

THE GREAT WAR AND WOMEN'S  
CONSCIOUSNESS

# The Great War and Women's Consciousness

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Images of Militarism and Womanhood  
in Women's Writings, 1914–64

CLAIRE M. TYLEE

*Lecturer in English Literature  
University of Málaga*

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MACMILLAN

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*Dedicated to my Heroines of the Past*

*Edith Cavell  
Sylvia Pankhurst  
Virginia Woolf*

*and to my heroines of the future*

*Jessica and Hannah Matthew*

*The purblind policy of shielding women against their will from a knowledge of truths, however unpleasant they may be, is disastrous not only for women, but for the community at large.*

*Mrs St Clair Stobart, War and Women, 1913*

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# Preface

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One August, when I was a little girl of about six, my parents, my elder brother and I spent a day in Brighton with my grandparents. After lunch we went for a stroll along the Front. Out of the cloud of rules that floated above my head two were selected for attention: 'Walk *properly*, and don't keep asking "why?" all the time!' Then my mother and granny took my brother, who could be 'a bit of a handful', off in one direction, and I was left, most unusually, alone with my father and grandfather. Grandad, who was my mother's father, was strict and rather fierce. With a hand firmly grasped on either side, I concentrated on getting my small feet in their white socks and sandals to keep up with the large, polished shoes on both sides of me. All six feet strode down a flight of steps. Mine watchfully did not jump the last couple.

At the bottom Grandad let go of my hand to go over to a rather shabby man selling matches from a tray around his neck. He was a long time. My father gazed out to sea, his hands carefully not in his pockets, 'a bad habit' my brother had been copying. My grandmother not being there to notice ('it's rude to stare at people'), I kept my eyes fixed on my grandfather. Like all his generation his back was extremely straight. He held himself upright and rather rigid. Now, from behind, he seemed animated, laughing and gesticulating in a way I had never seen.

'Daddy, is that man a friend of Grandad's?' It seemed unlikely, Grandad was clean and always very correctly dressed.

'I shouldn't think so.'

'Then why are they talking for so long?'

'I expect they were in the War together.'

'Oh.' I already knew what that meant: not the Second-rate war Daddy had been in, but the earlier one, the *real* one, the 'Great War'; the one where Grandad had got his medals and his arthritis, and since which he had 'never been the same again'.

Then I saw Grandad take out of an inside pocket and unfold one of those large white pieces of paper that he and Daddy always carried 'for emergencies' (like Granny carried an extra hankie), but which were rarely seen: one of the old five pound notes. As he walked back towards us, he turned and held up his hand to shake a box of matches at the man, who waved his one arm in reply.

When he rejoined us, Grandad still had a smile on his face.

'Grandad, you didn't get any change.' I had watched scrupulously. Sometimes my brother and I got a silver threepenny bit out of the spare change in Grandad's pocket.

'No.'

'That was a very expensive box of matches.'

'Not to me.'

I pondered this sublime piece of adult logic. Whatever would Granny have said? Then, with undreamt of temerity, I chanced my arm:

'Grandad?'

'Yes?'

'*Why* did you buy the matches? – You've got a lighter.'

'One day, when you're grown-up, you'll understand.'

But I think I had already realised, incoherently, that on the contrary it was not until I did understand that I ever should be grown-up. So I continued to step out of line and to ask awkward questions.

Developing that strategic refusal to be ladylike, this book marks one more impatient skip along my progress to adulthood.

Claire M. Tylee  
University of Málaga

# Acknowledgements

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This book had two midwives to coax it into the open: Angela Ingram and Joe Marsh. I relied on their emotional support which never failed me.

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I am grateful to Kenneth Graham for enabling me to carry out research at Sheffield University Library and to Bryan Burns for helping me with it, and I want to express my gratitude to the librarians there, and at Birmingham Public Reference Library, Friends House Library and Leicester University Library for their energetic help and interest. Without the resources of the Imperial War Museum and the care of its staff, particularly Dr Bayliss, I could not have written this book at all, and I want to thank them especially for their time and patience.

