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no. 6941

WOMEN, WAR, AND WORK: BRITISH WOMEN
IN INDUSTRY 1914 TO 1919

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the
University of North Texas in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

By

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August, 1993

Kimball, Toshla, Women, War, and Work: British Women in Industry 1914 to 1919. Master of Arts (History), August, 1993, 101 pp., bibliography, 48 titles.

This thesis examines the entry of women, during World War I, into industrial employment that men had previously dominated. It attempts to determine if women's wartime activities significantly changed the roles women played in industry and society. Major sources consulted include microfilm of the British Cabinet Minutes and British Cabinet Papers; Parliamentary Debates; memoirs of contemporaries like David Lloyd George, Beatrice Webb, Sylvia Pankhurst, and Monica Cosens; and contemporary newspapers. The examination begins with the early debates concerning the pressing need for labor in war industries, women's recruitment into industry, women's work and plans, the government's arrangements for demobilization, and women's roles in postwar industry. The thesis concludes that women were treated as a transient commodity by the government and the trade unions.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Although historians disagree over the issues surrounding World War I, most would agree on one point; that the war unceremoniously pushed Great Britain out of the Edwardian Era, and into a vastly different future. Much more than the actual turn of the century, the war served to divide the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The tremendous loss of life, the changes in the map of Europe, the advances in technology, and the shift in the balance of power among nations combined to create a world fundamentally changed from the one prior to the war. Gone were the days of limited warfare, and with it went the romantic notion of war as primarily a physical struggle between men--a war of dashing young soldiers, flashing uniforms, and handsome cavalry horses. Instead, World War I gave the world tanks, machine guns, airplanes, monstrous muddy trenches, chemical weapons, and an enormous number of casualties. Rather than man against man, war became national economy versus national economy, and invisible enemy against invisible enemy.

As a result of this new type of total warfare, women played a more vital role (in the war effort of every belligerent nation) than they had in the past. From 1914 to 1918, in most European nations women were employed in jobs

which in the past had been unavailable to them. For example, in France, women now replaced men in numerous industries, such as munitions and factory work.¹ The same could be said about almost every European country. In Germany and Russia, war legislation specifically granted permission for women to be employed in coal mines, and in Italy, women were encouraged to apply for employment in auxiliary army services.² Gertrude Atherton's evaluation of French women during the war applied to the women of most belligerent nations, when she declared that they "stepped automatically into the shoes of the men called to the colors in August, 1914, and it was, in their case, merely the wearing of two pairs of shoes instead of one, and both of equal fit."³

This quick transition from an all-male workforce to an increasing number of female workers did not occur in Britain. Although significant numbers of women flooded into the workforce of Britain as the war siphoned off more and more men for duty at the front, these changes transpired only gradually. The continual demand for munitions and men during the war forced the government to turn more and more

¹ Gertrude Atherton, The Living Present (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1917), 37.

² J. Maurice Clark, et al., eds., Readings in the Economics of War (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1918), 526.

³ Atherton, The Living Present, 1.

to women as replacements for men in employment previously unavailable to, or considered unsuitable for, women. By 1916, British women had escaped from traditional women's fields and had gained employment in such diverse areas as heavy industry (including munitions) and Civil Service.

Why did it take longer for British women to be employed in industry during World War I than in other European countries? And, most importantly, what became of these women once the war ended? This study seeks to answer these questions, as well as to determine how British women performed in these new jobs and to examine how these new roles acquired by British women fit into the political, social, and economic turmoil of the war period. Through the words of journalists, politicians, prominent women leaders, and the women themselves, this study portrays how the war changed their lives, for better or for worse. Instead of narrowly focusing on one particular class, women across classes are viewed, with a particular focus on women who performed jobs previously considered appropriate only for men.

The War Cabinet papers, preserved in the Public Record Office, are the backbone of this thesis. These papers include minutes from various cabinet meetings throughout the war period and after its end, reports published by various committees, and dissenting opinions of committee members to

those reports.⁴ They were extremely helpful in providing lists of the members of the committees, and serve to provide historians with a glimpse into matters considered of utmost importance to the government, including the employment of women. In addition to these papers, one source which yielded an enormous wealth of facts and figures on the war, as well as a contemporary view of its events, is the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace series, The Economic and Social History of the World War. This series examined various parts of the history of the war, with the most important book to this thesis being Irene Osgood Andrews and Margaret A. Hobbs' Economic Effects of the War on Women and Children in Great Britain.⁵ This book, first published in 1919, included a number of important tables and other invaluable statistics on the work performed by women from 1914 to 1918.

Several sources which proved fruitful for personal

⁴ The papers (all on microfilm from the Public Record Office) I used in particular include "Estimate of the Condition of the Population with Regard to Enlistment, State of Employment on Government and Other Work in Various Occupations in April 1915, Cabinet (CAB) 37/40; G.-27, "War Policy and Supplementary Memoranda of a Cabinet Committee," 12 October 1915, CAB 24/1; "Output of Munitions of War," 25 March 1915, CAB 37/40; "Possibility of Importing Labour from Italy," 16 April 1916, CAB 24/2; "Acceleration of Output on Government Work," 19 March 1915, 37/40; and G.-253, "Report of the Women's Employment Committee," 1919, CAB 24/5.

⁵ Irene Osgood Andrews and Margaret A. Hobbs, Economic Effects of the World War Upon Women and Children in Great Britain (New York: Oxford University Press, 1921).

information on this period included the memoirs of the Prime Minister, David Lloyd George⁶; an autobiographical account of life in London during the war, titled The Homefront⁷, by the suffragette and pacifist Sylvia Pankhurst; and the diaries of the socialist leader Beatrice Webb.⁸ These three sources provide three completely different views of life in wartime Britain, as well as three completely different views of the roles women played in the war effort. Several books published by women during the war on the different jobs employing women also supplied a contemporary view of working women. Among the most useful of these types of documents were Monica Cosen's Lloyd George's Munitions Girls--a propaganda piece written to give middle- and upper-class women a sentimental view of munitions workers, and to encourage them to join the workforce as volunteers.⁹ The Times also furnished contemporary information on how the general public viewed the employment of women.

Despite the significance of this topic to a complete understanding of the effects of the war on Britain, very

⁶ David Lloyd George, War Memoirs of David Lloyd George, 1914-1915 (1933, reprint; Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1935).

⁷ Sylvia Pankhurst, The Home Front (reprint, 1932; London: Century Hutchinson Ltd., 1987).

⁸ Margaret I. Cole, ed. Beatrice Webb's Diaries 1912-1924 (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1952).

⁹ Monica Cosens, Lloyd George's Munitions Girls (London: Hutchinson and Co., 1916).

little has been written on women in industry. The one book which comes closest to achieving this goal is Gail Braybon's Women Workers in the First World War.¹⁰ Despite her claim to examine the roles of all British working women during the war, her book is limited to a discussion of women in munitions work and their rejection by the trade unions. She emphasizes the oppression working women received at the hands of the trade unions, while denying that women made any significant social and economic gains during the war. Sheila Lewenhak in Women and the Trade Unions¹¹, and Norbert C. Seldon in Women in the British Trade Unions, 1874-1976¹², offer a more comprehensive look at women and their relations with the trade unions. These two books supply thorough examinations of the roles working women performed in British society in this period.

In addition to these books, a good discussion of modern British economic history in general, and the British trade unions in specific, may be found in G.D.H. Cole's Short History of the British Working Class Movement.¹³ Cole, a

¹⁰ Gail Braybon, Women Workers in the First World War (London: Croom Helm, 1981).

¹¹ Sheila Lewenhak, Women and the Trade Unions: An Outline History of Women in the British Trade Union Movement (New York: St. Martins Press, 1977).

¹² Norbert C. Seldon, Women in British Trade Unions 1874-1976 (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1978).

¹³ G.D.H. Cole, A Short History of the British Working-Class Movement, 1789-1947 (London: Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1952).

former member of the Fabian Society, an associate of Sydney and Beatrice Webb, and a Member of Parliament, carefully examines how the working classes, including women, helped to mold modern British society.

Other sources examine the social aspects of the war. Caroline Playne's Society at War describes the effects of the war on all parts of British society, including the clergy, businessmen, statesmen, the average citizen, and women in particular.¹⁴ Chapter Four, titled "The Women's War," offers insight into what it was like for women to manage a home in wartime Britain, to work in new industries, to survive air raids, and so on. This book provides an excellent look into what it was like to be a women, whether working or not, in wartime Britain. Arthur Marwick in The Deluge: British Society and the First World War gives a more traditional examination of World War I in Britain.¹⁵ While Marwick does discuss the role of women in the war effort, he focuses primarily on the political events of the period.

While it seems obvious to most people today that women would replace in industry the British men who left for the front, for the British government of this period the decision to use women was extremely difficult. In the past

¹⁴ Caroline E. Playne, Society at War, 1914-1916 (London: Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1931).

¹⁵ Arthur Marwick, The Deluge: British Society and the First World War (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1965).

women had played only minor roles in warfare and had worked only in industries such as textiles, millinery, and clothing. Therefore, the use of women in fields such as heavy industry and transport seemed unthinkable in the early years of the war. Nevertheless, World War I became a war which required the efforts of all parts of British society, most especially those of women.

CHAPTER TWO

WOMEN ENTER INDUSTRY

In July 1915 Christabel Pankhurst, the militant suffragette, staged her last demonstration. Thirty thousand women marched down Whitehall with the slogan: "We demand the right to serve."¹ Although the War Cabinet soon granted the women their demand, they did so in response to a sense of desperation and not as an effort to recognize the abilities of women. From the beginning of World War I, Britain, as well as most other European nations, had not anticipated the new kind of warfare which would follow nor the enormous demands it would make on the nation and its people. The average British citizen was still a long way from appreciating the ultimate scale of that effort. While Britain had been prepared for the traditional form of warfare that involved men, tactics, marches, and battles, the modern total war of machines and economic production left the British government scrambling to find the massive number of people needed both on the front and at home in the factories. As the British leaders soon realized, the war proved to be a contest, not of which side could out-shoot

¹ A.J.P. Taylor, English History 1914-1945 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 38.

and out-manuever the other, but which side could out-produce, out-supply, and simply out-survive the other.

Much to the consternation of many conservatives and Trade Union leaders, this type of warfare forced the government to turn to women as a source of labor. David Lloyd George, in a statement in the War Cabinet's War Policy of October 12, 1915, set the tone for the governmental policies concerning women in industry during the war when he declared that "one of the best things that could result from this war would be the destruction of the effeminate idea that it was degrading to call upon women to do manual labour."² More than any of the demonstrations by the Pankhursts and their suffragette followers, the two basic problems of supply during the war, that of recruiting men and of creating materials, compelled the British government, and British society as a whole, to recognize women as an economic force outside the domestic sphere.³

When the war first began in 1914, the government had no plan for an organized effort to obtain the personnel required for both industry and the military. It hoped that manpower needs would be met by the public's patriotic responses to immediate demands. Therefore, in the

² Cabinet Paper G.-27, "War Policy: Report and Supplementary Memoranda of a Cabinet Committee," 12 October 1915, CAB 24/1, PRO.

³ Frank P. Chambers, The War Behind the War, 1914-1918: A History of the Political and Civilian Fronts (New York: Arno Press, 1939; reprint, 1972), 48.

beginning, soldiers were recruited simply through calls for volunteers.⁴ Through these recruiting efforts, approximately 2,387,000 men, or fifty-one percent of males aged 18 to 38, had left civilian employment for the military or naval forces by April 1915.⁵ Although these tactics were obviously successful, this shortsighted policy was extremely wasteful of national resources. Recruiting sergeants paid no attention to any special civilian skills which made men more valuable as workers than as soldiers.

While most members of the government appreciated the British public's "response to the appeal to honour and duty" and recognized it as "one of the most glorious episodes" in British national history, they also realized that it had been "achieved at an unnecessary cost in national and social organization and in industrial productivity."⁶ In the spring of 1915, members of the British government, and the War Cabinet in particular, faced a significant drain of manpower in industry as a result of this injudicious recruiting of military personnel.

⁴ Janet Roebuck, The Making of Modern English Society From 1850 (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), 89-90.

⁵ Cabinet Paper, "Estimate of the Condition of the Population with Regard to Enlistment, State of Employment on Government and Other Work in Various Occupations in April 1915," CAB 37/40, PRO.

⁶ Cabinet Paper G.-27, "War Policy and Supplementary Memoranda of a Cabinet Committee," 12 October 1915, CAB 24/1, PRO.

