

# BACKGROUND TO EDITH CAVELL LETTER, 26-07-1915

## **Image 1** - Edith Cavell (EC) as matron – photograph taken around 1910

### **1. The July 1915 letter itself**

Many thousands of letters must have been sent home from British soldiers and nurses at the front to family members during WW1.

This letter is distinctive in that it is from a British nurse living behind the lines – and many of EC's letters back home had to be committed to men escaping Belgium who carried them home secretly, or had to be sent via third parties in Brussels.

### **2 Is the letter definitely from Edith Cavell?**

The *content* suggests it is - see the references to Gracie, Jackie, W(est) Runton (in North Norfolk where family friends lived) etc - EC's mother was familiar with all of them (see 7 and 8 below).

The *style* suggests it is - we can compare with earlier letters EC wrote to her mother on 08-08-14, 30-8-14, 14-9-14, early October, 19-10-14, 8-11-14, 2-11-14, 22-12-14, 14-3-15, 14-6-14 all survive (the Ryder and Souhami biographies (see end note) have their texts). Neither biographer was aware of the existence of the 26-7-15 letter.

The *handwriting* suggests it is - we can compare images of one of EC's last letters from prison about 11 weeks later (**Images 2.1 and 2.2** - a letter from EC to her colleague sister Wilkins (2pp) dated 11-10-15).

EC was arrested August 5 1915 so this will have been her last letter when at liberty delivered to her mother. She was arrested in the old Clinique (see para 5 below).

It is unlikely her mother got a reply through to EC in prison between August 7 and October 11. (It would be intriguing to know what address/es EC was using in Brussels while still at liberty to have any mail delivered 'under the radar')

EC's final letter to her mother, written in her cell on 11-10-15, the night before her execution, was never delivered. Despite protests, the Germans declined to put it into the public domain.

### **3 The destination of the letter**

It was received by Mrs Louisa Sophia Cavell, EC's mother

**Image 3** aged c 79

Mrs Cavell had been to spend some days at the Clinique to see if living with Edith might suit her. [Ryder dates this as over Christmas 1913, Souhami as 1910 within months of her being widowed – this seems more likely]. Mrs C appears to have been firm that such a move would not work well for her - but EC's offer does illustrate her concern for her mother. The July 1915 letter shows EC tried to keep in touch even if she couldn't be very explicit about some of her circumstances.

Mrs C was aged 79 at the time of the letter, living alone in a terrace house in College Road Norwich - she and her husband had moved there in 1909 when (after 46 years) he resigned from being vicar in nearby Swardeston. He died the following year.

In 1915 the whereabouts of the three other Cavell children were:

*Lilian* - married - nursing - Henley on Thames (where Mrs C eventually moved – she died there on June 17 1918, before the return of EC's remains to England in May 1919)

*Florence* - nurse - matron of Withernsea Convalescent Hospital, Yorkshire

*John* - single - living and working at Norwich Union in Norwich - special constable.

None of them would have been well placed to care for Mrs C in 1910 or thereafter though, before his death, her father had asked Florence to be there for his wife..

EC's letters to her mother frequently refer to the future when communication would be straightforward and all would be explained, unhindered by concerns about divulging potentially incriminating evidence.

#### **4. Reference to her Mother's letter to Edith Cavell June 24 1915**

No copy of this letter is extant - an earlier letter written by Mrs Cavell on August 21 1914 reads:

*My darling Edith*



*It is almost against hope that I am writing for news of you - if at all possible do let me have a line or wire - no news is intolerable, one conjectures all sorts of things - my anxiety is terrible but I am afraid yours must be much worse....*

*I pray for you constantly that God will grant you His loving protection... I cannot write on any other topic - my heart is full of one thing. My dearest love to you dear child*

*Your loving Mother*

The letter only came into Edith's hands in March 1915.

