

### **Kate Marsden**

Kate was born in Edmonton, Middlesex, just north of London, on 13 May, 1859. Her father was a solicitor, practising in Cheapside, London and the family lived in middle class comfort in what was then a semi-rural setting. Kate was the youngest of 8 children, 4 sons and 4 daughters. As a child she was something of a tomboy, and whilst her sisters fitted into the traditional upbringing which would set them up to be refined young ladies in polite society, Kate showed an independence – she shunned sewing, embroidery and other traditional feminine pursuits. She loved carpentry, climbing trees, and getting into various kinds of mischief. At school she was often in trouble for ill discipline, but it seems likely that she was a bright girl. The time came when she had to go away to boarding school and she was most displeased about that. As with her early childhood education, the discipline of the classroom did not suit her and she was always getting into trouble.

Then, at the age of just 14, Kate had to leave school because of the sudden death of her father. Though Joseph had been able to support his family in some comfort during his life, in death they were left relatively poor. The family home had to be broken up, the servants dismissed and carriages sold. The family moved to much a more modest home, and Kate began to consider her future. She answered various advertisements for nurses and corresponded with a large number of hospitals, but in each case was turned down because of her youth. That is until, at the age of 17, she tried the Tottenham Hospital, close to her former home. To her great joy she was accepted and entered the institution as a probationer. The Tottenham Hospital had developed out of the Ragged School founded in Tottenham in 1855 by the German Jewish-turned-Christian doctor Michael Laseron. The school flourished and before long grew into an orphanage for 800 girls with an infirmary attached. In 1867 a Deaconess from the Lutheran Institute at Kaiserworth began training some of the girls to work among the sick poor in Tottenham. Out of this small beginning grew the Evangelical Deaconesses' Institute.

As some of you may know, the Institute at Kaiserworth is where Florence Nightingale received some of her training.

The Deaconesses received no salary and were trained to regard their vocation as life-long. Kate revelled in her nursing duties and for the first time in her life responded well to the discipline required.

In the years 1877-1878, Russia was at war with Turkey. Newspapers recounted the terrible sufferings of the troops and the horrors of atrocities in Bulgaria. Some of the nursing sisters at the Tottenham Hospital were to be sent to the battlefields, and to Kate's surprise and delight – she was then just 18 – she was included in the party. They travelled in rough wagons and on arrival in Bulgaria they were assigned to tend the Russian wounded. There Kate and her colleagues dealt with the badly injured in trying circumstances. Two of the sisters fell ill with typhoid but eventually recovered. On one occasion Kate was sent out from camp with a companion to search for any wounded who might have been overlooked on the battlefield. Kate looked inside a deserted barn and found inside, two men suffering from leprosy – scarcely recognisable as human beings. This experience had a major effect on the 18yr old Kate, and I will return to this later.

After returning to England, Kate decided to take up a conventional nursing career, and found a post at the Westminster Hospital in London. Some time later she accepted a post as Assistant Superintendent at the Liverpool Convalescent Home in Lower Woolton, Liverpool. She stayed there for four and a half years, before resigning because of ill health. She had some form of chest complaint and feared that she might have Tb which was common in other members of her family. She had the idea of travelling to Australia to seek better health, but friends persuaded her to go to Ventnor on the Isle of Wight. She slowly recovered her strength and then helped with nursing an invalid sister. Another of her sisters did have pulmonary Tb and had been ordered by her doctors to try New Zealand for better health. That sister's health did not improve however, and she wrote home begging her mother and Kate to come to her. So it was that on 20 October, 1884 Kate and her mother set sail on the SS Tongariro, arriving in Wellington on 4 January, 1885. Sadly, Kate's sister died just 1 week after their arrival.

Kate's mother thought that the NZ climate would help Kate fully recover her health and resolved to stay in Wellington. Kate was well enough to start looking around for suitable work, and as luck would have it, the Lady Superintendent at Wellington Hospital, Mrs Kissling, had announced her resignation to remarry. And as I said at the beginning of the talk, Kate was appointed to the post.