According to a report on the Output of Munitions of War published for the Cabinet by the War Committee on 25 March 1915, one of the most serious causes in delay in the delivery of machinery and material to the government by industry was "the difficulty in obtaining an adequate supply of highly skilled male labour."⁷ For example, in the production of munitions, the War Committee found that one operation, Armstrong, Whitworth, and Company, required "1,000 millwrights at the moment to set up the new shell-making machinery already lying on the premises, and over 500 skilled men for employment upon 18-pr. shell alone." Another company, Vickers, for their Erith works, needed "at least 700 skilled men of various types by April [1915], and an additional 650 between then and July." For their Barrow works, Vickers required nearly 2,000 skilled men. The Committee insisted that "about 10,000 skilled artisans of the above-mentioned classes are needed by the main contractors and sub-contractors" in order to maintain the promised deliveries of machinery and material. Furthermore, they demanded that "instructions should be issued to recruiting officers that no more skilled men of the class required for producing munitions should be enlisted." The Ministry of Munitions even resorted to the issuance of war service badges which were to protect those workers whose

⁷ Cabinet Paper, "Output of Munitions of War," 25 March 1915, CAB 37/40, PRO.

removal from their employment was "likely to prejudice the production, transport, or supply of Munitions of War, or the successful prosecution of the war."⁸ Despite these attempts to stop the drain on manpower, Lloyd George estimated that during the first year of the war about 250,000 men joined the forces from six groups of trades largely engaged in munition work.⁹

Although other attempts were made to increase the output of essential war industries through additional overtime for workers as well as through the improvement of machinery to replace manual labor, both the industrial and governmental leaders, including Lloyd George, realized that there was no surplus of labor in any industry. To obtain a large enough labor force to complete their orders, industry, working in combination with the government, had only a few options. One was to release skilled workers from the Army. Another was to import skilled workmen from other countries, including the British Dominions. A third was to transfer skilled men from private work to war work. Fourth, they could combine skilled labour with a larger mixture of semi-skilled and unskilled labour, whether male or female.¹⁰

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ "Munitions (War Service Badges) Rules, 1915," in Labour Supply and Regulation by Humbert Wolfe (London: Clarendon Press, 1923), 310-311.

¹⁰ Cabinet Paper, G.-27, "War Policy: Report and Supplementary Memoranda of a Cabinet Committee," 12 October 1915, PRO.

All of these possible solutions contributed to easing the labor shortage somewhat, but each presented a different problem for the government and industry to overcome. Approximately 700,000 skilled workers eventually returned from military to civilian jobs during the war (with about 600,000 of these soldiers "invalided out of the armed forces").¹¹ Still, in 1915, Lloyd George expressed his belief that along with the certain proportion of men who were unwilling to leave their units, commanding officers and others were putting obstacles in front of those men who were prepared to return to civilian life.¹² In addition, the War Office directly discouraged any attempt to secure men both from the armies in the field and from those at home who had undergone most of their training. In fact, in 1915, Lloyd George regarded the First, Second, and Third Armies as "entirely barred for this purpose, it being stated that of 70,000 names given by employers of skilled men, not less than 55,000 were unapproachable."¹³

The second option, that of hiring foreign workers, provided only a relatively small number of laborers to most areas of industry. Although in Australia, Canada, and South Africa there was a considerable body of skilled labor as well as comparatively heavy unemployment among them, the

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

Dominion governments, particularly the Canadians, preferred to bring contracts to their countries rather than sending labor overseas.¹⁴ This preference, however, did not prevent the British from recruiting a limited body of labor, but the amount fell far below the most pessimistic expectations. They got no more than 7,000 men, of whom about 5,000 were Australians.¹⁵ The two main problems with obtaining laborers from the Dominions were: 1) the number of skilled men there had also been reduced through the efforts of the military recruiters; and 2) these workers, particularly the Canadians, earned much higher wages than those in Britain. The Canadians naturally did not want to transfer overseas where they might be paid less, and, moreover, the British Trade Unionists were not content to work side-by-side with non-Unionists from overseas who possibly earned more than they did.¹⁶

In comparison, the reinforcement of labor from foreign countries was more substantial. In all some 75,000 Belgians, Danes, Portuguese, and Dutch were recruited, with the largest proportion being Belgian.¹⁷ The British government even considered importing Italian male workers as replacements for workers on the docks and railways, but only

¹⁴ Humbert Wolfe, Labour Supply and Regulation, 154.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

with the guarantee to the trade unions that the Italians' rates of pay would be arranged with their consultation and that the laborers would be repatriated to Italy as soon as the normal supplies of labor were equal to the demand.¹⁸ Once again, the trade unions were suspicious of this proposal and these negotiations with the Italian government were never implemented. Alien labor remained a good idea without much substance.

The remaining option open to industry involved a greater use of unskilled labor to replace those skilled workers lost to recruiting, with the remaining skilled workers serving as foremen. This practice became known as "dilution." The government at first tried to substitute more machinery for manual labor and attempted to move unskilled male workers from parts of the country where they were not employed in war work to the areas engaged in the production of munitions and other supplies necessary to the war effort. In 1915 the government appealed to laborers in private industry to become War Munitions Volunteers and, therefore, to place themselves at the disposal of the Ministry of Munitions for munitions work.¹⁹ Over 100,000 men enrolled within two weeks, but it was subsequently discovered that almost sixty percent of these workers were

¹⁸ Cabinet Paper G.-19, "Possibility of Importing Labour from Italy," 16 April 1916, CAB 24/2, PRO.

¹⁹ Humbert Wolfe, Labour Supply and Regulation, 158-159.

already employed in war work.²⁰ Despite the limited success of some of the government's schemes to spread around the finite numbers remaining in the male workforce, the enactment of military conscription laws in 1916 eventually compelled the government to look more closely at the possibility of female labor.

Although industry was desperately seeking new sources of labor, and women could provide an almost unlimited supply of this labor, the continuing resistance to the employment of women by trade unions led employers to consider all of their other options first. In their report of March 25, 1915, which discussed the output of munitions, R.E. Graves (Deputy Chief Inspector of Factories), Gerald Bellhouse (Superintending Inspector of Factories), and W. Sydney Smith (Inspector for Dangerous Trades) declared that while "very large numbers of new female workers have been brought into employment, particularly in the making of fuzes and small arms ammunition," and that "little difficulty seems to have been experienced in obtaining them," the inspectors

anticipated that there may be difficulty in supplying the necessary labour for the new factories now nearing completion. In some parts of the country, especially in the north of England and Scotland, objection is taken by the men to the employment of females in turning and other machinery operations, though they have always been largely so employed in Birmingham and the Black Country. Much more use could be made of

²⁰ Ibid.

female labour in other districts if Trade Union restrictions were withdrawn.²¹

Most of the trade unions believed that women, who traditionally were not considered the breadwinners of the family and therefore were not paid a "living wage," would undercut salaries and force them to lose the ground they had gained against the employers since the turn of the century. Some of these unions vociferously voiced their disapproval of increasing the number of women in their trades. For example, from the very outset of the war, the Federated Society of Iron Founders viewed the employment of women as a threat to their future job security. The executive committee congratulated its men for resisting an attempt to employ women as core-makers and in not allowing patriotic sentiment to outweigh sound judgement and common sense in protection of their trade interests.²²

Lloyd George himself realized that he was facing difficult times in his efforts to convince the trade unions to consider his scheme of dilution: "Through long years they had built up as a protection against the dangers of cut wages, unemployment and blackleg labour an elaborate set of rules and customs designed to control the rate of output and

²¹ Cabinet Paper, "Output of Munitions of War," 25 March 1915, CAB 37/40, PRO.

²² Norbert C. Seldon, Women in British Trade Unions, 1874-1976 (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan Ltd., 1978) 81.

narrow the doorway into industry."²³ Lloyd George traveled throughout the country in a round of speech-making in 1915, and attempted to appeal to the workers' patriotism for the hundreds of thousands of fellow countrymen who were facing death in the trenches. Unfortunately, the Trade Unionists often shouted down these attempts at patriotism, and, in Glasgow, the workers retorted that "they had just received a letter from a fellow-member in the trenches entreating them not to give way about dilution even though it would mean the shells would arrive too late to save him."²⁴

As a result, in the early days of the war, the trade unions, the government, the press, and public opinion compelled women to play the traditional roles allotted to them in the past. While men did the fighting, it was the women's role to say goodbye, bear heroes' children, and lure or browbeat men into the forces. During the first months of the war, Admiral Penrose Fitzgerald launched the White Feather Movement in a speech at Folkstone. He assembled a squad of young women whose duty was to present white feathers of cowardice to all young men not enlisted in the

²³ David Lloyd George, War Memoirs of David Lloyd George, 1914-1915 (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1935) 269.

²⁴ Ruth Adam, A Woman's Place, 1910-1975 (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1975), 46-47.

military.²⁵ In a weekly column in The Times in August, 1914, titled "How to be Useful in War time," middle- and upper-class women were given suggestions from readers as to how they could help the war effort. These suggestions included donating clothing and other personal items which could be useful to the troops at the front (such as pipes, smoking pouches, peppermint drops, handkerchiefs, etc.), donating money to help finance the war, and serving as volunteers in societies such as the Association of Infant Consultations and Schools for Mothers, and The Children's Aid Committee. One elderly female reader, who claimed to be a survivor of the nineteenth-century wars, encouraged women to gather in groups at train stations where they would wait for returning hospital trains with "fresh water, soft handkerchiefs, eau-de-Cologne, and so on, ready to render any of the small services which may in a few minutes soften terrible pain."²⁶

Later in 1914, however, the same weekly column was inundated by other proposals which countered these traditional approaches to the roles women should play in war time:

Our post-bag has contained every day suggestions made by women on the lines of the letter from Lord Redesdale, which was published in The Times of

²⁵ David Mitchell, Women on the Warpath: The Story of the Women of the First World War (London: Jonathan Cape, 1965) 39.

²⁶ The Times, 27 August 1914.

last Tuesday . . . Lord Redesdale suggests that retired Civil servants should take the places of active young men in the offices. Our correspondents point out that there is a great deal of men's work that could be done by women, and that women are very anxious to do it, in order that the men may be free to take arms. Women, they say with justice, could act as letter-carriers, clerks, and tram and omnibus conductors, and do a hundred other things. The pay would be taken by the woman and kept or used for the benefit of the soldier or of his family; and on his return to civil life he would find his berth waiting for him.²⁷

Unfortunately, middle- and upper-class women who sought a more constructive part in the war effort soon found that, while donating clothing and other comforts for soldiers was welcomed by both the public and the government, more ambitious efforts were not so appreciated. For example, when the distinguished Scottish physician, Dr. Elsie Inglis, offered to form a women's ambulance unit, she was contemptuously refused by the War Office with the words, "My good lady, go home and sit still."²⁸ Like Dr. Inglis, those women who desired to be trained for new duties, were discouraged and advised more or less politely to attend to their own business. As a result of this attitude, during the first months of the war, most of these women were occupied in charitable work, in nursing, and in performing other duties in military hospitals. The more elderly worked

²⁷ Ibid., 3 September 1914.

²⁸ Arthur Marwick, The Deluge: British Society and the First World War (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1965) 88-89.

in Canteens and War Supply Depots, where they made all kinds of things from any obtainable material. The older women also looked after the welfare of the wives and children of soldiers and sailors. Practically all this work was unpaid, and always there were more people wishing for work than there was work for them to do.²⁹

Ironically, despite the fact that the war effort required increasing amounts of war material and men, the women of the lower class as a whole initially faced severe unemployment during the first months of the war. After the initial Stock Exchange panic which followed the declaration of war, most of the people who lived on unearned income (in other words, the upper classes who subsisted on inheritances) expected to be ruined at any time. Their first defensive idea was to eliminate luxuries. This resulted, with startling speed, in many factories having to dismiss staff. Lloyd George, in a fit of hell-fire oratory on the moral purpose of the war, encouraged this behavior by declaring that "the great flood of luxury and sloth which had submerged the land is receding and a new Britain is appearing."³⁰ Following this speech, most "ladies" considered it a point of patriotic honor not to buy items considered luxuries, which included their usual new dresses.

²⁹ C. S. Peel, How We Lived Then, 1914-1918: A Sketch of Social and Domestic Life in England During the War (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head Ltd., 1929) 105-106.

³⁰ Ruth Adam, A Woman's Place, 1910-1975, 39.

This fad for instant economy threw approximately 250,000 female industrial workers into unemployment.³¹ In August and September of 1914, unemployment figures rose sharply and, in response, the government hastily set about to create a strong committee for the prevention and relief of distress. A Special Department of the Local Government Board, the department concerned with distress, was created, and schemes were established for the institution of relief committees and for the creation of workrooms to find occupation for women workers.³²

This general lack of employment and rising prices, combined with the fact that the wives of soldiers and sailors received neither separation allowances nor pensions, in the early months of the war placed many lower class women in dire straits. Even women whose husbands had yet to join the military faced tremendous hardships. A typical letter written by a working-class woman in Bromley-by-Bow to Sylvia Pankhurst demonstrated the debt and privations facing working-class families:

My husband is a casual worker earning 1 pound sterling, 2s. 6d., sometimes a little more. I hardly know how to make ends meet. I have five children, the eldest not yet twelve, the youngest one year and five months. I am expecting another in June. . . .We are eating less, and have pawned

³¹ Humbert Wolfe, Labour Supply and Regulation, 16.

