

Women and War: A Historical Perspective. NANCY MILLER CHENIER and AMBER WALPOLE. Mounted at the Canadian War Museum, Ottawa, 27 July 1984 to September 1986. No published catalogue.

At a time when archivists are coming to see the mounting of exhibitions as an increasingly large part of their professional responsibilities, a careful consideration of why this potentially very exciting exhibition is a rather disappointing failure may reveal some valuable lessons to the readers of *Archivaria*. *Women and War* displays a dazzling range of intriguing artifacts, including weapons, uniforms, personal memorabilia of many outstanding and hitherto unknown Canadian women, paintings, and posters, most of them drawn from the collections of the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa. To the feminist, the social historian, and the amateur of military history, this exhibition offers a veritable feast of interesting items. Yet, sadly, the parts overwhelm the whole, and the visitor is left with unanswered questions and a general sense of puzzlement in spite of the careful planning and hard work of the organizers.

The exhibition was mounted by the War Museum with the assistance of the Museum of Man and the National Museums Corporation. The idea for the exhibition came from Nancy Miller Chenier, a freelance researcher, who worked closely with Amber Walpole, the designer, who is with the Museum of Man. Jenny Cave of the National Museums Corporation conducted a survey of War Museum visitors over several weeks to determine their attitude to women and war. The exhibition was designed to appeal primarily to the average War Museum visitor.

Women and War is arranged in five sections. They are entitled: "Fighting and Protecting," "Caring for the Wounded," "Producing the Materials of War," "Serving the Military," and "Providing Economic Support." There is an historical introduction to each section which is illustrated with facsimile photographs and paintings, followed by displays of artifacts, dioramas, and paintings. Most of the exhibits are drawn from the First and Second World Wars, with two sections on nursing services during the Rebellion of 1885 and the South African War. Individual cases hold poignant collections of personal memorabilia collected from individuals who served in these conflicts.

One of the reasons for the disappointing impact of the exhibition is the lack of a catalogue. It is indeed unfortunate that shortage of funds made it impossible not only to produce a permanent record of this show but also that the full information on each artifact is nowhere available. While the participating institutions and individuals are acknowledged in a panel at the beginning of the exhibition, individual items are not completely captioned. Much of the historical introduction to each section is illustrated by facsimile photographs and paintings. No information is given about the date, size, or origin of these items. In many cases they are used in a way which is positively misleading. To take but one example from many, a section entitled "Peacemakers" illustrates a text on the work of women in anti-war groups during the Second World War with a photograph showing a group of demonstrators who are holding up banners reading "Our babies need milk NOT Atom Bombs." Quite obviously, this is a photograph taken *after* the Second World War and could not rightly be said to illustrate the work of anti-war demonstrators *during* the conflict. The organizer explained that, in the absence of a satisfactory wartime photograph, she had used this one. If this type of symbolic illustration is to be used in an historical exhibition, the curator's intention should be made clear in the accompanying caption. To use historical documentation in this way is to show a profound contempt towards the public viewing the exhibition.



Canadian Women's Army Corps Recruiting Poster. Courtesy: Canadian War Museum, National Museum of Man, National Museums of Canada, Negative No. 73-9221.

It is perhaps even sadder to see how lack of adequate information detracts from appreciation of the fascinating artifacts in the exhibition. To take another example, an intriguing painting showing a group of soldiers in the uniforms of the First World War with some brightly dressed girls is captioned with the title, “Whizz-Bang Corner,” the name of the artist, and the medium. Even if the viewer already knows that a “Whizz-Bang” is a slang term for a type of explosive, she is little further ahead in understanding where the place is, what the people are doing, and why the explosive has this name.

Apart from the absence of catalogue and captions, there is a deeper reason for the lack of a clear and coherent message coming from *Women and War*. Although Ms. Miller Chenier carefully followed the ROM *Guidelines* in writing the four levels of text to accompany the exhibition and each theme section is introduced by a large panel which lays out the ideas to be expounded through the succeeding artifacts, the essential weakness of the exhibition is that the organizers have carefully avoided coming to grips with the inherent conflicts underlying the history of women and war in any society. They were obviously aware that these conflicts existed. The work of Ruth Roach Pierson, the leading historian in this field, is on display in the exhibition hall, but the organizers have chosen not to use her analysis of the themes dealt with in the exhibition. The introductory panel to “Women in the Military,” for example, tells us that “Women were forbidden to serve openly as combatants,” but we are never told why this was so, surely an essential point for anyone wishing to understand women and war.

The failure of *Women and War* illustrates the fact that the most beautiful paintings and interesting artifacts can tell us little when they are put on display unless they are presented within an intelligent narrative and with a respect for historical fact and methodology. I believe the organizers of this exhibition were misled by the idea that only highly educated people are capable of appreciating historical scholarship and accuracy. Complex ideas, such as the relationship between women and war in Canadian society, can be presented in

simple terms through an exhibition, providing the organizers have themselves absorbed them and can express them in a comprehensible way. (Issue No. 54(1984) of *Oracle*, a publication of the National Museum of Man, describes the exhibition.)

Jeanne L'Espérance
Picture Division
Public Archives of Canada