

***A Sisterhood of Suffering and Service: Women and Girls of Canada and Newfoundland During the First World War.***

Edited by Sarah Glassford and Amy Shaw. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2012. 345 pp.

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It was long known as The Great War, reflecting unprecedented loss of men in Canada and Newfoundland (a British colony before joining Canada in 1949). In Canada, over 600,000 of the population of eight million joined the forces, leading to 230,000 dead and wounded, while an astonishing 58 per cent of the Newfoundland Regiment fell. Noting the sacrifices and the attendant growth of military and political voice, Canadian historians deem World War One a “war of independence.” It was such an anvil of nationhood that (as Lynn Kennedy notes in her chapter on the motherhood motif in wartime poetry) Canadians eschewed the malaise seen in British and American verse, preferring a coming-of-age theme. Sarah Glassford and Amy Shaw compiled this collection of articles to “reinsert... the female half of the population into the historical narratives of Canada and Newfoundland at war ... to add to the slim body of literature on that subject and encourage future research” and reveal how women were “actively engaged... and deeply affected” (2). The book succeeds in its goals.

Women of this era certainly warrant a resurrection. Countless memorials feature male names and masculine imagery, apart from the allegorical angel. Even on the home front, bereaved women were urged to be discreet and, to avoid frightening potential recruits, substitute pins or armbands for traditional black attire, as Suzanne Evans shows in an innovative chapter on female bodies as sites of mourning. Many thousands were affected. In the shadows, Desmond Morton notes in an insightful chapter on the Patriotic Fund, were nearly 20,000 widows, mothers and dependent relatives of the dead, left to make their case to a new and intrusive bureaucracy. Glassford and Shaw concede that the era saw no transformation of female roles comparable to that often associated with the Second World War, and the chapters document activities situated within traditional ideals of maternalism and duty.

In Newfoundland, thousands knitted the traditional woolly island sock to ward off trench foot, or gathered at the Governor’s mansion to sew for the enlisted. Relief from boredom for elite daughters (shades of *Downton Abbey*) who arranged skits and concerts in the wards pervade accounts of Voluntary Aid Detachments overseas. Yet one admires their willingness to wash and dress the wounded, travel miles to cheer up soldiers from home, or face death through contagion, discussed in Terry Bishop Stirling’s vivid chapter on Newfoundland overseas nursing volunteers. A study of wartime employment by Kori Street concludes that despite an upsurge of female bank clerks and munitions workers, their work was cast as old-fashioned moral duty. Nor did the brief surge in numbers change convictions that female work was temporary and unskilled, requiring male supervision.

As Glassford and Shaw acknowledge, further research is needed. The diaries, correspondence, organisation minutes, and press clippings tend to reflect the church and society ladies who did much of the knitting and volunteer work. Various authors note the proclivity of overseas nurses and other women to focus on soldiers’ experience rather than their own, and the failure of family letters to survive in soldiers’ wet backpacks. We lack the polling that revealed the attitudes of “Rosie the Riveter” and her *consoeurs* in the 1940s (many placing economic need ahead of patriotism). A Toronto journalist who visited a wartime factory in 1917 made a blanket statement that all the women felt they were helping win the war, but one longs for corroboration. The closest glimpse the book offers of the *lumpen* may be the oblique view

gleaned in Desmond Morton's study of case files for pensions of relatives of dead soldiers. A surprising number of common law unions and bigamies stymied the bureaucrats, do-gooders of both sexes who perhaps annoyed recipients by preaching thrift, holding back summer allocations to pay for winter fuel, and pointing adulterous wives onto paths of virtue.

Despite the keynote of minimal change, the book supplies a few surprises and counter-themes. Some of "His Majesty's oldest allies" continued the tradition when Iroquois women knitted for their men at the front, as Alison Norman documents in a chapter that uncovers both patriotism and dissent on the 4700-person reserve near Brantford, Ontario. Vicki Hallett tracks the widely read poetry of an unmarried postmistress from Topsail, Newfoundland, as it evolved from patriotic grieving mothers to a pacifist-tinged celebration of a little girl's innocence as greater than all men's machinery of war and profit. Margot Duley finds that although "primarily maternalist ideology" (26) pervaded the Women's Patriotic Association and the postwar organizations it spawned, the wife of a St John's mayor shepherded some ladies into female suffrage efforts, achieving the goal in 1925. The book makes good use of wartime photos, posters and songsheets, for example in Kristine Alexander's chapter on the Canadian girl during the war (she portrayed as missing daddy, he as shielding her from enemy rapes such as those alleged in Belgium). Examining period novels from the perspective of Disability Studies, Amy Tector discovers much concern to revalidate the injured veteran as head of household, though one novel did model a fresh balancing of gender roles. Clearly there was no dawn of "a new day," but along with a ladylike response to war, the book delivers some glimmers of changes to come.

*Jan Noel*