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Angela Woollacott

'Khaki Fever' and its Control: Gender, Class, Age and Sexual Morality on the British Homefront in the First World War

In late 1914 an epidemic of khaki fever broke out across Britain. Young women, it seemed, were so attracted to men in military uniform that they behaved in immodest and even dangerous ways. The excitement which reportedly gripped young women at the sight of troops in towns, cities and near army camps was identified as sexual, and named 'khaki fever'. The discourse on khaki fever conducted by military and police authorities, feminists, other reformers and social commentators showed the first world war as a climactic time of concern about young women's social and sexual behaviour. Protests over young women's behaviour echoed previous concerns but were exacerbated by the excited atmosphere of the war and, in turn, sparked a movement to control the sexual behaviour of young women which became a feature of life on the homefront. The measures taken to control khaki fever outlived the epidemic itself, which subsided as the war dragged grimly on and women's direct involvement in the war effort increased.

An analysis of the discourse surrounding khaki fever reveals both continuities and disjunctions with the public debates on working-class women and sexuality in preceding decades. As a body of historical scholarship demonstrates, the last decades of the nineteenth and first decades of the twentieth centuries witnessed movements and legislation to control the sexuality of the poor in order to inculcate a middle-class moral order, to improve health and fitness, and to control VD and prostitution. Very young women had often been the special focus of these discussions, particularly in the storm over 'white slavery', the believed abduction of English girls into continental prostitution, from the 1880s (the 'Maiden Tribute' scandal) through to the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1912.¹ In

this discourse, working-class women were represented as victims, both passive and vulnerable.² Like all prostitutes, they were seen by middle-class reformers as falling into depravity, beyond redemption unless they were fortunate enough to be the beneficiaries of middle-class intervention. But it is the disjunctive components of the khaki fever discourse of the first world war which allow us to ask how young women's sexuality was perceived to be changing. In contrast to earlier representations, this discourse depicted young, working-class women as wilful, expressive of sexual desire, and as autonomous social agents.

Significantly, much of the concern about khaki fever focused on adolescent girls between the ages of thirteen and sixteen. The Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 had raised the age of consent from thirteen to sixteen. The fact that the putative sufferers of khaki fever fell precisely within this bracket suggests that the sexuality of very young women continued, three decades later, to be a matter of contested definition and negotiation. Furthermore, it demonstrates that even though these young women were now supposedly protected by the law, as Lucy Bland has argued, public images of women in the early twentieth century were becoming sexualized in contrast to the Victorian ideal of asexuality.³

The sufferer of khaki fever in the first world war was distinctly different in important details from those who had been seen as having 'scarlet fever' in the mid-nineteenth century. The term 'scarlet fever' was applied to prostitutes who were particularly attracted to soldiers (in their scarlet coats). Mayhew observed that soldiers were 'all powerful' with the casual prostitutes known as 'amateurs', 'dollymops' or 'demoiselles de comptoir', women who supplemented their regular income from shop-assisting, millinery work, domestic service and other areas of work that were very poorly paid. 'Amateurs' did not always work for cash; they sometimes exchanged sex for 'trifles' or even for their own pleasure. But descriptions of the mid-nineteenth-century amateur show her as mostly discreet, meeting men at 'dancing academies' and casinos, or making her assignations quietly in the park or the street, as though in a subdued or self-effacing way.⁴ In contrast, the sufferers of khaki fever were consistently described as blatant, aggressive and overt in their harassment of soldiers. This assertive behaviour by young working-class women threatened a subversion of the gender as well as the moral order.

The British 'amateur' bears a distinct resemblance to the 'charity girl' of the United States. Kathy Peiss and Elizabeth Lunbeck have

described new social and sexual codes among urban American young women in the decades either side of the turn of the century. Research on Britain to date has not provided such sharp contours of a new working-class sexuality although, at the same time in Europe generally, young people of the working class were more socially autonomous at an earlier age than middle-class youth and were seen as sexually transgressive. We know that by the last decades of the nineteenth century, respectable working-class families were instilling a bourgeois moral code in their daughters.⁵ What is most significant about khaki fever is the fear that this was more than the lax morality of the 'rough' poor — that this was a contagion infecting even the 'respectable' classes, perhaps threatening the middle class itself.

Anxiety about wartime loss of social control crystallized in the formation of the middle-class Women Patrols Committee and Women Police Service, both of which found their patriotic calling in policing public places for young working-class women going astray.⁶ To promote their own inclusion in the career of police work, middle-class women used the fears of changing female behaviour represented by khaki fever as an opportunity to claim authority to carry out 'women's' policing. Marilyn Lake has pointed out that, in Australian society in the second world war, age was a factor which affected how women responded to wartime social turbulence. Lake suggests that femininity was in the process of being sexualized in a way that represented romance and adventure, particularly for young women.⁷ Although preceding the significant cultural shifts of the 1920s and 1930s, age also mattered in Britain in the first world war: young women were far more likely to find that wartime offered new possibilities and excitement. The fact that women police and patrols were probably close to a generation older than the young women they disciplined indicates generational disparity in female behaviour, as well as interclass dynamics. Khaki fever seemed a flagrant challenge to the belief that sexual chastity was integral to respectable femininity.

With the outbreak of war in August 1914, a wave of excitement swept over England. People took to the streets, with no apparent purpose but to mingle with each other and partake of the charged atmosphere. An American woman writer of some maturity who lived in London admitted that, in late 1914, although she 'hated the streets in their new excitement, they fascinated me and I did not

want to keep out of them'. She noted, furthermore, that her business associates suffered from a restlessness which kept them from work and propelled them to more or less aimless wanderings.

Publishers, whom as a rule we must beg humbly beforehand for a morning interview, dropped in at eleven for no reason except that, as they were doing nothing at their office they thought they might as well come round and do it with us . . . Nobody could do any work, and as nobody would let us do ours, we put it up and accepted the inevitable.⁸

Not everyone, however, had jobs to go to. The immediate economic dislocations of war had driven tens of thousands of young women out of the trades, often sweated, in which they had been employed: dressmaking, millinery, sweet manufacture, laundry work, lace-making and others.⁹ Their individual futures were uncertain in a far more immediate way than for most of the middle class.

