

“Angels of Mercy in a Thousand Terrible Situations”:
A Historiographical Essay of Women Nurses in the Civil War

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Topic

For American women in the mid 1800s, few domains existed outside of the traditional domestic sphere. Teaching was an acceptable occupation by period standards, but nursing was still far from being considered proper for a lady. Furthermore, at that time, according to Marilyn Mayer Culpepper and Pauline Gordon Adams, “there were no nursing schools, no diplomas, no credentials” by which to define the profession.¹ With the onset of war in 1861 and men being consistently drawn into the escalating conflict throughout the next four years, women took action, expanded their field of influence, and joined the fight as volunteer nurses in both the Union and the Confederacy.

Though male nurses outnumbered their female counterparts five to one in both the North and the South, approximately 3,000 women served as officially appointed nurses in the North throughout the duration of the Civil War, and thousands of others volunteered without official recognition on both sides of the conflict. Women’s motivations for service were as varied as their duties. Some came simply for the “excitement” of war. Others were mothers, wives, or sisters “who rushed to the bedsides of wounded sons, husbands, or brothers and who remained to care for the sick and dying.”² Aside from setting up and staffing hospital kitchens, female nurses wrote letters home for wounded soldiers, read to “those unable to see or hold a book,” aided patients as they learned to use crutches, helped “men cope with the loss of a leg or an arm – or both,” listened to the confessions of the dying, supported their patients’ mental health, and entertained by “singing and playing musical instruments.”³

¹ Marilyn Mayer Culpepper and Pauline Gordon Adams, “Nursing in the Civil War,” *American Journal of Nursing* 88, no. 7 (July 1988): 981-982, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3425867>.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 984.

Many women, inspired by the efforts of Florence Nightingale in Eastern Europe's Crimean War (1853-1856), volunteered after reports circulated "of widespread disease in military hospitals and camps and of neglect and chaos following battles."⁴ Women who had fought for women's rights viewed the war as a "moral crusade" and saw their service as an opportunity to "prove themselves capable and equal in a man's world."⁵ One historian, in the 1970s, even suggested that women viewed their wartime nursing as a way "to extend their power."⁶

On June 10, 1861, the Secretary of War appointed Dorothea Dix as Superintendent of Female Nurses though "she had done no actual nursing." She served throughout the war, selecting women thirty years old and above who were considered "plain in appearance" to provide assistance in hospitals and on battlefields.⁷ Shortly after her hiring, Dix, in an attempt to organize the mass of females already following field regiments, "issued an order [...] that only women serving as matrons or laundresses be allowed to stay." Though some women defied the order and remained, most were sent to "base hospitals where they would be supervised" after approval.⁸ In the South, no such organization existed "to bring relief to the Confederate soldier." However, this did not deter women from volunteering as "relief workers [...] most often, without pay."⁹

For the women chosen for service, conditions were less than ideal. Many often worked "16-hour days, sleeping on top of baggage on the hospital boats or among boxes in the supply

⁴ Peggy Brase Seigel, "She Went to War: Indiana Women Nurses in the Civil War," *Indiana Magazine of History* 86, no. 1 (March 1990): 1, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27791351>.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁶ Ann Douglas Wood, "The War Within a War: Women Nurses in the Union Army," *Civil War History* 18, no. 3 (September 1972): 202, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/419091/summary>.

⁷ Louise Oates, "Civil War Nurses," *American Journal of Nursing* 28, no. 3 (March 1928): 207, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3408924>.

⁸ Seigel, 10.

⁹ Oates, 208.

rooms.” Dozens, “weakened by the debilitating labor of hospital life,” contracted the illnesses borne by their patients, and many succumbed to the conditions.¹⁰ Even among those who remained healthy, women nurses often found themselves fighting “their own war within a war with male medical and military authorities” who did not see them as capable of holding such positions.¹¹

Despite the difficult circumstances created by war and skepticism, “women showed the world they had the stamina, commitment, organizational ability, and talent to become a vital force in the nation.” Through their efforts in the Civil War, American women were able to open up the field of nursing as a viable and respectable career for females. Their insistence on stricter standards of cleanliness and organization “laid the groundwork for developing the modern hospital.”¹² Though their impact was great, women nurses of the Civil War went largely unrecognized until the rise of women’s history, and not until the last twenty years have historians begun to consider the topic as significant within the larger context of the Civil War. An overview of the limited scholarship available which illuminates the contributions of women nurses from this era can finally bring about the celebration of service they deserve and can help to identify related areas of study which remain unexplored.

