

## A short introduction to the female experience of World War I in Britain

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Two million women replaced men in employment during the war. They did the jobs the men had done: milk rounds, ticket collectors, van drivers, butchers, bus conductors. Just as it would a couple of decades later, the war opened up new avenues of employment for these, mostly young, women, add to this the legions of women who took jobs in the -very well paid- munitions industry, and women were a potent labour force.

But any woman that might have hoped for a more radical revision of the labour market would be disappointed, when the men returned home, they did so to a depressed economy and mass unemployment; in the years after the war it was a not uncommon sight to see ex servicemen sleeping rough, or selling matches in the street. Anger was directed at women in the workplace who perceived as 'taking their jobs.'

However regressive the years after the war though, things *had* changed, and permanently, since the vote was granted in 1918. Popular wisdom has it that this act of largesse by the coalition government was in recognition of the work women did during the war, but since it was only for property owning women over 30 it must have been galling for those younger women who had done the majority of the war work. The franchise would only be finally extended to all women over 21 in 1928, when the labour government gave the go ahead to the so called 'flapper vote.'

Still, it was a huge victory, and the culmination of a campaign by the various women's suffrage movements which had raged for many years. But in 1918 when the war drew to a close in the novels, and diaries of contemporary women

the presiding note is one of numbed exhaustion. So many women had lost someone – whether a lover, brother or husband – it was difficult to be happy about much. At the end of the war, the diarist Cynthia Asquith wrote: “One will have to look at long vistas again instead of short ones, and one will at last fully recognise that the dead are not only dead for the duration of the war.’

Many of the generation of women born in the last years of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century would never marry. Opinions differ as to the numbers, but for thousands of women the men they knew and loved, or might have loved, were simply wiped out. Because of the way that the predominantly working class Pals battalions had been recruited- Kitchener’s plan to have men fight alongside the men they grew up with – whole communities were decimated. Among the middle and upper classes, which fielded the vast majority of officers, the losses were even greater. The average life expectancy for a Captain on the Western Front was six weeks.

This bleak outlook was not helped by the popular press. These women were pored over in public, their wounds poked and prodded. Becoming known as the ‘Surplus Women’ their fate was debated on the front pages of newspapers. In February 1920 The Daily Mail, never shy of a headline, screeched there were ‘A Million Women Too Many – 1920 Husband Hunt.’ When the 1921 census was published the headlines became even more extreme; ‘Problem of the Surplus Women 2 million who can never become wives,” and the Daily Mail again: ‘The 2 million superfluous women a disaster to the human race.’ Papers urged women to go ‘to the Colonies’, where the war had not taken such a toll.

Even within the context of the time the shrill sexism and judgement in these lines is astonishing. Not only had many of these women fought their own war– but they were drenched in survivor guilt and grief; women like Vera Brittain who after spending the war as a nurse in the V.A.D. returned to Oxford to take up the place she had left in 1915 –and struggled, tormented by nightmares. She felt herself to be ‘at the borderland of craziness.’

Making matters worse was the generation below them – eager to throw off the shackles of outmoded gender stereotypes – to cut their hair and bind their breasts so their chests were flat as a boy’s. But above all they wanted to dance. This is the generation that would usher in the Charleston, the generation that would give birth to youth culture of the 1920s– who would demand pleasure as a right and not a privilege.

This is not to say that these women did not make the most of their lives. Virginia Nicholson's book 'Singled Out' traces just how much they transformed the culture – energies which were not used for marriage and children were channelled into different, and equally productive pursuits, blazing a trail for those that came after. The maw that had opened on the Western Front, into which the Imperial powers had poured millions of their young men, was also that fault line between what went before – an Empire sure of its status in the world, - and what came after – the fracturing of certainties – the birthing of the radical, difficult, twentieth century and the extraordinary gains of the women's movement – a revolution that continues to this day.

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