

University of Warwick institutional repository: <http://go.warwick.ac.uk/wrap>

**A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD at the University of Warwick**

<http://go.warwick.ac.uk/wrap/36306>

This thesis is made available online and is protected by original copyright.

Please scroll down to view the document itself.

Please refer to the repository record for this item for information to help you to cite it. Our policy information is available from the repository home page.

**Women at the Front during the First World War:  
The Politics of Class, Gender and Empire**

**Lynda Dennant**



# Contents

Acknowledgements	ii
Abbreviations	iii
List of Illustrations	iv
Introduction	1
Chapter One:       The Route to the Front	38
Chapter Two:       On Active Service	95
Chapter Three:     The Female Hierarchy	151
Chapter Four:      The Myth of the Ministering Angel	203
Conclusion	257
Bibliography	263

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank the staff at the Imperial War Museum for their help and advice on accessing their Women's War Collection; Peter Liddle and his staff at the Brotherton Library, University of Leeds; the Modern Records Centre at the University of Warwick; Birmingham University Library; and the Queen Alexandra Royal Army Nursing Corps Museum, Keogh Barracks, Aldershot; all of whom have provided valuable source material for this dissertation.

I would also like to extend my thanks to the students and staff in the Centre for Women and Gender at the University of Warwick for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this thesis, and to Dr Maria Luddy for her guidance and encouragement throughout my period of study.

## List of Abbreviations

AC	Area Controller, Women's Army Auxiliary Corps
APM	Assistant Provost Marshall, British Army
ASC	Army Service Corps
BEF	British Expeditionary Force
BRC	British Red Cross, Women at Work Collection, Imperial War Museum
BRCS	British Red Cross Society
CJVADC	Central Joint VAD Committee
DC	Deputy Controller, Women's Army Auxiliary Corps
FANY	First Aid Nursing Yeomanry
GH	General Hospital
IBD	Infantry Base Depot
IWM	Imperial War Museum
LC	Liddle Collection, University of Leeds
MO	Medical Officer
MRC	Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick
NCO	Non-commissioned Officer, British Army
OC	Officer Commanding, British Army
QAIMNS	Queen Alexandra Imperial Military Nursing Sisters
QAIMNS R	QAIMNS Reserve
QARANC	Queen Alexandra Royal Army Nursing Corps
QMAAC	Queen Mary's Army Auxiliary Corps (formerly the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps)
RAMC	Royal Army Medical Corps
SCH	Scottish Churches' Huts
SH	Stationary Hospital
SJAA	St John's Ambulance Association
TFNS	Territorial Forces Nursing Sisters
UA	Unit Administrator, Women's Army Auxiliary Corps
VAD	Voluntary Aid Detachment
WAAC	Women's Army Auxiliary Corps
WL	Women's Legion
WVR	Women's Volunteer Reserve
YMCA	Young Men's Christian Association
YWCA	Young Women's Christian Association

## List of Illustrations

Figure 1	Extracts from letters and diaries. Imperial War Museum.	21
Figure 2	VAD recruitment poster, 1918. Joyce Dennys. Imperial War Museum.	43
Figure 3	Grades of fitness for men's military service with the British Army, 1917-18: 'Specimens of men in each of the four grades.' Parliamentary Papers 1919 xxvi, 308.	77
Figure 4	Map of France, 1914, indicating main base towns where women were located.	97
Figure 5	Group of nursing sisters visiting the Pyramids. Sister Lesley Martin. QARANC.	107
Figure 6	WAAC Gwen Lovell rescuing injured soldiers: 'The burden-bearers were coming once more.' Bessie Marchant, <i>A Transport Girl in France</i> , 217	115
Figure 7	Funeral procession for Sister Ware who died of wounds during a German air raid. No. 2613/1956. QARANC.	126
Figure 8	'A windy night - but the precious thermometers are saved.' Olive Dent, <i>A VAD in France</i> , 257.	138
Figure 9	Surgical Ward at No. 2 General Hospital, Quai d'Escale, Le Havre. April 1918. QARANC.	140
Figure 10	'A VAD's Nightmare' in 'The Goodbye Book of the Quai d'Escale'. BRC 25 <sup>0</sup> /2. WAWC, IWM.	159
Figure 11	'The 'Blighty' Smile - an LTA case.' Dent, <i>VAD in France</i> , 117	211
Figure 12	Male patients knitting. No. 1 General Hospital, 1915 QARANC.	215

Figure 13	'Tommy's Impression. What the Sleeping Powder given by Sister looks like to Tommy'. Dent, <i>VAD in France</i> , 44.	220
Figure 14	Sketch. VAD nurse monitoring pulse of soldier. Autograph album of VAD Alice Beaumont. LC.	223
Figure 15	Sikhs photographed preparing a meal. Sister Rebecca Read. QARANC	240
Figure 16	Sketch. Profiles of two officers. Diary entry of Irene Rathbone, 20 October 1918.	244

# Introduction

Whenever I think of the War to-day, it is not as summer but always as winter; always as cold and darkness and discomfort, and an intermittent warmth of exhilarating excitement which made us irrationally exult in all three. Its permanent symbol, for me, is a candle stuck in the neck of a bottle, the tiny flame flickering in an ice-cold draught, yet creating a miniature illusion of light against an opaque infinity of blackness.<sup>1</sup>

Our memory and understanding of women's experiences at the Front during the First World War are overwhelmingly influenced by the autobiographical account of Vera Brittain. *Testament of Youth* was published in 1933 as part of a wave of antiwar literature produced by men and women. Brittain's chronicle of the war achieved renewed popularity in the 1970s and early 1980s when it was dramatised by the BBC and acclaimed by feminist academics who recognised its value in contesting the predominantly male literary war canon. Brittain wrote about the effects of losing the young men in her life, her fiancé and her brother, and the inability she felt as a young woman, to achieve anything constructive during the war. When her fiancé enlisted in the army she decided to enrol as an auxiliary nurse with the Red Cross Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD), believing this would give her at least some idea of what it was like to experience war. The loss of the men she loved shaped her war experiences, as did the labour and anguish of volunteer nursing and the eclipse of her youth in a war that she considered neither just nor worthwhile. Her experience of

---

<sup>1</sup> Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, London: Virago Press Ltd, 1992, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1933, 372.

being a young woman from a provincial middle-class background, without medical training, going off to war to nurse as a way of comprehending the experiences of the men closest to her came to personify the experience of women who went to the Front.

The role of the inexperienced female volunteer stepping out of the sheltered confines of the Edwardian drawing-room into the unimagined horrors created by trench warfare to nurse the wounded is a popular image of women during the First World War, and represents the heroic female equivalent of the volunteer soldier.<sup>2</sup> Brittain's experience is the foremost example, but the stories of other voluntary aid detachment nurses, fictionalised and real, have since been resurrected. The nursing experiences of Edith Bagnold, Mary Borden, Irene Rathbone and Helen Zenna Smith confirm Brittain's description of the war as an extended period of 'winter', and any hint of 'summer' an illusion.<sup>3</sup> Brittain's account does typify the experiences of many young middle-class women who took on voluntary nursing at the Front, but it is not altogether typical of the women who went to the Front as part of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) between 1914 and 1919. This thesis does not seek to challenge the validity of Brittain's attitude to the war, but instead, will place her views, along with other postwar pacifist writers, into a historical context which will take account of the experiences of other women at the Front who were part of the British Expeditionary Force on the western Front and in other theatres of war.

---

<sup>2</sup> Lyn Macdonald, *The Roses of No Man's Land*, London: Penguin, 1993.

<sup>3</sup> Enid Bagnold, *A Diary without Dates*, London: William Heinemann, 1918. Mary Borden, *The Forbidden Zone*, London: William Heinemann, 1929. Irene Rathbone, *We That Were Young*, London: Virago, 1988, 1<sup>st</sup> ed, 1932. Helen Z Smith, "Not So Quiet...". *Stepdaughters of the War*, London: Albert E Marriott Limited, 1930. Helen Z Smith is a pseudonym used by the writer, Evadne Price.

One of the aims of this thesis will be to explain how the experience of the volunteer nurse has come to dominate our understanding of women at the Front during the First World War. In order to do this we need to analyse the position of the military nursing profession on the eve of the war, and the reasons why it became necessary to draft in so many untrained volunteers to nurse the wounded. Although the large number of casualties cannot have been guessed in August 1914, this does not completely account for the inadequacies within the nursing profession and the strain under which it was placed throughout the war. In order to find some answers, questions of gender and class will be addressed to discover why it was that young, educated, inexperienced, middle-class women were seen to be the most satisfactory answer to the shortage of trained nurses so desperately required at the Front from 1915 onwards. An analysis of the reasons why the Voluntary Aid Detachment nurse came into being at the Front necessarily requires an analysis of her relationship with the trained nurse, and an examination of why the experience of the latter has been overshadowed by the former.

A study of the development of women's work and the mobilisation of women for overseas service involves not only an analysis of the nursing services, but also of the evolution of a women's army in 1917. Again this requires a class analysis, as this was the first time that working-class women were drafted to work at the Front for the BEF. In terms of women's experiences at the Front, those of the Women's Army have also been marginalised in favour of that of the VAD nurse. Vera Brittain's autobiographical account of the First World War remains the most articulate and important female work but it is flawed as a representation of the experience of all women at the Front. Brittain expressed the biases both of her class status and her



experience as a volunteer nurse, which have since contributed to the eclipse of the experiences of other women at the Front. This study will contextualise voluntary nursing as part of women's wider experiences at the Front, and see it in relation to the changes that occurred in the position of women as the war continued.

The generally received image of women during the First World War has been shaped by women's roles on the home front and their gradual drafting into the war effort, either as munitions workers or as self-sacrificing nurses. In as much as an image of women at the Front exists in the popular imagination it is that of the volunteer nurse. This image casts the nurse into the role of passive, ministering angel, epitomised by the saintly bowing figure of the posters and photographs of the period.<sup>4</sup> The reproduction of Alonzo Foringer's depiction of the nurse as 'The Greatest Mother in the World' in a 1918-19 Red Cross poster campaign in the United States, and in book titles such as Lyn Macdonald's *The Roses of No Man's Land*, continue to perpetuate the stereotype. These portrayals of women confirm a belief in women's passivity at the Front, their marginality and the atypical nature of their presence. Interpretations of these images have been deconstructed in recent work carried out about women who went to the Front, and it is to this body of work that I will now turn, as part of a wider literature review of women at the Front.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> A nurse with head bowed is the only female representative of women at the Front in the Imperial War Museum's permanent First World War exhibition.

<sup>5</sup> The possible meanings of Foringer's poster have been deconstructed by Sharon Ouditt, *Fighting Forces, Writing Women. Identity and Ideology in the First World War*, London and New York: Routledge, 1994, and Jane Marcus, 'The asylums of Antaeus. Women, war and madness: Is there a feminist fetishism?' in Elizabeth Meese and Alice Parker (eds), *The Difference Within: Feminism and Critical Theory*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1989, 49-83.

Mainstream historiography of the First World War does not include any significant analysis of women. It deals instead with the causes of the war, the military strategy of generals, the development of weaponry in the first 'industrial' war, and the psychology of trench warfare. Histories dealing with the social and cultural aspects of the war have addressed the impact of war upon women. However women are usually viewed as marginal players, barely mentioned, or occasionally confined to specific chapters, mostly about the home front.<sup>6</sup> The exception is Arthur Marwick who has written about the war's positive effects upon the lives of women.<sup>7</sup> Otherwise, women's contribution to the war, and its effects on their lives, is seen as minimal. It is understood that the war enabled women briefly to step out of their traditional roles, allowing them to become the focus of historical curiosity, for example munitions workers, or to become brave heroines like Elsie Knocker and Mairi Chisholm who worked at an aid post on the Belgian front line, or died in the line of duty like Edith Cavell.<sup>8</sup> Women's role in the First World War in this type of history then, is viewed as exceptional or extraordinary, with them afterwards returning to their natural domestic sphere, largely unaffected by their experiences. The main debate among historians is the extent to which women's contributions affected their acquisition of the vote in 1918. Historians like Trevor Wilson, take up the 'anti-women' sentiments

---

<sup>6</sup> Trevor Wilson, *The Myriad Faces of War*, Oxford: Polity Press, 1988. Martin Gilbert, *First World War*, London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995. Malcolm Brown, *The Imperial War Museum Book of the First World War*, London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1993. JM Bourne, *Britain and the Great War, 1914-1918*, Edward Arnold, 1989. Eric Leed, *No Man's Land: Combat & Identity in World War I*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979.

<sup>7</sup> Arthur Marwick, *Women at War, 1914-1918*, London: Fontana, 1977.

<sup>8</sup> Chisholm and Knocker became known as 'the Madonnas of Pervyse', and have a section dedicated to them representing the work of nurses at the Front, in Brown, *IWM Book of the First World War*, 185-190.

promoted in the work of contemporary poets who objected to the ignorance of civilians on the home front. Wilson does not challenge Vera Brittain's assumption that her life was secondary to that of her brother and his friends, but concludes that 'she was lucky to have been born a woman.'<sup>9</sup> As for the effects of the war on women more generally, he writes:

...it must still be said that, excepting those mothers and wives and brides-to-be whose loss of menfolk was never made good, the female experience of war was highly privileged compared with that of most able-bodied males. It was the latter who, by choice or (increasingly) compulsion, conformed to military direction, suffered under gunfire, saw comrades mangled, inflicted death in close combat or at remote distance, possibly sustained atrocious injuries, and sometimes died abruptly or lingeringly. For non-combatants, and this meant virtually all females, the desire to care might be present. But the gulf between experience and its absence was well-nigh unbridgeable. Siegfried Sassoon recognized, and was enraged by, it.<sup>10</sup>

Dependence upon the views of poets like Siegfried Sassoon, has thereby perpetuated the myth in general histories that the war was 'boring' for (female) citizens, and a descent into hell for soldiers. This type of argument also fosters the idea that war exacerbates a gender conflict in which the experiences of men and women become polarised. This is misleading because even the experiences of men alone varied greatly from each other during the war. Forty-two percent of men were physically unfit to fight. Men who were at the Front were not all fighting soldiers. Some were needed for other work considered crucial for the war effort, while those classed as unfit to fight could be sent to the Front as orderlies, postal workers or railway workers, and in some cases were eventually replaced by women, or worked alongside women. By polarising the experiences of men and women, we ignore the

---

<sup>9</sup> Wilson, *Myriad Faces of War*, 710.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 710.

diversity of life at the Front among men as well as women. The quality of Sassoon's poetry does not mean that we should see his views as representative. Historians like Wilson (and poets like Sassoon) believed the trench experience was *the* war experience. As women were excluded from this paradigmatic experience their exclusion from the history of the war was guaranteed, and provided a valid reason for marginalising women's experiences and ignoring what they had to say about war. Wilson asks: 'Apart from their roles of encouraging men to enlist and of sharing at a distance the suffering and death of the battlefield, what part did women have to play in this war?'<sup>11</sup> Although he acknowledges the bias against women in society he nevertheless concludes that women cannot be considered as important players in an analysis of war: 'The attitudes that, by law or custom, debarred women from a whole range of responsible or arduous jobs were precisely those that prescribed that women were not obliged - and in major respects not allowed - to respond to the demands of war in the same ways as were men'.<sup>12</sup> Wilson does not concern himself with the reasons for women's exclusion.

It is feminist historians who have reconsidered the role of women in the war and the reasons for their marginalisation. Most academic research about the role of women during the First World War has focused on women on the home front, analysing the impact of the war on women's work, the effects on the suffrage

---

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 710.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 714.

campaign, and the part played by women in the pacifist movement.<sup>13</sup> These studies acknowledge that women were mostly confined to the home front, and recognise this was a result of contemporary gender politics. The extent to which women actually benefited from the war remains a contentious issue, and whether these benefits, if any, were short-term or produced permanent changes in the lives of women.<sup>14</sup>

There has been less specific academic interest in the role of women at the Front, and much that has been carried out has concentrated upon the literary representations of women's experience. The few historical studies focused on women at the Front have privileged the role of the voluntary nurse. Only recently have studies begun to question the received knowledge of the role of women at the Front by examining different aspects of their work, and challenging the reasons for the continued focus on the volunteer nurse. These studies have illustrated the importance of gender in any analysis of war as a way of revealing the impact of war upon women.

Of those historians who have dealt more specifically with women who went to the Front, the most comprehensive history is by Lyn Macdonald who relies on diary

---

<sup>13</sup> Gail Braybon, *Women Workers in the First World War*, London: Routledge, 1989. Angela Woollacott, *On Her Their Lives Depend. Munitions Workers in the Great War*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994. Susan Kingsley Kent, *Sex and Suffrage in Britain, 1860-1914*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987. Idem, 'The Politics of Sexual Difference: World War I and the Demise of British Feminism' in *The Journal of British Studies*, Vol 27, 1988, 232-253. Anne Wiltscher, *Most Dangerous Women. Feminist Peace Campaigners of the Great War*, London: Pandora, 1985. Margaret Kamester & Jo Vellacott (eds), *Militarism versus Feminism. Writings on Women and War*, London: Virago, 1987.

<sup>14</sup> For a fuller debate see Joan W Scott, 'Rewriting History' in Margaret Higonnet, Jane Jenson, Sonya Michel, Margaret Collins Weitz (eds), *Behind the Lines. Gender and the Two World Wars*, New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1987, 19-30. Also Penny Summerfield, 'Gender and War in the Twentieth Century' in *International History Review*, Vol xix, no 1, February 1997, 3-5.

evidence and oral testimony to reconstruct the lives of nurses during the First World War. But as the title, *The Roses of No Man's Land* suggests, she endorses rather than challenges the view that women were self-sacrificing, heroic angels of mercy, despite evidence to the contrary in her selection of materials.<sup>15</sup> The book, therefore, perpetuates the myth of the nursing angel and romanticises the image of women at the Front. She writes:

If the ghost that haunts the towns of Ypres and Arras and Albert is the statutory British Tommy, slogging with rifle and pack through its ruined streets to his well-documented destiny 'up the line', then the ghost of Boulogne and Etaples and Rouen ought to be a girl. She's called Elsie or Gladys or Dorothy, her ankles are swollen, her feet are aching, her hands reddened and rough. She has little money, no vote, and has almost forgotten what it feels like to be really warm. She sleeps in a tent. Unless she has told a diplomatic lie about her age, she is twenty-three. She is the daughter of a clergyman, a lawyer or a prosperous businessman, and has been privately educated and groomed to be a 'lady'. She wears the unbecoming outdoor uniform of a VAD or an army nurse. She is on active service, and as much a part of the war as Tommy Atkins.<sup>16</sup>

Macdonald sees women, not as passive, but as a gritty group of pioneers who defied convention in their country's hour of need, coping against the odds given the appalling conditions and the limitations of being the 'delicate' sex, and unused to the rigours of such a demanding job because of their social status.

Aspects of the development of nursing on the eve of the First World War have been studied by Anne Summers.<sup>17</sup> She has suggested that the profession had advanced to the point where military nursing had become a respectable activity for women to undertake, but far from being a challenging occupation it helped maintain

---

<sup>15</sup> Lyn Macdonald, *Roses of No Man's Land*.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., foreword.

<sup>17</sup> Anne Summers, *Angels & Citizens. British Women as Military Nurses, 1854-1914*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1988.

the sexual division of labour. This view, however, perpetuates the image of women's passivity within a working environment. It will be demonstrated that the sexual division of labour at the Front, rather than being a fixed entity, was continually renegotiated and redefined by the women who found themselves at the Front.

It is to the work of literary historians that we must turn to find a critical analysis of the meaning of nursing during the First World War. Though not dealing exclusively with women at the Front, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in their research into women in the First World War, argue that the war produced a reversal of gender power relations. They suggest that the nurse, far from being passive, came to occupy a powerful position over the emasculated bodies of her patients.<sup>18</sup> They concentrate on the symbolic image of the nurse, suggesting that she derived potency from her active service, and that images like Foringer's 'Greatest Mother in the World', depicting a large nurse cradling a tiny soldier in her arms, only underline her immanence. While I would agree that the nurse was a powerful figure at the Front, Gilbert and Gubar's historical analysis of gender relations is less convincing. Changes which occurred in the gender hierarchy can be better explained by addressing the impact of prevailing class and imperial ideologies. Nevertheless, their analysis provides room to challenge the traditional perception of nursing at the Front. Importantly they challenge the passive image of women in war, suggesting that it was women, as nurses and ambulance drivers who were mobile and dynamic in contrast to the immobilised soldier trapped in the trenches. They conclude that the war which

---

<sup>18</sup> Sandra M Gilbert & Susan Gubar, *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century, Volume 2: Sexchanges*, New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1989, 258-323.

emasculated men liberated women, who gained economic and sexual freedom as well as the vote.

Gilbert and Gubar's analysis has been substantively reappraised by Claire Tylee. She has argued that no war which dehumanised men could correspondingly liberate women.<sup>19</sup> Tylee supports her argument by demonstrating that women were usually paid less than men, were already on the way to sexual freedom before the untimely outbreak of the war, and that most young women who worked during the war did not gain the vote until 1928. Sharon Ouditt, another literary historian, has developed this argument further, with an analysis of the role of the VAD nurse during the war.<sup>20</sup> She concludes that the constraints of 'femininity' ultimately resulted in failure for women to advance socially and politically despite the opportunities presented to them by the Great War. Gilbert and Gubar and Tylee and Ouditt rely almost entirely upon literary works to support their arguments. Tylee criticises Gilbert's work for ignoring class and race issues, but does not significantly address them either. Her aim is to redress the imbalance of the literary war canon dominated by the male war poets and perpetuated by historians such as Fussell and Hynes, by illuminating women writers of the period. However, the same contextual problems arise. Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen may have articulated the experience of being in the trenches, but their privileged status as officers does not mean their war was the experience of the rank and file soldier or other men who were at the Front. Likewise, Vera Brittain's account best describes the war experience of an untrained VAD, but does not shed light on the position of other women at the Front. Problems

---

<sup>19</sup> Claire M Tylee, "Maleness Run Riot" - The Great War and Women's Resistance to Militarism' in *Women's Studies International Forum*, 1988, Vol 11, No 3, 199-210.

<sup>20</sup> Ouditt, *Fighting Forces*, 7-46.



of gender remain the focus for debate and a wider historical context is absent from Tylee's analysis. The issue of class is addressed by Ouditt. However, apart from drawing attention to the social status of the VAD and the conflict this created with professional nurses, she does not contextualise their class position in relation to the soldiers they nursed or define how it affected their perspective of being at the Front.

The main area of contention with these works of historical literary criticism is that the source material is used without being placed in historical context. Tylee suggests that Gilbert and Gubar rely on propaganda images of women during the war, thereby reproducing rather than challenging the principle that the war was beneficial for women. Tylee also asserts that they indiscriminately use male literary sources from America, Germany and Britain, or from those men who were mostly confined to the home front, to convey a fear of empowered women. However, Tylee's own sources are also selective. In order to put forward her argument she relies almost entirely upon antiwar literature published during the 1920s and 1930s. Of the few antiwar autobiographical accounts published during the war and cited by Tylee, one is from a woman who served in an English hospital at home, and the other from an American nurse. These writings are not juxtaposed with pro-war sentiments to draw out the dilemma confronting many women working in hospitals either at home or overseas. Ouditt also relies heavily on published antiwar material of the 1920s and 30s, and intersperses these with several unpublished memoirs. Neither Tylee nor Ouditt take account of the meanings of different source materials, the different times they were written, or the multiple meanings that the war was likely to offer to women from different social classes and professions. The war was not a single experience for all women. It is not therefore profitable to argue that the war was liberating for

women on the one hand, or that it was constrictive and confining on the other. It is perfectly possible that it could be both, as diversity of experience would suggest that there could be no static experience for women at war, whether at home or for women at the Front. Despite efforts by the authorities to contain the presence of women at the Front, the pressures of war drew in women from different backgrounds. Although propaganda and myth have generated images of women as a unified body with shared interests and similar backgrounds, sustained historical analysis does not support such a conflation of interests. What is required is a much more focused approach to the different ways in which women were writing about the war. This thesis will move away from literary sources and present new materials and evidence in the form of contemporary letters and diaries in an attempt to show how issues of class and race were as important as gender in informing women's understanding of the war. It will examine why women were writing, how they were influenced by contemporary events, and the form of their writing and memoirs, whether as letters, diaries, fiction, memoirs or recorded oral histories. An understanding of the forms and diversity of relating experiences will produce a much more complex picture of women's lives at the Front; one that is richer, more varied, and more realistic.

There have recently been specific studies of women at the Front. Margaret Darrow has analysed the difficulties which arise in reconciling the antithetical concepts of women and war by examining the role of French volunteer nurses.<sup>21</sup> She suggests that the portrayal of voluntary nursing as a naturally feminine pursuit was a contradiction because it had to take place within the war zone which was essentially

---

<sup>21</sup> Margaret H Darrow, 'French Volunteer Nursing and the Myth of War Experience in World War 1' in *American Historical Review*, 101,1, February 1996, 80-106.

masculine. By analysing women's war fiction and autobiography, Darrow concludes that in order for the experience of the French war nurse to survive she had to be able to project the male myth of war, as any other portrayal led to her literary and historical eradication. Leah Leneman has examined the role of medical women during the war, focusing particularly on female doctors.<sup>22</sup> She charts the battles with the War Office to gain entry to the Front and serve in the field. In order to achieve this women were sent to work with other allied forces. Only with the establishment of the Women's Army in 1917 were they allowed to officially serve in France, and then they remained behind the lines as part of the Women's Army rather than the Royal Army Medical Corps. Leneman concludes that the First World War proved not to be an advance for British women doctors who wished to apply their skills as part of the British Army. Their experience of the battle zone was gained beyond the British lines. Joanna Bourke's analysis of masculinity and the male body during the First World War provides a useful contrast with the effects of war on femininity.<sup>23</sup> Relying on the unpublished letters and diaries of men mostly from the ranks, she challenges the notion that the war created a gender gulf, by providing evidence to suggest that for many men home never lost its appeal. She also questions the extent of any meaningful male bonding in the harshness of the conditions, arguing instead that men were more likely to tolerate shared humiliations and privations while always desiring a return to domestic comfort. Far from being estranged from the feminine, men from the ranks, she argues, surrounded themselves with reminders of home, with

---

<sup>22</sup> Leah Leneman, *In the Service of Life. The Story of Elsie Inglis and the Scottish Women's Hospitals*, Edinburgh: Mercat Press, 1994. Idem., 'Medical Women at War, 1914-1918' in *Medical History*, 1994, 38, 160-177.

<sup>23</sup> Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male. Men's Bodies, Britain and the Great War*, London: Reaktion Books, 1996.

many carrying out 'female' tasks such as cleaning, mending and cooking, and adopting a 'maternal' role when caring for injured and dying comrades. She cites class differences as the ultimate impediment to male bonding, but suggests that regiment, marital status, religion and ethnicity all hindered a truly shared male experience of war.

Much of the academic analysis has focused on the experiences of VADs and, to a lesser extent, nurses and other medical workers. A comparative study like Ouditt's, has contrasted the views and expectations of VADs with professional nurses, though without examining the records of the latter. By contrasting the VADs with other women who worked officially with the BEF it is possible to take a wider class and gender perspective. Because the figure of the nurse is such a pervasive image of the First World War, less academic attention has been paid to the formation of the women's army and its introduction at the Front. Jenny Gould has described the unsettling implications of women in khaki uniform in a society that was already divided on whether the suffrage campaign had gone too far.<sup>24</sup> Its introduction, she suggests, exposed female rivalries as well as conflict among government and military authorities as to how to solve the manpower shortage. The creation of a women's army illustrated the gulf between those who saw its formation as an advance for women, and those who wanted a strictly controlled use of female khaki labour. Krisztina Robert has examined the class issues involved in the formation of the

---

<sup>24</sup> Jenny Gould, 'Women's Military Services in First World War Britain' in Higonnet et al, *Behind the Lines*, 114-125.

women's army.<sup>25</sup> She illustrates how the women, who were mostly working-class, were stigmatised as immoral and unpatriotic, concluding that this reflected wider fears about their growing economic and sexual power. Diana Shaw has examined the specific experience of the Women's Army at the Front, and describes its development as one of necessity to meet the manpower shortage.<sup>26</sup> Once the reason for its creation was removed with the end of the war, then the corps, she argues, could not survive. Shaw's article is entitled 'The Forgotten Army' and indicates not only the eclipse of women's paramilitary experience by men's, but also suggests that this aspect of women's experience of the Front has been overshadowed by the work of the war nurse. This thesis will address the reasons for the 'disappearance' of the experience of the women's army from historical accounts in favour of that of the voluntary nurse.

The focus on the VAD is largely because the fiction and literature studied was written by women who were VADs, and consequently their role has been seen as the key female role in the war. One must bear in mind their privileged position, not only in getting out to the Front, but in recording their experiences, and authenticating their role over and above that of other women at the Front, namely the professional nurse, but also women in the Women's Army. The war brought many changes to women's lives, both negative and positive, short and long term. The VADs were just one group of women who were affected. Their experience alone should not be considered as central when analysing the experiences of women at the Front. If instead we see the

---

<sup>25</sup> Krisztina Robert, 'Gender, Class, and Patriotism: Women's Paramilitary Units in First World War Britain' in *International History Review*, Vol xix, No 1, February 1997, 52-65.

<sup>26</sup> Diana Shaw, 'The Forgotten Army of Women: Queen Mary's Army Auxiliary Corps' in Hugh Cecil & Peter H Liddle (eds), *Facing Armageddon. The First World War Experienced*, London: Leo Cooper, 1996, 365-379.

deployment of the VADs at the Front as part of a process of general female deployment, a different picture emerges, in which the VADs can be identified as part of the evolution of women's entry into the military. The experience of the VADs should not just be contrasted with the military nursing profession, but also with the other large professional body of women who arrived at the Front in 1917, the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC). It is then possible to ask why it is that the VADs' experience is so important, and begin to find alternative answers as to why the VADs did not survive beyond the war. It will become evident that the reasons for the demise of the VAD organisation are far more complex than the accepted view of professional jealousy.

One of the reasons why the VADs have been more studied than most other women at the Front, apart from the availability of their source material, is their proximity to wounded men, enabling them to offer an 'authentic' women's account of the effects of war. Their close access generally allowed them, more than any other women, to feel and relate the impact of war. However, we need to question their privileged access, before uncritically accepting their observations. Relating the experiences of the traumatising effects of war on men does not in itself produce authenticity. The relationship of the women to their patients should be considered in VAD texts. It must be remembered that most VADs who nursed considered themselves to be socially superior to their rank and file patients, placing them in positions of power which enabled them to appropriate and retell men's war stories. This allowed the VAD, mostly unpaid volunteers with little medical training, to demonstrate their own capabilities and self-worth in an environment deeply suspicious and sceptical of their presence, and therefore aid their professional

survival. This helps explain what motivated VADs to reproduce their war experiences as fiction and autobiography.

Professional nurses also had access to the same sights in the wards and usually carried out the more intricate nursing tasks, yet it is the volunteer nurse who has been valorised at the expense of the professional nurse. This is in part due to the retelling of the VAD war story, either by VADs themselves, such as Vera Brittain, but also by historians. The VAD experience within the 'women at war' narrative has been privileged in this way. This thesis will address how and why the VAD story has become central to an understanding of the position of women at the Front, and what effect this has had upon an understanding of other women who worked at the Front. The valorisation of the VAD has meant that the experiences of other women at the Front have been marginalised because they have been placed outside the VAD experience. Their experiences have been considered less important. If women at the Front have been generally marginalised in the war narrative because they were not part of the trench experience, then so the experiences of women have been marginalised if they were not volunteer nurses in the female war narrative. This has happened as a result of VADs privileging themselves and their war work as volunteers. Their testimony has been taken up uncritically in the historical process and reproduced as the authentic female experience of the Front.

It may be possible to argue that within the First World War narrative, with the Front and the trench experience at its centre, women were situated at the political and narrative margins of events. By being placed effectively outside the narrative and authentic experience of the First World War, women attempted to place themselves within the narrative through proximity to fighting men, whether injured or resting.

Retelling men's war stories in their letters, diaries, newspaper articles and fiction was one way which enabled women to authenticate their experiences at the Front. The result created a hierarchy of experience among women at the Front which was more likely to place VADs as central female figures while diminishing the role of other women.

Bringing women into the war narrative has been an important task for feminist historians, but its consequence has been to reproduce the hierarchy of female experience and leave women who were not VADs at the Front at the margins and even outside of its experience. Feminist academics have relied upon the work of literary women who saw first-hand the consequences of battle action in an attempt to place women within the war narrative. What they have generally failed to do, however, is to examine why these texts seem to have been produced by women who were VAD nurses, or cast themselves as fictional VAD nurses.<sup>27</sup>

The experiences of professional military nurses, the VADs and the WAAC, and women working with the Christian organisations, will be the focus of this study, as they were drafted in to work for the British Expeditionary Force in its main theatres of war. The purpose of a comparative study of women in the BEF is not to demonstrate that women were pioneers and adventurers who were interesting but soon forgotten, or that they were a unified body who were equally affected by the conditions. The aim of this work is to demonstrate that these women, though small in number, illuminate the gender politics of the organisation of war. The process of

---

<sup>27</sup> Sharon Ouditt has noted the sparseness of working-class women's testimonies in the archives when compiling an account of their experiences during the war. Ouditt, 'Tommy's Sisters: the Representation of Working Women's Experience' in Cecil et al, *Facing Armageddon*, 745.



women going to the Front lies at the heart of gender transgression during war.

Women entering an exclusive male space increased anxiety about the boundaries between male and female roles. The thesis will therefore analyse which women were allowed to go to the Front, and the ways in which they were deployed.

The conventional image of the Front is distinguished by the scenes of trench warfare which demoralised the men who fought and produced one of the twentieth century's greatest horrors, and is encapsulated in the slaughter of the first day of the Battle of the Somme. In some respects, an analysis of women's writing has contributed to rather than challenged this fixed image of the war by focusing on the pacifist works of Vera Brittain, Evadne Price and Enid Bagnold. While I would not disagree that loss and brutalisation should remain themes of analysis of the First World War, to suggest that this was the war's sole legacy for women or men is a misrepresentation and casts most of its participants, men as well as women, as helpless victims, without reflecting either their differences or their methods of resistance in creating their own space in a hostile environment. A study of the records of women who went to the Front will therefore address the war from a different perspective, focusing on women's concerns in the war - their status as workers, their relationship to the Front and their relations with men and each other. Rather than focusing exclusively on the published literary works of women, the basis for this thesis is their unpublished letters and diaries (see Figure 1). Extracts from the letters and diaries will be used to illustrate the immediate contemporary concerns of women at the Front, and with a few minor amendments to spelling and punctuation to aid comprehension, are presented here as they were written. These contemporary



accounts are supported by selections from private photograph collections and autograph albums of women at the Front. The evidence provided by these contemporary sources is contrasted with literary works, memoirs and oral histories to ascertain women's changing perceptions of their involvement in the war. Important in helping to formulate this analysis has been the work of gender historian Joan Scott. She asserts that women can be central subjects in historical analysis if gender is the tool applied to examine areas of history which have traditionally excluded or marginalised women, such as politics, and the gender politics of war.<sup>28</sup> Once gender enters the equation, Scott argues, then women become part of the process of historical analysis. This is so in a gender analysis of the role of women at the Front.

The First World War enabled women to travel to all areas of the globe, and come into contact with many different nationalities and races. This study will address issues of race, as women who served overseas defined themselves in relation to the Empire. Women working with the BEF were very aware of their status as representatives of the British Empire, and the imperial context was crucial in formulating women's perceptions of men and women from different nations and cultures. An awareness of race issues raises the question of power relations and areas of perceived threat, confrontation and resistance. While representing the Empire, women used the language of imperialism in order to safeguard their position as civilised Englishwomen. In relationships with people from other cultures, women invariably felt they were acting from a position of imperial or racial superiority. Work has already been carried out on the role of British women of the Empire in the

---

<sup>28</sup> Scott, 'Rewriting History' in Higonnet et al, *Behind the Lines*.

years leading up to the First World War, and their role in the colonisation of India, Africa and the Dominions.<sup>29</sup> At issue has been the extent of complicity and privilege of white English women in perpetuating an imperial system from which they benefited, either by seeking work within the Empire, or using racial analogies to further their suffrage claims. With the onset of the First World War, the imperial backdrop came into even sharper focus as a way of framing women's attitudes to the war. While at home the renaming of *The Suffragette* as *The Britannia* was an obvious example, concepts of Empire, its values and preservation, were particularly potent in the shaping of experiences of women who travelled overseas with the BEF. They became in effect colonisers in two important ways: colonisers of the land of others, whether in France or Egypt or India. They also became colonisers of traditional male territory, occupying and converting 'masculine' space to their own advantage. Thekla Bowser, who wrote an account of VAD work at the Front described the position of its Principal Commandant, Rachel Crowdy, as holding 'the threads of VAD work which stretch like a vast cobweb over the war zone in France'.<sup>30</sup>

The use of contemporary sources reflects the concerns of women as they experienced them. We can examine their priorities at the time, rather than as they were filtered later, either by political influences or dimmed by memory. Personal accounts not intended for publication convey a different agenda, are at times less articulate, but remain historically relevant. By comparing contemporary writing with

---

<sup>29</sup> Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865-1915*, Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994. Mupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel (eds), *Western Women and Imperialism. Complicity and Resistance*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992.

<sup>30</sup> Thekla Bowser, *The Story of British VAD Work in the Great War*, London: Andrew Melrose, 1917, 174.

later memoirs and recollections we can see what has been lost, forgotten and changed. Contemporary materials provide an immediacy of experience lacking in later recollections, however powerfully conveyed. The contemporary materials will be contrasted to illustrate the differences between personal accounts and fictionalised and imagined representations of war. By taking account of the context in which material reflecting the experiences of women was reproduced, it becomes clear that women's attitudes to the war and their role in it was not fixed or even consistent in any historical period, but changed as a result of the political and social climate of a given era. I will discuss how and why women chose to record their war experiences and the problems this raises. The reliance by historians upon the wealth of material recorded by women who were VAD nurses is one example. In terms of unpublished materials, there are letters and diaries reflecting the experiences of women who were not VADs, though the VAD's experience is predominant in the archives. It is important to ask why records left by VADs are so numerous in comparison to those of other women. It is not because VADs outnumbered other groups of women. The wealth of VAD material, written and deposited, may have a great deal to do with social attitudes to the writing of letters and diaries. Women from upper- and middle-class backgrounds had a tradition of writing letters and diaries. Of the letters and diaries I have studied written by military nurses, most are from a similar social background. I have come across no letters or diaries by women who were in the rank and file of the WAAC. Women in the WAAC who did write were again middle-class women, mostly serving as supervisors and administrators. However, this does not mean working-class women who were in the WAAC did not record their experiences. They may not have placed the kind of value upon writing noticeable among women from more privileged

backgrounds who enthusiastically recorded their part in a great world event. It is possible that as the war became a memory, and the devastating impact of trench war gained primacy in people's minds, the importance of the role of women in the war diminished, and their accounts were considered to lack relevance to the central narrative experience of war. Hence, when it came to depositing collections in the archives, the experiences of women were considered to be of less importance and historical value than those of men. The exception was those women in the VAD who were close to the men.

It is only in more recent years that a more varied picture of women's war experience has been established within the archives. The Imperial War Museum, in its 1970s oral history collection, includes several accounts from women who were in the WAAC, though their reminiscences were outnumbered by women who nursed. In this respect this project is not just a matter of an analysis of women's experiences, but involves the fundamental task of recovering women from historical anonymity and finding their voices even when they appear not to exist. As Joan Scott observes, history needs to be rewritten.<sup>31</sup> Because of the processes of history which have eradicated women's contributions and records, this has proved an almost impossible task. It should not be concluded that no records indicate no experience. Given the lack of contemporary evidence from rank and file members of the Women's Army, experiences of the women in the WAAC are usually filtered through the eyes of their peers, either their superiors or other women at the Front who considered themselves socially superior and more authoritative. Only in oral history records do rank and file women of the WAAC speak for themselves. However, the position of the WAAC is

---

<sup>31</sup> Scott, 'Rewriting History', 19-30.

vital to an understanding of the role of women at the Front. This constructed, partial evidence is, despite its limitations, important, as an analysis of the views about the WAAC illuminates the position of all women working in the BEF.

A study of women's letters and diaries reveals the kinds of issues which preoccupied them while working at the Front. Their vision is not one always dominated by the effects of trench warfare. Being at the Front opened up new avenues for women to explore the meaning of their lives. As well as accounts of the effects of war on men, women also wrote about a more personal side of the war as it affected them. Many women did not mix with soldiers who fought in the war, and were not in a position to relate men's stories or the more recognisable aspects of the war. Those who did mix with fighting soldiers did not necessarily privilege this relationship in their writing. Often what was important to women was acquainting themselves with their surroundings, making friends, dealing with the demands of their jobs, situating themselves within a different environment and coping with the pressures it entailed. War for women at the Front was not simply a matter of confronting streams of wounded men, though this was also part of their experience. However, as far as the value of women's historical records is concerned, women's accounts which support the trench war narrative are seen to be the most important. If women's accounts shed light on this aspect of men's war then they are of some value, but if their experiences existed outside this relationship they do not generally form part of the war narrative. Letters written by Netta Hamilton, a canteen worker for the Scottish Churches Huts, were deposited with the Liddle Collection at the Leeds University archive with an accompanying note from her son:

The letters are concerned chiefly with her work in the canteens of the Scottish Churches Huts, her social life, gossip about colleagues, news

from home, clothes and money from home, and similar domestic trivia. They are disappointing as historical documents in that, although the Huts operated not far behind the front line and the canteens served very large numbers of soldiers, there are very few references to the war and none at all to the fighting. This may have been because letters had to be censored (there is one reference to a censor), but, on the other hand, there is no marked change in the letters after the war had ended when, presumably, censorship had ceased.<sup>32</sup>

This note illustrates what accounts of the war needed to be about in order for them to be considered valid and valuable archival documents. In this instance, Netta Hamilton told her own war story, not that of the men she mixed with at the camp. Despite the letters being of great interest in depicting the life of women at the Front, within a wider male war narrative they are considered unimportant. In terms of historical value, then, women's accounts which can relate men's stories of the war are the ones most likely to be considered of lasting importance. Telling men's stories places women more centrally within the activity of war. Netta Hamilton's prime concern was being happy in her work, and worrying if she was doing her job properly, reflecting the concerns of inexperienced women in a strange environment; being part of a greater war experience was of secondary importance to her.

The context of writing both letters and diaries raises further issues. Netta Hamilton's son mentions censors in the case of letters. Women wrote letters with the knowledge of possible censorship. Information on numbers of troops and locations were most likely to be edited, and women avoided giving this information. The possibility of censorship, however, did not prevent women relating their experiences. There was always a possibility that letters criticising superiors might be discovered so an element of caution is evident in some writers, and may have prevented others from

---

<sup>32</sup> Mrs Janet Brown (nee Hamilton). Letter to Peter Liddle from Dr William Brown, dated 22 November 1988. Unpublished letters. LC.



expressing their feelings. Sister James worked at a casualty clearing station in France and resented the behaviour of the matron. She decided to write to a friend in order to expose her: 'I mean to say something in my next letter to [Jane] of the beastly callousness of the Matron - more for the Censor's eye than for hers.'<sup>33</sup> Some women themselves acted as censors, while others were well-connected enough to evade having their letters censored at all. In the case of diaries, privacy was a possible issue. Army regulations forbade the keeping of diaries, though this had little impact. It may be the case that those who felt they had little privacy or whose quarters were liable to regular inspection were less likely to keep a diary. This was particularly applicable to the WAAC, who were supervised and disciplined more stringently than other women at the Front. Keeping a diary was favoured by many VADs, though a large collection of diaries kept by nursing sisters also exists in the archives. The content of some diaries indicate that a number of women who went to the Front kept a diary for the first time; the war was an opportunity for women to play a part in a world event, to make history, and this was reflected by starting a diary. Sister Alice Slythe, for example, wrote a diary of her work for her stepsister. Other diarists seem consciously to have written with an audience in mind. The entries for public consumption rather than the recording of private thoughts indicate the overriding significance of recording their part in the war, and passing that information on, or at least being able to recount it at some future point. Others rewrote their diaries into clearer accounts after the war in order presumably that the record of their service would be preserved. Others returned to their diaries to provide a basis for a narrative account of the war, like Irene Rathbone and Vera Brittain. The diaries, then, seem to serve the main

---

<sup>33</sup> Unpublished diaries of Sister MM James. Diary entry for 21 November 1914. LC.

purpose of providing a permanent record of a woman's war experience, and with an audience, however small, in mind. This raises the issue of readership, and how personal or accurate diaries can be as historical documents. About writing a diary, YMCA canteen worker Irene Rathbone wrote:

I read somewhere lately that it was impossible for a woman to write a really disingenuous diary. I believe this is true. I find myself writing this all the time for somebody else -either an interested girl friend, or myself when 60! As a matter of fact the light humorous line is the only one I find it possible to adopt in writing a diary. I am too shy to make it really intimate, and I don't write well enough. I am not Turgenev's Lisa! How I wish I had the gift, because there are all sorts of things going round and round inside my heart which I would love to relieve myself by expressing - queer longings, passionate and strange, which sometimes I feel I must give vent to or burst! Give a feeling a form and it will cease to hurt. I know, but this is impossible for me, so my diary continues to be a valueless record of outward events and observations. Even as such I find it a great comfort - but it is rather a silly "me" which is revealed in its pages.<sup>34</sup>

Rathbone was aware that the diary was not a 'true' record and felt that she was not representing her 'true' self. Nevertheless she believed in the importance of recording something, and therefore valued her own experiences and her own writing. Diary writing is therefore not necessarily about 'truth' as much as about 'being there'. In other diaries a typical entry may read 'nothing happened', which raises questions about which parts of their day-to-day experience were important enough for women to write about. Irene Rathbone used her diaries as a memory aid when she wrote her fictionalised account of the war, demonstrating that what was significant at the time could easily be forgotten. She had recorded picnicking in a farmyard barn with some officers, and wrote: 'That farm itself, and our queer picnic on the straw I shall never

---

<sup>34</sup> Unpublished diaries of Miss Rathbone. Diary entry for 15 July 1918. 90/30/1, DoD, IWM. Emphasis in the original.

forget'. Years later, in 1930, she had pencilled in the margin: 'Have completely.'<sup>35</sup>

In her published novel, *We That Were Young*, the representation of events recorded in her diary appear very differently.<sup>36</sup> The political concerns and emphasis have been modified in a different era. Similarly, Vera Brittain in *Testament of Youth*, does not faithfully reproduce either the events or the sentiments depicted in her 1913-1917 diary.<sup>37</sup> These differences of emphasis in another era raise questions about the function of memory and the importance of memoirs and oral histories in relating events of the First World War.

Although an analysis of letters, diaries and contemporary materials has provided the core of the research for this thesis, I have also considered memoirs and oral histories. This source material has provided valuable information about how women came to perceive their role in the First World War, and, in certain respects, serves as a contrast with experiences recorded in letters and diaries. In the case of women of the WAAC oral testimony has proved a vital source of information. It seems that oral histories in particular have played an important part in forming the recent popular perception of women's (and men's) role in the war, largely through television and the media.<sup>38</sup> These testimonies have continued to be dictated by the experiences of men, however. By the 1970s feminist perspectives were being

---

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 22 September 1918. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>36</sup> Irene Rathbone, *We That Were Young*. Part Four of the novel is based on the events in her diary.

<sup>37</sup> Vera Brittain, *Chronicle of Youth. Vera Brittain's War Diary, 1913-1917*, Alan Bishop with Terry Smart (eds), London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1981, 18.

<sup>38</sup> Since the 1960s a number of television documentaries about the First World War have relied on the oral testimony of those who took part. In 1964, the BBC produced, *The Great War*, and more recently, *1914-1918* (1996). Channel 4 broadcast *The Roses of No Man's Land* in 1997 based on the oral testimony of the last surviving nurses of the First World War.

considered, and questions were being addressed as to what women did in the war. One way of addressing the lack of written records was through oral testimony. Women who were absent from written records were represented in the oral histories collected by the Imperial War Museum in the 1970s, and Peter Liddle included their accounts in his project. The main way to access the voices of women who served in the rank and file of the WAAC has been through oral testimony and written memoirs, both of which were recorded many years after the event. This does not negate their usefulness, but does highlight that women's experiences had to be reclaimed. A consideration of the centrality of the trench experience is necessary when analysing the style of questioning and the responses. Additionally, it must be remembered that these recollections were mediated by the experiences of two world wars. Importantly, analysing oral histories and memoirs allows us to chart the ways women contextualised their war experiences within the scope of their lives, and what events they were likely to recall (through prompting, or through pictorial or written assistance). Even though it is not possible to follow individual women's responses to the war throughout a lifetime, it is possible to gauge the range of opinion and influences upon women, and contrast the significance of ways of recording war experiences. Accuracy is not a problem merely with oral history testimony, the content of diaries is also open to question when representing 'facts'. For example, diaries occasionally detail 'atrocities' stories which may or may not have been founded on truth. What is important is perception and reaction. For instance, in one oral testimony a WAAC recalled the hostility of the public to women in uniform even

though only 50,000 WAACs were sent overseas.<sup>39</sup> This is factually inaccurate, as only 4,000 WAACs went to France in 1917, the figure rose to around 8,000 by the end of the war, but there were nowhere near the recollected figure. However, Emily Rumbold's perception conveys the impression of what it felt like to be part of a large mobilisation of women under the critical gaze of the public unused to women in any sizeable numbers in khaki uniform. Women in uniform became visible during the war, even in relatively small numbers, creating the impression that there were more than in reality. The image rather than the accuracy of the figure given is supported by contemporary accounts and rhymes which also suggest that the Front was 'overrun' with WAACs. WAAC Elsie Broderick included this rhyme among her war memorabilia:

Have you heard of the latest advance  
I don't mean of Tommies or Jacks  
But this awful invasion of France  
By those wonderful women the WAACs.<sup>40</sup>

Netta Hamilton was also struck by the seemingly huge numbers of khaki-clad women. She wrote to her parents about the reasons why she was to afraid to sing at a concert one evening: 'I couldn't summon up courage to do so and really if you knew what things are like here now you wouldn't wonder. For one thing there are as many Waacs as Tommies.'<sup>41</sup> The perception both at the time, and remembered, was of mass female mobilisation. Although Rumbold's testimony was not factually accurate, the remembrance of large numbers of women conveys accurately the contemporary

---

<sup>39</sup> Oral history testimony of Emily Maud Victoria Newing (Emily Rumbold). Reel 1. 516//6. DoS, IWM.

<sup>40</sup> 'The Waac' in the unpublished memoir of Mrs EE Quinlan. P348. DoD, IWM.

<sup>41</sup> J Brown. Letter to Mother, September 1919. LC.

vision of women being mobilised for war.

In a written memoir from the 1970s another woman who was a VAD recalled that a maternity unit for WAACs had been established in an American hospital next to where she worked.<sup>42</sup> There is no official evidence to suggest that such a unit existed. It is much more likely that there was a wing for sick WAACs in the hospital. However, the extensive rumours of WAAC immorality and large numbers of pregnancies fuelled the belief that maternity wings must exist. Despite the inaccuracy of the statement, the observation by Charlotte Dalton conveys a remembrance of wild rumours, taken as fact, and fears of female immorality among the WAAC in the war zone. In this way the letters and diaries of women, and memoirs and oral histories complement each other, but it is important to see them in relation to each other and not standing alone.

Women's fiction and autobiography about women's role at the Front has been analysed in much the same way. Its function is not simply to provide factual historical evidence about how women experienced the war, or as providing an alternative to the male voice in war. Instead it will be used to illustrate the different ways in which women represented themselves in war, and to reflect the ways in which women's attitudes to their involvement changed. Antiwar material is not viewed as the authentic voice of women in war, but rather as an alternative voice. Patriotic and pacifist work written both during and after the war is examined in an attempt to establish the different positions adopted by women who had been active at the Front. It has been easy in the past to suggest that patriotic writing was no more than wartime propaganda, and that women were only able to write about their real experiences

---

<sup>42</sup> Memoirs of Mrs G Mackay-Brown (nee Dalton) RRC. DoD, IWM.

years later, producing the wave of pacifist writing of the 1920s and 30s. It is important to see the different genres as responses to a given political era and this is as relevant to the 1920s and 30s as it is during the war itself. The themes revealed in fiction and autobiography can be compared to the content of letters and diaries and to memoirs and autobiography and create a varied and evolving picture of women at the Front. In many diaries and letters, and later oral histories, women record their pride at being at the Front, yet feelings of pleasure and enjoyment are significantly absent from some of the literature published in the 1930s. Instead they are replaced with hostility to war in general and resentment to the drafting of women in particular to take part in an event of mass destruction. This genre of fiction and autobiography has been central to the argument that women were opposed to the war even when they were taking part. This period of writing can be seen as part of the process in which some women sought to distance themselves from their involvement in the war. The sentiments expressed in these works are important in understanding the position of women in the postwar period, but they alone cannot represent the authentic or even the final response of women's experiences at the Front. The processes of writing, rewriting or remembering reflect the ways in which women came to terms with their experiences of the war, and were part of their coping mechanism, whether through rejection, denial or through patriotic identification.

Another valuable source for this thesis is the private collection of photographs and autograph albums that have accompanied letters and diaries deposited in the archives. Women who did not write letters or diaries often did keep photographic records, autograph albums and mementoes, all of which indicated their participation in a great event. These images and tokens offer an antidote to propaganda images and

can illustrate what was important to women to record as part of their experience of war. Official propaganda photographs and images illustrate women carrying out interesting and unusual duties, encouraging women to extend the boundaries of their sex for the good of their country and for empire. In addition to photographs, cartoons, rhymes, poems and messages fill the pages of autograph albums indicating the transient nature of relationships, and the sentimentality that often accompanied them. They also reflect the humour and spirit of those who were caught up in this historical moment, and the attempt to give it meaning.

The concern of this study is to convey the experiences of women at the Front through their own accounts. Much of the evidence is drawn from women's accounts to reflect how women recorded the war as they experienced it. Where relevant men's records have been examined, including their diaries, autobiographies, memoirs and oral histories. What is immediately apparent is how little women at the Front who served with the BEF feature in men's accounts, either in reality or imagination. Men were often central to the experience of women at the Front, whether as soldiers or colleagues, but the reverse was certainly not true. Despite the immense number of casualties, the mass feeding of the troops and the journeys to and from the Front, all instances when men were likely to have met women, they barely receive a mention. This absence has certainly contributed to the virtual eradication from popular memory of women at the Front. Where women appear in men's accounts, we are usually left with the one-dimensional image of woman as the angelic nurse, or occasionally the love or sex interest. Usually however, women are absent. Leonard Ounsworth, who was a corporal, recalled that after he was injured during the Somme campaign he was



taken to a clearing station and then onto the railway station for Rouen: 'And that was the first time we saw any nurses. All this guff about nurses in the battlefront, I mean that was just rubbish'.<sup>43</sup> Ounsworth is actually using the presence of women to underline their absence and exclusion from the Front. His recollection, and the representation of women in other male accounts, contrasts sharply with encounters between women and men recorded by women. Women were often anxious to meet men who had been in battle to gain insight into the war and give weight to their own war experience. What was also important to women was the recognition and acknowledgement of the men to their presence. In women's accounts we are constantly being offered a vision of the pleasure, delight and amazement of men on finding themselves in the welcome company of women of the BEF, but the corresponding picture in men's accounts is almost entirely absent.

The thesis suggests that constructs of masculinity and femininity were organisational principles which shaped the way women reacted to being at the Front. Women were aware they were extending the boundaries of femininity. That femininity was safeguarded by constructing domestic situations, to undertaking the role of cleaner and carer and finally by fulfilling maternal responsibilities. The civilised femininity associated with Englishness was used to construct a female hierarchy to preserve concepts of femininity and female authority. Despite an implicit awareness of British imperial hegemony, a recourse to imperial rhetoric and the absolute belief in the superiority of the English, not all English/British women were

---

<sup>43</sup> Oral history testimony of Leonard Jesse Ounsworth. Reel 7. 000332/12. DoS, IWM.

included in its discourse, as its operation could only be fully epitomised by women from the governing classes. A class analysis reveals the ways in which these women relied on their social position to instil their values and principles upon those considered socially inferior, whether women of the WAAC, men from the ranks, or people of other nations and races.

The thesis will examine the politics of the deployment of women at the Front, and the extent to which women found being at the Front an opportunity for adventure. It will then examine the construction of a female hierarchy based on social privilege and professional status. This will involve an analysis of the impact of the WAAC upon female relations and will raise questions about female morality and their relationships with male colleagues. Finally, the thesis will address the relationship between women at the Front and the soldier, analysing the meanings of femininity and masculinity and attitudes to heroism and death. The nurturing image of women will be discussed, as well as the acquisition of power by women. The thesis will first of all examine the position of women in relation to the military services on the eve of the war and the ways in which women were deployed at the Front.

## **Chapter One**

# **The Route to the Front**

A State Service should be started for women in which they will have the honour of wearing the King's uniform. If they deserve one fraction of the praise showered on them by the Press, they deserve this honour which would be inestimably appreciated by them. Women should be enlisted as men are enlisted in the Army and from the date of selection they should be paid, housed, fed, clothed, etc... I believe that the real solution of the difficulty is to set up a Department for women under the State. To be organised and controlled by women.<sup>1</sup>

The introduction of women [to the Front], especially of clerks, must be gradual, for however willing they may be, they must take time to assimilate their new surroundings and conditions of work. They must be prepared to experience a certain degree of bodily discomfort, both in offices and in their dwellings, to which they will be unaccustomed: they must be disciplined: they may be called upon in times of stress to perform long hours of duty: they must realise that there are few or no distractions, and that no one in this Country has time for anything but work.<sup>2</sup>

By 1916, when it was clear that the war would last for several years, some influential women, like Katharine Furse who was head of the VAD, and Hermia Durham at the Ministry of Labour, recognised that this was a chance to introduce women into the armed forces at an officially recognised level. It was anticipated that women would be able to replace non-combatant men at the Front under the direction

---

<sup>1</sup> Papers of Katharine Furse. Memorandum, December 1916. LC.

<sup>2</sup> Appendix to letter from Field Marshal Sir D Haig to War Office, dated 11 March 1917. Para 90. Army 34/7. WAWC. IWM.

of women based at the Ministry of Labour. However, these grandiose ideas met with resistance from entrenched War Office dogma which assumed that women were unsuitable and distracting from the male business of war at the Front, as Field Marshal Haig's reservations indicate. Similar views about women's suitability and capabilities had consistently restricted the deployment of women at the Front since the start of the war, and continued to be an issue even with the crisis of manpower in 1917. The creation of the Women's Army and its subsequent deployment in France in 1917 was one fraught with dispute about the projected role of women in a war zone. Its existence was always precarious and personified the uneasy relationship between women and the military that emerged as soon as war broke out. This chapter will explore the relationship of women to the military services prior to and during the war, and the fundamental differences of opinion that emerged about the organisation of women at the Front.

Current historical debates concerning the role of women during the First World War, and the position of women who went to the Front have been concerned with the extent to which the war brought about positive changes for women. Increasingly historians have suggested that if the war brought any benefits at all they were short term and had much to do with gender perceptions during war.<sup>3</sup> Leah Leneman has argued that women doctors had to wait until the Second World War before they received proper recognition from the military authorities.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Diana Shaw has argued that the end of the war resolved the manpower shortage and any *raison d'être* for the continued existence of the Women's Army.<sup>5</sup> In her

---

<sup>3</sup>Scott, 'Rewriting History', 19-30.

<sup>4</sup>Leneman, 'Medical Women at War', 177.

<sup>5</sup>Shaw, 'The Forgotten Army', 373.

examination of the VAD, Sharon Ouditt concludes that the type of constrained femininity required for voluntary nursing was not conducive to war, and that along with hostility from the nursing profession meant that scores of volunteers were not able or allowed to capitalise on their war experience.<sup>6</sup> In order to comprehend women's apparent lack of success within a war context, Margaret and Patrice Higonnet have demonstrated how wartime heightens awareness of a cultural, social and economic understanding of gender relationships. They offer the useful metaphor of the 'double helix', in which women are allowed to advance but only proportionally in relation to men. Whatever advances women made, therefore, the Higonnets suggest, would always be positioned on the underside of the helix, signifying the subordinate position in society.<sup>7</sup> The subordinate and auxiliary roles designated to women also require analysis. Despite being sent to the Front, this did not provide equality with men at the Front, or with the men they replaced. Instead, as the Higonnets have observed, women continued to be viewed in a subordinate capacity. The actual introduction of the Women's Army in 1917 was called 'substitution' or 'dilution' of labour, with the emphasis upon women's auxiliary function.

