Sunday Times bestselling author of *A Nurse in Time*

EVELYN PRENTIS

A Nurse in Action

My Life as a Nurse During the Second World War

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About the Book

Surprising Matron as well as herself, Evelyn Prentis managed to pass her Finals and become a staff-nurse. Encouraged, she took the brave leap of moving from Nottingham to London – brave not least because war was about to break.

Not only did the nurses have to cope with stray bombs and influxes of patients from as far away Dunkirk, but there were also RAF men stationed nearby – which caused considerable entertainment and disappointment, and a good number of marriages…

But despite all the disruption to the hospital routine, Evelyn’s warm and compelling account of a nurse in action, shows a nurse’s life would always revolve around the comforting discomfort of porridge and rissoles, bandages and bedpans.

About the Author

Brought up in Lincolnshire, Evelyn Prentis (real name Evelyn Taws) left home at eighteen to become a nurse. She later moved to London during the war, where she married and raised her family. Like so many other nurses, she went back to hospital and used any spare time she might have had bringing up her children and running her home. Born in 1915, she sadly died in 2001 at the age of eighty-five.

Evelyn published five books about her life as a nurse, and Ebury Press are reissuing them all. *A Nurse in Time* and *A Nurse in Action* are the first two, and *A Nurse and Mother* will follow shortly.

Evelyn Prentis in 1938, newly qualified

Evelyn on her wedding day, 4 July 1942

Also by Evelyn Prentis

A Nurse in Time

A Nurse in Action

My Life as a Nurse in the Second World War

EVELYN PRENTIS

For Judith and Barbara
with love

Part One

Chapter One

I STOOD ON the mat in the Matron's office, feet shuffling nervously, palms sweating, exactly as I had stood on it so often since the day I started my training. It was a poor threadbare little mat, worn thin in the middle by the nervous shuffling of generations of nurses before me. The same shabby little mat I had sprawled headlong on, the morning I was summoned to the office for the first time. Missing the step and falling flat on my face had done nothing to make my debut into nursing a thing of joy. Then, as now, the Matron had looked at me coldly and was not amused. Then, as now, the fat Scottie dog at his post by the desk had bared his teeth contemptuously. Now as then I quailed before the look and shrank from the dog's bad breath. It seemed that nothing had changed. Nor ever would.

Yet changes there had been. I was no longer a probationer nurse, butterfly cap concealing my ears, anchored there hopefully by a dozen Kirby grips. I had passed my Finals, and was now a staff-nurse, entitled to wear a little bonnet of a cap held firmly in place by a length of tape and a pair of lacy bows. Only that morning I had read my name on the pass list, rushed across to my room, rescued the bows from the back of a drawer, ironed them by sitting on them then proudly put them on. Though I had worn them for such a short time their starched crispness was already chafing red weals beneath my chubby chin.

They were still new enough to give me an exaggerated sense of my own importance.

The Matron quickly took away some of that importance. She glanced at the bows, raised her eyebrows and spoke. ‘Good morning, Nurse,’ she said. ‘I see by your bows that you managed to pass your Finals.’ There was a touch of ice and disbelief in her voice that suggested she was as astonished as I had been that I could ever have achieved such a miracle. It had taken some achieving. There had been things the oral examiners and I had failed to reach any agreement over, and several of the statements I had made on the written papers were open to debate. I left the examination centre gloomily certain that I would remain a probationer for ever. It was therefore not surprising that the Matron found it hard to believe that I could have blossomed overnight from a Kirby-gripped junior to a bow-bedecked staff-nurse. There was clearly etched on her mind an imprint of the laziness, slackness, inattention to detail, and total lack of aptitude for nursing that had brought me in disgrace to her office so many times during the past three years. Each of my sins, from the palest grey to the deepest black, had been remembered and recorded, ready to tell against me whenever I presented myself on the little mat, as they were doing now.

I remained stiffly silent, consoling myself with the thought that the reception I was getting would have been no warmer if I had been a born nurse – which I most certainly wasn’t – a paragon of efficiency and a second coming of Florence Nightingale, all neatly packaged in my blue striped uniform. The Matron treated everybody with the same chilling aloofness. She was the Eternal Matron. Her bows were larger, lacier and starchier than any other bows in the hospital. They nestled confidently between her second and third chins and wobbled as she spoke. They were the metronome our hopes and fears were adjusted to.

