"MALENESS RUN RIOT"—THE GREAT WAR AND WOMEN'S RESISTANCE TO MILITARISM

CLAIRE M. TYLIE
Department of English, Faculty of F. y Letras, University of Málaga, Málaga 29071, Spain

Synopsis—The psychological warfare of propaganda and censorship was first developed by the British government during the First World War. Straight after the declaration of war in 1914 it introduced the Defence of the Realm Act to intimidate groups opposed to the war and suppress their views, while promoting its own imperialist policies. However, pacifists, both women and men, worked together to reveal the methods used, in order to avoid further coerced hostility. They demonstrated that, while force degrades all individuals, women in particular always suffer in militarist societies. A recent article on women and the Great War, by Sandra Gilbert, ignores the research by women which has recovered and discussed this writing. She in fact relies on the British state's war-time propaganda, to try to argue that the First World War was an "apocalyptic turning-point in the battle of the sexes." Not only does her argument disregard the history of the women's suffrage movement in Britain; it also has to ignore what women themselves wrote to show how little "exuberance" or "sexual glee" they actually felt. By fudging the cultural distinctions of class and age, she obscures the fact that women are as dehumanised by the modern technological state as men are. It is a point that women made clearly at that period. Furthermore, not having any voice in government, women were almost powerless politically to prevent the war, but they did what they could. In their political stand against bullying and the mechanisms of deceit, women wrote with compassion and irony to show that young men were as psychologically vulnerable to a militarist system as women. It was not something they crowed over.

One of the first moves of the British government after the declaration of war in 1914 was to introduce the Defence of the Realm Act, which enabled it to intimidate groups opposed to the war and to suppress their views (Hopkin 1970: 156–7, 163; Pankhurst, 1932/1987: 36). It also set up a bureau of "information" to promote the British case for the war, in Britain and abroad (Wright, 1978). This was the first war in which psychological warfare was used so efficiently. Circumspect censorship and propaganda were two of the tools used to coerce the population into continuing with armed aggression. Nevertheless, there were women and men who persevered in trying to further international cooperation. Men and women, such as Bertrand Russell and Catherine Marshall, worked together to defy conscription and to bring about a negotiated peace (Vellacott, 1980). Such resistance was seen by many pre-war suffragists as a continuance of the campaign for women's right—and indeed duty—to take part in the political processes affecting war and peace. Pacifism and feminism were, for the Cambridge philosopher Charles Kay Ogden as for many other thinkers of the time, logically connected in the stand against violence, and against militarism in particular. Working cooperatively with others, including women, such as Mary Sargent Florence and Mrs. C. R. Buxton, Ogden promoted open, reasonable discussion of political controversies throughout the war. One of the works authored jointly by Ogden and Florence was Militarism versus Feminism in which they argued that the conduct of human affairs by force perverted and ruined society because force depreciates and degrades the individual. They demonstrated that women suffer particularly from the violence of militaristic societies and so feminists should be particularly opposed to militarism (Ogden & Florence, 1915/1987). In the work conceived on Armistice Day, November 11th, 1918, and written together with I. A. Richards, The Meaning of Meaning (1923), Ogden analysed the emotive techniques by which the psychological bullying of propaganda is effected. It is ironic that, 60 years later, an article on women and the Great War by a woman, Sandra Gilbert, should make...
Or is it? Ogden and Richards were convinced of the need for an intellectual "League of Nations" in place of "a new arrangement of conquests", conciliation rather than vindictive suppression (Baldick, 1983: ch. 6). Half a century after the birth of fascism, the lessons of the Treaty of Versailles forgotten, Gilbert believed that the sexual combats of the early 20th century "offered enduring possibilities of vengeance and victory" (Gilbert, 1983: 450). Gilbert's article spans along with the aggressive jingoism by which militaristic women such as Mrs. Pankhurst and Jessie Pope spurred men and women to continue fighting when a negotiated peace was feasible. Using edited extracts from propagandist writings, and reproductions of wartime visual propaganda, Gilbert tries to convince us that the First World War became "an apocalyptic turning-point in the battle of the sexes" expressed by the men's literature in images of "sexual gloom" and in the women's by "sexual glee" (Gilbert, 1983: 426). Men's writing of the period exhibited a "barely veiled hostility" to the home front because this war necessitated "a sacrifice to the sons to the exigencies of the fathers—and the mothers, wives, and sisters" (Gilbert, 1983: 432). The generational conflict revealed in men's poetry, Ms. Gilbert finds to be "not just associated with but an integral part of the sexual struggle fostered by the war" (Gilbert, 1983: 432). Male "sexual anger" was reinforced by the eagerness with which women implored men to sacrifice themselves and the "exuberance" with which women workers benefited from men's absence to succeed to men's places and "man the machines of state" (Gilbert, 1983: 433). Particularly as nurses of invalid men [sic], according to Gilbert, women were triumphant survivors, who exploited the dependent passivity of their male patients to experience an exhilarating bacchanalian satisfaction: the war's topsy-turvy role reversals resulted in a release of female libidinal energies and a liberation of female anger, which contributed to male anxiety and impotence. Even women pacifists, in Gilbert's view, show an implicit edge of contempt for men, which surfaces as hostility in "violent anti-patriarchal fantasies" (Gilbert: 1983: 455). And women writers found their art strengthened or inspired by the "deaths and defeats of male contemporaries" (Gilbert, 1983: 446).

