

Sisters in a distant land: The exploration of identity and travel through three New Zealand nurses' diaries from the Great War

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Abstract

As historians we know very little about the experiences of New Zealand nurses during the Great War. The lack of understanding derives from the rarity of nurses in historiography, though recent attempts have been made to bring nurses into the Anzac national memory. The under-utilised diaries of Louisa Higginson, Mildred Salt, and Fanny Helena Speedy explore two aspects of significance – the shaping of their identity and the independence of travelling in a new environment. Through identity, the ‘colonial’ label is examined, with a difference between how the British viewed a ‘colonial’ and how the nurses perceived ‘colonial’, which runs alongside the difference in terminology used by the nurses when writing about the ‘natives’. Also embedded within identity is the evolution of gender from pre-war Victorian ideals to a new definition during the war. Independence through travel was emphasised in diary entries. Travelling nurses experienced both the ‘home’ culture of London and the exoticism of Egypt and the Middle East. Travel was also an escape mechanism, allowing the nurses a break from the hectic nature of ward work. By exploring these aspects through the experiences of three nurses, this article aims to give a broader understanding of what the almost 600 New Zealand nurses experienced during the Great War period.

Keywords

Nursing, Egypt, Great War, diaries, travel, colonial, empire

Introduction

What do we, as historians, know about New Zealand nursing experiences during the Great War? The answer is ‘very little’. There is no single work dedicated to New Zealand nurses who served on the frontlines, unlike their Australian, British, and Canadian counterparts. Very little is also mentioned about them in World War I (WWI) historiography. Steps have been taken in recent years to introduce nursing into the national memory of the war, but these attempts have been stylised and gendered to a certain extent, never reflecting a well-rounded representation of a nurse’s experience. Soldiers have been attributed with forging the Anzac identity on the hills of Gallipoli, but the nurses who served in the hospital wards, in casualty clearing stations, or on hospital ships have been neglected. The under-utilised accounts of three New Zealand nurses, Louisa Higginson, Mildred Salt, and Fanny Helena Speedy, shed light on their contribution within shaping the broader Anzac identity and demonstrate that the often neglected role of the nurses during the war was significant in establishing a name for New Zealand separate from their colonial identity.

As a part of the British Empire, imperialism permeated all sectors of Aotearoa/New Zealand’s society, shaping the identity of its citizens. This was reflected in the nurses’ writing. All three nurses wrote about their interactions with the British public and the ‘native’ people of Egypt, particularly emphasising the difference between being a ‘colonial’ in the eyes of the British and a ‘colonial’ from their own perspective. Their interactions highlight the change in traditional gender expectations in British society during the Great War period, with women

breaking away from the restrictions of Victorian life. Travel was one of these new freedoms, and, just as for male soldiers, war could give nurses the opportunity to travel to the heart of the British Empire or other exotic places. Travel was a significant experience for Higginson, Salt, and Speedy, featuring heavily in their diary entries. At times the nurses' diaries read more as travel memoirs than the accounts of their medical experience. Having the ability to travel for leisure for months at a time was something only readily accessible to the wealthy prior to the war. Travel allowed nurses to escape the horrors they faced in the wards and enabled independence, a change in scenery, and the ability to establish a new sense of normality.

Louisa Higginson, Mildred Salt, and Fanny Helena Speedy represent a small sample of professional nurses who trained in Aotearoa/New Zealand in the early twentieth century, with their pre-war life shaping their experiences during the Great War. Born in 1884 in the Waikato, Louisa Higginson was the youngest of the three nurses. Trained in Hamilton and gaining qualification in 1910, Higginson worked as a Sister and Matron at a number of hospitals before the outbreak of war (State Examination of Nurses, 1910). At age 30, Louisa Higginson paid her own way to Britain to nurse soldiers, embarking on February 26, 1915. It took some time in London before Higginson was attached to the British Red Cross and stationed in the Middle East. She was then attached to the Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service Reserves (QAIMNSR or QA) for the remainder of her war service, having the title of 'Acting Matron' attached to her name by the end of the war (Higginson, personnel file). Born in Wellington in 1873, Sister Fanny Helena Speedy gained her qualification in 1905 and worked at Wellington Hospital prior to the war. At age 42, Speedy was one of the first 50 nurses to embark for service on April 8, 1915 on SS *Rotorua*. The first nine weeks of Speedy's diary are missing; the account of her experiences of nursing begins in Egypt attending to soldiers in the latter stages of the Gallipoli campaign. For her services during the war, Speedy was awarded the Royal Red Cross before she was discharged from service in June 1919 (Speedy, personnel file). Finally, born in 1875, Wellington Staff Nurse Mildred Jane Salt (née Ellis) trained in Wellington and achieved state registration in 1909 (State Examination of Nurses, 1909). Working in a private hospital in Wellington prior to the war, at age 40 Ellis embarked on Hospital Ship No. 1 *Maheno* on July 10, 1915, immediately starting service in Egypt nursing soldiers in the latter months of the Gallipoli campaign. Obtaining special dispensation to remain on duty, Mildred married Lieutenant Alexander Edward Wrottesley Salt (Alec) on May 21, 1916 whilst still in Egypt. She was discharged from service in August 1918, prior to the end of the war, at her own request (Ellis, personnel file).

