Introduction

> The decade 1910–20 saw not only an advance in the position of women, unparalleled in any similar period, throughout the civilized world; it saw also an entire reversal of the public attitude towards their claim to equal citizenship. Yet this is true only of the second half of the period. . . . It was only the outbreak of the World War which brought about that great and sweeping reform in the position of women which had been accomplished by 1920.
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> Encyclopaedia Britannica, *1922*

On 4 February 1916, *The Pioneer and Labour Journal* of Woolwich reported that "Elsie Mary Davey, aged 17 years, who has been missing from her home at Fleet-road, Hampstead, since January 10, has been found engaged on munition work in a factory at Woolwich. In trying to obtain assistance from the Marylebone magistrate on Monday, the mother—a widow—said the girl was 'mad on munitions.'" In this account, which is reminiscent of that of a boy's running away to sea, munitions work figures as an alluring wartime adventure for girls and young women. It offered them a means of escape, if escape they wanted, a way of legitimately moving to distant places around the country. Because the wages were at first livable and later lucrative, munitions work proffered independence, a reliable income, and even an improved standard of living. Financial independence, mobility around the country, and some disposable income either to save up or to use for immediate pleasure were attributes that had characterized men's work before the war far more than the low-paying jobs available to women of the working class.

This book offers an examination of the experience of women munitions workers in Britain in World War I. Munitions factories were the arena in which British women's experiences of the Great War were most comparable to those of working-class men, of "Tommy." The numbers of women in munitions work were far larger than those in any other wartime role; indeed, they constituted the army of women who were most directly involved in supplying the forces and thereby conducting the war on the

home front. They were the first stage in the production line of death that ended at the front; they were well aware of the lethal nature of their manufactures and believed themselves to be essentially involved in the conduct of the war.

I focus on the approximately one million women who worked in munitions factories in a variety of capacities, ranging from unskilled assemblers to skilled fitters and turners. In spite of their celebration by the wartime press, middle- and upper-class women munitions workers were a tiny fraction of the whole. Thus at times, unless they are of particular significance, they are overlooked in my assessments in order to reach a class specificity appropriate to the dominant portion of the group. However, British women who worked in munitions factories in World War I came from all classes and all strata within each class, as well as all regions of Britain (including some from the dominions). They worked in factories all over Britain, in very different jobs, and earned wages with sizable discrepancies. A matrix of class, age, and other factors of difference underlies this whole book and I have sought to illuminate these factors wherever possible.

This study includes the middle-class women who held quasi-professional jobs such as welfare supervisors, factory inspectors, and women police and patrols, as well as reform and religious association workers, insofar as they dealt with women munitions workers. In a context in which women availed themselves of unprecedented employment opportunities created by the massive dislocation of the war, the interaction between women of different classes on the shop floor and in other venues associated with munitions factories failed to create cross-class gender bonding. Instead, this interaction exacerbated class tensions to a degree that would significantly affect postwar reconstruction.

The testimony of the articulate upper and middle classes, so powerfully recorded in the novels and memoirs of the war, can answer questions about the gendered experience of those women. Although a small proportion of the educationally and economically privileged participated directly as nurses or workers in the war effort or gained work as professionals, they more typically took newly available clerical jobs or confined themselves to charitable works. Clerical work offered middle-class—and some working-class—young women both financial and social independence. Yet it was mostly working-class women who learned new skills with machinery and experienced sharp increases in pay. For the women munitions workers who were able to do "men's work" for the duration, their jobs often involved challenge and the excitement of operating

powerful equipment. Women who were trained as oxyacetylene welders enjoyed the creative satisfaction of their trade. Women drove electric cranes, locomotives, and trucks at a time when a woman driving a car drew social comment. Women who were trained as fitters and turners were made well aware that they were privileged to join a trade normally the preserve of men.

