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Angela Woollacott, *On Her Their Lives Depend: Munitions Workers in the Great War* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), 241 pages, introduction, twelve illustrations, four tables, extensive bibliography, and index.

"Angela Woollacott's evocative book examines the experience of women munitions workers in Britain during World War I. From her analysis of oral histories, workers' writings, newspaper articles, official reports, and factory song lyrics emerges an intimate understanding of approximately one million women's experience of the Great War. Munitions work offered financial independence, but women workers also believed themselves to be directly engaged in the waging of war. Woollacott sees the wartime woman munitions worker as a powerful symbol of modernity who challenged the gender order through her patriotic work and challenged class differences through her increased spending power, mobility, and changing social behavior." [Book Jacket].

Contents - The author's subheadings give an excellent overview of the contents of the book.

Introduction

1. The Army of Women: Munitions Factories and Women Workers–an abundance of statistics about the women munitions workers, extracted mostly from government sources. "The total number of women in paid employment increased from 5,966,000 in July 1914 to 7,311,000 in July 1918 (while the total female population went from 23,721,000 to 24,538,000)" (17). "There is no exact statistic of the number of women employed in munitions work in World War I" (18). The rough estimate is 1,000,000 give or take a few hundred thousand. One guess claims that in 1918 about "ninety percent of all the workers in every branch of munitions manufacture were women" (19). "Ironically, the industries that had so quickly laid women off at the start of the war found trouble getting sufficient women laborers when, by 1916, their trade had picked up; this trouble was ascribed to the 'patriotic glamour' of doing 'men's work' as opposed to the 'feminine occupations' of dressmaking and millinery, but wage rates were surely a significant factor" (24). "The rapidity and technological innovation with which the government and employers facilitated women's entry into these areas of work exposed the degree to which their previous exclusion had been due to custom and prejudice rather than practicality" (36).

Women Enter Munitions Factories
Women Workers Before the War–discusses the "servant problem"
Hard Times Early in the War
Women's Work during the War

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The Factories–treats the "dilution" of the labor force
Women's Work on Munitions

2. The Heterogeneity of Women Workers: Mixing and Mobility–a multifaceted look at the complex matrix of women munitions workers. "The danger of a phrase like 'Tommy's sister' is that it implies a homogeneity among women munitions workers that simply did not exist" (37). "Many observers were delighted by the social incongruity of ladies working in factories" (40). "Women migrated from their homes to munitions factories at unprecedented rates" (46). "In a November 1916 case in Woolwich, a woman munitions worker with four children whose husband was away in the army was given one month's notice of eviction when she fell behind in paying her rent after the landlord raised it. She had sought alternative lodgings in all the surrounding neighborhoods for a fortnight, but landlords did not want her because of her four children, apparently a common prejudice. The overcrowding caused by the concentration of munitions workers usually occurred in the areas that had been most densely inhabited before the war: the slums or poor areas where industrial workers lived" (48).

Factors of Difference
- Class and Ethnic Tensions
- Friendship and Sisterhood

The Mechanics of Mobility: Transport and Housing
- Getting to Work–includes excellent material on government policy
- Finding Lodgings–also includes good treatment of government intervention
- Hostels for Munitions Workers

3. Industrial Work Is Good for Women: Health, Welfare, Deaths, and Injuries–details how an increase in pay and better living conditions actually benefitted the health of women munitions workers. "Given not only the long hours and continual strain of munitions work but also the frequent involvement with explosives, toxic chemicals, and heavy machinery, it seems at first paradoxical that it could have improved women's health. The resolution to the paradox lies in the fact that poor women had always worked hard, and that prior to the war their diet and living standards had been, to say the least, inimical to their health. Further . . . mortality rates of both women and infants dropped during the war" (60). "What most makes the improved dietary standard of women workers remarkable is the fact that it was obtained despite food shortages and rationing" (61). "Dr. H. M. Vernon conducted an experiment with women workers turning aluminum fuse bodies on capstan lathes. He found that whereas in a 74.5 hour week (which was not uncommon) their average output was 108 fuse bodies, when their week was reduced to 55.5 hours their average output increased to 169 fuse bodies" (67). "One reason for absenteeism was the burden of domestic duties and childcare often borne by women workers; it was because of

