

# Women's Poetry of World War I

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### 'Nobody asked what the women thought'<sup>1</sup>

The opening salvoes of this centennial re-appraisal of the 'Great War' have already been fired, this war that, variously, with all the imaginable shades of interpretation in between, 'had to be fought' or 'should never have been fought'. We are engaged in a process foreseen in 1918 by Eleanor Farjeon:

Men will begin to judge the thing that's past  
As men will judge it in a hundred years.<sup>2</sup>

The quotation chosen to head this Bookmark may seem to be deliberately provocative, but even the most diligent reader of the poetry of the period would be hard-pressed to find any popular anthology that includes the work of a single female poet and might be tempted therefore to add to the quotation used, 'or cared what they wrote'. As one commentator has put it, 'And here I must raise with bewilderment the near-as-may-be non-presence of women in modern Great War anthologies.'<sup>3</sup>

In major part this is caused by the emphasis we put on a narrow concept of 'the war poets', a term which seemingly can only be used with reference to those males who experienced the grim realities of mud, mutilation and /or mortality. One hundred years on from 1914, the Secretary of State for Defence has recently announced an intention to investigate the possibility of women directly engaging in front-line conflict. One hundred years ago, there was no such possibility, with the most minor of exceptions, of women being so involved: the Albanian Virgins, Flora Sandes and the Russian Death Battalion are isolated examples of direct involvement in battle in and around the period.<sup>4</sup> Women, especially those serving as nurses near the Front Line and occasionally caught up in its fluctuations, some even losing their lives through misdirected shelling, did not obviously qualify as 'combatants', just 'casualties of war'. Those who died in factory accidents or Zeppelin raids were at an even further remove. And in any case, to repeat the point, even the survivors of such grim incidents do not usually have their experiences relayed through mainstream anthologies.

This was, above all else in literary spheres, the age of poetry, with Ezra Pound quoted as saying, 'Everybody's Aunt Lucy or Uncle George has written something or other.'<sup>5</sup> The editors of the *Wipers Times* were driven to exhort would-be contributors to offer reflections on life in and around the front line in other-than-poetry format. That women should respond through this discipline is therefore no surprise. That the voices were almost exclusively middle-class should be even less of a surprise, but the range of responses remains worthy of much more significant attention, as Catherine Reilly has indicated in her selection of women's poetry in the Virago 'Scars Upon My Heart' anthology,<sup>6</sup> from which the poems featured here have been drawn.

As the poetic output of women of this period has been so largely neglected, this Bookmark seeks merely to give an indication of the range of styles and attitudes displayed within one aspect of the canon, women at work on the Home Front, and, in particular, their involvement in one aspect of that work, munitions. More importantly, it has deliberately selected not only to give a flavour of the values of the period, but also to reflect on history as process, so that we may still look, with continuing interest, at the role of the working woman in society, and how the concept of 'working women' was, and is, perceived.

### Women at Work

At the outbreak of war, unsurprisingly the first attempts by women to persuade 'the authorities' (male) that their sex had more to offer than simply staying at home, bringing up families and knitting met with little or no enthusiasm. Gradually, however, women began to take a greater part, be it as nurses, clerical assistants, dispatch riders, ambulance drivers, bus conductors, taxi drivers or, in the country, land workers. Others took over family businesses, left bereft of labour by recruitment, and as the war went on this trend continued. 'Pit lasses' re-appeared, often despite the disapproval of male miners, and women appeared in shipyards, usually as unskilled workers but with some training as riveters and welders.<sup>7</sup> To the pre-war legions of housemaids and shop assistants were added new roles.

Jessie Pope's poem *War Girls* lists a number of everyday roles undertaken by women increasingly as volunteering, and then conscription, took greater hold:

There's the girl who clips your ticket for the train,  
And the girl who speeds the lift from floor to floor,  
There's the girl who does a milk-round in the rain,  
And the girl who calls for orders at your door.  
Strong, sensible and fit,  
They're out to show their grit  
And tackle jobs with energy and knack.

The tone is jaunty and confident. The last three lines seem to echo the qualities required of front-line troops. There is no suggestion that they are not capable of performing such tasks, nor that their customers should expect a lesser service simply because they are 'the girl'. Pope goes on to state, quite baldly, that women have been liberated by these opportunities:

No longer caged and penned up

and that their commitment is not some short-lived affair:

They're going to keep their end up

and deliver what they have taken on in the long term.

