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British women's writing of the Great War

“The time has come,” the Foreman said
“To talk of many things,
Of Screws and Shells and Overalls
Of clocking on, and Kings
And why the shaft gets boiling hot
And should the mandrels sing?”¹

This short extract from E. S. Caley's "The Foreman and the Manager," a parody of Lewis Carroll's "The Walrus and the Carpenter," raises many issues central to women's war writing and the feminist scholarship that has brought both women's experience of the war years and their considerable body of writings on the war to public attention since the 1980s. Published in a munitions factory newspaper, the poem is about male responses to the huge impact of the war on gender roles. The Foreman, according to Claire A. Culleton, who discusses this poem in her rich account of women and working-class culture, has recognized the need for women's labor and is lecturing the manager of a munitions factory on the need to begin instructing the new female workforce. Culleton tells us that munitions workers numbered 900,000 of the nearly 3,000,000 women employed in British factories by the end of the war. Another 2,000,000 "worked in the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry, the Women's Land Army, the Volunteer Aid Detachment, and other paramilitary organizations,"² working both at home and in the war zone, albeit not as combatants. Women's mass entry into previously male jobs fundamentally challenged the period's dominant assumptions about women's capacities and proper role in the home. Even though women were forced out of these jobs at the end of the war, their experience of "Screws and Shells and Overalls" marked British twentieth-century society and contributed to women's economic, social, and sexual emancipation.

In the same way that women workers, both middle and working class, were pushed out of their wartime jobs after 1918, women's contribution to war



5 “Screws and Shells and Overalls”: women munitions workers, Britain

writing was until the 1980s largely invisible. Women wrote and published extensively about the war; for example, between 1914 and 1918 women's poetry was published in single-author collections, anthologies, and the leading newspapers and periodicals of the day, as well as factory newspapers, women's magazines, and local newspapers. Of the more than 2,000 poets publishing during these years a quarter were women. By contrast soldiers on active service wrote less than a fifth of the total output.³ This widespread circulation of women's poetry during the war years is not recorded in later-century anthologies or criticism. For example, Jon Silkin's 1979 *Penguin Book of First World War Poetry* included only Anna Akhmatova and Marina Tsvetayeva, and Brian Gardner's *Up the Line to Death: The War Poets 1914–1918* (1964) contained no women.⁴

Combatant experience, particularly trench experience on the Western Front, swiftly became a guarantee of the authenticity of war writing. The privileging of soldiers' first-hand accounts began during the war, in, for example, discussions of war poetry in the pages of the *Times Literary Supplement*. Not only was it presumed that the soldiers' first-hand experience of the horrors of trench warfare protected them from the naïve jingoism of the civilian, but women all too soon came to represent the culpable war enthusiasm of the home front. As symbols of nation and home, women were memorably addressed by Siegfried Sassoon in his sonnet "Glory of Women": "You love us when we're heroes, home on leave, / Or wounded in a mentionable place."⁵ He links women to a failure to imagine the conditions of war, and conflates the middle-class norms of sexual propriety over which women had little or no control with a willful silence about the true nature of war. The equation of women with a civilian home front that could never successfully comprehend the war experience of the soldier set up a significant obstacle for feminist critics attempting to restore women's writing to visibility and to explain its value.

The crucial retrieval work done since 1980 by critics such as Margaret Higonnet, Catherine Reilly, Jane Marcus, Claire Tylee, and Agnes Cardinal, had to be done in tandem with a wider feminist reconceptualization of the relationship between war and gender, most memorably in Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (1989) and Helen M. Cooper *et al.*, *Arms and the Woman* (1989).⁶ Critics, such as Nosheen Khan in *Women's Poetry of the First World War* (1988), Claire Tylee in *The Great War and Women's Consciousness* (1990), and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *No Man's Land* (1987)⁷ among many others, have relocated women's writing against the assumption that war is an exclusively male experience. Women's writing gives us, they argue, much needed access to women's different historical experience of war and tells us about women's relationship to

militarism. It has not always been easy, however, to escape the assumptions of traditional literary criticism on the war. The near exclusive focus on the work of a few soldiers who wrote about the war's horror has encouraged a series of myths about war writing that do not stand up to closer inspection.⁸ Most pervasive is the belief in a standard trajectory from naïve enthusiasm to ironic disillusion, despite contrary evidence that both criticism of and support for war coexisted from 1914 onwards. Recent feminist scholars have their own version of this myth of disillusion. Women writers who diagnose or subvert the conjunction of masculinity, militarism, and English nationalism have proved much easier to write about than those for whom Britain's part in the war seemed just or simply inevitable.

The privileging of experience as a criterion of value in Great War criticism, albeit limited to male combatant experience, has also sat well with early second wave feminist criticism's emphasis on women's experience. Thus, critics often look at the writing, particularly the major war genres of memoirs, autobiography, letters, and diaries, for evidence about women's experience of war. This work is welcome for the new insights it has generated about how war affects women in specific ways. Unfortunately, it has also trapped feminist critics, often against their stated intentions, into comparisons between men's and women's writing, on such varied grounds as the claims to suffering and sacrifice in the war effort, and on aesthetic grounds. Women almost always lose since combatant realism, deriving its authority from the eyewitness, so often sets the standard for aesthetics.

Feminist criticism has only recently begun to analyze how aesthetics shapes the gendered meanings of war. In order to understand the historical place of women's war writing more clearly we still need to name the ways women were forced to negotiate the relationship between gender, nationalism, and war in their choices of genre and means of publication and circulation of their texts. Women's writing helped produce and reproduce the meaning of the war in Britain, both during and afterwards, so that we can learn much from such an analysis about all First World War writing. It makes sense to begin with poetry since the genre's privileged relationship to aesthetics has made women's poetry of the 1914–18 period the clearest challenge to critics.

