THE FORGOTTEN BATTLE OF THE HOME FRONT: FEMALE POETRY OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

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Introduction

The year 2018 marks the 100th birthday of The First World War’s Armistice. One hundred years have passed since the fields of Flanders and France were not only red with growing poppies, but also with blood shed by thousands of soldiers. My interest in the Great War started at a young age, as my parents would regularly take me and my little sister to Ypres to visit the Menin gate and the Flanders Fields museum, and to graveyards in the surrounding areas, such as Tyne Cot Cemetery in Passchendaele and the German graveyard in Vladslo. These trips left a lasting impression on me that was intensified in secondary school when we analysed a few war poems by Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon and John McRae in English class. I was intrigued by the way these poets were able to capture the monstrosity of war in a way that it still resonated with the readers decades later. When deciding on a theme for my dissertation, it did not take me a long time to realise that war poetry of World War 1 would be a topic that I would enjoy investigating very much. The fact that I am able to write my dissertation exactly one hundred years after the war ended also played into this decision, as I consider it a great privilege to be able to do so.

Upon deciding to investigate World War 1 poetry, the options were still very much open as there were so many directions that I could go in. I soon realised, however, that the poems that I had read in class and the things that I had seen when visiting graveyards and museums, had all been focused on the male experience. I found it striking that the experiences of the other half of the population were seemingly completely erased, which is when the idea to write about female poetry started to grow. To further verify this observance, I would often perform a quick test on relatives and friends, as I would ask them to name a few war poets. Every time they were able to do so, the names that came up were all male. This was quite striking to me, and made me realise that female poetry of World War 1 simply does not exist in our heads. Knowing that this was unjust in the 21st century, I knew for sure that I wanted to give these forgotten women their voice back.

To delve into this world that was unknown to me, I decided to work with Catherine Reilly’s anthology called Scars Upon my Heart: Women’s Poetry and Verse of the First World War, as it was the first anthology that focused on poetry by women alone. It was only published in 1981, meaning that for over sixty years, no one had had the ambition to collect poems written by women. Her anthology was an eye-opener, as the collection of poems was so varied that many
different stances towards war were unveiled, as opposed to the homogenous way in which women of World War 1 are often remembered, if they are ever thought about at all.

My dissertation consists of 6 chapters, in which I investigate World War 1 women’s thoughts on war by looking at their poetry collected in *Scars Upon My Heart*. In the first two chapters, however, I do not address their poetry yet, but instead reconstruct the England that they lived in. Chapter 1 is meant to free World War 1 women of the stereotypes they are remembered for. Two main images come to mind when thinking about women during the First World War. On the one hand, the period is seen as a liberating time in which women took over masculine jobs while their male counterparts were away at war. It is however untrue to label these women as liberated, for it does not take in account the difficulties that they were faced with in the testing days of war. Presenting them as emancipated women could not be further from the truth. On the other hand, the unflattering custom of handing out white feathers is also remembered as being female betrayal on a large scale during the First World War. Patriotic women would hand out white feathers to men who had not enlisted and in doing so, they branded them as cowards. This image, too, must be nuanced, as the myth has taken on much bigger proportions than there ever were women who took part in this public shaming. These two stereotypes combined construct an image of women that is false. The emancipation myth and the white feather narrative make women look as if they regarded war as a positive time in which they were freed while at the same time shaming men for not enlisting. This does not do justice to women’s reality during World War 1, and chapter 1 thus nuances this cliché image.

The second chapter is crucial as it introduces some important conventions in Great Britain that were dominant during World War 1. Knowing about these conventions helps to understand the war poetry that women wrote. There are three different fields of customs that I present that will be discussed in depth from chapter three to five. The first of these conventions is the fact that during the war, the Georgian tradition was dominant when writing poetry. This poetics was traditional in nature, as it was a continuation of the romanticism during the Victorian era. Georgian poetry focused on pastoral images and favoured a national identity. In many poems in *Scars Upon My Heart*, these Georgian ideas can be found. The second important aspect of British culture during the war was the country’s Christianity. As war was a testing time, people started praying again, for it brought solace and helped to accept war’s atrocities. As will be shown, many women would
address God or Christ in their poetry. In addition to the Georgian tradition and Christianity, a third aspect of wartime England was its stiff upper lip attitude, something that Brits are still known for today. This custom demanded that everyone concealed their true emotions, and thus prevented their lip from trembling. Showing feelings was frowned upon, as it was a sign of instability. In *Scars Upon My Heart*, poems addressing this convention can be found as well. The second chapter thus functions as an introduction for the three next chapters, as poems sporting these conventions will be discussed in depth.

In the third chapter, the Georgian tradition is illustrated with many poems. Firstly, the nature references that are so typical for Georgian poetry are discussed, as they are a regular occurrence in war poetry by women. These rural images are used in various ways, as many poems use nature imagery to indicate that time is passing by, while others use it to contrast the pre-war landscape with the distorted countryside during the war itself. Next to this, flowers and budding nature are also used to prettify death, as comparing soldiers to flowers is much easier to endure than the truth. Secondly, another aspect that often returns, is to glorify soldiers by comparing them to knights. This fits into the romanticizing qualities of Georgian literature, for war is portrayed as a quest and soldiers as heroic adventurers. The third aspect that is typically Georgian, as it plays into the patriotic idea, is to regard the sacrifices made by the soldiers as glorious. This gloriousness is thematized in a lot of poems in two different ways. On the one hand, female poets often decide to show their gratitude towards the dying soldiers by addressing the Unknown Soldier and in doing so, thanking everyone who made the big sacrifice. On the other hand, many poems glorifying death were pro-war propaganda that urged men to enlist to receive this glory. Not all poetry was as positive about the Georgian ideals, however, as many voices can be heard that protested its values. Helen Hamilton is an important figure, because she shows that not all women were swooned by the idea of soldiers being knights. Next to her poetry discussing the knightly ideal, the fact that only men were allowed to enlist was also criticized in a number of poems. The endless mutilation and killing of young men was of course also a theme in female poetry as well. Thus, chapter 3 tries to give a complete picture of how Georgian imagery was used in poetry, but also shows how those values are not appreciated by everyone.

The fourth chapter deals with Christian imagery that can be found in war poetry written by women. At first, the restoration of faith will be discussed, for the country saw a great return to
Christianity when war broke out. Many poems are prayers to God, as He helps the soldiers to ascend to heaven. Two comparisons are often made in this poetry that is religious in nature, as women tend to compare the sacrifice made by soldiers to Christ’s Crucifixion, while also comparing themselves to Mary. Next to these poems that are positive towards religion, other feelings can also be found in *Scars Upon My Heart*, as many women could not understand how God could allow this war and the pain that came with it. In chapter 4, we thus see a very varied stance towards religion, as many women voiced their gratitude, while others were angry with God.

The fifth chapter discusses the stoicism of Great Britain during the war. Two different types of poems can be distinguished when it comes to this custom, as there are poems that explicitly thematize the stiff upper lip attitude and voice an opinion on it, while other poems give the custom away because of the wording that is used in the poem, implicitly showing the stoic mask that had to be worn at all times.

Finally, the last chapter shows reasons that could explain why poetry by women of the First World War is so little known today. Paul Fussell’s influential anthology that was published in 1975 has constructed the modern war canon. Unfortunately, his anthology focuses on the warfare experience and leaves no room for poetry by women. Next to this, poetry by women is not discussed in secondary schools, with the only mention of a female poet being Jessie Pope, whose reputation is not great. Thirdly, several investigations have pointed out that there was a subconscious sex war between the two sexes, as men could not accept how the world had changed during their absence, which led to feelings of anger and the decision to completely ignore female poetry immediately after World War 1.

In this dissertation, I discuss women’s poetry in a thematical way. The Georgian tradition, Christianity, and the stiff upper lip attitude are three aspects of British culture that had a huge influence on wartime poetry by women, as nearly every poem in *Scars Upon My Heart* can be discussed in one of these three chapters. In doing so, varied stances on war will be unveiled, as both poems in favour of war as anti-war poems will be discussed. It is my goal to free women from the way they are perceived nowadays and to show that there is more to them than the clichés make believe. Underneath the stereotypes and the country’s conventions, there were real women with their own individual thoughts, fears and hopes.
Chapter 1: Stereotypes reconsidered

When thinking of World War 1, the images that come to mind are mostly inherent to a male perspective of war. We think primarily of the soldiers, the trenches and the mud, the survival and the shell shock that followed. The stories of the soldiers have exhaustively been told in the decades after the war and are imprinted in our collective memory. We have visited the graveyards and monuments that remember the dead, we have seen the documentaries and we have read the trench poetry. The story of the home front, however, contains many more question marks. The position that women had during World War 1 was very intricate, but until this day not well known. When their story line is taken into consideration, we often turn to stereotypical thinking. Through research, I have found that there are two dominant, yet simplifying images that have managed to survive the test of time. The first image that has stuck with us is women being liberated by the Great War. For the first time in modern history, women took on jobs previously deemed fit for men only, such as factory work. As several sources used below will demonstrate, it is often seen as a feminist example for later generations and the war era is considered as a golden emancipation period for women. The second image that has persisted, is that of the White Feather Brigade, a notorious group of women who handed out white feathers to men who remained at home instead of enlisting, branding them as cowards. Women who practiced this identified themselves as patriots, or jingoists.

Obviously, these two images are too simplistic and restricting; women of the First World War were not all the same persons with the same ideas. It is my aim to investigate their various emotions and stances towards the war. To do this, I must first free them from the restricting stereotypes of the emancipation myth and the White Feather Brigade that have marked them for too long.

1.1 The Emancipation Myth

The Great War is often seen as an era of great emancipation for women. This is mostly because of a simplified account of events that remains dominant until today: women took over men’s jobs while they were away at war, and thus destroyed the traditional gender ideology; women were no
longer trapped in the conventional opposition that existed pre-war and left domesticity to go and work in public places. It was the first time in modern history that women on a large scale could be seen doing work that was not traditionally regarded as feminine at that time, such as female tram inspectors, vets and chimney sweepers (Marwick: 1977). One could argue that this was an early sign of liberation reaching deep into British society, given backbone by the suffragette movement that was already standing strong pre-war, and the great advances in education and employment for women made in the decades leading up to the war (Robb, 2002: 36-37). However, seeing this time period as a culmination of female emancipation, is ignoring the struggles and backlash that these working women faced and does not take in account the unique situation that the country found itself in. In reality, British society was much more complex and resistant: it is a myth that women simply took on work previously deemed fit for men only and that this was wholeheartedly accepted because of the circumstances. The emancipation myth is too simple, and it is romanticized, as it ignores the resistance of the paternalistic society. There are various reasons that demonstrate why it was not self-evident to be a working woman at the time.

First of all, when war broke out, women were not seen as labour sources. When it became apparent in 1915 that there were severe labour shortages because of Lord Kitchener’s call for recruits, Great Britain did not make the logical turn towards women to fill in. Instead, the country turned to retired men, boys who were still in school and men who worked in non-essential sectors (DeGroot, 1996: 127). One could argue that this was mainly because the jobs were dangerous and that women should be protected from such places, but it also shows the misogynist time spirit of the Edwardian era, which saw women as fragile housewives only. Later, when dilution was pushed through, which made women able to work in factories, but at lower wages than men, unions stayed reluctant towards them (DeGroot, 1996: 130). Factory workers protested, claiming that if women could do the job, men would no longer be taken seriously (DeGroot, 1996: 131). Male spinners complained: “We shall have the employers saying there is nothing in spinning if a girl can do it, and will pay accordingly” (DeGroot, 1996: 131). This sense of hostility towards women was omnipresent and would remain during the whole war. It shows the complicated relationship that existed between the genders: women trying to provide now that their significant other was no longer able to, and men refusing to come to terms with this new situation, branding women as interlopers (DeGroot, 1996: 131).
Not only did these women face a lot of criticism, but George Robb also demonstrates that wartime England was an era in which the opposition between the sexes actually became stronger, instead of softening - as the emancipation myth would have us believe. He speaks of the era of “the manly man”: “the war, it was hoped, would regenerate manliness in men and femininity in women.” (Robb, 2002: 33). Men who did not go to war were seen as inferior, uncomplete men. An example that demonstrate this narrative can be seen in a popular wartime postcard entitled “He, She and It”, which depict a soldier and woman walking hand in hand, passing a dandy who is ignored by the young woman. “He” and “she” are the couple, who fit into the ideal image of the time, while “it” refers to the dandy, as he is not seen as a person but rather a thing, because “any man not in uniform isn’t really a man” (Robb, 2002: 34). It is thus quite obvious that British society was not interested in female emancipation, but was instead actively trying to steer both sexes into the right behaviour. Men were meant to be soldiers fighting for their country, and women were also forced in a certain direction: they were meant to engage in charity work or nursing (Robb, 2002: 35).

“The ideal British man and woman were most often embodied in the images of soldier and nurse – he representing the masculine virtues of bravery, strength, and courage, she the feminine ideals of compassion, nurturing and virtue” (Robb, 2002: 36). It becomes apparent when reading letters written during the Great War how deeply embedded this preferred behaviour of the sexes was. A soldier wrote to his fiancée:

Whatever you do, don’t go in Munitions or anything in that line – just fill a Woman’s position and remain a woman – don’t develop into one of those ‘things’ that are doing men’s work…. I want to return and find the same loveable little woman that I left behind – not a coarse thing more of a man than a woman – I love you because of your womanly little ways and nature, so don’t spoil yourself by carrying on with a man’s work – it’s not necessary. (Robb, 2002: 39).

By referring to female munition workers as “things”, the soldier’s stance towards working women becomes very clear. It is similar to the postcard that referred to the dandy as “it”: there is no space in society for women who are too masculine or men who are too feminine. The letter plays into the misogynist society of Great Britain during World War 1 and again underlines how women were not seen as work forces but as frail creatures who should either stay at home, or volunteer as nurses. However, the approval of women becoming nurses was interesting, because it was approved from a Christian point of view: in nursing, women represented the angels or Madonna’s (Robb, 2002: 41). This stance did not take into account that girls who volunteered as nurses
quickly lost their innocence because of the gruesome things they saw at the battlefield. It also did not take into consideration that nurses were actually much freer than they had ever been before as civilians.

Furthermore, Great Britain struggled a great deal with accepting the changes in society, as these changes were seen as a threat to the integrity of the old-fashioned home (Cohen, 2002: 3). The government thus tried to assure those opposed to women entering the work field by stating that the new status quo was only a temporary turn of events and that everything would return to normal when the war was ended (DeGroot, 1996: 138). At the same time, working women were given symbolic interpretations: the jobs that they did were presented as “essentially domestic”: a woman stoking fire in a factory was simply another version of keeping the fireplace at home lit, placing their public sphere occupations in a traditional light (Cohen, 2002: 4). It was evident that women would return to domesticity after Armistice and society would go back to the way it was before the war started. Effectively, when a woman stayed in service after Armistice, she was branded “a selfish bitch” for depriving a capable man of a job (DeGroot, 1996: 138). From the beginning of the war it was clear that what women did, was only temporary, caused by the extraordinary nature of events. When war was over, a return to the status quo of the pre-war society was executed immediately, depriving women from the freedom they had gained in the war years. We thus cannot speak of a golden era of emancipation, but rather of a temporary turn against Victorian notions that was quickly undone afterwards (DeGroot, 1996: 139).

Even though women gained a lot of working experience during the war, this development was only temporary and for a small group. To speak of a golden era is to simplify the circumstances and to dismiss in large part the backlash and conditions that working women faced. Not only were they judged and called interlopers for doing work that was deemed unfit for them, but at the same time essential to keep society going, they were also seen as objects rather than humans because they did not follow the convenient role pattern. In addition, the independence working women gained was undone after the war and many of them were forced to give up their jobs. The myth of the golden emancipation era furthermore ignores the anxiety and bereavement that these women permanently lived with, which are feelings that are very visible in their poetry.
1.2 The Jingo Woman

Next to the emancipation myth, there is another story regarding the female role in World War 1 that has managed to live on until today. It is the story of the notorious Jingo Woman and her white feather. A jingoist was someone who was in favour of the war and actively spread this opinion. The White Feather Brigade consisted of chauvinistic women who would hand out white feathers to men in civilian clothing to highlight their cowardice, without knowing their background story (Gullace, 1997: 179). A white feather was chosen as a symbol, as a white feather in the tail of a game bird indicated that it had come from inferior breeding, suggesting that men who did not enlist were lesser than other men, branding them as unmanly, which was a grave insult in Edwardian times (Gullace, 1997: 189).

The handing out of white feathers during the war became “an emblematic act of feminine betrayal” (Robb, 2002: 49), and it has remained on of the most persistent memories of the home front of World War 1 (Gullace, 1997: 179). This implies that women took part in the public shaming on a massive scale. It would indeed make sense for the practice of handing out white feathers to be remembered to this day if it was truly that common in wartime Britain, but this was not the case, as only a small percentage of women actually took part in the public shaming (Robb, 2002: 49). Various other reasons can be added as to why the White Feather Brigade has been given too much attention in post-war recounts when focusing on the female role. The handing out of white feathers is a given that has managed to live on until today and does not help to redeem the image of the First World War woman. It makes it seem as though the whole female population agreed to uphold the fiction of war’s nobility, but this was absolutely not the case.

