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# The Great War in the History of British Feminism: Debates and Controversies, 1914 to the Present

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

1 When, in the 1980s, numerous feminists began joining the women's peace camp at Greenham Common, a radical feminist pamphlet was published questioning the wisdom of this move. One contributor expressed her fear:

of large numbers of women abandoning women's liberation struggles in favour of what is seen as a 'larger cause'. It runs deep in all of us to put aside our 'special concerns' for the human race. (...) The parallel that haunts me is with what happened to the first wave of feminism in this country when the First World War began. I want to be reassured that this is not an appropriate parallel.<sup>2</sup>

2 As this statement indicates, the Great War occupies a special place in what Barbara Caine has aptly called the 'feminist imaginary'.<sup>3</sup> I take her to mean by this a collection of 'iconic' images, a Pantheon of heroines and villains, saints and martyrs, celebrated victories and devastating defeats that feminists draw on to legitimise, vindicate, defend and justify their own struggles and identities to themselves, to each other, and to their enemies.<sup>4</sup> Such iconic images are typical of all social and political movements (think of 'the October Revolution' for Communists, or 'Margaret Thatcher' for British Conservatives) who nourish, maintain and rekindle them through a variety of rituals ranging from annual commemorations to marches and songs. Because of the role they play in buttressing political identities, these icons are often the subject of controversy as opposing tendencies within the movement attempt to impose specific readings in a bid to validate their present position and/or undermine that of their internal adversaries.

3 There are arguably four such images associated in the feminist imaginary with the Great War. Each stands for an event that is immediately recognisable as a 'watershed' in British feminism's history but the meanings or 'lessons' of which, for feminists in the present, remain ambiguous. The first, most obvious, of these polysemic icons is *the Vote*. The Representation of the People Act of 1918 was clearly a seminal event. But women were not given the vote on the same terms as men. So, was this a victory or a defeat, and who was responsible for it? The second iconic image is *the Home Front*. The demands of war were such that women replaced men in all manner of jobs and professions, to the cheers of the patriotic press, but only 'for the duration'. Had feminist ideas about women's equal abilities finally triumphed or was this evidence of patriarchy's resilience? The third icon (clearly at the heart of Sophie Laws's concern above) might be called *the Fall*, to connote the sense of loss at the sharp decline of the organised women's movement in the post-war period. What had caused this collapse, the changed environment in which it operated, or feminists' inability to stick to their ideological guns? The fourth and final icon might be called *the Hague*, in reference to the Dutch city where an international Women's Peace Congress was held in 1915, and which a number of prominent British suffragists participated in. It is widely considered as the seminal event in the emergence of the contemporary women's peace movement.<sup>5</sup> But these suffragists' pacifism was grounded in a belief that women were naturally against war because of their role as mothers. Hence a fierce debate: were these inspirational foremothers, or dangerous essentialists?

4 Historians have, over the course of the century that separates us from the Great War, played an active part in these debates about feminism's past (and therefore about its present).<sup>6</sup> What I propose to explore in this article, are, to borrow the terminology of Winter and Prost, the three 'historical configurations' through which this historical engagement has passed.<sup>7</sup> As we shall see, each configuration was shaped by specific questions, themselves emerging from a unique political context, and answered through the prism of a distinct scholarly paradigm. This

in turn has had important consequences for how historians have approached feminism as a historical object and for the 'place' they have awarded the Great War in their narratives of British feminism's history. Where this leaves us, and where we may fruitfully go next, are the questions I shall attempt tentatively to address in closing.

