

In Florence Nightingale's Footsteps

*A Biography of Mary O'Connell Bianconi with Particular Reference to
her Nursing Career*

By

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Britain's declaration of war on Germany on 4 August 1914 was one of the first in what went on to become an orchestrated series of worldwide battle cries resulting in the mass mobilisation of Europe's and, indeed, much of the world's young and middle-aged population, who flocked in their tens of millions to additionally staff the armies, navies, fledgling air forces, and nursing corps of the opposing powers for the duration of the First World War.

While the majority of those mobilised on both sides of the divide were men, a significant minority were women, most of whom served as professional and volunteer nurses throughout the conflict, in their home countries, at stationary hospitals near the various theatres of war, on hospital ships and trains routinely moving wounded personnel from the battlefields, at casualty clearing stations adjacent to military engagements, and on the front lines during and after all battles waged.¹

The contributions of nurses worldwide throughout the 1914-1918 conflict have yet to be fully documented, dissected, and commended. Despite this regrettable gap in extant factual Great War literature, the quality of nursing care administered by women to wounded and dying combatants has been widely acknowledged.²

In fact, the wartime endeavours of nurses have been accorded an impact even greater than that of having widely and positively influenced individual experiences of physical and mental trauma, up to and including expiration, amongst their respective patients.

Within the frequently divergent and constantly revisionist social, political, and historical commentary conducted throughout the ninety years that have passed since 1918, one of the few uniformly and consistently held positions of all parties contributing to same has been that the most significant single factor influencing the (almost) universal gradual shifting away from patriarchy towards gender equality in the period, amongst individuals, within families, communities, nations, and internationally, was the participation and conduct of women, and, in particular, nurses, in World War One.

One of these commentators, Lyn MacDonald, made the point succinctly when she said, in the foreword to her book *The Roses of No Man's Land*:

‘...It was here (on the battlefields of the Great War) that women achieved a quiet but permanent revolution, by proving beyond question they could do anything’.³

Referring specifically to volunteer nurses, she continued:

‘ If the ghost that haunts the towns of Ypres and Arras and Albert is...the British Tommy...then the ghost of Boulogne and Etaples and Rouen ought to be a girl. She’s called Elsie or Gladys or Dorothy, her ankles are swollen, her feet are aching, her hands reddened and rough. She has little money, no vote, and has almost forgotten what it feels like to be really warm...She sleeps in a tent...She is twenty-three. She is the daughter of a clergyman, a lawyer, or a prosperous businessman, and has been privately educated and groomed to be a ‘lady’. She wears the unbecoming uniform of a VAD...She is on active service and as much a part of the war as Tommy...

On the face of it, no one could have been less equipped for the job than these gently nurtured girls who walked straight out of Edwardian drawing-rooms into the manifold horrors of the First World War...

They worked in flooded operating theatres... where, in a big ‘push’, there might be four operations going on at one time, and as many as ten amputations an hour. They nursed men with terrible wounds and sent them off...or laid them out when they died. They nursed in wards where the stench of gas-gangrenous wounds was almost overpowering. They nursed men choking to death as the fluid rose in their gassed lungs, men whose faces were mutilated beyond recognition, whose bodies were mangled beyond repair, whose nerves were shattered beyond redemption...

Yet the volunteer nurses rose magnificently to the occasion...

(And when the war was over), they shortened their skirts, bobbed their hair...and...set out to carve themselves a place in what was still a man’s world...’⁴

Mary O’Connell Bianconi was one of those volunteer nurses for whom, like the portrait painted by Lyn MacDonald, the First World War largely defined the early years of her adult life and subsequently influenced her, along with countless others, to play an active part in helping to redefine a new world order in which, slowly but surely, the vast majority of men and women choose to embrace the concept and the spirit of gender equality.

Perhaps her biggest contribution to the shaping of this ‘brave new world’ was to decide, as a very young woman, to make an independent, non-typical lifestyle choice, and to continue, right up until the time of her death, to live a life less ordinary. In this regard, Lyn MacDonald’s pen picture of ‘a typical outcome’ for the Great War volunteer nurse is, in her case, uncannily accurate, as shall presently be revealed.

Mary (or Molly, as she was affectionately referred to by those close to her throughout her life) was born on 22 December 1896 to John and Arabella (née Burke Hayes) O’Connell Bianconi. She was, as her double-barrelled surname perhaps suggests, a descendant of two of Ireland’s most prominent nineteenth century public figures, Daniel O’Connell, the Liberator, champion and chief exponent of the Catholic Emancipation and Repeal (of the 1801 Act of Union which united the parliaments of Britain and Ireland) movements, and Charles Bianconi, ‘King of the Irish roads’, the founder of public transport in the country, a quintessential Victorian self-made man. The two men, near enough in age, were also close friends throughout their lives.