First of all, the movement was not even started by women. Admiral Charles Penrose Fitzgerald started a campaign in Folkstone in which he asked 30 women to hand out white feathers to men who had not enlisted (Gullace, 1997: 178). The purpose of this was to “shame every young slacker found loafing about the Leas and to remind those deaf of indifferent to their country’s need” (Gullace, 1997: 178). The White Feather Brigade thus started as propaganda to recruit more men for Lord Kitchener’s army rather than as a protest group of women that formed spontaneously from a jingo mindset. This important detail is often overlooked.
The seed for the movement that was planted in Folkstone would spread across Britain, but it would not take on huge proportions. Despite its small scale, the movement would spark concern across the country. Although the Brigade started as war propaganda, it was met with a lot of criticism during the war itself already, including concerns by patriots. Many people thought it was an example of women “transgressing the norms of feminine behaviour” (White, 2009: 662). As mentioned above, wartime England was not comfortable with the idea of the female gender carrying out a man’s work. This discomfort is also applicable to the White Feather Brigade: it was unladylike and unnatural for women to feel so strongly about men not enlisting and taking matters into their own hands. In fact, many figures of authority spoke out publicly against the practice. Major Leonard Darwin stated that he was “very far from admiring those women who go up to young men in the street and abuse them for not enlisting, a proceeding which requires no courage on the woman's part, but merely a complete absence of modesty” (Gullace, 1997: 186). Recruiting sergeant Coulson Kemahan called White Feathers “ignorant, vulgar and impertinent” (Gullace, 1997: 186). Especially the aggressive way in which jingo women would approach their ‘victims’ was frowned upon: “Jack FG. If you are not in khaki by the 20th I shall cut you dead. Ethel M.” This personal column, dated July 8th 1915, was one of the many jingo messages that appeared in The Times during the war and gives a good example of the tone that was used to persuade (Beckett, 2008). Another aspect that sparked a lot of concern, was that women often handed out white feathers to men who tried to enlist, but were rejected, falsely branding them as cowards for not signing up (Beckett, 2008).

Furthermore, it is necessary to understand the reason why many women took part in the handing out of white feathers. They were simply guilt tripped into it. As mentioned above, propaganda was very influential during World War 1 in showing genders what their role should be. In London, a poster was printed that was addressed to “The Young Women of London” and shows clearly why a woman could easily feel persuaded into handing out a white feather. The lord mayor of the city speaks to them directly and in a way that cannot be misinterpreted:

“Its your 'Best Boy' wearing Khaki? ...If not don't YOU THINK he should be? If he does not think that you and your country are worth fighting for - do you think he is worthy of you? Don’t pity the girl who is alone - her young man is probably a soldier - fighting for her and her country -and for You. If your young man neglects his duty to his King and Country, the time may come when he will Neglect You. Think it over - then ask him to JOIN THE ARMY TO DAY!” (Gullace, 1997: 185).
This message does not only appeal to women, but also to men who are indirectly told to be responsible lovers. As mentioned before, both genders were constantly reminded through propaganda how they should behave in order to be virtuous. Another recruitment poster showed a man surrounded by his children, asking him the question: “Daddy, what did you do in the Great War?” (DeGroot, 1996: 50).

Lastly, it must be noted that it was not only women who took part in the shaming of the White Feather Brigade, although this fact is seemingly forgotten. Many men who were unable to go to war because of their age or because of a disability were frustrated to see young capable men not enlisted. A man of military age named Maurice C. Bolt received an anonymous card in the post with a white feather sewn on it, accusing him of ‘unmanly and cowardly behaviour’ because he stayed home while so many other young men were risking their lives. The card was signed with “A Retired Man, White Feather Brigade” (White, 2009: 664). There are various other instances that confirm a male participation in the campaign. These men saw it as their duty to the country to send out the anonymous cards, for if they could not serve the country themselves, at least they could push others to do so.

Nuancing the White Feather Brigade and its impact by no means ignores the painful experience that many men had to face because of jingo women handing out white feathers to them unjustly. It does however put the amount of women who took part in this practice into perspective. It was not the widely spread custom it is believed to be today, and it was met with a lot of criticism - albeit often for the wrong reasons - during the war itself already, despite being started as war propaganda.

1.3 Conclusion

When we think of World War I women, two stereotypes come to mind because of how vaguely we know their story. Branding the First World War era as a time of exceptional female liberation or as a period in which a tremendous amount of women handed out white feathers is looking at women too simplistically. There were of course women who felt a profound sense of liberation because of the war, and there were jingo women who believed it to be their duty to the country to hand out white feathers to men who had not enlisted, but these women are only exceptions when
looking at the broader picture. These exceptions should not dominate our collective memory. Women of World War 1 had a tremendous amount of feelings and opinions, and do not deserve to be reduced to simple stereotypes that do not reflect their experiences at all. Thankfully, women have left a legacy behind that we can consult. By looking at their poetry, we can get an insight into what life was really like for a wartime British woman.
Chapter 2: Great Britain and its World War 1 poetry

To look into the poetry written by British women during World War 1, it has proven insightful to look at some relevant conventions of the country first. Although it is impossible in this research to delve into British society in all its aspects, there are a few facets I would like to address, as they are helpful in trying to understand poems written in the wartime years and give background information to the selected poetry in the next chapters. When it comes to its poetry, Great Britain favoured the Georgian tradition, which sported pastoral and romantic features. As it was conventional in style, it was widely popular. Great Britain was also a very religious country at the time of World War 1, and Christian imagery is thus extensively used in a lot of wartime poetry. It was also a time of oppression, meaning that feelings had to be hidden at all times. As I have already mentioned, women were often told through propaganda and their environment what the proper way of behaviour was, which included not showing any emotions. This British stoicism is also thematized in poetry of *Scars Upon My Heart*. Three customs will thus be discussed in this chapter, which is an introduction to the next three chapters.

2.1 The Georgian tradition

To fully comprehend poetry written during the war, it is crucial to understand the poetic landscape of the time. People who had never picked up a pen before now felt the need to write down their experiences, and they did so in enormous numbers. Both civilians and soldiers wrote down their thoughts and sentiments on paper, which resulted in a large quantity of verse. *The Times* would at a certain point report receiving “as many as a hundred metrical essays in a single day” (Khan, 1988: 3). Some of this poetry is rather good, but a lot of it is of poor quality, as it was mostly used as a way to express the many emotions that writers were faced with because of war (Khan, 1988: 4).

It is understandable that these untrained writers would turn to a model that they were familiar with. The poetics that were in fashion in Great Britain when war broke out were rooted in the Georgian tradition. Today, this period of poetry is often mocked and used in a pejorative way, as it is known to exhaust clichés (Simon, 1969: 121). Georgian poets were in favour of a national
identity and would cultivate traditionalism and false simplicity, using the English countryside as setting for their verse (Costenoble, 2013).

Whereas these themes, in combination with the pompous language that was used, are seen today as old-fashioned and worn out, these were not the connotations the Georgian poetry had during the First World War. When Edward Marsh introduced the term by publishing five volumes of Georgian poetry between 1912 and 1922, the poetic techniques were seen as new, modern and energetic, making it “good poetry” (Costenoble: 2013: 39). Named after George V who reigned the country from 1910 until 1936, the Georgian tradition was essentially a modified continuation of the Victorian Romanticism that was sentimental and pastoral in nature (Khan, 1988: 5). The themes that seem now to be so cliché, lent themselves perfectly to describing wartime experiences as they stimulated a national awareness. The romantic aspect of Georgian literature was used as a way to celebrate the heroism of the soldiers who died for their county. The pastoral aspect of the poems was also significant, as the Georgian fashion for using the countryside as a setting stimulated patriotism; the peaceful landscapes of Great Britain were idealized in this poetry, justifying the mass sacrifice of young soldiers (Khan, 1988: 57). Georgian poetry helped the national cause in portraying England as a country worth dying for (Khan, 1988: 7). Due to its traditional and conservative nature and its favourable imagery, Georgian poetry was thus the logical idiom to turn to for civilians who had never written poetry before, which is a choice that is very apparent in many of the selected poems of chapter three.

2.2 Christianity

Another significant aspect of British society as a whole that must be taken in consideration when reading war poetry, is its Christianity. The importance of religion in war-time Britain cannot be underestimated, for the very name of the country implies religion: “If we don’t remember that in 1914 middle-class England was a Christian country, we lose the numinous glow behind the word ‘England’” (Kazantzis, 1981: xviii). Going to war for one’s country was fighting for God. This idea was confirmed by Britain’s Established Church, as they proved to be in favour of the conflict, declaring it a “Holy War”, which evokes imagery of the Crusades and imagery of the eternal struggle between the forces of good and those of evil, with Germany and its Kaiser as the obvious Antichrist (Khan, 1988: 37). There were no doubts about the justness of the cause, as the whole
nation believed that Great Britain functioned as the agent of a divine power. Poet Laureate Robert Bridges would write in *The Times*: “I hope that our people will see that it is primarily a holy war. It is manifestly a war declared between Christ and the Devil” (Khan, 1988: 39). In wartime Britain, religion and patriotism were very much intertwined, as the own country was idealized and presented as holy and thus worth dying for.

In pre-war years however, there had been a decline in religious observance, as Britain was amongst other things changing towards a more secular world view and going through social and industrial changes (Shaw, 2014). Religion was slowly losing its grip on the population, but when war arrived, attitudes changed. The First World War had a profound impact on religion, as it meant the rediscovery of faith for many: “Christ the Saviour, who had been near-forgotten in the soft days of peace, was being discovered anew by man in the testing days of war” (Khan, 1988: 42). Christianity was a big factor in keeping hopes up, even at the worst times. A popular rumour spread to uphold optimism was the story of an angel strengthening the British troops in Mons (DeGroot, 1996: 175). For many, turning to faith proved to be comforting, as it helped explain the brutality of the conflict. Only through suffering and pain, salvation could be obtained. Religion gave reason to the war, as opposed to the viewpoint of it being senseless manslaughter.

Christianity has always made use of imagery. During the war, Biblical iconography was merged with Victorian pseudo-medievalism, comparing soldiers to holy crusaders and their deaths to the sacrifice of Christ (Cohen, 2002: 24). In this comparison, women were however placed in a very passive position: “the knightly ideal leaves women on the side-lines, and the mythology of the Crucifixion represents woman as mater dolorosa or weeping daughter of Jerusalem.” (Cohen, 2002: 24). Women were reduced to passive bystanders, whose biggest accomplishment was the sacrifice of their menfolk. This passivism fits perfectly into the behaviour that was expected from women during the First World War, i.e. stoicism.

2.3 The stiff upper lip attitude

It is important to understand that Great Britain’s wartime society was a society which favoured the stiff upper lip tradition: both men and women were taught to hide their emotions, and thus to literally stop their lips from trembling. War posters were a popular form of propaganda and
showed what the role of both men and women was. One of the most famous war posters depicted a woman looking out the window with her children by her side, looking at men leaving for the battlefield. The poster was titled: “Women of Britain say - GO!” (Cohen, 2002: 6). It not only showed men what they ought to do, but it was also meant to show women what their ideal behaviour would look like: a woman was supposed to send off her loved ones without any resentment, not even something as small as a trembling lip, for men went off fighting for a noble cause. “The poster seems designed as much to convince women of what to say, as to convince men that they were saying it” (Cohen, 2002: 5). Even though showing emotion in public was discouraged with propaganda, the stiff upper lip was only part of a mask for both genders to uphold in public. The countless number of love poems and poems about loss and mourning are proof that the stoic exterior hid a lot of emotions.

2.4 Catherine Reilly’s anthology in the context of Georgian poetry

The pastoral and romantic, Christian and stoic themes that I have just presented are very visible in work by women of World War 1. In the next chapter I will subdivide these three aspects further into different motifs. In doing so, different stances and feelings towards war are unveiled. The poetry that I have used was selected from Catherine Reilly’s anthology Scars Upon My Heart: Women’s Poetry and Verse of the First World War.

As society returned to what was considered normal after the Armistice, anti-war poetry surfaced. Owen, Sassoon, Rosenberg and others would become part of our collective memory, while patriot poetry would be frowned upon and disappear into obscurity. However, it is striking how very absent female poetry is in our collective memory. It is therefore interesting to take a look at anthologies that were published during and after the first World War. On his own website, David Roberts (2016), the writer of Minds at War - The Poetry and Experience of the First World War, points out that anthologies published pre-1990s suffer from various shortcomings. They sometimes lack context, they are sometimes misrepresenting because of the choices made by the editor, but he also points out that these anthologies are often “men only” poem collections. The most popular anthology of British war poetry published during the war itself was The Muse in Arms, edited by E.B. Osborn. It was first published in 1917 and already had a second print run in
1918 due to its popularity. The poems in the anthology were very much all patriotic and focused on warfare in trenches, in the air and on the sea (Sillars, 2007: 33). Not so surprisingly, no women can be found in this anthology. In the years following the war, similar anthologies would be published that focus solely on the warfare experience.

When skipping a few decades, nothing seems improved. In the sixties, poetry of both World Wars became popular and sparked a new wave of anthologies (Kendall, 2007: 436). *Up the Line to Death: The War Poets 1914 – 1918*, published in 1964, was the best-known. It contains work by 72 poets. Yet again, despite being published nearly fifty years after the first world war had ended, none of them are female (Kendall, 2007: 436).

Roberts argues that there is one exception to his pre-1990s statement when it comes to gender, which is Catherine Reilly’s *Scars Upon My Heart*, an anthology that only contains work written by women. It appeared in 1981 and it was the very first English anthology to focus solely on female war poets, and it remains the only one to date.

I decided to use her anthology as a guide into female poetry for various reasons. Before *Scars Upon My Heart*, there had been entries of women in anthologies, but none of them were solely focused on them. Reilly carried out pioneering work, as she took on the challenge to dive into a large corpus of poems that were little known in order to select the ones that would make it to print, going as far as including a poem by C.A.L.T., a poet of whom we know nothing more than her initials. The collection of poetry that made it to the final version of *Scars Upon My Heart* is very varied, ranging from love to protest poems, from poems written by nurses to poems written by jingoists. This anthology saved obscure poetry from disappearing into oblivion, and because the collection is so varied, it helps to get rid of the limited view on war women.

Not all this poetry is of great quality, as lot of it is written in an amateurish fashion. This is, however, of secondary importance in this study, as the underlying message is what is most interesting. Many of these women would not have taken up the pen had it not been for the extraordinary situation they found themselves in. The different voices show complex and sensitive responses to the war and help to get away from the oversimplified wounded heroes versus white feathers cliche image. Their poetry was often written from the heart and deserves to be remembered.
Chapter 3: Georgian tradition: pastoral and romantic motifs

Catherine Reilly’s anthology was not only ground-breaking as it finally gave the attention to female poetry that it deserved, it also gives an insight into how women experienced the customs of wartime England. In the previous chapter, I have introduced three aspects that were dominant in wartime British society, namely Georgian poetry, the country’s Christianity and its stiff upper lip attitude. When reading the selected poems that made it into the anthology, it becomes very clear that these conventions are omnipresent in women’s war poetry.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Georgian poetry was very popular during the war, as it favoured romantic and pastoral motifs which lend themselves perfectly for writing war poetry. In Reilly’s anthology, various reoccurring themes demonstrate how deeply embedded Georgian customs were in the works of the selected female wartime poets. This chapter will be divided on the basis of those themes. Firstly, I will focus on the use of imagery regarding nature, the most obvious characteristic of the poetics that favours rural images. This nature imagery will be further subdivided into three reoccurring tendencies. Secondly, the patriotic aspect of Georgian literature is also very prominent in poetry that romanticizes war, which results on the one hand in poetry making use of heroic terms to describe soldiers, and on the other hand in poetry that dwells on the sacrifices made for the homeland. Nature imagery, comparing soldiers to heroes, and poetry celebrating the sacrifices made are three components of Georgian poetry, as they all play into the idea of an idealised country.

3.1 Nature imagery

When reading poetry of World War 1, one is struck by the density of the imagery. In following the conventions of Georgian poetry, this imagery is often pastoral and rural in nature. Even though both men and women used the Georgian fashion in writing their poetry, as it was the dominant poetry form at the time, Janet Montefiore points out that both sexes tended to use the pastoral motif in different ways in their poems. For male poets, nature was more often used as a setting to celebrate the beauty of the English countryside and in doing so, showing their readers that the motherland is worth fighting for. For female poets, however, the focus was much more on the pastoral as a means of coping with mourning and with death (Montefiore, 1993: 63). Especially
flowers were very popular with women when writing about their deceased loved ones. It was a logical decision to use flower imagery, as funerals would make use of flowers, too, to honour the dead. During war, women were often bereft from the possibility of having a funeral, and thus also of the solace it could bring. Instead, soldiers were often buried in unmarked graves overseas. In *Scars Upon My Heart*, it becomes visible that nature imagery in many poems functions as a way of coping with loss.

3.1.1 The passing of time

Three dominant tendencies can be distinguished in the poetry of *Scars Upon My Heart* regarding imagery of nature. A first recurring motif is nature being used to indicate that time is passing by. Often, the implied message is that the literary I may be able to enjoy nature again one day, but will never recover from the death of their loved one. Edith Nesbit makes use of this motif in “The Fields of Flanders”:

> The changing seasons will bring again
> The magic of Spring to our wood and plain:
> Though the Spring be so green as never was seen
> The crosses will still be black in the green.

(13-16)

The 20-line poem, written in 1915, makes use of an opposition between the green of spring and the black of the crosses, representing death. While spring might return to the country, its landscape will forever be scarred by what happened during the war. The landscape represents her state of mind: she might feel happiness again one day, but there will always be an empty spot in her heart, marking her for life. War scars both the country and the soul.

Another example of this tendency is “Perhaps”, by Vera Brittain. The poem is addressed to R.A.L., who died of wounds in France in 1915. In four stanzas, Brittain lists the characteristics of each season, with the last line of each stanza indicating that she cannot experience the joys of them anymore because of the death of her loved one. In the fifth stanza, we find her conclusion; although she may be able to experience the joys of the seasons again once upon a time, she is forever bereft of her “greatest joy”:
Perhaps the golden meadows at my feet
Will make the sunny hours of Spring seem gay
And I shall find the white May blossoms sweet,
Though You have passed away.

(…)
Perhaps some day I shall not shrink in pain
To see the passing of the dying year,
And listen to the Christmas songs again,
Although you cannot hear.

