REPRESENTATIONS OF DOBRUJAN TOWNS IN THE DIARIES OF THE SCOTTISH NURSES FROM THE GREAT WAR

Costel Coroban
Assist., PhD., "Ovidius" University of Constanța

Abstract: This article is intended to present an outline of the Scottish Women's Hospitals' (SWH) sojourn to Romania before turning to its full purpose, an analysis of the instances in which Romanian towns are mentioned in the diaries and letters of the SWH during their stay on the Eastern Front. The hypothesis is that most of the nurses' representations of towns were written in a tragic tone. This was owing, on the one hand, to the fact that the destruction of important urban centres as elements of European civilization was part of the general devastation caused by the Great War and, on the other hand, to the immediate feelings of sorrow, disappointment and hopelessness of the Scottish women who travelled and worked in a country ravaged by war. The Tragic mode of emplotment, as one of Hayden White's archetypes which the scholar opposes to Comedy, lays emphasis on a gain in consciousness for the spectators of the fall of the protagonist (White 1973, 9). The spectators, in the case of the present research, are the nurses who visited Romania in the First World War, while the protagonist whose fall they tragically witness is the country for whose engagement in the war they were initially enthusiastic.

Keywords: SWH, Romania, World War I, Constanța, Medgidia, Tulcea, War diaries

A premise that this article relies on is that cities represent "an aggregation or accumulation, not just in demographic, economic or planning terms, but also in terms of feeling and emotion" (Preston and Simpson-Housley 2002, 1). Similarly, Robert Alter, in a study of the representation of the city in 19th-century literature, shows that "…to live […] to walk the city streets, to enter the urban crowds, to be exposed to the exponential increase of noise and bustle, to inhabit an apartment building or tenement […] The perception of the fundamental categories of time and space, the boundaries of the self, and the autonomy of the individual began to change" (Alter 2005, xi). Therefore, given the range of experiences awakened by the situation of the individual in the urban space – and more so, in times of war – our intention is to discuss aspects such as sentiments, reactions, passions, fears and thoughts awakened by the Romanian towns in the minds of their Scottish visitors, as revealed by the writings these nurses and doctors have left us, as well as to illustrate the way they describe these localities.

Another important premise for the subject of this chapter is that the importance of city space as a literary symbol cannot be overstated. In 19th-century culture, for example in the works of Wordsworth or Dickens, the city tended to be described both as a place of confusion and crowdedness, as well as an alluring location of excitement (Preston and Simpson-Housley 2002, 4). In the nurses' descriptions this multiplicity is present: Romanian towns are sometimes described as fascinating as well as teeming with people, perhaps owing to the cultural baggage of the British visitors, yet the realities of war have an important part in this as well. Towns were attractive and busy – except if facing enemy bombardments – for the reason that they were among the few places where food and supplies – most of the time in small quantities and for high prices – were available. As we shall see, the fragments include accounts about Medgidia, Constanța, and Hârşova as well as Tulcea. This corresponds to the areas of the front where they were active, namely the southeast of Romania. Impressed or not,

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amazed at the lively boulevards, appalled by the seeming indifference of the townspeople or taken aback by the traumatic effects of bombardments, the nurses and doctors of the SWH included all these localities in their accounts. This was perhaps due to the importance of space and time in Victorian culture, in which these concepts had been standardized earlier than other European cultures (Pettitt 2012). As can be imagined, the nurses felt the need to always situate themselves in time and space owing to the long tradition of diary writing in Britain and to their being used to exact quantifications of time and distance, of which plentiful examples will be provided.

On 24 September 1916, the Scottish Women Hospitals unit left Odessa towards Medgidia, where the Russian military headquarters in Dobruja were found. The train trip to Reni, which on a normal day should have lasted six hours, took three days and four nights. On their arrival in Reni at 6:30 in the morning, one of the nurses, Yvonne Fitzroy, describes the view as similar to the Scottish Lowlands. They finally arrived in Medgidia on 30 September 1916, in the evening (at 11:00 p.m.), where Dr. Elsie Inglis was given a barrack to turn into a campaign hospital, while 12 members of the unit plus the transport sub-unit, were sent to Bülbül Mic (which mostly appears as Bul-Bul Mic in the diaries of the Scottish medical women, today the village Ciocârlia de Jos, Constanţa County) under Dr. Chesney to establish another hospital closer to the front.

