

THE GREAT WAR THROUGH WOMEN'S EYES

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ABSTRACT: How did women serving in World War I frame their encounters with mortality? While the sacrificial mother and the homefront sweetheart are familiar figures from the Great War, tens of thousands of American women who served overseas are left out of gendered depictions of sacrifice and loss. Although these valiant women willingly faced the dangers war brought, how they understood these experiences after the fact is less clear. An underutilized source, their wartime scrapbooks, provides insight into their responses. This article, the results of an honors undergraduate student project at Rosemont College, focuses on visual narratives of wartime nurses, two with Pennsylvania connections and one from New York, as examples of women's efforts to record histories of a war from which they are too often excluded.

KEYWORDS: Women, World War I, nurses, Pennsylvania

The Great War through Women's Eyes is a student-centered research project at Rosemont College that connects them with first-hand accounts left by women who served overseas under the US flag. As a professor, I began using genealogical research and military records to teach students how historians locate factual information about individuals. The heart of our project, however, soon shifted to far more intimate sources, the scrapbooks many women compiled to commemorate their involvement in the Great War. This kind of memorabilia provides glimpses into the personal sacrifices of a generation of women. Amid accounts of endless days spent mired in mud and the wry humor more generally associated with men in the trenches, we found celebrations of sisterly camaraderie and poignant lamentations over the death that inevitably surrounded these women.¹

This article introduces three American women who served in the Great War. Helen McClelland (1887–1984) (see fig. 1) of the Pennsylvania Hospital Unit in Philadelphia and Beatrice MacDonald (1881–1969) of New York



FIGURE 1 Helen McClelland in her World War I uniform, 1919. Courtesy the Pennsylvania Hospital Historic Collections (Nursing Collection Image—MG3.11—ff59).

City's Presbyterian Hospital Unit were among the first trained American nurses to arrive in France in the spring of 1917. Alma A. Clarke (1890–1963), granddaughter of Pittsburgh transportation mogul Charles J. Clarke, worked as a child welfare worker and then as a Red Cross Auxiliary nurse from January 1918 to June of 1919.² McClelland and MacDonald experienced military action, while Clarke cared for the most severely wounded soldiers during their long convalescences. They all created and left scrapbooks for us to study. Factual information about these three can be learned from online searches, but their feelings when compiling war memorabilia is more difficult to discern. This vignette, which focuses on their encounters with mortality, reads their scrapbooks as a form of visual autobiography (see fig. 2).³

In August of 1917, MacDonald and McClelland were serving at British Casualty Clearing Station no. 61 on the border between Belgium and France. During a German air attack, flying shrapnel badly injured Beatrice MacDonald. Helen McClelland tended her wounds until she could be taken to the operating theater. MacDonald lost an eye, but continued to serve through the remainder of the war. Afterward, both women received the Distinguished Service Cross, among other medals, in recognition of their bravery in the face of danger.⁴ When compiling her scrapbook of wartime memorabilia, MacDonald framed her history largely as a military account, while McClelland depicted herself only as a member of a medical team doing her duty (see fig. 3).⁵

MacDonald saw all nurses' service from a military standpoint. She pasted the Oath of Allegiance, a "muster roll" of nurses, and various military identity papers and orders in her album, alongside her many official letters of commendation. Furthermore, in an account MacDonald wrote of the death of nurse Catherine Irwin, which appears in her scrapbook, she notes approvingly that Irwin's grave was marked with "a soldier cross for one who died like a soldier." Beatrice MacDonald borrowed from the male military

