An archive of humanity: the records of the NSW Division of the Australian Red Cross and the First World War

- Alison Wishart, Senior Curator, State Library of NSW

War histories are often written from the standpoint of the military participants – the fighters, strategists and commanders. The Australian Red Cross New South Wales Division Archive 1914-2014 offers an alternative perspective. The Australian Branch of the British Red Cross Society was established on 13 August 1914 just nine days after Britain (and then Australia) entered what became the First World War. Some local branches were established even earlier – such as those at Goulburn, Broken Hill and Bulli-Woonona near Wollongong.

Lady Helen

They responded to the wife of the Governor General, Lady Helen Munro Ferguson’s call to form local branches to raise funds and make articles required by soldiers, field hospitals and ambulance trains. Thousands of volunteers around Australia (mostly women and girls) worked together to knit, sew, bake, pack and transport comfort parcels to the troops serving in Europe and the Middle East.

Packing comforts

Under the banner of the Red Cross, they ran up to 16 convalescent homes, seven military or field hospitals and two sanatoria in NSW for soldiers who returned with severe war injuries after the war. To commemorate its centenary, and as part of a national process termed a ‘gift to the nation’, the NSW Division of the Australian Red Cross donated its archive to The State Library of New South Wales in 2014. At the same time, the National and Victorian Division, both located in Melbourne donated their archives to the University of Melbourne. Both of these transfers will take about five years. It is still unclear what is happening in other States (who were also meant to be a part of the centenary ‘gift to the nation’. All these archival donations followed that of South Australia, who donated their records to the State Library of South Australia in the early 2000s.
Ariah Park (near West Wyalong) Branch records, including minute books, catering ledgers and honour certificates, Red Cross Archive, MLMSS 9836, Box 5.

**Branch records**
The archive contains records which are mostly created by women – they provide a counterpoint to the predominantly masculine records of war. By November 1914, only three months after Lady Helen’s call to action, 88 urban branches and 249 country branches of the Red Cross had commenced in New South Wales. By June 1918, that figure had almost doubled as there were 632 branches across the state (Oppenheimer, *Power of Humanity*, 26). Through the extensive branch records, researchers can gain an intimate understanding of how women supported the war effort at the grassroots and the far corners of the state.

**Photo albums**
The 92 personal photograph albums of Red Cross staff and volunteers, which contain over 8000 photographic prints, provide a complementary visual record of women’s war work. The albums of amateur photographs contain domestic details which are missing from the
official war photographs – someone had to do the laundry, clean the bedpans and make the tea, and it was often the female Red Cross volunteers.

**Posters and Realia**

In addition, the archive contains fundraising posters, framed pictures, realia/objects, maps, magazines, knitting patterns, uniform catalogues and publications. This archive is one of the reasons that I feel proud to work at the State Library.

VADs Myrtle Innes and M. Ruse take in the laundry at Rose Hall Convalescent Home in Darlinghurst, c. 1916. Red Cross Archive PXE 1692/51/2
Organising, describing and cataloguing this extensive archive has required the skills of a team of specialist librarians and volunteers. It has been a collaborative project. Working with the Red Cross volunteers who have looked after the archive at the state headquarters, the Library agreed to divide the archive into ten sections based on format:

**Sections**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>344 boxes of branch records</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>86 framed images</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>approx. 7400 photographs stored in 61 albums</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>three boxes of posters</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>22 boxes of committee minutes, 49 boxes of VAD records</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>42 flat boxes containing newspaper cuttings, architectural drawings and loose photographs, knitting patterns, promotional pamphlets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>outsize or extra large boxes containing newspaper cuttings, architectural drawings and loose photographs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>30 boxes of realia including badges, trophies, commemorative merchandise, donation tins, trauma teddies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>30 boxes of Red Cross publications such as the Red Cross Record</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>100 books from the Red Cross archive.</td>
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</tbody>
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These sections were chosen because they correspond with how the Library stores and catalogues the various formats in the collection. Each section was sorted, listed and boxed by the Red Cross volunteers before it was transported to the Library. Not everything was accepted into the Library’s collection – duplicates and items already held by the Library were weeded out.

**Librarians**

Then one of seven librarians catalogued the items following library and archive standards. Where necessary, the items were assessed by the Library’s conservation team, before being housed in archival boxes and made available to the public. The Red Cross records are now
searchable and accessible worldwide via the Library’s online catalogue. Due to the size of the archive, which comprises over 665 boxes of material, this work has been going on for the past three years. On 19 June 2018 we held an event to celebrate the completion of the handover. However, the archive, like the Australian Red Cross, is not static.

**Uber**

The volunteers who have worked at the Red Cross state headquarters will continue to collect branch records, promotional material and other items and transfer them to the Library.

