

They also served: Nurses, the great war, and children's picture books

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Abstract

British and Australian children's books about the Great War remain a steadfastly conservative example of popular culture, particularly when exploring war time nursing. The marginalized place of females in children's literature, the failure of the official histories to adequately acknowledge the unique experience of the nurses, and the popular focus on the battlefield have discouraged any sustained focus. This article will analyze how Hilary Robinson and Martin Impey (*Peace Lily*), Kate Simpson and Jess Racklyeft (*Anzac Girl: The War Diaries of Alice Ross-King*), and Mark Wilson (*Rachel's War: The Story of an Australian WWI Nurse*) have responded to this challenge.

INTRODUCTION

In 2014, *The Guardian* journalist Moira Redmond, identified a significant gap in Great War literature emerging in Britain in the months leading up to the war's centenary. Drawing inspiration anti-war anthem, *Where have all the Flowers Gone?*, she challenged her readers to ask themselves: “Where have all the conscientious objectors in literature gone?” Between sixteen and twenty thousand British men claimed conscientious objector status after the introduction of conscription in the United Kingdom, one-third of whom were imprisoned, often under extreme conditions. Though historians and biographers have shown interests, conscientious objectors' experiences rarely factor into popular understandings of the war. Even the Peace Pledge Union could only identify two works of fiction dealing with conscientious objectors, one written in 1917 (and suppressed) and the other in 2008. This stands in marked contrast to the sustained interest in the 300 soldiers executed for desertion or cowardice. Despite the tension between “fidelity to the atrocities” and the perception that children's literature should be “sanitary, benign, and didactic” (Tribunella 102), children's picture book authors and illustrators have, like other historical fiction writers, avoided the story of those, who often through a strong sense of conviction, refused to fight. A war story without battle is apparently unenticing.

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Had Redmond focused on picture books, she might have also asked “where have all the women gone,” and more specifically, “where have all the nurses gone?,” Great War literature dealing with women's war time experiences on the home front, thereby consigning the nurses to the periphery of the war time record (Andrews and Lomas; Grayzel, *Women*; Grayzel *Gender*; Damousi and Lake). Recently, fueled by a “rediscovery” of their memoirs, there has been a growing interest in the nurses' experiences (Hallett, *Veiled Warriors*; Harris “New Horizons”). This contemporary scholarship challenges the sustained decades-long failure to acknowledge the nurses' experiences, an oversight evident in the official histories written after the war and the wider historiography subsequently written about the conflict. This void was exacerbated by the literary and historical focus on the battlefield and the pre-eminence that this myopia granted to the combatant and traditional views about women's work being inherently “feminine” even when it was done at the front (Higonnet and Higonnet). The marginalization of the nurses' experiences has been replicated in contemporary British and Australian children's picture books.

The sustained interest in a stretcher bearer on the Gallipoli peninsula, John Kirkpatrick Simpson, reveals that the relative absence of picture books on Great War nurses is not solely due to a reticence to explore the experience of a non-combatant. For example, *Simpson and his Donkey* (Greenwood and Lessac) was a Children's Book Council Honour Book and a United States Board on Books for Young People Outstanding International Book. Additionally, *Only a Donkey* (Walters and Mullins) is an ambitious re-imagining of the Simpson mythology, which is merged with two other cultural touchstones, Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer. Ostensibly, they are children's stories about friendship and respect; in reality, though they portray a hero's quest, one that reaffirms the war as a unifying force. Simpson was a stretcher bearer with the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) on Gallipoli who, with his donkey, transported wounded soldiers to the beachhead. He was killed after 3 weeks of service and though undoubtedly courageous, the story is: “a distillation of an epic model of swagger and bravado created and perpetuated by the print media, overseen by government and the censors, and attributed to Australian soldiers in general. That epic model was heroic rhetoric for cannon-fodder, a grotesque romanticisation of Australian soldiers in battle and death” (Cochrane para. 25).

The image of Simpson with his faithful donkey bearing the wounded soldier is embedded in the national consciousness by virtue of its appearance in paintings, sculptures, legal tender, and postage stamps. This powerful heroic rhetoric also sustains via misguided efforts to retrospectively award Simpson a Victoria Cross. Although an exaggeration, Graham Wilson's observation that almost every word either uttered or written about Simpson is false is not entirely unjustified. Simpson is a man, a soldier, and a stretcher bearer. As a frontline soldier, he is considered an authentic participant since his story unfolded on the battlefield, the only appropriate setting in which to explore the war and the Australian character. If the war was indeed futile and destroyed worlds, it is not the non-combatant's place, let alone a woman's place to recount that truth. That is the soldier's prerogative.

