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2129 A Voice Immortalised in Fiction – Nurse Mary Ellen Warmington

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Nurse. Suffragist. Matron. Veteran.

Mary Ellen Warmington (1860-1941) was a woman of conviction, who used her nursing expertise, courage, and leadership to minister ordinary New Zealanders and wounded soldiers, support women's rights, and advocate the development of the nursing profession.

Born in Bradford, Yorkshire on 17 November 1860,^{1,2,3,4} Warmington emigrated to the far-flung colony of New Zealand in 1883 aboard the SS Rimutaka.⁵ Despite nursing then being "regarded as a very low occupation... done by women regarded as below the status of a domestic servant"⁶ she found her calling, going against the wishes of her friends by enrolling in a two-year nursing course at Christchurch Hospital in 1891.^{7,8}

As an educated, driven woman, Warmington supported universal suffrage. While studying, she made her voice count: signing the 1892 Women's Suffrage Petitions.^{9,10} 31,872 New Zealand women, approximately a quarter of the eligible voting population, supported the petition.¹¹ At the 1893 New Zealand General Election, she would have been one of the first women in the world to cast a vote.

Warmington completed her training at Christchurch Hospital in 1893.¹² She commenced her nursing career at the Whanganui Hospital as a junior nurse before being selected as Matron in 1894.¹³ She was a popular Matron, but her commitment to her staff and propensity for voicing strong views led to professional difficulties in 1898. The newly appointed House Surgeon, Dr Anderson, ignored Warmington and tasked nurses and probationers without her knowledge, disrupting the efficient running of the hospital.¹⁴ In late 1898, Anderson dismissed the Hospital's servants with claims of insubordination. Warmington resigned in protest over their treatment.¹⁵ In their deliberations, the Board noted that nearly all hospital staff were

¹ Ancestry.com. *1861 England Census* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2005.

² Ancestry.com. *West Yorkshire, England, Church of England Baptisms, Marriages and Burials, 1512-1812* [database on-line]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2011.

³ Ancestry.com. *1871 England Census* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2005.

⁴ Ancestry.com. *1881 England Census* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2005.

⁵ *The Cyclopaedia of New Zealand [Wellington Provincial District]* (Wellington: The Cyclopaedia Company, 1897), p 1384.

⁶ 'The International Council of Nurses', *Kai Tiaki: The Journal of the Nurses of New Zealand*, 1 April 1925, p 72.

⁷ Ancestry.com. *New Zealand, Registers of Medical Practitioners and Nurses, 1873, 1882-1933* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2014.

⁸ *The Cyclopaedia of New Zealand [Wellington Provincial District]*, p 1384.

⁹ 'New Zealand women and the vote', URL: <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/politics/womens-suffrage>, (Ministry for Culture and Heritage), updated 20-Dec-2018 (accessed 27 May 2021).

¹⁰ Archway. *Digitised 1892 Women Suffrage Petition Roll - Sheet 242 - Region: Christchurch (R25672874)* [record online]. Wellington, NZ: New Zealand Archives, 2021.

¹¹ 'New Zealand women and the vote', URL: <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/politics/womens-suffrage>, (Ministry for Culture and Heritage), updated 20-Dec-2018 (accessed 27 May 2021).

¹² 'Town and Country: The Hospital Nurses', *The Lyttelton Times*, 7 April 1893, p 5.

¹³ *The Cyclopaedia of New Zealand [Wellington Provincial District]*, p 1384.

¹⁴ 'Hospital', *The Wanganui Herald*, 7 September 1898, XXXII (9535), p 3.

¹⁵ 'Why the Matron Resigned', *The Wanganui Chronicle*, 8 September 1898, XLIII (15000), p 2.

prepared to resign in support of Warmington. Despite a divided vote, Warmington's resignation passed, and she retreated to private practice for several years.¹⁶¹⁷¹⁸

When the South African War (1899-1902)ⁱⁱ broke out on 11 October, the colonies were quick to volunteer. After initially rejecting New Zealand's offer of nursing personnel, the Imperial Government declared it would accept a small contingent.¹⁹ Of the approximately 25 nurses known to have deployed, only six travelled officially as part of the New Zealand Government's war effort.²⁰²¹ Despite the continued poor attitude towards nurses and often limited or no pay²², women actively sought to serve with some paying their own way. Others were sent on behalf of patriotic towns and communities, which raised funds to support the nurses' journeys.²³ Even as independent volunteers, the Government insisted the nurses were to be formally trained.²⁴ Warmington departed for Cape Town on 28 March 1900²⁵ after Whanganui raised funds to support her deployment.²⁶