Many women munitions workers found themselves in unfamiliar surroundings. They commonly moved across the country to take jobs at new factories, and even those who travelled lesser distances often found themselves in new towns, or at least new domestic situations, surrounded by other women workers in large hostels, or boarding with local women and their families. Being away from their own homes and families frequently meant greater social freedom: even in the relatively controlled situation of hostels, women workers could still exercise some discretion about what they did in the evenings and on Sundays off, with whom and until when. In this way too they were thwarting conventions of women's social behavior that had affected women of the working class as much as, or perhaps more than, women of the middle and upper classes.

During the war the woman munitions worker became a powerful symbol of modernity. She challenged the gender order through her patriotic skilled work and control of machinery, and she undermined class differences through her increased spending power. Robert Graves and Alan Hodge later claimed that at the end of the war "the 'modern girl' was still the popular heroine that she had become when working on munitions in factories."[1] British society was well primed to perceive and discuss changes in women's roles and behavior. Not only had the years immediately prior to the war been the culmination of the largest and most dramatic phase of the suffrage campaign, but at the same time feminists had broadened their agenda and raised issues such as female sexual pleasure, homosexuality, and birth control.[2] In the same years, experimental cultural modernism was so powerful that many believed an important transformation had taken place.[3]

1. Robert Graves and Alan Hodge, *The Long Week-End: A Social History of Great Britain 1918–1939* (1940; reprint, New York: Norton Library, 1963), 43.

2. Susan Kingsley Kent, *Sex and Suffrage in Britain, 1860–1914* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 22. On the significant developments in American feminism in the 1910s, see Nancy Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

3. David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 28; Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989). On the connections

The word "flapper" came to signify the modern young woman on the eve of the war and implied physical and social liberation as well as changing sexual mores that crossed class boundaries.[4] The expansion of regulating agencies during the war was central to the experience of women workers. The social and sexual behavior of women workers was observed, decried, and regulated by the government, military authorities, and voluntary middle-class women's groups, a reflex of a society in great fear of losing control. There is insufficient evidence concerning the intimate aspects of women munitions workers' lives to say whether they experienced the war as sexual release, despite contemporary accusations that the working class created huge numbers of illegitimate "war babies." As before the war, many women workers aimed to live by the tenets of respectability. The interaction between women workers and the mostly middle-class women police, patrols, welfare supervisors, and social workers should be seen as a process more complex than class conflict or social control. With new opportunities for women of all classes, class relations among women adapted to new circumstances, but interclass tension continued.

For many women of the working class, the war offered escape from jobs of badly paid drudgery. Compared to domestic service, work in munitions factories was free of servility and far better paid. Elsie Bell recalled that her wartime job at Pirelli's cable works was "very nice" after domestic service "'cause you had more freedom and you were amongst more people," on top of the fact that she was earning around three pounds a week compared to her previous half crown (two shillings and sixpence).[5]

Not everyone reacted the same way. After all, a job in a munitions factory was usually physically exhausting, protracted work in an unpleasant and even dangerous environment. Lottie Barker's overwhelming feeling at the Armistice was relief that she could quit her job as a crane driver at the Chilwell shell-filling factory and leave "the confines of the factory, that had held us captive for three years with never one single moment to relax."[6] But a widely shared sense among munitions workers that they had proven themselves able and hard workers, and deserved to

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between Futurism, Expressionism, and the outbreak of the war, see George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 54–59.

4. Graves and Hodge, *Long Week-End,* 43–44.

5. Imperial War Museum (hereafter IWM), Department of Sound Records (hereafter DSR), 7435/01.

6. Lottie Barker, "My Life as I Remember It, 1899–1920," TS, 62, Brunel University Library.

be considered so, drove them to large, angry demonstrations against their demobilization at the end of the war. It was not that they thought they could or should continue to make the munitions of war, but they demanded that their hard work be recognized by a public commitment to their continued employment in industrial work. They vehemently resisted returning to the servility, low pay, long hours, poor conditions, and lack of autonomy of domestic service.