This article analyses how Hilary Robinson's and Martin Impey's *Peace Lily* (2018), Kate Simpson's and Jess Racklyeft's *Anzac Girl: The War Diaries of Alice Ross-King* (2020), and Mark Wilson's *Rachel's War: The Story of an Australian WWI Nurse* (2021) recent centennial contributions have responded to the challenge of portraying nurses' war time experiences in children's picture books. Each volume focusses on either a British or Great War nurse's experiences and compromises the authors and illustrators have made to tell their stories in a genre and commemorative tradition that have at best, been uninterested, or at worst, unsympathetic to their plights.

Usually chosen by parents or family members, children's picture books reflect an adult construction of childhood and deeply engrained cultural understandings of the role books should play in child readers' development. As such, they are an important indicator of contemporary

attitudes and morals and often reveal parents' and teachers' desires for the children in their care (Kerby and Baguley; Baguley and Kerby; Duncum, Flothow; Avery). They do more, however, than just reveal what is important, as books play a significant role in transmitting societal values and driving young children's social and academic development (Adam; Adam et al. *Book collections*; Adam et al. *Portray cultures*; Adam and Barratt-Pugh). Therefore, they are rarely apolitical, for as Clémentine Beauvais argues, "ethical instruction has always formed part of children's literature" (108–109). As a result, it is "a facilitator of ethical life, as a companion in ethical choices, and more generally as a participant in the ethical climate of a given society" (108–109). When dealing with issues related to personal and communal identities, such as war, children's picture books significantly contribute to the creation and maintenance of what Hazard characterizes as the "national soul" (11). Yet despite concerns about their use as ideological weapons in a culture war, they are rarely as radical as some of society's more conservative elements fear. They generally move in step with changing attitudes rather than positioning themselves at the vanguard of political and social change.

THE CHALLENGE OF EXPLORING THE WARTIME EXPERIENCE OF NURSES

Over the last 10 years, various children's publishers and library groups have assembled lists of Great War picture books, complete with plot summaries and glowing assessments of their literary worth and capacity to generate emotional responses to the futility of war. For example, *LibraryThing*, an online community of two and a half million "book lovers," lists 91 "Children's Books about World War I", 15 of them focusing on animals. In terms of people, women are only slightly more likely to be the main protagonists, with 17 coming-of-age stories including major women characters, often in domestic settings. Only four books on the list are specifically about or include nurses. One tells the story of British nurse Edith Cavell, whose execution lifted her from relative obscurity to secular saint. It is predominantly about men and battlefield-centric, though there is crossover between the various approaches. There is also a sizeable subset of children's books dealing with historical events such as the Christmas Truce of 1914, the Armenian genocide (1915–1917), and the sinking of the RMS *Lusitania* (7 May 1915). Interestingly, the preference for men protagonists extends far beyond internet lists: ninety-nine percent of Australian early childhood classroom books promote dominant cultural viewpoints (Adam; Adam and Barratt-Pugh; Adam and Harper), an imbalance that relegates women-centered war narratives to the margins.

British children's books examining nurses are also scant. Of the 100 bestselling children's books in the UK in 2018, twenty percent do not include women characters, six have men lead characters for every one book with women lead characters. In addition, there were seven times as many men villains as women, and women characters were far less likely to speak in the stories than men. Though more than 20 percent were first published last century, a similar number had been published in the previous 12 months. This did not result in a growing women's presence in the books; instead, their inclusions decreased (Ferguson).

This man-centric approach is not exclusive to Australia and Britain. Researchers have also identified similar representational gender disparities in the United States. In a study of 6000 US children's books published between 1900 and 2000, McGrabe, Fairchild, Grauerholz, Pescosolido, and Tope found that despite spanning a period of enormous political and social change for women, children's literature had in fact become even more man-centric. A range of other researchers have also identified similar trends in North American children's literature (Murmelstein; Brower; Heinz; Taber and Woloshyn; Kittelberger; Trepanier-Street and Romatowski; Turner-Bowker; Ernst). Diekman and Murnen found that even when women are major characters, they are often confined to "feminine" work, while men engage

in “masculine” activities. Ernst, Temple, and Rudman also identified consistent portrayals of women as nurturers and carers in children's literature, a denial of agency by authors and illustrators exacerbated by regularly positioning them as beneficiaries of men's heroism and leadership. Jackson and Gee observe in the New Zealand educational system, even when women's capacity to “do anything and everything,” is acknowledged it is invariably balanced by the “apparent necessity of including the traditional ‘feminine’ activity or marker [which] suggests the possibility that to only depict girls in traditionally ‘masculine’ activities is a threat to their identities as girls” (125).