Charles Bianconi had made the acquaintance of Daniel O'Connell when both were young men. Their friendship remained steadfast right up until the day that O'Connell died, en route to Rome, on 15 May 1847.⁵

Given the strong bond between the two men and the interconnectedness of their families over such a long period of time, it was no great surprise to anyone when two of Bianconi's three children married two of the O'Connells. His son, Charley, married Daniel O'Connell's grand-daughter, Eilie FitzSimon⁶, in 1859, and his daughter, Mary Anne (after whom her grand-daughter, Molly, was named), married the liberator's nephew, Morgan John O'Connell, a man much older than her, in 1865. Mary Anne and Morgan John had one son, John, who was Molly's father. Molly was, therefore, the great grand-daughter of Charles Bianconi and the great grand-niece of Daniel O'Connell.

John and Arabella O'Connell Bianconi spent the early years of their married life living at Ballylean House (part of the Clare estate once owned by the Liberator when he was MP for the county⁷) with their daughters Helen, Molly, Oona, and Mabel.

They separated, however, while the children were still quite young and Arabella and her daughters moved to Longfield House⁸ outside Cashel in County Tipperary once her estranged husband settled the estate on his family after the couple's disavowal. Longfield house and estate had once been the home of Charles Bianconi.⁹ In his latter years, he bequeathed the holding to Molly's father, John, his grandson and sole surviving heir.¹⁰ Bianconi, however, placed one condition on the inheritance. John was to legally adopt his Italian surname, through changing his own, by deed poll, to O'Connell Bianconi, to ensure the continuation of the family name of which he was so proud.¹¹ Hence John's, and subsequently Molly's and her siblings', unusual last name.

Molly was educated at Laurel Hill Convent in Limerick and, just prior to the outbreak of the Great War, at finishing schools at Namur (in French speaking southern Belgium) and Paris.

She never 'finished' finishing school, choosing instead to leave in 1915, aged nineteen, to join the Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD). This was the first of many 'road(s) less travelled' taken by Molly O'Connell Bianconi throughout her life.

She was initially posted to a hospital in Yorkshire. Such a 'first' posting, in a conventional hospital far from the front lines of the conflict, would have been typical for all newly recruited VADs in 1915. They were not, after all, professionally qualified nurses and, therefore, required accelerated training within properly staffed and equipped hospitals before being sent out to the almost constant pressure and danger that awaited them in the various theatres of war to which they had pledged their futures for the duration of the war. They continued to be supervised and trained when they reached their eventual destinations at the heart of the numerous battles that waged on several fronts throughout the years 1914-1918, frequently in appalling conditions. They learned about new medical techniques and procedures, with rapidly improving and expanding medical equipment, relating to the treatment of diabetes, blood transfusions, dental reconstruction, plastic surgery, and psychiatry, from qualified nurses and doctors pioneering numerous medical advances in direct response

to the urgent needs of their war-damaged patients until they, too, were adequately trained to the high standards required of all First World War health care professionals attempting to function in the midst of the carnage that surrounded them.

Having successfully completed a basic instruction programme for untrained nurses at the hospital in Yorkshire, Molly further volunteered to attend a Motor Car Maintenance Course that she was also deemed to have effectively passed in 1916. Interestingly, knowledge of motor car maintenance would have been fairly rare amongst men in the second decade of the twentieth century, with the scarcity (in terms of production capacity) and cost of the machines rendering them far beyond the orbit of the average punter. It would, therefore, have been considered extraordinary for a woman, and, particularly, one of Molly's privileged position in society, to have such expertise in the workings of the motor cars. All things considered, while she had, again, chosen to acquire another non-typical 'skill-set', one cannot help but speculate that her interest in, and affinity with, vehicular transport was pre-programmed into her genetic make-up and that Charles Bianconi, had he still been alive, would have been inordinately proud of his great grand-daughter!

Armed with basic training in nursing and motor car maintenance, Molly was then accepted into the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry (FANYs). While waiting for a posting, she would have known that she was probably going to be sent overseas, somewhere on the front lines of the conflict, and that her job would entail driving ambulances (not forgetting, of course, when occasions demanded, and sometimes under extremely hostile conditions, also maintaining the vehicles, rectifying faults with their motors, frames, and body works) to and from battle sites to administer emergency medical care (when feasible) to injured personnel for whom delays might prove fatal, to transport the remaining wounded to casualty clearing stations, hospital trains and ships, or base hospitals, depending on local circumstances including the ready availability of some or all of the options listed. She would also have known that evacuating the wounded from battlefields was frightening and fiercely dangerous work.