Now that the Red Cross NSW Division archive is at the State Library, I am hoping researchers will explore its depth and breadth and cross-examine it to tell us more about how this organisation assisted Australians during the First World War. While it is tempting to conclude that every facet, battle, and perspective on the First World War has been researched and re-examined, especially during the centenary of the conflict, here is a new archive that has only just been made publicly accessible. There is scope for new research projects, at a macro and micro level.

**VADs Double Bay**

For instance, I would like to see an economist analyse the archive to calculate the monetary value of the work that the Red Cross in New South Wales has contributed to the Australian and New South Wales economy. Think of all those hours which Volunteer Aids spent working at up to 16 convalescent homes and seven army hospitals – by 1917 there were 3000 VADs in New South Wales who had received their St John’s First Aid certificate, and had been trained in home nursing and invalid cookery (New South Wales Division Report and Financial Statements, 1917-18, 23). These women were part of the citizen forces and worked full-time or part-time cleaning, cooking, doing laundry and serving of meals.
Illuminated address presented to Miss Dulcie Clarke VAD by the returned soldier patients of the Russell Lea Red Cross Home in Sydney, expressing regret at her departure and appreciation of her service and help, May 1920. The Russel Lea home closed in 1920 and patients were moved to another home in Exeter (SMH, 15 January, 1921, p.12). Red Cross Archive MLMSS 9926, Box 1X.

**Knitting**

Then there is the volunteer work of knitting socks, sewing clothing, boiling, bottling and selling jams and pickles, compiling comfort parcels, growing and collecting fruit and vegetables for the fresh produce depots,

**Fresh produce depot**

collecting, packing and transporting eggs, making and rolling bandages from recycled linen, making furniture, invalid crutches and meal trays for the local Red Cross hospital, putting on fundraising concerts, card nights, garden parties and fetes to raise money....I cannot be comprehensive in this talk.
VAD no.21, Double Bay at a fundraising stall on War Chest Day, September 28, 1917.
Photographer F. Smith, PXB 238.

Add to this the value of the goods themselves – for example – in October 1915, members of the Camden branch of the Red Cross filled 124 ‘billies’ with ‘Christmas cheers’ to send to the men at Gallipoli – the volunteers had to purchase the billies and make or purchase the tobacco, soap, chocolate, socks etc. that filled them. Many country branches sent cases of locally grown fruit, vegetables, eggs, and donations of tobacco, cigarettes and homemade cake to the Fresh Produce Depot in Sydney. Quantities sent by each branch are usually listed in the state division annual reports. Some branches, such as Morangarell and Mulgoa even sent in cases of dripping (Red Cross NSW Division Annual Report 1917-18). No donation in kind or cash was too small. The minutes of the Camden branch meeting held in December 1914 ask those who “are having poultry for Christmas to please remember to save the feathers for pillows” (MLMSS 9836 Box 83). Estimating the value of the volunteer labour and donations in kind would make a great project for a political or social economist.

**Red Cross collectors WW1**

We know that during the First World War, Australia spent £307,962,399 on defence (Yearbook of Australia, 1919, 1017). We also know that the value of goods despatched overseas from the Australian Red Cross depot in Melbourne was estimated at £1,276,666 at the end of the war (Oppenheimer, The Power of Humanity, 21). And we know that in its first
three months of operation, the NSW branches despatched goods to the value of £44,255/6/4 (New South Wales Division First Annual Report, 30 November 1914, 16).

However, no one has costed out the in-kind and voluntary labour of the home front – the work that (mostly) women were doing. Women’s work inside the home, such as domestic labour and caring for children and other family members, has long been invisible because it is unpaid, and therefore regarded as ‘unproductive’ and not contributing to the economy. However, the Red Cross volunteers worked both inside and outside the home. Their volunteer labour in Red Cross kitchens, hospitals, convalescent homes, depots, fundraising stalls, tea rooms and meetings has not been calculated. A conservative estimate was made in 1916, when The Story of the Red Cross in New South Wales, published as a supplement to the Red Cross Record, estimated that there were 20,000 workers in the state and the daily value of their labour was £2,500 (p.9). As Kiwi economist Marilyn Waring states: “what we don’t count, counts for nothing” (Waring, Counting for Nothing, 1). We know from the letters and diaries of invalid soldiers that they greatly valued the work of Red Cross volunteers and the comfort parcels, so we need to start counting their contributions in our official and financial statistics.

**Sewing in the open air**

I hope sociologists will examine the archive to analyse and measure the social capital that the Red Cross generated. Social capital can be defined as a form of capital in which social networks are central; transactions are marked by reciprocity, trust, and cooperation; and people produce goods and services not mainly for themselves, but for a common good (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_capital accessed 18 May 2018). There are ways to measure social capital and it is now seen as part of the triple bottom line of investment and development – profit, planet and people. As Melanie Oppenheimer points out in her 2008 book, Volunteering: why we can’t survive without it, Red Cross volunteers generated immense social capital, and were the foundations of a civil society (p.8-11).

