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NEWS

By Ally McRoberts



amcroberts@dunfermlinepress.co.uk

A CAMPAIGN has started to highlight the heroics of the West Fife women who volunteered to go to the frontline of the First World War.

Amateur historian Alan Cumming, who has family in Fife, said the work of those who joined the Scottish Women's Hospitals should never be forgotten.

Sisters Mary and Margaret Gray, from Oakley, and Catherine Cook Miller, from Dunfermline, were among 1000 Scottish women who travelled far from their homes and braved the horrors of the battlefield to tend the wounded.

And with the 100th anniversary of the outbreak of the Great War falling next year, Alan said it was an apt time to pay tribute to their courage and tell their stories.

He said, "Britain likes to make a show of celebrating and respecting heroes of war, and even in some cases fictional accounts of war heroism in film, but has not acknowledged the work, bravery and altruism of these women in a time when women did not have a presence of being involved in direct conflict and were certainly not encouraged to do so."

Alan continued, "The women worked in terrible conditions, often working themselves to exhaustion and going without food, sleep and regard to their own safety."

"In the hospitals, every inch of space was occupied, sick and wounded lay crowded together, men who had just undergone the amputation of limbs, men in the grip of typhoid, dysentery or frostbite. Men waiting to die and men already dead."

"Many of the women themselves were struck down by typhus, too exhausted to combat the fever."

It was the Scottish Federation of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies that put forward the idea of female medical units to serve on the front line.

The War Office rejected the idea but private do-

# Heroic West Fife women from the Great War

nations and fund-raising financed 14 field hospitals, staffed entirely by women, to treat the wounded in France, Serbia and Russia.

Some were even caught up in the fighting and the woman behind the idea, Dr Elsie Inglis, was even imprisoned after her camp was overrun.

Alan said little was known about their deeds but found out that the Gray sisters signed up for the SWH in December 1914 and made their way to the Royaumont Abbey Hospital in France.

He said, "Witness to some of the war's bloodiest battles, the women would work day and night lifting the shattered bodies on to stretchers and into their care."

"Sadly, Mary died at Royaumont in January 1916 after she was operated on for appendicitis. She was buried at Asnières-sur-Oise cemetery and remembered at the war memorial in Leven, York Minster and St Giles in Edinburgh."

"Margaret would see the war out at Royaumont, playing her part in saving the lives of men during the battle of the Somme before leaving in 1919 when, with the war now over, she would retire to

Greenock."

Alan continued, "Catherine Cook Miller grew up in Dunfermline, after leaving education she would work at the Dunfermline Fever Hospital which is now McLean House."

"Catherine joined the SWH in 1917 and promptly headed for Serbia and then on to Russia, where we believe she joined up with Elsie Inglis' unit in Bessarabia on the Russian front."

"The hospital at Bessarabia had a serious malaria outbreak and Catherine became infected with the disease and so was forced to return home."

"Six months later in December 1918 Catherine passed away at the Liverpool Military Hospital. She was only 30."

She was buried in Dunfermline Cemetery and is commemorated at the Dunfermline War Memorial and at St Giles in Edinburgh."

Alan said he had known nothing about the SWH and the valuable work they did until a visit to Belgrade.

He explained, "What saddened me was that the women involved are known about and revered in

Serbia, yet their work and achievements are barely recognised in the country they came from."

"In Serbia one will see statues, monuments and streets named after these women, although in the place they came from these women have been virtually completely overlooked."

"I started to look into it and was just so surprised that women from places like Dunfermline, 100 years ago, had travelled so far and did what they did."

"It really fascinated me, it was an incredibly brave thing to do - their stories should be told."

"I'm sure there may well be other women from Dunfermline and West Fife who were involved so I'll be delighted if anyone wants to get in touch and tell me."

"Someone may have information or memorabilia which would help us and, you never know, their stories may even be included in the new museum in Dunfermline."

Alan's email address is oshawauk@hotmail.com and there is also information on Facebook - at <http://www.facebook.com/ScottishWomensHospitals>



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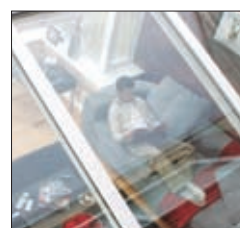
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