In August 1917, aged twenty-one, Molly was sent, with a contingent of FANYs, to Amiens in France. Although she, in common with the rest of the 'foot soldiers', probably had no sense of the real extent of the Allies' ongoing challenges, the Western Front in 1917 was at least as frenetic as it had been the previous year, perhaps even moreso, since the Germans, free of the war in the East, could focus their undivided attention on the campaign in France and Flanders.

Be that as it may, Molly conducted herself in an exemplary fashion on this, her first posting to the front, gaining a reputation for hard work, innovation, bravery, courage, endurance, and flair.¹²

She was redeployed to St. Omer in 1918, soon after the start of the Kaiser's 'Spring Offensive'.¹³ Given the initial success of the Kaiserschlacht, her second posting at the front could have been brief, terrifying, and fatal. As it turned out, it was, simply, terrifying. In fact, from the position of hindsight, one cannot help but be glad that Molly, and indeed the vast majority of the Allied expeditionary forces, had no idea how close the Germans came to winning the war throughout the early months of 1918! She arrived in St. Omer at the beginning of April and spent the next few

months helping to evacuate the wounded during the Allied retreat. Her approach to the job was as thorough, dedicated, and inspiring as had been her attitude the previous year in Amiens. She was, in fact, awarded a Military Medal (MM) for her conduct throughout the period of retreat which she subsequently received from King George V, together with a citation for bravery, addressed to her and six of her colleagues, which read:

‘Miss Muriel Thompson, F.A.N.Y.
Miss Winifred Millicent Elwes, F.A.N.Y.
Miss Elsie Agnes Curtis, F.A.N.Y.
Miss Mary Richardson, F.A.N.Y.
Miss Molly O’Connell Bianconi, F.A.N.Y.
Miss Hilda May Dickinson, F.A.N.Y.
Miss Elizabeth Beveridge Callander, F.A.N.Y.

For conspicuous devotion to duty during an (sic.) hostile air raid. All these lady drivers were out with their cars during the raid, picking up and in every way assisting the wounded and injured. They showed great bravery and coolness, and were an example to all ranks.’¹⁴

Almost of equal distinction, Molly was also specially mentioned in General Herbert Plumer’s dispatches for bravery in the field. She was one of the first, of very few, women to be honoured with both distinctions during the First World War.

Molly returned to Ireland soon after the ending of the war in 1918. Clearly not prepared to stay at home in Longfield House essentially doing nothing, conditioned to making unusual lifestyle choices centred around work, and whether she had already met the man who was to become her husband a year later and wanted to join him as soon as possible, or whether she simply wanted the experience of travel and adventure, she left for London almost immediately.

Once settled there, she began working as one of London’s first real mannequins (artificial wooden, and, later, wax, ones appeared in store windows throughout Britain for the first time, apparently, a mere fifty years earlier).¹⁵ Whatever about the job itself, and there are no further details available through which to make a considered estimation other than the bare facts mentioned in one of the obituaries published at the time of her death, it is interesting to note that Molly once again choose to be one of the ‘first’ women in London to undertake work as a model.

She married Captain Arthur Stanley Watson, Queen’s Royal West Surrey Regiment, on 18 December 1919, at Brompton Oratory in South Kensington. To date, there are no further details available regarding the circumstances of their courtship, engagement, or nuptials. The same is true of their married life together. All that is currently known is that the couple separated within a short period of time. They had no children and, when Molly inherited Longfield House and Estate soon afterwards, she returned home to live there.

Having worked continuously since she had left school, always interested in pursuing novel careers, clearly not afraid to take risks, and presumably needing a substantial income to properly maintain her house and farm in a post-war era that had seen steady declines in the ready availability of staff willing to ‘go into service’, together with sharp increases in the general cost of labour, Molly decided, in the early 1930s, to

apply for a hotel licence and open her home to paying guests. Considering the status of the house and indeed her family, over many years, details of the licence application process were published in local and national newspapers¹⁶ with much attention being given to the Judge's concerns that Molly didn't, in fact, know anything about running a hotel. Undaunted, she assured him that, firstly, she would employ someone who did to help her unravel any mysteries resulting from her stewardship of the new venture and, secondly, most of the expected guests would be friends and acquaintances from elsewhere in Ireland, as well as from Britain, and that she was very well versed in entertaining same! The licence was duly granted and, up until the outbreak of World War Two almost ten years later, Molly ran Longfield house and estate as a 'hunting, shooting, fishing' lodge.

At the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, Molly, then aged forty-three, rejoined the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry. She was subsequently offered a commission as a Junior Commander (the equivalent Army rank was that of Lieutenant) in the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS), the women's branch of the British Army during World War Two. The ATS accepted volunteers between the ages of seventeen and forty-three, with First World War veterans being accepted up to the age of fifty.

The ATS had been formed on 9 September 1938. It had 65,000 members in September 1941. By VE day on 8 May 1945, that number had increased to over 190,000 affiliates.