### **First configuration: what did the Great War speed up – British feminism's victory or its collapse?**

- 5 When Richard Evans wrote his synthetic comparative history of women's emancipation movements in Europe, America and Australasia between 1840 and 1920 the object of his enquiry appeared sufficiently uncontroversial to need defining only in a footnote: '*[t]he term 'feminism' is defined in this book in its usual meaning as 'the doctrine of equal rights for women, based on the theory of the equality of the sexes'*'.<sup>8</sup>
- 6 This definition was widely shared by scholars writing in the 1960s and 1970s, both immediately before and after the grass-roots explosion that was the Women's Liberation Movement. Whether or not they referred to the nineteenth-century women's movement as the 'first wave' of British feminism's history, they shared four assumptions. First, that 'feminism/feminist' and 'the women's movement' were interchangeable terms. Second, that the principal preoccupation of the women's movement had been securing equal rights with men, above all the right to vote. Third, that suffrage organizations had fallen silent in August 1914, dutifully sidelining their demands in the name of the national emergency. Finally, that the movement had definitively collapsed sometime around 1920, following the partial securing of the vote in 1918. Their challenge was to explain this victory in light of the alleged wartime quiescence of women's suffrage activism. What had the war done to British society for women's suffrage to become acceptable? Two competing answers emerged, best represented by the works of David Mitchell and Richard Evans.
- 7 Writing on the war's half-centenary, and echoing the thesis put forward in the interwar years by Millicent Fawcett and Ray Strachey, the first boldly claimed that the '*speeding of the women's revolution was one of the Great War's most important and resounding victories*'.<sup>9</sup> This historical acceleration was the direct result, he argued, of women's largely acclaimed entry on an unprecedented scale into areas of employment that had previously been predominantly or even exclusively male. To him, the connection between this war work and the winning of the vote was obvious: '*[t]he massive achievements of women doctors and nurses, of women police and other auxiliaries, of former domestic servants in factories and of the Queen herself, in her social welfare work, made emancipation inevitable*'.<sup>10</sup>
- 8 From this perspective, then, the war could be said to have created the conditions for a double ideological victory for the women's movement. First, by forcing the workforce open to women, it had, in Fawcett's words '*ploughed up the hardened soil of ancient prejudice*'.<sup>11</sup> Second, and as a direct consequence of this first triumph, it had handed the women's movement its most sought-after victory: suffrage.
- 9 This vision of war as an accelerator of women's emancipation would come in for severe criticism from Richard Evans a decade later. Drawing on the cumulative work of scholars working on 'first wave' women's movements across the globe, he concluded that the winning of women's suffrage '*owed little to the direct influence of the war on the position of women in society*'.<sup>12</sup> Instead, it was best understood in every case as part of an attempt to stabilise and shore up the existing political order against perceived threats.<sup>13</sup> Pointing to the unequal terms of the Reform Bill and to the unequal treatment women had faced in the workplace, he forcefully rejected the claim that British women were rewarded for a job well done as '*a myth*'.<sup>14</sup> Pushing the argument further, he went on to argue that far from accelerating British feminism's victory, the war had instead sped up the ideological and organisational decline the movement had, he claimed, been undergoing since the turn of the century, in three ways. Firstly, it had pushed the social base of the women's movement, the middle-classes, to the right via the 'red scare' caused by the Bolshevik Revolution (which had, amongst other things, enfranchised women). Secondly it heightened the already important obsession with the birth rate, the deaths of the Great War coming on top of the regular drop in birth rates since 1900 which had,

characteristically, been ‘widely attributed to the growing independence of women’.<sup>15</sup> Both contributed to strengthening the hand of antifeminists, whose counter-attack had begun before the war and who could now portray feminist organisations as ‘part of a massive Bolshevik conspiracy to undermine the nation and destroy the family’.<sup>16</sup> Thirdly, it took away from feminist organisations their main rallying point: the campaign for suffrage, thus leading to a split between the majority which continued to drift towards the right in response to the political context, accepting that women’s primary role was in the household and welcoming racist or Social Darwinist arguments, and a radical minority which ‘lost support, turned to pacifism or collapsed’.<sup>17</sup> Thus, by creating the conditions for a massive anti-feminist backlash and by taking away its main unifying factor, the Great War durably weakened the British feminist movement. It was more of a vehicle for ideological collapse than for ideological triumph. The women’s revolution was not durably launched, Evans concluded, but was in for years of setback: ‘1920 marked the end of the era of feminism. In the countries where women possessed the vote, feminist movements continued to decline or were eventually suppressed’.<sup>18</sup>

10 Whether the winning of the vote is seen as the sign of an ideological triumph or as the harbinger of an ideological and organisational collapse, the Great War appears in both of these interpretations as an abrupt full stop in British feminism’s pre-1960s history. The demolition of the ‘two-wave model’ by herstorians and the advent of a ‘pacifist paradigm’ in the 1980s would offer an entirely different interpretation of the war’s place in British feminism’s history.

## Second configuration: the ‘pacifist paradigm’ or what did you do (for peace) in the war, Mommy?

11 The exponential growth of women’s history from the 1970s, led to a threefold challenge to the ‘two-wave’ model. It was accused, firstly, of exaggerating the abruptness of the decline of the women’s movement after 1920. By interviewing participants in the movement and exploring the archives of women’s organizations, historians were discovering, as Dale Spender put it, that *There’s always been a women’s movement this century*.<sup>19</sup> There were no full stops, only semi-colons. The model was also challenged, secondly, for reducing the history of feminism to a chronicle of the rise and fall of a social movement of women and their organizations, thereby paying insufficient attention to feminism’s history as a developing body of thought, the chronology of which did not necessarily match that of the movement.<sup>20</sup> Finally, the model was criticized for defining ‘first wave’ feminism much too narrowly as an overwhelmingly bourgeois ‘doctrine of equal rights’ obsessed with a single issue: the vote. Indeed, not only were historians finding it impossible to adequately portray nineteenth-century feminism by only taking into account what Olive Banks called ‘egalitarian feminism’,<sup>21</sup> the Women’s Liberation Movement itself was increasingly self-consciously dividing into three strands – liberal, socialist and radical – prompting the question of the historical lineage of the latter two.<sup>22</sup> This meant that writing a history of feminism for the period running between 1850 and 1920 required including social movements and ideas that could be found outside of the suffrage movement. The emphasis, in other words, was now on *longue-durée* and continuities since 1850 (and sometimes earlier) rather than watersheds and abrupt changes, on ideas and individuals as well as movements and collectives, on a plurality of feminisms (with no universally accepted taxonomy but a multiplication of prefixes) rather than a singular feminism. This was the intellectual backdrop against which, to paraphrase Sheila Rowbotham, a massive (re)interrogation of the Great War’s place in British feminism’s history would take place in the wake of the events at Greenham Common.