Such a harangue does violence to the careful distinctions which we need to make if we are actually to understand our past culture and how it continues to influence our present state. The vehemence of the tone might succeed in deafening us to the basic dilemma in her argument which Gilbert wishes to obscure.

She is right to remind us that effects of the Great War were "gender-specific problems," and that literary criticism in ignoring the literature written about the First World War by women has also ignored women's representation of the War's effects upon their self-image. However, the construction of gender differs between cultures, and it changes in the course of the development of a particular culture. Gilbert ranges indiscriminately between American and British experience, between women of different generations, and between different social groups. Furthermore, at any one time the hegemony of any one definition is not total—during modern history both men and women have contested unitary, polarised ideas of sexuality. Fixed ideas tend to be imposed by a despotic society organised on aggressively competitive principles, and they distort the individuality of both women and men. One of the problems which contemporary Western women face is that in rejecting the model of "feminine" passivity (the object of desire), many see no other choice than the alternative of "masculine" covetous aggression and they may try to become token "men." This is not to escape society's iron grip; it is to exchange one form of powerlessness for another. That is what Gilbert's paper fudges. She begins by pointing out that World War I "virtually completed the Industrial Revolution's construction of anonymous dehumanised man . . . entrenched on the edge of No Man's Land, this faceless being saw that the desert between him and his so-called enemy . . . was a symbol for the state." Yet, she also wishes to assert that women were liberated by the very same wartime state which "by compelling 'women to work', (it) sends them 'over the
The emotionless reiteration of the sentences is the correlative of the mechanical process they describe. La Motté's book, first published in 1916, was banned during the War and not re-published until 1934.\footnote{The circumstances of the ban were outlined in the preface to the second edition of 1934. For a discussion of the banning of women's writing connected with the First World War see: Angela Ingram (1986).}

Critics have analysed the way in which men's literature expresses their sense of the absurdity of a war which was only too real, and which challenged the conventions by which up until then the existence of industrialised man had been disguised. Wartime propaganda aimed at the civilian population idealised soldiers as Christian heroes redeeming the corruption of their society by the noble sacrifice of their lives, whereas for the political and military machine men were of value simply to make up the numbers, to fill the gaps in the line; to give the impression that "he was merely a unit, a murder robot, a wisp of cannon fodder" (Alldington, 1929/1965: 228). The particularity by which we distinguish people, the peculiarities for which we love each other, are of no significance to the modern state. Soldiers were presented as modern Christs, displaying "Greater Love" by pouring out "the red sweet wine of youth," whereas death at the Front was random and disgusting, often obliterating bodies entirely, and the strain of trench warfare led to madness and suicide. Women too were aware of this absurdity and expressed it by sarcasm: "By expert surgery, by expert nursing, some of these were to be returned to their homes again, mutilated for life, a burden to themselves and to society; others were to be nursed back to health, to a point at which they could again shoulder eighty pounds of marching kit, and be torn to pieces again on the firing line. It was a pleasure to nurse such as these." But to nurse back to life a man who had attempted suicide, so that he could be court-martialled and shot, "truly that seemed a dead-end occupation" (La Motté, 1916: 7). Women shared in the absurdity: "The world was mad and we were all victims; that was the only way to look at it." (Brittain, 1933/1978: 376). One method by which men challenged the relevance of European traditions to modern war was irony. (And not only in novels and poetry, but in the parodies of hymns sung by the common Tommy: "When this bloody war...
is over . . .”). Women writers also used irony to express their sense of the outrageousness of what was being done to live human beings, but not the ironic operation of outworn literary conventions. Their method was more direct, and more appropriately satirised the stupidity propaganda pre-supposed: they used innocently paradoxical exclamations or rhetorical questions. “Are all these laughing voices really going to the war? . . . what beautiful cemeteries we are passing!” (Mansfield, 1937: 185), “Those inert lumps cannot be men . . . Why, if they are men, don’t they walk? Why don’t they talk? Why don’t they protest?” (Borden, 1929: 114). The incredulity suggests that normal acceptance is insane.

