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British Women Writers and the First World War

Relatrice
Prof. Marilena Parlati

Laureanda
Veronica Zuccollo
n° matr. 2056343/LMLLA

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Introduction

The First World War can be defined as an epoch-marking event, a phenomenon that unreservedly changed the very conception of war. The singularity of this historical event lays in different factors that represented a source of novelty at the time. Firstly, from a military perspective, the First World War can be described as the first industrial war, because soldiers fighting in it employed basic tools, such as grenades, mortars, axes, and clubs, along with some brand-new technological inventions of the time, including the aircraft, the submarine, some gasses, and forms of explosive that made this war the most gruesome ever seen before. Furthermore, looking at the human capital involved in it, Strachan has defined World War One as a 'total' event.[1] Therefore, during it, people could see a mobilization of mass armies, composed by citizens, and yet the participation of people from all strata of society – from children, to women, to elderly people – in the war effort. Another factor that is worth consideration is the length of the conflict that for the first time in history was measured in terms of months rather than weeks. Not last, the total amount of soldiers that have been killed in it is more than 9 million and that of civilians, who died because of hunger, violence, and diseases, is around 30 million. As a direct consequence, the conflict has become difficult to comprehend and thus to retell, even if it left an indelible mark in both history and literature.

From a historical point of view, World War One was officially declared on 28 July 1914 in Sarajevo by Austro-Hungary, precisely a month after the terrorist attack that took part in Sarajevo against Austro-Hungarian archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophie. Europe immediately saw itself divided into two factions: the Triple Alliance and the Triple Entente, of which Britain was part. Despite the initial opposition of radicals, Britain was committed to defend Belgian neutrality through a treaty and so it took part in the conflict. However, in Britain

[1] Hew Strachan, "Introduction", in *The Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016): pp. 1-10, p. 1.

male conscription was not employed at the beginning of the war, and people were recruited on a voluntary basis putting pressure on their sense of honour and their moral commitment to protect their 'home' and beloved ones. The press and propaganda played a crucial role in this action. Nevertheless, male conscription entered into force only since January 1916 with the Military Service Act, and this quickly caused manpower shortage in factories and fields. To overcome the problem, women started to be employed in the production system, both in the cities, working in factories and performing public roles, and in the countryside, as the so called 'Land Girls', performing field work. The active employment of women to support the war effort had different consequences, and all of them are worth consideration. To start with, even if movements for female enfranchisement had already started in late nineteenth century, many women had never worked outside the protected and circumscribed space of the home, nor perceived a salary, until the outbreak of the First World War. After that time, they started to perform previously male jobs, causing a sort of crisis in the strict patriarchal mentality of the time that saw their place uniquely inside the home. Furthermore, I would argue that the war helped women on the home front in acquiring a certain degree of freedom both socially and economically, since for the first time many of them took over a paid job that allowed them to own some money and, also, to exit the circumscribed environment of the home, in which they were previously confined by the social rules of the late-nineteenth-century patriarchal society they lived in. Yet, there were also women who took an active role on the real 'battle front': VADs and nurses. Surely, their experience of the war has been different from the one of women on the 'home front' and this can provide a clearer understanding of the First World War phenomenon.

Overall, the written production of the war years is huge. Writing in general had a crucial role and it represented a fundamental tool for both combatants and civilians. Thus, it was used to bring testimony of what had happened during the war, both on the 'battle front', in the cities,

and in the countryside, to provide people with pieces of information – even if not always reliable – about the war and about their beloved ones fighting at the front and, maybe most importantly, to connect people, such as soldiers at the front with their families at home. These functions were performed mainly thanks to the press that represented a fundamental tool during all the years of the war, together with the new media – such as the telegraph, photography, and the cinema. However, the press was not always the best tool if people wanted reliable information, since it was full of half-truths and lies, together with the fact that it did not show the proper horrors of the war to avoid a decrease in terms of morale. Thus, this function was performed by another main character that is literature. Therefore, looking at the First World War from a literary point of view, it is possible to delineate some distinctions – as I sought to do also in the present work. There were poet-soldiers', and more in general men's, writings that could be seen in opposition to women's ones. And yet, there were women's writings that can be divided into women's writings from the 'home front' and from the 'battle front' – even if they share both similarities and differences.

Starting from the masculine perspective, it is important to remember that at the outbreak of the First World War many literate people voluntarily enrolled *en masse*. The majority of them were excited about the war, in all likelihood, spurred by the Horatian mindset "dulce et decorum est pro patria mori"[2], they had probably learnt in schools. However, since the war prolonged and they came in contact with the horrors and rawness of the conflict, many started to feel disillusionment. Their written production changed accordingly, from a patriotic one, to one full of resentment towards institutions, older people, who had started the war unconcerned of what it would have meant for the younger, and even towards women, willing to help in the war effort but, according to male soldiers, who 'could not understand' the harshness of war. Women were

[2] Horatio, in Modris Eksteins, "Memory and the Great War", in H. Strachan (ed.) *The Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016): pp. 317-329, p. 319.

considered as symbols of the 'home front' who could neither fully comprehend nor write about war. For all these reasons, men's and, more precisely poet-soldiers', writings have long been considered as the only 'true' accounts of the First World War, since they were the product of first-hand experience of the war and thus provided readers with a reliable testimony. However, with the years this turned out not to be completely true. In fact, historically, women always had the responsibility to lament over the dead and to indirectly talk about the human responsibility for the war. And this is precisely what they sought to do in their First World War writings. Of course, their style and tone were different from those written by men, because their very experience of the war was different. Undoubtedly, the First World War brought about some positive changes in women's economic and social life and their writings also reflected their newly acquired sense of freedom, excitement, liberation, and self-confidence. The consequence of women's new responsibilities and social role made their literary response to war as varied and complex as that of men.

This thesis focuses on British women's writings related to the First World War. Nonetheless, it has wider goals. First of all, I offer an overview of the major changes brought about by World War One, firstly in general terms and then more specifically looking at British women's lives, both in the cities and in the countryside, as well as on the very 'battle front', shifting then the attention on some outstanding examples of female war-related writings – three of which consist of poems and one of a prose work. However, the main purpose of my work is to prove that women's writings are as reliable and precious as men's, since, only by considering the written production of World War One as a whole, can people acquire a complete view of the representation of the war scenario. To say it otherwise, I argue that all testimonies are important to understand the First World War as a whole, since it was a 'total' phenomenon that involved all the strata of society of every age and sex. Furthermore, the present work aims at showing not only the main differences as well as possible similarities between the written productions

of women who experienced war from the ‘home front’ and from the ‘battle front’, confronting them while analysing the chosen poems or prose excerpts, but also hints to a comparison with men’s writings that may come out in the process.

This work is divided into three different chapters. The first one is more descriptive, while the second and the third ones have the same structure, with an introductive and speculative part focusing on the subject of each of them, followed by some literary examples together with their analysis. The first chapter provides an overview of the First World War as a historical phenomenon, providing some facts and recalling crucial historical events, shifting then the attention to writing that is the core of the present work. In the first chapter, the focus is on writing in general and on the press and literature in particular, deeply investigating their different functions and characteristics. There is also an extended part dedicated to propaganda, that seems to have played an essential role in all the war different phases. To conclude the section there is a general comparison between men’s and women’s war-related writings, showing the main differences in terms of attitude and topics.

The second chapter is concerned with the major changes that the First World War brought about in the lives of women who experienced the war from the ‘home front’. It provides an overview of the main jobs women started to perform in the cities, then shifting the attention to the countryside and the question of the ‘Land Girls’, also presenting the gender-related challenges women had to face in a moment of transition that caused a crisis of patriarchal mentality. To conclude with, the chapter provides an overview of women’s writing and its main characteristics together with two examples, namely the well-known journalist and propagandist Jessie Pepe with some of her outstanding war poems and the less know writer Eleanor Farjeon and three of her poems.

On the other hand, the third chapter draws attention to the other side of the coin, the women who experienced the war from the ‘battle front’ while working as VADs and nurses.

The chapter provides an overview on VADs and nurses, explaining how they were trained and which tasks they performed during wartime, together with the differences between them. An overview on their writings follows, pausing on the thematic differences between VADs' and nurses' writings and their main features. This is followed by two more literary examples. The first one is a prose work, *The Forbidden Zone*, by American-born writer Mary Borden. I include her since she had been in Europe for a long time before the war and she worked as a voluntary nurse in France, so it is possible to say she was naturalized as British; I conclude with the second, and last, example that consists of the analysis of two war-related poems by the British writer Rose Macaulay.

The materials I gathered to investigate this topic are various, but many useful essays are included in both *Cambridge Companion*[s] and in *The Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War* by Hew Strachan. The latter was very useful in writing the first chapter and the introductive sections of chapter two and three, as well. I found it complete, and it has proved a valuable help. Furthermore, I used various critical articles taken from different books, some of which were *Cambridge Companion*[s]. More precisely, *The Cambridge Companion to War Writing* edited by Kate McLoughlin helped me in writing about the characteristic of war writings in general, and in dealing with the differences between female and male writings, while *The Cambridge Companion to the Poetry of the First World War* edited by Santanu Das has proved very useful in the analysis of some of the poems that I have included in my work, together with Stuart Sillars' *Fields of Agony* and Christine E. Hallett *Nurses Writers of the Great War*. Nevertheless, not much has been written on some of the writers and poems I have chosen. This is probably due to the fact that women's poetry, and writing more in general, concerning the First World War, still is a highly unexplored field, with almost no critical work entirely dedicated to it. The difficulty in finding out outstanding critical commentaries on some of the poems I wanted to quote and analyse did so that I had to use some blogs written by professors

and poetry experts that might result less academic if quoted in a work such as the present one. Unfortunately, in some, few, cases they were the only source of commentary I managed to find but, before using them, I verified their reliability.

To conclude, from the investigation I carried out about this topic, it emerged that women's writings related to the First World War can be considered as fundamental as men's. In fact, only by including women's writings in the war testimonies, readers and critics can get a complete understanding of the war scenario of the time. Furthermore, from many points of view, that of women's writings concerned with the First World War is a still extensively unexplored field that is worth more consideration. I therefore believe that a further investigation on such topics and writings is needed, not only because they represent an important part of British history and a precious and reliable source of testimonies about a crucial historical event, but also because if more consideration was given to such writings, they could prove to be powerful resources also in fields such as teaching. In this respect I have been particularly moved by Mary Borden's *The Forbidden Zone* and its sketches about the daily routine of a nurse. I think that if more attention and academic prestige was given to such works, they could be used also in schools, not only at a university level, but also in middle and high schools together with their male counterparts' works, to show students also another side, up to now almost dark, of what the First World War has meant for people, in this case for women.

1. War Culture in Britain

The First World War has left an indelible mark from both a historical and a social point of view. The conflict broke out in Europe in 1914, as the Austro-Hungarian empire declared war to Serbia on 18 July, and it soon involved the major world powers of the time, thus becoming the first global conflict in history. The war brought about some technological innovations such as the aircraft and the submarine along with some innovations on a social level. Therefore, middle class women left the circumscribed space of the home to join the war effort, both from the home front and the battle one, taking over salaried jobs for the first time. Propaganda revealed to be a powerful tool, addressing both men and women, and it gave its best during the very First World War years. Equally important has been the role played by writing as both a testimony and a means of communication. Men's writings have long been considered the only reliable source of testimony regarding World War One, because of their first-hand experience. However, since the 1980s a rediscovery of women's writings related to the First World War period has started even if they still represent a highly unexplored field.

1.1 Britain and the First World War

The term "war" is defined by *Encyclopedia Britannica* as "[…] in the popular sense, a conflict between political groups involving hostilities of considerable duration and magnitude. […]".[1] However, the First World War can be defined as more than simply this, it is what Winston Churchill called "[t]he greatest of all human contentions"[2] and Eksteins writes about it "[i]ts agony is with us still. We cannot forget, nor can we ever truly comprehend".[3] In the introductive section to *The Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War*, Strachan defines it as "global,

[1] Joseph Frankel, "War", *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2023, https://www.britannica.com/topic/war, last accessed: 23.05.2023.
[2] Modris Eksteins, "Memory and the Great War", cit., pp. 317-329, p. 329.
[3] *Ibid*.

"total" and "modern".[4] All the three adjectives are analysed and criticized throughout the chapter. More precisely, the adjective "global" could be defined as inaccurate since not all the world's states took an active part in this armed conflict; the adjective "total" could be criticized because the First World War did not actually involve civilians, since most of the battles were fought in the circumscribed space of the trenches, thus limiting the dangers for civilians, at least in the physical sense. However, I believe it can be defined "total" since there was the mobilization of mass armies, made of citizens; moreover, the fighting involved both the airspace and the sea. Strachan also mentions the term "total war" in his chapter on "The Idea of War" in *The Cambridge Companion to War Writing*. He states that it was in the First World War that for the first time the participation of the entire population of each nation was required, both combatants and civilians, in order to support the war effort.[5] As far as it concerns the adjective "modern", World War One can be defined as a mixture of primitive and modern war, since the weapons used included grenades and mortars as well as axes and clubs but also some technological inventions of the time, such as the aircraft, the submarine, some gasses, and forms of explosive.[6] In fact, it is described also as the first industrial world war, which means a war on an industrial scale that uses industrial technologies.[7]

Another parameter that it is important to observe when dealing with the First World War is its length. According to Strachan its length is one of the reasons why this conflict can be described as "total" and as "modern". Strachan explains that the length of previous wars, such as that of German unification in 1866, was measured using the parameter of weeks, while the First World War is usually measured in terms of months that were fifty-two if we set its end on 11 November 1918 when Germany signed the armistice. Nevertheless, the war did not end

[4] Hew Strachan, "Introduction", cit., p. 1.
[5] Hew Strachan, "The Idea of War", in K. McLoughlin (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to War Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009): pp. 7-24., p. 8.
[6] Strachan, "Introduction", cit.: pp. 1-5.
[7] Trudi Tate, "The First World War: British Writing", in K. McLoughlin (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to War Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009): pp. 160-174, p. 163.

abruptly on that day and conflicts and civil wars in Eastern Europe followed for months. Even if historians are reluctant to define the First World War as a long one, it can be surely said it was a very intense conflict, without any truce occurring in it.[8]

The First World War was officially declared on 28 July 1914, precisely a month after the assassination of the Austro-Hungarian Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophie in Sarajevo. In fact, on 28 June 1914, Gavrilo Princip, a member of the Serbian terrorist group the Black Hand, headed by Serbian military intelligence Colonel Dragutin Dimitrijević, also known as Apis, shot the archduke and his wife killing them.[9] However, if this was the root cause that made the war start, there were also long-term tensions among European Countries that contributed to its beginning. Firstly, there was the Eastern-Question, with the Ottomans considered as the "Sick Men of Europe"; secondly the Habsburg monarchy that was also considered "sick"; and thirdly German ambitions,[10] the so called "German threat" particularly feared by Britain, which Empire started to decline since the end of the nineteenth century.[11]

By 1914 Europe found itself divided into two diplomatic factions: the Triple Alliance that included Germany, Austro-Hungary, Italy, and, secretly, Romania; and the Triple Entente that included France, Russia, and Britain.[12] Looking at the Serbian situation, Williamson states it was probably the most dangerous one, because "the Serbian military wanted to become a virtual state in state".[13] And the shots in Sarajevo on 28 June 1914 converged all the danger points about domestic and foreign policies of Europe, the result of it has been, as history has shown, the First World War.[14] After the terrorist attack that took part in Sarajevo against Austro-Hungarian archduke and his wife, the Serbian Prime Minister Nikolai Pašić found himself in a

[8] Strachan, "Introduction", cit.: pp. 8-9.
[9] Samuel R. Jr. Williamson, "The Origins of the War", in H. Strachan (ed.) *The Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016): pp. 11-27, p. 11.
[10] Williamson, "The Origins of the War", cit., pp. 12-13.
[11] *Id*., p. 14.
[12] *Id*., p. 13.
[13] *Id*., p. 17.
[14] *Ibid*.

difficult situation since he had heard some rumours that could have helped him to foresee what was about to happen, but Apis put up resistance as he tried to investigate deeper. This is known as the July crisis. The only thing he could do was hoping that Austro-Hungarian did not make connections to Apis, since Princip had connections to Belgrade. Nevertheless, all the Austro-Hungarian senior leaders advocated for an action against Belgrade since Serbia was considered undoubtedly guilty. Therefore, after various meetings, as all the leaders agreed on enacting a strong action and possibly a war towards Serbia, a forty-eight-hour ultimatum was delivered in Belgrade on 23 July in late afternoon. The ultimatum asked for several Serbian concessions and for the permission to investigate over the assassination of the archduke and his wife. In the meanwhile, Germany confirmed its support to Vienna in case of war and Russia to Serbia and mobilization started. Pašić drafted the response in which he allowed some concessions but refused the most important one, the permission to investigate, in order not to be discovered as complicit.[15] As a consequence, the War was officially declared on 28 July 1914.

As far as it concerns Britain, on 29 July Winston Churchill ordered naval vessels to position themselves in British North Sea battle stations. Initially, radicals did not want Britain to take part in the conflict, but Britain was committed through a treaty to defend Belgium and its neutrality. Therefore, on 31 July Britain asked France and Germany to guarantee Belgian neutrality. France accepted, Germany did not. So, as far as German troops were mobilized, Britain intervened in the war to defend Belgium. More precisely, on 14 August 1914, at 11 p.m. (GMT), Britain and Germany were at war.[16] Started as the third Balkan war, the conflict that broke down on 10 August 1914, soon became what nowadays people know as the First World War.

As I stated above, the First World War is considered "total" since it involved both combatants and non-combatants. Among the effects of war on people, one certainly includes

[15] Williamson, "The Origins of the War", cit., pp. 17-21.
[16] *Id*., pp. 22-25.

the employment of male conscription in virtually every State (except for Britain that adopted it only in January 1916, with the Military Service Act) that surely deprived the industrial production system of its workforce. Consequently, those who were not actively involved in the armed conflict were employed in the production system to sustain the war effort.[17] These categories, of course, included women, who took different roles, according to their geographical location. The ones living in rural areas substituted the male workforce in agricultural labour, while the ones living in the city worked mostly in factories and took up public roles; more generally, jobs available to women increased.[18] Some of them drove busses and some became white collars in banks and worked in public offices.[19] Especially in London, women occupied in the transport sector proliferated.[20] By 1918 "British women numbered almost 5 million across all industrial occupations […]".[21] Many women also became important figures in the medical field, working as voluntary nurses, driving ambulances, and setting up field hospitals.[22] Also, at the outset of the war, some British women created the Women's Voluntary Reserve and other paramilitary organizations to incorporate women into national armed forces.[23] Some women even started to wear trousers. Hence, this involvement of women in the society's workforce challenged the traditional distinction between men and women and, notably, it caused a sort of crisis of the patriarchal mentality of the time. Moreover, a sentiment of harsh misogyny grew among the men fighting in the trenches.[24] On the other hand, some women started to feel guilty for not having fought in the trenches, and this is visible also in their testimonies.[25]

[17] Strachan, "Introduction", cit., p. 4.
[18] Susan R. Grayzel, "The Role of Women in the War", in H. Strachan (ed.) *The Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016): pp. 149-162, pp. 151-155.
[19] Vita Fortunati, *Women's Counter-Memories of the First War World: Two Emblematic Case–studies: Vera Brittain, Mary Borden* (Bologna: University of Bologna Press, 2014): p. 228.
[20] Susan R. Grayzel, "The Role of Women in the War", *op. cit.*, pp. 151-155.
[21] *Id*., p. 155.
[22] *Id*., p. 156.
[23] *Ibid*.
[24] Vita Fortunati, *op. cit.*, pp. 228-229.
[25] *Id*., p. 229.

As Sarah Cole points out, "[d]eath, as every soldier in every war has noted, is indiscriminate".[26] This means that in war there are no categories, people are all the same, all subjected to death. War does not only divide people, it also puts them together. An example of this can be seen in the Christmas truce on the Western Front in 1914, during which British and German soldiers played a football match in no-man's-land. The two enemy factions managed to unite for some time, also dropping the subject of the opposition "us" and "them", due also to the similar living conditions the soldiers of both factions were subjected to.[27] The total amount of people who were killed or died during the Great War is around 9 million soldiers and 30 million civilians, who died because of hunger, violence, and diseases.[28] In Britain more than 6,200,000 soldiers fought during the war and about 800,000 of them died in action. In addition, more than 1,400 people were killed by bomb raids during 1917 and 3,400 were wounded.[29]

At the outbreak of the war literate people such as teachers, students, poets, historians, writers, and artists more in general, volunteered *en masse*.[30] Even people who were past the age of military service enrolled on the home front to contribute to the war effort. This large involvement of the educated social classes, who were characterised by similar social ideas, influenced the form of warfare, especially on the western front, they were all reunited in the trench warfare.[31] At least initially, they were sustained by Horatian mindset "dulce et decorum est pro patria mori"[32] that they probably learnt in schools. Unfortunately, ten million of them died and twenty million were mutilated. Officers usually fought in the frontlines to lead by

[26] Sarah Cole, "People in War", in K. McLoughlin (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to War Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009): pp. 25-37, p. 26.
[27] *Id*., pp. 27-28.
[28] Margaret Higonnet, "The Great War and the Female Elegy: Female Lamentation and Silence in Global Contexts*"*, *The Global South*, Vol. 1, n. 2, *Globalization and the Future of Comparative Literature* (Fall, 2007): pp. 120-136, p. 123.
[29] Elias Beck, "Britain in World War I", *History Crunch* (2021), https://www.historycrunch.com/britain-in-world-war-i.html#/, last accessed: 05.04.2023.
[30] Modris Eksteins, "Memory and the Great War", in H. Strachan (ed.) *The Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016): pp. 317-329, p. 318.
[31] Eksteins, *op. cit.*, p. 318.
[32] Horatio, in Modris Eksteins, "Memory and the Great War", *op. cit.*: pp. 317-329, p. 319.

examples, so casualties were higher among them and many of the intellectuals died as well.[33] With time the many who were initially excited about the idea of fighting for their Country started to lose confidence.[34]

Morale can be considered a key word in war times and people needed to maintain it at a high level. As the war broke out in 1914 people thought it would have been short; soldiers' skills at arms and fieldcraft were trained and discipline and order were considered fundamental for high morale. However, the most important purpose of training was to introduce men to the military mindset and to the attitude of obedience. The recruits had to obey immediately to orders and they had to do it all together. Even if during the training period discipline was most oppressive, soldiers were not allowed to forget that the army had an absolute power over them, neither after the training period.[35] However, as the war started to prolong, the attention shifted from an initial emphasis on discipline and obedience to a greater interest for individual initiatives and groupwork.[36] Military authority, however, did not lose its importance, and there was a variety of punishments for transgressors, the harshest of which was death sentence. In fact, among the 1914-1917 death sentences in the British army, made of 6,147,000 men, 3,080 were death sentences, yet only 346 of these were actually executed. As the war went on, and more men were required to fight at the front, training sessions became shorter, lasting about two or three months, a time that proved insufficient to instil the necessary discipline and obedience in them.[37] However, in general, the British army condemned its soldiers to death more frequently at the outbreak of the war than later.[38] Another strategy to keep up morale was to motivate soldiers to be proud of their military identity and of the corporation they belonged

[33] *Id*., p. 319.
[34] *Id*., p. 320.
[35] Alexander Watson, "Mutinies and Military Morale", in H. Strachan (ed.) *The Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War*, *op. cit.*, pp. 191-203, p.193.
[36] Watson, *op. cit.*, p. 192.
[37] *Ibid*.
[38] *Id*., p. 193.

to, using promotions and awards as an encouragement. Moreover, regiments were proper military communities with their costumes and habits, and of course their history. The members of each dressed differently, and all wore the colours of their community. Usually, British units took their name from the county or even the street their soldiers came from. Morale was benefitted by this regional homogeneity, since the men forming each unity spoke the same dialect and shared the same local culture, but also, and most importantly, they were fighting to defend the same narrowed "home". Finally, personal bonds were another crucial point in keeping up morale, since the dozen of men that formed a unit lived and did all their routine activities together, becoming a kind of family.[39] Notwithstanding the importance of keeping morale high there were some conditions that made it difficult, such as the high number of casualties that often involved people from the same unity and, also, the disparity perceived by common soldiers towards their commanders. A good leader in a unit could also determine an inferior number of soldiers suffering from psychiatric disorders. Soldiers also needed to be ingratiated during rest periods and the British army was particularly skilled at it, due to the experience they had gathered with the management of the British Empire. The many opportunities soldiers had to take their minds off included sports, such as football, films, horse shows, and excursions to the seaside.[40] Nevertheless, almost all of the soldiers that fought in World War One were citizens and so they remained primarily loyal to civilians: their submission to the army authorities was temporary and conditional, since military service was seen as a civic duty that was worth the endeavour of defence.[41]

Families too played an important emotional role, since they embodied the Country the soldiers were fighting for. Packages containing goods such as food, letters, and gifts for soldiers were sent to the front from home on a weekly basis as a powerful reminder. In 1917 more than

[39] *Id*., p. 194.
[40] *Id*. pp. 195-196.
[41] *Id*., p. 196.

a million parcels were delivered to British soldiers on the western front every week. Another event to remember is the foundation of the British propaganda office in March 1918.[42] Indiscipline was severely punished even if only rarely did soldiers disregard orders. Deserters were not only punished by their army, but they were also excluded by their comrades and at worst they were executed. Morale was important also in this regard because a low one could influence the behaviour of soldiers and lead to dangerous consequences.[43] To conclude, morale was a very important tool to sustain the long duration of the war; however, obedience was not the only ability that was required to win and the signals of disintegration that started in 1917 on the western front underlined the limits of morale. In the trenches it was easier to maintain discipline rather than morale and armies applied postal censorship to track the worrying of the soldiers and sometimes recurred to negotiation in order to meet soldiers' demands to maintain authority.[44]

As I stated above, morale was important for many reasons, but it was not the only tool required in the war effort. As a matter of fact, another central role was played by literature and the press and involved both soldiers and civilians.

