

Edited by Sarah Glassford and Amy Shaw

A SISTERHOOD  
Women and Girls of Canada  
OF SUFFERING  
and Newfoundland  
AND SERVICE  
during the First World War



UBC Press · Vancouver · Toronto

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## Acknowledgments

Once upon a time, beside a table full of muffins at the Canadian Historical Association (CHA) conference in Saskatoon, Sarah Glassford introduced herself to Amy Shaw, saying, “Claire Campbell suggested I should talk to you about this idea I have.” Two muffins, one call for papers, twelve contributors, hundreds of e-mails, dozens of drafts, and four CHA conferences later, the result of that fateful meeting is the volume you are reading now. Our initial thanks, therefore, must go to Claire Campbell for her excellent social networking skills!

The original idea for a book about Canadian and Newfoundland women and the First World War arose during Sarah’s doctoral years as she wished for such a thing to help her in her own research on the Canadian Red Cross. The courage to attempt the project came from Amy’s immediate enthusiasm for the idea, and the eventual content came from scholars in various disciplines scattered across North America. Jonathan Vance, Suzanne Evans, Cynthia Toman, and Desmond Morton provided early encouragement for the undertaking, and we are immensely grateful to have found a cozy home for it at UBC Press. Early on we learned that our editor Emily Andrew entirely deserved her stellar reputation for efficiency, helpfulness, and good humour.

Many thanks to our colleagues at the University of Lethbridge history department and the University of Ottawa’s AMS Nursing History Research Unit for providing moral support at various points. Thanks also to our twelve contributors for being such a great group to work with. It’s been a long road and a lot of work, but they’ve made it a pleasure. We are collectively indebted to the

peer reviewers who sharpened our insights and brought a greater cohesiveness to the sum of our research, and we thank the many librarians, archivists, and anonymous packrats without whom this foray into the past would have been utterly impossible.

Sarah would like to thank her family and friends for their love, laughter, and interest in this project; but, most of all, she thanks Amy for sharing this experience, for being a delight to work with, and for helping make this dream a reality. Amy is grateful to Sarah for her inspiration, passion, humour, and hard work, and to friends and family for their patience and encouragement.

And finally, we thank all the First World War-era women and girls of Canada and Newfoundland who suffered, sacrificed, and served in such diverse ways, leaving behind a wealth of stories for us to uncover.

# INTRODUCTION

## Transformation in a Time of War?

SARAH GLASSFORD AND AMY SHAW

On 24 April 1915, Helen Fowlds wrote to her mother from France, exclaiming:

I am afraid you will think me very careless about writing the last couple of weeks – but at last I can offer a very good excuse – namely work – and lots of it ... since things began in earnest up at the front we have been full to overflowing. I think perhaps of all the nurses we are the most fortunate in many ways. We are attached to a stationary hospital which contrary to its name, moves up with the army. We are under canvas, which makes it really seem like active service – and we are the nearest Canadian nurses to the front ... and we are near Boulogne which is the main British base and therefore a very busy place. And last of all we have the most splendid lot of girls.<sup>1</sup>

Back in Canada, on 18 May 1918, Lois Allen joined a group of about one hundred other women, who, “filled with enthusiasm for the cause,” hulled strawberries in E.D. Smith and Son’s jam factory in Winona, Ontario. As Allen explained in her diary:

These girls all came from good homes and all were anxious to do their “bit.” They came from all parts of Ontario, and two even came from Montreal. The girls lived in a camp under Y.W.[C.A.] supervision, having the choice of either a room in the barracks where we ate, or a tent. Alice Goodwin and I chose a

tent. In the factory we worked for ten and sometimes twelve hours a day, enlivening the monotony of the work by “making up” parodies to popular songs and telling stories to one another. Twelve of us at the first table christened ourselves the “family,” and became the liveliest group in the camp, and also some of the best workers.<sup>2</sup>

For two members of the large body of non-combatant wartime citizens whom author Nellie McClung called “those who wait and wonder,” Canadians Helen Fowlds and Lois Allen seem to have spent the war years doing a lot more than waiting. If anything, they seem to have been having the time of their lives: eating, sleeping and working with “splendid” young women, enlivening their work with music and storytelling, and making a hands-on contribution to the war effort. From the distance of nearly a century, it reads like a grand adventure and, compared with most women’s prewar experiences and expectations, perhaps even a life-changing time.

Contemporary Canadian and Newfoundland society placed certain parameters around the type of involvement acceptable for the female halves of their populations during wartime. Fighting was out of the question. For many, factory work was frowned upon. But within these bounds, the girls and women of North America’s two British dominions contributed to – or in some cases spoke against – the war effort in whatever ways they could. Their access to full citizenship may have been constrained by their gender, but when their two countries and their mutual Empire went to war, women responded as quickly as men. The aim of this collection is to bring together major elements of women’s wartime experience as a step towards meaningfully (re)inserting the female half of the population into the historical narratives of Canada and Newfoundland at war, from 1914 to 1918. Women were not bystanders in the Great War, quietly knitting for the duration: in a multitude of ways they were actively engaged in wartime society and deeply affected by the vagaries of war.

The First World War has been accorded enormous significance in both Canadian and Newfoundland history as a result of the scope and scale of suffering it produced as well as its political and economic impacts on each dominion. A further long-term impact is the way the war has woven itself – in a process that continues today, through memory and commemoration – into the two dominions’ national myths. The decimation of the Newfoundland Regiment at Beaumont-Hamel on 1 July 1916, and the triumph of the Canadian

forces at Vimy Ridge between 9 and 12 April 1917, became, in different ways, iconic moments for their respective countries. For Newfoundlanders it was a shared grief, for Canadians a shared victory. In both cases, contemporary observers and subsequent historians viewed these battles, and the entire war experience, as turning points. Classic interpreters of Canadian history have portrayed the Great War as the defining event that transformed Canada from a political coalition into a truly united country. Arthur Lower contends that Canada entered the First World War as a colony of Britain and emerged from it as something close to an independent state. C.P. Stacey sees the capture of Vimy Ridge as a milestone “on the road to national maturity.” Desmond Morton and J.L. Granatstein refer to the First World War as Canada’s “war of independence.”<sup>3</sup> These interpretations have been complicated and challenged by subsequent histories that highlight rifts and divisions sparked or exacerbated by the war, but the narrative of a unifying nationalism persists. Newfoundlanders have seen the First World War in similar terms. The Newfoundland and Labrador Heritage website’s extensive online digital collection relating to the Great War describes it as “a watershed in the country’s history.” Kevin Major calls Beaumont-Hamel Memorial Park in France “Newfoundland’s most sacred soil,” and he argues that the Great War “affirmed Newfoundland’s view of itself as a separate nation, if but a minor one still under the considerable influence of Britain.”<sup>4</sup> In national memory, Canadians and Newfoundlanders were transformed by the experience of the First World War.

