

Exhibit Review:

Women and War at the Canadian War Museum, Ottawa, July 1984 - September 1985

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The opening of a one-year exhibit on the subject of women and war by the Canadian War Museum, one of our major national museums, is a significant event. Women's participation in wartime activities and their contributions to the success of Canada's war efforts are subjects which have been much neglected in previous years, not only by the War Museum but also by military historians in general. Historical accounts of Canada's wars have tended to focus on military strategy and political decision-making, excluding studies of the contributions or responses of the civilian population. Apart from occasional passing references to nurses at the Front, female munitions workers or women serving as auxiliaries to the armed forces, women are absent from the pages of our military histories. This first effort by the Canadian War Museum, which displays many items never before available for viewing by the public, goes a long way toward opening the eyes of those who still view war as an activity in which Canadian women have played no significant part. Given that in 1983 the Museum received slightly fewer than a quarter of a million visitors, a substantial

number of people will be exposed to some convincing evidence that women have contributed in a variety of important ways to the success of Canada's war efforts. Unfortunately, however, these visitors will not be invited to reflect on broader questions about the impact of war on women, about the factors that shaped women's responses to war, and about the instances when women responded to the war effort with indifference or outright hostility. These questions, it appears, do not fall within the framework of *Women and War*.

During the year of this exhibit, at a time when war and peace are subjects very much on everyone's mind, many women are asking probing questions about their own historical relationships to these issues. A major exhibit on the theme of women and war at this time seemingly presents an ideal opportunity to raise some of these complex questions about the relations of women, feminism, and the ideology of femininity to war, militarism and pacifism. Why, for example, has war traditionally been a male-dominated activity? Is it true that women are less

militaristic than men? Have Canadian women responded with one voice to previous declarations of war or have they, like men, been divided by factors such as class and ethnicity? Has women's participation in war efforts challenged traditional notions of femininity? How have these same notions been used with great effect in wartime propaganda? Is it true, as popular wisdom holds, that twentieth-century wars have had a liberating effect on women by presenting them with new responsibilities and job opportunities? These and other significant questions remain unanswered, indeed unasked, in this exhibit.

Instead, the team of researchers, designers and other museum professionals who contributed to *Women and War* has opted for a much more restricted focus and less ambitious hypothesis. The exhibit's central theme is that Canadian women have had a long tradition of participation in war and that this participation has been vital to the success of the national war effort. Furthermore, it is strongly suggested, for the benefit of those who need convincing, that women's support for Canada's war efforts has provided proof of their loyalty, heroism, competence and other admirable qualities. The exhibit is organized into five sections based on what the exhibit organizers have defined as the major supporting roles played by women during wars throughout Canadian history: Fighting and Protecting, Caring for the Wounded, Producing the Materials of War, Serving with the Military, and Providing Economic Support. The result, it is suggested, should "provide a lasting impression of women's active participation in events that shaped our country's development."

Women and War is a multi-media presentation which attempts to survey its subject from the Indian wars of the sixteenth century to the end of the Second World War. Its message is communicated through text supplemented by artifacts such as guns, shells, lamps, masks and a variety of uniforms. Glass cases contain the per-

sonal memorabilia of individual women who served in the South African and World Wars. The exhibit is dominated by the many visuals on display—photographs, a number of large oil paintings, an impressive collection of war posters, and a 1945 recruiting film, *Proudly She Marches*. Adding to the effect is a piped-in selection of popular songs of the World War II era.

The first section, Fighting and Protecting, suggests that while the idea of women using weapons may seem unusual, Canadian women did in fact serve as combatants or take up arms to defend their homes on a number of occasions. By the twentieth century, their activities were more restricted, and they organized groups to learn the use of weapons and other home defence skills. It is also suggested that from Molly Brant and Laura Second to the Second World War, Canadian women have participated in espionage activities. The second section, Caring for the Wounded, focuses on the living and working conditions of military nurses, particularly the thousands of nursing sisters who served overseas during the two world wars. Reflecting nursing's status as "one of the most visible and widely accepted wartime roles for women," it is one of the two largest sections of the exhibition. Featuring a furnished tent of the type used by World War I nurses and relying heavily on displays of personal memorabilia, it stresses the "courage and compassion under duress" shown by Canadian nursing sisters, some of whom died or suffered injury when their hospitals were bombed or their ships torpedoed.

