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VOICES OF PEACE ***First World War Women Poets as Pacifists***

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TABLE OF CONTENT

| | |
|---|----|
| INTRODUCTION | 5 |
| Chapter 1: The Iconic Role of Women and a Historical Perspective on Modern Conflict | |
| 1.1 Gender and War | 7 |
| 1.2 The First World War and its Impact | 11 |
| Chapter 2: Women's Contributions to the Great War | |
| 2.1 Standing for Peace | 14 |
| 2.2 Women's War Efforts | 15 |
| 2.3 Vads Nurses: Verse in Service | 16 |
| 2.4 Vera Brittain: A Journey Towards Peace | 18 |
| 2.5 Barriers of Indescribable Experience: Vera Brittain: <i>Hospital Sanctuary & Military Hospital</i> | 22 |
| Chapter 3: Women's Voices in War Time | |
| 3.1 Women's Poetic Perspectives on War and Peace | 26 |
| 3.2 Innovative Avant-Garde Poetry Of WWI Edith Sitwell <i>The Dancers: During A Great Battle, 1916</i> | 28 |
| 3.3 Lost Voices of The First World War | 34 |
| Chapter 4: Marjorie Pickthall: A Poetic Voice Bridging Borders | |
| 4.1 Canadian Identity in Times of War | 37 |
| 4.2 Canadian Women on the Frontlines | 40 |
| 4.3 Canadian Churches' Role in WWI: Concealed Pacifism | 43 |
| 4.4 Marjorie Pickthall: A Christian Mystic Poet <i>Marching Men</i> | 46 |
| 4.5 Dealing with Homecoming Soldiers | 50 |
| APPENDIX | 55 |
| <i>"Interviewing Grandma"</i> | |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY | 59 |

INTRODUCTION

The central aim of this thesis is to illuminate women's contributions and expressions during the Great War (1914-1918). These are the voices of women who have played pivotal roles in times of conflict analysing their experiences and shedding light on the multiple ways in which they have shaped and responded to the tumultuous scenery of war.

In Chapter One, this thesis provides a discussion on the complex relationship between gender and war underlining how societal roles have mixed with the experience of warfare throughout history as well as exploring the evolution of these gender dynamics, from women primarily serving as caregivers and homemakers to their emerging roles as active participants in conflicts.

In Chapter Two it focuses on women's contributions to the Great War. This includes an examination of the interplay between suffrage and peace movements during the war years, as well as a close look at the diverse roles that women played in the war effort, from working in munitions factories to serving as nurses on the frontlines. It also focuses on the personal journey of Vera Brittain, whose transformation from an ardent patriot to a staunch pacifist provides an emotional case study of how women's experiences during the Great War influenced their activism. In this context, Vera Brittain's poetry, in particular two of her works, *Hospital Sanctuary* and *Military Hospital*, have been analysed. The poetic expressions of women during this period serves as a testament to their commitment to peace and their reflections on the horrors of war.

In Chapter Three of this dissertation, the objective is to acknowledge the overshadowed contributions of women such as Edith Sitwell and her poem "The Dancers: During a Great Battle, 1916." Sitwell's avant-garde poetry vividly captures the emotional and intellectual essence of early twentieth-century society during the Great War. Furthermore, Professor

Ruzich's exploration of “lost voices” in World War I poetry reveals its important role in reflecting societal responses to the conflict. This chapter also underlines why these diverse voices, particularly women's poetry, were marginalized over time and emphasizes the importance of embracing and amplifying all perspectives.

The last chapter turns its attention to Canada, exploring the impact of the Great War on Canadian identity and the roles Canadian women played on the frontlines as nurses and volunteers. Additionally, it uncovers the hidden pacifism within Canadian churches and the lesser-known aspect of Canadian involvement in the Great War investigating on Marjorie Pickthall as well as her poem *Marchin Men*; a poet whose life was caught in-between borders and who made a substantial contribution to the transformation of poetry during her relatively brief lifetime. Finally, in the supplementary material provided within the appendix of my dissertation, I have included an interview with my grandmother Barbara, who describes her father's involvement in World War I; an experience that left an indelible mark on both him as a war veteran and his wife and their family.

To conclude, in the process of conducting research for my thesis, I was fortunate enough to obtain valuable insights by contacting Professor Connie M. Ruzich Ph.D., who holds the position of Professor of English and serves as the Coordinator of the Writing Center at Robert Morris University in Pennsylvania. For comprehensive information regarding Marjorie Pickthall, I reached out to both the University of Victoria and the University of Toronto, where I received useful resources, including textual information and visual materials such as photographs.

CHAPTER 1

THE ICONIC ROLE OF WOMEN AND A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON MODERN CONFLICT

1.1 GENDER AND WAR

"If the nation is made up of men and women, why is a female figure representing it as an allegory? And why if men await the place of command, women are seen in the statues holding weapons?"¹ These are the questions Alberto Mario Banti asks at the beginning of his book *The Honour of the Nation*, where he goes back in time and analyses the classical origins of female allegories of the nation. The latter are presented according to a general tripartite: the first type features a young and beautiful woman, seated or standing in a noble position, in some cases wearing armour and bearing arms pointed downwards and with the blade held close to the body. In addition to this, various symbols of the nation can be added, which in the case of Britain may be the lion or the trident of Neptune, symbol of power over the sea. The second type is a variant of the first with the breasts uncovered while the third is given by a female figure completely unarmed, sometimes represented with bare breasts, and at others, covered. Each of these national allegories, which finds its moment during the 16th and 19th centuries, "denounces maximum diffusion and politicisation between the Greek and Roman symbols, later resumed and codified in the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance."²

Towards the end of the 1700s, during the British war against Napoleon, the image of Britannia was widely used to represent the nation, domestic and maritime forces. It encouraged a fair and courageous war that defended purity. Although the image of Britannia initially carried, along with the shield, a lance, it was also often painted with a trident symbolizing naval strength. She was depicted with classical qualities that closely resembled Minerva the Goddess of War who

¹ Alberto Mario Banti, *L'onore della nazione. Identità sessuali e violenza nel nazionalismo europeo dal XVIII secolo alla Grande Guerra*, Einaudi, Torino, 2005, p. 5 (translations are my own).

² *Idem*, p. 8.

was often seated upright wearing armour and medieval clothing. On the other hand, from the middle of the eighteenth century, and subsequently during the French Revolution, the role and image of women partly matured in relation to the changing nature of the dominant political subject; namely the nation was more and more understood as a body of sovereign citizens. The words of Rousseau in *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* perfectly describe how women were seen as virtuous mothers, citizens and as governess:

Could I forget that precious half of the republic that assures the happiness of the other and whose sweetness and goodness maintain its peace and good morals? Amiable and virtuous women of Geneva, the destiny of your sex will always be to govern our destiny. Happy are we when your chaste power, exercised solely within the marriage bond, makes itself felt only for the glory of the state and the wellbeing of the public!³

In October 1789, many women participated in the march on Versailles and joined the meetings of the public assemblies as well as the sessions of the national legislature and other such popular activities. Towards the end of the 1790s, women's societies were created in various towns in France, and more and more women expressed the desire to join the nation's army purely for the honour of defending their homeland just as their men. In England, according to Mary Wollstonecraft, motherhood legitimized women's citizenship. She was an activist who wrote *Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) in order to attack Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). However, the fame thus achieved was overshadowed by Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man* (1791-92). "Wollstonecraft railed against the rich and great who were no longer manly because they lived in idleness without keeping either body or spirit in exercise."⁴ In contrast, Burke described how women were "pusillanimous, soft, delicate, not meant to exercise the intellect and thereby conquer the virtues."⁵ This concept forms the central theme of Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of*

³ Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, Oxford University Press, NY, 1994, p. 58.

⁴ Gisela Bock, *Le Donne nella Storia Europea, dal Medioevo ai Nostri Giorni*, Edizione digitale Laterza, Bari, 2023, posizione 1960, (translations are my own).

⁵ *Ibidem*.

Woman, in which the author strongly criticizes the ideas of Rousseau and English ideologues who believed that women should devote themselves exclusively to pleasing their husbands, obeying them and taking care of household chores. The *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was essentially a response and a challenge to the limiting and discriminatory views regarding the role of women in society, but it was also a criticism to women, from whom she demanded a revolution of morals. For her, female weakness and sensuality was to be blamed on education, which sharply distinguished between the sexes and induced women to resemble men's image of them. In fact, "women were taught eagerness to please, coquetry and they were systematically made voluptuous, only to be degraded to slaves satisfied with ephemeral pleasure."⁶

During the first half of the nineteenth century, although with great difficulty at first, women began to venture out of the domestic-private sphere and conquer spaces of autonomy, civil and political equality. In fact, they were excluded from the right to vote, they were forbidden access to universities, they could not dispose of their property, nor could they sign contracts. Moreover, they could not use their own wages, have legal custody of their children and could not give evidence in court. Only after the second half of the nineteenth century, did married women acquire the right to get their dowry back in the event of divorce. On the other hand, there was a growth of female protagonists in the domestic sphere. The concept of domesticity extended not only into the family but also spread into society and the state. All those caring tasks that were proper to the family sphere were transferred to the social level. The same political parties, which were against the political and public life of women, took advantage of the concept of social domesticity to convince women to participate in all those support activities that would help the nation. Women, in fact, were the first to fight against the injustices of the world and began to form anti-slavery organizations, philanthropic associations

⁶ *Ibidem*.

and civic committees. However, even though women's movements gave rise to organizations with social aims in Britain, in America and the rest of Europe, women's differences were the reason for their exclusion from citizenship and the right to vote: "a woman's life was biologically conditioned by fragile emotionality and passion, the sexual divisive nature considered women born for virtue domestic care".⁷

Over the course of two centuries, an idea of nationhood was formed which was built around the representation of the difference between men and women. The former was seen as someone who physically sacrificed themselves for the nation while the latter was given the task of reproducing, of caring for men, of nurturing the children of the fatherland, to represent the honour of the nation and to sacrifice themselves both physically (by rape) and psychologically (by losing their men in war). The violence and horror of the Great War partly modifies this vision of the ideals of man and woman. "Gender, and specifically femininity, was invoked in competing and often contradictory ways, and many women anti-war writers critically engaged with each other in their consideration of the relationship between women and peace."⁸ In fact, when exploring how women expressed their opposition to war, it becomes evident that gender played a crucial role in shaping their self-consciousness and understanding of the conflict. Women in this period explicitly linked their anti-war views to their perceptions of gender. However, it is important to note that women also used gender in other diverse and intricate ways. While drawing from societal norms of femininity and masculinity, they also adapted and reinterpreted these norms to suit their perspectives. Thus, their understanding of the gender system during both war and peace was multifaceted. They not only considered the impact of the conflict on both men and women but also pondered its broader implications for society. For example, the image of mother and child was a prominent theme in women's antiwar writing

⁷ Gisela Bock, *Women in European history*, cit., position 2853.

⁸ Sabine Grimshaw, *The Responsibility of Women: Women's Anti-War Writing in the Press, 1914-16*, Vol.24, Routledge, Oxfordshire, 2017, p. 80-93, p. 80.

and was used to critique the effects of war on society. Nevertheless, women also directed their attention towards men in a way that was not well-defined, expressing their concerns about how the war was affecting men's sense of masculinity. Finally, the Great War changed traditional notions of masculinity and femininity, particularly challenging women's identity and, as Susan Kress's review highlighted in Bethke Elshtain's *Women and War* "the challenges of confronting the image of women during the war was far more complex than commonly portrayed in reality"⁹.

