Gender, remembrance, and the sinking of the Marquette

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Abstract

Concepts of sacrifice and bravery are central to our rhetoric of remembrance about World War I. The example of the sinking of the Marquette and the subsequent drowning of ten New Zealand nurses in October 1915 demonstrates that these values are not inert, but instead, change to reflect contemporary ideas about gender and national identity. Contemporary narratives of the sinking centred on the experiences and deaths of the nurses, and built upon a wider culture of British martial values and gender expectations to represent the nurses as imperial heroines. The nurses’ deaths were framed as an extension of traditional gender ideas of maternal sacrifice. Conversely, the nurses were also hailed for demonstrations of masculine qualities of bravery and heroism in opposition to expected female behaviour and these were used to emphasise their connection to British civility. This narrative influenced the shaping of memorials after the war. New generations have reclaimed the story of the Marquette. While values of bravery and sacrifice remain evident in the reworked narratives, they are re-inscribed with new meaning to reflect changes in national identity and gender relationships. The nurses are now celebrated as national and professional exemplars and used to provide access for women into the Anzac narrative.

Keywords

Nurses, World War I, sacrifice, remembrance, memorials, Marquette

Introduction

Amongst the unfurling tragedy of the Gallipoli campaign, the sinking of the British transport ship Marquette on October 23, 1915 sparked national attention. The Marquette was torpedoed in the Aegean Sea by a German submarine as the ship travelled from Alexandria in Egypt to Salonika (Thessaloniki) in Greece. Along with its regular cargo of troops, ammunition, and mules, the Marquette was carrying the No. 1 New Zealand Stationary Hospital, New Zealand’s contribution to the British campaign in the Balkans. At this point in the war, combatant nations generally excluded hospital ships as legitimate targets, in line with the Geneva Convention (McLean, 2013); however, travelling on the troop ship Marquette without the protection of Red Cross markings, the New Zealand hospital staff were vulnerable to attack. Of the 32 New Zealanders who drowned, it was the deaths of 10 nurses that marked this event for special attention in the Aotearoa/New Zealand papers. ‘Disaster in Aegean Sea’ proclaimed The Press in their coverage of the event, ‘New Zealand Stationary Hospital Staff – Ten Nurses Drowned – Also Several Male Members of Staff’ (1915, p. 6). In New Zealand, the Marquette sinking became synonymous with the story of the nurses. The deaths of New Zealand women meant the sinking was singled out as a different kind of war tragedy. Male death in war was tragic but accepted (Macdonald, 1984); however, female death perverted the idea that war was fought by men for women’s and children’s protection (Pickles, 2007).

The nurses aboard the Marquette were a contingent of the New Zealand Army Nursing Service that had been established, through much lobbying, only in January of that year (Rogers, 2003). Many of the nurses were killed or injured when lifeboats were mishandled during the
evacuation, while others succumbed during the hours afloat in the Aegean waiting for rescue. The story of the nurses’ deaths, and the ordeal of survivors, was played out in newspapers across the country. Narrative of the event reflected British and colonial masculine martial values and expectations of ideal behaviour for both men and women.

Public narratives of an event reflect contemporary social mores, especially of those in the position to assert their voices and frame the ongoing process of remembering and forgetting. As Pickles and Wanhalla (2010) have demonstrated, the creation and commemoration of heroines is constantly redrawn, mirroring changing social and cultural expectations. The idea that remembrance has a ‘shelf-life’, that it is not static but re-discovered by each generation in their image (Winter & Sivan, 1999, p. 16), provides a useful framework to investigate the initial construction of the *Marquette* incident in the public imagination, and then, how its remembrance has been transformed across time. The events surrounding the sinking of the *Marquette* have been written into the narratives of both New Zealand women’s war experiences and New Zealand nursing history (Christie, 2014; Kendall & Corbett, 1990; Rees, 2008; Rogers, 2003; Smith, 1990). This article hopes to add to these histories while also building on a growing body of work that has investigated the socially constructed nature of Anzac memorialisation in Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand (Inglis, 1998; Sumartojo & Wellings, 2014). It attempts to gender this analysis by focusing on the concepts of sacrifice and bravery, investigating the way these values have been socially, culturally, and temporally constructed. These values, ascribed to the narrative of the *Marquette* sinking during the war, most notably in newspaper accounts, became important in how remembrance and memorialisation of the event was subsequently fashioned. Contemporaries adapted the ideals of maternal sacrifice, celebrating the nurses for illustrating traditional concepts of women’s work of caring for others. This depiction was combined with British and colonial principles of bravery that, while gendered in their execution, presented the nurses as imperial heroines. Memorials constructed after the war reflected these portrayals. In later generations, the ideas of sacrifice and bravery were used to emphasise the nurses’ professionalism and incorporate them into a nationally focused Anzac dialogue.

Whose voices were audible, and for what purpose, influenced the values associated with the developing narrative and subsequently the ways in which communities established their ongoing collective memory of the event. The New Zealand public experienced the war primarily through newspaper reports and letters. Reporting on the *Marquette* sinking illustrates the blurred lines between these forms, with newspapers publishing detailed eyewitness accounts from survivors’ letters. The *Auckland Weekly News* published a letter from an anonymous nurse describing her time in the water before her rescue:

> We were swamped again and again, until we were exhausted. It was pitiful to see the nurses and soldiers gradually becoming tired in their frantic struggles, and finally releasing their grasp upon the gunwale, floating for a few seconds, and then slowly sinking without a murmur. (“The sinking of the transport Marquette,” 1915, p. 53)

Testimonies such as these recreated the drama of the event for audiences at home and made the tragic events more personal. Reprinting of articles from metropolitan sources by regional newspapers helped to construct a nationally homogenous version of events (“Marquette disaster,” 1915; “The Marquette,” 1915; “The Marquette disaster,” 1915b). Reports of the sinking were subject to layers of policing around what was included and excluded.