Poetry

In *Mr. Punch's History of the Great War* (August 1918), *Punch* comments on how the “[w]ar has not only stimulated the composition, but the perusal of poetry, especially among women,” and although women's memoirs and fiction are now much better remembered, poetry was the preeminent genre

for women writers between 1914 and 1918.⁹ Reilly's bibliographic research revealed 532 women poets writing about the war, both during and after, although few are remembered outside of the specialist work of feminist scholarship.¹⁰ Some were already established writers before the war, as for example, Alice Meynell, Charlotte Mew, Edith Nesbit, May Sinclair, Cicely Hamilton, an important suffrage writer, and Katharine Tynan, a recognized *fin-de-siècle* poet of the Celtic Revival. Tynan is singled out in an early *Times Literary Supplement* assessment of *Poems in War Time* from 1915 as remarkable for her "simplicity and poignancy, pity, and tenderness . . . a woman's tender, all-hospitable heart."¹¹ The reviewer offers a conventional picture of Tynan's feminine virtues as a poetess, but talks knowledgeably and intelligently about her reworking of ballads and carols, contrasting her with a range of male poets who sacrifice poetry to public rhetoric. Some women such as Enid Bagnold, Elizabeth Daryush, Mary Webb, and Edith Sitwell were beginning to establish themselves as writers when the war broke out, while yet others, Margaret Postgate Cole, Vera Brittain, Eleanor Farjeon, Nancy Cunard, and Rose Macaulay, only became famous after the war, sometimes because of the war, as in the case of Brittain, whose *Testament of Youth* (1933) epitomizes the war memoir for many readers.

Even while poetry is arguably the most central of women's wartime genres, readers have often found it disappointingly backward-looking in both style and subject matter, many poems reiterating a version of femininity rooted in home front experiences of waiting and mourning. This may say more about readers and critics than about the poetry itself. The outbreak of the war coincided with hot debate about the proper form, language, and sensibility of modern poetry. The first Georgian anthology of 1912 had declared a modern English poetics that combined established verse forms with naturalism. Imagists and Vorticists, like H.D., Richard Aldington, and Ezra Pound were by 1914 announcing the poetic revolution of modernism, as they introduced the experimental rhythms of free verse, and caricatured Victorian poetics as linguistically florid and emotionally mawkish. Most poets, whether male or female, combatant or civilian, still espoused formal meter, stanzaic forms, and familiar genres such as the short lyric, sonnet, elegy, and ballad. To later twentieth-century critics, trained to associate poetic and political innovation with a modernist aesthetics, the wide variety of formal choices and their specific period implications are often invisible. Because modernism has so fundamentally altered our understanding of Victorian and Edwardian poetry, aesthetic value may not be a useful framework for understanding women's war poetry.

Aesthetics remains important, however, insofar as the meaning of particular stylistic choices is necessarily linked for women poets to patriotism

as a discourse structured by gender difference. The same is true for male poets, but the gendering of patriotism makes the use of particular verse forms different for men and women. First World War poets of both gender frequently couple so-called “traditional” verse forms with a patriotic-heroic rhetoric linking war and love and defining each soldier’s death through a discourse of national honor. Later readers, themselves conditioned by the victory of modernist aesthetics in the twentieth century, the devastation of two world wars, and the anti-war rhetoric of the Vietnam era, are understandably alienated. Yet a return to the pre-modernist context in which the women war poets wrote reveals both a subtle use of Victorian and Edwardian forms to situate discourses of militarism and patriotism, and the intense pressures on women poets as women to publicly represent national honor.

Women’s importance to the war effort was acknowledged by the government and by the wider culture in many ways. The recruitment campaign that led to slogans such as “Women of England Say ‘Go’” not only spoke for women, but also directly addressed them. Women were asked to put pressure on the men in their lives to enlist. Even the infamous white feather campaign was part of a government-orchestrated effort to mobilize women to recruit male soldiers, resulting also in the unreflective jingoism of poems such as Louisa Prior’s “To a Hesitant Briton,” Marjorie Pratt’s “To a ‘Shirker,’” and Jessie Pope’s infamous “The Call,” in which the speaker asks:

Who’s for the trench –
 Are you, my laddie? . . .
 Who’s fretting to begin,
 Who’s going out to win?
 And who wants to save his skin –
 Do you, my laddie?¹²

The speaker’s peculiar authority to shame the reluctant young man derives from women’s special place in the home, that metonymy for the nation, with moral and spiritual influence on men. This role was easily adapted to wartime propaganda. Patriotic poems by women appeared not only in publications like *The Times* and the *Spectator* but were quoted in sermons and reprinted in leaflet form for the troops, as in the case of Lucy Whitmell’s “Christ in Flanders,” or, like Tynan’s “Greeting: From the Women at Home,” published in the 1917 Christmas issue of *Blighty*, a newspaper distributed to the frontline troops.¹³

Women’s poetry was actively used to promote and give definition to women’s relationship to nationalism at the time, particularly in their role as mothers. G. W. Clarke’s *A Treasury of War Poetry, 1914–1917* (1917),

which appeared in both Britain and the United States, includes a final section titled "Women and the War"; it groups all but a couple of the poems by women, with subjects such as a mother's pride in her soldier son and her anguish at his death. A woman's words end the anthology, with Sara Teasdale's poem "Spring in War-Time" protesting the coming of spring with its suggestions of hope and regeneration. Each stanza places the conventional imagery of spring, "bud and leaf," lengthening daylight hours, and apple blossom, against a final couplet that registers the effects of war, for example: "How can it [spring] have the heart to sway / Over the graves, / New graves?"¹⁴ Placed at the end of the volume, Teasdale's poem acquires an additional resonance, asked to conjure another spring, that of postwar regeneration. The poem itself refuses renewal and regeneration whilst painfully acknowledging its inevitability, but in Clarke's anthology Teasdale finds herself acting the role of earth mother, mourning like Circe for Proserpine but ultimately doomed to unwilling fertility. Clarke thus recruits women, as female poets and subjects, to their place as ideological supports for the nation, representing its organic continuity with nature, and the country's natal link to its soldiers through the mother poet.

Critics have noted the explicit challenge pro-war suffragists mounted against the limiting of women to traditional feminine war work. Cicely Hamilton, an important pre- and postwar feminist playwright who worked in a British army hospital in France, wrote in 1916 of the misery of passivity in the "Non-Combatant." The speaker, whose gender remains unspecified, suffers the wound of redundancy: "With life and heart afire to give and give / I take and eat the bread of charity. / In all the length of this eager land, / No man has need of me." More outspoken in her 1918 protest, "Drafts," Nora Bomford demanded the right to fight and die alongside men: "Why should men face the dark while women stay / To live and laugh and meet the sun each day."¹⁵ Thus, resistance to women's ideological work representing hearth and nation for the male soldier was not limited to pacifist and anti-war poets. However, British women were prominent in feminist anti-war work.

