

# H-Net Reviews

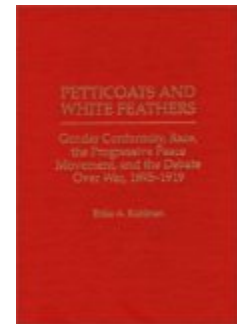
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Erika A. Kuhlman. *Petticoats and White Feathers: Gender Conformity, Race, the Progressive Peace Movement, and the Debate Over War, 1895-1919*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1997. xiv + 146 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-313-30341-8.

Alan Price. *The End of the Age of Innocence: Edith Wharton and the First World War*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996. xvii + 238 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-312-12938-5.

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One of the implications of much of the recent scholarship on World War I may be that war really is too important to be left to the generals. Over the past decade or so, we have seen the development of a rich historical literature which has broadened our understanding of the Great War as a cultural and social event. From Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory*, to Modris Eksteins' *The Rites of Spring*, to Michael Hynes' *A War Imagined*, to Jay Winter's *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, scholars have explored the impact of the war on language, literature, and culture. Others, like Sandra Gilbert and Susan Grubar in *No Man's Land: The Place of the Women Writers in the Twentieth Century. Vol. 2: Sexchanges*, Claire Tylee in *The Great War and Women's Consciousness*, and Susan Kingsley Kent in *Making Peace: The Reconstruction of Gender in Interwar Britain*, have more specifically plumbed women's consciousness and experience of the war. Two recent studies of women, war, and peace fall within this tradition.

The first is Erika A. Kuhlman's *Petticoats and White Feathers: Gender Conformity, Race, the Progressive Peace Movement, and the Debate Over War, 1895-1919*. Relying on the political theories of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci and the linguistic theories of the Russian scholar Mikhail Bakhtin, Kuhlman attempts to explain the development of feminist pacifism in the United States up to and through the First World War. Gramsci's work, she argues, helps historians understand the power relations between the dominant and subordinate groups in capitalist democratic societies. She maintains that his model of cultural hegemony helps to explain "how the prevailing

group uses culture—including the beliefs, values, prejudices, and norms that are embodied in cultural symbols—to define and reinforce its power" (p. 9). Kuhlman argues that Bakhtin's theories of language complement those of Gramsci and help historians "analyze the way words and symbols work in a society to create support for, or dissent from, public policies" (p. 13). Her goal is to apply these theories to the progressive—and especially the progressive feminist—peace movement of the early twentieth century.

Kuhlman notes that feminist pacifism evolved out of the broader progressive peace movement. She begins with the Lake Mohonk Conferences of the 1890s. Attended by idealistic and socially prominent scholars, churchmen, and politicians, these annual conferences focused on the use of international law, arbitration, and arms control as the means by which to limit international conflicts. Disturbed by the Spanish-American War and American imperialism, the Lake Mohonk conferees, after 1900, made a determined effort to attract participants with stronger and more influential political and economic connections. Imbued with progressive ideals of "vigorous masculinity, reason, and practicality" (p. 30), these mostly male newcomers, in effect, co-opted the peace movement and turned it into a practical and efficient social movement based on sound business principles. One organization that reflected this new, vigorous, business-oriented approach to international peace was the World Peace Foundation.

Kuhlman implies a certain irony in the World Peace

Foundation's operations. On the one hand it attempted to lift the peace movement out of "sentimentality" and put it on a sound and practical business footing. Yet, on the other, it pursued what she calls the "irrational" policy of promoting peace through the "re-education of the world" (p. 34). The irony was compounded by the WPF's unsympathetic attitude toward women's concerns and perspectives—apparently considering them part of the sentimentalism which it hoped to eliminate. Although it did maintain a Women's Department, and although it did provide its Director—Anna Sturgis Duryea—with a salary and some financial support, Kuhlman writes that the WPF never took women seriously and came to believe that its resources could be better employed elsewhere.

The outbreak of war in August 1914, combined with the difficulties they faced within the established peace organizations, led women activists to organize the Women's Peace Party. Early organizers included Carrie Chapman Catt, Jane Addams, Lilian Wald, Rose Schneiderman, Fanny Garrison Villard, Crystal Eastman, and others.

The preparedness movement created serious dilemmas for both the World Peace Foundation and the Women's Peace Party. Some progressives advocated a "reasonable" preparedness (p. 52). They maintained that the United States must recognize its responsibilities and prepare itself for possible participation in the war. Of all the great powers, only the United States could—or would—use its might to reform the international system in order to make war less likely in the future. Other progressives spoke of "real preparedness" (p. 53). They argued that real or true preparedness would come only when progressive social and industrial policy could insure the loyalty and commitment of the nation's workingmen.