Women's perceptions of themselves in relation to the war will also be considered. Anne Summers has suggested that imperial ideology allowed women to consider the possibility that military service in the form of army nursing overseas was an attractive alternative route to citizenship.<sup>8</sup> A different view is offered by Claire Tylee who has argued that the war proved to be an untimely interruption in women's

---

<sup>6</sup> Ouditt, *Fighting Forces*, 30.

<sup>7</sup> Margaret R Higonnet and Patrice L -R Higonnet, 'The Double Helix' in Higonnet et al, *Behind the Lines*, 6, 31-47.

<sup>8</sup> Anne Summers, *Angels and Citizens*, 8.

lives at a time when they were finally making real advances in the public sphere.<sup>9</sup>

Women's access to the Front also raises the question of the sexual division of labour, and how far this determined their deployment at the Front. The sexual division of labour during the War suggests separate spheres of work for men and women based on gender differences. Along with a heightened sense of gender awareness operating during the War, the deployment of women into an overwhelmingly male sphere allows us to test the concepts of the sexual division of labour, and that of the functioning of gender. A consideration of the politics behind the deployment of women to the Front will contribute to our understanding of these debates.

In her book about the development of nursing as a respectable female profession, Anne Summers suggests that nursing proved to be the ideal auxiliary role to employ women in the military: 'because it was the means of co-opting women for war service without threatening gender roles and hierarchies, it was perceived by many civilians as a successful model for co-option in other social spheres.'<sup>10</sup> Summers' analysis seems feasible: military nursing whether performed by professional nurses or amateurs, appeared to be conducted within a constrained environment of prevailing notions of femininity and domesticity, with the emphasis placed upon women as carers, cleaners and cooks. However, the practicalities of nursing duties observed by women themselves dispel the image of the nurse as subordinate and passive. In the view of Margaret Darrow, the association of femininity with war nursing is misleading. In her study of French volunteer nursing, she argues that concepts of femininity and nurturing were used in order to gain

---

<sup>9</sup> Tylee, "Maleness Run Riot", 205.

<sup>10</sup> Summers, *Angels and Citizens*, 278.

women access to the war zone but the two proved incompatible.<sup>11</sup> It is therefore possible to argue that the official focus on the feminine aspects of military nursing was illusory - a framework created in order that women could function without fear of reproach for stepping out of their demarcated feminine boundary. The tasks carried out by the nurse were far removed from the conventional image of the clean, unthreatening, dedicated women who featured in propaganda photographs, and eventually became the symbol for recruitment of the volunteer nurse and general service VAD in Joyce Denny's 1918 poster (see Figure 2).

An examination of women's war work at the Front is concerned with the redefinition of roles, duties, and identities. By continuing to adopt terms such as auxiliary and subordinate to categorise women's work, we continue the process of labelling women as they were seen by contemporaries, marginalising women's role in wartime, and ignoring the ways in which they represented themselves. This is why the Higonnets' symbol of the 'double helix' is so useful, as it provides a model to explain how subordination occurred and to what degree women were obliged to see themselves in an 'auxiliary' and less important role during the war. They argue that as women took on increasingly specialised and skilled work, so the value of men's work proportionately increased.<sup>12</sup> This is a different argument from Summers' suggestion that nursing was 'auxiliary', and women were encouraged into it as a result. It might be more fruitful to suggest that nursing was classed as auxiliary because it was carried out by women. The theory of the 'double helix' may also be applied to the development of the Women's Army when women were encouraged to take up men's

---

<sup>11</sup> Darrow, 'French Volunteer Nursing', 80-106.

<sup>12</sup> Higonet & Higonet, 'Double Helix', 34-5.



Figure 2. 1918 VAD recruitment poster by Joyce Dennys.





jobs. This didn't make women's work equal to men's work, but the jobs that they replaced men in were reclassified as 'auxiliary'. The process of introducing the Women's Army was called 'substitution' in which it was considered that it required four women to do the work of three men. The reason for this reclassification had as much to do with preserving the status of masculinity as it did with maintaining a sexual division of labour. But the 'double helix' can be misleading. It allows for a historical explanation of women's subordination but does not take account of women's rejection of their subordinate status, either on the grounds of class status, imperial superiority or professional qualifications. The 'double helix' is useful as a model for analysing gender relations but does not completely explain class and imperial attitudes which also influenced women's perceptions of themselves. While gender ideology may have limited women's mobility and access to the military, class and imperial ideologies were the levers which women used to assert their femininity and rights as individuals over those perceived to be inferior, and this included some men. In order to progress into the military women were obliged to accept the subordinate status given to their work. This should, however, be balanced with the notion of the newness and diversity of women undertaking work carried out by men in an environment that had previously excluded them.

As we examine the politics which lay behind the deployment of women throughout the war we should be wary of labels such as subordinate and auxiliary relating to women's work, and bear in mind the 'double helix'. Re-examining how and why the sexual division of labour operated at the Front involves the complex balancing of discourses of femininity with the progress and evolution of women's war work against a background of the emerging concept of the 'modern woman'. The

question of social distinctions, which Summers identifies as a prewar issue, remained relevant during the war. As the war progressed questions of social status permeated the entire deployment of women at the Front, from the early detachments of VADs to the despatch of the WAACs in 1917. The class issue, overlaid with questions of gender, was so important that to a large degree the relative successes and failures of women's ventures at the Front depended upon it.

Women's relationship to the military establishment on the eve of war is crucial to an understanding of women's experiences of going to the Front. In keeping with other recent achievements, women had gained limited recognition for nursing services in the decades leading up to 1914, following on from the public recognition of the work of Florence Nightingale in the Crimea.<sup>13</sup> By August 1914, there were 300 military nursing sisters, with a further 2,000 territorial nurses who could be called up by the War Office at a moment's notice.<sup>14</sup> Although these numbers are relatively small, they indicate a continued association between women and the military, rather than a situation which could easily have meant starting afresh. Given the sporadic history of military nursing up to the turn of the century the standing army of military nurses was quite an achievement.<sup>15</sup> The positive moves within military nursing with the establishment and recognition of the Queen Alexandra Imperial Military Nursing Sisters in 1902, (QAIMNS) and the creation of the Territorial Forces Nursing Services (TFNS). From 1909, British women had the opportunity to join the Voluntary Aid Detachments formed by the British Red Cross and St John's

---

<sup>13</sup> Anne Summers gives a comprehensive history of nursing leading up to the First World War in *Angels and Citizens*.

<sup>14</sup> Note about nursing figures. BRC 25 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> and BRC 25 <sup>2</sup>/<sub>8</sub>. WAWC, IWM.

<sup>15</sup> Summers, *Angels and Citizens*.

Ambulance Association to train civilians in the art of first aid and home nursing in the case of invasion. There was, however, no concept of a women's army, and the fact that the Women's Army came into being in 1917 is testimony not only to the desperation of the military authorities' need to maintain the strength of its fighting forces but also to the persistence of some influential women to demand the permanent acceptance of women into the military.

Voluntary organisations attached to the military appealed to women from middle- and upper-class backgrounds. These women were considered educated, domesticated, wealthy, leisured and available. Britain was the foremost imperial power and in order to sustain this position the best daughters of the Empire had a role to play. It was partly this feeling of imperial superiority, and a patriotic desire to serve country and empire, which prompted many British women to join these organisations prior to and following the outbreak of war. The principles of empire and patriotic duty as reasons for wishing to serve overseas are reflected in the letters, diaries and memoirs of women who went to the Front. The significance of the British Empire transcended class barriers among women. While working-class women might have been initially excluded from taking part in the war overseas because of their class position, when the Women's Army was created, the concept of empire was a motivating factor in signing up for service. Ruby Start was a suffragette before the war and worked for Boots. She joined the WAAC as a clerk, and recalled: 'Britain before the First World War was still marvellous. Just to be British - it didn't matter how poor you were, unimportant in your country, you were important in the world,

you were a Briton.’<sup>16</sup> Initially, however, it was not anticipated before the war that mass female mobilisation would be necessary on the scale that eventually came about. Although the principles of empire governed women’s attitudes to state service and the establishment of the voluntary organisations, there was little likelihood of service overseas. Before the war, women were trained only to provide auxiliary medical assistance based on improvised voluntary organisation in case of invasion. This proved to be no guarantee that they would be part of an overseas campaign, and was eventually a sticking point in the VAD being fully accepted by the War Office as part of the military. Initially only the trained nurses of the QAIMNS and the Territorial Reserve were mobilised and sent to the Front. Any other participation in the war for women seemed likely to be confined to the home front.

Frustrated with War Office impediments, trained units of female Red Cross workers went to the Front to assist the allies. Some went off to help the Belgians and French, while others made their way to Serbia and the Russian Front, working as doctors and nurses.<sup>17</sup> The dispersion of female resources to Britain’s allies indicated Britain’s own uneasiness with the developing position of women within society and the role they could play within medicine in the military. At a time of crisis the Front remained no place for all but the most essential women, and even then they were kept away from the battlefield.

The belief among officials that the war would be over by Christmas was not the only reason which prevented an early mobilisation of women to the Front. Entrenched attitudes declared that women belonged in the home, the newly designated

---

<sup>16</sup> Oral history testimony of Ruby Adelina Ord (nee Start). Reel 1. 0000/44/05. DoS, IWM.

<sup>17</sup> Leneman, *In the Service of Life*. Idem., ‘Medical Women at War’, 160-177.

home front. Women who had struggled over the preceding decades to break into the public realm, found their war involvement would confine them back to the kitchen and drawing room, as they discovered that war at the Front was not considered a woman's business. Women who wished to play a part were encouraged to knit socks, sew handkerchiefs, and make bandages, either at home, or at one of the rapidly emerging auxiliary hospitals. The heightened awareness of gender demarcation during war on the home front helps explain how, during the early days of war, women's desire to gain access to the Front was significantly hampered. While the onset of war initially impeded women and helped sharpen the gender divide, it also provided fresh outlets where women could challenge gender boundaries. While academics debate whether war can ever be considered advantageous to women, there is little doubt that some women in 1914 saw war as an opportunity to penetrate the masculine enclave of the army. However they had to be careful with the language they used in order to win their argument. Their initiatives highlighted women's feminine and civilising qualities while stressing that women's role would be in a supportive capacity. It is this contradiction of modifying femininity to a masculine war zone which is cited by Ouditt and Darrow as the chief reason for the failure of women to establish a successful and permanent position within the First World War narrative.<sup>18</sup> However, polarising women and war, and femininity and masculinity does not allow room for an exploration of the successful ways in which femininity was modified in relation to masculinity. Neither was masculinity a fixed concept by which women were constantly attempting to adapt their notions of femininity. Often at the Front, women perceived changes in masculinity, and responded to these

---

<sup>18</sup> Ouditt, *Fighting Forces*, 30. Darrow, 'French Volunteer Nursing' 89.

changes by modifying their femininity in order to maintain a gender balance. The ability of women to respond in this way vested women with more power than they have usually been credited.

The war at once offered previously unexpected opportunities for women with the chance to offer their services to their country in the name of patriotism, but the opportunities were limited both in number and scope. However, this rare opportunity for women to become significant and appreciated members of society was not missed by those looking to advance the role of women. At the same time as elevating women to important positions as nurses of Britain's war wounded, it was deemed essential to keep this elevated position of women in perspective; thus as the importance laid upon the role of women in society rose, it only rose in proportion to that of men, who were also elevated as fighters - the principle of the 'double helix'. Society valued its heroines, but valued its heroes even more. The women who called for female participation were aware of the distinction and were careful to contain the position of women within the gender hierarchy. The application of this cautious discourse to gain advantages for women to win access to the Front prevailed throughout the war. An account of VAD work published in 1917 observed: 'The highest privilege goes to the man who may fight his country's battles, give his life for his King, risk living a maimed man to the end of his days; next comes the privilege of being of use to these men who are defending us and all we love.'<sup>19</sup> Likewise an account of the WAAC in 1918 celebrated women's advance into the military while stressing femininity by declaring:

It has been left to the new "Women's Army" to bring thousands of women in close touch with direct war activities - women, young,

---

<sup>19</sup> Bowser, *Story of British VAD Work*, 16.

vigorous, and charming, fresh from our universities and high schools, or drawn from the countless hosts of domesticity; who are, in 1918, veritably soldiers of the King, actual units in the British Army at home and abroad.<sup>20</sup>

The publication of the histories of these two organisations before the war had ended indicated the desire to see women accepted within the military structure that extended beyond a propagandist recruitment appeal. These plaudits for women's work fall just short of claiming equality with the status of the soldier. While women were prepared to defer to the sick and injured in their care, private correspondence indicates they were less enamoured with male officialdom and the system which undervalued its wounded and relegated its women. Women in authority felt obliged to defer to fighting war heroes but were less keen to tolerate what they perceived to be the incessant obstructions emanating from the War Office. Women were willing to defer at one level, while continuing to maintain their challenge on the establishment. Their battle with the establishment was characterised by concepts of masculinity in which the fighting soldier was pre-eminent, while the be-suited civil servants and officials occupied the underside of the masculinity helix.

Replacing the Army Nursing Service in 1902 following the Boer War, the Queen Alexandra Imperial Military Nursing Sisters were a small and professional body, and the only female organisation directly attached to the military. This was an important step as it at once bestowed upon women the approval of the Queen, the acknowledgement of their imperial status and recognition within the military. They were augmented by the subsequent creation of the Territorial Forces Nursing Sisters

---

<sup>20</sup> EM Barton & M Cody, *Eve in Khaki. The Story of the Women's Army at Home and Abroad*, Edinburgh, Thomas Nelson & Sons Ltd, 1918, 6.

in the same year (the equivalent of the army Territorials) and the VAD in 1909. The onset and continuation of war placed the professional nursing system under a great deal of pressure. Many civilian nurses joined the QAIMNS as reservists or joined the Red Cross. Given the pressures, owing to the lack of fully trained nurses, and restrictions on their deployment, there was a constant shortfall in the numbers. The most highly skilled army nursing sisters were sent overseas, and the most competent of those were sent to casualty clearing stations where it was considered that the most intense nursing was required. The numbers, however, remained small. The army Matron-in-Chief, Maud McCarthy, reported that in 1915 the number of nurses at casualty clearing stations increased from 9 to 29. This number rose significantly in 1916, and by September 1916, 427 nurses were posted to casualty clearing stations. Despite an increase in the numbers of nurses the shortfall was never met. By the end of 1917 it was estimated that 1947 nurses were required for the western Front, while the actual number working totalled 1773. The numbers of VADs, however, exceeded demand. A total of 1465 was required by the end of 1917, though there were 1642 working in the military hospitals.<sup>21</sup> McCarthy noted that: 'At times of extreme pressure, trained Nurses had been sent to advanced units who had only just completed their training, and had had little, or no other experience, and I may say almost invariably these Nurses were not found able to tackle the work before them in these units.'<sup>22</sup> This argument was used to bar VADs from undertaking anything but the most routine nursing duties, and prevented them from working in casualty clearing stations. However, VADs were needed to try and meet the shortfall of trained nurses.

---

<sup>21</sup> Official war diaries of Dame Maud McCarthy. Official diary for 1917. QARANC.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. Official diary for 1919.



As the supplies of trained nurses were quickly exhausted, the VADs were eventually widely mobilised both at home and abroad, working in military hospitals as well as the Red Cross hospitals.

From the start of the war, the supply of trained nurses never matched demand. With the high casualties suffered at Loos in 1915 and the Somme in 1916 nursing resources were stretched to the limit. Predictions of further rises in casualty figures for 1917 prompted an investigation as to how to tackle the nursing shortage. The nurses' own testimonies provide evidence of understaffing and chaotic conditions. Sister Millicent Peterkin recorded the reasons for neglecting to write in her diary for nearly a month in May 1915, shortly after she was posted to a surgical ward:

A few day afterwards a perfect rush of wounded began to come down, and for nearly a fortnight none of us got off duty. We had convoys in every day, sometimes twice a day, and often at night as well, which meant that after working all day without a break (except hurried dashes across to the mess for meals) we would be called up at night again, and have to go on duty and work at full pressure till the early hours of the morning, then back to bed for a couple of hours, and on again the next morning as usual. It was killing work, especially as most of the cases were pretty bad ones, (including a lot with gas-poisoning,) and we were often dressing from 9 or 10 in the morning till 4 or 5 in the afternoon, practically without a break. As for the theatre, it was in use night and day. When the rush was at its worst, they recorded 42 operations in 48 hours, which is not bad! Things are much quieter now, as nearly everyone has been parked off to England, and we have had no new convoys for 2 days, so we are taking advantage of the slack time to have ½ days, and I have had mine today, which was a great treat. The work was all the more arduous as we were sending people home to England almost as quickly as we were taking them in, often in and out again on the same day. One day we had 2 lots in and 2 lots out between 8 am and 8 pm. I believe over 300 were sent out the day before yesterday, so this has really been more like a Clearing Hospital than anything else. As we were short of several Sisters, several more having either gone sick or been changed to other Hospitals, the remainder of us were even more over-worked than we would otherwise have been. Within the last two days, however, 5

VAD people have arrived, who, even if not fully trained will be of considerable assistance in many ways.<sup>23</sup>

It was anticipated that a further 3,000 nurses would be needed to cope with the casualties expected in 1917. A committee, chaired by the MP, William Bridgeman, was established to investigate the pressing problems of recruitment.<sup>24</sup> It had little good news to report, however, concluding that very few trained nurses remained outside the military system who were not already engaged in valuable work among the civilian population in both nursing and midwifery. There was no more slack within the system. It was seen as a priority that all probationary nurses coming up to the end of their training be recruited upon completion of their courses. The Committee considered the possibility of recruiting nurses from abroad, and turned to the Dominions for assistance. It was hoped that up to 1,000 could be supplied in this way. The Committee disapproved of the idea of requesting nurses from the United States, noting that, 'No doubt nurses might be secured in the United States, but we think that the British Empire should be able to provide her own nurses for her own men'.<sup>25</sup> The supply of nurses was not completely dictated by need but also by class considerations which placed the care of officers above those of men from the ranks, and by the discourse of empire which dictated that Britain should be self-sufficient.<sup>26</sup>

The Bridgeman Committee made recommendations to ensure that the services of nurses once enlisted could be retained. While the salary of a nurse was

---

<sup>23</sup> Miss MB Peterkin. Diary entry for 15 May 1915. 77/60/1. DoD, IWM.

<sup>24</sup> Interim Report of Advisory Committee appointed by the Army Council to enquire into the supply of nurses. 14 November 1916. BRC 25 0/4. WAWC, IWM.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. Average nursing ratios for military hospitals: 1 trained nurse to 17 beds (1:14 was the desirable maximum); in private hospitals for officers: 1 trained nurse to 4 beds.

considerably higher than that earned by VADs, £40 per annum, as opposed to £20 for VADs (for those VADs who received a salary), it was not considered attractive enough to retain their services. The Committee identified 'wastage' as the main reason for the short supply of nurses, ie losing nurses from the service to other areas of employment while waiting to be posted. By correcting this it was believed that up to 2,500 nurses could be drafted in, almost two thirds of the target recruitment seen to be necessary for 1917, and considered sufficient to nurse 35,000 men. It was therefore seen as essential that conditions be improved to attract and keep trained nurses, by improving their salary, their benefits and offering better pension rights should they be incapacitated by their war service. Unlike VADs, nurses had to sign on for the duration rather than take a six month or yearly contract, which was considered to be a deterrent to non-military nurses. Likewise it was recommended that civilian nurses should receive the same allowances and recognition as military nurses. At the heart of the problem of supplying nurses was considered to be the process of recruiting and allocating properly trained staff. The Committee cited too many organisations recruiting, with very little communication between them, resulting in unnecessary competition and consequent confusion. In addition to the military nursing organisations like the QAIMNS and the TFNS, and the voluntary organisations like the British Red Cross and Order of St John, there were many other local and private bodies which employed nurses on a domestic basis. Throughout the war nurses continued to work for local government boards, poor law institutions, the Metropolitan Asylums Board, civil hospitals and nursed privately. These services still had to be maintained, but it was unclear how the training schools could meet civilian needs and those of military nursing. A clearing house based on a full register of

trained nurses was considered to be the solution, to be overseen by one committee which would have representation from all the relevant bodies, who could then select and place candidates in areas most suited to their skills. There was neither the time nor the desire from the relevant bodies to implement such a scheme during the war. The quickest way of meeting the military needs proved to be the wider deployment of the VAD. Other emergency measures were suggested. One option considered was to utilise the VADs more effectively, as probationary nurses working under a sister. Another option was to tempt former nurses out of retirement to cover civilian work and help release the remaining trained nurses. Governing the employment of nurses throughout the war was a policy of short-termism, and a distinct feeling that the War Office was not inclined to unnecessarily mobilise or organise women on a large-scale except as and when needed. Despite constructive proposals relating to the development of military nursing, and later the creation of a women's army, the authorities only ever appeared to act when confronted with a crisis. The plethora of organisations did not help women's cause and inter-organisational rivalries between women were also evident. Some of the problems encountered in the war, however, did help the nursing profession after the war, as it moved towards full registration and recognition that it was a permanent professional body.

The war did not allow a smooth transition from a career considered acceptable for women to enter if they wished to or had to work, to one which resulted in official registration and recognition. Instead the war exposed the fragility of the position of women nurses within society. While those who were working within the military at the outbreak of the war were seasoned professionals with many years training and experience to their credit, in some cases previous military campaigns under their belt,

the sudden influx of civilian and reservist nurses placed their achievements under threat. In order to maintain their professional military status they demanded distinctions. However, necessity dictated that less experienced nurses were promoted to sisters' posts while others became matrons. There was continued disagreement about the methods of promotion, the award of stripes, allowances and titles. This antagonism was further exacerbated by the influx of inexperienced VADs into the military hospital wards from 1915. In order for nursing in the war to be effective it was the job of officials to solve these rivalries satisfactorily, something they manifestly failed to do. While arguments were carried on most visibly in the hospital wards at home, they were liable to flare up abroad too, though VADs abroad were considered to be (or considered themselves to be) the most skilled.

The Voluntary Aid Detachments were formed in 1909 by the British Red Cross Society and St John's Ambulance Association. Women were encouraged to join and train at a local hospital to gain certificates in first aid and home nursing, and learn how to improvise. It was hoped that the VAD would provide support for the army medical services by caring for the sick and wounded, in a similar capacity as that provided by the Territorial Forces to the army in the case of invasion. Women were seen as essential members and beneficiaries of the scheme:

Now it is quite a good thing to know that every woman who belongs to a Voluntary Aid Detachment, or is interested in voluntary aid, cannot help also being interested in the Territorial Army itself; but it is far better to know that every woman who joins a Voluntary Aid Detachment cannot help thereby learning a large amount of first aid and home nursing which will be of the greatest possible help to herself in her own home and outside it: and this is one more reason - leaving out the military question - why every woman who can do it should try

to join a Voluntary Aid Detachment and learn voluntary aid work.<sup>27</sup>

From the outset it was considered that women could play an important part in the defence of the nation. The voluntary status of the support they could provide was crucial, as it was deemed that patriotism would encourage membership, without burdening the tax payer. The links between voluntary aid, women and patriotism require further exploration. Summers' assertion that army nursing offered the equivalent of citizenship as opposed to suffrage seems justified. Women's patriotism, their desire to wear uniform, and their commitment to the Empire were seen to be the basis of an appeal to women, drafted in for work that was more 'naturally' female, though still had to be learned by those unused to domestic labour. Bowser saluted the: 'Highly educated women [who] have learned to scrub floors, to labour with their hands, to undertake disagreeable duties, with no thought of fame or glory, but simply for the sake of sharing in the huge fight which has been thrust upon the British Empire.'<sup>28</sup> The voluntary aspect was an appeal to female self-sacrifice and public duty while remaining within the domestic domain.

Enrolling in the VAD would not provide professional qualifications, but equipped the volunteer to provide support for medical teams in the event of war. Improvisation was the key. By the start of the war the VAD was a recognised entity for carrying out voluntary work with military associations. Joining the local VAD meant wearing a uniform which appeared to be an important factor in appealing to

---

<sup>27</sup> Lt-Col Sir Richard Temple, Assistant Director of the Ambulance Dept and Controller-in-Chief of its Territorial branch, addressing Conference of Nursing Officers of the St John's Ambulance Brigade, on 16 April 1913. BRCS 1/19. WAWC, IWM.

<sup>28</sup> Bowser, *Story of British VAD Work*, 24.

women with the chance to serve their country. The VAD, therefore, while outside the military, drew on military principles for the organisation of its members. Local groups were required to parade and drill, and were subject to War Office inspections. As it was anticipated that the VAD would support the army medical services, discipline was also considered to be an issue. If the VAD was to wear the full uniform of either the Red Cross or St John's Ambulance Association, then it was considered that the women of the VAD should also be disciplined, accept orders unquestioningly, and stand to attention in front of superiors. Nora Pemberton described the effects of discipline upon her work in a letter to her father following an inspection by senior officers.

It is most embarrassing when they come and chat to the Commandant while I am polishing this or scrubbing tables and even more so if it happens on a slack afternoon and I am sewing at splints or bandages. The law of Medes and Persians requires me to spring from my chair as their nose appears round the door and remain standing and speechless (unless addressed) until they have gone. Now to sew standing is none too easy!<sup>29</sup>

Despite national organisation it was expected that the VAD would work at home and not at the Front. They were originally formed on the basis of providing care for the sick and wounded in case of invasion. This proved to be a stumbling block in mobilising the VAD for overseas action, and was the reason why the VAD never became a fully recognised military body. Initially, however, the VAD was anxious to provide whatever support it could, including sending units overseas to carry out improvised work. In October 1914, Katharine Furse led a small detachment of women to France. Their final destination was Boulogne where they took over

---

<sup>29</sup> Miss EB Pemberton. Letter to Dad, dated 26 November 1914. 85/33/1. DoD, IWM. Emphasis in the original.

some railway carriages, converting them into a small dressing station and a canteen where they could make up drinks to be delivered to men on trains moving along the lines of communication, and attend to minor dressings. Their arrival coincided with the First Battle of Ypres and within days they were feeding and dressing the wounds of thousands of men. By Christmas they had expanded their remit and were distributing magazines, cigarettes and Christmas presents to the men passing through. Within six months they had fed 80,000 men and distributed 40,000 papers and magazines. Nora Pemberton was one of the original members of this detachment and described her role in a letter home:

There is a cry 'train's off' and I dash up the platform, 'any cards to be posted? Cards? and anything ready for post?' and from every carriage they come till I have a bulging pocketful and the train steams slowly out on its twelve hour journey carrying men who are heroes in their cheery courage in the face of pain, and leaving us with the joyful feeling of having done just a little something to help them over a few hours by giving them something to smoke, something to read and something to talk about.<sup>30</sup>

This early VAD venture overseas proved to be a propaganda success back home. The VAD had demonstrated its indispensability; and the VAD spirit, encapsulating improvisation and selflessness, which lasted throughout the war and beyond, was cemented as a consequence of this scheme. On her return in early 1915, Katharine Furse was appointed head of the British Red Cross VADs, and installed at the VAD Headquarters at Devonshire House in London. Rachel Crowdy remained at the Front as the commandant in charge of the VADs in France. The VAD was able to capitalise on its early success, and fought to extend its remit, and increase its numbers. As the war became entrenched and there was no stem in the tide of

---

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. Letter to Mum, dated 19 December 1914.



casualties, similar rest stations came into being, run by the VAD. In 1915 rest stations were established on the lines of communication at Abbeville and Etretat, and remained as crucial feeding points until railway transport improved sufficiently so that the majority of troops could eventually be fed on board trains. From working at the rest stations the VADs were able to branch out. As they were not always busy with trains, they used their spare time to help out at the local military and Red Cross hospitals as and when required. This too ensured that the VAD became a necessary fixture in understaffed hospital wards, and by 1915 more and more VADs were arriving in France as nursing members and to carry out general service duties in kitchens and dispensaries in military and Red Cross hospitals. While the VAD was successfully able to expand its work at the Front, VADs who worked in military hospitals were restricted by the authority of the matrons and sisters as to the type of work they were allowed to carry out. The relationship between the professional nursing services and the VADs remained tense throughout the war. Because of the understaffing of professional nurses it became necessary to provide assistance through the VAD scheme but this arrangement was fraught with difficulty as the inexperience and lack of professional training challenged the status of the professional nursing bodies. Furse received many complaints from VAD members about their treatment at the hands of authoritarian sisters and unsympathetic matrons, yet she felt helpless to address their problems. The Matrons-in-Chief dismissed the complaints as a lack of discipline on the part of the VADs. Furse fared no better when she tried to introduce a promotion scheme for the VADs. In order to allay some of the complaints of the VAD members it was suggested that VADs with long service should be rewarded with an efficiency stripe which would demonstrate to the matrons that they were

capable of more than the most menial ward work. The nurses' training schools resisted the measure as a possible threat to professionalism, and argued that any stripe should not be an indication of training but merely of long service. The introduction of stripes for VADs was approved by Miss Sydney Browne, the Matron-in-Chief of the Territorial Forces Nursing Service, and the Central Joint VAD Committee in June 1916, but the records indicate that in February 1917 there was still no resolution to the problem, and the 'business of white stripe now in hopeless muddle' was entered into the minutes.<sup>31</sup> Eventually, in May 1917, a War Office regulation stipulated that VADs could wear a scarlet stripe for efficiency, qualifying them for the duties of a junior nurse, though Ethel Becher, the Matron-in-Chief of the QAIMNS said it should not be awarded retrospectively. A white stripe would be awarded to denote 13 months' service on the recommendation of the matron. The idea of junior and senior VADs was considered, but any attempts to professionalise the VAD were met with resistance from the nursing profession, and Furse, with little backing from the Central Joint VAD Committee, had to be content with these few benefits she had been able to extract. She concluded on the continued obstinacy of the nursing profession: 'The Matrons-in-Chief resent complaints and take them up in such a way with the Hospitals that the VADs would often sooner resign than complain... The fetish of the three years training might well form the subject of an enquiry'.<sup>32</sup>

Given the expansion of women's work during the war, and the VAD's constant struggle to retain its status in the face of opposition from the professional nursing bodies, the VAD continued to rely upon its self-sacrificing volunteer image in

---

<sup>31</sup> Memorandum about awarding stripes to VAD. BRC 10<sup>4</sup>/10. WAWC, IWM.

<sup>32</sup> Draft memorandum: 'Foundations of the Present Difficulties in VAD Service'. BRC 10<sup>4</sup>/8. WAWC, IWM.

order to appeal to the public. In order to demonstrate that women in the VAD were essential workers, it was their essential feminine qualities in relieving men worn out by battle which were stressed. Thekla Bowser visited the VAD units at the Front and observed:

It was pathetic to see how these men appreciated having a talk with an English woman, and perhaps it is not too much to say that the women who minister to the minds of the men who are cut off from their homes and from their own women folk, are not doing a less 'great' job than when they are attending to the men who have been broken in battle.<sup>33</sup>

Here it was the civilised femininity of the VAD, associated with their Englishness, that was considered of equal value to the women who nursed. Femininity rather than training was the focus relied on by the VAD for their acceptance at the Front. Recruits were drawn from the best class of young women among local detachments, and by appeals to girls' schools. Additionally, to be accepted women required a report from a matron if they had previous hospital experience, had to demonstrate the nationality of their parents, and required character references from a 'Lady' whom they had known for at least five years, and from the head of the school they had attended. These rigorous qualifications ensured an exclusive organisation of women. VAD Nora Pemberton went on to run a VAD ambulance convoy in December 1916, and wrote to her mother that most of the new young members were from "High Wycombe, St Andrews, Roedean and such like schools".<sup>34</sup> Essential qualities for joining the VAD were not years of medical training, but basic knowledge acquired through gaining a First Aid and Home Nursing Certificate. A well-educated, presentable lady was a pre-requisite to being a VAD,

---

<sup>33</sup> Bowser, *Story of British VAD Work*, 215.

<sup>34</sup> Pemberton. Letter to Mum, dated 3 December 1916, DoD, IWM.

demonstrating the values demanded of the VAD, namely loyalty and self-sacrifice. Furse received a letter about a woman with hospital experience seeking a placement within the VAD. It requested: 'Now is there anything? She is an attractive young person - not a lady exactly - but really a lady, I think, in essentials...'.<sup>35</sup> Katia Freshfield joined the VAD in January 1915, and realised that domesticity was considered to be one of the qualities a lady should possess. In her diary, she described her interview experience at Devonshire House conducted by Katharine Furse and a matron: 'Got a wire from the BRCS asking me to report to go abroad tomorrow morning...Interviews at BRCS offices - Miss Swift, a matron, asks me if I am domesticated. Say yes but don't know what it means. Mrs Furse asked me if I will go and nurse civilian population with typhoid at a port, sounds vague. Once more say yes, though feeling rather like no.'<sup>36</sup> Many young women who joined the VAD did so on account of their social position rather than any nursing skills they held. However it was considered that young women because of their class had the correct social skills, and were 'domesticated' by association, and this was enough to allow them into the VAD, though this did not make them nurses. The stress for the VAD was upon its auxiliary role in relation to professional nursing. Lady Perrott, head of the St John's VAD wanted to see that all women VADs assumed the title of 'Member' and not of 'nurse'.<sup>37</sup>

As more VADs arrived at the Front throughout 1915 and 1916, the type of VAD work varied and increased to meet the demands of the vast war machine at the

<sup>35</sup> Letter to Katharine Furse from Miss A Maude Royden, dated 5.11.17. BRC 10 8/72. WAWC, IWM. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>36</sup> Miss Katia Freshfield. Diary entry for 30 January 1915. LC.

<sup>37</sup> Conference of Nursing Officers of the St John's Ambulance Brigade, 16 April 1913. BRC 1/19. WAWC, IWM.

Front. The VADs turned their hand to a variety of war-related tasks, and took over some of the work hitherto carried out by orderlies and non-combatant men. As more men were required to maintain the strength of the fighting units, so women were called upon to fill the positions of those men sent further forward. The General Service VADs (GS VAD), established in 1915, were increasingly taken on to carry out a variety of non-medical duties, such as clerical work, cooking and driving, though they were still attached to the medical services and restricted by their voluntary status. By 1916 the VADs were operating ambulance convoys behind the lines, carrying out clerical work in hospitals, tracing the missing, helping with the Red Cross mail, and running hostels which looked after relatives visiting the injured. The VAD also set up nursing clubs and homes where nurses could rest, take their laundry, take a bath, borrow a book, or find a bed for the night if they were travelling between postings. By the end of the war there were 8,000 VADs serving overseas.

The increasing workload of the VAD was monitored, and in order to stress its importance was praised within the widest terms. Furse conducted an inspection of the VAD units in July 1916 and concluded that VAD work in France was 'a credit to the women of the Empire' and that the way they conducted themselves proved 'women can be trusted in the Zone of the Armies'.<sup>38</sup> The VAD remained on a voluntary footing, however, with the emphasis very much on self-sacrifice. Furse, herself, had other ideas for women and was anxious for their work at the Front to remain high

---

<sup>38</sup> Report on VAD work under the Joint Committee in France. BRCS 10 <sup>2</sup>/7. WAWC, IWM.

profile and crucial. In 1916, she wrote:

Personally I have been convinced for the last six months that if the war continues, we shall require some form of conscription or enlistment to supply sufficient suitable women for the needs of the Government in various spheres of work. Many women are still selfish and like to choose both their work and where they will consent to do it. We have absolutely no power over our members until they are under contract.<sup>39</sup>

As women's work at the Front with the VAD expanded, Furse realised the limitations of the voluntary status of women attached to the military. Furse wanted women to be involved in the war effort and believed that families should be prepared to sacrifice their daughters as well as sons. She wrote:

This is especially necessary, for the daughters are wanted by the Country as well as the sons. All who can afford to work without pay should do so for the sake of the Country - giving all they have to give for the men who have risked everything to save their Country.<sup>40</sup>

Furse was careful to stress the importance of women's work in relation to the elevated position of the fighting soldiers, and used the comparison to develop a more permanent role for women to the army. However, she was aware of competing services to attract women to military work, and work that was paid. Within the VAD only those who worked in the wards of military hospitals were paid, all other VAD members paid for their own expenses and uniform. As more women were needed, Furse was aware that joining the VAD would leave women in financial difficulties if they were without the support of wealthy families.<sup>41</sup> Furse saw the appeal of a national register of women orchestrated by the Ministry of Labour which would be

---

<sup>39</sup> Memorandum on the Work of Devonshire House in appointing VAD members to Military Hospitals. Filed 18.9.1916. BRCS 10 <sup>2</sup>/10. WAWC, IWM.

<sup>40</sup> Undated memo from Katharine Furse, 'What we want included in the National Service Appeal to Women to join VADs. BRCS 10 <sup>1</sup>/2. WAWC, IWM.

<sup>41</sup> Memorandum about problems related to the VAD. BRCS 10 <sup>4</sup>/3. WAWC, IWM.

responsible for holding women on a retaining fee until suitable work could be provided.

The VAD had prided itself upon its elite membership, and its voluntary status ensured that in addition its members could be considered self-sacrificing and performing war services out of the highest and most worthy motives. Recruitment on this basis ran into difficulties as the VAD authorities became acutely aware as the war went on that they were competing with other organisations. The need for women to work at the Front outside the medical services could not be met by the VAD. The elitism of its leadership, its voluntary status, and its lack of official military recognition at the Front impeded the development of the VAD into a professional organisation during the war. As the service of women became more in demand on the home front, other bodies were able to offer remuneration and other benefits which made war service elsewhere more compelling. Being a VAD was no longer enough for women who did not know how long they would be on a waiting list for a hospital and were turning down other jobs which offered better pay. The stigma of women earning money was eroded throughout the war, and actually became a moot point with the growing number of VADs who usually had to pay for their transport, their uniform, and their living costs, as well as committing themselves to signing on for six months or the duration. Part of the problem they encountered as the war went on was how far they should remain a voluntary force of unqualified and largely unpaid women. By the end of 1916, the Ministry of Labour was seriously contemplating some form of national service for women. Katharine Furse had her own ideas on the subject. In January 1917, memos were being drafted to discuss the possibilities of 'women's service with the army' and how it could be structured. Furse pondered the

questions that would need to be addressed in the event of the formation of such a scheme, including whether women should be enrolled or enlisted, to what extent women should be involved in the central organisation, the status of women within the army, whether this should be as 'camp followers', 'civil subordinates', or 'enlisted women' (Furse's preference was for the latter). She wanted women to be graded and subject to discipline like men in the army, and recommended the introduction of women police. She was in favour of harsh penalties which would include detention, fines, and de-grading, though she was unsure about court-martials. She wanted women to be paid, uniformed and given allowances for laundry, rations, travel and accommodation.<sup>42</sup> Rachel Crowdy, the VAD Commandant in France, had slightly different ideas. She believed that military ranks should be avoided, and women categorised by the kinds of jobs they carried out. Discipline, she thought, 'should be strict, but not to my mind include saluting or other pseudo-men touches'.<sup>43</sup> Exemptions to the service would be given on medical grounds, financial hardship, married women with children under 16, and for those women already employed whose trade would be affected. In an additional note, she wrote: 'Enough stress cannot be laid on the fact that the women should, as far as possible, be drawn from the upper middle and middle classes.'<sup>44</sup> As the necessity for women's national service gained in momentum, the beginnings of the Women's Army began to take shape. In its early form, it was anticipated that the organisation would be called 'The Queen's Women', recruited by the National Service Department at a county level. Women

---

<sup>42</sup> Memorandum: Questions Relating to Women's Service with the Army' by Katharine Furse, dated 2 January 1917. Army 3 1/10. WAWC, IWM.

<sup>43</sup> Memorandum: 'Women's Service in the Army' by Rachel Crowdy, Principal Commandant, VADs, France, dated 10 January 1917. Army 3 1/9. WAWC, IWM.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. Emphasis in the original.



appointed would be paid and housed until required to retain their services, and those overseas would not be able to go until suitable accommodation had been found.

Billeting was not considered acceptable and a hut building programme was begun.

Above all it was considered necessary to institute a women's organisation within the army in order that they could provide substitution for men both at home and abroad.<sup>45</sup>

By mid-January 1917, Lieutenant-General Lawson had completed his investigation into the possibility of better utilising manpower at the Front in order to maintain the strength of the fighting units.<sup>46</sup> His report recommended female labour. Following this, the formation of a women's army which would be paid and uniformed and recognised as an official part of the military was just a few months away.

The formation of a women's army had repercussions for the VAD. Furse had seen the professionalisation of women's work occurring. She recognised that female volunteers recruited on the principles of self-sacrifice would not be enough to guarantee their survival. Furse demanded that VADs should receive a decent salary in order to retain the services of the best young women. This brought her into conflict with the Central Joint VAD Committee of the Red Cross and St John's Ambulance Association which wanted to maintain the voluntary status of its detachments to ensure their social exclusivity. Sir Arthur Stanley, head of the Committee, feared the intervention from women such as Hermia Durham and Miss Clapham at the Ministry of Labour who were also working towards the amalgamation of women's war work. Stanley did not wish to see the growing General Service VAD become part of the new

---

<sup>45</sup> Memorandum: 'Scheme for Women's Service with the Army'. Army 3 2/14. WAWC, IWM.

<sup>46</sup> Report by Lieutenant-General HM Lawson CB into Economy of Man Power in the Armies, January 1917. Army 3/3. WAWC, IWM.

Women's Army, though they carried out similar work. Hermia Durham wrote to

Furse of her frustration:

I feel more strongly impressed and depressed than ever with the extent of the muddling vacillation of the Powers that Be in the Red Cross world. I regard it as a misfortune at such a time as this that so great and important an organisation on whose efficient service so much depends should show themselves capable of bad faith. The tragedy is that in an ill-thought, ill-timed effort to guard their own defences, they risk damaging their own prestige and usefulness. This is not a time for 'class distinctions' between voluntary and professional or official effort to spoil a great enterprise. For the Red Cross to desire to organise a separate and independent machinery for recruiting, distributing and administering the General Service section is folly that cannot be justified on grounds quasi a sentiment. I agree that much is always lost when any association unites and co-ordinates with another - but on the other hand much more is to be gained than lost by a joining of forces. And at this time no chance of strengthening the women's effort should be lost - the country really needs the women's help, and cannot afford to waste strength by the narrow policy of a separation being adopted.<sup>47</sup>

Stanley and the rest of the Central Joint VAD Committee could not agree with Katharine Furse that it was a good idea to pay women a salary. Furse wanted much more than this for women. She really wanted a department of women to be set up and run by women in order that a female labour reserve could be established and women could be placed according to where they were best suited and most needed. This would avoid the need for conscription, though she was not against this for young, single women as a way of avoiding unnecessary competition between female organisations. Given the development of women's work, she now recognised that amalgamation of the General Service VAD with the Women's Army was the only way to ensure their survival and save resources. In a memorandum expressing her 'somewhat kaleidoscopic views' on the subject she stated:

---

<sup>47</sup> Letter from Miss I H Durham to Katharine Furse, dated 21 October 1917. BRC 10 8/19. WAWC, IWM. Emphasis in the original.

I fully appreciate the certainty that some members of the British Red Cross Society and Order of St John may consider this to be disloyal but I have never hidden from them the fact that I have always wanted to see the VADs an integral part of a greater women's organisation for National Service, and I consider that loyalty to the Country is greater than loyalty to organisations...I also believe that the British Red Cross Society and Order of St John would benefit by being commended for giving the VADs to the Government instead of retaining them under conditions which must inevitably lead to their extinction if the war goes on.<sup>48</sup>

Furse believed that the obstinacy of the VAD governing bodies would lead to the demise of the VAD. She found little support from the War Office either, which also feared her ideas. Sir Arthur Stanley expressed his fears over the direction of women's work and the General Service VAD:

I saw no objection to people working at Devonshire House who were not VADs especially bearing in mind the fact that some of us on the Joint VAD Committee itself were not members of Detachments. My trouble is that I see the VAD organisation, of which we had every reason to be very proud, being merged into the larger Women's Army and I fear that Miss Clapham's influence will be used in this direction. Much the happiest time and the best work was done during the first two years while we were all thinking of VADs and nothing else. Now I fear that Devonshire House - or at all events some of the people there - are thinking more of the Women's Army and less of the VADs.<sup>49</sup>

The failure to agree illustrates the division of opinion about how women should be used in war and who should control them. Stanley refused to accept the changes that had occurred within women's work, or that future change was necessary. The dispute between Furse and Stanley ran deeper than a clash of personalities, for there was also a clash of ideology. Stanley remained steadfast to the idea that women's work should be confined to a privileged few and that their status should

---

<sup>48</sup> Katharine Furse's 'Memorandum on what may have appeared to be my somewhat kaleidoscopic views with regard to the VAD General Service Section', dated 16 October 1917. BRCS 10<sup>6</sup>/13. WAWC, IWM.

<sup>49</sup> Letter from Sir Arthur Stanley to Dame Katharine Furse, dated 4 October 1917. BRC 10<sup>8</sup>/8. WAWC, IWM.

remain voluntary to maintain their exclusivity. Furse, on the other hand, saw the war as an opportunity for the irrevocable expansion of women into the army, and believed that women should be responsible for the organisation of their own sex. While she was always careful to defer to the heroism of fighting soldiers, she had little time for the men who sat on the war committees and obstructed her plans. She was exasperated by the intransigence of the all-male VAD county directors, citing them as ignorant of women's needs. She blamed Stanley for bowing to them:

[Stanley] also has to appease County Directors who resent my demand for authority to investigate complaints and to ensure proper control. He calls meetings of County Directors, puts my demands before them and they all tell him that the VADs are quite happy and that women prefer being managed by men. All County Directors in England are men. I believe there is one truth in the theory that women like being managed by men when they are managed. The trouble is that there are not more than about 8 or 10 really competent Country Directors in the Country.<sup>50</sup>

Furse was equally annoyed that the Committee governing the VAD was composed of men only, and that the women who organised the VAD from Devonshire House had to sit on a separate women's committee. She believed that her title as head of the VAD was cosmetic only, and that she had very little power, as this remained in the hands of men. Furse had wanted female representation on the Joint Central VAD Committee, and feared that Devonshire House was being blamed for the complaints made by VADs about expenses and bullying, while she in fact felt she was not allowed to act without the authority of the Chairman. Six months after the formation of the Women's Army, Furse believed that the problems for the VAD were increasing. She wrote to Stanley about the continuing issue of the welfare of the

---

<sup>50</sup> Letter to Lady Lyttleton from Katharine Furse, dated 14 October 1917. BRC 10 8/16. WAWC, IWM. Emphasis in the original.

VAD and how she viewed her own position:

I very much doubt whether people will be as willing to entrust this responsibility to a Committee mainly composed of men. I further doubt whether any woman who cares about her work more than about her title would consent to fill an office which implies so much responsibility but which has so little authority.<sup>51</sup>

Furse believed that the continued voluntary status of the VAD hampered their status, leaving them inadequately funded, and not officially recognised by the military. She felt that this would lead to the VAD folding after the war.<sup>52</sup> The lack of official recognition meant that travel at the Front was made more difficult because women in the VAD were classed as 'aliens'. This Furse believed was an insult to women who had paved the way for the acceptance of women into the army.<sup>53</sup> She argued that the continued separation of the VAD from other women's work was expensive and wasteful, but clearly she continued to strongly object to the methods of the male-dominated Committee. Furse drew up a set of proposals in which the General Service VAD would operate under the same conditions as the WAAC. She wanted Stanley to present them to the Committee, and staked her position on their acceptance. The Committee rejected the proposals and Furse's bluff was effectively called, leaving her with little alternative but to resign, which she did in November 1917. She wrote:

...the sorrow of leaving the VADs is very great. I have loved them more than words can express, and would never have resigned had I felt that my efforts to help them were profitable. It has been a heartbreaking struggle, as for many months I have felt nothing but

---

<sup>51</sup> Letter to Sir Arthur Stanley from Katharine Furse, dated 6 October 1917. BRC 10 8/9. WAWC, IWM.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., dated 6 June 1917. BRC 10 8/5. WAWC, IWM.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., dated 6 August 1917. BRC 10 8/6. WAWC, IWM.

failure while acting as a figure-head, with all the pomp of office and none of the authority to obtain what was necessary.<sup>54</sup>

While Furse might have hoped that developments elsewhere for a scheme of national service for women was progressing, the planned deployment of women at the Front was still limited, and constrained by women's perceived lack of relevant skills, inabilities, and expensive additional accommodation. The creation of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps was the most significant and controversial development for women in the war in relation to women at the Front. While the WAAC appeared to be a revolutionary development in theory, in practice women were barely welcomed by the authorities, and were the last group to be considered as a possibility for substitution of labour. In terms of recruiting women, however, the creation of the WAAC was a radical step.

Unlike the other organisations which deployed women at the Front, this body contained many working-class women in its ranks. It was not a body for working-class women as such, but the way in which it recruited meant that working-class women could join its ranks. Among young women who were already involved in the war at the Front, a women's army was an attractive proposition; it was the embodiment of women participating in the war, and why so many had rushed to join the VAD, or taken some other form of employment which would carry them to the Front. By 1917, the Women's Army had arrived, and it was upper and middle class women who it particularly appealed to as it promised greater involvement with the military. VAD Nora Pemberton who had been at the Front since October 1914 wrote to her mother in February 1917:

---

<sup>54</sup> Letter to Lady Norman from Katharine Furse, dated 14 December 1917. BRC 10<sup>8</sup>/3. WAWC, IWM.

Did you see quite a long and interesting article in the *Daily News* one day last week about women workers for the Army in France? It sounds most thrilling and I think I should like to transfer to it. I should love to form an actual part of the Army!<sup>55</sup>

Unfortunately this kind of idealism invested in the WAAC did not survive. A romantic vision of becoming a female soldier was not what was required. Though officials romanticised the WAAC in terms of helping 'Tommy' win the war, the work was little different to that being carried out already by women at the Front, and probably harder. In August 1917 when Katharine Furse was considering the benefits of combining the General Service VAD with the WAAC, she went out to investigate the living conditions of the WAAC at the Front, bothered by reports of their harshness and rumours of immorality, but concluded:

It was very kindly arranged by the War Office that I should go to France and see as much as possible of the WAAC conditions. After seeing some thirty units, I was of the opinion that though the conditions were undoubtedly hard, they are adequate and as good as the Country can afford and that there is no reason why VAD members should not accept them; I was also convinced that most of the rumours were unfounded.<sup>56</sup>

Women at the Front were by 1917 well aware of the rigours of the work, and the essence of WAAC work, once realised, would not necessarily be an attractive proposition. It was also not easy to transfer from one organisation, carrying out vital war work, to another. The WAAC did not want female soldiers, it wanted women who could wait at tables, cook, clean, drive and do clerical work and generally continue the menial work that women had already started back in 1914. But now the authorities needed women who already had some experience so that little training was needed, and women could be despatched abroad with the minimum of fuss. As

---

<sup>55</sup> Pemberton. Letter to Mother, dated 21 February 1917. DoD, IWM.

<sup>56</sup> Furse, 'Memorandum on what may have appeared...'. WAWC, IWM.

regards the job distribution, upper- and middle-class women entered the Women's Army as administrators, the equivalent to army officers; while the ranks were made up mostly but not entirely of working-class women. The more skilled jobs such as telegraph work and driving were usually carried out by middle-class women, while working-class women became waitresses, cooks and domestics. Some drafts consisted of Lancashire bakers or Glaswegian cooks, as women from the same region joined to go to France together in a similar fashion to the 'pals' battalions who joined Kitchener's Army.

In the Army Council Instruction issued in July 1917, it was stated that the object of the Corps was to 'effect substitution of women for soldiers in certain employments' at home and overseas.<sup>57</sup> Substitution was to take place on the basis that four women would usually replace three soldiers in clerical and technical areas, and would not be carried out until 'suitable' accommodation had been provided. It was considered that women were also more expensive to house than men because of the additional sanitary arrangements they would require, so women were not considered ideal as substitute labour. A report on the economy of manpower in the armies had stressed the necessity of finding substitute labour and it was considered that women would be acceptable for carrying out some tasks at the Front.<sup>58</sup> This report was concerned with moving forward men who worked behind the lines, either into fighting units, or further up the line. Work behind the line was considered less stressful and physically less demanding, yet it was discovered that men of sound constitution were still to be found. It was in these areas, where men categorised as

---

<sup>57</sup> ACI 1069 of 1917. 'Approval for the formation of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps' in the papers of Lucy Deane Streatfield. Miss 69. MRC.

<sup>58</sup> Lawson, 'Economy of Man Power in the Armies'. WAWC, IWM.



weaker or older, 'coloured' labour, prisoners of war, and also women, were considered possible suitable replacements, depending on proximity to the firing line, and the skill or sensitivity of the work. Figure 3 illustrates how men were graded from 1917 onwards. Grade 1 (formerly category A) indicated men fit for combat; grade 2 (formerly categories B and C) indicated men capable of comfortably walking six miles and fit for service either abroad in a supporting capacity or for service at home. Grades 3 and 4 were classed as unsuitable for combat and completely unfit.<sup>59</sup> Lawson's report stated that as many grade 2 men as possible who were at home should be released to work at the Front, and these could then be replaced by women. The general principle, therefore, was that as few women as possible should be sent to the Front. At the Front, category A or grade 1 men were still working behind the lines, and these were to be replaced by grade 2 men wherever possible. At the Front, the use of any other category had to be carefully considered. While Field Marshal Haig accepted the idea of female employment in France in principle, he believed there were difficulties, and in response to Lawson's report, stated:

It is necessary to point out that there is a limit with regard to the extent to which replacement by unfit men, women and coloured labour can be carried out with safety, and this limit can only be decided in this Country. Conditions in England and France differ, and the failure of any service in this Country through inefficient personnel may directly affect the troops, and even endanger operations.<sup>60</sup>

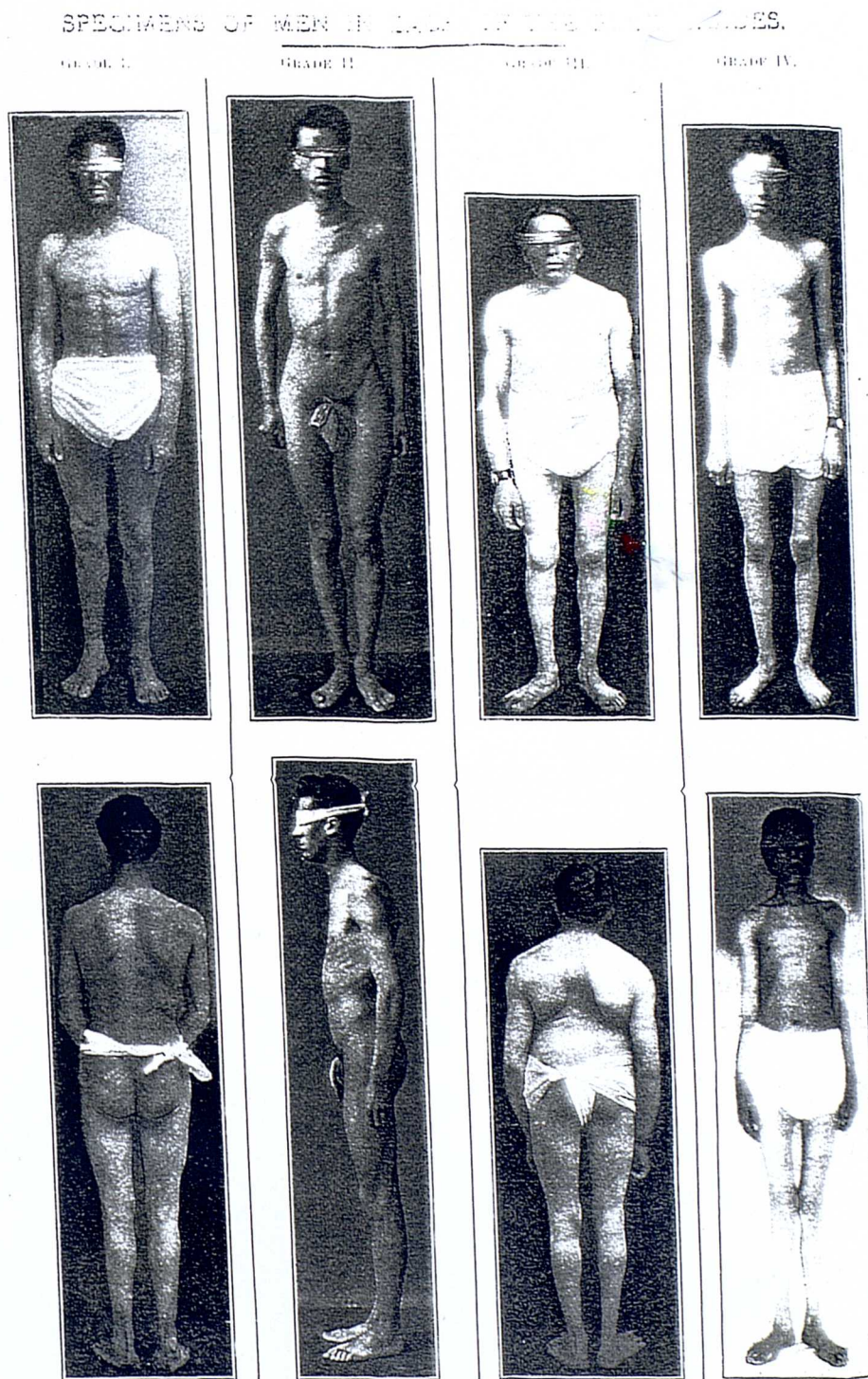
Women were seen to be disadvantaged on account of their inferior qualities relating to their sex, while men were graded on their capability of fighting. All those outside

---

<sup>59</sup> Bourke, *Dismembering the Male*, 172-3.

<sup>60</sup> Letter to The Secretary at the War Office from Douglas Haig, dated 11 March 1917. Army 3 4/6. WAWC, IWM.

Figure 3. Grades of fitness for men's military service: 'Specimens of men in each of the four grades'. Parliamentary Papers 1919 xxvi, 308.