Upon arrival, the war authorities assigned Warmington to Number 8 Bloemfontein General Hospital,²⁷ amid an enteric fever epidemic. The horror of Bloemfontein was acute. Fellow nurse, Elizabeth Teape, described the outbreak:

*...the place was a hotbed of fever – enteric raged everywhere... with no sanitary arrangements, animals lying dead everywhere, water bad, buildings covered black with flies, and patients covered with vermin.*²⁸

An estimated 6000 troops were ill at Bloemfontein.²⁹ Warmington described the cemetery as "literally packed" with 50 to 60 personnel dying every day.³⁰ While Warmington's service at Bloemfontein was praised by returning troops,³¹ she inevitably succumbed to enteric fever.³²³³ She departed on the casualty ship *Britannic* on 6 October 1900 to England.³⁴³⁵

¹⁶ Ancestry.com. *New Zealand, Registers of Medical Practitioners and Nurses, 1873, 1882-1933* [database online]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2014, No. 5; p 19.

¹⁷ 'Presentation at the Hospital', *The Wanganui Herald*, 1 October 1898, XXXII (9556), p 2.

¹⁸ 'Hospital', p 3.

¹⁹ Joan Rattray, *Great Days in New Zealand Nursing* (London: Harrap, 1961), p 126.

²⁰ Rattray, p 126.

²¹ Sheryl McNabb, *100 Years New Zealand Military Nursing : New Zealand Army Nursing Service : Royal New Zealand Nursing Corps, 1915-2015* (Hawke's Bay: self-published, 2015), p 29.

²² Ellen Ellis, 'New Zealand Women and the War', in *One Flag, One Queen, One Tongue: New Zealand, the British Empire, and the South African War 1899-1902* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2003), p 129.

²³ McNabb, p 20.

²⁴ *The Weekly News*, 9 February 1900.

²⁵ Sheila Grey, *The South African War 1899-1902: Service Records of British and Colonial Women* (Auckland: self-published, 1993), p 77.

²⁶ 'Miss Warmington on Duty', *The Wanganui Chronicle*, 9 June 1900, 15000, p 3.

²⁷ 'Miss Warmington on Duty', p 3.

²⁸ A New Zealander, *New Zealanders and the Boer War, or, Soldiers from the Land of the Mōa* (Christchurch: Gordon and Gotch, 1907), p 227-228.

Initially published anonymously, the work was later credited to Sarah Hawdon.

²⁹ Ellis, p 132.

³⁰ 'Nurse Warmington's Experiences', *The Wanganui Chronicle*, 6 March 1901, p 2.

³¹ 'Returned Troopers', *The Lyttelton Times*, 15 September 1900, p 7.

³² 'Nurse Warmington's Experiences', p 2.

³³ 'Illness of Nurse Warmington', *The Wanganui Chronicle*, 27 July 1900, 15000, p 2.

³⁴ 'War Casualties', *The Morning Post*, 19 October 1900, p 3.

³⁵ 'Return of Sick and Wounded Officers', *The Mail*, 31 October 1900, 6256 edition, p 5.

Never one to rest, Warmington used her time in England to enhance her nursing skills, focussing on massage.³⁶ Committed to serving the war wounded, she tried to return to the front but was deemed too weak and returned to New Zealand.³⁷

Upon her return, Warmington voiced the need for greater organisation of New Zealand military nursing practices. She argued military nursing should be treated as a professional formed element, attached to military units, in line with international standards.³⁸ She argued for nurses to receive the medallic recognition.³⁹

During the royal tour of 1901 the then-Duke and Duchess of Cornwall presented Warmington with the Queen's South African Medal on a rainy day in Wellington in front of large crowds.⁴⁰⁴¹ The nurses of the South African War joined the returned services leagues, attending meetings with their military counterparts.

She married the young widower, Archibald Thomson in 1904 in Sydney, becoming stepmother to his young daughter Christine.⁴²⁴³ She remained close to Christine following her husband's tragic drowning in Wellington Harbour; her stepdaughter contributed to Joan Rattray's *Great days in New Zealand Nursing* many years after Warmington's death to ensure her war service was recorded.⁴⁴

Warmington was an active member of the New Zealand Trained Nurses Association for over a decade, serving as President of the Wellington Branch.⁴⁵⁴⁶⁴⁷ She used her experience and public conviction to improve pay, conditions, and education for nurses. In 1925, Warmington represented New Zealand at the 5th International Council of Nurses Congress in Finland alongside two thousand nurses from 35 countries.⁴⁸⁴⁹ Travelling aboard the SS *Ulimaroa*, she was accompanied by Christine, herself a newly trained nurse at the Napier Hospital.⁵⁰

³⁶ 'Nurse Warmington's Experiences' p 2.

