



Conflicting Attitudes to the War in Europe in Women's Diaries from the Great War

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Abstract

This paper discusses the change in women's mentality towards the concept of war and their own role in it according to autobiographical sources such as was journals, diaries, letters or autobiographical novels authored by women who were present at the front during the Great War. The primary sources quoted in this analysis include letters and diaries from nurses who worked in Dr. Elsie Inglis's Scottish Women's Hospitals unit as well as the "testament" of Vera Mary Brittain, famous English Voluntary Aid Detachment nurse and writer and women's rights activist. Among the secondary sources employed in the analysis are the seminal works of Christine E. Hallett, Maxine Alterio, Santanu Das, Eric J. Leed and Claire M. Tylee. Before arriving at a conclusion, the paper highlights important changes in women's discourse towards the war as well as the way in which such changes were supported by the novel situation in which women found themselves, namely as active participants at the front, and their aspirations towards equal rights and equal treatment.

Rezumat

Această lucrare aduce în discuție schimbările din mentalitatea feminină despre conceptul de război și despre rolul acestora în cadrul războiului în ceea ce privește surse autobiografice precum jurnale, însemnări zilnice sau scrisori ale femeilor care au fost prezente pe front în timpul Marelui Război. Sursele primare citate în această analiză includ scrisorile și jurnalele asistentelor care au lucrat în unitatea Spitalelor Femeilor Scoțiene a Dr. Elsie Inglis dar și „testamentul” Verei Mary Brittain, faimoasă voluntară englezoaică în VAD (Detașamentele Voluntare de Ajutor), scriitoare și activistă pentru drepturile femeilor. Printre sursele secundare uzitate în această analiză se numără volume importante scrise de Christine E. Hallett, Maxine Alterio, Santanu Das, Eric J. Leed și Claire M. Tylee. Înainte de a ajunge la o concluzie, lucrarea de față scoate în evidență schimbările importante din discursul feminine față de război dar și modul în care aceste modificări de mentalitate s-au datorat noului statut al femeilor, adică cel de participant direct pe front, cât și datorită aspirațiilor lor către drepturi egale și tratament egal.

Keywords: World War 1; war propaganda; feminism; diaries; representations of war

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Publishers, 2019).

A discussion of the idea of Europe in autobiographies written during the Great War can only begin by looking at the ways in which war itself was thought of in such writings. Each of the who sides locked in conflict saw itself as the representative of civilized Europe and considered “the other” to be barbaric, uncivilized, and brutish.

At the beginning of the Great War the voices of those who foresaw the horrors and destruction caused by war and who actually envisaged the series of actions that had led to its outbreak were considerably fewer than those who validated the pro-war indoctrination in the political discourse of the various governments¹. There were many who thought that military victory would contribute to more equality and prosperity, and who were blinded by political propaganda, by the general spirit of optimism at the time and by the comfort brought by recent industrial developments².

An American nurse who came to Europe, Ellen N. La Motte, published *The Backwash of War* in 1916 (actually printed later due to censorship reasons) in which she described the conflict in realist, unflattering tones. Similarly, Ethel Gordon Fenwick, head of the *American Journal of Nursing's* external section, wrote in the *British Journal of Nursing* on 7 August 1915, p. 119: “We have been asked why we do not record events happening in connection with the European War. So it may be time for us to remark that the Foreign Department, at any rate, intends to boycott this particular war. The only mention it will draw from us will be denunciation of ‘war’ as a specimen of man’s stupidity. This war will get no advertising, no ‘write ups’, from the secretary of the International Council. It is a colossal piece of atavism – of return to the age of the tiger and the ape”³. She and other writers such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Catherine Marshall in Britain specifically linked pacifist ideals with more political power being awarded to women.

¹ Maxine Alterio, *Memoirs of First World War Nurses: Making Meaning of Traumatic Experiences* PhD Thesis. (Wellington: Victoria University of Wellington, 2013), 8.

² Alterio, 8.

³ Christine E. Hallett, *Veiled Warriors: Allied Nurses of the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 124.

Victoria Stewart notes that "abstract ideas about war took prevalence over actual knowledge, and the clash between ideals and practicality was a difficult one to reconcile"⁴ as regards the general perception of the war at the front as well as at home. In his acclaimed work, *No Man's Land: Combat and Identity in World War 1*, Eric J. Leed highlights the difference between two concepts in reporting the situation on the front: "the military way" and "militarism"⁵. "The military way" refers to a discourse about war in which practical aspects are brought to the foreground, while "militarism" means a "system of images, symbols, and rituals designed to express the character of the 'warrior' and the character of the community in which he is at home"⁶.