Almost 600 New Zealand nurses served during the Great War, and about a dozen diary and letter collections detailing service in the Middle East have been collected and stored in repositories throughout Aotearoa/New Zealand. Soldier diaries and correspondence from the Great War period have become a valuable source for historians, providing vivid first-hand accounts of life on the frontline. But that poses a question – if soldiers' diaries and letters are valuable, why have the diaries of nurses who also served on the frontlines been neglected? The focus of Great War historiography can provide an explanation. Works by historians such as Christopher Pugsley (2004), Jock Phillips (2015), and Glyn Harper (2015) focus, almost exclusively, on the military aspects of the war – political motivations, campaigns, and soldier experiences – which, in turn, shapes how the nation understands the Great War. As nursing diaries do not deal exclusively with the military aspects of the war, one could understand a military historian's hesitance in exploring nursing accounts. A nurse's diary offers a different perspective of a wartime experience. As Australian historian Katie Holmes (1995) explains, 'the diary is situated at the intersection between women's personal lives and public discourses' (p. xiii). Not only did the diaries deal with their personal thoughts, reactions, and experiences, they also attempted to negotiate these experiences whilst in the middle of a warzone.

New Zealand historians have rarely written extensive histories about their nurses. Anna Rogers (2003) and Kendall and Corbett (1990) are most notable in focusing on New Zealand nurses, but they do not focus entirely on the Great War. Australian historians Peter Rees (2008), Kirsty Harris (2011), and Marianne Barker (1989) also mention New Zealand nurses throughout their works but never in great detail. Concerning other mentions of New Zealand nurses, many of these histories rely heavily upon Australian and British nursing experiences, of which there is a larger historiographical body. Many of the works surrounding nursing may dedicate a few chapters to the campaign in the Middle East, but their primary focus is on the nursing conditions and experiences on the Western Front. As a large proportion of the Anzac experience was on the western front, this focus can be understood. However, no New Zealand historian has neglected the nine months of the Dardanelles campaign, as it is foundational to New Zealand identity; therefore, the nursing experience in the Middle East should not be ignored.

Negotiating the 'colonial' identity in different environments

... learned she was the only Colonial in the Hospital: also how jealous the English Nurses were of her and how very much they showed it (Speedy, Diary, January 10, 1916).

The term 'colonial' was used by a number of groups to define New Zealanders, which the nurses both revered and detested during their Great War experience. As Speedy illustrates in the above quote, the colonial status benefitted one nurse experiencing difficulties in London in early 1916. However, this was not a universal experience. The diaries of Higginson, Speedy, and Salt were used as a platform to negotiate a multitude of experiences, particularly defining their identity as a New Zealander within the British Empire serving under the command of an imperial force. Higginson, working within the British nursing network, was taken aback by how she was treated by fellow British nurses and military commanders, as neither she nor many other New Zealanders viewed themselves as 'colonials' and thus of inferior skill and rank. The suffocating climate of Egypt, exotic clothing, and interactions with 'native' citizens further emphasised the nurses' negotiation of how to define their identity during the war.

How New Zealanders identified themselves within the British Empire is important to understanding the nurses' experiences. The adoption of dominion status in 1907 potentially signalled a gradual movement away from Britain, and the growth of a more independent nation. However, by 1914, Aotearoa/New Zealand's identity was still embedded in British culture. Education, literature, and politics particularly highlighted imperialism within society, influencing the upbringing of younger generations who then volunteered for King and Country. As Keith Sinclair (1986) illustrates, Britain was classed as 'home', where 'the expression "He's going home" came to mean a person leaving the land of his birth and sailing for this ancestral homeland' (p. 94). Aotearoa/New Zealand's pre-war 'national' identity was constructed under the imperial shadow, therefore, I would argue, New Zealanders did not have a separate identity from Britain. However, Sinclair (1986) also states that 'by the 1920s most New Zealanders were very clear that they were New Zealanders and not English, Irish or Scots' (p. 107). This indicates that a New Zealand British identity was understood as similar but ultimately different from other British identities on the other side of the globe.

Aotearoa/New Zealand has always had a strong connection with Britain and, more specifically, London. Felicity Barnes (2012) argues in her work, *New Zealand's London: A colony and its metropolis*, that 'the construction of New Zealand as "British" ... continued well into the twentieth century, with London at the heart of that process' (p. 6). She further discerned that 'white colonials ... participated in the definition process, using the metropolis to

construct Britishness and secure their place in empire's hierarchy' (p. 6). Due to the connection between Aotearoa/New Zealand and London, Higginson and many other New Zealanders saw themselves as equal to their British ancestors in terms of race, religion, and culture. The British, on the other hand, regarded New Zealand people as 'colonials' and of inferior standing. Such treatment brings into question the use of 'colonial' regarding different sections of the British Empire.

