

The Anglican Historical Society of New Zealand

Te Rōpu Hītori o te Hāhi Mihinare ki Aotearoa

Casualties of Peace: three nurses in the 1918 influenza pandemic

Janet Elizabeth Hancock; Isabella Maud Manning; and Sylvia Mary Easton Fleming

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(AHS Newsletter 70, April 2020)

Writing to 'My dear People' in December 1918, Bishop Averill observed that: 'In the midst of our joy at the signing of the armistice came the epidemic, the veritable thorn in the flesh' ¹. In fact, the highly contagious influenza was caught by many in the crowded streets on November 11 as they celebrated the ending of the war. The bishop went on to deplore the loss to the diocese of Auckland of many valuable workers, specifically naming **Miss Janet Hancock, Nurse Isabella Maud Manning, and Miss Sylvia Fleming**, and thanking God for their lives, influence and work.

Janet Elizabeth Hancock

Janet Hancock was born in 1848, presumably to an unmarried mother as on her birth certificate her father was an 'unknown gentleman.' Nothing is known of her early life other than that, while young, she began rescue work in London i.e., working with 'fallen women' or prostitutes and attempting to rehabilitate them. She joined the Order of Divine Compassion, founded in 1889 specifically to work with 'the Fallen.' Probably Hancock trained as a 'social purity' worker at St Agnes' House, founded by the Order in 1891 for this purpose. Until 1911 it was the only such training establishment in Great Britain. Bishop Neligan had some connection with the Order: when visiting London in 1903 he appointed **Lucy Hudson**, one of its members, as matron of the new St Mary's Homes which opened in Otahuhu the following year. On a later visit in 1908, after Hudson's resignation and on the recommendation

of Mrs. Ruspini, superior of the order, he appointed Hancock as Superintendent of St Mary's Homes. Hancock took up her role on 1 October 1908. During her ten years at St Mary's the work practically doubled, from an average of 14 girls to about 32 with 50 infants under three years old.

At the height of the influenza pandemic in Auckland in 1918 Sister Bennett, the assistant matron at St Mary's, was asked to go to Kilbryde, the former home of John Logan Campbell in Parnell, to set it up as a temporary hospital. Hancock went to advise her with no intention of staying but remained to help with a sudden influx of patients. After four days of intensive work, she herself contracted the disease, followed by pneumonia. She was taken to Bishopscourt where she died on 18 November, aged forty-one. By her own wish she was buried in the graveyard of Holy Trinity Church, Otahuhu, near the graves of some of the children she had cared for. The many tributes paid after her death commented on her unselfishness and devotion to the needs of others, her greatness of heart and breadth of vision, and her personal influence on the girls in her charge. The Janet Hancock Memorial Fund, which still exists, was set up by the Diocesan Synod in her memory, to create a fund to provide pensions for paid women Church workers (Hancock herself never accepted anything like adequate remuneration for her work). In 1922, a font and episcopal chair in her memory were placed in the

St Mary's chapel and a new nurses' home opened at St Mary's in 1926 was named in her honour.

Nurse Isabella Maud Manning

Maud Manning was born, probably around 1880, to a well-known family in Christchurch where her father Samuel was mayor in 1890. After training as a nurse at Christchurch Hospital Manning worked for the Māori Mission in the diocese of Auckland for almost ten years until her death in 1918. When she joined the Mission in 1909 there were only two mission houses, both in the Waikato (then part of the Auckland diocese). One was at Hukanui and the other, recently opened, at Paeroa where there was a fairly large Māori population and a number of marae within easy reach. Manning began by spending some time with Miss Brereton at the Paeroa Mission House, gaining some experience in the work and learning te reo Māori. In 1910 a third mission house, a small cottage built by local Māori, was opened at Pukepoto near Kaitaia in Northland. Nurse Manning was in charge with Miss Maraea Ngawaka as her assistant. The following year there was a severe outbreak of typhoid fever at nearby Ahipara. The Health Department sent three nurses to a temporary hospital. Manning also went to nurse there but contracted typhoid herself. For weeks it was doubtful if she would recover but a special nurse was engaged for her and eventually, she was able to return home to Christchurch to convalesce. Twenty Māori died during the epidemic.

