

Dame Maud McCarthy: Australia's most distinguished nursing expert?

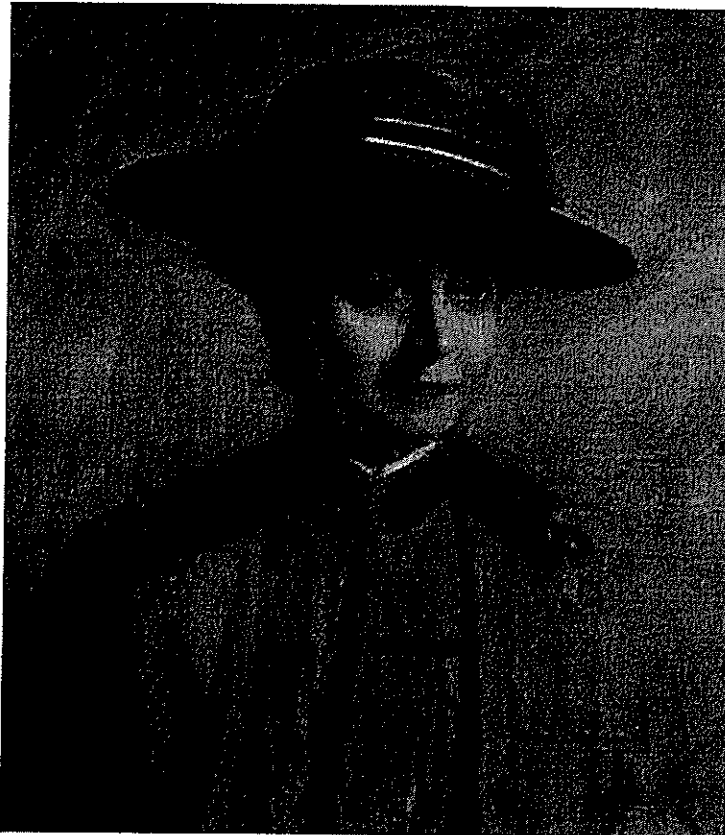
Linda and Rosemary Shields

Professor Linda and Ms Rosemary Shields are a mother-daughter team. Professor Shields has been the Professor of Paediatric and Child Health Nursing at the Curtin University in Perth since 2008. This is a joint appointment between the Child and Adolescent Health Services (based at Princess Margaret Hospital for Children) and Curtin University of Technology. Originally from Queensland, she previously held Chairs in Nursing at the University of Limerick in Ireland and the University of Hull in England. She is a Life Member of the Australian College of Children and Young People's Nurses; a Fellow of Royal College of Nursing, Australia; Sigma Theta Tau International; and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Medicine (UK). Her interests in history lie around issues surrounding nurses' roles in the euthanasia programs of the Third Reich. The subject of the following article, Dame Maud McCarthy, is now a largely forgotten Australian, who nevertheless had a huge impact on the development of nursing as a profession.

Ms Rosemary Shields is a historian employed by the Brisbane City Council. Working within the Planning Division her role consists of researching historical places around Brisbane to ascertain their significance to Brisbane's Cultural Heritage. Prior to her work with the Brisbane City Council, Ms Shields worked in the Heritage Unit of the Environmental Protection Agency as a historian primarily involved with researching historic sites prior to their inclusion onto the Queensland Heritage Register. Although working in the field of Queensland history, Ms Shields completed her Honours Degree by specialising in seventeenth-century English social history, specifically on the impact of tobacco.

ABSTRACT

Dame Maud McCarthy was born in Sydney and became one of the most influential and important nurses of the early 20th Century, yet she is largely unknown in Australia. Made a Lady [Dame] of Grace of St John in 1919, and Dame Grand Cross of the Order of the British Empire in 1918, she is important enough to have her portrait hung in the National Portrait Gallery in London. In this paper we describe Dame Maud's early life and her work during the First World War. Further work on her life will follow, as we discover more about this rather historically elusive woman whose contribution to the profession of nursing, in Australia and the UK, has been profound.



The 1917 portrait in oils of Maud McCarthy by Francis Owen Salisbury in the National Portrait Gallery, London.