The women who came to the front found themselves in an unprecedented situation. Laurie Kaplen shows that these ladies belonged to "The new generation of young women, some of whom had never seen a naked man, much less a suppurating wound or mangled body..."⁷. Many questions arise: how would these women cope with the new setting they found themselves in? What did they make of this male universe, the war theatre – coupled with the operation theatre – some of them were suddenly admitted to?

Vera Brittain noted in her famous war diary, *Testament of Youth*, that the nurses or journalists that went to the front longed to be heroic, but the administration only permitted them a secondary role in war and concluded: "Women get all the dreariness of war, and none of its exhilaration"⁸. The assumption that, for men, war is 'exhilarating' imparts the traditionalistic/imperialistic perception of war propagated by the government(s). One of the most important pieces of literature when discussing the way women saw their relationship with the men on the front is Claire M. Tylee's *The Great War and Women's Consciousness. Images of*

⁴ Victoria Stewart, *Women's Autobiography, War and Trauma* (New York: Macmillan, 2003), 36.

⁵ Eric J. Leed, *No Man's Land: Combat and Identity in World War 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 56-57 qtd. in Stewart, 36.

⁶ Leed, 57 qtd. in Stewart, 36.

⁷ Kaplan, Laurie, "When the War Was Over: The Return of the War Nurse." in *Writings of Persuasion and Dissonance in the Great War*, eds. David Owen & Cristina Pividori (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 69.

⁸ Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth* (London: Virago, 1978), 104.

Militarism and Womanhood in Women's Writings 1914-1964, which has become one of the fundamental works on women's war writings. Paul Fussell, was concerned with what men wrote during the Great War, Tylee did the same but focused on women. She highlights how nurses or other women present on the front fail to see behind their government's propaganda and were 'easy victims' of it, not because of the legislation that prohibited any anti-war texts (*Defence of the Realm Act*, 1914), but because they lacked the intellectual flexibility required to adopt a different perspective on war, even after dealing with the horrible suffering of their patients. Christine E. Hallett calls this "the mental straitjacket of their upbringing within a patriarchal and imperialistic society"⁹.

Claire M. Tylee uses the phrase "the heroic pageantry of war" to refer to the spirit of adventure which captivated many young men and women – who had no idea about the horror and trauma they would witness and suffer – on the eve of the First World War. The same scholar shows that women had trouble in finding a language that was adequate to describe their experiences during the war because "The idea of war was intimately connected with many other values of Western culture. To challenge its heroic image was to undermine ideas fundamental to their world and to their conception of history"¹⁰.

Nevertheless, the famous World War 1 poster that reads "Are YOU in this?" displays, in a chain of work, what each social category should be doing to support the soldiers at the front: men and women on the "home front" are depicted working in the production of ammunition, while on the real front soldiers are first assisted by boy scouts who are passing them bullets, and only then by women nurses (*sic!*), who are described as "dispensing care rather than treatment"¹¹, and certainly not driving ambulance cars or using X-ray devices. For the government's and the

⁹ Hallett 2014, 4.

¹⁰ Claire M. Tylee, *The Great War and Women's Consciousness. Images of Militarism and Womanhood in Women's Writings 1914-1964* (London: Macmillan, 1990), 20.

¹¹ Heather Kate MacNamara, "Are not All Angels Ministering Spirits": *Representations of British Military Nurses and the First World War*. Master of Arts thesis manuscript. Kingston: National Library of Canada, 1998, on-line: https://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/obj/s4/f2/dsk2/tape17/PQDD_0002/MQ28228.pdf, 81.

military authorities' spatial understanding of the front, the nurse is situated behind the Boy Scout, therefore closer to the "home front", so adult women were considered less fit for military experience than very young boys even. This example shows how challenging it was for women to "write themselves back"¹² into the memory of the Great War. Worthiness on the front as well as access to the vault of war memory were awarded by proximity to trauma.

It was not surprising that women, who up to that moment lived relatively domestic lives, would see their sojourn on front as an extraordinary adventure. This was coupled with the government's propaganda that aimed to persuade as many young men as possible to join the front by turning war into a righteous crusade against barbarous enemies. As a result, many nurses took up this rhetoric in their journals and consequently expressed their eagerness to become part of the glorified war effort.

