

'Their sister in both senses'.

The memoirs of Emma Duffin V.A.D. nurse in the First World War

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Introduction

When the First World War broke out in August 1914, the War Office later estimated that at least 23,000 committed and educated young females throughout Britain, Ireland and the British empire enlisted in the Voluntary Aid Detachment of the Red Cross and St John Ambulance service.¹ In literary terms, there is a number of published reminiscences that relate the V.A.D.s' (as they became known) experiences. The most widely recognised of these has been Vera Brittain's *Chronicle of Youth 1913-1917*, published in 1981, in which the mother of Baroness Shirley Williams records her early days at Oxford, Somerville, her relationship with the poet Roland Leighton, her decision to put her academic progress in abeyance and join the Red Cross as a V.A.D. and, following her poignant recording of the news and the impact of Leighton's death on the front line at Christmas 1915, her subsequent experiences as a V.A.D. abroad.²

Emma Duffin, born in Belfast in 1883, likewise applied, at the age of thirty-one, to enlist as a V.A.D. She was called up in September 1915, reported to London and was immediately sent by boat to Alexandria in Egypt, where she spent the next few months as a nurse, tending to casualties many of whom had been evacuated from Gallipoli, until then the most concentrated military engagement encountered by the Allied armies. On her return after six months' service abroad, she re-enlisted and was in April 1916 sent to the several hospitals in Le Havre and Calais where, until the end of the war, she would nurse the wounded as they were stretchered in, in increasingly large numbers, from the Western Front.

Emma was the fourth daughter of Adam and Maria Duffin's nine children. The eldest, Ruth, born in 1878, and her six younger sisters were educated at home in Belfast in a conventional middle class fashion with governesses and several German Frauleins.³ All the Duffin girls attended Cheltenham Ladies College which had been established in the early 1840s 'to provide', as its report of 1854 stated 'an education...which, preserving the modesty and gentleness of the female character, should so far cultivate a girl's intellectual powers so as to fit her for the discharge of those responsible duties which devolve upon her as a wife, mother and friend, the natural companion and helpmate for man'.⁴ By the time the

Duffins enrolled in the 1890s, its enhanced academic reputation was increasingly attracting the daughters of middle England.

When Emma went to Cheltenham Ladies College at the age of sixteen, in May 1900, the Duffin family home was located at 22 University Square.⁵ Soon after, her address is given as 'Dunowen' on the Cliftonville Road, located between the Misses' Rentoul School for Ladies and Cliftonville Cricket ground and this remained the family home until the death of her father, Adam Duffin, in 1924, whereupon the family moved to Summerhill in Stranmillis. Emma's mother, Maria, was thirteen years her husband's junior and lived to be one hundred, dying in 1954. She was a great granddaughter of Dr William Drennan, a founding member of the Society of United Irishmen when it was established in Belfast in October 1791. Emma's father, Adam Duffin, had assumed responsibility for his own father's (also called Adam, born in Broughshane Co. Antrim) stock broking business in Belfast in the 1870s. The 1911 census records everyone in the household as Unitarian (Non-Subscribing Presbyterian) except for the two Catholic maids.⁶ Two of Emma's sisters also served in the First World War as V.A.D.s and her two brothers saw active service as officers.

Adam Duffin was also politically active in the Unionist business community, a sector that was particularly exercised in the final decade of the nineteenth century by the prospect of William Gladstone's answer to the problem of Ireland, Home Rule, being re-established in Dublin. When the second Home Rule Bill threatened to become a real possibility in the early 1890s, he was a member of the Ulster Convention League that organised the programme of opposition to the Bill, culminating in the huge demonstration at Botanic Gardens in June 1892. When Gladstone presented the Home Rule Bill in 1893 Duffin was one of a Belfast Chamber of Commerce delegation that petitioned him. He wrote to his wife from London after having met the Grand Old Man, 'Dearest, As I expected we did not get much change out of Gladstone yesterday. ... We shall defeat this conspiracy. He [Gladstone] has the look of a bird of prey and the smile of a hyena. It was positively shocking to see the hideous mechanical grin with which he took leave of us'.⁷ Duffin then goes on to say, slightly incongruously, 'Love and kisses to the chicks' but at the very least it is evidence, if such were needed, that Emma was brought up in a closely knit, socially responsible family.

