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James Hinton. *Women, Social Leadership and the Second World War: Continuities of Class.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. xii + 267 pp. $100.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-924329-7.

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"The Bloomin' Women wot Werk fer Nuffin"

These words of a young male evacuee during the Second World War (p. 63) capture key elements of the identity of the membership of the Women's Voluntary Service (WVS): their gender, their commitment to voluntarism, and, by implication, their class status. It also suggests, with some justification, that the organization's well-meaning members were not always welcomed. The women did not always "work for nothing": the organization employed some paid staff and offered some financial assistance toward expenses. However, one indication of the class composition of the WVS leadership is provided by the approval of the Home Office of the payment of first-class rail fares to full-time volunteers, as this was the mode of travel to which they were accustomed (p. 33). This policy stands in marked contrast to the rail fare policies toward the home defense organization of the Home Guard, for example, whose members had to travel third class. As Hinton comments, although no marks of rank were used on the distinctive green uniform of the WVS, "the equality involved was limited to an elite" (p. 33).

Founded in 1938 to meet the desire of the Home Office to recruit women to support the local authorities in air raid precautions, the organization still exists as the Women's Royal Voluntary Service (since 1966). Its role to provide assistance when the populace are under attack continues, most recently in the aftermath of the London terrorist attacks of 22 July 2005. For an organization of such longevity and which at its peak attracted close to one million members, the WVS has attracted comparatively little scholarship beyond Hinton's 1998 article in *Twentieth-Century British History*; adumbrating this publication are Louise Westwood's article on "Tea and Sympathy" in *History Today* of the same year, and Charles Graves's history, *Women in Green*, published in 1948. Hinton argues that the lack of scholarship may be the consequence of the age profile of the organization: analysis of wartime social change tends to encourage a focus on the young, but WVS membership was somewhat older: women between the ages of thirty-five and fifty were more than twice as likely to be doing voluntary work than younger women (p. 6). Hinton's volume sets out to remedy the silence around the associational life of middle-class and middle-aged women in this period.

Hinton's scholarly study is based upon WVS files, local and national records from other women's organizations, the Conservative Party, studies of voluntary work carried out by the Nuffield College Social Reconstruction Survey and by Mass Observation, as well as the local media (p. 7). The WVS files are not complete, the most curious loss being those of London, and Hinton excluded material held in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, although it is unlikely their inclusion would have substantially altered his thesis. The volume is divided into two parts. The first examines the processes of WVS mobilization, the constitution of the urban female public sphere of the interwar period, as well as the organization's position in rural and coalmining areas (County Durham). Hinton also pays an appropriate amount of attention to the charismatic Stella Charnaud, Lady Reading, whose vision determined the undemocratic, hierarchical and authoritarian structure of the force, "untempered by any kind of representative structure" (p. 33). Part 1 also examines the profile of the local leaders and their relationship with local government. Part 2 focuses on the postwar years when the future of an organization set up specifically to meet the exigencies of war was in doubt. Hinton explores the tensions between the organization and other women's organizations, as well as with the government, which had to justify why the WVS had privileged access over other women's organizations to finances covering administrative expenses.

Hinton's thesis in *Women, Social Leadership and the Second World War* is that the WVS provides a case study to reveal that "the social relations of voluntary work contributed to the continuities of upper- and middle-class power" (p. viii). By serving the community, the members

of the WVS also served to "uphold the authority of their class" (p. 5). Despite the rhetoric of the People's War, the period of the Second World War therefore did "more to sustain than to undermine middle-class social leadership" (p. 238), which was not eroded until the postwar period, with its consumer capitalism and increasing professionalization. Its survival was rooted in social networks and individual negotiating skills. Although personal contacts within the organization may have transcended the class divide, Hinton argues, "friendliness was probably more commonly rooted in deference than in democracy" (p.77). And although class constituted an identity which could transcend individual, local, occupation, and gender differences (p. 10), the text is permeated by the tensions between localities, between the urban and rural, Labour and Conservative, center and periphery, and between antagonism between individuals, not only males fearing "petticoat interference" but also between women divided by personality, conviction, and class. As one middle-class Mass Observation diarist commented, for example, "Mrs A [the WVS Centre Organizer] is the best type of aristocrat no doubt, public-spirited, conscientious and very gracious but we waste most of the morning in civilities" (p. 137). *Women, Social Leadership and the Second World War* is stronger on perceptions of class than it is on gender identities, and the focus on organizational issues can become heavy going until a member's voice illuminates the text. Although it would have been valuable to convey a greater sense of women's activities and experiences within the organization, this social history is fascinating on the relationship between Victorian understandings of community and voluntary service, and its wartime manifestation, an understanding transformed in the twenty-first century.

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