

BOOK REVIEW

Women as Veterans in Britain and France after the First World War

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Book by Alison S. Fell. Publisher: Cambridge University Press, 2018 226 pp. ISBN: 9781108425766.

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By filling a niche in international veterans studies research, Alison Fell's *Women as Veterans in Britain and France after the First World War* details women veterans identities and representations post-World War I (pp. 14–15). Specifically, this book explores the reasons French and British women veterans “aligned themselves with the ‘War Generation’” in order to speak and be heard. Indeed, Fell spends much time examining the veteran identity, deliberately noting a hierarchy amongst veterans—whose experiences are held in greater cultural value than others. Interestingly enough, this hierarchy has been said to exist today. Calling it “the veteran trope,” Corley (2017) has also noted the ways in which, “the attribution of a narrowly constructed veteran status can place a millstone of expectations and beliefs around the necks” of individuals with prior military service (p. 69). Fell examines how women veterans aligned themselves with particular “veteran tropes” (Corley, 2017) in memoirs, groups, and society.

Fell is Professor of French Cultural History at the University of Leeds (United Kingdom) and Director of the Leeds Arts and Humanities Research Institute. Her faculty webpage states that she began studying “women’s experiences in, and cultural responses to, the First World War in France and Britain since 2003” the result of which is this published book (University, 2019). Previously published books include the topics of *First World War Nursing* (Routledge, 2013) and *The Women’s Movement in Wartime: International Perspectives 1914–1919* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). In addition to books on the topic of French and British women and war, particularly the First World War, are dozens of chapters and journal articles that blend gender, history, culture, and war.

In *Women as Veterans in Britain and France*, Fell combines her interests in gender, history, culture, and war in seven comprehensive chapters. Chapter one examines the

ways in which women aligned themselves with the iconic military/war nurse in order to establish credibility for their military service. She also observes memorials and commemorations of women who died on active service and the degree to which women’s sacrifices equated with men’s. Fell argues that deceased women were held in an equal degree of societal reverence with their male counterparts. In chapter two, “The Afterlives of First World War Heroines,” Fell looks at how French and British war heroines reintegrated into society. Apparently those who died stayed heroines, but those who lived used their heroine status to gain credibility—in veterans groups and in the media. The following chapter, “‘That Glorious Comradeship’: Female Veteran Groups in the 1920s,” is an analysis of the publications of two groups—war nurses and British ex-members of Queen Mary’s Army Auxiliary Corps—in order to understand “the collective expressions of female veteran identity” (p. 17). According to Fell, these two groups were active in the early 1920s and were modeled after men’s groups. She adds that women veterans used their group membership as a means of accessing roles or professions outside the realm of “traditional” women’s roles. In doing so, these women enacted another form of ethos building.

Chapter four is why I was so eager to get my hands on the book. In it Fell looks at women’s memoirs. I’ve been trying to write a book about women veterans’ memoirs for several years now; this chapter looks at how women tried to “enter the male-dominated ‘war literature’ market” (p. 18). Fell’s careful analysis of women’s written works shows how French and British women appealed to ethos or reputation in order to gain credibility—in order to share their stories. Specifically, in order to be heard, women aligned themselves with the revered military/war nurse and women involved in resistance movements. Sometimes, however, Fell states

that the women writers resorted to fictionalizing their experiences in order to fit in with the genre and appeal to readers' sensibilities. In the last chapter before the conclusion, "Women's Wartime Industrial Action and the Limits of Female Veteran Identity," Fell focuses on women industrial workers during the war. She analyzes the writing of women who led strikes on behalf of women workers. In her investigation she finds the "limits of the identity of war veteran for women" (p. 18). In essence, Fell finds, like Corley (2017), that aligning one's self with public perceptions of "the veteran" is a trope with common stereotypes that veterans regularly enact in their writing and through identity markers.

Published as part of the Cambridge University Press series *Studies in the Social and Cultural History of Modern Warfare*, this work is more veterans studies than military science because it examines the ways in which women who aided WWI military efforts represented themselves after the war. This work would be of particular interest to those studying WWI and after or French and British history. While I found the fourth chapter interesting because of my interest in women veterans' writing, I would have appreciated more understanding of the author's methods and methodologies. The book is devoid of such information. Some mention of how and why Fell analyzed what she did would have been of particular interest to me, a fellow methodologist.

Although she was regarding French and British women after WWI, I was not surprised by any of Fell's findings given what I know of contemporary women veterans' identities

and representation in their written works. I saw parallels between Fell's work and that of Kathleen M. Ryan's (2009), who looked at the oral histories of WWII women. One parallel is that the women used particular tropes, as Corley (2017) notes, (though Corley is not writing about women veterans) in order to fit within societal roles and in order to share their stories. Perhaps the most compelling takeaway from Fell's work is the following: "It was not the case that women were denied a voice in relation to the war. What this book has shown, however, is that some women's stories counted more than others. And it was those who could claim veteran status who were the most likely to find a route into public life via their war service in the years following the war" (p. 201).

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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