

WW I Reporter demands a voice for women of war

Most of those who fought and died in World War One were men. But the conflict also heralded a momentous shift in women's social roles. Has the female side of the story been marginalised?



For most people, the mention of World War One brings to mind grim images of haggard, mud-spattered soldiers marching single file while shells throw up dirt on all sides. But life on the front line was not the only reality of war: far from the horrors of Ypres and the Somme, the conflict revolutionised almost all aspects of life.

Now, war reporter Kate Adie has written a new history of the first world war, focusing on a group of people who she feels have been overlooked: women. 'Somehow their story faded,' Adie says, 'paling before the torrent of military memoirs, battle analyses, personal diaries and books from the men who had endured hell at the front.' Yet for ordinary European women, these were arguably the most transformative four years in all of history.

When war broke out in 1914, it was generally considered uncouth for a respectable woman to work outside the home. That is not to say none did: many



Sugar and spice: War workers shovel charcoal at a sugar refinery in 1916 © Getty Images

working class families relied on a second wage to supplement the man's efforts as chief bread winner. But unless the job lay within a narrow range of domestic occupations like teaching and keeping a house, paid work was usually thought to compromise a woman's femininity.

Conscription swept away those prejudices fast. Young men were whisked away to battle and the only people fit to fill their places in factories and other vital public roles were the women they left behind. The munitions factories that churned out shells and bullets were driven by female labour. Over 80,000 women appeared in military uniform as part of the new non-combatant women's services, while others joined the police and the railways.

The work was hard. But for many, it was also liberating. It changed how women were perceived in momentous ways: so much so that in 1918 some British women were finally granted the vote, the most famous landmark in the history of gender equality.

When men returned home from the trenches, they wanted to go back to their old lives, not to a world transformed. Most women retreated back into their traditional roles; yet gender relations would never be quite the same again.

War of the sexes

Many historians believe that the first world war heralded the start of a new social order. Such was the social upheaval created by four years of total war, they say, that old hierarchies and norms were left in tatters. It takes an event of this magnitude to shift from one era to another.

But not everybody agrees with this perspective: some argue that great social changes take place almost imperceptibly, over the course of many years. Earth-shaking events like World War One might speed that process up, but beneath the surface life was already changing fast - perhaps that could even explain why the war itself occurred.

Q & A

Q But surely something that happened 100 years ago can't still be affecting us today?

A Of course it can! Most historians would say that we are still feeling the influence of events that happened many thousands of years ago - so a mere century is nothing.

Q So how would life be different if the first world war had never happened?

A It's impossible to predict what might have come to pass without the war. But there's no question that it left us with a changed social and moral order: faith in rigid pre-war hierarchies was seriously damaged and small groups of women (most famously the 'Flappers') began to adopt a more assertive

and independent identity. The 'modern world' is generally said to have been born in 1918.

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

'Well-behaved women seldom make history.'
 Laurel Thatcher Ulrich

WHAT DO YOU THINK?



RAINFORD
HIGH

READING HOMEWORK

1. What was the significance of WW1 for women, in the short and long-term?

2. Do you think the position of women in society would have improved if the war had not happened? Explain.
