

“Encounters with nurse Edith Cavell”

This paper is the majority of a presentation given in Swardeston church on October 12th and 13th 2024 with some revisions and additions.

Edith Cavell died 109 years ago in front of a firing squad at the Tir National in Brussels. She became a national heroine – and the focus of considerable British War propaganda. Swardeston people honoured her courage and self-giving in creating in 1917 a new East window in the church and in 1920 including her name on the village War Memorial with those of the 10 men from the village who died.

East window, St Mary's Swardeston – installed 1917



Swardeston World War I War Memorial, 1920



Telling the stories of ‘encounters’ over 100 years ago

Historians/biographers have to collect evidence on their chosen subject. This may be from written records, memories remembered and reported by others, sifted from books their subject is known to have had/read or music they loved, and evidence from choices made by their subjects. They seek to assemble the facts - wherever they can be found – fairly, even where they are possibly misrepresentations...

For Edith Cavell, writing her story is difficult – there are no TV / radio interviews, no diary (Edith burnt her records in summer 1915) and there is no autobiography. We have a few of her letters. Hence an account of her depends on observations of others about what she did, what she said, how she came across. Inferences as to what she might have been *thinking* are skating on thinner ice ... but I would argue that we can confidently base ‘conjecture’ today on the remarkable consistency of her character and action as reported through her 40 years.. This paper proceeds on that basis..

Edith might well take a dim view of what is said about her here. She famously recast what one of our subjects today said, namely ‘*I shall always remember you as a heroine and a martyr*’, saying ‘*Don’t think of me like that – Think of me simply as a nurse who tried to do her duty*’.

This paper contains five short accounts of people who first encountered Edith Cavell between 1911 and 1915 and whose lives were changed by their encounters. These include a girl who was ‘adopted’ by Edith in 1911, a nurse who was ‘forgiven’ by Edith in spring 1914, a soldier sheltered by her in June 1915, a French resistance worker (*‘resistante’*) whom she met in February 1915, and the chaplain who talked with her in prison on October 11th 1915, the night before she died. In each case they are “representative” (in broad terms) of many like them.

Edith Cavell wrote a letter to her cousin Eddy in her late teens which included the sentence: *Some day I am going to do something useful - something for people. They are most of them so helpless, so hurt and so unhappy.*

This quote from when Edith was only 16 may provide a partial rationale for our first encounter... one which led to a four-year relationship for Edith – her help to Pauline Randall ...

1. Pauline Randall



To our knowledge, the nearest Edith Cavell had in the way of sustained relationships with teenagers was when she was a governess to families in England between 1886 and 1890 and then with the Francois family in Brussels from 1890-5. This pre-dated her initial 'encounter' with Pauline in 1911 by over 15 years.

Already, In early 1909, Grace Jemmett, an English teenage girl, came to live at Edith's Clinique in Brussels, referred from England by Edith Cavell's brother-in-law who was a doctor. Edith had agreed to care for her and to manage her morphine addiction and associated depression. In keeping with her early nostrum of *doing something useful for people*, she took Grace on (with regular payments for her care). Edith must have wondered how she would find time for this new 'charge' – life in the nurses training school and the hospitals was already packed enough!

Then, in 1911, Edith Cavell 'adopted' a new 'daughter', Pauline Randall. She was a 13-year-old, and had travelled Europe with her father in a circus. She had no memory of her mother. When they were in Brussels her father decided to leave her there. The chaplain at Edith's church contacted Edith as an English parishioner had asked him to help find someone to look after Pauline.

Edith agreed to help.... A life-changing encounter for Pauline – who otherwise could have been homeless and possibly taken into care by the Belgian authorities. Did Edith reflect on the security of her own childhood here in Swardeston? – on what stood in the way of her offering similar care and support to Pauline?

Edith Cavell became her godmother, found a room for her in the Clinique, and funds for her upkeep and her schooling. When Edith went on holiday to Norfolk in July each year (1912,1913,1914) Pauline Randall accompanied her (in 1912 and 1913 along with Grace Jemmett: Grace opted not to join them in 1914).

At the very beginning of August 1914, as Edith made her life-changing decision to head back from Norfolk to Brussels and the imminent War, Pauline Randall was determined to return with her, regardless of the risk of war. She presumably understood Edith Cavell's statement '*My duty lies with my nurses*' and decided to stay with her rather than be abandoned to unfamiliar carers in Norfolk... So away on the trains and the Dover-Ostend ferry they went together.

At Christmas time in 1914 Edith Cavell arranged a Christmas meal and party for friends and thirty local children amid the stringent rationing of the fourth month of German occupation. She invited in some Allied soldiers she had hidden – Pauline was there, as was Rev Stirling Gahan (see 5 below).