12 In August 1981, thirty-six ‘Women for Life on Earth’ from Cardiff set out on a ten-day, 120-mile walk, to the American base at Greenham Common in Berkshire to protest against the potential introduction there of ninety-six Cruise missiles, part of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation’s response to the so-called ‘Euro-missile crisis’. Eager for a televised debate on nuclear weapons that Mrs Thatcher’s government refused to grant them, they decided to stay put, thereby founding what rapidly became known as Greenham Common Women’s Peace Camp. For over a decade this camp was to dramatically claim (all the more so after February

1982 when it became strictly women only) the existence of a distinctly female approach to issues of war and peace in Britain.<sup>23</sup> This event sparked a new research agenda. In the words of Jill Liddington: '[t]he walk for *'Life on Earth'* lacked a tidy, easily traced ancestry: it seemed to spring from nowhere. (...) Curiosity for precedents grew. It provoked the question: *'Did women do anything for peace before Greenham?'*'<sup>24</sup>

13 That question led historians directly to the Great War, where they (re)discovered an event of significant importance: the Women's Peace Congress at The Hague in April-May 1915.<sup>25</sup> The latter brought together women from both belligerent and neutral countries and sent delegates to all belligerent and neutral governments with a plan for peace. Here was an event that chimed with their own experience: like Greenham, it was a women-only gathering, acting for peace, which captured the headlines and imaginations of its time. Also like Greenham, it was the visible tip of a much larger iceberg of women's peace activism, the existence and long-term legacy of which began to be chronicled in great depth, not least thanks to the mining of the archives of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), a pacifist organisation created during the Great War.<sup>26</sup>

14 The effect of this deluge of findings was to cast the Great War's place in British feminism's history in a new light, a point most forcefully evident in Canadian historian Jo Vellacott's groundbreaking work on those she called the 'Anti-War Suffragists'.<sup>27</sup> These were leading members of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), such as Catherine Marshall, Helena Swanwick or Maude Royden, who resigned from the organization in protest at the pro-war position adopted by its president Millicent Fawcett, and campaigned instead for peace. And this peace activism was anything but the turn away from feminism that historians such as Richard Evans had suggested. Instead, what their speeches, pamphlets and articles demonstrated, Vellacott argued, was that *'the war provided a catalyst welding together feminism, anti-militarism, and, perhaps more tenuously, socialism, in a far more closely-knit and coherent theory'*.<sup>28</sup> Nor must this turn to peace activism be understood as a turn away from suffragism. Indeed, Vellacott contended that the diametrically opposed responses to the war within the suffrage movement were no coincidence but the logical outcome of suffrage campaigners' different rationales for seeking the right to vote. Those who had wanted suffrage in order to radically change the political system tended to oppose the war, whereas those *'whose suffrage claims still rested mainly on a demand to be admitted to the existing male political system, unchanged'*,<sup>29</sup> such as Fawcett, or the leaders of the militant Women's Social and Political Union, tended to support it, and did so by conforming to the roles traditionally expected of women in wartime. So prewar differences in the suffrage movement translated into the war context where the true colours of the different sides shone clearly through. On the one hand a *'sophisticated feminist view of the war'*,<sup>30</sup> and on the other a conservative form of suffragism. The fact that the vote was apparently won because of the actions of the latter rather than the former made it nothing better than *'a Pyrrhic victory in that, ironically, women had indeed been accepted into the political system on existing male terms – in practice, on condition of conformity'*.<sup>31</sup>

15 Through the prism of the pacifist paradigm, the Great War no longer appeared as a historical meteorite that obliterated feminism from the British scene for four decades. Connections and continuities could be traced between pre-war positions, war time disagreements, and post-war engagements. Neither did the war appear anymore as an 'historical accelerator' of feminism's triumph or demise. It was now configured instead as a crucial juncture when the 'feminists' inside the suffrage movement separated from their conservative allies.<sup>32</sup> The emphasis was no longer on the undeniable weakening of the movement's organisational structures that the war entailed, but on the ideological clarification that it allowed. And what stood out, on this reading, was not the partial winning of the vote, which formed a disappointing anticlimax to the long chapter of suffrage activism, but the Hague Congress, which announced with gusto the opening of a 'new era in the annals of feminism' and, importantly, 'illuminat[ed] and validat[ed]' the struggles of pacifist feminists in the 1980s.<sup>33</sup>

- 16 The Great War's place as the opening chapter of a glorious phase in British feminism's history was not secure for very long however. Soon, historians' turn to cultural history prompted fresh challenges to the interpretations emanating from the pacifist paradigm and a return to the questions it had sidelined.

