CHAPTER 4

When the War Was Over: The Return of the War Nurse

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In the period between the two world wars, nurse-novelists depicted how demobilization orders for women serving in the medical corps triggered intense psychological dramas. When their units were disbanded, fictional nurses returned home along with their real life colleagues and found domesticity claustrophobic, alienating, and a source of social displacement. For female medical corps veterans in popular novels of the 1920s and 1930s, the motif of the returned nurse forms an implicit critique of society’s post-war relegation of experienced women to the status of superfluous, unwomanly beings. Nurse-novelists such as Vera Brittain, Mary Borden, and Irene Rathbone, among others, focus on how their decommissioned nurse-characters reject the home/marriage/motherhood triad to seek instead the satisfaction of meaningful occupation. These novelists capture the symbolic, circular, and paradoxical journey of growth and arrested development that defined women’s roles in the immediate post-war period.

In her 1923 novel Told by an Idiot, Rose Macaulay summarizes the ‘great and dreadful war’ as ‘nightmare and chaos and the abomination of desolation’ (1983: 290). She describes how, after the destruction and horror,

[t]he post-war period swung and jolted along, like a crazy, broken-down charabanc full of persons of varying degrees of mental weakness, all out on an asylum treat. ...Meanwhile, the people settled down, were demobilised from the army, and from the various valuable services which they had been rendering to their country, and began to fall back into the old grooves, began to recover, at least partially....(1983: 302–304)

Macaulay encapsulates the damaged condition of the demobbed men and women who returned home after serving not only in the forces but also in ‘valuable services’, such as nursing and ambulance driving. Alienated from the past and isolated from the ordinary by their hellish experiences of war, veterans returning home are, in myth and in fiction, at the centre of a symbolic, circular, even paradoxical journey of growth and arrested development. For female
nursing corps ‘veterans’ in post-First World War popular novels, the return of the nurse motif forms part of an implicit critique of society’s relegation of experienced demobbed nurses to the status of ‘superfluous’ beings. In their post-war novels, nurse-novelists focus on how the demobbed ‘female ex-soldiers’ (Rathbone 1989: 26) ended up rejecting home, marriage, and motherhood to seek instead the dignity of work. Women who had trained to give medical and nursing care to the wounded became anonymous when the war ended.

During what has come to be known as the ‘long weekend between the wars’, writers regenerated the myth of the ‘return of the soldier’, a theme explored by D.H. Lawrence, Rebecca West, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, Robert Graves, and Siegfried Sassoon. Yet, the ‘return of the nurse’ has received little critical analysis, even though British nurse-novelists such as Vera Brittain, Mary Borden, Irene Rathbone, Rose Macaulay and Radclyffe Hall, among others, wrote popular novels about how war service gave nurses a sense of purpose and a meaningful job that led to self-fulfilment, and how demobilization relegated them to domestic obscurity. Exposing the myth of the return home and the happy family reunion, these nurse-novelists focused on how demobilization set nurses adrift on the home front and demoted them from positions of competence and usefulness to their pre-war status as Angel of the House. The following examination of post-war women’s popular novels written by demobbed nurse-novelists focuses on the aftermath of demobilization for women. For demobbed nurse-characters in these books, the return to domesticity meant soul-destroying idleness when they could not find meaningful work.

In Angels and Citizens, a history of military nursing, Anne Summers comments on the paradoxes attending the figure of the war nurse:

> a symbol of motherhood and domesticity, required to play a part on the public stage of international war; a symbol of healing, required to consent to a policy of collective slaughter; a symbol of service and self-abnegation, encouraged to respond to challenge and responsibility. (1988: 9)

Summers points to the ‘let-down these [demobbed] women experienced when the war was over and their services were no longer required’ (1988: 289). On their return to England, nurses found that ‘it was not easy for them to find a rewarding public role or full-time occupation’ (1988: 289). The strong work ethic that buoyed nurses during their service is replaced by a sense of inertia and powerlessness on the home front, and nurse-novelists scrutinise the