

CRAIGAVON HOUSE

CARING FOR VETERANS THROUGH THE DECADES

Philip Orr

**Commissioned by
The Military Heritage of Ireland Trust CLG**





DEDICATION

To the memory of Moreen Rawson



FOREWORD

The Military Heritage Trust of Ireland CLG was established in 1999 to foster knowledge of Ireland's unique military heritage, and its relationship to the economic, political, social and cultural life of the country. The Trust promotes an inclusive view of Irish men and women who participated in conflict through military service.

In this context, the Trust remains actively involved with the study and commemoration of Irish men and women, who served in military forces, wherever in the world, and for whatever nation, coalition of nations, or particular cause.

One of the Trust's objectives is to encourage and facilitate research into our shared military heritage and disseminating the results of such studies by means of seminars, lectures and publications.

"Craigavon House – Caring for Veterans Through the Decades", written by Philip Orr, was commissioned by the Trust in memory of Mrs Moreen Rawson, who left a bequest in her will requesting it to be used to commemorate veterans and women in ancillary military services.

Mrs Rawson had an enduring interest in the role of women supporting the medical and nursing services, and especially in convalescents. She worked at Craigavon House which is now called the Somme Nursing Home.

The Trust sees the publication of *“Craigavon House – Caring for Veterans Through the Decades”* as a means of promoting a wider awareness of Ireland’s military heritage.

The Trust would like to acknowledge all those associated with this project including Jonathan Kitson, Executive Director of the Somme Nursing Home, Peter Baillie, Director of the Somme Nursing Home, and the following who were interviewed by the author during the course of his research: Lorraine Gibb, Ann Yendal, Philis Rooney, Laureen Megaw and Arlene Megaw.

The Trust complements the Defence Forces Printing Press for the manner in which Philip Orr’s article was formatted and published.

Finally, the Trust extends its sincere thanks to Philip Orr for undertaking the commission and for producing an absorbing account of the role and experiences of both the medical staff and patients who were part of Craigavon House, and whose service and sacrifice richly deserve to be honoured and commemorated by all.



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Nursing staff at the former UVF hospital in central Belfast

Patients at the former UVF hospital in Craigavon House, wearing their 'blues.'

Arlene and Lorraine, who had been chefs at the UVF hospital, look through some memorabilia relating to their time there.


CRAIGAVON HOUSE - CARING FOR VETERANS THROUGH THE DECADES

Philip Orr

The Somme Nursing Home on the outskirts of East Belfast is a special place with a distinct history. Situated in tree-lined grounds, it forms a tranquil environment for the elderly ex-servicemen and women who reside there. The home originated, as its name suggests, in the era of the Great War. The empty mansion which also stands in the grounds was once the family home of James Craig, the Unionist politician and Prime Minister of Northern Ireland. During that terrible global conflict, Craigavon House was turned into a military hospital and this is why a history of medical and nursing care began in such a fine location.

For many years after the war, the facility at Craigavon House had been known as the 'UVF Hospital'. The letters UVF stood for the Ulster Volunteer Force, which was the militant wing of Ulster Unionism in the years leading up to 1914, when most Protestants in the north of Ireland felt threatened by plans for an Irish Home Rule parliament in Dublin. The UVF went on to contribute thousands of men to the British Army, suffering greatly on the opening day of the Battle of the Somme. From the very start of that war, the UVF assisted the hard-pressed medical authorities in Ireland, when wounded servicemen arrived back home in unforeseen numbers.

The hospital at Craigavon House was only one of many medical and nursing facilities organised by the UVF. Their main hospital was situated in the Exhibition Hall, situated in the city's Botanic Gardens and owned by the Belfast Corporation. Queens University was situated close by and it allowed the hospital use of its grounds



to expand the facilities and provide recreation for the patients. The university also allowed the medical staff to use a number of laboratories and X Ray apparatus.

Other smaller branches were soon to be found throughout Ulster, including facilities at Gilford in County Armagh. By the mid-1920s, as the main hospital in central Belfast closed down, a new branch was opened at Galwally, not far from Newtownbreda.

