

Lady Howard de Walden and the First World War



Margherita van Raalte married the 8th Baron Howard de Walden in 1912 at St Marylebone Parish Church where Lord Howard de Walden was Crown Warden.

At the time the name was over 300 years old, granted to Lord Howard by Elizabeth I in 1588, supposedly in gratitude for his bravery in battle against the Spanish Armada. Margherita possessed the aristocrat's structure – her neck was long, and took its languid time to meet her body. Her fingers were slim and graceful: designed to dangle jewels or to barely hold a fan of feathers. And her eyebrows rushed downwards: the titled lady's suffering, hooded glory. After holding the ancient name for only a few years, she too was fighting. She defied the Director General of Army Services who refused to give her permission to take on a Matron and eleven private nurses and establish a convalescent hospital in Egypt. It became the Convalescent

Hospital No. 6, in Alexandria. A newspaper article from January 10, 1916 read:

"A visit was paid to Lady Howard de Walden's British Red Cross hospital which was formerly a palatial residence. Much marble has been used in its construction, and it stands amidst beautiful grounds. Among the patients were 36 New Zealanders. Lady de Walden's husband, who is serving with the Forces in the Dardanelles, is one of the richest men in England, and both husband and wife have been generous and indefatigable to a degree. New Zealanders who come to this hospital are indeed fortunate."



This patient is wearing his 'hospital blues'. Smoking a pipe, smiling broadly – perhaps the war is over for him - a 'blighty' wound lurking beneath his beaming exterior – and he is bound for home. The men flanking him might be mates from his battalion, if it weren't for the red crosses winking from their biceps. The marble fountain, suddenly masculine, that they rest upon might have been giddy and romantic once. The grounds extending behind them are vast and manicured, flinching at the new voices, jovial and therapeutic.

Margherita's efforts did not go unnoticed. She was named Commander, Order of the British Empire (C.B.E.) as well as Dame of Grace, Most Venerable Order of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem. During peacetime, she might have been brushed off as a society doyen. But with the outbreak of war she was among the many women who turned their attentions from linen tablecloths to linen poultices. They gained the approval of writers, doctors, their husbands – and the blessings of their jaunty blue-clad patients.