

Edith Cavell was killed by the German army on 12 October 1915. She was a 49-year-old British nurse working in Brussels who had hitherto attracted little attention and, if she had not been executed, it is likely she would have become one of many forgotten figures serving behind the lines of the First World War's Western Front. In death Cavell took on significance far beyond her relatively humble life: a martyr; a symbol of German beastliness; a heroine ranked in her profession next to Florence Nightingale; and a cause from which propaganda could emanate. A statue of her stands in St Martin's Place, London, King Albert of Belgium conferred on her the Cross of the Order of Leopold, the French made her a Chevalier of the Legion of Honour and the transporting of her remains for reburial in Norfolk in 1919 had Britons lining the streets like a state funeral. Cavell's legacy has endured. Her words on the eve of her execution – 'I realise that patriotism is not enough. It is not enough to love one's own people. One must love all men and hate none.' (Clark-Kennedy, 1965: 221) – have become a testament to the folly of war; and in 2015 the Royal Mint produced a £5 coin to commemorate the centenary of her death after nearly 110,000 people signed a petition asking for her to be commemorated (Simpson, 2014). Horne and Kramer (2001: 311) wrote that this modern admiration had its roots in public reaction a century earlier, a response stoked by a need to justify the suffering inflicted by the First World War and intensified by propaganda published by newspapers:

The British acquired their own martyr in the person of Edith Cavell. The explanation for the outpouring of British emotion on her death, apart from the fact that as a nurse she embodied wartime female selflessness, lies in the way her tale particularised the surrogate relationship of British opinion with the invasion of Belgium by providing a direct victim.

This article explores Britain's use of Cavell's death as a tool in a war that, according to Carruthers (2000: 29), was the first 'in which propaganda was a vital, and thoroughly organized instrument'. It does so by examining, in the main, three

newspapers: the *Daily Mail*, *Manchester Guardian* and *Daily Express*. The *Mail*, aimed at the emerging lower middle classes (Williams, 2010), began the war as the country's highest circulation newspaper with a daily sale of 946,000 (Butler and Sloman, 1975).<sup>1</sup> Owned by Lord Northcliffe, it achieved its success, according to Williams (2010), despite largely ignoring the issues of the day including Ireland, women's suffrage and pre-war industrial strife. Northcliffe did not ally his newspapers to any political party, but was a consistent critic of Asquith's government and in May 1915, five months before Cavell's death, he wrote an attack on Lord Kitchener, the War Secretary, claiming the British Army had been starved of shells, causing the *Mail*'s circulation paper's circulation to drop 1,386,000 to 238,000 (Taylor, 1996:). Two years later Northcliffe became part of David Lloyd George's coalition government, becoming responsible for propaganda in enemy countries, and when hostilities ended his newspapers vigorously demanded German reparations. The dominant figure at the *Manchester Guardian* was less flamboyant than Northcliffe, but one with a comparable significance in newspaper history. C. P. Scott, the editor and owner, had been Liberal MP for Leigh between 1895 and 1906 and, despite his newspaper's regional base and modest circulation of 40,000 in 1914 (Butler and Sloman, 1975), carried influence in the ruling governments from 1906 to 1922.<sup>2</sup> Scott regarded himself as a friend of Lloyd George, Minister of Munitions at the time of Cavell's death and Prime Minister from December 1916, but frequently disagreed with him, particularly when the post war government became more influenced by Conservatives and Unionists (Ayerst, 379). The *Daily Express* was launched in 1900 with the promise: "It will not be an organ of any political party, nor the instrument of any social clique. It will not provide a parade-ground for marshalling the fads of any individual"<sup>3</sup>. The first British national newspaper to print news on the front page, it

nevertheless was running at a loss by 1915 and only survived thanks to loans, including £25,000 from the Canadian-born Unionist MP Max Aitken (later Lord Beaverbrook) in January 1911. His influence grew in proportion to his increasing financial stake and he finally purchased the newspaper in November 1916. It had a circulation of 400,000 at the start of the war (Butler and Sloman, 1975), and, politically, thanks to Aitken, was aligned with the Conservatives and Unionists.