³² Ibid.

many things to make up the difference, but that cannot go on.³³

These forces of patriotism and economic hardship combined to push women of all classes into pressuring the Government to encourage the employment of women in greater numbers in war industries. In fact, in early 1915, the government had made their first attempt to expedite the introduction of women into industry when the Board of Trade issued an appeal to the women of the country to enroll in war service. Although this governmental scheme received praise from both the press and the public, even The Times was unsure as to what would be the response of employers:

Throughout the country yesterday the Government scheme for ascertaining how the reserve force of woman labour, trained and untrained, can be made available if required aroused the greatest interest and appeared everywhere to be hailed with approval. There is no doubt of the great response that will be made by women, but what, it is understood, the Board of Trade are not quite sure about is the extent of the response of employers. On them the success of the scheme will ultimately rest. Will they as a body be prepared to consider seriously the duty of substituting, as far as possible, female labour for male in the national interests?³⁴

The appeal, as predicted, was enthusiastically received by British women, despite the fact that rumours abounded about the purpose behind the registration. Although some people claimed that registered women would be forced to fight and

³³ Sylvia Pankhurst, The Home Front (1932, reprint; London: Century Hutchinson Ltd., 1987) 128-129.

³⁴ The Times, 19 March 1915.

others insisted that registration had some connection with prohibition, within two weeks approximately 100,000 had enrolled.³⁵

Unfortunately for the plan, in the following three months not more than 100 were placed in employment. Explanations for the failure of this scheme were numerous and varied from class to class. Trade Unionists argued that it was absurd to call for volunteers when large numbers of working women were still unemployed. Employers insisted that they needed skilled men and not unskilled women. Both groups maintained that the type of women attracted by the appeal were, in any event, unsuitable for employment. The real explanation was that the prejudice against female labor in British society could not be killed by a few months of war. While some women had been employed in work on the land, especially in market gardens, and had performed for some time all sorts of hard and repulsive tasks, such as preparing catgut in filthy surroundings, making matches (where they suffered from "phossy jaw"), and working in china factories (where they contracted lead poisoning), these were not the women employers opposed having in the factories.³⁶ As one woman of this era explained, "When it was considered impossible or at all events inadvisable for

³⁵ C. S. Peel, How We Lived Then, 109; Humbert Wolfe, Labour Supply and Regulation, 79

³⁶ Humbert Wolfe, Labour Supply and Regulation, 79.

women to do men's work it was educated women of the better-to-do classes that the don't-let-women-work folk had in mind."³⁷ Instead of understanding the intrinsic value of the contribution that women could make to the war effort, most members of the government who had enacted registration for National Service seemed to want merely the appearance of doing the right thing for women.

It was precisely these middle- and upper-class women who led the charge against the obstinant employers who refused to employ women in jobs they considered men's work. Since the outset of the war, the suffragette, Mrs. Emmeline Pankhurst, and her daughter, Christabel, had abandoned their fight against the government for women's suffrage and, instead, had become first-rate jingoists. In fact, Christabel denounced former suffragette colleagues, such as Alice Beale, who refused to support the war effort.³⁸ Both women travelled around Britain (with Christabel even voyaging to the United States) giving speeches on behalf of the government's war effort, but they still maintained their emphasis on the roles women should play in helping with the

³⁷ C. S. Peele, How We Lived Then, 109-110.

³⁸ Miss Beale was such an anti-war advocate that she refused to complete her National Registration form and told the magistrate: "I refuse, without the safeguard of the vote, to help the Government in any way build up the lost trade of the country on the forced and sweated work of myself and my fellow women. I refuse to take part in a plot to force men, against their will, to give their lives in defense of this country." David Mitchell, Women on the Warpath, 49.

national emergency. In one speech at the London Pavillion, Mrs. Pankhurst went so far as to warn that women might go on strike if they were not given their full share of war work.³⁹

In July, 1915, following the unsuccessful attempt to register women for National Service (in which, of the 87,000 registered, only 2,332 by now had received employment), the clamor for jobs for women grew louder.⁴⁰ In this atmosphere, Lloyd George, now Minister of Munitions, was forced to approach his former nemesis, Mrs. Pankhurst, to discuss the need to recruit women for factory work to overcome the munitions shortage. Although stiff opposition remained in the Cabinet and among the trade unions to such a scheme, he believed the Pankhursts and their organization, the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), could help him put pressure on his opposition to force them into changing their minds. With the help of a £2,000 Ministry grant, the WSPU organized a monster procession to promote the cause of women.⁴¹ On July 17, 1915, Mrs. Emmeline Pankhurst led the procession--125 contingents strong, two miles long, and accompanied by ninety bands playing the "Marseillaise"--to its final destination at the Ministry of

³⁹ Ibid., 58.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

Munitions. One contemporary journal described the demonstration as "picturesque, enthusiastic, and impressive," and declared that "when the story of the World War comes to be written, the patriotic part played by women...will be chronicled, and this great demonstration of women craving to work for the war will find honourable place."⁴²

As the marchers halted at the Ministry of Munitions, they were met by Lloyd George and Winston Churchill, who were to answer questions about the greater roles women might play in war industries. When asked about the conditions for the employment of women and whether women would receive equal pay for equal work to that of the men, Lloyd George assured her, as well as the rest of the deputation, that munitions factories would be controlled by the government, which would not allow women's labor to be exploited, and that, as far as possible, the government would attempt to secure equal pay for equal work. "Without women," he said, "victory will tarry, and the victory which tarries means a victory whose footprints are footprints of blood."⁴³

Whether or not this procession had any effect on the effort to enlist more women in war industries is uncertain. More likely, the first large-scale use of women in industry, which came in the late summer of 1915 along with the

⁴² Illustrated London News, 24 July 1915.

⁴³ David Mitchell, Women on the Warpath, 60.

revelation of the adaptability of female labor to tasks long believed to be beyond their powers, was a result of economic necessity more than of feminist agitation. By August, trade magazines and other periodicals began commenting a little incredulously that by no means all of the work being done by women

has been of the repetition type, demanding little or nor manipulative ability, but much of it. . . taxed the intelligence of the operatives to a high degree. Yet the work turned out has reached a high pitch of excellence. . . It may safely be said that women can satisfactorily handle much heavier pieces of metal than had previously been dreamt of.⁴⁴

As the labor shortage became critical late in 1915 and early in 1916, when military conscription was introduced for men, and, therefore, female labor became increasingly more important, the government pushed the trade unions into endorsing agreements that lifted the restrictions against the employment of women in industry. In return for a guarantee from the unions of the removal of these restrictions, including a promise that during the war period there would be no stoppage of work on munitions and equipment of war, the government promised, first, that any departure during the war from the practices governing workshops, shipyards, and other industries would only be for the period of the war. Second, the government promised that no change in practice made during the war would be allowed

⁴⁴ Arthur Marwick, The Deluge, 89-90.

to prejudice the position of the workpeople or of their trade unions in regard to the resumption and maintenance after the war of any pre-war rules or customs. Third, the government guaranteed that, in any readjustment of staff which had to be made, priority of employment would be given to workmen in employment who, at the beginning of the war, were serving with the colors. Finally, the government declared that the relaxation of existing Trade Union restrictions on the admission of semi-skilled or female labor would not affect adversely the rates customarily paid for the job.⁴⁵

The government realized that these matters had to be handled delicately. A very large demand was being made of the workmen, and if the government was to succeed in its aims of expanding the workforce, it could only do so by proving that its intervention was solely due to desperate national needs, and in no way involved taking sides in an industrial controversy. Before the year was out, the new use of female labour was being extended to industries other than those directly involved in the manufacture of munitions, and the Board of Trade had increased its strength of women factory inspectors by fifty percent. Although these developments were primarily limited to working-class women, middle- and upper-class families soon realized that

⁴⁵ Cabinet Paper, "Acceleration of Output on Government Work," 19 March 1915, CAB 37/40, PRO.

the advantages of having several working women in the family included defraying the rising cost of living.⁴⁶

The press served as a vehicle to recruit women into industry, particularly munitions, by depicting workshops in overly rosy terms. According to one female munitions worker, "The papers spoke of shells and tool-setters, of enormous wages and cheery canteens, happy hostels and gay girl-workers."⁴⁷ Books were also published during the war which encouraged women to apply to the Ministry of Munitions for positions as munitions girls. In one book, the author proclaimed that what she "wanted more than anything else in the world" was "to become a 'Miss Tommy Atkins' in Lloyd George's army of Shell Workers."⁴⁸ The author indicates that the appeal to women for industrial service was much the same as the appeal to men for military service:

I passed the local recruiting office ablaze with posters. For the first time they appealed to me as they had never done before. I could understand how the men felt when they rolled up in answer to them. "How will you answer your children when they ask what you did for the Great War?" In after years I should be able to tell them: "I was one of 'Lloyd George's Munition Girls.'"⁴⁹

Hall Caine, a best-selling author of the period, described a visit to a workshop as large as Trafalgar

⁴⁶ Arthur Marwick, The Deluge, 90

⁴⁷ Monica Cosens, Lloyd George's Munitions Girls (London: Hutchinson and Co., 1916), 7.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 7-8.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

Square, where 2,000 women were at work: "There is something incongruous in the spectacle of women operating masses of powerful machinery (or indeed any machine more formidable than a sewing machine), but it is surprising how speedily they have wooed and won this new kind of male monster."⁵⁰ With the help of a sympathetic and zealously patriotic press, a government starved for manpower, and outspoken leaders such as the Pankhursts, British women also "wooed and won" another kind of monster--the societal prejudice which insisted that women were not capable of being employed outside traditionally feminine occupations. Women were now set to play a greater role in wartime than they had in the past.

⁵⁰ David Mitchell, Women on the Warpath, 248.

CHAPTER THREE

WOMEN'S WORK AND WAGES

By May 1915, when David Lloyd George became head of the Ministry of Munitions, the war had changed British society in ways which would have been inconceivable to previous generations. As the scarcity of men for civil employment gradually increased, women slowly filtered into businesses, shops, industry, and offices as replacements for men. In fact, in the four main classifications of work determined by the government--clerical, commercial, agricultural, and industrial--the number of women employed increased from approximately 3,224,800 in 1914 to almost 4,814,600 in 1918.¹ Of these entrants into the work force, approximately 1,200,000 women were new workers who, before August 1914, had not worked outside their homes. All in all, these new employment opportunities dramatically changed the roles women played in British society.²

¹ Cabinet Paper G. - 253, "Report of the Women's Employment Committee," 1919, CAB 24/5, PRO.

² Women also replaced men as teachers and policewomen, and served as nurses in the Voluntary Aid Detachments. This paper, however, seeks to examine women in jobs considered out of the ordinary by wartime British society. For a good discussion of the roles of policewomen, teachers, and nurses, see David Mitchell's Women on the Warpath (London: Jonathan Cape, 1965).

Women's war work developed in four stages. The first stage involved the jobs that had been traditionally considered women's work, such as food, textiles, and clothing.³ As the war continued in France, the recession which had accompanied the outbreak of the conflict subsided and demand increased for military supplies. In particular, a threatened food shortage and the military's insatiable demand for more uniforms intensified production and led to an immediate reduction in women's unemployment levels.⁴ Unfortunately, since these jobs had always been female occupations and the wages were relatively small in ordinary times, the increases in employment as a result of the war effort failed to translate into much higher wages. In addition, the cost of living spiraled and, therefore, even the slight increases they did receive had little effect on their economic position. As a result of these conditions in the early period of the war, women employed in traditional women's work still received the low wages relegated to them in the past.

In the second stage, women substituted for men who had been released to the forces. For the first time, women were accepted into jobs which had only employed men in the past. While it seemed strange to see a female perform these

³ Ruth Adam, A Woman's Place, 1910-1975 (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1975), 45.

⁴ Ibid.

occupations, the work itself did not seem to challenge the traditional views of women.⁵ These jobs included clerical occupations and the civil service, work in commercial enterprises, and agricultural employment, and placed women primarily in service positions. In all of these occupations, women were employed mainly in the lower grade jobs and men supervised them.

The invasion of women into clerical work, which the government defined as occupations in finance, banking, hotels, theaters, civil service, and services under local authorities, excluding transport, proved to be one of the greatest accomplishments of women during the war. Of all the employment opportunities available to women, clerical work received the largest proportionate increase in the number of women workers. In fact, the estimated number of women employed in clerical work had almost doubled from approximately 452,200 in July 1914 to almost 754,200 by the end of the war.⁶ In the Civil Service, excluding the women employed in the Post Office which had employed a number of women before the war, the ratio of women employed during the war was twenty to each one employed before the conflict, while in industry this ratio was only four to three.⁷

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Cabinet Paper G.-253, "Report of the Women's Employment Committee," 1919, CAB 24/5, PRO.

⁷ Ibid.

Part of the reason for this large increase was that, unlike other types of employment, clerical work appealed to women with some education. Women employed in clerical jobs fell into three categories: women who were over 18 years old and who usually had a high school or university education; women, aged 16 to 18 years, who were educated at the secondary schools; and women, aged 14 to 15 years, who had received an education in the elementary schools.⁸ According to a governmental committee formed after the war to examine the employment of women in clerical work, women with a general education provided by the high schools and secondary schools were more successful in clerical employment than those with an elementary education or those with specialized training.

