

BRIAN BEST & KATIE STOSSEL



SISTER JANET

NURSE & HEROINE OF THE
ANGLO-ZULU WAR 1879

Edited by ADRIAN GREAVES

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*Nurse and Heroine of the
Anglo-Zulu War*

by

**Brian Best
&
Katie Stossel**



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MILITARY

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Acknowledgements

The publication of this book was first considered in 1880 by a young English nurse, Sister Janet Wells, on her arrival home from two major wars, the Russo-Turkish Balkan War of 1877–8 and the South African Anglo Zulu War of 1879. She was just twenty years old. Her remarkable deeds and bravery were duly acknowledged by Queen Victoria with the award of the Royal Red Cross decoration and by the Russian government with the Imperial Red Cross of Russia. Due to the exigencies of the time and her ongoing nursing duties, followed by her marriage to a successful newspaper editor, her remarkable story remained unpublished and largely unknown outside her family.

Then, in 2003, her direct great-granddaughter, Mrs Susie Cooper, re-discovered Sister Janet's scrapbooks and her personal effects relating to the Anglo Zulu War. The role of Susie Cooper in bringing this remarkable story to the attention of *The Anglo Zulu War Historical Society* is acknowledged with sincere thanks. Without Susie's generosity and willing assistance to make this material available, Sister Janet's story could not be told.

As editor, I also acknowledge the two years of detailed research and work to assemble the story by the book's two enthusiastic authors. Both visited relevant locations in the UK and Zululand. Brian Best, chairman of the Victoria Cross Society, researched the background to events that brought Sister Janet to nursing and her subsequent career. Katie Stossel SRN, a former operating theatre sister, prepared the nursing and personal side of Janet's life, ably

assisted by her Consultant Surgeon husband Clifford who helped with the research of the medical records, the preparation and photography of the South Africa field medical kit and the restoration of the 1870s photographs of Tottenham Hospital. My task as editor, was made easy by their diligent research. I also thank Geoff Fawcett and Jenny Martin for their advice in compiling the book and Anna Maplesden and her husband, Mark, for enthusiastically searching out and accompanying me to relevant locations in Zululand.

Other thanks go to David and Nicky Rattray for the use of the Mangeni photograph and wonderful hospitality at their Fugitives' Drift Lodge during our lengthy research, and especially to Robert Waite, assistant curator of Haringey Libraries, Archives and Museums, for his kind permission to use their excellent Victorian hospital photographs.

Dr Adrian Greaves, Editor

Foreword

The Anglo Zulu War of 1879 caused many British soldiers and Zulu warriors terrible wounds, and disease was rife. Hospital care was in its infancy, especially in the British Army, and so it is remarkable that in the midst of this terrible war a nineteen year-old English nurse, Sister Janet Wells, was sent from London to take charge of the isolated and overcrowded British Army hospital at Utrecht in South Africa. Already a decorated veteran of the 1878 Balkan War, she was highly experienced in treating war wounds. In her first two months at Utrecht she treated over 3,200 patients, both British soldiers and Zulus, many from the battles of Hlobane, Khambula and Ulundi.

She performed numerous operations, tended the sick and wounded, and brought an air of discipline, tempered by her charm and femininity, into a chaotic and desperate situation. Towards the end of the war she was sent to Rorke's Drift where she administered to the remaining garrison. She walked the battlefields of Rorke's Drift and Isandlwana where she collected flowers for her scrapbooks – already containing many sketches and photographs, which survive to this day.

After the war she returned to her home and family in London, just in time for her twentieth birthday. Recognition by Queen Victoria followed, who decorated her with the Royal Red Cross, which was then the nursing equivalent of the Victoria Cross. The previous recipient was Florence Nightingale.

Hers is an astonishing story, of bravery and determination,

which I commend to everyone who loves an adventure; it will especially fascinate students of the Anglo Zulu War – to whom this factual account will come, I am sure, as something of a surprise.

