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ABSTRACT

"A World of Distant Rumbling":
The Great War and the Scottish Nurses' Diaries

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KEYWORDS: Scottish Women's Hospitals, New Historicism, Romanian front, World War I/Great War, diaries, letters, autobiographies, Elsie Inglis, Yvonne Fitzroy, Dobruja

The aim of this thesis has been to analyse the representation(s) of the different instances of war in the letters and diaries of the nurses and doctors of the Scottish Women's Hospitals who worked in Romania during WWI. During my research, I have followed five objectives: to provide a theoretical background for the analysis of nurses' journals and letters as sources of historical and literary importance, to analyse the manner in which the nurses referred to the realities they faced in the south-eastern Romanian towns they lived in for a while, to analyse the descriptions of the Romanian countryside they provided against the ideals of their Victorian and Edwardian cultural background, to investigate their representation of the soldiers of different nationalities, and finally, to explain the way trauma influenced the nurses' thoughts during their experiencing the front line.

The Scottish nurses detailed their experiences into journals through literary *diegesis* that included minute observations on their work, surroundings, different developments of the front as well as their own interpretations of, and impressions on, their work and the War's destructive character. Generally, the approaches to the Great War by women who witnessed and/or lived it have either been gender oriented or, simply, seen as *petit histoire(s)*. This research represents a complementary addition to such materials, through its contribution to reunite the experience of the women on the fighting front and to look at it from the double perspective of autobiographical writing and war testimony.

In *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975), Paul Fussell advances the idea that the devastating conflagration of WW I has modified the aesthetic sensitivity of individuals. Those

who witnessed the war were marked by its vainness and irrationality to such an extent that they lost any predisposition towards romanticism and idealisation and started perceiving the world in harsher terms. This was evident in the front-participants' diaries and in the letters they sent home, but also in the poems soldiers wrote and in their novels and essays. In a 1996 interview the American cultural and literary historian, Paul Fussell, stated that the Great War

> was the initial twentieth-century shock to European culture. By the time we got to the Second World War, everybody was more or less used to Europe being badly treated and people being killed in multitudes. The Great War introduced those themes to Western culture, and therefore it was an immense intellectual and cultural and social shock (Fussell 1996).

While Paul Fussell's book has proved ground-breaking in changing the way cultural historians were treating the Great War, his work completely ignores the voices of women.

The primary sources I have used in my research include a collection of diaries and letters of the Scottish Women's Hospitals personnel from the Imperial War Museum edited by Audrey Fawcett Cahill (*Between the Lines. Letters and Diaries from Elsie Inglis's Russian Unit*, 1999), who is a descendant of one of the Scottish Nurses, as well as the individually published diary of Yvonne Fitzroy (*With the Scottish Nurses in Romania*, 1918), and the autobiographical work of Ishobel Ross (*The little grey partridge: First World War diary of Ishobel Ross*, 1988). Besides, I have used the articles written by Mary Milne, Elsie Inglis and Mary Henderson about their experience on the front at the time in *Blackwoods*, T*he English Woman* and *The Common Sense*. The major of my research has been Audrey Fawcett Cahill's collection of diaries and letters. Although it includes the most detailed accounts of the Romanian front during Great War written by British witnesses, it has been totally ignored by Romanian historians up to now.

The secondary sources which have been essential for this thesis include Leah Leneman's monographs, *In the Service of Life. The Story of Elsie Inglis and the Scottish Women's Hospitals* (1994) and *Elsie Inglis. Founder of battlefront hospitals run entirely by women* (1998). These two books contain essential details from the life and activity of Dr. Elsie Inglis and the charitable medical organization she established, including information on the decision-making process that brought a SWH unit and its leader to Romania in the autumn of 1916. Other important sources in this respect are articles by Jane McDermid (2007, 2008) and Lawrence Margot's volume, *Shadow of Swords. A Biography of Elsie Inglis* (1971). Christine

Hallett's pioneering work, *Veiled Warriors: Allied Nurses of the First World War* (2014), has been very useful in opening the possibility of identifying relationality or contradictions between the Scottish Nurses' accounts from the Romanian front and their colleagues' from all over Europe. Similarly, Margaret R. Higonnet's *Lines of Fire: Women War Writers of World War I* (1999) served as a model for my analysis. These sources give very little importance to the nurses' experiences on the Eastern front (if they mention the Romanian front at all). Therefore, for details on the situation in Romania during the SWH's activity I have resorted to historians of the Romanian front such as Constantin Kiriţescu, with his well-known *Istoria Razboiului pentru intregirea Romaniei:1916-1919* [The History of the War for the Reunification of Romania: 1916-1919], published in 1989 and Michael B. Barrett with his challenging perspectives in *Prelude to Blitzkrieg: The 1916 Austro-German Campaign in Romania* (2013).