#### **5. The original nursing school and the new nursing school in Uccle**

The original nursing school  was located in the Rue de la Culture in 4 converted terraced houses. It was set up for 12 nurses, 24 bedrooms for patients and accommodation for EC and other senior staff. This was felt to be unsuitable as the school and its student numbers expanded and fund-raising for a new purpose-built school building started in 1912. Work on a site at 32, rue Uccle-Bruxelles had started in 1913 under EC's supervision. It was to have a central block with lecture halls, treatment rooms and operating theatres with two wings, one providing rooms for 50 nurses and the other beds for 30 patients. 

Delays occurred from August 1914 from problems with building materials getting to Uccle - and presumably Belgian workers being in military service or finding it difficult getting to the site with reduced public transport.

Jacqueline van Til's account confirms that EC's last weeks at liberty saw her very pre-occupied with the 4 remaining nurses and 5 students and other staff based at the original school in Rue de la Culture in preparing and cleaning the new school for occupation - and moving materials there - by handcart. (The old and new Schools were about three-quarters of a mile apart).

EC herself never moved in to the new premises but several nurses did before she was arrested. It is difficult to establish quite what use was made of the new School from the end of 1915 to 1919 - funds and staff seem to have been in short supply.

In 1920 the school was renamed The Ecole EC. The street it is in was renamed Rue EC (later renamed rue Franz Merjay). A statue of EC and her colleague Marie Depage was unveiled there.

#### **6. Pension referred to in the July 26 letter**

EC was scrupulous in her handling of money, including money for her mother (see also image 2.1 where she instructs Sr Wilkins how to settle her accounts).

EC presumably had set aside money as a pension when nursing in England 1896-1907 - it may have accrued to her from her employers. It appears from the letter to be lodged in a bank/pension fund (where it was known about by a Mr Dick) and to be likely to become accessible in early 1916 when she wishes her mother to access it as a source of income. An earlier letter to her mother suggests the pension amounted to £100.

#### **7. Gracie**

Grace Jemmett was sent out to her in Brussels to be cared for - she had become addicted to morphine when in hospital in England. She lived in the Clinique at the Rue de la Culture. Her father clearly paid money for EC's account for her care.

#### **8 Jackie**

Mrs C will have known Jack, EC's Belgian sheep dog. He had lived at the Clinique in her rooms since she adopted him in 1910 as a stray. On her death he was cared for in Brussels and then in Northern France with EC's friend the Princesse de Croy in her chateau. He died there in 1923 and was preserved. After some years in the Cavell Nurses Home in Norwich he was taken on by the Imperial War Museum in London.

## 9. What does the letter (in its 445 words) convey of the character of nurse Cavell?

1	Her commitment to her mother, including arranging regular correspondence to her	<p><i>..fewer opportunities of sending... .. glad .. to see your letter of June 24<sup>th</sup> Will you please reply to the address enclosed with this letter. I shall get your answer surely tho' probably with some delay.</i></p> <p><i>I often think of W. Runtton My dearest love to you &amp; all the family Ever your affectionate daughter</i></p>
2	Constraints on sharing news	<p><i>We are without news and very quiet and I can tell you nothing .. reply to the address enclosed with this letter</i></p>
3	Commitment to others Her mother's financial needs  Gracie Jackie  The new Nursing School Nurses Current patients	<p><i>Will you ask them to pay it direct to you quarterly if they can – and use it yourself. Gracie is better again... [Jack] gets old &amp; is not quite so frisky...</i></p> <p><i>It advances rapidly now &amp; the nurses are nearly all there already. The patients will be moved last.. glad we shall not have to move them far.</i></p>
4	Commitment to quality and detail	<p><i>[The new School] is very dirty as you may imagine &amp; will want going over many times The little garden in front is gay with flowers Her detailed instructions re payments and Gracie, her mother, her own pension etc</i></p>
5	Hope for the future	<p><i>... when I return, there will be much to relate. ... looking forward to a happy meeting later on..</i></p>

The letter goes on or after July 26 1915 to her widowed mother aged 79 in Norwich from a daughter who is under close surveillance by the German occupiers (see pages 5 and 6 below). She is managing an establishment with severe restrictions on staff, money and supplies. She is focussed on getting everyone up to the new Nursing School (which is about to be handed over after 3 years work). She has some patients in beds in the Clinique and needs to manage continuity of services to them through this change of location.