Contemporary observers hailed the benefits of women's wartime opportunities. Flora Annie Steel's assessment of women's situation at the time of the Armistice was one of apocalyptic optimism:

> Verily and indeed, if we women have done something in this war, the war has done more for us women. It has taught us to recognise ourselves, to justify our existence. Ideas that for the most part were but the baseless fabric of a dreamer's vision have taken form and the world is fresh and new for womanhood. Why, our very carriage is different, as anyone with eyes can see! As Kipling puts it, we walk now as if we owned ourselves, and we stand closer to each other.[7]

Working-class women benefited from the war in the gender-specific ways of increased employment opportunities, higher wages (up to three times their prewar rates of pay), and a chance to learn new skills. Not all women experienced greater gender consciousness during the war, but the evidence suggests that, at least for some women, wartime work created gender-related growth in self-esteem and assertiveness. The gender consciousness that existed among women munitions workers was not, however, an identity that cut across class lines. Rather, their sense of themselves as women was constructed around options available to them as members of the working class.

"ON HER THEIR LIVES DEPEND"

The massive recruitment of civilians for the total effort of the Great War opened up direct war participation far beyond the bounds of the regular armed forces. In the process, the gendering of patriotic involvement became negotiable. While the primary, heroic, mythical figure of the soldier remained resolutely male, the introduction of women's paramilitary organizations raised questions about the precise nature of the mas-

7. Flora Annie Steel, "Woman Makes a New World," *Daily Mail,* 12 November 1918. See also H. M. Principal Lady Inspector of Factories, *Annual Report of the Chief Inspector of Factories and Workshops for the Year 1916,* Cd. 8570, 1917–18, vol. 14, 161, 7.

culine domain of soldiering. As women approached the battle zone in their supportive roles, clerical and transport functions were no longer exclusively masculine preserves. Physically distant from the battle zone but directly involved in propagating the war, women's role in making the munitions of war transgressed notions of war as a masculine enterprise. Much as the working men of Britain were expected to join up and go off to fight for king and country, and to lay down their lives if necessary, so working women were expected to do their share by taking over the critical jobs in industry. The poster that proclaimed "On Her Their Lives Depend" sought to draw women into munitions factories by glamorizing the munitions worker's patriotic importance. But its message became a commonly held belief, particularly in the wake of the May 1915 "shells scandal" in which the Northcliffe press attacked the government for hampering the army with an inadequate supply of munitions.[8]

The woman munitions worker, dubbed a "munitionette," was also nicknamed "Tommy's sister." A standard term for the representative British private soldier, "Tommy" originated in nineteenth-century War Office manuals. Thomas Atkins was the name used in sample entries instructing soldiers how to fill out their forms. It was said that the Duke of Wellington had chosen the name in honor of a soldier who had been exceptionally brave.[9] Tommy Atkins became a national folk hero through Rudyard Kipling's verse of the 1890s, in which the poet paid homage to the ordinary, working-class soldier who was treated with contempt in time of peace and then put on the front line in time of war.[10] With the same amalgam of class condescension and genuine appreciation, in 1916 Hall Caine paid tribute to Tommy's sister:

> They are in the factories now, five hundred thousand of them all over the country, a vast army of female soldiers, who stand for British womanhood. . . . We talk of the British Tommy and his unconquerable light-heartedness, as if he were a peculiar type, but the Cockney girl is Tommy's own sister, with the same humour and the same tameless blood in her. . . . Tommy's sister in the munition factories, like Tommy in the trenches, lives in the last moment, now joking, teasing, laughing and wriggling, and then fuming and flaming and weeping over her troubles as if the world were coming to an end.[11]

8. R. J. Q. Adams, *Arms and the Wizard: Lloyd George and the Ministry of Munitions 1915–1916* (London: Cassell & Co., 1978), 31–35.

9. Ralph Durand, *A Handbook to the Poetry of Rudyard Kipling* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1914), 26–27.

10. See, for example, "To T. A." and "Tommy," in *The Complete Barrack-Room Ballads of Rudyard Kipling* (London: Methuen & Co., 1973), ed. Charles Carrington, 29–33.

