**Waterloo, Brussels, and developments in humanitarian nursing as context for the emergence of the ‘lady nurse’.**

Alannah Tomkins

Arriving in Brussels in the late evening of 18 June 1815, Richard Henegan reflected on the response of Belgian people to the news that the Allies under Wellington had defeated Napoleon at the Battle of Waterloo. He observed wryly of public rejoicing ‘Had victory been on the side of the French, it is probable that the demonstrations of joy evinced by the populace … would have been equally vehement and more sincere’. Even so he admitted ‘greater enthusiasm could not have been displayed … Nor in the annals of war were the inhabitants of Brussels ever surpassed in the humanity and tenderness they exhibited towards the distressed wounded of all nations’.[[1]](#endnote-1)

The inhabitants of Brussels were not the first in the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars to nurse people to whom they were not related, and without recompense. The outbreak of war in 1793 saw householders across the European continent accommodate, feed and care for strangers who fell at their door or were billeted upon them.[[2]](#endnote-2) Numerous memoirs of English military men recall the attention given by landlords and landladies to the wounded in Belgium, Holland, Portugal, Spain and even France.[[3]](#endnote-3) What was novel about the days after the battles of Quatre Bras on 16 June and Waterloo on 18 June was the concentration of medical and nursing effort within a relatively small geographical compass, the vast numbers of men wounded, and the pervasive eagerness of civilians to offer help.

This article is not attempting to claim that the wounded of Waterloo received sufficient attention to their wants: commentators confirm that it took five days to clear the battlefield, and that lives were certainly lost as a result.[[4]](#endnote-4) The wounded lay unattended, or were the further victims of ‘cruel handling’ as plunderers stripped the dead and wounded alike of their clothes and other belongings; Prussian patrols (but allegedly not British) shot both their own men and French soldiers who were deemed so badly injured as to be irrecoverable.[[5]](#endnote-5) I will argue, though, that once in Brussels (or to a less marked extent Antwerp) the wounded were treated with as much care and effectual humanitarianism as was possible, by townspeople rapidly swamped by injured soldiers.

Testimony can be gleaned from the multiple memoirs of the events of June 1815, or from letters and diaries written concurrently with or shortly after the battle. Many such works have been published since 1815, if not in an entirely continuous stream. There have been pulses of interest in the Napoleonic wars not least since the late 1990s, when previously-manuscript sources have been edited for the first time, or early books have been reissued with a modern introduction and scholarly referencing. Gareth Glover and Andrew Bamford have been responsible for locating, enhancing and publishing or reissuing an entire bibliography of texts. The list of works used for the analysis here have been selected for their attention to human as well as military matters; multiple publications describe the Battle of Waterloo and its aftermath without touching on the medical or nursing care of the wounded.

Twenty-two works containing suitable narratives, published in the two hundred years between 1816 and 2017, are used extensively here. Eighteen are by men, as soldiers, staff, or medical personnel, one by a male non-military traveller, and three are by female non-combatant observers. This subset of published work has been drawn from an extensive survey of all of the Napoleonic war memoirs listed by Robert Burnham.[[6]](#endnote-6) My intention here is to examine small sections of numerous accounts to contribute to the historiography of nursing, in distinct contrast to their typical use by military historians to study aspects of fighting.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Over half of the authors were contributing to a literary phenomenon, the evolution of war writing into the published war memoir genre. Conflicts prior to the wars of 1793-1815 generated relatively few or truncated first-person accounts by combatants, whereas a profusion of publications from the start of the first war with France up to the mid-1830s signalled the popularity of the format.[[8]](#endnote-8) Clusters of narratives have been used to examine both the literary and historical potential of the field.[[9]](#endnote-9) A key feature of the memoir for my purposes is the lapse of time between historical events and the act of writing. Time gives the author the space and opportunity to tell and retell the story to themselves and others, to check facts, rewrite and forget, a process which facilitates the introduction of a specific agenda. Memoirs could even be disguised as something else: the modern editor of James Hope’s ‘letters’, for example, raises questions about whether the material was fashioned into letters as a literary device rather than copied from letters literally sent through the post. The memoir-as-travelogue was already well established among men who travelled to fight, and strove to write, among foreign scenes.[[10]](#endnote-10) At the simplest level, the writer’s agenda will have differed between those who wrote life-long autobiographies and others recalling only phases of life (such as military service). Participation in or proximity to one of the most notable battles of the century is likely to have influenced writes in others ways, too, as they strove to position themselves in relation to historic events.[[11]](#endnote-11) This context does not inevitably mean that they were writing fiction, but that they were shaping memory for specific stated, tacit or unconscious ends.

That said, these works are marked by a varied literary heritage.[[12]](#endnote-12) Sergeant William Clarke’s account was neglected for two hundred years in the belief that it was the text of a novel, rather than a memoir, explaining why its issue was delayed until the twenty-first century.[[13]](#endnote-13) Letters and diaries make up the remainder of the narratives used here. In contrast to memoirs, these are ‘diurnal’ writings with an immediacy that is less susceptible to the expression of subsequent agendas by the original writers.[[14]](#endnote-14) They are eminently open to shaping, however, particularly by non-authorial editors who can cut, interpolate, gloss and otherwise control the release of the material for publishers and/or ideological ends.[[15]](#endnote-15) At the same time, the determination to keep diaries or write letters by people under stress can be seen retrospectively as acts of defiance in the face of authority or (during wartime) the threat of sudden death.[[16]](#endnote-16) These competing motivations among authors and editors can make interpretation complicated. Most usefully for the purposes of this article, though, letters and diaries illustrate the emergence of the ‘mundane’ account of wartime experience, as it is only the writer who notes daily, repetitious occurrences that notices the minutiae of care.[[17]](#endnote-17)

The majority of writing which gives notice to nursing activity comes from rank-and-file soldiers, NCOs and junior officers. This remains the case for the wider literature of the Napoleonic war era, in that accounts of the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain fit the same pattern.[[18]](#endnote-18) The more senior the author in the army’s hierarchy, the less likely they were to give sustained attention to the minutiae of care, whether on the battlefield or elsewhere. Some memoirists even refer to prolonged stays in hospital without giving any detail of their experience of treatment or recuperation.[[19]](#endnote-19) Nonetheless among those who did describe nursing work, there is a remarkable coalescence between writers and across genres about the features of this work as carried out in Brussels. One or two writers might not be thought authoritative on their own: an array of writers, publishing at different times for different audiences represents a form of unforced consensus.

