**Entry type:** Person
**Entry ID:** AWE5399

# Lawlor, Gertrude Frances

(1883 - 1959)

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| **Born** | 18831001, Monasterevin Co. Kildare Ireland |
| **Died** | 19590110, Dublin Ireland |
| **Occupation** | Army Nurse, Matron, Nurse |

## Summary

Gertrude Frances Lawlor served in 1918 with the Australian Army Nursing Service in India during the latter stages of World War I. She enlisted in 1917 after Canberra Hospital, where she was Matron, closed because of war restrictions. She resumed as Matron when the Hospital re-opened in 1921 and continued in the position until 1928.

## Details

**A substantially revised version of this entry, based on significant new research by Patricia Clarke, was published 2 February 2017. The *Canberra Women in World War I: Community at Home, Nurses Abroad* exhibition page contains a fully footnoted version of this entry.**

Gertrude Lawlor gained the nursing positions she held in Australia after reinventing herself, obliterating all traces of her background and creating a new persona while on a ship migrating from Ireland to Australia in 1913. Her claim to have been born in England, to be a member of a decorated military family, to be related to several members of the First AIF, to be a widow and a member of the Church of England, were all accepted without question by the Australian Army, the public services of Victoria and the Commonwealth, her superiors, colleagues and friends in Australia.

Her life should be easy to document in the numerous official documents and other sources, many more than those available for most women at a time when most lived fulfilling but unrecorded lives. But checking Gertrude Lawlor's records led only to mysteries and questions until her Irish background began to unfold.

Gertrude Frances Lawlor was baptised on 1 October 1883 in the Catholic parish at Monasterevin, Co Kildare, Ireland. She was a daughter of Michael Lawlor, a farmer, and his wife, Mary Donaher and she had two older brothers Michael and James who were farmers. The names of the mythical army family she invented were the same but their status was different. She claimed she was the daughter of the late Captain Michael Lawlor R.E. and sister of the late Major Jim Lawlor R.E. and of the late Captain Michael Lawlor I.N. [sic]. She was a talented student and her family appears to have invested considerable resources into ensuring that she had a superior education and a high standard of professional training. In various statements Gertrude claimed to have qualified as a pharmacist at the Rotunda Hospital, Dublin; to have a nursing certificate from Richmond Royal Hospital in England (this was probably the Richmond Surgical Hospital, Dublin); a course in Midwifery and Gynaecology from Holles St Royal Hospital, Dublin, and a qualification in infectious diseases.

It has not been possible to check these qualifications because of the lack of surviving records but there is no doubt she was a competent, highly qualified nurse. On 20 June 1906 when she was only 23, Gertrude was appointed to a prestigious position as Assistant Matron in the Irish Prison Service. It is highly unlikely that she would have been appointed to this position, particularly at such a young age, unless she had the professional qualifications she claimed. She was posted to the prison at Derry where she appeared set on a powerful career path.

On 15 May 1909, however, when Gertrude was nearly six months' pregnant, she married Jeremiah Joseph Hayes, also an employee in the Irish Prison Service, at St Columb's Catholic Chapel, Derry. Their daughter, Mary Gabriel Hayes, was born on 25 August 1909 at Holles Street Hospital, Dublin. At the 1911 Irish Census the Hayes family was living at Dundalk, Co. Louth. Jeremiah Hayes was recorded as a prison warder, aged 34, his wife Gertrude Hayes, was 22, and their daughter Gabriel Hayes was aged one. All were Catholics.

The Hayes marriage appears to have reached a crisis in 1912 as later that year Gertrude was living on the Lawlor family farm at Mount Rice, Lackagh, Monasterevin, Co Kildare. Her promising career was over, her marriage had disintegrated and her husband appears to have kept the care of their daughter. In late December 1912, two separate cases in which Gertrude and her brother James were charged with assaulting each other came before the Kildare Court of Petty Sessions. Both cases were adjourned until the last session in February 1913, James being remanded on bail. When they came before the court, the case against Gertrude was dismissed and James was put on a good behaviour bond after providing two sureties totalling £20.

