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The Mythic Matters of Edith Cavell: Propaganda, Legend, Myth and Memory

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# The Mythic Matters of Edith Cavell:

## Propaganda, Legend, Myth

### and Memory

Shane M. Barney

According to the *Collins Greater London Street Atlas*, there are at least eleven streets named for the World War I nurse and heroine Edith Cavell. These include: Edith Gardens, Edith Grove, Edith Road, Cavell Avenue, Edith Yard, Edith Terrace and Edith Cavell Close.<sup>1</sup> London, of course, is not alone in street name memorials to Cavell; indeed, Birkenhead has an Edith Street, as does Sunderland. Oxford has both Cavell Road and Edith Road, while Swardeston has Cavell Court. This is not to say that the eponymic use of Cavell's name is limited to streets. The Edith Cavell Hospital is located in Peterborough, while the Edith Cavell Lower Elementary School and the Edith Cavell School of Nursing are both in Bedfordshire. There is also Radio Cavell out of Lancaster and, oddly, the Edith Cavell Pub in Norwich. Nor should one forget the Edith Cavell Rose (two different varieties), the Edith Cavell Lilac, and the Edith Cavell Tree. Of course, these only speak for the United Kingdom. In Brussels there are the Edith Cavell School for Nursing

1. *Collins Greater London Street Atlas* (London, 1998), p. 43.

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and the rue Edith Cavell. In Canada a mountain is named after Cavell, Mount Edith Cavell, along with Edith Cavell Glacier, Edith Cavell Lake and the Edith Cavell Hostel (the dining area of which is named the Edith Cavell Room). France, Australia, New Zealand and the United States, too, have Edith Cavell hospitals, roads and schools. In fact, one could continue for several pages just listing Cavell's cenotaphs, as we have yet to mention the many statues, hospital and nursing-home wings named in her honor. Nevertheless, this truncated list of Cavell's memorializations prompts an immediate reaction: who was Edith Cavell? And the more compelling question, *why* Edith Cavell? These seemingly straightforward questions have very complicated answers.

The voluminous number of commemorations to Cavell undeniably assures her legendary status while making her identity all the more complex. The Edith Cavell question is in fact a bipartite inquiry: who was Edith Cavell before her death, and who did she become afterwards? This paper addresses the latter, as an inquiry into Cavell's posthumous life, more correctly understood as the collective memory of Edith Cavell as manifested in her legend and myth. Of particular interest here is the role of language in the memory-making process, specifically, the mnemonic nature of propaganda<sup>2</sup> and its relationship to the genesis of the Cavell legend and myth. Propagandists, as we shall see, targeted the key elements of the Cavell story at various social factions. These groups, in turn, collected and used aspects of the story according to their own ideological desires. The sum of these elements became the Cavell legend.

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Edith Cavell was an English nurse during World War I. She was born 4 December 1865 in the small town of Swardeston, just west of Norwich. In April 1895 she applied for and was accepted into a training program for

2. The term "propaganda" often invokes images of state-run mind control campaigns reminiscent of the Hitler's Germany. While propaganda always involves some form of persuasion with the intended desire of eliciting a response, it differs from other types of suggestive communication, such as teaching, by the limitations placed upon the message and the mediated audience. In other words, propagandists alter the "truth" of their message depending on the audience they hope to influence. Educators might change their lecture according to the intellectual development of their students, but they do not change the basic thesis of that message. Propaganda, then, is the attempt to persuade individuals or the public at large to accept one point of view and close off others. It is also important to kept in mind that this can be either a conscious or unconscious act. See David Welch, "Powers of Persuasion," *History Today* 49 (1999): 26.

nursing at Fountains Fever Hospital in Lower Tooting.<sup>3</sup> In September of the following year Cavell graduated and took a probationary position in the London Hospital; she held this position until December 1899 when she advanced to the position of staff nurse. Cavell continued to work in the London Hospital until June 1907, when Dr. Antoine Depage, a Belgian physician and director of a medical *clinique* on the *rue de la Culture*, offered her the position of Directress of a training school for nurses and its attached hospital in Brussels; this position she accepted and held until her death.