At the same time, new tent cities sprang up around the countryside as mobilization and training bases for Kitchener's army, and towns swelled with troops. The new recruits were warmly welcomed. Men of the towns treated them to drinks at the pub, to such an extent that 'treating' came to be seen as a threat to the soldiers. Women invited officers to tea, conversation and singing around the piano. Young people of both sexes were drawn to the men, many hardly older than themselves, who were often full of bravado about the prospect of what they hoped would be a short and glorious campaign. The Honorary Secretary of the National Union of Women Workers' (NUWW) Women Patrols Committee observed that '*our lads* and lasses throng the places where soldiers are collected'. Policewoman Mary Allen noted the 'hordes of boys and girls, frightened but elated by all the din, who . . . were suffering from what was then known as "khaki fever"'.¹⁰ For boys below enlistment age, the vicarious thrill of hanging about the troops was comparable to that for the girls excluded by sex. Young men, some even under the required eighteen years of age, could join up and be praised for doing so. Girls of the same age, this early in the war, had not the same structured and patriotic outlet for their urge to participate in the great national effort. They could only congregate where the boys in khaki gathered, flirt with them, and join vicariously in the general activity.

The sexual potential in the presence of girls around troop camps and prevailing attitudes about appropriate feminine behaviour gave khaki fever its gender specificity. The fact that, in such a generally

excited atmosphere, the behaviour of young women was singled out as requiring special attention and control reveals both patriarchal assumptions and, in Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's words, the desire to define the 'socially disorderly as sexually deviant, dangerous infections within the body politic'.¹¹

In the months following the outbreak of the war, police and military authorities, members of the clergy, YWCA workers, journalists and other social commentators in Britain were lamenting the phenomenon of khaki fever. The phrase 'khaki fever' was coined by those who were responsible for dealing with what they perceived as the problem, and in so doing they constructed the terms of the discourse. In April 1915, *The Police Review* offered an appraisal of how the war was responsible for the outbreak of khaki fever: 'The new conditions of life which followed the mobilisation of troops on an unprecedented scale presented difficult problems to the authorities — both military and Police — in dealing with girls and women susceptible to the influence of khaki.' 'Another evil even more insidious and more degrading than drink has to be guarded against and fought', Millicent Garrett Fawcett warned.

Everyone, including, of course, all the young girls, has a strong desire to visit the camps and see the soldiers. All this is quite natural and wholesome. But it is easy to see that in the absence of proper control it certainly leads in very many cases to deplorable consequences.¹²

Several commentators noted that the young women in question came from a range of social classes, not only the very poor but also respectable classes. One commentator claimed to have seen herself that

[t]hey were well-dressed girls many of them, girls who, judging by their appearance as apart from their manners, belong to the respectable class. None the less they were under no control, completely out of hand, and, well, they had just lost their heads.

Mary Allen, who was Sub-Commandant of the Women Police Service during the war, recalled in 1925 that: 'Girls who suffered from what was aptly called "khaki fever" were much in evidence in London, and belonged to no particular class or district.'¹³ The connotations of the terms 'respectable class' and 'no particular class' are crucial here. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were a period of class instability, particularly for the perennially blurred gradations between the working class and the middle class.

At a time when skilled trades and clerical work offered relative comfort for the upper echelons of the working class, and when educational levels had improved significantly following the introduction of compulsory schooling, the culturally defined differences between being 'respectable' and being 'rough' mattered a great deal to members of the working class with social aspirations. As Judy Giles has put it: 'Working-class "respectability" was a complex cluster of values embracing female sexuality, material security, respect for authority and behaviour appropriate to this, and a certain moral and emotional outlook.'¹⁴ Moreover, contemporary usage of the term 'classes' included differences of neighbourhood, standards of housing, cleanliness and clothing, as well as distinctions of skill and occupation. Thus, the commentators above should not be taken to suggest that the young women accused of khaki fever included young aristocrats or the daughters of the landed gentry, but rather that they included the respectable working class whose upper echelons merged into the middle class itself.

It was often observed that a good proportion of the sufferers of khaki fever were indeed very young. 'Women-patrols report that though in some cases complaints have been grossly exaggerated', *The Common Cause* noted, 'it is nevertheless true that quite young girls from thirteen or fourteen to sixteen, are making themselves a positive nuisance to the men, and are a source of danger to themselves.'¹⁵ The Chief Constable of Essex referred to '[t]he Khaki Fever which was so prevalent and infectious, especially among very young girls, during the early stages of this war'.¹⁶ This suggests that khaki fever can be attributed, at least in part, to the exuberance and excitement common to adolescents, the particular object of which could well have been rock musicians at another historical moment. The fact that girls of this age were involved meant that social reformers could invoke the relatively new (since the 1890s) discourse on adolescents. Carol Dyhouse has pointed out that, in the literature on adolescence, working-class girls were 'often dismissed in a few stock phrases as painted, pleasure-seeking flirts with vulgar tastes and cheap morals'.¹⁷

One writer proclaimed the girls' innocence of intention while describing a reversal of sex-gender behaviour which signified social disorder:

It was only the young girls, the flappers, with their hair down their backs many of them Some of them certainly behaved themselves very badly, simply pestering the younger of the soldiers by their 'forthputfulness', lying in wait for

them, seizing them by the arm as they passed. I once saw some young Colonials running for their very lives to escape from a little company of girls. One might have thought, to see them, that they had tigresses at their heels. Another day I saw some English Tommies, who were being pursued by girls, spring into an omnibus for safety. The girls sprang in after them, whereupon the boys promptly betook themselves to the top, although it was raining in torrents at the time.

