

A Biography of Nurse Myra Bennett

Don't Have Your **Baby**
in the
Dory!
H. Gordon Green

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Myra Bennett's nursing practice spanned 200 miles (320 kilometres) of coastline on the western side of the Great Northern Peninsula.



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1

To the Man Who Never Complained

ONE OCTOBER MORNING LAST YEAR, a rugged old “liveyere”—as permanent inhabitants of Newfoundland are called—stood with me on the hill in northwestern Newfoundland looking down at the coastal village of Daniel’s Harbour. To me, it was a bleak, uncomfortable morning. The sun had no reach to it and the wind, which rode in on the ship-high waves from Labrador, tore at the shingles of the frame houses clinging to the rock ledges below us. Overhead the gulls screamed as they kept trying to climb above the wind, and a few yards away a sled dog pulled his tether to the choking point, to get into the lee of a fish shed.

And in the stony bit of field beyond the cemetery, some girls, wearing mitts, were skipping rope. Skeletons of stunted juniper caught at our feet, and the few half-green junipers which tried to

grow out of the bones of the dead ones, were already tortured by the storms into all the shapes of a sick dream.

To a shivering mainlander like myself, there were but three elements in this part of the world: wind, sea, and rock. And each of these seemed diabolically determined that man had no business here. But my friend evidently saw a different country than I did. "Beautiful morning, sir, don't you think?"

There is an inexplicable something about Newfoundland that makes one hesitate to be dishonest, even for the sake of being polite, so I parried the question. Was there anything at all in the scene that was gentle or fat? I wondered. And I recalled the supposedly funny story of how, according to the worldly wise on the mainland, the "Newfiejohn" plants potatoes. He puts the seed on a rock, lays a herring over it to keep it from blowing away, and then scrapes up a bucket of earth to throw over it.

It occurred to me now as I looked below me that the gardens were remarkably verdant, and I said as much. "Beats me how you can make a garden on this coast."

My friend laughed with the ease of a man to whom humour is as necessary to survival as potatoes and fish. "If a man has enough elbow grease he can grow just about anything here," he said. "A man doesn't need to be hungry very often around here if he's willing to work."

I picked up a stick of the dead juniper and ran my fingers over the gnarl and twist of it and wondered at the strange strength that kept the men of this rugged shore so straight and proud. And what kept them laughing so freely.

My friend seemed to read my mind. "Lived here all my life at

Daniel's Harbour, sir, and I couldn't of asked the Good Lord for anything better. Not that I deserved it or anything, but it's been a very, very full life and awful exciting, sir"

When I came away from Daniel's Harbour a short time later to begin the writing of this book, I was still thinking of that remark, for the man who had shown me the harbour that morning was Angus Bennett: seaman, fisherman, carpenter, storekeeper, guide, bakeapple dealer, and most important of all, the husband of Myra Bennett, the amazing woman who for fifty years has been nurse to some 200 miles of this coast. During that half-century, Angus has had to interrupt his work time and time again to rush his wife by boat or horse or dog team to some nearly inaccessible cove, where Death tapped impatiently on someone's door. Or if there were others to take his wife where she alone could help, he has had to resign himself to being alone for weeks at a time, or keeping house for their three children and whatever convalescing patients Myra might have left behind in their parlour.

He has given his own bed to more emergency cases than he can easily recall. He has seen dozens of babies born on his own kitchen table. He has held many a shrieking child between his solid knees while his wife opened a boil or rooted out a throbbing tooth. And he has cleaned more messes from his kitchen floor than you can ever get him to talk about.

For nearly half a century, Angus Bennett has been privy to nearly every pain, every tragedy on this coast, but he still insists that it has been a marvellous life. "I have been wonderful lucky that I could help a woman like that," he says.

Myra Bennett's lonely battle with death and disease has

not gone unnoticed. Premiers and prime ministers, bishops and archbishops, doctors, social workers and journalists have all tried to give her the honour they know she deserves. Most cherished of all these honours is her Medal of the British Empire given her by George VI.

