



THE SURPLUS WOMEN

An unnecessary and cruel name.

In 1918 a headmistress, addressing the 6th Form Girls told them that only one in ten of them would marry – “For the rest of you, the men whom you would have married are dead.”

The signs of this impending tragedy were starting to show in 1917 when it became clear that the slaughter on the battlefields had been so intense we were running out of population.

It can be seen from Cabinet papers that we could no longer find enough men to reinforce the front lines and have enough for the mines, steel works and shipyards. It was the time when the Land Army was established and the Women’s Services expanded. Women took over as dispatch riders, signallers, telephonists and in the countryside as shepherdesses and herdswomen as farmers released their most important workers. Men who had been classed as unfit for active service were re-examined and re-classified. Increasingly women took over heavier work. The Women’s Farm and Garden Association planned ahead, trying to alleviate the problem they foresaw.

Now, in the fractured society which emerged after the Armistice young girls, brought up in a society where the place for women was to marry and bring up children, where the women had foreseen no other future, had to face the prospect of a life alone, working and providing for themselves.

Initially it was thought there were 1 million ‘surplus women’. The 1921 Census showed there were 2 million.

The problems were huge. For many girls their education had been elementary. Despite the ingenuity and adaptability women had shown in the War opportunities now were very scarce and the careers that were ‘acceptable’ were few. Some of us can remember how many ‘maiden aunts’ were in the family. We never gave it a thought, just accepted it. Not until much later did we understand the tragedy of their young lives which underlay this – boyfriends or fiancées lost in the War and women too heartbroken to find another partner and many others who would never have a chance at all to experience the joy of such a partnership. It must have taken a great deal of rethinking, courage and determination to face the future and make a success of it.

To add to the burden all the old attitudes still existed.

A single woman trying to find lodgings would be turned away by a landlady who would assume the woman would be living off 'immoral earnings'.

A father could still forbid a daughter from doing any form of work of which he disapproved.

Women were not accepted in refreshment places alone.

Unbelievably it was even suggested that women working alone on smallholdings should be chaperoned! This called forth a great deal of ridicule.

Two million pounds had been set aside for ex-servicemen to return to university. When asked if this would be extended to Women's Corps and the Voluntary Aid Detachment the Chancellor replied that the interruption to women's education had not been enough to justify such a step and he would raise strong objections in the event of this being considered.

The general tone was set by the newspapers. *The Mail* called these women "A disaster to the human race" and an MP asked "What use are these women if they cannot procreate". (Perhaps with regard to the latter gentleman someone should have sat him on their knee and explained How Babies Are Made).

Another matter was raised in Parliament where an MP asked the PM if, in view of the casualties in the War, would he introduce a Bill legalising the marriage of a woman with her deceased husband's brother in the same way as it was legal for a man to marry a deceased wife's sister? The Prime Minister dismissed the subject on the point that there was too much to be done to consider the matter. The MP did come back to ask if the Prime Minister was aware that many Hon. Members were keenly interested in the subject.

So, with so much against them how were all these women to find work, find accommodation, improve their education and fill their lives with some form of enjoyment in the face of restrictions, mockery and prejudice? What type of women were they? They ranged from the group mentioned above through the stratum of our class-ridden society, to women who had had a grammar school education to those who were at University before the War (studying for a degree but not able to take it) and therefore better placed than others to establish a career.

Teaching and nursing were the first two acceptable careers, for which one had to be single. Shop assistant; nursemaid – for those who tried to suppress their desire for their own children by looking after those of other people; shorthand-typist, rising to secretary; dressmaker; milliner; telephonist.

But it was the loneliness which affected these women most. Going 'home' to a not particularly pleasant lodging, with no family warmth, to go to bed to return to an uninspiring job the following day and to contemplate that this was to be their life.

As time passed 'Matrimonial advertisements' appeared in newspapers but they do not seem to have been a successful means of attracting a partner and they would continue being printed for six months or more. Reading them now one cannot but help a feeling

of sympathy. They were written out of desperation but the wording is such they were never going to attract a response. “Well-educated woman of good family.” This person was “desirous of marrying either bachelor or widower about 48, wounded officer for preference with an income of about £400 a year”. Another would be “very happy to marry wounded officer needing a cheerful companion and pal”. It made the men they hoped to attract sound like trophies. Widows, on the other hand, were marrying. This is understandable – the ‘surplus women’, the widows and the wounded ex-servicemen were all war casualties in their way but it would be the widow and the soldier who would be most likely to meet with mutual sympathy.

Then there was this - an opinion expounding the view in the *Daily Mail*.

A lecture given on the 4th February, 1920 by a Dr Murray Leslie to the London Institute of Hygiene. His view too was that the ‘surplus women’ posed a threat to society! He was of the opinion that as the more intelligent women followed careers so the “established system of marriage, children, family, would collapse, leaving only the unskilled, lower orders to breed, thus lowering the quality of the blood stock”.

This was entirely the fault of the ‘surplus’ women, not, of course, the catastrophe which had left a world where there were no men for women to marry.

There is also a very chilling feeling about these comments. We know where such a philosophy led but did people then understand where it could go? It would be in the next decade that fascism would deepen but is there a threat of it in Dr Murray Leslie’s lecture?

The Daily News and Leader of the 23rd June, 1918 felt it was wrong for trained women to be employed on the land – that this was “unsound”, for the women should be continuing their training as their skills would be needed in the future.

