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WOMEN’S POETRY IN FIRST WORLD WAR ANTHOLOGIES AND TWO COLLECTIONS OF 1916

*This study seeks to account for the obscurity of poetry written by women about the First World War by examining trends in anthology selection during and since the war as context in which to recover a forgotten 1916 collection by W.J. Cameron,* War and Life*, counterpointed with the better-known contemporaneous volume* The Pageant of War *by Lady Margaret Sackville.*

Poetry written by women about the First World War remains largely unknown. This can be attributed, in part, to its inconsistent representation in anthologies published both during and since the period, in part to changing taste about what furnishes legitimate subject matter for war poetry, and to aesthetic judgement about what makes good poetry. Academic anxiety about the classification of poetry by women written about the war but without front-line fighting experience, explored by Brian Murdoch in his investigation of women’s poetry of the Great War, further complicates the positioning of this body of work, and affords fresh opportunity for oversight.[[1]](#endnote-1) Factors of visibility and taste undoubtedly contribute to the longstanding neglect of this body of poetry, yet there are other considerations, some of which point to significant differences between the function of poetry then – in time of national crisis, and now – in relative peace.

Anthologies have provided the widest access to war poetry both during and since the era. A comparison of two which bookend the war, *Poems of the Great War* (1914)*[[2]](#endnote-2)* and *Poems Written during the Great War 1914-1918* (1918)traces an increasing role for poetry by women. *[[3]](#endnote-3)* The former, in paper wrappers and costing 1/-, was published on behalf of the Prince of Wales’s National Relief Fund. It represents, the unsigned editorial note states, “the free offering of English poets to the cause of National Relief”, merging both expressive and financial need in the term “relief”. Seventeen poems follow by sixteen male poets, the first and last by laureate Robert Bridges, “Wake up, England” and “Hymn in War Time”. The volume sustains a mood of noble conviction in the necessity of war, typified by the opening stanza of Laurence Binyon’s “The Fourth of August”:

Now in thy splendour go before us,

Spirit of England, ardent-eyed!

Enkindle this dear earth that bore us,

In the hour of peril purified.[[4]](#endnote-4)

The call to arms within the volume is powerful, sombre, and dressed in patriotic archaism to demonstrate continuity with a valorous past. The approach contrasts decisively with the tone of the 1918 anthology, outlined by the editor Bertram Lloyd in his Preface:

The contributors to this collection, several of whom either have been or actually now are at the Front, represent widely divergent and even fundamentally opposed points of view as to the value, necessity, and results of ‘civilised warfare’…Their only common point of agreement can probably be best described as hatred of the cant and idealization and false glamour wherewith the conception of war is still so thickly overlaid in the minds of numbers of otherwise reasonable people.[[5]](#endnote-5)

This volume contains work by 29 poets, of several European nationalities including German, five of them women (six if we include Nataly Yencken the translator from Russian). Four poems by Margaret Sackville (who dropped her aristocratic title for this collection) from *The Pageant of War* are printed cheek by jowl with work by Siegfried Sassoon.[[6]](#endnote-6) In the business of debunking war, women, it seems have equal authority with their male counterparts, even if Sassoon declared Sackville’s poetry to be “fairly rotten” after meeting her at Craiglockhart.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Yet the privileging of the soldier’s authority, which necessarily excludes women, is evident even here in Bertram Lloyd’s Preface. This trend began at least two years earlier, in 1916 when the prolific publisher of war poetry, Erskine Macdonald, brought out *Soldier-Poets: Songs of the Fighting Men,* an anthology compiled by Galloway Kyle, followed in the same year by a “Trench edition” and by a second series in 1917, *Soldier-Poets: More Songs by the Fighting Men*.[[8]](#endnote-8) The evident appetite for such work brings with it a perhaps unnoticed or unquestioned acceptance of its inherent strains of misogyny: the sarcasm of Sassoon’s “The Glory of Women”, printed in Lloyd’s anthology, unifies women’s war-time conduct in order to vilify it.[[9]](#endnote-9) An alternative and equally well-known example of the soldier’s contempt for women, and here specifically their poetry, is seen in “Dulce et Decorum Est”. Wilfred Owen’s first draft is dedicated “To Jessie Pope etc”, and later “To a certain Poetess”, before finally deleting the explicit reference. It is retained implicitly, however, within the poem, which concludes with a sustained address to “you”, culminating,

My friend, you would not tell with such high zest

To children ardent for some desperate glory,

The old Lie...[[10]](#endnote-10)