Nurse Margaret Fawcett writes later about their arrival in Cernavodă on 30 September 1916, where they were met by someone more familiar than most people they met on the eastern front. The arrival occurred at three o'clock in the afternoon, when the nurses were greeted by an Irishman, whose name they recorded as Bryson. The Irishman conveyed them on the recommendation of the Russian military command in Dobruja to open a hospital at Medgidia. The nurses left Cernavodă at 8:30 and arrived in Medgidia at 9:15, where Dr. Elsie Inglis discussed with the military authorities and planned what course of action was to be taken there (Cahill 43).

The nurses did not receive an enthusiastic welcome in Medgidia, some of them having to spend the night in the train, which was probably a consequence of bureaucratic confusion in the organization of field hospitals at the time.

The first two days in Medgidia meant cleaning the barrack for proper hospital hygiene while the personnel set up tents to sleep in. The same Yvonne Fitzroy was wondering in her journal what it would be like to be near a dying man, but she soon found out that when the wounded were pouring in from the battlefield there was too much to do and little time for contemplation. When the situation returned to normal everybody took advantage of the break and accepted the proximity of death as a daily routine, as she bravely tells us in her journal. The same situation is described by Katherine Hodges, who, looking back to this extraordinary experience, tells us that the chaos of the war in Romania made the women who were unfamiliar with it quickly adapt. Hard and continuous work meant that nobody had the time to think too much about the tragedy of the situation. The bad news from the front and the increasing numbers of wounded caused a serious drop in morale, but what kept the Scottish women going was the correspondence they received from their families (Leneman 1994, 76-77).

The journal of Miss Yvonne Fitzroy also mentions the existence in Medgidia of a unit of the Russian Red Cross. Generally, the soldiers agreed that the Scottish nurses were more professional and offered better treatment, but this does not mean, for example, that patients did not sleep on hay mattresses on the floor, even in the Scottish women's hospital. And even though they were all women they still accepted the help of men, especially using a Serbian soldier whom they called "Chris" for translation. Miss Fitzroy remarks in her diary that he was rather tall and that he really did not appreciate having to explain to his fellow patients "the mysteries of (forgive me) a British bedpan" (Fitzroy 1918, 37). He would take quite a

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few moments to detach himself from his other occupations in order to explain to other soldiers that they would sadly have to lose a limb, or that they should not eat a certain thing if their stomach was injured. Of course, nobody envied Chris and his role, but he was extremely useful to the Scottish women, who also appreciated the help of the Russians, even though it took even longer for them to offer a helping hand (Fitzroy 1918, 37-38).

The daily schedule of the Scottish medical women, while at Medgidia in Dobruja, is very interesting, and we are lucky that the same Yvonne Fitzroy described it in her journal: waking up at 6:00 a.m.; breakfast at 7:00 a.m.; at 7:30 a.m. the roster was called and tents were inspected; 7:45 a.m. meant the beginning of the work day; at 11:30 a.m. a snack was served, followed by lunch at 12:30 p.m.; tea was served between 3:15-4:00 p.m. and dinner at 8:00 p.m. The women could take up to 3 hours off every day, but this of course depended on the number of patients in their care (Fitzroy 1918, 42).

Once, in Cernavodă, Yvonne Fitzroy took the time to describe the locals in a letter to her mother. She mentioned that the "real Roumanians", the urbanites, had been charming to them, and that the men and women are "pretty and delightful", which she considered a pity in the case of the former, as she would have preferred Romanian soldiers to be more ready to fight, much like their Cossack (Russian) allies (Cahill 131). In those times Cernavodă was an urban commune totalling 2,235 inhabitants, of which less than three-quarters were Romanian (1,532). It was a rather cosmopolitan locality, with many Muslim inhabitants (537), but there were also Roman Catholics and Jews. The most impressive architectural monument at that time was the St. Constantine and Helena Church, but there were also two mosques and a Muslim school, besides the two Romanian primary schools (Lahovari, Brătianu and Tocilescu 1900, 330). Still, what captivated people's imagination about Cernavodă were not its religious edifices, but the "Carol I" Bridge, the outstanding engineering accomplishment of Anghel Saligny, that had been built between 1890 and 1895 under the patronage of the Romanian Royal family.