The vulnerability of human flesh, which arouses the feeling concern of other persons, in fact reduces the value of industrial man. The “war to save civilization” revealed the actual contempt for civilized values which was disguised by an idea of social progress in which the financially rich industrialised nations would lead the world. In a sketch imaging the absurdity of modern “civilized” war, Borden makes use of the incongruity of a converted casino at a seaside resort, where there is “a gala night . . . whenever there’s a battle” and the crowd rush there in motors:

Gambler, of course, down and outs, wrecks—all gone to pieces, parts of ’em missing, you know, tops of their heads gone, or one of their legs. When they take their places at the tables, the croupiers—that is to say, the doctors—look them over. Come closer, I’ll whisper it. Some of them have no faces. (Borden, 1929: 46)

Mary Borden’s idiosyncratic play with colloquial metaphor shows that she was quite aware of the way in which the Great War made men faceless, gave them tags in place of individual human identity:

It’s tied to you like a luggage label. It has your name on it in case you don’t remember your name. You needn’t have a face, but a ticket you must have to get into our casino. (Borden, 1929: 47)

Helpless to combat the mass-production of so much pain that she cannot bear, Borden can hardly identify with her wartime self, that nurse who killed her heart in order to be able to help at all: “She is no longer a woman . . . There are no men here, so why should I be a woman? There are heads and knees and mangled testicles . . . There are these things, but no men; so how could I be a woman here and not die of it?” (Borden, 1929: 60). It is surely pervers of Gilbert to speak of Borden’s ironic sense of the absurdity of the war-machine and her own inability to cope with its dehumanising effects as “culpable numbness” (Gilbert, 1983: 449). What these quotations do is to show that the war was far from exhilarating for all women, at least after the initial thrill had worn off. War constructed anonymous, dehumanised EveryWoman too. If the men’s literature created a new symbol for the modern competitive state, the waste-land of No Man’s Land, the women’s literature gave us a new myth for the emotionless support system for that state, where human care and concern are outlawed: the Forbidden Zone. As La Motte and Mansfield made clear, it was not exactly females who were banned; sexless nurses, automatic prostitutes, mercenary bar-owners were all permitted. Indeed they were all encouraged by wartime regulations. The physical servicing of No Man was to be catered for by the bureaucratised welfare state, product of the War. But personal emotion was forbidden, both to men and to women.

It is misleading of Gilbert to talk of the “guilt” implicit in such memories as Borden’s since one of the points that women of all nations made over and over again during the War was that, not having had the vote, they had no say in the declaration of war or in the conscription of young men. Gilbert is keen to point to the example of Mrs. Pankhurst, but not all women by any means were as belligerent as she was, and many women worked for the vote precisely to prevent further war. The Englishwoman Mrs. St. Clair Stobart was one suffragist among many who stated this forthrightly:

I believe it is because we women feel in our souls, that life has a meaning, and a value, which are in danger of being lost in militarism, that we are, at this moment, instinc-
tively asking society to give us a share in safeguarding the destinies of those human lives, for which Nature has made us specially responsible. The idea for votes for women, or justice for women, is not here my concern; the idea, which, as a result of my small experience, eclipses all others, is the necessity of votes for life, justice for humankind (Stobart, 1916: 315).

The “small experiences” of which she speaks were the founding of a “Women's Convoy Corps” in 1907, which she headed during the Balkan War, 1912–1913, the establishment of a women’s hospital unit first in Antwerp and then in Cherbourg in 1914 (where she came under bombardment), and finally the organisation of a hospital unit in Serbia, which became a field hospital that took part in the great Serbian retreat of 1915. If Mrs. Stobart was “exhilarated” by her witnessing of what she called “every conceivable form of horror,” this is how she expressed it: “we were content to feel that we had contributed our tiny share towards the relief of suffering, and we had, perhaps, made it easier for other women to do the same” (Stobart, 1916: 307). Mrs. Stobart published her pacifist memoir in 1916 to oppose the depersonalising failure of modern society: “Angry, cursing in my heart” at the bestiality and humiliation of war, “I have written this book in the first person, because it would have been an affectation to write in the neuter person about these things which I have felt and seen” (Stobart, 1916: vii).

