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*A Nurse at War: The story of Emily Peter 1858-1927* by Joan Woodward and Glenys Mitchell, Te Waihora Press, Christchurch, New Zealand, 2008. ISBN: 978 0 908714 09 4. pp168.

Emily Peter trained as a nurse in London in the 1890s, after which she briefly returned to her native New Zealand before two further forays overseas, firstly to nurse in the Boer War and then secondly to work for the Red Cross in Serbia, Egypt and the UK between 1915 and 1917.

During some of this time she kept a journal which, along with some letters, photographs and postcards, has been deposited in the Ashburton Museum, near Christchurch, New Zealand. The authors have pieced these together and created a book that varies from fascinating detail to frustrating black holes, as they are so limited in their sources. Like many people Emily started her journal with good intentions, but over the years it faded into non-existence. Where other sources have been used, they are not always accurate, for instance succumbing to the popular misconception that *“Florence Nightingale had gone to the Crimea, where she organised the first military base hospital of modern times”*.

Medical historians will enjoy Emily Peter’s detailed descriptions of cases she nursed in London and Southern England in 1895-6, including the Bursar of New College, Oxford aged 53 (a very nice old man) who died of influenza, leaving her to fend off the over-felicitous attentions of the college scout, and also a clergyman and his wife who were rendered unconscious by carbon monoxide poisoning after having a stove lit in their bedroom with no windows open.

In 1899 she and her party of five nurses, paid for by a Ladies Committee in Christchurch, arrived in South Africa on the day that Ladysmith was relieved. Over the next two months she worked there and at Modder Spruit and formed a very low opinion of the RAMC – *“in the Army everything is badly done, there is always a muddle, you can get nothing, though the things you want may be rotting in the store beside you”*. There is a single case history in this section, a young soldier who died shortly after she was moved to another hospital, and who she felt had been *“murdered”* by the ignorance of the medical orderlies. However her journal is then not touched for six months, during which time it is thought she was unwell, and then there is only another week of entries to cover the two years before her return home. There are copious photographs of the Boer War from the Peter Collection, but most will be recognised as official photographs that were used as postcards and can be found in other books of the period.

The description of her time of service during the First World War will be even more disappointing to military historians, as she kept no journal at all, and the authors have had to construct a narrative from a short account she wrote for a nursing journal on her return, and the letters from grateful patients that form part of the Collection.

With those caveats, however, the book does throw interesting light on the way women thought and worked in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The medical details from the pre-antibiotic era are particularly revealing. From a military history point of view, however, there is little new, though it is refreshing to see things through female, colonial eyes.