11. T. Hall Caine, *Our Girls: Their Work for the War* (London: Hutchinson & Co.,

The image of a female counterpart of Tommy Atkins has also been invoked to emphasize the significance of the war experience of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC), through which women entered into the military forces in Britain in World War I, albeit in clerical and service positions. Thus when one WAAC chose to publish her letters home at the end of the war she called them *The Letters of Thomasina Atkins*.[12] Similarly, the World War I image of "the girl behind the man behind the gun" has been taken to apply to members of the WAAC, although during the war it was used in posters aimed at recruiting women into munitions factories.[13] But the number of WAACs was a small fraction of the women who entered the munitions factories.

My point here is not to make invidious distinctions between various women's roles in the war in order to claim that women munitions workers were more critical to the war effort or that they sacrificed more. Nurses and women ambulance drivers behind the lines in France knew the dehumanization and numbing terrors of the war zone as those in Britain could never know them.[14] Yet nurses, the Florence Nightingales of World War I, performed the maternal, nurturing role of healers, those who worked to restore life to the decimated, emasculated victims of war.

In contrast, women munitions workers, besides being numerically more of an army, were the first stage of the production line of war: they made the guns, shells, explosives, aircraft, and other matériel that "made" the war at the front. They could not consistently partake of the pacifist opposition to war that was available to, and subscribed to by, some nurses, members of the Voluntary Aid Detachments (VADs), and ambulance drivers. Women munitions makers were utterly implicated in the "making" of war. It is probable that most of them were at least morally comfortable with their direct involvement in the propagation of war; those on the home front who opposed the war were a vilified minority in every class.

1916), 66–70. See also Deborah Thom, "Tommy's Sister: Women at Woolwich in World War I," in *Minorities & Outsiders,* vol. 2 of *Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity,* ed. Raphael Samuel (London: Routledge, 1989), 144–57.

12. *The Letters of Thomasina Atkins* by "Private (W.A.A.C.) on Active Service" (New York: George H. Doran, 1918).

13. Elizabeth Crosthwait, "'The Girl Behind the Man Behind the Gun': The Women's Army Auxiliary Corps, 1914–18," in *Our Work, Our Lives, Our Words: Women's History & Women's Work,* ed. Leonore Davidoff and Belinda Westover (London: Macmillan Education, 1986), 161–81.

14. See, for example, Lynn Knight, introduction to *We That Were Young,* by Irene Rathbone (New York: Feminist Press at CUNY, 1989), xv.

In many ways, they were subject to a militaristic regimen. The hostels built to house them near the factories had a barracks atmosphere. Women munitions workers put in long hours on regular shifts six and sometimes seven days a week, were disciplined by various agents of authority, wore uniforms, and were continually urged to work hard, to increase production, and thus to help to win the war. At least at Woolwich Arsenal, women workers were known to the office by their number rather than their name.[15] All over Britain, the factories in which they worked were deafeningly noisy, full of noxious fumes, often unheated, and usually located either in the industrial parts of cities or in the remote countryside, surrounded by fields of mud.

Like the men in the trenches, women munitions workers received public acclamation for their part in the war effort. For example, the *Daily Mail* proclaimed: "Only those who are daily risking their lives and safety, flying over the scenes of strife and warfare, can fully comprehend how much they owe to the women aeroplane makers. For in the skill and care of the hands that construct the machine the lives of the men are held."[16] The burden of doing what their country needed and expected was lightened for women workers by the respect and gratitude expressed in the press and in a few public ceremonies. A number of women munitions workers received the Order of the British Empire for bravery during explosions or accidents and for injuries they suffered.[17] On 20 April 1918, a special service for London munitions workers was held at St. Paul's Cathedral, during which the "Last Post" was played for those who had died.[18] They were recognized in the charitable works of middle- and upper-class women, who knitted for the troops and sold flowers in order to build huts for women workers.

