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From Harkaway to Amiens: Jessie Traill's war

Jessie Traill was 33 years old when Britain declared war on Germany and Australia pledged its support. While the Australian Red Cross, established in 1914, was forming Voluntary Aid Detachments in the first months of 1915, to prepare for wounded soldiers returning to Australia,¹ Jessie was sailing to England. Leaving her developing art career and her sister Elise to look after their properties, Jessie responded to the outbreak of war with decisive action. Letters home reflect her motivations of patriotism and compassion. Jessie's previous experience of travel, familiarity with the city of London and rural France, absence of familial responsibilities and financial independence enabled her to speedily put her affairs in order in Australia and seek ways of assisting the war effort in Europe. Little did she know that it would be five years before she returned to Australia and her art.

In the years leading up to the war, Jessie established herself as a printmaker of renown and held her second solo exhibition in 1913.² She studied drawing and painting with Frederick McCubbin at the National Gallery School in Melbourne from 1901 until 1906 and trained in etching with John Mather in 1903. Jessie further developed her etching technique with Frank Brangwyn in London in 1907 and also attended Académie Colarossi in Paris in 1908. Returning to Australia in 1909, she set up a studio in Collins St, Melbourne, and procured an etching press suitable to print the large etchings she had learned to produce. In 1912 Jessie and Elsie bought a block of land in Harkaway, a village at the

Jessie Traill, 'A Night at Gifford House', London, 1915, ink on paper. 'Gifford House', Jessie Traill Papers, Australian Manuscripts Collection MS 7975, Box 796/1(a)

A NIGHT AT GIFFORD HOUSE.



8.30 p.m. Receiving the report (1)



9.45. Light (2)



10. Tomeslation (3)



10.30 - Mrs for Congl. Minutes (4)



(4)



Note the Hygiene with Gifford - kept all healthy - good!



12. am. Dinner (5)



1.30. Mrs for Congl. Minutes (6)

(7)



Living Room (8)



1.30. Mrs for Congl. Minutes (9)



4 o'clock tea! about (10)



4.30. Bed time (11)



5. am. Light (12)



6.30. Light (13)

foothills of the Dandenong Ranges, east of Melbourne. In a letter to Tom Roberts, Jessie showed her excitement: 'We have only five acres of land but every bit of it paintable.'³

By 1914 Jessie had produced an extensive body of work with a lyrical fresh vision of the Australian landscape. A letter to the secretary of the Victorian Artists Society, dated 28 December 1914, with which she had exhibited each year since returning from London, succinctly captures her decision to leave her art practice for the sake of the war effort:

On account of leaving for England this month I regret to inform you that I must resign my position on the Council of the Society.⁴

Apart from nursing services, which required trained nurses, one of the only ways that women could actively participate in the war effort was to join one of the patriotic funds. Britain established Voluntary Aid Detachments after the Boer War, concerned that in the event of another war, medical and nursing services would be unable to cope. By the outbreak of war in 1914 over 2000 detachments had been registered with the War Office.⁵

VADs, as the volunteers were called, were nursing assistants who had undergone short periods of training. Most were single, middle-class women of independent means. VADs were to carry out the menial but essential tasks of cleaning, including scrubbing floors, sweeping and dusting wards, cleaning bathrooms; emptying bedpans; rolling bandages; washing; and cooking.⁶ For Jessie, whose financially privileged background meant she was accustomed to having a maid or household help employed for such tasks, much of the work would be new. The VADs also helped with dressings and to undress, wash and dress the men. Many young women of the time may never have been unchaperoned with a man before, let alone seen or touched their bodies.⁷

Jessie's training as a VAD volunteer began in spring 1915 at the Queen Alexandra Hospital Home for Discharged Soldiers, Gifford House, in Roehampton, near Putney, in London. The hospital was classed as Grade A, which meant accepting the bedridden 'cot cases' and, initially, it had 80 beds, which number was soon increased to 140. It was staffed by members of the London/96 Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) of the Order of St John.⁸

Jessie was familiar with the Putney area from eight years previously when she used to visit Tom Roberts and his family at their home there while she was a student at the London School of Art.⁹ Her experiences at Gifford House as a trainee Voluntary Aid Detachment volunteer are described in 11 pages of her handwritten notes and pen sketches.¹⁰ A series of photographs in her papers¹¹ depict some of her duties, the patients, the house and its grounds.

