

Edith Cavell:

famous nurse heroine



Edith Cavell in Brussels with her two dogs (1914).



George W Bellows, EDITH CAVELL DIRECTING THE ESCAPE OF SOLDIERS FROM PRISON CAMP, 1918. Canvas. Museum of Fine Arts, Springfield, Massachusetts, The James Philip Gray Collection.

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We so often give recognition only to certain well known nurses and tend to forget others who also made tremendous contributions of various kinds. One such brave nurse is Edith Cavell (1865-1915).

Edith Cavell, a famous nurse heroine of World War I

The story of World War I cannot be complete without mentioning a very famous nurse heroine, Edith Cavell*. She was an English nurse who founded a School of Nursing in Brussels, Belgium, in 1909.

Miss Cavell remained at the school when the War started even though Belgium was occupied by the Germans. During the War, she helped to organise an underground escape route for Allied Soldiers (mainly English and French). She also assisted Belgian males to escape to nearby Holland who were old enough to be conscripted into the army by the Germans. During all this time Miss Cavell and her nurses faithfully cared for all the sick and injured persons including Germans.

Arrested and executed for treason

Ms Cavell was arrested by the Germans for her part in assisting the prisoners to escape. Despite diplomatic efforts to obtain a reprieve for her, she was executed before a German firing squad on October 12, 1915 at 07:00. The charge against her was harbouring British and French soldiers and assisting them with escape from Belgium.

She did not deny any of the charges brought against her and faced her death with tremendous courage. She was detained for a period of approximately 10 weeks in solitary confinement.

Last words

It is reported that the following were her last words: **“I have no fear or shrinking; I have seen death so often that it is not strange or fearful to me. I thank God for this ten weeks’**

quiet before the end. Life has always been hurried and full of difficulty. This time of rest has been a great mercy. They have all been very kind to me here. But this I would say, standing as I do in view of God and eternity: I realise that patriotism is not enough - I must have no hatred or bitterness towards anyone.”

Edith Cavell and South Africa

With South Africa’s British links of the past, Edith Cavell was also honoured in South Africa. Various towns have streets and buildings named after her. There is also (apparently) a memorial of some kind in the military cemetery near the Belfast station.

Readers from that area are invited to photograph the memorial and forward the photograph and any relevant information to *Nursing News*.

Do you recognise this bronze plaque

During the past few months South Africa has been suffering from a spate of petty thievery of anything made of copper and/or bronze. Many priceless memorials and other valuable items made of these metals have been removed illegally (stolen) and sold to scrap yards for cash. South African history is being melted away in this manner!

A friend of DENOSA, Ms Marié Weeks, contacted the Editor recently with news of a bronze plaque picked up by her in a piece of open veld. There is a photograph of Ms Weeks and Ms Isabel Nel, Technical Editor, holding the plaque. It was apparently removed from a memorial in honour of Edith Cavell and the thief most probably intended to sell it as scrap metal in exchange for cash! Fortunately it was found!

Do you recognise the plaque?

Have you seen this plaque somewhere? If so, please contact us and tell us all about it. All other enquiries into the possible origin of this plaque has been unsuccessful so far. Ms Weeks has been hard at work with the Monument’s Council, the War Museum and a variety of individuals and institutions without any luck so far.

We would like to locate the legal ‘owner’ of this plaque with the view of returning it to them. Your assistance in this regard will be appreciated. If you have any information, please write to:

The Editor, Nursing News, PO Box 1280, Pretoria, 0001.✉



Ms Marié Weeks and Isabel Nel with the ‘stolen’ Edith Cavell plaque.

* Miss Cavell’s surname is pronounced with the emphasis on the first syllable.

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