As to the theoretical background, in order to outline the features of New Historicism I have started from Stephen Greenblatt's *The Power of Forms in the English Renaissance* (1982). Essential theoretical sources included Hayden White's *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (1973) and *Tropics of Discourse. Essays in Cultural Criticism* (1978), where the author's theory that writing history is a process that is similar to literary writing is presented and explained. For the field of autobiographical studies, I have referred to scholars such as Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (*Reading Autobiography. A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 2001), Bill Roorbach (*Writing Life Narratives*, 1999) and Estelle Jelinek (*Women's Autobiography. Essays in Criticism*, 1980).

In Chapter One, entitled *History, Diary Writing and New Historical Discourse*, I have proposed a New Historicist approach as outlined by its founders as a mode of doing literary criticism that relies on multi-disciplinarity and inter-textuality. Most importantly, New Historicist critics have aimed to re-read and re-settle excluded texts, such as war diaries and letters in the category of historical documents. As war diaries as autobiographical sources had been placed at the border between literature and history, Hayden White's theory of *metahistory* allows the consideration of these texts as historical sources. In the theoretical part of the thesis, the proposition has been advanced that the dialogical character of women's war diaries as both literary and historical sources does not exclude but augment their value as emblematical sources on the Great War. Hayden White's and Northrop Frye's theories, mainly the introduction and description of the four modes of *emplotment* (Romance, Comedy, Tragedy and Satire) have helped me in distinguishing between the Romantic (traditional) and Tragic

(subversive) ways of depicting the Great War in the nurses' diaries and letters from the Romanian front.

The second theoretical line on which the research has been grounded on follows the specific categories of journals, diaries and letters, texts generally considered to be at the border between history and literary discourses. Within the category of journals, the theoretical analysis undertaken has identified a few types such as witnessing, trauma narratives, and travel narratives (Smith and Watson, 193). I have considered the first two types of journals (witnessing and trauma narratives) to be of special interest in my research, given the overwhelming experiences the nurses have undergone in their venture on the Eastern Front and the traumatic events they lived during the war.

In Chapter Two, entitled *Urban Cartographies in the Scottish Nurses' Diaries*, I have looked at how Romanian cities and towns were evoked and represented in the diaries and letters of the SWH nurses and doctors and how the tragedy of their fate was illustrated by the nurses. The working hypothesis has been modelled after assumptions of scholars such as Robert Alter, who recognizes in urban spaces the ability to exert changes on an individual's self and his perception of time and space as well as of the individual's autonomy (2005, xi). Another important feature of the way urban spaces were constructed at the turn of the century lies in the multiplicity of the city's role in the life on its people because it may appear as a place of confusion and damnation, or, conversely, as a place of redemption and excitement (Preston and Simpson-Housley 2002, 4). These multiple layers have been highlighted in the Scottish nurses' descriptions of Romanian urban localities.

The accounts about Constanţa , for example, have confirmed that at the beginning of the 20th century the town exercised fascination with its visitors and seemed as attractive as a Mediterranean destination such as Monte Carlo. Brăila, like Constanţa, elicited the romantic imagination of the British medical women, who were charmed by this Danube port town; however, they were also shocked by the urbanites' complete ignorance of the suffering and horror in the neighbouring Dobruja. Medgidia, where the nurses established their first hospital, became a kind of metaphor for dreadful location that was bound to face the tragic fate of occupation by enemy troops. To exemplify, when the nurses encountered the desolate plateaus of Northern Dobrogea they thought the location had a "Medgidia feel" about it, therefore associating the name of the town with imminent disaster. The descriptions of Iaşi provided the most startling example of multiplicity. In the early days of the war, it is seen as a superb town with a bustling and picturesque population, while a few months later the spectre of war changed Iaşi to a town where plague and typhus were rampant and animal corpses were rotting in the

streets, creating a general atmosphere of decay and degeneration. Another interesting detail concerning the significance of the cities with the nurses has been the frequent reference they made to the towns Constanţa, Tulcea, Galaţi and Brăila, no matter where they were, whether in Bessarabia or South Moldova. In their perception, the militaristic context they were part of did not mean fortresses or trenches (which, in Dobruja at least, were so shallow that they were of no use), but when speaking of developments on the frontline the nurses often wondered whether Romania still held the towns they had visited and had grown attached to.

