



**New Zealand Society of Genealogists
NELSON BRANCH
est. 1973**

**WORLD WAR ONE
COMMEMORATION PROJECT**

**NELSON NURSES of WORLD WAR ONE
Biography of Mabel Atkinson VAD**

Full Name: Alice Mabel Atkinson
Birth: 3 November 1864, Beach Cottage, New Plymouth
Marriage: No
Death: 30 December 1935, Nelson
Buried : Wakapuaka Cemetery, Nelson

And younger members of the "Mob"
who went overseas in WW1

Anna Richmond FELL later BRITTON 23 February 1892 - 1972
Dorothy Blanche HURSTHOUSE 26 June 1892 – 7 March 1938 married James Bannister
Phyllis FELL 13 September 1884 - 15 July 1919

Chronology for Alice Mabel

3 November 1864	Born New Plymouth
1877	To England for Education
c1893-c1895	In England training as a midwife and masseuse Living in Nelson
Sept 1915	Arrived in England to undertake War work
02 Nov 1915	Registered as a VAD
Nov 1915	Left for France
1921	Returned to Nelson
30 December 1935	Died in Nelson

Chronologies for younger members of the “Mob”

Anna Richmond FELL

23 February 1892	Born Wellington daughter of Walter FELL and Margaret RICHMOND
	School Private School Wellington
3 February 1908	Enrolled Nelson College for Girls
April 1914	Training Arrived England (travelled with Dorothy Hursthouse) Enrolled Froebel Institute, London War service No VAD record –assisted with hospital work at NZ hospital Walton-on-Thames, entertaining the troops and Land Army in Mappowder, Dorset
Partner Noel BRITTON	
Occupation	Farmed Okaihau, North Auckland
16 August 1972	Died Wellington

Dorothy HURSTHOUSE

Born 26 June 1892	Daughter of Richmond HURSTHOUSE and Mary FEARON
	School Primary not known
May 1903	Enrolled Nelson College for Girls
1914	Training Arrived England (travelled with Anna Fell) Enrolled Froebel Institute, London War Service No VAD record – assisted with hospital work at NZ hospital at Walton-on-Thames.
1916	Appointed Assistant Teacher in Kindergarten Department at Kelburn Training College, Wellington
1918	Married James Edgar John BANNISTER
7 March 1938	Died

Phyllis FELL

Born 13 September 1884	Daughter of Charles Yates FELL and Edith ATKINSON
	School Primary not known Nelson College for Girls
25 Sept 1915	Travelled to England (With her parents and Mabel)
War Service	No VAD record. Described as “various forms of war work”
Occupation –	Musician at Nelson School of Music and Nelson College for Girls
Married	No
15 July 1919	Died

Origins

Alice Mabel Atkinson was born on 3 November 1864 at 'Beach Cottage', New Plymouth. She was known as Mabel to avoid confusion with her cousin Alice Richmond born two years before. Mabel was the youngest daughter of Jane Maria (nee RICHMOND) and Arthur Samuel ATKINSON. The families of her parents had been friends in England and emigrated in a family group on the *Sir Edward Paget* in 1852. On the voyage the 19yr old Arthur and 28yr old Maria fell in love and married in New Plymouth on 30 December 1854. They had five children. Margaret who died at birth in 1856, Edith Emily born in 1858, Ruth born in 1861, Arthur Richmond born in 1863, and Alice Mabel who was described by her mother as 'a plump little creature' and later a 'delightful little dunce, sparkling with life and happiness'¹.



Beach Cottage (2013) on a new site and restored. Photo by Judith Fitchett 2013

Following an unsettled time in farming and the NZ land wars in New Plymouth the family moved to Nelson in 1867 where her father became a lawyer and was active in business and politics. He was interested in astronomy and made detailed observations from a specially built platform at their home. Other interests were orthology, arachnology and philology. Her mother was active caring for family, even to wet nursing other babies in the family when needed. As Unitarians they were progressive thinkers and involved in the cutting edge of early New Zealand settlement and politics. In later life Maria advocated for Votes for Women, the Temperance Society and promoted education for girls. 'I am a believer in women's rights, but I do wish some of its advocates had more commonsense and tact, for they seem to retard the cause. I have no expectations that conferring the franchise on women will revolutionise society or effect any sudden change, but I do think that a great change is needed. The ordinary life of women is either constant drudgery or complete frivolity out here, tho' happily with some bright exceptions.'² Their home, in Trafalgar St Nelson was built in 1871 and named "Fairfield" It was an important centre for the extended Richmond, Atkinson and Hursthouse families known to themselves as 'the Mob'.

Nelson was a town of just 25 years. Because of the rugged hinterland it was cut off from the rest of the South Island and had to rely greatly on its own resources. There was a regular sea transport between Nelson and New Plymouth but it was not without its dangers.

Education

Mabel attended the schools of Miss McKay and Mrs Picketts. To further her daughters' education and after much debate Maria took her three daughters and two nephews Dick and Wilsie Richmond to England in 1877. Her older brother James Richmond, a widower, was already in England with his 3 eldest children. Maria's husband Arthur and son Arthur were to follow later. She travelled on the *Avalanche* and arrived at the London Docks on 4 June 1877 and was soon joined by James daughters Alla and Dolla Richmond. Octavia Hills's school had been recommended to Maria and at the beginning of their stay Dolla, Edie and Ruth attended as boarders and Maria took Mabel, Wilsie and Dick with Alla to teach them French and German. The following term Maria's brother James returned from working in Algeria, his daughters Alla and Dolla studied for the English Cambridge exam, and his sons Wilsie and Dick went to London University School.³ James writes to his sister-in-law 'The girls were hardly so beautiful as I had expected but are certainly handsome fine creatures. I speak of Edie and Ruth, at present Mabel is not pretty, but straight, healthy and bright.'⁴

In the autumn of 1877 Maria and her daughters went to a long awaited visit to Syrgenstein, a castle on the Bavarian border in Germany, the home of her dear friend Margaret Taylor.