The tone of her writing is light-hearted with a self-deprecating humour, and the descriptions of the setting and gardens convey Jessie's sensitivity to natural beauty. She dwells little on the injuries of the men but reflects on how the priorities and predilections of her previous life have been altered by her context. In contrast with the experiences recorded in her later diary in Rouen, France, life at Gifford House followed set routines without the pressure of large convoys of new patients and was, by and large, a pleasant time for Jessie:

Having negotiated ones uniform & got one's cap to 'sit' a bit 'in', one descends to be told ones duties which are numerous. – So one tears off now to lay tea in the hall – I pour out – persuade one fellow to take something, I tear up the stone stairs with a tray of tea to those in bed others to fly round & clear away again & sweep up the crumbs then to see what has come in to wash up & then descend to ones tea among all strange faces of the other workers & outside it is sweet & beautiful with the great bare trees against a glorious sky & the wood and the heath all grey thick with white birch stems showing out here and there & one realises in a moment what it is not to be ones own master.

Then blinds to be drawn as it gets dark rooms prepared for tonight & then supper for the men & hot water bottles to be filled & so on to ones own supper – & this is to be concert night, so when all is done one descends to the concert room where all have come & all are smoking ... popular songs the men join in heartily – 'It's a long way' the lustiest & all the parts of 'Sister Susie Sewing Shirts' sung with great delight. So weary from ones unusual rush and blinded and choked by the smoke the first day ends ...

Now it is that me who once chose ones own time of going and coming appreciates that little two hours a day, all too short & sweet. Still in a minute one is in the most beautiful surroundings – the grounds themselves are like a 'zoo' or Botanical Garden, there is everything heart could desire ...

At first one felt the Gramophones distracting, each playing a different tune in different places & to me, who always felt a Gramophone something I could well do without. Now I scare hear them & judging by the delight and interest the men take one feels they are jolly well worthwhile. And scrubbing hard the floors of a ward to a jolly tune with the men joining in every now and then as they bear their pains, one begins to thank the inventor for bringing so much joy into life ...

There are generally about 50 odd patients & every few days some go out & others come in – & it is quite a big number has passed thro' the hospital since it started in October. But very soon they expect to have a lot more & open new wards for them so they are trying to train as many nurses as possible so as to have a lot ready to come & work if needed.¹²



In July 1915, Jessie was sent out on active service to France. The Jessie Traill Papers at State Library Victoria contain 42 pages of typewritten entries in diary form that are based on letters she wrote home, probably to Elsie.¹³ Their type style and format is similar to a number of other manuscripts she wrote during the 1920s, which suggests they were typed by Jessie some time after the war.

Censorship and a patriotic concern to maintain good spirits influenced the degree to which Jessie's and other diaries spoke of the horrors of war injuries and deaths. Overall, the tone of many letters or diary entries written during the war is cheerful, and Jessie's writing focused on positives amid the hard work and tragedy with which she was surrounded. There are detailed descriptions of the conditions of the military hospitals and ways the wounded and dying were comforted by the work of nurses and VADs. Often she light-heartedly described adventures on days off, even though these times were rare amongst weeks of relentless work. There are few reflections of Jessie's feelings about the pain and suffering she witnessed, but the historical record of horrific injuries, number of amputations and high death toll of the war form a poignant backdrop to the beauty and humanity she saw.

Jessie was first posted to No. 12 British General Hospital on the racecourse south of Rouen in Normandy, north-west France. A number of base hospitals were located around the city and they formed part of the casualty evacuation chain. Located further back from the frontline than the casualty clearing stations, they were situated near railway lines on the way to the coast so



Above and opposite: Jessie Traill, 'A Day at Gifford House', London (details), 1915, ink on paper. 'Gifford House', Jessie Traill Papers, Australian Manuscripts Collection, MS 7975, Box 796/1(a)

that patients could be transported from them for longer term treatment in Britain. These hospitals were staffed by men from Royal Army Medical Corps and women nurses and VADs from Red Cross and St John's Ambulance organisations. Pay and leave entitlements were managed by the War Office in London.¹⁴

Jessie's diary began in August 1915 with reflections on camping in the tent hospital and the beauty of the surroundings. She wrote about the minutiae of everyday life rather than the wider developments of the war, the facts of which were largely unknown to those in its midst.

August, 1915

I have been here two weeks now but still feel quite in a dream, it is all so new and interesting but not a bit as I imagined; just think of camping at Waratah¹⁵ and living in the camp at Broadmeadows and you will get an idea only mix a very little of Waratah and a lot of Broadmeadows and you have it ... The surroundings here are beautiful and there are lots of walks for off days ...¹⁶

29 August, 1915

They talk of building huts instead of tents, I am sure it will be not so nice I love my corner and my camp bed, I sleep in blankets always, no good bothering about sheets and I am still divided whether I like my blue striped pyjamas better or my tussore nightdresses.

