

Letters from Nora Kelly to family members.

108a.

Hospital Ship "Maheno".
21-2-16

My dear Frank,
I must now take every chance of writing - use up every spare minute - we may be busy soon.

You have my address, haven't you? and I'm asking different ones of you to send these letters on. I want you please to send this to Louisa, Lucy and Nellie - and ask Luis to send it on quickly or it will be a very long time before they get news.

Well my text is - Colombo -
You can't imagine Frank, how beautiful, wonderful, dirty, smelly and altogether different Colombo is from anything else one could imagine. Well we landed about 9a.m. in the Boat's launch, the Maheno always stands out a bit so as to coal. Before we landed the boat was surrounded with blacks, Cingalese, who dived for silver and came to see if there was any laundry. (And before I forget, they wash, starch and iron any articles, big or small, for 2d each - it may be an underskirt beautifully done up all for 2d, or a handkerchief still 2d.)

Well as soon as we landed we went to the "Grand Oriental Hotel" followed by a whole army of black boys and men selling papers, flowers, anything. One pretty little black boy gave me a single flower. Of course I took it and gave him a beautiful smile but that was not enough, he wanted money. As mine was not then changed I let him take his old flower back again. Cents (about 5 to 1 penny) and rupees, 1/4, are about all you want to shop but you want an awful lot of them. At this Hotel we got an awful cup of tea (cold water not boiling):

Well we waited while Major Burrow, one of the Medical Staff, went to Cooks and arranged a trip to Kandy, the Capitol of Ceylon. It is 76 miles from where we landed. Well they put on a special train for us (we were 75 I think), arranged 3 drives about Kandy, afternoon tea, dinner, bed and breakfast, driven back to the station and all luggage looked after for 30/- each. Any ordinary time the trip would have cost quite £5 but that is what it cost us, very decent wasn't it?

Well we had just 1 hour to start and do a little shopping before the train left, so we went off in fours, still followed by a dirty, picturesque, smelly, good natured crowd of blacks, all yelling and trying to sell lace and silk etc. We dived down into a Pagoda place where we got a lovely cup of tea. While tea was being made, boys came with postcards to sell, beads, lace - it was quite bewildering. Anyway we hurried through tea and then went into the Bazaars - then the fun began. If they ask 30/- for anything, you can be sure its value is about 10/-. We got to be regular hagglers, even then I suppose we paid a lot more than we should. After about an hour of frantic beating down (I did not get much) we had to run to catch the train, just got a car tram and went through such queer streets. Some very nice buildings, surrounded with beautiful palms, brilliant red flowers, and lovely whites and yellows. Then for a contrast were mere hovels, with about 50 people in front where you would think there was only room for 6. Just a few white people we saw, and they looked white and anaemic. -must go and work now -

Well we caught the train and travelled through 70 miles of wonderful scenery, life, everywhere Rice fields with the natives at work, hundreds of them, tea plantations, more coolies, bungalow houses, some looking very picturesque, others very squalid, and in each about 50 people. We went through a lovely bush, in it we saw some rare birds, one especially a lovely blue, not dark, quite bright, but we didn't see any red birds. In one river we saw two elephants bathing and some more further on, I could hardly realize that I was really seeing these things and wish I could describe it better.

When we had nearly reached Kandy, we stopped at a station near the Peradeniya Gardens - there we found rickshaws and carriages waiting to take us to these beautiful gardens. Our suitcases etc. were taken on by the train, Cooks arrange that, and you find your luggage in your room at the Hotel. Well we leave to the gardens, quite a long procession, the nurses in grey with their red capes, grey hats and veils, all the Medical Staff wearing khaki. These gardens were just a dream, 150 acres in all, such masses of brilliant flowers and all in such good order -. lovely walks, ferneries and fountains, beds of small flowers, then great trees covered with a bright red flower and other shades.