Craigavon House had a particular remit in its early years to care for men who had developed psychiatric problems, known at the time as neurasthenia or shell-shock. In modern terms, their condition would be described as post-traumatic stress disorder. The building was equipped with 70 beds and the men were given a variety of treatments for this little-understood condition, encouraged to relax in the sylvan environment of the Craigavon grounds and obliged to undertake, where possible, a range of useful tasks in the on-site vegetable garden. Hopefully, this would divert them from unhelpful introspection.

The men were also encouraged to learn a trade that would assist them with social re-integration and economic survival in the poverty-stricken, post-war world. Clad in the blue suits which military patients were all obliged to wear, the men were allowed passes for visits off the premises. Relatives could also visit.


As the number of potential patients declined in the post-war years, the Craigavon hospital was no longer dedicated only to psychiatric care. Beds were offered to veterans who suffered from long-term physical ailments and disabilities. A new 'Somme wing' was built to facilitate this development, although an inevitable 'thinning' of the ranks meant that the numbers at Craigavon House had dropped to 48 by the final months of 1932. However, within a few more years,

the return of global war meant that the hospital became a busy place one more.

By the late 1940s, as peace resumed, Northern Ireland was undergoing considerable social and structural change, including the creation of a National Health Service. The management of the UVF hospital decided to retain an independent status, relying to a large degree on funding from the British Ministry of Pensions. They knew however that they must keep up with the process of modernisation in nursing, medical and surgical care which society at large was starting to enjoy, and so the hospital continued on its unique journey, caring for the veterans of two world wars and other men who became casualties of Britain's subsequent engagements in military conflict across the globe.

The beginning of the local 'Troubles' in 1969 presented the hospital with a dilemma. A new paramilitary group called the UVF was viewed with intense dislike by most of the general public. For those who were unable to distinguish between the contemporary and the historic UVF, the hospital's name was an issue. In a volatile city where violence was often meted out on a cruel and retributive basis, a change of name was needed. The Craigavon House facility was renamed the 'Somme Hospital.'

By the end of the 1980s, the two old wards at the heart of Craigavon House were closed, with an upgraded and extended Somme wing remaining as the sole facility. It was officially 'opened' in 1992 and in the two and a half decades since then, a great deal of further new build has taken place so that a smart, comfortable nursing home now stands in the Craigavon grounds, next to the deserted mansion that once housed men who were struggling to come to terms with the horrors of the trenches and receiving the care that they so badly needed.



A legion of nurses, cooks, gardeners, doctors and other workers have attended to the needs of the many men - and more recently women- who lived at this venue or received temporary care there. It is important to acknowledge that women made up the majority of this number. The matrons who ran the UVF hospitals at Craigavon and elsewhere were legendary figures in their day. Not least was the remarkable Miss Burnside, who became a theatre nurse in 1917 in the Queens hospital and served as a matron from 1920 to 1950, when she was succeeded by a Miss Crawford - yet another remarkable person.

Miss Burnside's character is revealed in the letter she wrote to her employers explaining that she 'could not recall one unhappy incident with either patients or staff during these thirty-three years' and that she was 'grateful to the board' for so much 'freedom' in the execution of her duties.

Another of the many able women who worked at Craigavon House was Miss Moreen Mellon, who came to the UVF Hospital as a medical secretary in 1948, while in her mid-twenties. She was interviewed at the Galwally complex by Captain George Nash, who was such a redoubtable character that she never thought to inquire what the wages might be, much to her father's annoyance! Not long afterwards she had the privilege of joining a group of local nursing staff who were present when Field Marshall Montgomery, of recent wartime fame, visited Stormont on a short visit to Ulster.

Moreen had already started work in a small office in the main Craigavon building and remained there until the early 1950s, when she took on the duties of full-time care for her invalid mother. In 1963, she went on to marry, to reside in London and to travel the world but she retained clear memories of her time in the hospital. She recalled the residents still wearing their 'blues' – the official

uniform of the institution, just as the Chelsea Pensioners in London wore their more famous garments of vivid red. This was a practice that was discarded at Craigavon House, shortly afterwards.

