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Claire Bowen

*Rites of passage mark the crossing of a line that defines
a fundamental division in the social order. They
therefore attract the observer's attention [...] but the
important thing is the line.*

Pierre Bourdieu¹

- 1 The Great War saw the massive arrival of women of every social class into virtually all the areas of the British economy. Certain sectors resisted longer and more fervently than others. Just as the presence of women on the labour market was perceived by the suffragists to possess a great symbolic value that could be turned to the advantage of the struggle for votes for women, so their presence in certain professions was perceived by others as a symbol of the destruction of traditional values and the harbinger of society's decline and inevitable collapse. The most difficult area for women to enter, and the most significant for critics of women's work, was the army. The question of acceptance here was less to do with competence—women were, after all, working in almost all the professions by the time that they were allowed to become army auxiliaries in 1917—than with the implications of a female presence in an eminently masculine context. Front-line fighting was, and essentially remains, a masculine prerogative and the role and status of individuals possessed of that prerogative was, and is, structured and indicated in complex codes of rank, decorations and uniforms that are awarded to the bearer after various rites of passage. The battle over the presence of women in the forces was very much about their right of access to these codes while negotiating the perceived emasculation of men and “manning” of women consequent on the achievement of symbolic equality.
- 2 Women had, of course, been involved in uniformed organizations well before the Great War. The creation of the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry in 1907 gave “Aristocratic Amazons in Arms”² the opportunity to train for hypothetical horse-back rescues on the battlefield, wear uniform and generally participate in countryside rough-and-tumble

justified by patriotism. Other uniformed, paramilitary structures such as the Women's Emergency Corps, Women's Volunteer Reserve and Women's Legion etc. came into being at the beginning of the War, their members eager for "the right to serve"³ in a rather more vigorous capacity than those of fund-raising and comforts collecting usually available to women. Uniform, for both its advocates and opponents, implied rather more than a practical and recognizable working dress. A correspondent writing to *The Morning Post* in 1915, observed that "the use of khaki and the adoption of military titles" was "wrong and jarring" because their work "hardly [gives] women a claim to assume the uniforms and titles of men who have fallen on the blood-stained fields of Flanders or in the trenches of Gallipoli".⁴ Rank, decoration and uniform were, as symbols of gendered rites of passage, powerful markers of the inherent inequality between men and women.

This is what a rite of passage that confers a quality does. It says: this man is a man—the implication, which is not self-evident, being, a real man. It makes the smallest, weakest, most effeminate man a complete man, distinguished by a natural, essential difference from the most masculine, tallest, strongest etc. woman. In this case what the rite of passage does is to confirm and sanctify the established order of things. (Bourdieu 177)

- 3 The fight for the "right to khaki" as an extension of the "right to serve" was, therefore, of great significance in the sense that to allow women access to military symbols was to blur one of the clearest dividing lines between the sexes.
- 4 An unspoken additional objection to women in khaki was that uniform and insignia-wearing were intimately associated with masculine sexual attractiveness! The official recruiters of the 19th century predecessors were well aware of a uniform's appeal and much energy was devoted to the designing of attractive plumage! Tommy's Great War khaki was less romantic but nonetheless a powerful sexual symbol. Marie Lloyd was quite straightforward:

Oh I do feel so proud of you, I do Honour Bright!
 I'm going to give you an extra cuddle tonight.
 I didn't like you much before you joined the army, John
 But I do love you cocky now you've got your khaki on.⁵
- 5 Uniform then, suggested desirability. And it was the case that the women who finally managed to "[get their] khaki on" in 1917 were perceived as being, if not necessarily desirable, certainly sexually available. The consequence was dubious jokes ("What would you prefer, a whack in the face or a W.A.A.C. on your knee?") and, more seriously, a great deal of slanderous comment. An investigation by a W.A.A.C. official, Miss Tennyson Jesse, concluded in 1918, showed that the incidence of unwanted pregnancies and general "misbehaviour" in the Corps was significantly lower than that in the typical English village! The point here is not the admirable result of the investigation but the fact that it had to be mooted at all. Public opinion in the first months of the existence of the women's auxiliary forces did deal in sexual caricature, and policing the behaviour of its members was one of the organisation's major concerns!
- 6 Women came into uniform as the need for female labour extended to the services by 1917. Of course, almost from the first, economic necessity had provided solutions to the questions about the perception of women and their capacity to perform "masculine" tasks. As the need to replace men became acute, especially after 1916, women took on all sorts of jobs. Propaganda articles and illustrations insisted on the ability of women