45 'Specimens of Men in each of the Four Grades'. [Par. Papers 1919 xxvi, 308]

category A were therefore deemed to be deficient in some way, and not conforming to the masculine ideal, either because they were considered physically deficient or racially inferior. Haig declared the improbability of women coping with the pressures at the Front. He noted that: 'During the battle of the Somme the strain imposed upon our medical personnel almost reached breaking point. Convoys and evacuations took place all night and all day, and it is quite certain that women could not have stood the enormous and incessant strain, both mental and physical.'<sup>61</sup> Yet he failed to acknowledge that women were working and coping with the pressures during the Somme campaign. He judged women ideologically rather than on the practical evidence before him. He accepted that women could come to the Front to replace some category A men in the postal service, though he doubted women's ability to acquire the military technical knowledge needed, 'which admittedly women are slow at acquiring', he noted.<sup>62</sup> He accepted that they could be part of the Army Service Corps, helping with cooking, storeholding and cleaning, but could not work as butchers or in the field bakeries. Women could join the bakeries at the bases, however. Women were also considered suitable to work as clerks at railway depots as replacements for class A men, 'provided that they are introduced gradually', and were allowed to drive cars but not lorries. Haig did not consider women suitable for the printing and stationery services as he thought women did not possess the required skill or strength, though they might be useful in certain aspects of the work. Within the medical corps it was accepted that women could be employed as stewards and dispensers and storekeepers, but not as stretcher-bearers. In the ordnance department,

---

<sup>61</sup> Letter to The Secretary at the War Office from Douglas Haig, dated 11 March 1917. Appendix. Paragraph 49. Army 3<sup>4</sup>/7. WAWC, IWM.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., paragraph 6.

women were also considered suitable to replace class A men, though not as supervisors. They were acceptable as clerks in the pay corps, but could not be accepted into the domestic services of labour units as they were not permitted to work alongside 'coloured' labour and prisoners of war, who were already employed there. Haig was wary of introducing women to the base depots where reinforcements arrived. He was unsure of the control over the men and felt that in these areas there would be 'more likelihood of the sex difficulty occurring in these base depots than elsewhere'.<sup>63</sup> He was, however, prepared to experiment with small detachments of domestic workers in controlled areas. As regards canteens, Haig demanded that trained class B men be sent to the Front and women could be employed in their place at home. He commended the YMCA and other similar organisations for increasing the numbers of women at the camp canteens. Haig had general problems about the employment of women apart from the problems of accommodation. His tone in responding to Lawson's report was one of resignation at accepting women's labour, and concern about the many wider considerations in bringing them to France. He was worried about accommodation, skill, sex, and protection from non-white men. The allocation of women interfered with Haig's main plan for labour:

...the ultimate allocation of labour in France will be roughly to employ Coloured labour at Base Ports, and on the Lines of Communication, and white labour in Army Areas. This will mean a mass of coloured men at Bases where our women will be chiefly employed, and it will then be necessary either to leave white guards or to alter our proposed allocation of labour throughout.<sup>64</sup>

Despite Haig's reservations about the introduction of women at the Front to work within the army, the War Office recognised that the army was by 1917 'to a

---

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., paragraph 80.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., paragraph 90.

serious extent, dependent on women's labour'.<sup>65</sup> Plans were drawn up to formally recruit and induct women into a women's army in which they would be uniformed, paid and sign on for 12 months or the duration of the war. There was some concern that patriotism and the attraction of wearing uniform might not be enough to induce women to sign on for such a lengthy period, but Mrs Burleigh Leach, who later became head of the WAAC, claimed that the women she knew 'were willing to sign anything, and that what they wanted was to be soldiers, that they wanted to take the place of a man in every sense.'<sup>66</sup> This aspiration was of course not met, and it was in a more limited capacity that women were allowed to go to the Front to work with the army.

Once at work the women were under the supervision of the commanding officer of the base where they were employed, at other times they would be under the control of their own administrators. The areas of work in which it was considered acceptable for women to work in place of men were split into categories. Those employed in clerical work would operate chiefly as clerks, but also as typists, shorthand typists, accountants and librarians; those in the cookery division would be cooks, waitresses, wine waitresses and butlers. This category also included domestic staff who were subdivided into housemaids, laundresses, vegetable women, pantry maids, scrubbers, washers up, char women, and collectively known as 'bye-product' women. The transport section was not specified in the Army Council Instruction, though it was hoped that women would be employed as drivers and chauffeurs able to

---

<sup>65</sup> Memorandum on Proceedings of Conference, AG XI, 10 April 1917. Army 3 7/15. WAWC, IWM.

<sup>66</sup> Minutes of meeting on 'The Employment of Women in the Army' held on 15 January 1917. Army 3 9/5. WAWC, IWM.

maintain their own vehicles. Storekeeping involved checking and packing and was classed as unskilled labour. This category also covered tailors, shoemakers, messengers and bakers. The next category was the signal services covering telephone and postal work, and this work was highly prized by women as hours and the nature of the work dictated that they lived and worked separately from the rest of the WAAC. They were also distinguished by wearing a blue armband on their uniform. When status, badges and symbols were all important, this particular distinction was capable of rousing envy and pride.

The WAAC was organised along military lines with an emphasis on discipline. The system was more flexible for women regarding punishment (women would not be shot for desertion or even court-martialled), and leave on compassionate grounds was more readily available. Supervision and discipline for the WAACs were regulated through a hierarchy of administrators rather than officers, though they were the equivalent to army officers. NCO status also existed in the Women's Army with the creation of the post of forewoman. The supervisory structure was subdivided. At the head was the Chief Controller of the WAAC, Mrs Burleigh Leach, and the Chief Controller of the overseas division, Mrs (later Dame) Gwynne-Vaughan. In France, bases were supervised by an area controller; a unit administrator was responsible for the running of an individual camp along with an assistant administrator. Running these camps and hostels was seen as a very important task to be undertaken by specially qualified women. Desirable candidates were:

House Mistresses and house keepers in schools and large institutions, and women trained in welfare work, and superintendents of Hostels organised by the Ministry of Munitions, University women, and those who have gained experience in Canteens and girls' clubs; and the qualities chiefly sought in them is that they should have been used to

dealing with girls, have helped to organise games and women's work, and above all that they should have tact and strength of character.<sup>67</sup>

On a more local level the forewoman was responsible for a group of women at work or in individual huts when they were back at base. This elaborate supervisory network was in place to ensure that the rank and file were constantly supervised, in order to allay fears at home, rather than because the women were considered untrustworthy, though this was often the impression felt by many of the workers. Overall control remained in the hands of male officers, and the military hierarchy.

The formation of the WAACs was an idea that had been mooted in various forms since the beginning of the war. Because women were keen to form a section of the military prior to the war, but found few openings other than through the medical sections, the continuation of war provided them with an opportunity. In December 1915 following the call for volunteers to join the Women's Volunteer Reserve and wear khaki uniform, over a thousand had joined within weeks. Their programme was one of preparation to replace men should the call come, by drilling, marching and offering to help fundraise. Their initial success was limited, and judged to have very little focus or purpose. They also failed to make a great impact on the War Office, which remained the key to any lasting female role within the military. The creation of the Women's Legion by the Marchioness of Londonderry in 1915 was the first decisive step towards placing women in khaki. They were the khaki equivalent of the VAD. Their uniform was a brown skirt and jacket, worn with a felt hat, and as with the VADs they were paid £20 a year plus food and lodging and a uniform allowance. Their purpose was to supply women cooks and domestics to release men for other

---

<sup>67</sup> Streatfield. 'The (Official) History of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps.' MRC.

work. It was thought that the introduction of this kind of female labour would improve the cooking and cleaning within camps as this was more obviously seen as women's work. It was also anticipated that female knowledge of domestic management could introduce economies into the process of feeding men in camps. Their cookery skills were quickly taken on at home training camps with the first contingent of 20 despatched to a convalescent camp in August 1915. The Women's Legion later widened its remit to provide cooks in home hospitals, taking over the responsibility of the VADs, and drivers for the War Office, but they were not to be found abroad. When the WAAC finally came into being the 6,000 members of the Women's Legion were absorbed into its ranks wearing the WAAC uniform but maintaining the Legion's own badge. This was not a smooth transition by any means, and class rivalry was an inevitable result of this merger, with the socially superior Legion members being preferred to their lower-class colleagues.

Patriotism was the key to enrolling women into the WAAC, though as with other female bodies there was an awareness that the 'best' young women were already employed elsewhere. Robert has countered suggestions that the patriotism of working-class women was in doubt as the reason for their joining the WAAC, the women tempted instead by the rates of pay. She argues that working-class women were as likely to join for patriotic reasons, the opportunity of working overseas, and for the enjoyment and prestige of carrying out work previously undertaken by men.<sup>68</sup> The WAAC was an attractive proposition because women were keen to be part of a military body, also the rate of pay was comparable and even favourable to other war work, certainly to that received in the medical sectors. However, while the women's

---

<sup>68</sup> Robert, 'Gender, Class, and Patriotism', 61-3.



army sounded attractive, the reality of unflattering khaki uniform, strict discipline and basic living quarters was less than appealing. In order to counter this negativity, the authorities set out to take advantage of the changing role of young women and appeal to the 'modern khaki woman' carrying out glamorous, previously male work. Edith Barton, in her co-written history of the WAAC, despaired of those women who had not enrolled in the war effort as the way forward for women:

If every woman under fifty wore uniform, small shops devoted to luxury - blouses, millinery, and lingerie - could be closed until after the war, and the energies of the manufacturers, middlemen, and retailers switched on to war work. There would then be no question of lack of aeroplanes in readiness for the enemy's air campaigns. There are over 3,000 workers in one large store alone; if all non-essential departments were closed, how much of this human energy might be used for other more vital purposes of war industry. The "khaki woman" has shown the way.<sup>69</sup>

The role of the WAAC, based ostensibly on the substitution of men for women, in reality allowed women to capitalise on the opportunities of war. However limited the type of work appeared to be, to women joining the army, the prospects offered difference and excitement. Rather than the passivity that was associated with the home front, serving abroad promised the opportunity of action. Women had not been hostile or indifferent to the military prior to the war - they had actively sought admission. Now that the war had dragged on for so long, women seized this opportunity to demand what they had in many instances craved. Serving one's country was seen as a great honour, and women could do that only by wearing a khaki uniform. The war provided this opportunity which was welcomed by women. From the very limited role for women initially anticipated and desired by the authorities, there had been a shift which took account of what women had been calling for:

---

<sup>69</sup>Barton & Cody, *Eve in Khaki*, 50.

It is not unnatural that women should for the first time in this war have demanded a more active part than it was previously thought possible for them to play in military operations...In the making of munitions they have long been doing work of which few had previously thought them capable...There are many employments in connection with the army itself, which they felt as capable of performing as men, whereby they would be able to release more men from auxiliary occupations to places in the trenches and the firing line.<sup>70</sup>

Thus women were able to build upon their continuing war experiences by combining a sense of femininity with a sense of the groundbreaking evolution of women's work and capabilities. When the Women's Legion took over driving on the home front, as VADs and FANYs were driving ambulances abroad, it seemed a natural development that this skill should also fall within the realm of the newly formed WAAC, and encouraged women to learn to drive. The official history recording the formation of the WAAC stated:

This was an even greater innovation than that of employing women as army cooks, for not only were women motor-drivers unheard of in the army before the war, but they were extremely rare in civil life. The way in which hundreds of women have trained themselves for a profession which requires considerable courage and nerve and entails hard work in all weathers is one of the many indicators of women's eagerness to help their brothers in this great war.<sup>71</sup>

In this context the deployment of the WAAC at home was a reasonably straightforward evolution of women's work, by making army-related work more centralised rather than the fragmentation of organisations which had existed previously. The deployment of women in the WAAC overseas was not straightforward. The move was not considered without an investigation and report which was conducted in early 1917. It found:

In the last year or more in England the employment of women has developed to an immense extent and has been attended with

---

<sup>70</sup> Streatfield. 'The (Official) History of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps.' MRC.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

remarkable success. Women have taken up various forms of male employment, which by many had been deemed impossible for the sex. They have found their way into work in all branches of life and have proved their capacity for it.<sup>72</sup>

The foremost consideration was the release of men in auxiliary positions for work further up the line, as well as the logistics of accommodating the women who would replace them. Emphasis was also placed upon the safety of women and the report stressed that any women serving abroad would be based in safe areas 'on lines of communication far from the firing line'. There was little difficulty targeting the men who could be replaced, so once quarters for women had been arranged, a controlled draft of 14 waitresses to work in an officers' club was sent out at the end of March 1917. They were followed by a detachment of 27 cooks and waitresses for a second officers' club. Marguerite Cody who wrote up a history of the WAAC, noted of these first drafts: 'Thus it was most fittingly too - that the first members of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps to work in France undertook the womanly duties of cooking and waiting.'<sup>73</sup> This deployment was followed by detachments of clerks, telegraphists and telephonists placed in the telegraph exchanges in various base towns. By May 1917 a large WAAC camp had opened for cooks who were assigned to work in the kitchens of an infantry base depot. However, it should not be considered surprising that these early drafts were confined to officers' clubs, not merely because officers' comforts were considered over and above those of the men, but because one of the greater questions facing the authorities over the deployment of the WAAC was whether or not they should be allowed to mix with the men. This dilemma was resolved partly because of the need to release more men, and supplying

---

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> EM Barton & M Cody, *Eve in Khaki*, 91.

women meant that women could not work at the Front within the army without being in contact with large numbers of soldiers and non-combatant men. It was therefore officially sanctioned that, under the closest supervision, women away from work could mix with the men, with the hope that this would eliminate the necessity for illicit behaviour and consequent scandals which would be difficult to quell back home. It was the responsibility of the administrators and their deputies to enforce discipline and supervision at the camps and maintain the well-being of the women. All accommodation in France was supervised and consisted of hut encampments and hostels housing between 30 to 500 women. Within the first six months accommodation was arranged for the deployment of more than 4,000 women. Health and hygiene came under the supervision of women, with inspections of work and accommodation sites by women doctors. Provision was made in hospitals for the care of WAACs who fell ill, and a VAD was also attached to the WAAC camps. In addition, an official network of entertainment outlets were planned, led by the setting up of YWCA huts in WAAC areas, where, in a Christian environment, the women were allowed to invite male guests under a system of signed passes, to dances, sports and other types of entertainment sanctioned by the authorities.

It was considered that substitution was the sole reason for the employment of women at the Front in the WAAC. The pay for the WAAC was higher than that of the VADs, with a minimum salary of £26 per year paid to those engaged in domestic service with free board and lodging, and a uniform allowance. The uniform required was a great coat, a khaki-coloured coat-frock, stockings, shoes, leggings and a brown felt hat. The WAACs were entitled to wear shoulder straps which were coloured to denote which section they worked for: blue for women at headquarters; orange for

administrators; scarlet for domestic section; brown for clerical; claret for mechanical; purple for miscellaneous. In addition the women wore on their uniform the badge of the corps which was a laurel wreath surrounding the initials of the corps.

Administrator distinctions were also marked by the wearing of a badge with a rose and fleur-de-lys arranged according to the particular grade; and the forewoman grade was denoted by the wearing of a laurel leaf on the upper arm. The wearing of insignia bestowed prestige and enabled women to feel part of the military system.

The enrolment of women into the Corps was organised by the Ministry of Labour. They followed up calls from the War Office for certain numbers of women with particular skills required in France. Details were then sent from the Ministry of Labour to local employment exchanges. This was very different from the recruitment of VADs, and was really a further development in the engaging of women for employment. This was much closer to the scheme envisaged by Katharine Furse and other like-minded women, including Hermia Durham at the Ministry of Labour, who felt that women's war work could best be co-ordinated from a pool of women, rather than through competing organisations. The training of recruits for the Corps was minimal as it was hoped that women joining would bring with them skills from their civil employment, whether as domestic servants, clerks, cooks, or telegraph operators. However, this level of skilled labour was soon exhausted and training was made available. This was particularly necessary for drivers, though large numbers of drivers arrived in France unable to drive the old cars there to a satisfactory standard, and many were returned home. It became necessary for a certificate of competence to be issued, but driving at the Front whether for the WAAC, the FANY or the VAD, was always a precarious affair given the state of both vehicles and roads, and lack of

lighting. Entry to the WAAC depended upon two references, followed by a selection board and a medical, and then engagement for a year or for the duration. Once engaged they were paid to ensure their service until required. When called up they were sent to the WAAC hostel at the Connaught Club in London for three weeks of training, lectures and vaccination. Here they were put in uniform and put through some basic drilling procedures. Many women recounting their experiences later in life recalled the embarrassing debacle of undisciplined drill sessions in Hyde Park under the critical gaze of a bemused public. This was also the time where women would be inculcated into the spirit of the Corps in preparation for the unknown. From London they were sent to Folkestone or Dover for further drill and instruction until they received their embarkation orders, and proceeded to France in drafts of between 30 and 60, headed by their unit administrators.

By the end of the war in November 1918, there were over 8,000 WAACs serving in France. Their experience was not one of total success, and was dogged by rumour and scandal surrounding their behaviour, which set sections of the public against them. However the reasons for their failings were not to do with behaviour, as this was shown to be above reproach with misdemeanours contained to a minimum. The problem for the WAAC was similar to that faced by other women employed during the war, and was one of confused organisation stemming from indecision as to how best to employ women without transgressing the boundaries of acceptability. The administrators at the Front received conflicting orders, or felt they had little authority to make decisions without first referring up through a very long chain of command. Administrator Dorothy Pickford complained to her father: 'Can you believe it, I am being moved again. Tonight I feel absolutely disheartened, what is the

use of working up any enthusiasm over a place?... I am raving with fury and discontent when really I ought to be full of self-satisfaction for I am going to Bapaume.'<sup>74</sup> Margaret Gibson was equally exasperated with her rôle as a WAAC administrator. She wrote: 'Here you may do nothing without referring to, or through the AC [Area Controller], you're just to be a medium for carrying out orders, unquestioningly; and if you question them, if they seem to you as a reasonable, and intelligent thinking person unreasonable, you are very disagreeably brought to task.'<sup>75</sup>

Despite organisational problems, the experiment with the Women's Army had demonstrated once and for all that women would be a valuable resource at the Front in any future major conflict. Large-scale wars could be fought in the future because Britain had discovered a new and valuable source of labour that did not have to be confined to the home front, but could be used within limits at the Front. If women, prior to the outbreak of war, had hoped they could find a permanent place within the military, they were granted this wish. It may not have furthered their opportunities in peacetime, but in war the mould had been broken. One can debate whether this was a benefit for women, but for those women who believed in Britain's imperial and military superiority, the war was a success. Their failing was that they were still constrained by War Office dogma unsure of how far to trust women to organise themselves. Perhaps if women had been given this opportunity and trust, then the problems encountered by women working at the Front may have been eased. Many of these problems could be related to class prejudice which was just as prevalent

---

<sup>74</sup> Unpublished letters of The Honourable Dorothy Pickford. Letter to Father, dated 17 July 1918. Con Shelf DS/Misc/33. DoD, IWM.

<sup>75</sup> Unpublished letters of Margaret Gibson. Letter to Mary, dated 16 September 1917. 86/19/1. DoD, IWM.

among women in authority as men.

The WAAC remained at the Front beyond the Armistice, continuing to serve the men until their demobilisation. The WAAC authorities considered their unit a success. They were seen as pioneers in the finest tradition of Florence Nightingale.

Of the significance of women's war work Marguerite Cody wrote:

The revolution has affected the whole status of womanhood. We cannot realize its significance to-day; but in the future historians will gauge its true value. The greatest development of this revolution came into being just a year ago with the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps, which, maybe, in years to come will be known as the greatest single event that has occurred in the history of the women of England. Then the names of its pioneers will be handed down through the generations as the successors of Florence Nightingale.<sup>76</sup>

Whatever the moral dilemmas involved surrounding the creation of a Women's Army on the one hand, and the high hopes invested in them on the other, the changing nature of war ensured that women would have a role to play in the military, and it would be on the professional footing established with the WAAC, rather than the ad hoc voluntary basis in which the VAD had been conceived. In this respect, Cody's observations were accurate, though she did not take into account the social reaction to women being part of the military. The formation of the WAAC indicated the extent to which women's involvement in war at the Front had developed and this was certainly welcomed by those women who had struggled to gain admittance to areas previously out of bounds to women. The WAAC was proud of its service and its members believed they had changed the face of women's employment. WAAC Eve Reynolds was invited to speak at a public meeting in June 1918 on the subject of women's future after the war, and stated: 'I think we all agree that in most

---

<sup>76</sup> EM Barton & M Cody, *Eve in Khaki*, 87-8.



cases the introduction of women into the places that the men were obliged to vacate has been very successful. After showing themselves capable and intelligent, can they fall back again into the shadow and live only for domestic affairs alone...'<sup>77</sup>

Feeding and entertaining the troops became the responsibility of mostly Christian organisations, which included women among their staff. Those who were officially attached to the BEF went with the YMCA, Scottish Churches Huts, and the YWCA. The women who helped out with the Christian organisations were few in number and were from upper- and middle-class backgrounds. There were about 350 women engaged in this sort of work in 1917, and Haig had given his blessing for women to replace men in the camp canteens, as this was work that women were considered capable of managing.<sup>78</sup> The work involved a variety of domestic tasks ranging from cooking and cleaning and serving behind the counters in camps. They ran clubs specially for officers, and also worked in large camps serving men from the ranks resting from the line. Another vital area of the work of Christian organisations was to help organise entertainment for the troops. Drinks and food were provided cheaply. It was believed that if the troops could be entertained cheaply at these huts they would be less likely to go off into the towns to the local bars to drink and get drunk or cause trouble. It was also considered desirable that the men should be kept away from brothels and prostitutes and consequently venereal disease. It was therefore one of the responsibilities of the Christian organisations to keep the men out

---

<sup>77</sup> Miscellaneous documents of Miss Eve Fayle Gawne (nee Reynolds). Public address on the role of women after the war, June 1918. 94/51/1, DoD, IWM.

<sup>78</sup> Letter to The Secretary at the War Office from Douglas Haig, dated 11 March 1917. Appendix. Page 28. Army 3 4/7. WAWC, IWM.

of mischief, and women helped play a role in providing a temperate environment for the men to rest. It is possible that selected women were considered to be a beneficial addition to the work of these organisations, not just because they brought 'domestic' skills with them, but as a result of their civilising, spiritual influence. Young, upper- and middle-class women traditionally were associated with abstinence and purity, and these associations could be seen to have beneficial effects upon men who were from lower social classes. Unlike the women who worked in the medical sphere these women worked closely with men who were not injured and this significantly altered the nature of the relationships that were formed. The work of organisations like the YMCA was closely linked to entertainment, and in addition secular entertainment was provided at the Front by touring concert parties, the most popular and well-known being the tours organised by the singer and actress Lena Ashwell. Again these parties contained numbers of women entertainers, and while they were officially sanctioned the fact that many were not 'ladies' was a cause for concern.

The changing position for women at the Front during the course of the war illustrates the ideological constraints which had to be loosened or shifted in order to pursue the war to its bitter conclusion. Attitudes to class and gender couched within the parameters of imperial discourse were therefore at the heart of the politics of war, and the deployment of women to the Front. Although women had connections with the military on the eve of the war, the relationship remained uneasy throughout. There was a continued feeling of grudging acceptance. The disagreements illustrate the extent to which the authorities devalued women's work and made permanent involvement beyond the war difficult. Women were not entrusted with high office,

and the few women who were, felt they had little authority to control and organise the women under them. During the war, women felt they had advanced significantly from the position of August 1914, though power and permanence remained illusory. While historians may have concluded that women and war could not be reconciled, this was not a contemporary view held by women eager to gain access to the military. They relied on traditional concepts of femininity to gain acceptance, though this acted as an impediment as well. By accepting subordinate definitions of women's work, they achieved relative success in increasing the numbers of women at the Front. The 'double helix' metaphor is only relevant, however, in terms of gender hierarchy and organisation at the Front. Many of the women who went to the Front were from middle- and upper-class backgrounds. This, with an awareness of their status as civilised Englishwomen of the British Empire, invested them with status and power which they were fully prepared to exercise on their arrival at the Front.

## Chapter Two

# On Active Service

Oh, I'm in France, I'm in the war!<sup>1</sup>

Tennis some mornings, Boulogne others! Except for the French sentries, the torpedo boats, the constant railway traffic and the occasional distant sound of guns, it is very difficult (in Wimereux) to realise that we are at war.<sup>2</sup>

Here I am on the desert [Kantara] at last, and so happy. Nothing but tents to be seen as far as they eye can reach. Nothing to be heard but the steady tramp of marching feet and rumble of Army lorries.<sup>3</sup>

This camp has been adding to its unenviable reputation. Last week one of the household absconded. She was away 24 hours before she was rounded up and returned to Madrillet, so giving the wretched UA three prisoners to guard. The next thing was that the original two escaped. They got out of the window when the guard was momentarily called away, and departed without hats and in overalls and sandshoes.<sup>4</sup>

The men came up the line from the canal in a very, very bad state of repair having been gassed for the first time...we had gone with a very satisfactory collection of sanitary towels...and so we cut those in half, saturated them with my beautiful Rimmel's toilet vinegar...and got plenty of gauze...and fastened them round the men's faces and noses and mouths...Very effective.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Oral history testimony of Emily Maud Victoria Newing (nee Rumbold). Reel 3. 000576/07. DoS, IWM.

<sup>2</sup> Slythe. Diary entry for 1 August 1915. DoD, IWM.

<sup>3</sup> Unpublished diaries of Sister Theresa Apperley. Diary entry for 12 July 1918. LC.

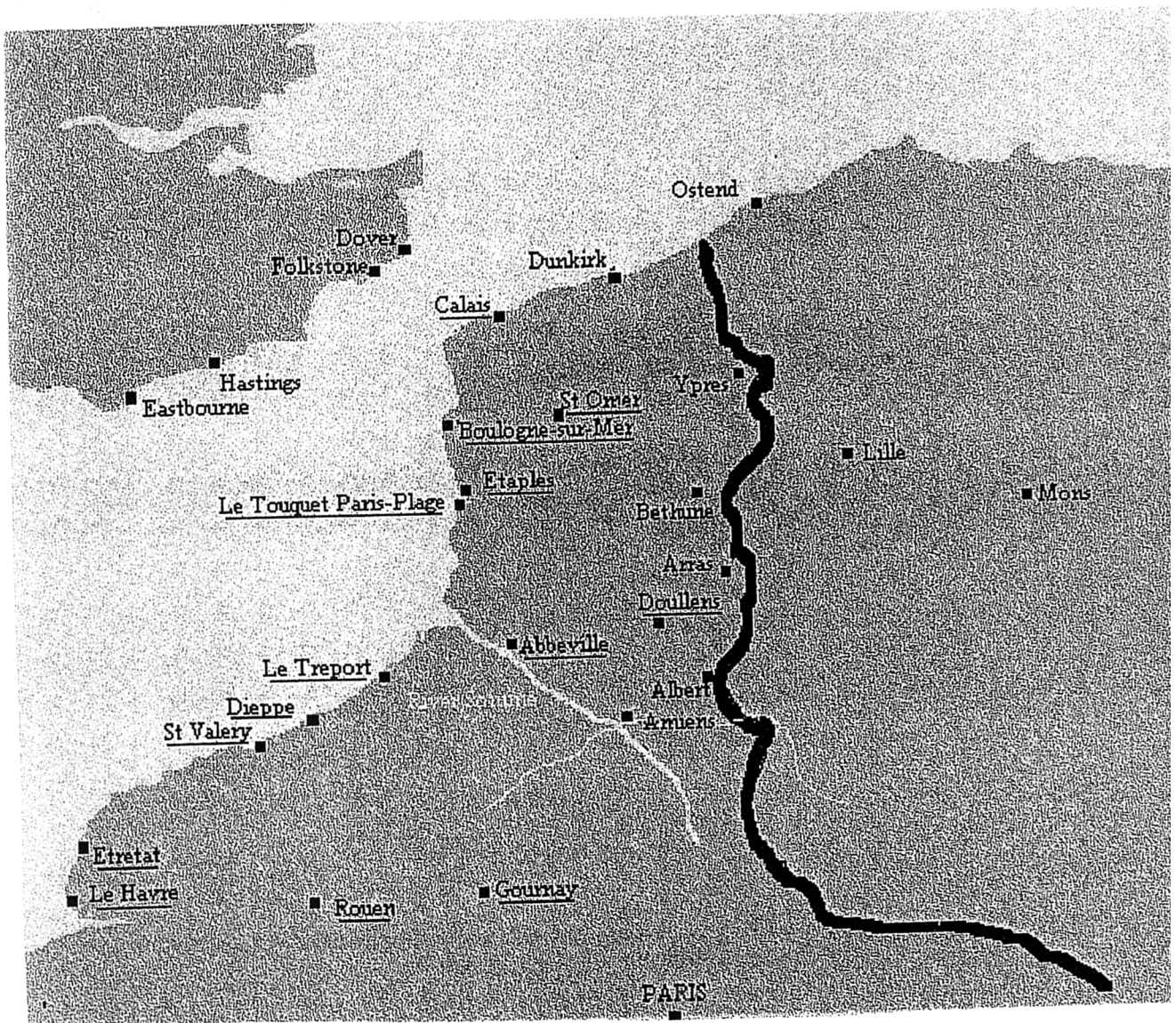
<sup>4</sup> Pickford. Letter to Molly, dated 29 July 1918. DoD, IWM.

<sup>5</sup> Oral history testimony of Beryl Butterworth Hutchinson. Reel 2. 000562/11. DoS, IWM.

Women who worked at the Front have written about and remembered the war in many different ways. Their war was not necessarily the one they had expected, imagined or anticipated. Nor was it the war that is now mythologised in contemporary imagination - the horror of trench warfare on the western Front. Instead the women of the BEF wrote about a paradoxical war. One that was both extraordinary and ordinary, one full of joy but also immense tragedy, one that brought fulfilment as well as loss. It is the multiple meanings of their experiences at the Front that will be examined in this chapter: the expectations that women had and the extent to which they differed from the reality. What did being on 'active service' involve for the women of the BEF?

When we think of the Front, the image is usually one of muddy trenches and barbed wire with men trying to stay alive against the odds. It was a place from which women were altogether excluded, and so women defined their own Front to feel included in the 'heart of war'. The Front was more than a firing line - it had to be for women to feel involved. Apart from trenches it was a place of communication bases, headquarters, first aid posts, and further back still, base depots and hospitals - the places where women of the BEF worked (see Figure 4). As women left the shores of Britain they considered themselves 'on active service'. But it was the exclusive area of the front line that was most attractive to women, and the nearer they were the more real and active their war became. The Front, then, for women was both a geographical and a psychological location.

The Front symbolised the heart of war, inspiring traditional heroic notions of battle. In addition to patriotism, women were lured by the prospect of taking part in a real life adventure. Patriotic women who desired direct involvement seized any



Front line

Base towns where women were mostly stationed

Figure 4. Western Front (1914), indicating main base towns where women were located.

opportunity which would take them to the Front as part of the British Expeditionary Force, like VAD Winifred Kenyon, who noted in her diary:

When I returned from May Hicks' about 10 on Thursday evening I found a letter from Bessie Curtis, saying she was going out with a mobile field hospital, and had just heard they wanted another cook, could I go? I am more pleased than words can say, though I don't suppose it will be a jam[boree] by any means.<sup>6</sup>

While WAAC administrator, Dorothy Pickford's first letter from the Front to her family and friends began: 'My dear Everybody, Here begins the tale of the Great Adventure.'<sup>7</sup> Women eagerly embraced the opportunity to enter this exclusive male domain. The Front represented the antithesis of home and women wanted the recognition and glamour of overseas active service. Recalling her reasons for volunteering for work abroad, WAAC Ada Potter felt that 'somehow giving one's all in France seemed much more worthwhile.'<sup>8</sup> VAD Daisy Spickett recalled that signing up for overseas service: '...seemed to me the only hope of getting right into the middle of everything, getting abroad and doing whatever was going, and the idea of the Army attracted me – being in the Army.'<sup>9</sup> Throughout the war, the Front remained an exciting possibility for women. VAD Ruth Manning arrived in France in 1917 and wrote, 'I was awakened in the night by two explosions, but not very near. In the morning, I heard that a mine had been washed up on the beach that exploded! Oh, the excitements of life here.'<sup>10</sup> Excitement was also evident among the WAACs. Dorothy Pickford led a thirty-strong draft to France and described the event in a letter

---

<sup>6</sup> Unpublished diary of Miss WL Kenyon. Diary entry for 28 February 1915. 84/24/1. DoD, IWM.

<sup>7</sup> Pickford. Letter home, dated 24 January 1918. DoD, IWM.

<sup>8</sup> Unpublished memoirs of Ada Potter. LC.

<sup>9</sup> Oral history testimony of Daisy Colnett Spickett. Reel 2. 000514/08. DoS, IWM.

<sup>10</sup> Unpublished diaries of Miss RB Manning. Diary entry for 3 May 1917. 80/21/1. DoD, IWM.

to her sister: 'I didn't get much sleep with two glaring unshaded lights over my head, but I would rather have that than rats! The girls were very good tho' awfully excited, and I only had to call for silence twice, but I sounded exceedingly sévere.'<sup>11</sup>

Women arrived at the Front expecting and hoping for an adventure. The prospect of sleeping in tents, of existing on rations, and of carrying out demanding work was part of that adventure. Being at the Front offered a different experience and knowledge about the war itself. Having only received censored news at home, YMCA worker Irene Rathbone expressed surprise on her arrival at the Front:

What a lot one learns over here in an hour. For instance I hadn't realised that for weeks Boulogne was bombed almost nightly...that Abbeville was such a danger spot that scarcely a single civilian was left, and about 18 WAACs had been killed - all this and more we gathered once on this side of the channel.<sup>12</sup>

Access to the 'real' war at the Front filled women with excitement. Winifred Kenyon was at the Front for three months before she was able to record 'Bombs at last!' in her diary, after being woken at 5am one morning by distant explosions.<sup>13</sup> Far from being afraid of being close to the frontline, women actively sought to be as close as possible. Only in this way could they feel involved in the 'real' war. Sister Jentie Paterson worked in a casualty clearing station in the first months of the war, and wrote to a friend:

We are the furthest up lot of sisters except those on the trains which have penetrated to within a mile or two of the lines. Last week one such train was under fire while they were moving in the wounded & they are the 1<sup>st</sup> Sisters to be specially commended; - we are dying for our turn next.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Pickford. Letter to Molly, dated 24 January 1918. DoD, IWM.

<sup>12</sup> Rathbone. General diary entry for June 1918. Emphasis in the original. DoD, IWM.

<sup>13</sup> Kenyon. Diary entry for 1 June 1915. DoD, IWM.

<sup>14</sup> Unpublished letters and diaries of Sister Jentie Paterson. Letter to Martha, dated 16 November 1914. 90/10/1. DoD, IWM.



The excitement of being involved in the first hectic weeks of the war is captured in the diaries of the first military nurses who went overseas. They recount many atrocity stories which are not related in the diaries of other women who came to the Front later in the war. Though diaries throughout the war contain references to various spy stories and local rumours, none contain the sheer scale of reported atrocities as these early accounts by professional nurses. Fuelled by propaganda, fear and excitement, nurses recorded reported atrocities, which perhaps they needed to believe in. These included German barbarities performed on Allied soldiers, stretcher bearers or French and Belgian locals. Women lived in a forbidden place where rumours played upon their anxieties and prejudices, and were easily convinced by propaganda about German brutality.<sup>15</sup> With so few women at the Front these rumours exacerbated their sense of vulnerability. Sister Jentie Paterson wrote about hospital evacuations: 'Nurses arrived in caps and macs no clothing - some say the British were destroying the Bridges but after German atrocities not safe to leave wounded or women!'<sup>16</sup> Sister Burgess was stationed at Marseilles waiting to board HMT *Aragon*, and wrote: 'We are warned to be very careful as the place is full of spies, ie. Marseilles. We are not allowed out alone but must go in twos or threes during the day or in fours or sixes after dark.'<sup>17</sup> Sister James wrote in her diary about the reported death of a nursing sister at the hands of a German patient, though was unclear as to

---

<sup>15</sup> See Peter Buitenhuis, *The Great War of Words: Literature as Propaganda, 1914 and After*, BT Batsford Limited, 1989, 29. Also Ruth Harris, 'The 'Child of the Barbarian': Rape, Race and Nationalism in France During the First World War' in *Past & Present*, 141, November 1993, 172-205.

<sup>16</sup> Paterson. Diary entry for 28 August 1914. DoD, IWM.

<sup>17</sup> Unpublished diary and miscellaneous papers of Sister Burgess. Diary entry for 7 December 1917. LC.

whether it was supposed to be a strangulation or stabbing. She wrote:

The story of the German stabbing a nurse at No. 11 is now contradicted. One can't tell if anything is true or not. It is certain one had died because I saw the funeral myself.<sup>18</sup>

At this stage of the war it was easy to rationalise the death of a nurse as the responsibility of the enemy. The Front was a place of fear for women because it was unknown to them, yet fear and the unknown also produced a sense of excitement, danger and glamour. Avidly recounting rumours in their diaries helped convey the excitement of the war they felt they were part of. Sister Mary Brown was stationed in Basra, and wrote:

The canteen was broken into last night, and several things stolen, and a patient also reported that his watch, belt and cigarette case were pinched off his locker during the night. Some Arabs thieving again, strange the sentries didn't see them, 2 Indian guards walk about all night and 1 stands at Officers enteric (intestinal), the other end of my beat. An English one stands outside Sisters Quarters and another stands round the back where the Sisters sleep in huts. I will need to carry round the carving knife with me, I certainly wouldn't like to disturb them at their thieving, its a wonder I didn't, because I passed by the canteen 4 times last night, they must have shaded their light well. If I see any suspicious creatures about I will just call the guard and clear out, in case a stray shot comes my way.<sup>19</sup>

Many of the fears that women had about being at the Front were unfounded for their safety was paramount for the authorities, if only to allay the fears of concerned relatives. For those who wanted to be close to the trenches and the 'heart of war', safety considerations ensured that this wish remained unfulfilled. The emphasis in this report in *The Times* of 11 February 1918 was for the safety of the women on board the transport ship *Aragon* when it was sunk in December 1917. An

---

<sup>18</sup> Unpublished diaries of Sister MM James. Diary entry for 24 November 1914. LC.

<sup>19</sup> Unpublished diaries of Sister MA Brown. Diary entry for 18 January 1917. 88/7/1. DoD, IWM.

officer who had been aboard reported:

...that when six boats full of nurses were lowered not a single man tried to enter the boats. He adds:- "I think it speaks volumes for the discipline of the troops on board that all the nurses were saved. Many of the nurses were doing artificial respiration, and they told me that whenever a Tommy came to, the first thing he asked was: Are all the Sisters saved?"<sup>20</sup>

As a result of the need to place women in safe areas, women of the BEF were situated well behind the lines, and saw little battlefield action. Women realised that their Front was not the same as that of the men's. Women who were part of the BEF were behind the lines. Nurses were posted as far as casualty clearing stations, but moved away if there was any major risk of attack, and when women began driving ambulances, their journeys were between railway stations and the base hospitals; they did not operate near the fighting. Diary accounts reveal that nurses often felt they would be of most use working on or close to the battlefield, precisely the areas they were not allowed by the British. As a result women felt they were missing out on the 'real' action. Sister Millicent Peterkin noted in her diary:

They say that the wounded lie for days up at the front, with no one taking any notice of them, and it is a notorious fact that we only get comparatively slight cases here, for the simple reason that the bad cases either die on the battlefield, or in the train on the way down here. It seems absurd to keep hospitals partly shut up away down here, when they are so badly needed nearer the front.<sup>21</sup>

By contrast, two other British women, Elsie Knocker and Mairi Chisholm went to the Front as independent Red Cross workers, and set up their aid post on the battlefield in the Belgian sector. They felt that if they were to be of any real value medically, then

---

<sup>20</sup> Burgess. Extract from *The Times*, Monday 11 February 1918. LC.

<sup>21</sup> Peterkin. Diary entry for 18 September 1914. DoD, IWM.

they had to be as close as possible to the trenches, for it was in those critical moments immediately after injury that they could save patients rather than lose them because of infection and shock. Their direct action may help to explain why they felt less impotent in their attempts to save the lives of their patients, though they witnessed many deaths during their four years of work.<sup>22</sup>

The story was very different for those officially working with the BEF. Women were never allowed to stretch men off the battlefield. The closest women came to the battlefield was as bystanders. Sister Anna Cameron nursed aboard HMS *Delta*, and wrote home describing her viewpoint of the Gallipoli landings in April 1915:

...all day we watched the fighting on the land and saw our Men of War shell the nearest villages. It was a curious experience. The glorious day, sky and sea so blue, the long line of men of war, all so peaceful and quiet except for the screaming of the shells and the noise of artillery from the land. We saw the guns taken along on land, and the positions of the troops through our field glasses.<sup>23</sup>

The incongruity of the experience described by Sister Cameron, of being in the war, but also being in a war that did not always feel like war, was typical of the experience of women at the Front, whether in France or aboard hospital ships. The 'real' war as experienced by men lay beyond women's grasp. Frustration at their exclusion from the battlefield was acknowledged by women of the BEF. WAAC Dorothy Loveday arrived at the Front in 1918, and wrote to her niece, illustrating the dilemma of her sex: 'Within the sounds of the guns. My God, what wouldn't I give to be there. I

---

<sup>22</sup> See Brown, *IWM Book of the First World War*, 185-190; and oral history testimony of Mairi Chisholm of Chisholm. 000771/04. DoS, IWM.

<sup>23</sup> Correspondence of Anna Cameron. Letter home, dated 8 May 1915. BRC 25 <sup>4</sup>/3. WAWC, IWM.

wonder if I were dead my spirit would be allowed to go and fight.’<sup>24</sup> Shortly after transferring to a hospital in Rouen, VAD Dorothy Field wrote: ‘Troops, motor lorries, motor cycles - motor cars - guns, etc; seem endlessly to be going up and down the road beyond our hedge boundary. If only one could be among them.’<sup>25</sup>

In order to give added authenticity to their own experiences at the Front women attempted to associate themselves as far as possible with the experience of the trench soldier. VAD Nora Pemberton was aware that while being at the Front was special, she remained excluded from the frontline. Nevertheless any association with the frontline added authenticity to her part in the war. After a visit to the dentist to replace a tooth, she wrote to her father: ‘It was a real tooth he put in - a Tommy’s tooth - out of some shattered jaw I suppose, so I say I have the most permanent ‘souvenir’ of the war of anybody!! and although I myself have not been to the front, my tooth has!’<sup>26</sup> It was perhaps because women were so rigorously excluded from the frontline that they wished to be there. Instead women created their own vision of the Front in order to feel included.

Physical separation from the mainland of Britain signified a crucial psychological barrier. Leaving the shores was associated with the attainment of a certain amount of personal freedom. It was the chance to experience life away from home. The fact that so few women were allowed to work officially with the BEF illustrated the exclusivity and prestige afforded by official recognition. YMCA worker Irene Rathbone wrote proudly that ‘Army HQ by the way is frightfully keen

---

<sup>24</sup> Unpublished letters of Dorothy Loveday. Letter to niece, undated. LC.

<sup>25</sup> Unpublished diaries of Miss D Field. Diary entry for 10 June 1916. 91/27/1. DoD, IWM.

<sup>26</sup> Pemberton. Letter to Dad, dated 2 November 1914. DoD, IWM. Emphasis in the original.

on the YM at this camp. All this makes one realise the extraordinary privilege it is to be out here at this work.<sup>27</sup> So women who went to the Front were honoured as a small and exclusive group to be granted an opportunity closed to so many others at home. Because of the element of privilege involved in going to the Front, women also saw it as a place of opportunity not just for adventure but also personal fulfilment and advancement. In response to Gilbert and Gubar's assertion that the war liberated women from sheltered backgrounds, Claire Tylee has argued that young women were already making advances in the public sphere and that the war proved to be an untimely interruption in their progress.<sup>28</sup> I would agree with Tylee that women who went to the Front were not necessarily 'sheltered' and in some cases already had a degree of independence. However, it is clear from the letters and diaries of young women that they saw their involvement in the war as a further advancement into the public sphere, and an escape from the more restrictive domestic environment to which they were accustomed, if not confined. In this sense, going to the Front did have a transforming and positive effect on their lives. Irene Rathbone noted of a fellow worker at the YMCA camp:

I can't remember that before the war she was at all practical, and yet here she is cooking for an enormous camp, and doing the orderlies' work far better than they can do it themselves. All this without any show of competence, and with perfect serenity and softness. Her appearance belies her - nobody with such lovely cloudy grey eyes, and rose pink cheeks, ought by nature to be so extraordinarily competent.<sup>29</sup>

The heavy and demanding work of cooking for thousands of soldiers may not be the aspiration of modern women at the end of the twentieth century but at the beginning

---

<sup>27</sup> Rathbone. Diary entry for 25 July 1918. DoD, IWM.

<sup>28</sup> Gilbert & Gubar, *No Man's Land*, 258-323. Tylee, "Maleness Run Riot", 205.

<sup>29</sup> Rathbone. Diary entry for 23 June 1918. DoD, IWM. Emphasis in the original.

of the century, the desire to prove oneself in the limited capacities open to women have to be placed in context. Women did see the Front as a place where their modest personal ambitions could be fulfilled. VAD Nora Pemberton was called upon to help out with nursing duties at a short-staffed hospital. She wrote to her father:

...six of us were summoned amidst great jubilations and trotted off, to be told when we got there that we were to go on night duty. This, to me, was better news still as it meant an absolutely and entirely new experience, and 9 o'clock saw me almost chattering with excitement.<sup>30</sup>

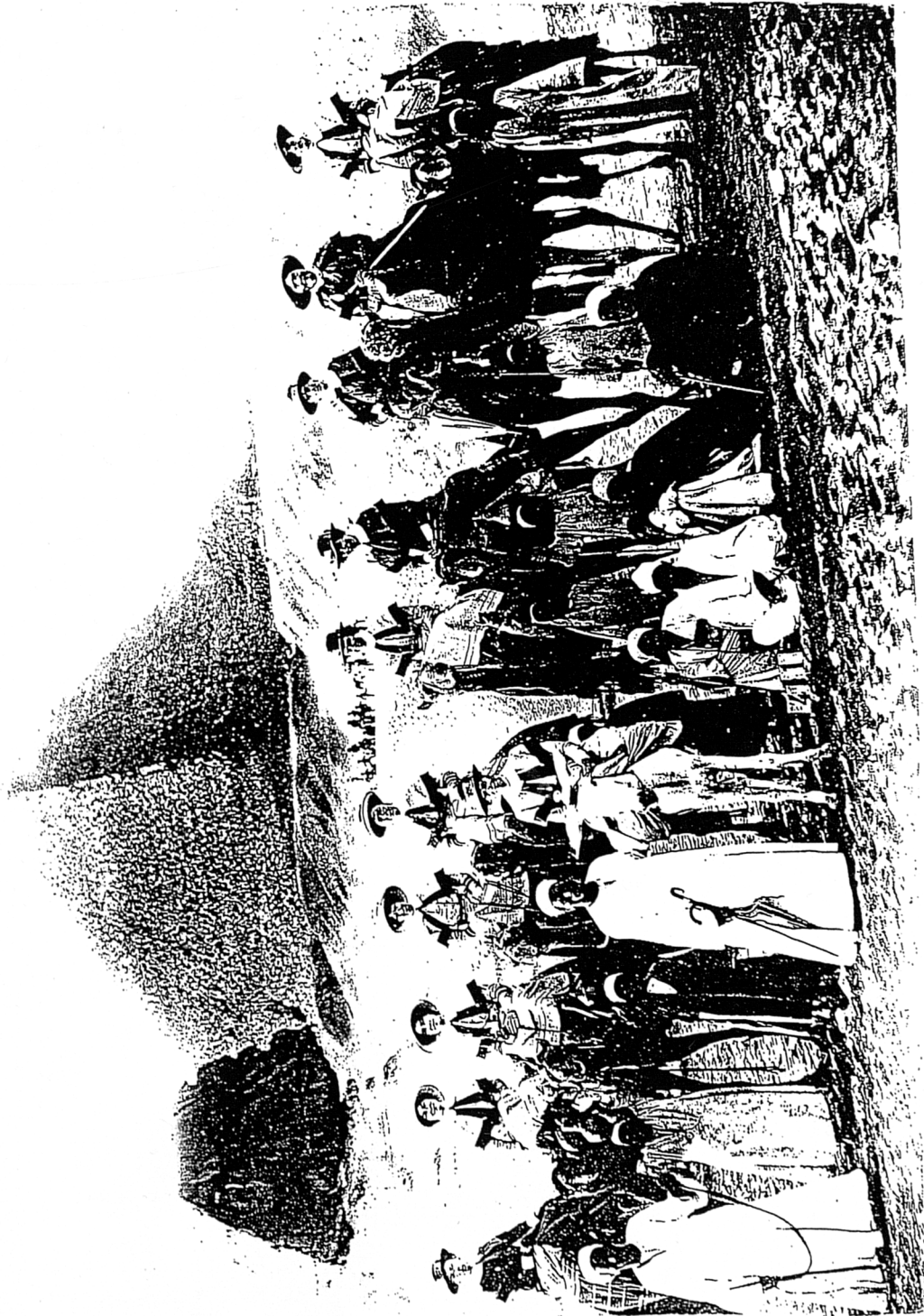
The Front was seen as a different space which was capable of bringing unexpected pleasures and excitement. Women's appreciation of their war experiences was informed by concepts of the British Empire, and women seized upon the advantages of being among its privileged members. Nursing sisters who served aboard hospital ships recounted global travel adventures incorporating visits to distant and exotic lands. On her second trip out to Egypt, via the Mediterranean, Sister Priscilla Simpson wrote in November 1915: 'I would not have missed the ruins of Pompeii for anything, they are wonderful. I can hardly believe that I am really seeing these wonderful places. Who would ever have thought I should be so privileged. I have so often longed to travel.'<sup>31</sup> Autograph and photograph albums are permanent reminders of women's days at war. A favourite image for those who worked in the Mediterranean is one capturing a visit to the Egyptian Pyramids, as illustrated in Figure 5. War at the Front therefore fulfilled women in unexpected ways. The Front offered possibilities that no other place could. Netta Hamilton worked for the Scottish Churches' Huts and on the prospect of her return home in 1919 she wrote with regret

---

<sup>30</sup> Pemberton. Letter to Dad, dated 2 November 1914. DoD, IWM.

<sup>31</sup> Unpublished diaries of Sister Priscilla Simpson. Diary entry for 23 November 1915. LC.

Figure 5. A visit to the Pyramids.  
Sister Lesley Martin. QARANC.





to her officer brother:

I don't expect I shall ever go to any dances at home. I shouldn't enjoy them a bit after here and feel I have had enough dancing here to last me for the rest of my life and although I don't expect I'll ever have a "good time" again, I mean in the dancing line, I will always look back on the time I have spent here with great pleasure. There are always 3 times the number of men here at dances than ladies; just the opposite from home.<sup>32</sup>

Irene Rathbone too, welcomed being at the Front and the transformation she had undergone. She recorded feelings 'of sheer delight - of such delight as one can experience I mean against the eternal background of the war. It seems a miracle that I am out here. For years I have not been so completely free and happy.'<sup>33</sup> Helen

Dormer went to the Front in October 1917 to work as a YWCA administrator. She wrote to a friend:

I've been feeling very light-hearted and happy and generally bucked with life just lately. I like the work too on the whole - and it's ripping being utterly independent of home at last, and having definite work to do. I can't explain how I feel, but extraordinarily at ease inwardly, and very very happy...<sup>34</sup>

The Front could offer contrasting experiences for women and men. Women found the Front could be a place of freedom and liberation, while soldiers could find themselves confined to the trenches. VAD Dorothy Higgins received a letter from a patient, who wrote: 'There's no news up here, same old life - go in the trenches and come out, and nothing whatever to look forward to.'<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup> J Brown. Letter to Alex, dated 14 March 1919. LC.

<sup>33</sup> Rathbone. General diary entry for June 1918. DoD, IWM. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>34</sup> Correspondence of Helen Haslam (nee Dormer). Letter to G, dated 13 November 1917. F/3/8/9. MSS 121/F/3/8/1-45. MRC.

<sup>35</sup> Unpublished letters of Miss DE Higgins. Letter to Miss Higgins, dated 8 August 1915. 86/73/1. DoD, IWM.

The feeling of freedom women felt at the Front was in contradiction with the reality of the constraints imposed upon their movements. Inspections were frequent, not just to maintain order among women but also because women working at the Front remained a curiosity. VAD Katia Freshfield recorded:

We are so used to living on top of each other that one does not mind the constant chat and coughs and it is quite normal to be roused at 6 am to wash and to have orderlies about...it is rather like the horse show loose boxes with matrons and colonels constantly looking in instead of the public.<sup>36</sup>

Draconian rules were also imposed. VAD Elizabeth Lupton noted the stricter rules for British nurses when the Americans arrived:

The Americans manage to attract the neighbouring camps, and are very gay, both going out themselves and giving little after-supper dances here, 8.30-11. We have had three of them here, and one the other day in the officers' new hut, at which we were not allowed to dance, as Miss McCarthy came round that very morning and declared dancing for us forbidden.<sup>37</sup>

McCarthy herself, as army Matron-in-Chief, described the official position in her summary of the war:

Dancing has never been permitted in British or Australian units, except when especially sanctioned by the War Office, on the occasion of the Armistice, and for Peace Celebrations. However, many and varied requests for Nurses to attend dances have been received at different times from various sources. Sanction has never been given, and with few exceptions this rule has not been broken, and in these cases, it was immediately brought to my notice and the matter dealt with.<sup>38</sup>

She noted that very little recreation was either sanctioned or needed by the nurses, though felt that the VADs required more than the nurses. In order to meet these needs, women were allowed to play golf, tennis and badminton. Bathing was

---

<sup>36</sup> Unpublished diaries of Miss Katia Freshfield. Diary entry for 2 February 1916. LC.

<sup>37</sup> Unpublished diaries of Elizabeth Lupton. Diary entry for 18 September 1917. LC.

<sup>38</sup> McCarthy. Official diary for 1919. QARANC.

permitted, though bicycling was not encouraged due to lack of storage and manoeuvrability in the uniform. It was acceptable for women to attend concerts, and women were encouraged to make use of nurses' clubs. They were also granted an 'At Home' day, usually a Sunday, on which 'men friends' could be invited to visit.<sup>39</sup> Despite close supervision women felt they had more personal autonomy away from the watchful scrutiny of parental authority, and found themselves in situations that would have been undreamed of before the war. Obligated to billet in a room already occupied by several British soldiers in Boulogne, Sister Jentie Paterson wrote: 'took beds furthest away, did not undress, spread matts on bed in case of -, I was well clad, thankful I went for that thick petticoat and that I knew the language - our mothers would have a fit if they saw our surroundings!'<sup>40</sup> As well as a place of opportunity, being at the Front allowed women to become more worldly. However, it was not always easy as youthful women were thrown into socially awkward situations with which they were unfamiliar. VAD Ruth Manning described the problems of having a bath in the presence of her roommate:

We decided that the most private way of each having one would be to have them at the same time, both to be too occupied to notice the other's actions! It was perfectly lovely. I completely changed my underclothes and put on one of my new vests for the summer. We sat in our baths for some time having my bed between and could just see one another over the top of my bed! We felt so clean and comfortable all the rest of the day. Those camp baths are a joy'<sup>41</sup>

In relationships with men women also felt emboldened and liberated by being at the Front. Women looking back on their part in the war remember the Front as a

---

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Paterson. Diary entry for 23 December 1914. DoD; IWM.

<sup>41</sup> Manning. Diary entry for 26 May 1917. DoD, IWM. Emphasis in the original.

time of freer relations with the opposite sex despite strict supervision. Nursing probationer, Margaret Ellis recalled:

Of course, in normal times or even at home we would never have dreamed of 'picking a man up', as they used to call it, because we were very well brought-up girls, but out there it seemed the natural thing to do. You were there more or less doing the same thing and certainly for the same reason. We were all part of the BEF, and that seemed to be as good as an introduction. The whole country around there was one huge military base, so there was never any shortage of officers. We knew perfectly well that every time we went to Paris-Plage we would meet someone. Of course, you'd never have dared if you'd been just on your own, but if there were two of you and two of them it seemed quite safe, even if it wasn't quite proper.<sup>42</sup>

The apparently relaxed social conditions at the Front were easily contrasted with the strict social codes that women thought they had left behind, leading women to behave in ways they might otherwise have not. Irene Rathbone was invited to lunch by an officer from the Royal Engineers who dropped by her billet. She wrote: 'Ireen (sic), what are you coming to? Accepting invitations to lunch from total strangers who once or twice you have served in a tea-garden - whose name you don't even know - who doesn't know yours!<sup>43</sup> Rathbone managed to extricate herself from this tricky situation. Similar caution was not always evident at the Front, even if liaisons had to remain surreptitious. VAD Elizabeth Lupton was invited to the cinema with a Captain and noted, 'while at the corner of the road many officers were awaiting their Sisters in the dark and trying to find them by furtive flashing of electric torches. Most ridiculous performance.'<sup>44</sup> While Sister Mary Brown stationed at Basra noted Matron's vain attempts to supervise a group of sisters at a tea party:

Miss Gilmour peered out with one eye on the Officers Pier watching to see if any Sisters went out alone with a man, she would need 6 pairs of

---

<sup>42</sup> Margaret Ellis, quoted in Macdonald, *Roses of No Man's Land*, 188.

<sup>43</sup> Rathbone. Diary entry for 27 August 1918. DoD, IWM. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>44</sup> Lupton. Diary entry for 18 September 1917. LC.

eyes to watch all of us, there are lots of other ways to the river besides Officers Pier.<sup>45</sup>

Breaking the rules added to the sense of excitement of women's war. Female behaviour was supervised, but being at the Front in a war environment provided women with a licence to more freedom than they had previously experienced. The environment of war felt different, and women behaved differently. They were able to enjoy their new-found freedoms, holding parties, going on picnics, playing sports, exploring the surroundings whether in France or further afield, and in all theatres of war, taking part in concerts and shows to entertain colleagues and the troops. Sister Mary Brown attended a concert in Basra, followed by games: 'The first game was great fun, the ladies all stood on one side holding small fishing rods and their male partners stood opposite and tried to eat the bun attached to the fishing line, Capt Boney was my partner and he did bravely but nearly choked, the bun was so dry.'<sup>46</sup> Irene Rathbone enjoyed a champagne picnic with officers staying at the Third Army rest camp:

We lit a fire, boiled a kettle, took off our hats and crowned ourselves with ivy wreathes, pretending to be nymphs and fawns. That was a most successful touch! To see Captain Mann, the sedate and dignified adjutant of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Army Rest Camp lolling on the grass, in a Bacchanalian-tilted ivy wreath, was a sight to make the high gods laugh!... It was an orgy, nothing short! What did we care for the amused looks of passing Tommies - the disgusted stare of French civilians. We were being thoroughly English and having an English picnic. Mad they probably thought us, but we are winning the war!<sup>47</sup>

While flirting was part of the relationships formed at the Front there was a recognition that most of these relationships would be short-lived, though some did

---

<sup>45</sup> MA Brown. Diary entry for 17 June 1917. DoD, IWM.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. Diary entry for 31 August 1917. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>47</sup> Rathbone. Diary entry for 1 September 1918. DoD, IWM.

result in marriage. For women at the Front, marriage usually involved their return home, as husbands and wives were not allowed to work in the same theatre of war, and it was the wife who had to be reassigned. Marriages did cause excitement, given that arrangements were usually concluded in haste. Sister Mary Brown wrote of a colleague who became engaged to an army officer after just six days aboard a hospital ship. Women were well aware that relationships under the conditions of war were often fraught with difficulty, and usually most attachments involved nothing more than a few hours' flirting. Irene Rathbone met an officer at a dance and wrote:

A hot breathless night - impossible not to flirt on such a night. I felt about 19. I know nothing about the Stevens man - I don't even know what his face was like, but he was young, he had a gentleman's voice - he danced divinely - he was temporarily attracted and held my hand tight - that was enough for the moment. We danced on and on together till the end of the evening. Yes, I had forgotten the intoxication of dancing.<sup>48</sup>

For the WAACs who went to the Front from 1917 onwards, the war also promised adventure and opportunity. WAAC Dorothy Loveday wrote to her former headmistress about the mood among the WAACs in her detachment awaiting embarkation for France: 'I am sure most of the working class girls do go into it with the idea that they are going to do and stand for something, all the ones I came across did.'<sup>49</sup> Discipline for the WAAC was strict but they still had plenty of opportunity to enjoy themselves at the Front. They were allowed passes in the evening to visit the local towns of Rouen, Boulogne and Etaples, and one of their functions was to help organise concerts for the troops. Dorothy Pickford was a WAAC administrator and wrote to her sister:

---

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. Diary entry for 4 September 1918.

<sup>49</sup> Loveday. Letter to Miss Robertson, dated 16 December 1917. LC.

I went down to the YWCA Hut on Monday evening for the weekly dance. The workers dance from 6.30-8.15, and officers, Administrators and FANYs from 9-11. Our UA is slightly disapproving of it as a weekly thing and also wants more control over the people invited. She said she was coming to turn them out, so I could only stay for an hour, and then had to come back and relieve her. It made me quite young again, and I felt just like Cinderella coming away.<sup>50</sup>

Despite a more disciplined regime for the WAAC recruits the chance to work abroad was still appealing, if a little daunting, for women who had not expected such an opportunity to come their way. One WAAC wrote:

We've dropped in most lucky for it is an ideal little village right on the coast and right in the midst of beautiful scenery and the most glorious stretch of sea, and with such advantages as these we feel that we are absolutely in clover, because we had expected a lot of hardships, and instead we have only convenience.<sup>51</sup>

Joining the WAAC as an adventure had popular appeal among women.<sup>52</sup>

Bessie Marchant's novel, *A Transport Girl in France*, published in 1918, tells the tale of plucky Gwen Lovell, a WAAC driver who goes to France and becomes a heroine when she rescues soldiers during an air-raid:

Like other soldiers of the Empire, she was off to the Front. True, the front for her might be miles behind the lines, but it would be the front for all that, the place of peril, of strife, and of high endeavour. She would have her part to play in the war, and she must play it to her very best.<sup>53</sup>

Being based behind the lines, however, does not deter the heroine, whose courage takes her to scenes of battle action. One illustration depicts Gwen at the wheel of a lorry rescuing soldiers while a battle rages in the background (see Figure 6). While

---

<sup>50</sup> Pickford. Letter to Molly, dated 28 February 1918. DoD, IWM.

