

MEDIA RELEASE

What Courage Such a Thing Takes: The Life of Mary De Garis

Video launch

Tuesday 30 April, 6 - 7.30pm

Her Place Women's Museum Australia, 208 - 10 Clarendon Street, East Melbourne

Her Place Women's Museum Australia is extending an open invitation to view its new short video, *What Courage Such a Thing Takes: The Life of Mary De Garis*, at its new address at Clarendon Terrace, East Melbourne.

Supported by a grant from the Victorian Government and the Victorian Veterans Council, the video celebrates the life and contributions of **Dr Mary De Garis**, who was one of at least 24 Australian women who served at the front as doctors during World War I.

Robin Scott, the Minister for Veterans from the Victorian Government, will officially launch the video.

It draws on the 2014 book, *Woman War Doctor: The Life of Mary De Garis* (Australian Scholarly Publishing), by historian **Dr Ruth Lee**. Dr Lee, who will speak at the launch, is also the co-author, with **Dr Heather Sheard**, of *Women to the Front: The Extraordinary Australian Women Doctors of the Great War* (Penguin Random House, 2019).

Mary Stuart, who chairs Her Place Women's Museum Australia, said the recognition of Dr De Garis and the other female doctors was way overdue.

"At the outbreak of war, there were 129 registered women doctors in Australia. Dr De Garis volunteered to join the Australian Army in 1914 but was refused so she travelled independently (with her revolver) to the UK to help the war effort there, but also to be on hand for her fiancé, Colin Thomson, should he get injured," Stuart said.

"Colin survived Gallipoli but was killed on the Western Front, so Dr De Garis joined the Scottish Women's Hospitals, founded by suffragist and activist Dr Elsie Inglis after women doctors were famously told to 'go home and sit still'."

Dr De Garis joined the unit operating in Ostrovo, northern Macedonia, under the Serbian army on the Balkan (Eastern) front, taking over in 1917 as chief medical officer from fellow Australian **Dr Agnes Bennett**, who was struck down with severe malaria. It was a 200-bed hospital operated by 50 women, surrounded by camps of soldiers from the Serbian, French, Russian, Italian and Greek armies.

It was close to the front and Dr De Garis performed difficult surgery in all weather, battling flies and wasps, typhoid, dysentery and malaria. **Miles Franklin**, the celebrated Australian writer, worked as an orderly and cook at the hospital, and struck up a friendship with Mary. In an unpublished manuscript of her war memoirs, she wrote:

"A story of the sang-froid of Dr De Garis was current. Once in the early days of the unit, while a serious operation was proceeding in the little operating tent of the advanced dressing station, the bombs began to rain. The men assistants promptly disappeared to their funk holes, but Doctor continued her operation, occasionally remarking very politely to the Sister who stayed with her, that she was sorry, she supposed the Sister would like to have a look at what was going on outside, but the patient had to be attended to or he would bleed to death."

In 1917 the British Army started to appoint women doctors, but the Australian Army did not appoint any until 1942, at the height of World War II.

Stuart said that after the war, Dr De Garis was awarded the Serbian Order of St Sava III class by the King of Serbia as well as two British medals for her contribution in a place of peril and medical urgency.

“However, her extraordinary war effort was not recognised in Australia then and, even today, remains under-acknowledged. As the women doctors were necessarily volunteers, they are left out of history. Clearly, it is high time for this to change. This video and Dr Ruth Lee’s book point the way.”

The remainder of Dr De Garis’s career was equally distinguished. Settling in Geelong after the war, she campaigned for the first maternity ward to be included at Geelong hospital and was responsible for antenatal and postnatal care being implemented there. In 1931 she was appointed the Honorary Medical Officer to the Maternity Ward and, in 1941, an Honorary Consultant, a position she held until 1959.

Dr De Garis was the first and only female medical doctor in Geelong from 1919 to 1941. She conducted research into the causes of pain in labour and other obstetric matters and published over 40 articles and letters in the British/Australian Medical Association journals, as well as three books. Practising until 1960, she died in Geelong in 1963 at the age of 81.

Her Place Women's Museum Australia is not yet open to the public but can be visited by appointment. Email: herplace@herplacemuseum.com

The video and educational resource will be freely available on Her Place Women’s Museum’s website from Wednesday 1 May: www.herplacemuseum.com

***Please note disabled access is currently limited. Please email herplace@herplacemuseum.com if you require assisted access.**

***What Courage Such a Thing Takes: The Life of Mary De Garis* is supported by the Victorian Government and the Victorian Veterans Council.**

To book: <https://herplacemuseum.com/events/whatcourage/>

Media comment: Mary Stuart, Chair, Her Place Women’s Museum Australia: 0417 367 786; mary.stuart@lunapark.com.au

Media interviews: Carmel Shute: 0412 569 356; carmel@shute-the-messenger.com

More information: www.herplacemuseum.com



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