Historiography

In the more than 150 years since the end of the American Civil War, literature focusing on women’s wartime involvement as nurses on battlefields and in hospitals has evolved from narratives filled with sacrificial romance to scholarly studies examining female nurses’ impact on the future of the profession. Prior to the rise of women’s history and gender studies in the 1970s

¹⁰ Culpepper and Adams, 984.

¹¹ Seigel, 12.

¹² Culpepper and Adams, 984.

and 1980s, historians' accounts of female Civil War nurses were rare, and those which did exist were often transformed into fanciful stories of heroism. Modern studies have presented a more robust understanding of the roles, influence, and lasting achievements of women nurses from both sides of the conflict.

Two years after the war came to an end at Appomattox, Frank Moore published a collection of narratives encompassing the lives of more than forty women whose Civil War service had proven heroic. *Women of the War; Their Heroism and Self-Sacrifice* was unprecedented for a period in which the "histories of wars" were still "records of the achievements of men."¹³ According to Moore, the "story of the war" could not "be fully or fairly written if the achievements of women in it are untold."¹⁴ His aim was to fill in these gaps so that "the nation" might hold "them in equal honor with its brave men."¹⁵

Although Moore's collection was significant for the era in which it was written, the individual accounts are filled with dramatic language. Nurses were described as going "down into the very edge of the fight, to rescue the wounded, and cheer and comfort the dying [...]; who labored in field and city hospitals, and on the dreadful hospital-boats [...]; who were angels of mercy in a thousand terrible situations."¹⁶ Furthermore, he wrote that the women showed extreme courage through "adventures romantic and daring."¹⁷ While such assertions were not untrue, contemporary scholars have evolved the topic to include more insight into the political, social, and medical implications of women's involvement in the war.

¹³ Frank Moore, *Women of the War; Their Heroism and Self-Sacrifice* (Hartford, CT: S. S. Scranton & Co., 1867), iii, Google Books.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, v.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, iv-v.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, v.

George Barton, in 1898, published *Angels of the Battlefield: A History of the Labors of the Catholic Sisterhoods in the Late Civil War*. Barton clearly stated his purpose for doing so: “Many books have been written on the work of other women in this war, but aside from fugitive newspaper paragraphs, nothing has ever been published concerning the self-sacrificing labors of these Sisterhoods.” He, like Moore, sought to fill notable gaps in the history of women’s roles in the war.¹⁸

Barton’s work would later be highly reflected in more recent articles on the Catholic Sisterhoods by Betty McNeil and Cindy Intravartolo. Their accounts, however, were much evolved from Barton’s admonishment of the “ridiculously small” amount of material available for research.¹⁹ His language is similar to Moore’s in its overtly laudatory prose, referencing “the modest hands that bound up [soldiers’] wounds, soothed their fevered brows and performed those other acts of faith and charity that seem to belong essentially, not to the *weaker* but to the gentler sex.”²⁰ Under the influence of the Victorian era’s emphasis on literature for entertainment, Barton claimed he had made “a conscientious effort to avoid political, sectional or religious controversy.”²¹

In 1928, Louise Oates attempted to approach the topic of Civil War women nurses from a more pragmatic perspective than Moore or Barton. Her brief yet concise article, “Civil War Nurses,” written for the *American Journal of Nursing*, outlined how “in spite of their lack of practical training and the imperfections of the central organization of women nurses, the Union

¹⁸ George Barton, *Angels of the Battlefield: A History of the Labors of the Catholic Sisterhoods in the Late Civil War* (Philadelphia: The Catholic Art Publishing Company, 1898), iii, https://books.google.com/books?id=kWo9AQAAMAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, iv.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, v.