### **Edith Cavell**

Cavell, the daughter of a vicar, was born in Swardston, near Norwich, three weeks before Christmas in 1865 and described her childhood as a time when ‘life was fresh and beautiful’ (Souhami, 2011: 14). She became a governess at the age 22, first in Essex and then in Brussels from 1890, and followed her younger sisters into nursing only when she was 30. Cavell had wanted to do ‘something useful’, ‘something for people’ (Souhami, 2011: 45) from an early age and by the late Nineteenth Century the stigma surrounding the job, regarded as suitable for the old, weak, drunk or stupid (Florence Nightingale, cited by Spencer, 2011: 42) had receded. Her first appointment was as an assistant nurse in Tooting, south London, in December 1895 and she rose steadily, becoming a probationary nurse at London Hospital 10 months later, gaining a municipal medal for her work during an outbreak of typhoid in Maidstone and being promoted to matron when she worked at the Bradford Nursing Home in Manchester. While she was in the north of England she worked with patients in the neighbouring terraced houses and became known, according to Cook (2013), as ‘the poor man’s Nightingale’. A Mancunian contemporary wrote:

I can see her now in her cape and her black bag... hurrying through the streets. People would look up and say ‘there’s Nurse Cavell’. I remember her always first

on the scene when there was an accident in one of the mills or an explosion in a mine (Cook, 2013: 194).

In 1907 she returned to Brussels to teach nurses at the Berkendael Surgical Institute, training nurses for three hospitals, 24 schools and 13 kindergartens. Shaddox (1999) wrote that Cavell had a reputation for being dour and strict but suggested this might have stemmed from a desire to elevate the profession. In a letter home Cavell wrote: 'The old idea that is a disgrace for women to work is still held in Belgium and women of good birth and education still they think lose caste by earning their own living' (Shaddox, 1999: 7).

As Europe headed for war Cavell was visiting her mother in Norfolk but returned hurriedly to Brussels on news of the German Army massing for the invasion of Belgium, reportedly saying: 'At a time like this I am more needed than ever' (Hepplewhite, 2014: 101). When Brussels was occupied Cavell treated both German and Allied wounded, but some of the latter she helped escape to the neutral Netherlands. The German authorities arrested her on 15 August 1915 and she was charged with aiding the escape of 200 British and French soldiers. The fullness of her confession has been disputed by historians, but in court she admitted lodging the escapees and furnishing them with civilian clothes (Butcher, 2015).

She was imprisoned for 10 weeks and on Tuesday, 12 October, dressed in blue coat and skirt, a white blouse and a grey fur stole, she was executed with her Belgian accomplice Philippe Baucq. According to Souhami (2011: 376), she told an accompanying British clergyman, Reverend Horace Gahan: '*Ma conscience est tranquille.*' Some contemporary reports said she swooned on the way to the execution and was shot where she lay by a German officer. Others, including the *Manchester Guardian*, wrote that the firing squad refused to fire and a German officer had to

shoot her.<sup>4</sup> Historians since have discounted these versions, including Souhami (2011: 376):

There was a crack of gunfire. Edith Cavell's face streamed with blood. She jerked forward and three times her body rose up in a reflex action. One shot had gone through her forehead. There was a bullet hole as large as a fist through her heart. She remained upright at the post.

## **Methodology**

For the empirical part of the research the focus of the attention was the newspapers, which were chosen because they provided contrasting audiences, alternative political allegiances and different proprietors. The research comprised a study of the *Daily Mail*, *Manchester Guardian* and the *Daily Express* from 16 October 1915, the day her execution was first reported, to 18 May 1920, the day after her statue was unveiled in London. All significant reports were studied, in conjunction with editorials, readers' letters and advertisements, totalling more than 250 extracts. The study period allowed critical reflection of the press's response over a period of more than four years, examining coverage of her death, the use of her name to bolster the war effort in Britain and reports of her funeral. The newspaper columns were also used to track the passage of her name and story into other art forms.

This is an historical case study that traces the different discourses between newspapers and their audiences as the press moved from being influencer to influenced as the need to bolster opinion during the First World War ended. This corresponds to the three prominent news cycles regarding Cavell: the reports and reaction to her death in 1915 and early 1916; her funeral that coincided with the Paris Peace Conference in 1919; and the unveiling of her statue in London in 1920. Studies soon after the First World War, including Lippmann (1922), Lasswell (1927) and

Bernays (1928), looked at the biased use of words in newspapers in the description of Us/Them and Our/Their actions and characteristics and this paper applies a similar framework for the reports and headlines in the first three months after Cavell's execution. Van Dijk wrote that if this 'othering' was applied to newspaper reports:

We may expect that Our good actions and Their bad ones will in general tend to be described at a lower, more specific level, with many (detailed) propositions. The opposite will be true for Our bad actions and Their good ones, which, if described at all, will both be described in rather general, abstract and hence 'distanced' terms, without giving much detail (Van Dijk, in Bell and Garrett, 2000: 35).

