

IN ASSOCIATION WITH IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUMS

WAR DIARIES

A NURSE AT THE FRONT

The First World War Diaries of Sister Edith Appleton



Foreword by **MICHAEL MORPURGO**

Edited by **RUTH COWEN**

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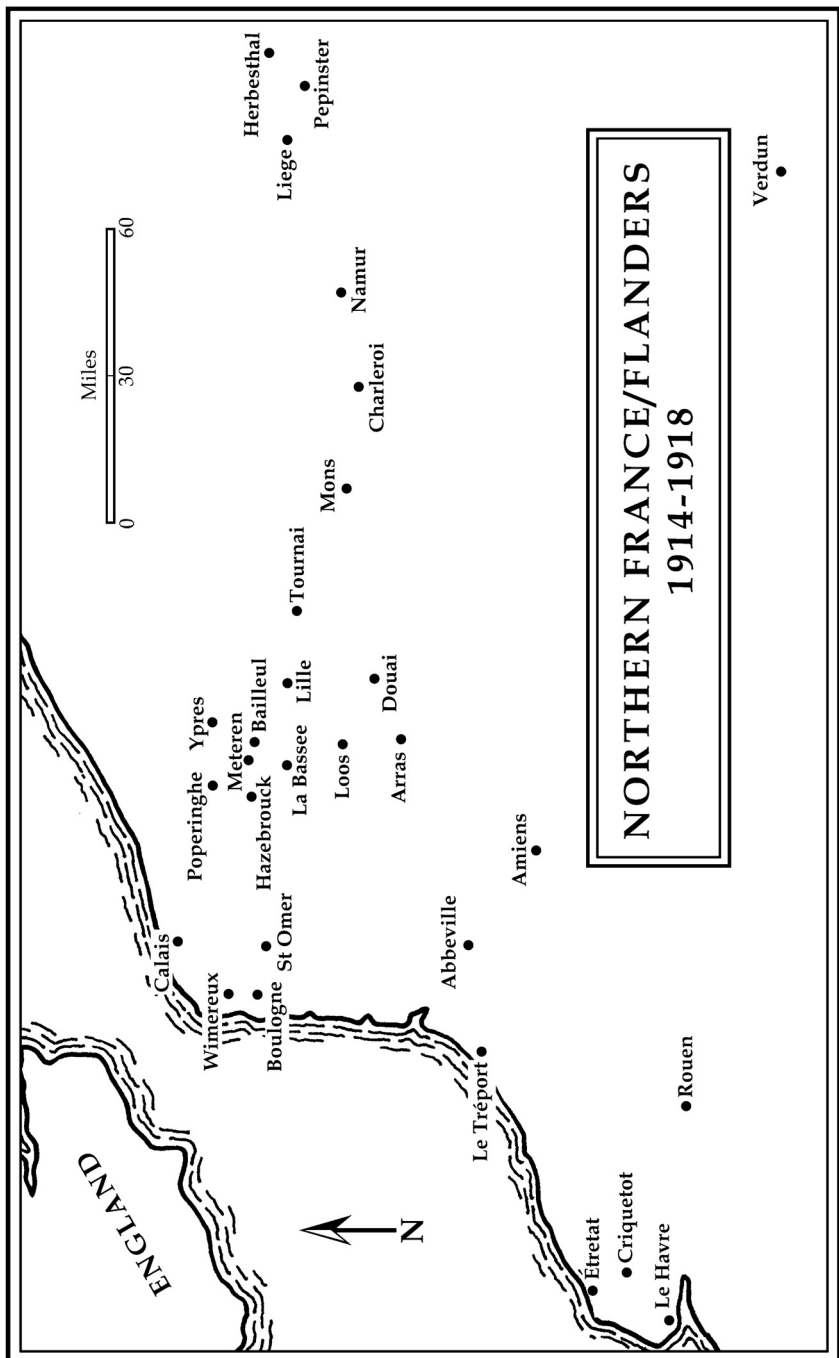
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Introduction

The Great War diaries of Edith Appleton paint an exceptionally vivid picture of daily life just behind the lines, in the makeshift clearing stations and hospitals which received wounded and dying men straight from the Front. Simultaneously, they chart the transformation of the northern French towns, villages and landscapes which the conflict irrevocably changed over the course of those four bloodstained years.

