

The German Master's Wife

A Case Study of Mary Aloysia Brown



House Photograph from Lancing, used with the kind permission of the College Archivist.

By Simon Machin

Introduction

The surge of patriotic feeling that led to many volunteers swelling the ranks of the British Army, Royal Navy and Royal Flying Corps from late 1914 can obscure the fact that not all who served abroad during hostilities were men and not all who set aside domestic responsibilities for direct action in or near the front line were convinced of the moral justification for fighting. Even though it is fitting, because of the scale of their sacrifice and their preponderance in theatres of war, that most case studies in the Great War Project will be about men and possibly most about those enlisted in the armed services, this case study is devoted to a woman. She was a nurse, who volunteered with an organisation which held a moral objection to war, but did not see this as a reason not to engage actively with the suffering of thousands or to meet their needs. In the event, however, it is hard not to conclude that the absence of detailed information about Mary Aloysia Brown - her shadowy presence, so to speak - is a product of her being a woman, although we know a considerable amount about the work she would have undertaken as a nurse in a Dunkirk Hospital. The photograph that accompanies this study is formal and all-male; it would be interesting to know whether her apparent invisibility is something Mary would have preferred to have maintained from personal reticence or whether it was simply the result of the First World War taking place in what was, far more than today, a man's world.

The Quakers and the Friends Ambulance Unit (FAU)

That we should know anything of Mary Brown and her contribution to nursing care behind the front line in France and yet have no photograph or only limited personal information is a strange quirk of history in itself, and one worthy of brief explanation. The organisation with which she volunteered in 1915, the Friends Ambulance Unit, was the brainchild of a small, religious sect, the Religious Society of Friends, more popularly known as the Quakers. Growing out of the religious and political turmoil thrown up by the English Civil Wars of the seventeenth century in which a higher proportion of the male population died than in the First World War, the Quakers endured decades of severe persecution, followed by more than a century of discrimination through exclusion from the universities and professions. Other sects like the Levellers or Ranters quickly

died out, but the Quakers developed a highly structured system of organisation, which allowed them to record the ill-treatment to which they were subjected, and to influence the state for better treatment of religious dissenters. William Penn, who worshipped in the West Sussex meeting house at Thakeham (famously known today as The Blue Idol) was well connected and able to influence the government to respect freedom of conscience, a concept he was able to build into the constitution of his North American colony, Pennsylvania. The practice of meticulous record-keeping and also of solidarity with the oppressed or the suffering, expressed in a lifestyle of simplicity and peace-making centred on silent, contemplative worship, has continued to this day – in fact a central executive committee is still known slightly quaintly as Meeting for Sufferings. At the end of the Great War, therefore, it was natural for the FAU to publish the name of every volunteer who had served in France with them, and in the list for Sussex is the entry for a Miss M. A. Brown, care of Mr G. A. Brown of Lancing College.

Wartime Teaching at Independent Schools

Anne Drewery the archivist at Lancing, the independent school, whose chapel stands out on the hills above Shoreham, has kindly supplied a contemporary House photograph of teachers and pupils at the College. G. A. Brown is sitting to the left of the Reverend Henry Thomas Bowlby, the Head Master of the College from 1909 to 1925, who went on to become a canon of Chichester Cathedral. Brown was Senior German Master at Lancing from 1917 to 1921. The Lancing Register confirms Brown's appointment at the school on a temporary contract to cover those teachers called up for military service following the introduction of conscription, and that he had been educated at Bonn University. School records show that he also had the role of House Tutor at a time when this resulted in having the young Evelyn Waugh under his care. There are, regrettably, no references to Mary Brown.

Another librarian and archivist, David Blake, of Friends House Library in London has helpfully undertaken some research that has established that in fact "Miss" Mary Aloysia Brown was married to the teacher George Alfred Brown, since the

1911 census records them as living in Stubbington near Fareham in Hampshire as husband and wife. The census records him as being 40 and her as 30 (although the ages may be approximations), his birthplace being Whitstable, Kent and hers Carlow in southern Ireland. A Teacher's Registration Council entry shows that he taught at Stubbington House, Fareham from 1896 to 1916, then at Lancing College. The Friends Ambulance Unit personnel card in the possession of Friends House confirms that (Sister) Mary Brown was born in August 1875, joined the FAU on 14 February 1915 as a trained nurse and that she left France on 30 July 1915, and that she was not a Quaker. On the card, their Hampshire address is crossed out and the Lancing College substituted which appears to confirm that while she was volunteering, the Browns were resident in Stubbington and by 1919 were at Lancing. Circumstantially, this suggests that the Browns moved from Stubbington School, which had links with the Royal Navy, to Lancing as a good career move for George, since he was above the age of conscription. Subsequent teaching appointments at the prestigious schools Berkhamsted and Alleyn's bear this out, but regrettably there is no reference to what his wife was doing after the war.