Jowett and O'Donnell (2012: 303) wrote that this frequently manifested itself in language that tended to 'deify a cause and satanize opponents' and a typical example appeared in *The Times* in August 1914 when a correspondent reported that a witness had seen 'German soldiery chop off the arms of a baby which clung to its mother's skirts'.<sup>5</sup> The report added: 'Other stories showed that Germans shot or bayoneted the inmates on the pretence they had fired on them'. The first allusion to the butchery of the innocent blatantly painted the enemy as barbaric, but the words 'showed' and 'pretence' more subtly depicted German evil. 'Showed' could have been replaced with 'alleged', but the former removed any suggestion of doubt, while the use of 'pretence' implied that the Germans used deceit to cover their crimes.<sup>6</sup> By contrast, another report in the same edition wrote of the British troops' reception in France: 'It was roses, roses all the way'.<sup>7</sup>

Cavell's funeral in 1919 and the unveiling of her statue near Trafalgar Square a year later were treated differently by the press and, in turn, a contextual approach was made to the analysis of this and the subsequent reports. Whereas in 1915 newspapers responded to persuasion from Downing Street to manufacture support for the war, the hegemonic imperative had changed after the armistice and the Liberal-Unionist coalition had comprehensively won the December 1918 General Election on

an anti-German rhetoric. The Prime Minister Lloyd George wanted a conciliatory tone at Versailles (Taylor, 1988), but this was not fully reflected in the press's reporting the transfer of Cavell's body from Brussels to Norfolk and, although language modified, there were also hints of the anti-German 'frenzy' (Taylor, 1988: 127) for reparations. The narrative changed again for reports of Queen Alexandra's unveiling Cavell's statue in 1920 as Britain looked forward to peace rather than backward to war.

### **British Propaganda in the First World War**

The press, as the main conduit between the government and the public, played a vital part in sustaining the war effort, the author John Buchan commenting in 1917: 'So far as Britain is concerned, the war could not have been fought for one month without its newspapers' (Ferguson, 1998: 213). British propaganda focused on the demonisation of the enemy, – the German soldier was depicted as a murderer who committed 'all sorts of atrocities' (Demm, 1993: 181) – censorship and news management. Cavell's execution was just one incident in a list of crimes, including the alleged bayoneting of babies, reported by the British press (Knightley, 2002: 487), while censorship was achieved by the close control of news by the military authorities combined with news management provided by a 'tight-knit group of "press lords" who (over lunch or dinner with Lloyd George) decided what was 'good for the country to know' (Goldfarb Marquis, 1978: 476). Newspapers failed to mention losses or battles, including the sinking of the battleship *Audacious* in 1914, and the Battle of Jutland occurred in a news vacuum because, as Lord Balfour told George Riddell, 'it would have occasioned un-necessary anxiety' (Goldfarb Marquis, 1978:

477-78). Why were journalists so willing to suppress important news? Goldfarb

Marquis (1978: 478) wrote:

The obvious answer is that they all belonged to the same club, whose membership also included the most powerful politicians. Publishing a casualty list... would have meant expulsion from the club; social ostracism apparently meant more to the newsmen than their professional duty to inform the public.

Knightley (2002: 84) wrote: 'More deliberate lies were told than in any other period of history, and the whole apparatus of the state went into action to suppress the truth.'

With Cavell, the British had a martyr who could be moulded into an idealised figure who had been 'murdered' by the enemy. The Germans, Knightley (2002: 86) noted, were never able to escape the impression that they were the aggressors who had started the First World War, nor could they popularise counter epithets, Hun or Boche, that the Allies were able to employ. As a consequence, throughout the war, they referred to Britain and France as the 'All-Lies'. They were inept, too, at handling 'human interest' stories, of which Cavell was a good example. Knightley (2002: 86) wrote:

They handed the Allies a ready-made atrocity story – 'cold-blooded murder... poor English girl shot for housing refugees... the greatest crime in history' – which was sent all over the world. Yet the Germans could have quite justifiably presented Miss Cavell as an enemy citizen who had freely confessed to helping Allied servicemen to escape under cover of her mission as a nurse, an act she knew to be punishable by death. The French had already shot one woman for exactly the same offence and were to shoot another eight for other capital offences before the end of the war.

