



*The Women's
Land Army in
First World
War Britain*

BONNIE WHITE



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Bonnie White
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List of Abbreviations

CWAC	County War Agricultural Committee
FPD	Food Production Department
NAL	National Association of Landswomen
NFU	National Farmers' Union
NFWI	National Federation of Women's Institutes
SWLA	Scottish Women's Land Army
WAC	War Agricultural Committee
WFGU	Women's Farm and Garden Union
WLA	Women's Land Army
WNSC	Women's National Service Scheme
WWAC	Women's War Agricultural Committee

Introduction

The role of the Women's Land Army (WLA) in the agricultural history of the First World War has often been overlooked due to the seemingly minor role played by the organisation in maintaining domestic food production between its formation in January 1917 and its demobilisation in October 1919. The WLA, however, marked the first time that a group of women came together in a national organisation for farm work. The creation of the WLA was part of a broader effort to mobilise a domestic force of women workers, but with the specific task of replacing the male agricultural labourers who had enlisted or who had been conscripted into Britain's armed forces. This study argues that although farm work became an imperative patriotic act, valued not just for the food produced, but also through the symbolic act of tending the land, organisers like Meriel Talbot (the Director of the Women's Branch in charge of the WLA) and Edith Lyttelton (Deputy Director) did not envision the organisation simply in patriotic terms. The WLA was formed to help solve the real problem of the dwindling agricultural labour supply, but organisers believed that a national organisation would help convince farmers, potential recruits, and the public of the valuable role women could play in agriculture, not only in wartime, but as a viable employment opportunity beyond the years of the conflict. This organisational history of the Women's Land Army contextualises the work carried out by the Land Army by examining the relationship between organisers, farmers, unions, and Land Girls between 1914 and 1919.

Little work has been done on the organisational history of the Land Army, and existing works fails to include the Scottish experience due to the structural variations between the English and Scottish organisations. Historians have focused on England, the motivations of Land Girls for undertaking agricultural work, and how their experiences fit

into the larger narrative of women's war work. While including the voices of Land Girls, this study aims to understand the role of organisers in England, Wales, and Scotland in bringing women to the land. Examining how they envisioned the organisation, what their goals were, and what obstacles they faced allows us to properly contextualise the Land Army's role. Understanding the organisers' motivations and the organisation's goals helps clarify the WLA's successes and failures. On the one hand, the WLA recruited, trained, and placed thousands of women on Britain's farms and made a meaningful contribution to the British war effort. On the other hand, the organisation faced the difficult challenge of making women's employment in a male-dominated industry acceptable and permanent, a goal organisers ultimately failed to achieve. The reasons for the acceptance of women on the land and their departure from it post-1918 was most directly a result of the war and its cessation; however, broader trends in agriculture helped to ensure the brief lifespan of the organisation.

The purpose of this book is not to provide a breakdown of every organisation and organiser involved in the Land Army's operations, but rather to construct a history of the Women's Land Army that is attentive to the variances of – and motivations for – the establishment of the Land Army scheme, how those methods and approaches impacted the operability of the scheme, and why, in spite of the efforts of organisers to validate the Land Girls' contributions on the land, the WLA demobilised in 1919 when the food situation remained uncertain.

The obstacles facing organisers were great. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, women's role in agriculture was diminished as changes to agricultural practices created a clearer division of gender roles. As the sharing of work diminished, the separate spheres of home and field were gradually reinforced. The proportion of women engaged in fieldwork varied from region to region, but the loss of women from the land confirmed the common belief that women were unsuited to the work despite the fact that the daily operation of farms tended to rely, to some degree, on women's labour. The First World War presented an opportunity for organisations interested in the advancement of women in the agricultural industry to affect change. The vulnerability of British imports to German U-boats meant that the state would have to adopt new strategies to maintain a population of 36 million, especially considering that half of all of the food consumed in Britain in 1914 was imported.¹