1.2 THE FIRST WORLD WAR AND ITS IMPACT

The Great War marked a turning point, both in reality and in the collective imagination, as the first modern war. It shattered traditional notions of warfare and affected various spheres of human existence. As Fussel wrote in *The Great War and Modern Memory* "every war is ironic because every war is worse than expected."⁹ In fact, Eric J. Leed describes the First World War using a variety of different dramatic symbols such as "invisibility, death, burial and contamination which became extremely problematic experiences in war."¹⁰ Along the front, the trenches covered the enemy making it impossible to see them and this further exaggerated the importance of hearing. Furthermore, soldiers were obliged to live in these channels dug into the ground along with rats and the dead bodies of their compatriots that would begin to decompose making it unbearable to live in, turning the land into both a necessary refuge and a permanent threat. The front was in fact described by Franz Schauwecker as "a holiday from life" where life and death became one. Those who returned from the front were psychologically traumatized but at the same time terrified at the thought of reintegration into their home society

⁹ Susan Kress, *Women and War*, Reviewed Eork: *The Great War* by Bethke Elshtain, Skidmore College, NY, 1988, p. 238.

¹⁰ Eric J. Leed, *No man's land*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1981, p. 29.

or even convinced that they would never again be able to find a social place. Some underlying themes present in Erich Maria Remarque's *All quiet on the Western front* are indeed disillusionment and loss of human dignity as well as loss of youth and premature aging. This indicated “how much the War set a boundary between the present and the past, between the soldier and everyone else.”¹¹

During the war, women bravely and resolutely stepped into the roles previously occupied by men, undertaking their working duties with unwavering dedication and determination. However, after the war, the government tried its best to convince girls to rejoin domestic work. The Daily News of 13 January 1919 published the perspective of Miss J. L. Crossley Batt, a lady inspector of munition factories, which echoed the sentiments of many from the higher social classes who employed servants.

...the (munitions) girl must not forget that householders have also had remarkable wartime experiences and are prepared to consider the happiness and comfort of those who return to domestic service ... her hours will be shorter, opportunities for more outdoor recreation will be given her, in addition to more food and more money. Therefore, I appeal to discharged factory hands to enter domestic service, and not to live on state money longer than is really necessary.¹²

Finally, the conflict's unprecedented scale and brutality compelled people to react in different ways questioning its purpose and consequences, which eventually gave rise to diverse forms of opposition. At the heart of this study lies the notion of women standing apart from the war and experiencing aesthetic or humanistic reactions against it. Many writers opposed the war when faced with the realities of it and this is why their motivations towards protest became, in some cases, more individualistic and less driven by organized movements or war propaganda. Vera Brittain, Edith Sitwell, and Marjorie Pickthall are three notable examples of anti-war writers who, in their distinctive and personal styles, eloquently highlighted the harrowing atrocities and devastating impact of the Great War. Their poignant literary

¹¹ *Idem*, p.105.

¹² B. A. Waites, *The Effect of the First World War on Class and Status in England 1910-20*, Journal of Contemporary History, Sage Publications, NY, 1976, p. 15.

contributions serve as powerful reminders of the human cost of conflict and continue to inspire empathy and reflection in readers today.

CHAPTER 2

WOMEN'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE GREAT WAR

2.1 STANDING FOR PEACE

“Before the outbreak of the war, a considerable number of women had already established a rich history of opposition, notably through their active involvement in the women's suffrage movement, which courageously challenged the prevailing political structure.”¹³ The suffrage movement, while primarily focused on attaining the right to vote, also championed the cause of broader gender equality, moving beyond the realms of politics alone. Following this, it was only to be expected that a noteworthy contingent of prominent women within the suffrage movement would staunchly oppose the war when it erupted. In addition to those involved in suffrage politics, some women took their opposition to the war to a deeply personal level, surpassing the confines of formal movements. Their resistance extended beyond traditional means, reflecting a profound conviction to stand against the war's horrors and advocate for peace and understanding in a more intimate and individualized manner. In fact, the profound and extensive human suffering brought about by the conflict would cause many of these women to undergo a transformative process of introspection and contemplation. Furthermore, when confronted with the stark reality of the unprecedented scale of physical and psychological injuries, they would begin to question the horrifying consequences of the war. The agonizing discoveries of the war's devastating impact convinced them to believe that armed conflict was fundamentally wrong, no matter the reason or country involved. The once-defined boundaries between nations became increasingly blurred, while the distinction between propaganda and truth faded into obscurity. As a consequence of limited and constrained official channels for

¹³ Jonathan Atkin, *A War of Individuals: Women at War*, Manchester University Press and New York, 2002, p. 131.

protest, many women who found themselves intellectually against the war, ardently expressed their convictions in private conversations and through the written word. In fact, “this form of expression of female opposition became the norm, as women found that other accessible outlets for protest were few and far between”¹⁴. By reading some of their personal writings like poems, diaries, letters, memoirs, and some fictional works, we can “observe their turning away from the general call to arms and mobilisation of opinion”¹⁵.

2.2 WOMEN'S WAR EFFORTS

During World War I, many women's political aspirations and energies towards suffrage were diverted into anti-war thoughts and activities. Moreover, there were women who wanted to work, be more involved in the war and who had a humanistic response to the devastating consequences they witnessed. After the new industrial regulations enacted by the Trade Boards Act of 1909, women began to hope: "women are beginning to think for themselves, to act for themselves, to work for themselves"¹⁶. And so it was that the onset of the conflict marked a significant change in the work experiences of nearly “six million working women in Britain”¹⁷. Initially, the austerity measures led to widespread unemployment among those in vulnerable professions like domestic workers and dressmakers. However, as the war progressed, women quietly stepped into roles left vacant by fathers, brothers, and husbands who were serving in the military. They started taking on responsibilities in family businesses, such as delivery services and window washing, gaining visibility and prominence in the workforce. As the war intensified, the labor supply in several industries, especially munitions work, reached a critical low as male workers departed to join the fighting. While the government “considered

¹⁴ Jonathan Atkin, *A War of Individuals: Women at War*, cit., p. 132.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶ Margaret Llewelyn Davies, *Maternity: Letters from Working Women*, Virago, London, 1978, p. 54.

¹⁷ Susan Pyecroft, *British Working Women and The First World War*, cit., p. 704.

importing male Belgian workers”¹⁸, it eventually recognized the untapped potential of women, viewing them as docile, pliable, and well-suited for repetitive tasks. The perception of women workers as a "stage army to be wheeled on and off"¹⁹ sharply contrasted with the reality of the considerable number of women who were already actively engaged in the workforce. In addition, many of them volunteered as ambulance drivers and nurses to provide essential medical care and support on the frontlines and in hospitals. The majority of these “were young, educated women, who, given the norms of their time, held remarkable capabilities”²⁰. Their contributions as volunteer nurses played a pivotal position in alleviating the immense suffering caused by the war and left a lasting impact on the history of nursing and women's roles in society.

2.3 VADs NURSES: VERSE IN SERVICE

Most of the Voluntary Aid Detachments (VADs) embarked on their relatively short-lived nursing roles within civilian medical wards, which often led to a sense of frustration. This frustration stemmed from the fact that their primary motivation for entering the field of nursing had been driven by a desire to make a direct and meaningful contribution to the overarching war effort. In the early spring of 1915, a significant shift occurred as VADs were granted the privilege to practice in military hospitals, including those stationed abroad. From this point onwards, many of them sought to enhance their rudimentary nursing skills within the demanding environment of territorial hospitals. Overseas assignments were generally reserved for those who had demonstrated exemplary proficiency in domestic hospital settings on the home front. In fact, “most British VADs (Voluntary Aid Detachments) took courses, passed

¹⁸ *Idem*, p. 703

¹⁹ Susan Pyecroft, *British Working Women and The First World War*, cit., p. 702.

²⁰ Christine E. Hallette, *Nurse Writers of the Great War: Epic romance on Western and Eastern Fronts*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2016, p. 211.

examinations, and obtained certificates in four aspects of nursing care: first aid and bandaging, sick-room cookery, hygiene, and home nursing.”²¹ After acquiring necessary training certificates, most VADs would undergo an additional six-month apprenticeship in a local hospital to consolidate their skills.

One of the most prominent themes that emerges from women's wartime writings is the palpable tension between trained, professional nurses and Voluntary Aid Detachments (VADs). Interestingly, VADs, compared to trained nurses, were more inclined to document their war experiences through memoirs. This seemingly paradoxical aspect is further reflected in their narratives and poems, as volunteer nurses tended to focus on the complexity and emotional drama of nursing practice itself, while trained nurses emphasized the courage and endurance of their patients. VADs closely watched their professional colleagues and faced the challenge of learning without becoming emotionally distant from their patients' pain. “For many of the volunteer nurses, the romance of nursing went beyond the execution of nursing skills.”²² For example, an anonymous diarist voiced her most profound and emotionally charged experiences occurred when she “was assigned to the ward caring for German prisoners.”²³ Here, she grappled with the inner conflict between her deeply ingrained patriotic dislike towards the enemy and her innate sense of compassion and empathy in the face of the constant suffering of her young German patient. The poet Vera Brittain herself commented in her later autobiography, *Testament of Experience*, that her workdays in the German Ward had set her “on the path to pacifism and work for the League of Nations”²⁴. Here she recalled the vulnerability of her German prisoner-patients, and her sense of a common humanity with them. However, as the war raged on and its reverberations continued in the post-war era, a wave of

²¹ *Idem*, p. 187.

²² Christine E. Hallette, *Nurse Writers of the Great War: Epic romance on Western and Eastern Fronts*, cit., p. 211.

²³ *Idem*, p.

²⁴ Vera Brittain, *Testament of Experience: An Autobiographical Story of the Years 1925–1950*, London: Fontana, 1980, p. 77.

writers emerged to break the romanticized myths that had covered warfare. These literary voices courageously ventured into the trenches of reality, uncovering and vividly portraying the stark contrast between the idyllic, romanticized notions of battle and the unrelenting, brutal truths of modern industrial warfare. In doing so, they sought to dispel the illusions that had long influenced the collective consciousness, shedding light on the horrendous experiences and profound transformations of the war.

2.4 VERA BRITAIN: A JOURNEY TOWARDS PEACE

Vera Brittain was born on 29th December 1883 at Atherstone House in New Castle. Her father was Arthur Brittain, a paper manufacturer (1864–1935) and his wife, Edith Mary (Bervon) Brittain (1868–1948) “was the daughter of an impoverished musician, John Inglis Bervon.”²⁵ Vera Brittain's family was not inclined toward a literary lifestyle. Her mother, Mrs. Brittain, enjoyed reading Dickens and the latest popular novels from the local library, while her husband rarely ventured beyond the pages of the newspaper, limited to the local news. In her later years, Vera frequently reflected on the unfortunate circumstances of growing up in a household she once described as having “contained precisely nine books”²⁶. In 1907 she had been sent away to St Monica's, the “select girls' School at Kingswood in Surrey where her aunt, Florence Bervon, was Co-Principal.”²⁷ Considering the lack of girls' education at the time, it would later reveal itself as a fortunate decision. Her four years at St Monica's had coincided with the “Women's Social and Political Union increasingly violent campaign for women's suffrage”²⁸ led by Emmeline Pankhurst who, during the 1912 conspiracy trial at the Old Bailey in central London, justified the suffragists' use of vandalism, stating that:

²⁵ Paul Berry and Mark Bostridge, *Vera Brittain: A Life*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1995, p. 15.

²⁶ *Idem*, p. 26.

²⁷ *Idem*, p. 30.