Nevertheless, the reaction was profound. Hoehling quoted the American author Owen Wister (1958: 141) as saying the Cavell death tilted US public opinion firmly towards Britain and France: 'If ever there had been a possibility that American sympathy might be so divided as to hold us back from our duty and our salvation, that possibility was killed forever when Edith Cavell died for England.' Even German-based people were shocked by the Cavell case. Evelyn, Princess Blucher, who was



English but who was married to the grandson of Blucher of Waterloo and lived in Berlin throughout the war, wrote on 15 October 1915 (even before the outcry in the British press): ‘It is one of the most dastardly deeds of the whole war, and I am by no means alone in this opinion, even in this city. Maybe she was guilty, but of what, and why was it done in such a hurry?’ (Clark-Kennedy, 1965: 230).

### **Newspaper coverage during the First World War**

The idea of a neutral and objective press in times of war, as Carruthers (2000), Webster (2003) and other academics have stated, is far from the reality and Cavell’s death, according to Pickles (2007: 84), ‘played beautifully into the hands of the British propaganda machine’. Souhami (2011) described the *The Times*, the *Daily Mail*, and the *Daily Express*, among others, as ‘avid broadcasters’ of the government’s messages, but local, and foreign, newspapers also played their part. The government-funded wartime cable press service inevitably led to homogeneity in the coverage of Cavell’s death, but editorials and news stories of local commemorations brought proximity to readers throughout Britain, and those reports, in turn, were cabled round the world. Sanders and Taylor (1982: 145) wrote:

The death of Edith Cavell provoked global indignation because of her role as an ‘angel of mercy’ (at least that was the way she was portrayed) and because her execution was set against the broader and emotive background of Belgian violation.

The newspapers in the study created an image of Cavell that stressed her mediatised role: maternal but innocent, patriotic but forgiving. Lloyd (2013: 75) argued that socially constructed motherhood is an ideal that ‘finds its full expression in war’ and, while Cavell did not marry and had no children, a maternal narrative was available thanks to her profession. The noun ‘nurse’ was used in many headlines, while ‘matron’, her job and a word endowed with power, never appeared outside the

body type and even then was used rarely. The *Manchester Guardian*'s first editorial on Cavell stated that her life 'had been given to works of tenderness and pity', while the *Daily Express* wrote of her devoting 'her life to relieving the sufferings of others' and also noted she had a 'love of dogs'.<sup>8</sup> The *Daily Mail*, reporting a service of remembrance at St Paul's Cathedral, stated that Cavell had become symbolic: 'She stands for the collective chivalry of the tender and brave women of England'.<sup>9</sup> That description also touched on another consistent theme, Christian martyrdom. The profession of Cavell's father linked her to the church and there were repeated references to sacrifice, with many headlines using 'martyr'. The Guardian described Cavell as 'Happy to die for her country' while her 'heroic spirit' was 'unshaken to the last'.<sup>10</sup> The *Mail* wrote Cavell's 'wonderful heroism', while the *Express* noted 'she died like a heroine' and that she wore a 'martyr's crown'.<sup>11</sup> In Canada the *Morning Leader* went further by describing Cavell as the 'English Joan of Arc'.<sup>12</sup>

Central to these descriptions was an ongoing mismatch between the image and reality. The propaganda did not recognise Cavell's age, but instead constructed a narrative of a young woman, a characterisation that was touched upon in the newspaper copy, but was most fiercely pressed by commercial products advertised within their pages a matter of days from her death. On 10 November the *Manchester Guardian*'s 'Books Received' column included *The Martyrdom of Nurse Cavell* by William Thomson Hill, followed by an advertisement for the 'the authorised biography' by Randall Charlton and Frank R. Lascot 15 days later.<sup>13</sup> A waxwork effigy – 'Heroes of the war on sea and land' – at Madame Tussaud's was advertised in the *Daily Mail*'s 'Amusement Guide' small advertisements section on 30 November and in early 1916 the *Guardian* noted that *Figaro* in Paris had reported that a new play in three acts had been written by Andre de Sorde and Henry Bauche entitled 'The

Murder of Edith Cavell'.<sup>14</sup> Shaddox (1999: 9) noted that most of the portrayals of Cavell were both idealised and sexual:

Depictions of the execution cast Cavell as nun like, all in white except for her Red Cross, a tower of virtue being done in by the savage Hun. Yet hers was a sexualised virtue. Cavell was 40 [sic] at the time of her death, did not dye her gray hair, and tended to wear matronly clothes. But she is usually pictured as a shapely woman in her twenties, her ruby lips uttering a prayer as her long-lashed eyes look up to heaven.