Indirectly I am indebted to the Centre for Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham, the root of many of my ideas about the relation between literature, ideology and cultural hegemony. More directly, I am indebted to feminist literary historians such as Jane Marcus and Elaine Showalter for blazing the trail.

For permission to reproduce the illustrations in the plates section I am indebted to the following: The Imperial War Museum (1), (2), (3), (6), (7), (9) and (17); Mary Evans/Fawcett Library (8), (10) and (12); McMaster University Library (13); Tate Gallery (5); Walker Art Gallery (4). [The publishers have tried to contact all copyright

holders but in cases where they may have failed will be pleased to make the necessary arrangements at the first opportunity.

Finally I want to thank the person whose unflagging conversation and hospitality have enabled me to explore my ideas: Una Flett; and the person whose moral courage gave me strength when I most needed it: Dr Lorenzo Valderrama.

I hope they all find this book an adequate outcome for so much generosity.

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# Terminology and Abbreviations

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The British term 'The Great War' refers to what Americans call 'The European War, 1914–18', or World War I. I have used the phrase 'The Great War' where I wanted to stress the emotional reverberations which that war has in British consciousness, or, for brevity, I have written 'the War' as people of the time did. Where I wanted to be dispassionate I have used the terms 'the 1914–18 War' or 'World War I'. Otherwise I have spoken less neutrally of 'The First World War', an idea charged with apprehension of the Second.

**DORA** = The Defence of the Realm Act, 1914. (See Appendix 2.)

**ELFS\*** = East London Federation of Suffragettes. Founded by Sylvia Pankhurst in 1913, this split from the WSPU (see below) in 1914, became the Workers' Suffrage Federation in 1916, and then Workers' Socialist Federation in 1918. It had provincial branches and was uniquely democratic in organisation and proletarian in membership.

**ILP** = Independent Labour Party.

**NCF\*\*** = No Conscription Fellowship (later the National Council for Civil Liberties). Founded in 1915 on the principle of conscientious objection to killing for the state. Reached a membership of 12 000, mainly male, of conscription age, religious-pacifist and belonging to ILP.

**NUWSS\*** = National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies. Founded in 1897, with roots back to 1866. By 1914 it had 480 affiliated societies and 53 000 members. It had a democratically-elected president, Mrs Fawcett, and a national executive committee, several of whom resigned in 1915 to work instead for WIL (see below).

**UDC\*\*** = Union of Democratic Control (of Foreign Policy). Founded in August 1914 to work for a non-vindictive peace treaty and post-war disarmament, it grew from an individual membership of 5000, through an affiliated membership of 300 000 in 1915, to an affiliated membership of 650 000 by 1918.

**VAD** = Voluntary Aid Detachment. Detachments, consisting of 23 people, were established from 1910, under the British Red Cross

or St John Ambulance Brigade, to assist the professional military nursing services in case of war. A 'VAD' came to mean an individual female nurse who was a war-time volunteer.

**WFL\*** = Women's Freedom League. Under the leadership of Charlotte Despard, broke away from the increasingly autocratic and conservative WSPU in 1907. With strong links to ILP, it had 53 branches in 1908, but only 4000 members by 1914.

**WIL\*\*** = British Section of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (founded as a result of the 1915 International Women's Congress at The Hague). Affiliated to UDC, WIL had an official membership of 3687 in 1918.

**WSPU\*** = Women's Social and Political Union, the 'Suffragettes'. Founded in Manchester in 1903, specifically to adopt militant tactics; under the increasingly autocratic leadership of Mrs. Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughter Christabel it broke away from ILP and moved its headquarters to London in 1906. By 1907 it had over 70 branches (but no membership figures). From 1914 it was nationalistic, xenophobic and war-mongering.

**WWSL** = Women Writers' Suffrage League. Founded in 1908 with Elizabeth Robins, the actress/writer, as president, with the aim of using the pen to further feminist aims non-violently.

\* = discussed in Garner, Les (1984), *Stepping Stones to Women's Liberty*.

\*\* = discussed in Wiltshire, Anne (1985), *Most Dangerous Women*.