Many authors' and illustrators' conservative approach adopted to children's literature is particularly evident when they deal with historical events such as war. As Michael Howard explains, from the very beginning, “the principle of nationalism was almost indissolubly linked, both in theory and practice, with the idea of war ... war was the necessary dialectic in the evolution of nations ... It is hard to think of any nation-state ... which was not created, and had its boundaries defined, by wars, by internal violence, or by a combination of the two” (39). Conflict is entrenched into “the very marrow of the national idea” (Samuels 8). British and Australian children's picture book authors and illustrators understand recognize that reality and almost universally explore war in a manner consistent with their national “imagining.”

The relative absence of nurses from historical scholarship and fiction is an inherited shortcoming, evident from the moment the warring nations began assembling their official histories, which helped shape subsequent scholarship. Britain's 13-volume official medical history (MacPherson) uses the generalized term, “nurse,” but conflates the nursing sisters with members of the Voluntary Aid Detachments (VAD). This blurring of the professional and the amateur foregrounds the “traditional” view of women as nurturers rather than medical experts. After 1918, VADs wartime experiences' have come to dominate professional and popular accounts of the war in vivid, memorable books such as Vera Brittain's, *A Testament of Youth*. Although many professional nurses also published their memoirs, they never became a part of the public memory to the same extent as their lesser-trained colleagues in the VAD, which served to further de-emphasize their professional expertise. Indeed, even when MacPherson discusses the “nursing sister” as a separate category in his official history, the women are subsumed within the broader discussion of medical operations.

Australia's official historian Charles Bean edited the 12 volumes of the war's official history and authored six of them. As Robin Gerster asserts, the Official History's reputation “rests in large part on its emphasis on the travails of the men at the cutting edge of battle, and not on the machinations of politicians, or the generals who directed things from behind the lines” (645). If the “pre-eminent literary repository of the nation's military past and a canonical text of the Australian tradition” focused on the battlefield and “secured for the ‘Digger’ a permanent place atop the hierarchy of Australian heroes,” it is unsurprising that Bean almost entirely neglected the nurses. Harry Gullett acknowledges them in Volume VII of the Official History, but in unapologetically gendered and familial terms: “no womanhood has ever presented a richer association of feminine tenderness and sheer capacity” than did the Australian nurses of the Great War as they nursed the soldiers “back to strength or softened the close of their soldier-life” (645). In doing so, they proved themselves “true sisters to the fighting sons of Australian pioneers” (645). This comment that values the nurse's contribution only inasmuch that it is consistent with the broader national mythology of a frontier society. A.G. Butler did marginally better when wrote the three-volume medical history of Australia in the war which includes a chapter on the history of nursing that amounts to a general overview. He conceded, however, that he did not attempt “to cover the varied experiences and adventures of Australian nurses in the First World War” (527).

Later works also struggled to effectively address the nurses' varied experiences. Instead, the histories from the interwar period set the tone early by being heavily political. They predominately focus on the war's origins and war guilt. Since women were politically marginalized

at this time, there was little reason to include them in political scholarship. Though often more sympathetic, contemporary histories have also regularly failed to recognize the Great War as a crucial period in the evolution of professional nursing. Contemporary nursing histories tend to focus on Florence Nightingale, and to a lesser extent, Mary Seacole's efforts during the Crimean and Second World War, respectively. A British-Jamaican nurse, Seacole challenged gender, racial, and professional barriers and is often positioned in children's literature in competition with Nightingale as much as she is with entrenched discrimination. Historians are divided about her, and as a result, their assessments range from installing her as the real founder of modern nursing to a kind woman who merely delivered tea and lemonade to wounded soldiers.