The women of the ATS were not allowed to serve in battle. Due to shortages in the numbers of men available, however, they were engaged in support duties such as radar operations, helping to crew anti-aircraft guns, and working as military police.¹⁷

When the war ended, Molly returned home again and proceeded to re-launch Longfield House and estate as a hotel. She retired from the business, however, when she was approaching her late fifties, to embark on an entirely new career path.

She had been aware, since she was a child, of the fact that her grandmother, her namesake, Mary Anne, had written a book about her father, Charles Bianconi, in 1878.¹⁸ She also knew that, apart from her three siblings and herself, there were no Bianconis left in Ireland to carry on the family name and preserve the family legacy. She decided, therefore, to write a new biography about her great grandfather.

Commencing the project in the early 1950s, and with the help of a co-writer, Colonel S.J. Watson, MBE, of Ballingarrane, County Tipperary, she spent the next ten years processing Bianconi's papers, diaries, letters, and various other extant remnants of his coaching empire left to her along with his house and estate. *Bianconi: King of the Irish Roads* was eventually published, to modest critical acclaim, by Allen Figgis in 1962.

Before she had a chance to turn her sights to something else different and new, Molly died in 1968, aged seventy-two. Her obituary contained an impressive list of her numerous occupations that had, like her great grandfather's coaching business, spanned over half a century. It concluded with the following poignant tribute:

‘ (She was) ...a woman of splendid physical appearance, despite advancing years...a warm, friendly, jovial character, well liked by all who knew her’.¹⁹

She was the last of the Irish Bianconis to be buried in the crypt of the church built by Charles Bianconi at Boherlahan adjacent to Longfield house.

Of the many and varied careers embarked on by Molly O’Connell Bianconi throughout her fifty year old working life, it is as a nurse of the Great War that she is best remembered and singularly honoured. Like ‘the lady with the lamp’ in whose footsteps she so impressively followed, Molly, too, with courage, ability, and determination, carried a glimmer of hope into various pockets of the Western Front at a time when the lights had, indeed, ‘gone out all over Europe’.

¹ For further details, see Yvonne McEwan, *‘It’s a Long Way to Tipperary’: British and Irish Nurses in the Great War.*

² See, for example, Joyce Marlow (Ed.), *Women and the Great War*, pp. 70-74.

³ Lyn MacDonald, *The Roses of No Man’s Land*, pp. xi-xii.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ For further details on the friendship between the two men and the interconnectedness of their families, see Mary O’Connell Bianconi and S.J. Watson, *Bianconi: King of the Irish Roads.*

⁶ Daughter of Christopher FitzSimon MP, whose wife, Ellen, was Daniel O’Connell’s daughter. For further information, see Ibid., p.169.

⁷ For more information, see Fergus O’Ferrall, *Daniel O’Connell*, pp. 63-64.

⁸ For further details, see www.clarelibrary.ie/eolas/coclare/history/lack_school/personalities.htm

⁹ Molly O’Connell Bianconi subsequently inherited Longfield House and estate. After her death in 1968, it remained empty for some time before being bought and restored to its former glory by John Mangier. With its substantial stable quarters still in place since the time of Bianconi’s coaching business, the house estate readily became part of Magnier’s Coolmore Stud nearby. On the occasion of the wedding of Magnier’s daughter, Kate, to one of Ireland’s top flat trainers, David Waschman, in 2005, he gifted the holding to them. They live there now, and, from the estate, operate the highly successful Longfield Stud.

¹⁰ For more information, see Molly O’Connell Bianconi and S.J. Watson, Op. Cit., p. 170.

¹¹ Because John (who was an only child, his sister having died in infancy) and Arabella O’Connell Bianconi had no sons, the Bianconi surname ceased to exist in Ireland upon the passing of Molly and her sisters. There are, however, numerous descendants of Charles’ branch of the Bianconi family throughout the Lombardy region of Italy.

¹² These qualities were, for example, highlighted in General Plumer’s dispatches for bravery in the field.

¹³ For further details of the Kaiserschlacht, see Max Arthur, *Forgotten Voice of the Great War*, p.18. See also Richard Holmes, *The First World War in Photographs*, pp. 249-303.

¹⁴ From the *Fifth Supplement to The London Gazette*, Friday, 26 July 1918.

¹⁵ For further details, see www.madhaberdasher.com/brief-history-of-mannequins .

¹⁶ See, for example, *The Tipperary Star*, 17 October 1931.

¹⁷ From www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Auxiliary-Territorial-service .

¹⁸ Mrs Morgan John O’Connell, *Charles Bianconi: A Biography 1786-1875* .

¹⁹ *The Irish Times*, 2 September 1968. See also *The Nationalist*, 14 September 1968.

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