At the end of her stay in Cheltenham in 1903, by which time she was nineteen years old, she attended Churchill School in Shrewsbury and on her return to Belfast she is known to have attended the Belfast Art College. Taking into consideration the specialities she later developed as an illustrator of books, particularly children's books, she may have had training in this capacity at the Belfast Art College.⁸ In the autumn of 1911 she went to Germany, in Polzin in Pomerania, as an au pair, with a view to improving her grasp of the German language. She stayed with a family, the Van Bochens, where, her letters home suggest, she was fulfilled and where she developed her language skills, skills that she was called on to use only three years later as a Voluntary Aid Detachment

nurse in a capacity she could not possibly have foreseen during her period on placement in Germany. As an aside, one of the people mentioned in her many letters home was 'Tommy Andrews', as she called him, her second cousin and the designer of the *Titanic* that had been launched at Harland & Wolff only a few months before she set out for Germany in the autumn of 1911.⁹

The early entries in Emma's diaries do not give much indication that she was from the first aware that they would have an eventual value beyond her personal and her family's interest. Their intrinsic historical worth did become apparent in the 1960s to the then Deputy Keeper of the Records: a card in the fly-leaf of the first diary states that they are 'Diaries written by Emma S. Duffin during the 1914-18 war. At the request of the Deputy Keeper of the Records, Mr Kenneth Darwin, I would like these deposited in the Northern Ireland Record Office after my death. Emma S. Duffin'.¹⁰

The first entry records something of the excitement and haste prompted by the arrival of her call-up papers:

Thurs Sep. 9/15. I came in at 1 o'clock to find a letter saying I was to report myself in London at St John's Gate and start for Egypt on Sat[urday]. I had to dash round getting things ready.... I crossed to Heysham that night, There were one or two other St John people on board. One ... was a Miss Russell of Downpatrick ... one from Stranorlar and another from Galway. Fred Heyn was crossing, on his way back to drive a motor ambulance in France after a week's leave. He sat beside me and talked for a long time. He said most of his work was done by night but he had never been under fire yet. Lucy Murphy, a Richardson, and her boy were crossing to meet her husband home on leave from the trenches in France.

The next day she arrived in London and there had her first encounter with the impact of war:

We went down through Holborn and saw where the Zeppelins had dropped bombs. Some of the houses were wrecked and windows were smashed for a long way off. St John's Gate [Red Cross headquarters] was a dear old place and we were ushered into a room with a carved and panelled ceiling and portraits of the knights of St John all round the walls. There were various women in nursing uniforms fussing round and a lot of girls waiting to be interviewed. A dark, short-sighted youth in an officer's uniform gave us out passports. I had a mild inclination to giggle when he asked me the colour of my eyes and hair and whether I had any scars on my face or hands. He gave me my passport having stuck my photograph on it, also a Red Cross active service brassard and an identity disc.

In the event she arrived at Alexandria in late September 1915 where a considerable number of casualties from the ill fated Gallipoli campaign of that

year had been sent. Curiously, the great majority of the cases that she encountered initially were suffering from dysentery, a reflection of the trials of active service in Mediterranean basin. In fact, as she sombrely records, it was not for some months that she even saw a soldier who had been wounded in action.¹¹ Worst of all, her first stint of duty in the wholly new and literally foreign environment of the Alexandria hospital was on night shift, during which time she was often left on her own through the long night hours with a ward full of seriously ill patients.

