**‘*It’s a Long Way to Tipperary’[[1]](#endnote-1)***

**The Great War Contribution of Molly O’Connell Bianconi to Allied Nursing Care**

**By**

**Alice Mc Dermott**

**(Retired) Lecturer in History**

**Waterford Institute of Technology**

**amcdermott@wit.ie**

**In recognition and respect of the contribution of Molly O’Connell Bianconi to Allied nursing care during the 1914-1918 conflict**

In Ireland in 1914, as, indeed, a significant proportion of the rest of the developed world, most young women from families whose affluence and upper class position in society was sufficiently secure and long established tended, around the age of eighteen, to complete their second level education by attending various carefully selected finishing schools. Some of these establishments for the ‘concluding’ education of suitably refined, well-bred young ladies were available within the country, others were located abroad.

Regardless of their whereabouts, the uniform, express purpose of all of these schools was twofold. Essentially ‘charm’ schools, with their focuses on the teaching of etiquette and what was, and, indeed, still is often referred to as culturally valued ‘norms’, they were expected, firstly, to instil in their pupils the correct combination of personal, social, management, budgetary, and artistic skills to allow them, upon completion, to function efficiently and successfully, in both their private and public adult lives in whatever manner their individual family statuses and financial circumstances warranted.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Secondly, while it was never formally stated in their various prospectuses, it was generally anticipated that the competences and confidences attained in finishing schools would greatly enhance advantaged young women’s prospects of securing, preferably in the not-too-distant future, eminently suitable marriage partners. This was widely deemed to be important because, broadly speaking, ‘strategic’ matrimonial alliances were the only viable ‘future prospects’ available, at the time, to young women from the higher rungs of middle and, of course, upper class society.

Molly O’Connell Bianconi was a member of a family whose privileged financial and social position effectively ensured the culmination of her tuition at one of these establishments. Finishing school, for her, was simply part of the life for which she was pre-destined.

Born in 1896, she was the second of four daughters of John and Arabella (nee Burke Hayes) O’Connell Bianconi.[[3]](#endnote-3) As her notable double-barrelled surname may, perhaps, indicate, she was a descendant of two of Ireland’s most eminent public figures of the nineteenth century, Daniel O’Connell, ‘the emancipator’, and Charles Bianconi, the ‘prince of the Irish highways’.

Molly attended Laurel Hill convent school in Limerick where she completed her second level education a year or so prior to the outbreak of the First World War. Subsequently, as noted, she was enrolled at finishing schools, firstly, in Namur, in French speaking Belgium, and, secondly, Paris France. It was while she was a student at the second academy, in Paris, that the 1914 to 1918 conflict erupted.

A year later, when she was only nineteen years old, prompted by a strong urge to contribute to the war-effort, and without graduating, Molly displayed the first evidence of what turned out to be her driving and life-long determination to take ‘the road less travelled’[[4]](#endnote-4), to eagerly engage with what could probably best be described as a ‘less ordinary’, less ‘prescribed’ existence.

Before completing her ‘grace and refinement’ studies, she left her Parisian finishing school in 1915 to join the Voluntary Aid Detachment.[[5]](#endnote-5)

All professional and volunteer nurses who offered their medical assistance to the Great War effort were invited, upon joining the various nursing fraternities, to indicate their preference for home-front or front- line service.[[6]](#endnote-6) In almost all cases, their wishes in this regard were granted.

Without hesitation, Molly volunteered, at the outset, to travel overseas to wherever she was most needed, to look after wounded, dying, and, far too frequently, fatally injured soldiers on or close by the battle-fields on which they fell.

Before that, however, like all newly enlisted VADs, she was initially required to complete a supervised First Aid and Nursing Certificate programme, all of which were delivered within the British Isles.[[7]](#endnote-7) The one to which she was assigned was provided by a professionally staffed and properly equipped hospital in Yorkshire. This safe, secure home-base was where she spent the first few months of her war-time nursing service learning the basic principles of her newly chosen war-prompted medicinal endeavour.

In keeping with the pioneering spirit she had, for the first time, so recently displayed, and to supplement her future front-line medical care duties, she further volunteered, upon completion of her basic first aid and nursing accreditation, to undertake training in elementary motor car maintenance. She was deemed to have successfully ‘graduated’ from the ‘accelerated’ mechanics course in 1916.[[8]](#endnote-8)

With rudimentary training in both vehicular repairs and nursing, and thereby essentially ‘overqualified’ for working with the Voluntary Aid Detachment, Molly immediately applied for, and was granted entry into, the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry.