Edith (known as 'Edie' or 'E') served in France and Belgium throughout the war. Following the Armistice, she continued to work first on an ambulance train, transporting casualties and repatriating prisoners of war, and then on the staff of the Matron-in-Chief in Boulogne, until her demobilisation in December 1919. A conscientious diarist, it is likely that she wrote her detailed and engaging journals right through from her enrolment as a military nurse in 1914 until her permanent return home. She seemed to manage to create for herself a brief pause in which to chronicle the events going on around her during even the busiest times at the height of great battles. However, the first volume we have begins in April 1915 (frustratingly, on a page numbered 112), almost seven months after her departure from England. There are other missing sections as well, most significantly an entire journal charting her life between November 1916 and June 1918.

Despite this long gap, the 400 mainly handwritten pages of Edie's diaries make a valuable and moving contribution to

the literature of the Great War. For Edie was not just an intelligent observer, but a compassionate and nuanced writer, with a gift for thumbnail characterisation, a quick wit and a sharp eye for the telling detail. Acutely aware of the significance of the events she witnessed from the sidelines – the first gas attacks, the ebb and flow of casualties as the great battles waxed and waned – she never deviates from a frank and competent account of what she witnessed. The horrific wounds, the amputations, the seemingly endless procession of agonising deaths. She calmly reports the effects of gas and shellshock – neither of which had been seen before – and the extreme youth of most of those who died. Nothing is spared, nothing is embroidered and Edie never takes refuge in sentiment. Indeed her unflinching account is perhaps especially surprising as the diaries were addressed to her mother Eliza, whom Edie might have been expected to protect from the most graphic details.

And yet what lifts the diaries from an almost unendurable catalogue of horrors is Edie's ability to switch from this grinding ghastliness to a genuinely joyous, exuberant appreciation of the natural beauty around her. She was a robust walker, and a lover of rugged coastlines, and whatever the season every spare moment off-duty was used to tramp around the glorious countryside sketching the views, reveling either in summer flowers or wintry storms. Ever practical, even in the direst circumstances she embraces new pastimes – in Poperinghe, famous for its Flanders lace, she takes up lace-making, and for a favoured colleague she even tries her hand at carpentry, creating a large wooden cabinet with movable shelves, which she polished with beeswax and turps to look like old oak.

Edith Appleton was born in Deal in Kent in June 1877 – the eighth of eleven children. Her father Edward was a master mariner and pillar of the Deal community, who later became

a Trinity Pilot, assisting ships as they manoeuvred through the dangerous sands and shallows around the Channel coast. It was an intimate and affectionate family, and Edith remained particularly close to her mother Eliza – the diaries are full of warm concern for her comfort and safety and greetings to the rest of her much-loved family.



A family portrait from the 1890s. Edward and Eliza Appleton (seated, centre) with nine of their eleven children.

Edie is standing, right, in the back row.

Photograph courtesy of the Appleton family

In 1897, when Edie was 20, her father drowned while attempting to board a cattle steamship at Dungeness, leaving Eliza with a number of children still at home. Three years later, in October 1900, Edie made the journey from Deal to London, where she enrolled to train as a nurse at St Bartholomew's Hospital, close to St Paul's Cathedral. She lived in nurses' digs and worked in the surgical and medical wards, qualifying in 1904. She had achieved a consistently

excellent record, finishing fifth out of her class of twenty-six students.

By the time Britain joined the war on 4 August 1914, Edie had spent four years working as a private nurse, a spell as a health visitor, and the last two years as a District Nurse in Crediton, Devon. She quickly realised that there would soon be a pressing need for such experienced civilian nurses to work at the front line. Within three weeks she had signed up, and on 16 September travelled to Fort Pitt in Chatham to join Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service Reserve (QAIMNSR).

QAIMNS had been established twelve years earlier and was considered an elite nursing service. Pre-war, QAIMNS nurses had been required to be well educated, highly qualified, unmarried, between 25 and 35 years old and ladies of a 'high social status'. With such exacting standards, it was hardly surprising that at the outbreak of war there were barely 300 regular members, but as the scale of the casualties soared these restrictions were quickly swept away to enable more than 10,000 reservists to join.