In July 1914 while Cavell was visiting her mother in England, Austria declared war on Serbia, starting the chain of events that led to World War I. It was reported that upon hearing the news, Cavell hurried back to Brussels against the protests of friends and family because, according to Cavell, it was her "duty."<sup>4</sup> In Brussels the training school and the attached hospital became part of the Red Cross. Following the invasion and occupation of Belgium, the German military police permitted Cavell, even though she was English, to remain at her post as a Red Cross nurse and Directress of the *clinique*. In the spring of 1915 she became involved in an underground network, which smuggled Allied soldiers across the Dutch border. On 5 August 1915 the German military police arrested her and thirty-five others on charges of treason. The trial began on 6 October and lasted only two days. The brevity was due in part to Cavell's willingness to admit freely to the crimes for which she stood accused. Along with seven others she received the death penalty. Hours before her death the Rev. Stirling Gahan visited Cavell in her cell; her parting words according to him were:

this I would say, standing as I do in view of God and eternity, I realise that patriotism is not enough. I must have no hatred or bitterness towards anyone.<sup>5</sup>

At dawn on 12 October 1915 Cavell and Phillip Baucq, a Belgian member of the underground, were shot. According to the German priest in attendance, Cavell "professed her Christian faith and that she was glad

3. A. E. Clark-Kennedy, *Edith Cavell: Pioneer and Patriot* (London, 1965), p. 28; and Rowland Ryder, *Edith Cavell* (New York, 1975), p. 80.

4. Clark-Kennedy, *Edith Cavell: Pioneer and Patriot*, pp. 96-97.

5. *Correspondence with the United States Ambassador Respecting the Execution of Miss Cavell at Brussels* (London, 1915), pp. 22-23.

to die for her country. She died like a heroine.”<sup>6</sup> To further the injury to the Allied powers, the German government refused to release her body, and Cavell was buried only a few hundred feet from where she died.

### A Posthumous Life

To say the German volleys that took Cavell’s life were heard round the world would not be an exaggeration. Within days of the execution Cavell’s name made newspaper headlines from Australia and Egypt to France, Italy, Great Britain, the United States, Canada and even Russia; in many cases her death remained front-page news for several weeks and even months. For Allied countries the value of her death was clear—a pious English woman and nurse shot by the enemy, a propagandist’s dream. Perhaps this best explains the instant posthumous celebrity status that Cavell achieved. Indeed, many Allied countries were in need of a new reason to remain in the war, as the once “quick and decisive” action slowed to a standstill.

Cavell propaganda was highly successful, and her death is credited with an enlistment rate unparalleled after the first months of the war.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, if Cavell were merely a tool of wartime propaganda, her fame should have ended with the war, or, at the very least, decreased in magnitude like most wartime atrocity stories. Yet, it did not; in fact, her celebrity grew and continues to grow to this day, as the previous survey of Cavell’s cenotaphs suggests. Unexplained, however, is the manner in which these memorials became placeholders of the Cavell memory. For this we must turn our attention to the memory-making process that gave rise to the Cavell legend, and its mnemonic facilitator: the propagandists of World War I.

Cavell in life was relatively unknown. Aside from a few articles in nursing journals, England knew little of her and the rest of the world even less. Yet, when her body was returned to Great Britain on 16 May 1919, tens of thousands lined the streets of Westminster to pay their final respects to, as one *Daily Post* reporter noted, the Joan of Arc of England.<sup>8</sup> At the memorial service in Westminster Abbey, dignitaries from around the world

6. *The Daily Mirror* (London), 23 October 1915, p. 4; *The Morning Post* (London), 23 October 1915, p. 6; *The Times* (London), 23 October 1915, p. 7; and *Correspondence with the United States Ambassador Respecting the Execution of Miss Cavell at Brussels*, p. 23.

7. Katie Pickles, “Edith Cavell—Heroine: No Hatred or Bitterness for Anyone?,” *History Now* (New Zealand) 3 (1997): 4.

8. *The Morning Post*, 15 May 1919, p. 7.

gathered to offer their respective countries' sympathies.<sup>9</sup> The following day, 17 May, Cavell's body was buried in the shadow of the Norwich Cathedral, where it remains. This interment marked the beginning of the prolific outpouring of Cavell memorializations.

Understanding how a nearly anonymous woman on one day came to be mourned the world over requires an analysis of the original wartime propaganda that introduced her to a global audience. To this end, it is argued here that the language of propagandists along with the images it conjured up became the building blocks of the Cavell collective memory. Given that propagandists' stratagems became the accepted remembrances of Cavell, this examination also serves, then, as our gateway into her semantic memory. Allowing for the enormity of the task and the intended brevity of this paper, a full accounting of the propaganda surrounding Cavell is beyond our grasp.<sup>10</sup> Yet, a detailed understanding of a single aspect of the propaganda concerning her is within reach and it involves the semiotics of language, which recognizes the symbolic meaning of words as well as the power of those symbols in evoking imagery.<sup>11</sup> From this perspective the language of myths and legends is best understood as a series of signs and connotations.<sup>12</sup> The role of WWI propagandists, then, was to mold the narrative of Edith Cavell around certain popular beliefs and understandings in an effort to sell the war. A clear example of their efforts was the way in which they targeted women.

For obvious reasons, women were among the first to identify themselves with Cavell's plight. Propagandists played a major role in this response, as an early headline announcing Cavell's death suggests: "Heroic Englishwoman's Sacrifice."<sup>13</sup> This simple headline introduced three aspects

9. *The Times*, 16 May 1919, pp. 13-14.