²¹ *Ibid.*, vi.

Army had far better nursing care than any which preceded it in American history.”²² Though she, in the vein of Barton, decried the available resources as “desultory in the extreme,” Oates was able to present an overview in which she argued “the service and influence of these women has not been forgotten.”²³

Rather than focusing on individual sketches, as did Moore, Oates included a comprehensive bibliography of existing published collections, diaries, memoirs, and letters from those serving in medical positions and instead centered her article on how “the people of the Northern States for the first time went systematically about preparing to care for their sick and wounded soldiers.”²⁴ Whether due to a lack of material or the absence of an interested audience, Oates’ article is void of the rich detail and historical data synonymous with more current research. However, she did improve upon the literature predating her by shifting the tone away from the fantastic and toward the factual.

As evidenced by Oates’ sparse research, the topic of female nursing in the Civil War suffered from a lack of coverage for decades. The rise of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s ushered in a new focus on women’s roles throughout history. One of the first to address the subject of Civil War women nurses was Ann Douglas Wood. In her 1972 article, “The War Within a War: Women Nurses in the Union Army,” published in *Civil War History*, Wood highlighted the push by Civil War era female nurses to, as she stated, “attack [...] the very professionalism which had exiled them to a domestic shrine.”²⁵ Throughout her article, she emphasized the methods in which women were able to wage “their own war [...] on the

²² Louise Oates, “Civil War Nurses,” *American Journal of Nursing* 28, no. 3 (March 1928): 207, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3408924>.

²³ *Ibid.*, 207, 209.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 207.

²⁵ Wood, 198.

masculine establishment that tried to exclude them.”²⁶ Though her article introduces the topic into the modern era, there are numerous flaws throughout. Largely influenced by the period in which it appeared, the article reads more as a feminist manifesto than a true work of scholarship. Also, the language Wood employed harkened back to the romantic, heroic prose of Moore’s and Barton’s books by referencing a nurses’ work as “herculean labors in a veritable Augean stable of a hospital.”²⁷

By the 1980s and 1990s, literature influenced by the new women’s and gender histories emerged in earnest. In 1988, Marilyn Mayer Culpepper and Pauline Gordon Adams co-wrote an article for the *American Journal of Nursing*, entitled “Nursing in the Civil War,” tackling the subject introduced into the new era by Wood fifteen years earlier. Much like Oates’ article, Culpepper and Adams’ offering is a relatively short exploration of the subject. They, however, opened the door to deeper examinations by calling attention to the medical conditions which women intended to improve by their service.²⁸ Though much of the article is repetitive of the larger themes covered by Wood, Culpepper and Adams approached the topic in a more scholarly fashion, eschewing overtly feminist language, to demonstrate how women overcame “the early skepticism of the surgeons and general public about the propriety and ability of women to serve as nurses,” and as a result, were able change the nursing and medical professions in numerous ways.²⁹

Peggy Brase Seigel narrowed the focus on female nurses to those hailing from a single state for her 1990 article in the *Indiana Magazine of History*. In “She Went to War: Indiana Women Nurses in the Civil War,” Seigel identified numerous nurses who lent their aid to the

²⁶ Ibid., 200.

²⁷ Ibid., 207.

²⁸ Culpepper and Adams, 982-984.

²⁹ Ibid., 984.

cause of the North, and much as Moore had done, created narratives of their service. She, however, went further than her predecessor by also addressing Indiana women's overall contributions in playing "a strategic role in Governor Morton's aggressive organization [the Indiana Sanitary Commission] to help Indiana soldiers."³⁰ Seigel also called out Ann Douglas Wood for her article's sole focus on "the general resistance that women nurses met from male authorities" and hoped that her own article would shed some light on the "exceptions to this rule."³¹

In the 1992 article, "The Inhospitable Hospital: Gender and Professionalism in Civil War Medicine," published in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Jane Schultz followed in the footsteps of Wood with an account exploring women's involvement in Civil War medicine and the often-uninviting environment awaiting their service. In fact, she, like Seigel, criticized Wood for failing "to perceive [the power struggle's] true terms." Schultz argued that "replacing male decision makers with females was not the nurses' goal; delivering more humane care to patients was."³² By refocusing attention to the internal dynamics of the system, she demonstrated how "[w]omen's response to the desperate need for better medical care in Civil War hospitals helped pave the way for the postwar professionalization of nursing."³³ In contrast to Wood, Schultz's work is a far more insightful, well-researched, and unbiased creation.