She cannot mention her activities in support of allied soldiers – she may have just had at least two and possibly three Irish soldiers hidden on the premises (or be about to have them in late July). The Clinique has already been searched on several occasions since June (see page 5). She is aware of the net closing on other participants in the underground network – its leader and others were arrested on July 31, five days after she wrote this letter.

Her *resolution* to carry on working, knowing that if she is arrested she may spend the rest of the War in concentration camp or even be executed, is challenging. Her *commitment to others* around her, for whom she is responsible, is evident: her concern for her mother's future is plain. There is *no word of anxiety or of exhaustion* – the impression is rather of composure. Twice the letter carries a message of *hope for the future* – while this is understandable in the light of the need to keep her mother hopeful, it is in keeping with the Christian faith which is so evident at her end (see right hand column of page 6 below).

## 10. Context of events around Edith Cavell (EC) up to and after the July 26 1915 letter

### Background up to July 1915

Date	Event	EC comment
<b>1907-14</b>	EC appointed matron of the first professional nursing school in Brussels autumn 1907. She starts with a group of 4 trainees. By 1914 she has around 300 nurses in 3 hospitals, 3 private nursing homes, 13 kindergartens and 24 schools.	
<b>1912</b>	Fund raising for new Nursing School premises	
<b>1913</b>	Building of the new Nursing School starts	
<b>1914</b>	Building of the new School continues to August	
July	EC is in Norfolk as usual for her annual holiday	
August 2 <sup>nd</sup>	EC receives a telegram from her deputy in Brussels advising that if she does not return immediately she will not be free to do so because war is imminent.	
2 <sup>nd</sup> /3 <sup>rd</sup>	EC takes the overnight ferry from Harwich to Ostend, going straight back to Brussels	EC says: 'My duty is to my nurses'
4	The Germans advance over the border into Belgium. The UK and Germany are at war	
5 onward	EC is involved preparing 18,000 hospital beds and supplies in Brussels under the Red Cross. Initially mainly Belgian wounded are treated	
20	The German army occupies Brussels	EC writes: 'Our hearts were divided between pity for these poor fellows, suffering the weariness and fatigue of an arduous campaign, and hate of a vindictive foe, bringing ruin and desolation'
22	Battle of Mons – first engagement in WWI of the British Expeditionary Force of some 80,000	
Late August-September	Brussels hospitals admit almost exclusively German soldiers	EC writes: 'Life has reverted to the middle ages. Poverty is extreme. Bread is short'
	Posters in streets of Brussels warning citizens to hand over allied soldiers or face penalties	EC wrote: 'I can only feel the deep and tender pity of a friend within the gates'
	German nurses arrive and take over hospitals	
	Work is halted on the building of the new school	
November 1	EC hides first 2 British wounded, Col Boger and Sgt Meachin, in the basement of her Clinique	
	Steady stream of Allied soldiers assisted by EC	
December 23	EC shelters Sgt Tunmore and Pte Lewis of the Royal Norfolk Regiment	
25	EC arranges a Christmas party for 30 children	
Late Dec	The two Norfolk soldiers are sent towards Holland twice – they return and are sheltered again	

