

Tammy M. Proctor. *Female Intelligence: Women and Espionage in the First World War*. New York and London: New York University Press, 2003. vii + 205 pp. \$26.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-6693-4.

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Underground Diligence: Women's Secret Service Work in World War One

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A French perfume house, some years ago, launched a scent named "Clandestine," as in "clandestine woman." The advertising slogan assured prospective buyers that "there's something clandestine in every woman." The ad, then, drew on a specific cultural trope, that of an ineffable link between secrecy and femininity. This trope's most forceful image is, of course, that of the sexy woman spy, the ultimate embodiment of an underground feminine mystique. From Mata Hari onward, the spy/seductress, epitomizing as she does women's supposed "natural skills for duplicity," has become a cultural icon "that still informs our visions of gender, secrecy, and sexuality today," writes the historian Tammy Proctor in her fine study of women's intelligence work in World War One (pp. 7, 5).

In this book, Proctor looks at the gendered representations of intelligence work. (A telling example is that "the International Spy Museum in Washington, D.C., features an exhibit on women spies that has at its center a boudoir with a phantom Mata Hari's face speaking from a mirror" [p. 3].) But Proctor also, and importantly, studies the reality of women's intelligence work: from the painstaking spy-tracking at Secret Service offices in London to the long nights of observing train movements in occupied France and Belgium, a task both dull and deadly, with nary a boudoir in sight.

World War One consolidated the practice of professional intelligence work in the service of the British state. And the British intelligence service relied, as Proctor points out, on women's work: "there were many strong, educated women who were patriotic and willing to 'do their bit' for a low salary, and it was these female workers on whom the British intelligence establishment precariously balanced." The example of MI5, the counterespionage service, is instructive: the small spy-tracking office established in 1909 grew into "a massive information clearinghouse" (p. 53), thanks to the work of six hundred young, educated women (in 1916; up from only four secretaries in 1914) who worked nine-hour days, seven days a week, staffing the vast Registry, a card file of suspects. The department, as its chief wrote, "increased its value by employing a staff of women" at what Proctor describes as "the mundane work of listening to, sifting, recording, and maintaining mounds of detailed personal information in an age of carbon copies and file cards" (p. 72). Besides designing and running the spy-tracking paperwork networks, women also operated postal censorship, and contributed to developing propaganda and cryptography.

In short, "the intelligence community, popularly understood as a male preserve, rested on the backs of female laborers" (p. 55). The Postal Censorship Branch, for example, employed over 3,500 women in November 1914 (and only 1,300 men). These women worked as examiners, clerks, translators, censors, and testers for chemical ink. The chief censor pointed to women's "special abili-

ties” (p. 56) by which, presumably, he meant a high tolerance for repetitive work, not to mention mediocre pay. Even at the top level, the female staff at the censorship office was paid by the week. They were hired on a temporary basis, outside of the established civil service system—whereas the men were paid per annum, and at nearly double the salary. This discrepancy characterized the entire intelligence community. Women in intelligence, hailing as they did from flawlessly patriotic and patrician backgrounds, were tacitly assumed to neither want nor need proper remuneration for their efforts. Even the typists were, as an observer wrote, “ladies passed under the microscope of every kind of social and political scrutiny” (p. 57).

Among the actual spies recruited to gather information behind enemy lines, the female constituent was equally crucial to the success of the enterprise. Women, Proctor points out, “often provided an important component to intelligence and escape networks because their movements aroused fewer suspicions than the activities of men” (p. 75). She concentrates on one specific intelligence network by the name of La Dame Blanche (LDB). The legendary “White Lady” was a specter whose appearance was held to spell the end of the Hohenzollern dynasty. The network was founded in occupied Liège in 1916 and funded and managed by the British War Office through representatives in neutral Holland; it employed over a thousand agents in Belgium and Northern France. Women made up around 30 percent of the total. Importantly, the network’s leaders in Belgium devised a service that, in case of arrests, could run entirely on womanpower; a women’s shadow executive body was created which performed leadership functions and could, if need be, take over completely. In order to reconstruct the composition of LDB, Proctor focuses on one particular “Batallion” (the network organized itself along military lines), based in Brussels, headed by Laure and Louise Tandel, two sisters in their forties who ran a school. The Tandels’ batallion employed 190 agents, 59 of whom were women. Of these, over two-thirds were not married, and most of them were in their thirties and forties. They were independent, slightly older women, of by and large “respectable” backgrounds, ranging from the middle class to the aristocracy (the network’s men came from comparable backgrounds).