The First Aid Nursing Yeomanry had been founded some years earlier, in 1907, ‘to provide first aid to the fallen heroes of the battlefield.’[[9]](#endnote-9) Undoubtedly because of the predominance of upper-class recruits in its ranks, the FANY, during its first year in existence, was referred to in one contemporary newspaper account as a ‘busy band of aristocratic amazons in arms’.[[10]](#endnote-10)

The overall aim of the FANY was to offer its services not only as a nursing organisation but also ‘as an independent paramilitary “yeomanry” group whose intention was to rescue the wounded where they fell as well as administer first aid. As such, they combined the functions of a volunteer cavalry force’ with their roles as unpaid, very basically trained nurses ‘into the job of ambulance transport’[[11]](#endnote-11) with as much of the entirety of its sundry associated medical assistances as could be provided in potentially perilous conditions on, or close to, the Western Front’s (in particular) various battle sites.

For the entirety of its war-time voluntary work involving, as noted, vehicular maintenance, transport of, and medical assistance to the wounded and dying between the years 1914 and 1919, the FANY continued to enlist the majority of its members from the upper levels of British, including Irish, society.

The very first member of the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry to arrive in France and Flanders was its future Commanding Officer, a Scottish woman, Grace Ashley Smith.[[12]](#endnote-12) Anxious to establish a FANY presence on the front lines of the conflict as soon as possible, to provide rescue and relief to wounded soldiers, she disembarked in Ostend, Belgium, in September 1914 and travelled seventy five miles to Antwerp where she had, prior to her own arrival there, and using all the influences of her upper class status with its associated personal, including military, connections, arranged to serve as a sole FANY at a field hospital in the town under the direction of a Doctor Beaver until she could make arrangements to bring her first FANY corps out to join her.[[13]](#endnote-13)

That initial unit of First Aid Nursing Yeomanry personnel arrived in Belgium within a month, in October 1914. It immediately took over the running of a hospital for wounded Belgian soldiers in Lamarck.

For the remainder of the First World War, indeed until 1919, the FANY variously and continuously took care of wounded Belgian, French, and British soldiers at both numerous hospitals and front line battle-fields and sites along the Western Front.

Less than three years after the women’s voluntary organisation first arrived in France and Flanders, in August 1917, when she was only twenty one years old, Molly was transported into the heart of the conflict when, together with the FANY contingent to which she had been assigned, she was sent on her first overseas posting, to Amiens in France.[[14]](#endnote-14)

The town of Amiens, it is worth noting, was the location for a strategic railway junction constantly frenetically busy throughout the Great War employed, as it was, with the vital task of co-ordinating and transporting supplies, munitions, soldiers moving to and from the trenches at the front-lines, the many battle-lines, and, of course, wounded and dying combatants right across the entire expanse of the Western Front.[[15]](#endnote-15)

The timing of her arrival at Amiens was going to impact on Molly’s, and indeed, the rest of the four hundred and fifty strong Western Front band of FANYS’ World War One nursing experiences in two important ways, both inter-related, that neither she nor they could have been properly aware of at that significant juncture in the war’s endlessly tragic execution.

The first of these substantially influencing factors arose as a result of a very recently adopted major change by the FANY in the way they operated when working on the front lines of the conflict.

Essentially, Molly and the party of female Yeomanry to which she had been assigned landed in Amiens at a time, late 1917, as noted, when the members of FANY, along with many other women serving in ‘sister’ voluntary outfits, were becoming officially ‘militarised’ in ways that had not existed previously for women attending the variously war wounded. This was literally practically borne out, as Molly and her unit were being introduced to their new roles as front line ambulance-drivers/mechanics/nurses, assuming responsibilities that were ground-breaking even for ‘seasoned’ FANYs, where they often worked in areas of heavy fighting, transporting the wounded and dying, under enemy fire, in difficult and dangerous conditions.[[16]](#endnote-16)

Such a volatile and potentially hazardous working environment would have been totally ‘off limits’ to all women serving in the Great War a short six months earlier. At the end of the third full year of brutal combat however, the alteration to FANY operational procedures, facilitated by the Allied Armies’ recognition of the need for increased and ongoing medical assistance on the battle-lines, meant that there was no longer any place for those gender based restrictions amid the harsh realities of that particular time and place.