And so on 9 October a group of nurses, including 37-year-old Edie, embarked at Southampton and sailed via the port of Dungeness – where her father had died seventeen years earlier – to Ostend. In a letter to her mother Edie described how, after a night crossing in eerie darkness, with a pilot navigating the ship through the minefields, they had steamed safely into port and she had woken to the sound of dogs barking and church bells ringing. The harbour was packed with British ships and the town was rapidly filling up with Belgian refugees, soldiers, horses, guns, ambulances, cars, dog-carts and even London buses – already the German onslaught was taking its toll. Edie was able to go ashore and fight her way through the crowds to the cathedral where, she told Eliza, she gave thanks for a safe crossing.

After a further night's voyage in pitch darkness, she arrived in Boulogne ready for her first posting, which would be to No. 10 Stationary Hospital at St Omer. By the following February Edie was addressing letters home from further up the line, from No. 3 Casualty Clearing Station (CCS) at Hazebrouck. CCSs were mobile treatment stations, usually set up in huts or under canvas near established rail routes to receive the casualties from the Front. If local digs could not be found quickly, nurses could find themselves billeted in tents or ticket offices. When under fire a CCS could pack up and move at top speed, and sometimes they were forced to move every few days.

By April, No. 3 CCS had moved right behind the front lines to Poperinghe near Ypres – which is where Edie's diary opens. The unit had found shelter in two convents and a seminary, but within a few pages Edie is describing how the station suffered three successive days of continuous shelling and bombing. The medical staff struggled to cope with the flood of civilian as well as military casualties as the shells rained down. 'The air was so thick with red dust, bits and smoke,' reported Edie with her customary sangfroid, having been up all night in the operating theatre, 'that it was difficult for us to go on as usual'. The CCS was quickly evacuated, and Edie and the other nurses returned to the relative safety of St Omer until it could be re-established in Bailleul.

In the first year of the war conditions in the CCSs were often very basic and equipment inadequate. A stream of men – some already dead – would be carried on stretchers from motor ambulances and deposited at the CCS. The injured, all suffering from shock, usually had infected wounds and at first there was nothing with which to sterilise new dressings. Frequently rows of stretchers with scarcely space to stand between them would lie on bare floors, a brown blanket the soldiers' only protection against the

bitter winter. There were few bedsteads, trolleys or dressing tables. Only the most severe cases were operated on, and evacuations to the base hospitals took place every day by ambulance train before a new intake of casualties was admitted. As Edie herself writes, on occasion the nurses worked twenty-hour days to get the rudimentary work done.

Understandably, the authorities selected the nurses to work in these hellish conditions with care. The nurses had to be in good physical health, to have completed at least six months in the country, living in active service conditions, and to have an excellent previous record. With the unrelenting pressure of dealing with up to 2,000 beds with a skeleton staff, often with unrelieved shelling all around them, the women needed to remain mentally strong, and it was decided that, ideally, they would not spend more than three months at the Front before returning to base for a further six months of relative respite.

Things deteriorated further for the nurses during the Second Battle of Ypres, with the appearance of a new and terrifying enemy – gas. On 5 May, a week or so after the first gas attacks of the war, Edie reported in her diary that the wards were ‘full of gas-poisoning victims. They are fearfully sad to see. The slight ones look rather like pneumonia, and the bad ones are terrible – the poor things are blue and gasping, lungs full of fluid, and not able to cough it up.’ For nurses like Edie, watching helplessly as so many men died in agony was almost unbearable.

By the end of 1915 Edie found herself on the Normandy coast at Étretat, between Le Havre and Fécamp. She was stationed at General Hospital No. 1, one of several hospitals on the casualty evacuation chain. She remained posted there for more than a year, and while she found the work absorbing and the scenery exquisite – the rocky coastline reminded

her of home – she remained anxious to be posted back to the Front. On 18 November, shortly after her last entry for 1916, the five-month slaughter of the Battle of the Somme finally ended. It had cost the British more than half a million casualties.

