

Souvenir D'Evreux

When searching through the endless memorabilia of UConn School of Nursing's Josephine Dolan Collection, you will stumble upon a fragile cloth bound book. This book has seen more than many will see in their lives, for it traveled through the hands of French soldiers serving on the frontlines of World War 1. Bearing resemblance to something you might bring on a family trip to Disney World, this World War 1 autograph book served as a the medium for one nurse's memories of the war to end all wars.



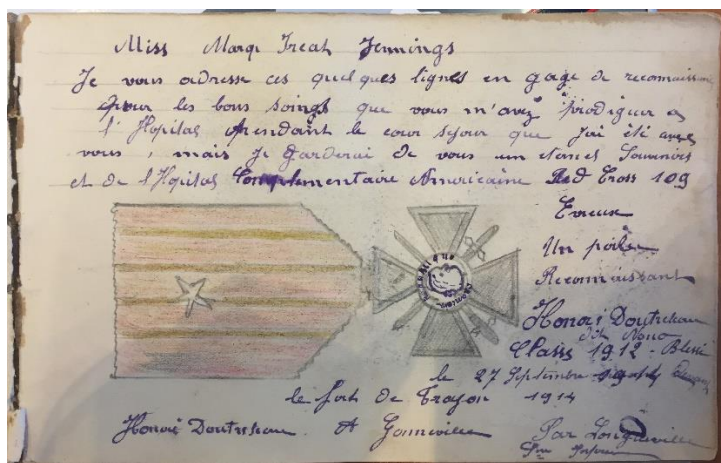
Handling this piece of history is akin to being held a newborn child; a combination of caution and wonder immediately claims its place in your mind. This autograph book is celebrating a hundred years of storytelling, and it has the scars to show for it. Weighing as much as the iPhone in your pocket, this piece has 32 worn pages that are filled with illustrations and photographs ameliorating the stories that accompany them. As if cursive wasn't enough of a task to understand, the stories and memories are in French. The ink has faded and the wax crayon has

smudged, suggesting that different sets of fingertips have made their way over them in the past century.



This book belonged to Miss Mary Treat Jennings. Very little is known about her or her history. After countless attempts to find a single piece of information about our heroine on the World Wide Web, we have to settle for what can be deduced from this book. These next few assumptions are based on the illustrations in the autograph book, for the French is beyond my comprehension. One soldier described her as a “good American English teacher”, having stated this claim in a fold out letter written in broken English. It is comforting to know that nurses have assumed the role of both healer and educator a hundred years ago in the profession. Another page of the book depicts the French military decoration, the Croix de Guerre (cross of war). The institute of Heraldry describes this medal being awarded to French and American servicemen to commemorate individual mentions in dispatches in both World War One and Two (The institute

of Heraldry, 2017). The fact that this illustration was included in this book can be two things: Miss Mary Treat Jennings received this decoration in her time serving in France, or one of her patients felt she was deserving of one. However, more can be said about her situation than what can be said about the woman in the nursing cap. She was one of 10,000 graduate nurses assigned to serve her fellow man overseas in the First World War. She was also one of the estimated 9,740 nurses to return from the front lines, escaping the estimated fraction of 1% of nurses who lost their lives during the call of duty (Judd & Sitzman, 2010)



What good was an autograph book during one of the most brutal exhibitions of the human condition ever recorded in history? What significance did this small pocket book serve amongst the dead and the dying? “[The nurse] kept an autograph book inscribed by wounded and dying soldiers, with poignant verses and humorous drawings showing love, wit and tragedy. Despite the dreadful conditions, kindness and compassion brought them comfort and raised their morale - a critical message for today, and [the nurse’s] gift to us from World War I” (Watkins, 2017) Books, like art, can be seen as a way to comfort those in times of hardship. The patients of Miss Mary Treat included both elaborate illustrations and sheet music, showing love and compassion to the nurse whose only duty was to honor and serve those who served with honor.



These soldiers were native to Evreux France. This is where Miss Mary Treat's story took place. Occupying its place in the northern part of France, the American nurses and the French troops were not too far from both Belgium and the Western Front. Within these pages are mention of the word "poilu". Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the word poilu as a French soldier serving on the front lines of World War 1. This term is said to derive from the medieval term "poil" meaning hair, which makes a whole lot more sense when paired up with photographs of the servicemen. These hairy men formed a bond with Miss Mary, their protector, which can be seen throughout the 32 signed pages of this small personal autograph book. If you look closely at the faded photographs you can see the bushy mustaches these men wore at the time.



Miss Mary Treat Jennings did not serve here fellow Americans, but her fellow Man. Being in a place far from home with probably not a whole lot more than this autograph book to call her own. It was her efforts as well as the men whom she saved that ended the First World War, fighting for the families and children back home, wherever it is. Miss Mary can be seen as one of the first cohorts of military service nurses, paving an avenue for the nursing profession to aide in military nursing for the next century. The stories and thanks are preserved in this book for the time being, waiting to be shared with the world on another occasion.

Citations

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This article was prepared for Dr. Thomas Lawrence Long in NURS 4265 Nursing's Past as Prologue during the spring 2017 semester.