only once; Montgomery did so multiple times throughout the war. And once the money is raised, it must be spent on materials and supplies, which must then be manufactured (knitted or sewed) or bought, packed (no sinecure) and shipped abroad. The pyjamas, shirts, towels, bandages, socks, and other goods that the nurses received were sewn or knitted by those local Red Cross chapters; Montgomery’s journal for the war years is peppered with references to the weekly meetings, where she “sewed all afternoon” before returning home to other duties (*CJ 3*; *CJ 4*).

What kept women who did such work active throughout the war? The nurses’ letters home also communicate soldiers’ tragedies, so women in Canada were knowledgeable about the suffering of the soldiers and knew the stories of men such as Acting Matron Mildred Forbes’s “young officer … only 24, who is an organist who has just had his right arm amputated” at her hospital in France (McKenzie, *War-Torn Exchanges*, 192). Montgomery’s half-brother Carl had his leg amputated after the fighting at Courcelette, and when she met with him, he told her stories of his experiences, while other young men wrote to her or to neighbours throughout the war (*CJ 3*; *CJ 4*). The women in Canada, contrary to myth, did have realistic understandings of soldiers’ experiences. Perhaps this is why no soldier who went to war in *Rilla* remains unchanged, and why Montgomery so clearly describes the suffering and grief of those at home as well as the impact on the men: Anne’s long illness when Walter is killed; Gertrude’s unexpressed suffering when she believes her fiancé has been killed; Nan’s agony when Jerry Meredith is shot in the back; Miller Douglas’s changed aspirations and Mary Vance’s stoicism when Miller’s leg is amputated; and the Blythe family’s suspense when Jem goes missing.

Although Montgomery does not mention men’s experiences in hospitals, each man who was wounded or became ill went through the care of nurses, who fought for each patient’s life and health, providing emotional as well as physical care (Hallett).6 The community at home was, for Canadian nurses, just as important as that home community was for the men in *Rilla of Ingleside*—indispensable to mitigate the horrors of war. As I have written elsewhere, for Montgomery, the women of Canada demonstrate as much heroism as the men in the trenches (“Women at War”). Canadian nurses also acted heroically, though they almost invariably responded that they were just doing their jobs when those at home tried to call them heroines. Yet it took courage to work through air raids and shelling, and to sustain nursing soldiers for four long years. As Mildred Forbes wrote, her Casualty Clearing Station near Ypres was “a pretty hot spot,” and she and Laura were shelled out of it twice (McKenzie, *War-Torn Exchanges*). The women of Canada may not have experienced such dangers, yet they suffered suspense, grief and loss, as Montgomery so vividly described in *Rilla*, and most carried on despite these emotional traumas.

Acknowledging All Women War Workers?

It was the honour of a lifetime to lay a wreath at the Cenotaph in London on behalf of Canada's First World War military nurses, and to know that much work has been done in Canada to tell their stories. And yet, as my sister and I walked back down Whitehall at the end of that long, intense day, I could not help but notice a memorial to the British women of the Second World War—to the many female civilians who had worked and suffered and died during that war. Military nurses are honoured—and rightly so—for their work as part of the Canadian Army Medical Corps during both the First and the Second World Wars. But what of the Canadian civilian women war workers like L.M. Montgomery and her colleagues?

Some progress has been made to acknowledge their work, but it's interesting to note that much of that work has come from scholars who have also written about Montgomery's life and works. For instance, Sarah Glassford, who contributed an essay to *L.M. Montgomery and War*, also co-edited *A Sisterhood of Suffering and Service*, an essay collection about Canadian and Newfoundland women's work during the First World War. Laura Robinson, a noted Montgomery scholar, created the international exhibit *The Canadian Home Front: L.M. Montgomery's Reflections on the First World War*, which foregrounded Canadian women civilians' war work, while noted First World War scholar Jonathan Vance, besides contributing an essay to *L.M. Montgomery and War*, has his undergraduate and graduate students study *Rilla of Ingleside* as part of their First World War coursework. Benjamin Lefebvre and I edited the restored original text of *Rilla of Ingleside* in 2009, including notes about war events and war vocabulary, while Lefebvre's volume of reviews about Montgomery's work provides fascinating glimpses of how Canadian reviewers saw her war book as "a story that might be written of a thousand communities in Canada" and a "faithful and worthy picture … of the war years" (Toronto *Globe*, 229). The *Manitoba Free Press* reviewer went even further, predicting that "A hundred years hence, *Rilla of Ingleside* will be useful to historians for a picture of Canadian home life during the Great War" (236). Montgomery readers and scholars have indeed looked to her work to better illuminate the lives of Canadian women during the First World War one hundred years later.

