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Women, Social Leadership, and the Second World War: Continuities of Class

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The tenacity of the Women?s Voluntary Services (WVS: they were awarded ?Royal? status in 1966) in maintaining their unique position in the voluntary sector must, in no small degree, be due to the powerful personality of its founder, the redoubtable Stella Charnaud, Lady Reading. Whether or not she would recognise any trace of her vision in the organisation of 2003 may be another matter. The current WRVS website (www.royalvoluntaryservice.org.uk [2]) gives no hint of the hierarchical and autocratic structure which characterised Lady Reading?s wartime and immediate post-war organisation; indeed it pays only brief homage to its history and the personalities involved. Yet from James Hinton?s detailed analysis of the archives of this anomalous, government-backed yet voluntary organisation it would seem that, without the social networks and consequent influence, the WVS as a civil defence entity in time of war would have faded gently into the background, passing its duties to the younger and professional social workers of the emergent welfare state.

The effect of war, especially the Second World War, on changing gender roles for women is a much-rehearsed debate within both mainstream and women?s history. Women?s activities on the Home Front, it is

claimed, established their right to full citizenship within the postwar welfare state. The simple narrative suggests that their efficiency in the workforce combined with the management of domestic responsibilities in times of trouble, and later austerity, proved once and for all that a woman?s place was not necessarily to be limited to the home. However the 1943 Beveridge Report which laid the foundations for the Welfare State assumed a family unit of male breadwinner and a housewife-mother who had ?vital work to do in ensuring the adequate continuance of the British race and of British ideals in the world?.(1) Women were encouraged back into the home not least by social pressures and the dominance of John Bowlby?s time-consuming theories of child-rearing. The resultant 1950s model of the middle-class housewife whose prime duty lay in the domestic and voluntary sphere with possible part-time employment for pin money demonstrates, as Hinton suggests, a social and economic continuum of constructions of classed gender roles from the late Victorian period. His argument that it was middle-class women who were instrumental in maintaining the social hierarchy is persuasive and once again demonstrates the far-reaching significance of the ?private? sphere.

With the obvious exception of Penny Summerfield?s research on women?s wartime lives, analysis of women?s role in the mid-twentieth century has been focused within the framework of the developing welfare state, most notably by Jane Lewis, Pat Thane and Hilary Land. It may be that the present generation of women?s historians have scant interest in the world of their mothers. As Lytton Strachey?s review of the Victorians demonstrated, the following generation attach little importance and even a little contempt for their parents? experience. Certainly the middle-class world which James Hinton describes of whist drives, ladies? lunch clubs, afternoon meetings and good works is strikingly reminiscent of this reviewer?s childhood. For whatever reason, the WVS ? perhaps because of its somewhat old-fashioned image of green sleeves and good works ? has not been examined in any depth by historians of social change in the twentieth century. As Hinton notes the leaders were middle-aged (35-50), and middle classes are not usually the subject of historical interest. Yet, as the ?backbone of England? the Mrs Minivers should not be overlooked or underestimated.

Women, Social Leadership and the Second World War is written in two parts; the first investigates the mobilisation of the WVS and the second brings the story up to date, focusing in depth in the immediate post-war years. Hinton makes judicious use of case studies to illustrate the regional peculiarities in an organisation which was dominated by a seemingly intractable central control. Lady Reading?s views of the role to be played by the women under her command (and this term seems singularly appropriate in this case) could be considered as an extension of the social maternalism of late Victorian philanthropy. Although the WVS recruits male volunteers today, in wartime it was a female organisation which was partly directed by, but by no means subservient to, the dictates of Whitehall.

Women?s relationship to definitions of social class is notoriously difficult to define. To define their place in the social hierarchy as dependent on their husbands? or fathers? status may be sociologically problematic, but it is clear from Hinton?s account that this assumed status did define social class during and immediately after the war. Lady Reading is a fascinating example of one who played this card to its utmost effect. Hinton?s biography of Lady Reading, which underpins the first part of the book, highlights the strange combination of eastern mysticism she retained from her early years in Constantinople with a practical Christianity that produced her individual style of leadership. Lady Reading?s social status was clearly derived from that of her husband. Although of middle-class origin she had to earn her own living after the First World War. She was employed as secretary to Lord Reading, becoming indispensable to this Liberal politician who was briefly Foreign Secretary in MacDonald?s national government. The brief marriage before widowhood (she was 27 and he 70) left her involved in the elevated social networks of her late husband, which enabled her to put her energies to immediate use in the organisation of the Personal Service League. She was therefore the obvious choice when the decision was made to recruit women to assist in ARP (Air Raid Precautions) work.

