

Angela Colenso – WW1 Red Cross VAD

Angela Margaret Cockburn Colenso was born in Kensington on the 20th July 1891. Her father was Robert John Colenso (1850-1926), a doctor raised in South Africa, son of the Bishop of Natal. Her mother was Emily Anne Kerr (1857-1923) whose father had been a merchant in Hamilton, Ontario where she was born, but the family had moved to London before he died in 1878. Angela's parents had met while her father had been studying at Oxford. They had originally settled in Durban, Natal, where her brother, John Eric, was born in 1880. This family returned to England around 1890.

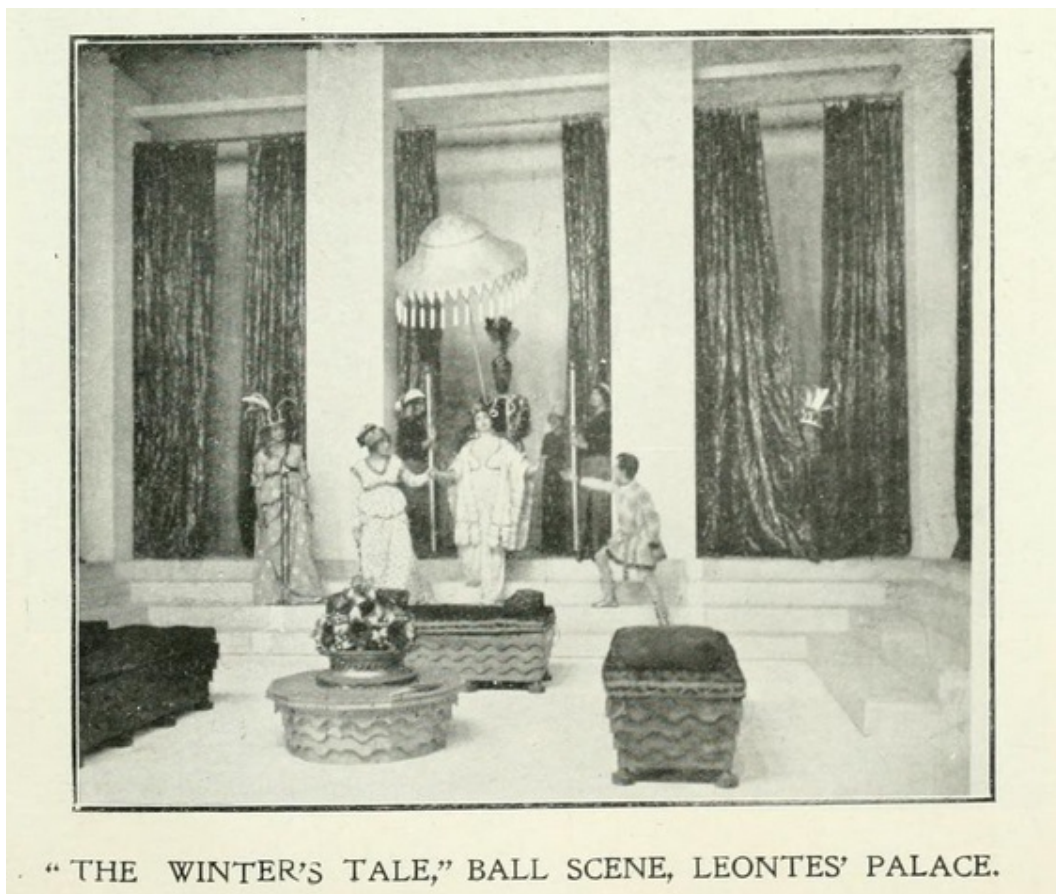
Robert Colenso was a physician in Kensington, and a fellow of Obstetrics and Gynaecology. Together with the rest of his family he was a campaigner for the Zulus and Pan Africa movement. He also lectured on "Artistic Anatomy" at the London Polytechnic Institute and Camberwell School of Arts and Crafts, co-authoring several books on the subject.

