Homes and Hospitals: Locating Medical Memorials

After the Great War the concept of ‘war memorials’ extended far beyond traditional stone and metal statues. There was a move towards utilitarian monuments that were ‘other than stone and mortar’\(^1\) with parks, hospitals and homes for the elderly and wounded compared to traditional stone arches, crosses cenotaphs and obelisks.\(^2\) This chapter locates and analyses the hospitals, wards and rest homes around the world that commemorated Cavell. There was a high degree of sameness in the form that medical memorials took, and this was often an example of networks whereby the peripheries copied the metropolis. British and European initiatives were followed by colonial elites who sought to create civic and national identities out of a connection with the imperial centre. Organizing medical monuments was a gendered project, and transnationally medical memorials for Cavell depended upon organized elite women with the necessary respect and resources to fulfil their wishes. As well as being able to run large fund-raising campaigns, women needed to occupy key positions of influence on hospital boards. They were able to draw upon their fund-raising skills learnt during the war, and had a practical sense of what utilities were needed. There was a new-found confidence in these women’s endeavours. If the post-war years are often generally argued as a conservative time for women, they were also a new age, especially for young women who were likely to follow in Cavell’s footsteps and become nurses. New modern hostels were needed to make sure that trainees received the attention they deserved.

The location of medical monuments for Cavell largely conforms to the geographic pattern identified in Chapter 5. As with stone and metal memorials for Cavell, medical memorials for her were most likely to appear in places where she was born and had lived, or where she had worked, or died. And again, they were also likely to appear in Allied
countries, or in the ‘White Dominions’. Memorials at medical sites often incorporated traditional forms of monuments, such as plaques and busts, as well as wards named after Cavell. This chapter begins with the monuments for Cavell in places where she nursed. It then turns to whole hospitals named after Cavell, then to wards named for her, and finally to Nurses’ homes.

Old haunts

With her nursing identity so important to her posthumous fame, medical institutions with connections to Cavell were fast to commemorate her, emphasizing her service and devotion to her country and to the nursing profession. The hospitals where Cavell trained, worked and lived all have memorials for her. In the St Pancras Infirmary where Cavell worked as night superintendent for three years a plaque to commemorate her survived both the hospital’s rebuilding of the 1960s and its renaming as the Whittington Hospital Chapel, Islington, Upper Holloway. The plaque bears the inscription ‘To the glory of God and to perpetuate the memory of Edith Cavell night sister 1901–1906 who died for her country in Brussels – October 12th 1915. This tablet was erected by the nursing staff of St Pancras Infirmary, Highgate. “Faithful unto Death”’. Symbolizing peace, there is a line border around the plaque with fleur de lys at each corner. The Shoreditch Infirmary on Kingsland Road in Hoxton, in the district of Hackney, now St Leonard’s Hospital, is where Cavell worked as assistant matron in the early years of the twentieth century. This site has a circular brown plaque that was erected by the Hackney Council. There was also an Edith Cavell Memorial in the Shoreditch Infirmary that was unveiled by the Mayor of Shoreditch, a year after Cavell’s death on 12 October 1916. Miss Inglis, matron of the infirmary and a correspondent of Cavell, collected by subscription from local residents the costs for the traditional expenses. The memorial was an oil painting consisting of three panels – Faith, Hope and Charity. In arts and crafts in style, it had particularly ornate borders. The effort taken in fund-raising and constructing memorials was indicative of the important place that Cavell held as a role model for nurses – particularly in the places where she was known.

Cavell’s nursing time in the North-West of England resulted in a number of medical monuments to her memory. In the Wigan Leigh Infirmary, Infirmary Road, Greater Manchester, is a plain mottled stone tablet with an incised inscription in gold lettering

To perpetuate the memory of Nurse Edith Cavell A heroic British nurse who was brutally shot by German soldiers at Brussels on