One night about the end of our first week I was told ...I was to go to a new ward. On the table was a bowl of disinfectant. I was told that this was a bad dysentery ward [and] that I was to disinfect my hands before I touched a patient. To my unaccustomed eyes all the patients seemed dying and I was suddenly struck by the terror of the whole thing. On the way out we had pictured ourselves nursing wounded only; we had never thought of illness somehow. Here was something the result of war, just as surely as any wounds and somehow it seemed even more terrible. Some of the patients looked more [like] skeletons as they sat up in bed in the dim light, rocking themselves backwards and forwards, groaning, grinding their teeth with agony. 'My God, oh my God' they would mutter.' ...I sat there terrified ...Supposing one of them asked for something, worse still, one might die while she [sister] was at supper. What was wrong with them? Were they surgical or medical? What a ghastly night this was!

The perplexed honesty of Emma's early diary entries is gradually replaced by a more confident and considered tone as she became used to the pressures under which she found she was having to work, often single-handedly.

After a few nights I got more reconciled. I got to know the patients and they got to know me and welcome me when I came on duty... No. 24, a little skeleton of an Irish boy called Cairn Church I soon learnt was Sister's particular favourite and indeed the favourite of the ward. He had been in some time and was not expected to live. 'Sister, sister', his soft whispering voice would call and if sister was occupied I would go to him. 'That cruel pain's coming again. Stand by me till it goes. Oh, my God, my God'. He would grind his teeth and clench his poor miserable hands in agony, often never closing his eyes all night yet when I asked him how he was when I came on duty I invariably got the same response 'I'm grand, thank you'. He had to have a lot of treatment and many tincture injections which he dreaded. 'Don't be stickin that needle in me again, sister, now don't. Now listen till I tell ye, sister'. 'Now Cairn, listen to me like a good boy', sister would say soothingly, as if talking to a baby, 'This will make you well again and you mustn't be cross'. A smile flickered on his poor wizened face. 'Sure how can I help bein' cross when me [full] name's Cairn Cross Church'.

Then [p, 41] there was poor Billy Williams, one of the most pitifull[sic]. ...'Talk to me a little, sister', he would say pathetically in a strangely refined

voice. 'No, Billy, you are to go to sleep'. 'Don't be cross to me, sister, you are a good kind sister and you are a big sister and could throw me out of the window'. 'Don't be silly, Billy and go to sleep'. A few minutes later another shout, 'Sister, good kind sister, come here'. 'Billy, you should be ashamed, you are waking all the other patients'. 'I will try and be good. I will try. Just stroke my head. I like to feel your hand, Sit by me, sister I can't sleep....'. Touchingly, Emma recorded that 'He was cured of dysentery but too weak to recover and he died in his sleep one night, quite peacefully.'

Hectic and constant as the demands on the ward were, these were increased immeasurably when convoys of trains with their laden carriages or a boat, often with injured men lying out on deck, arrived, usually at night.

... the nights we dreaded were when we came in to find there had been a convoy and the beds which had often only been vacated that afternoon were filled again with gaunt and burning-eyed patients, some of them already delirious and trying to get out of bed. It was often hard enough if there were many such cases to prevent them from doing it. 'You must try to keep covered up or you will catch cold. We will let you get out of bed very soon', I was saying. Having been just in time to catch one patient, a nice curly-haired boy ... from flinging himself out of bed. He looked at me with burning, unseeing eyes. 'My two chums died, one at each side of me on the boat. Wouldn't you want to get out and see your mother if you were dying?', he said pathetically. 'We are not going to let you die', I said, confidently, but alas he died the next night.

Emma goes on: 'The patients that were convalescent were always so sympathetic and helpful. One big good-looking New Zealander who was 'warded' home and was waiting for a boat used to be very helpful and he was especially good to little Cairn Church One boy confided to me that the next day was his birthday. I brought him a bunch of roses and as I went down the ward one man said 'Sister, might I just smell them?' After that I brought him some and he told me that he had a cottage at home with roses growing over it and then shyly produced a photograph of his wife and a baby boy who had been born since he left home. They were almost without exception extraordinarily patient and grateful and polite; if they were not', Emma adds meaningfully in her diary, 'they were soon taught to be.'