Moreen Mellon also recollected meeting men who had served in the Boer War. This military engagement in far-off South Africa had taken place more than a decade before the outbreak of the war with Germany in August 1914. So, the Somme Home which we see today, stands in a long, proud line of care for Irish soldiers, stretching back to the final days of Queen Victoria's reign over a far-flung empire.

That some of the deference to authority which characterised those earlier days still existed in her time at the hospital is clear from Moreen's comments to her family. She explained that she had a great deal of respect for the matron and for the trustees but she aimed where possible to avoid all of them!

On Saturday 7th April 2017, I sat in a café in East Belfast with five women who had dedicated many years to caring for the veterans who resided at the Somme Hospital. In undertaking this interview, I felt not only that the story of Craigavon House needed a wider audience but that the spotlight falls too rarely on women's lives when we contemplate Irish military heritage. In the two hours that we had at our disposal, the reminiscences of Anne, Arlene, Lorraine, Laureen and Phyllis gave me an excellent insight into life at Craigavon House during some of the many decades that preceded the current one. They also gave me a powerful sense of the gratification that the staff had found in their job.

Whereas three of the women had worked as assistant nursing staff, Arlene and Lorraine had been chefs in the kitchens at the hospital. Arlene had started work there in 1986, aged 21 and left ten years



Patients and nurses at the former UVF hospital in central Belfast.



Craigavon House, formerly the UVF hospital on the eastern outskirts of Belfast, in whose grounds the Somme Nursing Home now stands.



Nursing and medical staff at the former UVF hospital in Gilford, County Armagh.




Nursing staff at the former UVF hospital in central Belfast.



Patients at the former UVF hospital in Craigavon House, wearing their 'blues.'



Arlene and Lorraine, who had been chefs at the UVF hospital, look through some memorabilia relating to their time there.



later. Both ladies were proud of the standard of food which they set up to the men, referring jovially to the hospital building as ‘the hotel’. Phyllis and Laureen had spent several years on the wards, with Phyllis’s work dominated by spells of night duty. Anne had worked there as a nurse for thirty-seven years and when she retired she wished she could go back, so happy were the times she had spent there. The reminiscences which I collected therefore spanned a long period from the 1970s through to the 1990s.

The women were keen to emphasise that the men varied greatly both in their backgrounds and their military service. Some men had been veterans of the Great War, such as George McBride, a man whom I interviewed myself in bygone years, when I was compiling stories of the 36th Ulster Division. Many other men had been soldiers in the Second World War.


The most badly disabled man that the women could remember was a veteran called Henrik Usin who was paralysed from the neck downwards and needed a lot of care. He was an Estonian mariner with the Merchant Marine who had been rescued from the water after a torpedo attack on the vessel in which he was travelling during the Second World War. The consensus amongst the women was that although Henrik had been badly injured he was very bright and knowledgeable. He had resided at the hospital from 1950 and would do so until 1995, making him the longest ever resident.

Other men were struggling with a missing limb or some other wound or ailment while a number of patients were relatively able-bodied. Indeed these able-bodied ones were glad to help out by doing various minor duties – and indeed they were encouraged to do so. Some men had a great sense of humour and loved to play practical jokes. Phyllis remembered one playful patient who loved to jump out of the dark and give her a fright when she was walking around the

wards at night. Not every patient was a permanent resident, by any means. Anne stressed that some men came in for a short period, which gave their family carers a break. Some men were from the Irish Republic but had served in the British forces. Many men were delighted to come to Craigavon House due to the camaraderie they experienced, the care they were given and the good food which was prepared for them.

As noted already in this article, Craigavon House was originally a hospital for 'shell-shock' victims of the Great War, but by the time these ladies were employed at the hospital, psychiatric care for army veterans was provided in a specialised form by the mainstream health services. However, one relevant story about post-war trauma surfaced as we talked. It concerned a man who had reacted very badly to a nurse who adopted an authoritarian manner with him. He was found crouching behind a locker and holding a knife. No harm resulted but it was clear to everyone that his behaviour had been triggered by adverse nursing practice that rekindled wartime fear and suffering.