While they ticked over steadily we sweated less, as their tempo increased we oozed accordingly.

The Matron was the axis of our world, feared by the nurses from the highest to the lowest and held in awed respect by the most senior of the honorary consultants. While she sat at her desk, unmoved and largely unmoving, we felt safe in the knowledge that the hospital and all that therein was would go on revolving regardless of anything that went on in the world outside. We were soon to find that not even she could remain impervious to the things that were going on in the world in 1938.

Her bows started twitching again. They sank in anticipation as she opened her mouth and rose up sharply when she snapped out her censure.

'Your record over the last years has not been particularly outstanding, Nurse,' she said, then waited for me to agree with her. She didn't have long to wait. I had been brought up to respect my elders and fear my betters. There was not the remotest possibility of my disagreeing with her.

'Yes, Matron,' I agreed. 'No, Matron,' I amended hastily.

Her eyes slid over my apron, crumpled but clean, rested briefly on my collar, smooth but grubby, took in the bonnet and came to rest on the bows which by now had started to shrink into insignificance.

'I trust you will carry out your duties as a staff-nurse with greater assiduity than you employed while you were muddling through them as a probationer,' she said coldly, and paused to give me time to mull over assiduity. I mulled over it. Muddle I was familiar with. Assiduity I was not. I was no wiser after I had finished mulling than I was before.

'Yes, Matron, thank you, Matron,' I breathed gratefully, and left the office.

Over in the drab unfurnished room we called the library, which was the only place in the nurses' home where we were allowed to smoke and almost certainly the only room

in the hospital where there was not a book in sight, Baker, Weldon, Davies and the Irish girl were already smoking. They had been by my side through the years of toil, stress and strain, getting far more fun out of it than any of us had ever expected to get when we started our training. They also had passed their Finals and done their shuffling on the Matron's mat and were celebrating the glorious victory over the enemy examiners with cheap cigarettes. Like me, they desperately needed nicotine to calm their Matron-shattered nerves.

I accepted a Woodbine from Baker and applied it to the glowing end of the Irish girl's Park Drive. It was the middle of the month and the last payday but a bygone memory and the next too far away to be more than a promise for the future. None of us could run to the more luxurious brands of cigarettes. There were those amongst us who could scarcely afford even the cheaper sort. Weldon was spending her thirty shillings a month salary almost as fast as she got it on fripperies for her bottom drawer, which meant that she was cadging fags off us long before payday, and Davies was blessed with a streak of Welsh prudence that drove her to the Post Office every month to deposit small sums against penury in her old age. I had no such streak. I was destined to penury from the start. Nor had I a bottom drawer to worry about. I was twenty-one and had already resigned myself to spinsterhood.

Weldon helped herself to my last de Reszke Minor, broke it in half and gave half to Davies.

'Well, what did she say to you?' she asked me, throwing the empty packet out of the window for a gardener to curse about when he had to bend his back to pick it up. She and Davies both knew that I would never have grudged them my last cigarette. Not at any rate while Baker had some left to share with me. From the start of our training they had been something special in the way of friends; eager with their advice whether I asked for it or not and offering

support when I looked like sagging. Though we hadn't always seen eye to eye, they were the first to admit that it took all sorts to make a world and I was definitely a different sort from either them or Baker. I had none of the indefinable qualities which had turned them into born nurses but this had caused no permanent rifts in our friendship.

They may have sometimes been driven to criticize my wilder indiscretions but their criticisms had never been too destructive. Without them my training days would have been far less rewarding than they were.

I waited until we were all nicely lit up, then I told them how astonished the Matron was when she saw that I had passed my Finals. I gave them a lively demonstration of the gymnastics of her bows, and a run-through of the critical assessment she had made of my progress, paying special attention to the word 'assiduity'. When I had finished the demonstration and concluded the assessment Baker started to giggle. Baker was a happy, buxom girl, always able to see a silver gleam behind the most threatening cloud. This was to be a great asset to her when the clouds had grown so threatening that it was almost impossible to get even the smallest gleam out of them.