There are, sadly, no diaries for the nineteen-month stretch between November 1916 and June 1918, but we know that Edie continued to work at hospitals and clearing stations throughout this period. America joined the war in April 1917, and the first US troops began arriving in France on 26 June, shortly before the Third Battle of Ypres. We know from the meticulous and highly detailed diary of the indomitable Dame Maud McCarthy, Matron-in-Chief of the British Expeditionary Force, that in June 1917 Edie had temporary charge of 45 Casualty Clearing Station in Achiet-le-Grand, seven miles south of Arras, from which the Germans withdrew (after devastating the area) in March. In an entry dated 17 June, when Dame Maud was officially meant to be off duty with appendicitis, she wrote: ‘Received letter from Sister Appleton . . . to say the hospital had been quite busy and shells had been falling very near. The hospital cook and a patient had been wounded. The patients and staff had had to go to dugouts.’ At some point in 1917 Edie received the Royal Red Cross (First Class), a highly prized decoration which was awarded to nurses almost invariably for ‘exceptional devotion and competency’, and for their sustained efforts over a long period.

With the Third Battle of Ypres raging from July to November 1917, Edie would have been kept busy as British troops pressed from Ypres. The village of Passchendaele was finally taken on 10 November, and Allied losses had totalled more than 250,000 men. Just ten days after that British tanks spearheaded an attack towards the Hindenburg Line which launched the Battle of Cambrai and the attrition continued, punctuated by concerted pushes and offensives by both

sides. Reinforced by troops from the now defunct Russian front, Germany launched a major offensive in March 1918, beginning with the Battle of Picardy against the British. Four more attacks followed, starting with the Battle of the Lys in April, near Armentières. United under the leadership of Marshal Foch, the Allies continued to repulse the German offensives at the Battle of the Aisne in late May and the Battle of the Matz in June, which alone cost 35,000 Allied lives.

Edie's diaries resume on 21 June, six days after the end of the Battle of the Matz and shortly before the final 'spring push' which would become the Second Battle of the Marne. By this time Edie was posted to General Hospital No. 3 in Le Tréport, which was based in part of the Trianon Hotel, a newly built and very grand hotel on a cliff top. While the fighting continued the hospital continued to receive a steady stream of casualties, including many German troops – to whom Edie displayed as much compassion as she could muster – but it was becoming increasingly clear that Germany was losing momentum and Edie's optimistic mood grew stronger as she sensed an anticipation of victory among the troops. 'Dare we feel that there is one small chip of Peace?' she wrote as the Bulgarians began to negotiate terms for surrender.

Life in general was improving. 'I sometimes wonder if I realise that I am living in one of France's smartest hotels . . .' she continued, in a rare moment of self-interested gloating. 'Beautifully situated, good rooms, wide corridors, bathrooms galore – I always choose one that looks towards the rising sun and over the harbour and town – it is so quaint and beautiful in the early morning. And all free of charge!' In spite of the work she still finds time to explore the local villages, bathe in a hastily adapted 'swimming gown' and relish the beautiful coastal sunsets. And when, finally, the Armistice

arrived on 11 November, Edie comments with her usual crispness: 'Peace! Thank God for that! It feels very queer too – as if your elastic had snapped.'

The work didn't end with the peace, of course, and on 6 December Edie was sent to Boulogne to take temporary charge of an ambulance train just arrived from England to collect hundreds of wounded soldiers and repatriated prisoners of war. The diaries end with the men enjoying a well-earned Christmas feast in a siding outside Calais, seated at a long trestle table made up of the beds from one of the carriages, followed by a whist drive and a makeshift concert.

In late January 1919 Edie joined the office staff of Dame Maud, the Matron-in-Chief, who was based at the Marine Hotel in Boulogne. In her diary, Dame Maud referred to Edie at this point as a nurse who 'has been out since the beginning of the war and who is a woman of considerable experience'. It's likely that Dame Maud had specially selected Edie for a job, and that she also recommended her for an OBE, which was awarded that June. Edie remained in Boulogne until her final demobilisation in December 1919.

