Introduction

Boulogne, France

October 1916

Imagine, for a moment, that we are granted an eagle's-eye view of the fields and villages, the roads and towns of northern France. It is dusk on a mid-autumn evening. This is the Western Front, one hundred and eighteen days after the beginning of Operations on the Somme. To our east is the combat zone. Here, two of the largest armies the world has ever seen are engaged in a mammoth struggle, entrenched, facing one another across a no-man's-land that runs from the Swiss border to the North Sea. The Germans, falling back to defensive positions in 1914, chose them well. The eminences from which they command their trench lines will give their names to the bitterest struggles of this war: Thiepval Ridge, Vimy Ridge, Messines Ridge. From our vantage point we can see flashes and drifting smoke, and hear the rumble of the guns.

Below us is the port of Boulogne. It is close to England, just across the Channel, and is the northernmost of eight British Expeditionary Bases in France. In the harbour, hospital ships stand, their green bands of light visible, and their Union Jacks and Red Cross flags snapping in the breeze. Ambulances line up on the quay, women of the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry climb from their cabins, and men unload and embark their wounded. It is bitterly cold. The frosts have set in and some days it glitters all day upon the ground. Right now, though, the wind is buffeting from the sea. Noise carries in snatches. Another ambulance train, their red crosses noticeable in the
gloom, makes its way to the main station. The wounded on board – over four hundred men – are reaching the end of a journey that began with jolting carries on stretchers through regimental aid stations to field ambulances then, in the cold of motor ambulances, to clearing stations. After care or perhaps an operation, they have a berth on this train to Base.

Four months ago, fifty-eight thousand such soldiers became casualties on the first day of this battle. In the first four days, ambulance trains carried over thirty-three thousand patients in one hundred journeys from casualty clearing stations to three British bases. When the operations end, in three weeks’ time, this total of Allied casualties will have reached six hundred thousand. Nearly four thousand nurses in over one hundred clearing stations, barges, trains, hospitals and hospital ships are engaged on their own field of battle: the ‘second battlefield’. Among them are over two hundred Australians.

There is a real sense in which the tragedy and scope of the First World War, the level of problems faced and the ramifications for the societies involved can only be grasped when considering the aggregate figures, the overall schemes of battles and the collective experience that will ultimately become the myth of the war. Some kinds of understanding require us to telescope our view down from this overall picture to the tier of the individual, and the meaning they make of their experiences, for here lie the elusive answers to different questions about our country’s involvement in war, and its effect on our society. They are questions about those whose experience differed from the tale of the combatant – especially the wounded combatant – who had privileged authority to speak of their understanding of war and, in Australia, from the dominant story of the Anzac. There are questions that concern us still – about identity and war – and those that have until now been impossible to answer: about women, war and change. Here, the aggregate and objective measures, such as the number of women who moved into different roles during the war, and then retired back into private life afterwards, fail us. Where, here, can we find change? If we seek answers about both the experiences of women at war – what they did, what it was like, how they were treated and how they acted – and, more than this, how their experiences affected them, we need to turn to more intimate sources: to subjective accounts of the experience of war.

It is in the quest for such understanding that we adjust our gaze and focus on the train that is now drawing into the station. We move past the English Voluntary Aid Detachments, who are providing the walking wounded
INTRODUCTION – BOULOGNE, FRANCE

with cocoa and biscuits, and past officers distributing stretcher cases among ambulances bound for different hospitals. We follow a convoy of ambulances as they set off, out of the town of Boulogne, past buildings turned into hospitals and military headquarters, the sea dashing against the breakwater and threatening the road, and out along the coast to the village of Wimereux. Here, there are tents and huts on every side: thousand-bed hospitals housing medical units. They are mainly British at this stage of the war, but two of them are Australian. On one side of the road, on a cliff above the sea, is a huddled English unit – the No. 8 Stationary Hospital. On the opposite side, a wooden sign announces the No. 2 Australian General Hospital. There is evidence of building activity – huts being erected – but large marquees form many wards, and these billow and shake in the strengthening wind from the sea below.

Stopping outside a row of huts, we walk across the wet ground towards one in particular. There are curtains in the window – blue, over a white casement – all lit by lamplight within. There is a smell of coal fires in the air. A nurse, oilskins flapping, hurries to the door with jug in hand. She opens it and enters. A woman sitting at the table glances up at her companion. The seated nurse is pale and looks tired, huddling into the coat she is wearing over her grey uniform, but her grin as she anchors her papers against the skirling wind holds both welcome and evidence of stoicism and a dry humour. Her veil is in place, her brown hair waved over her brow caught up beneath it. She is ready to go on duty.

A plain wooden box is nailed to the wall behind her, doing service as a bookshelf and in it a copy of *The Youngest Miss Mowbray* stands upright beside some *British Australasian* magazines piled one upon the other. The table is covered with a green tablecloth and at its centre branches of autumn leaves stand in a tin that once held Mackintosh’s Toffees. Cigarette in one hand, fountain pen in the other, and round glasses she does not always wear perched on her nose, the seated nurse turns back to her task. She opens a blue notebook, leafs forward to a half-written page, and we peer over her shoulder as she begins to write:

30 Monday: We had one of the roughest nights that ever blew – beds got wet – tents blew out at the side the poles bent & flattened. I was sure the whole thing was coming down – however morning found it still up but some of the tents were flat – While we were having morning tea the stag light blew out of the “kitchen” in fact it wasn’t safe to walk about.
She sits for a moment, thinking. Her companion places the billy on the stove, its damp base hissing on the plate, and in the distance voices are raised in greeting as a motor engine grumbles. She reads back over what she has written, frowns, and adjusts the dates on two previous entries. She turns back a page to check, and we catch a glimpse of life on other days: ‘26: Went on night duty again last night, out in the paddock “some tent” five marquees joined together, got 56 patients in and had some busy time.’ Just above it, ending the previous entry, she writes, ‘such frosts beat Australia out of sight. It’s raining today soft drizzle – no sign of the sun here now’.

On the table beside her the lid of a wooden travelling desk is open. She has been answering letters for the Christmas mail, looking at photographs, sorting through carefully kept treasures. Facing up is a stained and much-travelled envelope with an inked address: ‘Sister K. McNaughton, No. 2 Australian General Hospital, A.I.F. France.’ A letter she has been re-reading lies half open. We can see the salutation, ‘Dearest Kitty,’ and the photograph tucked inside it, of an older woman posing gravely for the camera. Each envelope addressed for home is proudly annotated across the top, ‘O.A.S.’ – On Active Service. The nurse briskly screws the top on the bottle of ink, tidies the letters she has been answering and gathers together the other photographs – a home-developed view of feluccas on the Nile; the studio portrait of a soldier on leave in London; and herself, rounder featured, but not so long ago, on a donkey in Egypt and another of her smiling at the camera on a different coast but always with her hair framing an oval face and firm brows, a slight smile and a direct look hinting at a strong and, perhaps, mischievous personality. She places them in a large envelope, together with a photograph of the SS Orsova that has been signed by fellow travellers on every available space.

This hut and the life within it on the coast of France is a stage in a journey. It is a journey of a particular kind: the journey of an Australian nurse through war. The diary of Kit McNaughton allows us to take this voyage with her – to read over her shoulder and to view her experiences in the Great War with immediacy, through her eyes, as they unfold. Many of these experiences are extraordinary – extracting a bullet from a German’s back in a ward full of prisoners on the Somme, running the operating theatres at a clearing station during the Battle of Passchendaele, sleeping with a pal in the freezing cold under canvas on Lemnos Island, where she nursed the Gallipoli sick and wounded, and falling in love. All these events add to our knowledge
of the experience of Australian nurses and, more broadly, women at war. The medium of the historian’s enquiring gaze, though, enables us to do more than this. It opens up the possibility of a kind of double vision – the ability to not only read over Kit’s shoulder, but to step from behind her, to walk around the table, and to contemplate her as she writes – to cast a questioning eye upon the diary as a medium, and to ask questions that historians have not been able to ask of other material.

