
On the night of 29 March 1918, Dr Phoebe Chapple saw the world explode in flames. She had been inspecting a Women’s Auxiliary Army Corps camp near Abbeville in France when the site came under fire from a German aerial bombardment. Chapple and 40 other women were sheltering in a trench when a direct hit killed eight women and mortally wounded a ninth. Chapple worked for hours in the destroyed camp, tending to the wounded in the dark. For ‘gallantry and devotion to duty’ during the attack, Chapple was awarded the Military Medal, making her the first woman doctor to receive the award. Chapple had enlisted in England with the Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC) in 1917 as she was ineligible to join the Australian forces. At the outbreak of hostilities in 1914, women doctors were seen as unsuitable for active service in England, too. Women were allowed to serve as nurses and in a number of auxiliary roles, until the unceasing swell of wounded from the Western Front prompted the RAMC to reluctantly allow women medical practitioners into its ranks. Chapple was among dozens of women doctors who served in World War I, and who have largely been forgotten by history.

*Women to the Front: The Extraordinary Australian Women Doctors of the Great War* is a thoughtful tribute to an overlooked section of Australian service personnel. Heather Sheard and Ruth Lee explore the lives of 24 Australian women who served as medical practitioners and participated in medical war work during World War I, including Chapple. The complex experiences of these women have been refined into the authors’ compelling narrative, in which they argue for a reconsideration of these women, both as individuals and as a community of Australian women doctors serving amid the devastation of World War I.

It is disappointing (but not surprising) that women doctors have been relegated to the periphery of Australian histories of World War I, albeit women doctors being a relatively small and emerging group. Dr Constance Stone, the first woman to practise medicine in Australia, registered as a medical practitioner in Victoria in 1890. At the outbreak of war, 129 women were registered as medical practitioners in Australia. Often referred to as ‘lady doctors’, as indicated, women doctors were barred from service with the Australian Army Medical Corps (pp. 2, 13). Some
sought service elsewhere with medical units attached to other Allied powers, or, later, as in Chapple’s case, with the RAMC. Others joined ‘free enterprises’ seeking to establish medical teams for overseas service, including the Scottish Women’s Hospitals, a suffragette initiative that was staffed entirely by women. None of these women served as Australian doctors. *Women to the Front* argues, however, that they should be understood as such.

For Australian women, mobilisation for World War I took various forms, both on the front lines and on the home front. Various books have considered the work undertaken by Australian women during World War I, including Patsy Adam-Smith’s *Australian Women at War* (1984) and Bruce Scates and Raelene Frances’s *Women and the Great War* (1997). Australian women undertook paid and unpaid work, were involved in political and industrial movements, and acted as agents of remembrance both during and in the aftermath of the conflict. These experiences had an enduring impact on the engagement of women in the postwar workforce, but histories of Australian women on active service have focused on the many women who served as nurses, particularly army nurses or VADs (Voluntary Aid Detachment members). Research on nurses has included Kirsty Harris’s *More than Bombs and Bandages: Australian Army Nurses at Work in World War I* (2011) and Jan Bassett’s *Guns and Brooches: Australian Army Nursing from the Boer War to the Gulf War* (1992), while Melanie Oppenheimer has examined voluntary patriotic labour in Australia. Beyond Australia, Susan R. Grayzel’s *Women and the First World War* (2002) surveyed the varied experiences and contributions of women during the conflict across the participating states. This included an examination of the increase in paid employment for women during this period, including many who served as substitutes for absent men. Little has been written, however, about the women who served as medical doctors.

Both Sheard and Lee have previously published biographies of individual Australian women doctors, Sheard with *A Heart Undivided: The Life of Dr Vera Scantlebury Brown, 1899–1946* (2016) and Lee with *Woman War Doctor: The Life of Mary De Garis* (2014). *Women to the Front* expands on previous research from both authors, reassessing traditional narratives of Australian service during World War I by way of a chronological structure. The authors seek to complicate a narrative of wartime experiences for Australian women that is often reduced to key phrases such as the ‘mourning mother’ or the ‘dutiful nurse’. The experiences of Australian women doctors during World War I are a means of exploring a broader legacy of service and of considering the enduring impact of conflict on its participants. *Women to the Front* follows the ebb and flow of the conflict through short thematic sections focused on a particular time and place. The 24 women profiled served in an estimated 12 countries and often reappear in multiple contexts. There is some slight overlap in descriptions as subjects are reintroduced in different sections, but the structure allows for these women to be presented as part of a cohesive community,
examining their service in relation to one another. These short sections are situated within broader chapters, with one or two chapters allocated for each year of the war. Sheard and Lee do an admirable job in weaving these stories together, extending this narrative to incorporate the postwar lives and careers of subjects where possible. Alongside this broader narrative, *Women to the Front* also contains biographical notes for each of its subjects, creating a useful reference work.