1.2 Introduction to British War Writing: The Press and Literature

With the advent of the Great War "Words, literary words, visible on the page, flowed as they had never flowed before, in the trenches, at home, and across the seven seas"[45] and "Before the wireless, before the television, this was the great literary war. Everyone wrote about it, and for it".[46] Thus, the amount of literature produced by World War One is huge. However, as Strachan writes in his introduction of *The Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War*, "Putting the

[42] *Id*., p. 197.
[43] *Id*., pp. 198-199.
[44] *Id*., p. 203.
[45] Eksteins, "Memory and the Great War", in H. Strachan (ed.), cit., pp. 318.
[46] *Ibid*.

war into words has never been easy".[47] The ones who wrote during the war and became famous for it are a testimony of this. Primarily, they were compelled to writing in the attempt to figure out what was happening and give sense to the irrational and the vague, nonetheless what they produced rarely succeeded in reflecting their expectations.[48] Eksteins writes that "Words seemed so remote, syntax so helpless".[49] And "Because of the failure of imagination and hence language to contain experience, the soldiers of the Great War felt that they possessed a secret"[50], a secret that was almost impossible to communicate. It is a complex task to put war into words since war is a convoluted phenomenon that changes and reconfigures everything, from nations, to people, to lands.[51] Obstacles to translating the experience into words came from different perspectives: censorship, political advantages, self-interests, shock, and the different positioning of the writers – they could be first-hand experiencers, like soldiers, or external to the war zones; for the latter it was more difficult to claim the legitimacy of their accounts.[52] In fact, it was largely believed among combatants that only the ones who directly experienced war could really understand what it meant, and yet many stories from the First World War come not only from personal experience but also from the retelling of experiences they had heard by others.[53] As McLoughlin writes, a possible way out – in writing about any war – could be silence, but even silence could have different forms: it could be an ethical-aesthetic reaction to the difficulty of representing the war; or it could be psycho-physiological, in this case the subjects are unable to express themselves and it could be a reaction to a traumatic situation or to grief.[54] McLoughlin also explains that there are different reasons that push people to write about war. Firstly, it is a way of controlling it, to make order, at least in a verbal sense, to make

[47] Strachan, "Introduction", in H. Strachan (ed.), cit., p. 1.
[48] *Ibid*.
[49] Eksteins, *op. cit.*, p. 320.
[50] *Ibid*.
[51] Kate McLoughlin, "War and Words", in K. McLoughlin (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to War Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009): pp. 15-24, p. 15.
[52] McLoughlin, *op. cit.*, p. 16.
[53] Trudi Tate, "The First World War: British Writing", cit., p. 165.
[54] McLoughlin, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

it understandable and safer; secondly, it is a way of keeping memory of the ones who died and cannot tell their story by themselves,[55] thus witnessing was a concern for many writers of the time[56]; thirdly, writing can be healing, since it allows people to articulate pain with words, and a key element of this is sharing, because a community of hearers is needed; finally it can be solicited by the excitement of the fight.[57] Words are a very powerful tool, as silence is. They should be accurately chosen and frequently interrogated. Even if sometimes the failure in finding words to talk about war can be an equally powerful technique to explain the power that war experience possesses.[58]

At the time of World War One writing in general and literature and the press in particular were the tools through which people could understand what was actually happening. This particular means of communication was used by both soldiers and civilians. British trench poets expressed their grief towards fellow soldiers as a mixture of different emotions that included love, mourning, and anger, and some of them also tried to describe the suffering experience both from within – including themselves in the war experience – and without – not including themselves but talking about others –, an outstanding example of this is Wilfred Owen with his very well-known poem "Dulce et Decorum Est".[59] On the other hand, as far as it concerns civilians, a powerful example can be seen in Virginia Woolf, civilian and pacifist writer, who used her writing both to witness the horrors of the time and to warn future generations about the dangers of the war.[60]

However, it exists a marked difference between the press and literature in wartime. The former intermingled truths, lies, and half-truths and it was virtually impossible to distinguish between them and some of the most famous British newspapers of the time were *The Times*,

[55] McLoughlin, "War and Words", cit., p.19.
[56] Tate, *op. cit.*, p. 160.
[57] McLoughlin, "War and Words", cit., pp. 19-21.
[58] *Id*., p. 22.
[59] Tate, *op. cit.*, pp.160-161.
[60] *Ibid*.

Daily Mail, and *Daily Mirror*, to name a few.[61] The consequence was that they were not reliable, and they did not properly show the horrors of the war to British civilians. This task was accomplished by the latter, literature, instead, that aimed at bringing up some knowledge. The aim of World War One literature was to tell the truth, even the one that was difficult to express. This explains why this literary strand has become fundamental to both historians and literary critics.[62] However, the expression "First World War literature" actually includes a vast body of written texts that consists of trench poets' writings, memoirs and fiction written by combatants, nurses and civilians' memoirs, propagandistic and patriotic writings, pacifist ones, and also civilians' thoughts about the war. Also, all of the above mentioned groups can be intermingled and no one can stand for its own.[63] Furthermore, among all the writers, there were some who were enthusiastic about war – even if they had never joined any fighting –, even if many of them changed their mind as soon as they started to serve, and then there were the ones who saw it critically and condemned it. Among the formers there were writers, almost all civilians, who produced propagandistic writings, inciting people to join the conflict, and never lost their enthusiasm, such as Jessie Pope, an English journalist, poet, and writer, who can be seen as a very influential person even if extreme. On the other hand, among the latter, there were of course the soldier poets, the ones who started to feel disillusionment as the war prolonged, and some pacifists.[64] Many soldier writers were disgusted by the lies that circulated among civilians to increase recruitment and lower dissent. This disgust was increased by the fact that soldiers' letters were censored and they were ordered not to talk about their experience as they came home on leave. In fact, the civilians were thought as speaking a different language, the one they were subjected to by newspapers. [65]

[61] *Id*., pp. 162-163.
[62] *Ibid*.
[63] *Ibid*.
[64] *Id*., pp. 164-165.
[65] Trudi Tate, "The First World War: British Writing", in K. McLoughlin (ed.), cit., p.167.

When dealing with war writings, another central issue is trauma. This word was originally used in Ancient Greece and it meant 'wound'. It acquired its psychological meaning at the end of nineteenth century as it was employed by people like the French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot to describe a wound of the mind caused by an unexpected emotional shock. The term was then deepened by Sigmund Freud at the beginning of twentieth century as he worked with traumatized soldiers who had survived to the First World War. Basically, he sustained that trauma was caused by a shocking event connected to the lack of preparation to front anxiety. Recently, the theorizations of the term trauma focus on its characteristic compulsion to repeat actions, confirming Freud's thesis according to which shell-shocked people kept on repeating the traumatizing experience, however adding to it some related problems such as cognition, memory, knowledge, and representation.[66] "The trauma of war is as old as war itself, but it was not until the First World War that it came to be seen as a serious medical problem […]".[67] There are many writings coming from both soldiers and civilians that deal with the war trauma, also known as "shell shock" or war neurosis. Unfortunately, before this illness was officially accepted, it met the resistance of both military and medical authorities and many times soldiers were seen as cowards or mutinied and condemned for it, while they were simply ill. As the cases increased, authorities saw themselves forced to recognise "shell shock" as a serious illness in need of cures rather than punishment. The reason why the number of traumatized people was by far higher during War World One than in any previous war is probably due to the passivity that soldiers experienced in the trenches in constant contact with death, being at the same time asked to be brave and active.[68]

Another topic of the war writings of the time is resentment, the emotion experienced by the young men forced to fight also for the older generation that, on the contrary, looked at them

[66] Santanu Das, "'The Impotence of Sympathy': Touch and Trauma in the Memoirs of the First World War Nurses", *Textual Practice* (Vol. 19, n. 2, 2005): pp. 239-262, pp. 241, 247.
[67] Tate, *op. cit.*, p. 169.
[68] *Id.*, pp. 167, 169.

safely from the home front. It was the old generation who started the war, but the young one had to pay the price of it with life.[69] It is possible to read this topic in Wilfred Owen's poem "The Parable of the Old Man and the Young" that runs as follows:

> So Abram rose, and clave the wood, and went,
> And took the fire with him, and a knife.
> And as they sojourned both of them together,
> Isaac the first-born spake and said, My Father,
> Behold the preparations, fire and iron,
> But where the lamb for this burnt-offering?
> Then Abram bound the youth with belts and straps,
> And builded parapets and trenches there,
> And stretchèd forth the knife to slay his son.
> When lo! an Angel called him out of heaven,
> Saying, Lay not thy hand upon the lad,
> Neither do anything to him, thy son.
> Behold! Caught in a thicket by its horns,
> A Ram. Offer the Ram of Pride instead.
>
> But the old man would not so, but slew his son,
> And half the seed of Europe, one by one.[70]

Owen starts the poem by retelling the story of Abraham, present in the Book of Genesis, the first one of the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Old Testament, who is asked by God to sacrifice Isaac, his only son. Abraham, the father, obeys to God without saying a word, and as Isaac asks the father where the lamb is to offer, Owen shifts the story to the contemporary time, to World War One. It is clear that the fathers described here are believed to be responsible for the sufferings and, in this particular case, the death of the youngest.[71]

Finally, in war writings there is another motif that consists in the personification of land as a mother and, consequently, the desolate war zones are described as a maternal body that protects soldiers but also menaces to suffocate or founder them in mud. As a sign of gratitude for being their mother the soldiers use technology to attack and destroy the land. However, the destructed land also stays for the dead and mutilated bodies of the soldiers. To conclude, the

[69] *Id*., pp.170-171.
[70] Wilfred Owen, "The Parable of the Old Man and the Young", *All Poetry* (https://allpoetry.com/The-Parable-Of-The-Old-Man-And-The-Young, last accessed: 29.06.2023).
[71] Tate, *op. cit.*, pp.170-171.

war writers use the land both to keep memory and to bear witness of what is impossible to retell, so the effects of war on human beings.[72]

World War One has been a defining event in the history of humankind. More than 9 million soldiers have been killed in it and around 30 million civilians died because of hunger, violence, and diseases, and the war left its mark both on literature and history.[73] Nobody turned out to be prepared for what it meant and literature has been used as a tool to attempt the understanding of the inexplicable horrors of the conflict as well as a means of keeping memory of the dead. Nevertheless, as I already anticipated above, there are some other kinds of writing and means of information that have been used for different aims, at least at the beginning of the war, and have developed in a quite different way.

1.3 Propaganda and the Media in War Time

The *Cambridge Dictionary* defines 'Propaganda' as "information, ideas, opinions, or images, often only giving one part of an argument, that are broadcast, published, or in some other way spread with the intention of influencing people's opinions".[74] And according to the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* it is "information which is false or which emphasizes just one part of a situation, used by a government or political group to make people agree with them".[75] The term was used for the first time by Pope Gregory XV in 1622 as he was establishing the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (*Congregatio de Propaganda Fide*). It has later been used for activities that aimed at spreading religious and political belief systems. During the nineteenth century, in Germany, the term started to acquire a negative

[72] *Id*., pp. 171-172.
[73] Margaret Higonnet, "The Great War and the Female Elegy: Female Lamentation and Silence in Global Contexts*"*, *The Global South* (Vol. 1, n. 2, *Globalization and the Future of Comparative Literature*, Fall, 2007): pp. 120-136, p. 123.
[74] "Propaganda", *Cambridge Dictionary*, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/propaganda, last accessed: 03.07.2023.
[75] "Propaganda", *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, https://www.ldoceonline.com/dictionary/propaganda, last accessed: 03.07.2023.

connotation since it started to be associated with the French Revolution and its horrors, however in the other Countries it was not described as something negative until 1918. Since then, it started to be used to describe the manipulation of public opinion through a series of strategies.[76]

'Propaganda' can be identified as a key word when dealing with the First World War, since at the time every nation involved in the conflict established specific agencies to both influence – a task that required the invention of new strategies – and control – something that had always been done when talking about war – public opinion. It was fundamental that propaganda reached the nation as a whole to rise consent, another key element in warfare time. Since the First World War is defined as the first modern 'total war' in which the population as a whole was mobilized, as I have explained in the first section of the present work, the importance of spreading the information making it reach a large number of people seems clear, in fact people were all involved in the conflict, were they at the front or at home.[77] Propaganda was what helped people to withstand during the over fifty months of World War One,[78] in fact it was also used to keep morale high, and many countries at the time still not associated it with a negative connotation.[79] Nevertheless, the First World War marked the first time in which propaganda was used in an organized and systematic way.[80] However, there is a number of related technological developments that happened at the beginning of the twentieth century that are useful to understand why propaganda became a crucial factor during World War One. These changes include the increase of mass societies and the consequent increase of the flow of information, which is strictly connected with technological improvement in both sea and land communications, namely the invention of the telegraph and the establishment of new agencies.

[76] Nelson Ribeiro, et al., "World War I and the Emergence of Modern Propaganda", in K. Ribeiro, et al. (ed) *The Handbook of European Communication History* (John Wiley & Sons, 2020): pp. 97-113, p. 97.
[77] Ribeiro, *op. cit.*, p. 97.
[78] J. M. Winter, "Propaganda and the Mobilization of Consent", in H. Strachan (ed.) *The Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016): pp.216-225., p. 216.
[79] Ribeiro, *op. cit.*, p. 98.
[80] *Id*., p. 97.

All of these made it possible to interconnect a greater number of people and to deliver them the same message. Also, a central role was played by the press, photography and the cinema, crucial means to spread information about the war.[81]

Undoubtedly, World War One produced the biggest and most spectacular advertising campaign up to now.[82] Its aim was to justify war and its language was preachy and full of symbolic forms that helped to inscribe the notions of justice and injustice in popular culture. It was this very effort, sometimes exaggerated, that led people to associate the term 'propaganda' with the term 'lie'. However, during the Great War propaganda played a role far bigger than this.[83] According to Winter, during the First World War propaganda had a double face: it was a mixture of political polemic and the private sector. There was also manipulation from the upper echelons, but it is not all. State propaganda and its power worked together with the formed popular opinion that laid below, so that, if popular opinion did not get along with state propaganda, then the official message would lose its power, on the contrary, if they coincided propaganda would have great power.[84] British propaganda during the war succeeded in presenting the war as an obstacle to overcome. The way to succeed in this was to recruit enough men to fight, also encouraging women to wear uniforms, and teach people how to ration food at best. The key to success for British propaganda was its being inclusive, persuasive, and practical.[85]

During the first years of the war, more precisely between 1914 and 1916 both the Triple Alliance and the Triple Entente's propaganda sustained the defensive nature of the war. In fact, they both maintained they had been provoked and attacked and each one claimed to be defending itself, then this first part of the war was predominantly military. The situation shifted

[81] *Ibid*.
[82] Winter, *op. cit.*, p. 216.
[83] *Ibid*.
[84] *Id*., p. 217.
[85] Ribeiro, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

from 1917 as civilian agencies started to play a leading role and propaganda became interested in war aims; this was surely due to political changings such as the exit of Russia and the entrance of the United States in the conflict. The main concerns that interested the public opinion in the last two years of the war regarded how the world was about to be after the conflict and the peace negotiations and, staying on topic, what was the kind of peace that would have been chosen.[86]

Narrowing the field to the British war propaganda during World War One, it is now regarded as exquisitely efficient, organized, and successful. The British war propaganda apparatus developed gradually and sometimes in unexpected ways. It has been successful thanks to "its adaptability to events and technological innovations"[87], together with the great variety of actors, media, and messages that were involved, always paying attention to the limits and the role imposed by official institutions.[88] More specifically, the development of British wartime propaganda can be divided into three different phases. From 1914 to 1915 both institutional and independent agencies worked together to gain the support of public opinion on war issues. This phase is characterized by the demonization of Germany, also known as the "German threat", and the encouragement of volunteering. British people showed they were openly Germanophobic in wartime and in July 1917 the British Royal family changed their dynastic name from the more Germanic Saxe-Coburg and Gotha to Windsor, a more Anglophone one.[89] Furthermore, immediately after the outbreak of the war, the Press Bureau was established by the British Government, its task consisted in distributing and censoring war news; it also established the War Propaganda Bureau in Wellington House, London. Outstanding British writers, notably H. G. Wells, were employed in the War Propaganda Bureau and their messages reached people both at home and overseas thanks to pamphlets, newspaper articles, fiction related to current topics, and eye-witness testimonies from the front that were

[86] Winter, *op. cit.*, p. 217.
[87] Ribeiro, *op. cit.*, p. 102.
[88] *Id.*, pp. 101-102.
[89] *Id.*, p. 104.

pleasantly patriotic. At the same time, political institutions focused on the support and the defence of neutral Belgium, maybe slightly overdoing it. Meanwhile young men were targeted by army recruiters with specific pamphlets, posters, and public rallies, as well as with exhibitions in music halls. With the years, it turned out that most of the propaganda produced in this phase was independent from government instructions, in fact, after the outbreak of the war, newspapers started to print stories about German cruel acts in Belgium totally independently, the same did preachers talking about the British cause and its righteousness, and popular songwriters that invoked British martial pride.[90] On a more general level the propaganda efforts of both the Alliance and the Entente spread from dreadful stories of the war, to caricatures of barbaric peoples, to children' stories, to blatant lies.[91] The second phase goes from 1916 to 1917 and it incorporates new challenges, such as the introduction of military conscription in Britain in January 1916, that shifted the focus of propaganda to the home front, underlining the action of workers on the home front in the war effort. Also, journalists, film cameraman, and news photographers were embedded in front lines and the government started to be deliberative towards propaganda, also establishing the first Department of Information and the National War Aims Committee, its domestic adjunct. State propaganda was then led by an entourage of experts in popular persuasion, such as newspaper business owners. Finally, the third phase covers the last year of the conflict. This last one is characterized by experts in their field running the propaganda machine. In March 1918, the Department of Information was given a higher position, becoming Ministry, and operating under the control of press magnates – Lords Beaverbrook and Northcliffe. Poets and writers who had written during the first phase were replaced by new media with a simple and clear message: "stay strong, and make our endurance and sacrifice worthwhile".[92]

[90] *Id*., p. 102.
[91] Winter, *op. cit.*, p. 218.
[92] Ribeiro, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

The cultural dimension of propaganda is important as well. It contributed to the cementation of collective solidarity. Even if it did not make the war shorter, it certainly helped to modify the societies making them more effective in warfare time. As I have already said above, from 1914 in Britain there was a mobilization of minds, in which the boundaries between public and private were totally destroyed or redrawn.[93] The strongest propaganda did not come from institutions but from people and societies themselves. Hate was a core topic and the more visual and verbal it was the more effective. Its effectiveness was due to the fact that the images it used were taken from below, from popular imagery, and spread through commercials, cartoons, posters, postcards, sermons, songs, and amateur poetry that developed in wartime. Particular consideration is owed to sacred images and words on behalf of the cause. So, propaganda happened to be somehow related to religion, in fact, this war was considered a 'holy' one, consecrated by both established and most unconventional churches.[94] Always in religious mood, the war reduced religious divisions between the nations. For example, Jews' patriotic spirit helped them to reduce antisemitism in most of the countries, at least for some time. Also, preachers made sermons about the righteousness of the war, asking God's protection for combatants. Virtually in any Country war was an event for the Church, as well.[95]

Propaganda was not a matter for adults only, there was also propaganda containing messages for children and most of it dealt with the hatred of the enemy. Since the Napoleonic era, children were considered both brave subjects and victims. But starting from the First World War children began to do something more, and more bewildering as well, they killed. In total war also children were mobilized and used guns to kill, as the English nursery rhyme "The House That Jack Built", partially quoted by Winter, shows:

> This is the house that Jack built.
> This is the bomb that felt on the house that Jack built.

[93] Winter, *op. cit.*, p. 218.
[94] *Ibid*.
[95] *Id*., pp. 218-219.

> This is the Hun who dropped the bomb that fell on the house that Jack built.
>
> This is the gun that killed the Hun who dropped the bomb that fell on the house that Jack built.[96]

Here is also a photograph taken from the British Library website that shows children imitating soldiers:

Figure 1. Child soldiers in a redeemed country, 1916.[97]

The photograph clearly shows that children lives were influenced by the warfare spirit of the time. Their toys were replaced by objects simulating real guns probably used by their fathers, uncles, or even brothers. They also had to quit playing to work in factories and replace the absent male workforce, sometimes they were also subjected to violence.[98]

Another interesting aspect is that at the beginning of the war propaganda was more verbal than visual. In fact, many combatants wrote down their experience to denounce the atrocities perpetuated by the enemy and the horrors of the war, as well as to claim its righteousness. Later visual forms of propaganda became popular, especially posters and caricatures that aimed at stereotyping the enemy as an animal or as mad. There was a massification of propaganda, since gadgets such as beer mugs, doilies, and ash trays, were produced and sold, thus intermingling patriotism and economic profit. Huge gains came from

[96] *Id*., p. 219.
[97] *Child Soldiers in a Redeemed Country* (1916, Istituto Centrale per il Catalogo Unico), https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/child-soldiers-in-a-redeemed-country, last accessed: 05.07.2023.
[98] *Ibid*.

postcards, which were the main tool of correspondence between the home and the front, and which usually carried patriotic messages.[99] This is an example of "propaganda from below" used to restrain dissent about the war. [100]

Around the middle of the war, a new medium emerged and shortly gained importance as a tool to spread the 'right' cause of the war: Cinema, with its many genres, comedy, melodrama, and tragedy.[101] At the time this tool was not yet 20 years old, yet it turned out to be the most effective propaganda medium of the war, essential for the information, inspiration, and recreation of an increasingly exhausted nation, including especially women, who were experiencing factory work for the first time.[102] Governments did not directly influence film production, however they contributed to fund it. Even if censorship was applied, the industry was led by the private sector. The topics were the same propaganda used, glorifying one side and demonizing the other. Of course, cinema was a form of commercial profit, together with music halls and the gramophone industry. Cinema also offered moments of recreation and amusement with its mockery of the enemy.[103] During the second half of the war, films, initially used to briefly tell stories from the front, turned to feature longer films about battles, documentaries about war workers, especially women, and clips to promote domestic economy, including the usual comedies and programs as well. By doing so the cinema industry incorporated a new middle-class audience that did not exist before.[104]

An iconic cinematic figure became famous in that period serving the allied effort from California: Charlie Chaplin. He was born in Britain, but he spent wartime in the United States. Initially, he was a music-hall performer, however he was already a famous actor in 1914. Some of his films were openly propagandistic and he is famous for his cinematic productions against

[99] Winter, *op. cit.*, pp. 219-220.
[100] *Id*., p. 220.
[101] *Ibid*.
[102] Ribeiro, *op. cit.*, p. 104.
[103] Winter, *op. cit.*, pp. 220-221.
[104] Ribeiro, *op. cit*., p. 104.

the Germans during the last year of the war, as in *Shoulder Arms*, in which he impersonates a soldier on the Western Front who manages to capture the Kaiser.[105] Most of the filmic production of the war period had an escapist aim, however some films were used to spread moral messages, to make public morale stiffer, and to reduce the anxiety that the conflict inevitably created. The army as well had its own cinema industry. [106]

In all likelihood, the most important media in wartime was the newspaper. By 1914 the majority of the population, including the working class, was at least basically literate, and this helped in establishing its pivotal role. In fact, between 1899 and 1914, the literacy level among people from 20 to 24 years reached 100%. Newspapers represented the cheapest form of literature and the years between 1855 and 1914 are regarded as the 'golden age' of newspaper publishing.[107] It was Britain's principal medium of information. It played a central role in forming the British popular opinion and perception of the war. At the beginning of the conflict the circulation of information about the war was restricted by the Defence of the Realm Act, whose acronym is DORA, that severely condemned the spread of news that could potentially help the enemy. More constraints came later, and they included military censorship and the reluctance of some editors to print "bad" news about the war. Despite these attempts at imposing repressive control by the government, the British press was too powerful to be repressed.[108]

Newspapers were not used only to spread censored war news, they were also a powerful means of propaganda, as I have already explained above. Images played a crucial role: in fact, they were used for satirical portrayals of the enemies or for caustic depictions of trench life. Images made it easier to communicate the war to people and "[by] 1914, every major British newspaper had at least one dedicated picture page, while the *Daily Mirror* […] and the *Daily*

[105] Winter, *op. cit.*, pp. 221-223.
[106] *Id*., p. 223.
[107] Lisa Peters, "The Role of the Local Newspaper During World War One: An Important Link Between the Home Front and the Battle Front", *Publishing History* (Vol. 79, 2018): pp.7-31, p. 9.
[108] Ribeiro, *op. cit.*, pp.102-103.