10. For a more detailed analysis of the Cavell propaganda see Shane M. Barney, "Edith Cavell—Wonder Women: Propaganda, Legend, Myth, and Memory" (Master's Thesis, University of Vermont, 2001): 33-59.

11. Karin Doving, introduction to Harold D. Lasswell, *Road of Propaganda: The Semantics of Biased Communication* (New York, 1959), pp. 1-2; and Nicholas F. S. Burnett, "Ideology and Propaganda: Toward an Integrative Approach" in *Propaganda: A Pluralistic Perspective*, ed. by Ted J. Smith, III (New York, 1989), pp. 127-28.

12. Here I draw from the important work of Roland Barthes, who suggests that connoting words and phrases are culturally endowed with meanings beyond their dictionary definition. A perfect example is the name "John Hancock." By definition Hancock was a president of the Continental Congress and nine-times governor of the State of Massachusetts. Yet, his name also serves as a request for one's signature. Signs are words that call to mind specific images, such terms as tree, car and book. Roland Barthes, *The Semiotic Challenge* (New York, 1988), pp. 157-59 and 175-79.

13. *The Times*, 16 October 1915, p. 8.

about Cavell. First, it established her identity as an “Englishwoman,” and therefore conveyed her kinship with other women of England. Second, the semiotic effect of the term “heroic” evoked the mythical heroes of ancient Greece.<sup>14</sup> While “Englishwoman” established Cavell’s group membership, the term “heroic” defined her status within that group. The final term, “Sacrifice,” explained the nature of her heroic status, suggesting that her execution was a religious act reminiscent of the “Sacrificial Lamb,” Jesus. Nearly all the early headlines followed this pattern of identification.

Beneath the headlines propagandists definitively defined Cavell the woman. The first notice in *The Daily Mirror*, under the headline “Martyred Women,” did not mention her citizenship, her status as a nurse, nor her piety, but instead her execution at the hands of the enemy.<sup>15</sup> A few days later, *The Daily Mirror* called on the women of Great Britain to remember Cavell as a woman made of “steel and lilies” and a worker who knew no bounds in the fulfillment of her duty. Similarly, an editor writing for *The Morning Post* questioned the civility of a nation that could execute such a “noble and devoted woman.” The weekly magazine *The Spectator* ventured the opinion that it was her “womanly generosity, tenderness and most of all, her humanity” that caused her to commit the offense for which she was executed, and it was personal strength that enabled her to face the German forces that took her life. The appeal of such themes was not limited to English women. As *The Spectator* also reported, Lord Lansdowne suggested in Parliament that Cavell “was not only a woman, but a brave and devoted woman—a soldier among soldiers.”<sup>16</sup>

Cavell soon came to be associated with other established legendary figures. Only six days after her death, *The Daily Mirror* labeled her the “Florence Nightingale of Brussels,” and *The Times* soon suggested that the Florence Nightingale Memorial Fund be used to erect a memorial to Cavell.<sup>17</sup> For its part, *The Morning Post* saw Cavell as the modern incarnation of Antigone. J. H. Morgan, writing for the *Graphic*, even compared her to Jesus.<sup>18</sup> With each association Cavell assumed to some

14. Anna Makolkina, *Name, Hero, Icon: Semiotics of Nationalism through Heroic Biography* (New York, 1992), pp. 13-14.

15. *The Daily Mirror*, 16 October 1915, p. 3.

16. *The Daily Mirror*, 22 October 1915, p. 5; *The Morning Post*, 22 October 1915, p. 5. *The Spectator*, 23 October 1915, pp. 526, 532 and 526. Prime Minister Asquith apparently went even further. According to one source, he stated that Cavell “has taught the bravest man among us a supreme lesson of courage.” See (no author), *The Death of Edith Cavell* (London, 1915), p. 1.

17. *The Daily Mirror*, 18 October 1915, p. 8; *The Times*, 25 October 1915, p. 6.

18. *The Morning Post*, 22 October 1915, p. 6; *Graphic* (London), 27 October 1915, p. 23.



extent the qualities and status of the legendary figure to which reference was made. Clearly, then, the image of Cavell was an amalgamative association drawn from the past and established legendary figures infused with perceived notions of Cavell's own qualities and traits.

The first memorializations of Cavell came in the form of biographies, some of which appeared within a few weeks of her death. These early works were nothing more than rewordings, or in some cases exact copies, of the original newspaper propaganda; even their titles were drawn from headlines. Take, for example, *The Case of Edith Cavell* (1915) by James M. Beck, its title coming perhaps from a headline in *The Times*, or *A Noble Woman* (1916) by Ernest Protheroe, the title from *The Daily Mirror*.<sup>19</sup> In essence, these early memorials continued the motifs of the propagandists and kept them alive throughout the war.