Angela's brother was educated at Glenalmond in Scotland, while it appears that she was educated in London.

When her brother returned in 1907, on leave after 5 years in India with the army, he wrote to his aunts in Natal that Angel had grown to be a tall and very handsome girl. Her aunt Harriette thought of her as a possible contender to carry on the family's missionary work with the Zulus.

However in the 1911 census she was described as an actress, aged 19 - living with her parents.

While she did not become a star she was in two of Harley Granville Barker's highly influential productions of Shakespeare's plays at the Savoy Theatre. In 1912 he directed *The Winter's Tale* for Evelyn Millard. Angela played one of the ladies. This production ran for 52 performances from the 22nd September until the 2nd November. In February 1914 he directed *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, where Angela played an attendant for Theseus¹.

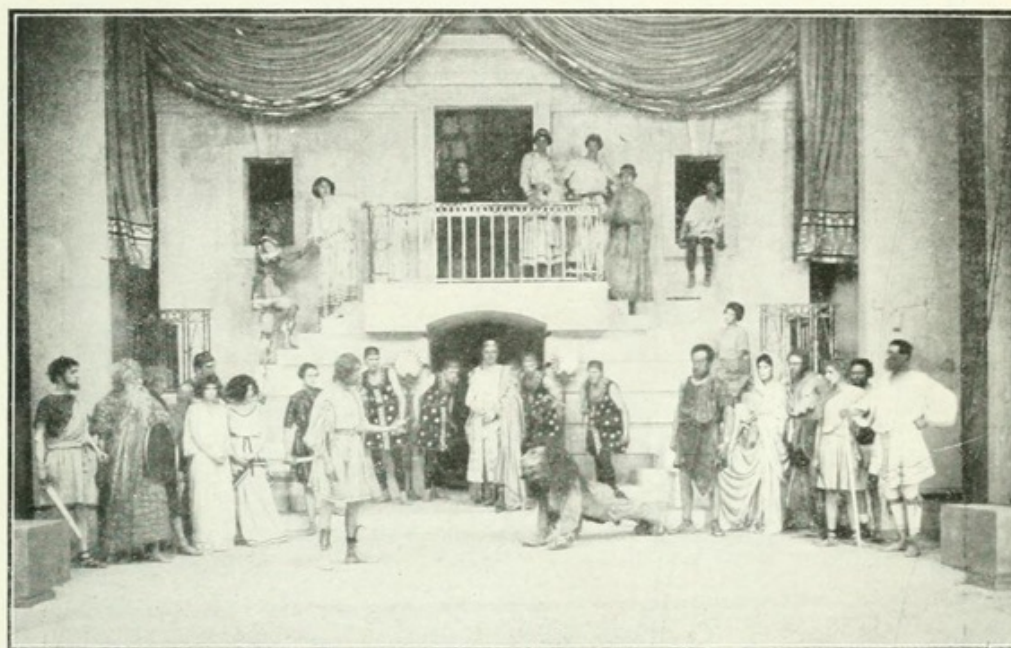


¹ Photograph from 1914 Stage Book.

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“Granville Barker did away with the “star” system of acting and instead concentrated on excellence in the entire ensemble. He directed actors to speak Shakespeare’s text rapidly, and used mainly curtains to create scenery, thus cutting down on the length of performance. He steered clear of elaborate, historically “accurate” scenery and opted instead for symbolic patterns and shapes on stage. He extended the stage of the Savoy over the footlights and onto the first few rows of the stalls; thus his actors could play on an open stage, and connect more closely with the audience. In all of these innovations, Barker sought to capture the “spirit” of Shakespeare’s plays.”²

In the 1914 Stage Year Book she is also mentioned as having been a maid in the cast of *A Matter of Money* by Cecily Hamilton, performed by the Pioneer Players in February 1913 and a Christian or courtier in George Bernard Shaw’s *Androcles the Lion* performed between the 1st September and the 25th October 1913³.



A SCENE IN “ANDROCLES AND THE LION”
AT THE ST. JAMES’S.