The Women's Branch, the central organising body for the WLA, set out to restructure the various groups that had advocated for a place

for women in the industry prior to the war in England, Wales, and Scotland into a formal national organisation. Talbot's goal was to turn the organisation into a long-term training and promotional group for women's agricultural work. Talbot thus approached the organisation and its management from this perspective. These organisations would become an important part of the Land Army organisation both locally and nationally. The arduous task of managing domestic food production, even just women's involvement, meant that independent groups had to cooperate if the scheme was to be a success. Groups that had eagerly promoted agricultural work for women prior to the war devised plans to replace male agricultural labourers with an army of women workers. The British nation sought victory by many means and the government urged citizens to participate in and support the war in various ways. Beginning in 1915, the 'call to the land' became part of this nationalist experiment and the formation of a women's land army became part of a broader national dialogue about identity, nationalism, gender, and class. Revisionist studies of the war have sought to re-examine how Britons experienced the conflict beyond the national framework. Adrian Gregory's work on British society's response to the Great War moves beyond the national narrative in an effort to avoid over-generalisations about how Britons responded to the outbreak of war in August 1914, but also to examine why people consented to war and continued to support the state throughout the war's duration.² While Gregory does not deny patriotism as a real and organic response to the conflict, he carefully dissects 'myths' surrounding Britain's war effort through a cautious examination of the British home front. This study heeds Gregory's warning by challenging the assumed patriotic impulse of the organisation and by expanding our critical engagement with it. Cecilia Gowdy-Wygart argues that although the war 'brought significant change in the relationships women and their governments had with agriculture', our evaluation of that change cannot be confined to weighing material gains for women, nor can it be reduced to a cultural memory of women's patriotic work or wartime nostalgia.³ Earlier works such as Pamela Horn's study of rural responses to the war asserts that not only was the Land Army a patriotic construct, but that its existence exposed unpatriotic farmers who refused to release their sons for military service.⁴ Horn not only imposes a patriotic framework on the Land Army, but also connects female patriotism to the perceived absence of male patriotism in Britain's agricultural districts. Her conclusions dilute the economic, social, and political value of the Women's Land Army and accepts that the culturally constructed image of the

Land Army – broadcast to the public as an organisation that offered women new opportunities during wartime without disrupting accepted pre-war gender codes – was an accurate reflection of the organisation and its responsibilities and duties, rather than examining the politically charged atmosphere within which the Women's Land Army was formed and operated.

This history of the Women's Land Army is therefore positioned at the crossroads of various histories and illustrates the organisation's social, economic, and cultural importance in the shaping of identities in the first quarter of the twentieth century. Over the course of the war the women of the Land Army, and organisers in particular, used the new organisation and its wartime importance to make statements about the way in which women saw their role in agriculture and in the war itself. In turn, the Land Army's interactions with government and the farming community made an equally important impression on the organisation. Land Girls not only provided necessary labour, but the process of promoting women's place and space on the land intersected with both national and local historical interests. The government exercised caution in moving women into wartime industries, characterising their employment as a vital service, rather than as a new employment opportunity and a future model for women in the workforce. Likewise, rural paternalism, the evolution of small specialised labour force, and the declining importance of agriculture as imports increasingly satisfied British dietary needs, meant that farmers had more to lose than just their male labourers.⁵ The placement of women on British farms was never simple. This truth serves as a warning that reducing the challenges faced by organisers in the promotion and implementation of the Land Army scheme to simple prejudice on the part of farmers or the public ultimately ignores regional farming practices and devalues local experiences. Yet, the prejudices of farmers were made paramount during the war as the propaganda campaign surrounding women's land service vilified farmers who refused the well-intentioned efforts of women workers. The farmers' self-interests were juxtaposed with propaganda and imagery that focused on the government's attempt to cultivate a national identity based on a willingness among the populace to make the necessary sacrifices and to exercise an unrelenting resolve to nobly bear the burdens of war. The cultivation of the land was essential to victory and the return of women to the land was a character-building exercise that demonstrated many women's eagerness to support the war in any way they could. As such, the Land Army became connected to a national campaign that aimed to reaffirm British identity and the role of women in the nation's future.

