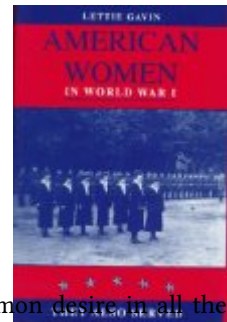


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Lettie Gavin. *American Women in World War I*. Boulder Springs: University Press of Colorado, 1999. xi + 240 pp. \$32.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87081-432-7.

Reviewed by Kay Sexton (Birkbeck College, University College, London)  
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In this text Lettie Gavin attempts to provide an overview of women's voluntary recruitment into each of nine service areas in the United States. It is an ambitious attempt to combine the facts of female service in and with the military during the First World War, with the recollections of those recruits about their experiences. An excellent array of well chosen photographs informs the text and allows the reader to develop a real sense of the spirit of the women who served and the conditions under which they did so. The nine service areas explored in the text are: Navy Yeomen, Marines, Army Nurses, Army Signallers, Reconstruction Aides, YMCA women, Physicians, Red Cross Volunteers and Salvation Army personnel. Necessarily, in 240 pages (including the photo plates), the examination of female recruitment into the military is factual rather than deeply philosophical, but Gavin manages to unite the historical bones of the text with a remarkable amount of anecdotal text. An example is the experience of Corporal Pearl Chandley who acted as part of President Woodrow Wilson's bodyguard during a White House parade and whose recollection of the day is partly about having concealed in her skirt pocket a chocolate bar that melted during the heat. Fortunately for Marine Reserve Chandley, her jacket covered the resulting stain!

The nine chapters are discrete but if they are taken as a whole, certain linking themes emerge. It is fascinating to examine the motives given by the various women who volunteered to serve; the military volunteers tend to cite patriotism but also refer to glamour (smart uniforms seem to have inspired quite a few recruits!), revenge and ambition, whereas the nursing and ancillary volunteers also cite patriotism but then appear to have been motivated by the desire to be of service and the feeling that their presence, as much as their skills, could raise

morale among the troops. A common desire in all the nine branches was to use skills already developed—many women were already working, filling jobs left by men—some felt that by taking a job within the services they could free a man to fight. Others clearly thought that their skills and abilities would be better recognised and rewarded in the military than in civilian life, but a number of young women seem not to have expected much reward. Private Ingrid Jonassen thought she would just get room and board for her military service and payday came as a pleasant surprise. Several women talk about the disappointment of returning to civilian life and although few express bitterness about being released from service at the war's end, the fact that many tried to re-enlist during World War II suggests that they felt their service should have continued in peace-time.

Gavin does not shirk detailing some of the less attractive aspects of voluntary recruitment—the treatment of black men and women volunteers is covered in the book, and the work of the Pioneer (black) regiments is linked to the experiences of black women YMCA volunteers, in both cases discrimination not only affected the feelings of black personnel but also led to a less efficient use of their skills and abilities. There is no direct discussion of discrimination against women in general, but the reminiscences of several contributors to the book make it clear that while some men welcomed women, others were obstructive and unpleasant to the volunteers.

Only a handful of American women died as a direct result of their voluntary service, but many, maybe even hundreds, were to die from the influenza that swept the world in 1918. Appendix B gives valuable information about the women involved in the 'war effort', detailing those who were killed, wounded or died during service

and the decorations awarded to American women. Appendix A is an interesting but rather detached précis of chemical warfare and shell shock. It is useful information, but its relevance to the rest of the text is not apparent.

The index is based on proper names both of people and places, and seems exhaustive, although again there seems to be some arbitrary indexing, influenza gets a listing, as does shell shock but neither chemical warfare nor mustard gas do.

Overall this is an extensive book, and Gavin's research has been wide reaching and meticulous, especially as there is very little existing military record for these pioneer women. The life of these women is brought vividly to us through their own words and through Gavin's excellent journalistic style. Given the breadth of Gavin's work, it may seem unfair to quibble about its depth, but there will doubtless be many readers who will wish there

had been more detailed information about subjects that particularly interest them. There is also the tantalising effect of excerpting from letters held in the author's personal collection, which must be extensive. Gavin has clearly managed to contact many of the first ever serving women in each of the nine branches of the services and to obtain from them insight into conditions and experiences from 1917 onwards. This insight informs the work as a whole with a sense of immediacy that is fascinating as well as validating the text with first hand reporting from a generally unexamined wartime perspective. However, those with a specialised interest in one service or one branch of the service, will probably be frustrated by the brevity of each chapter, especially because it is clear that Gavin calls on a personal archive of data that must contain much unpublished material. It is to be hoped that Gavin will continue to publish and to utilise that material to provide deeper knowledge of these pioneer women.

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