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Edith Cavell
Diana Souhami, Quercus

Some biographies are mere hatchet jobs; others, so over-praise their subjects that all credibility is undermined. Fortunately, Diana Souhami's wonderful new book on the World War One nurse, Edith Cavell, does justice to her by sticking to the truth.

While many biographers might have tried to gussie up Cavell into someone more lively or attractive – Souhami shows her for what she was: a religious, self-effacing, duty-bound woman who had greatness thrust upon her by the fortunes of war. In an era of noisy self-promotion and fake sentimentality, Souhami's brave choice to focus on a middle-aged spinster whose entire life was dedicated to serving others, can only be applauded.

The daughter of a vicar, Cavell was born in 1865, six months after the conclusion of the American Civil War – a war whose terrific slaughter and suffering helped to convince the international community of the vital role performed by female nurses. Cavell was fortunate that by 1895, the year she decided to study nursing, many of the barriers which had stymied previous generations of women were going or already gone. This is not to say that the Establishment made it easy to become a nurse or that the life of a nurse was the pathway to high wages and little effort. Most women were crushed by the hard and lonely sacrifices demanded of them – but not Cavell whose life until then had been one long exercise in self-denial.

The Rev Cavell was a martinet who twisted his intelligent and sensitive son into a craven alcoholic. His three daughters also suffered under his rule. The only surviving letter from Edith's Cavell's adolescence talks of Sundays as "too dreadful: Sunday school, church services, family devotions morning and evening. And father's sermons are so dull." By the time Cavell was eighteen, her personality had retreated so completely behind a blank outer shell, that no one knew it existed until the last months of her life. She was, for example, an extremely talented draughtsman who, with training, could have forged a career as a commercial artist.

Yet revealing nothing of herself, allowing herself no desires or idiosyncrasies, was probably the very thing that enabled Cavell to survive

during her time as an English governess and then a trainee nurse. She was not particularly popular at the London Hospital, where she worked from 1896 – 1901. The famous matron there, Eve Luckes, had been a friend and disciple of Florence Nightingale. Luckes liked her nurses to have spirit and was suspicious of Cavell's quiet exterior. She wrote somewhat disparagingly "Edith Cavell had a self-sufficient manner, which was very apt to prejudice people against her." The statement was unfair: that Cavell did indeed have very deep feelings is proven by a poignant scrap of verse which was found among her papers. It is not known to whom the poem was addressed, but Cavell's words speak eloquently of unfulfilled love and longing: "The winter of age, O love , my love, for us no shade shall bring, but in thine eyes divine, my dear, my dear, for me, 'twill always be spring."

In 1907 Cavell was rescued from a lifetime of drudgery and short-term nursing jobs by an invitation from a Belgian doctor to set up a training school for nurses in Brussels. By the time the war broke out in 1914, her St Gilles hospital had become a thriving institution with more than two dozen fully-trained nurses. Cavell's hospital naturally treated the wounded from all sides. But very soon Cavell was not only caring for the wounded, but also helping the Allied patients to escape to safety. Despite the extreme danger of her work, two British soldiers carelessly sent her postcard after they reached England, thanking her for helping them get home. This and other leaks in the network led to Cavell's arrest on 5 August, 1915. By then, according to Souhami, she had helped to facilitate the escape of at least 1500 Allies soldiers.

The lack of details or private papers to flesh out Cavell's life means that almost half the book concentrates on her arrest, interrogation and execution. What emerges from Souhami's careful recounting is a picture of the kind of woman that once made Britain great but may, alas, no longer exist. At the military tribunal, Cavell deliberately wore civilian clothes rathe r than her nurse's uniform, for example, in order to protect the hospital and deflect attention away from the other members of staff.

Much more could and should have been done by the international community to win clemency for Cavell. But it appears that the Germans were determined to execute her come what may. Little did the military authorities realize that it would be – after the sinking of the Lusitania - the greatest propaganda mistake of the war. Almost immediately after her death, Edith Cavell was transformed into a saint and holy cause. The real Cavell became lost beneath with pages of hyperbole, even the meaning of her famous declaration:

“Patriotism is not enough. I must have no hatred or bitterness for anyone," has since been much fought over by pacifists and patriots.

Diana Souhami has done more to restore the elusive Cavell than any other biographer before her. This the closest we will ever get to a woman who kept the world at bay with one arm, while she embraced its neediest and most vulnerable with the other.