



The Cellar-House of Pervyse

Mairi Chisholm (1896 - 1981) and **Elsie Knocker** (1884-1978)

edited by G.M. Mitton

Mairi Chisholm and Elsie Knocker were two British nurses and ambulance drivers whose heroic efforts during World War I saved countless lives and earned them life-long honor. They were especially known for their determination to treat wounded soldiers on the front lines instead of transporting them at great risk to "safer" hospital facilities, even though many of their actions went directly contrary to official bureaucratic regulations. In November 1914, they decided to leave the corps and set up their own dressing nearby in Pervyse, north of Ypres, just one hundred yards from the trenches. Here, in a vacant cellar which they named the "Poste de Secours Anglais" ("British First Aid Post"), the two would spend the next 3 1/2 years aiding the wounded in the Belgian sector. Knocker gave most of the medical attention, while Chisholm transported the injured, often in terrible conditions and under fire, to a base hospital 15 miles away. No longer affiliated with the Belgian Red Cross, they were forced to raise their own funds. They arranged for the cellar to be reinforced with concrete and even have a steel door fitted, supplied by Harrods. Through sheer perseverance Knocker was able to arrange for the two of them to be officially seconded to the Belgian garrison stationed there. Equipped with cameras, both women photographed not only each other but also much of the suffering around them. In January 1915, they were decorated by King Albert I of Belgium with the Order of Léopold II, Knights Cross. In this account, G.M. Mitton acted as more than an editor; she has taken the journals and "home letters" of "the Two" (as she continually and reverently refers to Knocker and Chisholm) and created out of them a lucid, eloquent, and coherent story of two heroic individuals doing their part on the Western Front.

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Read by Expatriate

Cover design by Kathryn Delaney

other photographs can be found at <http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/listing/object-205010284>