In May 1878 Mabel's father Arthur arrived with her brother Arfie who had been head boy at Nelson College. He then went to Clifton College, in Bristol on a scholarship. Another niece Margaret Richmond⁵ joined them and went to Newenham College, Cambridge where she read zoology and physiology. Edie, Alla and Dolla went to Bedford College and Ruth and Mabel to Octavia Hill's school. It had been recommended to Maria as 'not an ordinary school' and Octavia Hill was certainly not an ordinary woman. She was born in 1838, the daughter of a family with strong social reforming ideals and when her father, a former banker and prosperous corn merchant, was bankrupted and suffered a "mental collapse" Octavia's mother Caroline took her children to London⁶. From the 1861 -1881 census they have a school at 14 Nottingham Place, Marylebone, London where Caroline is the House Proprietor and Octavia is variously described as an Artist in water colours or a teacher. Her 3 sisters are also teachers and about 7 pupils are boarding.⁷ As well as teaching, Octavia was a moving force behind developing improved housing for unskilled tenants while encouraging personal responsibility and education. In 1866 she was managing 5 houses for artist John Ruskin along these lines. She advocated for open spaces for the disadvantaged in crowded cities and one of her enduring legacies in England is the National Trust organisation which she founded with Robert Hunter and Hardwicke Rawnsly in 1885⁸, a few years after the Atkinsons had arrived back in NZ.

In March 1879 Arthur and Edie returned to Nelson. Maria felt that she would have liked Edie to have another year in England but she felt she was now "thoroughly awakened intellectually". Maria took a 10 roomed furnished house in Bristol while Arf was a weekly boarder at Clifton and she planned to stay until he was ready to go to Oxford. Mabel, Ruth and their cousin Alice Richmond joined her. In October 1880 James and his five children and Maria with her two daughters Ruth and Mabel and niece Alice, set off on a farewell visit to Margaret Taylor at Syrgenstein. I believe that this photo from the Richmond-Atkinson papers⁹ was taken at this time but has at some stage been misnamed. The front two seated young women being Ruth and Alice Mabel Atkinson not Richmond.



Back row: From left, 2nd WILSON RICHMOND, 3rd MAURICE RICHMOND, 4th J. C. RICHMOND, 5th ANN ELIZABETH RICHMOND. Middle row: From left, 1st DOROTHY K. RICHMOND, 3rd JANE MARIA ATKINSON. Front row: From left, 1st DICK RICHMOND, 2nd RUTH RICHMOND, 3rd ALICE RICHMOND.

The Richmond, Atkinson 'Mob'

The two families travelled via Florence and Venice to the seaport of Brindisi, meeting the *Kaiser-i-Hind* at Suez which took them to Melbourne. They embarked on the *Rotorua* and arrived in Wellington on 7

January 1881. Mabel was 17 years of age and her uncle William found her "so much grown and Ruthie a handsome girl with a Roman nose"¹⁰ While Mabel had still been in England, the wife of Arthur's partner Charles Yates Fell had died and her sister Edie was now engaged to him. They were married on 22 July 1881 at Bishopdale Chapel, Nelson and Charlie Fell's four daughters were attendants.

In 1882 the education of girls in Nelson is hotly debated. There was a Ladies Private Boarding school 'Rosebank' with Lady Principal Mrs Thos Scott as Principal. Charlie Fell had a school of eighteen girls in his home taught by Miss HS Milne who was bought from England as a governess for his daughters and their friends. Mabel's parents Maria and Arthur, her Uncle James (JC Richmond) and Aunt Emily were leading proponents for the establishment of a girls' college.¹¹ On 2 February 1883 Nelson College for Girls opened quietly in an unfinished building. Charlie Fell was a member of the board of governors that ran the boys' and girls' colleges. Alla taught German and French and Dolla taught art.¹² This is interesting because although Mabel wrote back to Nelson College for Girls during WW1 as an 'Old Girl' it appears to have been highly unlikely she was taught there.

Nurse Training

Mabel went back to England between 1893 and 1895 to train as a midwife. Her practical experience gained in the slums of London was followed by a course in massage. I wonder if she made contact again with Octavia Hill and was influenced by her to work in this area. Letters from this period are unfortunately tantalisingly unknown. Maria and family members wrote at great length about the achievements of Dolla as an artist and Alla as a musician but Mabel was described as not being good looking and she and her sister Ruth had a reputation of being a good sorts, practical, unselfish, energetic.