Role of Empire

One of the more regular features in her writings is the strong representation of empire among both the nursing staff with whom she worked as well as (as was the case with the New Zealander who helped with Cairn Church) among the casualties who were brought in for care and recovery. These included a strong representation of people from Ireland north and south, a timely reminder of the extent to which Irish nationalists, many who had armed themselves as Irish Volunteers to oppose the resistance to Home Rule, saw it as their duty to fight for

empire, an empire that guaranteed them Home Rule at the end of the war. In spite of conscription never being introduced, it has been estimated that over 200,000 enlisted from the island of Ireland, including some 24,000 who had served in the Irish Volunteers.¹² And it is noteworthy that, despite her father's determined stand against the spectre of Home Rule, tantamount to 'Rome Rule' and the fact that she and her sisters had had their formal education at a leading English public school, Emma consistently sees herself as Irish in all the contexts she describes, on the wards, in the nurses' accommodation, and in liaison with the army nurses, orderlies, the medical officers and the doctors of the Royal Army Medical Corps. Her observations on them are peppered with references to their background: many, indeed the majority, were Scottish, Canadian, Australian, New Zealand and most commonly of all perhaps South African, all a reminder of the extent to which the First World War allied cause was not only being fought for but by the British empire.

Her First Christmas

Having served for three tempestuous months on the wards in Alexandria, Emma allowed herself what was almost her first moment of reflection as she retired to bed on Christmas night 1915, a reflection that took into account the fruitful and happy time she had spent in Germany as an au pair only three years earlier, when she had made a number of friends and appreciated their culture and countryside. The medical staff had agreed that they would all work on Christmas day and devote it to the patients and had sung carols and distributed presents for them.

We got home about twelve and tumbled into bed utterly exhausted. I thought of the only other Christmas I had ever spent away from home, in Germany. We had visited a hospital there too and sung German carols outside the wards and I wondered if they had done it this year and if they had had their Christmas trees as usual and their little tables 'bedecked' and talked about the 'Christkind'. It seemed impossible when one thought of all the dreadful things they had done but they had been very good to me then and I felt sorry that we could never meet on friendly terms again. I thought of the patients ... singing hymns and it had given me a lump in my throat to see some of them so terribly ill and worn singing 'Abide with Me' and 'Onward Christian Soldiers', 'Peace on earth, Goodwill to all men'. We were all singing it and no doubt the Germans were doing the same and what a farce it would seem to an outsider and what hypocrites we ought to appear and yet I knew we weren't all hypocrites and all the Germans weren't, though I felt a good many must be. It was impossible to understand or reconcile. What fools we all were. I gave it up as a bad job and went to sleep.

Posted to the Western Front

Emma's six months' duty in Alexandria came to an end in early 1915 and, in common with the majority of V.A.D. nurses at the end of their first six month period of duty, she elected to re-enlist. She was then posted to France, where she would serve out the rest of the war in No. 2 General Hospital in the port of Le Havre where of course she was much closer to the theatre of war itself. It was on her first day in Le Havre that she encountered the full extent of the pitiless suffering of the wounded and their stoicism. The patients she tended were altogether too seriously injured to be transported by boat back to Britain. She recalls passing by the docks on her first day on her way to hospital, where the ships carrying those bound for Blighty were being put on board the hospital ships.

The men were only detained until a boat came. They had all their Blighty tickets on, and ever full of spirit and chaff and all helping each other. One big Highlander, with a wound in his leg, fed the two men on each side of him, neither of whom could use their arms, with bits of bread and spoonfuls of egg alternately. In the middle of this operation I heard him give a wild yell and in answer to my look of surprise he said 'Jim's my pal. We went over the top together and I hadn't seen him since.' They proceeded to shout messages and enquiries to each other across the shed.

The extent of the injuries and the care they required in the Le Havre hospital constantly shocked Emma. Nonetheless, she recorded her feelings, particularly in cases where there was an unfolding human story, with care as well as with feeling.

