

# JUST A NORMAL DAY'S WORK

John Hyett

Edith Mildred Greer was born in 1874 in Brisbane, Queensland.<sup>1</sup> Her parents' marriage was recorded in Victoria in 1875 with four more children being born (the first dying at 15 days) between 1877 and 1880 when her mother died. Her father remarried in 1882 and moved to Tasmania where another four children were born.<sup>2</sup>

In October 1913 Sister Greer was appointed as the superintending nurse of the Victorian Bush Nursing Association. This Association had been formed to provide medical services in the more remote areas of the state and was essentially a co-operative movement with the residents of the area responsible for funding their local nurse. The first nurse had been appointed in early 1911 with another three districts established by the end of that year. At the time of Nurse Greer's appointment in October 1913 eleven districts had been formed and her job description required her to visit the local committees and to report back to the central committee in Melbourne. Following this she was required to relieve the nurses when they took their annual leave of three weeks. She was reported to have trained as a nurse in the Launceston Hospital, Tasmania, and the Women's Hospital, Melbourne, with extensive experience in private nursing in country districts of Victoria and to have been the sister in charge of the Kew Asylum as well as being proficient in shorthand.<sup>3</sup>

Within a few months Sister Greer was fully occupied "travelling from one centre to the other, knitting the scheme together and explaining the ideals of bush nursing to people in remote districts anxious to discuss the scheme."<sup>4</sup> In 1916 she visited Meeniyan district giving four lectures in different townships over four nights – each lecture illustrated the work being performed in the 21 centres then operating throughout the state with lantern slides from Sister Greer's own photographs taken in her organising work.<sup>5</sup>

Melbourne,  
March 8th, 1917

To W. H. Thomas, Esq.,  
Hon. Sec. Progress Association, Erica.

Dear Mr. Thomas,

I have your letter addressed to Dr. Edith Barrett.

I shall be pleased to come to your district and give one or two organising lectures in explanation of the Bush Nursing Scheme. Would it suit you if I left town on Wednesday, April 11th, and returned on Friday, April 13th? I could give two lectures in that time in any part of the district that your committee thought fit, or if one would be sufficient, on either of those nights that will suit you best.

With regard to the lecture. We have a very good lantern, with views of the bush nursing work and the various centres. If you would care to have that used, the charge is £1 1s each time it is used, all other funds to go to the district centre.

I shall be pleased if you will advise me about a place to board. I pay my own expenses during a tour like this, but am dependent on advice as to where to go. I shall be pleased to hear from you as soon as possible.

I will do all in my power to help your district to establish a good centre.

Faithfully yours,  
EDITH M. GREER,  
Superintendent<sup>6</sup>

The following article from *The British Journal of Nursing*<sup>7</sup> gives some indication as to the conditions under which Sister Greer worked although I am not sure she would have considered herself to be 'exceptional'.

*The Graphic* has an appreciative illustrated article on 'Australia's Bush Nurse'. We are told: "To-day, at the head of these Bush Nurses, is a stalwart, cheery, optimistic, big-brained woman – Sister Greer. She lives and works but for one thing, the further developing of her organisation. Sister Greer oft-times begins work at five o'clock

on a cold winter's morning, and ceases at the same time about three days later. What she will have accomplished in the interim would surprise a hefty man accustomed to long hours and hard work. She travels over hard roads, often on horseback, often in a primitive conveyance, and, if she is lucky, in a motor. She crosses rivers, she scales mountains, she penetrates deep forests. Nothing seems to baffle her if she knows there is sickness and suffering to be tended at the end of her journey. What Sister Greer does, is done in lesser fashion by the hundred odd women who make up the Bush Nursing Association to-day.

"That a Bush Nurse needs to be an exceptional woman will be realised when it is known that, in addition to a thorough training in medical and surgical work and midwifery, she must be able to ride, to act as inspector of the school-children – under the direction of the State Medical Officers, to give lectures to the mothers on the care and feeding of infants, and on such special subjects as the cure of snake bite.

"Most of the 'out back' settlers – and it is necessary to have some minute knowledge of Australian conditions to realise fully what 'out back' means – find the Bush Nurse the one person to whom they can turn in dire emergency, such as when an accident occurs as a giant tree falls the wrong way. To give an idea of these giant trees, one hotel of thirteen rooms, at Gonyah Gonyah, is built from one tree.

"Sister Greer has, amongst her possessions, a series of lantern slides made from photos taken with her own camera. One of these shows four children rowing in the midst of the Snowy River, and their boat consisted of a pumpkin!"<sup>8</sup>

Sister Greer resigned in 1921 with 35 bush nursing centres then in operation.<sup>9</sup> The same year she married William Henry Flood, a Melbourne solicitor 12 years her senior, who died 12 June 1930, aged 66. Edith followed ten years later on 3 August 1940, aged 64.<sup>10</sup>

## NOTES

1. Birth, Death and Marriage (BDM) records, Queensland
2. BDM records, Victoria and Tasmania Government Archives
3. *The Argus*, 3 October 1913, p.12
4. *The Herald*, 12 May 1914, p.5
5. *Great Southern Star*, 9 February 1916, p.2
6. Letter reprinted in *Narracan Shire Advocate*, 21 March 1916, p.3
7. *The British Journal of Nursing*, 20 September 1919, pp.173-4
8. Other references to this slide say the boat was half a pumpkin shell
9. *Australasian*, 24 September 1921, p.49
10. BDM records, Victoria



A rare image of Edith Greer taken from a newspaper cutting