It was commonly believed that women munitions makers worked for reasons beyond the high wages, that in fact their ambitions were fired by the patriotic cause of war. Newspapers, frustrated by the censorship that limited their coverage of the war at the front, seized on munitions factories as scenes of the war at home. In March 1917, *The Englishwoman* published a one-act play, "The Munition Worker," the dramatic tension of which

15. Caroline Rennles recalled that this made her feel "like a soldier." IWM, DSR, 000566/07, 16.

16. G. Ivy Sanders, "Women Aeroplane Builders," *Daily Mail,* 11 August 1916.

17. For example, "Blind Heroine's Medal Presentation at Brighton," *The Times,* 17 May 1918, 3; "The Empire Medal: Remarkable Record of Brave Deeds by Women & Men," *Sheffield Weekly Independent,* 12 January 1918, 2.

18. "Service for Munition Workers," *The Times,* 9 March 1918, 3.

centers on Tina, a skilled shell worker who is dying of a consumptive complaint but refuses to be placed in a rest home by the factory matron and doctor. She explains that when she heard she could work in a munitions factory,

> God was talkin' to me, and He'd never done that before, 'cos of course I'm too poor for the likes of Him, and He said, 'Tina, you must go along and make shells for your country, and never think you won't have the strength,' He says, 'I'll give you the strength,' and to this day He's given it to me, Matron, and there's nothing you can say to me—nothing—for my country wants me![19]

The doctor and matron urge Tina to take a spell at the rest home for munitions workers, but she refuses because there is nothing in the world she wants to do more than keep on turning out as many shells as possible, and thus help the men at the front to kill Germans. Finally, they resign themselves to the fact that she "will die as surely on the battlefield as any of our heroes" but comfort themselves with the thought that Tina's "spirit is the spirit of a whole nation soaring towards Heaven."[20]

Although their deaths were only a fraction of those of the armed forces, a significant number of women and men munitions workers laid down their lives for their country as surely as did the troops. Of the women who worked in munitions factories in World War I, many (certainly hundreds, perhaps upward of a thousand) were killed and others maimed, poisoned, or injured in the processes of making explosives, filling shells, and working with fast, heavy machinery.[21] Of course, this is not to suggest that their sacrifices or suffering approached those of the men who were physically or psychologically scarred by or killed in the war.[22] Nevertheless, suffer and die women munitions workers did. When their deaths were publicly announced, they too were called noble; but for reasons of security and national morale, these factory injuries and

19. Alec Holmes, "The Munition Worker: A Play in One Scene," *The Englishwoman* 33 (March 1917): 264.

20. Ibid., 255–70.

21. David Mitchell estimated that "several hundred women" died in munitions factory explosions during the Great War. *Women on the Warpath: The Story of the Women of the First World War* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1966), 248. Other writers eschew attempting to guess the number. My own estimate that the number was well into the hundreds and perhaps over a thousand is derived by assessing the prevalence of the explosions for which there are records and extrapolating to include those that are likely to have gone unrecorded.

22. J. M. Winter asserts that the "best estimate" shows that 722,785 British servicemen died in the First World War. *The Great War and the British People* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), 71.

fatalities were covered up as far as possible.[23] Numerous accounts tell of women who witnessed or were close to a fatal explosion and who returned to work as soon as the dead and wounded had been removed and the debris cleared. Munitions workers also knew that their factories were targets of the zeppelins and airplanes that bombed coastal areas and London—one hit would have an exponential effect.

According to public mythology, the male experience of war included patriotic service, being under fire, and heroism to the point of dying for one's country. Insofar as women munitions workers' experience of war shared some of the features of this mythological construct, they too were publicly praised and a few given militaristic honors. When they sought by their own agency to control and shape that experience to their own ends, however, they were harshly and publicly condemned, were considered threatening by male coworkers, and were widely criticized for exhibiting autonomy in their social behavior and the ways they chose to spend their increased income. They were accused of sexual promiscuity, drunkenness, and wanton extravagance and were subjected to the surveillance of newly created women police forces. Because women's experience of war was constituted by the opening up of a temporary liminal gender space between normal expectations of feminine and masculine behavior, in which women appropriated masculine roles and characteristics, it posed a threat to the hegemonic gender order of peacetime.