Despite considerable obstacles from the government, English suffragists attended The Hague Women's International Peace Conference in 1915, insisting that militarism was antithetical to women's interests and even her very nature. In verse we find outspoken criticism of the war linked to feminist politics in S. Gertrude Ford's 1917 poem, "'A Fight to the Finish'":

'Fight the year out!' the War-lords said:
 What said the dying among the dead?
 'To the last man!' cried the profiteers:
 What said the poor in the starveling years?¹⁶

Ford gives her concise analysis of the war's economic and ideological roots a feminist cast, "Nobody asked what the women thought," echoing the speeches of suffragists like Helena Swanwick and Sylvia Pankhurst.¹⁷

Critique was quite politically and stylistically various. We have Ford's diagnosis of the interconnections between militarism, patriarchy, and capitalism written in the cadence of another war skeptic, Thomas Hardy. Different is the apocalyptic seer of Cunard's "Zeppelins" with its resonance of both Blake and Revelations: "I saw the people climbing up the street / Maddened with war . . . / And after followed Death, who held with skill / His torn rags royally, and stamped his feet." Like Cunard, Edith Sitwell in "The Dancers" turns to a mythic register as commensurate with the horror of battle: "The floors are slippery with blood: / The world gyrates too . . ." In this poem, perhaps influenced by Vernon Lee's "Ballet of the Nations" (discussed below), she takes a trope familiar in Great War writing, that of the civilian population dancing while soldiers died, and turns it into the dance of death: "We are the dull blind carrion-fly / That dance and batten / . . . We dance, we dance, each night."¹⁸ Although Sitwell, like many combatant poets, casts the civilian population as criminally naïve parasites, "blind carrion-fly" feeding on the rotting bodies of the soldiers, she detaches this rhetoric from that of the heroic, suffering soldier, and redirects it toward a universalizing anti-war discourse, signaled in the poem's opening, where "the world gyrates too."

Margaret Sackville, a prominent Scottish activist in peace organizations and outspoken anti-war poet, skillfully represents the losses inflicted by war on civilians and soldiers alike without recourse to the language of national sacrifice. "A Memory," for example, ends: "Not by the battle fires, the shrapnel are we haunted; / Who shall deliver us from the memory of these dead?" These dead are the civilians in a village devastated by an attack, where they "lie unburied" in the street and "a bayoneted woman stares in the marketplace." Sackville self-consciously protests the idealization of a male soldier's heroism and valor, by focusing on a woman's body, and "the low sobbing of women / The creaking of a door, a lost dog – nothing else." Here there is "no pride of conquest" and neither is there any reflection on the soldiers who did this. They are left out of the picture altogether, not even named as Germans or English. Where she invokes the terms of sacrifice, as in "Sacrament," she holds it resolutely to a Christian pacifist agenda in which the blood of the dead is "this wine of awful sacrifice outpoured." But the blood pollutes and destroys: "These stricken lands! The green time of the year / Has found them wasted by a purple flood . . . / Not all our tears may cleanse them from that blood."¹⁹ Sackville detaches the symbolism of blood and sacrifice from its Christian support, implicitly refusing the use of Christianity as support for a militaristic nationalism.

Other anti-war poets assume a working-class perspective, like that of the mother in May Herschel-Clarke's "For Valour," for whom the bronze posthumous medal is inadequate payment for the "golden hair, / And firm young flesh as white as snow." In a quintessential dramatic monologue, Herschel-Clarke uses the working-class mother to question the patriotic rhetoric of the soldier whose "valour" in dying for his country is worth more than his life. Simultaneously, she questions the woman's patriotic duty in bearing children for her country, "[s]ay, don't you think I've done my bit? . . . / Jest bronze . . . *Gawd! What a price to pay!*" Emily Orr's "A Recruit From the Slums" mounts a savage attack on the rhetoric of recruitment, following Kipling's example in taking the working-class soldier's part against a government that embodies middle-class interests. Each stanza turns on the famous Kitchener slogan: "what have you done for your country?," as, for example, "What has your country done for you, / Child of city slum," and "What can your country ask from you, / Dregs of the British race?"²⁰ But despite her recognition of the cynical betrayal represented by this call to national service, registered too in the title of her postwar volume of poems, *A Harvester of Dreams* (1922), the poem ends by contrasting the hypocrisy of the government with an endorsement of the soldiers' heroic sacrifice.²¹

Orr's ambivalence reveals the degree to which both pro- and anti-war poetry shared the same cultural framework. She evidently intends to correct the dominant eugenicist portrait of the working-class poor as symbolizing national decline, a condition which includes a perceived confluence of moral and physical degeneration. The poem transforms urban slum-dweller into hero through the experience of battle: "And why we were born we could hardly guess / Till we felt the surge of battle press / And looked the foe in the face."²² However, the effect of this transformation is to initiate the slum-dwellers into the proper English manliness, which is the other pole to the eugenicist slur. According to the last stanza, they learn the value of comradeship based on sacrifice. Unlike the preceding three stanzas, the last opens with a popular biblical tag instead of a question: "Greater love hath no man than this / That a man should die for his friend." The slum recruit responds with the recognition that "our bones were made from the English mould." The rhetoric of a brotherhood of soldiers dying for their country could be used to support nationalism, to intensify the tragedy of the war by marking the nobility of young men who remained loyal to each other even while betrayed by their country, and in Orr's example to show the true value of the so-called "dregs of the British race." Elisabeth A. Marsland has commented on this potential ambiguity in protest poetry.²³ The representation of the soldier as noble victim of government policy brings protest and

patriotism dangerously close together because of the integral role that stories of male comradeship and courage in battle play in building national unity and pride.

By far the majority of women poets, however, reiterate the nobleness of the soldier whose sacrifice buys England security and peace, and more disturbingly provides the blood that ensures national unity. Eva Dobell's "Pluck" depicts a seventeen-year-old soldier, now wounded in hospital, who has told a "gallant" lie in order to join up "[w]hile other boys are still at play." Although "he shrinks in dread / To see the 'dresser' drawing near," the boy ultimately displays true stoic courage to "face us all, a soldier yet, / Watch his bared wounds with unmoved air."²⁴ Dobell seeks to pay tribute to the young man's courage in the face of tragedy, but in doing so she turns his literal status as a soldier into militaristic metaphor, by measuring his courage by his soldierliness. Brittain, famous now as both feminist and pacifist, eulogized her fiancé: "Of heart without reproach or hint of fear, / Who walks unscathed amid War's sordid ways / . . . Roland of Roncesvalles in modern days."²⁵ The language of medieval chivalry displaces the politics and day-to-day actualities of modern warfare with a literary fantasy of pure and honorable knights. And the speaker turns into a passive feminine figure, whose role is confined by the chivalric romance model Brittain borrows, that is, to remain faithful to the memory of her knight and thereby guarantee his purity.

