

**Elizabeth Edmondson**

**Matron-Superintendent of Aberdeen Royal Infirmary and  
Nurses' Advocate for the Joint Hospitals Scheme**

**By Diane May**



Elizabeth Edmondson, Matron of Aberdeen Royal Infirmary from 1912 until 1935, was a crucial figure in the development of the Joint Hospitals Scheme. A lifelong advocate for the professionalisation of nurses and a believer in the centralised management of hospital care and services, her contribution to the development and success of the scheme cannot be underestimated. Her commitment to the scheme can best be understood through an examination of her incredible career as a nurse in both civilian and military roles.

Elizabeth Edmondson was born in Kendal in England on the 6<sup>th</sup> of June 1862, the daughter of James Edmondson, a successful Woollen Goods Manufacturer and his wife Mary Ann Bailey. Sadly, her father died in 1874 and her mother passed away in 1889 and she, thereafter, moved to Keswick to live with her paternal aunt Margaret Edmondson.

After the death of her parents Elizabeth decided to train as a nurse and enrolled for an innovative three-year training course at Edinburgh Royal Infirmary gaining her certification in 1899. She commenced her nursing career there working as a Night Sister, Temporary

Laundry Matron and Ward Sister. It is clear through her rapid promotions that she was a highly respected nurse and administrator, receiving a special recommendation from the Infirmary for her administrative skills.

Inspired by the work of Florence Nightingale, who had advocated for the creation of a military nursing organisation, Elizabeth enlisted in the Army Nursing Reserve (South Africa) during the Second Boer War. Her work as a military nurse commenced on the 8<sup>th</sup> of June 1900 when she was posted to Portsmouth. She embarked for duty in South Africa on the Hospital Ship "Simla" on the 26<sup>th</sup> of June and served in South Africa until her return on the "Dunera" on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of July 1902 prior to her resignation from the service, by now known as Queen Alexandra's Imperial Nursing Service (QAIMNS), on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July. She was commended for her work and received the King's South Africa Medal and the Queen's South Africa medals for her service.

After army service she worked at the Salop Infirmary, Shrewsbury for three years as Home Sister, Deputy Matron and Sister-in-Charge of the Outpatient Department before accepting the post of Matron at the Beckett Hospital in Barnsley.

In February 1912 Elizabeth Edmondson was appointed Matron at the Aberdeen Royal Infirmary, then located at Woolmanhill in the city centre, following the death of Matron-Superintendent Grace MacNaughton. On June 26<sup>th</sup> 1912 she also was appointed as the Principal Matron of the 1st Scottish General Hospital of the Territorial Force Nursing Service (TFNS) based at Oldmill Hospital, now Woodend Hospital, succeeding Matron MacNaughton who had been the first Principal Matron appointed in 1908. She was to serve in both roles until her retirement from Aberdeen Royal Infirmary and the then Territorial Army Nursing Service (TANS) in 1935. Her service and commitment to the TFNS was commended and rewarded by the award of the Royal Red Cross (1<sup>st</sup> Class) by King George V on the 15<sup>th</sup> of January 1916.

Matron Edmondson quickly established her authority at Aberdeen Royal Infirmary assuming managerial control over the laundry, kitchen and nurses' home as well as oversight of the hygiene and cleanliness of wards and supervision of wards and maids. Given the respect for her professional control of the nursing field at the Infirmary the hospital directors unanimously appointed her to the position of Matron-Superintendent in 1915.

Throughout her nursing career Elizabeth Edmondson was a keen proponent of high-quality training for nurses as evidenced by her presentation entitled "Co-operation and Affiliation in the Training of Nurses" at the Nursing and Midwifery Exhibition and Conference in London in April 1914. She also supported the creation of preparatory schools for seventeen and

eighteen year olds to help them prepare for the three-year training courses. As a result of her efforts the Preliminary Training School was opened at Woolmanhill in 1927.

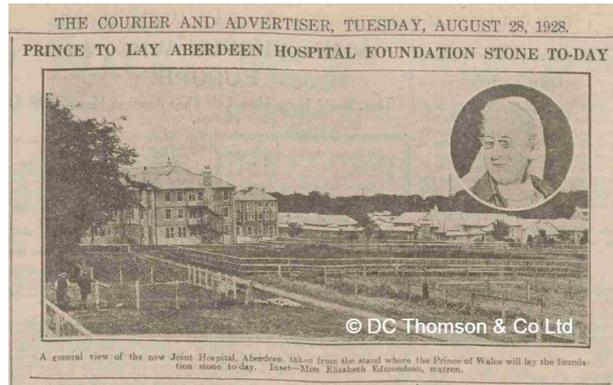
She also advocated for nurses to have decent accommodation and pushed for the purchase of a new nurses' home resulting in the purchase of 15-16 Albyn Terrace which was opened in 1920 with a matron in charge. Nurses also benefited from her efforts to reduce working hours and improve working conditions and pay.