The administrative structure of the WVS was based on eleven civil defence regions with a volunteer organiser and paid administrator supervising the work of volunteer centre organisers. As a government-funded organisation that relied on volunteer workers, the WVS brought together women from other

organisations, most notably the Women?s Institutes, Townswomen?s Guilds and the Guiding movement. Local leadership was largely drawn from women who were already leaders of other organisations and a clear hierarchy of command was established from the central offices in Tothill Street, London. Expenses paid included re-imbursement of first-class railway travel, indicative of the lifestyle of the women involved. The familiar green uniforms reflected the status of those entitled to wear them.

James Hinton has undertaken an in-depth study of the regional archives of the WVS, which are more comprehensive than many other associations. Strangely the London archives are missing, but this ensures that the relationship between the regions, even those in the far north-east of England, and the centre is highlighted. The study also omits Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, but the regional differences that become apparent within England provide a useful framework within which further local studies might be located. It is doubtful whether more wide-ranging geographical analysis would have contributed significantly to this discussion.

Fortunately for the historian, the ?weeding ? of the archive was left to the WVS itself and, as a result, far more material has been retained than the familiar committee minutes and public statements. This mass of documentation has enabled the author to detail the sometimes less than friendly relations between the centre and the regions and to explore the nuances of the interpersonal networks and mores of the urban and rural elites who formed the leadership of the WVS. The detailed primary material underpinning the book provides more than enough evidence for the significance of personality, politics and idiosyncratic local social networks in understanding the deep-seated continuities of social class.

Many of the women who joined the WVS leadership belonged to non-partisan organisations like the Women?s Institute. Hinton nevertheless interrogates the role of party politics within the supposedly non-partisan, but state-funded, WVS. He argues that with the rise of the professional society and the democratisation of local party politics the social elites had withdrawn from local political involvement with the lower echelons yet still maintained their superior social status within the region. Labour party women apparently found it particularly irksome to work with the WVS; they were far more politically active than their conservative counterparts but had equally forceful personalities amongst their leadership. Hinton however points out that Labour party supporters amongst the WVS leadership tended to be middle-class, thus not compromising the dominance of this group. Hinton indeed asks whether the presence of working class women who did join the WVS simply acted to reflect and confirm the superiority of the middle-class members. The experience of the practice of middle-class philanthropy was still in working-class memory. As Hinton observes, ?it is difficult to exaggerate the hatred with which Labour women viewed philanthropy and the de haute en bas condescension involved?.(p. 71) However the regional differences are important in that Coventry and Leicester who did have Labour women leaders maintained much better relations with Labour councils.

The case studies demonstrate that although minutes suggest centralised control from Tothill Street, the centres did claim some autonomy. Despite the frequent references to Lady Reading?s autocratic style of leadership and the lack of power held by the local organisers, the County Durham section was one group that defied central control, and Hinton devotes a chapter to examining the place of social class in the WVS in this area. He notes that Easington represented very different forms of social power with the core middle class comprising less than 5% of the population. The County organiser, Sabrina Gordon, widow of the bishop of Jarrow, was unable to work with Winifred Waring, the local Easington organiser. Eventually the Easington Centre was closed down because of conflict and lack of compliance with the central organisation. That this appears to be an isolated and well-documented event also illustrates how harmonious relations were in the other regions.

Hinton locates the work of the WVS in relation to the plethora of female associations in existence ? not an easy task given the number of these organisations recently identified by David Doughan and Peter Gordon. (2) The glossary of abbreviations is extremely useful. Membership of one or more of these associations appears to have been part of the quasi-public role of the middle-class woman before, during and immediately after the war; this study of the WVS, which drew its members from these established groups, further

illustrates the complex workings of the rural and urban female networks upon which such organisations drew. Tory ladies and active Labour women complete the cast of thousands of women who joined the WVS, becoming local leaders and regional organisers. Not surprisingly the women who became leaders (personally appointed by Lady Reading) did not always see eye to eye and, accustomed as they were to their ?natural? leadership, there appears to have been much in-fighting as to who controlled the organisation of evacuees, the provision of food for troops and the housewives? service.