During the funeral in 1919 women escorted and carried Cavell's body to its grave. When queried about her admiration of Cavell, one pallbearer reportedly responded: "[Cavell] gave her life that others might live."<sup>20</sup> Women throughout the world expressed their admiration for Cavell as well. A group from Bexhill sent flowers to the funeral inscribed with a note that simply read: "To a noble woman. . . ."<sup>21</sup> An open letter to the women of England was commissioned from women in France; it stated:

Edith Cavell was the embodiment of the highest qualities which we admire in you all. She went to execution [sic] like a true English woman—calmly, piously . . . She is our sister also . . .<sup>22</sup>

Meanwhile, both the French and Belgian governments announced that Cavell would receive the Cross of Chevalier of the Legion of Honor. A poem published in *The Daily Mirror* read in part:

To-day a nation mourns you—you who stood  
Emblem of England's noblest womanhood;  
Steadfast and calm, unflinching to the end,

19. *The Times*, 22 October 1915, p. 10; *The Daily Mirror*, 25 October 1915, p. 7.

20. *The Morning Post*, 15 May 1919, p. 7.

21. *The Times*, 16 May 1919, p. 14.

22. *The Daily Mirror*, 16 May 1919, p. 4.



Think it fine to die—content and proud  
 To some foreign field  
 With England's men.<sup>23</sup>

The publication of biographies continued, including Reginald Berkeley's *Dawn: A Biographical Novel of Edith Cavell* (1928 and reprinted in 1940). The book repeated the themes found in the wartime propaganda: Cavell was strong, courageous, intelligent, humanistic and, most of all, dutiful.<sup>24</sup> Other biographies were written under such titles as *The Dutiful Edith Cavell* (1955) and *Ready to Die: The Story of Edith Cavell* (1980). In 1934 a biography of Cavell appeared in an anthology, *Courageous Women* by L. M. Montgomery, which described her under the chapter title of "A War Heroine: Edith Cavell" as dutiful and courageous.<sup>25</sup> Other compilations included biographies of Cavell as well: *Women Leaders* in 1940, *Women of Today* in 1946, *Heroes of Our Time* in 1962, and *Eleven Who Dared* in 1967.<sup>26</sup> These works kept alive Cavell's memory. While newspaper propaganda established and controlled the initial public understanding of Cavell, these biographies and anthologies, as linguist Anna Makolkin notes, explain why she came to be remembered.<sup>27</sup> In other words, newspapers introduced the elements of the Cavell legend while biographers institutionalized her significance.

In more recent years Cavell has become the subject of study for many feminist writers, who have come to see her as a link between the "heroic men immortalized in stone and the ordinary women who are not."<sup>28</sup> Historians Bonnie Anderson and Judith Zinsser view Cavell's death as

23. Ibid., p. 2. In subsequent years memorializations to Cavell continued to well forth. In March 1920 dowager Queen Alexandra unveiled a memorial statue with a forty-foot obelisk in St. Martin's square. Other memorials followed, from a monument at the site of Cavell's execution in 1921, a memorial tablet dedicated by the Belgian senate hung in 1951, the naming of a YMCA camp on the shores of Lake Michigan in 1988.

24. Reginald Berkeley, *Dawn: A Biographical Novel of Edith Cavell* (New York, 1928), pp. 2-3, 29, 41, and 137-38.

25. L. M. Montgomery, Marian Keith, and Mabel Burns McKinley, *Courageous Women* (Toronto, 1934), pp. 116-24.

26. John W. Prince, "Edith Cavell—Martyr Nurse," *Women Leaders*, ed. Philip Henry Lotz (New York, 1940); Margaret Cole, *Women of To-day* (New York, 1946); Pamela Bright, *Heroes of Our Time* (New York, 1962); Hermann Hagedor, *Eleven Who Dared* (London, 1967).

27. Anna Makolkin, *Name, Hero, Icon: Semiotics of Nationalism through Heroic Biography* (New York, 1992), p. 3.

28. Chilla Bulbeck, "Women of Substance: The Depiction of Women in Australian Monuments," *HECATE* 18 (1992): 26. See also: Judith Barrington, "Woman Sites: A Traveler's Guide, Finding the Footprints of Austen, Pankhurst and Potter," *MS*. (February 1988): 88-89.

contributing to the success of the suffrage movement in 1918. Arguing along similar lines, Catherine Speck sees Cavell's death and later memorialization as indicative of society's acceptance of women's "wartime citizenship and sacrifice."<sup>29</sup> For these writers, Cavell represented a challenge to the male dominance of the turn of the century, and her death and subsequent celebrity provided a spark that reignited the women's suffrage movement. When in 1996 a series of stamps was commissioned in the United Kingdom to celebrate women of achievement in the twentieth century, Cavell was not listed among them. Instead, her name was chosen for the postmark, acting, in a sense, as a seal of approval.<sup>30</sup> Time, it seems, has not eroded Cavell's importance. To this day, in fact, a small group of women, dressed as turn-of-the-century nurses, gather at 11:00 AM on 12 October to place flowers at Cavell's memorial in London.<sup>31</sup>

