



James Blackburn and Alan Cumming visit Elsie Inglis's grave in Dean Cemetery; right, Dr Inglis, who set up field hospitals

Lost angels of the First World War

Gardener unearths the stories of Scotland's brave lady medics, writes Gillian Bowditch

TO THE people of Serbia, they are national heroines, celebrated throughout the country for saving the lives of hundreds of thousands of soldiers.

However, the identities and stories of the 1,500 women who served as doctors, nurses and ambulance drivers in the Scottish Women's Hospital Units of the First World War have been largely written out of British history.

Now, a landscape gardener from Cumbernauld, who left school without qualifications, has turned detective in an effort to track down these forgotten heroines.

Alan Cumming, 48, was visiting friends in Belgrade in 2008 when he came across a plaque to Dr Elsie Inglis, an Edinburgh doctor and suffragist who is best known for her ground-breaking work in obstetrics. Intrigued, Cumming asked his hosts about the memorial and was amazed to hear that Inglis is commemorated nationally in Serbia as the founder of the Scottish Women's Hospital Units (SWHU).

Back home in Scotland, he started delving into the story of the SWHU. It established field hospitals during the First World War in Serbia, France, Russia, Romania, Corsica, Malta and Salonika which were staffed by female doctors, nurses, ambulance drivers and orderlies. Cumming was surprised to discover that no comprehensive history existed of these pioneering women and the work they did.

"I started to look at it and I got really involved in the story," says Cumming, who is working with Glasgow city council's First World War project. "I knew the centenary of the war was coming up and I asked around to see if anyone was doing anything to let people know about these women. When I realised nothing was happening, I was really surprised and I felt I had to do something. I have no academic experience but I feel we all owe a debt to these women."

With funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund, Cumming set up a website and started sifting through local archives at home and abroad and issued appeals for information on the 1,500 women, 600 of whom served in Serbia. So far he has tracked down several hundred. His work will form the basis of a television documentary narrated by Kirsty Wark which will be broadcast in November. An audio-visual presentation will be available for schools from September.

"In Serbia you will see statues, monuments and streets named after these women," says Cumming, who was instrumental in the recent campaign to have Inglis's grave in Edinburgh's Dean Cemetery restored. "But in the place they came from, they have been completely overlooked."

Inglis, who studied at the Edinburgh School For Medicine for Women in the late

1880s, took her idea for all-female field hospitals to the War Office at the outbreak of the conflict but was dismissed by an official who told her: "My good lady, go home and sit still." The British Red Cross also turned her down.

Undeterred and with funding from the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies and the American Red Cross, Inglis approached the French and Serbian authorities and set up her first 200 bed hospital in 13th-century Abbaye de Royaumont, France, under the auspices of the French Red Cross, before going on to establish another 14 units across Europe.

She was a stern taskmaster. On the voyage to Archangel from Liverpool in September 1916 as part of a group of 80 female doctors and nurses, Eleanor Rendel, a first-year medical student who would go

to be a physician to Virginia Woolf and many of the Bloomsbury set, recorded in her diary: "Dr Inglis likes a great deal of deference paid to her as head of the unit, and she goes in for roll calls, cabin inspection, etc. At roll call she has given the order that we are

to say, 'Here, Ma'am.' Some of the unit are rather upset by this and there are one or two grumbles."

Another colleague, who operated the X-ray machine, wrote of Inglis: "Dr I is also a difficulty. She flies into blind rages over trifles, and is quickly reducing all her sisters to despair."

But nobody could criticise her dedication. In Serbia, Inglis worked to reduce the typhus epidemic which had been raging when she arrived and which claimed the life of Madge Neill Fraser, a celebrated golfer who captained the Scottish and British teams and who served as a nurse with the SWHU.

In a letter home in September 1915, Inglis wrote: "One day a division passed through and left 100 sick behind them. This more than filled every bed we had ready. So you can imagine our feelings the next evening when we suddenly heard that 50 more were coming down the line. It was really like war work, as one imagines it! We went and turned out a gast house, people who had been sitting there in the cafe helping to clear out the tables and chairs, the proprietors helping too, and showing us where extra wood was to be had, and so on. We swept the whole place out to the light of storm lanterns, made a roaring fire, got on some boiling water, in the little kitchen place, and then down on us came the patients, beds, bedding, all together. Some of the men were really ill, and all of them were dead tired. We packed that house as no English hospital would ever dare to pack! But we got a bed for each man. There was no question of bathing, of course! We just tore off their uniforms and their heavy muddy boots."

Later that year, Inglis was captured and repatriated. Undaunted, she set about raising funds for a SWHU in Russia and spent a year running the hospital in Odessa. In 1917, suffering from cancer, she was forced to return to Britain. After a rough passage, she arrived in Newcastle on November 25, 1917. Desperately ill, she dressed in her uniform and decorations to stand on the cold quayside for 20 minutes, taking a salute from the grateful Serbians. She died the following night.

Dr Jennifer Novotny, a



Nurses serve in a hospital in Antwerp, above, close to the horrors of the frontline, right, where stretcher bearers are carrying a casualty across the water-filled craters



research assistant at the University of Glasgow who is working on the Great War project, says that when the SWHU was founded, it caught the public imagination and attracted generous donations. "It wasn't just in Scotland," says Novotny. "You have people from all over the UK and abroad giving to the Scottish Women's Hospitals. There was a lot of international support for them. These women were very much in the vanguard and were among the earliest female medical graduates."

"Many of them were working as surgeons and had

high professional qualifications and they were running the whole show. It was revolutionary. The SWHU was tied-in with the women's suffrage movement. It was consciously designed to show off the talents and skills of women, all the way from the chief medical officer to the orderlies."

Perhaps for this reason, and despite Sir Winston Churchill's declaration that "the record of their work, lit up by the fame of Dr Inglis, will shine in history", the SWHU did not feature prominently in the male-dominated histories produced

in the aftermath of the war. Many of the women went on to stellar careers. Dr Anne Louise McLroy, a graduate of Glasgow University, who commanded a unit of the hospital at Troyes in France before being posted to Serbia and Salonika, became a dame and was the first woman to be appointed a medical professor in the UK. Others continued their careers overseas free from the constraints of British class and sexual politics in the early 20th century.

"Many of the women came from privileged backgrounds," says Cumming, who spends two to three hours a

night collating and cross-referencing the women's stories. "They could have lived a Downton Abbey lifestyle but they chose to serve, often in appalling circumstances. They were never really able to go back to that life afterwards."

"There are about 10 of the big hitters whose stories are quite well known but there are other women who have done amazing things and absolutely nothing is written about them. Often the local communities where they've come from don't have any knowledge of them. I feel as though I am bringing them back to life."

PITLOCHRY

Just a few of the 102 characters onstage this Summer!

Whisky Kisses • Perfect Days • The Admirable Crichton
Passing Places • The Yellow On The Broom • Mr. Bolphy

Book your tickets today: 01796 484626 • PitlochryFestivalTheatre.com