Suffrage stories

René Shadbolt

1903-1977

René Shadbolt was born in Akaroa and grew up in small farming communities throughout New Zealand. She graduated as a nurse in 1932 and by 1936 was head sister of Auckland Hospital's casualty ward.
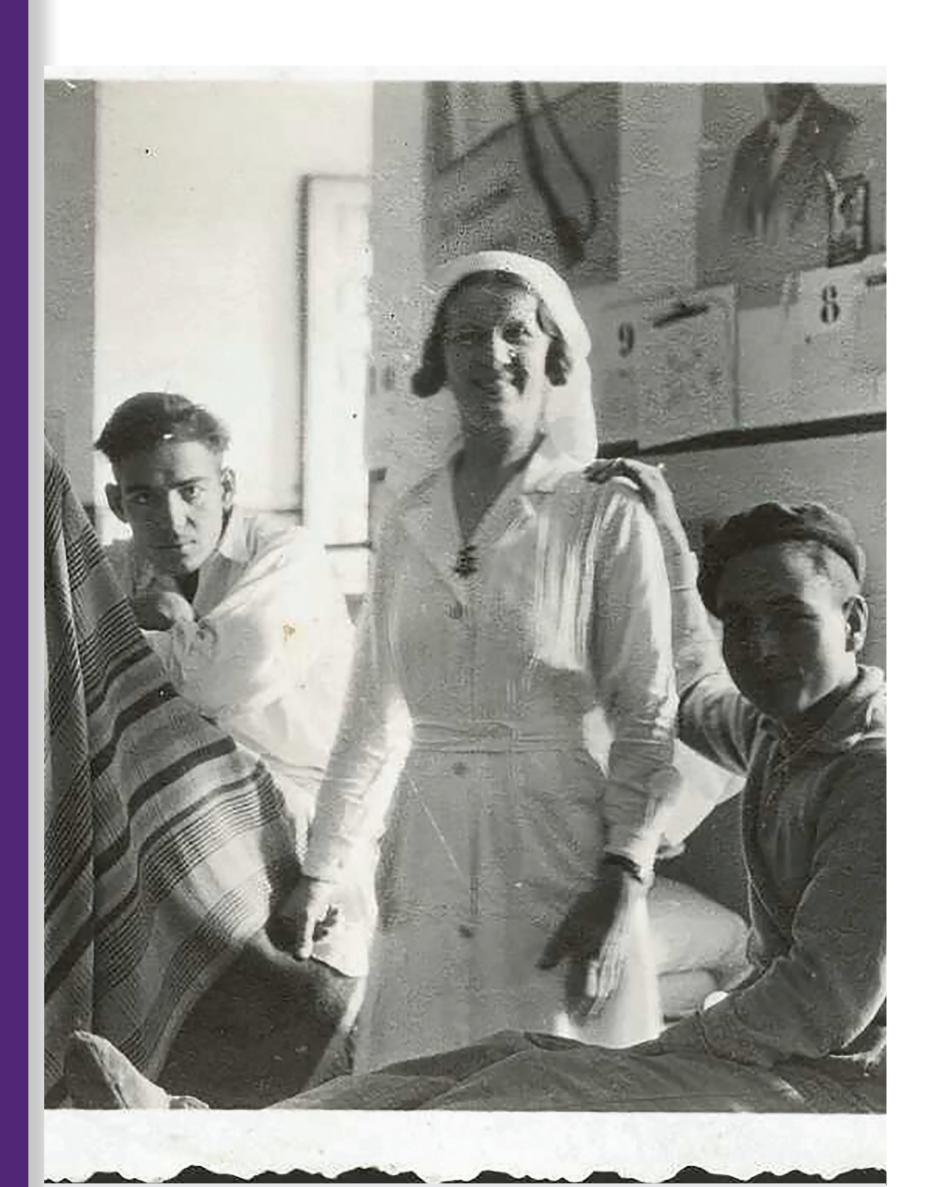
The misery of the Depression years coloured René's political views. She was horrified at medical staff who were reluctant to treat demonstrators wounded by police during street marches. In 1937, René and two other nurses volunteered to provide medical care to soldiers wounded in the Spanish civil war. The nurses' first posting was to the International Brigade Hospital in central Spain. For 18 months they worked in appalling and dangerous conditions, until they were withdrawn in 1938.

On her return to New Zealand in 1939, René went on a lecture tour and fundraised for Spanish Republican refugees. Her experience marked her as dangerously political and made it difficult to find a nursing job. During World War II, nurses were needed regardless of their views and René found work caring for convalescent soldiers in Auckland.

In 1949, René became Matron of Hokianga Hospital at Rawene, where she earned the loyalty of the people of Hokianga. In 1969, she was made an MBE thanks to the impassioned pleas of the community.

■ New Zealand nurse, René Shadbolt with patients, in Huete, Spain, during the Spanish civil war, 1937. *Credit: McGuire, Isobel, 1913-2008: Photographs of nursing during the Spanish Civil War, and a 50th anniversary in 1989, PAColl-6956-02-2, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.*

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