Jessie Pope, satirist and children’s author, published three collections of war poetry, more inflected than the wholesale daubing of her work as jingoistic would suggest.[[11]](#endnote-11)

Evident from these publications are some of the further, instrumental, purposes fulfilled by poetry at this time. First is the use of poetry sales to raise money, a feature of such significance that it merited Catherine Reilly’s attention in her *Bibliography*: “a large proportion of verse was published to aid war charities”.[[12]](#endnote-12) The blurb on the khaki-coloured back cover of *Poems of the Great War* makes no mention of the poetry inside. Instead, it announces “A Suggestion”:

Those who cannot fight for their country can help in quieter ways. One way is to collect money for the Prince of Wales National Relief Fund.

Every purchaser of this book is, in a real sense, a subscriber to the Fund, but his duty does not end there. Let him make it his business to see that at least twelve of his friends buy the book too.

That would be really *doing something*!

Poetry became a product during this period, which here specifically links power to fight with power to buy and both are masculine, dual prowess seemingly confirmed by the fact that the anthology ran to three editions within 1914. This commodification renders anonymous the work between the covers; the poetry is subsumed by the gesture of purchase and there is a sense that the individualised voice, whether male or female, is less important than the collaborative effort, even “duty”, of the transaction between seller and purchaser. Women contributed to this field as the war developed, as writers and editors, no doubt as purchasers too. Women’s fund-raising in these ways can be illustrated here by three examples. Their charitable work as writers can be represented by a religious pamphlet-length collection, *Prisoners of Hope and other Verses*, composed by the otherwise unknown Mary Martineau, “Sold for the Relief of British and Allied War Prisoners”. It contains a simple prayer for “Christmas 1914”: “Guns are booming. Death stalks rampant/Over fields of snow....Sweetest Jesu, Lord Most Holy/Make the terror cease”.[[13]](#endnote-13) Alternatively, the anthology *A Book of Poems for the Blue Cross Fund (To Help Horses in War Time)* contains work by a number of women, including Jessie Pope whose “A Dumb Appeal” was composed especially to support the campaign and was published first in the *Daily Mail* to amplify its reach.[[14]](#endnote-14) Finally, to represent women’s fund-raising through editorial work, *The Fiery Cross: An Anthology*, was compiled by Mabel C. Edwards and Mary Booth, sold for the benefit of the Red Cross and also contained poems by several women: Jessie Pope, Alice Meynell, Katharine Tynan, Margaret L. Woods.[[15]](#endnote-15) Women did not necessarily have greater involvement in this particular use of poetry than men, but the widespread nature of the phenomenon diminishes the value of the art itself, its value passing as new charitable means, or the next anthology, are found.

At the same time, this trend is entirely contradicted by the evident hunger for the expression in poetry of the conditions endured by soldiers and civilians alike and the urge to remember it. Lawrence Cotterell, writing the Foreword to Reilly’s *Bibliography*, stated “[o]ne legacy that helped to make the situation just bearable...was the immense tide of poetry that surged up out of the minds of the fighting men, especially, but also of civilians in widely differing circumstances.”[[16]](#endnote-16)Cotterell identifies here the notion of “legacy”, the act of memorialising, which was paradoxically inscribed in the very present tense act of writing about immediate and hitherto untold experience. This was a view of poetry which made aesthetic and political virtues of the transient needs it was written to fulfil. The appetite for such work can be seen in the run-away sales and multiple editions of anthologies of war poetry: *Soldier-Poets*, for example, selling both at home and at the Front; or, in the Commonwealth, Carrie Ellen Holman’s compilation *In the Day of Battle: Poems of the Great War* which ran to three editions from 1916 to 1918.[[17]](#endnote-17)

An example of an anthology which combined collective expression with charitable purpose was J. W. Cunliffe’s *Poems of the Great War* published in 1916 by the New York offices of Macmillan, sold to raise funds for The Belgian Scholarship Committee. Outlining his principles of selection, Cunliffe states:

While poetic merit has been, of course, the paramount consideration, I have endeavoured to exercise catholic judgement, and to give fair representation to various schools of thought and expression as well as to the various phases of the War. If undue prominence seems to have been given to what may be called its more personal aspects – the spirit of sacrifice and devotion which inspired men and women to give themselves and those dearest to them to a great cause – I must plead in excuse that during much of the time of the preparation of this volume my mind was full of the memory of my friend Lieut.-Col. G. H. Baker of the 5th Canadian Mounted Rifles, who fell in command of his battalion during the third battle of Ypres on June 2, 1916.[[18]](#endnote-18)

