'Suffering and Service': The Role of Australian Women During the Great War

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La guerre mondiale a forcé les femmes australiennes à adopter un rôle traditionnel. Pour celles qui ont essayé d'échapper à ce rôle, ces années ont apporté des frustrations intenses.

'...War at all times, makes its call upon women, not only for suffering but for service ...'

'...The women wait; theirs is the harder part
For them no clarion call to Victory's heights,
No glorious thrill of flight, no crown of Fame ...
... In dull suspense
The women wait; theirs is the harder part ...'

The Great War had a shattering and lasting impact on Australian society.

Much has been written about Australia's involvement in the war, but little mention has been made of the actions and experiences of women. There has been an almost complete lack of recognition of the work they did (or, as was so often the case, *tried* to do).

Our understanding of the war and its effects has been limited greatly because research has been confined to the masculine experience. We are left with the stereotypes of women knitting socks, and handing out white feathers — gross over-simplifications.

Frequently, 19th and 20th century wars have been seen as stepping-stones on the pathway to female emancipation. The argument is often that, in the absence of men, women are called upon to fill new roles and to shoulder new responsibilities. As a result, both men's and women's attitudes regarding women's capabilities are challenged and changed. In the inevitably different society following war, the position and status of women are improved.

Such was not the effect of the Great War on Australian society. Two influential factors were: distance from the front, and lack of conscription.

Before the war, Australian women were in a relatively good position. All were enfranchised by 1908. The period between Federation in 1901 and the outbreak of war in 1914 had seen the passing and implementation of progressive social legislation.

Visitors to Australia, such as Jessie Ackermann, considered it to be a country with great potential for equality between the sexes. Although Ackermann observed obvious signs of discrimination, she also saw the evolution of a new breed of women, often moving away from the domestic sphere, entering the professions and playing a greater role in the public sphere.

The war caused a marked polarization of acceptable male and female roles. Acceptable roles for women were those related to motherhood, domesticity and tending the sick. Other roles were discouraged.

For most women, the war experience was vicarious. Early in the war, women's magazines began to publish lists of names of women who had relatives at the front. Soon there were additions to these lists — heavy black borders and titles ('Fallen Heroes') — as the lists of men became lists of casualties. Women asked for, and received, badges to signify that they had sons and husbands away.

Huge amounts of energy were channelled into fund-raising and providing comforts for 'our boys'. Traditional feminine skills such as knitting, sewing and baking were glorified in magazines and pursued with vigour in practice.