In June – August 1915 Edith was aware that Pauline Randall and others at the Clinique were being questioned (and rewarded) by German police spies. How did she react? No record remains. Pauline continued by Edith's side till her arrest. She saw Edith and Sister Wilkins, her deputy, being arrested on August 5th – Edith told her and the nurses to be strong, that everything would be all right and that she would be back soon. She never saw Pauline again.

In September 1915, while Edith was in prison awaiting trial, Pauline moved out to be a maid in a Brussels household. Edith wrote her a letter from prison on September 27: *I was very glad to hear you were with a kind lady and hope you will try to please her and stay with her, for as I told you, it is no good to keep changing [households]. I was very sorry to hear that you had left the Nursing School but I hope now all is for the best. Do not worry about your money. If I am free soon, I will come and see you; if not I will leave it in the hands of Miss Butcher for you.... Be a good girl and don't forget all I have tried*

to teach you: say your prayers and go to church when you can and remember not to make friends with people you don't know and that you must never repeat the things you hear which are not your business... Goodbye my child. If I want a little maid, you must come back to me... Your affectionate godmother Edith Cavell

Pauline learnt of Edith Cavell's impending execution on October 11th, in the company of Grace Jemmett and several of Edith's nurses. She was not yet 17.

After Edith's execution Pauline returned to England... for six months she worked for a Dr Broadbent caring for his children in Hertfordshire. Mrs Broadbent reported to the Daily Mirror (5th September 1919 – from where we have the only photograph of her) - *"She was a very good girl, sweet to the children, very religious, attends Bible class in St Albans regularly"*.

Edith Cavell undoubtedly moulded Pauline's character: Pauline is reported in the Mirror article as saying that Edith had always been like a mother to her and that she could not remember her own mother. When she fell ill Edith Cavell treated her herself. There is some evidence that Pauline joined up with the Salvation Army but she vanishes from public view in around 1919... **

** : This **was** true until the presentation on *Encounters with Edith Cavell* on October 12 2024. Someone present knew of Pauline Randall's death aged 92 in a nursing home in Hertfordshire in December 1992, reported in a local newspaper. Further research is in hand...

Further instances like Pauline Randall in Edith Cavell's life

Grace Jemmett, Edith's two dogs Jack and Don (both 'strays' who were re-homed by her – Don moved on but Jack was with her to the end and died in France in 1923). In addition, Edith did seek to care for her widowed mother in Brussels. Mrs Cavell tried relocating to Brussels over Christmas 1910 but decided to return home to her home in College Road, Norwich.

Our next 'encounter' represents but one of Edith Cavell's many professional relationships with her nurses, trainees, doctor colleagues etc

2. Nurse Margaret Pickering

There is no
known
photograph of
Margaret

Margaret Pickering was born in Wrexham in 1878 – her father was a Baptist minister. She lived in Wales until she was around 23: in 1901 she enrolled as a trainee nurse in Great Ormond Street Hospital in London. She nursed in England and Wales and came to Edith Cavell's nursing school in Brussels in around 1910. Sadly, there is no known picture of her.

We have no evidence of her arrival in Brussels nor of *any* interaction (spoken or written) between her and Edith - but Margaret Pickering was still nursing with Edith Cavell nearly 3 years later when, in autumn 1913, she became pregnant. [All the material which follows came to the Swardeston Edith Cavell archive from Margaret's great-niece in Australia who had been exploring her family tree].

Margaret was a British nurse in a foreign land, pregnant by an un-named local man. We do not know how good her French was: finding maternity care and a family or agency who would look after the child would have been challenging. Should she resign? If not, when should she disclose her predicament to her employer Edith Cavell? In all ordinary circumstances in any English nursing setting this would mean immediate dismissal – nurses who married were expected to resign.

We have no record of when Margaret explained her predicament to Edith. What did she expect of Edith? – disappointment, concern that her pregnancy should not be viewed by her other nurses as ‘acceptable’, dismissal? If so, what future job might Margaret be able to apply for with this ‘history’? Edith, herself unmarried, was more than ten years older than Margaret and came across to some as strict and serious. She spent many an evening with her nurses and trainees, sharing her experience and discussing nursing values, standards and ethics. As with Margaret, Edith’s father was a minister and for both, their shared Christian faith was deeply important. Did Edith reflect on her own career and dreams and view Margaret’s predicament, as it were, from her perspective?