One of the greater and better known towns of Romania at the beginning of the 20th century, Constanţa was also among the first the nurses explored. According to the Great Geographical Dictionary published at the turn of the century under the aegis of the Romanian Geographic Society, in the early 20th century Constanţa was an urban commune, the same as Medgidia and Cernavodă, with 62 streets, including magnificent boulevards (such as Elisabeta, Carol I, Ovidius) and important edifices: the St. Peter and Paul Cathedral, the "Carol I" Hotel, the "Casino", and other accommodation centres such as Gambeta, Central, Regal, the "Prince Ferdinand and Princess Marie" Primary School, the Azizia Mosque, the Communal Hospital, the Town Hall Palace, Greek church, Prince Sturdza Palace and, of course, the statue of Ovid. Constanţa had a population of 10,419 people at the census in 1894, but it had unquestionably become larger by the outbreak of the Great War. There were eight mosques in the town, more than the number of Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant churches, which gave it an oriental flair, even though the civilians were dressed after the European fashion. The most important function of the town was that of being a port, and the importance of the commerce that was taking place there was highlighted by the impressive number of foreign representatives who were found there, such as the Consuls of Austria-Hungary, Belgium and the Ottoman Empire, the Vice-Consuls of Germany, France, Russia, Great Britain, Spain, Sweden-Norway, and consular agents of Italy, Bulgaria and Greece. The ambience surrounding Constanţa was very pleasant, with hot weather in summer but a lot of dust, while the autumns were rainy and muddy (Lahovari, Brătianu and Tocilescu 1900, 610-620).

In October 1916, the Scottish women travelled to Constanţa, conveniently situated rather close to their hospitals in Medgidia and Ciocârlia de Jos, in order to acquire food and items needed for the daily running of their camps. Later on, after 22 October 1916 when

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Constanțahad to be abandoned to invading German and Bulgarian troops (Kirițescu 1989, 383), the nurses made frequent references to it being occupied or suffering in the wake of occupation, which means that they understood how important the port of Constanţa was for Romania's position in the war. An interesting discussion may arise here concerning the question to what extent the perceived strategic importance of the Black Sea Romanian city is reflected in the nurses' few but valuable Romantic evocations of this place. More likely, the women were charmed by the seaside glamour of Constanța, as it was the only location on the Black Sea shore they had reached. Another possible factor was that they may have heard from the locals that the Russian Imperial family visited Constanța in 1914, when Tsar Nicholas II met King Carol I of Romania in order to discuss terms for Romania's entry into the War on the side of the Entente (Agrigoroaiei 2000, 110-111). This high profile diplomatic meeting had made such an impression on the public that the newspapers of the time reported that as many as 100,000 people travelled to the seaside to witness the historic event (Pauleanu 2005, 40-52). Finally, Constanța's prestige was also owed to the fact that it was the summer residence of the Romanian Royal family. King Carol I was one of the greatest supporters for the integration of Dobruja into the Romanian Kingdom and the proponent of vital projects for the city and the region, such as the Carol I Mosque, the "Anghel Saligny" Bridge and even the port, which the King had personally inaugurated on 27 September 1909 (Pauleanu 2005, 19-39).

Turning to the nurses' chronicles of this Romanian Black Sea port, from the diary entry of Lois Turner that is dated 15 October 1916, the reader is informed that she had a glorious day travelling to Constanţa from Medgidia with her colleague, Miss Henderson, which took the women one and a half hours on a straight road (Cahill 59). It is not surprising that Lois Turner emphasized what a glorious day that was considering that until the Second Battle of Cobadin (19-25 October 1916) the Central Powers forces, mainly consisting of the Bulgarian Third Army, were held in check at a distance of approximately 25 kilometers south of the port city (Toshev 2007, 184). Nurse Lois Tuner noted that there were few woods in that part of Romania and that the roads were crowded with Russian and Romanian troops and army logistic units, but there were already refugee Romanian peasants. Lois Turner finds them picturesque, appreciating their bright-coloured traditional clothing, which she found more interesting than those of the Russian peasants. The nurse also noticed the existence of a large Turkish community in Dobruja (Cahill 59).