Sandra Gilbert, summarising several studies of modernist fiction, suggests that 20th-century Everyman, the faceless cipher, is not only publicly powerless; his figurative journey through No Man's Land has rendered him privately impotent too: the war has violated him, unmanned him, made him an un-man (Gilbert, 1983: 423). Women, by contrast, had no power to lose, and in fact “manned” society in man's place (Gilbert, 1983: 433). If women were wounded by the war, it was with guilt from a “half-conscious fear” that they had perpetrated the “unspeakable crime” of castration (Gilbert, 1983: 426). Gilbert attributes the responsibility for men's psychical sexual wounds to women's wartime powerlessness.

The first critic to suggest that Modernist literature expresses a sense of war as emasculating was Frederick J. Hoffman, who actually said:

That sense of violation is present in each of the principal works of American war literature. (English writers were “disenchanted”, disabused of their sacrifices pro patria, but in only a few cases had a comparable feeling of outrage.) (Hoffman, 1949: 57)

Stanley Cooperman explored this idea of war's effect on men's virility in World War I and the American Novel, where he discussed the idea of “technological rape” and the loss of male initiative, particularly in the novels of Hemingway; Cooperman also found castration images reiterated in the work of other American authors such as March, Cobb, Harrison, Boyd, and Fredenburgh, conveying the futility of an essentially static war where men died at random (Cooperman, 1967: 64). Cooperman produced no British examples, nor any inference that women were held to blame. (In his opinion, American women simply made themselves ridiculous by ignorantly repeating prudish, romantic propaganda, although that view has been contested (Schwind, 1984).) Gilbert does not mention Cooperman's work, but she does draw extensively on No Man's Land, Eric J. Leed's book about the traumatic effects of trench warfare and their long-term political influence. Although Leed mentions first-hand accounts of their experience by English, French, and American soldiers, he is particularly interested in German reports and the rise of National Socialism between the wars. What he finds is that fantasies about revengeful rape appear in German writing; English soldiers apparently suffered more from a sense of degradation and pollution (Leed, 1979: 18–19, 114).3 This tallies with Gilbert's quotations from Richard Aldington and Roland Leighton, but it does nothing to justify her view that men in general blamed

---

3It is worth noting that Gilbert's quotation from Leed with regard to women's wartime “increase in libido” refers to examples of German women, rather than British or American; see Leed (1979: 47).
women for their degradation. Nor does her reference to sexual wounding in the writings of T. S. Eliot or Hemingway, who were both American, nor to D. H. Lawrence's sexual anxiety. It might also be remarked that these three men were non-combatants; if a man's sense of his manhood at that time was connected with his ability to defend women, being a non-combatant must have produced very special types of psychic conflict and sexual anxiety.4

In a study of the First World War writings of British men, Andrew Rutherford came to somewhat different conclusions about the experience of the trenches from those which Cooperman reached (Rutherford, 1978: chapter 4). Later reinterpretations by British veterans were more complex than the initial bitterness. By comparison with French and German writing, which emphasised the debasing, brutalising effects of the war, British writers passionately indicted the waste of war but celebrated the common soldiers' preservation of their humanity in the face of the madness of military life. It is that comradeship which is evoked by the British popular memory of the satirical songs of the period. Perhaps Rebecca West identified the roots of that solidarity when she wrote in 1916: "For the life in the trenches . . . we require the men that the trade unions have made for us" (West, 1916/1982: 391). The Australian novelist, Katherine Susannah Prichard, specifically related the renowned pride, courage and solidarity of the Australian forces to the shared hardship of the gold fields (Prichard, 1948). Some of us might wish that the unions had made better internationalists of their members, but the self-conscious unity of the British working class, forged on the industrial shop-floor and in the pits, gave us that other crucial metaphor for jocular comradeship and endurance: "the spirit of the trenches."

One matter Gilbert does not consider, although she alludes to his work on the Great War, is Fussell's claim that war was an erotic experience for men, that the experience of assault in battle was arousing (Fussell, 1975: 270). Cooperman's study of Willa Cather's One of Ours suggests that Cather had grasped this. More than one British writer expressed the "vile attraction" of war in sexual imagery: "Once you have lain in her arms you can admit no other mistress" (Chapman, 1933: 226). Although the war in the trenches was largely a stalemate, there were trench raids, there were successful assaults, and air pilots in particular experienced a sense of liberation and power which is the obverse side of the mechanisation of modern society. However, that power was destructive. Part of the repressed guilt associated with war neurosis seems to have stemmed from the ecstasy men felt in killing to save their own lives. The sense of comradeship went hand-in-hand with the fellowship of shared slaughter.4 The rupture of normal social taboos, including the sexual ones, liberated a masculine energy which was not necessarily beneficial. One must treat fiction with care. Hilda Doolittle's autobiographical Bid Me To Live attributes her wartime breakdown to the increased libido of her soldier-husband, Richard Aldington, whom she found committing adultery in their marital bed when he was home on leave. Indeed she began to find this "oversexed officer" a stranger to her as he took on the colouration of war and began to enjoy it (Doolittle, 1960/1984: 45–46). The bitter misogyny of his own autobiographical novel Death of a Hero may well be the result of a guilty conscience towards her—not merely the guilt of the survivor which many men (as well as women) suffered from.