There's the motor girl who drives a heavy van,  
There's the butcher girl who brings your joint of meat,  
There's the girl who cries, 'All fares, please!' like a man,  
And the girl who whistles taxis up the street.

Here the tone clearly emphasises the competence of women who can act 'like a man'; the van is 'heavy'. The 'motor girl', the 'butcher girl' and the girl who 'whistles taxis' have taken on male-ness.

### IN THE MUNITIONS FACTORY

In many ways, one of the most significant developments in women's work opportunities was the recruitment, from 1915 onwards, of women in munitions factories. The scope of this work was wide, embracing not only the manufacture of shells, guns and other military equipment, but also tents, uniforms, boots and tents. Below, however, we concentrate on the activity eloquently summed up by Kate Adie in her chapter entitled, 'A square meal but a yellow face'.<sup>8</sup> Madeline Ida Bedford's munitions worker has no pretensions that her work's importance is noble and patriotic service to her country, her King, or, indeed, her God:

MUNITION WAGES

Earning high wages? Yus,  
Five quid a week.  
A woman, too, mind you,  
I calls it dim sweet.

The immediate emphasis, from the colloquial, interrogative opening, is on earning power, even for 'a woman'. It is a case, here and throughout the poem, of, 'Ask not what your country can do for you,' but, 'See what a chance of a better life I've got'. There may be an element of exaggeration here, as the wages quoted are far higher than other sources indicate, but there is an immediate celebration of happiness and liberation.

Ye'are asking some questions –  
But bless yer, here goes:  
I spends the whole racket  
On good times and clothes.

The last line of this stanza is an eloquent reminder of the standard alternative for women such as the munitions' worker, the enthraldom of 'service', whether in the country house or the department store. Here there are no restraints – her choices are not regulated by notions of uniform and duty.

Me saving? Elijah!  
Yer do think I'm mad.  
I'm acting the lady.  
But – I ain't living bad.

While she obviously acknowledges that someone is questioning the lack of frugality in her life-style, she makes two telling points, firstly that she is 'acting the lady', but, secondly, 'living bad' is not within her terms of behavioural reference. The emphatic 'But' at the beginning of the line, and the pause before the final comment on how she is conducting her life is meant to dismiss notions, held and reported more than once, that such girls were 'rough' and their morals and habits, especially with regard to drink, questionable. 'Acting the lady' means that she is enjoying herself, given models already established for the relative few in society, but there are limits to what is acceptable. Moreover, she is aware that her work is not without its dangers:

We're all here today, mate,  
Tomorrow, perhaps dead,  
If Fate tumbles on us  
And blows up our shed.

What must have been the ever-present possibility of such an event is immediately dismissed:

Afraid! Are you kidding?  
With money to spend!  
Years back I wore tatters.  
Now, silk stockings, mi friend!

This is a scornful rebuke to worries about mortality: the prime motivator is purchasing power and the chance to taste, even in a trade fraught with danger, the 'good life', for a time at least:

I've bracelets and jewellery,  
Rings envied by friends,  
A sergeant to swank with,  
And something to lend.

The wages bring her 'envied' acquisitions, and status – no mere Tommy Atkins as an escort, but 'a sergeant'. But the last line is telling – despite all her emphasis earlier in the poem on personal acquisitions, there is also generosity, 'something to lend', a situation that her previous life in 'tatters' has never allowed her to contemplate, let alone pursue. Her final verdict on her situation is as matter-of-fact as the rest of the poem:

I drive out in taxis,  
Do theatres in style.  
And this is mi verdict –  
It is jolly worth while.

Worth while, for tomorrow  
If I'm blown to the sky,  
I'll have repaid mi wages  
In death – and pass by.

Finally, as throughout, there is no reference to any higher purpose but simply a recognition of what she has done and what she has enjoyed is simply being 'repaid' – a fair exchange, and honourable.

It is relatively rare to find the voice of the working people in anthologised poetry, imagined as this voice undoubtedly is. It is also rare to find a celebration of opportunity for improvement of personal circumstances, a chance to 'better oneself'. That many women who found themselves in munitions factories saw this as a quick taste of a more financially rewarding life is quite clear, even though not all women were so approving of their experiences. There is nothing here of the long-term effects of such work, heavy and chemical-ridden, and the worker in this poem does not seem to have faced circumstances which other accounts show offered workers less freedom and lower wages. It is the celebration of a new life. Death is a possibility to consider round the corner, yet no more of a certainty than a short life expectancy was the likely outcome of her days of 'tatters'.