David Rattray
Fugitives' Drift Lodge
Zululand
South Africa

January 2006

INTRODUCTION

By Queen Victoria's command

The profession of nursing, as we know it today, is relatively new. During the early 1870s the concept of young women of good background becoming nurses became more socially acceptable and so training hospitals and the Red Cross began to attract a growing number of dedicated single women to nursing. For the first time, women felt they could gain fulfilment by doing something that was both feminine and worthwhile. However, the strict training, based on Florence Nightingale's system of cleanliness and scrupulous attention to hygiene, discouraged those who had a woolly or sentimental concept of what nursing was about. Nurses' conditions were austere, working long hours and their training was rigorous and impartial.

After only a short period of training, one of these pioneering nurses, Janet Wells, aged only eighteen, was to undergo a remarkably tough baptism of fire from which she would emerge as one of the nursing heroines of the late Victorian era. Like other girls of her class, Janet Wells kept a scrapbook of newspaper clippings, photographs, sketches and pressed flowers, which chronicled her life on the battlefields like an illustrated diary. What emerges from the pages of her records and other contemporary material is the life of a young woman whose bravery, stamina and dedication to nursing were readily recognized by her peers and who, at the end of her all-too-short life, was hailed as an early nursing heroine alongside Florence Nightingale.

During her nursing career, in which she saw action in two major wars while still a teenager, she would undertake major surgery, care for thousands of wounded, fall in love, and yet retain her gaiety, charm and her high personal level of professionalism. She would mix with soldiers, generals and royalty with equal ease. She became known as an 'angel of mercy' by many whose lives she saved. Hers is a story as unusual as it is dramatic.

Janet Wells was born in 1859 at Shepherd's Bush, London, to Benjamin Wells, a noted musician of his time, and his wife Elizabeth. She was the second child of five daughters and three sons. During her childhood the family moved to Islington. In November 1876, aged seventeen years, she entered the emerging profession of nursing by joining the Evangelical Protestant Deaconesses' Institution and Training Hospital as a trainee nurse. On qualifying, she was immediately sent to the Balkans to assist the Russian army medical teams in the 1877-8 Russo-Turkish War. In the depths of a bitterly cold Russian winter she was thrust into an appallingly cruel war and required to treat many thousands of seriously wounded soldiers – frequently on her own and with scant medical backup or resources.

In early 1879 she returned to England but was immediately requested to go to South Africa. Alone, she was sent more than 200 miles across wild and unpopulated bush to take control of the most distant British Army medical post at Utrecht in Zululand, where she cared for sick and injured soldiers after the savage Anglo Zulu War. Following the peace declaration, she visited many of the famous battlefields, including Rorke's Drift and Isandlwana, where she administered medical care to the remaining British garrison. She also met and treated King Cetshwayo, then a prisoner of the British at Cape Town. On 28 October 1879 she departed from Cape Town for the return journey to England; her intention was to resume her nursing career. She was not yet twenty years old.

