

M A R I A G E I G E R

No Trench Required

Validating the Voices of Female Poets of WWI

It is an ironic fact that the canon of WWI poetry is still defined by those who historically manned the actual cannons, the male soldiers. The 1914-1918 WWI canon is dominated by combatant poets who are perceived of as anti-war because of their use of prose-like “trench lyrics.” The WWI canon includes very few women poets, and those who are mentioned are usually nurses who tended the wounded soldiers. These women were close enough to battle to be considered “in the know,” which seems to be the prerequisite for entry into the WWI canon. Women wrote the majority of WWI poetry, and it was as diverse as the women themselves, running the gamut from militaristic jingoism to outspoken pacifism. Through reviewing the publishing history of women’s WWI poetry, along with close readings of Margaret Sackville’s anti-war poem “Nostra Culpa” and Siegfried Sassoon’s “The Glory Of Women,” it is evident that women’s WWI poetry did not cease to be published because it was inferior or less diverse than that of their male counterparts. Rather, it is the continuation of that other “Old Lie” that keeps women’s poetry out of the WWI canon—the one that perpetuates the ideology that the only WWI poetry of value is that which was written by those with first-hand experience of battle.

Literature had extraordinary power during WWI. Gill Plain reminds us, “It is all too easy to forget that in the years of the First World War, poetry had an audience. It was produced and consumed by a voracious public who both shaped, and were shaped by the verse they read” (44). Poetry was enjoyed by society at every level, as it was regularly published in newspapers such as the *London Times*, the

Nation, the *Herald*, the *Daily Mail*, and the *Times Literary Supplement*, as well as factory and trench newspapers, local women's magazines, and local newspapers (Buck 434). Paul Fussell calls attention to the way in which poetry and the war were intertwined on the national level. In 1916, at the height of society's despair with the war, the poet laureate Robert Bridges issued an anthology of uplifting literary passages entitled *The Spirit of Man*. Bridges suggested that the comfort-starved public look "instinctively to the seers and poets of mankind, whose sayings are the oracles and prophecies of loveliness and kindness" (11). Poetry was the perfect medium for the unstable WWI period, mainly because it allowed for the spontaneous outpouring of grief that was the reality for so many.

During and immediately after WWI, women's poetry still had a strong voice. Women poets published their own individual poetry collections, and were featured in poetry anthologies along with the male poets. Brian Murdoch confirms this fact, stating, "anthologies published during the war, including the more jingoistic ones at the start, were largely not by soldier-poets, and regularly contained material by women" (34). *G.H. Clarke's Treasury of War Poetry 1914-1917* was one of the most popular anthologies published during the nineteen-twenties. Clarke's anthology concluded with a section entitled "Women and War," which featured poems written by women on traditional themes such as the role of mother, fiancé, and mourner (Buck, "First World War" 434). Murdoch discovered that women's WWI poetry was taught in schools by way of Editha Jenkinson's *Malory Book of Verse*, published in 1919. Jenkinson's anthology contained sixteen poems by women (34). Sometime after the dust of WWI settled, however, the publication of women's poetry began to decline, and their once strong and clear voices were gradually reduced to a faint whisper. In the last twenty years, scholars have begun to look at women's WWI poetry with renewed interest, from both a literary and a historical perspective.

Scholars offer a variety of reasons for the gradual decline in the publication of women's WWI poetry, with many casting doubt upon the quality of the writing. It is true that some of the women were not experienced writers (most women had limited educational opportunities at the time), but neither were the majority of male poets. One needs only to read and note the mediocre quality of poems in all-male anthologies such as *The Songs of Fighting Men* as testament to that truth (31). However, even feminist scholars such as Plain perpetuate the female inferiority myth, by making generalizations that some of the women's writing was "embarrassing" (42). Nosheen Kahn, who paved the way in 1988 and compiled one of the only modern anthologies of the WWI poetry of women, writes, "viewed as a whole, the writing is decidedly uneven in quality. It is often marred by the scars of

haste, of hysteria, and of the melodramatic” (4). The choice of such words is biased and opinionated; stereotypical wording such as “hysteria” and “melodramatic” to describe women’s writing has not helped the cause of women’s WWI poetry for obvious reasons. It is difficult to get the conversation about the status of women’s WWI poetry going when even the feminist scholars insist upon using language that is not only negative, but also apologetic. Women’s WWI poetry should be considered an important piece of the whole that was WWI, a piece that can give us a glimpse into the hearts and minds of the majority that were doing the everyday work of living on the home front.