While masculinity was traditionally defined in terms of an aggressive act upon a passive female object, then war was essentially bound up with notions of sexual identity, as in the German "rape" of "little Belgium," and the need to defend the English "Motherland." In fact many older women who opposed militarism did so in expressly gendered terms: "militarism is maleness run riot."

4For further discussion of male authors' gender problems see for instance: Paul Delaney (1978) and Frederick Crews (1987).
However, this definition of the relation between the sexes was precisely what had been at issue in the feminist struggle in Britain for the previous half-century. And in fact the propaganda of wartime Britain, although fantasising about the sexual atrocities committed by the “Huns,” most prominently did not stress the aggressive, “Prussian” aspects of British soldiering; it spoke euphemistically of soldiers as “laying down their lives” rather than as bayonetting their enemy. The conflict between such propaganda and what men were actually required to do one can imagine as producing further barriers to communication between men and women.

Men found army discipline humiliating; its aim was to deprive men of their individuality, and it certainly rendered the majority less powerful. Office war-work was tedious and confining too. Men who were rejected by the army also suffered humiliation, and those who refused conscription risked penal servitude. Is Gilbert right in asserting that by contrast the war gave women a power they had previously lacked:

Never having had public power, women could hardly have become more powerless than they already were. As for private impotence, most late Victorian young girls were trained to see such “passionlessness” as a virtue. (Gilbert, 1983: 423)

It may be true that the militantly patriotic women Gilbert cites, women such as Mrs. Pankhurst, May Sinclair, Mrs. Humphry Ward, and the woman who initiated the white feather campaign, Baroness Orczy, all being aged over fifty were likely to have had a Victorian training in sexual and personal repression. They were all raised in the heyday of the British Empire, and identified with the Victorian ideology of belligerent international competition. However, younger middle-class women who grew to maturity during the Edwardian period were already benefiting from the headway gained by the Women’s Movement. Vera Brittain and Enid Bagnold had both been educated at schools with feminist head mistresses. Storm Jameson, having graduated from Leeds University, was already registered for a research degree at the University of London before the War, and Vera Brittain had just been accepted at Oxford when war was declared. They may have had no formal instruction as to “the facts of life,” but they were not privately impotent. According to their lively autobiographies, neither Enid Bagnold, nor Storm Jameson, nor Helen Thomas were virgins at their marriage, and none of them was ashamed of it. Rebecca West spent the war years having a passionate affair with H. G. Wells and looking after their illegitimate son. Part of Vera Brittain’s wartime tragedy was that she was awakened to passion but prevented by the death of one young man after another from consummating it.

As a child before the War, Vera Brittain tells us, she dreamed of a new Renaissance when “women would no longer be the second-rate, unimportant creatures that they were now considered, but the equal and respected companions of men” (Brittain, 1933/1978: 41). (Storm Jameson already enjoyed that companionship of bohemian student life, until she married.) Vera’s ambitions were supported by her brother and by her fiancé, Roland Leighton, the son of a feminist. Vera and Roland shared a faith in the forward-looking, feminist ideas of Olive Schreiner, yet on the outbreak of war Vera became subject to reactionary propaganda. Reverting to a traditional female role, she knitted and darned, and gave up her dream of a university education to confine herself in the drudgery of nursing. The depersonalization of any big Hospital of that period is well outlined in Diana Cooper’s autobiography, and the inhumanity toward suffering

Cf also Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1911): “In warfare, per se, we find maleness in its absurdest extremes” and Emmeline Pankhurst quoted in Andrew Rosen (1974: 251).