### Third configuration: the cultural turn – back to the future?

- 17 At the heart of the *herstory* project lay the recovery and celebration of women's lives. From the middle of the 1980s, cultural historians began questioning the political and scholarly pertinence of both endeavours. The first salvo was fired by Joan Scott, in her influential and controversial defence of gender as a '*useful category of historical analysis*'.<sup>34</sup> As she later explained, her 'frustration' with *herstory*'s emphasis on recovery was that, by focusing exclusively on women, it was failing to have any 'impact on the historical profession'.<sup>35</sup> Yes, women had been ignored, historians would concede, but this was for good reason.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, how had recovering their past changed our understanding of, say, the history of politics, a realm from which they were mostly absent? The marginal position of women's history in the profession was, in other words, a reflection of women's marginal position in the societies of the past. To challenge this state of affairs, Scott called on feminist historians to change narrative tracks: '*[t]he story is no longer about the things that have happened to women and men and how they have reacted to them; instead it is about how the subjective and collective meanings of women and men as categories of identity have been constructed*'.<sup>37</sup> The point was to show that such categories, constructed through discourse, were everywhere at play, in all realms of society, even those closed to women by law or custom. Gender (and with it feminist history) was potentially everywhere to be found. Thus, the aim was no longer to chronicle women's actions and activities across time but to untangle the web of gendered meanings in which women and men's actions and activities were caught, and show how that web had evolved over time and space. The consequences for historians of feminism were spelt out by a close collaborator of Scott's, Denise Riley. If 'women' was not a noun with an eternally fixed meaning but an unstable category, '*historically, discursively constructed, and always relative to other categories which themselves change*', then feminism was best understood as '*the site of the systematic fighting out of this instability*'.<sup>38</sup> To explore the history of feminism, one had to be attentive to the discursive context, to the specific ways in which the category 'women' was defined in the period under consideration. What was needed, in other words, was a deeply contextual reading. A very similar point was made by Antoinette Burton, if from a different starting point. To her, the main problem with *herstory* was the '*cheerful narratives of the more distant feminist past*' which occluded the '*ethnocentric/imperial/racist ideologies which structured the white middle-class feminism of Europe and America*'.<sup>39</sup> The cost of celebrating the powerful voices of the past was a tendency to downplay their less palatable aspects. What was needed, both as a matter of historical accuracy and in order to articulate critically self-aware feminisms in the present, were histories of feminisms, warts and all. The result of these critiques, as far as the Great War is concerned, has been a rehabilitation of the feminist credentials of the patriotic suffragists and a revisiting of the controversy over the Representation of the People Act of 1918.
- 18 Insisting that '*the ideology we call 'feminism' is a product of, and must be understood within, the specificities of historical time and place*', Jacqueline de Vries eloquently made the case that the rabid patriotism of Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst was best understood as a melding together of the dominant patriotic discourse with a coherent, '*arguably feminist*', analysis which saw the conflict as caused by the global '*unjust dictatorship*' exercised by men over women, the most typical representative of which was Britain's enemy, Germany.<sup>40</sup> At about the same time, Susan Kingsley Kent also defended the Pankhursts' feminist credentials, but within a larger framework. Inspired by Denise Riley, she suggested that the '*activities and ideas that we as historians identify as feminist at any given time (...) are contingent on the discourses that construct "women" and on the discourses of resistance that feminists produced in their challenge to society*'.<sup>41</sup> We therefore must identify the discourses that constructed 'women' during the Great War and evaluate whether the statements made by suffragists can be described

- as discourses of resistance to them or not. Arguing that the dominant discourse constructing women during the war was that of *'separate spheres'*,<sup>42</sup> she concluded that patriotic suffragists, who could go so far as to call for women to join the ranks, were feminists, while pacifist suffragists, who insisted on women's opposition to the war *as mothers*, had capitulated to the dominant associations of *'men with war and death and women with the home and the giving and preserving of life'*.<sup>43</sup> Thus, far from acting as a catalyst in bringing to the fore a properly feminist consciousness set against war and militarism, the Great War had simply pushed most feminists into the self-defeating essentialism that Kent argued only the Second World War would free feminist thinking from. Contrarily to Vellacott, she thus suggested that this period had nothing of significance to offer her contemporaries, apart from a warning that placing too much emphasis on women's 'difference' from men was a one-way ticket to political oblivion.<sup>44</sup>
- 19 A decade later, Nicoletta Gullace would also be of the opinion that the patriotic suffragists had been short-changed by historians, not least in light of the key role they played in the enfranchisement of women, *'British feminists' most significant victory'*.<sup>45</sup> Returning to a question that had been central to historians of the first configuration – why were women partially enfranchised in 1918? – she offered to answer it with reference to the impact that the war had on the cultural environment, and more specifically, on *'the way Britons understood the rights and obligations of citizenship'*.<sup>46</sup> Drawing on a startling diversity of sources, Gullace offered a sophisticated version of the answer given earlier by David Mitchell. Where he had claimed that women's participation in the war effort had made suffrage *'inevitable'*, she showed that the war had created *'a cultural episteme in which notions of duty, loyalty, and Britishness gained an authoritative that undercut the hegemony of sex in defining the rights of citizenship'*, thus making *'long-standing feminist claims [seem] increasingly persuasive to the press, to legislators and to the general public'*.<sup>47</sup> However, this would not have led to women's enfranchisement had the Great War not caused a *'tremendous ideological break for suffragists, as the two principal organizations and a multitude of their followers abandoned feminist pacifism for a hardy love of country'*.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, she argued, the resulting *'right wing feminism'*<sup>49</sup> of the patriots played a crucial part in convincing Britons that the great majority of British women (bar a small group who were agitating for peace) had loyally done their duty to their country.<sup>50</sup>
- 20 With the cultural turn, the clear waters that the pacifist paradigm allowed us to see have become more muddled. Not one, but many feminist voices can be heard, and none that is unproblematic to twenty-first century ears. No longer the harbinger of a bright future, the conflict is, at best, seen as facilitating the success of the suffrage movement or, at worst, as causing its ideological capitulation to separate spheres ideology. Intriguingly, Jo Vellacott's most recent work also describes the war as dealing a powerful blow to British feminism's historical evolution. Returning to her earlier theme, she shows, in a fascinating study of the inner workings of the NUWSS during the Great War, that the conflict allowed the *'traditional suffragists'* in the organization to wrestle power away from the *'democratic suffragists'*. As a result, the gathering momentum that the alliance between the suffrage and labour movements had been gaining before the war was shattered, thus relieving the Labour Party of supporting a broad franchise for women (something she insists would have been possible to obtain) when the Reform Bill was under discussion, to women's short and long-term detriment.<sup>51</sup>