This being the case, how do women fit into this narrative of war-leading-to-national-maturity? Does this transformation theme encompass them? Or is it more clearly a masculine story, with a focus on the exploits of the soldiers overseas? Many Canadian women received the franchise during the First World War; some women in both Canada and Newfoundland challenged gender expectations by engaging in non-traditional occupations. Did women as a whole therefore experience their own separate transformation – as women – during the First World War? If so, what was transformed, how, and why? The idea of transformation often implies notions of progress – movement towards something better. How do we measure such a transformation when the war affected women differently according to age, race, ethnicity, class, and a range of less easily categorized factors such as their personal connections to the men fighting overseas? What have contemporaries and historians had to say on the subject?

The idea for *A Sisterhood of Suffering and Service* sprang from a sense of the remarkable absence of women and their activities from Newfoundland's and Canada's memories of the First World War. The same is true to an even greater extent when it comes to the experiences of girls (and children more broadly, although boys are not dealt with here). As the scholarly literature on the First World War continues to grow yearly, women's experiences of this period remain largely obscure. In particular, women are glaringly absent from Newfoundland's Great War history. *Pursuing Equality: Historical Perspectives on Women in Newfoundland and Labrador* (edited by Linda Kealey) addresses many silences surrounding women's political and legal experiences in the history of Newfoundland and Labrador, and Margot I. Duley's chapter in that volume reveals the international network in which Newfoundland women operated. Yet those who search for a few good books or articles on Newfoundland women and the First World War will still turn up precious little.

The main bibliographic source for available scholarly material on Canada's military history, O.A. Cooke, *The Canadian Military Experience, 1867-1995: A Bibliography*, does not include a single entry for women in the First World War. While women may have no place in the story of battlefield tactics and military strategizing in this period, a robust Canadian military history ought to recognize that women are implicated in the waging of war even when they are not engaged in planning or physically fighting it. Happily, studies of the Canadian home front in the First World War have made a valuable start: Robert Rutherford's *Hometown Horizons: Local Responses to Canada's Great War* and Ian Hugh Maclean Miller's *Our Glory and Our Grief: Torontonians and the Great War* contain chapters detailing women's local war work, while women are integral to nearly all of Jonathan Vance's cultural analysis in *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning, and the First World War*, which argues that Canadians interpreted the war in very traditional ways rather than adopting a cynical modernist view.<sup>5</sup> Rutherford's chapter, "Gendered Fields," provides a particularly useful assessment of how "gender and class combined and encoded the specific practices and fields of activity [women and men] pursued" during the war – an assessment upheld by the chapters in this volume.<sup>6</sup> But the need for greater attention is not limited to histories of the war. There are important monographs on women's history that take a longitudinal approach, including the years 1914-18, but which do not pay more than passing attention to the First World War. Examples include Joy Parr's *The Gender of Breadwinners: Women, Men, and Change in Two Industrial Towns, 1880-1950*; and Mariana Valverde's *The Age of Light, Soap and*

*Water: Moral Reform in English Canada, 1885-1925. Quebec Women: A History* contains only a single page on the First World War, which discusses changes in women's paid employment. An important exception to this general neglect is Linda Kealey's *Enlisting Women for the Cause: Women, Labour, and the Left in Canada, 1890-1920*, which examines the subject of women workers and labour activists, and situates their wartime experiences within a longer history of women, work, socialism, and struggle.<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, Alison Prentice et al.'s *Canadian Women: A History* makes somewhat fuller reference to women's wartime experiences. Women's paid labour during the Great War is integrated into a chapter on women's work, while wartime activities (with a focus on suffrage victories) are discussed in the chapter "Marching into the Twentieth Century." In both cases, women's activities, challenges, and advances are placed within a wider context of change and continuity throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This is an important perspective as it inserts women's wartime experiences into a broader sweep of history than most studies can provide. Prentice and her co-authors highlight the many divisions among women that were sparked by the war – between Liberals and Conservatives, French- and English-speakers, labour and the middle class, pacifists and war supporters – that are often overlooked or underplayed in existing literature. Unfortunately, in covering so much ground in only a handful of pages, space limitations keep the authors from delving deeply into broader or more idiosyncratic responses to the war. A further strength of this synthesis is its linking of women's wartime work (paid or otherwise) to an expanded public role. By providing further examples of women's increased public presence due to wartime activities, the chapters in *A Sisterhood of Suffering and Service* not only bolster the connection made by Prentice et al. but also analyze the rhetoric and imagery of traditional femininity, which, when applied to specific activities (such as Red Cross work or women's non-traditional paid labour), kept this increased movement into the public sphere from sparking a more fundamental transformation of Canadian gender relations.

Another worthwhile but necessarily limited look at Canadian women's experiences of the Great War is the engaging documentary film *And We Knew How to Dance: Women in WWI*, which uses women's oral histories to argue that the First World War was a watershed moment for women workers.<sup>8</sup> While the research undertaken by Kori Street in *A Sisterhood of Suffering and Service* as well as elsewhere casts doubt on this conclusion as it applies to gender relations within Canadian society as a whole, the film leaves no doubt that, for many

women, the experience of non-traditional paid labour during the Great War was transformative on a personal level.

Another notable contribution to the literature on Canadian women and the First World War is Joan Sangster's chapter on the wartime mobilization of women, which may be found in David Mackenzie's edited collection entitled *Canada and the First World War*.<sup>9</sup> Sangster focuses primarily on women's paid labour and morality, foregrounding issues of class in terms of Canadian women's First World War experiences. By emphasizing these two areas, Sangster passes lightly over elements such as women's voluntary work, their emotional responses to the war, and the war's effects on domestic and familial relations. Yet the chapter's focus, and its use of non-traditional, literary sources, makes it a welcome and important contribution to the literature, while also providing a fruitful direction for new research. Her argument that the war brought about an increased level of surveillance for women is supported in *A Sisterhood of Suffering and Service* by Terry Wilde's study of young women at the University of Toronto and Desmond Morton's examination of the Canadian Patriotic Fund's interactions with soldiers' wives.