More self-consciously than Brittain, May Wedderburn Cannan writes in 1916 of the soldiers who have "died to give us gentleness." Responding to poems such as Brooke's "The Dead," she seems to imitate his diction and pathos with a view to giving the civilian's answer: "I have thought, some day they may lie sleeping / Forgetting all the weariness and pain, / And smile to think their world is in our keeping, / And laughter come back to the earth again."²⁶ She echoes and is echoed by many others who write of the dead as having "made it possible and sure / For other lives to have, to be,"²⁷ or who serve their country in dying "to serve a friend," as Alice Meynell writes in "Summer in England, 1914."²⁸ Meynell's poem displays a painful awareness of the devastation of the battlefield by dwelling on the pastoral abundance of England in the later summer and fall of 1914. Although many surviving combatants also wrote elegies for the men who had died, women's elegies enact the classic female task of mourning the dead soldier. It may be more comfortable for critics today to concentrate on the poems that simultaneously protest the war and subvert its supporting discourses of nationalism and militarism, but the overwhelming pervasiveness of patriotic, elegiac work in women's First World War poetry demands a reading that attends fully to the gendered nature of citizenship.

Drama

If women's poetry has been a problem for later critics, women's drama has, until very recently, been all but invisible. The prewar years saw the emergence of a new women's theatre that challenged the "masculinist managerial and organizational structures of Edwardian theatre" that had "offered little, if any support for the woman playwright."²⁹ The Actresses' Franchise League had played a significant role after its formation in 1908 in training suffragists in public speaking and in organizing women's theatre in a wide spectrum of settings, ranging from Elizabeth Robins's well-known *Votes for Women* (1913) to the "spectacles" of suffrage political demonstrations. The League also established a play department run by Inez Bensusan to support dramatic writing by women.

The war interrupted this new promotion of women as actors, directors, and playwrights, and the war years figure as an ellipsis in critical histories of women and the theatre that is only now being filled. Additionally, women's largest contribution was probably in the area of amateur theatricals, and "the very nature of amateur theatricals indicates that scripts, published or in manuscript form, are more likely to be found outside larger institutions and libraries."³⁰ Birmingham Reference Library War Poetry Collection, for example, lists over twenty plays as poetry rather than drama, of which only a quarter are to be found in larger research libraries. While a richer body of work is being uncovered, the plays that are presently available need to be understood in a context of the war's negative effects on women's drama.

The declaration of war in August 1914 was accompanied by the immediate but temporary closure of London theatres. When they reopened managers largely turned to the entertainment of both troops on leave and the new female workforce, who saw a sudden increase in money and independence. Indeed, commentators in the postwar period saw the theatre as deleteriously feminized thanks to a growing female audience.³¹ The licensing of plays by the Lord Chancellor combined with the censoring effects of the Defence of the Realm Act of 1915 and its later amendments to restrict possibilities of wartime drama, particularly if it criticized the war or took the Front as its subject. By comparison, women's plays in the United States were published and performed considerably more frequently up until the country's entry into the war, when the Espionage and Subversion Acts of 1917 and 1918 changed the climate. For example, Marion Craig Wentworth's strongly feminist and pacifist play, *War Brides* (1914), was produced in New York in 1915 and made into a film, but "never licensed for performance in Britain."³²

Commercial London theatre was not, of course, the only venue for dramatic production and it remains to be seen what kinds of women-authored

or -directed theatre was active in the regional repertory theatre, independent theatre, subscription theatre, Sunday theatre, or other types of dramatic performance. For example, with Annie Horniman's financial backing the Gaiety Theatre in Manchester performed new works by both women and men between 1907 and 1917. From its formation in 1911 until the early 1920s, The Pioneer Players, Edy Craig's subscription theatre society, performed weekly at small London theatres and public halls. The Pioneer Players staged Gwen John's one-act play *Luck of War* in May 1917.³³ This play examines the effects of the war on working-class women and their families by staging a scenario like Tennyson's "Enoch Arden" (1864), in which a soldier, missing and presumed dead, returns home to find that his wife has remarried. The story is told from the woman's perspective, with the brutal and unsympathetic husband telling his wife that: "I left you t' country, Ann, as a soldier 'as to do. But if you'd been one o' them blatant brassy-haired hussies I shouldn't 'a done it."³⁴ John, not to be confused with the painter of the same name, allows George to express the brutalities of his experience at the Front and engages with Ann's emotional and financial difficulties at home. For example, the government reduces Ann's income by cutting off her separation allowance and putting her on a pension after George has been presumed dead. However, the play ends with Ann reunited with George, having abandoned Amos, a significantly better husband and father. Thus the play is typical of the Pioneer Players' wartime productions in explicitly addressing the problems that the war posed but avoiding "clear solutions."³⁵

John's play shows us that despite the inhospitable climate of the theatre profession and war conditions, women were active in a number of ways, especially if we look beyond commercial London theatre and the narrower definition of the well-made stage play. The broader category of performance is also helpful here, allowing us to see the role of women as actors who, as early as October 1914, had begun to work as entertainers for the troops, at the instigation of Lena Ashwell, manager of the Kingsway Theatre in London and a leading member of the AFL. Much of this entertainment took the form of scenes from Shakespeare, Sheridan, Shaw, and Barrie, but Gertrude Jennings wrote comic sketches, such as *Poached Eggs and Pearls: A Canteen Comedy in 2 Scenes* (1916) and *Allotments* (1917), for Ashwell's companies, while Cicely Hamilton wrote and produced *The Child in Flanders* for Christmas 1917.³⁶ By 1917, twenty-five companies were performing over 1,400 shows a month in France alone. Most of the women were members of the AFL.³⁷

As writers, directors, and actors women also contributed to amateur theatrical productions aimed at supporting the war effort. The magazines and newspapers of women's organizations such as the Women's Volunteer

Reserve and Munitions Factories provide a record of amateur performance as a significant recreational activity for women war workers. Jane Potter discusses a three-scene play, "Discipline," that was included in the *Women's Volunteer Reserve Magazine*, July 1916, which shows two women, the middle-class Miss Earle and the working-class Emma Jones, united in their common bond as service women. The play concludes with a tableau in which the entire WVR Company stands to attention while the National Anthem is played. "Discipline" evidently served a number of purposes to do with morale and the building of unity in both the WVR and a nation faced with class divisions that threatened to fracture the imagined cohesiveness of patriotism. In the context of women's war work, drama seems to have had much to do with middle-class concerns about working-class morals. Theatre took its place in an array of "wholesome recreational pursuits," and other more coercive methods such as women police, designed to control newly independent working women.³⁸