Identity in war is something all three nurses address throughout their diaries, with Higginson devoting the most time to self-contemplation, particularly when treated as a 'colonial' by co-workers. Based on the pyramid structure of racial hierarchy, those with Anglo-European heritage were viewed as the elite race. Within the elite tier were a number of different nationalities deriving from the same Anglo-European heritage who perceived themselves as part of the elite race. For the English, their extensive Empire, culture, and heritage influenced their perception of being *the* elite race of the world. This perception of elitism translated to the broader British Empire, where the White settlers saw themselves as equals to their ancestors back 'home'. However, for a natural-born British citizen, anyone who was not born at the heart of the Empire was perceived as second class or 'colonial'; Australians, New Zealanders, and Canadians were identified as such. The White settlers in Aotearoa/New Zealand did not consider themselves as 'colonials' in their own culture, nor did they perceive themselves as such within the broader British Empire. Within the same hierarchy, indigenous people, be they Maori, Aboriginal Australians, or Indians, were viewed as inferior because of their skin colour. As illustrated in the nurses' writing, those living in the Middle East were termed 'natives' rather than 'colonials' in their entries, highlighting a difference in attitude towards other sectors of the British Empire, particularly when compared with how the Australian nurses wrote about the 'natives'.

The QA nurses were admired by a large proportion of New Zealand nurses because of their patriotism, service, and absolute professionalism. These women, alongside Florence Nightingale's achievements during the Crimean War, were the epitome of the nursing ideology. Louisa Higginson, influenced by such notions, paid her own way to England, believing the British military, and by extension the QAs, would welcome her services with open arms. However, receiving acceptance from the QA Matron and British military was not as easy as she expected. Many New Zealand nurses were treated as mere 'colonials' in London, at British-run hospitals, and when working alongside 'professionally' trained British military nurses. Higginson's diary pays particular attention to the treatment she received, which a number of other Anzac nurses comment on throughout their war experience.

Upon arrival in London, Higginson headed straight to the War Office to offer her nursing services. However, she was not impressed with the treatment she received once there: 'Miss Beecher arrived, she was not even civil to us [Higginson and her friend Mary], and I'm afraid gave us a very bad impression of the English manner. We felt very small ...' (Diary, April 12, 1915). Higginson's experience was not singular; upon meeting another New Zealand nurse based in London, she wrote, 'Met another N.Z. nurse there, Auckland. She had been treated rather shabbily by War Office, we of course sympathised with one another' (Diary, May 3, 1915). Higginson interprets this treatment as a reflection upon their colonial status, and the perception that they were not sufficiently trained. Higginson's notion is given further solidification when serving at a hospital: 'met Miss Hoadley, Matron in Chief, not very much impressed with her manners. She informed us we were not wanted here and yet they are crying out for nurses' (Diary, May 17, 1915). Speedy's diary reflects the same impassivity in the first 50 New Zealand Army Nursing Service (NZANS) nurses arriving to serve: 'we were told before we left our anchorage in the harbour that Doctors and Nurses were not wanted in Egypt, there were enough they said, yet we were all received with open arms (the arms would have

been wider had we been English and QAIMNSR, etc.)' (Diary, June 16, 1915).

Higginson's criticism of the military command was not just restricted to matrons or high-ranking female administrators. She noted in her diary that 'Capt. Griffith made a tour of inspection this morning, we all come to the conclusion that he has no more manners than a pig' (Diary, September 5, 1915). Her attitude towards Griffith is similar to how she discusses other matrons throughout her diary and how, in turn, Higginson wrote about other nurses' perceptions of Griffith. Labelling Griffith a 'pig' is her first insult directed solely at a military commander. Whether she held a similar view of other male commanders is unknown, but being compared to a pig was one of the worst insults she penned for the duration of her war entries.

Though Higginson's entries reflect criticism of the British military, her judgement of the female London population was far more critical. London opened Higginson's eyes to a whole new society and way of living. Soon after arriving in London, Higginson documented a peculiar encounter: 'Caught express back to town, was near compartment in tube to number of young women, who looked very like the "Arriet" type' (Diary, April 17, 1915). The 'Arriet' type described by Higginson derives from a series of cartoons published in *Punch* during the 1880s, which depicts 'arry and 'arriet, a representation of 'the unlovely and odious attributes of lower middle-class vulgarity' (Graves, 2014, p. 106). As summarised by Graves (2014), 'they form a sort of composite photograph of the mean Cockney who belongs neither to the classes nor the masses, who lacks that breeding and reticence of the one and the primitive virtues of the other' (p. 108). This image of the ill-bred 'arriet was further emphasised in the travelling musical comedy show 'arry and 'arriet performed by the Taylor-Carrington Company, which toured Aotearoa/New Zealand in 1911. These plays received great reviews, with encores, 'roars of laughter and thunders of applause' present at every show (Taylor-Cannington Musical Comedy Company, 1911, p. 1). Higginson's use of comparison in her diary here highlights a number of things. First, she has a very low opinion of women trying to behave like a lady when they do not have any of the qualities or airs about them to reflect such an upbringing. Second, she does not like the new modern women and the behaviour associated with them. Finally, it reflects that the class structure in Britain had transferred, to an extent, to New Zealand society, with Higginson believing her behaviour to be above that of the lower classes, giving her authority to pass judgement in this way.