In the course of preparing this volume, it became increasingly evident that, although there is a clear need for a comprehensive and authoritative scholarly monograph that draws together and interprets the varied strands of female experience, the historical forgetfulness surrounding women and the First World War is more apparent than real. There is a genuine lack of research into Newfoundland women's Great War experiences, but there is a surprising amount of literature that deals with aspects of Canadian women's experiences between 1914 and 1918. This includes such work as Barbara Roberts' biography of Gertrude Richardson and her "*Why Do Women Do Nothing to End the War?*": *Canadian Feminist-Pacifists and the Great War*, which reveal the activities of Canadian women who stood by their prewar pacifism and braved public scorn and hostility by protesting against the war.<sup>10</sup> Roberts makes it clear that, although for such women the war was a different experience than it was for their pro-war sisters, it was no less harrowing. Suffrage, nursing, and literature are among other areas that have received a certain amount of scholarly attention.<sup>11</sup>

The literature on Canadian and Newfoundland women exists within a rich context of international scholarship on women and the First World War. Among English-speaking countries, there has been an interesting tendency to focus on certain thematic areas. American historians have often emphasized women's pacifism and war resistance; British scholars have produced many of

the more definitive works on the relationship of women's suffrage to the war; and several Australian and New Zealand scholars have focused on nursing. However, while some women's wartime experiences have held a particular interest or significance for certain countries, others appear nearly universal. Voluntary work, new fields of paid labour, and emotional turmoil, for example, seem to have been common wartime experiences for women of all the English-speaking Allied countries.

The chapters in *A Sisterhood of Suffering and Service*, which examine the First World War through the eyes of the girls and women of Newfoundland and Canada, is a place to start, not a place to end. As a result of the kind of research presently being undertaken, there is more here on Canada than on Newfoundland, more on women than on girls, more on central Canada than on the east or the west, and, regrettably, very little on Quebec. Boys deserve study as well but are not included here. Similarly, the women depicted here tend to be those who supported the war and were in society's mainstream: pacifists, enemy aliens, visible minorities, and women in leftist and labour movements are among those underrepresented or unrepresented. Poets receive more attention than novelists, although the place of L.M. Montgomery's *Rilla of Ingleside* in shaping late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century popular memory of women and the war makes it a much-cited reference throughout the volume. Artists and musicians are not included here. While these weaknesses are genuinely regrettable, an imperfect beginning is better than no beginning at all. By establishing a clearer sense of the parameters of mainstream female experience in these two dominions during the First World War, *A Sisterhood of Suffering and Service* may spur other scholars to fill in the gaps that remain. In the meantime, the chapters presented here, each comprehensive and solidly-researched, help fill a major void in Canadian and Newfoundland history.

Since *A Sisterhood of Suffering and Service* aims to encourage further research in the field, it includes a selected bibliography that lists key sources on Canadian and Newfoundland women and the First World War. Surely one way to foster future research is simply to make others aware of what is already available. There *is* a modest body of literature about Canadian and Newfoundland women and the First World War. It just does not seem, thus far, to be making its presence felt.

So why Canada *and* Newfoundland (the latter a separate country until 1949)? Why women *and* girls? Newfoundland is included in this volume not merely because the island subsequently became part of Canada but also, and

more important, because there is much to be learned from comparing and contrasting the two countries' wartime experiences. Though the two British dominions were very different economically, politically, and socially, they shared a sense of affectionate duty towards their mutual motherland, a common view of women's appropriate roles in wartime, and a vast geographic distance between themselves and the battlefields.<sup>12</sup> This is not to say that Canadian and Newfoundland women's Great War experiences were the same. However, while respecting their unique national contexts and their divergences from one another, they deserve to be considered in tandem. Similarly, *A Sisterhood of Suffering and Service* specifically includes young girls as well as adult women because age can be a very fruitful category of analysis. Historians of the family and of childhood, as well as cultural historians, have shown that, despite generally functioning from positions of powerlessness, children do make history. They are both contributors to, and powerfully shaped by, prevailing cultural norms and social conditions. They are mobilized as powerful symbols, and concerns for their safety and development frequently provoke policy decisions and action by adults.<sup>13</sup> An examination of the ways in which age mediated girls' experiences, and how representations of girls were used and read in wartime, adds depth and complexity to our understandings of women's and military history. If adult women's wartime roles were limited by their gender, young women's and girls' roles were additionally limited by their youth. It is also worth noting that the term "girl" itself was used loosely at the time – denoting anything from small children to adolescents to grown women in positions of lower status. Being mindful of such nuances can only enrich our understanding of this period.<sup>14</sup>

One important factor in the relative historical neglect of Canadian and Newfoundland women and girls in the First World War may be a very practical one. Debbie Marshall's *Give Your Other Vote to the Sister: A Woman's Journey into the Great War* and Susan Mann's *Margaret Macdonald: Imperial Daughter* both point to the frequent paucity of records as a major hindrance to the study of women and girls in wartime. Their subjects are two of the more visible and publicly active women in Canada – the matron-in-chief of the Canadian Army Nursing Corps during the Great War and the first woman elected to the Alberta Legislature – but both authors faced the problem of an absence of records.<sup>15</sup>

As a result, Marshall's study of Roberta MacAdams is as much a story of Marshall's own search for evidence as it is a narrative of her subject's experiences. Where information was unavailable she took educated leaps into the dark, imagining what MacAdams' responses to certain situations may have

been, and combining what records were available with secondary material about surrounding people, places, and events, to reconstruct some semblance of MacAdams' otherwise obscure life. To a much lesser degree, Susan Mann similarly places herself within Margaret Macdonald's story in order to address gaps and silences.

Mann and Marshall were forced to take an unconventional approach not only by the absence of external records but also, and more significantly, by the reluctance of their subjects to put forward their own narratives of their experiences in the war. Like many Canadian and Newfoundland women and girls, Margaret Macdonald and Roberta MacAdams (despite their public prominence and professional achievements) wrote no memoirs about their experiences in the war and preserved few letters, diaries, or other documents. A widespread public desire to return society to "normal" after the war may have contributed to this neglect.

Susan Mann raises this point when she discusses the absence of an official history of the Canadian women's military nursing service after the First World War. As matron-in-chief, Margaret Macdonald was asked to write a history of women in the war, but the task proved beyond her – possibly beyond any satisfactory telling. Macdonald, perhaps in an effort at collaboration, solicited reminiscences from former matrons and nursing sisters, but almost no one responded. Mann suggests an explanation:

Her letter seemed to request the soldiers' stories rather than the nurses' and she had qualified it with the phrase "of historical value." What woman in the 1920's would have used that phrase to describe any experience of her own? ... Besides, as nurses they had been enjoined to silence since the very beginning of their nursing training.<sup>16</sup>

The question of how to tell women's stories within the male narrative of war was a hindrance to would-be women memoirists at the time, just as it continues to hinder our ability to integrate women's wartime experiences into wider wartime narratives of tactics and technologies, taxes and trade.

