

Patriotism and duty: the Women's Work Collection at the Imperial War Museum

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If one were asked to name a famous woman connected with the First World War the most likely nominee would be Edith Cavell. The martyrdom of Miss Cavell was not only a tremendous propaganda coup for the British against Germany, but was significant for another reason.

During a final conversation with her pastor she reportedly reacted to his declaration that she would be remembered as a heroine and a martyr by replying: 'Don't think of me like that, think of me only as a nurse who tried to do her duty'. Her execution on 12 October 1915 shocked the nation, but it also brought into sharp focus the plight and quiet dedication of many nurses helping the wounded near the front lines. The Prime Minister, H H Asquith, a long-time victim of the militant actions of the suffragettes, admitted: 'There are thousands of such women, but a year ago we did not know it'.

With the outbreak of war British women were ready to answer the call for service. Mrs Millicent Garrett Fawcett, a leading light in the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), acknowledged this fact. In her early article on women and the war in the December 1914 issue of the *Contemporary Review*, she reiterated Asquith's plea that every man and every woman should do his or her share, but pointed out that, although women's role in the alleviation of suffering had long been acknowledged, 'what is comparatively new is the general recognition that war makes a call upon women... for service'. She claimed that 'by an instinctive good sense, the women of Britain recognised that their first duty was... to strengthen the resources of the country in the gigantic struggle in which she was engaged. It was a time for resolute effort and self-sacrifice'. Even the militant Mrs Pankhurst was now fully supportive of the Government's war effort.

Accrued largely between 1917 and 1920 and originally embracing art, models, documents, uniforms, badges, books, photographs and memorabilia of every variety, the Women's Work Collection recording this 'service' is now dispersed among the Museum's reference departments. The hard core, however, remains with the Department of Printed Books, and includes 189 boxes of papers, 20 albums of press cuttings, 100 books and various journals, that between them, cover the activities of over 1,200 war charities and 6,000 home hospitals.

By the time the Imperial War Museum was established late in the war, women had determinedly applied themselves in many new or expanded areas of social and economic activity, and had earned the right to be represented in any institution set up to document the conflict. Surprisingly, no-one stepped forward to suggest or formalize a plan for establishing a war museum until 1917, when the curator of the Armouries in the Tower of London, Charles ffoulkes, took the initiative. The idea was enthusiastically received by Sir Alfred Mond, First Commissioner of Public Works, and his suggestion (in a memorandum of 27 February) for the creation of a National War Museum was accepted by the War Cabinet.¹ On 26 March 1917. *The Times* announced that a committee had been established to carry out the project. It included representatives from the Admiralty, War Office, Ministry of Munitions and House of Commons, with Mond as chairman, Sir Martin Conway in the honorary position of Director-General and ffoulkes as Secretary and Keeper. Accommodation was scattered and far from ideal, but a start had been made.

Sir Martin Conway was an enigmatic character, keen to be involved in politics². One-time mountaineer, explorer, author, Slade Professor of Fine Art at Cambridge and politician, Conway was a brilliant after-dinner conversationalist, but had little else to recommend him for his post apart from his friendship with Mond. He did, however, make two valuable contributions to the Museum. After his trip to the Western Front in July 1917, he perceived the important part that artists could play in recording the war, and actively encouraged their recruitment. His second contribution was more indirect. On 4 April his only child, Agnes Ethel Conway, then 32 years of age, was invited by Mond to join the newly set up Women's Work Subcommittee (WWS) and, as its honorary secretary, by 15 April she had drafted a suitable collection policy for the section.

Agnes Conway was an interesting individual, evidently much loved by her peers. Inheriting her father's preoccupation with art and archaeology (she would later be a pioneering force behind excavations at the ancient city of Petra in Jordan in the 1920s and 30s), she was an invaluable aid to Sir Martin and they were devoted. A terrible accident on her fourteenth birthday had left her face scarred and semi-paralysed. She struggled with this disability for many years, and underwent several very painful operations between 1899 and 1931 before her condition dramatically improved. It was perhaps this that gave her a sympathetic understanding of the wounded Belgians she sought to help during the early part of the war (work which earned her an MBE).

The Women's Work Subcommittee's first meeting took place on 26 April 1917. Of the members none was more dedicated than Agnes Conway and Lady Priscilla Norman, who went on to become the longest serving trustee in the Museum's history.³ The youthful Lady Norman, 'Lord Aberconway's charming daughter', was described as 'somewhat fragile in appearance, with grey eyes and quantities of soft brown hair and a delicate complexion', and was 'one of the comparatively few society women

entitled to wear the coveted 1914 medal for she ran a hospital in France during the first months of the war'. Co-helpers on the Women's Work Subcommittee were Lady Askwith, Lady Mond and Lady Haig.