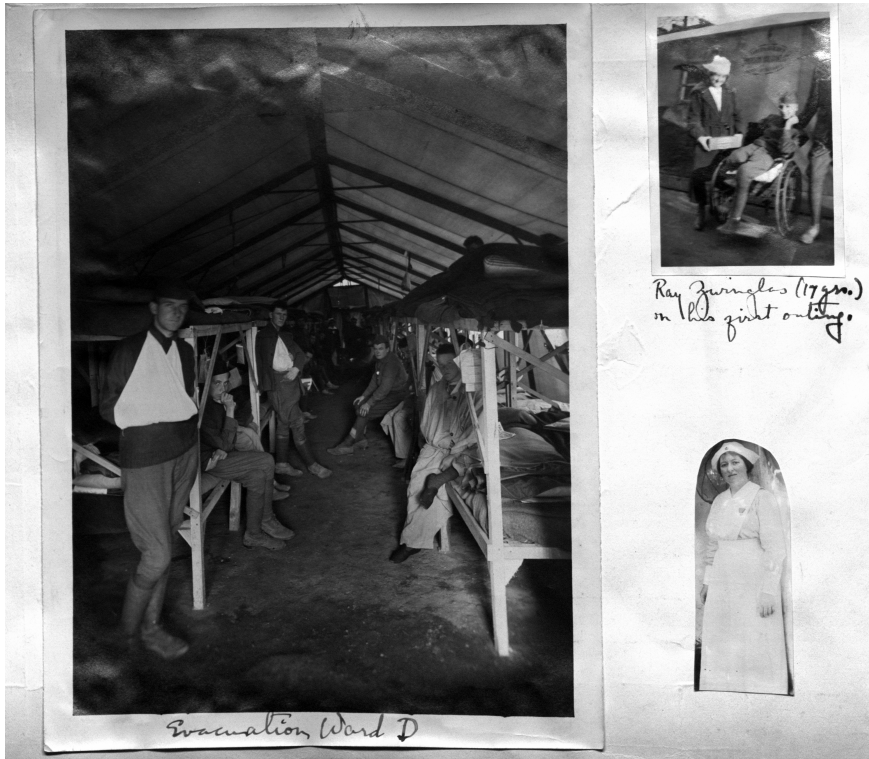


FIGURE 2 A page from Alma Clarke's scrapbook showing her in her nursing auxiliary uniform c. 1918. Clarke, Alma A. English Scrapbook. Courtesy Alma A. Clarke papers, 1914–1946, Special Collections Department, Bryn Mawr College Library.

model to frame wartime experiences because the female alternatives limited women to a second-hand sacrifice woefully inadequate for depicting either her own injuries or the death of her colleague.

Helen McClelland's scrapbook, on the other hand, offers a chronological account of the Pennsylvania Hospital Unit's activities from departure through homecoming, but omits any reference to her heroic exploits.⁶ While McClelland kept her handkerchief used to staunch MacDonald's blood, she chose to paste only a Red Cross armband in the scrapbook, emphasizing a nurse's common service rather than the individual acts for which she received military recognition (see fig. 4). McClelland also excludes from the scrapbook the much-publicized death of Pennsylvania Hospital nurse Helen Fairchild, buried with full military honors in France after she died following an operation in June of 1917. McClelland, who later became the nursing

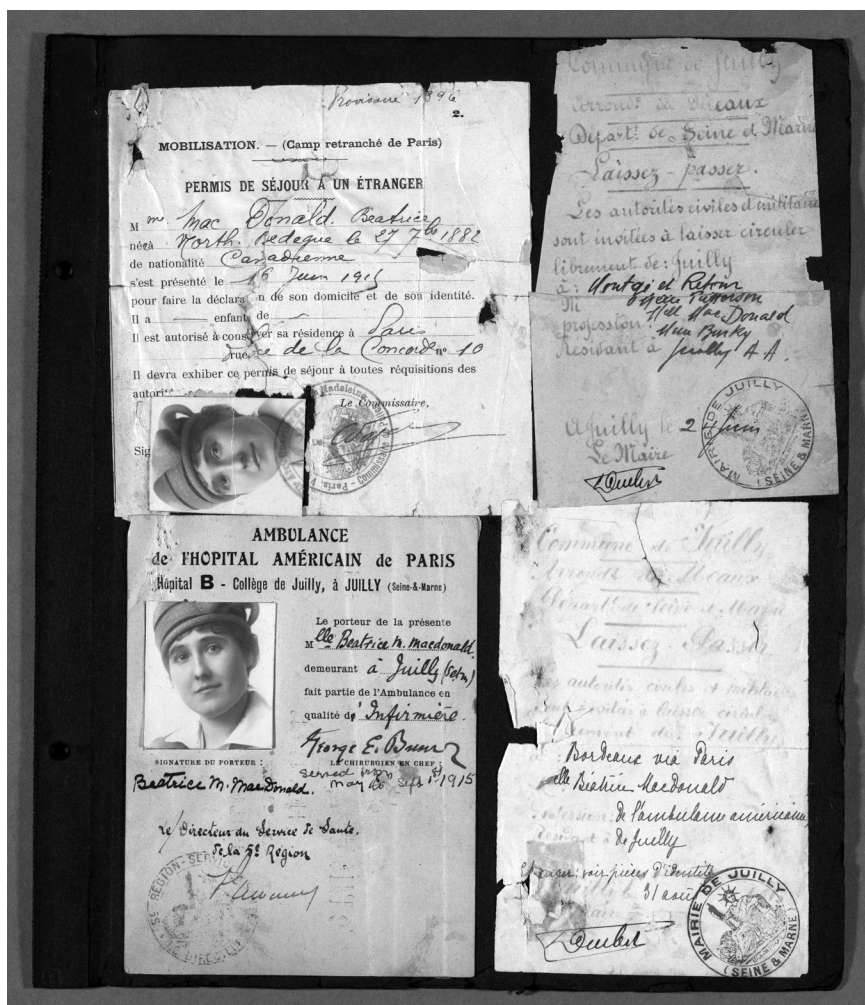


FIGURE 3 A page from Beatrice MacDonald's scrapbook showing her identification papers. MacDonald, Beatrice. Scrapbook, 1915–1918. Courtesy MC 697, Ann Fraser Brewer Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Courtesy of Myrna Babineau.