As studies in the last decades have begun to reveal, a world of great complexity lies within the covers of a woman’s diary. Socially acceptable – even expected – psychologically useful, and an agent of change in its own right, the diary more than any other kind of writing reflects both life-in-process and the many facets of the self: both change and identity. Approaching the diary in new ways, using at times completely new sources, will enable us to come to fresh and more complex understandings of change in response to the experience of war, as well as the connections between gender, identity and war, and the impact of war on our society.

This colonial-born woman, who is now pulling on her mittens, straightening her newly knitted brown woollen stockings and gathering her gumboots, is also a nurse in the first generations after Florence Nightingale. She is a farmer’s daughter, an Australian in the first years after Federation, a member of the British Empire, a Roman Catholic, and one of the very few Australian women permitted to travel officially to war. In the daily recording of her experiences over four years of war, as she attends to the topics expected by her audience, Kit has room to show herself acting in these different guises. We see her create herself in new roles, and push the boundaries of others. Each one of these images of herself will be challenged, conflicted and expanded by her experiences at war. Conscious always of her audience, she is a player to their gallery, negotiating her way between their expectations of correct behaviour, the realities of her lived experiences and her own desires. Along the way, her presentations of herself tell us something about all three. But Kit is choosing what to tell her audience – and, just as interesting to us in our quest for new understandings, what not to tell them – and there is knowledge to be found in her silences as well. The silences are a timely reminder that a diary is not a mirrored reflection of reality. Taken at face value, it tells only part of the story.

As Kit’s circumstances change, and as she does, too, her diary will expand to include responses to a different set of demands, and to perform different
services for her than the travel and adventures it was given as a gift to record. At times, in fact, it will become, according to contemporary norms, that most transgressive of documents: a woman’s war diary. In this and other ways, our study will tell us something about the nature of diaries: about what they may reveal, and how they may be examined. But one last question remains: how will we, from a distance of nearly one hundred years, unlock the secrets of her silences?

Some secrets Kit’s diary will always keep. We cannot know everything, and some of her meanings, shared by her intended audience, are lost to us. But other silences we can unlock, and to do so we must break new ground. The answer is all around us, on this dark night as Kit gathers her oilskins, looks outside, and switches on her torch. She steps outside into the now dark night and smells the tang of the sea on the wind that snatches at her dress below her coat. She greets fellow Victorian nurse Hope Weatherhead, who is hurrying past to her own ward. Decades from now Hope will write a memoir of this time for her family. Across the hospital in his office, Lieutenant-Colonel Thomas Martin, the commanding officer of the unit, is writing the daily entry of the unit’s official war diary, his pen scratching across the page: ‘Numbers of tents damaged by wind and rain had to be struck and others pitched in their places.’ In her office in Abbeville, Emma Maud McCarthy, Matron-in-Chief of the British Expeditionary Force, is finishing the day’s paperwork. In her war diary, in which she gives attention to all hospitals under her purview, including No. 2 AGH, she will write in December: ‘Miss Gray [sic], the new Australian Matron . . . dined with me . . . capable . . . keen . . . I expect there will be vast improvements in 2 Australian General before very long.’

Across the Channel, in the comfort of her office in No. 1 Australian Auxiliary Hospital at Harefield near London, the lady in question, Ethel Grey, is unaware of her pending move. In the letter–diary she is keeping she will write on her transfer: ‘this is active service in earnest . . . Before today was complete I realised there was very stiff work ahead of me. I cannot explain more fully here.’ Just south, in Horseferry Road in London, the Australian matron-in-chief, Evelyn Conyers, works on her own administration of the nurses, including a monthly report to Defence in Australia. Scattered in tents and huts across the hospital compound and across the Western Front, nurses are writing home and ‘scribbling in their books’, among them some who will be interviewed or write accounts for the official history at war’s end.
INTRODUCTION – BOULOGNE, FRANCE

‘Dear Mother and Father . . . I don’t think any of us could stand another winter here, but I suppose we will have to,’ one writes. ‘It was a severe winter and we had no heating apparatus and the tents were not weather proof. Afterwards, however, conditions improved,’ another will recall. Yet another will report ‘Patients could not be kept warm . . . The Matron, Ethel Grey and Staff did not spare themselves.’

This is an officially administered army at war, and a unit of Australians far from home. Official and private accounts of experience are produced in abundance – daily, weekly, monthly and yearly. These records still exist, and the voices of their authors can be heard. Gathered together they form a rich framework in which to consider Kit McNaughton’s own account of her time at war. In combination with her diary, they help us to put together a vibrant description of daily life in the units in which she served. Written, as they were, for a different purpose, a different audience, and in different circumstances, they say different things. It is these discrepancies that, in comparison with Kit’s diary, highlight and map the contours of her silences. The insights of oral historians, transferred here to her written narrative, will help to uncover the meaning of those silences.

She walks towards a row of tents pitched broadside to the wind, then Sister Kit McNaughton reaches her destination. She lifts the flap. The firm, measured tones of a male voice become clearer and a brief look of pain is in Kit’s eyes before she lifts her chin. She makes the sign of the cross, her movements echoed by only a few, though many heads are bowed. Another nurse, working while still in her coat, her breath visible in the lamplit air, moves and we catch sight of the white stole and the hand laid on a forehead: ‘Unto God’s gracious mercy and protection we commit you; the Lord bless you and keep you . . .’

Orderlies move by, the day nurse comes to whisper to Kit, and we turn away, stepping back into the windy night, the flap closing behind us. We will leave her, for the moment, at work on the cliffs overlooking the French coast. We must begin elsewhere in our search for new understandings about the effect of such experiences upon the self-images of a woman at war. We must go back, to a wharf at Melbourne, half a world away and over a year ago on a much milder winter day, where this journey begins.
Chapter one

Journey into war

July–August 1915

And it was Goodbye ‘Australia’

On the middle Saturday of July 1915, Sister Catherine ‘Kit’ McNaughton stands under a grey sky on Port Melbourne’s Station Pier, surrounded by the bustle and emotion of military embarkation. Crowds line the wharf. Orders ring out as officers and men of the Siege Artillery Brigade, the Australian Engineers, and nearly a dozen medical and dental units climb the gangways carrying their white, sea kitbags. As a newly enrolled member of the Australian Army Nursing Service, Kit is in the tiny minority of Australian women permitted to be part of it all and she will later describe the scene:

July 17th 1915 – Embarked on “Orsova” 10.30 – signed on & returned to pier, met all the “Riverites” & took fond farewell – was almost left behind had to run up pier. Cabin very nice . . . Afternoon tea 4 p.m. officers & nurses together best fun of day Concert given by troops on Aft deck & returned by nurses, also Boxing match in progress – the whole show is just like a nice big picnic.

Kit is one of sixty-five nurses from Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania, dressed in their new outdoor uniforms, who are surrounded by well-wishers on that wharf. Her family, the ‘Riverites’, are there to see her off. They are farmers of sheep and oaten hay from Little River in Western
JOURNEY INTO WAR

Victoria. It is in this district of dry-stone walls, meandering creeks and blue-stone schools at the foot of the You Yangs range that she has spent her first twenty-five years. The 1911 census counted 300 inhabitants – man, woman and child – of Little River district. Kit is one of thirty-nine Riverites who will enlist. Twelve will not return.