The Daily Express of the 19th November 1918 came up with this gem:

RURAL ROMANCE - The gist was that the Government was indulging in match making and that “The Authorities” wanted to encourage rural romances with the returning young land workers marrying the Land Girls which would mean a skilled farmer would have a skilled wife to manage the dairy and incidentally take her turn at the hardest work. This would mean fit parents to raise healthy families and thus improve the standard of the rural population. The article started with the words “The Daily Express understands...” which probably means the article had no basis in fact and was thought up possibly during a tea break. No doubt the “rural population” had a comment or two to add but there it is again – the social engineering.

There then followed a grotesque period with the groups within our society all turning on each other. It was very strange – so much so that a theory developed that the whole country was suffering from neurasthenia.

It was probably set in motion as the economic situation worsened and unemployment rose. Trade Unions turned on women being trained, as did demobbed men- all insisting the women should “return to the kitchen” and leave the vacancies for men. Sympathy for widows waned with the public thinking they were particularly favoured. The surplus women turned on the working women whose husbands had returned saying they were

taking money from them when they had to support themselves while wives had men to do that for them, overlooking the fact that wives were caring for injured and/or traumatised men and the family needed more money to survive.

The demobbed found that those who 'had stayed behind' would not hand the work back to those who had returned but employment was so scarce anyone with a job would cling to it – they also probably had a family to feed.

The survivors were also coming together, the unemployed and disabled protesting at the Cenotaph on Remembrance Day. They were particularly incensed when they discovered how much better the survivors were treated in Canada, Australia, New Zealand and France. Here they began to feel they were regarded as second-rate simply by surviving – as Siegfried Sassoon said "Those of us who had the *temerity* to survive".

Their frustration was understandable. Two men standing together, hit by a sniper, one is wounded and recovers, the other is killed. The latter becomes one of the 'glorious dead', the other is - what? a survivor – and in the bizarre period through which society was moving the attitude towards him had become "Survived – well now, how did you manage that then?"

The survivors had their own problems – so many were wounded, even more were traumatised. They grieved for their comrades. The great relief they felt at having survived was replaced by guilt. They had not returned to a 'Land fit for heroes.' Many of them were back on the streets, begging.

Here are two poems written at the time both of which clearly express how people were feeling. The first is by Vera Brittain, herself one of the 'surplus women', having lost her fiancée in the War.

THE LAMENT OF THE DEMOBILISED

"Four years" some say consolingly,
"Oh well.
What's that? You're young. And it must have been
A very fine experience for you!"
And they forget
How others stayed behind and just got on –
Got on the better since we were away.
And we came home and found
They had achieved, and men revered their names,
But never mentioned ours.
And no one talked heroics now. And we
Must go back and start again once more.
"You threw four years into the melting-pot –
Did you indeed!" these others cry.
"Oh well,
The more fool you!"
And we're beginning to agree with them.

This was written by Edward Shanks, a 2nd Lieutenant, South Lancashire Regiment.

ARMISTICE DAY

The hush begins. Nothing is heard
Save the arrested taxis throbbing
And here and there an ignorant bird
And there a sentimental woman sobbing.

The statesman bares and bows his head
Before the solemn monument:
His lips, paying duty to the dead
In silence, are more than ever eloquent.

But ere the sacred silence breaks
And taxis hurry on again,
A faint and distant voice awakes
Speaking the mind of a million absent men:

“Mourn not for us. Our better luck
At least has given us peace and rest.
We struggled when our moment struck
But now we understand that death knew best.

Would we be as our brothers are
Whose barrel-organs charm the town?
Ours was a better dodge by far -
We got *our* pension in a lump sum down.

We, out of all, have had our pay,
There is no poverty where we lie:
The graveyard has no quarter-day,
The space is narrow but the rent not high.

No empty stomach here is found,
Unless some cheated worm complain
You hear no grumbling underground\;
Oh, never, never wish us back again!

Mourn not for us, but rather we
Will meet upon this solemn day
And in our greater liberty
Keep silent for you, a little while, and pray.

These two poems give us a glimpse of a troubled society but rather than the various psychological theories that have been put forward it would seem that the problem was a collective journey through the various stages of grief.

What was it like to confront the enormity of the social change brought about by not just the War but the type of War, with its new and horrific weapons with men damaged or eradicated in large numbers? Did sympathy become lost in this enormity, did so many people in need of so many forms of support become an embarrassment, was it a

constant reminder of the War as the need 'to forget' grew stronger? Had we lost what we considered was tolerant and civilised behaviour?

Eventually the mood changed. There may have been a frenetic quality to the enjoyment but people did emerge from the miring gloom and doom to dance, go to the theatre, concert hall or cinema. There was a surge of interest in driving, walking and cycling with, inevitably, criticism in the newspapers about how bad women drivers were and whether they should be allowed on the road. Advertisements regarding oil etc. and the general mechanics, with careful instructions of the 'little woman' variety, were directed at *all* women, forgetting that many had driven buses during the war and others had chauffeured various officials. Women had also driven ambulances and lorries at the Front where a lack of mechanical understanding could mean life or death.

There was nothing women could do that did not bring forth mockery. A shepherdess was automatically called Bo Peep. A herdsman was Diana in Breeches. Reports on the women at Wiremill included a comment on some having "bobbed hair" with no explanation as to why hair style had any significance. Everything was trivialised.

This period in our social history has been described as bizarre and grotesque. The only way to understand is to realise what had been lost, apart from the large percentage of the population. The air raids had taken away the security of being on an island protected by the navy. Any future war could come to us. The society for which we had fought had disappeared. Now there was displacement, imbalance, insecurity and a new philosophy needed to solve innumerable social problems and, remembering the Cabinet Papers of 1917 referring to ships bringing us food having to be turned away because we could not pay for them, all to be done by a country on the verge of bankruptcy plus a large American loan to be repaid.

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