From there we drove to the Hotel, had afternoon tea about 5p.m., a tidy up and another drive, Lady Horton's Drive, all around Kandy and through the Native Quarters. Then back to the Hotel, and then we went to see Buddha's Temple of Truth (but I don't think there is any truth in Ceylon). We saw his sacred tooth, lovely white flowers which they bring every day and offer up to Buddha. It is a wonderful building and all the time they were beating a tomtom affair, making an awful din.

Back to the Hotel dinner at 7-30, a few went out again but I had a good hot bath and went to bed. The Hotel was lovely - so clean, and such large rooms. Two of us shared a room, 2 beds each, all curtained round, a dressingroom and writing room as well - in fact the room was almost 4 times as large as in ordinary Hotels. The bath-rooms were tiled, so was the large entrance hall, and black men everywhere, even to turn on the electric light.

We had breakfast at 6-30, drove to the Station, had our photos taken in a rickshaw, and left at 8 a.m.. We had a glorious run down to Colombo. There are about 27,000 people in Kandy and, I think, 250,000 in Colombo. We had another breakfast on the train (Cooks provided it) and when we got to Colombo, we got a tram and made for the shops - more wild shopping and we again went to our nice tearooms and had a good cup of tea. Lunch at the Grand O. Hotel was 4/- - well not many of us wasted our money over that, we got ours for 8d.

At 1-30 p.m. we went for another motor drive, going all around Colombo, through the principle streets, past the Hospitals where they have a notice up to "Drive slowly" not to disturb the patients. Then we went to Mt Lavinia, where there is a very good Hotel, afternoon tea served out in the gardens if you wished it. We passed the Cinnamon Gardens, got some leaves which had a lovely smell when crushed; back to the town through the Market Place and back to headquarters just in time to collect our luggage and get to the wharf at 4 p.m. after having had a lovely time.

[Completion on top of first page.]

Hope you are all well, not forgetting Baby, hope you are all writing heaps of letters so that when we get a landing place there will be lots for me to read. All our letters are censored, hope the censor will get tired of reading them.

Much love to all,
Nora.

Excerpts from a letter to Isa Watson, a few days later.

At Sea.

My dear Isa,
By now I hope you have the first letter I wrote. You don't know how we all long for letters and newspapers and are hoping for a real good Budget; when we get our mail.

Well do you know I've written until my head just swims about Colombo and Kandy. Wrote a long one to Aunt Frank asking her to send it on to the rest of the female part of the family (horrid word that is). Then to Uncle Will and he will send it to other Uncles and a long one to Grandma - every mail I have written.

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Well we didn't have much time for shopping in Colombo but

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we did our best, such lovely silk kimonos! In fact everything was lovely, and it took such a time to buy as the [?] asked three times too much and they had to be beaten down. I regret not getting a kimono very much, but I wanted to get something for all of you who haven't seen these wonderful things and thought my money wouldn't hang out - but it is nicely. I've not drawn a penny of my pay and won't require it for a long time so very likely I'll get a kimono yet.

Our days are full of change, we have Ward work, physical drill 7-30 a.m., French Class 4 p.m. - then we get a Fire Alarm all of a sudden, away we fly for life belts, then down to the Wards to rescue (so far imaginary) patients, then when the last blast goes up on deck and in place under our boats and you have to hustle too.

[Completion on top of first page.]

Goodbye. Much love to you and your mother,

Aunt Nora.

Forgot to say I got something for you at Colombo, hope you will like it. Am bringing it with me - I don't like to post it.

Nora.

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Maheno.

April 5th,
1916.

My dear Peg, You would get a big surprise when you saw that the Maheno was returning so soon to N.Z. - so did we.

Just at this moment of writing there is an awful sea on, we are pitching and tossing from side to side - not one of the Staff are seasick so far. Well these last letters won't be censored I don't suppose as we will arrive as soon as they - but am sending you this to let you know about the time I will be "happening along". We call at Auckland first, and Dunedin last so there will be time for this letter to reach you before we return to Wellington.

We may not all have to go to Dunedin, but most likely we will, as of course everything will have to be clean and tidy before we leave the Boat. Then we don't know yet whether we return or not - the 1st Maheno Staff may be called out, but as we have not completed our time, I suppose we will go back.