The image of Cavell remains one of a strong, independent, noble and devoted woman, nurse and Christian. While the basic tenets of her narrative remain the same, various groups accentuate images specific to their needs and de-emphasize those that are not. These minor changes include the reasons for Cavell's martyrdom, the nature of her devotion, and even the manner in which she died. For nurses, for example, "Nurse Cavell" died because of her courageous devotion to the sick and afflicted; she went to her death, quite naturally, wearing her uniform as a sign of professional pride. For women in general Cavell was a brave example of one of their own who refused to be blindfolded or bound so that she might stand and face her "murderers." She was not afraid to die.<sup>32</sup> For Christians, her image is illustrated best in this quotation from a 1978 biography: "We [Christians] remember Edith Cavell especially because of what she said before she died. She remembered that Jesus told us to forgive everyone who hurts us. She remembered that Jesus told us to love everyone."<sup>33</sup> Cavell went to a martyr's death professing her faith.

29. Bonnie S. Anderson and Judith P. Zinsser, *A History of Their Own: Women in Europe from Prehistory to the Present* (New York, 1988), p. 366; Catherine Speck, "Women's War Memorials and Citizenship," *Australian Feminist Studies* 11 (1996): 140-41.

30. Copies of the stamps and the Edith Cavell postmark are in the possession of the author.

31. This occurred most recently on 12 October 2001. Video is in the possession of the author.

32. L. M. Montgomery, Marian Keith, and Mabel Burns McKinley eds., *Courageous Women*, p. 121.

33. Jan Johnson, *The Secret Task of Nurse Cavell: A Story about Edith Cavell* (Minneapolis, MN, 1978), p. 29.

Each of these motifs engendered during the Great War had traits and qualities that were carried over into the postwar years. Each would spawn its own set of biographies (including *Edith Cavell: Pioneer and Patriot* and *Edith Cavell: Heroic Nurse*),<sup>34</sup> memorials (including the plaque at Peterborough Cathedral and a Costa Rican stamp featuring both Nightingale and Cavell), and remembrances (including the flower festival held yearly in her memory in Cavell's home town of Swardeston—using Edith Cavell Lilacs of course—and the corner of St. Mary's Church in Norwich set aside for her portrait and a small piece of the cross that marked her grave in Brussels). Clearly, with such a wide base of support the Cavell legend could not easily be forgotten. In fact, the propagandists were so successful that the image of Cavell they created in order to sell the war became the way in which she was remembered. This suggests that the true art of propaganda is ultimately an art of programming memory.

There are two important aspects to note about the mutable images of Cavell and the groups who subscribed, and still subscribe, to them. First, present-day devotees to her memory are drawn from the same groups as those targeted by the propagandists: women, nurses and Christians. Second, the images these groups invoke are the same as those used by the propagandists, including the labels assigned to her (e.g., the British Nurse) and the legendary figures whose company she joined (e.g., Joan of Arc). Taken together, these aspects show a clear connection between the Cavell propaganda of the war and the views adopted by her supporters today. The fact that no two groups see her in exactly the same way presents a problem to researchers looking to understand the "real" Cavell. Each recounting of her story presents a snapshot representing a group's current needs and ideologies. The basic account of Cavell may remain, but aspects of her story are added and deleted according to the specific images most useful to a particular group. This also hints at the failure of historical narrative as a tool for understanding Cavell's significance—the supposed purpose of a biography. The history of Edith Cavell is at once a history of Cavell the nurse, the woman and the Christian, and the efforts of those who would tell her story, making that story convoluted at best.

### Of Myths and Legends

Words and their associated imagery extend beyond the propagandist's pen. This point leads to a necessary distinction between legend and myth. In too many cases, the two terms are used interchangeably. It should be

34. A. E. Clark-Kennedy, *Edith Cavell, Pioneer and Patriot*; Juliette Elkon Hamelecourt, *Edith Cavell: Heroic Nurse* (London, 1958).

noted, however, that while a myth can be a legend, a legend is not necessarily a myth. The latter is a story of origin and relationships. Such is the case with the Judeo-Christian creation story found in Genesis or the tales of the Roman and Greek gods of antiquity.<sup>35</sup> At the communicative heart of a myth is language. The story and more particularly the language of that story relate the signs, symbols and values of the myth. These meanings are discernable by the members of the group who maintain a belief in the myth. Recent scholarship has broadened the understanding of myth to include stories other than those of superhuman beings.<sup>36</sup> In this latter sense, myths are understood to be a set of assumptions in narrative form that are accepted uncritically by a group and serve to found or affirm its self-conception.<sup>37</sup>