Answering the summons of photographer Josiah Barnes, Kit joins the other nurses for an official photograph. She stands massed with them in her ankle-length dark-grey serge dress, her hands hidden under her matching cape and the tails of her chocolate and grey bonnet blowing in the Melbourne breeze. Then it was time for the ‘fond farewell’, and embarkation.1 Watched from the ship’s rail by sixty nurses who had already boarded in Sydney, Kit McNaughton is about to take her first step on a journey that will change forever the way she thinks about herself and her place in the world. In stepping onto His Majesty’s Australian troopship the SS Orsova, Kit is stepping out of place in the eyes of many of those who are watching.

This is an era when travel and war – and their firsthand narration – are largely the preserve of men. Ideas about what is appropriate for the feminine gender, particularly in terms of place, tether a woman to home. Panic about what will result if these boundaries are breached place obstacles in the way of women’s active involvement in war.2 When Kit emerges on deck and waves to her family as the Orsova pulls out, with troops crowding every vantage point around her, the role of women promoted by military authorities and in the media in Australia is the traditional one: of support, sacrifice and quiet waiting on the home front, not active service on the battlefront. Many of the wives, mothers and sisters now waving handkerchiefs on the wharf will be granted a Nearest Female Relative’s badge by the Commonwealth Government. Engraved around the base, inscribing sacrifice as their role, is the citation: ‘For Duty Done’. At war’s end, Kit’s local newspaper, the Werribee Shire Banner, will report from a Welcome Home Ball, that ‘[t]he days of anxious waiting and watching for the mothers and sisters, wives and sweethearts, had now passed. The hearts of fathers and brothers were gladdened and welled with pride at the warrior’s return with the honors of war and victory upon them.’3 It is an ancient division, based on ideas that go back to Homer and the Iliad, which tie the full rights of citizenship to the defender of the realm, and in 1915 it still has force.4

The women of Australia do not agree, and they rush to offer their services in any capacity, in their thousands.5 Yet the nurses now moving
away from the Orsouva’s rail are some of the few women, estimated to be about two thousand and seven hundred nurses and a small number of masseuses, who are accepted for active service with the Australian Army. Although nurses from the Australian colonies did travel to the Boer War in 1900, Nightingale-trained nurses have only been in their first generation in Victoria at this time, and there has been much prejudice against the use of female nurses in the British Army. As the Great War begins there is still evidence of these attitudes among senior medical officers, including Neville Howse who will become Director of Medical Services, Australian Imperial Force. The Principal Medical Officer of the Commonwealth forces in Victoria, Colonel Charles Ryan, is quoted as saying that ‘most women were a nuisance on the battlefield, even in the limited capacity of nurses, and [should] keep within their own sphere to the best of her knowledge and ability’. There are concerns that hospital camps are not fit places for women, that some medical cases are unsuitable for female nursing, and that the possibility of sexual liaisons poses a threat to discipline. Fully trained male orderlies are the preference.

Kit’s record of the voyage she is embarking on provides us with a window on the manner in which she negotiates her unconventional position. For her, the diary is a tool in this process of negotiation. Viewed in new ways, it can also tell us about the effects that her movement outside the boundaries begin to have upon the identities of the woman she had once been, when she was captured in that moment in time in Josiah Barnes’ photograph.

With the ship underway, Kit has lunch (‘I was almost starving’). We can imagine her, then, making her way past gangways posted with guards to the cabin she will occupy with two other nurses. The cabin, though ‘very nice’, is not, she laments, shared with her close friend and fellow nurse Ethel Buchanan. Kit will begin to unpack what she needs for the voyage, and the nurses do not travel light. Matron Grace Wilson, acting matron-in-chief, AIF, dictated that, ‘Baggage should be limited, and this rule enforced.’ But that baggage consists of, ‘One regulation cabin trunk, one large holdall, a hat bag and one large suitcase, and in addition a small suitcase that can be carried in the hand’, which is considered ‘quite enough under active service conditions’. Packed also are the smaller items enumerated on an Australian Imperial Forces memo headed ‘Nurses Outfit’: ‘Each Nurse is required to bring her own Bed or Stretcher, which
should be strong as well as light, and Pillow, Rugs &c. . . . Camp Stools or Deck Chairs or both are extremely useful.’ Nurses going to France are later advised to add a washing bowl, galoshes, oil stove and a torch or lantern to their kit.\textsuperscript{10}

The formidable amount of baggage is another clue that, in contemporary eyes, the nurses are moving out of place. Femininity is synonymous with delicacy. It signals that they are intended to be restricted, as befits their sex, to the less mobile hospitals in Base areas. The official establishment tables of more forward medical units – clearing stations, field ambulances and stationary hospitals – do not include female nursing staff. After the war, Sister Briseis Belstead, who also quotes the contemporary argument that ‘a woman’s emotions unfit her for Active Service in times of storm and stress’, observes that ‘certainly the baggage of the AANS has been a problem’.\textsuperscript{11}

The nurses, in negotiating their way into war against the background of these prejudices, have to convince authorities – both military and familial – that their contribution will be uniquely valuable, and that their travel to war will be within the boundaries of respectable middle-class feminine behaviour. In 1915, the admissible reasons for travel are those that reinforce the traveller’s identity as a proper lady.\textsuperscript{12} Nursing is an acceptable womanly profession. An article in \textit{Una}, the journal of Kit’s professional organisation, declares, ‘Nursing is pre-eminently a woman’s work and it therefore follows that to be eminently successful in our profession we should be pre-eminently womanly.’\textsuperscript{13} When nursing authorities insist nurses be included in Australia’s response to Britain’s declaration of war, it is in fact these ‘womanly’ aspects – her attention to domestic detail, maternal instincts and sympathy, and the ‘humane alleviation and support, physical and moral’ that she offers to the sick and wounded – that the medical authorities agree have value.\textsuperscript{14} These are not qualities deemed necessary in medical officers, and Australian female doctors are not permitted to enlist. The nurses, given the public image they project of themselves, can also point to missionary and philanthropic work, both extensions of appropriate feminine home-centred fields of activity, as precedents. The higher calling of these fields can now acceptably take a woman overseas.\textsuperscript{15} Kit refers to her role, on reaching Egypt on 11 August, as ‘our mission’. It is an answer to others’ objections as the nurses sail away from lives of social constraint, as well as their potential usefulness as domestic carers.
At six o’clock, Kit is taken into a special afternoon tea with the officers on the arm of Major Hurst of the Siege Artillery Brigade. '[P]layed around afterwards, she writes, ‘& fed “Jacko” the kangaroo, mascot of ship’. Roll call is followed by boat drill (‘rather good fun, as you have to roll up even if you are in bed’), then dinner at 7.30 p.m.: ‘Went right thro the menu, much to the steward’s amusement & had to have the menu translated into English – Have a nice table Misses Humphries, Bull, Corkill, Buchanan & self & we make the most of our time.’

The visual picture Kit presents, on the arm of Major Hurst and in her severely modest uniform and symbolic veil, tells us how the nurses succeed in navigating their way into this male domain where others have failed. The professional space they now occupy was opened up for them by religious nursing sisters in the previous two centuries. The pious nurses, taking the protection of the cloister out into the world, showed how to do such work outside the home, among male bodies, without loss of status. Florence Nightingale generalised this model of nursing as moral work to a wider group of women.16 In the pages of Una nursing is held up as a vocation, their ministry ‘an immortal one’ and the work idealised as sacred, as service to mankind.17 Kit and her fellow nurses are certainly involved in the same process of negotiation and representation, and on much of the same grounds as the religious sisters had been in their own movement into the male domain of travel and war. They sail forth clothed not only in their chaste attire but also in the discipline and skill of their training, their vocation and their sense of mission, and the cloistered respectability of their separate, single lives under the supervision of matrons.