Schultz's intent was reflective of Moore's objective to convey a more complete history through the inclusion of women. Through her article, she sought to "restore women to the interactive role they played with male medical officials in military hospitals."³⁴ She asserted that

³⁰ Seigel, 27.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

³² Jane E. Schultz, "The Inhospitable Hospital: Gender and Professionalism in Civil War Medicine," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 17, no. 2 (Winter 1992): 375, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3174468>.

³³ *Ibid.*, 365.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 365.

“historians of the war have downplayed or ignored altogether the presence of female hospital workers [...] because of a perception that only men make, fight, and matter in wars.”³⁵ However, rather than viewing these individuals from a superhuman perspective, Schultz used these women’s stories to “shed light on the conflicts that emerged [...] over issues of corruption, bureaucratic inhumanity, and morality in Civil War hospitals” thereby introducing a variety of fresh lenses to the topic of study.³⁶

Two years later, Schultz expanded on her research in the article, “Race, Gender, and Bureaucracy: Civil War Army Nurses and the Pension Bureau,” for the *Journal of Women’s History*. By exploring the legislation and politics surrounding the decisions of the post-Civil War Pension Bureau in granting or withholding pay from women who had served as nurses, she offered a “glimpse [into] the working relations of men and women, African Americans and whites, and slaves and free people in Union Civil War military hospitals.”³⁷ As Schultz asserted, despite the often contentious environment in which women nurses found themselves throughout the duration of the war, “the Army Nurses’ Pension Act of 1892 [...] tacitly acknowledged that women’s war work had been roughly equivalent to the work of soldiers, a remarkable concession.”³⁸

In a departure from previous scholarship on female nurses, Schultz highlighted the role of African Americans who performed hospital work. Though the article is lacking in rich detail with regards to the marginalized group, it did demonstrate the inequalities of the period by showing how the “Bureau’s handling of black women’s claims reflected the white cultural

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 366.

³⁷ Jane E. Schultz, “Race, Gender, and Bureaucracy: Civil War Army Nurses and the Pension Bureau,” *Journal of Women’s History* 6, no. 2 (Summer 1994): 45, 10.1353/jowh.2010.0384.

³⁸ Ibid., 48.

assumptions that black women's hospital work did not measure up to white women's and that black women had not been motivated by patriotism as white women had."³⁹ Schultz provided the foundation for a topic which has only just begun to be acknowledged.

Like Seigel, Kathleen Hanson constricted the focus of Civil War nurses in her 2004/2005 article, "Down to Vicksburg: The Nurses' Experience," written for the *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*. She argued that the nurses who "participated in the Vicksburg campaign" have been silenced and that their "perspectives on the campaign have not been illuminated" nor have their "experiences [...] been widely shared."⁴⁰ Hanson further asserted that Vicksburg "presents a microcosm of the female nursing experience in the Union army of the Civil War."⁴¹ By exploring the accounts of three Union nurses and their experiences in field and general hospitals and aboard transport ships, she offered a more personal account on "the nature of their work, their daily lives, and [...] their thoughts on the battle."⁴²

In 2005, Nina Silber focused her broad research on the efforts of women in the North for her book, *Daughters of the Union: Northern Women Fight the Civil War*. Silber's account demonstrated how "women chipped away at the model of Republican motherhood, exposing certain conflicts and contradictions implicit in the notion that women's patriotism had to be tied to the home."⁴³ Taking a more political course than much of the previous literature and building upon the research of Schultz, she posited that the women who served as nurses "came to

³⁹ Ibid., 53.