Despite the comparable dimensions of the experiences of Tommy Atkins and Tommy's sister, the lives of World War I women munitions workers have not become part of the fabric of British culture. Paul Fussell has described the ways in which the trench warfare experience has permeated literary culture since the war.[24] In response to the exclusion of women's experience of the war from Fussell's book, Claire Tylee has sought to recapture women's cultural memory of the war through their writing.[25] Yet the factory-floor experience of Tommy's sister has attracted little scholarly attention, in part because few written records were left by the women involved. Further, women's factory experience, lacking warriors, battles, and other traditional components of war, has usually been

23. Short notices of some explosions did appear in the press, but not for all explosions, nor were they given the prominence they warranted. It was only when an explosion was inescapably known to the public that it received detailed coverage.

24. Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975).

25. Claire Tylee, *The Great War and Women's Consciousness: Images of Militarism and Womanhood in Women's Writings, 1914–64* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1990).

viewed by historians as an aberration from normal employment patterns rather than as involvement in war. To the extent that feminist scholars have shared pacifism and belief in the interrelationship between feminism and pacifism, we have had ideological difficulties with evaluating women's work in munitions factories. I do not claim that making the munitions of war was a liberating or inherently good process for women or that women's increased participation in war is a feminist goal. Rather, I argue that munitions making needs to be seen as a sphere of activity within the war effort replete with its own moral problems, dangers, and discomfort. I hope a female experience of war, a war endured and fought in the close, grinding confines of the factory, can be recuperated and retained as part of Britain's cultural memory of the Great War.

HISTORICIZING EXPERIENCE

This study is not a narrative of the policy decisions and attitudes of the government and male trade unions that allowed the wholesale entry of women into areas of work from which they were previously excluded. My aim, rather, is to discover and interpret the experience of being a woman munitions worker in Britain in the Great War. My understanding of experience as a category of historical analysis is that people's responses to changes and events in their own lives and circumstances reconstitute their self-identities and their understanding of their positions in relation to others. Women's experience of World War I, therefore, was a composite of how they responded to the changes in their class- and gender-defined circumstances as the demands of total war opened up a liminal space between gender roles as they had normally operated before the war.

By the term "experience" I mean both women's individual lives and their shared circumstances as munitions workers during the war. The term implies not only that women workers were exposed to new realities but also that they recognized and responded to them.[26] My intention is to historicize the experience of women munitions workers in World War

26. Clifford Geertz emphasizes the dimension of individual response in human experience, which he says makes all experience construed experience. *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 405. My use of the term "experience" here is similar to that proposed by Mary Jean Corbett, *Representing Femininity: Middle-Class Subjectivity in Victorian and Edwardian Women's Autobiographies* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 8–9. See also Ruth Roach Pierson, "Experience, Difference, Dominance and Voice in the Writing of Canadian Women's History," in *Writing Women's History: International Perspectives,* ed. Karen Offen, Ruth Roach Pierson, and Jane Rendall (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), 79–106.

I by identifying the shared dimensions of the lives of that group and searching for the ways in which, as a cohort, they constructed the meanings of being a woman munitions worker. But at the same time as seeking the commonality of their experience, it is critical to be aware of the diversity among the women who were munitions workers and the very different ways in which munitions work shaped their lives.

World War I women munitions factory workers in Britain, despite their diversity, formed a cohort that acquired new jobs and in many cases new skills.[27] They gained public recognition for the national importance of their work, a recognition that led to greater self-esteem for many workers. Together they shared the exhaustion of long shifts and the dangers inherent in many areas of munitions work. A subgroup among them bore the visible emblems of yellow skin and orange hair, effects of the poisoning induced by working with TNT. For many, the experience of working in a large factory with so many other women was novel, a significant contrast to their cramped or isolated working quarters before the war.