The WWI period that these women poets were writing in was a tumultuous one, on every front. While some modern readers find WWI women’s’ poetry to be disappointing because it portrays the domesticity of waiting and mourning or a pro-war jingoism that is disturbing, the turbulent circumstances under which it was written must be considered. Immediately preceding the war, Georgian poetry, which relied on established verse forms combined with naturalism, was threatened with the arrival of modernism (Buck, “British Women’s Writing” 89). This poetic revolution, the struggle for equal voting rights for all women (not just those over 30), and the growing fervor of British nationalism that began with the Boer War created a complicated situation. With this in mind, appreciation of and critical commentary on women’s WWI poetry requires an understanding of not only style and subject matter, but also time and place. In addition, women’s poetry should not be viewed as a “whole,” as it would be impossible to combine jingoists, advocates, pacifists, and satirists of varying writing skills into one group.

Unlike the soldier poets, women were never part of an exclusive group. They were filling every possible role on the home front, and their writing was inspired by these diverse and often novel experiences. WWI was one of the major catalysts that propelled women from the domestic into the public; before the war, the majority of British women were firmly “entrenched” in their own domestic spheres. With many of the would-be male writers enlisted in the British Army, the war offered aspiring women writers the opportunity to write and publish; it created the conditions for women poets to speak to the nation in a public mode (Buck, “First World War” 436). Women wrote not only as part of the “work of mourning,” but also to take advantage of the opportunity to gain personal identities. Over five hundred women were published during the WWI period, and nearly all of them forgotten. There is no doubt that a literary genocide of sorts did occur in the post WWI years.

There are early clues as to when the “eye-witness to war” canon requirement started. As early as 1935, critics such as Frank Swinnerton stated that women

did not possess the “disenchantment” of the soldier poets, which was “true and original” (Crawford 139). According to Buck, “the privileging of soldiers” first hand accounts began during the war, in, for example, discussions of war poetry in the pages of the *Times Literary Supplement* (“British Women’s Writing” 87). This type of poetic favoring continued to grow; Frederick Brereton’s *Anthology of War Poets* (London: Collins, 1930) focused on the soldier poets, and included only one poem by a woman, G.M. Mitchell (who had the atypical experience of being a V.A.D. (Voluntary Aid Detachment) nurse).

The WWI nurses who wrote poetry were in an unusual place for women, for they were not in the domestic sphere of the home front, nor did they witness the first stage of the horror of combat. Rather, their job was the tending of the damaged remains of men’s bodies and souls. Naturally, society looked favorably upon these nurses, who belonged to “the group of women war workers that most epitomized respectable female patriotic service” (Buck “First World War” 438). These writing V.A.D. nurses often wrote poetry that reflected much admired patriotism; one of the most well known published women of WWI is Vera Brittain. Brittain’s *Verses of a V.A.D.* is mainly a collection of poems that mourn the dead soldiers. Buck states that:

Brittain’s early work offers feminist criticism an alternative model of women’s war poetry; it does not offer the consolation of explicit antiwar protest, nor the awful betrayal of jingoism. Instead, it wrestles with the insistent, but crucially contradictory, demand that women do their patriotic duty as poets. (“First World War” 439)

Brittain is often inaccurately portrayed as being against the war at an early stage, but it is only in her later writings that her pacifist views come through. She wrote her well-known memoir, *Testament to Youth* in 1933, a full fifteen years after WWI (Crawford 151), giving her the mature advantage of hindsight. However, Brittain has held the distinction of being one of the few women who has been regularly published in poetry anthologies since the war. This is mainly because she was an “eyewitness” to the misery that was thought to inspire worthwhile poetry.