For instance, Katherine Hodges, who worked as an ambulance driver, recounts her joining the Scottish Women's Hospitals in the fashion of an unexpected escapade. Hodges' adhesion to the ambulance unit of the SWH as a driver is clearly outside the boundaries set by the British government that regulated the "home front". The language used in the diary expresses her astonishment at succeeding in this feat in spite of hostile odds: the driver accidentally found out about the possibility of work at the front, while performing a chore in the garage. As she had been trying to find work at the front for a long time, Hodges wasted no time. She took a cab to the SWH headquarters, where she was straightaway welcomed to join the "round table" of the Transport Unit by its leader, the "Honourable" Evelina Haverfield (an honorific form of address reserved at the beginning of the 20th century to venerable men). Katherine Hodges's enthusiasm to join the front and her being "delighted" at the prospect does not uniquely mark her excitement on that specific day. Her confession is a common description of how the rest of the drivers and the nurses saw themselves in relation to their roles within the war system and reflects the view of the

¹² Cixous, Helene. "The Laugh of the Medusa" *Signs* 1, 4 (Summer, 1976), 875-893.

general public on such matters¹³. Ambulance driver Katherine Hodges continued to express anticipation as well as wonder as the nurses were getting close to the front. She appears very excited, even “jolly glad” at the thought of getting into “the thick of fighting”, at the same time expecting to face the fear successfully¹⁴. This defies traditional gender roles in which women are expected to adopt a passive attitude to war, and this aspect leads to what has been called “gender blurring”.

Before embarking on the ship that would take them to the East, Nurse Lilius Grant described the Ambulance or Transport unit of their hospital in very kind words, looking quite envious of the fascination they exercised on the public while marching, as quaint remarks came from the public, such as “Now I shouldn’t mind joining that lot”, or “They are not going into danger at all”¹⁵. The disjunction between the way one of the nurses saw the Ambulance unit and the way in which the prejudiced public reacted opens the topic of the masculinized female body. In her *Masculinity and the Wounds of the First World War: A Centenary Reflection*, Ana Carden-Coyne asserts that “masculinity underpinned imperialism and militarism, fundamentally shaping the experience of modern war as social, embodied and psychological experiences”¹⁶. The women desired to be seen as men in order to be able to claim the same rights, yet some of them did not accept this masculinization without protest. The public comment, “They are not going into danger at all” excludes women from the “honour” of becoming a victim of the war, which is part of the world of men. It is also possible that Lilius Grant may not have been entirely honest in her journal and actually expressed her own doubt at the thought that the ambulance drivers – the “stars” of the SWH unit – would be more exposed to danger than the usual nurses or orderlies.

The Christian ideology professed by some women on the front – who express faith in being protected by Providence – is included in the

¹³ Cahill, 15-16.

¹⁴ Cahill, 32.

¹⁵ Cahill, 16.

¹⁶ Ana Carden-Coyne, “Masculinity and the Wounds of the First World War: A Centenary Reflection.” *Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique* XX, 1, (2015), on-line: <http://journals.openedition.org/rfcb/305>, 2.

“Christian mythology of chivalry” regarding the war, developed by Claire M. Tylee in her book, where she argues that such descriptions of the nurses reinforce traditional nationalist discourse about war¹⁷ because they do not challenge the legitimacy of the war or those who started it and caused so much destruction and suffering. This proposition can be complemented by Santanu Das’s theory of the “silent witnessing” attributed to women in the Great War¹⁸.

Claire M. Tylee shows that:

Men themselves found it difficult to articulate the effect of war on their lives. This was partly due to the social and linguistic conventions that governed expression, particularly literary expression; but it was also because war-events had frequently been traumas so shocking that they were repressed, and resulted in neurotic reactions. Since these responses conflicted with the cultural stereotypes of manliness that soldiers were expected to live up to, and because the whole front-line experience was so remote from the standards of 'normal' civilised life, it was hard for either men or women to conceptualise them. Moreover, the effects of propaganda and censorship made it especially difficult for women to deal with such emotional responses to the war, by disguising what had given rise to them and might have made sense of them.¹⁹

This helps us understand why women always tended to minimize the trauma they were going through, resulting in a sort of mechanism of self defence against the surrounding desolation they witnessed on the active front. If, before arriving in the East, the women were required to have their hair cut soldier-like, the physical transformation caused a change in their sensibility, which can be decoded in fragments of their writing in which patients are described as dehumanized or reduced to mere statistics. This militarization of speech was imposed tacitly on the fighting front, via

¹⁷ Tylee, 26.