The indirect dedication of the volume to Baker, delivered as prose elegy, and noting military engagement as well as personal loss, stands for the twin impulses of action and reflection, valour and grieving which characterise responses to the trauma of engagement. Cunliffe does not privilege one type of experience over another, nor does he draw distinctions of gender. His contents pages are divided by nation: Australia, Canada, India, United Kingdom and United States; of the 90 poets who represent the UK, 20 are women, and of the 39 who speak for the US, 19 are women. It is, in Cunliffe’s account of his responsibility as editor, as appropriate for men to write about grief as it is for women to write about fighting, and this is entirely borne out by the work presented. Poetry, for all its unusually instrumental purposes, was still considered an act of the imagination; so, for example, Margaret L. Woods’ “The First Battle of Ypres” written as though by a soldier present in the field is granted the same poetic authority as that accorded to, for example, Herbert Asquith’s grieving for “The Fallen Subaltern”.[[19]](#endnote-19) Yet there is a difficulty here too, which might encourage the relinquishing of women’s own war-time experience at the expense of amplifying reflection on men’s experience. Winifred Letts, for example, is represented in Cunliffe’s anthology by “The Spires of Oxford” in which the speaker reflects on the sacrifice made by “Oxford men” who “gave their merry youth away/For country and for God.”[[20]](#endnote-20) Cunliffe reprinted this poem from its publication in the *Westminster Gazette*; but Letts also published it in her full-length collection *Hallow-e’en and Poems of the War* where it has the sub-title “(Seen from a Train)”, emphasising women’s role as spectators, excluded from the university as from the Front.[[21]](#endnote-21)Cunliffe’s sources were frequently national newspapers or journals, and previously published anthologies (particularly, when it came to British women’s poetry, the 1915 *Country-Life Anthology of Verse* and the 1915 *King Albert’s Book*),[[22]](#endnote-22) less usually single-author collections. This led to a narrowing range of poetry by women in the public domain.

The post-war story of women in anthologies is taken up by Catherine Reilly’s 1981 publication for Virago of the anthology, *Scars upon my Heart: Women’s Poetry and Verse of the First World War*, which brought the body of women’s war poetry firmly into view once more. Reilly herself noted the prevailing absence of women’s voices in post-war anthologies of First World War poetry, and indeed the same absence from more general anthologies of twentieth-century verse, observing that Larkin’s 1973 selection for the *Oxford Book of Twentieth-Century English Verse* affords the exception, by the inclusion of a single poem by a woman from this era, “Rouen” by May Wedderburn Cannan.[[23]](#endnote-23) While anthologies of Great War poetry published since 1981 of course include a range of work by women, they tend to repeat both poets and work from Reilly’s selection. For example, George Walter’s 2004 Penguin anthology, *In Flanders Fields. Poetry of the First World War* (reprinted as *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry* in 2006) chooses exclusively from the same women as those who appear in Reilly’s anthology and of these only Vera Brittain is represented by poems which differ from those offered by Reilly. Reasons for such replication rightly entail judgements about the quality of the writing, the range of experience conveyed, and editors must operate within the practical constraints of the length of the volume. Yet the cumulative effect is to repeat the narrowing of representation of women’s First World War poetry already seen in Cunliffe’s approach.

Repetition also compounds one inevitable weakness of anthologies – the inability to appreciate the development of an individual voice, to trace the cohesion of aesthetic endeavour or political persuasion. In most cases, this failure is an acceptable compromise because the larger body of work is known and read in other contexts. However, in this situation, where neither the poets nor their work are current or even available elsewhere, rather than alleviating the lack of cultural purchase made by women’s poetry of the First World War, it simply contributes to its homogenising dismissal. Simon Featherstone’s view of Reilly’s anthology epitomises this trend: it demonstrates, he asserts, that “for most women writers there was no ready alternative to the adoption of doggerel or conventional poeticisms”.[[24]](#endnote-24) In terms of “legacy”, women are particularly badly served by anthologies. Against these backgrounds it is important, where possible, to read more closely the individual collections with which women made their mark as poets of this war and which have all but vanished from circulation.