The second (which, interestingly and undoubtedly, brought about the first) was a direct consequence of the conduct and progress of the war along the Western Front throughout all of the skirmishes that hellishly characterised 1917.

While Molly and her unit of FANYs newly arrived in Amiens, like the rest of the soldiers entrenched throughout the regions of France and Flanders that constituted that particular theatre of war, couldn’t have had a comprehensive or informed[[17]](#endnote-17) understanding of the nature and extent of the Allies’ formidable challenges there, the fact remained that, in 1917, the Western Front was at least as frantic, militarily, as it had been the previous year during all those appalling months of battles as were, for example, fought along the Somme. It was, perhaps, even more frenzied and precarious than it had been in 1916, given that the central powers, no longer trying to simultaneously maintain and co-ordinate their fighting units in the East, were free to re-focus their energies and military-might within the West of Europe.

The confluence of these two almost inevitably connected elements meant that, simply stated, enormous tracts of France and Flanders, including the busy railway hub of Amiens, were extremely unsafe places to be in 1917, for civilians, and even more so for front line participants, including Molly and her cohort of FANYs.

Despite the treacherous conditions in the region, Molly, according to the available evidence,[[18]](#endnote-18) rose magnificently to the challenges and risks that confronted her during that perilous first year of her posting along the battle-lines in and around Amiens. Her conduct and demeanour throughout her time there earned her a reputation, amongst colleagues and seniors, for commitment, dedication, industry, aptitude, tenacity, and valour.

Soon after the start of the Kaiserschlacht in March 1918, Molly was re-assigned to FANY Unit 8. Under the direction of Commanding Officer Muriel Thompson, the section was at that time stationed at St. Omer in France, almost a hundred miles from Amiens, providing medical transport and assistance during the Allied retreat to injured and dying soldiers.

Conditions at the camp on the outskirts of the city where FANY Unit 8 was positioned, including Molly, newly arrived at St. Omer, were, apparently, dreadful. Her commandant, Muriel Thompson, for example, had noted in her diary just before Molly joined the contingent that St. Omer was ‘a cold and dirty camp “pleasantly situated on a mud swamp.”’[[19]](#endnote-19)

All of that notwithstanding, and impressive and all as her war-time nursing contribution had been to date, it was in St. Omer that Molly really distinguished herself, and was later officially militarily recognised, as a heroic Great War volunteer nurse.

As has been well documented in the almost hundred years that has since passed, in the first weeks of the Spring Offensive, with the sequence of military successes for the Germans and consequent defeats for the Allies, all of the indications were that the Central Powers were going to win the First World War that was, by then, almost four years old.[[20]](#endnote-20)

Within this localised, ominous, hazardous environment, Molly and her colleagues, undaunted and undefeated, set to work rescuing, retrieving, and recovering variously injured military personnel with enthusiasm, determination, and fortitude.

Perhaps the biggest display of the resilience and endurance of Molly and her FANY unit during the carnage and chaos that abounded as the Allies attempted to flee the (briefly) rampaging Germans and their Allies was in evidence on one fearsome night in early April 1918 when they took part in several search and salvage missions during a hostile air raid.

Seven of them, including Molly and Muriel Thompson, were, in fact, subsequently awarded Military Medals, together with citations for bravery, for their gallant conduct throughout the long night of apparently savage aerial bombardment by the Germans. These were later presented to the FANYs by General Plummer during an award ceremony in July 1918.

The citation read as follows:

‘Miss Muriel Thompson, FANY.

Miss Winifred Millicent Elwes, FANY.

Miss Elsie Agnes Curtis, FANY.

Miss Mary Richardson, FANY.

Miss Molly O’Connell Bianconi, FANY.

Miss Hilda May Dickinson, FANY.

Miss Elizabeth Beveridge Callander, FANY.

For conspicuous devotion to duty during an air raid. All these lady drivers were out with their cars during the raid, picking up and in every way assisting the wounded and injured. They showed great bravery and coolness, and were an example to all ranks.’[[21]](#endnote-21)

Considered of equal prestige, Molly was also specifically named and honoured in General Plummer’s *Dispatches for Bravery in the Field.* She was one of the first of less than thirty women to be doubly cited for bravery during the First World War.