Peace progressives, both male and female, split first over preparedness and then over American intervention in the war. Some members of both the World Peace Federation and the Women's Peace Party came to support some form of preparedness, while others remained unequivocally opposed. Peace activists in this latter group ultimately formed the American Union Against Militarism, a leftist organization that devised what was virtually a class critique of the preparedness movement.

The U.S. declaration of war in 1917 further split the peace movement. For example, the Massachusetts branch of the Women's Peace Party supported the President, while the more radical New York branch remained steadfast in its opposition to war. Elements of the Amer-

ican Union Against Militarism helped to form a bureau for conscientious objectors, and some members of the Women's Peace Party opposed serving in humanitarian or non-combatant roles, maintaining such service only advanced the war effort. The journal of the New York branch of the Women's Peace Party, the *Four Lights*, was so outspoken in its opposition to the war that it eventually ran afoul of the U.S. Post Office and had to suspend publication (p. 118).

While Kuhlman has tackled an important subject in an innovative way, her book is not without its problems. One unfortunate pattern is a lack of examples to support and illustrate her main points. This may be due to the book's brevity (137 pages of text and notes divided into five chapters), but it often leaves the reader looking and asking for fuller and more developed arguments. For instance, Kuhlman argues that the debate over preparedness was often expressed in gendered language, but she doesn't provide us with clear examples of that language. She maintains that Hudson Maxim, brother of the machine-gun manufacturer, used such gendered language in his tract "Defenseless America." She writes that Maxim "liberally sprinkl[ed] his prose with such words as 'penetrate' and 'invade'—to convey conventional images of a strong manhood ready to protect vulnerable femininity" (p. 51). Now, in some situations, "penetrate" could certainly have a gendered or sexual connotation. But "invade" seems much more problematic, especially when discussing defense policy. Unfortunately, Kuhlman doesn't provide us with the necessary context so we can fully understand the gendered implications of this language.

Similarly, in her discussion of the Congressional debate over war, she argues that proponents of war spoke in gendered terms which were designed to overcome and forestall debate and dissension. "The power of nationalism," she writes, "which was equated with masculinity, loomed large in President Wilson's speech, in the setting of congressional deliberations, and in the debate itself" (p. 87). It may well be true that Wilson, Congress, or the public at large equated nationalism and masculinity, but again Kuhlman does not provide the broad documentation needed to fully make her case.

In other instances she offers matters of interpretation and belief as if they were uncontested fact. Her discussion of the American Union Against Militarism is a case in point. Sounding much like H. C. Engelbrecht and F. C. Hanighen in their 1934 expose of the munitions industry, *Merchants of Death*, she states flatly and without

documentation that the AUAM “realized that preparedness allowed the munitions industries to line their pockets and that government and industry were conspiring to involve the United States in the war” (p. 66). But was the AUAM correct in this assertion? Was there a conspiracy to drag the United States into war? Perhaps there was, but we don’t know because she provides no critical examination of the charge.

Contextual problems also appear in others areas. Throughout, Kuhlman introduces the reader to a variety of peace organizations—the World Peace Federation, the Women’s Peace Party, and American Union Against Militarism and others. But we never get a sense of their size or scope or influence. How big were they? How many chapters did they have? Were they fully national or were they regionally based? Did they have any connections with the religious denominations, such as the Mennonites or Quakers, who opposed the war? Did they have any influence on decision makers and policy? The same is true with her discussion of the *Four Lights*. While its editorial staffing and policies are fascinating, one wonders what impact it had. How was the journal funded? What was its circulation? Was it distributed only in New York City, or did it have a broader impact? Kuhlman leaves us asking for more.

Some of these questions might have been answered with a broader research strategy. Limiting herself almost exclusively to the archival records of the peace societies themselves, we get a good sense of their thinking. But we get little idea of their impact on others. For example, she writes that the peace advocates placed a great deal of emphasis on international law and arbitration as a means of preventing war and violent conflict. As a proud pacifist, Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan should have been highly regarded by the peace movement. Did the movement support Bryan? What did it think of his “cooling off” treaties? Did the peace movement lobby Congress or build public support for their ratification? What did the peace activists think of Bryan’s principled resignation over the Second Lusitania Note in 1915? And with equal significance, what did Bryan and other pro-peace members of the government think of the peace movement? Did they see it as an ally in a common struggle? Did they try to work with it? Unfortunately, we just don’t know.

