

Preface

In Britain until the middle of the Nineteenth century the work carried out by women on the land was of a traditional nature. Conventionally regarded as light, it largely comprised seasonal tasks like hop-picking or the stooking and binding of sheaves at harvest time, dairying and poultry-rearing - the latter being an enterprise which even well into this century was seen as a woman's province rather than part of the farm business. Only in parts of Scotland were 'bondager' women obliged, until as late as the 1880s, to take on the heavier labouring tasks by virtue of being the sisters, wives, or daughters of farm workers.

A gradually perceived need for social reform in the cities was also to bring about reforms in the countryside, although at a slower pace. As a result of the findings of a Royal Commission set up in 1867, child labour was curbed, and the Gangs Act of 1869 required a licensed 'gangmistress' to accompany the newly segregated female-only gangs. If the establishment, in 1865, of the first Women's Suffrage society had little immediate effect upon women generally, or country women in particular, it did indicate the logical direction of reform.

Towards the end of the century a new class of educated women began to interest themselves in horticulture and agriculture and with places for women at the existing agricultural colleges practically non-existent, the demand was to be met by wealthy private patrons. In 1889, Arthur Harper Bond established Swanley Horticultural College, and Francis Evelyn, Countess of Warwick, bought two large houses in Reading which, in 1898, were used to found Studley College, an agricultural and horticultural college solely for women. Later, in 1904, Viscountess Wolseley started the Glynde School for Lady Gardeners.

For the educated woman, such training might lead to paid employment as gardeners or market gardeners; a teaching position in a rural school; even joining organised co-operative societies, with the chance of finding work in the Dominions. More usually, it meant returning home to oversee the work of the home garden or the home dairy. Such women, in any case, were exceptional, viewed in relation to the great majority, whose aspirations were limited both by education and class.

Then, with the coming of war in 1914, thousands of women from comparatively ordinary backgrounds were suddenly required to go far beyond the old boundaries of dairying and gardening into a hitherto male-dominated world of heavy horses,

ploughing, and field work. Women unused to labouring, or even to country life, were called upon to help maintain vital food supplies for the nation. Hundreds of untrained women were to venture further, to work in the woods and forests, felling timber to provide pit props for the mines, as well as working in the huge and dangerous sawmills.

The conditions under which the women volunteers lived and worked were often far removed from those to which they were used, and they had also to contend with resentful male farm workers who viewed them as 'blackleg' labour. Nevertheless, they were to make a demonstrable contribution to British agriculture in those years: from a situation in which, at the outbreak of war, Britain was importing nearly fifty per cent of its total food requirements, by 1918, and despite poor harvests and crop failures, she was producing some eighty per cent of her food. Then, during the Second World War, more than 200,000 women were to follow the lead set by the women of the previous generation and join the new Women's Land Army, while thousands more were to make their contribution through the offices of the National Federation of Women's Institutes, the National Union of Townswomen's Guilds, and the Women's Farm and Garden Association. There were, of course, many women already working in agriculture and in horticulture whose contribution to the national effort should not be forgotten; what was exceptional about the women from the towns was that at the time they volunteered few had any idea about farming or of what they were letting themselves in for!

Women on the Land is essentially the story of how untrained women, from many different backgrounds, coped with food production when Britain was at war. It is a story of courage and of the dauntless acceptance of a farmworker's or forester's way of life.

In writing this book, the pride which the women took in their achievements has shone through, and some to this day have retained a close affinity for farming. It is clear that for many, those years opened up an entirely new way of life, an opportunity to do something completely out of the run of their normal lives. For some it represented a time of growing up, and of acquiring the self-confidence to cope with the tough realities of the world in which they found themselves; for others, their time on the land simply offered adventure.

Due to the fragmentary recruitment and administration of women's farm labour in wartime, there are no archives, as such, for either of the Women's Land Armies. The material selected for deposit in the Public Record Office, indispensable in the search for information, is contained not only among the records of the Board [later Ministry] of Agriculture, and the Ministry of National Service, but also among the less accessible material relating to emergency (and therefore temporary) government departments. There is no mention, for example, of the work of the Women's Timber Corps in the normal Forestry Commission Annual Reports, as the now-defunct Ministry of Supply had overall control. Even within the official channels of research there are numerous dead ends. For instance, a large proportion both of Land Army and Timber Corps members were employed privately and details of these were never logged.

The four moves that the 1939 Women's Land Army undertook between London and Balcombe Place account for yet more gaps. On her first arrival at Balcombe the Chief Administrative Officer was horrified to discover that an involuntary paper trail of master index cards had been laid through the suburbs of London from one of the removal vans. They were never recovered. For the duration of the war the incident touched a raw nerve in the Enrolments Department at HQ, and too-close enquiries were coldly discouraged!

Such things as enrolment forms, and correspondence between the Land Girls and their county committees, were never lodged at Balcombe as women were paid by the farmers not by the Ministry of Agriculture. Further WLA material was lost during the 1944 removal to London, and back; and there were yet more losses in the final return to London at the end of the war. Certainly much of the administrative paperwork belonging to the final phase of the WLA, so the story goes, was burned - although on whose authorisation, and when, remains a mystery. Records preserved at the Public Record Office at Kew are selected, of course, by the creating department, and papers not required are destroyed. The minutes of some War Agricultural Committee meetings lodged at the PRO can only be viewed by special permission. Fortunately, archive material of one kind or another has found its way into libraries and museums, and it was here, after an invaluable 'first dip' into the Public Record Office, that much of the information eventually surfaced.

The women themselves, fortunately, not only hoarded souvenirs of their years on the land, but many had kept wartime diaries, as well as copies of *The Landswoman* and *The Land Girl*. Most important of all were their memories. With few exceptions, the women to whom I have spoken, or who have written to me, recalled their experiences in the Women's Land Army with generosity and enthusiasm, although, naturally, stories of bulls being mistaken for cows are legion! One woman wrote saying she had just seen a television programme that mentioned the Land Army, and only wished that the man who had written it had telephoned her first - then she might have set him straight on a few points. She passed them on to me instead! Another wrote, 'They did not actually say that we were only useful for twenty-one out of every twenty-eight days, but that is what a lot of them meant. What a cheek!'

To all of these, and to the many readers of *Home and Country*, *Farmers Weekly*, *The Townswoman*, and *The Landworker*, who sent in their reminiscences of Land Army days, I offer my sincere thanks.

Carol Twinch

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