to work well in any of the professions. From 1917, as it became increasingly urgent to recruit women and equip them for their working lives, advertisements insisted on training, advantages in pay and living conditions and even the opportunity to wear fetching overalls! Career opportunities for the educated middle-classes also expanded as women's work was also increasingly overseen by women administrators and inspectors. Demographic necessity took all available men to the only remaining gendered task—fighting—while women progressively entered all the other areas of military activity. The Women's Auxiliary Army Corps was formed in 1917 precisely with a view to providing a replacement work force; "Every fit woman can release a fit man". The Corps, with Helen Gwynne Vaughan⁶ as its first Overseas Controller, was the first organization to recruit women into service in cooperation with the British Army in a non-nursing capacity.

- 7 W.A.A.C. organization was that of a factory rather than of an army unit. With "Workers", "Forewomen" and two grades of "Officials" or "Administrators" replacing private soldiers, Non-Commissioned Officers and Officers. The women wore uniform, khaki and designed for modesty, otherwise the military associations of the Corps were left deliberately vague. W.A.A.C. "members" enrolled rather than enlisted and so were not subject to military discipline but to the Corps' own system of policing and chaperoning.⁷ Saluting was neither authorized nor forbidden but W.A.A.C. officials were usually saluted in army areas and were addressed by all personnel as "Ma'am".
- 8 The work available was varied and, above all, reasonably paid. The recruiting posters offered "Work at home and abroad with the forces—good wages, uniform, quarters, rations". Jobs were available in catering, storekeeping, maintenance, and administration, with training opportunities for, *inter alia*, domestics, clerks, drivers, gardeners, shoemakers, machinists, painters, printers, photographers, turners, tracers, car mechanics, sand blasters, welders, electricians, coppersmiths and tinsmiths. The majority of recruits applying for these jobs were working-class women, anxious to earn W.A.A.C. wages and, perhaps, to enjoy the relative freedom of working abroad.⁸ Recruited through a special Professional Services Bureau at the Ministry of Labour, the Administrators were middle-class, educated women, attracted by the opportunity of service but also by the status of the work, by the degree of equality with men and by the clear possibility of earning a living during and perhaps after the War. Their work was to manage their Camps, to oversee the living arrangements of their "girls" and to supervise their behaviour, censoring their letters and imposing a ban on alcohol, on smoking in public places or on duty, and on inappropriate relationships with soldiers. Margaret Campbell Gibson,⁹ an Administrator in France writes of a daily routine that is less that of an army auxiliary than of Victorian housewife, a college bursar and a public school prefect.

You wanted a programme of my day. Called at 7 and rise almost immediately—roll call is at 8 and the girls do about 10 minutes drill after that, I don't take that and then Miss Suche and I have our breakfast. The girls are called (by a gong struck on an empty shell case) at 6.30 and breakfast at 7.30, they do out their own huts and leave everything tidy, blankets all folded up, and they go off to their different offices at 8.30 or thereabouts. There are always some letters to be seen to and given to the girls to take into town, and at 9 I go to the kitchen and interview the Cook. We've got the rations for tomorrow in already today and tomorrow's menu is made out up to supper. Breakfast (tomorrow), boiled bacon, tea, marmalade, butter; dinner, beef stew with a few vegetables, and boiled rice and jam for pudding. [...] tea, 4.30, bread and butter and jam; and supper either cheese and biscuit or soup

and biscuit; sometimes sardines, sometimes toasted cheese, they don't fare at all badly, but it is rather monotonous and it's difficult to get fresh vegetables. Miss Suche and I have what the girls have for breakfast and lunch, and the Cook makes us up something for our evening meal at 8 o'clock, she's very good about that and takes an interest in making something nice. She makes quite good omelettes—Next, the office—there's always something to do there. Sometimes I go into town on an errand and lunch is at 1 o'clock. After that I rest on my bed, generally not for long, somebody comes along or some message and you have to get up.