Nursing with the Friends Ambulance Unit in France

The limited information that exists for Mary Brown does at least confirm that the FAU is a reliable source, which is welcome in view of the extensive written record that exists about their activities in war-torn France. The main source is the book *The Friends Ambulance Unit, 1914-19*, co-edited by Meaburn Tatham and James E. Miles, which describes the formation in September 1914 and subsequent engagement of an organisation whose stated purpose was to fill a gap in the provision for those who could not participate militarily but wanted to show solidarity to those who did, by sharing their dangers and self-sacrifice.

The extent of relief work grew considerably. The first party left London for Dunkirk on 31 October 1915 with 43 men, but eventually there were over 600 volunteers in France and Flanders alone; the FAU began with a donation of £100, but ultimately received £138,000 in donations. It supported a dozen hospitals, the majority of which it established and managed at Dunkirk, Ypres, Poperinghe,

Hazebrouck and elsewhere in Flanders and also at York, Birmingham, London and Richmond. At Queen Alexandra Hospital, Dunkirk, 12,000 in-patients were treated; 27,000 inoculations against typhoid were made in Belgium; 15,000 Belgian refugees were fed; temporary schools and orphanages were established; tens of thousands of soldiers were received in recreation huts at Dunkirk; two hospital ships transported overseas 33,000 cases; the ambulance convoys ran more than two and a half million kilometres and carried over 260,000 sick or wounded soldiers of all nations; and four ambulance trains conveyed 520,000 patients. The work was done by non-enlisted and unpaid young men providing their own staff, equipment and expenditure. Twenty died, many were wounded or invalided, ninety-six were awarded the Croix de Guerre or other decorations for valour. ¹ Their willingness to engage is striking, since there was no immediate dilemma in Britain for those with religious, political or ethical objections to war. Conscientious objection only became an issue in 1916 after conscription; and even then, 350 Quakers were granted unconditional exemption from any participation (including civilian service) under the Military Service Acts. A few die-hard absolutists refused to co-operate with the national system of military tribunals which reviewed on a case-by-case basis the reason for objecting, and the imprisonment and brutal treatment of the Quaker, Stephen Hobhouse, received national publicity. But the absolutists were not typical of the Society. ²

Nursing at Malo-les-Bains, Dunkirk

The 1919 record of volunteers shows M.A. Brown as active in Dunkirk, and there are two FAU hospitals where she may have nursed between February and July 1915. The French Service de Santé was under great strain because of engagements at Yser and Ypres, so accommodated the FAU's desire to provide immediate assistance. The author of *Three Men in a Boat*, Jerome K. Jerome, although well above the age for enlistment, was also unwilling to do nothing, and managed to find a voluntary role with the French Ambulance Service, noting that '[t]he Quakers were already there', and adding dourly, '[b]ut for the Quakers, I doubt if Christianity would have survived this particular war.' ³ On 23 November 1914, eight trained nurses under the charge of a Miss Slade crossed to Dunkirk and with the generous funding of Hon. Mrs. Frederick Guest, established the Villa St. Pierre Hospital on the sea-front, offering 50 beds across three storeys, with

operating theatre, x-ray room and medical stores. The hospital treated French soldiers and surgical or medical cases other than infectious diseases. 413 patients were treated before it closed in July 1915 because French fighting on the northern fronts was not sustained.

At the same time, plans were afoot to establish the Queen Alexandra Hospital, also at Malo-les-Bains, to deal with typhoid epidemics amongst French troops as a result of being stationed in fever-struck Flanders. Over the winter, the London Committee of the FAU negotiated with the Service de Santé to set up a hospital for 100 patients. Land was requisitioned, huts built and utilities supplied, the huts being used as wards. The Queen Alexandra opened its doors on 3 March 1915 as a French military typhoid hospital, continuing with this form of nursing until the epidemic subsided over the following months. On 27 April, the long-range bombardment of Dunkirk took the authorities by surprise, and as a result French soldiers started to be diverted from the war zone to other hospitals. The number of wards dropped to two but soon rose again to five, and by September 1915 the routine of admissions had been re-established, the patients now being British (the first to arrive being naval officers) who naturally welcomed treatment from United Kingdom doctors and nurses. They were soon followed by workmen who had been imported to labour in the docks, men who were not always healthy and whose conditions were aggravated by primitive living conditions making them prey to chills, influenza and bronchitis. In October the Queen Alexandra Hospital medical team was supplemented by the arrival of the first Voluntary Aid Detachment nurses (VADs) to assist the trained staff. Over time, the patient-base diversified as the result of the introduction of Chinese, Egyptian and British West Indian labour troops, and as numbers grew, several large marquees were erected in the hospital enclosure. The Queen Elizabeth remained the only British hospital in the area until 1917.

