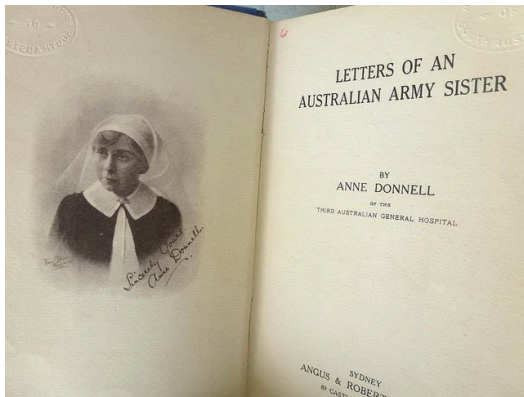


Book Review for the Royal United Services Institute of New South Wales.

'Letters of an Australian Army Sister', Anne Donnell, 1920. Published by Angus & Robertson, Sydney. 291-pages and plates. First Edition.

"I mustn't forget to tell you this bit of news", so wrote Sister Anne Donnell in one of her first letters home after embarking for war service with the Australian Army Nursing Service in 1915. In 1920, she published many of her letters in a book, reviewed here.



Above: The Frontispiece of the 1920 book. Credit: Paul Simadas.

Anne Donnell (1878-1956) left a wealth of archival material relating to her war service as a nurse in the Great War. That material included her diary, her letters, and many photographs she took of her work and the nurses she served with overseas.

Anne's letters home were published as "Letters of an Australian Army Nurse" in 1920. This book is one of the treasures held in the Ursula Davidson Library of the RUSI NSW at the Anzac Memorial and this year is one of ninety important books in the institute's library that is being showcased to coincide with the ninetieth-anniversary of the opening of the Anzac Memorial in Sydney in 1934.

Over 3,000 Australian women served as nurses in the Australian Army Nursing Service between 1914 and 1919 or with the British forces and in the Red Cross at home or abroad. There are too few first-hand published

accounts of that service. This is one of the best to read even though it is virtually unknown today being published only once and then in a limited-edition printing by the publishers Angus & Robertson in 1920.



Above: The book has the distinctive colour patch of the 3rd Australian General Hospital embossed on its cover. This was the parent unit of Sister Anne Donnell, Australian Army Nursing Service. Credit: Paul Simadas.



Above: The archival records of Sister Donnell in the State Library of New South Wales are pictured here. Credit: SL of NSW.

Her diary and the letters upon which this book is based were acquired by the State Library of NSW, apparently for a mere £5, as part of a wider programme for the acquisition of written personal records of war service. This

may have been part of, or in addition to, the decision by Angus & Robertson to publish this book in 1920.

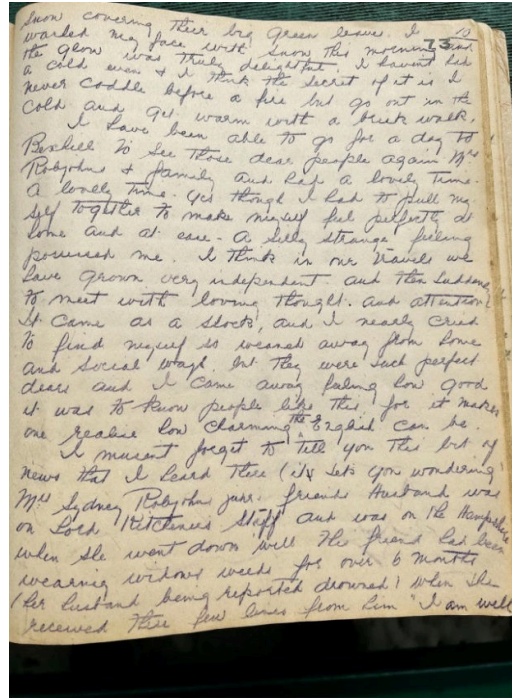
In her introduction Anne writes: 'When I said "au revoir" to all my dear friends in South Australia, I resolved to spare a few minutes each day to write a line or two, but the ship had scarcely left the wharf when I was well and truly down to it.' The resulting letters are described as 'circular letters that could be handed around' or shared amongst her contacts.

Anne's attestation papers describe her as being aged 39 in 1915, five feet two inches tall, of medium complexion with light grey/blue eyes and with brownish-grey hair. She was officially posted to the 3rd Australian General Hospital during the First World War but her actual service would be in many other military hospitals.

This book is a very good account. Sister Donnell served in Egypt (1915-1916), on Lemnos (1915), and then between both England and France (1916-1919) in casualty clearance, hospital ward, and surgical treatment appointments. Unusually, Anne served mainly in British hospitals (the latter in individual attachments from the AANS). Her accounts of service in France, particularly the overwhelming numbers of casualties she treated and the regular artillery and aerial bombing attacks that she endured, are the grimmest part of her writing.

Through her descriptions of her duties as a nurse for the 'poor boys', the reader finds out many interesting details about how military nurses were employed in the war, all of which were new to this reviewer. In addition to happenings at the front, Sister Donnell also attended investiture awards for nurses at Buckingham Palace in 1917 where she was one of a small group of Australians to be served afternoon tea by members of the Royal Family, she nursed at the famous No. 1 Australian Auxiliary Hospital at Harefield Park in England 1918, and even attended the opening

of Australia House in London later in that year.



Above: an extract from her original "circular letter" correspondence. Credit: SL of NSW.

On her return to Australia she was appointed as the matron of the South Australian Anzac Hostel at Glenelg and later went on to train as a mother-craft nurse in New Zealand, and ran the Infant Welfare Centre in Kalgoorlie. Sister Donnell died in Perth in 1956.

Along with her photographs, original diaries and letters, which are now in the custody of the State Library of New South Wales, this book remains a poignant personal record of one woman's war service and a reminder to us all of the commitments and sacrifices made by Anne Donnell and many other Australians in military service to their country in War.

Paul Simadas is a member of the RUSI NSW. In 2018, Paul co-launched with researcher David Perkins an on-line database recording the biographical details and service histories of many of the Australian nurses of the First World War. This includes Sister Anne Donnell.