Programme cont. Back at the office soon after 3 o'clock today; worked there until 4.30—Tea—office again after tea and just left it now 6:30 P.M. Have been round the huts and inspected in the course of the morning, and this evening at Roll Call I shall read out: 'that, Hut no. 11 Ablution room, Basin dirty; Bed no. 4 Blankets badly folded—Hut 12 Basin in Ablution room not cleaned, Hut otherwise in very good order (the only one). Hut 16 same charges against Basin in Ablution room, Blanket badly folded—Cigarette found between blankets' etc. etc. etc. Poor things have absolutely no place to keep their belongings except their suit-cases [...].¹⁰

- 9 Gibson's letter describes living conditions as uncomfortable for everyone. She asks for woolly vests, bed socks, warm shirts and gum boots or snow shoes to be sent to her for her personal comfort against the coming winter but also relates negotiations with "a really nice [...] Sergeant" on behalf of her workers to obtain "a few small shelves [...] and hooks on which they hang their clothes" as well as glass for the office windows and pieces of linoleum to cover the worst cracks in the floor.¹¹

- 10 Manifestly Margaret Gibson was popular with her "girls". In a letter of 30 June 1918, written on Gibson's transfer to Le Tréport in Normandy, thirteen Camp Members express their "appreciation of your régime at Camp 2".¹² Relations with the army¹³ and especially with her own hierarchy were not necessarily so pleasant.

The really vexing and trying thing[s] here are our Governors. I hadn't met it or run up against it at the other place. There is (as you know) a Chief Controller, and each area has an Area Controller; there wasn't one at D.G.T.;¹⁴ it was a Unit on its own practically, though directly under the C.C.¹⁵ to whom you referred. It made things simpler and life happier. Here you may do nothing without referring to, or through, the A.C., you're just to be a medium for carrying out orders unquestioningly; and if you question them, if they seem to you as an intelligent and reasonable-thinking person unreasonable, you are very disagreeably brought to task. Not being accustomed to the treatment I do not take to it kindly. It will come to this that one will carry out orders blindly and won't care. I've got to carry out the orders unquestioningly, but, at the same time, if they appear to the girls [...] to be unreasonable, I am expected to make them palatable. It's damned disagreeable, I tell you.¹⁶

- 11 Gibson's account of W.A.A.C. life indicates that popular fantasies at home about promiscuity and adventure had very little foundation. The only women in uniform exposed to near front-line activity were not army auxiliaries but rather the staff of field hospitals and F.A.N.Y ambulance drivers. However, dangers were added to the irritations and routine of Camp life in spring 1918 with air attacks on Etaples and Abbeville. These were Allied bases providing important communications and administrative centres as well as major hospital facilities and, as such, were an obvious target for German bombers. A series of raids on the Somme bases began on 21 March. The women at work in the area were not removed, Helen Gwynne Vaughan observing to the press that since they were replacing soldiers they must expect to be shot at! During the night of 29-30 May a bomb fell into a protection trench at Abbeville killing eight Workers, all attached to No. 2 Army Supply Depot, immediately. Another died of

wounds later. For the women of the Camp, these, the first W.A.A.C. deaths on active service “confirmed their right to khaki” and made them “one in sympathy and sacrifice with the fighting forces”.¹⁷ The men in Abbeville shared the women’s sentiments. The nine victims were given a military funeral with Royal Flying Corps pilots flying overhead, troops lining the route to Abbeville Communal Cemetery and the coffins taken to the cemetery on gun limbers and covered with the Union Jack.

- 12 The Abbeville bombing of 29-30 May was significant in that the nine W.A.A.C. deaths caused the men of the base to redraw the line separating combatants and non-combatants and, by extension, to redefine the rights of women who now possessed *de facto*, combatant status. That the men did this was crucial in the sense that access to what Bourdieu calls “symbolic capital”—military ceremonial, for example—is defined by the dominant society that values it. In this sense, the W.A.A.C.s could not demand that their dead Workers be treated as soldiers. The decision to bring them into the military group with access to its symbols and rituals could only be made by existing members of that group. The gift of military funerals, a rite of passage for soldiers, brought women into the system of reward and recognition for courage on the battlefield and thus altered the way in which they would henceforth be seen by the rest of the world:

[...] the rite of passage has an absolutely real effect in that it really transforms the person who has been initiated: first it changes the way in which others see him and, perhaps above all, the way in which others behave towards him (the most obvious change being that he will be given titles and afforded the respect that they merit). (Bourdieu 178).