⁴⁰ Kathleen S. Hanson, "Down to Vicksburg: The Nurses' Experience," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 97, no. 4 (Winter 2004/2005): 286, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40193667>.

⁴¹ Ibid., 287.

⁴² Ibid., 288.

⁴³ Nina Silber, *Daughters of the Union: Northern Women Fight the Civil War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 5, <https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.snhu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=282207&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

understand better than most that the war, and their government, demanded allegiance more than it encouraged their critical interaction.”⁴⁴

Silber, like Schultz, explored the relationships of women nurses across gender, race, and class. She also agreed with Schultz in shirking Wood’s dominant feminist perspective in favor of an account which showed how women challenged their sphere of influence while also upholding the status quo. According to Silber, “Union nurses learned significant lessons in civic engagement and political expression, but those lessons placed considerably less emphasis on expressing independent opinions than respecting the established hierarchy and following the orders of male superiors.”⁴⁵ In essence, Silber provided a critical exploration into the impact of the Northern women glorified for their heroics by Moore nearly 140 years prior to her own publication.

In her 2012 book, *Worth a Dozen Men: Women and Nursing in the Civil War South*, Libra Hilde did for Confederate women what Silber did for those of the North. Hilde’s purpose in exploring Southern female nurses was to examine “their contributions and sacrifices, their relationships with patients, surgeons, and the home front, and ultimately their changed sense of themselves.”⁴⁶ As she argued, in a war defined by the defense of foundational ideas, “[n]urses emerged as the female equivalent of citizen-soldiers.”⁴⁷

Throughout her work, Hilde noted that existing scholarship on female nurses in the Civil War era tended to focus solely on Union nurses, while Confederate nurses were often portrayed as caricatures of the proper Southern lady. In response, she asserted that “Southern women [...]

⁴⁴ Ibid., 11.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 221.

⁴⁶ Libra R. Hilde, *Worth a Dozen Men: Women and Nursing in the Civil War South* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2012), 1, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.snhu.edu/lib/snhu-ebooks/reader.action?docID=3444036>.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 1-2.

deserve a more accurate representation in the story of the war.”⁴⁸ Essentially, one of Hilde’s primary goals was to draw attention away from the fantastical narratives of writers such as Moore and Barton and the overtly feminist language of Wood.

Similar to Schultz’s exploration into the internal machinations of the medical system, Hilde devoted much time to examining the relationships of female nurses to both their patients and their co-workers. While Schultz’s approach, as well as Silber’s, was more political, Hilde’s was typically more social and cultural as she surveyed female identity through diaries, letters, and memoirs. Her contention that Southern nurses’ “contributions to the war” were “explicitly pro-Confederate and allowed women to function as political actors” in celebration of their own efforts rather than being lauded by men for their pious self-sacrifice (in the manner of Moore and Barton) reveals the evolution in the historiography of the topic over the last century and a half.⁴⁹

Hanson’s 2004/2005 article appeared to have shifted the trend from a general overview of women nurses to a more concentrated study of individual groups. Two more recent articles have continued this move. In 2013, Betty Ann McNeil published “Daughters of Charity: Courageous and Compassionate Civil War Nurses” in the *U.S. Catholic Historian*. As she stated in her article, her reason for emphasizing the work of the group is because “the charitable endeavors of these sister nurses have often been overlooked by modern historians.”⁵⁰ Barton’s 1898 book had begun this important research. However, limited resources had left the subject of study predominantly untouched for more than a century.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 13-15.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 4.

⁵⁰ Betty Ann McNeil, D.C., “Daughters of Charity: Courageous and Compassionate Civil War Nurses,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 31, no. 1 (Winter 2013): 51, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24584778>.