While in England Ruth was said to have been interested in photography and in NZ is said to have trained as a nurse but Prohibition and the Baptist Church came to absorb her energy. At times she looked after children. Mabel's role seemed to be the family's 'flying angel despatched on the instant from Fairfield to cope with illness or death within the clan.'¹³

In 1896 Mabel lived in Waimea St and worked as a masseuse an occupation which was the forerunner of modern day physiotherapy treatment. When her brother Arf stood for the Wellington City that year, she and Ruth were there to support him. His mother wrote 'I can't believe he will get in because he is far too outspoken & enthusiastic for the classes, and his name and education brand him as a Tory to the masses.'¹⁴ About this time Mabel began a general nursing course at Wellington Hospital. Her mother Maria on discovering her daughter was spoiling her hands doing the work of a charwoman and learning nothing, persuaded Mabel to return to Nelson to get further experience with Dr McKie. In 1900 and 1905 she is living at 'Fairfield' and her occupation is recorded as Nurse.¹⁵

Mabel does not appear on the NZ Register of Nurses and we must remember that as well as being the first country in the world to legislate for women's suffrage in 1893, NZ was the first country to introduce a nursing register in 1901. There began then a 3 year course of training, a state examination and a register making a clear distinction between those qualified and unqualified. The Midwives Act was introduced in 1904.¹⁶ We don't yet know where Mabel did her midwifery training in London. It would be interesting to know her thoughts on the new registration.

She cared for her elderly parents and coped with illness and death within their very large extended family. In October 1901 her father suffered a stroke, which affected his speech and he died at 'Fairfield' on 19 December 1902. She continued midwifery work. In 1911 and 1914 she is still living at 'Fairfield' but her occupation is recorded as spinster. Her mother died 29 September 1914 aged 90 years but Mabel must have hardly time to draw breath before she became immersed in supporting the organisations to help the War Effort.

World War I

I wonder in 1914 with her mother needing much care and running 'Fairfield' with numerous family members in and out if she had time to read page 4 of *The Colonist*--

THE COLONIST.
PUBLISHED EVERY MORNING.
TUESDAY, JUNE 30, 1914.
THE AUSTRIAN ROYAL TRAGEDY.

"A thrill of horror has again been sent through the world by the act of an assassin which has cut short the lives of a useful Royal personage and his consort. The Archduke Francis Ferdinand heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary appears to have been the object of two Distinct schools of plotters."¹⁷

A series of complicated pacts and alliances between countries soon plunged them into war and although so far removed from the action, New Zealand with her ties to Great Britain was soon involved. The Atkinsons and Richmonds as did many New Zealanders still referred to England as "home". On passenger lists they are "British Subjects" Although Mabel's parents had migrated out in 1852, she had twice been back to England for her education and training.

New Zealanders in general rallied to the aid of "poor little Belgium" By early 1915 more than 37,000 pounds had been sent to the British Belgian relief fund in London. Mayors in towns and cities set up relief funds to handle donations of goods and money.¹⁸

On 26 March 1915 the Nelson College Old Girls Association organised an 'At Home' at 'Fairfield' in aid of the Belgian Fund. It was kindly lent by Miss Atkinson (probably Ruth) for the occasion. The attractions were varied and numerous. Dramatic entertainment, bran tub, sweet stall, palmistry tent and orchestra.¹⁹ The Belgian Relief fund does seem to be more of Ruth's war charity and throughout the war the Colonist recorded and acknowledged ongoing donations of goods and money to the committee.

Mabel was active on the Red Cross Committee. In August 1915 the chief matter being discussed was the opening of the Red Cross room which had been offered by Mr Thorne in Bridge St. opposite Healy's boot arcade. It had been well cleaned out and disinfected, and with a little furnishing would be ready for use. The room was to be opened every day and all parcels for the Red Cross chests could be left there and Committee members were asked to be present when ever possible to 'get on with the necessary work' This was to make up the chests to send to the British Red Cross for the use of NZ men in England. The last three had been sent to the Dardanelles. Mabel tendered her resignation as she had offered her services for the war and was shortly leaving for Europe. Her resignation was received with regret as she has been a most useful member of the committee.²⁰

On 25 September 1915 a cable was received in Nelson stating that Mr and Mrs CY Fell, Miss Fell and Miss Mabel Atkinson have arrived in Plymouth on the *Ruahine*²¹. This is confirmed by the shipping list of the *Ruahine*. Passengers include Miss A Atkinson age 50yr, occupation – Masseuse. Mr CY Fell age 71yr, Barrister, Mrs CY Fell age 58yr and Miss P(hyllis) Fell a spinster age 30yr.²²



TSS Ruahine

Soon after her arrival in England she writes to the Nelson Girls Collegian and describes the scene of their arrival:--

" I thought I was excited when I closed my letter to you, but from that moment till now, Ossa has piled Pelion or vice versa, with Mont Blanc and Mt Cook thrown in.²³ I don't think Germany would have been at all pleased with the scene all around us; steamers and sailing craft of all sizes, coming and going in all directions, and soon we were joined by a lean, low, smut black destroyer, which rang rings around us and then zig-zagged in front of us all the way up to the Moles, between which we passed to our anchorage. Oh the first the great, mighty old Eddystone. How the waters were swirling and rushing round it, smooth though the sea seemed to us. They soon passed "destroyers and torpedoers by the dozen" further down the harbour they saw "a huge black, two funnelled Cunarder alive with khaki boys. We all cheered and cheered madly, so did they, and then we shouted "Are we down heartened?" and they roared "No", as they swung passed and dropped anchor." Other boats were described and "overall a real English sunset, golden streaks and luminous ponds." She mentions names like the 'Sir Francis Drake' and 'Sir Walter Raleigh'.