Kate quickly settled into the job, and very soon showed her initiative. Within 3 weeks of her arrival she had suggested that she and her nurses should act in conjunction with the Ambulance Corps of the Wellington Guards, should the need arise. She arranged for a series of lectures to be given by Dr Chilton at the hospital to the Ambulance Corps and her nurses. She was instrumental in the founding in July 1885 of the Wellington branch of the St Johns Ambulance Society, and she acted as their Secretary.

All was not well at the hospital, however. A small group of female patients had written to the Colonial Secretary protesting at the treatment they had received from Dr Chilton, his rude manner and the fact that on at least one occasion he was drunk on duty. Kate Marsden called on the Inspector of Hospitals, Dr Grabham, and reported that there was general disorder at the institution; owing to Dr Chilton's behaviour, either she or he would have to leave. Maurice Chilton was the Resident Medical Officer.

The Colonial Secretary summoned Dr Chilton and asked for his resignation – this came as a surprise to the Dr who asked for 48hrs to consider his position. That time passed with no further response from Dr Chilton and he was dismissed. This led to a flurry of protest from other members of staff in support of the doctor. Ten nurses wrote complaining that Miss Marsden had made a number of false statements about the doctor and they asked for her resignation. The hospital steward and eight other male staff members also wrote in support of Dr Chilton. The upshot of all this was that there was a Royal Commission of Inquiry, Dr Chilton's dismissal was confirmed, the protesting nurses were all dismissed and the male staff members were given one month's notice.

Dr Chilton's replacement was Dr Kenny who quickly found himself at odds with Kate Marsden over their respective responsibilities, especially in regard to the training of the nurses.

This dispute was overshadowed by an incident in mid September 1885, when Kate Marsden's world literally came tumbling down. She was standing on a step-ladder to fetch linen from a high shelf in the linen room when she fell heavily to the ground, sustaining a serious back injury. Initially it was thought that she was partially paralysed, but by early October she began to recover. She remained confined to bed however for several months and by December it appeared clear that she would be unable to resume her duties as Lady Superintendent. She was discharged from hospital to convalesce with her mother who requested that a nurse who had been tending her in hospital be allowed to continue that care at home. That nurse was Nurse Ellen Dougherty, a first year probationer, who would go on to become the first nurse to be registered in NZ (& indeed the world), and in 1893 the first Matron of Palmerston North Hospital.

In early 1886, Kate Marsden had recovered sufficiently to resume her role as Secretary of the St John Ambulance Association. She also gave lectures in the community on Nursing.

In May 1887, Kate moved to Nelson where she thrived in the benign climate. She enjoyed holidays in the bush, camping, hunting and fishing. She continued to deliver nursing lectures, and in some cases travelled to remote parts to do this. One such place was the antimony mine at Endeavour Inlet where she taught the basics of first aid to the miners. The Marlborough Express reported this event thus:

"The dwellers of the inlet had the monotony of their existence broken in upon by Miss Marsden's lecture yesterday. For nearly two hours the lady kept her audience (mostly of men) not only interested, but delighted with her clever way of blending humour with instruction"

Reports of the plight of lepers in various parts of the world began to appear in the press in increasing numbers during 1889. In particular there was much publicity about the leper colony on Molokai, one of the Sandwich Islands and the good work of Father Damien, a

Belgian priest who looked after the lepers there. Kate saw some of these reports and was reminded of the harrowing scene she had stumbled across when nursing in Bulgaria in 1877.

Kate resolved that she wanted to devote her life to looking after lepers and set her sights on joining Father Damien in Molokai. In her last few lectures, she announced these plans to her audience.

Kate and her mother sailed from Wellington on the SS Ruapehu in June 1889 bound for England. Soon after arrival, she discovered that, since she was not a Roman Catholic, it was unlikely that she would be accepted into the small team on Molokai. Then, Kate came across an article about the 250,000 lepers of India, and she considered spending the rest of her life helping these people.

About this time, Kate was invited to go to St Petersburg to receive a medal from the Russian Red Cross. She decided to make this a starting point for a thorough study of the lot of lepers, not only in Russia but also in the Near and Middle East, but with India as her final destination.