The tableau that ends "Discipline" refers back to a long tradition of nineteenth-century theatrical spectacle representing war. Pageants and tableaux were effective forms for the many women who used amateur dramatic performances for propaganda, recruitment, and fund-raising, all forms of war service seen as appropriate to women. Pageants "placed contemporary events in the setting of a heroic past,"³⁹ offering continuity and order to a population confronting the disturbances of war. Typically, pageants such as Gladys Davidson's *Brittania's Revue* (c.1914) and May Bell's *Brittania Goes to War*, which was published in 1919 but almost certainly performed much earlier, provide a spectrum of allegorical characters. These represent the nations and countries fighting the war, types such as Tommy Atkins, the Red Cross Nurse, the Land Girl, and Virtues such as Honour and Chivalry. In *Brittania's Revue* Brittania summons these characters on stage to express loyalty through patriotic songs and verse-speeches. National and imperial unity are performed through the martialing of Scotland and Wales, and colonies such as Ireland, Canada, South Africa, and India, all of whom are heralded with national songs or dances. Ireland, for example, sings "In Erin's Isle there beats one heart, one mind; / Although we oft have squabbled, now you'll find / United we stand." Despite, or more likely because of, the British government's constant anxiety through the war about Irish resistance to English colonial domination, Davidson represents the Anglo-Irish conflict as a trivial "squabble" that can be set aside in the interests of national and imperial unity.⁴⁰

Although these pageants reflect a longer history of British national and imperial propaganda, and were primarily associated with support for the war, the pageant was also available to more politically dissident perspectives,

having for example been used to effect by the prewar suffrage movement, in, for example, Cicely Hamilton's famous *A Pageant of Great Women* (1911). In the immediate war context, Vernon Lee's savagely anti-war drama, *Ballet of the Nations* (1915), although conventionally read as a masque or a reworking of a medieval morality play, derives some of its satiric force from imperial pageants like *Brittania Rules*. Set in a London square, the play includes a dance orchestrated by Death and performed by the nations and other allegorical figures. Satan and Clio, the muse of history, whose job is to narrate the scene under Satan's direction, form an audience. The ballet is described as increasingly grotesque with the dancers "chopping and slashing, blinding each other with squirts of blood and pellets of human flesh,"⁴¹ although the dancers are not directly visible to the audience. Neither is the accompanying Orchestra of Patriotism, composed of Passions such as Heroism, Pity, Love of Adventure, Idealism, Science, and Organization, entirely audible. Unlike the patriotic pageant or tableau, *Ballet of the Nations* presents the war as violent and grotesque waste, a perspective amplified through the inclusion of an introduction and lengthy notes in Lee's 1920 version, *Satan the Waster*.⁴²

Lee's complex Brechtian text emphasizes Satan's staging of the war as spectacle and was ill received on its first publication.⁴³ George Bernard Shaw reviewed the 1920 version enthusiastically in the *Nation*, praising Lee as an Englishwoman who "by sheer intellectual force, training, knowledge, and character, kept her head when Europe was a mere lunatic asylum." Other writers of the inter-war years seem to have seen it as a prescient model of pacifist writing, as for example Margaret Skelton, who acknowledged Lee's text as a source for her own anti-war novel *Below the Watchtowers* (1926).⁴⁴ In addition to Skelton, Gillian Beer finds Lee's influence in Miss la Trobe's pageant in Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts* (1941).⁴⁵ These traces are important to a picture of women's resistance to the war, at the time and in the years following, as coherent and collaborative.

The 1929 production of R. C. Sherriff's *Journey's End*, which represented trench experience on the West End stage for the first time, is usually understood by critics to have initiated the difficult process of coming to terms with the war in British theatre. Although Sherriff's play was undoubtedly significant (Brittain describes it as a spur to her own "women's" memoir *Testament of Youth*), a critical focus on mainstream London theatre once again obscures women's theatre.⁴⁶ As early as 1924, Hamilton's *The Old Adam: A Fantastic Comedy* was played at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre, coming to Ashwell's Kingsway Theatre the following year.⁴⁷ *The Old Adam* is a remarkable satire on British militarism set in the imaginary country of Paphalagonia, much like Britain. In this three-act play, the government is

offered a weapon that will end war by disabling all modern weapons. Instead of negotiating a peace the Paphalagonians go off to war with pikes, horses, and handcars. The play ends with government ministers and a bishop cheering the departure of the first regiment of volunteers. The curtain falls to the sound of "It's a long way to Tipperary," leaving a 1924 audience to ponder its own patriotic enthusiasm for the war that had just ended, and the myths of heroism and righteousness that fueled it.

During the 1920s and 1930s, women dramatists frequently used the war to explore changes in women's relationship to the family and to their traditional domestic roles, as in G. B. Stern's plays *The Matriarch* (1931) and *The Man Who Pays the Piper* (1931).⁴⁸ M. E. Atkinson's *The Chimney Corner* (1934), a one-act play evidently influenced by Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*, shows a community of Belgian women during the war.⁴⁹ The women work for the Germans, as nurses and domestic servants, but all the time their subservience masks their participation in a resistance network signaled by codes such as the wearing of a safety pin on the underside of a skirt. The obvious patriotism of Atkinson's subject may obscure the play's implication; it was not only the Germans who underestimated and undervalued women's service work during the war.

Muriel Box, a prolific dramatist, screenwriter, and film director, is another example of a writer who used the stage to dramatize women's war work. Published in a collection of new plays for all-women casts in 1935, *Angels of War* does not seem to have been performed until 1981, when Mrs. Worthington's Daughters, a British feminist theatre group, took it on tour.⁵⁰ The play takes place in the months before the Armistice and portrays a women's ambulance unit from the arrival of a new and idealistic young recruit, through her disillusionment and "hardening" to the unit's demobilization. Although the play is set just behind the British front lines, and centered on the women who were most involved in frontline experience, all three acts of *Angels of War* take place in one claustrophobic room where the women are billeted. This quasi-domestic setting, motivated in a practical sense by the limited resources of the amateur players for whom the play was originally designed, intensifies the play's thematic preoccupation both with women's new wartime opportunities and freedoms, and with the idea of all-female communities. Box's complex use of theatrical space to represent the way men's and women's different relationships to the war were enacted through the management of space is but one example of how drama offers a specific dimension to women's representation of the war. Until we have available the full range of plays, venues, and performance genres in which women participated as writers, actors, performers, managers, and directors, any account of drama and gender in First World War writing will be provisional.