The vast majority of women munitions workers were of the working class. When they confronted the hostility of some male coworkers and the efforts of male trade unionists to exclude them from postwar industry, they were brought face to face with their subordination as women within their own class. But when they dealt with middle- and upper-class women war workers and with the middle-class women who served as welfare supervisors, police, and club leaders, they sharply confronted their status as members of the working class. Thus women munitions workers knew that they could not identify simply either as workers or as women. Their increased income, newfound discretionary control over disposable money, and the industrial assertiveness that led to their increased union membership all challenged their subordination as women both at home and in the labor movement. Probably few working-class women ever believed that they could overcome class differences sufficiently to form any kind of class-blind feminist movement. As Florence Bell noted in 1919, while ruminating about the likelihood of women of different classes understanding one another in the postwar world,

27. This study shares, unfortunately, in the English bias of much of so-called British history. Although munitions factories in Scotland and Wales are within its parameters, the bulk of the evidence on which it is based deals with factories in England. There were munitions factories in Ireland; they receive bare mention in the sources I have used. Irish women who moved to England to work in factories during the war receive more attention than the Irish factories.

> The working class have always known a very great deal about the well-to-do; many of them have been in domestic service themselves, or have associated with domestics, and the domestic class obviously have a very intimate knowledge of the daily life of their employers. The employer has not always the same intimate knowledge of the daily life of the woman at the works; although most of the well-to-do now know a great deal more about the working class than they did before. Public opinion requires them to do so.[28]

The few middle- and upper-class women who worked in munitions factories gained a detailed appreciation of the daily lives of the working class. But wartime cross-class interaction did nothing to persuade working-class women that there was any significant newfound sympathy or understanding on the part of their more fortunate colleagues. Without hope of meaningful or lasting bonding with women above their own station, but strengthened by their employment, income, skills, and patriotic status, women munitions workers gained autonomy as women within the limits imposed on them by class.

Another reason for salvaging and interpreting women munitions workers' experience is to further the feminist scholarly project of probing the intersections of gender and war.[29] Gender is disrupted, constructed, and reconstructed during war.[30] Such gendering and regendering occurs in state policy and in all arenas and media of wartime discourse. Essential to the gendering of war is the meaning that both male and female participants give to their roles. Interpreting the meaning for women munitions workers of their own experience in war thus becomes a project crucial to the deconstruction of wartime gendering. To find this meaning, we must look at all dimensions of their experience both as it was represented in wartime discourse and as it can be constructed from the records of what they did and when, where, and how they did it throughout the war.

This book is founded on the premise that it is not only possible but

28. Florence Bell, "Women at the Works—and Elsewhere," *Fortnightly Review* 106 (1 December 1919): 911.

29. For further discussion of the intersections of gender and war, see Miriam Cooke and Angela Woollacott, "Introduction," *Gendering War Talk,* ed. Cooke and Woollacott (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993). Other volumes concerned with the interconnections between gender and war are Margaret Randolph Higonnet et al., *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987) and Helen Cooper et al., *Arms and the Woman: War, Gender and Literary Representation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989).

30. By "gender" I mean the social and cultural construction of ideas of femininity and masculinity, which are linked to but distinct from biological differences between women and men.

crucial to study a period on its own terms rather than in the light of later issues or concerns that subsequent decades might cast backward.[31] The war was a searing epoch unto itself that no one who lived through it could forget. As Samuel Hynes opens his account of how the war transformed culture: "The First World War was the great military and political event of its time; but it was also the great *imaginative* event. It altered the ways in which men and women thought not only about war but about the world."[32] For the women who made the munitions of war, it was their war, a war in which they had been caught up and were centrally involved. So much was changing about the world that it was not unreasonable for them to hope that, especially given their hard work and dedication to the war effort, they might have a significantly better position in industry when the war was over.

