

Alison Redgrave – Always a nurse

By Tess Redgrave



Marjorie Alison King's graduation photo circa -1951

If there was one thing my mother Alison Redgrave (nee King) impressed upon me as I was growing up, it was “cleanliness”. She was fanatical about germs. She scrubbed surfaces clean, aired beds, opened windows and disinfected the toilet constantly. “Wash your hands after you have been to the toilet,” she’d repeat to my sister Anne and I over and over again. “And don’t lick your finger and put it back into the dish like that!”

As a child and teenager, and even adult my mother’s unrelenting focus on “cleanliness” annoyed me but as I’ve got older and reflected on her life, I realize it was all merely an extension of her nursing training. Admittedly too her father died of a septicemia infection in hospital after a routine hernia operation –more fuel for Mum’s war against germs.

My mother was the consummate nurse. It was a vocation, a way of seeing the world that she proudly held onto all her life. When we were sick as kids she was a steady, competent hand, unfazed by broken arms, measles, flu, chickenpox – even hemorrhaging after my sister had her tonsils out.

Among our wider family Mum was the one who looked after relatives’ illness with ease, held her own mother’s hand in the ambulance after a massive stroke and played a part in helping nurse a brother and sister to their untimely deaths. When she too became ill with terminal cancer late in life, even in her last

moments of consciousness Mum – the nurse to the end – was able to tell us exactly what was happening. “I am going now,” she said.

Marjorie Alison King was born on 17 April 1930, at home to Jessie Rebecca and Arthur William Herbert King of Napier. She was a ten-month-old baby in her cot when the 1931 earthquake rattled Napier’s bones. As the earthquake became part of her and her family’s mythology, one of the stories that stayed with Mum and was passed on to us was the terrible fate of the Napier Hospital Nurses’ Home. Night staff were still sleeping when the quake struck on a hot mid-February morning. The many-storied building fell like a pack of cards and twelve nurses lost their lives. In 1956 Mum worked as a ward sister at Napier hospital so this story must’ve been part of its historic fabric – and one she absorbed too.

Mum was a prefect at Napier Girl’s High school in 1948, and then in 1949 she caught the train to Wellington to train to be a nurse at Wellington Hospital, boarding at the Kilbirnie Nurses’ home. She gained registration at the end of 1951 and then spent two years doing her maternity training at Kawakawa Hospital in the Bay of Islands, by the end assuming a position of some responsibility. All I remember her saying about this time was how much she loved working with the local Māori women.

At the end of that year she left Kawakawa and prepared to go overseas to London with her nursing friends: Jennifer North and two others, Maureen and Mary.

On the 21st of January 1954, Mum was probably at the *SS Rangitoto*’s railing as it shuddered into life and slewed away from Wellington’s Glasgow Wharf. Thirty-one days later after a wonderful trip of concerts and deck games, celebrations crossing the equator and stops at places like Pitcairn Island, Balboa in the Panama Canal and Curacao, Venezuela, Mum and her fellow nurses disembarked at Southampton on 20/2/1954.



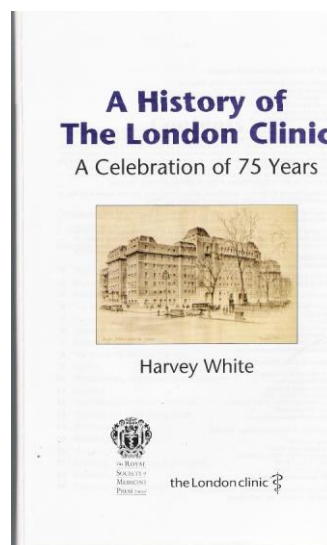
Mum about to board the *SS Rangitoto* in Wellington



SS Rangitoto

The following day the New Zealand nurses were shown to their future place of work (sorted before they had left) on the corner of Harley and Marleybone Street. This was The London Clinic – a leading private hospital established by a group of Harley Street doctors in 1932.

Wanting to know more about the hospital, I recently emailed the press office and was told it still had Australian and New Zealand nurses on “working holidays” there today. I was also referred to a newly published history of the hospital by a former physician Harvey White.



White writes: “The London Clinic was the first institution in Britain for private patients to cater for all aspects of a modern hospital, supplying not only modern equipment but also a wide variety of services. The fees were seven guineas a week. Inside the complex, 36 physicians and surgeons had consulting rooms and two residential medical officers provided continuity of care. Most of the 214 rooms had adjoining bathrooms. The rooms were served by 200 nurses and seventy maids.”

Looking through inherited jewelry of Mum’s, I find The General Nursing Council badge for England and Wales engraved with M.A. King 4/12/1953 on it. She

must have been sent this before she left New Zealand. Did she have to pass a test of some sort? I'm not sure.