Other stories relating to the long-term impact of war included an anecdote from Arlene and Lorraine. They recalled how some men hated to be served rice. They could not face this dish because it brought back the time they'd spent in Japanese Prisoner of War camps, where a monotonous diet of rice was part of the regime of cruelty and degradation. Other men spoke explicitly of their ordeals in a way that they were sometimes reluctant to do with relatives. One man talked of being made to walk in bare feet in the snow around the camp where the enemy held him captive. One elderly man at Craigavon had been a medical officer in the army while another patient was a young fellow who had been badly injured in a shooting incident in a recent overseas conflict. He was confined to a wheelchair, with limited mobility and a head wound that had affected his mental powers.



For many of these men, physical rehabilitation took place at the Joss Cardwell Centre nearby, an institution that was part of the Belfast Health Trust. Sending ill men in the UVF ambulance to the Royal Victoria Hospital was a worry as the name on the side of the vehicle was likely to arouse aggression on the Falls Road where the RVH was based. Onlookers were not able to discern the difference between the Ulster Volunteer Force of 1914 and the paramilitary UVF which operated during the Troubles. In due course, the 'UVF' label was removed.

However, the Ulster Volunteer Force insignia from bygone times was also engraved on much of the cutlery that the men used, though the interviewees around my table were keen to explain that veterans from all political backgrounds were welcome in the hospital and the subsequent nursing home. There were no debates about politics on the wards though men in the hospital came from Catholic districts like Ardoyne as well as Protestant districts such as the Shankill. The women were all adamant that the patients they cared for were mostly courteous, brave and a pleasure to care for. There was an occasional incident where an overly critical nurse would upset a patient. One man said about a nurse who was annoying him that if he had been fit enough he would have given her a 'slap up the bake'. The comment was made in a spirit of typically direct Belfast humour rather than with actual violence in mind!


For Arlene and Lorraine, as chefs in the hospital kitchens, the important mentor was their boss, Mrs Allen. Each of these young women learned about good food and careful cooking from her. They reached a level that they had never been asked to achieve in training college. They got to know those soldiers who had special diets and they were especially mindful of those whose diet reflected the fact that their health was fading fast. They used the mincers in the kitchen to puree food, when required. The hospital intake was at its peak during Arlene and Lorraine's stay when the chefs were cooking

for no less than seventy patients plus numerous staff.

Xmas dinners were important as were barbeques in the summer. Porridge was a must, every morning. Good quality fish was obtained from St George's Market and Arlene and Lorraine were shown by Mrs Allen how to gut it and fillet it. They learned how to bone a turkey. They learned how to create their own succulent slices of ox's tongue – something that the men relished. Mrs Allen taught her two trainee chefs to be seasonal in their choice of ingredients – strawberries in the summer but definitely not the ones that were ferried in from abroad at other times of the year. They learned from their 'boss' a scrupulous and methodical approach to cleanliness. The mops, according to Lorraine, were always snow-white, once they had been thoroughly rinsed.

Arlene recalled, with a laugh, the amusing way in which some men believed in the health-giving properties of cabbage water! This was the water in which the cabbage had been boiled. It was supposed to contain nutriments that would prolong their lives indefinitely! Anne also laughed as she remembered the fact that each man was entitled to one bottle of Guinness a day. Indeed, some men managed to persuade her to get them a second bottle. Other patients, if they were more able bodied, would sometimes slip out quite illegally to a nearby pub for a drink! Occasionally there were functions for the board members in the board room and the kitchen staff would have to prepare a big meal, served on a snooker table that was covered with a board and a tablecloth. Military VIPs also visited. Arlene recalled that a member of the Royal Family had visited the hospital during her time there - food had to be prepared for the special visitor.

The staff clearly existed as a hierarchy – all the way down from the matron and the assistant matron at the 'top of the pile'. An assistant



matron lived on the premises for many years. There was also a 'wee old lady' who finally retired at eighty years of age having worked in the basement on the endless task of sewing and mending, fixing and darning, as the bedclothes and the men's clothing went through a yearly process of wear and tear. Everyone had their role to play, including the orderlies and the cleaners. There were so many jobs to be undertaken, such as lighting the coal fires in a building that could often be chilly.

