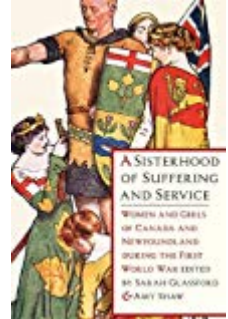


**Sarah Glassford, Amy Shaw, eds.** *A Sisterhood of Suffering and Service: Women and Girls of Canada and Newfoundland during the First World War*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2012. 345 pp. \$37.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-7748-2257-2.



**Reviewed by** Caroline D'Amours (University of Ottawa)

**Published on** H-War (July, 2013)

**Commissioned by** Margaret Sankey (Air University)

## Women and War

In their respective memory narratives, both Canadians and Newfoundlanders emphasize how they were transformed by the experience of World War I. For the former, the battle of Vimy Ridge represents the transition from a British colony to a newly independent nation on the international stage. For the latter, the battle of Beaumont-Hamel marks the advent of a new and distinctive collective identity. The purpose of *A Sisterhood of Suffering and Service: Women and Girls of Canada and Newfoundland during the First World War* is to integrate the female experience in this “war-leading-to-national-maturity” story (p. 3). The discussion of the twelve contributors extends beyond the right to vote to include the various nontraditional roles that women fulfilled during the war and how they were transformed by these experiences. The book is divided into four sections: volunteer work in different localities, wartime nursing and paid labor, soldiers’ family life, and various artists’ responses to the impacts of war.

The first two parts of this book discuss how women in Canada and Newfoundland were as likely as men to respond to the call of duty from the king and the empire. In their own war effort, they generally conformed to the established conventions of “suitable” tasks for women, including volunteer work and caretaking tasks such as knitting and nursing. However, Allison Norman’s analysis of the Six Nations in the Grand River Reserve war effort underscores the distinctive wartime response of the Aboriginal women. It also reveals similarities with the experiences of their Canadian counterparts, in that “much of the Six Nations community was acculturated to an Anglo-Canadian way of life” (p. 30). According to Margot I. Duley, the Newfoundlanders’ involvement in various wartime causes of the Women’s Patriotic Association, such as the temperance and health education movements, resulted in a greater awareness of their exclusion from the public and political spheres. After the war, this new consciousness led

many to become involved in women's civic organizations and to seek full citizenship. By comparison, Terry Wilde argues that the minor changes in the roles of University of Toronto female students had no long-term consequences and that prewar normality returned to the school shortly after the armistice.

The second part of the book includes two chapters that examine the active nursing roles of women in the Voluntary Aid Detachment. Linda Quiney suggests that Voluntary Aid Detachment in the Canadian St. John Ambulance constituted a form of military service, since it was legitimized as a service provided directly to the state. For his part, Terry Bishop Stirling indicates that Newfoundlander women in overseas Voluntary Aid Detachment service suffered tragedy, death, and the "everyday challenges and frustrations of hospital and military life" (p. 143). Kori Street argues that women's presence in the labor market during the war was insufficient to redefine gender ideology and this may explain why the transformation did not persist after the war.

The third section describes military families and how they coped during their relatives' absence. For example, Kristine Alexander examines the experience of Canadian girls whose relatives served in active duty. It was common practice for the government to use these young women as tools to mobilize society in the war effort. In his chapter, Desmond Morton discusses the Canadian Patriotic Fund, which was a private charitable organization whose mission was to provide support for families of overseas soldiers. Suzanne Evans examines how symbols of loss, including mourning black, special medals, and service flags, were offered to families of soldiers to perpetuate the model of female sacrifice. Evans argues that these symbols afforded special status that promoted war-effort propaganda and became integrated into Canadian collective culture.

The fourth and last section of the book discusses the artists' responses to war. Vicki S. Hal-

lett's chapter summarizes the role of poet Phebe Florence Miller in Newfoundlander cultural memory. Miller's poetry evoked the conflicting emotions of Newfoundlanders in response to the war, as one can see from this excerpt of "The Knitting Marianna" poem: "And so at morn and noon and night, / Her needles joined the battle-song / They clicked the glory of the right, / While comforts flourished, grey and long. / Her idle tears away she flicked-- / They only hindered needlecraft;" (p. 248). For her part, Lynn Kennedy focuses on the prominent use of the motherhood metaphor in Canadian poetry to represent the country's new autonomy and independence on the international stage. For example, in Elspeth Honeyman's poem "Canada Answer," the author writes: "Hear, O Mother of Nations, in the battle of Right and Wrong, / The voice of your youngest nation, chanting her battle-song; ... The price of a nation's manhood we offer to pay the debt-- / Did you dream, O Mother of Nations, that Canada could forget?" (p. 277). Finally, Amy Tector analyzes Canadian novels about the First World War. Tector concludes that these novels, which feature disabled soldiers, confirm that the war did not transform gender roles but rather reinstated "heterosexual norms and the 'natural' dominance of men" (p. 310).

In short, *A Sisterhood of Suffering and Service: Women and Girls of Canada and Newfoundland during the First World War* shows the transformative power of the Great War while also highlighting the non-lasting experiences of this conflict for a generation of women, a similar situation lived by women in the Second World War and best described by historian Jeffrey Keshen with the "Two steps forward and one step back" analogy.[1] The relevance and originality of this publication emerged from three main elements. First, the editors note a "remarkable absence of women and their activities from Newfoundland's and Canada's memories of the First World War" (p. 4), so this study is most welcome while there is still further research required. Second, the happy mix of emer-

ging scholars and established historians in this publication is a huge advantage as they offer several research avenues of investigation. In terms of age, race, ethnicity, class, religion, or region, the book raises as many questions as they answer about the female experience during World War I. As the editors point out, this book “is a place to start, not to end” (p. 7). Third, the authors’ imaginative use of primary sources provides an excellent impetus for young historians interested in this subject, which is often dismissed as lacking enough material to base the research on.

As noted by the editors, one shortcoming of the book is its dearth of studies on the specific experience of girls and women in Quebec during World War I. Lately, Geneviève Allard and Mélanie Morin-Pelletier have both worked on the experience of Nursing Sisters overseas--the latter even wrote a doctoral dissertation on this subject. If Allard could not participate in the preparation of this book, then perhaps Morin-Pelletier of the Canadian War Museum could have contributed. Regardless, the Quebec women’s experience should have been addressed or its absence explained. However, this observation does not detract from the importance of this book as a whole. It offers outstanding value to those interested in the experience of girls and women in Canada and Newfoundland during the First World War.

Note

[1]. Jeffrey Keshen, *Saints, Sinners, and Soldiers: Canada’s Second World War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2004), 171.

object of study  
referred  
why it was not

d

or

K

E

taking care of men

at

ture

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

**Citation:** Caroline D'Amours. Review of Glassford, Sarah; Shaw, Amy, eds. *A Sisterhood of Suffering and Service: Women and Girls of Canada and Newfoundland during the First World War*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. July, 2013.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=37345>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.