There was a man desperately ill in 4 ward, shot through the chest, and his wife arrived with his baby daughter which he had never seen. She sat by him night after night and the baby slept on an empty bed in the corner of the ward and in the mornings always smiling and chuckling and crowing was handed from bed to bed. She even made her way into our ward and one of our few 'up' patients could be seen in the morning, full of pride in the possession of her, walking up and down the balcony (p. 64) whistling to her and tossing her up and down in his arms, she blissfully unaware of all the sorrow and pain around her. We had a patient in our ward, too, who had also been shot through the chest, a sergeant in the Inniskilling Fusiliers. He told me he had been in the Irish Rifles but had transferred because he fancied himself in a red coat. He had a red coat on now, one supplied by the Red X [Cross] and night after night lay awake panting, but always patient. 'Do you think, Sister, the Dr would give me something to make me sleep? Of course, just as you think best. I'm not too bad at all. I'll maybe get off yet. I'll be better soon.'

Because she sat with the patients through long nights, often over lengthy periods of time, and perhaps because she was not a trained nurse, some of the cases she

tended affected her very deeply, not simply by the suffering they had to endure but by the stoical, often heroic, manner with which they bore their suffering and, in many cases, their death.

All the cases in the Back ward were on the dangerously ill list, most of them transfers from other wards. The father of the little baby, who had returned to England with her mother, was one of them, very ill with a chest wound. Next [to] him was a poor fellow dying of septicemia, pitifully grey and emaciated. Then there was a French boy with a head wound ...It was very hot weather. ...In the corner the poor French boy, unable to move, would call repeatedly 'à Boire, à Boire' or 'Tournez, tournez' and I would turn him for the 100th time and give one more drink to try and quench a thirst that I had learnt to know was unquenchable. Sister Dean and Sister Young both refused to take any interest in him because he was French so it fell to my share to feed him, always very slowly like feeding a poor kid. The poor septicemia boy, though he looked more dead than alive, used pathetically to ask for a cigarette. He was so weak that he could not even lift his hand to put it in his mouth ... but I used to stand by him while he had a few feeble puffs at the cigarette before it fell from his lips. He and the French boy both died but the babies' (sic) father made a wonderful and unexpected recovery.

The work was unrelenting and Emma frequently makes a note about how strenuous she found it. It was not only the responsibility of the care of so many seriously ill soldiers but the demands of very difficult cases, though she was always quick to point out that instances of obstreperous and difficult patients were very rare.

I found night duty in three ward pretty strenuous. We had to watch the head cases as they were inclined to hop out of bed at every opportunity; The heart boy was a great trial, too. He refused to take his medicine or any nourishment, refused to be washed, even raising his fist and using awful language. It was all I could do to keep my patience with him. 'I hate you, nurse', he said to me one day ... and on another occasion he even used the 'Pygmalion' word¹³ to me but I ... made him apologise, and I think we were better friends afterwards, though he hated us all, poor boy, .. and I was astonished one day to hear his people had come, to find what nice, refined better-class people they were. His sister was terribly upset at the way he behaved and [we] could only comfort her by telling her sick people were often like that. All the same, I had never met a patient like him and I often thought the boy must have been going to the Lord and sometimes thought it would have been less heart-breaking for his mother if he died than if he lived and went to the devil. However, he recovered sufficiently to go to Blighty and I heard no more of him.

The nurses were entitled to one half day off duty per week but such was the demands made on the hospitals by, especially, the arrival of convoys carrying hundreds of wounded soldiers requiring urgent attention, their leave often went unclaimed. On top of the work they were often subjected to the evacuations and other emergency measures that accompanied the warnings of imminent air raids. She struggled to cope with the rigours and demands that V.A.D. nurses encountered regularly while on night duty, often on their own in a ward full of up to one hundred ill or wounded men, too seriously wounded to be shipped back to Britain.