The shift from the aesthetics of identity formation to the Land Army's utilitarian purpose forced organisers to reconceptualise the Land Army. Although the WLA sought to redefine femininity through the work the girls performed and through an interrogation of contemporary assumptions about womanhood, the Land Army actually reinforced traditional conceptions of masculinity and femininity. Historians have tended to adopt this framework in their discussions of the women who participated in the WLA. Susan Grayzel's study of women at war uses the popular axiom that women should 'do their bit' for the war effort by entering the labour force to challenge the one-dimensional propaganda narrative of duty-bound women whose contributions were both supportive and limited. While Grayzel's intention is to broaden our understanding of women's work, her attention to the Land Army is limited to the point that she reinforces the limited nature of women's agricultural employment, but without a full examination of the organisation's intentions and purpose. Janet Watson's work on the Land Army reaffirms the patriotic value that middle-class Land Girls placed on their war work, but she also argues that those women who came from the working-classes tended to see their war work as just that – work, and not service. Although Watson offers a new conceptual framework for our understanding of 'middle-class make-up of the Land Army', the exclusion of the organisation's female leadership both nationally and locally, which tended to come from the upper classes, and the lack of discussion surrounding the organisation's attempt to advance the position of women in the industry tends to limit her conclusions. As the educated, middle-class Land Girls gave way to a more diverse group, the need to reinforce the temporary nature of the organisation and to emphasise conventional stereotypes about gender became a primary concern. While the organisation was invested in creating a positive experience for women in farming and aimed to create a new place for women in the industry, the regimentation of life on the land and the hierarchical nature of land service glossed over individual efforts in favour of the group narrative. This is not to suggest that organisers devalued the opinions of Land Girls or that they were uninterested in how the women viewed their wartime roles, but the promotion of a Land Army culture became a solution to the myriad social, economic, and gendered struggles experienced by women during the war.

Although women's labour disturbed the social order, their displacement from farming once the war ended represented the reclamation of the land by men and the return to normalcy after 1919. Women in the nineteenth century had few options in terms of entry into the

agricultural industry beyond their employment as temporary or seasonal workers, and although the war did little to increase those options in the post-armistice period, the formation of a national organisation of women workers that laboured to help feed the nation between 1917 and 1919 was a victory for those who made the scheme possible. So although the war did not bring a 'sudden and irreversible advance in the economic and social power' of women workers, it was not necessarily regressive either.⁶ Although the patriarchal system remained in place⁷ and the Land Army scheme proved to be temporary, the WLA owed its heritage to the efforts of middle-class reformers who drove the movement for expansion of women's role in agriculture forward, leading to the creation of the Women's Land Army. The resumption of the Land Army's duties in the Second World War and the development of new organisations in the inter-war period that aimed to expand employment opportunities for women in industry hints at progress even if the results were not wholly tangible.⁸ Even before the outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939 the need to organise women for agricultural work was apparent. The government recognised that women agricultural workers would be a valuable part of the domestic economy and the WLA was reconstituted in June 1939, before the outbreak of hostilities. The advocacy work carried out by Talbot and Lyttelton on behalf of women agricultural workers was invaluable to the speedy deployment of Land Girls post-1939. Unlike in the war of 1914–18, the government did not wait for women to respond to the call to service and instead introduced conscription for single women between the ages of 18 and 32. Understanding the role of women in the First World War requires that we do not separate the years 1914–18 from the larger narrative of the women's lives or from the rest of the twentieth century. These women not only staked their claim on the land through their war work, but also appropriated a place in the nation's victory.

