

The Queen Elisabeth Medal

In this month of May 2020, the medical world has been struggling for almost two months now to contain the Covid-19 pandemic. Going beyond the scope of their duties and putting their lives at risk, healthcare workers are being admired around the world. This recognition results into daily applause or material support. Aware that they are living through a historic event, a section of society is also expressing the wish for a break with the past, through the implementation of social reforms.

One hundred years ago, the end of the World War I was also an opportunity to rethink the society that emerged from this ordeal. The war effort called for strong measures to be taken through the accreditation of pre-existing social struggles. At his "Joyeuse entrée" in Brussels on November 22, 1918, King Albert I emphasized in his speech to Parliament that "equality in suffering and endurance created equal rights to the expression of public expectations". He thereby announced the government's decision to introduce universal suffrage for men as early as 1919, which was to be effective for women at municipal level in 1920. Labour pressure led to the introduction of an 8-hour working day and a 48-hour week in 1921.

These political and constitutional decisions were part of a long implementation of a culture conducive for considering the needs of civil society. Among the many formative factors of this culture is the democratization of honour, which materializes in the creation of medals. In Belgium, during the World War I, civic decorations based on the 1867 model - instituted to reward exceptional careers in administration - were awarded from 1915 onwards to civilians or non-combatant military personnel for exceptional merit. These small objects are outward signs and symbols, marking a social recognition essential for overcoming traumatic experiences during the war. It is necessary to give meaning to an unbearable event and to show that the suffering was not in vain. These medals are also demonstrations of nationalism and help to unite a young nation that has already built itself economically, but which is now being consolidated by a concept of fatherland. A patriotism which will be fade away over the years with the revival of community tensions.

Among the other tangible traces, a medal bearing the effigy of Queen Elisabeth stands out. Instituted on 15 September 1916, this bronze medal is intended for those, Belgians or foreigners, who, during the World War I, devoted themselves to war reliefs for at least one year. One version bears a red cross in the open circle below the ribbon to thank the hospital staff for their devotion to the sick and wounded. This medal is especially intended for nurses who, in a spirit of steady and discreet sacrifice, helped to ease the misery caused by war. The association with Queen Elisabeth, Queen Nurse, presented on the obverse of the medal, is natural because, as Home secretary Paul Berryer reminds us, she "personifies kindness, devotion and self-sacrifice". On the reverse, a female figure adorned with the veil of the nurse holding an oil lamp - a reference to Florence Nightingale, the lady with the lamp, an English pioneer of nursing - and surrounded by the text "Pro Patria Honore et Caritate" symbolises submission to duty and humanity, virtues attributed to those who will be called "white angels".

Although a plaque cannot be enough to make people forget the turmoils of war and pre-existing social struggles, it nevertheless underlines the recognition of a profession that was particularly in demand during the war. The deadly fighting that followed the invasion of Belgium by German troops on 4 August 1914 quickly had repercussions on the Army Health Service and the Red Cross sections, which were disorganised and overwhelmed by events. There was a lack of qualified personnel and qualified nurses, and first-aid posts were hastily opened throughout the country; many women volunteered for these posts, such as Josephine Cloostermans, a boatwoman who joined the Red Cross at the outbreak of the war and who will later be awarded the Queen Elisabeth Medal for helping the sick and wounded in Ypres during the winter of 1914.

The medical facilities followed the progress of the fighting. As soon as the conflict began, the sovereigns asked the surgeon Antoine Depage to organise the Red Cross and to set up a surgical unit in the Royal Palace. At the end of October, the Queen asked Depage to create and manage surgical ambulances and hospitals behind the Yser River, where the army would dig in for four years. The project was completed with the opening on 21 December 1914 of the 1,000-bed Ocean Hospital in La Panne. The staff was initially composed of English nurses. The number of Belgian nurses, many of whom had received training in England, gradually increased, bringing the total to more than 200 for around thirty doctors. Under the influence of English nursing methods, discipline was military, with rigid regulations and a uniform made compulsory. For nearly four years, the nurses would live in waiting for wounded patients, or even a real influx when a disaster loomed, all in fear of artillery fire.

