

“AS SOUND AS A DOLLAR”: FUNDRAISING IN AMERICA AND ITS CONTRIBUTION TO THE GREAT WAR IN NURSES’ DIARIES

Abstract: At the beginning of World War I the Scottish Women’s Hospitals organization was founded with the purpose of providing medical aid for the Entente armies. But this organization was not only based in Scotland or the United Kingdom, as it also drew funds and members from the United States and the entire Commonwealth. Dr. Elsie Inglis, credited as the founder of the Scottish Women’s Hospitals, encouraged fundraising in the United States of America, where she sent the charismatic SWH office worker Kathleen Burke. Mrs. Burke would soon become known as the “thousand dollars a day girl”, as her efforts in the United States and Canada brought in about a quarter of all the funds of the SWH (sic!). This allowed for the sending of a new SWH unit to Macedonia, which was called the “America unit” in honor of the charity of those that sponsored it. This article provides an overview of the SWH fundraising efforts in the USA while also presenting the venture of the America unit in the Balkans based on their diaries and secondary literature.

Keywords: Scottish Women’s Hospitals, America Unit, World War I, the Balkans

Introduction

Even though this fact is generally less known, during World War I among the medical staff of the Russian, Romanian and Serbian troops, there were also volunteer units of Scottish women orderlies, nurses and doctors. They were members of the Scottish Women’s Hospitals (SWH), an organization founded at the beginning of World War I as an expression of patriotism and feminism.² The main supporter of the SWH was the National Union of the Women’s Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), and members of it formed the London sub-committee of the SWH. In Edinburgh, the headquarters of the SWH was provided by the Scottish Federation of the Women’s Suffrage Societies, of which Dr. Elsie Inglis (credited as founder of the SWH) was also a member.³

Elsie Maude Inglis (16 August 1864-26 November 1917)⁴ spent her early years in India with her family, until 1876 when they moved to Edinburgh. She studied there and in Paris: in 1886 she attended the Edinburgh School of Medicine for Women, and then she gained the Triple Qualification Licentiate of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow in 1892. She set up medical practice in Edinburgh in 1894 together with Jessie McGregor. In 1899 Elsie Inglis went on to obtain her MBChM from the University of Edinburgh, which was now open to women. She also lectured on gynecology in the Edinburgh Medical College for Women, and travelled to Vienna and the U.S.A. to improve her profession. Before World War I she worked mostly in medical care for women and children (Ewan et al. 177-178).⁵

¹ Valahia University of Târgoviște

² For the context of Scottish feminism, the right to vote and civic participation, see McDermid, “School board...”

³ See McDermid, “A very polite...,” McDermid, “What’s in a Name?...,” Leneman, “Elsie Inglis...,” Leneman, “Medical Women at War, 1914-1918,” Leneman, “In the Service of Life...,” 7-22. Also see Cahill, Balfour, McLaren, More 641, 650.

⁴ Also see Coroban, “Women at War – Elsie Inglis (1864-1917).”

⁵ Also see Knox 224, Abrams et al. 68, 154, Watson 489 and Wenzel.

The Scottish Women's Hospitals was not the first organization of this kind to have traveled in the Balkans.⁶ In 1912, during the First Balkan War, an all-women medical unit formed by Mabel St Clair Stobart had travelled to Bulgaria, "for the sole purpose of fully demonstrating my argument that women are capable of undertaking all work in connection with the sick and wounded in warfare" (St Clair Stobart 19). Mrs. Stobart did not have medical education but instead she had money and connections. Among her unit were women doctors such as Dr. Hutchinson, Dr. Tudor and Dr. Ramsbotham. Later on, Dr. Alice Hutchinson would lead the first medical unit of the Scottish Women's Hospitals. This first venture of British medical women in Bulgaria lasted for 10 weeks, after which the doctors stayed for a while under the Bulgarian Red Cross. For now though, the impact of their enterprise was small-scaled, as Bulgaria was of rather no interest for the British at that time, a situation which would change during the Great War (Leneman, "Medical Women at War, 1914-1918," 163).