But, though kind Time may many joys renew,
There is one greatest joy I shall not know
Again, because my heart for loss of You
Was broken, long ago.
(5-8, 13-20)

The custom of writing about nature to indicate that time is passing by was very popular, as the metaphor is quite obvious and convenient for the many untrained writers to express their emotions. It also helped to accept the disappearance of their loved ones into memory, as the presence of blooming nature in general served as a coping mechanism (Montefiore, 1993: 63).

In Elizabeth Daryush’s “Flanders Fields”, the flowers in Flanders garland the graves of the soldiers, and “Poppies bright and rustling wheat / Are a desert to love’s feet” (11-12). For her, this has a solacing quality, as her lover is not alone, but surrounded by flowers. For many women, it was impossible to know where exactly their loved ones fell in action, and consequently, as Ada M. Harrison points out in “New Year, 1916,” “their grave-turf is not wet with tears” (3), but imagining that their grave was surrounded by flowers may have been a consolation, however small.

This consolation is also voiced in Isabel C. Clarke’s “Anniversary of the Great Retreat”, in which a year has passed since the troops’ withdrawal in 1914, indicated by the passing of seasons in the
poem. Many soldiers died and were buried in anonymous graves in France, and on their graves, nature has started to grow again:

Now a whole year has waxed and waned and whitened
Over the mounds that marked that grim advance;
The winter snows have lain, the spring flowers brightened,
On the beloved graves of Northern France.

The unnamed graves are far removed from the homeland, making it impossible to visit. The images of the graves being buried with snow first, and then with the spring flowers, is consoling, as they associate the deaths with peaceful nature that passes by regardless of human events. The soldiers are resting now, and despite being in graves “that bear no name” (8), they are surrounded by nonviolent nature. The poem also has a patriotic aspect, which is typical of Georgian poetry and is discussed at length in the next section. England is directly spoken to and asked to remember the boys who died for her: “Be their names written on thy roll of glory, / Who fought and perished in the Great Retreat!” (15-16). This helps the solacing aspect of the nature imagery. That time is passing by, does not mean that the dead are forgotten. They died for their country and made victory possible. Paring the death of loved ones on the one hand with nature growing on their graves, and on the other hand with their gift to the motherland helps the mourning process.

In Charlotte Mew’s “The Cenotaph”, the passing is so recent that nature has had no time yet to recover: “Not yet will those measureless field be green again / Where only yesterday the wild sweet blood of wonderful youth was shed” (1-2). In this poem, Mew suggests a cenotaph should be build surrounded by flowers that remind of better times:

And over the stairway, at the foot – oh! Here, leave desolate, passionate hands to spread
Violets, roses and laurel, with the small, sweet, twinkling country things
Speaking so wistfully of other Springs,
From the little gardens of little places where son or sweetheart was born and bred.
In splendid sleep, with a thousand brothers
to lovers – to mothers
Here, too, lies he:
Under the purple, the green, the red,
It is all young life: it must break some women’s hearts to see
Such a brave, gay coverlet to such a bed!
(11-23)

The flowers are meant to be a memory of other springs in which the men were still alive. By comparing the colourful flowers to a coverlet, the intention of the author becomes clear; the cenotaph functions as the equivalent of the unknown graves overseas. At the cenotaph, their lives can be celebrated and the flowers are seen as covering their bodies. It is a consoling image to think that one day the fields will be green again and that flowers will grow in remembrance of the many soldiers who died and are honoured at the cenotaph. Mew sees spring as a comforting time, as she also addresses its soothing powers in “May, 1915”. She simply writes: “Let us remember Spring will come again” (1), indicating that time will pass, which helps the healing. Choosing spring to represent time passing by makes sense, as nature wakes again in this season, bringing new life to earth. Spring is a hopeful season with positive connotations.

Sara Teasdale offers a similar feeling of hope in “There Will Come Soft Rains”, stating that one day, no one will be alive that remembers war and the pain it has caused:

There will come soft rains and the smell of ground,
And swallows calling with their shimmering sound;

And frogs in the pools singing at night,
And wild-plum trees in tremulous white

Robins will wear their feathery fire
Whistling their whims on a low fence-wire;

And not one will know of the war, not one
Will care at last when it is done.

Not one would mind, neither bird nor tree,
If mankind perished utterly;
And Spring herself, when she woke at dawn,  
Would scarcely know that we were gone.  

(1-12)

The sonnet not only works as an instance of solace, as it promises that the pain will one day be over; it also shows awareness of how meaningless human life and its sufferance is after all, while Spring, personified in this poem, will still return after everyone has long vanished. The poem is bittersweet when one reads it today, as no one could anticipate that World War 2 would follow only less than three decades later.

Indicating that time is passing by writing about nature was thus very popular, as the many poems in Scars Upon My Heart using this strategy show. It was a helpful technique in indicating how life was no longer experienced in the same way without a loved one, as being able to one day enjoy nature again was a possibility, but recovering from loss would never happen completely, as Edith Nesbit’s “Fields of Flanders” and Vera Brittain’s “Perhaps” show. It was also used as a coping mechanism: time passing by meant that flowers were growing on graves, which was comforting and helped the healing process, as the poetry by Elisabeth Daryush, Isabel C. Clarke and Charlotte Mew shows. Mew also made use of the mindset of trying to remember that whatever happens, spring would always come to the country again, which is yet another way of dealing with the atrocities of war. It was also used in Sara Teasdale’s “There Will Come Soft Rains”.

3.1.2 “Then” versus “now”

Linked to using nature to indicate that time is passing by, the poetry in Scars Upon My Heart shows that images borrowed from nature provide a useful way of demonstrating how much can change in a short span of time. A lot of women make use of a “then” versus “now” perspective in their poems to establish the changes that they have experienced because of war. Edith Nesbit portrays the opposition in “The Fields of Flanders”, comparing the fields of the previous year to those of 1915:

Last year the fields were all glad and gay  
With silver daisies and silver may;  
There were kingcups gold by the river’s edge
And primrose stars under every hedge.

This year the fields are trampled and brown,
The hedges are broken and beaten down,
And where the primroses used to grow
Are little black crosses set in a row.

The obvious opposition between the landscape in 1914 and in 1915 implicitly shows how good life used to be before World War I started, as the images associated with it are all positive. The idyllic picture is ruined one year later, as “The noble, fruitful, beautiful schemes / the tree of life with its fruit and bud, / Are trampled down in the mud and the blood” (10-12). Nesbit seemed to truly favour the “then” versus “now” perspective as she also used it in “Spring in War-time”, in which she compares the smell of the budding flowers to the same ones of the previous spring:

In the hedge the buds are new
By our wood the violets peer
Just like last year’s violets, too,
But they have no scent this year

Here again, we can see how mourning is paired to nature imagery. A new spring has come, but whereas the year before the violets smelled sweet, they have no smell to her this year, which represents her sorrow and inability to enjoy the new spring. This inability to enjoy nature reviving can also be found in “June, 1915”, by Charlotte Mew:

Who thinks of June’s first rose today?
Only some child, perhaps, with shining eyes and
rough bright hair will reach it down
in a green sunny lane, to us almost as far away
As are the fearless stars from these veiled lamps of town.
What’s little June to a great broken world with eyes gone dim
From too much looking on the face of grief, the face of dread?
(1-7)

The poem, starting with a rhetorical question, instantly opposes “today” to better times in which a rose would be received with joy. When a country is at war, however, joy for something as small as a rose can no longer be felt, as it simply cannot compensate for the grief that has been experienced.

In the post-war “Afterwards”, by Margaret Postgate Cole, we can see how much life changed because of the conflict, represented by the larches:

The people that were resigned said to me
– Peace will come and you will lie
Under the larches up in Sheer,
Sleeping,
And eating strawberries and cream and cakes
(…)
And peace came. And lying in Sheer
I look round at the corpses of the larches
Whom they slew to make pit-props
For mining the coal for the great armies.
(3-7, 11-14)

Whereas at first a picturesque image is evoked, the sweet pastoral image has vanished completely in the second part of the extract. The larches have been made into pit-props because they were needed for the army. In “the corpses of the larches,” the anthropomorphic representation of the trees further strengthens the bond between nature and the soldiers. The poem continues by describing the change in soldiers who survived war:

And think, a pit-prop cannot move in the wind,
Nor have red manes hanging in spring from its branches,
And sap making the warm air sweet.
Though you planted it out on the hill again it would be dead.
And if these years have made you into a pit-prop
What use is it to you? What use
To have your body lying here
In Sheer, underneath the larches?
(15-19, 23-25)

The poem is a critique on war. Comparing soldiers to larches proves to be an apt metaphor, for the larches were cut and made dead to be used in war, just like the soldiers who survived are traumatised by it. Their body may be present, but on the inside, there is a painful absence in that there is neither life nor soul. They have become pit-props themselves, and the picturesque image of relaxing in Sheer is completely destroyed. What remains intact, however, is the deeply romantic connection between human beings and nature. It is in nature that we discover our own identity, whether we are in full bloom or no longer live.

Another “then” versus “now” perspective can be seen in Aimee Byng Scott’s “July 1st, 1916”, which commemorates the battle of the Somme. An opposition of the landscape is portrayed to show how atrocious the battle was:

A soft grey mist
Poppies flamed brilliant where the woodlands bend
Or straggling in amongst the ripening corn

A shuddering night;
Flames, not of poppies, cleave the quivering air,
The corn is razed, the twisted trees are dead
(1-3, 7-9)

The straightforward comparison again evokes a peaceful image, with the poppies and corn as proof of the landscape’s undisturbed tranquillity. Hard sounds mark a turning point: “cleaving the quivering air” is dissonant to the calmness at the beginning of the poem and shows that the landscape is no longer at peace. The battle is compared to thunder and lightning, implicitly comparing war to a storm.
Comparing what nature used to be like to what it is at the moment of writing was thus a quite common motif, as it was an effective way of showing the difference in lifestyle before and after war. Nesbit and Mew, who often used nature imagery to indicate time passing by, made use of the “then” versus “now” perspective to show what life was like after being hit by war’s atrocities. Margaret Postgate Cole makes an apt comparison between soldiers and larches in “Afterwards”, indicating what war can do to a soul. Aimee Byng Scott portrays the landscape in France before and after the battle of the Somme, showing that war, just like a storm, can be immensely destructive. All these poets further develop the Georgian theme of human beings discovering their true state of being in nature, and thus remain deeply rooted in the romantic movement.

3.1.3 Prettifying death

Next to the two instances of nature imagery relating to the passing of time, a third tendency of using nature in wartime poetry tells us a lot about the era. Nature imagery in wartime poetry by women is very often used to censor the ugliness of death (Montefiore, 1993: 63). It is as though dead bodies and the monstrousness of war could not be named directly, but had to be prettified at all costs. There are numerous poems in Scars Upon My Heart that make use of this strategy.

In “London in War”, Helen Dircks compares soldiers with deadly wounds to “helpless petals on the stream” (2) that “Swirl by, / Or linger” (3-4) before disappearing forever. The comparison implies that some men die quickly while others survive with their wounds for a while before finally passing away. Opting to compare their deaths to petals on water softened reality and made coping easier. We know very little of Dircks – there are no biographical details about her in Scars Upon My Heart, as opposed to most poets – but from her other selected poem “After Bourlon Wood”, we can assume that she served as a WAAC, meaning that wounded soldiers would be something she was familiar with. The strategy to turn towards the consoling image of petals rather than describing the corpses in a realistic way was a logical decision to make for a wartime poet, as it fits into the Georgian tradition of prettifying, instead of shocking with realism.

Margaret Postgate Cole’s “Falling Leaves” is set in November 1915 and compares dying soldiers to “brown leaves dropping from their tree” (2). The analogy between the dying soldiers and the leaves in this poem is again a prettifying image, as the falling of leaves is a peaceful image which
mitigates the ugly truth of warfare. Not only does Postgate Cole avoid to address the dying soldiers directly in this way, choosing the metaphor of the falling leaves also shows the abnormality of war. Brown leaves are dead and thus meant to fall to the ground and rot, for this contributes to the circle of life. Falling soldiers, however, fall to the ground in the prime of their lives: “Slain by no wind of age or pestilence, / But in their beauty strewed / Like snowflakes falling on the Flemish clay” (10-12). The metaphor points out the unjustness of war, but does so in a prettifying way. The dying and rotting of the bodies are implied by using the metaphor of brown leaves, but the poem does not voice death and decay directly. “Falling Leaves” implicitly critiques the justness of war, making it an anti-war poem.

Another instance of censoring can be found in “Spring in War-Time”, by Edith Nesbit. The poem makes use of a lot of images associated with spring, before turning to a grave in the last line:

Presently red roses blown
Will make all the garden gay…
Not yet have the daisies grown
On your clay.
(13-16)

Not only does the absence of flowers indicate how recent the passing is, in deciding to refer to a grave as “your clay”, the materiality of the dead body is softened. In doing so, the beauty of the deceased is preserved, making the loss more bearable.

When one looks at female war poetry that deals with death, it becomes clear how imbedded pastoral and rural images are in describing what normally is very gruesome. The only instance that I could find in *Scars Upon My Heart* of a woman naming a dead body and what happens to it directly, is Elinor Jenkins’s “Dulce et Decorum?”:

A scholar’s brow, o’ershadowing valiant eyes,
Henceforth shall pleasure charnel-worms alone.
For we, that loved him, covered up his face,
And laid him in the sodden earth away,
And left him lying in that lonely place
To rot and moulder with the mouldering clay.

(7-12)

Even in this poem, which in the selected lines manifests itself as unusually blunt, a hawthorn is brought into the poem as well, weeping “softly over him, the whole night through / And made him of her tears a glimmering shroud” (15-16). Whereas the poem seemed to break the tradition of prettifying at first, it proves to be impossible to get away from comparing death to nature completely. As Montefiore points out, the female Georgian poets seem unable to be direct when it comes to death: “it is as if the conventions of Georgian poetry simply could not accommodate the vision of slaughter” (Montefiore, 1993: 66).

As “London at War” by Helen Dircks, “Falling Leaves” by Margaret Postgate Cole and “Spring in War-Time” by Edith Nesbit show, it is easier to write about dying men when their death is softened by using nature imagery. Petals replacing white faces, brown leaves representing the rotting bodies of the men on the battlefield and choosing to write about clay instead of about a corpse in the ground are all ways to cope with death’s ugliness. Even in the most straightforward poem by Elinor Jenkins, a hawthorn weeps over the grave of the deceased lover. Death is prettified, for it helps those who are left behind. Choosing to disguise reality with the imagery of flowers let women remember their loved ones as they were, and not as scattered bodies.

In Georgian poetry, it was thus very common to use nature metaphors when writing about war. This choice makes a lot of sense, because writing helped women come to terms with their losses, and as most female writers were amateurs, it is logical that they would choose nature to compare war’s toll to, as it is a straight-forward, simple and conventional metaphor that can be used for various ends.

3.2 Comparing soldiers to heroic knights

Another Georgian tendency that is often to be found in female poetry is comparing the soldiers to heroic knights or adventurers. These are, like nature, logical images to turn to, as their symbolism fits into the traditional heroic framework of men going on adventure and women being the waiting figures at home. In a lot of war poetry by women, a crusading mood can be found, as Britain
“regarded their country as a crusader – redressing all wrongs, and bringing freedom to oppressed nations” (Khan, 1988: 13).

In the first decades of the 20th century, comparing soldiers to knights inevitably has imperialistic and romantic connotations, and portrays them as virile and manly. This kind of imagery is too often used in a naïve way, as Marian Allen’s poetry shows. Her two poems included in Scars Upon My Heart describe war as an adventure. In “The Raiders”, “the spirit of Adventure calls ahead” (9) and in “The Wind on the Downs” she refuses to believe that her loved one has passed away, but believes instead that he is seeking “adventure in some other place” (8). Using this type of imagery seems to make war more acceptable, as it is seen as a typically “boys will be boys” activity. This naïve stance can be read as a lack of sense of reality, of a kind that later on would be famously and severely criticized by poets like Siegfried Sassoon, but it can be also be interpreted as a coping mechanism that makes the loss easier to bear.

A similar instance of attributing heroic characteristics to deceased men can be found in Millicent Sutherlands’s “One Night”, in which the Moon comforts her by stating that the dead soldiers are looking for new adventures in the afterlife:

    Sudden the air seemed filled with eager breath
    Of great Adventurers, released from death,

    And shaking blood from out their eyes and hair
    Shouting for further knowledge here and there.

    I lighten these across the treacherous Path
    To reach the garden of Life’s aftermath.
    (25-30)

Painting deceased men as “Adventurers”, on which emphasis is put because it is written with a capital letter, helps to accept their passing. In thinking of them as looking for new adventures, the image that they are simply travelling is evoked, which can make their deaths more acceptable – their ‘passing away’ becomes no more than a simple ‘passing by.’ Solace can also be found in the fact that the moon accompanied them in their search for new adventures in “Life’s aftermath”. 
In “In a Restaurant, 1917”, Eleanour Norton describes soldiers as “khaki knights” (3) and thus combines the typically green uniform of soldiers of World War 1 with the knightly ideal in just one line. Patriotic outbursts like this show an admiration for man and for his courage (Kazantzis, 1981: xxii). Comparing them to knights furthermore plays into the idea of war being a crusade in which there is no doubt that the English soldiers fight for the right cause. The fact that Christian knights committed atrocities, too, was completely ignored, as they were fighting on the right side of history.

However, not all poets are as naïve or uncritical in their descriptions of soldiers. One poet in Scars Upon My Heart decided to use the knightly ideal to show how blinded other women were by the heroic aspect of war. In “He went for a Soldier”, Ruth Comfort Mitchell introduces us to “Billy, the Soldier Boy”. The first stanza makes us believe that the poem is an elegy for the courageous Billy, but the tone soon shifts:

He marched away with a blithe young score of him
With the first volunteers,
Clear-eyed and clean and sound to the core of him,
Blushing under the cheers.
They were fine, new flags that swung a-flying there,
Oh, the pretty girls he glimpsed a-crying there,
Pelting him with pinks and with roses –
Billy, the Soldier Boy!