<sup>51</sup> Streatfield. Extract from a WAAC letter: ACI 1874, 1917. MRC.

<sup>52</sup> Robert, 'Patriotism, Gender and Class', 52-65.

<sup>53</sup> Bessie Marchant, *A Transport Girl in France. A Story of the Adventures of a WAAC*. London: Blackie & Son Limited, 1918, 101.

Figure 6. WAAC Gwen Lovell rescuing injured soldiers.  
'The burden-bearers were coming once more.'  
Bessie Marchant, *A Transport Girl in France*, 217.



c 962

THE BURDEN-BEARERS WERE COMING ONCE MORE



Marchant's adventure story bestows military glory upon the WAAC heroine, the experience of the rank and file WAAC was rather less glorious. Their 'good times' were liable to be the subject of disciplinary measures if they strayed away from regulation dances organised by the YWCA, trips into town with officially sanctioned passes, or games and sports organised by the administrators. WAAC administrator Dorothy Pickford described some 'misdemeanours' in a letter to her sister:

...two of my beauties have been fined before the Colonel for being found in a Café on the report of a 'red cap'...two workers had overstayed their late pass, and one of them had come back distinctly muzzy!...I don't think these girls intentionally swing the lead, they are not shirkers, but some haven't got much stamina.<sup>54</sup>

The rank and file WAAC experience of the war was therefore governed by strict discipline which impeded the sense of freedom women felt that being at the Front had provided them with.

All around them women observed the reality of war in different ways. The strangeness of involvement in the war extended to perceptions of time. Sister Millicent Peterkin wrote: 'Two months today since we mobilised at Chatham. It seems far longer. Not that the time has dragged, - quite the reverse, - but we have been in so many places, and seen and done so much, that it is hard to believe that it has all been crammed into two months.'<sup>55</sup> And women often noted the strangeness of celebrating a birthday or Christmas away from home - struck by the alteration in their life, the improvisation required adding to the sense of adventure. Sister Anna Cameron celebrated Christmas 1915 aboard HMS *Delta* while nursing 500 Colonial

---

<sup>54</sup> Pickford. Letter to Molly, dated 29 July 1918. DoD, IWM.

<sup>55</sup> Peterkin. Diary entry for 14 October 1914. DoD, IWM. Emphasis in the original.

troops, and wrote to her parents that 'it was really the happiest Christmas I had ever spent...' <sup>56</sup>

Despite the opportunity for personal fulfilment and excitement, these experiences were far from the war that women expected, or the one that we imagine women to have experienced. The popularly received image of women at the Front is that of the nurse whose experience revolves around the men's horror of the trenches. This has led academics such as Tylee to argue that the war also dehumanised women after the initial excitement it produced.<sup>57</sup> These contemporary accounts do not reflect the war as dehumanising even after women had been at the Front for some time. However, these experiences, though very much part of women's war, led them to believe that this was not real war. Women arrived at the Front with a preconceived image of what war should be, and that was very much associated with the battlefield. Being at the Front brought women to the 'real' war, but even at the Front the 'heart of war' could seem very far away unless the battlefield images, either soldiers, guns and hardship, were present. When these images were absent women wrote with surprise and embarrassment at their circumstances. Sister Alice Slythe wrote in her diary:

I'm a little bit ashamed of this diary: far from being what you would expect of an Active Service Diary - it is simply an account, on the surface, of a pleasant summer holiday on the Continent: of course it ought to run "called up at 2am, dressed 50 cases: swallowed a cup of cold water: motored 3 miles up the line: dressed 70 more: slept 10 minutes"...Possibly the next volume may be more strenuous.<sup>58</sup>

Similarly, Sister Sadie Apperley, posted at a hospital in Cairo, wrote, 'We have no work for nearly a fortnight. It's far more like a hotel than a hospital. I feel as if I

---

<sup>56</sup> Cameron. Letter home, dated 17 December 1915. BRC 25<sup>4</sup>/13. WAWC, IWM.

<sup>57</sup> Tylee, "Malenness Run Riot", 202.

<sup>58</sup> Slythe. Diary entry for 14 July 1915. LC. Emphasis in the original.

were on a holiday.’<sup>59</sup> While Mary Brown, a Sister on HMS *Devanha*, noted, ‘We call ourselves “Kitchener’s Tourists” now’, as the ship docked in Albania.<sup>60</sup> She thought differently however, when posted to Basra the following year, and described the harsh conditions in her diary: ‘This is Active Service and no mistake, brown sugar, tinned milk and tinned fish, bread and butter, not too nice but we must get used to it.’<sup>61</sup> When the ‘real’ war intervened, the war they had imagined, it proved to be a sobering sight. VAD Katia Freshfield arrived at the Front in February 1915, and recorded in her diary:

At the station I had my first sight of what war meant, a hospital train unloading. Men with their feet (trench feet) done up in cotton wool and riding in rows on special trolleys from train to car looking jolly but worn and blackfaced from weather and dirt. Then stretcher cases, one had not seen men looking like that out of a hospital ward and here they were in hundreds being taken up, put down travelling, jolting all with that strained look and white mixed with black colour not to speak of their dirty wound stained khaki and white bandages...<sup>62</sup>

Scenes like this were how women imagined the war should be. It was men’s war.

When women could see or relate this aspect of war, it was then they felt themselves to be in the heart of war. Women wanted to be able to relate men’s war, or recount men’s war stories to authenticate their own experiences. Irene Rathbone met two officers at the rest camp where she worked. She recorded in her diary:

...both got onto war experiences, which I am always glad to hear of first hand. Capt Fairclough is evidently a splendid soldier, and did awfully well on the Sept 2<sup>nd</sup> show. He got excited talking (his nerves have gone a bit – that’s why they let him stay on) and gave me the most vivid picture I have ever had presented of the horrors of going over the top and killing Germans – the excitement, the fear, the madness. For two days, he said, it seemed as though he were drunk, and he

---

<sup>59</sup> Apperley. Diary entry for 1 February 1918. LC.

<sup>60</sup> MA Brown. Diary entry for 19 January 1916. DoD, IWM.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. Diary entry for 2 January 1917.

<sup>62</sup> Freshfield. Diary entry for 3 February 1915. LC.

remembers nothing of what he did. I listened fascinated, though I could hardly bear it.<sup>63</sup>

Women's accounts which support the male experience of war by recounting battle stories or describing extensive injuries have become the most valid in terms of the archives. It is the reason why nurses' accounts have become the primary experience of all women at the Front. Women did not necessarily have to nurse in order to hear of men's experiences, as the Rathbone extract suggests. It was, however, more difficult for those women outside the hospitals to have access to the trench experience and its consequences. Women were disappointed when these scenes did not form a significant part of their experiences at the Front. In letters, diaries and oral histories, women describe the routine of their women's war, but are anxious to demonstrate that they also know the 'real' war, the one that involved soldiers, rows of ambulances, marching boots. Women at the Front wished to connect themselves directly with the battlefield. 'Straight from the trenches' was one of the most frequent expressions women used in letters, diaries and oral histories to describe their contact with the men. VAD Marjorie Starr wrote in her diary: 'I never saw such filth, or wounds as we have had today, straight from the trenches, all gory and muddy.'<sup>64</sup> The need for women to locate themselves at the heart of war because of their actual exclusion does not, however, invalidate their accounts. Women witnessed and described men's war, but their accounts also demonstrate that war at the Front was more than a trench experience.

When women were set apart from their perception of what war should be, they

---

<sup>63</sup> Rathbone. Diary entry for 2 October 1918. DoD, IWM.

<sup>64</sup> Unpublished diary of M Starr. Diary entry for 25-27 September 1915. 81/12/1. DoD, IWM.

questioned the relevance of their involvement. Women wanted to be in war, at its heart, not its outskirts. Going to the Front appeared to offer that opportunity, but this was not always the case. Entertainment and routine work continued to be part of women's lives at the Front even during the greatest crises, and women were struck by the incongruity of the pleasure and horror of being at the Front. Sister Slythe noted during yet another quiet spell at her hospital, 'Still slack: extremely pleased of course to know our Tommies aren't getting smashed: one wouldn't have it otherwise: but scrubbing windowsills and methylating windows isn't quite the same work.'<sup>65</sup>

However, VAD Nora Pemberton, who was working at a quiet convalescent horse depot at Gournay in July 1916, was seemingly unaware of the impact of the Battle of the Somme which was in full swing when she wrote to her father: 'At the present time my connection with anything warlike is remote and we might be living near a garrison town in peace time. Really there are so many gaieties that a card of fixtures for the season will soon be necessary!'<sup>66</sup>

There are several reasons why accounts detailing women's lives away from the men disappeared from women's own writing and historical accounts. Women, themselves, may not have considered it important enough as it did not fit their preconceived ideas of war. Additionally, such 'digressions' did not support the male trench experience or 'real' war, though these accounts not only illustrate important elements of women's experiences at the Front, but also highlight men's experiences out of the trenches. One of the striking features about the oral history testimonies of soldiers held at the Imperial War Museum is how their accounts of their experiences

---

<sup>65</sup> Slythe. Diary entry for 3 June 1915. LC.

<sup>66</sup> Pemberton. Letter to Dad, dated 26 July 1916. DoD, IWM.

frequently end when they come out of the trenches. Those who were injured provide very little detail about the time they spent in hospitals at the Front, indicating the lack of value placed on this aspect of their experience. For women too, accounts of the horror of the war took precedence in the postwar world, and superseded and displaced feelings of excitement and opportunity which had been so prominent in women's letters and diaries. The traumatic effects of the Great War sank in on the population with the publication of autobiographies, and personal accounts published by soldiers such as Robert Graves and Siegfried Sassoon. Women too published their side of the story. Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth* became a popular account of what women did during the war. But the postwar period of fiction and writing about the women's war at the Front is noticeably different to original letters and diaries. While the letters and diaries cannot provide an accurate or even true picture of the war as women saw it, neither does the fiction tell the whole story. Horror and loss have replaced adventure and excitement, and in some cases the latter feelings are entirely absent. One of the most interesting novels about a woman's experience at the Front is the fictionalised account of ambulance driver, Nel Smith, in Evadne Price's novel, "*Not So Quiet...*" *Stepdaughters of the War*, published in 1930. How different Nel's first night at the Front is to those related in letters and diaries. Gone is the excitement and enjoyment prevalent in so many unpublished diaries, to be replaced by fear, loathing and ultimately resentment at the use of women in war, unfit for their duties on account of their social position. Now, the young women of Britain who went to the Front are portrayed as sheltered and unready for the task ahead of them, bullied by their elders, not excited by the prospect of adventure, and ultimately traumatised by their experiences. These are the 'dehumanised' women to whom Tylee refers. Nel's first

night on duty as an ambulance driver is described as: 'that ghastly first night I was shoved in to an ambulance and told to meet my first convoy of wounded. I had never driven by night before, even in England. My nerves were all on edge, and the first ghastly glimpse of blood and shattered men sent me completely to pieces.'<sup>67</sup> In order to emphasise the horror of the war's impact, Price relies very much on an idealised vision of a prewar Britain and gender relations. Although Evadne Price was not herself at the Front, she did base the novel upon the diaries of a VAD nurse. However, writing in the anti-war climate of the 1920s and 1930s, Price reflected the pacifist sentiments of the time by a total rejection of anything positive that women might have originally experienced. In fact, Nel exposes the deception she performs on her patriotic mother, by illustrating to the reader how she sent her mother letters saying how much she was enjoying herself, in order to satisfy her mother's 'war lust'.<sup>68</sup> The horror of participating in the war, of being forced to participate, as expressed by Price, was not a common feature of diaries and letters left behind by the women who were present. They expressed horror and disgust, but such feelings were personal expressions and reactions amid a realisation of impotence, and were usually accompanied by expressions of enjoyment, pleasure and excitement. Perhaps Price's feelings of impotence had in the postwar years turned to rage informed by shame and horror, as women who returned counted the cost of their participation at the Front. The next logical step of dealing with their contribution was to reject any sense of fun or enjoyment they could have had amid the slaughter. It became impossible to accept that fun and excitement were possible at a time when so many lives were so cruelly

---

<sup>67</sup> Smith, *"Not So Quiet"*, 11.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 30-1.

lost. The heroine of Price's novel is emotionally destroyed by her part in the war. Yet women, in letters and diaries, reveal coping strategies for surviving the horror. Entertainment was one, humour another, and additionally women recognised that they *had* to survive, they had to demonstrate bravery in the man's world to which they had been admitted. In the wider context of the war narrative, however, there was no room for recognising women's coping strategies without elevating women to a position of strength. Consequently, this aspect of women's war effectively disappeared. A narrative which allowed for women to occupy a position where they could survive and help men survive was not plausible in an environment which still privileged the soldier. Yet access to the Front endowed women with 'masculine' qualities required for war zones. Strength and bravery were qualities women desired.

Women were proud of their bravery in the face of adversity, not simply keeping their cool during air raids, but keeping their feet on the hospital wards when confronted with appalling injuries. Women felt they had to prove themselves to male colleagues and patients that they could handle the sight of extensive injuries. Letters and diaries reflect a degree of denial about some of the horrors of the war which go beyond official censorship or self-censorship. Women felt obliged to cope. They convey a desire or perhaps an anxiety to be accepted at the Front and to transcend traditional 'feminine' sensibilities, particularly the VADs who had most to prove. Humour was a device employed which not only reflected the high spirits of the BEF, but also helped deflect the horror of nursing wounded men. VAD Nora Pemberton described to her parents her impressions of a convoy which arrived at the rest stations where she worked: 'There were wounds of every sort and description, but a great many were in the hands and one got to the point of asking, as one snipped at a



crimson mass that had once been a bandage - Well, sonny, and how many fingers have you left behind?’<sup>69</sup> Given the extent of wounds now associated with the First World War it is easy to imagine that for young, inexperienced women, nursing could border on the obscene, and it is this impression that is conveyed by Evadne Price. Yet at the time women felt compelled to demonstrate their willpower as they were confronted with the bloodiest of scenes. Women became almost proud of the sights they were able to stand before, wearing their new-found self-possession like a badge of honour. Nora Pemberton felt she had survived the trauma demanded by nursing at the Front. Writing to her parents shortly after arriving at the Front in 1914, she remarked: ‘I am thankful to say it has not affected my nerve in the very least, and the sights and what is much worse, the smells leave me untouched from a nurse’s point of view, and I have been able to handle anything and see anything without flinching.’<sup>70</sup>

Women took pride in their newly acquired bravery and even actively sought it. Medals and newspaper clippings of heroic deeds by women have been deposited in the archives alongside their letters and diaries. VAD driver Josephine Pennell was awarded the Military Medal in May 1918: ‘For conspicuous devotion to duty during the hostile air-raid on the night of the 18 May 1918. This lady was out with her car during the raid, picking up and in every way assisting wounded and injured, showed great bravery and coolness, and was an example to all ranks.’<sup>71</sup> The Front was a place of heroes. Death, too, was therefore seen as an honourable sacrifice. Olive Dent attended a VAD funeral and commented: ‘What a magnificent end to one’s life, to lie

---

<sup>69</sup> Pemberton. Letter to Dad, dated 2 November 1914. DoD, IWM. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>71</sup> Unpublished papers of Miss RJ Pennell. 92/26/1. DoD, IWM.

there among those splendidly brave boys in the little strip of land which the French Government has given over in perpetuity to our dead.’<sup>72</sup> Death was not something to be feared by women. Women who gave the ‘ultimate’ sacrifice received an elaborate military-style funeral with full honours (see Figure 7).

Danger, however, remained a real factor for women at the Front despite steps to protect women and move them away from imminent risk. Women were killed in the German advances of 1917 and 1918 and others drowned at sea. For those who survived, there was the choice of whether or not to carry on. VAD Edith Oswald suffered particularly badly in some air raids in October 1917. She had no memory of the details of the raid which finally pushed her into the realms of shock. She returned with a clean bill of health in the Spring Offensive of 1918, and it was not long before she was caught up again in the raids:

Last night about 11.30 just as I was dozing off the guns started. My heart gave one jump, and then started rattling away just as it used to and I shook from head to foot. However, I soon got all right so I must be all right again and got into my things calmly enough and went along to a bedroom with three Canadian Sisters. Then we all went downstairs but it was evidently a false alarm, for nothing more happened. I am surely much better - after all it is the fear of fear that is the worst to bear. I am not actually afraid of death - but I dreaded getting the wind up when I am on duty - having those helpless men dependent on one - however everyone tells me it is the very fact that keeps you from becoming nervous.<sup>73</sup>

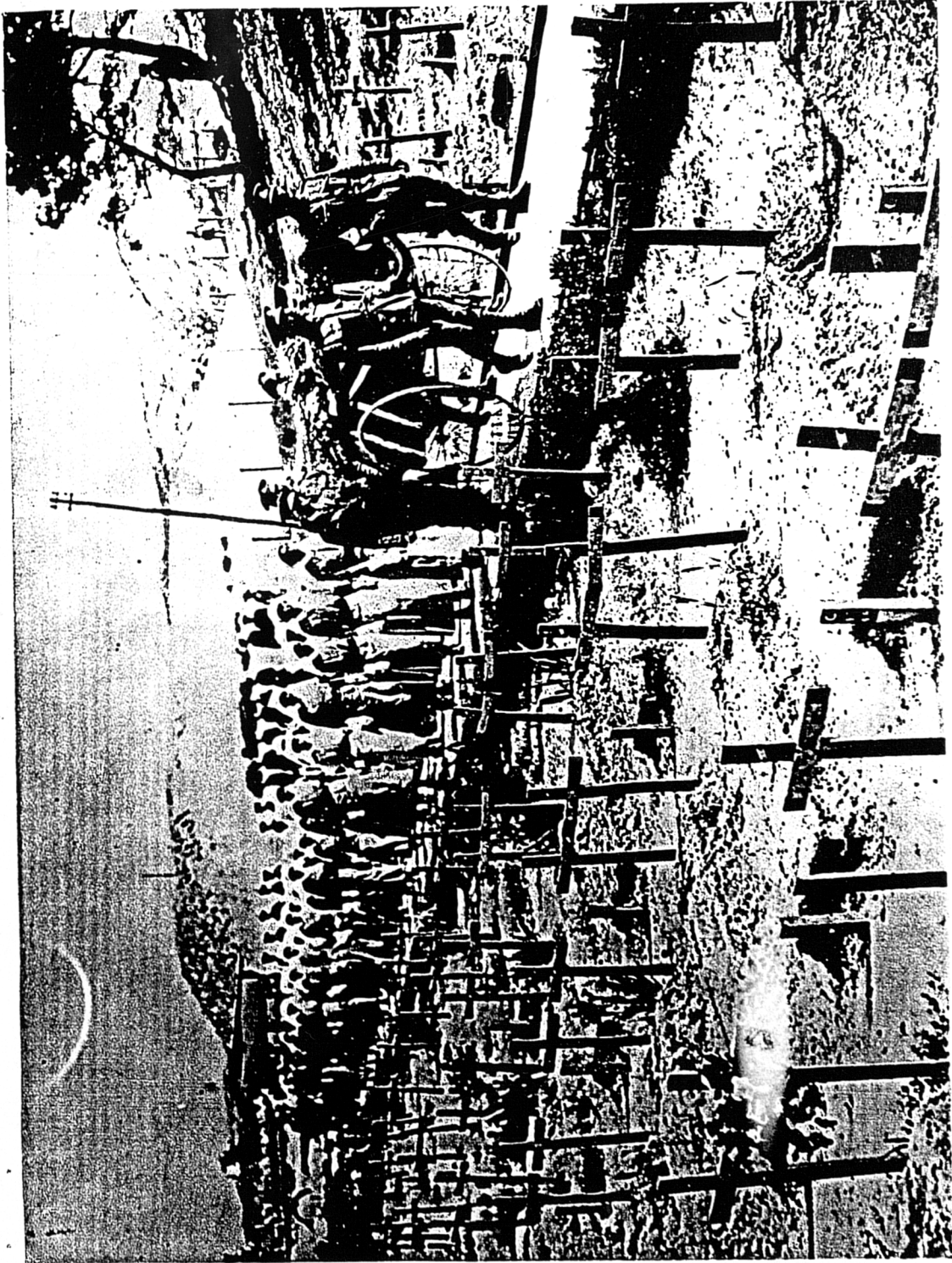
Coping with fear was therefore something that women had to deal with directly. As Edith Oswald pointed out it usually helped that they were needed by their patients and had to be strong or even brave. Courage was one of the qualities attributed to the ‘new’ woman of the war, and many women were determined to grit their teeth and

---

<sup>72</sup> Olive Dent, *A VAD in France*, London: Grant Richards Limited, 1917, 203-4.

<sup>73</sup> Unpublished diaries of Mrs E Briggs Constable (nee Oswald). LC.

Figure 7. Funeral procession for Sister Ware who died of wounds during an air raid.  
No. 2613/1956. QARANC.



confront the situation they faced, though, as with the men, it could all too easily be a facade when the crunch came, and women too could break under the strain of being under direct fire and also from the repeated strain of dealing with appalling injuries. It was one thing for women to feel obliged to subordinate their emotions at the Front but the pressures they faced exposed them to feelings they were not able to contain.

Being at the Front was an induction into military life. Wearing a uniform, whether that of a nurse or a WAAC, was the most visible sign. The uniform was a symbol of military recognition, pride and status. Women did not slip off coats at Boulogne or Alexandria as unnoticed civilians, but immediately aroused curiosity, both among the troops and the locals. Sister Mary Brown was aboard HMS *Devanha* when it docked in Albania in 1916. She wrote: 'We caused quite a sensation when we landed, every one stopped their work and crowded round us... We met an English General on shore. He got rather a shock to run across English Sisters in Albania.'<sup>74</sup> VAD Marjorie Starr, who worked with a Scottish Women's Hospital, went for a ride in an ambulance, and wrote: 'We drove through 'a French regiment and got such a warm reception: I think they were amused at us, one girl in khaki driving and 2 of us in our grey and two in their blue hospital caps and dresses, they all salute us.'<sup>75</sup> As well as an awareness of the effect of their uniform, the women were acknowledging the effect of their feminine presence, and the authority invested in them by their uniform. They noted the favourable response to their presence, and were pleased to see they had an effect on others. 'They were astonished', ambulance driver Alice

---

<sup>74</sup> MA Brown. Diary entry for 20 January 1916. DoD, IWM.

<sup>75</sup> Starr. Diary entry for 15 October 1915. DoD, IWM.

Proctor remembered of the men she drove, 'the ones that weren't too badly wounded, you could see them getting up in the ambulance off their stretcher and sort of peering round the corner. "Eh, it's girls" - absolutely astonished.'<sup>76</sup> Their uniform added to their sense of importance and enhanced their identity on the world stage on which they now had a part to play. The interest in women in uniform at the Front, however, was not even, and depending upon the type of uniform worn, women received very different reactions. Women at the Front were already in a minority, and their uniform whether that of the WAAC, the VAD or the FANY drew more attention still. For nurses and VADs this was not so much of a problem. The nurse's uniform did not pose any undue threat to the femininity of its wearer, and because of the largely favourable image of the nurse throughout the course of the war, the nurse's uniform actually became a potent symbol of nurturing femininity and maternalism. In an effort to maintain the nurse's femininity, her uniform was often impractical. VADs and nurses complained, depending on their circumstances, that it was too restrictive for movement, it was too long, not warm enough in winter, or too hot in summer. And for those who wore white, faced with paying their own laundry bills, it was almost impossible to keep clean. VAD Neville complained in a letter home: 'The weather has been unspeakable lately, snow, frost, cold winds, and now sleet rain, perfectly beastly, the trenches must be worse I suppose, but the men don't wear cotton frocks in them!'<sup>77</sup> However, she was still proud of her VAD uniform and wrote later about her leave plans: 'I am going to bring home one of my cotton dresses, aprons and

---

<sup>76</sup> Oral history account of Alice Christobel Remington (nee Proctor). DoS, IWM.

<sup>77</sup> Unpublished letters of Miss AA Neville. Letter home, dated 8 March 1916. DoD, IWM.

capas to have a photo taken in uniform, it will be an interesting souvenir after this beastly war is over.’<sup>78</sup>

The women who wore the WAAC uniform did not have the advantage of the idealised caring and nurturing role associated with the nurse and her uniform. Instead, the WAAC uniform was considered unflattering and ultimately ‘unfeminine’. This led women at the Front to modify their uniform. WAAC administrator, Dorothy Pickford described the women in her camp: ‘Their one virtue used to be their uniform and now they are beginning to wear white collars and turn in the necks of their dresses. It is awfully difficult to keep them up to the mark and yet avoid nagging which is fatal.’<sup>79</sup> Pickford was aware that she was powerless to impose her ideas of discipline upon women who were more concerned with their feminine appearance rather than military indoctrination. The negative connotations associated with the WAAC uniform are undoubtedly related to the class of women who were admitted to the ranks of the WAAC. While the VAD was exclusively the preserve of young middle- and upper-class women who could volunteer because they could be supported by their families, the WAAC was an enlisted and paid corps. While there were many middle-class women among the WAAC ranks working as administrators, as drivers, and in the signals section, the novelty of working women in an overtly military-style uniform became the focus of attention. Consequently, the reception of the arrival of the WAAC in uniform in France drew a different response. Firstly, there was a degree of hostility as the women were seen to be replacing men who would be sent up to the firing line. Though by this stage many of the men they were replacing were not

---

<sup>78</sup> Ibid. Letter home, dated 4 April 1916.

<sup>79</sup> Pickford. Letter to Molly, dated 29 July 1918. DoD, IWM.

considered fit for fighting and were instead reassigned to other areas behind the lines. The women of the WAAC also had to contend with scepticism about their capabilities to do 'men's' work. Dorothy Loveday arrived in France qualified as a chauffeur but described a disastrous first day in a letter home:

Yesterday I went down to the Garage, rather an unfriendly looking place with an atmosphere of women being considered a nuisance. The OC said he was sick of them this afternoon. Like a fool I went down with studded shoes and slipped off the pedals so badly that I couldn't drive.<sup>80</sup>

Later she wrote: 'The OC when he tested us, wrote a letter of protest against incompetent women being sent out for whom he had to release good men drivers and gave our names.'<sup>81</sup> The other problem faced by the WAAC on arrival was their association with 'camp followers' or prostitutes. The sight of the WAAC uniform could draw scorn and contempt from all quarters at the Front. Among the French too, WAAC telegraphist Annie Martin recalled that they were followed down the road by local children who identified them as prostitutes and called after them, 'Jig-a-jig, one franc; jig-a-jig, one franc.'<sup>82</sup>

The presence of women in uniform at the Front was unsettling - the WAAC in their military uniform raised fears of gender transgression. The official spaces accorded to women at the Front had been carefully defined but there was nothing to contain the effect of their presence and the fears this consequently instilled among those accustomed to separate male and female roles. The events leading up to the mutiny at Etaples in September 1917 are varied and discussed in detail elsewhere.<sup>83</sup>

---

<sup>80</sup> Loveday. Letter to Miss Robertson, dated 7-9 February 1918. LC.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid. Letter to Miss Robertson, dated 24 March 1918.

<sup>82</sup> Oral history testimony of Annie May Martin. Reel 2. 000//42/3. DoS, IWM.

<sup>83</sup> Gloden Dallas & Douglas Gill, *The Unknown Army. Mutinies in the British Army in World War I*, London: Verson, 1985.

Women of the WAAC who were stationed at Etaples at the time recalled that their own presence helped fuel the disturbances, which resulted in physical threats, and finally the women's removal from the area. Betty Donaldson wrote:

A large number of our men collected round our camp later on in the evening and made a great deal of noise and threatened to raid it if we did not come out! During this time all of us, about five hundred altogether, were locked in the recreation hut with instructions to sing hymns, which we did with our tongues in our cheeks, but with just a little sprinkling of fear in our hearts.<sup>84</sup>

The fear generated by this incident resulted in various rumours back home of a WAAC having been shot by a soldier, and a soldier having been shot for raping a WAAC.<sup>85</sup> Ultimately, however, it was the reputation of the WAAC which suffered.

Despite constraints and restrictions upon their movements, their appearance and their work, the Front is nevertheless reflected as a place of opportunity and personal fulfilment in women's contemporary writing. Women who were chauffeurs looked back affectionately upon the types of ramshackle cars they were obliged to drive. Ambulance drivers were conscious of the responsibility of their work, believing that they could drive more compassionately because they were women, sensitive to the pain of the men they carried to the hospitals. Working at the Front was rewarding in itself while the war lasted. VAD Nora Pemberton was given the responsibility of running a rest and dressing station set up at Abbeville. She wrote to her parents: 'Now they [BRCS and RAMC] have handed it all over to me and my heart is spending its time alternately filtering through the holes in the soles of my

---

<sup>84</sup> Unpublished memoirs of Mrs R Leared (nee Donaldson). 73/34/1. DoD, IWM.

<sup>85</sup> Streatfield. Letter to Miss Durham from ME Nanson, dated 20 September 1917, and 'Extract from report from Scottish Division', dated 19 December 1917. MRC.



shoes at the enormity of the responsibility and bounding high into the air with the pride of the position.’<sup>86</sup> Women who were from middle- or upper-class backgrounds had a certain amount of authority prior to the war, associated with their social status, but were not necessarily in a position to exercise it. Usually they would defer to parental authority or perhaps to their brothers.<sup>87</sup> The opportunity to exercise authority, therefore, was an unusual experience for many young women who went to the Front, who were then called on to supervise wards full of men, either as VADs or nurses. VAD Ruth Manning recorded in her diary, ‘I enjoyed today very much. Sister Stevens was away for the whole day and Nurse McMurray and I ran the whole show...I was left entirely in charge of the ward from 6.30 to 8.’<sup>88</sup>

Women at the Front felt they had to prove themselves and justify their presence. This feeling partly explains why women felt guilty when they were not busy. However, they also wanted to demonstrate they were capable of carrying out the jobs to which they were assigned, hence the VAD desire to work hard at even the most menial chores. Before the war women had been making inroads into the public sphere, demonstrating that they were not handicapped by their sex, and this attitude is evident in the letters and diaries of women at the Front. They desired acceptance at the Front, they wanted to be involved and they wanted to be valued, above all by men. Letters and diaries reflect gratitude, appreciation and praise from soldiers and officers. VAD Nora Pemberton worked at a rest station, and wrote: ‘I am really rather overwhelmed at people’s kind appreciation of our work out here. It is what every one

---

<sup>86</sup> Pemberton. Letter to Dad, dated 3 May 1915. DoD, IWM.

<sup>87</sup> Angela Woollacott, ‘Sisters and Brothers in Arms. Family, Class, and Gendering in World War I Britain’, in Miriam Cooke and Angela Woollacott, *Gendering War Talk*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993, 131.

<sup>88</sup> Manning. Diary entry for 29 May 1916. DoD, IWM.

else could do just as easily and what dozens of girls would give anything to get the chance of doing...'<sup>89</sup> Netta Hamilton who worked for the SCH, wrote to her mother: 'You've no idea how much our club is appreciated by the officers and how much our baking is complimented. I don't expect anyone would think my scones worth eating at home.'<sup>90</sup> An acknowledgement that women could do jobs not considered fit for ladies prior to the war provided the validity women sought to consider themselves worthy to be at the Front.

Most of the women who went overseas to work with the BEF would have had very specific ideas about what it was to be a woman within a given class. For women who went overseas in the early part of the war, there was a realisation, and to some degree, an acceptance, that the female role was to be limited, and that the work they would carry out was 'women's work', which involved cooking, cleaning, mending, and other domestic chores. With the exception of sewing, it is unlikely that many upper class VADs would have much experience of the other requirements, as such jobs were normally carried out by women from lower social classes. Military nursing too was by the time of the First World War a predominantly female occupation. These considerations have led to claims that the war conducted at the Front which cast men as warriors and women as nurses only helped perpetuate the sexual division of labour already visible in peace time.<sup>91</sup> Yet an examination of women's work at the Front reveals it is not possible to argue that the sexual division of labour was maintained without first acknowledging that it was redefined. Not all women who went to the Front were nurses. General Service VADs were called on to carry out

---

<sup>89</sup> Pemberton. Letter to Dad, dated 26 November 1914. DoD, IWM.

<sup>90</sup> J Brown. Letter to Mother, undated. LC.

<sup>91</sup> Summers, *Angels and Citizens*, 278.

heavy or dirty work that was more usually associated with labouring men or working-class women, such as scrubbing lockers, carrying stretchers and repairing ambulances. Additionally women came to the Front as drivers, mechanics and builders as part of the WAAC. Then there were doctors and anaesthetists within the medical profession who eventually found work at the Front with the BEF. The understanding of a sexual division of labour also implies that women's work was physically segregated from men's but again this was not the case. Although their living quarters were apart, their camps even separated by barbed wire, and the women of the WAAC were marched in groups back and forth to the workplace, once at work women were in constant contact with male colleagues. In the case of nurses and VADs, women supervised patient care and the work of male orderlies. The prevailing discourses of the day which stressed the femininity of women's work helped create the illusion that their work was separate from and subordinate to men's. This view has been reproduced since, perpetuating the myth of the sexual division of labour at the Front. This is not to say that the barriers of the sexual division of labour were irreparably broken down at the Front, but rather that because of the circumstances created at the Front it was difficult to erect and maintain the traditional sexual division of labour. Separate and distinct gender identities were challenged by women working at the Front and their presence was often viewed with suspicion and alarm. Prevailing ideology demanded that women's work should be separate and feminine but this was very difficult to put into practice. Equally, the argument in favour of the sexual division of labour at the Front does not explain the class anomalies which placed some women in positions of authority over men.

A consideration of women's living and working conditions indicates that they were often far removed from the refinement that many women had left behind. Conditions at the Front were harsh, even though this remained part of the appeal of the Front for women. The escape from the more 'feminine' home front to the 'masculine' front line was part of women's adventure at the Front. The image of treacherous muddy trenches is synonymous with the male experience of the war, while women were seemingly associated with the cosiness of hospital wards. Though they lived and worked in relative comfort by comparison to trench accounts, women were also subjected to the vagaries of the elements. WAAC administrator Dorothy Pickford described in a letter the conditions of her camp in the month following the Armistice when the women were still busy at work:

The weather is quite unspeakable, it pours ceaselessly every day and the camp is ankle deep in mud and slush. I can't get gum boots for all the girls and they must be wet through all day and every day. They remain wonderfully cheerful all things considered.<sup>92</sup>

Matters were not helped by women wearing long skirts and dresses. Sister Georgia Crozier wrote: 'We are living in tents right on top of a very high cliff with not even a tree to shelter us. When I came [to Le Treport] first the weather was bitterly cold, the wind would pierce you and the wet and mud were unspeakable. We really needed men's attire instead of skirts.'<sup>93</sup> While Dorothy Pickford did not report serious illness among the women at the camp she did observe that there was much absenteeism which could be attributed to the conditions women had to live and work in. While the WAAC were normally housed in Nissen huts, other women at the Front were obliged

---

<sup>92</sup> Pickford. Letter to Molly, dated 19 December 1918 DoD, IWM..

<sup>93</sup> Unpublished letters of Miss GAD Crozier. Letter to Mrs Lewis, dated 5 May 1917. 91/27/1. DoD, IWM.

to live in tents. As they were behind the lines their accommodation was located on the cliffs of seaside base towns, and consequently experienced the full force of adverse weather conditions. Many of the Stationary hospitals where the nurses and VADs worked were also accommodated in tents, with nurses moving between wards along duckboards in all climates. As for their living quarters, women were supplied with a regulation army kit. Some women were fortunate enough to be billeted in old vacated French houses, surprised, not to say pleased, at the luxury they encountered. However, many women would usually have to stay in army tents and be at the mercy of the changing seasons. In the first instance, this might have appeared to be an adventure and women tolerated the discomfort of their own intolerable circumstances because those of the soldiers were considered to be worse. VAD Marjorie Starr described her hectic work schedule in letters home and then wrote: 'I am terribly amused at people writing to me not to overdo it and take care of myself: one simply can't think of oneself at all: one's little ills are nothing at all in comparison to the wounds about us, and it matters more if they are neglected than if I am tired.'<sup>94</sup> In this respect women carried the burden of guilt that they should feel discomfort in order to properly feel part of the war which by its very nature had excluded them. Vera Brittain used this justification to nurse at the Front in order to be as near as possible to her fiancé, Roland's experience of the war. Unless she was a nurse, seeing the suffering of others and suffering 'minor' discomforts herself then she could never fully appreciate what war meant. However this logic only led to the further marginalisation of other women at the Front and further underlined how much the war was a masculine experience beyond the comprehension of women. Discomfort then

---

<sup>94</sup> Starr. Diary entry for 8 October 1915. DoD, IWM.

was actively sought by women at the Front to add meaning to their war experience, and was even seen humorously, as in the illustration included in Olive Dent's account, *A VAD in France*, in which the nurse saving the thermometer is hailed as carrying on her job regardless of the conditions (see Figure 8).

The nature of women's jobs at the Front was difficult to adapt to in the chaotic atmosphere of the Front. Even the experienced military nurses who had gone to the Front in the first weeks of the war found the working environment harsh and they faced severe stress as they struggled to nurse in conditions that were far from adequate. Their professional status and experience proved not to be enough to prepare them for what they found. Women with previous nursing experience believed that this war, seen from the Front, was different. Sister James was sent to a casualty clearing station in October 1914, and recorded in her diary:

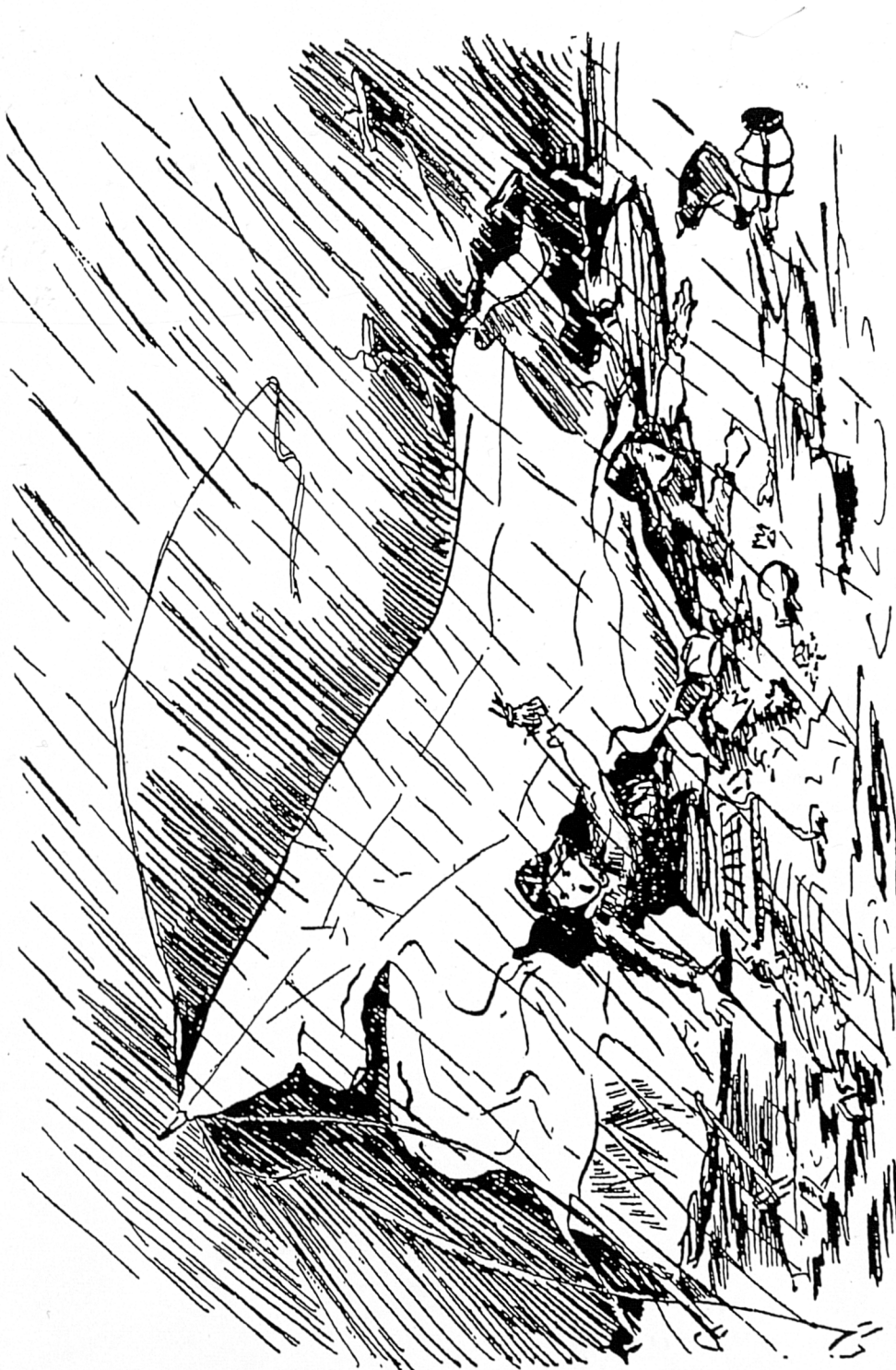
An endless day on duty...terrible cases - very septic and smelly. No supply of hot water. The patients can't be washed properly. They get a lick for face and hands. Hot water has to be fetched from the basement kitchen and is taken from a dirty dixie...very few bowls and plates. Bread put on the floor beside the patients, all in the dirt. Took in some awful cases. Poor devils! I had never really realised what fighting for one's country really means in spite of my two months at Bristol before coming out...<sup>95</sup>

Very heavy work remained a feature of the war for many nurses and VADs, usually but not always coinciding with the major offensives. At these times their heavy workload could be hampered by shortages of supplies, and often staff, as women were always in short supply. There was no doubt that nursing, whether performed by VADs or the senior duties performed by sisters, was a dirty and tiring business. Cramped conditions, large numbers of patients, and difficult, extensive

---

<sup>95</sup> James. Diary entry for 30 October 1914. LC.

Figure 8. 'A windy night – but the precious thermometers are saved.'  
Olive Dent, *A VAD in France*, 257.



A WINDY NIGHT—BUT THE PRECIOUS THERMOMETERS ARE SAVED

R

wounds requiring constant attention added to the women's difficulties (see Figure 9).

While the sisters usually performed the dressings it was the VADs who were left to do much of the ward cleaning. Despite their keenness to be part of the war, such chores inevitably challenged their traditional notions of middle-class femininity, not least because they were obliged to do jobs for which their 'lady' status had not prepared them. Irene Rathbone, who worked with the YMCA at a rest camp in France in the summer and autumn of 1918, recorded in her diary the terrors of getting to grips with cooking fish and chips for hundreds of men, whilst Netta Hamilton replaced her sister in the Scottish Churches Huts in August 1918 and had to try her hand at baking at an officers' club, with mixed results. She wrote to her sister:

Don't get a shock but I am baking every day, drop scones, biscuits and shortbread. Miss Fiddis (an awfully nice girl) gave me some demonstrations and I am getting on fine. She is going to Paris for a week and I have to do all her baking in the interval. It's awfully good practice for me and no one is a bit particular, the officers would eat anything. Miss A is awfully kind and tells me to practice baking as much as I like...Neither of the other girls knew a bit about baking when they came out so they don't think me a bit stupid...<sup>96</sup>

When VAD Eleonora Pemberton went to work at a convalescent horse depot there was no water supply inside the building. She wrote home: 'our five months' training at the station at Boulogne has been just the very thing and has quite inured us to fetching and carrying water and being in and out of doors in all weathers.'<sup>97</sup> Those in authority applauded the efforts of refined young women turning their hands to tasks they had never before considered. When Thekla Bowser wrote a propaganda book about the work of the VAD, she referred to such work as a 'labour of love' as VADs supplemented or replaced the role of the orderly in the hospitals:

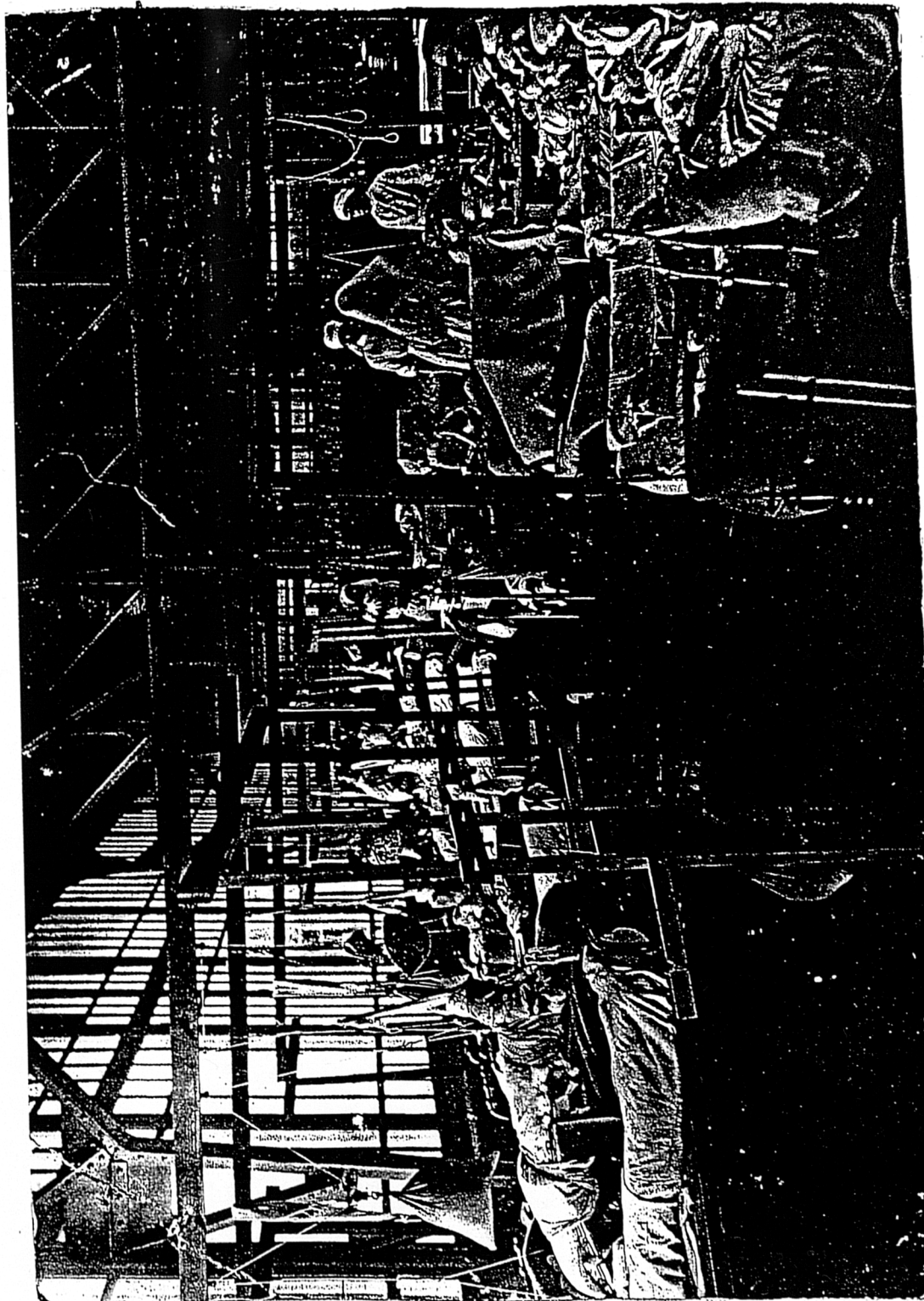
---

<sup>96</sup> J Brown. Letter to Elsie, undated. LC.

<sup>97</sup> Pemberton. Letter to Mum, dated 9 March 1915. DoD, IWM.



Figure 9. Surgical ward at No. 2 General Hospital, April 1918, Quai d'Escale, Le Havre. QARANC.



...we cannot but admire these women, most of them highly educated and delicately nurtured, who have thrown themselves into the gap made by the departure of the men, and who cheerfully carry out the arduous labour which falls to the share of the orderly in hospital.<sup>98</sup>

When upper- and middle-class women carried out arduous work therefore it was something that was noble rather than demeaning which deflected the challenge to traditional concepts of middle-class femininity. During the war, women successfully redefined heavy and menial work at the Front as glamorous. VAD Marjorie Starr described a spell working in the hospital kitchen: '...we have lots of fun over our dish slinging. You ought to see us throwing those tins plates about, they go like lightening.'<sup>99</sup> Concerned parents, however, needed to be convinced that their refined daughters were not carrying out work which was socially beneath them. VAD Nora Pemberton reassured her parents:

Please darlings, don't run away with the idea that I am overdoing it and wasting my sweetness on the desert air! as I very certainly am not! I get just as much of the interesting side of nursing - dressings etc as I should as a probationer in hospital at home - more in many ways and very little more 'charing'. All probationers have to char to a certain extent and after all as I am neither a trained nurse nor a professional cook, what else could I do?<sup>100</sup>

After the war any 'glamour' associated with nursing or VAD work was stripped away in the accounts of Vera Brittain and Evadne Price. At the time, however, women were content to adapt themselves to the conditions, despite the threat to their femininity. Women had to work in dirty environments which consequently took its toll on their appearance as they had little access to washing facilities, and were liable to catch lice from the men coming into the wards. Sister Anna Cameron nursed

---

<sup>98</sup> Bowser, *Story of British VAD Work*, 183.

<sup>99</sup> Starr. Journal entry for 8 October 1915. DoD, IWM.

<sup>100</sup> Pemberton. Letter home, dated 29 March 1915. DoD, IWM.

aboard HMS *Delta* and wrote:

It is so horrid to undress and find things crawling on your clothes - one of the joys of Active Service. Some of the men came on all tortured with vermin bites and have to have frequent disinfectant baths. We are so accustomed now to these things we make rather a joke of them. One night I picked four fleas off one of the sister's capes. She told me while she dressed - she was on night duty - she found 16.<sup>101</sup>

Being at the Front therefore was the antithesis of femininity and associated cleanliness. If women considered themselves dirty they were unfeminine too. It is not surprising then, that the VADs developed a reputation for clearing up and keeping things clean, so much so that the VAD became a symbol for cleanliness during the war. Irene Rathbone described the dugout at the tent where she worked: 'Kit and Maudie and Joan had spent a happy morning doing the VAD touch to the entire tent. There was nothing they hadn't scrubbed and tidied. Our dugout was a dream of cleanliness. The rubbish of ages had been cleaned away'.<sup>102</sup> Some VADs were obsessed with cleanliness and hygiene, scrubbing floors, tables, walls and cupboards. Were they conforming to what they thought women should be doing, given that women of this class did not usually carry out such work? They certainly appreciated the praise of their superiors for clean and tidy work stations. But there was perhaps even more to it than that. Their spotless wards contrasted sharply with the very muddy or very bloody patients who arrived into them, though the men were quickly cleaned up. Cleanliness and domesticity therefore disguised the more bloody aspects of the war, and gave a further appearance of normality. The obsession with domesticity and cleanliness was also a way in which women could assert their femininity in an environment that challenged these concepts. Women on the one hand

---

<sup>101</sup> Cameron. Undated letter (incomplete). BRC 25 4/6. WAWC, IWM.

<sup>102</sup> Rathbone. Diary entry for 18 September 1918. DoD, IWM.

wanted to be in the war by being at the Front but on the other went to great lengths in their working environments to disguise the presence of war, not only for themselves but in the hospitals for their patients.

Despite the hardships experienced by women at the Front, and attempts made by women to contain attacks upon their traditional values, women also refined their notions of femininity. Thus traditional middle-class femininity, signifying wealth, education, moral respectability, refined appearance, as well as being caring, gentle, unthreatening and maternal, was not a static concept for them. When femininity stopped working for them, ie. when their long hair or long nails became a hindrance, they were dispensed with (and not necessarily as a temporary or expedient measure), seen as being dated and associated with an old-fashioned femininity which no longer served a purpose in this new environment that showed no signs of coming to an end. Women certainly constructed their lives at the Front around traditional concepts of domestic and feminine comforts, but with a practical awareness of their conditions. In some cases notions of domesticity could still hamper women getting on with the business of war, but there is evidence to suggest that femininity was felt by women to be a fluid and adaptable concept under the conditions of war at the Front.

Women made sure that the comforts they had left behind were not entirely banished from their lives, as they asserted themselves over their surroundings. Letters were written home requesting all variety of treats to ease the burden of their new-found hardships, such as curtains to replace screens and china cups to replace tin mugs. What women were doing to counter the severity of their living conditions was recreating the domestic environment which they had left behind. Nora Pemberton oversaw the transformation of the staff room at the rest station where she worked:

It is looking very nice and cosy now as the lamps have just been brought in, ... We have just finished and put up, curtains, at one end and they look so comfortable and cover up all the lockers in which everybody stuffs everything! They are rather a nice shade of peacock blue and go well with the brown paint and make a contrast to the cupboards at the other end which our talented carpenters... have fashioned and finished with consummate skill and neatness out of packing cases. Some of them were pretty black when they started but hard scrubbing has greatly improved their appearance and now they really look rather smart. It is difficult to realise that this is really a luggage van.<sup>103</sup>

Women were transforming and camouflaging their environment to reproduce a sense of normality in conditions they were unused to. Recreating a domestic setting in their living quarters and in their place of work, whether it was an office or a hospital ward, was a stamp of their femininity and also one of reassurance. Domesticity within the hospital was seen to be reassuring and welcoming for patients, too. One of the arguments advanced for allowing women out to the Front was that they would provide a civilising presence in all that was brutal. Women were conscious that femininity and its civilising qualities could be used to cope with their living and working surroundings, recognising that men brutalised by their experiences in the trenches would also recognise and respond to the feminine touch. Olive Dent wrote:

The men come practically straight from the trenches, and are deeply grateful for, and appreciative of, the cosy beds, the nicely cooked food, the absence of vermin, the cleanliness and brightness of the wards, and our attempts to make them comfortable and happy.<sup>104</sup>

Though Dent's published account is very much part of war propaganda, the message that women provided a much-needed civilising presence at the Front is evident in both diaries and letters. Clean, empty wards were therefore also a sign of the imminent

---

<sup>103</sup> Pemberton. Letter to Mum, dated 19 December 1914. DoD, IWM.

<sup>104</sup> Dent, *A VAD in France*, 39.

arrival of a convoy of injured men. Domesticating the environment allowed women to assert their femininity, though the men were probably all too often simply relieved to find themselves in a situation of relative safety and comfort, with the prospect of going home, and the domesticated wards served as a welcome transition. Sister Anna Cameron recorded the reaction of a convoy who came aboard HMS *Delta*: 'We were sent to Anzac and took on a sorry crowd of wounded and typhoid. Some of them nearly cried with joy to get a bath and bed and decent food.'<sup>105</sup> Escape and safety seem to be the priority for the men, though Cameron associated their reaction with the feminine presence of the sisters aboard. It could also be argued that given the class differences between VADs and most of their patients, the level of comfort provided would be just enough for the men to appreciate that they were being better cared for than they would be at home, and that they were being 'treated' by ladies. Sister James recorded the reaction of a Christmas convoy: 'They said it was like heaven to sleep under a roof again, dry and warm. They departed at 9.30 very grateful for everything. Said they'd had a better time here than anywhere.'<sup>106</sup>

In order to establish their position at Front women relied very much on prewar conceptions of femininity. The conditions of the Front were shocking to women, and yet they felt the pressure to overcome them out of a sense of patriotism and a keenness to prove themselves as women. If conditions proved to be too harsh, then middle-class women could resort to using their social influence to improve their situation. Those who were well-connected turned to friends, like Dorothy Loveday who wrote: 'My resolution to get what I want without influence is getting

---

<sup>105</sup> Cameron. Letter home, dated 13 October 1915. BRC 25 <sup>4</sup>/5. WAWC, IWM.

<sup>106</sup> James. Diary entry for 27 December 1914. LC.

undermined, by seeing how easily people who have it get everything. Still I am not going to use any for at least 2 weeks.’<sup>107</sup> Miss A Neville went to the Front as a VAD and was placed in a hospital where her aunt was the matron, and VAD Nora Pemberton evaded the censors by sending her letters home with female superiors who regularly visited the Front.<sup>108</sup> Social position continued to ensure that middle-class women at the Front were not powerless. Women at the Front, accustomed to the changes their new circumstances had brought about were not completely prepared to forego all the luxuries they had left behind. Off duty days provided opportunities to go and have their hair dressed in the local towns, go shopping, sightseeing, visit cafes, and enjoy the pleasures the Front had to offer them. Netta Hamilton worked with the SCH and transferred from a men’s camp to an officers’ club at Le Treport. She wrote to her mother:

I certainly couldn’t have found a softer job anywhere...it is just about as good as a holiday being here we have so little to do. In the forenoon we do the baking for the afternoon or go out shopping and then from 2-6 we give out teas to anyone who comes but since I came there haven’t been many. In the evening we sit, talk and read or play games...<sup>109</sup>

While they accepted the hard work they had to carry out, work that was considered more feminine was welcomed. Sewing splints was more preferable to cleaning stoves. VAD Nora Pemberton wrote to her parents in December 1914: ‘The new shift is just posted and to my great delight I find I am to be in the Dispensary by day again, so now I shall be a lady and clean on Christmas Day.’<sup>110</sup> While VAD Neville wrote to her parents: ‘Now I feel the place belongs to me and am not so shy. You would be

---

<sup>107</sup> Loveday. Letter to Miss Robertson, undated. LC.

<sup>108</sup> Neville. DoD, IWM; Pemberton. Letters, February 1915. DoD, IWM.

<sup>109</sup> J Brown. Letter to Mother, undated. LC.

<sup>110</sup> Pemberton. Letter home, dated 22 December 1914. DoD, IWM.

astonished at the odd jobs we all find to do for the officers, little mendings and heaps of cleaning of clothes.’<sup>111</sup>

On the one hand the Front offered the opportunity of escape and adventure, while on the other the very principles of the society they left behind were used to cope with the horrors of the war they discovered there, and maintain their social position, under the kinds of work they were required to carry out. Their concepts of femininity were not in this respect a source of weakness but one of strength, as they cemented their position and authority over their immediate surroundings for the duration of the war. However, the work was mundane for many VADs and volunteers and without the glamour of the war the reality of the chores they were doing removed the desire to work. Netta Hamilton, for example, was still at the Front in 1919 working for the Scottish Churches Huts at Wimereux. She wrote home:

I don't let the others know I think it, but I am really awfully glad I am only here till the end of the month. I don't like it a bit, it's too much all work and no play and somehow now that the war is over, I don't feel like half killing myself with voluntary work.<sup>112</sup>

Once the war was over hard, menial work began to be recognised for what it actually was. With the compulsion of duty removed, the more attractive and familiar prospect of home was a realistic option. It was the women writers of the 1920s and 1930s who stripped away the facade created by women at the Front in order to survive in the hostile surroundings. But the memory of excitement of being at the Front, the opportunities it provided and the keenness to do the work asked of them reappeared in women's later recollections. As the war became more distant the memoirs and accounts recaptured how women coped. Recollecting the war in their final years, and

---

<sup>111</sup> Neville. Letter home, dated 15 August 1917. DoD, IWM.

