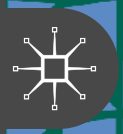

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Edith Cavell and her Legend

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Preface and Acknowledgements

This project took four years to complete. During its research phase, the centenary of Edith Cavell's execution created a new upsurge of interest in her life, work, and death, enabling me to incorporate numerous insights drawn from recent commemorative activity into the work. The book's main purpose is to trace the parallel processes of individual memory and public commemoration across a period of one hundred years, in order to offer insights into the nature of memory, remembrance, and commemoration. In Edith Cavell's case, these processes were highly volatile, and the availability of primary sources—many of them distorted and some deliberately fictional—has at times threatened to become overwhelming. In order to bring coherence to the project, I have chosen to focus mainly on British commemorative processes, using evidence from British sources. Alongside these, however, I have incorporated material relating to Britain's self-governing Dominions (particularly Canada, Australia, and New Zealand), along with some Belgian material that enabled a better understanding of the commemorative partnership that developed between the British and Belgian nursing professions.

I have accumulated numerous debts. My research took place at several British libraries and archives, and I would like to acknowledge the kind assistance of librarians, archivists, and curators at the Imperial War Museum, London; the Archives of The Royal London Hospital; the Wellcome Library, London; and the Royal College of Nursing Library and Archives, London and Edinburgh. I would add my particular thanks to Porshia Boafo of the Royal College of Nursing Archives, who kindly obtained a copy of Cavell's *Nursing Mirror* article, published in April

1915; and to Jane Rosen of the Imperial War Museum Archives, who arranged for me to see original holdings at the Imperial War Museum which were not available on microfilm.

I am very grateful to Emma Cavell, a descendant of Edith Cavell, who kindly confirmed that permission was not required for the reproduction of text from Cavell's own writings. The inclusion of extensive quotations from Cavell's letters, publications, and diary has greatly enhanced the book. Material has also been directly quoted from several biographies—notably those authored by Adolphe Hoehling, Archibald Clark-Kennedy, Rowland Ryder, and Diana Souhami, and from a number of newspapers. Of particular value has been the direct quotation of material from two British newspapers: *The Times* and *The Manchester Guardian* (later *The Guardian*). Collections of letters, eyewitness statements, and other manuscript and printed sources were accessed at the Imperial War Museum, London. Among the materials directly quoted in this book are letters and narratives donated by Archibald Clark-Kennedy, Rowland Ryder, Millicent Battrum, and Jesse Tunmore. Images are reproduced by kind courtesy of The Wellcome Collection, London, UK, and the Library of Congress, Washington DC, USA.

The length of time it has taken me to bring this project to completion has, undoubtedly, tested the patience of my commissioning editors at Palgrave Macmillan—Emily Russell and Carmel Kennedy—and I thank them, and their colleagues, for their valuable support, professionalism, and tolerance. I would also like to thank my employer, the University of Huddersfield, UK, for its collegiality and support. Beyond that, my appreciation goes to Professor Alison Fell, the University of Leeds, for her generous advice and support; and to the anonymous reviewers who advised on both the initial proposal for this book and on an early draft.

As always, I owe the greatest debt of gratitude to my family, particularly to my mother, Margaret Hallett, and my husband, Keith Brindle, for their constant support and generosity.

Huddersfield, UK Christine E. Hallett

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Faces of Edith Cavell

Abstract Edith Cavell has been portrayed in many different ways, and this book examines her myriad "faces", as they have been constructed and handed down by propagandists, biographers, and artists. Its introduction relates these ideas to a rigorous form of "public history", in which analysis can intersect with commemoration. Edith Cavell was first introduced to the British public through a series of Foreign Office statements which claimed to establish the "facts" of her case. Her own voice, along with those of her family, colleagues, and friends, was muted, as a monolithic image of a national heroine and martyr emerged. The two main areas of tension in her commemoration are identified. The difference between the complexity of her behaviour and motivations and the simplicity of the "legend" that was constructed around her is highlighted. And the attempts of individuals and professional organisations to commemorate her life and work are contrasted with the public construction of a "heroine" who could be of value to the nation state.

