

Battling the Enemy on Two Fronts: Nurse Venice Hackett and the Great War

By Alice McDermott

Introduction

According to present day global medical experts,¹ somewhere 'between 291,000 and 646,000 people worldwide die from seasonal influenza (and) related respiratory illnesses each year...The estimate excludes deaths during pandemics...'² Of course, regardless of which side of the documented range is the most precise, for loved ones left behind, each of the deaths is a tragedy. Internationally, somewhere between 50³ and 100⁴ million people died during the 1918 Spanish Influenza, 'the deadliest plague in history'.⁵

This article discusses the nursing career of a Tipperary woman during the Great War, her contracting of the flu virus, and lastly, the complex relationship between the 'ideal growing conditions' for an influenza pandemic and the Great War of 1914 to 1918. Perhaps the most compelling way to trace the multifaceted connection between the spreading of the virus and the Great War is to do so by means of an account of one of its victims.

Venice Hackett

Venice's determination to commit to Great War nursing care required her to fight the foe on two fronts, only one of which she (and, indeed, the rest of the world) was aware of when she volunteered for service and commenced her overseas war-time journey. Venice Clementine Henrietta Hackett was born on 27 February 1887.⁶ The Hacketts, listed in *Burke's Irish Family Records*⁷ belonged to an illustrious Anglo-Irish Ascendancy family. The branch from which Venice was descended had put down roots almost three hundred years prior to the Great War directly outside Ballycumber in County Offaly with an imposing Georgian mansion and estate they called Castletown Park.⁸

Her father, Edward Augustus*, was an engineer and her mother, Emilie (nee Hen(d)ry),⁹ the daughter of a Captain in the British Royal Navy. Venice was the second of six children born to the couple. In order of age, her siblings were Learö, Geraldine, Eric, Alma, and Edward.¹⁰ Being an engineer, early in his career Venice's father took numerous jobs abroad which is why her older brother, Learö, was born in Natal in Southern Africa and she (on 27 February, 1887) in Milngavie outside Glasgow in Scotland.¹¹

*See County Tipperary 1917 - 21 A History in 80 documents, document No. 16 (Editor)

However, upon finding themselves with two young children and all the complex demands that inevitably ensue, her parents were anxious to return to Ireland and so, a few months after her birth, her father accepted the job of County Surveyor with Kerry North Riding.¹² Edward Augustus and his wife, Emilie, moved home to Ireland and Kerry with their two young children when Venice was only five months old. The family remained there for the next two years.¹³

Then, in July 1889, when Venice was two and a half and Learö five years old, their father was transferred, with the same position of County Surveyor, to Tipperary South Riding.¹⁴ His request for transfer was entirely understandable, Clonmel, after all, was a mere eighty one miles from Ballycumber whereas North Kerry was almost fifty miles further at one hundred and twenty six. Thus the Hackett family came to reside in Clonmel, while her father worked as engineering assessor for the surrounding area. Venice and her family remained in Clonmel for a considerable period of time. Four more siblings were born there over the next twelve years, Venice and her brothers and sisters attended school and, over time, grew to adulthood.

Venice was twenty seven when the Great War broke out on 4 August 1914.¹⁵ She didn't volunteer to serve throughout the first two years of the conflict, probably because of a variety of factors pertaining to females at the time. Firstly, there were very few jobs open to women in the British, indeed global, armed services in 1914 and consequently, even less women lining up to do them. The only option available to women who wanted to actively participate overseas in the British Great War effort was to serve as nurses, either professional or volunteer depending on their training.

Secondly, some (clearly not all) women of her higher social class choose not to defy the lifestyle expectations of both their families and society, generally, and stayed at home, 'sitting out the war.' Her younger brother, Eric, had sought a commission with the Royal Irish Regiment at the start of the conflict and had been accepted and made 2nd Lt. in September 1914. He served on the Western Front from then on.

