

Alison S. Fell. *Women as Veterans in Britain and France After the First World War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Pp. 226.

The social and cultural history of the First World War are rapidly developing fields. More researchers are pushing the boundaries of traditional military history to include and better understand the lives of the men in the trenches, the struggle of civilians displaced by war, the pressures faced by those unfit, unable or unwilling to serve, the contribution of francophones, indigenous peoples, and visible minorities, as well as the war's effects on wives, children, and families at home. Among the many facets of this developing research is the role of women in war. This is where Alison Fell's, *Women as Veterans in Britain and France After the First World War* (2018) makes an excellent contribution to First World War historiography. Not only does Fell highlight the incredible acts of individual women from France and Britain, but she also emphasises the role that women played in shaping the post-war societies of their respective countries.

Alison Fell is a Professor of French Cultural History at the University of Leeds and Director of the Leeds Arts and Humanities Research Institute where she is also Co-Investigator for the Gateways to the First World War AHRC Public Engagement Centre. Her impressive list of publications highlights her interest in cultural history, women's history, inter-war history, and First World War history. According to her biographical profile, *Women as Veterans* is the product of research that she had been conducting since 2003 though she is now working on a research project exploring the lives of Belgians living in the United Kingdom during and after the First World War.

*Women as Veterans* examines the ways in which women from France and Britain aligned themselves within the cultural constructs of the 'War Generation' and the 'female veteran identity' from 1915 to 1933. Through the exploration of the lives of former nurses, charity workers, journalists, secret service agents, pilots, members of resistance networks, and female industrial workers, among others, Fell argues that women were united in their fight for and use of female veteran status. Using case studies, she examines how women gained societal advantages and explores the different ways in which women interpreted war work, as well as the varying degree of success

that they experienced. Additionally, Fell outlines the elements of the male war veteran identity that women used in order “to have a voice in a political climate in which women were rarely heard on the public stage,” as well as the limits of the identity of female war veteran (p. 4). In so doing, Fell ultimately examines why and how women “staked a claim for the importance and validity of their stories and perspectives” (p.19).

Fell concedes that, “The women who were most able to exploit their veteran status to gain entry into public life were the ones who had not strayed too far from ‘feminine’ respectability,” as well as those with a degree of wealth to come back to (p. 90). However, expanding on the traditional interpretation that ‘active service’ for women was primarily based on social class affecting their war experience, Fell argues that self-identifying as part of the ‘War Generation’ led to a collective generational identity which came with heightened visibility and societal benefits. She states that “the war veteran was a jealously guarded and highly contested social identity in the interwar years,” meaning that many male veterans struggled with accepting women as veterans (p. 8). As Fell explores, in both England and France there existed a veteran hierarchy with male combatants who had been in physical harm at the top. Due to this hierarchy, even nursing sisters and female civilians working in dangerous areas had to fight hard for veteran status as they lacked ‘trench experience.’ For this reason, few women chose to push for recognition of their veteran status after the war and instead prioritised domestic life as wives and mothers. While Fell acknowledges that the women highlighted by her study were perhaps outside the norm, she intentionally chose to focus on women who did not fully identify with the more traditional post-war roles available to them, and instead “turned to their wartime identities as a key factor in their self-presentations” and in so doing, carved out new models of female identity in the post-war society (p.10).

A key element to this book is the comparison between the experiences of women veterans in France and those in Britain. Throughout the work, Fell ensures that her readers understand the dissimilarities between the cultural frameworks that were affecting women. The 1920s veteran culture in each country differed, as did the women’s experience in relation to wartime service. In France, the veteran movement was bigger and more politically driven than it was in Britain. Additionally, since Britain militarised women through the women’s auxiliary services, they inherently created a female

military identity, though it differed from that of the combatant male. In contrast, France never formally militarised women, thus the understanding of military identity was almost exclusively male. However, due to France's experience with occupation, women who worked in resistance movements and intelligence services were often heroized and considered combatants, though such a position was considered a direct result of exceptional circumstances. Despite these differences, Fell presents the stories of French and British women side by side throughout her book. Though such presentation made the greater context of the experiences confusing at times, it did help to highlight the elements of shared experience that would otherwise been lost.

The book is divided into five chapters, each focusing on broad themes such as "The Afterlives of First World War Heroines" and "Writing as a Veteran: Women's War Memoirs." Within each chapter, Fell weaves together the women's experiences through the use of newspaper and journal articles, diaries, journals and personal correspondence, speeches, postcards, published works (and different editions of said works), as well as a number of other source material. The true strength of this book and where it really adds to the historiography of women and the First World War is that it presents a collection of women who contributed to the war effort in both traditional ways such as through nursing and charity work, as well as those working in underappreciated roles such as female espionage agents, aviators, journalists, and industrial workers. Fell includes a wide array of women to demonstrate the roles they played in the commemoration of the First World War, the post-war political sphere, and the ways in which they were sometimes promoted as symbolic heroines by the state and other times received no formal recognition of their service whatsoever. She examines the stories of women who struggled and had to overcome much hardship in their fight for recognition, as well as those whose actions during the war meant that they were unquestioningly considered as women veterans.

One area that I wish had been included was the role and reception of female artists during and immediately following the First World War. Fell mentions some women writers and the ways in which they shaped their war experience and veteran status through their text, but she makes no mention of female war artists who captured the conflict in other ways. Women such as Olive Mudie-Cooke, an ambulance driver, travelled to France where she drew scenes of the

war and the British Voluntary Aid Detachment workers that she worked alongside. Others like Norah Neilson-Gray, a volunteer nurse, were commissioned by the Women's Work Sub-Committee of the Imperial War Museum in the 1920s to produce artwork representing women and their war experiences. Through their own service these women inherently gained war work experience, so I am curious to know the reception of their work and whether they used their veteran status to enhance their status as artists. Though perhaps such a question is worthy of its own study, war art beyond writing would have been an interesting topic to expand on.

This book would be an excellent addition to the reading list of any undergraduate or graduate level course discussing the role of women in the First World War, and/or post-war European culture. It is also recommended for anyone interested in learning more about powerful fascinating women. For a Canadian perspective, an excellent complement to Fell's book is Cynthia Toman's *Sister Soldiers of the Great War: The Nurses of the Canadian Army Medical Corps* (UBC Press, 2016) as it explores the ways in which nursing sisters often struggled to assimilate back into society after the war and looked back on their wartime experience with a degree of nostalgia similar to some of the women that Fell discusses. Additionally, for another book which explores the amazing but often overlooked contributions of a woman to the First World War, see Susan Mann's *Margaret Macdonald: Imperial Daughter* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010).

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