Keywords Edith Cavell • Public history • Commemoration • Legend • Propaganda

A century after her death, Edith Cavell has many faces: some physical—carved out of marble or stone; others portraits—made in pencil, watercolour, or oils. Some are realistic, others highly stylised, still others totally

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imaginary. Some were drawn or sculpted with the intention of recapturing an accurate likeness of Edith Cavell; others were intended as external representations of what the artist believed to be her interior features: her character, her motivations, her transcendent qualities. But the most powerful faces of Edith Cavell were neither carved from rock nor painted on canvas. They were created in narrative form: mind's eye images, emerging out of carefully constructed stories. Through these stories, Edith Cavell has been handed down through the generations since her death as a fragmentary figure—more a crowd than an individual. Although one of the aims of this book is to offer a reintegrated portrait of Edith Cavell, its other—more important—goal is to examine and analyse the multitude of "Edith Cavells" that have emerged in approximately 100 years since her death. I hope to set these against the contexts and circumstances of their times in order to offer a better understanding of how these "cultural afterlives" of Edith Cavell emerged.

In a book this size, it is impossible to examine every commemoration and representation of Edith Cavell—literally thousands of such representations exist. My focus is, therefore, primarily on the ways in which Cavell was remembered, commemorated, and memorialised in her home country, Britain, although a few prominent and significant overseas commemorations are also considered—particularly in Cavell's adopted homeland of Belgium, and in Britain's self-governing Dominions.

In his *Theatres of Memory*, Raphael Samuel equated history with memory.[1] His perspective has been criticised by some professional historians, who baulk at any failure on the part of the historian to distance himself or herself from the material evidence. Yet, others—particularly self-confessed "public historians"—openly embrace Samuel's approach.[2] In examining the way Edith Cavell has been handed down through generations of narrators, both professional and amateur, this book draws on the idea of "public history" as a rigorous engagement between historical analysis and collective memory. It explores the ways in which individual memories come under public ownership through the processes of "remembrance", only then to be transformed and hardened into a single dominant narrative which becomes the focus for public acts of "commemoration" and "memorialisation". It also considers the ways in which, in Edith Cavell's case, these processes were advanced both through deliberate manipulation by organisations such as the British War Propaganda Bureau and, more organically, through the receptiveness of British and Dominion citizens to a 'whitewashed' image of Cavell as national heroine.

The processes of storytelling are at the heart of this analysis. Very few forms of cultural exchange are as powerful as personal stories. Yet storytelling is a fragile medium, highly susceptible to deliberate distortion and propagandising. The commemoration of Edith Cavell is a series of overlapping stories, some more closely related to the historical evidence than others. The examination of inaccuracies within the narratives themselves is perhaps less important than the analysis of the possible reasons behind them.

The earliest remembrances of Edith Cavell were introduced to the public consciousness by a series of carefully composed statements from the British Foreign Office, purportedly intended to establish the "facts" of her case: she was a British nurse who enabled her countrymen to escape from occupied Belgium; for this she was executed in spite of the protestations of neutral diplomats. Existing at the same time as these stark official statements were Cavell's own writings and the memories of her family, friends, and professional colleagues; but these were, for the time being, almost invisible—her own voice rendered inaudible. In these personal remembrances, Cavell was both a "nurse who did her duty" and a human being who, because she was outraged by the German invasion of Belgium in August 1914, was willingly drawn into resistance activities.

Following Cavell's death, the official statements of the British government rapidly coalesced with a number of newspaper stories of doubtful provenance to produce a monolithic image of a patriotic "martyr" who died for her own country—Britain. And within a few years this image had hardened into that of a "national heroine", who was somehow both victim and victor.