Higginson also documents and passes comment on women, particularly nurses, who spent their downtime smoking and drinking. In almost all cases that Higginson mentions these activities, they go hand in hand. As one British man commented in late 1915, 'The Nation had gone mad on tobacco' (Wrigley, 2014, p. 5). And he was correct. Smoking became a soldier's pastime whilst in the trenches, with tobacco companies using the ideals of patriotism and comradeship to promote the smoking of their product. This typically masculine activity, harking back to men smoking tobacco in their pipes on evenings in the drawing room, or chewing tobacco constantly, began to influence the images of femininity during the war period. It was wholly accepted for those in the armed forces and those engaged in war production to be provided with tobacco (Wrigley, 2014, p. 29). As Chris Wrigley wrote, there were 'accounts of young female munitions workers spending their money in restaurants and smoking publicly, a practice almost unimaginable before the war' (Wrigley, 2014, p. 25). However, this acceptance did not necessarily translate to the accepted behaviour of nurses on frontline service.

Critiquing smoking and drinking in the work environment appears to have come naturally to Higginson; therefore, she is a good source of information. Her first encounter with women smoking in public was met with shock: 'First time of seeing ladies smoke in public, can't say I like it' (Diary, April 19, 1915). In the nursing environment, 'smoking [and by extension drinking] emerged as an important feature of relaxation and of leisure' (Tinkler, 2001, p. 115).

One of Higginson's first documentations of whisky is an interesting episode: 'Some people have queer idea's [sic] about picnic, we all were invited to a moonlight one ... so walked along the beach then sat down, nearly everyone drank whisky, ate sandwiches which had sand in them, felt cold, sand damp, then back again. Nothing here can be done without whisky' (Diary, February 18, 1916).

The use of whisky in the nursing environment could be viewed as a coping mechanism for the endless traumatic injuries the nurses treated on a daily basis. It was, however, still frowned upon by officials for any military person to be seen consuming such quantities of alcohol in a professional environment. Whether Higginson considered whisky as a coping mechanism is unknown, but taking into account her tone and overall character as shown through her diary entries, it would be unlikely that such a notion would have been seen as justification to consume alcohol so readily. Higginson states quite openly in her diary, 'the women here think I am old fashioned because I disapprove of it' (Diary, April 25, 1916). Higginson's critique highlights her conservative opinions over the public image portrayed by women who were challenging the traditional Victorian notions of modest behaviour. Women consuming alcohol, smoking cigarettes, and being more forthcoming to males illustrated her view that such behaviours were detrimental to their sex.

Service in Egypt broadened Higginson, Speedy, and Salt's knowledge of the British Empire, with each nurse encountering a foreign culture and processing her interactions with the 'natives' in individual ways. Knowledge about the Middle East would have come from literature, bible stories, education, or hearing stories throughout their communities, though nothing would ever do justice to what the women actually witnessed. Salt's diary is optimistic in tone, highlighting her sense of duty and fortune at being able to travel to new lands and use her nursing skills for the war effort: 'I went by train to Cairo, it's a wonderful place we call home' (Diary, August 17, 1915). Cairo became home for a number of New Zealand nurses until early 1916, with hospitals established in the Middle East to treat the wounded patients evacuated off the Gallipoli peninsula.

Few of Salt's diary entries discuss her interactions with 'native' citizens, although whether this was by choice or because she did not encounter many is unclear. One of the few mentions was on the day of Salt's birthday: 'This is my half afternoon and I'm sitting in the lovely balcony. I tried to lie down but it was hopeless for heat, soldiers everywhere and endless native chatter' (Diary, August 25, 1915). The other mention made was when she visited a mosque with Sergeant McCullum: 'we took a guide and he rattled off the usual chatter which I [could not] understand' (Diary, September 15, 1915). Salt indicates the guide was not the first local she had encountered and she had become accustomed to the 'usual chatter' of the local people (Diary, September 15, 1915). Speedy also mentions the chatter of the 'natives', though using slightly different terminology: 'native fishing boats, probably one or two of the nets being drawn in too, by a long line of pulling Natives who jabber nearly all the time at the work' (Diary, July 26, 1915).