²⁸ *Idem*, p. 36.

we cast about to find a way, as women will, that would not involve loss of human life and the maiming of human beings, because women care more about human life than men, and I think it is quite natural that we should, for we know what it costs.²⁹

Furthermore, *Woman and Labour*,³⁰ written by Olive Schreiner, a book which examines the relationship of women to work, war and, in a penultimate chapter, sex differences towards men, caught Brittain's attention mainly because it "supplied the theory that linked her personal resentments with the public activities of the suffragettes."³¹ However, what truly captured Vera's interest were not Schreiner's reflections on sexuality or her passionate advocacy for women as innate peacemakers, which would later become influential in Vera's pacifist beliefs, but instead, it was Schreiner's passionate support for a woman's right to pursue work that resonated with Vera and would remain a significant influence on her as she embraced the cause of gender equality in her adult life. Moreover, those advocating for women's progress have also championed the cause of peace. "Even though feminism and pacifism can at times appear to be an uneasy alliance, women often find themselves torn between conflicting allegiances and ideals."³²

Vera expressed her desire for "independence and a wider-life"³³ in her writings. Although her teachers had certainly fostered such aspirations in her, the prospects of achieving them in the future appeared complex. While she may have expressed the desire to attend university from the moment she learned of its existence, it wasn't a feasible goal. For the time being Oxford remained no more than a distant dream and Vera had no alternative but to return home. Nevertheless, in 1913, she competed for an essay prize at Oxford Summer School and won which boosted her confidence. Throughout her life, she consistently struggled to achieve

²⁹ Vera Brittain, *Lady into Woman: A History of Women From Victoria To Elizabeth II*, McMillan, NY, 1953, p. 199.

³⁰ Olive Schreiner, *Woman and Labour*, T. Fisher Unwin, London, 1911, p. 169.

³¹ Paul Berry and Mark Bostridge, *Vera Brittain: A Life*, cit., p. 36.

³² Muriel Mellow, *One Woman's Way to Peace: The Development of Vera Brittain's Pacifism*, *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 2, University of Nebraska Press, 1985, p. 1.

³³ Paul Berry and Mark Bostridge, *Vera Brittain: A Life*, cit., p. 24.

even a modest level of self-assurance, and even in her later years, those encountering her for the first time were often left with the prevailing impression of a woman who appeared to be in a state of near-constant anxiety. Vera depicted her childhood as “outwardly serene and uneventful”³⁴, as indeed it appears to have been. But her inner imaginative life was a more turbulent world, full of unexplained fears waiting to torment her. Owing to her persistence, she convinced her parents to arrange tutoring for her Oxford University entrance examination but after starting her education, Brittain decided to abandon it. The reason behind this was the beginning of WWI and the overwhelming feeling that she could not bear staying safe at home while her brother and his friend Roland Leighton, whom she was falling in love with, had enrolled and were facing danger at the front. She wanted to be as close to them as possible. In fact, in a letter to Roland she wrote: “Suffering myself makes me want nothing so much as to do all I can to alleviate the sufferings of other people.”³⁵ Nursing was intended to be a gesture of support for Roland and a way to alleviate the ceaseless mental torment of wondering about his well-being through the monotonous, physically demanding tasks it involved.

After Roland’s death, she had made up her mind to leave the VADs when her contract came up for renewal. No longer was there the thought of Roland's hardships to spur her on. The unexciting tasks she had previously approached with great diligence were now completed hastily, or sometimes not at all. She sadly observed that enduring suffering was negatively impacting her personality. In *Chronicle of Youth* she wrote:

in the utter blackness of my soul I seem to be touching the very depths of that dull lampless anguish which we call despair. Little, sweet phrases from his letters keep coming into my mind - and I just cry and cry.³⁶

Despite her pain, she couldn't tolerate the idea that someone might think she had taken the easy way out by quitting nursing. Consequently, she persisted in her duties, even though her initial

³⁴ *Idem*, p. 20.

³⁵ Vera Brittain, *Violets from the Trenches: Selections from the Letters of Roland Leighton and Vera Brittain*, McMaster University Library digital collection, Hamilton, Ontario, 25th April 1915.

³⁶ Vera Brittain, *Chronicle of Youth: War Diary 1913-1917*, Charnwood, London, 1982, p. 550.

patriotic zeal had vanished, and she no longer entertained notions about the nobility of any cause. Privately, she had committed herself to playing her "small, weary part in this War"³⁷ until the very end. In December 1917, it was a letter sent to her mother which she categorized as her "first angry protest against war-time hypocrisy"³⁸:

I wish those people who write so glibly about this being a Holy War ... could see a case - to say nothing of 10 cases - of mustard gas in its early stages could see the poor things burnt and blistered all over with great mustard- coloured suppurating blisters, with blinded eyes .. and always fighting for saying that their throats are closing & they know they will choke breath ... The only thing one can say is that such severe cases don't last long; either they die soon or else improve - usually the former; they certainly never reach England in the state we have them here, and yet people persist in saying that God made the War, when there are such inventions of the Devil about.³⁹

Later, she described this as the period when she "definitely ceased to regard the War as an instrument of God or even of human justice."⁴⁰ The seeds of her future pacifism had been sown. It became evident that Vera was beginning to embrace the internationalist ideas she would later promote on numerous lecture platforms during the interwar years. The groundwork for her future pacifist beliefs had been laid.

Late in August 1918, *Verses of a VAD* by Vera M. Brittain (V.A.D London / 268, B.R.C.S) appeared, "ushered unobtrusively into an indifferent world"⁴¹, and on to a market filled with war poetry. The collection primarily adopts an elegiac and documentary tone, offering a poignant glimpse into Vera's emotional landscape. Within its pages, readers will encounter Vera's expressions of grief and sorrow for those who have passed away. Alongside these lamentations, the collection also features a selection of hospital poems, which provide a vivid and candid portrayal of the experiences and emotions tied to her time in medical service. By the time the war ended on 11 November 1918, Vera had become a "complete automaton"⁴²

³⁷ *Idem*, p. 598.

³⁸ Paul Berry and Mark Bostridge, *Vera Brittain: A Life*, cit., p. 122.

³⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁴¹ Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, Seaview Books, New York, 1980, p. 447.

⁴² Paul Berry and Mark Bostridge, *Vera Brittain: A Life*, cit., p. 136.

existing in a state of numb disillusion, with little interest in either the present or the future.

Many years later she states:

I ended the First World War with my deepest emotions paralysed if not dead. This would not have happened if I had had one person left. It was Edward's death rather than Roland's which turned me into an automaton ... It left nothing. Only ambition held me to life.⁴³

2.5 BARRIERS OF INDESCRIBABLE EXPERIENCE:

VERA BRITTAIN: *HOSPITAL SANCTUARY AND MILITARY HOSPITAL*

For Vera Brittain “nursing was the obvious choice of war work, and she offered her services to the Devonshire Hospital in her hometown of Buxton, starting her career as a VAD on 27th June 1915.”⁴⁴ On 18th October, she transferred to the First London General Hospital at Camberwell.

When she first began nursing, she exclaimed in her diary: “Oh! I love the British Tommy!

I shall get so fond of these men I know. And when I look after any one of them, it is like nursing

Roland by proxy.”⁴⁵ The intriguing combination of innate innocence and susceptibility to

propaganda had initially led women like Brittain to idealize the war. However, once they faced

its consequences firsthand, they realized the true reality and futility of the conflict. As Claire

M. Tylee commented in *The Great War and Women's Consciousness*:

...the whole front-line experience was so remote from the standards of normal civilised life; it was hard for either men or women to conceptualise it. Moreover, the effects of propaganda and censorship made it especially difficult for women to deal with such emotional responses to the war, by disguising what had given rise to them and might have made sense of them.⁴⁶

Vera Brittain eventually became a strong advocate for peace and “not until war touched her personally did she begin a painful rebellion against the patriarchal values that had dominated her prewar life”⁴⁷. In her writings, not only does she share her personal struggles

⁴³ Vera Brittain, *Violets from the Trenches: Selections from the Letters of Roland Leighton and Vera Brittain*, cit., 15th September 1952.

⁴⁴ Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, cit., p. 141.

⁴⁵ Vera Brittain, *Chronicle of Youth*, cit., p. 230.

⁴⁶ Claire M. Tylee, *The Great War and Women's Consciousness: Images of Militarism and Womanhood in Woman's Writing, 1914-64*, University of Iowa Press, Iowa, 1990, p. 52.

⁴⁷ Lynne Layton, *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars: Vera Brittain's Testament(s)*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1987, pp. 70–83.

but also how these experiences had a profound impact on humanity at various levels. In her memoirs and poems, she shares her tragic losses and uses literature to make sense of her pain as well as telling stories about war that teach us important lessons about how to behave personally and politically. She connects her own suffering with the suffering of her generation, expressing the sorrows they all faced. Furthermore, she warns future generations about the dangers of ideology and idealism during wartime, which played significant roles in World War I using real life examples that she personally experienced on the frontline.

VERA BRITAIN: *HOSPITAL SANCTUARY*

“When you have lost your all in a world's upheaval,
Suffered and prayed, and found your prayers were vain,
When love is dead, and hope has no renewal -
These need you still; come back to them again.

When the sad days bring you the loss of all ambition,
And pride is gone that gave you strength to bear,
When dreams are shattered, and broken is all decision -
Turn you to these, dependent on your care.

They too have fathomed the depths of human anguish,
Seen all that counted flung like chaff away;
The dim abodes of pain wherein they languish
Offer that peace for which at last you pray.”⁴⁸



Picture 1: Vera Britain

As a nurse during wartime, Britain and others faced the dilemma of having to create a delicate balance between personal and professional obligations. Britain had responsibilities to her brother, fiancé, and friends, alongside her duty to England. Nursing provided a way to immerse herself in the present moment, but it also presented its own challenges, especially when dealing with her own personal hardships. In the poem *Hospital Sanctuary*, Britain writes, “When dreams are shattered, and broken is all decision - / Turn you to these, dependent on your care”⁴⁹;

⁴⁸ Vera Britain, *Hospital Sanctuary, Because You Died: Poetry and Prose of the First World and Beyond*, edited by Mark Bostridge, Little and Brown, London, 2010, position 694.

⁴⁹ Samantha Kichman, *The Changing Voices in Women's Literature of the World War One Period*, Honors Thesis, Department of English and Comparative Literature, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 2018, p. 17.

feeling like she no longer had her own dreams and life ahead of her, she sought meaning in those who depended on her. In this poem, nursing is combined with the poet's personal suffering in order to give meaning to life. The poem then continues with "They too have fathomed the depths of human anguish"⁵⁰ meaning that the men she cared for were in a similar emotional state, confronting what war had taken from them, such as friends or their own bodies. She concludes with "The dim abodes of pain wherein they languish/ Offer that peace for which at 18 last you pray"⁵¹ referring to the soldiers' alleviating pain and wanting to offer them some of the peace she was craving.

In her poem, *A Military Hospital*, she describes the devastation she had witnessed during her nursing experience. Brittain writes: "A mass of human wreckage, drifting in/ Born on a blood red tide"⁵² underlining how the injured made it to the hospital describing them as "human wreckage" rather than people. They "drift" without agency, inanimate and destroyed. Moreover, the scene unfolds with the haunting image of a "blood red tide" that approaches with a sense of gentle movement, but carries a brutal and repellent undertone, inundating everything in its path with violence and slaughter. The war is transformed into a turbulent sea, relentlessly casting humans toward the shores of hospitals. Men come and go, seeking solace in military medical facilities, with the nurses serving as their unwavering anchors. Yet, even after this chaos, there are no guarantees of survival. Tragically, the significant contributions of women in war work are often overlooked, and they endured their sufferings without recognition or glory.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*.

⁵² Samantha Kichman, *The Changing Voices in Women's Literature of the World War One Period*, cit., p.18.