Jessie enjoyed working with other VADs and nurses and her friendships included discussions of women's issues of the time:

My Sister (she is such a dear) is going for a fortnight's leave tomorrow ... She is very keen on suffrage for women and all sorts of questions.

While in France, Jessie received a letter from Frank Crozier, with whom she studied at the National Gallery School in Melbourne. Crozier saw active service at Gallipoli and France and went on to produce illustrations with historian Charles Bean for *The Anzac Book*, which was published in 1916.¹⁷ Her response to his news of having been painting is her only reference to art during her time in war-torn France, an activity for which she found no time.

6 September, 1915

Crozier writes from Egypt, seems to find plenty of time to do some painting, really I feel amazed, if I gave up writing letters or reading or taking exercise I might be able to get a few odd hours a week but I would not call that good enough ...

As the war on the Western Front of France developed, the hospital became busier. By the end of September new convoys of patients began to arrive and Jessie reveals in her diary something of her way of coping with the knowledge of what new troops are heading toward.

27 September, 1915

We are increasing our hospital though the staff has been slowly depleted and with the advance we are to expect convoys in any time of day or night ...

You know I really love it ... I do love my Sister, she is a real good sort all through, Scotch of course and just A.1 to me and has been sweet 'cause you know I am not – well not meant to be a nurse I think but I try to do my bit as best I can.

30 September, 1915

... every body is working at high pressure and one goes on and on without rest and things get done but it is just then one feels glad to have come and to give all or as much as one can and we see the necessity of keeping so large a staff.

4 October, 1915

Since I last wrote we have started being busy and I can see now what a rush is and why they kept us all waiting through the time of so little doing; the rush is over now for the moment and we can breathe again before the next any day soon ... For about a week no one had off time and the orderlies were often up late and early getting convoys in ...

Of course the news is good but it seems that it must be only with a huge cost. We hear night after night the boys singing and shouting who are going up the line, they are so jolly and are going off with such good heart, one tries not to think of the convoys which come back.

Jessie had spent nearly two years of her schooling with her sisters and cousins in a French-speaking part of Switzerland. Her fluent French allowed her to make many connections with the local people during her time in Rouen. Having this contact meant Jessie became more attuned than her fellow compatriots to the plight of the French people, particularly the women. On rare days off Jessie explored the surrounding countryside and villages and conversed with the local women and children.

11 October, 1915

I got up on the hills at the back among orchards but just fruit trees on green slopes and then a cottage with a garden full of great bushes of Michaelmas daisies and dwarf sunflowers, and Camile aged 13 carrying Desiree 18 months rushed to ask if I would buy flowers so the mother was called out to gather and I came away with as much as I could carry for 1 franc. Coming back I walked with a dear French woman who had been up the hills getting grass for rabbits. She has a son who has been a prisoner since last Oct. 4th 'Il s'ennuie, she said, et moi je m'ennuie aussi' [he is bored and I also miss him], poor woman, we talked sadly of the war and then she said I must take some of her flowers to the 'blesses' too ... She gathered her only flowers in a wee back garden to take to the wounded and then I went back to town by tram thus laden.

Jessie moved between talking humorously of chilblains and a new straw hat, to the men for whom she cared. Although working for the British, Jessie was most deeply moved by the plight of Australian soldiers.

11 October, 1915

They are all dear men and it is a privilege and most interesting to work amongst them. I can see them, hear their descriptions of horrors and read about it all perfectly calmly, but to read the accounts of our fellows fighting at the Dardanelles, I just can't do it I simply break down.

Her compassion for the wounded soldiers, many of whom were very young, was often expressed in tender diminutives.

11 November, 1915

A lot from this ward I work in went off to England at 6.30 a.m. a cold raw morning, six stretcher cases, such a dressing up in the early hours and some

had no caps and we made some out of bed socks folded back. Only five lambs left and all sleeping as I write this.

Winter brought men with frostbite and trench feet. At the end of November 1915 Jessie was transferred to No. 8 General Hospital at Bois Guillaume on the north side of Rouen at 28 route de Neufchatel. After six months of work, Jessie had to decide whether to commit to a further six months of service. Frequent staff changes led to her being viewed as a long-term worker.