A staunch supporter of State Registration of Nurses, Elizabeth Edmondson in 1916 was one of the 34 founding members of the College of Nursing, later to become the Royal Council of Nursing (RCN), and became Honorary Secretary of the Aberdeen Branch of the College of Nursing Club after a building on Fonthill Road was donated in 1929 by Lady Cowdray. She was also one of the first elected members of the General Nursing Council (GNC) which was established by the Nurses Registration Act of 1919. The Act removed the requirement for local certification of nurses and by 1925 the State Registration (SRN) was introduced which, thanks to the work of Matron Edmondson, all of the Aberdeen nurses passed.

As well as supporting nurses Matron Edmondson cared greatly for patients and supported, personally and financially, charitable efforts to raise money to support patients at the Infirmary. In 1920, with the support of a number of the wives of medical staff she supported the creation of a Linen Guild. The charity, set up to supply woollen garments and accessories to patients, continued to operate until it was disbanded in 1990. She also supported and encouraged events such as Christmas singing and encouraged nurses to treat patients as "guests".

Given her authoritative, managerial role in the nursing field and her interests in providing high quality nursing training and patient care in Aberdeen Elizabeth Edmondson became heavily involved in the development of the Joint Hospitals Scheme and was appointed as an adviser to the Board for the new Aberdeen Royal Infirmary to be built at Foresterhill.

A key figure in the innovative and unique scheme, her role was acknowledged in a photograph on the front page of the Dundee Courier and Advertiser on the 28<sup>th</sup> of August 1928 when the foundation stone was laid for the new Aberdeen Royal Infirmary by the Prince of Wales.



Thanks to her efforts as part of the scheme a new 5 story nursing home was built at Foresterhill to replace the inadequate Albyn Terrace building and to provide for a great expansion in the nursing staff at the new Aberdeen Royal Infirmary. She also advocated for proper management of the facilities in the site contributing to such things as the innovative decision to build the “Aberdeen Joint Steam Laundry” on the Foresterhill campus to do the laundry for all three hospitals.

In recognition of her services to the City of Aberdeen the Lord Chancellor appointed her to the position of Justice of the Peace in December 1929.

Elizabeth Edmondson decided in 1935 to tender her resignation as Matron-Superintendent of Aberdeen Royal Infirmary and as Principal Matron of T.A.N.S for the 1<sup>st</sup> Scottish General Hospital ostensibly due to health reasons. It is clear that she also wanted her successor Matron Florence Kaye to have time to prepare for the expansion of nurses and changes which would occur with the opening of the new Aberdeen Royal Infirmary in Foresterhill in 1936.

In tribute to Matron Elizabeth Edmondson it was noted that the Board of Directors of the Aberdeen Royal Infirmary recorded that

“The honoured place which Miss Edmondson has held in the highest councils of her profession, her expert knowledge of every branch of hospital activity and her gifts of human sympathy and understanding...have contributed in no small measure to the upbuilding of its reputation and to the extension of its public usefulness.”

After retirement she returned home to live in her native Keswick but it is clear that she still felt the call of service because on the 1939 Register she is listed as a General Hospital Matron and a Principal Matron for the Territorial Army Nursing Service.

Elizabeth Edmondson died in Cumberland on January the 3<sup>rd</sup> 1949 at the age of 86. Her death was recorded with a photograph and article in the Aberdeen Press and Journal on the 5<sup>th</sup> of January where it was noted that she was

“Held in the highest regard by members of her profession, she had an expert knowledge of every branch of hospital activity. She was a woman who possessed gifts of human sympathy and understanding”.



Photograph of Elizabeth Edmondson  
Aberdeen Press and Journal 5th January 1949

As a mark of respect for the former Matron a Memorial Service was appropriately held for her at Aberdeen Royal Infirmary Nurses Home on the 9<sup>th</sup> of January 1949. At the service she was remembered, amongst other things, for her contribution to the new hospital scheme at Foresterhill and it was noted in a Press and Journal article that in an address given by Mr William Anderson, Senior Surgeon at Aberdeen Royal Infirmary

“...her advice and guidance in this bold and original conception was frequently sought and freely given.”