We would come on duty some nights to find there had been a convoy and the beds were full of strange faces or sometimes we would see an empty bed and be told that one had died. One night as we all came up laughing and chattering there was a sudden hush and we met two stretcher bearers carrying a stretcher covered with a Union Jack. It is strange how familiar death can become and, how, without being in the least heartless, one can sit by a patient till he dies, and yet laugh and chat off duty, just the same. It seems as if it belongs to two lives.

She described the impact of the arrival of trains laden with wounded survivors:

I had not been on night duty very long when the big push began and the trains came and came and the boats did not come fast enough and we worked all night and came on duty again after breakfast and prayed and looked for the boats,.... I was sent on duty on the station platform and if the hospital had not made me realise the war I realised it that night. Under the big arc lights in the station lay stretchers 4 deep, so close one could scarcely fit one's feet between [them] all down to the platform. At the end of the station were the walking cases. They were part walking and the majority had been huddled together, their arms in slings and their heads bound up, the mud from the trenches sticking to their clothes and the blood still caked on them. I walked up and down all night feeling I was in a bad dreamin the middle of the night we heard the whistle of another hospital train and my heart sank. Every ward was full, there was scarcely room for another stretcher on the platform and there was no boat. The train crawled slowly in and turned out to be only walking cases waiting for the boat, with their Blighty tickets in their buttonholes. As one tall figure limped along with his arm in a sling, one of the men on the stretchers who had come down in an earlier train sat up and shouted at him. 'Hello' he said, the other turned such a dull apathetic look on him and gave no greeting. 'How's the colonel?' said the first. 'He's dead,' came the reply in an utterly toneless voice. 'And the major?' 'Dead too' and he limped on, his face impassive as a stone. The other sank back in his stretcher, without a word.'

The convoys that arrived during the summer of 1916 and into 1917 included not only allied soldiers; a number were laden with German prisoners, captured on the western

front but in such a state as to require hospital treatment in the nearby Le Havre and Calais hospitals, and all as seriously injured as the British soldiers. Furthermore, Emma had some intriguing comments to make on the treatment the German prisoners were subjected to:

Then came a big convoy of Germans....Some of the Germans were terribly badly wounded. We were short of sheets and, naturally and rightly enough, our own men came first. They had what sheets there were. The Germans lay on brown blankets, which gave them a neglected look. To a certain extent, they were neglected, too, for the staff was inadequate. It was a physical impossibility for me to wash all the helpless men. ... Enemies or not, they had terrible wounds and I hated to see them lying unwashed in the dirty brown blankets but I could not help it. One poor creature, shot through the stomach, was sick all night. During the air raid alarm I crept along in the dark to his bed several times but there was nothing I could do to ease him. He asked for a bit of cotton wool which he dipped continually into a bowl of water and sucked it. In the morning I made time to wash him myself, poor soul, I knew he would not be there to wash long. With tears running down his cheeks he thanked me. 'Schwester, daß hat nicht erwartet, daß Sie so viel für mich thun wurden' ['Sister, I didn't expect that, that you would do so much for me'.] His pathetic humility nearly made me cry. 'Schwester', he said, 'I cannot live; you know I am dying'. I do not know what I answered but he must have read the answer in my face. 'For myself, I do not mind. I am glad. But my poor old mother – it will kill her. She had but three of us. The other two have been killed', he continued. When I came in the next day he was dead. 'Poor old German mother!' Emma added.

She later narrates the story of two other German prisoners, both very seriously wounded, and laments the callousness shown by her fellow nurses to their treatment. What made the heartlessness worse, if anything, was that it was the 'striped' professional career nurses who were most prone to it.