About the Black Sea port she wrote the following:

Constantza is an awfully jolly town, like what I imagine Monte Carlo to be – white houses, and the sea and the sky. We did not have much time there, as we had a good deal of serious shopping to do. Everything is ruinously expensive. We wanted a couple of little roasting tins and shelves for our stove, and they asked twenty francs. They are absolutely sold out of cigarettes, so we are getting the Roumanian government to send us large consignments for our canteen (Cahill 59).

As we can see in the beginning, the account of this short trip to Constanţa begins with the decription of the roads. This is a subject that always surfaces, given how important roads were for their activity (let us remember that the SWH had an ambulance unit that depended on the – rather precarious – existence of roads). Roads are almost always swarming with soldiers, supplies, convoys or refugees. The tone of the description of Constanţa is quite positive, it being compared to Monte Carlo, one of the symbol landmarks of Monaco. Thus, Constanţa is seen as a leisurely place, with beautiful white dwellings and marked by the striking presence of the sea. Unfortunately, the nurses' presence in Constanţa on 15 October 1916, did not allow them much time for enjoying the sights, as they had to return to their task of buying

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supplies. Even kitchen items are described as expensive, perhaps due to the rapacity of the Romanian traders, and there were no cigarettes[1] to be bought in town. Towards the end of this diary entry, the subject shifts from the pleasant visit to Constanţa to the traumatic reality of bombardments.

The last visit of the nurses to Constanţa, before it was occupied by the Central Powers, took place on 20 October 1916, when Nurse Mary Henderson was given a lift there by one of the ambulance drivers:

The last few days the sound of the guns got nearer and nearer, and the order to evacuate came on 19 October. We went back to a village near Medgidia, where we stayed one night. The next day I had occasion to go on business to Constantza, one of the Transport drivers, Miss Mackenzie-Edwards, driving me in the staff car. I found the city practically deserted, and the enemy took it the next day. On the return from Constantza we got into the midst of the retreating Roumanian army. The enemy must have been very near, for the soldiers were crouching low as they went along, taking what they could (Henderson 1917).

It is not clear which village next to Medgidia she is mentioning, perhaps it was actually Ciocârlia de Jos or some other settlement. This time there is no romanticism or metaphors to be found in the description of the city, since the people had gone and only soldiers could be seen everywhere. Next, the difficulty of getting around Dobruja in those times is again mentioned. Perhaps the nurses acquired the impression that the country was like a labyrinth, given how long it took – them and, thankfully, the enemy as well – to get around.

Another account of a visit to Constanţa from before 20 October 1916 is painted in warmer hues:

I did my shopping with Bell. I like her very much. She is the first person I spoke to in Liverpool, one of the Buffs, a widow of a few months. She longs, as I do, to get away from the crowd… We did not know the way to Constantza, but she is a *beautiful* driver. We went over hills and moors – no real roads, just tracks. We had taken the wrong road, but we didn't care – we seemed so free, away from everyone. It was glorious, and so was the day – bright mid-summer weather, the first day I have really loved, just being away with a kindred spirit. Bell was in breeches, so of course they thought she was a man, with her short hair (Cahill 52).

It was provided by the SWH cook, Mary Milne, who visited Constanţa with one of the ambulance drivers, Miss Bell, to whom she took a liking. Once more, roads appear as non-existent, but on this occasion there is no immediate danger. The nurses took their time and Mrs. Milne expressed her joy at spending a bright autumn day in Constanţa. She remarked how her colleague and driver was taken for a man by the inhabitants of the town, which was not a unique occurrence, as we will see later. Perhaps the charm exercised by the port town on the Black Sea coast augmented Mary Milne's feelings for her colleague, whose beauty she mentioned in the journal entry. Manifesting a certain amount of wanderlust that was probably owing to the difficult conditions of war work, the two women did not mind taking the wrong road, thus spending more time together on that wonderful day on the Romanian seaside.

