
Article:
Kielty, D (2017) "Hands That War: In the Midlands": Rebecca West's Rediscovered Article on First World War Munitions Workers. Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature, 36 (1). pp. 211-217. ISSN 1936-1645

https://doi.org/10.1353/tsw.2017.0012

"Hands That War: In the Midlands": Rebecca West's Rediscovered Article on First World War Munitions Workers

Daniel Kielty

University of Leeds

Addressing the experiences of female munitions workers during the First World War, Rebecca West's "Hands That War" series first appeared between 17 February and 3 June 1916 in *The Daily Chronicle*. Most modern readers first encountered these articles in Jane Marcus's *The Young Rebecca: Writings of Rebecca West, 1911-1917* (1989).[1] More recently, Bernard Schweizer reissued one article from the series in the appendix to his 2010 edition of *The Return of the Soldier* (1918).[2] Both Marcus and Schweizer have acknowledged the existence of three articles in the series: "Hands That War: The Cordite Workers," "Hands That War: Welfare Work," and "Hands That War: The Night Shift." During a research trip to the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University in September 2015, I discovered a fourth article among West's papers that has escaped the attention of West scholars: "Hands That War: In the Midlands." Though the full date is barely legible on the newspaper clipping that survives, it looks as if it was published on 17 February 1916, making it the first article in the series.

Possibly due to the censorship restrictions established by the Defence of the Realm Act (1914), West does not explicitly name the munitions factories in the Midlands that she visited.[3] However, she refers "to a motor works that is now producing shells," which is likely

the Austin Longbridge Plant near Birmingham.[4] As with the other articles in the series, "In the Midlands" gives a detailed account of workers' pay and conditions. West is keen to stress the irony that a state that so fervently resisted the movement of women into the workplace during peacetime should now be so reliant on it in a time of war. Moreover, she seeks to establish a parallel between the debilitating factory environment endured by female munitions workers and the trench conditions faced by men fighting on the Western Front.

More explicitly than the other articles, "In the Midlands" highlights West's sense of the incongruity between the female hands manufacturing weapons of destruction and existing conceptions of youth and femininity:

> The girl who gave the shell the brushful of red lead that prevents premature explosions looked so young as she mixed this stuff that was like blood; and it was dreadful to see a child that it would be a gross over-statement to call small—a mere pinch of little girl that could fairly be taken between the thumb and forefinger—dipping her curls as she bent to add her touch to the instrument of death.

We learn from this article that the title of the series was inspired by Psalms 144:1; with this title, West emphasizes that the troubling agency of female manual labor is driven by divine inspiration:

> Among the lacquerers, who are doing work that no man can learn to do efficiently and which is of the highest importance, since the coat of varnish preserves the shell as water-glass preserves an egg, one found a figure that reconciled one to this terrible use of womanhood. She had the face and body of a mother; but she smiled down on her work and seemed rapt, as though she were whispering to herself the cry of the Psalmist, "Blessed be the Lord my strength, which teachest my hands to war and my fingers to fight."

Though strident about the extent to which the manual labor of munitions workers justified feminists' confidence in the capabilities of women, "In the Midlands" reveals that West is anxious about how this labor could be reconciled with her understanding of "womanhood."

The uncertainty that West displays allows us to read the "Hands That War" series alongside contemporary writing that explicitly and implicitly expresses concern about the impact of manual labor on traditional gender roles. In the poem "Women at Munition Making" (1916), Mary Gabrielle Collins laments that those with "fingers [that] guide / The rosy teat, swelling with milk / To the eager mouth of the suckling babe" are "coarsened in munition factories" and "bruised against the law" to "kill."[5] Whereas Collins's poem laments the damage that women's direct contact with weapons of death does to their ability to rear new lives, West's image of the munition worker's divinely inspired manual labor enables her to reconcile hands that war with "the face and body of a mother."

In his book *Our Girls: Their Work for the War* (1916), Hall Caine attempts to head off this perceived threat to gender roles by presenting the manual labor of munitions workers as simply an extension of their domestic duties into an industrialized setting:

> The machines themselves seem almost human in their automatic intelligence, and, if you show a proper respect for their impetuous organisms, they are not generally cruel. So the women get along very well with them, learning all their ways, their whims, their needs and their limitations. It is surprising how speedily the women have wooed and won this new kind of male monster."[6]

Unlike Caine's attempts to refigure the uncomfortably destructive agency wielded by female hands in terms of a conventional domestic relationship, West accords female industrial labor a sacred legitimacy by invoking the psalm.

