



'Surplus Women': a legacy of World War One?

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More than 700,000 British men were killed during World War One. This tragic loss of life affected the lives of young women in 1920s Britain. Virginia Nicholson has discussed in her 2007 book, *Singled Out*, the difficulties of unmarried women following the gender imbalance of the population which followed World War One. The middle classes were especially affected with a higher proportion of officers killed than those in lower ranks. The 700,000 deaths resulted in a particularly large gap between the male and female populations of people aged 25 to 34 with 1,158,000 unmarried women and 919,000 unmarried men, according to the 1921 census.

Although the press sensationalised the results of the 1921 census, using the phrases 'surplus' and 'superfluous' women, the imbalance of population in Britain was not a new phenomenon arising with World War One. The 1851 census showed that 30 per cent of English women aged 20 to 40 were unmarried. By the late 19th century, around a third of British women between the ages of 25 to 35 were unmarried, and census records show that an imbalance of men and women continued in the Edwardian years. Indeed, Jay Winter has argued that World War One actually increased the popularity of marriage in Britain in general, but that there was an effect on women born between 1894 and 1902.

Like the press in the early 1920s, Nicholson focusses on the 2 million 'surplus women'. However, she notes that this was a number rounded up from 1.75 million, which was documented in the 1921 census. Ten years later, half of the women who were 25 to 29 years old in 1921, were still unmarried. However this did not mean they were never to marry as, particularly in the 1930s, women married into their 40s.

Jay Winter has proposed that the war may not have affected the demography of Britain any more than emigration would have if it had continued at the same high rate as in 1911-14. From 1884, the British Women's Emigration Association sponsored working class women and distressed gentlewomen to settle overseas, to correct the gender imbalances in settler colonies where there were more men than women, and to reduce the surplus of women in Britain. With worries about demobilisation and restructuring following the war, the government established the Oversea Emigration Committee in 1918. In 1919, the Society for the Oversea Settlement of British Women was established and was provided with an annual grant. The Society's panels included ones for areas 'Africa, Canada, Australia and New Zealand' and for work 'for nursing, for training and for agriculture. All of this effort was in spite of the evidence collected by the Dominions Royal Commission of 1912-1917 which found that the casualties of men from the dominions during the war meant that marriage prospects in the Empire had also declined. Additionally, men were emigrating as well as women, perpetuating the imbalance in Britain. So in 1920, 125,000 women emigrated but 115,000 men also did. Between 1923 and 1927, fewer women than men emigrated as a result of the Empire Settlement Act (1922), through which the government provided financial assistance to emigrants.

The legacy of the war created problems for women who wanted to work as well as those who wished to marry.

The number of women in paid employment increased from 4.93 million to 6.19 million during the war and many wartime work opportunities were better paid and were more rewarding roles. Yet, when the troops were demobilised these women were expected to stand aside. 750,000 women were made redundant in 1918. Indeed, it was the end of the war which formalised marriage bars in many roles, in particular in teaching, nursing and the civil service, and there were also unofficial marriage bars in some commercial companies where women had to resign upon marriage. This was in spite of the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act of 1919 which was meant to prevent discrimination because of sex or marriage within public offices and professions. For many women, World War One did not provide long-term employment opportunities; Elizabeth Roberts has highlighted that the 1921 census reveals that there was a lower percentage of females working than there had been in 1911.

Through my research on the Overseas Nursing Association (ONA), an agency run by lady volunteers which recruited nurses for the colonies and areas overseas with significant British communities, I became interested in the demography of Britain as the statistics and popular beliefs regarding marriage prospects resonated with the large numbers of women who applied to the ONA in the early 1920s. As shown by the list of further readings, the topic of surplus women is far from a neglected topic, but overviews of singleness in Britain by Nicholson and Katherine Holden have shown that there is much more scope for detailed research into the impact of World War One on particular groups of single women.

Link to Vera Brittain's 'The Superfluous Woman' '

<http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/education/pathways/path/yaipin/5>

Further reading

Brian L. Blakeley, 'The Society for the Oversea Settlement of British Women and the Problems of Empire Settlement, 1917-1936,' *Albion*, 21 (1988), pp. 421-44.

Gerard DeGroot, *Blighty: British Society in the Era of the Great War* (Harlow, Longman, 1996).

Dane Kennedy, 'Empire Migration in Post-War Reconstruction: The Role of the Oversea Settlement Committee, 1919-1922,' *Albion*, 20 (1988): 403-419.

Katherine Holden, *The Shadow of Marriage: Singleness in England, 1914-60* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2007).

Arthur McIvor, *A History of Work in Britain, 1880-1950* (Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2001).

Virginia Nicholson, *Singled Out: How Two Million Women Survived Without Men after the First World War* (London, Penguin, 2008).

Elizabeth Roberts, *Women's Work: 1840-1940* (Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1988).

Deborah Simonton, *A History of European Women's Work, 1700 to the Present* (London and New York, Routledge, 1998).

Jay Winter, *The Great War and the British People* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

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