The founder chose the Scottish Women's Hospitals as the name of their organization with the aim of attracting personnel as well as sponsorships from feminists, but not only them. Even women who did not personally agree with female suffrage were admitted in the SWH as long as they wished to contribute to the war effort. Nevertheless, the latter category could not advance to an officer position in the organization, which also employed the red-white-green standard of the suffragists (McDermid, "A very polite..." 135-138).

Despite initial cautious expectations, the SWH grew quite quickly. The organization received positive feedback from within the United Kingdom and as well as from the Dominions and the United States of America. It is estimated that approximately 50% of the SWH personnel were women from Scotland, while the rest came mainly from England with a few from Ireland, Wales and at least one from Canada, Australia and New Zealand. There were even working guests from the U.S.A. The one credited with founding this organization, Dr. Elsie Inglis, even proposed to change its name to "British Women's Hospitals for Foreign Service", but the Edinburgh committee vetoed this proposal, so the original name was preserved (McDermid, "A very polite..." 135-138).

Women joined the SWH for different reasons, but above all to prove their loyalty to the British Empire (Dr. Inglis herself was born in India in 1864, where her father was working for the East India Company). Other reasons were the adventurous and brave spirit of some of them, while the feminists among them were determined to prove that women were useful in a war and deserved the right to vote. Generally, from the journals they left behind we can deduce that they were negatively impressed by the destructions brought by the war, but they still treated both Prisoners of War as well as refugees, besides Entente soldiers of course (McDermid, "A very polite..." 135-151).

Initially, Dr. Elsie Inglis offered the services of her organization to the British government but her offer was refused.⁷ Instead she did receive a positive answer from the allied governments of France⁸ and Serbia,⁹ which immediately accepted her generous offer. For Dr. Elsie Inglis, this was the beginning of a life-long sympathy for Serbia.

The Fundraising Campaign

After her return from occupied Serbia, Dr. Elsie Inglis also encouraged fundraising in the United States of America, where she sent the charismatic SWH office worker Kathleen Burke. Mrs. Burke would soon become known as the "thousand dollars a day girl", as her efforts in the United States and Canada brought in about a quarter of all the funds of the SWH (Leneman, "In the Service of Life..." 58; Leneman, "Elsie Inglis..." 54). This allowed for the sending of a new SWH unit to

⁶ Also see Coroban, "Women at War – The Scottish Women's Hospitals in its Early Days."

⁷ Before that moment, her initial offer to serve as a surgeon was declined by the War Office with the reply "My good lady, go home and sit still" (Ewan et al. 178).

⁸ For the SWH units in France, see Crofton, de Navarro, Coroban, "Women at War - The Scottish Nurse Corps..."

⁹ Also, for the SWH units in the Balkans, see Corbett, Hutton, "With a woman's unit...", Hutton, "Memories of a doctor...", King, Krippner, Stebbing.

Macedonia, which was called the “America unit” in honor of the beneficence of those that sponsored it (Leneman, “In the Service of Life...” 54).

In the beginning, nobody from the SWH offices in London or Edinburgh could imagine the effect the fundraising campaign in the U.S. would have on the whole organization (Leneman, “In the Service of Life...” 47). Miss Kathleen Burke, the SWH envoy to the U.S. was of Irish descent, and enjoyed an education in London and Sorbonne. Her first job in the organization was speaker for the city of Oxford, and it was offered to her by the previous speaker, Dr. Elsie Inglis in 1915, when she decided she was going to leave for Serbia (Leneman, “In the Service of Life...” 57-58). She proved to be very talented for public speaking, and General Pétain even invited her to visit the fortress of Verdun.

Her departure for the U.S. took place in February 1915, and although America wouldn't join the war until 1917, she found plenty of sympathy for the SWH organization, and was able to write back to London on March 4 1915 that she had already managed to raise \$15,000 (£3,000). This is when she also made the recommendation that a unit should be named the “America unit,” being very sure of the fact that she would be able to raise enough money for its upkeep.