But to me at least, that brief statement by the one person who has known her best and longest is surely the finest tribute of all. It is indeed something more than the tribute of a great husband to a great woman. It is proof, as simple as it is sure, that when one finds happiness in helping, such things as money and comfort and geography are very trifling matters.

Knowing Angus as I do now, I am certain that he will be more than happy for this book to leave him in the background and centre its attention on the life story of his incredible wife. But this biography could be neither fair nor complete, I think, without some special acknowledgement of the man whose love and patience and quiet strength have supported her through all her magnificent years of struggle.

Allow me then to dedicate this book to him. I do not have to ask Myra to know that she will approve.

2

Of Zeppelins and War Babies

TO A FUTURE GENERATION, THERE will be few aspects of our present way of life quite so mystifying as our reasons for heaping fame on a woman. And surely, if our grandchildren have the intelligence to survive the chaos we will have left them, they will be particularly caustic of our custom of lavishing wealth and worship on one of the opposite sex because of a pretty face or a super bosom or a voice with some kind of squeak or quiver in it. Nor will they be able to understand why we have given so little recognition to many of our truly magnificent women—to those whose courage and sacrifice and inspiration have made this world, or some part of it, a better place to live in.

And in that more sensible day, it is entirely possible that Newfoundland's Nurse Bennett will have become the kind of heroine that the school books love to make into legend.

Those who think that prophecy somewhat unlikely might consider that most of the heroines who are already established in the readers and history texts are there because of the way they met a single emergency. But Myra Bennett, in her fifty years on the northwest coast of Newfoundland, has faced so many emergencies that she hasn't had the time to record them all. It should also be remembered that few of the duly acknowledged heroines were without some human help or advice in their hour of trial. But in most emergencies that confronted Myra Bennett, she was desperately alone. And Death himself was often the challenger.

AT THE AGE OF FOURTEEN, Myra Grimsley was an attractive, bustling tailor in a London shop, and something of her ability to adapt herself may be indicated by the fact that by the time she left the job to train as a nurse, she had learned to speak her employer's Yiddish. Shop hours were long in those pre-union days, the work exacting, and the pay was pitifully meagre. Nevertheless, the energetic young miss was somehow able to save enough to complete the course for a diploma in nursing. Myra can never remember a time when she aspired to be anything but a nurse.

Her first nursing job of any importance was in 1911, in the Surrey town of Woking, then a railway junction between Portsmouth and London. Apart from the activity in the railway yards, Woking was a rather quiet, peaceful place with no more hurry in it than there was in the lush surrounding countryside. And it was here that Myra became District Nurse, a post that required her to carry her skill into the homes much as a nurse

of the Royal Victorian Order might still do today. She travelled on foot or by bicycle, a quietly ambitious young woman whose bustling impatience must have seemed rather out of place in surroundings that were so unhurried and haphazard.

Then in August of 1914, Britain found herself in the throes of a terrible war, and Myra Grimsley found that her chosen profession was one of the most desperately needed skills in the whole Empire. As for the town of Woking, its idyllic country existence ended almost overnight. An ammunition works was hastily established there, along with other factories that were needed now to appease the dreadful appetites of war. The railway junction itself now became one of the most important ones in the nation and, through its yards, men passed by the thousands on their way to France, many of them never to return. A little later, when the war began to take to the air for the first time in history, an airplane factory was established here, and along with it a testing area, and the none-too-steady roar of the very first war birds now became a familiar sound in the Surrey skies.

To the sensitive young nurse, the most immediate concerns were the tremendous number of refugees who soon began to flood in from London, and the terribly few doctors who came with them. Doctors were of even more importance to the realm now than nurses were, since the war across the Channel was swallowing far more of them than could be spared. There was another aspect of the war with Germany's Kaiser which was threatening the health of the nation, and that was the severe shortage of food. Britain, always dependent upon its colonies for its bread and meat, was now surrounded by another insidious

danger, the submarine pack. The insularity that had so often been its salvation in the past had now become an enemy that might starve it to death.