Gertrude's life in Ireland was falling apart, the humiliating court cases adding to her lost career and broken marriage. The solution for this ambitious young woman was to reassert herself by obliterating her life in Ireland and migrating to Australia. She landed in Melbourne in October 1913 as Miss Gertrude Lawlor, aged 24, occupation 'domestic'. Within a short time she had been appointed to the Victorian Public Service as Nurse Grade III in the Lunacy Department and at the beginning of 1914 she began work at Sunbury Hospital for the Insane, north-west of Melbourne. In 1915, articles by Gertrude Lawlor, including 'Treatment of Post- Partum Haemorrhage', 'Laryngeal Diphtheria', 'Acute Mania' and 'Compound Fracture of the Femur caused by gunshot', were published in *Una: The Journal of the Royal Victorian Trained Nurses' Association*. Each of the articles was awarded 'The Miss Lyons' Prize Essay', establishing her reputation as a highly qualified nurse.

During 1915 Gertrude joined the Bush Nursing Association and nursed at Edenhope, near the Victorian/South Australian border. While at Edenhope a man she claimed was a cousin, Harry Alfred James Linford, named her as his next of kin on his AIF enlistment form, allocated her three shillings per day from his army pay and made her beneficiary in his will, all actions implying that he and Gertrude were lovers. A former soldier in the British 9th Lancers, Linford served on Gallipoli until the evacuation then transferred to the Camel Corps. He was killed in action on 9 January 1917 in the Battle of Rafa during the Sinai/Palestine campaign. Following his death, Mrs Martina Johanna Elario Linford of Cape Town, South Africa, the mother of several children, came forward as Linford's widow and his army record was changed naming her as his next of kin.

Linford's death occurred after Gertrude had moved to the position of Matron at Deniliquin Hospital in western New South Wales. After about a year at Deniliquin she was appointed Matron/Dispenser at Canberra Hospital. She appears in histories of Canberra and in reminiscences of life in the early decades of the National Capital as an exuberant, controversial and colourful Irishwoman. Described as 'nearly six feet tall, with black hair, blue eyes, a very strong Irish brogue and a fiery temper', she was warm-hearted towards friends, implacable towards enemies, but esteemed by her patients as a 'very

sympathetic nurse'. An official described her unselfish devotion in responding at all times of the day and night to accident and other cases in the construction camps.

During her two spells as matron, she became one of Canberra's best known figures, riding side saddle in tall, highly polished boots through thick mud to the workmen's camps to care for her patients. A sociable and outgoing personality, in a city where there were few amenities, she made the hospital a social centre, entertaining visiting Ministers of the Crown, parliamentarians, heads of departments and other dignitaries at dances and social events. She was even known to dance on the kitchen table causing the cook to resign.

Her first spell as matron lasted less than a year as construction work in the Capital slowed to a halt during World War I. When the hospital closed in October 1917, Gertrude's employment ceased and early the following month she enlisted in the Australian Army Nursing Service (AANS) in Melbourne. On her enlistment form, she stated that she was a widow, aged 29, born on 1 March 1879 at Grantham, England, her permanent place of residence was Sunbury, Victoria, and her religion was Church of England. She named her next of kin as her step-brother, Lt J.A. Underwood, AIF, of Seymour, Victoria, a claim which cannot be substantiated.

Soon after enlisting, Gertrude boarded SS *Indarra* bound for Bombay to nurse in India. She was sick when she arrived on 18 December 1917 but after about three weeks in hospital she was posted to the Station Hospital at Bangalore on the Deccan Plateau in southern India where she nursed for about six months then cared for an invalid nurse on the ship back to Australia. She arrived in Melbourne early in September and was discharged in November 1918. She spent 1919-20 on Nauru as Matron and Dispenser working for the British Phosphate Commission and employed on part time work for the Australian military. Nurses were in demand on the island following the introduction of the influenza pandemic by passengers who arrived on SS *Talune* from New Zealand. The Australian Government sent HMAS *Encounter* on a relief expedition and the British Phosphate Commission sent a small medical party. The pandemic accounted for the death of 16 per cent of the population which was particularly vulnerable to the introduced disease.