Though "In the Midlands" avoids Collins's and Caine's reactionary representations of munitions work, we can detect in West's depiction of manual labor a similar degree of unease

about this destructive form of female agency. Helping to reconcile herself to "this terrible use of womanhood," West's attempt to stress that the hands of the munitions worker are the instruments of a higher power shares with Caine a need to refigure female manual labor into a more acceptable framework of agency. Along with the reactionary literary responses of contemporary writing, then, "In the Midlands" shows us that even progressive portrayals of munitions workers register an unease about the implications of their agency on existing conceptions of gender roles and femininity.

"In the Midlands" allows us to approach West's "Hands That War" as a series concerned not only with recording the vital contribution of female munitions workers but also with the unsettling impact it had on the ways in which women were portrayed. This missing article helps to situate the series within a broader body of contemporary writing that grapples with the problem of how to represent women who became more physically involved in the destructive processes of war than ever before. A century after its initial publication, this rediscovered article encourages us to continue our pursuit of West's subtle and complex responses to the defining events of the twentieth century.

"Hands That War I. In The Midlands"

All of us realize how wonderful it is that even the most ill-used sorts of common men, the drapers' assistants, not very fit after years of "living in," the stunted factory hand, the underfed agricultural labourer, should have joined the Army. Why should those for whom England has done so little do so much for England? But the other day I visited a provincial town and discovered a host of defenders of a different sort, whose kindness in this returning good for evil has not yet been sufficiently realised by England. It was not a town in which one would expect to find any exceptional bloom of patriotism. It had apparently been built by an architect infatuated with the loveliness of the slag-heap, and it is ugly with more than mere

physical ugliness, for very plainly it was designed by capitalists for people they did not love. And least of all, if social investigators have written truly, did they love the women workers that lived there. But then before the war the woman who was a producer instead of a consumer was in most places treated with contempt; it was a kindness to employ her; the fewest shillings one chose to pay her were more than her "economic worth."

To-day things are different. In that town I found a little city of white workshops where there sit 3,000 women who are engaged in work whose vital importance to the community is symbolised by the armed guards at its gates. You will find them sitting there for ten hours a day, for they work for two stretches of five hours on end. This girl is picking up cartridge caps and tossing them aside to be remelted if they show the most infinitesimal flaw of surface; this girl is feeding cartridges into a chute that carries them down to two steel fingers that indent them at each end; this girl is gauging the cartridges by passing them under bars that reject them if they are one-thousandth of an inch too long or short; this girl, who has been sitting at one of the heavier machines while it is being set by a skilled male operator, leaps to her feet, and an instant later a stream of cartridges spurts on to the floor beneath. There are cartridges everywhere, they leap from the girls' fingers, they dash out of the machines, they are heaped up in barrels all over the floor, hundreds of cartridges, thousands of cartridges, millions of cartridges, enough to kill every man in the German Empire. That is what these women are doing for the army, and for us.

"In the Munition Trenches"

They are doing it, too, at a cost to themselves. It is true that they are making what is good money for a woman worker, for none make less than a pound a week, and some earn £2 10s. But they lose all the sunshine, for they come at dawn and leave at dusk. And the processes are so simple and automatic that the work is monotonous past the endurance of any educated woman. Worst of all, they are the victims of a house famine. There were only 500

women working in this factory before the war, and the problem of housing the 2,500 that have come to work during the last 18 months seems insoluble. The firm is full of good will, as it has shown by building a splendid canteen. But the factory stands in what even in peace-time was a congested district, and there is as little chance of getting land for new houses as there is of getting the timber and labour for them. And thus it is that many of the women go home at night that a worker on night shift has just left, and many more are tired out when they sit down at their machines by an hour's journey by tram or rail.

But the cartridges have to be made, so they put up with these discomforts, just as the Army puts up with trench life. We must bear this parallel in mind, and remember that it will be as disgraceful if we do not alter these conditions after the peace as it would be if we left our soldiers to live in dug-outs for the rest of their lives.

