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JANET S. K. WATSON

Khaki Girls, VADs, and Tommy's Sisters: Gender and Class in First World War Britain

IN A POPULAR book on women war workers published in 1917, Mrs Alphonse Courlander declares that 'scoffing at amateur nurses went out of fashion when a new amateur army became a great factor in the war'.¹ When the First World War broke out in 1914, the call to young men was clear: their country needed them as soldiers. Women, who also wanted to show their patriotism, were not sure what they should do. For many, the obvious first choice was volunteer nursing. As Olive Dent explains: 'defence was a man's job, and I, unfortunately, was a woman ... And yet the New Army of men would need a New Army of nurses. Why not go and learn to be a nurse while the Kitchener men were learning to be soldiers?'²

Dent was not alone in thinking nursing the best she could offer her country. Eleanora Pemberton referred to her nursing in France as 'what dozens of girls would give anything to get the chance of doing'.³ Sylvia Beale agreed, writing in August 1915 to her sister-in-law, Helen Beale, that 'it must be an immense satisfaction to feel you have fitted yourself to do what every woman in the country would wish to be doing now if she had the knowledge. I mean, there is nothing a woman could help the country more in doing than mending its men'.⁴ The entire Beale family supported amateur nursing by unmarried middle-class women like Helen. Her sister Dorothy, for example, proudly reported that Helen's niece Peggy, set to make 'comforts' for soldiers at school, was making something for her aunt in France, because 'it is for a nurse which is just as good as a soldier'.⁵

¹ Mrs Alphonse Courlander, 'The V.A.D. Nurse', in *Women War Workers: Accounts Contributed by Representative Workers of the Work Done by Women in the More Important Branches of War Employment*, ed. Gilbert Stone (New York [1917]), p. 207.

² Olive Dent, *A VAD in France* (London, 1917), pp. 14-15.

³ Pemberton to her father, 26 Nov. 1914, I[mperial] W[ar] M[useum], D[eartment of] D[ocuments] 85/33/1.

⁴ Sylvia Beale to [Helen M.] Beale, 16 Aug. 1915, Beale [Family] Papers [Cobnor Cottage, Chidham, Chichester]. I am grateful to the late Joan Edom, née Beale, for giving me access to her family papers, and for her help. I also thank her daughter-in-law, Gillian Edom.

⁵ Dorothy Brown to Beale, n.d. [early Nov. 1915], Beale Papers.

Helen Beale and Olive Dent were both members of Voluntary Aid Detachments, or VADs.¹ Founded in 1909 under the joint auspices of the British Red Cross and the Order of St John of Jerusalem, during the First World War they assisted professional nurses in hospitals.² Many VADs explicitly equated their service in the wards with the service of their brothers and men friends in the trenches. They echoed Katharine Furse, their commandant-in-chief, who wanted everyone to understand that 'the[ir] daughters are wanted by the Country as well as the[ir] sons.'³

Perceptions of class and social status played a crucial role in determining how different types of war work were viewed for different groups of women. Women who wore military-style uniforms, whether upper- and middle-class volunteers who joined paramilitary organizations at the beginning of the war or the mainly working-class women who filled the ranks of the official service corps founded towards the end of it, were often criticized. Some working women, who found better pay, more interesting work, shorter hours, and better living conditions in the munitions factories than they were used to in domestic service, aroused mixed responses; sometimes they were equated with soldiers, sometimes condemned for lack of patriotism. Ideas about gender were as influential as class, as both criticism of and support for war work were rooted in deeply held convictions about the need to preserve the existing social order. Comparisons between men's and women's war work acted as a battleground for a struggle over gender: setting limits to what women might do, defining how they should behave, and also defining their position in society relative to that of men. Different types of war work were seen as socially acceptable or problematic for different groups in comparison with perceptions of other groups. Thus, while gender and class shaped perceptions of war work, at the same time war work shaped ideas about gender and class.

* * *

The closest parallel between the work of men as soldiers and the work available to women was drawn with the primarily middle-class amateur nurses, the VADs. The symbolic parity of volunteer hospital service with military service recurs regularly in contemporary writing by both men and women. When Ruth Manning, a VAD serving in France, returned home

1 A 'VAD' was technically the detachment itself rather than a member of it, and official documents consistently refer to 'VAD members'. The women, however, referred to themselves and were regularly referred to as VADs.

2 VADs performed other tasks in certain hospitals, including cooking and cleaning, and later in the war drove ambulances. General Service VADs did clerical work, waited on tables in officers' clubs, tended military cemeteries, all similar to the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps' work.

3 Memo, 'What We Want Included in the National Service Appeal to Women to Join Voluntary Aid Detachments', IWM, Women at Work Collection, BRC 10 1/1.

on leave, she discovered that she was 'looked upon as a heroine', and her aunt asked her to wear her uniform at dinner, as a soldier would.¹ A soldier patient at the First Eastern Hospital published the following tribute to his nurses:

It's a pill for Mr Kaiser,
And sadly him it vexes
When he full well knows
That his toughest foes
Win war by BOTH the sexes.²

Such women were explicitly equated with soldiers: only a joint effort would lead to victory. The comparison between volunteer nurses and volunteer soldiers was made in popular patriotic literature as well. Bobby Little, the young officer hero of Ian Hay's widely read novels *The First Hundred Thousand* and *Carrying On – After the First Hundred Thousand*, compared VADs with second lieutenants, 'the people who do all the hard work and get no limelight'.³ South Hampstead High School, a member of the Girls' Public Day School Trust, started 'a Roll of Honour for King and Country, on which are inscribed from time to time the names of near relatives of members of the School who are on active service, and of those who are nursing abroad under the Red Cross Society'.⁴ Only Red Cross nurses were equated with soldiers, not women doing other war work. In order to make the comparison, the school had to redefine the term 'Roll of Honour', which usually meant soldiers killed, to mean those serving; otherwise, women would have been almost entirely excluded.

Furse repeatedly reinforced the idea in communications, both with the volunteers themselves and with government officials, that VADs served in the same way as soldiers. The most striking example is a letter she sent to every VAD on active service, closely modelled on one that Earl Kitchener, the secretary of state for war, had sent in 1914 to every member of the British Expeditionary Force, and which she thought so important

¹ Diary entries, 15 June 1915, 24 April 1917, IWM, DD 80/21/1.