dean at Pennsylvania Hospital, may have considered the scrapbook, which she assembled years later, as an official record rather than an account of individuals. However, she also seems to have been less comfortable with the military narrative that MacDonald embraced. In a 1930 interview, McClelland is modest about her actions, which she describes only as “doing her duty.”⁷



FIGURE 4 Red Cross nurse's arm band. McClelland, Helen. World War I Scrapbook, MG 3.11, Pennsylvania Hospital Nursing Collection, Pennsylvania Hospital Historic Collections, Philadelphia. Courtesy the Pennsylvania Hospital Historic Collections (World War I, US Base Hospital No. 10, Le Treport, France, 1857–1985 [MG 3.11]).

facility in France, Red Cross Military Hospital no. 1 in Neuilly-sur Seine near Paris, headed by Philadelphia surgeon James P. Hutchinson. Unlike McClelland and MacDonald, who served at the front in medical facilities designed to treat men quickly before evacuating them, Clarke cared for the most severely wounded, who often convalesced for months. Her scrapbook reflects the close bonds she formed with some of the men she nursed, as well as her sorrow for the men who died under her care. One page of Clarke's scrapbook, dedicated to three Pennsylvania men, records her reactions to their deaths. Clarke carefully noted the date and place of the three men's burials within a few days in November of 1918. While it isn't clear that she attended their services, Clarke framed her notes with a pictorial funeral consisting of a clipped advertisement featuring the poem "Flanders Fields" with the dead rising to heaven, a photograph of an AEF military grave, and a clipping of the lines of "Taps" (see fig. 5). Clarke's scrapbook generally depicts the auxiliary nurse as a sister-in-arms who supports the troops, but here she functions as the typical female mourner while also adopting the position of the soldier who laments fallen comrades.⁹

These brief glimpses into women's scrapbooks of the Great War reflect the richness of these sources for historians as they explore how different women framed their wartime encounters with death. While historians have utilized

Neither MacDonald's nor McClelland's scrapbook documents the numerous casualties they encountered. This omission is not atypical. Pennsylvania Hospital Unit physician George W. Norris introduced his scrapbook with the notation that wartime sanity demanded a focus on something other than a war that "was such a harrowing, ghastly, and depressing affair."⁸ However, Red Cross auxiliary nurse Alma Clarke's scrapbook hints at her reactions to encountering death. Her scrapbook combines aspects of MacDonald's military narrative with McClelland's account of duty. Clarke served at the premier American medical



FIGURE 5 Page from Alma Clarke's Scrapbook. Clarke, Alma A. English Scrapbook. Courtesy Alma A. Clarke Papers, 1914–1946, Special Collections Department, Bryn Mawr College Library.

women's written accounts of the war, the visual accounts they left have been more difficult to access and interpret. We have considered them here as a form of visual autobiography. Although we have shared just three albums, there are hundreds more scattered throughout archives across America that digitization is making more widely available. In the New York Public Library, we located an extraordinary album created by Ethel Anderson that documents her band of buddies, seven nurses who served together at the front. We tracked down first-person accounts by several of her buddies (see fig. 6).

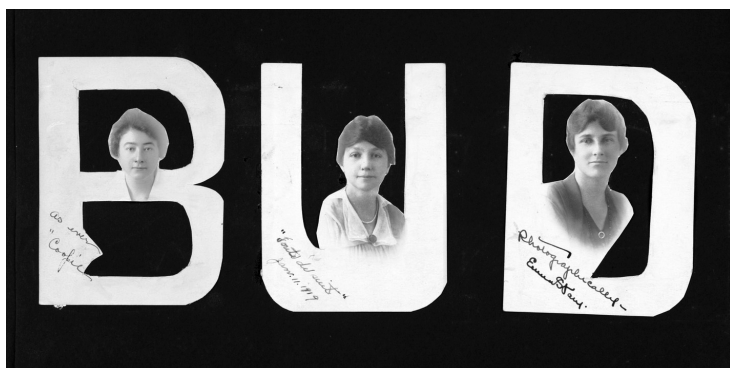


FIGURE 6A Two pages from Ethel Anderson's scrapbook spelling out "Buddies." The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Photography Collection, New York Public Library. "Photographs depicting nurses and Mocton Hospital, Massachusetts."



FIGURE 6B Two pages from Ethel Anderson's scrapbook spelling out "Buddies." The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Photography Collection, New York Public Library. "Photographs depicting nurses and Mocton Hospital, Massachusetts."

