

# Women, War and Remembrance

## Saturday 13 March 2010

At The National Memorial Arboretum, Alrewas, Staffordshire

The conference is organised by: The National Memorial Arboretum, Staffordshire University  
and The Midlands Region of the Women's History Network



Although, women have not necessarily been central to official forms of remembrance, their lives have been directly and indirectly shaped by war and the memory of war in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Popular representations of women's wartime experiences, personal memories and women's writing have contributed to public perceptions of war and the iconography of war now includes for example: munitions workers, the home front, evacuation and the grief of mothers and lovers.

Speakers :

**Professor Susan-Mary Grant**

**Dr Jane Gledhill**

**Dr Janis Lomas**

**Professor Dorothy Sheridan**

**Dr Lucy Noakes**

**Dr Debra Marshall**

**Dr June Balshaw**

Conference Fee - £8 and Concessions £4, Staffordshire University, local sixth form and FE college students free **Lunch is available from the NMA Cafeteria**

To book please send a cheque made out to the Women's History Network Midlands Region to Dr Maggie Andrews at Faculty of Arts, Media and Design, College Road, Stoke on Trent, ST4 2XW or email [m.r.andrews@staffs.ac.uk](mailto:m.r.andrews@staffs.ac.uk) or telephone 01782 294523

**10:00 Registration and coffee / tea**

**10:30 Mourning Becomes Electra: Women and the Commemoration of the Confederate Dead.  
Professor Susan-Mary Grant – University of Newcastle**

The American Civil War remains the nation's defining conflict. America's urban and rural landscapes contain more physical memorials to the dead of that war than to any other, and nowhere more so than in that section of the country that suffered defeat; the states of the former Confederacy, the South. When it comes to the commemoration of the Confederate dead, most people think first of the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC), but before they ever came into existence in 1894 Ladies Memorial Associations (LMAS) across the South organized themselves in commemoration of the dead; but theirs was mourning with a political and gendered purpose. Challenging both the conclusions of those historians who propose that Confederate women moved back to the domestic sphere as soon as the troops returned scholars such as Scott Poole, William Blair and Caroline Janney reveal a story of politically-motivated activity on the part of elite white southern women. Devoted to repatriating the remains of Confederate soldiers, raising the money for memorials, tidying and remounding Confederate graves, and organizing Memorial Day activities, the LMAS ensured that the Confederate dead would be interred not just in southern soil, but at the heart of the white South's memory of the Civil War. Through the efforts of the LMAS, the South became itself a shrine, almost an extended rural cemetery in its function as a 'didactic landscape'. This paper argues that this new and expanded female mourning enterprise represented an American variant of what George Mosse identifies, in the context of the First World War, as the 'Myth of the War Experience'. Drawing on classical precedents, this elevated the role of the volunteer soldier in the age of people's war, in which warfare was fought for national ideals and death in war 'was a sacrifice for the nation'.

**11:00 Women's Writing and the First World War  
Dr Jane Gledhill – Independent Scholar**

The response of women to the First World War is multifaceted and contradictory; in particular it is shaped by expansion in employment opportunities for women. At Christmas 1914 women were giving white feathers to men who had not enlisted. On April 27<sup>th</sup> 1915 at the International Women's Congress at the Hague it was agreed that delegates from the Congress should go as envoys to "...belligerent and neutral governments and the President of the United States" to demand peace.

Women's writing in WW1 both published and unpublished expresses these dilemmas and reveals some aspects of the war in general but often conceals the reality of trench warfare. The determination to forget about the war, to induce amnesia, was a form of remembering. For many this continued to be a way of coping with the memories up to and beyond the middle of the C20.

This paper will look at some unpublished women's writing in WW1 while also giving some analysis of the work of Virginia Woolf, Hilda Doolittle and Rebecca West and other writers whose concern was to advance literary achievement in spite of the war. The published work at this time, which has contributed to modernism and the literary canon, avoids direct reference to the battlefields but reflects the devastating effects of war obliquely. The more straightforward accounts by women in diaries and letters were also usually selective in giving any detailed account of what was happening on the front line but offer instead a particular type of commentary.

**11:30 Coffee / Tea Break**

**11:45 - 'They took my husband, they took the money and just left me':**

## **War Widows and Remembrance after the Second World War**

**Dr Janis Lomas - Independent Scholar**

In the popular 1943 film, *Millions Like Us*, Celia, the war widow heroine of the story, is portrayed at the end of the film looking towards a hopeful future surrounded by her workmates who comfort and enclose her in an all enveloping and sustaining community. As this paper hopes to show, the reality for most Second World War widows was very different from this fictional representation. The anguish and loss they felt was exacerbated by the neglect and indifference they felt surrounded them. Their pension provision was minimal and subject to income tax. Remembrance for them was personal not collective as they were excluded from Remembrance Day ceremonies, had no association of war widows that they could join until 1971 and little opportunity for their grief and loss to be acknowledged within the public arena.