Historical writing about the pre-Nightingale nurse is chronologically patchy, and struggles to avoid the implication that the women employed were inadequate in some way. Brian Abel-Smith thought it ‘certainly unfair to condemn all the untrained nurses. There had been good nurses as well as bad before the Nightingale revolution’, but also thought that the activity required of them was ‘little more than a specialised form of charring’.[[20]](#endnote-20) Reassessments of Nightingale’s own role continue to find her predecessors generally deficient, and even Carol Helmstadter’s *Nursing Before Nightingale* focusses on explaining the low status of nurses in London hospitals from the 1820s to the 1840s, rather than challenging the basis for contemporary judgementalism.[[21]](#endnote-21) Anne Borsay and Jacques Carré have started to suggest alternative readings of nurse competence.[[22]](#endnote-22)

Analyses are bedevilled by difficulties of terminology (when was a nurse a sick nurse, rather than a children’s nurse?) and by a sparsity of evidence. Margaret Pelling questions Alice Clark’s assumption for the seventeenth century, that ‘Nursing which was not religiously inspired, not middle-class, not institutional, and yet pursued outside of the household for money, had to be a low-grade occupation, and could only be carried out by poor women’: the majority of her discussion, though, is devoted to the difficulties of defining sick-nursing, and to other negative stereotypes of women who nursed in this period (for example during the London plagues).[[23]](#endnote-23) Histories of women’s work have tried to contextualise nursing alongside other options for ordinary women with limited results, for nursing if not for finding women in the economy.[[24]](#endnote-24) The records of parish poor relief provide of evidence about the employment of poor women in caring roles including laying out the dead or monthly nursing, as well as nurse-keeping for the sick, and more may yet be done with these resources.[[25]](#endnote-25) The period 1750 saw three models of parish nursing in operation, whereby women were employed as a consistent component of routine relief for the nurses, as an intermittent but high-cost investment for selected paupers, or as a rare or diminishing feature of relief for the non-nursing poor.[[26]](#endnote-26) Under the first two regimes, women might obtain repeat employment by the same parish, or multiple engagements across parish boundaries.[[27]](#endnote-27)

Barely anything has been written about military nursing during the wars 1793-1815 or earlier except as an aside in the history of camp-following, where women are generally depicted as of doubtful virtue, or as likely to strip the dead for spoils as to tear up rags for dressing wounds.[[28]](#endnote-28) Histories of nursing during wartime have been drawn to the development of official services rather than their pre-history, doubtless owing to the survival of coherent archives for discrete organisations.[[29]](#endnote-29)

Similarly little consideration has been given to women in the middling ranks or above as nurses for their family members and others, not even as a theoretical feature of separate spheres ideology, despite the widespread understanding that the wives and daughters of propertied men routinely visited and dispensed charity to their poorer neighbours and tenants. Separate spheres has been used as an explanatory factor in the rapid acceptance of the Lady Nurse, but not as a strategy for the reappraisal of her unreformed predecessor.[[30]](#endnote-30) Histories of professional nursing from Lucy Seymer onwards place their origins within the continental Deaconess movement, and there are strong arguments to support the apprehension of the Kaiserswerth Institute as a starting point for professional nursing reform.[[31]](#endnote-31) Nonetheless there is further reason to consider the societal context which informed the reception of the women who were inspired by the Deaconesses. I will argue below that the swift success of the lady nurse of the mid-nineteenth century owed something to the European wars fought up to 1815. The capacity of women for nursing care was increasingly appreciated over the first half of the century, not least because literary precedents were laid before the British public in the form of war memoirs and particularly accounts of the aftermath of Waterloo.

**Brussels and the response to the wounded**

The care shown by civilians towards the wounded of Waterloo manifested itself in transport, accommodation, provisioning, medical supplies and emotion work. Transport was laid on by people who still had horses, and carts or carriages for them to pull; ‘every attainable or siezeable vehicle [was] unremittingly in motion’.[[32]](#endnote-32) Waggons entered the city slowly, driven by those conscious of the pain of their passengers, and then ‘thundered the contrary way’ to collect more.[[33]](#endnote-33) Families with both coaches and horses drove to the battlefield ‘taking cooling drinks to administer and bandages for wounds, returning to the city with two or three soldiers who were taken to their houses to be nursed’.[[34]](#endnote-34)

Official ‘hospital’ style accommodation in hastily-requisitioned churches and other large structures ran out immediately. Inhabitants therefore took both officers and rank-and-file soldiers into their own homes; ‘the people opened their houses, which literally became hospitals’.[[35]](#endnote-35) ‘There was hardly a door without a number, showing how many were lodged within’.[[36]](#endnote-36) ‘In the greater number there were not fewer than four, six, or eight’.[[37]](#endnote-37) A family in the Place de Louvain were said to have ‘received and tended no less than fifty wounded Englishmen’.[[38]](#endnote-38) Elizabeth Ord, an English woman in Brussels, wrote her own account in addition to the more famous one by her stepfather Thomas Creevey.[[39]](#endnote-39) She described how ‘we had five badly wounded Prussian common soldiers billeted upon us at 12 o’clock that night [18 June] and as we have no outbuildings we were obliged to lay them on the floor of our dining room, it was so late we could get no straw for them or could do anything but feed them. Poor fellows, their groans were miserable & we could not understand one another’s language.’[[40]](#endnote-40)