(…)
Soon he is one with the blinding smoke of it –
Volley and curse and groan:
Then he has done with the knightly joke of it –
It’s rending flesh and bone.
There are pain-crazed animals a-shrieking there
And a warm blood stench that is a-reeking there;
He fights like a rat in a corner –
Billy, the Soldier Boy!
(1-8, 17-24)
Whereas Billy is full of hope and excitement at the start of the poem, it becomes very clear by the third stanza that war is not as glorious as he had believed beforehand. Mitchell decided to express this disappointment by mocking the knightly ideal. In writing “the knightly joke” in the third stanza, she implicitly acknowledges the well-known and heroic framework so many took for granted, and which she then proves to be a lie by comparing Billy to a fighting rat. By repeating “Billy, the Soldier Boy” at the end of each stanza, the irony of the poem becomes even more obvious. Whereas Billy was regarded as heroic in the first stanza with the line cheering him on, as the poem progresses, the cheering becomes painful and the myth of war being glorious is dispelled. The bitter irony is strengthened by the use of sounds. “The blinding smoke of it is echoed in “the knightly joke of it,” in such a way that the assonance ironically connects “knightly” with “blinding,” and in the end-rhymes (smoke of it / joke of it), the dense smoke on the battlefield makes a mockery of chivalric ideals.

“Billy the Soldier Boy” is a rather remarkable poem, as it was already published in 1916 (Reilly, 1981: xxix). This is two years before Siegfried Sassoon would publish his “Glory of Women”, in which he lashed out against the female idealisation of heroes. Whereas Sassoon depicts all women as being blinded by glory, Ruth Comfort Mitchell’s poem proves that this generalizing is a lie. Unfortunately, her poem never reached the same level of fame as Sassoon’s condescending “Glory of Women”.

There is nothing heroic about war, and women – as well as men – who tried to portray it as an adventure were very naïve, as is shown in “He went for a Soldier”. However, many continued to believe that fighting in war was noble, without seeing war for what it truly was: horrific and haunting. Some poets take a stance directly against what they saw as a naïve attitude. Winifred M. Letts shows the gullibility of a mother in “The Deserter”:

But here’s the irony of life, –
His mother thinks he fought and fell
A hero, foremost in the strife.
So she goes proudly; to the strife
Her best, her hero son she gave.
O well for her she does not know
He lies in a deserter’s grave.
(26-32)

When reading the whole poem, it becomes clear that her son was a deserter for running away from the enemy as he was too frightened to face them. For this, he eventually was shot by “an English bullet in his heart” (24). His mother is, however, blissfully unaware of the events and seeing her son as a hero helps her to accept his death. It would be cruel to take this solace away from her, especially as Letts shows sympathy for the soldier herself, because she realises that war is not heroic at all, but rather a horrible and frightening experience:

He could not face the German guns
And so he turned and ran away.
Just that – he turned and ran away,
But who can judge him, you or I?
(3-6)

When seeing war as an adventure that confirms the manliness of the soldiers, the ugly side of it all is too easily overlooked. By comparing soldiers to knights or heroes, the attention is focused solely on soldier’s courageousness. This motif portrays war as if it is just a game played by children pretending to be knights. It is simply too naïve and does no justice to the men who fought. The poems by Ruth Comfort Mitchell and Winifred M. Letts show how not all women were tricked into thinking so, but that many realised that the portrayal did not reflect reality.

3.3 Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori

As soldiers are compared to knights in Georgian poetry, the quest that they go on is glorified as well. The fighting is romanticised, for the soldiers die for their country. Patriotism was a very strong feeling during World War 1 and it is thematized in a lot of poems. The gloriousness of sacrifice for the country can be found in two different ways in Scars Upon My Heart. Some women chose to commemorate the Unknown Soldier and in doing so, thanking all soldiers who died for their country, while others used poetry as propaganda to urge more boys to go fight for Great Britain.
3.3.1 Commemorating the Unknown Soldier

“The Victory is ours because you died”, the closing line of Isabel C. Clarke’s “Anniversary of the Great Retreat”, immediately shows us this dominant image in wartime poetry. Pairing loss of life to victory of the country was very popular and its success was twofold: on the one hand it again worked as a coping mechanism to readers who had lost a loved one, for their death was not in vain, and on the other hand it showed the patriotic aspect, as the profound love for the motherland was expressed. There are numerous poems in the anthology that sport this idea. In “The Lost Army”, Margery Lawrence thanks sixteen officers and 250 men who have disappeared for their sacrifice. “We may not hear of their valour, their death or their glory / Nay! They were ours – and they died for their country” (12-13).

It often happens that these poems expressing gratitude are quite general, instead of being about a particular soldier, showing that the poets not only mourn the deaths of their loved ones, but weep for the massive losses of England. In “Casualty”, Winifred M. Letts thanks a certain John Delaney of the Rifles, who has been shot. This name is picked randomly, as he is “a name seen on a list” (17) and “a man we never knew” (2). This is however of no importance, as he serves as an example for the many men who died anonymously. It would be easy to simply forget about those soldiers, as they are “all unknown and all unmissed” (18), but this attitude would be disgraceful. The message of the poem becomes very clear in the closing line: “Yet he died for you and me” (20). These soldiers must be remembered as they are the very reason that she is alive and able to compose her poem.

The same message can be found when looking at Muriel Stuart’s entry in *Scars Upon My Heart*, with the patriotic intent already visible in the title: “Forgotten Dead, I Salute You”. In the poem we meet a fictional soldier who was alive the year before but is now dead and already forgotten. This is shameful, as he made the greatest sacrifice for his country:

The great, sad sacrifice was made
For strangers; this forgotten dead
Went out into the night alone.
There was his body broken for you,
There was his blood divinely shed
That in the earth lie lost and dim.
Eat, drink and often as you do,
For whom he died, remember him.
(39-48)

The soldier has been given a Christ-like status in these lines, indicating how selfless he was in giving his body and blood for the salvation of human kind. The imperative used shows that it is thus crucial that he be remembered. Readers must realise that that soldier is the very reason that they can read the poem. This is one of the poems in *Scars Upon My Heart* that compares soldiers to Christ. I will discuss this motif in greater detail in the next chapter.

Poetry in which soldiers are commemorated show a great awareness of the mass slaughter and proves that the predicament and psychology of World War 1 women were in fact much more intricate than what conventions make us believe until this day. Not only did women mourn the loss of their loved ones, they also mourned the deaths of the unknown soldiers. Remembering them seemed to be crucial, as these anonymous soldiers were the very reason that England and the home front were safe. Expressing gratitude towards them also seems to be penance in a way, for women themselves were too often powerlessly watching from the side-line. This sentiment of atonement becomes very visible when looking at May O’Rourke’s “The Minority: 1917”, a poem that admonishes a woman who seemingly cares more about curling her lashes and painting her nails than she does about the sacrifices made:

O Dead! Who went to die
To save her light blue eyes from dreadful scenes,
To keep her dainty feet from broken ways,
Her youth from Hell – now see her as she preens
Bright thro’ the weary days,

Tinkling her silly mirth against the dread
Calm of those lives who listen for dear feet
That will not come again.

– Ah! Fool! you tread

No mere commercial street,
But ground made consecrate by their spilt lives
Who stood but yesterday where now you stand
And died; or grope in darkness; fret in gyves,
Or lack their good right hand

(…)

– And you are hued
Gay, as a painted flower,
Filling our days with foolishness and noise
And wooing Love with all your careful arts,
Forgetting quite the thousand, thousand boys
Who gave you their pierced hearts!
(5-18, 22-27)

O’Rourke puts an ungrateful woman on the spot in this poem that mocks her own sex, as she describes the woman in a pejorative way that makes use of features that are typically seen as female: her obsession with appearance, her “light blue eyes” and “dainty feet”, and her resemblance to a “painted flower”. It is not a poem that portrays the woman in a positive light, but instead presents her as a short-sighted and self-obsessed creature. The “thousand boys” are, however, praised for their sacrifice. Stating that they gave her “their pierced hearts” in the last line, is a strong image, used to let the woman open her eyes. Their sacrifice must be remembered by all, as S. Gertrude Ford writes in “The Tenth Armistice Day”, in which she pleads to keep bringing flowers to memorials when war is over: “And yet bring flowers and heap them, all this day, / On the high Cenotaph, memorial-wise, / So to commemorate their sacrifice” (15-17).

Writing poetry about an anonymous soldier is meant to thank all soldiers for their service. All soldiers must be remembered, for all of them are the reason that these poets are alive and well. This message can be found in the poems by Isabel C. Clarke, Margery Lawrence, Winifred M. Letts, Muriel Stuart and S. Gertrude Ford. May O’Rourke’s “The Minority: 1917” has a different approach, for she attacks women who do not realise that this great sacrifice was made for them. To these women, it is important that everyone commemorates all soldiers who fought, which shows an awareness of the mass slaughter. These poems might have also functioned as penance, for women stayed at home while men were murdered on the battlefield.
3.3.2 Propaganda

The gloriousness of sacrifice was, needless to say, also used by jingoists. The notorious Jessie Pope cheers men on to enlist by posing rhetorical questions in “The Call”. The questions are meant to make men decide which side of history they want to be on, as she establishes an opposition between the cowards who do not enlist, and the brave “laddies” who do:

Who’s going out to win?
And who wants to save his skin –
Do you, my laddie?
(…)
Who’s keen on getting fit,
Who means to show his grit,
And who’d rather wait a bit –
Would you, my laddie?
Who’ll earn the Empire’s thanks –
Will you, my laddie?
(…)
Who’ll stand and bite his thumbs –
Will you, my laddie?
(6-8, 13-18, 23-24)

The poem is one long instance of pro-war propaganda. This makes sense, as it was published in The Daily Mail in 1914, which was a paper in favour of war (Khan, 1988: 19). The rhetorical questions throughout the poem are meant to make men uncomfortable about not enlisting.

Because of propaganda of the kind found in “The Call” many men were indeed driven to volunteer. In Helen Parry Eden’s “A Volunteer” we meet a man who did so. He did, however, not enlist out of a patriotic sentiment to fight for his country, but rather because he did not want to be judged after the war had ended:

He had not ventured for a nation’s spoils.
So had he sighted for England in her toils
Of greed, was’t like his pulse would beat less blithe
To see the Teuton shells on Rotherlite
(…) Why had he sought the struggle and its pain?
Lest little girls with linked hands in the lane
Should look ‘You did not shield us!’ as they wended
Across his window when the war was ended.
(5-8, 11-14)

In the poem, Helen Parry Eden paints a realistic picture of why many men enlisted. It was not because they felt so immensely patriotic and wanted to make the greatest sacrifice for their country, but because they did not want to be confronted with the humiliation of being seen as cowards. The reasoning behind enlisting thus mocks the title of the poem. The soldier did not go to war as “A Volunteer”; instead he felt pressured to do so because of propaganda and patriots.

In the anthology there are also instances to be found of women writing from a male perspective. One of the poems is Emily Orr’s pro-war “Recruit from the Slums”. It is a typical patriotic poem, as children “of the city slum” (2) realise how much their country means to them, despite their weak social position. The end lines of the poem are so embedded in the pastoral motif that it becomes almost comical:

We thought life cruel, and England cold;
But our bones are made from the English mould,
And when all is said, she’s our mother old
And we creep to her breast at the end.
(20-23)

England is personified in this stanza and becomes literally the recruits’ mother. It is a nationalistic-minded rendering of soldiers’ experience and portrays it as the greatest good to die for one’s country. It is interesting to see how Orr turns to the male perspective when writing poetry that idealises the country. As mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, Georgian imagery that praises the motherland was more often used by men, whereas women typically used it to express mourning. By writing from a male perspective, this gender division is overcome.
Some women thus used the gloriousness of sacrifice as a means to get more men to enlist. Jessie Pope does so by posing rhetorical questions that urge men to be on the right side of history. Helen Parry Eden shows how this strategy worked in “A Volunteer”, as men enlisted to avoid jingoists’ scorn. Emily Orr wrote a patriotic poem to prove that even for the lower classes, England was a great country worth dying for.

3.4 Scepticism towards glorification

So far, I have only presented Ruth Comfort Mitchell and Winifred M. Letts as being sceptical about the knightly ideal. However, it would be misleading to only include these two poets as having a critical stance towards war. In fact, *Scars Upon My Heart* features many poems criticising the justness of war and seeing through the patriotic lie. As Montefiore (1993) points out, very few go anywhere as far as Rosenberg or Owen in their protest poetry, but it is remarkable that despite being governed by the conventions of Georgian poetry, they did voice protest at all.

3.4.1 Helen Hamilton’s poetry

Helen Hamilton addresses two kinds of people glorifying war. In “The Romancing poet”, she takes a similar stance to Wilfred Owen’s. She demands that poets who romanticize reality would stop doing so, as it is wholly inappropriate. In this poem, we can see that some women were very much aware of how war was glorified through poetry and propaganda and how they refused to take part in it:

If you have words –
Fit words I mean,
Not your usual stock-in-trade,
Of tags and clichés –
To hymn such greatness,
Use them.
But have you?
Anyone can babble.
If you must wax descriptive,
Do get the background right,
A little right!
(11-21)

In the fired-up poem, which voices the frustration about the way war is portrayed in romantic poetry, it becomes clear that many women would distance themselves from this approach. This undermines the cliché image of the simple-minded woman who was always in favour of war because of its gloriousness. Hamilton is very aware that prettifying the conflict does no justice to the soldiers:

Don’t make a pretty song about it!
It is an insult to the men,
Doomed to be crucified each day,
For us at home!
(26-29)

Helen Hamilton not only criticizes the glorification of war as presented by romantic poets, in “The Jingo-Woman” she turns her attention to a woman handing out white feathers. She voices her very obvious dislike for her by saying: “I’d like to wring your neck / I really would! / You make all women seem such duffers!” (17-19). It is a poem that opposes the women with common sense, who understand that some men are simply unable to enlist, to the “insulter” (4), who embarrasses the female population:

Do hold your tongue!
You shame us women.
Can’t you see it isn’t decent
To flout and goad men into doing,
What is not asked of you?
(56-60)

Hamilton seems to be very aware of the privileged position that women are in, which is a sentiment that can be found in a lot of poetry. To say that women simply accepted the division between the sexes, would be a lie.
Helen Hamilton was very aware of how war was prettified by both romantic poets and jingoists. Her poetry shows a lot of anger towards these two groups of people as she exposes the lies that were told to the people of Great Britain.

3.4.2 The gender opposition

In *Scars Upon My Heart*, we can also find several instances of women pointing out how unfair it is that they remain at home while their loved ones die in great numbers overseas. Nora Bomford expresses this exact idea in her protest poem “Drafts”:

O, damn the shibboleth
Of sex! God knowns we’ve equal personality.
Why should men face the dark while women stay
To live and laugh and meet the sun each day.
(17-20)

Bomford does not protest against war in this poem, but rather against the reason why women stay at home and men go to war. “Sex, nothing more” (11) determines one’s fate and she does not approve of this opposition. In the poem she voices her feeling of uselessness in war: “They go to God-knows-where, with songs of Blighty, / While I’m in bed, and ribbons in my nightie” (9-10). The female role in war is very restricted and this frustrates her, as her only task seems to be to “’Keep the homefires burning’” (8), which is unexciting. The poem may not take into account how atrocious war was and seems to rather focus on the adventurous that women miss out on, but it does show awareness of how arbitrary the choice between living and dying was made.

The feeling of uselessness that women experienced by waiting at home can be found in many other poems as well, such as Harriet Monroe’s “On the Porch” in which an army is “proudly swinging / Under gay flags” (18-19) in the rain, while she is protected in her own cocoon:

As I lie roofed in, screened in,
From the pattering rain,
The summer rain –
As I lie
Snug and dry,
And hear the birds complain
(1-6)

In Pauline Barrington’s “‘Education’”, the events of war are compared to those at home, represented by a woman sewing:

The rain is slipping, dripping down the street;
The day is grey as ashes on the hearth.
The children play with soldiers made of tin,
    While you sew
    Row after row.
(...)
The blood is slipping, dripping drop by drop:
The men are dying in the trenches’ mud.
The bullets search the quick among the dead.
    While you drift,
    The Gods sift.
(1-5, 11-15)

The woman in the poem is encouraged to realise what is going on, instead of being occupied with sewing only: “For Christ’s sake think!” (24). She wants to make women aware of how nothing more than gender determines one’s future and how unfair this is to men.

The sentiment that we find in “‘Education’” is completely different from what we find in jingo poetry, in which knitting is seen as something positive. In “Socks”, Jessie Pope also opposes warfare to household chores, but she portrays the woman’s part in a positive light. The poem consists of five stanza of four lines, each stanza showing the drifting thoughts of a woman while knitting, with the last line of each stanza bringing her focus back to knitting:

Shining pins that dart and click
In the fireside’s sheltered peace
Check the thoughts that cluster thick –
20 plain and then decrease.
He was brave – well so was I –
Keen and merry, but his lip
Quivered when he said good-bye
_Purl the seam-stitch, purl and slip._

Never used to living rough,
Lots of things he’d got to learn;
Wonder if he’s warm enough –
_Knit 2, catch 2, knit 1, turn._

(…)

Wonder if he’s fighting now,
What he’s done an’ where he’s been;
He’ll come out on top, somehow –
_Slip 1, knit 2, purl 14._

(1-12, 17-20)

In this poem, her anxiety about her loved one in the trenches is visible, but she comforts herself by concentrating on the familiar and predictable rituals of life. The regular patterns of her knitting bring reassurance. The warm socks that she is preparing are her contribution to his health and comfort and will help him come out on top in the end.

