David W Fletcher, October 2001
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ON HER THEIR LIVES DEPEND: A BOOK REVIEW

In her book, *On Her Their Lives Depend: Munitions Workers in the Great War*,[1] Angela Woollacott, who is Associate Professor of History at Case Western Reserve University, examines the experience of women munitions workers in Britain during World War I. She centers her study on the army of one million women who worked in various capacities, as both skilled and unskilled labor, for government and private munitions industries. She highlights the fact that these women played an indispensable wartime role, since they greatly outnumbered women employed in any other wartime activity in Britain during the war. She includes middle-class and upper-class women who held "quasi-professional jobs" in various levels of administration and management, but these women, as she notes, represented only "a tiny fraction of the whole." Rather, Woollacott draws attention to the majority of working-class women in Britain's munitions establishments, since they were the ones who replaced the bulk of male workers who were conscripted into the military. These women became powerful symbols of modernity, Woollacott suggests, as they moved away from home, learned new skills, earned increased wages, experienced greater social freedom, undermined class differences, and challenged the gender order. But the picture that Woollacott draws from this army of women workers is quite diverse, as she notes:

> British women who worked in munitions factories in World War I came from all classes and all strata within each class, as well as all regions of Britain (including some from the dominions). They worked in factories all over Britain, in very different jobs, and earned wages with sizable discrepancies. A matrix of class, age, and other factors of

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[1]Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994; 241 pages with twelve illustrations, four tables, introduction, bibliography, and index.

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> difference underlies this whole book and I have sought to illuminate these factors wherever possible (2).

Woollacott, in her discussion, transforms this varied experiences into a credible story about the feminine counterpart to the men in the trenches. They were, no less, part of the fighting force that engaged just as fully in the British national war effort.

Woollacott does not intend to make "invidious distinctions" between munitions workers and medical personnel such as nurses, Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) members, or ambulance operators who labored "to restore life to the decimated, emasculated victims of war," as if "munitions workers were more critical to the war effort or that they sacrificed more" (7). But women munitions workers, numerically as large as an army, could be considered active participants in the conflict for a variety of reasons. First, by making armaments, explosives, and weapons that were used at the front, they were the first stage in "the production line of war." As a result, they could not oppose the war with any consistency (i.e., like noncombatants and pacifists among the medical workers), since their involvement in the propagation of the war fully implicated them as activists.

Second, like soldiers, they followed "a militaristic regimen" with long hours, regular shifts, uniforms, difficult work, and an unhealthy environment that was "deafeningly noisy, full of noxious fumes, and often unheated" (8). Additionally, the hostels maintained a "barracks atmosphere," and supervisors constantly prodded the laborers to increase production "to help win the war." Third, the munitions workers earned public praise for doing their part. The press wrote favorably about their work, and a few official ceremonies, such as the bestowing of the Order of the British Empire, honored women who braved explosions or serious accidents.

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Fourth, like men in the trenches, the women held patriotic ideals that kindled their zeal for work in the munitions sector, perhaps more so than higher wages. In March 1917, *The Englishwoman* published a one-act play titled "The Munition Worked" that showed the dedication of Tina, a skilled shell worker who refused to be placed in a rest home even though she was dying of consumption. Tina says:

> God was talkin' to me, and He'd never done that before, 'cos of course I'm too poor for the likes of Him, and He said, 'Tina, you must go along and make shells for your country, and never think you won't have the strength.' He says, 'I'll give you the strength,' and to this day He's given it to me, Matron, and there's nothing you can say to me–nothing–for my country wants me! (9).

Like Tina, thousands proudly served the British cause by doing their share in the factories even in spite of debilitating circumstances.

Fifth, many munitions workers–both women and men–died as a result of their war service, just like the troops. Perhaps as many as one thousand were killed,[2] and several others were "maimed, poisoned, or injured in the processes of making explosives, filling shells, and working with fast, heavy machinery" (9). Quantitatively, men in the trenches suffered more, but this does not distract from the fact that women in the factories had to deal with physical and psychological impacts of accidents, explosions, and even enemy bombings.[3] Through these wartime experiences, Woollacott argues, women workers exploded certain myths of what was believed to be the revered domain of males–"patriotic service, being under fire, and heroism to

[2]Woollacott admits the lack of exact statistics on such casualties. The British government possibly withheld data about factory injuries and deaths due to security and national morale.

[3]Factories along the coast and along the Thames River to London were targets of enemy zeppelins and airplanes.

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the point of dying for one's country" (10). In this way, they proved themselves to be not only "Tommy's sister" but his fellow or comrade in arms.[4]

To develop her argument, Woollacott proposes "to discover and interpret the *experience* of being a woman munitions worker in Britain in the Great War" (11; emphasis mine, DWF). Her understanding of "experience" as "a category of historical analysis" seems to be anthropological and perhaps phenomenological, as she relies on constructivist type models developed by Clifford Geertz, Mary Jean Corbett, and Ruth Roach Pierson.

> People's responses to changes and events in their own lives and circumstances reconstitute their self-identities and their understanding of their positions in relation to others. Women's experience of World War I, therefore, was a composite of how they responded to the changes in their class- and gender-defined circumstances as the demands of total war opened up a liminal space between gender roles as they had normally operated before the war (11).