² 'To Our Fairer Sex', by 'Birdseed, Ward 7', *First Eastern Hospital Gazette*, ii (April 1916); IWM, DD 80/21/1.

³ Ian Hay, *Carrying On – After the First Hundred Thousand* (Edinburgh and London, 1917), p. 310. This identification with the soldiers could lead to happiness with small details: one VAD, Gwen Ware, was pleased when hospitalized with bronchitis to ride in an ambulance 'just like a wounded Tommy', while Eleanora Pemberton was excited that the replacement tooth given her by the military dentist had previously belonged to a Tommy, so 'although I myself have not been to the front, my tooth has!' Gwen Ware, *'A Rose in Picardy': The Diaries of Gwen Ware* (privately published, 1984), p. 12; Pemberton to her father, 21 Feb. 1915, IWM, DD 85/33/1.

⁴ *South Hampstead High School Magazine*, no. 27, Nov. 1914, p. 4, South Hampstead High School archives.

that she printed both letters in her memoirs. The letters are, however, differentiated by gender: where the men are urged to do their duty 'bravely', the women are to do theirs 'loyally'. In addition to the 'courage', 'energy', and 'patience' needed by the men, the women needed 'humility' and 'determination'. Both are reminded that the 'honour' of all rests on the shoulders of each one, who must give 'an example of discipline and perfect steadiness', though 'under fire' for the men, 'of character' for the women. While the men are to 'maintain the most friendly relations with those whom you are helping in this struggle', the women need only be 'courteous'; Furse may have been worried about what would happen to, or what would be thought of, obviously 'friendly' young women. While the men need only be 'considerate', the women had to be 'unselfish'. The letters then diverged significantly. Kitchener ended with a warning against looting, and against French wine and women: duty could not be done 'unless your health is sound'. Furse added several paragraphs in praise of humility, compliance, patience, and generosity – especially to the Red Cross. The religious imagery, including the addition of a specially written 'Red Cross Prayer' on the back of the letter, is more explicit. Both the letter and the prayer explicitly portray volunteer nursing as displaced labour for men fighting in the trenches.¹

All VADs serving in military hospitals were required to be single; twenty-one-years old at home, and twenty-three abroad. These age limits, however, were regularly circumvented. Although married men were expected to join the army, married women were presumed to make family obligations their top priority, even during a national crisis. Although the 'host of women who have too many home ties to give themselves entirely to war work'² were not excused by these commitments from other duties, the expectations of them were markedly different. Immediately after the outbreak of war, the women's magazine *The Lady* suggested in August an appropriate outlet for the patriotism of its readers: 'The fact one cannot bear arms does not excuse any one from helping their country's cause by fighting such foes as misery, pain and poverty.'³ This opinion was anything but controversial; work on behalf of the local needy had been the responsibility of upper- and middle-class women for centuries. Unpaid, of course, it was the only full-time work before the war which did not require a lady to jeopardize her social status.⁴

¹ Katharine Furse, *Hearts and Pomegranates: The Story of Forty-Five Years, 1875-1920* (London, 1940), pp. 333-5. When Lady Ampthill took over the VADs after Furse's resignation in 1917, she amended the letter significantly.

² Barbara McLaren, *Women of the War* (London, 1917), p. 81.

³ Nicola Beauman, *A Very Great Profession: The Woman's Novel, 1914-1939* (London, 1983), p. 16.

⁴ See Jane Lewis, *Women and Social Action in Victorian and Edwardian England* (Aldershot [UK],

Such social work seemed to Victorians and Edwardians an appropriate extension of women's influence over their own domestic 'sphere', the family, rather than an invasion of the public sphere, the domain of men and unwomanly women. Owing to its respectability and the perception of it as service, full-time social work provided an acceptable sublimation for many women of ambitions otherwise thwarted.¹ Obligation to the family had always to be placed above that owed to the community. From the path-breaking reformer Octavia Hill onwards, middle-class women never publicly questioned the primacy of the family.

This language of service applied as clearly in wartime. Whereas men proved their worth to the nation publicly by military service, women proved theirs by the traditional extension of private responsibility into social work. The outbreak of war did not introduce new ideas of service for middle-class women; it merely shifted their focus. Whereas, before the war, women visited poor families, worked in girls' clubs, and worried about the health of infants, after August 1914 they collected supplies for hospitals and helped Belgian refugees and needy soldiers and their families. Gilbert Stone lists an impressive number of such groups: the Primrose League, the Women's Service Bureau, the Union of Jewish Women, the Victoria League, Queen Mary's Needlework Guild, Lady Sclater's Workrooms, the Belgravia Workrooms and Supply Depot, Lady Smith-Dorrien's Hospital Bag Fund, the Mesopotamia Comforts Fund, and the 'Disabled Soldiers' Aid Committee' of the Friends of the Poor.²

The work done by such organizations was varied. The Soldiers' and Sailors' Families Association, which before 1914 had helped wives 'off the strength', took over the administration of their pensions.³ Women formed the majority, if not the leadership, of myriad groups which sprang up to help Belgian refugees in England; to find them housing, food and clothing, medical treatment, and work.⁴ Following the first rush of enthusiasm, many women quickly became disenchanted, however, especially when the Belgians, emulating the 'undeserving' poor and natives in the colonies, failed to be sufficiently grateful.

Many women sent care packages to prisoners of war (known colloquially

1991), p. 2.

¹ Lewis, *Women and Social Action*, p. 304; Carol Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England* (London, 1981), p. 74.

² Gilbert Stone, 'War Organizations for Women', in *Women War Workers*, ed. Stone, pp. 289-94, 298, 302-5.

³ Few men in the ranks had permission to marry, and only their wives received spousal allowances; other women were considered to be 'off the strength'. See Susan Pedersen, 'Gender, Welfare, and Citizenship in Britain during the Great War,' *American Historical Review*, xcvi (1990), 292.