This portrayal of Cavell as innocent and youthful was done, Pickles (2007) wrote, because constructing her in such a feminine and vulnerable way served to prompt men to avenge her death, and the reaction of newspapers and commercial enterprises to Cavell's death has to be seen in the broader context of demonising the enemy. As this article showed earlier, there was frequently little subtlety employed in stoking hatred, but the commonest device in the *Mail*, *Guardian* and *Express* in October and November 1915 was to present oppositions by placing Cavell virtues against German atrocities in adjacent sentences. Thus the *Guardian* article describing her memorial service in St Paul's Cathedral described 'an enemy who murders women' and then stated: 'The German bullet won for this English nurse the supreme honour of a funeral service in our central church.'<sup>15</sup> The use of 'murders' and 'enemy' is emphasised by the juxtaposition of 'supreme honour' and 'our', while the splendour of St Paul's is made homely and welcoming by the choice of 'church'. A *Daily Mail* report described Cavell's 'brutal' execution and quoted Lord Lansdowne, a member of the Coalition Cabinet: 'I doubt whether any incident during this war has moved this country more'.<sup>16</sup> The sub-head read: 'Civilised mercy refused'. Alongside this report another wrote of the 'callous and secret cunning of the German masters of frightfulness'.<sup>17</sup> On 25 October its headlines on a single-column report read 'Kaiser's excuses' and 'Sneer at Nurse Cavell's work'.<sup>18</sup> The *Daily Express*, which included

the headlines 'German orgy of blood in Belgium' and 'Savage mockery of justice' on 30 October wrote of the 'immortal infamy' of the Germans before describing Cavell as a 'brave and true woman'.<sup>19</sup>

The consequence of this propaganda was immediate. Clark-Kennedy (1965: 233) stated that the reaction in allied and neutral countries was 'emotional and sentimental' even though the facts as to what she had done were unknown and Hoehling wrote that 'a national spasm of outrage swept both Great Britain and the United States' (1958: 138) with a concomitant rise in the numbers of volunteers for the army. This had been flagging, but it jumped immediately on the news of Cavell's execution, 'in one day alone ten thousand enlisted' (Hoehling, 1958: 138). Clark-Kennedy wrote (1965: 233):

All that was known was that the Germans had shot a woman, and that woman a British nurse, and the elevation of her into some sort of martyr was irrational and, in certain quarters, born of a deliberate desire to make capital for propaganda purposes out of her execution.

The reaction of the non-combatant British public manifested itself in the newspapers in a number of ways. Readers' letters have to go through the gate-keeping that means their publication frequently reflect the subjective views of the newspaper's proprietor or editor, rather than the wider public, but in this case the reaction seemed to be uniformly in line with the narrative. In the *Manchester Guardian*, a reader called for a memorial window to be installed at a pertinent church to 'immortalise' her 'heroic deed', while another letter immediately below demanded the names of the executioners so that a final verdict could be 'pronounced by humanity'.<sup>20</sup> In the *Daily Mail* a letter referred to 'the heart of the civilised world' bleeding at Cavell's 'murder' and noted that she had 'nursed many wounded Germans'.<sup>21</sup> Eighteen months later, another correspondent called for Cavell to be posthumously awarded the newly

created OBE. 'The Order would be adorned for all time if the name of the first woman on its brilliant list were that of Edith Cavell,' A. F. Roberts, from Poole, wrote.<sup>22</sup> In the *Daily Express* a letter from the vicar at Cavell's Norfolk church appealed for donations to erect a memorial.<sup>23</sup> There were also reports of tributes: a nurses' residence home at London Hospital, was named the 'Edith Cavell Home'; a variety of flower was named after her by the National Chrysanthemum Society; an un-named peak in the Canadian Rockies was titled Mount Edith Cavell; a street in Algiers was renamed in her honour with a tablet erected bearing the words '*Chemin Edith Cavell: Victime de la barbarie des Allemands*'; and a medal was minted in France.<sup>24</sup> The *Mail*'s description of the medal in the report conformed to Van Dijk's ideological square:

Motionless on the ground lies the body of Miss Cavell. Her murderer is seen standing on one side, and on the horizon appear the outlines of a mutilated church and the ruins of a village in flames. On the reverse of the medal, under the inscription 'Virtus, Caritas' [trans: power of love], appears a nurse directing the steps of a wounded soldier whom she supports, and who leans with one arm on a stick.