VERA BRITTAİN: *A MILITARY
HOSPITAL*

“A mass of human wreckage, drifting in
Borne on a blood-red tide,
Some never more to brave the stormy sea
Laid reverently aside,
And some with love restored to sail again
For regions far and wide.”⁵³



Picture 2:
Vera Brittain with other nurses

After the armistice, Brittain faced challenges in resuming her studies. She felt strangely disconnected from life at Somerville College, Oxford, and even experienced moments of psychological distress. While striving to comprehend her wartime encounters, she pursued her passion for writing. Later, she authored several novels, including *The Dark Tide* (1923) and *Honourable Estate* (1936), which aimed to explore the lives of those who had wholeheartedly devoted themselves to war and endured immense suffering, which often seemed to go unnoticed by others. She strongly believed that women, too, had entered war with high ideals, suffered disillusionment, had served in wartime, and then somehow found the courage to go on and in *Testament of Experience* she asks herself: “Why should these young men have the war to themselves?”⁵⁴ Her novels and poems were not only war testimonies but were also written to “ensure that the female voice would be heard, and that one particular feminine perspective would be understood.”⁵⁵

⁵³ Vera Brittain, *Hospital Sanctuary, Because You Died: Poetry and Prose of the First World and Beyond*, cit., position 412.

⁵⁴ Vera Brittain, *Testament of Experience*, cit., p. 77.

⁵⁵ Christine E. Hallette, *Nurse Writers of the Great War: The British “VAD”*, cit., p. 196.

CHAPTER 3

WOMEN'S VOICES IN WAR TIME

3.1 WOMEN'S POETIC PERSPECTIVES ON WAR AND PEACE

Over time, critics have come to appreciate the skill exhibited in women's poetic responses to the all-encompassing warfare of 1914-1918, which profoundly affected not only soldier-poets but also civilians. The question of whether women could or should write about war without having been combatants was effectively put to rest by Susan Schweik's insightful essay on the meaning of war poetry and women's writing during modern warfare. She states that "in twentieth-century war and twentieth-century war poetry, present-day critics and anthologists must recognize that the discourse of war consists not just of what men have said but also of what women have written."⁵⁶ In fact, many women conveyed their experiences of war work and bombardments on the home front, while others composed verses amidst the destruction of occupied territories. New roles during the war led to changes in attitudes and poetic personas, as well as stating a potent and transformative wave of witness, social critique, righteous anger, and poignant laments among women poets in the years that followed 1914, spurring them to voice their profound perspectives on the effects of conflict and their passionate yearning for lasting peace.

For many years, "the most well-known female British war poets were the melancholic Vera Brittain and Alice Meynell."⁵⁷ Yet, some of the finest poets, such as Mary Borden and H. D. (Hilda Doolittle), were cosmopolitan individuals transcending national boundaries and who did not easily fit into conventional histories. Today, thanks to Catherine Reilly's extensive bibliography of war poetry and her anthology *Scars Upon My Heart* (1981), critics have

⁵⁶ Susan Schweik, *Writing War Poetry Like a Woman*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1987, p. 556.

⁵⁷ Margaret R. Higonnet, *The Poetry of the First World War: Women's Poetry of the First World War*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2013, p. 185.

explored a more diverse range of poets, considering factors like class, wartime occupation, artistic skills, and audience. In addition, in one of the first major critical studies, *Women's Poetry of the First World War* (1988), “Nosheen Khan connected the comprehensive collection of human emotions expressed in women's poetry”⁵⁸ to the varied vocations and new gender roles they embraced in response to the war. Despite the war's revelation that gender distinctions are not absolute, many women who remained in England, often portrayed as a pastoral realm, turned to the traditional lyric form, which ironically contrasted death with rural springtime; where “rural life itself is now forever tainted by awareness of the enemy.”⁵⁹ “They also adapted the language and rhythms of canonical poems by S.T. Coleridge and Christina Rossetti to forge new anti-pastoral forms.”⁶⁰ In their elegiac poetry, women's traditional role of lamentation conferred social significance and empowered their voices. Their aesthetic choices were intimately tied to allusive conversations with poetic predecessors and contemporaneous official discourses on the war. They engaged with the works of male poets like Brooke, Owen, and Rosenberg. Responding to the social upheavals and violence of the Great War, these female elegies reveal subtle strategies of interrogation, offering a striking imagery that defamiliarizes traditional pastoral scenes and rhythms that skilfully manipulated the tools found in canonical works. “Of particular significance is the ironic representation of peace, a strategy wielded adeptly by female mourners. While most lyric voices remain introspective, some poems adopt a quasi-dialogue, reaching out to the departed and definitely challenging those responsible for the war.”⁶¹

⁵⁸ Margaret R. Higonnet, *The Poetry of the First World War*, cit., p. 185.

⁵⁹ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Oxford UP, USA, 1975, p. 258.

⁶⁰ Margaret R. Higonnet, *The Poetry of the First World War*, cit., p. 186.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*.

3.2 INNOVATIVE AVANT-GARDE POETRY OF WWI

A productive response to the challenges faced by the British trench poets during World War I is to teach their works in order to present a new vision of reality brought on by the war. The task of inventing new poetic forms to reflect this reality was complicated by the sheer volume of poetry written in response to the war's outbreak. While some of this poetry was patriotic and amateurish, the serious soldier-poets engaged in poetic struggles with existing and emerging aesthetic traditions. The British poets tended to reject the avant-garde forms due to their problematic ideology influenced by the political implications offered by their respective avant-garde enemies. Even though avant-garde forms were not preferred, some poets experimented with Futurism and Vorticism and with their celebration of energy, technology, and violence which created a virtual mockery of their experiences in the trenches. Furthermore, Modernism, with its pressure to restrain feeling and maintain impersonality, deprived them of the new vehicle of highly crafted and controlled poetic forms to express their experiences. As the poet Ezra Pound reported referring to the arts shortly after the European powers declared war: "things which are in seed and dynamic."⁶² In other words he meant that "new masses of unexplored arts and facts were pouring into the vortex of London."⁶³ In fact, Symbolist; Futurist; Imagist; Cubist; Vorticist; Post-Impressionist and suffragist demonstrations in the streets; warmongers as well as pacifist and many more were influencing poets "into new aesthetic languages that neither waited for the war nor required it but primed retorts to the guns of August from vantages unbounded by nation and empire."⁶⁴

The war inspired all sorts of poetry; nevertheless, after the outbreak of the war on 4 August 1914, the voices of soldiers, civilians and especially protesters as well as civilian

⁶² Margaret R. Higonnet, *The Poetry of the First World War*, cit., p. 186.

⁶³ Christine Froula, *The Poetry of the First World War: War, Empire and Modernist Poetry 1914–1922*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2013, p. 210.

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*.

resident aliens from distant parts of the empire underwent a transformation. During the war 1915-1918, state censorship led to silence and restrictions were established on who could speak about the war's horrors and how they could express it. As a consequence, a new form of poetry emerged with new dimensions, characterized by allusions, historical references, multiple languages, and technical innovations. Many poets embraced this style to challenge belligerent nationalisms, imperial dominance, and the manipulative public language supporting Britain's war policy but at the same time drowning out honest testimonies and critiques.



Picture 3: Dame Edith Sitwell

Dame Edith Sitwell (picture 3) is an extraordinary example of a British modernist female anti-war poet; a literary celebrity and best known for her formidable personality and eccentric opinion. But the issue of her value is far from clear. Sitwell was an established literary presence by the 1920s, publishing poetry, prose, criticism, and journalism as well as giving lectures and readings. "Her avant-garde performances and spirited campaigns heightened the sense that Sitwell was, in Leonard Woolf's words, up to the neck in modernity"⁶⁵. Her writing was described as abundant and innovative, showcasing various modes of expression and

⁶⁵ Marsha Bryant, *Sitwell beyond the Semiotic: Gender, Race, and Empire in "Façade"*, *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, Vol. 26, No. 2, University of Tulsa, Tulsa, 2007, pp. 243-267, p. 243.

techniques that align with the different stages of her thoughts and attitudes. “In this context, the poetic roles of Edith Sitwell refer to the prolonged yet evolving and maturing states of mind as they find suitable language, metaphor, image, and rhythm to shape and reveal themselves as poems.”⁶⁶ Most importantly, “Edith Sitwell reacted against that war before it came in her antimilitaristic poems”⁶⁷ and when it eventually did occur, her resistance and protest against it became even stronger and more impassioned. “She alone, of all the English war poets, was prepared for the shock that awakened Britons to realities and had not to change her poetic purpose.”⁶⁸ In addition, she denounces the repelling bestiality of modern life and the devastation caused by futile conflict attempting to understand “a world that seems to have lost all order.”⁶⁹

EDITH SITWELL: *THE DANCERS: DURING A GREAT BATTLE, 1916*

“The floors are slippery with blood:
The world gyrates too. God is good
That while His wind blows out the light
For those who die hourly for us –
We can still dance, each night.

The music has grown numb with death –
But we will suck their dying breath,
The whispered name they breathed to chance,
To swell our music, make it loud
That we may dance—, may dance.

We are the dull blind carrion-fly
That dance and batten. Though God die
Mad from the horror of the light—
The light is mad, too, flecked with blood,—
We dance, we dance, each night.”⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Ralph J. Mills, *The Poetic Roles of Edith Sitwell*, Vol. 14, No. 4, Chicago Review, Chicago, 1961, pp. 33-64, p. 34.

⁶⁷ F. N. Karmatz, *Edith Sitwell and Her Poetry*, Vol. 9, No. 1, Chicago Review, Chicago, 1955, pp. 139-144, p. 142.

⁶⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁰ Edith Sitwell, *The Poetry of Dame Edith Sitwell: "I am patient with stupidity but not with those who are proud of it."*, Portable Poetry, 2014, p. 12.

During my research on Dame Edith Sitwell, I was able to gather information by contacting Professor Connie M. Ruzich Ph.D., a Professor of English and Coordinator of the Writing Center of the Robert Morris University in Pennsylvania. In an interview conducted by Edel Hanley and published in modernistreviewcouk.wordpress.com, Professor Ruzich mentioned that in 2014 she was granted a U.K. Fulbright Scholar award at the University of Exeter to research how poetry was being used in British commemorations of the First World War. Moreover, she explored university libraries and visited second-hand bookshops, where she discovered war poetry that had been out-of-print for many years. She then unfolded poems that were widely known and read during the war, many of which were well-reviewed at the time, but which had been forgotten. These one-hundred-year-old volumes of war poetry were often dirty and tattered, but they were rich and alive with the authentic voices of a century ago. In *International Poetry of the First World War: An Anthology of Lost Voices* (Bloomsbury, 2020), and her personal blog *Behind Their Lines*, she discusses poetry of the Great War, specifically of the lesser known poets; what she thinks of as lost voices and faded poems. According to Ruzich's blog, *The dancers: during a great battle, 1916* was most likely a reference to the battle of the Somme, in which Fussell states that "the artillery fire prior to the first day of the battle could be heard in England, rattling windows."⁷¹ In fact, Sitwell's brother Osbert (also a poet) served in the trenches of France, and it was through him that she encountered Sassoon. According to Professor Ruzich, this poem "is depicting a society party, shockingly disconnected from the soldiers' sufferings."⁷² Sassoon also expressed a similar opinion: "the man who truly endured the War at its most dreadful was always set apart from everyone except his fellow soldiers."⁷³ Alternatively, perhaps the dancers were near the front, just behind the battle lines, in a staging town like Poperinghe, near Ypres, where soldiers,

⁷¹ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, cit., p. 68.