About this time we got two awfully bad cases in the ward, both Germans. ...One was a middle-aged man with a terrible jaw wound and a wound in the thigh. The other was a mere boy with one elbow shattered and a fractured pelvis. They were known in the ward as 'the old Bosch' and 'the little Hun'. The old Bosch, owing to his wounded jaw, could not talk but the little Hun was a great chatter-box and as I acted as interpreter Capt Berry always called him 'Miss Duffin's little Hun'. ... According to his medical card he was 18 but he looked about twelve. He was small and very sallow with very dark hair and the most beautiful big brown eyes which could dance with mischief in spite of the pain their owner was suffering.

In Emma's account of their mistreatment, it was the 'striped' nurses, as she called them, the official army nurses, who were not so attentive to the enemy patients as they were to their own kind. An instance that particularly shocked her arose in the

treatment of the poor young German to whom she had grown attached. Sister Johnson was a case in point.

My little Hun could not bear Sister Johnson. 'Sie ist keine gute Frau' ('she is not a good woman') he murmured one day and when I protested, though I secretly disliked her myself, he only shook his head and said 'es nutzt nicht, ich kenne eine gute Frau wenn ich eine sehe' ['It's no use, I know a good woman when I see one'] and nothing would change him. ... They took him into the theatre one day and opened his hip for drainage and put him in a double Thomas splint. I dreaded the result when I heard of it for, though I suppose such splints were necessary, they always seemed a refined form of torture. The patient was laid on his back on a leather pad a strap across his chest and both his legs fastened to splints which were fixed to the leather pad. As the poor little Hun also had his right arm in plaster of Paris the only thing left for him to move was his left arm. To anybody compulsory immobility must be terrible, but to this little active, wiry, nervy boy it was torture. I foresaw that he would never be able to stand it and it was pitiful to hear his cries like a little wild animal caught in a trap. I could not bear to see his tortured agonised brown eyes and to hear his endless appeals for release. Capt Berry was miserable about it too but it had been done of course with the best of motives by a colonel, a surgeon at the Quai and Capt Berry did not dare to take him off until [sic] the poor little chap was actually dying... His pitiful cries 'nicht auf die wunde tuchen, Schwester, nicht auf die wunde' ('don't touch the wound, Sister, don't touch the wound') and 'langsam, bitte, langsam, Schwester' ('slowly, please slowly, Sister') were terrible to hear and I used to feel quite done up after his dressing and that of the poor old Bosch, whose jaw was nearly shot away. Day by day he grew iller and it became obvious that he was not going to recover. He was seldom now free from pain and Capt Berry constantly had to give him morphine. ... At last it was impossible to keep him quiet except under morphine. ... With Capt Berry's permission, we took him off the dreadful splint... Never shall I forget the sight of his back when we turned him... His wounds had been bad enough but his back was absolutely raw with bedsores from [WORD UNCLEAR] in the splint. A morning or two later when I came on I was told he was dead. It was a relief but I was sorry I had not been with him, especially when poor Kalber, who could not understand German, told me that he had called to her 'Schwester, fini, fini'. She was terribly upset about it, for she said Sister Johnson (the [p.158] night Sister Johnson) had been so unsympathetic. I had never liked her but I hated her when she remarked 'Well, Miss Duffin, your little Hun is dead. He did the most Hunnish thing he could do and died at 6 o'clock when we were at our very busiest'. I did not deign to reply but doubted if a German woman could have made a more hunnish speech on the death of a poor boy dying in agony. I missed him for many days long after his bed was occupied by another patient.'

Emma remained in Le Havre until the end of the war. In 1918 she was promoted to 'Assistant Nurse'. Until then, great care had been taken not to refer to the

V.A.D.s as nurses and the changes in the regulations just before the end of the war that facilitated them to be named as assistant nurses served as a recognition of the V.A.D.s' worth during it.

Armistice

The news of the armistice on 11th November 1918 prompted a great sense of celebration but even in their midst Emma went to some lengths to visit the battlefields where so many she had tended had received their wounds. She arranged a completely un-voyeuristic visit to Ypres with two Royal Army Medical Corps officers, in their cars.

