WOMEN AS MILITARY NURSES IN GREAT BRITAIN BETWEEN 1856 AND 1899*

The history of the introduction of female nurses into military hospitals, where they supplemented and supervised male orderlies, has many features in common with the movement for civilian hospital reform by middle and upper-class women, but involved an additional, and particularly complex set of difficulties. A 'parallel power', almost independent of medical officers and military commandants, was constructed for the first female corps; 'lady superintendents' attempted to impose the social norms and work patterns of an upper-class household within an alien sphere where this was much resented.

The medical officers' struggle for full authority over the nursing corps achieved complete success by 1885. Army medical officials were reluctant to create a role for female nurses in colonial warfare: however, under pressure from civilian war relief committees in 1879, 1883 and 1898, they despatched female nurses to war theatres; between 1894 and 1897 another civilian body, the Royal British Nurses Association (RNBA), worked to constitute the Army Nursing Reserve.

Although army nurses were not prominent public figures, war nursing aroused much civilian interest, especially among women. The institution in 1883 of the first national decoration for women, the Royal Red Cross, legitimated heroism in war as an ambition for many women; and the RBNA's attempt to be recognised as officially responsible for recruiting a military nursing reserve indicates that for professional nurses, war service represented an important advance in public status, necessary to the success of their campaign for registration.

The early history of the female military nursing corps clearly demonstrates the influence of civilian standards and expectations upon military institutions; developments towards the end of the century suggest that the institution of military nursing was an important agency through which civilian women were militarised.

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