Many women found the position that they found themselves in unfair, as the poems by Nora Bomford, Harriet Monroe and Pauline Barrington display. They were placed in a passive position from which they could do very little, despite Pope trying to portray knitting socks as something helpful. This sense of uselessness was not cared about however, as S. Gertrude Ford pointed out in “A Fight to a Finish”: “Nobody asked what the women thought” (8).
3.4.3 Mutilation and death

In addition to criticizing the different positions of the sexes, many women also called attention to the pointless mutilations of soldiers, both physically and mentally. Winifred M. Letts’s “What Reward?” shows awareness of the many boys who were scarred for life and got no recognition for this at all:

You gave your life, boy,
And you gave a limb:
But he who gave his precious wits,
Say, what reward for him?
(…)
With brain bemused and dim,
O God, for such a sacrifice
Say, what reward for him?
(1-4, 10-12)

Letts worked as a nurse during the war and would often see these “mental cases” as later labelled by Owen (Khan, 1988: 125). These boys received no glory whatsoever, as they did not die for their country and had no obvious shortcomings. Just like we saw in Margaret Postgate Cole’s poem “Afterwards”, discussed above, these men are but shadows of their former selves after their war experience and would be better off dead.

In another of Margaret Postgate Cole’s poems, called “The Veteran”, we meet a man who was blinded by war and is portrayed as an experienced soldier:

We came upon him sitting in the sun,
Blinded by war, and left. And past the fence
There came young soldiers from the Hand and Flower,
Asking advice of his experience.
(1-4)

Contrasting the veteran sitting in the sun to the young soldiers asking for advice, makes it seem as though the veteran is not that young anymore. However, the last stanza tells us otherwise:
And we stood there, and watched him as he sat,  
Turning his sockets where they went away,  
Until it came to one of us to ask  
‘And you’re – how old?’  
   ‘Nineteen, the third of May.’  
(9-13)

The shock value of the last line points out how young lives are terribly scarred beyond repair by war. The abnormality of the boy’s mutilation can also be seen in the verse form. Had it not been for the last line, the poem would have been a sonnet. The sonnet is disturbed by the revelation of the soldier’s age in the thirteenth line, representing how his life was disturbed by war.

Unsurprisingly, the mass slaughter is also criticized in female poetry. May Herschel-Clarke’s three-line poem captures the pointlessness of a single life in a war:

   One minute we was laughin’, me an’ Ted,  
   The next, he lay beside me grinnin’ – dead.  
   ‘There’s nothin’ to report,’ the papers said.

The poem is written from a male perspective, evoking a first-hand experience. The informal language used and the three lines having the same end rhyme makes the poem look very simple, but its message is haunting as what happened to Ted is not just one instance, but something that happened constantly in war. A life is disposable during war and death can occur at all times.

Another poem from a male perspective criticizing the killing, is Maud Anna Bell’s “From a Trench”. This poem, too, shows how aware women were of the slaughtering of men while they were at home:

   Out here the dogs of war run loose,  
   Their wiper-in is Death;  
   Across the spoilt and battered fields  
   We hear their sobbing breath.  
   The fields where grew the living corn  
   Are heavy with our dead;  
   Yet still the fields at home are green
And I have heard it said:
That –
There are crocuses at Nottingham!
Wild crocuses at Nottingham!
Blue crocuses at Nottingham!
Though here the grass is red.
(…)
There are crocuses at Nottingham!
Bright crocuses at Nottingham!
Real crocuses at Nottingham!
Because we’re here in Hell.
(1-13, 36-39)

The poem shows the huge difference between the hell of the soldiers and the home front and its flowers. In opposing the crocuses to Hell, the poem shows at what cost life at home is preserved. The soldier from whose viewpoint the poem is written, recalls the crocuses at home in Nottingham in a nostalgic way. As Sheila Kaye-Smith pointed out in her 1918 novel Little England, many men who fought for England out of patriotic ideas, actually fought for “a little corner of ground which was England to them. (…) Before their dying eyes had risen not the vision of England’s glory, but just these fields.” (Khan, 1988: 58). For the soldier in this poem, the England that he is fighting for is Nottingham with its beautiful crocuses. Just like “Nothing to report” by Herschel-Clarke, the decision for a male perspective works well in showing that women were in fact very aware of the atrocities of war and deserve redemption of their too simplified remembrance.

The poetry by Winifred M. Letts, Margaret Postgate Cole, May Herschel-Clarke and Maud Anna Bell shows that women did not take the sacrifices for granted, but instead protested how young men were mutilated or killed at a young age. The gloriousness of war that was preached by patriots is mocked by them, as their poetry shows how war brings nothing more than pain.
Chapter 4: Christian motifs

After studying the images of Georgian poetry in the previous chapter, I will now turn my attention to the Christian imagery in *Scars Upon My Heart*. As pointed out in the second chapter, Christ had been nearly forgotten in the “soft days of peace” before World War 1, but the secularisation of England was put on hold when war came to the country (Khan, 1988: 42). Unsurprisingly, many war poems were religiously inspired, as war was a testing time in which many women would turn to faith to find solace. In this chapter, many instances of women praying to God through their poetry will be discussed. Two motifs that are frequently used in poetry evoking Christian imagery, are the motifs of comparing soldier’s sacrifice to Christ’s crucifixion, and linked to this, the identification of women with His mother Mary. These poems were all written by religious poets, but next to these poems filled with Christian imagery, another stance can be found as well in *Scars Upon My Heart*, as many women would reject the Church and faith in general. The last part of this chapter will address poetry that is sceptical towards war’s glory.

4.1 The restoration of faith

For many women, religion became the only reliability in uncertain times. Women constantly remained in uncertainty about the health and whereabouts of their loved ones, but as the Church portrayed war as holy, there was at least no doubt about the justness of their absence, or their dying. Many poems would praise sacrifice with religious imagery, as examples below will show. The country turning to religion in dark times of war is portrayed in Lucy Whitmell’s “Christ in Flanders”. This religious poem was published in *The Spectator* in 1915 and would be reprinted multiple times during the war because of its popularity, as well as being quoted by the Bishop of London in his sermons (Khan, 1988: 42-43). The poem, written from a male perspective, which probably helped its popularity, portrays a soldier’s shifting stance towards Christ during war:

> We had forgotten You, or very nearly –
> You did not seem to touch us very nearly –
> Of course we thought about You now and then;
> Especially in any time of trouble –
> We knew that You were good in time of trouble –
But we are very ordinary men. 

(...) 

You walked among us, and we did not see. 
Your feet were bleeding as You walked our pavements – 
How did we miss Your Footprints on our pavements? – 
Can there be other folk as blind as we? 

Now we remember; over here in Flanders – 
(It isn’t strange to think of You in Flanders) – 
This hideous warfare seems to make things clear. 
We never thought about You much in England – 
But now that we are far away from England – 
We have no doubts, we know that You are here. 

(...) 

Though we forgot You – You will not forget us – 
We feel so sure that You will not forget us – 
But stay with us until this dream is past. 
And so we ask for courage, strength, and pardon – 
Especially, I think, we ask for pardon – 
And that You’ll stand beside us to the last. 

(1-6, 15-24, 37-42) 

The soldier’s perspective reflects what the whole English nation is experiencing. Before war started, Christ was only thought about occasionally by most, when going to church or when going through a hard time. During war, however, the soldier in this poem realises that Christ was amongst them all along in England, and is with them too in Flanders. The poem serves as an apology to Christ for needing a war to realise this. The asking for pardon twice shows a dominant thinking pattern in wartime England that justified war from a Christian point of view. The pre-war mentality had to be cleansed and to do so, the sin of forgetting God had to be punished. With war being regarded as a divine punishment, it made sense that the sacrifice of soldiers was necessary to heal the sinful pre-war society that had left God behind (Khan, 1988: 40-41). The poem helped in
accepting the mass slaughter, for the deaths were not in vain, but instead helped the country to get back on the right, Christian track.

Because God is not portrayed as an evil deity in this explanation of war, but rather as trying to improve the country’s moral awareness, many poems in *Scars Upon My Heart* express Christian gratitude. In Alice Meynell’s “Summer in England, 1914”, the religiously inspired last stanza serves as consolation, for a reward is promised to the soldier who dies for his country and his friends:

Who said ‘No man hath greater love than this,  
To die to serve his friend’?  
So these have loved us all unto the end.  
Chide thou no more, O thou unsacrificed!  
The soldier dying dies upon a kiss,  
The very kiss of Christ.  
(25-30)

One can be extremely proud of these soldiers, as they are not only opposed to the “unsacrificed” who do not die for their country, but also because they are making salvation of the country possible. The kiss of Christ that these soldiers receive implies that they are going to heaven for doing so. Dying is portrayed in a positive light, for Christ is waiting for them.

This last stanza of the poem is very uplifting, especially when compared to the previous stanzas. The poem, which consists of five stanzas, paints the idyllic summer of 1914 in the first two stanzas, stating that it was a “Most happy year!” (7). In the third and fourth stanzas, however, war has come to the country and its atrocities penetrate the peacefulness of pastoral England: “And while this rose made round her cup, / The armies died convulsed” (13-14), indicating how times have changed, a motif that I have discussed in the previous chapter. In doing so, the poem reminds one of Edith Nesbit’s “The Fields of Flanders”, in which the fields of 1914 are compared to those of 1915 to criticize war. Without the fifth stanza in Meynell’s poem, this poem would have felt like a protest poem as well. However, the fifth stanza of “Summer in England, 1914” serves as a consoling stanza, for it offers a Christian justification for war. It shows that the men are not dying
in an unknown and unloved place, but are accompanied by Christ. The last stanza of the poem thus shows gratefulness towards Christ for standing by the soldiers when they die.

Another instance of gratitude regarding the dying of a soldier can be found in Agnes Grozier Herbertson’s “Seed-Merchant’s Son”. In the poem, we meet an observer who looks at a seed-merchant’s behaviour after he has lost his son in the war. The observer is full of pity towards the man, as his loss must be hard to bear:

The Seed-Merchant goes on his way:
I saw him out on his land today;
Old to have fathered so young a son,
And now the last glint of his youth is gone.

What could one say to him in his need?
Little there seemed to say indeed.

So still he was that the birds flew round
The grey of his head without a sound

Careless and tranquil in the air,
As if naught human were standing there.

Oh, never a soul could understand
Why he looked at the earth, and the seed in his hand,
As he had never before seen seed or sod:
I heard him murmur: ‘Thank God, thank God!’
(13-26)

To the onlooker, thanking God seems an illogical thing to do as (s)he cannot understand why the seed-merchant would be thankful after losing his only son. However, the last line serves as a turning point in the poem, as it reveals that the observer has projected feelings onto the seed-merchant that he did not necessarily experience. His standing still on the field with the birds flying around him is interpreted as mourning his loss by the on-looker, but that moment can be interpreted as the seed-merchant praying to God as well. The last two couplets are very telling, for
they change the whole outlook of the poem. It shows that there are multiple interpretations of the killing in war and that the seed-merchants can see the bigger picture as planned by God, as opposed to the onlooker. In the last couplet the seed-merchant looks at the ground with its seeds as if he had never seen it before, which the observer cannot understand. It is however a very symbolic scene, for the merchant realises that the seed indicates new life growing. In the Old Testament, the word ‘seed’ often refers to human offspring, in most cases a son. Like Abraham, he is “Old to have fathered a son”, but unlike Abraham, he has lost the young life that was so dear to him. However, the sacrifice made by his son was not in vain, but helps the world continue. He seems to be handling the loss of his son much better than the observer could imagine, for his faith helps him understand. The death of his son is shown in a new light. Next to death, there will always be resurrection, represented by the seed in this poem. For the seed-merchant it is logical to thank God for this circle of life.

Various poems would try to portray the mass slaughter in a positive light, as it was necessary to cleanse the sinful nation. In Lucy Whitmell’s “Christ in Flanders” we see how the country returns to Christianity and asks for pardon for abandoning Christ in the pre-war years. Alice Meynell knows that soldiers who die will be greeted by “the very kiss of Christ” and in “Seed-Merchant’s Son” by Agnes Grozier Herbertson, an old man thanks God, for he is grateful that the sacrifice of his only son contributes to the circle of life, that consists of dying and resurrection, represented by the seed.

4.2 Popular motifs

In Scars Upon My Heart, various religious poems can be found that make use of a comparison between a human being and a biblical figure. Soldiers dying on the battlefield would get Christian connotations by comparing their suffering to Christ’s Crucifixion. Women would feel a connection to Mary, as they took care of the soldiers, as Mary had taken care of Christ.

4.2.1 Comparing sacrifice to Christ’s Crucifixion

As I have discussed in the previous chapter, the sacrifice made by soldiers was often interpreted as being for the country. In many instances, however, the sacrifice was not only regarded as patriotic,
but had Christian connotations as well. Comparing a soldier’s sacrifice to the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ was a motif that was used frequently. This motif turned soldiers into martyrs who died for the sinful English society to purify it. The comparison to Christ was very explicit in some poems, as the previously discussed “Forgotten Dead, I Salute You” by Muriel Stuart already portrayed:

He gave, as Christ, the life he had –
The only life desired or known;
The great, sad sacrifice was made
For stranger; this forgotten dead
Went out into the night alone.
There was his body broken for you,
There was his blood divinely shed
That in the earth lie lost and dim.
Eat, drink and often as you do,
For whom he died, remember him.

(39-49)

The soldier must be remembered for his great sacrifice, and to do so, he is compared to Christ. Firstly by explicitly stating that he has given himself “as Christ”, and secondly by comparing his body and blood to the Holy Communion. Biblical iconography made a lot of sense for the home front, because on the one hand it turned soldiers in heroic, untouchable martyrs, which freed them from all charges of impiousness, and on the other it offered consolation (Khan, 1988: 40).

In the solacing “Unknown Warrior”, by Elizabeth Daryush, an unknown soldier is again compared to Christ, for he has a “heaven-born soul” (2) that must be slaughtered for the sinners on earth. This poem is comforting, as the soldier is given Christ-like qualities, implying that he did not truly die, but has obtained “unsought immortality” (14). Paying the fatal price is thus not only painful for those who are left behind, it is also glorious and something to be proud of, for Christ did it, too, to rid the world of sins.

In both Stuart’s “Forgotten Death, I Salute You” and Daryush’s “Unknown Warrior”, an anonymous soldier is chosen as subject, for he can represent all soldiers fighting in World War 1, basically rewarding them all with Christ-like virtues for their sacrifice.
Sacrifice is often mused upon by female poets. In “Love, 1916”, May Wedderburn Cannan tries to find the true definition of love:

One said to me, ‘Seek Love, for he is Joy
Called by another name.’
A Second said, ‘Seek Love, for he is Power
Which is called Fame.’
Last said a Third, ‘Seek Love, his name is Peace.’
I called him thrice,
And answer came, ‘Love now
Is christened Sacrifice.’

(1-8)

Three different people give three different answers to her question. Upon reflecting on these answers, Wedderburn Cannan gets a fourth answer from an unspecified voice in the closing lines, saying that “Love now / Is christened Sacrifice”. In the short poem, “Love” is personified, and by comparing it to sacrifice, having undergone the baptism of faith (“christened”), the poem gets a religious tone that evokes the sacrifice made by Christ. By stating that “Love” is equal to “Sacrifice”, Wedderburn Cannan shows her deep adoration for the dying soldiers. At the same time, it implicitly links their deaths to Christ’s Crucifixion. This assumption is made stronger by the religious answer coming out of the blue, as if it is God himself who speaks and gives her the religious definition of love.

4.2.2 Mater dolorosa

When comparing soldiers to Christ, it comes as no surprise that women would feel connected to His mother. Often, women would thus write poetry in which they compare themselves to Mary. This makes sense, as many poets were mothers themselves. What is striking, however, is that women who served as nurses or canteen workers would often make use of a mother-perspective as well, which can be explained by the unique position they found themselves in. They became mother figures to wounded or hungry soldiers, for they took care of them in their hardest moments.
In “An Incident”, by Mary H. J. Henderson, the Christian imagery is very clear throughout the whole poem. In the first stanza, the wounds of a soldier are compared to Christ’s Crucifixion, as they are located on his hands. The situation is very serious, as Henderson goes as far as stating that the boy’s wounds are even worse than those of Christ:

He was just a boy, as I could see,
For he sat in the tent there close by me.
I held the lamp with its flickering light,
And felt the hot tears blur my sight
As the doctor took the blood-stained bands
From both his brave, shell-shattered hands –
His boy hands, wounded more pitifully
Than Thine, O Christ, on Calvary.
(1-8)

It is clear from the beginning that the literary I in this poem is a nurse, and in the next stanza we see a shift from comparing the soldier to Christ, to comparing herself to Mary, as the position that she finds herself in with the soldier is very symbolic:

I was making tea in the tent where they,
The wounded, came in their agony;
And the boy turned when his wounds were dressed,
Held up his face like a child at the breast,
Turned and held his tired face up,
For he could not hold the spoon or cup,
And I fed him. . . . Mary, Mother of God,
All women tread where thy feet have trod.
(9-16)

Whereas the stanza starts with an ordinary task, she soon finds herself in a position that makes her the caretaker of the soldier. The Mary-analogy is anticipated by comparing him to a “child at the breast”, but the realization of the symbolism comes very suddenly to her, represented by the four dots. She realises that in that very moment she is acting as his mother, because of her position, but
next to this, she also shows strong awareness of the fact that this is a sentiment felt by many women. As mentioned above, a lot of poetry would present all men fighting as Christ for their sacrifice, and this poem shows that women at home felt responsible in taking care of them, as if these men were their own children. This is shown in the last stanza, in which the image shifts from that particular soldier back to the battlefield. Whereas in the first stanza the soldier is compared to Christ and in the second stanza the nurse is compared to Mary, both images come together in the last stanza:

And still on the battlefield of pain
Christ is stretched on His Cross again;
And the Son of God in agony hangs,
Womanhood striving to ease His pangs.
For each son of a man is a son divine,
Not just to the mother who calls him ‘mine’;
As he stretches out his stricken hand,
Wounded to death for the Mother Land.
(17-24)

The last stanza focusses on the battlefield, but instead of writing about the many soldiers who are dying, Henderson unifies them all into Christ on His Cross, indicating that their sacrifice is analogous. If a woman cares for “His pangs”, she cares for all soldiers, and essentially becomes their mother. This sense of motherhood is strengthened by calling the soldier a young boy and a child throughout the poem and by choosing to refer to England as the Mother Land in the very last line of the poem. The sacrifices become mutual: the soldier sacrifices himself for the land of the mother, and the mother for the home country of the soldier.