'My God,' she said. 'She must have it written down in front of her on a piece of paper. She said exactly the same to me.' 'And to me,' echoed the others. This didn't surprise me at all. The speech had sounded much too set to be a one-off. We stood for a moment thinking about it then Davies looked round at us. 'As a matter of interest,' she said in a serious way, 'what exactly does assiduity mean?' Davies said most things in a serious way. She was a very serious girl. She lacked the more relaxed approach to life that made living so bearable for Baker. Clouds already tinged with grey became ever more grey for Davies.

The Irish girl allowed a ring of smoke to curl to the grimy ceiling before she came up with her definition of the

word ‘assiduity’. When she gave it to us it was an extremely Irish definition. ‘It sounds as though it should have something to do with acid,’ she said, watching the smoke rise like incense, ‘as in urine testing and litmus paper.’ The rest of us looked scornful and assured her that whatever else the word might mean it could have no possible bearing on urine. The sluices and the Path. Lab. were the place for urine. There was no room for anything so sordid in the Matron’s office. We left the problem of ‘assiduity’ unsolved as we had left so many other problems unsolved over the years.

I felt a lot easier in my mind since I heard that the Matron had been as scathing about the others’ progress as she had been about mine. It could only mean that I had not been specially picked on for her censure. Though I knew it was unfair to class me with Davies, Weldon and Baker it made me feel less of an impostor and a let-down to the nursing profession.

I could see that the Irish girl was as pleased as I was. She also was not a born nurse. Her career had been thrust upon her as resolutely as mine had been chosen for me. Our mothers, who had done the thrusting and choosing, had done them for much the same reasons: the main one being that nurses got paid from the start with food and washing thrown in – though not all in together as the flavour of the hospital food suggested. Another was the naïve belief that nursing was a ladylike occupation. They were old-fashioned enough to imagine that nurses whiled away their time flitting round being ladies and laying cool hands on fevered brows. They would have been sadly disillusioned could they have seen us not long after we left our sheltered homes laying freezing cold hands on men’s bedwarm bottoms. On my visits home I carefully avoided saying anything that might destroy the picture my mother had of nurses. I told her only the things I thought she would want to hear.

Baker gave her bows a self-conscious little twiddle. ‘These bloody things are choking me,’ she said, tweaking the tape and shifting a thread that was making inroads into her flesh. We each gave our bows a self-conscious little twiddle, stubbed our cigarettes out on the lino and walked with new-found dignity to the wards.

I was on Female Medical, which suited me fine. I was happy to escape Gynae where the sister got a lot of sadistic pleasure out of bullying new nurses. Having a new staff-nurse to bully would have thrown her into a frenzy of delight. Especially when she saw that the staff-nurse was me. Hers was the first ward that I ever worked on and ever since then we had found little joy in each other’s company. There were things on both sides that were best forgotten, even if they could never be forgiven.

I was just as happy not to have been put on a Male ward. Walking through a double row of men with my round chubby face cut off from my round chubby body by a length of tape and a pair of bows was all that the wit of the ward would need to set the rest of the men off laughing. The bows were yet too new to command respect. Given a day or two longer to lose their first crispness they may have spared me some of the cruder comments about my bust and my bottom but not while they were still in their infancy.

The sister on Female Medical greeted me kindly but with no enthusiasm. There was nothing personal about this. She was just not the enthusiastic type. She was small and mousy with a soft face and a gentle voice. The overall impression led the unwary to think that her character would be as colourless as her appearance. Those foolish enough to bank on it were soon having to make a fresh assessment. Beneath the surface softness there was a hard core as steely as my mother’s burnished fender. She ran her ward with as much ruthless efficiency as did the sister on Gynae.

The only difference between the two women was that whereas the sister on Gynae stormed and bullied her nurses into abject obedience the sister on Female Medical had more subtle ways of wielding power. She could walk down the ward, head modestly lowered and eyes vigilantly searching, and without a word have all the patients smoothing their top sheets and snatching rubbish off their lockers with as much urgency as if she had browbeaten them into doing it. The technique worked as well with the nurses as it did with the patients.

We rushed to obey her command, did at top speed whatever was commanded, and only realized after it was all done that there had been no command to rush to; or certainly not one that made impact on our ears. We were never quite sure how the message was transmitted: all we knew was that we received it loud and clear. And obeyed.