On Saturday 5 March 1915, as she was traveling by train from New York to Washington she wrote:

Sunday, in all probability, I shall see the President and a prominent Washington woman is giving a large reception for me. Monday there is a lunch and a dinner party for me. Now all this sounds like pleasure, but it is really solid *hard work*. It means meeting people, getting them interested to come and hear you, and getting them to interest their friends. America is simply overrun with people collecting money, and it is only ‘personal’ interest and enthusiasm that one arouses by the social visits that gets one money in the end. The hardest work in connection with my mission was done *in England before I left*, and I am finding the 490 odd letters of introduction I amassed, of the greatest help and assistance. (Leneman, “In the Service of Life...” 58)

The next two weeks were also very lucrative. Andrew Carnegie¹⁰ donated as much as £1,000, which caused Miss Burke to again write to the London Committee asking for the inauguration of an America unit. The received reply was that in order to do so, the sum of £10,000 was required, which Miss Burke agreed to rise provided the Committee would award her an extension of her fundraising leave. This was also the time when the Committee informed her that most probably the new America unit would be headed to Serbia or the Balkans. Her leave extension was approved for a 6 months period, a decision which would prove to be very wise. On 24 April 1916 she was in Toronto and had already raised £8,000. The Canadian Pacific Railway even awarded her free travel anywhere she wanted to go, and she confessed that:

Quite apart from the money point of view the speaking over here has won sympathy for Serbia more than anyone realizes. The sympathy for France existed. As for the Scottish Women's Hospitals, every man, woman and child seems to know of them now. This pleases me as much as the money. (Leneman, “In the Service of Life...” 58)

The £10,000 required was reached in May 1916, but this did not put an end to the fundraising campaign. In India fundraising went better, but that is because funds from the U.S. reached a low point when a SWH inspector (Mrs. Farnham) reported that the America unit, which was based in Ostrovo, did not bear any flag of the United States. This and other reports created the impression that the SWH awarded no merit to the Americans for the funds they generously provided. Dr Bennet, the commanding medical officer (CMO) of the America unit replied that under the Geneva Convention they were not allowed to bear the American flag, but she also added that although she tried to be polite

¹⁰ Andrew Carnegie (November 25, 1835 – August 11, 1919) was a Scottish-American industrialist, businessman, entrepreneur and a major philanthropist.

to the visiting Americans, “they really are the most arrant bounders”, while Mrs. Farnham “always referred to all the Royalties of the Balkans by their Christian names, and when she departed she told me if I wanted to see her to be sure and search for her in the Social Columns of the New York press, and I should know at once know where she was to be found! If such a person comes to me with no credentials whatsoever what is one to do in this land of adventuresses!” (Leneman, “In the Service of Life...” 111).

Despite these difficulties, the diplomatic prowess of Miss Kathleen Burke allowed her to continue raising funds. In April 1917, following America’s entry into World War One on the Entente’s side, the donations also increased. That month she was able to send three rates of £1,000 each. Her route was Portland, Oregon, Seattle, Washington again, then San Francisco and back east to Kansas City, Chicago, Toronto for the second time and finally returning to New York, from where she wrote to London how she made \$1,000 in just two days, when a friend asked her to rest for a while:

To which I replied that if he could stop the war for a little while so we would not need money, I would stop work. He still insisted that I should rest for two days, and finally struck a bargain with me. He is to pay the Hospitals 500 dollars a day, and in turn I have entered into a contract with him to go down to his country place and stay quietly with his daughter. So Thursday and Friday of this week I shall be earning 500 dollars a day by doing nothing. I wish some of the other millionaires would follow his example. (Leneman, “In the Service of Life...” 129)

At the same time, Miss Curwen, a SWH official, also remarked how well Miss Kathleen Burke was treated by American officials, who “simply vied with each other to show her more attention than anyone else!... She was given a beautiful suite of rooms including her own bathroom, and every facility to work in her sitting room should she wish to” (Leneman, “In the Service of Life...” 153). She calculated that on her first trip, Miss Burke had brought the SWH £10,630 and as much as £46,609 on her second one. The fact that recently the Royal Family had personally inspected the Elsie Inglis unit boosted Miss Burke’s efforts, who was reassured in her fundraising efforts. This was welcome as just recently the wife of a Serbian minister in Philadelphia issued a public statement saying that too much praise was given by Miss Burke to the work done by Elsie Inglis.