In the third chapter, *Rural Space(s) and War*, the work hypothesis has been that the aesthetic representation of the nurses' depiction of the Romanian countryside is highly comparable with the 19th century Romantic and Victorian tradition, which featured the Sublime, the Picturesque and the Beautiful. I have also distinguished between representations of *tamed* Nature and *wild* Nature, and employed the concept of *humanized landscape* (introduced by Fletcher 2002, 498) in regard to nature portraiture. Passing through Dobruja, Wallachia, Bessarabia and Moldova, the nurses created romanticized descriptions of the vast surroundings that were dotted with ancient ruins or picturesque village houses. Rural locations were often depicted as plagued by war. This is seen in the nurses' short descriptions of Muntenia, which tragically describe the destruction of the bucolic countryside, the nurses witnessing the war's caustic side. Unlike their reports of towns, in which the nurses associated calmness and serenity with the failure of the Romanians to take the war effort seriously, rural locations were spared this judgement; on the contrary, the villages were often rendered as victims of war. Feelings of isolation are evinced in descriptions of the vast fields of Bessarabia, which accommodated the Scottish women for more than half a year. The Bugeac region sometimes appeared as gloomy and dark, a dehumanized landscape. In Moldova, one of the worst bombardments they witnessed took place in Varniţa, which produced a change in the nurses' descriptions from the Romantic to the Tragic register. The landscape lost its picturesque character in favour of the elements highlighting the horror of war: typhus epidemics, hosts of deceased domestic critters and dehumanized victims. Since many villagers' houses were abandoned, the Scottish women frequently made use of them to settle in. As it was difficult for the nurses to identify specific countryside locations, in their descriptions they simply referred to them in relation to the Danube, which became an emblematic referential *topos*.

Chapter Four, entitled *Representations of Soldiers*, has drawn on the idea that war and trauma have a special role in the shaping of identities, whether we consider national identities or individual ones, and that the hardships of war tend to highlight the friction between different groups. According to Hayden White, the writer who engages himself/herself in the tragic tone

positions himself as a mediator at the border between two abysses, two types of culture or types of order, one that is ascending, the other one descending, believing that (s)he is working in the service of good as (s)he sees it (White 1973, 220-228). In constructing their representation(s) of Romanian troops, the Scottish women were influenced by the disaster on the Dobruja front, resulting in a rather negative image in which they mixed elements of Byzantinism with Balkanism, in contrast to the official position of the government that greatly valued the "gallant little ally" for choosing to fight on the side of the Entente. On the other hand, Serbian soldiers and officers appeared heroic and brave owing to their great sacrifice on the front, which to them was more honourable than the way the Romanian soldiers fought. Actually they had the opportunity to meet Romanian soldiers on the eastern front, in Dobruja, where they were caught in chaotic retreat.

The Scottish women held strong positive views on the Russian troops, whom they described as efficient and whose masculinity they praised besides other allegedly typical, Russian features such as stoicism, hardiness, simplicity as well as inclination towards singing and merrymaking. Initially sent to the Eastern Front to aid the Serbian Division that had been dispatched to Dobruja by Russian War Minister Alekseyev, the nurses' opinion of the Romanian troops copied the Serbians' and Russians'. Still, the women sympathised with the simplicity of the Romanian soldiers, actually blaming the Romanian officers and politicians, their lassitude, for the defeat on the front they witnessed. They labelled some of the Romanian officers as "Boscophile" (German-loving). By far the most positive image in the Scottish nurses' war diaries was that of the Western troops (British and French) whom they encountered on the Romanian front, who appeared to be saviours or even "crusaders" on a front where, apparently, there was little strategic perspective and order. Claire M. Tylee (1990) reveals that this view which thee Scottish nurses shared and described may indicate their Victorian roots or the Edwardian model of military affairs they were more familiar with. Whether friend or foe, the wounded were treated equally by the nurses, which reveals their humane attitude to people in general and contrasts with the official propaganda that dehumanized the enemy and represented him as barbarous "Hun". In their reference to the enemy, the nurses use the word "Bulgar", once again misrepresenting and stereotyping the other.