After her recovery Manning returned to the Mission House at Paeroa where she was assisted by Miss Miriama Hopa. As at the other mission houses their work was mainly with women and children, nursing the sick and also visiting and giving advice. Regular Sunday services were held in te reo at local marae. Consumption (TB) was common and in 1913 there was an outbreak of enteric fever with a temporary tent hospital set up for those too ill to be sent to the Waihi hospital.

Epidemics of typhoid, smallpox and enteric fever were common among rural Māori communities, but the influenza pandemic struck Māori particularly hard, with approximately 2,500 deaths. Military camps, with large numbers of men living close together, were badly affected. The Narrow Neck Military Camp near Takapuna was a training base for Māori contingents together with volunteers from a number of Pacific islands. In October influenza broke out in the camp of about 400 men more than 200 were ill. A call went out for nurses and Nurse Manning volunteered. She had been there less than two weeks when the epidemic broke out at Paeroa, and the mayor sent a telegram asking her to return. Unfortunately, Manning had already contracted the deadly disease and after being ill for a week died on 18 November. Family members from Christchurch arrived too late. Manning was buried with full military honours alongside some of her former patients in the O'Neill's Point Cemetery.

In 1920 a brass tablet in memory of Nurse Maud Manning was placed in St Paul's church, Paeroa, where she had been a regular worshipper and communicant.

Sylvia Mary Easton Fleming

Sylvia Fleming, member of a well-known Wellington family, graduated from Victoria College of the University of New Zealand in 1902. She taught at St Hilda's, Dunedin, and then at St Margaret's College, Christchurch. In 1915 she joined the staff of St Mary's Diocesan School for Girls in Stratford as First Assistant to Miss Marchant, the principal. The school had opened a few weeks earlier in February with a roll of 22 (2 boarders, 10 daygirls and 10 dayboys) and a staff of two - Miss Marchant and an assistant. Soon after her arrival Fleming was left in charge for about a year while Marchant took a trip to England (arranged prior to her appointment). Marchant returned in 1916 but left for another

position in April 1917 whereupon Fleming was appointed as Principal. Under her leadership the school continued to grow, land was purchased, and new buildings planned. By August 1918 there were 40 girls at the school, nearly all boarders, and Fleming was assisted by three teachers.

Unfortunately, the school was not to enjoy Fleming's services for long. Having nursed both pupils and colleagues after the outbreak of the flu epidemic, Fleming succumbed herself and died in November 1918. Her patients all survived. Fleming was much loved by the girls and her death was a great blow to the school. At the laying of the foundation stone of the new St Mary's School in December 1918 Archbishop Averill described her as an ideal teacher, a lady of culture, capability, and refinement. While her death was very deeply regretted, they were thankful for the foundation that she had laid.²

Sylvia Fleming was buried in the Stratford Cemetery and commemorated in the school by a memorial window in the main building, the plaque reading, in Latin, 'Come, my children,

listen to me and I will teach you the fear of the Lord.' [Venite, filii, audite me, et vos docebo timorem Domini], and in the name of one of the four schoolhouses. She is not mentioned in the brief historical section on the school website, and I have been unable to find any information about the memorial window, or if a house is still named after her.

Although medical treatment at the time has been described as 'medieval' and there was no effective medication, good nursing could save patients. It consisted mainly of frequent bathing to keep down the fever, changing sweat-soaked bedding, and keeping the patient hydrated. As the disease was highly contagious nurses and doctors were at great risk of contracting the disease: at one point of 180 nurses at Auckland Hospital 140 were ill. Over 20% of medical personnel who succumbed died (37 nurses and 14 doctors). The consequent shortage of medical help made the situation even worse.

Janet Hancock, Maud Manning and Sylvia Fleming were just three of those who lost their lives while nursing influenza victims.

Endnotes

¹ *'Bishop's Letter'*, Church Gazette, December 1918.

² *Stratford Evening Post*, 12 December 1918.