McNeil explored the contributions of the “more than 300 Daughters of Charity during the Civil War.”⁵¹ Unlike most volunteer nurses, the sisters were “a neutral relief corps to both Northern and Southern armies” and were one of only four “religious communities” who “had previous hospital experience in the U.S.”⁵² Despite this enlightening and little examined information, McNeil often descended into the same overtly laudatory language that Moore used when describing women nurses two years after the end of the war. In this, her work bore striking similarities to Barton’s book. She even claimed that other volunteer nurses “viewed the sisters as outsiders and resented the military authorities’ esteem for them” for being “humble, charitable women of integrity and courage who lived the faith they professed.”⁵³

Cindy Intravartolo followed McNeil a year later with a similar exploration in her 2014 article, “St. Mary’s Goes to War: The Sisters of the Holy Cross as Civil War Nurses,” in the *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*. Like McNeil and Barton, she laments the historical exclusion of “the lesser-known groups of women who also contributed significantly to Civil War nursing.”⁵⁴ Both McNeil’s and Intravartolo’s articles are similar in structure, examining their respective groups from their origins to their locations of service in the war and the lasting impacts of the sisters’ aid. Intravartolo’s approach, however, is far more fact-based and less romantic, even though she asserted (without convincing evidence) that, unlike the sisters, “civilian volunteers would only attend the wounded and refused to treat those with infectious diseases.”⁵⁵ Though both articles suffered from personal bias and a general lack of proper research, the authors’ each presented intriguing insight into the seldom recognized Civil

⁵¹ Ibid., 52.

⁵² Ibid., 51, 54.

⁵³ Ibid., 54, 72.

⁵⁴ Cindy Intravartolo, “St. Mary’s Goes to War: The Sisters of the Holy Cross as Civil War Nurses,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 107, nos. 3-4 (Fall/Winter 2014): 370, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/jillistathistsoc.107.3-4.0370>.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 385.

War service of the Catholic sisterhoods and, after more than one hundred years since the first appearance of Barton's book, reintroduced a narrowed focus on the contributions of these individual groups.

Conclusion

It is clear the historiography of Civil War women nurses has advanced greatly over the last 150 years, yet there remains much work to be done. Individual biographies of the more well-known women, such as Clara Barton and Louisa May Alcott, are numerous, as are the published memoirs, letters, diaries, and journals of the women who served. However, critical interpretations of and scholarly insights into the topic are a fairly new creation and continue to be rare.

Beginning with Seigel's exploration of Indiana's Civil War nurses in 1990, scholarship evolved from heroic tales and empowerment monologues to legitimate examinations of the work of women nurses. More current literature draws largely from the women's individual experiences rather than their collective affairs, but considerable gaps have emerged as a result. Jean Schultz's article, "Race, Gender, and Bureaucracy," raised important questions into the experiences of African American women nurses but failed to fully explore the topic. Likewise, due to the difficulty in locating appropriate resources, Hilde's book is the only known scholarship of its kind focusing solely on Confederate nurses. Both of these areas deserve further examination.

There is undoubtedly untapped potential in many repositories across the nation. As noted by Betty McNeil, in 2000, researchers discovered the *Daughters of Charity Civil War Annals*, a "500-page three-volume manuscript [...] containing 'Notes of the Sisters' Services in Military Hospitals, 1861-1865, Annals Civil War, 1861-1865 – War Between the States.'"⁵⁶ Furthermore,

⁵⁶ McNeil, 53.

recently digitized collections of papers, letters, and diaries, such as those held by Duke University, that have been largely neglected in favor of the more well-known published works offer compelling insight into women's perspectives of the Civil War and present an opportunity for greater research into those women who may have performed work as nurses without the official status.

With so little scholarly literature in existence, the opportunities for future research on the topic are boundless. A comparative approach, such as Schultz attempted in her 1994 article, could provide intriguing insight into the experiences of a variety of women. Drawing on the influence of gender history, historians could compare the experience of male nurses to that of female nurses in order to gain a clearer picture of the extent to which women were viewed negatively within the medical profession of the period. A more scientific approach might demonstrate the detailed manner in which women nurses improved upon existing medical practices to bring about lasting changes in healthcare. Even within the limited historiography currently in existence, many authors and historians have begun to ask new questions with regards to the Civil War's female nurses and have introduced new avenues of research which provide unlimited possibilities for future scholarship.

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