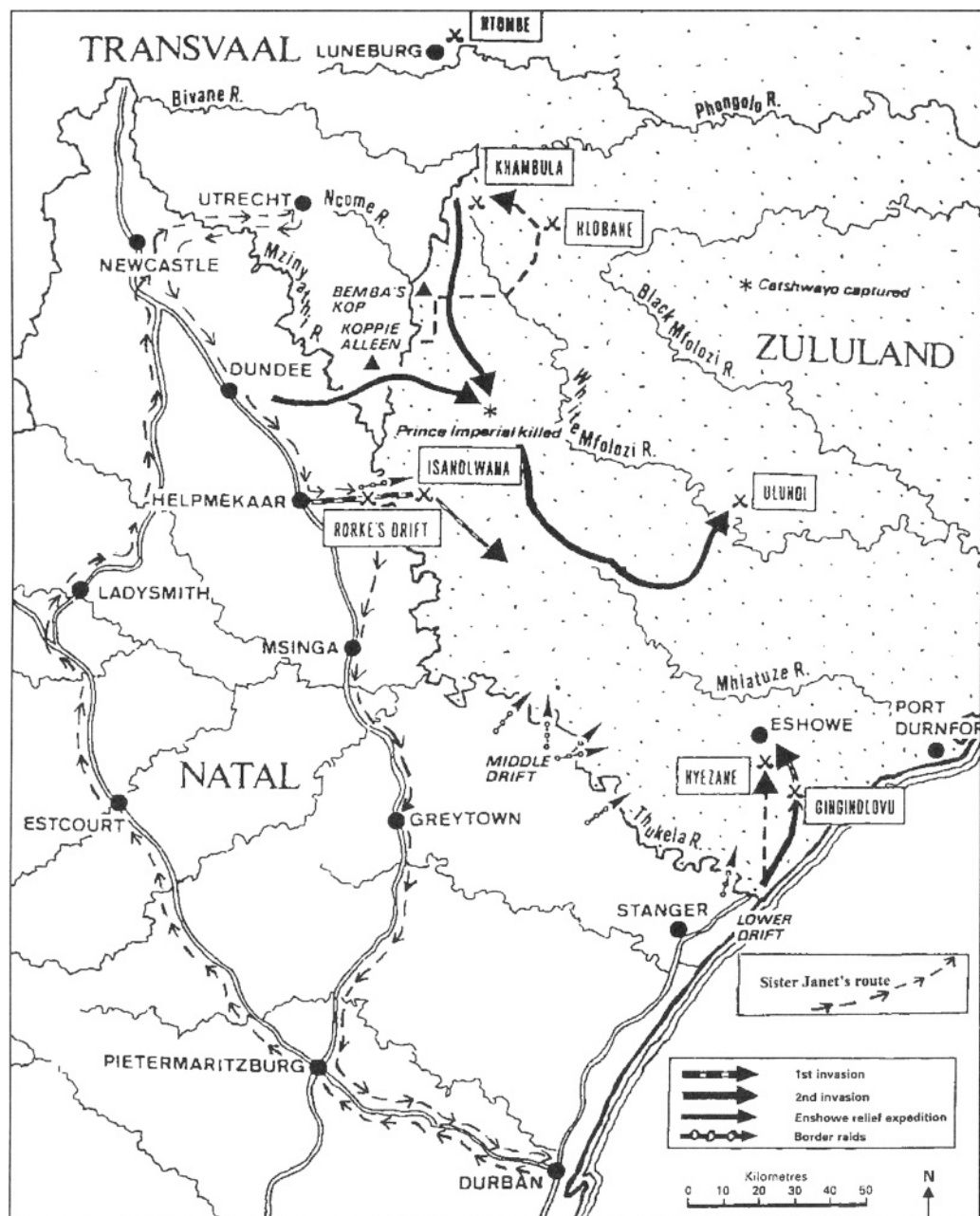
In 1880 she met Mr George King, an up and coming young London journalist who was soon to become the distinguished editor of the *Globe* magazine and founder of *Tatler*. They married in May 1882 and subsequently had two daughters, Elsie and Daisy.

Janet was widely recognized for her dedication to nursing; she received the Russian Imperial Order of the Red Cross for assisting the Russian army in the Balkans, the South Africa Campaign medal for her participation in the Anglo Zulu War and, in 1883, by Queen Victoria's command, she and Florence Nightingale were the very first recipients awarded the Royal Red Cross decoration for 'the special devotion and competency which you have displayed in your nursing duties with Her Majesty's Troops'. At the time, the Royal Red Cross was regarded as the nursing equivalent of the military and naval Victoria Cross. (see Appendix A)

In 1901, Queen Victoria died and Janet King RRC was invited to the state funeral. Janet died of cancer on 6 June 1911 at the age of fifty-three. Hers is an astonishing story, of bravery and determination, which I commend to everyone who loves an adventure; it will especially fascinate students of the Anglo Zulu War – to whom this factual account will come, I am sure, as something of a surprise.

The early life of this brave young nurse is inextricably bound up with a number of vicious wars that raged across Europe as well as with the protracted development and establishment of the Red Cross.