The chapters presented here make creative use of a diverse array of sources in their respective attempts to uncover the parts played by girls and women in the global drama of the First World War. In so doing, they demonstrate that diligent digging and a willingness to read deeply into what evidence has survived reap rich rewards. In the tradition of women's history of all periods, reading

“against the grain” and “between the lines” pays off. Letters and photos carefully preserved by her family give Suzanne Evans’ chapter a touchingly personal quality; Terry Bishop Stirling extrapolates from limited surviving correspondence to illuminate a broader Newfoundland nursing experience. Terry Wilde relies heavily upon that historical standby the period newspaper (indeed, most of the authors draw useful material from newspapers and periodicals of the time). Kristine Alexander, Linda Quiney, Alison Norman, and Suzanne Evans make use of material culture artefacts, including postcards, flags, medals, teddy bears, sheet music, and uniforms, to gain insight into the lives of girls and women. Many of the authors analyze the visual statements found in wartime propaganda posters. Institutional and governmental records and correspondence provide a solid base for the work of Desmond Morton, Alison Norman, Kori Street, and Margot Duley. Kori Street and Desmond Morton notably integrate quantitative data (in Street’s case, from databases she herself painstakingly compiled) with more qualitative sources. Lynn Kennedy and Amy Tector unpack the imagery and ideologies present in literary works, while Vicki Hallett uses biography to complement a close reading of poetry. In short, the same kinds of sources historians draw upon for all sorts of social and cultural history topics are available for writing the wartime history of women and girls. They may be few and far between, but much can be made of them.

Another reason for the relative invisibility of female Great War history may lie in the fact that our collective memory of the First World War is often overshadowed by its successor. When we think about women and war, it is the Second World War that comes most quickly to mind, borne jauntily along by the iconic American image of Rosie the Riveter flexing her muscles and assuring viewers that “We Can Do It!” The historical scholarship on Canadian women and the Second World War is far from comprehensive, yet it has made a strong impression on the wider scholarship on Canada and the Second World War. This is primarily the result of Ruth Roach Pierson’s pathbreaking *“They’re Still Women After All”: The Second World War and Canadian Womanhood*, which contends that the Second World War did not produce a conscious and long-term expansion of women’s opportunities or fundamentally change prevailing gender norms. In his survey of the Canadian home front, Jeffrey Keshen argues that Pierson “sets the bar too high in identifying what needed to be changed or be dismantled to constitute ‘real progress.’” Some restrictions remained and some hopes went unfulfilled, Keshen suggests, but nonetheless there was change – primarily in women’s views of themselves and their abilities. Cynthia Toman’s

*An Officer and a Lady: Canadian Military Nursing and the Second World War* also explores the question of transformation. Toman asserts that traditional notions of femininity constrained what nurses could and could not do within the masculine military sphere, but she also finds nurses contesting these expectations in a variety of ways. Ultimately, while technological developments aided the Nursing Sisters in reshaping their workplace relationships with male doctors and surgeons, Toman's evidence suggests that these changes did not translate into a transformation of postwar and non-military nursing settings.<sup>17</sup>

What we might call the “transformation thesis” – a desire to establish whether or not the popular image of the Second World War as a liberating experience for women is an accurate one – echoes through the literature on women and war in many nations. As the work of Pierson, Keshen, and Toman suggests, the answer is far from clear in the Canadian case. Applying the same question to the First World War produces even muddier results.

At the outset of the conflict, many women responded to the prospect of war with the same enthusiasm as did men. Writing for the *Canadian Magazine* in early 1917, Mabel Durham proudly asserted that, “while the men have been quick to answer the call[,] the women have not been behind them in manifesting a patriotic spirit.”<sup>18</sup> Imperial and nationalist sentiments ran high, and the war seemed to offer an opportunity both to serve the British Empire and to display to the world the bravery, steadfastness, and pluck of Canadians and Newfoundlanders. Some Newfoundlanders and Canadians alike envisioned the war as the event that would transform their respectively far-flung and under-appreciated colonies into full members of the British Empire.<sup>19</sup> Many women also saw an opportunity for their sex to prove itself. Women's suffrage advocates had been agitating unsuccessfully for decades in an attempt to gain a political voice for women at the ballot box. Where words had failed, perhaps deeds in a time of crisis might succeed in transforming anti-suffragists into allies of women's cause? Emerging stories of German atrocities contributed further to existing patriotic wartime rhetoric, leading many women to support the war effort with an almost religious sense of urgency. Support for the war, in their view, was necessary to save (or avenge) the women and children of Belgium and the rest of Europe from the inhuman depredations of “the Hun.” Neighbours of certain ethnic backgrounds were transformed in the public mind from fellow citizens into enemy aliens. For most, supporting the war meant aiding the individual men fighting it, upholding the collective body of soldiers overseas, or justifying the deaths of those already fallen by winning the war.

As the war on the Western Front settled into a muddy, bloody stalemate, for many of the girls and women in North America's two British dominions the underlying mood of the war years became what one author calls "this terrible strain of waiting."<sup>20</sup> Worry, fear, and uncertainty quickly took their toll, and any form of tangible work could become a source of much needed distraction. As a result, church groups, war charities, and voluntary organizations were flooded with female volunteers looking to do something concrete for the war effort. Many of the projects undertaken by these groups fell into the traditional categories of women's work – what the Newfoundland Women's Patriotic Association christened "distaff work" – in particular, the seemingly unending tasks of sewing and knitting comforts and hospital supplies, or bandage-rolling, undertaken individually or in groups. The knitting woman, especially the knitting mother, exemplified a societally approved means of fulfilling a female citizen's wartime obligations. By linking the comfort of a familiarly humble domestic activity to broader wartime goals, the knitting woman became a powerful and enduring icon of an engaged home front.<sup>21</sup> Such a connection in the minds of ordinary women had the potential to transform their views of themselves and the humble tasks they undertook. Distaff work was war work, and war work was work of national – nay, imperial – significance.

Despite its ubiquity in wartime society, knitting was by no means the only activity undertaken by girls and women in wartime Newfoundland and Canada. They also raised millions of dollars by the war's end for the Red Cross, Belgian Relief, the Women's Patriotic Association of Newfoundland, the Canadian Patriotic Fund, and a host of other causes by organizing concerts, tag days, teas, card parties, bake sales, lectures, and bazaars. Church groups and secular voluntary organizations played fundamental roles in the functioning of Canadian and Newfoundland society in the early twentieth century, so not only did women instinctively turn to these organizations as an outlet for their "desire to serve and save,"<sup>22</sup> but the governments of both Newfoundland and Canada relied heavily upon these voluntary organizations to assume wartime duties that later generations would deem to be state responsibilities. Given this reality, women's participation in the voluntary aspect of the war takes on an even wider significance within the broader war efforts of Canada and Newfoundland.

