

A Brave Renton Nurse

In 1915 two women from Renton were participants in momentous events of the First World War. In May, Gracie French was one of the survivors of the sinking of the Lusitania. That story is well known but Elisha Bryan's part in the Great Retreat from Serbia is not. Nurse Bryan was one of hundreds of thousands of people, both military and civilian, who fled Serbia by undertaking an arduous trek of hundreds of miles across the Balkans to the Adriatic, as the German, Austrian and Bulgarian armies encroached. Her story, as reported in the press, follows:



In Renton Public Hall on the evening of 24th May 1916, a Renton nurse was publicly honoured for her work with the Scottish Women's Hospital¹ in Serbia.

Elisha Bryan, who was born in Alexandria in 1885, at Dalmay Place, and who lived at 7, John Street Renton, was presented with a purse of sovereigns and an illuminated wristlet watch by Alexander Wylie of Cordale, Chairman of the Dumbartonshire Parliamentary Recruiting Committee.

A few months earlier, on Christmas Day 1915, just days after she had returned to Scotland from the Balkans, the *Daily Record* had published an account of Elisha's experiences in Serbia under the headline:

Serbian Trek - Experiences of a Renton Nurse - Through Snow in Stocking Soles.
Here are extracts from the article:

Nurse Bryan and her companion, Miss Donley from Stirling, had worked at Yoker hospital and together went to Serbia, arriving at the end of July 1915. The Scottish nurses put in some hard work helping the Serbs.

On 19th October, Elisha was ill in





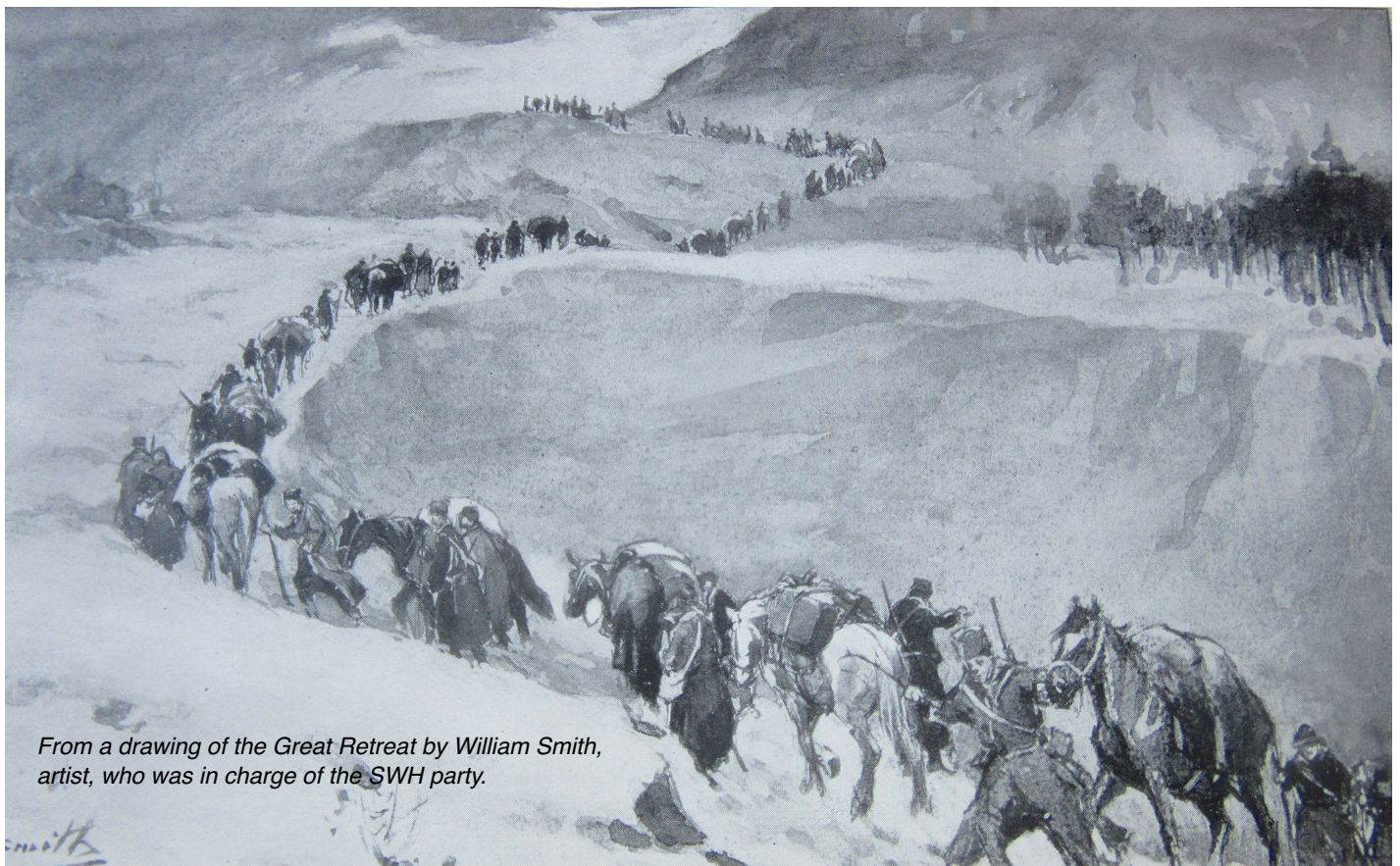
hospital when news came that the enemy was approaching.² Although in a weakened state of health, rather than be taken prisoner by the Germans, she got up from her bed, joined the retreat and reported that it was the worst experience she had had in her life. To quote Elisha, "If people at home could see the pinched faces of the poor Serbs they would realise the horrors of war and how Serbia had suffered". At Lazaravatz they made for the railway station in bullock wagons and slept on the floor of the waiting room there. Their baggage got soaked. Arriving at Kruschevatz, twenty two of them slept in one room and they were there for three weeks. The population of the town rose from 7,000 to 25,000 and a palace was converted into a hospital. The Scottish nurses did what they could for the many