On 27 November 1920, days after her return from Nauru, Gertrude married Kenneth Macquarie Fennell, an analytical chemist employed by the British Phosphate Commission on Nauru, at the Union Presbyterian Memorial Church, North Melbourne. On her marriage certificate she stated she was a spinster, aged 29, born in Grantham, England. She gave her father's name as Michael Lawlor, Captain Royal Engineers, and her mother's name as Stella Seawright. Kenneth Macquarie Fennell was an Australian-born bachelor, age 30.

Early in 1921 when Canberra Hospital re-opened Gertrude Lawlor, who had obtained an undertaking that she would be reinstated, returned as matron/dispenser. While she remained matron she kept her marriage secret: marriage would have disqualified her from appointment to any public service position due to the bar on married women that remained in force for nearly fifty more years.

Gertrude Lawlor's seven years as matron of Canberra Hospital was a continuous saga, dotted with complaints by, and about, her. When it reopened in 1921, the hospital was described by surveyor-general, Colonel J.H.T. Goodwin, who was also administrator of the Federal Capital Territory, as 'only a First Aid Station'. There were no doctors on the staff and midwifery cases had to be sent to Queanbeyan Hospital. Gertrude believed that having no doctors above her left her in a commanding position as matron but this was a very different view from the official position.

In her first communication to Colonel Goodwin, Gertrude itemised many deficiencies in the condition of the hospital including the dilapidated building, rusted operating table, badly soiled linen, dirty floors, missing medical items and the disappearance of most drugs. She continued to complain throughout her service about the inadequate accommodation and condition of the hospital for patients and nurses. All her communications were signed with the qualifications: BSc, PH.C., M.P.S., R.V.T.N.A. She also enlisted political support from Austin Chapman (later Sir), the Federal Member for Eden Monaro, who had been a minister in Barton and Deakin ministries, and Eric Kendall Bowen, Federal MP for Nepean, who took a keen interest in the Federal Capital, giving them specific instances of what she regarded as unfair treatment. These included the refusal to pay her allowances for her horse, her laundry and her dispensing duties or to pay compensation for a broken arm sustained when she fell off her horse.

Many of her complaints centred on her treatment by the Surveyor-General Colonel J.H.T Goodwin. She resented getting instructions from him instead of the Secretary, Department of Home and Territories and she accused him of persecuting her over paltry matters. She told the departmental head her position was 'fast becoming intolerable'.

Concurrently with Gertrude's complaints, her administration of the hospital and staff came under almost constant departmental scrutiny. She vigorously refuted claims against her by the all-male administration unused to dealing with a formidable woman and she continued to press for the rights and entitlements of herself, the staff and patients. When the Federal Capital Commission (FCC) took over the hospital in 1925 it was seriously under resourced with some staff accommodated in tents.

The FCC began expanding the accommodation and appointed a superintendent, Dr John James, who took over much of the responsibility that had been Gertrude's. Over the next two years problems escalated. On three separate occasions all the trained nursing staff resigned, there were disputes among the medical staff and the inadequacies of the hospital were magnified as the population increased with the transfer of public servants to Canberra when Parliament House opened in 1927.

In 1928 the resignation of four nurses precipitated a Federal Government inquiry into allegations of maladministration and inadequate staffing at Canberra Hospital. Evidence indicated a dysfunctional hospital which Dr James attributed to the matron. Several nurses gave evidence of working and living conditions that would not be tolerated at other hospitals. When Gertrude was questioned closely about her relations with the nursing staff and the departure of so many trained nurses, she blamed the trouble on her having no status despite her superior qualifications and compassion and willingness to work 24 hours a day.

The Inquiry recommended that the hospital be upgraded to a community hospital and become a training school for nurses. It acknowledged the Matron's professional skill and care and solicitude for her patients but criticised her administrative methods and her relations with the superintendent and the trained nursing staff who had stated that they refused to work under her.

Gertrude resigned on 2 May 1928. After she left Canberra about 500 residents out of a population of about 8000 subscribed to a testimonial that raised £69-8-0; this was forwarded to her in Melbourne with an illuminated address. She also received £600 from the Federal Capital Commission made up of half a year's pay and compensation for the fall from her horse that had been the subject of an unresolved legal battle.