In “Y.M.C.A”, by the no further identified C.A.L.T., we see a similar instance of how a canteen worker is regarded as a mother figure by the soldiers:

Some linger for a friendly chat,
Some call me ‘Mother’ – think of that!
And often, at the magic word,
My vision grows a little blurred –
The crowd in khaki disappears,
I see them through a mist of years:
I see them in a thousand prams –
A thousand mothers’ little lambs.

(15-22)

We know nothing about C.A.L.T., but it is easy to assume that the poem is autobiographical and that she was of the right age to be the mother of many soldiers. When they call her “Mother”, she gets a vision of the soldiers being children in prams, indicating again their difference in age and how she feels responsible as a caretaker of them. When she compares them to lambs in the next line, the vision gets Christian connotations, for Christ is the Lamb of God, slaughtered to take away sin from the world. Choosing to compare soldiers to “little lambs”, thus not only indicates that the soldiers are young and require care, evoking a mother and son relationship, but it also evokes the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ, indicating that these lambs will be slaughtered soon too. The canteen worker is very aware of their sacrifice:

And when the Camp is wrapped in sleep,
Ere wearily to bed I creep,
Oh Tommy Atkins! Brave and true –
I humbly thank my God for you.

(41-44)

“Tommy Atkins” or simply “Tommy”, was the name used to refer to soldiers of the British Army. C.A.L.T. is thus not addressing a single soldier, but is calling all of them “brave and true”. She is thankful for their service and wants to voice this gratitude, but this proves to be harder than expected:

Two simple words are all I say,
I’ve saved them up for many a day –
Just ‘thank you’, but they mean a lot!
Accept them, for they’re all I’ve got
To tell my gratitude, they come
Straight from my heart. On Monday, some
Five hundred times I say them o’er,
And I wish it were five hundred more!
(33-40)

The canteen worker is used to saying “thank you” all day on Mondays because of her job, but to her these words mean more than just receiving the soldier’s tickets for food. She hopes that this is clear to the soldiers, but never explicitly thanks them for their service. This plays into the idea of Great-Britain being a society that favoured the stiff upper lip attitude, a custom that I will discuss in the next chapter. This poem shows how the stiff upper lip prevents her from saying how she feels. This does not, however, mean that she is ungrateful or unaware of their sacrifice, for she lies thinking about it at night. A stiff appearance does not reflect inner emotions. Expressing emotions was improper, and poems like “Y.M.C.A.” show that women were simply respecting conventions, but struggled with this as they certainly hid a lot thoughts and feelings underneath their stoic mask.

Comparing soldiers to Christ was an image that came naturally, for both the soldiers and Christ suffered enormously. Muriel Stuart and Elizabeth Daryush compare anonymous soldiers to Christ to indicate how virtuous all the fighting men are. May Wedderburn Cannan voices adoration for the soldiers as well. Mary H. J. Henderson who worked as a nurse and C.A.L.T. who was a canteen worker see themselves as mother figures to the soldiers, with Henderson comparing herself explicitly to Mary, while C.A.L.T. describes the soldiers as little lambs to whom she is a mother figure.

4.3 Protest poetry

When I stated previously that the country made a return to Christianity, it must be taken in account that this did not mean that everyone agreed with the slaughter because of its Christian justification. There are many protest poems to be found in Scars Upon My Heart, either criticizing religion as a whole, or criticizing God’s ways. They reflect how religion actually divided the country instead of uniting it, as “for every person who, in extremis, was drawn to prayer, there were others for whom the whole experience would lead to the rejection of Church, clergy and faith alike” (Barrett, 2014: 174).
Probably the best example of criticism towards the Church can be found in “The Parson’s Job” by Madeline Ida Bedford. The poem portrays how a parson visits a widow after her husband has died in war. She does not take this visit well:

What do you want
Coming to this ‘ere ‘ell?
Ain’t it enough to know he’s dead,
Killed by a bit o’ German lead?
What! – the Lord means well?

I guess ye’ are daft!
He’s one o’ the good’uns, Jim;
Nature’s gentleman, rough but true.
He didn’t know ‘ow to sin,
But – what is that to you?

You make me sick.
Why should he die,
When forger Wright wins a V.C.
And criminal Kelly catches a spy?
That don’t spell Justice to me.

Get out, or I’ll strike you down.
I’m carrying his kid.
Do you call that fair?
(…)
I hate your religion;
I don’t want gold;
I only want my man.
(1-18, 26-28)

A parson would often come see a widow to condole her and to offer some nice Christian words. This widow is, however, not interested to hear what he has to say. This is portrayed by not once letting him speak in this poem. Instead, the widow delivers a monologue in which her anger is
very visible. The monologue is written in a casual dialect and full of rhetorical questions, both of these features making the situation more lifelike. The widow is infuriated with the parson and with God, for she does not find his ways fair; her Jim was a “gentleman” whereas a certain Wright and Kelly get rewarded for criminal activities. The poem calls out the unjustness of war to which religion cannot bring justification or solace. This is very clear by her calling the parson “daft”, indicating that she has lost all respect for the clergy. The church and God have failed this woman and the poem is a critique of both war and religion, as it paints the parson as a man who cannot provide satisfying answers.

Much more often, however, God Himself is addressed in poetry by women. In Ruth Comfort Mitchell’s previously discussed “He went for a Soldier”, the last stanza breaks with the previous stanzas that read as a parody on a knight’s heroic songs. After portraying what happened to “Billy, the Soldier Boy”, Comfort Mitchell shifts her focus to God, leaving all mockery behind:

How much longer, O Lord, shall we bear it all?
How many more red years?
Story it and glory it and share it all,
In seas of blood and tears?
They are braggart attitudes we’ve worn so long;
They are tinsel platitudes we’ve sworn so long –
We who have turned the Devil’s Grindstone,
Borne with the hell called War!
(41-48)

In this last stanza, it becomes clear that the parody used in the previous stanzas is a form of self-protection, for the endless killing is taking its toll on the whole population. Using rhetorical questions helps the dramatic effect of the sudden seriousness of the poem, but it also voices the inability to do something about the killing, for God is the one causing the red years.

Posing rhetorical questions to voice powerlessness is a technique that is also used in Mary Gabrielle Collins’ “Women at Munition Making”. The poem focuses on how women should be mothers, but instead are making munitions to kill the enemy:
They must take place in defacing and destroying the natural body
Which, certainly during this dispensation
Is the shrine of the spirit.
O God!
Throughout the ages we have seen,
Again and again
Men by Thee created
Cancelling each other.
And we have marvelled at the seeming annihilation
Of Thy work.
But this goes further,
Taints the fountain head,
Mounts like a poison to the Creator’s very heart.
O God!
Must It anew be sacrificed on earth?
(18-32)

Despite the poem being heavily focused on the right role for women, which according to Collins primarily exists of being a mother, the poem does criticize God’s plan. Not only are men killing each other regularly throughout history, the fact that women are involved now, too, is too much to bear. The poem makes it clear that the poet is religious, but disapproves of what is happening during war as not only men are killed but women assist in the killing.

In Margaret Sackville’s “Sacrament”, we meet a group of people who are desperate for the war to come to an end as they have had enough of the endless slaughtering:

Before the Altar of the world in flower
Upon whose steps thy creatures kneel in line,
We do beseech Thee in this wild Spring hour,
Grant us, O Lord, Thy wine. But not this wine.
(…)
Thy little children clinging about Thy knees,
Cry: “Grant us, Lord, Thy Bread!” But not this bread.
This wine of awful sacrifice outpoured;
This bread of life – of human lives.
(1-4, 7-10)

At first, a naïve reading could argue that people long again for good wine and good bread, something that war has deprived them of, but as the comparison is made explicit in the following lines, it becomes clear that the wine represents the blood of the soldiers and the bread represents their bodies. By comparing soldiers to the Holy Communion, a relationship to Christ is yet again established, but this poem has no solacing quality, as opposed to the previous poems linking soldiers to Christ. Instead, the poem is a plea to God to stop the killing and return to actual wine and bread during mass, instead of slaughtering so many young men whose flesh is “crumbled away like bread” (19) and whose blood is “poured out like wine, like wine” (20). Whereas comparing Christ’s blood to wine and His body to bread has a prettifying quality about it, portraying these soldier’s body as bread being crumbled and their blood as being spilled wine, the poem ironizes the holy rite. The protest against the endless killing is made stronger by the repetitions and by making use of words as “outpoured” (9), “overflowing” (11) and “sodden and wasted everywhere, everywhere” (15), which shows how lives are spilled on a vast scale. In doing so, the poem criticizes war and how the Church portrays it as a Holy Crusade.

In “The Dancers”, Edith Sitwell makes use of irony as well to criticize war. The poem is captioned as being written “During a Great Battle, 1916”, which seems odd to begin with, as dancers usually have positive connotations, making it inappropriate to write about during a battle. Yet, that is exactly what Sitwell does:

The floors are slippery with blood:
The world gyrates too. God is good
That while His wind blows out the light
For those who hourly die for us –
We still can dance, each night.
(1-5)

God is portrayed as blowing out the candles of life of the many soldiers fighting, but at the same time making the world go on and allowing the people in the poem to dance, making him a good
deity. However, the scene is macabre, for the floors “are slippery with blood” and “the music has grown numb with death” (7). The atmosphere in the poem is one of total madness, for the dancers are aware of the atrocities of war, yet plead to “swell our music, make it loud / That we may dance, – may dance” (10-11). The poem evokes a danse macabre, for the dancing of the living civilians is blended with scenes from the dying men on the battlefield. In the last stanza, the situation escalates, as the dancers are compared to “the dull blind carrion-fly”, indicating that they are not thinking at all, but are frantically dancing, as it is the only joy left in a world that is so horrifying. Even God has left the world behind, for He has gone “mad from the horror of the light”. In a world abandoned by God, the concluding line of the poem shows the only thing left to do for civilians: “we dance, we dance, each night” (16). War is thus heavily criticized in this ironic poem, for the soldiers are dying and the home front has gone completely insane.

Finally, in “Despair”, Olive E. Lindsay uses a unique point of view to indicate that war is unholy. The poem is written from a soldier’s perspective who sees himself split into two parts: his religious soul and his earthly body:

```
Half of me died at Bapaume,
And the rest of me is a log:
For my soul was in the other half;
And the half that is here is a clog
(…) 
The best of me died at Bapaume
When the world went up in fire,
And the soul that was mine deserted
And left me, a thing in the mire
(…) 
If half of you went at Bapaume,
And with it your soul went too,
That soul has laid as a sacrifice
The half that was torn from you.
At the feet of the One who Himself has given,
Laid all that a man can give;
```
And then will return to the other half
And show it how to live.

(1-4, 9-12, 17-24)

The soldier’s earthly part is speaking. This part is nothing more than a “log”, for his soul has left him “when the world went up in fire”. The poem thus argues that the battlefield is not a place for religion, as it is only the soul that can experience Christianity. If the ability to experience religion is gone on the battlefield, this means that the soldiers on it are nothing more than mindless bodies fighting each other. In this poem, Lindsay thus criticizes the portrayal of war as holy, for the soldiers are simply “a thing in the mire”. They are unable to pray, for the ability to pray is in the soul, which has abandoned the soldiers. War is unholy, as God is not present on the battlefield. The endless killing must thus come to an end, for the explication given by the Church is not reflecting reality.

Not all women simply accepted the fact that war was necessary to become a pure, Christian country again, as the many protest poems aimed towards God show. Madeline Ida Bedford portrays how unfair God is in deciding who should die, for the widow’s husband died despite being virtuous, while criminals were saved. The widow is angry with God and has lost her faith. Ruth Comfort Mitchell and Margaret Sackville address God in their poems and tell Him that they have had enough of the endless killing. Gabrielle Collins criticizes God as well, because he has involved women, too, in World War 1, which she cannot understand. Edith Sitwell shows how the world has gone completely mad because of war and is convinced that God has abandoned them. Olive E. Lindsay criticizes war by stating that there is no God on the battlefield. These poems are important, as they show that not all women accepted the slaughtering as necessary to heal the country’s sins.
Chapter 5: Stoicism: the stiff upper lip attitude

After focussing on Georgian and Christian motifs in the last two chapters, in which it appeared that many women followed conventions, while others defied them, a third aspect of British society that has proven to be very dominant in the war years is the stiff upper lip attitude. Stoicism had been established as a traditional feature of British society for centuries. Among the oldest examples is that of Francis Drake finishing his bowl game unperturbed whilst the Spanish Armada is approached and needs to be defeated by his good care. He lived in a century in which the Roman writer Seneca’s influence became stronger than ever before in England. Already in Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516), priests are chosen among the stoics, and are already being mocked. England increasingly saw itself as a nation in which both men and women needed to be discouraged from showing their emotions to others, literally preventing their lips from trembling. A stoic exterior was favoured at all times.

5.1 Awareness of stoicism

In Rose Macaulay’s “Picnic” the suppressed emotions are very obvious. The poem, dating from July 1917, portrays an opposition between the home front going on a picnic in England and the soldiers fighting overseas. The poem starts by describing the beautiful nature in which the picnic takes place:

We lay and ate sweet hurt-berries
In the bracken of Hurt Wood.
Like a quire of singers singing low
The dark pines stood.

Behind us climbed the Surrey hills,
Wild, wild in greenery;
At our feet the downs of Sussex broke
To an unseen sea.
And life was bound in a still ring
Drowsy, and quiet, and sweet…

(1-10)

Despite the poem portraying the picturesque countryside of England as sweet and quiet, it stands out that the group is eating “hurt-berries” while being surrounded by “dark pines”, indicating that the calm and beautiful landscape is actually hiding something much darker than the Georgian pastoral would suggest. The fact that the place is called “Hurt Wood”, works very well, too in creating an anticipatory atmosphere. Halfway through the third stanza the underlying tension is explained, making an end to the picturesque description of the area:

When heavily up the south-east wind
The great guns beat.

We did not wince, we did not weep,
We did not curse or pray;
We drowsily heard, and someone said,
‘They sound clear today’.

We did not shake with pity and pain,
Or sicken and blanch white.
We said, ‘If the wind’s from over there
There’ll be rain tonight’.

(11-20)

It is revealed in these lines that the picnickers can hear the gunshots from where they are, indicating that the fighting is not even that far away, and yet the lives of the soldiers and the picnickers could not be further apart. The way in which the gun shots are dealt with, describes very accurately how the era responded to war’s sorrow. If one person had not made the remark that the guns sounded particularly clear that day, the sound of warfare would have been left completely unaddressed. Instead, the picnickers turn to talking about the weather, and in doing so they ignore the proximity of war and pretend that it is just a normal day. The writer is very aware of how odd this is, for she explains:
We are ringed all round by guarding walls,
So high, they shut the view.
Not all the guns that shatter the world
Can quite break through.

Oh, guns of France, oh, guns of France,
Be still, you crash in vain…
Heavily up the south wind throb
Dull dreams of pain,…

(…)
Oh, we’ll lie quite still, nor listen nor look,
While the earth’s bounds reel and shake,
Lest, battered too long, our walls and we
Should break… should break…

(37-44, 49-52)

In these lines, Macaulay offers an explanation for their stoic exterior. Not only was it good behaviour to show little emotion, it also served as a coping mechanism for this group. As the description of a calm landscape at the beginning of the poem hid the gunshots, the calm exterior of the women hides their fears. Their stoic behaviour is described as being a guarding wall, which they have built around themselves “lest we run / Mad from dreaming of naked fear” (34-35). Uncontrolled thoughts can lead to madness, so these women prefer not to think about the war at all: “the guns are muffled and far away, / Dreams within dreams” (27-28). This wall becomes a symbol of essential, insular Englishness, for it protects them from the outside world and functions as a cocoon in which they are safe from all harm. The stiff upper lip convention thus has consoling qualities, for if they did not behave in this way, they would be overwhelmed with painful emotions.

Whereas Macaulay’s poem tries to explain the stoic nature of the Brits as being a coping mechanism during war, Iris Tree is much more condemning for the custom in her untitled poem in *Scars Upon My Heart*. The poem protests against the killing of soldiers, and it also portrays the restricting character of the stiff upper lip mentality in two stanzas:
And we, the mourners, dare not wear
The black that folds our hearts in secrecy of pain,
But must don purple and bright standards bear,
Vermilion of our honour, a bloody train.

We dare not weep who must be brave in battle –
‘Another death – another day – another inch of land –
The dead are cheering and the ghost drums rattle’…
The dead are deaf and dumb and cannot understand…

(17-24)

The poem shows how far the exterior emotionlessness actually went: not only did women have to keep up a neutral expression, their mourning could not even be expressed by the clothes that they wore. Instead, they wore bright colours, upholding the illusion of war’s greatness. Propaganda portrayed war in a positive light and many men and women were gullible and believed the glorious stories. In this poem, the propaganda is shown by giving a positive twist to soldiers dying, for each death meant another inch of land won. The poet sees through this brainwashing, as she realises that the soldiers are dead and unable to be cheering for war’s progress. All that is left of the dead soldiers is “love” (26) and women should be able to voice their love for them without stoical restraint, instead of being suppressed by England’s conventions.