One such is W. J. Cameron who had published two full-length volumes of poetry prior to her 1916 pamphlet-length collection *War and Life* (21 poems, 48 pp.).[[25]](#endnote-25) Reviewers believed she was a man: “[t]he very decided literary merits shown by the author...stamp him as a man of taste and culture” readers are told of her first collection *Poems* in the advertising pages of *War and Life* and it is unlikely that she counts as one of the 532 women poets of the war identified by Reilly.[[26]](#endnote-26) Her name was Williamina Jean Cameron and we know next to nothing about her life. Her obscurity has played its part in the failure of her publications to make an impact beyond their own time. The reader can only interpret her work in the context of other poems, and it is worthy of attention not because it is remarkable but because it is ordinary, a position shared by the war poetry of many unknown women in this era. The little we know of Cameron is gleaned from her student records at Royal Holloway College, where she arrived at the age of 18 in 1893 to study German and Music. Cameron narrowly missed working alongside Emily Wilding Davison who had read Modern Foreign Languages and Literature at Royal Holloway during 1891-2 before family finances forced her early departure in 1892. In January 1896 Cameron likewise left abruptly and perhaps for similar reasons, without graduating, having passed the Oxford Prelim Examinations in 1894 and won a gold medal for Music in 1895. Before arriving at Royal Holloway she had been to school in Aberdeen; her mother, listed as her guardian and likely therefore to be widowed, lived in Ladbroke Grove, Notting Hill, London. Cameron published nothing new after *War and Life*, and she died in 1948.[[27]](#endnote-27)

The sequence of poems is structured by an unfolding narrative of the war, the tone by turn hortatory and public or lamenting and domestic, as poems about national events juxtapose with poems which reflect more private circumstances.[[28]](#endnote-28) Cameron’s early commitment to music shows itself in the hymn-like swell of her grand themes or the intimate nursery rhythms and repetitions of her more homely lyrics. Her decision to structure the pamphlet by events of warfare, although they are not chronologically ordered, forms a striking narrative. The volume opens with a sonnet, “Once more for Freedom! *August*, 1914” which presents Britain as a resilient island nation under attack; it closes with a poem to commemorate Shakespeare’s tercentenary. Poems also consider the bombardment of the east coast of England in December 1914, the sinking of the Lusitania on 7 May 1915, and the execution of Edith Cavell on 12 October 1915, each of which represents assault on a feminised figure, the motherland, the mother ship, and, more literally, the nurse. These are coupled with poems to mark the passing of time: Christmas 1914, Christmas 1915. The last poem, alert to strength to be drawn from the centennial imagination, entitled “23 April 1916. May 3rd. New Style” muses on England at the time of Shakespeare’s birth, recalls the unlikely victory of Henry V, and Raleigh’s defeat of the Armada, concluding, “Three hundred years ago he died to-day/ Yet liveth still both in our speech and hearts/ Our Shakespeare who *is* England verily.”[[29]](#endnote-29)

The community brought into being by the use of “our” in Cameron’s closing poem is inclusive and ungendered, forming a radical contrast with that created by the same means in the second poem of her collection, “The Women in War-Time”. This begins “How shall *we* help thee, land of our fathers?” (the italics of “*we*” are by Cameron).[[30]](#endnote-30) The question is addressed to a male domain, a place in which the dwelling of women seems contingent on the presence, or absence, of “fathers”. While the notion of “Pro Patria” configured the land as masculine, much more usual was the address to “England, Mother of Liberty!” or “England, our Mother, our Mistress and our Queen!”[[31]](#endnote-31)Cameron herself deploys this maternal figure in other poems. Yet here she dwells on the perspective of watching resolute men depart for unknown futures, leaving the “Land of the shining sheaf, bounteous and golden,/Land of the valley, the veldt and the plain”. The land, like the women, is left behind. It is here, in the land itself, that the speaker ultimately finds rather than offers help. Stoicism and endurance, passive forms of help, merging women with the earth itself as the endlessly yielding backdrop to war, are invoked as the best answer to the opening question:

Nay ne’er remind them of those left behind them,

Waiting in hope till they come once again.

This dost thou help us, oh land of our fathers!

Now must the wonderful thought of thee be

Father and brother and son and that other

Nearer than all to our hearts – ah me!...

This is their story – this is their glory –

For these are thy daughters, oh sons of the sea![[32]](#endnote-32)

The volume opens, therefore, with a picture of society firmly separated into “them” and “us”, men and women, according to the roles demanded of each by war. The voice of “The Women in War-Time” speaks as a loyal daughter of Empire, accepting, even embracing, subordination and occlusion as her lot. Her duty is to serve “their story” and “their glory”, to be as ready as the nurturing valley, veldt and plain, to supply an army of men for the needs of war. The tone is patriotic but withholding of judgement about the value of war. War is simply required, and women, gathered into community by “we”, “us” and “our”, must serve in their own land-bound, home-bound way.