Rilla of Ingleside stands as Montgomery's testament to Canadian women of the First World War, and Montgomery's works seem inextricable from Canadians' views of that war. In *Rilla of Ingleside*, women stand beside their men, battling for the cause, with their efforts enabling the men to endure the horrors of war. Women's work on the home front created strong connections with the men overseas and with the nursing sisters who cared for wounded and ill soldiers.

On November 11th when I had the honour of laying a wreath on behalf of Canadian military First World War nurses, it would have been an equal honour to lay a wreath in memory of Canadian civilian women who, like Montgomery, also served in that long war.



Andrea and her sister, Allison Dean, at the Cenotaph. Image courtesy of Alastair Dean. Used with permission.

Bio: Andrea McKenzie is an associate professor at York University in Toronto. A literary scholar and historian, she co-edited the essay collection *L.M. Montgomery and War* with Jane Ledwell (McGill-Queen's 2017) and co-edited the restored text of *Rilla of Ingleside* (Penguin, 2010) with Benjamin Lefebvre, with whom she also co-founded the award-winning L.M. Montgomery Readathon in March 2020. She has also contributed chapters to several collections of essays about Montgomery's works and co-chaired two of the biennial conferences. Andrea has also edited and published the letters of Canadian First World War nurses (*War-Torn Exchanges: The Lives and Letters of Nursing Sisters Laura Holland and Mildred Forbes*, UBC Press, 2016) and written a number of articles and book chapters about their experiences overseas. She is a regular presenter at nursing history conferences and war conferences.

- 1 Figures about the numbers of Canadian military nurses vary with the sources used. Cynthia Toman, in *Sister Soldiers of the Great War*, calculates that almost 800,000 patients passed through Canadian nurses' hands during the First World War (*Sister Soldiers of the Great War* UBC Press, 2016).
- 2 Not until 2006 was a book-length history of Canadian First World War nurses published, Mélanie Morin-Pelletier's *Briser les ailes de l'ange: Les infirmières militaire canadiennes (1914-1918)*. Cynthia Toman followed in 2016 with *Sister Soldiers of the Great War: The Nurses of the Canadian Army Medical Corps*. Other useful sources include Genvieve Allard's "Caregiving on the Front," and G.W.L. Nicholson's three chapters about First World War nurses in *Canada's Nursing Sisters*. The history of

Canadian V.A.D.s (untrained nurses) came still later with Linda Quiney's *This Small Army of Women: Canadian Volunteer Nurses and the First World War*.

- 3 Lefebvre and McKenzie discuss this in the introduction to their 2009 edition of *Rilla of Ingleside* (xv). In addition, Laura Robinson notes that Rilla "focuses on the labour that women always perform" (125). Sarah Glassford also points out that many Canadian women did not have "access" to "options" such as traditionally "male labour" activities, and so had to leverage "their peacetime organizational and domestic skills … to the wartime context" (130).
- 4 Essays about some forms of non-traditional Canadian and Newfoundland women's labour can be found in Sarah Glassford and Amy Shaw's edited collection, *A Sisterhood of Suffering and Service*.
- 5 Constance Bruce and Mabel Clint were among the first 100 Canadian nurses to go overseas, serving in France, Lemnos (on the Gallipoli front), and England (McKenzie, "First"). Katherine Wilson-Simmie joined in 1915, and also served in Lemnos, France, and England. Clint published her memoir in 1934 because she thought the nurses' work had been forgotten; Wilson-Simmie, writing in 1980, also thought that the experiences of the nurses were not remembered.
- 6 Christine Hallett's *Containing Trauma: Nursing Work in the First World War* describes the work that First World War professional (graduate, trained) nurses performed on multiple fronts. In doing so, she points out that nurses took a holistic approach to their patients' health, looking after their emotional well-being as well as their physical wounds and illnesses.

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