As a footnote, her name was also dragged unwittingly into an industrial dispute in the last year of the war when the *Daily Mail* reported that munitions workers at the Edith Cavell Factory on the Clyde had agreed to forgo their local Spring Holiday to maintain the supply of guns.<sup>25</sup> This action was taken in protest against the threat of a strike by engineers.

### **Post-war newspapers**

The end of the First World War did not bring an end to press coverage of Cavell; instead it gained a fresh impetus. Within a fortnight of the Armistice the

*Observer* reported that a Franco-Belgian delegation ‘knelt with deep emotion at the grave of the British national heroine, Miss Edith Cavell, who rests among the Allied martyrs’.<sup>26</sup> Cavell’s resting place, marked by a simple wooden cross and, according to Batten (2009: 116), ‘in the most anonymous graveyard in all of Brussels’, became a focal point the following year when on 17 March 1919 an official British party that included George V attended a ceremony in which her body was exhumed. This was the start of a process that culminated in reburial in Norwich two months later, a procession of grief that in its later stages received extensive daily coverage in the newspapers, but with a more nuanced message than simple blame. For example, on 14 May, the *Daily Express* wrote that her death had done more than bequeath a ‘legacy of vengeance’; it had emphasised the ‘gentler ideals of succour and compassion’.<sup>27</sup>

The tone in the *Daily Mail* on the same day was mixed. A poem by ‘Touchstone’ that praised her ‘gentle hands that tended friend and foe’ also included a line that would resonate later in the year: ‘Ringed round by crafty spies, she lent her aid to those who sought it that they must be free.’<sup>28</sup> The language constructed the contrasting image of a humane innocent surrounded by cunning forces of evil. This was reinforced on the same page where an editorial referenced Cavell in an attack on German protests about the peace terms. Its concluding paragraph, which also referred to the sinking of the passenger liner *Lusitania* by a German U-Boat in 1915 at a cost of 1,198 lives, read:

Let it always be remembered that these deeds – the massacre of the innocents in the *Lusitania* and the judicial murder of Edith Cavell – were not condemned, but the whole country applauded and celebrated with hymns and medals and picture postcards by the whole German people.<sup>29</sup>

While the editorial suggested *Mail*’s lust for revenge had not cooled, Horne and Kramer’s (2001) assertion that British enthusiasm for pursuing German war criminals

dissipated quickly after the war was perhaps reflected in Alexander M. Thompson's report that noted Dover's 'carpet of luscious grass dappled with glistening buttercups and daisies'.<sup>30</sup> These were not the words of blame and recrimination and his final sentence, describing the ceremony that accompanied Cavell's coffin into Britain, read: 'There was certain glory in it, not of boastfulness, but of earnest assertion that the triumph of this death lay not with the German executioners, that the grace here won no victory and death imposed no sting.' A service in Cavell's name was held at Westminster Abbey as the body reached London and the *Mail's* reporting on 16 May reflected on the victim rather than the perpetrators of the crime: 'Respect for the noble dead and pride in the race that claimed her drew London not to a funeral, but to shrine, a shrine made holy by the great sacrifice'.<sup>31</sup>

The *Manchester Guardian*, which had close links to Lloyd George, was inclined towards rapprochement when Cavell's body reached Dover. Its report noted the preponderance of uniforms, but added that war thoughts were not uppermost in the 'golden evening'.<sup>32</sup> Instead there were 'thoughts of reconciliation, of ordinary human pity suited to the image of the woman who knew how to rise above the passions and agonies of the moment'. The report on the service at Westminster Abbey focused on the large number of nurses in the congregation describing the colours of their uniforms 'quiet' and their presence providing an atmosphere absent of 'military pride'.<sup>33</sup> This, the report continued, was the other side of war, 'the side that works and watches and succours life and sees it depart'. The same day the *Guardian* carried an editorial that reminded readers that her final words included the message that she would have no 'hatred or bitterness towards anyone'. The leader article continued:

If we reject the appealing and difficult example which she thus showed us, we traduce her memory, make vain the honour with which we have buried her, and rob her inspiration of the greatest power for good in the world's future.<sup>34</sup>

There was a stark difference to the aggressive, ‘othering’ newspaper narrative in the immediate aftermath of Cavell’s death.