Prose

“War,” complained the *Times Literary Supplement*, perhaps with Angela Brazil’s schoolgirl stories about German spies in mind, “has become as much the stock-in-trade of the novelist as are treasure islands, pirate schooners or the Great North road.”⁵¹ The division into culturally sanctioned war stories and those seen as unpatriotic or trivializing is useful for thinking about the wealth of wartime and postwar prose, from novels and short stories to memoirs, diaries, and journalism, and is intimately linked to the question of who has the license to comment on the war.

Much wartime prose by both genders was written directly in support of the war, including works of propaganda commissioned by the War Propaganda Bureau. First-person accounts of nursing in the war zone, such as Millicent Sutherland’s *Six Weeks at the War*, published by the London *Times* in 1914, and Phyllis Campbell’s *Back of the Front: Experiences of a Nurse* (1915), ghost-written to help substantiate the *Bryce Report on German Atrocities*, appeared from as early as 1914.⁵² The well-known novelist Mary Ward (Mrs. Humphrey Ward) was recruited to the propaganda effort in 1915, leading to *England’s Effort* (1916), *Towards the Goal* (1917), and *Fields of Victory* (1919), all based on government-authorized tours of military sites in England and France.⁵³ These reports on the war effort were both aimed at building US support for the war and maintaining civilian patriotism at home.

As a leading member of the prewar Anti-Suffrage League and government propagandist, Ward has “low standing” in the canon of First World War women’s writing.⁵⁴ Her war work as a government propagandist is nonetheless significant for its contradictions, with Ward propelled into a prominent position as a spokeswoman on what she saw as a man’s issue. Relentless detailing of facts is mingled with the claim to have seen for herself, testifying to an anxiety to measure her authority to report on the war by her truthfulness, despite her willing subjection to the government censor. The difficulties of her position and her anxieties about the relationship between literature and propaganda are obliquely addressed in novels such as *Missing* (1917) and *Harvest*, published in 1920 but written in 1918.⁵⁵ These novels often “interrogate the terms in which they choose to support the war”⁵⁶ by organizing the action around secrets about the war. The preoccupation with truths concealed or withheld reflects on Ward’s own position as a government propagandist committed to telling the truth about war under strict censorship.

Other eyewitness accounts such as Mildred Aldrich’s impressions of life in France during the war, or the many memoirs of war-zone nursing, such as Violetta Thurstan’s *Field Hospital and Flying Column* (1915), Kate Finzi’s

Eighteen Months in the War Zone (1916), Olive Dent's *A V.A.D. in France* (1917), and G. M. McDougall's *A Nurse at War* (1917), implicitly ask how they can represent the war adequately.⁵⁷ Tylee points out that Aldrich, an American whose journalistic impressions in *A Hilltop on the Marne* (1915) and *On the Edge of the War Zone* (1917) were published in England, commits herself to a distanced and neutral stance at the cost of representing the war as a spectacle.⁵⁸ Writers like Finzi and Dent, by contrast, speak from a position of engagement as nurses and VADs, but are authorized at the time by the values they share with national culture as much as by their position as women war workers. Thus, they portray the war as a special initiation and adventure, made the more so by its horrors, which are thus accommodated rather than minimized. For Finzi the war is full of horror, "arms rotting off . . . half heads," but it is also "something one would not have missed," while Dent describes it as "a great purifier" that has "brought out valour indescribable, self-sacrifice unforgettable . . . It has made better women of us all."⁵⁹ Not surprisingly, the *Daily Mail* serialized excerpts from Dent's memoir, while a major-general endorsed Finzi's book by writing an introduction praising both the book and the work of women nurses.

The works of these and other pro-war women, like Flora Sandes, whose *An English-Woman Sergeant in the Serbian Army* (1916) turns her life as a combatant soldier in the Serbian army into an adventure story, cast an interesting light on Gilbert and Gubar's much contested argument about women's experience of the war as a form of highly sexualized liberation.⁶⁰ These writers do give evidence of such liberation, but their capacity to see the war as heroic adventure is evidently deeply rooted in more conservative forms of patriotism and militarism. The contradictoriness of women's position, which has been the focus of most critics since Gilbert and Gubar, is clearly evident in May Sinclair's eyewitness account of seventeen days spent in Belgium with an ambulance unit in 1914.

Sinclair, who published parts of her *Journal of Impressions in Belgium* early in 1915 in the *English Review* and in complete form that September, focuses on the psychology of war, and on "how femininity is constituted in relation to the war."⁶¹ An important progenitor of early modernism with a particular interest in psychoanalysis, Sinclair risks the charge of being "too personal," as one reviewer defined it, by examining her own responses, whether "black funk . . . shameful and appalling terror" or a highly sexualized excitement, "a little thrill . . . growing till it becomes ecstasy."⁶² Her embrace of these abject feelings produced highly ambivalent responses in reviewers and later critics; Tylee, for example, calls her both sentimentalizing and self-indulgent.⁶³ But Sinclair's fascination with the war, albeit uncomfortable, allowed her to explore the interconnections between sex, love, and

aggression, a focus central to twentieth-century psychoanalysis and to her many novels and short stories about the war such as *Tasker Jeevons* (1916), *The Tree of Heaven* (1917), *The Romantic* (1920), and *Anne Severn and the Fieldings* (1922).⁶⁴ Sinclair, as an enthusiastic supporter of the war, does not belong in a feminist canon of self-conscious female resisters, but her scrutiny of war perversions, ranging from its thrills and ecstasies to the unheroic cowardice that Sinclair discovers in herself and some of her characters, denaturalizes the experiences that underwrite other eyewitness accounts.