The recipients of this attention were aware of the generous spirit in which house-room was offered. Friedrich Lindau, a rifleman in the King’s German Legion who had suffered a bullet wound to the back of the head, recalled ‘I was treated in a very friendly way by my hosts’ even though he remembered being in a lot of pain at the time.[[41]](#endnote-41) Eventually even household accommodation was exhausted, and hundreds of men were laid in the streets on straw, whether under canvas or in the open, on every spare patch of ground.[[42]](#endnote-42) In this situation, any space which became available in houses was given first to the British or Prussians; French wounded were taken to hospitals or ‘those houses, whose owners may have shown a lukewarmness in the present contest’.[[43]](#endnote-43)

Provisioning comprised food, water and alcohol or ‘cordials’, clothing and bedding, supplied in person or at a distance: ‘Madame d’Henin sent her servants and money, and cordials to all the French that came within her reach; Madame de la Tour du Pin was munificent in the same attentions; and Madame de Maurville never passed by an opportunity of doing good’.[[44]](#endnote-44) From one home ‘nourishment is distributed with a bountiful hand’. [[45]](#endnote-45) It was as though people were competing to administer assistance, ‘particularly when they recognised men whom they knew, who had been quartered upon them the year before, or recently’.[[46]](#endnote-46) The pre-battle soldiers ‘growing from lodgers to be acquaintances, from acquaintances companions, and from companions friends’, inspired compassion for the post-battle wounded where the need for food was only one of the wants supplied.[[47]](#endnote-47)

The efforts of the Bruxellois were imitated if not entirely matched by the inhabitants of Antwerp. Wilhelm Schutte was a surgeon working at Merxem, just outside the city, who noted with a combination of surprise and approval ‘The Antwerp people take great care of our wounded; every day they send wine, shirts, bandages, fruits, foodstuffs, in general anything that one could ask for…thanks to the beneficence of the Antwerpers, everyone of the wounded has a straw mattress, two bed sheets and two blankets’. He went on to identify the Van Hauer family as particularly philanthropic, since ‘all we need do is give them a list of our needs, and the next day the things are in our hands’.[[48]](#endnote-48)

The loss of so much blood required vast quantities of lint and bandages to make dressings.[[49]](#endnote-49) Novelist Fanny Burney was on the continent to be near her husband General Alexander D’Arblay, who was serving with the King’s Guard (ie Louis XVIII, King of France) but did not fight at Quatre Bras or Waterloo. Burney remembered ‘we were all at work more or less in making lint’ and protested

‘Thousands, I believe, I may say without exaggeration, were employed voluntarily at this time in Brussels in dressing wounds and attending the sick beds of the wounded. Humanity could be carried no further; for not alone the Belgians and English were thus nursed and assisted, nor yet the Allies, but the prisoners also, and this notwithstanding the greatest apprehensions being prevalent that the sufferers, from their multitude, would bring pestilence into the heart of the city.’[[50]](#endnote-50)

The privacy of the care on offer was such that some men rejoined their regiments after their recovery to learn that they had been assumed dead.[[51]](#endnote-51)

This lay care was somewhat at odds with the exhaustion, marked by either cavalier, horrified or numb responses, among medical men. It was with evident bravado that Isaac James, hospital assistant, wrote on 29 June ‘we have had lots of legs and arms to lop off’ but his was a lonely example of such gusto.[[52]](#endnote-52) More typical was Haddy James, a surgeon treating the wounded in a house at the rear of the battle, who felt ‘it was all too horrible to commit to paper’: he was invoking the ‘inexpressibility motif’.[[53]](#endnote-53) Hospital assistant John Davy reflected in retrospect, in July 1815, ‘I trust that most of those who attended them [the wounded] became indifferent to life and in my own case at least, little regard for self remained.’[[54]](#endnote-54) Non-medical combatant Lieutenant William Hay summed up the difference between fighting and its aftermath as witnessed at a convent-turned-hospital: ‘Seeing suffering on the field of battle, where all are alike exposed and actively engaged, is nothing compared with this, which made me feel quite sick’.[[55]](#endnote-55)

Most notable, though, was the gender and social standing of the people offering practical and comfort work reported by multiple observers. Fanny Burney pointed out the broad social spectrum of those involved: ‘M. de Beaufort, being far the richest of my friends at this place, was not spared; he had officers and others quartered upon him without mercy’.[[56]](#endnote-56) Lieutenant James Hope recalled ‘Many of the most respectable ladies in Brussels stood all day at the gate by which the wounded entered, and to each soldier, as they arrived, distributed wine, tea, coffee, soup, bread, and cordials of various kinds’.[[57]](#endnote-57) John Davy reported seeing ‘people at their doors…taking the tenderest care of them [the wounded]. The most delicately brought up women, and persons of all ranks were occupied in this way.’[[58]](#endnote-58) The houses of the ‘best’ families were open, and the ladies busy ‘attending and dressing their wounds and nursing them like their own children’.[[59]](#endnote-59) Ladies also left their homes to deliver succour: ‘much to their honour ladies of the highest rank were not ashamed to traverse from hospital to hospital in the dead hour of night and employ their persons and property in this work of humanity’.[[60]](#endnote-60) Richard Henegan, an army commissary, claimed that ladies ‘took upon themselves to assist the surgeons in their painful duties’.[[61]](#endnote-61)

Some authors moved from general praise to specific examples. Hope was quartered in a house with a mother and two adult daughters, the latter of whom took it in turns to visit the city’s hospitals with cordials at eight in the morning and again twelve hours later. A family on Rue de l’Empereur made over two ground-floor rooms for the use of the wounded. One contained mattresses for the immobile, ‘and the other is a kind of laboratory, cooking, and dressing shop where all those who are able to walk about, have their wounds dressed by the young ladies’.[[62]](#endnote-62) Women’s activities were even credited with compensating for a paucity of surgical attendance, at the risk of personal injury. Edward Costello (a serjeant wounded in the arm) thought that ‘the humane and indefatigable exertions of the fair ladies of Brussels, however, greatly made up for this deficiency’ by bandaging, feeding and reclothing injured soldiers without regard to social nicety: ‘indeed, altogether careless of fashionable scruples, many of the fairest and wealthiest of the ladies of that city now ventured to assert their pre-eminence’.[[63]](#endnote-63) A young female member ‘of one of the first families in Brussels’ dressed the wound of a sergeant-major despite having a cut on her finger, and ‘her life very nearly paid the forfeit of her humanity’.[[64]](#endnote-64)