Miss Burke was now on her third trip (11 February to 20 June 1918), which she began in New York, then crossed the country over to the West coast where she would spend March, followed by 10 days of publicity in the Mid-West. Afterwards she went towards the East coast, returning inland to Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin and Indiana, and then on the coast again.

Surprisingly, at Denver, Colorado, 15,000 people flocked into the civic auditorium. Describing this experience, she wrote that “probably 8,000 of them heard, and the rest of them applauded from time to time on general principles” (Leneman, “In the Service of Life...” 154). If this impressive audience was not flattering enough, the mayor of Denver was also taking the required steps in order to make her a citizen of the city. Miss Burke confessed that it was probably not “a higher honor than being made a special member of the police force in San Francisco” (Leneman, “In the Service of Life...” 154). That happened when she told the mayor there that a ticket collector at the railway station had refused to allow her on the platform to return her luggage. “When the Mayor of the city heard of it, he immediately had me appointed a special policeman and I carry a good five pointed silver star inside my coat. It may be useful someday,” adding that “the audiences were not too friendly owing to a hostile German element” (Leneman, “In the Service of Life...” 154).

During the autumn of 1918 Miss Kathleen Burke visited different SWH units and fronts and expressed the desire to return to the U.S. in order to raise another £10,000 (Leneman, “In the Service of Life...” 184). In 1919 she was in Serbia from where she reported to the Committee that it would be untactful for the SWH to completely retreat from there.

The America Unit in the Balkans

On August, 3rd, 1916, the personnel of the America unit together with their transport column (ambulance service, headed by Mrs. Harley) started their naval journey to Thessaloniki. When they arrived (August, 13, 1916) a change of plans occurred, as they were sent closer to the front, to Arnissa (known as Ostrovo in Bulgarian). On August, 17th, Dr. Agnes Bennett, the Chief Medical Officer (leader of the unit – administrator was Mrs. Florence Jack), visited the site and described it as “a picturesque spot besides a large lake [Lake Vegoritis – ed.] with rather barren hills all around” (Leneman, “In the Service of Life...” 72).

Eventually, as the location was too close to the front, the SWH members were initially settled outside Thessaloniki at Mikra Bay. On September, 7th, 1916 the American unit and its transport column would send a joint advance party towards Arnissa (Leneman, “In the Service of Life...” 72). Unfortunately this advance party would be struck by malaria, of which they informed their base at Mikra by a telegram that never arrived. Starting with 12 September 1916 those at Arnissa had to bear the distress caused by the battle raging on at nearby Kelli ridge (called Gornichevo in Bulgarian). Dr. Agnes Bennett was given until 19 September 1916 to open her hospital, while Mrs. Harley had to face a small revolt of her drivers, who preferred not to listen to her advice of not driving during the night (Leneman, “In the Service of Life...” 86).

The hospital at Arnissa was indeed very close to the front and it received the worst cases. Dr. Agnes Bennett wrote on 25 September that:

We now have 160 cases, all bad and it is terribly hard work, 10 of the staff are hors de combat, and we can only just keep going, but we can't refuse these poor mangled things, it is all too terrible. I think the compound fractures are the worst, we try to save them but there have been 10 amputations in two days and others must come. Those who don't die seem to get on well and are very happy, indeed they are most appreciative and it is such a pleasure to have to deal with them. (Leneman, “In the Service of Life...” 87)

The battle now moved to the Kajmakčalan peak, where the Serbs of the 3rd Royal Serbian Army difficultly pushed back the Bulgarians in battles raging from 19 to 30 September 1916. This victory also inspired and boosted the morale of Dr. Agnes Bennett's unit, which during its first 8 weeks admitted no less than 523 patients, of whom 60 unfortunately succumbed to their wounds. There was even the tragic case of Olive Smith, the masseuse of the unit, who passed away because of the malaria in the evening of 5 October 1916. She was taken to Thessaloniki for burial, where Dr. Bennett made the acquaintance of Colonel Sondermayer¹¹ and the Serbian Crown Prince (which she describes as “a charming fellow,” Leneman, “In the Service of Life...” 88).