The work undertaken by various war charities and women's groups also held transformative potential for the organizations themselves. In its fiftieth-anniversary history, the Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire (IODE) called the years 1914 to 1918 "a turning point in the history of the Order," which diverted

the IODE from child welfare work into “an efficient organization by which prompt and united action may be taken by the women and children of the Empire” – a sort of imperial women’s emergency response team. Similarly, the Canadian Red Cross was transformed from a sleepy group of retired military medical men in Toronto into Canada’s leading humanitarian organization, with a nationwide membership fuelled by women’s labour.<sup>23</sup>

Throughout the war women also played active roles in recruiting men to enlist. Women and girls were an important audience and motivation for men’s heroism, so women’s efforts to recruit soldiers became a central element of wartime discourse and, subsequently, of the collective memory of the First World War. A significant amount of recruiting propaganda was actually aimed at women. Jeffrey Keshen notes, for example, the twenty thousand booklets distributed in Montreal by the Citizens’ Recruiting League that pleaded with “mothers, wives and sweethearts ... [to] think of [their] country by letting [their] sons go and fight.”<sup>24</sup> One poster, addressed “To the Women of Canada,” directly linked the threat of German invasion, masculine pride, and women’s role in the enlistment process, concluding with the appeal: “Won’t you help and send a man to enlist to-day?” (see Figure 1). Newfoundland’s Julia Horwood, a member of the Women’s Patriotic Association, noted in 1916: “Recruiting is largely affected by the attitude of the women.” She went on to claim that the bulk of Newfoundland’s soldiers came “from homes where the women ha[d] put selfishness aside and not placed obstacles in the way of the men, doing their public duty conscientiously.”<sup>25</sup> Wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters were expected to persuade their male relations to enlist, and their willingness to sacrifice loved ones for the cause of the empire at war was constructed in public discourse as an important part of female war service. A woman’s decision to encourage – or not to hinder – a man’s enlistment had the potential to transform the man in question from ordinary citizen into citizen-soldier. The consequences for the woman might include fear, a measure of pride, temporary elevation to head of the household, and, further down the road, the grief of loss – any one of which could transform a woman’s daily life in dramatic yet intimate ways.

To ease increasing wartime labour shortages and provide material for the battle front, unmarried women entered the workforce in large numbers during the First World War, as did some married women. On farms, in factories, and in offices, women filled positions previously occupied by men. In the summer-time, the YWCA recruited hundreds of female volunteers like Lois Allen from towns and cities to help on farms. Thousands of women stepped into these

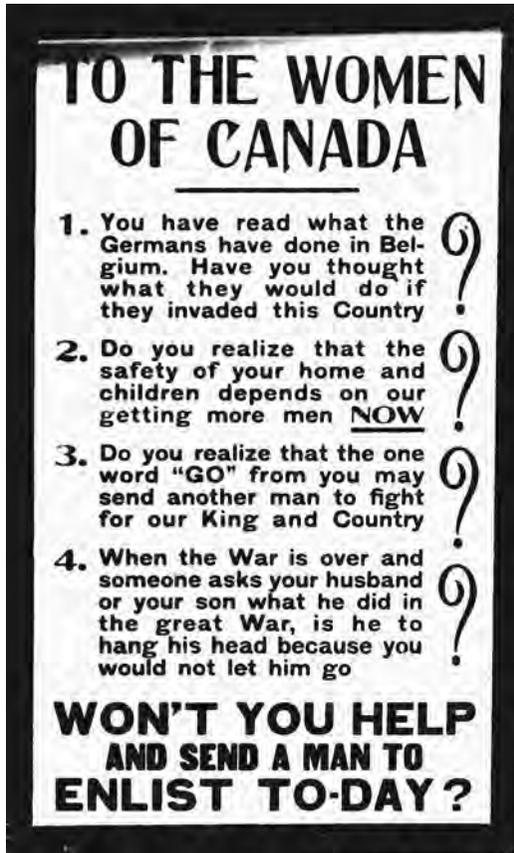


FIGURE 1 Recruiting poster. Military recruiters believed women were essential agents in the task of recruiting men. [World War I Poster Slides, Queen's University Archives, Vo43]

unaccustomed roles and, to some degree, were lauded for doing so, but the gender discrimination that predated the war remained the norm. Women still earned lower wages than did men for the same work, often lacked union support, and did not have access to day care facilities adequate to meet the needs of married women who went to work. Thousands of women filled jobs previously closed to them, altering the visual landscape of even such male-dominated industries as railways and steel production, yet this unprecedented change did not produce a complete transformation of either Canadian workplaces or the gender dynamics therein.

A small proportion of women came relatively close to the battlefields. Over two thousand women enlisted as Nursing Sisters in the Canadian Expeditionary Force during the First World War, while an unknown number of Newfoundlanders nursed with various British and Canadian nursing corps. Their overseas work at stationary hospitals and casualty clearing stations, on hospital ships, and on ambulance trains was often grueling and sometimes downright dangerous. An overseas posting temporarily transformed a young nurse's existence, bringing her into contact with foreign lands and peoples, and testing both her professional skills and her personal resilience under trying conditions. For a time, the Nursing Sister's life was turned upside down. Whether war service had a longer-term transformative impact, however, is more difficult to determine. Many nurses seem to have settled into a quiet, unexceptional postwar life back in Canada or Newfoundland – but does that mean the war had no transformative effect upon them at all?

Although the wartime courage and caring demonstrated by nurses from Canada and Newfoundland earned them praise and gratitude back home, there were definite limits to the ways in which Canadians and Newfoundlanders would allow their womenfolk to be involved in the war effort. A small group of Toronto women, for example, formed what they called the “Women's Home Guard.” They wore uniforms, practised drill in public, and honed their rifle skills. These women wished to free up men in the official Home Guard for overseas service and take on the role of protecting Canada's home front themselves. Neither the citizens of Toronto nor the Canadian military, however, were prepared to accept this degree of deviance from conventional views of women's appropriate roles, and the Women's Home Guard experiment came to an end.<sup>26</sup> If members had hoped the war emergency heralded a transformation of Canadian society's views regarding women and military or paramilitary service, they were sorely disappointed.