Editing processes began with the survivors, only a handful of whose descriptions made it to the public realm. These accounts were influenced by the narrator’s powers of recall and self-censorship and the purpose for which they were writing. Letters then faced censorship and editorializing by newspapers, which operated under the censorship of New Zealand’s
War Regulations. In his letter recounting the sinking to his wife Evelyn, Captain Isaacs, Quartermaster with the New Zealand Hospital, illustrated both the desire of some survivors to make their accounts public and the issues of censorship: ‘The following narrative has been reported to the Press Association through Reuter, so I hope the censor will not cut out very much. What was on the ship besides our hospital, and where bound, I am not permitted to state’ (Smith, 1990, p. 34). Captain Isaac’s letter illustrates the motivation of some eyewitnesses to make their recollections of the event public. For other re-tellings of the event, it is harder to assess an author’s willingness to contribute to a public narrative. Some contributions to newspapers and magazines were anonymous, whereas others were published extracts of letters to relatives.

The line between personal accounts to loved ones and the public narrative was thin, as people back home shared letters and gave them to newspapers to publish. Barbara Mildred, a staff nurse on the second New Zealand hospital ship the Marama, writing home in January 1916, spelt out that her letters were for family only and to refrain from publishing them in the newspapers (Rogers, 2003). Conventions on behaviour and professional ethics also played a role in what was included and excluded. Hester Maclean, the Matron-in-Chief of the New Zealand Army Nursing Service during the war and editor of the nursing journal Kai Tiaki, believed that the hard work and stoicism of discomfort were the price nurses paid for doing the jobs they felt called to. She felt that public complaints about nursing conditions, especially during the war, undermined the recognition for nurses’ patriotic work and was ‘distinctly against nursing ethics’ (‘Nurses on the Maheno,” 1916, p. 19). A collective memory of the event was therefore influenced by these processes of inclusion and exclusion. Personal and official censorship and newspaper editorialising reflected contemporary ideas around empire, nation, and gender expectations, and these values therefore inevitably helped shape the public narrative of the Marquette sinking.

Sacrifice and bravery: Framing the ‘heroines’ of the Marquette

There was genuine shock at the deaths of the New Zealand nurses. The reaction to the Marquette deaths drew upon British ideas of masculine civility in war, which held that it was ‘essentially wrong to shoot a woman’ (Pickles, 2007, p. 39). The battlefield was a masculine space where displays of bravery and heroism were celebrated and considered proof of men’s commitment to their country and empire. Women’s duties to nation and empire were through an extension of their maternal roles. Nurses represented and negotiated an in-between space, a composite of the battlefield and the home. While they were part of the war, there was an expectation they would be separated from the war’s frontline because of their gender and role as medics. The Star voiced its ‘great shock’ at ‘women who were devoting their skill to the alleviation of pain, and working for the welfare of humanity, being among the victims of war (“The Marquette disaster,” 1915a, p. 4).

The sorrow and anger over the deaths of the Marquette nurses, as New Zealand’s first nursing casualties of the war, spurred anti-German sentiment (Macdonald, 1984). This was compounded by the fact that the sinking of the Marquette had occurred 11 days after the allied world had been horrified by the death of Edith Cavell. Edith Cavell was a British nurse shot by Germans in occupied Belgium for assisting stranded Allied soldiers (Pickles, 2007). Edith Cavell’s death provoked international outrage and was seen by the Allies as one of the greatest atrocities of the war (Pickles, 2006). As Katie Pickles’ work has explored, Aotearoa/New Zealand commentators linked the two events, drawing connections based on ideas of self-sacrifice and service to others.
The sinking of the Marquette was used to reinforce patriotic rhetoric of the ‘evil Hun’ (Haste, 1977, p. 79), an enemy killing without attention to chivalric codes of conduct. The horror of New Zealand women killed in action added to images of Germany as an evil aggressor, an enemy who broke the code of non-violence against women. Captain Harrison’s account of the sinking fostered an image of German callousness, not only causing disaster but also relishing it. He wrote, ‘As I was getting the nurses into the boat from the deck the periscope of a submarine was plainly seen about 300 yards off, and she [the submarine] watched through this evil eye for a long time’ (“The Marquette – a few impressions,” 1915, p. 3). This image of Germans gloating over the maritime deaths of women are echoed in reporting of the sinking of the Lusitania in May 1915, an event used in Britain and New Zealand to reinforce the un-chivalric behaviour of Germany (“Account by survivors,” 1915; “All Sorts of People,” 1915).

In contrast, New Zealand nurses, like Cavell, were represented as model imperial women through their dedication to duty and self-sacrifice.

New Zealand’s nationalism was, during World War I (WWI), inseparably intertwined with its identity as part of the British Empire (Woods, 1997). Since the Boer War, Rabel argues, New Zealand had developed an image of itself as representing the ‘Best of British’, excelling in imperial loyalty and the epitome of what British values could become when forged by the local colonial environment (2009, p. 249). Celebrating the exhibition of ‘British’ values was therefore also a way to demonstrate national pride. This sentiment was demonstrated by the Hon. G. W. Russell, Minister for Public Health at a Dunedin reception given for some of the returning Marquette survivors in January 1916. The war, he felt, ‘had displayed to the world many of the finer characteristics of the British race, and none finer than the womanly qualities which were the pride of our nation – especially of the women of New Zealand’ (“Arrival of the transport ‘Tahiti,’” 1916, p. 31). The story of the Marquette therefore became part of a much wider patriotic imperial discourse justifying the war.

Local communities used memorialisation of the Marquette nurses to connect themselves to these larger national and imperial communities. The Marquette deaths, framed using the language of sacrifice, were incorporated into community remembrance activities as exemplars of a New Zealand and British ideal; placed on pedestals alongside other imperial heroines and heroes. The Evening Post on January 29, 1916 advertised a parade and short remembrance service to be undertaken by members of the National Reserves in Upper Hutt, Wellington. The parade and service were in memory of sons of local residents as well as Edith Cavell, the Marquette nurses, and Captain A.J. Shout of the Australian Imperial Force, a Military and Victoria Cross recipient with local connections (“Church parade,” 1916). In October 1919, the Trained Nurses Association arranged an ‘Anniversary Memorial Service’. The Venerable Archdeacon Watson delivered a eulogy that drew on ideas of Christian consolation and the example of the sacrifice of Christ. The rhetoric of Christian duty and sacrifice was connected to ideas of national pride and an even broader sense of imperial duty. ‘Many among those who were present on this occasion’, Archdeacon Watson said, ‘knew well some of those nurses who had laid down their lives; knew their various talents, their various characteristics, but different though these may have been the one great gift, that of supreme self-sacrifice, had been common to all.’ These sacrifices, he instructed, had been made so that the ‘Empire would be a better Empire and New Zealand a better country’ through people’s imitation of their example (“Marquette disaster,” 1919, p. 3).

