

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Nora Saltonstall. *"Out Here at the Front": The World War I Letters of Nora Saltonstall*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004. xiii + 296 pp. \$52.00 (library), ISBN 978-1-55553-599-5; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-55553-598-8.

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The edited and published letters of Eleanor (Nora) Saltonstall, a young lady from Boston's upper-class society, chronicle her wartime experiences in France from 1917 to 1919. These letters were neither produced in a void nor presented to the reader that way. Editor Judith Graham does an admirable job of contextualizing Saltonstall's war service by using her diaries and other materials to provide a complete picture of Nora Saltonstall, her thoughts, motivations, and her actions.

Nora Saltonstall attended school in Paris after graduating from the Winsor School in 1911. When the war began in 1914, France was neither unfamiliar to her nor was the fate of the country something just happening half a world away. By late 1914, Saltonstall was sewing night clothes for the soldiers, working at fund-raisers for the Belgian relief and the Red Cross, and rolling bandages, eventually becoming a leader in women's volunteer war work. She sailed for France in October 1917 to serve as a volunteer. She worked first at finding housing for refugees and assisting at canteens set up as places of respite for the soldiers. As revealed in her letters, she did not find this work to be satisfying and arranged for a transfer to a dispensary run by the American Red Cross. She quickly found this work also to be less than challenging and accepted an invitation to join a mobile surgical hospital run by the French Medical Corps, where she ended up managing supplies and driving both the wounded and the personnel, as well as assisting with nursing duties when needed. It appears that her background and social status helped her to make the necessary connections to move around so easily.

It is fortunate for researchers and scholars of women's history and of World War I that Nora Saltonstall left a body of work in the form of diaries and letters from 1911 through 1919. These include the time she was in school in Paris, her war service in Europe, and the postwar time spent on a motor trip in the American west, where tragically, she died of typhoid fever. Graham uses the materials from the early period to introduce Nora to

the readers and show how her background and education led her to volunteer. Her letters begin with her sailing to France in October 1917. Nora wrote to various family members as well as close friends. Her letters are often chatty, personal, and reflect her social class: "I hate my uniform so that I have ordered a new one on the same lines but which is much warmer and which I hope will fit me and have a little more chic" (p. 51). There is nothing in the language to convey the idea that she thought these would be read by anyone other than her circle of family and friends, although it is obvious that one purpose of the letters was to reassure her parents that she was not in danger and that she enjoyed what she was doing. There was little in the way of negative comments. Graham assures us that the diary entries present a more realistic overview of what was happening and balance the cheerful tone of the letters. Her untimely death also meant that Saltonstall did not have an opportunity to reread the letters and change anything or add commentary. This is helpful in one way as it means she never had the chance to edit out any material, but on the other hand, it also means that she did not have the chance to add any commentary based on personal hindsight.

Although the book is subtitled *The World War I Letters of Nora Saltonstall*, and the letters provide the bulk of the printed material, this might be a slight misrepresentation. With the very detailed footnoting, annotations, and contextual material added by editor Judith Graham, it might be more accurate to call this volume *"Out Here at the Front:" The World War I Experiences of Nora Saltonstall*, as this book is more than just a collection of letters, but a detailed and valuable examination of one American woman's involvement at and near the frontlines of the Great War. This kind of comprehensive presentation of even one woman's wartime experience helps balance the view that only men go to war and only men can write about war. Nora Saltonstall was just one of thousands of American women who served in the war zone from 1914 to 1919.

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