Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE5415

Parnell, Ida Mary

(1871 - 1950)

Born	18711118, Oxley Victoria Australia
Died	19500315, CamberwellCamberwell Victoria Australia
Occupation	Red Cross Worker, Volunteer, War Worker

Summary

Ida Parnell lived in the Canberra region during 1914-1920 while her husband (then Colonel) John William Parnell was Commandant of the Royal Military College (RMC), Duntroon. She was present at the founding meeting of the Federal Territory War Food Fund in Canberra and was a regular presence at Red Cross fundraising events at Duntroon.

Details

Ida Mary Grover was born in Oxley, Victoria on 18 November 1871, the fourth of six children and only daughter of Charles Chaplyn Grover, gentleman and Anna Frances Kent. Her brothers attended Melbourne Grammar School but there is no record of where or how Ida received her education.

On 10 August 1892, Ida married John William Parnell, a career soldier who was then Captain in the Victorian Engineers, at St John's Anglican Church, Melbourne. The detailed report of her wedding, in the Queenscliff Sentinel, Drysdale, Portarlington and Sorrento Advertiser on Saturday 13 August 1892, indicates her family enjoyed some social status. As with many of her appearances in the news media during her life, excerpts from the news report describe her in relationship to the men in her life, and portray the clothing she was wearing at the time.

Sources for Ida are typical of those available for women of her time who feature in the historical record. She appears in social pages from 1893 to 1947 with descriptions of her outfits at numerous social occasions including a reception for actor Ellen Terry in 1914, weddings, 'at homes', balls, engagement parties, government house functions, the Lord Mayor's ball, vice-regal occasions and Duntroon events, including fundraisers, during World War I. An advertisement in the Queenscliff Sentinel, Drysdale, Portarlington and Sorrento Advertiser, on Saturday 16 December 1893 notes that Ida was to play a banjo solo for the Victorian Engineers Dramatic Club performance ('Wednesday. Victorian Engineers Dramatic Club', 1893, p. 4).

Over the thirteen years following her marriage, Ida gave birth to four children in Melbourne, three of whom died tragically young: Dorothy May, born in 1893 died in 1896; Charles Edwin Gerard, born in 1897 died on 10 July 1904, and Catherine Doreen, born in 1901 died in 1908. Mary Eleanor 'Molly', born 1908, was the only surviving child.

In August 1904 John Parnell attended training courses in England but newspaper reports make no mention of Ida, suggesting she remained in Melbourne ('Australians in England', 1905, p. 5). From 1905 when he returned to Australia, his career moves suggest the family may have moved several times as he was appointed commandant of Tasmania in 1909, and transferred to Queensland in 1911 before his appointment as commandant of Victoria in May 1912. In June 1914 his appointment as commandant of the RMC, Duntroon in the Federal Territory necessitated the family's move to Canberra where Ida lived during World War I.

On 21 August 1914, soon after World War I erupted, Ida Parnell attended the inaugural meeting of the Federal Territory War Food Fund convened by the Territory Administrator's wife, Jane Miller, at the Residency in Acton. According to a report in the Queanbeyan Age on 25 August 1914, a representative group of women residents of Canberra and surrounding districts attended the meeting and supported the establishment of a local branch of the War Food Fund. One of the many wartime patriotic funds, the Sydney Chamber of Commerce established the War Food Fund to 'assist in relieving the great amount of distress which is inseparable from war.' The Queanbeyan Age reported that 'Mrs. Parnell, wife of the Commandant of the Royal Military College, promised to do all in her power to make the movement a success so far as the college was concerned' ('Patriotic Fund', 1914, p. 2).

Ida, however, does not appear on the committee list while ‘Mesdames Macartney and Barnard’, the wives of less senior RMC staff, do. Alexandrina Vans ‘Nina’ Macartney (1884-1965) lived in Canberra after her marriage in December 1912 until 1916 when her husband Henry Dundas Keith Macartney, was on the instructional staff of the RMC. Jessie Barnard was married to Professor Robert James Allman Barnard, RMC foundation professor of mathematics.