Sketch […] typically printed six or more pages of photographs in each edition".[109] The photographers who worked for the press travelled between different front lines, also overseas, at the beginning as free-lance professionals and later as British army employees. In this way, British readers were provided with a world-wide panorama of the war. Usually, pictures were coupled with short captions that helped people to understand better what they were looking at. The front line was not the only perspective shown, thus, newspapers also shared testimonies and pictures from the home front, such as desirous army recruiters, refugees, Belgian towns before and after German destruction, and London ruins after naval bombardments and Zeppelin raids.[110]

Another very important wartime series of printed publications regards newspapers printed in the trenches, meant to keep morale high among the soldiers fighting in the trenches. These publications were created as a consequence of the long time that soldiers spent in the trenches to defend their positions, and they became very popular particularly among British soldiers, who often used them to criticize the news published at home, accused of not reflecting the truth. Many of these soldiers gave a sense of authenticity to their writings by adopting the voice of a common soldier to speak. Others used humour and satire in order to make their living situation less distressing. More than 100 British trench journals were published throughout the war. They could differ in length, because some of them consisted of only a single page handwritten and then carbon copied, while others were composed of several pages printed thanks to real printing presses. Most of these journals came spontaneously from soldiers, while others were launched by military officials.[111]

Apart from the role that local as well as national newspapers covered as propagandistic tools, as I have already discussed, newspapers played many other different roles. In her article

[109] *Id*., p. 103.
[110] *Ibid*.
[111] *Id*., pp. 109-110.

"The Role of the Local Newspaper During World War One: An Important Link Between the Home Front and the Battle Front", Lisa Peters argues that during the First World War local newspapers formed a link between the battle and the home front, connecting soldiers and civilians.[112] Local newspapers published real accounts of the life at the front and asked their soldier-readers and their families to send them soldiers' letters that they published. Then they also sent them to the soldiers at the front so that they could see their words printed and read news about the home front with the loved ones they were fighting to protect. With the advent of World War One it is possible to spot a growing interest in human-interest stories written by both soldiers and civilians. Thus, the local newspapers, not the national ones, were the principal source of information that people living outside London looked for, the same did working class soldiers or conscripts who felt a connection with it. In fact, local newspapers succeeded in creating a connection between soldiers and the local community they belonged to, a task that a national newspaper could not succeed in.[113]

Local newspapers published during the First World War presented a set of common features that are worth attention. Firstly, since they contained direct visual testimonies of the conflict thanks to letters, they helped to increase local interest in the conflict and so also sales. Secondly, they praised and supported the effort of local soldiers: this particular attention to local is a crucial characteristic. Thirdly, for the first time in newspapers' history local newspapers created an active link between the battle and the home front. The idea of local newspapers of publishing soldiers' letters came as a reaction to the increasing competition they had to face towards the growing industry of the national press. Soldiers' letters were inexpensive and easy to obtain, and, even if they were less elaborated than the poems produced by soldier-poets, they formed a crucial link and an emotional bond between the battle and the home front. *The Times* was the first newspaper to publish a soldiers' letter column in 1914, most precisely on 16

[112] Lisa Peters, *op. cit.*, pp. 7-8.
[113] *Id.*, p. 10.

September, with letters written to friends and relatives by soldiers and officers that were then passed to *The Times*. However, another distinction between national and local press is that, while the former tended to receive more letters from officers, the latter received more from privates, being so able to provide a working-class viewpoint of the war. Sometimes local newspapers offered payments to people to convince them to send their letters. Copies were sent also to the front and, if they were not for free, sometimes they presented special subscription price.[114] During World War One there were also soldiers' newspapers that were somehow similar to soldiers' letters columns, but the former were read only by soldiers.[115] As far as censorship is concerned, it is possible to state that while the national press was subjected to government's censorship, it was more difficult for institutions to control what was published in local newspapers that nevertheless happened to apply a sort of self-censorship, enacted by both soldiers and editors.[116]

Focusing on the link that local newspapers created between the battle and the home front it is possible to observe that soldiers, by publishing or asking relatives to publish their letters allowed people from the home front to become aware of what was happening at the front and vice versa. Also, they conveyed messages from home, such as the effort local communities were making to support soldiers, so showing civilians' appreciation towards soldiers.[117] This is the very link I was mentioning above.

Another important function accomplished by newspapers was keeping up morale, especially by publishing soldiers' letters that, in contrast with war news that were usually gruesome, focused on the excitement and adventure of conflict. And they were also used to recruit new soldiers, in fact the soldiers' letters they published harshly criticized the ones that did not join the conflict, so the men that were still at home could read what those fighting on

[114] *Id*., pp. 11-14.
[115] *Id*., pp. 14-15.
[116] *Id*., p. 15.
[117] *Id*., pp. 15-18.

the front thought about them. Furthermore, as I have already anticipated, soldiers' letters columns provided people with the 'reality' of the war, since some of them contained detailed descriptions of soldiers' lives, and of the actions of the day. Soldiers also used the letters they wrote to make people who were not actively fighting aware of their experience and of what they had to face in the battle front, even if they tended to apply self-censorship to avoid shocking their readers.[118] Furthermore, these soldiers' letters often contained place descriptions, since the war represented the first opportunity to travel for soldiers belonging to the working class. They described people and customs from places that their readers would have probably never had the possibility to visit, and this contributed to both distract readers from the horrors of the war and make soldiers' work looking 'exotic', together with the fact that it helped recruitment.[119]

The support soldiers received from home took different forms, such as messages or gifts, which included tobacco, music items, such as mouth organs, sporting goods, and hair-clipping machines. Also, local newspapers provided an opportunity of correspondence between the battle and the home front and, most interestingly, if a soldier did not have anyone to write to, he could request a correspondent. Newspapers also represented a form of recreation for soldiers experiencing boredom in moments of stasis at the front and furthermore they have proved to be an efficient tool to create bonds between soldiers, who formed communities and this surely raised morale. Finally, newspapers provided soldiers with news from other soldiers, and it was a tool to seek information about friends.[120]

To conclude, the different media, such as newspapers, both local and national, as well as the cinema, revealed to be tools of fundamental importance during the First World War, since they were used for propagandistic aims, even if they played many other crucial roles, as we have already seen. As I have pointed out throughout the chapter the First World War is described

[118] *Id*., pp. 19-22.
[119] *Id*., pp. 23-24.
[120] *Id*., pp. 24-29.

as a 'total war' that actively involved all strata of society, from men, to women, to children, rich and poor. I would now look at another fundamental distinction that is possible to spot in war writings that mirrors a clear distinction present in the society: the one between men and women, here in particular focusing on their writings.

1.4 Men vs Women Writers

As I have pointed out several times in the present chapter, World War One brought about several newness concerning almost all fields of human life. It has been described as a 'global, 'total', and 'modern' war, as I have already explained at the beginning of the chapter. However, in my opinion, there is one aspect of innovation taken by the war that deserves a little more attention, and it concerns the changes that the First World War brought in the relationship between men and women, as well as in their roles within the society.

In 1914 English society was characterized by an apparently rigid social stratification, that is, hierarchy was very important both between people of the same sex and of different ones.[121] To better understand the social environment of the time it could be useful to briefly look at women' situation between the end of nineteenth century and 1914. From the second half of the nineteenth century actions started to sustain female suffrage and enfranchisement, all part of a larger movement that aimed at higher social, political, intellectual, and economical freedom for women. However, all this refers almost only to the middle class, since women coming from different social classes, especially working-class ones, had already been forced to work in order to help the sustenance of their family. Education was still scarce if compared to their male counterparts. Universities had started to allow women's participation to classes, even if in some cases they were not allowed to graduate yet. A consequence of this social progress was that women were then part of the reading public, rising its percentage, with some periodicals

[121] Stuart Sillars, "'What did They Expect?': The Nature of War Poetry", in *Fields of Agony: British Poetry of the First World War* (Literature Insights. Tirril: Humanities Ebooks, 2007): pp. 7-17, p. 11.

published specifically for them, and some women even started to work in the periodical sector as journalists, such as the famous female propagandist Jessie Pope.

When the First World War started, women claimed to actively take part in the military effort. Initially, the Government did not support this option, but then it realized this was, in all likelihood, the only way to sustain the war effort by maintaining the industrial production and services in function, exactly thanks to women's help. In 1918, thus, one third of the total female population, 7.5 million, was working as actively employed in the transport, farming, munition, the police, and administrative services. The consequence was obvious, women gained an increasing independence both in financial as well as in other terms.[122]

The other side of the coin includes women who actively took part in the war effort on the very battle front: nurses and VADs (Voluntary Aid Detachments). Their tasks included driving ambulances, setting up field hospitals, taking care of wounded soldiers, as well as clerical or cleaning works. In 1917 the WAAC (Women's Army Auxiliary Corps) was established.[123] Women from the wealthier classes usually did not enjoy such tasks and the great majority of them suffered the distress of being separated from their male beloved ones, that is, husbands, brothers, and sons, involved in the fighting.[124] The result was that women's literary response to war has been as varied and complex as that of men.

For obvious reasons, soldiers directly experienced the most horrifying aspects of the war: they had to fight and live in the trenches, in close contact with death, diseases, and anxiety, even if at the outbreak of the war many of them were positively excited about this 'necessary' action to protect their nation and beloved ones. This, of course, has had a strong impact on their writings, thus, some writers tried to translate into words the horrors they experienced in first person or were told by other fellow soldiers. The aim of war literature was to tell a truth that

[122] Sillars, *op. cit.*, p. 12.
[123] *Ibid*.
[124] *Id*., pp. 12-13.

was not easy to tell at all.[125] Male writings usually included the topic of death that they were forced to face on a daily basis, but this, in some cases, intermingled with a homoerotic perception of the beauty of the young men in distress, critiques towards the established system of social order, and the awareness of the beauty of the countryside and its power, so the topic related to nature and landscapes.[126]

Another crucial role played by war writing produced by men was healing. In fact, the process of writing down their trauma, revealed to be therapeutic for shell-shocked or traumatized soldiers. This was part of the 'talking cure' that was developed by Dr W. H. H. Rivers at Craighlockhart War Hospital. Among Dr Rivers' patients were the very famous war poets Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen.[127] Therefore, since men fought in front lines, their combatant experience, and in particular the trench experience on the Western Front, was usually considered a guarantee of the authenticity of their writings, while women were too often considered as culpable war enthusiasts of the home front.[128] Women were considered symbols of nation and home and they were memorably addressed by Siegfried Sassoon in his sonnet "Glory of Women", in which he links them to the failure to imagine the reality and horrors of the war. Basically, women were thought to be passive observers that were located on the home front and could not fully comprehend, nor then write, the experience of war that men actively faced.[129] So women, according to the stereotype established by Sassoon and others, were considered as unable to produce 'truthful' war poetry or writing. So, in "Glory of Women", Sassoon denounces their passive, protected, and, maybe, virginal status on the home front. He also writes that their grief was not comparable to the one experienced by fighting soldiers and he implicitly makes women responsible for soldiers' deaths, with the sentence "[y]ou make us

[125] Trudi Tate, "The First World War: British Writing", in K. McLoughlin (ed.), cit., p. 162.
[126] Sillars, "'What did They Expect?': The Nature of War Poetry", cit., p. 11.
[127] *Ibid*.
[128] Claire Buck, "British Women's Writing of the Great War", in V. Sherry (ed) *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005): pp. 85-112, pp. 86-87.
[129] Buck, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

shells".[130] In history women have then been accused of jingoism and poetic inferiority since they did not have direct experience on the battlefield. However, this conception has been denied by modern critics.[131] Higonnet also states that, contrary to Sassoon and other war poets' assumptions, women have always been asked to lament over the dead in many oral-culture traditions, such as the Greek one. While they were traditionally excluded from military and political action, they had the authority to indirectly talk about the human responsibility for the war. And so they did in their World War One's writings.[132]

To sum up, analysing women's writings, it is clear that they have a style and a tone that are markedly different from those of their male counterparts. This can be easily explained by the fact that the First World War radically changed women's ways of living, and, also, by the fact that their experience of war was different from that of men. Male writings are usually characterized by a sense of mourning, suffering, frustration, impotence, together with the feeling that war represents a sexual wound, because of the crisis of the patriarchal order and the upheaval of roles it brought as a side effect, while female ones express a sense of excitement, liberation, and newly acquired self-confidence.[133]

In the following two chapters I will carry on an analysis of British women's writings produced during the First World War. More specifically, I will firstly develop the topic of women who experienced the war from the home front and the related writings they produced, making specific reference to Jessie Pope and Eleanor Farjeon; I will then move to the women who were more 'active' in the war effort, with an insight on the role of the nurse and the VAD and some related writings, such as the sketches of Mary Borden in her book *The Forbidden Zone* and Rose Macaulay's war-related poems.

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[130] Higonnet, "The Great War and the Female Elegy: Female Lamentation and Silence in Global Contexts", cit., p. 124.
[131] Higonnet, *op. cit.*, p. 124.
[132] *Id*., p. 125.
[133] Vita Fortunati, *Women's Counter-Memories of the First War World: Two Emblematic Case–studies: Vera Brittain, Mary Borden*, cit., pp. 228-230.

2. British Women and the First World War

Undoubtedly, the First World War marked a watershed between the role women played before and after it. However, women's experience varied according to their age, social class, marital status, the specific place they lived in, their race, sexuality, and occupation.[1]

It is important to remember that, despite few exceptions, women did not fight on the front lines. In fact, it was common belief that the front active fighting was men's field, while women belonged to the home front. Nevertheless, the Great War reshaped the role of women and the way they participated in the war effort for the first time.[2] Also, men were often compelled to fight – in Britain male conscription was introduced in January 1916 –,[3] while women's participation in the war effort always remained on a voluntary basis.[4]

2.1 Gender Issues and Women's Jobs

> There's the girl who clips your ticket for the train,
> And the girl who speeds the lift from floor to floor,
> There's the girl who does a milk-round in the rain,
> And the girl who calls for orders at your door.
> Strong, sensible, and fit,
> They're out to show their grit,
> And tackle jobs with energy and knack.
> No longer caged and penned up,
> They're going to keep their end up
> Till the khaki soldier boys come marching back.
>
> There's the motor girl who drives a heavy van,
> There's the butcher girl who brings your joint of meat,
> There's the girl who cries 'All fares, please!' like a man,
> And the girl who whistles taxis up the street.
> Beneath each uniform
> Beats a heart that's soft and warm,
> Though of canny mother-wit they show no lack;
> But a solemn statement this is,
> They've no time for love and kisses
> Till the khaki soldier-boys come marching back.[5]

[1] Susan R. Grayzel, "The Role of Women in the War", in H. Strachan (ed.) *The Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016): pp. 149-162, p. 149.
[2] *Ibid*.
[3] Ribeiro, et al., "World War I and the Emergence of Modern Propaganda", cit., p. 102.
[4] Grayzel, *op. cit.*, p. 149.
[5] Jessie Pope, "War Girls", *The Poetry of Jessie Pope* (2014, Kindle Edition), p. 4.

This is how the female journalist and propagandist Jessie Pope describes the situation women found themselves in during the First World War, while men were fighting at the front.

In fact, even if women could not actively fight alongside their men in the battlefields, they could support the war effort in other ways. For example, they became instigators and objects of propaganda to incite men to join the war. However, according to what Susan R. Grayzel writes, the role and experience of each woman in the war depended on where they lived. In fact, "[u]rban life provided one set of challenges while rural communities […] offered another set".[6] Therefore, women living closer to active battle zones suffered more personally the war – even if the technologies employed during World War One sought to involve less civilians – and the lands occupied by enemy armies provided the women living there with another set of dangers and obstacles as they tried to maintain their usual lives. For example, the risk of being raped by foreign soldiers was higher there. An interesting fact, even if not directly related to Britain, comes from France, where a senator proposed to change the law to allow women living in occupied territories to have abortions as far as they claimed to have been raped by the German enemy, in order to avoid the proliferation of the 'children of the enemy'. Yet, this proposal never became law.[7] Other dangers were related to air raids and naval bombardments directed to Britain that put people living in coastal areas, as well as in central London, in danger.[8]

Shifting to the world of work, at the outbreak of the First Word War, despite the enfranchisement movements that had started at the end of the nineteenth century, there were still few women who were unfamiliar with the world of salaried labour, nevertheless most of them were already accustomed to it. However, the war radically transformed their waged labour in several crucial ways. For example, some women shifted to works that were previously men's

[6] Grayzel, *op. cit.*, p. 151.
[7] *Id.*, 151-152.
[8] *Id.*, p. 153.

fields, while most of them moved from one type of factory work to another one, or they moved from domestic service into more industrial or service sector employment.[9]

However, women were not the first choice for employers such as industrialists and governments who were trying to replace the male workforce then fighting at the front. In fact, they first turned to men who were not serving because under or over aged and, also, to imported colonial labour, recurring to women only as their last choice. Therefore, women's numbers in industrial workforce started to be significative only from 1915, as female work in factories, especially war-related ones, became a clear sign of women's active effort in the war and, also, of the potential threat this represented towards traditional gender roles. Moreover, many women started to perform industrial labour while the same factories were shifting to mass production, therefore breaking down work into smaller units and so redistributing it to semi- or unskilled workers of both sexes. Clearly, women performed almost unskilled and repetitive jobs, even if wartime conditions helped to create opportunities for them to be trained and become suitable to perform more complicated tasks.[10] As far as it concerns salaries, women earned less if compared to their male counterparts, however their wages were up to two or three times higher than what they could earn in traditionally feminine occupations that included textile, clothing production, and domestic services. To help women in dealing with both domestic labour and factory work, the state promoted some measures, such as the creation of day nurseries in factories.[11]

By 1918 British women employed in factories of any type numbered 5 million, only one million more than the number before the war's outbreak. All in all, the innovation was to be found in the increasing and varied number of jobs that were then available to women, especially in metal-working and munition sectors.[12] By the end of the war, the British industrial sector

[9] *Ibid*.
[10] *Id*., pp. 154-155.
[11] *Id*., p. 155.
[12] *Ibid*.

employed nearly 3,000,000 women, 9,000 of these were employed as munition workers.[13] Unfortunately, these new jobs also carried some risks for the workforce: twelve-hour shifts, working with explosive and chemical materials, such as TNT, caused toxic icterus (because of the yellowish skin colour it caused, British women affected by it were called "canary girls") and the constant threat of explosions. These made women's work as risky and vital as men's.[14]

The introduction of women in factories as well as in broad daylight employments, such as the transport sector, considerably contributed to the change of the wartime landscape. In London women employed in the transport sector proliferated, but they were also employed as tram and trolley drivers, police officers, and in office work for state growth and industrial bureaucracies, in other words, in jobs traditionally associated to men.[15] Another achievement attributed to wartime female emancipation is to be found in the jobs that we nowadays associate to women, such as secretary duties. During the war, women also played an important role in the field of espionage. In fact, many women worked as intelligence agents in occupied zones, their task was to gather and spread information in the attempt to help the progression of the war.[16] Of course, women's entrance into previously male job areas challenged the role of women in the home and assumptions about their abilities.[17]

Despite all these achievements in the working sector, and the many women joining the labour force, during the war years governments still sustained the idea that women primarily belonged to the home and especially the ones depending on their men then serving in the army needed special funds. Such funds were also used to maintain high the morale and the well-being of female dependants.[18] However, the state also accomplished the task of supervising women's behaviour in absence of their men and while the funds could be used to support illegitimate

[13] Claire Buck, "British Women's Writing of the Great War", cit., p. 85.
[14] Grayzel, *op. cit.*, p. 155.
[15] *Ibid*.
[16] *Id*., p. 156.
[17] Buck, *op. cit.*, p. 85.
[18] Grayzel, *op. cit.*, p. 158.

wives and sons born out of the marriage, the support could also be revoked if the woman was found to be misbehaving. Furthermore, in Britain as well as in France, in wartime the considerably high wages that women earned led to many reports of alleged profligacy, and the governments were pushed, also by the public opinion, to restrain their misbehaviour. Therefore, some regulations were produced that targeted specific women as 'enemies within', subjects possibly dangerous for the morale, morality, and health of the society and the army.[19]

As far as it concerns morale, the emotional support that women provided to their men and families was evident also in wartime's media. In fact, with the outbreak of the war women's patriotism and their readiness to make sacrifices were highlighted by states and civil organizations. So, women's commitment was used as a tool to sustain soldiers at the front. Women's voluntary organizations, as well as women working at home, usually prepared packages filled with hand-knit objects, special treats, letters, and items requested by their husbands, sons, brothers, lovers, and friends, and sent them to the men fighting at the front. Furthermore, despite censorship, intimate relationships – such as those between husbands and wives, mothers and sons, and so on – helped to maintain morale high and to remind soldiers of their beloved ones they were fighting for. In addition, men without relatives or beloved ones received the communal support of women's organizations.[20] However, the negative aspect of this apparently unbiased action of enlisting women's support for soldiers has been the sexualization of such female figures and the danger that some women could have represented if they became too enthusiastic. In fact, since women gained a considerable degree of freedom with all the advancements of wartime era, public opinion was always ready to criticize the new gender situation and the apparent lack of moral standards it brought about. In 1917, some British newspapers mentioned and denounced the 'Harpies of London' who preyed upon innocent men,

[19] *Id*., p.159.
[20] *Id*., pp. 159-160.

even the ones serving oversea that were lonely and far from home, such as American ones present in London during 1918, menacing them with sexually transmitted diseases.[21]

Another potential threat or 'problem' that needed to be kept under control was prostitution. In fact, during wartime, many States made regulations regarding wartime sexuality and in some Countries prostitution was legalized, but in Britain it was not. Severe penalties were inflicted to women accused to have infected soldiers with venereal diseases, even if having contacts, especially sexual ones, with women was seen as a necessity for young men deprived of their usual relationships while fighting in the army. In Britain, the Defence of the Realm Regulation 40D established that any woman culpable of infecting a man of His Majesty's Force with sexually transmitted diseases had to be subjected to a harsh punishment. Finally, states like Britain and France tried to impede interracial relationships between non-white members of colonial troops and white European women, especially nurses.[22]

To conclude, a particular role that has always been associated to women, and one that they endured also during the First World War, is the role of women as familial and intimate memories carriers. They had to represent national grief and, especially at the end of the war, women featured in public ceremonies of remembrance, for example 1920's unveiling of the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior in Westminster, and they also appeared on war memorials as mourners and grieving mothers.[23] Even if women were forced out all of the above mentioned jobs at the end of the war, their experience, as Buck Claire states, "[…] marked British twentieth-century society and contributed to women's economic, social, and sexual

[21] *Id*., pp. 160-161.
[22] *Id*., p. 161.
[23] *Ibid*.

emancipation".[24] As a noteworthy outcome, women's work of all kinds during the First World War led them to achieve the right to vote in 1918, even if only for women aged over 30.[25]

2.2 The "Land Girl"

The experience of women during World War One was surely influenced by the place they lived in, in fact countryside women's experience was different from city women's one. As we have already seen, the new technological innovations implied in the First World War, such as air raids, brought devastation into Great Britain, and the war home to London, Yorkshire, and Kent, and this, together with the need of food supplies, raised a new interest for the rural, a dimension that seemed lost in the past, especially among British women.[26] According to Susan Grayzel, this happened in a historical period in which the very meaning of the term 'home' was shifting and reshaping itself. In fact, it was precisely during the Great War that the term 'home front' came into popular English and common use since the terms 'home' and 'domestic' were used for the first time to distinguish it from the military front. This is clearly connected to the fact that the First World War has been a 'total war' that not only involved soldiers but also civilians of any class, age, and gender, so women as well. As Grayzel points out, the term 'home' acquired a specific meaning and value, sending people's imagination back to the 'homeland' that they had to protect. This 'homeland' not only included cities and urban areas, but also fields, hills, and cottages of rural Britain, so evoking the idea of England as 'arcadia', a place that was worth protection.[27]

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[24] Buck, *op. cit.*, p. 85.
[25] Stuart Sillars, "'Nobody Asked What the Women Thought': Poetry by Women", in *Fields of Agony*, cit.: pp. 40-48, p. 41.
[26] Susan R. Grayzel, "Nostalgia, Gender, and the Countryside: Placing the 'Land Girl' in First World War Britain*"*, *Rural History* (Vol. 10, n. 2, 1999): pp. 155-170, p. 156.
[27] *Ibid*.

However, in Britain, after the entrance into force of male conscription in 1916, almost all the male workforce was occupied in fighting, and so, who was taking care of rural areas? The answer seems quite clear, as for the factory work in urban areas, also the work in the fields was taken up by women, again underlining the changes in gender politics and roles brought about by the First World War. Therefore, women were called to form a different kind of army, the 'Land Army', to maintain food supplies and support men's effort at the front. However, this inevitably reshaped the countryside itself. Women started to wear trousers, breeches, and puttees, and of course to actively work in the fields, as men did before.[28]

Because of the need to increase domestic food supplies and to replace male workforce in the fields, special organizations were created. They included the Women's Land Army and the Women Forestry Corps that aimed at recruiting urban women in order to front the shortage of manpower. Therefore, as both food producers and consumers, women started to play a central role in supporting the war effort also from an agricultural and rural perspective.[29] The women who took part in the Women's Land Army were called the 'Land Girls' and their appearance raised a series of issues regarding gender categories and roles. People asked themselves if women were appropriate for farm working and if it was really necessary for them to wear trousers and other typically masculine clothes.[30]

Despite criticisms, historical facts show that around 23,000 women served in the Women's Land Army as agricultural workers between the spring of 1917 and October 1919. Here is a photo taken on 8 January 1919 and labelled "Beauty Competition" on the back that portrays some 'Land Girls' of the Great War wearing clothes regarded as masculine, and because of this, harshly criticized by part of the popular opinion:

[28] *Id*., pp. 155-156.
[29] Susan R. Grayzel, "The Role of Women in the War", cit., p. 154.
[30] Susan R. Grayzel, "Nostalgia, Gender, and the Countryside: Placing the 'Land Girl' in First World War Britain", cit., p. 156.