Cameron maintains this stoicism throughout the collection. Her poem “For Service”, subtitled “On the sinking of the Lusitania 7 May 1915”, for example, records the effect of that event on British resolve. The poem makes no attempt to imagine the circumstances themselves, in which the Cunard liner, sailing from New York to Liverpool was torpedoed by a German submarine south of the Irish coast. Instead it speaks with galvanised patriotism, opening “Britain! Mother! Hear the cry,/ ‘Take me-use me-or I die!’” . Its only internal gestures towards the Lusitania itself being the invocation “By the life ‘neath seas swept shaken -/Babe and mother now are taken”, and the promise, “Streams of life gush forth and fail;/Others follow – to prevail”.[[33]](#endnote-33) The sinking of the Lusitania triggered international outrage and was used by both the British and the American governments as war propaganda.[[34]](#endnote-34)

The execution of Edith Cavell by German firing squad in Belgium later that year was also used in British war propaganda.[[35]](#endnote-35) Eminent in the nursing profession, Cavell had worked as a matron in Brussels since 1907, training nurses and in 1910 launching the professional journal *L’Infirmière*. In August 1915 she was accused of smuggling wounded French, Belgian and British soldiers across the border into the neutral Netherlands. Cameron’s poem “On the Death of Miss Edith Cavell” is in three stanzas, addressed to “Cain among the nations”. The first stanza berates the enemy for this new crime and questions why it was committed. The second reminds the “foe” of the message of Christian brotherhood. The third reflects directly on Cavell’s death:

Some days agone

Thou didst to death a woman, one who served

Thy countrymen in sickness, as her own,

Since are not all men brothers? She that star

Of Hope still followed, aye, and shows it still

Unto us, sorrowful, now left to grieve

Her own star’s setting on that dreadful morn....

Did Joan the martyr greet her as she fell

Before these rifles grim? Did kindly arms,

Womanly arms, yet saintly, raise her then,

Support and comfort her, and lead her far

From this earth’s dust and din unto that world

Of peace, where every star its glory takes

From one great central Sun Whose rays are Love

That sheddeth light on man and all His creatures?[[36]](#endnote-36)

The linguistic collision between the fate of “a woman” at the hands of an abstract personification, and her location in a cosmos of swirling “Hope”, “Sun” and “Love”, effects an immediate transfiguration of the person into a martyr for whom St Joan is the fitting sisterly guide into heaven. Shot by rifles, Cavell becomes one of the battle fallen. Preferring assonance to rhyme, and embedding the notion of life cut short by the half line which is integral to each stanza, the poem achieves a technically accomplished response to this act of war.

Cavell’s death prompted several contemporaneous poems, predominantly, it seems, by women, seizing the opportunity to memorialise one of their own. The perspective of Cameron’s poem is flanked, for example, by Mildred Low’s deeply religious “Faith with Thanksgiving. In Memoriam: Edith Cavell. Martyred in Belgium, October 12, 1915” which names Cavell a “martyr-saint”, projects an account of actions, faith, prison circumstances, last communion, execution, and which ends with a prayer (and a hymn):

...Help Thou our unbelief!

And hear our echo of her latest prayer,

‘In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me.’[[37]](#endnote-37)

By contrast, Helen Key’s rallying “Edith Cavell” opens, “Weep for her, sigh for her, cry for her? No!” and thumps out rhyming couplets to demand, “Fight for her, ache for her, wake for her? Yes!/Brothers! This murder is yours to redress!”[[38]](#endnote-38) Cameron’s poem holds a relatively neutral position, if tending towards sanctification, between these typical poles of represented martyrdom or avowed belligerence.[[39]](#endnote-39)

One of Cameron’s more domestic lyrics, “Fugitive” in three stanzas, presents a mother singing to her child as they flee from home. It is both a lullaby and a song of escape, a drama in which exhaustion overcomes the speaker rather than the listener. It begins in thoroughly conventional mode, lulling attention before the alert:

There’s a time to laugh, they say;

There’s a time to weep and pray.

Now my feet be prayers instead

So they save thee, sleepy-head,

Sleepy-head!

Hearken how the bullets sing!

(Nestle closer, little thing.)

Burst the shells while houses fall.

(‘Tis a game, my dear, that’s all.)