For the duration of World War I, however, Ida appears in a number of news reports, usually accompanying her husband at Duntroon events rather than in her own right. Apart from the original news report of the Territory’s War Food Fund establishment, it has not been possible to find activities outside of her husband’s role, let alone her inner life, despite her social status and frequent appearance in newspaper reports. On 20 October 1914 the Queanbeyan Age reported her presence with Colonel Parnell at a ‘patriotic concert’ in aid of the War Food fund (‘Canberra Patriotic Sports’, 1914, p. 2). Just over a week later Table Talk in Melbourne reported Ida and her husband were among 500 people present at a patriotic sports meeting held in Canberra on 17 October in aid of the Federal Territory War Food Fund (‘Patriotic Sports Meeting’, Canberra, 1914, p. 31).

The following year, on 23 November 1915, the Queanbeyan Age and Queanbeyan Observer reported that ‘Colonel and Mrs Parnell and other prominent residents’ [including Colonel and Mrs Miller] lent their patronage’ to the third Carnival in aid of the Allies’ Day fund, established to help alleviate distress in occupied allied nations like Belgium and France (‘Canberra Sports Carnival’, 1915, p. 2).

Ida features in a report of the Duntroon Red Cross Fund Grand Ball in May 1916 that was held under the patronage of her husband Brigadier-General J.W. Parnell CMG in the Duntroon gymnasium. A ‘magnificent success’ from both a social and financial point of view, it is likely Ida played a significant part in organising the ball (‘Duntroon Red Cross Fund’, 1916, p. 2).

At the RMC fifth annual sports day on 21 October 1916 the winning competitors had donated their prize money to the Duntroon Red Cross fund. The Queanbeyan Age and Queanbeyan Observer reported that Mrs. Parnell, on behalf of the Duntroon Red Cross Society, sincerely thanked the cadets for their generosity, and said that the money thus received would allow, amongst other things, the sending of 200 shirts to the soldiers at the front. She congratulated the cadets on the success of the sports, and handed the certificates to the successful competitors (‘Military. “At Home”‘, 1916, p. 2).

The following year, on 27 October 1917, the RMC annual sports day drew a large crowd and again the cadets had acted generously, giving the money that would have been spent on prizes to the Red Cross Society. Again Ida presented the winners with their certificates and thanked them, on behalf of the Red Cross, for their noble action in giving the value of the prizes to the Society (‘Royal Military College’, 1917, p. 2).

Ida was again present when the RMC hosted a fundraiser in aid of the Red Cross on 27 April 1918 in the form of a gymkhana and sports day that raised about £100. The Queanbeyan Age and Queanbeyan Observer reported that ‘there were numerous attractions… aimed at augmenting the funds of the Red Cross by extracting cash from the patrons’ and that ‘throwing balls at a Kaiser’s head, with a chance of winning a cigar, drew a large number of triers’ (‘Gymkana and Sports’, 1918, p. 2).

On 4 August 1918 Ida attended a ‘Cinderella dance’ in aid of the Red Cross at Duntroon’s new recreation hall which was officially opened that night by the Minister for Defence, George Foster Pearce (‘Duntroon’, 1918, p. 2).

For the seventh annual RMC sports, on 18 October 1918 shortly before the end of hostilities, Ida, described as ‘Mrs Parnell, wife of the Commandant’, again presented the winners with certificates in lieu of the prize money which they had donated to the Red Cross as in previous years (‘Royal Military Sports’,1918, p. 2).

The Parnells left Duntroon in May 1920 when Ida’s husband was appointed Administrator of Norfolk Island and they remained there until his retirement in 1924. He died in 1931. Even less is known about Ida Parnell’s life from that time, than is known of her war years. She died in Camberwell, Victoria on 15 March 1950 and was buried at the Melbourne General Cemetery, Carlton, Victoria.

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