These histories all but ignore that profound changes in medical technology and nursing practices occurred between 1914 and 1918. The anti-war sentiment of the 1960s and 1970s, which might have facilitated a greater focus on non-combatants' experiences, created a school of historians who refused to attribute any innovations to wartime experiences. Women's societal gains, such as those achieved by nurses, were therefore often ignored (Cooter). Key works addressing the absence of women in war histories only began to appear in the 1980s, though they generally concentrated on *why* nurses are omitted rather than investigating their experiences (Higonnet and Higonnet; Scott). Even so, they still regularly blurred the distinction between professional nurses and members of the VAD, thereby helping further de-professionalize women's experiences (MacDonald). While there has been considerable scholarly focus on Great War nurses since the 1980s (see: Macdonald; Gilbert; Gilbert and Gubar), there remains a piecemeal understanding of their lived experiences as professionals in a war zone. Though nurses wrote prolifically during and after the war, much of the material has been ignored, with the exceptions of a few major texts that have exerted exaggerated influence on professional and popular attitudes (Hallett, "The personal writings" 320).

Having confronted the twin challenges of framing a woman-centric narrative and the century-long failure to explore the experience of nurses in the Great War, children's picture books authors and illustrators face a final hurdle: addressing what their readers (in reality, their adult family members and library professionals) believe the war meant, and what it continues to mean. While these authors and illustrators, like historical novelists, "declare intentions similar to historians, striving for verisimilitude to help readers feel and know the past" (Lowenthal 224), they are constrained by an adult imagining of the war that has become "almost immutable, encased in invented tradition and embedded in an orthodoxy of remembrance that is all pervasive" (Gough 14). As neither the UK nor Australia have fully included nurses' experiences in this orthodoxy, authors and illustrators do not have an ideologically fertile tradition established in previous picture books, historical scholarship, or popular memory dealing exclusively with nurses, on which to draw. They are thereby unmoored from tradition both in form and ideology.

In Britain during the decade immediately after the war, nurses were often granted the rough equivalence to mobilized men, but as the disillusionment narrative began to dominate the public consciousness, "women war workers ... shifted from the separate-but-parallel peers of their brothers-in-arms to something so different that comparison between the two groups was no longer conceivable" (Watson 264). From the 1970s onwards, a "new kind of military history" gaining traction in England, one that focused on "ordinary soldiers" recollections. This approach manifests the "mud, blood, and trauma of battle," but in doing so, the Great War in British collective memory was "whittled down to one sacred day, the First of July 1916 – understood as a holocaust moment" (Reynolds 360). This was not fertile ground on which to acknowledge that the nurses were participants in the cataclysm rather than mere observers. From this point onward, British authors and illustrators operated in a context that positioned war poets such as Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon as the nation's authentic wartime voices.

Since the 1960s, their status served to further focus the nation's attention on the trenches of the Western Front as the archetypal Great War experience. In doing so, they have helped position the conflict in the public imagination as having “meant nothing, solved nothing and proved nothing” (Leon Wolff qtd. in [Bond](#) 487). As a result, authors aspiring to write history must contend with two Western Fronts, the historical one and the one that pervades literature and popular culture ([Badsey](#) 39–51). Whatever their claims to historical veracity however, British authors and illustrators have shown themselves to be enthusiastic devotees of the literary over the historical view of the war ([Baguley and Kerby](#)). The use of a fictionalized story by [Robinson and Impey](#) is consistent with the wide acceptance that literary responses, usually poetry, are best suited to conveying the “truth” of the Western Front. This is despite that there were options available, not the least being [Edith Elizabeth Appleton's](#) 100,000-word four-volume diary. By contrast, the Australian picture books analyzed in this article are either non-fiction or distillations of a few true stories, a difference reflecting the less prominent role played by fictional works in shaping the popular imagination and the almost total absence of a Great War poetic canon.

For all its wide appeal, the literary Western Front, with its “poets, men shot at dawn, horror, death, waste” ([Todman](#) 158–160) is challenging subject matter for children's book authors writing about nurses. As the nurses were non-combatants working behind the lines in a profoundly gendered occupation, their experiences are usually relegated to the periphery of this “popular shroud of death, waste, and futility” that no generation since the 1920s has questioned ([Spiers](#) 77; [Hynes](#)). This is reflected in British school curricula which encourages history lessons about the Great War to focus on mud, barbed wire, machine guns, and trenches ([Lister et al.](#)). Historians have “repeatedly deplored” the teaching of this narrow understanding of the Great War in British schools, as it has helped create a public convinced of the importance of the conflict but ignorant of what it involved ([Pennell](#)). In the lead up to 2014, then-prime minister [David Cameron](#) promised that young people would be situated “front and centre” of the government's centenary commemorations, an ambition that only exacerbated the Anglo-centric view of the conflict that children's book buyers absorbed during their own educations.