What such girls do, they do no doubt in joke, meaning no harm by it.¹⁸

However, most observers perceived harm, blamed the girls for irresponsible behaviour which led to sexual liaisons, and at least by implication ascribed sexual desire to the girls. For example in November 1916, *The Englishwoman* reported in its 'Problems of the Day' section:

Headstrong, impressionable, undisciplined girls, hardly more than children, have made themselves a nuisance by running after soldiers without any thought of more than silly or perhaps vulgar flirtation, and, by turn tempters and tempted, have often ended by entangling themselves and their soldier friends in actually vicious conduct.¹⁹

Khaki fever was short-lived in its original form. The same commentators who delineated the existence of khaki fever all agreed that it was a phenomenon of the early stages of the war. Concern about venereal disease and sexual morality, however, continued throughout the war.²⁰ The women police and patrols who used khaki fever as their opportunity to enter policing justified their existence partly because of these continuing concerns, and partly because the government was using them for its own ends in munitions factories. Regulation of women suspected of prostitution was most extreme in the last months of the war. The period when people were drawn to the streets to see what was happening, and could not focus on their work, came to an end as the war lengthened, as people grew accustomed to living in a state of war, and the grim news from the front instilled the mundane morbidity of war into their minds. The proud procession of soldiers marching off to France was countered within months by the pathetic trainloads of wounded soldiers shunted back from the front. All too soon, the public image of the soldier had to accommodate the bandaged, the wounded, those on crutches, the limbless, those with disfigured faces, lost eyes and damaged nerves.

But it was more than the shock of reality or a growing war-weariness which caused khaki fever to subside. Looking back at the outbreak of the phenomenon from our own times, the excitement

which seized girls at the sight of troops drilling and preparing for war seems understandable in light of their own disqualification from direct participation in the war effort. Barred, in the early stages of the war, from joining up themselves, the closest they could come to war activity was to hang about on the fringes of the male domain of war preparation. A contemporary essayist saw this connection:

War turned men into heroes, while women thought the war was going to be so fine they could do anything to help; they wanted their share, each one to have a stake for herself, and the easiest way to gain this was the ownership of a soldier-lover. It prevented the feeling of 'being left out'.²¹

Khaki fever was, in part, a manifestation of the gendering of patriotism. It was defined as a problem of young women's sexual behaviour, yet an examination of the term's usage reveals that much of the behaviour it depicted was shared by others also barred from direct war participation. The fever abated as the war became more mundane and routine and, more significantly, when women's direct participation in the war effort expanded, giving them regular employment and acceptable outlets for their patriotic emotions. In 1917 and 1918 women's membership in para-military organizations (WAAC, WRNS and WRAF) became a ground-breaking development, one that required women to overcome considerable initial male resistance. From the start of the war a woman could join the Red Cross, become a nurse or join the swelling ranks of the Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD). As the men left for the front, women found jobs in transportation, shops, offices and banks. By the middle of 1915, munitions factories had sprung up around Britain like mushrooms after rain. In factories producing shells, explosives, guns, tents, uniforms and other war matériel, the demand for labour grew and many of those recruited were quite young women. An intangible benefit of war work was the knowledge that one was playing a direct role in the war effort, a knowledge which could well help provide immunity to khaki fever.²²

One way in which younger women's thirst for the vicarious excitement of hanging around troops was slaked was through their own direct access to the emblems and prestige of war work. The social status of a uniform was at a premium during the years of war, and many people availed themselves of as near an approximation to military uniforms as they could. Journalist J.R. Raynes recalled that, in the first months of war: 'The Bishop of London went into khaki, and vicars went into khaki, and seemed to imagine puttees

were episcopal gaiters.' For women munitions workers, women in the Women's Land Army, the WAAC, the WRNS and the WRAF, wearing a uniform invoked the prestige of direct involvement in the war effort but it even more obviously signified the status accorded to male warriors. Unlike women who had, over the centuries, participated in war by cross-dressing and passing as men, these women during the first world war, even when wearing trousers, were claiming the status of active belligerents *as women*.²³

Khaki fever lost its potency in part because women were assuming more of the patriotic involvement and warrior garb which had created much of the attraction in the first place. Caroline Rennles and her friends at Woolwich Arsenal delighted in the opportunity that an air-raid warning in the evening would afford them of leaving their posts and showing off their own khaki uniforms to the soldiers who would congregate not far from the Arsenal:

If we used to run down to Beresford Square it used to be alive with soldiers and of course us in our khaki, oh, we was the centre of attraction, you can bet your life. They'd say 'Come on, kids, and let us have a look at your new trousers'. Oh, we used to toss our old heads and you know, think we were the cat's whiskers.²⁴

These excited young women thus showed that, to a degree, they could even generate a little khaki fever themselves.

The multiple terms of the discourse on khaki fever reflect its larger social context and the interests of the different groups which addressed themselves to it. Military and police authorities, with governmental sanction, placed it squarely in the context of the decades-old worry about VD and prostitution. Feminists responded with a critique of the double standard of sexual morality which the threatened regulation of women would legislate. At the same time, two separate organizations of middle-class feminists immediately hailed it as a pretext for involving themselves in police work, as a patriotic wartime occupation and as the thin end of the wedge which would allow women into the hitherto male precinct of police work.

In effect, the government, the police and military authorities sought to control women in order to control the problem of VD among the troops. Curfews were imposed on women, in towns such as Grantham where troops were stationed, which women police were introduced, in part, to enforce. Prohibitions were imposed on women's drinking in certain places and at certain hours by several

municipal authorities early in the war. Finally, in March 1918, Regulation 40d under the Defence of the Realm Act, made it an offence for any woman with VD either to have sex with, or to solicit, a member of the armed forces.²⁵ These measures all restricted and penalized women but not men. Women bore the brunt of the social control measures imposed. As contemporary feminists pointed out, men could just as easily have been made liable to punishment for sexual intercourse or placed under curfew.

Feminists saw khaki fever as a prime example of the problems which stemmed from women being taught to define themselves through marriage. Issues of sexuality had been on the feminist agenda well before the war; beginning with the campaign to repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts, feminists continued to be vociferous in their denunciation of the double standard of sexual morality. In the militant stage of the suffrage campaign even more controversial issues, such as birth control and women's sexual pleasure, were raised. During the first world war, as well as decrying the way women were restricted by curfews and special regulations and made liable to punishment for sexual activity in which men were necessary partners, feminists analysed khaki fever as part of the systematic subjection of women. 'Let us be honest', *The Common Cause* insisted.

As long as girls are taught that to attract men is the first duty of woman, and to attract one sufficiently to persuade him to marry her, is 'the vocation of woman' . . . so long will the temptation to hang about those places where men congregate, exist, and in many cases be irresistible.²⁶

At base, feminists argued, the issue was that of women's dependence on men, economically and in terms of their self-definition.