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[4]Woollacott notes that "women's factory experience, lacking warriors, battles, and other traditional components of war, has usually been viewed by historians as an aberration from normal employment patterns rather than as involvement in war" (10-11). But this, apparently, creates difficulty for her as a feminist, since she must dissociate her feminism (i.e., pacifist) from her scholarly judgment (which renders munitions workers in Britain during the war as very activist). She remarks, "To the extent that feminist scholars have shared pacifism and belief in the interrelationship between feminism and pacifism, we have had ideological difficulties with evaluating women's work in munitions factories. I do not claim that making the munitions of war was a liberating or inherently good process for women or that women's increased participation in war is a feminist goal. Rather, I argue that munitions making needs to be seen as a sphere of activity within the war effort replete with its own moral problems, dangers, and discomfort. I hope a female experience of war, a war endured and fought in the close, grinding confines of the factory, can be recuperated and retained as part of Britain's cultural memory of the Great War" (11). She raises this problem only in her introduction and does not discuss it again in the book.

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But while she clearly says what she means by the term "gender" in a footnote on page thirteen,[5] she nowhere defines certain vague phrases (e.g., "temporary liminal gender space" or "hegemonic gender order of peacetime"). This problem, though, discounts none of her work, since she is not thoroughgoing with her proposed feminist methodology.[6]

Rather than an extended analysis based on a feminist hermeneutic, Woollacott's work excels as a wonderful description of the experience of women munitions workers and the very important contextual setting of that experience. This descriptive aspect of Woollacott's work comes out clearly, for example, in her narration of "The Heterogeneity of Women Workers: Mixing and Mobility" (chapter two) and "Off the Job: Leisure, Socializing, and Sex" (chapter six). But surprisingly, Woollacott disclaims for her work any sustained interest in bureaucratic processes: "This study is not a narrative of the policy decisions and attitudes of the government and male trade unions that allowed the wholesale entry of women into areas of work from which they were previously excluded" (11). Yet this precisely is one of the strengths of *On Her Their Lives Depend*, since Woollacott uses official documents to paint a rich statistical portrait of "The Army of Women" (chapter one), shows the extent of government interaction to provide support

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[5]"By 'gender' I mean the social and cultural construction of ideas of femininity and masculinity, which are linked to, but distinct from, biological differences between women and men." Accordingly, the author wishes "to further the feminist scholarly project of probing the intersections of gender and war. Gender is disrupted, constructed, and reconstructed during war. Such gendering and regendering occurs in state policy and in all arenas and media of wartime discourse. Essential to the gendering of war is the meaning that both male and female participants give to their roles. Interpreting the meaning for women munitions workers of their own experience in war thus becomes a project crucial to the deconstruction of wartime gendering" (13).

[6]For example, after her introduction, Woollacott does not use gender as an analytic tool until chapter four, "Status and Experience as Workers" (89).

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for "The Heterogeneity of Women Workers" (chapter two), depicts the work of health and welfare administrators as to whether or not "Industrial Work Is Good for Women" (chapter three), and examines how male dominated institutions viewed and tried to manipulate women's "Status and Experience as Workers" (chapter four). On this consequential leverage of systematic institutional control over the actual living and working conditions of women during the war, along with its weighty outcome on postwar perceptions of women's place in society, Woollacott strikes a keen balance with enlightened insight.

To elucidate these historic interrelationships, Woollacott depends on a lively array of personal and institutional sources, both published and unpublished. She gleans from diaries, interviews, newspapers, memoirs, photographs, sound recordings, official records, government publications, charitable and welfare organization papers, university collections, and of course, traditional secondary sources such as books, theses, and periodicals (217-233). One of the very best aspects of Woollacott's treatment is her appeal to personal testimony, as this conveys the feelings and thoughts of women who profoundly were affected by the brutality of an evolving bellicose world. From the ranks of the army of one million women come the voices of Grace Bryant, Joan Williams, Beatrice Lee, Lilian Miles, Miss O. M. Taylor, Ellen Harriet, and G. M. West (21, 32, 33, 39, 40). Even unlikely male figures of authority, such as Reverend Andrew Clark (22), are called on to provide testimony. By allowing the reader to listen to these voices, Woollacott counters the tendency that too often accompanies the historical analysis of a group (especially when the study involves a crisis such as war), namely, the tendency to collectivize or deface human individuality. This warm personal approach to Britain's home-front women soldiers distinguishes Woollacott's work as a splendid accomplishment.

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As she intends, Woollacott's study moves beyond the traditional debate on the Great War as a powerful force that altered feminine identity (i.e., an apocalyptic liberation a la many social and political historians versus "the war changed nothing for women" as per "the new feminist pessimism" or "the revisionist interpretation," 14-15). She concludes that, rather than "an aberration in the pattern of women's employment in the early twentieth century," the experience of female munitions workers represents actual participation in the war, "just as much an experience of war as being in the armed forces was for Tommy" (15). In this respect, the role of such a sizable number of women laborers in the production of munitions, as well as the deployment of women's paramilitary forces late in the war, discredits the typical polar image of male as active warrior and female as passive observer (16). On this main point, Angela Woollacott's *On Her Their Lives Depend: Munitions Workers in the Great War* is a great success.