Australian authors and illustrators face a similar problem when they attempt to move outside the widespread “imagining” of the Great War. Where the Anzac mythology had once been a celebration of Anglo-masculinity, firmly “grounded in beliefs about racial identity and martial capacity,” from the 1980s onwards, it has been increasingly linked to notions of trauma, suffering, and empathy ([Holbrook](#) 19). Indeed, as [Joan Beaumont](#) observes, the values of multicultural Australia have necessitated a move away from a narrow military context. This does not, however, translate seamlessly to picture books or the explorations of nurses' experiences. The frontline soldier, who is deified as the founder of the nation and national archetype, is the core of Australia's war mythology. The gendered language of the war further highlighted that archetype, notably “home front,” which “began to be used during the 1914–1918 conflict, as part of a war propaganda that coded the military front as exclusively masculine and the home front as exclusively feminine” ([Branach-Kallas](#) 410).

Although the Great War made extraordinarily complex demands on the nations involved, the battlefield remains the most “poignant site of the war imaginary” ([Chouliaraki](#) 319), a point best evidenced in Australia. Even more than their English counterparts for whom the Somme represents all that was futile and destructive about the war, Australian authors and illustrators of children picture books have struggled to move beyond the battlefield or Anzac Day, the National Day of Commemoration ([Kerby and Baguley](#)). Despite the efforts of some researchers to ascribe to the Anzac mythology a newfound gender inclusivity, it “remains firmly centred on the ill-fated Gallipoli campaign of 1915, and the sacrifice of ‘sons and fathers’ in frontline combat. The place of women in this foundational story is also made clear—that of onlookers and supporters” ([Mayes](#)).

As the myth glorifies the frontline soldier over victims or witnesses, it also marginalizes nurse's voices and experiences, ensuring they are not celebrated as heroes in war literature (Branach-Kallas). The Anzac mythology is remarkably exclusive in this foundational narrative (Damousi and Lake; Howe; Beaumont; Hancock; Adam-Smith). Authors and illustrators are faced with the choice of either retrofitting the mythology to include women or carving out a distinct place for them. The pervasiveness of the mythology as a sacred parable above criticism (McKenna) makes the former a far more attractive option.

THE BOOKS

The British imagining of Great War as a futile event played out in the trenches of France and Belgium is so pervasive that talented and successful authors and illustrators such as Hilary Robinson and Martin Impey avoid directly challenging this orthodoxy. Instead, they carve out places for the nurses within the existing mythologies, as they did when exploring a Great War nurse's experience in the *Peace Lily*. The volume is the last of four fictional books in their award-winning "Poppy" series, targeted at readers 5 to 7 years old. Robinson's decision to dedicate the book to her great-grandmother, Jane, who lost her mother in the conflict, illustrates how the war has been reduced to a series of individual tragedies. Impey supports this approach by including an illustration of a family photograph album. Drawing on all the tropes that now dominate literary responses to the war, Robinson and Impey seek to challenge, rather gently, the paucity of fully rounded women characters in picture books and the dominance of the frontline soldier and the trenches in the broader imagining of the conflict.

From the opening, the book immerses the reader in the familiar. Lily (Jane's mother and Robinson's grandmother) and her two male friends revel in their lives in pre-war England, existences characterized by sunshine, picnics, paddling in brooks, running through the woods, and hiding in the old willow trees. This idealized portrayal draws on the pervasive Spring and Summer of 1914 collected memory (a more useful term than collective memory given that the imagining of the Great War is essentially a literary one), which is "marked in Europe by an exceptional tranquillity" (Winston Churchill, in Steiner 1986, p. 215). The destruction caused by the war has only heightened the perception that it was a "hot, sun drenched, gorgeous summer ... the most beautiful within living memory ... remembered by many Europeans as a kind of Eden" (Fromkin 11). It was, in Rupert Brooke's memorable words, a world in which people rejoiced in "breathing English air" and being "blest by suns of home." Robinson also contributes to this imagining, observing, simply, that on the day Lily was born "the world was calm."

Lily is positioned as a nurturer early in the text when her father predicts that 1 day "You'll light up the dark ... And bring hope to a world in pain." In her childhood games with her friends Ben and Ray, she is dressed as a nurse, thereby presaging her role as a wartime caregiver. Nevertheless, despite harboring career ambitions, in this context, nursing is synonymous with the characters' qualities and gender rather than a profession in its own right. Indeed, the opening of the text which includes a passage from Florence Nightingale, is the only overt reference to the professional role women such as Lily played in the Great War. However, that is even muted by the inclusion of Nightingale's description of nursing as "an art" comparable to "any painter's or sculptor's work." Interestingly, she had opposed standardized nursing training, fearing that it would focus on examinations at the expense of "character training," an argument that continues to resonate at a political level today (Rae).