<sup>112</sup> J Brown. Letter to Mother, 16 October 1919. LC.



seen through the span of their lives, another picture of the war emerged. War at the Front was by then often the best years of their lives, certainly the most memorable, and as in diaries, a feeling that they had taken centre stage in an important historical event. Louise Saunders gave a speech at the fiftieth anniversary celebrations of the WAAC, in which she exclaimed: 'What a wonderful gathering of women who in my opinion are second to none in the qualities of courage, the spirit of adventure, hard work and resourcefulness. After fifty years, I felt that once more I had come home.'<sup>113</sup> In their later years the memory of duty and destiny replaced one of horror and revulsion in the final analysis of what war at the Front meant to the women who were there. FANY Beryl Hutchinson wrote in her memoir:

This account of my FANY life has failed to portray the most important aspect of all, the feeling of pure comradeship with every man and woman, senior General to FANY Bugler to aged and wobbly Base Detail stretcher bearer, with whom one had shared the conditions, the life of dedication. We may have been naïve, lived with illusion, we did not say the actual words, but we all had the feeling that we really were keeping the world fit to live in, that our many sacrifices had been worthwhile. My generation had absorbed the idea of responsibility, our men-folk had gone out in peace as in war to serve the Empire with its many, many irresponsible people who suffered famine and disease. Despite the sneering of TV and young revolutionaries that our methods were "Paternalism", we honestly felt that it was our destiny to supply the need. In that Spring of 1919 we felt the biggest task, the utmost sacrifice had been made and the world was a better place.<sup>114</sup>

Through women's accounts we get a different view of the experiences of women and men at the Front. The following chapter will analyse the relationships between women and with their male colleagues. The Front was not divided along gender lines, but women and men worked alongside each other. From women's

---

<sup>113</sup> Unpublished papers of Mrs L Downer. Address to WAAC Jubilee Dinner, 1967. DoD, IWM.

<sup>114</sup> Unpublished memoir of Beryl Butterworth Hutchinson. 74/105/1. DoD, IWM.

accounts we can see that war at the Front was not always 'war' as imagined, and could be one of enjoyment. The idea that war at the Front was a time of excitement, however, challenges deep-rooted myths about the First World War which have taken hold through the male literary war canon and have not been dispelled by recent attention to women's war literature. The focus on postwar fiction and memoirs excludes the varied experiences recorded by women in letters and diaries which further challenge the dominant male voice of the war. However, the importance of women's postwar pacifist literature cannot be ignored. Instead, it is possible to trace a reaction to women's involvement in the war at the Front and identify how women's perception of their participation evolved. What was initially seen as an opportunity for women changed to rejection in the pacifist 1920s and 1930s and then again in oral histories to reconciliation. In the letters and diaries there was no static concept of revulsion or joy, but a constant repositioning about women's attitude to being involved in the Great War. The letters and diaries indicate that women were prepared to reconcile femininity to a war environment, and that their class status as representatives of the Empire gave them a framework for authority in which to assert themselves at the Front. While women might have been excluded from areas and aspects of the Front on account of their gender, concepts of class and empire proved to be less restrictive. For the rank and file WAAC who lacked the social authority of the middle-class nurses and VADs, the conditions at the Front presented more of a challenge. Their experiences away from the wounded meant they also found it more difficult to find their way permanently into the war narrative. What is evident is that women recognised that their experience of war at the Front was inextricably linked to the male experience of the trenches. The Front may have been seen as an opportunity

for adventure and excitement but those women who wanted to be heroines at the Front first of all needed heroes. Sister Alice Slythe's poem captures women's predicament:

We came to France to nurse our wounded men  
There were no men.  
We turned the cupboards out  
Until there were no cupboards left, and then  
We scrubbed each scrap of woodwork round about.  
We methyated all the window panes,  
We cleaned a hundred bedsteads till they shone.  
We rearranged the furniture until  
It hadn't got a leg to stand upon.  
But this is not the work that wins the praise  
Of cheering crowds adown triumphal ways,  
And should the war end now, I shall not dare  
To show my face - just yet - en Angleterre!<sup>115</sup>

---

<sup>115</sup> Slythe. Diary entry for 10 June 1915. LC.

## Chapter Three

### The Female Hierarchy

If I may say so, what the nursing profession is suffering from is lack of education, and the reason why we VADs are often preferred by the doctors, to say nothing of the patients, to professionals, is that many nurses not having been brought up in refined homes, begin in hospitals to be taught things we have been taught all our lives - (1) How to associate with men without cringing or familiarity, (2) How to take hold (many of us come from the governing class), and (3) We have good manners, can speak grammatically, many of us are young and good looking, some have money which smoothes the way all the world over; others good social connections; and we have a powerful, rich corporation at our backs. I hope this does not sound snobbish and insolent, but we “uppers” are rather insolent and the jealousy of women of inferior social status, (however highly trained) has aroused a sense of resentment in the bosom of many VADs...<sup>1</sup>

Tensions between voluntary aid detachment nurses and professional military nursing sisters remained unresolved throughout the duration of the war.<sup>2</sup> Occasionally they flared into open public hostility as illustrated by the above letter published in *The British Journal of Nursing* in 1916. The conflicts reflected in this letter revolved around the issues of class, professional status and morality. These conflicts were ever-present among women at the Front, not just among the military nurses and the VAD, but among all women of the BEF from different social and

---

<sup>1</sup> ‘A Few Home Truths’ from a VAD. Letter in *The British Journal of Nursing*, May 1916, which was cut out and pasted into an illustrated diary kept by Sister Alice Slythe for the benefit of her step-sister. She wrote in the margin: “Can’t you imagine what a storm this piece of impertinence raised?”

<sup>2</sup> See papers of Dame Maud McCarthy, QARANC, and papers of Dame Katharine Furse, WAWC, IWM.

professional backgrounds who sought to establish their own identities at the Front. Women from upper- and middle-class backgrounds who worked with the BEF, especially those who were VADs, found themselves in positions of professional inferiority. Power struggles ensued as women competed for social authority and respectability by questioning each other's suitability on the grounds of class, race, and moral integrity. The relationship of women to their male colleagues at the bases and the ways in which some women were able to exert authority over working class men at the Front, while deferring to the judgement of their social equals will be the focus of this chapter. Finally, this chapter will analyse the impact of the introduction of the Women's Army as a way of exploring the hierarchical organisation of women at the Front and its consequences for femininity and female sexuality.

As well as reflecting the tensions between women, letters and diaries do convey a sense of female friendship that is referred to in recollected testimonies. The pioneering spirit shared by women in the face of adversity has been remembered as a unifying experience, given added potency by reunion events in which shared experiences are reminisced and mythologised. When Louise Saunders addressed the WAAC golden jubilee dinner, she stated: 'I feel happy to be with my own "kind" and to re-live again the Good Comradeship of the Past.'<sup>3</sup> However, this type of collective unity is not evident in the letters and diaries. Female friendships which are represented in contemporary accounts are based on shared experience but were also usually class specific and, given intense female rivalries, confined to the same organisation or unit. In her study of French volunteer nursing, Margaret Darrow has suggested that unlike male accounts, female bonding is absent from women's

---

<sup>3</sup> Downer. *Memoirs*. DoD, IWM.

narratives.<sup>4</sup> She argues that tales of female friendship in war are threatening because they convey an alternative 'feminine' war. Consequently, she says, women's accounts were more likely to survive if they complemented rather than challenged the male myth of war. There are parallels with English accounts. The depth of female friendship at the Front has not been translated into women's literature of the war, where female friendship is treated with ambivalence, when it is not ignored. In early works, like Olive Dent's *A VAD in France*, there is no mention of special female friendship or even female bonding. Here the focus is on the primacy of the VAD's relationship with her patients and female friendship would only undermine this central relationship between nurse and soldier. In Bessie Marchant's adventure novel, *A Transport Girl in France*, female friendship is portrayed as dangerous. The heroine, Gwen, is betrayed by a girlfriend, who represents a traditional 'mendacious' femininity. Gwen, on the other hand, has discovered the benefits of heroism and is rewarded for her bravery when she saves soldiers during an air raid. Postwar women's literature continued to reflect the ambivalence of female friendship at the Front. The spectre of guilt looms over female friendships where male-female relationships cannot survive. In Evadne Price's *Not So Quiet*, the very presence of women at the Front is questioned. Nel's relationship with Tosh, one of the other drivers in her ambulance unit, is meaningful only in so far as it illustrates how fruitless, disappointing and damaging are her dealings with the other women in the unit. By the time Nel has become a WAAC, she has absolutely nothing in common with other women, demonstrating just how illusory the war is as a vehicle for meaningful relationships, a point underlined when Tosh, her only female friend, is killed. Vera Brittain too, in *Testament of Youth*, privileges the relationship with her

---

<sup>4</sup> Darrow, 'French Volunteer Nursing', 105-6.

brother, fiancé and male friends over and above those of her girlfriends. She is suspicious, and at times hostile, towards the other women with whom she works. Her relationship with Winifred Holtby, formed after the war, and away from the Front, is an indication how little value she placed upon female bonding at the Front. Only after the war when the men in her life were dead, was it important to re-establish same-sex friendships. Significantly, Holtby had also been at the Front in the Women's Army, and satisfied Brittain's need to share her wartime experiences. The themes of *Testament of Youth* personify the wartime obsessions of many female wartime writers, privileging the lives and experiences of the men around them, whether friends, acquaintances or patients, while in the background same sex friendships remain as a foundation to help women through the war. There are some exceptions. Irene Rathbone's semi-autobiographical novel, *We That Were Young*, reflects the strength of female friendship at the Front, though Joan's friend at the Front is Betty, her best friend before the war. The novel also plays down the significance of female relationships at the YMCA camp which were described in detail in her diaries covering part of the same period. Instead, Rathbone, like Brittain, focuses on male-female relationships as the central motivation of the novel.

In letters and diaries the emphasis placed upon same-sex relationships contrasts to fiction and literature where the main preoccupation is with the soldier. While many friendships were probably taken for granted and did not merit special mention in letters and diaries, relationships with other women were important. They feature more prominently than references to relationships with soldiers. These relationships indicate the depth of female friendship based on shared experiences. VAD Nora Pemberton struck up a friendship with a co-worker, Mary Crowdy, when

working at a rest station, and described her in a letter to her mother in terms of a schoolgirl crush:

She is perfectly charming, and so pretty; beautiful would really describe her better and it is the beauty of a beautiful mind looking out of a pair of the clearest and most candid of blue eyes. I quite love her and I am sure you will too!<sup>5</sup>

Letters and diaries reveal the continuity of female shared experience through the war which allowed for meaningful same-sex relationships to occur. Throughout the war women were able to observe others around them, and assess themselves performing unusual tasks in unfamiliar conditions. The school dormitory atmosphere of women's living quarters, shared working experiences, the isolation of the Front from home, and the war itself, helped to create an intimate environment in which female friendships could flourish. Irene Rathbone, a YMCA worker, shared an attic room with her friend Pussy:

Some nights Pussy and I undress and go to bed almost without a word, other times we talk half through the night. Tonight was one of those occasions. Our brains were wide awake, and the war and women and marriage and love were discussed with eloquence and ardour till early dawn.<sup>6</sup>

Close female friendships permeate the letters and diaries kept by women at the Front. VAD Winifred Kenyon constantly referred to her friend, Sister Gower, until the latter was returned to England following a scandal at the hospital. Sister Mary Brown's diaries reflect the close bonds between the nurses who served aboard her hospital ship, while WAAC Dorothy Pickford formed a close relationship with the doctor at her camp. In much of the postwar literature and history, these close friendships have been lost as the focus switched to women's relations with soldiers.

---

<sup>5</sup> Pemberton. Letter to Mum dated 19 December 1914. DoD, IWM. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>6</sup> Rathbone. Diary entry for 4 August 1918. DoD, IWM.



Women experiencing war at the Front away from the soldiers does not fit into the traditional war narrative. It is this aspect of women's lives at the Front which has been lost. Women's literature indicates a shift in emphasis to the soldier, while in oral testimonies they were encouraged to relate their experiences to the soldier in order to make their role in the war relevant to the traditional narrative.

While later recollections and historiography have recaptured some of the unity between women that existed at the Front, it has reproduced the unity propaganda of the period rather than focused on the specific conditions necessary for female friendships. It ignored some of the very real differences between women at the Front which were cause for concern to the authorities. Female rivalry was a key feature of women's war experienced at the Front. Often belonging to rival organisations and competing to work in similar areas, women were prepared to assert themselves over one another on the basis of class and racial identity. Differences between women, especially the apparent rivalry between the VADs and the sisters, exhibited in the hospitals at home and the Front has featured in more recent historiography. Sharon Ouditt has discussed the ways in which the VAD were victimised by professional nurses jealous of their success.<sup>7</sup> Krisztina Robert has also suggested that it was 'professional jealousy' on the part of sisters that drove VADs to leave the hospitals for other paramilitary services.<sup>8</sup> While there was tension between the trained nurses and the Voluntary Aid Detachments, their rivalry was indicative of the creation of a female hierarchy at the Front based on perceptions of class, race, volunteer status and organisation. Professional jealousy was just one aspect of the female hierarchy at work, and therefore it is unwise to reproduce the criticisms VADs had about the

---

<sup>7</sup> Ouditt, *Fighting Forces*, 26-7

<sup>8</sup> Robert, 'Gender, Class, and Patriotism', 59.

sisters without an examination of the formation of a female hierarchy which shaped women's working lives.

Most recent academic work dealing with women at the Front has focused on literature where a VAD has been the central subject, notably Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth*. The VAD point of view as expressed by Brittain, and also Evadne Price and Edith Bagnold, has been reproduced by academics keen to counter the male literary war canon and allow women's voices to be heard. The VAD has therefore been cast as the forgotten heroine of the war, patriotically and selflessly volunteering her services. On becoming a VAD, Olive Dent described herself as a 'Kitchener nurse'.<sup>9</sup> It was the VAD who went to the Front and witnessed and shared in men's horror. It was she who suffered the pain of war at first hand. And it was she who suffered at the hands of bullying, inconsiderate sisters who underestimated her skills and placed unreasonable obstacles in the way of her continuing to nurse after the war. Efforts to restore the voices of women in the war narrative have therefore tended to reproduce some of the prejudices of the female writers who themselves were influenced by prevailing attitudes on issues of class and race. Missing from the female war narrative is the voice of the professional nurse. Her story has usually only been told from the point of view of the VAD. It is clear from letters and diaries written by professional nurses that there is another side to the argument and that VADs were not hapless victims of vindictive sisters. The relationship between sisters and VADs needs to be examined with the position of the professional nurses in mind. This reveals that the concern of the professional nurse was less with the status and duty of the VAD than with the inter-organisational rivalry

---

<sup>9</sup> Dent, *VAD in France*, 16.

between the Territorial nursing sisters, the Reserves, civilian nurses, and the army regulars.

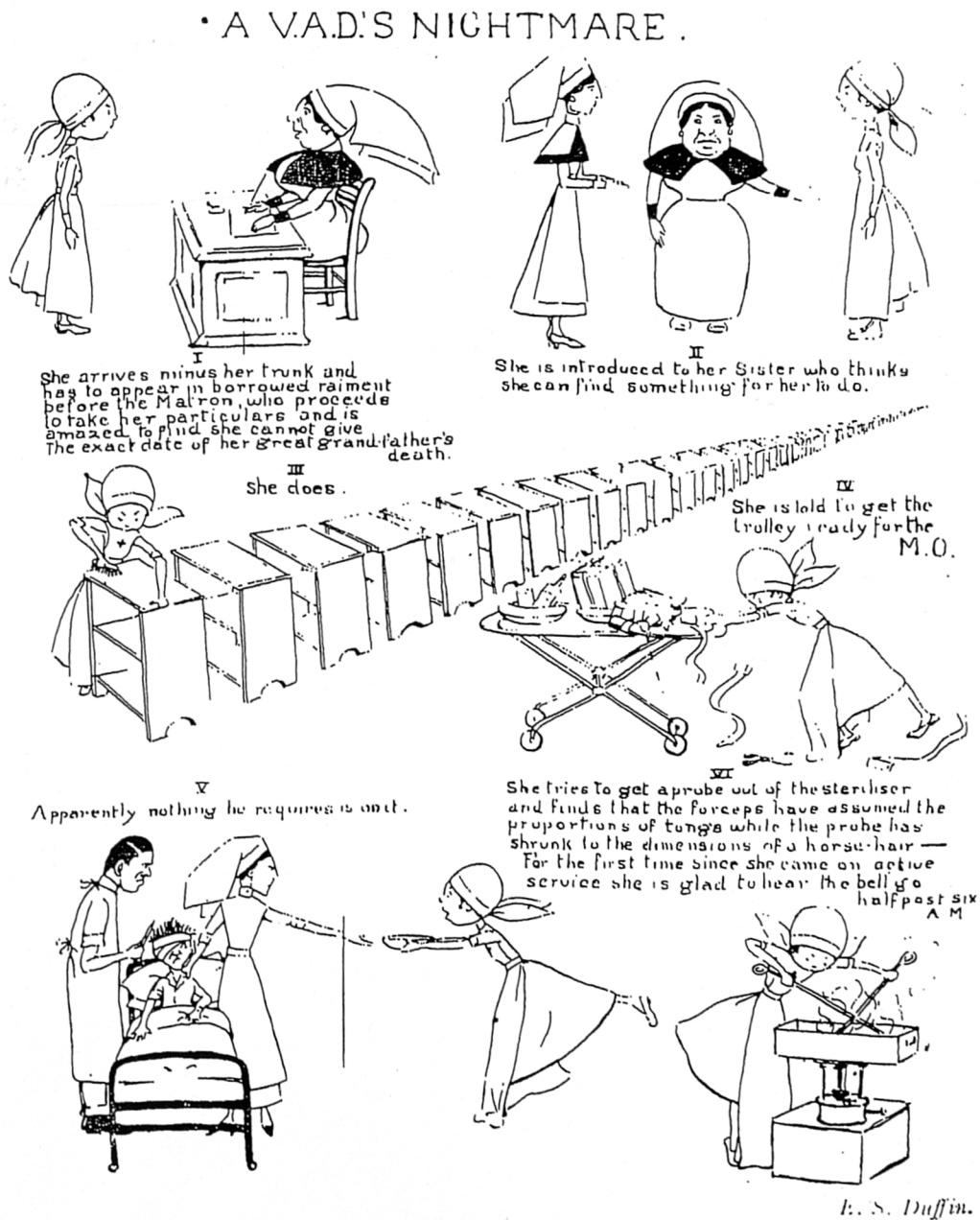
VADs resented their subordinate status within the nursing hierarchy where they were supposed to be addressed as 'member' not 'nurse'. They were ward auxiliaries with little or no medical training and were usually given the task of keeping the wards clean, scrubbing floors and lockers, cleaning stoves, emptying bedpans, washing dishes, and following orders from professional nurses, women they considered to be their social inferiors. This endless routine of menial chores for educated young women could be the source of humour (see Figure 10). VAD Edith Oswald found herself carrying out the more skilled task of bandaging which drew an ironic response from the doctor on duty, aware perhaps of the limits placed upon VAD duties: 'He also came up and whispered with a twinkle in his eye "I'm sure that's too big a dressing for a VAD to do"! when I was busy doing a man who hasn't a single bit of his body that isn't bandaged.'<sup>10</sup> Humour however masked deeper tensions. The source of the tension has been ascribed to social distinctions between professionals and volunteers. The image of the hard-bitten, hard-drinking Boer War veteran making the life of an innocent VAD a misery is a myth. But the image of inefficient lower-class women ordering ladies about persisted at the highest levels. Itemising the reasons for complaints and difficulties experienced by the VAD, Katharine Furse observed 'that the dregs of the Nursing Profession are now being used owing to insufficiency of the best type of Trained Nurses. The result is that you get very inferior women put in charge posts while you have highly educated cultured women serving as VAD members.'<sup>11</sup> Class distinctions might have been apparent in

---

<sup>10</sup> Oswald. Diary entry for 16 August 1918. LC.

<sup>11</sup> Draft memo: 'Foundations of the Present Difficulties in the VAD Service'. BRC 10 4/8.

Figure 10. 'A VAD's nightmare' in 'The Goodbye Book of the Quai d'Escale'.  
BRC 25 0/2. WAWC, IWM.



some hospitals at home, but women who went to the Front were meticulously selected, with class background a factor. Matron-in-Chief, Maud McCarthy, noted in her Annual Report for 1915 the procedure for selecting nurses to work at casualty clearing stations:

Great care was taken in selecting these staffs so that only the most suitable in every respect were appointed, this information being obtained by receiving regular reports from each Unit. It was also possible at this time to interview all members of whom there are any doubt as to their suitability.<sup>12</sup>

With only 300 regular army nursing sisters available on the outbreak of war many nurses who joined the Reserves had very little nursing experience. With the exception of some aristocratic VADs, it is unlikely that the social background of nurses and VADs differed to any great extent, with both drawn mostly from the middle classes. Views expressed in the diaries of Reserve sisters are almost indistinguishable from those of the VAD. Tensions, if they existed at all between professionals and volunteers, must have some other explanation. It may well be that the image of the professional nurse working for her living and therefore associated with being from a lower social class affected the view of all nurses who went on to join the ranks of the Reserves. It certainly appears that the fact that the nursing sister worked for her living, rather than being 'leisured' proved to be a sufficient distinction for elitism and disparagement, as seen in the opening quotation of this chapter. 'A Few Home Truths' from 'A VAD' indicates the levels that resentment between professionals and volunteers could reach and this was most explicitly expressed by the VADs. As a result of their connections, or merely on account of their self-perceived status, they voiced their resentment and discontent at their treatment, and dismissed

---

<sup>12</sup> McCarthy. Diary 1914-19. QARANC.

years of training and hard work undertaken by the professionals. Nevertheless the atmosphere generated by an influx of untrained women into a profession which valued its training meant that rumours of tension were not unfounded. The Central Joint VAD Committee received regular complaints from its members that their work was not valued and that 'once a VAD always a VAD'.<sup>13</sup> The Joint Committee worried constantly that it would lose capable women to other organisations involved in war work. Furse, as ever, wanted more control to intervene on her members' behalf, but this she was never granted, and control remained with the Matrons-in-Chief.

Accounts of bullying are referred to time and again in the diaries of VADs, whether explicitly or simply by alluding to such instances. Again this was considered a matter of interpretation. What was considered 'bullying' on the part of the VADs was 'discipline' to the nursing services which some members of the VAD, it was believed, had difficulty acquiring. The situation of admitting experienced VADs into the nursing profession was unresolved when the war ended, and the VADs were demobilised acrimoniously. Maud McCarthy was forced to conclude: 'As regards the Nursing VADs it has been considered very regrettable that the record of loyalty they had shown, and the good service they had rendered throughout the war should have been broken by the lack of discipline exhibited by difficult members.'<sup>14</sup>

On the ground, the VADs wrote about their experiences. VAD Elizabeth Lupton worked in France and wrote about the treatment meted out by the hospital matron to a colleague whose main problem appeared to be exhaustion and overwork. The matron thought otherwise, and her reaction caused shock and distress among the

---

<sup>13</sup> 'Foundations of the Present Difficulties'. BRC 10 4/8. WAWC, IWM.

<sup>14</sup> McCarthy. Diary for 1919. QARANC.

other VADs who felt helpless to respond to her reported attack on the VAD in question. The matron told her:

she was altogether unfitted for the work and had better give it up. Was neither mentally nor physically fitted for it. Showed no intelligence nor interest in her work. Was always tired and had a perpetually whining voice. Was difficult to work with and discontented. Did the worst work of any VAD in the hospital.<sup>15</sup>

Nevertheless a growing confidence in their abilities as they became more experienced, together with a natural self-confidence based on their social superiority enabled some VADs to strike back, as illustrated in 'A Few Home Truths', but also in asides in diaries and letters. VAD Nora Pemberton wrote home describing some of her personal battles with her Sister, writing with humour to deflect some of the resentment she obviously felt, and perhaps an awareness of the censor:

You behold me then occupying the coveted position of "Dispensary pro[bationer]", last week by day and this week by night. It includes all sorts of odd-jobs, including keeping the Dispensary clean, helping Sister with any odd dressings that come along, fetching and carrying for her and taking her orders and instructions with meekness and sobriety even when they are entirely opposed to my own private programme! It has a most comic side and you would laugh to see the internal struggles that go on sometimes! However Sister is most awfully kind and nice and does not oppress her pro unduly! <sup>16</sup>

It is also necessary to consider the tensions from the point of view of the sisters. Very rarely do disparaging accounts of VADs appear in the letters and diaries of nursing sisters. They were usually more concerned with the hierarchical system within the profession itself. Millicent Peterkin, a Reserve sister, wrote of a visit from the army Matron-in-Chief, Maud McCarthy in December 1914 to investigate complaints about the treatment of Reservists by Regulars:

Were all paraded in Matron's office, and asked if we had any complaints to make, as someone had been writing home, and also to the nursing papers, complaining of her treatment by the QAIMNS

---

<sup>15</sup> Lupton. Diary entry for 9 November 1917. LC.

<sup>16</sup> Pemberton. Letter to Dad dated 26 November 1914. DoD, IWM.

Sisters, and saying that nearly everyone else had the same grievance. This letter was stopped by the Censor, and sent to Headquarters, so the business is now being investigated. No one else would own up to any trouble and all said they were quite happy and satisfied.<sup>17</sup>

Sister Priscilla Simpson had a different point of view. She recorded in her diary:

Many of us are feeling very depressed over the way things are done here. So much favouritism seems to be shown. They have even picked out about 12 of the Sisters and given them stripes which means a certain status and also an extra £10 a year. Why should this be done, we are quite content to work for a small salary at a time like this if it will help the country in any way, but why should some be put over the others who have done nothing to deserve it.<sup>18</sup>

Sister Millicent Peterkin's sense of rivalry was roused by the arrival of some Canadian nurses. She wrote in her diary: 'They are fully trained, so should be quite useful. Their uniform is very showy, of a decidedly "military" cut, with plenty of brass buttons and stars on their shoulders!'<sup>19</sup>

The conflict between the VAD and the professional nurses must be seen in the wider context of the hierarchical organisation of women at the Front. It was not simply a matter of class conflict but rivalry between different organisations and uniforms. Women's presence and authority at the Front were precarious throughout the war despite their expanding role. Women's organisations desiring to make a permanent impression were prepared to denigrate other women to maintain their own status. The VAD remained a volunteer organisation throughout a war which increasingly witnessed the professionalisation of women's paramilitary work. Their volunteer status and lack of recognised training made them vulnerable. It was this vulnerability which spurred them to scorn other women who had authority over them. Professional nurses recognised that the main threat to their authority and professional

---

<sup>17</sup> Peterkin. Diary entry for 20 December 1914. DoD, IWM.

<sup>18</sup> Simpson. Diary entry for 10 January 1916. LC.

<sup>19</sup> Peterkin. Diary entry for 22 May 1915. DoD, IWM.



status did not come from the VAD but from within their own ranks. This is reflected in the emphasis in their letters and diaries. Sister Jentie Paterson was concerned about the undermining of nursing at the Front, but the threat she perceived was not from the VAD or inexperienced Reservists. She wrote to a friend:

Orderlies to my mind are all very well but they can never take the place of women nurses. To begin with they lack education, perception and conscience. A man can be a doctor and order treatment but he has not the patience nor detail to carry out the nursing part and the Orderlies being of a different social status to us, his ideas of cleanliness differ and he never not even the best grasps "Surgical Cleanliness". I would rather work with the most "fatheaded" woman probationer under me than a nursing orderly.<sup>20</sup>

Cleanliness and precision were seen to be attributes of middle-class women.

Consequently VADs, despite lack of training, were not beyond the pale in terms of nursing in a way that working-class male orderlies were clearly thought to be. Only the commitment of the VADs remained to be questioned by the professionals.

While I have suggested that there were factors other than class involved in the formation of a female hierarchy at the Front, class issues cannot be ignored. They were most visible with the introduction of the WAAC to the Front in Spring 1917. The introduction of the WAAC created another layer of tension at the Front within the female hierarchy, reflecting the tension already exhibited within the corridors of power back home. Anecdotal evidence suggests that there was rivalry and even resentment between the VADs and the WAAC and this often related to class differences and concerns about morality. Writing after the war, WAAC Betty Donaldson recalled in her unpublished memoir the ways in which the rivalry between the two organisations manifested itself. Referring to one colourful episode,

---

<sup>20</sup> Paterson. Letter to Martha, dated 16 November 1914. DoD, IWM. Emphasis in the original.

Donaldson related the story of a woman in her hut who was discovered to be pregnant:

The story spread rapidly round the Base and two of our neighbours and rivals, the VADs over the fence, showed their delight in a quarter which was not well received. They dined one night with two officers, one of whom they only knew slightly, and who happened to be a particularly loyal friend to the WAAC drivers, by whom he was driven daily. 'X's misfortune was fresh in all their minds, and one of the VADs could not resist referring to it, although in an indirect way. Our partisan drew himself up in his chair, glared at her for what must have seemed an interminable time, then leaned towards her, banging his fist down on the table as he did so. "And who was the first woman in the war to have a baby?" he roared. "A VAD in Egypt!" Not very long after this we heard a rumour that a VAD had had twins, but I have not the slightest idea if that or the Egyptian yarn was correct. Whether true or false, we made the most of both stories, hoping thereby to restore our damaged prestige.<sup>21</sup>

What appeared to be important to women in both organisations was to gain the good opinion of the men in authority, which could then be used to the detriment of the rival organisation. If Betty Donaldson thought the WAAC had friends among the male officers, Irene Rathbone, a former VAD who transferred to the YMCA, defended the women of the YMCA who were from the same social background as the VAD. She recorded in her diary the events of a dance at a training camp near Le Treport:

Capt Stevens from the 5<sup>th</sup> Army - no, his face is nothing much but he is quite a dear. By the way from his account and others we seem to have been an immense success at that dance, and completely cut out the WAAC officers whom they can't abide! Did I mention that there were about 6 at the dance, and that they did not behave like perfect little ladies!<sup>22</sup>

The antagonism between women's organisations can be traced to the origins of the WAAC. When women had first joined the war effort as voluntary nurses in the VAD or as volunteers carrying out canteen work, women from the upper- and middle-

---

<sup>21</sup> Leared. Memoirs. DoD, IWM.

<sup>22</sup> Rathbone. Diary entry for 8 September 1918. DoD, IWM. Emphasis in the original.

classes were given opportunities over women from the working classes who were considered morally suspect and lacking the requisite patriotic motives. As the VAD who wrote the letter 'A Few Home Truths' asserted, the women themselves also believed that they could conduct themselves with men 'without cringing or familiarity'.<sup>23</sup> With such attitudes prevalent, the labour of working-class women was denigrated by other women anxious to demonstrate their patriotism. However, as Krisztina Robert has pointed out, the working-class women who joined the WAAC were not lacking in patriotism.<sup>24</sup> It was difficult for them to demonstrate their patriotism given the ingrained hostility not only arising from the general public to women in military uniform, but also from other women anxious to protect their own positions at the Front.

The WAAC was not universally welcomed either on the home front, or at the Front. The paid status of the WAAC appeared to fly in the face of what it was to be a woman in war, challenging the self-sacrificial status of women who had travelled to the Front using their own resources, rather than those of the State. While professional nurses had faced similar opprobrium, they did at least have the defence that they were carrying out the recognisably caring and nurturing duties of looking after the sick and wounded. The WAAC however, fell outside the recognised and acceptable distinctions of what women should be allowed to do, ensuring that scorn, based on fear and prejudice, was heaped upon it following its deployment, from society at large, and from other women already part of the war effort.

It is difficult to identify any one particular issue concerning the WAAC which proved to be the source of the hostility towards it. Outwardly it was formed with very

---

<sup>23</sup> Slythe. 'A Few Home Truths'. LC.

<sup>24</sup> Robert, 'Gender, Class, & Patriotism', 63.

conservative aims. The women wore a uniform, but then many women of the time were in uniform of some description; some were carrying out unconventional jobs, not traditionally identified with women, but most were conventionally employed. The majority of WAACs in France were cleaners, cooks and waitresses. Even those who held driving posts were no longer unusual by 1917, either at home or at the Front. This suggests that if there was a root to the hostility towards the WAACs, it was not simply on account of any gender transgression, though the hostility often manifested itself as such. Recent academic work has suggested that working-class women found it very difficult to counter unfounded accusations aimed at their morality and patriotism, and that this was evident during the war wherever working-class women found employment.<sup>25</sup> Robert argues however, that despite antagonism to their new roles, joining the WAAC enabled working-class women to forge new gender roles even though they were informed by wartime jingoism. The admittance of working-class women into the ranks of the WAAC was deemed unacceptable by sections of society, even to the point where it was felt to reflect upon the status of the country. Robert Cude, a soldier in the British army, was on leave from the line in Dieppe in July 1918 with three comrades, where he observed:

One thing all four of us are agreed upon, and that is that we are to have as much drink as decency will allow, during our stay here, as we are kept short of it when we are forward, and it is improcurable. Three of us keep it up, but the other one pals off with one of the WAACs that are here in their thousands. The 50<sup>th</sup> Div. is billeted just outside of the town, and we see some of the antics of the WAACs with them. I have no hesitation in saying that, to my mind, they are a disgrace to the Country that they belong to. There are good among them, but the good are over shadowed by the bad. Girls I prefer to give them another name. I said that three of us keep together, but the other one got

---

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., and Janet K Watson 'Khaki Girls, VADs, and Tommy's Sisters: Gender and Class in First World War Britain' in *International History Review*, Vol xix, No 1, February 1997, 32-51.

hitched to one of these, but so far as we can see, she was one of the decent ones, so it is not too bad.<sup>26</sup>

The reputation attached to the WAACs extended beyond the British Expeditionary Forces. Annie Martin who worked as a wireless telegraphist, remembered that the French were sceptical of the Women's Army. She describes being stoned on several occasions in Abbeville where she was stationed. She recalled, 'In the opinion of the French there was only one reason why the women had been sent out – that was for comforts of the troops... and were undercutting the French women.'<sup>27</sup> It was an attitude which was shocking to Martin and her fellow signallers, most of whom were from respectable middle-class backgrounds, unused to having their morality questioned.

The notion that women were paid to work in conjunction with the army was clearly an unsettling prospect, even for those within the Women's Army. The official brief for the WAAC sanctioned the mixing of the sexes in order that the WAAC could assist in entertaining the troops. This remained a sensitive issue, however. It was considered to be fraught with difficulty and involved tight supervision of the women. For Christmas 1918, camp administrator, Dorothy Pickford was responsible for organising a mixed performance of Dick Whittington, with a WAAC as principal girl, and another eleven in the chorus. She confided in a letter to her sister: 'I am not going to be quite happy in my mind till that first night is over. In the days when there were only men it was fairly riotous. I don't want to have to spend every evening for a fortnight behind the scenes, but it may be necessary.'<sup>28</sup>

The belief that women from a particular social background were not to be

---

<sup>26</sup> Robert Cude. Diary entry for July 1918. Con Shelf, DoD, IWM.

<sup>27</sup> Martin. Oral history. Reel 2. DoS, IWM.

<sup>28</sup> Pickford. Letter to Molly dated 14 December 1918. DoD, IWM.

trusted in the company of large numbers of men was pervasive. The surveillance and discipline of the WAAC was geared towards preventing incidents of immorality rather than to the general welfare of the women, though at this time it officially amounted to much the same thing. Controlling and monitoring women's behaviour was the received way of preventing immorality. While women from upper- and middle-class backgrounds could just about be trusted to behave with decorum in the company of men, those from lower social groups could not. Dorothy Loveday went to France as a WAAC driver in February 1918, and noted the behaviour of other WAAC women during the evening crossing in a letter to her former headmistress:

Most of us wanted to sleep, but a few kept up an intermittent conversation through most of the night with men on the deck, outside the port holes. Why does uniform have such an odd effect, the girls (just like the men) at once try to pick up someone much more abandonedly than the girls on munition work did, though they are very much the same class. It's the effect of getting into the uniform, perhaps they feel they don't show up so much individually, lost in a crowd and can throw off all restraint. Of course it isn't all, perhaps not even half, but they are giving all the [WAACs] a bad name.<sup>29</sup>

The WAAC became synonymous with poor discipline. This was attributed to its intake of working-class women. Within twelve months of the WAAC arriving in France, rumours at home and abroad, about their conduct prompted the setting up of a commission to investigate the living and working conditions. It was also a pretext to allay the rumours of immorality which were seen as a threat to the recruitment of 'decent' women at a time of national crisis. An analysis of the nature of the rumours indicates that concern centred on the class of women who were in the WAAC rather than about women in general. As already suggested, the WAAC, while providing a radical departure in women's war work, was conservatively structured in order to assuage fears about women transgressing conventional boundaries. The Commission

---

<sup>29</sup> Loveday. Letter to Miss Robertson dated 2 February 1918. LC.

received reports from across the country detailing the allegations against the WAACs.<sup>30</sup> Foremost among them was the widespread rumour that many WAACs were being returned to England pregnant. The nature of this rumour varied from region to region, and took on different forms. Of concern to the Commission however, was the central allegation that up to 500 women had been returned to England because they were pregnant, and that a large maternity hospital had been established in France for the purpose of looking after pregnant WAACs.<sup>31</sup> It was further believed that the War Office was paying a bonus of between £5 to £50 for every baby born to a member of the WAAC.<sup>32</sup> Alarm was expressed that the purpose of forming the WAAC was to increase the population of Great Britain, currently being decimated on the western Front. It was feared in some quarters that the War Office was intending to introduce compulsory conscription for women aged between 18 and 25 in order to supply 'camp followers' for the troops, and that conscripted women would have to have their hair cropped.<sup>33</sup> An official visiting the Park Royal munitions factory in order to assess protective clothing requirements was mistaken as a recruitment officer for the WAAC: 'The rumour went round that the Government Official was going to make the girls in trousers to go into the WAAC and in consequence a very large number of them hid until after the visit.'<sup>34</sup>

The Employment Department was concerned about recruitment. It had received letters from concerned applicants who had heard that women were expected to 'associate' with soldiers; and that joining the Women's Army would forever tarnish

---

<sup>30</sup> One of the commissioners was Lucy Deane Streatfield. Her papers, relating to the investigation, are stored at the Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick.

<sup>31</sup> Streatfield. 'Rumours of alleged immoral conduct of the WAAC in France'. MRC.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. Interview with Miss Maud Pauncefote.

a woman's reputation and hence damage her future job prospects.<sup>35</sup> One letter from a new recruit received by the Commission detailed the reasons for returning her railway pass:

There are rumours all over the country that the WAAC is only for the convenience of soldiers and for the purpose of increasing the population... I beg of you to give me some assurance that the girls who come back ruined, have become so at their own option, or because they have not the strength of will to resist the temptation, and not through being compelled or induced by those in authority. If, as I am told, they have done it on a sense of patriotism, I would not try to hinder it, but would wish them success, but at the same time could never take part in it myself.<sup>36</sup>

Another WAAC recruit waiting to be sent to France described how she was insulted by a woman where she was currently employed: 'I overheard her pass these remarks to the girl sitting next to her (myself sitting opposite). "An honourable girl wouldn't go out to France!"'<sup>37</sup> Others were warned not to join by brothers and male friends at the Front, who reported that the WAAC was undisciplined.<sup>38</sup> It was further alleged that prostitutes were infiltrating the WAAC to ply their trade, supplying addresses at base camps where soldiers and officers could seek them out.<sup>39</sup> The atmosphere was frenzied and consequently the fears on the effect of recruitment were taken seriously. The Wales Division responsible for recruiting WAACs noted in its report for October 1917:

"Terrible rumours" are pervading South Wales with regard to the behaviour of the soldiers and WAAC girls at Rouen. It has been stated by a man who has just returned from France, that he has heard "that the men and women are mixing together in the most promiscuous manner" and that the morals are much worse since the arrival of the British girls

---

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 'Rumours of alleged immoral conduct'.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. Letter from Amy Fox, Leeds, dated 21 January 1918.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. Letter from Elsie Berry, dated 24 January 1918.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. Letter from Lady Hope Dunbar to the Duchess of Atholl.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. 'Rumours of alleged immoral conduct'.



than even before. He has, under the circumstances, forbidden his wife to raise a finger to help recruiting.<sup>40</sup>

The report reflects middle-class anxiety about immorality, seen to be associated with the working classes and working-class women in particular. The surveillance of working-class women during the war was considered necessary on the home front in order to safeguard morality.<sup>41</sup> Although women were supervised at the Front, the distance from the home front increased fears that it was not strict enough to keep them under control. The powerlessness of those on the home front to contain the behaviour of working-class women at the Front produced an atmosphere of panic. The call for an investigation of the rumours was instigated by two aristocratic women, Lady Hope Dunbar and the Duchess of Atholl. Supported by some sections of the clergy and Members of Parliament, they made it their business to gather evidence about the conduct of the WAAC in France in order to highlight how recruitment was being affected. While presuming such allegations to be untrue, Lady Hope Dunbar and the Duchess of Atholl nevertheless assisted in fuelling speculation about the conduct of the WAACs. The result was a bizarre collection of rumours submitted from across the country, with little or no substantiation. In Greenock it was rumoured that a WAAC in France had been shot, and that a soldier had been shot following the rape of a WAAC.<sup>42</sup> Lady Hope Dunbar wrote the following in a letter to the Duchess of Atholl, a copy of which was passed to the members of the Commission:

My Head Forester told us his daughter and a girl wanted to join, but her brother was home this last week, he begged his father on no account to allow it, "if you knew what the women were out there you'd

---

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. Extract from Report from Wales Division dated 30 October 1917. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>41</sup> Lucy Bland, 'In the Name of Protection: the Policing of Women in the First World War' in Julie Brophy & Carol Smart (eds), *Women in Law*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985, 23-49.

<sup>42</sup> Streatfield. 'Extract from report from Scottish Division', 19 December 1917. MRC.

never allow it.” A Sergeant Major was also in there on another night and those questions came up, with the same result. My late cook’s brother made much more serious allegations almost unbelievable, still he knew it and told his mother. I myself saw my second tablemaid’s letter from her young man, and she cut out and gave me part of it, and I sent it to the Lady who is at Dumfries in charge of the WAAC who wrote me yesterday morning she knew the subject badly wanted thrashing out, and she had forwarded it to the Head. Anyhow, there is an old saying, “There is no smoke without fire, is there! and that there is something very wrong somewhere is certain.”<sup>43</sup>

The threat of prosecution under the Defence of the Realm Act for spreading misleading information did act as some sort of restraint on the tone and detail of public allegations, but the overall impact of the rumours proved a damning indictment of the conduct of the WAACs abroad, regardless of the apparent motives of those who thought they were acting in the best interests of the WAAC. The WAAC was not without support at home, though, as Betty Donaldson recalled in her memoir, it could not dispel the negative image:

Speaking generally, the attitude adopted by women who remained at home towards their fellow countrywomen who served abroad, ran to extremes. Either we were heroic martyrs carrying on our work under continual shell fire or bombardment from the air, or we were the lowest type of womanhood, which had made its way to France solely in pursuit of men and pleasure.<sup>44</sup>

Ivy Kewley who was a clerical worker with the WAAC experienced one of those extremes when she recalled an incident at Lime Street Station. She was returning to France after taking leave:

I happened to come on the station, was going to the barrier, and two women got hold of me and a crowd got round. Well I felt, I felt about that big and you know they weren’t very educated and they kept saying, “where you going love,, where you going.” I said, “I’m going to France.” “Ah, God love ’er, ah, God love ’er, she’s going to France.” Oh! I have to laugh when I think of it myself. You can just picture it can’t you, the conversation. And they, oh honestly, but there

---

<sup>43</sup>Ibid. Letter from Lady Hope Dunbar to the Duchess of Atholl. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>44</sup> Leared. Memoirs. DoD, IWM.

was a heart of gold, those women. And some of them went to the kiosk and bought me chocolate, bars of chocolate, oranges. Oh, they stuffed me up with all sorts before I could get through the barrier and you daren't refuse.<sup>45</sup>

In women's fiction too, WAACs were portrayed as heroines, as in Bessie Marchant's 1918 adventure story, *A Transport Girl in France*. However, it became necessary to address public concern, however unfounded and unsubstantiated, and the Commission of six women was convened by the Ministry of Labour in February 1918 to investigate the spiralling allegations; the all-women selection a small victory for women being responsible for their own organisation. The Commission was carefully monitored and once in France its members had to declare that they would 'avoid criticism of the conduct of operations, or of individual officers, or anything reflecting on the Allied Forces.'<sup>46</sup> They also had to cope with the conditions of the Front, and their inspection challenged further notions of what was a woman's place in war.

WAAC administrator Dorothy Pickford's camp was one of those to receive a visit.

She described the event in a letter to her sister:

I have never told you about the Commissioners. They came just a week ago. Mrs Streatfield and Miss Julia Varley spent a night here, and three others, one of whom was Miss Violet Markham picked them up next day. The night they were here, the French turned off the electric current, and there wasn't a light in the place, we also got them up at 3am with a raid warning, so they saw life... Julia Varley was the queerest creature, do you know her name, I believe she is quite a light in the Labour world? She began life in a Yorkshire factory, we know the type well, but for the others she was something quite new. Social distinctions just didn't exist for her, and I wish you could have heard her ordering tea and hot water when I took her to her room at night.<sup>47</sup>

The Commission's task was to investigate the rumours of immorality with a view to 'calming' public opinion. It was also to examine the conditions in which the

---

<sup>45</sup> Oral history testimony of Ivy Kewley. 3154. DoS, IWM.

<sup>46</sup> Streatfield. Form 89C. MRC.

<sup>47</sup> Pickford. Letter to Molly dated 14 March 1918. DoD, IWM.

WAAC were accommodated and worked. The six members of the Commission spent a week in France in March 1918 visiting 29 camps and hostels, and speaking to administrators, base officials, chaplains, medical staff, and YMCA and YWCA representatives. The statistical evidence on their return regarding widespread immorality bore no relation to the horror stories circulating in the country at large. Official figures presented by the Commission indicated that the total number of pregnancies among women in France was officially recorded as 21, 16 of which were home cases (women who were married or had become pregnant before leaving for France), and the remaining five overseas. There were 12 cases of venereal disease of which 'some cases were doubtful and others of old standing.' 19 women had been dismissed on disciplinary grounds for various offences ranging from drunkenness, theft, insubordination, desertion and unspecified 'general misdemeanours'; a further 20 women had been dismissed for inefficiency. 59 women had been discharged for medical reasons including the 12 venereal cases, the remainder were largely related to discharge for compassionate reasons.<sup>48</sup> With over 6,000 women serving in France, the Commission believed this was a full vindication of the conduct of the WAAC, and that instead of receiving censure from the public, the WAACs deserved praise for their largely excellent behaviour and devotion to duty.<sup>49</sup> While the Commission was keen that the report should not be a whitewash, it did manage to avoid addressing the issues as to how the women became pregnant, or had contracted venereal diseases, instead opting to explain as much away as possible. Nevertheless the Commission held its ground when the War Office demanded that all references to venereal disease be suppressed from the final report. Violet Markham, a member of the Commission,

---

<sup>48</sup> Streatfield. Draft Copy of Commission's Report to Rt. Hon. G Roberts MP at the Ministry of Labour. MRC.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

wrote of the incident to another Commission member, Lucy Deane Streatfield, in April 1918:

The War Office actually proposed to leave out all reference to cases of venereal disease. All the Ministry of Labour people had protested strongly against this. Naturally I entered a protest no less emphatic. Apparently the War Office are extremely sensitive on this subject, and both Sir Reginald Brade and Lord Derby feared adverse criticism if any reference to the subject was made. The Ministry of Labour pointed out the extraordinary ostrich-like character of this attitude, that to omit any reference to these cases would be at once to excite public suspicion of the gravest character. Sir Reginald Brade was then anxious to add an explanatory sentence showing how small was the proportion of such cases. Personally I disapproved of an explanatory sentence. I think this situation should be dealt with by a plain statement of fact, and that explanations of a deprecating character produce just the situation which it is desired to avoid.<sup>50</sup>

The fear of linking the army with venereal disease is evident from the treatment of the WAAC. Any woman known to have venereal disease was to be discharged.

However, the hysteria pervading rumours of venereal disease among the WAAC instilled itself within the ranks. The Controller of the WAAC Medical Services, Dr Turnbull, was obliged to issue a statement following an outbreak of rumours in hostels that 'offensive smells' indicated the disease. She urged that women should avoid compromising themselves with soldiers to avoid allegations of passing on venereal disease to a soldier, which was an offence under the Defence of the Realm Act. She also advised that medical training was needed to identify venereal disease and 'that an offensive smell very rarely indicates Venereal Disease, and that there are many skin troubles which, though disfiguring, are not contagious, and are certainly not of this nature.'<sup>51</sup> However small the figures, the reality of WAAC life was hard under such constant rumour and innuendo, and women who

---

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. Letter to Mrs Streatfield from Violet Markham, dated 6 April 1918. MRC.

<sup>51</sup> Memos from JH Turnbull, dated 22 March and 8 April 1918. Army 3<sup>14</sup>/73 and 3<sup>14</sup>/74. WAWC, IWM.

wore the WAAC uniform in Britain and in France suffered unwanted attentions from a curious and at times abusive public. WAAC Signaller Kathleen White was on leave in London, when she was accosted by a soldier who made offensive remarks about the WAAC: 'He hinted that we were more or less prostitutes sent out to amuse the army, which naturally I took exception to, and stood up to him and told him off.'<sup>52</sup>

Awaiting departure to France, Dorothy Loveday experienced similar reactions from men in uniform, and wrote to her former headmistress about the perils of wearing a WAAC uniform:

The deed is done, from today I can watch the board for my name being put on draft. When once we are in uniform any Tommy thinks he can make advances. It's very annoying not being able to move without being spoken to...[A Canadian soldier] said France was no place for women and thought, just as the Corporal did, that men respected women much less now than before the war and that they made themselves cheap and had no pride. They may think that and yet they lead girls on and want to lark with them and despise them for it all the time.<sup>53</sup>

Women who belonged to the rank and file WAAC remembered the petty discipline and harsh conditions to which they were subjected. WAAC telephonist Kathleen White found that the job she hoped for on arrival in France was not available: 'And at the beginning they set me on cleaning latrines. And it wasn't a job I liked either. I hadn't gone out to do that, but we were told we were in the army, and in the army you do as you're told, and ask no questions.'<sup>54</sup> WAAC clerk Ruby Start remembered that most of the women officers behaved reasonably but 'I don't think they appreciated our adulthood, the fact that we were grown-up women. I think they could have done a great deal more for our comfort, but they were much more

---

<sup>52</sup> Oral history testimony of Kathleen Charlotte Bottomley. Reel 5. 000172/09. DoS, IWM.

<sup>53</sup> Loveday. Letter to Miss Robertson dated 31 January 1918. LC.

<sup>54</sup> Bottomley. Oral history. Reel 3. DoS, IWM.

concerned about our being good troops, which women never will be.’<sup>55</sup> The rank and file of the WAAC were feeling the effects of being at the centre of an experiment of women wearing army uniforms. Their superiors felt that they had something to prove and therefore discipline had to be seen to be tight, yet at the same time it could not mirror the men’s army because women were not like men. Consequently it appears that the women commandants in the WAAC were always unsure how far to enforce discipline and such uncertainty and diversity undermined the organisation as a whole.

Even after the Commission had reported, problems of discipline remained. The Controller-in-Chief of the WAAC made her own inspection of the camps in October 1918 and noted mixed results. She was particularly concerned with the maintenance of discipline and cleanliness. At Porte de L’Arche it was noted:

The appearance and demeanour of the women was on a par with that of the huts, both equally unsatisfactory. No attempt had apparently been made to smarten up at all for the Controller-in-Chief’s visit, and when she addressed the women, it was obvious that they were unused to military discipline. The Forewomen in charge hardly knew how to bring them to attention. The women seemed thoroughly slack, very slovenly in appearance, and the whole affair was badly managed.<sup>56</sup>

The Controller was most impressed when the camps were tidy and comfortable where the women’s welfare and amusement were taken into account, making sure that they were not ill or bored. When standards were considered low it was deemed that the administrator was ill and could no longer cope, or that the women had been in France too long and had developed ‘poor’ habits. At Hardelot she found the perfect camp: ‘Most of the women had been here over a year, many of them being old members of the Women’s Legion. There was a pleasant atmosphere about the whole place and the

---

<sup>55</sup> Ord. Oral history. Reel 4. DoS, IWM.

<sup>56</sup> Inspection of QMAAC BEF by Controller-in-Chief, October 1918. Army 3 <sup>13</sup>/114. WAWC, IWM.

women seemed contented and happy in their work.<sup>57</sup> The fact that this camp contained women formerly of the Women's Legion was no doubt considered the reason why the camp was in good order, with Legion women having come from middle-class backgrounds.

Women appear to have objected to the level of discipline they had to endure and there is evidence of rebellion. Even after the war was over there were problems with discipline. Administrator Dorothy Pickford wrote to her sister describing one such incident:

We have had one of our periodic scandals. On Saturday night two girls never came in but turned up yesterday morning at 9.30. I wormed their story out of them by degrees and they had spent the night at the Angleterre with two Americans they had picked up the day before. One girl owned to having drunk too much at dinner, the other said she was all right. Fortunately by degrees they made a clean breast of it and gave the names of the men, and I was able to get straight on to the APM with details and he went to the hotel, verified the statements and left a policeman to arrest the men. The DC is dealing with the girls tonight. They both swore they have done no harm, but it is these kind of things that make me grey headed.<sup>58</sup>

This event occurred after the war was over, indicating that women felt less obliged to conform to strict codes of discipline for which many felt they were ill-suited.

The social differences within the rank and file of the WAAC created problems and tensions. The rank and file of the WAAC were perceived, and remembered, to have been made up of working-class women. Alice Proctor who was a VAD driver recalled the segregation of women's organisations during the war and that it was working class women who 'went into the WAACs chiefly, I think because they hadn't the money to learn how to drive and at that time their class didn't have cars...It was much easier for them to go along with the stream and go into the Women's Army

---

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Picford. Letter to Molly, dated 10 February 1919. DoD, IWM.



Corps.’<sup>59</sup> The reputation gained by the WAAC was inextricably linked to their social background, consequently the WAAC have become associated in memory with working-class women. Yet this association was based on a wartime fear that working-class women were morally suspect, and that these women had inexplicably been allowed into the army. In fact the WAAC was much more socially diverse than people imagined or memory recalled. The WAAC was created out of the Women’s Legion, an organisation formed early in the war before working-class women had been allowed to wear the uniform of this elite body. Class tensions which surfaced among and between other organisations based upon social distinctions, were also visible within the ranks of the WAAC. Dorothy Loveday who was a WAAC driver noticed the distinctions between the women who came from the Women’s Legion compared to those women who came straight into the WAAC:

There are 2 more drivers today, a ‘Lady’ and an ‘Hon’. They are so funny about discipline, and say nothing would make them call officers “Sir” and stand to attention when spoken to. They wouldn’t do it to any man. Isn’t it an extraordinary attitude. I can understand the rank and file of the WAAC objecting to say “Mam” because they are a different class and they think it marks it, but the WL drivers here could afford to. Their potted dignity won’t allow it I suppose.<sup>60</sup>

She noted too that the women from the Legion were treated differently:

There are 30 drivers in the club who have been waiting for 3 months being paid 35/- a week. Some were sent home on leave with full pay for 10 weeks! The trouble was between the WAACs and the WL. The ASC tested the WAACs and turned 9 out of 10 of them down, just because they were WAACs. If you knew how badly some WL girls drive! There is nothing to choose from the driving point of view between them, but there is supposed to be socially.<sup>61</sup>

Loveday also felt that the behaviour of women from diverse social groups was different. She drew distinctions between ‘nice girls’ who were from a similar

---

<sup>59</sup> Remington. Oral history. Reel 3. DoS, IWM.

<sup>60</sup> Loveday. Undated letter to Miss Robertson. LC.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

background to her own and 'noisy Lancashire bakers' who were clearly not, though she liked them after reforming their habits to something akin to her own. Loveday was aware that the harsh discipline was taken less seriously by women from the working classes and consequently posed problems for the authorities. Awaiting departure to France at the WAAC headquarters in Folkestone, she described the situation as she saw it to her former headmistress:

There is a lot of trouble with the girls staying out late. We have to be in at 5 pm by special request of the APM. The discipline of the men here is supposed to have degenerated since the coming of the WAACs. The girls who want to stay out, just do, they say it is worth it. They are used to work and fatigues are nothing to them. Scrubbing floors is a change. The officers know it isn't any good stopping pay. One girl came in late two nights having been out with a different man each evening. She had 3 days pay stopped. Both men asked her how much she had lost and paid her, each of them the amount.<sup>62</sup>

The hygiene of working-class women was also considered inferior and a code was established to ensure that all women of the WAAC remained hygienic. They were forbidden to share beds in order to prevent passing on lice. It was recommended that 'regulations will probably be insufficient to check the practice effectively in winter, and surprise visits after "lights out" are necessary to ensure compliance.'<sup>63</sup> Bathing was strictly monitored particularly where the wash-houses were not adjoined to the living quarters, and hairbrushes and toothbrushes were inspected. Laundry was inspected by the forewoman to ensure that the women changed their clothes, and followed hygienic practices when menstruating. It was advised that: 'Special supervision should be given to cleanliness during the periods, as the majority of working girls do not wash more than the face and hands during the entire period, and

---

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> 'Suggestions on Personal Hygiene of QMAAC for Administrators in Training and in Camps'. Army 3 15/8. WAWC, IWM.

the use of sanitary towels is unknown to many. A surprisingly large number actually believe that water is dangerous at such times.<sup>64</sup> Advice was also offered on the care of the skin which had more to do with morality than hygiene: 'Watch should be kept for an increasingly common habit of rouging: not only is the impression conveyed as to the woman's character very unfortunate, but cheap rouge injures the skin...'<sup>65</sup> The women from the working classes were thus seen to have different moral values and hygiene standards, a view echoed in the letters and diaries of the administrators in France. Following an inspection from the Commission, WAAC Camp administrator Dorothy Pickford expressed her doubts about its purpose in a letter to her sister:

Candidly I doubt very much if their visit will have any definite results. They addressed the workers on the necessity of correct deportment, but they, conscious in their own rectitude, are only furious that a word should be said against them. They have their standard of behaviour and very few transgress it, but it isn't always our standard, and with ten weary years experience of the Girls Club, I haven't much hope of ever altering it, so it is as well that younger and more sanguine spirits are in command. In my opinion the behaviour is exceedingly good.<sup>66</sup>

Dorothy Pickford was well aware of the danger of double standards in the treatment of the rank and file, though she nevertheless insisted that strict discipline was essential. She also believed in the superiority of middle-class standards which could not be matched by women from the working class, no matter how good their behaviour:

I feel such a fraud here very often, stopping the girls doing things I know I should do myself in this place but I always felt I couldn't take such a high souled tone, and really it seems to me the standard of behaviour is very good. The behaviour of the men, officers as well as others, in the street is a pretty good indication of the local estimation of the WAACs and I have been out a good deal at night and alone this week, and have never had any bother at all, but I am told it is far

---

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Pickford. Letter to Molly dated 14 March 1918. DoD, IWM.

otherwise at B[oulogne] which is a pity when it means first impressions.<sup>67</sup>

At the root of all antagonism lay irreconcilable social distinctions. Even though the WAAC had been established upon egalitarian lines, with the hope that all women who served would be equal, in reality social distinctions and a hierarchy soon emerged. This went beyond the created distinctions between administrators and the ranks, but was discernible within the ranks too, mirroring the class gulf which existed during the First World War. Although it has been suggested by historians and old soldiers alike that the war was a great leveller, this was only superficially so.

Class distinctions were apparent elsewhere in the female hierarchy at the Front, fostered among women establishing themselves in unfamiliar territory. Irene Rathbone was a middle-class woman who worked for the YMCA. Despite her claims to be both a feminist (having been part of the suffrage campaign) and a socialist ('we are all socialists in practise here', she noted in her diary),<sup>68</sup> she nevertheless found it difficult to reconcile these ideologies with the more pervasive values associated with the traditional, civilised femininity demanded of Englishwomen at the Front. Rathbone was prepared to denigrate other women around her from different social and national backgrounds and organisations in order to maintain a sense of her own moral integrity and position of authority as a woman at the Front. Rathbone's rationale for women's presence at the Front was the prevailing view that civilised Englishwomen were best able to minister to the needs of men brutalised by war. As a former VAD and now as a YMCA worker she felt perfectly qualified to entertain the men at the camp where she worked, unlike others who arrived at the Front for the same purpose.

---

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. Letter to Molly dated 28 February 1918.

<sup>68</sup> Rathbone. General diary entry for June 1918. DoD, IWM.