All we do know is that, after the disclosure, in late April 1914 Edith Cavell wrote to the Salvation Army in London on Margaret’s behalf. They were seeking help with the birth and placement of the baby, due in May 1914. (Edith’s nursing work in inner London prior to her appointment in Brussels in 1907 had almost certainly given her knowledge of this Salvation Army service). Edith stated that she had arranged that the father of the baby should pay 5s 6d weekly towards its support which Edith would remit monthly to the Salvation Army. In addition, Edith herself offered £5 towards the Salvation Army’s costs. The help and arrangements evidence Edith ‘going the extra mile’ for Margaret.

As things worked out, the baby was probably born in Brussels before the place offered in London could be used. There is no record of the birth, nor of what arrangements were made for the baby’s care. All we do know is that Margaret returned to her nursing with Edith with no baby to care for. How did she cope with the pain of the loss of her child over the months and years ahead? Did she and Edith spend time together, with Edith supporting her ...? Margaret remained working with Edith and her deputy, Sr Wilkins. She could have joined the team of English nurses from the nursing school who left Brussels in September 1914 – like Edith, she chose to stay.

After Edith’s execution, Sister Wilkins read Edith’s last letter to all the remaining nurses, written from prison on October 10th. Parts of this must have had particular poignancy for Margaret as she listened: *‘When better days come our work will again grow and resume all its power for doing good. I told you in our evening conversations that devotion would bring you true happiness and that the thought that, before God, you have done your duty well and with a good heart will sustain you in the hard moments of life and in the face of death... I may have been strict, but I have loved you more than you can know.’*

In November 1915 a new matron took over Edith’s nursing services and Margaret was pressed into nursing German officers in the German Legation building, ‘suffering great privation’. Did Edith Cavell’s statement from early in the war echo afresh in Margaret’s head? *‘Any wounded soldier must be treated, friend or foe. Each man is a father, husband or son. As nurses you must take no part in the quarrel – our work is for humanity. The profession of nursing knows no frontiers.’*

In the winter of 1915 Margaret escaped in disguise to England with help from the American Refugees Committee in Brussels. From 1916 she nursed in private nursing, till her death in 1935 back in Wales.

Further relationships like Margaret Pickering in Edith Cavell’s life

Edith’s care and support for Margaret was no doubt replicated for countless nurses and doctors who encountered and worked with her, from her training at the London Hospital and subsequent ten years nursing in England. In Brussels this extended to her employer Dr Depage and Marie his wife, Sister Wilkins her deputy, and many more, including over 150 nurse trainees in the Clinique from 1907.

Sister Wilkins, Edith’s long-standing deputy in Brussels, recalled Edith as being *‘rather withdrawn, uninterested in superficial friendships, but thoughtful, pleasant and sympathetic to all her patients’*

Based on Margaret’s story, we may surmise this would have been the experience of many of her nurses who were in real difficulties (even if, as she admitted, she was often ‘strict’ with them).

We move on to one example of the many (possibly over 200) 'encounters' for which eventually Edith Cavell paid with her life. These were with Allied soldiers trying to escape northern France or southern Belgium in fear of the German occupiers. Edith would have kept detailed records of each man she helped away to freedom. She destroyed these in summer 1915 as the German police net tightened.

3. Private Billy Mapes



Billy grew up in Hethersett, a village about four miles from Swardeston where Edith Cavell grew up. (His date of birth is not known). He served in the First Battalion of the Royal Norfolk Regiment. He was severely wounded in his ankle in a battle near Mons and became detached from his comrades. He was sheltered and nursed in a convent in Wiheries (near the Franco-Belgian border). Then he was taken in by a family who kept a large store at Quievrain. He had a narrow escape when German officials went through his room to inspect the family's pigeons – the escape was joyously celebrated in champagne. Eventually, after nine months in all in hiding, he reached Brussels in early June 1915.

Mapes was accommodated in 'a very large house' in Brussels with a number of other soldiers. He later reported: *'While staying there, a lady visited us who seemed very interested in us all. She seemed to notice in particular the way I spoke English and asked what regiment I belonged to. I told her the Norfolks. This interested her still more and she asked if I came from Norfolk. I answered "Yes Madame, from Hethersett, a small village near Norwich". She smiled and said "How strange. I know Hethersett quite well. I was born in Swardeston."* Naturally we had to have a little chat about dear old Norfolk'. Mapes often told his family that Edith Cavell was visibly affected by the talk about Norfolk: *"She whispered something about dear old Norfolk"* and said *"I would do anything to help a Norfolk man"*. She put her arms around him and kissed him. (Did she reflect later that her encounter with Billy could so easily have been with her brother, Jack, or with her cousin, Eddy, had they been in Billy's shoes?)

