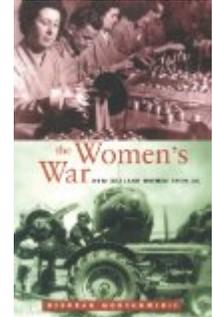


Deborah Montgomerie. *The Women's War: New Zealand Women 1939-45.* Auckland, New Zealand: Auckland University Press, 2001. 200 pp. \$24.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-86940-244-0.



Reviewed by Kathryn Spurling

Published on H-Minerva (December, 2001)

Questioning the real role of New Zealand women in the Second World War

New Zealand is uniquely situated for a gender case study. Geographically it is isolated, Pacific islands far removed from the British origins of the population which signed The Treaty of Waitangi with Maori Chieftains in 1840. Such a tyranny of distance from the "motherland" resulted in a loyalty to the British empire not evidenced elsewhere. It was New Zealand which, proportional to population, suffered the worst Allied casualty rates of World War I. The sacrifice made by its servicemen resulted in a military legend New Zealand was proud of and future generations emulated. When Great Britain declared war on Germany for a second time, in 1939, New Zealanders again answered the call to arms with alacrity. Again young men in their prime were dispatched in increasing numbers to fight yet another war in another hemisphere. As the war effort expanded more and more of those living in New Zealand became involved. It is here that Deborah Montgomerie takes up her study, offering a treatise on what effect this Second World War had on women

and the gender balance of labour, or as the first sentence of the book puts it: "The Second World War raised a barrage of questions about the role of women in New Zealand society."

There have been several examinations of the role women played in various nations during the world wars but this is the first comprehensive analysis of the New Zealand experience. New Zealand was the first nation to allow women to vote, in 1893. One could assume that such social enlightenment would augment progressive gender relations prior to 1939 and certainly during the 1939-1945 war. But was this the case? Certainly as the war-time manpower shortage worsened employers, both Government and commercial, were forced to accept more women employees. A comparison of the New Zealand census figures of 1936 and 1945 shows there was a significant change in the number and distribution of women workers in six broad industrial categories and that the number of women employed in domestic service had declined. But how substantial was this? Montgomerie shows how difficult it is to work out exactly which occupations were involved because

Government statistics were broken into industry classification rather than occupation, so we can observe some broad trends, but not the fine detail of women's choices. An example was that while there was an increase of 1,000 women in farming, it is unclear which duties within the industry women were undertaking. There was certainly a 25% increase of female employees in the engineering and metalworking industries but this was somewhat a statistical anomaly insofar as there was only an increase of 1,000 women in these industries. With exception of some highly visible and very publicised exceptions like railway porters and tram conductors, New Zealand women continued to work in conventional female areas. Unlike their counterparts in the United States and the United Kingdom opportunities in heavy industry were small. New Zealand's war effort was geared to the production of food. Any new employment opportunities for women workers were carefully monitored by union and Government authorities to ensure women did not undertake exact duties previously the province of male workers. The uneasy relationship between women workers and the union movement was exacerbated by the temporary status of women's employment as well as the ideology surrounding women's voluntary war service. The industrial conscription of women in 1942 did little to ease the tension because it contravened the widely held belief that women's energies should be focused within the home.

Montgomerie offers a very detailed examination of women's civilian employment during the war. She immerses us well in the period using an extensive range of primary source material as well as secondary sources dealing with the topic. She rightfully takes exception to New Zealand texts which purport to democratise the understanding of war but fail to contextualise women's experiences. A good mix of narrative and analysis makes the journey an interesting one. She shows how women who pushed for equity were treated at best with derision, at worst with contempt.

These women were seen as questioning the entire fabric of society as New Zealanders knew it. Many people believed that sexual inequality in the paid work force was necessary to the maintenance of the gendered division of labour in the home, and, specifically, the concept of a male family wage. And the inequality was not limited to employment but the private domain also. New Zealand women were expected to remain chaste until their men folk returned. Those wayward enough to submit to the amorous attentions of United States "over-sexed, overpaid and over here" servicemen were publicly accused of sexual sedition. Maori women suffered the blight of their race as well as their sex. The examination of the war-time employment of Maori women is one of the more informative aspects of the book. The least informative is the very limited space given to women in the New Zealand military, roughly two pages in a 187 page book. The size of the women's auxiliaries was small but the subject matter ripe for study. Such neglect leaves Montgomerie open to the criticism directed at too many women academics that their own ideological differences with the military tradition has resulted in their preference to ignore the plight of those women who joined that tradition. This book draws heavily from the printed media and frequently uses advertisements and cartoons to demonstrate how advertisers capitalised on the novelty of women's war work whilst simultaneously highlighting the socialised differences between the sexes. Of course the difference most often featured involved women's physical weakness. In these advertisements women may be dressed in unglamorous overalls but they were still offered support by "Berlei" foundations, their femininity ensured by "Max Factor" cosmetics and of course they never were shown "down and dirty", always spotlessly clean, delicate and vulnerable. At least this was the public perception, the reality was entirely different. But the media has seldom been a slave to reality. Such depiction fed people's perceptions that nothing had really changed, just the overalls. The media joked

that men would become domestic slaves to working women. While the cartoons caused mirth they were also a none too subtle warning.

Women in uniform were portrayed as brainless glamour girls, in the military for a good time, or as man-hating battleaxes. These uncomplimentary images diminished the service of women volunteers. It also assured the majority of New Zealanders that women had no place in the "real" military and that the military tradition would continue to be the prototype of masculine national ideals.

Throughout the Second World War women assumed multiple roles and bore special burdens yet these were too easily dismissed and diminished. As servicemen returned women returned to the duties of the prewar years. A new generation was needed and motherhood and full-time child-rearing were the roles women embraced. How much was due to choice and how much was due to coercion is not a question which can be satisfactorily answered.

Early women's suffrage should have predisposed New Zealand to social evolution yet it did not. Wartime conditions had the potential to produce lasting change, but they did not. The conservative gender order proved remarkably resilient. Deborah Montgomerie's book answers the question resoundingly, World War II did not result in dramatic changes in women's lives, indeed it strengthened the gender order.

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

Citation: Kathryn Spurling. Review of Montgomerie, Deborah. *The Women's War: New Zealand Women 1939-45*. H-Minerva, H-Net Reviews. December, 2001.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5734>



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