She also writes of a visit to Kew Gardens:--

"we dived into various hot houses and as often as not out again because of the heat. E was in search of the blue Victoria Nyanza water lily, and at last we found it. What do you think of leaves as large as the washing up tray"? She continues "homely similes for homely minds from a homely pen" and "the texture woolly and rough and so strong a fat baby could sit on it and float, I'm sure."

I wonder if Anna 21 yr and William Fell 17 yr, the niece and nephew of Charlie Fell were on the docks to greet the *Ruahine*? They had left NZ in February 1914 and with Dorothy Hursthouse had travelled on the *Ceramic* from Sydney and arrived in Plymouth on 13 April 1914. Anna and Dorothy were studying at the Froebel Institute in London.²⁴ In keeping with the Atkinson-Richmond convoluted relationships Anna and William's mother was Margaret Richmond, a cousin of Mabel, and their father was Walter Fell, the brother of Charlie Fell. Anna and Dorothy Hursthouse had both registered in 1903 as students at Nelson College for Girls. Old Girls Reports in the School magazine advises of their activities.

"DOROTHY HURSTHOUSE and ANNA FELL, who left NZ in February, are now deep in their work at the Froebel Institute in London. They are to sit for an examination in July, and are 'simply breathless with trying to catch up two term's work" They recently spent a delightful week-end at Peaslake, in Surrey, among the most entrancing bluebells, violets, primroses and speedwell, and they seem to have lost their hearts to the quiet, cultivated English country.²⁵

“ANNA FELL is finishing her Froebel course training in London. She has been assisting to entertain the soldiers at White City with her interpretation of “Mechanical Jane”²⁶

“ANNA FELL is still in London and was mixed up in an air raid. She said it was simply terrifying; the bombs were not so bad, as the terrible din made by the anti-aircraft guns.”²⁷

“DOROTHY HURSTHOUSE and ANNA FELL have obtained second class certificates from the National Froebel Union, London. They were able to devote only eighteen months to the two years course and in addition found time for war work as well as study. For sometime they have been assisting at the NZ hospital at Walton-on-Thames. Dorothy has been appointed assistant teacher in the Kindergarten department of the Kelburne Training College, Wellington”²⁸

“ANNA FELL is still war-farming in Dorset, at Mappowder.”²⁹

In a later magazine there is a very descriptive article “With the Land Army in England.” It is not signed but I suspect this is by Anna as it describes living in Dorset for three years. It is written with humour and fortitude and describes the problems of understanding the locals, hoeing mangels and working like a slave from 4am till dark, including Sundays milking cows. However in spite of the trials she wouldn't have missed the experience “for a King's ransom.”³⁰

Voluntary Aid Detachment

Mabel had planned to work with an English woman Mrs Allen, who was setting up maternity hospitals in Belgium but when she arrived she found these fully staffed.³¹ According to a later article in the Nelson Girls Collegian³² she didn't know about the Voluntary Aid Detachment known as V.A.D.'s when she arrived in England but her cousin took her to St John's Gate and introduced her to the authorities. Mabel thought that the fact that she had come 12,000 miles, half way round the world, was allowed to weigh somewhat against the fact that she was at least a dozen years over the age limit.

The Old Girls news confirms Mabel had joined the Voluntary Aid Department. V.A.D.'s She left England on 2 November 1915 for 'somewhere in France'³³

In a very few weeks she found herself one of a party of some fifty V.A.D.'s setting out from Charing Cross for Boulogne and an unknown destination in France. She describes the journey and spending the night in a big dreary, dirty, cold barn of a railway station, crowded with British Tommies in khaki and French Polius in blue, all hurrying hither and thither... There were officers of every rank and from every part of our vast Dominions, many of them glad to get through the hours of waiting by chatting to the bright-faced members of our party. She found it mighty cold as it was November and she had recently come through the tropics. Before dawn they all scrambled into a high over-crowded train and wandered off into space. They took all day to go a very short distance and late in the afternoon some eleven of them reached a little out-lying fishing village on the coast of Normandy. They were taken by ambulance to one of the summer hotels which were the sister's quarters and mess 'on the edge of the smelly little village'. The fact that Etretat was best known for its cliffs, 3 natural arches, the Pointed Needle and was famously painted by Claude Monet was obviously not relevant.

Mabel also writes

“that the big rambling hotels for summer visitors did not make convenient hospitals, and you may guess the amount of cleaning and polishing required in the long corridors and parquet floors throughout. And the huge looking glasses! Many a time my arms ached, and I expect my temper too, over these mirrors, for it did seem such a waste of time. However the “up boys” as we called them, were very good in helping us. The heaviest surgical cases went to the Casino, beautifully situated right on the sea front, with wide verandahs and esplanade, so that many of the beds could be carried out even through the winter, on sunny days. Through the terrible July and August rush of that year, every hole, corner and even the corridors of all our five big buildings were full to overflowing with constant incoming and outgoing convoys, all surgical and into the medical wards they had come, however unprepared we might happen to be”.