The ideal of personal sacrifice for a greater cause was part of a wider public culture evident in the decades before the war and ‘mobilised’ during it. Personal sacrifice was seen as the highest tier of valour in a chivalric code that defined a masculine British ideal of sacrificing your life for King and Country. A feature of what Loveridge (2013) refers to as a ‘cult of
sacrifice’ (p. 243) in New Zealand was the notion of ‘equality of sacrifice’. This belief that the impact of war should be evenly distributed amongst the community was, Belich (2001) argues, a strong feature of wartime rhetoric within Aotearoa/New Zealand. While women were expected to share the burden of this equality of sacrifice, gender expectations reserved sacrifice on the battlefield for men. For women to show their patriotic colours in New Zealand (Anderson, 1990), as in Britain (Grayzel, 1999), was to sacrifice their sons to war and their time and energies to patriotic causes. As Barbara Brookes points out (2016), some women used their role as mothers to protest the use of their sons in war, but for many, maternal sacrifice was seen as their patriotic duty. Reporting and memorialisation of the Marquette incident during and immediately after the war both drew on and reinforced this ideal of sacrifice, and did so within the bounds of gender conventions of the time. Commentators framed the nurses’ service as maternal duty, thereby establishing them as examples of ultimate New Zealand womanhood, and memorialised them as imperial heroines.

If women’s duties to nation and empire were an extension of maternal roles, then nurses, while single, represented an extension of this maternal care into the theatre of war. By WWI, nursing had become a respectable profession for single middle-class women who wished to pursue an ‘independent life’ (Pickles, 2007, p. 91). Nursing might have provided a new alternative to domestic work as a wife or daughter, but its respectability was based on more conservative gender constructs. Religious precepts of female duty to care for the sick and suffering added a religious sanction to the idea of nursing as a suitable feminine vocation. The submission of self through the practice of caring for others through home and hospital nursing had been demonstrated by women in vowed religious orders from early in the nineteenth century. The nineteenth century had also seen Protestant women use their belief in their godly appointed role as guardians of the family and home to extend their sphere of influence to embrace social and welfare reforms (Nelson, 2001). Professional nursing, therefore, was both an extension of the nineteenth-century idea of the self-sacrificing single woman and the ultimate expression of maternal qualities of healing and solicitude (Pickles, 2007). Conceptualising nursing as both religiously sanctioned duty and an extension of maternal care also helped to counter concerns about young single women viewing and handling male bodies. Thirty-one New Zealand women had served in the Boer War attached to the Army Nursing Service Reserve associated with the British Red Cross (Kendall & Corbett, 1990), but female presence in the theatres of war as professional nurses was still contentious during WWI. Nurses faced opposition to their presence in military hospitals from some politicians and from within military hierarchies. Making nursing ‘maternal’ helped to desexualise the presence of single women in the masculine spaces of war and often soften their existence to a male hierarchy, even if it belied the reality of their professional capacity and leadership.

New Zealand nurses faced hardships: long and trying working conditions, personal grief, and daily witness of the direct impact of bombs and bullets. These competent women, as Anna Rogers (2003) has pointed out, faced doubt about their abilities from politicians, army bureaucracy, and some soldiers who were unused to seeing women working in this context. However, the nurses were also constructed as ultimate and replacement mother figures. Nurses were often portrayed by soldiers in letters, poetry, and cartoons as earthly angels. As Rogers (2003) has summed up, nurses represented ‘good food, quiet, rest from the pounding noise of battle, a reminder of home, memories of maternal care’ (pp. 8–10). The nurses’ role as surrogate mothers, despite the insistence that only single women were sent as nurses, is evident in the following poem:
Volunteers for our boys

Some linger for a friendly chat,
Some call me ‘Mother’ – Think of that!
And often at the magic word,
My vision grows a little blurred
The crowd in khaki disappears,
I see them through the mist of years:
I see them in a thousand prams –
A thousand mothers’ little lambs …’ (Pugsley & Barber, 1996, p. 121)

While the nurses were undertaking professional medical roles, they also represented New Zealand mothers, wives, and sisters and the domestic and family nursing roles they informally undertook on a day-to-day basis in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Far from home then, while the soldiers were the ‘sons’ of the nation they were also the ‘sons’ of the nurses. Belief that New Zealand women should be given the opportunity to nurse New Zealand men formed part of the argument by those pressing for the establishment of the New Zealand Army Nursing Service in 1914. Dr Macdonald, the president of the Dunedin branch of the New Zealand Trained Nurses Association, argued that ‘there were none so well qualified to nurse our troops as our own nurses’ (‘Active service,’’ 1915, p. 13). Even before the establishment of the New Zealand Army Nursing Service (and in some respects, a significant part in helping to establish it), New Zealand women were keen to prove they were as patriotic as their men. By October 1914, over 400 nurses had already volunteered their services to the New Zealand war effort (Rogers, 2003).

Service and sacrifice, central to the nurses’ sense of identity and vocational calling, were not just undertaken on behalf of King and Country but also in the name of ‘their men’. This feeling was articulated by Margaret Rogers, one of the nurses who drowned in the Marquette sinking. ‘There is no romance about war’, she stated, ‘it spells suffering, hunger and filth, and how thankful I am every day that I came to do what I could to help and relieve our [emphasis added] brave boys.’ (‘The Marquette disaster,’’ 1915c, p. 2). Nurses claimed special connection with soldiers not just at a national level but with those who shared regional associations as well. In reporting on the Marquette sinking, The Press told its readers how Nurse Isabel Clark, who had drowned in the sinking, described in her letters home her special efforts to track down ‘boys’ from her home town of Oamaru in the hospitals where she worked (‘Personal notes,’’ 1915, p. 6).

