



In the Front Line: A Doctor in War and Peace

Alec Glen

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This memoir by a Scottish doctor who was born and went on to work in Govan was found among family papers long after his death in 1972. Less an account of the author's inner life, it is a graphic narrative, by a practitioner in the hospitals and homes of a major city, of hands-on medical care during much of the twentieth century. After training as a medical student on the wards of Glasgow hospitals, at the outbreak of the First World War the young doctor joined the army and served as a medical officer for the duration. Early on he provides a shattering account of the hopeless slaughter at Gallipoli, where he survived almost certain death many times as his companions fell around him. Only 100 men survived of his battalion of 1,000. His later service in the Middle East and Mesopotamia is an astonishing tale of courage and endurance, interwoven with spells of leave, during which the Scot encountered exotic experiences undreamed of in Govan. After the war Glen became a GP in Govan, one of the poorest areas in Britain, at a time long before the National Health Service. Preventable illnesses were often a death sentence for old and young alike. The extremes of poverty and suffering he witnessed brought home to him that he was in the front line once more, but in a different kind of warfare. The Second World War brought new challenges, and a post-war transformation when the NHS was finally came into being. Glen's shrewd commentary on the birth-pangs of the new institution provides valuable insights for the ongoing debate about this most controversial of public services.

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