Four days later Billy with five others left for the Dutch border. The group remained together until they approached Antwerp, where they had to turn back. A second attempt, crossing near Turnhout, proved successful. Billy and his comrades reached England on 15th June 1915. News of his escape attracted attention from local media and he conducted a cautious interview with the Eastern Daily Press. Wary of protecting their identities, he did not disclose information on Cavell or the escape network to anybody.

Unknown to Billy, for months he had been listed by the Army as missing – believed killed. Nothing had been heard of him since September 19th 1914. His mother had stubbornly rejected the Vicar of Hethersett's suggestion of a Memorial Service and had refused outright to believe he was dead. Villagers wept at his return to the village. He joined up again, expecting to go back to France.

When news broke of Edith Cavell's death in mid-October 1915 he was on leave at home. His mother found him weeping openly. Turning to her, he exclaimed; *"You may as well know it all now... It was Miss Cavell who helped me get back to England"*. He believed, like many of his fellow Norfolk Regiment colleagues, that he would never have escaped Belgium if it were not for Edith Cavell. Mapes was not the only soldier to shed tears through October 1915.

Further relationships like Billy Mapes in Edith Cavell's life

We know little of the men who stayed at the Clinique between November 1914 and July 1915 (stranded British and French soldiers and Belgian civilians seeking to escape to Holland to avoid being forced to work for the German occupiers. Some of them wanted to enlist). Rowland Ryder, a Norwich historian, published his list of over sixty in 1975. Billy stands for all these men - five more, like Billy, were from the Royal Norfolk Regiment. Stories are rare, too, for the many who never came Edith Cavell's way but relied on men and women similar to her. [We do have the biography of nurse Ada Cole from Norfolk who was working like Edith to help soldiers, based in a convent in Antwerp : see the Edith

Cavell website link at page 10 below]. We have no stories of those summarily executed when found in hiding by the Germans. One of those sheltered by Edith told the harrowing tale of eleven colleagues shot at a mill in Hiron. Many, like Edith Cavell's first 'guest', Colonel Boger of the Cheshire Regiment, were sent to Prisoner of War camps in Germany for the rest of the war.

Our next example of people Edith Cavell encountered in her helping of allied soldiers is one of her underground network colleagues:

4. French *resistante* Louise Thuliez



Louise's date of birth is uncertain: somewhere between 1870-80. She was a school teacher in Lille, Northern France. She spent August 1914 - July 1915 based with her parents in St Waast in northern France. From August 1914 she was active in the area, arranging the harbouring of British and French soldiers by locals and ensuring, as far as she and colleagues could, that they all escaped from the Germans who were scouring the area. Her autobiography, *Condemned to Death* (published in English in 1934 by Methuen), is an amazing read of selfless courage.

Louise was introduced to Edith Cavell in Brussels in February 1915 by a fellow resistant, Herman Capiiau. This was her first face-to-face encounter with someone she knew of, who for nearly four months had been hiding soldiers in central Brussels and helping them towards Holland.

Louise recorded her assessment and key memories of Edith :

She rose at 6:30 every morning and visited the different branches of her hospital, allotting to each one their day's work. I was struck by the severe aspect of her little office in spite of the flowers that stood there. The furniture consisted of a writing table in the corner, with everything upon it in perfect order, and a bookshelf. Everything breathed order and method, the two fundamental characteristics of the woman who presided over the destiny of this nurse's training school. Slight, of medium height, silvered hair brushed straight back under her nurse's cap, her blue dress trim and spotless with its carefully starched collar and cuffs - this is how Edith Cavell appeared to me. Her grey blue eyes, intelligent and scrutinising, above the vigorous chin, gave a severe expression which disappeared at once when she smiled. (This happened rarely, though, when she was discussing serious affairs). Her smile, once seen, could never be forgotten. page 92

While discussing the possibilities of our being arrested, Edith said coolly *"If we are arrested, we shall be punished in any case, whether we have done much or little; so let us go ahead and save as many as possible of these unhappy men"*. page 101

Edith Cavell wrote to the Comtesse de Belleville (another 'resistante'): *'I beg of you to tell all the helpers not to send any more men here for the present, as my situation is becoming more and more strained every day'*. This concern was shortly followed by Edith Cavell saying to the princesse de Croy: *'...we must save them - if one were caught and shot it would be our fault'*. page 106.

The princesse met Louise after a time with Edith Cavell in Brussels at the end of July and said that all further work in that direction must cease, that Miss Cavell was now closely watched, and that she had had her nursing home searched several times. She begged me not to go anywhere near the rue de la Culture again. page 108

On July 27 1915 Louise was arrested with Philippe Baucq (who was executed with Edith Cavell), having delivered some soldiers earlier in the day to a safe house in Brussels. Louise was with Edith through the two days of their trial (October 7-8) with 33 others, and for the sentences demanded of the court. The prosecutor recommended that Louise should be executed with Edith Cavell and others: (later reduced to long term imprisonment. Till November 1918 she was in a concentration camp in Siegburg.