Rifleman Lieutenant George Simmons was quartered on the ‘very respectable’ Mr Overman, a German merchant and banker, in May 1815, and returned to the Overman house on the Rue de l’Etoile after Waterloo apparently with a fatal wound; he had been shot through the liver and was told he could not survive.[[65]](#endnote-65) It is not clear whether Simmons was nursed by a daughter or a servant of the house, but whoever the young woman was she won sentimental gratitude from Simmons. He wrote just a month later ‘My dear little nurse has never been ten minutes from me since I came to the house…For ten nights together she never went to bed, but laid her head on my pillow’.[[66]](#endnote-66) The ladies of the house supported him definitively and apparently physically in September, when he was sufficiently recovered to go out with them for a walk ‘which amused the people that passed’.[[67]](#endnote-67) Years later, in an additional memoir written for the benefit of his son, Simmons claimed that before Waterloo, Overman had instructed him to return to the house if wounded ‘& my wife & daughter will be proud to nurse you’. Here he confirmed that ‘one or other of the family never left me, night or day, until I was out of danger’ suggesting that the ‘dear little nurse’ had in fact been one of Overman’s daughters Julia, Harriett or Eulalie.[[68]](#endnote-68) Simmons provides a rare instance of a writer with a double voice, who both experiences and remembers their experience.[[69]](#endnote-69)

Among the memoirists, if not always the letter and journal-writers, there was clearly some retrospective idealisation of the women who offered assistance, in both the short and the long term: ‘the softest hands in each house smoothed the couch of the agonised warrior’ wrote literary editor John Scott sentimentally, as early as 1816.[[70]](#endnote-70) William Pitt Lennox who was a young cornet at the time of the battle later rhapsodised ‘Beautiful as woman is in all the charities of life, never does she appear so pre-eminently beautiful as in the chamber of sickness or death’ but forbore to reveal the identity of any of the Brussels ‘ministering angels’ for fear of their blushes.[[71]](#endnote-71) It is important to position Lennox’s comments in particular in the wider chronology of the nineteenth century, given that his memoir was first published in 1864, the only narrative that was released during the high period of nursing reform 1855-1885: he may have been writing in the knowledge of Nightingale’s reputation and her recommendations for nurse activity, thereby allowing his later understanding of nursing to infiltrate his memory of earlier lady nurses. It is also germane to recall that Lennox was a son of the fourth Duke of Richmond, who enjoyed something of a dilettante literary career.

The broader view of activity in Brussels somewhat qualifies the picture of ‘humane and indefatigable exertions’ to admit that generosity was not *entirely* unstinting.[[72]](#endnote-72) The Ord-Creevey household, for example, perceived limits to what the inhabitants could offer its temporary military guests. As soon as their billeted soldiers had been fed, an additional servant was hired to wash the men and make them comfortable until both men and mattresses could be removed to space in a church.[[73]](#endnote-73) Author Charlotte Waldie confessed that she purposefully did not act the nurse, when she might readily have done so. She excused herself on the grounds that she did not think it safe for ‘ladies’ to bind wounds, and thereby planted a seed in the imaginations of her very many British readers: tacitly, lady nurses would have been even more prevalent if they had been competent, or in other words trained.[[74]](#endnote-74)

But the consistency of accounts across different genres of personal writing confirms that, rosy retrospectives aside, the attention paid to the wounded was largely indiscriminate, delivered by ordinary women and ladies alike, and carried with it elements of what would come to be seen, 50 years later, as a Nightingale-style ideal of nursing, as expressed in her *Notes on Nursing – what it is and what it is not*.[[75]](#endnote-75) For example: a young woman of approximately eighteen was allegedly observed accompanied by a servant dispensing hot and cold refreshments. ‘She moved along with an eye of lightening, glancing about for those whom she thought most in need of her assistance’. On encountering a Highlander with an injured thigh ‘she knelt at his side, and gently moving aside his blood-stained kilt, commenced washing the wounded part; the Scotchman seemed uneasy at her importunity. But with the sweetest voice imaginable, she addressed him in English with ‘Me no ashamed of you – indeed I will not hurt you! And the wounded man, ere he could recover his rough serenity, found his wound bandaged, and at ease, under the operations of this fair attendant.’[[76]](#endnote-76) The unnamed woman combined the keen observational skill, lack of fuss or embarrassment, and clear soothing voice, recommended by Nightingale a generation or two later, but without the author writing in full knowledge of the nursing reform movement.[[77]](#endnote-77) These events were witnessed by Edward Costello, whose memoirs were first published in 1841.

Why did this near-ubiquity of nursing activity among the inhabitants of Belgium in the vicinity of the battle develop in June 1815? There was no mention in the accounts of the women being inspired by any role models, such as nursing nuns or Deaconesses, although it probably had some origins in the customary largesse of wealthy women towards the poor. I have suggested that some of the answer lies in the sheer number of wounded and the relatively short distance between the battlefield and the amenities of Brussels. Additional factors include the localised collapse of social barriers: Waldie describes such uncertainty and trepidation in Brussels until the decisive announcement of the Allies’ victory that all ranks spoke to each other regardless of former social divisions in order to obtain news. Furthermore, 18 June was a day of horror for inhabitants of Brussels according to Hope, so their gratitude that their ‘defenceless’ city had been spared, and not overrun by the French army, was made concrete. Combine these high-stakes emotions with a recent history of relatively light or comparatively amiable experience of housing billeted soldiers in the months preceding Waterloo, and the humane Belgian reaction to what was in front of their eyes becomes more readily comprehensible. Basil Jackson ascribed this to Christian charity (among the Catholic Belgians), and as a tribute to the character of the soldiers who had earned the good opinions of city folk before Napoleon’s 100 days.[[78]](#endnote-78) Doubtless Elaine Scarry would add that the function of soldiers’ suffering – to confer reality and authority on state conflict – had the auxiliary effect of drawing in Belgian observers as spontaneous participants in the memorialisation of the battle.[[79]](#endnote-79) The scale of injury precluded a recourse to mass stoicism, so often the alleged choice of the individual soldier, so the next best response to such widespread distress, loss, grief and bewilderment was generous sympathy: tending to specific wounds contributed to the healing of the body politic.[[80]](#endnote-80)