Game of war that Kaisers play

While their minions hunt and slay.[[40]](#endnote-40)

The disruptions of war are evident as fear rather than sleep is invoked to bring “hush”, bullets rather than mothers “sing”, and “feet be prayers” in a spectacle of destruction. The trochaic tetrameter should create an upbeat rhythm, the rhyming couplets should bring a sense of security and completion. But instead, the rhythm generates alarm, and the ending rhyme of “play” with “slay” makes for a world of nightmare.

The monstrosity of nightmare suppressed by Cameron is fully articulated in the long title poem of Lady Margaret Sackville’s 1916 pamphlet-collection, *The Pageant of War*.[[41]](#endnote-41) As the bloated and ghastly figure of War parades in triumph along a shining white road made from the dust of war-dead children’s bones, he “had to wear a mask” for were his true countenance revealed, “The heart of every human being/Should shrink in loathing and in fear/And turn upon this thing and slay it there.”[[42]](#endnote-42) The pageant is heard before it is seen:

And down the street, and down the empty street

I heard the slow, monotonous, heavy beat

Of a million and a million feet.[[43]](#endnote-43)

Coupled with the “empty” street, this sound is uncanny. The hollowing repetitions (“down”, “street”, “million”) and internal rhymes arrest the forward motion of the scene even as the imagery conveys movement. The “heavy beat” seems to be marking time, holding it still, filling it with foreboding; the rhythm of these “feet” conducts the reader inwards, into the trance of nightmare. War makes his appearance, passes by, and is followed by the same disembodied “tread”:

And after him with measured tread

Came sweeping on in long defile

Marching together without word or smile,

Gesture or turn of the head,

The pitiful, bright army of the dead. [...]

Their even feet

Beat without wrath or heat,

As the world’s heart might beat;[[44]](#endnote-44)

Sackville does not establish a regular metrical foot in which to convey this procession, instead she deploys disruptions to enable pause and emphasis, as though to survey the scene, and to capture the diversity of the dead host whose “even feet” must keep time with War, paradoxically “as the World’s heart might beat” were there any left alive.

Although there are some overlaps of theme and craft between Cameron’s war poetry and that ofLady Margaret Sackville (1881-1963), aristocrat, public figure, prolific publisher of poetry and children’s literature, there were powerful divisions between them, not only social class but also political persuasion since Sackville’s ardent pacifism shapes all her war writing. While some poems in *The Pageant of War* are historically situated, most are not, and even those which do refer to immediate events of the war use such reference to launch quickly into a world of subliminal, internal vision or abstract argument. The envoi, “*Flanders – 1915”* opens the collection with the idea that the “promised land” of battle exerts a mesmerising compulsion:

*They’ve drunk their fill of blood and wrath,*

*Of sleeplessness and pain;*

*Yet silently to Flanders*

*They hasten back again.[[45]](#endnote-45)*

Just as the fighting men cannot free themselves from the spell of war, the poems which follow situate themselves, for the most part, in a spellbound, visionary world, to explore a consciousness that is normally unvoiced.

In the much anthologised “A Memory”,[[46]](#endnote-46) women too are transformed by war, unable to put down the burden of their experience. The poem begins with a description of “no sound at all” and explores how “the shells” have changed the nature of sound itself, “Nothing you would count as sound, that is, after the shells”. The dream quality of Sackville’s poetry reflects a world in trauma where sound, movement, cause and effect, feelings, all are disconnected, disassociated. In the poem “Reconciliation”[[47]](#endnote-47) she projects these effects into an imaginary future:

When all the stress and all the toil is over,

And my lover lies sleeping by your lover,

With alien earth on hands and brows and feet,

Then we may meet.

Like the dead, the bereaved are all of one nation, and here, all of one sex. The poem succeeds in the paradox of its enterprise, to create a contemplative silence through “uneven” rhythms and “broken” lines; the communion of the living is a distorted echo of the dead, as though the dead who ‘talk together’ had greater life than the bereaved who are “without sound or speech”. It suggests a coming together more primal than language. Yet, in its use of words, this dream state communicates directly, exploiting its liberation from the inhibitions of waking life. Cameron, for instance, was unable to use the word “lover”, writing instead the clumsy circumlocution “that other/Nearer than all to our hearts”, whereas Sackville deploys it readily, not once but twice in the second line of the poem.