The first report of the Subcommittee laid down its objectives as the collection of exhibits, and the formation of a record of the war activities of women by means of a collection of photographs, pamphlets and manuscript reports from all women's organisations and outstanding private individuals. An early draft report on the composition of the Museum states:

While a large proportion of this section will consist only of records, it is proposed to make small scale models, showing the costumes and equipment of women in various operations in which they have either been solely engaged, or have substituted men.

The plaster models were fragile, but, though most have required conservation treatment since they were made, examples can still be seen in the Museum's galleries.⁴ The problem of standardising scale models soon became apparent and close co-operation was necessary to ensure some conformity of size. Photographs were to be a key feature of the Women's Section whose scope, by May 1918, had expanded to include charts, badges, examples of munitions work, and original art work.

The working plan divided the collection into a number of sub-sections. Lady Violet Mond was made responsible for recording the work of hospitals, and a questionnaire was compiled for dispatch to all home hospitals. Miss Conway took special care of foreign aid, such as the Fund for Wounded Belgian Soldiers, and work by the university women's colleges. Other sub-sections included the British Red Cross and Voluntary Aid Detachments, huts and canteens, Auxiliary Army services, relief work, employment, munitions, education, national economy, agriculture, women's honours and memorials, and journalistic records.

It was perhaps inevitable that the Women's Work Section should be looked upon as the Museum's poor relation. With no established site or suitable stores the Museum Committee could only promise them 5,000 square feet of space. Even the Director-General's recommendation that an historian should be appointed to provide a written account of the role of women in the war, regrettably, was not adopted.

In November 1917 arrangements were finalised for an interim exhibition of the Imperial War Museum's collections at Burlington House, pending the Museum acquiring its own public premises. Organized by the British Red Cross Society, which bore all the costs incurred, the profits were to go to the BRCS's joint war effort with the Order of St John. The women had a hurried two months to

complete arrangements for the exhibition, and much of the work fell on Agnes Conway's shoulders (as Lady Norman was indisposed with chickenpox and jaundice). Matters were not helped when an untimely bomb damaged the gallery and resulted in a re-allocation of display space, ffoulkes declaring that he was at his 'wits end to know how to fit everyone in as it is'. More pressure was exerted on the accommodation given to the Women's Section when the Australian High Commission wrote proposing to use some of their allotted wall space for a display of official Australian war art, and a further difficulty arose when the organisers quashed the Section's plans to include in its area a special munitions recruitment stand for the Ministry of Labour and forbade them to use temporary exhibits. Miss Conway wrote to the Ministry of Labour expressing her regret at this decision which 'from our point of view is a fiasco'.

The Section's first big solo moment came in April 1918 when Campbell Ross, Secretary of the Whitechapel Art Gallery, agreed to host an exhibition of women's work. The lower gallery was occupied by material provided by the Women's Work Subcommittee itself and included exhibits relating to Edith Cavell, the women of Pervyse and Sergeant-Major Flora Sandes scattered amongst the bays devoted to munitions, hospitals, substitution in industry, canteens, honours and memorials. The Ministry of Labour undertook to fill the top gallery with material illustrative of the work of the various organised services - the Women's Forage Corps, the Women's Land Army, Queen Mary's Army Auxiliary Corps, the WRNS, and the WRAF, with the proviso that all items exhibited should thereafter become the property of the Museum.

The exhibition opened on 7 October. Admission was free and by the time it closed six weeks later 82,000 people had visited it, including the Queen and Princess Mary. The press published many photographs of the exhibits including that of Edith Cavell's bust and of the two royal visitors examining the Women's War Shrine, over which Lady Norman had laboured long, adorning it with flowers. Particular interest was shown in the pictures on display, which included Lucy Kemp-Welch's remount scene, Anna Airey's painting of women working in a gas retort and Clare Atwood's depiction of Green Cross workers at Victoria Station.

The Museum's new premises at the Crystal Palace opened to the public in June 1920. Lack of space, and an unappealing site led the Women's Work Subcommittee to seek professional advice with regard to the memorial section which was to be 'in a very unattractive corner... with every possible disadvantage.' They were also pledged to be 'economical' and the familiar round of letters with regard to stands, cases, mountings and plinths was soon resuscitated. Damage to exhibits and mountings was commonplace - £15 had to be paid out to Messrs Farmer and Brindley for damage to two marble pedestals loaned for the grand opening on 7 July 1920.