Women's wartime service, as the preceding discussion demonstrates, was visible and tangible; their suffering and sacrifice less so. Both elements came, in time, to be linked to female suffrage at the national level. In Canada, Prime Minister Robert Borden's administration enfranchised a large number of women in 1917 through two measures. With regard to any general election held during the war, the Military Voters Act quietly included Nursing Sisters in its general enfranchisement of all British subjects, regardless of age, who had participated actively in any branch of the Canadian military. More controversially, the Wartime Elections Act granted the federal franchise to the wives, widows,

mothers, and sisters of serving soldiers, provided they were British subjects and over twenty-one years of age.<sup>27</sup> This move has generally been understood (both at the time and subsequently) as a blatant political manoeuvre meant to ensure Borden's pro-conscription Union Party would win the upcoming election, based upon the assumption that female relatives of soldiers would champion conscription for overseas military service as a way to support the men already serving.<sup>28</sup> However, the gesture also seemed to offer a tacit recognition that women's contributions to the war effort had demonstrated the type of responsible citizenship deemed necessary in a voter. The Women's War Conference called by the federal government in 1918, and the passage of a dedicated women's franchise measure in the same year, seemed to reinforce this acknowledgment.<sup>29</sup>

However, the Wartime Elections Act was not an unmixed blessing. While it saw somewhere between 500,000 and 1,000,000 women go to the polls in the 1917 federal election, it also deliberately disenfranchised other Canadians: individual conscientious objectors, male and female members of pacifist religious groups like the Mennonites and Doukhobors, and all men and women born in enemy countries (not just ethnic Germans and Austrians but also Czechs, Slovaks, Ruthenians, and Poles) who had been naturalized after 1902. The latter was intended, in part, to exclude many immigrant women who had been naturalized by marrying British subjects. Respective provincial franchise qualifications relating to age, race, residence, and property-holding, which had hitherto applied to men, were extended to the new prospective women voters at the federal level. Aboriginal and Asian women and men were notable among those thus excluded.<sup>30</sup> Many suffragists, such as those in the Victoria and Regina local councils of women, opposed the Wartime Elections Act because of its discriminatory elements, believing that only universal female suffrage would achieve real social change. In Montreal, the Wartime Elections Act was so divisive among local women activists that it led to a dramatic impeachment trial for Dr. Grace Ritchie-England, long-time president of the Montreal Council of Women.<sup>31</sup> The Wartime Elections Act must therefore be considered, at best, as a partial transformation of women's political rights in Canada and as a divisive, rather than as a unifying, development.

The link between women's war service and the granting of the vote in Newfoundland is less direct than the Canadian example, but it is nonetheless present. In *A Sisterhood of Suffering and Service*, and in her previous work, Margot I. Duley shows that leaders of Newfoundland's women's movement considered the country's Great War nurses and Voluntary Aid Detachment

personnel (VADs) as models of female citizenship, while members of the war-time Women's Patriotic Association made a smooth transition from patriotic charitable work to suffrage agitation after 1918. Their persistent efforts resulted in attaining the franchise for Newfoundland women in 1925.<sup>32</sup> In the Newfoundland case, then, the war did not immediately transform male Newfoundlanders' attitudes towards the idea of women's voting, but it appears to have at least contributed to transforming some female Newfoundlanders into activists for the cause of women's suffrage and hardened the resolve of others.

The chapters presented in this volume reveal a portion of the diverse range of activities in which Canadian and Newfoundland women and girls engaged during the war. All of the authors argue that women and girls made significant contributions to the war effort (often in overlooked ways), but they differ, depending upon the particular group or activity they examine, in their assessments of whether these female contributions challenged or conformed to prevailing gender norms. Some see transformation taking place as barriers crumbled and minds were changed; others see established views holding fast and identify women's efforts as arising out of older gendered traditions. This ambivalence speaks to the incredible vastness of the geographical areas in question and to the broad range of ages, classes, religions, racial and ethnic backgrounds, occupations, ideologies, political persuasions, and experiences being studied. A resounding universal "yes" or "no" to the question of transformation would be extremely surprising. Just as a serviceman's experience varied, depending upon the branch of the service in which he found himself and the arena of war in which he fought, so what women experienced between 1914 and 1918 was not one Great War but many unique individual wars – local and personal. The war's transformative impact – or lack thereof – is therefore more a question of millions of potential transformations. The chapters presented here tackle small subsets of this enormous body of experience and attempt to measure the war's impact within those particular confines.

But *A Sisterhood of Suffering and Service* also shows that there were ways in which women's experience of the war was distinctive and unifying. One munitions worker in Daphne Read's oral history *The Great War and Canadian Society* remembers:

In meeting these people that we had never had any opportunity to meet before, and finding they were just the same as we were, but they just hadn't had the chances that we'd had for education and that kind of thing, we began to realize

that we were all sisters under the skins. Wars do bring every class together and I think we need to do a little bit more of that without war if we can.<sup>33</sup>

The experience of women of different classes working together – whether in industrial workplaces or volunteer sewing circles – broadened women’s experience of their similarities across traditional social divides. The idea of the war’s producing a certain form of “sisterhood” – in this case a sisterhood of service and suffering – is dealt with more fully in the conclusion to this collection.

Part 1, “Mobilizing Women,” examines the wartime responses of three regionally, ethnically, and socially disparate groups. In the process, it not only reveals certain commonalities that suggest how we might broadly characterize the experience of women during the First World War but also examines idiosyncrasies that remind us that factors such as race, class, and region can shape historical experience as much as gender. Alison Norman traces the ways in which Six Nations Aboriginal women’s voluntary knitting, sewing, and fundraising simultaneously demonstrated the acculturation of their community to an Anglo-Canadian way of life and upheld a distinctive Six Nations warrior tradition that predated both Canada and the British Empire. Margot I. Duley’s examination of the Newfoundland Women’s Patriotic Association reveals how the war brought a lustre of patriotic service to traditional tasks and gender roles that fed into a successful postwar suffrage movement and a general increase in public leadership roles for women at the community level. Terry Wilde’s analysis of young women at the University of Toronto suggests that, although the years 1914 to 1918 dramatically altered co-eds’ self-perceptions and the expectations placed upon them by their school, community, and government, the change was in some ways as restrictive as it was liberating and, in the end, proved transitory. Together these three chapters combine to enrich our knowledge of what it meant for women in Canada and Newfoundland to live, work, and learn as women in a society at war.

With this broad context for women’s wartime experiences established, Part 2, “Women’s Work?” moves on to consider women’s participation in wartime nursing and non-traditional forms of paid labour. Linda J. Quiney demonstrates how familiar maternalist ideology and a corresponding ethic of service were mobilized by the Canadian St. John Ambulance Association with unconventional results: the portrayal of female VAD personnel as female soldiers. In her complementary examination of Newfoundland’s overseas VADs and Nursing Sisters, Terry Bishop Stirling finds that, while these women shared common challenges

in their overseas service, their responses to them were highly individual. Driven less by gender than by factors such as class, education, and personality, these women's unique responses make generalization about any kind of war-induced transformation difficult. In her detailed look at responses to women's moving into banking and munitions work during the war, Kori Street concludes that, although the war infused prewar gender norms with a certain flexibility, insufficient numbers of women entered the workforce to fundamentally transform prevailing views. Collectively, these three chapters demonstrate that the women of Canada and Newfoundland tackled concrete, hands-on roles during the Great War, some of which upheld contemporary gender norms, others of which had the potential to challenge long-held views about what was and was not "women's work."