INTRODUCTION

On 1 April 1949, an important but largely forgotten Australian died in London. Dame Emma Maud McCarthy, who had been Matron-in-Chief of the British Expeditionary Forces (BEF) in World War I had been born in Sydney in 1859, and left Australia in 1889. She trained as a nurse at The London Hospital, served in the South African War, and became Matron-in-Chief of Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service in 1914. After the war she was Matron-in-Chief of the newly formed Territorial Army Nursing Service, and was made Dame Grand Cross of the Order of the British Empire in 1918 and Lady [Dame] of Grace of St John in 1919. However, apart from her extensively detailed war diaries, little evidence about the life of this hugely influential nurse has come to light. Her portrait hangs in the National Portrait Gallery in London, but sad to say, a straw poll of Australian nurses today has shown that few had ever heard of her. We have decided that the time has come to redress this deficiency in the history of nursing, and of Australia. We have used primary sources from the Army Medical Services History Museum in Aldershot, UK, St John Ambulance Museum and The London Hospital Archives in London, and secondary sources, and our paper outlines what we have been able to discern about Dame Maud thus far.

BEFORE THE FIRST WORLD WAR

Emma Maud McCarthy was born in Sydney on 22 September 1859 (McCarthy 1986). She was the daughter of William McCarthy, a prominent Sydney solicitor, and great-niece of Sir William áBeckett, the Chief Justice of Victoria. Maud, as she was known, was educated at Springfield College, a private girls' school at Paddington (about which little can be found now). Maud was the oldest of 11 children and in about 1889 travelled to London. In 1891, giving her age as 28, she began her training as a nurse at The London Hospital in Whitechapel. Her probationer report describes her as 'a lady', 'wanting courage', 'needing more force of character' (The London Hospital 1894). By 1894 she had been made sister and along with six other sisters from The London Hospital was chosen to go to the war in South Africa as Princess Alexandra's Military Nursing Contingent. She served there from 1899 to 1902, and was awarded the Royal Red Cross, the Queen's and the King's Medal.

In 1902, Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service (QAIMNS) was set up under a royal charter, as a result of an awareness of the government of the time that nurses could contribute significantly to any war effort (Piggott 1990) The QAIMNS became an elite force. With lofty standards of professional knowledge and experience required, they were experts in modern nursing techniques, and an inherent part of the work and training was a high level of compassion towards invalid men. In 1903 Maud McCarthy was accepted into the QAIMNS as a matron. She served as matron of the Royal Victoria Military Hospital, Netley, and the Millbank Military Hospital, and in 1910 was appointed a principal matron in the British War office.

When the First World War began in 1914, McCarthy had been promoted through the ranks in a formal process which consisted of a system of merit and routine. Under normal circumstances, the



Maud McCarthy, aged five or six.



Maud McCarthy, aged about 28, about the time she left Australia for the UK.



The Queen Alexandra Imperial Nursing Service on the march in London, 1902.

service would have had only one matron-in-chief. However, war dictated requirements, and McCarthy was instituted as Matron-in-Chief for France and Flanders. She travelled on the first ship to leave England for the battlefields of the Western front. She and her nurses travelled by train to Rouen and then on to Abbeville where she set up headquarters. As Matron-in-Chief to the British Expeditionary Force in France, McCarthy was answerable only to General Headquarters. She was responsible for the administration of nursing facilities throughout the Somme campaign including all leave, promotions, maintenance of discipline, reinforcements and deciding which nurses would treat which soldiers under what conditions. Her authority covered nurses from Britain, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa, India and the United States (Light 2009).

Nursing and medical facilities on the Western front consisted of casualty clearing stations (CCS), hospital trains that transported the wounded, 'stationary' [tent] hospitals (which were essentially mobile), base hospitals to where the wounded men were taken for care, and hospital ships which returned wounded soldiers to England. All these came under her control. Her nursing workforce consisted of all trained nurses, the volunteer aid detachments (VAD) and orderlies. VADs were women without nursing training who wanted to help in the war effort, and so undertook nursing (and other) duties under the supervision of the trained nurses. They provided significant care to the wounded soldiers throughout World War I (Light 2009).



Model of an Australian Regimental Aid Post on the Western Front during World War I (photograph courtesy of Australian War Memorial).

World War I has gone down in history as a war of carnage unparalleled before or since. Nurses working in the front line hospitals and CCSs were often confronted with hundreds of wounded men, with significant injuries, arriving for care within very short periods of time. Empty hospital wards could fill to overflowing within an hour (Rees 2008). There were never enough trained nurses or VADs. A major part of McCarthy's role was staffing, something which she constantly bemoaned as she never had sufficient nurses or VADs. In a quote from the Annual Report of 1916, Section 1, McCarthy describes staffing needs for the hospitals:

exclusive of the CCSs: 'In August 1916...deficiencies of 415 trained, 125 VADs...In reply to this demand the War Office stated that every effort was being made to meet the needs, but nurses were scarce...