Middle-class women who believed that khaki fever and related problems needed special handling which policemen could not offer, quickly formed the Women Police Service and the National Union of Women Workers' (NUWW) Women Patrols Committee. Apart from their other motivations, in so doing they were making a fair bid to use wartime turbulence to their own advantage, by staking out an area of work which at least some hoped could survive as a career in the postwar world. They were, thereby, also participating in the transition from social purity reform work to the casting of social problems in terms of social hygiene and efficiency expertise — the work of the law and administrators rather than reformers.²⁷

The NUWW, an organization of social purity feminists established

in 1876 to carry out rescue and reform work among and on behalf of young women, launched its Women Patrols Committee soon after the outbreak of war. While in keeping with the NUWW's prior work, the new Committee sought to create an outlet for members' desire for patriotic activity, as well as to deal with wartime conditions. According to the Women Patrols Committee's self-description, it was khaki fever which prodded them into action:

Who and what are Women Patrols?

They are not detectives, neither are they rescue workers — but they are friends of the girls. Girls, who, over-excited by the abnormal conditions caused by the great war, flock to places where men in khaki are stationed It is small wonder our lads and lasses throng the places where soldiers are collected. But it is clear these places are not where girls should spend their leisure hours, and by so doing they run into grave moral danger.

More broadly, as the Women Patrols Committee for Scotland put it: 'The object of the Patrols was to act as a steadying influence on girls and young women, and in general to look after their interests.'²⁸

The Women Patrols Committee of the NUWW operated by selecting and training paid organizers, who were then dispersed to the scattered towns where NUWW branches existed and which were interested in taking up patrol work. The paid organizers there recruited and trained volunteers, who became the bulk of women patrols. By December 1914, 62 organizers had been taken on, 26 in London and 36 elsewhere; and by October 1915 there were 2,301 women patrols at work in 108 places in Britain and Ireland, including 425 at 20 different places in Scotland.²⁹ The patrols extended to Capetown, South Africa, invited by the Capetown branch of the NUWW which was concerned about relations between local women and the troops stationed there.

Women patrols always worked in pairs, not wearing a uniform but a recognizable armband, which was thought sufficient to designate their semi-official status. They patrolled streets and parks, and considered public places such as cinemas, music halls and dancing halls within their bounds. Naturally, considering the time of day when the danger they were guarding against was most threatening, their work took them out on the streets from mid-afternoon until late in the evening.

Most of their work consisted only of practical intervention such as moving along or taking home any young women they thought at risk. If an instance arose in which an actual offence was committed, they would call a constable to carry out the prosecution. In

February 1918, for example, a Woman Patrol in the company of a constable visited a cinema in Hornsey and found that 'a number of soldiers and girls were reclining in each other's arms, and that several acts of impropriety took place'. They were successful in having the company which ran the cinema prosecuted and fined for allowing improper conduct.³⁰

There is an identifiable parallel between the women patrols and the young women they sought to control in that they were both out after dark, roaming the streets, both enjoying a certain new, wartime freedom and imbibing the excitement of the times. By patrolling streets and parks with their armbands showing their semi-official status and controlling interaction between young working-class women and soldiers, women patrols could believe that they too were doing their bit for victory. But more than that, they were pushing back the socially-prescribed limits on their own behaviour, claiming that it was necessary in the circumstances. To the disinterested observer, it may have appeared that these older middle-class women were exhibiting a form of khaki fever in their own way.

At precisely the same time as the NUWW was forming its Women Patrols Committee, a rival organization called the Women Police Service was established by a group of equal rights feminists who sought to open up police work to women. The two groups were immediately competitors. A number of those who were involved in founding the Women Police Service had been militant suffragettes before the war. Some had been associated with the Women's Social and Political Union, and at least one had been jailed, gone on hunger strike and been force-fed. The NUWW was closely connected to the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS). Thus the two organizations of women in wartime policing, the Women Patrols and the Women Police Service, continued the rivalry which existed between the NUWSS and the WSPU during the suffrage campaign.³¹

The Women Police Service (initially called the Women Police Volunteers) was formed in September 1914 by a group of women who saw the war as an opportunity to attain the acceptance of women as permanent career members of the Metropolitan Police Force. The Service got its first lucky break in November 1914 with the establishment of a large military camp just outside the town of Grantham in Lincolnshire, and a consequent invitation from the local authorities to prevent sexual liaisons between local women and troops. Their success in Grantham led to other invitations to

perform a similar role in other parts of the country; some of their members were placed on local constabulary payrolls.

Despite success in Grantham and other country areas, the work of women police, like that of women patrols, was restricted to what could be described as 'preventive'. Women police were not given the same powers as male police constables. The bulk of women police were taken on during the war by the Ministry of Munitions, to work in munition factories employing large numbers of women workers whom they were to control and discipline. During the war, the Metropolitan Police Force accepted women in a subordinate role, but not as constables on a par with men. Harassed by wartime social turbulence as well as depleted of their men by the armed forces, police authorities agreed to accept women policing other women. In September 1918 the Metropolitan Police Force finally bestowed upon the Women Patrols organization (but not its more threatening rival, the Women Police Service) its coveted official recognition, and women were thus gradually admitted into the mainstream of police work. The failure of the Women Police Service to become permanently integrated with the Metropolitan Police Force at the end of the war was due in part to the assertive feminism brought to the organization by those who had been militant suffragettes.³²

Through their wartime work restricting young, mostly working-class, women's social and sexual behaviour, these middle-class women were publicly visible evidence of the seriousness of the challenge which such young women represented to the hegemonic gender and social order. It would be mistaken to see women police and patrols as simply the arm of a powerful élite: they were, after all, women seeking public roles in a patriarchal order. Instead of women patrols and police being regarded as engaged in control or oppression, they should be seen as agents of cultural hegemony. As Jean and John Comaroff have suggested, when hegemonic systems are most powerful they are least visible because their power has been internalized; on the other hand, when challenged, hegemonic power needs to be visibly exercised.³³ Women police and patrols represent just such a visible flexing of state power in the face of perceived gender and sexual disorder, at the same time that they themselves were challenging the gender order.