## **12:15 "Hitler Couldn't Get Us Down": Gender and Memories of the Second World War on the BBC 'People's War' Website**

**Dr Lucy Noakes - University of Brighton**

In 2003 the BBC created the 'People's War' website; an electronic space on which people could record their own, and their families, memories and stories of the Second World War. This paper will position this website within the wider 'memory boom' of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, discussing the reasons for its creation and popularity and analysing the ways in which the memories entered on the website are shaped by both gendered experiences of warfare and by the gendered identities of the contributors. Arguing that men and women often use different 'discursive registers' when narrating their memories of warfare, the paper will contend that when historians and cultural theorists attempt to analyse the construction of memories of warfare, gender should be understood as a key factor in the ways in which these memories are composed and expressed, both in their collective form as shared 'popular memory', and in their more private form as personal narrative.

## **12:45 Walk to relevant memorials and Lunch available from the Cafeteria**

## **2:00 The Second World War industry: wartime Mass Observation and how we understand it today** **Professor Dorothy Sheridan - Mass Observation Archive Sussex University**

The Mass Observation Archive was officially opened to the public as a historical resource in 1975, almost exactly 30 years after the end of the Second World War in Britain. Since then, it has become one of the primary sources for non-governmental accounts of contemporary wartime experience. The Archive is valued for the material about women's lives during the Second World War and particularly for the material written by women themselves about their own experiences in diaries and other personal documents.

Indeed it could be argued that the survival and development of the Archive as an institution could not have occurred had it not been for the enduring public fascination with this period of history and the profound political and cultural meanings which continue to surround it. Popular and academic representations of WW2 in books and the media generally have drawn extensively on the Mass Observation material since the 1970s. In these representations, the MO accounts are often combined with memorialisation and oral history of the period. The Archive, then, and my role as a worker within it, can be seen as a significant part in what I suggest is the Second World War "industry". How are these contemporary accounts of women's lives received today? What are the

issues in bringing together stories which were written in wartime with women's memories gathered today?

**2:30 Remembering women : Envisioning more inclusive war remembrance in 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain  
Dr Debra Marshall - University of Gloucestershire**

In 2005 a national war memorial celebrating the achievements of British women during the Second World War was inaugurated in Whitehall in London. Although the Memorial to the Women of the Second World War reflects the greater involvement of women in the public life of the nation, its inauguration 60 years after the end of the conflict, highlights the delay in claiming public recognition for their wartime achievements.

The trend towards a more inclusive remembrance grew steadily in the years leading to the Millennium as more groups claimed space for remembrance of their activities and contested the hegemony of the established remembrance tradition. It was in 2000 that the Women's Land Army and the Women's Timber Corps were successful in their bids to join the annual Remembrance Day March to the Cenotaph although other national service organisations had been included in the parade for some time. This inclusion of a greater range of female participants in a tradition that has endured for almost a century brings with it the promise that re-envisioned Remembrance will be more reflective of the contribution of British women in future years.

**3:00 We'll meet again: female reunions and the Second World War  
Dr June Balshaw - University of Greenwich**

When the Second World War ended in 1945 and the process of demobilisation began, plans were already underway for reunions which would ensure that men who had fought together would remember together. But what of those women who had contributed to the war effort by being conscripted or joining the numerous women's services?

Using recently acquired oral testimonies from women who served in the Women's Land Army and the Wrens, this paper explores women's experiences of war and the impact this had on how they organised (and continue to organise) reunions. It will consider the gendered nature of reunions and discuss the focus of women's remembering assessing the impact of reunions on their collective and individual identities. In particular, this paper will focus on how women remember and commemorate their experiences alongside a discussion of Government policy and attitudes towards women and war work.

This paper will also consider how governments have (latterly) recognised the contribution made by women in different occupations during the Second World War and what impact this has had on how women are remembered, reconstructed and represented. For example, in January 2008, the Government announced its decision to award a badge of recognition to female war veterans who had joined the Women's Land Army and the Women's Timber Corps providing food and timber for the nation during the Second World War. This act prompted additional reunions, enabling those surviving women the opportunity to reflect on, celebrate and debate this belated recognition.

**3:45 Close tea and coffee available from NMA cafe**