Women not only took on unaccustomed activities during the war but also had to shoulder significant emotional, psychological, and economic burdens. Part 3, "Family Matters," is concerned with the significant repercussions of loneliness, privation, worry, and grief that attended the absence of fathers, husbands, brothers, and friends. Kristine Alexander surveys Canadian girls' wartime experiences on discursive, emotional, and practical levels, and she concludes that these impressionable youngsters were drawn into the conflict in ways that often proved transformative. Desmond Morton outlines the Canadian Patriotic Fund's successful but intrusive role providing financial support to soldiers' dependents, suggesting it was made obsolete by the time of the Second World War as a result of both women's experiences with it in the First World War and broader changes that had transformed Canadians' views of state and charitable responsibilities. Suzanne Evans details the material manifestations of mourning assumed by women who lost loved ones in the war, finding that the Great War altered older Victorian mourning customs but that women's bodies and homes remained primary physical sites of visible mourning. Together, these studies remind us that loss (whether temporary or permanent) was both a unique, intimate experience and a collective, public experience that irrevocably altered entire communities, regions, and nations. In time-honoured tradition, women bore the emotional and financial impacts of warfare without taking part in the fighting.

Part 4, "Creative Responses," addresses both literary representations of women and women's own efforts at writing about the war. Vicki S. Hallett's examination of Newfoundland poet Phebe Florence Miller's war poetry reveals a reliance on traditional gendered images of women as supportive, domestic

figures defined by their relationships to men – images that contributed to a male-dominated Newfoundland cultural memory of the war. In her examination of the growing sense of nationhood evident in Canadian poetry, Lynn Kennedy finds a constant motif of motherhood but notes that, as the war progressed, a nurturing Mother Britain or Canadian landscape was increasingly replaced by the sacrifices of real Canadian mothers. Amy Tector's study of Canadian novels sheds light on Canadians' discomfort with the way masculine disability transformed gender roles, and it highlights novelists' efforts to reassure readers that disabled veterans could reclaim positions of patriarchal dominance. All three chapters exemplify how, through the written word, women played an important role – as authors or as symbols – in preserving and transforming Canadians' and Newfoundlanders' lived experiences of the war for future generations. That process is continued, nearly a century later, by *A Sisterhood of Suffering and Service*.

What, if anything, does this brief overview of some of the main lines of female experience in the First World War suggest about the transformative effect of the war? It indicates that, when it came to women, much-vaunted developments in labour and politics did not immediately transform either sphere. The changes were partial at best, and their real significance lies in being part of a larger, longer process of slow, incremental change, which took much of the twentieth century to transform women's lives and society's view of appropriate gender roles – a process many would argue remains incomplete. It goes almost without saying, however, that the Great War had a major impact on both Canada and Newfoundland. Women experienced that impact as much as men, participating in both celebration and mourning as national myths were being constructed; taking pride in their own contributions; suffering disappointments, losses, and unfulfilled hopes; and, in many cases, experiencing transformation on a personal, emotional level. It is perhaps most appropriate, then, to speak of the Great War not as a time of total transformation for Canadian and Newfoundland women but, rather, as a time of shifts and repositioning – as a milestone rather than as a finish line in the great transformation that was the twentieth century.

#### Notes

- 1 Helen Fowlds to her mother, 24 April 1915, "Transcripts of Helen Fowlds' World War One Letters," Letter 15, Trent University Archives, available at <http://www.trentu.ca/>.

- 2 Lois Allen, personal diary 1918, R 1792-0-2-E, Library and Archives Canada, available at <http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/>.
- 3 As testament to the influence and popularity of this interpretation, Arthur Lower's *Colony to Nation* (Don Mills: Longmans, Green and Company, 1946) has gone through five editions and several reprints. See also C.P. Stacey, "Nationality: The Experience of Canada," *Canadian Historical Association Historical Papers* (1967): 11; Desmond Morton and J.L. Granatstein, *Marching to Armageddon: Canadians and the Great War, 1914-1919* (Toronto: Lester and Orpen Dennys, 1989), 1.
- 4 Newfoundland and Labrador Heritage, "Introduction and Overview," Newfoundland and the Great War, available at <http://www.heritage.nf.ca/>.
- 5 Robert Rutherford, *Hometown Horizons: Local Responses to Canada's Great War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2004), chap. 6; Ian Hugh Maclean Miller, *Our Glory and Our Grief: Torontonians and the Great War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), chap. 4; Jonathan Vance, *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning, and the First World War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997).
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- 9 Joan Sangster, "Mobilizing Women for War," in *Canada and the First World War: Essays in Honour of Robert Craig Brown*, ed. David MacKenzie, 157-93 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005).
- 10 Barbara Roberts, "Why Do Women Do Nothing to End the War?" *Canadian Feminist-Pacifists and the Great War* (Ottawa: Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women, 1985); Barbara Roberts, *A Reconstructed World: A Feminist Biography of Gertrude Richardson* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996).
- 11 Please see "Selected Bibliography" for specific examples.
- 12 For a concise introduction to Canadian and Newfoundland participation in the Great War, see David Mackenzie, ed., *Canada and the First World War: Essays in Honour of Robert Craig Brown* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005).
- 13 Mary Jo Maynes, "Age as a Category of Historical Analysis: History, Agency, and Narratives of Childhood," *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 1, 1 (2008): 115-16. The entire inaugural issue of the journal helpfully frames the challenges and rewards of children's history.