That older middle-class women attempted to control young working-class women reflects the class and age tension long inherent

in social reform work. What was remarkable about the way they did so was the fact they chose to work hand-in-hand with police and military authorities. This choice was in dramatic contrast to the nineteenth-century feminists and social purity reformers of the campaign to repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts, who fought against police, medical and military authorities.³⁴ The choice, made equally by the equal rights feminists of the WPS and the social purity feminists of the Women Patrols Committee of the NUWW, reveals the primacy of their class identification and their own ambitions. Further, that women were allowed this subordinate role in policing during the war, and were kept on afterwards, reflects the slow gains that middle-class women were making in professions during and after the first world war, albeit on terms laid down by the men who dominated those professions.

Women's inclusion in police work also reflected the conviction on the part of police authorities that the male constable's traditional policing of the prostitute was no longer enough to contain social/sexual disorder. The provisions of Regulation 40d made it clear that authorities were worried not only about prostitutes, but also about 'amateurs'. Social workers concerned to prevent sexual liaisons around troop camps in the US during the first world war also grappled with the prevalence of the 'charity girl', whom they believed to be a particular wartime product.³⁵ According to HM Inspector of Constabulary at the Home Office in October 1914, the 'amateur' had been on the rise in Britain well before the war. 'I am convinced', he declared,

that every year sexual immorality is becoming more the amusement of the amateur than the business of the professional, and in consequence is getting further outside the reach of the law and the control of the police, whose powers are almost entirely confined to the Vagrant Act, which touches only the common prostitute, who makes her living in whole or for the greater part by prostitution.³⁶

Women workers, making use of the extraordinary social fluidity, mobility and relatively good wages of wartime to create their own leisure, could and did resist, even mock, the middle-class women who sought to round them up, separate them from soldiers and escort them home. For example, one night in mid-1918, twenty-four-year-old Kitty Ivy made some disparaging remarks about police-women to a friend going home on the tram, pointedly in the presence of 'a woman police patrol'. After an ensuing exchange in which

she slapped the Woman Patrol, Ivy was convicted of drunken and disorderly behaviour and assault, and fined 80s (£4).³⁷

Members of families and communities whose young women were subject to policing voiced their own resentment and opposition. While one mother expressed relief and gratitude that women patrols were providing a 'patriotic room' which would give her daughters a safe place to go to in the evening, some mothers resented the accusation that their daughters suffered from khaki fever. In Grantham, where women police were first invited to control the relationships between the town's young women and the soldiers in army camp, a town meeting called by the mayor (a woman) provoked angry letters to the paper. 'An Old Grantham Girl' condemned the meeting as having been for nothing other than 'a terrible indictment of the girls of Grantham — an indictment uncalled for, unkind and untrue'.

Why should the girls not give a smile and a word — maybe even a kiss — to the boys in khaki? As one of our girls quaintly put it: 'If we (who try to be nice girls) do not smile at or speak to them, then we leave them to the girls who are not nice.' To the latter class belong the minority, not the majority of our girls.

And 'A Grantham Mother' expressed her 'great surprise' when a 'local lady rose and hurled accusations against the girls of Grantham. I venture to say about every mother present resented those charges on behalf of her own girl or girls.'³⁸

At least one soldier considered the introduction of women patrols 'a studied insult' to both 'the Army' and 'the Weybridge young ladies'. 'A Weybridge Girl's Brother in Khaki', as he signed himself, wrote to the editor of the local paper while home on leave in mid-1915 to express his view that 'the Weybridge lasses . . . have no superior in character or behaviour' and to contrast 'these ridiculous patrols' with 'the many brave English women out in France, who work day and night for the comfort and convenience of Tommy'.³⁹

Feminists, however, argued that women police were needed to help and protect women in cases of sexual crimes and offences. It is important to note that women police and patrols believed themselves to be working for the protection and benefit of the women whom they disciplined, just as Gail Reekie has emphasized in her study of similar women's organizations and their work in Perth, Australia, in the second world war. In some ways, women patrols and women police did work in the interest and for the welfare of young, working-class women. They occasionally rescued women

from situations that were violent or threatened to be, directed them to refuges or other kinds of assistance, and sometimes even to chances of employment. Nevertheless, the attitude which one woman patrol expressed in a confidential report underlay much of their work. Reporting on patrol work in Letchworth in April 1915, she complained of the resistance proffered by young women to their ministrations:

There is a spirit of democracy and free thought prevalent in which there is no *true* liberty and any attempt to control is deeply resented. So much has been done for the girls at the different factories, and every new movement started in the place that they are a very superior order of beings who think they can do no wrong!⁴⁰

In general, women patrols and police sought to impose a code of conduct which they deemed moral and respectable. They wanted young women to behave in an orderly way consonant with the qualities of piety, chastity and sobriety, in other words middle-class respectability which was not identical to working-class respectability. Moreover, they insisted that young working-class women recognize and respect their authority, which rested in part on the code of class deference as well as their greater age.

The meaning of khaki fever can be read from the phrase itself, from other words associated with it, and from contemporary and later observations on women's sexuality during the war years and subsequently. The use of 'fever' as a metaphor signified the fear, shared by those who wished to preserve the gender and moral order, that British society was suffering from a contagious disease which would weaken the social body at a time when its life depended on fitness and strength. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg has suggested that such use of the body as a discursive symbol is a political tactic generally adopted out of fear of social change in 'periods of social transformation'.⁴¹ While 'fever' indicates a contagion which could be serious (such as typhoid fever or yellow fever), it simultaneously connotes a disorder which will probably pass with time rather than proving fatal. 'Khaki fever' implies, therefore, that with the right treatment the social body will ride out the danger.