Kate's friends convinced her that to succeed in her mission in India, she needed to have introductions to various Indian princes. She therefore applied to be presented at Court, and on 5 March, 1890 she had an audience with Queen Victoria. On hearing of her mission, Victoria suggested that she meet the Princess of Wales – Princess Alexandra, who, after a private meeting on 8 March, gave Kate a personal letter of introduction to her sister, Maria Fedorovna, the Empress of Russia. Armed with this important document, Kate set off for St Petersburg, to receive her medal and to meet with the Empress. Kate arrived in St Petersburg in late April, 1890 and within a few days had secured an audience with the Empress, at the palace in Gatchina (a few miles south of St Petersburg). Kate explained her mission to learn all she could about leprosy including its cause and to seek remedies. The Empress expressed surprise & concern to learn that there were cases of leprosy in Russia, and she gave Kate a letter of introduction to the authorities of the hospitals and leper settlements throughout the Russian empire. Kate was presented with the Russian Red Cross recognising her service during the Turko-Russian war. She then visited some of the hospitals in St Petersburg before returning to London to plan a more extensive journey to study not only leprosy in Russia, but also in Palestine and Turkey.

Her first move was to visit Paris to seek a meeting with Louis Pasteur in the hope that he might have some good news about a vaccine against leprosy. She visited St Louis Hospital where there was a facility for lepers, and after some difficulty secured a short meeting with Pasteur. However he was unable to hold out any hope of a cure or of a vaccine. This opinion was relayed by cable to NZ newspapers as a brief but strange statement.

Kate, meanwhile, returned to London and began to set about raising money to support her future travels. At first she did this quietly, approaching friends and contacts, and she also visited Florence Nightingale and received her blessing for the mission. In London Kate founded the St Francis Leprosy Guild, an organisation which continues today.

Kate gave an extended interview to a reporter working for the Pall Mall Gazette. Following publication of that interview, some controversy arose, as it seems Kate may have embellished her story to get the most impact. She was reported as having said that leprosy was being suffered by the Maoris in NZ and that she had had first hand knowledge of this. These statements filtered down to NZ and questions were raised about Kate's integrity. A few months later, Kate wrote a letter to the editor of Wellington's Evening Post denying that she had said much of what had been reported in the Pall Mall Gazette.

In that letter she outlined her proposed expedition, and by the time the letter was published in Wellington, Kate was already in Moscow.

To get there she had sailed first to Alexandria in Egypt where she found the German Hospital well run. She went on to Jaffa and then Jerusalem where she found excellent hospital facilities for lepers, and she also spent time at the Jerusalem branch of the Evangelical Deaconesses' Institute. Next, she sailed from Jaffa to Constantinople via Cyprus. In sharp contrast to Jerusalem, the facilities for lepers in Constantinople were virtually nil, and Kate was appalled by what she saw. Whilst in Constantinople, Kate heard of a possible remedy for the disease, and this rumour would change her long-term plans. Up to now, she had been

resolute in her ultimate desire to care for the many lepers in India. The rumoured remedy that she heard about was that in Northern Siberia there grew a herb which had been found to benefit sufferers. So she resolved to include in the Russian leg of her journey, a mission to locate this herb and return with sufficient samples for experts to work with. The journey to Moscow saw Kate cross Turkey to Tiflis in southern Russia (where she visited two hospitals, and where she again heard of the existence of the curative herb) and then over the Caucasus she proceeded north to Moscow. There she rested for a couple of days before returning to St Petersburg, anxious to discuss the herb with the Empress and her circle. Kate found a lot of support in high places for her proposed mission to Siberia, including financial support, and she set about preparing for the journey. There were a number of people who expressed doubts that a woman could make the journey, but Kate was determined to succeed.

On 1<sup>st</sup> February, 1891, Kate set off, initially by train to Zlatoust, a town situated in the Urals, a few hundred miles from Moscow. At that time, the trans-siberian railway was still in the planning stage, and from here on, Kate would travel by sledge. In Zlatoust, as in other towns she would visit, Kate was welcomed by local officials as a result of instructions from the Empress that she should be afforded every assistance and courtesy.