The image of the Marquette nurses’ deaths as sacrifice for ‘their boys’ was enhanced by the repeated motif of nurses putting the rescue of troops before their own. The nursing journal Kai Tiaki’s coverage of the Marquette’s sinking in their October edition included a small piece entitled “Take the Fighting Men First!” Heroic Nurses – Splendid Sacrifice’ (1915, p. 198). The article paraphrased London’s The Morning Post, which quoted the captain of a French rescue ship. The article claimed that, as the French neared survivors, the nurses ‘with one accord, called out: “Take the fighting men on first!”’ This motif of sacrifice on the soldiers’ behalf was utilised in the retelling of different parts of the sinking narrative. An account by an anonymous nurse printed in the Auckland Weekly News on November 25, 1915 (“The sinking of the transport Marquette,” 1915), reproduced this story of sacrifice but placed it during the evacuation of the sinking ship rather than the rescue. The nurses she claimed ‘showed great courage and refused to go into the boats until most of the soldiers were saved: they stayed on deck cheering them on until only a few men remained. These helped the women into the boats.’ Framing the death of her fellow nursing sisters in terms of sacrifice helped to give their death some meaning, and the author eulogised that ‘It will be a comfort to the relatives of the nurses in New Zealand to know that they were so splendidly brave and self-sacrificing
in facing death.’ Less emotive stories such as that of a nurse insisting that a New Zealand orderly who was collapsing and drifting away be loaded into a rescue rowboat first (Kendall & Corbett, 1990), and of four nurses who, finding themselves still on board the Marquette in its final stages of sinking, took their chances and jumped into the sea (Rogers, 2003), are probably closer to reality and may have been the basis for more elaborate accounts of self-sacrifice. The propagation of the ‘troops first’ motif is more easily understood in the context of wartime ethos and recruitment propaganda.

As with Cavell, the Marquette nurses’ deaths were utilised for recruiting purposes and as civil instruction to encourage personal sacrifice amongst the public. The Evening Post used the ‘troops first’ motif in an editorial on November 24, 1915 to call for further volunteer soldiers. The sacrifice of the nurses was used to shame ‘fit’ young men who were not prepared to offer up the same sacrifice for their country:

New Zealand nurses requested that the fighting men should have first place in the boats. This is a record of supreme self-sacrifice which will have its high place in history for generations to come. Any hesitating young man of New Zealand, fit and free for service, who reads that cable message today, should either be proud to register his name for the Army, or - if he continues to doubt the need of his help - he should blush for his weakness every time he sees a woman, particularly if she is a nurse. (“Brave women,” 1915, p. 6)

The editorial also highlighted how this commendable behaviour was seen as different from male heroism, and in fact praised it as superior. It reiterated the theme of the nurses as heroines of empire by comparing their actions to that legend of British heroism, the charge of the British cavalry at the Battle of Balaclava during the Crimean War. The nurses’ sacrifice for others, composure, and endurance were, the Evening Post decreed, a ‘kind of heroism which surpasses the courage of men in a forlorn hope or dash in a valley of death, as at Balaclava’ (“Brave women,” 1915, p. 6).

Narratives of heroism, especially when they tested established gender conventions, were not without contestation. In response to the editorial, Marquette survivor Lieutenant Colonel McGavin felt compelled to present his version of events. He wrote a letter to the Hon. James Allen, Minister of Defence, which subsequently also appeared in the Evening Post. In his letter, he challenged the ‘implication that the men neglected the nurses and permitted them to remain on the ship while endeavouring to save themselves.’ This, he claimed, had created ‘no little indignation amongst the members of my company’ (“The Marquette,” 1916, p. 5). While he acknowledged the courage of the nurses, his version of their bravery conforms to more conservative gender roles, depicting feminine obedience as nurses gathered at evacuation points and were helped on with life jackets and into lifeboats. He claimed nurses would not have been permitted such acts of ‘theatrical’ bravery but would have been ‘placed in the boats by force’ if they had attempted to stay (“The Marquette,” 1916, p. 5).

Except for one anonymous account (“The sinking of the transport Marquette,” 1915), most of the nurses did not lay claim to the myth they had insisted on the rescue of soldiers before their own. In public, they praised their rescuers and men who had supported them in the water (“Loss of the Marquette,” 1915). In private correspondence, however, some nurses criticised male behaviour during the sinking. As Anna Rogers’ research has uncovered, following the publication of McGavin’s article, both Mabel Wright and Jeannie Sinclair wrote angrily to Hester Maclean, Matron-in-Chief of the New Zealand Nursing Service during the war, to challenge McGavin’s recollections and complain about the treatment of nurses during the evacuation. McGavin’s assertion that all nurses evacuated in an orderly fashion into lifeboats ran counter to the experience of some nurses who claimed that nurses had indeed been left on board to fend for themselves. To these nurses, Colonel McGavin’s official and public comments amounted to false statements that cleared some men of unchivalrous behaviour.
Maclean, always supportive of her nursing staff, sent a strongly worded protest to the Minister of Defence. Miss Wright considered it her ‘duty to speak out and let the truth be known’, but Hester McLean, perhaps more aware of the power dynamics of critiquing military officers, war censorship regulations, and her personal belief in presenting a professional public face for military nursing, requested Allen to not ‘open a controversy over this matter’ (Rogers, 2003, pp. 108–111). This debate around the nurses’ evacuation illustrates that moulding memory narratives was not an uncontested process. Who was designated as courageous therefore was also influenced by whose voices were heard and whose versions of events were silenced.

Bravery and heroism were also part of the British code of manliness that was celebrated during wartime. Women could aspire to these masculine values if it emphasised their British civility in comparison with German barbarity. In depictions of the nurses and their ordeals, bravery and heroism were demonstrated through stoicism and endurance. Self-control in a crisis and perseverance was something of a necessity for a successful military nurse, but the repeated praise for the nurses’ unruffled behaviour during the sinking suggests it ran at least somewhat counter to expectations of feminine emotionalism.