Modern mythic stories also help to explain and define the origin of a group, thereby dictating the boundaries of membership.<sup>38</sup> In Cavell's case, she has been described as the founding matron of practical nurse training in not only Brussels, but Europe at large; she is also perceived as a pioneer in establishing standards and instituting educational and professional protocols used by nurses throughout the world.<sup>39</sup> Such views have become well established over time. Indeed, they are seen in the biographies by Ernest Protheroe in 1916, Reginald Berkeley in 1928, Helen Judson in 1941, A. E. Clark-Kennedy in 1965, Rowland Ryder in 1975, Brian Peachment in 1980, and Sally Grant in 1995.

Many feminist authors have also come to identify Cavell as a founding member of their group. They see her not only as contributing to the suffragists' movement, but also as a pioneer for a strong, independent female work force.<sup>40</sup> Newspaper accounts from World War I seem to support these views as do the biographies published from 1915 to the

35. Laurence Coupe, *Myth* (London, 1997).

36. For example, Roland Barthes' opening essay on professional wrestling in France: Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York, 1987), pp. 13-24.

37. Peter Heehs, "Myth, History, and Theory," *History & Theory: Studies in the Philosophy of History* 33 (1994): 2-3.

38. William E. Paden, *Religious Worlds: The Comparative Study of Religion* (Boston, 1994), pp. 73-75.

39. Laurence Dopson, "An International Nurse" *Nursing Standard* 13, no. 38 (9 June 1999): 19; Catharine Sadler, "Executed in the Cause of Duty" *Nursing Mirror* 161, no. 15 (9 October 1985): 13.

40. For the latter Dianna Condell and Jean Liddiard argue for a positive change in the perception of women in the workplace by the "noble" sacrifice of Cavell. Dianna Condell and Jean Liddiard, *Working for Victory? Images of Women in the First World War, 1914-18* (London, 1987), pp. 22, 38, and 70.

present. The historical evidence, however, for both claims is sketchy at best. What is important to note is that nearly all recent assertions made about Cavell the woman and Cavell the nurse reference commemorative places of memory as evidence for their affirmations, including biographies, newspaper articles and other such memorials. The “facts” of Edith Cavell the woman and Edith Cavell the nurse are lost in the Cavell myth.<sup>41</sup>

The Cavell myth can also function by giving those groups who subscribe to it a common frame of reference as well as a means of understanding their contemporaneous concerns. This became particularly evident shortly before and during World War II. In October 1939, four days after the twenty-fourth anniversary of Cavell’s death, Imperado Pictures released the film, *Nurse Edith Cavell*.<sup>42</sup> This film was the sound adaptation of *Dawn*, a 1928 silent film, and both were based on the 1928 biographical novel *Dawn* by Reginald Berkeley, which was published again in 1939 as *The Story of Nurse Cavell*. Herbert Wilcox wrote, produced and directed both films, and his wife, Anne Neagle, played Cavell in 1939. While controversy surrounded the original release of *Dawn* over its portrayal of Germany and the injustice the film allegedly did to Cavell’s image, the 1939 film had no such problems. *Nurse Edith Cavell* and the story it told would come to have new meaning in the climate of World War II. For example, an author writing for *The Times* realized, based on the Cavell story, that Nazi aggressions were “typical” of Germans.<sup>43</sup> A month later another critique of the film appeared. The author praised both the director for maintaining the “Antigone” figure of Cavell and Neagle for correctly representing her as a “superhuman” and “heroic woman.” The article concluded that Cavell’s story provided both “an enduring example of German hatred towards England” and a better understanding of the “current conflict.”<sup>44</sup> Two years later, Stanley Washburn, a military correspondent for *The Times*, wrote an article on the problems facing Britain. In light of the events of World War II, Washburn argued that British society needed to look to its past to understand the present. One aspect of that past was the story of “the English nurse,” Edith Cavell. According to Washburn, her death at the

41. A stunning example of this are the numerous negative reviews of Cavell’s nursing skills done while she was a staff nurse at the London Hospital. These reviews have been on file in the Hospital’s archives since at least the early 1920s. Yet, no biographer refers to them. Information based on a telephone conversation with the head archivist of the London Hospital, 8 June 2000.

42. *Nurse Edith Cavell*, directed by Herbert Wilcox. 96 minutes. Imperado Pictures, R.C.A. Victor, 1939.

43. *The Times*, 2 September 1939, p. 8.

