CHAPTER 4

“Our common colonial voices”: Canadian Nurses, Patient Relations, and Nation on Lemnos

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Introduction

In August 1915, the nurses of Canadian Stationary Hospitals (CSH) Nos. 1 and 3 disembarked on the tiny island of Lemnos in the Aegean Sea, 600 miles north of Alexandria. Their first work was at a nearby Australian hospital, where hundreds of soldiers from Gallipoli lay ill with dysentery and enteric fever. “Some were dying, some found dead”, wrote Nursing Sister Mabel Clint in her 1934 memoir. “They lay on Egyptian wicker mattresses, about a foot high, almost all had an excreta vessel beside them, uncovered except for flies, a cup of water or canned milk here and there had been overturned by a restless sufferer, and the delirious were tormented by swarms of insects in a temperature of 100° [38°C]”.1 For the next five months, the Canadian nurses and doctors would fight to save patients deprived of water, food, and sanitation, consequences of the chaotic British administration. “I suppose fifty years from now people will write up this end of the war and the Crimea will be a thing of the past”, Helen Fowlds wrote home to her mother in September. “At present we are all adding our common colonial voices to the general uproar – demanding everything under the sun”.2

Fowlds’s comment speaks to the ambiguity of the Canadian nurses’ position within the medical hierarchy. “Common”, here, carries a double meaning: the Canadians, as “common colonials”, are perceived as lesser – as less refined and less capable than their British counterparts because of their colonial status. Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of language as a “linguistic” marketplace in which the legitimate, “official” language is imposed by the state holds true for the

1 Mabel Clint, Our Bit: Memories of War Service by A Canadian Nursing-Sister (Montreal: Alumnae Association of the Royal Victoria Hospital, 1934), 60.
Canadians. Those who spoke with the “correct” accent – linguistic, social, cultural, and educational – garnered symbolic “capital”, the authority to be heard within the social and cultural system. In wartime, which imposes military discourse as the “official” language, such “capital” is also denoted by rank and uniform, markers of the ability to authoritatively command. Yet a crucial concept in Bourdieu’s theory is that domination “can only be exerted on a person predisposed ... to feel it”. The Canadian nurses, marked by their accent, uniforms, and gender, rebelled against their assumed position as lesser; instead of, as women and colonials, being quiescent, complicit, and quiet, they added their “common” and shared female voice to “the general uproar”, demanding better treatment for their patients and themselves. In this sense, “common” also carries the sense of many voices unified to create a shared power that denies their expected place.

In 1914, when Britain declared war on Germany, the young Dominion of Canada was also automatically at war. Canadians were British subjects; although Canada created its own laws and had its own parliament, it had no independent foreign policy. Jay Winter and Antoine Prost theorize that each nation developed a defining myth about the war that would surprise and conflict with other nations’ collective memories. For Britain, this myth is epitomized by the Battle of the Somme, which came to characterize the futility and wastage of war. Because Canadians on active service were considered part of the British Army, most British histories of the war erase or subsume Canada’s contributions and attitudes. Yet Canada has its own distinctive histories and unique myth about its experience in the war. In Canada’s collective cultural memories, the war signalled the birth of the nation’s independence from Britain, with one battle coming to symbolize the moment of national awakening and unity: the Battle of Vimy Ridge.

In April 1917, the four Canadian Corps, fighting together for the first time, won a great victory where the British and French had failed, winning the strongly-held Vimy Ridge in April 1917. This victory has infused Canada’s national memories about the war. Tim Cook, studying how Canadian historians envision the two World Wars, notes that “Canadians celebrate their defining

4 Ibid., 51.