Women straying from the rigid model of refined femininity were cruelly mocked. As noted earlier, her feelings towards the WAAC were of outright hostility. Rathbone would not have been ignorant of the rumours concerning the WAAC by the summer of 1918 when she was at the Front, yet she was prepared to perpetuate the image of immorality among its ranks in order to ingratiate herself among the men whose company she sought. Her feminism counted for nothing as she appeared unimpressed by the radical development of the women's army but instead remained preoccupied with the moral character of the Women's Army, and its affront to refined femininity. Rathbone's scorn was not just reserved for the women of the WAAC. The camp was visited by a concert party, and its female members also fell short of the requisite standard of civilised femininity despite appearances. Rathbone wrote: "Oh dear what common voices they have when they talk to each other, and yet from their singing voices you would never think they were anything but ladies."<sup>69</sup> Rathbone's disappointment turned to hostility when it came to the question of moral behaviour. The women of the concert party again were found to be sadly lacking. When one of the party announced her engagement to an officer from the line, Rathbone wrote:

They lose no time these people. They have accomplished more in their fortnight, than we have in our whole summer! Of course there is this to be said, that they have nothing else to do, and any girl with leisure on her hands, and a desire to attract can pretty easily secure to herself one of these poor officers on a fortnight's rest from the line. They are in that kind of state that they will practically go down before anything feminine.<sup>70</sup>

Middle-class women like Rathbone believed that it was they who had the necessary social skills and level of education to conduct themselves in a male environment. This widely held view gave very little room for widespread female

---

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. Diary entry for 4 October 1918.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. Diary entry for 14 October 1918.

unity and inter-organisational co-operation. Instead women, anxious to preserve their position at the Front, often treated women from different backgrounds with suspicion and contempt. When a new arrival appeared to work alongside Irene Rathbone at the YMCA she wrote:

My first impression was of alarm. I saw a short plump girl, with a mop of curly fair hair, and a good deal of exposed leg. "Ah thought I, that type! We shall have to look out!" As a matter of fact (it shows how appearances can belie a person) she has turned out to be a very nice girl. She is a lady, well-educated, well-behaved, and well-dressed.<sup>71</sup>

Despite Rathbone's claims to be a feminist, she was still very much hamstrung by orthodox values which allowed her to judge other women primarily on their moral characters.

In order to validate their role at the Front and establish their position within the female hierarchy, women frequently sought the approval of male officers for their deeds. Ultimate power rested in the hands of men, so it was paramount to gain the favourable opinion of officers, with little advantage seen to be gained in merely impressing other women. When VAD Eleonora Pemberton took on the responsibility of running a busy rest station she was concerned that her methods were correct but gained reassurance from the medical officer, and wrote home:

I asked Captain Hughson whether things were done to his liking, or whether he had suggestions to make, as our only wish was to do things as they should be done, but he could not suggest any improvements, and he thought the arrangements were all perfect!!!<sup>72</sup>

The good opinion of men therefore proved justification for the presence of women at the Front. Among the papers of Eleonora Pemberton is a note she received from the officer in charge of the convalescent horse depot where she was stationed at a rest hostel, concerning a concert the women had arranged:

---

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. Diary entry for 2 October 1918. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>72</sup> Pemberton. Letter to parents dated 15 May 1915. DoD, IWM.

On behalf of myself the officers and men of No 1 Convalescent Horse Depot I am writing to thank you and the Sisters of No 1 Section British Red Cross Hospital for the most enjoyable evening you gave us last night. Also for the colossal help in entertaining the guests [French Staff Officers]. Everyone left last night full of envy of us in having such neighbours, and the amount of offers, to exchange jobs with me, I had were striking evidence of how much you had all been appreciated.<sup>73</sup>

Male colleagues at the bases occupied the thoughts of many women diarists and letter writers. With medical officers and base officers, women at the Front were among their social equals, though they were not necessarily allowed to mix socially. Only women bearing the rank equated with an officer, such as a sister or matron in the nursing services, administrators in the WAAC, and women belonging to the Christian organisations, were allowed to associate with army officers. Despite some women exercising considerable authority at the Front, even the highest ranking were eventually subordinate to a male officer at the base. It was not unusual for women, however, even as unskilled VADs, to be in positions of authority over some men (other than their patients). Women from middle-class backgrounds considered themselves socially superior to working-class men from the ranks who acted as orderlies, batmen and engineers. Women were able to exercise authority officially and unofficially over them. The subordinate role of the orderlies enhanced the importance and superiority of the voluntary aid auxiliary, the cook and canteen worker, from whom they received their orders.

Women at the Front who worked alongside working-class men mediated their relationships through social distinctions, even when they were viewed affectionately by the VAD or sister. Sister Anna Cameron who worked aboard the HMS Delta, wrote a story published in *The Nursing Times* under the guise of a patient to illustrate

---

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. Letter from AS OC to Miss Pemberton dated 28 April 1916.

the difficulties of nursing the wounded at Gallipoli. Her portrayal of the orderlies not only draws attention to their lower social status, and consequent lack of refinement, but in certain passages uses the role of the orderly to distinguish between acceptable forms of masculinity. This orderly is deemed not up to the job of assisting a sister trying to cope with a haemorrhaging patient:

Sister was successfully stemming the flow of blood with expert fingers which never faltered; but she needed assistance, and to her explicit instructions the orderly turned a deaf ear and a piteous face. "I can't abide the sight of blood," he whispered, "and I'm feeling very sick." He crashed down on the floor. Jackson ["an anaemic-looking very young ship's engineer"] kicked him aside savagely. "*His* job should be taking babies out in prams," he said, angrily. "Let *me* help you, although I am but a fool."<sup>74</sup>

A second orderly was similarly deemed to be ineffectual:

Only once did I see Sister completely lose her serenity. It was when her most capable orderly was torn from her. She disliked the substitute; so did the patients. Hitherto the day orderlies despite their lack of skill had been nearly all that orderlies should be; but the newcomer appeared to have but one mission in life, and that was to dodge his urgent duties and Sister's all-seeing eye. She did not discover his deficiencies at once, and the finding out was bitter. One of the patients had been shot through the abdomen, and for two days did well. On the third day Sister watched him anxiously; untoward symptoms were appearing. Suddenly he became restless, with clouded brain. "Orderly, keep a strict eye on Bed 4 while I find the MO." Being one of those excellent persons who give clear explanations, she added: "I know the Doctor is operating, but he may give me permission to give the patient a sedative, if I explain things. Don't leave him; if he gets out of bed he will die; his life depends on his being kept very quiet. "Very good, Sister."

The Doctor had finished operating, and was on his way to the ward; Sister met him just outside and explained matters. The orderly, depending on Sister's absence for about 7 minutes, had hurried to the kitchen to imbibe a hidden bottle of beer. The poor patient, becoming more restless every moment, tore off his dressings and stumbled out of bed. The captain had sent down a basket of fruit to the ward, and it had been distributed to the patients whose wounds did not interfere with their appetites. When the horrified Doctor and Sister entered the Ward, they found their cherished patient looking out of a porthole eating an apple. The unconscious orderly, hurriedly reappearing met

---

<sup>74</sup> 'A Medical Student's Story' in *The Nursing Times*, 4 December 1918. BRC 25 4/31. WAWC, IWM. Emphasis in the original.



the full blast of Sister's withering scorn. Turning to the MO, she said passionately, "Please insist this orderly is removed at once. We have quite enough to bear without seeing our brave men die through sheer brutal carelessness." The orderly was removed. And thanks to Sister's almost superhuman efforts, the patient did not die.<sup>75</sup>

It is interesting that a nurse would choose to write this story from the point of view of a patient in the ward, enabling multiple messages to be conveyed. The nurse is everything the orderly is not. She is portrayed as brave, caring, dedicated, and self-sacrificing. She defers to the superior knowledge of the medical officer, even though she knows the correct course of treatment and action for each patient in her care. Anna Cameron, by writing from the point of view of one of her patients, was getting someone else to endorse the hard work of nurses and women in the war, adding further authenticity to the courage and skill of the nurse. The story is given the further validity that the author is a medical student who knows his subject, and that his social class raises his authority even though he is a soldier from the ranks. By stark contrast the lower class orderly, even if he is capable, is still acknowledged as unskilled, thus further endorsing and distinguishing the nurse's role, both socially and professionally. In both instances, the orderly acts as a contrast between the soldier and the non-combatant, with the morality and masculinity of the latter being questioned.

Consciously and unconsciously, women at the Front, in positions of authority over men, enhanced their own values of social superiority and patriotism to the detriment of men who did not match the masculine ideal of war hero. While Anna Cameron chose to fictionalise her portrayal of orderlies, diarists were more to the point, like Sister James who noted in the chaos of the early months of the war that 'we slave from morning till night but there aren't enough of us. The orderlies are mostly

---

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

untrained and will shirk if they can. The trained ones are all doing clerical work.<sup>76</sup>

Sister Alice Slythe also recognised the power of the sister to punish disobedient orderlies: 'The orderlies' punishments are pretty severe: one has just had 7 days "field punishment" for cheeking a Sister: this means that for so many hours a day he is tied to a gate for all and sundry to see.'<sup>77</sup> She also noted that the orderlies operated with different values and wrote: 'I met an orderly this morning who used to be rather a pet of mine...I said, "Milton, you aren't looking very well". "No, I don't feel it Sister". "Why don't you report sick?" "Not today Sister, it's my half day, I'll report tomorrow". He couldn't have been seriously ill.'<sup>78</sup>

Non-combatant men at the Front were in an invidious position as their masculinity and patriotism were always likely to be questioned. Irene Rathbone working with the YMCA was critical of both the Christian men who ran the camp and the base officers who frequented it. The base officers she presented as drunken and brutish, because they were away from decent feminine company, which Rathbone and her co-workers were less inclined to provide for them than they were for the more 'deserving' officers from the line. The Christian men attracted special disdain, however, as they exercised control over the role played by the women in entertaining the men, which in Rathbone's view was far too restrictive. The women were effectively barred from dining in the officers' mess. She wrote:

The waste of it! The sheer waste! As if it was these Christians they wanted! It is women - decent women like us, who remind them of their homes; haven't we been told so again and again. We could do endless good among the officers as well as among the Tommies - we have golden opportunities, only such difficulties are put in the way of our using them.<sup>79</sup>

---

<sup>76</sup> James. Diary entry for 7 November 1914. LC.

<sup>77</sup> Slythe. Diary entry for 2 July 1915. LC.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid. Diary entry for 6 July 1915.

<sup>79</sup> Rathbone. Diary entry for 29 July 1918. DoD, IWM. Emphasis in the original.

WAAC Administrator Dorothy Pickford was also unimpressed by the effect on officers who remained at the base. She wrote to her sister about a dance: 'I had as much dancing as I wanted and was much entertained looking on, but ye gods - what men! Life at the base breeds some awful specimens.'<sup>80</sup> Masculinity might have been a preoccupation with women who judged their male colleagues but women too found themselves the objects of sexual curiosity. Sister Burgess, travelling aboard HMT *Aragon* commented upon the sexual dynamics between medical officers and sisters: 'Think Captain Cook doesn't want to talk to me anymore because I won't flirt with him. I warned him and the engineer officer. Can't be helped. Wish men would be content to tell me interesting things. It's rather too bad, the moment one won't do exactly as they wish, they don't want to talk even since.'<sup>81</sup>

Sexual harassment was not necessarily recognised as such during the war, and women were likely to have to bear the responsibility if they happened to find themselves caught up in such a situation. Women were well aware that they were sexual objects to the men around them. The danger was that for those women who risked forming liaisons with their male colleagues, it was they who were likely to be blamed, as Winifred Kenyon noted in her diary when the social relationships formed between some nurses and medical officers were discovered:

Fearful scandal caused by Mr Herbert, Vaughan and Workman, Sisters Ross and Vicks, and Weyman having champagne suppers in the barn several times, up till 11.30 at night. French are saying fearful things but the women are all to be sacked and we expect and hope that Mr Herbert who is away for a holiday won't be allowed to return and that the other men will have to go too, for they are thorough rotters through and through.<sup>82</sup>

---

<sup>80</sup> Pickford. Letter to Molly dated 20 May 1918. DoD, IWM.

<sup>81</sup> Burgess. Diary entry for 22 December 1917. LC.

<sup>82</sup> Kenyon. Diary entry for 5 July 1915. DoD, IWM.

It is among the WAACs that the suggestion of sexual harassment from colleagues is most in evidence. We have already seen that the reputation that befell the WAACs resulted in adverse comments from the locals, and that the sexual morality of the WAACs was cause for concern among the home population. But from the point of view of the WAACs this left them more vulnerable to unwanted sexual attentions, and also most likely resulted in incidents which were misreported to reflect badly upon the WAACs themselves. Dorothy Loveday described how keen some of the WAACs were to converse with soldiers on the crossing to France (an act easily misconstrued and exaggerated in the 1910s); in *Not So Quiet*, Evadne Price's apparently autobiographical heroine Nell joined the WAACs who are portrayed as lower class (knowing this will enrage her mother). The WAACs Nell bunks with have come to France in order to find husbands amongst the soldiers. Ten years after the war had finished, a woman writer had taken on board the notion that WAACs were morally suspect and ignorant on account of their social origins, in order to make the seemingly greater point that the mothers of middle-class women were acting criminally in sending their untrained daughters to war.

Cheery and Blimey argue about most things...but on one point they agree emphatically...it's a jolly good war, and they hope it goes on for ever. They will probably get their wish. They both derive from large families living in two small rooms in a crowded slum district, and they still revel in the luxury of a bed to themselves. At first they mistrusted the long row of bathrooms, but now they are immersed at every available opportunity. Blimey has developed into a "Reg'ler K-Nut". She has cut her hair short in imitation of mine, her skirt is a fraction shorter than the others', and her Burberry a few shades lighter. At church parade she wears yellow wash-leather gloves with the cuffs turned back from the wrists and a yellow *crepe-de-chine* handkerchief tucked coily into her sleeve. Her stockings are well-fitting and her shoes as highly polished as those of the girl in the well-known boot-polish advertisement. Her teeth protrude slightly, but they are even and white. Until she became a WAAC, she had never cleaned them, but now she does it several times daily. It is her staple topic of conversation.

This personal cleanliness and extravagance of dress is not for mere show. It is a commercial proposition - the capital, so to speak, that Blimey is putting into her business...the business of marrying the first suitable Tommy she can ensnare.<sup>83</sup>

While continuing to suggest that the WAACs deserve sympathy as they have been drafted into a war they know nothing about, Price relies on a shared recognition amongst readers, of WAAC ignorance, highlighting class differences and habits in order to make her point:

Some of them don't even know what the war is about. I met a canteen waitress the other day who thought the Huns were black and came from Africa and were on the side of the Allies. She knew the Germans as Fritz and was astounded that the Huns were the same. She had joined up to see Paris, and although she wasn't exactly seeing Paris she was having the time of her life. The truth is, the greater percentage enlisted because of the pay, which was good, considering they are rationed and uniformed free. Incidentally, the change from home life is not to be despised. They had no idea there would be personal danger, but once in they stick it because they're here for the duration.<sup>84</sup>

Price's novel is a passionate plea for pacifism by drawing on the horror and absurdity of the war, and the ignorance of the WAACs with their strange habits only adds to the absurdity which Price wished to create. Louise Saunders, who was a WAAC clerk, recalled in the 1970s, her part in the war and remembered differently what WAAC life entailed:

There was only Quartermaster Kipp, an orderly and myself left on duty late one night. We had completed our work and Kipp said, "Do you mind if I go now as I have to be in my billet tonight as early as possible. The orderly will see you safely back to your Camp". I said, "Yes, you go, I shall be alright". He hadn't been gone many minutes when the 'phone went and a voice said, "there has been a movement of troops up the line so the train waiting to go with its load will have to be stopped and fresh amounts of food put in for different places". The voice said, "I'll order the men back from their Camp to make the alterations, etc". I managed to say "yes, I will see to it", and then went cold all over thinking of my responsibility with the Quartermaster gone and I in charge, and deadly tired already.

---

<sup>83</sup> Smith, *Not So Quiet...*, 218-9.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid, 220-1.

The men had been paid that night and had been drinking. The rain was pouring down but eventually the Quartermaster in Charge burst open the door and said in a slurry voice, "I'll stay here with you". I picked up the 'phone and walked towards him and said "Either you get out of here at once or I'll ring up the Police to come down", and to my amazement he went out and didn't come back.<sup>85</sup>

Dorothy Loveday wrote to her former headmistress about a scene she was confronted with before departing for France which perhaps would be interpreted somewhat differently today:

There is a sub-depot about four miles from here where four girls, under 20 and not of a reliable type, work together with four men, in charge a sergeant. The place is very out of the way and isn't always visited by an officer once a day. Anyhow the door is kept shut and one has to knock to get in. There is very little work to do there. I went up one day and found the sergeant with a girl on either knee and we all had tea and another sergeant came in and a girl immediately sat on his knee. No supervision of any kind and no girl made responsible. Isn't it asking for trouble.<sup>86</sup>

Betty Donaldson who was a WAAC driver suggested that dealing with harassment and drunkenness from male passengers was routine for WAAC drivers, but they took it in their stride. After describing an incident when a passenger who had been drinking heavily 'became amorous, so that I had to wriggle over the side of the car and take refuge on the road,' Donaldson concluded:

Episodes of this variety happened to most of us from time to time but we were seldom alarmed by them, treating them as occurrences that were all part of the day's work. We always told one another about them, and our passengers would have sometimes been surprised had they known what a good laugh we got out of them.<sup>87</sup>

While there is evidence that women in the WAAC (and other women at the Front too) were subject to forms of sexual harassment, the prevailing attitudes of the day meant that women were not only to tolerate harassment from colleagues but were

---

<sup>85</sup> Downer. Memoirs. DoD, IWM.

<sup>86</sup> Loveday. Letter to Miss Robertson, dated 14 January 1918. LC.

<sup>87</sup> Leared. Memoirs. DoD, IWM.

pressured to submit to attentions from those who were in positions of power over them, whether on account of professional seniority or simply gender. Given this impediment, WAACs found it very difficult to assert themselves within the workplace as they had little voice, whether reporting cases of harassment and discrimination or in putting their point of view in historical terms. The WAAC have generally been incorporated into the war stories of other more powerful groups, usually to their disparagement and consequently to the virtual eclipse of the role of the WAAC as a significant organisation at the Front in the history of the First World War. The development of the WAAC, its impact upon the society in which it was formed, and the consequent maligning of these women once at the Front, have only provided further reasons to lose sight of their role and significance in the war. An understanding of the reasons for the problems encountered and created by their formation can only help shed more light upon the complex gender and class formations at the Front, and their role in the female hierarchy.

In terms of race the WAAC did assert itself as an organisation representing the British Empire and consequently carried forward imperial values. Along with other women at the Front, the WAACs distinguished the racial and national differences that contributed to the British Expeditionary Forces. In the context of British imperial domination, British women believed that they were on the side of right, and this resulted in expressions of superiority, fear and loathing when encountering people of other nations and races, whether in the form of the enemy, or those who were drafted in from the Empire to work for the British Expeditionary Forces. The race aspects of women's presence at the Front have so far been overlooked by historians. Yet an examination of women's relationship to local and overseas workers reveals another

dimension to the structure of the female hierarchy at the Front which enabled women to exert authority over those considered inferior.

WAAC Louise Saunders may have been alarmed at the prospect of dealing with a drunken quartermaster sergeant, but this reaction did not spill out into a general feeling of fear of all men, as she felt with the men of the Chinese labour corps whose job it was to fetch and carry the meat carcasses at the depot where she worked.

There were, squatting outside, Chinese labourers helping to carry out all the heavy hinds and quarters of meat etc. There were also black boys from Africa, but we had strict orders not to speak to them. We didn't like passing them so nobody need have worried. I felt sorry for them. They looked so poorly clothed and looked frozen very often.<sup>88</sup>

If Louise Saunders felt sorry for the Chinese men, she did so with the benefit of hindsight, but also because she was in a privileged position to do so. Most striking is her expression of fear, and the relief that the rules supported her fear. As with women the Chinese labour corps and the South African labour corps and other ethnic groups who were drafted in to assist the BEF on all war fronts have featured very little in mainstream history accounts, and if so only very recently. They, like women, were used in a supportive or specifically subordinate capacity. Yet to understand why this was so reveals the gender, class and race factors upon which the organisation of war depended.

For women who travelled overseas, the war ensured that they came into contact with other nationalities and races, and white women placed themselves in a position of racial superiority consciously and unconsciously - a situation which was endorsed by the rules and regulations which prohibited fraternisation. The perceived danger of men from other cultures instilled irrational fear in women, yet they barely acknowledged that their position as white women of the British Empire meant that

---

<sup>88</sup> Downer. *Memoirs*. DoD, IWM.



power remained with them. Sister Priscilla Simpson worked on the western Front and recorded in her diary an encounter with a Chinese labourer:

There is a Chinese camp close by here and they are at present building a light railway for taking timber from the forest to the trenches, when I reached the forest yesterday there was no one to be seen but one Chinaman. At first I felt a little nervous about going on but seeing me gathering flowers he came up and commenced gathering some too and brought them to me so I thought he was quite safe and friendly so went on without any fear.<sup>89</sup>

Even when her fears were not confirmed in this meeting she was always prepared to believe the worst about men from other cultures. A month later Simpson recounted rumours which seemed to confirm her worst fears:

I heard some harrowing tales about this particular labour battalion of Chinese lately and shall feel rather nervous of passing them when alone as I often have done. Since they have been in France they have had 38 murders to their account and 190 wounded, they cut off the head of their Sergeant Major one day! A Corporal who had brought them from China told us this, he said they bore the worst reputation of any of the camps.<sup>90</sup>

The barbarity of other races was a commonly held belief. The atmosphere of the war zone leant itself easily to stories of barbarity. The start of the war produced tales of German barbarity. As the war progressed these widened to incorporate other cultures drafted in to help the allied war effort. Haig himself had insisted that women should not be stationed near to 'coloured' labour. His mistrust and prejudice was not untypical, playing on women's own fears of the unknown. Sister James wrote about one of her patients: 'Pte Spreat, when he was acting as train guard actually saw an Indian with a necklace of ears, and when the men in one carriage complained of the smell an Indian was made to turn out his kit-bag, and lo! a German head!'<sup>91</sup> While women were prepared to believe in the barbarity of others and wrote about it as truth,

---

<sup>89</sup> Simpson. Diary entry for 31 March 1918 (Easter Sunday). LC.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid. Diary entry for 17 April 1918.

<sup>91</sup> James. Diary entry for 3 January 1915. LC.

they did not recount atrocities attributed to British soldiers. Despite references to criminal acts, women preferred to see the British soldier as a hero and could not therefore believe in anything that countered that image. Unheroic behaviour was attributed to those men who did not fight, and barbarous acts to those from other cultures. Tales of barbarity therefore only served to increase the value of the British soldier hero.

Women considered themselves superior to those brought in to labour for the British during the war. It was therefore considered perfectly acceptable for women to exert authority over the labourers, if the opportunity arose. In a diary printed shortly after the war, WAAC administrator ME Roach wrote about WAAC work at the docks alongside Chinese workers. It is unclear whether the diary is fictionalised but, either way, it encapsulates women's derogatory perception of another culture:

Some of the girls are nervous of the Chinese, and then they are no good at all in the docks, as they have to be shepherded from their offices whenever they want to move. It is a real cruelty to send a girl here if she has that unaccountable racial fear which certain people do suffer from. There is one such girl in my sick bay now who is suffering from nothing else, poor child. I am putting through a transfer for her.

We have a girl from a Yorkshire factory, with a mass of untidy fair hair, who is exceptionally good with Chinks. She rules a gang of twenty-five. They obey her absolutely, and she cuffs them when they bite through the sacks to steal handfuls of sugar. She has picked up enough Chinese to order them to fetch a barrow or anything else she wants... They like this girl and obey her better than a sergeant.<sup>92</sup>

The ability to travel as a result of being part of the war, endowed women with a further sense of power over their surroundings which is most visible in their descriptions of other countries and cultures. When Sister Mary Brown, travelling aboard the Hospital Ship *Orsova*, arrived at Alexandria, she observed:

---

<sup>92</sup> Diary entry for 29 December 1917. ME Roach in *The Woman's Leader*, 17 September 1920. Army 3<sup>26</sup>/27. WAWC, IWM.

The Egyptians and Soudanese are the queerest lot of people I have struck yet. About 100 of them were coaling the "Orsove" to-day. They are the wildest and dirtiest looking lot I ever set eyes on. One of the Tommies threw a shirt over board to them and they fought like cats for it, they crawled over each other and were half buried in the coal dust trying to take it from the man who got it first, the noise they make is worse than monkeys at the zoo.<sup>93</sup>

Her surprise and anxiety was stirred further by the discovery of Indian nurses when she arrived to work in Basra:

The Indian Hospital is on the right of our Quarters, a nicely fitted Hosp. There are Indian or Eurasian Sisters there and they use our mess. Some of them would pass for British they are so fair, but the others have a decided touch of the tar brush or 4 annas of the rupee; they always tell you their home is in Scotland or Ireland, probably their father was a Scotch man or Irish man, but poor things they have never been west of Suez and not much chance of their going either.<sup>94</sup>

Sister Brown's condescension towards women professionals from other cultures reveal her own fears. It is also evident that the value of whiteness or a British connection is the reason why the Indian nurses were selected for their work, suggesting a hierarchy of colour.

On the western Front too, women were equally likely to describe in derogatory terms people of other nationalities with no obvious ethnic or cultural differences other than that they were not British. When WAAC Betty Donaldson arrived at the main Rouen WAAC camp she recalled that the adjoining camp for Belgian refugees provided a useful scapegoat for anything that went missing from the WAAC camp. Even then they were preferred to the South African labourers in the vicinity:

Our camp was in a low lying situation, but the social situation on the other side of the fence was lower still. Awful fights and caterwaulings took place almost daily, and bleeding noses and battered heads were sights of everyday occurrence. Our situation was nevertheless preferable to that of the camp that was in close proximity to a South African Labour Corps camp. Of this one the tale is told that a girl woke one night to find a burly native of South Africa leaning over her

---

<sup>93</sup> MA Brown. Diary entry for 22 May 1915. DoD, IWM.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid. Diary entry for 22 January 1917.

bed with his face only a few inches from hers. Better a thousand times, our thieving, unhealthy, white neighbours!<sup>95</sup>

The French too, were a target for abuse both in personal accounts among women, and in authorised official publications. When the Commission reported on their findings into the conduct of the WAACs in France and the catalogue of allegations levelled at them, the only one the Commission felt compelled to find any truth in was the rumour which suggested that French women of ill-repute stole WAAC uniforms and consequently helped to tarnish the WAAC reputation. Women were more than prepared to deride women of other nations and cultures to protect a sense of British superiority and infallibility, while accepting the prevalent view that women should bear the responsibility for sexual misconduct. The rumour that British officers borrowed the coats of their men to frequent brothels established by 'WAACs' was of course not believed. If one was believed, why not the other? Swapping identities and changing identities that existed at the Front created fear among many people, and hostility to the unfamiliar was widespread, fuelled by rumours and scare stories which played upon those fears.

Portraying French women as prostitutes was not beyond British women at the Front, in effect blaming them for the poor quality of morals among BEF soldiers. If French women were not prostitutes they frequently appeared in letters and diaries as downtrodden, or inferior women there to do the dirtiest work on behalf of British women. Irene Rathbone noted with relief the arrival of a couple of French female workers at the YMCA rest camp: 'There is a new Frenchwoman so we don't have to kill ourselves over fish and chips any longer.'<sup>96</sup> It was the case that the war meant

---

<sup>95</sup> Leared. Memoirs. DoD, IWM.

<sup>96</sup> Rathbone. Diary entry for 12 July 1918. DoD, IWM.

that many French peasant women had not been in a position to leave their homes when the war encroached upon their towns and villages. Those who stayed out of choice or necessity found that working for the vast machinery of the BEF would provide some income in these hard times. However, from the point of view of the British women they were seen and treated as ignorant peasants, who were at best charming and quaint. Thus passing references to French women scrubbing floors, fetching and carrying water and provisions, sorting laundry, etc, can be found in the letters and diaries of women who were at the Front, indicating a further level in the female hierarchy. VADs and other upper-class women were happy on patriotic grounds to carry out heavy chores, but when the domestic war at the Front became more organised and local women could be drafted in, these were the first chores to be handed over, providing another way in which British women could enhance their authority and power. More challenging to upper- and middle-class British women were French women who were their social equals, though ultimately it was cultural differences which set them apart. While Irene Rathbone was keen to disparage a local French female dignitary, she was presumably writing out of a fear of the power the French woman could exert because of her position in the community:

That woman is a regular octopus! She pounces flagrantly upon all the handsomest and nicest officers in the Rest Camp (specially if they can talk French) and drags them to her house on every possible and impossible occasion - I suppose with the hope of getting one of them off with her extremely dull daughter.<sup>97</sup>

We have already seen that the British authorities were keen to contain working for the war within the scope of the Empire, ultimately leading to the employment of women as WAACs, to the exclusion initially of other potential allies, particularly and importantly the Americans. The original aim to avoid American assistance may in

---

<sup>97</sup> Ibid. Diary entry for 12 August 1918.

some degree have been based on a certain feeling of anti-Americanism, and this feeling is evident when the Americans arrived at the western Front in large numbers in 1917. VAD Elizabeth Lupton wrote of the influx of American staff into the hospitals, including her own, exposing a little more than anti-Americanism:

Patients and orderlies demoralised and very much prejudiced against “the Yanks”, who showed no love of work. Sisters all very pleasant but orderlies ready to sit in armchairs all day with books and watch our orderlies and patients work...  
[Later] All our orderlies have left the wards, and the Americans are having to do the work. But they do very little and never think of helping with bed making etc. Sisters very lax and work without method as a rule. Many of them of German origin and name, as also the doctors, who are German in manner. Patients have little faith in them, but are settling down.<sup>98</sup>

Perceptions of race, class and gender differences constantly defined the structuring of relationships and hierarchies at the Front, leading Irene Rathbone to ponder the alliance struck up between some British male canteen orderlies and the French kitchen workers over the preceding two months. When the orderlies were required to leave to take up jobs nearer the Front, Rathbone fell into discussion about them with one of the French cooks:

She went on to discuss their several characters, and made some penetrating remarks, which showed me clearly that difference of race and language is a very thin barrier really, for that funny uneducated old Frenchwoman knows far more about our four orderlies than any of us do. Class is the only impenetrable barrier - race is nothing to it. Of course I think they were genuinely sorry to leave us, as we have always been very nice to them. There were tears in [Corporal] Hall’s eyes when he shook hands with me, but Jeanne he kissed behind the tent when he said goodbye to her.<sup>99</sup>

Concepts of class were of course of supreme importance to Irene Rathbone while she was at the Front. The Front operated on the basis of structure and hierarchy, and hierarchies were to be found not just between organisations but within.

---

<sup>98</sup> Lupton. Diary entry for 27 June 1917. LC.

<sup>99</sup> Rathbone. Diary entry for 2 October 18918. DoD, IWM.

Whether women's organisations could survive beyond the war was another matter. Following the Commission's report into the conduct of the WAAC in 1918, a name change was initiated, and a royal patron adopted. The Women's Army Auxiliary Corps became the Queen Mary's Army Auxiliary Corps. No doubt this went some way in distancing the Corps from its apparently sordid beginnings and invested it with a more charitable and philanthropic status, making lewd criticism more difficult. Crucially the formation of the WAAC, which placed women on a more professional footing within the military system, sounded the death knell for the VAD. The General Service sections were gradually absorbed, and this move into paid female service brought renewed calls for the VAD nursing system to face a similar overhaul. The situation was not resolved by the end of the war, and the unsatisfactory position the VAD found themselves in, no longer volunteers in the purist sense, and not professionally qualified, ensured that the organisation could not survive in its existing form until the next war. Lessons had been learned, some not quickly enough, and the development of women's organisations and their role at the Front were changed forever. These changes, however, were not simply structural, but were dictated by overriding political and cultural considerations about the position of women in society. Hierarchies were based not only upon an acknowledged basis of professional rank, but were informed by concepts of class, gender and race. None of these concepts necessarily took precedence over the other, but were dependent upon a complex series of readjustments and redefinitions in order that women who went to the Front could find their own space in which to survive and establish some form of authority for themselves. Crucially, what women were seeking was the justification to be near the men who fought, and it is this relationship which will be examined in the next chapter.

## Chapter Four

### The Myth of the Ministering Angel

So broke with pain, he shrinks in dread  
To see the 'dresser' drawing near,  
And winds the clothes about his head  
That none may see his heart-sick fear.  
His shaking, strangled sobs you hear.<sup>1</sup>

We used to see him watching us as the dressing  
trolley came down the ward, and you could see  
that he was dreading the moment we would get to  
him... We all used to dread it because it was so  
very hard on him. He used to cry. He couldn't  
help it but he felt very badly about crying and we  
used to cover his face with a handkerchief so that  
he wouldn't be so embarrassed about it.<sup>2</sup>

They put the screens around his bed;  
A crumpled heap I saw him lie,  
White counterpane and rough dark head,  
Those screens - they showed that he would die.

They put the screens about his bed;  
We might not play the gramophone,  
And so we played at cards instead  
And left him dying there alone.<sup>3</sup>

I do try and stay by them and hold their hands  
when they die - but now and then the rush is awful  
and the needs of the living more imperative, and  
then I feel such a beast, but after all they are  
practically unconscious at the last.<sup>4</sup>

The weight of historical evidence has so far tended to illustrate suffering at the  
Front during the First World War and feminist historians who have written women

---

<sup>1</sup> Eva Dobell, 'Pluck' in Catherine Reilly (ed), *Scars-Upon My Heart. Women's Poetry & Verse of the First World War*, Virago, 1992, 31.

<sup>2</sup> Memoir of Sister Christina Hastings, quoted in Macdonald, *Roses of No Man's Land*, 93-4.

<sup>3</sup> Winifred M Letts, 'Screens' in Reilly, *Scars Upon My Heart*, 62.

<sup>4</sup> Slythe. Diary entry for 5 July 1916. DoD, IWM.



into the war by examining women's fiction, have kept suffering to the fore, illustrating how men and women suffered together.<sup>5</sup> I want to analyse how women reconciled feelings of excitement and freedom, discussed in chapter one, with the scale of the human tragedy which they witnessed, as well as demonstrating how women's records convey the spirit of the men. Women's contemporary accounts illustrate how they attempted to cope with conflicting feelings. Drawing on women's perceptions of masculinity which were mediated by class and race considerations, this chapter will consider the consequent reflections upon femininity and its function as a civilising and powerful force at the Front. Countering the conventional view that women at the Front were passive ministering angels, and the view of Gilbert and Gubar that women were empowered by the emasculation of soldiers, diaries and letters reveal that women were aware of the contradictions of their role at the Front. Women articulated this conflict and tried to resolve it within a traditional gender framework which privileged masculinity while acknowledging its fragility, and in some cases, its destruction. Women did not cherish the emasculation of men but instead found it confusing. Women wanted men to be masculine and heroic and did what they could to restore masculinity where they perceived it was in danger of breaking down. This required a new language where heroism was defined not as behaviour solely displayed on the battlefield but in the soldiers' reactions in the hospital ward confronting extreme suffering. Women's perceptions of masculinity were also mediated by concepts of social rank and ethnic background. Some men were considered inherently more masculine than others and this influenced the ways

---

<sup>5</sup> See Tylee, 'Maleness Run Riot', Gilbert & Gubar, *No Man's Land*, Ouditt, *Fighting Forces*. Gilbert & Gubar are the exception in that they argue women seized the initiative in the war, but their argument is still based on the premise of men's suffering.

in which they were cared for. The scale of suffering constantly confounded women's views on class and race and profoundly affected their perceptions of gender relations.

The myth of the ministering angel is a potent symbol in the representation of women at the Front whether to show the limits of women's role, confined to mopping fevered brows, or to subvert that myth by suggesting that women drew strength from the deaths of men. This chapter will challenge these perceptions by demonstrating how the image of the ministering angel was important to women at the Front as a model of idealised femininity which they could hold onto amid the chaos of gender instability. Femininity, far from being a source of weakness as argued by Sharon Ouditt, was a source of strength and empowerment. The restoration of gender order and the need to reassert the primacy of masculinity, rather than leaving women passive and subordinate, vested women with a new kind of power. While this perception relied heavily upon an orthodox and idealistic understanding of the prewar world, paradoxically the power to restore a gender balance rested with the women at the Front. While women at the Front took for granted their class and imperial superiority, gender instability was difficult for women to come to terms with, though it was their perception of their class and racial superiority which empowered them. Middle- and upper-class women never considered themselves subordinate to working-class men or allied soldiers who were not British. Women were, however, aware of men's masculinity which had been proven on the battlefield, and their own self-conscious role in protecting or restoring it. The freedom and the excitement offered by working at the Front had disrupted gender power relations in a way that was not anticipated. With an awareness of an added sense of power, women at the Front witnessed the physical and emotional breakdown of the men around them, and struggled for a language to express its impact upon them. Sister Christina Hastings in

the opening quotation was recalling some fifty years later the powerlessness of a young soldier who had lost his genitals in an explosion. Despite her apparent sensitivity to protect his shattered masculinity, Hastings nevertheless went on to compound his emasculation, remembering that he recovered but, 'he'd never be any good as a man after that.'<sup>6</sup> Bearing a striking resemblance to Hastings' recollection is Eva Dobell's contemporary poem, *Pluck*, which reflects the terror of a 17-year-old private who has lost his legs. Unlike Hastings though, Dobell reflected the contemporary need to protect and restore a vision of heroic masculinity, as indicated in the poem's title and final verse: *But when the dreaded moment's there/He'll face us all, a soldier yet/Watch his bared wounds with unmoved air,/(Though tell-tale lashes still are wet),/And smoke his woodbine cigarette.*<sup>7</sup> The determination of Dobell not to emasculate the patient is indicative of that reflected in the letters and diaries of women in which the restoration of masculinity was paramount. Women reflected the spirit of the men in the face of agony, rather than as completely emasculated and passive, as they were later represented in some of the postwar women's literature, where the destruction of masculinity on the battlefield signalled the destruction of femininity in the hospital ward.<sup>8</sup> The power that women had in restoring masculinity however, did not provide vicarious pleasure as suggested by Gilbert and Gubar, though in both recollections, the nurse, as observer, is in a position of power rather than the passive position normally associated with her.

Sister Alice Slythe's diary entry indicates the extent of the impossible duties of a nurse confronted with the needs of the dying and those of the living. There is no suggestion of gratification about this unwelcome kind of power. Likewise, Winifred

---

<sup>6</sup> Christina Hastings, quoted in Macdonald, *Roses of No Man's Land*, 94.

<sup>7</sup> Dobell, 'Pluck' in Reilly, *Scars Upon My Heart*, 31.

<sup>8</sup> Borden, *The Forbidden Zone*. Smith, 'Not So Quiet'.

Lett's poem, *Screens*, reflects the painful irony of the nurse's role. The themes of guilt touched on in this poem were later developed in women's postwar literature but are barely visible in contemporary letters and diaries.

The male literary war canon is central to the work of many historians of the First World War. The focus is on the unique bonds formed among men in the trenches, the creation of a community of men set apart from a society, including women, which was ignorant of its horrors.<sup>9</sup> The men's war in the trenches is depicted as the defining experience of the First World War in which a community of men shared the trench experience to the exclusion of others. Focusing on different, mostly unpublished sources, Joanna Bourke has recently challenged the hegemony of the male literary war canon within historiography.<sup>10</sup> She suggests that among the rank and file of the British army there is little evidence to support the view of any meaningful male bonding, and that among the ranks there was a continued desire to return home. In Bourke's analysis therefore associations of femininity and domesticity were important not redundant.<sup>11</sup> This view is supported by the evidence in the letters and diaries of women at the Front who helped to fulfil these expectations by recreating the domestic scene behind the lines. They did it not just to build a familiar image of home for their own benefit but also to serve as a contrast to the brutal environment from which they believed men had emerged. The desire for home and signs that brought men closer to their families were welcomed, though women's domestic ministrations were mediated by class and imperial considerations. The

---

<sup>9</sup> Fussell, *Great War & Modern Memory*. Leed, *No Man's Land*. Wilson, *Myriad Faces of War*.

<sup>10</sup> Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male*.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

Englishness of women and their middle-class manners only added to the potency of a welcoming domestic environment, whether it happened to be a hospital ward or a hospitality tent. The men were not just treated to domesticity, they experienced it in its most 'refined' form. Though women were eager to record positive comments about their work in order to justify their presence at the Front, their letters and diaries support Bourke's argument and indicate that pleasure rather than hostility was the typical response of soldiers encountering a feminine environment behind the lines.

The most common relationship between men and women at the Front was that between the middle-class woman and the rank and file soldier. It is this relationship which features most commonly in letters and diaries. Women came into contact with soldiers who were either ready to go up the line, resting from the line, or were injured. The relationship between the nurse and the patient can be contrasted with other female-soldier relationships to illustrate how women perceived the influence of their civilising qualities. The contrast will also enable us to see how the role of the volunteer nurse emerged as the primary experience of women at the Front.

The social differences between nurses and rank and file soldiers lent weight to the need for the presence of women at the Front with special feminine qualities who could recreate a welcoming feeling of domesticity in the hospital wards. Supporting the notion that domesticity and homeliness within the wards benefited the patients as well as the nurses is the evidence provided in letters and diaries that the men were glad to find themselves in hospital, as part of the route back to 'Blighty' and their own families. The trenches marked the furthest point away from home. Women's letters and diaries suggest that men were also likely to wish for the familiarity and comfort of a home environment while they were away at war. Symbols of home took on greater importance, whether it was through carrying personal photographs, or writing and

receiving letters and cards. Within this context, the homeliness of the hospital ward and its marked femininity was important to the soldiers. Because of the predominance of the trench experience as the defining aspect of the First World War we rarely glimpse the soldiers behind the line and this has distorted, even eradicated, the significance of home to the soldier. Women's accounts go some way to redressing the omission of home from historical studies of trench warfare, as well as illustrating its importance. A study of men in the hospital or behind the lines environment provides a different view of men's war. To the fore is their desire for domesticity provided by the women. Being injured was a sign that home was not far away. Women themselves were of symbolic importance in this identification with home as the antithesis of the war as represented by the trenches. The sight of female ambulance drivers later in the war was greeted with surprise, even delight by those being carried to hospital from ambulance trains, the feminine presence a sign that the trenches were receding. Women were perceived to be untainted by the hardships of the Front, even though ironically nurses were more likely than most women to have an understanding of what men had experienced. FANY Beryl Hutchinson recalled her experiences as an ambulance driver in terms of men's need for domesticity, and the women's crucial role in providing it: '...when a man, even if he is feeling psychological, gets into an ambulance and thinks he is going that much on his way home, it has a wonderful soothing effect. And the girls listen to their grumbles and did the sort of motherly act.'<sup>12</sup> Ambulance driver, Alice Proctor noted of the men she drove in her ambulance, 'if they'd got what was known as a 'blighty' they were absolutely on top of the world because they felt then 'Well, at least I shall have a couple of months in the ward with the clean sheets'. It was the dirt they hated so

---

<sup>12</sup> Hutchinson. Oral history. Reel 8. DoS, IWM.

much, like me.’<sup>13</sup> Men’s desire for cleanliness, domesticity and for home, and their disgust of dirt and discomfort, is expressed and evident in contemporary accounts. In mainstream histories we are given the impression of men adapting to the ‘troglodyte’ existence of trench life, cohabiting with rats and lice and the rotting corpses of old comrades, while living off a diet of bully beef (if lucky), biscuits and tea made in petrol cans.<sup>14</sup> Women’s letters, diaries and recollections provide an alternative perspective. They suggest veterans of the trenches never accustomed themselves to that bizarre and inhospitable existence, and that the domestic, feminine surroundings first identified in the hospitals, were a source of relief and pleasure. The women’s view of the war offers a rejection of war by men in favour of a world inhabited and created by women. The journey to and arrival at the hospitals in France was the beginning of the journey home and women were important signposts along the route. Anecdotes, literature and cartoons depict the desire for home (see Figure 11). Sister Bickmore who worked aboard an ambulance train observed:

Occasionally the Train loads again within a couple of hours at the Base to which it has just discharged its sick and wounded from the front. Now the load consists of patients leaving the Base hospital for “Blighty” - these, indeed, are happy loads and the travellers can be recognised from afar, not only because they look clean and have so many labels attached to them - oh no! - not those reasons - but by the “Blighty Smile” which diffuses their whole person.<sup>15</sup>

Josephine Pennell was an Ambulance driver and wrote: ‘If they are not bad cases you are greeted with a chorus of “What’s this place, miss?” “What hospital are we going to, sister?” “Sister, is there any chance of Blighty?”’ Women were aware of men’s desire for home. Olive Dent recorded in typically humorous tone the requests she received as a VAD in her published account:

---

<sup>13</sup> Remington. Oral history. Reel 2. DoS, IWM.

<sup>14</sup> Fussell, *Great War and Modern Memory*, 1975, 36-74.

<sup>15</sup> Unpublished memoirs of Miss Bickmore. 85/51/1. DoD, IWM.

Figure 11. 'The 'Blighty' Smile – an LTA case.'  
Olive Dent, *A VAD in France*, 117.



THE "BLIGHTY" SMILE—AN L.T.A. CASE



‘Is it a Blighty one, sister? we are invariably asked, perhaps by the owner of a gaping gash three or four inches long.  
‘That scratch a Blighty one! Good gracious, boy, you’ll be marked ‘Active’ very soon. Still, of course,’ altering the tone of voice, ‘in three or four days’ time the medical officer is sure to have too many Blighty tickets to carry round, and we might persuade him to get rid of two when he reaches your cot.’  
Such a beatific smile dawns that there is nothing to be seen above the bed-clothes but two crescents of inflated cheek and a wide, red mouth. And he is left to his beatitude.<sup>16</sup>

The desire for men to return home as witnessed by the women at the Front was equalled by men’s perceived appreciation of the domestic environment within the hospitals that women had created. EM Spearing’s published account of her VAD work in France noted that for men the hospital was ‘a fit place for men to rest and recover from the strain of the trenches, and they appreciate to the full all that is done for them in hospital. “I never thought there was such comfort in France, Sister,” said one of them, and “I could stay here easy for the duration” is a remark I have often heard.’<sup>17</sup> The notion that men were relieved to find themselves in the hospital environment contributed to the myth of the nurse as ministering angel. In the hospital, the nurse was welcoming, comforting, feminine and protective. Sister James worked at a casualty clearing station and wrote: ‘The new patients say that the fighting has been worse the last two days than at any time during the war. One boy I washed was sobbing the whole time – “It’s almost too good to be true.”’<sup>18</sup> And VAD EM Spearing remarked:

When I had occasion to tell some new patients that they must keep their ward tidy, I thought they might feel worried by so many instructions, but they said at once, “Oh, Nurse, it makes it seem more ‘ome-like. If we was at ‘ome, the missus ’ud be telling us to wipe our boots and not make the place in a mess”.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> Dent, *A VAD in France*, 52-3.

<sup>17</sup> EM Spearing, *From Cambridge to Camiers Under the Red Cross*, Cambridge, W Heff & Sons Ltd, 1917, 40.

<sup>18</sup> James. Diary entry for 1 November 1914. LC.

<sup>19</sup> Spearing, *From Cambridge to Camiers*, 57-8.

The men from the ranks were also drafted into the domestic environment, with those well enough assisting the women. Men from the ranks were not unfamiliar with domestic duties and appeared keen to help women they considered too refined for the domestic tasks they were obliged to do. VAD Nora Pemberton described the assistance she received when her convalescent home was quarantined following an outbreak of scarlet fever:

...none of the patients were allowed to leave even if they were well enough, until today. It has meant an easy time for us as several of them were quite well enough to help a lot in the ward housework and in the kitchen. We have had a wonderful Sergeant - Roberts by name and he simply constituted himself scullery maid and did all the washing up, scrubbed tables and the kitchen floor and was altogether of the very greatest assistance to [the cook].<sup>20</sup>

VAD Katia Freshfield relied on the assistance of the men as she worked frantically to cope with casualties arriving at the beginning of the 1916 Somme offensive. The atmosphere was spirited and communal, and the men at ease within the domestic setting:

The ward was deep in dirty dressings, khaki and sheets crawling with "chatties". In one corner where the lice were thickest we had three Lancashire lads in fits of laughter. Harbour of course put the gramophone on and the Sergeant cut up dressings, also 2 very nice boys who were BS cases and whose beds I had given away sat cutting up dressings in the bunk for 3 hours because I forgot them there, but they were very cheerful about it.<sup>21</sup>

As far as women were concerned, the men's appreciation of the environment they had created in the hospitals was an endorsement of their efforts and an acceptance of their role which elevated their significance as central figures in the war at the Front. The men, too, are seen to be at ease within the domestic environment, anxious to join in, and content to carry out domestic duties. Needlework and knitting

---

<sup>20</sup> Pemberton. Letter to Mum, dated 19 April 1915. DoD, IWM.

<sup>21</sup> Freshfield. Diary entry for 2 July 1916. LC.

were some of the activities men were encouraged to take up to aid the flexibility of the hands and fingers (see Figure 12). Men from the ranks are portrayed as easily adapting to the domestic setting as part of their recovery. Although women were creating a domestic environment in part to disguise the horror, it became a familiar environment in which women and men alike could function together temporarily distancing the trauma of war.

Women gained a certain amount of satisfaction by idealising the hospital environment into a scene of domestic bliss in order to acclimatise men for their return home. Vera Brittain refers to the 'devotional glamour' of voluntary nursing, meaning satisfaction gained through self-sacrifice in return for praise from the patients.

'Devotional glamour' is evident in letters and diaries too. Sister Anna Cameron who nursed aboard HMS *Delta* wrote the following in a letter home about the apparent appreciation of the nurses, even from men who had received appalling injuries during the Gallipoli landings of May 1915:

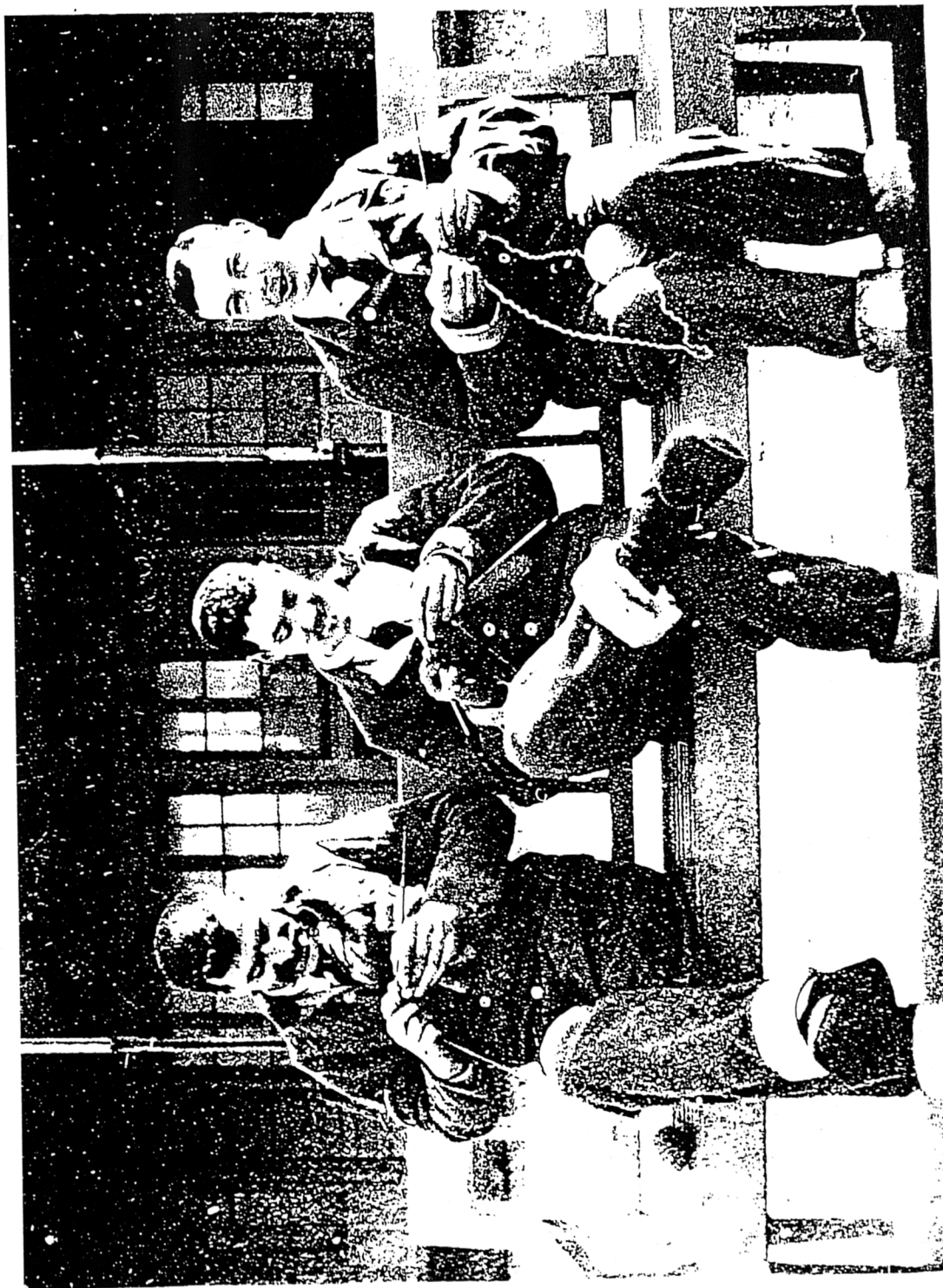
Oh dear, that few hours. I had such scares. Some of the men as soon as they dropped asleep woke screaming through shock, none were undressed - at least very few by that time. They were so dead beat we wrapped them in blankets in their filthy clothes poor fellows, and let them rest. Faces shot away, arms, legs, lungs, shots everywhere. One man had a shattered hand, a broken arm, a smashed wrist, shrapnel through the top of his head, his lips shot, and his right knee, and all he said was "Thank God we have the Sisters."<sup>22</sup>

The civilising qualities associated with middle-class femininity were not just associated with nursing. Other middle-class women at the Front also worked at the Front on the premise that they could bring refinement to the lives of men from the ranks. Irene Rathbone, a YMCA worker, organised dinner parties for men resting from the line. She noted in her diary: 'I like these little Tommy parties in the evening,

---

<sup>22</sup> Cameron. Letter home, dated 8 May 1915. BRC 25 4/3. WAWC, IWM.

Figure 12. Patients knitting at No. 1 General Hospital, 1915.  
QARANC.



being nice to the poor dears and giving them decent food properly served - we ought to have them more often - they do love it so.'<sup>23</sup> The sentiment expressed by Rathbone is not just one of pity for men who have experienced life in the trenches but a perception that, with her social background, she can bring something special to their lives.

The civilising qualities associated with women at the Front had much to do with cultural differences which set British women apart from other women. Englishness and an English voice were sought by men and championed by women. As Antoinette Burton has pointed out, the world view of feminist women (and others) of this period was informed by the supremacy of the British people which accompanied the British Empire, and at its centre was England.<sup>24</sup> Women who served overseas as part of the BEF saw no reason to contradict this supremacy, which was given added impetus by the war footing. Their writing reveals how the quality of Englishness was acknowledged with gratitude by the men, who equally recognised the superiority of Englishwomen of the British Empire. In men's accounts there is some evidence of an imperial ideology which privileged Englishwomen above others. Arriving in Amiens en route to the Front in 1915, Private Robert Cude noted that it was 'pleasant to air our French to well-dressed girls,' but a year later, while out of the lines near a casualty clearing station, found it was 'a treat to see and speak to an English girl again.'<sup>25</sup> It is in women's accounts, however, that we see the extent to which Englishness was a factor in relations between women and soldiers at the Front and the appreciation of the civilising qualities that were assumed to accompany it. Englishness placed women in a superior position on account of their perceived

---

<sup>23</sup> Rathbone. Diary entry for 31 July 1918. DoD, IWM.

<sup>24</sup> Burton, *Burdens of History*, 5-7.

<sup>25</sup> Cude. Diary entry for August 1916. DoD, IWM.

civilised qualities and consequently it was seen that men were grateful for coming into contact with them. Irene Rathbone's diary entry expresses the position of power women were placed in over men from the line on account of their Englishness. While serving in a YMCA canteen she encountered a sergeant who: 'showed me a photo of his wife as a WAAC and then told me that he had "near gone mad" when he saw us ladies and heard us talking English! He was nearly choking and inarticulate, the poor [\*]. I told him to come again and talk to me.'<sup>26</sup>

Englishness endowed women with power at the Front. The civilised qualities associated with middle-class Englishwomen were seen to be beneficial to the morality of the men who could be susceptible to the corrupting environment of war. Women's role could be one of both physical and moral repair. When Nora Pemberton worked at a convalescent horse depot, which drew its patients from men working behind the lines, she wrote:

We have been told several times by NCOs and officers from the different camps from which our patients come, that they come back showing a distinct improvement in mind as well as in body. We have had (during the whole time I mean) several quite bad characters who have been like lambs here and on whom the impression of a certain amount of refinement, and an atmosphere of happiness and interest in one another, seems to remain to their great improvement.<sup>27</sup>

Some men therefore were considered by the women as morally dubious and would benefit morally and spiritually from the care and presence of women from a more refined social background. In much the same way as feminists had used the 'Englishness' argument to gain access to serve the Empire, women invoked similar justification to help maintain the morality of the men of the BEF.<sup>28</sup> Nora Pemberton

---

<sup>26</sup> Rathbone. Diary entry for 28 June 1918. DoD, IWM. \* Word omitted in original text.

<sup>27</sup> Pemberton. Letter to Mum, dated 5 April 1915. DoD, IWM.

<sup>28</sup> See Burton, *Burdens of History*.

described to her father the benefits of concerts attended by women: 'The chaplain was saying only the other day that it had often been noticed that the more men were kept amused, the shorter were the crime sheets. They just love any sort of show and it gives them something to talk about besides criticising their officers.'<sup>29</sup>

Despite the tendency to portray the voluntary nurse as a ministering angel, it does not necessarily follow that she was passive. Neither did the nurse occupy a subordinate position in relation to the men in her care. The social class of the VAD elevated her above that of the majority of her patients. Relations between middle- and upper-class nurses and VADs and their mostly working-class patients were dictated by perceptions of social background and class habits. The interests and standards of rank and file soldiers were considered inferior to those of officers. While the women commended their own behaviour for helping the men and being benevolent, their actions were governed by class perceptions of the men in the ranks. In her role as an acting commandant at a rest station, which tended the needs of thousands of troops passing up and down the line, VAD Nora Pemberton wrote home requesting magazines to help relieve the monotony of their journeys. She sent her father a list of what she thought they would appreciate: 'Weeklies like *Pearsons*, *Titbits*, *Puck*, *Our Boys* and all those rather low standard things are what the Tommies love!... Probably anything that would amuse the villagers would amuse them, more than what would interest us.'<sup>30</sup> Contact with rank and file soldiers allowed women to observe a group of men with whom they would previously had very little social contact. These men were often portrayed as objects of intense curiosity. Women were in positions of

---

<sup>29</sup> Pemberton. Letter to Dad, dated 6 August 1916. DoD, IWM.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. Letter to Dad, dated 20 August 1915.

power over men from the ranks, both socially and professionally. As nurses, women had privileged access to men's behaviour and bodies. Nursing was seen as instructive or 'educational', not simply in terms of learning about war but in terms of discovering another social group of the opposite sex. Gilbert and Gubar, keen to dispel the myth of the passive ministering angel, have pointed out that the nurse's relationship to the patient was one of 'mistress rather than slave'. They have, however, ignored the class aspect of this relationship, which was the key to women's power over men in the wards. Women's power did not involve an overthrow of prewar gender hierarchy, instead the war provided them with an opportunity to exercise power which they already took for granted. The war provided an environment in which women could exert their 'natural' superiority, which was invested in them by their social status. Letters and diaries convey the power of women over their working-class patients. The power of the women is not disputed from the point of view of the men. In Figure 13 the power of the nurse is conveyed through the eyes of a private taking his medicine. In accounts and illustrations, the men from the ranks are depicted as subordinate and objectified. Olive Dent wrote of the rank and file soldiers she nursed: 'Excellent boys all of them. It has been an education and a pleasure to know them, and to work among them,' while observing, 'Tommy is a sentimental cuss.'<sup>31</sup> The habits of the soldier were a constant theme in letters and diaries and occupied many thoughts as the women perceived the differences between them. Sister Alice Slythe wrote in her diary:

These men are funny. You go up to a patient and say "Well, how are you tonight, old man?" and if he's feeling absolutely rotten, he'll say "Not too good, Sister" - and if he's feeling as fit as a lark, he says "Not too bad!" These are his two expressions, and he hardly ever varies from them.<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup> Dent, *A VAD in France*, 181 & 197.