She describes night duty:--

“the bug bear for most of us, because of the extra responsibility it entails”. To her horror she found it was in buildings that were unfamiliar – four tall narrow French houses, the annexe of a

big hotel over the road To get from one to another meant down stairs, out into the street, and up, and up, and up again, for they were each three or four storeys high and though it was supposed that no serious cases were put in them, it generally seemed my luck to have several, all scattered on the top floor of each house. It blew and it rained and it snowed, and I wondered why I had ever left my little far off home in sunny NZ".³⁴

In 1916 Mabel writes to Nelson College for Girls from No 1 General Hospital BEF France;-

"I have signed in till the 2nd of June, and it seems more than probable that I shall be asked to continue another six months after that. You would not think there is much hardship in what I am doing if you could see me at this moment. I am sitting high up on an edge of the cliff with such a scene spread out before me. A gentle breeze and warm sunshine, and over the sea a soft grey channel mist – only one little steamer in sight – perhaps a patrol boat – all the fishing craft are up on the beach with their tri-colour ensigns flying at half mast. I know not why, but it makes a good patch of colour in the middle distance. Right below, on the dry shingle of the beach are dozens of Tommies lying in all sorts of attitudes, also adding a touch of colour in their picturesque blue hospital uniforms. The beach runs in tidal banks, and on the highest of these, just below the esplanade, are spread rows and rows of hospital sheets, put there by the French folk, who do the washing.

Mabel also describes

"if the tide was a little further out there would be groups of French women doing this same washing. "These frugal folk dig out little ponds in the shingle, and kneel there in the coldest of weathers and all sorts of hours- according to the tide- slapping, banging and sluicing away".



Washerwomen at Etretat by Felix Vallotton 1899 and Fishing Boats Leaving the Port, Etretat by Claude Monet 1899

On the esplanade about the middle of the bay, are a row of beds with cases in from the surgical wards. Such a delicious spot for them, and they sometimes even have a gramophone going there too. Away to the left is the village with its many shuttered up boarding houses and hotels, for in summer and peace time this is a fashionable resort for wealthy French, English and Americans. The majority of the cases we get here are medical, and it is very cheering to see how quickly they respond to the changed surroundings – good beds, cleanliness, more generous diet, and so forth. If there are not sufficient to effect a cure, they are sent on to England, or 'Blighty,' as it is universally called, and should, I believe, be spelt 'Blithi' as it is I understand a Hindostanee word for home or country.

Yesterday I had a half day off, and had a try for a seat in a motor ambulance 'bus to Havre; but it was too full, so we consoled ourselves with a good walk up the valley inland, then made a bee line up a steep hill and back by the cliffs, first visiting the old church."³⁵

On 19 May 1916 Sister Edith Appleton, a nurse with Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service (QAIMNS) records in her diary 'Last night I went for a stroll in the gloaming with Miss Atkinson, who is a

New Zealand VAD, about 56. The poor thing is being sent to England after having an outbreak of nasty boils, and she is terribly sorry to go'.

At the end of the previous year, 1915, Edith had a lot to say about V.A.D.'s and describes the types of women who help.

"November 29th. The V.A.D.'s are a source of great interest to me – taking them as a bunch they are splendid. They may be roughly divided into 4 sorts: "Stalkers", "Crawlers", the irresponsible butterflyers and the sturdy pushers. At the moment I am thinking of a butterfly one who is on night duty in these wards and says with a light hearted laugh: "It's rippin' nursin' the men, great fun, when I was in the Officers' ward I did housework all the time, great fun – but there men are really ill – great fun." When I show her how to do anything fresh, she twitches to get at it and says, 'Oh do let me try – I'd love to do that – simply love to. She is an aristocratic little person, most dainty and well groomed, and the thought of her doing scrubbing and dusting all day makes me smile. The 'stalkers' are nice girls, very lordly with high-pitched, crackly voices. They look rather alarmed at some of the jobs they have to do. By "Crawlers" I mean the little people with their hair done like thisat the back, who think they are unworthy to do anything at all. They have an expression of, "Stand on me if you like. I should be pleased to be your doormat."

There is little to say about the sturdy pusher ones; they are not remarkable for anything, but are quite reliable, very strong, never forget and are always ready to do every bit of work.

On December 6, Edith also describes the stream pouring at full force down the beach and tumbling into the sea.

"The women make great use of it, and it is a quaint sight to see them every day, spade under one arm, bundling a heavy wheelbarrow of wet clothes down to the beach to rinse the things they have washed and boiled at home. They dig deep holes in the beach which become their wash tubs and a river of water runs swiftly through them so it is always perfectly clean".

In February she writes

"I have put my exasperating little VAD in a ward where there are two staff nurses – she is very happy there and I have someone older, more a woman of the world, in La Plage.... So that's an improvement."³⁶

(I wonder if this is Mabel?)

An article in Kai Tiaki, the journal of the nurses of NZ had an interesting article in 1916 which would have been read with interest. Titled 'Rules for Nurses and V.A.D.'s' it says

"A very curious difference appears to exist in some of the Imperial Hospitals between the rules made for the fully trained Army Sisters and the V.A.D.'s. The latter from what a sister now in France, writes appear to have much more liberty allowed them. They can go about as they like and with whom they like, while the rules are very strict for sisters.

"Sister remarks it seems rather a pity because, after all, the average Frenchman does not know the difference between a V.A.D. nurse and a trained sister, and forms his opinion on the whole of the English nurses by the conduct of the V.A.D.'s."³⁷

In the spring of 1917 Mabel was sent to a large hospital outside Rouen. This was chiefly under canvas, with few huts:--

“Soon after my arrival I was put into the medical hut and stayed there eight months, an unusual time without a change. Our patients were chiefly the worst cases from the tents – chests, fevers, inflammatory conditions of various sorts, and most pitiful to see, gassed cases. Mustard and phosgene had just been invented, or first used, and the best method of treating it had to be discovered. After mistakes these difficulties were overcome, but the sufferings in many cases were terrible to behold, but always borne with incredible fortitude and cheerfulness.