## Conclusion

'Each conception of the history of the Great War is a response to the questions of the here and now, of a particular milieu and a particular time (...)'.<sup>52</sup>

- 21 Winter and Prost's observation certainly holds true for the history of British feminism during the Great War. The very different questions and paradigms at the heart of the three configurations have led to quite radical shifts in the Great War's place in British feminism's history, from full stop to semi-colon, or from sad conclusion to glorious introduction, and back again. Also shifting has been the relative importance accorded to the different icons: *the Fall*, *the Vote* and *the Home Front*, central to the first and third configurations, were almost



entirely eclipsed by *the Hague* in the second configuration, itself obliterated in the third. And, as we have seen, one of the stakes of these shifts has been the issue of the status that should be accorded, both in the past and the present, to the champions of non-violence and reform, whose fortunes have also fluctuated from the periphery of feminism's history to the centre and back. In the midst of all these shifts, it is nonetheless possible to identify at least three cross-cutting trends that might give us some pointers as to where research might helpfully proceed in the near future.

- 22 The first salient trend is the relentless polarisation of scholarly work along the patriots vs. pacifists divide. This has had two particularly regrettable consequences. The first is that insufficient attention has been paid to the dialectical relationship in which those two camps found themselves, that is to the extent to which they forged their arguments and identities in *response* to one another. By reading them separately, this co-dependence does not surface, and our understanding of both is thereby impoverished. The second negative consequence is that the other responses to the war that flowered in the women's movement are ignored. This is understandable, given the prominence of the patriots and pacifists at the time, but does a disservice both to our historical understanding of the period and to our contemporary thinking about these issues, which would benefit from knowing of other avenues explored in the past.<sup>53</sup>
- 23 The second salient trend is how often the trope of the war as an 'ideological turning point' recurs. This, I submit, is a particularly rich vein to mine for those interested in the history of feminist political thought. Indeed, to my knowledge, there are no studies of British feminism's intellectual history that take the Great War to be a noteworthy milestone.<sup>54</sup> In light of the literature discussed in this article, this is, to say the least, rather puzzling. The root of the problem seems to lie in an academic convention, whereby historians of political thought leave 'war and peace questions' to international relations and peace studies scholars.<sup>55</sup> Whether or not this division of labour is justified in general is a discussion that I do not wish to enter into here. Suffice it to note that if Jill Liddington is correct in claiming that '*any history of feminism in Britain which omits peace [and war] ideas (...) is inadequate and misleading*', then this division may not have served historians of feminist political thought in Britain well.<sup>56</sup>
- 24 The third salient trend across the three configurations has been to explore historically the dilemmas and disputes that were befuddling or dividing feminists in the present. At times, this has led to questionable attempts at using the scientific clout of history to settle scores, for instance by stripping the 'feminist' label from organisations or individuals in the past, in order to discredit their self-proclaimed descendants in the present. But more often than not it has driven scholars to offer the kinds of subtle and rich studies that have informed feminist thought and action in the present. This is an important function of the historical study of feminism, one neatly captured by Dale Spender: '*[t]o believe that we are on our own, that we have started a protest for which there is no precedent, is to be plagued by doubts, to be vulnerable, to be without models, experience or guidance*'.<sup>57</sup> And yet, this deep connection between feminist history and contemporary feminism may well be on the decline. Indeed, much of the literature on 'feminism and war' that was produced in the wake of the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq in 2001 and 2003, though powerful and sophisticated, was also relentlessly present-ist.<sup>58</sup> Yet the Great War seems to me an ideal terrain to explore historically the questions thrown up by those conflicts – can wars ever be justified on feminist grounds? What is imperial feminism and why is it apparently so effective at mobilising (at least for a time) popular support for war? Can the relentless logic of war be efficiently countered by transnational feminist organising? In seeking out answers to these urgent questions we need not be on our own. One hundred years on, the Great War's potential to rekindle the flames of the feminist imaginary is undeniable.