After World War II, the canon of 1914-18 became even more rigid, with Jon Silkin’s Penguin anthology containing no women poets (Murdoch 35). Soldier poets such as Wilfred Owen, Isaac Rosenberg, and Edward Thomas gained everlasting renown, not only because of their poetic talent, but also because of that dependable fame-maker, death. (Thomas wrote most of his poems that deal with

the loss of war before he arrived on the battlefield) (Lyon 46). With each soldier poet's death, critics of the day came to erroneously believe that only "the experience of fighting provides a connection to reality, an unmediated truth to which only those that have undergone the liminal trauma of combat have access" (Campbell 207). For women poets, they lost the publishing battle before their ink had dried; they were never going to have the experience of fighting, for obvious reasons.

Women had their own overwhelming realities on the home front. The trauma they experienced from the loss of their loved ones cannot be underestimated. Every man that died in WWI was a woman's husband, lover, father, son, or brother. Khan describes the conflicted situation that women faced during the war:

The claim that war makes upon women is, in comparison with that made upon men, more hidden and often more difficult; for it is easier to be active than passive, easier to place oneself under obedience in a time of crisis than to serve in silent anxiety. Courage is manifest not only in brilliant attack, but also in patient waiting and patient endurance. In war-time, women, too, go to battle; they battle with the slow torture of fear and suspense, the long agonies of anticipation; the sleepless nights and fevered imagination; the pitiless hours usurped by visions of battered bleeding bodies. (138)

As Khan points out, the differences between male and female sacrifices should not be "ranked" in a way that detracts from women's contributions to the literary canon. The canon of WWI poetry is the *only* one that requires the poet to witness the death and destruction of war as a prerequisite for inclusion. It is an unrealistic and impossible (considering women were not allowed on the battlefield, even though some surely would have fought given the chance) expectation for women to fulfill.

There is no denying that the eyewitness "poetry" that a male combatant wrote is going to read differently than a woman's imagined rendition of battle. Some women actually made ill-fated attempts to write "from the trenches" by crawling into the dark depths of their imaginations, and writing of fictional events. However, they could rarely depict a convincing reality of the trench, with its "accompanying images of filth, shellfire, and barbed wire which became the dominant icon of WWI" (Campbell 205). Critics are disparaging of the few women who did attempt to write from abstract trenches, and not only because they believe women should write of what they were familiar with, which was their own "domestic front." The

major reason was the authenticity of the so-called “fake” poems, as they were quite unbelievable.

Poet C.A. Renshaw wrote “My Mate,” which was one of the most notorious of the imposter poems. Renshaw speaks in the voice of a combatant who leans over a dead comrade and exclaims “God! Let me touch his lips / and go, lest I forget I am a man.” Margaret Louise Woods’ disastrous attempt to describe a gunner’s innermost thoughts on the Western Front gave critics like Swinnerton all that they needed to attack the quality of women’s poetry (Crawford 139-140). The women’s poetry that overreaches in this way is almost farcical, and did much to discredit the worth of women’s WWI poetry. These poems make up a very small percentage of the poetry that women wrote, yet, these poems get much more attention than the excellent poetry of Margaret Sackville that we will discuss later. Over time, critics began to unfairly use such samples to justify women’s exclusion from the canon; many of these “bad” poems began to represent women’s poetry. Sadly, a plethora of poetry that rivaled that of the soldier poets was “dismissed as a tapestry of secondhand images gleaned from the ‘reality’ of masculine experience” (Plain 42). The time has come for that tapestry to be unfolded, and every thread reexamined. That tapestry, which is long and varied, is sure to reveal not the only coarse threads, but golden ones as well.

The poetry women wrote during the war years was vast, incredibly diverse, and defied categorization. Plain remarks that the poets were “lacking the superficial homogeneity of the soldier-poets’ experience of life in the trenches, or even a cohesive vision of life on the home front. These disparate writers stubbornly resist comfortable categorization as chroniclers, defenders, or even supporters of the conflict” (42). While I agree that women poets should not be “categorized” in the way Plain indicates, there is a real need to examine the different viewpoints and talents that the women had, and then implement a “categorization” of sorts. This is mainly because aside from the nurses and jingoists, everyone else is cordoned off into one big group of weepy wailers, waiting for their men to come home to love, or bury.