The outbreak of the war sees Lily bid farewell to her friends who leave "to fight in lands far away." Soon, the propaganda posters that had encouraged her friends to enlist, inspire her to also join the war effort. The conflict becomes a means for her to fulfill her dream of becoming a nurse since during peacetime; she may have been denied that ambition. Notably, the text does not reference to training, an absence that establishes an uneasy equivalence with

her childhood friends, who are not regular soldiers but volunteers, as conscription would not be imposed until early 1916. Therefore, Lily moves immediately from enlistment to “battlefield/To nurse in a hospital tent/A place for emergency medical need/Where all the wounded were sent.” She is now far more than an observer of the war, but significantly less than a full participant. Here, Victorian-era structures, which the army promoted in the nursing service, are evoked. Powerlessness in the public sphere was a feminine virtue (Gilbert 423); therefore, Lily could serve and still be considered a non-political, non-militant player (Gilbert 423–424).

When Ben is critically wounded and brought to her hospital, Lily sits by his bedside and “Night after night, she said to herself/I’ll make you better, you’ll see.” In these pages, Lily concerned but stoic, holding Ben’s hand, a clear ideological statement about women’s roles; motherly attention is necessary to make a soldier better. One morning at dawn, Ben regains consciousness to the sound of a lark singing. He is a beneficiary not of Lily’s professional skills, but of her innate devotion and compassion. This reflects the popular wartime understanding of nursing as an extension of a woman’s domestic role as a caregiver and nurturer (Hallett and Fell) and volunteer rather than professional nurse (Hallett “The personal writings”). During the war, the image of the gentle volunteer was compelling to Anglo-Allied societies which preferred images of nurses as “angels” instead of sterile medical figures (Quiney 90).

While Robinson’s and Impey’s approach does neither explore nursing as a profession nor challenges gender hierarchies, it allows Lily to participate, compensating for her absence from the trenches. As Carol Acton points out:

... the physical wound [has] become an abstract idea in the cultural consciousness: as capital in a country at war, the man can receive the wound, signifying masculinity tested at the front, while at the same time it creates his culturally acceptable counterpart in the woman who cannot be wounded but can participate in his wounding, and thus the cultural capital, by nursing him. The wounded male body thus paradoxically reinforces gendered binaries and is a place where men’s and women’s war experience intersect.

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Impey’s illustrations evoke the contrast between peace and war. The bright and warm colors depicting family and friendship in England (before and after the war) are offset by the somber brown backgrounds of dirt, mud, debris, and destruction—much like the soldiers’ uniforms—and the muted colors of the battlefield. When peace comes after 4 years of war, Lily marries Ben, who survived the amputation of his left leg, and is once again free to enjoy the delights of an English spring among the daisies mixed and poppies. Neither author nor illustrator fully characterize the war as futile. Ben is marked physically, but he is not mutilated, nor is he, in the words of Erich Maria Remarque in *All Quiet on the Western Front*, a member of a generation “who, even though they may have escaped its shells, were destroyed by the war.” The book ends with a scrapbook of photographs documenting the protagonists’ lives, first as children, through the war, their marriage, children, and old age, subconsciously reinforcing the notion of the romantic nurse who seeks her husbands on the battlefield (Hallett, *Veiled Warriors*). For on 11 November 1918, “a new world was born” or, perhaps at the very least, the best of the old world was saved.

Beyond Robinson’s and Impey’s efforts to explore the nurse’s experience, there are very few English publishers that also attempt to do so. Edith Cavell’s story appears in a range of compendiums such as *Mary Seacole, Florence Nightingale and Edith Cavell* (Hunter), though her execution by the Germans has undoubtedly dissuaded children’s authors and illustrators from telling her story. For older readers, there is *Edith Cavell: Nurse Hero* (Arthur and Taylor), which was written and illustrated by an American team and based on Arthur’s non-fiction book, *Fatal decision: Edith Cavell, World War I Nurse*. Other youth fiction, such as *Some Other War* (Newberry) and *Without Warning: Ellen’s Story 1914–1918* (Hamley) pairs a nurse with

either her brother or a friend who enlists as a soldier. Though many of these books succeed in achieving the authors' ambitions, they offer few real insights into a Great War nurse's lived experience. The paucity of offerings is contrasted with the plethora of children's picture books on Florence Nightingale, whose veneration as "The Lady with the Lamp" is both gendered and limiting in that it does not recognize her substantial contributions to modern nursing and requires a knowledge of an earlier conflict to understand it.