Figure 2. WW1 Photo: Land Girl Beauty Competition.[31]

The tasks performed by the 'Land Girls' were different and included milking cows, felling woods, and field work. Whatever the work they performed, these women joined the Women's Land Army and offered an active participation and played their role in countryside life and economy.[32]

The Women's Land Army developed since 1917 and it was the official and final outcome of a few voluntary organizations that started to bring women together immediately after the beginning of the war, such as the Women's Legion and the Women's Defence Relief Corps. Nevertheless, it shortly became clear that a more organized effort was needed. For this reason, in 1916 the Women's National Land Service Corps was created thanks to the Asquith government. Behind the creation of this organization laid the belief that the war could not be won without replacing the workforce then serving at the front or dead because of the war, and without an increase in food supplies. This organization existed until 1919 and it was for women

[31] Catherine Procter, "WW1 Photo: Land Girl Beauty Competition", *womenslandarmy.co.uk* (1919), last accessed: 18.07.2023.
[32] Grayzel, "Nostalgia, Gender, and the Countryside: Placing the 'Land Girl' in First World War Britain*"*, cit., p. 157.

who did not want to join the Women's Land Army for a commitment that lasted from six months to one year.

The Women's Land Army was officially established in December 1916 as Rowland Prothero became President of the Board of Agriculture. Since the beginning, demonstrations and rallies were organized by local leaders, in order to show women what they could do in the agricultural sector and convince both them and the farmers to accept this 'new' workforce.[33] Furthermore, the Women's Land Army, officially created in 1917, always represented one of the many alternatives for women who wanted to serve their Country for patriotic reasons. Its members wore armlets to distinguish themselves and to certify that they were performing a necessary national labour. By March 1917 Women's Land Army's members were given free uniforms, free transports, and were paid an initial amount of 18 sterlings per week, then the wage raised to 20 or 22 after they passed an efficiency exam. Unfortunately, this kind of agricultural labour included hard physical work and paltry lodgings in the farms, this was recognized also by officials, and it is the reason why this kind of work resulted less attractive than other war services.[34]

Women were initially divided into two kinds: the ones who already inhabited the countryside, and the ones who came from urban areas and could be recruited. Since its beginning, the Women's Land Army hardly tried to attract single, educated, and middle-class women from urban areas, even if to do so they needed to fight against some prejudices regarding the countryside and the women that were placed there.[35]

Until the beginning of the Great War, female labour in rural areas had declined for several generations, consequently only few women were employed full-time in agriculture in 1914. Here arose the difficulty to convince women to go back or to turn to agricultural labour,

[33] *Id*., p. 157.
[34] *Ibid*.
[35] *Ibid*.

instead of performing a more remunerative wartime job and to admit that Britain had been wrong in its previous efforts to take women away from the land. This challenge regarded especially urban women that were certainly not accustomed to back-breaking farm work. Therefore, it was necessary that agricultural labour could be normalized for 'ladies', and both women and the farmers had to be convinced of this. In order to do so, the government carried out some tricks, such as adopting urban, educated, probably bourgeois women, to serve as an example for rural ones living in local villages. Another trick was to compare British women to French ones that were not afraid of performing agricultural labour, trying to arouse patriotism and reduce negative stereotypes regarding this kind of job and lifestyle.[36] For example, from early on in the war, some farm works were regarded as being too difficult for women and an article of 1915 described women as working subjects that were disabled because of their sex that prevented them to do men's works. However, to make it suitable for women, agricultural work was then presented as not contradicting the canonical aspects of 'femininity', as an essential task for the sustenance of the nation, and as a tool to both revitalize the countryside and allow modern women to regain pride.[37] To sum up, on the one hand, farm work was extremely hard and the environment in which it was performed did not help much but, on the other, leaders were needed to teach women living in villages that such work was necessary to sustain their nation at war and that it was not derogative, in contrast to what they thought.[38]

The ideal Land Girl was often described in newspapers, and according to such descriptions she ought to be: well-educated – because educated women proved to be good at farm working as well, not frivolous but prone to reading, an animal lover, curious about farm folklore. Especially, the college girl was targeted as an ideal candidate, because thanks to her education she was considered able to tackle with practical problems, as well. Thus, throughout

[36] *Id*., pp. 157-158.
[37] *Id*., p. 158.
[38] *Ibid*.

the Great War, the 'educated woman' was seen as the perfect land girl, also because she would probably have worked because of patriotic reasons rather than for salary, since education made her self-sufficient.[39]

With the arrival in the countryside of Land Girls coming from the cities some polemics arose. They concerned especially their clothing, since Land Girls wore breeches, smocks, and puttees – as can be seen in the picture above – and popular opinion saw it as a violation of feminine canons and gender roles, and they were considered against decency. Also, newspaper's articles reported that farmers were shocked by these women wearing breeches, and they assumed it was a lack of modesty.[40] However, the official *Land Army Handbook* answered back to such critics by stating that even if a woman wears breeches she deserves respect and that she can behave as a proper woman, by being "straight, strong, and pure-minded [and, above all,] respected"[41] As Mrs. Alfred Lyttelton, the deputy director of the Women's Branch for the Food Production Department, underlined in February 1918, the uniform should be seen as a privilege that did not deserve any act of mockery, and that women were dressed like men because they had to perform men's work. In addition, as said by Mrs. Lyttelton, it was exactly because they were dressed like men that they wanted to behave like women. And precisely this 'behaving like women' was what feminized their 'threatening appearance' in breeches and puttees, and by being straight, strong, and pure minded, women counteracted their being dressed like men.[42]

Another crucial issue in the action of recruiting women from the city into the Land Army was to assure them that neither their femininity nor the land would be altered. Indeed, the Land Girl needed and wanted to be both beautiful but also 'useful' to the nation. Obviously, newspapers, journals, and other wartime media helped in this task of double assurance towards women, now depicted as new robust women but preserving their elegance even as Land Girls.

[39] *Ibid*.
[40] *Id*., p. 159.
[41] *Ibid*.
[42] *Ibid*.

Thanks to the media, Land Girls started to be both singled out from their urban counterparts and praised because of their particular physique, described as robust and picturesque because of their "workmanlike costume"[43]. For example, the *Daily Chronicle* praised women for their camouflage – their being dressed like men – that hid patriotism. Therefore, a good deal of cultural work was performed in order to normalize the Land Girls that could work the land and preserve their femininity at the same time.[44] Basically, as Grayzel writes in the article, they were the "[…] pink ribbons beneath the manure-stained, masculine outwear".[45]

Another topic that in my opinion is worth attention is that of advertisements specifically created for Land Girls. Thus, *The Landswoman*, the official magazine of the Women's Land Army, gave women advices on how to maintain a good skin while working the land under the sun. There are plenty of advertisements in newspapers of the time, usually linked to interesting visual images:

Figure 3. Advertisemnt for Royal Vinolia Cream.[46]

[43] *Id.*, p. 160.
[44] *Id.*, pp. 159-160.
[45] *Id.*, p. 160.
[46] "Advertisement for Royal Vinolia Cream", *The Landswoman* (January 1918, online source: *Women's Land Army and Timber Corps*), https://www.womenslandarmy.co.uk/archive-material/the-landswoman-magazine-ww1/january-1918/), last accessed: 20.07.2023.

This is an advertisement for skin cream that appeared on the magazine *The Landswoman* in January 1918. It also contains the slogan "beauty on duty has a duty on beauty", that means it was women's duty to preserve their good aspect even if working the land to support the war effort.[47]

Another interesting advertisement for women's face cream appeared on the same number of *The Landswoman*:

Figure 4. Oatine Face Cream: Use It and Prove It.[48]

Always in the same number of January 1918, I found this other advertisement that has to do with fashion and, especially, fashion regarding Land Girls' outfits, that are even suggested as a suitable Christmas Gift:

[47] Grayzel, "Nostalgia, Gender, and the Countryside: Placing the 'Land Girl' in First World War Britain", cit., pp. 160-161.
[48] "Oatine Face Cream: Use It and Prove It", *The Landswoman* (January 1918, online source: *Women's Land Army and Timber Corps*), https://www.womenslandarmy.co.uk/archive-material/the-landswoman-magazine-ww1/january-1918/), last accessed: 20.07.2023.

Figure 5. Gamages.[49]

'Gamages' is the name of a clothes shop that was situated in central London,[50] and this is its advertisement of masculine clothes for Land Girls. Moreover, in the first chapter, I mentioned propagandistic objects that became part of the massification of propaganda, that is, propagandistic objects of common use that were produced and sold to obtain a profit. Quite similarly, the advertisements above clearly show that a model – that of the Land Girl, which needed to be stabilized in British society – was massified and became the target for the mass production of goods such as creams and clothes. As a result, this was meant to make the abovementioned model more fitting in the popular opinion. Land Girls have surely introduced some changes in the land by populating and working it, nevertheless any anxiety about their femininity was meant to be dispelled, as I have just tried to explain.

In one of her papers, Susan Grayzel investigates the consequences that the land itself had on women. In fact, as Grayzel explains, "it seems that the Land Girl needed to be both 'beautiful' in a classical feminine way so as not to destabilize her gender identity and yet newly 'useful' as to demonstrate her total commitment to preserving the nation"[51], so it is like the land

[49] "Gamages", *The Landswoman* (January 1918, online source: *Women's Land Army and Timber Corps*), https://www.womenslandarmy.co.uk/archive-material/the-landswoman-magazine-ww1/january-1918/), last accessed: 20.07.2023.
[50] *Mary Evans Picture Library Prints*, https://www.prints-online.com, last accessed: 04.09.2023.
[51] Grayzel, "Nostalgia, Gender, and the Countryside: Placing the 'Land Girl' in First World War Britain", cit., p. 160.

had the effect of granting to those women dressing and working like men their essential femininity and yet it reshaped their social role, making them active helpers in the war effort. At the time the countryside was somehow in need of these women and in particular middle-class ones had to be 'persuaded' to return to the countryside life. Nevertheless, on the other hand, it was a hard task to persuade them, since they needed to be assured that they were not going to lose the femininity they had gained thanks to their bourgeois status. Even in fictional works, it is possible to read that the return to the countryside not only let women preserve their femininity but also made them even more desirable. Evidently, also popular culture played a great role in this passage. For example, some popular novels were used as persuading tools, telling stories of Land Girls who found the love in the countryside.[52] However, the real social plague that afflicted the British society during wartime was not represented by women dressing like men, but men who did not take part in the war effort, who refused to wear a uniform, and to fight for their nation. This is why, as I already explained, women were often used as propagandistic subjects and objects to persuade their men to join the war effort, and this may also explain why it was so important that they maintained their femininity also while working the land. Furthermore, the 'Land Girls' also became subjects of cartoons and comic strips as in the following one:

[52] *Id*., p. 162.

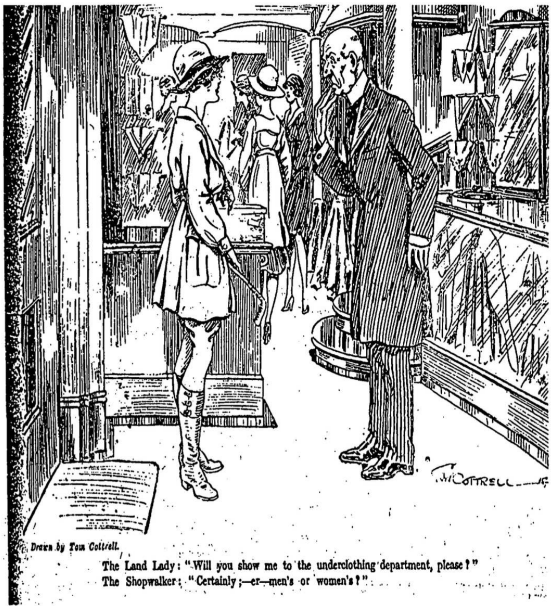

Figure 6. Cartoon.[53]

This cartoon is taken from the April 1918 *London Opinion*. Basically, the Land Girl in the picture, who is wearing masculine clothes, is looking for fashionable undergarments in a shop and the male shop assistant seems confused by her aspect and so asks her if she is looking for men's or women's clothes. However, the real object of fun is precisely the old gentleman who is not up to date with the situation and, moreover, even if too old to wear a uniform, he proves not able to help his nation by openly criticizing a woman who wants to do so. This example clearly shows that gender differences were not the same anymore since "breeches do not make the man".[54]

Looking once more at the effects that living and working the land had on British women, I believe this excerpt of a nursery rhyme shows the potential that land had to regenerate women and make them beautiful, and it runs as follow:[55]

> There was a young woman
> Sick, nervous and blue,
> She had so many troubles—
> I know what I 'd do.

[53] Cartoon (*London Opinion,* 27th April 1918, Courtesy of Women's Work Collection, Imperial War Museum), in Grayzel, "Nostalgia, Gender, and the Countryside: Placing the 'Land Girl' in First World War Britain", cit., p. 164.
[54] *Ibid*.
[55] *Id.*, p.166.

I'd give her a kit
Without any skirt.
And I 'd soon have her whistling
And shoveling dirt.

Daughter dear, daughter dear, where have you been?
I talked to a girl with an armlet of green. ...
Daughter dear, daughter dear, what did you do?
I saw her complexion and I enrolled, too.[56]

Basically, this nursery rhyme shows that the Land Girl soon became a sort of model that women were willing to imitate. Furthermore, at the beginning of the nursery rhyme there is a hint to those women staying at home without helping in the war effort, and they are described as sad and in distress, while taking up the Land Girl's model is the suggested solution that also influences more women making them willing to join the Land Girls.

Furthermore, *The Landswoman* published a contest for Land Girls who had to answer to the question "what I want to do after the war"[57] and it printed the response of the winner. Prizes were awarded to the women who wanted to stay in the country also after the end of the conflict.[58]

These examples clearly show that the Land Girl surely became the incarnation of British femininity, virtuous and rustic, even if always maintaining a certain degree of femininity. However, the war also created its antithesis: the urban flappers – young women living in urban areas who did not join the war effort. These women were harshly criticized by newspapers such as the *Daily Express*, which argued that they should have been banned from places of recreation and sent to the land. Here again it is possible to spot the idealized regenerative power of the land that transforms these 'useless' girls into useful, active subjects.[59] Another positive aspect of being a Land Girl was that at the end of the war those women would have been ready and

[56] "Nursery Rhymes for the next Generation", *The Landswoman* (August 1918), in Grayzel, "Nostalgia, Gender, and the Countryside: Placing the 'Land Girl' in First World War Britain*"*, cit., p. 166.
[57] Grayzel, "Nostalgia, Gender, and the Countryside: Placing the 'Land Girl' in First World War Britain*"*, cit., p. 166.
[58] *Ibid*.
[59] *Id*., p. 167.

trained for emigration and suitable for marriage with farmers living in Countries around the Commonwealth. Furthermore, they were praised for their sacrifices and services and remembered as the ones who sacrificed themselves for the well-being of the children that had to be.[60]

To conclude, with the figure of the Land Girl in Britain it is possible to identify a double movement: on the one hand there were urban women who moved to the countryside to support the war effort and so preserved the idea of idyllic English countryside; on the other hand, the British land somehow saved women, by creating a new, virtuous, and yet gentle femininity.[61] This upheaval of gender roles required a great effort to accept and standardize them. This hard task was skilfully played by the media of the time and, in particular, propaganda played a crucial role in both recruiting women and stabilizing the gender issue.

2.3 Propaganda by and for Women

In the first chapter I have already tried to explain the roles played by propaganda during the First World War and the means of communication it used. In this section, I would like to focus on a particular type of propaganda addressed specifically to women that could be divided into two different areas: propaganda *by* women and propaganda *for* women. As we have already seen, women's roles considerably changed during wartime. Women acquired more freedom, they started to perform previously male jobs, and, eventually, they obtained the right to vote. On the other hand, during World War One the female image was abundantly used for propagandistic reasons, and women were depicted as emblems of the nation in many types of propagandistic media.[62] Some propagandistic posters or images sexualized female bodies, representing them as raped or subjugated by the 'barbaric' other, incarnated by the enemy.

[60] *Ibid*.
[61] *Id*., p. 168.
[62] Susan R. Grayzel, "The Role of Women in the War", in H. Strachan (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 150.

There were also less sexualized images that used allegories that represented the nation, liberty, or justice and were personified by women.[63] Throughout the war it was commonly believed that women's opinion could influence men's actions.[64] This is connected with what I defined above as 'propaganda by women' and it concerns all that propagandistic actions aimed at persuading men to do something, most of the time this included fighting for their nation, and it was done using women as a source of attractiveness, even if women did not actively write propaganda. In fact, women were often used as lure and taunt to better attract and persuade men.[65] This revealed particularly useful at the beginning of the war as Britain did not rely on conscription – that was introduced in January 1916 – but on volunteers, so volunteering needed to be prompt, and the British government decided to use appeals coming from women of every age – from children, such as soldiers' daughters, to women of marrying age, to wives, to mothers.[66] Hereafter is a very famous poster depicting a very powerful example of 'propaganda by women':[67]

Figure 7. Women of Britain say 'Go!'. [68]

[63] *Ibid*.
[64] *Id*., p. 151.
[65] *Id*., p. 150.
[66] *Id*., pp. 150-151.
[67] "Women of Britain say 'Go!'" (British Library Images Online, 1914), https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/women-britain-say-go, last accessed: 26.07.2023.
[68] "Women of Britain say 'Go!'" (British Library, 1914), https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/women-britain-say-go, last accessed: 26.07.2023.

Women soon started to be considered very important subjects to the war effort both by the government and by popular culture. Slogans such as the one above formed part of the recruitment campaign enacted at the outbreak of the war, in which women were asked to put pressure on their men – were they sons, boyfriends, or husbands – to make them enlist.[69] Basically, at the outbreak of the war, women's place was the home, and it was easy to adapt it to propaganda, converting the home into the nation, to make men who did not enlist feel ashamed and women push them to do it. Furthermore, at the time, women's poetry was used to show their nationalistic attitudes: many patriotic poems written by women appeared in newspapers such as *The Times* and the *Spectator*, they were also quoted in sermons, and printed in leaflets for the troops.[70]

'Propaganda for women' concerned all the propagandistic actions made in order to persuade women to take part in the war effort. For example, as Susan Grayzel writes, "Government propaganda posters aimed at recruiting women to labor on the land had portrayed land girls as idyllic women in an even more idyllic English countryside".[71] In such posters, women were invited to help soldiers by providing raspberry jam, so the task appeared domestic and homey, therefore more traditionally suitable for women, even if the real tasks included outdoor labour as fruit pickers. Other posters depicted women feeding farm animals like horses or gently tapping cows. Even if their task was outdoor labour with barnyard animals, the posters were studied not to undermine bourgeois femininity, in order to better attract women from the city. Moreover, women who joined the war effort were praised in articles which reminded men of female heroism,[72] as in the case of this Land Army Song:

> Come out of the towns
> And on to the downs

[69] Claire Buck, "British Women's Writing of the Great War", in V. Sherry (ed), *op. cit.*, p. 88.
[70] *Id*., pp. 88-89.
[71] Grayzel, "Nostalgia, Gender, and the Countryside: Placing the 'Land Girl' in First World War Britain", cit., p. 159.
[72] *Id*., pp. 159-160.

Where a girl gets brown and strong.[73]

Posters for the Board of Agriculture recruiting rallies also praised the ability of women to reinvigorate the land:

Let not the city do you wrong
The town your prison be;
Come to the land and make it strong
To keep our England free Up ladies; play a soldier's part.
On this unstricken field
That by the valour of your heart England may never yield
Thus Freedom's flag shall fly unfurled Beneath God's smiling sun;
The gentlest woman in the world
Shall overthrow the Hun.[74]

Here again women are depicted as actively strengthening the land while maintaining their femininity and gentleness, all helping to defy the enemy.[75]

Drama was another propagandistic form used for but also produced by women.[76] Therefore, during the First World War, women contributed to amateur theatrical productions as writers, directors, and actors. This was another way in which they supported the war effort, and their performances were recorded by magazines and newspapers connected to women's organizations, such as the *Women's Volunteer Reserve and Munition Factories*. Drama was seen as a recreational activity for women who worked, however sometimes the figure of women police was used as a figurative coercive method to control newly independent working women.[77] Pageants and tableaux were the preferred forms for amateur performances for propaganda, recruitment, and fund-raising. Pageants used allegorical characters, such as the Red Cross Nurse, the Land Girl, and Virtues like Chivalry and Honour, to represent the nations fighting in the war and types.[78]

[73] *Id*., p. 166.
[74] Harold Begbie, "Up, Ladies, Up", in Grayzel "Nostalgia, Gender, and the Countryside: Placing the 'Land Girl' in First World War Britain*"*, cit., pp. 166-167.
[75] Grayzel, "Nostalgia, Gender, and the Countryside: Placing the 'Land Girl' in First World War Britain*"*, cit., p. 167.
[76] Claire Buck, "British Women's Writing of the Great War", cit., p. 94.
[77] *Id*., p. 93.
[78] *Ibid*.

Apart from Land Girls and factory workers, there were also women who helped the war effort in another way: with their writings, be they propagandistic or against the war. In the next sub-section, I introduce British women writers who did not actively take part in the war effort as did nurses or VADs, but who wrote about this outstanding event, either to support or to denounce it.

2.4 British Women Writers at Home

Women's contribution to war writing has been virtually ignored until the 1980s, yet the amount of writing they produced during the war is larger than one could imagine.[79] In fact, during 1914 and 1918, many women's written works – especially poetry – were published in anthologies, single-author collections, newspapers, periodicals, women's magazines, and local newspapers.[80] During these years there were around 2,000 poets, and a quarter of them were women. However, most of the output produced by women in this period has not been recorded in later anthologies.[81]

A common perception of contemporary readers is that all poetry written by women during the First World War is against war, however this is not true.[82] Yet, Sillars argues that the anger intrinsic in the lines of some women's poems could be related more to their frustration because of their exclusion from the direct participation into the conflict than to the existence of the conflict itself. In any case, it is important to underline that many of the poems produced during wartime and also published in newspapers and anthologies were emphatically pro war.[83]

[79] Claire Buck, "British Women's Writing of the Great War", cit., p. 84.
[80] *Id.*, p. 85.
[81] *Ibid*.
[82] Stuart Sillars, "'Nobody Asked What the Women Thought': Poetry by Women", in *Fields of Agony*, cit.: pp. 40-48, p. 40.
[83] *Ibid*.

Women poets mainly used simple rhymes, direct language, and archaic poeticism; basically, Sillars argues that their poetry lacked sophistication and was outdated.[84] Nevertheless, this kind of writing was adopted also by their male counterparts who expressed themselves through a poetry that seemed weak, archaic, and full of clichés. However, during the twentieth century, critics sought to find out characteristics that could link a particular kind of poetry to women only.[85] Probably, there was a reason behind the abundant use of clichés and archaicisms, the kind of language that non-specialist readers of the time would associate with poetry. Clichés were associated with the idea of safety and stability – much needed at the time – and were immediately recognisable. For these reasons, poems adopting such style were accessible to a mass readership. Women in particular needed reassurance at the time, since they had been left out from the decision-making process regarding both the war and its consequences. On the contrary, their responsibilities concerned the care of children, bereavement, and the struggle of not knowing what was happening to their men, and these could be the source of familiar topics that brought reassurance to them. All this matched with the interest of some poems in supporting the war.[86] Basically, women's war poetry and its form offered reassurance, support, and sustenance, at least in the short-term. And this was the very kind of support that women active on the 'home front' needed, since they were dealing with sufferance of all kinds, separation, and loss on a daily basis.[87]

There is also another important kind of poetry and writing more in general that is the one produced by women who were active on the war front, such as nurses and VADs, as I will analyse in the next and last chapter. Moreover, Sillars argues that it is true that the majority of the poems produced by women in that period was in favour of the war and many of them linked

[84] *Id*., p. 41.
[85] *Ibid*.
[86] *Ibid*.
[87] *Ibid*.

the topic of war with qualities such as nobility and sacrifice, present also in previous war poems written by men.[88] Some of the themes taken from previous war poetry concerned the address to Christ, the idea of learning how to die – already present in manuals of seventeenth-century conduct books –, and the idea of regeneration thanks to nature after death in battle. Some poems written by women during the First World War were also addressed to women, as it is the case in "Women at Munitions Making" by Gabrielle Collins (1916), quoted in Sillars' chapter; the beginning of the poem deals with the contemporary reaction to the idea of women working in munition factories, and it runs as follows:

> Their hands should minister unto the flame of life,
> Their fingers guide
> The rosy teat, swelling with milk,
> To the eager mouth of the suckling babe.[89]

These lines echo what was the role of women as birth givers and mothers, opposed to the will of many women of the time to actively help in the war effort, both for patriotic reasons or for wages and increasing freedom.[90] Then, as the poem goes on, it becomes a clear protest against the destruction brought about by the war:

> They must take part in defacing and destroying the natural body
> Which, certainly during this dispensation
> Is the shrine of the spirit.[91]

And it ends with a rejection of the war and of the destruction it causes.[92] This was only an example, but much was written and directly addressed only to women and their unique situation in wartime.[93] Sillars also suggests that "[…] the limitations of much of the writing reflect the constraints that women writers have habitually suffered […]"[94], since the female models for them to follow were very few. Despite this, in the period of the First World War, women

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[88] *Id*., p. 42.
[89] Gabrielle Collins, "Women at Munitions Making" (1916), in Stuart Sillars, "'Nobody Asked What the Women Thought': Poetry by Women", in *Fields of Agony: British Poetry of the First World War* (Literature Insights. Tirril: Humanities Ebooks, 2007): pp. 40-48, p. 45.
[90] *Ibid*.
[91] *Ibid*.
[92] *Ibid*.
[93] Sillars, *op. cit.*, p. 47.
[94] *Ibid*.

produced many poems, and prose writings, such as memoirs, autobiographies, and fictional accounts of the war experience. In dealing with women's writings, it is however important to remember that the female experience at war was different from that of their male counterparts – this does not mean that women did not need endurance to survive under war conditions, but that the very first-hand experience they had was different. In fact, men's actions were usually made of small moments of great intensity, as it was in battles, and their writings reflected this, while women were more prone to the composition of extended prose works, since their life on the 'home front' was probably less intense and more reflexive.