Illustrations of all aspects of women's work were acquired - over 3,400 had been collected by the time of the second annual report. Although the Women's Work Subcommittee had been slow to commission original paintings they were still the first to appoint an official British woman war artist. In May 1918 Victoria Monkhouse began to make sketches of women who were doing traditionally male jobs - bus conductresses, window-cleaners, postwomen and so on. In their brief survey of the paintings held in the Women's Work Collection, Meirion and Susie Harries marvel at the manner in which the Women's Work Subcommittee cajoled artists to provide paintings at bargain-basement prices. Even Sir John Lavery was induced to halve his fee.⁵

A vast proportion of the documentary records gathered were acquired by the diligent efforts of Agnes Conway. Hundreds of letters were dispatched to organisations asking for a written account of their wartime activities and statistics relating to the employment of women. The correspondence with the Scottish Women's Hospitals is a good example of the pleading but forthright tone which Miss Conway adopted in pursuit of archival material.

We should very much like other exhibits to show... in addition to Mestrovic's bust... I am wondering whether Dr. Hutcheson would part with the Union Jack which she carried under her skirt while she was an Austrian prisoner.

One gem which emerged is now in the Library's main collection - an account by a Miss Joan Williams entitled A munition worker's career at Messrs Gwynnes, Ltd., Chiswick, 1915-1919. In her letter enclosed with the typescript, the author warns: 'I feel it is dreadfully unworthy but I did my best as I said I would and wish I could have recounted some more thrilling things'. She was one of the first girls to be taken on as unskilled or semi-skilled labour, but as the war continued the numbers swelled: There was an indescribable scrimmage before 7.00 with the night shift going off and the day shift arriving and it was no uncommon thing to see your hat knocked off its peg and go footballing about without anyone bothering to pick it up, and be unable to move yourself in a crowd of people, all hopping on one leg, taking off or putting on their boots.

Plainly written, it conveys a real sense of factory life: the rigour of the hours, the pleasures of learning new skills, the relationship between girls and bosses, girls and the rival men, the jealousies and the helping hands, the pride and exhaustion of working, the description of a royal visit, and the travel to and from work in the blackout and during air-raids.

The appeal for descriptive accounts of organized activities drew a good response, and the Library's shelves are rich with the results. Several extraordinary women such as Mrs St Claire Stobart and Lady Muriel Paget of the Anglo-Russian Hospital, Sergeant-Major Flora Sandes of the Serbian Army, and

the 'Women of Pervyse' gave what time and help they could. The latter (Baroness T'Serclaes and Miss Mairi Chisholm) gave not only their published wartime experiences describing their aid in Belgium to wounded soldiers and war victims⁶, but also the steel door and other sections of their dismantled dressing station (this last exhibit a little awkward to house and display). Dr Elsie Inglis, who had provided much-needed relief during the typhoid epidemic in Serbia, died shortly after her return to England, but her two sisters co-operated fully with the women's section by offering mementoes of her work.⁷ One prize piece, a bronze bust of the late doctor by the sculptor Mestrovic, was presented by the Serbian Government.

Although the bulk of the documentary material was added to the library in 1921, its value to researchers went largely unnoticed for over forty years until David Mitchell made use of it for his book *Women on the Warpath*.⁸ Since then other authors, such as Arthur Marwick, Monica Krippner, and Gail Braybon have consulted the collection, and it remains in frequent demand.

A particularly useful element of the collection, and one which can tend to get overlooked, is the assembly of press cuttings. Covering such topics as munitions, agriculture, nursing, trades and professions, these albums, though not comprehensive, offer a useful gauge of public attitudes towards the changing role of women and merit closer study.

Inevitably the issue of 'the woman's place' drew animated comment. In the *Sunday Pictorial* of 21 March 1915 Austin Harrison, editor of the *English Review*, declared that motherhood was the first duty of women: if they were to fail in this there would be a biological crisis in the next decade.

By 1918 commentators were concerned not with whether women should perform 'men's work' or join auxiliary services, but whether they should receive equal pay for equal work. There was acknowledgement too of 'the new sense of responsibility that the war has developed in all ranks of women,' (*Daily Telegraph*) while the *Evening Standard* observed: 'The majority of girl clerks... have become accustomed to a life of useful work, and for them the busy idleness of suburban gentility has lost its attraction.'

In December 1918 Millicent Garrett Fawcett declared 'we cannot forget what our men have done during the war, but we must not forget either what the women have done, and we must be as ready to give them their chance as we are to help the men who come back'. Women had infiltrated every sphere where men were becoming short, especially the public services - tram and bus services, postal services, farming, on the canals, and so on. Little published material is available on many of these 'substitution' roles, and the press albums fill this gap.