44. *The Times*, 12 October 1939, p. 6.

hands of the “enemy” demonstrated all too well the depths of German depravity.<sup>45</sup>

British subjects involved in underground operations against the Germans during the Second World War drew upon these themes in establishing a connection to the past through Cavell. Sue Ryder was one such person, who saw Cavell as “a symbol of superb courage and faith, irrespective of race or creed, and therefore, the precursor of thousands of men and women suffering for the help they gave to those fighting in the cause of right, and who finally—without bitterness in their hearts—faced death unafraid.”<sup>46</sup> Ryder’s testimonial suggests that the mythical Cavell provided a model to emulate and became a genesic source from which to draw inspiration. Here we enter the realm of legend.

Cavell has been described as “the British Nurse,” “the British Woman,” and a saint and Christ-like figure. These images represent her legend. Legends are not used to explain the past, but to provide those in the present with an exemplar, a persona who represents an ideal for a group’s members. Legends can resemble myths, as both are constructed narratives that serve a particular group’s ideology. However, to refer to a person as “legendary” means that he/she exemplifies the group’s ideal, and whose actions, thoughts or deeds are to be revered and imitated.

Propagandists provided the imagery of Cavell’s posthumous legendary existence. They connected her to Joan of Arc, Antigone and other such figures, established the important qualities of her remembrance such as noble, strong and dutiful, and, most importantly, disseminated these understandings to a global audience. While propagandists could not directly control the extent to which groups adopted their messages, they did target those most susceptible to their influences; such was the case, as we have already seen, with women. What makes Cavell legendary, then, is a belief in her exemplary nature. For nurses, Cavell remains the “Florence Nightingale of Brussels” and the person responsible for professionalizing and modernizing nursing on the Continent. Her duty to her patients, quite naturally, is paradigmatic for those in the nursing profession.<sup>47</sup> For feminists, Cavell’s story tells of a strong, courageous woman stranding up to the men of the world—a modern Antigone. She serves, therefore, as an illustration to women worldwide of resolve in face

45. Stanley Washburn, “What Makes Morale” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 5 (1941): 530-31.

46. Quoted in Rowland Ryder, *Edith Cavell* (New York, 1975), p. 240.

47. John Cooper, “Badge of Courage,” *Nursing Times* 91, n. 41 (October 1995): 42-43; Laurence Dopson, “An International Nurse,” *Nursing Standard* 13, n. 39 (9 June 1999): 19; No Author, “Executed in the Cause of Duty,” *Nursing Mirror* 161, n. 15 (9 October 1985): 13; and Ruth Hellyer, “My Matron,” *Nursing Mirror* (9 October 1975): 50-52.



of insurmountable odds. For Christians, Cavell is, quite simply, a saint. Her final hours spent in prayer and meditation coupled with her interment in the shadows of Norwich Cathedral, provide ample evidence of her piety.

### A Timeless Tale

The memory of Edith Cavell consists of a series of traits, qualities and references as held by a particular group. These notions take the form of images, and both the images and the groups that remember them can be traced back to the propaganda of World War I. The collective memory of Cavell, however, is dyadic, as it has taken the form of both legend and myth over the last eighty-five years. The legend indicates an exemplary status by drawing on the images of Cavell most relevant to a particular group's needs. The myth draws on that same imagery, but understands Cavell not only as a model but also as a founding member. Despite this difference, both legend and myth locate the imagery of Cavell in physical places of memory. Interestingly, this too is a remnant of the war as the words of the propagandist were coupled with physical representations. These depictions came first as a picture of Cavell published in *The Daily Mirror* on 17 October 1915. This image, which included her two dogs, became the most often reproduced picture of Cavell during the war, and it was used at nearly every event where propaganda about her was disseminated. Along with the picture were frequently distributed roses and lilacs in "remembrance of Edith Cavell." Not surprisingly, this same picture was also included in nearly every postwar publication about Cavell, and in 1920 a British horticulturist bred the Edith Cavell Rose and the Edith Cavell Lilac. The propagandists, therefore, helped to establish both the images of Cavell and their location.

Yet, a primary question remains unanswered: why Edith Cavell? I offer three answers. The first possible reason for Cavell's life after death may be the broad nature of the audience targeted by the propagandists. This study has alluded to Cavell the woman, the nurse and the pious Christian. The three images differ, as each group focused on that which best represented them. With such a wide base of remembrances, Cavell was not easily forgotten. This explanation, however, is partial at best and only hints at the nature of why a society chooses to remember one event or person and not another. While this essay has shown that propagandists can instill societal memory, it does not explain why that society *chooses* to remember just certain events or persons. In World War I propagandists were also involved



in championing other dramatic cases, such as that of Captain Fryatt.<sup>48</sup> Yet, to the best of my knowledge, no biographies of Fryatt are due out this year, and there are no yearly festivals commemorating his execution.