It is after the night-time concert that Kit, in her cabin and ‘feeling rather tired & slightly lonely’, puts pen to paper for the first time. The porthole open to the sea air, she inks her pen and considers what she will record of her first day’s voyage into war. Opening her diary she reveals, on the flyleaf, the giver’s inscription: ‘To Dearest Kit with love & best wishes from Ethel.’ It is dated three days previously, possibly the day of a farewell function. Yet, significantly, Kit will give no account of what she was doing even moments before she embarked. The woman who writes the diary is not the ‘K. McNaughton’ of ‘Little River, Victoria, Australia’ whose name is inside the front cover as the recipient of the gift. Rather, it is the woman whose name she is now inscribing in bolder ink on the bottom of the page facing it: ‘K. McNaughton, Cabin 377’ and, underlining it with a flourish, ‘Orsova’.
JOURNEY INTO WAR

It is the extraordinary life that she is now commencing that her audience is expecting her to report upon.

The travel diary is a traditional gift upon departure. It is a literary form Kit will have been familiar with, through both private and public accounts. Although the nature and function of Kit’s diary will evolve in response to changes in her circumstances and needs, it begins under this umbrella, and will continue to operate, sometimes valiantly, according to its conventions. From a distance of nearly a century, we can see Kit make her choices about what to write within this framework, and also within the overlapping borders of others, of which she is the centrepoint. They include the customs of her age, the expectations of her audience, the images of herself she is carrying into service and, as we shall see, her own desires. Although the image of the diary will evolve into a recipient of secrets by the middle of the twentieth century, most diaries are written with an eye to audience. Kit’s diary is typical of its age: an aide memoir that she will read aloud, or that other women – her companions among the nurses, her ardently Catholic mother, or her cousin Manie at home – will enjoy reading.

There is quite clearly a ‘you’ addressed in its pages. ‘We often think of the people at home & wonder what you are all doing,’ she writes after describing a concert given by the troops, the first day out of Australian waters, ‘& if you could only see us all doing the grand you would know how we are enjoying our selves’. It is to this audience that Kit’s presentation of herself has to be acceptable. Their image of the ‘good woman’ – the image Kit takes into war – is informed by ideals of female piety and submissiveness, of modest self-effacing behaviour, ideologies of propriety and, above all, of selflessness. It is in perfect harmony with the contemporary vision of the ‘good nurse’. Kit identifies with the professional qualities of the nurse – discipline, rigour, efficiency and obedience – which are promoted by the Royal Victorian Trained Nurses’ Association, of which she is a member. State loyalties, in the new Australian nation, are also strong. Ten days out of Fremantle, as serious illness begins to arise on board, she observes that ‘some of these nurses . . . ought to be put over board, the way they nurse’. She is referring to a unit of nurses who are very possibly from another state. She adds, ‘I hope I never fall into their hands.’ Kit is more approving of the nursing, however, on 2 August when Victorian nurses do duty in the hospital.
Entries in *Una*, under headings such as ‘Jottings’, contained quotations, excerpts and poems that highlight the personal qualities to which Kit is encouraged to aspire as a nurse. They include cheerfulness and optimism in the face of hardship, and a quiet, frank and refined manner. The pinnacle, however, is a selflessness that amounts to self-sacrifice. It is exemplified in the person of Florence Nightingale, and her ministering angel imagery of the nurse at war is current in popular imagination. Edward Cook’s *Life of Florence Nightingale* has just been published and nurses receive lectures about her on the way to war.¹⁹ As a result, women’s diaries are usually self-effacing in nature. This diary, though, will provide Kit with the means of reinventing herself, and presenting her new personas to her audience. The travel diary carries with it permission for Kit to record her tales for the education and entertainment of an audience at home.²⁰ This explains why Kit, in common with many of her fellow nurses, begins her diary with the very first step on her journey: ‘embarked on Orsova 10.30.’ Ending the entry describing her first day, she writes, ‘No more tonight as bed is calling me – Goodnight’. But within a few hours of the *Orsova* steaming out of Port Phillip Heads and into Bass Strait on the first, westward, leg of the journey, rough seas and seasickness make Kit temporarily impervious to anything else. The open porthole let in water and ‘I didn’t care a D____ if I was drowned’, is what she manages to scrawl the next day. She is back in bed by 5 p.m. The day after she records, miserably, that ‘my “Major” came & took me round the deck a cuple of times. Went to bed 8.30 – getting rather gay staying up so late.’

Kit’s awareness of her audience results in a degree of censorship as she walks the tightrope between presenting herself in new roles and emphasising her propriety and conformity. This discretion has a far greater effect on the diary than the draconian censorship regulations officially in force in Australia during the war. Kit, like the soldiers, circumvents these when she can. She leaves no doubt that official censorship profoundly affects her letter writing: ‘Wrote some letters, but I’m afraid they were very poor attempts . . .’ she declares on 20 July, as the ship pitches its way through Bass Strait, ‘there is not much fun writing for other people to read but I gave them a little work to do’. She added in her dry way, ‘hope they enjoyed it’. The atmosphere of official censorship, however, affects the diaries very little. Kit is openly critical, for example, of the officers’ treatment of soldiers, even though ‘criticism judged harmful’ to recruiting is banned from letters.²¹ The *Orsova* has departed in the wake of the first recruiting drive of the war, and at least
nine Little River boys responded to that call.22 Eleven days into the voyage, on 28 July, Sister McNaughton writes:

Men have parade on deck each day some of the officers want a kick the way they speak to the men, talk about encouraging enlisting. I'd be sorry to see any one I care for spoken to in such a manner. And the limit was reached yesterday when the men were ordered to strip & be hosed. Result: they refused & were put under arrest.

This remarkable entry puts the spotlight upon the accepted convention of the egalitarian nature of the Australian Imperial Force, and the relationship between the men and their officers in these early days.

It is a striking feature of Kit’s diary of the voyage that she identifies strongly with the men in the ranks and is by contrast critical and disparaging of the officers. ‘I don’t see a “Major” on board I like,’ she declares early in the voyage, on 23 July, having done her constitutional mile around the deck, and watched some boxing. ‘[T]he nicest men are in the troops.’ Indeed, she refers to the officers as ‘Knuts’, a reference to the popular music hall song from 1914 by Arthur Wimperis, ‘Gilbert the Filbert, the Colonel of the Knuts’, of which a crude parody was used as a marching song.23 ‘The Knuts came out & swanked round,’ she writes, on reaching the disembarkation port on 11 August, ‘& of course we got no news’. A planned concert by the Knuts is dismissed as hardly likely to be as good as one by the ‘boys’. Kit and her friends throw oranges to the boys after dinner, and she records that when the officers go down to their dinner, the men come up and have a ‘yarn’ to the nurses. She regards it as ‘just lovely’. Her repetition of the information two days later reveals something about how she sees herself, and suggests her tale will attract the interest and approval of her audience.24 The next day, 24 July, the nurses are ordered not to talk to the men. Sister McNaughton comments, in a way uncharacteristic of the obedient nurse, ‘they will have their work cut out watching us’.

