

BOOK REVIEW

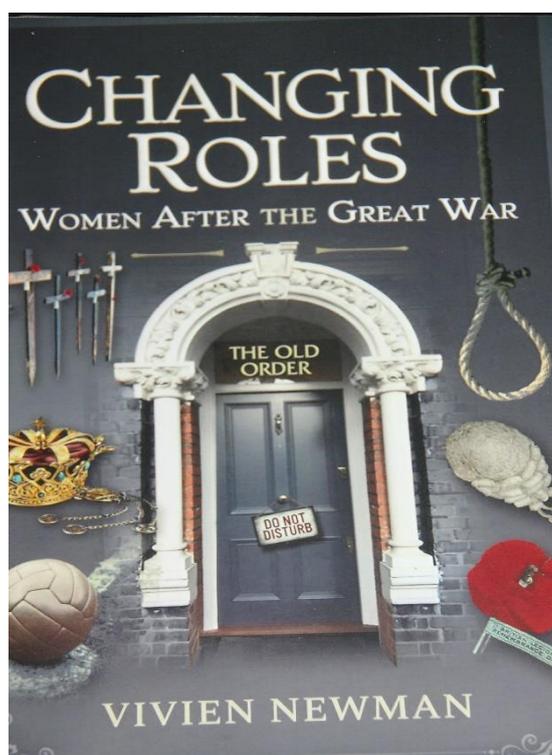
CHANGING ROLES – WOMEN AFTER THE GREAT WAR

BY VIVIEN NEWMAN ~ PUBLISHED BY PEN & SWORD HISTORY

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The contribution given by women during the First World War should not be underestimated. They fulfilled vital roles which had been vacated by men who went off to fight for their King and Country. Women quickly adapted, learning new skills, and outwardly were accepted on an equal basis as their male counterparts. Optimism grew and heralded a brighter future for the position of women in a male dominated society.

After the ending of the First World War men returned to resume their former civilian occupations. Women were expected to step down and return to their former employment. As this book reveals women having proved themselves to be as capable as any man in their chosen careers, became knowingly or unknowingly pioneers for women's rights.



The author devotes each chapter in this informative and fascinating book to a particular theme, informing the reader about the lives of some remarkable women. Sport, in particular football was encouraged as a healthy pursuit for women who worked in munitions and other factories fostering a team spirit. Prominent amongst these women was Lily Parr, who played for Dick, Kerr's Ladies team of Preston and who became a legend in her own lifetime. Men's football was suspended in 1915 and provided an opportunity for women's teams to prove their ability. Reports of women's football matches began to appear in newspapers elevating its popularity. A game played between two women's team on Christmas Day 1917 attracted a crowd of 10,000. Significant sums of money were raised and the residue after deductions was given to war charities. The success which these teams built up began to sour as male critics began to question the appropriateness of football for women. The Football Association protecting the male game, imposed restrictions, and effectively banned women's football in 1923. The ban was not lifted until 1970! These numerous and largely unknown facts about women's football in the early decades of the 20th century are an enlightening disclosure to the reader.

Another, entirely different team spirit was that of the 'Forty Elephants', a criminal gang of female shoplifters led by Alice Diamond. Based around the Elephant and Castle, these women embarked on a successful career targeting London's west end shops and department stores. Alice enforced strict rules on her group of well-dressed lady shoplifters and with detailed planning often outwitted the police. Some were apprehended, including Alice. Although they were sent to prison, on release it did not inhibit their criminal activities. The author compares and reflects that a century later, some individuals living in poor and deprived areas gravitate into gangs to give themselves empowerment and status.

It may be a surprise for readers to learn that the magnificent and well cared for CWGC cemeteries mask a controversy of how the war dead of the First World War were to be commemorated. Mothers campaigned vigorously for their dead to be repatriated. This was contrary to the IWGC policy that all, of whatever rank would be equally treated and buried where they had fallen. A particularly moving account described by the author is that of William Arthur Durie whose mother defied authority to have her son returned to Canada. It was the inspiring vision of Gertrude Jekyll to compliment the war cemeteries, with an English country garden setting. Various issues surrounding remembrance is thoroughly explored in the book including the origin of the iconic poppy.

The legacy of the naval blockade of Germany and the devastation caused by the war across Europe had by 1918 left hundreds of thousands of people facing starvation. Of particular concern was the plight of children. Many women including the Quakers, the Women's International League expressed concern and were determined to bring about change in the lives of these desperate people. In January 1919 Fight the Famine Council was formed in London organising rallies raising public awareness of the situation in Europe. As is related to the reader many difficulties were overcome and eventually led to the creation of Save The Children Fund and Declaration of the Rights of Children in 1924.

An ardent campaigner for women to have control over their bodies was Marie Stopes. Academically trained as a palaeobotanist she co-wrote for the government in 1916 about the efficient use of coal. She also wrote several books on taboo subjects regarding marriage and family planning. Despite hostility from many quarters, she persevered and opened clinics to advise, particularly women of working-class backgrounds on how to have control of their own fertility. Her pioneering work enriched and changed the lives of many women.