Quoted from an extract of Religious Thought and National Service (National Service League pamphlet, 1903) reprinted in Carolyne E. Playne, (1928) The Pre-War Mind in Britain: 128, Quoted by Anne Summers, (1976).
was what prompted Enid Bagnold to publish the *Diary without Dates* (1918) which earned her immediate dismissal from the Royal Herbert Hospital (Bagnold, 1969: ch. 6). As Storm Jameson wrote:

Why do not women know that in any war, the enemy is not on the other side? Their enemy is war itself—which robs them of their identity; and they cease to be clever, competent, intelligent, beautiful, in their own right, and become the nurses, the pretty joys, and at last the mourners of their men. (Jameson, 1933: 211)

Middle-class women had already been gaining new power before the War, which they tried to exploit further. The "Heroines of Pervyse," Mrs. Knocker and the eighteen-year old Mairi Chisholm had been pioneering motorcyclists, and offered themselves as despatch riders. Mature aristocratic ladies, accustomed to exercising authority, swung into action in 1914, organising relief for refugees and hospital units for the wounded. Millicent, Lady Sutherland reached Belgium with her nurses as the German invasion was in progress. The War seemed to offer opportunities to some working-class women too, even if it initially meant unemployment or temporary destitution for others. Women who lost their jobs in domestic service, the retail trade, and the textile industry moved into heavy industry after the introduction of conscription in 1916. But it is a gross exaggeration for Gilbert to claim that the War meant "chances at first-class jobs—and first-class pay." Which women became bankers, stockbrokers or judges, professors, archbishops, or cabinet-ministers because of the War? Jobs as farm labourers or chimney-sweeps hardly earned first class salaries; women doing factory-work eventually got the negotiated union rates for men, and the munitions workers merited their danger money (joining the men who suffered from industrial diseases and accidents at work: the TNT absorbed through the skin in munitions work could render a woman sterile). Women in the munitions factories were often living in barracks, wearing uniforms and working 12 hour shifts (West, 1916/1982: 387–390; Wiltsher, 1985: 181–182). Nor should glamorous government photos taken of "beaming" trousered women shovelling coal and digging graves blind us to the long hours and physical arduousness of such outdoor work, which undermined the health of women as much as men. And, as the full quotation from Jessie Pope would indicate, the occupation by women of men's employment was definitely temporary: "Till the soldier-boys come marching home again" (Reilly, 1981: 90). However, some women did acquire skills which previously would have required an apprenticeship of several years, open only to men. Kathleen Dayus's autobiography shows what advantage she made of this in the long run. That was as well for her, since her marriage like that of other young women was ruined by the alcoholism her husband acquired at the Front.\(^\text{10}\)

It is not even clear that women gained politically from this wartime slavery. The power and freedom women gained through warwork was summed up ironically by Edward Grierson: "Ladies no longer padlocked themselves to railings outside Buckingham Palace: they had chained themselves in large numbers to machines" (Grierson, 1972: 169). The vote was finally granted to British women over the age of 30 as part of an Act passed in 1918. How far this was due to the militant activities of pre-War suffragettes in the WSPU and WFL and how far to the more constitutional movement of suffragists in the NUWSS is still a matter for debate.\(^\text{11}\) If it had anything much to do with women's warwork it did little to benefit precisely those women who had contributed most and were most in need of political power: women workers under the age of 30 and young mothers. After the War the old sexual division of labour was re-established. Women's place was in the home, replacing the lives lost in the War. Men were given priority in the job market. The struggle for the vote had given a focus to pre-War feminism; the unity disappeared once the vote had been (partially) won. As Les Garner put it: "It was a shallow victory which hardly heralded a new sororial

\(^\text{10}\)See also the fictionalised autobiographies of Margaret Penn (1954) and Antonia White (1952).

\(^\text{11}\) Cf Roger Fulford (1957), Martin D. Pugh (1974: 358–374) and Les Garner (1984). The situation in Britain was different from that in USA where several states had already granted women's suffrage.
world. Not only did sexist values continue to predominate, but class and political differences between women remained unaltered" (Garner, 1984: 109).

The breakdown of normal social barriers and taboos was certainly thrilling, at the beginning of the War, as was the initial promise of adventure. The heightening of all awareness under the threat of imminent death was as stimulating for women as for men. Did that outlast, or finally outweigh the realisation of what modern warfare signified? Gilbert's vision of women ambulance drivers who “raced motor-cars along foreign roads like adventurers exploring new lands” and “swooped over the wastelands of the war with the energetic love of Wagnerian Valkyries, their mobility alone transporting countless immobilized heroes to safe havens” (Gilbert, 1983: 439) can be seen as self-indulgent fantasy when read alongside memoirs of the reality by the most adventurous heroines of all:

Taking wounded to hospital 15 miles back at night was a very real strain—no lights, shell-pocked pavie roads mud-covered, often under fire, men and guns coming up to relieve the trenches, total darkness, yells to mind one's self and get out of the way, meaning a sickening slide off the pavie into deep mud—screams from the stretchers behind one and thumps in the back through the canvas—then an appeal to passing soldiers to shoulder the ambulance back on to the pavie. Two or three of these journeys by night and one's eyes were on stalks, bloodshot and strained. (Mairi Chisholm, in Marwick, 1977: 107)