The few Australian children's picture books that explore Great War nurses' experiences are not generally fictional. Instead, they are positioned as historically accurate, replete with original photographs and diary entries, or at the very least heavily based on an identifiable nurse. *Anzac Girl: The War Diaries of Alice Ross-King* (Simpson and Racklyeft) for readers 8 to 11, is an example of the former. Kate Simpson is the great-granddaughter of Alice Ross-King, an Australian nurse who served in hospitals and on hospital transport ships in Egypt and the Suez, before serving in France where, for her gallantry in rescuing patients during an air raid, she was awarded one of only eight Military Medals for bravery awarded to nurses during the Great War. Though the story of Australian nurses has until recently been either ignored or under-explored by scholars, Simpson's approach has seamlessly aligned with the evolution in the wider understanding of the war as it pertains to Australians.

To a modern audience "saturated with traumatic memories and understandings of victimhood," Simpson's emphasis on trauma and suffering conforms to a wider construct of history that increasingly characterizes it as a "wound or scar that leaves a trace on a nation's soul" (Twomey). The novel's readers will also be concurrently studying the Australian National Curriculum (History), which remains politically divisive. Speaking in 2021, Alan Tudge, the conservative education minister, argued that Anzac Day should be viewed as "sacred" rather than "contested" and remain a vital part of a curriculum that offers "a positive, optimistic view of Australian history" (Lake). Despite his concerns, schoolchildren have long been "conceptualised as the inheritors of the Anzac spirit and its custodians" (Lake). Indeed, this type of instruction often begins in pre-school and is supported at every school in the country, which teach sophisticated curriculum materials and resources courtesy of the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Children's picture books present few challenges to this official imprimatur, as is evidenced by Simpson's text. She establishes trauma, suffering, and lost innocence as primary motifs early in the narrative. Ross-King enlists despite her mother's warning, because "nursing was her passion ... Now her country needed her, and she was ready." Next, Simpson juxtaposes her text with excerpts from Ross-King's diary, thereby emphasizing her protagonist's position as a **witness and participant**. The text notes that despite her training, "Alice wasn't ready. Nobody was," thereby mirroring the experience of the frontline soldiers. In a diary entry, Ross-King concedes that "I shall never forget the shock when we saw the men arrive covered in blood, most of them with half their uniforms shot or torn away." As her readers would be conditioned to expect, in 1914, Australians naïve innocence had been dispelled by the reality of industrialized warfare.

The trauma is not just professional, for Ross-King's fiancé is killed at Fromelles in 1916. Simpson describes her crying into her pillow at night for hours, while a diary entry addresses her confusion and grief: "I do not know how to face the lifeless future..." Even the medal, she earned for protecting her patients during an air raid cannot hide her doubts. Her patients, however, are a cause to which she remains committed. Ross-King's went beyond her professional role in providing emotional support for a young, wounded soldier who had lost both legs and a hand. Her actions reflect the extent to which the relationship between Great War nurse and patient was gendered: the nurses deliberately assumed roles that mirrored family caregivers such as mothers and sisters (Hallett and Fell), while the soldiers saw their presence as proof that gentleness and compassion still existed and psychologically linked them to their homes (Harris "All the boys" 156).

Though Simpson celebrates Ross-King's efforts to mitigate others' trauma, she acknowledges that her great-grandmother was also traumatized. She returns home after the war, vowing that "she would not forget the past few years. She would live her life to honour those who would never return." This reassures readers that her life "was full and happy and blessed with love." However, "she also never forgot the horror and the heartache of those years of war," memories that are equally important as her happy post-war existence. Simpson relates that when she died in 1968 her children discovered her diary, with the last letter her fiancée had written her. She had received it after she was informed of his death.

The degree of reverence necessary to characterize any literary treatment of the near-mythical figure of the Australian soldier is non-negotiable. Having faced danger, shared the men's privation, and having emerged scared but victorious, Simpson's protagonist does not challenge the prevailing mythology. She demands that her great-grandmother's story is incorporated into it. Racklyeft's illustrations make this all the more effective. Intermingling illustrations like a family-history scrapbook, Racklyeft evokes the emotional wartime memories through photographs, maps, letters, the worst kind of telegram, and excerpts from Ross-King's diary.