In Chapter Five, *Elated and Traumatized Self(ves)*, the focus has been on the horrific images witnessed by which the nurses changed their initially optimistic discourse on war. In his study on the memory of the Great War, Paul Fussell identifies recurring elements such as miracles and perils, ritual, magic numbers, a magical, otherworldly landscape, social arrangements that culminate in pompous ceremonies, the constant training of the protagonist

to prove himself against danger, and the fact that the protagonist and his allies often constitute a group of solidarity or "community of the elect" (Fussell 1975, 135). Looking for these elements in the nurses' narratives, I have identified them in their attitude towards the war before they reached the front. The situations of shock they faced caused them to abandon the "heroic pageantry of war" (in Claire M. Tylee terms) and to replace it with a language of trauma that desisted in intensity after witnessing bombardments and after patients with horrible injuries became ordinary events in their lives. The younger nurses, less acquainted with the hardships of their role, wrote very expressive accounts of bombardments and other traumatic situations. Those who were more experienced shielded the emotion that rose from such experiences and maintained their *sang froid*, performing their duties exemplarily. Instead, they seemed to have engaged in what historian Christine E. Hallett calls "philosophies of trauma", meaning questioning the necessity of all the destruction they were witnessing and asking themselves whether the war was really necessary. The examples of journal entries where the destruction caused by the war raised questions regarding the pointlessness of warfare were mostly found in the accounts from the retreat out of Dobruja in late October 1916. The chaos and suffering witnessed on that occasion by the Scottish women left ample marks in their writing. One of the nurses, Yvonne Fitzroy, rhetorically expressed her desire that it would be an excellent lesson if some people on a certain island witnessed the horror of an entire country's retreat (Fitzroy, 51). The analysis undertaken has drawn to the conclusion that that the traumatic existence on the fighting front has shifted the nurses' imaginary representation of war to a great extent from the romantic and heroic image of the conflict to the more realistic, tragic image of the war's irreconcilably destructive character.

The different levels of analysis – the representations of the urban space(s), the descriptions of the countryside and rural space, the minute observation of soldiers and of the war disarray have led to the conclusion that in their war narratives (in journals diaries and letters), the nurses' discourse changed from an initial Romantic literary impetus into the tragic contemplation of utter destruction. Through my research I have reached the deeper significance of the autobiographical literature left by the Scottish who travelled to the Romanian front by comparing their perception of the war (mostly based on their nineteenth-century cultural background and understanding of the necessity of war from the perspective of large empire) to the reality and effects of the people who fight in it by observing orders they do not fully understand. If the Victorian background laid the mark on the women's writings of what they called a "world of distant rumbling," the actual facts disclosed its tragic effects.

My research contributes to the enrichment of the cultural history of the Great War through the analysis of the autobiographical sources that have been ignored for a long time because they were written by women and because the events on the Romanian front that the Scottish women recorded were given less importance within the cultural memory of the Great War by comparison with, for example, the battle of the Verdun or Ypres on the Western front, or the Bolshevik Revolution on the Eastern front. The importance and innovative character of this research lies in the fact that I have included diaries and letters from one of the least studied fronts of the First World War with a view to re-integrating women's voices into its memory (an approach to the war supported by Claire M. Tylee since the 1970s). This is significant especially as the front on which most women were active during the Great War was the Eastern one. The historiographical myth of the naïve but dedicated, nurturing and motherly nurses standing by the bedside of injured soldiers, commiserating with their fate but otherwise being locked in "silent witnessing" may have been reinforced as a side effect of the desire of second- and third-wave feminists to write women back into the history of the Great War on the Western front. The anecdote of the reply received by Dr. Elsie Inglis at the War Ministry, "My dear lady, go home and sit still", is revelatory in this case, and it may even be possible that, by repeating it, gender studies scholars have only contributed to the perpetuation of the stereotype that that answer carried. During the 1970s, Claire M. Tylee and other enthusiasts of women's writing from the First World War were eager to employ the model introduced by Paul Fussell in order to reveal the – hidden by prejudice – feminine role in writing about the cultural image of the conflagration. Though Fussell, who fought in the seconf World War in 1944 in France as a 20-year-old lieutenant with the 45th Infantry Division and was wounded in the battle, was highly praised for his study on the importance of the cultural representation(s) of the war in poetry, journals or novels, he was criticized for limiting his analysis to the literature written by men. Fussell's single reference to literature written by men in his *The Great War and Modern Memory*, may have been caused by the fact that women were largely absent on the Western front, the focus of his work.

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