It was this indomitable spirit that most struck the American and Nursing Unit who took over this hospital in June of that year. They came from St. Louis, USA, prepared to work in a hospital of 500 beds, and found themselves landed with 1,200, and as they could not easily get reinforcements from America, we V.A.D.'s were left to carry on our maid-of-all works jobs for them.

“I was with them five months, and I'm glad of this opportunity, as always, to say what a happy time I had with them – quite the happiest of my two year in France. Courtesy and consideration was the keynote of their behaviour to us, and as I say, their astonishment and admiration of the way the boys bore their sufferings was unbounded. Even the M.O.'s used to think bad cases were going to die, when we, with our short experience, knew they were not: and three year medical students turned sick and faint in the surgical wards at the sight of the wounds to which we had become inured”.

Mabel finished her article in 1920 with a description of a regular routine approaching a mud-stained weary and worn soldier with a basin, wash cloth, soap and towel.

“Oh Sister, you can't wash my feet! I haven't had m'boot off for three weeks!” “Why, then, old man, they'll be worth washing!” This with a laugh to hide the fact that tears were not far off.

*It was a great privilege to be allowed to do even those two years' work and very loth was I to leave soon after the desperate rush began, as you all remember, on 21 March 1918. But I had sent in my papers early that month and it was too late to withdraw when the push came”.*³⁸

While Mabel was in France, her sister Ruth was busy in Nelson with the Belgian Relief Fund and she was still President of the WCTU. (The National Women's Christian Temperance Union) There is a sale of work at the Temperance Hall on 25 October 1916 and Ruth reminds the large attendance that 'it was not the time to talk much as there were so many things to work for. Although the W.C.T.U was not directly connected with any patriotic effort, the union was working for the sake of the boys of the Empire, for they felt if they did not keep the temperance flag flying they would suffer in the end.'³⁹ The Colonist reported on 27 October that she was leaving for England in December for a visit.⁴⁰ There are no clues in the paper as to the reason for her journey. Was she going to support other members of the family in England during the war?

She would have hardly landed when on 1 February 1917 Ruth and Mabel's sister Edie 60yr returns to NZ with her husband Charlie aged 71yr. They travel on the *Turakina*⁴¹ We do not have a record of where they have been living for the last year and half. Charlie dies the following year on 9 June 1918 and members of the many institutions that he had been connected with were present. They included the Mayor and city councillors, Board of College Governors and Trustees of the School of Music. He had spent most of his life in Nelson and his interests were bound up in its welfare.⁴²

The Armistice between the Allies and Germany is agreed to end the fighting of the First World War at 11am on 11 November 1918 but it takes six months of negotiations at the Paris Peace Conference to conclude the peace treaty known as the Treaty of Versailles. It is a victory for the Allies.

Mabel's Medal Card, now to be found in The National Archives at Kew, England records that her date of entry is 2 Nov 1915. Her Corps is VAD, Rank – Nurse. Her Theatre of War – France. She is awarded the Victory Medal, the British Medal and the 1915 Star⁴³.

Back to New Zealand

On 7 December 1919 Ruth returns to NZ from Southampton travelling 1st Class on the “*Bremen*”. The Women's Corner of the Press records that other passengers include Miss May Palmer, the first nurse to

leave NZ with the intention of serving in France and Miss Mildred Rees who saw considerable nursing - some in a French hospital and some on a hospital barge on the Somme.

In the Nelson Girls' Collegian in 1920 the death on 15 July 1919 of Mabel's niece Phyllis is recorded with sincere sorrow. After travelling out to England with her parents and Mabel in 1915 she had been engaged in various forms of war work and returned recently to Nelson on the staff of the Nelson School of Music. She was considered to be a brilliant musician and had at different times held the position of visiting teacher of music at the College. As a pupil, ex-pupil and teacher she had always closely identified with the college. Her sudden illness and untimely death was deeply regretted.⁴⁴

Mabel appears to have returned home to NZ on the *Rimutuka* which left Southampton on 7 July 1921. We have no record of her occupation after the war until her departure.

'Fairfield'

Ruth and Mabel lived at 'Fairfield' until 1922 when the property was bought by Nelson College for Girls who used it as a preparatory school downstairs and boarding house for 9 of the smallest girls upstairs. It was a wonderful place for little girls to enjoy make believe games and tree climbing. The following year there was a plan to have all boarding at Fairfield and all dormitories at the college to be classrooms to relieve serious overcrowding. In 1930 the numbers of boarders decreased sharply and continued to fall with the Depression. It was decided to lend it to Nelson College who were short on space after the Murchison earthquake.⁴⁵ It fell into disrepair until saved by Alan Stanton and his band of Friends of Fairfield in 1979. Lovingly restored with dedication and fortitude in the face of many doubters it is again resplendent. As a Category 1 Historic Places Trust listed house it is a wonderful community facility and memorial for a pioneer family and "Mob" who so industrially contributed to the life of their adopted country.⁴⁶



After Fairfield was sold Ruth and Mabel built a new home called 'Cranford' near to Edie in Brougham St but their travelling days were not over. In 1926 Mabel age 61yr and Edie age 67yr travelled First Class to England on the *Ruapehu* on 22 March 1926. Their destination was 15 Upper Phillimore Gardens, Kensington W8 London. Also headed for the same address was their cousin Margaret Fell age 68yr and her daughter Anna Fell age 34yr on the *Ruahine* on 28 April 1926. Anna returned alone to NZ on the *Osterly* on 26 June 1926.⁴⁷

On 26 October 1926 Mabel wrote another article for the Nelson Girls' Collegian from England. This time she describes the record arrival of Alan Cobham after flying to Australia and back, in the same aircraft, a distance of 25,000 miles. She had seen an advertisement that St Thomas's Hospital were selling tickets for 5/- and felt justified in going to see the dramatic end of a great flight, as the money would help a great cause. As she crossed Westminster Bridge the words 'Earth has not anything to show more fair' came naturally to mind.