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## Notes

1 I would like to thank David Ferguson, Saul Newman and Jim Martin for comments on a much earlier (and considerably longer!) draft of this article. Karine Bigand, Valérie André and Nicolas Boileau, as well as ridding the text of its worst infelicities, provided me with much needed comradeship as I struggled to whittle the original beast down to size. Thanks also to the anonymous reviewer for her/his helpful comments. My greatest thanks are for Florence Binard and John Mullen, whose patience and forbearance put Penelope to shame.

2 Sophie LAWS, "Letter", pp. 43-44 in Brenda WHISKER et al., *Breaching the Peace: A Collection of Radical Feminist Papers*, London: Onlywomenpress, 1984.

3 Barbara CAINE, *English Feminism, 1780-1980*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 10.

4 This notion of iconic images was suggested to me by reading Jill Liddington's groundbreaking study of feminism and anti-militarism in which she describes 'Greenham woman' as 'a many-sided icon, ever shifting'. See Jill LIDDINGTON, *The Long Road to Greenham: Feminism and Anti-Militarism in Britain since 1820*, London: Virago Press, p. 246, my emphasis.

5 See, for instance, Jill LIDDINGTON, *ibid.* p. 105; or Josephine Eglin's claim that "since 1915 there has always been a women's peace movement in Britain" in Josephine EGLIN, "Women and Peace: From the Suffragists to the Greenham Women", p. 221 in R. TAYLOR & N. YOUNG (eds.) *Campaigns for Peace: British Peace Movements in the Twentieth Century*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987.

6 Readers familiar with the work of Joan Scott will perhaps have been reminded, in reading the above, of her review of the debates surrounding the impact of the twentieth century's two World Wars on women (cf. SCOTT, J. "Rewriting history", pp. 21-29 in HIGONNET, M.R. (ed.), *Behind the lines : gender and the two world wars*, New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1987). Indeed, she identified four such debates, all subtle variations on the 'watershed theme' (p. 23):

7 J. WINTER & A. PROST, *The Great War in History: Debates and Controversies, 1914 to the Present*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, chapter 1.

8 Richard EVANS, *The Feminists: Women's Emancipation Movements in Europe, America and Australasia, 1840-1920*, London and Sydney: Croom Helm, Barnes & Noble, 1977, p. 39, fn. 1.

9 David MITCHELL, *Women on the Warpath: the Story of the Women of the First World War*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1965, p. xvi. See also, Millicent Garrett FAWCETT, *What I Remember*, London: Adelphi Terrace, 1924, p. 226; and Ray STRACHEY, *The Cause: A Short History of the Women's Movement in Great Britain*, London: Virago, 1978 [1928], chapter XVIII.

10 David MITCHELL, *ibid.*, pp. xv-xvi.

11 Millicent Garrett FAWCETT, *The Women's Victory – and After: Personal Reminiscences, 1911-1918*, London: Sidgwick and Jackson Limited, 1920, p. 106.

12 Richard EVANS, *op. cit.*, p. 222.

13 This view had been defended in the interwar years by Sylvia Pankhurst. See Sylvia PANKHURST, *The Home Front: a Mirror to Life in England During the First World War; Forward by the Rt. Hon. Mrs Shirley Williams; Introduction by Richard Pankhurst*, London: Cresset Library, 1987 [1932]. See also Brian HARRISON, *Separate Spheres: the Opposition to Women's Suffrage in Britain*, London: Croom Held Ltd., 1978, p. 221.

14 Richard EVANS, *op. cit.*, p. 222.

15 Richard EVANS, *ibid.*, p. 210.

16 Richard EVANS, *ibid.*, p. 211.

17 Richard EVANS, *ibid.*, p. 233.

18 Richard EVANS, *ibid.*, p. 228.

19 Dale SPENDER, *There's Always Been a Women's Movement This Century*, London: Pandora Press, 1983. See also, Dale SPENDER, *Feminist Theorists: Three Centuries of Women's Intellectual*

*Traditions*, London: The Women's Press Limited, 1983; and Dale SPENDER, *Time and Tide Wait For No Man*, London: Pandora Press, 1984.

20 An eloquent articulation of this argument can be found in Rosalind DELMAR, "What Is Feminism?", pp. 8-33 in J. MITCHELL & A. OAKLEY (eds.), *What Is Feminism?*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986.

21 Banks distinguished three strands of feminism in Britain in the nineteenth-century, the egalitarian, the socialist and the evangelical. See Olive BANKS, *Faces of Feminism: A Study of Feminism as a Social Movement*, New York and Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1981. A particularly helpful account of historians' increasing frustration with the initial definition can be found in Karen OFFEN, "Defining feminism: a comparative historical approach", *Signs*, vol. 14, issue 1, 1988, pp. 123-31.

22 For socialist feminists, this meant bringing into the history of feminism individuals and organizations that had been previously seen as sitting outside of that story. For instance, in his important study, Richard Evans had drawn a distinction between two wings of the women's movement, one 'socialist' and the other 'feminist' (see *op. cit.*, p. 243). This made sense so long as feminism was defined as he had suggested. But as soon as the term was given a broader acceptance, the same groups now appeared as the 'socialist' and 'liberal' wings of nineteenth-century 'feminism'.