A very different view of women munitions workers is made all too clear from the very outset in Mary Gabrielle Collins' poem *Women at Munitions Making*:

Their hands should minister unto the flame of life,  
Their fingers guide  
The rosy teat, swelling with milk,  
To the eager mouth of the suckling babe  
Or smooth with tenderness,  
Softly and soothingly,  
The heated brow of the ailing child,  
Or stray among the curls  
Of the boy or girl, thrilling to mother love.

Madeline Bedford's munitions worker is clearly unmarried, and equally clearly Mary Collins regards such work as anti-motherhood, a picture she paints with almost religious intensity in this opening section of the poem. The proper pursuit of a woman is to 'minister', not merely to a baby, but rather to 'the flame of life'. The concentration is on an archetypal image of woman-as-mother, the giver and sustainer of life, whether the latter be through breastfeeding, nursing or bonding. The repeated use of sibilants, 'smooth', 'softly', and 'smoothingly' portray the woman's role as that of 'angel-on-the-hearth'<sup>9</sup>. The tone is immediately categorical, for 'Their hands **should**'.

But now  
Their hands, their fingers  
Are coarsened in munitions factories.

The fingers and hands which should be guiding teats, smoothing brows and caressing locks have been 'coarsened', made, perhaps, unfit for 'real' purpose, not particularly by contact with metal and chemical, but chiefly by what their work represents set against the maternal ideal. It is a

representation in poetry of a view expressed in an enormously popular pamphlet of 1916, allegedly written by 'A Little Mother', that women were 'created for the purpose of giving life, and men to take it'.<sup>10</sup> It is not, therefore, merely physical disfigurement that is the problem:

    Their thoughts, which should fly  
    Like bees among the sweetest mind flowers,  
    Gaining nourishment for the thoughts to be,  
    Are bruised against the law,  
        'Kill, kill'.

The direction of their thoughts, which, using the word again '*should* fly', may well be the reason that this poem has been labelled 'anti-feminism'.<sup>11</sup> The poet does not seem to recognise that many of the women working in munitions may well have had thoughts already flying in other directions, to fathers, brothers, uncles and, for those who were married, husbands, nor that women are to be satisfied merely with 'the sweetest mind flowers' in any situation. Their thoughts are 'bruised', which word is offered as sufficient criticism of their deviation from the path of the 'true' woman. Like bruised fruit, they are spoiled and their perfection has been wasted. But the accusations go further:

    They must take part in the defacing and destroying of the human body  
    Which, certainly, during this dispensation  
    Is the shrine of the spirit.

Because of their working role, women now are as guilty as men of participating in the horrors of war, contributing to the destruction of the holiness ('spirit') that Man was given by God:

    Oh God!  
    Throughout the ages we have seen,  
    Again and again  
    Men by Thee created  
        Cancelling each other.  
    And we have marvelled at the seeming annihilation  
    Of Thy work.

Until now, 'Men' have been responsible for the 'annihilation' of God's work, but now:

    But this goes further,  
        Taints the fountain head  
    Mounts like a poison to the Creator's very heart.  
    O God!  
    Must It anew be sacrificed on earth?

The involvement of women in making some of the artefacts 'goes further' apparently than the wrongdoing of just 'men' in the past. Women, by participating in such work, are denying their defining, creative role. As the poem progresses it seems that Collins can barely contain her outrage, as is clearly seen through the ways the structure and tone of the poem change.

The contrasts between the two poems are everywhere apparent, most notably between the self- and God-centred views, but also the very different views of the proper purpose of roles of women. It is well-known that the outbreak of war divided the response of those who had been actively engaged in the Suffrage movement. What was the most appropriate reaction to this situation? Once again, just as there exists a range of opinions about the reasons for the war, its conduct and its outcomes, so there is a range of views, expressed by women and largely ignored, about the true role of women in this war. At one unusual extreme are the ideas expressed in Nora Bomford's *Drafts*:

    O, damn the shibboleth  
    Of sex! God knows we've equal personality.