Apart from a short appointment in Tasmania, Gertrude was unable to work from 1929. Repatriation files reveal that in the early 1930s she spent two years in a psychiatric hospital in Sydney after attempting suicide. She was granted a TPI (Totally and Permanently Incapacitated) repatriation pension in March 1944. During the early 1950s her admissions to hospital for treatment for coronary disease and mental confusion increased. In February 1957 she was admitted to Concord Repatriation Hospital but two months later she discharged herself against medical advice stating that she intended to return to England. She refused to sign a statement accepting responsibility for any detrimental effects.

Soon after discharging herself, Gertrude returned to Ireland where she lived for some time at Brownstown, Co. Kildare, not far from where she was born. She died on 10 January 1959 at St Colman's Hospice, Dublin, and was buried after a Requiem Mass. She was described in her death notice as 'late of Sydney, Australia'. In electoral rolls during the 1940s and until her departure, Gertrude Frances Fennell, was recorded as an artist, residing in North Sydney with her husband. In the 1970s following her husband's death, two of Gertrude's works were listed for sale in the *Australian Art Sales Digest*.

It is not known whether Gertrude contacted Gabriel Hayes, the daughter she abandoned as a baby in Ireland. Gabriel became a distinguished Irish sculptor undertaking many commissions for important buildings including ornamental carved panels for the Department of Industry and Commerce building in Kildare Street, Dublin, and sculptures for St Mary's College of Domestic Economy. When Ireland adopted a new currency in 1971, she was commissioned to design the bronze coins. In 1936, she married Sean O'Riordain, a major figure in Irish archaeology. He and Gabriel had two children.

Gertrude Lawlor abandoned a husband and child in Ireland, contracted an apparently bigamous marriage in Australia, yet managed to be appointed to the Victorian and Commonwealth public services and to join the AANS in World War I, all organisations that barred married women. She did this by adopting a new identity changing her birthplace from Ireland to England, changing her religion and creating a fictional family, while keeping secret her true background. It is noteworthy that she made an important exception by retaining her birth name of Gertrude Lawlor, the name under which her early career had flourished and a family name of which she was so proud that she attributed illusory military ranks to her father and brothers.

The trigger that led to the breakup of her marriage and abandoning of her child remains unknown. The marriage may have been forced on her by pregnancy and been incompatible from the start. It may have been violent. The most probable explanation may be that Gertrude had such an urge to pursue a career that she could not contemplate the life-long role of housewife and mother. In Australia she was able to resurrect her career, reinventing herself as a person of high achievement, authority and self-esteem. She demonstrated these qualities as matron in Canberra in her resolute defiance of a male world that sought to dominate her. She does not appear to have ever recovered from the criticism of her at the Canberra Hospital inquiry. Her descent into mental and physical illness began soon after and lasted until her death.

*I am indebted to ADB researcher, Jennifer Higgins, for her research in Irish records that resulted in the unravelling of much of Gertrude's history.*

## Published resources

**Site Exhibition**
Canberra Women in World War I: Community at Home, Nurses Abroad, Clarke, Patricia and Francis, Niki, 2015, http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/cww1

**Book**
As I recall: Reminiscences of Early Canberra, Daley, Charles, 1994

With Horse and Morse in Mesopotamia: The story of the Anzacs in Asia -The Australian Nurses in India, Burke, Keast (ed.), 1927

Royal Canberra Hospital: An anecdotal history of nursing 1914 to 199, Newman, Janet and Warren, Jennie, 1993

Canberra 1913-1953, Gibbney, Jim, 1988

History of Medicine in Canberra and Queanbeyan and their hospitals, Proust, A. J., 1994

**Resource**
Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

**Book Section**
Official History of the Australian Army Medical Services 1914-18. Vol. III: Problems and Services, Butler, A.G., 1943

## Archival resources

**National Archives of Australia, National Office, Canberra**
LAWLER Gertrude Frances : Service Number - Sister : Place of Birth - Grantham England : Place of Enlistment - N/A : Next of Kin - (Step Brother) UNDERWOOD J A

**Author Details**
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Digital resources



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