⁴ See Peter Calahan, *Belgian Refugee Relief in England during the Great War* (New York, 1982), esp. pp. 176-7.

as 'adopting' a POW), or knitted socks and mufflers for soldiers at the front and bought them cigarettes and chocolate. As part of her contribution to the war effort, Mrs L. Hayman, a Sunday-school teacher, also wrote to many of her former pupils.¹ Care was taken to try to forestall misunderstandings between the classes and the sexes:² in explaining the work of the Comforteers, who visited wounded soldiers in the wards, took them out for drives and on picnics, and to the theatre and concerts, Mrs Gordon-Stables warned the other ladies, for ladies they must be, to exercise tact in their relations with Tommies, lest they should give them the wrong idea about who they were and why they were there. She was confident, however, that the women's superior social skills would enable them to handle any potentially awkward situations.³

Whole families of middle-class women, like the Beale clan, met the demand for social service as war service almost automatically. Helen Beale's sister, Dorothy Brown, made slippers at a War Work Centre; another sister, Amy Worthington, sewed clothing and blankets for Belgian Hospitals and convalescent camps in Brittany and Normandy; her sister-in-law, Sylvia Beale, worked at the nearby Hospital Supply Depot, making swabs and bandages; her cousin, Daisy Moss, did POW work after VAD nursing proved too hard for her; another cousin, Sybil Field, while trying to decide whether to leave home and nurse full time, 'adopted' a prisoner of war.⁴ Helen's mother sent parcels to an enlisted POW, who came to see her and to thank her after his release; afterwards, she sent him to have tea with the maids: 'The maids must have had a lively afternoon.'⁵ For these women, the war provided opportunities which were different in particulars but generally similar to the philanthropic work they had been brought up to take for granted as their duty to society.

The work these women did met with almost universal approval, because it resembled pre-war social work while extending the 'family' to include the needs of the military and their families, and civilian casualties. Lieutenant Denis Barnett, a young volunteer officer, wrote to his sister praising her work for refugees with the Croix Rouge.⁶ Olive Dent, while a VAD in France, told the knitters and other 'comforteers' back in England who might be chafing at their more tedious, less glamorous work, that it was highly appreciated: 'You are doing some of the most valuable war service.

¹ IWM, DD 88/51/1.

² For a contrasting view of France, see Susan R. Grayzel, 'Mothers, Mairaines, and Prostitutes: Morale and Morality in First World War France', *International History Review*, xix (1997), 66-82.

³ Mrs L. Gordon-Stables, 'The Comforteers', in *Women War Workers*, ed. Stone, pp. 228-30, 232.

⁴ Brown to Beale, 24 Sept. [1915], Worthington to Beale, 21 Nov. [1915²], Sylvia Beale to Beale, 7 Nov. [1915], Moss to Beale, 3 Jan. 1916, Field to Beale, 7 Nov. 1915, Beale Papers.

⁵ Margaret A. Beale to Beale, 19 Feb. [1919], *ibid.*

⁶ Barnett to his sister, 22 June 1915, IWM, DD 67/196/1.

The comfort supplying department is as necessary to the Army Medical Service as the Commissariat or the Clothing Department is to the army in the field. The fighting forces are infinitely glad of the existence of Sister Susies and their nimble fingers.¹ The impressive output of the volunteers at the Central Workrooms were held as proof 'that women of the country, to whom more conspicuous service has been denied, have indeed achieved miracles of devoted industry'.²

* * *

By contrast, when women's war work did not fit as neatly with class and gender, both the work and the women who did it were seen as problematic, and even threatening. The ideal of service equivalent to soldiers held up to the VADs, for example, was not applied to the women who might have seemed the more obvious candidates: the members of paramilitary and auxiliary groups. In fact, women who wore military-style uniforms aroused grave suspicions. This was true of both the Women's Legion and Women's Volunteer Reserve (WVR), voluntary organizations set up in the early stages of the war, and the official organizations, the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC), the Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS), and the Women's Royal Air Force (WRAF), which came later. Though all were women's 'military' organizations, the two groups were more different than similar. Both put women into military-style uniforms and trained them on the parade ground to march, and although both were seen by outsiders as 'women soldiers', they represented different social classes, motivations, and ideas about gender roles and war service.

The sub-group of volunteers who sought to contribute to the war effort in a more soldierly style – to emulate what their brothers were doing in the army – were the 'upper-class Amazons' of the WVR.³ One of them, Winnifred Adair-Roberts, became a captain after learning that 'practically everyone I knew had joined the war in some capacity or another'.⁴ She took parade and drill very seriously, and was disappointed when the inexperience of 'recruits' prevented her from giving them any 'invigorating drill'.⁵ After quarrels with her senior officers, she resigned in October 1915, taking half her company with her to form the independent 'Captain Roberts' Company'. Hers was an effort to preserve an army style despite increasing resistance to militarism from within women's organizations.

¹ Dent, *VAD in France*, p. 148.

² McLaren, *Women of the War*, p. 83.

³ See Arthur Marwick, *The Deluge: British Society and the First World War* (New York, 1965), p. 88.

⁴ Adair-Roberts, narrative of her Swiss 'holiday' in Aug. 1914 [preceding her personal papers], p. 36, IWM, DD 89/20/1.

⁵ Adair-Roberts, 'Official Reports for A Company, WVR', IWM, DD 89/20/1.

One of her former comrades, who signed herself 'Reeves' (adopting a masculine form by using only her surname), and who decided not to follow Adair-Roberts, explained why in an emotional letter:

I know that if I were my brother instead of myself, and were in the Army where you can't resign, I know then that I'd have to go on with the work I was doing ... I know that he would go on ... the soldiers have as bad as this to face every day ... and I hope I shall be able to pass the test and do the work even when all the joy's gone.¹

If men could not leave the army, she could not resign from the WVR; she must carry on with the work whether or not she enjoyed it. Her sense of obligation and desire to measure up to expectations of performance echoes the words of volunteer soldiers like her brother, with whom she equated herself.

'Tingle', who held a non-commissioned rank, used even more heavily weighted language in explaining a similar decision to Adair-Roberts. Sadly pondering how few women were likely to attend the first meeting of her WVR group following Adair-Roberts's resignation, she felt that she understood 'a little bit how a boy we know felt a little while ago when he came out of a [battle]. His Batt[alio]n went up [with] 800 and came out two hours afterwards [with] 200.'² To compare resignations from the WVR with casualties among soldiers at the front was, of course, absurd. This lack of risk in battle partly precluded any legitimization of the women's paramilitary organizations. Whereas women could not fight, should not fight, and did not fight, combat experience was essential to the image of the soldier.