The third section, Producing the Materials of War, again suggests that women have long played an essential role. It is dominated by displays focusing on the 35,000 World War I munitions workers and on the estimated 261,000 women employed in war production during the Second World War. The latter display suggests that the war opened up opportunities for women to acquire new job skills, that women responded eagerly to these opportunities, and that while

earning less than their male equivalents, “they won the respect of the nation” as welders, electricians, riveters, and machine operators. The fourth section, *Serving with the Military*, which dominates the exhibit along with the section on nursing, shows how Canadian women traditionally provided support services such as cooking and laundry which in the twentieth century were brought under direct military control. The large display on the Second World War illustrates the activities and experiences of women in the three branches of the armed services. In each case, it is stressed that women progressed, over the course of the war, from traditional tasks such as cooking, laundry and clerical work to skilled non-traditional employment as parachute riggers, welders, wireless operators and diesel motor mechanics. The final section of the exhibit, *Providing Economic Support*, argues that for generations women have “provided wartime services essential to the maintenance of a thriving home economy” by volunteering their time, energy, skills and money. Photographs and artifacts present women engaged in agricultural production, assembling comforts for soldiers, fundraising for hospitals and tanks, shopping for rationed goods and working for the Red Cross.

Women and War accomplishes its objectives in that it provides evidence that women have indeed contributed to the success of Canada’s war efforts. Reflecting the influence of social history, the display acknowledges that the social consequences of war are as worthy of study as the tactics of generals and the movements of troops. Although the War Museum has collected materials relating to women since the 1950s, many of the personal collections donated by women have never before been publicly displayed, and it is important that these materials be made more accessible. Also important is the belated recognition given to these women, some of whom lost their lives in their country’s service. Especially significant is the inclusion of women’s contributions within the so-called private sphere. Home-

makers and volunteer workers appear alongside women in uniform and those employed directly in war production. The heavy emphasis on visuals, the displays of personal mementos, and the musical accompaniment make the exhibit attractive and entertaining. It falls far short, however, of being a scholarly or questioning exploration of the theme of women and war.

Such a criticism, of course, immediately raises the question of the purpose of an exhibit such as this one. The museum-going public, it is argued, is in search of an experience that is as entertaining as it is educational. Visitors don’t want to be taxed by too many printed materials or bored by a lot of facts. Yet it is too frequently assumed, as in this case, that there is an inherent conflict between the goals of entertaining and those of teaching and challenging preconceived ideas. A major exhibit at a national museum ought to aim at nothing less than the presentation in a simplified and appealing form of the best and most recent scholarship on the subject. If the subject is a controversial one, the exhibit ought to shed light on the nature of the controversy, not ignore the fact that one exists. It ought also to challenge the public image of history as the mindless collection of facts and artifacts by showing how artifacts, written documents and visual images constitute historical evidence to be analyzed and interpreted, not merely labeled and displayed in glass cases. History, moreover, did not end at some clearly-defined point in the past. It is intimately connected to the present.