What attracted women (and men) to this dangerous service? Recruitment often proceeded along lines of kinship, with entire households or extended families enrolling simultaneously. One widow who had lost a son in battle joined up together with her four daughters, work-

ing as couriers, transcribers, and “letterboxes” (receiving and passing on messages). Another family pattern was that of the so-called “trainwatching cells” (*cellules ferroviaires*), families working in shifts to ensure twenty-four-hour surveillance of rail lines. A third example is the Tandel Batallion’s “Platoon 49,” a network of aristocratic kinswomen who provided a crucial connection between Liège and the French border.

The patriotism that sustained LDB agents also motivated them to “do their bit,” even under occupation, and to be considered, as one young woman called it, as “soldiers without uniforms” (p. 75). LDB granted its agents military status (recognized by the War Office), which constituted, Proctor notes, a “powerful motivating force.” Members swore an oath to “enlist in the capacity of soldiers in the Allied military observation service until the end of the war” (p. 89). The taking of this oath, later described by members as a moment of great importance, elevated intelligence work to the level of soldiering, clearing it of all stigma. Significantly, LDB’s directors forbade members to call themselves “spies.” They were “agents” or “soldiers.” For these “soldiers,” the term “home front” took on a specific meaning: “their own homes,” Proctor astutely notes, “became fronts,” fronts that were almost as lethal as the military front, and certainly as mind-numbing (p. 98). Witness the case of the brother-and-sister “trainwatching cell” in its rented room next to a train line, working twelve-hour shifts watching German troop trains. The young girl later described her life thus: “There is nothing more horrible than long winter nights in a room without lights in forced idleness ... fighting drowsiness and fearing to fail in one’s duty. The next day taking up again the same life, with nothing, not relaxation nor distraction to come break the somber monotony of this existence” (p. 86). LDB’s spymasters insisted that women were at least as competent at these dangerous and thankless tasks as men. Yet this did not prevent an intelligence officer from stating in a 1926 newspaper article that “Women are fundamentally inaccurate. They experience a constant ‘urge’ to be working in the limelight, jibbing at the patient compilation of dull details which forms the basic job in spying” (p. 50).

Postwar recognition of women’s intelligence work was hampered by the elaboration of a dichotomous imagery of “women in intelligence”: on the one hand, the chaste martyr; on the other, the sexy traitor. The elevation to iconhood of the austere head nurse Edith Cavell (shot in Brussels in 1915 for her role in an escape service for Allied soldiers) set the tone for the commemoration of female commitment. What was celebrated was not ef-

iciency, and certainly not wiliness—much as one might consider this a crucial quality in an underground agent—but on the contrary, the virtues of honesty, chastity (“key to her image was her purity,” Proctor writes [p. 106]), and an unflinching willingness to die for the cause. For Cavell, as for other executed women, “the real celebration was of their ... deaths, not their ... ingenuity” (p. 107). She was, moreover, portrayed as a merciful angel, which enforced her image as a victim. As with other fusill=es, the actual merit of her war work was obscured in postwar accounts.

Women like Cavell “became a useful counterpoint to the enemy within expressed in the alternative account of female spies as unpure and treacherous women” (p. 109). Cavell’s counter-icon, the alleged spy Mata Hari (the Dutch exotic dancer Margaretha Zelle, executed in Paris in 1917 on inflated charges of selling state secrets to the Germans) epitomized the ever-present dread of women’s sexual complicity with the enemy. In between these two highly gendered clich=es there was virtually no space to honor women’s wartime role as active, intelligent patriots. “I was a Secret Service agent, not a ridiculous young girl,” stated the distinguished Belgian agent Marthe McKenna in 1932 (p. 1). It is telling that such a

first-rate resistance worker had to assert the seriousness of her commitment with such energy.

Proctor’s book is a genuine contribution to our understanding of women’s work and war experiences in the twentieth century, not least because it shows so well how the undervaluation of so much women’s work obtained with equal force in the field of state intelligence services. Reading her accounts of barely acknowledged drudgery, one is reminded of the scene in Michael Apted’s 2002 World War Two thriller *Enigma*, when one of Bletchley Park’s telegraph operators approaches the brilliant mathematician hero (played by Dougray Scott), asking whether her and her co-workers’ efforts really matter because “all we hear all day is beep beep bloody beep.” This thriller is instructive on other counts as well: for, towering above the rows of drudges, whom else should appear but the tall blond trope of the inescapable clandestine (Saffron Burrows), a sexually generous beauty who may or may not be a traitor. There is, however, another female role: in a memorable turn, the hero’s Girl Friday (played by Kate Winslet), who sets her underappreciated mind to work in uncovering the dark conspiracy that is at the heart of the drama. There may, then, be some cultural hope for “female intelligence” yet.

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