Newspaper recrimination occurred in August 1919 when one of Touchstone’s alleged ‘crafty spies’, a French officer Georges Gaston Quien, was court martialled for exposing Cavell’s work to the Germans. The *Manchester Guardian* described it as a ‘sensational case’ under prejudicial headline ‘Betrayal of Miss Cavell’, although the coverage amounted to only three paragraphs and the defendant’s name was spelled as Guyien.<sup>35</sup> Two days later the *Daily Mail*’s court story abandoned any pretence at objective reporting.<sup>36</sup> Quien was described as thin and tall with a ‘short, weedy, yellow moustache’ and ‘weak grey eyes’. ‘He looked,’ the report continued, ‘very different from the dashing French infantry officer it is alleged he pretended to be when he won the friendship of those whom he is accused of betraying subsequently.’ The words ‘weak’, ‘short’ and ‘weedy’ were used to diminish the subject.

The Cavell story was brought to a form of closure in terms of the news agenda with the unveiling of her statue near Trafalgar Square in March 1920. Four and half years after her execution there was no attempt to apportion blame by the *Daily Express*, *Daily Mail* or the *Manchester Guardian*. This tallied with Horne and Kramer’s assertion (2001: 355) that ‘When a statue of Edith Cavell was unveiled... the tone of the ceremony was remarkably free of recrimination’, a sign of newspapers reflecting the changing mood in Britain. The *Express* noted the ‘strength, serenity and gentleness’ of the monument, while the most moving incident, according to the *Mail*, was when the Grenadier Guards eschewed the official programme of music to play Cavell’s favourite hymn, *Abide With Me*.<sup>37</sup> This, it was reported, was at the suggestion of Queen Alexandra, who performed the unveiling ceremony. The *Guardian* had moved a sufficient distance from the raw emotions of 1915 to criticise



the statue, arguing that carved figures, scrolls and tablets detracted from the ‘simplicity necessary is such a memorial’.<sup>38</sup> *The* report also noted the simple inscription; ‘Edith Cavell. Brussels. Dawn – October 12, 1915’.

Like the inscription, none of the newspapers used the words ‘German’ or ‘executed’. This was a considerable movement away from the vitriolic narrative of the war years and is also remarkable in that all three newspapers adopted similar language. The newspapers had different political views, strong-minded proprietors unafraid of taking an individual stance and different target audiences. Yet none of the reports would have looked out of place if it had been printed by a rival.

## **Conclusion**

Cavell’s legacy, as the minting of the £5 coin in 2015 illustrated, is lasting. A play based on her life (*Nurse Cavell*, 1933) was co-written by the author of the Horatio Hornblower novels C. S. Forester, a film, *Nurse Edith Cavell* starring a 34-year-old Anna Neagle, premiered in 1939 and the BBC’s 2014 television drama on First World War nursing, *The Crimson Field*, mentioned her. Shaddox (1999) noted that when her statue was first erected in London, men would stand by making sure passers-by removed their hats. Monuments, hospital buildings, schools and roads have been named after her in at least a dozen countries and there are also memorial services held annually in Britain. In these terms it is difficult to remember many more successful examples of propaganda influencing public opinion. Cavell, after all, admitted her guilt, the former director general of MI5 Dame Stella Rimington alleged that Cavell’s network was smuggling intelligence to the allies (*Secrets and Spies*, 2015), France shot women for similar offences and Britain was not above executing soldiers for ‘cowardice’ or threatening journalists reporting on the Western Front with

a similar fate (Gardner, 2014). Shaddox, too, has speculated that Cavell's imprudence prior to her capture, the frankness of her confession and her lack of interest in trying to escape suggest she 'on some level sought martyrdom' (1999: 9). Contrarily, Clark Kennedy (1965: 233) asserted: 'In no sense was Miss Cavell a martyr, unless the meaning of that word is stretched to include every soldier who gives his life for his country in war-time.'