Throughout the First (and Second) World Wars, which had a profound effect on Australian Society, most of the 600+ branches of the Red Cross in NSW were holding fundraising and social events which brought people together and enhanced social networks and connectedness. The local branches helped form the bedrock of the local community. While
the conscription referenda were tearing the social fabric of the nation apart, Red Cross branches like those at Camden (south of Sydney) and Thuddungra, a tiny town north of Young, were holding regular card nights, open gardens, dances, sports days and sewing circles. As the war dragged on, branches such as that at Bulli-Woonona (south of Wollongong) held fun ‘Picture Entertainment nights’ and made 175 Christmas gifts in 1917 to send to soldiers (MLMSS 9836 Box 83).

**Jam**

The Berry branch of the Red Cross had 160 members in 1916 and found ways to involve people who were not members of the branch. They placed an appeal in the local paper for fruit, sugar and jars for making jam and were impressed with the donations. This enabled them to make 789 pounds of jam in 1916 and 1000 pounds (453 kilograms) in 1917, which was transported to the Red Cross store in Sydney (MLMSS 9836 Box 208). They must have filled a railway carriage.

**Pickle depot**

The archives contain further information about the jam depot, fruit and vegetable depot, produce depot, old linen depot, clothing depot, men’s carpentry branch and my favourite, the pickle depot. In the 1916-17 financial year the volunteer ‘girls’ made and despatched 37 tons (33,565 kg) of pickles and chutney. The stall holder at no.2 Markets supplied free vegetables and the Australian Bottle and Glass Works provided free jars (*New South Wales Division Report and Financial Statement, 1914-16, 20 and 1916-17, 29*).
In addition to providing soldiers with food, clothing and comforts, the Red Cross also opened a book depot. Branches were encouraged to send in magazines, books, games, vinyl records and gramophones which were passed on to training camps, transport ships, base hospitals and the garrison at Rabaul. In 1917, 70 people were working there, having covered and despatched 138,000 books in less than two years. This was caring for the ‘whole’ person (*New South Wales Division Annual Report*, November 1914, 22 and June 1917, 26).

**Double Bay VADs**

The regular Red Cross activities of local branches offered opportunities to socialise while working to meet the needs of others. This provided important connections for women who lived on small farms and whose men-folk were serving at the front. In Berry, the sewing group met on Tuesday afternoons, fortnightly meetings were held on Wednesdays, knitting circle convened on Thursday nights and Miss Pulman started a junior band which met on Saturdays.
Before the Junior Red Cross was formally incorporated in 1918, younger members of the Berry community were encouraged to ‘do their bit’ by joining knitting and sewing classes and packing comfort parcels (MLMSS 9836 Box 208).

One of the questions this archive raises for me is, where are the Indigenous people? Were there any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who were members of Red Cross branches? Perhaps one way to answer this question is to look at the service records of Indigenous soldiers and then, using their place of enlistment or place of birth and surnames, look for people with the same surnames in the records of nearby branches, in the hope that they may be related to the Indigenous soldier. The Australian War Memorial estimates that about 1000 Indigenous Australians served in the First World War [https://www.awm.gov.au/about/our-work/projects/indigenous-service accessed 21 May 2018].

Sheepskin vest

There are other areas where cross-referencing between the Red Cross Archive at the State Library and the collection at the Australian War Memorial will prove beneficial. For example, I am wondering whether these sheepskin vests, worn by Australian soldiers during the bitter French winter were provided by the Red Cross. The annual report for the NSW State Division for 1914 (p.12) states:

A member of the Executive, after many experiments in tanning, evolved a waistcoat practical in cut and economical to make. It is a sleeveless coat high at the back and cut long to cover the vital organs of the body. It is made from green pelts, with about ½ to ¾ of an inch of wool; the wool side turned inwards, the leather side out, and the whole fastened down the front with leather straps and buckles. The Red Cross immediately ordered 4,000 coats costing £1000 and a large number of gloves and insoles for use in the European winter. The country took up the idea and an influential committee is engaged in a campaign to send 60,000 to 70,000 of these coats to Europe. Japanese hand-shields and stretcher bearer gloves are made from the odd pieces; nothing is wasted. They are being made at 248 George Street. The Red Cross will take orders for these vests at 6s. per vest from private people who want to send them to individual solders at the Front.
As previously mentioned, children contributed their time and labour to the war effort and many joined the **Junior Red Cross branch at their local school**. Due to the dynamism and organisation of its founder, Eleanor MacKinnon, the Junior Red Cross grew from New South Wales into a worldwide movement. (The Canadian Red Cross instigated a junior scheme at a similar time – Oppenheimer, *The Power of Humanity*, 29). Initially conceived to involve children in helping soldiers who were recuperating in Red Cross convalescent homes, it later morphed into a movement that provided care for the children of those soldiers. Three
homes for the children of ex-servicemen were set up in New South Wales following the end of World War I. Six more were set up during and after World War II. This was a way for the Red Cross to extend its mantle of care to the sick and needy children of soldiers. The homes were established near the beach or in the Blue Mountains to provide the young residents with fresh air and fun. The Red Cross NSW Division archive contains photos of Cudgelo Junior Red Cross Home near Ramsgate in Botany Bay and Shuna Red Cross Home in Leura. Shuna (for girls), and Juong, its companion house for boys in Faulconbridge, were both in the Blue Mountains. They were for the children of soldiers with tuberculosis and were known as ‘preventoriums’. Junior Red Cross groups, mostly located within primary schools, raised funds for the homes which were staffed by VADs. In 1920-21, the Junior Red Cross had 36,000 members in New South Wales (Oppenheimer, Power of Humanity, 73). They had their own monthly publication – The Junior Red Cross Record and handbooks on first aid, cooking and health. After the war, the emphasis of the Junior Red Cross shifted again from hands-on participation to educating children and helping them develop an ethic of humanitarianism. Very little research has been published on the Junior Red Cross and the archive is a rich source for historians.
Eleanor MacKinnon (left) and Lady Edeline Strickland, wife of the Governor and patron of the Red Cross in New South Wales at a rally at Government House on 22 November 1919 for the Junior Red Cross, PXD1438/3

The 344 boxes of Red Cross branch records will provide a rich source of information for local historians. As previously mentioned, there were over 600 branches established in NSW during World War I. The minutes, correspondence, membership lists, fundraising certificates and annual reports contain information about how tiny towns and regional centres were working through the Red Cross to support the war effort. Similarly, family historians who are researching their civic-minded, female ancestors may come across their names in this archive.

**Bodington**

Going from the macro to the micro – there is ample scope for someone to write a history of Bodington Sanitorium. The Red Cross archives tell us that a stately home in Wentworth Falls, was purchased by the Red Cross for £11,000 in 1916 and renovated and expanded at a cost of £17,270 so that it could provide care for 98 patients recovering from tuberculosis. Yes, it was largely run by VADs with medical supplies, fresh produce and nurses’ stipends provided by local Red Cross branches (MLMSS 9836 Box 83).

**Mountain Mists**

Separate from the Red Cross archive, the State Library holds copies of *Mountain Mists*, a monthly magazine published by the convalescent soldiers of Bodington. This is one of the synergies that exists for researchers in having the Red Cross NSW Division archive available at the Library – it provides context to other Library holdings which are also about the Red Cross.
Annie Evans

And going even more micro, but certainly no less important, I would like someone to research the indefatigable Miss Annie Evans. As Commandant of the Mosman no. 8 Volunteer Aid Detachment of the Red Cross, she managed Sydney's Anzac Buffet ‘with a bundle of tact’ from 1916-1920.

Anzac Buffet

Located in Sydney’s Domain behind the hospital, the Anzac Buffet was open from 10am-10pm, 7 days a week for nearly four years. During this time, a legion of female volunteers served free meals to 24,000 servicemen and their families. I feel tired just thinking about the washing up!

Plaque

Miss Annie Alethea Evans was awarded an M.B.E. (Order of the British Empire no. 1085163) in October 1920 for her services but we know very little about her. Some family history research reveals that she was born in 1883, the eldest of four children, and died in 1937. She is buried at Waverley cemetery. Her younger brother Major Harrie Evans served in the First World War.
Conclusion

The *Australian Red Cross New South Wales Division Archive 1914-2014* is a rich and largely untapped resource which offers historians and other researchers the opportunity to examine the First World War from a fresh perspective. It complements other collections, such as the Australian War Memorial. Working at a macro or micro level, the researcher will be rewarded with a new analysis of New South Wales’ ‘citizen forces’. The Red Cross Archive provides indisputable evidence that women played a critical role in supporting the war from Australia and that more work needs to be done to recognise the true value and significance of their work. Despite recent publications such as Joan Beaumont's *Broken Nation* (2013),
this archive supports Beaumont’s earlier statement (2001, p.278), that “the home front remains a rich lode for researchers”.

**List of References**


British Red Cross Society, Australian Branch, New South Wales Division Report and Financial Statements for 1914-1918.


Red Cross Branch Records, State Library of New South Wales MLMSS 9836, Boxes 5, 83, 208.

*The Story of the Red Cross in New South Wales*, supplement to the *Red Cross Record, 1916*, Sydney.