⁷² <https://behindtheirlines.blogspot.com/> accessed on 15th July 2023.

⁷³ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, cit., p. 90.

nurses, ambulance drivers, and VADs were searching for temporary relief and diversion from the war. In addition, she states that the repetition of the phrase “we dance” resonates like an incantation, a desperate charm wielded by those entrenched in the horrors of war, seeking to shield themselves from its devastating impact. The act of dancing assumes a paradoxical role among the chaos of battle; a potent means of forgetting, an ephemeral refuge where one can momentarily pretend that life remains unscathed, while the tumultuous world gyrates around them. The earth itself trembles for miles under the relentless barrage of heavy shelling, a dissonant accompaniment to the surreal spectacle of dancers twirling and swaying. Yet, even within the confines of the dance floor, the presence of blood, an eerie testament to the ongoing carnage, slowly spreads throughout the event, staining the floors and creating a gloomy atmosphere. The lights that illuminate the dancers are a haunting reminder of the bloodshed and suffering in the outside world, in a strange and eerie contrast to the joy and energy of the dance with the underlying sombre reality of war's constant hold. Professor Ruzich then moves on to how the speaker identifies herself as distinct from the deceased, but not entirely disconnected. Instead, she compares herself to a carrion-fly, moving over the bodies, finding nourishment in the process, and bracing for the challenges by embracing the dance. Her self-identification revolves solely around being a dancer. Whether the dance mentioned is a gentle waltz or a symbolic representation of the overwhelming struggle during the war, the poem expresses an aching and horrifying beauty.

Further to this, in her analysis, Professor Ruzich compares this poem to the painting *Dance of Death 1917* by Otto Dix (picture 2) who was a German painter and printer noted for his ruthless and harshly realistic depictions of the harrowing realities of the war he had personally witnessed. Having served as an artillery gunner in the Somme and Eastern Front trenches, Dix directed his attention towards the aftermath of battles, capturing scenes of dead, dying, and shell-shocked soldiers, as well as devastated landscapes and graves. He skilfully

manipulated the etching and aquatint techniques to intensify the emotional and realistic impact of his profoundly detailed and horrifying images exactly like Sitwell did using words. By selectively leaving white patches in darkened scenes of bones in no man's land, he achieved an eerie effect, akin to decaying flesh. As a pacifist himself, his objective was for his portfolio of war painting to “circulate through the country even though doubted that this would have any impact on future wars.”⁷⁴



Picture 4: Otto Dix - *Dance of Death*

Following the war, unlike Vera Brittain, Edith Sitwell expressed her belief that war poetry should be reserved for the men who experienced it firsthand. Unfortunately, even among women, the war's impact on their lives was diminished, leading many to believe they lacked the authority to speak on the matter. Nevertheless, Professor Connie M. Ruzich in *International Poetry of the First World War: An Anthology of Lost Voices* reassures us that “like soldiers, noncombatants also struggled with experiences of isolation and powerlessness.”⁷⁵ War poetry written by non-combatants problematizes the very definition of war as well as forces us to re-examine the question of what constitutes war writing helping us to recover a broader picture of

⁷⁴ <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/63261> accessed on 16th July 2023.

⁷⁵ Costance M. Ruzich, *International Poetry of the First World War. An Anthology of Lost Voices*, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, London, 2021, position 3937.

the experience of total war and a more nuanced understanding of what it meant to live through such a war.

3.3 LOST VOICES OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

Professor Ruzich's attempts are to recover some of those neglected voices and to provide contexts that offers fresh insights into the literature. In the years leading up to and during the WWI, poetry held a significant place in both public and private life. As Professor Ruzich mentions in *International Poetry of the First World War: An Anthology of Lost Voices* "this specialized use of language was a shared activity, and poetry was not just for the cultural elite, the educated, the romantic, or the bookish."⁷⁶ In fact, poetry served as a crucial tool for communal reflection on social matters, human emotions, and contemporary happenings as well as seen as expressions of a nation's collective sentiment and response to the times. It also held a very different place in society than it does today. Mike Chasar, author of *Everyday Reading: Poetry and Popular Culture in America*, notes that poetry

was included in classroom readers, comic books, song books, guides, propaganda, and in a wide variety of advertising media ... and it decorated many ephemeral, commemorative, value-added and/or commercial goods, ranging from postcards to greeting cards, calling cards, playing cards, business cards, bookmarks, matchbooks, posters and wall hangings, stickers, calendars, event tickets, notepads, menus, fans, trivets, thermometers, milk bottles, pinup girly posters, bird-food and breath-mint tins, packages for drafting tools, candy boxes, souvenir plates, handkerchiefs, pillows, and table runners.⁷⁷

It is no surprise then that when war broke out, people responded with poetry supporting war, in opposition to the war, or by simply describing how the world was changing. Newspapers across the UK were flooded with poems that spoke about the war and the country's response. The London Times, for example, "estimated that it received as many as a hundred such poems

⁷⁶ Costance M. Ruzich, *International Poetry of the First World War. An Anthology of Lost Voices*, cit., position 334

⁷⁷ Mike Chasar, *Everyday Reading: Poetry and Popular Culture in America*, Columbia UP, New York, 2012, p. 5.

a day during August 1914.”⁷⁸ Catherine W. Reilly's *English Poetry of the First World War* lists over “2,000 poets who were published in England.”⁷⁹ Many of the poems first published in newspapers and periodicals were then republished in popular anthologies of war poetry. Poetry anthologies have been significant in preserving and shaping literary, cultural, and social histories, and “early anthologists of the First World War approached the task of collecting and publishing war poetry with a variety of interests and agendas.”⁸⁰ Some of the most significant examples are in the 1915 collection *The Fiery Cross* which aimed “to inspire and to console.”⁸¹ Furthermore, the 1917 *Treasury of War Poetry* sought to be “humanly hospitable, rather than academically critical, especially in the case of some of the verses written by soldiers at the front,”⁸² believing that these poems were to be psychologically interesting as authentic transcripts of personal experience. Such anthologies prepared the ground, but Frederick Brereton's 1930 collection, *An Anthology of War Poems*, was the first anthology to focus on the “figure of the archetypal 'war poet' as a battle-traumatized soldier writing in protest against it.”⁸³ Since that time, nearly every anthology of First World War poetry has centered its collection on soldiers' poetry written in protest of the war demonstrating the general assumption that the best war poetry, was written by soldiers, which “has made it difficult to hear different voices.”⁸⁴ There is no single explanation as to why some poetry of the war has lasted in time and other works that had been popular and respected have been largely forgotten. However, a related reason for the exclusion of some works is that, as Paul Fussell writes, “There seems to be one dominating form of modern understanding; that it is essentially ironic; and that

⁷⁸ Ted Bogacz, *A Tyranny of Words: Language, Poetry, and Antimodernism in England in the First World War*, *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 58, No. 3, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1986, pp. 643-668, p. 647.

⁷⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁰ Costance M. Ruzich, *International Poetry of the First World War. An Anthology of Lost Voices*, cit., position 389

⁸¹ *Ibidem*.

⁸² *Ibidem*.

⁸³ Hugh Haughton, *Anthologizing War*, Oxford UP, Oxford, Oxford, 2007, p. 423.

⁸⁴ Jane Potter, *A Certain Poetess': Recuperating Jessie Pope (1868-1941) Landscapes and Voices of the Great War*, Routledge, Oxfordshire, 2017, p. 97.

it originates in the application of mind and memory to the events of the Great War."⁸⁵ As a consequence, women's war poetry, which rarely offered a first-hand, realistic account of combat, has been largely neglected. But as First World War scholar Jane Dowson notes, "collectively, the diversity and ingenuity of the (women) poets demonstrate that it is fruitless to approach the period with a binary model of modernist or non-modernist."⁸⁶ Historian Julia Ribeiro extends the argument: "poetry was seen as a highly intellectual reaction to war when read from the point of view of the avant-gardes or of the formal innovations related to modernism, a more visceral and culturally diverse response to the conflict."⁸⁷ Ribeiro advocates not only expanding the literary canon, but also expanding ways in which war poetry might be read and understood. In fact, she suggests that: "poetry can be a valuable historical source, not only a potentially accurate model of the experience of the conflict, but also the poetic gesture capable of changing that experience and therefore worthy of study as a practice as well as a discourse."⁸⁸ Lately, there has been a growing demand to broaden the variety of voices and viewpoints found in First World War poetry. Andrew Motion, poet laureate of the UK from 1999 to 2009, reminds readers that "less-familiar voices open up new perspectives", and "our definition of 'war poetry' has become too narrow to be accurate or fair."⁸⁹ Like Professor Ruzich, Motion's words underline the compelling need to reconsider and recalibrate our appreciation of the genre, acknowledging the multitude of experiences, insights, and emotions that have often been overshadowed by a more limited perspective.

⁸⁵ Paul Fussel, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, cit., p. 35.

⁸⁶ Jane Dowson, *Women, Modernism, and British Poetry, 1910-1939*, Ashgate, London, 2002, p. 4.

⁸⁷ Julia Ribeiro, *Knowing That You Will Understand: The Usage of Poetry as a Historical Source about the Experience of the First World War*, vol. 31, *Alicante Journal of English Studies*, Alicante, 2018, pp. 121-117.

⁸⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁹ Costance M. Ruzich, *International Poetry of the First World War. An Anthology of Lost Voices*, cit., position 520.

CHAPTER 4
CANADA'S ROLE IN WWI:
A POETIC VOICE BRIDGING BORDERS

4.1 CANADIAN IDENTITY IN TIMES OF WAR

Through time “Canadians, more than most people, have consciously distanced themselves from thoughts of war.”⁹⁰ However, “since about 1815, Canadians have had to go abroad to fight”⁹¹ even though they have largely been spared from direct warfare on their soil. War has played a significant role in shaping this nation, a fact often overlooked by many Canadians. This nation owes its very existence to historical events driven by war such as “the European conquest which was instrumental in the creation of Canada”⁹², preventing it from remaining under French and Spanish control. In addition, “the American Revolutionary War and the War of 1812 were pivotal in establishing Canada as a separate entity”⁹³. The wars that occurred during the twentieth century may not have directly affected Canada's territorial boundaries, but it had an impact within the country. For example, Canadians were forced to choose between remaining part of the British Empire or not. Over time, these conflicts also acted as a catalyst for significant industrial growth and the establishment of Canada's social security system. It is evident that a transformation occurred as a “rural country goes to war”⁹⁴ and transitioned it into an “industrial nation”⁹⁵. “Without the war, Canada might have continued to be primarily characterized as a nation of farmers, hunters, and fishers”⁹⁶. However, the significant wartime industrial developments, though impressive in output and complexity, did not necessarily lead to sustained progress in productivity and innovation. Rather, there are suspicions that this rapid

⁹⁰ Desmond Morton, *A Military History of Canada*, McClelland & Stewart, Toronto, 2009, p. 10.

⁹¹ *Ibidem*.

⁹² *Idem*, p. 9.

⁹³ *Ibidem*.

⁹⁴ Lee-Anne Broadhead, Sean Howard, *Birth of a Nation Life of a Narrative: Steps to a Critical Remembrance of Canada's Great War*, Canadian Mennonite University, Winnipeg, 2017, p. 13.