It is also not clear exactly where Mum and her three friends were accommodated at the London Clinic – though it would've been in premises very nearby. Soon after they left, Vernon House, on the east side of Regent's Park was opened as the clinic's main nurses' home.

Still one of London's leading private hospitals today, the clinic's patients have included royal families, dignitaries, politicians, captains of industry and celebrities from across the world. Edward VIII, the Duke of Windsor, had surgery for a detached retina in 1965. In 1959 and 1964, the Duchess of Windsor, Wallis Simpson, "spent time in the clinic for what was described as 'facial surgery'". King Hussain of Jordan was a patient more than once and while there "kept his gold-plated revolver close at hand"; John Paul Getty Jnr 's dog was allowed up the back stairs to visit him while he was a patient and Elizabeth Taylor, suffering from pneumonia, was a patient in 1961 while in London to make *Cleopatra*.

But the famous patient mum nursed at the London Clinic was T.S. Eliot. In her journal of her overseas trip she writes: "Saw T.S. Eliot's play *The Confidential Clerk*. I have since nursed the author – a humble sincere person of extraordinary intellect."

She came back to New Zealand with a signed copy of an Eliot book but we now can't find it and I have no memory of her telling me why T.S. Eliot was in The London Clinic. Perhaps the stories she told stayed within certain boundaries as I can see some of the stories I tell my children doing now. I never questioned her about Eliot. What exactly was he like? What did he talk to her about? Where was he in his career?

I have since discovered, Eliot, at the time Mum met him, was living in London sharing a flat with his friend John Davy Hayward. His marriage to Vivien Haigh-Wood had been over since 1933. (She apparently committed suicide in a London mental hospital in 1938, without having ever been visited by her husband.)

Eliot married again in 1957 and died eight years later on January 4, 1965, of emphysema. For many years, apparently, he had health problems owing to the combination of London air and his heavy smoking, often being laid low with bronchitis or tachycardia. ¹

¹ The only reference to his stay at the London Clinic that I could find is in the John Hayward bequest of TS Eliot papers and material: Notes for Speech at the Opening of the McKnight Kaufer Memorial Exhibition, Victoria and Albert Museum. 6 Oct. 1955. Pencil holograph. 2pp. folio. and Notes for Television Interview on the Exhibition. Pencil holograph. 2 pp. folio. Both written from a sick-bed in the London Clinic and tape-recorded by T.S. Eliot. x. "The Frontiers of Criticism".

The matron at the London Clinic let Mum and her friends work two weeks straight then have two weeks off. After lots of sightseeing around London including getting up early one morning to watch the new Queen's return from her first Commonwealth tour, the nurses began boldly hitchhiking further afield. A diary entry dated 7.5.55(54) Devon and Cornwall reads: "To commence our first big hitch-hiking tour, we left London for Wimbledon, Mary and Maureen together, and Jennifer and I together. After a mile of heavy labour we were picked up by a sandman who took us to Hampton Court. After several further rides we reached Winchester."

There were trips to Oxford and Cambridge, to the Isle of Wight and then on the 20th August the four nurses began a tour, hitchhiking around Europe through Italy, France, Austria, Switzerland, Germany and Holland. One of the last entries in her diary of that trip is headed: "Screaming Italians 1.9.54 Wednesday. Spending the night in a Continental train with screaming Italians talking at one all night, can become rather tedious."

And then 2.9.54 "We arrived in Rome, a couple of positive wrecks, so headed for a bath in the railway station - a beautifully equipped place possessing every facility imaginable...."

My mother worked on at the London Clinic in 1955 and went on another major hitchhiking trip up to Scandinavia that year. (One of her possessions I coveted as a teenager was her rucksack with the flags of all the countries she'd been to sewn on it.)

I remember mum telling me that despite her adventures she got very homesick. In either November 1955 or early January 1956 she boarded the Shaw Saville Line's new *Dominion Monarch* bound for New Zealand via Capetown.

She returned to Napier to live with her family and was employed at nearby Napier Hospital as a ward sister. In May 1957 she married my father Jim Redgrave and gave up her nursing career to become a full time mother and housewife.



But my mother never forgot her nursing career. It was something she was immensely proud of and later in life she sometimes lamented that she had stopped nursing when she married.

After she died my father pinned her Royal New Zealand Nursing Badge on the wall next to a service medal of my grandfather's from World War 1.

Now I wear the red and blue Royal New Zealand star badge like a brooch or use it to pin together a winter scarf. I feel lucky to have it as a reminder of my mother and a career she held dear.

Tess Redgrave

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