For those readers keen to gain a comprehensive overview of the situation, then Part I leads the way. Those more interested in the life and experiences of Janet Wells can turn to Part II to assuage their interest – before, no doubt, returning to Part I.



The route taken by Sister Janet from Durban to Utrecht, then on to Rorke's Drift before returning to Durban. The routes shown are all rough cart tracks: there were no roads in 1879.

PART I

Leading the Way

CHAPTER ONE

Enter Florence Nightingale

and the start of care for the casualties of war . . .

For all its destructiveness, war has paradoxically been responsible for great scientific and social advances. Communications and the media were revolutionized by the need to report conflicts swiftly, while many chemicals and materials that we use every day were developed because of war. The field of medical care was an area that cried out for change and it was due to war in the far-off Crimean peninsula in 1854 that brought this about. Not that the medical establishment sought change. Quite the reverse, it fought long and hard to maintain the status quo but was unable to resist the determination of a strong-willed woman to change forever the method of care for sick and wounded soldiers. This outstanding woman was, of course, Florence Nightingale.

In the summer of 1854 Russia and Turkey went to war on the strength of a petty squabble that had broken out concerning the guardianship of Christian holy places in the Holy Land, then part of the Ottoman Empire. Using this as a pretext to invade the Turkish provinces of Moldavia, Wallachia and Bulgaria that bordered the western shores of the Black Sea, Russia declared war. The destruction by the Russians of the Turkish fleet at anchor in the port of Sinope, which cost the Turks 4,000 lives, led to public outrage in Britain. The spectre of Russia gaining control of the Bosphorus and having access to the Mediterranean began to look distinctly possible and it was a situation that neither Britain nor France could allow. The two old adversaries agreed on armed

intervention to support the Turks and during April and May 1854 they dispatched a large combined force of British and French troops to Varna in Bulgaria.

By the time they arrived, the Turks had managed to repulse the Russian invasion and the war had petered out. Thwarted, the allies sat in their cholera-ravaged camps around Varna undecided as to what to do next. To have gone to the expense and trouble of sending their magnificently attired soldiers to fight the hated Russians and then to slink back home without doing battle was too shameful, so a fresh objective had to be found.

In November a joint British-French expeditionary force of 58,000 men was sent across 400 miles of the Black Sea to land on the west coast of the Crimean peninsula. From their beachhead, the allies would then attack and destroy the main Russian naval port of Sebastopol. The Russians showed a lack of enterprise by not attacking the vulnerable and ponderous flotilla that deposited its cargo of seasick soldiers on the open beach at the ominously named Calamita Bay, just thirty miles north of Sebastopol. In fact, seasickness was the least of the allies' worries for the soldiers carried the cholera virus with them from Varna, where the disease had stricken whole camps.

The allies, and the British in particular, were badly prepared for what was to come. Because of lack of space in the ships, they had left their medical supplies behind at Varna along with all their hospital marquees, ambulance wagons, pack animals, bedding, stretchers and kitchen equipment. A lack of transport when they landed meant that they had to march without tents. Before a shot was fired, over 2,000 men were sent off to the main hospital at Scutari on a ship that carried precious supplies but which had been unable to land any due to the administrative chaos.

Still unopposed and lacking any accurate maps of the region, the huge colourful cavalcade marched south towards their objective. For those who were free from sickness, the journey into the Crimea was pleasant as the allies marched through the gently rolling autumn countryside, interrupted only by easily fordable streams that traversed the valleys. As they breasted the rise that led down to the River Alma, the allies saw their enemy for the

first time. Arrayed on the heights on the far bank were the grey ranks of the Russian army. With little or no control and even less direction from the British commander, Lord Raglan, the British advanced under heavy fire and, despite serious losses, managed to cross the river. The Light Division then led the advance up the shell-swept slope and captured the earthwork housing the main Russian artillery. A determined Russian counter-attack forced the British back down the slope where they met the Brigade of Guards – who steadily pressed on through the withering hail of shot. With great bravery and determination, the Brigade captured the well-defended ‘Great Redoubt’ and shortly afterwards, the Russians quit the battlefield.