¹⁸ Santanu Das, *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

¹⁹ Tylee, 52.

ensorship, but violently on the home front. Those who did not conform to the government's view on what should be revealed about the war and what should remain hidden from the masses were demonized in the eyes of public opinion, threatened with execution squads or heavy prison sentences (anti-war philosopher Bertrand Russell served 6 months in prison). Those on the home front were supposed to see only pre-approved and staged images or documentaries of the war hospitals or trenches²⁰.

The similarity between Siegfried Sassoon's poetry and documentary sources has been noticed by Harold Bloom in *Poets of World War I*, where he asserts that Sassoon had the persistent determination to shape an unembellished, almost documentary, account of his experience at the front, allowing the inexperienced reader to comprehend what the poet had gone through on the fighting front. The literary critic then adds that, in doing so, Sassoon "sacrificed the complexity of his feelings about the war in a single-minded campaign to valorize the common soldier as he attacked the noncombatant population"²¹. The value of Siegfried Sassoon's poetry consisted in providing imageries that represent descriptions of actual battles, as realistically as possible, thus managing to convey singular feelings of living the horror of war.

The various manifestations of trauma found their way into the culture of the First World War. In Romanian culture, a description in which the individual is rendered powerless in face of the destructive nature of war is found in Camil Petrescu's psychological novel, *The Last Night of Love, The First Night of War*. In one of the chapters in the second part that is suggestively entitled "God's ground has covered us" where the author concludes, "There is nothing human left in us"²². One example that is similar in intensity to a nurses' account of the bombing of a hospital is Siegfried Sassoon's description of the horror of witnessing military conflict in the poem *Attack* (1918). Unlike the nurses' diary entries, which are written in the past tense, Sassoon's poem describes the terror of assault in

²⁰ Tylee, 53.

²¹ Harold Bloom, *Poets of World War I: Rupert Brooke & Siegfried Sassoon* (Broomall, PA: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003), 66.

²² Camil Petrescu, *Ultima noapte de dragoste, întâia noapte de război*, (București: Agora, 2012), 200.

the present tense to give the reader the sense that he/she too is on the battlefield: "tanks creep", "the barrage roars", "men jostle" and "leave their trenches". In many diary entries daylight turns into darkness with the onset of artillery barrages. Similarly, in *Attack* the light of the rising sun is blocked, resulting in a vile daybreak, that is of a "wild purple" (line 2), whereas the sun appears "glowering". The entire landscape reflects the terror felt by the soldiers, and smoke "shrouds" like a funeral vestment the "menacing scarred slope" (line 4). The same feeling of inescapability is induced as in autobiographical descriptions, where devastation pervades the chthonian and aerial spheres and the wounded come "pouring" in a flood. All sense of hope is lost as the soldiers, "masked with fear" (line 9), are only advancing to meet their unquestionable death and become unwilling martyrs: "And hope, with furtive eyes and grappling fists,/ Flounders in the mud..." (lines 11-12). In the final verse, Sassoon underpins the confronting theme of his poem by directly addressing the Son of God, who himself was martyred: "...O Jesus, make it stop!".

The nurses' diaries, carefully dated, similarly represent inimitable descriptions of trauma that together coalesce into forming the tragic (his)story of the First World War. Passing through Medgidia, in early October 1916, ambulance driver Ysabel Birkbeck wrote how "the town was bombarded by nine aeroplanes and the streets were littered with dead and dying..." and how after waiting out the bombardment in the open streets as she could not bear the thought of being buried, "When I got up to crank the car, I found I had stopped her in a pool of blood"²³. Around the same date, Yvonne Fitzroy described how "...the roar and flash of guns was incessant"²⁴. Mary Milne adds a description of a shell-shocked patient – which are extremely rare on the Eastern Front – the nurses encountered while going through a retreat after the occupation of Medgidia:

...One man in the truck was evidently suffering from shell-shock. He moved restlessly around the crowded truck in delirium. Every now and then he screamed, and then shouted all the

²³ Cahill, 57.