Prevented by votelessness and the government's ruthless use of the Defence of the Realm Act from exercising the one power which really counted, the power to influence the course of the war, were any women tricked by brief bribes into believing themselves suddenly publicly powerful enough to “man the machine of state”? Banned from near the front line, deceived by propaganda and strict censorship, denied the passports necessary to travel abroad, it was difficult for most British women to gain much sense of what the war on the Continent was like, but from 1916 onwards the casualty lists increasingly disheartened people back home. The effect on fighting men was not to be ignored. The constant grief and anxiety were hardly to be born, as women struggled to maintain the men's morale. Men started to suffer from hysterical disorders which had previously been the prerogative of women, and we gain some idea of the strain this imposed on women, even upper-class women, from Cynthia Asquith's diary. (Lady Cynthia Asquith was the daughter of the Earl of Wemyss and married to a son of the Prime Minister). Already worried about an autistic son, and grieving for the death of a younger brother and at the lack of news about her elder brother, as well as for the deaths of friends, she had to do her best to deal with a husband invalided home in August 1915, suffering from “shellshock.” At the prospect of his going out to the Front again in February, 1917, she recorded: “I have got a complete mental or nervous collapse, akin to a kind of madness. Such ghastly depression—life seems a sheer nightmare, every prospect a horror, every retrospect a pain” (Asquith, 1968: 272). Similarly, the once vivacious Diana Cooper recalled that in 1917 “as the weeks galloped along toward the spring offensive, the more listless and crippled my inner self became” (Cooper, 1958: 161). War did not make women immune to neurosis. Hilda Doolittle was not the only woman to suffer a breakdown during the war, reaching “the bedrock of desolation.” Vera Brittain recalled sitting by a painting of Hagar in the Desert which she felt summed up women's situation: “merely a human being without omnipotence . . . at the mercy, as were all women today, of an agonising, ruthless fate which it seemed she could do nothing to restrain” (Brittain, 1933/1978: 458).

Even the women who were actively trying to restrain the governments which were prosecuting the War, were collapsing. Catherine Marshall who had overworked herself on behalf of conscientious objectors suffered a nervous breakdown in September 1917. The active British socialist and NUWSS suffragist, Ethel Snowden, who toured America during the War campaigning for peace, wrote afterwards:

For months before the sudden end of war, acute sadness and cruel pessimism had
possessed us all. Ten, twenty, thirty years, the best that life held, had been devoted by one or the other to the building of a better humanity and this destruction of everything we had worked for, this swift rattling back to the beginning of things, and to worse than the beginning in some ways, was too tragic to be borne. (Snowden, 1921: 3)

It is hard to interpret such despair as an “invigorating” sense of powerfulness.

Sassoon’s famous statement about the callous indifference of those at home to the suffering of those at the Front is much illuminated by the journals and letters of the period, which show that men as well as women were frightened of becoming indifferent to death and pain. Both men and women repressed their memories of horror (Moynihan, 1980: preface). Vera Brittain explains that by 1917 she was growing accustomed to the wounds she was daily treating in France: “most of us, at that stage, possessed a kind of psychological shutter which we firmly closed down upon our recollection of the daily agony whenever there was time to think” (Brittain, 1933/1978: 458). By 1918 the war was going badly for the Allies, and her base hospital was performing the job of a casualty clearing unit. Extreme tiredness “battered our exhausted nerves into indifference” - even to dying men “shrieking and writhing in a grotesque travesty of manhood.” She returned to England to take care of her mother, who had broken down. Then she took up the “unbearable monotony of nursing” once again. After the death of her brother, when she felt completely alone, she reached a state of mechanical apathy akin to Mary Borden’s; she describes herself as becoming “the complete automaton, moving like a sleep-walker” as she passed “into a permanent state of numb disillusion” (Brittain, 1933/1978: 458). This parallels the numbness with which men walked across No Man’s Land into battle:

In an attack such as this, under deadly fire, one is as powerless as a man gripping strongly charged electrodes, powerless to do anything but go mechanically on . . . Only safety, or the shock of a wound will destroy such auto-hypnosis. At the same time all normal emotion is numbed utterly (Alexander Aitken, in Ellis, 1976: 101; Also see: Mott, 1918: 170).