"The view from the terrace was worth the money: for it was a lovely soft day and the great pile of the Houses of Parliament stood out majestically at either end - a sight not beaten anywhere. She enjoyed the two hour wait, watching the crowds and entertainers. At about 2.10pm with a great whirr, and greeted by real British cheers, the plane came swooping down from the east, then rushed on towards Battersea and Chelsea to circle over London, returning in a few minutes much lower down. He stopped but a few yards beyond the House of Commons at 2.14pm by Big Ben. He was due to arrive at 2.15pm - a splendid achievement."⁴⁸

Ruth died at Queen Mary Hospital in Hanmer Springs in Canterbury on 19 May 1927 age 65yr. Brother Arf died in Wellington in March 1935. As a member of the House of Representatives 1899-1902 and member of the Wellington City council he had given great public service. High tributes were paid to his ability and integrity. Mabel was among the chief mourners.⁴⁹

Death

Mabel's death on 30 December 1935 was sudden and was recorded in the Nelson College for Girls.

*"The sudden death of Miss Mabel Atkinson in December last removed from the College one of its most sincere supporters. Though her own connection with the school as a pupil was but a short one, she took the greatest interest in all that concerned its welfare. She was most enthusiastic over the Old Girls' Association and when in Nelson never failed to attend its meetings. Hers will be a personality we shall greatly miss, more especially those of us who knew her more intimately in connection with Girl Guide work."*⁵⁰



Wakapuaka Cemetery

Her funeral service was conducted by Dean Haggitt at Christ Church Cathedral, Nelson on 31 December 1935⁵¹. She was buried at Wakapuaka cemetery in Nelson in the Anglican Section. As in life she is surrounded by family. Also buried there is her aunt Helen Hursthouse, died age 92yr in 1895, her grandmother Maria Richmond, died age 81yr in 1872, her mother Jane Maria Atkinson age 90yr in 1914, her father Arthur age 69yr in 1902, her paternal uncle William Atkinson age 48yr in 1874 and her sister Ruth in 1927.⁵²

In the adjoining area is Mabel's aunt Mary Richmond died age 31yr in 1865⁵³, a great niece Pamela Ruth Fell died age 28yr in 1942, an aunt (who died before Mabel's birth) Alice Atkinson died 1863 age 21yrs. Also a memorial to nephew Charles Richmond Fell died 1952 age 70yr and great nephew Roderick Buchanan Fell died 1941 age 31yr.

In her will written in 1932 she left 100 pounds to the Royal Society for the Health of Women and Children and expressed the hope that the sum be used to augment the endowment fund of the said Society.⁵⁴ She had "taken a prominent part in the Plunket Society since its inception" according to her obituary in the

Nelson Evening Mail.⁵⁵ On 10 December 1912 "A large number of ladies assembled at the Council Chamber in response to the Mayor's invitation to consider the formation of a Nelson Branch of the Society for the Health of Women and Children upon the lines laid down by Dr Truby King.

Miss Atkinson proposed 'That a branch of the Society of for the Health of Women and Children should be formed in Nelson.'⁵⁶In 1915 she was on the committee.⁵⁷ Dr Truby King would have been well known to Mabel. Their parents were friends in the New Plymouth days⁵⁸ and her Uncle Henry Robert Richmond had tutored Truby King at 'Beach Cottage' when he was younger.⁵⁹

Other beneficiaries of her will were her extended family and her friend Kathleen Strachan. The whereabouts of her medals are not known at this time.

Alice Mabel Atkinson was a member of an extraordinary family who contributed to many factors of early life in NZ. While some members were leaders and prolific speakers and writers, Mabel was nurturing and caring. So far her letters are only known to readers of Nelson Girls Collegian. We look forward to finding more letters someday and reading the thoughts of this well educated and observant woman.

Endnotes

¹ Born to NZ, A Biography of Jane Maria Atkinson by Frances Porter

² Born to NZ, A Biography of Jane Maria Atkinson – Chapter 6 The Hurworth Community

³ Born to NZ, A Biography of Jane Maria Atkinson – Chapter 13 European Cultivation.

⁴ Born to NZ, A Biography of Jane Maria Atkinson - letter of JC Richmond to his S-in-L Emily Elizabeth Richmond

⁵ Margaret Richmond and Edie Atkinson were later to become sister-in-laws when they married the Fell brothers.

⁶ www.london-footprints.co.uk/peooctavia.htm

⁷ English Census 1861, 1871, 1881

⁸ Infed.org/mobi/Octavia-hill-housing-and-social-reform/

⁹ Alexander Turnbull Library. Richmond-Atkinson family ms papers, Acc 77-253. Edited Guy Scholefield

¹⁰ Born to NZ, A Biography of Jane Maria Atkinson by Frances Porter. Letter CW Richmond to his wife Emily still in England.

