

Introduction: "A Change in Attitude: The Women's Work Collection of the Imperial War Museum"

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In one of the more famous British recruiting posters of the First World War, a young girl perched in her father's lap asks: "What did you do in the Great War Daddy?" This image implied that all men would want to be able to tell their children about their military exploits during this extraordinary event. In many ways the Women's Work Collection, now being made accessible to so many, answers the question that a young child might have posed to his or her mother or aunt, neighbour or elder sister, "What did you do in the Great War?" The evidence assembled in this collection demonstrates that what women did in the Great War was nearly everything.

Those who compiled the documents that form the core of Women's Work Collection wanted to be able to tell future generations about women's impressive, albeit largely non-military, exploits during this transformative era. If men were to become soldiers, what was to become of the women? In addition to their enduring responsibilities in the home and for their families, millions of women in all participant nations also took on a diverse and significant range of roles and occupations for the duration of the war. By examining these letters and reports, pamphlets and newspaper clippings, researchers will be able to see the broad scope of women's activities and their growing acceptance by the wartime state.

When, what would become the Imperial War Museum was established in 1917, the founders created a Women's Work Subcommittee under the auspices of Agnes Conway, and its members got to work in April 1917. Conway and Lady Priscilla Norman proved the most dedicated members of the committee, and both had performed war work that gave them some valuable insights into what women had done. Lady Norman had helped run a hospital in France in 1914, and Agnes Conway had been involved in aiding wounded Belgians. The overall committee took as its main objective the compilation of a thorough record of women's wartime activities. In practice, this meant collecting material from every identifiable women's organisation as well as from noteworthy individuals. In addition to assembling an archive of written matter, such as letters, reports and pamphlets, the committee sought photographs, badges, art work and other material emblems of women's wartime service. For example, the Women's Work Subcommittee sponsored the first official British woman war artist in 1918, and that year Victoria Monkhouse began to sketch women who had taken on such previously all-male occupations as tram and bus drivers or window cleaners. Given the enormity of

their task, the Women's Work Subcommittee quickly created its own sub-sections on such issues as employment, relief work and medicine, and collectively they produced a voluminous and rich archive.

The bulk of what would become the Women's Work Collection was compiled by volunteer labour between 1917 and 1920, but the earlier war years were not neglected. Agnes Conway proved an invaluable aid to this effort. She wrote numerous letters to every organisation that she could think of, asking for material to add to the collection, and especially for descriptions of what women had accomplished. As a result, the collection includes materials that reveal a great deal — although not everything — about what women did during the entire period between 1914 and 1920. Given that the organisers were working under the auspices of Great Britain's Imperial War Museum, the documents here emphasize the participation of British women. However, it would be a mistake to think that the collection could only tell us about them. It tells us an enormous amount about women in many of the participant nations and about the situation of women and men, soldiers and civilians in wartime society.

The list of subject headings provides a glimpse of the widespread nature of the matter covered by the collection. These topics include those that focus on work done by, or on behalf of, a particular geographic region, ranging from Belgium to Serbia, Czechoslovakia to the United States. The most extensive heading covers "Employment" with a separate listing for "Munitions," but detailed records are also grouped under such categories as the "Army", "Benevolent Organisations", including everything from the National Canine Defence League to the Y.W.C.A., "the British Red Cross Society", "Food", "Land", "Relief Funds", and "Welfare." Among the most under-utilized sources are the 460 pieces listed as "Local Records;" here the activities of women from nearly every locale in Britain, listed alphabetically from Abbey Wood (Kent) to York, have been preserved. Hidden among them all are doubtless many local stories with national implications waiting to be told.

The general subject headings not only prove a tremendous aid to finding material but also reveal something of the scope of women's contributions and what the Women's Work Subcommittee deemed important. However, the documents contained within them are the real gems. Students, researchers and future historians will find here materials ranging from the papers detailing government policy towards women's wartime labour to such things as the citations for all women decorated and honoured for their wartime service by the British government. The Women's Work Collection contains the records of more than a hundred separate voluntary charitable organisations, among them dozens devoted solely to aiding Belgian refugees. In addition, press cuttings on all aspects of women's wartime experiences and the personal reflections of such notable individuals as Dame Katherine Furse help put the official records in a much broader and, at times, more intimate context.

Some of the essays on specific subjects that accompany this introduction will shed detailed light on particular aspects of women's wartime experiences. Deborah Thom offers a thorough overview of women's waged labour, especially in factories and in the manufacturing of munitions. Both Joanna Bourke's and Kaarin Michaelsen's essays help illustrate the extensive geographical range and significance of women's medical services. Women's direct contributions to the armed forces are explored in Lucy Noakes's piece on women and military services, both official and voluntary. Two essays by Jacqueline deVries illuminate the enormous diversity of women's volunteer and charitable organisations as well as highlighting the often neglected role of women's religious groups and their support of the war effort. In addition, Laura E. Nym Mayhall places all of these activities in the context of women's struggles for political rights, especially suffrage, and Nicoletta F. Gullace shows how the entire collection reveals the complicated meanings of women's patriotism.

Nearly everyone who has researched any aspect of the history of British women during the First World War has relied on the Women's Work Collection. By helping to make this invaluable resource more widely available and providing new tools with which to search its content, this project will be able to aid those writing more general histories of Britain, World War One and women. The range of the collection also provides us with material with which to explore issues that continue to challenge us in the contemporary world, be they the status of women in the military, the plight of refugees displaced from war zones, the aid extended to the dependents of those serving in the armed forces, or the most successful way to utilize the female workforce. These are subjects that take us well beyond Britain and the years 1914-1918.

War is still too often seen as a solely male experience and its history largely written as if it only involved combatants. Given how much changed with the first, modern, total war, neglecting the part played by women leaves out vital information and makes for an incomplete story. By showing us the women's part in the Great War, the Women's Work Collection offers a vital counterbalance, demonstrating how women both contributed and responded to this time of immense social, economic and cultural upheaval.

Bibliography

Wilkinson, Mary. "Patriotism and duty: the Women's Work Collection at the Imperial War Museum." The Imperial War Museum Review No. 6 (1991), 31-37.

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