The mention of 'chatter' arises in a number of nursing and soldier accounts from the war period, indicating the effect a different language and way of communicating had on New Zealanders during their time in Egypt. 'Native' and 'chatter' are not terms of neutrality, instead reflecting the hierarchical structure of British society. As General Godley informed New Zealand troops, 'the natives of Egypt have nothing in common with the Maoris [sic]. They belong to races lower in the human scale and cannot be treated in the same manner' (Belich, 2001, p. 107). When compared with the language used by Australian nurses, 'darkeys', 'coolies', and 'brutes', New Zealand nurses appear less prejudiced when encountering a new culture (Ström, Diary, June 25, 1917; July 14, 1917).

Alongside the unfamiliar language, the clothing of the native population was unusual to the eyes of nurses and featured frequently in diary entries. Higginson's description, whilst on a short excursion to Cairo, offers a concise description of what she and many other nurses witnessed: 'All the Egyptian men were in long gowns, blue predominates and some wear an ordinary short coat over this all. Also all white government officials wear a dark red fez, some of the very poor just wear a piece of rag round their heads. The women wear bl[ue] veils to cover all but their eyes, the ladies seem to wear white' (Diary, November 11, 1915). Nurses noted that disparity between the classes was particularly evident through the clothing of the Egyptians. Those of wealth had the ability to purchase and wear garments indicating their status to other citizens, while also protecting them from the changeable climate. The poor, on the other hand, had little to no money to spend on clothing. Seeing naked people would not be as much of a shock for the nurses given their training. However, witnessing people living in poverty may have been a less familiar sight for New Zealand nurses, indicated by how frequently such sights were commented on during their time in Egypt.

The heat of the Middle East was all consuming and turned out to be detrimental to the health of so many nurses. The most common theme throughout Higginson, Salt, and Speedy's diaries is the mention of the heat and climate on an almost daily basis. On arriving in Alexandria, Speedy recorded the dreadful heat: 'in fact getting on the wharf from the ship was like having a furnace door opened in ones face' (Diary, June 16, 1915). Salt conveyed similar sentiments throughout her entries: 'the heat all day has been fearful', 'another fearfully hot day', and 'it's roasting hot and I have had a bath and it does no good' (Diary, August 27, August 28, September 5, 1915). Working in a hot climate, near dry deserts did nothing to help the nurses cope with the already strenuous task of nursing the sick and injured from Gallipoli. The combination of heat and exhaustion from working 12-hour shifts or more took its toll on the nurses, with many invalided home, suffering from different illnesses such as enteric and dengue fever, along with typhoid. Struggling through the heat each day can be attributed to the uniforms the nurses were required to wear, as the material was not suitable for the conditions the nurses were working in day after day. Though the nurses never explicitly stated the connection between the hot conditions of the Middle East and the clothing worn by the 'natives', these conditions give understanding as to why the 'natives' wore bright, loose-fitting clothing, as they were breathable and kept the wearer's body temperature down.

The entries of Salt, Higginson, and Speedy reflect a range of encounters each nurse had with the local population, often reflecting a wider consensus of the nursing community as outlined in secondary literature. Imperialism is paramount in understanding their experiences. Higginson highlights the colonial debate throughout the British Empire, which brings into question the actual distinction of a 'colonial'; the New Zealand nurses did not identify themselves as 'colonial' and felt isolated within this label. Traditionally, women were to be modest and chaste, but a new era of women was emerging that challenged the traditional norms of society. Women were now drinking and smoking and had 'looser' morals, which many associated with masculine behaviour. Encounters with the 'native' population of the Middle East were met with fascination due to the stark difference in their culture. The use of 'chatter' and 'jabber' in entries emphasises the interest the nurses took in noticing the variations in language, highlighting the diversity of the British Empire.

Exploring the unknown

'It was most enjoyable, these are things which helps to break the monotony of the place for though it is beautiful ...' (Higginson, Diary, February 15, 1916).

Serving the Empire in the greatest conflict the world had witnessed enabled nurses to use their skills to save lives, as well as giving them the freedom to travel around exotic areas they would have been unlikely to visit otherwise. Before the war, those of wealth were readily able to travel around the world, experiencing new cultures and environments in comparative luxury; the travellers would have witnessed the different economic conditions and racial differences. Louisa Higginson spent a significant amount of time in London before the War Office accepted her services for the British Red Cross, and later the QAIMNSR, thus enabling her ample time to travel around 'home'. Mildred Salt never seemed to spend much time nursing soldiers, as she was constantly ill; instead, she spent a lot of time travelling around the sites in the Middle East, whether on days off or during recuperation from illness. The tones evoked by both nurses in their travels reflect the awe they both felt in witnessing these sites, highlighting a shift in how single women travelled across the British Empire.