Louise was active in the French Resistance in the Auvergne during WW2. [Did she re-engage in honour of Edith, remaining consistent with their shared values?]

Further relationships like Louise Thuliez in Edith Cavell's life

Louise represents all those *resistants* in what was known as the YORC network (Croy spelt backwards) including the 34 tried with her, as well as those never tried and others who died in front of firing squads. Also Ada Cole and her sister in the Antwerp convent (see above page 5 and below p 10).

Our final example of someone who encountered Edith Cavell in Brussels and her impact on him:

5. Revd Stirling Gahan



The Revd Horace Stirling Townsend Gahan was familiar to Edith Cavell as the Irish Anglican chaplain serving at Christ Church in Brussels from May 1914 (today Holy Trinity Brussels). Edith had worshipped at the Church of the Resurrection since 1907: the English minister there was not allowed by the Germans to return from his summer holiday in August 1914 and the church was closed. Edith then moved to Christ Church though how often she managed to attend services during the War is not known. But Edith knew Gahan and his wife well and invited them to her 1914 Christmas celebration. Gahan attended: his wife was ill – Edith sent her a present.

Pastor Paul Le Seur visited Edith on the afternoon of October 11th in her cell. He wrote later: *'I knew that from me, as a German in the uniform she must have hated, she could not receive spiritual help. I asked her if she wanted Reverend Gahan to come to her to take the Holy Sacrament. Her eyes lit up and she accepted gratefully. I finally told her it was my duty to stand by her side at the end and I asked if she would prefer the Reverend Gahan to be there instead. She declined and said "It would be too much for him: he's not used to such things."* (I wonder whether there was a moment when Edith thought back to her own father and how he might have felt in bringing Christian comfort to someone in similar circumstances).

Gahan was notified by pastor Le Seur at 6.30pm on October 11th that Edith was to be executed the next morning. He secured a pass to the prison and recalls: *On my way to the prison I had been apprehensive as to the condition of mind in which I might find her. Distraught? Bitter? Unnerved? Full of hopeless grief? All anxieties were set at rest in a moment. There she stood, her bright, gentle, cheerful self, as always, quietly smiling, calm and collected'.*

He spent an hour with Edith Cavell. She remarked that she was *'thankful to God for the absolute quiet of her 10 weeks imprisonment: it had been like a solemn fast from all earthly distractions and diversions'.* *'I have no fear or shrinking - I have seen death so often that it is not strange or fearful to me. Life has always been hurried and full of difficulty: this time of rest has been a great mercy. Everyone here has been very kind'.*

He celebrated communion with her after they had recited verses from the hymn *'Abide with me'* together.

Abide with me; fast falls the eventide;
The darkness deepens; Lord with me abide.
When other helpers fail and comforts flee,
Help of the helpless, O abide with me.

Hold Thou Thy cross before my closing eyes;
Shine through the gloom and point me to the skies.
Heaven's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows flee;
In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me.

At the end of their time Edith said: *'Standing as I do in the light of God and eternity, I have realised that patriotism is not enough: I must have no hatred or bitterness towards anyone.'* Gahan's private manuscript version of their interview reads: *'It is not enough to love one's own people: one must love all men and hate none'*. In an article published in a nursing journal in England Edith had written of her reactions to the arrival of the German occupying forces in Brussels on 20 August 1914: *'We were divided between **pity** for these poor fellows, far from their country and their people, suffering the weariness and fatigue of an arduous campaign, and **hate** of a vindictive foe bringing ruin and desolation on hundreds of happy homes and to a prosperous and peaceful land.'* The words to Gahan suggest she had moved on from this to a place where she felt that she could and should love her enemies.

When Stirling Gahan said: *'I shall always think of you as a heroine and martyr'* she sought to reframe his understanding of her - she was simply *'a nurse who tried to do her duty'*.

Gahan's published account of their last moments together has *Edith* saying to him as he left her: *'We shall meet again'* (clearly implying 'in heaven', as she knew already that he was not to be at her execution). Gahan's private manuscript version of their exchange differs: there he records that he said, as he shook her hand, *'We shall meet again'*, and that she pressed his hand firmly, saying *'Yes, we shall'*. Whichever account is accurate is of little consequence - their mutual assurance of the reality of a new life beyond the firing squad is echoed in thousands of martyrdoms and deaths of faithful Christians down the centuries.