At one level, the modern day critic could be very critical of the hospital's facilities and the way it was run. There were no showers for the men, only baths. Some of the rooms were dark and cold. Health and Safety rules were fairly lax. The staff members were allowed to do things that would be forbidden today – one cleaner called Ruby regularly took bets for the men on the race meetings of the day. The staff did not have to pay for food – at least not in the early years and they were paid weekly in cash, which was tucked inside small brown envelopes.

Arlene and Lorraine told me that they constituted a health and safety hazard themselves, when sun-bathing on the roof! They also recalled that one woman who worked there had an occasional alcohol problem but her sympathetic colleagues would let her lie down on the potato sacks, rest and recover and not a word of disapproval was uttered. Yet the accounts were meticulously looked after by Mrs Allen, as she was excellent manageress and very good at sorting out embryonic disputes between members of staff. Every spoon, knife and fork and every plate, cup and saucer was accounted for. There was a bake house too, for chefs to make their own bread.


All things considered, Mrs Allen would appear to have created an environment that nurtured the men in her care. Arlene does ponder the fact that the hospital was still functioning in much the same way

it did when the Craig family were living there in that distant Victorian era. It was, she felt, like 'Upstairs, Downstairs' with everyone knowing their place. All the employees worked together in this archaic, former mansion, where there were holes in the ceiling and basins were strategically placed to catch the drips. But at the end of the day, everyone agreed that the hospital was being run for one reason only – for the men themselves. That as what finally mattered, despite the imperfections.

Amongst the favourite events for the men were the impromptu concerts where they could enjoy a sing-song. Anne told us about her role as a singer – she has performed in many a concert both at Craigavon House and elsewhere across Northern Ireland. She delivered the old favourites from the war years but also a number of country and western favourites such as 'Blanket on the Ground' during which she would invite one of the men to join her and mime the actions, accompanied by much laughter from everyone. Sometimes she would dance up and down the wards. It was all great fun.

But at Xmas when 'Silent Night' was being sung, there were tears in many of the old men's eyes. I happen to know that men in the trenches during the First World War sang this carol and were touched to hear the Germans on the other side of No Man's Land sing their own Teutonic version. For men like George McBride, the war had become an exercise in futility, in which he had fought young fellows who were the same as himself, for a cause which was ever more difficult to understand.

Another big favourite was a concert by the band of the Irish Guards who would turn up at the hospital and deliver a selection of tunes. They would bring their Irish wolf-hound with them and that was



always a source of great interest. The men enjoyed the sense of honour that came with such a visit. The Salvation Army came to the hospital as well and so too did clergy. A portable screen was available to enable private sessions for the men, should a relative, doctor or clergyman require it.

Everyone that I interviewed agreed that the grounds at Craigavon House were gorgeous and the trees were beautiful. At lunchtime, Arlene and Lorraine would often wheel the men in wheelchairs around the gardens to enjoy the beauty of a summer day. Families would visit – that is, if the man in question actually had a family. Sometimes, the wife of a patient would visit her loved one every single day. As far as the five ladies around my table could assess it, the men at the hospital really loved the open wards and did not enjoy moving to single, self-contained rooms at a later stage. The open wards were a source of constant human interest to the patients, reminding them of barracks life and bringing a sense of familiar comradeship. These wards constituted a home from home.

The women I interviewed all agreed that the men were generous, showering Arlene with gifts, for instance, when her wedding day came. The two chefs sometimes discovered that they had been left a little money in the men's wills, after they had passed away. One particular memory that stood out for Arlene concerned a long corridor with tall glass windows. It acted as a kind of conservatory where the men could sit in the warmth and where plants were placed, to catch the light. There was a phone-box there for both staff and patients, in an era long before the advent of mobile phones.