11 January, 1916

Work goes on here, staff goes and comes, and at present we are shorthanded and kept very busy. I am in the same hut as when I first came but have had no less than 6 different Sisters in the 6 or 7 weeks since I came here, it is rather disturbing for the poor patients and they look to me as the one in their difficulties, the others are so new.

Jessie was very excited when Australian nurses and soldiers arrived.¹⁸

16 April, 1916

Well I have been off my head the last two days because 5 Australian Sisters arrived here, jolly and lively and full of go in their ripping uniform, red capes and all ...

If you go into town it is just full of our boys and they are ripping! And what is so grand everyone is just mad over them, they look so splendid and all the sisters here are so taken with our sisters, they think they are so jolly and fresh and not a bit swanky ... I am glad I signed on and am here now they have come. It is great to feel I came as soon as many of them, you know I begin to feel an old-timer now.

27 April, 1916

The dear Australian Sisters have all gone ... like a whirlwind they seem to have come and gone. I am glad they came, they showed this lot a little of how you can be professional and not stiff and bored to bits, and everybody liked them. Now they have all been collected and are starting No. 1 Australian in the place of our old hospital on the Racecourse isn't it great! They will have it all so nice with their jolly equipment; their orderlies one sees about look so smart and nice.

Again Jessie's enjoyment of the beauty of her surroundings was mixed with her compassion for the wounded soldiers.



Jessie Traill in VAD uniform, Rouen, France. Photograph album: military hospital, France, Australian Manuscripts Collection, Jessie Traill Papers MS 7975, Box 805 F

27 April, 1916

I like the work in the officers' wards it is a change rather to the other tho' I was very sorry to leave my hut and the dear Tommies who are really the best. Still there is plenty of work and the poor dear wounded things need all they get, they have all the big responsibilities and nerve strain, and some of them are such kids ...

It is perfectly beautiful about our hospital now, avenues of chestnuts all tender green and patients sitting and lying in the shade of glades, the huts are all among the trees; and from the windows of the building I look daily on some glorious old pear trees all out. I don't comment on the news of the day which is not too bright but try to feel with the Bishop of Khartoom in his Easter sermon 'hopeful that out of all this wreck lasting good may come at length ...'.

After a year in Rouen, Jessie signed on again for another six months, hoping the end of the war would come in that time, 'that the great "it" will happen and one would hate not to be here when it does ...' In fact, the Battle of the Somme¹⁹ had begun, with huge loss of life and numbers of wounded. The war was at a stalemate as both sides realised that any victory was many months if not years away.



Left: Tents used for officer convalescing at No. 12 General Hospital, Rouen, 1916.
Right: The nurses & Voluntary Aid Detachment mess at No. 8 General Hospital, Rouen.
Photograph album: military hospital, France, Jessie Trail Papers, Australian Manuscripts Collection, MS 7975, Box 805 F

The establishment of No. 1 Australian General Hospital on the south side of Rouen gave Jessie a place to regularly see other Australians.

10 September, 1916

I had such a work over trying to get a gramophone for No. 1 A.G.H ... after waiting months and telling them it was coming my agents in London can't get one, they aren't being made, it seems absurd; now I see a couple procurable here so I am going to get one if possible.

1 October, 1916

The gramophone I have at last managed to get here, some Paris shop has a secret supply in stock to dribble round to the provinces. The hospital has received it and is enjoying it greatly.

16 October, 1916

I was up dining at No. 1 A.G.H. the other day, such a jolly mess all talking. You should have seen, all just in, big fat *Australasians*, *Bulletins* etc such a homely looking post.

Jessie's photographs show how creatively the wards were decorated for Christmas celebrations and the staff's efforts to make the celebrations special for the patients.

26 December, 1916

Of course there was a lot of shopping to be done, little gifts for 37 patients, we put them in wee bags with chocolates and sweets the Red Cross gave and of course there was paper for decorations etc ...

A lovely dinner the men had, all who could went to the dining hall and we served the ones who could not leave their beds. Then we prepared the tea,



Left: Officer patients, No. 8 General Hospital, Rouen.

Right: Costumes for play, No. 8 General Hospital, Rouen, 1917.

Photograph album: military hospital, France, Jessie Traill Papers, Australian Manuscripts Collection, MS 7975, Box 805 F

which we gave, Sister and I both got cakes sent (in time this year) and we had a jolly tea our M[edical] O[fficer] excelling himself in attending to their wants, then of course they sang and got jolly and all the wards were lively and bright and amusing themselves in any old way ... all slept well and no ill effects, our worst cases seemed to brighten up and improve. We had wattle and gumleaves mingled with our holly and rising suns cut out of orange paper though we only had one A.I.F. left.