We have some evidence of contemporary perceptions of changing sexual morality in the shifting meaning of the word 'flapper'. Billie Melman has noted that, whereas 'flapper' acquired two novel meanings in the last decades of the nineteenth century, one an

innocent young girl and the other a child prostitute, by the 1920s it had come to denote young women under voting age but still carried with it a connotation of loose sexuality. Although Melman states that the word acquired this later, fused meaning in 1918, it was already used in this way during the war. One observer warned that

flappers . . . get into trouble from mere giddiness, love of amusement, the prestige in each other's eyes of being accompanied by a soldier, and the pleasure of being taken to theatres and shows, or given suppers or chocolates and so forth,

thus connecting all three terms – 'the flapper', 'the amateur', and 'khaki fever'.⁴² The prevalence of the wartime 'flapper' is indicated by the fact that *Punch* immortalized her with an ode in her honour. The following lines suggest that the flapper either was a munitions or other war worker, or that she should become one when 'saved' by the women police:

[Then again] we only see her when she's out for play or meals,
And distresses the fastidious by her gestures and her squeals,
But she is not always idle or a decorative drone,
And if she wastes her wages, well, she wastes what is her own. . . .

But, in *Punch's* way of thinking, 'tis for women, kind and wise,
These neglected scattered units to enrol and mobilize,
Their vagabond activities to curb and concentrate,
And turn the skittish hoyden to a servant of the State.

She's young; her eyes are dazzled by the glamour of the streets;
She has to learn that life is not all cinemas and sweets;
But given wholesome guidance she may rise to self-control
And earn the right of entry on the Nation's golden Roll.⁴³

In 1919 the Association of Moral and Social Hygiene appointed a committee to study issues of sexual morality, prostitution and venereal disease as they were affected by the war. Sir Charles Tarring, Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons and a member of the wartime Medical Advisory Board to the Ministry of National Health, testified to the committee that 'promiscuity among girls of hitherto respectable position' had 'very much increased especially latterly, during the war'. Tarring provided details of cases among his patients, such as 'a girl whom I had known for years, of considerably more than respectable parentage' who consulted him professionally to find out whether or not she had VD. While he darkly testified that 'I have seen more cases of promiscuity among girls in the last five years than in all the rest of my practice, which now extends over 43

years', Tarring suggested that the war had not been the beginning nor would it be the end of these changes. He claimed that this shift in morality had 'increased' during the war, and the middle class that were 'the backbone of the country' were not 'as moral as they were many years ago'.⁴⁴

Other contemporary commentators echoed Tarring's observation of the effects of the war itself.⁴⁵ Some of the limited historiographical assessment of sexual morality in this period has countered such contemporary observation by stressing the chastity of young people, as John Gillis does when he asserts that 'the generations from 1890 to 1960 were perhaps the most severely restrained in modern times'. Particularly valuable on this subject is Steve Humphries's oral history of illicit sex in the first half of the twentieth century; Humphries stresses both that heterosexual morality loosened among young people particularly after the first world war, and that the tension between the dominant morality which prohibited premarital intercourse and their own increasing sexualization caused great anxiety and unhappiness for many young people. Judy Giles has similarly pointed to the competing pressures on working-class women's sexual behaviour in the interwar period.⁴⁶

The contradictions among historians' assessments, contemporary observations, contemporary behaviour and moral prescriptions point to a site of social tensions. Lucy Bland, while noting the wartime focus on the amateur, argues that in the Edwardian and first world war period the health, social hygiene and eugenist dimensions of the debate over promiscuity and VD came to the fore and thus overshadowed concern simply with morality.⁴⁷ Although it is admittedly a question of emphasis, it can be argued that the construction of khaki fever reveals gender and morality as the central concerns of debate and regulation. The fear that immorality was increasing among the respectable classes was crucial.⁴⁸ But the gender and age specificity of blaming young women for their assertive, wilful behaviour shows that feminine promiscuity was feared as yet a further way in which the gender order was being destabilized, particularly through challenging the centrality of chastity to conceptions of feminine respectability.

That the phenomenon occurred so early in the war suggests that the fever pre-dated the khaki, in contrast to the perception, both contemporary and historiographical, that the war itself changed morality and women's sexual expression. The conviction that the

war produced a vast increase in 'the amateur' was reinscribed twenty years later by Robert Graves and Alan Hodge, who claimed that there had been 'a phenomenal increase in sexuality', in which 'the enthusiastic amateur had swept away all professional opposition'.⁴⁹ But fear about young women's social behaviour was present prior to the war, a reaction to changes already occurring and those which threatened should suffrage be granted to women. The effect of the war, more than just exacerbating those fears, was to focus them in a sharply-etched form: fear of sexual promiscuity among young women (a fear exacerbated by other clear changes in young women's behaviour during the war, such as short skirts and hair, the wearing of make-up, smoking in public and dining in restaurants without a male chaperone)⁵⁰ which would constitute a clear generational challenge, at a time when the class order was already considered unstable by some. Khaki fever represents a transition from the hidden 'scarlet fever' of the nineteenth century to the public display of feminine sexuality. Instead of casual prostitution practised by poor women as a strategy for survival, it embodied the fear of women's social and therefore sexual independence.

Notes

1. Deborah Gorham, 'The "Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon" Re-examined: Child Prostitution and the Idea of Childhood in Late-Victorian England', *Victorian Studies*, 21 (Spring 1978), 353–79; Judith R. Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class and the State* (Cambridge 1980) and 'Male Vice and Female Virtue: Feminism and the Politics of Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century Britain', in Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell and Sharon Thompson (eds), *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality* (New York 1983), 419–38; Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society: The Regulation of Sexuality since 1800* (London and New York 1981); Lucy Bland, "'Guardians of the Race", or "Vampires upon the Nation's Health"?: Female Sexuality and its Regulation in Early Twentieth-Century Britain', in Elizabeth Whitelegg et al. (eds), *The Changing Experience of Women* (Oxford 1984), 373–88; Frank Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities: Medico-Moral Politics in England since 1830* (London and New York 1987); Linda Mahood, *The Magdalenes: Prostitution in the Nineteenth Century* (London and New York 1990) and Barbara Littlewood and Linda Mahood, 'Prostitutes, Magdalenes and Wayward Girls: Dangerous Sexualities of Working-Class Women in Victorian Scotland', *Gender & History*, vol. 3 (Summer 1991), 160–75. On campaigns concerning the sexual abuse of children see Sheila Jeffreys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality 1880–1930* (London and New York 1985), chaps 2, 3 and 4.

2. Deborah Gorham makes this point in 'The "Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon" Re-examined', op. cit.