In Alys Fane Trotter’s “The Hospital Visitor”, which consists of two sonnets, we see a similar awareness of the custom. The woman in the poem is conditioned not to say anything too emotional when visiting friends in hospital:

When yesterday I went to see my friends
With cigarettes, and foolish odds and ends,
(Knowing they understand how well I know
That nothing I can do may make amends,
But that I must not grieve, or tell them so)
(4-8)

A lot is left unspoken, as everyone feels the sadness hanging in the air, but nobody addresses it. Just like she has brought “foolish odds and ends”, the conversation remains superficial. This
becomes especially clear when the visitor’s attention turns towards a young soldier who has lost a leg in the war, as instead of addressing this, he shows her a gift that he has received:

A pale-faced Iniskilling, just eighteen
Who’d fought two years; with eyes a little dim
Smiled up and showed me, there behind the screen
On the humped bandage that replaced a limb,
How someone had left him, where the leg had been
A tiny green glass pig to comfort him.
(9-14)

The lines show how the soldier is still a child who finds joy in a small gift, but it also shows how much indoctrination was involved in not talking about traumatic events such as losing a limb. Instead, soldiers tend to brush off their injuries, which Trotter identifies as the typical behaviour of men who have experienced war. The second sonnet of the poem is devoted to wounded soldiers in general:

These are the men who’ve learned to laugh at pain.
And if their lips have quivered when they spoke,
They’ve said brave words, or tried to make a joke.
Said it’s not worse than trenches in the rain,
Or pools of water on a chalky plain,
Or bitter cold from which you stiffly woke,
Or deep wet mud that left you hardly sane,
Or the tense wait for ‘Fritz’s master stroke’.
You seldom hear them talk of their ‘bad luck’,
And suffering has not spoiled their ready wit.
And oh! You’d hardly doubt their fighting pluck
When each new operation shows their grit,
Who never brags of blows for England struck,
But only yearn to ‘get about a bit’.
(15-28)
These men mask their horrible war experiences with humour, which is emphasized by the many comparisons in the poem. If their lip trembles now, it is not because of an inability to hide their emotions any longer, but because they say something brave or because of the joke they are trying to make. Trotter thus portrays these men as incredibly strong-natured and in doing so, voices admiration for them. The unconventional rhyming scheme of the sonnet, however, – ABBA ABAB CDC DCD – shows how unnatural the behaviour to not speak about experiences and emotions actually is. It is as if the rigid form of the sonnet is slightly disturbed. The poem ends with an understatement, as the soldiers hope to “get about a bit”, which is a very stoic reaction to the things they have experienced and have changed them, both physically and mentally.

These women wrote about how unnatural the stiff upper lip attitude was, which is striking, as it shows that they were very much aware of the custom, instead of being so used to stoicism that they did not even notice its restricting qualities. This can especially be seen in the poetry by Iris Tree and Alys Fane Trotter, as they criticize how they cannot talk freely. Rose Macaulay, on the other hand, is not as condemning for the stoicism, as her poem explains how the custom also has solacing qualities.

5.2 Stoicism in relationships

Not only women at home and soldiers surviving war were being suppressed in their emotions, the stoic behaviour went as far as making communication between lovers difficult as well. As mentioned before, a famous war poster was titled: “Women of Britain say: GO!”, which pushed both genders into a certain direction, without leaving space for open communication about what war could mean to a couple. There are three poems in Scars Upon My Heart that allude to this, whether the poets are aware of this or not.

The first poem is called “Lamplight” and was written by May Wedderburn Cannan in December 1916. It is a touching love poem in which a woman says goodbye to her lover. They planned “a great Empire” (11) and planned “to shake the world together” (1), but these precious plans came to an abrupt end because of war:

We shall never shake the world together, you and I,
For you gave your life away;
And I think my heart was broken by the war,
Since on a summer day
You took the road we never spoke of: you and I
Dreamed greatly of an Empire in those days;
You set your feet upon the Western ways
And have no need of fame –
There’s a scarlet cross on my breast, my Dear,
And a torn cross with your name.
(21-30)

Despite the poem showing that the couple was madly in love, and that the woman’s heart was broken because of the war, it does stand out that the couple never discussed the possibility of the soldier dying. “You took the road we never spoke of” indicates this, and it also provides insight on wartime relationships. The lovers felt inhibited in their conversation when it came to the risk of him dying and apparently did not discuss this possibility at all. This is very curious, especially when reading the poem today, but it shows the inability to be completely open with each other in wartime England, because of the stiff upper lip attitude.

This is not the only instance of a relationship in which death is not discussed. It can also be found in Eleanor Farjeon’s “Now that you too”. In this poem, we meet a woman whose lover will soon leave for the battlefield. She reminds herself constantly that she should not think of what can happen:

I must not strain the moments of our meeting
Striving each look, each accent, not to miss
Or question of our parting and our greeting,
Is this the last of all? Is this – or this?
(5-8)

And yet, discussing that this might be the last time that they see each other would be very logical, for it could give a sense of closure if her lover were to die. By indicating that she will not do this, a conversation about the possibility of death will not be started. Here again, we see a relationship in which talking about disaster seems to be impossible for the lovers.
Lastly, Lesbia Thanet’s “In time of War” shows how the propaganda of making war glorious has influenced a woman in the way she said goodbye to her lover. When he left, she saw an idealized version of him and send him off as a hero:

I dreamed (God pity babes at play)  
How I should love past all romance,  
And how to him beloved should say,  
As heroes’ women say, perchance,  
When the deep drums awake –  
‘Go forth: do gloriously for my dear sake.’
(1-6)

By saying goodbye to her lover in this way, she not only glorified war, but she also left no room to feel real emotion during his departure, being so sure that he would return a hero. Unfortunately, her lover did not return and it is only then that she realises that he was not a glorious knight on a chivalric adventure, but a real human being who she did not say goodbye to in a proper, emotional way that indicated how much she loved him:

But now I render, blind with fear,  
No lover made of dreams, but You,  
O You – so commonplace, so dear,  
So knit with all I am or do!  
Now, braver thought I lack:  
Only God bring you back – God bring you back!
(7-12)

By writing “You” with a capital letter, and directly after calling him “commonplace” in this stanza, she shows how she realises how perfect her lover actually was in his simplicity. Unfortunately, it is too late to tell him this personally, for he has passed away. The stoic exterior caused by the nation’s propaganda made their last contact stiff and impersonal, which she now deeply regrets.

In these poems, we can see how the serious topic of death was completely avoided. May Wedderburn Cannan’s poem mentions the “road we never spoke of”, which indicates that the
lovers never discussed the possibility of death. This shows that they were never completely open with each other, despite their love for each other. A similar message can be seen in Eleanor Farjeon’s “Now that you too”, as the woman knows that the possibility of death exists, but chooses not to mention it. Lesbia Thanet saw an idealised version of her lover when he left to go to war, which caused her to keep an stoic exterior, being so sure that he would return. The stiff upper lip attitude made open communication impossible for all these women.
Chapter 6: The mystery of absence in our collective memory

In the previous chapters, I have shown how deeply imbedded women’s poetry was in the traditions of Great Britain. In the third chapter we saw that many women made use of Georgian imagery, meaning that a lot of flower and nature references were made to write about loved ones, and that the sacrifices were glorified, as Georgian poetry tended to portray reality in a romanticised way. But next to this, instances can also be found of women seeing through the glorification and writing war poetry that protested the endless killing.

In the fourth chapter, I focused on Great Britain’s Christianity, which was of course a big theme in many poems as well, as the country became more religious again in the testing day of war. Comparisons of soldiers to Christ and mother figures to Mary helped to cope with loss and gave reason to war’s cruelty. God was, however, also questioned about why he would let this happen, with poetry going as far as pronouncing Him dead.

Finally, in the fifth chapter, the stiff upper lip attitude, which was a dominant way of behaviour in Great Britain, was discussed. This stoicism can also be found in war poetry by women, sometimes explicitly, which indicates that they were aware of the custom and would criticize it, but also implicitly, showing that the stiff upper lip influenced relationships between lovers and left important things unspoken.

The three chapters discussing these conventions show a great variety in stances towards war and should free women from the too-narrow minded ideas that have been following them for decades. However, these varied opinions have never been able to contest the stereotypes of World War 1 that portrayed women as enthusiastic about war, as the two dominant images in our minds are those of women handing out white feathers and of women being liberated. The only question that is thus left to ask is why women have always been portrayed in this simplistic, pro-war way, without room for nuance. I will discuss three reasons that can help explain this curiosity, which are the influential anthology by Paul Fussell, Jessie Pope’s legacy and a subconscious post-war battle between the sexes.
6.1 Paul Fussell’s anthology

When war came to an end, it made sense that the stories of the men who survived were told in the decades that followed. In doing so, the glorification of sacrifice was finally replaced with realism. As the truth about war was unveiled, women’s experiences were pushed to the side, as their suffering had only been mental, without seeing gruesome things. This is of course too simplified, as nurses took care of wounded soldiers and thus faced terrible scenes, but this was not taken in account at all. The tendency to ignore female experiences can also be seen in the published poetry in the decades that followed World War 1. As discussed, many anthologies would simply ignore the existence of poetry by women, and this stance remained dominant in the seventies when the World War 1 canon was formed as we know it today. The focus was mainly on the trench experience, and one man in particular is often regarded as being responsible for this decision that marks war poetry until this day:

“[Paul] Fussell's immensely influential book on the First World War, The Great War and Modern Memory, is a study of the War's impact on British culture. Its focus is almost exclusively that of the combatant: the experience of the First World War is synonymous with the experience of the trenches in Fussell's analysis.” (Campbell, 1999: 206).

Paul Fussell’s decision to focus on the experience of trenches alone and regarding this as the only experience of war that mattered, automatically meant that the stories of women were ignored, for they took no physical part in the fighting. The book that appeared in 1975 became incredibly popular, receiving several prices and even being voted to the 75th place in the top 100 non-fiction books of the 20th century (Modern Library, 1999). The anthology thus had a tremendous influence on how war poetry was regarded from the mid-seventies on.

Despite the praise that The Great War and Modern Memory has received, it is important to understand the fundamental flaw in the way Fussell portrayed war, as individual female stories were completely ignored, instead presenting them as a homogenous group: “if civilians reacted to the war in any terms other than wholesale enthusiasm, we do not know it from Fussell” (Campbell, 1999: 206). It is remarkable that one man’s ideas regarding war poetry were so important in the construction of a war canon, but it also showed how deeply misogynistic Great-Britain still was several decades after World War 1:
“That women have no voice in mainstream World War literary criticism is due to the exclusive primacy it grants to a mythical direct access to experience and presence. To put this in psychoanalytic terms, combat is phallic: it allows one to speak while those without the phallus must stay silent.” (Campbell, 1999: 209).

The one condition to be accepted as a war poet, was to have experienced the actual warfare. As only men were allowed to enlist, only men were thus seen as war poets, helping Sassoon, Owen and Blunden to rise to fame. Fussell’s anthology was incredibly popular and would remain to be dominant until feminist voices would rise that questioned this bias. Catherine Reilly’s *Scars Upon My Heart* was the first anthology that raised awareness of the gap in history and made “unavoidable the observation that the typical English First World War poet was not a combatant but a civilian” (Campbell, 1999: 205). Because of her anthology, war poetry criticism was reopened to give attention to female poetry (Campbell, 1999: 205). She took the first steps into releasing women from the lies they were remembered with, giving their poetry the same attention that men had had for decades, instead of minimizing their war stories:

“Any explanation of women’s poetry that privileges battlefield experience is very unconvincing, because it effectively depends on trashing the experiences of anxiety and bereavement, which women’s war poems are full of, as somehow less authentic, less historical, than having your legs blown off.” (Montefiore, 1993: 54).

It was only with Reilly’s anthology in 1981, followed by works by Khan, Murdoch, Marsland and Tylee that the canon has started to be reformed (Campbell, 1999: 207). Modern definitions of war poetry include female writing, but despite the effort of these feminist studies, it is clear to see that war poetry by women is still much lesser known than their male counterpart, indicating that Fussell’s point of view regarding war poetry is still dominant today.

6.2 The poet students love to hate

Next to Fussell’s vision on poetry that remains dominant until today, despite the attempt to reform the canon, another factor that also contributes to the ignorance of female poetry, is the way in which World War 1 poetry is being taught in secondary schools in the present years. The portrayal
as it is now gives a distorted view on how men and women experienced war, as mostly only poetry by men is discussed in schools, while women’s varied stories are still neglected.

In discussing male poetry during World War 1, a shift from idealisation to realism is visible throughout the years. “I went to war with Rupert Brooke and came home with Siegfried Sassoon” was a popular saying during the war which indicated that soldiers went overseas to find glory, but found despair instead (Khan, 1988: 9). During the war itself, however, it was mostly pro-war poetry that would be published in newspapers, as these poems played into the country’s pro-war propaganda, while protest poetry was little published and would only become popular after the war had ended, finally making an end to the patriotic lie (Robb, 2002: 151). Fussell’s anthology, along with others, further helped in building the reputation of Owen and Sassoon in modern day England, while most patriotic work became forgotten as it no longer fitted into the time spirit. In secondary schools, pupils read “The Soldier” by Rupert Brooke as well as “Anthem for a Doomed Youth” by Wilfred Owen, showing the evolution in stance towards the conflict as time passed by. This shift is seemingly absent in female poetry, for a very one sided story of their experiences is taught at secondary schools as only one woman is discussed.

A recent survey in British secondary schools revealed that the three most famous World War 1 poets are Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon and Jessie Pope (Pruszewicz, 2015). The first two are no surprise, for their poetry is famous for showing war’s atrocities, but Jessie Pope, however, comes as a remarkable third, as her stance towards war was completely different. She was a jingoist and her poems glorified sacrifice for the country. Her work was often read out loud in schools during World War 1, feeding young children this patriotic stance from a young age (Goldensohn, 2006: 52). It seems odd that she has become a household name for 21st century pupils, but her fame can easily be explained.

Whereas other patriotic work gradually became forgotten, Jessie Pope was singled out in war studies, for one of World War 1’s most famous poems was addressed to her. Wilfred Owen dedicated his “Dulce et decorum est” to “a certain Poetess”, in other versions simply “to Jessie Pope”, after she had written “Who’s for the Game?” (Pruszewicz, 2015). He did so to protest her standpoint on war. “Dulce et decorum est” shows the atrocities of World War 1 and dismisses the idea of it being glorious to die for one’s country, as this is “the old Lie”, which glamourizes the
cruel battlefield (Goldensohn, 2006: 52). Owen is sure that if Pope would experience what the soldiers have seen and gone through, she would not write her jingo poetry:

If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace  
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,  
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,  
His hanging face, like a devil’s sick of sin;  
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood  
Come gurgling from the froth-corrupted lungs,  
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud  
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues, —  
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest  
To children ardent for some desperate glory,  
The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est*  
*Pro patria mori.*  
(17-28)

In Owen’s poem we see a very realistic and uncensored depiction of what happened to a soldier who did not put on his gas mask in time. With “My friend” being Jessie Pope, an opposition is made between the traumatized soldier who witnessed his friend dying, and the cruel jingoists who spread the lie of war’s gloriousness. Pope becomes the villain in this poem as she encourages the killing.

During World War 1, her poetry was well known, as *The Daily Mail* was in favour of war and would publish her work, along with poems by like-minded men. (Irvine, 2008). Today, pupils still read her poetry, but this is only in relation to Wilfred Owen’s now much more famous poem addressed to her. Pupils read her work with an instant sense of dislike, as she is the woman that wanted men to die. This makes her the poet students “love to hate” (Pruszewicz, 2015). Other pro-war poets have been forgotten, as their work was never responded to by a poet as famous as Wilfred Owen.

It makes a lot of sense that teachers choose to discuss “Dulce et decorum est”, as it is a famous and moving poem that shows the realities of war, but the fact that Pope is always linked to it in
class might not be ideal, as it implicitly establishes an opposition between the good, wounded soldier and the bad, patriotic woman. Unfortunately, she is the only woman who is regularly discussed in secondary schools when analysing World War 1 poetry, meaning that she is the only female voice heard. Jessie Pope is singled out as being the only woman writing, which leads to a distorted view of how women experienced war. Her legacy does not help the reputation of World War 1 women, but instead makes it easier to regard them as a homogenous group, all in favour of war. This does not invite to read more poetry by women. Teacher are aware of the lack of representation of female voices in their poetry classes but Dr. Ann-Marie Einhaus, lecturer in modern and contemporary literature at Northumbria University, admits that teachers simply do not have the time to cover more female voices:

"There's definitely a lot of willingness to teach a more nuanced view of WW1 writing, but teachers don't have much time, alternative texts are often quite difficult and it's also about what you already have in the store cupboard. (...) In the end, it's not the job of English literature teachers to teach history, it's their job to teach literature and language" (Pruszewicz, 2015).

Just like the canon reformation at the end of the 20th century has not stopped the popularity of Fussell’s anthology yet, secondary schools are not yet ready to let go of the traditional framework of seeing World War 1 poetry as the trench experience, with Jessie Pope being a trivia attached to Owen’s poetry. Until women are properly discussed in poetry class, their experiences during the war will only be discovered by curious students looking it up for themselves.

6.3 The subconscious sex war

Next to the two previous arguments that show why female poetry is still neglected a century after the war has ended, it is important to point out that men were very sceptical about female poetry a hundred years ago already, too. As the suffering of women had only been “in the nerves, and not in the heart”, their poetry was met with irritation, as their mental suffering was not understood (Khan, 1988: 105).

The irritation about war poetry by women was part of a greater problem that appeared during World War 1, namely the sense of hostility between men and women caused by their division. The First World War was for many women the first time that they were left alone without male figures
in their life to obey. They were thus much freer than they had ever been before and men were aware of this freedom and felt quite uncomfortable about it. For men, the world has turned upside down, as women were freed by war and men were enslaved because of it:

Soldiers felt cheated and betrayed, not only by the politicians and generals, but by civilian society as a whole, which seemed to prosper while they died like flies. That so many women appeared positively to enjoy the war, inevitable led to male resentment and an escalation of misogynist rhetoric (Robb, 2002: 47).