WW1 began in August 1914 with the French suffering major defeats at Aisne and Marne during September 1914. After these battles it was estimated that there were 450,000 wounded soldiers in France, with 42,000 in Brittany and 5,000 in the Dinard area⁴. All the casinos and hotels on the coast were transformed into hospitals.

In Dec 1914, Angela, then aged 23, entered France as a French Red Cross Nurse⁵. On the British Committee French Red Cross medal roll for the Victory and British War medals her service on the Western Front, located at

Campaign — 1914-15 Star		(A) Whose decorations were earned.	
		(B) Present situation.	
Name	Grade	Rank	Reg. No.
SEE THE WALL			
(A) COLENSO	FR Red X Nurse		
(B) ANGELA M.C.	NURSE		
Action taken:			
Theatre of War		France	
Qualifying date		12.14	
(C 31.10) 1914-15 500,000 4/19. 11VV(1210) K002		85/8/11419	

² Harley Granville-Barker, Wikipedia

³ Photograph from 1914 Stage Book

⁴ From Noel Clark’s account of Lillian Maud Trotter’s Military Service

⁵ <http://www.scarletfinders.co.uk/2.html> - Researching a Nurse or Hospital

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Dinard, was recorded as from December 1914 to April 1915. There is no record of this service in the British Red Cross archives.

She is listed as a British subject who went abroad on Red Cross and kindred war work for the French in the book “For Dauntless France” by Laurence Binyon (also the poet who wrote for The Fallen).⁶

There is no record of her training but national registration of nurses was not introduced until 1919, however three years training was required for a Red Cross Nurse or two years for a staff nurse⁷. On the same medal roll a couple of “nurses” were remarked to having received their medals from a VAD Roll - it most probable that Angela was a VAD probationer.

VAD stood for Voluntary Aid Detachments which had been formed by the British Red Cross Society before the war. They were intended to aid soldiers if Britain was invaded by an enemy – to fill the gap between a Clearing Hospital and a Base Hospital. Learning lessons from the Boer War, where untrained women had ‘donned the Red Cross’, the original VADs had trained themselves for 5 years before the war, in discipline, drill, nursing and sanitation. This organisation was ready to absorb the volunteers that flocked to aid France.



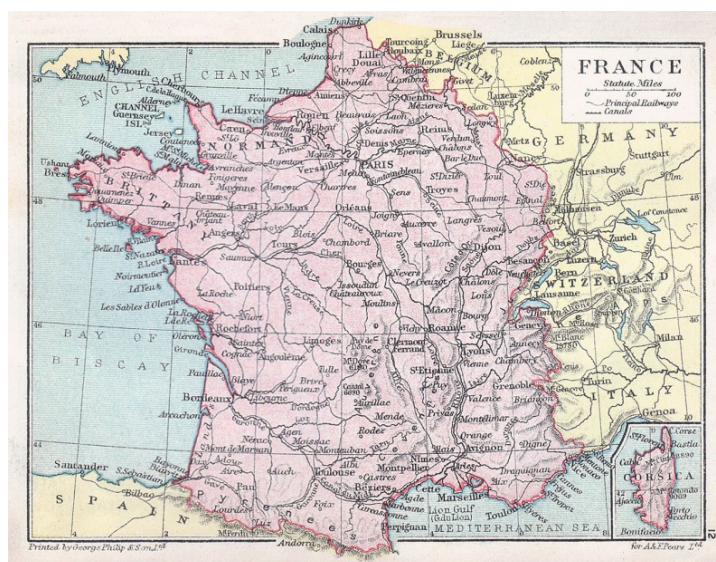
Pictured is a group of British Red Cross Nurses leaving for the front at some point in 1914. From September of that year over 2,000 offered their services, many declining a salary.