<sup>32</sup> Slythe. Diary entry for 25 July 1916. LC. Emphasis in the original.



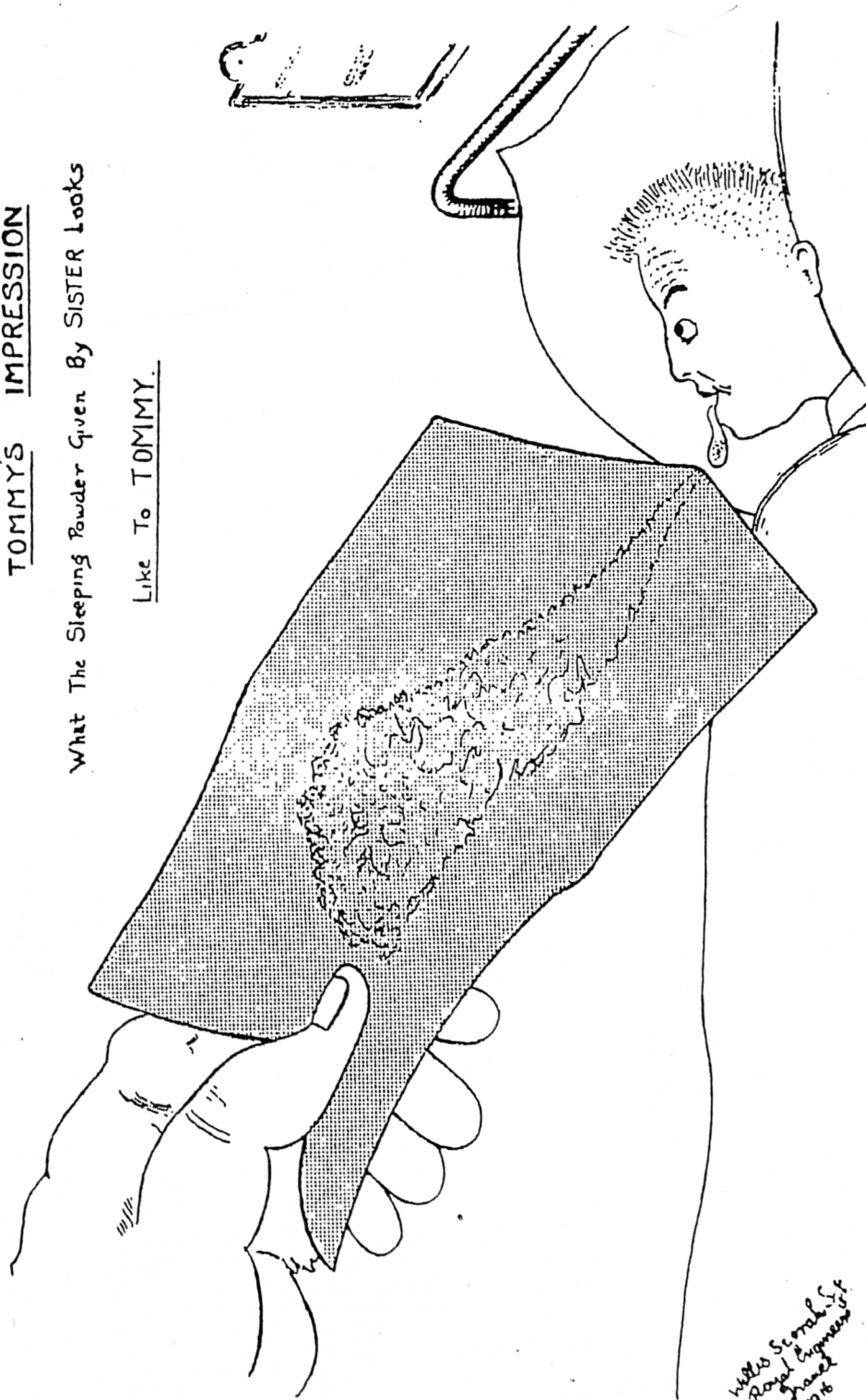
Figure 13. 'Tommy's impression. What the sleeping powder given by Sister looks like to Tommy'.

Olive Dent, *A VAD in France*, 44.

TOMMY'S IMPRESSION

What The Sleeping Powder Given By SISTER Looks

Like To TOMMY.



Away from the hospital too, Irene Rathbone observed the differences in behaviour between men from different social backgrounds. Exercising a different kind of power which rested in her favour, one of her responsibilities while working for the YMCA was to assist in censoring men's letters. She recorded her feelings about the authors:

Probably I handed him a cup of tea over the counter, and knew nothing, nothing at all of what he was going through. After all how can one know! there are so many! One makes friends with a few, and they like to talk to one and hang round like dogs, but it is only to their own people that they are really themselves, and how unlike they are to our own class in their entire lack of reticence. If they feel that God is protecting them and they are in His care, and believe in His power to save they will write about that for pages. If they have had a booze and are suffering from a fat head, or find the French girls attractive, they will write about that quite gaily too, to their Mothers and girls. I like it... Yes, I learnt a lot reading over those letters.<sup>33</sup>

Like Olive Dent and other women at the Front from a similar social background, coming into contact with men from the ranks and being obliged to socialise with them, Rathbone wrote about her experiences of this aspect of the war as a social education that would otherwise have remained undiscovered, placing her in a more privileged position than those who lacked this opportunity. In this sense the war was seen as a social and educational opportunity, not simply one of personal freedom, but personal enhancement. The men were objects and had little voice when represented in letters and diaries. While women sometimes focused on the humour of the men, it was usually for the entertainment of the women. It is these observations, so much a product of the time, which differentiate contemporary accounts from later oral histories. Oral history testimony from women is often dominated by the soldier's trench experience, and women's relation to it. While this is a useful perspective, we do not always see the operation of class relations, which were clearly at work. When

---

<sup>33</sup> Rathbone. Diary entry for 23 June 1918. DoD, IWM.

women wrote about the rank and file soldier, they were writing from a position of social authority in which the men were perceived as passive, not just because those who were patients were injured and immobile, but also because they were seen as children or 'boys' and hence the women's manner was usually condescending. While professional nurses took their authority for granted on the wards, the VAD relied on her social authority to exercise her power over the men. By casting the men in her care into a passive and needing role, the unqualified VAD enhanced her own authority.

The relationship between women and men from the ranks is portrayed in the letters and diaries as one of dependence by the men upon the women. While this relationship may present men as passive it was not necessarily the case. Men are seen to have acknowledged their lower status in the social hierarchy, which enabled them to enjoy the ministrations of socially refined nurses. In Figure 14 a cartoon sketched by a private demonstrates his smallness in the presence of the large, glamorous VAD who takes his temperature. The cartoon depicts his social subordination, rather than his passivity, in contrast to the aloofness of the nurse. The innuendo and consequent incongruity provide the humour. Dependency, therefore, could be pleasurable as well as threatening. Men were reassured by the medical environment, staffed by socially-elevated and confident women. The fostering of men's dependency helped make the women, particularly the VADs, feel important. It also further infantilised the position of the men. VAD Olive Dent described a 'typical' night duty, which in addition to official duties involved:

...the unending, infinitely pathetic call of "Sister, sister, may I have..." a drink, my pillows moved, my heel rubbed, now my toe, my splint moved, my bandage tightened, my bandage slackened, the tent or the window closed - or opened - a blanket off, a blanket on, a hot water bag, a drink of water, of lemonade, of hot milk, of hot tea, now a cold drink, sister, to cool my mouth, a crease taken out of the under-sheet,

Figure 14. Sketch of VAD nurse monitoring the pulse of a private soldier.  
Autograph album of Alice Beaumont. LC.



the air-pillow altered, my hand and face washed, my lips rubbed with ointment, my fan, that fly killed, a match, a cigarette lighted, another drink, some grapes, my apple peeled, a cushion under my arm, under my back, a pad of cotton-wool under my heel, knee, arm, a bed sock put on, the bed-clothes tucked in, I feel sick. I can't go to sleep. Shall I have an antiseptic, - the almost invariable name for anaesthetic, - "tomorrow when my wound is dressed?" Then when the gamut is exhausted - "What time is it?" "What kind of weather is it?" "Can't I have a prick, sister?" "Can't I have a comforter?"<sup>34</sup>

Dent is undoubtedly using her class authority and her status as a nurse to demonstrate her enthusiasm and knowledge as a VAD. In this account, men are dependent, not upon each other, but upon the care of an untrained nurse. There is a sense of men's fear and unease in the hospital environment, despite women's attempts at domesticity. In this context, the creation of a familiar domestic environment, along with attempts to convey normality, seemed so necessary to the women who sensed men's apprehension about their predicament.

It is possible, however, that the relationship could be one of interdependence, as the women needed the men to appear dependent upon them in order for the women to feel they were being usefully employed at the Front. Middle-class women frequently conveyed a sense of identifying and supplying men's needs in a way no other class of women or men could. Away from their homes, trapped in an alien environment, men were considered to be infatuated with their maternal carers. The middle-class nurse or canteen worker could represent an alternative but unattainable lover, and be the object of men's fantasies. VAD Nora Pemberton was delighted to describe to her parents an incident following an absence of leave:

I had occasion to go into the big ward yesterday...and one of the men greeted me with "where have you been, Sister? You seem quite a stranger here, we are missing you!" Wasn't it nice of them? they really are awfully nice and some think and say such nice things: one, who in private life was an assessor (or something of the sort) at

---

<sup>34</sup> Dent, *A VAD in France*, 279-80.

Somerset House when I was seeing him off into the car said "Goodbye  
- I shall think of you as Sister Sunshine."<sup>35</sup>

Women enjoyed their charms being greeted with appreciation from the men and portrayed it as infatuation or even love. The sentimentality of the soldier was recorded in autograph albums. The following lines written by a Cameron Highlander for VAD Dorothy Field were typical of the affection the soldier felt for his nurse:

You have heard of deeds of soldiers and of sailors bold at sea  
But I am sure that on this point you will with me agree  
That the Sisters in the hospital wards who nurse us back to health  
Are precious far more precious than the winning power of wealth  
See the smile upon their face as they pass by to and fro  
It helps you bear your burden with that smile they always show  
You may be suffering lots of pain and feeling very dread  
But how that pain is soothed and eased when she comes round to your bed

They converse with you freely what every soldier loves  
It is the touch of nature and not the touch of gloves  
They give you every comfort that is possible to be had  
Let you be a College youth or just a working lad  
It's a god send that in England we have Ladies such as these  
Who always do the best they can their study is to please.<sup>36</sup>

The qualities admired in the verses are quintessentially associated with English ladies. The nurse is idealised and so is her role in the war, helping to create and perpetuate the myth of the nurse as a ministering angel. In this sense the myth is important both to the writer and the nurse who kept the lines. At another level the copying of the verses signifies an attachment on the part of the soldier for the nurse which is akin to infatuation. Her healing powers lie not in her medical attention but in her femininity. It was in women's interests to see themselves in an elevated and benevolent light, increasing their self-worth and adding to their sense of indispensability.

---

<sup>35</sup> Pemberton. Letter home, dated 20 March 1915. DoD, IWM.

<sup>36</sup> Field. Diary entry. DoD, IWM.

The letters and diaries reveal that the soldier's dependency upon upper- and middle-class women was fostered by women themselves, consciously and unconsciously. Nora Pemberton wrote about some former patients she met at a church service: 'After the service we spent a few minutes chatting to friends in the shape of old patients. They are so funny. They simply love to show the others that they know us and rush up and seize us by the hand!!'<sup>37</sup> Irene Rathbone was delighted to receive letters from troops who had assisted her at the YMCA rest camp canteen but who had now returned to the trenches, including one from

my gunner boy, Alan Parks. The last the sweetest effusion, full of appreciation, and so funnily expressed. Frightfully pathetic too. He said he had been quite unable to sing on the last night for thinking of leaving us, as we had been so kind, and made the camp almost like home. These are the letters I like keeping for ever. Read again in the dim hereafter, they will remind one that after all the little one did was not altogether useless.<sup>38</sup>

Rathbone's observation reflects the class imbalance between the men and women. She writes from a position of authority over the men, their habits open to her amusement, but there is also a sense of interdependency. Rathbone still needs to feel that the men are gratified by her presence and ministrations. Reflected in the letters and diaries are sentiments of affection, infatuation and sentimentality that the men have for the middle- and upper-class women whose care they are in. VAD Edith Oswald noted in her diary: 'One of the boys had an operation and was awfully funny coming out of the chloroform: 'Oh Sister, dear dear Sister, Sister do come and sit beside me and hold my hand'!'<sup>39</sup> Years later, she recalled the nature of relationships between nurses and patients:

We were young, like most of them; but we also, as part of the nursing staff, were representatives of a certain authority, and I think were

---

<sup>37</sup> Pemberton. Letter to Mum, dated 5 April 1915. DoD, IWM.

<sup>38</sup> Rathbone. Diary entry for 28 June, 1918. DoD, IWM.

<sup>39</sup> Oswald. Diary entry for 4 September 1918. VAD. LC. Emphasis in the original.

respected as such. When they were very ill, what most of them wanted, apart from treatment for their wounds, was simply a female presence representing a mother or a wife; when they began to feel a little better (and often it was a welcome sign), we were then the girl next door, to be chatted up, teased and complimented. Often they used to imagine themselves a bit in love with us, but I doubt if they were really - it was simply a longing for normality in a horrible war.<sup>40</sup>

Infatuations, where they existed, were recognised to exist only on the part of the men for their nurses - class consciousness as well as authority, precluding men in the ranks from being considered as possible lovers, whereas relationships with officers always held out the possibility of romance. With men from the ranks, the relationship, when it was not one of condescension, was one of benevolence and a recognition that middle-class women could bestow their feminine charms. VAD ambulance driver Josephine Pennell reflected the shared camaraderie between the women and soldiers, when she described her duties of loading the men from the trains into the ambulances to a local newspaper. She considered her behaviour risqué on account of the class divide: 'You get down and see that they are warm enough, and give them cigarettes, and perhaps a boy will squeeze your hand as he gives you back the matches, and you squeeze back, shamelessly.'<sup>41</sup> The hint of physical intimacy across the class divide was dangerous but contained by the circumstances of the Front, and the class superiority of women, which placed them beyond the reach of rank and file soldiers.

The moral influence that women felt they could assert over the men was little more than cosmetic away from the hospital wards and the deliberately created domestic environments of the canteens. The men from the ranks were considered to be different, their values and their behaviour not those of respectable middle-class propriety. When Irene Rathbone heard of a brothel operating in a town near the

---

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. Oral history testimony, circa 1980.

<sup>41</sup> Pennell. 'Driving a Red Cross Ambulance'. DoD, IWM.



YMCA camp where she worked, she wrote:

How little we know the men really. Of course they are dear and polite with us; but below that surface how far do we penetrate? It can't be true that the men who come to the YM tent are not the men who get drunk and behave like animals in the town - both sorts come, only we happen to see them at their best. There is nothing to do, I suppose, as far as we are concerned but continue to be ourselves. In this work the threads we hold them by are so intangible. In hospital one had them bound there - chaste and sober by force of circumstances. Here they are their own masters, and every sort of path is open to them. they have not to be specially viciously bent to fall victims to all the beastly influences that crowd in the passage of armies. Weakness, illness, boredom, is quite enough - they may have been heroes at the Front. How hard things are for them! How hard. What we are seeing now is the extinguishing and degrading of an entire generation. Oh war! War!<sup>42</sup>

Women at the Front did not consider men from the ranks their social equals and were content to address them en masse as 'Tommies', from the colloquial expression 'Tommy Atkins' which signified the rank and file soldier. The blanket description of so many men under this term indicates something more than an attempt at harmless familiarity with the men. It suggests that women were writing from a position of authority which involved a loss of identity for the men - the merging of many hundreds of thousands under one name whose individual stories of war became less significant, as one 'Tommy' was considered very much like the next. This apparently innocent term is fraught with class associations and loss of identity. The women's condescending attitude towards 'Tommies' was further compounded by the frequency with which men from the ranks were referred to as 'boys'. Although it suggests a maternal relationship between the women and soldiers, this was much more the case when women were referring to young officers. The term 'boys' when applied to men from the ranks was used with a recognition of power bestowed by class authority which women took for granted. Very rarely did women at the Front

---

<sup>42</sup> Rathbone. Diary entry for 27 July 1918. DoD, IWM.

acknowledge rank and file soldiers as men - they were nearly always 'Tommies' or 'boys'. In her published account, VAD Olive Dent constantly refers to the soldiers as 'boys' inferring familiarity and camaraderie, but despite her humorous tone the condescension is unmistakable, enhancing the passivity of the men she nursed.

Dent's account has not been considered as seriously as other published accounts of women's experiences at the Front. Its humorous and patriotic tone does not fit easily with the more critical pacifist writings, which are considered more accurate portrayals of the war experience among male and female writers. However, her observations should not be entirely dismissed. In common with contemporary letters and diaries, she reflects the spirit among the troops. These observations suggest that the war was not an unparalleled emotional disaster for men who fought, but that they too could find time for humour and entertainment. Some recent historians have focused on the experiences of the men of the allied forces when out of the lines, suggesting that the war was not always about the fighting and misery of the trenches (though this was always the backdrop from which they sought escape).<sup>43</sup> Accounts by women at the Front who were only to be found behind the lines support this evidence and help illustrate another aspect of men's war as they rotated out of the line, or arrived injured at the many base hospitals. Despite the gravity of their experience of the trenches, life at the Front involved a wide range of experiences out of the trenches, and a more light-hearted behind the lines experience is reflected in the contemporary observations of women, without undermining the horror of the trench experience from which men had escaped or were due to return. In capturing the more

---

<sup>43</sup> JG Fuller, *Troop Morale and Popular Culture in the British Dominion Armies, 1914-1918*, Clarendon Publications, 1990. Stephane Audoin-Rouzeau, *Men at War 1914-1918: National Sentiment and Trench Journalism in France during the First World War*, Berg, 1992.

light-hearted side of men's experience women do so from a position of class authority - bemused by the men's social habits. Sister Alice Slythe recorded in her diary: 'Everybody has a sense of humour. I listened to the men having their tea: one remark was "Anybody want any more shaving-water? Pass it along, please..."'<sup>44</sup> Away from the hospitals, Irene Rathbone was able to capture the spirit of the men being entertained at the YMCA tent of the Third Army rest camp, noting the particular enthusiasm they reserved for her:

The audience was in almost uproarious mood tonight, and the way they took my songs, and shouted and whistled and clapped, gave me delicious pleased thrills down my spine. I always want to kiss my hands to them on the occasions, but suppose it wouldn't quite do. I say to myself "You dears! You dears! You dears!"<sup>45</sup>

While Rathbone enjoyed receiving the men's praise which placed her at the centre of attention, VAD Olive Dent relied on the soldier's ignorance of medical knowledge, conversely inflating her own grasp of medical matters, in order to portray the humour on the wards:

Had a case of typhoid in one of the wards, so several boys in that particular marquee are to be inoculated. One boy informed me that he didn't think it would be necessary in his case as it was only six months since he had been tattooed, and tattooing was as good as inoculation, wasn't it?<sup>46</sup>

While Dent captures the humour of the patients, she is clearly observing the men from a socially superior vantage point, relying upon the men's apparent ignorance. Part of her published account contains reprinted letters she received from patients. She shares with her readers the 'inarticulate' and 'uneducated' expressions of gratitude, as well as enhancing the role of the VAD by emphasising expressions of appreciation from the most 'unrefined' rank and file soldier. Despite women's ambiguous motives

---

<sup>44</sup> Slythe. Diary entry for 30 May 1915. DoD, IWM.

<sup>45</sup> Rathbone. Diary entry for 28 June 1918. DoD, IWM.

<sup>46</sup> Dent, *A VAD in France*, 210.

for desiring the gratitude of men from the ranks, their thoughts, expressed in letters and diaries, do convey a sense of community spirit infused with hospitality and congeniality, even if it was not based on equality of position or treatment, but was instead informed by class perceptions and gender distinctions.

The care for men in the hospitals was different to that received by their officers. Men from the ranks were kept in separate wards, their diets were different, and fewer trained nurses staffed their wards in which there were many more beds, hence the eventual need for VADs. When the VADs went into the military hospitals they mostly helped staff the wards of private soldiers rather than officers. Vera Brittain asserted that it was her 'chocolate box prettiness' that prevented her working on officers' wards. This was probably a reaction of her professional jealousy towards the trained nurses, as it is far more likely that Vera Brittain and other VADs were simply not considered skilled enough to be allowed to nurse officers, the latter being entrusted to the care of trained nurses.

VADs from wealthy backgrounds were capable of using their social station to impress the men in their care. Lynette Powell, who worked at the Duchess of Westminster's hospital at Le Touquet recalled the Duchess's attempts to make the men feel better:

Whenever we got word that a convoy was coming in, even if it was nine o'clock in the morning, that's what they always used to do - went upstairs and changed into full evening dress, with diamond tiaras and everything. Then they would parade themselves and stand at the entrance to take the names of the men. They used to set the gramophone going too, so that they would have a welcome. They meant very well, but it did look funny, these ladies all dressed up and the men, all muddy on the stretchers, looking at them as if they couldn't believe their eyes.<sup>47</sup>

---

<sup>47</sup> Lynette Powell, quoted in Macdonald, *Roses of No Man's Land*, 73-4.

While these actions were no doubt considered by the Duchess to be a welcoming treat for the men, it is likely that they also exacerbated the social divide between nurse and patient, and hence contributed to the hospital being a daunting place for the rank and file soldier. Women's attempts to provide comfort, based as they usually were on middle-class concepts of domesticity, could easily be misconstrued by the men. The inescapable presence of social distinctions was not always brushed aside with humour or good-natured banter. Expressions of hostility, fear and loathing also accompanied perceptions of class difference. Women did little or nothing to challenge the discrimination operating against men from the ranks, but usually took it for granted and contributed to its maintenance. Some women, however, were aware of the injustices against the men from the ranks. *Sister James* worked at a casualty clearing station and was appalled by 'the beastly callousness of the Matron.' James wrote: 'Today she said the men were not to have playing cards - they ought to sweep and tidy up. And she told [Sister] Alexander, thinking she was a meek innocent, to say anything she liked to them - they had no feelings and were not at all refined - were just a lower type of humanity.'<sup>48</sup> For Sister James, the chaos and incompetence of the early part of the war was not due to administrative overload but based on a preferential system in which care of men from the ranks was a secondary consideration. She wrote: 'A lot of my men got as far as the boat today and were sent back - no room. Seeing we are on the telephone from the quay there must be some first class muddling. They move these poor souls about as if there were so much baggage. An unnecessary journey is nothing to them.'<sup>49</sup> The poor conditions for the men were also noticed by Sister Millicent Peterkin who described in her diary the

---

<sup>48</sup> James. Diary entry for 21 November 1914. LC.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. Diary entry for 23 November 1914.

terrible state of men who had arrived in a convoy:

... some with wounds a week old, and all having been at least 4 days and nights in train, open cattle trucks and horse-boxes, with no conveniences of any kind, and fearfully rough to travel in. But this is how they always come, poor wretches. One man had both feet shot through, they are now hopelessly gangrenous, smell awful, and of course will have to come off. Many other similar cases. They say that the wounded lie for days up at the front, with no one taking any notice of them, and it is a notorious fact that we only get comparatively slight cases here, for the simple reason that the bad cases either die on the battlefield, or in the train on the way down here.<sup>50</sup>

It did not escape the notice of VAD Nora Pemberton that care of the wounded was low on the list of priorities, though she showed less concern than Sister James:

It is terrible, but I believe inevitable, that in every way the wounded are looked upon by the transport officials as - well, to put it brutally - a bother. Their work is done, they are no more use, they are only cumbering the line and the ships which are wanted so badly to send up more fighting men, more stores, more ammunition and to feed that most voracious of monsters, an army in the field.<sup>51</sup>

Within the hospitals it was felt that separate wards for men and officers were important as both would find a mixed environment inhibiting, yet segregation proved another way of more easily discriminating against the ordinary soldier. The attitude towards men from the ranks who were not mired in working-class tradition or culture was perceptibly different. Among the patients on VAD Katia Freshfield's ward was:

Askey, a valet in civil life, wounded in head and amputation: foot. He reads the psalms to himself and the only thing I have ever heard him ask for was if I would mind giving him drinks in a glass (ie. not the inevitable enamel mug). He probably has handled the most exquisite cut glass and I could sympathise.<sup>52</sup>

Sister Mary Brown who nursed men injured withdrawing from Gallipoli in December 1915 aboard HMS *Devanha*, wrote that heavy casualties produced mixed wards containing 'all sorts from a Baronet to a very grubby little Private,' but within a few

---

<sup>50</sup> Peterkin. Diary entry for 18 September 1914. DoD, IWM.

<sup>51</sup> Pemberton. Letter to Mum, dated 8 November 1914. DoD, IWM.

<sup>52</sup> Freshfield. Diary entry for 1 December 1915. LC.

days the Baronet Colonel was moved to another cabin 'with special orderlies to look after him.'<sup>53</sup>

While women did all they could to domesticate the environment into which they received men from the trenches, they did so through a perception of social difference between men from the ranks and their officers, the latter seen as belonging to their 'own' class, while the men from the ranks were different. Differential treatment was sustained. VAD Nora Pemberton's letter to her mother reveals the extent of the differentiation of treatment, the dependency and consequent passivity of the men from the ranks in the eyes of the women:

The longer I am here, the more sorry I am for the Tommies' home people. Officers have so many more means of communicating with them and setting their minds at rest; they can tip orderlies to telegraph for them - often their wives can come out or friends are asked to look them up; but Tommy is just one of a herd; he has neither pens, ink nor paper, even if he feels well enough to write - and as many of them have said when I have asked them - "I'm not much good at the writing, Sister - you write for me". Almost everyone I have asked preferred to have it done for him and has not even been willing, or I suppose able, to dictate his own letter, but has preferred a stranger like myself to say whatever they chose! It seems strange doesn't it? but I suppose it is a different kind of education. In most cases they had hardly anything in the way of news to suggest and yet when one persevered one could drag quite an interesting story of personal exploits out of them.<sup>54</sup>

By attributing the men's reticence in writing letters to class differences, Pemberton compounded their feelings of fear and inhibition before women who were socially self-assured, even if professionally inexperienced. The treatment of officers, both medically and socially was altogether different. Injured officers were treated in separate wards, and once convalescent, in separate hospitals and homes. Their transport arrangements were different, and for those rotating out of the lines, their

---

<sup>53</sup> MA Brown. Diary entries for 4 & 7 December 1915. DoD, IWM.

<sup>54</sup> Pemberton. Letter to Mum, dated 8 November 1914. DoD, IWM. Emphasis in the original.

social life and entertainment was apart from the men in the ranks, with the exception of concert parties or the cinema, when even then seats were reserved for them at the front of the arenas.

Women's respect for men who fought was higher than for those who were behind the lines working at the bases (as seen in the last chapter). Men from the ranks were usually accorded respect from women, not because they were men but because they were perceived to be more obviously heroic and masculine. However, men from the ranks lacked the essential middle-class traits desired by women at the Front to attain the masculine ideal. On 23 April 1918, VAD Dorothy Field marked St George's Day in her diary with the words: 'Heroism. Chivalry. Endurance. Courage. Self-sacrifice.'<sup>55</sup> While Field might have thought that these words might aptly describe her tiring role as a VAD, they also epitomised idealised masculinity in the eyes of middle-class Englishwomen. Most highly regarded and deemed the embodiment of masculinity was the youthful British volunteer officer, fresh from public school. Writing to her mother a year after attending the Eton speeches for her younger brother, VAD Nora Pemberton pondered the fate of her own family and the school's students:

...how very little we then dreamt that a short twelve months after would find us scattered in 5 different places while the nations of the world tore at each other's throats. How many too of the young and eager crowd of Eton and England's most promising manhood now lie still and cold on a foreign soil.<sup>56</sup>

While women were prepared to praise the working-class volunteers who swelled the ranks, their perceptions were tinged with class prejudice. Unlike their officer counterparts they were not fulfilling their destiny. One of the pleasures of

---

<sup>55</sup> Field. Diary entry for 23 April 1918. DoD, IWM.

<sup>56</sup> Pemberton. Letter to Mum, dated 4 June 1915. DoD, IWM.



working for the YMCA at the Third Army rest camp for Irene Rathbone was that she was at last working among the men who fought the war:

I love being right in the army like this. War is much less horrible when you are among the people who wage it, and not among the people who talk. These soldiers are the most gentle and patient of human beings; that they have coarse and sometimes brutal sides to them I do not doubt (though not all) but the side they present to us is in essentials all we could ask of our ideal of a gentleman.<sup>57</sup>

The men from the ranks were not quite the perfect gentlemen however when compared with their officers. Rathbone wrote of the pleasure the YMCA women were bringing to officers resting from the line despite disquiet around the camp:

Nothing that has subsequently happened can efface the gratification of the fact that they loved being with us, and that for the time being we were like a breath of home and England to them. [The officers]...have said the sweetest things on this subject - things that are of more value than anything even the nicest Tommies can say, because naturally one can be more to a decent man of one's own class, than to a man of another class at any time.<sup>58</sup>

Rathbone not only believed that officers from the same social background were more masculine but was prepared to use their praise to support her own comments. They were considered more worthy than men from the ranks and men and officers stationed at the bases, a fact distinguished down to the way their food was served. Rathbone wrote shortly after arriving at the camp: 'The number of officers who come for tea varies between 12 and 20. Some are from the Rest Camp (and these we like best of course, and they are allowed more sandwiches), others are from schools of instruction or depot round about, others are Americans.'<sup>59</sup>

---

<sup>57</sup> Rathbone. General diary entry for June 1918. DoD, IWM. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. Diary entry for 3 July 1918.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. General diary entry for June 1918.

Women were prepared to be more tolerant with men and officers from the lines. When WAAC administrator Dorothy Pickford went to a dance attended by officers who had been to the Front, she remarked in a letter:

Don't ask me who I danced with. There was a Subaltern of mature years in the ASC who had just come down from the line after months, and he was almost pathetic in his delight at meeting an Englishwoman again. His dancing had grown a bit rusty, but I hauled him round in the good old Club style, and by the end he was going like a bird.<sup>60</sup>

The Englishness of women is again very important in their relationships with officers from the line, not in a civilising way, but through an understanding that their civilised Englishness would be recognised and fully appreciated. While the power balance between women and men from the ranks rested in women's favour, it was less obviously so in their relationships with officers, to whom they usually deferred. The relationships were also more flirtatious, as captured by VAD Olive Dent, in an anecdote of a train journey taking her home on leave with a couple of VAD friends. They shared the carriage with some typically youthful English officers from the line:

Some English officers help us to settle our luggage. We thank them and chatter idly among ourselves. One of the officers asks us how we would like the window - closed or open. We tell him, and return to our conversation. Another asks us if we object to smoking. We state our wishes, and resume our conversation. Another asks us if the heating of the compartment is rather excessive. We reply, and then retire to our own conversation. Finally, after a time one of the officers blurt out: "Do talk to us, won't you? We haven't spoken to an English girl for months." So we all laugh, and the conversation becomes general until we reach the port of embarkation, when we bid good-bye to our khaki companions, - ships that pass in the night.<sup>61</sup>

While Dent gently satirises the awkward relationships between women and officers engendered by the war, the conventions between the sexes of the upper and middle classes are evident - the men must make the first move. At the same time it is

---

<sup>60</sup> Pickford. Letter to Molly, dated 28 February 1918. DoD, IWM.

<sup>61</sup> Dent, *A VAD in France*, 310-11.

Englishness which is valued and sought, in both the women and the men. The most satisfying reward for an officer out of the line is be in the company of an Englishwoman, while for her the acknowledgement or chivalrous attention of an heroic English officer is the most flattering advance she could receive. Dent also captures the social confidence of the women, and their willingness to finally converse with the officers who respond to their respectable English charm. She recognises the lost chance of romance as they disappear - 'ships that pass in the night' being a common expression among women who fleetingly formed relationships with officers. While the ideal masculine hero was alluded to in letters and diaries, he was no more than a 'passing ship of the night', a myth of English manhood perpetuated by women at the Front, seldom seen, and even more seldom found on an individual basis. It was more often assumed that this romantic and idealised hero existed among the officers. Rathbone recognised the reality behind the myth when she pondered the officers she met at the YMCA rest camp in the last summer of the war: 'oh dear where are the men of one's dreams. The man of one's dreams? A real man. True, Life is full of matches that go out, but some were never worth lighting, and some we blow out ourselves.'<sup>62</sup> Rathbone had been under the illusion that being at the Front among England's heroic officers promised romantic possibilities but in reality these were difficult to fulfil. Despite her reservations she insisted on perpetuating the idea of men and officers from the trenches as heroes. As she watched one camp of soldiers depart after a fortnight's rest she wrote: 'Poor brave passing ships, what after all can we do for you!... I think you can never be so wonderful, nor so dear, as when you are marching back in the dawn to the hell of the line.'<sup>63</sup>

---

<sup>62</sup> Rathbone. Diary entry for 8 August 1918. DoD, IWM.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. Diary entry for 20 July 1918.

The idealised English officer was the benchmark for masculinity in the eyes of women at the Front, and other men were compared to him. Officers who came from other parts of the British Empire or the Dominions were regarded differently by women, as were those officers who rose through the ranks. The Englishness of women resumed its civilising context when in contact with officers from the Dominions. Irene Rathbone met a New Zealand officer at the YMCA rest camp who she judged to be ‘about 1000 years behind me in civilisation,’ for no other reason than the fact that he appeared to lack an English public school education. She considered that she ‘could do a good deal with him if I could take him in hand for a bit.’<sup>64</sup> And she remained mystified about her attraction to him: ‘Why is there something about a primitive colonial that appeals so irresistibly to the feline instincts of a civilised Englishwoman!’<sup>65</sup> Officers from the Dominion territories were considered exotic, though less civilised, and therefore could only benefit from the company of an Englishwoman. Following a dance attended by officers held at the house where she boarded, Rathbone wrote of the apparent effect of the YMCA women: ‘the New Zealand officers from the camp (we heard afterwards) were nearly off their heads with wonder and delight at beholding English ladies in evening dresses, and being at a proper ‘party’! Poor dears!’<sup>66</sup>

Indian soldiers were also considered exotic. Their customs and culture roused the curiosity of women as well as challenged their understanding (see Figure 15). VAD Nora Pemberton encountered Sikh soldiers at the rest station where she worked and wrote:

The Indians will of course not take food from us, as our shadow falling across has defiled it for them: sometimes however they will take hot

---

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. Diary entry for 2 October 1918.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid. Diary entry for 6 October 1918.

Figure 15. Ambulance train sister photographed alongside Sikh soldiers preparing a meal. Sister Rebecca Read. QARANC.



water to make themselves tea and one day someone had a bright inspiration. We had given all the English wounded bread and butter and felt so sorry that the Indians would not take anything. Then someone thought of biscuits and a whole new square tin was produced out of the Quartermaster's store. This the orderly on the train opened before their eyes so that they could be quite sure we had had nothing to do with it, and they simply loved them!<sup>67</sup>

The refusal of English hospitality is resented by Pemberton. Her view of the infallibility of her own methods is challenged by the Sikhs' adherence to their own customs. She does, however, retain her respect for the men on the grounds that they were considered to be heroic fighters. Unlike the labour corps of China and South Africa, seen in the last chapter, women maintained respect for men from other cultures who fought bravely. Women accepted the proximity of Indian soldiers, unlike men from the Empire who laboured rather than fought at the Front. Tolerance for nations outside the Empire, fighting on the allied side, however, was not always the case. Sister Priscilla Simpson, based at a casualty clearing station, was sceptical about the fighting prowess of the Portuguese allies based at a nearby camp. She wrote in her diary:

Some of them are very quarrelsome. We have had several of our Tommies in hospital wounded with bayonets by them. They hold part of this line, we wondered at one time how much they were to be depended upon for holding the Germans back from here, but last week we heard they did very well and drove a raiding party off.<sup>68</sup>

Her prejudice resurfaced a month later during another German advance:

The Germans are through the line and advancing rapidly and it is the Portuguese we have to thank I suppose. The terrific bombardment was too much for them for they just ran away, we saw them coming by the camp, we hear today they are being taken out of the line and sent to work on the land.<sup>69</sup>

---

<sup>67</sup> Pemberton. Letter to Mum, dated 10 December 1914. DoD, IWM.

<sup>68</sup> Simpson. Diary entry for 31 March 1918. LC.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. Diary entry for 11 April 1918.

The derogatory description of the Portuguese contrasted dramatically with Simpson's praise for British soldiers during the same attack: 'Our men have just been splendid the way they have held out and fought to the last man against overwhelming odds.'<sup>70</sup>

Lack of understanding of another culture meant that women's assumption of ignorance and inferiority in others could rebound and illustrate their own shortcomings. Sister James was invited to visit an Indian hospital near the casualty clearing station where she worked, and recorded with some remorse:

They told us about their 'show' cases. One poor wretch had had the right leg amputated for frostbite and he showed us the left foot - it was all shrivelled and black. Not thinking he would understand I said "He will have to lose the foot surely", and then found he could speak English. I was so sorry and was very careful after that...Many had never seen an English nurse before and they came and stood round us and gazed.<sup>71</sup>

Given the prevailing imperial ideology women operated within a limited cultural framework. Their adherence to imperial and social boundaries meant that their beliefs were frequently challenged by the needs created by the war. Later in the war, as men were called up and eventually conscripted in increasing numbers, those who became officers were drawn from a broader social background. It is evident from letters and diaries that women found this challenging to their perceptions of the officer ideal. There was a belief among women, and perpetuated since in oral history accounts, that the 'best' men died in the early years of the war, culminating in the Battle of the Somme, and that the war lasted so long because the men, and particularly the officers, were of poorer quality. Irene Rathbone described one batch of officers newly arrived at the rest camp as 'duds': 'it is the Colonel's opinion that they have

---

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. Diary entry for 16 April 1918.

<sup>71</sup> James. Diary entry for 31 December 1914. LC.

been sent down here to get them out of the way while the offensive is on. A cruel reflection but possibly true.<sup>72</sup> When she encountered officers from working-class backgrounds, Rathbone heaped contempt upon them, questioning their masculinity and their right to wear the uniform which in her eyes was the rightful preserve of the English gentleman. When the YMCA leader sent some officers to dine with Rathbone and the other YMCA women, she wrote:

He must have been playing us a grim jest, because really... ...! Well two of them weren't so bad, but the other two were either grocer's assistants before the war, or else young men in a Boots Cash Chemist. Literally I have never seen anything so grotesque in officers' uniform!<sup>73</sup>

Accompanying this diary entry, Rathbone sketched two of the officers as if to attempt to make the unbelievable believable (see Figure 16). She judged them unsuitable as officers as a result not of physical or mental incapacity, but because of their social background.

Women's perception of the ideal masculine officer was also affected by those who were mentally affected by the war. Elaine Showalter has examined how male war neurosis was considered to be 'feminine' behaviour, and disconcerting to the medical profession.<sup>74</sup> This is certainly borne out in women's reactions to patients who had no physical injury. Women did not identify, or appear familiar with, the recently diagnosed condition of 'shell-shock'. Instead they wrote of men afflicted by 'nerves' or 'war exhaustion', or who exhibited the unmasculine symptoms of screaming or gabbling incoherently. When the rank and file displayed nervous behaviour it was more easily dismissed as an inferior constitution, or perhaps

---

<sup>72</sup> Rathbone. Diary entry for 29 August 1918. DoD, IWM.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. Diary entry for 20 October 1918. DoD, IWM. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>74</sup> Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady. Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980*, London, Virago, 1991, 167-194.



Figure 16. Sketched profiles of two officers in the diary of Irene Rathbone.  
Diary entry for 20 October 1918. DoD, IWM.

as far as the camp, & saw them on their way - I think they liked coming over. They are coming on Wednesday to play a hockey match against the Infantry School & say they will come & look us up & see if we will come out to dinner. We wish Col. Hancock would have a dance at his billet for them that night! To tea we had nobody but the Muffin Man, who came to say goodbye, & stayed hours! Thanks the Lord he is going to England tomorrow. He has been here for two days.

Then to supper - oh to supper - came 4 officers from the camp sent by Uncle. He must have been playing us a grim jest, because really - Well 2 of them weren't so bad, but the other 2 were either grocer's assistants before the war, or else young men in a Boots Cash Chemist. Literally I have never seen anything so grotesque in officers' uniform! I don't know what their names were, but one had a ferret nose with a walrus moustache, the other a pug nose & a booby bush moustache.

I kept gazing at them in a sort of trance.

Outside Punch I have never seen anything

like them.



This are not exaggerations

cowardice owing to social origins (in the case of the Portuguese soldiers, race was seen to be the primary factor). For the 'educated' soldier, however, there was no convenient explanation. Women were able to cope better with something that could be physically cured. They found it difficult to articulate their feelings for men who did not behave in a traditionally masculine way. Even when men arrived in new convoys screaming in agony, there was an attempt to disguise the extent of the crying by stressing the bravery of the men. However, the extent of the suffering could not easily be ignored, though it was done so with an awareness of class consciousness.

Sister Mary Stollard recalled:

They were very pathetic, these shell-shocked boys, and a lot of them were very sensitive about the fact that they were incontinent. They'd say, 'I'm terribly sorry about it, sister, it's shaken me all over and I can't control it. Just imagine, to wet the bed at my age!' I'd say, 'We'll see to that. Don't worry about it.' I used to give them a bedpan in the locker beside them and keep it as quiet as possible. Poor fellows, they were so embarrassed - especially the better-class men.<sup>75</sup>

Ambulance driver Alice Proctor remembered the condition of the men she drove:

The ones that had dysentery, poor things, that was really terrible because they couldn't be looked after and they were in a shocking state. I used to feel so sorry - they were so ashamed of themselves, they couldn't help it, but sometimes the smell was simply frightful. I used to feel very sorry for them because, particularly the ones of a slightly higher intelligence and education, to feel that they were in that state and that we girls were doing things for them.<sup>76</sup>

It was the sheer horror of nursing at the Front that proved to have a levelling effect on women's perception of the men. Despite entrenched middle-class values being widely held among women at the Front, the extent of the injuries they witnessed transcended class consciousness. Women may have believed that working-class men

---

<sup>75</sup> Mary Stollard, quoted in Macdonald, *Roses of No Man's Land*, 214-5.

<sup>76</sup> Remington. Oral history. Reel 5. DoS, IWM.

from the ranks, and men from other cultures, were socially or racially inferior to English officers, but overriding this preconception was the immediate reaction that the war was capable of emasculating all men who fought regardless of social background or ethnic origin. Sister Anna Cameron, aboard HMS *Delta*, nursed colonial soldiers who landed at Gallipoli in August 1915. She wrote home:

The Delta was one mass of suffering humanity. How to cope with over 1240 when we were inadequately staffed for 536! The ship's crew helped to a man, especially with the feeding - the deck cases. The worst cases were in the wards and my ward was a perfect Hell. It was so awful I can't bear to think of it yet - sixty terrible cases. Several burnt from head to foot. One couldn't cope with the agony. Eight of my cases died - hopeless cases. Splendid Colonials - never a groan. Some begged to be finished off with Morphia - and those who were in agony were kept under till they died.<sup>77</sup>

Women witnessed the destruction of men's bodies, and often young men's bodies, men of their own generation, if not necessarily from their own class. In an attempt to make sense of the extent of mutilation that women encountered it was easy for men's bodies to become idealised. Irene Rathbone watched a group of men bathing near the YMCA camp where she worked and wrote:

...all over the expanse of salty grass, in among the pools and up to the edge of the water were soldiers bathing - a beautiful sight, hundreds of white bodies stark naked - running in the sunlight - all far away enough to make a picture. The whole thing was intensely Greek. They looked like human beings in the Golden Age. A little gleaming white temple against the blue of the sky was all that was needed to complete the early Greek impression. The whole scene was so beautiful that it almost made one cry. This is what men were made for - not to kill each other with hideous machinery, but to dance, and bathe and leap in the sunshine and the sea - naked, unmarred and beautiful.<sup>78</sup>

The idealisation of men's beauty was shattered in the hospitals. Preconceived notions of class disappeared as women stood over maimed and dying men. The presence of emasculated, war-ravaged bodies of men in an environment that brought

---

<sup>77</sup> Cameron. Letter home, dated 26 August 1915. BRC 25 4/4. WAWC, IWM.

<sup>78</sup> Rathbone. Diary entry for 23 August 1918. DoD, IWM.

excitement and opportunity to women was the paradox of women's war at the Front, but it was also the essence of the war for the many middle- and upper-class women who worked there. However exciting the war was, its grim realities were never very far away. VAD Nora Pemberton wrote:

When you turn down the blanket to wash an arm and find no arm only a soaking bandage that was once white, or you go to feed "no 14" and find that he has only half a face and cannot swallow but tries to speak and you strain to understand. It fills you with a fury against the devilish ingenuity which conceived the perfection of the weapons which have caused this devastation and a loathing of the man who set loose these fiends of hell.<sup>79</sup>

Despite women's attempts to maintain an image of domesticity - pristine uniforms, wards scrubbed clean, and an atmosphere of discipline and order fit for heroes, the nature of the war constantly confounded them. Women might have bemoaned not being busy, and felt that scrubbing lockers all day was not the work of women at war, but coping with the reality of a ward full of injured men, stretching resources to the limit, was far from glamorous. But this situation was not necessarily defeating, as has been suggested by some academics who have relied upon the literary works of women to depict conditions at the Front. These scholars have conveyed an image of women destroyed by the war, and argued that the kind of restrained femininity needed to get women to the Front as VADs, buckled under the strain of the horrific duties.<sup>80</sup> Letters and diaries depict how women continued to cope with the horrors they witnessed, and how their femininity was a source of strength rather than weakness. After the war they may have had time to count the emotional cost to themselves, but during the war, women continued to be resourceful. VAD Daisy Spickett nursed aboard the *Aquitania*, and remembered that the sheer scale of their

---

<sup>79</sup> Pemberton. Letter to Dad, dated 2 November 1914. DoD, IWM.

<sup>80</sup> Tylee, 'Maleness Run Riot'. Ouditt, *Fighting Forces*.

task helped them through: 'One would have been shocked if one could afford to be, but one couldn't afford to be... That was our salvation, we were thrown head first into the work but we had to do something about it.'<sup>81</sup> Women's approach to injury and death may have varied but none remained unaffected by the extent of the casualties who passed through their hands. Women were traumatised by their experiences and yet they continued to cope, probably because they felt, as women, they had something to prove. Their nerve had to hold but the strain was visible. Sister Anna Cameron wrote:

I keep wonderfully well but I do feel the nervous strain. The hopelessness of struggling against heavy odds and unable to relieve suffering adequately tries me so dreadfully. The other Sisters keep much calmer inside - I can't. If only I could I should be thankful.<sup>82</sup>

Women who had arrived at the Front spurred by the image of the ministering angel discovered the limitations of their training in this mechanical war, for the angelic image was not a physical healer. No amount of nursing could save men as badly injured as those they often confronted. Women could not physically repair their patients. Sister Alice Slythe nursed men injured in the early days of the Somme offensive in 1916 and wrote:

We haven't been taking in so many lately, but those we have had have been far worse than usual. The number of deaths is awful - 29 in this last week only - the abdominals are the worst of course: one yesterday was so brave and cheery over it and so anxious to get well. I took his temperature etc at 5pm and he said: "Is it all right, Sister?" and I said: "Quite, you're getting on fine, old man" - and I nearly cried as I hung up the chart, for it couldn't have been worse. T 96.8: P 162: R 48, and he was dead in an hour - such a dear; they all are.<sup>83</sup>

Here is another function for writing letters and diaries. Women at the Front carried the burden of nursing appallingly injured men, and felt under pressure not to give

---

<sup>81</sup> Spickett. Oral history. Reel 3. DoS, IWM.

<sup>82</sup> Cameron. Letter home, dated 26 August 1915. BRC 25 4/4. WAWC, IWM.

<sup>83</sup> Slythe. Diary entry for 5 July 1916. LC,

under the strain. The letters and diaries were therefore an outlet, almost a confessional for women to release their feelings at the horror they were witnessing. Despite censoring, the letters of Sister Cameron and VAD Nora Pemberton were quite detailed and graphic. Both the letters and the diaries contain much that conveys the excitement of the war for women, but it was important that they relieved themselves of its horror, and this is perhaps why they were also keen to write of opportunity and entertainment as antidotes to the other side of war.

The horror of nursing was intensified by the youth of the patients, instilling in women a maternal approach to their work, and filling a void in the lives of men who were apart from their own families. While this added to the construction of the nurse as ministering angel it was done not through an innate feminine instinct but as a reaction to the needs of men. Maternal imagery was something which nurses were very aware of in their relationship with patients, and something which they fostered as part of appealing to men's faded masculinity. Fulfilling the role of maternal ministering angel was not a gentle, passive role for the nurse but one filled with angst and torment. Men needed their mothers and the nurse had little alternative but to fill that vacuum. Sister Alice Slythe wrote:

The baby of the Ward now is Private Gates who had his 17<sup>th</sup> birthday last month: he is just a baby and has a horrible skull fracture: sometimes he is sensible and calls me "Miss" or "teacher" and I really feel like crying - he's a little cockney from Mildmay Park. The other Sisters all say they are glad and thankful to see the men die when they are really desperate, but I cannot get used to it and I can't bear them all dying like flies - it seems as if we could prevent it and yet I know we can't. even though I know that if he lives he will never be normal. I don't want him to die.<sup>84</sup>

The destruction of youth brought home forcefully to women what the war meant in terms of casualties, and was captured in women's postwar fiction and

---

<sup>84</sup> Ibid. Diary entry for 25 June 1916.

autobiography. Vera Brittain's autobiography was entitled *Testament of Youth*, while Irene Rathbone's fictionalised account of war was called *We That Were Young*.

Women were not distanced from the horror. They recognised their patients or the men they met as their own brothers or lovers, often having experienced loss themselves. WAAC Annie Martin recalled the relief that greeted the Armistice, 'because by this time we'd all lost so many of our young men, brothers, cousins, friends.'<sup>85</sup> Women were aware of the anxieties of families at home who had sent their sons to war. And it was from this perspective that they could write poignantly about the deaths of young men. Sister Mary Brown described the death of a young officer aboard HMS *Devanha*:

One very nice boy of 23, Lt Rayner, died on the 9<sup>th</sup>, he was shot through the neck and his spine was fractured...Poor fellow, he asked me to take care of him and take him alive to England, he said he didn't mind himself whether he lived or died but his people would be so upset if anything happened to him. With his last breath almost he sent his love to his mother.<sup>86</sup>

The connection with home did not stop there for women. Kathleen Mann, the Matron aboard the *Devanha* had the responsibility of contacting Lieutenant Rayner's parents with details of his death. She received this reply from his mother:

My dear Matron, I really do not know how to write in answer to your kind letter to us telling of our dear dear boy's death. My heart is full of deep thankfulness to you and your Staff for all your kindness to our boy in his last hours in this world. We pray god will ever bless you for it. Your letter will be treasured by us more than words can express. Our hearts are so full of sorrow yet that we cannot see why God took him home [so] soon. He has been good all his life. Ours was such a happy home of love and kindness. My husband Cecil Leonard and May our daughter, she simply worshipped Cecil, and for the present she is just crushed. She is 16 years. Leonard our second boy is going out to Egypt next...Signed Cecil's Mother.<sup>87</sup>

---

<sup>85</sup> Martin. Oral history. Reel 3. DoS, IWM.

<sup>86</sup> MA Brown. Diary entry for 12 November 1915. DoD, IWM.

<sup>87</sup> Kathleen Mann. Letter to Matron from Mrs Rayner, dated 1 December 1915. LC.

They understood the grief of women at home, which enhanced their maternal role, and felt entrusted to take the place of women who could not be there. The letter received by Kathleen Mann indicates the scope and impact of the war upon families at home, and how women in particular bore the grief. Women at home were not oblivious to the traumatic events of the Front, even if they were spared some of the details. Women at the Front contributed to the knowledge of those at home, whether writing to their own families and friends, or communicating with strangers whose sons they had nursed. Women at the Front occupied a pivotal role in connecting the home front and the frontline hospitals, bringing humanity and dignity to the countless deaths they witnessed. Kathleen Mann received another letter of gratitude from another mother, the similarities in the expression of grief to the other letter are striking:

Dear Matron, I feel it is my duty to write and thank you so very much for sending me the last postcard my dear boy wrote to me, as I shall treasure it all the rest of my life. I also feel so grateful to think he passed away so beautiful without knowing his suffering as so many dear creatures suffer dreadful at their last. He was the eldest of my 5 children, 23 years old last October. Now I have another of my sons age 19 just joined. I hope the war will have ceased before he is trained, as 1 dear boy is quite enough to lose. But I hope he is at rest, my dear boy. O I shall never forget the morning I had the news. But now I know the real end of him I am much more lightened of the burden.<sup>88</sup>

Women who worked in the hospitals at the Front witnessed the helplessness of men fresh from the battlefield. The mutilation and madness of men was part of the nurse's wartime experience, but during the war, it was an experience from which she derived strength. The weakness of men made women strong. The destruction of masculinity challenged women's perceptions of gender roles. Women pitied the men in their care, but they did not turn their backs on war while it was still being waged,

---

<sup>88</sup> Ibid. Letter to Matron from Mrs E Harris, dated 21 January 1916.



instead they filled the power vacuum and tried to repair the damage to the masculinity of men. The ignoble and undignified reality of nursing had to be denied in order to protect the masculinity of men, hence the depiction of nurses as ministering angels. Yet for many men who arrived at the casualty clearing stations and hospitals at the Front, no amount of nursing could restore the physical and mental damage they had endured on the battlefield. VAD Nora Pemberton described how the war had produced 'travesties of the fine strong husbands, fathers, lovers, sons who had gone forth so proudly how short a time ago.'<sup>89</sup> While women may have felt powerless to heal the physical scars of men, they felt empowered to provide a feminine, domestic environment which would go some way to restore the masculinity of men who arrived so broken. Their own femininity was enhanced and strengthened. Women have recalled that they had felt fitter during the war than at any other time of their lives. Being able to care for men allowed women to fulfil their function in war, bringing them closer to the men's experiences. It was restoration of gender differences that women sought to achieve for the benefit of themselves and their patients, though ironically the power to do this rested with them. The strength of women has been submerged behind the myth of the ministering angel, in part perpetuated by nurses themselves. Women had to exercise compassion in order to gain access to the Front, and once there, their compassion could be used to disguise the amount of suffering of men. In reality, the nurse at the Front was inextricably linked to death, but the angelic, submissive image of the nurse was necessary to help preserve the image of the soldier hero - if he died then his death at least should be noble or dignified. Women at the Front did not dispel the myth because it provided a model of idealised femininity in which they could help to reconstruct the masculinity of the shattered

---

<sup>89</sup> Pemberton. Letter to Dad, dated 2 November 1914. DoD, IWM.

soldiers. However, the historical perpetuation of the myth of the ministering angel ignores the deeper meanings of gender reconstruction in war.

From a class point of view women could be threatening to men from the ranks, but they could present another threat too. Gilbert and Gubar have received criticism for suggesting the nurse derived pleasure from men's pain, and therefore that the war was liberating for women, and correspondingly confining for men. While they have used mostly literary sources to reach their conclusions and have largely ignored the class and imperial aspects of women's war experience, the suggestion that women gained power which could be threatening to men is compelling. Women did not derive pleasure from power over men, for it was already considered their prerogative on account of the class distinctions between them. When power was exercised over men who were badly injured and nearing death, however, the ministering angel could represent a less benign and more ambiguous presence. For men grievously injured, the nurse embodied life. She was the ultimate embodiment of the soldier's terror - a reminder of his imminent mortality, someone who would hear his final words, and hold his hand when he died. Symbols of death were all around the hospital. Escaping the battlefield did not mean an escape from death. The screens in Winifred Letts's poem at the beginning of the chapter were a potent symbol. VAD Kitty Kenyon recalled another frightening reminder of death when she described the imminent death of a patient: 'His bed was up against the door of the marquee, because anyone who was likely to die was always put there...'<sup>90</sup> In the hospitals, in death, it was women who were with the men, as Sister Slythe observed in the opening quotations.

Ambulance driver Alice Proctor was responsible for driving coffins to the cemetery:

If I had the time and I wasn't to go back and do anything I always tried to go and stand with the padre beside the grave because there were no

---

<sup>90</sup> Kitty Kenyon, quoted in Macdonald, *Roses of No Man's Land*, 93.

other women there for these chaps, and I felt sometimes that some of their mothers might be sort of feeling, although I don't suppose they did know, but whether it was any comfort to them or not I don't know. I used to try to as much as possible if I hadn't to go back to do anything else.<sup>91</sup>

This observation raised another aspect of the power of the nurse. While we have seen how she often felt powerless to heal the physical wounds of the soldiers, she did have the power over life and death, as Sister Slythe observed in a crisis 'the needs of the living [are] more imperative.' Sister Anna Cameron aboard HMS *Delta* wrote:

Men who know Death is near often try to gasp out last messages. The Sisters who realise that every death on their Ship must mean an aching heart or several aching hearts somewhere do all in their power to secure these last messages, but sometimes they cannot leave the living whose chances of living at all are dependent on the quick help they get from skilled hands. Many a warm hearted Sister has had to turn, sick at heart, from dying lips which beseeched her to control let us say haemorrhage from stretcher cases just brought in. The lives of living men must not be risked, for lives going out, but the memory of some things which have had to be often left undone in the stress of War nursing stabs and stabs in the quiet days.<sup>92</sup>

The confessional tone is evident again here, along with an awareness of the wider implications for the families of the men.

Postwar pacifist women's literature focused on the destruction of women during the war as well as the men, but in Mary Borden's story, *Moonlight*, she chooses to depict the pain men suffer in hospital as a feminine experience:

Pain is the stronger. She is greater. She is insatiable, greedy, vilely amorous, lustful, obscene - she lusts for the broken bodies we have here. Wherever I go I find her possessing the men in their beds, lying in bed with them; and life, the sick animal, mews and whimpers, snarls and barks at her, till Death comes - the Angel, the peacemaker, the healer, whom we wait for, pray for - comes silently, drives Pain away, and horrid, snarling life, and leaves the men in peace.<sup>93</sup>

---

<sup>91</sup> Remington. Oral history. Reel 3. DoS, IWM.

<sup>92</sup> Cameron. Note dated 29 November 1915. BRC 25 4/10. WAWC, IWM.

<sup>93</sup> Mary Borden, *The Forbidden Zone*, London: William Heinemann, 1929, 53.

Borden's vision is of a lecherous femininity devouring the masculinity of men, before they are released to death. Perhaps Borden was afraid of the power nurses were able to exercise during the war, as the nurse symbolised death and life.

The agony of men, irrelevant of class or ethnic background, challenged women's understanding of traditional masculinity. Heroism, bravery and courage were redefined. Men who survived and suffered in silent agony were the ones who were now brave, the lucky ones were those who died. Under these conditions, concepts of femininity took on a different meaning, and a new force. Nurses came to realise that their power lay not in their ability to heal or cure but instead to help restore wounded masculinity. Gentle, nurturing, maternal femininity was required to stimulate the men's recovery or provide a comforting domestic presence in the face of death. Women were not automatically gentle, nurturing and maternal simply because they were women. Conditions at the Front were such that these traditional feminine associations had to be relinquished in certain situations. However, women did draw strength from the weakness of masculinity, recalling a more traditional gender order, adopting the role of maternal carer to re-establish blurred gender distinctions. They enhanced their own femininity. Women did not seek to overthrow the gender hierarchy with their newly exercised power, taking advantage of the weakness of men. This was challenging to women. While they accepted some of the freedoms created by being at the Front, the greatest challenge of the destruction of masculinity was something they felt they could repair.