Spring 1917 brought more casualties and the hospitals were busy. Jessie visited the Australian hospital and graveyard, which showed the great losses suffered by Australian troops and the dangers of war work for women too.

23 April, 1917

I was up on the racecourse world last week, I went to look up a grave at the cemetery for the Australians, it gave me a great shock to see how much it had grown since last I was there grown out into the field beyond, just pitiful. I saw an Australian sister Miss Knox's grave, a Melbourne girl who had only just arrived from Egypt and a V.A.D. who was buried on the same day, and a worker at a coffee stall, they all lie in the officers' part.²⁰

The medical workers at No.8 General Hospital built a tennis court on which to play during breaks. The staff also worked on concerts and pantomimes and Jessie's photographs show their creativity in making costumes despite limited time and resources.

3 June, 1917

Tuesday saw the final rehearsals for the concert; Wednesday was the patients' day, nearly all we had were taken on stretchers at 5 p.m. I made myself useful behind the scene helping people to dress and do quick change. It went grandly with a fine swing, a good little play and then a sort of carnival, singing, dancing

etc. all beautiful costumes ending up with dances of all allies and then a general dance with showers of confetti, cigarettes and chocolates on the audience.

Continued fighting at the front over the summer brought more casualties to the hospital. Jessie hoped the cooler weather would slow the fighting but knew it made conditions more difficult for soldiers and the wet would cause many of them to develop trench feet.

23 September, 1917

The last convoys had lots of ours, they have done splendidly fearful losses but the wounded are in great heart.

1 October, 1917

Such a lot of our dear boys are in now, they are so different to anyone else, we have a D.C.M. & one or two mere kids from N.Z. They are doing splendidly.

8 October, 1917

The last few days we have had a bout of cold and wet intense one night & morning & such a drop from the week before. It may hold things back a bit, 'ours' are doing splendidly we are feeling a bit bucked. It reminds me somewhat of what last year was when you had to go round the ward trying to make poor perished feet in splints a little warmer with wool & hot bottles. In the army winter is not started yet, at least [an] extra blanket & undershirt have been issued but not fuel or oil.

But, through the winter and another spring, the war continued.

16 June, 1918

We have a wee boy who had his 21st birthday to-day, looks about 16 & is a baby too but has been in Gallipoli & Salonica & here wounded several times, well we made him a lovely salad & I put onions in (they were the first thing he asked for weeks ago when he was very ill) & they did all love it so.

In August 1918 Jessie enjoyed some leave in London and visited Tom Roberts and his family in Golders Green.²¹ By autumn 1918, news of a possible armistice came through.

30 September, 1918

There is heaps to write about if one writes of news for is it not great! every front! every convoy coming in with fresh news & fresh hopes!

The Armistice was signed by Germany on the morning of 11 November 1918.²² The following day, Jessie described the events at No. 8 General Hospital, Rouen.

12 November, 1918

I feel I want to write, write all about everything, it's all too wonderful for words, we heard it was to be signed yesterday noon. At 12 guns went & sirens & whistles & bells oh such a noise such a lovely noise. I am with 'flus' & poor things they are very depressed so they did not leap up, they regretted not being up 'there' but as they were here & in bed they did not want to do anything, I then tore over to lunch, met a group of the night staff waiting to do something, not knowing what.

Jessie's diary continued but, when she returned home to Australia in 1920, she wrote specifically about the day of Armistice in a beautifully expressed and poignant piece titled, 'Armistice Day 1918 by a V.A.D':

Scene, a big Military Hospital in France

The news has just come through. All the morning there was expectancy in the air, now something has happened, something different than ever before ... Something we have been waiting for, hoping for, all these years. What shall we do? – is the question on everybody's lips. We all used to imagine what we would do when the war was over, let's do something now ... The air is full of tension, something must be done, but nobody knows exactly what. 'Where's the Colonel? Can't he do something?' The Matron is asked 'What shall we do?' 'Do' she says, 'Why?' and goes on with her work. Then it is that the inspiration comes to one of us V.A.D.s She is an English girl ... who had left her home for the first time to give herself heart and soul to her work for our boys ... When everybody is wondering what to do, she does it. None of us are bold enough, resourceful enough, but she is equal to the occasion and makes that day for everybody.