The unacceptable link made between men and women as 'soldiers' served as a battleground between gender identities and redefined the boundaries between them. As Violet Markham, a vocal opponent of the women's suffrage movement and supporter of women's war work, explained, the women's uniforms struck 'a wrong and jarring note' because the efforts the women were making, though worthwhile, 'hardly give [them] a claim to assume the uniforms and titles of men who have fallen on the blood-stained fields of Flanders or in the trenches at Gallipoli. These things have become the symbols of death and sacrifice. They should not be parodied by feminine guards of honour at concerts or entertainments.' Markham's letter was one of a number published by the *Morning Post* in the summer of 1915, which overwhelmingly condemned women who

¹ Reeves to Adair-Roberts, 20 Oct. 1915, IWM, DD 89/20/1.

² Tingle to Adair-Roberts, 25 Oct. 1915, *ibid.*

joined quasi-military organizations, 'making themselves, and, what is more important, the King's uniform, ridiculous'.¹

The idea of women wearing military-style uniforms was generally unpopular during the early phases of the war, even when disassociated from organizations such as the WVR. Women in uniform provoked fears of a sexual challenge; a woman dressed in men's clothing moved from the private to the public world, and 'public women' was a term long associated with prostitution.² When Peggy Bate plans to wear a borrowed army tunic in a show, she is forced to give up the idea. She grumbles to her boyfriend, a lieutenant, that 'some people are nasty dirty minded rotters ... it's utterly absurd 'cos I show less of myself in that than anything ... not a curve visible anywhere and my legs are one mass of knickers and puttee.' Here Bate misidentifies gender transgression as sexual transgression. The reason for the popular aversion, however, was more complex. The costume gave offence not just because it overexposed Bate's sexuality, but because it denied her femininity: she could not be allowed to seem to cast off, even emblematically, the role of a young woman, especially in wartime. Dressing as – and thus impersonating – a soldier and taking on a masculine role would have deprived her of her feminine identity as one of the 'defended'. Bate enjoyed the attention and the feeling of being put upon, but whether she felt constrained or merely wanted her boyfriend to think that she did, she told him that, in urging her not to risk social condemnation, he had 'voiced the scruples [she had] been fighting down within [her]self for the past week'.³

* * *

In contrast to the treatment of the WVR and the Women's Legion, the official women's services founded two years later were welcomed by much of the press. When the formation of the Women's Army Corps was announced in February 1917, the *Daily Express* called it 'a proof that the Government is determined to make the mobilisation of the nation a reality and not a pretence. The new invitation to woman is an acknowledgement that she is indispensable.' The following day, the paper pointed to the change that had taken place in attitudes towards women who wore military-style uniform: 'There is not the smallest doubt that, had it been

¹ Jenny Gould, 'Women's Military Services in First World War Britain', in *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars*, ed. Margaret Randolph Higonnet, Jane Jenson, Sonya Michel, and Margaret Collins Weitz (New Haven, 1987), pp. 119–20.

² See Judith R. Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State* (Cambridge, 1980) and *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Chicago, 1992). For the associations between cross-dressing and military organizations, for both men and women, see Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York, 1992), esp. pp. 55–7.

³ Bate to Brettell [1915], IWM, DD PP/MCR/169.

suggested that women should undertake work of this kind during the first months of the war, there would have been a great outcry, and the busybodies would have shaken their wise heads and said it was asking the impossible.¹ Two years of war, two years of popular acceptance of women workers in industry and especially in munitions, a year of conscription, and the recognition that if more women worked behind the lines, more men could be sent to the front, led to the more ready acceptance of women's services, now that they were officially sanctioned, not run by upper-class volunteers.²

The women's services were not, however, welcomed with enthusiasm by the public. Despite agreeing that women should 'do their bit' like the soldiers, many people continued to distrust women wearing military-style uniform, sanctioned by the war office or not. The fact that the women's services drew their recruits from different social and economic groups from their predecessors both diminished some tensions about gender and class boundaries and exacerbated others. Whereas the WVR had drawn its members almost exclusively from the upper and upper-middle classes, the WAAC, WRNS, and WRAF sought 'educated' middle-class women to act as pseudo-officers, and large numbers of working-class women to fill the ranks. The use of actual military titles was considered but ultimately rejected as unsuitable.³ Dorothy Loveday, who joined the ranks of the WAAC because she wanted to drive, told her former teacher that 'having begun by calling them officers they are now trying to change it to "Forewomen and Administrators".' Loveday's administrator 'was at College and is attractive and interesting', but her room-mate 'has been a dressmaker'.⁴

The working-class women who filled the ranks were criticized both during and after the war for not being sufficiently attuned to ideas of honour and service to the nation. As David Mitchell, who is embellishing the words of the novelist F. Tennyson Jesse, explains in a popular account of women in the First World War: it 'was not easy ... to instill a sense of military pride and etiquette [in the WAACs]. Jewelry-bedecked Tommettes were apt to stroll arm in arm with Tommies, for all the world like parlourmaids on their half day off.'⁵ Although the WAAC described

1 Gould, 'Women's Military Services', pp. 124-5, 114.

2 The Women's Volunteer Reserve was headed by the marchioness of Londonderry, though she disapproved of the more military aspects of the organization. See her memoir, *Retrospect* (London, 1938).

3 See J. M. Cowper, *A Short History of Queen Mary's Army Auxiliary Corps* (privately published, 1967), p. 22.

4 Loveday to Robertson, n.d., P[eter] L[iddle 1914-1918 Personal Experience] A[rchive, Leeds, Women Collection, Miss Dorothy] Loveday.