Historians suggest the presence of nurses’ brothers, fathers and fiancés in the ranks is an explanation for their general disobedience of this order.25 The belief that the nurses should not be travelling to war resides most strongly with the officers, and this is another possible factor explaining Kit’s behaviour towards them.26 By contrast, throughout the war it will be
the boys who will cheer the nurses for their presence. In Kit’s attitudes and revelations, however, there can be detected the use of a quite particular – and unexpected – set of ideas, within which she frames the stories she tells. To the degree to which Kit and her fellow army nurses on the Orsova are moving out of place, they are entering areas where there are no existing female stories to be their guide, in life or in its recording. If travel and war are male domains, what ideas, then, does a woman draw upon to define herself within them? In Kit’s presentation of herself there is evidence of the nurses constructing their image as Australian women travelling officially to war by drawing upon the dominant discourse available for Australians going to war in July 1915. This is a story that has been described as ‘fiercely masculine’: the Anzac legend.

This was just three months after the landing of Australian and New Zealand troops at the place that would become Anzac Cove in the Dardanelles. Although the legend will be refined by Charles Bean, the official Australian war correspondent, in his editing of The Anzac Book in 1916, and amplified by the writings of C.J. Dennis and poet John Masefield, the essential qualities of the Anzac are very much alive in the public imagination as Kit sailed to war. These qualities are the result, so the narrative runs, of his bushman’s life and egalitarian social system; they form the basis of his ability as a superb fighter, and are vindicated before all the world at Anzac Cove. ‘[T]he Australian is not a soldier’, Sergeant Aitken writes home from Gallipoli in August:

but he is a fighter, a born fighter; each Australian has his separate individuality & his priceless initiative which made him . . . infinitely better that the clock-work soldier. Discipline irks him . . . every man . . . considers himself the equal of every other man, its not in his programme to take peremptory orders.

The various elements that make up the Anzac legend were being canvassed as the essential qualities of Australians before the Great War. Australia was a new and untested nation – one searching for a collective identity to overlay strong colonial allegiances – and this was a martial age. The ‘universally recognised test’ of a nation’s virility was that of war. Soldiers on the eve of the landings were aware that this was the Australians’ chance to prove the value of the characteristics of the ‘Australian type’, and lay to rest fears about the degeneration of British stock transplanted overseas.
In May, in Melbourne, Kit would have scanned the reports of British war correspondent Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett and of Bean in an atmosphere of public euphoria, the subheadings crying out the story of their success: ‘Australians Cover Themselves With Glory’, ‘Not Found Wanting’ and ‘A Stand as Worthy as Mons’. The reports were quickly bound and distributed to schools in New South Wales, and Allied commander General Hamilton’s congratulatory speech received the same treatment in Victoria. The government seized upon the burgeoning legend for use in recruiting and, seven weeks before Kit sailed, Empire Day provided another opportunity ‘to eulogise the exploits of the Anzacs’.

In Kit McNaughton’s diary, here and elsewhere, she selects and privileges material that validates the legend, and simultaneously draws upon the constellation of qualities embodied in it – and lionised by it – to create her own images. Kit’s record reveals the interactive relationship between personal and national identity. Her comment on the Orsova on 23 July that ‘the nicest men are in the hold of the ship it is worth while looking at them as they are a fine looking crowd, knock the officers Kite high’ has elements that are straight out of Ashmead-Bartlett’s reports on the ‘race of athletes’ who stormed the cliffs at Anzac Cove, and shows her drawing upon such positive public images to present behaviour, such as turning the female gaze upon male bodies, which normally would be frowned upon.

Interestingly, Kit’s identification with the men and her comment about the men’s physiques, in particular, seem to indicate that in these early months after the landings the legend is seen as applying to the men in the ranks rather than the officers. In 1915 officers are still being appointed directly from among those who have held rank in the militia and cadets, and are perhaps seen to be more of a British-style officer caste. The first wounded from the war arrived in Port Melbourne the day that Kit sailed, and the version of the Anzac legend she carried with her to war was unmodified by their stories. As she stood above the welldeck, physically and ideologically admiring the men, the evolving legend was in its earliest incarnation.

The work of Australian oral historian Alistair Thomson, based on interviews with Great War veterans from Melbourne’s western suburbs, shows that the legend would come to silence or marginalise experiences that were different, and historian Richard White is not alone in arguing that women were excluded from both the images of the ‘Coming Man’ and the ‘Australian type’ that had preceded it, and from the legend itself. However,
Sister Kit McNaughton’s use of the legend as a framework through which she constructs her own personas as an Australian woman travelling to war, and a nurse in the army, and presents them in a form she feels is acceptable to her audience, forces us to a more complex understanding. It bears witness to the legend’s power as a positive collective identity, and is one example of its value to a number of different groups in society, whose understanding and narration of their experience are shaped by its influence, but who also engage with it.38

Kit’s use of it to actively craft her persona shows agency. The nurses are not simply passive recipients of the identities thrust upon them. It reveals a desire for a level of freedom denied them at home. For nurses travelling to war, the Anzac legend opens out the boundaries of acceptable behaviour. Australian soldiers experienced a loss of identity as they entered training camps, left their individual civilian jobs, clothing and characteristics behind, and were informed that discipline meant ‘the sinking of self for the good of the whole’.39 The experience of the nurses was directly opposite. They continued the work they did as civilians, but their journey into war challenged and enabled them to expand their sense of self. This provides a useful lens through which to view what would be the war-long attitude of the nurses as the Osowa arrived in Fremantle on 22 July; their desire to serve along with joy at being set free from circumvented lives and the scrutiny of neighbourhood.

Nurses wanted to make a contribution, to take part in an adventure and to experience real life to the full. Kit, admiring the views from the rail (‘I think Fremantle is best in the distance’) after a ‘hurried lunch frightened we’d miss something’, was a member of the more restricted sex at home. As a nurse, even though she resides away from home, she lives a cloistered, tightly controlled life. At the Geelong Infirmary and Benevolent Asylum, Mrs Thelma Daniel later recalls, ‘Nurses lived in a weatherboard cottage in the Hospital grounds . . . Nurses had one late pass a week until 11 pm. Lights went off at 10.10 pm.’40 In the Trained Nurses’ Homes in Melbourne, where Kit later resides, thirty or forty private nurses live together under the supervision of a Lady Superintendent. One nurse complains in a letter to Una that in such places the nurses’ lives are very regulated. She argues that ‘Matrons of nurses’ homes cannot overlook the fact that nurses must be kept in subjection and supervised’ and refers to the list of ‘don’ts’ for nurses signed ‘Lady Superintendent’. She ends with the plea that ‘[a]ll a nurse asks for
is to live like other women – free and independent’. Although the letter indicates that times are changing, it also gives insight into the status quo, and the desire for more freedom that nurses carry into war. At this time single working-class women were breaching traditional boundaries of behaviour and place, particularly in terms of their interaction with the opposite sex. Their income gives them power in families, and the lack of accommodation in working-class homes takes them out into public spaces for the reception of suitors. The middle class, however, was the last bastion of correct behaviour, and the image of the ‘good woman’ is still very restrictive.

The ‘lady’ metaphor of the Nightingale nurse means that, in Kit’s case, these standards are particularly enforced. Respectability, including sexual propriety, in hospital nurses has been a particular goal of reformers in the nineteenth century, given their previous reputation as drunken, debauched and dishonest. The life the nurses are about to experience challenges previous historical assumptions that a person’s experience of the war is wholly determined by their gender. Class – in this case the perceived respectability of the middle class – is a key determining factor in the nurses’ acceptance for active service. Kit takes every opportunity in her diary to emphasise her maintenance of this quality. On the side of the ledger arguments are made against the possibility of ‘making use of the working class woman in France’. The Anzac legend’s validation of the ‘larrkin’ and ‘civilian soldier’ aspects of Australians at war give the nurses a narrative that suits their flight from constraint into adventure and enjoyment – and a degree of autonomous decision-making – and that such behaviour, including Kit’s boldness and ‘cheek’, within an additional framework of acceptability.