Lucy Delap (2006) has shown how discipline and composure during crises at sea were constructed in the Edwardian period as a value of British manliness. Most survivor accounts emphasise the calm assembly of nurses at their allotted lifeboat stations in the moments after the torpedo hit the Marquette. Captain Harrison’s account praised the nurses for exhibiting ‘not the slightest trace of panic. Every one of them showed a spirit that would not have shamed the bravest troops in the whole world’ (“The Marquette, absolutely no panic,” 1915, p. 3). Nurse Jeannie Sinclair’s account in the Auckland Weekly News corroborated Captain Harrison’s description of calm discipline. She described the nurses’ composure as they donned their lifejackets and waited in an orderly fashion for lifeboats to be launched, ‘There was no noise; not a single scream. I cannot think now how it was that we were so cool and collected’ (“Loss of the Marquette,” 1915, p. 22). Nurse Popplewell, in a letter printed in Kai Tiaki, hinted at the emotion that was being kept in check: while both the men and women undertook the evacuation calmly and quietly, both men and women were, she said, as ‘white as sheets’ (‘From Sister Popplewell,” 1916, p. 11). New Zealand reports of the sinking of the Lusitania had also focused on the calm response of female passengers as an illustration of the triumph of British values in the face of German hostility (“Account by survivors,” 1915). Mr Russell, who had feted the nurses for their exemplary feminine qualities, was equally able to celebrate their demonstration of masculine heroism. ‘It was a fine thing for this country’ he pronounced ‘that its women were showing the same pertinacity and bull-dog courage as our heroes at the Dardanelles’ (“Arrival of the transport ‘Tahiti,’” 1916, p. 31). Women could therefore be celebrated for values that were part of a code of manliness when it was necessary to accentuate a British imperial identity.

This is not to say that the praise for their endurance was not deserved. Survivors of the sinking spent over seven hours in the water. Many injured during the lowering of the lifeboats had then faced hours of clinging to makeshift rafts or scrambling in and out of lifeboats that kept capsizing. One nurse’s account described how she and others had ‘clung to our boat for seemingly an endless period, suffering intensely from increasing exhaustion, and holding on by sheer strength of will only’ (“Loss of the Marquette,” 1915, p. 22). Hester Mclean, in her role as editor of Kai Tiaki, applauded ‘the wonderful resource and coolness shown by the women’ as well as the ‘endurance also of these girls, many of them not specially strong’ (“Arrival of the transport ‘Tahiti,’” 1916, p. 31).

Endurance was not confined to their ordeal in the water. Commentators praised the survivors’ sense of commitment to duty and willingness to return to service. After initially helping to set
up the New Zealand hospital in Salonika, the nurses were taken back to Egypt for recuperation. While many who were fit enough were eager to return to Salonika, the decision was made not to send female nurses (Rogers, 2003). In December 1915, the transport ship Tahiti returned to Aotearoa/New Zealand with four survivors of the Marquette sinking. There to meet them was Hester Mclean, who felt that their ‘readiness to return as soon as possible to the work, and even to face the dangers of the Aegean Sea again, is worthy of the highest admiration’ (“Arrival of the transport ‘Tahiti,’” 1916, p. 31). At a morning tea given at Parliament before the ship departed again, Mr Russell spoke of the ‘heroism and courage’ that the Marquette survivors ‘had displayed in having asked to be allowed to go forward again as soon as possible’ (“Arrival of the transport ‘Tahiti,’” 1916, p. 31).

While the nurses did not claim the status of heroines for themselves, they repeatedly acknowledged as bravery the fortitude and strength of others. A letter from an unknown sister catalogued what she saw as bravery amongst the Sisters; nurses clinging to wreckage for hours until overcome by ‘exhaustion and cold’, Sisters Popplewell and Walker supporting their friend until she could not hold on any longer, Sister Hildyard singing ‘Tipperary’ and ‘Are We Down Hearted’ while in the water before she died of a heart attack (“Extracts from Sister _____’s letter,” 1916, p. 10). Despite stories of bravery and heroism, the nurses’ accounts also hinted at the turmoil and trauma underneath, especially of losing friends. ‘We are experienced soldiers now’, wrote Sister Edith Popplewell, ‘and should I daresay, feel proud, but I’m only a tin soldier.’ Her letter also described having to let go of her friend who had died – ‘It was all to [sic] awful and too harrowing to write about’ (From Sister Popplewell, 1916, p. 12).

Surviving nurses may not have felt themselves to be heroines, but the nurses who had been on the Marquette were incorporated into a wider imperial narrative that celebrated them as examples of the best of imperial womanhood. As in Britain, New Zealand had to negotiate the entrance of women into previously male spheres of activity. In New Zealand, the war enabled women to enter occupations previously the domain of men (Coney, 1993). This was balanced against an anxiety over the need to safeguard motherhood and reinforce traditional gender roles (Grayzel, 1999). Nurses were accepted in the masculine theatre of war by presenting them as an extension of maternal care. The media’s motivations to support the war and to reconfirm gender roles helped shape a narrative where the nurses were the key protagonists and marked out as exceptional women who had displayed the feminine virtue of maternal sacrifice and, equally, demonstrated masculine traits of bravery through self-control and endurance. However, it was permissible for nurses to exhibit masculine traits of bravery and courage in a sphere of war if it emphasised their Britishness and reinforced patriotic propaganda of an uncivilised enemy. This portrayal of the nurses, while wrapped up in the context of the time, continued to influence future portrayals and the ways in which communities sought to remember them.