Why should men face the dark while women stay  
To live and laugh and meet the sun each day?

Not, however, a lone voice in the wilderness. Rose Macauley's 1915 poem *Many Sisters to Many Brothers* has, to say the least, an interesting opening:

Oh it's you that have the luck, out there in blood and muck:  
You were born beneath a kindly star;  
All we dreamt, I and you, you can really go and do,  
And I can't, the way things are.  
In a trench you are sitting, while I am knitting  
A hopeless sock .....

This poem has been characterised as naïve, especially, one suspects, because later in the stanza the poet says that, for her, 'a war is poor fun'. Nevertheless, it should remind us that, to quote *Blackadder* ironically, a 'note from Matron' was, even just imaginatively, not something everyone was looking for.

So much is known and has been written about peace bringing, for women, little emancipation. It is only intellectually honest now to complete the consideration of Pope's *War Girls*:

They're going to keep their end up  
Till the khaki soldier boys come marching back.

This has been an interregnum; women will dutifully return to their rightful place in society when the men return. The status quo will be re-established. Moreover, whatever 'uniform', a subject of much debate during the early years of the war both literally and metaphorically, the women have worn:

Beneath each uniform  
Beats a heart that's soft and warm,  
Though of canny mother-wit they show no lack;  
But a solemn statement this is,  
They've no time for love and kisses  
Till the khaki soldier boys come marching back.

'Mother-wit' is a well-chosen phrase, emphasising women's understanding but also referring to their main function in life, being mothers. 'Love and kisses' have been abandoned for the duration. Women will revert to being 'soft' and 'warm', qualities they have retained under the assumed, temporary war-time dress codes. Life will return to previous standards, and procreation can take place again, despite the previous statement that women were 'caged and penned up'. One wonders what men in reserved occupations still in England might have made of this sentiment, but it is surely meant really to reinforce the idea that 'women bear'.

The debate, and the decisions for women, continues. Is it the career, the earning power, the independence? Should women think no further than ultimately becoming mothers? Are 'the khaki soldier boys', translated into whatever 21<sup>st</sup> century equivalent, the ultimate reference? Spare a final thought for Flora Sandes. After her heroic exploits in arms she was commissioned into the Serbian Army in 1919, later commenting that her experiences as a combatant had been 'wonderful precisely because they were years of unimagined freedom'. Her comments on the return to civilian life are revealing, 'I cannot describe what it now felt like, trying to get accustomed to a woman's life and a woman's clothing again; and also to ordinary society after having lived entirely with men for so many years.' For her, reverting to the role of a woman in society after her temporary life as a private soldier, was 'like losing everything at one fell swoop, and trying to find bearings again in another life and an entirely different world.'<sup>12</sup>

## Bibliography

The three poems this Bookmark concentrates on are to be found in Catherine Reilly's *Scars Upon My Heart: Women's Poetry and Verse of the First World War*, first published by Virago in 1981.

Kate Adie's book *Corsets to Camouflage* (Hodder and Stoughton, 2003) has proved an invaluable resource.

*Women and the Military during World War 1*, Professor Joanna Bourke (posted on [bbc.co.uk/history/british/Britain\\_women](http://bbc.co.uk/history/british/Britain_women) combatants, last updated 2013)

*The She-Soldiers of World War One*, Kate Lindsay (posted March, 2012 on [ww1centenary.oucs.ox.ac.uk/unconventional\\_soldiers/the-she-soldiers-of-world-war-one/](http://ww1centenary.oucs.ox.ac.uk/unconventional_soldiers/the-she-soldiers-of-world-war-one/))

## Footnotes

- 1 *A fight to the finish*, S. Gertrude Ford (Reilly)
- 2 *Peace*, Eleanor Farjeon (Reilly)
- 3 *Preface to Scars Upon My Heart*, Judith Kazantzis, p.xx
- 4 Notably in Bourke, op.cit., and other sources
- 5 *Introduction*, Reilly p.xxxiii, quoting C.K. Stead in *The New Poetic*
- 6 *Scars Upon My Heart*, Reilly
- 7 Adie, op.cit., p.95
- 8 Adie, especially Chapter 9, p. 92 and onwards.
- 9 Kazantzis, p.xxii
- 10 Lindsay, p.3
- 11 Kazantzis, p.xxii
- 12 Bourke, p.2

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