⁹⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁹⁶ *Ibidem*.

expansion contributed to increased reliance on foreign capital, management, and techniques in the long run. Canadians sacrificed countless lives and resources, believing that the Great War would usher in lasting peace, but this faith was later revealed as an illusory hope. Furthermore, not only did soldiers offer their lives during this war, thousands of them, representing the finest of their generation, returned permanently scarred, physically or mentally. One can only speculate about the contributions these brave individuals might have made to Canada and humanity had they not been affected by the devastating effects of war. Some examples of how these men coped with the trench life in Europe is described in *How Canadians Survived the Great War* by Tim Cook, who argues that Canadian soldiers developed what he calls “soldiers’ culture”⁹⁷. This was a unique way of living war life because it allowed them to cope with the violence that surrounded them, creating strong connections among themselves, and also serving as a channel for questioning the established military order. For instance, the author examines how soldiers put up with the harsh conditions of life in the trenches by employing various strategies to adapt, including naming trenches after familiar places in Canada and developing a macabre solidarity with the deceased.

Not only was war fought on the frontlines, but it also affected the lives of people waiting at home. For example, Canadian children's experiences during this time have often been overlooked by historians, as if they “simply went about the business of being children; studying, playing and doing chores.”⁹⁸ However, how did a war that took place in faraway continents manage to impact the daily lives of boys and girls in English-Canadian society? There were certainly several underage recruits in the Canadian forces, but most Canadian children never saw conflict. Instead, “the war came to them.”⁹⁹ They were the sons and

⁹⁷ Tim Cook, *The Secret History of Soldiers: How Canadians Survived the Great War*, Allen Lane, Toronto, 2018, p. 480.

⁹⁸ Stéphane A. Rouzeau, *La Guerre des Enfants: 1914-1918: Essai D'histoire Culturelle*, Colin, Paris, 1993, p. 3.

⁹⁹ Susan R. Fisher, *Boys and Girls in No Man's Land: English Canadian Children and the First World War*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2011, p. 4.

daughters, brothers and sisters, who were directly impacted by the experiences of their families in combat, becoming deeply intertwined with the influence of the war. Some of them reached the legal age during the war and chose to enlist, while others tragically became orphans under the care of the state. A significant number of them had relatives or members of their community who enlisted in the war effort. In various ways, the effects of total war extended to them, not only in their domestic lives but also in their active involvement in contributing to the war.

Focusing her study on the classroom and on children's literature, Susan R. Fisher illustrates in *Boys and Girls in No Man's Land: English Canadian Children and the First World War* that children were perceived as the nation's future and, as such, were assigned the cause and responsibilities of the war. The author also categorizes children's books into four genres aimed at younger readers: stories for boys, animal tales, boys' adventure tales, and girls' stories. It is interesting to see how, throughout these novels and short stories, the portrayal of the Great War consistently depicts it as a noble cause and a worthy sacrifice. From a gender point of view, for boys, war was presented as a thrilling adventure and a way to display healthy masculinity. It is described as an honourable and noble endeavour, particularly when contrasted with exaggerated stories of cruel acts by German soldiers against animals and Belgian children. The genre for girls is more complex. Some stories resemble boys' adventure tales, with girls catching spies and showcasing their independence. However, "these stories tend to revert to highlighting traditional female qualities during wartime, such as caring for soldiers or seeing the war as an opportunity to find a husband."¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, "independence, when depicted, is not seen as progressive but rather as a reflection of the wartime reality where women had increased responsibilities in the absence of men."¹⁰¹ Beyond indulging children's fantasies, war stories also offer practical lessons relevant to their roles during the war. They emphasize proper

¹⁰⁰ *Idem*, p. 204.

¹⁰¹ *Idem*, p. 184.

behaviour and the willingness to sacrifice time, money, and possessions to contribute to the war effort. In contrast, Fisher points out that representing wartime children as skeptical of the war's cause and the worthiness of the sacrifices, obscures the historical context. Even if a child was a pacifist, they faced "terrific pressure . . . to support the nation's cause."¹⁰² Fisher's study therefore contributes to the growing of doubts about the source of the contemporary conversation about war, which departed from the traditional patriotic language of duty and sacrifice. The war, in fact, inflicted a heavy toll on Canada, with "60,661 Canadian men and women losing their lives in battles, due to wounds, accidents, or war-related diseases."¹⁰³ The number of those who returned severely injured, both physically and mentally, exceeded the count of the deceased. Instead of uniting Canadians, the war had the opposite effect, leading to divisions among French and English speakers, patriots, slackers, Canadian-born citizens, Canadians who might not have spoken English or French, "the 3500 natives and thousands of recent immigrants."¹⁰⁴ Among the deepest divisions was the contrast between those who remained in Canada during the war years and those who had served overseas for months and years. In fact, at the conclusion of the war, many Canadians were less concerned about Canada's representation in the Treaty of Versailles and more focused on achieving a sense of normality.

4.2 CANADIAN WOMEN ON THE FRONTLINES

In 1914, the outbreak of the Great War required a reconfiguration of the workplace and feasible employment opportunities accessible to working women, as "more than 600,000 Canadian men eventually departed overseas for active military service."¹⁰⁵ "One of the most interesting

¹⁰² *Idem*, p. 225.

¹⁰³ Desmond, Morton, *A Military History of Canada*, cit., p. 165.

¹⁰⁴ Tim Cook, *Fighting Words: Canadian Soldiers' Slang and Swearing in the Great War*, War in History, Vol. 20, No. 3, Sage Publications, NY, 2013, pp. 323-344, p. 334.

¹⁰⁵ Linda J. Quiney, *Borrowed Halos: Canadian Teachers as Voluntary Aid Detachment Nurses during the Great War*, Historical Studies in Education, Ottawa, 2003, p. 79.

wartime phases in Canada is the remarkable part that women have played in it. From farmer's wife to bank president's wife, and all through the various ranks of society, women have come forth and performed nobly."¹⁰⁶ Canadian women contributed significantly during World War I. As Dickies mentions in *Canada's Work in the World War*, "they were actively involved in various organizations, such as the Red Cross, Belgian Relief Committees, and Women's Institutes, providing essential aid to the war effort."¹⁰⁷ Women played a crucial role in sending millions of articles, including surgical supplies and clothing, overseas for the soldiers. They were also instrumental in promoting prohibition and securing the right to vote in several provinces and "by 1918 the Union government gave the rest of Canadian women the vote."¹⁰⁸ In addition, women engaged in munition works, proving their capabilities in handling high-power machinery and demonstrated their ability to stand alongside men and actively shape the destiny of the nation. Working class women displayed their patriotism through long hours in the dirty and dangerous war industries, finding that "the demand for their labour increased and those women doing a man's job saw their wages become more closely aligned to a man's pay."¹⁰⁹ Meanwhile, women's patriotism had aligned itself with masculine patriotic service through the language of militarism. Voluntarist activities like fund-raising and Red Cross work were lauded as the "heroic sacrifices of time and money, but only mothers who made the supreme sacrifice of a son were rewarded with an equal undying glory."¹¹⁰ However, the majority of women, whether they were mothers or not, responded enthusiastically to the call for duty, with only a small number showing reluctance. Just like men, women considered failing in their patriotic responsibility to be a grave dishonour. An apathetic or indolent woman

¹⁰⁶ Francis J. Dickie, *Canada's Work in the World War*, *Current History* (1916-1940), Vol. 5, No. 6, 1917, pp. 1023-1030, p. 1029.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰⁸ Desmond Morton, *A Military History of Canada*, cit., p. 158.

¹⁰⁹ Linda J. Quiney, *Assistant Angels, Canadian Women as Voluntary Aid Detachment Nurses During and After the Great War: 1914-1930*, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, 2002, p. 11.

¹¹⁰ *Idem*, p. 14.

was likened to a man who did not stand and be counted, leading to the accusation of weakness and a lack of patriotism by receiving the white feather as a symbol of cowardice.

Framed within a maternalistic context, women's loyalty to their country further strengthened the conventional notion of women's nurturing service and their inherent aptitude for motherhood. The interplay of gender, social class, and the history of women's charity work consequently paved the way for the emergence of voluntary nurses as a portrayal of women's patriotic dedication during the Great War. "Like soldiering for men, the pinnacle of women's wartime service was embodied in the figure of the nurse."¹¹¹ This allowed women to be acknowledged as equal to soldiers while preserving their femininity. Similar to military nurses, VADs wore uniforms, symbolizing efficiency with a white apron, and showing allegiance with a saintly veil.

By using gender and class to define acceptable traditions of service during the war, the VADs' experience reflects the transformation of women's status in a critical era, transitioning from the pre-suffrage era to the post-war working woman as the right to vote emerged.¹¹²

Nursing, along with teaching and social work, was one of the occupations of the early twentieth century regarded as suitable for respectable, educated women. In *Bedside Matters: the Transformation of Canadian Nursing, 1900-1990*, McPherson underlines how trained nurses became significant during the Great War:

The trained nurse stepped onto the Canadian health-care stage in the last decades of the nineteenth century when hospitals joined their American and European counterparts in the radical restructuring of institutional staffing. Hospitals moved to eliminate the old-style nurses, those working-class women who had informally acquired skills, who might be married or widowed, who sometimes lived in the hospital, who provided patients with at least rudimentary bedside care, and who often provided doctors with skilled medical assistance. In their place, hospital administrators introduced student nurses, single women who laboured for two (and later three) years on the wards in exchange for training and certification as graduate nurses.¹¹³

¹¹¹ *Idem*, p. 14.

¹¹² *Idem*, p. 18.

¹¹³ Kathryn McPherson, *Bedside Matters: The Transformation of Canadian Nursing 1900-1990*, Oxford University Press, Toronto, 2003, p. 27.

Only the “3,141 qualified nurses recruited by the Canadian Army Medical Corps (CAMC) were officially required for military nursing service abroad in Canada’s military hospitals.”¹¹⁴ Nevertheless, female teachers, unlike their male counterparts, were expected to remain in their classrooms for the duration of the war. Yet for some this status quo was not sufficient, and, for a brief time, “at least forty Canadian women teachers relinquished their identity as professional educators to assume the temporary role of a Voluntary Aid Detachment nurse, or VAD, many serving in British military hospitals in England, France, and other theatres of war.”¹¹⁵

4.3 CONCEALED PACIFISM: THE ROLE OF CANADIAN CHURCHES IN WWI

As Thomas P. Socknat clearly shows in his study, “Canadians are not usually thought to be very militaristic people, but Canadian pacifists, have suffered just as much as their comrades elsewhere.”¹¹⁶ The small pacifist movement in Canada before World War I was concentrated in the churches and to some extent in the labour movement. But, when Canada went to war in August 1914, pacifism was quickly portrayed as being connected to a German conspiracy, and conscientious objectors were seen as slackers. Canada was then still a political and intellectual part of the empire more fervid in its loyalty than the British, and there was little tolerance for those who refused to volunteer to fight or, even worse, who urged men to resist military service. For this reason, the main-stream churches instantly abandoned their principles and turned themselves into recruiting organizations, and the government in Ottawa gave conscientious objectors scant consideration. As Melissa Davidson writes:

Although the English Canadian churches justified the war as a defence of ideals like liberty and righteousness, some individuals remained conflicted about how to reconcile Christian principles with the demands of war. Nonetheless, these justifications made the events unfolding

¹¹⁴ G. W. L. Nicholson, *Canada’s Nursing Sisters*, Samuel Stevens Hakkert & Company-National Museum of Man, Toronto, 1975, p. 98.

¹¹⁵ Linda J. Quiney, *Borrowed Halos: Canadian Teachers as Voluntary Aid Detachment Nurses during the Great War*, cit., p. 80.