A category that Plain does not mention is that of the anti-war female pacifist poets, who did exist, albeit in smaller numbers. Poets such as Margaret Sackville were voicing their anti-war views before Britain formally made a declaration of war. These early objectors understood that by mid-December of 1914, British troops had been fighting for over five months and were locked in a stalemate. At that early stage, the loss of life was staggering, and people began to realize that the war was

not going to be over by Christmas as promised, but would “extend itself to hitherto unimagined reaches of suffering and irony” (Fussell 3).

The poet Margaret Sackville had a broad view of humanity, and her passions were “the commonality in suffering of supposedly enemy peoples and the prevention of war” (Stout 77). Sackville was writing and publishing anti-war poetry before either Siegfried Sassoon or Wilfred Owen. In mentioning these well-known poets, the problem of validating the worth of female poets becomes even more evident. The canon is full of the same handful of male poets, and there is no choice but to use them as a marker. I do not imply that their work is of better quality by doing so. Sackville had been writing poetry since the age of sixteen. She was published in periodicals such as *The English Review*, the *Englishwoman’s Review*, *Country Life*, *The Nation*, *The Spectator* and the *Pall Mall Gazette*, and published *Floral Symphony*, a book of poems, in 1900 at the age of nineteen (Brown, Clements, and Grundy). Sackville knew first-hand the pain that “national sacrifice” causes, as her brother, Gilbert Sackville, 8th Earl De La Warr, was killed in 1915 at the beginning of the war. Rather than evoke a desire to avenge her brother’s death, Sackville, as a humanitarian, continued to write poetry that embraced everyone who died in WWI, including the German soldiers. Hers was an unusual voice in a society that was becoming more and more fixated on hearing tales of retribution and purported righteousness spurred on by nationalism.

Although she was an accomplished poet, playwright, and illustrator, Sackville is remembered more today for the secret love affair she had with Ramsay MacDonald, who served three terms as British Prime Minister, rather than her contribution to WWI poetry. Her poetry is notably ahead of its time; Stout comments “when the English were standing in line to enlist, and cheering the opportunity to teach the Hun a lesson, Sackville already perceived the glory they sought as a delusion and a sham” (77). After the war, Sackville quietly faded into obscurity, while modern readers read the private love letters exchanged with MacDonald (discovered in 2006) unaware of her bravery and poetic talent.

Sackville’s first published collection of war poems, aptly named *The Pageant of War*, was published in 1916. The epic poem that bears the anthologies’ title speaks for all the victims of war, not just the fallen British. After describing armies of dead soldiers and mourning women, Sackville manages to convey “a tone of resignation in the underlying assumption that mankind is like that, and will accept the disguised horror. This is an important contribution to the pacifist literature of the war, with motifs found again in later novels, but it is striking for

1916" (Murdoch 40). The *Pageant of War* very well might have influenced both Sassoon and Owen, as Sackville had presented a copy of her book to Sassoon while he was at Craiglockhart Hospital, and a copy was found in Wilfred Owen's personal library after his death (Khan 31). Sackville's poetry did not have the warmest reception in 1916, for it was published at a time when British nationalism was booming. In fact, at that early stage of the war, if she were a male poet, the general pacifism expressed in her poetry would not have been published (Murdoch 37). Sackville, as we shall learn, was everything the artificial women described in Sassoon's "Glory of Women" were not.

Sassoon's "Glory of Women" sardonically accuses women of allowing their "patriotic chauvinism to prevail over pity" (Crawford 128). The anger and resentment that Sassoon feels toward women is undeniable; the exclusionary nature of the canon might very well have started with poems such as "The Glory of Women." Sassoon expressed feelings of immense resentment toward civilian women, whom he associated with an inability to imagine the conditions of war. In the "The Glory of Women," he writes:

You love us when we're heroes home on leave,
Or wounded in a mentionable place.
You worship decorations; you believe
That chivalry redeems the war's disgrace. (1-4)

It is unfortunate that with all Sassoon's merits, he insensitively corrals all women into one homogenous herd of shallowness. The accusation that women "worship decorations" implies that they are superficial enough to overlook the horrors against humanity for the winning of the war. Sentiments like these, coming from one of the most influential of the trench poets, discredited much of what women had to say—especially their poetry.