Edith's last known words before her execution were recorded by the German pastor, Paul Le Seur, who accompanied her to and witnessed her execution. She told him, *'Ask Father Gahan to tell my loved ones later on, that my soul, I believe, is safe and that I am glad to die for my country.'*

Gahan remained in Brussels until the end of the War and beyond. He was able to minister to Edith one last time when her body was to be returned to England. Her body was taken on a gun carriage through crowd-lined streets to the Gare du Nord in Brussels, where he presided at a service for her, blessing her once again for this final journey home to Norfolk. From 1923 he served in a parish in Leicestershire till his death in 1956.

Canon Peter Doll of Norwich Cathedral kindly researched and spoke to a paper on Gahan at the October 12th presentation of 'Encounters with Edith Cavell'. Some of his material has been used above – further extracts are appended as an Annex (pages 11-12).

Further instances of those like Stirling Gahan who encountered Edith Cavell near the end of her life

Prison staff : the German guard who admitted Gahan to Edith's cell said of her to Gahan that she was a fine woman. *'Like this'*, he said and stiffened his back.

Dr Gottfried Benn, the German doctor who certified that Edith Cavell and Phillipe Baucq were indeed dead. He said of Edith Cavell : *'She went to her death with a bearing which it is quite impossible to forget... She acted as a man towards the Germans and deserved to be punished as a man... there is fear lest her death should lead to disorders... we must hurry, and silence and secrecy should surround her grave'*.

6. Reflection on the five different ‘encounters’ with Edith Cavell

Where did Edith Cavell’s reactions come from? To me the key elements which emerge are her sense of duty, her self-discipline and her hope for better things to come when in a dark place. Undergirding all this I sense she knew she was loved by her Master, Jesus Christ and was following His calling and pattern of living and dying. As the apostle John wrote in his first letter (chapter 3 verses 16 and 17 – King James Version) *Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him?*

For me they all point to the centrality of what Edith learnt, here in Swardeston’s parish church, and then lived with in her following Him all of her life, namely Her Master Jesus’s commands – *Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind and Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. Matthew’s gospel chapter 22 verses 37 and 39 King James version* (which is expanded in chapter 5 verse 44: *Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you.*)

These rules for living seem, at least to me, to be central to Edith Cavell’s living and her dealings with those she encountered. Common themes emerge from the five representative stories of people Edith Cavell encountered in the years 1911 -1915:

- she understood and responded to their needs
- she got alongside them
- she disregarded risks
- she offered them a future and hope despite the odds
- she put their needs first
- having known her will have affected the rest of their lives

Maybe readers of this paper would like to reflect how these characteristics play out in each of the five brief stories presented above.

7. Conclusion

To conclude, we seem to have a choice between two diametrically opposed views of Edith Cavell and her dealings with those she encountered:

On the one hand:

The many statements about her quoted throughout this paper from those she lived and worked with and the impact her decisions made in their lives. A key instance in her eventual fate illustrates this. Of As the German investigations were becoming more and more threatening Edith wrote in a letter May 1915: *Don’t send any more men’* – but when she learnt from the Princesse de Croy that thirty more men had been found in the forests around Cambrai she said to the Princesse: *‘If one of those men got caught and shot it would be our fault. We must carry on...’*

The assessment of one of Edith Cavell’s biographers, Noel Boston was that: *‘Those who knew [Edith Cavell] never ceased to speak of her kindness, her consideration and her amazing patience ... utterly, unbelievably unselfish, with an almost fanatical sense of duty. She expected the same from all those who worked with her.’ The Dutiful Edith Cavell, 1976 pp 8-9*

On the other hand, from the German side come assessments such as:

Sergeant Pinkhoff, a German police investigator, said to another woman tried with Edith:

We understand perfectly that childless old maids like you [Miss Cavell, Mademoiselle Thuliez and the comtesse of Belleville] sacrifice your lives quite easily. (Louise Thuliez, *Condemned to Die*, page 151)

The German official explanation, for the execution of Edith Cavell and others, published in the Brussels paper controlled by them (*La Belgique*): *"It is certainly distressing to have to execute a woman, but what would happen to a country, especially in wartime, if it let crimes which endanger its armies go unpunished because they are committed by a woman?.... This is not a question of a crime committed in a moment of passionate excitement by one individual alone but of a regular conspiracy premeditated and widespread which succeeded during nine months in spite of all our efforts in rendering services precious to the enemy but prejudicial in the extreme to our own army"* ibid page 162

Both Edith Cavell and the Germans would come together on one key conclusion:

"One must be prepared to seal one's patriotism with one's own blood." ibid page 165

However, for Edith, patriotism was not enough *per se* – her duty was to a higher authority, to love all men and women and hate none, and to do what she felt to be her duty in helping and caring for those who came her way in need.