- 13 London followed the example of Abbeville in July 1918 when, for the first time six women were awarded the Military Medal. Five were members of F.A.N.Y including Sarah Bonnell, the first female M.M. (for alphabetical reasons) who received the award for “gallant conspicuous devotion to duty” while picking up wounded from an ammunition dump explosion. Unit Administrator Mrs Margaret Annabella Campbell Gibson received the first W.A.A.C. (now Queen Mary’s Auxiliary Army Corps) Military Medal:

For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty during an enemy air-raid when in charge of a Q.M.A.A.C. camp which was completely demolished by enemy bombs, one of which fell within a few feet of the trench in which the women were sheltering. During the raid, Unit Administrator Gibson showed a splendid example. Her courage and energy sustained the women under most trying circumstances and undoubtedly prevented serious loss of life.¹⁸

- 14 London’s gesture was a little less generous than that of Abbeville. Although access to military rewards had been facilitated, this was not quite equality! The usual award for a male officer displaying gallantry in the face of the enemy would have been the Military Cross. The lesser Military Medal was normally for other ranks, the justification for the award here being, presumably that the action did not take place quite in the front line and that Margaret Gibson was an “official” and not a commissioned officer.
- 15 This final question of rank was resolved, possibly by inefficiency rather than intent, after her death. Gibson’s final posting as a Unit Administrator was to Dieppe. She died of dysentery at No. 16 General Hospital at Le Tréport in August 1919. A request for information emanating from the War Office reads:

Enquiry from Staff Captain, War Office to Headquarters Q.M.A.A.C., November 1919
Captain Mrs M. Gibson

Q.M.A.A.C.

Killed.

Can you state with which Unit the above officer was serving at the time of her death, also the date of her death, please?¹⁹

- 16 The letter is probably a standard document. What is interesting is that the Staff Captain found it neither necessary nor useful to adapt his text to the case of a female member of an auxiliary service. As far as the War Office was concerned, Captain Gibson, a serving officer was killed while attached to her unit. A case of lazy administration, perhaps, but the point is that terminology that would have been unthinkable when the creation of the Corps was first proposed in January 1917 was perfectly admissible two years later. Whether deliberately or unconsciously, it was accepted that women had crossed the line of military uniform, insignia and rank with courage and efficiency and with no deplorable moral consequences for themselves or society in general.
- 17 The period of grace scarcely lasted. Just as women were ejected from their civilian jobs in favour of the returning men, so the women's auxiliary forces were to disappear in a short time. The Women's Royal Naval Service, created in November 1917 was the first to be disbanded in 1919. The Women's Royal Air Force lasted from April 1918 to 1920. Queen Mary's Army Auxiliary Corps continued to serve in France until 1920, playing an important part in the management of war cemeteries. All three women's services were revived in 1938-1939, the A.T.S. (Auxiliary Territorial Service) the first to come into being under the direction of Helen Gwynne Vaughan. There were no debates this time about the right of women to wear uniform, give orders and win medals. On a more personal level, however, the hard-won recognition of the work of one woman was apparently never confirmed:

The M.M. awarded to my sister the late Mrs M.A.C. Gibson, Unit Administrator in Q.M.A.A.C. has never yet been received by her family. I feel sure the matter has been overlooked, and am asking if you will kindly tell me how to draw the attention of the authorities to this omission.

We are all very proud of the fact that my sister was the first W.A.A.C. to be awarded the M.M. for her courage and coolness when her camp was bombed at Abbeville in (illegible) 1918 and are naturally desirous of possessing this memento of honour conferred on her.

It is over a year since my sister's death at Le Tréport on 17 September 1918, and we have never received the M.M. earned by her, or heard anything from the authorities with regard to the matter [...].²⁰

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NOTES

1. Bourdieu 176, my translation.

2. *The Daily Graphic*, 25 February 1908.

3. The W.S.P.U. expressed this demand from the early stages of the War. *The Illustrated London News* of July 24th 1915 devotes space for comment on and photographs of the Right to Serve march on Parliament.

4. Letter from Violet Markham, *Morning Post*, July 22, 1915 in uniforms and women debate (Watson 17).

5. *Now You've Got Your Khaki On*, lyrics and music by Charles Collins and F.W. Leigh, Star Music of London 1916.