The advantage of High School and Secondary School Education in fitting girls to take up clerical work with much hope of real success is clearly established, and, what is much more remarkable, the High School is also considered superior to special commercial classes for this purpose.⁹

Marie A. Seers, a bank employee during this period, supported this view in her declaration that "a thorough education stands the woman bank clerk in good stead, and those banks which insist upon a reasonably stiff entrance examination find that the necessity for close supervision of

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

the work is considerably reduced."¹⁰ Women with this kind of education were typically from the middle-classes of British society. Much like before the war when middle-class men had been the primary employees in clerical work, clerical work remained a middle-class occupation with the employment of women. Although a number of university-trained women were also engaged in clerical work, they were few in number and therefore, their success was difficult to determine.¹¹

Despite their education, most women lacked the training required for jobs in the clerical field, mainly as a result of a dearth of clerical employment opportunities in the pre-war years. Yet, with the exodus of men to the front, women invaded all grades of clerical employment and demonstrated a capacity for all parts of clerical work. They were acting as managers and heads of departments, in a wide range of occupations, and were praised for "their business capacity."¹² For the first time, banks and insurance offices hired women and girls in great numbers, and the civil service took on a good many women in the lower grades

¹⁰ Gilbert Stone, ed., Women War Workers: Accounts Contributed by Representative Workers of the Work Done by Women in the More Important Branches of War Employment (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1917), 88.

¹¹ Cabinet paper G.-253, "Report of the Women's Employment Committee," 1919, CAB 24/5, PRO.

¹² Stone, Women War Workers, 87.

of its work.¹³ As employees of financial institutions, women kept pass-books, acted as ledger clerks and cashiers, took charge of securities, and handled bills of exchange--all jobs previously unavailable to women.¹⁴

Despite their demonstrated abilities to perform in these positions, women faced the same barriers to promotions in clerical occupations that they did in most other forms of employment. Although their business capacity was "well spoken of," employers still had "some doubt as to their ability to meet emergencies or to accept responsibilities."¹⁵ The unavailability of intensive training for women was partially responsible for women's work being regarded as slightly inferior to that of men.

In practice it is often found that two women ledger clerks, for instance, are needed to do the work of the one man previously engaged on the task. But it must not be forgotten that these women have had barely two years' training, while the man has had perhaps six or seven.¹⁶

In addition to this lack of training, the women themselves complained that the work on which they were employed was

¹³ Irene Osgood Andrews and Margaret A. Hobbs, Economic Effects of the World War Upon Women and Children in Great Britain (New York: Oxford University Press, 1921), 33.

¹⁴ Stone, Women War Workers, 87.

¹⁵ Cabinet Paper G.-253, "Report of the Women's Employment Committee," 1919, CAB 24/5, PRO.

¹⁶ Stone, Women War Workers, 87.

"often monotonous, discouraging initiative and enterprise."¹⁷ The main reason for this outlook among women workers was that, since they were relatively new to the clerical job market and faced the traditional prejudices against women in the work force, as a whole they were denied opportunity for advancement.

Much [clerical] work must always be monotonous, for men as for women. The remedy is, not in changing the character of the work, which is often impossible, but in giving the worker hope of advancement, when he will cheerfully endure early years of drudgery. It is the absence of this hope which takes the heart out of a worker, from which women are suffering.¹⁸

M. E. Stannard, president of The Women's Institute, echoed this sentiment in her letter to the editor of The Times on 9 October 1916.

It is our conviction, based on experience, that, given adequate remuneration and satisfactory prospects of advancement--conditions hitherto absent--there would be no difficulty in attracting to posts in the service of the Government well-trained, experienced, and highly-educated women in sufficient numbers to set free men who are needed elsewhere.¹⁹

In the civil service, women also expressed dissatisfaction with the prejudices which confined women to routine work

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ The Times, 9 March 1916.

while men in the "upper division" struggled on understaffed.²⁰

Despite their problems with advancement beyond entry-level jobs, women in clerical occupations eventually secured both high wages and a chance to continue their employment after the war. By 1918, female telephone and telegraph operators were earning anywhere from 40s. to 50s. weekly, while women employed as ledger clerks and civil service clerks could collect between 50s. and 60s. each week.²¹ Compared to women employed in women's work, whose wages at the end of the war were under 25s. weekly, women in clerical work were more than amply compensated for their work.²² In contrast to women in other jobs previously considered men's work, such as agriculture and industry, women in clerical occupations revolutionized their field of employment.

To a far greater extent even than in the distributive trades, women have been introduced to do the work of men in almost every branch of clerical work. It seems probable that much of the work will be retained by them after the war.²³

In fact, a report prepared by the Board of Trade in 1917 demonstrated that 53,000 women had directly replaced men in banking and finance, and one enthusiastic committee went so

²⁰ Andrews and Hobbs, Economic Effects of the War on Women and Children in Great Britain, 33.

²¹ Ibid., Appendix G.

²² Ibid.

²³ Cabinet paper, G.-253, "Report of the Women's Employment Committee," 1919, CAB 24/5, PRO.

far as to declare that "clerical work. . . has no characteristic which unfits it for women" and that "all clerical posts open to men should be open to women."²⁴ Clerical occupations had now become open to women workers.

Although the employment of women in clerical work may have been the most long-lasting and revolutionary of all occupational changes during the war, women were the most visible to the public in commercial jobs. Commercial employment, which included work in retail establishments and public transportation, placed women in direct contact with the public and reminded them daily that the war had drastically altered British society. As men left their jobs to join the armed forces, British women were seen in retail trades working as shop assistants in dry goods and provision stores, as packers, and as delivery girls. Meanwhile, in the railway service, women were appearing as carriage cleaners and as ticket collectors on station platforms, and some cities hired women as tram conductors and street cleaners.²⁵

In fact, women bus-conductors became common sights.

You do not merely see an occasional woman on a bus, strange-looking and out of place, a cynosure for the curious-eyed, but the woman bus-conductor is a familiar everyday sight in the streets of London. She calls forth no more comment than when

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Andrews and Hobbs, Economic Effects of the World War Upon Women and Children in Great Britain, 33.

she was in the neat attire of housemaid or cook.²⁶

Women first made their appearances as bus-conductors in March 1916, when the London General Omnibus Company asked for women to take the places of the men who had left for military duty.²⁷ By August of that year, almost all of the London omnibuses had women conductors. The "tubes and trams" were also staffed to a considerable extent by women.²⁸

Wages for women in commercial occupations, including transport, varied as much as the types of jobs included in this category. Wages ranged from 25s. and 30s. weekly for waitresses to over 60s. per week for bus conductresses, one of the highest paying occupations for women during the war.²⁹ Wages for other commercial occupations fell somewhere in between these two extremes. Shop assistants in small establishments earned between 30s. and 35s. weekly, while shop assistants in the larger stores, as well bakery workers, collected 35s. to 40s for the same period.³⁰ Generally, in this category, if the job had been considered

²⁶ Stone, Women War Workers, 108.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ C.S. Peel, How We Lived Then, 1914-1918: A Sketch of Social and Domestic Life in England During the War (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head Ltd., 1929), 119.

²⁹ Andrews and Hobbs, Economic Effects of the World War Upon Women and Children in Great Britain, Appendix G.

³⁰ Ibid.

primarily a man's job before the war (such as bus conducting), then the wages tended to be higher than those wages for women who worked in areas traditionally considered to be women's work (such as millinery, dressmaking, and so on).

Unlike women who worked in commercial occupations and other forms of employment, the "Land Girls," as women who worked in agriculture and belonged to organizations such as the National Land Service Corps were called, probably had the most demanding and least glamorous of all jobs available to women. Although newspapers such as The Times continuously published romanticized reports about the glorious life and work available to women on the farms, most women failed to answer the call to agricultural life. Between July 1914 and July 1918, the number of women in agriculture only increased from 80,000 to 113,000.³¹ One governmental committee went so far as to conclude that "a much smaller number would have engaged had the attraction of the pursuit been the only inducement."³²

Several reasons account for this lack of interest in agricultural pursuits. First, the work required extremely long hours; it was hard and foreign to most women; and, additionally, they were not offered enough incentives to

³¹ Cabinet paper G.-253, "Report of the Women's Unemployment Committee," 1919, CAB 24/5, PRO.

³² Ibid.

join. For example, one woman described her first experiences with the Women's Defence Relief Corps: "The first day we were given reaping-hooks, and were told to cut down all the thistles we saw in a certain meadow, about half a mile long, with a ditch all the way around. It took two of us nearly all day; some of the thistles were like trees."³³ The typical pay for such wearisome work was approximately 15s. per week, far below those wages earned by women in less arduous employment in the cities and towns. When one Land Girl discovered that she was only to earn 15s. a week, while working eight hour days, she protested that she did not think she could live on that amount. Like many young patriotic women, she felt resigned to try.

Of course the question of payment is a difficult one. Work on the land has never been well paid, and with the high prices of commodities prevailing in these days it isn't exactly easy for women like myself who have never had to do anything of the kind before to live on what they earn, but it is interesting to try, and I found that it could be done.³⁴

In addition to low wages, women farm workers often found that the village or farm to which they had volunteered lacked adequate accomodation. At best, the average farmer had very inadequate housing for his regular laborers, which made additional accomodation for "imported labour" almost

³³ E. Royston Pike, ed., Human Documents of the Lloyd George Era (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1972), 188.

³⁴ Stone, Women War Workers, 47-48.

nonexistent.³⁵ Women agricultural workers, therefore, had to spend a significant amount of their small salaries on housing. A third reason for this unpopularity was that these women often were viewed with distrust by many farmers. An article published in The Times calling for women to work in agricultural employment protested against "the prejudice in many districts against the introduction of the 'furriner' to assist the farmer," and the Women's Employment Committee reported that "no doubt the smallness of the number [of Land Girls] is partly explained by the reluctance of farmers to employ women."³⁶ Part of the reason for the farmers' lack of interest in employing women came from the fact that they were "making do with schoolchildren, who came much cheaper than land girls."³⁷

To combat women's prejudices against work on the land, the government appealed to women's patriotism.

There is every indication that next year [1917] will be one of the most fateful in the world's destiny. The potential forces of all the Entente nations have been gathering strength, and slowly the fullness of their power is becoming visible. So, too, it should be with women's work as food producers. By organized, united effort, guided and assisted by the State, the women of Great Britain in 1917 ought to be able to avert the crisis of decreasing food production.³⁸

³⁵ The Times, 20 December 1916.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Adam, A Woman's Place, 53.

³⁸ The Times, 20 December 1916.

The government even gave women agricultural workers an armlet in order to make them feel they were working, not merely for the farmers, but for the government and the country.³⁹ The government also appealed to women's pocketbooks, most particularly to those of educated women who were needed as forewomen, by offering scholarships of £4 for four weeks of training through the Board of Agriculture.⁴⁰ They were also offered free rail passes, a free uniform, and, by 1917, a minimum pay of 18s. per week.⁴¹ Even with the praise of the press, (who mildly teased them about their trousered uniform with jokes like "Is this the way to Wareham [wear 'em]?" "Well, they look all right to me, missy.") and the offers made by the government, most women still refused to work in agricultural employment.⁴² Although they were often employed in occupations which most likely would return to men once the war ended, most women felt that perhaps this situation would change. Agricultural work, however, was viewed from the beginning of the war as temporary work for women who longed to express their patriotism.

³⁹ Caroline E. Playne, Society at War, 1914-1916 (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1931), 137.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Adam, A Woman's Place, 53-54.

⁴² Ibid., 54.

The third and final stage of women's work was their employment in munitions and other heavy industry. And, like many of the women who were employed in other areas of the economy, women entered into industry in Britain during World War I encountered hostility and opposition from their male cohorts and their employers. Unlike women in other occupations, however, women in industry had to deal with two other powerful contingents--the government and influential trade unions. While on the one hand women's trade unions and female industrial leaders such as Mary MacArthur, Sylvia Pankhurst, and Beatrice Webb demanded equal pay for equal work by women in industry, the British trade unions overall were convinced from the outset of the war that women would undercut their wages. They, therefore, refused to support women's demands. In addition, British social traditions insisted that, since women were not heads of families, they did not need to earn a "living wage"--a wage large enough to support a family.

Faced with a military conflict requiring the industrial resources of the entire country, the British government was forced to create a workable compromise for all parties. A combination of three factors--the women's demand for equal pay, the efforts of the men's unions to maintain their wage standards, and the public's recognition of women's services to the state--played a part in forcing governmental regulation of the wages of women workers. Since the

munitions industry was under the direct control of the government throughout the war, munitions work remained the storm center of these wage disputes.