Venice's older brother, Learö, having previously been a professional soldier for a brief spell with the Royal Munster Fusiliers, re-joined his regiment at the start of 1916.¹⁶ When Learö joined the war sixteen months after Eric, having two brothers serving as officers and vulnerable to injury and death may well have been the incentive that encouraged Venice to do the (then) only available female equivalent. Later in the year, sometime in August, she sought entry into and requested official registration with the British Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD's).¹⁷

After what appears to have been an inordinate delay in making selections from prospective volunteering Great War nurse applicants, especially given the obvious need, Venice was eventually accepted for service overseas with the British Red Cross in March 1917.¹⁸ In preparation, as was mandatory for all VADs newly accepted for Great War nursing service, she was obliged to first attend an accelerated training programme in first aid and rudimentary medical treatment and care. Although there are no details available, it is very likely that Venice completed her extremely fast-tracked schooling in the basics of

emergency and more general nursing skills at her local hospital in Clonmel or, perhaps, the Military Hospital established there throughout the conflict.¹⁹

She completed her speeded-up elementary nursing training throughout the month of March 1917. Prior to that, just after she applied to serve overseas as a VAD, her brother, Eric, aged twenty one, was killed during the Battle of Ginchy²⁰ on 9 September 1916.²¹ As a result, Venice was simultaneously enduring profound bereavement for Eric's untimely death while anxiously awaiting details of her initial nursing placement and duties abroad. Having bravely opted to serve overseas following a period of mandatory rudimentary training in nursing and first aid,²² Violet was first assigned to a VAD unit designated 'Tipperary 4.'²³

In France

She was then dispatched to her first overseas posting, on 12 April 1917,²⁴ to Allied Forces Base Hospital Number 7. Her new position as a Great War volunteer nurse was located in Boulogne in Northern France, close to the port, in what had been before the Great War the Hotel Christol.²⁵ Poignantly for her and her family, the city and the hospital in which she would work from then on was only eighty miles from where Eric had been killed in action a mere seven months earlier. Venice was thirty years old when she first took up her Great War nursing work. This made her moderately older than the 'typical' 'starter' Great War VAD whose age was, more typically, twenty three.²⁶

When she arrived in Boulogne, Venice discovered that her new work place, Allied Forces Base Hospital Number 7, was a relatively large war-time medical facility committed to the treatment of sick and variously injured Allied soldiers.²⁷ This was to be her work station for the next eighteen months, from April 1917 until October 1918. Attempting to generally assess the different natures and dangers of the three main locations for overseas volunteer (and, indeed, professional) nursing work throughout the Great War, namely, at base hospitals, casualty clearing stations, and on the front-lines, is virtually impossible for two reasons. Danger came from the unpredictability of war and the fact that hospitals were frequent targets for the Germans and their affiliates throughout the Great War.²⁸

Boulogne was certainly subjected to enemy aerial attack during the 1914 to 1918 conflict, not least because they knew it was one of three portal transport bases in northern France (the others being Etaples and Calais).²⁹ Venice's posting in Allied Forces Base Hospital Number 7 which was, as earlier noted, close to the port in Boulogne, was therefore dangerous. There was also the emotional and physical impact on each of the nurses and doctors so directly associated with the truly appalling range and extent of the injuries, both physical and mental that they had to help.³⁰ For eighteen months this was her life and was a far cry from the pre-Great War life she had known, one of privilege and security typical of most British middle and upper class women of the Edwardian era.

Boulogne, as previously documented, was periodically bombed by the Germans throughout the Great War. The Hotel Christol, being close to the city's port, was within a danger area every time the enemy bombs fell. It would certainly have experienced

windows being damaged, being so close to the enemy's target range. Venice and her medical comrades in the hospital, as well as the patients, must have lived in abject fear for their safety every time the Germans undertook aerial raids on Boulogne.

She was still working there, when another family member, the previously mentioned Learö, the eldest of her siblings, who had transferred to the 10th Battalion of the Royal Irish Rifles soon after his enlistment in 1916,³¹ was killed in action during the Fourth Battle of Ypres, on 24 April, 1918.³² The death of her brother was the second Great War generated heartbreak that Venice and her family had to deal with. To further add to her sense of loss, just as with the place of Eric's passing, the Ypres salient, the site of Learö's death, was a mere sixty miles or so from Boulogne.

