

Sisters by Birth and Sisters in Service: Winnifred and Claire MacLeod

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This is a story about some members of the family of my paternal grandmother and their involvement in The Great War. Since there are no longer any surviving members of the family to tell the stories or verify the facts, the story is fragmented at best. It's a grand mystery to accept the facts that are available, trace the evidence trail for additional information, and allow the imagination to fill in the gaps of the lives lived and loves lost.

My paternal grandmother was Jean Wallace MacLeod, born and raised in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island. Her father, John A. MacLeod was of the generation that transitioned from agriculture to city life. Leaving the farm-life behind, John resided in Charlottetown and was a merchant tailor. According to various records, including the death notices of John and his wife, Margaret, they had nine children (all of whom survived infancy and early childhood), seven of whom served in WWI, and six of whom served overseas.

The ones that served overseas, in birth order, were Winnifred, Claire, John, Arthur, Keith, and Kenneth. I am most intrigued by the stories of the women. They both left PEI to train as nurses, at a time when women were not eligible to vote in elections and often didn't work outside the home. It's unknown what motivated these two women to enlist for overseas service, whether it was patriotic duty, the sense of adventure, or running away from something. Both women enlisted with the Canadian Army Medical Corps as Nursing Sisters, during 1915. The stories of Claire and Winnifred are quite a contrast to one another and both illustrate the lasting social costs of the conflict.



Winnifred trained in British Columbia and enlisted in September 1915 with the No. 5 Canadian General Hospital. The story of the nursing sisters of this unit is well documented in the book *The Battlefront Nurses*. This unit served on the Balkan front in Salonika which Kaiser Wilhelm considered as an asset to the Triple Entente side because it was so tightly enclosed that it wasn't clear whether the camp was intended to keep the allied forces in or the aggressors out. The weather in Salonika was extreme and the nature of the conflict in this

area meant that most of the nursing was in relation to medical conditions rather than injuries. The needs were typically lice, malaria, and other illnesses. Over the course of 1916, Winnifred lost 30 lbs and by the end of the year was so sick that she was invalided back to England. After a period of convalescence, she returned to active duty and was assigned to the western front.

Winnifred's service on the western front included a time at the No. 1 Canadian General Hospital. Winnifred arrived in the spring of 1918, shortly before the hospital was deliberately targeted and bombed. The damage was so great that the hospital at its present location was closed in June 1918, and

was re-located and re-opened in October of the same year, just ahead of the armistice. Winnifred returned to the unit when it re-opened and served with this unit until demobilization.

Winnifred's war service wrapped up with distinction. She was recognized by being named in a despatch from Field Marshall Sir Douglas Haig and signed by Winston Churchill, stating "gallant and distinguished services in the field. I have it in command from the King to record His Majesty's high appreciation of the services rendered."

Despite Winnifred's accomplishments during the war, she didn't work much afterwards. It is understood that the strains of serving in Salonika – the heat, exhaustion, and disease – contributed to Winnifred's lasting and debilitating arthritis. After demobilization, Winnifred first returned to PEI but without relief from her arthritis, she sought out comfort in Arizona. She was planning to return to Canada to seek medical attention in Montreal but didn't make it home before dying. She died in 1936 at the age of 52. Her family made arrangements to have her body re-patriated and her funeral was recognized with full regimental honours.



Claire's story is quite different. Where Winnifred's story has several points of professional accomplishment and recognition, Claire's story is of a naïve young woman who sets off on adventure. Claire trained with the Royal Victoria Hospital in Montreal and graduated in 1913. She enlisted for service in April 1915 with the No. 3 Canadian General Hospital, which was a dedicated unit sponsored by McGill University. Claire was stationed on the western front.

Claire resigned her commission and was "struck off strength" in August 1916. Women were allowed to resign from active service for two reasons: because they were needed by the families at home, or because they were to be married. There is some evidence that Claire resigned to be married but it's not clear that she ever was married. There are some references to her married name but no marriage record. The possibility is that the man she thought she married was already married and she didn't learn the truth until after returning to Canada in 1919. The shame of the situation was enough to keep the truth hidden.

Claire returned to PEI for a time and then relocated to Montreal to work where she trained, at the Royal Victoria Hospital. In some ways, she became a statistic, part of the "surplus women". According to British 1921 census estimates, there were 2 million young adult women with no hope of marriage because of the "lost generation" of men who were killed in the war. While this situation contributed to significant and lasting change in options for women, for many women of the period, it was sad and lonely. Claire's death notice lists only her maiden name with no mention of her marriage.

Where John and Margaret had nine children, there were only six grandchildren. The grandchildren were spread across three provinces. The connections between cousins, uncles, and aunts were at best weak and even those have faded away. Despite the gaps in the stories, I am honoured by the bravery and service of both Claire and Winnifred.