**Memory and memorials**

In the two decades following WWI, Aotearoa/New Zealand, like other belligerent nations, built war memorials around the country in a campaign of communal memory making (Inglis, 1998). More than just silent stone testimonials to past actions, these memorials reveal as much – if not more – about the groups that constructed them and the values they identified with, than the event they memorialise (Maclean & Phillips, 1990). The values that framed communities’ experiences of war were reflected in the memorials they built and helped to justify their losses. The memorials to the nurses of the Marquette at once preserved the wartime narrative of the nurses as imperial heroines and allowed communities to reinterpret the values of sacrifice and bravery.
Like New Zealand soldiers who died overseas, the nurses who drowned during the Marquette sinking were commemorated in Commonwealth war graves and memorials. Nurse Margaret Rogers, whose body was recovered, was buried in a British Cemetery in Kalamaria. The remaining nine nurses are commemorated, alongside the other British and New Zealand casualties, on the Mikra Memorial in the British cemetery at Thessaloniki in Greece (Rogers, 2003). Within Aotearoa/New Zealand, there is no single national memorial to all New Zealanders who died on the Marquette. Instead, individuals were commemorated on local war memorials and through the commemorations of the professional communities of civilian and army nurses.

Local communities claimed identity with the nurses for a variety of reasons, from family association and birth through to nurses having trained or lived in the district before the war. This sense of shared identity prompted local communities to memorialise the Marquette nurses. For some local communities, this was by incorporating the New Zealand Army Nursing Service Sisters who had died in service overseas into their memorials to male soldiers. In Oamaru, an oak tree was dedicated to Nurse Isabel Clark, part of a planting of 400 oak trees to commemorate servicemen from the district (New Zealand History, n.d. a,b). Waimate claimed a connection through local families with five of the nurses who were lost in the Marquette sinking. The town set its flags to half-mast on November 4, 1915 in honour of those killed in the tragedy, and the local paper described the sense of ‘gloom over the town’ (“Some of the nurses, gloom in Waimate,” 1915, p. 8). However, when the official war memorial was built after the war, Waimate chose to name only three of the nurses connected with the town (New Zealand History, n.d. c). It was the communities constructing the memorials, not those they memorialised, who determined community identity and inclusion. This meant that an individual could therefore be included by more than one community in their memorials. One such is Nurse Catherine Fox, who is commemorated in Waimate, along with Nurses Brown and Gorman, as well as in the Auckland War Memorial Museum’s World War I Hall of Memories with Nurse Margaret Rogers (Online Cenotaph He Toa Taumata Rau, n.d. a,b).

Community plays an important role in the creation and preservation of memorials through re-telling old narratives and re-inscribing new meanings. The example of the monument constructed to honour the Marquette nurses by Miss Evelyn Dasent in Karori, Wellington, is illustrative of what Winter and Sivan have termed the ‘shelf-life’ of memory: the concept that public memory fades over time unless it is constantly re-inscribed with meaning by future generations (1999, p. 16). This private commemoration consisted of an arched gateway, constructed as part of her property’s front fence when she built the house in 1925. Plaques listed the names of the drowned nurses and the words ‘The Gateway of Life is Death’ and ‘To Him be the Glory, To Them Eternal Peace.’ We are left to guess at Miss Dasent’s motivations for erecting the monument. As far as can be determined, she had no link to the nursing profession or any personal connection to the nurses (Smith, 1990). However, the sinking of the Marquette obviously affected her deeply. Without a community to retell the narrative of the memorial, subsequent owners had no connection to the gateway as a monument of sacrifice and probably knew little of the events for which it had been erected. Consequently, the gateway was taken down by later owners of the house sometime after 1940.

The professional community of nurses was deeply impacted by the sinking of the Marquette and has been instrumental in maintaining the memorial narrative of these women. The nurses for WWI had been drawn directly from the civilian nursing profession, with over 400 nurses volunteering their services before the New Zealand Army Nursing Service was even formally established. There was a strong sense of identification and support from within the profession with those who served overseas (Rogers, 2006). A memorial church service held in Christchurch
on November 9, 1915 was noted for the attendance of over 200 nurses in uniform (Rogers, 2006, p. 112). Within the nursing community, there was a range of memorial responses from a National Memorial Fund to commemoration plaques in hospitals where nurses had trained or served.

Tracing the commemoration of the Marquette anniversary in newspapers provides another avenue for investigating the ‘shelf-life’ concept of memory. Initially, the anniversary of the Marquette sinking became a date around which nursing communities could remember the event and arrange fundraising, reunions, and remembrance services. An example was a concert held in Wellington in 1917 in honour of the Nurses’ Memorial Fund (Rogers, 2003). During the 1930s, the anniversary was commemorated through the establishment of ‘Nurses Day’, featuring parades and services in Wellington, which were covered by the local paper. In 1935, the 20th anniversary of the sinking, a parade was held at the National War Memorial in memory of the ‘nurses who were lost at sea’, and the bell from the hospital ship Maheno was added to the Carillon in honour of all nurses who had served during the war. The Evening Post retold the story of the sinking headed ‘The Marquette memorial Service – Anniversary of loss – Story of disaster’, and extolled the ‘splendid heroism and quiet obedience of the Sisters’ (1935, p. 10). However, by 1945, an advertisement for a bell-ringing concert to mark the anniversary was simply titled ‘Carillon Recital’ and listed the pieces to be played (1945, p. 3).

The most notable Marquette memorial is the Christchurch Nurses’ Memorial Chapel. The establishment of the chapel is testament to the power of the Marquette narrative within the nursing fraternity as well as the importance of local community agency in memorial creation. The red brick late Gothic Revival structure was built between 1927 and 1928 and stands next to the Christchurch Hospital. The location and form of the memorial are due to the strong leadership within the nursing community of Christchurch, especially Matron Rose Muir and Sibylla Maude. They had previously identified the need for a chapel at Christchurch Hospital and campaigned for many years for its establishment. They saw Marquette nurses as fitting for such a commemoration (Rogers, 2006). The Christchurch chapel provides evidence of continuity in identifying the Marquette nurses as imperial heroines into the 1920s. For both the Christchurch and nursing communities in the 1920s, imperial connections remained important. The Duke of York (later King George VI) was asked to lay the foundation stone for the chapel during his 1927 tour of Aotearoa/New Zealand. The ceremony reinforced once more the image of the nurses as models of personal and national service. In his speech at the opening, Medical Superintendent Mr Fox drew on the motif of self-sacrifice in the name of duty. He extended this beyond war service to include the service of nurses who had also died in peacetime, especially during the influenza epidemic (of 1918–19):