Rather than look for a scapegoat to blame for her disappointment in humanity, Margaret Sackville began by first looking at her own sex. According to Khan, Sackville's poem "Nostra Culpa" (which means "our fault" in Latin) uses "the argument of women as life-savers to launch an attack on them on account of their mute, passive acquiescence to a scheme of things, which they instinctively perceive as a monstrosity, and yet will not speak out against for fear of their veracity losing them the love and respect of men" (86).

"Nostra Culpa" begins with reference to the sword:

We knew the sword accursed, yet with the strong
proclaimed the sword triumphant. Yea, this wrong
unto our children, unto those unborn
we did, blaspheming God. (1-4)

I disagree with Khan's remark that "Sackville's indictment of women needs to be approached as warily as the trench poet's jaundiced view of them" (86), because Sackville is not "indicting" only women in her poem. Although it seems that way initially (by the inclusive "we" that begins the poem), Sackville brings both women *and* men under scrutiny, for her use of the "strong" (implying fighting men) indicates that women chose to follow the *wrong* side, those with the "sword triumphant." Sackville was not only an outspoken pacifist, but also a devout Catholic, and the occasional use of Christian iconography and inference is sometimes found in her poetry. Considering her views, this is not surprising, as the philosophy to "turn the other cheek" applies to both Christians and pacifists in its true context.

The next lines of "Nostra Culpa" refer to one of the greatest sins of the Christian faith, which is succumbing to pride. Sackville writes: "We feared the scorn of men; / men worshipping pride, so where they led/ we followed" (4-6). Murdoch remarks that "Nostra Culpa" might not be as appealing today because it falls into a Christian, rather than a classical context, and that the use of antiquity undermines the broad nature of Sackville's pacifist sentiments (40). When "Nostra Culpa" was written, the majority of people were believers, despite growing speculation to the contrary. This is best evidenced by poet laureate Robert Bridges' statement that the war brought, "a grief that is now intolerable constantly to face, nay impossible to face without trust in God, which makes all things possible" (Qtd. in Fussell 11). Perhaps Sackville's seemingly passé Christian themes made "Nostra Culpa" seem dated (when taking into consideration the drastic changes in the way of Modernism that were brewing) when she wrote it. However, one would hope that a poem that argues against the pro-war mentality that was leading the country's young men to a forsaken place called "no-man's land" would always be in style.

The women that are the targets of Sassoon's scorn are described more like the anti-Christ than "the metonymy of the nation with moral and spiritual influence on men" that Buck writes of ("British Women's Writing" 90). Sassoon characterizes women as having a false appreciation of war:

You make us shells. You listen with delight,
By tales of dirt and danger fondly thrilled.
You crown our distant ardours while we fight,
And mourn our laurelled memories when we're killed. (5-8)

Sassoon continues to blast women by accusing them of being insensitive to the soldier's plight, when in reality, women knew less about the reality of war than he realized. In addition, to point the finger at women is ironic, especially when Sassoon (known early in the war as "Mad Jack" for his gung-ho actions in the name of British nationalism) was well known for going out on patrol in no-man's-land even when there were no raids planned (WWI Bibliographical Dictionary).

Sassoon did not express the early pacifism of Sackville and other poets. Rather, he arrived on the Western Front in 1915 with the same patriotic fever that had taken hold of the majority of British citizens. Fred Crawford points to evidence of these sentiments in early poems such as "Absolution," where Sassoon writes: "War is our scourge; yet war has made us wise / And, fighting for our freedom, we are free" (120). When Sassoon's younger brother Hamo died in 1915, Sassoon wrote an elegy entitled "To My Brother" which concludes with: "But in the gloom I see your laurel'd head / And through your victory I shall win the light" (120). Sassoon had drastically changed his pro-war views by the time he wrote "Glory to Women," which is not a surprise. The sense of responsibility, and even the love that Sassoon felt for his fellow soldiers, comes through in many of his other poems. Sadly, the way Sassoon lashes out at all females in "The Glory of Women," rather than the entirety of the war monster, seems to serve no other purpose than to expose his own sense of self-loathing that he took part in such a futile war.