- 14 The history of childhood is a burgeoning field. The *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* was inaugurated in 2001, and works such as Paula S. Fass, ed., *Encyclopedia of Children and Childhood: In History and Society* (New York: Macmillan Reference, 2004), show that the field increasingly spans nations and cultures. Examples of Canadian histories that examine aspects of girlhood and girls' lives include: Tamara Myers, *Caught: Montreal's Modern Girls and the Law, 1869-1945* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006); Cynthia Comacchio, *The Dominion of Youth: Adolescence and the Making of a Modern Canada, 1920-1950* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2006); and Neil Sutherland, *Growing Up: Childhood in English Canada from the Great War to the Age of Television* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997).
- 15 Debbie Marshall, *Give Your Other Vote to the Sister: A Woman's Journey into the Great War* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2007); Susan Mann, *Margaret Macdonald: Imperial Daughter* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005).
- 16 Mann, *Margaret Macdonald*, 167.
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- 24 Secretary of the Montreal Citizens' Recruiting League to O.C. of M.D. no. 4, n.d., Department of National Defence, vol. 4479, file 25-1-20, cited in Jeffrey Keshen, *Propaganda and Censorship during Canada's Great War* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1996). Suzanne Evans discusses the propaganda aimed at women, especially at mothers, during the Great War in *Mothers of Heroes, Mothers of Martyrs: World War I*

- and the Politics of Grief* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007). Images of Canadian propaganda posters of the First World War are available at <http://www.museedelaguerre.ca/>.
- 25 Julia Horwood, "W.P.A. Visiting Committee," *The Distaff* (1916): 1.
  - 26 Kori Street, "'Toronto's Amazons': Militarised Femininity and Gender Construction in the Great War" (MA thesis, University of Toronto, 1991).
  - 27 Catherine Cleverdon, *The Woman Suffrage Movement in Canada* [1950] (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), 122-25.
  - 28 See, for example, Robert Craig Brown and Ramsay Cook's classic *Canada 1896-1921: A Nation Transformed* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974), 271.
  - 29 For example, the argument that women were given the vote as a reward for their war service is put forward by one woman interviewed in the documentary *And We Knew How to Dance*.
  - 30 Cleverdon, *Woman Suffrage*, 125-31.
  - 31 Prentice et al., *Canadian Women*, 234-35; Tarah Brookfield, "Divided by the Ballot Box: The Montreal Council of Women and the 1917 Election," *Canadian Historical Review* 89, 4 (2008): 473-501.
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## PART 1:

# MOBILIZING WOMEN

The nimble fingers of the knitting women are transforming balls of wool into socks and comforters, but even a greater change is being wrought in their own hearts.<sup>1</sup>

– NELLIE McCLUNG, 1915

When war broke out in August 1914, a surge of patriotic propaganda and recruiting appeals quickly followed. Though this material was largely directed at their male friends and relatives, the appeal to do one's duty by King and Empire hit home with vast numbers of girls and women as well. Moreover, many women felt the call to care for soldiers and support the war effort for the sake of relatives and friends in uniform as strongly, or perhaps more strongly, than they felt the call to work for the nation and empire at war.

Women whose hearts and minds were not immediately stirred by a sense of duty or a desire to care for absent loved ones did not escape the home-front mobilization of girls and women. There were no white feather campaigns against reluctant women, such as those that strove to shame able-bodied men into enlisting in the army, but women were equally pressured and shamed into participating in volunteer war work. Newspapers printed lists of volunteers' and donors' contributions; classrooms, volunteer groups, and communities competed to raise the most money or produce the most comforts; and the wagging tongues of observant friends and neighbours worked to provide an informal network of community surveillance. Citizens were exhorted by their peers to "fight or pay" or "fight or knit," and the implication was clear: those not in uniform had better be making a contribution to the war effort in some other way.

These non-combatant, voluntary, charitable, stay-at-home roles comprised the bulk of Canadian and Newfoundland women's contributions to their respective dominions' war efforts between 1914 and 1918. Celebrated at the time

as a glowing testament to the worth and splendid patriotism of the women and girls who performed them, the humble tasks of knitting, bandage-rolling, and fundraising have not fared well in our cultural memory of the war and have been largely overlooked in subsequent historiography. Sarah Glassford, Linda Quiney, Natalie Riegler, Robert Rutherford, and, in the Australian and British contexts, Bruce Scates and Peter Grant, are among the relatively few scholars who have given serious consideration to women's First World War voluntary labour.<sup>2</sup> Compared to the more hands-on work of military nurses, British women's non-traditional factory work, or the dramatic Second World War-era entry of large numbers of women into the armed forces, women's humble Great War efforts with knitting needles and collection boxes seem, to modern eyes, boring and possibly frivolous.

Seen in their proper context, however, they are anything but. In 1914 women throughout the English-speaking world were fighting (with little success) for the right to vote and facing uphill battles as they tried to enter traditionally male professions, while a woman's place was still seen as being firmly within the domestic sphere. In this restricted context, the women of Newfoundland and Canada found ways to contribute to the war effort that showed them to be not only patriotic daughters of their dominions and their Empire but also capable organizers and workers. These efforts arose out of a long tradition of women's supportive work behind the lines during times of war and generally conformed to established conventions of what was "appropriate" work for women. They nonetheless played a significant role – perhaps because of their very conventionality – in convincing many observers that women were fit for the privileges and responsibilities of full citizenship.

In this section, Alison Norman surveys the war work of a group whose citizenship was considered doubly suspect at the outbreak of war: the Aboriginal women of the Six Nations reserve on the Grand River in southern Ontario. Margot Duley details the work of Newfoundland's über-war charity, the Women's Patriotic Association, which not only mobilized in aid of Newfoundland soldiers but also went on to become a key element in Newfoundland women's postwar fight for suffrage. Terry Wilde takes us inside the collegiate world of the University of Toronto as he considers the role of the Great War in altering women students' place in the then overwhelmingly male culture of the university. In each case, we see that, although the vast majority of women remained outside the realms of the army and the factory, they nevertheless comprised a massive

army of voluntary labour, which they directed towards the cause of the British Empire at war. When Britannia called up her sons in August 1914, her daughters responded as well.

#### Notes

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20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12      5 4 3 2 1

Printed in Canada on FSC-certified ancient-forest-free paper  
(100% post-consumer recycled) that is processed chlorine- and acid-free.

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### Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

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.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Issued also in electronic formats.

ISBN 978-0-7748-2256-5

1. World War, 1914-1918 – Women – Canada. 2. World War, 1914-1918 – Children – Canada. 3. World War, 1914-1918 – Women – Newfoundland and Labrador. 4. World War, 1914-1918 – Children – Newfoundland and Labrador. 5. World War, 1914-1918 – Canada – Literature and the war. 6. World War, 1914-1918 – Newfoundland and Labrador – Literature and the war. I. Shaw, Amy J. (Amy Jeannette). Glassford, Sarah Carlene.

D639.W7S58 2012

940.3082'0971

C2012-900582-7

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### Canada

UBC Press gratefully acknowledges the financial support for our publishing program of the Government of Canada (through the Canada Book Fund), the Canada Council for the Arts, and the British Columbia Arts Council.

This book has been published with the help of a grant from the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, through the Aid to Scholarly Publications Program, using funds provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

UBC Press

The University of British Columbia

2029 West Mall

Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2

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