

**‘Everything is so different here’
How one woman’s diary can help us understand the
Great War**

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Elsie May Tranter.

Elsie Tranter served with the Australian Army Nursing Service (AANS) from 1916 until 1919. The diary she kept during this period is a significant historical document and in this paper I will outline some of its values briefly. Not only are there few surviving accounts from Australian women who served overseas during World War One, Elsie’s diary offers us a rich source of evidence to help explore a range of issues. Her writing illuminates topics such as the social history of the period, the history of the AANS and the relationships between Australian national and a broader British identity.

Although about 2,500 Australian nurses served overseas during the First World War, detailed personal accounts by them are quite rare. For one thing, keeping a diary was against army regulations. While correspondence is an important source for historians, routinely letters were censored. Keeping a diary offered an opportunity to record particulars that they would not – or could not – include in letters home. Practically, just finding the time and energy to write a diary must have been a challenge at times. Twelve-hour shifts were normal. Whilst working in an operating theatre at No. 26 British General Hospital, France, Elsie’s diary gives an insight into the workload of nurses at busier times. Some of her shortest entries are the following:

14.5.1917

Tremendous day. On from 7 a.m. till 2 a.m. on 15th, then up twice for haemorrhage between 2 and 7 a.m.

15.5.1917

Assisted at twenty-three operations. Off duty 1.30 a.m.

16.5.1917

Assisted at twenty-two operations. Off duty 2 a.m. On call – up twice.

17.5.1917

Assisted at eighteen operations. Off duty midnight.

18.5.1917

Assisted at twenty operations. Off duty 1 a.m. On call – up once.

Everything is so different here. At home, I used to see the long casualty lists but did not realise one-thousandth part of the full meaning of them.¹

From the twenty-first century, what fraction *do we* understand? More than ever, primary sources from the period – particularly those that keep us mindful of the human

price of the conflict – are an indispensable resource if we aim to improve understanding of the War and its aftermath.

Personal accounts, of course, must be viewed with an appreciation of their limitations and biases. Why were they written? Who was the intended audience? Who was the writer? Many diarists of the period had a strong sense of being involved in a major event. For Elsie, her impending departure for service abroad was 'the real life of work and adventure'.² Her account is not a diary as we might expect from the term. It reads more like a long letter to a good friend; she does seem to have an audience in mind. The anticipated audience must have been sufficiently intimate to allow a degree of candour. For example, I cannot imagine her including such asides as the following for just any audience:

24.6.1917

... Sal, Peg and I went to Church Parade (Presbyterian) at the Walton Hut. It was just packed with Kilties. We were far more interested in the different tartans and badges – not to mention the bare knees – than in the sermon ...³

Likewise, there are significant personal instances that remain unrecorded; the most notable we are aware of is the proposal of marriage by her future husband. Nonetheless, her entries are detailed and intimate enough for us to gain an insight into her and thus something of the impact her experiences had on her.



Nurses on the *Orsova*.

The diary gives us many vivid sketches of social life in the AIF. Her detailed account of entertainment and social interaction on board the *Orsova* as it sailed to England gives us an awareness of the lively culture that thrived on the troopship. She details poems and songs written during the voyage; possibly the only record remaining of this material.

One particularly interesting aspect of military life of which her diary provides evidence is the social dynamic between the nurses of the AANS – the only women then in the Australian Army – and the soldiers. The usual social constraints and concerns about women and their role were magnified and further complicated when transposed into a male institution like the Army. How were these women to be 'protected' and 'controlled'? How was discipline in the ranks to be maintained with women about? The army responded by imposing rules and regulations on the women.⁴ For example, they were given honorary rank as officers – this did not result in the same pay as officers

but it did mean a prohibition on social contact with other ranks. Elsie's diary details attitudes to these attempted controls and efforts to circumvent them.

29.12.1916

By some mischance, several of us overlooked some of the army rules while in port and – horror of horrors – we were even guilty of sightseeing with Diggers and now all the naughty little sisters in grey have been on parade and have been absolutely forbidden to talk to the NCOs or men or naval officers, while if we dare to go out with them while in port, our shore leave will be stopped and we will be shot at dawn or something or another horrible like that. I think my mind was wandering at the time, I never can remember these 'toe the carpet' lectures. The immediate result of this lecture however was the establishment of a travelling post office between the promenade and the troop deck and the production of a new song by the troops ...⁵

The women were not ignorant of the sexual politics of their situation. The following poem (author unknown) was written as the ship sailed through the tropical heat:

Come, Sisters dear, and did you hear
The news that's going 'round?
That sisters all may sleep upstairs
From the flaming underground.
You all may make your little beds
At the end of the promenade deck,
It is well screened off, so 'tis said,
Away from the opposite sex.
You must not take your mattress
Beyond your cabin door,
For it's essential for your happiness
To feel the hard deck floor.
The Purser says he will allow
A pillow for your heads,
So now, my girls, you must not howl
If you've nothing for your legs.
Of bedding on the *Orsova*
There is a scarcity
But what's the need to cover all over
When there's no-one there to see?
But now my girls, beware!
And pass that curtain white
You must not let your wicked stare
Go wandering out of sight.
For over that white curtain there
Are bad and wicked men,
Who will return you stare for stare
And then my girls! What then?
Your dear old MO, Major Cook,
Keeps a record for a cert
And jots it all down in a book
And posts it back to Bert.
So, sisters all, just do your best
To keep up your good name
And leave unto our Lord the rest,
Your good health to retain.⁶

The diary provides plenty of evidence to examine the well-developed notion of a distinct Australian national identity at the time. Elsie's parents were both English-born but it is obvious that she identifies as being Australian. This does not detract, however, from her sense of being part of the British Empire, despite the difference she sometimes sees between the two.

Her reflection on her view of the character of Australian soldiers shows an understanding that modern commentators who love to polish the stereotypes of the 'Anzac legend' could learn from. (By this time, Elsie has worked in British, Canadian and US hospitals).

14.4.1918

... Needless to say we are all tremendously proud of our own Aussie boys. They always seem to be the nicest, the bravest and the most humorous of all. But then, perhaps, it is just because they belong in a special way to us that we like them best, for when I think of all the wounded ones and all the ones who work with us – stretcher bearers and orderlies – bless my soul, I believe I love them all ...⁷

I am concerned by the increasing trend to write of Australian involvement in war in such terms as 'legend', 'heroes' and 'tradition'. It obscures humanity. We cannot hope to approach an understanding of the First World War and its aftermath if we lose sight of its intense human impact. Elsie's diary gives us glimpses of some of the many impacts the War had on individuals.

20.10.18

... In one village we were passing through, we saw some of our 4th Division boys just coming out for their long earned rest. One of the boys called out, 'They are Digger sisters,' and they got all round the limber to talk with us, about forty of them. Presently one of them said, 'Keep quiet, you chaps, and let us listen to the girls talking'. They all made such a fuss of us, then when the limber moved on...one Digger ran after the limber for quite a long way, then insisted on us having his watch ...⁸

Her account of her service helps us to understand – on a vast scale – the organisation (and sometimes the disorganisation) of medical and nursing services:

26.3.1917

... He leaves a list of the names of the men who are to go to England. These are classified:

- A: On stretcher, needing special attention on journey.
- B: On stretcher, not requiring special attention.
- C: Able to sit up, requires attention.
- D: Able to sit up, not requiring attention.

We have then to get all these poor chaps ready for the stretcher bearers. We dress their wounds again if necessary, see that their splints are in good position and that they are warmly clad. We have cardigan jackets, bed socks, pyjamas, mufflers, capes and gloves for them from the Red Cross. Then all their little treasures are put in little bags, 'Blighty bags', the boys call them. We tie tickets on them with their name, number, rank, regiment, nature of wound and a few other particulars; give them hot drinks and off they go in high glee at the thought of a spell in Blighty.⁹

The diary offers a range of rich detail about daily life in the midst of war:

3.4.17

... In our mess, the food is mostly tinned and we ring the changes on bully beef – hot, cold and lukewarm; Machonachie's pork and beans (puzzle – find the pork), army biscuits (dentists' friends), margarine, marmalade (which frequently tastes of petrol) and a few other delicacies. ... we came over to breakfast after a hard night's toil and found one sardine sitting on each plate, looking so lonely. I was hungry enough to eat an ocean full but Peg said, 'Never mind Trannie dear, you don't look so silly beside that sardine as I do'.¹⁰

Elsie's diary is significant as a human glimpse into life during the Great War. Her account is also a valuable source of evidence of broader issues and ideas of the period. Both are vital if we are to write good history.

Select bibliography:

J Bassett, *Guns and Brooches: Australian Army Nursing from the Boer War to the Gulf War*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1992.

EM Tranter, *In all those lines: the diary of Sister Elsie Tranter 1916-1919*, edited and published by JM Gillings and J Richards, Launceston, 2008.

¹ EM Tranter, (edited by JM Gillings and J Richards), *In all those lines: the diary of Sister Elsie Tranter 1916-1919*, p. 55.

² Tranter, p. 1.

³ Tranter, p. 61.

⁴ J Bassett, *Guns and Brooches: Australian Army Nursing from the Boer War to the Gulf War*, pp. 55-6.

⁵ Tranter, p. 15.

⁶ Tranter, pp. 27-8.

⁷ Tranter, p. 102.

⁸ Tranter, p. 125.

⁹ Tranter, pp. 46-7.

¹⁰ Tranter, pp. 49-50.