Of all national heroines in modern civilisations, Edith Cavell is probably the subject of more biographies than almost any other. A number of these "Cavell biographies" claim to be serious texts based on rigorous research; others are more avowedly imaginative or novelistic writings inspired by Cavell's life. Both types can offer some insight into the ways in which Cavell's story has entered into the cultural psyche of British—and more generally Western—societies. One of the earliest of the more serious biographies, Adolphe Hoehling's *Edith Cavell*, based its claim to veracity on the use of a number of conversations with individuals who had known Cavell personally. But Hoehling's text is an acknowledged polemic—a biography with an explicit message. On its frontispiece, the author dedicated the book to "the many women who have given their lives in this twentieth century that freedom might live".[3] At times, the tone of

Hoehling's text is somewhat overwrought, and he often appears more interested to present a poetic than an accurate portrait.

Later biographers Archibald Clark-Kennedy and Rowland Ryder offered less partial and more deliberately dispassionate portrayals, though both relied heavily on witness testimony provided in response to newspaper advertisements.[4] Much more recently, Diana Souhami offered a twenty-first-century portrait of Cavell: an image of a tragic heroine whose early life forged the character traits that would both rob her of her life and win her enduring fame.[5]

Very few authors have chosen to step back from Cavell's own life and focus on the impact of her death. One very notable exception is Katie Pickles, who offers a detailed analysis of the world's reaction to Cavell's death through the lenses of gender and transnational history. In the introduction to her book, Pickles indicates her intention of "revealing and interpreting the sonic boom of empathy and outrage for Cavell and mapping and analysing the resulting commemoration of her".[6] This comment is revealing of Pickles' perspective on the processes that translated what was known about Cavell's life and death into a kaleidoscope of consequences—intended and unintended. What is most striking about Pickles' perspective is the extent to which she sees the world's reaction to Cavell's execution (and the consequences of that reaction) almost as a natural process, perhaps minimising the role of deliberate propaganda and myth-making in the construction of Cavell's public identity.

In this book I focus on the ways in which Edith Cavell's story was distorted and analyse the reasons for those distortions. I focus on the writings of biographers, and on the press handling of Cavell's story rather than on mapping the memorialisation of her death. I also, as mentioned earlier, focus more on the British reaction to Cavell's death than on the significance of commemorations in other countries—although the latter are referred to, and the relationships between the British and Belgian nursing professions are examined more closely.

Edith Cavell and Her Legend is, thus, less a gender and postcolonial history than a cultural history of the ways in which professional organisations, the press, and individuals preserved, translated, distorted, and transmitted a series of narratives based on evidence that was highly open to interpretation. It focuses on two areas of tension: first, the difference between the evidence for Cavell's highly complex character and motivations, and the simplicity of the "Cavell Legend" that emerged; and, second, the conflict between attempts to commemorate her life and

work—particularly within the nursing profession—and a desire to focus on the manner of her death and thus transform her into a "heroine" and "martyr" whose execution could be of value to the nation state.

Ultimately, then, this book traces two long processes: one through which Cavell's family, biographers, and nursing organisations attempted to remember her as a complex human being who experienced conflicting demands and desires, but who, ultimately, wished to be remembered as a nurse and patriot; and another, through which the state, powerful organisations, and the press deliberately selected, distorted, and embellished evidence relating to her trial and execution. In this way, it aims to cast light on the conflict inherent in two distinct processes of remembering, and, hence, to offer insight into the nature of commemoration—and of memory itself.