Rachel's War: The Story of an Australian WWI Nurse (Wilson), intended for readers between the ages of six and 10, was inspired by the life of Rachel Pratt, a Great War nurse who like Ross-King was awarded the Military Medal when, despite being severely wounded in a German air raid, she continued to treat her patients before succumbing to her wounds. Her convalescence and life were marked by wartime trauma, as she suffered from chronic bronchitis, war neurosis, depression, and melancholia to the point that she was declared totally and permanently incapacitated. Her Military Medal is on display in the Hall of Valour at the Australian War Memorial, the most important cultural institution in the country. Yet, as author and illustrator, Wilson moves beyond a narrow biography, positioning his book as a "tribute to all the women who served," he notes that the nurses "were not recognised as veterans by the Australian Government" and were therefore "unfairly denied healthcare and benefits available to returning soldier."

The mistreatment that the nurses endured combined with their lack of recognition is the narrative's driving force. Wilson does not seek a separate place for the nurses in this wartime history; he demands the ultimate accolade—that they are recognized as veterans equal in status to the soldiers. Many thousands of women "also put their lives at risk," "were often under enemy fire," and while working in "terrible conditions, many ... suffered the same afflictions their patients suffered." Many struggled with illnesses for the rest of their lives, "as Rachel Pratt so bravely did." Wilson also references the nurse's professional skills by including a full-page image of them assisting in an operating theater. Beyond that, however, most images of the nurses at work are grounded in their roles as caregivers rather than trained professionals. Wilson is eager to position the nurses as veterans of the conflict but at times, in an otherwise fine book, he is perhaps overly eager. Most notably, the nurses' confrontation with battle, as explored in the illustrations, is ambiguous. A dozen of the illustrations might lead readers to believe that the nurses served in battle alongside the soldiers. Though they were subject to artillery fire and air raids and displayed an often underrecognized courage and devotion while enduring it, they were not in the trenches. Nevertheless, there are almost 50 images in the book's 33 pages wither of battles or traumatized individuals, including some that are quite confronting given the genre's intended audience.

CONCLUSION

Since the 1970s, women historians have sought to restore women to their place in the history of the Great War by acknowledging that they were active participants rather than passive observers (Hallett and Fell). Recent research has sought to rectify the disproportionate focus on volunteer

nurses rather than their professionally trained colleagues. This is not an easy task, as VADs were characterized as angelic volunteers, motherly figures to the dying, and romantic risk-takers; in other words, figures who taught children about feminine duty (Hallett, 2014). Furthermore, because VADs tended to write their own narratives with immediate publication in mind, their own war stories serve as inspiration for books that seek to engage children in the emotional yet exciting aspects of war that are intrinsically linked with war mythology (Hallett, 2010). Nevertheless, children's picture book authors and illustrators continue to operate in a conservative environment. As their protagonists are women nurses, who did not serve in combat, they occupy an uncertain place on the periphery of their nation's war time mythologies. Therefore, they do not challenge the broader mythologies and instead work to include nurses within it.


Western culture has struggled with this for some time, as national monuments accessible to families rarely depict nurses as professionals, and instead, relegate them to actions such as praying over the soldiers (Ingles; McPherson 419). Though there is a growing appreciation of their experiences, nurses still lack a distinct identity in Great War historiography. Appreciating their independent identities in addition to their service to nation and servicemen and making this apparent in all aspects of the culture is critical to writing strong literature inclusive of nurses. Hilary Robinson and Martin Impey (*Peace Lily*), Kate Simpson and Jess Racklyeft (*Anzac Girl: The War Diaries of Alice Ross-King*), and Mark Wilson (*Rachel's War: The Story of an Australian WWI Nurse*) include nurses in the wartime record. Unfortunately, they are hampered by an orthodoxy of remembrance that has hitherto focused on the battlefield and frontline soldier.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Open access publishing facilitated by University of Southern Queensland, as part of the Wiley - University of Southern Queensland agreement via the Council of Australian University Librarians.

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How to cite this article: Millward, Allison, Martin Kerby, Catherine Dewhirst and Margaret Baguley. 2023. “They Also Served: Nurses, the Great War, and Children's Picture Books.” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 56 (3-4): 704–718. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jpcu.13268>.