Other music hall songs, such as Vesta Tilley's *Jolly Good Luck to the Girl Who Loves a Soldier* encouraged "good" women to prefer "good" men and clearly suggested that members of the forces should and would be found more attractive than civilians. Tilley herself (said to be "Britain's best recruiting sergeant") sang the song dressed in a Tommy's uniform, a war-time adaptation of her usual cross-dressed act and an interesting repositioning of the sexual power of the uniform.

6. Helen Gwynne-Vaughan 1879-1967, Botanist and Mycologist, Professor Birkbeck College, London, Chief Controller Overseas W.A.A.C. 1917-1918, Commandant Women's Royal Airforce September 1918-1920, Chief Controller Auxiliary Territorial Service (A.T.S.) 1939-1941.

7. See David Mitchell, *Women on the Warpath: The Story of the Women of the First World War*, London, Cape, 1966.

8. Most of the W.A.A.C. and Q.M.A.A.C. records were lost during the 1940 London bombings but evidence from surviving documents and Commonwealth War Graves Commission records indicate that recruits tended to be young and that some gave or had no next of kin. The average age of seven of the women killed in the May, 1918 Abbeville bombing, for example, was 22. The remaining two are given as "age unknown, no next of kin".

9. Mrs Margaret Annabella Campbell Gibson (also Captain Gibson) was born in Mauritius 12 July 1877 to Thomas Elliott C.M.G. and Georgina Campbell Elliott. The widow of John MacDougal Gibson, she became a Unit Administrator in the W.A.A.C./Q.M.A.A.C. She was awarded the Military Medal (*London Gazette*, 5th July 1918) "for conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty". Margaret Gibson died of dysentery in No. 16 General Hospital at Le Tréport on 17th September 1919, aged 42. She is buried in the town's Mont Huon Commonwealth War Graves Commission Cemetery. No other information about Gibson's service has survived. I came across her grave by accident while on holiday in Le Tréport in summer 2008—the first step in what was to become the research for the present paper.

10. Letter from Margaret Campbell Gibson to her sister, May, September 16th/17th 1917. Liddle Collection, University of Leeds.

11. *Ibid.*

12. Note to Margaret Campbell Gibson from Camp No.2, Q.M.A.A.C., A.P.O.S.1, dated 30.6.18, signed L.M. Reid with 12 others, Liddle Collection, University of Leeds.

13. "there's a Captain and a Lieut. In charge, and they are very kind and helpful. I don't think they're real soldiers." Margaret Campbell Gibson, letter to her sister, May. *op. cit.*

14. Director General of Transportation.

15. At this point, Helen Gwynne Vaughan.

16. Margaret Campbell Gibson, letter to her sister, May. *op. cit.*

17. *The Times*, 7th June 1918.

18. *The London Gazette*, Third Supplement to the issue of Friday 5th July, 1918, issue number 30784.

19. Margaret Campbell Gibson file, National Archive, Kew.
20. Margaret Campbell Gibson file, National Archive, Kew.
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ABSTRACTS

Economic necessity saw the massive arrival of women into the British economy during the Great War. Their presence in the armed forces from 1917 was of special significance in that women, for the first time, found themselves working for and with rigorously all-male national institutions possessed of a complex system of rituals and symbols legible both inside and outside the forces. Equality for the members of the women's forces, therefore, implied the right to share the symbols of rank, uniform and medals used by male soldiers. The career of Captain Margaret Campbell Gibson, the first W.A.A.C. Administrator to be awarded a Military Medal throws considerable light on the nature and importance of the struggle for the full "right to khaki".

Des besoins économiques croissants expliquent l'arrivée en nombre des femmes sur le marché du travail britannique pendant la Grande Guerre. Leur présence au sein des armées à partir de 1917, donc dans des structures nationales entièrement masculines dotées de systèmes complexes de rituels et de symboles ayant un sens à la fois pour les militaires et pour le grand public, a donné lieu à un nombre de débats particulièrement intéressants sur l'égalité des femmes. La carrière du Capitaine Margaret Campbell Gibson, premier officier du W.A.A.C. à recevoir la *Military Medal* est un bel exemple de la lutte de ces femmes qui cherchaient à transgresser les limites de l'ordre militaire historique pour avoir droit aux symboles et donc à la signification de l'uniforme, du rang et des décorations.

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Mots-clés: Grande Guerre, travail féminin, armée, uniforme, W.A.A.C., médaille militaire

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