London, the mystical metropolis, was considered to be 'home' by so many colonial subjects, being perceived as 'a centre of history and heritage' (Barnes, 2012, p. 68). Prior to the war, travel to London appealed to women due to 'the romance, the distance and the promise of adventure of the metropolis', though those who ventured overseas may have gained themselves a less than proper reputation in society (Woollacott, 2001, p. 6). The war gave a respectability to travelling overseas, as venturing to the heart of the Empire highlighted a woman's patriotism towards the Empire and the boys in the field of battle. To an extent, romance, distance, and adventure also appealed to the nurses, though some reasons held more weight than others.

When Louisa Higginson first arrived in London, she was 'not very struck with' the historic city, though admitting 'it's very much quieter since war broke out' (Diary, April 11, 1915). She was further disillusioned with London and the British culture after her encounter with the War Office. In the weeks before the War Office finally attached her to the British Red Cross, Higginson had ample time to visit the historic sites she had learned about in school and heard about in family stories; sites that remain tourist attractions in the twenty-first century. 'It seemed very wonderful', she wrote, seeing 'St. Pauls Cathedral, Temple Church, Westminster Abbey', commenting that they were 'all very old and smelling very musty' (Diary, April 13, 1915). She visited other famous landmarks, being escorted to 'see the King's stables at Buckingham Palace ... Regent's Park and [spending] a couple of hours at zoo' (Diary, April 14, 1915). Even taking tea at Selfridges, the high-end department store established by Harry Gordon Selfridge in 1909, is mentioned a number of times throughout Higginson's stay: 'had afternoon tea at Selfridges, went on top of roof a good view from there' (Diary, April 14, 1915).

Travelling through the historic and iconic sites in London, which many dreamed of doing, did not curb Higginson's critical nature. Attending an afternoon play, *The man who stayed at home*, Higginson makes no mention of the play but rather comments that 'a number of male actors who aped the soldier, would be better employed, in the Trenches, [cannot] understand the lack of Patriotism ... everywhere one sees numbers of young able bodied men evidently having nothing better to do but stroll the streets, etc.' (Diary, April 22, 1915). Attendance at a play readily turned into a severe critique of the British male and his lacking Empire patriotism. Higginson's acceptance of the norms of patriotism, masculinity, and the role of the male in times of war is relatively severe, reflecting the wider female belief, in the early stages of the war, that all men should be fighting, and a woman's duty was to encourage them to do so.

Higginson also attended a concert at the Royal Albert Hall sitting 'opposite the Royal box',

exclaiming, 'my first sight of Royalty, felt every drop of blood tingle, as the massed bands played God Save the King on entrance of Royalty' (Diary, April 24, 1915). Seeing King George V and Queen Mary was a rare opportunity for citizens of the Empire living outside Britain. Prior to the outbreak of war, there had been two visits by members of the Royal Family to Aotearoa/New Zealand, with Prince Edward, Duke of Edinburgh, visiting in 1869 and the Duke and Duchess of Cornwall and York, later King George V and Queen Mary, visiting in 1901. After the concert had concluded, Higginson 'rushed out to see King and Queen leave [the] hall', but found a crowd with the same intention (Diary, April 24, 1915). Here, Higginson's colonial status was a novelty to many London locals, working to her advantage: 'one lady, hearing we were colonials, very kindly gave up her place to us, enabling us to have a good view' (Diary, April 24, 1915). The royal family represented not only the history and culture of Britain for centuries but also the broader British Empire. The commonly used phrase during this period, 'For King and Country', reflects how influential the monarchy was throughout the empire.

As Barnes (2012) observed, 'great enthusiasm was felt for seeing the Old World ... a number of men had relatives in England and took the opportunity of visiting them and re-establishing family contacts' (p. 54). Women also had family or family friends throughout England who they were able to spend time with, even if just for an afternoon. After Higginson's time nursing in Egypt, she was stationed in an English hospital. This enabled her to spend her time off visiting acquaintances, taking tea or sometimes dinner or luncheon, either in the acquaintances' homes, or visiting a popular café. Salt and Speedy also refer to such visits. Visiting acquaintances or family friends not only re-established connections between family members but also gave the nurses some distance from their experiences in the wards.

Nurses stationed in the Middle East spent a large amount of their free time exploring Cairo, Alexandria, or Abukir, popular places frequented by tourists. The wonders of the Middle East were known throughout the British Empire, with tales of visiting the pyramids, sphinxes, and the Nile River featuring in photographs taken during the pre-war and war period. Salt, Higginson, and Speedy make mention of all the traditional tourist destinations of the area: the pyramids and sphinxes, donkey and camel rides, and taking afternoon tea at Groppi's. Salt, in her time invalided away from the hospital, was able to spend time exploring lesser known areas and discovering less frequented areas.

