

# The work of Australia's Great War nurses given voice at Mosman Library

*"From now and forever I am in love with all Army nurses. I was brought in yesterday, wounded and feeling frightened, and the first person I saw was a Victorian nurse. She smiled at me and said: 'Well soldier, I'll do what I can to help you but you'll have to look a bit more cheerful.' I was cheerful from that moment."*  
Unknown Soldier

Australia's leading historian of First World War Australian Army nurses will speak at Mosman Library on Wednesday 19 September. Dr Kirsty Harris is the author of *More than Bombs and Bandages* (Big Sky Publishing, 2011), the definitive account of their work.

*"Nursing is one of the largest professions for women in Australia; it struck me as a serious omission that a book didn't exist that revealed nursing practice in the first twenty years of professionalisation. My one regret in the project is that this book wasn't published twenty years or thirty years ago when diggers of the First AIF were still alive. They personally knew the value of the Army nursing sister in her red cape and were effusive in their thanks for lives saved. Now through this book we have the chance to marvel at the AANS' achievements."* Kirsty Harris

This is a rare opportunity to hear the nurses' story from an eminent historian. Join us for what promises to be a fascinating talk at Mosman Library.

Wednesday 19 September, 7pm-9pm  
Mosman Library, 605 Military Road, Mosman NSW Australia  
Free, but please RSVP <http://mosman1914-1918.net> or (02) 9978 4091  
Enjoy a glass of wine & finger food after the talk



## **Doing our bit, Mosman 1914-1918**

Dr Harris' presentation is part of an innovative project by Mosman Library to tell the stories of local service men and women ahead of the centenary of World War One. *Doing our Bit, Mosman 1914-1918* was awarded a \$30,000 State Government Library Development Grant in May 2011. The project, led by Dr Tim Sherratt [Mapping Our Anzacs <http://mappingouranzacs.naa.gov.au> and Invisible Australians <http://invisibleaustralians.org>], will use web technologies to link previously unconnected documents and information and aims to share the tools & techniques developed with other digital history & commemorative projects. More information: <http://mosman1914-1918.net>

## **Downloads**

Project logo set - <https://www.box.com/s/16491dbcb30b2ebe72fe>  
Project flyer - [http://mosman1914-1918.net/project/file\\_download/1/Doing\\_our\\_bit\\_DL\\_flyer.pdf](http://mosman1914-1918.net/project/file_download/1/Doing_our_bit_DL_flyer.pdf)  
Project poster - [http://mosman1914-1918.net/project/file\\_download/2/Doing\\_our\\_bit\\_Poster.pdf](http://mosman1914-1918.net/project/file_download/2/Doing_our_bit_Poster.pdf)  
*More than Bombs and Bandages* book cover - <https://www.box.com/s/a095afbc8482c66aad41>  
Dr Kirsty Harris photograph - <https://www.box.com/s/380e00dc3d9a9e2ae8c9>

**ABOUT THE SPEAKER**

Dr Kirsty Harris is an Honorary Fellow at the School of Historical and Philosophical Studies at the University of Melbourne. She joined the Australian Army in 1978 and served both as a private soldier and officer in Signals Corps (RASIGS) in Sydney [including Georges Heights, Mosman], Melbourne, Toowoomba and Wagga.

Although not a nurse, in 2002 she commenced her candidature for a doctorate in history, researching the work and work practices of nurses in the Australian Army during World War I. *More than Bombs and Bandages* is the result of that CEW Bean Prize winning study.

Her research interests include Empire women at Gallipoli in 2015, female convicts of the First Fleet, and the life of Frenchman and convict Francois Girard sent to Sydney in 1820 courtesy of the British Government.



**REVIEWS of 'MORE THAN BOMBS AND BANDAGES'**

*"... perhaps the clearest and most thorough account of [Great War] nursing I've read."*

*"This book is recommended reading for those looking for information about the Australian Army Nursing Service, but more importantly it demonstrates a wider picture of nurses and nursing during wartime, wherever and wherever they were, and is therefore a vital source for anyone wanting to learn more about all military nurses during the Great War." - Sue Light, Scarlet Finders*

*"When Kirsty Harris was asked by her younger sister to explain what their paternal grandmother, Bessie Proudfoot, actually did as a nurse in World War 1, she did not have an answer. So from that innocent question came this excellent book. Up to 3,000 nurses served overseas during WW1, under the banner of the Australian Army Nursing Service (AANS), serving in almost every theatre of war. At the outbreak of war, Harris found that there was little recognition of the difference between military and civilian nursing. Additionally, opinion was divided as to the value of nursing in a military environment. 'Some important Medical Officers do not think that lives were actually saved, but only that greater comfort was given to the seriously sick and injured, and that death was made easier,' wrote nurse Adelaide Kellett.*

