

WOMEN WORKERS IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR

Gail Braybon

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WOMEN'S HISTORY

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GAIL BRAYBON

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To:

My parents, my dogs, Alan and my friends

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PREFACE TO THE PAPERBACK EDITION

This book was originally written soon after I had finished my thesis on the same subject. At the time, I was most interested in men's attitudes to women entering war work, and the standard expectations and prejudices these displayed, and so there is very little here about the views of the women themselves. Since that time, I have been able to fill some of that gap by writing *Out of the Cage* (Pandora, 1987) with Penny Summerfield, which explores women's own feelings about war, work, and employment in the First and Second World Wars, using diaries, typescripts, and interviews. But *Out of the Cage* itself was not designed to be a re-write of our own earlier books about the wars, and lacks the kind of analysis of government, trade union, and employer attitudes found in *Women Workers in the First World War*. Ideally, this book should be read in conjunction with both Penny Summerfield's book, *Women Workers in the Second World War*, also published in paperback by Routledge, and *Out of the Cage*. Together, they give a rounded picture of both wars.

At the end of *Women Workers in the First World War* I wrote that I hoped that other writers would take up some of the subjects mentioned here, and provide more specialised coverage of areas I could mention only briefly. Although women's history is a thriving area, and much interesting research is going on, unfortunately much of this never reaches publication. I have used only a fraction of the original material available, and the war is still a particularly rich area for further study.

PREFACE

This book does not pretend to be a full history of women's work during the First World War. To begin with, I am mostly concerned with the position of working-class women, and thus there is no information on the work of VADs, members of the Land Army, clerks or civil servants, who were primarily middle-class — although it should be evident that many comments made by contemporaries about women's work and their domestic role were aimed at women in general. In addition, although there is some description of women's industrial work, my major interest is in the public and semi-public debates which revolved around such work. What I am trying to show is the remarkable consistency of male attitudes towards women's work, even in the exceptional time of war, and the way in which such attitudes affected the women themselves.

My work here is a development of an MPhil thesis, and although I have, in the last two years, been able to widen the scope of my work considerably, I have still not been able to use all the sources I would have liked, particularly material in the PRO and Imperial War Museum. I have not been funded in my continuing research, and this has been a handicap: it is, indeed, the main reason why I cannot expand this book further. I am very grateful to the Twenty Seven Foundation for the help with travelling expenses during the last few years; without such aid the book would certainly never have been written. Critics of this work will notice many omissions in the source material; I have not been able to do any local studies, which I feel would have been very useful, or follow through union policy in detail between 1914 and 1922, or look at the approach of suffragettes and suffragists as fully as I would like to have done. Although some work has been done in these fields by other writers, there is still much more for historians to do. This book has to be seen as a broad study, and one which has incorporated as many different kinds of source material as possible. I have used government reports and the evidence presented to wartime committees, books of the time, trade union and trade journals, some feminist journals, and newspapers of all kinds. Attitudes towards women's industrial work and opinions about their domestic roles were expressed readily in these, and they represent the view of a broad cross-section of society; these attitudes are what concern me here, as they had a devastating effect upon working-class women after the war, when the public applause

for their 'marvellous work' died away.

In the following chapters, I shall show the way in which the general expectations that women's energies and time should be spent on homes, husbands and children dominated discussions about the desirability of paid work for them, the suitability of certain jobs, and their capabilities as workers. These ideas existed at all levels of society, and the importance of this should be appreciated. I have been criticised for concentrating on women's oppression by some of those who are more concerned about the oppression of the working class in general, and who think that by describing the prejudice of workmen and unions towards women workers I am ignoring the fact that men's behaviour was influenced by their fear of cheap female labour displacing them. I am a socialist as well as a feminist, and appreciate this point, but I see this matter as being more complex than do many labour historians. The following statements sum up my views, and will be elaborated upon during the book.

- (1) The patriarchal system coexists with the capitalist system; the working class have been exploited by the latter, but women have also been oppressed by men of their own or other classes in a multitude of ways.
- (2) The ready acceptance by working-class men of women's lower status, and of strictly defined sex roles at home and work, has bolstered up capitalism and contributed to men's own economic vulnerability. Men who did not wish their wives to work accepted the existence of a cheap female labour force; members of this labour force took low-paid, short-term jobs with the expectation of leaving work on marriage, or were driven to take such work in desperation. This pool of labour was a danger to male workers, yet many men were reluctant to work towards equal pay and equal job opportunities, as such action meant the tacit acceptance of the idea that women need not be defined primarily as wives and mothers.
- (3) The sexual division of labour has also encouraged working-class men to fight for higher male wages *rather than* shorter hours or better conditions for all, and to accept higher risks at work. This fight has been waged on the assumption that women need less money when working, that they will be dependent upon men for most of their lives, and that they will perform all domestic tasks and look after the children (whether or not they are doing paid work themselves), thus sparing the exhausted male worker such chores.

As working-class women were invariably worse off than any other section of the population under this economic system, whether or not they were wage-earners, I make no excuses for wishing to examine the rhetoric and action used to keep them in their 'proper place'. Labour historians have examined the nature of men's oppression; I hope to throw some light on that of working-class women. They can be seen as a coherent group, whether or not they were full-time wage-earners for life, since all of them were affected in some way by the assumptions about women's role in society. Much of this book is concerned with the way in which attitudes towards them influenced their lives as paid workers, as most working-class women were employed for at least part of their lives, but in addition the importance of their unpaid domestic work has to be taken into account. It was this which was used to limit their job opportunities and wages, and this which made their lives harder.

There is another point which I would like to clarify. In the following pages I make much of the importance for women of the right to paid work. In many ways there is nothing wonderful about the right to work (hence the slogans which went up around Paris in 1968, 'Never Work'), as it simply means the right to sell your time and your labour for an inadequate sum of money. But women always worked; it was simply a matter of whether they were doing *paid* work or unpaid, and whether they were forced into the ghetto of low-paid jobs or allowed to enter other trades. Women before and after the war were often obliged to depend upon men for financial support or work at rates few men would have accepted; in this context the 'right to work' and the right to enter men's trades were important indeed.

Finally, it should be obvious that I see the evidence in this book as being relevant to the present. A study of women's position during the First World War isolates one phase of a continuum. Research (undertaken by Penny Summerfield, and to be published shortly) indicates that even during the Second World War, when, it is popularly assumed, women were allowed into men's jobs *en masse*, the assumption that a woman's first responsibility was to her home and family remained remarkably resilient, and acted as a brake on the opening up of opportunities for women. The demand for women's labour during the two wars may suggest that at this time, if no other, views of women's position and role might change — such has been the conviction of many a social historian when describing the granting of women's suffrage. Yet in fact views of women remained consistent during the war. Perhaps traditionalist views were even encouraged by the events of 1914 to 1918. By the end of the war there was a strong desire to get back to the