³⁷ 'Nurse Warmington's Experiences', p 2.

³⁸ 'Nurse Warmington's Experiences', p 2.

³⁹ *Warmington, M.E. Letter to Officer in Command, Wellington Military District (AD34 2) 12 Jun 1901; Wellington, NZ: New Zealand Archives, 2021.*

⁴⁰ 'Loyalty of New Zealand: An Interesting Day at Wellington', *The Courier*, 20 June 1901, p 5.

⁴¹ McNabb, p 32.

⁴² Ancestry.com. *Australia, Marriage Index, 1788-1950* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2010.

⁴³ Marriage Certificate – Thomson/Warmington; New South Wales Registrar General's Department (1904), 8112/1904.

⁴⁴ Rattray, p i.

⁴⁵ Rattray, p 128.

⁴⁶ 'The International Council of Nurses', p 72.

⁴⁷ 'Wellington Branch', *Kai Tiaki: The Journal of the Nurses of New Zealand*, 1 October 1914, p 149.

⁴⁸ Rattray, p 128.

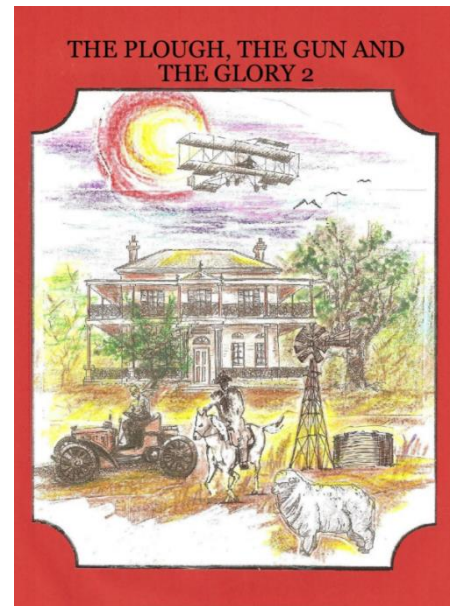
⁴⁹ 'The International Council of Nurses', p 72.

⁵⁰ 'The International Council of Nurses', p 72.

Warmington died on 10 March 1941 in Wellington.⁵¹⁵²⁵³

A century after her heroic service at Bloemfontein Hospital, she was given voice once again, in a most unexpected research finding: as a character in a novel. In Angus Hyslop's *The Plough, the Gun, and the Glory 2*, a fictional Warmington appears as the tent-mate and fellow nurse of the romantic heroine, Christiana.⁵⁴ The novel's hero, James, travels across war-torn South Africa seeking Christiana with little success. He tracks Christiana, over the dry veldt, to Bloemfontein Hospital but is met by Warmington's news that Christiana returned to Australia only three short weeks beforehand. Warmington assures James of Christiana's evident love, and he begins the long journey to the colony, buoyed by Warmington's guarantee.⁵⁵ Even in fiction, Warmington used her voice to help those in need.

Efforts to contact Hyslop have been unsuccessful. His reason for highlighting Nurse Warmington may never be known. However, the inclusion of Mary Ellen Warmington, a hard-working professional nurse in the midst of the South African War's trauma and bloodshed has ensured her voice will remain immortalised in fiction.



Angus Hyslop's self-published novel "The Plough, the Gun, and the Glory 2" which features Nurse Warmington.

ⁱ While known as "Wanganui" during Warmington's lifetime, the city is now officially known as "Whanganui".

ⁱⁱ Commonly known as "The Boer War", the author has used the South African War per current academic standards.

⁵¹ Death Certificate – Thomson, New Zealand Birth, Death and Marriage Registry (1941), 1941/17483.

⁵² "Mary Ellen Thomson", headstone Taita Cemetery, Photograph held in Private Collection.

⁵³ *Napier Probate Files - Thomson, Mary Ellen* [R23221606]; [record online]. Wellington, NZ: New Zealand Archives, 2021.

⁵⁴ Angus Hyslop, *The Plough, the Gun, and the Glory 2* (Lulu.com, 2008), p 15.

⁵⁵ Hyslop, p 16.