As mentioned in the beginning, the fall of Constanţa (on 22 October 1916) is described by the nurse Elsie Bowerman on their retreat from Medgidia to Brăila, on 23 October 1916. She wrote that pandemonium reigned at Făurei as there were huge crowds of refugees for

[1] A less known aspect of the culture of the Great War was that cigarettes were considered almost as important as food. Through the involvement of Lady Denman (1884-1954), the founder and president of the Smokes for Wounded Soldiers and Sailors Society charity, some 265 million cigarettes and large quantities of tobacco were sent to the frontline. She helped the suffragist movement by having the cigarette packs, like, for example, the Black Cats trademark, illustrated with images of women taking masculine jobs, in order to acquaint the soldiers with the efforts of their mothers, sisters or daughters on the home front (Huxley 63).

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whom no provisions had been supplied by the authorities. All of them were trying to get on trains by whatever means possible, in a general panic and despair, and Elsie Bowerman was wondering what became of stretcher cases. The only ones whose morale was higher were Russian reinforcements who were heading in the opposite direction, towards the front. The Russian soldiers are the only ones who seem to be in "excellent spirits", compared to the local population (Cahill 67). Hearsay about the occupation of Constanţa pervades through those dramatic moments, when, in Făurei, refugees lacking provisions were struggling to get away from the front, while the nurses themselves were trying to transport the hospital equipment to Galaţi.

The next account, provided by Yvonne Fitzroy, is more detailed. It is also set during the retreat from Dobruja and it dates from 22 October 1916. It portrays the beauty of the scenery, the ubiquitous dysfunctional roads, and provides a description of the native peasants showing how well informed the nurse was about the history of the place they had gone to and finally how the nurses arrived in Gălbiori, named by its Turkish name which was in use at the time – Saragea – much like all the other locations they visited in Dobruja:

The whole country is in retreat, and we had an extraordinarily interesting drive, Behind we could see the shells exploding, and the sky was alight with the glow of burning villages. On our right a bigger glow showed the fate of Constantza, which fell today. The road was indescribably dilapidated and crammed with refugees, troops and transport. The retreating troops seem mostly Roumanians; I gather the Russians are protecting our rear (Fitzroy 45).

The bombardment of Constanţa is alluded to by the "bigger glow" the nurses witnessed to the right (east) on their retreat northwards. The harshness of war conditions was temporarily abated by the enjoyment of frugal snacks, but even these would become increasingly hard to obtain. The only joy that could be found on the front in Romania consisted of cigarettes and Turkish delight, the first provided by the government whenever possible and the second obtainable from shops in towns and some larger villages, if available at all (Cahill 72).

The occupation of Constanţa on 22 October 1916, caused a great exodus of people, who fled the city in the afternoon of that day, together with the General Staff of the 5th Army Corps. The Russian commander, Volkovitzky, had decided that petrol should be released out of the fuel tanks in the town once the troops had been evacuated (Cojoc 401). This created a huge explosion that could be seen from miles away – described by the Scottish nurses as a "bigger glow" – the moment the Central Powers began their bombardment prior to occupying the town and port. The Russians believed they could at least hold the port for a longer time, but they were proved wrong. In spite of the efforts of General Pavlov or Admiral Patton to delay the disaster, Russian troops retreated out of Constanţa in a chaotic and hasty manner, toppling refugee wagons on their way north. In order to buy time for the retreat of the civilians and other troops, a single Romanian detachment, armed with only a machine-gun and a few other firearms, opposed resistance to the invaders in the area of Ţepeş Vodă Street. Needless to say, they were massacred by the invading forces, some of them even decapitated and disfigured (Cojoc 401). The following day the fall of Constanţa was announced across diplomatic channels. Many understood that the entire Dobruja would soon face a similar tragic fate (Cojoc 402).

