

Edith Cavell

December 4, 1865
Swardeston, Norfolk, England
October 12, 1915
Brussels, Belgium

Nurse, humanitarian, martyr



Accused of helping Allied prisoners escape their German captors during World War I, British-born nurse Edith Cavell was executed by a German firing squad in Brussels in 1915. Cavell had helped Belgian hospitals establish a modernized system of nursing education and patient care and had sheltered Allied soldiers in the clinic she supervised. Her death caught the notice of British propagandists (people who spread information to further or damage a cause), who portrayed this execution of a humanitarian as yet another example of German brutality. Cavell's death caused such a storm of protest that Kaiser Wilhelm (1859–1941) decreed that any future execution of a woman would require his personal approval. When Cavell's body was brought back to England after the war, bells rang and thousands of people gathered by the train tracks to honor her funeral procession as it made its way from Dover to London. Her funeral took place in Westminster Abbey on May 15, 1919, and she was buried in Norfolk, near where she had been born more than fifty years earlier.

A Bright Beginning

Edith Cavell was born in the village of Swardeston in Norfolk, England, on December 4, 1865, the eldest child of Fred-

“Edith, like Joan [of Arc], was an arch heretic: In the middle of the war she declared before the world that ‘Patriotism is not enough.’ She nursed enemies back to health, and assisted their prisoners to escape. . . .”

—From George Bernard Shaw's introduction to his play *Saint Joan* (Constable, 1923), quoted in Rowland Ryder, *Edith Cavell*, p. 237.

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erick Cavell, an Anglican priest, and his wife, Louisa Sophia Warming. Edith, whose name means “happy in war,” had two sisters and a brother. The Cavells lived in a comfortable house and employed several servants. Edith, an energetic and high-spirited child, had a carefree childhood, enjoying lawn tennis, croquet, skating, swimming, and other pastimes. She also had a keen sense of observation and enjoyed studying and sketching the wildflowers that grew in abundance around Swardeston.

Edith received her early education at home, with her father as tutor, and then briefly attended a high school in Norwich. She was an exceptionally good student, and her father sent her to several boarding schools for young women, including Laurel Court in Peterborough, where she learned French and piano. After graduating, she returned home to Swardeston and taught at the Sunday school in her father’s church, selling Christmas cards and her own watercolors to help raise money for the school. In 1886, Edith became a governess (nanny) for a vicar’s family in Essex. Two years later, she traveled to the European continent, visiting Austria, France, and Germany.

During her European trip, Edith Cavell’s humanitarian instincts first surfaced. She donated money to a hospital in Bavaria (a region in Germany) for the purchase of medical equipment and became known as the “English Angel” for her generosity. Around this time she developed an interest in becoming a nurse, though for the next few years she continued to work for several different families as a governess. In 1890 she took a job in Brussels as a governess for a prosperous family, but she returned to Swardeston five years later to take care of her ailing father. Caring for her father convinced Cavell that she should become a nurse. She was accepted into the nurse’s training program at a hospital in the East End slums of London, where she remained for five years. She was devoted to her duties and helped comfort her patients with prayer and sympathetic words. During a typhoid epidemic in Maidstone in 1897, she was one of a group of nurses sent from London to take care of suffering children. Beginning in 1901, she served on the nursing staff of several hospitals that treated the poor of London. In 1907, thanks to connections she had with the family she had worked for in Brussels, Cavell received an invitation that would change her life. She was asked to become matron, or supervisor, of the Birkendael Medical Institute, Belgium’s first training school for nurses.



Cavell and one of her young patients standing for a photo outside of the Shoreditch Infirmary in 1903. *Reproduced by permission of Archive Photos, Inc.*

Dedication to Duty

Edith Cavell returned to Brussels in October 1907 to begin the job of transforming a small clinic into a modern teaching hospital. She worked tirelessly to set up an excellent healthcare network that vastly improved the level of health care in Belgium, especially by providing better medical training for nurses. She helped train many nurses who went on to staff other hospitals, nursing homes, and schools around the

country, including the clinic at St. Gilles Prison, where Cavell would be incarcerated after her trial in 1915. She was superintendent of the medical institute in Brussels when World War I broke out in the summer of 1914.

In the days just before World War I began, Edith Cavell was on summer vacation with her mother in England—her father had died in 1910. Hearing news of the impending war, she hurried back to Brussels, reportedly writing to one friend, “My duty is with my nurses,” according to biographer Rowland Ryder. The Germans invaded Belgium in August, just days after Cavell’s return to Brussels, but Cavell had been able to mobilize her staff in time to care for war casualties.

Never losing a sense of courage and cheerfulness in the face of adversity, Cavell described the horrors of the war in letters to family and friends and as a war correspondent for a British magazine read by nurses. Her commentaries evoked compassion and sympathy for the Belgian people and helped turn public opinion against the Germans even though Cavell wrote from a humanitarian and not a vengeful point of view. For example, in the magazine *Nursing Mirror*, Cavell expressed sympathy for both sides; biographer Ryder quotes her words regarding the German soldiers: “We were divided between pity for these poor fellows, far from their country and their people, suffering the weariness and fatigue of an arduous [difficult] campaign, and hate of a cruel and vindictive foe, bringing ruin and desolation on hundreds of happy homes and to a prosperous and peaceful land. . . .” About the Belgians Cavell wrote: “I can only feel the deep and tender pity of a friend within the gates, and observe with sympathy and admiration the high courage and self-control of a people enduring a long terrible agony.”