But for the young nurse on her bicycle, there was still another new horror to contend with. January of 1915 saw the first Zeppelin raids on the coast of England, and within a matter of weeks the giant, silvery, gas-filled bags from Germany began to drop their deadly cargo inland. And Myra had to risk the treachery of England's first blackouts to carry on her mission of mercy. Woking, with its strategic railway junction, was a prime target for enemy bombs. She recalls with a chuckle now, that on one blacked-out night when she was on her way to attend a maternity case, her effort to comply with the new regulations was to paste tissue paper over her bicycle headlight and focus the beam downward. But she got only as far as the railway overpass in Woking when an authoritative voice came out of the dark ahead, commanding her to stop.

"Stop" is a word that has never frightened Myra very easily.

"I wondered what silly fool should be trying to interfere with my going to some poor woman in labour," she says now. The thought also crossed her mind that perhaps here was a soldier who wanted to use the dark for a bit of clandestine romance.

In any case, Myra's bicycle kept pointing its way toward the house up the hill, where a baby was in need of a little help to get through to this crazy world.

"Stop!" came the command again. Myra, who even then had a healthy contempt for officious authority, replied by pedalling faster.

The third time the order sailed out of the black at her, Myra got off her bicycle. "I was thoroughly angry," she explains. "I was all set to give some smart young fellow a real dressing down for trying to play games with me, when I was in such a terrible hurry."

But to her utter astonishment, a shiny bayonet suddenly cut through the feeble beam of her bicycle light and pointed straight at her breast. And when she came to her senses, Myra could see that a roadblock had been thrown up directly ahead of her.

"Sorry miss," the soldier said, "but we've got our reasons for thinkin' there might be some saboteurs around tonight. Pretty important place, that railway bridge, you know And what identification might you be carrying?"

Nurse Grimsley didn't have to produce much in the way of credentials, however, as a couple of other guards quickly came up to vouch for her reliability. "She's our nurse hereabouts," they told the officer, "and she's all right."

It must have been comforting for the young nurse to realize that even in the hollow dark of night like this, she had been able to find friends.

The Zeppelin raids reached their peak of terror the following autumn, when they became brave enough to go farther and farther inland, even dropping their cargo of death on London. Myra left Woking that next year, and went to a maternity hospital in Woolwich, but the Zeppelins found her there too. Woolwich happened to be the site of an arsenal and the Germans knew it.

"Strangely enough, we didn't depend too much on the sirens to warn us of a coming raid," Myra remembers now. "The dogs

seemed to be much more reliable. Whether their ears could detect the sound of those airship motors so far away, or whether it was some other sense man doesn't understand, we all knew that the dogs would often set up their howling quite some time before the sirens would go off. And that extra time was very handy for those of us who had to evacuate a hospital!"

Some of the preparations for those early air raids seem rather peculiar now. First of all, large bowls of chemical solution were placed at convenient spots in the corridors, and beside each of these was a large pile of cotton pads. One of the great fears of those months was that Zeppelins would drop gas bombs as well as the explosives, and one of these pads, soaked first in the solution, could be tied over the nose to make a fairly effective mask.

Having prepared as best they could for a cloud of the fearful chlorine, the nurses and their aides would take their patients down into the cellar, placing them on mattresses along with their babies. The nurses themselves, however, were not allowed to stay below where there was comparative safety. Always there would be patients on the floors above who were too sick to be moved, and it was the duty of the nurses to return to these unfortunates and stay beside them during the bombing.

"Yes," Myra admits, "there was some hysteria at times. It wasn't very pleasant for those mothers to be locked up in that basement while their other children were miles away perhaps, and maybe having to shift for themselves."