Britain experienced a relatively peaceful domestic front in the first two years of the war. Although the entire country was startled by the outbreak of a great unofficial strike of engineering workers in the Clyde factories in late February 1915, most disagreements between employers and employees were eventually settled. The first settlement came with the Treasury Agreements of 1915, which proposed that the trade unions accept both compulsory arbitration and the abrogation of Trade Union restrictions. In return, the government pledged to restore the status quo and end dilution at the close of the war. These agreements were followed by the Munitions of War Act of 1915, which made these restrictions (along with the limitation of profits in the munitions trades) legally binding.⁴³ While the act applied primarily to engineering and shipbuilding, it was also used to apply compulsory arbitration to any industry supplying vital war needs. The arbitration machinery under the Munitions Act worked well enough to prevent most industrial unrest. Employment was plentiful, and overtime was generally usually available for anyone who

⁴³ G.D.H. Cole, A Short History of the British Working-Class Movement, 1789-1947 (London: Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1952), 354.

desired it. In fact, in the war trades, high piece-work rates were common, though not universal.⁴⁴

Opposition by the Trade Union leaders, and male laborers in general, to the employment of women in industry continued to be a thorny issue for the British government throughout the war. The main objection of trade unions to allowing women to undertake what they considered men's work (i.e. jobs that had traditionally been considered those performed only by men, such as those in the engineering trades) was that the employment of women, who in the past had been considered cheap labor, would reduce the standard of men's wages.⁴⁵

So alarmed were male union members about the possible result of women entering into men's trades that in some cases they threatened to strike if this practice continued. At the works of Land and Sons, Johnstone, the workers' committee declared "that no women shall be put to work on a lathe and if this is done the men will know how to protect their rights."⁴⁶ At other times, skilled male laborers refused to teach female employees skills needed to perform certain jobs or to explain why certain actions were

⁴⁴ Ibid., 354-355.

⁴⁵ C.S. Peel, How We Lived Then, 1914-1918: A Sketch of Social and Domestic Life in England During the War (London: John Lane The Bodley Head Ltd., 1929), 107.

⁴⁶ Adam, A Woman's Place, 47.

performed. As one munitions girl working in an engineering shop explained,

engineering mankind is possessed of the unshakable opinion that no woman can have the mechanical sense. If one of us asks humbly why such and such alteration is not made to prevent this or that drawback to a machine, she is told with a superior smile that a man has worked the machine before her for years and that therefore if there were any improvement possible it would have been made.⁴⁷

The engineering trade unions chose not to attract women into their organizations where they would be protected like other union members and receive the same consideration from employers and the government in regards to wages. Nor did they demand equal pay for equal work (which would have gone against the traditional view of women workers). Instead, the engineering trade unions (particularly the Amalgamated Society of Engineers) chose to appeal to the government for guarantees that women's wages would not have a negative impact on those of skilled men. In fact, in the Treasury Agreement of March 1915, the Trade Unionists secured a clause to the effect that "the relaxation of existing demarcation restrictions or admission of semi-skilled or female labour shall not affect adversely the rates customarily paid for the job."⁴⁸ When pressed by Sylvia Pankhurst, a leading feminist who lobbied for equal pay for

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Cabinet Paper, "Acceleration of Output on Government Work," 19 March 1915, CAB 37/40, PRO.

women workers, on the meaning of this ambiguous statement, the Minister of Munitions David Lloyd George replied:

The words which you quote would guarantee that women undertaking the work of men would get the same piece rates as men were receiving before the date of this agreement. That, of course, means that if the women turn out the same quantity of work as men employed on the same job, they will receive exactly the same pay.⁴⁹

Although this statement did not satisfy Sylvia Pankhurst, who continued to press the minister about time rates and bonuses not addressed in his reply, this declaration temporarily appeased the Trade Unionists by promising that men's wage standards would not be affected by the introduction of female dilutees.

The government began to require increasingly larger amounts of munitions. For example, as of September 1915, the government had placed an order from the Ministry of Munitions for field guns for 100 divisions, artillery ammunition for 70 divisions, a new heavy gun program with its ammunition, 4 million rifles, 30,000 machine guns, etc. Lloyd George himself recognized that the production of this enormous amount of munitions was "being greatly hampered. . . for want of suitable skilled labour."⁵⁰ Caught between the demands of the military for greater war material, the

⁴⁹ Andrews and Hobbs, Economic Effects of the World War Upon Women and Children in Great Britain, 100-101.

⁵⁰ Cabinet Paper G.-27, "War Policy: Report and Supplementary Memoranda of a Cabinet Committee," 12 October 1915, CAB 24/1, PRO.

Trade Union fears of women's undercutting wages, and the agitation of feminist leaders such as Sylvia Pankhurst and Mary MacArthur, Lloyd George announced his policy for the payment of women munitions workers:

The government will see that there is no sweated labour. For some time women will be unskilled and untrained; they can not turn out as much work as the men who have been at it for some time, so we can not give the full rate of wages. Whatever these wages are, they should be fair, and there should be a fixed minimum, and we should not utilize the services of women in order to get cheaper labour.⁵¹

As a result of this announcement, and partly in response to the requests by feminist leaders such as Mary MacArthur (who had demanded for some time that a weekly wage of £1 be made compulsory), the Ministry of Munitions issued an official circular of recommendations for wage rates for women "on men's work" to government-controlled establishments.⁵²

This circular, referred to as L2, set a prescribed time rate of £1 (then \$4.80) weekly, and the same piece-rates for women as for men.⁵³ In the L2 circular, the Ministry emphasized its view that only women performing skilled men's work should be paid the men's rate.

⁵¹ Andrews and Hobbs, Economic Effects of the World War Upon Women and Children in Great Britain, 101.

⁵² Adam, A Woman's Place, 48.

⁵³ Andrews and Hobbs, Economic Effects of the World War Upon Women and Children in Great Britain, 101.

What the circular did not do, however, was to set a minimum wage nor did it have any power with which to enforce these suggestions. Fearing the permanent lowering of their standard wages, and finally realizing that the government firmly believed that British society could not "afford to let a military male needed for the army do work which could be done by a woman," the men's unions pledged to promote "dilution" (i.e. the substitution of unskilled labor for skilled labor) if the provisions of the L2 circular were made compulsory.⁵⁴ In response to the demands of the trade unions, by February 1916 the Ministry made the provisions of L2 circular compulsory, authorizing the Ministry to fix wage rates for all females and for semi-skilled men doing skilled work in munitions plants. Women time workers (i.e. women who worked for weekly wages, regardless of the job performed, as opposed to working by the piece or job completed) 18 years and older who were employed on men's work were to be paid £1 per week for the usual hours worked by male engineering workers. Rates for piece-work and for work performed by skilled men were to be the same as those paid to men.⁵⁵ The government, however, did insert a loophole for employers. Women were not to be put on piece-

⁵⁴ Cabinet Paper G. - 27, "War Policy: Report and Supplementary Memoranda of a Cabinet Committee," 12 October 1915, CAB 24/1, PRO; Andrews and Hobbs, Economic Effects of the World War Upon Women and Children in Great Britain, 102.

⁵⁵ Andrews and Hobbs, Economic Effects of the World War Upon Women and Children in Great Britain, 103.

work until the employer felt them to be "sufficiently qualified."

Most women never achieved the wage levels of skilled male laborers. Most munitions establishments, responding to the government's demands for greater amounts of arms and more speed in producing them, divided the jobs traditionally performed by skilled tradesmen into several basic operations, which they felt that women could then perform more quickly and accurately. Although this process enabled "women to do part of such heavy work as the making of large crucibles and the moulding processes in oil and seed milling," it also reduced the possibility that they would receive equal pay.⁵⁶ In many munitions factories, this division of work meant that, where formerly each machine was set up, operated, and repaired by a skilled man, a machine, although still operated by a single woman, was one of several supervised and repaired by one skilled man. While this process helped to increase the output of the munitions factories by allowing women with little or no training to be employed in work which in the past had required years of training, it also had the effect of keeping women's wages low and, therefore, preventing them from achieving the wage standards of skilled men. The "Report of the Women's

⁵⁶ Cabinet Paper G.-253, "Report of the Women's Employment Committee," 1919, CAB 24/5, PRO.

Employment Committee," published in 1919, reached this conclusion:

To what extent has woman acquired skill? How far can she compare with the "skilled man," the craftsman, the tradesman? . . . If a "skilled man" be taken in the strict sense, as it is used in the engineering trades, for instance, to mean a man who can "put in labour and carry out any given complete job on a particular class of work when furnished only with the requisite drawings," it is doubtful that such a person as a skilled woman exists. But if, on the other hand, "skilled" be used . . . not of the man but of the work to mean "operations which in normal times are only undertaken after the close of a definite period of apprenticeship," there are thousands of women who can do "skilled man's work," even work of the highest accuracy, provided they are specially trained and that very few operations are involved [my emphasis].⁵⁷

A comparison of men's wages to those of women in the same industries confirms that, despite all of the government's promises, women still earned less than men. In the National Shell Factories, the flat rate for male workers was £2-19s-3d per week, and with a bonus, £4-6s-6d, while the flat rate for women was £1-12s-8d and £2-2s-4d with a bonus. In the National Filling Factories, men received weekly wages of £2 while women earned only £1-12s-7d in the same period. A foreman took home £5-1s-10d, but a forewoman only pocketed £3 8s 0d. As the noted socialist Beatrice Webb stated,

The Treasury agreement of 19th March 1915 embodied a pledge that the women employed in war-work in substitution of men should receive the same pay as

⁵⁷ Cabinet Paper G.-253, "Report of the Women's Employment Committee," 1919, CAB 24/5, PRO.

the men they replaced. The pledge has been wholly ignored by some government departments and only fulfilled by others tardily and partially, to the great loss of the women concerned.⁵⁸

Despite these lower wages, and knowing that as a part of Trade Union agreements with the government that they were to be the "first out" of industry at the end of the war, British women were actually in a better economic situation than they had prior to the conflict. For instance, the girls in projectile factories could earn up to £3-4s-2d per week and the women at works on Tyneside could take home £5 a week.⁵⁹ These wages were not only significantly greater than the wages to which they were accustomed, but, despite the dramatic wartime increase in the cost of living, they bought a comfortable amount of nutritious food--which most of these women did not expect, even in peace time.⁶⁰

Women also received improved health care as a part of their wartime wages, although its value is not as easy to discern as monetary earnings. As workers contributing to the national war effort, women were the recipients of what the Chief Inspector of Factories called "a striking degree of solicitude on the part of the managers for their welfare and comfort."⁶¹ While factory inspectors had long been

⁵⁸ Adam, A Woman's Place, 49.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 49; Peel, How We Lived Then, 118.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Arthur Marwick, The Deluge: British Society and the First World War (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1965), 113.

concerned with the welfare of women factory workers, the convergence of women into industry following the outset of the war forced employers to look more closely at the atmosphere surrounding their employees. The more intelligent factory owners were becoming aware of the correlation between output and the physical conditions of their workers, so that, by 1915, dining-rooms were becoming more readily available, "especially in the modern and most up-to-date factories," and "a great advance in welfare work" occurred with the appearance of the first arrangements for dealing with sickness and injury.⁶² In that same year, the Ministry of Munitions also created the Health of Munitions Workers Committee, whose members' duty it was "to consider and advise on questions of industrial fatigue, hours of labor, and other matters affecting the personal health and physical efficiency of workers in munitions factories and workshops."⁶³ This improved health care, combined with increased wages, sharply diminished sickness among women workers and may be considered one of the most important benefits of the war for women. As one woman stated, "When under-nourishment and hunger has been a regular part of your home life as long as you can remember, it takes a long time

⁶² Ibid., 114.

⁶³ John A. Fairlie, British War Administration (London: Oxford University Press, 1919), 109.

to exhaust the pleasure of there being enough to go round all the time."⁶⁴

Even as the war continued to create a demand for more women in industry, British society still experienced difficulties in accepting the role of women as breadwinners. Female munitions workers, who most often came from the lower classes, were often portrayed by the press as wastrels who squandered their wages on luxury items. These women, who became known as munitionettes, were described as being "very well dressed. . .in smartly-cut tailor-mades of carefully chosen colour, with hat and blouse, gloves and stockings all to match, and particularly neat boots or shoes, with. . .under clothes. . .in the best of taste."⁶⁵ In contrast to these stereotypes, one woman expressed an altogether different experience:

The enormous wages held out by the papers to the clutching hands of mammon worshippers, as carrots before the noses of recalcitrant donkeys, melt somewhat upon inspection, or rather have a tendency to be given to no one nearer than a friend's sister's niece. However, there is no doubt that we do earn more than women have ever done before. . . .At the same time, living is so very expensive in these days that three or four pounds are not nearly what they seem.⁶⁶

Despite being paid lower wages than men and receiving negative publicity from the press, women continued to

⁶⁴ Adam, A Woman's Place, 49.

⁶⁵ Peel, How We Lived Then, 118.

⁶⁶ Stone, Women War Workers, 40.

perform well in monotonous and often dangerous jobs with very little advance training. Along with increased wages and improved health care, women also received praise for the first time from government officials and employers.

Commenting on the abilities of the women who worked in the shell-filling factories where they faced the constant peril of TNT poisoning and explosions, Lloyd George declared "The courage of the girls and women engaged in these factories has never been sufficiently recognised. They had to work under conditions of very real danger to life and

limb. . ."⁶⁷ One employer, the general manager of a National Shell Factory, expressed his satisfaction with the performance of the munitions girls in his factory by stating "I am in every sense proud of the women in my factory, and am not afraid to say so. They seldom, if ever, give me any worries or anxieties beyond commonplace ones. . . .They are willing and cheerful; they sing at their work, and are immensely keen to get as big an output as possible."⁶⁸

Although British women never achieved equal pay for equal work during the First World War, they finally did earn two things of almost equal importance--a margin of respect from those men in places of political power, and well-

⁶⁷ David Lloyd George, War Memoirs, 1915-1916 (1933. Reprint. Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1935), 54-55.