Six months after her eldest brother was killed in action, on 10 October 1918, Venice was transferred from Allied Forces Base Hospital Number 7 to the Number 8 British Red Cross Hospital located close to the site of her previous posting in Boulogne.³³ By the time she moved to Number 8 British Red Cross Hospital on 10 October 1918, Violet was already fighting a new enemy, an unknown and unseen one, because she was, unfortunately, incubating the second wave of the dreaded Spanish Influenza virus.³⁴ Having survived eighteen months in the routinely blitzed 'hot-spot' of Boulogne so frequently targeted by German fighter pilots and their aerial bombardments throughout the Great War, she then commenced her last great battle. One she did not win.

Illness and Death

Within a matter of days of taking up her new voluntary nursing appointment at Number 8 British Red Cross Hospital close to where she had formerly worked, she was placed on a hospital ship bound for Britain, grievously ill with the second strain of the Spanish Influenza virus.³⁵ Over the space of that single year, the last of the Great War, worldwide, the pernicious pandemic killed somewhere in the region of one hundred million people.³⁶ Worldwide deaths from Spanish Influenza appear to have outweighed both civilian and military deaths directly caused by Great War conflict by a factor of five to one.

When the ship docked, Venice was transported to St. Mary's hospital on the Marylebone Road in London. The date of her admission was either 11 or 12 October, 1918.³⁷ When she was examined by hospital doctors following her entry to the facility, it was discovered that, as well as suffering from the second outbreak of Spanish Influenza, indeed probably as a direct result of same, Venice had also contracted pneumonia.³⁸ In the circumstances London was not the best place to be.³⁹ Tragically, on the third day of her illness and, indeed, like so many who contracted Spanish Influenza from August onwards in 1918, Venice passed away, having succumbed to the complicating factor of pneumonia in tandem with the brutal second strain of the contagion.⁴⁰

Venice Hackett died from the virulent and, of course, then still untreatable virus and ancillary infection in St. Mary's hospital on 13 October 1918, a mere twenty nine days before the Great War ended. She was thirty one years old and to make the tragedy of her untimely death even bleaker for her loved ones, engaged to be married to (Acting) Major Henry Evans, serving on the Western Front (which is probably where she met him)

with the 4th (Queen's Own) Hussars, at the time of her passing.⁴¹

As a result of her war- nursing work, Venice Hackett was given a Commonwealth War Grave.⁴² This is sited at the Hackett family plot where Venice is laid to rest, in Liss cemetery in Ballycumber, County Offaly (where her father was from). Her headstone, permanently documented by Tipperary man Michael Dolan on behalf of the Commonwealth War Graves Photographic Exhibition,⁴³ reads as follows:

**'British Red Cross
Order of St. John
Member
Venice C.H. Hackett
British Red Cross Society
13 October 1918'⁴⁴**



References

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- 2 From [cdc.gov/media-release/2017/flu-death-estimate](https://www.cdc.gov/media-release/2017/flu-death-estimate).
- 3 Estimate from [cdc.gov/remembring-the-1918-flu-pandemic](https://www.cdc.gov/remembring-the-1918-flu-pandemic).
- 4 According to Barry, John, *The Great Influenza: The Epic Story of the Deadliest Plague in History* (The Penguin Group, 2004).
- 5 According to *Ibid.*
- 6 From [ancestry.com/Venice Hackett](https://ancestry.com/Venice-Hackett).
- 7 See *Burke's Irish Family Records* (1976) on [rootsweb.com](https://www.rootsweb.com).
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- 9 From Mc Dermott, Alice, ' " The Undone Years": An Account of the Hackett Siblings from Clonmel who Laid Down their Lives for the Great War Effort' in the *Tipperary Historical Journal* (2014).
- 10 From *Ibid.*
- 11 See *Ibid.*, pp. 188 and 192.
- 12 From *Ibid.*, p. 192.
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- 17 For more information on the British Voluntary Aid Detachment throughout the Great War, see, for example, 'The British "VAD"' in Hallett, Christine E., *Nurse Writers of the Great War* (Manchester University Press, 2016), pp. 187-210.
- 18 Venice's service details initially supplied by the British Red Cross and kindly passed on to the current author by Tipperary local historian, Michael Dolan.
- 19 See, for example, Dennehy, John, *In a Time of War: Tipperary 1914-1918* (Merrion Press, 2013).
- 20 For accounts of the entire Somme campaign, including the Battle of Ginchy, see, for example, Hart, Peter, *The Somme: The Darkest Hour on the Western Front* (Pegasus Books, 2010) and Philpott, William, *Bloody Victory: The Sacrifice of the Somme* (Abacus Books, 2010), pp. 348-9..
- 21 See Mc Dermott, Alice, ' "The Undone Years": An Account of the Hackett Siblings from Clonmel who Laid Down their Lives for the Great War Effort' in the *Tipperary Historical Journal* (2014), Op. Cit..
- 22 For accounts of Great War basic nursing training for VADs, see, for example, Byrne, Niall, *The Waterford Leper Hospital of St. Stephen and the Waterford County and City Infirmary: A History of Institutional Medicine in Waterford* (Waterford County and City Infirmary Trust, 2011) and Bowser, Thekla, *The Story of British V.A.D. Work in the Great War* (The Imperial War Museum, 2003).
- 23 Taken from Venice's British Red Cross service details.
- 24 From Ibid.
- 25 For details of this base hospital in Boulogne throughout the Great War, see, for example, longlongtrail.co.uk/british-base-hospitals-in-france.
- 26 See p. VI of the introduction to MacDonald, Lyn, *The Roses of No Man's Land* (Penguin Books, 1993) for more information on this.
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- 28 For more information, see, for example, Kenneth, Lee, *The First Air War, 1914-1918* (Free Press, 1999) and Madison, Rodney, 'Air Warfare, Strategic Bombing' in Tucker, S.C. and Roberts, P. (Eds.), *The Encyclopaedia of World War 1: A Political, Social, and Military History* (ABC-Clio, 2005).
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- 31 See Mc Dermott, Alice, ' " The Undone Years": An Account of the Hackett Siblings from Clonmel who Laid Down their Lives for the Great War Effort' in the *Tipperary Historical Journal* (2014), Op. Cit., p. 190.
- 32 See Ibid., p. 191, for further details of the tragedy.
- 33 From Venice's Great War service details supplied by the British Red Cross. For more information, see Ibid., p. 195.
- 34 For more details of the second outbreak of the 1918 Spanish Influenza epidemic, see, for example, cdc.gov/1918-flu-pandemic.
- 35 See Mc Dermott, Alice, ' "The Undone Years": An Account of the Hackett Siblings from Clonmel who Laid Down their Lives for the Great War Effort' in the *Tipperary Historical Journal* (2014), Op. Cit., p. 195.
- 36 Figures confirmed by both Barry, John M, *The Great Influenza: The Epic Story of the Deadliest Plague in History*, Op. Cit., (see inside fly-leaf), and Spinney, Laura, *Pale Rider: The Spanish Flu of 1918 and How it Changed the World*, Op. Cit., p. 171.

- 37 Currently unable to confirm which of the two days she was admitted on.
- 38 For more details on this, see, for example, Humphreys, Margaret, 'The Influenza of 1918: Evolutionary Perspectives in a Historical Context,' *Evolution, Medicine, & Public Health Journal* (2018).
- 39 From 1914-1918.invisionzone.com/forums. See, also, independent.co.uk/22 October 2005/flu-how-britain-coped-in-the-1918-epidemic and nationalgeographic.com/03-04-2018/history-spanish-flu-pandemic.
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- 43 Michael Dolan kindly supplied the author with photographs of Venice's grave for which she is deeply grateful.
- 44 Photographic information provided by Michael Dolan.