Sassoon continues his assault of women with the following lines: "You can't believe that British troops "retire" / When hell's last horror breaks them, and they run, / Trampling the terrible corpses- -blind with blood" (9-11). These lines could be understood if they were directed toward jingoist poets such as Jessie Pope, Louisa Prior, or Marjorie Pratt because all three of these women not only shamed young men into enlisting, but also fervently supported the war even after discouragingly heavy losses (Buck, "British Women's Writing" 90). However, most women could not have known the true conditions of the Front until the latter part of the war, when the soldier poets began to "speak" from the trenches. Perhaps Sassoon's blame would have been put to better use if it had been directed at the government who encouraged all young men to enlist with the aid of unsuspecting women and their propaganda campaigns.

Sassoon and Sackville are often speaking to the same women in their poems; if we look at Sackville's "Culpa Nostra" at the midway point, she asks: "Dare we now lament our dead? / Shadows and echoes, harlots! We betrayed / Our sons; because men laughed we were afraid" (6-8). These lines address the women mentioned earlier, who persuaded young men to enlist in a war that had in part been created by the government propaganda machine, as well as the press, who "kept the people at home ignorant of the true nature of life in the trenches" (Khan 92). What sets Sackville's poem apart from Sassoon's poem is the way she holds both women *and* men responsible for the tremendous loss of life. When she writes, "men laughed," Sackville is indicting that they did not take precious human life seriously, leaving women cowering in the dark with only the "shadows and echoes" of the dead.

Sackville's poem concludes with a regretful lament of the price that was paid for such shadowy silence:

That silent wisdom which was ours to keep
Deep buried; thousands perished; still we slept
Children were slaughtered, women raped, the weak
Down-trodden. Very quiet was our sleep. (9-12)

The language that Sackville uses in these lines is quite graphic, and most unusual for a woman in the time it was written. Once again I am bringing up the language of the soldier poets to make the point that the type of irony and striking language displayed in many of their poems was already fully incorporated into Sackville's poetry by 1916. Sackville uses a tone of resignation that forces the reader to examine their conscience in a way that the more accusatory do not. Her poetry is void of the bitterness so often found in the works of the popular soldier poets, making it an agent of unity, rather than another source of division.

While Sackville makes no mention of the enemy in her poems, Sassoon (it can be argued that the experience of being in the trenches made him feel overwhelmingly angry towards all), in his unrestrained bitterness, could not be more specific. He writes, "O German mother by the fire, / While you are knitting socks to send your son / His face is trodden deeper in the mud" (12-14). I am in complete agreement with Silkin that the ending of this poem is "unnecessarily brutal, aimed, it seems at the mother, who is also a victim, although a lesser one than both her son and the other soldiers" (161). These lines epitomize the extent of Sassoon's resentment, for the dreamy mother by a warm and cozy fire contrasted against the dead face of her beloved son makes a startling point in its distorted presentation. Many would

argue that in such a comparison, Sassoon reveals the inhumanity of war. The worth of these lines may, however, be softened by the juxtaposition providing a temporary shock value rather than a lasting commentary on the futility of war.

Margaret Sackville is one of many talented female poets who wrote anti-war poetry only to fade into obscurity, while Siegfried Sassoon is one of a small number of soldier poets whose writings make up the bulk of the WWI canon. Women wrote a vast number of poems during WWI, yet only a very small number of their poems exist in modern WWI anthologies. While a few anthologies of all female WWI war poetry have been compiled in the last two decades, there is a need for more exposure of women's WWI poetry, without the usual apologies about how it differs from that of the trench poets. While it is true, as Buck acknowledges, that "the angry and satiric anti-elegies of the soldier poets express what we want to hear: that war is wasteful, tragic, and costly" ("First World War" 448), there are female poets who say the same if only we would listen. It is time to listen anew to the female poets who clarify that war is wasteful, tragic, and costly—not only because of the buildings totaled and the budgets broken, but more importantly, because it takes that which can never be replaced, the gift of each and every human life that is lost.

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