A second reason, which relates to the first, is the large number of commemorative places of memory. Numerous groups have come to understand and venerate Cavell in different ways. These varying notions have become immortalized in an array of memorials, as each group has attempted to preserve its memory of Cavell against societal amnesia. These points of remembrance were depositories for her various images. By 1921 there were at least a hundred such places in England, and countless more spread around the world. Memorials were constructed in hospitals, churches, parks, schools and city squares. Cavell's name also adorned boats, power plants, streets, office buildings and more. Given the number and prominence of these memorials, the opportunity for public contact with the sites of Cavell's memory became vast. As with the case of the many biographies, these physical placements provide the viewer/reader with a rich source of remembrances. Forgetting Cavell was not easy. This also helps to understand, perhaps, why the figure of Cavell, unlike other victims, survived the war. She may simply have occupied more places of memory than anyone else.

A final reason has nothing to do with places of memory, group theory, propaganda or memory in general, but more with society's need for inspiring figures. Thomas Carlyle argued that "in all epochs of the world's history, we shall find the Great Man to have been the indispensable savior of his epoch."<sup>49</sup> While Cavell may not have been the savior of her time, her story has exerted a certain appeal for the last eighty-five years. The basic qualities of the story—devotion, nobleness, honesty, integrity, patriotism

48. Fryatt was captain of the merchant ship *Brussels*. On 28 March 1915, following an unsuccessful attack by a German submarine, Fryatt attempted to ram the sub. For his efforts, the British Navy awarded him a gold watch. The Germans, embarrassed by the incident, were anxious to make an example of him. On 22 June 1916 the Germans succeed in capturing his ship. Fryatt was found guilty of being a "*Franc-tireur*" and executed on 29 July. The Allied press was quick to notice the story, with *The Times* calling it a "new German atrocity." For some it became the example of German atrocities at sea. A pamphlet was published, *The Murder of Captain Fryatt*, and translated into French, Dutch and Italian. At the peace conference in 1919 one of the three charges against the Kaiser brought by British law officers was "offences in the category of the execution of Captain Fryatt." However, there are few memorials to Fryatt and certainly no plays or movies about his life and death. See *The Times*, 29 July 1916, p. 9; and Lloyd George, *Memories of the Peace Conference* (New York, 1972), p. 81.

49. Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (London, 1897), p. 13.

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and martyrdom—have a timeless enchantment. As American journalist Hunter Thompson once wrote:

Myths and legends die hard . . . we love them for the extra dimension they provide, the illusion of near-infinite possibility to erase the narrow confines of most men's reality. Weird heroes and mold-breaking champions exist as living proof to those who need it that the tyranny of "the rat race" is not yet final.<sup>50</sup>

We remember Edith Cavell because we like her story.

### Conclusion

A criticism of my approach to Cavell's myth and legend could note the possibility exists that she was, in fact, a pious, noble, strong and dutiful nurse who willingly gave her life for King and Country. Indeed, this might very well have been the case, which again prompts the question: who was the "real" Edith Cavell? No one truly knows. She died unmarried and childless, and no diary of hers was ever found.<sup>51</sup> Cavell's story as it stands today is based on secondhand testimony and accounts taken twenty, thirty and even fifty years after her death from those who claimed to have known her.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, earlier biographies, films, plays and newspaper reports heavily influence these accounts. In Cavell's case, therefore, the facts are irrelevant and only the images have meaning, since the study of a myth or legend is less about revealing the falsehoods of history than discovering why it is groups believe certain things to be true. In other words, the study of myths and legends is an exploration of the human mindscape, similar, perhaps, to the role Charles Baudelaire once ascribed to imagination:

The whole visible universe is but a storehouse of images and signs to which the imagination will give a relative place and value; it is a

50. Hunter S. Thompson, "Those Daring Young Men in their Flying Machines . . . Ain't What They Used to Be!" *Pageant* (Sept. 1969): 32.

51. Four pages of a diary believed to be Cavell's were found in May 1919. These pages, however, if Cavell's, yield no insights into the persona of their author.

52. Rowland Ryder's *Edith Cavell* was championed as the book that set the Edith Cavell story straight. In his acknowledgments, however, Ryder admits that the "facts" for his book came from newspapers, previous biographies, and a series of interviews with associates (and sometimes friends of associates) of Cavell conducted in the late 1960s and early 70s. In legal terms this is circumstantial evidence at best. See Rowland Ryder, *Edith Cavell*, pp. ix-x.

sort of pasture with which the imagination must digest and transform.<sup>53</sup>

For Cavell, the imaginative pastures of the storyteller gave her image place and importance. Factual truth within these milieus has no precise meaning, and only the collective notions of Cavell have value. It is here, in the collective memory of Edith Cavell, in a world of myths and legends, that we find the “real” woman, nurse and Christian—an ideality of human cognition, yes, but inimitable and historical nonetheless.

53. Jonathan Mayne, ed., *The Mirror of Art* (Garden City, NY, 1955), p. 46.