The pyramids and sphinxes are defining images of Egypt for colonial travellers, representing a vast history and exotic culture. Higginson received a few days off from hospital duty towards the end of the Dardanelles campaign, in which she travelled to Cairo with her friend Mary. Her first impression, once again demonstrating her critical temperament, was that 'Cairo strikes us as being very dirty ...' (Diary, December 18, 1915). The tone of her first impression does dull, thereafter simply recording, 'motored to the foot of hill by the Pyramids and then M and I mounted camels, which is the usual, the two male folk rode on donkeys, up to the pyramids and then had our photos taken by the Sphinx' (Diary, December 19, 1915). On another occasion, she uses the same placid tone: 'we went out to the Pyramids and had a good look round and M took more photos' (Diary, December 22, 1915). When comparing Higginson's entry to one a few days later, 'we went to the zoo, fairly good one. The paths are wonderful, made of different coloured stones, inlaid cement, in various patterns something like mosaic work', she appears more impressed with the zoo than her time at the pyramids (Diary, December 20, 1915). It could be argued that she felt an obligation to visit the pyramids and have her photo taken because that was the expectation whilst in Egypt, but also indicating that she took more interest in places that were not necessarily tourist attractions.

In comparison with Higginson, Salt's accounts of visiting the pyramids and sphinxes are far more extensive and detailed, relating interesting historical facts she learned from her tour

guide alongside what she witnessed. On her first visit, Salt commented, ‘the pyramids looked very grand outlined by the glorious sunset, colouring so wonderful. These pyramids were built 3000 years before Christ, and yet there is another pyramid further off that was built 3000 years earlier still, and there they stand’ (Diary, September 10, 1915). Her second visit was filled with the same awe: ‘we walked out to the Sphinx and sat on the edge of the old temple and gazed and gazed ... then we turned towards the pyramids again, they are perfectly wonderful ...’ (Diary, September 24, 1915). It could be argued that Salt’s enthusiasm and awe was conveyed in her entries because she had an intended audience of her diary, being either her family or close friends back home. The revisiting of the pyramids on a number of occasions does give some insight into her opinion of the structures, and how wonderful she perceived the pyramids to be. A common sentiment of many nurses about the pyramids was, with some variations, ‘I shall never forget’ (Diary, August 27, 1915).

Donkey and camel rides were normally attached to visiting the pyramids and sphinxes, but there are mentions throughout the nurse’s diaries of them taking advantage of the novelty. Higginson, in a more excited tone than some of her statements, was quite impressed with her adventure: ‘finished up by going for a donkey ride, had a four or five mile ride enjoyed it immensely’ (Diary, December 13, 1915). However, her critical nature is still evident, commenting it is the ‘first time on a donkey of course would rather have a horse’ (Diary, December 13, 1915). There is little evidence of Higginson truly enjoying herself throughout her diary. Two possibilities arise as to why – she was either not in Egypt to travel and have adventures but to do her work or she was fond of moaning in her diary. Salt, in contrast, mentions a number of donkey rides she enjoyed while in Egypt: ‘went for a donkey ride ... all along the beach to the forts. I never could have imagined a more wonderful sea ... then back and over the ark ...’ (Diary, December 7, 1915). Salt’s tone clearly indicates pure enjoyment of the experiences she is having.

Venturing away from the hospital to have afternoon tea with fellow sisters or being accompanied by high-ranking officers was a common theme throughout the diaries of nurses, not just Higginson, Salt, and Speedy. A number of different venues were mentioned by the nurses, but the most prominent was Groppi’s, which Salt frequented regularly: ‘went to Cairo today, Alec met me and we took [illegible], Donohue and Carter to tea at Groppi’s’ (Diary, November, 15 1915). Higginson also mentions visiting Groppi’s when able: ‘we went into Alex[andria] had tea at Groppi’s’ (Diary, December 13, 1915). Groppi’s tearoom was renowned not only for its delicious patisserie and chocolate but also for being a place of leisure. Visiting Groppi’s was a far cry from the primitive hospital canteens in which the women had been eating only basic foods. Tearooms sometimes had a different menu, meaning foods that had often not been seen throughout the British Empire since the outbreak of war may have been available as a treat. The freedom and ability to purchase treats like these was another indicator of the changing roles and expectations of women in society.

Once Mildred became engaged to Alec at the end of October 1915, she spent a large amount of time writing about the adventures she had with him. Her experiences were intrinsically linked with her affection for Alec and her newly engaged bliss, with less time spent on discussing the places they visited and more on how she spent the time with Alec. ‘Alec and I had a most delightful day ... a bazaar boy took us round, we bought all sorts of things ... we bought a lovely table cloth and bowls and shoes, etc.’ (Diary, December 22, 1915). Alongside experiencing the culture of Cairo, it is evident that Alec and Mildred were shopping for their future; the items they were purchasing would, most likely, be placed in their home once the war was over, acting as reminder of when they fell in love, spent hours together, and were involved in a war that changed society.