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this that many factories built or provided nurseries for workers' children. Another major reason for absenteeism was the fatigue produced by the excessive hours and heavy work women were doing: most munitions workers' jobs involved standing all day, and one of the common side effects of this was varicose veins, especially in older women who had had children" (68). "Programs for pregnant workers and nurseries for munitions workers' children showed that, even though the maternalistic emphasis on women's familial roles had not lessened, employers and government could remove these normal restrictions on women's industrial work when they wanted" (79). "Mrs. Dean, who worked in Woolwich Arsenal on sewing in the Danger Buildings, was very grateful not to have been made a TNT worker because of their awful yellow coloration and the illness they suffered. She remembered that the TNT workers had their own separate canteen because 'everything they touched went yellow, chairs, tables, everything.' Lilian Miles, who worked with tetryl, remembered how she was yellow and her black hair had gone 'practically green': 'you'd wash and wash and it didn't make no difference. It didn't come off. Your whole body was yellow'" (81-82). "Explosions in munitions factories were scenes of the war as surely as were battles at the front" (85). "Zeppelin raids did, quite rationally, engender fear among women workers and some women experienced panic at work, on the way to and from work, and even at home. But they were also good for a joke. YWCA canteen workers became used to being asked for 'two Zepps and a cloud,' the standard fare of two sausages and mashed potatoes" (87).

- Health
    - Food Economy and Rations
    - Canteens–links the origin of canteens in factories to the prohibition campaign
    - Working Hours
- Welfare
    - Women Factory Inspectors
    - The Welfare Department of the Ministry of Munitions
    - Women Welfare Supervisors during the War–details their expansive role
    - Pregnant Workers and Nurseries–a temporary innovation in lieu of "minders"
- Scenes of the War: Deaths, Poisoning, and Injuries
    - First Aid, Accidents, and Injuries
    - TNT and Other Poisoning–talks about the "canary girls"
    - Explosions–describes the carnage of war on the home front, in the factories

4. <u>Status and Experience as Workers</u>–deals with attitudes and policies in response to the large number of female workers in the factories. "'Tommy's sister' was lured, cajoled, and welcomed into the munitions factories by a barrage of government propaganda, jingoistic journalism, and the public atmosphere of frenzied enthusiasm for any work or effort that would help 'our boys' or hasten the progress of the war. Once on the job, the basic facts of her life were

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determined by the needs of the state and employers" (89-90). "It is difficult to disentangle the ways in which women munitions workers were oppressed as workers per se from the ways they were oppressed as women" (90). "Employers often shared with male unionists a patriarchal resistance to the presence of women. This was complicated for employers by the need to provide extra facilities for women in the factory: at first, this meant a separate toilet facility, but . . . it came to mean washing, changing, canteen, and first aid facilities also" (94). "The demobilization of women munitions workers ran into a thicket of issues surrounding the status of women in the labor force. . . . As the unions for skilled and semiskilled trades had insisted in 1915, and as they were now prepared to enforce under the Restoration of Pre-War Practices Act of 1919, all 'dilutees' were to give up their jobs. This act sought to reintroduce prewar trade practices, union rules, and the privileges of skilled workers by compelling all munitions industries to return to the old practices within two months of the passing of the act and to maintain such practices for a year following the act. Any employer not complying with prewar practices (particularly by continuing to employ workers considered unskilled, mostly women) was liable to be called before the munitions tribunals, which were sustained for this purpose, and was further liable to fines that the tribunals were empowered to levy. Male unionists were determined to exclude women in order to ensure that men should be employed and the prewar hierarchy of labor reinstated" (109). "One of the great problems faced by women workers in need of employment was the pervasive social prejudice against women working, a prejudice based on the belief that the returned servicemen needed, or deserved, jobs more than anyone else. While the gratitude widely felt toward returned men was natural, the failure to perceive the equally real need of women workers who were widowed or who supported themselves, dependent children, or other family members was the product of the long-held patriarchal desire to minimize women in the work force" (111).