**One Lady Nurse, and the literary influence**

The most detailed account of nursing by a lady was written by the woman herself, a British rather than Belgian participant. Genteel Scottish woman Magdalene Hall married Colonel William De Lancey in April 1815 and accompanied him to Belgium soon afterwards. During the Battle of Waterloo William was struck in the back by a cannonball, and Magdalene was told first that he was alive, next that he was dead, and eventually that he was badly wounded. She travelled to the village of Waterloo, arriving on 20 June, whereafter William survived for a further six days.[[81]](#endnote-81)

On meeting her injured husband ‘He asked me if I was a good nurse. I told him that I had not been much tried’.[[82]](#endnote-82) Magdalene quickly lost hope of her husband’s recovery, but found consolation in tending to his wants. She made his bed, which was too short for him, as comfortable as possible by attention to bedding, and sat up with him at nights. Her nursing proficiency, and determination to fill the role, came as something of a surprise to the surgeons attending William De Lancey. A Mr Powell who visited continually was evidently disconcerted: ‘He had some difficulty to consider me as a useful person. At first he used to ask me to tell the servant to come; but he learnt to employ me very soon’.[[83]](#endnote-83) In response to her husband’s requests or the doctors’ recommendations she fumigated the room where he lay, fomented his limbs, and applied leeches. She became so adept at the latter that Powell (exhausted by medical duty) thanked her for anticipating him and asked her to apply them in future: ‘He said I was as good at it as any hospital nurse could be’.[[84]](#endnote-84) In saying this Powell was not being sarcastic, or bracketing the colonel’s wife with the stereotypical unreformed nurse. Instead he was consoling a woman soon to be a widow, and at the same time giving posterity a hint that perhaps some hospital nurses were much practised at (and valued for) routine tasks like fixing leeches.

The most poignant aspect of Magdalene De Lancey’s account derives from the intimacy of the comfort work she was able to undertake for her husband. When she first sat down next to him and took his hand, she recalled ‘This was my occupation for six days’ but this was merely one aspect of the support she offered. She tried to remain quiet and composed (if not falsely optimistic), suppressing her own distress and hiding her tears. She brushed his hair, and he stroked her face. On the last evening of William’s life, he asked her to lie in the narrow bed with him ‘to shorten the weary long night’.[[85]](#endnote-85) She was reluctant for fear of hurting him, but eventually lay down on the narrow bed to both of their satisfaction; ‘He was delighted; and it shortened the night indeed for we both fell asleep’.[[86]](#endnote-86) In this way Magdalene De Lancey provided something close to the ideal care for an upper-middle class man: he was her terminally-wounded husband, and she was his exemplary wife requiring neither encouragement nor any form of repayment to undertake any and all nursing work. In the terms of her memoir, the couple enabled each other’s emotional self-sufficiency, under the most extreme circumstances. Her account cannot be accused, though, of giving additional gloss to recollections of the ladies in Brussels, because her writing remained in manuscript only until the 1880s.

Other literary accounts had the potential for much greater influence. The humanitarian response to the wounded of Waterloo was referenced throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. This was achieved at first in piecemeal form, with the sporadic publication of military memoirs or documents, and of eye-witness accounts, rather than retrospective histories. *The Battle of Waterloo, containing the accounts published by authority, British and Foreign, and other relative documents, with circumstantial details, previous and after the battle* ran to at least seven editions in 1815 alone.[[87]](#endnote-87) The already popular genre of Peninsular-war memoirs, which began publication well before that conflict was over and combined the appeal of a personal account with a travelogue, was quickly joined by the stories of individual participants or observers of Waterloo. The quantity of material was such that, by 1830, the *Monthly Review* ‘suggested that the British reading public must be in possession of everything there could be to know’ about the wars after 1808.[[88]](#endnote-88) The quality of wartime memoirs improved too, particularly from the mid-1820s, when some volumes took on novelistic qualities.[[89]](#endnote-89)

Two of the most significant publications in terms of the Waterloo literature, and emphatic in their capacity for memorialisation, were those written by women. Charlotte Eaton née Waldie first published a description of her days in Brussels in 1817, and the volume was reissued in the early 1850s. The account is written in elegiac mode, where all participants were blessed with retrospective glory: ‘every private soldier acted like a hero’.[[90]](#endnote-90) She was therefore inclined to idealise the whole affair, but this does not make her claims about Belgian generosity any less significant. She made four explicit references to the ‘humane’ response to the wounded or the ‘humanity’ of attention to them and thereby coached readers to expect or recognise certain forms of selfless generosity from those who did not fight.[[91]](#endnote-91) Another literary heroine’s perspective was revealed when Fanny Burney’s diaries were released in successive volumes from 1841 onwards, with the diaries dealing with 1815 published in 1846. Burney dwelled on the same events as Waldie at less length, but with more personal investment in the scenes around her.