At the end of war, Molly returned home to Longfield House close to Cashel in County Tipperary. Having already spent two years of her young life as a ‘class and gender ground-breaker’, having first framed and then gone on to experience an unrestricted, unconventional lifestyle, she spent the remainder of her life living ‘a life less ordinary’, working, an option simply and comprehensively unavailable to women of her social status prior to the Great War, in chronological order, as a model, hotelier, Junior Commander in the ATS (Auxiliary Territorial Force, women’s branch of the British Army during World War Two), writer, public speaker, conservationist, and restorer of her Georgian family home.

It was when she had just completed the latter, and before the house was opened to the public, that she died, aged seventy two, on 29 august 1968.

Her many obituaries, containing glowing tributes to her person and imposing accounts of the varied and various imaginative and daring career paths she had pursued, as had her great-grandfather with his coaching business, for over half a century, can, perhaps, be summarised with the following poignant observation:

‘(She was)…a woman of splendid physical appearance, despite advancing years…a warm, friendly, jovial character, well-liked by all who knew her’.[[22]](#endnote-22)

In conclusion, what was the legacy of Molly O’Connell Bianconi? For what, exactly, do we remember her?

There are, perhaps, two reasons, why Molly’s existence, and, in particular, her continuing residue, her remnant, should be documented and honoured. The first concerns her status as a ‘trail-blazer’, a role-model, throughout her relatively long life, for women, for adventurers, for risk-takers, for entrepreneurs. The second relates to her Great War voluntary nursing career. Because it was here, surely, that she contributed enormously to the easing of suffering and dying amongst many of the fallen Allied soldiers who lay helpless and lost as she and her colleagues, like the ‘lady with the lamp’ in whose footsteps they so faithfully followed, attempted to carry a small beacon of compassion, hope, and deliverance throughout the wastelands of the Western Front during the godforsaken years 1914-1918.

1. From the Music Hall song of the same name which was adopted as a popular marching song by many British Army units during the First World War. For more information, see Wikipedia.Org/ It’s a Long Way to Tipperary. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. For further details, see Wikipedia.Org/ Finishing Schools. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. For further bibliographic details, see Alice Mc Dermott, ‘ “In Florence Nightingale’s Footsteps”: A Biography of Mary O’Connell Bianconi’, *Tipperary Historical Journal* (2009). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. From Robert Frost, *The Road Not Taken.* [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. For a detailed account of the Voluntary Aid Detachment, see Lyn MacDonald (Penguin Books, 1983), *The Roses of No Man’s Land.* [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. See Neil R. Storey& Molly Housego, (Shire Publications, 2011), *Women in the First World War*, pp. 17-20*.* [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., pp.16-17. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. See Alice Mc Dermott, ‘ “In Florence Nightingale’s Footsteps” ’, Op. Cit., pp. 131-132. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. From Janet Lee, *War Girls: The First Aid Nursing Yeomanry in the First World War* (Manchester University Press, 2012), p. 23. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. The *Daily Graphic,* 25 February. 1908. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. From Janet Lee, Op. Cit., p.14. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. For more, see Ibid., p. 30. See, also, Grace Ashley Smith, *Five Years with the Allies: 1914-1919,* Imperial War Museum. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Janet Lee, Op. Cit., p. 71. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. See Alice Mc Dermott, ‘ “In Florence Nightingale’s Footsteps” ’, Op. Cit., p.132-133. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. For a detailed account of the geographic, military, and political importance of Amiens, see Hew Strachan, *The First World War* (Pocket Books, 2006), pp. 289, 301, 310-311. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. For a more detailed account of their new ‘militarised’ role, see Janet Lee, Op. Cit., pp. 160-208. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Largely because of widespread restrictions imposed by official censorship. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Sources consulted include General Plummer’s Dispatches for Bravery in the Field and oral testimony from various Boherlahan residents whose relatives worked for Molly O’Connell Bianconi in the later years of her life. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Janet Lee, Op. Cit., p. 197. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. For a detailed account of same, see Max Arthur, *Forgotten Voices of the Great War,* p.18. See also, Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War: 1914-1918,* (Penguin Books, 1999), p.285. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. From the *Fifth Supplement* to *The London Gazette,* 26 July 1918. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. *The Irish Times,* 2 September, 1968. See also *The Nationalist,* 14 September, 1968

The author would like to acknowledge the tremendous assistance of Lynette Beardwood from the FANY archives in providing information for the article, supplying photographs of Molly from the FANY collection housed therein, and granting permission to reproduce. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)