Kate was well-equipped for the harsh Siberian climate and here she describes the clothing she wore:

I had a whole outfit of Jaeger garments, which I prized more as the months went on; then a loose kind of body, lined with flannel, a very thick eider-down ulster, with sleeves long enough to cover the hands entirely, the fur collar reaching high enough to cover the head and face. Then a sheep-skin reaching to the feet, and furnished with a collar which came over the fur one. Then over the sheep-skin I had to wear a dacha, which is a fur coat of reindeer skin. A long thick pair of Jaeger stockings made of long hair; over them a pair of gentlemen's thickest hunting stockings; over them a pair of Russian boots made of felt, coming high up over the knee; and over them a pair of brown felt valenkies.

Needless to say, with all this clothing, Kate's mobility was severely limited, and she had some difficulty getting on to the sledge.

Kate spoke no Russian, but she was accompanied on her journey by a friend, Ada Field who knew the Language. They set off and Kate later recalled the difficulties of sledge transport: "Bump, jolt, bump, jolt – over huge frozen lumps of snow and into holes, and up and down those dreadful waves and furrows, made by the traffic. Your head seems to belong to every part of the sledge; it is first bumped against the top; then the conveyance gives a lurch, and you get an unexpected knock against the side; then you cross one of the ruts, and, first, you are thrown violently forward against the driver, and, second, you just as quickly rebound." The first town they came to was Ekaterinberg, still in the Urals. After settling into a hotel, Kate visited the local hospital and the prison – something that she would do in each of the towns on her trip. From Ekaterinberg they travelled to Tjumen which "is an old town, with long, broad streets and several churches, generally painted white, with green domes, giving them a bright and fresh appearance. The hospital, I am sorry to say, is the worst I have ever seen"

Next stop was Tobolsk.

"We arrived in Tobolsk around midnight, and having been previously told that the Governor had kindly engaged a room for us at the hotel, we were grieved to be taken to a tumble-down wooden house. The room contained two bedsteads and one mattress, but no bed linen. We slept on the floor." The next day Kate visited the prison and the hospital, both of which were clean and not overcrowded. At each village station where we stopped as we proceeded on our journey, numbers of peasants used to assemble, attracted by the red cross on the sledge. As we went on, the road became worse & worse, and we were obliged to stop at Tukulinsk, where we arrived thoroughly exhausted. We were taken to a peasant's house, too ill to undress, and we slept like logs until the following afternoon."

"Our journey from Tukulinsk to Omsk was accomplished without any particular mishap, but with the usual discomforts. Much to my regret, Miss Field had to return home on account of bad health. The prison at Omsk was in excellent condition, as was the Military Hospital."

“On arrival in Tomsk, in April, I was too ill to visit the prisons immediately, and had to wait, trying to get strength, for two days. I went to the hospital first, and then to the prisons, where I gave food comforts and Testaments to over 2000 prisoners. Can it be wondered at that, when I retired to rest at night, after visiting day by day these scenes, my dreams were haunted by desperate convicts, threatening murderers, awful-looking women, poor starving children, and ever-clanging chains?”

These are two photos of Tomsk taken just 5 years earlier by another traveller.

“Krasnoyarsk, about five hundred miles from Tomsk, is a pretty place. The inhabitants call it “lovely”, and so it is when you drive out of the town into the suburbs. The prison is in admirable condition, well managed, with good ventilation, and proper sanitary provisions.”

Kate had to buy a tarantass before leaving Krasnoyarsk. “Now, this vehicle was never designed for comfort, is innocent of a single spring. It runs on wheels and stands a long way from the ground, making it awkward for a woman to get in without assistance.

The roads at this time of the year are in a terrible condition; a ploughed field, containing a good many deep ruts, is the nearest description I can give of them. When a traveller thinks he is going to glide along in tolerable ease, he suddenly bumps down through the ice into a great hole of sticky, pulpy mud.”

“I arrived in Irkutsk in a pitiable condition. For two days I could scarcely walk.” She was now 5000 miles from Moscow.