Therefore when W.M. Thackeray published his novel *Vanity Fair* in 1847-8, depicting incidents in the final conflict with Napoleon, the literary landscape was already well populated with contextual material.[[92]](#endnote-92) Furthermore, as Catriona Kennedy has pointed out, in the novel ‘the entire campaign is filtered through the experiences of the women left behind in Brussels’.[[93]](#endnote-93) The actions of Amelia Osborne and Mrs O’Dowd in caring for Tom Stubble at their hotel in Brussels consolidated the images of genteel (or if not genteel, then prosperous) women tending the wounded. The two woman ‘watched incessantly by the wounded lad’ who had received a spear in the leg at Quatre Bras on 16 June, and in doing so proved their bravery when ‘the cannon of Waterloo began to roar’.[[94]](#endnote-94) Amelia’s brother Jos Sedley leaves the city to a commentary of sarcasm from Mrs O’Dowd, and Mrs Becky Crawley makes a calculated decision to stay for her own potential advancement; but the two self-appointed nurses (both staunch for their combatant husbands, as well as attending the hapless Stubble) are selflessly immovable. Thackeray reminded his readers ‘All of us have read of what occurred’ at Waterloo, ‘never tired of hearing and recounting the history of that famous action’.[[95]](#endnote-95) The battle was additionally replete with famous consequences, including the response in Brussels. *Vanity Fair* drew together the existing narratives of Waterloo and assembled them in fictional form, and in doing so underscored both the emblematic significance of the battle for a generation and the scope for women as nurses at all social levels.

**Conclusion**

The streets and homes of Brussels in June 1815 witnessed a mass of humanitarian activity, before the word was widely used in the modern sense.[[96]](#endnote-96) An array of letter-writers and memoirists offer a consistent picture, albeit with different details, of widespread and generous treatment for soldiers of all nations. Social distances narrowed, but did not close altogether, as prosperous men and women worked alongside their poorer neighbours to offer assistance and alleviation to the wounded. Thus far, this history offers a vignette in the ongoing development of a humanitarian ethos in nursing. The question remains, does it also offer an important milestone in the acceptance of ladies as employed nurses? The female population of Brussels was not remunerated for offering care, and probably suffered material loss by feeding, housing and tending to the wounded and dying. Their actions were directed by charitable precedent, immediate necessity, and perhaps by spiritual injunction, but in the process they contributed a practical demonstration of care for the injured as a form of calling. Arguably, the events in Brussels, and other parts of Belgium in 1815, laid down not direct foundations for but sowed seeds of the possibility of lady nursing in the national psyche through the cannon of literature it generated.