Notes

1. Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture*, Revised Edition (London: Verso, 2012, first published 1994), 8.
2. Pedro Ramos Pinto and Bertrand Taithe, 'Doing history in public? Historians in the age of *impact*', In: Pedro Ramos Pinto and Bertrand Taithe, *The Impact of History? Histories at the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century* (London, Routledge, 2015), 2; Jerome de Groot, *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture*, Second Edition (London: Routledge, 2016).
3. A.A. Hoehling, *Edith Cavell* (London, Cassell & Company, 1958), frontispiece.
4. A.E. Clark-Kennedy, *Edith Cavell: Pioneer and Patriot* (London: Faber & Faber, 1965); Rowland Ryder, *Edith Cavell* (New York: Stein & Day, 1975).
5. Diana Souhami, *Edith Cavell* (London: Quercus, 2010).
6. Katie Pickles, *Transnational Outrage: The Death and Commemoration of Edith Cavell* (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 2.

CHAPTER 2

Edith Cavell: Her Life and Her Death

Abstract The evidence relating to Edith Cavell's life and death is examined in this chapter. The paucity of "original" primary evidence and eyewitness testimony is recognised. The significance of evidence located at the Archives of The Royal London Hospital, the Imperial War Museum (which holds several collections of witness testimony), the Royal College of Nursing Archives, and newspaper archives (particularly those of *The Times* and *The Manchester Guardian*) is acknowledged. Four significant biographies are mentioned: those of Adolph Hoehling, Archibald Clark-Kennedy, Rowland Ryder, and Diana Souhami. Cavell's life is traced. Particular attention is given to Cavell's own writings, including a fragment of an original diary she kept in 1914 and 1915. From her prison cell at St Gilles, she wrote several letters, some of which have been preserved at the Imperial War Museum, London. She also spent some of her time studying Thomas à Kempis' *The Imitation of Christ*, before bequeathing a marked copy to her cousin, who had this version republished in facsimile as the *Edith Cavell Edition*. Edith Cavell was executed by a firing squad on 12 October 1915.

Keywords Edith Cavell • Biography • The London Hospital • History of nursing education • First World War escape networks • Belgian resistance

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Tracing the outlines of Edith Cavell's life and work is far from straightforward. Only a handful of primary sources—letters, journal articles, and a highly ambiguous diary—capture her own voice. Significant collections of materials record the eyewitness testimony of people who knew her during her lifetime. Yet, the preservation alongside these of a vast array of sources created by individuals who never met her has left a kaleidoscope of perspectives, some more authentic than others. The student of Edith Cavell's life is presented with a vast and confusing patchwork of primary sources, which have, in their turn, laid the foundation for a number of biographies, stage plays, and cinematographic outputs. In offering a narrative of Cavell's life and death, this chapter attempts to peel away the multiple retellings of her story, bringing to the fore those materials which enable her voice to break through, or which give voice to the accounts of those who appear to have been genuine eyewitnesses. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that my particular retelling of Edith Cavell's life history is necessarily brief, and follows a well-worn path that leads back to two significant repositories of primary material: the Archives of The Royal London Hospital, where much of the material relating to Cavell's nursing career is held, and the Imperial War Museum, London, which holds sources relating to her later years in Belgium and to her imprisonment, trial, and execution (including letters she wrote from St Gilles prison). Within these archives, alongside Cavell's own writings, are preserved the witness testimony of her nurses and associates, some of which is also published in earlier biographies[1] (Image 2.1).

Ultimately, much of what is known about Cavell's early life is based on hearsay. Cavell's most significant early biographers, Adolph Hoehling, Archibald Clark-Kennedy, and Rowland Ryder, all spoke to, corresponded with, and drew upon the memoirs of individuals who had known Cavell during her lifetime. Many of their source materials were of questionable provenance, and some of the details were, later, questioned or disputed by other eyewitnesses. All three had unrecorded conversations that they were, later, to cite as sources, and, although these conversations can be viewed as prototype "oral history interviews", they were conducted without the rigour or reflection that were later to be claimed by oral historians as the foundations of their methodology.[2]

Certain facts are agreed by all: Edith Cavell, the oldest of four siblings, was born in December 1865 in the village of Swardeston in Norfolk.[3] Biographers, from Hoehling in 1958 to Diana Souhami in 2010, emphasised the harshness of her upbringing. It was said that, although the family