Hinton?s analysis, which so firmly integrates social class and gender, is welcome, since neither polarised accounts of working and middle class, or male and female experience provide a satisfactory framework for understanding the politics (with a small ?p?) of the wartime voluntary sector. Rather than seeing the war as a brief window of opportunity for an embryonic classless society, James Hinton offers a persuasive analysis which places the continuities of class in the hands of the upper middle- / upper-class ladies and their influence in the urban and rural networks of power. The continuing hegemony of middle-class values into the 1950s can be seen through the women?s magazines of the period and the experience of the grammar schools modelled on upper class public schools that, even after the apparently meritocratic changes of the 1944 Education Act, attracted primarily middle class pupils. The WVS provides an ideal focus for the analysis of this social and political power and the figure of Lady Reading acts as a wonderful example, not of a nineteenth-century Lady Bountiful, but a woman who saw in her social position a duty and a mission to put the ?character? of the female middle-class to work for the good of the nation in war and peace.

Hinton also raises the thorny problem of these clearly autonomous women and their relationship to contemporary ideas of feminism. The divisive ideological gulf between maternal feminism and equal rights activists did, he argues, diminish somewhat during the war; but, as the furious discussions over teachers? pay in the 1950s demonstrate, although these issues may have been overlooked at the time they certainly remained bubbling under the surface. Hinton observes that equal pay was less important to these women than the ?exercise of their skills as social leaders?. (p. 179) The relationship of social status and economic independence is of course at the centre of any discussion on the definition of social class. What is interesting here is that Hinton suggests that, through an analysis of WVS activity, we can see how the women themselves ordered the importance of social status over financial gain. Although not part of this current research (and the bibliography is evidence of the enormous number of files there are to consult) this study paves the way for a fruitful oral history investigation into the perceptions and memories, of what will have to be the younger members or children, of the way the management of the WVS reflected local social structures.

Hinton neatly examines the diversity of experience, even among the upper-/ middle-class women. He observes that most of the leaders tended to be widows and spinsters with a background in philanthropic work. Single women may not have had the maternal ?expertise? but they did have more time to focus on voluntary work, following the Victorian model of public social maternalism. For professional women who joined the WVS, the relationship with the leisured amateur appears to have been particularly problematic. This antipathy became obvious after the war when the future of the WVS was in question.

It was expected that at the end of hostilities the WVS role would disappear and although a two-year delay was negotiated, Hinton concludes that without the active involvement of Lady Reading and her contacts in government, it is unlikely that it would have survived even into the 1950s. Out of the one million members, possibly as many as four-fifths of the membership left to take up their previous activities.(3)

However, if continuities of class remained after the war, patterns of women?s work did change and for middle-aged, middle class women without training, the professionalisation and growth of social work threatened to undermine their role within the voluntary sector and the WVS. Inevitably this led to a decline in the significance of social leadership. Lady Reading was clearly on her own in her vision that the WVS would provide a peacetime model for the ongoing relationship between government and volunteer bodies. It appears a pragmatic decision on the part of the government to use the WVS in communicating to housewives the message of austerity, food education and fuel economy. It might also be significant that the 1950s saw an increase in the number of women embracing the Myrdal and Klein dual role model of

employment and gaining status through paid work rather than through membership of voluntary associations. It was not only the WVS membership that declined into the 1960s: other organisations reported similar declines.

Lady Reading mobilised the middle-class, middle-aged women who were the ?backbone of England? through colonising the multitude of women?s organisations in existence during the 1940s. The leadership of women recruited through these organisations and existing social networks confirmed their superior position through the exercise of their character and notions of duty. ?Intelligence? came last in Reading?s list of desirable attributes, which included tact, patience, understanding and cheerfulness. Yet, worthy though these might be, they could not compete with professional expertise expected in the 1950s.

Hinton?s detailed research into the WVS archive and examination of their close relationship with other associations is a welcome addition to understanding the central role that women, supposedly marginalized from definitions of social class, played in the maintenance of middle-class hegemony through the war and into the 1950s. ?Imagined communities? of class maybe difficult to define, especially within the disruption of war, but Hinton?s foregrounding of the position of the middle-aged woman through her voluntary work adds another dimension to the construction of class and gender identities into the 1950s. By adding age to the mantra of gender and class, Hinton offers a nuanced framework for further research into the significance of the role of the not-so humble housewife.

Notes

1. *Social Insurance and Allied Services [SIAS]* (London: HMSO, 1943), Cmd. 6404, p. 53.Back to (1)
2. Peter Gordon and David Doughan, eds, *Dictionary of British Women's Organisations, 1825-1960* (London: Woburn Press, 2001).Back to (2)
3. [Note supplied by Dr Hinton] A February 1951 Home Office estimate of numbers leaving the WVS gives a figure of 200, 000, but sources suggest that by 1951 membership had been substantially consolidated: p. 166.Back to (3)

Dr Hinton is pleased to accept this review without further comment.

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