5 David Mitchell, *Monstrous Regiment: The Story of the Women of the First World War* (New York, 1965), p. 224. Mitchell identifies 'les soldates' and 'les Tommettes' as the French nicknames for the

might formerly have been employed as a parlourmaid, her social life, appropriate for a woman in domestic service, was thought not suitable in a woman wearing military-style uniform. Working-class women, given a new public role to play within the women's services, were also thought to lack the altruistic motivations to play it properly. As they could easily be seen as a threat to the social order, their 'morality' was constantly called into question.¹

The class-based definition of improper behaviour on the part of 'khaki girls' led to unfavourable comparisons with other groups of women working for the war, even ones with paramilitary roots. Peggy Bate, then a member of the Women's Legion driving for the war office, hastened to assure her fiancé, then a prisoner of war, that she was not a WAAC: 'Let me at once explain that to ask one of my Squad if she is a Waac [*sic*] is rather like asking a Guardsman if he's in a labour corps!' She added: 'We are the Women's Legion ... and of course the most superior thing you could dream of.'² Bate was defending her position as middle class in contrast to the predominantly working-class WAACs. While the WAACs were often compared with the other ranks of the army, Bate saw herself as an officer, like her fiancé. She even compared her salary, uniform, and costs of living (unfavourably) with those of a 'masculine subaltern', as if there were another, feminine, kind.³ Dorothy Loveday saw the difference between the two groups from the WAAC side. WAAC drivers working in London were asked either to join the Women's Legion, if they wished to stay in London, or to volunteer for duty overseas. Though Loveday herself chose the second, she said of the Women's Legion: 'the ones I have met ... think themselves very above the Wacks [*sic*] and are furious at having such riff-raff put into their corps.'⁴

Although the WAACs were sometimes praised in the press, they were required to appear in gender and class disguise. One piece recounted the experience of an American pilot, who could not say enough in appreciation of the WAACs. They were described, however, as 'the daughter of a

WAAC members, then uses 'Tommettes' as if it were English; I have never encountered it anywhere else.

¹ As an example, WAAC discharge forms rated both 'work' and 'personal character'.

² Bate to Brettell, 30 Jan. 1918, IWM, DD PP/MCR/169.

³ Bate to Brettell, 15 Jan. 1917, IWM, DD PP/MCR/169. Bate enjoyed portraying herself as a member of the army; though merely attached to the Army Service Corps as a Women's Legion driver, she referred to herself as being 'in the army'. She wrote Brettell a somewhat cryptic letter in which she explained with pride that she had been forced to eliminate detail, as it was 'censorable (doesn't that sound important?)'. Similarly, when she injured her arm starting a difficult and heavy car, she called herself 'wounded', and asked Brettell: 'Isn't it a killing that I should be wounded first after all?' Bate to Brettell, 10 Oct., 6 Nov., 14 May 1916, *ibid*.

⁴ Loveday herself had already been passed for foreign service: Loveday to Miss Robertson, 30 Dec. 1917, PLA Loveday.

theatrical manager' and 'a young war widow who was counting the hours till she could reach her small son', not as the single women from domestic service or the factories that most of them were. The pilot ended: '*it's not only their work we admire, either!*'¹ WAACs could not be praised merely for the important work they were doing as army auxiliaries, but only as socially acceptable and physically attractive. And the praise was also given by a foreigner, not by a fellow-countryman.

The reverse side of attractiveness, however, was immorality, the charge most often brought against WAACs. The very fact of being working-class women dressed in army-style uniforms at work, if behind the lines, in the traditionally masculine war zone, turned them into a threat to social stability, a threat usually portrayed in terms of sexual misconduct. Rampant unfounded rumours told of huge numbers of WAACs sent home pregnant. When Loveday first heard the rumours, she attributed the pregnancies to unsupervised mixing with soldiers. When she learned the truth – the 'number of girls sent back from France has now dwindled from 200 (rumour) to 8 (official)'² – she criticized the soldiers' hypocrisy. Soldiers whom she had rebuffed told her they 'respected women much less now than before the war and that [the women] had made themselves cheap and had no pride'. Loveday summed up the double-bind in which WAACs were caught: the men 'think that and yet they lead girls on and want to lark with them and despise them for it all the time'.³

In an attempt to redeem the WAACs' reputation, the minister of labour, G. H. Roberts, spoke out in February 1918 in their support; the archbishop of Canterbury echoed him in the same month after having visited the troops in France the previous July; and the war office set up in March 1918 a commission of enquiry. The commission, of which both Violet Markham and the Independent Labour Party organizer Julia Varley were members, described the WAACs, who resented the slur on their characters, as 'a healthy, cheerful, self-respecting body of hard-working women, conscious of their position as links in the great chain of the Nation's purpose, and zealous in its service'.⁴ Dorothy Pickford, a WAAC administrator (or 'officer') in France, told her sister that everyone was 'furious that a word should be said against them'. She added that the controversy had arisen from differing class-based ideas of 'good behaviour'. The WAACs had their own moral code, which might be different from other people's, but they kept to it and were not likely to change it. Compared with the Girls'

1 Hilda M. Love, 'America and the "WAACs"', newspaper clipping [no publication information], IWM, DD 86/48/1.

2 Loveday to Robertson, 6 Feb. 1918, PLA Loveday.

3 Loveday to Robertson, n.d. [Jan. 1918?], PLA Loveday.

4 Cowper, *Queen Mary's Army Auxiliary Corps*, pp. 42-51.

Clubs for which she had previously worked, their 'behaviour is exceedingly good'.¹ Not good enough, however, for many members of the general public, who continued to question WAAC morality. As a racy cartoon in *Sporting Times* asked: 'Would you rather have a slap in the eye or a WAAC on the knee?'²

Although the WRNS and WRAF – founded after the WAAC in early 1918 and smaller – suffered from some of the same associations, they, too, were ultimately given a patriotic stamp of approval by the government and the high command. Furse, who left the VADs to become commandant of the WRNS, was pleased to find her task easier. At first, the admiralty was obstructive, but her attempts to model the WRNS to the traditions of the Royal Navy, so far as women could follow them, ultimately bore fruit. Charles Walker of the admiralty told Furse in November 1918 that 'the way you have caught on to the true Navy spirit is one of the secrets of the extraordinary success of the W.R.N.S.'³ The first lord of the admiralty, Eric Geddes, was even more lavish in his praise:

[O]f all the women's Services which the War has brought into being, there is none which in my opinion has attained the general high standard and the absolute absence from reproach of any kind which the W.R.N.S. has maintained throughout ... Their work, general deportment, conduct, and business-like smartness have won for them a place in the heart of the Navy which few of us foresaw when the Service was started, and I am grateful to yourself and those who have had the framing of the Organization for what you have done for the Navy and for the credit you have brought to the great Service to which you belong.⁴

Notice that the WRNS, a small group set up late in the war, were praised by the admiralty for their social attributes – 'general deportment, conduct, and business-like smartness' – more than for their tangible contribution to the war effort, which consisted of clerical work and driving, summed up simply as 'work'.