wounded soldiers.

On 5th November the party left Kruschevatz, again in bullock carts, with only a change of clothes and some stores. They spent four days at Ipek, arriving on 22nd and leaving on 26th November. By this time it was snowing.

It was a terrible journey. A child died and there were other painful incidents. It was anything but an easy task to undertake such a journey in a blinding snowstorm. To make matters worse, Nurse Bryan had the misfortune to get her boots burned while resting for the night in one of the rest houses at the foot of the mountains. As she had given the other pair away to one of the sisters, she had to finish the journey in her stocking soles.

How she lived through the ordeal she did not know. Miss Bryan secured a pair of men's stockings and put them over her own, while she had also a pair of leggings with her.



From a drawing of the Great Retreat by William Smith, artist, who was in charge of the SWH party.

The crossing of the rivers was a difficult task. They had to ford them and after crossing, their stockings froze to their feet. To make matters worse, the ponies got lost and their food and raiment were stolen. They were left with only half a loaf of bread and some coffee and bully beef for each day.

Miss Bryan had brought a small piece of bread home with her to show her friends what she had lived on for most of her time on the snow-clad mountains. To make matters worse, the bread got frozen. On one occasion they could get no hut or barn to sleep in and had to pass the night in the open or lie down in the snow.

It was indeed something terrible and words failed her to describe what they had come through, but she states she would rather undergo such privations than fall into the hands of the Germans.

Many of the party suffered from frostbite, but she fortunately escaped that. While fording one of the rivers, one of the horses fell into the stream and their stores were all thrown into the water. Snow fell heavily for the greater part of the mountain journey. The highest mountain they climbed was about 7,500 feet above sea level and they walked fifteen or sixteen miles a day, sometimes nearly knee-deep in the snow. They lost their way once during the journey, but with the aid of some of the Serbian army regained the track again.



An Incident in the Great Serbian Retreat—British Nurses Crossing the Mountains of Albania

Drawn by F. Matania

The retreat of the Scottish Women's Hospital Unit from Serbia was made through Montenegro and over the Albanian mountains to Skutari. The nurses retreated with the Serbian Army and had an escort over the mountains, a precaution which the presence of marauding hillmen rendered very necessary. The journey was a very hard one, through storms and blizzards and over the roughest ground. In many parts of the mountains there was no track owing to the snow, and sometimes this was so deep that they were up to the waist in it. Long processions of peasants fled southwards from the enemy.

On arriving at Cellico (Cettije?) they spent two days there. Then they went to Levereke. The motor got stuck on that journey, and it took a day to do a two hours' journey. On arriving at Podgoritzza they received the first good meal they'd had since they commenced their eventful tramp over the mountains.³

One of Miss Bryan's brothers, who was with the colours, was drowned in the Dardanelles earlier in the campaign. Needless to say, Miss Bryan has received many congratulations from Rentonians on her safe return home.⁴

1 Official SWH documents are sometimes headed, "Scottish Women's Hospital for Foreign Service" and others have "Scottish Women's Hospitals for Foreign Service".

2 The authorities ordered evacuation but personnel of SWH were given the choice of leaving as part of the great exodus from Serbia or of remaining. Dr Elsie Inglis and some of her colleagues stayed behind to continue their work of treating the sick and wounded. They were captured but repatriated in early 1916.

3 Several SWH personnel had died in Serbia from typhus prior to the retreat and one was killed in an accident during it. On the way to the coast they had to have an armed escort because of marauding Albanian tribesmen. Many, many thousands of Serbian soldiers and civilians perished on the journey and the exact numbers will never be known. Of 30,000 boys (ordered to leave so that they could join a reconstituted Serbian army) who started the trek, only 7,000 made it to Corsica.