The Ministry of Munitions: Role and Policies–deals with the "aristocracy of labor"
Employers' Attitudes
Job Mobility and Munitions Tribunals–notes problems in the "leaving certificate" system
Trade Unionism and Women's Industrial Assertiveness–discusses aspects of the NFWW
Demobilization–a very important section

5. High Wages and Premature Liberty: Wages, Autonomy, and Public Censure–some repetition of earlier material in the first part of the chapter. "Munitions work, at least, offered relatively well-paid, full-time, year-round work for the duration of the war. While munitions wages were attractive to all kinds of women workers, it was young single women with no children, husband, or parents dependent on them who most experienced these wages as offering unprecedented spending choices or entertainment opportunities. . . . For women workers who had financial dependents, being the breadwinner often also entailed being the household manager, cook, and cleaner. Domestic duties, after an eight- or twelve-hour day in a munitions factory, meant that little else in life was possible" (122).

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Wages
Costs of Living, Standard of Living
Breadwinners: Family and Domestic Responsibilities
Autonomy and Spending–contains a nice quote, "In Self-Defence, By A Munition Girl"
Public Censure: Drinking and Extravagance
Drinking
Clothes and Cultural Meaning

6. Off the Job: Leisure, Socializing, and Sex–deals with workers' time away from the job. "It was during the war, and after it, that the changing moral standards of women became definitely noticeable. Thousands of women had seen their actual or potential mates swallowed up in that ever-increasing wave of death which was the Great War. Life was less than cheap; it was thrown away. The religious teaching that the body was the temple of the Holy Ghost could mean little or nothing to those who saw it mutilated and destroyed in millions by Christian nations engaged in war. All moral standards had been submerged. Life and love were held for a short moment and irretrievably lost. Little wonder that the old ideals of chastity and self-control in sex were, for many, also lost" (144; quoted from Ray Strachey, ed., *Our Freedom and Its Results*). "In the light of Miss O. M. Taylor's reminiscences of her life as a munitions worker, Miss Newcomb was right to worry about the effect of young, unmarried women working side-by-side with married women. Taylor recalled vividly: 'It was in this factory that to my disgust I was told how babies were made. I refused to believe it and told those women in no uncertain terms what I thought of them, remarking, "My mum and dad would never do that!"' How those women laughed! It seems hard to believe in these permissive days but women in the country had no idea of what was to happen to them when they married. At one period while working in this factory I was employed in the Transit shed, and it was very embarrassing to find that my ignorance of sexual matters and what I thought of those women who talked of them had preceded me and the men called to each other, 'Hey! here comes old Molly never had it.' That became the name by which I was known" (145-146). "Evidence of women munitions workers' actual sexual activity, as opposed to the opinions of commentators, is elusive" (146). "The figures shown in table 3 do not substantiate the wartime claims that there was a vast number of 'illegitimate' children or 'war babies'. It seems, instead, that there was an upsurge of 'peace babies' when the troops returned after the war" (147). "Allegations about rampant 'war babies' were usually made by middle- and upper-class observers scandalized by what they perceived as sexual license among the working class. But working-class morality too condemned 'illegitimacy'" (148). "The most prevalent means of birth control for working-class people were still coitus interruptus and abortion" (149). "For women munitions workers who endured an unwanted pregnancy but were too frightened, or did not know how, to have an abortion, there was another way out: infanticide. Although, like abortion, it was a traditional solution to an age-old problem, it is extremely difficult to estimate how commonly this occurred" (150). "Marriage was not as

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socially necessary in the working class as it was in the middle or upper class. Although most working-class people got married in early adulthood, many of these marriages ended in separation (but not divorce because of the expense), which was followed by nonlegalized cohabitation with another partner. Such cohabitation was socially acceptable, and it was 'said of rough labourers that they behave best if not married to the women with whom they live.' Despite this tolerance of cohabitation, marriage was made a significantly more attractive prospect during the war by the fact that a legal wife could claim a separation allowance when her husband was serving in the armed forces, whereas a de facto spouse could not" (154).