There was only one thing that disturbed the sister's tranquillity. A nurse had discovered her little weakness one Christmas morning while the staff were congregated in the office drinking the annual celebratory cup of coffee. In the world outside the lodge gates coffee was still a beverage mostly favoured by the leisured classes, the nobility who had scaled the heights, important people like visiting medical staff and very senior sisters; but on Christmas day the beans were brought out, ground down, and distributed like Maundy money round the wards as part of the promotion scheme to get the festivities off to a good start. Most of us would have preferred a nice cup of tea but we suffered the coffee because it was Christmas, and we were supposed to be enjoying ourselves.

'Where do you come from, Sister?' the nurse had asked, emboldened by the heady strength of the coffee and made curious by the faint trace of an accent that crept in whenever the sister was even mildly carried away in conversation. To everybody's amazement she choked into her grouts. She laughed until the tears ran down her

cheeks while the nurses stood round not knowing where to look. Nobody had seen the sister behave like this before and it took time to adjust to after her usual unruffled calm. But at last, in an effort to be polite, somebody joined in and gave a restrained little titter. Soon everybody was tittering though they didn't know why. At last the sister told them. 'Nether Wallop,' she gasped, and was off again. Asking the sister on Female Medical where she came from soon became part of the Christmas fun. It made even the coffee taste better.

For the first few months after I became a nurse I walked around in a state of shock. Nothing was easy; life was intolerably hard. My feet killed me, my legs ached, and my heart bled. The new life I had been thrown into at the deep end was so different from anything I had known before that it cast me into deepest despair.

Being a staff-nurse for the first time may not have been so hard on my feet or my legs but there was plenty to make my heart bleed and as much for me to despair over. Suddenly finding myself in a situation where I was expected to dictate instead of being dictated to all the time frightened me to death. I was a follower rather than a leader, content to let others with initiative show me the way. This was to be a great drawback to me in my new role. Other staff-nurses as new as I were able to position themselves at vantage points in the ward and project their voices into the farthest corner and beyond to the usual offices. They could order a junior to 'fetch a bedpan and look sharp about it' with so much authority that the junior downed tools at once to go off at the double and come back at a gallop with the required pan. It didn't work like this for me. I could spend ages looking for a junior, beg her pardon for finding her then humbly ask if she would very much mind going for a bedpan for the patient who had been

yelling for one for the past ten minutes. The junior would look so much as if she minded that I invariably finished up begging her pardon again and galloping off for the pan myself. This delighted the juniors and they were as quick to take advantage of it as I would have been under such ineffectual rule.

The sister had me in her office about it one day. She was kind but firm. She always was. She gently pointed out to me that one of the greatest benefits to be derived from becoming a senior was the opportunity it gave to push all the least pleasant jobs on to a junior. This, she said, was called delegating responsibility. She told me that being able to delegate responsibility was as big an asset as the proper use of the powers of observation. Done properly, either could turn a staff-nurse into a sister at an amazing speed. She also reminded me that the reason for the juniors being there at all was because they had an insatiable desire to learn, and if I insisted on doing everything for them they would never learn. I knew that everything she said was true, but knowing did not help. The damage was already done. The juniors continued to look meaningfully in my direction when there was something to be done that they didn’t want to do and I continued doing it, as they knew I would if they waited long enough.

The same thing happened whenever I used my powers of observation on them. If I caught them eating or drinking behind the kitchen door when the sister wasn’t there it was my duty as a disciplinarian to shriek at them, shout at them, threaten to send them to the Matron, and sort out something particularly nasty for them as a penance for their sins. I did none of these things. I was stopped before I started by vivid mental pictures of myself not so long ago, swallowing lumps of cold cod and slices of plum duff behind a kitchen door, praying earnestly that nobody would come and catch me swallowing. The trouble with me, on top of all my other troubles, was that I could always see two sides of

everything and lived in a state of confusion about which side I was on. Getting my bows did little to improve my status; all it did was raise my salary from twenty to twenty-five pounds per year and give me more problems than I had had before.