3. Bland, "'Guardians of the Race'?", 374. Bland also cites evidence that confirms the perception that 'amateur prostitutes' during the war were very young, op. cit., 380-1.

4. Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, orig. pub. 1861-2 (London 1985), 486; Françoise Barret-Ducrocq, *Love in the Time of Victoria: Sexuality, Class and Gender in Nineteenth-Century London* (London and New York 1991), 51-5, 75. Mayhew distinguishes between the 'dollymop' who would go to the dancing academies and casinos, and the 'demoiselle de comptoir' who would only meet men in the street or when she was behind the counter at work: *London Labour and the London Poor*, op. cit., 486.

5. Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia 1986), esp. 110-12; Elizabeth Lunbeck, "'A New Generation of Women": Progressive Psychiatrists and the Hypersexual Female', *Feminist Studies*, 13 (Fall 1987), 513-43; Ellen Ross and Rayna Rapp, 'Sex and Society: A Research Note from Social History and Anthropology', in Snitow et al. (eds), *Powers of Desire*, op. cit., 59; Walkowitz, 'Male Vice and Female Virtue', op. cit., 427.

6. Richard A. Voeltz has adopted my own interpretation of khaki fever to argue that it was also a motivation for the dramatic expansion of the Girl Guide movement during the first world war. 'The Antidote to "Khaki Fever"? The Expansion of the British Girl Guides during the First World War', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 27, 4 (October 1992), 627-38.

7. Marilyn Lake, 'Female Desires: The Meaning of World War II', *Australian Historical Studies*, 24, 95 (October 1990), esp. 268-9.

8. Elizabeth Robins Pennell, 'London Under the Shadow of War', *Atlantic Monthly*, 115 (March 1915), 398, 400.

9. See, for example, Gail Braybon, *Women Workers in the First World War* (London 1981), 44-5.

10. 'The Problem of Our Camps', *The Common Cause*, 6 (13 November 1914), 536 (emphasis added); M.G. Carden, Hon. Secretary, 'Women Patrols', National Union of Women Workers of Great Britain and Ireland, Women's Patrol Committee, London, 1916[?], 1; Mary S. Allen and Julie Helen Heyneman, *Women At the Crossroads* (London 1934), 75.

11. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, 'The Body Politic', in Elizabeth Weed (ed.), *Coming to Terms: Feminism, Theory, Politics* (New York and London 1989), 103.

12. *The Police Review*, 23 (9 April 1915), 176; Millicent Garrett Fawcett, 'Women's Work in War Time', *The Contemporary Review*, 106 (December 1914), 780.

13. Bland also notes this concurrence in "'Guardians of the race'?", op. cit., 381; Edith Sellers, 'Boy and Girl War-Products: Their Reconstruction', *The Nineteenth Century and After*, 84 (October 1918), 704; Mary S. Allen, *The Pioneer Policewoman* (London 1925), 84.

14. Ellen Ross, "'Not the Sort that Would Sit on the Doorstep": Respectability in Pre-World War I London Neighbourhoods', *International Labor and Working Class History*, 27 (Spring 1985), esp. 42-4; Judy Giles, "'Playing Hard to Get": Working-class Women, Sexuality and Respectability in Britain, 1918-40', *Women's History Review*, 1, 2 (1992), 243.

15. 'Woman's Part in War Time', *The Common Cause*, 6 (December 1914), 597.

See also the letter from Nina Boyle to the Archbishop of York, *The Vote*, 2 July 1915, 665.

16. Public Record Office [hereafter PRO], HO 45/10806/309485/71. Letter from Chief Constable of Essex Police to HM Inspector of Constabulary, 21 March 1916. Similarly, the Chief Constable of Brighton referred to 'so many girls . . . who had scarcely attained the age of mature judgement'. *The Police Review and Parade Gossip*, 23 (26 March 1915), 152.

17. Carol Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England* (London 1981), 116.

18. Sellers, 'Boy and Girl War-Products', op. cit., 704.

19. 'Problems of the Day: The Need for Policewomen', *The Englishwoman*, 32 (November 1916), 107.

20. The work of Marek Kohn suggests that a discourse on 'dope girls' took up where that on khaki fever left off, by representing a cluster of fears about women's sexual and social disorder and vulnerability connected to the racially threatening drug underworld. Marek Kohn, *Dope Girls: The Birth of the British Drug Underground* (London 1992), esp. 5–6, 8–9.

21. C.G. Hartley, *Women's Wild Oats: Essays on the Re-fixing of Moral Standards* (n.p. 1920), 63.

22. See Angela Woollacott, *On Her Their Lives Depend: Munitions Workers in the Great War* (Berkeley 1994).

23. J.R. Raynes, *The Pageant of England, 1900–1920* (London 1920), 169; on women who had cross-dressed and passed as soldiers see Julie Wheelwright, *Amazons and Military Maids: Women Who Dressed as Men in the Pursuit of Life, Liberty and Happiness* (London 1989).

24. Imperial War Museum [hereafter IWM], Department of Sound Records, 000566/07, 17.

25. Lucy Bland, 'In the Name of Protection: The Policing of Women in the First World War', in Julia Brophy and Carol Smart (eds), *Women In Law: Explorations in Law, Family & Sexuality* (London 1985), 32. For a history of the slow, agonized promulgation of Regulation 40d by the government, see Suzann Buckley, 'The Failure to Resolve the Problem of Venereal Disease Among the Troops in Britain in World War I', in Brian Bond and Ian Roy (eds), *War and Society: A Yearbook of Military History*, vol. 2 (New York 1977), 65–85.

26. Susan Kingsley Kent, *Sex and Suffrage in Britain, 1860–1914* (Princeton 1987), 22; 'Woman's Part in War Time', *The Common Cause*, 6 (11 December 1914), 597.

27. Frank Mort has delineated the coalition of reformers and hygienists in the first decades of the twentieth century as an important transitional stage in the regulation of sexuality. *Dangerous Sexualities*, op. cit., 173–83.

28. 'History of the National Union of Women Workers', *Handbook and Report of the National Council and Union of Women Workers of Great Britain and Ireland, 1917–18* (London 1918), 78–9; M.G. Carden, Hon. Secretary, 'Women Patrols' (London 1916[?]), 1; PRO, HO 45/10806/309485, Report: November 1915, Women Patrols Committee for Scotland, of the National Union of Women Workers of Great Britain and Ireland, 1.