⁶⁸ E. Royston Pike, ed., Human Documents of the Lloyd George Era (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1972), 166-167.

deserved economic freedom. They proved to British society that women could work outside of the home. British society would never be the same thereafter.

CHAPTER FOUR

DISCUSSION OF PLANS FOR WOMEN IN POSTWAR BRITAIN

Long before the war was over, the British government had begun discussing plans for the future of working women in Britain. On 18 March 1916, the Prime Minister Henry H. Asquith announced the creation of the First Reconstruction Committee, "a Committee over which I shall preside, to consider and advise with aid of subcommittees upon the problems that will arise on the conclusion of Peace, and to coordinate work which has already been done by the Departments in this direction."¹ As a result of this announcement, a letter was issued to each governmental department on March 28, 1916, asking for details of its work pertaining to reconstruction. The report from the Board of Trade alone listed seven major problems with which it planned to contend, six of which related directly to the status of women workers. These problems included the forecasting of the postwar industrial situation, the return of military men to civil employment, the transference of labor and industrial plants from munitions work to peace work, the restoration of prewar conditions of employment,

¹ Paul Barton Johnson, Land Fit For Heroes: The Planning of British Reconstruction 1916-1919 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968), 10.

the relations of capital and labor, and the actual provision of employment.²

After examining the reports of the individual departments, the committee realized it would have to contend with three terrible problems: tremendous unemployment, general and extreme dislocation of business, and fierce foreign competition. While these issues would remain constant throughout the reconstruction process, this committee failed to contribute much towards their solution, for Asquith's committee was dissolved and recreated within the new government of David Lloyd George.³

Under the Lloyd George government, the Second Reconstruction Committee was assembled in mid-February 1917, with Edwin Montagu as chairman. Beatrice Webb, one of the members appointed to the committee by Lloyd George, had grave doubts about its success from its beginning. For example, in Lloyd George's attempt to choose the members of the committee, he rejected Montagu's proposal that he create a central committee of three members, with each subcommittee directly reporting to this main committee. Instead, Lloyd George demanded "a list of persons with ideas," from which in "a spare ten minutes" he chose fourteen members to serve on the committee, including Mrs. Webb. Apparently without consulting Montagu or Vaughan Nash, the chairman of the War

² Ibid., 13-14.

³ Ibid., 28-30.

Cabinet, Lloyd George ordered a letter to be written to each of the fourteen inviting them, in the name of the War Cabinet, to serve on the Reconstruction Committee.⁴

In addition to her concerns about how the committee was chosen, Beatrice Webb also considered the scope of the committee too broad and, in many cases, inefficiently redundant.

Lloyd George talks about the committee as 'a committee at large to advise about everything'--even India. He is going to give two hours a week to it. Meanwhile his Ministries are to go on administering their Departments without being consulted about the programmes to be submitted to the War Cabinet by this informal and 'viewy' body. It is the maddest bit of machinery, and if there be neither open revolt nor silent obstruction in Whitehall [at the War Cabinet], I shall be agreeably surprised. . . .The chance of the Committee surviving long enough to accomplish anything seems remote.⁵

In fact, her main criticism of the committee was that it was "at once too pretentious" in its goals and "too powerless" in its abilities to accomplish these goals.

If the acting Chairman and the Secretaries had been able and energetic men, determined to use the members of the Committee, each for what he or she was worth--the Committee might have won for itself a useful position. But the office-holders have a contempt for the Committee and the Committee have a contempt for the officers. The majority of the Committee do not intend to work: they are not representative of varied interests nor do they make a homogenous body of counsellors.⁶

⁴ Margaret I. Cole, ed., Beatrice Webb's Diaries 1912-1924 (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1952), 82.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 88.

She was, unfortunately, correct in her assumptions about the success of the committee. By July 18, 1917, the committee had ceased to exist. Before the committee had had the chance to accomplish much in the way of plans for the future, including the future of women, Lloyd George replaced it with the Ministry of Reconstruction, with Lord Christopher Addison, the former Minister of Munitions, as Minister of Reconstruction.⁷

With Addison at its head, the Ministry of Reconstruction was established to continue for the duration of the war and for a maximum of two years after the war's conclusion.⁸ Parliament specifically defined the functions of the Minister of Reconstruction. As Minister, Addison was to consider and advise upon the problems which possibly could arise from the war, and "to institute and conduct enquiries, prepare schemes, and make recommendations as he saw fit" on issues important to the government.⁹ According to Parliament, the business of the Ministry itself was

to be acquainted with all proposals for dealing with post-war problems. . . under consideration by government departments or committees or put forward by responsible bodies or persons, to study them in their bearings upon each other, to initiate proposals for dealing with matters which are not already covered, and out of all this

⁷ Ibid., 91.

⁸ J. Maurice Clark, Walton H. Hamilton, and Harold G. Moulton, eds., Readings in the Economics of War (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1918), 628.

⁹ Ibid.

material to build up in consultation with the other departments for submission to the Cabinet and ultimately to Parliament, a reasoned policy of reconstruction in all its branches.¹⁰

For purposes of administration, the Ministry was divided into six separate branches, or committees, which included commerce and production; finance, shipping, and common services; labor and industrial organization; rural development; central and local government, health, and education; and housing and internal transport.¹¹ Of these committees, primarily two--commerce and production, and labor and industrial organization--were concerned with the demobilization of women workers.¹²

As a result of this interest in reconstruction, many conferences were held to discuss different aspects of reconstruction from 1916 to 1918, and a multitude of books and pamphlets were put forth on the topic. The Ministry of Reconstruction published several of these documents which discussed the issues of reconstruction, including those that would directly affect women, such as demobilization and the employment of women after the war. The "Civil War Workers Committee," the "Committee on Joint Standing Industrial Councils," and the "Women's Advisory Committee on the Domestic Service Problem," were just a few of the

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 629.

¹² Ibid., 629-634.

subcommittees which dealt with problems and questions pertaining to the woman worker.¹³ Despite the numerous conferences held and the multitude of documents published on reconstruction, when the war ended most plans were not complete, and in only a few cases had the machinery for putting them into effect actually been created. So, after two years of debates over the composition and scope of the Reconstruction Committees/Ministry of Reconstruction, the British government, like most of the governments of other belligerent nations, had to rely on hastily created arrangements or place faith in chance.¹⁴

The one positive result which arose from these discussions on reconstruction was that, as time progressed and thoughts on reconstruction continued, the idea of reconstruction as a simple return to prewar conditions was gradually replaced "by the larger and worthier ideal of a better world after the war."¹⁵ Reconstruction came to symbolize a movement aimed at solving the problems disclosed by the war, and not just to serve as a transition from war to peace. As a part of this movement, most segments of British society agreed that "the industrial institutions of

¹³ Irene Osgood Andrews and Margaret A. Hobbs, Economic Effects of the World War upon Women and Children in Great Britain (New York: Oxford University Press, 1921), 204-205.

¹⁴ Ibid., 205.

¹⁵ Ibid.

England are 'rotten-ripe for change,'" and that it was evident "that the problem of the transition to a status of peace" was "no mere problem of a 'return'".¹⁶

People also held these high hopes for change in the future employment of women. In their report to the Ministry of Reconstruction, the Women's Employment Committee predicted an extension of job openings for women, not only in industry, but also in the other branches of commerce. The committee believed that employers would continue to employ women after the war in work formerly done by men in shops, such as managing, buying, and traveling. The committee also predicted that great opportunities for women would be available in local government service, as well as in the health and sanitary services.¹⁷ The committee even declared that women would compose part of the "industrial army of the future."¹⁸ Because of the advances made in factories through such industrial processes as repetition work, the committee believed that "there will be found a body of capable, quick-witted, deft-handed, self-reliant women ready to run intricate machines and to produce what the modern world requires."¹⁹ The committee hypothesized

¹⁶ Clark, Readings in the Economics of War, 620.

¹⁷ Vera Brittain, Women's Work in Modern England (London: Noel Douglas, 1928), 9-10.

¹⁸ Cabinet Paper G.-253, "Report of the Women's Employment Committee," 1919, CAB 24/5, PRO.

¹⁹ Ibid.

that women would be found at all levels of industry, from the craftswoman--"the woman completely skilled at her trade"--to the forewoman, the supervisor, the woman works manager, and ultimately the managing director or partner. "From the top of industry to the bottom there will be work for women suited to their capacity."²⁰

Some women were just as hopeful about the future for women in employment. Monica Cosens, a volunteer in the munitions industry during the war, praised her fellow women workers and expressed her opinion that women had earned the confidence and respect of both their male co-workers and of their families.

There is creeping into their hearts a slow-growing admiration of the Khaki girl. . . .Where as [sic] a year ago they would have said: 'Bessie? She couldn't work a machine any more than that cat there!' and laughed at the idea, will have to own when the War is over that Bessie did work a machine, and that if Bessie and the thousands of other Bessies had not proved they could do this, England would not have been able to put the army she has in the field, and could not have taken the share her Allies expected of her.²¹

Other writers were more cautiously optimistic about the chances of women in the postwar years. Gilbert Stone, in his collection of essays written in 1917 to praise the efforts of women war workers, declared that he hoped to see "a general shifting of women workers into employments for

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Monica Cosens, Lloyd George's Munition Girls (London: Hutchinson and Co., 1916), 157.

which they are as well fitted as men," and that "the tendency should be for certain kinds of work to be almost entirely surrendered to women."²² He also knew that difficult times were ahead for women after the war. Recognizing that the trade unions would largely determine the fate of women in employment, he appealed to union members to remember "that there is full friendship between man and woman," and that "the women competing with him are no blacklegs, but the daughters and the widows. . . of those comrades who died by his side on the battlefields."²³

Despite this optimism, many people recognized that the further employment of women in industry was in serious danger and that an unemployment crisis for women loomed in the future, particularly since so many women were working in industries related directly to the war and other women had replaced men only for the duration of the war. The Civil War Workers Committee, a subcommittee of the Ministry of Reconstruction, was the official governmental agency charged with creating a plan for the prevention of unemployment among war workers. It focused primarily on the demobilization of workers engaged in national factories, controlled establishments, and in other firms involved in

²² Gilbert Stone, ed. Women War Workers: Accounts Contributed by Representative Workers of the Work Done by Women in the More Important Branches of War Employment (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1917), 318.

²³ Ibid., 319-320.

the production of munitions.²⁴ In its report to the Ministry, the committee estimated that, by the end of the war, approximately 420,000 women munitions workers alone would lose their jobs.²⁵ Although the committee provided suggestions for the demobilization of these women workers, including the provision of governmental aid through official employment exchanges and a general extension of the existing plan of unemployment insurance to all workers, the committee members were not hopeful that all women workers would be placed in other employment.²⁶ In fact, the authors of the Memorandum on the Industrial Situation after the War maintained that there would be a considerable amount of unemployment after the war, not because of surplus labor, but because of the general dislocation of industry.²⁷

Several writers were even more pessimistic about the future of women's employment. As one leading female writer declared in 1918, "we see looming ahead of us the horrible possibility of something like an industrial sex war, in which the men's trade unions, and no doubt, for sentimental reasons, a large section of the public will be on one side,

²⁴ Andrews and Hobbs, Economic Effects of the Great War, 206.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Stone, Women War Workers, 318.

and the industrial women. . . on the other."²⁸ Most women recognized that, even with their highly successful performance in extremely difficult jobs during the war, old male prejudices against working women had not completely disappeared. One writer succinctly appraised the situation in 1917: "many women now engaged in work will have to make way for the men returning from the Front. Women are today doing far more of men's work than they will do in times of peace."²⁹

While this was true of the employment of women in general, each class of women--whether married or single, or upper, middle, or lower class--had different roles expected of them in the future. For married women, employment after the war seemed an impossibility. In general, British society believed that the great number of married women whose husbands were currently in the military would "cease to be wage-earners."³⁰ In fact, the Women's Employment Committee of the Ministry of Reconstruction declared in its report to the Minister that the employment of married women "should not be encouraged."³¹

While it is recognized that under existing conditions very many married women must leave

²⁸ Clark, Readings in the Economics of War, 639-640.

²⁹ Stone, Women War Workers, 311.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Cabinet Paper G.-253, "Report of the Women's Employment Committee," 1919, CAB 24/5, PRO.

their homes and go to work, it is hoped that every inducement, direct and indirect, will be given to keep mothers at home. Particularly it is hoped that the excessive employment of married women, which obtained during the war, will cease at its termination.³²

In explaining their reasoning behind these statements, the committee claimed that these measures must be taken "for insuring the race against injury to health and happiness arising from the overwork of women, or their employment in work unfit for them, or in unsuitable circumstances."³³

While these expressions of concern for "the race" were probably genuine, the primary reason for the discouragement of the employment of married women in general came from the old idea that women who had husbands to support them did not need to work and, therefore, they would be taking jobs away from those workers (i.e. soldiers) who did need them. As early as 1916, a journalist for the newspaper, the Trade Unionist, in discussing the future unemployment figures, declared that 750,000 people should be deducted from the statistics, since this was the number of married women with children who should be back in the home.³⁴ Old prejudices could not be killed with a few years of employment.