The debate among the current generation of historians about the effects of World War I on women in Britain has been waged in terms of changes that can be seen to have outlasted the war, that is, through the lens of the postwar period. The first position in this debate was taken by several social and political historians who saw the war as an apocalyptic liberation for women because of their novel roles, their newly won partial right to vote, and a greater assertiveness, all of which, it was contended, had lasting impact.[33] The response to this position, the argument that the war changed nothing for women, has been called both "the new feminist pessimism" and "the revisionist interpretation."[34] Those who take this position argue that the war was a victory for patriarchy, which

31. Lizabeth Cohen has argued for the importance of assessing the historical meaning of a period on its own terms rather than by subsequent developments. *Making A New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 367. E. P. Thompson similarly issues a warning against reading history "in the light of subsequent preoccupations, and not as it in fact occurred. Only the most successful . . . are remembered. The blind alleys, the lost causes, and the losers themselves are forgotten." *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963; reprint, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), 12.

32. Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (London: The Bodley Head, 1990), ix.

33. Arthur Marwick, *The Deluge: British Society and the First World War* (London: The Bodley Head, 1965), 93–94. Mitchell, *Women on the Warpath,* xv–xvi. Adams, *Arms and the Wizard,* 112.

34. Sylvia Walby calls this position "the new feminist pessimism." *Patriarchy at Work: Patriarchal and Capitalist Relations in Employment* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986), 156. In an essay on the effects of World War II on women in Britain, Penny Summerfield has proposed that it is time to go beyond what she labels the "revisionist" historical interpretation that war changed nothing for women. "Women, War and Social Change: Women in Britain in World War II," in *Total War and Social Change,* ed. Arthur Marwick (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), 95–118.

resisted the challenge of women performing a multitude of different roles and tasks by in fact hardening the distinction between "men's work" and "women's work."[35] Underlying this debate are common assumptions that the war was a powerful force that bore on women's roles, women's experience, and attitudes toward women.[36] The historiographical debate about women and war reaches well beyond the impact of World War I on women in Britain.[37]

My study is a conscious attempt to move beyond the terms of this entire debate to look for what was of significance to women munitions workers during the war. I consider women's work during the war not as an aberration in the pattern of women's employment in the early twentieth century—a view in which its importance is gauged by what did or did not change—but as women's participation in the war. The women who worked in munitions factories believed themselves to be directly engaged in the war effort, as well as earning their living. They believed they deserved whatever wages they could earn, and they tolerated extraordinary working shifts and conditions because of the demands of the war effort. It is critical to view their wartime lives from their perspective (rather than those of the government, the employers, and the male trade unions) and to recognize their awareness that their employment was dictated by the war. For Tommy's sister, munitions making was just as much an experience of war as being in the armed forces was for Tommy. There are multiple

35. The most important articulation of this view is Gail Braybon, *Women Workers in the First World War: The British Experience* (London: Croom Helm, 1981; reprint, Routledge, 1990). In this pioneering book, Braybon examines men's attitudes toward women working in World War I and presents an overall picture of the shifts in women's employment during the war. Braybon's conclusions were a needed antidote to the apocalyptic tone of previous writers because they underscore the systemic power of patriarchy. In a second book coauthored with Penny Summerfield, *Out of the Cage: Women's Experiences in Two World Wars* (London: Pandora, 1987), Braybon, in contrast, emphasizes the positive, liberating aspects of the war for women.

36. See also Deborah Thom, "Women and Work in Wartime Britain," in *The Upheaval of War: Family, Work and Welfare in Europe, 1914–1918,* ed. Richard Wall and Jay Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 317. A body of unpublished research also exists: Marion Kozak, "Women Munition Workers During the First World War with Special Reference to Engineering" (D.Phil. thesis, University of Hull, 1976); Deborah Thom, "Women Munition Workers at Woolwich Arsenal in the 1914–1918 War" (M.A. thesis, University of Warwick, 1975); Antonia Ineson, "Science, Technology, Medicine, Welfare and the Labour Process; Women Munition Workers in the First World War" (M.Phil. thesis, University of Sussex, 1981); Sallie Heller Hogg, "The Employment of Women in Great Britain 1891–1921" (D.Phil. thesis, Oxford University, 1967).

37. The essays in Higonnet et al., *Behind the Lines,* cover different aspects of women's work and lives in various countries in both world wars and are linked by the premise that gender definitions shifted through both.