

EVELYN HELEN VICTORIA CULLING

Born : 4th June 1865. Died 1944.

Evelyn Helen Victoria Ongley was the youngest child of Henry Sarell Ongley and his wife Lucy. She was born in Patras, where her father was the Consul.

Having spent her childhood in Patras, the family moved, after her father's retirement in 1874, to Cyprus.

Evelyn was living at Limasol with her family when she married John Chislett Culling, a surgeon in the British Army, who was posted to Cyprus and living at Polymedia. Evelyn was only nineteen and therefore a minor and would have required her father's consent to marry. The wedding took place on board H.M.S. Alexandria, and was conducted by the Naval Chaplain. The Rev. Pidcock on the 5th October 1884.

In the following year, Evie gave birth to their only child, a boy who was called Evelyn Claude Culling.

The Culling family continued to live in Cyprus, until 1889, when John was posted to India, and then the family moved there.

In India, Evie met Captain John Sanctuary Nicholson, and started an affair with him. Her husband found out in 1893, and was persuaded not to sue for divorce, but Evie left India and returned to England. The couple had separated formally.

However when John Culling discovered that Captain Nicholson had visited Evie in England, he did sue for divorce and was granted this in February 1896. He was also granted costs, and custody of their son.

Evie never remarried, and Captain Nicholson ceased to play a part in her life, in due course.

Over the next eighteen years, Evie would spend time with her sisters and visiting friends and relations in Europe. She was a passive sympathiser of the Suffragettes, and a close friend of hers was more active, but Evie herself, did not get involved.

Evie also became actively involved with the theatrical world, during these years, and appeared on the stage. In October and November of 1910, Evie appeared at the Kingsway Theatre in a production of "Company for George" by Warren Bell, playing the part of Mary P. Cowpit. Her friend Eva Moore also had a lead part in the play. The theatre critic in The Times of the 17th October, whilst declaring the play to be a farfetched comedy, went on to state that "The play was well received".

The situation in Ireland was also of great concern to her, as her sister Minna, known as Darnie, was living with her husband Lucius Stafford O'Brien in Donegal, at Fahan, which is close to Londonderry.

At the outbreak of the 1914-18 war, Evie joined the Women's Emergency Corps in London and served on eleven committees, before she realised that she would be more use in a different, less over staffed organisation. To this end she joined Le Comite

Britannique of the French Red Cross, whose London headquarters were at No.9 Knightsbridge. Working with the French Red Cross, it became apparent that what was needed by the French Army, were canteens.

In April 1915, with money raised from amongst her friends and also with assistance from her son Evelyn Claude Culling, Evie was able to take a canteen over to France. Initially it was some way back from the lines, at a spot where the walking wounded were sent from the front lines, and near where an ammunition factory had been set up. In December 1915, Evie and her contingent handed over their canteen to the French and returned to London with the view to collecting funds to take another canteen over to France, and for it to be closer to the Front Line.

After some delays, during which time Evie and her colleagues helped out at the Canadian Hospital at Folkestone, they returned to France. Le Comite Britannique of the French Red Cross, were not keen for Eve and her colleagues to go closer to the Front Line and wanted them to stay near Paris, but they ignored this, and following information provided by the Quakers, they got clearance to get the junction at Revigny on the Meuse. This was an important distribution centre for troops going up to the Front, and especially to Verdun.

It was at Revigny that Evie and her colleagues, who included her sister Minna Stafford O'Brien, spent most of the war. Even when under severe bombardment in September and October of 1917, the canteen carried on.

The French recognised the role that Evie had played and honoured her with the Croix de Guerre, in 1919. The letter from Marshall Petain to Eve reads as follows:

March 9th 1919.

“Dear Madam -

“I have great pleasure in informing you that Marechal Petain, Commander-in-Chief of the Armies of the East, has, on my proposal, conferred upon you, as from February 27th 1919, the croix de Guerre with the following inscription:

“Mistress Culling, of the British Committee of the French Red Cross, Directress of Railway Canteens, has in the course of the campaign, unceasingly provided our soldiers with valued comfort, material and moral. Has carried on her beneficent mission under violent and repeated bombardments, in particular at Revigny, on September 5th, and 6th, and October the 4th, 5th and 7th, 1917, gaining the admiration of all by her presence of mind and indifference to danger.

(Signed) Petain.”

Evie was presented with the decoration by General Gouraud in front of the canteen and in the presence of her colleagues since as she realised the decoration was a recognition of the role that they all had played.

After the 1914-18 war, Evie found herself in a state of limbo, until Commandant Goudau who was a member of General Gouraud's staff asked if she would be interested in running their canteens in Syria where they were now based. With two of her former colleagues she moved to Syria and did that over the next few years.

Evie visited her cousin Philip Sarell when he was Consul General in Barcelona

between 1924 and 26, and then spent some time with them again in the summer of 1938, at their home, Braeside, in East Grinstead. During this time she was living in Ramsgate, first at 6 Royal Crescent and then at 20 Southwood Rd.

Evie died during the 1939-45, having written a book about her wartime experiences called "Arms and the Woman" which was published in 1932.