Sackville establishes a secure sense of a female collective identity, moving through “my”, and “your” to “we” and “our” as the poem speaks with the authority of “we who are bound by the same grief”. The same authority is claimed in “Nostra Culpa” (our fault),[[48]](#endnote-48) but used to different ends. This is the manifesto poem on which the vision of “The Pageant of War” is founded and it provides the key to the merged aesthetic and political enterprise of the volume as a whole. The force of this outspokenly pacifist poem is directed against “we” women, guilty because of their silence. “We spoke not, so men died.” It is not just that “we” settled for silence, observing a conventionally subordinate role, but “[f]earing that men should praise us less, we smiled”; the crime of collaboration is still worse than this, because as life-givers, “[w]e knew the sword accursed, yet with the strong/Proclaimed the sword triumphant.” In this duplicitous role, women betrayed their own sons and “blasphem[ed] God”: “Dare we now lament our dead?/Shadows and echoes, harlots!” With this appellation Sackville reveals that it is neither sentimentality nor convention which underlies her depiction of women throughout the volume as “shadows”; it is not that they are turned to ghosts by grief, but that they are simply dark reflections of their ignorant, warrior men, therefore culpable, and complicit in their own destruction:

That silent wisdom which was ours we kept

Deep-buried; thousands perished; still we slept.

Children were slaughtered, women raped, the weak

Down-trodden. Very quiet was our sleep.

Her scathing logic here underpins the image of the procession of shadows which follows the “bright army of the dead” in “The Pageant of War” : “But sombre, darker,/I saw following after these,/A troop of shadows, silent, pale;/Each, lest her tears should mark her,/Wrapped her head close beneath her veil.”[[49]](#endnote-49) The source of the visionary quality of her verse is also made known in “Nostra Culpa”. It originates with women’s intimate knowledge of the life force, of motherhood, “[o]urs was the vision, but the vision lay/Too far, too strange; we chose an easier way”. She concludes with crushing accusation of her sex:

Reap we with pride the harvest! It was sown

By our own toil. Rejoice! It is our own.

This is the flesh we might have saved – our hands,

*Our* hands prepared these blood-drenched, dreadful lands.

What shall we plead? That we were deaf and blind?

We mothers and we murderers of mankind.

Nothing could be more opposed to the views advocated by Cameron in “The Women in War-Time” which had praised women’s resilient silence to make way for “their story”, “their glory”, and which had found solace in the lessons of the “land of the shining sheaf”, embracing union with it. For Sackville, silence is neither passive nor permissive; it is an act of aggression, even against God. Like Cameron, she finds metaphoric identity between women and the earth, but it is an identity that speaks of slaughter. “Deep/We lie in the same womb,/The slain, the slain together in one sleep”.[[50]](#endnote-50) Ideas of “Motherland” and even Binyon’s “dear earth that bore us” are given sinister connotations by Sackville’s vehement condemnation of her sex.

Whether the longstanding silence of women’s war poetry is born of the conventions of political subordination or conservative aesthetic judgement, whether a consequence of the circumstances of war-time publication, or whether it is chosen – stoically by Cameron, culpably in Sackville’s terms - we have now the opportunity to hear it. This brief sampling of anthologies of poetry published during and after the war shows that each one provides a barometer of mood, need, or community at specific moments or periods of political development, and that the absence of women’s voices in the post-war period does not reflect conditions during the war itself. It also suggests that our understanding of war poetry by women is particularly impoverished if it is restricted to anthology publication which provides important hinterland for individual collections but no substitute for engagement with a single author’s integrity and ambition. The readings of both collections, the time-bound documentary of *War and Life*, and the timeless protest of *The Pageant of War*, suggest ways in which anthologised poetry intersects with the single-author collection, and that each whole is greater than its parts.