²⁴ Cahill, 63.

time...He got worse, and we soon saw he was quite raving mad. The difficulty was to keep him from stumbling over the bodies of other men on the floor. One man with a fractured thigh suffered terribly, and at any jolt he screamed. A man shot through the face cried quietly all night...The candle burned lower and lower – Little and I began to talk rather feverishly about other things, when the shell-shocked man jumped up, and as the candle gave its last flicker, he crumpled up, dead.²⁵

Shell-shock represents the most infamous type of trauma associated with the “Great War” and the one which elicited the greatest range of responses in the literature and memory of the First World War. Signs of shell shock included a plethora of neurological symptoms defined as “neurasthenia”, fits, jerking, gait, muscle rigidity, muteness and fugue. The term itself began to be widely used in 1915 following the publication of an article on it by Dr. Charles Samuel Myers in the *Lancet* medical journal, but the British public was already acquainted with it and other examples of “hysteria” or “weak nerves” conditions such as “railway spine”, a term that had been employed to denote the post traumatic suffering of victims of railroad accidents.

One can draw a parallel between this shocking image and Wilfred Owen’s celebrated poem *Dulce et decorum est*, in which the victims of gas attacks are “flung” in the wagon uncaringly, and where brave soldiers appear like “old beggars”, “bent double”, “knock-kneed”, and “coughing like hags” (lines 1-2). There is no place for the brave, courageous, patriotic, hero-type soldiers such as could be seen in propagandistic recruitment posters in this landscape of decay. In Mary Borden’s sketches from her book of war stories, *The Forbidden Zone* (1929), the victims of war are similarly dehumanized, “they are pulled out of the ambulances as loaves of bread are pulled out of the oven”²⁶, and the author comments that just as “You send your socks and your shirts again and again to the laundry...and

²⁵ Cahill, 79.

²⁶ Mary Borden, *The Forbidden Zone, A Nurse’s Impressions of the First World War* (Hesperus Press, 1929, 2008), 118.

you sew up the tears... we send our men to the war again and again...just until they are dead, and then we throw them into the ground"²⁷. The proximity of death dehumanizes and excoriates the scene, leaving no room for human feelings for the beauty and honour of sacrifice for one's homeland.

Recognizing the impact that this traumatic phenomenon had at the beginning of the 20th century, Fiona Reid states that "It was the shell-shocked soldier who first began to dismantle the Victorian 'stiff upper lip'..."²⁸, which supports the hypothesis in this paper that witnessing such horrific episodes altered, to some extent, the nurses' consciousness and their vision of the war. Because the disorder was not well understood, military authorities were initially reluctant to accept shell shock as a medical condition and there were cases when soldiers who suffered from it were court-martialled for "cowardice"²⁹. War poets such as Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, who also spent time in the Craiglockhart War Hospital in Edinburgh being treated for "war neurosis", were the first to depict the tragedy of this psychological affliction and are credited as the creators of the "poetry of shell shock"³⁰, in which there is no place for heroism in representing the suffering of the shattered victims. Other important artists and writers that used shell shock to represent the war as grotesque or mad were Virginia Woolf, H. G. Wells, and D. H. Lawrence. It could be argued to a great extent that in the cultural impact of the Great War, shell shock probably stands as one of the most significant elements³¹.

Analysing the responses of the nurses from all the fronts to witnessing such trauma, Christine Hallett finds that they were torn between the "society's expectations that they maintain their *sang froid* in order to provide the best care to their patients and the drive to

²⁷ Borden, 117

²⁸ Fiona Reid, *Broken Men. Shell Shock, Treatment and Recovery in Britain 1914-1930*. (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), 1.

²⁹ Wessely, Simon. "The Life and Death of Private Harry Farr." *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* 99, 2006: 440-443.

³⁰ See Daniel Hipp, *The Poetry of Shell Shock: Wartime Trauma and Healing in Wilfred Owen, Ivor Gurney and Siegfried Sassoon*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2005.

³¹ Reid, 72.

record/understand the suffering they witnessed”³². The author concludes that women who volunteered to go to the front and were handling medical cases for the first time “conveyed the intensity of their own personal responses to suffering”, while the more experienced “Nurses appear more likely to have limited themselves to comments about their fatigue or rhetorical statements implicitly questioning the need for war, whilst offering descriptions of the actions they took to relieve suffering. Many of them go further, and attach meaning to suffering, offering what I refer to as ‘philosophies of trauma’”³³.

³² Christine E. Hallett, "Portrayals of Suffering: Perceptions of Trauma in the Writings of First World War Nurses and Volunteers." *CBMH/BCHM* 27, 1, (2010), 71.

³³ Hallett 2010, 81.

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