Over the months, the hospital acquired a solid reputation, strengthened by the symbolic role of the Queen, who wore the Red Cross uniform and identified with all the nurses. Élisabeth became the herald of the profession, known for assisting Surgeon Depage during operations or for making dressings and visiting the wounded. Another name related to the hospital is Marie Picard, wife of Antoine Depage and a renowned nurse. Before the war, she had been the administrative director of the Belgian School of Registered Nurses and had taken part with her husband in sending Red Cross ambulances during the Balkan War in 1912, for which she was decorated with the Order of Chekafat of the Ottoman Empire. When the World War I broke out, she joined the ambulance of the Royal Palace and then the Ocean Hospital. In 1915, she went to the United States to raise funds for humanitarian relief to Belgium. Described by the Americans as "the personification of the heroism of Belgian women", Marie Picard perished on her return aboard the *Lusitania*, torpedoed by a German submarine. The same year, another British nurse living in Belgium, Edith Cavell, was shot by the German occupying forces for having organized an escape network of Allied soldiers. The fate of these two nurses gave the profession an aura of martyrdom and ignited outrage throughout the world. Their death stirred up propaganda and helped to justify the noble struggle of the forces of the Triple Entente against German barbarity, which murdered nurses, embodiment of the primary virtues. The striking of a "1915 Remember" medal in the effigies of Edith Cavell and Marie Picard fuelled the culture of war which, by discrediting an ontologically evil enemy, aimed to mobilize consciences and ultimately to bring the United States into the war.

The heroism of these nurses and the cult of the Queen make these figures examples to be followed, as they concretely manifest the value system of a society to which everyone is invited to join. This self-sacrifice is promoted by an iconography that spreads the myth of the "white angel", while the terrible outcome of the fighting is mitigated by newspaper censorship. This vision contrasts with daily life at the Ocean Hospital, whose history is known to us thanks to the publication in 1936 of the book "Infirmières de guerre en service commandé", based on the daily notes taken by Jane De Launoy. Jane De Launoy, graduated as a nurse from the Saint-Camille school in 1908, was one of the first two Belgian nurses to join the Ocean's Hospital, where she worked until 1920. In recognition of her devotion, she received the gold medal of the Order of Leopold II and the Queen Elisabeth Medal. Her book is an invaluable source for understanding the horrors of war experienced by hospital staff. It reminds us the appalling conditions in which the nurses had to work, living with the battered bodies of soldiers and civilians in a spirit of self-sacrifice, like Henriette Van Acker, recipient of the Queen Elisabeth Medal, who carried on her work after staying up all night with her fiancé, who was mortally wounded by a bullet to the chest. In the conclusion of her book, Jane De Launoy reflects on human dignity and reveals the other side of the coin of commitment to the wounded, that of the loneliness of those who have lived through inhuman situations:

"Many of those we have loved are lying there in the land of Flanders, and to have touched by too much suffering, surely there remains in us a disproportion! There also remains that absolute contempt for prejudice which will have the consequence of somehow relegating us... and that egalitarian spirit which makes us now value a being only for his personal value, without regard for his situation or his name! Our new conception of life is going to make us pay with the solitude of soul for our passage in the turmoil because many will no longer understand us!"

These particular stories are often overshadowed by major military operations, but the creation of the Queen Elisabeth Medal is nonetheless evidence of the recognition of civilians as contributors to the idea of nationhood, from which a new vision of social order emerges. The Great War had in fact contributed to the sacralization of the very young profession of nursing. The social usefulness of the profession was recognised and English nursing became a necessity: in-depth scientific studies, military discipline and submission to regulations. It enabled many young girls to practice a remunerated activity worthy of consideration. A revaluation of the nursing profession is claimed and the studies are reorganized in 1921, but neither the working conditions nor the wages are improved. In 1922, the National Federation of Nurses of Belgium is created, with the aim of defending the professional, material and moral interests of the registered nurse. But the nurses had difficulty in making their voices heard. Sense of duty, courage, generosity, devotion, these qualifications acquired during the war contribute, in addition to the religious origin and the female status of the profession, to the acceptance of the difficult working conditions of nurses. No extra pay for non-standard services. The law on 8-hour working days and 48-hour weeks, which dates back to 1921, will not apply in hospitals until 1937.

One hundred years after the end of the World War I, the situation created by the Covid-19 pandemic confronts countries with an invisible enemy able to destabilize the world's greatest powers. The climate generated by the pandemic is often described as a war situation, because of the mobilization it provokes and because the workings of society have come to a standstill, waiting for the enemy to withdraw. As in any conflict, our societies have created heroes, who demonstrate a value system that the community embraces and strengthens social cohesion. Expressions of altruism and devotion lessen the sense of helplessness in the face of a mortality that is beyond us. But beyond the applause, how will the social recognition of those who were on the front lines be realized? This will be one of the questions to ask at the end of this landmark event, in order to give it meaning. More generally, it is a general reflection on our societies. On November 18th 1918, the newspaper *Le Soir* already asked Belgian society an essential question: are we ready to face the challenges ahead? "Are we ready to restore our country on a new basis and to face the gigantic task ahead? Are we ready to put our old political quarrels aside, or at least to silence them? Are we ready to approach the problems that lie ahead of us tomorrow, with a mind free of prejudice, with a clear and sound mind? Are we ready to make the sacrifices that the interests of the country will demand, to revise our labour legislation, to fulfil our duties, all our duties, towards the workers and the humble? ». All these questions could mutatis mutandis be applied to our contemporary societies.

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