McCarthy was also responsible for ensuring that the hospitals, CCSs and nursing staff received adequate stores, drugs, rations and equipment. She saw, as an important part of her role, that her nurses were accommodated in as much comfort as possible, with adequate and edible food, beds in which to sleep, warm clothing and bedding, and was even concerned that the nurses had 'extra comforts and dainties' (McCarthy, War Diary, 15 December 1915). She was much loved by her nurses.

War is always a catalyst to change for medicine and nursing. World War I, as the first great mechanised war, saw the development of surgery, perioperative nursing, innovative wound care, the treatment of shock, and most importantly, recognition of the devastating effect on the mind of severe trauma. McCarthy was a leader in the recognition of shell shock, and was instrumental in setting up wards specifically for men suffering from this condition. Indeed, the recognition of mental illness as a nursing speciality was part of McCarthy's legacy. She wrote on this subject in her war diary:

Learnt from the Sister in charge, 12 CCS, 2nd Army, that extensive alterations were being made in the unit—beds were being supplied for 580 patients and huts were being built to enable patients suffering from shell shock and head injuries to be nursed until it was considered safe to remove them to the Base (War diary, 9 November 1916).

Another innovation implemented by McCarthy (though stopped by the exigencies of war) was the training of BEF nurses as anaesthetic nurses (McCarthy 1918). The Americans had been doing this for sometime, and the rate of surgery on the frontline hospitals meant that anaesthetics had to be given often, rapidly and efficiently. Nurses who worked in operating theatres were often called upon to administer anaesthetics. McCarthy realised that these nurses required specialist education and training, and she implemented a scheme whereby British nurses could learn by working with American anaesthetic nurses. This proved very popular with the nurses themselves, to such an extent that it was stopped because it meant a shortage in the ranks of those caring for the men in the wards.



Members of the Voluntary Aid Detachments (VADs) provided supplementary staff for the hard-pressed military hospitals during both World Wars. Many were members of St John Ambulance Brigade divisions. Maud McCarthy made it possible for them to receive further training. Left: a World War I VAD recruiting poster; above: four young VADs wearing their Red Cross uniforms.

The VADs were prominent in the nursing workforce during World War I. However, there was some resentment about the differences in rank between VADs and trained nurses (Rees 2008). Many VADs believed that they had gained enough knowledge and experience to take the role of trained nurse. There was much resistance to this, particularly on behalf of the trained nurses, who believed that the VADs, while providing valuable service, did not have the education to supervise care and make clinical decisions. McCarthy negotiated with some British nursing schools and with the registration board to enable these women to gain what we would now call 'recognition of prior learning' so they could do a shortened course and become trained nurses once they returned to England. Her thoughts on this subject were evident in the annual report of the VADs:

It has been felt that it would be of the very greatest advantage both to the civil and Military Nursing professions if the work done by VADs was recognised by Training Schools as an equivalent for part of the 3 years training required in order to obtain the certificate of a qualified nurse. (Annual Report 1917, Section 16).



A group of Australian VADs enjoy a break from their nursing duties in their temporary quarters at a military hospital behind the Western Front during World War I.



Dame Maud McCarthy wearing her various honours and awards, including Dame Grand Cross of the British Empire, Royal Red Cross and Bar, Lady (Dame) of the Order of St John, and the Legion of Honour.

After the Armistice was signed on 11 November 1918, McCarthy left France once she had closed down her headquarters and made sure all her nurses were home safely. She remained Matron-in-Chief of the QAIMNS. Dame Maud McCarthy was decorated many times, holding the following: Dame Grand Cross of the Order of the British Empire (1918), Royal Red Cross and Bar, French Legion of Honour (Chevalier), Lady of Grace of St John of Jerusalem, *Medaille de la Reine Elizabeth avec Croix Rouge Belgium*, *Medaille Epidemies en Vermeille*, American Red Cross Medal, and Florence Nightingale Medal (McCarthy 1986).

AFTER THE WAR

Our information about Dame Maud becomes somewhat sketchy from this point. Her war diaries are extensive and detailed, as is the 1924 Annual Report of the Territorial Army Nursing Service, of which she was Matron-in-Chief 1920–1925. The Annual Report of 1924 is all the information we have to date on her work there, and this is held by the Army Medical Services Museum at Aldershot in the UK. More investigation is needed there, and also at the National Archives in Kew, London, to see if we can unearth details of Dame Maud and the Territorial Army Nursing Service.