4 Newspapers in many parts of the country reported on the horrors of the retreat. Elisha Bryan's account is restrained compared to some.



Villa Miot, Ajaccio, where Elisha worked in the Manchester and District Unit of SWH.

Elisha rejoins SWH

Her experiences in Serbia did not prevent Elisha Bryan from signing up again with the Scottish Women's Hospital for Foreign Service. In October 1917, before she left to work in Ajaccio, Corsica, where SWH had a convalescent unit, the *Daily Record* reported that she had been presented with a gold bangle, a pair of gold hatpins, a silver chain bag

and a writing case from the Housing Committee and the staff and patients of Blawarthill Hospital in Yoker, where she had worked since her return from Serbia.

Local support for SWH

The Scottish Women's Hospitals for Foreign Service, under founder, Dr Elsie Maud Inglis, did outstanding work during the First World War and had great support throughout the country. The National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, from which SWH came, organised the funding of the hospital units.



Just after Elisha left for Serbia, a Scottish Flag Day was held. *The Common Cause*, the fortnightly newspaper of the National Women's Suffrage Society, listed the amounts raised, and Alexandria and Renton gave £39.17.6d.



Various towns and individuals endowed beds and lectures were given throughout Scotland and beyond on the work being undertaken.

Some information about Elisha Currie Bryan before, during and after her time with SWH.

Elisha was born in Alexandria in 1885 to William Bryan, a journeyman joiner, and his wife Mary Hamilton, both of whom were natives of the Vale. The family moved to Govan but they were at 10, Stirling Street, Renton by 1901, when Elisha was a factory worker. She had three brothers and three sisters. In the census of 1911, she is recorded as working in Paisley Poorhouse as a dressmaker together with her sister Annie, who is described as a nurse assistant. She then worked as a nurse in the Fever Hospital, Yoker before signing up with SWH in 1915.

Elisha's father died in 1914 and in April 1915, her brother William, who served with the Royal Field Artillery, died in the Dardanelles. Another brother, Peter, who served with the Argylls, was wounded and a prisoner of war in Germany

The Archive department in the Mitchell Library, Glasgow has Elisha's file, which covers her correspondence with the Treasurer of the SWH, Mrs Laurie. She earned £50 per annum in Serbia and in Corsica and received uniform, travel expenses, laundry, and board and lodging during her time with SWH. During her two spells as a nurse in Serbia and Corsica, she remitted £1 per month to her mother, Mary.

On 23rd June 1915, Elisha received £11.1.6d for her expenses and those of Nurse Donley for the first part of their journey to Serbia and for repayment of the cost of wellington boots, plus £3 each for future expenses. They were to be put up in the Wilton Hotel in London en route for Serbia but this was paid for them. Any surplus money had to be handed back.

When Elisha got back to London just before Christmas 1915, she was given £2 by William Smith, who was in charge of the retreating party, and she bought a pair of boots and "little necessary things". She was also given 18/- for expenses and spent 13/6 on accommodation and food and 4/6 on cabs and porters. Elisha sent a 100 denari note she had brought back from Serbia to the Treasurer and received £3.6.8d in exchange. She was due a payment of £22.4.2d (less £6 which had been sent by SWH to her mother) for the period June-December 2015, as she had received no salary while abroad.

In the file, details are given of the possessions Elisha lost on the Great Retreat. She claimed for everything, including her travelling trunks, a gold watch and chain, her uniform and all her clothing and she expressed the hope that the Committee of SWH would help her, as she had no personal insurance and had no idea how much the items were worth.

By the time Elisha rejoined the SWH in 1917 her address was 60, Geils Avenue, Dumbarton. While in Ajaccio, Elisha nursed one of the medical officers, a Canadian, Dr Edna Guest, through a serious illness and queried why she was earning the salary of a staff nurse and not that (£64) of a sister.

In 1922 she married Alfred Shaw in Newcastle upon Tyne and by 1939 the couple were in the Brighton area. She was listed as a nurse and Alfred as ex-Naval. Elisha has so far not been found on UK nursing registers but in the 1930s appeared on the UK Physiotherapist and Masseuse Register. She died in hospital in Brighton in 1960 aged seventy five.

Sources:

British Newspaper Archive - www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk for reports of Elisha Bryan's part in Great Retreat.

Elisha Bryan Image © Trinity Mirror. Image created courtesy of THE BRITISH LIBRARY BOARD via British Newspaper Archive.

British Nurses crossing the Albanian mountains - Image © Illustrated London News Group via British Newspaper Archive

Google Newspaper Archive - image of flag day results.

A History of the Scottish Women's Hospitals, McLaren, Eva Shaw, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1919 - Images not otherwise credited.

Perth & Kinross Archives for image of flag of SWH/ NUWSS.

TD1734 Scottish Women's Hospitals Archive, Mitchell Library, Glasgow.

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Information about the Scottish Women's Hospitals and personnel can be found at www.scottishwomenshospitals.co.uk