On her return to England Edie took a nursing post in London, at Bedford College, a women-only institution based in Regent's Park, which had relatively recently become part of the University of London. Her mother Eliza died in 1922, and the following year Edie and one of her elder sisters bought Buddlebrook, a property with a large fertile garden in the exquisitely pretty village of Brighthstone on the Isle of Wight, where she grew fruit and vegetables, kept chickens and even, according to family tradition, a pet trout called Algernon in the brook. Several of the Appleton siblings lived at Buddlebrook, including Fred, who became the vicar of Brook and Mottistone, and the house became a happy and comfortable focus for the extended family.



Eddie relaxing at home at Buddlebrook on the Isle of Wight in the early 1920s, with members of the extended Appleton family.

Eddie is on the running board, holding the chicken.

Photograph courtesy of the Appleton family

Eddie stayed in touch with Dame Maud, and the year she moved to Buddlebrook she received an invitation to join the Territorial Force Nursing Service. This was the sister organisation of QAIMNS and existed to provide the army with reserve civilian nurses in times of crisis, which Dame Maud had taken over in 1920. Initially, although flattered by the offer, Eddie declined. In a regretful letter she wrote: ‘Thank you for offering to have me in the Territorials. I am afraid I cannot join, much as I should like to for many things – and should love having you as my chief again. One reason is that I am 46 and the other is that I really mean to give up nursing next year and to make my living at poultry-keeping, etc.’ However, Dame Maud persevered and apparently within a few days Eddie had changed her mind.

In 1926, at the age of 49, Eddie married. Her husband was the stepson of her elder sister Mabel, and at 38 he was eleven

years her junior. Known as Jack, Lieutenant-Commander John Bonsor Ledger died of cancer just ten years after their marriage, leaving Edie a widow for the last 22 years of her life. She died on 6 February 1958, at Buddlebrook, at the age of eighty.

Edie's diaries stayed within her family until 2008, when some of her great-nephews and nieces, led by Dick Robinson, began to create a website to celebrate her life and work. Since then www.edithappleton.org.uk has grown out of all recognition, as Dick and his family have uncovered more information and added further documents – including three recently discovered letters, written by Edie to Eliza, that fill in some of the gaps left by the missing first months of the journal. They are indebted to many general readers, scholars, and the descendants of some of the soldiers mentioned in the diaries who have helped them to tease out more extraordinary stories of those extraordinary days. And with this publication, the work goes on.

Volume One

answering each other's ravings. One of them tells us he has been killed and does his mother know. Certainly death will be no stranger to him, when he comes in a day or two - or perhaps to-night. 3 ops. - 2 trephines and an arm. A field ambulance at Ypres was shelled last night, 2 orderlies killed, and 10 wounded, some fatally all the patients were transferred to us. So we have been very busy to-day.

6th 2 cases in the theatre, heavy convoy in and out, worked in wards this morning. Gave the little orphans a tea this afternoon. We laid the tables for them. They came in and we came after, and as we entered they struck up "God save the King" in French. Then the eldest girl made us a little speech. Then they fed and we poured out tea for them, then they gave us a little concert, "Vive Angleterre!" "Vive la France!" three cheers, all over, very happy - on duty again. Have not been out for 3 days, firstly because of much work, and partly weather, rainy and windy, not good for caps and tempers.

7th Very busy day, going hard in theatre and wards until nearly 9 this evening. Very tired.

8th Busy day, but only 1 case in theatre. Men who came in convoy to-day were in a terrible state of nervous collapse, a great many of them having been blown up in their trenches. Went for a walk after tea with Latham.

9th Heavy convoy, bad cases, I am off for 1 hour, to go back this evening, 2 cases (heads) for theatre. Many of to-day's wounded were shot in the stomach in several cases, the bullet went in in

The first volume of Edie's diaries - the only one which was typed - begins tantalisingly on page 112. Pages 1-111 have never been found.

1915, Near Ypres

April 5

A field ambulance at Ypres was shelled last night – two orderlies killed and ten wounded, some fatally. All the patients were transferred to us, so we have been very busy today.

April 6

We gave the little orphans a tea this afternoon. We laid out the tables, they came in and we followed, and as we entered they struck up 'God Save the King' in French, and the eldest girl made us a little speech. They fed as we poured out tea for them, then they gave us a little concert, '*Vive l'Angleterre!*' and '*Vive la France!*' Three cheers all round, very happy! Now on duty again. Have not been out for three days. First because of much work, but also the weather, which is rainy and windy – not good for caps and tempers.