Before her embarkation, Kit’s persona as a private nurse requires her to be ‘calm, humble, obedient . . . quiet in movement and mind, be . . . of delicate feeling, and . . . genuine sympathy . . . [and] perfect self control’. In contrast, granted leave in Perth on 22 July, the nurses are met by the governor on the pier, and then catch the train up to the city. Kit writes that they:

Arrived in Perth & straight to P.O. created some sensation, were stopped by crowds & “God blessed” . . . Had a very lively Dinner at “Union Service Club Hotel” real good fun . . . were told to be at pier at 8.40 but missed train. I’m afraid we didn’t try to get it – anyhow all the heads were full of Black & White so what was the odds; we had a ripping time and got on board about 10 p.m.
The portrayal of Australian women in contemporary literature – usually in counterpoint to the English gentry – as possessing a ‘natural, unaffected charm . . . independence and initiative’ helps prepare the ground for this new step in the nurses’ presentation of themselves.\(^46\) They also defy military authorities (the heads) who are ‘full of Black and White’ (a brand of whisky) by posting uncensored letters when they go ‘straight to P.O’.

A credible precursor to the new image adopted by the nurses can also be pointed to in the person of the intrepid lady explorer in a ‘good thick skirt’, who appears in the second half of the nineteenth century, and whose presence can also be detected in Kit McNaughton’s construction of herself in her diary.\(^47\) The Anzac legend, as well, had a broader resonance in its early days than it has come to have today. Fellow nurse Olive Haynes’ fiancé, on meeting one of her civilian connections in mid 1917, writes, ‘I didn’t feel bound to stand on ceremony too much in her company – felt she was an Anzac straight off’.\(^48\) The nurses feel that they are entitled to draw upon the ideal to define themselves, and find it not only meaningful, but also tailor-made to their needs and desires. In the meantime, simply being among the few women officially on their way to war, and ‘God Blessed’ by crowds, begins the process of unsettling their traditional self-effacement.

At 3.30 a.m. on 22 July, after coaling at Fremantle, the Orsova weighs anchor. ‘There was 4 blasts of ships siren . . . And it was Goodbye “Australia”’, Kit records. She adds, ‘I didn’t get up to see the last piece of land as I was too tired’, but her implication is that others did. For most of those travelling overseas to war, this last glimpse of their country is a matter of significance. The focus is not all forward on Empire – on going ‘Home’ – and adventure. Here there is a sense of leaving ‘Home’, a consciousness of being Australian. Kit buys boronia in Perth: ‘the last we shall see for some time.’ Together with eucalyptus and wattle, sprigs of this shrub, redolent of home, will be highly prized among Australians on the Western Front.

As the Orsova sails across the Indian Ocean on the unbroken fortnight’s leg from Fremantle to Aden, life on board the enclosed world of the ship settles down into enjoyment. The weather becomes perceptibly warmer as the days go by. The naval officers appear in whites, the troops leave off their shoes (‘wish we could go without ours,’ Kit yearns) and Kit and the other nurses take off their coats. ‘Will soon be down to my sing[let] and bloomers,’ she declares, as the temperature continues to rise. The nurses take turns around the deck for exercise as the Royal Australian Artillery band play,
they sit and chat or read books in their deck chairs. From the rail of the promenade deck they watch boxing matches and concerts among the troops on the deck below, scan for whales, and marvel at flying fish.

In Kit’s journey away from the eyes of the village, her diary provides her with the space in which to re-imagine herself, as well as create herself in her new roles, and to present these new aspects of herself to her audience. The diary also has a role to play in her navigation of her unconventional place. Both aspects of her diary are illuminated by her attention to one of the traditional and expected topics of this section of a travel diary: the shipboard romance. Of dinner on board she writes:

> We have fun at our table, as we have the finest looking steward aboard. Some of the Girls say he is a “Prince” in disguise . . . The dining saloon is a brilliant spectacle of an evening all the nurses look so nice in their grey dresses red capes & white caps, & all are as merry as can be.

She adds, ‘I can see several budding romances coming on between nurses & Dr.’ There are dances, as well. After one, on 26 July, she records, ‘had a waltz with Jimmy [Geelong doctor James Bell] great success – & met Capt Powell nice boy had a two step & some talk’. On 31 July, as the Orsova approaches the equator, the traditional fancy-dress ball is held. The matrons appear at the ball plastered with luggage notices that read ‘Not Wanted on Voyage’. Their class and Kit’s comment ‘& of course they kept clear’ explains how their dress is in recognition of the leeway accorded the nurses and officers because of the liminal space of the voyage – suspended between home and war – and the shipboard tradition of romance. It is a far cry from the Geelong Infirmary and Benevolent Asylum where the House Committee made it quite clear in the last year of Kit’s training that ‘[t]hroughout the whole staff, it is to be fully understood that all private or unnecessary conversation between the sexes is against the wish of the Governing Body’.

Kit McNaughton and her friend Ethel Buchanan met two of the ship’s engineers on the top deck while playing quoits, which they flirtatiously commandeer from ‘a good second lieutenant’. ‘Of course, I had to give [them] some cheek,’ writes Kit of the engineers. ‘[M]ine,’ she goes on, ‘has nice brown eyes is a Sydney boy & the only Australian in the engine room.’ The relatively private boat deck is the place of rendezvous, and she and
Kit has received the news of its impending publication with some concern. It was to include a ‘births, deaths and marriages column’, she writes on 1 August, ‘I’m afraid it will be rather personal.’ The next day, four days from Aden, Kit adds, ‘many & varied yarns going about the ship – re the boat deck – married men & nurses – very skittish I hear’.

Finally, the nurses are paraded at 2 p.m. on 6 August. A senior officer deputises the genial – and according to Kit, less culpable – Major Mills to address them on their behaviour. The nurses’ relationships with the two groups on board – the NCOs and privates on the one hand, and the officers on the other – are considered separately, and differently. Major Mills, Kit records:

spoke very nicely about the men & said figuratively he took his hat off to every one of them, but never the less there must be discipline & order on a troopship & if the nurses persisted in talking to the men the O[fficer] C[ommanding] troops must take other measures to put a stop to things.

The nurses are specifically asked not to gaze down upon the sleeping forms of the men. Major Mills, Kit writes, says that it wasn’t ‘ “a nice thing to do” and might make them [presumably the men] dream dreams’.

The senior officer’s comments reflect the argument against the presence of women at war, that the possibility of sexual liaisons is a threat to discipline. It is partly against this attitude that Kit is constructing herself in her diary as chaste during her journey to war. The solution to the scandal of the nurses’ relationships with the officers, on the other hand, is that they should exercise more discretion. ‘Poor dears they are all so easily led,’ Mills says, putting
the blame, and the onus for resolution, firmly on the nurses. Gertrude Moberly, however, makes it clear that it was the officers who were making the running. Kit comments that:

I think that little bit was well deserved by the frequentation of the boat deck, as I’m sure any nurse that so far forgets herself as to stay up with an officer till the “wee small hours” has no respect for herself or her profession.