23 For an outstanding study of the camp see Sasha ROSENEIL, *Disarming Patriarchy: Feminism and Political Action at Greenham*, Buckingham: Open University Press, 1995.

24 Jill LIDDINGTON, *op. cit.*, p. 2, emphasis original.

25 For a detailed account of the congress see Anne WILTSHER, *Most Dangerous Women*, London: Pandora Press, 1985.

26 The literature here is vast. In addition to the studies already cited, one may profitably consult Jill LIDDINGTON, "The Women's Peace Crusade: the History of a Forgotten Campaign", pp. 180-98 in Dorothy THOMPSON (ed.), *Over Our Dead Bodies: Women Against the Bomb*, London: Virago Press, 1983; Sandi E. COOPER, "Women's Participation in European Peace Movements: the Struggle to Prevent World War I", pp. 51-75 in R.R. PIERSON & S. BROADRIBB (eds.), *Women and Peace: Theoretical, Historical and Practical Perspectives*, London: Croom Helm, 1987; Deborah GORHAM, "Vera Brittain, Flora MacDonald Denison and the Great War: the Failure of Non-Violence", 137-148 in R. R. PIERSON & S. BROADRIBB (eds.), *Women and Peace: Theoretical, Historical and Practical Perspectives*, London: Croom Helm, 1987; Claire M. TYLEE, "Maleness run riot" – the Great War and women's resistance to militarism", *Women's Studies International Forum*, Vol. 11, No. 3, 1988, pp. 199-210; Sybil OLDFIELD, *Women Against the Iron Fist: Alternatives to Militarism, 1900-1989*, London: Basil Blackwell, 1989; Joyce BERKMAN, "Feminism, War, and Peace Politics: The Case of World War One", pp. 141-160 in ELSHTAIN, J.B. & TOBIAS, S. (eds.), *Women, Militarism, and War: Essays in History, Politics, and Social Theory*, Savage: Rowman & Littlefield, 1990.

27 Jo VELLACOTT-NEWBERRY, "Anti-war suffragists", *History*, Vol. LXII, 1977, pp. 411-425.

28 Jo VELLACOTT, "Feminist Consciousness and the First World War", p. 121 in R. R. PIERSON & S. BROADRIBB (eds.), *Women and Peace: Theoretical, Historical and Practical Perspectives*, London: Croom Helm, 1987.

29 Jo VELLACOTT, *ibid.*, p. 121.

30 Jo VELLACOTT, *ibid.*, p. 116.

31 Jo VELLACOTT, *ibid.*, p. 126.

32 Vellacott's arguments fit into a broader historiographical pattern, as a number of scholars argued for a rehabilitation of the constitutionalist suffragists whose significance they felt had been overlooked by the constant attention paid to the militant suffragettes. Doubtless the most sophisticated of those studies was Sandra Stanley HOLTON, *Feminism and Democracy: Women's Suffrage and Reform Politics in Britain, 1900-1918*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986. See chapters 6 and 7, as well as the postscript, for Holton's assessment of the Great War's impact on suffrage organizations and suffragists' ideas. More detailed and less definitive than Vellacott's, her analysis paints however a similar picture: the organizational reconfigurations of the movement caused by the war can be roughly mapped on to pre-war ideological differences between "democratic suffragists" and their more conservative allies.

33 KAMESTER, M. & VELLACOTT, J. (eds.), *Militarism Versus Feminism: Writings on Women and War / Catherine Marshall, C.K. Ogden and Mary Sargent Florence*, London: Virago, 1987, pp. 20 and 1 respectively. The first quote is taken from C. K. Ogden, a male suffragist, whom had used it to describe the Congress in the Hague.

34 Joan W. SCOTT, "Gender: a useful category of historical analysis", *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 91, No. 5, Dec. 1986, pp. 1053-1075. There is a vast literature questioning the scholarly purchase and political wisdom of this move. Three well-known contributions are Linda GORDON, "Gender and the politics of history (review)", *Signs*, Vol. 15, Issue 4, Summer 1990, pp. 853-858; Laura Lee DOWNS, "If 'woman' is just an empty category, then why am I afraid to walk alone at night? Identity politics meets the postmodern subject", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 35, 1993, pp. 414-437;