Whilst Mildred was still recuperating from her illness, she and Alec went 'for the most delightful walks, generally in [the] glorious hour of dusk' (Diary, March 2, 1916). These walks led to the discovery of 'a most delightful old orchard', she wrote, 'with rows and rows of oranges and other fruit trees and it's generally there we find ourselves [in] our own Garden of Eden we call it' (Diary, March 2, 1916). A few days later, they revisited the garden: 'today we went out to our garden for an hour ... it is as near to the Garden of Eden as anything could be, I am quite sure of that' (Diary, March 14, 1916). Mildred does not come across as a very religious person throughout her diary entries, but a reference to their own Garden of Eden is significant. Anyone familiar with Genesis from the Old Testament would be aware that the garden represented paradise or heaven on earth. Labelling their garden as such shows they had both discovered an area completely secluded from their current life, where they could just be together, discuss the future, and reflect on what had happened so far in their lives.

The experiences of Higginson and Salt highlight a change that was occurring in regard to women travelling across the British Empire. There was no second thought given to visiting the sites of ancient Egypt, or sites of history associated with 'home' in London. The war enabled many citizens of the British Empire, who did not live at the heart, to experience their 'home' culture and other exotic cultures, both of which were new and different. For Higginson, travel did not appear to be an incentive for offering her skills for the Empire as a nurse. How she communicates her excursions did not portray a consistently excited tone, though brushes with royalty highlight her patriotic beliefs. London and the Middle East are met with the same placid tone, which highlights her more traditional and proper character, particularly when placed alongside her critique of the men acting in the play instead of serving the Empire. Salt's entries are the exact opposite of Higginson's, filled with expressions of wonder and awe at the Middle Eastern culture. Many of her excursions are communicated through a blissful tone, where nothing wrong or horrible could ruin the time she spent with Alec, even the fact they were at war.

Conclusion

What do we now know about New Zealand nurses' experiences during the Great War? Though their experiences still feature very sparsely in national memory and Anzac historiography, the diary entries of Louisa Higginson, Mildred Salt, and Fanny Helena Speedy offer a more comprehensive image of the experiences of New Zealand nurses. Their experiences add another dimension to the growing story of Anzac involvement in the Great War.

Identity was a significant aspect of the nursing accounts, with gender and race at the forefront of their discussion. These themes feature frequently in soldier experiences, with New Zealand soldiers trying to place themselves within the British Empire, but at the same time creating a distinct identity for themselves. The three nurses' experiences are in line with those of the soldiers. Much as Higginson questioned being labelled a colonial in the British nursing network, New Zealand soldiers refuted this term in their own accounts. Encountering this 'native' population of the Middle East, particularly Egypt, enabled nurses to have a wider range of experiences whilst nursing injured soldiers. Though the term 'native' featured frequently in their accounts, the New Zealand nurses' descriptions did not reflect tones of superiority when placed alongside the terms used by Australian nurses. Instead, Higginson, Speedy, and Salt's encounters with 'natives' are written in various tones of fascination. In addition to negotiating their race identity, the nurses discussed the image of women in society. A new, more modern generation was beginning to emerge prior to the outbreak of war, which conflicted with the

already established gender and class norms in British society. Higginson, the most critical of the more modern behaviour, paid particular attention to women, particularly nurses, who publicly smoked and drank whisky. In her eyes, these types of behaviours were not befitting for a woman.

The Great War gave independence to New Zealand women, and travel – alongside witnessing the British Empire – was a new experience for Higginson, Salt, and Speedy. Away from the constraints of home, the nurses were able to experience their ‘home’ culture and heritage of Britain, along with immersing themselves in the foreign and exotic cultures in the Middle East. For Higginson, travel was not an incentive to serve as a nurse, which was illustrated through her placid tones when describing adventures. However, her experience in London supports Barnes’ claim about London being ‘home’ for many New Zealand citizens. This is particularly highlighted with Higginson’s brush with royalty; she felt at one with the Empire, believing she was a part of something great. Salt’s entries contrast Higginson’s particularly, as they are filled with details and expressions of wonder and awe at the sights of the Middle East. Many of her excursions are communicated through a blissful, ‘in love’ tone, reflecting on the positive aspects of her experience. Speedy, the anomaly of the three diaries, does not spend a significant amount of time documenting her travels, choosing to focus on other experiences whilst nursing.

By examining these three diaries, a richer understanding of Aotearoa/New Zealand’s overall involvement in the Great War can be created. Soldiers’ diaries have forever been present in Anzac mythology, but the existence of nurses’ diaries highlights the importance of women being active participants. The contents of the diaries emphasise that professionally trained nurses had similar experiences to the Anzac soldiers. Both genders experienced ‘home’ and an exotic culture. Both struggled with their national identity in war – were they mere ‘colonials’, subservient under the British Empire? Both negotiated what it was to be a man or woman at war. Their diaries are diverse in experience, giving a daily insight into a woman’s life at war, halfway across the globe.

HANNAH CLARK recently completed her Masters degree in History at Victoria University of Wellington. This article derives from part of her thesis, which explores four New Zealand nurses’ diaries and the various forms of identity discussed in the women’s writing. She has a keen interest in the social and cultural aspects of the First and Second World War, and hopes to have the ability to further explore these interests throughout her career.

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