Anyway if not returning I hope to stay a few days in Dunedin, and in Timaru, report in Wellington and then am coming to Bulls, to break the journey to New Plymouth. I couldn't tell you the date of being in Wellington as we don't know it - but perhaps you could come down to see us off this time - I hope so. Am packing up and bringing to Bulls things I got on the way, to show you, and can post them off from your place. I hope you will like what I got you - its Egyptian - I like it very much myself but must not tell you beforehand in case you are disappointed. My big trunk I'll leave in Wellington, or on the Boat if we know for certain what is going to happen.

Let the Boys know I am coming back so that they can, with Patriotic promptness, get out their Motor Car and take us all for some drives to Palmerston, Feilding, etc. - I gave up breakfast, dinner and tea for several days when we first started "for the good of the cause" so I am sure they will enjoy taking us for some drives.

It was so lovely getting our mail at Albany - we hardly slept a wink that night after reading our letters - got yours all right and 3 of Isa's I think, she was good to write so many. Here I am nearly at the end of my letter, and I never congratulated you on Billy's success, he has done well, and now I wish he would be sent home to New Zealand until this War is over. Do you know one of the patients on board described a Watson, Auckland Battalion etc., so like Billy - well this Watson was in the Pont-de-Kubbeuh [where? spelling] Hospital, had been ill with dysentery but now almost well. Well I was in that Hospital for about half an hour (when we went up to Cairo to see Sister Scott) but of course it could not be Billy as he is in England.

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Anyway we will have a good old talk when I come up to Bulls - don't expect me to get up to 7 a.m. breakfast, Peg - I'll creep out and get a cup of hot water and a crust of bread, and go back to bed till 8.30 a.m.!

When I know what we are to do I'll wire to you letting you know the day I'll arrive at Bulls. When we have reported in Wellington I would rather come straight on to Bulls, then if we go back it would be lovely for you to come

Completion on top of first page.

down with me. I'll try to find out, so as to get a night to spare at Bulls on my downward journey. Am so looking forward to seeing you all, although we were very much disappointed at not going on. Much love,

Nora.

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S.S. Maheno,
April 6th, 1916

My dear Isa,
Was so glad to get all your letters and news - so you didn't know your Aunt was a ~~xxxx~~ Poetess, she is not a speller anyhow. How glad I was to hear of Billy's doings, he has done splendidly. I would like to see a piece in the N.P. papers about it, so that all his relatives can see and hear what he is doing.

Hope this letter isn't censored - there will be great excitement when we get near Auckland I know. We were almost dumbfounded when at Port Suez we had orders to return, but of course it was our duty to come back if there was no work to do - two trips in the Indian Ocean straight off; we thought it was dreadfully hot but the Captain said we were lucky not to have it hotter.

You ought to be having Easter holidays just about the time I get back to New Zealand but don't let this interfere with them, as I can't tell you what date I'll be free, or for how long - hope it will be 3 weeks. You see we are not off duty until all the Patients are landed and the Boat tidied up. I'll wire as soon as I know, and I hope you'll get it - wouldn't like to land at Bulls and find you both away.

Do hope all our Patients will land as well as we can make them, or rather the Doctors, they are all looking forward so much to seeing New Zealand again.

Will soon have to go on duty so must finish quickly. I have so much to tell you about Colombo, Kandy, and Cairo, will leave that until I come back. We only saw each place for a short time, but still enjoyed that time very much, and went hard at sightseeing - in the East it is all so different. The Hotels we stayed at themselves were lovely, about 6 black people to wait on one person and so clean.

All the mails we got ready for Suez will return with us so we stopped writing then. Only a few days off Auckland now - Goodbye
Much love,

Aunt Nora.

On Active Service.

PASSED BY CENSOR
ON ACTIVE SERVICE
"HOSPITAL SHIP"
MAHENO.
Miss Du Watson.

Back N.S. Wales.
Bulls.
North Island
New Zealand.