<b>1915</b> Early Jan	The two Norfolk men get away successfully at their third attempt	
January on	EC provides a steady stream of men with shelter, medical aid and onward passage towards Holland	In her trial EC admits to having sheltered some 200 men
End April	A section of EC's diary records...	'Suspicious people have been to ask for help to leave the country either in the form of money, lodgings or guides. People have been taken on this way several times'
Mid May	EC writes a letter to her network colleagues...	'Tell all the helpers not to send any more men here for the present, as my situation in becoming more and more strained every day'
June	Gaston Quien, a French spy for the Germans, stays in the Clinique for some days June-July	
	Fewer Allied soldiers are being sheltered by EC	
Mid June	Raid by German police at EC's Clinique	
14	EC writes to her mother (this has been presumed to be her last letter to Mrs Cavell till the discovery of letter of July 26 1915 in the autumn 2020)	'All is quiet here as usual. We are only a small number, so many being at the front nursing Belgian soldiers. Our new school is still unfinished...'
	A further search of the Clinique– EC taken to police HQ and questioned for 3 hours.	EC burnt many of her records when she returned to the Clinique
Around June 30 <sup>th</sup>	The Princesse de Croy, one of EC's colleagues from the underground network visits. In her memoir she reports a discussion:	EC: 'I wish you hadn't come. Look at those men cleaning the square.. they have been there several days and are scarcely working at all. #they must be set to watch the house'. They were initially agreed that sheltering soldiers must stop but EC changed her mind – 'if one of the men were caught and shot it would be our fault'.

### During July 1915

Date	Event	EC comment
13	EC and team start move to the new Nursing School ¾ of a mile away	
Late July	3 men from the Royal Irish Rifles are sheltered and taken on to be handed on to local guides – dressed in white as monks from a silent order.	
26	<b>EC writes her last letter to her mother (newly discovered in autumn 2020)</b>	EC writes of the context: 'We are without news and very quiet and I can tell you nothing – after, when I return there will be much to relate'.

### Subsequent events

Date	Event	EC and others' comments
July 31	Leaders of the underground network are arrested	
	Another search of EC's Clinique	
August 2	Quien returns and questions Clinique staff	
3	Three callers who make out they were English are turned away by EC	
4	German officer searches EC's office	
5	EC and her deputy are arrested following search. EC is retained in custody: her deputy is released	
5-6	German police interrogate EC	
7	EC is moved from police HQ to St Gilles prison	
August 7 –October 7	EC is held for 10 weeks in solitary confinement, with ½ hour exercise daily, unable to communicate with any other prisoners	EC reflects on October 11 <sup>th</sup> : 'I thank God for these 10 weeks of quiet. My life has always been so hurried'.
August	Diplomatic efforts are made to get legal support	
August	EC's nurses are in the dark about her situation	
October 7 and 8	EC is tried with 34 others in the Belgian Senate chamber – her own trial lasts about 10 minutes.	Later she said 'I believe my sentence was just'.
9	Sentences on those tried recommended by the tribunal are considered and settled	'I have seen death so often that it is not strange or fearful to me'.
10	EC writes her last letter to her nurses	'In your beautiful new Institute you will have ..all that is necessary for the comfort of your patients and your own. ... I have perhaps sometimes been too strict but never knowingly unjust, and I have loved you all much more than you can know'.
11	3pm The accused from the network are informed of their sentences 9pm Rev Stirling Gahan, chaplain to her Anglican church in Brussels, visits EC  EC writes a letter to Sister Wilkins EC writes to her mother (letter never delivered) Evening – attempts are made by US and other diplomats to seek delay in execution	EC (on being asked whether she will appeal): 'It is useless: I am English' EC says to Gahan 'Standing as I do in the light of God and eternity I have realised that patriotism is not enough – I must have no hatred or bitterness towards anyone'. As he leaves EC says, knowing he will not be at the execution: 'We <i>shall</i> meet again' She concludes 'My love to you all . I am not afraid but quite happy'
12	7 am EC and her Belgian colleague Philippe Baucq are executed by 2 firing squads of 8 men at the Tir National and buried where they lay  Posters on the streets announce verdicts	EC's last words: 'I am glad to die for God and my country'. The German doctor present recalls: 'She went to her death with a bearing that is quite impossible to forget'

Sourced from: Rowland Ryder, *Edith Cavell*, Hamish Hamilton 1975 and Diana Souhami, *Edith Cavell*, Quercus 2010 by Nick Miller, November 2020 – enquiries to enquiry@edithcavell.org.uk