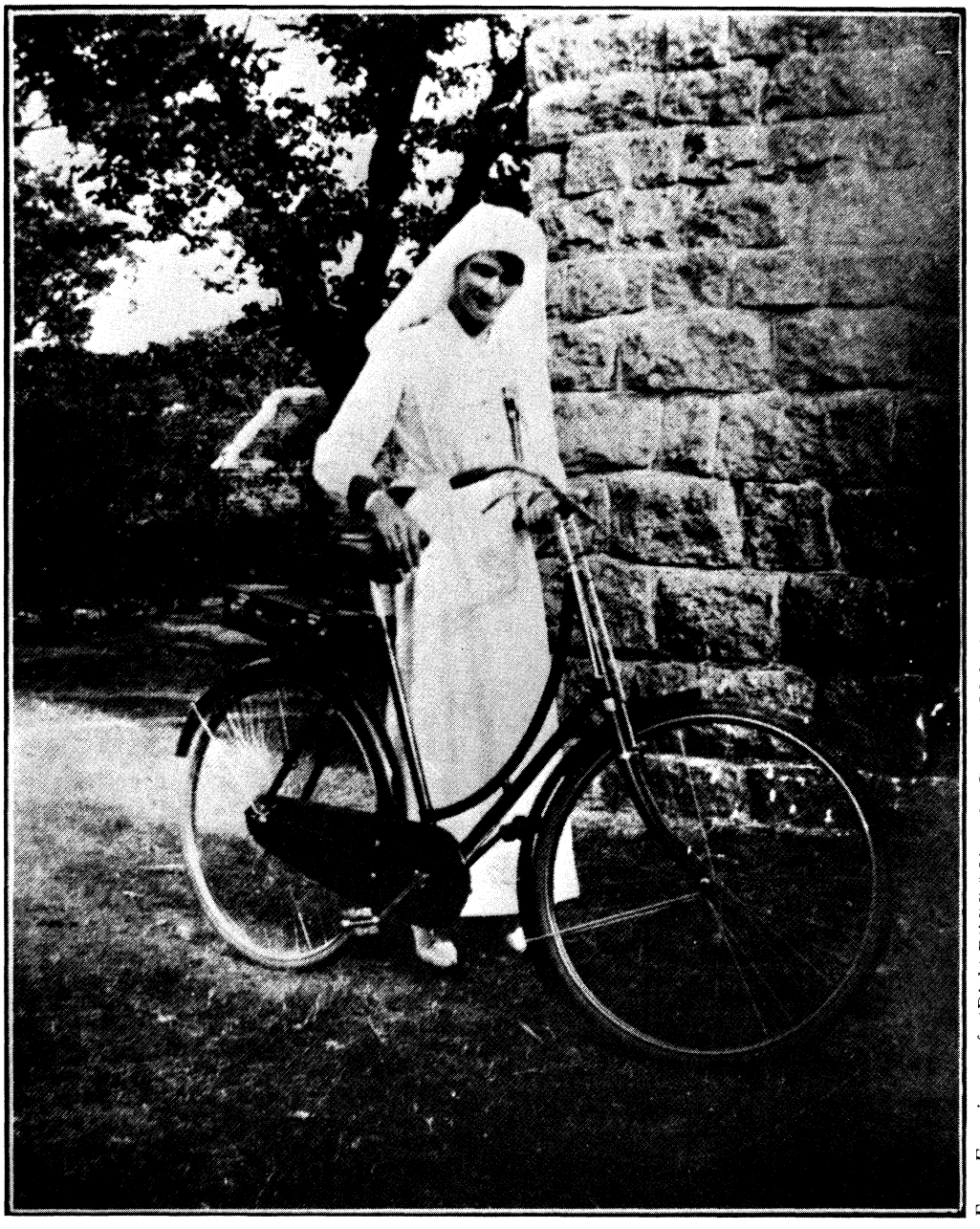
Many Australian women, both individually and in organized groups such as the Red Cross, were swept up in the great sock-knitting marathon. Many knitted vast quantities of socks (and balaclavas and mittens).

There was something of a religious fervour surrounding the whole exercise. Special dispensations allowed knitting in churches. Poems were published about knitters and the accomplished Sydney artist, Grace Cossington-Smith, painted *The Sock Knitter* in 1915.

The knitters proved to be resourceful — when they ran out of knitting needles they used bicycle spokes. They dyed wool, using onion skins. The Red Cross, mindful that many knitters were more enthusiastic than capable, published booklets of 'Shocking Examples', in an effort to cut down waste!

But much of the work proved to be futile. Socks sent to hospitals in India went mouldy because of the heat. Others were so uncomfortable that soldiers claim to have worn them as ear muffs.

The efforts of the women reflect their complete inability to imagine the soldiers' lives. One group of Melbourne women was pledged to sending a sprig of lavender to each Australian soldier at the front. The gap between expectations of the war, and the hideous nightmare reality of the trenches was immense, but hardly



From *Experiences of a 'Dinki-Di' RRC Nurse* by Gertrude Moberly

Australian matron, Gertrude Moberly, at a hospital in India during the First World War

surprising given the distance, and censorship.

Motherhood was extolled. 'Baby Weeks' were held at the Melbourne Town Hall and included among exhibits were 'model babies' procured from institutions. There was a sickening correlation between increasing deaths at the front and increasing emphasis on motherhood. Those killed had to be replaced. Having babies was part of the war effort.

Women were the targets for much of the propaganda during recruitment campaigns and the bitter and unsuccessful conscription campaigns of 1916 and 1917. There were constant and conflicting appeals to mothers:

. . . Was it your look that held me back
When I heard the trumpet call?
Jack lies out there in glorious rest
Billy and Ted and all.
And I sit here and think of them
They wished me to I know
But now it's too late to follow them all
Or to pay the debt I owe.
Was it your look that held me back?
Oh! Mother dear, was it you? . . .