For the modern reader, the Quaker passion for detailed documentation comes into its own as Tatham and Miles provide a 'life in the day' at the Queen Alexandra. They describe the tidy and unmilitary wards, where the beds sported pink coverlets and were deliberately unaligned to avoid an institutional atmosphere. The effect is clean and airy, with a tall vase of Dorothy Perkins

ramblers on the Sister's table, and quiet banter taking place between the assorted patients; some solid, clean-shaven officers of the Navy or Naval Air Service, some old and decrepit dock labourers admitted after industrial accidents and others strong, moustached privates, 'front area' troops suffering from minor ailments. Patients arrive, are seen by a medical officer, assigned a bed, made to undress, washed, put to bed and assigned a patient number, their clothes taken away.

The working day on the ward starts early, with temperatures being taken at 4.30am. At 5am the morning orderly arrives and the washing of patients starts, using two inches of warm water, yellow soap and a face cloth. The pleasant aroma of brewing coffee is detectable. Breakfast is dispensed, bread and margarine (with an egg on Sundays). The medical equipment is sterilised before teams do a round, changing dressings. Lunch is served early, a serious meal of stew, potatoes and tapioca pudding. In the afternoon, stretcher cases are brought in, and some patients prepare to leave. After lunch, medical activities stop, the atmosphere relaxes, and the ward 'becomes rather like an inn parlour.' At 3.30pm a tea of bread, butter and jam is served and then there is time to read a magazine, before a further round of washing and wound-dressing, and the issue of medicines. At 6pm there is a supper of broth and stew, after which the patient can compose himself for slumber with 'Dixie' playing on the gramophone.

On 3 August 1918 the Queen Elizabeth Hospital was honoured by a surprise visit by King George V. It closed its wards on 31 December 1918, but not before seeing one of its busiest periods in October when the influenza epidemic resulted in a large number of flying officers being admitted from the front.

Conclusion

After the Quaker testimonies recording the activities of the FAU between 1914 and 1919, the trail of information about Mary Brown comes to an end. We do not know which of the two Dunkirk hospitals she served at or the circumstances of her return. We do know that volunteer nursing was, as Janet Watson states, 'the only full-time work for women untainted by professionalism'⁴; and that Mary Brown stands out from the VADs who went to France by being married, while

they were expected to be single if they worked in military hospitals. Mary's FAU card also emphasizes the fact that she was a trained nurse. Why she chose not to stay longer is unclear, and what happened to her after the war only conjecture.

Conversely, more is known about the continuing activities of the Quakers in later conflicts, particularly the Second World War, when support to displaced persons in Germany was one aspect of relief that led to this small sect being awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1947. Reconstructing the volunteer stories in this later war is easier because it is still possible to record the contributions first-hand from participants. In both European conflicts, the experience of abandoning home life for the front and then eventually returning to pick up the threads again, enriched by an experience one's neighbours had not shared, was essentially the same. A recent volunteer interview conducted during post-graduate research ⁵ into Quaker humanitarian assistance between 1945 and 1948 throws an interesting sidelight on what might have been Mary Brown's experience:

If you do exotic things in faraway places and you come home, and this applies to half the British army as well, you suddenly find that not only does nobody want to know but they don't really understand either and simply it's a matter of people getting on with their boring ordinary lives and you've been out there, you know ... and all these exciting things you see and nobody wants to know.

It seems likely that Mary returned to the uneventful life of a German master's wife at a British public school. One wonders whether she found opportunity to talk about her experience at Dunkirk, and if indeed she made the courageous decision to do so (and she appears in her life to have made courageous choices), whether she was met with the same response of indifference as her counterpart in the Second World War. The West Sussex Great War Project therefore provides a welcome opportunity to redress this imbalance and honour her service abroad with an organisation that then and now has seen the link between its own historic sufferings and contemporary needs.

¹ Tatham, M. And Miles, J.E. ed., *The Friends Ambulance Unit, 1914-1919. A Record* (London: The Swarthmore Press, 1920), pp. ix-x.

² Caudel, Martin, *Pacifism in Britain 1914-1945: The Defining of a Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p.39.

³ Jerome K. Jerome, *My Life and Times* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1926), p.274.

⁴ Watson, Janet S.K., 'Khaki Girls, VADs, and Tommy's Sisters: Gender and Class in First World War Britain', *The International History Review*, Vol. 19, No. 1, (Feb. 1997) pp. 32-51.

⁵ Carson, Jennifer, *The Friends Relief Service – Faith into Action: Humanitarian Assistance to Displaced Persons Camps in Germany, 1945-1948*, University of Manchester, 2009, 202-3.