This formal declaration strikes an odd note amid the dry humour of Kit McNaughton’s more typical observations. The explanation can be found in the fact that nurses, in being on the troopship at all, are pushing at the entwined boundaries of place and gender. Emphasising their conformity and propriety in their diaries is one strategy the nurses use to minimise their transgression, and to maintain their claim to respectability, particularly in the face of stereotypes that give a travelling woman the aura of sexual availability. The boundaries have been re-imagined. Kit appears to be drawing a line between the acceptable enjoyment of, in Moberly’s words, ‘mild’ shipboard flirtation – risqué enough in home terms – with crossing the line by staying out very late, and dallying with married men. Significantly, Kit adds ‘it isn’t a very nice tale to go back to Australia’.

Kit takes great care to declare her own chastity for this home audience, whom she sees as enforcing these mores. Her romance with the brown-eyed George having faltered – ‘I’m all upset . . .’ she writes on 1 August, ‘my “engineer” loves another’ – she is targeted, two days later, by an officer she dubs the ‘Crown Prince’. He offers to take Ethel and herself up to the boat deck to ‘see the sights’. She writes that he:

Came along after dinner & sat on foot of my chair – Ethel & Alice were there, he squeezed my foot & knee in full glare of electric light & then asked me to top deck, rather a gay dog I’m afraid – Any how I didn’t go – so he left in disgust. I’m sure he thought I was a sport – but I’m not.

It is a declaration aimed at an audience whose clarity on this point was important.

The sharp division that the opening line of the diary represents between the recorded and the unrecorded life reflects an equally great contrast between Kit’s current experiences and her life before she boards. This was
an era when travel was the prerogative of the wealthy, leisured classes. The nurses were drawn from the middle class, in line with Florence Nightingale’s reforms. Like the majority of the soldiers, however, Kit and her fellow nurses were neither wealthy nor leisured. Kit, who watches the ‘Australia Day’ concert, ‘the event of the trip’, on a welldeck draped with the flags of the Allies, is the granddaughter of a Scottish immigrant. He became a pioneering white settler in the Little River district, and the builder of the Presbyterian Church there. Kit’s own father caused consternation in the family by marrying a devoted, and determined, Catholic. Although other branches of the family are quite prosperous, ‘Boss’ McNaughton’s family is less well-to-do. There are no records of him still owning land at his death in 1914 and the family leases a property known as ‘Daley’s’ at the base of the You Yangs range. All of his children find outside work. Kit’s brothers become butchers and shearers as well as farmers.

Kit was interviewed and listed as a probationer at Geelong Infirmary and Benevolent Asylum, the hospital in the nearby port and market town, in December 1907 at the age of twenty-four. She commenced her three months’ unpaid probation at 6.30 in the morning on 27 March 1909, a week after a resolution had been taken that staff would contribute half the cost of any broken property ‘unless a satisfactory explanation could be given’. The average working week of a hospital nurse at this time was sixty-five hours, easily extended by emergencies. On completion of her probation, Matron Davidson recommends Kit McNaughton for three years’ training. She is paid £12 in her first year, which is raised to £15 in her second year, and £20 in her third year. Trainees were cheap labour for the cash-strapped institution, a fact reflected in the staffing ratios.

Potential nurses were rejected if they were of ‘too frail a build to stand the strain’. After three years of hard training, if Kit had still been employed there she would have been paid the staff nurse’s wage of about £30 – the same as the starting wage of an office boy, and £9 less than the kitchen maid. A sister in a position of responsibility earned around £50 at the same time and a wardsman earned £70 at the institution. At the commencement of the First World War, the wages for hospital nurses had stood still for twenty years. The weighted average annual wage for women as Kit McNaughton sailed away was £70 12s 8d. For men, it was more than double this amount.

The Royal Victorian Trained Nurses’ Association, in its push for professional status for nurses, associated trade union-like activity to raise
wages with the aura of manual labour they were trying to leave behind. This, together with the self-sacrificing self-image of the nurses, explains their acceptance of such poor working conditions. During the 1913 debate in the pages of *Una* over the raising of nurses’ fees, one correspondent regretted that she needed to charge a fee at all. One historian has suggested that for a nurse to question her working conditions in this atmosphere was ‘tantamount to admitting she was not fit to be a nurse’. Combined with the ministering angel persona of the nurse at war, this would have consequences for Kit’s self-image as she faces the shock and pressure of the rushes on the Western Front.

Although she is later to work for a time as a charge nurse at the Bairnsdale Hospital in the main town of rural Gippsland, Kit was in tune with three-quarters of her professional sisters when she left the Geelong hospital at the end of her training in February 1912 to become a private nurse. She moves into the Royal Melbourne Trained Nurses’ Home, overlooking the Exhibition Gardens, in Rathdowne Street, Carlton, an inner suburb of Melbourne. This is the climax of the great era of the Homes. The Royal Melbourne was one of fourteen metropolitan Nurses’ Homes whose lady superintendents controlled the industry. It was run by Matron Amy McKinnell who, on receipt of a telephone call from a doctor requiring a nurse, would issue nurses on rotation.

Kit’s fee was the standard two guineas a week, which until February 1913 had been the same for twenty years. She could, however, work twenty-four hours at a stretch, and had to rest between cases to recover – a time when she was not paid. With home fees of £30 per year, and laundry expenses of £13, she was unable to save for what was often, for nurses, a premature old age. Overstrain was an accepted part of both private and hospital nurses’ lives. Her long hours were worked, moreover, under ‘conditions which no domestic servant will suffer’. Letters to the journal painted a grim picture of what a private nurse’s life could entail. ‘[A] year ago,’ one correspondent writes:

> the writer nursed an old lady paralysis . . . the dirt and filth I waded through in that house was incredible. The patient expected me to sleep with her, as she had a double bed, which was infested with vermin . . . Pots and pans were left out in a very small dirty back yard for roving cats to clean . . . I went out and paid for my meals. I did this for five weeks, made a hole in my two guineas per week.'
Kit’s first experience of being a nurse at war, by contrast, is one unique to New Zealanders and Australians. It is a month-long cruise on a passenger liner on the tourist route to Egypt. She finds herself among nearly one hundred and fifty nurses and one thousand and five hundred troops, and with very little work to do. It is a tourist’s experience with all the trappings: the same ceremonies as they crossed the equator (‘I felt the bump’, she writes) and the same deck games, tourist ports, cameras, postcards, souvenirs and fancy-dress balls. It is an experience few of them would have been able to enjoy otherwise, and they embrace it. The chance to see the world was linked to enlistment, and the ‘soldier-as-tourist’ is one part of the identity of Australians on active service during the First World War.68

Although the travel diaries they keep, as part of this impulse, has their own conventions in terms of acceptable topics, by and large the character of the travel diary is a liberating one for women. Despite diary and letter writing being seen as the domain of women, their content is dictated by contemporary norms regarding appropriate topics for the feminine pen. Kit McNaughton, as she gathers her traveller’s tales, is expected to confine herself to the domestic sphere, family, social life, the lives and activities of women, and cultural matters.69 Her diary presents a contrast to the ship’s Routine Orders, which bring to life a bustling military operation – the military headquarters on board receiving daily Returns from all units, the bugle calls, the gathering of the officers of the guard each morning outside the smoking room, their red armbands replacing Sam Browne belts, the instruction of junior officers of combatant units in semaphore on the boat deck in the early morning, and the sentry posts.70 All are nearly invisible in the primary picture of the Orsova painted by Kit. This convention was less of a problem on the ship, when much, although not all, of what she experiences is suitable for her diary than it would be later in the war.