And from the anti-conscriptionists:

. . . Why is your face so white, Mother?
Why do you choke for breath?'
'O I have dreamt in the night,
my son,
That I doomed a man to death . . .

Nurses and masseuses were amongst the few women who left Australia to serve overseas. They were acceptable because they posed no threat to men; their role was seen to be an extension of the maternal domestic one. According to the *Official History of the Australian Army Medical Services 1914-18*, necessary qualities for nurses included '. . . a strongly developed *maternal instinct* . . .', and '. . . acquired domesticity . . .'.

There were restrictions. Australian nurses had to be over 25, experienced and single (or widowed). Many who were not eligible paid their own fares and joined British services.

Nurses were acceptable, women doctors were not. The authorities argued, with a spectacular lack of logic, that women doctors would be unable to cope with the conditions (with which, presumably, the nurses were coping). It was also thought that men would not work with the women doctors.

The women proved rather more determined. A number of doctors paid their own fares and joined organizations such as Dr. Elsie Inglis' Scottish Women's Hospital, working in France and Serbia.

On the home front, constant offers from women to take men's jobs met equally constant rejections.

In 1915, the Australian Women's National League made an offer of women to take the place of men, if required, in industrial and clerical work. There was no real response.

Also in 1915, a meeting was held at the Melbourne Town Hall to bring forward the cause of Universal Women's Service. Forty-two women's organizations were represented. Two-thousand names of women willing to help the country in any way were registered. There was no action from the government.

An Australian Women's Service Corps was founded in late 1916. It had a membership of 1,000 and its object was to train women to take over the duties of motor drivers, orderlies, clerks and kitchen hands, in order to release more men to fight. An offer was made to provide 200 women for such duties. A discouraging reply from the Secretary of the Defence Department thanked the Corps for its patriotic offer, but intimated that there were no such positions available in which women's services could be used. A further approach to the government met with no response.

In late 1917, two women of the original 1915 committee visited the Prime Minister urging Universal Women's Service. Once again they were rebuffed.

In March, 1918, a women's auxiliary army was formed, to be run on the lines of that which was doing war service in England and France. Seven-hundred-and-fifty names were collected — and no further mention was made of them.

In April, 1918, a group of Sydney women undertook '. . . with one voice, to proceed to Europe if desired by the authorities and undertake any work required by them, even to the point of going into the firing line . . .' It was not desired by the authorities.

When the Minister for Defence inspected the Women's Rifle Brigade, made up of volunteers from the Commonwealth Clothing Factory, he:

. . . referred to the "splendid Guard of Honour". A friend had described them as the most killing guard he had ever seen — (laughter) — as every shot they fired would go straight to the heart . . .

During the war, some single women did enter the paid workforce for the first time, often in clerical jobs. Mostly, they had to be single and employed on a temporary basis, often replacing a particular individual who had enlisted. They were paid roughly half of men's wages. They were often given mechanical tasks.

Frequently, they were recipients of patronizing comments. Women bank clerks were described in the following way:

. . . As junior clerks they are successful . . . it is probable that even after the war much of the mechanical work of the banking business will be done by women. That they will become tellers is not likely . . .

In September, 1918, one writer calculated that it took nine ordinary 'girls' to do six ordinary men's clerical work.

Most changes in employment were short-term. By 1921, the proportion of women in paid employment was basically the same as in 1911.

The war closed more doors for women than it opened. They were forced into a passive waiting role. Those who worked hard received little or no recognition (except the nurses). For those who wanted to do more than knit, the war years must have been years of intense frustration.

I sometimes wonder whether attempts to see the war providing increased opportunities for women are rationalizations — attempts to make sense of the senseless, to salvage some good from the horror that was the Great War. ⊙

I am writing a post-graduate thesis on this subject, and would be very interested in reading material about Canadian women and the First World War.

Extensive footnotes have been eliminated due to space restrictions. For information, contact CWS/CF.