‘PLAYING AT BEING SOLDIERS’?
BRITISH WOMEN AND MILITARY UNIFORM IN THE
FIRST WORLD WAR

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The idea of a uniform makes a decided appeal to women. None will ever estimate what was the lure of the khaki that the innumerable leagues and battalions and corps and platoons and squadrons of women assumed in the first 6 months of the war. There was no more real reason for assuming this very nondescript hue than apple green or rose pink, but it savoured of active service and its wearers had a faith that it showed as nothing else could that they were out to do their bit. (Newcastle Daily Journal 1/11/1917)

Introduction: Uniforms and Gender

Throughout history practices of dress have frequently been evoked to symbolise the gender of the body beneath. Clothing as an aspect of culture plays a central role in the production and the ‘acting out’ of masculinity and femininity, allowing us to swiftly and easily read the sex of an individual and to thus assign gender roles and traits to them. As Elizabeth Wilson has written, “fashion is obsessed with gender; defines and redefines the gender boundary.”1 Fashion draws attention to the physical differences between men and women, often emphasising and embellishing these differences and, as part of a wider culture, helping to produce discourses of masculinity and femininity. Dress acts as a function and a feature of gender; it tells of the sex of the wearer and helps to assign culturally appropriate gender roles. If dress and fashion help to produce and define gender, the gender traditionally defined through military uniform has been masculine. The military uniform, with its ability to award authority and membership of a separate, elite group to its subjects, has come to signify a certain high-status type of masculinity.

Historically, militarism and masculinity have had a close, even intertwined, relationship and, although different forms of masculinity can and do co-exist, this militarized masculinity has often been seen as a masculine ideal, for example in the culture which predominated in late Victorian and Edwardian male public schools.\(^2\) Even today, in a ‘post-military society’, when the majority of recruits to the armed forces come disproportionately from relatively low-status working-class households, the donning of a military uniform, with all its accompanying accoutrements, retains the ability to confer status upon the wearer. In a militarized society, such as Britain during the First World War, the status granted by military uniform was concomitantly higher, the khaki uniform coming to embody a chivalrous, heroic, patriotic ideal of masculinity. Indeed, men not in uniform were sometimes subject to the attentions of The Order of the White Feather, a group of women who presented white feathers to non-uniformed men of military age as a mark of their disdain, whilst Baroness Orczy, the author of the popular ‘Scarlet Pimpernel’ novels, formed the ‘Women of England Active Service League’ whose 20,000 members pledged “never to be seen in public with any man who, being in every way free and fit for service, has refused to respond to his country’s call.”\(^3\) The *Evening Standard* claimed that the only ‘real’ men were those in khaki, urging female readers to “cut the acquaintance of your sweetheart unless he is prepared to wear khaki and show that he deserves the name of a man.”\(^4\) The sheer numbers of those killed in the First World War, and the manner of their dying, in which bodies were often literally ‘lost’, destroyed by artillery or swallowed by the mud of the Western Front, lent another, almost religious, level of significance to the uniform.

Yet military colours were by no means the only form of uniform seen in wartime Britain. In an increasingly militarized society uniforms often appeared ubiquitous, worn not only by combatants but by members of a wide variety of other organizations, including factory workers, nurses, canteen staff, transport operatives, Girl Guides and Boy Scouts. Uniforms held a strong appeal for many women, signifying both a patriotic

\(^2\) For discussion of this see J.A. Mangan, ‘“The Grit of our Forefathers” Invented Traditions, Propaganda and Imperialism’ in Mackenzie (1986), pp. 113–139.

\(^3\) Cited in Haste (1977), p. 56. For more on both organisations, see Gullace (1997), pp. 178–206. It should be noted, however, that despite extensive press coverage of the movement to shame men not in uniform, the Women of England Active Service League only recruited 20,000 of its target of 100,000 members.

\(^4\) *Evening Standard*, 26/8/1914.