It was within the power of women to fulfil the role of ministering angel, and women chose this role because it helped them cope with the war. Being at the Front did not restrict women's development or leave them compromised by their femininity.

Women asserted their femininity which was constantly developing and being redefined by the conditions at the Front. Orthodox as the ministering angel role appeared, it was applied from a position of power and authority, often predicated on prewar class and imperial assumptions. As masculinity appeared to disintegrate before them, it lay within the power of women to reassert gender distinctions, as this was a way in which women at the Front could maintain their authority as civilised Englishwomen.

## Conclusion

Within this study it has been demonstrated that women can be drawn into the narrative of war as important historical subjects, not just because women at the Front did something unusual for their sex, but because a gender analysis of history demands that women are key historical subjects, whether in terms of their presence or by their absence. The research has offered an analysis of the reasons women were mobilised for the Front, and has illustrated how women's records illuminate an analysis of war at the Front. Current academic concerns about the discourses of class, gender and empire are reflected in the study, representing the motivating factors informing both women's deployment and experiences. Previous studies have focused on some of these issues when examining the role of women in war. This study, by contrast, has analysed women at the Front separately. While their experiences were not unrelated to women on the home front carrying out similar jobs, an analysis of the mobilisation of women at the Front brings into sharper focus the politics of class, gender and empire governing the organisation of a society at war.

The deployment of women at the Front highlighted the tensions between women and war. This thesis demonstrates that the two were not irreconcilable in a number of ways. While the War Office remained sceptical, some prominent women were motivated by the principles of empire and middle-class values to move women permanently into the military. Obstructions based on perceptions of gender differences meant that the disagreement was not resolved during the war, and the resulting mobilisation of women, as nurses, VADs and WAACs, was often confused and acrimonious at home and at the Front. Women were considered weak, slow and

unskilled, useful only for the seemingly nurturing role of nursing. Despite the existence of a professional military nursing body, it proved inadequate for dealing with the casualties of modern warfare. It was middle- and upper-class women, considered educated and refined, who were seen as suitable to ease the nursing shortage. Only when there was a crisis of manpower were class and gender considerations modified and working-class women were admitted to the Front.

The Front was imagined by women of the BEF as the heart of war. They wrote about it as a place of excitement, adventure and opportunity. The entry into a male space made women feel they had an important part to play in a great event. However, the Front was not always as imagined. Women's experiences were not always those of men and battle. Often their experiences seemed unconnected to the war they thought they had come to the Front to be part of. As a result, women attempted to authenticate their experiences by defining themselves in relation to the men in the trenches. This has produced a hierarchy of female experience. Historically, in a war in which the trench experience represents *the* war, the experience of the voluntary nurse, like Vera Brittain, has become the authentic female voice of war, marginalising those women employed in other areas and even those professional nurses who were considered employed rather than volunteers. This research has brought other women of the BEF into the war narrative to demonstrate the multifaceted experiences of women's war, as well as illustrating the reasons why women other than VADs have usually been excluded.

The excitement of being at the Front, expressed in letters and diaries, has been shown to be consistent throughout the war. Women's experience of the war did not unfold from one of excitement to one of disillusionment, horror, or exhaustion. The research demonstrates that women's reactions to the effects of the war were not static.

Consequently there is no single authentic experience of the women's war. The excitement expressed in contemporary accounts turned to anger in the literature produced in the 1920s and 30s. Later still, in oral history testimony, the war is remembered as a great event, in which women's involvement contributed to female emancipation in the twentieth century.

The development of a female hierarchy is identified in the research, highlighting women's vulnerability in an unfamiliar environment. Their position as workers was not guaranteed, and in some places, hardly tolerated by the authorities. The VADs felt particularly vulnerable because they lacked the professional training of the nursing sisters. Women were in need of validation, seeking the approval of men. The arrival of the WAAC opened up further rifts between women. Class differences and inter-organisational rivalry based on class difference prevented any significant female solidarity being established at the Front. The WAAC was better organised than the VAD, though its composition of many working-class women made it a target of abuse from men and other women at the Front. The extent of the rumours directed against them was indicative of the unease of women transgressing gender boundaries. However, it was the class factor which made the presence of working-class women in the army more potent. The rank and file of the WAAC were relatively powerless by comparison to other women at the Front, though did benefit from their status as subjects of the British Empire. Women occupied authoritative positions which stemmed from their class and imperial status. The combination of class and imperial authority placed some women in positions of power over women and men of other nationalities and over working-class men of the BEF who were either patients or orderlies. Their authority did not arise simply because of the anomaly of being at the Front, but was part of their prewar identities.



The idea of women as authoritative figures at the Front is developed in the final chapter. It examines the enduring myth of the ministering angel, and suggests that women were seduced by this image. The passive connotations normally associated with the image of the ministering angel are undermined, however, as it is demonstrated that women were in control of this aspect of their identity. Women held on to an idealised vision of prewar gender relations as their frame of reference in establishing their position at the Front and helping them through its traumatic events. When they witnessed the undermining of masculinity, women were strong enough to assert their femininity to restore a gender balance. This conservative use of gender identity has misled historians into believing that femininity was too far removed to survive in a masculine war environment. This research demonstrates that femininity was a powerful force at the Front, with women recreating a feminine environment enabling them to function in a war zone. Women's accounts illustrate that soldiers had difficulty reconciling themselves to a war environment, and were anxious to be part of a more familiar domestic, feminine world.

The goal of restoring a gender balance was influenced by perceptions of class and race. The civilised middle-class femininity of Englishwomen, constrained and conservative as it was, proved to be a powerful defining force. As an ideology, it was used to disparage others considered inferior, yet it also provided the parameters which allowed women to survive the enormous stresses they confronted. It was the sheer scale of destruction witnessed by women that undermined their value system, based as it was on the pre-eminence of the British Empire and middle-class sensibilities.

Women were not a homogenous group with the same interests and aims, and so it is not possible to ask whether or not the Front was a liberating experience for women. Women did not experience the Front with any degree of uniformity.

Women's presence at the Front was clearly a complex set of experiences. For some, the Front does appear to have been a liberating experience, in terms of allowing a process of developing personal autonomy, and helping women make choices about careers after the war. It is clear from oral histories and later correspondence that some women chose not to return home but stayed on in Europe, either assisting with the postwar regeneration or travelling, while others pursued medical and nursing careers. For these women at least, the war and working at the Front provided them space to make choices about their lives. Being at the Front provided some women with a sense of purpose that they were not prepared to sacrifice after the war. The presence of women at the Front helped to make paid employment for women more acceptable within the military establishment. Though the formation of the WAAC was beset with problems which were not satisfactorily resolved by the end of the war, it nevertheless opened up the possibilities for women's future acceptance into the military system. It had been accepted that women's involvement in the military in future would need to be on a professional and not a voluntary footing.

In terms of mobilisation, the course of the war brought about many changes for women who went to the Front as part of the BEF. In the short term these were physical changes which placed women within a new environment where they lived and worked. The experiences at the Front also had consequences in the long term, whether for those women who wished to continue working, or for those women whose consciousness was radically altered by their part in the war. These consequences may not have been effected immediately, but it is impossible to conclude that working at the Front did not permanently influence women in some way, even for those who returned to a domestic environment, now fully inducted into the art of domestic improvisation.

In the immediate aftermath of the war, there was little room for women within the military system. Women stayed at the Front officially until late 1919. Related war work diminished after this time, and for women like Katharine Furse, who had hoped that the war was the turning point for the mobilisation of women, the end of the war brought disappointment and disaffection. Loss was therefore expressed in terms of what the war promised for women but could not deliver when it was over.

Katharine Furse's hope was that the war would be able to demonstrate how women were united, but this was unrealistic. It was not simply as a result of War Office intransigence as she believed, but was dictated by the wider prevailing ideologies of class, gender and empire separating women. Her postwar wish was therefore ultimately unattainable when she wrote: 'I wish we could all join up again some how for some national endeavour and believe we shall be needed again for something, so I feel sure it is right to rest for the time being.'<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Field. Letter from Katharine Furse to Dorothy Field, dated 1 June 1920. DoD, IWM.

# Bibliography

## Primary Sources:

### Imperial War Museum:

Women at Work Collection (studied on microfilm at The University of Birmingham):-

Army Tapes.

Reel 2:

Army 3/3: Report by Lieutenant-General HM Lawson CB, on the Number and Physical Categories of Men employed out of the fighting area in France, 16 January 1917: Economy of Man Power in the Armies.

Army 3<sup>1</sup>/8: Memo: "Possible Problems of Stationing a Women's Army in France", by Rachel Crowdy (Principal VAD Commandant, France), dated 16 January 1916.

Army 3<sup>1</sup>/9: Memo on Women's Service in the Army, by the Principal VAD Commandant, France, dated 10 January 1917.

Army 3<sup>1</sup>/10: Memo on Questions Relating to Women's Service with the Army, dated 2 January 1917.

Army 3<sup>2</sup>/14: Memo on Scheme for Women's Service with the Army, undated.

Army 3<sup>4</sup>/6: Letter to The War Office from Field Marshal Sir D. Haig, Commander-in-Chief, British Armies in France, dated 11 March 1917, re report by General Lawson.

Army 3<sup>4</sup>/7: Appendix to above letter. Haig's responses to report by General Lawson on Man Power in France, dated 11 March 1917.

Army 3<sup>5</sup>/3: Letter to The War Office from Field Marshal Sir D. Haig, dated 8 April 1917 re proposed substitution of labour.

Army 3<sup>5</sup>/4: Appendix details for above letter.

Army 3<sup>7</sup>/15: Memo on Proceedings of Conference AGXI, 10 April 1917, re substitution of men by women.

Army 3 <sup>8</sup>/4: Draft Appendix A, Women's Army Auxiliary Corps – General Rules.

Army 3 <sup>9</sup>/5: Minutes of Meeting on The Employment of Women in the Army, chaired by General Woodward, held on 15 January 1917.

Army 3 <sup>10</sup>/2: Diary of Mrs Gwynne Vaughan re Visit to France, February 1917.

Army 3 <sup>11</sup>/7: Letter to Sir Reginald Brade from Katharine Furse, dated 17 January 1917, re Engagement of Women by the War Office for Service in France.

Army 3 <sup>13</sup>/114: Inspection Report of QMAAC, BEF by Controller-in-Chief, 14 October 1918.

Army 3 <sup>14</sup>/47: Memo re Pregnancy and Venereal Diseases, from TH Turnbull, Controller Medical Services, WAAC, dated 11 February 1918.

Army 3 <sup>14</sup>/52: Letter from Deputy Chief Controller re concerns of the Medical Controller, WAAC, dated 18 February, 1918.

Army 3 <sup>14</sup>/61: Memo re Inspection of WAAC Drafts, dated 28 February 1918.

Army 3 <sup>14</sup>/73: Memo re Accusations of Soldiers against Women of the WAAC, to War Office from Controller of Medical Services, WAAC, dated 8 April 1918.

Army 3 <sup>14</sup>/74: Memo re Discussion of Venereal Disease in WAAC Hostels, to War Office from Controller of Medical Services, WAAC, dated 22 March 1918.

Army 3 <sup>14</sup>/78: Correspondence re change of title of WAAC to Queen Mary's Army Auxiliary Corps, letters dated 13 and 16 April, 1918.

Army 3 <sup>15</sup>/8: Memo for distribution to Administrators in Training and in Camps on Suggestions on Personal Hygiene of QMAAC, undated.

Reel 3:

Army 3 <sup>19</sup>/4: Memo from Unit Administrator of QMAAC re Postwar Employment of Women, 9 November 1918.

Army 3 <sup>19</sup>/5: Memo from Senior Unit Administrator, QMAAC, Dover, re Suggested Scheme for Employment of QMAAC Personnel Surplus to Requirements on Demobilisation, dated 30 October 1918.

Army 3 <sup>20</sup>/5: Letter to QMAAC Headquarters from William Howard, re Suggestions for WAAC Recruitment, dated 22 June 1918.

Army 3 <sup>26</sup>/26: WAAC Letters from BEF by ME Roach, dated 25 November 1917 in *The Leader*, 13 August, 1920.

Army 3 <sup>26</sup>/27: WAAC Letters from BEF by ME Roach, dated 1 December 1917 in *The Leader*, 20 August 1920.

Army 3 <sup>26</sup>/28: WAAC Letters from BEF by ME Roach, dated 8 December 1917 in *The Leader*, 27 August 1920.

Army 3 <sup>26</sup>/29: WAAC Letters from BEF by ME Roach, dated 18 December 1917 in *The Leader*, 10 September 1920.

Army 3 <sup>26</sup>/31: WAAC Letters from BEF by ME Roach, dated 28 December 1917 in *The Leader*, 17 September 1920.

Army 3 <sup>26</sup>/34: "Only a WAAC!" by Sgt. Sumner, in *The CRO*, 15 March 1919.

Army 3 <sup>27</sup>/10: Precis of the Medical Services for QMAAC in France, by L Stewart Sandeman, Controller Medical Services, QMAAC, dated 5 April 1919.

Army 3 <sup>27</sup>/11: Duties of Medical Women with the QMAAC with the British Expeditionary Force, France.

Army 3 <sup>27</sup>/12: Medical report on Scale of Hutted Camp Accommodation.

Army 3 <sup>27</sup>/13: List of Illnesses among WAAC for 1918.

Army 3 <sup>27</sup>/14: Letter to Miss Conway from L Sandeman, dated 28 March 1921, re list of medical women attached to QMAAC in France.

Part Two: BRCS Records.

Reel 25:

BRCS <sup>1</sup>/14: St John's Ambulance Brigade Annual Report, October 1913-September 1915.

BRCS <sup>1</sup>/19: Conference (minutes) of Nursing Officers of St John's Ambulance Brigade held on Wednesday 16 April 1913.

BRCS <sup>1</sup>/23: Red Cross Journal, 15 June 1920.

BRCS <sup>1</sup>/24: Roll of Hospitals to May 1915.

BRCS <sup>1</sup>/25: Roll of Hospitals to October 1915.

BRCS <sup>1</sup>/26: Summary of Six Military Hospitals, August 1914 to February 1915.

BRCS <sup>1</sup>/28: Summary of Red Cross Work, fortnight ending 4 March 1916.

BRCS <sup>1</sup>/29: Summary of Red Cross Work for March 1917.

BRCS <sup>1</sup>/33: Summary of Red Cross Work for June 1918.

BRCS <sup>1</sup>/40: Don'ts for VADs.

Reel 26:

BRCS <sup>2</sup>/5: Line of Command for Ambulance Trains.

BRCS <sup>2</sup>/18: Terms of Service for VADs of BRCS and Order of St John.

Reel 27: 10/1-9: Papers of Katharine Furse:-

BRCS 10/1: The Ideals of the VADs.

BRCS 10 <sup>1</sup>/2: What We Want Included in the National Service Appeal To Women To Join the VADs.

BRCS 10 <sup>1</sup>/3: Letter to VAD members.

BRCS 10 <sup>1</sup>/4: "The Spirit of the VADs".

BRCS 10 <sup>1</sup>/5: The Work the VADs Do.

BRCS 10 <sup>1</sup>/6: The VADs – an appeal.

BRCS 10 <sup>1</sup>/7: VAD Work.

BRCS 10 <sup>1</sup>/8: Draft memo by Katharine Furse re VAD economies, dated 15 April 1917.

BRCS 10 <sup>1</sup>/9: Letter from Katharine Furse about control and correct wearing of VAD uniform, dated 28 May 1917.

BRCS 10 <sup>1</sup>/10: "What VADs are Doing" – appeal for members 17 April 1917.

BRCS 10 <sup>2</sup>/3: Proposed Regulations for probationary members in military hospitals.

BRCS 10 <sup>2</sup>/4: Pay scales for GS Members in Military Hospitals.

BRCS 10 <sup>2</sup>/5: Declaration of loyalty form.

BRCS 10 <sup>2</sup>/6: Structure of Joint Women's VAD at Devonshire House.

BRCS 10 <sup>2</sup>/7: Report on VAD work under the Joint Committee in France.

BRCS 10 <sup>2</sup>/8: VAD system of appointment.

BRCS 10<sup>2</sup>/9: The VAD Organisation.

BRCS 10<sup>2</sup>/10: Memo on the work of Devonshire House in appointing VADs to military hospitals, September 1916.

BRCS 10<sup>2</sup>/11: Process of Selection of VAD Members and Allocation to Hospitals, February 1917.

BRCS 10<sup>2</sup>/14: The Work of the Women's Voluntary Aid Detachments.

BRCS 10<sup>3</sup>/3: General complaints received from VAD members.

BRCS 10<sup>3</sup>/7: Letter to Katharine Furse from Joint VAD Committee for Ireland, dated 15 June 1917.

BRCS 10<sup>3</sup>/8: Katharine Furse reply to above letter, dated 19 June 1917.

BRCS 10<sup>3</sup>/13: Letter to Katharine Furse from Sister Dora Hall, dated 19 June 1917.

BRCS 10<sup>4</sup>/3: VAD grievances.

BRCS 10<sup>4</sup>/4: Memo: "War Office Central Control of Trained Nurses", dated 1 December 1916.

BRCS 10<sup>4</sup>/5: Possible scheme for running of a training school for VADs.

BRCS 10<sup>4</sup>/6: Responses to training school for VADs.

BRCS 10<sup>4</sup>/7: Correspondence relating to invaliding sick members home, 25 September 1916 to 20 June 1917.

BRCS 10<sup>4</sup>/8: Draft memo: Foundations of the Present Difficulties in VAD Service.

BRCS 10<sup>4</sup>/9: Correspondence re inspection of auxiliary hospitals.

BRCS 10<sup>4</sup>/10: Details of correspondence re awarding stripes.

BRCS 10<sup>4</sup>/12: Recognition of unpaid VAD members and granting of allowances and facilities.

BRCS 10<sup>5</sup>/4: Survey of 200 Random VAD members (previous occupational background).

BRCS 10<sup>5</sup>/5 Expenditure breakdown for VAD in Military Hospitals, 19 December 1916.

BRCS 10<sup>5</sup>/7: Comparative Rates of Pay (VADs and those in other occupations).

BRCS 10<sup>5</sup>/10: Review of Appeal for VADs, July 1916.



BRCS 10 <sup>5</sup>/11: Statistics of VADs posted for fortnight ending 15 September 1916.

BRCS 10 <sup>5</sup>/13: Reasons for Leakage of 2,784 Members.

BRCS 10 <sup>5</sup>/14: Women appointed to Military Hospitals between 1 April 1917 and 30 September 1917.

BRCS 10 <sup>5</sup>/16: Statistics from 30 October 1917 following National Service Appeal.

BRCS 10 <sup>5</sup>/17: Membership of VAD, November 1917.

BRCS 10 <sup>5</sup>/18: Description of VAD Work.

BRCS 10 <sup>5</sup>/19: Result of Appeals for Women for VAD Work.

BRCS 10 <sup>6</sup>/1-3: Correspondence regarding concerns about the conditions for General Service Members, May 1917 to February 1917.

BRCS 10 <sup>6</sup>/4: Details of correspondence relating to Terms and Conditions and Relation to WAAC, 6 March 1917-26 October 1917.

BRCS 10 <sup>6</sup>/11: General Service Members' Salary in Military Hospitals.

BRCS 10 <sup>6</sup>/12: Letter from Katharine Furse to Louis Pearson (Secretary of Central Joint VAD Committee), dated 1 June 1917.

BRCS 10 <sup>6</sup>/13: Memo: What May Have Appeared to be My Somewhat Kaleidoscopic Views with Regard to the VAD General Service Section, dated 16 October 1917.

BRCS 10 <sup>6</sup>/14: Details of correspondence relating to General Service Uniform Scheme, 10 August 1917-16 October 1917.

BRCS 10 <sup>6</sup>/15: Memo re "the curiously unequal establishment of VAD Nursing to GS Members", dated 12 December 1916.

BRCS 10 <sup>6</sup>/16: List of home hospitals with figures for Nursing Service and GS members, March 1916-November 1916.

BRCS 10 <sup>6</sup>/18: Equivalent Rank of VAD and WAAC.

BRCS 10 <sup>7</sup>/3: Functions of Joint Women's VAD Committee, Devonshire House.

BRCS 10 <sup>7</sup>/4: Reasons for the need for a Joint Women's VAD Committee.

BRCS 10 <sup>7</sup>/5: Correspondence relating to the Joint Women's VAD Committee, July 1917.

BRCS 10 <sup>7</sup>/6: Further correspondence about the Joint Women's VAD Committee, August-October 1917.

BRCS 10 <sup>7</sup>/7: Minutes of Joint Women's VAD Committee, 31 October 1917, detailing resignation of Katharine Furse as chairman.

BRCS 10 <sup>7</sup>/8: History of the Joint Women's VAD Committee.

BRCS 10 <sup>8</sup>/3: Letter from Katharine Furse to Lady Norman re resignation from Devonshire House, dated 14 December 1917.

BRCS 10 <sup>8</sup>/5: Letter from Katharine Furse to Arthur Stanley, dated 6 June 1917.

BRCS 10 <sup>8</sup>/6: Letter from Katharine Furse to Arthur Stanley, dated 6 August 1917.

BRCS 10 <sup>8</sup>/7: Letter from Katharine Furse to Arthur Stanley, dated 3 October 1917.

BRCS 10 <sup>8</sup>/8: Letter from Arthur Stanley to Katharine Furse, dated 4 October 1917.

BRCS 10 <sup>8</sup>/9: Letter from Katharine Furse to Arthur Stanley, dated 6 October 1917.

BRCS 10 <sup>8</sup>/10: Letter from Katharine Furse to Miss Wilson (acting secretary of CJVAD Committee), dated 8 October 1917.

BRCS 10 <sup>8</sup>/11: Letter from Arthur Stanley to Katharine Furse, dated 9 October 1917.

BRCS 10 <sup>8</sup>/12: Letter from Katharine Furse to Lord Milner (War Office), dated 10 October 1917.

BRCS 10 <sup>8</sup>/13: Letter from E Ridsdale (former controller of VADs) to Katharine Furse, dated 10 October 1917.

BRCS 10 <sup>8</sup>/14: Letter from Lord Milner to Katharine Furse, dated 11 October 1917.

BRCS 10 <sup>8</sup>/15: Letter from Katharine Furse to Lord Milner, dated 12 October 1917.

BRCS 10 <sup>8</sup>/16: Letter from Katharine Furse to Lady Lyttleton, dated 10 October 1917.

BRCS 10 <sup>8</sup>/17: Letter from Katharine Furse to Mr Ridsdale, dated 15 October 1917.

BRCS 10 <sup>8</sup>/19: Letter from Miss IH Durham to Katharine Furse, dated 21 October 1917.

BRCS 10 <sup>8</sup>/21: Memorandum from Katharine Furse detailing events of 24 October 1917.

BRCS 10 <sup>8</sup>/22: Memorandum detailing meeting between Katharine Furse and Arthur Stanley, 24 October 1917.

BRCS 10 <sup>8</sup>/23: Letter from Violet Markham to Katharine Furse, dated 24 October 1917.

BRCS 10 <sup>8</sup>/24: Letter from Katharine Furse to Violet Markham,

dated 26 October 1917.

BRCS 10 <sup>8</sup>/25: Memorandum from Katharine Furse detailing events of 26 October 1917.

BRCS 10 <sup>8</sup>/27: Memorandum from Katharine Furse detailing events of 27 October 1917.

BRCS 10 <sup>8</sup>/28: Memorandum from Katharine Furse detailing further events of 27 October 1917.

BRCS 10 <sup>8</sup>/29: Letter from Violet Markham to Katharine Furse, dated 29 October 1917.

BRCS 10 <sup>8</sup>/30-32: Correspondence between Katharine Furse and Central Joint VAD Committee secretary.

BRCS 10 <sup>8</sup>/33: Minutes of 40<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Central Joint VAD Committee on 30 October 1917.

BRCS 10 <sup>8</sup>/34: Minutes of meeting of the Central Joint VAD Committee on 1 November 1917.

BRCS 10 <sup>8</sup>/35: Letter from Katharine Furse to Mrs Chalmers Watson, dated 30 October 1917.

BRCS 10 <sup>8</sup>/37: Letter from Jack Badeley (House of Lords) to Katharine Furse, dated 31 October 1917.

BRCS 10 <sup>8</sup>/39: Letter from Arthur Stanley to Katharine Furse, dated 23 October 1915.

BRCS 10 <sup>8</sup>/40: Letter from Arthur Stanley to VAD County Directors, dated 12 May 1916.

BRCS 10 <sup>8</sup>/41: Letter from Miss Wilson to Katharine Furse, dated 4 October 1917.

BRCS 10 <sup>8</sup>/42: Memorandum by Katharine Furse detailing minute 569D to define her responsibilities as VAD Controller in chief.

BRCS 10 <sup>8</sup>/48: Letter from Arthur Stanley to Katharine Furse, undated (but a response to <sup>8</sup>/42).

BRCS 10 <sup>8</sup>/50: Memorandum by Katharine Furse, dated 23 October 1917.

BRCS 10 <sup>8</sup>/51: Letter from Arthur Stanley to Katharine Furse, dated 25 October 1917.

BRCS 10 <sup>8</sup>/53: Letter from Katharine Furse to Arthur Stanley, undated (but relating to <sup>8</sup>/51).

BRCS 10 <sup>8</sup>/54: Letter from Katharine Furse to Arthur Stanley, dated 27 October 1917.

BRCS 10 <sup>8</sup>/55: Letter from Katharine Furse to Miss Wilson, dated 28 October 1917.

BRCS 10 <sup>8</sup>/58: Letter from Katharine Furse to Mr Badeley, dated 1 November 1917.

BRCS 10 <sup>8</sup>/60: Letter from Arthur Stanley to Katharine Furse,  
dated 1 November 1917.

BRCS 10 <sup>8</sup>/64: Letter from Katharine Furse to Arthur Stanley,  
dated 2 November 1917.

BRCS 10 <sup>8</sup>/65: Memorandum by Katharine Furse detailing minutes of recent  
Central Joint VAD Committee, dated 2 November 1917.

BRCS 10 <sup>8</sup>/66: Letter from Katharine Furse to Lord Milner, dated 3 November 1917.

BRCS 10 <sup>8</sup>/69: Letter from Katharine Furse to Geoffrey Dawson at *The Times*,  
dated 3 November 1917.

BRCS 10 <sup>8</sup>/71: Letter from Rachel Crowdy to Katharine Furse,  
dated 4 November 1917.

BRCS 10 <sup>8</sup>/72: Letter from Miss A Maude Royden to Katharine Furse,  
dated 5 November 1917.

BRCS 10 <sup>8</sup>/73: Letter from Katharine Furse to Miss Royden, dated 6 November 1917.

BRCS 10 <sup>8</sup>/74: Letter from Arthur Stanley to Katharine Furse,  
dated 7 November 1917.

BRCS 10 <sup>8</sup>/75: Letter from Katharine Furse to Arthur Stanley,  
dated 7 November 1917.

BRCS 10 <sup>8</sup>/76: Letter from Arthur Stanley to VAD County Directors,  
dated 6 November 1917.

BRCS 10 <sup>9</sup>/3: Statement by Katharine Furse detailing reasons for resignation,  
dated 1 December 1917.

Reel 31:

BRCS 25 <sup>0</sup>/2: The Goodbye Book of the Quai d'Escale.

BRCS 25 <sup>0</sup>/3: Nurses' Registration Bill, 1919.

BRCS 25 <sup>0</sup>/4: Interim Report of Advisory Committee Appointed by the Army Council  
to Enquire into the Supply of Nurses, chaired by William Bridgeman,  
14 November 1916.

BRCS 25 <sup>1</sup>/3: Regulations for Admission to QAIMNS, 1 October 1916.

BRCS 25 <sup>1</sup>/4: Note on the number of trained QAIMNS nurses.

BRCS 25 <sup>1</sup>/9: "Nursing in Egypt and Palestine, 1915-19" by Elizabeth Oram, Matron-in-Chief, Egyptian Expeditionary Force, dated 17 March 1921.

BRCS 25 <sup>1</sup>/10: "A Base Hospital in 1914" by M Hopton, QAIMNS R, dated August 1919.

BRCS 25 <sup>1</sup>/11: "Life on an Ambulance Train in 1914" by M Phillips, QAIMNS, dated August 1919.

BRCS 25 <sup>1</sup>/12: "A Matron's Experiences of Work at a Base Hospital, France, 1914-15" by A.L. Walker, QAIMNS, dated August 1919.

BRCS 25 <sup>1</sup>/13: "A Matron's Impression of Life in a Base Hospital in France in 1915 and 1916" by E Minns, QAIMNS, dated August 1919.

BRCS 25 <sup>1</sup>/14: "An Officers' Hospital in France during the War" by E. Fose, QAIMNS, dated August 1919.

BRCS 25 <sup>1</sup>/15: "A Few Notes on a Sister's Experience on a Hospital Ship" by A. Meldum, QAIMNS R, dated August 1919.

BRCS 25 <sup>1</sup>/16: "Some Experiences of Work at Casualty Clearing Stations in France at different periods between 1915-1919" by A. Duncan, QAIMNS R, dated August 1919.

BRCS 25 <sup>1</sup>/17: "Sketches of Hospital Life in France, 1914-15" by J. Todd, QAIMNS, dated August 1919.

BRCS 25 <sup>1</sup>/18: "Work on an Ambulance Train in France, 1917-18" by J. Orchardson, TFNS, dated August 1919.

BRCS 25 <sup>1</sup>/21: "Notes on the Gallipoli Campaign – HMHS *Gloucester Castle* – Lemnos, July 1915" by Sister M.E. Webster, QAIMNS R, undated.

BRCS 25 <sup>1</sup>/22: "Nursing in Mesopotamia 1916-18" by Miss Hodgins, Matron, QAIMNS, undated.

BRCS 25 <sup>2</sup>/6: TFNS Standing Orders, 1912.

BRCS 25 <sup>2</sup>/7: "The TFNS during the War" in *The Hospital*, 18 December 1920, 269.

BRCS 25 <sup>2</sup>/8: Notes on first conference of TFNS held at War Office on 6 March 1908.

BRCS 25 <sup>2</sup>/8: TFNS statistics for January 1918 and December 1910.

BRCS 25 <sup>2</sup>/10: TFNS Guide for Members of the Service, undated.

BRCS 25 <sup>2</sup>/15: Letter to Miss Sidney Browne from Elinor Sheard, dated 11 August 1918, re war experiences.

BRCS 25 <sup>2</sup>/16: Letter to Miss Sidney Browne from Theresa M. Hayes, dated 2 October (no year), re war experiences.

BRCS 25 <sup>3</sup>/10: Summary of women's war work with the sick and wounded.

BRCS 25 <sup>4</sup>/3-13: Correspondence of Sister Anna Cameron serving aboard HMS *Delta* at Gallipoli:-.

BRCS 25 <sup>4</sup>/3: Letter home from Sister Anna Cameron, dated 8 May 1915.

BRCS 25 <sup>4</sup>/4: Letter home from Sister Anna Cameron, dated 26 August 1915.

BRCS 25 <sup>4</sup>/5: Letter home from Sister Anna Cameron, dated 13 October 1915.

BRCS 25 <sup>4</sup>/6: Part of letter written by Sister Anna Cameron, undated.

BRCS 25 <sup>4</sup>/7: Letter from Sister Anna Cameron (first sheet missing).

BRCS 25 <sup>4</sup>/8: Letter home from Sister Anna Cameron, dated 21 October 1915.

BRCS 25 <sup>4</sup>/9: Letter home from Sister Anna Cameron, dated 24 November 1915.

BRCS 25 <sup>4</sup>/10: Note written by Sister Anna Cameron, dated 29 November 1915.

BRCS 25 <sup>4</sup>/11: Letter home from Sister Anna Cameron, dated 4 December 1915.

BRCS 25 <sup>4</sup>/12: Letter home from Sister Anna Cameron, dated 13 December 1915.

BRCS 25 <sup>4</sup>/13: Letter home from Sister Anna Cameron, dated 17 December 1915.

BRCS 25 <sup>4</sup>/14: Interview with Miss Violetta Thurstan, 10 April 1919.

BRCS 25 <sup>4</sup>/15: Correspondence between Sister Anna Cameron and Miss Conway (compiler of women's war work for the IWM after the War).

BRCS 25 <sup>4</sup>/16: "At Anzac in a Hospital Ship" by A Trained Nurse (Sister Anna Cameron) in *The Navy*, January 1916, 8-9.

BRCS 25 <sup>4</sup>/20: "On a Hospital Ship: the Nurse as Patient" by Sister Anna Cameron in *The Nursing Mirror & Midwives' Journal*, 11 November 1916, 116-7.

BRCS 25 <sup>4</sup>/21: "Christmas on a Hospital Ship" by Sister Anna Cameron in *The Nursing Mirror & Midwives' Journal*, 9 December 1916, 195-6.

BRCS 25 <sup>4</sup>/22: "Incidents in a Nurse's Life: A Memory of Frozen Foot Day"

by Sister Anna Cameron in *The Nursing Mirror & Midwives' Journal*, 3 May 1917, 423.

BRCS 25 <sup>4</sup>/23: "As Sister on a Hospital Ship: Preparation and Realisation" by Sister Anna Cameron in *The Nursing Mirror & Midwives' Journal*, 31 March 1917, 499-500.

BRCS 25 <sup>4</sup>/29: "English Soldiers at Gallipoli" from Sister Anna Cameron (AMC) in *The Nursing Mirror & Midwives' Journal*, 26 October 1918, 67.

BRCS 25 <sup>4</sup>/31: "A Medical Student's Story" by AMC in *The Nursing Times*, 4 December 1918, 124-5.

BRCS 25 <sup>5.4</sup>/13: List of Nurses Killed or Died During the War.

BRCS 25 <sup>5.4</sup>/21: Letter to Mr Griffith from Alfred Keogh, Director General, Army Medical Corps, dated 3 November 1915, re death of daughter.

BRCS 25 <sup>5.4</sup>/26: Roll of honour of nurses serving during the war, April 1918.

BRCS 25 <sup>5.6</sup>/2: List of VADs Killed or Died on Active Service.

Department of Documents:-

Miss Bickmore. Sister. Memoir (1918). 85/51/1.

Sister MA Brown. QAIMNS. Unpublished diaries, May 1915-January 1918. 88/7/1.

Sister GAD Crozier. Miscellaneous letters, 1916-17. 91/27/1.

Sister J Paterson. Unpublished diaries and letters, 1914-15. 90/10/1.

Miss MB Peterkin. Sister. Unpublished diaries, 1914-15, and memoir. 77/60/1.

Miss D Field. VAD Nurse. Unpublished diaries, 1915-18. 91//27/1.

Miss DE Higgins. VAD. Unpublished letters. 86/73/1.

Mrs George Mackay Brown (nee Dalton). VAD. Unpublished Memoirs. 78/4.

Miss WL Kenyon. VAD Cook and Nurse. Unpublished diaries, 1915-18. 84/24/1.

Miss RB Manning. VAD Clerk. Unpublished diaries, 1915-18. 80/21/1.

Mrs D McCann. VAD Nurse. b. 1890. Unpublished memoirs.

Miss EB Pemberton. VAD Nurse. Unpublished letters, 1914-17. 85/33/1.

Miss RJ Pennell MM. VAD Driver. Miscellaneous documents. 82/26/1.

Marjorie Starr. VAD Nurse. Unpublished diary, 1915-16. 81/12/1.

Miss P Dalglish. WAAC. Unpublished papers. 93/30/1.

Mrs L Downer (nee Saunders). WAAC. Unpublished Memoir. 79/15/1.

Miss EF Gawne (nee Reynolds). WAAC. Miscellaneous Papers. 94/51/1.

Margaret Gibson MM. WAAC Unit Administrator. Unpublished letters. 86/19/1.

Mrs GA Jones OBE. WAAC Deputy Controller. Unpublished official diaries, 1918-19. 73/42/1.

Mrs R Leared (nee Donaldson). WAAC Driver. Unpublished Memoirs. 73/34/1.

The Honourable Dorothy Pickford. WAAC Administrator. Unpublished letters, January 1918-February 1919. Con Shelf DS/Misc/33.

Mrs EE Quinlan (nee Broderick). WAAC Forewoman. Unpublished memoirs and miscellaneous documents. P348.

Elsie Sheppard. WAAC Telegraphist. Miscellaneous documents. 83/3/1.

Jenny Swann. WAAC Waitress. Unpublished Memoir. Misc. 61/947.

Beryl Butterworth Hutchinson. FANY Driver. Unpublished Memoir. 74/105/1.

Miss Rathbone. YMCA canteen assistant. Unpublished diary, June-October 1918. 90/30/1.

R. Cude. Private. Unpublished diaries, 1914-18. Con. Shelf.

George Heaney. Lieutenant. Unpublished diaries, 1918. 88/27/1.



Frank Johnson. Lieutenant-Colonel. Medical Officer. Unpublished letters, 1915-18.  
88/56/1.

Henry Russell. Private. Unpublished memoirs. 76/119/1.

Paul Sulman. Captain. Unpublished letters, 1916-17. 82/29/1.

Department of Sound:

Louie Johnson. Sister. TFNS. 000330/11.

Mary Millicent Rumey. Sister. QAIMNS. 000 739/16.

Agnes Frances Allan. VAD Nurses. 000517/09.

Eleonora B Pemberton. VAD Nurse. No numerical reference.

Edith Cecily Evans. VAD Nurse. 000508/06.

Adelaide Ellen Methven. VAD Nurse. 000517/09.

Alice Christobel Remington (nee Proctor). VAD Ambulance Driver. 000511/08.

Daisy Colnett Spickett. VAD Nurse. 000514/08.

Dorothy Taylor. VAD Nurse. 000557/07.

Beryl Butterworth Hutchinson. FANY Driver. 000562/11.

Antonia Marian Gamwell. FANY Ambulance Driver. 000502/11.

Mary Devas Wilkinson. FANY Nurse. 000486/06.

Mairi Chisholm of Chisholm. Ambulance Driver. 000771/04.

Kathleen Charlotte Bottomley (nee White). WAAC Telephonist. 000172/09.

Elsie Cooper. WAAC Clerk. 3137.

Ivy Kewley. WAAC Clerk. 3154.

Annie May Martin. WAAC Telegraphist. 000042/03.

Emily Maud Victoria Newing (nee Rumbold). WAAC Forewoman, Storekeeper and Clerk. 000576/07.

Ruby Adelina Ord (nee Start). WAAC Clerk. 000044/05.

Elizabeth Mariam (Dolly) Shepherd. WAAC Driver. 000579/12.

Tom Edwin Adlam. Captain. Infantry Platoon Commander. 000035/05.

Andrew Ramsay Bain. Captain. Staff Officer. 000375/06.

Ulick Bernard Burke. Captain. Infantry Platoon Commander and Adjutant.  
000569/18.

Fred Dixon. Private. Signaller. 000737/16.

Maberly Squire Esler. Captain. Medical Officer. 000378/03.

Victor Edgar Fagence. Private. Machine Gunner. 000327/08.

Thomas Walter McIndoe. Private. Infantryman. 000568/08.

Leonard Jesse Ounsworth. Corporal. Signaller. 000332/12.

Charles Robert Quinnell. Sergeant. Infantryman. 000554/18.

Thomas Eustace Russell. Salvation Army Canteen Assistant. Private. 000665/09.

Liddle Collection, Brotherton Library, University of Leeds:

Sister Theresa Apperley. QAIMNS. Unpublished diaries, 1918-19, and miscellaneous papers.

Mrs Margaret Black (nee Hale). Sister. QAIMNS. Miscellaneous papers.

Sister Burgess. Unpublished diary, Nov-Dec 1917.

Mrs Ida E Cliffe (nee Jefferson). Sister. QAIMNS. *A Nurse's Memoirs of 1914-18*, 1975 (privately published, no publisher provided).

Sister MM James. TFNS. Unpublished diaries, Oct 1914-Jan 1915.

Miss K Mann. TFNS. Sister/Acting Matron. Unpublished diaries, 1915-16.

Sister Priscilla Simpson. QAIMNS. Unpublished diaries, 1915-18.

Sister Alice Slythe. TFNS. Unpublished diaries, May 1915-May 1917.

AG Beaumont. VAD Nurse. Miscellaneous Documents.

Mrs E Briggs Constable (nee Oswald). VAD Nurse. Unpublished diaries, June 1917-January 1918, and memoirs.

Miss Katia Freshfield. VAD Nurse. Unpublished diaries, August 1914-November 1918 (typescript).

Katharine Furse. VAD Commander-in-Chief. Miscellaneous papers.

Elizabeth Lupton. VAD Nurse. Unpublished diaries, 1916-17 (photocopy).

Elsie Maxwell Ogilvie. VAD Nurse. Unpublished memoirs.

Mrs EF Colston (nee Walton). FANY. Oral history (typescript) and miscellaneous documents.

Miss Mary Booth. Salvation Army. Staff Captain. Miscellaneous letters, October 1917-May 1918.

Mrs Janet Brown (nee Hamilton). Unpublished letters, August 1918-October 1919.

Miss Winifred Alys Robertson. YMCA Worker. Unpublished diaries, 1918-19, and letters, 1920.

Miss Dorothy Loveday. WAAC Driver. Unpublished letters, 1917-18.

Miss Ada Potter. WAAC Telegraphist. Memoir (typescript) and recollections.

Mrs Ada M Ansell. Civilian. Unpublished Diaries, July-September 1914.

Photograph Collection in the Department of Photographs.

Poster Collection in the Department of Art.

Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick

Lucy Anne Evelyn Deane Streatfield, CBE. Commissioner appointed to investigate the conditions of the WAAC in France, March 1918. Unpublished papers and official documents. MSS 69.

Helen Haslam (nee Dormer). YWCA Administrator. Unpublished letters, 1917-18, and additional correspondence. MSS 121/F/3/8/1-45.

Queen Alexandra Royal Army Nursing Corps Museum, Keogh Barracks, Aldershot

Dame Maud McCarthy. Army Matron-in-Chief. Unpublished official diaries, 1914-19.

Rebecca Jane Read. QAIMNS Reserve. Unpublished letters and diaries, 1915-18.

Photograph collection.

**Contemporary Published Works:**

- Aldington, Richard, *Death of a Hero*, London: Chatto & Windus: 1929.
- Bagnold, Enid, *A Diary Without Dates*, London: William Heinemann: 1918.
- Barton EM & Cody M, *Eve in Khaki*, Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson & Sons Limited: 1918.
- Borden, Mary, *The Forbidden Zone*, London: William Heinemann: 1929.
- Bowser, Thekla, *The Story of British VAD Work in the Great War*, London: Andrew Melrose, 1917.
- Brittain, Vera, *Chronicle of Youth. Vera Brittain's War Diary, 1913-1917*, Alan Bishop with Terry Smart (eds), London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1981.
- Brittain, Vera, *Testament of Youth*, London: Virago, 1992 , 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1933.
- Coppard, George, *With a Machine Gun to Cambrai*, HMSO, 1969.
- Dent, Olive, *A VAD in France*, London: Grant Richards Limited, 1917.
- Ford Maddox, Ford, *Parade's End*, London: Penguin, 1982.
- Graves, Robert, *Goodbye To All That*, London: Penguin, 1960, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1929.
- Hall, Radclyffe, *The Well of Loneliness*, London: Virago, 1982, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1928.
- Hemingway, Ernest, *A Farewell to Arms*, London: Everyman's Library, 1993, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1929.
- Marchant, Bessie, *A Transport Girl in France. A Story of the Adventures of a WAAC*, London: Blackie & Son Limited, 1918.
- Rathbone, Irene, *We That Were Young*, London: Virago, 1988, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1932.
- Remarque, Erich Maria, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, London: Pan Books Ltd, 1987. Trans. AW Wheen. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1929.
- Sassoon, Siegfried, *Sassoon's Diaries 1915-1918*, Rupert Hart-Davis (ed), London: Faber & Faber, 1983.

Sassoon, Siegfried, *The Complete Memoirs of George Sherston*, London: Faber & Faber, 1986.

Sassoon, Siegfried, *The War Poems*, London: Faber & Faber, 1983.

Smith, Helen Z, “*Not So Quiet...*”. *Stepdaughters of the War*, London: Albert E Marriott Limited, 1930.

Spearing, EM, *From Cambridge to Camiers Under the Red Cross*, Cambridge: W Heffer & Sons Limited, 1917.

### **Secondary Sources:**

Appleby, Joyce, Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History*, New York and London: WW Norton & Company, 1994.

Ashworth, Tony, *Trench Warfare 1914-18*, London: Macmillan Press Limited, 1980.

Audoin-Rouzeau, Stephane, *Men at War 1914-1918: National Sentiment and Trench Journalism in France during the First World War*, Providence and Oxford: Berg, 1992.

Barnett, Corelli, ‘Oh What a Whingeing War!’ in *The Spectator*, 18 January 1997, 18-19.

Beauman, Nicola, “‘It is not the place of women to talk of mud’: Some Responses by British Women Novelists to World War I’ in Goldman, Dorothy (ed), *Women and World War I. The Written Response*, London, MacMillan Press Ltd, 1993, 128-149.

Benstock, Shari (ed), *The Private Self. Theory and Practice of Women’s Autobiographical Writings*, Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988.

- Bergonzi, Bernard, *Heroes' Twilight: A Study of the Literature of the Great War*, London: Constable & Co., 1965.
- Bland, Lucy, 'In the Name of Protection: the Policing of Women in the First World War' in Julie Brophy & Carol Smart (eds), *Women in Law*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985, 23-49.
- Bock, Gisela, 'Women's History and Gender History, Aspects of an International Debate' in *Gender & History*, 1,1 (1989), 6-20.
- Bogacz, Ted, 'War Neurosis and Cultural Change in England, 1914-22: The Work of the War Office Committee of Enquiry into "Shell-Shock"' in *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol 24, 1989, 227-256.
- Bourke, Joanna, *Dismembering the Male. Men's Bodies, Britain and the Great War*, London: Reaktion Books Limited, 1996.
- Bourne, JM, *Britain and the Great War, 1914-1918*, London: Edward Arnold, 1989.
- Braybon, Gail, *Women Workers in the First World War*, London: Routledge, 1989.
- Braybon, Gail & Penny Summerfield, *Out of the Cage: Women's Experiences in Two World Wars*, London: Pandora Press, 1987.
- Bridenthal, Renate, 'Something Old, Something New: Women between the Two World Wars' in Bridenthal, Renate & Claudia Koonz (eds), *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977.
- Brown, Malcolm, *The Imperial War Museum Book of the First World War*, Sidgwick & Jackson, 1993.
- Buitenhaus, Peter, *The Great War of Words. Literature as Propaganda, 1914 and After*, London: BT Batsford, 1989.

- Burton, Antoinette, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865-1915*, Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994.
- Butler, Judith, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, London: Routledge, 1990.
- Cadogan, Mary & Patricia Craig, *Women and Children First: The Fiction of Two World Wars*, London: Victor Gollancz, 1978.
- Cecil, Hugh & Peter H Liddle (eds), *Facing Armageddon. The First World War Experienced*, London: Leo Cooper, 1996.
- Chancellor Press, *Great First World War Stories*, London: Chancellor Press Limited, 1994.
- Chaudhuri, Nupur and Margaret Strobel (eds), *Western Women and Imperialism. Complicity and Resistance*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992.
- Clark, Alan, *The Donkeys*, London: Pimlico 1994.
- Condell, Diana & Jean Liddiard, *Working for Victory? Images of Women in the First World War, 1914-18*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987.
- Cooke, Miriam & Angela Woollacott (eds), *Gendering War Talk*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993
- Cooper, Helen M, Adrienne Auslander Munich & Susan Merrill Squier (eds), *Arms and the Woman. War, Gender, and Literary Representation*, Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989.
- Dallas, Gloden & Douglas Gill, *The Unknown Army. Mutinies in the British Army in World War I*, London: Verson, 1985



- Darrow, Margaret H, 'French Volunteer Nursing and the Myth of War Experience in World War 1' in *American History Review*, 101, 1, February 1996, 80-106.
- Davin, Anna, 'Imperialism and Motherhood' in *History Workshop Journal*, 1978 (Spring), 9-65.
- Demm, Eberthard, 'Propaganda and Caricature in the First World War' in *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol 28, 1993, 163-192.
- Dyer, Geoff, *The Missing of the Somme*, London: Penguin, 1995.
- EMI Music Publishing, *Oh! It's a Lovely War. Songs, Ballads and Parodies of the Great War*, London: EMI, 1978.
- Enloe, Cynthia, *Does Khaki Become You? The Militarisation of Women's Lives*, London: Pluto, 1983.
- Fuller, JG, *Troop Morale and Popular Culture in the British Dominion Armies, 1914-1918*, Oxford: Clarendon Publications, 1990.
- Fussell, Paul, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, London: Oxford University Press, 1977.
- Gamarnikow, Eve, 'Sexual Division of Labour: the case of nursing' in Kuhn, Annette & AnnMarie Wolpe (eds), *Feminism and Materialism*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978.
- Gardner, Brian, *Up the Line to Death. The War Poets 1914-1918*, London: Methuen, 1993.
- Gilbert, Martin, *The First World War*, London, HarperCollins, 1995.
- Gilbert, Sandra & Susan Gubar, *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century, Volume II: Sexchanges*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989.

- Giles, Judy, 'Playing hard to get: working-class women, sexuality and respectability in Britain, 1918-40' in *Women's History Review*, Vol 1, No 2, 1992.
- Goldman, Dorothy (ed), *Women and World War 1. The Written Response*, London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1983.
- Goldman, Dorothy, with Jane Gledhill & Judith Hathaway (eds), *Women Writers and the Great War*, New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995.
- Gorham, Deborah, "'The Friendships of Women': Friendship, Feminism and Achievement in Vera Brittain's Life and Work in the Interwar Decades' in *Journal of Women's History*, Vol 3, No 3, Winter 1992.
- Gould, Jenny, 'Women's Military Services in First World War Britain' in Margaret Randolph Higson, Jane Jenson, Sonya Michel & Margaret Collins Weitz (eds), *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars*, New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1987, 114-125.
- Grayzel, Susan R, 'Mothers, Mairaines, and Prostitutes: Morale and Morality in First World War France' in *International History Review*, Vol xix, No 1, February 1997, 66-82.
- Griffiths, Gareth, *Women's Factory Work in World War 1*, London: Alan Sutton Publishing Limited, 1991.
- de Groot, Joanna, "'Sex" and "Race": The Construction of Language and Image in the Nineteenth Century' in Susan Mendus and Jane Rendall, *Sexuality and Subordination. Interdisciplinary Studies of Gender in the Nineteenth Century*, London: Routledge, 1989, 89-130.
- Harris, Ruth, 'The "child of the barbarian": Rape, Race and Nationalism in France during the First World War' in *Past & Present*, 141, November 1993.
- Harrison, Brian, *Separate Spheres*, London: Croom Helm, 1978.

- Haste, Cate, *Keep the Home Fires Burning*, London: Allen Lane, 1977.
- Hibberd, Dominic, *The First World War (Context & Commentary)*, London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1990.
- Higonnet, Margaret R, 'Not So Quiet in No-Woman's-Land' in Miriam Cooke & Angela Woollacott (eds), *Gendering War Talk*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993, 205-226.
- Higonnet, Margaret R & Patrice L -R Higonnet, 'The Double Helix' in Margaret Randolph Higonnet, Jane Jenson, Sonya Michel & Margaret Collins Weitz (eds), *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars*, New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1987, 31-47.
- Higonnet, Margaret Randolph, Jane Jenson, Sonya Michel & Margaret Collins Weitz (eds), *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars*, New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1987.
- Huston, Nancy, 'The Matrix of War: Mothers and Heroes' in Susan Rubin Suleiman (ed), *The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives*, Harvard University Press, 1986.
- Hynes, Samuel, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture*, London, The Bodley Head Limited, 1990.
- Jarrold Poets Series, *The War Poets: An Anthology*, Jarrold Publishing, 1994.
- Jeffries, Sheila, *The Spinster and Her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality, 1880-1930*, London & New York: Pandora, 1987.
- Jones, Nora & Liz Ward (eds), *The Forgotten Army: Women's Poetry of the First World War*, Beverley, California: Highgate Publications Limited, 1991.
- Kamester, Margaret & Jo Vellacott (eds), *Militarism versus Feminism. Writings on Women and War*, London: Virago, 1987.

- Keegan, John, *The Face of Battle: A Study of Agincourt, Waterloo and the Somme*, London: Pimlico, 1993.
- Kent, Susan Kingsley, 'Love and Death. War and Gender in Britain, 1914-1918' in Frans Coetzee & Marilyn Shevin-Coetzee (eds), *Authority, Identity and the Social History of the Great War*, Oxford: Bergahn Books, 1995, 153-174.
- Kent, Susan Kingsley, 'The Politics of Sexual Difference: World War 1 and the Demise of British Feminism' in *The Journal of British Studies*, Vol 27, 1988, 232-253.
- Kent, Susan Kingsley, *Sex and Suffrage in Britain, 1860-1914*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987.
- Krippner, Monica, *The Quality of Mercy: Women at War, Serbia 1915-18*, London: David and Charles, 1980.
- Layton, Lynne, 'Vera Brittain's Testament(s)' in Margaret Randolph Higonnet, Jane Jenson, Sonya Michel & Margaret Collins Weitz (eds), *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars*, New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1987,
- Leed, Eric, *No Man's Land: Combat and Identity in World War I*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979.
- Leneman, Leah, *In the Service of Life: The Story of Elsie Inglis and the Scottish Women's Hospitals*, Edinburgh: Mercat Press, 1994.
- Leneman, Leah, 'Medical Women at War, 1914-1918' in *Medical History*, 1994, 38, 160-177.
- Lewis, Jane, *Women in England*, Brighton: Wheatsheaf, 1984.
- Liddle, Peter H, *The Worst Ordeal. Britons at Home and Abroad, 1914-1918*, London: Leo Cooper, 1994.

- Macdonald, Lyn, *1914-1918, Voices and Images of the Great War*, London: Penguin, 1991.
- Macdonald, Lyn, *The Roses of No Man's Land*, London: Penguin, 1993.
- Marcus, Jane, "The Asylums of Antaeus", Women, War and Madness: Is there a feminist fetishism?' in Elizabeth Meese & Alice Parker (eds), *The Difference Within: Feminism and Critical Theory*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1989.
- Marwick, Arthur, *Women at War, 1914-1918*, London: Fontana, 1977.
- Mitchell, David, *Women on the Warpath: The Story of Women of the First World War*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1966.
- Oldfield, Sybil (ed), *This Working-Day World. Women's Lives and Culture(s) in Britain, 1914-145*, London: Taylor & Francis Ltd, 1994.
- Offen, Karen, Ruth Roach Pierson & Jane Rendall (eds), *Writing Women's History. International Perspectives*, London: MacMillan Press Ltd, 1992.
- Ouditt, Sharon, *Fighting Forces, Writing Women: Identity and Ideology in the First World War*, London, Routledge, 1994.
- Ouditt, Sharon, 'Tommy's Sisters: the Representation of Working Women's Experience' in Hugh Cecil & Peter H Liddle, *Facing Armageddon. The First World War Experienced*, London: Leo Cooper, 1996, 736-751.
- Pickering, Jean, 'On the Battlefield: Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth*' in *Women's Studies*, Vol 13, 1986, 75-85.
- Pierson, Ruth Roach, 'Beautiful Soul or Just Warrior: Gender and War' in *Gender and History*, Vol 1, No 1, Spring 1989, 77-86.
- Pollock, Griselda, *Vision & Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art*, London: Routledge, 1991.

- Potter, Jane, “‘A Great Purifier’: The Great War in Women’s Romances and Memoirs 1914-1918’ in Raitt, Suzanne & Trudi Tate, *Women’s Fiction and the Great War*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997, 85-106.
- Pugh, Martin, *Women and the Women’s Movement in Britain, 1914-1959*, London: Macmillan Press Limited, 1992.
- Purvis, June (ed), *Women’s History: Britain, 1850-1945. An Introduction*, London: UCL Press Limited, 1995.
- Raitt, Suzanne & Trudi Tate, *Women’s Fiction and the Great War*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997.
- Reilly, Catherine (ed), *Scars Upon My Heart: Women’s Poetry and Verse of the First World War*, London: Virago, 1981.
- Riley, Denise, *War in the Nursery: Theories of the Child and the Mother*, London: Virago, 1983.
- Robbins, Keith, *The First World War*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.
- Robert, Krisztina, ‘Gender, Class, and Patriotism: Women’s Paramilitary Units in First World War Britain’ in *International History Review*, Vol xix, No 1, February 1997, 52-65.
- Rowbotham, Sheila, *Hidden from History*, London: Pluto Press, 1992, FP 1973.
- Sanders, ML, *British Propaganda during the First World War, 1914-1918*, London: MacMillan Press Ltd, 1982.
- Scott, Joan W, ‘Rewriting History’ in Margaret Randolph Higonnet, Jane Jenson, Sonya Michel & Margaret Collins Weitz (eds), *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars*, New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1987, 19-30.
- Scott, Joan Wallach (ed), *Feminism and History*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.

- Scott, Joan Wallach, *Gender and the Politics of History*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.
- Shaw, Diana, 'The Forgotten Army of Women: Queen Mary's Army Auxiliary Corps' in Hugh Cecil & Peter H Liddle (eds), *Facing Armageddon. The First World War Experienced*, London: Leo Cooper, 1996, 365-379.
- Showalter, Elaine, *The Female Malady. Women, Madness & English Culture, 1830-1980*, London: Virago, 1989.
- Showalter, Elaine, *Sexual Anarchy. Gender & Culture at the Fin de Siecle*, London: Virago, 1993.
- Silkin, John (ed), *the Penguin Book of First World War Poetry*, London: Penguin, 1981.
- Small, Helen, 'Mrs Humphry Ward and the First Casualty of War' in Raitt, Suzanne & Trudi Tate, *Women's Fiction and the Great War*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997, 18-46.
- Stallworthy, Jon (ed), *The Poems of Wilfred Owen*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1992.
- Steedman, Carolyn, *Landscape for a Good Woman*, London: Virago Press Limited, 1991.
- Stone, Martin, 'Shellshock and the Psychologists' in Bynum, WF, Roy Porter, Michael Shepherd (eds), *The Anatomy of Madness*, Tavistock, 1985.
- Summerfield, Penny, 'Gender and War in the Twentieth Century' in *International History Review*, Vol xix, No 1, February 1997, 3-15.
- Summers, Anne, *Angels and Citizens. British Women as Military Nurses, 1854-1914*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1988.
- Taylor, AJP, *The First World War. An Illustrated History*, London: Penguin

- Thebaud, Francoise (ed), *A History of Women in the West. V. Toward a Cultural Identity in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996.
- Tylee, Claire M, “‘Maleness Run Riot’: The Great War and Women’s Resistance to Militarism’ in *Women’s Studies International Forum*, Vol 11, No 3, 1988, 199-210.
- Tylee, Claire, *The Great War and Women’s Consciousness, Images of Militarism and Womanhood in Women’s Writings, 1914-1964*, London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1990.
- Vellacott, Jo, ‘Feminist Consciousness and the First World War’ in *History Workshop Journal*, 23 (Spring), 80-101.
- Vicinus, Martha, *Independent Women. Work and Community for Single Women, 1850-1920*, London: Virago, 1985.
- Walsh, Colin, *Mud Songs and Blighty*, Hutchinson of London, 1975.
- Watson, Janet K, ‘Khaki Girls, VADs, and Tommy’s Sisters: Gender and Class in First World War Britain’ in *International History Review*, Vol xix, No 1, February 1997, 32-51.
- Wilson, Trevor, *The Myriad Faces of War*, Oxford: Polity Press, 1988.
- Wiltscher, Anne, *Most Dangerous Women*, London: Pandora, 1985.
- Winter, JM, *The Great War and the British People*, Basingstoke & London: MacMillan Press Ltd, 1986.
- Woollacott, Angela, *On Her Their Lives Depend. Munitions Workers in the Great War*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.
- Woollacott, Angela, ‘Sisters and Brothers in Arms: Family, Class, and Gendering in World War I Britain’ in Miriam Cooke & Angela Woollacott (eds), *Gendering War Talk*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993, 128-147.