

Nancy O'Brien Wagner, ed.. *Alice in France: The World War I Letters of Alice M. O'Brien*. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2017. Illustrations. 216 pp. \$17.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-68134-026-5.

Reviewed by Whitney Walton

Published on H-War (November, 2019)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

These letters from Alice O'Brien are an excellent source for understanding American women's involvement in World War I. They reveal the high demand for American women's service in France in several different capacities, including as drivers, canteen workers, and nurses. Patriotism, anti-German sentiment, and enthusiasm for being useful drove twenty-six-year-old O'Brien to respond to the call for volunteers. Readers learn about the challenges of overseas transport during war, the sorrow over so many young French and American men dead or maimed, and the expectation of victory that enabled everyone to continue.

Editor Nancy O'Brien Wagner carefully reconstructs her grandaunt Alice O'Brien's family and social class background in St. Paul, Minnesota, prior to the outbreak of war in 1914. O'Brien was a well-educated young woman from a family of means involved in the lumber business. After completing her education at the Bennett Finishing School for Young Women in Millbrook, New York, in 1911, she traveled extensively in the United States and abroad; she was an avid car driver, mechanic, and outdoorswoman, and she worked for the suffrage movement. While O'Brien's motivations for volunteering for war work are not entirely clear, Wagner notes that many in O'Brien's peer group of East Coast-educated women and men supported the French even before the United

States entered the war in April 1917. Thereafter, the American Red Cross and other relief organizations redoubled their efforts to assist American soldiers and their allies. Wagner reasonably speculates that O'Brien and three friends applied to work for the American Fund for French Wounded (AFFW), rather than the American Red Cross, because of personal connections, less bureaucracy, and more opportunities, notably to be drivers and mechanics. After providing several testimonials to American loyalty, but undergoing no training, O'Brien and her friends set sail on the French Line ship *Rochambeau* on March 30, 1918.

The letters from the ship convey wartime apprehension about submarine attacks, blackout conditions on board, and sugar shortages, but the heart of the book describes the experience of the German offensive from the perspective of civilians in Paris and the rigors and pleasures of canteen work. After surviving an air raid in Paris unscathed, O'Brien wrote home: "We are living in thrilling times and I would not give up the last few days for all the money in the world" (p. 33). O'Brien and her friend Doris Kellogg did some driving in Paris, fetching and delivering supplies, and constructing a working automobile from parts, but they increasingly yearned to work in a canteen for the Red Cross because the AFFW could not obtain cars from the United States for

the volunteers to drive and repair. Eventually, the AFFW released them from their commitment since it could not provide any work, and the young women joined the Red Cross and headed to a canteen near Chantilly.

O'Brien thrived on the long hours and constant activity at the canteen. She described the food they prepared and distributed, the almost round-the-clock shifts to accommodate French soldiers leaving and returning to the front, and housing for the canteen workers. After a military engagement when wounded soldiers flooded nearby hospitals, the canteen workers pitched in to help in distributing water, food, tobacco, and kind words. They mourned the young men who did not survive.

The letters raise several questions. Wagner suggests a connection between O'Brien's driving and suffrage activism before the war: "owning and driving a car were political statements" (p. 8). It would be interesting to learn more about the effect of the war on her politics. Does O'Brien fit into Lynn Dumenil's analysis of the connection between activism and war service in her book, *The Second Line of Defense: American Women and World War I* (2017)? Wagner hints at such an effect when she writes about the founding of a women's club in 1920-21: "Alice and her contemporaries were charging into the public and political frontiers with the same determination they had brought to the front in France," somewhat of an exaggeration of their time near the front, and perhaps it is impossible to know more since the letters ended when O'Brien returned to the United States (p. 162). Another question is, in what specific ways was O'Brien's account similar to or different from those of other American women in World War I? O'Brien's unquestioned patriotism, support for the Allied cause, and vicious hatred of Germans contrast markedly with the modernist writings of American nurses Ellen Newbold La Motte (1873-1961) and Mary Borden (1886-1948), which Margaret R. Higonnet collected and edited

in *Nurses at the Front: Writing the Wounds of the Great War* (2001). The two works complement one another and invite further research.

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

Citation: Whitney Walton. Review of Wagner, Nancy O'Brien, ed. *Alice in France: The World War I Letters of Alice M. O'Brien*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. November, 2019.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=54000>



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