As the war came to an end in late 1918, the British government re-evaluated its priorities. The resumption of foreign importations would take time in order to match pre-war levels, which meant that domestic food production was still in demand. Further, the destruction of European lands by the war meant that home food production in Britain was not only essential to Britain's post-war recovery, but was also a political instrument. With price guarantees still in place in 1919, British farmers hoped to return to pre-war farming practices and readily made room for the returning men. The importance of the industry in the post-war economy gave the Land Army an extra year of life, but the exodus of women from farming and the oversaturation of the labour

market meant that the Land Army's services were no longer needed. Public recognition of the Land Army came in several forms, but one way was through the construction of cultural memories about the WLA that served both the individual Land Girls and the state. Land Girls could appropriate the language of essential service to define their work and contributions, and the state not only bore witness to their efforts, but also formed a national body to coordinate the women's work. But the construction of a cultural memory of the Land Army tended to mute the efforts and ambitions of organisers like Meriel Talbot who, in spite of her missteps, saw a future for women in agriculture. The recognition of this fact offers a unique perspective of the Land Army. In an attempt to understand the organisation, its objectives, failings, and successes, this study focuses on the intersection of groups and people who helped inform the Land Army's development and operation. Moving beyond the national image of the Land Army as a patriotic organisation that served the needs of the nation in wartime, this study reclaims that WLA as a tool for understanding broader trends in agriculture, women's work, and women's organisations in the early twentieth century.

Each chapter of this work establishes a link between characterisations of the Land Army and the real problems and challenges experienced by both organisers and Land Girls. It begins with an examination of volunteer groups that pre-dated the WLA. By exploring the challenges faced by the groups that pre-dated the WLA, we can come to a better understanding of the difficulties faced by the Land Army itself. The book then moves on in the second chapter to explore the relationship between the female organisers of the Land Army and the Board of Agriculture, both of whom approached the issue of women's farm labour from different perspectives. While both groups wanted to see women employed on the land, what the women's employment would look like, the longevity of the organisation, and the potential future of women in the industry were perceived and weighted differently. The third chapter looks at the role of propaganda in the marketing of the Land Army, but also at the promotion of women's participation in the war effort generally. Promotion for the Land Army as a patriotic work opportunity served to elevate the attractiveness of land service, but at the same time made it less desirable. The chapter also considers the degree to which intra-organisational divisions about what the Land Army was and what it sought to achieve, hindered recruitment and diminished the organisation's efforts to promote the role of women in agriculture.

The next chapter analyses the impact of the propaganda campaign on Land Girls after they were enlisted, trained, and placed on farms. Rather

than focusing on the Land Girls as an independent unit, this chapter recontextualises the Land Army by examining the experiences of Land Girls as a part of the larger agricultural community. Male prejudice toward female workers was only one obstacle faced by Land Girls, and this chapter seeks to understand the inter- and intra-gender conflicts and relationships that affected the experiences of women on the land.

The divergence of women's experiences is explored in the fifth chapter with the inclusion of the Scottish Women's Land Army (SWLA), which differed in its structure and organisation from the English model. This chapter stresses the importance of acknowledging and understanding regional variations, especially under the unifying umbrella of total war, and therefore warrants a separate chapter. Gender roles, rural structures, and government authority and priorities were determined by local attitudes, customs, and expectations, and each had a direct impact on organisers' presumptions regarding how the SWLA should be run. At the local level, the Land Army paradoxically supported and fractured the national image of the organisation. Finally, we turn to the aftermath of the armistice. In the peace that followed, the language of female war service was refashioned in order to return to the pre-war social and political order. The absence of women on the land was the value of victory, asserting that British society had not been destroyed by the war – the retreat of women from the land was as much a symbol of the return to pre-war conditions as was the return of men from the theatres of war. The demobilisation of the Land Army represented the actualisation of the return to normalcy.

The Women's Land Army could be dismissed as a wartime organisation that failed to find relevance beyond the war, and a case could arguably be made that the Land Army was a small and relatively minor addition to the agricultural labour force given that Land Girls numbered only 27,000 of the 250,000 women who worked the land in some capacity during the conflict.⁹ Despite its gloomy future after November 1918, organisers proved themselves to be resourceful, and at times outright defiant, and Land Girls were competently adaptable and resilient. Although the women who toiled on the land between 1917 and 1919 did not necessarily understand all of the economic, social, and political forces that were responsible for and resistant to their employment, land work was an exciting new work opportunity. The value of the WLA lay not in the specifics of its day-to-day accomplishments on the land, but in its existence as an organisation that crossed class lines, that simultaneously challenged and reinforced gender expectations, and which was developed and implemented by women both locally and nationally.