Here Dr. Agnes Bennett also greeted Dr. Marian Erskine and Miss Agneta Beauchamp, commissioners from the Headquarters Committee, who came to Thessaloniki to inspect both Dr. Bennett's unit and Mrs. Harley's transport column (“Flying Column”) but also the nearby Girton & Newham Unit. Eventually, with the Committee's consent, they released Mrs. Harley from service¹² (officially she had actually resigned, but this was not her initiative), and joined the “Flying Column” to Dr. Agnes Bennett's unit. On December, 11th, the French leadership of the Allied front in Macedonia suspended operations, but Monastir (Bitolia) had to be kept at all cost. Noticing that the injured had to suffer a long and tiring road to the nearest railway hub, Dr. Agnes Bennett proposed that a hospital of about 40 beds be set up in Dobraveni, near Monastir, and her idea was accepted by both Miss Agneta Beauchamp and by Colonel Sondermayer (Leneman, “In the Service of Life...” 100-101).

¹¹ In 1906 Colonel Dr. Sondermayer was Chief of the Medical Division of the War Ministry of Serbia and plenipotentiary delegate of the King of Serbia to Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded in Armies in the Field (6 July).

¹² Mrs. Harley went to Bitolia (Monastir) where she undertook relief work. On 8 March 1917 while she was in her room with her daughter the next house was bombed by a shell. Unfortunately, shrapnel came through the window and caused Mrs. Harley's death, hitting her in the head.

Now a conflict broke out between Dr. Agnes Bennett and Miss Agneta Beauchamp, because the latter proposed the splitting of Dr. Bennett's unit in two halves, giving one to the leadership of Dr. Alice Hutchinson. This was just after Mrs. Agneta Beauchamp estranged herself of Dr. McIlroy's Girton & Newnham unit too, over the latter's desire to remain attached to the French army and not to join the Serbians. Eventually, Mrs. Agneta Beauchamp resigned from the Committee and joined the Red Cross in Thessaloniki (Leneman, "In the Service of Life..." 103-104).

In the meantime, the British medical women from Arnissa (Ostrovo) took turns of six weeks in working at Dobraveni. They all were looking forward to it, as the scenery was enjoyable, despite the harsh winter. There were Russian, Serbian and Italian patients, and all of them badly injured. Ishobel Ross and other orderlies would walk up to the trenches and bury as many Bulgarian victims as possible. On February, 11th, came the good news of the decoration of Dr. Cooper by the Russians, to which Dr. Agnes Bennet added: "I am so pleased that they are not getting all the recognition on the Dobrudja side!"¹³ (Leneman, "In the Service of Life..." 104). Still, as months passed by, morale was still low because there was little work to be done in Arnissa (Ostrovo). Some of the unit members started doing relief work for the civilians in the nearby villages, some requested to be allowed to return home earlier, while others had to return because of malaria outbreak. Sister Florence Caton, one of the unit members, had to be operated of appendicitis but unfortunately it was too late, as it had already become gangrenous. Her death was much regretted by her fellow medical women, who regarded her as kind and hard-working (Leneman, "In the Service of Life..." 118-120).

In order to alleviate the situation of the American unit at Arnissa (Ostrovo) and to control malaria epidemics, the medical units were now allowed to take both medical and surgical cases,. Also, they could now bring in local civilian patients, the hospital in Dobraveni becoming full to almost too small. Dr. Agnes Bennett became too ill with malaria and had to return to Britain, a change in leadership was needed. The new Commanding Medical Officer was Dr. Mary Clementina de Garis, an Australian, and former junior doctor, who was thus promoted. Their transport (ambulance) unit also remained without a leader since the departure of Miss Bedford. The Committee decided the transport unit should again be separated from the American unit and leadership was given to Kathleen Dillon, who moved the transport unit to Jelak (Yelak). During the winter of 1917-1918, the patient count at Arnissa (Ostrovo) increased from 120 to about 170 at any given moment, but tending to malaria patients was not exactly what the personnel had in mind when they joined a field hospital. Morale was dropping again due to idleness when a hurricane struck the hospital on 25 February 1918. Even though it pretty much leveled the hospital tents, in only three days the unit was admitting 5 new patients, and 40 came in by the middle of March (Leneman, "In the Service of Life..." 144-148).

