

The Life of Captain Flora Sandes

By **Julie Wheelwright** | Posted 6th June 2013, 11:12

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'The changing role of women', according to the Heritage Lottery Fund, will feature large in events marking the centenary of the First World War next year. Flora Sandes, who strode Whitehall dressed in her Serbian officer's uniform, was awarded that army's highest rank and raised thousands of pounds for their cause, should be among them. Her work as both a nurse and a soldier did much to change public perceptions about what women could and should do during a military campaign. Her achievements shatter the image of Edwardian women: that, if they weren't at home knitting socks or manning munitions works, they were simply enduring.

Louise Miller's prodigiously researched and meticulously detailed biography reveals that when the Bulgarian army forced the Serbs to retreat into Albania in 1915 Sandes was given the choice of retreating with the field hospital, where she was then nursing, or joining up. She didn't hesitate to enlist, fulfilling a childhood dream. As a girl she pored over Tennyson's *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, envied her brothers their freedom and 'used to pray every night that I might wake up in the morning and find myself a boy'. Later she worked as a typist to fund her adventures, roughing it across Europe, doing a stint in Cairo and a long journey through North America with her five-year-old nephew in tow. An experienced horsewoman, she was also, as one of her relatives recalled, 'a capital shot with the big service revolver'.

When war broke out, Sandes, who had already trained with the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry and the Women's Convoy Corps, set off for the First Reserve Hospital in Kragujevac, Serbia. Other nursing stints followed, where, with only nursing experience, she performed surgery, including amputations, and ran a military hospital. What Miller illuminates very powerfully is the quite extraordinary role that women like Sandes and her lifelong friends, Emily Simmonds, Dr Elsie Inglis of the Scottish Women's Hospital and Dr Katherine MacPhail, played in running Serbia's medical services throughout the war. All were sympathetic to the suffrage movement, but in this forgotten corner of the continent the need was so pressing that their gender became irrelevant.

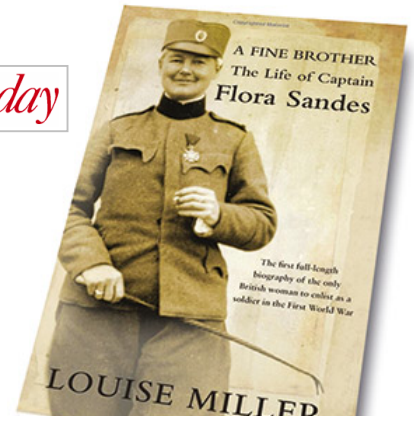
Although Sandes switched from nurse to enlisted soldier, rising to the rank of captain and receiving the Serbian army's highest military medal in 1917, she maintained close ties with the female medics and became Serbia's unofficial ambassador.

Sandes seems so modern to a contemporary reader, with her understanding of publicity and realisation that raising badly-needed cash for food and medical supplies was the best she could do for her adopted country. While on leave, dressed in her Serbian uniform, she would lecture to the Tommies about the Western Front, give press interviews and speeches and raised thousands of pounds.

Miller has exhaustively researched Sandes' life, including interviews with relatives, sourcing private archives and ironing out complex Balkan politics into readable context. But this biography seems pulled in two directions. There is as much in these pages about Flora Sandes as there is about the remarkable work of the western women doctors and nurses in Serbia. Although the material is sharply memorable because it provides such a stark contrast to the much-studied work of their counterparts on the Western Front, it confuses the biography's focus.

Indeed there are many questions about Flora Sandes' delightful personality that are left unanswered. How exactly did this daughter of an Anglo-Irish reverend evade the inevitable pressures of marriage, children and domesticity? What made her dream of becoming a soldier, spending her life 'gallumping' and toughing it out in the most difficult and dangerous of circumstances? Miller's biography, a curiously old-fashioned work that is fulsome with detail about events but far less with analysis, doesn't venture anywhere near this psychological territory.

But *A Fine Brother* does lay down the historical record, shedding much light on the achievements of that brave band of foreign sisters in Serbia who, I hope, will be well remembered in next year's commemorations.



A Fine Brother: The Life of Captain Flora Sandes
by Louise Miller