In the context of the retreat, the nurses always seem to remind themselves with great regret about the loss of Constanţa: "They have got Medgidia and Constantza and our only outlet remains into Roumania proper across the Danube. There is a stretch of flat marshy country between the mountain cliffs and the river itself" (Cahill 91). In this account belonging to Lois Turner and written on the way from Hârşova to Bessarabia, the nurse describes the landforms in Dobruja. We find out that the winds were – just like in the present day –

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exceptionally strong, and the Danube Delta was situated between Dobruja's mountains and the river Danube, which is not entirely accurate.

Katherine Hodges, one of the drivers, described the building that was used by her and her colleagues in Tulcea after 14 December 1916, on whose parquet floor they slept while billeted in Tulcea. The public building the nurses were given this time did not leave so much to be desired as their other building from Medgidia. It even had a romantic "gigantic ballroom", which must have been used by the nurses as a hospital ward. Despite the adequacy of the location and perhaps to the nurses' regret, the nurses had to move across the Danube and eventually reached a monastery, where they even established a field hospital (Cahill 151). The location was probably the Celic-Dere nunnery, which is situated 25 km away from Tulcea and had been established in 1835.

Earlier than their arrival in Tulcea was their passing through Hârşova. Lois Turner left a revelatory account dated 25 October 1916:

Still on trek. Last night we landed near Hirsova, a most picturesque town on a hill commanding the Danube and capped by its cathedral. I wish we could have seen the city. All day we had hurried through quite beautifully hilly country. We did not start till midday. I had to go up very early and found wood and water and made tea over a real camp fire – how we enjoyed it. We then had time to cook the goose in the cream which had been looted for us, but we kept it and hung it on the back of our cart and heated it up over a camp fire in the evening. Last night we had quite a beano – wine and the Turkish delight which I had kept. Early in the morning I was up again with another camp fire heating up the remains of the stew for breakfast (Cahill 98).

It seems Hârşova exercised the type of fascination that Constanţa and Brăila had done on the imagination of the nurses. It appears as a perfect little town, crowned by its cathedral and surrounded by picturesque hills. What is more, the day spent around Hârşova ended with a plentiful dinner. These happy moments did not last for long. As the enemy was advancing, the nurse had to leave the scenic town of Hârşova and continue towards the pontoon bridge (Cahill 98). At the beginning of the 20th century, Hârşova was a district situated between the Constanţa and Tulcea districts and bordering the Danube in the West. The town had twelve to fourteen streets, and was at that time divided in two neighbourhoods, Varoş (in the west) and the Tatar neighbourhood (in the east). It had a population of only 2,718 souls, but the fact that it was a port town on the Danube awarded the locality a special liveliness. The architectural attractions in pre-World War I Hârşova were the St. Nicholas church, which was described and appreciated by Lois Turner in the paragraph above, as well as two mosques – reflecting its past within the Ottoman Empire, even though the number of Muslims in the town was considerably lower than the number of Christians (Lahovari, Brătianu and Tocilescu 1900, 710).

Comparatively, their initial description of Tulcea was much briefer, perhaps due to them being in a hurried retreat. Around the time of World War I, Tulcea was one of the most ethnically diverse urban communes in Romania, with different quarters and neighbourhoods for its Tatar, Turkish, Bulgarian, Lipovan, German and Jewish communities. It was a picturesque town with a special flair that could be best admired reaching the locality by taking the ship from Galaţi to Sulina. The houses were painted in various colours but all of them had white roofs, the domes of the Romanian and Lipovan churches would shine brightly from afar, while any visitor could also admire the countless windmills on Tulcea's hills. The total population of the town was some 18,880 and its most important architectural assets were St. Nicholas Cathedral (Romanian) and the Annunciation Cathedral (Russian) (Lahovari, Brătianu and Tocilescu 1900, 656-657). Nurse Birkbeck appreciated that Tulcea was one of the few places in Romania at that time that had a "stone road" (Cahill 165).

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All in all, we have witnessed how the nurses' descriptions of and comments on Medgidia are not as rich and detailed as, for example, those relating to Constanţa. Medgidia, despite being the headquarters of the SWH for almost a month, did not elicit as much interest as Constanţa, owing to the town being abandoned because of its situation too close to the front. Furthermore, the burden of continuous work allowed little time for contemplation and autobiography, although the nurses did preserve some very sensible descriptions of the surroundings of their hospital at Medgidia.

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