

## What Impact did the First World War have upon Women Authors and the Publication of their Writing?

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### **Abstract**

Women's authorship during the First World War has been a topic of widespread academic debate and the overall consensus is that the war allowed women to contribute greatly to the output of literature during this time. As is shown by Margaret R. Higonnet, Claire Tylee and Dorothy Goldman, many women writers focused on themes of war and conflict during the Great War, and one might argue that the subject of war itself was a crucial factor contributing to the level of recognition they received. Jane Potter identifies a significant movement towards producing propagandist literature during the First World War and discusses how genres such as the romantic novel "responded both to the public need for reassurance and the political agenda that was 'the war effort'" (2005, p.6). The focus of this article is to determine how receptive the publishing industry was towards female authors during the First World War, explore the prevailing motives for publishers' decisions to print their work, and assess the impact the War had upon the content of women's writing.

### **Key Words**

Women writers, First World War, propaganda, publishers, war literature

### Women and Writing before the Great War

Before exploring the impact of the First World War upon women's writing, it is necessary to indicate that female authorship had begun to develop prior to this period. During the Victorian era the advent of the novel impacted significantly upon writing, providing women with a new opportunity for creative expression. Indeed, the nineteenth century has been thought of as "the age of the female novelist" (Showalter, 1978, p.3), and this is evident in the lasting reputations of great female authors produced at that time, such as Jane Austen and the Bronte sisters. However, as Elaine Showalter observes, there was a tendency amongst nineteenth century female writers to focus on the cultural stereotypes of femininity in their writing, which suggests that they may not have been expressing their own opinions, but reflecting those which were acceptable within their society (1978,p.7). Since the novel is considered the "dominant Victorian genre" (Tuchman, 1989, p.120), it can be argued that women writing in other genres, such as journalism and poetry, were not as successful in receiving opportunities for publication during the nineteenth century. Some female novelists, such as George Eliot, published poetry alongside their novels. However, the fact that Eliot, one of the most successful authors of the nineteenth century, used a pseudonym suggests that the publishing industry was not receptive towards female writers. Yet, it is evident that during the First World War poetry was produced prolifically by women who published under their own names, indicating that the war was a turning-point in female authorship. Additionally, political writing authored by women had begun to emerge with the Suffrage Movement in the 1890s, but it was during the Great War that it gained real momentum, impacted by the change in women's roles and their participation in war-time work. Indeed, Dorothy Goldman has written that the right to vote granted in 1918 was "in part recognition of the work they had done during the war" (1995, p.14).

Claire Tylee also suggests that the war was significant in providing new avenues for women to develop their writing, claiming that "with the war came the opportunity for (women) to achieve what they had struggled for: entry to what had been seen before as male centres of power" (1990, p14). Prior to the war, forms of writing such as journalism and authorship on themes of conflict were primarily male-dominated activities; before the twentieth century women were often regarded as unable to contemplate the subject of war as it was considered a purely male occupation (Higonnet, 1999, p.xxii). However, the Great War brought about change in this area, providing the opportunity for women to convey their own experiences and articulate how the conflict had impacted upon their lives.

### Three Women at the Forefront of War-Time Authorship

Despite the historical exclusion of women from war-literature, one of the first books about the First World War was written by a woman. *A Hilltop on the Marne* by American author Mildred Aldrich was published in 1915, and was comprised of a collection of letters about her experiences and reactions during the war. What is interesting to note is that following

this publication Aldrich was encouraged to produce more books (Tylee, 1990, p.25), which implies that the publishing industry was responsive towards wartime female authors. In 1916 Aldrich published *On the Edge of the War Zone*, another collection of letters that were distinctly patriotic in tone: "What joy it was for us of the cavalry to pass over the trenches and fly across the plains in the pursuit of the Germans [ ... ] Alas! The battles were costly and many of our comrades paid with their lives [ ... ] They are more than compensated by the results of the sacrifice." (Aldrich, 1916, p.278). The affirmation that the war was a noble calling worthy of the loss of life it caused suggests that publication may have been motivated by the text's propagandist appeal. This view is supported by Tylee, who claims that Aldrich's writing was influenced by propaganda as the war drew on (1990, p.25), and that the publication of Aldrich's books was used as a method of raising money for various war-efforts (p.27). Therefore, while the publication of Aldrich's work indicates that the publishing industry was becoming receptive to women writers, this may not have been due to changing views of the place of women. Many of the successful women writers at the time were producing this type of patriotic literature in line with British propaganda; one might argue that this was a major factor in publishers' decisions to print their work.