¹¹⁶ J. L. Granatstein, Reviewed Work: *Witness against War: Pacifism in Canada, 1900-1945* by Thomas Socknat, Oxford University Press on behalf of the American Historical Association, 1988, p. 1143.

in Europe more immediate for Canadians and set the moral and ideological foundations for the various kinds of war-work that would take place.¹¹⁷

“The pacifists' lot in Canada has not been a happy one in this century”¹¹⁸. The intense feelings stirred up by war were incredibly strong, and individuals who chose not to fight for their country due to their beliefs often faced accusations of cowardice. They may also have endured torment or suffering until they eventually yielded to military service in order to escape the harassment. Those who managed to withstand these pressures and stick to their peaceful principles demonstrated remarkable strength but the young men who firmly refused military service faced petition as well as other punishments setting an influential precedent for future Canadian pacifists. Furthermore, Shaw also points out that “those individuals professing a general ethical objection to war, even if that objection was rooted in religious principles, received ridicule and scorn from the tribunals established to determine exemption status”¹¹⁹. In fact, numerous individuals who had been involved in the peace movement before the war were willing to temporarily “set aside their general objections to war on the basis of the circumstances.”¹²⁰

It was on August 17th that James Sweeny, Anglican Bishop of Toronto, took to the platform at an open-air meeting held by the city's Citizens' Recruiting League, calling on each Canadian to “come forward and do his bit”¹²¹ in “a holy war, a fight of right against might, a fight for the inviolability of treaties”¹²². So, many Christian soldiers gave their service to the state and risked their lives as fathers and husbands to protect the vulnerable women and children at home. Their patriotism was defined by their role as citizens and fathers, but it was

¹¹⁷ Melissa Davidson, *For God, King, and Country: The Canadian Churches and The Great War, 1914-1918*, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, 2019, p. 37.

¹¹⁸ Thomas Socknat, *Witness against War: Pacifism in Canada, 1900-1945*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1987, p. 1143.

¹¹⁹ Amy J. Shaw, *Crisis of Conscience: Conscientious Objection in Canada during the First World War*, UBC Press, Vancouver, 2009, p. 119.

¹²⁰ Melissa Davidson, *For God, King, and Country: The Canadian Churches and The Great War, 1914-1918*, cit., p. 104.

¹²¹ James Sweeny, *Call of the Camp to Young Citizens*, Toronto Globe, 18 August 1915, p. 6.

¹²² *Ibidem*.

also shaped by the construct of manliness that was built on the late Victorian ethos of “muscular Christianity”¹²³, and by the concept of a “holy war”.¹²⁴ Neil McNeil, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Toronto, stated during an interview to the *Toronto Star*: “Today the loyalty of the Catholic soldiers and of Catholic populations is absolutely essential to the continued existence of the British Empire.”¹²⁵ In fact, Canadian churches played an important role in examining the sentiments and encounters linked to the Great War. “This has meant sitting at the intersection of different types of historical literature”¹²⁶ and using religion to build a fuller picture of Canadian society during the war.

Understanding Canadians and the connection with their churches, related to the war, provides a new perspective, not only on the wide range of their wartime activities, but also on the post-war period. Canadians who subscribed to the notion that the war served a grander purpose carried these convictions into their post-war commemorations. During the Great War period, religion transcended the realm of individual faith; “it was woven into society in a profound and pervasive way”¹²⁷ organizing communities and furnishing a shared language that, while at times exclusive and divisive, also served as a wellspring of inspiration and solace. Irrespective of linguistic or denominational affiliations, religion left an enduring imprint on people's perceptions of global and personal responsibilities, as well as the role of individual conscience. From their early attempts to fathom how the war aligned with a progressive world to the decision to enact conscription; religious terminology and concepts moulded the commitment of Canadians to the war effort and the extent of their contributions.

¹²³ Jeffrey A. Keshen, *Propaganda and Censorship During Canada's Great War*, University of Alberta Press, Edmonton, 1996, p. 130.

¹²⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹²⁵ Melissa Davidson, *For God, King, and Country: The Canadian Churches and The Great War, 1914-1918*, cit., p. 218 and Neil McNeil, *Not Religious but Racial*, *Catholic Record*, 17 November 1917, p. 1.

¹²⁶ Melissa Davidson, *For God, King, and Country: The Canadian Churches and The Great War, 1914-1918*, cit., p. 306.

¹²⁷ *Idem*, p. 307.

4.4 MARJORIE PICKTHALL: A CHRISTIAN MYSTIC POET

Marjorie Pickthall was born on September 14, 1883, near Chiswick, England, the only child of Arthur C. Pickthall and Helen Mary Mallard. The Pickthalls emigrated to Canada in 1889 and settled in Toronto where Marjorie attended the “Church of England School on Beverley Street, and later Bishop Strachan School”¹²⁸. During her childhood she was keen on drawing, painting, keeping a diary, playing the violin, and writing her own stories and verses. When her first book, *Drift of Pinions*, was published in 1913, she had already written her best poetry and “was to continue not only the repetition of her favourite attitudes and metaphors, but even the vocabulary that included such words as gray, little, silver, rose, dreams, mist, dove, and moth.”¹²⁹ In 1910, at the age of twenty-seven, her envisioned idyllic island home collapsed. The passing of her mother was an all-encompassing calamity that shattered her entire world. She was defenceless and her grief was profoundly tragic. During this trying period, she discovered solace and guidance in a group of individuals associated with Victoria College in Toronto. They helped secure a position for her in the Victoria College Library, and after a significant interval, she eventually resumed her pursuit of poetry. When the First World War broke in upon her own world, she was back in England and decided to help in the general call to service. She worked for a time on the land, but this proved much too heavy a load for her. “Next she worked in the South Kensington Meteorological Office, and the close confinement threatened her eyesight”¹³⁰. Even though she aspired to engage in war-related endeavours, her physical condition was ill-suited for the strenuous demands after the sheltered life she had led during peaceful times. She personally wrote in *Acta Victoriana*, a “major scholarly journal”¹³¹ of the times, that “even if I fail, it will be a satisfaction to know I've had a thorough good try at

¹²⁸ Lorne Pierce, *Selected Poems of Marjorie Pickthall*, McClelland and Stewart Limited, Toronto, 1957, p. 16.

¹²⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹³⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹³¹ Diana M. A. Relke, *Canadian Women Poets and Poetic Identity: A Study of Marjorie Pickthall, Constance Lindsay Skinner and the Early Work of Doraty Livesay*, Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, 1986, p. 36.

something useful."¹³² In 1920 she returned to Canada and moved to Vancouver. In the same year her one-act play, *The Wood Carver's Wife*, was produced in Montreal, and she began what was to be her greatest work in prose, *The Beaten Man*, a novel based upon contemporary life in the new world. Her career ended suddenly in 1922, when, at the age of 39, "she died in Vancouver of complications following surgery"¹³³.

Canadian critics of the early twentieth century "seized on her poems and stories as works of distinction,"¹³⁴ and some even hailed her as a genius and seer. "More than any other poet of this century,"¹³⁵ wrote E.K. Brown in 1943, "she was the object of a cult [. . .] unacademic critics boldly placed her among the few, the immortal names."¹³⁶ In her poems, she expressed genuine but emotional feelings about death, love, and being apart from loved ones. She deeply yearned for "fulfilment and peace".¹³⁷ To make up for what she considered a relatively unexciting life, she expanded her literary experience which influenced her poetry. The literature which influenced her verse can be divided into three groups: the work of her male predecessors, the Bible, and the poetry of a handful of nineteenth-century women poets. Chief among her male models is D.G. Rossetti. In addition, more than anything, Pickthall's sacred verses were influenced by the Bible that provided her with characters and themes through which she explored the Christian universe. She also read the poetry of "Christina Rossetti who influenced the group of poems which are the most revealing in terms of Pickthall's struggle for poetic identity."¹³⁸

¹³² Marjorie Pickthall, *A Memorial Address Given at Victoria University*, Graduation issue, Acta Victoriana, in commemoration of the twenty-first anniversary of the poet's death, Toronto, 1943, p. 22.

¹³³ Diana M. A. Relke, *Canadian Women Poets and Poetic Identity: A Study of Marjorie Pickthall, Constance Lindsay Skinner and the Early Work of Doraty Livesay*, cit., p. 22.

¹³⁴ E.K. Brown, *On Canadian Poetry*, Tecumseh Press, Ottawa, 1943, p. 65.

¹³⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹³⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹³⁷ Lorne Pierce, *Selected Poems of Marjorie Pickthall*, cit., 1957, p. 20.

¹³⁸ Diana M. A. Relke, *Canadian Women Poets and Poetic Identity: A Study of Marjorie Pickthall, Constance Lindsay Skinner and the Early Work of Doraty Livesay*, cit., p. 53.



Picture 5: Marjorie Pickthall
Victoria University Library (Toronto)
Marjorie Pickthall fonds

MARCHING MEN

Under the level winter sky
I saw a thousand Christs go by.
They sang an idle song and free
As they went up to calvary.

Careless of eye and coarse of lip,
They marched in holiest fellowship.
That heaven might heal the world, they gave
Their earth-born dreams to deck the grave.

With souls unpurged and steadfast breath
They supped the sacrament of death.
And for each one, far off, apart,
Seven swords have rent a woman's heart.

In *Marching Men*, Marjorie Pickthall represents a religious theme, “as though each human by his humanity is part of an imitation of Christ”¹³⁹. The poem starts with: “Under the level winter sky / I saw a thousand Christs go by” (43:1–2). The title is the only indication to the reader that “They” refers to the marching men, presumably soldiers, in the poem. These fighters resemble Christ as he made his way to his crucifixion on Golgotha, similar to innocent lambs led to the slaughter. In the second stanza, the speaker describes how “They marched in holiest fellowship” and “That heaven might heal the world, they gave / Their earth-born dreams to deck the grave” (43:5–7). This implies that they are forsaking their own lives, allowing heaven to offer its potential and conditional healing to the world. Just as God's love for the world led Him to sacrifice His only son, the implicit analogy suggests that these individuals, like Christ, will, through their sacrificial deaths, bring peace and healing to the world. In the third stanza, the breath of these Christs is “steadfast,” and they sip “the sacrament of death” (43:9–10). This suggests they embody Christ's essence while also participating in the act of

¹³⁹ Jonathan Locke Hart, *The Poetic of Otherness*, cit., p. 172.

consuming his body and blood in remembrance and honour of his ultimate sacrifice. Pickthall ends her poem with the same rhyming couplet she has used throughout the poem: “And for each one, far off, apart, / Seven swords have rent a woman’s heart” (43:11–12). “This image may refer to Mary as well as other women”¹⁴⁰, more particularly to the seven swords or sorrows that pierced her heart. “Mary mourns for Jesus as this woman does for each one of these Christs.”¹⁴¹

The poet “was seen as a Christian mystic, and her love of the language and mythology of the Bible was interpreted as a submission to Christian doctrine and a humble acceptance of her place in its scheme of things.”¹⁴² The opening sentence of J. D. Logan in *Marjorie Pickthall: Her Poetic Genius and Art* reflects this interpretation: “Whenever I have thought of Marjorie Pickthall, the person, I have re-imagined the kneeling, praying Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane, and I have fancied that I heard, from her lips, the agony of Christ's prayer.”¹⁴³ The Christian overtones of her verses appealed to the many clergymen and other church affiliates who constituted the core of the Canadian literary establishment at the time. In fact, numerous Canadian poets of the Great War resorted to the use of religious terminology in their literary works, a choice that reflected the profound significance of spirituality during the tumultuous twentieth century. This deliberate invocation of religious imagery aimed to convey the complexity of comprehending the sheer horror and devastation that this war had inflicted upon the world. The trauma endured by the soldiers, the cataclysmic impact on nations, and the enduring imprints left by writers, “both those who directly experienced the brutality of combat and those who observed from a distance”¹⁴⁴, all served to emphasize the profound strain inherent in attempting to grapple with the seismic shock that reverberated throughout Europe

¹⁴⁰ *Idem*, p. 173.