We remain in admiration at her decisions, taken calmly and consistently all through the first year of the War, to join many others sheltering Allied soldiers, to take what steps were in her power to resist oppression and if the occasion demanded it, to suffer any consequences threatened by the occupiers.

We will remember.....

Further information

The website www.edithcavell.org.uk –any enquiries / comments should be sent to enquiry@edithcavell.org.uk

Margaret Pickering's story: <https://edithcavell.org.uk/recent-new-material-on-edith-cavell/> April 2022

Stories of some **soldiers helped by Edith Cavell** including Billy Mapes: <https://edithcavell.org.uk/some-soldiers-stories/>

Ada Cole's story – <https://edithcavell.org.uk/recent-new-material-on-edith-cavell/> - November 2022

Rev Stirling Gahan's account of his last meeting with Edith Cavell : <https://edithcavell.org.uk/edith-cavells-life/account-by-reverend-h-stirling-gahan-on-the-execution-of-edith-cavell/>

Pastor Le Seur's testimony : <https://edithcavell.org.uk/edith-cavells-life/pastor-le-seurs-testimony/>

Other links on the web to:-

Autobiography of **Harry Beaumont, a soldier helped by Edith**: *Old Contemptible* (Hutchinson 1967) – see https://books.google.co.uk/books/about/Old_Contemptible.html?id=bEAYAQAAIAAJ&redir_esc=y

Princesse Marie de Croy's autobiography *War Memories* 1932 accessible on the web at: https://openlibrary.org/books/OL14047958M/War_memories

See also

Diana Souhami *Edith Cavell* (Quercus. 2010)

Rowland Ryder *Edith Cavell* (Hamish Hamilton, 1975).

Louise Thuliez's autobiography *Condemned to Death* (published in English translation 1934 Methuen)

Annex : Extracts from Canon Peter Doll's paper on Stirling Gahan and Edith Cavell for the 'Encounters with Edith Cavell' event on October 12 2024 in Swardeston Church

...Of course, Edith knew all about the clergy and about the Church of England more generally, being the daughter of the vicarage here in Swardeston. The religion of the parish seems to have been plain and rather severe. Edith undoubtedly supported her father's ministry, most notably when she helped through her drawings and paintings to raise the funds to build the Sunday School attached to the vicarage, but, perhaps like any daughter, she was embarrassed by her father's religiosity. She wrote to her cousin Eddy, *'I'd love to have you visit, but not on a Sunday. It's too dreadful, Sunday school, church services, family devotions morning and evening. And father's sermons are so dull.'* So perhaps it's not surprising that when she escaped into the wider world that she might have sought out a different kind of religious expression.

We don't have records of where Edith went to church for much of the rest of her life, so we don't know when her practice may have moved in a more Anglo-Catholic direction. It may have been influenced by her time as a governess in Brussels from 1890-95. Thereafter she trained for nursing at the London Hospital in the East End of London, where there were many Anglo-Catholic parish churches. She owned a copy of the World's Classics edition of Thomas a Kempis's *Imitation of Christ*, a classic of mediaeval catholic spirituality. This was first published in 1903, though she may have been familiar with it before then. [She had this for a period in her time in prison and annotated it as she read. The annotated version was edited by the Dean of Westminster and published in 1920].

The first evidence we have of a definite Anglo-Catholic attachment comes from Edith's time in Manchester. In 1906 she was Matron at the Manchester and Salford Sick, Poor and Private Nursing Institute, at which time she worshipped at Sacred Trinity Church, Salford. This was during the incumbency of Fr Peter Green, a noted Anglo-Catholic parish priest. The parish was noted for the poverty of its inhabitants and for high unemployment. He was particularly known for his work with the local 'lads', the boys and men of the parish.

The three guiding principles of Fr Green's ministry were: 1. He was in the tradition of the Oxford Movement Tractarians, and was determined to teach sound doctrine. 2. He was also a convinced evangelical and strove for conversions to the faith. 3. He encouraged parishioners to witness to their Christian faith in the world. He was a frequent contributor to the Manchester Guardian, where as her former parish priest he noted Edith's death. It is instructive to compare his outspoken opposition to war to Edith's own position: *'I profoundly disbelieve in the possibility of any good coming of war, and I regard all talk about the war itself as being a moral purge, and a wholesome discipline, and a school of character, and all the rest of it as being profoundly immoral and anti-Christian, or mere moral platitudes'* (in G.K.A. Bell, ed. *The War and the Kingdom of God*).