Middle- and upper-class women faced the same intolerance married women did. Most of British society

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Gail Braybon, Women Workers in the First World War (London: Croom Helm, 1981), 175.

assumed that the original intent of these women to gain employment resulted partly from "a spirit of patriotism, partly to gain new experiences and partly to fill in time left intolerably empty by the departure of their friend," but not "hardly at all to earn money."³⁵

It is hoped that this class when the war is over will cease to compete in the labour market, since for them wages are not an economic necessity, and if they work they tend to exclude others to whom money earned is a necessity.³⁶

The women themselves expected, for the most part, to return to their lives of pre-war years. As a member of the upper-class, Monica Cosens agreed that most women of her standing would withdraw from industry, and work outside of the home in general, once the war had ended.

Behind us are years of leisure and strength, husbanded by healthy surroundings and nourishing food. When the War is over we shall return to that leisure, or anyhow to occupations that will not be physically arduous.³⁷

British society as a whole adopted the opinion that these women needed to exit from the labor market, since for them wages were not an economic necessity. This class of women had two choices. The first choice was to return to their former jobs as "household managers," an occupation which one writer praised as "no light task, and one which

³⁵ Stone, Women War Workers, 312.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Cosens, Lloyd George's Munition Girls, 153-154.

will be rendered harder by the dearth of servants."³⁸ To women who found this employment unappealing or who had no household to manage because they remained single (as a result of the large number of men killed in the war), voluntary public service, such as social work, was the other option for the postwar years. "Of these many will form the splendid band of social workers which the needs of the war-wrecked will call into being."³⁹ Whatever their future might be, these women had little hope of paid employment in the years to come.

For lower-class women, just the opposite was true. They knew that their future would be based on hard work. What they did not know was that, just as suddenly as they had become the darlings of British society through their hard work in the factories, they would become unwelcome workers who took jobs away from men and spent extravagant sums of money on unnecessary luxury items. In The Times of March 5, 1917, munitions workers were chastized for their extravagance.

Among the wage-earning classes there are thousands of families who are stinting themselves of many things for the sake of the country. . . But there are others who are unwilling to deny themselves anything which is in their power to buy, not because they have always been accustomed to it but

³⁸ Stone, Women War Workers, 312.

³⁹ Ibid.

for the exactly opposite reason. Fur coats have come to be known as "munition overalls."⁴⁰

By July 1918 the press had turned from praising the roles women had played in the war to criticising them for their fondness for gramophones, smoking, and pretty clothes. One newspaper, the Daily Graphic, was fairly typical in its opinion of lower class women when it wrote:

The idea that because the State called for women to help the nation, the State must continue to employ them is too absurd for sensible women to entertain. As a matter of grace, notice should be at least a fortnight and if possible a month. As for young women in domestic service, they at least should have no difficulty in finding vacancies.⁴¹

Forgetting that these women had been employed in industry before the war, and in particularly arduous work in the textile mills and other such manufacturing processes, some men, and the Trade Unionists in particular, demanded that women leave industry as quickly as possible. The Factory Times carried an article which expressed this sentiment succinctly.

We claim that the solemn obligation to the men who went away will necessitate those women going out as quickly as possible, to say nothing of the fact that it was universally acknowledged that women brought into industry through the war were doing work that is not congenial or natural to a woman. . . we must get the women back into

⁴⁰ The Times, 5 March 1917.

⁴¹ Quoted in Norbert C. Seldon, Women in British Trade Unions 1874-1976 (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1978), 101.

the home as soon as possible. That they ever left it is one of the evil results of war.⁴²

With all of these conflicting opinions floating around British society concerning women and reconstruction, most women had no idea what to expect once the war ended. Although many women would have liked to have kept their positions in industry and commerce, they bowed out of industry so that returning fathers, brothers, and husbands could be employed once again. The Central Committee of Women's Training and Employment reported

a new problem of distress among women affected by the transition from war to peace conditions. . . the shrinking of opportunity due to the desire not to trespass upon occupations specially suited to disabled men and the depression in trade which restricts the development of new branches of work which had given promise of employment for women.⁴³

The roles of women in most branches of industry had ended for a while. Women had done their duty, and now had to return to their old under-paid occupations as industrial drudges, domestic servants, household managers, and social workers.

⁴² Quoted in Braybon, Women Workers in the First World War, 176.

⁴³ Ruth Adam, A Woman's Place 1910-1975 (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1975), 72.

CHAPTER FIVE

ROLES OF WOMEN IN POSTWAR BRITAIN

By the time 1918 arrived, many British people had succumbed to a general feeling of war weariness. The year 1918 began as a bad year for the British people. That summer, in August 1918, the people of Britain had witnessed the strike of 12,000 policemen over the government's non-recognition of their newly-created National Union of Police and Prison Officers.¹ Food shortages were at their worst since the start of the war, and the German offensive in the spring of 1918 resulted in 300,000 British casualties.²

The war began to take its toll on women workers as well. As a result of a significant increase in the demand for war goods in early 1918, workers, both male and female, worked longer hours, including large amounts of overtime, with few holidays.³ Despite the relatively high wages they received for their work in wartime industry, most women were tired--tired of death, shortages, and blackouts. They

¹ Arthur Marwick, The Deluge: British Society and the First World War (London: Jonathan Cape, 1965), 257.

² Gail Braybon and Penny Summerfield, Out of the Cage: Women's Experiences in Two World Wars (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987), 115-116.

³ Ibid., 120.

"longed for a return to normal life."⁴ When the armistice finally arrived on 11 November 1918, many of these women, and British people in general, experienced one emotion--relief. As Vera Brittain explained in Testament of Youth,

When the sound of victorious guns burst over London at 11 a.m. on November 11th, 1918, the men and women who looked incredulously into each faces did not cry jubilantly: 'We've won the war!' They only said: 'The War is over.'⁵

For some British women, particularly those of the upper- and middle-classes, a return to normality meant a return to their homes and their roles as wives and mothers.

Certainly, for women of all classes, the overwhelming thought was that they would see their men again.⁶ Some women willingly left their jobs. Married women with children, whose husbands had returned from military duty, were often relieved to relinquish such a strenuous existence, while most middle-class munition workers had never intended to remain in such work once the war had ended.⁷

Some women managed to hang on to their jobs for a few months after the Armistice, especially in aircraft work,

⁴ Ibid., 116.

⁵ Vera Brittain, Testament of Youth (London: Virago Press, 19), 460.

⁶ Mary Agnes Hamilton, Women at Work: A Brief Introduction to Trade Unionism for Women (London: George Routledge and Sons Ltd., 1941), 97.

⁷ Braybon and Summerfield, Out of the Cage, 121.

glass making, and printing. Eventually, many of these workers moved on to jobs that had formerly been considered boys' work, as workers in the iron and steel industry, or laborers on the docks, in the leather trade, at sawmills, and in brewing.⁸ Women also remained employed as booking clerks on the railway, and as delivery drivers for small businesses. Many women continued to be employed in offices and shops in work which drew lower salaries than it had before the war and, therefore, had become less popular with men.⁹ However, for many working women, particularly those women employed in traditionally male occupations where the Restoration of Pre-War Practices Act had the greatest effect, the armistice signified the end of their current jobs and an uncertain future.

Many of the women employed in these "men's trades" realized that, for the trade unions and the British government, a return to normality meant a return to pre-war practices and traditions in industry. In fact, while the British press and many government officials publicly lauded the performance of women in industry during the war, the trade unions remained convinced that women did not belong there. In a War Cabinet document discussing the position of labor in the munitions industries, the Cabinet Ministers found that the trade unions were carefully documenting the

⁸ Ibid., 120.

⁹ Ibid.

invasion of women into industry. The Munitions of War Act, 1915, required that records be kept of departures from any "non-statutory rule, practice, or custom in controlled establishments tending to restrict production or employment."¹⁰ These records of suspended restrictive practices were collected by local officers of the Ministry of Labour and submitted to labor organizations, and were then sent to the ministry. Up to the 3rd June, 1918, 25,024 records were collected, and, of these records, 21,593 were sent to the ministry. Of this number, 67 percent were concerned with the introduction of female labor.¹¹ The trade unions were determined to force the government to keep their earlier pledges to return to pre-war practices once the war had ended.

Most governmental officials recognized that the will of the trade unionists would determine the fate of women workers after the war. The Minister of Labour, George H. Roberts, realized that if Britain was to be economically successful in the post-war period, the trade unions must be consulted on major labor issues. This situation resulted from the fact that, despite the influx of women into the workforce during the war, the availability of trained labor had not actually increased. Instead, he, like many other

¹⁰ Cabinet Paper, GT-4919, "Labour Position in Munition Industries," 19 June 1918, CAB 24/55, PRO.

¹¹ Ibid.

governmental leaders, saw these women as merely a "substitution for labour drained off in other ways."¹² He also understood the danger in underestimating the power of the trade unions and their objections to keeping women in industry once the war ended.

In any event, any attempt by industries receiving favoured treatment in the way of materials to use the less-organised but comparatively skilled supply of women's labour in preference to the ordinary male labour would raise such a protest from the Trade Unions that no government could face the situation without interference.¹³

The resistance by the trade unions to compromise with women workers, combined with the unwillingness of the government to confront the unions and the general feeling of war-weariness among women, proved disastrous for women's employment in industry after the war. Whether they performed well or not during the war, women in most traditionally male occupations were the first workers released from their occupations once the war was over. The primary reason for their early release was that, in addition to their wartime pledges to the trade unions, the government had promised "a land fit for heroes" to the returning soldiers in the 1918 Parliamentary elections.¹⁴ Since hundreds of thousands of men had to be released from the

¹² Cabinet Paper GT-4899, "Priority and Allocation of Materials in the Post-War Period," 21 June 1918, CAB 24/54, PRO.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Braybon and Summerfield, Out of the Cage, 117-118.

military and would in turn be seeking work, an equivalent number of women would need to lose their wartime jobs.¹⁵

Roberts, as the Minister of Labour, understood the necessity for some kind of organization in the process of demobilization of women workers. In his memorandum to the War Cabinet regarding industrial demobilization, he provided recommendations for regulating the order of discharge of individual workers. He suggested that the workers be given "at least a fortnight's notice. . . or a fortnight's wages in lieu of notice."¹⁶ In addition, he also insisted that "the discharges of workers from factories should be regulated primarily in the interests of the early re-absorption of the workers and the avoidance of individual hardship, rather than on the lines of a 'business transaction,' with a view to reducing the cost to the particular factory concerned."¹⁷ While these suggestions seemed to be made mainly in the best interest of the workers, Roberts' intentions were to protect the government from having to support massive numbers of unemployed workers.

Some extra cost in respect of the individual factories will necessarily be entailed, but this cost will be far less than the charge that would

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Cabinet Paper GT-5947, "Industrial Demobilization: Memorandum by the Minister of Labour," October 1918, CAB 24/46, PRO.

¹⁷ Ibid.

have to be shouldered by the State in the way of unemployment benefit or some other form of sustenance if the discharges take place on a purely business principle.¹⁸

Again, when determining which workers would be considered for early dismissal, Roberts' first loyalty was to the government and the pledges it had made to the trade unions and returning soldiers. The three classes he recommended for early dismissal were: (1) workers who were not dependent on industrial employment for a livelihood; (2) workers who had been brought from a distance; and (3) workers who could be readily absorbed into their previous employment, or into one of the staple industries of the district.¹⁹ In addition to these categories, Roberts also emphasized that the previous industrial experiences of these employees, as well as the demand for workers of their experience elsewhere, should be adequately considered by factory management in determining dismissals.²⁰

Most women workers fell into at least one of these categories, and some of them fit into all three. First, the British government did not consider them to be dependent upon industrial employment for a livelihood, since they were thought to have male family members--husbands, fathers, brothers, and so on--to support them. Second, many of these

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

women had traveled great distances from their homes in order to secure work in the better-paying wartime industries, such as munitions work. Finally, the last category, with its emphasis on previous (i.e. before the war) employment and experience, posed the biggest threat to the jobs of women war workers. Prior to the war, most of these women had been employed in traditional women's trades, which included domestic service, dressmaking, millinery, weaving, and food processing.²¹ As this category indicates, they were expected to return to these trades, most particularly to domestic service, which had decreased by 400,000 workers during the war.²² In November 1918 the government, hoping to entice women back into domestic service and in their opinion prevent future unemployment among these workers, began planning a program for retraining demobilized women in "household management and domestic science" at the war's end in November 1918.²³

In the meantime, the government did attempt to appease women workers, and, in a way, to recognize women's service to the country during the war, in two ways. First, just before the Parliamentary elections were held in November

²¹ Braybon and Summerfield, Out of the Cage, 58.

²² Andrews and Hobbs, Economic Effects of the World War Upon the Women and Children in Great Britain, 213.

²³ Cabinet Paper GT-6849, "Training of Demobilised Women in Household Management and Domestic Science," 20 February 1919, CAB 24/51, PRO.