One of the soldiers who showed particular bravery that day was a twenty-two year-old officer in the Scots Fusilier Guards who unflinchingly carried the Queen’s Colour and inspired all those around him. He was Lieutenant Robert James Loyd-Lindsay, who was later to play a significant role in the establishment of the British Red Cross. For his role at the Battle of the Alma, and later at Inkerman, Lindsay was awarded the Victoria Cross.

The allied victory on the Alma was not followed up with any pursuit even though the Russian army was clearly in disarray. To do so would have brought about the capture of Sebastopol and the war would have been over. Instead, the British, who had borne the brunt of the fighting, spent a forlorn night trying to cope with the large numbers of wounded who covered the slopes down to the river. With little or no medical supplies or equipment in the field, the wounded had to be carried on rough wooden carts to the mouth of the river from where they were rowed to the British fleet anchored offshore.

In his report to the Hospital Commissioners, Staff Surgeon T. Alexander of the Light Division described the impossible conditions that existed on the battlefield. There were no ambulances and, incredibly, no lanterns, so nearly all the operations had to be performed in the dark. Until a door could be found for use as an operating table, surgical operations were performed on the ground. Without the French and the Navy to help, it would have been impossible to move the wounded from the battlefield.

Despite the best efforts of the Royal Navy the wounded then endured a terrible eight-day voyage to Scutari where, for those who survived, equally unspeakable conditions awaited them.

The British hospital at Scutari became synonymous with all that was wrong with the British Army during the period of the Crimean War. Situated opposite Constantinople and overlooking the Bosphorus on the Asian shore, the huge yellow-brick building had originally been a Turkish army barracks before being handed over to the British. Although designed to accommodate 2,000 soldiers, at the height of the war some 20,000 sick and wounded were packed into its overflowing corridors and rooms. When viewed from a distance the hospital was an imposing building, being four storeys high and built around a quadrangle with an imposing tower on each corner. Closer inspection revealed just how rundown it had become, with broken paving, dampness and filth from inadequate and blocked drains and sewers; worse, the hospital was infested with rats and vermin and it was about the last place suitable for accommodating seriously sick and wounded soldiers.

Even the landing stage was so dilapidated that ships could only disembark the sick in dinghies, another agonizing process for the suffering wounded. Those that survived this far were then conveyed on stretchers up the slope to the rapidly filling hospital. Thomas Chenery, *The Times* correspondent in Constantinople, was the first to report the shortcomings of the medical services when he wrote as early as 25 September 1854:

By the way, there is one experiment which has been a perfect failure. At the commencement of this war a plan was invented, and carried out, by which a number of Chelsea pensioners were sent out as an ambulancing corps to attend on the sick (the Hospital Conveyance Corps). Whether it was a scheme for saving money by utilizing the poor old men or shortening the duration of their lives and pensions, it is difficult to say, but they have been found in practice rather to require nurses themselves than to be able to nurse others. At Gallipoli and Bulgaria they died in numbers, while the whole of them are so weak as to be unable to perform

the most ordinary duties. The man who conceived the idea that the hard work of a military hospital could be performed by worn-out and aged cripples must have had slight knowledge of warfare or have profited little by experience. To attend the sick who lie by hundreds in the wards of a vast hospital, and require unceasing care by night and day, is no easy task, and certainly cannot be performed by such old men as may be seen at Scutari – the remains of the body who were sent out six months ago. The soldiers attend upon each other, and directly a man is able to walk he is made useful in nursing his less advanced comrades, but the few pensioners are not of the slightest use.

The more he learned of the situation at Scutari, the more scathing Chenery's reports became. He followed up a few days later with another report that read:

It is with feelings of surprise and anger that the public will learn that no sufficient preparations have been made for the cure of the wounded. Not only are there not sufficient surgeons . . . not only are there no dressers and nurses . . . but what will be said when it is known that there is not even linen to make bandages for the wounded.

