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Kate Adie. *Corsets to Camouflage: Women and War.* London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2003. v + 194 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-340-82059-9; $15.88 (paper), ISBN 978-0-340-82060-5.

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Women in War: Changing Roles and Clothes

Kate Adie provides an entertaining account of the deeds (and attire) of women in war from the 1700s to the present. The activities of British women are the main focus of her exposition, though she does say a few things about women from other nations–American, Australian and Russian women, for example–whose involvement in war intersects with the story of British women. Prominent female figures, such as the Austrian Archduchess Sophie, whose assassination along with her husband sparked World War I, are also given consideration.

Although this book appears to cover three centuries of women in war, the chronicle is somewhat unevenly weighted toward the period spanning World War I and World War II. Of twenty chapters, sixteen are devoted to this period. The two chapters on activities of women before this period–the second of which is a short chapter on the forming of the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry in 1907–and the two sketchy chapters that follow the World War II period seem belatedly appended to the main narrative. Since Kate Adie was a correspondent for the British Broadcasting Company during the 1991 Persian Gulf War and was the only woman among the British press on the front lines, the scant attention given to women in this war is especially disappointing. In addition, the cover of the paperback edition shows a woman soldier in camouflage fatigues standing in the desert, leading one to expect fuller consideration of women in the Persian Gulf Wars.

Adie explains that she grew up in Sunderland, United Kingdom, after World War II amid some of the remaining wreckage of the war. She ultimately became fascinated by the unsung women from this region who supported the war effort and endured bombardment. The finest sections of her book are inspired by this part of her personal history. British women's participation in World War II is the heart and the best part of the book.

Adie relies on letters, diaries, and interviews to construct a fascinating portrayal of women's experiences in war in this period. She brings attention to the fact that many British women "saw a great deal more action than the men who were in the services–with bombing, fire and destruction all around on the home front" (p. 202). But the women left to cope with "air raids and the threat of invasion" were denied recognition and medals and encouraged to be considerate of the troubles of the returning men (pp. 230-231). Adie reports an exchange with her former landlady in which the now elderly woman relates that her husband never stopped complaining about the sand fleas in North Africa where he served under General Montgomery. The landlady says she could have also lamented the black-outs, bombings, etc., (or talked about her job with the Royal Air Force), but she did not (pp. viii-ix).

During World War II, large numbers of British women worked in munitions factories. Though some of the troubles associated with munitions work that women experienced in World War I, such as fatal poisoning, had been resolved, munitions work was still extraordinarily difficult and dangerous. Working with combustible materials, these workers were constantly vulnerable to explosions. One of Adie's sources recounts that a spark one day resulted in the deaths of eight. The same source, Joan Talbot, recalls another incident when one alert woman quickly put out a fire that could have also resulted in a considerable explosion. The man in charge, however, was decorated for this lifesaving act.

British women also served in various military capacities and were drafted for the first time during World

War II. Adie describes the experiences of women in uniform in myriad organizations, such as the Women's Auxiliary Air Force, Women's Royal Naval Service, as well as the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS). ATS women often served in anti-aircraft batteries. Thinking it uncivilized for women to fire on the enemy, British authorities attempted to limit women in anti-aircraft teams to sighting German bombers, while the act of dispatching them was reserved to men. The fiction that women weren't actually involved in firing on the enemy was finally abandoned and all-female anti-aircraft batteries were formed.

The Women's Auxiliary Service in Burma, called the WAS(B), are particularly noteworthy for their steadfastness in adversity. The WAS(B) had been performing performed cipher duties in Burma when the country was captured by the Japanese. After the country was overrun, they could have left the area, but an intrepid group of these women remained in Burma and formed mobile canteens for the 'forgotten army ' fighting the Japanese in this war theater. These women served for over three years close to the front lines in difficult conditions and climate.

Adie's effort to bring attention to women's often unrecognized fortitude, resilience, and spirit in times of war does not indicate that she is in favor of full integration of women in the armed forces. On the contrary, she expresses misgivings about women serving in the front lines. Observing the controlled frenzy of British combat troops during the 1991 Persian Gulf War, Adie's expresses doubts about the suitability of women for combat. Combat, she avers, is a bloody, messy business involving brute force and requiring more strength than most women possess.

As I have indicated, the material on women in war after World War II is disappointingly sketchy compared to the attention devoted to women's activities during the first half of the twentieth century. Only twenty-four pages discuss the period from the 1991 Persian Gulf War to the present. In this section she makes a few observations about the inroads American servicewomen have made into the arena of combat. Relying on her own contacts with American soldiers and what appears from the bibliography to be a single source–Stephanie Guttman's *The Kinder, Gentler Military: Can America's Gender-Neutral Fighting Force Still Win Wars?* (2000)–Adie concludes that the integration of women has debilitated the U.S. armed forces. She sees Americans as desiring equality at all costs and lowering standards in order to achieve it. The integration of women American-style has wrought pernicious political correctness and resulted in a weakened force, in Adie's view.

Adie dwells on the political correctness she sees as undermining the U.S. armed forces not so much to confirm her reservations about women's participation in combat–though that is part of it–as to compare the American way of integrating women unfavorably with the more sensible British method. Her observation about the different ways these two nations deal with gender integration in the military is intriguing and most likely valid, but since the point is not developed and supported by credible evidence, it is less than compelling.

Despite the insubstantiality of some sections of the book–and some glib, unsupported assertions–there is, as I have indicated, valuable and interesting material in this book. This is not a scholarly work (and is not intended to be), but the personal accounts, letters, diary entries and interviews made available represent a commendable contribution to the study of women and war.

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