- Leisure and Recreation
    - Social Life, Sport, and Recreation in the Factory–excellent background material
    - Leisure Options beyond the Factory–the music hall, cinema, dancing, and cycling
- Sexual Morality and Sexual Activity–the "Flaunting Flappers"
- "War Babies," Abortion, and Infanticide–discusses a variety of birth control methods
- Love and Marriage
- Clubs and Huts for Munitions Workers

7. Class Relations among Women–seems to repeat themes of an earlier part of the book. "The fact that both the WPS and the Women Patrols Committee had strong suffragist connections, even though the women patrols were not as assertive in their feminism as the WPS, adds a powerful irony to the evidence of the primacy of class interests over gender solidarity during the war. That these groups of organized feminists, who sought to open the career of policing to women, were prepared to use women of the working class as objects for their own ends was a harsh assertion of their priorities" (178-179). "The class origin of many members of the WPS is revealed in the simple fact that many of them could speak French, in contrast to the 'ordinary London Bobbies', and were therefore useful with the flood of Belgian refugees in late 1914 and early 1915" (179). "In the politically polarized atmosphere of the 1920s and 1930s, class identity overwhelmed any gender bonding among women of different classes. The experience of women in World War I munitions factories cemented rather than challenged the primacy of class" (187).

- Authority on the Factory Floor
- Welfare Supervisors
- "The Beat" inside and outside the Factory: Women Police and Patrols–interesting section
- Class Tension among Women Munitions Workers
- Class over Gender in the Postwar World–war measures as temporary "leveling" of class

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8. On Her Their Lives Depend: Gender, War, and Women Munitions Workers–sums up the argument about the active participation of women in the war via their work in the munitions sector. "Carl Chinn, in his work on poor women in Birmingham, confirms [Robert] Roberts' view by identifying the war as the watershed in the first half of the twentieth century: 'In many respects it was shown that their men were not needed; women were doing men's jobs and, for the first time, they were openly in control of their own destinies. With their return, men found it harder to reimpose the old *status quo* whereby overt power was in their hands and covert power was in the hands of the women'" (191). "To cheer themselves during the long monotony of their shifts, especially on night shift, women munitions workers sang the songs of wartime popular culture. Some of the songs they repetitively sang were the same as those sung by soldiers while marching. In addition, women munitions workers took well-known tunes and made up new lyrics that featured themselves as heroines. . . . In the lyrics they invented, however, they often portrayed themselves as performing a direct, heroic role in the business of the war, in the bloodshed and the vanquishing of the enemy. The songs indicate a vivid awareness of the nature of munitions work and of the war at the front, as well as a desire to valorize their own role in it" (192). "For a working-class woman, munitions work was an available means of patriotic participation" (194). "Some women munitions workers were insulated from the war, caught up in their own lives, and unaware of military developments" (199). "Most were not pacifists. Some were in fact capable of enjoying thinking about the firing of the weapons they were creating, such as the 'Detonator Plug Girl' who imagined the life span of a detonator plug she made, called it 'a dear little thing', described 'his' creation in quasi-sexual terms, and told the end she foresaw for 'him' in which 'many were sent to their last, long rest' and 'what remains of him lies along unknown and unforgotten in a foreign land.' Such belligerence is not surprising, considering that they had been imbued with the imperialist and nationalist political and moral code of the Edwardian and prewar years, as had their men who went off to fight. The majority of the working class in this period expressed an imperialist patriotism that easily lent itself to militarism" (200). "An overwhelming impression is of the absence of general, philosophical, or political statements about the whole experience" (207). "It is inadequate to see the war as either masculinizing women workers or giving them access to some remote and diluted version of men's experience of war. We need to identify women's experience of war as valid and distinct. In exploring the options newly opened to them by the dislocations and demands of war, and by valorizing their own crucial involvement in the waging of war, women munitions workers actively participated in World War I in a way that contravened assumptions that the propagation of war was the exclusive domain of men" (215).

Effects of the War on Women's Status
Views of their own Role in the War–discusses lyrics of songs sung by women workers
Relations with Men in the Armed Forces
Relations with Male Coworkers

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Representations of the War's Impact on their Lives–talks about women's literature
Munitions Work: A Masculinizing Experience?

Conclusion