The character of the diary as a travel diary, does, nevertheless, make the traditional boundaries of a woman’s diary more elastic. When the ship eventually reaches Aden on 6 August, Kit, watching from the ship’s rail, will see what must have been the Aden Moveable Column heading out to an engagement. Conscious of it as an historical moment she notes the time – six o’clock – from the clock tower opposite the wharf, then she records:

And coming down the hills from the Garrison were troops in “Khaki” a most impressive sight with the famous “Algerian” camel train 1000 strong trailing
out behind all loaded up with stores of war, wheels of the guns visibal thro. the
glasses, also many mules carrying provisions – & they were going to the front,
where the Turks are attacking, only 12 miles from the town . . . Rumour says
there are 25,000 Turks massed only 15 miles from Aden. They have only 5000
British Troops there & have sent for reinforcements.

There is a consciousness at the time that this was a great war: the ‘great-
est war in history’.71 In the specialised form of travel in which Kit is
engaged – into, through and as part of this great war – the war makes its
appearance in her diary when it fits an acceptable category, such as sight-
seeing. Then, for the sake of others – and not, of course, herself – Kit is
able to place herself centre stage as an authoritative eyewitness. An early
scholar of diaries, Robert Fothergill, once observed that no major diary
draws its character from only one impulse. Here, Kit’s diary intersects
briefly, under the umbrella of the travel diary, with another kind of diary:
the public chronicle of an historic event, which is more often than not a
male prerogative.72

The historic event most commonly chronicled by ordinary men and
women is war. This, and the presence of scattered snippets of war news,
prompts us to look anew at Kit’s diary and ask to what extent it can be
considered to be that most transgressive of documents: a woman’s war
diary. For a woman of this time to write about personal experience of the
frontline goes against more than one convention. The titles of women’s
accounts of war published during the war show how unusual a woman’s
war diary was considered to be. The prominent inclusion of ‘woman’ in
the title of the coincidentally named Englishwoman Sarah Macnaughtan’s
_A Woman’s Diary of the War_ and Australian Louise Mack’s _A Woman’s
Experiences in the Great War_ point exactly to this. All such accounts were
by previously published writers, some of them moving in quite avant-
garde circles. Even so, within the covers of her book, as we would expect,
Sarah Macnaughtan is at great pains to minimise the transgression of
her acts, both in going to war and in writing about it. She apologises
if she appears ‘horribly egotistical’ – the antithesis of the self-effacing
woman – and prefaces her opinions with self-deprecating comments. ‘To
my ignorant mind . . .’, she writes, when offering her firsthand, and quite
correct, opinion that Antwerp seemed doomed beforehand, lest she pre-
empt mans’ place.73
Despite the great interest in personal accounts of war, there are no agreed criteria by which to define a war diary, whether by timeframe or writer or content. Kit McNaughton’s diary offers one measure in her presentation of herself as a woman travelling to war and, in particular, in how she positions herself in relation to the war. Much of the way Kit constructs herself as a nurse at war, as she relates her traveller’s tales in these early days, reflects both her modest self-images and the way she negotiates her way into war. She is present to serve the boys, and it is they who are the subject of her entries, not her own participation. Her news of the war is similarly as an eyewitness. She is the ‘eye’, not the ‘I’.

Yet a small thread of Kit as a participant is present from the very beginning in her diary. Kit lays claim to her presence as a woman who is officially part of the war effort from the start. This in itself is a challenge to assumptions about the place of women. On 22 July, the day they reached Fremantle, she wrote, ‘We are supposed to be a very valuable cargo & are going to have an escort from W.A. hope the Germans don’t get us.’ Here, in Aden, watching lighter leave their work coaling passenger steamers to fill the Orsova, she comments, ‘as we are of more importance, they have to wait’. As we will see, under certain circumstances, this thread will widen. At these times the diary will become, in effect, a woman’s diary of her participation in war.

There is a second, telling, indication of the presence of a ‘war diary’ under the aegis of the travel diary. In Kit’s diary, travel – the sight of places only heard about or read about in books – elicits delight, and the metaphor of a dream or fairy tale. The war, by contrast, is always couched in terms of disbelief. The last week of the voyage began with the first anniversary of the outbreak of war, 4 August. ‘Never in my wildest dreams did I see myself on “Orsova” . . . in Indian Ocean,’ Kit muses, noting, as they move closer to their destination and further from civilian life, that ‘she is now known as troopship “A67”’. She adds, ‘fate is a funny old thing’. What her daily record will show when she reaches the extreme edge of war will be a shift in perspective, as the surreal eventually becomes the familiar.

‘At 3.30 a m after coaling was completed, we weighed anchor & away we went,’ Kit writes of their leaving of Aden. ‘We are now making for the entrance to the Red Sea & things are rather warm.’ They pass through Hells Gate, she records, at 4 p.m. on 7 August, ‘& have met a good many ships going out since – they will soon be as common as trains’. The HMS Osterley ‘got a wonderful cheer & the Cooees were loud and prolonged’. As the
men with whom they are travelling to war are fighters, not soldiers, so too the nurses cast themselves as outsiders in the army. They see themselves as civilian nurses present essentially to nurse their 'boys'. Australian historians point to the ‘incorrigibly civilian’ disposition of the soldiers as volunteers. Combined with their egalitarian outlook, this makes them ‘baulk at the traditions and regulations of the traditional British Army’. Combined with their independence, it makes them less likely to obey authority for its own sake. In fact, of the two thousand souls on board, only one hundred and thirty-eight have been rigorously trained to discipline, and were used to being given, and unquestioningly and promptly obeying, orders: the nurses. Discipline was a cornerstone of their three-year training.

How successful this training has been can be seen from Kit’s attestation papers, which she filled in on first boarding the Orsova. In response to the question, ‘What is your experience in carrying out orders?’ she automatically writes, ‘Promptness’, before realising that the question meant ‘How many years experience have you had?’ She crosses it out, and writes, ‘three years’.

Yet Kit had commented the week before, on 2 August 1915 when she retires to a cabin now so hot it was like ‘a continuous Turkish bath’, that ‘[t]here is a court martial this a.m. a man struck his officer – so I suppose that will cause more fuss’. No censure of the arrested man or shock at his action betrayed any identification with the officers as a group, or with the army. Indeed, military doings are a source of irritation to her. She comments on 29 July upon the repeated parades to give personal information such as name and place of birth (‘this is about the tenth time since we came on board’) and the regulations. ‘Haven’t heard any new rules for today,’ she writes waspishly on 26 July, ‘but suppose there will be plenty before the day is out.’ A memoir by fellow passenger Sister A.E. Williams, written after the war and thus for a different audience and purpose, recounts the content of a series of lectures the nurses received. In her diary at the time, however, Kit records only the subject of the first, ‘Military Etiquette’. She notes drily that they will be well-drilled soldiers as they are to have them every day but, although she writes about the doings of every day, they never get a mention again. Such a lack of identification implies a self-definition of their roles that gives the nurses a degree of latitude and freedom. Cast in the anti-authoritarian, civilian–soldier framework of the Anzac discourse, as part of the larger project of a search for national identity, this freedom, again, was presented in a manner that deflected censure.
KITTY’S WAR

On the last day before reaching the Gulf of Suez, 9 August, Kit ‘[p]ut in a most strenuous day getting “Photo” of “Orsova” signed. The idea took on well,’ she writes, ‘& before long almost every one on the boat was hard at it.’ The experiences to come will put the conventional ideas of femininity, as well as other identities, with which the nurses now gathering their autographs have entered the war under further, and often extreme, duress. Kit’s life of movement from unit to unit, and one theatre of war to another, will be one of repeated displacement and continued unsettling of those identities. The process of challenge to identity, however, began the minute she stepped on board the Orsova. As she is assigned to a military hospital, and steps ashore at Suez, the liberating nature of the travel diary will continue to be instrumental in her re-imagination of herself.