By the end of the war 687 women had died in the service of their country.⁹ Edith Cavell may have been one of the first to acquire an international reputation in death, but the Imperial War Museum wished to make sure that every woman who made the supreme sacrifice should be publicly commemorated. The Women's Work Collection is their memorial. It also remembered the living by documenting as many of the activities in which women had participated as a handful of volunteers could collate. Clearly, if an historian had been appointed to advise the Section the collecting activity might have been better channelled and a more statistical approach adopted. On the other hand, a more professional approach might have omitted some of the interesting sidelights, and lacked some of the enthusiasm displayed by the women. The achievement was immense, and all the more so when contrasted with the lack of a comparable response to the Second World War. There are omissions, certainly. Some of the more radical female political groups are not well covered. However, would a contemporary historian drawn from the upper classes have done any better? Today we are better resourced and able to take advantage of techniques such as sound-recordings and video. The Women's Work Subcommittee had to rely largely on their wits. Modern historians and students of history who have already used the collection and those that still have to discover its riches are forever indebted to Agnes Conway and Lady Norman for the unpaid effort they put into its compilation.

Notes

1. For a detailed history of the foundation of the Imperial War Museum see Charles ffoulkes's autobiography, *Arms and the Tower*, John Murray, London, 1939, and an unpublished essay by Dr G M Bayliss, Keeper of the Department of Printed Books, Imperial War Museum, which gives an excellent account. Also see Diana Condell, *The Imperial War Museum 1917-1920: a study of the institution and its presentation of the First World War*, unpublished M Phil thesis, CNAA, 1985.
2. For a biography of Sir Martin Conway and his daughter see Joan Evans, *The Conways: a History of Three Generations*, Museum Press, London, 1966.
3. Lady Norman remained a Trustee until 1962, when she resigned her position to become a tax-exile in France. In honour of her life's interest in the Museum the women's gallery was renamed the Lady Norman Gallery and a plaque erected. She died in 1964.
4. See the First World War exhibition which opened in 1990.
5. Meirion and Susie Harries, *The War Artists*, Michael Joseph, London, 1983.
6. The two women originally went to France with Dr Hector Munro's Ambulance Corps, but separated when the Munro Corps amalgamated with a Scottish Women's Hospital Unit in November 1914. They set up a casualty clearing station, which at one point was only four hundred yards behind the front lines, with the cooperation of the Belgian Army. Mairi Chisholm was the eighteen-year-old daughter of the Chisholm of Scotland whilst Mrs Elsie Knocker married a Belgian noble in 1916 and became the Baroness de T'Serclaes. Both ladies were affected by poison gas attacks in March 1918,

and their post was forced to close down when the Baroness was deemed too ill to return to Pervyse after initial treatment in England. *The Cellar House of Pervyse* (Black, London, 1917) was written to help raise funds for their venture.

7. Mrs Fawcett draws attention to Dr Elsie Inglis's work in her article and to the founding of the Scottish Women's Hospital for Foreign Service. Funded by the NUWSS, who had collected £3,000 by mid November 1914, two hospitals completely staffed by women doctors and nurses were already at the front.

8. David Mitchell, *Women on the Warpath: the Story of the Women of the First World War*, Cape, London, 1966.

9. A list of women who died is included in a book entitled *Femina Patriae Defensor: Woman in Service of Her Country*, published by the Women's Auxiliary of the *Federation Interalliée des Anciens Combattants* (FIDAC) in 1934. The names and units were supplied by the Imperial War Graves Commission, but unfortunately no indication is given of how the women died. The final casualty figures do, therefore, include those women enrolled in service of some kind who died of the virulent influenza epidemic of 1918-1919 which saw 228,917 deaths in the United Kingdom and swept across all five continents.

Of the nurses listed (159 from the 'official' nursing organizations; 14 from Scottish Women's Hospitals; 239 Red Cross, VAD and St John's workers) many were drowned when their hospital ships were sunk or killed during air-raids or by enemy shell-fire, (nurses who died as a result of the bombing were buried beneath crosses marked 'killed in action') while typhoid and dysentery were especial dangers in the Balkan region. Several fatal accidents occurred in the munitions industries and account for some, at least, of the 219 deaths. The uniformed women serving with the armed forces were mostly active behind the lines engaged in cooking, administration or communications and were rarely in any immediate danger. However, enemy air raids in the spring of 1918 caused some deaths.

Further reading

Margaret Barrow, *Women, 1870-1928: A Select Guide to Printed and Archival Sources in the United Kingdom*, Mansell, London, 1981.

Gail Braybon, *Women Workers in the First World War: the British Experience*, Croom Helm, London, 1981.

Monica Krippner, *The Quality of Mercy: Women at War. Serbia 1915-18*, David and Charles, Newton Abbot, 1980.

Arthur Marwick, *Women at War*, Croom Helm and Imperial War Museum, London, 1977.

David Mitchell, *Women on the Warpath*, Cape, London, 1966.

Mrs C S Peel, *How We Lived Then, 1914-1918: a Sketch of Social and Domestic Life in England during the War*, Bodley Head, London, 1929.

Millicent Garrett Fawcett, *The Women's Victory – and After: Personal Reminiscences, 1911-1918*, Sidgwick and Jackson, London, 1920.

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