Women and War scrupulously avoids taking any position on its subject which could be described as critical or controversial. The very structure of the exhibit ensures that there is no place within it for Canadian women who did not support the war effort nor for the frequently devastating impact of war on the lives of women as individuals and as a group. Viewers are presented, then, with two curious anomalies. A display panel on the theme of “Peacemakers” appears at the close of the section on materials of

war. The text refers briefly to Indian women and women of New France who acted as mediators, Laura Hughes who organized a Toronto peace committee in 1915, and "a few public women" who, during the Second World War, "voiced concerns about wartime profiteering and about the exploitation inherent in war." The second anomaly is the final panel and display case on the theme of women as "Wives, Mothers, Sweethearts." The evidence of a mother's grief for her dead son becomes classified as economic support for the war effort, for lack of a more appropriate place to include it. Such issues as the influence of the two world wars on societal attitudes toward women or on female labour force participation rates are not even raised, presumably because they do not fit within the five designated categories.

A discerning visitor would be justified in concluding that the amount of space allocated in *Women and War* to the various activities undertaken by women over this large span of time has less to do with the relative importance of these activities than with the ready accessibility of relevant visual documentation. For example, the activities of World War II women in the services are depicted in great detail while the critically important large-scale undertakings of organizations such as the Young Women's Christian Association and the Imperial Order of Daughters of the Empire during the First World War receive barely a passing nod. Visual documentation of these activities is available but it remains with the records of the organizations rather than in the collections of the Canadian War Museum or the Department of National Defence. Given the scope of *Women and War*, the inclusion of at least some of these materials would have been appropriate.

Absent from the record presented here are contributions to the war effort which could be perceived as less than admirable or respectable. Camp followers in this exhibit did the laundry. The other "vital support services" they per-

formed are not defined. The notorious White Feather Campaign of the First World War when women were encouraged to present young men in civilian clothes with the white feather of cowardice, harassing some medically unfit men to the point of suicide, is nowhere in evidence. Canadian women, as they are presented here, were not divided by class, region or ethnic origin—they were united in their enthusiastic support of the national war effort. Even the Conscription Crisis of World War I which divided Canadian women as it did the rest of the country, as well as contributing directly to their enfranchisement, is not mentioned in *Women and War*.

Women were not, in fact, always eager to "do their bit," particularly if it meant sacrificing their husbands, sons, brothers and lovers. Women's readiness to enlist in the armed services and war industries frequently derived as much from an interest in better wages and working conditions as from patriotic motives. It does not seem to occur to the contributors to this exhibit that had Canadian women been genuinely unanimous in their enthusiasm for war, it is highly unlikely that the government would have expended so much energy telling them that they ought to be. Furthermore, while there are scattered references throughout the text to the fact that women workers were paid less than men or were viewed as a temporary phenomenon, the exhibit as a whole demonstrates a singular reluctance to challenge or even define the prevailing ideology of femininity which shaped both women's responses to war and the responses of governments and employers to women workers and women in the services.

The minimal text which accompanies this exhibit is entirely inadequate to do justice to the subject. On the assumption, it appears, that images and artifacts can speak for themselves, even to those who have no training in how to "read" them, the text too frequently consists of a label or some background information whose rele-

vance to the object being viewed is not at all clear. The mere labelling of the artifacts on display in *Women and War* constitutes, in many cases, the waste of a valuable opportunity to raise questions or provide important information. For example, we are not informed about exactly what women did to earn the many medals on display. Did women qualify for the same medals as men? Were different criteria used to define valour or service beyond the call of duty for women? In another instance, the service badge awarded by the Imperial Munitions Board to its female employees during the First World War is displayed without informing visitors that no such badges were awarded to men and that these badges were designed because it was believed that trinkets of this nature had a particular appeal for women. The many uniforms on display are accompanied by statistics on the number of women who wore them rather than by comments on the ways in which the designers tried to combine femininity with a flair. The visitor's attention is not drawn to the starched aprons, collars and cuffs which had to be kept clean by First World War nursing sisters at the Front. World War II uniforms featuring pants are displayed with no reference to the controversy which they surely must have caused. The personal memorabilia of individual women appear in a vacuum, tastefully arranged in glass cases. Why did these particular objects end up in personal collections? Was it because they had more significance than other possible objects, because they were officially authorized as souvenirs, or because they could be discreetly removed in one's personal baggage? Do they reflect in some way the impact of the war on a particular women's life? This question is difficult to answer when the accompanying text is limited to an account of her activities during the war itself, in twenty-five words or less. The great interest shown by visitors in the tent display, simulating the accommodations of World War I nurses, suggests that these memorabilia might more appropriately be incorporated into similar displays, rather than

arranged as art objects, divorced from any historical context.