- and Joan HOFF, "Gender as a postmodern category of paralysis", *Women's Studies International Forum*, Vol. 17, Issue 4, 1994, pp. 443-447.
- 35 Joan W. SCOTT, "Introduction", p. 3 in Joan W. SCOTT, *Gender and the Politics of History*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.
- 36 Joan W. SCOTT, "Gender: a useful category of historical analysis", *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 91, No. 5, Dec. 1986, p. 1055: 'the response of most nonfeminist historians has been acknowledgement and then separation or dismissal'.
- 37 Joan W. SCOTT, "Introduction", p. 6 in Joan W. SCOTT, *Gender and the Politics of History*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.
- 38 Denise RILEY, "Am I that Name?": *Feminism and the Category of "Women" in History*, Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1988, pp. 1-2 and 5 respectively.
- 39 Antoinette BURTON, "'History' is Now: feminist theory and the production of historical feminisms", *Women's History Review*, Vol. 1, Issue 1, 1992, pp. 33 and 26 respectively.
- 40 Jacqueline DE VRIES, "Gendering Patriotism: Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst and World War One", pp. 77, 77 and 81 respectively in Sybil OLDFIELD, *This Working-Day World: Women's Lives and Culture(s) in Britain, 1914-1945*, London: Taylor & Francis, 1994. See also Cheryl R. JORGENSEN-EARP, *Speeches and Trials of the Militant Suffragettes: The Women's Social and Political Union, 1903-1918*, London: Associated University Press, 1999, pp. 147-151.
- 41 Susan Kingsley KENT, *Making Peace: the Reconstruction of Gender in Interwar Britain*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993, p. 8.
- 42 Susan Kingsley KENT, *ibid.*, chapter 1.
- 43 Susan Kingsley KENT, *ibid.*, p. 17.
- 44 This was a point Kent had made in an earlier article: Susan Kingsley KENT, "The politics of sexual difference: World War I and the demise of British feminism", *Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 27, Issue 3, July 1988, pp. 232-253. The title could not be clearer: the historical lesson feminists must take from this period of British feminism's history is that arguments by women's advocates that concentrate on sexual difference rather than sexual equality lead to political dead-ends.
- 45 Nicoletta GULLACE, *The Blood of Our Sons: Men, Women, and the Renegotiation of British Citizenship during the Great War*, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002, p. 10.
- 46 Nicoletta GULLACE, *ibid.*, p. 2.
- 47 Nicoletta GULLACE, *ibid.*, pp. 10 and 6 respectively
- 48 Nicoletta GULLACE, *ibid.*, p.5, my emphasis.
- 49 Nicoletta GULLACE, *ibid.*, p.130
- 50 Nicoletta GULLACE, *ibid.*, p. 5 and chapters 6 and 8.
- 51 Jo VELLACOTT, *Pacifists, Patriots and the Vote: the Erosion of Democratic Suffragism in Britain During the First World War*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
- 52 J. WINTER & A.PROST, *op. cit.*, p. 211.
- 53 I have made this point in greater depth here: Marc LEFEBVRE, *Feminism and the Challenge of War: Responses of the British Women's Suffrage Movement to the Outbreak of the Great War*, unpublished PhD Thesis, University of London, 2009.
- 54 Compare for instance, Judith SABROSKY, *From Rationality to Liberation: the Evolution of Feminist Ideology*, London: Greenwood Press, 1979; Olive BANKS, *op. cit.*; T. AKKERMAN & S. STUURMAN (eds.), *Perspectives on Feminist Political Thought in European History: from the Middle Ages to the Present*, London and New York: Routledge, 1998; and Valerie BRYSON, *Feminist Political Theory: An Introduction*, London: Macmillan, 2003.
- 55 For the former see, for instance, Jean Bethke ELSHTAIN, *Women and War*, Brighton: Harvester Press, 1987. For the latter, see Martin CEADEL, *Pacifism in Britain 1914-1945: The Defining of Faith*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980 and Martin CEADEL, *Thinking About Peace and War*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987.
- 56 Jill LIDDINGTON, *op. cit.*, p. 26, my emphasis.
- 57 Dale SPENDER, *Time and Tide Wait For No Man*, London: Pandora Press, 1984, p. 2.
- 58 See for instance Zillah R. EISENSTEIN, *Sexual Decoys: Gender, Race and War in Imperial Democracy*, London and New York: Zed Books, 2007; Cynthia COCKBURN, *From Where We Stand: War, Women's Activism and Feminist Analysis*, London and New York: Zed Books, 2007; Cynthia ENLOE, *Globalization and Militarism: Feminists Make the Link*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007; R.L. RILEY & C.T. MOHANTY & M.B. PRATT (eds.), *Feminism and War: Confronting U.S. Imperialism*, London and New York: Zed Books Editors, 2008.

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## Abstracts

### La Grande Guerre dans l'histoire du féminisme britannique : débats et controverses depuis 1914

Cet article se propose d'explorer les trois 'configurations historiques' au travers desquelles l'étude du féminisme britannique pendant la Grande Guerre est passé depuis 1914. Il tente de montrer que chacune a été caractérisée par ses propres questions, fruits du contexte politique du moment. Il montre aussi qu'à chaque configuration correspond un paradigme d'interprétation distinct. En conséquence, à chaque étape, les historien-ne-s n'ont pas abordé le féminisme en tant qu'objet historique de la même manière, ni donné à la Grande Guerre la même « place » dans leurs histoires du féminisme britannique. Après avoir rendu compte de ces évolutions, cet article tentera modestement de proposer quelques pistes de travail pour le siècle à venir ou, tout au moins, pour les dix prochaines années.

This article explores the three 'historical configurations' through which the historiography of British feminism during the Great War has passed to date. It attempts to show that each was shaped by specific questions, themselves emerging from a unique political context, and answered through the prism of a distinct scholarly paradigm. This in turn had important consequences for how historians approached feminism as a historical object at each juncture and for the 'place' they awarded the Great War in their narratives of British feminism's historical evolution. Having taken stock of this diversity, the article attempts, in conclusion, to tentatively suggest some fruitful avenues of research for the next century, or at least the next decade.