

## **Notes: Were women's horizons expanded during the War?**

Did war lead to a period of emancipation for women?

Agree: Arthur Marwick, *The Deluge* (1965)

Disagree: De Groot argues there was a powerful current urging return to social conservatism after the war. He perceives the social legacy of the war to be 'three steps forward, two back' (*Blighty*, 1996).

### Employment trends

Importance of dilution: tasks hitherto reserved for skilled men were redesigned into a series of semi-skilled or unskilled jobs.

The number of women in the industrial labour force increased by 1.5 million during the war (to around 4.8 million women in 1918) (See Summerfield and Braybon, p. 38).

The use of female workers expanded chiefly in munitions (by 700,000), in transport (by 100,000) and in banking, finance, commerce and public administration (by 400,000). (See Whiteside, 1988). At the same time the war saw the demise of women's employment in domestic service as they moved into previously male-dominated industries.

Although female munitions workers attracted most attention, the most significant long-term effect of the First World War was the growth of retail and clerical job opportunities.

### Debate: women's work

Marwick: 'As women flexed their muscles on behalf of their country they found that they were at the same time winning the battle for emancipation so long fought by their pioneers' (p. 96)

BUT Braybon and Summerfield stress that gains were 'for the duration only':

'Separate spheres for men and women was not shaken during the war: men were not expected to take an equal share of domestic responsibilities; not was it considered proper that women, like men, should die for their country.' (1987, p.2)

Thom stresses the importance of increased 'visibility' of women workers and also changed perceptions. Nevertheless 'their entry into war work had been negotiated on the presumption of their place as secondary, "meantime" workers; that presumption remained unchallenged by war' (Thom, 1998).

### Were votes a reward for women's work?

1918 Representation of the People Act:

- enfranchised all adult males
- women over 30, provided that they were householders or the wives of householders.
- only enfranchised 6 million women out of a total of 11 million
- excluded most women war workers
- C.O.s denied vote for five years

Marwick: links the granting of female suffrage to women's gains made during the war.

During the war PM Asquith reversed his opposition to votes for women; he told MPs, that women 'had worked out their own salvation'.

Suffragist Millicent Garret Fawcett (1920) agreed that war had 'revolutionised men's minds'.

However, DeGroot suggests that the argument for female enfranchisement had already been won before 1914. In fact the war had 'revived notions of separate spheres as much as it encouraged ideas of equality' (p. 313)

Most of the women who had worked in the war industries were still not entitled to the vote after 1918.

#### Further reading

G. Braybon and P. Summerfield, *Out of the Cage: Women's Experiences in Two World Wars* (1987) Pandora.

G J DeGroot, *Blighty: British Society in the Era of the Great War* (1996) Longman.

A Marwick, *The Deluge* (reissued second edn, 2006) Palgrave Macmillan.

D Thom, *Nice Girls and Rude Girls: Women Workers in World War 1* (1998) I.B. Tauris.

N. Whiteside, 'The British Population at War' in J. Turner (ed), *Britain and the First World War* (1988) Unwin Hyman.