Equally tantalising is the small amount of information about Dame Maud's association with St John Ambulance. She was made a Lady [Dame] of Grace of the Grand Priory of the Hospital of St John of Jerusalem in England in 1919. We have spent time in the archives of St John Ambulance at Clerkenwell in London, but apart from her letter of acceptance dated 15 March 1919 and her signed oath of allegiance to the order we have found little else about her involvement.

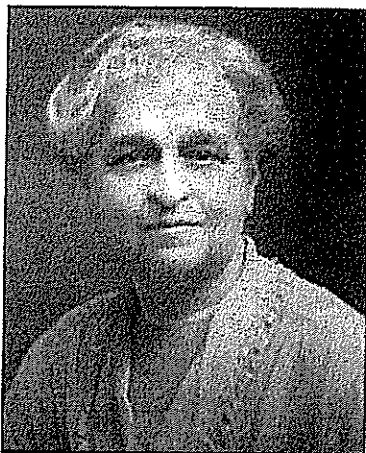
While we have extensive information about Dame Maud's war work, something from her earlier work in the South African War and her probationer's record from The London Hospital, very little else has come to light. Dame Maud remains something of an enigma. She died on 1 April 1949 in Chelsea, and we do not know if she ever returned to Australia, though we do know that in 1937, at St Pancras Station in London, she met Australian nurses who had travelled to England for the coronation of King George VI (which she attended) 'clutching a bunch of West Australian gum nuts'



Dame Maud McCarthy (right) with Major Julia Stimpson, Superintendent, US Army Nurse Corps, Washington DC, 1924.



Dame Maud McCarthy (right) with Major Julia Stimpson, Superintendent, US Army Nurse Corps, Washington DC, 1924.



Maud McCarthy late in life. She died in London in 1949 aged 90. Whether or not she ever returned to her homeland is uncertain.

(*The Age*, 1937). We have not been able to track down any members of her family, and even her old school, Springfield College at Paddington, is not recorded or known of in the State Library of New South Wales. She remains to be further investigated, both her work outside World War I, and her personal life. We are committed to bringing this most interesting and notable Australian to the attention of Australia and the world, and, perhaps even more importantly, to the nursing profession which she served so well.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank the Australian Army History Unit who provided seed funding. We also thank Mr Allan Shields, who helped with data collection, and others who helped with finding our data, and for permission to use it: Captain Peter Starling, Director, Army Medical Services Museum, Aldershot, UK; Ms Beth Dawson and Dr Ian Howie-Willis from St John Ambulance, Australia; Ms Kate Richardson, Assistant Archivist, Royal London Hospital Archives and Museum, UK; the staff of the Research Centre of the Australian War Memorial, in particular Dr Guy Olding and Dr Eric Carpenter; and Dr David Pollock, State Library of New South Wales. We thank Sue Light, and her wonderful Internet resource, *Scarlet Finders*, which includes a plethora of information about military nursing. The work involved in this site must be enormous, but it makes life so much easier for those of us researching the area. A special thanks to Professor John Pearn, University of Queensland and Dr Christine Hallett, UK Centre for the History of Nursing and Midwifery, for their support, and also Colonel Eric Gruber von Arni for pointing us in the right direction in the first place.

Shields

REFERENCES

- Light S. (2009) *Scarletfinders*, <http://www.scarletfinders.co.uk/110.html> (accessed 18 April 2009)
- McCarthy EM (1915) *War diary*, 15 December.
- McCarthy EM (1916) *War diary*, 9 November.
- McCarthy EM (1916). *Annual Report of 1916*, Section 1.
- McCarthy EM (1917). *Annual Report of 1917*, Section 16.
- McCarthy EM (1918) *Annual Report of 1918*, Section 9.
- McCarthy P.M. (1986). *McCarthy, Dame Emma Maud (1859–1949)*, Australian Dictionary of Biography Online Edition website, <http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A100210b.htm> (accessed 18 April 2009).
- Piggott J. (1990). Queen Alexandra's Royal Army Nursing Corps. In *Famous Regiments*, ed B Horrocks, 28. London: Leo Cooper Ltd.
- Rees P (2008). *The Other Anzacs: Nurses at war 1914–1918*. Sydney, Allen & Unwin.
- The Age (1937). War-time Matron: surprise for Australian nurses. April 23, page number unknown.
- The London Hospital (1894). Emma Maud McCarthy, September 1891–October 1894, *London Hospital Probationer Register*, Royal London Hospital Archives, Reference LH/N/1/4.