



Diana Souhani *Edith Cavell* Quercus, London, 2010. 417pp, £25.00.

This is a long needed and academically creditable biography of Edith Cavell (1865 – 1915) who was first and foremost a nurse of the Great War. Through extensive use of archival sources her family history, education and influences are revealed and understood in the context of the social norms of her day. She worked as a governess in England, travelled in Germany and gained a working knowledge of the language to add to her excellent French. This helped her secure a post in Brussels with a Belgium family in 1890. She was a vicar's daughter, who gained her early experience of nursing by caring for her invalid mother and the poor and sick of the parish. Her Christian faith was very strong and she perceived nursing – giving practical assistance to those in need – as an expression of her religious faith.

In 1895 Edith Cavell entered the nursing profession proper and considerable research into her training and experience as a nurse is given. Together with the nursing methods of the period, this is invaluable in understanding her sense of duty towards others. In 1907 Edith Cavell was asked to be the first Matron of the Belgian School of Nursing, using English secular training methods. She worked hard and was much admired and respected by her student nurses; over eight years she created and managed a model institution which became a 'benchmark' for nursing schools in Belgium. When war was declared she was in England, visiting her mother and returned in great haste because her nurses and future patients, of whatever nationality would need her skills.

A very clear analysis of the occupation of Belgium and Brussels is given, together with a detailed explanation of how Edith Cavell became involved with the resistance organisation and, in particular, the escape route to the Dutch border, which British, Belgium and French soldiers followed. The means by which the German authorities became aware of the escape route, together with her arrest, interrogations and trial are well discussed and make excellent use of primary sources. The clarity of the writing conveys the unseemly speed that the process from trial to execution took place and documents the German legal process. There are chapters on how both Britain and Germany made use of Edith Cavell's death for purposes of war propaganda and a detailed account of her funeral and burial at Norwich Cathedral on 14th May 1919. I would have liked a clear time-line, but the footnotes are excellent and good use is made of photographs and maps.

This book reclaims Edith Cavell as a nurse and as a daughter who loved her mother and extended family of nurses and friends deeply. However her sense of duty towards those in need overcame her own fear of death. She always understood what her fate might be and at her trial she wore her own civilian clothes, in which she was also executed, because she wanted to separate her actions as a nurse from her work with the resistance organisation.

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