We have just reason to feel proud of the New Zealand nurses who proved their courage and devotion to duty during the long years of the Great War, and gave untiring service to the sick and wounded. In peace as well as on active services, our nurses have laid down their lives and it is to perpetuate the memory of the brave and faithful women that this chapel is to be dedicated. (“Nurses’ chapel, foundation stone laid, in peace and war,” 1927, p. 9)

Memorials constructed after the war therefore continued to be influenced by wartime values. However, these values and their associations with the collective memory of the Marquette incident and its commemoration did not remain static. Instead, while the trope of sacrifice remained a central part of commemoration, the meanings that this evoked and its relationship to contemporary concerns changed as the community moved forward. After the opening, the chapel became a place in which to commemorate others who had given dedicated service to nursing and medicine during their lives. Seven stained glass windows were added to the chapel between 1933 and 1971, each commemorating a local nursing leader, including the leading
campanile for the chapel, Sibylla Maude, celebrated for her establishment of district nursing in New Zealand, and Mabel Thurston, who had been matron-in-chief of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force in Britain during WWI. The windows, such as *Faith and a sick child* (1932–3), *The Angel of charity and a waif* (1936), and *Christ and children* (1938–9), illustrate themes of protection, service, and duty to children, the sick, and the abandoned. One window, *St. Agatha* (1967) commemorates Mary Christmas who had survived the sinking of the *Marquette* and returned to Christchurch to become the first tutor at the School of Nursing. One further window references the *Marquette* sinking: *The Angel of Hope* (1952–3) was commissioned in memory of the region’s pioneer nurses for a nursing reunion in 1951. The angel holds an anchor, representing hope, and is surrounded by an ever-changing sea, chosen in memory of the *Marquette* nurses (Ciaran, 1990). Images of service, sacrifice, and duty continued to be incorporated into the chapel, but these memorials honoured a professional history of care rather than imperial ideals. However, sacrifice for women, even within a professional context, was still framed within the expectations that women were the natural carers for children, the aged, and the sick, echoing the ideas of maternal sacrifice evident in the WWI narratives.

A remembrance service held at the chapel to mark the ninetieth anniversary of the *Marquette* sinking illustrates the way in which the nurses had come to be remembered within the nursing fraternity for their service and dedication to their profession, rather than as imperial heroines. A parade of historic nursing costumes during the service reinforced the idea that the *Marquette* nurses were part of a broader New Zealand nursing history and could be remembered within this as exemplars and pioneers of their profession. The attendance of the Governor General, Dame Silvia Cartwright, provided a link to the incident’s imperial past, but her speech highlighted the change in values associated with the *Marquette* nurses. She emphasised the nurses’ work ethic and their ability to maintain their professionalism under the most trying of circumstances, values that reflected the wider social change in women’s status. The nurses were no longer honorary mothers but professional women. Their bravery was no longer seen in relationship to masculine activity and framed as quiet endurance but claimed as action in its own right. These nurses were, the Governor General claimed, ‘determined and daring’ (“Remembrance service for lost nurses,” 2005, p. 1).

For civilian and military nursing communities, the sinking of the *Marquette* has continued to hold relevance, but its significance to the wider New Zealand story of WWI began to fade in the decades following the war. Preservation of an event in the collective memory and its continuing memorialisation requires a community to continue to attach meaning to the values associated with it and for it to hold some resonance with their contemporary lives. Collective remembrance is not, Jay Winter points out, a linear process (Winter & Sivan, 1999). Public associations with an event can wax and wane as communities rediscover a person or event that is illustrative for them of current social values. Two books central to reinvigorating the narrative of the *Marquette* sinking were published in 1990. John Meredith Smith’s (1990) *Cloud over the Marquette* combined detailed research with recovered first-hand accounts and has influenced many later re-tellings of the event. Sherayl Kendall and David Corbett’s (1990) history of the Royal New Zealand Nursing Corps highlighted the *Marquette* as a central feature in the nursing corps’ collective memory as the unit’s most fatal incident to date. Subsequently, Anna Rogers’ (2003) *While you’re away* and Peter Rees’ (2008) *The other Anzacs* have provided valuable contributions to regaining women’s overseas war experiences and incorporating New Zealand’s nurses into the wider Anzac historiography. A renewed interest by the public in commemorating Anzac Day and its associated symbols and stories as markers of nationhood (Ministry for Culture and Heritage, n.d., para. 3–4), combined with the development of social and women’s history and changing gender expectations following second-wave feminism, has
facilitated this rediscovery of the Marquette nurses in the last 25 years. Within these histories, the Marquette nurses are re-positioned as national and professional heroines, and, alongside all nurses who served, used to place women within the national Anzac legend. These histories, and the incorporation of the Marquette incident into the ongoing exhibit Scars of the Heart at the Auckland War Memorial museum (Pugsley & Barber, 1996) have placed the nurses in national or trans-Tasman narratives rather than in an imperial context. In these recent histories, the nurses are again being presented as heroines. However, this time, it is their professional skills, tenacity, and endurance of extreme circumstances that are praised (Coney, 1993). Their suffering during war alongside New Zealand soldiers, and in the service of New Zealand soldiers, is now seen as providing them with equal honour and position within the Anzac story, marking them out as national heroines. In an interview with the The Press about her book on New Zealand nurses in war, Anna Rogers claimed that ‘Gallipoli might have played a large part in forging a New Zealand character but the whole experience of New Zealanders suffering and New Zealander nurses tending to the suffering, in far-off lands, was a major factor’ (Crean, 2003, p. C5).

That the Marquette incident has again found a public resonance is evident in its incorporation into more popular modes of historical remembrance from television series (Cameron, 2014) to novels (Alterio, 2012) and commemorative cruises (Wild Earth Travel, n.d.). Geoff Allen, the playwright of Sister Anzac, a play centred upon nurses working on the hospital ship Maheno while it was anchored off the Gallipoli coast, articulates the desire people have to find new stories and new meaning in the larger Anzac narrative. ‘This is a very different World War I story’, he claimed, ‘women are hungry for stories about themselves’ (Maude, 2014). New renderings of the story both reflect and reinforce previous depictions of the Marquette nurses, while at the same time creating new interpretations of events. The latest literary incarnation of the Marquette incident is the novel Daughters of Mars by Tom Keneally (2012), who appropriates the events into an Australian story by substituting Australian nurses as the key protagonists. Themes of sacrifice and bravery are again presented in relation to professional duty, but in this re-telling Keneally has the nurses knowingly volunteering to travel aboard the ship (renamed Archimedes in the novel) despite it being painted as a transport rather than a hospital ship and knowing the risks of submarines and torpedoes (Keneally, 2012).

