Who Cared?
Military Nursing during the English Civil Wars and Interregnum, 1642–60

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Very little work has been done on nursing prior to the nineteenth century; this chapter offers an examination of the profession in the mid-seventeenth century. Commonwealth Exchequer papers from the Long Parliament’s Committee for Sick and Wounded Soldiers are used. The numbers treated, the nature of contemporary military treatment by surgeons and physicians, and the extant evidence for medical and nursing practice at these hospitals are detailed, and it is suggested that the quality was far superior to that assumed by many historians.

Background
Military nursing is now recognised as a distinct speciality within the wider body of the profession, with its own unique fund of knowledge and experience. Although this reality has been generally accepted for many years, the concept has only recently been given sound academic support with the establishment of a service-based Masters degree programme for serving military nursing personnel of the British Army, Royal Navy and Royal Air Force. A similar format has also been adopted by the Republic of South Africa’s Defence Forces. Such developments provide a stark contrast with former times when this branch of the profession was, sadly, neglected, frequently undervalued, and ignored by historians and nurses alike.

A common misconception holds that the period between the sixteenth-century closure of monastic establishments and the mid-nineteenth-century arrival of Florence Nightingale formed a black void in which nursing existed only in parody.¹ Indeed, Granshaw claims that the nursing reformers of the second half of the nineteenth century went out of their way to vehemently stress the darker side of earlier nursing in order to emphasise the need for reform. Real or imaginary cases of drunkenness, dishonesty, immorality, corruption, and laziness among nurses were rolled out, tarring all with the same brush.² As a direct result, widespread ignorance of earlier practices has
prevailed for much of the twentieth century. The work of military nurses of earlier times has been inexorably excluded from the literature of warfare.\textsuperscript{3} A search for appropriate imagery among contemporary literature and drama offers little guidance, albeit this comment is equally valid when applied to the study of sick-nursing in general. In 1907, Nutting and Dock placed seventeenth-century nursing firmly in the ‘dark ages’ while in 1919, Alice Clark commented that seventeenth-century sick-nurses were recruited from the lowest classes of women who only undertook the work as a means of earning their food.\textsuperscript{4} Even Dr Margaret Pelling, writing in 1998, has remarked that ‘on the present basis, it is quite difficult to decide whether the early modern sick-nurse existed in England at all before the late-seventeenth century.’\textsuperscript{5} Is this true?

This chapter examines the nursing care provided during the English Civil Wars and Interregnum, 1642–60, as a test case. Remarkably, in the preface to his \textit{magnum opus}, The London Dispensatory, written in 1649, Thomas Culpeper, the renowned seventeenth-century apothecary and herbalist provides a contrasting picture when he dedicates his work as follows:

\begin{quote}
Not the least of all my respects kind Gentlemwomen to you who freely bestow your pains, brains and cost, to your poor wounded and diseased neighbours. 
[You] must not be forgotten. I humbly salute you with many thanks and present these, the beginnings of my labours at your feet.\textsuperscript{6}
\end{quote}

This was a glowing tribute in an age when the College of Physicians and the Company of Barber–Surgeons were heavily committed to increasing their influence on health care and suppressing the traditional role of carers and healers. In lauding the work of nurses, Culpeper was acknowledging the reality that nurses had provided the primary source of hands-on health care in most rural and poor communities for many hundreds of years and continued to do so.

Unfortunately, Henry VIII’s Dissolution of the Monasteries had destroyed the medieval facilities that had provided hospital-based health care to all-comers. Subsequent changes in the concept of hospitality and the public provision of charity were associated with a concomitant degrading of the status of nursing. Whereas many nursing nuns had formerly been recruited from the rich, noble and merchant classes, by the mid-sixteenth century when the major poor hospitals were re-established, considerations of cost and supply became paramount.

By the eve of the Civil Wars, most nurses working in the London poor hospitals probably shared the same deprived background as that of their patients. However, the widespread nature of the fighting brought people of