Dr. de Garis was described by one of her Serbian patients, Sergeant Major Milan Lubuvič:

Miss Dr de Garis is a woman of medium build, physically fairly developed, energetical and of serious look. Her every look, her every step is of great importance and significance"...After lunch there should be rest for her, but being brave among the braves, she avoids it and with her book on her table and knitting in her hands, she reads her book and knits her socks. She does two works in one and the same time. If there is urgent case for an operation, which she always performs with skill, alertness and success, she immediately leaves her book and drops her knitting going quickly to the operating theatre. If new patient comes to the hospital she never lets him wait 5 minutes unless she examines him. (Leneman, "In the Service of Life..." 156)

He also praised the work of Sister Sander, who "knows the Serbs and the thorny path through which they have gone through and that is why she can speak to Serbian patient heart to heart" (Leneman, "In the Service of Life..." 156). Dr. de Garis had to leave the American unit at Arnissa (Ostrovo) in September 1917 (she had offered her resignation earlier but eventually decided to bear through the malaria season, the summer). The new appointed CMO was Isabel Elmsie, who previously

¹³ For the SWH in Romania see Coroban, "The Scottish Women's Hospitals in Romania..."

worked in the Girton & Newnham unit since Troyes (France), and was only in her late twenties (Leneman, "In the Service of Life..." 118-120).

In 1918 they were joined by the Dr. Elsie Inglis unit of the SWH. Meanwhile, the Flying Column of Mrs. Kathleen Dillon at Jelak (Yelak) were performing admirably, but had to be more careful than usual, as the Austrians and Bulgarians started shelling their route. On 29 September the armistice was signed with Bulgaria at Thessaloniki. Now both the American medical unit of Dr. Isabel Elmsie and the transport column of Kathleen Dillon could move deeper into Serbia. The latter even arrived in Belgrade, where the two commandants received the Order of St. Sava, while the rest of the transport unit members were awarded the Gold Medal for Zealous Service. The Commander-in-Chief of the 1st Army even mentioned their dangerous excursions from Kumanovo to Vranje (Vranya).

The America unit of Dr. Isabel Elmsie left for Vranje (Vranya) on 23 October 1918, where their services were much needed, especially because of the Spanish influenza that was now spreading. In Vranje (Vranya) they were given the imposing barracks building to turn into a hospital, but it proved to be too small for all the patients. The death rate was quite high, amounting to 10 a day, but at least the doctors had enough supplies, as Mrs. Green, the unit's administrator, was thoughtful enough to procure them while in Thessaloniki. Besides local civilian population they also accepted Austrian and Bulgarian prisoners, of which the sisters confessed that they rather looked like skeletons than humans, but the Serbians did not appreciate this attitude (Leneman, "In the Service of Life..." 174-175, 189).

Epilogue

As there was not much work left for the transport unit of Mrs. Kathleen Dillon, they were dismissed in March 1919 and returned home. Of course, they could have returned earlier, but the Serbian government desired them to stay in order to distract the home-sickness of the Serbian army. In the same month the Committee decided to maintain Dr. Isabel Elmsie's America unit, since they had received just reports that there was still much work to be done, as typhus and influenza were rife. At the beginning of May 1918 the hospital was overcrowded, and hundreds of patients arrived every day. Despite the needs of Vranje (Vranja), Dr. Isabel Elmsie received a telegram from the Committee that she was supposed to close her hospital and become Commanding Medical Officer of Belgrade's Elsie Inglis hospital in September 1919. Of course, she did not receive the news too well, as there wasn't that great a need of a SWH unit in Belgrade as it was in the case of Vranje (Vranya), but it is possible that the Committee preferred the hospital named after their hero to be situated in the Capital where everyone could see it. It would have also hurt the Serb's feelings to withdraw from the country. Even so, the Elsie Inglis hospital in Belgrade was disbanded in April-March 1920, after the Committee had realized their mistake in closing the one in Vranje/Vranya (Leneman, "In the Service of Life..." 190, 195-201). In retrospective, considering the real importance and usefulness of this American funded medical unit, one could only positively appreciate the role of the America unit in Serbia and its contribution to the Allied cause in the Balkans on the whole.

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