There are also gaps in her bibliography. She does not use older works like Warren Kuehl’s study of American internationalism between 1890 and 1920, *Seeking World Order* (1969) and Ruhl J. Bartlett’s *The League to Enforce*

*Peace* (1944). Yet, she relies almost exclusively on Arthur Link’s work for her understanding of Wilson, much of which was published between 1954 and 1979. To rely on Link for Wilson is no bad thing in itself, but Wilson studies have moved forward since he published these volumes. She clearly could have benefited from Thomas Knock’s *To End All Wars* (1992), a book which examines the impact of left liberalism on Wilson’s internationalism. Neither does she take advantage of Robert David Johnson’s *The Peace Progressives and American Foreign Relations* (1995).

Alan Price’s *The End of the Age of Innocence: Edith Wharton and the First World War* is a very different kind of book. While Kuhlman attempts to use complex political and linguistic frameworks in her book, Price has written a detailed and straightforward account of Wharton’s humanitarian work during the war. His approach is traditional and virtually a-theoretical, and his book is a solidly researched conventional historical narrative. In short, Price has an interesting story to tell about Wharton, and he tells it simply and well.

Although the tragedy of August 1914 caught Wharton, as it did many others, by surprise, she was very soon involved in a variety of humanitarian activities. Living in Paris, wealthy, recently divorced, and about to begin a major literary work, war was—in 1914—far from her mind. Yet, within days of mobilization, Wharton was serving on the executive committee of the American Ambulance—a charitable organization organized by expatriate Americans to provide medical assistance to the French army. A devout francophile, Wharton would devote the next four years of her life to such humanitarian efforts. In March 1916, her work was formally recognized by the French Government when she was awarded the Legion of Honor.

Wharton’s first efforts were to find shelter, food, medicine, and employment for the wave of Belgian and French refugees that flooded Paris in 1914. The result was the establishment of the American Hostels for Refugees. Working in cooperation with the *Foyer Franco-Belge*, another private relief organization, Wharton’s American Hostels, in the span of one month in the fall of 1914, lodged and clothed 878 refugees, found employment for 153, and provided 16, 287 free meals (p. 34). The scope and efficiency of her operations led the Belgian Government to ask if she could provide similar services for orphaned and refugee children. By 1915, her Children of Flanders Rescue Committee was caring for over 600 Belgian children in addition to 200 elderly and infirmed. Finally, Wharton was instrumental in establishing large tu-

berculosis hospitals (using the American fresh air cure) for both soldiers and civilians.

Wharton moved within a social and literary elite in both the United States and Europe, and she used these connections to raise funds for her work. Not only did she see her friends and acquaintances as potential benefactors, but she personally wrote to thank each of those who contributed to her charities. In addition, she used her published writings to promote the allied and, especially, the French cause in the war. One significant effort, in cooperation with her publisher, Charles Scribner, was the *Book of the Homeless*, a sort of coffee table book to which many of the leading artists, poets, and authors of France, Britain, and the United States contributed. All profits went directly to her work.

The U.S. declaration of war changed the situation dramatically for Wharton. On the one hand she was delighted and thrilled that the United States had finally entered the fight. But, that very intervention radically altered her work. The U.S. Government made the American Red Cross the main instrument of its charitable and humanitarian efforts. And, in a manner reminiscent of the peace movement in the early years of the century, the Red Cross recruited a staff of experienced and high powered banking and business executives to put its operations on a solid business footing. For example, in 1917 it replaced the socially well-connected Mabel Boardman, who had led the American Red Cross since 1904, with Henry P. Davison of J. P. Morgan & Co. The result was

an unavoidable clash with organizations such as Edith Wharton's, which were based on the *noblesse oblige* of a social elite. Price's discussion of the conflict between Wharton's personal approach and the new Red Cross corporatism is one of the most interesting aspects of the book.

Price has produced a rich and detailed study of Wharton's wartime humanitarianism. He has thoroughly mined the Wharton and collateral manuscripts at nearly a dozen archives in the United States and at Harvard's Villa I Tatti in Italy; he has reviewed and cited the standard secondary works available to him. Yet, despite these efforts, he could have pushed his analysis a bit further. For example, his study could have been enriched had he engaged in a more systematic analysis of the role of gender and class in Wharton's humanitarian work. In addition, despite the fact that he briefly mentions Wharton's writing, a more sustained literary analysis of her war and post-war writings would have been very welcome. The war was a profound experience for her, and it certainly must have impacted her writing. It is too bad Price didn't push forward in these directions, for such analyses would have only helped to make what was already a good book much better.

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