By the side of the square hangs an iron rail from a post – the fire alarm, which is used for the church bell on Sundays. This she starts striking with the hammer that lies by it – stroke on stroke ... Stroke on stroke and the great empty square fills with hurrying figures. They come from the great grey building ... They come from the huts built among the chestnut trees of the garden ... Stroke on stroke, the whole place is alive, medical officers, sisters, nurses, orderlies, every patient who can walk; and those who can't, hear and know what the sound means. The call has come, the move is made, she has done her work, now the crowd does the rest.

The Padre brings out the portable harmonium, a patient with bandaged head installs himself as organist and we are singing the national Anthem, the Marseillaise, the Old Hundred, everybody at the top of their voices and from the depth of their hearts. The Colonel and the matron are not asked for now

... the lead came without them and only a few knew how. Over the road at the Convent of St. Vincent de Paul, the good nuns in their great white caps have mustered their children by the gateway, called by the sound, and they too are singing their songs and ours.

It is all over as quickly as it began. It lasts but ten minutes at the most. The crowd vanishes, each to his own task, and the night staff gladly to rest. The busy hospital couldn't stop for long. The tension is gone. The necessary something has been done and we can go to our work content and happy.²³

Jessie stayed on at the hospital until February 1919 as convoys were still coming through, influenza²⁴ was raging and many of the patients could not be transferred until fit to travel. She then travelled to London, staying in England until July 1919, then travelled back to Rouen, Paris and other parts of France. In September she visited towns on the Western Front of great significance to Australians. Her descriptions are sombre and she writes of the desolation left by war:

It was an unforgettable day.

Amiens, Villers-Bretonneux, Hamel, Corbie, Hangard are no longer merely names ... vague ideas & mere names are pushed away now by something vivid and concrete ... how different it all seems now one has seen it. And the gradual change from the country just around Amiens (open and bleak enough, but all ploughed now & with little to show that war had ever been near) to the wrecked town of Villers-Bretonneux & the utter desolation of poor little Hamel ... to see the towns & villages even after a year, wrings one's heart as acres of description never would ... Along the roadside are piles of war rubbish, petrol tins, rusty barb wire, rolls of camouflage etc ... on top of the next hill stands Villers-Bretonneux, or what is left of it. To our boys a name so different from all the rest of the names in France, (that terrible unnatural France that only soldiers knew). A name irradiated by a something – a feeling, a light! Every other name had grown to have but one meaning to them – the death of hope, but Villers Bretonneux means not only its birth, but the place where hope sprang full grown in every consciousness, to spur exhaustion with thoughts of victory, or – oh thought so quiveringly dear –

of HOME ...

Broken, scarred, torn, but still standing & not only standing but being patched up. For some people are back, a few; making pitiful makeshifts, how could they ever face it! And yet there are bits of washing hung to dry in one place, people seated at a meal in another, & other signs of life painfully finding its way through the bruised arteries & broken limbs ... To see these ruins, the

collapsed roofs, the broken walls, the tragedy seems so near that one almost expects to hear again the whine of the shells & the thump & roar of still more explosions.

But silence reigns.

And what shall I say of Hamel?

There is something so infinitely pathetic about Hamel. It is so small, so crushed, so pitiful. As if a little maiden lady unconscious of aught save her own small concerns & diminutive interests had been overtaken by a terrible accident & left mangled and dust covered to die by the wayside ... A nightmare paralysis seems to hold one on looking back on it all ... But I am glad I went if it enables me to realise a little more what those years meant to France & the soldiers.²⁵

Jessie's time in the area ended with a visit to Amiens Cathedral:

But it was not the cathedral alone we had come to see, it was a sacred cross within it, not one of gold & jewels but of stars – the Southern Cross – the flag of Australia our doubly consecrated remembrance of sacrifice, the sign of those who died to save the world & now consecrated afresh by those 60,000 Australians who followed it to death. And it hangs in Amiens Cathedral as a remembrance of how Amiens was saved & how the tide of the war first turned at the approach of that flag.²⁶

By the end of 1919 Jessie was on her way back to Australia. She would never forget the events of the years that she spent in France and the people and places with whom she had connected. While her experiences were not explicitly expressed in Jessie's subsequent art practice, they affected her personally. She was especially concerned with the plight of people displaced by the war and, in 1920, she began to raise funds for refugees and people returning to their devastated villages in France. In particular, the village of Feuchy was close to her heart and she raised money to rehouse widows and children and provide a water supply to the town. Jessie visited Feuchy again in 1926, the first of many visits she would go on to make in the future. Her experience of war left an indelible mark that, with her passion for art, would shape the rest of her life.