

THE IMAGE OF NURSING

2: Nursing Angels



First World War postcard, second of three in a series.

1914-1918, published by Bamforth Ltd



Royal College of Nursing

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The “selfless angel” image

This postcard presents an idealised image of nursing during the war. The devoted nurse is at her patient’s side in his time of need, in clean, comfortable surroundings. In reality nurses’ work was often demanding and dangerous, particularly when nursing soldiers close to the front. Rather than reflecting their bravery or skill, this image emphasises nurses’ care and compassion. This romanticised image reflects views widely held in the early 20th century.

Previously, nursing had not been regarded as a respectable job. It was during the Crimean War (1854-1856) that nursing began to be seen as a suitable occupation for women. This was partly due to the rising fame of nurse Florence Nightingale, a devout Christian from an upper-class family. Nurses began to be portrayed as angels, dutifully caring for others. By the time

the First World War broke out, the female nurse tending to wounded soldiers was an image the British public was comfortable with.

The red cross worn by the nurse in the image shows that she is part of a Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD). These were staffed by female volunteers who had no formal nurse training.

Gender stereotypes

Later, postcards, cartoons, film and TV often reinforced this ‘selfless angel’ stereotype, as well as others such as the ‘naughty nurse’ and the tyrannical ‘battle-axe.’ In most cases, nursing was stereotyped as women’s work. The reality is quite different; although the majority of nurses who served during the First World War were women, nursing was and is a demanding and skilled profession for both sexes.

Activity

Think about nurses you have seen in films and TV or have read about in books. What are the similarities to and differences from this image?

This postcard was distributed during the First World War, when nursing images were often used for propaganda purposes. Search for

references to nurses and VADs in the Illustrated News First World War Archive (www.illustratedfirstworldwar.com) How are nurses described? Why do you think this might have been useful for propaganda? And how might a nurse’s actual role in a casualty clearing station or hospital have differed from this stereotype?

Fact: During WWI soldiers serving in the trenches could send postcards featuring short pre-printed messages such as “I am well” or “I am wounded”. Commercial postcards could be bought behind the frontlines and mailed home with more personal messages.

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