The VADs worked under the supervision of fully trained nurses. *“The proportion of trained nurses in the units was small, and much of the basic work was the responsibility of the VADs – they cleaned, scrubbed and dusted, set trays, cooked breakfasts;*

they lit fires and boiled up coppers full of washing. They also helped to dress, undress and wash the men – which was of course a big step for young women who may never have been alone and unchaperoned with a member of the opposite sex before, other than their brothers.”⁸ “In the hospitals for French soldiers, the value of their work was enhanced by the fact that practically all of them spoke French – many of them extremely well.”⁹

In March 1915 her father reported in a letter to his sisters that she was nursing at a Hospital at Dinard, Brittany.

Also in March 1915, on hearing of her brother’s approach to France from India, via Egypt, she met her mother in Paris and they travelled across France to Marseilles to see him before he joined his regiment at



⁶ <https://archive.org/stream/fordauntlessfran00biny#page/110/mode/2up>

⁷ <http://www.redcross.org.uk/museumandarchives> Nursing during WW1

⁸ <http://www.scarletfinders.co.uk/2.html> - VADs

⁹ “For Dauntless France” by Laurence Binyon, <https://archive.org/stream/fordauntlessfran00biny#page/110/mode/2up>

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Neuve Chapelle on the 1st April.

In April 1915 she caught a bad case of measles and was recuperating at home by June. On the 29th August 1915 she was recorded as a VAD in the Red Cross Archives, working at The King George Hospital. This was for 4 days after which she became a “resident” - presumably now employed directly by the hospital.¹⁰

On the 20 Dec 1916 she married Captain John Francis Walter Thelwall in Kensington.

Frankie Thelwall had been born in Klagenfurt Austria on the 26th July 1884. His parents were Major General Sir John Bulkeley Thelwall and his second wife Gertrude Lindesay Willson. His father was retired by then and died in Venice in 1887. The General was from an old Welsh family and had served in the Bengal Army from 1843 until 1880. His mother was the daughter of Walter Lindesay Willson, a member of the Geographical Survey of India and Dublin.

Frankie was educated in Europe but by 1901 was a student at Ushaw, a Roman Catholic College in Durham. He then studied at Trinity College Oxford and was appointed Vice-Consul at Frankfurt am Main in January 1910, the acting Consul between 1913 and 1914. When war was declared in August 1914 he returned to England and enlisted in September as a private in the 11th Battalion of the Royal Sussex Regiment. He was commissioned in the 12th Battalion of the Essex Regiment in February 1915. In July 1915 he was appointed to the Intelligence Corps and entered France attached to the Indian Cavalry Corps Headquarters. He rose quickly through the Intelligence Corps becoming a Captain in December 1916, being awarded the Military Cross in June 1917 and the French Croix de Guerre in April 1918. In April 1918 he was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel.

In 1919 he returned to the Foreign Office, serving in Berlin as the Commercial Commissioner. He continued there until his sudden death in 1934, aged 49, following an operation. Here he witnessed the fall of the Weimar Republic and the rise of Hitler and the Nazi Party. From 1920 until his death he prepared the highly influential annual “Thelwall Report” on German politics and economics. He was appointed a companion of the Order of St Michael and St George (CMG) in 1932 – for people who render extraordinary or important non-military service in a foreign country.

In his last report, published after his death, he wrote “...in considering the new regime in Germany it is necessary to bear in mind that it is primarily a movement based on racial and party ideals and that its followers are prepared in certain respects to forgo economic and political advantages for the sake of their principals....The organisation of the State will be dominated by the National Socialist Party. The point that is probably hardest for the outsider to understand is that if the tenets of this creed and economic necessities come into conflict, the former take precedence over the latter.”¹¹

Angela and Frankie had one surviving child, Morwenna Colenso Thelwall, born in 1921. Angela was working in New Windsor as a college matron in 1939, and died in Kensington, of stomach cancer, on the 11th January 1962.



Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer,
Friday 18 May 1934.

¹⁰ <http://www.redcross.org.uk/About-us/Who-we-are/History-and-origin/First-World-War> which has on-line records for surnames A-C at the time of writing

¹¹ Thelwall, JWF "Economic Conditions in Germany to June, 1934," issued by the British Department of Overseas Trade.