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## Sister Catherine Black: 'King's nurse, Beggar's nurse.'

### Journal Item

How to cite:

Chatterton, Claire (2017). Sister Catherine Black: 'King's nurse, Beggar's nurse.'. *Bulletin of the UK Association for the History of Nursing.*, 6 pp. 50–51.

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Version: Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://ukahn.org/wp/download/ukahn-bulletin-november-2017/>

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Minnie then retired to the Sussex coast, where she was to live for a further twenty years.

It is good to be able to know more about this interesting nurse and very grateful thanks to Kathryn Adams, Julie Davey, Sarah Rogers, James McInnes and Lucy London for their help.

### **Sister Catherine Black: 'King's nurse, Beggar's nurse.'**

#### **Claire Chatterton**



Fig. 6: Source – Sue Light <http://greatwarnurses.blogspot.co.uk>

While doing some research into facial injury during the First World War, I came across some memoirs written by a nurse, Catherine Black. She had written these in 1939 and gave them the intriguing title of 'King's nurse, Beggar's nurse.' The title of her book reflects her varied career. Perhaps best known as the private nurse of King George V, whom she nursed until his death in 1935 and who called her 'Blackie', she also worked with patients from across the social classes during a varied and interesting nursing career.

#### **References**

Chatterton, C (2016) Sister Minnie Wood. *The Bulletin of the UK Association for the History of Nursing*. 5, 81.

Hallett, C (2017) *Nurses of Passchendaele*. Barnsley, Pen and Sword Books.

She was born in Ireland, in Ramelton, County Donegal, in 1878. The eldest of six children she grew up in what she later described as a 'fairly prosperous household'. Her father, Moses Black, ran a draper's shop. She said that the desire to become a nurse was there from her childhood ('while still a child playing with my dolls') but it wasn't easy to persuade her family to let her go and train (she described it as a 'long and hard battle'). Turned down by the City of Dublin Hospital after an unsuccessful interview, she turned to the adverts in 'The Hospital Magazine' and successfully applied to a hospital in a seaside town in England (which she anonymises as 'Southgate') where she was accepted to nurse patients with TB and lupus. After two and a half years in what she described as an understaffed and busy establishment she applied and was accepted as a probationer at The London Hospital, starting her training in 1903 at the age of 25.

Her descriptions of her time at The London are rich and evocative. She talks of the famous Matron, Eva Luckes and she recounts the long hours they worked, '*we were called at 6am, breakfasted at 6.30am ... and anyone who was five minutes late got a black mark. Five black marks in a quarter and you lost one of your cherished days off. Into the wards at 7am, on duty until 9.20pm.*' Her accommodation was in some dilapidated houses at the back of the hospital known as the 'Rabbit Warren', which were cold and damp.

In spite of these hardships, her love of The London Hospital, nursing and her patients shine through the pages. She writes with compassion about 'Lily', a nineteen year old, dying of pernicious anaemia. She reflects on the terrible loss of life before an effective treatment was found, as it was for those she nursed with diabetes.

1914 found her on the private nursing staff at The London, like Edith Cavell before her. The two women almost met when she was sent to Brussels to work with a private case there. She recounts how they spoke on the phone and exchanged notes but were never able to meet up, due to their busy schedules.

Although she had volunteered to join the Queen Alexandra's Imperial Nursing Reserve she wrote that she hadn't expected to be called up (*'like most people then I thought it would be over by Christmas'*). Miss Luckes however had promised to find 50 nurses for the War Office and so Miss Black found herself in Aldershot working in the Cambridge Military Hospital. Whilst she was there she worked on the newly established ward for men with facial injuries, describing her experiences there as the saddest of all her nursing experiences. She recounts working with the pioneering plastic surgeon, Harold Gillies, who was later to establish a specialist hospital, the Queen's Hospital at Sidcup. She was, he says, *'tireless in his determination to succeed'* in repairing as much as possible of the men's severe injuries, a *'task that demanded infinite time and patience.'* Behind him she recalls, came Professor Henry Tonks, who made drawings of the *'jaw-wound cases'*.

In Autumn 1916 she was sent to France to No 7 General Hospital in St Omer. Initially she worked on a surgical ward, then moved

to one for shell-shocked officers, which she described as *'one of the saddest conditions of modern warfare'*. As with her earlier descriptions of the men she nursed with facial injuries, her compassion shines through in her writing. After nearly a year in St Omer she was on the move again, this time to the Casualty Clearing Station at Poperinghe which had recently been shelled resulting in the death of one of the nursing staff, Staff Nurse Nellie Spindler. She worked in a chain of casualty clearing stations and then in another base hospital. Amongst her experiences was nursing soldiers with self-inflicted wounds – very exacting work.

At the end of the war she returned home to see her family and found them barricaded in their house due to the troubled situation in Ireland (they were Protestant). She then returned to the private nursing staff of The London, where she nursed a variety of patients (including being sent to a Midlands village where there was a typhoid epidemic). In 1928 she was sent to nurse King George V, who was seriously ill with pleurisy. She stayed on as his nurse, initially as a member of The London's staff and then from 1930 as a member of the Royal Household. She nursed him until his death in 1935. She then travelled to Australia to study bush nursing and wrote her memoirs in 1939. She died in 1949 in The London Hospital.

Sadly her book is out of print and it is hard to obtain a copy. I found a copy in the special collection of the RCN's Library and Heritage Centre in London and read it there. It was well worth the read.

*This brief biography is based on an article written for The Royal London Hospital League of Nurses Review No. 85, July 2016.*