After breakfast we packed into the motor and started for Ypres. Both Capt Duncan and Mitchell had been on ammunition service up and down the line and could show us all the places. The pavé roads were in excellent condition, to my surprise. A few stumps of wood showed where once a forest had been....At intervals, a signboard announced the name of a village pounded to powder. We met a padre walking in front of a lorry with a cover over its grim load - bodies being removed for burial...At Ypres we got out of the car and explored the cathedral and Cloth Hall, or what was left of them, and took some photographs Then ... back to Hazelbronch for tea and then St Omer again and the train for Calais. A very successful day.

Postscript

And although the war was over the care of patients remained paramount – the full effects of the *coup de grace* of the First World War, the Spanish flu epidemic, were being felt by both patients and staff - and it was not until the early months of 1919 that she herself was demobbed and was able to return to Belfast. Not at the time but almost fifty years later, in the 1960s, Emma added this postscript to her World War One experiences:

It had been a hard life, but a great experience, never to be regretted. We had seen great suffering but greater courage. We had learnt to take responsibility and to act on our own when required. We had learnt to be patient. To accommodate ourselves to different surroundings. We had learnt the value of comradeship and that barriers between classes could be ignored: an orderly could be a friend as well as an officer, a patient could be a brother. To me, some of those men are more real than those I met perhaps a week or so ago. I can never forget them, as many I know will remember me. I was their 'sister' in both senses.¹⁴

1. W.O. 8236, 1938

2. *Chronicle of Youth, Vera Brittain's War Diary* (ed) Alan Bishop. Foreword by Clare Leighton (London 1981). More recently, *War Diaries. A Nurse at the Front. The First World War Diaries of Sister Edith Appleton* (ed.) Ruth Cowen. Foreword by Michael Morpurgo (London, 2012) describes the experiences of Edith Appleton, a career nurse who, like Emma Duffin, served in the hospitals of northern France.

³ Gillian McClelland, *Pioneer Women. Riddel Hall and Queen's University, Belfast* (Belfast, 2010, p.26) says Ruth Duffin continued to influence Riddel Hall until its closure in 1975.

⁴ Cheltenham Ladies College archives. I am grateful to Miss Isabella Beale for providing me with this information.

⁵ *Belfast & Ulster Directory*, 1894 (p. 94) and 1900 (p. 100).

⁶ 'Census Enumerators Returns', National Archives, Dublin. Also, PRONI [Public Record Office of Northern Ireland] MIC 354

⁷ Patrick Buckland (ed.), *Irish Unionism 1885-1923: A Documentary History* (Belfast, 1973), p.273

⁸ Before the First World War Emma had illustrated a book of poems, *The Secret Hill* by Ruth and Celia Duffin. Illustrated by Emma S. Duffin, Maunsell & Co. Ltd, Dublin and London, 1913. She later illustrated children's books, including *The Fairy Cup* (Belfast, 1951) and *Handy Andy and the Wee House* (Belfast 1953) both by Ruth Duffin.

⁹ PRONI D2109/9/4a

¹⁰ PRONI, D2109/18/4

¹¹ PRONI D2109/18/4a. In a letter to her sister Celia, 2 October 1915, she writes 'my work has so far been stopping delirious patients from falling out of bed'.

¹² S. J. Conolly (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Irish History* (Oxford, 1998) p.196.

¹³ George Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion* contained a scene in which Eliza Doolittle uses the word 'bloody'. Margaret Drabble, *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* (Oxford, 1985) says that the play was first performed in 1913 in Vienna and then in London in 1916. Emma often went, during her leave, to the London theatres with her sisters, at least one of whom was stationed there.

¹⁴ PRONI D2109/18/9. In the inter-war period Emma Duffin served as Honorary Secretary of the Belfast Council for Social Welfare. On the outbreak of the Second War she was asked to be Commandant of the Stranmillis Military Hospital in Belfast. She recorded her experiences in this role in a diary, including her role in the aftermath of the Luftwaffe air raid in Belfast Easter Tuesday 1941, in which as many as 1,000 people are estimated to have been killed.