On the other side of the spectrum from these pro-war texts, we have Mary Agnes Hamilton's *Dead Yesterday* and Rose Macaulay's *Non-Combatants and Others*. They appeared within a few months of each other in 1916, the former rooted in international socialism and the latter in Christian pacifism, while Rebecca West published her famous novella *Return of the Soldier* in June 1918.⁶⁵ None of these novels was exclusively read as anti-war at the time of their publication, and West's subtle and sympathetic examination of the costs of a militarized English masculinity for men and women has also met with a surprisingly critical reception from some recent feminist critics.⁶⁶ Macaulay also published a series of postwar satires on government bureaucracy and the propaganda machine, including *What Not: A Prophetic Comedy* (1919), only published after the war, and *Potterism* (1917), an attack on the Northcliffe press.⁶⁷

Although critical of the war, none of these works fell foul of the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA), unlike Rose Allatini's now-forgotten novel *Despised and Rejected*, which was banned soon after publication in 1918, presumably because of the strength with which it linked pacifism to sexuality.⁶⁸ Allatini uses the romance genre as vehicle for her portrait of an aggressively militaristic society that rejects pacifists, artists, and homosexuals with similar brutality. Her anti-war message operates therefore within the context of the many romance novels, both popular and middlebrow of the period, that represent the war as a purifying force. Berta Ruck and Ruby M. Ayres, two popular romance writers, promoted the idea of the Great War as having given men back their manliness and restored women to admiring subservience.⁶⁹ The suffrage movement and artistic movements such as aestheticism, with their associated images of overly masculine women and effete men, were alike blamed for the degeneration of prewar society.⁷⁰

Allatini reconfigures the manly soldier hero of these popular women's romances through her high-minded and courageous hero Dennis, who is homosexual, pacifist, and an artist. Dennis at first denies his homosexuality and tries to repress his passionate love for Alan, a socialist conscientious objector. It is only when Alan is on the verge of imprisonment that he is willing to consummate the relationship sexually. Dennis then himself awaits

arrest, able to compose music for the first time since the outbreak of the war, so that homosexuality, art, and pacifism are linked both thematically and narratively. During the trial, the book's moral agenda was discussed at length, making it clear that although banned as "likely to prejudice the recruiting, training and discipline of persons in his Majesty's forces," its linking of sexuality and pacifism was the source of its threat. As Tylee explains it, "belligerence had been bound into the very definition of masculinity, and . . . homosexuality and the refusal to kill were intimately related in their defiance of the established notions of manhood."⁷¹

Allatini's novel loses clarity when it comes to Dennis's female counterpart, Antoinette, whose inversion is revealed to her by Dennis: "there's a certain amount of the masculine element in you, and of the feminine element in me, we both have to suffer in the same way."⁷² Gay Wachman analyzes in detail the reasons why, at the end, Allatini strands Antoinette in a position of frustrated desire for Dennis, despite her clear homosexuality.⁷³ Allatini's interest in the politics of conscientious objection as a response to militarized masculinity is incompatible with an exploration of lesbianism, which inversion theories associate with a belligerent manliness. The same connection between female inversion and masculinity made possible Radclyffe Hall's extensive use of the Great War to represent the lesbian in both "Miss Ogilvy Finds Herself" (1934) and *Well of Loneliness* (1928), her famous postwar lesbian romance that was banned on publication.⁷⁴ Unlike Allatini, Hall was happy to associate lesbianism with masculine heroism and militarism in the interests of making the invert an acceptable figure within English culture.

The link between war, gender, and sexuality that is so central to Allatini and Hall also motivates the war narratives of English modernists. The much neglected writer Mary Butts subverts the ideal of a biological, aggressive masculinity in her story about a male costumier turned soldier, "Speed the Plough" (1923), while her novel *Ashe of Rings* (1925) connects the repressions of family life to the cruelty and violence of war. Other better-known women modernists also make femininity central to their representation of war, for example, West, in *Return of the Soldier* (1918), where the soldier's story is narrated by his female cousin; Woolf, most famously in *Jacob's Room* (1922) and *Mrs. Dalloway* (1926); and Katherine Mansfield, in her remarkable 1915 short story "An Indiscreet Journey,"⁷⁵ based on her own "indiscreet" trip to the war zone to spend a weekend with her lover Francis Carco. So too, of course, do their American counterparts Stein, Willa Cather, H.D., and Mary Borden. Allyson Booth has argued that the formal markers of modernism have a close relationship to "the perceptual habits appropriate" to the Great War, for example "the dissolution of borders around the self, the mistrust of factuality, the fascination with multiple points of view."⁷⁶

For these women modernists the reinvention of fictional forms is often in the service of analyzing those aspects of English culture that made the war possible.

Woolf's first war novel, *Jacob's Room* (1922), begun only two years after the Armistice, takes on the astonishingly bold task of unpacking England's national imaginary at the very moment it is being constructed. The life-story of Jacob Flanders, the novel examines and dismantles the iconic figure of the young Englishman of officer class who came to symbolize England's lost generation. While West's novella generates considerable sympathy for her male protagonist, Woolf is relentless in locating Jacob as the unselfconscious beneficiary of masculine middle-class privilege. Her portrait of the young man at Cambridge, a world in which women are merely intruders, is nearly identical to that in her feminist ur-text *A Room of One's Own*,⁷⁷ published only seven years later. The novel is also the first in which Woolf fully realizes her aim to represent character as ultimately unknowable. Jacob's character is mediated through a series of viewpoints, and even the narrator is refused omniscience, being specified as older and female, creating "deliberate boundaries between herself and her central character."⁷⁸ When Jacob dies in Flanders at the end of the novel the reader is left to ask whether he is the victim of his society or the embodiment of the values of an England that supported the war.

The British government decided early in the war that soldiers' bodies should not be returned to England despite the proximity of the Western Front, an understandable decision when one considers that the death toll on the first day of the Battle of the Somme in July 1916 was 20,000 men. Woolf's novel, as Booth argues, registers this double absence, of both the dead man and his corpse, through its insistence on absence more than loss as the central definer of Jacob's death.⁷⁹ Although the novel has been described as an elegy, it might be more accurate to see it as replacing elegy with a necessary investigation of the mechanisms by which a culture will begin to fill the space of that loss with its own myths. Woolf, for example, regularly refers to gravestones and their memorializing function, as when the anonymous narrator observes a mason's van carrying tombstones "recording how someone loves someone who is buried at Putney." Not only are the tombstones weirdly mobile instead of reassuringly and monumentally fixed, but they "pass too quickly for you to read more."⁸⁰ As an allegory for both the novel itself as Jacob's memorial and for England's wider efforts to claim the meanings of the soldiers' deaths for national history, Woolf's traveling tombstones refuse the consolations of Brooke's "corner of a foreign field / That is forever England."

Skepticism about elegy also informs Katherine Mansfield's famous short story "The Fly" (1923), in which the pleasures of sadism replace the

indulgence of a good cry for a middle-aged man, the boss, whose son has died in the war. The boss slowly tortures a fly until it finally dies, exhausted by the struggle to live, leaving the man with “a grinding feeling of wretchedness” so frightening to him that he must repress it.⁸¹ The national task of mourning is given a nasty and significant twist in that the story involves the reader in the survivor's pleasure at “the spectacle of suffering without the anxiety of guilt.”⁸² As with *Jacob's Room* the apparent simplicity of grief is refused along with the genre of elegy.