Whatever Cavell's motive, it became irrelevant, as the British cited her death as an example of German atrocity and quickly attached 'martyr' to her memory. Alleged crimes inflicted on the Belgians were committed on faceless victims; Cavell provided an image to which the British could empathise and, as this study has shown, the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Express* and the *Manchester Guardian* were ready participants in the publication of propaganda. The story had a momentum of its own and Horne and Kramer (2001: 320] wrote: 'The terminology of "carnage", "butchery", and above all "sacrifice" became increasingly commonplace and found an echo in the flagging mobilization of civilian energies for the apparently endless struggle.' The British press became purveyors of messages in which distortion and exaggeration became the norm and Cavell's execution was treated in the same manner as reporting generally of the First World War. Lloyd George's famous comment (Knightley, 2002: 116-17) applied to Cavell as much as it did the Western Front. 'The correspondents don't write and the censorship would not pass the truth.'

Cavell died bravely and should be remembered for both her work as an advocate for better nursing and for helping others escape German imprisonment, but as Pickles (2007: 85) wrote: 'To the Allies she proved to be far more useful dead than alive.' Her death became a tool in the hands of British propagandists, who could justify their work because her story provided a ready cause for recruitment. 'The

estimated 1000 men Cavell helped to join or rejoin the allies while she was alive paled in comparison with the numbers her memory inspired to enlist' (Pickles, 2007: 84). Her endurance in popular memory has complex roots that include the determination of the nursing profession in ensuring she is not forgotten, but the role of the press was vital too. Cavell is a significant figure in the war-of-words narrative of the Western Front and this article addresses something of a lacuna in the literature in that it focuses on the role of the press in creating that memory. It also acts as a reminder of the influence of the British press a century ago and provides a cause for thought about newspapers and propaganda in the First World War.

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<sup>1</sup> The Daily Mail's circulation rose to just under 1.5 million in the early weeks of August 1914 (Ferguson: 241).

<sup>2</sup> Even today *The Guardian's* web comment and opinion pages carry the title 'comment is free', using a phrase from a Scott editorial (<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/uk-edition>>).

<sup>3</sup> Anon. 1900. 'Good News', *Daily Express*, 24 April: 4.

<sup>4</sup> Anon. 1915. 'Nurse Cavell's last hours', *Manchester Guardian*, 23 October: 9.

<sup>5</sup> Anon. 1914. 'Atrocities in Belgium', *The Times*, 28 August: 7.

<sup>6</sup> While the German invasion caused the death of 5,000 Belgian civilians (Knightley, 2002: 87) some in them due to 'severe and inexorable reprisals' including 'the shooting of individuals and the burning of homes' (General Alexander von Kluck, commander of the German First Army, cited in Tuchman, 1962: 255), there was no credible corroboration that small children had been intentionally maimed.

<sup>7</sup> Anon. 1914. 'First British Battle', *The Times*, 28 August: 8.

<sup>8</sup> Anon. 1915. 'Our London Correspondence', *Manchester Guardian*, 22 October: 6; Anon. 1915. 'Foul murder done in secret', *Daily Express*, 22 October: 1; Anon. 1915. 'Nurse Cavell's heroic death', *Daily Express*, 18 October: 5..

<sup>9</sup> Anon. 1915. 'Edith Cavell', *Daily Mail*, 30 October: 3.

<sup>10</sup> Anon. 1915. 'Merciless execution of Nurse Cavell', *Manchester Guardian*, 22 October: 7; Anon. 1915. 'Nurse Cavell's last hours', *Manchester Guardian*, 23 October: 9.

<sup>11</sup> Anon. 1915. 'Nurse Edith Cavell', *Daily Mail*, 21 October: 5; Anon. 1915. 'Last interview with Miss Cavell', *Daily Express*, 23 October: 1. Holt White, W. 1915. 'Edith Cavell martyr', *Daily Express*, 30 October: 5.

<sup>12</sup> Anon. *Morning Leader*, 25 October 1915: 1.

<sup>13</sup> Anon. 1915. 'Books Received', *Manchester Guardian*, 10 November: 11; Anon. Advertisement. *Manchester Guardian*, 25 November: 4.

<sup>14</sup> Anon. 1916. *Manchester Guardian*, 26 January: 12).

<sup>15</sup> Anon. 1915. 'Miss Cavell', *Manchester Guardian*, 30 October: 11.

<sup>16</sup> Anon. 1915. 'The executed nurse', *Daily Mail*, 21 October: 5.

<sup>17</sup> Anon. 1915. 'Nurse Edith Cavell', *Daily Mail*, 21 October: 5.

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