When Edith went back to Brussels, she had two Anglican churches to choose from, Christ Church, which today is Holy Trinity Brussels, and the Church of the Resurrection, which was just down the street from Christ Church. Christ Church was distinctly evangelical, while the Resurrection was Anglo-Catholic, its liturgies enhanced by the use of vestments, music, ceremonial and incense. Edith chose the Church of the Resurrection until it closed in 1914.

From her familiarity with Anglo-Catholic customs, she would have been used to calling her priests 'Father'. But when we ask whether it would have made sense to call Stirling Gahan 'Father' [when she made her last remarks to Pasto Le Seur at the execution site], the answer would be decidedly 'No'! We have a memoir of Stirling from an earlier stage of his ministry, around 1910, when he was curate of St Thomas' Church, Southborough, in Tunbridge Wells. The memoirist was Katharine Tynan, an Irish Roman Catholic resident of the community.

'There was another person who came and went that summer and played cricket with the children on the Common, who has recently acted a part which shall not be forgotten. Some

time in the preceding winter the vicar's wife had asked me to tea to meet the new curate. "Such a good Irishman !" she said. "You will be so much interested in each other." I was rather doubtful about it. The new curate belonged to a militant Irish Low Church family, and since I had come to Southborough I had become militant on my own side — at least when I came up against the other militancy. Still the Vicar's wife and I were friends, so I agreed to go, having protested that we should probably make a battle-ground of her drawing-room.

"The new curate was certainly very Irish to look at – he had in fact the face of an Irish priest: he was Irish, although he hated the Pope ; and there was enough kindly Irish about him to make me forget my antipathies. And I really think he forgot his.

"Of course, his views were very narrow – too narrow even for Southborough – and he banned other people's cakes and ale in a way which made other people rather indignant. But – perhaps it was the Irish – beginning with a strong prepossession against him, I came in time to like him. There was a streak of the poet in him and the visionary. I used to meet him on the Common talking to the cows, and he would observe the birds by the hour together.

"It was an odd association between him and the Catholic Irish children, who, as soon as they were free, would sally down the Common to his lodgings and call to him peremptorily to come and play cricket. He used to come as soon as he could and play as seriously as though he were playing for his school or 'varsity. Other children came and joined in, and Father Pat, as we had learnt to call him, used to keep them in order, even the small boy who owned the ball and wanted to go home with it when he was "Out."

"Southborough generally came to call him Father Pat, and when he was so addressed publicly he took it very well, ascribing its origin to the proper source, but bearing no malice.

"The other day Father Pat, the Rev. Horace Gahan, turned up as the fearless and faithful chaplain of Edith Cavell's last hours, the man to whom we owe an immense debt for his witnessing to that lofty soul. I could have foretold it of him. He would be perfectly fearless, devoted and sincere. A good hand to hold in those last moments on earth. For what he was to Edith Cavell, for the immeasurable service he rendered us by setting her there on her pedestal for us to see plain – *Sancta Editha* – let us remember and praise Father Pat....."

That is a remarkable document in a number of ways and a remarkable tribute. A fiercely Protestant Irishman who hated the Pope and yet who took kindly to playing cricket with Irish Catholic children and who recognised that being called Father Pat by them was a tribute and not an insult. And how remarkable too, that this Irish woman writer should have recognised Edith's holiness beyond the denominational divide, being prepared to call her Sancta Editha!

So, despite appearances, it is not altogether surprising that Edith should have called Stirling Gahan 'Father'. I even suspect, though there is no way to prove it, that there might have been an element of affectionate teasing in that designation, based on a long-standing recognition of their shared faith despite their adherence to different kinds of Anglicanism. Certainly 'Father' Gahan had been to her everything she needed in her priest – a source of sacramental blessing, a tender friend in a time of trouble, and a comfort in distress. And for the priest, Edith's faith was an astonishing and abiding inspiration.

In 1923 Gahan returned to England to be Rector of Thrussington and Brooksby, where he remained until his death in 1956. We might wonder whether his experiences in war had mellowed him in any way, but it seems as if he retained his Irish Protestant stiffness right to the end. Local historians of the parish recall that he is remembered as an eccentric. 'On Sundays when a cricket match was in progress on the Farm Institute playing field, he would shout, 'Sabbath breakers!' as he cycled past to Brooksby Church. Another take is that when he was approached about the possibility of a dance being held in Thrussington, he is alleged to have replied, 'Certainly, provided the young men attend on one evening and the young ladies on a different one.'" All the same, I can't help wondering whether he was playing up to his Protestant Irish stereotypical image, and that there might have been a tongue in his cheek.