At that time the Army Medical Department had just 163 surgeons for the whole of the British Army and most of these were old men on half-pay. Chenery continued, incredulous that the British had been so ill prepared:

Can it be said that the battle of the Alma has been an event to take the world by surprise? Has not the expedition to the Crimea been the talk of the last four months? And when the Turks gave up to our use the vast barracks to form a hospital and depot, was it not on the ground that the loss of the English troops was sure to be considerable? And yet after the troops have been in the country there is no preparation for the commonest surgical operation.

Not only are the men kept, in some cases, for a week

without the hand of a medical man coming near their wounds – not only are they left to expire in agony, unheeded and shaken off, though catching desperately at the surgeon whenever he makes his rounds through the fetid ships, but now, when they are placed in the spacious building where we were led to believe that everything was ready which could ease their pain and facilitate their recovery, it is found that the commonest appliances of a workhouse sick ward are wanting and that the men must die through the medical staff of the British Army having forgotten that old rags are necessary for the dressing of wounds.

The sick and wounded soldiers from the battlefields of Alma, Balaklava and Sebastopol had died in their thousands, in great pain, misery and terrible conditions, simply for want of care. It was the harrowing reports from the war correspondents William Russell and Thomas Chenery of *The Times* and Edwin Godkin of the *London Daily News*, writing about the desperate plight of the sick and wounded soldiers and appalling conditions at the main British hospital at Scutari, that outraged the unsuspecting British public. *The Times* swiftly launched an appeal for which £20,000 was raised, well above all expectations. Prompted by this publicity, a single-minded nursing superintendent named Florence Nightingale volunteered her services and, using her influential contacts, was given official support to take a group of nurses to work in the military hospitals of British occupied Turkey.

Florence Nightingale was a nursing superintendent at a time when the profession was not well respected. She had been inspired by an experiment at Kaiserswerth in Germany where the Protestant Deaconesses' Movement had set up a model hospital that not only attended the sick but also trained 'well-bred and educated young women to become nurses'. The Nightingale family was well connected and Florence was friendly with Sydney Herbert, who was Secretary of War in charge of finances. Herbert had long been interested in the care of the sick and *The Times* campaign prompted him to write to his friend, Florence Nightingale:

There is but one person in England that I know of who would be capable of organizing and superintending such a scheme . . .

The selection of the rank and file of nurses will be very difficult: no one knows it better than yourself. The difficulty of finding women equal to the task, after all, full of horrors, and requiring, besides knowledge and goodwill, great energy and great courage, will be great . . .

My question simply is, would you listen to the request to go and superintend the whole thing?

Herbert gained the approval of the government to support such an enterprise and with official backing, Miss Florence Nightingale set about recruiting her staff. The party consisted of fourteen hospital nurses and twenty-four nuns and Anglican sisters, who were dressed in a uniform of grey tweed with short red woollen capes. A scarf with 'Scutari' embroidered in red was draped over the shoulders.

On 21 October 1854, just a fortnight after Chenery's reports had appeared in *The Times*, the band of volunteer nurses left London. Two weeks later they spotted the minarets of Constantinople through a misty rain. When they landed at Scutari, Miss Nightingale sent ten of her nurses to the smaller, but marginally better maintained, neighbouring hospitals. She then took the remainder into the British hospital just as the wounded remnants of the Light Brigade, which had made their famous but disastrous charge against the Russian guns at Balaklava, were being received.

Although she and her staff were ready to go to work, Miss Nightingale would not allow their participation until the doctors specifically asked her. This was to convince the sceptical authorities that the nurses were not a reforming band of females trying to prove the incompetence of the male surgeons, but were present only to assist. So for a week or so, they sat in their cramped quarters in one of the corner towers, and rolled bandages. Such was the number of admissions that the doctors had to swallow their pride and belatedly request the nurses to help.

Miss Nightingale later recalled that she did not leave the