¹⁴¹ Jonathan Locke Hart, *The Poetic of Otherness*, cit., p. 161.

¹⁴² Diana M. A. Relke, *Canadian Women Poets and Poetic Identity: A Study of Marjorie Pickthall, Constance Lindsay Skinner and the Early Work of Doraty Livesay*, cit., p. 39.

¹⁴³ J. D. Logan, *Marjorie Pickthall: Her Poetic Genius and Art*, T.C. Allen, Halifax, 1922, p. 13.

¹⁴⁴ Jonathan Locke Hart, *The Poetic of Otherness*, cit., p. 161.

and extended to nations beyond its borders. This monumental event left an indelible mark on language itself, as it struggled to adequately convey the enormity of the experience.

4.5 DEALING WITH HOMECOMING SOLDIERS

One of the largest post-war concerns by the Canadian government in Ottawa was “Coping with returned soldiers.”¹⁴⁵ Unlike in previous wars, when disease killed more soldiers than combat, “the Great War was unique because the majority of sick and wounded troops returned home alive.”¹⁴⁶ Medical advances had made it possible for the injured soldiers to survive and two years after the armistice, “6,520 soldiers were still in the hospital.”¹⁴⁷ However, many soldiers returned bearing psychological wounds which, in turn, caused a wide debate on both sides of the Atlantic regarding psychological trauma, war-related stress and, what later became known as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and its long-lasting effects on traumatized veterans. Historians have discovered documented links between combat and intense psychological duress as far back as the seventeenth century, and “the mental effects of battle on combatants were recognized even during biblical times.”¹⁴⁸ Nevertheless, it was shell shock during the First World War that propelled psychological trauma into the spotlight and attracted attention from soldiers, civilians, and governments in addition to physicians.

The first phase, which Alan English calls “blissful ignorance,”¹⁴⁹ is a period where there is no real awareness of the unique challenges of dealing with mental health problems in military personnel, and civilian models of diagnosis and treatment are the norm. During the early times

¹⁴⁵ Desmond Morton, *A Military History of Canada*, cit., p. 165.

¹⁴⁶ Desmond Morton and Glenn Wright, *Winning the Second Battle Canadian Veterans and the Return to Civilian Life 1915–1930*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1987, p. 9.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴⁸ Adam Montgomery, *The Invisible Injured: Psychological Trauma in the Canadian Military from the First World War to Afghanistan*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal, 2017, p. 11.

¹⁴⁹ Alan English, *From Combat Stress to Operational Stress: The CF’s Mental Health Lessons from the Decade of Darkness*, *Canadian Military Journal*, Vol. 12, No. 4, Ottawa, 2012, pp. 1-17, p. 11.

of the First World War, those “who could not cope with the mental strain of combat in the British and Canadian armies were often diagnosed as suffering from hysteria”¹⁵⁰, a disease believed to occur most often in young women and thought to be caused by a lack of will-power, laziness, or moral depravity. Casualties were treated as they would have been in a civilian clinical setting. They were evacuated to Britain where, given rest and sympathy, “symptoms disappeared in some, but most ended up institutionalized, and then became chronic cases.”¹⁵¹ In December 1914 the War Office in London received reports that an alarming number of soldiers from the British Expeditionary Force were being evacuated with “nervous and mental shock.”¹⁵² According to those reports, between 3 to 4 percent of all ranks were being returned to Britain due to “nerves”¹⁵³ and “other forms of mental breakdown.”¹⁵⁴ Considering the unpredictable nature of a protracted and strenuous conflict, each soldier's contribution held significant importance, prompting the British to address the issue. The British public's empathy for shell shock, both in Britain and throughout the Empire, was partly cultivated through regular newspaper coverage, which, by 1917, fostered the belief that “shell shock was a normal and frequent consequence of war.”¹⁵⁵ Then again, a 1918 *Globe* article played an important role in increasing the scandal of such trauma: it exaggeratedly proclaimed that in Canada, “90 percent of returned soldiers suffer from some nervous disorder.”¹⁵⁶ However, empathy and public comprehension clashed with the requirements of the military and a military ethos that had no room for vulnerability. The military's approach to mental disorders was intertwined with long-standing masculine ideals of honour, resilience, self-discipline, and comradeship. Mental

¹⁵⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵¹ Chris Feudtner, *Minds the Dead Have Ravished: Shell Shock, History, and the Ecology of Disease Systems*, *History of Science*, Vol. 31, University of Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania, 1993, pp. 377-420, p. 377.

¹⁵² Ben Shephard, *A War of Nerves. Soldiers and Psychiatrists 1914–1994*, Pimlico Books, London, 2002, p. 21.

¹⁵³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵⁴ Charles S. Myers, *Shell Shock in France, 1914–1918 Based on a War Diary*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2012, p. 14.

¹⁵⁵ Terry Copp, Mark O. Humphr, *Combat Stress in the 20th Century: The Commonwealth Perspective*, Canadian Defence Academy Press, Kingston, Ontario, 2010, p. 14.

¹⁵⁶ Adam Montgomery, *The Invisible Injured: Psychological Trauma in the Canadian Military from the First World War to Afghanistan*, cit., p. 39.

disorder was linked with “weakness, effeminacy, and cowardice, and viewed as something “treatable by disciplinary actions.”¹⁵⁷ Even though the war produced a large number of soldiers who broke down in battle, military physicians wanted to prevent military “wastage, while still tenuously clinging to their other duty.”¹⁵⁸

Following the conclusion of the Great War, psychiatrists and neurologists played a leading role in important decision-making and instituted disability pensions or modifying programs for mentally ill veterans. Despite the fact that pensions were granted for a wide range of issues caused by the war, “mental illness produced another, less easily defined category, since there were myriad ways in which a damaged mind could hinder a man’s ability to stay gainfully employed.”¹⁵⁹ Unfortunately, numerous men found that the apparently impartial stance of pension authorities and consulting doctors was frequently influenced by prevailing societal judgments concerning masculinity, along with an overarching emphasis on productivity and adaptability. Canada remained distant from the European battlefields. Despite Canadians' exposure to accounts of the trench warfare horrors and firsthand encounters with physically debilitated soldiers struggling to secure or maintain employment in cities like Toronto and Edmonton, these veterans were still perceived as reinforcing the conventional stereotype of the “fecklessness of soldiers.”¹⁶⁰ This perspective mirrored historical middle-class perceptions of the typical soldier, often characterized as a working-class individual with a tendency toward criminal behaviour in the words of Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald, “these soldiers excelled primarily in hunting, drinking, and chasing women.”¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁷ Ben Shephard, *A War of Nerves. Soldiers and Psychiatrists 1914–1994*, cit., p. 25.

¹⁵⁸ *Idem.*, p. 26.

¹⁵⁹ Adam Montgomery, *The Invisible Injured: Psychological Trauma in the Canadian Military from the First World War to Afghanistan*, cit., p. 19.

¹⁶⁰ Desmond Morton, *Fight or Pay: Soldiers' Families in the Great War*, UBC Press, Vancouver, 2004, p. 162.

¹⁶¹ Allan English, *Understanding Military Culture: A Canadian Perspective*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal, 2004, p. 87.

The Great Depression exacerbated the already heated debates concerning the extent of the public's responsibility towards veterans and whether the nation was falling short in fulfilling that obligation. Throughout the 1930s, the Canadian Pension Commission faced significant challenges, contending with frustrated veterans whose claims were denied and with the CPC's conservative interpretation of pension legislation. Many believed that the CPC adopted an “overly bureaucratic and high-handed approach”¹⁶² to process pension claims. Despite the establishment of a Federal Appeal Board for those whose claims were rejected, disputes persisted until the outset of the Second World War. Amid the challenges of soaring unemployment, government frugality, and the enduring traumas of wartime experiences, numerous shell-shocked veterans sought pensions they were ultimately denied. As they found themselves either confined within mental health institutions or struggling to navigate the challenges of civilian life, a considerable number of these veterans gradually receded into the shadows within an inherently unstable socio-economic environment. It wasn't until the onset of WWII that public conversations concerning the profound impact of trauma were rekindled and brought back to the forefront of collective consciousness.

¹⁶² Peter Neary, *On to Civvy Street, Canada's Rehabilitation Program for Veterans of the Second World War*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal, 2011, p. 26.

APPENDIX

INTERVIEWING GRANDMA

My father was William Joseph Whitehead and he was a runner

He fought in the First World War

Who was your father and what led him to maintain silence about his experience in WWI?

My father was English and immigrated to Canada, British Columbia a few years before he enlisted. He was a gentleman, very discreet and of few words. One day I was in the kitchen entertaining guests, family friends who pretended to be World War I soldiers. As they drank coffee they bragged about the war and how brave they had been in succeeding in defeating the enemy. Father said nothing. They left after a couple of hours, and as soon as they left the house, I looked at him and asked him why he would not tell me his stories of the war and his bravery in fighting the Germans. His few blunt and cold words were, "Those who really fought in World War I forget about the war and talk to no one about it. Those who talk about it and boast of such glory are liars." The only stories I know of my father and the war he fought were told to me by the psychologist at Shaughnessy Hospital in Vancouver a few months before his death.

When was your father sent to war and what was his role in the Great War?

William enlisted in September 1915. He received approval from the Canadian Expeditionary on December 28th 1915 and began his terrible experience in the trenches in February 1916. He initially enlisted as a sapper (SPR in English, sapper); a soldier who specialized in digging trenches to block the enemy's approach, or tunnels at the base of fortifications to cause their collapse. His regiment number was 500834. Upon entering the war, they renamed him a trench runner or messenger. His role was to run from trench to trench and deliver urgent

messages. He would run fast over dead bodies, thus avoiding slipping in the mud, until he was hit with a bullet on his right thigh. He was hospitalized for a long time, and on June 27, 1916, he was sent home.

Did your father ever suffer from PTSD?

My father suffered from terrible nightmares and every night he would wake up screaming and shouting phrases like, "Run, run, run!" The nightmares he had would wake up the whole family. The dreams would catapult him into the war and he would find himself in the dark jumping the bedroom bed, the windowsills of the house, hiding from imaginary bombs screaming the impossible. I would get up and find him squatting like a small child in the arms of my mother who would promptly reassure him, "Don't worry Bill, it's ok, your home now. You're safe!"

What social class did your father belong to and did he ever tell you stories about how he got along with his comrades?

My father enlisted as a volunteer and fought for freedom and for his country. He belonged to the middle class and got along very well with his comrades, as far as I could tell. The reason they got along so well was because the amount of alcohol was enough to get them drunk every night. They drank a lot and he never had any social problems of any kind. On his return he married my mother, an English girl named Edith Mary Gorton. It was not his habit to drink but when he did he would overdo it and was violent only to her.

Do you think that veterans might have been dangerous and through what accounts would you confirm your view?

I believe that veterans are not dangerous men but they certainly need to have the right psychiatric care to deal with the trauma caused by war. I am not just talking about World War I and World War II soldiers, but I am speaking for all wars, including contemporary wars. Certainly, the traumas of the Great War were devastating for the families of veterans but not a danger to society, at least not my father.

Do you think that the government provided the necessary treatment for war neurosis?

Was William Joseph Whitehead ever admitted to a veterans' hospital?

The Canadian government did not have the right treatment for this kind of postwar trauma. My father was never hospitalized or attended to by anyone. Only the last two years of his life he was hospitalized in the clinic of the veterans' hospital, "Shaughnessy Hospital." The last memory I have of my father is of him lying in the hospital bed having his long white hair combed. He died in 1973.



William Joseph Whitehead
(1894-1973)

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