*"Through extensive research garnered while completing her prize-winning PhD thesis, Harris debunks this notion and clearly illustrates the enormous contribution made by AANS members. Interspersed with many historical photographs, More than Bombs and Bandages is an overdue recognition of the hardships and prejudices faced and then overcome by the Australian nurses in World War 1."*

- Peter Masters, Australian Defence Magazine, July 2011

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**VOICES of the AANS: EXTRACTS  
from 'MORE THAN BOMBS AND BANDAGES'**

*The Colonial was a very sick Canadian lad of twenty-one years, suffering a serious g.s.w (gangrene) in the leg... The doctors, hoping to save his limb, waited almost too long, and the day arrived when the M.O. said to me: "No good, sister. No more delay. It is his life or his limb. It must come off tomorrow. You tell him, I can't." I hated my job and lacked courage until I was off duty and could return to sit beside him. Then I told him. He turned his head and buried his face in his pillow, whispering hoarsely: "Oh, my God! No, sister, I won't consent, and they can't force me. Promise me you won't let them. I would sooner die than hop about on one leg for the rest of my life." I talked to him of his mother at home, waiting. She had written to thank me for my care of her only child... Next morning he faced his ordeal with an amazing calmness of spirit. - May Tilton*

*Today I had to assist with ten amputations one after the other. It is frightfully nerve-racking work. I seem to hear that wretched saw whenever I try to sleep. We see the most ghastly wounds and all day long are inhaling the odour of gas gangrene. - Elsie Tranter*

*One of my patients was hit with shrapnel in five different places, his eye blown out, left arm blown off and other wounds on the back and body... I have about 156 dressings to do for about 30 one-armed men. - Sister [Queenie] Avenell*

The experience for war nurses could be as bloody, as frightening and as foul smelling as it was for some of the men in the trenches. The AANS dealt with wards reeking of the often stale smell of unwashed men, mud, blood, pus and debris of dressings. May Tilton at 3 ACCS Poperinghe in October 1917 described in some detail the nurses' enormous responsibility for bringing men back from the brink of death if they could:

*One day a Jock was brought to us, unconscious, pulse-less, and stone cold, yet still alive, after lying in the rain for hours with a piece of shrapnel in his abdomen. For hours our efforts to thaw him seemed hopeless. The M.O. said he "couldn't make it." but where there was life there was hope, and we won.*

*Men from Suvla coming in. Most awful frost-bitten feet. They had a terrible time. Men frozen to death standing up. Their feet are worse than any wounds. It makes you sick doing them, and they are so grateful for anything. - Olive Haynes, Lemnos, 30 November 1915*

*28/4/18 ...but truth to tell, it was not all through that pet phrase of the press 'devotion to duty' that we kept on working while the shells were screaming round. It was really much easier to keep on working than not. Being with others made us feel safer. You can't face these things alone - but with a pal beside you, you feel strong to face danger. If alone in your hut you live every moment in dread until the bombing is over. - Elsie Tranter*

*How we hated the beastly war! Sights and sufferings like these sickened us. The whole thing seemed such a ghastly muddle, engineered by a few men, sitting in safety and civilization, who never knew the horror, the agony, and abomination these poor soldiers had to bear. Fine types of men, they were; young, splendidly fit, and healthy. Then the war mowed them down; doomed them to spend their future with broken bodies, the long years marred by ghastly memories that would only die with them. How often they would say: "What is going to happen to me now, sister? What can I do with my life crippled like this?" - May Tilton*

Non-nursing work was just as important, like sourcing food for the patients – stout on Lemnos, champagne given at blood transfusions.

*We are all becoming expert thieves and at every meal take what we can - sugar, nuts, etc, from the table. - Elsie Tranter*

*We kept ourselves alive by the Red Cross issue of Ideal Milk, tins of coffee au lait, Huntley and Palmer biscuits. We, in turn, kept our patients alive by the same means plus soup made from dried cubes and cooked over an open outdoor fire in a dixie, bully beef, army biscuits, salty bacon, badly cooked porridge, prunes, rice and straw. - Nellie Pike*

May Tilton persuaded her doctor to bend the rules to provide the necessary ingredients for two birthday treats, even at the risk of incurring her matron's wrath:

*With about three eggs coming to the ward for patients on special diets, I had set myself a task. I set to work to collect eggs to feed thirty patients. Each day, I coaxed the M.O., Captain G. Robinson (one of the best), to add a few special diets to our daily orders.... at lunch, a notice on the board: 'Will the sister who gave her patients curried eggs for tea report to matron at once.'*