The Royal Family made efforts to improve perceptions of the women's military services. The WRNS and WRAF were explicitly grouped with their corresponding military branches by the king, who on the day the Armistice was signed, sent a message of 'praise and thankfulness to the officers, men, and women of the Royal Navy and Marines'.⁵ Similarly, he marked the contribution of the WRAF by thanking the 'officers, men and women of the Royal Air Force [who] have splendidly maintained our just

¹ Pickford to her sister Molly, 14 March 1918, IWM, DD Con Shelf, Hon. D. F. Pickford.

² Quoted in Mitchell, *Monstrous Regiment*, p. 226.

³ Walker to Furse, 16 Nov. 1918, PLA [Women Collection, Dame Katharine] Furse.

⁴ Geddes to Furse, 18 Nov. 1918, PLA Furse.

⁵ M. H. Fletcher, *The WRNS: A History of the Women's Royal Naval Service* (London, 1989), p. 23.

cause'.¹ Though these congratulations nominally equated the men of the military with the women of the support services, the women were clearly not considered to have been of equal importance, and public concern did not abate. However, criticism never reached the virulent height of that aimed repeatedly at the WAAC, which continued even after Queen Mary attempted to legitimate them by giving her name to the corps. The WRNS, like the WRAF, was established relatively late in the war, and its tardy arrival may have saved it from much of the condemnation directed at the established and well-publicized WAAC, the only one of the three women's military organizations officially designated 'auxiliary'.

* * *

Women working in industry for the first time, especially in munitions factories, faced similar charges of lack of patriotism and of sexual and social misconduct. Although recruiting and propaganda emphasized the patriotic link between the women who made the weapons and the men who used them in the trenches, and the tiny group of middle- and upper-class munitions workers was held up as an example of patriotic sacrifice, working-class women factory workers were criticized for wanting higher wages and for spending them in the wrong way. Images of patriotic women linked to soldiers in the trenches conflicted with images of the socially threatening independent woman worker.

Though working-class women predominated, and class-based tensions certainly existed between them and the few middle- and upper-class women, the factory was portrayed in propaganda as a melting-pot, in which women from all classes worked side by side for the greater good of the nation in its time of crisis. L. K. Yates reported seeing 'the daughter of an earl, a shopkeeper's widow, a graduate from Girton, [and] a domestic servant' working side by side.² Ethel Alec-Tweedie described 'every class' happily working together: 'well-educated ladies ... parlour-maids ... [and] the usual factory hands'. Barbara McLaren found 'a soldier's wife from a city tenement, a vigorous daughter of the Empire from a lonely Rhodesian farm, a graduate from Girton, and a scion of one of the old aristocratic families of England'.³ The classes are carefully and, if unconsciously, deliberately balanced; the colonial daughter rushing to the aid of her British 'mother' shows an especially delicate and perceptive touch. Such idealized groups, if they existed, must have been very rare.

¹ 'The King's Message to the Royal Air Force', PLA [Women Collection], Miss J. G. Lambert.

² L. K. Yates, *The Woman's Part: A Record of Munitions Work* (New York [1918]), p. 9.

³ Ethel Alec-Tweedie, *Women and Soldiers* (London, [1918]), pp. 31-2; McLaren, *Women of the War*, p. 52.

Naomi Loughlan and Monica Cosens, two middle-class women who wrote positively about their war work in munitions factories, had no doubt that class did affect attitudes to the war. Whereas Loughlan's 'stern sense of duty' was her 'only weapon of defence' against sleeping while on night shift, 'ordinary factory hands have little to help keep them awake [because] they lack interest in their work because of the undeveloped state of their imaginations ... they do not definitely connect the work they are doing with the trenches.' Working-class women needed to understand that they were working for the nation, and not merely for the wages they earned, a standard which revealed a strong class bias. To prove her point, Loughlan told the story of a 'girl, with a face growing sadder and paler as the days went by because no news came from France of her "boy" who was missing, [who] when gently urged to work harder and not go to sleep so often, answered, with angry indignation: "Why should I work any harder? My mother is satisfied with what I takes home of a Saturday."' Similarly, Cosens described a group of workers clustered around a newspaper. As 'they look[ed] eager, excited, pleased,' she supposed that 'there [must have] been a great victory.' When she joined them, however, she discovered that they were talking of 'the portrait of a new cinema star'. How 'queer' they are: 'their work is so vital to the war, and yet how that war is progressing is to them a secondary thought.'¹

Lack of patriotism, however, took second place to obsession with wages in the unflattering representations of working-class women munitions workers. Many women *were* earning more money than they had ever done before, particularly if they had been in domestic service. Their wages, however, were regularly portrayed as excessive, and spent on extravagant display which centred on the women's bodies: fur coats (reserved for upper- and middle-class women) and jewellery – the favourite examples – or an 'orgy of silver bags and chiffons'. Supposedly, more money was spent on 'clothes, especially underclothes', in 1917 than 1915, primarily at 'second, third, and fourth-class shops'.² In fact, although the ministry of munitions ordered employers to pay women at the same rate for the same work as men, many of them paid women less. The simplest way to get around the order was by new job descriptions; if a woman was not doing exactly the same tasks as the man she replaced, the wage could be cut. Similarly, some jobs were redesigned to include a minimal amount of heavy physical work for which women were said to be unsuited. In April 1918, men working in the national shell factories earned on average

¹ Naomi Loughlan, 'Munition Work', in *Women War Workers*, ed. Stone, pp. 32-3; Monica Cosens, *Lloyd George's Munition Girls* (London, [1916]), pp. 80-1.

² Alec Tweedie, *Women and Soldiers*, pp. 77, 67.