¹¹ Sentinel at the Gates, Nelson College for Girls 1883-1983 by Lois Voller.

¹² Born to NZ, A Biography of Jane Maria Atkinson by Frances Porter

¹³ Born to NZ, A Biography of Jane Maria Atkinson by Frances Porter

¹⁴ Born to NZ, A Biography of Jane Maria Atkinson by Frances Porter Pge 351

¹⁵ Ancestry Electoral Rolls, 1896, 1900, 1905

¹⁶ Freed to Care. Proud To Nurse. 100 Years of NZ Nurses Organisation by Mary Ellen O'Connor

¹⁷ Paperspast The Colonist June 1914

¹⁸ NZ History on line. Archives NZ AAUR-W3549-box 104

¹⁹ Nelson Girls Collegian 1915 Vol XV1 No1 Old Girls Association

²⁰ Paperspast, Colonist 4 August 1915 Page 4

²¹ Paperspast Nelson Evening Mail VolXLV1, 25 September 1915

²² Ancestry, 'Ruahine' NZ Shipping Coy. Wellington to London No 124582

²³ . In [Greek mythology](#), Mount Pelion (which took its name from the mythical king [Peleus](#), father of [Achilles](#)) was the homeland of [Chiron](#) the [Centaur](#), tutor of many ancient Greek heroes, such as [Jason](#), [Achilles](#), [Theseus](#) and [Heracles](#). It was in Mount Pelion, near Chiron's cave, that the marriage of [Thetis](#) and [Peleus](#) took place. The uninvited goddess [Eris](#), to take revenge for having been kept outside the party, brought a golden apple with the inscription "To the Fairest". The dispute that then arose between the goddesses [Hera](#), [Aphrodite](#) and [Athene](#) resulted in events leading to the [Trojan War](#). When the giants [Otus](#) and [Ephialtes](#) attempted to storm [Olympus](#), they piled Mount Pelion upon [Mount Ossa](#)

²⁴ Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852) a German educator famous for his radical insight that the first learning experience of the young influences not only their later achievement but the health and development of society as a whole. He devised a set of principles and practices which took place in institutions which he named in 1840 as "kindergartens" The Prussian government ordered their closure in 1851 fearing this radical thinking would contribute to the democratic movement which was threatening to it. Many committed teachers took their enthusiasm and

methods overseas. With the support of Julia Salis Schwabe, the widow of a Manchester industrialist, Unitarian and educational benefactor the movement was established in London in 1874. (From www.froebeltrust.org.uk)

- 25 Nelson Girls Collegian 1914 Vol XV No1 Pge 43
- 26 Nelson Girls Collegian 1915 Vol XV1 No 1 Page 36
- 27 Nelson Girls Collegian 1915 Vol XV1 No2 Pge 28
- 28 Nelson Girls Collegian 1916 Vol XV11 No 1 Pge 30
- 29 Nelson Girls Collegian 1917 Vol XV111 No 2
- 30 Nelson Girls' Collegian 1920 Vol XX No 1 Pge 29
- 31 Nelson Notables 1840-1940 Published by Nelson Historical Society.
- 32 Nelson Girls Collegian 1920 Vol XX No 1 Pge 47
- 33 Nelson Girls Collegian, 1915 Vol XV1 No 2 Pge 22
- 34 Nelson Girls Collegian 1920 Vol XX No 1 Pge 49
- 35 Nelson College for Girls 1916 Vol XV11 No1 Pge 36
- 36 War Diaries, A Nurse at the Front, The First World War Dairies of Sister Edith Appleton. Edited by Ruth Cowen
- 37 Paperspast Kai Tiaki Volume 1X, Issue 4 October 1916
- 38 Nelson Girls' Collegian 1920 Vol XX Pge 51
- 39 Paperspast Colonist 15 November 1916 Pge 9
- 40 Paperspast Colonist 27 October 1916 Pge 4
- 41 Ancestry Shipping Records Turakina Plymouth -> NZ 1 Feb 1917
- 42 Paperspast Colonist 12 June 1918
- 43 The Archives, Kew, England. Medal Card Catalogue Reference WO/372/23
- 44 Nelson Girls' Collegian 1920 Vol XX No 1 Pge 33
- 45 Sentinel at the Gates, Nelson College for Girls 1883-1883 by Lois C Voller 1982
- 46 Photo of Fairfield House. November 2013. Judith A Fitchett
- 47 Ancestry Shipping Records for the "Ruahine" and "Osterly"
- 48 Nelson Girls' Collegian 1927 XXV111 Pge 55
- 49 NZSG Nelson Branch, Obituary Collection. Nn Evening Mail 29 March 1935
- 50 Nelson Girls' Collegian 1936 Pge 1936
- 51 NZSG Nelson Branch. Shone and Shirley Company Burial Record 1935
- 52 NZSG Nelson Branch, Wakapuaka Burial Records.
- 53 The mother of Alla and Dolla.
- 54 Will copy from NZ Archives Wellington. AA00 Series 17072 Box 105/2999
- 55 NZSG Nelson Branch Obituary Collection December 1935
- 56 Paperspast Colonist 18 December 1912 Pge 1
- 57 Paperspast Nelson Evening Mail 29 September 1915
- 58 Born to NZ, A Biography of Jane Maria Atkinson Pge 77
- 59 Biography Frederic Truby King 1858-1938. Published Dictionary of NZ Biographies Volume 2 by Barbara Brookes.