Another female writer who contributed to the output of literature during the war was Vera Brittain. Jane Potter ( 2005, p. 1) recognises that Brittain is often considered the "token women's voice" of 1914-18, which indicates that she was a significant wartime writer. Brittain's most well-known work was her autobiographical memoir, *Testament of Youth*. This book contained her personal experiences of the Great War, and although it included other information about Brittain's life and was not published until 1933, Brittain intended it as a memorial to her brother and fiancé who were both killed in conflict (Tylee, 1990, p.213). Additionally, in 1918 Brittain published the book of poetry *Verses of a V.A.D.* Higonet writes that the "war's profound effect upon her manifests itself" in this collection inspired by Brittain's work as a nurse during the war (1999, p.515). Many of the poems included in this volume present the devastation and suffering caused by the war rather than acting as a promotion of it. For example, "A Military Hospital" uses the expression "a mass of human wreckage" (Brittain, 1918, p.21) to describe wounded soldiers and "May Morning" speaks of "ruin such as only war can bring" (p.26). Brittain used her writing to express her own views of the war rather than endorsing those of the government, and therefore exemplifies that women's writing was not published exclusively for its use as propaganda.

Additionally, the novelist Dorothy Canfield had a number of works published during the war years. Interestingly, she was published by two publishing houses simultaneously throughout the war, which reveals that her writing was popular. In 1915 *The Bent Twig* was published by Grosset and Dunlap, followed by the publication of a children's book *Understood Betsy* in 1917 by the same publisher. Henry Holt and Company soon brought out editions of these books, and in 1918 this was followed by their publication of *Home Fires in France*, one of Canfield's most well-known books along with *Days of Glory*, also published by Holt and Company in 1919. These two latter works focused very much on the war, but the fact that Canfield also published literature which contained no war themes suggests that publishers

were not simply interested in publishing women's writing for propaganda. However, one might point out that Dorothy Canfield had already had books published prior to the war by Henry Holt and Grosset and Dunlap, and so these publishers' willingness to print her books may have been due to her previous success with them.

### **The Romance Novel**

Dorothy Goldman (1995, p.55) has written that during the First World War romantic novels flourished, and the majority of these were written by female authors. Although many of these books were considered a form of escapism, Jane Potter argues that they were not simply "light reading" but were in fact "vehicles of dissemination of patriotic ideals and models of appropriate wartime behaviour" (2005, p. 91), evident in their sustained engagement with themes of war. This leads one to believe that the publication of romantic fiction written by women was motivated by its utility as propaganda, which many publishers were encouraged to contribute to during the War (Potter, 2005, p.52). One example of a romantic novel which promotes patriotism and endorses the British participation in the war is Florence Barclay's *My Heart's Right There*. Published in 1914 by G.P Putnam's Sons, the cover is embossed with the Union Jack in the shape of a shield, and this clearly conveys a message of patriotism and military power. Additionally, the book is dedicated "to our men at the front", and focuses on the story of a soldier who becomes wounded while fighting at the Front. As Potter claims, it is evident that the author's intention is to promote the war as a "righteous one" (2005, p.96), and this is supported by the type of language used, such as "our brave men in the trenches" (Barclay, 1914, p.25) and "for King and Country and Home" (p.56). Barclay uses her characters to convey messages in line with the propaganda of the day, for example, referring to the Germans as "the Devil" (Barclay, 1914, p.56) and claiming the War is a fight "for rights and justice against treachery and wrong" (1914, p.58). This indicates that romantic novels were published in part due to their nationalistic content and presents women writers as being complicit in contributing to propaganda during the war.

### **Women as Journalists**

The nineteenth century saw the growth of newspapers and magazines which were wholly or partly devoted to women. These often revolved around issues such as housework and family, but Higonet acknowledges that the war brought a "new direction" in journalism, providing opportunities for women to report on their war-related experiences (1999, p.103). Cora Harris was one female journalist whose work benefited from the war. A regular writer for the American newspaper *Saturday Evening Post*, she was sent by her employers to investigate women's reactions to the war in Europe in 1914 and produced an article entitled "Women of England and Women of France" (1999, p.113). It is significant that the *Saturday Evening Post* chose to send a female journalist to investigate the impact the war had for women rather than men. This implies that the newspaper was in support of promoting women's writing and that it was interested in obtaining a woman's perspective on the outbreak of the war. Additionally, the content that was published in Cora Harris's article

suggests that the newspaper industry was open to women voicing their own opinions rather than merely stating the facts of what they had seen:

What men suffer through war is written in histories [...] but what women suffer is never written [...] When one writes of the women's side of the war one cannot tell of battles won, or of the glories that crown the heads of victorious men. It must be a story of sorrows; of despair; of poverty; of privations patiently endured [...] (Harris, 1914)

Here, Harris is not simply reporting on what she has seen in Europe, but expressing her opinion that historical accounts of war often favour the experiences of men over women. The fact that the *Saturday Evening Post* published such material is telling of the changing place of women in publishing, and conveys that the war was influential in providing opportunities for female writers to develop their voice and have it heard. Similarly, the British writer Rebecca West, whose article "The Hands that War" was published in the *Daily Chronicle* in 1916, expressed her view that women working in the cordite village "sacrifice almost as much as men who enlist" and "face more danger every day than any soldier" (Higonnet, 1999, p.125). The content of these articles confirm that propagandist appeal was not the only reason for the publication of women's writing.

Higonnet asserts that during the war female journalists who investigated war-torn areas "marked a rupture with the past, when only men would have been allowed free passage" (1999, p.103), and this reveals a change in attitudes towards female journalists. However, there is some evidence to show that women were occasionally forced to use devious methods unrelated to their publishing activities in order to gain access to restricted areas. For example, Mary Roberts Rinehart, another writer sent to Europe by the *Saturday Evening Post*, made the excuse of inspecting hospitals and raising relief funds in order to get her story (1999, p.103). This indicates that Rinehart's role as a journalist did not provide excuse enough, and therefore implies that women were still not being taken seriously in the publishing industry.

### **Female Writers and Poetry**

Poetry written by women during the war has been largely overlooked until recent years, and those poems that have received the most attention are often ones which contain jingoistic and patriotic themes (Higonnet, 1999, p.451). Although some women poets, such as the British poet Edith Sitwell and American Amy Lowell, wrote about the suffering caused by the war rather than the heroism, it was those poets who included pro-war ideology in their work who usually received the most commercial success (Dowson, 2002, p.49). Jane Dowson writes that many of the poems produced by women during the war were "a testimony to the power of the propaganda machines", and this use of women's poetry to support the war-effort is evident in the cases of Jessie Pope and May Wedderburn Cannan. Both Pope's *War Poems* and Cannan's *In War Time* were published in popular literary papers in order to encourage nationalism (Dowson, 2002, p.49), and this supports the view

that most female writers were being published due to the propaganda value of their work. This implies that the publication of women's writing during the war was not an indicator of changing views towards women and equality. Dowson writes that out of 2225 British writers who published poems during the Great War, 532 were women (2002, p.42). She goes on to say that it is difficult to determine how correct this number is due to pseudonyms used during this period, and despite revealing that women poets were being published, these numbers show that the majority of literature was being produced by men. Joan Montgomery Byles (1995, p.43) provides an explanation for this lack of women's poetry, suggesting that the literature of soldiers was favoured by publishers as the true representation of events. Interestingly, many women attempted to imitate the voices of soldiers on the Front in order to portray the war from a male perspective. Therefore, evidence suggests that the work of women poets was often overshadowed by that of male poets, and indicates that publishers would frequently choose to publish the latter over the former.

### **Conclusion**

It is evident that the First World War brought new opportunities for female writers to get their work noticed. Byles states that "women writers are important recorders of women's historical experience, and they give us invaluable insight into women's lives and their reactions and feelings in these momentous times" (1995, p.18). This reflects the input of women writers during the war, who have helped shape the narratives of this significant period in history. It is, therefore, evident that the place of women in the publishing industry was consolidated by the Great War. Although the first steps for female authors had been taken in the nineteenth century, the war provided women with the chance to build on their place in literature. However, access was not available to all women equally; most female writers published during the war came from prestigious families and were often educated to university level. As Jane Potter (2005, p.5) writes, it is difficult to find work published during the war by working-class women. Therefore, the material conditions of the women themselves dictated the likelihood of them becoming published authors.

The publication of women's writing during the First World War was evidently a result of a number of factors, and one must account for the Women's Rights Movement and the impact this may have had on changing views towards equality of gender. However, with its provision of opportunities for women to contribute to the war-effort, the Great War brought new and interesting experiences to the lives of women. Instead of writing about the domestic sphere, for the first time they could write legitimately about war because they were, to an extent, participating in it. It is clear that the subject-matter of women's writing was a major feature for achieving successful publication. Novels and poems often promoted the bravery of soldiers and the importance of supporting the war, and thus, the propagandist appeal of literature written by women can be said to be an important reason for why publishers chose to print their work. However, what is clear is that the First World War did have a profound impact upon women authors and brought about more opportunities for them to publish their work than had ever been available before.

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