1918, an Act was rushed through the government which made women eligible to vote and to stand for election to Parliament.²⁴ Since this act only applied to women over the age of thirty who were rentholders or who were married to rentholders, however, it was mainly a concession to middle- and upper-class women.²⁵ While this measure recognized such women as the Pankhursts and other suffragettes (who primarily came from these classes) for their support of the war, it still left an entire class of women--those women who had been the very backbone of industry during the war--without a voice in the government.

The government placated these women through another measure, the system for unemployment or "out-of-work" donation. When the war suddenly ended in 1918, women, now considered to be redundant workers by employers and the government (which now refused to renew its wartime contracts), were released by the thousands from industry, particularly in engineering, shipbuilding, and munitions.²⁶ At Woolwich Arsenal immediately after the armistice, for example, twenty thousand women were abruptly laid off without even the fortnight's notice recommended by the

²⁴ Marwick, The Deluge, 278.

²⁵ Noreen Branson, Britain in the Nineteen Twenties (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1976), 3.

²⁶ Sheila Lewenhak, Women and Trade Unions, 165.

Minister of Labor Roberts.²⁷ These women, demanding the right to some kind of maintenance from the government, marched to Whitehall and succeeded in securing a pledge from Lloyd George for the establishment of the out-of-work donation scheme. As promised, the government did enact a system of unemployment donation through an emergency order made within a few weeks after the Woolwich workers' protest.²⁸

The government initiated this system by issuing free policies to all war workers not covered by pre-war contributory unemployment insurance. In the case of civilian workers (there was also a policy for the military), these policies were originally to be good for six months beginning on November 25, 1918.²⁹ They provided their holders with donations for thirteen weeks of unemployment. For women workers, the original scale was 20s. (\$4.80) weekly, which increased to 25s. (\$6.00) after the plan was put into operation. Additional payments were made for dependent children, with 6s. (\$1.44) paid weekly for the first child and 3s. (72 cents) for each succeeding child.³⁰ Following the passage of a later amendment, payments to

²⁷ Hamilton, Women at Work, 97.

²⁸ Andrews and Hobbs, Economic Effects of the World War Upon Women and Children in Great Britain, 211.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

civilians were continued for an additional thirteen weeks at a reduced rate. For women, this new rate was 15s. (\$3.60) weekly.³¹ In May 1919, donation policies were again renewed for an additional six months, but, on 25 November 1919, exactly one year after it was initiated, the system was finally discontinued.³²

The problem with the unemployment donation system was that the government mistakenly believed that former women workers would welcome any kind of employment rather than accept the donation. The government expected women workers peacefully to withdraw from the labor force, accept the unemployment donation for a limited time, and then return to their places in the women's trades as soon as positions were available to them.³³ In order to encourage this process, the government continued to reduce the amount of the donation available to women, and then they proceeded to make receiving the donation more and more difficult. For example, The Times reported in April 1919 that, through March of that year, approximately 4,000 sittings had been held of the Courts of Referees, to whom disputed donation claims were submitted. During this period, the Courts dealt with 73,238 cases, of which no fewer than 39,906 claims were

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Braybon and Summerfield, Out of the Cage, 121.

disallowed. "In the case of women the unsuccessful applications represented 77 per cent. of the whole."³⁴

Women were often refused the donation because, in the opinion of governmental officials, they had refused "to accept suitable employment."³⁵ In his speech to a deputation representing the National Federation of General Workers and the National Federation of Women Workers in March 1919, the Minister of Labour Sir Robert Horne expressed the widely-held opinion that "one of the contributory causes to the unemployment of women was their reluctance to take work because of the fact that they were receiving the unemployment donation."³⁶ While it was true that positions were available for women workers, most of the jobs open were either very highly skilled or grossly underpaid and unattractive. The former was certainly true for one firm which needed 5,000 workers. The employment exchanges (the governmental agencies through which women found employment) could only find fifty women who seemed qualified, of whom the firm hired only fifteen.³⁷ The Times of 16 April 1919 described a similar problem facing female typists and clerks in London.

³⁴ The Times, 8 April 1919.

³⁵ Andrews and Hobbs, Economic Effects of the World War Upon the Women and Children in Great Britain, 211.

³⁶ The Times, 27 March 1919.

³⁷ Andrews and Hobbs, Economic Effects of the World War Upon the Women and Children of Great Britain, 212.

Among the women who are at present receiving the out-of-work donation are 21,000 clerks and typists. In view of the fact that complaint is being made in the City that typists cannot be obtained, this fact seems to require explanation. The trouble seems to be that a considerable proportion of the unemployed girls are not sufficiently competent to command the confidence of employers.³⁸

On the other hand, the government, through the employment exchanges, was continually trying to push women into low-paying domestic service jobs. When these women balked at returning to domestic service, the Courts of Referees promptly denied their requests for extension of the donation. Women workers were faced with either accepting a position in domestic service or having nothing. The Times of 8 April 1919 printed a story which typified this situation.

A young woman, 21 years of age, who had been unemployed for six weeks, was offered a situation in domestic service, where she would live in and receive £22 a year. The woman in her last employment had been paid 38s. a week, but had previously earned 12s. 6d. a week in a warehouse. She refused the offer of domestic service on the ground that the wages were inadequate, and expressed an intention of declining all offers of work where the wages were lower than 25s. a week. Her claim, however, was disallowed, as it held that a wage of £22 a year with board and lodging was quite equivalent to the wages she would have obtained if she had remained in her pre-war employment, and was also equivalent to the 25s. a week for which she asked.³⁹

³⁸ The Times, 16 April 1919.

³⁹ The Times, 8 April 1919.

The basis for her claim for 25s. per week was that the government had raised the rate of unemployment donation from 20s. to 25s. weekly on the ground that a single woman could not live on less.⁴⁰

The government continued to enforce this policy throughout 1919. While 494,000 women were registered unemployed by March 1919 and women made up two thirds of the unemployed by May, women's unemployment figures dropped drastically--to about 29,000--by November 1919.⁴¹ In reality, unemployment was not reduced, but the figures were. The government had systematically pushed women off the unemployment register by urging them to either quit paid work altogether or to accept work in the low-paying women's trades. This policy, supported by a harsh campaign in the Press which alternately pictured women as "traitors to men or scroungers on the state," left women workers with little choice but to return to these jobs.⁴²

As a result of these economic conditions facing women workers, the same spirit that led women in the pre-war years to demand the right to vote now led reformers to demand the right to work in the trades for which they were qualified. In a meeting of the National Union of Women's Suffrage held

⁴⁰ Andrews and Hobbs, Economic Effects of the World War Upon the Women and Children in Great Britain, 212.

⁴¹ Braybon and Summerfield, Out of the Cage, 121.

⁴² Ibid., 123.

on 5 March 1919, suffragette Millicent Garrett Fawcett demanded that "the freedom of women in the industrial world, engendered by the war, must be preserved."⁴³ She believed that women could not be kept out of the skilled trades in the future.

Several resolutions with the main purpose of ensuring the future of women workers were also passed at this meeting. The first resolution called attention "to the need of safeguarding the industrial rights of women in any legislation dealing with the restoration of pre-war practices, and resolving to oppose the introduction of any claim whereby legal restrictions would be imposed on women's right to work."⁴⁴ A second resolution was also introduced which expressed the opinion "that the exclusion of women from so many opportunities of technical training was a glaring injustice, and one which in the case of institutions supported by public funds should be immediately remedied by legislation."⁴⁵ While women lacked economic power, they still had their champions. And now they had a new weapon against inequality. This weapon was the right to vote.

The immediate post-war period was characterized by a sense of relief and an optimistic view of the future. Addressing a meeting in Victoria Square, Birmingham, on the

⁴³ The Times, 6 March 1919.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

evening of Armistice Day, the Lord Mayor, Sir David Brooks, declared:

today is the greatest day in the history of our country, and it marks the beginning of a new era in human development . . . We must take care to use this great opportunity aright so that the world may be better and not worse by reason of the overthrow of the old order.⁴⁶

Unfortunately for women, not only did the old order not disappear, the post-war government attempted to recreate it in a stronger, more conservative fashion. For women, the post-war period proved to be more of a return to the nineteenth century than a new era of human development. At least in the nineteenth century women workers had yet to experience the freedom available to women during the First World War. The women workers of the post-war period had shouldered the responsibilities of carrying on the industrial war effort, proved that they could handle any new job that was given to them, and were turned out by the thousands once the war had ended. Yet British women refused to quit. They still demanded respect from the government, for now they knew that no task was beyond their capabilities. The government may have taken away their jobs and tried to make the country like it was before the war, but it could not erase their experiences.

⁴⁶ Marwick, The Deluge, 260.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

For the most part, World War I was not the great emancipator of British women. The effect of the war on the roles of women in British society was much more subtle. While women proved themselves capable of handling almost any job in which the British government could place them, the post-war years proved that British society as a whole was not yet ready to accept women in anything beyond their traditional roles except in dire circumstances. The British people of the immediate post-war period lived in a modern world of mass destruction, but they still clung to the traditional values and social standards of the Edwardian period.

By 1919, the arguments over whether women could play a larger role in wartime seemed almost surreal. British women proved that they could serve in transport, in shops, in factories where they handled everything from lathes to TNT, in offices as clerks, and in almost any job that was required of them. Cutting through all of the suffragette rhetoric of the pre-war years about the roles women should play in British society, women workers demonstrated from 1914 to 1918 that women could and did have a place outside the home and feminine occupations.

One thing is certain. British women changed forever the roles women would play in wartime. The British government, looking around the world for manpower, suddenly awoke to discover an entire segment of their population that was willing to perform even the most dirty and dangerous jobs for the country. A sense of surprise and astonishment characterized the government's reaction to women workers throughout the war. They were amazed that women could be just as zealously patriotic and hate the enemy as fervently as any man. In contrast to the traditional notion that women were the kinder and gentler sex, women in wartime Britain could shovel coal or scream "Hang the Kaiser" as well as any man.

When the war was over, the government and the trade unions acted as if the war had been nothing but a bad dream. In their minds, women were still women, and men were still men. Women workers had served their purpose during the war, and now, for the good of the nation, they must return to their duties as mothers and wives. Men were still the breadwinners, for that was the way it had always been. It was as if the government was trying to convince the British people, and perhaps the world, that the war had not altered British society in any way. The trade unions encouraged this mode of thought. Having fought the government for so many decades to achieve a higher standard of living for their members, the trade union leaders were terrified that

women would provide the government with a way to destroy all they had gained. For life truly to return to normal, both the government and the trade unions believed that British society needed to return to its pre-war practices.

Despite this intransigent attitude of the government and the trade unions, women did make some gains as a result of the war. In post-war Britain, women had much more personal freedom than prior to the war. Women threw off whalebone corsets, and for the first time, skirts rose above the ankles. Black stockings went out of style and flesh-colored ones became popular, hinting that legs were to be viewed instead of hidden from sight.¹ Along with this change in appearance went a change in behavior. Women and men began to mix with one another much more freely than before the war. Women even smoked in public and used the same slang as men.²

Most importantly, women gained equality with men in the public sphere. Partly in recognition to their service and support during the war, women were finally granted suffrage through the Representation of the People Act on 30 January 1918.³ Although suffrage was limited to women over the age

¹ Noreen Branson, Britain in the Nineteen Twenties (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1976), 208.

² Ibid., 209.

³ Ray Strachey, Millicent Garrett Fawcett (London: John Murray, 1931), 321; Ray Strachey, The Cause (1928. Reprint. Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, Inc., 1969), 366; Parliamentary Debates, 5th ser., vol. 101 (1917-1918),

of thirty who were property owners or married to property owners, British women for the first time had direct influence over the government of their country.

In addition to the vote, women were also promised the right to a career through the 1919 Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act.⁴ This act guaranteed women that they would "not be disqualified by sex or marriage from the exercise of any public function, or from being appointed to or holding any civil or judicial office or post, from entering or assuming or carrying on any civil profession or vocation."⁵ More than anything, this law gave women equality of opportunity. This measure opened jury service, the magistracy, and the legal profession to women. It also allowed them to enter into the upper reaches of the Civil Service and into full membership at the universities of Oxford and Cambridge.⁶

Several other changes of great significance also occurred as a result of the war. Domestic service decreased in popularity as a possible occupation for working class women and girls. By 1921, the number of women employed in domestic service decreased to 1,072,000 from 1,400,000 in

col. 1592.

⁴ Parliamentary Debates (Commons), 5th ser., vol. 117 (1919), cols. 1283-1345.

⁵ Branson, Britain in the Nineteen Twenties, 209.

⁶ Marwick, The Deluge, 278.

1911. Clerical work, once considered to belong exclusively to men, now came to be viewed as primarily women's work, although the pay for women was nowhere near the male rate for the job.⁷

The war ultimately brought both positive and negative experiences for British women. Women had the chance to prove their worth outside of the domestic sphere. They earned the respect of men for their achievements, although it was only temporary. Most importantly, they experienced things in their lives that might not have ever occurred if the war had not been fought. Despite the efforts of British governmental officials to return to the traditions of the pre-war years, Britain and British women was never the same.

⁷ Branson, Britain in the Nineteen Twenties, 211.

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