In a similar fashion, the exhibit makes extremely poor use of the attractive visual materials displayed throughout. Oil paintings are hung as in an art gallery with only a title and the name of the artist. There is no discussion of the fact that these paintings were commissioned from prominent artists by the Canadian government. Why would the government want paintings of women workers when cameras were available and how did the nature of these commissions affect the presentation of the subjects? Most of the photographs displayed were commissioned by the government or employers or were taken by press photographers. Visitors are not encouraged to reflect on these officially approved images of women workers nor to compare them with photographs taken by women themselves, very few of which are available for viewing in this exhibit. The recruiting film, *Proudly She Marches*, is presented without comment, despite the fact that it has been re-released by the National Film Board precisely because of its value as a teaching tool. Worst of all, there is no attempt to analyze the content of the many war posters on display, beyond presenting them as evidence that women sold Victory Bonds or saved food or harvested the crops. No observations are made about the presentation of the pure and helpless Canadian nursing sister as the victim of German brutality, nor about the intriguing differences in the appeals directed to English and French Canadian women. The failure to deal with these images as propaganda—as the presentation of stereotyped images of women to manipulate both women and men for purposes defined by the government and employers of war workers—is one of the most serious shortcomings of the entire exhibit.

Women and War attempt to accomplish both more and less than the current state of scholarship on the subject would allow. In surveying the activities of women in wars throughout Cana-

dian history, the exhibit is on shaky ground much of the time. We are simply not in a position to make sweeping statements about the wartime roles of Native women, the women of New France, or even most nineteenth-century women. The lack of solid research in these areas results in a presentation that resembles the familiar public school textbook chronicles of the adventures of Laura Secord and Madeleine de Vercheres. By contrast, a more restricted focus on the twentieth century would have permitted a much more in-depth treatment of the subject of women and war, allowing for comparisons of women's experiences in the two world wars, an assessment of the significance of the inter-war period, and examinations of changing societal attitudes toward women and the legacy of war to Canadian women in this century.

Women and War makes no real attempt to link up the information it presents with contemporary issues or concerns. Given its abrupt conclusion in 1945, the visitor remains at a loss to explain how, since the Second World War appears to have opened up so many new opportunities for women, the 1940s were followed by the 1950s. The implication that this war resulted in substantial improvements for women runs, in fact, directly counter to the findings of recent scholarship, notably the excellent work of Ruth Pierson.¹ The exhibit also fails to present any conclusions about how its contents might be relevant to the 1980s. Visitors confused by the contemporary spectacle of anti-militarist women demonstrators, women advocating increased defence spending, and women fighting, in the name of feminism, for equality within the military, will gain little enlightenment from *Women and War* which implies that such discord is a deviation from the unity and enthusiasm which characterized Canadian women in the past. The issue of women and war is an extremely sensitive and complex one, and no one could fairly ask an exhibit on the subject to provide all the answers. Surely it is not unreasonable, however, to expect it to raise the questions. It is unfortunate that the

Canadian War Museum believes that a tribute to Canadian women should take the form of an uncritical celebration to their heroic accomplishments and that it should suppress the real divisions which existed among women. A tribute which presents historical inaccuracies and which seriously distorts women's experience does a disservice both to Canadian women and to the Canadian museum-going public.

NOTES

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1. A useful summary of Pierson's conclusions is *Canadian Women and the Second World War*, (Ottawa: The Canadian Historical Association, Historical Boklet No. 37, 1983). Its bibliography lists her other published works and is a guide to the rather meagre literature on the subject of women in World War II.