I wish to suggest that poetry produced by women during the First World War is not so famous possibly due to three main factors. The first one is that women were scarcely included in anthologies produced both during and after the war period because it was largely thought that only soldiers' writings were reliable, since they had a first-hand experience of the war; secondly, because the tastes regarding war topics were changing in the years following the end of the First World War; and thirdly because of the judgements around the principles of beauty regarding 'good poetry'. During and in the aftermath of the war it was not clear whether women's poetry was worth representations, since their experience was so different from the one of their male counterparts that was usually considered the only, official, and authentic one since they experienced it in first person at the front.[95] All in all, women's war poetry and their other contributions to the literature of the time have long been rejected.[96] Moreover, Anne Varty, points out another important role that was fulfilled by women's poetry at the time – in addition to memory-keeper and testimony – that was the economic one. In fact, poetry, both by men and women, became a source of profit, and women contributed to it as writers, editors, and purchasers, as well.[97] Therefore, as I have pointed out throughout the present chapter, the

[95] Anne Varty, "Women's Poetry in First World War Anthologies and Two Collections of 1916", *Women's Writing* (2017. Vol. 24, n. 1): pp. 37–52, p. 37.
[96] *Ibid*.
[97] *Id*., p. 39.

apparent absence of women's writings regarding the war period "[…] does not reflect conditions during the war itself".[98]

As I aimed to show, women played a completely new and important role during World War One and women's writings are worth attention as well as men's. For this reason, now I would like to look more closely at the writings, in my case especially poems, of two women who stayed on the 'home front' during the war. One of them is the journalist and propagandist Jessie Pope and another is the less known Eleanor Farjeon. Unfortunately, it has not been an easy job to find critical commentaries about the works produced by women writers during the Great War. Therefore, to comment on the poems I am going to present in the next section, I used both academic articles and book chapters together with poetry blogs written by experts in the poetic field that helped me in shaping my critical idea about these poems. I also tried to use my personal critic view, in the light of what I have written and studied so far.

2.4.1 Jessie Pope

She was born in Leicester on 18 March 1868. She had two sisters and two brothers, and she was the second daughter of the hop merchant and traveller Richard George Pope and his wife Elizabeth Windover. From 1883 to 1886 she attended the North London Collegiate School for Girls, after having been educated at Craven House in Leicester. At North London Collegiate School for Girls she was awarded various prizes, among which the needlework, the scripture, and the English ones, and she also passed the second Cambridge certificate. Later, her family moved to Hampstead, in London, and she lived with them, unmarried, until 1915, year in which she had already found a home at Lochleven House, Finchley.[99]

[98] *Id*., p. 50.
[99] Jane Potter, *Pope, Jessie*, (2014), https://www.oxforddnb.com/display/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-98109;jsessionid=DF0F67E59605A2F7503E3440F3FD8D21, last accessed: 23.02.2023: p. 1.

Pope was a famous writer and journalist. She started by working for the magazine *Punch*, and between 1902 and 1922 her contribution to it amounted to 170 poems. She used to boast that she never refused a job that was offered to her. She was author of humorous verses, articles, and short stories that were published in different popular magazines of the time, such as the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Express*, the *Queen*, and the *Westminster Gazette*, before they were collected into books.[100] She received distinctions for her humour, and she also wrote verses for illustrated collections addressed to children, such as *The Little Soldier Book* (1907).[101] Pope is probably best known for her patriotic writing during the First World War that includes especially poetry. Her verses were published in newspapers such as the *Daily Mail*, starting from 1914, and they were later collected into volumes such as *Jessie Pope's War Poems* (1915), *More War Poems* (1915), *Simple Rhymes for Stirring Times* (1916), and charity-gift books like *The Fiery Cross* (1915).[102]

In some of her pro-war poems she also makes a direct address to women, as in the poem "No!" that runs as follows:

> By bridge and battery, town and trench,
> They're fighting with bull-dog pluck;
> Not one, from Tommy to General French,
> Is down upon his luck.
> There are some who stand and some who fall,
> But how does the chorus go
> That echoing chant in the hearts of all?
> 'Are we downhearted? NO!'
> There's Jack, God bless him, upon the foam,
> His isn't an easy task,
> To strike for England, to strike right home,
> So much, no more, does he ask.
> On the dreadnought's deck where the big guns bark,
> Or in quiet depths below
> The salt wind wafts us a chantey. Hark!
> 'Are we downhearted? NO!'
>
> And what of the girl who is left behind,
> And the wife who misses her mate?
> Oh, well, we've got our business to mind
> Though it's only to watch and wait.
> So we'll take what comes with a gallant heart

[100] Potter, *op. cit.*, p. 2.
[101] *Ibid*.
[102] *Ibid*.

As we busily knit and sew,
Trying, God help us, to do our part,
'Are we downhearted? NO!'[103]

While in the first part of the poem she mentions the "steadfastness from Tommy to General French"[104] that means the determination showed by all the ranks of the army, from simple soldiers to generals,[105] in the second part she makes a direct reference to the women on the 'home front' that may have been bucked up by this poem as well as the soldiers could have been.[106] She also makes reference to the fact that women were not loafing at home but they had "[their] business to mind" and they were "busily knit[ting] and sew[ing]". In this case the patriotic or pro-war function is helped by the affirmation "Are we downhearted? No!" that is repeated three times in the poem and probably serves as a morale booster.

What probably decreed her reputation as a "jingoistic, pro-war propagandist"[107] was the poem "Play the Game", that runs:

Twenty-Two stalwarts in stripes and shorts
Kicking a ball along,
Set in a square of leather-lunged sports
Twenty-two thousand strong,
Some of them shabby, some of them spruce,
Savagely clamorous all,
Hurling endearments, advice or abuse,
At the muscular boys on the ball.

Stark and stiff 'neath a stranger's sky
A few hundred miles away,
War-worn, khaki-clad figures lie,
Their faces rigid and grey
Stagger and drop where the bullets swarm,
Where the shrapnel is bursting loud,
Die, to keep England safe and warm
For a vigorous football crowd!

Football's a sport, and a rare sport too,
Don't make it a source of shame.
To-day there are worthier things to do.
Englishmen, play the game!
A truce to the League, a truce to the Cup,
Get to work with a gun,

[103] Jessie Pope, "No!", *The Poetry of Jessie Pope* (2014, Kindle Edition), p. 8.
[104] *Ibid*.
[105] Potter, *Pope, Jessie*, *cit.*, p. 3.
[106] *Ibid*.
[107] *Ibid*.

When our country's at war we must all back up
It's the only thing to be done![108]

Pope starts the poem with the simple image of a football team playing but then she shifts to the war. In her words, thus, the ultimate sport that English people are called to play is war.[109] I would therefore argue that this is a highly nationalistic and propagandist poem. In the same vein I would quote the poem "Who's for the Game?" that runs:

Who's for the game, the biggest that's played,
The red crashing game of a fight?
Who'll grip and tackle the job unafraid?
And who thinks he'd rather sit tight?
Who'll toe the line for the signal to 'Go!'?
Who'll give his country a hand?
Who wants a turn to himself in the show?
And who wants a seat in the stand?
Who knows it won't be a picnic – not much-
Yet eagerly shoulders a gun?
Who would much rather come back with a crutch
Than lie low and be out of the fun?
Come along, lads
But you'll come on all right
For there's only one course to pursue,
Your country is up to her neck in a fight,
And she's looking and calling for you.[110]

Here again war is compared to a sport, a game. Nevertheless, in my opinion, it is far more spurring than "Play the Game", here the war is not only described as a sort of good sport for the nation but also as a duty to fulfil to help the country that is in 'distress'. It is again a poem that shows Pope's nationalism and propagandistic attitude. And it is a very famous poem, indeed.

There are many other poems that could be used to show her propagandistic attitude but, above all, I would like to quote her best-known poem, "The Call", that appeared for the first time in *The Daily Mail* – a journal that had been in favour of the war since the beginning – on 26 November 1916[111]:

[108] Jessie Pope, "Play the Game", *The Poetry of Jessie Pope* (2014, Kindle Edition), p. 5.
[109] Potter, *op. cit.*, p. 3.
[110] Jessie Pope, "Who's for the Game?", *The Poetry of Jessie Pope* (2014, Kindle Edition), pp. 12-13.
[111] Stuart Sillars, "'To Battle for the Truth': Popular Poetry", in *Fields of Agony: British Poetry of the First World War*, cit..: pp.18-39, p. 28.

Who's for the trench
Are you, my laddie?
Who'll follow French
Will you, my laddie?
Who's fretting to begin,
Who's going out to win?
And who wants to save his skin-
Do you, my laddie?

Who's for the khaki suit
Are you, my laddie?
Who longs to charge and shoot
Do you, my laddie?
Who's keen on getting fit,
Who means to show his grit,
And who'd rather wait a bit
Would you, my laddie?

Who'll earn the Empire's thanks-
Will you, my laddie?
Who'll swell the victor's ranks
Will you, my laddie?
When that procession comes,
Banners and rolling drums
Who'll stand and bite his thumbs-
Will you, my laddie?[112]

In this poem there is a peculiar speaking voice that aims at putting shame on men who did not join the war effort and are reluctant to do so.[113] Sillars defines the poem's tone as "reassuring and confirmative, rather than challenging and confrontational",[114] in fact it is direct and conversational.[115] Sillars argues that the speaker may be part of an older generation and the use of the expression 'my laddie' suggests a relationship between the speaker and the addressee that is parental or, at least, reflects a combination of intimacy and patronage.[116] It reflects a hierarchical order between generations and classes – that, as the chapter has shown, has surely been altered by the First World War – that is common to both the speaker and the reader. However, the poem's success, according to Sillars, lays on the fact that the addressee finds himself between the speaker and the reader and he is, basically, unable to deny 'the call'.[117] Furthermore, the questions present on each stanza are the same and all of them require an

[112] Jessie Pope, "The Call", *The Poetry of Jessie Pope* (2014, Kindle Edition), pp. 17-18.
[113] Claire Buck, "British Women's Writing of the Great War", cit., p.89.
[114] Sillars, "'To Battle for the Truth': Popular Poetry", cit., p. 28.
[115] *Ibid*.
[116] *Ibid*.
[117] *Ibid*.

obvious implicit answer that in the first three cases should be 'Yes', while in the fourth requires an equally powerful 'No'. This forces the addressee to answer properly.[118] In narrative terms the poem starts with a situation of keen recruitment, visible in the first stanza, moving then to training in the second, and to receiving rewards for victory in the third and last.[119] The actual battle is skilfully omitted by Pope, and this was a technique widely used at the outbreak of the war to incite enrolment.[120]

As I have already pointed out, this is probably the best known of Pope's war poems, however it also generated critiques towards its author. The most famous one is Wilfred Owen's reference in his most famous poem's last lines:

> My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
> To children ardent for some desperate glory,
> The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est*
> *Pro patria mori.*[121]

In the published version, the line uses the locution 'My friend', while in the initial draft there was a straightforward dedication 'To Jessie Pope etc.', and then 'To a certain poetess', eventually suppressed.[122] Basically, Owen accuses Pope, and all the women and people like her, because of her being in favour of the war without having actively joined it and without having seen the horrors he and many other soldiers experienced at the front.[123]

To conclude with Pope's personal life and thoughts, I would like to underline that she "had no pretensions to literary greatness",[124]. In fact, after the war she continued writing but only a few works had War World One as a theme, they were mostly books for children, instead.

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[118] *Ibid*.
[119] *Id*., p. 29.
[120] *Ibid*.
[121] Wilfred Owen, "Dulce et Decorum Est", *Poetry Foundation*, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46560/dulce-et-decorum-est, last accessed: 02.08.2023.
[122] Anne Varty, "Women's Poetry in First World War Anthologies and Two Collections of 1916", cit., p. 38.
[123] Anderson D. Araujo, "Jessie Pope, Wilfred Owen, and the Politics of Pro Patria Mori in World War I Poetry", *Media, War & Conflict* (2014. Vol. 7 n.3): pp. 326–341, p. 334.
[124] Potter, *Pope, Jessie*, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

Very little is known about her last years, what is sure is that she died on 14 December 1941, in Devon and was cremated at Plymouth.[125]

While many critics have condemned her for her war writings and accused her to be the "worst example of cold, female, non-combatant civilian",[126] others opted for a different consideration of her writings. The writings she produced during the war not only addressed the so-called 'slackers' – who refused to take part in the war effort – but also war profiteers, and she tried to persuade her readers not to forget the wounded soldiers and sick children in hospitals.[127]

To conclude, it is very important to remember that Jessie Pope was not an author of great literature, but her writing was primarily humorous. However, this humour not always encountered a positive response at the front, where soldiers were daily facing death and horrors of all kinds, and this could be why she returned to 'lighter' themes in her post-war writings. Anyway, with her written contribution during the war years she managed to demonstrate that even women could be active and in which way, she incited them to show their determination and courage and persuaded women on the 'home front' to save money.[128]

2.4.2 Eleanor Farjeon

Less well known than Jessie Pope, she was another British writer, especially for children. She was born on 13 February 1881 in London and was the third of five children. Her father was Benjamin Leopold Farjeon a Victorian novelist of Jewish origins, and her mother was Margaret Jane.[129] Given her father's job, their house in London was a meeting-place for actors, writers,

[125] *Id*., pp. 3-4.
[126] *Id*., p. 4.
[127] *Ibid*.
[128] Potter, *op. cit.*, p. 4.
[129] John Bell, *Farjeon, Eleanor*, (2011), https://www.oxforddnb.com/display/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-33079, last accessed: 03.08.2023, pp. 1-4, p. 1.

and musicians, and the theatre was an essential part of her and her brothers' education.[130] Eleanor Farjeon did not receive a formal education, but she was an avid reader and she found a wide choice among her father's 8,000 books. She used to describe herself in her childhood years as dreamy, shy, sensitive, and ill, always absorbed in her writing, reading, family, and imaginative life.[131] However, since her father died in 1903, she – then twenty-two years old – was forced to emerge from her fantasy life and to start writing in order to support herself. Hence, she developed a special ability in forming friendships and the most important one – at least for my scope – was probably the one with Edward Thomas and his wife, Helen. They became close friends and it was precisely thanks to the interest that Eleanor put in Thomas' writing that he managed to establish himself as a poet. In the same way, it was because of Thomas' death in France in 1917 that Eleanor became a mature writer.[132]

In Autumn 1917, Farjeon rented a cottage in Sussex, where she lived and wrote for two years. After the war's end, in 1920 she went back to London, where she spent the rest of her life. Farjeon's most important works are books for children, and even if she was a good businesswoman, she always remained a dreamy woman, often making things larger than life. She never married, nor had children, yet she lived with a schoolmaster, George Chester Earle, from her forty until his death in 1949, and then she had a relationship with an actor. She converted herself to Catholicism in 1951 and she died in London on 5 June 1965.[133]

Farjeon was not famous because of her wartime writing, yet some poems are worth attention, in this context, in my view. The first poem that in my opinion is worth attention is "Easter Monday", since it is connected to both the First World War and to Edward Thomas:

> In the last letter that I had from France
> You thanked me for the silver Easter egg
> Which I had hidden in the box of apples

[130] *Ibid*.
[131] *Ibid*.
[132] *Id*., p. 1.
[133] Bell, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

You like to munch beyond all other fruit.
You found the egg the Monday before Easter,
And said. 'I will praise Easter Monday now -
It was such a lovely morning'. Then you spoke
Of the coming battle and said, 'This is the eve.
'Good-bye. And may I have a letter soon'.

That Easter Monday was a day for praise,
It was such a lovely morning. In our garden
We sowed our earliest seeds, and in the orchard
The apple-bud was ripe. It was the eve,
There are three letters that you will not get.[134]

The poem was written in 1917, after Edward Thomas' death in battle – in fact the subtitle of the poem is "In Memoriam E. T.".[135] The specific date is 9 April 1917, and it is an elegy for the poet who was a close friend of hers.[136] The grief for his loss is expressed through their intimate correspondence[137]. In fact, Eleanor Farjeon repeats words that were in the letters they exchanged, thus constructing a narrative and suggesting their mental intimacy. In the poem, on the eve of the battle on the Monday before Easter he found a silver egg she sent to him inside a basket of apples.[138] As in much of the war poetry, the setting is a pastoral one, even if here it hides the threat of death and sacrifice.[139] As Higonnet underlines, at the turn of the sonnet, Thomas' death is hidden by a caesura, with the words 'Good-bye. And may I have a letter soon'.[140] Always according to Higonnet, the apple might signify a transgressive love for her married friend, because it recalls Adam and Eve and the original sin. Moreover, ironically, Easter Monday, the day that should represent ritual rebirth, excludes, with his death, any possibility of further communication or reunion, so hers are void words.[141] Furthermore, this poem is important because it not only records the sentiment of bereavement that was prevalent

[134] Eleanor Farjeon, "Easter Monday", *All Poetry*, https://allpoetry.com/poem/8603781-Easter-Monday-by-Eleanor-Farjeon, last accessed: 03.08.2023.
[135] Margaret R. Higonnet, "Women's Poetry of the First World War", in S. Das (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to the Poetry of the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013): pp. 185-197, p. 189.
[136] Stuart Sillars, "'Nobody Asked What the Women Thought': Poetry by Women", cit., p. 45.
[137] Claire Buck, "Reframing Women's War Poetry", in J. Dowson (ed) *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century British and Irish Women's Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011): pp. 24-41, p. 31.
[138] Higonnet, "Women's Poetry of the First World War", cit., p. 189.
[139] *Ibid*.
[140] *Id*., p. 190.
[141] *Id*., pp. 189-190.

during World War One – even if not exclusively in feminine terms –, but it also underlines the situation of separation that many women experienced at the time.[142]

Another poem that is linked with Edward Thomas is Farjeon's 1918 poem "Now That You Too" part of her collection *Sonnets and Poems*:[143]

> Now that you too must shortly go the way
> Which in these bloodshot years uncounted men
> Have gone in vanishing armies day by day,
> And in their numbers will not come again:
> I must not strain the moments of our meeting
> Striving for each look, each accent, not to miss,
> Or question of our parting and our greeting,
> Is this the last of all? is this—or this?
>
> Last sight of all it may be with these eyes,
> Last touch, last hearing, since eyes, hands, and ears,
> Even serving love, are our mortalities,
> And cling to what they own in mortal fears:—
> But oh, let end what will, I hold you fast
> By immortal love, which has no first or last.[144]

In the poem she addresses the beloved friend who, in 1915, leaves to join the army and will not come back. The poem explains the struggle of women on the 'home front' who were afraid not to see their beloved ones again, and who also desperately needed hope.[145] The poet struggles to find the right words to express this, because it is hard to write to someone you love but who, you know, could die.[146] Anxiety is also present in the poem as testified to by questions such as 'Is this the last of all? is this–or this?', the memories of being together are continuously broken down by the fear of no future greetings.[147] Basically the poem aims at representing the situation of a woman on the 'home front', who is writing to her man at the front, constantly fighting against the fear of not seeing him again.[148]

Lastly, I would like to focus on another poem –a double one – that is "Peace":

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[142] Sillars, "'Nobody Asked What the Women Thought': Poetry by Women", cit., p. 45.
[143] Higonnet, "Women's Poetry of the First World War", cit. p. 189.
[144] Eleanor Farjeon, "Now That You Too", *All Poetry*, https://allpoetry.com/Now-That-You-Too, last accessed: 03.08.2023.
[145] Higonnet, *op. cit.*, p. 189.
[146] *Ibid*.
[147] *Ibid*.
[148] *Ibid*.

I.

I am as awful as my brother War,
I am the sudden silence after clamour.
I am the face that shows the seamy scar
When blood and frenzy has lost its glamour.
Men in my pause shall know the cost at last
That is not to be paid in triumphs or tears,
Men will begin to judge the thing that's past
As men will judge it in a hundred years.

Nations! whose ravenous engines must be fed
Endlessly with the father and the son,
My naked light upon your darkness, dread! -
By which ye shall behold what ye have done:
Whereon, more like a vulture than a dove,
Ye set my seal in hatred, not in love.

II.

Let no man call me good. I am not blest.
My single virtue is the end of crimes,
I only am the period of unrest,
The ceasing of horrors of the times;
My good is but the negative of ill,
Such ill as bends the spirit with despair,
Such ill as makes the nations' soul stand still
And freeze to stone beneath a Gorgon glare.

Be blunt, and say that peace is but a state
Wherein the active soul is free to move,
And nations only show as mean or great
According to the spirit then they prove. -
O which of ye whose battle-cry is Hate
Will first in peace dare shout the name of Love?[149]

Higonnet argues that this is Eleanor Farjeon's darkest poem on the war.[150] In the poem Pace himself is speaking, declaring a power of knowledge that is equal to the one of his brother War. Peace says he shows a 'seamy scar' that is the result of War and represents its dark cost as it ends. Furthermore, Peace states he does not set off the end of the war but just a period of impasse, to reflect on the horrors that have just happened. Peace concludes that after the pause for reflection on the wrongs of war a new conflict is about to begin.[151]

Of course, Eleanor Farjeon was not an active woman, since from 1917 to the end of the war she stayed in her cottage in Sussex, writing. However, she is important for my discourse

[149] Eleanor Farjeon, "Peace", *All Poetry*, https://allpoetry.com/poem/8603747-Peace-by-Eleanor-Farjeon, last accessed: 03.08.2023.
[150] Higonnet, "Women's Poetry of the First World War", *op. cit.*, p. 190.
[151] *Ibid*.

since with her poetry she touches some topics that express the condition suffered by women on the 'home front' during wartime, dealing with the loss, anxiety, and nostalgia for the beloved ones fighting at the front, and with the fear of not seeing them again.

In the following, and last, chapter of my thesis I will focus on the other side of the coin, that is active women on the 'battle front', such as nurses and VADs and their writings. In particular, I will make reference to Mary Borden's *The Forbidden Zone* and some of Rose Macaulay's war poems.

3. British Women in Action During the First World War

In the previous chapter, I have pointed out the major changes that World War One brought about in women's life and in the social role they played. Therefore, I have extensively dealt with the topic of women that became an active part of the working society – both in the cities and in the countryside – in order to help sustain the huge war effort required by the First World War. Furthermore, it is important to remember that World War One was the first "total" war, as Strachan[1] and other critics have defined it. This means that, for the first time in history, a war involved all the strata of society, including civilians such as women and children.

However, besides civilian women who helped the war effort from the 'home front', there is another group of women who took a different route: Nurses and VADs. These women, as I am going to point out in the present chapter, represent the other side of the coin, since they participated to the war effort from the very 'battle front', taking care of wounded soldiers and living every day in close contact with death. Indeed, their writings reflect this peculiar experience and, in my opinion, are extremely important and worth consideration since war – and in particular the First World War – cannot be defined only as the active fighting in the trenches, but it also includes all the human experiences related to it. Therefore, the only way to look at this conflict as a whole is by taking into consideration all the writings produced as a reaction to it, including soldier's ones, but also those produced by women and civilians who experienced the war from the 'home front', together with nurses and VADs' ones, who lived closer to the battle sites and saw things that may be comparable to the ones seen by male soldiers.

For all the above-mentioned reasons I believe it is important to look at nurses' writings to better understand how the horrors of the war can be represented also by women and are not

[1] Hew Strachan, "Introduction", in H. Strachan (ed.) *The Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016): pp. 1-10, p. 1.

an exclusively male subject. This, indeed, is the purpose of the third and last chapter of my thesis.

3.1 British Women at War: The Nurse and the VAD

> What can the nurse do against this she-devil, this Elemental, this Diva? She can straighten a pillow, pour drops out of a bottle, pierce a shrunken side with a needle. She can hold to lips a cup of cold water. […] She is no longer a woman. She is dead already, just as I am […]. Her heart is dead. She killed it. She couldn't bear to feel it jumping in her side when Life, the sick animal, choked and rattled in her arms. Her ears are deaf; she deafened them. She could not bear to hear Life crying and mewing. She is blind so that she cannot see the torn parts of men she must handle. Blind, deaf, dead – she is strong, efficient, fit to consort with gods and demons – a machine inhabited by the ghost of a woman – soulless, past redeeming, just as I am – just as I will be.[2]
>
> – Mary Borden, *The Forbidden Zone*

This is how Mary Borden describes what being a nurse during World War One meant in her book *The Forbidden Zone*.