Questions around the New Zealand hospital unit travelling on a troop transporter rather than under the increased protection of a marked hospital ship, have increased in recent re-tellings of the Marquette story. This has added another dimension to the way in which the nurses are connected with the idea of sacrifice. In more recent versions, the focus on the inclusion of the hospital on the Marquette takes on a nationalistic tone with the emphasis placed on British bureaucratic bungling leading to tragedy for the New Zealanders (a common trope in popular discourse about Gallipoli and WWI in general). Standing in the sunshine, a social history of women in Aotearoa/New Zealand published for the centenary of women’s suffrage in 1993, raises the ‘mystery of why they [the nurses] were on the Marquette at all’ (Coney, 1993, p. 304). Anna Rogers goes further, describing the Marquette sinking as a ‘scandal’ (Crean, 2003, p. C5). Despite the increased agency ascribed to the nurses due to their professionalism and service, their deaths are presented as unnecessary and potentially preventable. In continuity with the initial reaction to the sinking, the nurses are again victims; this time of imperial army hierarchies, rather than German aggression. Whereas during the war the tragedy lay in female death during war, it is no longer their gender that renders them supposedly sacred during conflict but their profession.

The exhibition The scale of our war, opened in 2015 at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, presents an image of both the continuity and the change that is evident over 100
years surrounding the way we incorporate women into the histories of WWI. The exhibition is based around the stories of eight New Zealanders as it leads visitors through the timeline of the Gallipoli campaign. Each of these eight historical personalities is represented by an oversized fiberglass model, each portraying a different element of life during the campaign. The experience of New Zealand nurses on board the hospital boat Maheno, anchored off the peninsula and ferrying the wounded back to Egypt, is illustrated through the figure of Nurse Lottie Le Gallais, whose diary entries and letters become the portal for visitors connecting to these experiences. While the Marquette incident is mentioned briefly through a short journal entry, the figure of Lottie Le Gallais provides interesting parallels with contemporary representations of the Marquette nurses and affords further insights into how ideas of sacrifice are linked with our contemporary understanding and remembrance of women’s experiences in WWI.

The figure of Lottie is depicted in her nurses uniform, head bowed, crying, over a letter informing her of the death of her brother. Rather than a heroic depiction or one of action in the hospital wards, this presentation renders Lottie an allegorical figure of grief. As a representative of female grief, the nurse figure reflects again the idea that women’s sacrifice was through the deaths of their sons, husbands, and brothers. Sacrifice in this context is personal and emotional, not for heroic or imperial principles. Another model, a cut-away of the Maheno, includes a small-scale Lottie positioned in the same pose but placed within her cabin. The backdrop of the hospital ship provides the larger context to the personal event of her letter reading. This image of Lottie captures her in a small window of time in an extremely personal moment but represents, we know, the thousands of other similar moments that occurred for women (and men) throughout the war. The bravery of nurses, and by extension women more generally, is presented as the quiet bravery of putting aside grief to continue with work that was required to be done. A voice-over reading sections of Lottie’s letters and diaries finishes with her putting aside her letters and steeling herself to return to work. The theme of celebrating the nurses’ professionalism is evident, but this portrayal also echoes the initial responses to the Marquette sinking, where nurses were praised for putting the rescue of others before their own needs.

Conclusion

As Aotearoa/New Zealand, along with other belligerent nations, commemorates the centenary milestones of WWI, we are provided with an opportunity to reflect on the ways in which women’s war experiences have been incorporated into our histories and memorials and the Anzac mythologies around these. Women’s experiences and responses to war were complex and varied and, as Barbara Brookes argues, ‘span the spectrum’ from resistance to reluctant support and fervent patriotism (2016, p. 178). Nursing overseas was the wartime experience of a small number of New Zealand women; however, the figure of the Anzac nurse has become a symbol in modern remembrance for women’s sacrifice during war and their inclusion into the Anzac myth of national identity.

The story of the Marquette nurses has found a new resonance in recent times, ensuring its re-inclusion into wider narratives of New Zealand’s WWI participation. The reasons for the incident’s relevance has been adapted by each generation to reflect changing gender expectations and ideas of national identity. Initial coverage of the event constructed the Marquette nurses as the best of their sex and the best of their race. The survivors’ experiences of the sinking were co-opted for reasons of recruitment and civil instruction, and the narrative of the event that developed drew on contemporary gender conventions and martial ideals. The motif of nurses sacrificing their lives for male troops reinforced a picture of nurses as
substitute mothers, and by linking the drownings with the death of Edith Cavell, the nurses were memorialised as archetypes of imperial womanhood. The nurses were also portrayed as demonstrating bravery, endurance, and stoic calm in the face of crisis: values essential to the manly code of British chivalry and valour. These values, despite their usual use to reinforce masculine identities, could be bestowed upon the nurses as they emphasised their Britishness and therefore strengthened their status as imperial heroines.

The memorials constructed after the war continued to portray the nurses as both honorary men and imperial heroines. New Zealand’s assertion of its independence from Britain and changing gender paradigms across the later part of the century since WWI has seen the nurses recast as national heroines whose sacrifice and bravery highlights their professionalism. The remembrance of WWI in Aotearoa/New Zealand is intrinsically linked to the values ascribed to the Anzac tradition, of which sacrifice and bravery are central. An understanding of the ways in which these concepts are gendered and malleable will hopefully provide a more nuanced understanding to how we remember women’s experiences and memorialise their contributions.

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Notes
1 The chapel remains standing, albeit damaged and in need of repair, following the Christchurch earthquakes in 2010 and 2011.

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