April 8

Men who came in the convoy today were in a terrible state of nervous collapse, a great many of them having been blown up in their trenches.

April 9

Heavy convoy in with bad cases, but I am off for one hour. I have to go back this evening, we have two cases – head wounds – for theatre. Many of today's wounded were shot in the stomach.

April 14

A Zeppelin was reported as heading this way, but we heard this morning that it has gone south. Off duty this evening, went for a walk and then looked over the college, where we are to move tomorrow.

April 15

There was a tremendously heavy bombardment last night. It only lasted three-quarters of an hour, but it was impossible to sleep through the noise. I stood at my window and watched it all – gun flashes, ground lights and searchlights. It was over by about 12.30. I heard today that it was covering our troops' advance.

April 16

Moved into the college – which is better in some ways, worse in others than the Benedictine place. The theatre is not nearly so good, and I must say, I am rather tired with charring* all odd moments of the day. We heard that the Zeppelin that was sighted two nights ago dropped bombs on Bailleul, near the sisters' quarters – luckily no-one was hurt.

* Scrubbing, cleaning, general housework. From 'charwoman': a woman employed to clean other people's houses.

April 17

A Taube* that flew over here early this morning was shot down a little way away. The pilot was killed and the observer taken prisoner. He was walked through the town wearing an Iron Cross. At present there is a big attack being made by our men somewhere near Ypres, and there is much flashing going on. It has been a frightfully busy day again, although only two operations – an amputation and an appendix.

April 18

Sunday. Our men made an attack last night, and we heard the heavy firing that covered their advance – in fact it shook the houses. In three minutes they had taken a trench with 13 prisoners and two officers. The whole work of the night achieved a hill of importance blown up – arms and legs of men flung high and into our own trenches – and six lines of trenches taken, along with 2,000 prisoners. The Germans made a counterattack, and killed and wounded nearly 1,000 of our men, and we have had over 600 through our hospital today, all badly wounded and fearfully collapsed. Some who have been out since August say it is quite the worst time they have had.

We went on duty at 5.30 a.m. and stayed on till 9 p.m., and I missed tea and dinner because we were too busy in the theatre. I came straight to bed and am having dinner from the officers' mess brought up to me. It was a sad day in the theatre and a terribly tiring one, with so many amputations

* The first German mass-produced military plane. At the beginning of the war these basic monoplanes were used for all aerial tasks. However within a few months of Edie's entry they would virtually disappear from front line service as more sophisticated aircraft were introduced, and Taubes were relegated to training novice pilots. 'Taube' remained a generic term for any German aeroplane.

of arms and legs, and insides cut and packed in. Sir Anthony Bowlby* and Doctor Parbury from Sharnbrook each did one operation to give our men a rest.

April 19

We have had more patients in, in two heavy trainloads. Ypres is too dangerous for them to be treated nearby, so we get them brought in a few hours after they are wounded. One, a young officer, had both feet cut off. He was walking in Ypres when a shell struck him. He died soon after.

April 20

A frantic day from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. – one long rush of badly wounded being admitted, and three trainloads have been evacuated. It is a wicked war. Officers and men come in – many so blown to bits that they just come in to die. Most go straight to the theatre for amputation of limb or limbs, or to have their insides – which have been blown out – replaced, and to be made a little more comfortable for the few hours left to them. The big ward is all agonised groans and pleadings and we feel we don't know where to start on the hundreds of things to be done at once. Ypres is very much ruined and heaps of dead – English, French and Belgian – are lying about in the square and all around the town. We hear the Germans have given up the hope of taking Ypres, so have decided to utterly destroy it.

* Sir Anthony Alfred Bowlby (1855–1929) had arrived in France seven months earlier as Consulting Surgeon to the Forces. Later he would rise to become Adviser on Surgery for the whole of the British area, Front and Base. It was Bowlby's insistence that complex surgery could be done at the Front that led to the expansion of a number of Casualty Clearing Stations into fully equipped hospital units. The ability to get seriously wounded men into theatre much faster saved numerous lives and limbs.