Joining the Resistance Movement

After the horrific battles of Mons and Charleroi—which with their thousands of killed and injured revealed for the first time the massive destruction of modern warfare—a resistance movement developed, and numerous Belgian civilians began to secretly feed and harbor Allied soldiers and help them escape from German-occupied Belgium. Cavell became acquainted with two members of an old aristocratic family, Prince Reginald de Croÿ (1878–1961) and his wife, Princess Marie (1889–1968).



Humanitarian Organizations Assist the War Effort

When the United States entered World War I in 1917, humanitarian organizations like the American Red Cross and the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) rallied to the cause by expanding their services to assist soldiers and civilians injured in combat. At the request of the U.S. government, the YMCA sent chaplains overseas to minister to military personnel and to work with neutral parties in caring for prisoners of war. In 1914, when the war first broke out in Europe, the American Red Cross had only 562 chapters and about 500,000 members. By the end of the war in 1918, more than 31 million Americans—one-third of the entire population—had become members, representing every state and totaling 3,724 chapters. Even before the United States entered the war, the American Red Cross sent a mercy ship across the Atlantic to assist the wounded on both sides of the conflict. Four weeks after the United States entered the war, President Woodrow Wilson created a War Council for the Red Cross, transforming the organization into an "arm of the government," and embarked on a \$100 million fundraising campaign.

During the war, the American Red Cross became known especially for setting up canteens for soldiers both at home and overseas, serving coffee and food (doughnuts were a popular item) and

providing cigarettes, magazines, and snacks. Red Cross workers also offered morale-boosting words of encouragement to wounded or homesick troops.

The Red Cross also recruited 18,000 nurses, half of whom served with the armed forces in Europe and half on the home front. Letters from one of them, Helen Fairchild of Allentown, Pennsylvania, were reprinted in the *Daughters of the American Revolution Magazine* in November 1997 (also available online at http://www.ukans.edu/~kansite/ww_one/medical/MaMh/MyAunt.htm). Fairchild served in France and Belgium during the Battle of Passchendaele during World War I. After seven months' service, she had to undergo surgery for a liver ailment, and she died of jaundice on January 18, 1918. Her letters reflect her cheerful devotion to the war effort and the importance of the contributions of humanitarian organizations. She wrote to her family that "our own U.S. boys . . . will be so far from home, and they will have no one but us American nurses to really take any genuine interest in them. . . . What the Red Cross and the YMCAs are doing for us here means so much to us. Really, it would be awful to get along without the things they send us."

For more details, see the American Red Cross Web site at www.redcross.org.

Cavell's funeral procession arriving at Victoria in London in May 1919 after her body was disinterred from its burial place in Germany. *Reproduced by permission of Archive Photos, Inc.*



The de Croÿs helped organize some of the underground resistance efforts; as a humanitarian gesture, they made sure that the Germans as well as the Allied soldiers received medical care. Cavell opened her clinic in Brussels to wounded soldiers from both sides of the conflict, but she also became part of the informal network, supported by the de Croÿs and others, that helped stranded British soldiers escape across the border to the Netherlands and eventually back to England. Cavell's clinic

became a safe house where many of these men stayed while trying to get out of Belgium. Ryder quotes one of the soldiers Cavell rescued, who wrote the following words to Cavell's mother after Cavell was executed: "You will be surprised to receive this letter from me, a stranger, but had it not been for your daughter, I should undoubtedly have suffered the same fate. . . . I can only say, she has done a great deal more for her country than most of the men who are in England at present, and although I feel the deepest sympathy for you I am sure you will be proud to have such an heroic daughter."

In the summer of 1915, the Germans began threatening some members of the resistance network, but Cavell refused to leave her post at the clinic. She was taken prisoner on August 5 and locked in a cell at St. Gilles Prison. During the next few days, she signed several statements written in German admitting that she had participated in resistance activities; it is believed that the statements were not accurately translated into French for her. While awaiting trial, she drew strength from reading the *Imitation of Christ*, Thomas á Kempis's fifteenth century devotional book, and continued to write encouraging letters to the nurses at her clinic. In October, Cavell and thirty-four other prisoners, including Princess Marie de Croÿ, were put on trial. The unfair proceedings—which were conducted in German by judges who were already biased against the defendants—sent Cavell and four others to their deaths, while the other prisoners were sentenced to terms of hard labor varying from two to fifteen years; Marie de Croÿ was sentenced to ten. After writing a last, loving letter to her staff, in which she urged them to maintain their devotion to their patients and asked their forgiveness for any wrongs, Cavell was executed by an eight-man firing squad early on the morning of October 12, 1915. It was not until 1919, however, that Edith Cavell's body was disinterred (dug up) and returned to England, amidst a huge outpouring of public grief.

Edith Cavell's execution helped fuel the wartime belief that the Germans were brutal. British propagandists portrayed Cavell as the epitome (personification) of innocence and humanitarianism. Playwright George Bernard Shaw referred to Cavell in the introduction to *Saint Joan*, his play about Joan of Arc, the brave young woman who led French troops to victory over the English in the fifteenth century. Several decades after

the strong feelings generated by World War I had faded, Rowland Ryder summarized the fact of Cavell's death, "It is generally assumed that Edith Cavell was sentenced to death for sheltering Allied soldiers. This is not the case. She was not sentenced to death for sheltering troops—which she had done—but for conducting soldiers [delivering injured Allied soldiers] to the enemy—which she had not done. The sentence, therefore, was not justifiable." To this day, Edith Cavell is revered, especially in Europe, as a humanitarian figure who inspired a later generation to selfless service in World War II (1939–45). In Trafalgar Square, London, a monument that honors her is inscribed with her own words: "Patriotism is not enough. I must have no hatred or bitterness for anyone."

For More Information

Books

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