Although traces of the war are visible in most writing in the postwar period, for women as well as men the late twenties and early thirties mark a watershed for memoirs and fiction. Notable examples include the English-American writer Mary Borden's *The Forbidden Zone* (1929), which was first published in England, Evadne Price's *Not So Quiet . . . : Stepdaughters of War* (1930), written under the pseudonym Helen Zenna Smith, Irene Rathbone's *We That Were Young* (1932), Sylvia Pankhurst's *The Home Front* (1932), Storm Jameson's *No Time Like the Present* (1933), and Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth* (1933).⁸³ These works responded to the deluge of personal accounts and memoirs published by male combatants, most famously by Sassoon, Blunden, Aldington, and Graves. Like the men, women wrote both autobiography and fictionalized war memoir, using the authority of personal experience to present the bleak horror of the Great War. Women writers faced the additional task of inserting the woman's story into an increasingly uniform story of war experience as combatant experience. Consequently, these works, by contrast with either Woolf or Mansfield, focus almost exclusively on the female war worker, whether VAD, nurse, munitions worker, or WAAC. The only exception here is Sylvia Pankhurst, whose radical and distinctive mix of Communism, pacifism, and Suffragism produces a quite different style of memoir dedicated to exposing the violently repressive militarism of the British state during the Great War and the working-class woman's acute suffering under that state. Pankhurst's emphases are reflected in later twentieth-century writers such as Sheila Rowbotham and Chris Hannan, who both write plays about women's working-class resistance during the war, and in Pat Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy, which locates the combatant's experience in the context of British wartime culture.⁸⁴

Most women writers, however, were locked into a direct response to the male war story, although their strategies varied considerably. Borden uses a spare modernist hyper-realism similar to Stein and Hemingway in her collection of short sketches, stories, and poems about nursing in a military hospital in France. Published the following year, in 1930, Price's fictional memoir, which was based on the unpublished diaries of a real ambulance driver, Winifred Young, is described by Jane Marcus as an extreme form

of socialist realism in which she “reproduces the minefield of the forbidden zone as a dotted landscape on the body of the text, setting up disquieting relations between text and white space on the book’s pages.”⁸⁵ By contrast Brittain chose to write a formally conventional memoir appropriate to her intense desire to convey the historical experience of her youth in *Testament*.

Each of these texts wrestles with the logic of the war zone as a preeminently masculine space, searching for ways to redefine that space to accommodate femininity. Borden addresses this problem directly and memorably in a much-quoted passage about the desexualization of both men and women in the army hospitals: “It is impossible to be a woman here. One must be dead . . . There are no men here, so why should I be a woman? There are heads and knees and mangled testicles. . . .but no men.” To be a woman here means to be sexualized and to have feelings, and Borden’s sketches adopt a flat narrative voice intentionally divested of affect. Possibly the only sexual being in *The Forbidden Zone* is the urban criminal turned soldier in “Enfant de malheur.” This man coalesces in one wounded body the marks of a highly sexualized Parisian underworld literalized in his many obscene tattoos and an uncanny classical beauty which leads the narrator to describe him as “fashioned by Praxiteles.”⁸⁶ At the same time, his penal service in the French *Bataillons d’Afrique* and the narrator’s description of him as “apache” invest him with a racialized exoticism. The source of the apache’s fascination in Borden’s text seems to lie in the challenge his impurity poses for various representatives of European civilization, including an English nurse who is the type of asexual virtuous femininity. Borden’s text focuses here a more pervasive tendency of writers to renegotiate femininity through class and racial difference, particularly that of male soldiers. Enid Bagnold, for example, in her memoir *Diary Without Dates* (1918), uses her VAD narrator’s encounter with a black African soldier to mediate her own class relations with the working-class Tommies she nurses.⁸⁷

Changing definitions of femininity are also explored through the figure of the masculine woman, as in the case of Tosh, the glamorous, aristocratic driver from *Not So Quiet* who cuts her glorious red hair, happy to “unsex” herself because so obviously a mix of tomboy and mother. Tosh stands for an acceptable cross-dressing still anchored in conventions specific to her class and to the genre of the girl’s school story. Price reflects here the difficult negotiation of the “masculinity” of war work by women, faced with a series of regulations aimed to reinstate the codes of proper femininity even as women moved beyond traditional female roles. Tosh is foil to the cartoon-like Mrs. Bitch, the Unit Commander, who has inappropriately embraced masculine power, becoming petty-minded and sadistic as a result. In one sense femininity does not survive the war. *Not So Quiet* ends with an apocalyptic

scene in which the heroine's fellow-workers lie dead and dying around her, a mass of mangled and dismembered female bodies. Her heroine survives, but Price marks this survival by shifting from first- to third-person narration, leaving her protagonist without emotion or "soul," no longer human or feminine. Even Brittain's representation of the women's war in *Testament of Youth* charts the death of the feminine heart, although the conclusion emphasizes resurrection through Brittain's postwar commitment to anti-war internationalist politics and her 1924 engagement to G. E. G. Catlin. Ultimately, however, *Testament* is motivated by Brittain's insistence on mourning as the true anti-war work, and hence seals the relationship between femininity and emotion, as she channels both into the peace agenda of the early League of Nations.

As a survivor of the Great War Brittain believed herself, with others of the interwar years, responsible for preventing a future war. The men and women who reinterpreted English and European history in fiction, memoir, and political history during the 1930s, did so under the growing certainty that another war impended. Storm Jameson, in addition to her Great War memoir, published a trilogy of novels between 1934 and 1936, *Mirror in Darkness*, charting the political history of postwar England.⁸⁸ West's travelogue about Yugoslavia, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* (1941), reframes English history within the apparently marginal history of the Balkans, deliberately stitching together individual and collective memory.⁸⁹ In a different register, part realist, part spy story, and part fantasy, Stevie Smith's *Over the Frontier* (1938) represents her character traveling across "the familiar nightmare landscape of the Western Front" even though the novel's overt subject is 1930s Germany.⁹⁰ The urgency these writers all share about the future has its roots in the Great War. As Jameson wrote so memorably in her 1969 autobiography: "In 1934 an American reviewer, a woman, complained that 'like so many English writers, Storm Jameson seems unable to outgrow the war'. I retorted that the war we could not outgrow was not the one we had survived but the one we were expecting."⁹¹ Jameson's gloomy insight here, that our preoccupation with past wars is always a response to the war that has not yet happened, tells us something of why later twentieth-century writers, critics, and readers still return to the Great War as a subject. And, thanks largely to the efforts of feminist critics, women writers are now central to that return.

NOTES

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