Male non-combatants such as D. H. Lawrence, T. S. Eliot, and Hemingway used literature to express the psychic wound caused to their sense of manhood by the War. In Non-Combatants and Others Rose Macaulay expressed her sense of women’s wartime impotence through a crippled heroine, Alix. The one power that continued to be denied women was the power to defend themselves.

‘Girls can’t fight for their country . . . ’
‘. . . If they might, I’ve no doubt plenty would.’
‘A girl would hate it. She’d be hopeless.’
‘Plenty of men hate it and are hopeless, if you come to that.’ (Macaulay, 1916: 121)

Alix, a sensitive artist, tries at first to ignore the War, but finds that she cannot because it is hurting too many people. In particular it hurts her brother Paul, whom she loves and who commits suicide in the trenches. Bitter at the frustration of belonging to the sex that could not go to fight the War, she decides in the course of the novel to do “the only thing non-combatants can do with war, to make it hurt them less” - fight it by joining a peace movement. With only glimmers of hope she chooses one working for Continuous Mediation, a continuous conference of the neutral nations to promote understanding between belligerents. It is out of identification with their brothers, their “comrade-twins,” that many women like Macaulay have achieved a sympathy for men’s problems with the imposed stereotype of manliness which parallel their own difficulties with the feminine role. That the sympathy is not misplaced is shown by the insufferable strain that the war put on men as well as women.

If we learn nothing else from literature of the First World War, we learn that men and women share a common human psychology; the effect of grief, pain and alienation is not gender specific. We all finally break under stress. The work of that other great modernist, Virginia Woolf, is concerned with this fact. In Mrs. Dalloway, displaying the utmost empathy with a shellshocked soldier,
Woolf relates the suicide of one insignificant individual to the despotic violence of an imperialist culture. In that work, a character of the most feminine frailty, Clarissa, stands on behalf of the personal against the forces that would violate her soul just as they have violated the spirit of Septimus Warren. War not only mutilated men's bodies; it ravished their minds. Women were not shellshocked by the War, and they were not expected to repress their fear of cowardice or joy at killing. But their psyches were equally vulnerable to domination by force. Both men and women are depersonalised by a militaristic society. The radical structure of this novel, which moves in and out of one consciousness after another, male and female, expresses its thesis of common humanity. As in her study of militarism, *Three Guineas*, Woolf denounces the "damnable humbugs" who are capable of the indescribable outrage of forcing another person's soul (Woolf, 1925: 112, 204).

Her thesis is, as Gilbert says, anti-patriarchal; it is emphatically not "anti-male" as such. Like other women writers such as Rose Macaulay, Woolf used the subversive weapon of all oppressed groups, the defence of the tommy in the trenches: humour. Woolf was against women participating in the militarist state by repeating its bullying words and methods (Woolf, 1938: 164).

The one useful aspect of Sandra Gilbert's paper is that it makes evident that part of the British government's Great War propaganda campaign was designed to make both men and women believe that women in general supported the government's war-aims and "sacrificed" men gladly. Censorship was used to prevent women from denying this publicly, especially in print. Nevertheless, women pacifists persevered in leaving their opposition in forms that later generations could discover. It is important for us to recognise that some women and men collaborated in a joint stand against militarism. Part of their enduring opposition to war consisted in analysing the ways by which propaganda and censorship could deceive people into unwitting animosity. Women such as Virginia Woolf recognised with compassion that force dehumanises both sexes; not only women but also young men are vulnerable to violation of the self. Militarism led to fascism. British propaganda described the First World War as "the war to end wars"; the Second World War followed. The main pacifist message that the Defence of the Realm Act was used to stifle was that "war only breeds more war."¹⁴ In order to promote that message, women found non-belligerent methods of opposing state coercion, using irony, satire and ridicule. Their strategy of sardonic humour should not be confused with aggressive satisfaction at the injury done to young men; at the time of the Great War few women identified themselves as ghous.

**REFERENCES**


¹²The continuing connection between a militarist ideology and the definition of women's sexuality has been analysed by Maria Antonette Maciochi (1976), which was discussed in a paper on Women and Fascism, produced by CCCS, 1978, Birmingham. The relationship between male and female hysteria, gender, and patriarchal power, is discussed by Elaine Showalter (1985: ch. 7).

¹³Cf. also Rose Macaulay. (1919), Woolf's use of rhetoric in *Three Guineas* is analysed and discussed by Victoria Middleton (1982).

¹⁴This moral was quoted as grounds for the prosecution when Rose Allatini's pacifist novel, *Despised and Rejected*, was banned under the Defence of the Realm Act, 1918. A Pernicious Book, *The Times*, 27 Sept., page 3. I owe this reference to Angela Ingram.