Men felt bitter because of this turn of events, and more importantly, they felt emasculated, as their traditional role was taken away from them. Women were working, while men were put in a position of immobility and inability to carry out their prescribed aggressive role, as it has been before war started (Robb, 2002: 47). The frustration that this situation brought along, could lead to a new disorder that was coined ‘shell-shock’, which was the male equivalent of hysteria (Robb, 2002: 47). The First World War thus shows a crisis of masculinity, as many men felt uncomfortable about the changes and their role (Robb, 2002: 48).

The Great War had become a sex war, with frustration from both genders towards each other. Women at home enjoyed their freedom, for it fuelled their “unconscious rage against male dominance and desire for liberation” and did not want this situation to end (Montefiore, 1993: 58). Soldiers on the other hand felt threatened by the perception that war had liberated women at their expense (Robb, 2002: 48). Men’s reaction was to attack women’s newfound freedom. In the post-war years, literature was filled with antifeminism and misogyny, along with the theme of emasculation (Robb, 2002: 49). In this climate, there was no space to accept the mental suffering of the home front that came with the freedom of the war years. The damage done to one half of the human race was ignored, and so was their poetry.

6.4 Conclusion

Various reasons can be found to explain the lack of poetry by women in our collective memory, with misogyny probably being the main one. Paul Fussell’s *The Great War and Modern Memory* has shaped the World War 1 canon as we know it and despite feminist reactions to it, his all-male selection remains dominant until today. This can be seen by looking at poetry that is taught in
secondary schools, as all of the poets discussed are men, except for Jessie Pope. The only reason that she is brought up, however, is because Wilfred Owen wrote the world-famous “Dulce et decorum est”, which is a reaction to her jingo poetry. Pope being the only female poet spoken about in secondary school means that only a one-sided image of war as seen by women is discussed, which is a missed opportunity, for women had a wide range of emotions about the conflict.

Next to these two contemporary examples of female war poetry being unknown, it is important to realise that war poetry by women was already received in a negative way during and right after the First World War itself, as many men felt emasculated and hurt by how women seemingly enjoyed their freedom. Their reaction was to create an atmosphere of misogyny in which female voices were completely neglected. Ignoring them worked quite well, considering that the first person to delve into the unknown poetry by women only did so in 1981.
Conclusion

To discuss poetry by World War 1 women with an open mind, it was necessary to free them first from the stereotypes that have followed them for so long. This was the aim of the first chapter. When calling the Great War an emancipatory era in which women were liberated, one has a simplified gaze, as this approach only sees the positive aspects of wartime England without taking in account the many difficulties that women faced. Regarding World War 1 as the rise of feminism in Great Britain, is simply untrue, for it is a romanticised narrative that ignores how women were still very much suppressed by misogynist England.

First of all, women were initially not turned to when severe labour shortages were caused by Lord Kitchener’s call for recruits. Women were regarded as fragile creatures who should stay at home. Later during the war, when it became apparent that female labour was needed, reorganisations of the jobs happened so that women were able to work in factories. Unions only received them reluctantly, however, because if a woman could do a man’s job, men would no longer be taken seriously. Women were thus met with a sense of hostility while working and this feeling would remain throughout the war, as men would often brand them as interlopers.

Next to this, women who worked in factories were frequently mocked as well, as they were not behaving in the way that was expected of them. In Edwardian times, a lot of attention was placed on the right behaviour for both sexes, meaning that men had to be brave, whereas women should strive to be compassionate, nurturing and virtuous. Women who worked in munitions were frowned upon, as they behaved as “things”, rather than human beings. There was a complete lack of respect towards them, despite the fact that these munition workers were essential to provide enough weapons and munition for the armed forces.

These reactions showed that Great-Britain struggled with the changes in society, as women working in traditionally male jobs threatened the integrity of the old-fashioned home. This is why the government assured that the new status quo was only a temporary turn of events and that everything would return to normal after the war had come to an end. This is exactly what happened, as women who did not give up their job immediately after Armistice’s Day were removed. The country quickly returned to the status quo of the pre-war society, meaning that we cannot speak of a golden era of emancipation for women, but only of a brief turn against the patriarchy that was quickly undone after the war had ended.
The negative way in which women were greeted into the working field, shows how misogynistic Great Britain was during World War 1 and how their grievances and anxiety were completely ignored.

Next to the emancipation myth, the White Feather Brigade should also be nuanced. Patriotic women would hand out white feathers to men who had not enlisted, as a white feather was a symbol of cowardice. This custom has remained one of the most persistent memories of World War 1, as if thousands of women took part in it. This is not at all the case, for it was only a minor patriotic outburst at the beginning of the war. It is unfair that this is one of the images that World War 1 women are remembered for, as it is hardly representative for the female population.

Not only was the White Feather Brigade started by Admiral Charles Penrose Fitzgerald, which shows that it was not even a group formed by jingo women, the White Feathers were already criticized during the war itself, with figures of authority voicing their dislike towards women who “transgressed the norms of feminine behaviour”.

Furthermore, it should be understood that many women only took part in the handing out of white feathers because they were guilt tripped into it. World War 1 England is well-known for the pro-war propaganda that it spread, and some of those messages were directed at women, urging them to only date men who enlisted. If he did not fight for his King and Country, then how could he be worthy of you?

Finally, an important thing to know about the White Feather Brigade is that not only women took part in the public shaming, as men who were disabled or too old to fight would see it as their duty to force others to enlist. This is, however, too easily overlooked nowadays as the White Feather Brigade is seen as being a women-only organisation, which is untrue.

The White Feather Brigade portrays the role of women in World War 1 in a negative light, as the fact that it still remembered today suggests that this was a wide-spread custom that many women took part in. It does no justice to the many women who distanced themselves from this practice. Both the emancipation myth and the White Feather Brigade portray a picture of World War 1 women that is incorrect. Chapter 1 cleanses them from these stereotypes.
In the second chapter, three aspects of Great Britain were introduced that were dominant when war broke out. These three aspects were the Georgian tradition in poetry, England’s Christianity and its stiff upper lip attitude.

During the war, many women turned to writing their feelings down in poetry and to do so, they used the Georgian tradition, as this was popular and traditional in nature. Georgian literature focuses on a national awareness, as many poems would use the countryside as a setting for their poetry, to indicate how precious Great Britain was. In women’s poetry written during World War 1, we can thus find a lot of rural images. Next to this, soldiers were glorified in Georgian poetry, for the poetics tended to romanticize the battlefield.

Next to this, the country’s Christianity would also prove to be an important factor in many poems written by women, as England was a religious country during the war. Many had rediscovered faith because of the testing days of war. Turning to religion helped to accept the thousands of deaths, for they were not in vain, but made the salvation of the country possible.

Thirdly, the stiff upper lip attitude was typical for Great Britain during the war. It was inappropriate to show emotions during the war, as this would make the lip tremble, which was a sign of unstable behaviour. Women would use writing poetry as an outlet for their emotions that had to remain unspoken.

These three customs are illustrated with poetry from Catherine Reilly’s *Scars Upon My Heart*, which was the first anthology that focused only on World War 1 poetry by women. Not all the poems are of great quality, but they show how women responded to war. As many different opinions are voiced, many stances on war can be seen, which contradicts the one-sided way in which World War 1 women are portrayed today.

The third chapter thus focuses on three occurring aspects of the Georgian tradition. The first one is the use of nature imagery, which is something that can be found in many poems in *Scars Upon My Heart*, as this imagery was used in different ways. Often, women would write about how the seasons were changing, to indicate that time was passing by without their lover by their side. Edith Nesbit and Very Brittain used the motif of blossoming nature to indicate how they might one day be able to enjoy life again, but will never completely recover for their loss. Elizabeth Daryush, Isabel C. Clarke and Charlotte Mew portray soldier’s graves as being surrounded by flowers,
which is a comforting image, as they have become one with nature. Nature’s solacing qualities were also addressed by Charlotte Mew and Sara Teasdale, as time always passes by, regardless of the monstrosities that are happening on earth.

Another tendency was to compare nature from before the Great War started to the nature during it and thus creating a “then” versus “now” perspective. Edith Nesbit, Charlotte Mew and Aimee Byng Scott make use of this opposition to indicate how war has destroyed the country, and their hearts. Margaret Postgate Cole opted on comparing soldiers to larches; both were alive and fine before war came, but war turned them into dead material.

A third tendency of Georgian poetry was to prettify death by using flower imagery. Helen Dircks, Margaret Postgate Cole and Edith Nesbit would all use images that softened reality, as dying soldiers respectively became “petals”, “brown leaves” and “clay”. In doing so, the beauty of the deceased was preserved. Even Elinor Jenkins, who addressed the death body of a soldier directly, chose to let a hawthorn weep over his grave, as if Georgian poets could never completely get away from comparing death to nature.

Next to the nature imagery, Georgian poetry was also used to compare soldiers to heroic knights. Marian Allen described soldiers as “adventurers”, while Eleanour Norton called them “khaki knights”. It was comforting to pretend that men were on a quest, instead of being killed on the battlefield, as shown in Millicent Sutherlards poetry as well. Not all women were a fan of portraying men in this heroic way, however, as Ruth Comfort Mitchell’s “Billy the Soldier Boy” and Winifred M. Letts’ “The Deserter” show. These two poets saw through the lie of portraying war as something glorious.

Sacrifice for the country was thematized as well in Georgian poetry, and there are two tendencies that can be distinguished in *Scars Upon My Heart*. On the one hand, several women, such as Isabel C. Clarke, Margery Lawrence, Winifred M. Letts and Muriel Stuart, would write poetry to the Unknown Soldier. The anonymous soldiers who died overseas were the reason that the home front was safe, and therefore they had to be remembered. Their poetry also seems to functions as penance, for they are aware of the great sacrifice that was made for them, while women were stood on the side-line. May O’Rourke harshly criticizes a woman in “The Minority: 1917” as she does not show gratitude towards the anonymous soldiers at all.
On the other hand, women would write poetry that persuaded men to enlist, with the gloriousness of sacrifice being the main topic. Jessie Pope urged men to be on the right side of history in her poetry, and Helen Parry Eden’s “A Volunteer” shows how this poetry would help men to enlist, not because they wanted to die for their country, but because they wanted to avoid the scorn of jingoists such as Pope. Emily Orr wrote from a male perspective to show that England is that great that soldiers willingly die for it, even the lower class.

Of course, many women would turn against the glorification of war as presented by Georgian poetry. Helen Hamilton’s poetry in *Scars Upon My Heart* is very condemning for both romancing poets and jingo women, and Nora Bomford, Harriet Monroe, Pauline Barrington detest how gender determines one’s fate. While men were fighting overseas, women lead an unheroic and quiet life at home.

Mutilation and death were also protested in female war poetry. Winifred M. Letts and Margaret Postgate Cole wrote anti-war poems about young men whose life was completely destroyed because of World War 1, whereas May Herschel-Clarke and Maud Anna Bell thematized the dying of soldiers in their poetry. They both wrote from a male perspective, which makes their poems more lifelike.

The fourth chapter deals with the Christian poetry that can be found in *Scars Upon My Heart*. As mentioned, many women found solace in religion. Lucy Whitmell’s “Christ in Flanders” depicts how Christ was forgotten in the days before war, but how people now realise that He has been with them all along. Gratitude towards God is also voiced in poems by Alice Meynell and Agnes Grozier Herbertson, in which the deceased soldiers are received in God’s Realm.

There are two comparisons that are often made when writing Christian poetry. On the one hand, the sacrifice made by soldiers is compared to Christ’s Crucifixion. This can be found in poetry by Muriel Stuart, Elizabeth Daryush and May Wedderburn Cannan. On the other hand, women compared themselves to Mary, as can be seen in “An Incident” by Mary H. J. Henderson, who worked as a nurse, and in “Y.M.C.A.” by C.A.L.T., a woman who was a canteen worker. As these women took care of soldiers, the comparison was easily made in Christian times.

There were, however, also many people who lost all faith because of war. This feeling can be found in *Scars Upon My Heart* as well. Madeline Ida Bedford wrote about the visit of a parson to
a widow that did not go down well, as religion meant nothing to the widow anymore since her good husband died. Ruth Comfort Mitchell, Gabrielle Collins, Edith Sitwell and Olive E. Lindsay all voice their discontent about the war as well and cannot believe that God is letting such atrocities happen.

The fifth chapter covers the stiff upper lip attitude of Great Britain. There are two different kinds of poems to be distinguished in *Scars Upon My Heart* regarding stoicism, namely the ones that explicitly thematize the stiff upper lip attitude and the ones that did so implicitly.

Rose Macaulay’s “Picnic” acknowledges the existence of the stiff upper lip attitude, but portrays it in a positive light, as women kept a stoic exterior to protect themselves. Iris Tree, on the other hand, criticizes the custom, for she hates how mourning has to be done in silence. Alys Fane Trotter portrays soldiers in hospital as stoic figures, as they laugh at their own injuries, instead of being able to have a real, emotional conversation about losing a limb.

Next to these poems that address the stoic custom of Great Britain heads on, there is also poetry to be found in Reilly’s anthology that shows that even between lovers, communication was not completely straightforward. In the poetry of May Wedderburn Cannan and Eleanor Farjeon we meet two women who did not have a conversation with their significant other about the very likely possibility of them dying overseas. Lesbia Thanet’s poem shows how a women said goodbye to her lover as if he were a hero already, which meant that she kept a stoic exterior. When he died overseas, however, she realised that he was a human being who had deserved to see her unconcealed emotions.

The three chapters discussing the three presented customs broadcast a great variety in stances and emotions. Women not only saw war as a glorious cause, but also protested the many deaths. They did not only thank God in their poetry for guiding their lovers to his Realm, but also criticized Him for letting the country go through the calamity that was World War 1. They did not simply remain silent, but also protested the stiff upper lip attitude in their poetry. It is clear that women should not be regarded as a homogenous group.

Their poetry is, however, still little known today. Chapter 6 provides some reasons as to why their poetry is so unknown. The main reasons is probably Paul Fussell’s influential anthology that was published in 1975. *The Great War and Modern Memory* has shaped the way in which we look at
World War 1 poetry today. Fussell focused solely on the trench experience of war, and war poetry by men thus forms the Great War canon as we know it today.

In addition to this, female poets are not discussed when analysing poetry of the First World War in secondary school. The only female poet who is mentioned briefly, is Jessie Pope, as Wilfred Owen dedicated his “Dulce et decorum est” to her. Only mentioning Pope as a female poet, however, gives a very unnuanced image of women’s thoughts on World War 1.

Lastly, female poetry was sabotaged soon after the First World War already, because of the strained relationship between the two sexes. Men felt emasculated because of the war, as they had become slaves of their country while women were freed. The anger that came with this realization, led to the publication of literature that was filled with antifeminism and misogyny in the decades after the war. It goes without saying that there was no place for war poetry by women in this climate.

The aim of this dissertation was to discover the British women behind the stereotypes. The poetry in Scars Upon My Heart shows a wide range of emotions towards war and puts an end to the one-dimensional depiction of World War 1 women. These women were human beings whose hearts were broken by war but whose stories are unremembered. A hundred years after the Great War has come to an end, it is time to finally give their work the same attention as male war poetry.
Works cited


https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/20057530.pdf?refreqid=search%3A02a902a2e0b521720e8f91bb5cc98ee2.


Appendix: poetry cited

All poetry used in this dissertation was cited from Catherine Reilly’s *Scars Upon My Heart: Women’s Poetry and Verse of the First World War*.

Marian Allen – The Raiders

Marian Allen – The Wind on the Downs

Pauline Barrington – Education

Madeline Ida Bedford – The Parson’s Job

Maud Anna Bell – From a Trench

Nora Bomford – Drafts

Vera Brittain – Perhaps

May Wedderburn Cannan – Lamplight

May Wedderburn Cannan – Love, 1916

Isabel C. Clarke – Anniversary of the Great Retreat

Margaret Postgate Cole – Afterwards

Margaret Postgate Cole – Falling Leaves

Margaret Postgate Cole – The Veteran

Mary Gabrielle Collins – Women at Munition Making

Elizabeth Daryush – Flanders Fields

Elizabeth Daryush – Unknow Warrior

Helen Dircks – After Bourlon Wood

Helen Dircks – London in War

Helen Parry Eden – A Volunteer

Eleanor Farjeon – ‘Now That You Too’
S. Gertrude Ford – ‘A Fight to a Finish’
S. Gertrude Ford – The Tenth Armistice Day
Helen Hamilton – The Jingo-Woman
Helen Hamilton – The Romancing Poet
Ada M. Harrison – New Year, 1916
Mary H. J. Henderson – An Incident
Agnes Grozier Herbertson – The Seed-Merchant’s Son
May Herschel-Clarke – ‘Nothing to Report’
Elinor Jenkins – Dulce et Decorum?
Margery Lawrence – The Lost Army
Winifred M. Letts – Casualty
Winifred M. Letts – The Deserter
Winifred M. Letts – What Reward?
Olive E. Lindsay – Despair
Rose Macaulay – Picnic
Charlotte Mew – June, 1915
Charlotte Mew – May, 1915
Charlotte Mew – The Cenotaph
Alice Meynell – Summer in England, 1914
Ruth Comfort Mitchell – He went for a Soldier
Harriet Monroe – On the Porch
Edith Nesbit – Spring in War-Time
Edith Nesbit – The Fields of Flanders
Eleanour Norton – In a Restaurant, 1917
May O’Rourke – The Minority: 1917
Emily Orr – A Recruit from the Slums
Jessie Pope - Socks
Jessie Pope – The Call
Margaret Sackville – Sacrament
Aimee Byng Scott – July 1st, 1916
Edith Sitwell – The Dancers
Muriel Stuart – Forgotten Dead, I Salute You
Millicent Sutherland – One Night
C.A.L.T – Y.M.C.A.
Sara Teasdale – There will come Soft Rains
Lesbia Thanet – In Time of War
Iris Tree – “Of all who died in silence far away…”
Alys Fane Trotter – The Hospital Visitor
Lucy Whitmell – Christ in Flanders