

BOOK REVIEW

Nurses of Passchendaele: Caring for the Wounded of the Ypres Campaigns 1914-1918

by Christine E Hallett

Paperback, 216 pages
Pen & Sword History
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As its title indicates, this book by Christine Hallett, a respected historian of nursing, focuses on the care of casualties on the Western Front, particularly the Ypres Salient, throughout the series of campaigns fought there. Hallett's principal sources are letters, diaries and memoirs of nurses on the front, which provide a fascinating insight into both the women's work and how they reacted to it.

The early weeks behind the lines, as the Western Front and the system of Casualty Clearing Stations were being established; the many horrific stories of wounded men and the appalling conditions under which they often had to be treated; the heroism of nurses under fire as the hostilities progressed; the changes in the organisation of medical services as staff became increasingly professional and treatments more effective – all are documented in detail and brought alive by testimonies, often moving, from the nurses themselves.

A special mention for the fifty or so illustrations, which come not merely from Imperial War Museum stock but from archives in Belgium, Australia and Canada: they include superb photographs of some of the nurses in Hallett's story, the hospitals where they worked, and the men whom they treated.

Alas, a few criticisms. When was the word microorganisms ever spelled with a z? A tendency to put quotation marks round odd words and phrases that are not quotes and do not need them is slightly irritating. I came across bad – if minor – factual errors. Two examples: Almroth Wright was a scientist and bacteriologist, not a “well known surgeon”, and the claim that production of “vast quantities of lymph” caused pulmonary oedema in victims of chlorine gas attacks is unorthodox. Fortunately, these lapses are not enough to detract from the book's appeal overall.

By charting the progress of the Ypres offensives in some detail, principally through the eyes of women too often forgotten by historians, Hallett gives us a totally new perspective on the war, and for that reason her book is a valuable addition to those interested in the history of military medicine.

Jennian Geddes
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