£4.6s.6d. per week; in the national projectile factories, they earned £4.14s.8d. Women were paid half as much: £2.2s.4d. and £2.16s.8d. respectively.¹

Several journalists tried unsuccessfully to quash the rumours of extravagance among women munitions workers. How odd, said one, that 'wealthy leisured women, who bought fur coats themselves, should complain about factory girls buying clothes with their hard-earned wages'.² Men, too, were criticized for demanding higher wages, but not to the same degree or with the same virulence as women. Her freedom to travel, live away from home, and work fewer hours in less supervised circumstances than in domestic service turned the financially independent young unmarried woman (the culprit in the popular mind, despite the large numbers of married women and mothers who worked in the factories) into a gender as well as a class threat to the social order at a time when men were dying in France to defend it.³

Extravagance pointed to drunkenness, which in turn pointed to 'loose' sexual behaviour, even prostitution. These complaints were heard early in the war, even before large numbers of women began to work in the munitions factories. As a result, the Liquor Control Board set up a committee in October 1915 to assess drinking habits among women. Although no evidence of increased consumption was discovered, the board kept its eye on women; even so, near the end of the war the chairman, Viscount D'Abernon, announced that drunkenness had decreased by seventy-three per cent since 1914. He added that 'occupation, steady wages, and an independent, self-supporting career have developed the best qualities in women, have increased their self-respect and self-control, and have been in all respects – particularly from the health aspect – profoundly beneficial to the community'.⁴ Such reports did little to change the popular image of unmarried working women, any more than they had changed the image of the WAACs.

Efforts were made to meet the criticism by showing off the patriotism of

¹ Angela Woollacott, *On Her Their Lives Depend: Munitions Workers in the Great War* (Berkeley, 1994), p. 115. '“Equal pay” ... was solely intended to win over men's unions to the process of dilution. Nor in practice was it paid': Deborah Thom, 'Women and Work in Wartime Britain,' in *The Upheaval of War: Family, Work, and Welfare in Europe, 1914-1918*, ed. Richard Wall and Jay Winter (Cambridge, 1988), p. 305.

² 'Munition Girls Are Not Too Well Paid', *Daily Mail*, 13 April 1916, quoted in Braybon, *Women Workers*, p. 167.

³ Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up*, p. 113; Woollacott, *On Her Their Lives Depend*, p. 133. For an interesting but over-argued view on the discursive transcription of munitions work on women's bodies as a form of social control, see Claire Culleton, 'Gender-Charged Munitions: The Language of World War I Munitions Reports', *Women's Studies International Forum*, xi (1988), 109-16.

⁴ Quoted in Woollacott, *On Her Their Lives Depend*, p. 127. The legal hours for the sale of alcohol were restricted during the war.

women munitions workers. Loughlan denied that working-class women needed the money and equated them with war-profiteers, by urging 'no more [of them to] join us for the sake of mammon'.¹ Cosens, however, thought that the women she knew, who lived in hostels, were 'home-birds' who missed their families. Their feelings disproved

the idea that some people have that Lloyd George's girls only work for the sake of the wages. Of course, they could not afford to give their services, but they might find other work nearer home, less heavy and less irksome. They realize munitions are vital to the conclusion of the War, and they want to help by making them, no matter what discomforts they are called upon to bear.²

By reassuring her readers that working-class women were emotionally tied to their homes and families, Cosens presented them, despite their new financial independence, not only as patriotic but also as not threatening the social order. To make the same point, a newspaper headlined the last words to her father of Florence Gleave, a munitions worker who died from TNT poisoning: 'If I die, they can only say I have done my bit.'³

Here, Gleave's death is portrayed as selfless patriotism and equated with the deaths of soldiers in the trenches. Similar accounts claimed that women in munitions were 'working for the country as vitally as the soldiers', and if they should die, were equally deserving of a military funeral as any soldier killed in the trenches. Minnie, the heroine of 'A Story of Munition Life', serialized in *The Limit* factory magazine, tells her sweetheart that her holidays will probably not match his leave, as she must answer a higher call: 'I'm going to do real work now – Munitions are wanted dreadfully.'⁴ Both women and men must meet the demands of their war work; the factory and the army being equally beyond their control. In a similar story, a parlourmaid seems unrealistically self-denying. Before he leaves for France, she tells her fiancé, who was 'amongst the first batch of the New Army who went to the front' in 1916:

You are off to do your bit, God bless you, and you will be constantly in my thoughts and my prayers; but I do not suppose we shall meet again for many months – perhaps longer – and I am going to spring a mine upon you, not a German mine, old chap, but a truly British one. While you are at the front firing shells, I am going into a munition factory to make shells. The job will not be as well paid as domestic service, it will not be as comfortable as domestic service; it

¹ Loughlan, 'Munition Work', p. 34.

² Cosens, *Munition Girls*, pp. 119–20.

³ Woollacott, *On Her Their Lives Depend*, p. 82.

⁴ 'Minnie Phelps: A Story of Munitions Life: Chapter II', in *The Limit*, no. 4 (Oct. 1918), IWM, DD 76/103/1; McLaren, *Women of the War*, p. 29; Alec-Tweedie, *Women and Soldiers*, p. 34.

will be much harder work, but it will be my bit, and every time you fire your gun you can remember I am helping to make the shells.¹

He answers: 'Well done, my girl, it is splendid of you.'

Other men were less keen to see the women they loved working in munitions factories. Private G. F. Wilby wrote from East Africa to his fiancée, Ethel Baxter, a barmaid in London, to discourage her:

Whatever you do, don't go in Munitions or anything in that line – just fill a Woman's position and remain a woman – don't develop into one of those 'things' that are doing men's work, as I told you in one of my letters, long ago. I want to return and find the same loveable little woman that I left behind – not a coarse thing more of a man than a woman – I love you because of your womanly little ways and nature, so don't spoil yourself by carrying on with a man's work – it's not necessary.²

To Wilby, the work of a barmaid, however heavy, suited a working-class woman, but factory work was inherently masculine.³ Patriotism should not ask women to reconstruct their gender.

Wilby's feelings did not change when he learned that Ethel had ignored his advice: he was 'not at all pleased about it – in fact [he was] very cross'. He did not like '[his] little girl helping to make shells to blot out human lives ... [she wasn't] made for such a thing – [she was] really made to bring lives into the World.'⁴ Working in munitions factories made women unwomanly, and Wilby emphasized his wish to preserve Ethel's femininity (and corresponding passivity) through his use of the diminutive 'little girl'. Ethel was not too girlish, however, to be entrusted with the responsibility of reproduction; women, in the view expressed by Wilby, were inherently associated with the production of human beings, not weapons.