29. PRO, HO 45/10806/309485, Report of the Central Women's Patrol Committee, NUWW, 5 December 1914; 'Women Workers in Conference: More Female Police Demanded: Problem of the "Flighty Girl"', *Daily Chronicle*, 6 October 1915;

PRO, HO 45/10806/309485, Report: November 1915, Women Patrols Committee for Scotland, NUWW, 1.

30. 'Conduct at Cinemas: Mr Muir on Police Inspection', *The Times*, 16 May 1918, 3.

31. Johanna Alberti, *Beyond Suffrage: Feminists in War and Peace, 1914–28* (New York 1989), 23. Both organizations, however, played down their suffrage connections lest they prejudice their police work prospects. In Sunderland in 1915, for example, women patrol organizers were upset by 'an inaccurate newspaper report that "the patrol movement here, was really a suffragist attempt to obtain notoriety"' because some of the local patrol committee were in fact anti-suffragists whom they did not want to alienate. Report from Sunderland, 17 March [1915?], 1913–1946 envelope, Women Police Papers of the National Council of Women, Police Federation, Surbiton.

32. For more on the Women Police Service, see Chloe Owings, *Women Police: A Study of the Development and Status of the Women Police Movement* (New York 1925); Joan Lock, *The British Policewoman: Her Story* (London 1979); Philippa Levine, "'Walking the Streets in a Way No Decent Woman Should": Women Police in World War One', *Journal of Modern History*, 66 (March 1994), 1–45; and Lucy Bland, 'In the Name of Protection', op. cit., David Mitchell pointed out the connection between khaki fever and women police in *Women On the Warpath: The Story of the Women of the First World War* (London 1966).

33. Jean and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa* (Chicago 1991), 28.

34. Walkowitz refers to the feminists' 'archenemies — the military, police and medical profession', *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, op. cit., 129.

35. For the wartime movement to control charity girls see Jane Deeter Rippin, 'Social Hygiene and the War: Work With Women and Girls', *Social Hygiene*, 5 (1919), 125–36. On judicial and correctional treatment of young female offenders in the US see Steven Schlossman and Stephanie Wallach, 'The Crime of Precocious Sexuality: Female Juvenile Delinquency and the Progressive Era', in D. Kelly Weisberg (ed.), *Women and the Law: A Social Historical Perspective*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, MA 1982), 45–84.

36. PRO, HO 45/10724/251861. Memo. by Leonard Dunning, HM Inspector of Constabulary at the Home Office, 19 October 1914.

37. 'Woman's Assault on Policewoman', *The Times*, 10 June 1918, 3.

38. Report submitted to the Women Patrols Committee on patrol work in Portsmouth, 31 October 1915, Women Police Papers of the National Council of Women, Police Federation, Surbiton; 'A Grantham Girl's Protest', *The Grantham Journal*, 12 September 1914, 4; Letter to the Editor, *The Grantham Journal*, 12 September 1914, 4.

39. Newscipping attached to report of the Women's Patrol, Weybridge, 20 June 1915, Women Police Papers, Police Federation, Surbiton.

40. Gail Reekie, 'War, Sexuality and Feminism: Perth Women's Organisations, 1938–1945', *Historical Studies: Australia & New Zealand*, 21 (October 1985), esp. 582; Sheila Jeffreys casts women police particularly in this light in *The Spinster and Her Enemies*, 60–3; examples of assistance include a March 1916 report from Sheffield and a January 1915 report from Plymouth, 1913–1946 envelope, Women Police Papers, Police Federation, Surbiton; Confidential Report, Women's Patrol, Letchworth Branch, 11 April 1915, 1913–1946 envelope, Women Police Papers, Police Federation, Surbiton.

41. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, 'The Body Politic', op. cit., 103.

42. Billie Melman, *Women and the Popular Imagination in the Twenties: Flappers and Nymphs* (New York 1988), 27–9; M.H. Mason, 'Public Morality: Some Constructive Suggestions', *The Nineteenth Century and After*, 82 (July 1917), 190.

43. 'The Flapper', *Punch*, vol. 152, 10 January 1917, 30.

44. Fawcett Library, AMSH Papers Box No. 49, Committee of Inquiry into Sexual Immorality, 14 July 1919, Qus. 1384–97.

45. For example, The National Union of Women Workers of Great Britain and Ireland, *Occasional Paper*, No. 77 of March 1918 commented of women munitions workers that they would constitute a problem after the war because 'they will have had high wages and premature liberty, which may in some instances have become license', 'Women Patrols Committee', 29.

46. John R. Gillis, *For Better, For Worse: British Marriages 1600 to the Present* (New York and Oxford 1985), 277; Steve Humphries, *A Secret World of Sex. Forbidden Fruit: The British Experience 1900–1950* (London 1988), esp. 16–26, 96–9, 104 and 191; Giles, "'Playing Hard to Get'", op. cit. See also Penny Summerfield and Nicole Crockett, ' "You Weren't Taught that with the Welding": Lessons in Sexuality in the Second World War', *Women's History Review*, 1, 3 (1992), 435–54.

47. Bland, ' "Guardians of the race"?', op. cit., 378.

48. Here too there is a parallel with the US. Allan Brandt notes that the wartime charity girls worried reformers even more than before because they now included 'girls of apparently good families', from 'respectable, middle-class backgrounds', *No Magic Bullet: A Social History of Venereal Disease in the United States Since 1880* (New York and Oxford 1985), 81.

49. Robert Graves and Alan Hodge, *The Long Week-End: A Social History of Great Britain 1918–1939* first published 1940 (New York 1963), 107–8. Similarly Alison Neilans stated in a 1936 essay that 'it was during the war, and after it, that the changing moral standards of women became definitely noticeable', 'Changes in Sexual Morality', in Ray Strachey (ed.), *Our Freedom and Its Results* (London 1936), 223.

50. Bonnie S. Anderson and Judith P. Zinsser, *A History of Their Own: Women in Europe from Prehistory to the Present*, vol. II (New York 1988), 201–3.

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