Undoubtedly, professional women constituted a fundamental resource during the First World War. In fact, since the beginning of the war, to face manpower shortage, most countries started to rely on female work in the medical field, especially on nurses.[3] At the outbreak of the war, in August 1914, people were sure that the conflict would have been a short-term one, and thousands of British women volunteered – they could not have imagined it would have last so long.[4] Among the first who travelled to France as part of the British Expeditionary Force were the members of the QAIMNS (Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service)[5] – it also had a Reserve section and by the end of 1914 more than 2,200 women had enrolled in the service, while more than 12,000 was the total number of women who served in the Reserve during the war.[6] Then nurses from British dominions followed, such as Canadians, Australians,

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[2] Mary Borden, *The Forbidden Zone: A Nurse's Impressions of the First World War* (London: Hesperus Press, 2008): p. 43.
[3] Susan R. Grayzel, "The Role of Women in the War", in H. Strachan (ed.) *The Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016): pp. 149-162, p. 156.
[4] Christine E. Hallett, "Professional Women", *Nurse Writers of the Great War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016): pp. 97-98, p. 97.
[5] Hallett, "Professional Women", *Nurse Writers of the Great War*, cit., p. 97.
[6] Sue Light, "British Military Nurses and the Great War: a Guide to the Services", *The Western Front Association*, https://www.westernfrontassociation.com/world-war-i-articles/british-military-nurses-and-the-great-war-a-guide-to-the-services/, last accessed: 24.08.2023.

and New Zealand nurses reaching Europe between late 1914 and early 1915. The only exception was represented by the American Army Nurse Corps that were mobilized only after the American entrance into the conflict in April 1917, even if many American trained nurses offered their services to French and Belgian Red Cross Societies before the entrance of the United States and were engaged in 'front-line nursing'.[7] Members of the allied nations' nursing corps were trained in the best nursing schools of the time, so they had a good deal of self-belief and confidence and nursing journals of the time often reported their achievements. However, they experienced some prejudice and opposition by the army medical services they were attached to. Nevertheless, later they have been recognized as vital components of the organizations that helped sustaining the life-saving services in the front lines.[8]

At the outbreak of the war, nurses working in hospitals were recruited from national branches of the Red Cross or, in the case of Britain, were already part of other services, like FANY (First Aid Nursing Yeomanry) and VAD (Voluntary Aid Detachments), whose members also set up field hospitals and drove ambulances.[9] At the time, nursing was the only occupation that offered women the chance to contribute to the war effort by performing a vital and necessary work that was, furthermore, seen as totally appropriate for their sex.[10] However, even if nursing work was seen as 'safe', since it was not performed in the very battle zones, in reality, women who served as nurses worked extremely near or even inside the battle zones, so risking their life on a daily basis.[11] Women physicians offered their services, as well, however their number was much lower if compared to male ones. And, even if discouraged from their very governments some of those women set up field hospitals, so that, by the end of the war, female

[7] Hallett, "Professional Women", *Nurse Writers of the Great War*, cit., p. 97.
[8] Hallett, *op. cit.*, p. 97.
[9] Grayzel, "The Role of Women in the War", in H. Strachan (ed.) *The Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War*, cit., p. 156.
[10] Grayzel, *op. cit.*, p. 156.
[11] *Ibid.*

doctors were treating wounded soldiers not only in Europe but also in the colonies, from India to South Africa.[12]

Women also had the task of transporting the wounded and this put them, like nurses and doctors, in close contact with the horrors of the battlefield that represented a real carnage.[13] Therefore, the most astonishing thing for the time was that a few women were literally incorporated into the national armed forces and, in Britain, many groups of women even created paramilitary organizations, such as the Women's Voluntary Reserve, which wanted to prove that also women could actively and literally contribute to the defence of their nation. At the beginning of the war these groups have been denounced because people saw them as an insult to 'real' warriors, wearing kaki and pretending to be soldiers, but by 1917 the British government sought to create the first official Women's Army Auxiliary Corps that allowed women to provide non-combatant services within the army.[14]

The figure of the professional nurse has become crucial precisely mainly thanks to the First World War and hereafter is a photograph of some nurses who served during the First World War as the Daughters of Mr Joseph Mason:

Figure 8. Daughters of Mr Joseph Mason.[15]

[12] *Ibid*.
[13] *Ibid*.
[14] *Ibid*.
[15] Taken from "Nursing During the First World War", *British Red Cross*, https://vad.redcross.org.uk/medical-care-during-ww1/nursing-during-the-first-world-war, last accessed: 24.08.2023.

The photograph shows World War One nurses and, as one can see, they were all young girls, all wearing a uniform. They have been crucial female figures during the First World War, who helped to save many lives.

During the training period, nurses' lives were subjected to the patriarchal hierarchies of early-twentieth-century hospitals, however, once they obtained the level of senior trainee they could exercise high levels of responsibility, such as running wards and supervising junior staff.[16] Even if doctors and surgeons did never openly appreciate their work, it was considered by the public opinion as a vital one for the recovery of their patients, and it was implicit that physicians and surgeons could not succeed without the fundamental help and collaboration of trained and disciplined carers.[17] Looking briefly at the history of professional nurses we can say that it started around 1860s and 1870s, as training sessions normally lasted one year, since it was believed that such period of time was enough to learn the essentials of the job. However, during the 1880s and 1890s, people decided that to train a 'professional' nurse more time and a longer period of training were required. Nevertheless, it was not compulsory for hospitals to guarantee nurses with a three-year training. The consequence was that professional nurses' training became a split process, with nurses who had completed the three-year training in general hospitals and were regarded as 'proper' nurses, and others that were seen as less qualified on a professional level – including those who were trained in fever nursing, in the care of children and mentally ill people.[18] Prestigious hospitals in cities like London often hosted nursing training schools that were highly disciplined environments. There, success and even survival depended on women's ability to be obedient and respectful. Most important, once their qualification was obtained, nurses could use them to access environments in which access was

[16] Christine E. Hallett, "The War Nurse as a Free Agent", *Nurse Writers of the Great War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016): pp. 143-170, p. 143.
[17] *Ibid*.
[18] Sue Light, "British Military Nurses and the Great War: a Guide to the Services", *The Western Front Association*, https://www.westernfrontassociation.com/world-war-i-articles/british-military-nurses-and-the-great-war-a-guide-to-the-services/, last accessed: 24.08.2023.

usually denied to women, such as the 'male zone' of the army, a space that was about ten kilometres far from the front line.[19]

At the beginning of the war people used to think that the conflict would have been a short one. However, by 1915, as the war started to prolong, it soon became clear that the trained nurses were not enough to sustain the workload in the increasing number of hospitals and casualty clearing stations both in Britain and abroad. Therefore, partially trained nurses started to be employed in military hospitals. Moreover, applications were accepted from women who showed certificates to attest that they had completed a two-year training in fever, children's or mental nursing, or that they worked under the trained nurses of the QAIMNS.[20]

So, it is undeniable that the First World War constituted an opportunity for women – both in the cities and in the countryside – and, especially, for the ones who worked as nurses, it opened up a completely new world to them, allowing them to escape from the constraints of patriarchal societies. In fact, while many women who had worked in factories during the war were forced to give up their positions after the armistice, nurses' fate proved to be very different. Therefore, after the war, many of them used their hospital training certificates to be recruited by the Red Cross organizations around the world, so remaining independent as they did during the war, escaping patriarchal society's restrictions that limited women's opportunities at the time.[21]

Therefore, tens of thousands of women trained themselves to enter war service in the years preceding the First World War, however only a minority of them was fully trained, the others attached themselves to VADs – Voluntary Aid Detachments. Volunteer girls joined short courses in sick-nursing, bandaging, invalid cookery, and hygiene, and waited, ready for the war.

[19] Hallett, "The War Nurse as a Free Agent", cit., p. 143.
[20] Sue Light, "British Military Nurses and the Great War: a Guide to the Services", *The Western Front Association*, https://www.westernfrontassociation.com/world-war-i-articles/british-military-nurses-and-the-great-war-a-guide-to-the-services/, last accessed: 24.08.2023.
[21] Hallett, "The War Nurse as a Free Agent", cit., pp. 162-163.

There were also other women who had no training at all, yet at the outbreak of the war they volunteered and began to develop their abilities under the pressure of wartime.[22] They were conscious that, as nurses, they had the unique possibility of observing war events from a different perspective and of being in the middle of the action. Nevertheless, as nurses' writings and memoirs point out, the real situation did not meet their expectations – just as with many soldiers who enrolled enthusiastically and then felt deep disillusionment and anger, such as the well-known poet-soldier Wilfred Owen. In fact, war service could be adventurous and exciting sometimes, but most of the time, it was an alternation between boring waiting and rushing activity, with too many wounded soldiers entering the hospital and nurses watching them dying, powerless.[23] At the outbreak of World War One and during the first months of the conflict VADs served only in voluntary hospitals of the Red Cross or of the Order of St John of Jerusalem. However, as the utmost of the emergency – a consequence of the assaults on the Western Front – in spring 1915 created an even greater need for medical help, the military medical services consented to accept VADs in military hospitals in Britain and overseas.[24]

As far as American nurses and VADs are concerned, as I have already argued above, many American women helped in the First World War even before their nation entered the conflict in 1917. They were usually wealthy and independent women who could afford to travel and so they decided to join volunteer units or to offer their services on an independent basis to the French and Belgian Committees of the Red Cross.[25] Their reward for joining the war effort was to be admitted in the most horrific and dramatic scenarios of the time. The use of technology, such as machine guns, was not totally new, the real newness, that they were not prepared for, was represented by the extent of the carnage. In fact, the first three-and-a-half

[22] Christine E. Hallett, "Volunteer Girls", *Nurse Writers of the Great War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016): pp. 171-186, p. 171.
[23] *Ibid*.
[24] *Ibid*.
[25] Christine E. Hallett, "American Young Women at War", *Nurse Writers of the Great War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016): pp. 175-186, p. 175.

years of the war generated colossal numbers of casualties that sometimes reached the tens of thousands in one day. And most of the times, all the wounded arrived in 'rushes' that were almost impossible to manage even with the most highly trained medical staff in the best hospitals.[26] Many American nurses who volunteered in the French Red Cross found space in field hospitals with shortage of fully trained nurses. In fact, in France there were only few renowned training schools and the development of nursing as a profession has been slow and not consistent. Furthermore, much of the nursing cares addressed to civilians in the country were entrusted to religious nuns, who had little medical training.[27]

To sum up, the nursing force of the allied was a heterogeneous body that included the trained, the semi-trained, and the nearly untrained. Looking at Britain in particular, it was the Voluntary Aid Detachments, acting under the guardianship of the British Society of the Red Cross and the St John Ambulance Association, a branch of the Order of St John of Jerusalem, that administered instructions for volunteer nurses, the so called 'VADs'.[28] The VADs were a heterogeneous mixture that included a wide range of different ages and different life skills. They were usually part of the middle or upper-middle class – such as daughters of local gentry, landowners, army officers, clergy, and professional men – but some of them were also part of the aristocracy or had an aristocratic background. Most of them were young women experiencing a paid employment for the first time and three-quarters of them had never worked outside the home before.[29]

The majority of the British VADs attended courses, passed examinations, and obtained certificates. In particular, the fundamental aspects of nursing care they looked at were four: first

[26] *Ibid*.
[27] *Ibid*.
[28] Christine E. Hallett, "The British 'VAD'", *Nurse Writers of the Great War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016): pp. 187-210, p. 187.
[29] Sue Light, "British Military Nurses and the Great War: a Guide to the Services", *The Western Front Association*, https://www.westernfrontassociation.com/world-war-i-articles/british-military-nurses-and-the-great-war-a-guide-to-the-services/, last accessed: 24.08.2023.

aid and bandaging, sick-room cookery, hygiene, and home nursing, and fully trained nurses were hired by the Voluntary Aid Detachments to demonstrate their skills and teach their basic knowledge to volunteers. In this way the trained nurses could ensure themselves that their future assistants had at least a basic knowledge and were able to offer the right cares to their patients.[30] After having acquired the basic training certificates, most VADs underwent a further apprenticeship training to consolidate their skills that usually lasted around six months and took place in local hospitals. Nevertheless, during it, most of them found themselves performing humble tasks – such as sweeping ward floors, cleaning out grates and ward stoves, and cooking breakfast for the whole wards of patients. Furthermore, VADs were treated by the trained staff as new trainees or probationer nurses, so that they were given simple, safe, and boring work, to allow them 'settling-in'. However, this period of adjustment could last weeks or even months. Only after this, VADs were allowed to get into direct contact with patients, their care, and clinical treatment.[31] The workload in hospital wards was high. In fact, during the wartime emergency civil hospitals were short of trained staff, while military hospitals experienced high pressure of work. For this reason, VADs constituted an important support, and most of them proved to be able to provide fundamental care to their patients within a few months from their arrival.[32]

Most of the VADs began their 'nursing careers' on civilian wards, however, for many this was frustrating, since they volunteered mainly to help sustaining the war effort. Some of them worked in auxiliary hospitals that belonged to the Red Cross or to the Order of St John of Jerusalem, but it was only from spring 1915, as I already stated, that VADs were allowed to practice in military hospitals, also overseas. However, overseas positions were reserved to those who excelled and emerged for their skills in hospitals on the 'home front'. Nevertheless,

[30] Hallett, "The British 'VAD'", *Nurse Writers of the Great War*, cit., p. 187.
[31] *Id.*, pp. 187-188.
[32] *Id.*, p. 188.

wealthy women with good social connections succeeded in gaining positions in northern France before having been fully trained, and this surely generated a certain degree of frustration on trained nurses who did not manage to gain British hospitals' release to serve overseas and found themselves 'trapped' in civilian practice.[33] More than 90,000 women served as VADs during the First World War; among these, 10,000 worked in hospitals under the guidance of the War Office and 8,000 served overseas, in France, Malta, Serbia, Egypt, and Mesopotamia.[34]

An interesting fact is that, during their wartime service, VADs' knowledge of nursing standards was sometimes tested with competitions. These included tests in first aid and home nursing and some questions such as:

> What are bedsores? What precautions would you take to prevent their occurrence, and if they occur, how would you treat them?
> How would you prepare a patient and a room for a major operation?
> Write a brief history of a case of enteric fever during the third week, giving a temperature chart.
> How would you prepare a linseed meal poultice, an ice poultice, and a mustard poultice? What are the indications for their use?
> What do you mean by Crisis and Lysis? In what illnesses do they respectively occur?
> How do you make peptonised beef-tea?[35]

To conclude, I have tried to explain in which ways women could be active on the 'war front', and introduced the other side of the coin, the women who were active on the 'battle front'. In the following section I would like to provide a general overview of the kind of writings that were produced by nurses and VADs, underlining in which ways they are different from the ones already seen in the second chapter – that means the ones produced by women writing from the 'home front'. I then present two examples, namely Mary Borden, with some excerpts from her work *The Forbidden Zone*, and Rose Macaulay, with two poems connected to the war.

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[33] *Ibid*.
[34] Sue Light, "British Military Nurses and the Great War: a Guide to the Services", *The Western Front Association*, https://www.westernfrontassociation.com/world-war-i-articles/british-military-nurses-and-the-great-war-a-guide-to-the-services/, last accessed: 24.08.2023.
[35] "Nursing During the First World War". *British Red Cross*. https://vad.redcross.org.uk/medical-care-during-ww1/nursing-during-the-first-world-war. Last accessed: 24.08.2023.

3.2 Writing the War

The aim of the present section is to present the kinds of writings that have been produced during World War One by war nurses and VADs. In my view, their writings were different from the ones produced by women who lived and worked on the 'home front' since the very experiences were different. I eventually provide two outstanding examples of nurses' writings, namely Mary Borden's *The Forbidden Zone*, and two of Rose Macaulay's war-related poems.

In the previous section I already hinted at nurses' awareness that, thanks to their role, they were provided with the unique possibility to observe war events from a different perspective and to be in the middle of the action. Nevertheless, as nurses' writings and memoirs pointed out, the real situation did not always meet their initial expectations. This, I would argue, draws the first similarity with the other war writings I have mentioned or analysed in the present work. In fact, at the outbreak of the First World War, many male, as well as, female writers showed a certain degree of excitement towards the war, however, with the prolonging of the conflict they started to openly express their disillusionment and disgust towards the actual carnage it represented – the most outstanding example of this may be seen in Wilfred Owen's poem "Dulce et Decorum Est".

However, even if the chapter aims at showing the main differences together with some possible similarities between the war writings produced by women on the 'home front' and the ones on the 'battle front', it is possible to find divisions also among the same 'side' of women writers, as Hallett points out: "The writings of VADs offered a different viewpoint from those of trained nurses".[36] This could be explained by the fact that VADs had more free time and less responsibility if compared to professional nurses, this surely made it easier for them to observe and record life in military hospitals. Furthermore, Hallett underlines that their perspective was not distorted but a simple one, since they had no previous nursing experiences. Theirs was a

[36] Christine E. Hallett, "Volunteer Girls", *Nurse Writers of the Great War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016): pp. 171-186, p. 172.

completely new experience – in fact, for many of them it was the first time they undertook a paid job – and it is precisely this that made their recordings distinct and well-focused, even if more moralistic and simplistic than the ones of professional nurses.[37] Hallett also points out that in many VADs' writings the very VAD is the heroine and the actions in the hospital just create challenges she has to overcome.[38] In this respect professional nurses' writings are different, as I will show in the following section dedicated to Mary Borden and *The Forbidden Zone*, in which she also describes her experience as a nurse on the Western Front. Furthermore, VADs' writings, as Hallett writes, have been criticized for exaggerating the harshness of the discipline applied in medical hospitals, depicting VADs as victims who had to fight against the emotional crisis created by the inhuman military hospital climate.[39] Such writings were so powerful that the harshness, detachment, and inhumanity of some military hospital nurses acquired the status of myth.[40] Moreover, another recurring theme in the writings of VADs is that of romantic journey through beautiful landscapes, together with the one reducing the war to a simplistic battle between good – represented by Britain and its allies – and evil – represented by the central powers. It emerged that VADs were more likely to use old romantic literary tropes than nurses and this might be explained by saying that their greatest desire was more that of being part of the 'war struggle' than to actually help wounded people and become professional nurses.[41] More recurring themes of VADs' writings include the tensions between professional, trained nurses and the same VADs, interestingly, this topic is more frequent in volunteers' writings than in professional nurses' ones. In fact, as Hallett underlines, there are several stories of VADs bullied by professional nurses. Two more themes include professional nurses showing ridiculous behaviours and the suffering and adversity experienced by young women, the

[37] *Ibid*.
[38] *Ibid*.
[39] *Ibid*.
[40] Christine E. Hallett, "The British 'VAD'", *Nurse Writers of the Great War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016): pp. 187-210, p. 199.
[41] Hallett, "Volunteer Girls", *Nurse Writers of the Great War*, cit., p. 172.

majority of which was experiencing unskilled work for the first time.[42] Other VADs wrote of their poor working and living conditions and a part of them lamented that some volunteers, with a little training, could have become excellent nurses, but they were deflected into different careers because of bureaucracy.[43]

Another point made by Hallett in another chapter of her book *Nurse Writers of the Great War* is that British VADs, and especially the wealthy ones who founded their own volunteer hospitals, were largely celebrated by the British national press – here again it is possible to see the importance of press in wartime, as I pointed out in the first chapter of the present work – in contrast with American nurses that were not, even in their motherland.[44]

To sum up, VADs who wrote about volunteer girls during the First World War had different reasons for doing so. These included: the desire to promote the feminist idea that also women could help in the war effort, as well as men; a pacifist wish to show the horrors brought about by the war from the perspective of the women that witnessed it directly; and the desire of many nurses to share the most powerful and, maybe, shocking experience of their lives.[45] One example of VADs' writing could be Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth* (1933), that represents her first-hand experience of World War One. In fact, she started her career as a VAD on 27 June 1915. The novel deals with the emotions of a young woman who joined the war effort enthusiastically at the outbreak of World War One, to later find only horror and despair[46] – again the topic of disillusionment and horror after an initial period of enthusiasm about the war. Brittain's memoir was published in 1933, so more than a decade after the war's end, and Hallett describes it as a "deliberate challenge to the jingoistic propaganda that led the war generation

[42] Hallett, "The British 'VAD'", *Nurse Writers of the Great War*, cit., pp. 190-191.
[43] *Id.*, p.191.
[44] Christine E. Hallett, "American Young Women at War", *Nurse Writers of the Great War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016): pp. 175-186, p. 183.
[45] Hallett, "Volunteer Girls", *Nurse Writers of the Great War*, *op. cit.*, p. 172
[46] Hallett, "The British 'VAD'", *Nurse Writers of the Great War*, cit., pp. 193-196.

to destruction" and, also, as an act of feminism.[47] The novel is written, primarily, in memory of the men that Brittain lost, but also for the women who served during the war, to bring a witness of female voice and female perspective.[48]

To conclude, British VADs embodied classic feminine traits of gentleness, kindness, and compassion, yet working under harsh conditions and exhibiting both mental and physical strength, so that at the end of the war they became the emblem of British womanhood and achieved an iconic status. VADs proved to be brave, resistant, and strong, while in post-war mythology professional nurses have been depicted as inhumane – like all the military system – and as obstacles to overcome.[49]

As far as it concerns professional nurses' writings, they were quite different from those of VADs. As I have shown in the chapter, during the First World War, women who worked as nurses have had an important role. "For the first time women belonging to the middle and upper classes entered hospitals to care for the wounded and came into contact with the male body at a public level".[50] Early-twentieth-century British society immediately realised the possible erotic-sexual risks women may encounter and, consequently, started to impose strict regulations.[51] Nurses started to be compared to mothers – this was helped by propaganda – taking care of the wounded. This made it possible to promote the figure of the nurse without contradicting the stereotype of the woman as a ministering angel who took care of the man's wounded body, relieving his pain. Moreover, this symbolic maternity passed from the private to the public sphere.[52]

[47] Hallett, "The British 'VAD'", cit., p. 196.
[48] *Ibid*.
[49] *Id*., p. 205.
[50] Vita Fortunati, *Women's Counter-Memories of the First War World: Two Emblematic Case–studies*: *Vera Brittain, Mary Borden* (Bologna: University of Bologna Press, 2014): pp. 225-235, p. 230.
[51] Fortunati, *op. cit.*, p. 230.
[52] *Ibid*.

From a literary point of view, as I have already pointed out in the first chapter of the present work, it has long been believed that the only reliable writings on the First World War could be those written by men, and especially the ones written by soldiers, who had a first-hand experience of the war. Therefore, as Buck points out, women have long been considered passive observers who lived on the 'home front' and could not fully comprehend, neither write, the experience of war that men actively faced.[53] However, nowadays it is arguable that this is not true. In fact, there are many women who wrote about the war both from the 'home front', as we have already seen, and from the 'battle front', such as nurses, so granting people the access to the different ways in which women experienced the First World War and their relationship with militarism.[54]

In their writings, women, and especially war nurses, aimed at making readers feel the situation in which the nurse-narrator lived and their wish of bearing witness to the pain of others.[55] In their memoirs and letters, it is possible to spot both compassion for the wounded who suffered unbearable pain and exhilaration for the opportunity they were offered in so taking part in the war effort on the 'battle front'.[56] Often, nurses had to collect men's shattered body pieces. Their subjectivity, as nurse-narrators, was torn apart between two ideas: on the one hand, they had to deal with the gap between their work and that of men, especially soldier poets living in the trenches, since they could never fully understand what they saw and did out there; and, on the other hand, they had to cope with suffering from experiences that had never been considered a female field. And it is precisely the sense of helplessness felt by the nurses that makes women's writings about the war more depressing and painful if compared to men's. This

[53] Claire Buck, "British Women's Writing of the Great War", in V. Sherry (ed) *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005): pp. 85-112, p. 87.
[54] *Ibid*.
[55] Santanu Das, "'The Impotence of Sympathy': Touch and Trauma in the Memoirs of the First World War Nurses", *Textual Practice* (Vol. 19, n. 2, 2005): pp. 239-262, p. 243.
[56] Fortunati, *Women's Counter-Memories of the First War World: Two Emblematic Case–studies Vera Brittain, Mary Borden*, cit., p. 231.

helplessness is often translated into the helplessness of the witness and, also, in turn, of the reader.[57]

One important aspect to consider when dealing with war and, in this case, nurses' writings about the war, is the relationship with the human body. Moments of contact with male bodies are often told in nurses' writings. This because the sight of wounded body remains easily impressed in the memory, but also because the body helped them to establish a continuum with experience, and so to remember it.[58] From these writings transpires a sort of intimacy between the nurse and the wounded or mutilated body, as Das points out, and the sense of powerlessness nurses felt is the key to understand their peculiar experience.[59] Moreover, even if people tend to consider only male physical pain, it is important to underline that women, especially nurses and VADs, were not totally safe from physical harm. In fact, not all of them wore gloves and the risk of getting infected was high. Therefore, in nurses' memoirs, descriptions of sepsis, chilblains, bruises, fever, fainting, blackouts, nausea, retching, coupled with a sense of embarrassment and shame, are frequent, but they are crucial elements in providing readers with a reliable witness of what being a nurse during World War One really meant.[60]

For all the above-mentioned reasons, the First World War experience of the nurse led to a crisis of experiencing, as written by Das.[61] In fact, if being a soldier in the trenches was considered the supreme form of sacrifice, nursing was the second.[62] Young women were constantly in contact, not only with male body – that represented alone something new – but with the obscene sight of the wounded body. This, almost erased the differences between sexes that, since then, had been fundamental in British society.[63] Moreover, because of the cures they

[57] Das, "'The Impotence of Sympathy': Touch and Trauma in the Memoirs of the First World War Nurses", *Textual practice*, cit., p. 243.
[58] Das, *op. cit.*, p. 244.
[59] *Ibid*.
[60] *Ibid*.
[61] *Ibid*.
[62] *Ibid*.
[63] *Id*., p. 245.

provided to male soldiers, nurses learnt, for the first time, how male body functioned, an aspect that, since then, had been restricted by previous Victorian rules and education.[64]

Another important aspect is the trauma that this painful experience – both at physical and mental level – generated on women serving as nurses. Even if nurses did not usually suffer from what was defined as the proper First World War trauma that included forms of mutism or repetitive re-enactments of the traumatizing situations, they were frequently exposed to situations that generated forms of trauma similar to those experienced by male soldiers. Indeed, many nurse writers, including Mary Borden, have been hunted by their memories for years, after the war's end, and for them the act of writing became a way to reorder their experience.[65] Moreover, what is interesting about nurses' writings is that they do not contain 'black holes', as some writings by men do, but they are full of corporeal memories that are also extremely detailed. According to Das, this makes it possible to draw a parallel between trauma and witnessing.[66] Furthermore, while male writings about the traumatizing war experience are marked more by fright, texts by women show more anxiety. Indeed, even if they were not usually subjected to mutism, amnesia, or partial paralysis, like men did, they could be traumatized as well, since their eyewitnessing that enormous amount of suffering surely caused psychological wounds.[67] Of course, the main setting of nurses' accounts was the operating room, in which they were exposed to the sight of horrific wounds and agonizing patients.[68]

Finally, there is one more aspect, also analysed by Das, that is worth attention, that is the feeling of shame experienced by many nurses that is present also in their writings. This shame could derive from both the sight and contact with the male body – not something usual

[64] Fortunati, *Women's Counter-Memories of the First War World: Two Emblematic Case–studies Vera Brittain, Mary Borden*, cit., p. 231.
[65] Das, "'The Impotence of Sympathy': Touch and Trauma in the Memoirs of the First World War Nurses", *Textual practice*, *cit.*, pp. 245-246.
[66] *Id*., p. 247.
[67] *Id*., p. 248.
[68] *Ibid*.

at the time in a society with such strict and rigid sexual mores – and by the nurses' sense of well-being in contrast with soldiers' suffering from excruciating pain. In this sense, according to Das, shame and witness are linked. In fact, nurses' texts consist of the nurse recording the shame of her patient because of his awareness about the nurse's knowledge.[69] For all these reasons, writings by nurses of the First World War are a "ritual of owning experience"[70], not only their own but also those of many wounded others. Even if physical pain cannot be shared, trauma can. And, as Das, concludes "[t]he nurses' memoirs act in themselves as 'traumatic' objects: they evoke not only intense emotional experience but also a strong visceral response".[71]

This section aimed at showing and explaining the main features, topics, and functions of VADs and nurses' writings of the First World War. In the following two sections, as I already anticipated, I show two examples of nurses' writings. One is a prose work by Mary Borden, *The Forbidden Zone*; the other includes two war-related poems by the nurse Rose Macaulay. As to Mary Borden, she is American, but I include her since she came to Europe to marry a Scottish man in 1908 and they settled in Britain[72], so it may be said she is a standardized British. Furthermore, she was already living in Europe as World War One started, and she did not come to Europe because of the war. For this reason, I decided to include her as a British writer during the First world War in my work.