1

Answering the Call: The Formation of the Women's Land Army

In the summer of 1915 British women took to the streets of London demanding the right to serve. This 'Call to the Women' of Britain was part of a larger campaign that encouraged women to support the war effort by entering the labour force and relieving men for military service. At the beginning of the war women flocked to factories and urban centres hoping to capitalise on the wartime market, but in the winter of 1916 there were rumours of food shortages in the capital and all groups involved in women's farm labour agreed that a concerted effort was needed to bring more women to the land. While these volunteer organisations did much to encourage enlistment, offer training, and put women to work on British farms, they did not have the support of the Asquith government and lacked central organisation. To coordinate and effectively employ women in agriculture, Lord Selborne, who had been working independently to organise women's farm labour since 1915, established the Women's Branch in December 1916 before retiring from his post as minister of food with the Board of Agriculture. The Women's Land Army was created in 1917 to serve as a central organisation for women's farm labour and was intended to act as an umbrella for those volunteer organisations already in place. The lack of central coordination, the volunteer nature of early farm and horticulture organisations, the absence of government support, and the divergent tactics employed by the various groups involved undermined the success of these organisations and presented a number of obstacles and challenges for the organisers of the Women's Land Army (WLA) after 1917. While the WLA was successful in bringing women to the land and establishing a viable source of labour, its overall efforts were impeded by organisational mismanagement and the unwillingness of central government to abandon its commitment to laissez-faire policies regarding agriculture.

On the eve of the First World War the British government spent an average of £269 million for the purchase of food, tobacco, and drink from overseas markets.¹ Although Britain relied extensively on imports to feed the population, in 1914 the weather was good and the harvest fruitful, labour was not yet in short supply, and it was estimated that home supplies of grain would last for five months.² Agriculture anticipated no immediate problems since the war was supposed to be over by Christmas and British imports would remain largely unaffected. This lack of intervention in the early days of the war was partly because initial concerns were not about supply, but rather prices, which reflected the inflationary nature of war finance, the high cost of imports, and rising shipping costs.³

While the government under Herbert Asquith was accused of neglecting agriculture, by the end of 1914 the state was directly responsible for buying and shipping the bulk of Britain's imported foodstuffs and was considering the regulation of prices and the distribution of food items. In December 1916 Asquith appointed a Food Controller (Lord Devonport was the first but was not actually appointed until David Lloyd George became Prime Minister) to control food prices, and later civilian rationing. In the same month he also established the Food Production Department to increase home food production. The result of these changes was the control of imports and production, and the sale of much of the nation's food supply. From the perspective of the populace, these changes had the benefit of slowing the rate of inflation on food prices, and they eventually led to the stabilisation of bread prices between 1917 and 1919.⁴

In the first two years of the war, however, a number of merchant ships had been requisitioned to provide essential supplies to Britain's troops on the continent, which decreased the number of ships available for civilian food imports.⁵ Volunteerism in the early days and weeks of the war led to a shortage of dockhands to manage Britain's imports, leading to congestion and delays in British ports. In addition, the submarine campaign against Germany meant that shipping had to be diverted to ports away from the English Channel,⁶ many of which were not initially equipped to handle the new loads. There was also concern that the U-Boat campaign would intensify as the war progressed, a problem that was compounded by the fact that the Royal Navy was slow to adopt convoy practices until there was no other recourse in 1917.⁷ Shipping losses meant higher prices at home, which had already provoked consumer discontent. In order to make up for losses in shipping and imports, Britain's farming community had to increase home

food production. The only practical way to increase production was to abandon the livestock regime in favour of cereals and grains. Even under ideal conditions this would have been a tricky undertaking given the nature of British farming. Large landowning estates were in decline, although this did not diminish the role of this group in local politics and recruiting, which they did enthusiastically.⁸ Changing from livestock to cereals would have required massive intervention and the implementation of restrictive government controls to manage Britain's farms, which Asquith's Liberal government opposed.

