

Edith Cavell: What Makes a Hero?

Real life heroes come in all shapes, sizes, and from all places, but like a great many things heroism is often thrust upon the beholder. People standing and acting on what they believe in, especially in political or socially turbulent times, often find themselves given the title of hero with minimal say. Edith Cavell is one of these heroes. Serving as a nurse in Belgium, Cavell stood at the forefront of the war-torn Europe in 1914, fulfilling her nursing duties; while simultaneously aiding Allied soldiers evade German forces. Her actions led to her arrest, conviction, execution, and heralded hero status in England and the other Allied nations. Her story is one of an ordinary, small town girl to a woman with marble memorials: the story of who a hero is.

Born 4 December 1865 in Swardeston, England, Cavell's dedication and passion to nursing and her country was apparent in her lifelong commitment to the field.¹ Fountains Fever Hospital in Lower Tooting hired her first in 1895, where she stayed for four years before moving the London to work at the London Hospital.² It was there that she caught the attention of Belgian Dr. Antoine Depage who invited her to serve as the Directress at school for nurses in Brussels, so Cavell packed up and moved to Brussels in 1907.³ At the outbreak of World War I in 1914, Cavell continued nursing in Belgium for the Red Cross, and maintained her position even after the Germans gained control of Belgium.⁴ By 1915, Cavell had joined an underground network that worked to smuggle captured Allied soldiers out of German controlled territory.⁵ Her efforts in smuggling reportedly saved over 200 soldiers.⁶ As an English nurse in German occupied Belgium, Cavell's actions against those Germans put her at considerable risk of retribution from her enemy. Indeed, Cavell's secret

contribution to the Allied war effort did not continue for long, as German military police arrested her on 5 August 1915.⁷ During her trial on 6 October 1915, she pleaded guilty to charges of treason, and as a result was executed by a firing at dawn, 12 October 1915.⁸ Cavell's story does not end with her death. Almost overnight, Cavell's execution sparked something in propagandists, women, nurses, soldiers, potential enlistees, and ordinary people around the globe.

Much of Cavell's life was only widely known after her death. Most of the current understanding of Cavell as a woman, a nurse, and a hero come from articles propagating the righteousness of the war against those that would kill a pious, nurses. However, the night before her execution, Cavell met with Reverend H. Stirling Gahan, a British chaplain, with whom she shared her last conversation. Gahan wrote of Cavell's last thoughts and confession, and concluded with these words: "He (a German military chaplain) told me: 'She was brave and bright to the last. She professed her Christian faith and that she was glad to die for her country. She died like a heroine.'" ⁹ Although a fellow Christian, this chaplain was still the enemy, but could still recognize the heroic actions of this woman, sacrificing all concern to her own safety and security for the lives of her country's soldiers.

Accounts describe Cavell's calm demeanor towards her own fate in the days between the trial and the execution, but it is impossible to know if she understood the impact her death would have and the legacy she would leave behind. Thousands of people, people who never knew Cavell, came together in mourning to memorialize her actions. They made her the hero. Cavell's actions were not dissimilar from many others in war, but hers were remembered; remembered as heroic.

Endnotes

- ¹ Shane M Barney, "The Mythic Matters of Edith Cavell: Propaganda, Legend, Myth and Memory," *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 31, no. 2 (2005): (217-33), 218.
- ² Ibid. 218-19.
- ³ Ibid. 219V
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Ginny A Roth and Elizabeth Fee, "A Soldier's Hero: Edith Cavell (1865-1915)." *American Journal Of Public Health* 100, no. 10 (October 2010): (1865-1866), 1.
- ⁷ Barney, "The Mystic Matters of Edith Cavell," 219.
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ H. Stirling Gahan,. "Account on the Execution of Edith Cavell." Oct. 1915. 1

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