This imagined community of Australian women doctors is at the heart of *Women to the Front*. The structure presents these women in relation to one another, united by a common experience as women medical practitioners and motivated by a common desire for service. Most of these women came from upper-class families and were privately educated or attended academically selective schools such as Sydney Girls’ High School. In some instances, their lives directly overlapped. Brown and Dr Rachel Champion (later Shaw, having married a fellow doctor in 1917) both graduated from the University of Melbourne medical school in 1914 and lived close to one another in London in 1917. Eleven of the women were interconnected through Sydney Girls’ High School, the University of Sydney’s Women’s College and the University of Sydney. Other subjects had more tenuous connections to Australian identity, products of a broader imperial world.

The short biographies included in *Women to the Front* reflect the complicated intersections of imperial identity in the early twentieth century. In the introduction, Sheard and Lee pose a question: why would these women want to go to war? The ‘patriotic burden’ of World War I is discussed briefly, but this topic rarely reappears over the course of the book. It merits further consideration, although the absence of archival records for many of the subjects is a barrier to examining their personal motivations. For some subjects, wartime service was a brief interlude in a broader medical career. For others, their service in World War I reflected an opportunity for professional advancement otherwise denied to them in their postwar careers. Among the subjects of the book, there were substantial differences of ideology, and generational and geographical divides. In 1914, Dr Lilias Anna Hamilton was 57, while Champion was 23. Others maintained different associations with the broader feminist movement. Dr Emma Buckley was appointed to the Endell Street Military Hospital, but disagreed with political views of its founders, Dr Flora Murray and Dr Louisa Garrett Anderson, both of whom were members of the Women’s Social and Political Union, the militant organisation campaigning for women’s suffrage. Dr Josephine Letitia Denny Fairfield supported Irish independence, a view at odds with the imperial ideals held by many of the other women doctors profiled. For a book centred on ‘Australian women doctors’, it is unclear how many of them would have identified themselves as Australian. Someone like Dr Ethel Baker, for example, had an uncertain connection to the other subjects. Baker was born at Toowong, near Brisbane, Queensland, in 1885, but had been sent to England alone at the age of 10 to live with her mother’s family. She graduated from the University of Brussels.
in 1913 and served with the Belgian Red Cross in September and October 1914. Baker’s connection with Australia seems to have ended with her departure as a child, and she died in Britain in 1965. The limited archival records available, however, give no suggestion as to how Baker saw herself.

*Women to the Front* is a well-crafted overview of an overlooked component of Australian service during World War I. Sheard and Lee provide a level of detail that allows for the book to serve as an accessible overview of the subject and a reference for the individual women profiled. One small omission is that, while these women are presented in relation to one another, there is limited description of their perception of or by others. Sheard’s and Lee’s previous works on Brown and De Garis respectively were drawn from detailed archival material relating to their subjects, much of which is incorporated in the profiles of Brown and De Garis included in *Women to the Front*. Sheard and Lee include an account of a 1917 meeting between Brown and Captain Norman Bullen after her first day at the Endell Street Military Hospital in London, sharing wine and coffee over lunch. Bullen was a fellow graduate from the University of Melbourne and a colleague from their earlier work at the Melbourne Hospital. The authors describe a photograph of Brown and Bullen’s class of final year medical students in 1913, with Brown and Shaw outnumbered by the men. Seven of those men would die in the war, including Bullen, who died of wounds sustained during the Third Battle of Ypres on 10 October 1917, just a few months after his meeting with Brown. Throughout *Women to the Front*, there are frequent references to male colleagues and classmates, but it remains unclear how these male medical officers perceived their female contemporaries. While the women doctors profiled in this book were prohibited from Australian service, they were clearly moving in the same social spaces as their male counterparts. Would these men have understood women doctors as colleagues? The book makes occasional reference to patients treated at a hospital where a particular woman doctor was working, but there are no firsthand accounts from patients or colleagues. This is a small complaint, however, in a well-structured book.

*Women to the Front* is an engaging overview of an overlooked component of Australian service and a compelling introduction to the subject. As Sheard and Lee note in their foreword, the list of women doctors selected for *Women to the Front* is not necessarily exhaustive, and others may qualify for inclusion. One example is Dr Susan Annie Buckingham (née Robertson), who graduated from the University of Edinburgh in 1917 with a degree in medicine, and proceeded on to service with the Royal Army Medical Corps in Egypt in 1918. She registered as a medical practitioner in New South Wales on 8 October 1919 and was awarded a Diploma of Public Health from the University in Sydney in 1920. While born in New Zealand, Buckingham spent the majority of her working life in Australia, and is included in

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1 The National Archives of the UK (TNA), WO 372/23/5547, Medal card of Buckingham, Susan Annie.
the Book of Remembrance for the University of Sydney. There are sure to be others like her, and other stories to be shared. With this publication, Sheard and Lee have created empathetic profiles of women otherwise overlooked by history, placing them within an overarching narrative of service.