For centuries the legal profession was exclusively male. In 1888 Eliza Orme was the first woman to gain a law degree but was prohibited as a female to further any legal ambitions. A few

years later in 1913 Helena Normanton applied as a student to be admitted to the Middle Temple and was turned down. By 1918 women had gained limited enfranchisement and Helena renewed her application, again without success. Media attention and lobbying of Parliamentarians failed to change the outdated attitudes of the Inns of Court, who maintained there was no precedent for women to be admitted to the legal profession. After the passing of the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act, Helena Normanton was the first woman to be admitted to an Inn of Court in 1919. A Miss Bebb during her application process found out that ‘a woman was not a person! The enfranchisement granted to women meant that they could be called for jury service. Many objections were posited by men who considered that as ‘sensitive individuals’ women would during a trial have to listen to the unpleasantness of crimes. Arguments for and against women jurors rumbled on through the 1920’s but by the end of the decade they had demonstrated admirably that they were able to fulfil their duties as jurors.

The wide-ranging subject matter examined by the author in her narrative is formidable. Kate Meyrick, with eight children left her husband in 1919. Ambitious she found work and later became part owner of the London bar, which was subsequently closed by the police for being a ‘haven for women of the street’. Undaunted, Meyrick open the ‘43’ Club in Soho which became famous and notorious in 1920’s. Financially successful, the club was raided by the police and despite of being fined the club prospered. The authorities viewed nightclubs, such as the ‘43’ as undesirable and were determined to clamp down on their activities. Meyrick saw nothing wrong with her customers enjoying themselves and that it was the law that was out of step with society. She was prosecuted on several occasions and sent to prison but stubbornly did not yield meekly to law enforcement. She died in 1933, after a colourful life and her passing was deeply felt amongst London’s nightclub clientele.

Thoughtful consideration is given by the author to murder, both fictional and real. Female writers were conscious of society’s attitude towards women brought about by the war. Agatha Christie’s experience of war had been on the home front as a nurse and later she qualified to be able to dispense drugs and medication. The story of her life and the idea of using poisons, inspired her to begin writing crime novels. Her fictional characterisation of women, reflect the views and changing values of society in the real world. In contrast, Dorothy L. Sayers background was quite different to that of Agatha Christie. Both drew on wartime experiences for their fictional characters and the biographical details of these two renowned writers are clearly and comprehensively brought to the reader’s attention. In 1922 Edith Thompson and Frederick Bywaters appeared in court charged with murder. The reader is fully informed about the circumstances of this capital crime. Both were sentenced to death and hanged. Bywaters was

clearly guilty of murder. Edith, although enmeshed in a triangular relationship was manipulated to enable a charge of murder to be brought about. She was a victim of injustice rendered by prejudice and misogyny. Edith's fate generated intense debate lasting over ninety years. This harrowing account is full of pathos for this unfortunate woman.

The concluding theme in the book focuses on the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. Romania had joined the Allied side in 1916 after signing the Treaty of Bucharest, which promised her territorial gains after the defeat of Germany. Queen Marie of Romania, a granddaughter of Queen Victoria proved to be an outstanding and formidable woman in the cause of Romania sent as a representative to the Peace Conference. She took Paris by storm and was headline news in newspapers and magazines. When she met the conference leaders, she used all her persuasive and feminine guile to emphasize the plight of Romania and its people. She also visited London hoping her family ties with royalty and government would garner her further support. All the intricate web of political intrigue into which she stepped swirling around the conference is admirably described. The successful outcome for Romania was due to Queen Marie's overriding desire to ensure that the promises made to her country were fully realised.

Gertrude Bell, who was a writer, archaeologist, explorer, map maker, political officer and from 1916 a member of the Arab Bureau. Through her extensive travels in the Middle East, she was influential on the policies pursued in the region by Great Britain. Trusted by the Arab world at that time she was of fundamental importance in helping to establish the state of Iraq. The brief and concise story about Gertrude Bell's role in Arab affairs during and after the First World War is absorbing. A woman of outstanding attributes she was accepted and respected in the male oriented Arab society on an equal basis. Today she is still remembered by the Arabs, as one of the very few representatives of the British government, with a semblance of affection.

The author, Dr Vivien Newman has produced exceptional stories of women, now mostly forgotten who laid the foundation for future generation of women to be able fulfil their ambitions. Her in depth research has lifted the veil on women of the First World War and later who aspired to seek a better quality of life enabling them to gain a recognition of equality. These women who strived for a better future for themselves and others are to be applauded. The book contains black and white photographs, end notes, bibliography, and index. The author expresses her considered and brief conclusions about the changing roles of women brought about by the consequences of the First World War. It is a thoroughly readable and noteworthy book.

Roger Coleman