This maternal argument was at times turned around by some patriots. Hall Caine suggested that women answered the call to munitions work because they had always done it: 'For every war that has yet been waged women have supplied the first and greatest of all munitions – men.'⁵ Although Wilby went on worrying about Ethel 'because [he] thought [she] might develop coarse, manly ways', Ethel herself did not worry.⁶ This was

1 Ibid., pp. 28-9. Note the inaccuracies of the middle-class viewpoint in comparing the realities of factory work and domestic service.

2 Wilby to Baxter, 18 Aug. 1918, IWM, DD 78/31/1.

3 On more than one occasion, doctors pointed out that factory work was no more physically challenging than many of the tasks expected of women in domestic service. See, e.g., Gareth Griffiths, *Women's Factory Work in World War 1* (Phoenix Mill, UK, 1991), p. 28.

4 Wilby to Baxter, 3 Oct. 1918, IWM, DD 78/31/1.

5 Culleton, 'Gender-Charged Munitions', p. 110.

6 Wilby to Baxter, 3 Oct. 1918, IWM, DD, 78/31/1. Ethel (Baxter) Wilby gave a typewritten memoir from 1984 to the Imperial War Museum; in it she recalled that 'people didn't think much of munitions girls, but they had to do it. I thought I was doing the right thing, but evidently I shouldn't have and my

not atypical; most women munitions workers knew that they were doing what was thought of as 'men's work' but did not feel that it made them masculine.¹ Similarly, they enjoyed the feeling of making a contribution to the war effort without needing to know what was going on in France, as middle-class women felt they had to do to prove their patriotism.

The worry about the threat from working women to the social order was aggravated for middle-class women by 'the servant problem'. As a VAD sympathetically asked her mother in 1916, 'are all the servants making munitions?'² Contemporary estimates suggest that during the war between 100,000 and 400,000 women left domestic service. Although middle-class alarm about the dearth and quality of servants did not begin during the First World War, the debate did then crystallize around a specific, seemingly identifiable, cause:³ the flight from domestic service to munitions, to the women's services, and even to taking tickets on trams. When Peggy Bate helped her recently married sister set up her new flat in London, Peggy told her own sweetheart that though they had found 'laundry men butchers bakers etc.', they had 'absolutely failed to procure a maid – such things are unknown quantities since the war work for girls craze'.⁴ Bate herself considered her own war work to be important, but when working-class women left service for war work, their 'craze' was merely frivolous.

War, by opening up to women jobs previously done only by men, did give domestic servants the opportunity to earn more money. Their middle-class employers, used to lots of help in running large houses, paid the price. Mrs Beale lamented her daughter-in-law's difficulty in keeping her staff: 'her Kate and Mary' were leaving to become tram conductors; 'it seems a pity but the money tempts them.' Another of the Beale daughters, Amy Worthington, was also looking for staff, because her 'pretty Elsie and the housemaid both wish to leave to "better" themselves somehow, which is a nuisance'.⁵ Ethel Alec-Tweedie bewailed at length the insensitivity of wartime domestic servants, who remained selfishly unaware of the financial hardship suffered by their employers and failed to grasp that cleaning the house of a woman helping out in a canteen or a hospital was their 'bit of

husband wrote and said, "A nice girl like you was meant to produce, not to kill": IWM, DD, 92/49/1.

¹ See Woollacott, *On Her Their Lives Depend*, p. 213.

² Pemberton to her mother, n.d. [recd. 12 April 1916], IWM, DD, 85/33/1.

³ Woollacott, *On Her Their Lives Depend*, p. 183; Griffiths, *Women's Factory Work*, pp. 13-14. The number of women in domestic service was already known to be decreasing. See, e.g., the debate over 'education' for working-class girls who might become domestic servants in Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up*.

⁴ Bate to Brettell, 25 Dec. 1915, IWM, DD PP/MCR/169.

⁵ Margaret A. Beale to Beale, 27 Dec. [1915], Beale Papers. Sylvia herself was a bit more sympathetic to her former employees' position; though she seemed to feel a bit put out that the women were leaving after six years' service with her, she reported to Helen that the wages were very high, which allowed for saving: Sylvia Beale to Beale, 12 Dec. 1915, Margaret A. Beale to Beale, 6 Feb. [1916], Beale Papers.

war work, and ... a real help to the country'.¹ However, middle-class women liked to argue both ways. When Maggie Beale and Dorothy Brown 'cut back' on a maid or two as a 'war economy', they saw it as patriotism.² Their staff must not answer the country when it called them to the factories, but must sacrifice their meagre wages to the war effort when it suited their employers. They must not seek a new job, nor count on keeping their old one.

* * *

The flight of women during the First World War from domestic service to factories and to the women's services was doubly threatening. Because factory work was almost invariably better paid, the financial – and therefore physical – independence of a traditionally subordinate and dependent group increased class tensions. Because the new work had previously been done only by men, the power and status which accompanied the new work increased gender tensions. These parallel tensions constantly distorted the image of patriotic self-sacrifice employed both to mobilize women in the war effort and to contain the social threat that their new work entailed. Thus, the image of the patriot who was 'doing one's bit' constantly overlapped with the image of the immoral profligate. Working-class women suffered most. Whether working in industry or in the women's services, they were condemned for caring too little about the war effort and caring too much about their wages and new styles of life. The more their spending habits illustrated their independence, the greater the threat perceived from them to the social order which must be buttressed at home in order to justify the deaths of millions of young men overseas.

For the same reason, the women dressed in military-style uniforms who filled the ranks of the women's services could not be treated as the female equals of soldiers. Their role as 'khaki girls' undermined the social order which the soldiers were fighting to preserve: men defended women; women did not take independent action for themselves. Ideally, women were seen to be suited to only two types of war work: the first was part-time, cutting up bandages and knitting while looking after one's family. The second was volunteer nursing, the only full-time work for women untainted by professionalism, unthreatening because it was nurturing and healing – inherently women's work. Peggy Brown was correct: a volunteer nurse was, for a woman, 'as good as a soldier'.

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¹ Alec-Tweedie, *Women and Soldiers*, pp. 41-2.

² Margaret S. Beale to Beale, 10 Oct. 1917; Brown to Beale, 24 March [1916], Beale Papers.