It was inevitable that Davies and I should share some of the problems. We had been brought up with the same set of rules to abide by and were the victims of the same inhibitions. We were both timid when we should have been bold and strictly teetotal when we should have been sharing the Irish girl's bottle and her parties. The Irish girl was famous for her parties. She was throwing them all the time for the flimsiest of reasons. She started off the celebrations with a full bottle and only brought them to a close when the bottle was empty. None of this was enough to turn her into a raving dipsomaniac. There were always too many guests holding out their tooth mugs for a share of the bottle to make the share-out more than a taster.

During the years that Davies and I had slept in the Irish girl's room while we were still probationers we would never let her talk us into being guests at her parties. When we scented one in the offing, we insisted that she went off with her bottle and drank it somewhere else. Being brought up strictly teetotal we were only too aware of the dangers that befell those who had not signed the pledge and the Irish girl had definitely not signed the pledge. She gave her last party at the hospital soon after she had passed her Finals, not only to mark the occasion but to soften the blow of reminding us that she would soon be leaving.

One morning before we had become staff-nurses we were standing in the library looking gloomily into our empty purses and wondering where the next penny was coming from when the Irish girl got a letter telling us she had won an enormous fortune in the sweep-stake. Since the letter contained neither ready cash nor even a small postal order we were still broke and wondering where our next

penny was coming from long after the winner had partially recovered from the shock of winning. She never properly recovered. The thought of all that money lying around and her still penniless put her off her food and kept her awake at night, but being twenty-one now she had got her hands on it and was off to America to spend some of it.

At first Davies and I turned down the invitation to the party as we had turned down all previous ones. But, as it was after all a very special occasion and not likely to become a habit, and after the Irish girl had promised to buy us a bottle of lemonade if we would stretch a point and go, we stretched a point and went.

The party was not a success. We sat on the floor in somebody else's bedroom, afraid to turn on the light in case Mary was creeping about. Mary was the sister whose word was law in the home. Only to her face was she called anything but Mary. She did her duty as home-sister with such enthusiasm that nothing but the most infinitesimal escaped her. Though we were of age and entitled to the vote she still insisted on treating us like children in care. We were in for serious trouble if she caught us anywhere but in our own rooms after ten o'clock at night, and far greater trouble if she caught us drinking lemonade in any room at whatever hour. Telling her we were having a party would pour no oil on her troubled waters. Parties were permitted only on Christmas night as a final fling to see us through until the next Christmas night. It would have taken more than a migration to America to persuade Mary to unbend the unbendable rules.

Sitting in the dark may have kept the home-sister at bay but it did nothing to make the convivialities more convivial. The lemonade drinkers quickly segregated themselves from the others and were the first to slake their thirst and abandon the bottle. Thereafter they sat in cold silence on the cold lino while the opposing side sang songs about a woman called Nellie Dean and several green bottles. The

silent disapproval soon seeped across the room and the party broke up shortly after it started.

The Irish girl was very bitter about the way things had turned out. She tackled Davies and me about it next morning at breakfast.

‘Fine bloody friends you are, I must say,’ she said. ‘Ruined everything so you did, what with your don’t drink this and don’t drink that. I wish a thousand times I had never invited you.’ We apologized for ruining everything and promised it wouldn’t happen again. Then we remembered that because she was leaving it wouldn’t happen again anyway and we became a little sad and down in the dumps.

For nearly four years we had smoked each other’s cigarettes, borrowed each other’s stockings when ours were past darning, laughed, talked, and sometimes cried together. The thought of her leaving suddenly became a minor tragedy; and maybe not so minor at that. We were a close community, drawn closer by a chronic shortage of money and not enough time to join outside communities. The Irish girl had contributed greatly to our happiness, though none of us had appreciated her properly while she had been there. It was only after she went that we realized she was a model of every Irish girl we were to work with over the years: kind, generous and nice to know, and only very occasionally like the Irish jokes that later were to enliven the comedy shows and have audiences falling about in their seats.

‘We are going to miss her,’ sighed Baker the day before she finally left. We were standing at the uncurtained window in the library. From there we could see the railway bank that had so often provided us with an alternative route into the nurses’ home when saying goodnight to boyfriends took longer than it should and we were afraid to face the lodgemen and their menacing pens dipped in ink. Looking down I could almost feel the wet mud caking my