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1. Brian Murdoch, “*For Empire*, *England’s Boys* and *The Pageant of War*: Women’s War Poetry in the Year of the Somme”, *English*, 58.220 (2009): 29-53 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. *Poems of the Great War* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1914) [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Bertram Lloyd, ed. *Poems Written during the Great War 1914-1918*  (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1918) [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Binyon, *Poems of the Great War*, 13 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Lloyd, 5 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Sackville’s poems are: “Quo Vaditis?”, “Nostra Culpa”, “To One who Denies the Possibility of Permanent Peace”, “The Peacemakers”, 80-85; Sassoon’s poems are: “They” , “Does It Matter?”, “Glory of Women”, “Their Frailty”, “Suicide in the Trenches”, 88-92. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Sassoon, *Diaries 1915-18*, 187, cited in Dominic Hibberd and John Onions, eds., *Poetry of the Great War. An Anthology* (London: Macmillan, 1986) 224 [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Catherine W. Reilly, *English Poetry of the First World War. A Bibliography* (London: George Prior, 1978) 18 [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Lloyd, 90 [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. “Dulce et Decorum Est”, *Wilfred Owen. The Complete Poems and Fragments*, ed. Jon Stallworthy (London: Chatto & Windus et al., 1983), I: 140-41; II: 292-7. The poem was written in October 1917, published 1920 [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. The titles of her war collections are, *Jessie Pope’s War Poems* (London: Grant Richards, 1915), *More War Poems* (London: Grant Richards, 1915) and *Simple Rhymes for Stirring Times* (London: C. Arthur Pearson, 1916) [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Reilly, *Bibliography*, xix [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. (Birmingham: Cornish Brothers Ltd., 1916) 17 [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. (London: Jarrolds, 1917); Jessie Pope, ‘A Dumb Appeal’, 14 [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. (London: Grant Richards, 1915) [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. *Bibliography*, v [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. (Toronto: Biggs, 1916, 1917, 1918) [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. J.W. Cunliffe, *Poems of the Great War* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1916) v-vi. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Woods in Cunliffe, 290-95; Asquith, ibid., 10 [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Cunliffe, 157-58 [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. W. M. Letts, *Hallow-e’en and Poems of the War* (London: Smith, Elder &Co., 1916) 7 [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. P. Anderson Graham, ed., *The Country-Life Anthology of Verse* (London: Country Life, 1915); Hall Caine, ed., *King Albert’s Book – A Tribute to the Belgian King and People from representative Men and Women throughout the World* (London: Daily Telegraph et. al, Hodder and Stoughton, 1915) [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Catherine Reilly, “Introduction”, *Scars upon my Heart: Women’s Poetry and Verse of the First World War* (London: Virago, 1981) xxxiv. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Simon Featherstone, *War Poetry. An Introductory Reader* (London: Routledge, 1995) 98 [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. W. J. Cameron, *War and Life* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1916), preceded by *Poems* (London: Longman, 1909) and *In Arcady and other Poems* (London: Erskine Macdonald, 1913), 2nd ed. 1921 [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Reilly, *Scars*, xxxiii [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. I am grateful to Royal Holloway College Archivist, Annabel Valentine, for help to find this information. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. The titles of her poems, in sequence, are: “Once More for Freedom!”, “The Women in War-Time”, “Blood Brothers”, “Fugitive”, “War and Life”, “On the Death of Miss Edith Cavell”, “Drilling in Hyde Park”, “To Wilhelm II”, “To John Bull”, “Seedtime and Harvest”, “Autumn in War-Time”, “Christmas 1914”, “To the New Arm”, “The Waif of the World”, “For Service”, “The Game”, “Tommy Toujours Gai”, “Faith in Springtime”, “Christmas 1915”, “On the Death of an Airman”, “23rd April 1916. 3rd May. New Style”. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Cameron, 42 [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Cameron, 10 [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Margaret L. Woods, “The First Battle of Ypres”, Cunliffe, 295; E. Nesbit, “A Song of Peace and Honor”, Cunliffe, 193 [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Cameron, 11 [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Cameron, 31-2 [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. See for example [http://www.bl.uk/world-war-one/articles/propaganda-as-a-weapon#](http://www.bl.uk/world-war-one/articles/propaganda-as-a-weapon) [accessed 4.4.16] [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. See Shane M. Barney, “The Mythic Matters of Edith Cavell: Propaganda, Legend, Myth and Memory”, *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 31.2 (2005): 217–233 [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Cameron, 18 [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Mildred Low, “Faith with Thanksgiving”, *Victory or Death and other Poems* (London: Robert Scott, [1916]) 17-21. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Helen Key, “Edith Cavell”, *Broken Music* (London: Elkin Mathews, 1916) 32 [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Brian Murdoch notes C.A. Renshaw’s poem “Nurse Cavell” and Nadja Malacrida’s “In Memoriam: Edith Cavell”, see Murdoch, 45 [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Cameron, 13 [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Lady Margaret Sackville, *The Pageant of War* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent & Co. Ltd., 1916) [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Sackville, 12 [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Sackville, 10 [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Sackville, 12-13 [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Sackville, 7 [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Sackville, 32-3 [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Sackville, 49-50 [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Sackville, 36-9 [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Sackville, 14 [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. “Quo Vaditis”, Sackville, 23 [↑](#endnote-ref-50)