3.2.1 Mary Borden

She was born on 15 May 1886 in Chicago, USA, and was the second daughter of the milk magnate William Borden and his wife Mary Whiting. She had a peaceful childhood until her

[69] *Id*., p. 256.
[70] *Id*., p. 257.
[71] *Id*., pp. 257-258.
[72] Nicola Beauman, *Borden, Mary [May] [married names Mary Turner; Mary Spears, Lady Spears; pseud. Bridget Maclagan]* (2004), https://www.oxforddnb.com/display/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-57590, last accessed: 23.02.2023, pp. 1-5, p. 1.

mother converted to fundamentalist Christianity and her father died in 1904. Borden attended Vassar College, in the State of New York, from 1904 to 1907. After that, she set off for a chaperoned world tour during which she met her future husband, the Scottish lay-missionary George Douglas Turner. They married in Lausanne, Switzerland, in 1908 and had three children.[73] Once in London, as her husband was abroad nurturing his interest in social reform, Borden had an affair with another man, the British painter and writer Percy Wyndham Lewis. As the First World War broke out in 1914, her husband enlisted and Borden, after giving birth to their third child in London, volunteered with the French Red Cross and worked in a makeshift typhoid hospital built inside a Dunkirk casino.[74] She had no previous nursing experience, but she spoke a little French. Fortunately, and unlike many other volunteers, she was willing to work in the wards with typhoid victims. Nevertheless, the hospital soon proved to be bad equipped, with a very high mortality rate, and hindered by bureaucracy. Therefore, Borden decided to fund and manage her own hospital unit for the French Army and wrote to General Joffre for approval. It was an offer he could not refuse and so, in 1915, Borden took command of *L'Hôpital Chirurgical Mobil No.1*, near Rousbrugge, in Flanders, however she moved several times during the war.[75] In 1916, on the Somme, she met the soldier and Anglo-French liaison officer, Edward Louis Spears, with whom she fell in love and she asked Turner for a divorce. She married Spears on 31 March 1918 under the bombardment of Paris and in 1921 they had a son. Unfortunately, their marital life soon became unhappy because of the

[73] Nicola Beauman, *Borden, Mary [May] [married names Mary Turner; Mary Spears, Lady Spears; pseud. Bridget Maclagan]* (2004), https://www.oxforddnb.com/display/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-57590, last accessed: 23.02.2023, p. 1.
[74] Beauman, *op cit.*, p. 2.
[75] Hazel Hutchison, "Introduction", in M. Borden *The Forbidden Zone: A Nurse's Impressions of the First World War* (London: Hesperus Press, 2008): pp. xiii-xvi, p. xiii.

domineering and violent attitudes of her new husband.[76] A skilled novelist, she wrote all her life long, until she died on 2 December 1968, at the age of eighty-two.[77]

Undoubtedly, her most famous book is *The Forbidden Zone*. It was written during the rare snatches of time she had while serving as nurse during the First World War. In 1917 she sent a manuscript to Collins for publication, but it was refused because of its content – made of many graphic accounts of the war that often described mutilated soldiers or the gruesome scenery of the operating room – that was considered controversial and possibly damaging for wartime morale. Therefore, the book was not published until 1929.[78] In the preface to her book, Borden describes it as a "collection of fragments"[79] and she explains the title by saying "I have called [it] *The Forbidden Zone* because the strip of land immediately behind the zone of fire where I was stationed went by that name in the French Army".[80] Furthermore, she claims: "I have not invented anything in this book. […] The five stories I have written recently from memory; they recount true episodes that I cannot forget".[81] And she follows, "[…] they are fragments of a great confusion. Any attempt to reduce them to order would require artifice on my part and would falsify them"[82] and, also, "[…] I have blurred the bare horror of facts and softened the reality in spite of myself, not because I wished to do so, but because I was incapable of a nearer approach to the truth".[83] The main theme of the book is the courage of humanity in the face of death.[84] And for many years the book remained almost unknown, with only few sections reprinted, mostly in anthologies of women's war writing.[85] The style Borden used is

[76] Beauman, *Borden, Mary [May] [married names Mary Turner; Mary Spears, Lady Spears; pseud. Bridget Maclagan]*, cit., p. 2.
[77] Beauman, cit., p. 3.
[78] Hutchison, "Introduction", in M. Borden *The Forbidden Zone: A Nurse's Impressions of the First World War*, cit., p. xiv.
[79] Mary Borden, *The Forbidden Zone: A Nurse's Impressions of the First World War* (London: Hesperus Press, 2008): p. 3.
[80] Borden, *op. cit.*, p. 3.
[81] *Ibid*.
[82] *Ibid*.
[83] *Ibid*.
[84] Hutchison, "Introduction", in M. Borden, *op. cit.*, p. xv.
[85] *Id*., pp. xv-xvi.

peculiar, with a fragmentary method, clipped sentences, and unusual punctuation, that make it an even more powerful text.[86] The book is divided into two parts, "Part One: The North" that focuses more on the description of war scenarios; and "Part Two: The Somme – Hospital Sketches" that, as the title suggests, deals more with her experience as a nurse on the Western Front military hospital she run. The two parts are made up of seventeen short stories, five of which have been added after the war, as she heavily revised her original manuscript, and they are: "Enfant de Malheur", "Rosa", "Blind", "The Priest and the Rabbi", and "The Two Gunners".[87]

The first excerpt from the book I would like to analyse is taken from the first section of the book, "The North", it is entitled "The Regiment", and it runs:

> A regiment was marching along the high road towards the town. In the distance, looking towards Belgium, you could see it coming down the white road. It was a shadow moving across the bright surface of the country against the wind and against the shadows of the clouds. It looked like the shadow of a snake. […] It was a moving mass of men covered over with the cloth of fatigue. […] Each one carried the same burden that bowed his back, the same knapsack, the same roll of blanket, the same flask, the same dangling box, the same gun. Each one dragged swollen feet in the same thick-crusted boots. The same machine had twisted and bent them all. They did not look quite like men, and yet they were men. […] [T]wo things they did know; they knew that they were not going home, and they knew that they were condemned to death. […] There was only one thing they wanted, and this thing they wanted without hope. They wanted to go home, and they knew they were not going home.[88]

In my view, this excerpt perfectly depicts the situation First-World-War soldiers found themselves in. The war made men all the same, all wearing the same clothes, all moving in the same way, and all desperately desiring the same thing – going home – knowing that they could not fulfil their dream. As in the other sketches and stories that form the book, the man takes a central position, and Borden somehow deconstructs it – literally, in the case of dismembered or mutilated bodies, or only metaphorically, talking about the mind – showing the destructive effects that war has on everything, especially on men.[89] The next fragment I would like to quote

[86] *Id*., p. xv.
[87] *Id*., p. xiv.
[88] Mary Borden, *The Forbidden Zone: A Nurse's Impressions of the First World War*, cit., pp. 22-24.
[89] Sarah Cole, "People in War", in K. McLoughlin (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to War Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009): pp. 25-37, p. 34.

is from the sketch "Moonlight", always in the first part of the book, and it is important because it contains several aspects I would like to observe:

> The little whimpering voice of a man who is going to die in an hour or two comes across the whispering grass from the hut next door. […] It is like the mew of a wounded cat. […] I go on duty at midnight, and he will die and go to Heaven soon after, lulled to sleep by the lullaby of the guns. […] The cannonade is my lullaby. It soothes me. I am used to it. Every night it lulls me to sleep. […] That, too, is natural. It is the whispering of the grass and the scent of the new-mown hay that makes me nervous.[90]

This short passage focuses on sounds, and I found it impressive because the nurse's perception of sounds seems inverted: she is used to the sounds related to the war – the lament of the dying soldier and the gunshots – while the natural sounds make her feel nervous. This may be clarified by the next excerpt: "War, the Alpha and the Omega, world without end – I don't mind it. I am used to it. I fit into it. It provides me with everything that I need, an occupation, a shelter, companions, a jug, and a basin".[91] Basically, war provides her with everything she needs, also with companions, some of which are peculiar:

> For companions there are, of course, the surgeons and the nurses and the old grizzled orderlies, but I have other companions more intimate than these. Three in particular, a lascivious monster, a sick bad-tempered animal, and an angel; Pain, Life and Death. The first two are quarrelsome. They fight over the wounded like dogs over a bone. They snarl and growl and worry the pieces of men that we have here; but Pain is the stronger. She is the greater. She is insatiable, greedy, vilely amorous, lustful, obscene – she lusts for the broken bodies we have here. Wherever I go I find her possessing the men in their beds, lying in bed with them; and Life, the sick animal, mews and whimpers, snarls and barks at her, till Death comes – the Angel, the peacemaker, the healer, whom we wait for, pray for – comes silently, drives Pain away, and horrid, snarling Life, and leaves the man in peace.[92]

In this passage Borden personifies three key elements of the war hospitals, describing them as "companions": Pain, Life, and Death. I feel it is exactly this that she meant when she wrote in her preface to the book "[…] I have blurred the bare horror of facts and softened the reality in spite of myself, not because I wished to do so, but because I was incapable of a nearer approach to the truth".[93] The reality was so hard to describe that she used personification to explain it. Furthermore, another interesting aspect I noticed is that on the 'battle front', as Borden writes, people prayed for Death to come. Thus, there, death was seen as something positive, that

[90] Borden, *The Forbidden Zone: A Nurse's Impressions of the First World War*, cit., pp. 39-40.
[91] *Id*., p. 40.
[92] *Ibid*.
[93] *Id*., p. 3.

brought relief. On the contrary, as in the writings I analysed in chapter two, on the 'home front' people, especially women, hoped for death not to come, in order to be able to see their beloved ones once again. Therefore, here lays an important difference concerning the perspective of women serving on the 'battle front" and the ones staying on the 'home front'.

Another passage from the same sketch describes the routine of the nurses in the field hospital, she is drinking cocoa with colleagues, but the atmosphere is gruesome:

> At midnight I will get up and put on a clean apron and go across the grass to the sterilising room and get a cup of cocoa. At midnight we always have cocoa in there next to the operating room, because there is a big table and boiling water. We push back the drums of clean dressing and the litter of soiled bandages, and drink our cocoa standing round the table. Sometimes there isn't much room. Sometimes legs and arms wrapped in clothes have to be pushed out of the way. We throw them on the floor – they belong to no one and are of no interest to anyone – and drink our cocoa. The cocoa testes very good. It is part of the routine.[94]

It apparently describes a simple and comforting action like drinking cocoa, and yet it is full of gruesome details like spare arms or legs that nurses threw away with nonchalance, they simply were accustomed to it, it was part of their routine, and yet for readers it is something terrible, even to imagine. This was the war, and this is the reason why I firmly believe that this book is worth attention. The last passage from this story deals with what being a young woman in a field hospital meant:

> There are no men here, so why should I be a woman? There are heads and knees and mangled testicles. There are chests with holes as big as your fist, and pulpy thigs, shapeless; and stumps where legs once were fastened. There are eyes […] and mouths that cannot articulate; and parts of faces – the nose gone, or the jaw. There are these things, but no men; so how could I be a woman here and not die of it? […] It is impossible to be a woman here. One must be dead.
> Certainly there were men once. But now they are no longer men.[95]

This passage clearly shows what a young nurse who volunteered had to face daily in the field hospitals. They were constantly in contact with the obscenity of male wounds. It was an unbearable burden.[96] Furthermore, Das underlines that the human rests that are described in the passage above, named as "mangled testicles"[97] are no more men but just parts of them, objects,

[94] Borden, *The Forbidden Zone: A Nurse's Impressions of the First World War*, cit., p. 41.
[95] *Id*., pp. 43-44.
[96] Santanu Das, "'The Impotence of Sympathy': Touch and Trauma in the Memoirs of the First World War Nurses" (*Textual Practice*. Vol. 19, n. 2, 2005): pp. 239-262, p. 245.
[97] Borden, *The Forbidden Zone: A Nurse's Impressions of the First World War*, cit., p. 41.

and this dismantles the fixed and fundamental categories of gender and sexual difference of the pre-war time.[98]

In the first chapter I hinted at the fact that indiscipline was harshly punished, at the very worst with death. Of course, war was frightening, and it was not unusual for soldiers to try and shirk unpleasant duties, pretend to be sick, or seek cover in action.[99] Undoubtedly the most extreme attempt to escape the umpteenth battle was committing suicide. Therefore, hereafter is an excerpt from "Rosa", one of the five stories that Borden added later to the manuscript:

> 'Shot through the mouth. Revolver bullet lodged in the brain.' Monsieur X was reading the ticket that had been pinned to the man's blanket in the dressing station behind the front line.
> But how? I wondered. How queer, I thought. Shot in the mouth - through the roof of the mouth. He must have been asleep in the trench with his mouth open. […]
> But no, it was impossible. […]
> 'But how?' I asked. 'Who?'
> 'Himself. He shot himself through the mouth. It's a suicide.' […]
> 'Why suicide?' I asked aloud.
> 'Panic,' answered Monsieur briefly. 'Fear – he tried to kill himself from fear of being killed. They do sometimes.'
> 'This one didn't.'
> 'No, he didn't succeed. This big one. He ought to be dead. The bullet is here just under the skull. It's gone clean through his brain. Any other man would be dead. He's strong, this big one.'
> 'You'll extract it?'
> 'But certainly.'
> 'And he will live?'
> 'Perhaps.'
> 'And what then?'
> 'He'll be court-martialled and shot, Madame, for attempted suicide.'[100]

This was what usually happened to men who tried to kill themselves, if they did not succeed. After this, surgeons operated the man, trying to save his life and:

> […] suddenly through the confusion I heard a thin soft anguished voice cry as if from a great distance, 'Rosa, Rosa!' it came from his chest; it sounded like the voice of a man lost in a cave. […]
> It was a neat operation and entirely successful. […]
> He was much better next day. I found him sitting up in bed in a clean pink flannel night shirt, staring in front of him. […]
> 'So he knows what will happen?' I asked, following the surgeon to the door.
> 'But certainly. They all know. Everyone in the army knows the penalty.' […]
> That night […], he tore the bandage from his head. […] And the next night the same thing happened, and the next, and the next. Every night he tore off his bandage, and then let himself be tied up again.
> 'If his wound becomes infected he'll die,' said Monsieur X, angrily.
> 'That's what he's trying to do,' I answered. 'Killing himself again before they can shoot him,' […]
> 'He must have had a letter in the trenches – a letter from Rosa or about her. He's not a young man. He's forty or more. […]

[98] Das, "'The Impotence of Sympathy': Touch and Trauma in the Memoirs of the First World War Nurses", *op. cit.*, p. 245.
[99] Alexander Watson, "Mutinies and Military Morale", in H. Strachan (ed.) *The Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War*, cit., pp.191-203, p. 198.
[100] Borden, *op. cit.*, pp. 64-66.

> ‘And here you are with your military regulations asking me to save him for you so that you can shoot him.’ […]
> But what was the good of arguing against army regulations? We were at war. The general could do nothing. The man must be made example, so that those epidemics of suicide could be kept in check. […][101]

I feel that this passage perfectly represents wartime contradictions. The man had to be saved so that the army could execute him as a message for all the others. It also shows the trouble of wartime nurses and the ironies of nursing in wartime, as they had to help men recover just to send them back to their regiments to be killed or to face death all over again, if not too damaged, and so disabled for life.[102]

> Well, he’ll have his chance. […]
> I spoke to the nurse who was going on duty for the night.
> ‘When Rosa pulls off his bandage tonight, leave it off,’ I said abruptly. She looked at me a minute hesitating. She was highly trained. […] ‘All right,’ she said. […]
> Towards evening he grew delirious, but he tore off his bandage all the same, in the middle of the night. He managed to do that. It was his last effort [.] […] He was unconscious next morning and he died two days later[.][103]

I also think that from this episode one can also see that nurses, differently from many generals or even surgeons, were not ‘war machines’, instead, they could sometimes feel empathy and compassion towards their patients – maybe because of their maternal instinct – as this is the case.

Borden’s book is full of interesting examples, since it provides readers with a nurse’s direct view. To conclude, I decided to quote an excerpt taken from “In the Operating Room”, situated within the second part of the book, “The Somme”:

> 1st Patient: Mother of God! Mother of God!
> 2nd Patient: Softly. Softly. You hurt me. Ah! You are hurting me.
> 3rd Patient: I am thirsty.
> 1st Surgeon: Cut the dressing, Mademoiselle.
> 2nd Surgeon: What's his ticket say? Show it to me. What's the X-ray show?
> 3rd Surgeon: Abdomen. Bad pulse. I wonder now?
> 1st Patient: In the name of God be careful. I suffer. I suffer.
> 1st Surgeon: At what time were you wounded?
> 1st Patient: At five this morning.
> 1st Surgeon: Where?
> 1st Patient: In the arm.

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[101] *Id*., pp. 66-69.
[102] Hutchison, “Introduction”, in M. Borden *op. cit.*, pp. xiii-xiv.
[103] Borden, *The Forbidden Zone: A Nurse’s Impressions of the First World War*, cit., pp. 69-70.

1st Surgeon: Yes, yes, but in what sector?
1st Patient: In the trenches near Besanghe.
1st Surgeon: Shell or bullet?
1st Patient: Shell. Merciful God, what are you doing?
A nurse comes in from the corridor. Her apron is splashed with blood.
Nurse: There's a lung just come in. Haemorrhage. Can one of you take him?
1st Surgeon: In a few minutes. In five minutes. Now then, Mademoiselle, strap down that other arm tighter.
Nurse (in doorway) to 2nd Surgeon: There's a knee for you, doctor, and three elbows. In five minutes I'll send in the lung.
(Exit.)
3rd Patient: I'm thirsty. A drink. Give me a drink.
3rd Surgeon: In a little while. You must wait a little.
2nd Patient: Mother of Jesus, not like that. Don't turn my foot like that. Not that way. Take care. Great God, take care! I can't bear it. I tell you, I can't bear it!
2nd Surgeon: There, there, don't excite yourself. You've got a nasty leg, very nasty. Smells bad. Mademoiselle, hold his leg up. It's not pretty at all, this leg.
2nd Patient: Ah, doctor, doctor. What are you doing? Aiee.
2nd Surgeon: Be quiet. Don't move. Don't touch the wound, I tell you. Idiot! Hold his leg. Keep your hands off, you animal. Hold his leg higher. Strap his hands down.
3rd Patient (feebly): I am thirsty. I die of thirst. A drink! A drink!
2nd Patient (screaming): You're killing me. Killing me! I'll die of it! Aieeeee—.
3rd Patient (softly): I am thirsty. For pity a drink.
3rd Surgeon: Have you vomited blood, old man?
3rd Patient: I don't know. A drink please, doctor.
3rd Surgeon: Does it hurt here?
3rd Patient: No, I don't think so. A drink, sister, in pity's name, a drink.
Nurse: I can't give you a drink. It would hurt you. You are wounded in the stomach.
3rd Patient: So thirsty. Just a little drink. Just a drop. Sister for pity, just a drop.
3rd Surgeon: Moisten his lips. How long ago were you wounded?
[…][104]

In the above-quoted sketch Borden's style seems to be at its best.[105] The action described takes place after a particularly destructive action that produced a very high number of casualties arriving in droves at the field hospital where the nurse is working.[106] This is one of the moments of rushing activity that alternates with boring waiting in nurses' experience.[107] In the passage there are three surgeons and three severely injured patients on the operating tables, with other patients constantly coming in and claiming for attention. The sketch looks like a radio drama in which Borden reports, apparently verbatim, the dialogues between the three surgeons and the three patients, with seldom interventions attributed to 'Nurse' – that may be, as may not, the same Borden. And yet, the background of the scene is made menacing by the pounding of the

[104] Borden, *The Forbidden Zone: A Nurse's Impressions of the First World War*, cit., pp. 85-86.
[105] Malcom Brown, "Foreword", in M. Borden, *op. cit.*, pp. vii-xi, p. ix.
[106] *Ibid*.
[107] Hallet, "Volunteer Girls", *Nurse Writers of the Great War*, cit., p. 171.

guns some ten miles off.[108] I would like to add that the rhythm created by the reported dialogues perfectly renders the rushing atmosphere of field hospitals in the climax of action.

To conclude, I would argue that Mary Borden's *The Forbidden Zone* is an immensely important book, since it provides a nurse's first-hand testimony of what the First World War has meant to women working in military hospitals during it. For a reader of our day, as I am, it is almost impossible to read it and not wonder, even for a moment, whether it is fiction. What women and men saw and suffered during the First World War would be unbearable if writing such this did not exist. For this reason, it would be our crucial task to preserve and spread such writings, so that the effort of people such as Mary Borden and all the soldiers, nurses, doctors, and people more in general, will not be forgotten.

To conclude I would like to analyse two war-related poems by the British writer Rose Macaulay.