Kate then set about talking to local officials to get first-hand information about the lepers, and to get their support for her mission. Eventually, she set off for Yakutsk, initially by tarantass and then by cargo barge on the river Lena, a journey which took three weeks. She arrived in Yakutsk in June, 1891, 5 months after setting off from Moscow.

Soon after arrival, Kate went to see Meletie, Bishop of Yakutsk. He confirmed that there were no facilities available for proper care of lepers, and he also confirmed the existence of the herb that Kate had heard of – in fact he gave her samples of it to take back to Moscow. Kate then set about finding out how she might travel to Viliusk to see for herself the plight of the lepers. It turned out that this part of the journey would have to be on horseback.

“We left Yakutsk for Viliusk, June 22nd, 1891, to begin our long journey of 2000 miles on horseback. Our cavalcade was a curious one. It consisted of fifteen men and thirty horses. I wore a jacket with very long sleeves, and had the badge of the red cross on my left arm. Then I had to wear full trousers to the knees. The hat was an ordinary deerstalker which I had bought in London.”

“I carried a revolver, a whip, and a little travelling bag, slung over the shoulder. I was obliged to ride as a man for several reasons – first, because the Yakutsk horses were so wild that it was impossible to ride safely sideways; second, because no woman could ride on a lady’s saddle for three thousand versts; third, because in the absence of roads, the horse had a nasty propensity of stumbling on the stones and amongst the roots of trees; and fourth, because the horse frequently sinks into the mud up to rider’s feet, and then, recovering its footing, rushes madly amongst the shrubs and branches of trees, utterly regardless of the fact that the lady’s dress (if she wore one) was being torn into fragments.”

The journey from Yakutsk to Viliusk was extremely difficult. “Pushing through forests, plunging into bogs, camping at night, plagued with mosquitoes, sleeping at times in disgustingly filthy youtas which swarmed with vermin of many kinds, myself more than once so weary & aching that I could not dismount, my clothes sometimes wet through with rain, with no possibility of taking them off to be dried; after such experiences, I at last arrived in Viliusk.”

“Viliusk is one of the quietest places I ever visited.” Kate was met by Father John Vinokoureff, who was devoted to the lepers. From him and from others, she learned of the frightful condition of the lepers in the province. After meeting several of the leading Yakut people of the town, Kate asked to be shown potential sites for a hospital to care for the lepers.

She then set off to see for herself the lepers. This required riding along a rough 1500 verst track through forest, marked especially for Kate. Eventually they came upon two yourtas and a small crowd of people – the lepers. The yourtas were crudely constructed of tree trunks and cow dung mixed with earth. Inside the lepers eat, cook, sleep, live & die. Over the next few weeks, Kate would visit a number of such scenes, and this was her description of one of these:

“Twelve men, women & children, scantily & filthily clothed, were huddled together in two small yourtas, covered with vermin. The stench was dreadful; one man was dying; two men had lost their toes and half their feet. One man had no fingers. During the 8 or 9 months of winter, these people huddle together with the cattle as closely as possible in their dreadful hovels, in order to keep warm.”

An exhausted Kate eventually headed back towards Yakutsk, and after a brief rest, returned to Irkutsk by way of the river Lena. There she was able to enjoy the relative luxury of a hotel room and recover from her arduous journey. She met with the General-Governor who had summoned a committee together to hear Kate's report. As a result a total of £1000 was raised toward the building of a leper hospital & colony, and Kate promised the locals that she would see to it that the remaining funds required would be raised after she had delivered her report in Moscow & St Petersburg.

Kate then had to face the return journey by sledge. When she reached Tomsk in November 1891, she was delighted to be met by her friend Ada Field who had by now recovered, and together they made the rest of the trip to Moscow. They arrived back in December, nearly eleven months after setting off, and after a brief rest, went on to St Petersburg.