Ultimately, the war's impact on agriculture can be divided into two stages: indirect and direct. In the first stage, August 1914 until May 1916, few changes were made to the agricultural sector and Britain's farmers continued to operate within a laissez-faire framework. Farmers were left to produce what they thought they should and the impact of the war on farming remained indirect. In the second stage – mid 1916 until the end of the war – the rise in demand for farm products clashed with the expansion of the armed forces under the new conscription laws, resulting in a decline in agricultural production. The inability of the farmers to meet quotas forced the government to change its agricultural policies.⁹ The formation of the Women's Land Army was one of the changes introduced by the Lloyd George government in January 1917 as part of a larger policy to manage the nation's food supply.

In the meantime, the government encouraged farmers to manage the food situation locally. Upon the outbreak of war the government made several proposals to farmers through the medium of press releases by the Agricultural Consultative Committee. The policy favoured by the Committee was released on 18 August 1914, when it encouraged farmers to increase the production of staple crops by breaking up grasslands.¹⁰ There were no incentives offered to the farmers; instead the Committee was content to offer *suggestions* that it hoped the farmers would implement. The Committee's suggestion to the farmers was part of the broader 'business as usual' approach adopted by the Asquith government at the beginning of the war. Under this plan, Britain would participate in the European war through limited military, industrial, and financial means, and with minimal disruption to the domestic life of the nation.¹¹

During the war farmers' unions played a central role in organising and protecting members' rights, but their efforts were initially unsuccessful.¹² Many farmers, whether owner-occupiers or tenant farmers, were reluctant to plough up their fields because they wanted government assurance that prices and demands for their crops could be secured; the

issue of price guarantees was an important part of pre-war discussions between the government and the National Farmers' Union (NFU). The union also worried about the requisite labour for such an undertaking. Due to the decline in agricultural production in the second half of the nineteenth century the number of agricultural labourers had declined from 3 million in 1870 to 2.3 million in 1911.¹³ Farmers sought improved wages for their labourers in the hopes of preventing further loss of manpower to manufacturing and other industries where wages were higher, an issue that the Land Army would also be forced to deal with during recruiting.¹⁴ This was especially important for those farmers who had limited access to machinery. Ploughing up pastures was a risky undertaking that the farmers, smallholders in particular, were not willing to consider without guarantees. In October 1914 the NFU's organising secretary reported that the Union had 'absolutely failed to get a guarantee' of government support in return for increasing the acreage of grain.¹⁵

While the Asquith government dithered about the implications of government intervention into the domestic food supply, Lord Selborne, President of the Board of Agriculture, was given the responsibility of managing the nation's food supply. In early 1915 he established the Milner Committee, comprised of three councils for England, Ireland, and Scotland, to consider the NFU's position. The unanimous finding of the English Committee in December 1915 was that a 'plough-up policy' was the only way for England to substantially increase the gross production of food for the 1916 harvest. The committee recommended offering farmers a minimum price for wheat over the next several years, but only if the farmers were successful in increasing the percentage of arable land by ploughing up their fields to plant staple crops. However, the Irish Committee rejected the idea of guaranteeing prices for any longer than one year, and the Scottish Committee was opposed to fixed prices for cereals, believing that the 1916 harvest would be bountiful and price guarantees would be unnecessary.¹⁶ The findings of the Milner Committee eventually formed the basis of the food policy adopted for 1917–18, which included the formation of the Women's Land Army in England, Wales, and Scotland. Until then, however, intervention was rejected.¹⁷

Nevertheless, Selborne continued to stress the need for increased government action and encouraged the NFU to maintain pressure for government guarantees. Selborne also suggested that farmers offer a token of goodwill by voluntarily planting more potatoes and wheat, which some farmers did by abandoning their normal crop rotations. This was only a temporary solution as the land soon became weedy and