For Lorraine, one of the most profound moments in her time at the hospital was when an old man was dying and he summoned her over to talk, fully aware that his days were numbered. 'I am just about to die' he said. And then he explained how as children we


reach out with our hands to grab hold of everything we can reach. 'Now' he said, 'I will be lying here before too long, with my hands by my side and life will be over. All I have is my memories. Now, Lorraine, you go out and make a lifetime of memories'. This advice has stayed with Lorraine. It's something that she and her family refer to as a positive principle in all that they do together. Making 'a lifetime of memories' is their goal.

For Arlene and Loraine, those days spent as young women at the hospital were very influential. Both women ended up in jobs that involve caring for others and fighting for justice. Arlene trained as a counsellor and she works as a Life-skills co-ordinator at Hosford Hostel, which is part of the East Belfast Mission. She has responsibilities for health and well-being, horticulture and community arts. Lorraine has worked in Barnardo's, she has been a policy maker for the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action and she has worked as an advocate for NEETS (an organisation that works with those who are not in education, employment or training).

For Arlene, one precious reminder of her time at the hospital is a small steamer pot that was part of her kitchen equipment in Craigavon House. It's a practical memento but also a reminder of a vanished world that she was fortunate to be part of and where she learned so much.

All in all, the hospital that my five ladies remembered seems to have been an up-beat place. Despite the advanced years and, in many cases, the serious infirmity of the men who were there, it was a place of fellowship. The patients were survivors and they gladly knew it. They knew also that the people who were looking after them really cared about their well-being.

Towards the end of our session in the café, a number of the famous Craigavon House ghost stories were shared, including



one about the White Lady who wandered the premises and whose appearance always presaged a tragedy. I wondered if these spectral tales were a collective confirmation that this building had been lived in for a long time and was a place awash with troubled memories. Craigavon House was, in a sense, suffused with the past of its inhabitants, many of whom had known indescribable suffering and who still grieved for the uncompleted lives of dead, wartime colleagues.

I showed the women some photographs of their predecessors – the women who nursed the men in the aftermath of the Great War not just in Craigavon House but in the main UVF hospital in the vicinity of Queens University and at the hospital at Galwally. Then, I asked Anne and Phyllis about their childhood – these ladies were and are sisters and they are in their seventies and eighties now.

I discovered that during the Belfast Blitz of 1941, their family had resided in Blyth Street and that the street had been badly hit by German bombs. Whereas the families on either side were killed, the two sisters survived. Incredibly, little Anne was buried in the rubble for several hours until she was rescued. She had survived because, whatever way the bricks were placed, some air got through to her so that she could breathe unhindered until she was found. To my mind that was a useful way to conclude our session in the café – with a profound sense that the terrible wars of the 20th century had visited these fine ladies too. As we concluded, Laureen also mentioned a relative of hers who had died in the Great War.

I had thought when I came to do these interviews that I would hear an abundance of dark and haunting stories. I thought I would hear tales that were dominated by suffering. Rather, I received full confirmation that even in the midst of war's grim aftermath, there is kindness, inspiration, laughter and hope – and that women have played a key role in manifesting these restorative qualities.

AUTHOR



Philip Orr acclaimed historian, author, playwright, and Chair of Mediation Northern Ireland has written on several topics, embracing the Irish experience of the Great War.

Philip has addressed numerous international conferences on the subject of the First World War.

His publications include “The Road to the Somme”, an account of the experiences of the 36th (Ulster) Division on 01 July 1916, and “Field of Bones: an Irish Division at Gallipoli”, a narrative of the 10th (Irish) Division in August 1915.

His essay on the significance of the Somme Story for Unionists was included in The Atlas of the Irish Revolution, published by Cork University Press in September 2017.

Philip engages in outreach work with local museums and in community education.

In this context, he has employed oral history, exploratory public debates, site-specific theatre and community drama, to explore challenging historical narratives, most recently during the decade of political centenaries in Ireland.

One of his many projects, a play titled Halfway House dealt with the commemorative and personal legacies of the Easter Rising and the Battle of the Somme.

Philip was the Guest Speaker at the Trust’s 2015 Annual General Meeting on the subject “*Inclusive Memory and the Decade of Centenaries*”.