Kate spent the next 4 months in either St Petersburg or Moscow, reporting on her Siberian trip and seeking to arouse interest in the cause of the lepers. She had another audience with the Empress, and met with other nobility including Countess Tolstoy. A committee was set up to organise the design & erection of a leper colony just outside Viliusk, and to oversee the fund raising required. Kate addressed the Moscow Venereological & Dermatological Society and gained support for her mission from the medical fraternity. She promoted the cause with extensive newspaper interviews, and reports of her journey were published widely in a church pamphlet. This brought her mission to the attention of a community of sisters of mercy in Moscow, the head of which was Princess Shachovskoy. Immediately three of the sisters offered to devote their lives to the care of the Siberian lepers, and Kate was delighted to meet with them & welcomed their support.

Eventually she returned to London with the intention of writing a book about her trip and the plight of the lepers, and she then proposed to travel to the USA on a fund-raising trip. The book, “On Sledge & Horseback to Outcast Siberian Lepers” took longer to complete than she had hoped but was eventually published in 1893.

The American trip had to be delayed because Kate was persuaded to go on a lecture tour in England first. This was a highly successful exercise as newspaper reports testify. She also held a number of drawing room meetings attended by various well-to-do ladies including members of the extended royal family.

Kate was elected to Fellowship of the Royal Geographic Society, a relatively rare achievement in those times for a woman.

Kate eventually set off for the States to attend the Chicago Worlds Fair, where she had a small stand on which she displayed a model of a typical Siberian leper yourta together with a model of the proposed leper colony. She also gave a lecture on “The Leper” to the Congress of Women. About 1 year later, Wellington's Evening Post reported an interview with a Wellingtonian David Milligan who had visited the Chicago Fair.

Before setting off for the States, Kate knew that her integrity was being challenged from various quarters. Doubts were being expressed about various claims she had made, about where all the money donated had gone and about her fitness to be involved in any further leper work. Committees of Inquiry were established in both London & in St Petersburg, and in

1894 newspapers all over the world reported some of the findings. It seems that Kate had indeed been guilty of false claims made to raise funds.

More extraordinary was the revelation that Kate had apparently go up close & a bit too personal with a number of women she had approached for funds.

I have found no evidence that Kate did fraudulently misuse any moneys raised, other than the fact that her not inconsiderable travel expenses were largely funded from donations.

Kate maintained that the majority of claims against her were false and she contemplated suing various newspapers for slander, but did not follow through with these actions. Her London committee was disbanded after forwarding monies collected to St Petersburg. Kate retreated into relative seclusion depressed and rather broken.

However, she still had staunch supporters and friends at Court. Indeed, in 1906 she was invited to be presented to the Queen.

She was not entirely inactive in later years. In 1914 she co-founded a museum of natural history in Bexhill, near Hastings in Sussex.

The Royal Geographic Society still had faith in her and in 1916, Kate was made a free Life Fellow of the Society. But Kate never fully regained her health after her punishing Siberian odyssey and the mental stress resulting from all of the adverse publicity that followed.

Then, in 1919 she received a letter from one Henry de Windt, FRGS who had travelled to Yakutsk and was able to verify that the Leper Colony had indeed been established and he reported glowing tributes of Kate's work from several locals that he interviewed. The hospital had opened in Viliusk in 1897, costing 32,000 roubles. Accommodation was provided for patients in 6 separate buildings; there was a six-room doctor's house, a laboratory and a library.

The maximum number of patients = 76 in 1902; by 1917 number had fallen to 19.

It may well have been this letter that prompted Kate to have a go at clearing her name – in any case, she set about writing another book entitled "My Mission in Siberia – a vindication", and this was published in 1921. When I learned of the existence of this book, I was excited at the prospect of reading first hand rebuttals of all the accusations – but I was disappointed. Instead, the book largely recounts the Siberian journey and dismisses any accusations without further ado. "What I did – I *did*, and no slander in the world can ever alter that fact." "As to all the other untruths which have been invented about me, life is far too short and of too serious an import to waste time paying any attention to such scandal and slander."

Kate survived another ten years, dying in 1931 at Hillingdon, Middlesex. After her death, her friend, Miss Norris presented to the Royal Geographic Society the watch and whistle Kate had used in Siberia, and a large framed portrait of Kate in Court dress, signed by her and dated 1906, which was placed in the Ladies' Smoking Room.