3.2.2 Rose Macaulay

She was born on 1 August 1881 at Rugby, in England. She was the second of the seven children of George Campbell Macaulay,[109] a classicist[110] who worked as assistant master at Rugby School, and his wife, Grace Mary Conybeare. She lived in Italy for seven years, at Vernazza, a seaside town near Genoa, together with her family. She received her early education mostly from her parents. Furthermore, as a child she was a tomboy.[111] Nevertheless, despite her boyish traits, she was not a masculine woman, at all. On the contrary, she was tall, slim, refined and

[108] Brown, "Foreword", cit., pp. ix-x.
[109] Constance Babington Smith, *Macaulay, Dame (Emilie) Rose*. (2007), https://www.oxforddnb.com/display/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-34668, last accessed: 23.02.2023: pp. 1-5, p. 1.
[110] Margaret R. Higonnet, "Women's Poetry of the First World War", in S. Das (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to the Poetry of the First World War*, cit., pp. 185-197, p. 190
[111] Constance Babington Smith, *Macaulay, Dame (Emilie) Rose*. (2007), https://www.oxforddnb.com/display/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-34668, last accessed: 23.02.2023: pp. 1-5, p. 1.

delicate, brisk in speech but with courteous manners.[112] In 1894, she returned to England, together with her family and attended the Oxford High School, while in 1900 she attended the Sommerville College, also thanks to the financial support she received from her uncle and godfather. There, she read modern history and developed a fascination towards British literature of the seventeenth century. University life represented a panacea for her since it stimulated her independence and helped her in losing her shyness, from which she had suffered since she had returned to England.[113] While she was studying at Sommerville, her family moved to Wales, but in 1905 her father was appointed lecturer in English at Cambridge University, so the following year the family moved to Cambridgeshire. In her university years she began to write, her first poems started to be published, and her early fiction, defined as sombre, concerned woman's life and its problems, with topics that included loss and isolation from society. In the same years she moved to her own flat in London, again thanks to her uncle's generosity. In London, Macaulay started to move in literary circles.[114]

During the First World War, she worked both as a nurse and a land girl until 1916, when she became a civil servant in the War Office, there, she was responsible for exemptions from service and conscientious objectors. It was at the very War Office that she met Gerald O'Donovan, a novelist who was ten years older than her, with whom she started a close friendship. At the beginning Macaulay was reluctant in starting a romantic relationship with him because he was married and already had children, furthermore she had strong religious convictions. Nevertheless, two years later, they became lovers and, even if he never left his wife, their secret relationship lasted until his death.[115] After the war, she continued writing and her talent as a novelist flowered. Furthermore, in 1921 she entered the Bloomsbury circle,

[112] Frank Swinnerton, "Rose Macaulay", *The Kenyon Review* (Vol. 29, n. 5, Nov., 1967): pp. 591-608, p. 594.
[113] Constance Babington Smith, *Macaulay, Dame (Emilie) Rose*. (2007), https://www.oxforddnb.com/display/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-34668, last accessed: 23.02.2023: pp. 1-5, p. 1.
[114] Babington Smith, *Macaulay, Dame (Emilie) Rose*. (2007), cit., p. 2.
[115] *Ibid*.

starting a friendship with Virginia Woolf. During the Second World War she did not write much and in 1941 O'Donovan was diagnosed terminal cancer and doctors gave him six months to live. Macaulay felt deep distress since she was worried by her lover's conditions, but she could not express more than a friend's concern since their relationship had to remain secret. Therefore, after O'Donovan's death in 1942, she became ill and depressed. In 1950 she re-entered the Church of England after a long estrangement started when she became O'Donovan's lover. She died suddenly of a heart attack at her house in London, on 30 October 1958.[116]

As far as it concerns her war-related poetry, it is not vast, but I would like to provide two outstanding examples. The first poem I would like to look at is her famous "Picnic, July 1917" that is part of *Three Days* (1919)[117], her collection of poems:

> We lay and ate sweet hurt-berries
> In the bracken of Hurt Wood.
> Like a quire of singers singing low
> The dark pines stood.
>
> Behind us climbed the Surrey hills,
> Wild, wild in greenery;
> At our feet the downs of Sussex broke
> To an unseen sea.
>
> And life was bound in a still ring,
> Drowsy, and quiet and sweet...
> When heavily up the south-east wind
> The great guns beat.
>
> We did not wince, we did not weep,
> We did not curse or pray;
> We drowsily heard, and someone said,
> 'They sound clear today'.
>
> We did not shake with pity and pain,
> Or sicken and blanch white.
> We said, 'If the wind's from over there
> There'll be rain tonight'.
>
> Once pity we knew, and rage we knew,
> And pain we knew, too well,
> As we stared and peered dizzily
> Through the gates of hell.
>
> But now hell's gates are an old tale;

[116] *Id*., pp. 2-3.
[117] Higonnet, "Women's Poetry of the First World War", in S. Das (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to the Poetry of the First World War*, cit., p. 190.

Remote the anguish seems;
The guns are muffled and far away,
Dreams within dreams.

And far and far are Flanders mud,
And the pain of Picardy;
And the blood that runs there runs beyond
The wide waste sea.

We are shut about by guarding walls:
(We have built them lest we run
Mad from dreaming of naked fear
And of black things done).

We are ringed all round by guarding walls,
So high, they shut the view.
Not all the guns that shatter the world
Can quite break through.

Oh, guns of France, oh, guns of France,
Be still, you crash in vain...
Heavily up the south wind throb
Dull dreams of pain,...

Be still, be still, south wind, lest your
Blowing should bring the rain...
We'll lie very quiet on Hurt Hill,
And sleep once again.

Oh, we'll lie quite still, nor listen nor look,
While the earth's bounds reel and shake,
Lest, battered too long, our walls and we
Should break...should break...[118]

The above-mentioned collection is known for containing poems that, according to Higonnet, "start with a binary structure that contrasts the speaker in a familiar civilian context to a distant world of war".[119] "Picnic, July 1917" is an example of this. It is a pastoral poem, even if not an easy one, that evokes the war – already at its third year – first distantly then closely.[120] Macaulay starts the poem with an idyllic scene, where two people are lying in the bracken of 'Hurt Wood', eating 'hurt-berries', and they are initially lulled by the sound of the trees. So, apparently, there is a perfect harmony.[121] Higonnet suggests they "might be lovers or coworkers in the Land Army".[122] However, already in the first lines there are hints to something negative that is about

[118] Rose Macaulay, "Picnic, July 1917" (1917), in *Poetry by Heart*, https://www.poetrybyheart.org.uk/poems/picnic, last accessed: 07.09.2023.
[119] Higonnet, "Women's Poetry of the First World War", cit., p. 190.
[120] *Ibid*.
[121] *Ibid*.
[122] *Id*., pp. 190-191.

to come, and they can be found in the same word 'hurt'. In fact, a summer wind from the south brings threatening sounds of guns to Surrey, along with a promise of rain that prefigures the tears hold back by people on the 'home front' in England.[123] In Macaulay's idyll the people are enclosed by 'guarding walls' that prevent people from the view of the war across the Channel. And yet, according to Higonnet's comment, "despite psychological mechanisms of denial that muffle the sound of guns and [accustom people] to the 'old tale' of 'the gates of hell', [people] still hear the guns beating".[124] According to Higonnet, Macaulay wants to point out the theme of loss of mental control from the representation of the soldiers at the front. In Macaulay's poem, the only way to maintain sanity seems, according to Higonnet, to keep the pain and the 'hell' represented by the battlefields across the water separated from work in England.[125] Furthermore, the narration is interrupted five times by ellipses that should betray the treat of psychological collapse.[126] In the final section of the poem the narrator directly addresses the guns and the wind, repeatedly begging them to 'be still'.[127]

The last poem I would like to analyse is quite different from the one seen above. Macaulay was famous for her concern with the banal life experienced by women at home, in England, but she also aimed at illustrating that women had an equal right to participate in the war effort, as is evident from this poem, entitled "Many Sisters to Many Brothers"[128]:

> When we fought campaigns (in the long Christmas rains)
> With soldiers spread in troops on the floor,
> I shot as straight as you, my losses were as few,
> My victories as many, or more.
> And when in naval battle, amid cannon's rattle,
> Fleet met fleet in the bath,
> My cruisers were as trim, my battleships as grim,
> My submarines cut as swift a path.
> Or, when it rained too long, and the strength of the strong

[123] *Id*., p. 190.
[124] *Id*., p. 191.
[125] *Ibid*.
[126] *Ibid*.
[127] *Ibid*.
[128] Thecontemporarypalimpsest, "'But for me…a war is poor fun": A Study of Rose Macaulay's War Poetry'" (23 December 2017), in *Wordpress.com*, https://thecontemporarypalimpsest.wordpress.com/2017/12/23/but-for-me-a-war-is-poor-fun-a-study-of-rose-macaulays-war-poetry/, last accessed: 07.09.2023, n.p.

Surged up and broke away with blows,
I was as fit and keen, my fists hit as clean,
Your black eye matched my bleeding nose.
Was there a scrap or ploy in which you, the boy,
Could better me? You could not climb higher,
Ride straighter, run as quick (and to smoke made you sick)
…But I sit here, and you're under fire.

Oh, it's you that have the luck, out there in blood and muck:
You were born beneath a kindly star;

All we dreamt, I and you, you can really go and do,
And I can't, the way things are.
In a trench you are sitting, while I am knitting
A hopeless sock that never gets done.
Well, here's luck, my dear;--and you've got it, no fear;
But for me…a war is poor fun.[129]

The poem conveys the commonplace act of writing to a soldier, this similarity is evoked also by the title.[130] In the poem the speaker speaks on behalf of all the women safely waiting at home for the return of their beloved men from France and Belgium. The speaker underlines that she suffers as much as her brother[131], in saying "Your black eye matched my bleeding nose"[132]. According to the author of the blog, Thecontemporarypalimpsest, "the enjambement lines are indicative of the long duration of the war as they create a sense of fluidity throughout the verse and, hence, lengthen the poem".[133] Moreover, according to the blogger, in her poem, Macaulay underlines the sexual inequality that was present in 1910s, and the speaker in the poem basically argues that she is as good as her brother[134] – but he is at war while she is at home. It is possible to perceive a vein of envy in the speaker's words as she asks to the boy "Could you better me? You could not climb higher,/Ride straighter, run as quick/[…]…But I sit here, and you're under

[129] Rose Macaulay, "Many Sisters to Many Brothers" (1914), in *All Poetry*, https://allpoetry.com/Many-Sisters-to-Many-Brothers, last accessed: 07.97.2023.
[130] Thecontemporarypalimpsest, "'But for me…a war is poor fun": A Study of Rose Macaulay's War Poetry'" (23 December 2017), in *Wordpress.com*, https://thecontemporarypalimpsest.wordpress.com/2017/12/23/but-for-me-a-war-is-poor-fun-a-study-of-rose-macaulays-war-poetry/, last accessed: 07.09.2023.
[131] *Ibid*.
[132] Rose Macaulay, "Many Sisters to Many Brothers" (1914), in *All Poetry*, https://allpoetry.com/Many-Sisters-to-Many-Brothers, last accessed: 07.97.2023.
[133] Thecontemporarypalimpsest, "'But for me…a war is poor fun": A Study of Rose Macaulay's War Poetry'", *cit.*.
[134] *Ibid*.

fire.".[135] Here Macaulay may also be adding a feminist element, suggesting that also women wanted and could help in the war effort. In fact, the speaker is basically suggesting that women can be just as good as men in performing these actions and, consequently, in engaging combat.[136] The final stanza stresses even more the concept of gender inequality, by highlighting women's pre-established role at home in contrast with men's responsibility to fight for their country.[137] Basically, women are encouraged to accept their socially-established role at home and, thus, are excluded from taking up an active role in battles. Therefore, the poem may be seen as a critic to the sense of uselessness felt by women at the time.[138]

In my view, the two last poems are very important since they are strictly connected to their writer's role during the war. The first one is more related to her work as a land girl since it is more connected with the description of the landscape and the life on the 'home front', even if it conceals something more than this, as I have explained; while the second one is more close to her – together with many women's – will to actively participate in the war, even if sometimes hampered by social norms. Of course, Macaulay's poems are very different from Mary Borden's sketches from *The Forbidden Zone* that represent a visual and gruesome first-hand testimony of the First World War and its horrors. Nevertheless, in my opinion, they were worth attention since they dealt with equally important topics.

To conclude, it is possible to state that women's written production related to the First World War is vast and varied, as well as men's. Furthermore, women's writings provide a twofold perspective on the First World War: on the one hand, there are those women who lived the war and thus wrote it from the 'home front', therefore showing a homely perspective, more concerned with women's social advancements and anxiety related to the separation from their

[135] Rose Macaulay, "Many Sisters to Many Brothers" (1914), in *All Poetry*, https://allpoetry.com/Many-Sisters-to-Many-Brothers, last accessed: 07.97.2023.
[136] Thecontemporarypalimpsest, "'But for me…a war is poor fun": A Study of Rose Macaulay's War Poetry'", cit..
[137] *Ibid*.
[138] *Ibid*.

beloved ones fighting in the trenches; on the other hand, there are the writings of VADs and nurses from the very 'battle front' that provided a completely different female perspective on the First World War. In fact, by performing an active role on the 'battle front', for the first time women had access to a new scenario that used to be an exclusively male one. Nonetheless, only by intermingling these two different perspectives, that result as reliable as men's, one may acquire a complete view of what World War One actually meant for women, and only adding them to men's writings the perspective concerning the First World War phenomenon could become global. However, it is necessary to underline that female writings related to the First World War have been virtually ignored until 1980s, thus a further investigation is needed, also to allow the preservation of an important testimony of a crucial historical period, both in terms of human losses and of social advancements.

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Summary in Italian

La Prima guerra mondiale coinvolge, tra il 1914 e il 1918, le maggiori potenze a livello mondiale segnando, sicuramente, un momento importante nella storia dell'uomo come evento di portata epocale e rivoluzionaria. Conosciuta anche come la Grande guerra, presenta sin da subito delle caratteristiche peculiari che la distinguono dalle guerre combattute in precedenza. Innanzitutto, da un punto di vista prettamente militare, il conflitto vede l'utilizzo di attrezzi rudimentali, come asce, mazze e granate, accanto a nuove invenzioni tecnologiche dell'epoca, come il sottomarino, l'aeroplano, alcuni gas e forme di esplosivo che rendono lo scontro più violento e sanguinoso rispetto a quanto accadeva in precedenza. Inoltre, la Prima guerra mondiale è definita come un evento 'totale', nel senso che l'intera popolazione dei Paesi schierati viene coinvolta, pertanto, non solo i soldati al fronte e gli eserciti formati da civili, ma anche donne, anziani e bambini partecipano attivamente allo sforzo bellico. Un altro fattore che influisce nel definire la singolarità di tale conflitto è la sua durata. Infatti, i precedenti conflitti erano sempre stati misurati in termini di settimane, la durata della Prima guerra mondiale, invece, si misura in mesi. Tale conflitto lascia un segno indelebile nella storia anche dal punto di vista delle perdite umane, poiché i soldati uccisi in esso ammontano a circa nove milioni e i civili, morti a causa di fame, malattie e violenza, sono circa trenta milioni.

Il conflitto scoppia nel 1914, più precisamente il 28 luglio 1914, quando l'Impero austro-ungarico dichiara guerra alla Serbia, a un mese di distanza dall'assassinio dell'arciduca Francesco Ferdinando e sua moglie Sofia a Sarajevo. La guerra vede sin da subito lo schierarsi di due fazioni contrapposte: la Triplice Alleanza e la Triplice Intesa, di cui fa parte anche la Gran Bretagna che, nonostante l'iniziale opposizione dei radicali, è vincolata alla protezione della neutralità belga tramite un trattato e, pertanto, entra in guerra. In Gran Bretagna la coscrizione diviene obbligatoria a partire dal gennaio 1916, prima l'arruolamento era su base volontaria, pertanto, inizialmente il Paese è costretto far leva sul senso morale degli uomini nel

proteggere i propri cari e con essi la propria patria. In questa fase la propaganda e la stampa giocano un ruolo fondamentale. Tuttavia, con l'entrata in vigore della coscrizione obbligatoria per gli uomini, si viene rapidamente a creare una carenza di manodopera che lo Stato deve sostituire in tempi brevi. In questo senso, la Prima guerra mondiale segna un cambiamento radicale dal punto di vista sociale, vedendo l'uscita delle donne dall'ambiente domestico, definito come sicuro e appropriato per il loro sesso dalle rigide regole della società patriarcale britannica dell'epoca, e la loro entrata in massa nel mondo del lavoro salariato. Tuttavia, l'esperienza delle donne britanniche in rapporto alla Prima guerra mondiale non può essere definita come omogenea ma è influenzata, in particolar modo, dalla zona geografica di appartenenza e, in parte, dal ceto sociale. Infatti, le donne che risiedono in città si vedono costrette a far fronte a una serie di rischi, così come hanno accesso ad una serie di opportunità lavorative, mentre, quelle che risiedono nelle zone più rurali hanno una diversa varietà di rischi e opportunità.

In città le donne si vedono impiegate principalmente nelle fabbriche di munizioni, ma accedono anche ad altri tipi di lavoro, come autiste, impiegate pubbliche, membri del corpo di polizia, in generale, tutti lavori in precedenza riservati agli uomini. Nelle campagne, invece, le donne svolgono lavori agricoli a contatto diretto con la terra e gli animali. È proprio in questo contesto che si sviluppa il fenomeno delle '*Land Girls*', ovvero, una nuova figura sociale creata appositamente per invogliare le donne borghesi istruite a trasferirsi dalle città alle zone rurali per contribuire allo sforzo bellico e, allo stesso tempo, ripopolare le campagne. Questo arduo compito di costruzione di una nuova figura sociale, che diverrà simbolo della 'donna ideale' richiede un grande sforzo, soprattutto dal punto di vista propagandistico. La diretta conseguenza dell'uscita delle donne dall'ambiente domestico, in cui prima erano 'confinate' dalle severe regole della società patriarcale di stampo vittoriano, è una rapida emancipazione, grazie alla nuova disponibilità economica. I movimenti per l'emancipazione delle donne avevano visto la

loro alba già verso la fine del diciannovesimo secolo ma è con l'avvento della Prima guerra mondiale e l'entrata in massa delle donne nel mondo del lavoro salariato che si iniziano a vedere miglioramenti consistenti. Inoltre, un'altra diretta conseguenza, come già anticipato, è l'entrata in crisi della mentalità prettamente patriarcale del tempo, costretta a mettersi al passo con gli avanzamenti sociali richiesti da una società in crisi. Quelle appena descritte sono le donne che si adoperano a favore dello sforzo bellico sul fronte 'domestico'; tuttavia, è fondamentale prendere in considerazione anche l'altra faccia della medaglia in termini di azione femminile, ovvero, le donne che si attivano sul fronte di battaglia: le volontarie (in inglese '*VAD – Voluntary Aid Detachments*') e le infermiere specializzate.

Le donne attive sul fronte di battaglia rappresentano, appunto, l'altra faccia della medaglia, rispetto a quelle che sperimentano la guerra dal fronte 'domestico'. Esse, infatti, hanno la possibilità di vedere la guerra da una prospettiva completamente diversa e nuova per quanto riguarda l'esperienza femminile, inoltre, svolgendo una professione considerata appropriata per il loro sesso. Tuttavia, esse possono, a loro volta, essere divise in due macro-gruppi: le volontarie (spesso con una preparazione parziale o nulla) e le infermiere specializzate (con una formazione completa di almeno tre anni e una precedente esperienza lavorativa, almeno negli ospedali civili). A causa del protrarsi del conflitto e dell'elevato numero di feriti conseguente alle sanguinose battaglie, a partire dal 1915 anche le volontarie iniziano a essere accettate all'interno degli ospedali militari, seppur con compiti più umili e costrette ad affrontare la convivenza con le infermiere specializzate. Le volontarie costituiscono un gruppo eterogeneo composto da donne borghesi di diverse fasce d'età e con differenti abilità, che si suddividono in formate, semi-formate e prive di formazione. Alcune di loro decidono, dopo il 1915, di sottoporsi a un periodo di formazione di sei mesi e, durante la permanenza negli ospedali militari, le loro abilità vengono valutate mediante dei test.

Il presente lavoro, oltre a delineare il contesto storico e sociale che caratterizza la Prima guerra mondiale verte anche, e soprattutto, su un altro importante elemento che caratterizza questo fenomeno: la scrittura. Gli scritti prodotti durante la Prima guerra mondiale (siano essi di poeti-soldato, di donne, propagandistici, giornalistici, letterari, diaristici) costituiscono un insieme vastissimo. All'interno di questo, è importante, innanzitutto, adoperare una distinzione tra il giornalismo e la letteratura. Il primo consiste principalmente di giornali locali e nazionali, con le loro differenze strutturali e funzionali. Nel corso della Prima guerra mondiale, infatti, i giornali venivano utilizzati prevalentemente come fonte di informazione, anche se non sempre attendibile, per avere notizie sui soldati al fronte e sull'avanzamento della guerra. La letteratura, al contrario, aveva come scopo principale quello di fornire una testimonianza veritiera su quello che la guerra realmente rappresentava e comprendeva, una carneficina senza eguali, successiva fonte di disillusione e desolazione per molti giovani arruolatisi con iniziale entusiasmo. All'interno di questo macrogruppo rappresentato dalla letteratura, il presente lavoro opera varie importanti distinzioni. Prima tra tutte, quella tra gli scritti prodotti dagli uomini e quelli prodotti dalle donne. Infatti, fino agli anni Ottanta del Novecento gli scritti femminili riguardanti la Prima guerra mondiale, che costituiscono una discreta percentuale sul totale, sono stati praticamente ignorati, perché considerati di scarsa validità, poiché solo gli scritti prodotti dai poeti-soldato che avevano vissuto la guerra in prima persona sul campo di battaglia erano considerati affidabili testimonianze degne di considerazione critica. Tuttavia, negli ultimi decenni, questa credenza si è dimostrata infondata, poiché, anche le donne hanno svolto, sia sul fronte domestico, che su quello bellico, un ruolo fondamentale durante gli anni del conflitto, pertanto, anche le loro testimonianze sono degne di nota. Per quanto riguarda, dunque, gli scritti prettamente femminili essi possono essere suddivisi sommariamente tra scritti di donne appartenenti al fronte 'domestico' e quelli di donne appartenenti al fronte di battaglia. Sul fronte 'domestico' il focus di tali scritti prende due direzioni principali: una è quella propagandistica

di incitamento alla guerra, come si può vedere, ad esempio, dalle poesie della giornalista e scrittrice Jessie Pope (1868-1941); l'altra è quella che vuole rappresentare il disagio sofferto dalle donne che, dalla relativa sicurezza del fronte 'domestico', aspettano i loro cari che combattono al fronte, e la sofferenza spesso arrecata dalla loro perdita. Per quanto riguarda, invece, gli scritti delle donne che vivono la guerra sul fronte di battaglia è possibile operare una distinzione tra gli scritti delle volontarie e quelli delle infermiere specializzate. Le prime, in molti dei loro scritti, si presentano come delle eroine che devono superare varie difficoltà legate all'ambiente in cui si trovano, incluso il rapporto conflittuale con le infermiere specializzate, la cui severità, distacco, e inumanità vengono spesso esagerati; altre tematiche includono la descrizione di viaggi attraverso paesaggi nuovi, i comportamenti ridicoli di alcune infermiere specializzate, le emozioni provate dalle giovani volontarie che sperimentano per la prima volta un lavoro retribuito, e le lamentele riguardo le umili condizioni di vita e lavoro in cui queste si trovano. Per quanto riguarda gli scritti delle infermiere specializzate, invece, essi sono più focalizzati sulla descrizione degli orrori provocati dalla guerra, con accurate descrizioni del corpo maschile (con cui per la prima volta entrano in contatto all'interno della sfera pubblica) ferito e mutilato e del senso di compassione e di colpa che esse provano contemporaneamente per essere in salute mentre i soldati si trovano in una condizione ben peggiore. Inoltre, a differenza degli scritti degli uomini, che evidenziano la presenza di paura, quelli delle infermiere, e delle donne in generale, sembrano contenere un maggiore senso di ansia. Per tutti questi motivi la produzione scritta delle donne riguardante la Prima guerra mondiale rappresenta un'importante fonte di testimonianza storica capace di fornire un punto di vista diverso da quello dei poeti-soldato, utile per una comprensione più ampia e completa di questo fenomeno.

Il presente lavoro è articolato in tre capitoli. Il primo costituisce un cappello introduttivo al contesto storico della Prima guerra mondiale, così come all'importanza attribuita alla scrittura

e alla propaganda in esso, con uno sguardo alle principali differenze che caratterizzano gli scritti maschili e quelli femminili.

Il secondo capitolo verte sul ruolo delle donne che si sono attivate sul fronte 'domestico', esponendo le differenze tra la vita in città e quella in campagna e analizzando le funzioni delle loro produzioni scritte. Il capitolo si conclude proponendo due esempi di donne scrittrici dell'epoca, ovvero, Jessie Pope e Eleanor Farjeon, e un'analisi di alcune delle loro poesie.

Il terzo, e ultimo, capitolo si focalizza sulle volontarie e le infermiere specializzate, spiegando il loro ruolo sul fronte di battaglia e la loro formazione, passando poi a una descrizione dei loro scritti e delle loro tematiche, concludendo con altri due esempi presi dal mondo femminile che sono Mary Borden e Rose Macaulay.

I testi critici presi in considerazione per la stesura del presente lavoro si sono rivelati completi e utili per la descrizione del fenomeno da un punto di vista storico e sociale, tuttavia, è importante sottolineare che i testi e gli articoli critici riguardo le donne che hanno prodotto degli scritti, siano essi poesia o prosa, riguardanti la Prima guerra mondiale sono scarsi e di non facile reperibilità.

In conclusione, la Prima guerra mondiale rappresenta uno spartiacque nella storia dell'umanità, poiché, con essa, per la prima volta, un conflitto ha raggiunto dimensioni tali da essere considerato mondiale, in più, coinvolgendo tutti gli strati della società, di ogni età e genere. Oltre agli avanzamenti di tipo militare e sociale prodotti dal conflitto è importante sottolineare il ruolo svolto dalla scrittura, come fonte di informazione e testimonianza. Pertanto, si può concludere che gli scritti delle donne prodotti in queste particolare periodo storico dovrebbero essere considerati al pari di quelli degli uomini, perché altrettanto autorevoli e veritieri. Infatti, nel presente lavoro si è tentato di sottolineare quanto anche le donne abbiano svolto un ruolo

attivo nello sforzo bellico sia sul fronte ‘domestico’ che su quello di battaglia. La loro produzione letteraria, pertanto, è da considerarsi autentica e frutto di un’esperienza diretta. Sebbene meriterebbe una maggiore attenzione critica, essa costituisce una parte importante delle testimonianze riguardanti questo periodo storico, che andrebbero considerate nella loro totalità al fine di una sua analisi e comprensione completa ed esaustiva.