By overlapping the accounts of women who served in the same locations, as we do here with Beatrice MacDonald and Helen McClelland, we hope to write more complex accounts of the Great War that depict the nurses' service through the many narrative frames they fashioned to fit themselves into a history that too often excludes them (see fig. 7).

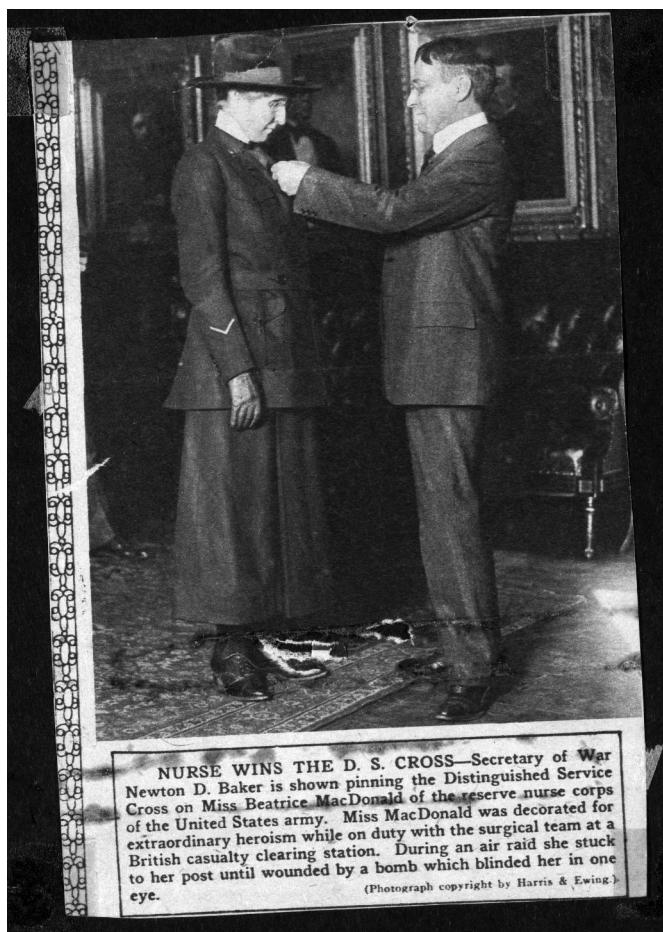


FIGURE 7 Beatrice MacDonald receiving the Distinguished Service Cross. MacDonald, Beatrice. Scrapbook, 1915–1918. MC 697, Ann Fraser Brewer Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts Courtesy of Myrna Babineau.

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NOTES

The authorial credit granted to students in this piece is a reflection of their participation in drafting this article, as well as the research they conducted. They are, in all senses of the word, true collaborators.

1. Michelle Moravec, "'Till I Have Done All That I Can': An Auxiliary Nurse's Memories of World War I," *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques* 42, no. 3 (December 1, 2016): 71–90.
2. Clarke was not a graduate of Bryn Mawr. How her papers ended up at Bryn Mawr is a fascinating story involving Katharine Hepburn.
3. The idea of scrapbooks as visual autobiography is explored more fully by Jessica Helfand. See Jessica Helfand, *Scrapbooks: An American History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).
4. Both women are listed in the Hall of Valor at the Military Times website: McClelland at <http://valor.militarytimes.com/recipient.php?recipientid=13445>; MacDonald at <http://valor.militarytimes.com/recipient.php?recipientid=16069>.
5. Beatrice MacDonald, Scrapbook, 1915–1918, MC 697, Ann Fraser Brewer Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts. The scrapbook is digitized and on line at <http://guides.library.harvard.edu/c.php?g=311100&p=2088108>.

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6. Helen McClelland, World War I Scrapbook, MG 3.11, Pennsylvania Hospital Nursing Collection, Pennsylvania Hospital Historic Collections, Philadelphia.
7. Vivian Shirley, "Vivian Shirley Learns from Heroic Nurse of the Horrors of World War," May 3, 1930, Box 3, Folder 67. News clippings re: McClelland's Awards and Heroism, Pennsylvania Hospital Nursing Collection, Pennsylvania Hospital Historic Collections, Philadelphia.
8. Judy Okun and Annie Brogan, "A Philadelphia Physician Encounters the Great War," Historical Medical Library of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia, <http://www.cppdigitallibrary.org/exhibits/show/great-war-physician> (accessed December 21, 2016).
9. Alma A. Clarke Papers, 1914–1946, The Special Collections Department, Bryn Mawr College Library. The permanent URL for her papers is http://hdl.library.upenn.edu/1017/d/pacscl/BMC_USPBmBMCM84. Her scrapbook is digitized online at <http://tritych.brynmawr.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/almaclarke/id/178>.