That is only one factory out of thousands. In the same town I found another which was, in its bricks and mortar, an even more wonderful example of the way industrial England has risen to the emergency. Where there were green fields a year ago there is now a factory where 8,000 hands, including 3,500 women, are engaged in the 600 processes which go to the making of shell-fuses. Here the housing problem is not so acute, for the War Office has commandeered an estate of 260 houses for the employees; and it is well, for the work is heavier.

In a vast workshop where great flags hanging from the ceiling tremble perpetually in the draught of thousands of whirling pulleys, women turn the capstan lathes, operate delicate drilling and milling machines, stand for ten hours a day before machines that crash down on red-hot rounds of steel and flatten them into fuse caps. It accords with the irony of the situation whereby England is being defended by her least regarded citizens that the heaviest of these last machines have, since the nerves of the young girls cannot bear the noise, to be

operated by women who have already served the State, and not been very well rewarded for it, as housewives and mothers.

"Among the Shell Makers"

From that factory I went on to a motor works that is now producing shells. Here there were 500 women working, and there was much heavy work going on, such as the cutting and turning and pressing on to the shell of the copper driving band. But most strange and impressive was the quiet room where girls in mob caps and Holland gowns sat round a long table, like pupils of a religious community in a refectory, while a moving platform brought the shells along the middle of the table so that the girls could apply touch after touch till it was finally filled with bullets and resin and handed over to the lacquerers. The girl who gave the shell the brushful of red lead that prevents premature explosions looked so young as she mixed this stuff that was like blood; and it was dreadful to see a child that it would be a gross over-statement to call small—a mere pinch of little girl that could fairly be taken between the thumb and forefinger—dipping her curls as she bent to add her touch to the instrument of death.

But among the lacquerers, who are doing work that no man can learn to do efficiently and which is of the highest importance, since the coat of varnish preserves the shell as water-glass preserves an egg, one found a figure that reconciled one to this terrible use of womanhood. She had the face and body of a mother; but she smiled down on her work and seemed rapt, as though she were whispering to herself the cry of the Psalmist, "Blessed be the Lord my strength, which teachest my hands to war and my fingers to fight." She was a Belgian refugee and knew what thing these girls were averting by their work, what evil they were labouring to undo.

I was told by managers, foreman and Government officials that these 7,000 women whom I saw working in the five hours of my visit to this provincial town could not have been

bettered for workmanship, discipline and timekeeping. But even more wonderful than their perfection is the fact that they form only one regiment of the great army that has been recruited in the last year from the despised and disfranchised sex.

Rebecca West

DANIEL KIELTY is a doctoral student at the University of Leeds. His thesis is entitled "Haptic Relations with Built Environments in the Writings of Rebecca West, 1909-1941."

NOTES

I would like to thank the Society of Architectural Historians of Great Britain and the School of English at the University of Leeds, whose generous funding made my research trip to the Beinecke Library possible. I wish to thank Helen Mcleod Atkinson, executor of the West Estate, for permission to reproduce "Hands That War I: In the Midlands."

[1] Jane Marcus, *The Young Rebecca: Writings of Rebecca West, 1911-1917* (London: MacMillan London Limited, 1982), 380-90.

[2] Rebecca West, "Hands That War: The Night Shift," in *The Return of the Soldier*, ed. Bernard Schweizer and Charles Thorne (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2010), 164-68.

[3] For a detailed summary of the Defence of the Realm Act, see Spencer Tucker and Priscilla Mary Roberts, *Encyclopedia of World War I: A Political, Social, and Military History* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2005), s. v. "Defence of the Realm Act (DORA)."

[4] West, "Hands That War I. In the Midlands," *The Daily Chronicle*, 17 February 1916, box 33, folder 1305, GEN MSS 105, Rebecca West Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. For details on the diversification of Austin Longbridge during the First World War, see James J. Flink, *The Automobile Age* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1990), 75. Subsequent references to "In the Midlands" will be to this newspaper article.

[5] Mary Gabrielle Collins, "Women at Munition Making," in *Scars Upon My Heart: Women's Poetry and Verse of the First World War*, ed. Catherine Reilly (London: Virago Press, 1981), 24.

[6] Hall Caine, *Our Girls: Their Work for the War* (London: Hutchinson, 1916), 22-23.