1. Richard Henegan, *Seven Years Campaigning in the Peninsula and the Netherlands, from 1808-1815* (Stroud: Nonsuch, 2005) volume two, p. 336. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. This article is not concerned with either nursing by fellow soldiers or by camp-followers. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. John Blakiston, *Twelve Years' Military Adventure in Three Quarters of the Globe* (London: Henry Colburn, 1840), volume two, pp. 257-8; Peter Hawker, *Journal of a Regimental Officer during the Recent Campaign in Portugal and Spain under Lord Viscount Wellington* (London: Ken Trotman, 1981), p. 127; Andrew Bamford (ed.), *Triumphs and Disasters: Eyewitness Accounts from the Netherlands Campaign, 1813–1814* (Barnsley: Frontline, 2016) for the narrative of Dunbar Moodie, especially pp. 164-8 and *passim*. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Gareth Glover (ed.), *The Waterloo Archive: volume III British sources* (Barnsley: Frontline, 2011), narrative of Donald Finlayson p. 217-8; Charles O’Neil, *The Military Adventures of Charles O’Neil* (Worcester, Mass.: Edward Livermore , 1851), p. 253. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Gareth Glover (ed.), *A Scots Grey at Waterloo. The Remarkable Story of Sergeant William Clarke* (Barnsley: Frontline, 2017), p. 218; Andrew Bamford (ed.), *Reminiscences 1808-1815 under Wellington. The Peninsular and Waterloo memoirs of William Hay* (Solihull: Helion, 2017), p. 118. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Robert Burnham, ‘British Memoirs of the Napoleonic Wars’, [http://www.napoleon-series.org/research/bibliographic/BritishMemoirs/c\_british.html](about:blank), viewed 5 November 2019. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Among a vast literature see particularly Paddy Griffith (ed.), *Modern Studies of the War in Spain and Portugal, 1808-1814* (London: Greenhill, 1999), which comprises the supplementary volume IX of a modern edition of Charles Oman, *History of the Peninsular War* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1902-1930). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Robert Lawson-Peebles, ‘Style wars. The problems of writing military autobiography in the eighteenth century’ in Alex Vernon (ed.), *Arms and the Self. War, the Military, and Autobiographical Writing* (Kent, Oh.: Kent State University Press, 2006). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Neil Ramsey, *The Military Memoir and Romantic literary culture, 1780-1835* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016); Catriona Kennedy, *Narratives of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. Military and civilian experience in Britain and Ireland* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Samuel Broughton, *Letters from Portugal, Spain & France 1812 - 1814* (Stroud: Nonsuch, 2005). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Ramsey, *Military Memoir*, p. 36. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Kennedy, *Narratives*, chapter one, first section on ‘writing and fighting’ for a comparison of the literary conventions and typical features of letters *versus* diaries and memoirs. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Glover, *Clarke*. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Alex Vernon (ed.), *Arms and the Self. War, the Military, and Autobiographical Writing* (Kent, Oh.: Kent State University Press, 2006), p. 23. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Margaretta Jolly, ‘Myths of unity: remembering the second world war through letters and their editing’, in Alex Vernon (ed.), *Arms and the Self. War, the Military, and Autobiographical Writing* (Kent, Oh.: Kent State University Press, 2006). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Lynn Bloom, ‘Women’s confinement as women’s liberation: World War II civilian internees in South Pacific camps’, in Alex Vernon (ed.), *Arms and the Self. War, the Military, and Autobiographical Writing* (Kent, Oh.: Kent State University Press, 2006). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Lawson-Peebles, ‘Style wars’, p. 71. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. The research presented here forms part of a wider project which will consider nursing activity during wartime 1808-1815 across the Peninsula as well as in the Netherlands. My survey of the literature listed by Burnham therefore takes in hundreds of texts covering multiple locations; see Endnote 6 above. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Even among the memoirists cited here, O’Neil mentioned that he refused amputation but otherwise dismisses three months of his life with the half sentence ‘I remained in the hospital at Brussels until September’: O’Neil, *Adventures*, p. 255. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Brian Abel Smith, *A History of the Nursing Profession* (London: Heinemann, 1960), pp. 4-5. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Carol Helmstadter, *Nursing Before Nightingale 1815-1899* (London: Routledge, 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Anne Borsay, ‘Nursing 1700-1830: Families, Communities, Institutions’, Anne Borsay and Billy Hunter (eds), *Nursing and Midwifery in Britain since 1700* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2012), chapter 2; Jacques Carré, ‘Hospital nurses in eighteenth-century Britain: service without responsibility’, Isabelle Baudino and Jacques Carré (eds), *The Invisible Woman: aspects of women’s work in eighteenth-century Britain* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005). [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Margaret Pelling, *The Common Lot. Sickness, medical occupations and the urban poor in early modern England* (London: Longman, 1998), chapter eight (quote on page 183). [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Peter Earle, ‘The female labour market in London in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries’, *Economic History Review*, second series, XLII 3 (1989), pp. 328-353; Elizabeth Sanderson, *Women and Work in Eighteenth-Century Edinburgh* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996); Hannah Barker, *The Business of Women. Female enterprise and urban development in northern England, 1760-1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 62, 186; Alex Shepard, ‘Crediting women in the early modern English economy’, *History Workshop Journal* 79 (2015), pp. 1-24. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Jeremy Boulton, ‘Welfare systems and the parish nurse in early-modern London, 1650-1725’, *Family and Community History* 10:2 (2007), pp. 127-151; Samantha Williams, ‘Caring for the sick poor: poor law nurses in Bedfordshire, c. 1770-1834’, Penelope Lane, Neil Raven and Keith Snell (eds), *Women, Work and Wages, c.1650-1900* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2004). [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Steven King, *Sickness, medical welfare, and the English poor, 1750-1834* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), p. 162. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. King, *Sickness*, pp. 163-4. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Annabel Venning, *Following the Drum. The lives of army wives and daughters* (London: Headline, 2006), p. 195; Noel St John Williams, *Judy O’Grady and the Colonel’s Lady. The army wife and camp follower since 1660* (London: Brassey’s Defence Publishers, 1988), p. 55. For an honourable exception in the field of naval nursing, see Erin Spinney, ‘Servants to the hospital and the state: nurses in Plymouth and Haslar Naval Hospitals, 1775-1815’, Journal for Maritime Research 20/1 (2018), 1-17. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Jane Brooks and Christine Hallett (eds), *One Hundred Years of Wartime Nursing Practices, 1854-1953* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), p. 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Perry Williams, ‘Religion, respectability and the origins of the modern nurse’, in Roger French and Andrew Wear (eds), *British Medicine in an Age of Reform* (London: Routledge, 1991). [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Lucy R. Seymer, *A General History of Nursing* (London: Faber and Faber, 1932), chapter five; Helmstadter, *Nursing Before Nightingale*. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. *Diary and Letters of Madame D’Arblay* *vol VII* (London: Henry Colburn, 1846), p. 177. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Glover, *Clarke*, p. 202. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Bamford, *Hay*, p. 117. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. William Verner, *Reminiscences of William Verner (1782 - 1871) 7th Hussars* (London: Society for Army Historical Research, 1965), p. 48. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Gareth Glover (ed.), *The Waterloo Archive: volume I British Sources* (Barnsley: Frontline, 2010), p. 221 for testimony from hospital assistant John Davy. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Stanley Monick (ed.), *The Iberian and Waterloo Campaigns. The letters of Lt James Hope (92nd (Highland) Regiment) 1811-1815* (Dallington: Naval and Military Press, 2000), p. 271. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Basil Jackson, *With Wellington's Staff at Waterloo: the Reminiscences of a Staff Officer During the Campaign of 1815 and with Napoleon on St. Helena* (Leonaur, 2010), chapter five. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Herbert Maxwell (ed.), *The Creevey Papers* (London: John Murray, 1903) volume 1 pp. 224-239. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Glover, *Waterloo Archive*: *volume I*, p. 229 for memories of Elizabeth Ord. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. James Bogle and Andrew Uffindell (eds), *A Waterloo Hero. The Reminiscences of Friedrich Lindau* (Barnsley: Frontline Books, 2009), p. 179. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Anthony Brett-James, *Edward Costello. The Peninsular and Waterloo Campaigns* (London: Longmans, 1967), p. 154; William Pitt Lennox, *Fifty Years’ Biographical Reminiscences*. 2 vols. (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1863), volume one p. 248. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Monick, *Hope*, p. 272. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. *Diaries and Letters of Madame D’Arblay*, pp. 177-8. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Monick, *Hope*, p. 274. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Peter Coleman (ed.), *George Walton 1796-1874. The Journal and Diary of a Rifleman of the 95th who fought at Waterloo* (Studley: Brewin Books, 2016), p. 34. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. John Scott, *Paris Revisited, in 1815, by way of Brussels* (Longman, 1816), pp. 86-8. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Gareth Glover (ed.), *The Waterloo Archive*: volume II the German sources (Barnsley: Frontline, 2010), p. 210 for letter by Wilhelm Schutte. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Bamford, *Hay*, p. 117; Walton, *Rifleman*, p. 34; William Tomkinson, *The Diary of a Cavalry Officer in the Peninsular War and Waterloo: 1809-1815* (London: Frederick Muller; 1971), p. 319. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. *Diaries and Letters of Madame D’Arblay*, p. 177. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. Glover, *Clarke*, p. 201; Bogle and Uffindell, *Lindau*, p. 180. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. Glover, *Waterloo Archive:* *volume I*, p. 223 for letter from hospital assistant Isaac James, whose memoir is not one of the core twenty-one narratives used here as this quote is his only pertinent comment; O’Neil thought the readiness to amputate derived from surgeons being rewarded per limb removed, thereby offered a rare and cynical perspective; O’Neil, *Adventures*, p. 254. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. Jane Vansittart (ed.), *Surgeon James’s Journal 1815* (London: Cassell 1964), p. 37; Kennedy, *Narratives*, p. 19. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. Glover, *Waterloo Archive: volume I*, p. 219 for testimony of hospital assistant John Davy. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. Bamford, *Hay*; this disparity of reaction, of indifference to battlefield carnage but finer feeling in other contexts including hospital deaths, is somewhat confirmed by Joseph Sinclair, *A Soldier of the Seventy-First: The Journal of a Soldier of the Highland Light Infantry 1806-1815* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2010) p. 132, whose memoir is in addition to those listed above. Calmness during the height of battle is discussed briefly in Kennedy, *Narratives*, p. 75. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. *Diaries and Letters of Madame D’Arblay*, p. 178. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. Monick, *Hope*, p. 269. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. Glover, *Waterloo Archive: volume I*, p. 219 for testimony of hospital assistant John Davy. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. Bamford*, Hay*, p. 117. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. Glover, *Clarke*, p. 201; ‘Letter from a Private Soldier of the 42nd Regiment’, *Caledonian Mercury* 3 July 1815, for a description of the hospital at Antwerp, too, being filled with ladies and gentlemen. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. Henegan, *Seven Years*, pp. 336-7. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. Monick, *Hope*, p. 274. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. Brett-James, *Costello*, p. 155. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. Scott, *Paris revisited*, pp. 168-9. [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. George Simmons, *A British Rifleman: Journals and Correspondence during the Peninsular War and the Campaign of Wellington* (London: Greenhill, 1986), p. 368. [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
66. Simmons, *Rifleman*, p. 371. [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
67. Simmons, *Rifleman*, p. 373. [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
68. Gareth Glover (ed.), *The Waterloo Archive: volume IV British sources* (Barnsley: Frontline, 2012), pp. 203, 208, 222 for the account by George Simmons. See also Scott, *Paris Revisited*, p. 87 for confirmation of the involvement of wives and daughters rather than servants. [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
69. Vernon, *Arms and the Self*, pp. 24-5. [↑](#endnote-ref-69)
70. Scott, *Paris Revisited*, p. 87. [↑](#endnote-ref-70)
71. Lennox, *Reminiscences*, pp. 248-9. [↑](#endnote-ref-71)
72. *Ibid*. [↑](#endnote-ref-72)
73. Glover, *Waterloo Archive: volume I*, p. 229 for memoir by Elizabeth Ord. [↑](#endnote-ref-73)
74. Charlotte Eaton [neé Waldie], *Waterloo Days; the narrative of an Englishwoman resident at Brussels in June, 1815* (London: George Bell, 1888), p. 78. [↑](#endnote-ref-74)
75. Coleman*, Walton* p. 3 for assistance given regardless of the wounded man’s nation. Florence Nightingale, *Notes on Nursing – what it is and what it is not* (London, 1859). [↑](#endnote-ref-75)
76. Brett-James, *Costello*, p. 155. [↑](#endnote-ref-76)
77. Nightingale, *Notes on Nursing*, throughout but particularly chapters on ‘Noise’ and ‘Observation of the Sick’. [↑](#endnote-ref-77)
78. Jackson, *Waterloo*, chapter five. [↑](#endnote-ref-78)
79. Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: the making and unmaking of the world* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 114-115. [↑](#endnote-ref-79)
80. For stoicism and challenges to stoicism in the context of these writings see Ramsey, *Military Memoir*, pp. 17-19. [↑](#endnote-ref-80)
81. Witnessed by others of the memoirists cited here: Bamford, *Hay*, pp.114-5 and testified by Eaton [neé Waldie], *Waterloo Days*, p. 80. [↑](#endnote-ref-81)
82. Magdalene De Lancey, *A Week at Waterloo* (London: Reportage Press, 2008), p. 25. [↑](#endnote-ref-82)
83. *Ibid*., p. 32. [↑](#endnote-ref-83)
84. *Ibid*., p. 33. [↑](#endnote-ref-84)
85. *Ibid*., p. 46 [↑](#endnote-ref-85)
86. *Ibid*., p. 47. [↑](#endnote-ref-86)
87. *The Battle of Waterloo, containing the accounts published by authority, British and Foreign, and other relative documents, with circumstantial details, previous and after the battle* (London: J. Booth; T. Egerton, 1815) seventh edition, held in the British Library. [↑](#endnote-ref-87)
88. Ramsey, *Military Memoir*, p. 51. [↑](#endnote-ref-88)
89. Ramsey, *Military Memoir*, pp. 63-5. [↑](#endnote-ref-89)
90. Eaton [neé Waldie], *Waterloo Days*, p. 156. [↑](#endnote-ref-90)
91. *Ibid*., pp. 78, 99, 117, 154. [↑](#endnote-ref-91)
92. Including an account of the battle (if not nursing in Brussels) in literary fiction: Stendahl, *The Charterhouse of Parma* (1839), chapter three. Full publishing details – place, publisher? I can’t find the details for the first edition, probably because I don’t read French well enough. How about giving the reference instead as Stendahl*, La Chartreuse de Parme* (first edition 1839: new edition Paris: Adolphe Delahays, 1854), chapter three. Alternatively we could use an English, modern edition eg Stendahl, *The Charterhouse of Parma* (first edition 1839: World Classics edition Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), chapter three. [↑](#endnote-ref-92)
93. Kennedy, *Narratives*, p. 188. [↑](#endnote-ref-93)
94. William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair* (London: Bradbury and Evans, 1848), chapter 32. [↑](#endnote-ref-94)
95. *Ibid.* [↑](#endnote-ref-95)
96. ‘Humanitarian’ was used in a theological context from the 1790s, but it took a further forty years or so to acquire general usage with the modern meaning. [↑](#endnote-ref-96)