Myra recalls ruefully that their iron-nerved matron had a very effective way of forestalling any outbreak of emotion on the part of either patient or staff. "She promised faithfully that if any one

of us lost our head or fainted during a raid, she would pour a bowlful of that horrid anti-gas solution over her head afterwards!"

The threat was generally sufficient.

Myra also recalls that a sort of tradition grew up around those Zeppelin raids. Always there would be a sort of picnic lunch afterward in the basement. If no bombs had fallen near them, bread and butter sandwiches and tea were deemed sufficient. If a bomb or two had shaken them up, however, ham sandwiches were the order of the day.

"It got so that we almost wanted the bombs to come," Myra remembers, "because ham sandwiches got to be a wonderful treat in those days."

It was during the early months of the war that Myra decided that she would like to be something more than an overworked nurse with no particular specialty. "The conviction began to grow on me," she says, "that I would make a good midwife. I was strong, I didn't fluster easily, and there was something about the task of alleviating the pain of labour that attracted me. There are people, you know, who are rather happier when they can move into the eye of the hurricane. I suppose I was always one of them."

As a nurse doing general work, Myra had been given considerable experience in maternity work right from the start of her career. Midwives were quite common in England then, and in those days when a few women went to a hospital to be delivered, it was often the rule rather than the exception for the midwife to be the stork's only attendant. The English midwife was well qualified and governed by strict regulations.

In Myra's early nursing days there was a law that required

a nurse or midwife to summon a doctor immediately if a birth presented any deviation from the norm, and ordinarily this law would have been strictly observed. But in 1914, when the doctors were needed behind the trenches and in the military hospitals, it became increasingly hard to find a doctor when one was needed. And generally, when one could be found, he was old and overworked and so nearly exhausted that the nurse could get very little help from him.

“Many and many a time,” Myra remembers, “I would deliver the child while the doctor stole a wink of sleep stretched out in the corner chair. And as time and the war went on and doctors became harder to get, I found myself forced to cope with all sorts of malpresentations and abnormalities without any real professional help.”

So out of the exigencies of war, a marvellously skilful midwife was born.

Myra insists, however, that for all her experience, she still had much more to learn about maternity work, and the idea grew in her, until in June of 1915, she began a special course in maternity work in Woolwich. It was a course that lasted six months in the hospital itself, and Myra followed this with three months of actual casework in the slums of North London. That three months among the poor and forgotten of a war-torn city was not an easy one. Indeed, from the very start, it looked as though the Fates were contriving against her.

“The very first baby I delivered after completing my course died ten minutes after it was born,” she recalls. “It was an awful ordeal for me, really. Not that it was in any way my fault. I’m

sure that it wasn't. The mother had lost two babies before. But as long as I live, I shall never forget how painful it was to have to go back to the matron, and report that the first case she assigned me had ended in tragedy."

Perhaps tragedy is hardly the word for the loss of a child newborn to the conditions in which Myra worked those days, for the North London slums of the war years were like something out of a Dickens novel. Here the demoralization of war was at its worst. Prostitution, illegitimacy, and drunkenness were common everywhere. Myra remembers that on more than one occasion when she prepared some humble tenement room for a delivery, she would first hang an apron over the window to keep the curious street urchins from watching the proceedings. She remembers too, that sometimes the patient who was in labour would have so much gin in her system that the baby would also be under the influence of alcohol when it finally came into the world.

"It made you wonder, when you had a bit of quiet afterwards" Myra says, "made you wonder how we can really believe that all men are born equal."

For nearly three years Myra worked tirelessly in North London. It would be a mistake to say that she was entirely happy with her mission, however, because she could never feel that what she was doing could really change the appalling conditions she saw on all sides of her. Could there be any depth of satisfaction in ushering a babe into a world where the cards were stacked against him from the very first cry? For Myra Bennett (as she was later to be known) has never been the kind of person to hold her peace when she sees something that is in dire need of change.

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