Flight of the White Feather: The Expansion of the White Feather Movement Throughout the World War One British Commonwealth

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FLIGHT OF THE WHITE FEATHER: THE EXPANSION OF THE WHITE FEATHER MOVEMENT THROUGHOUT THE WORLD WAR ONE BRITISH COMMONWEALTH

by

KIMBERLY ELISA STEVENS

(Under the Direction of Brian K. Feltman)

ABSTRACT

The historiography of the First World War in Great Britain has focused mainly on military matters, leaving home front experiences temporarily unexplored. While the soldier’s experience remains invaluable to historians, studies of women and the home front are significant. The White Feather Campaign, which called for women to give white feathers denoting cowardice to men in civilian dress, who allegedly had not enlisted, remains vivid in British historical memory, but few scholarly works have examined it thoroughly. Historians such as Nicoletta F. Gullace and Susan R. Grayzel have shed light on British women in the war, but there remains further room for study. Because of the shared war effort and the urgent need to recruit volunteers, white feather giving spread from the mother country to its territories. As no major works have studied the connections between white feather practices in Britain and in its Dominions, specifically Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, this thesis examines the transnational aspect of the evolving relationship between war and gender.

As British and Commonwealth women distributed white feathers to accused “cowards” and “shirkers” in civilian dress, they attempted to influence political opinion. By shaming men, they aimed to convince them to be real men by enlisting to protect their homeland from the enemy. Through sending letters containing white feathers, they confronted men privately with an
implied threat to do so publicly. In a national political setting which did not allow women to vote, giving white feathers was a radical way in which women could make their voices heard.

INDEX WORDS: CHARLES PENROSE-FITZGERALD, GENDER HISTORY, VOLUNTARY RECRUITMENT, WHITE FEATHER, WWI
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B.A., University of Georgia, 2014

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty at Georgia Southern University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

STATESBORO, GEORGIA
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Electronic Version Approved:
December 2016
DEDICATION

I dedicate this to my Papa and Granny, for their love and their instilling in me the value of hard work, integrity, and responsibility. Especially Granny, who never let anyone else tell me what to do with my life—“Do what you like. Don’t let anyone else tell you what to do.” Her kind of spunk is what makes life worth living.

And Kyle—I love you.

“Let me be as a feather
Strong, with purpose,
Yet light at heart.
Able to bend,
And, tho I might
Become frayed,
Able to pull myself
Together again”

Anita Sams
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Throughout life, we often find that after a lot of soul-searching, our calling turns out to have been in front of us the whole time. The subject of war and gender has followed me for the past decade, beginning when I first read *Rilla of Ingleside* sometime in middle school. Since then, I have taken numerous classes as an undergraduate that led me right back to the subject. In this respect, I must thank my elementary school teachers for encouraging my love of reading, as well as other teachers and professors who showed me how the study of the First World War and of women’s history is more complex than it seems at first glance. Education really matters, and I have encountered good educators along my entire way.

I must also thank numerous professors in my graduate program here at Georgia Southern University. Dr. Brian K. Feltman has been a marvelous thesis, as well as life, advisor. On top of searching for extra source material, ensuring my self-confidence in this project, and offering invaluable construction criticism, I admire his advocacy for the graduate students here. He is an asset to my work, but also to this program. Additionally, Dr. William Allison and Dr. Robert K. Batchelor have provided extremely helpful feedback, as well as avenues for further research, both within and outside of the scope of this thesis. To the rest of my professors at Georgia Southern, thank you for always challenging me to think and analyze more deeply.

Of course, I must acknowledge the value of family. My parents have always encouraged me to become as educated as I wanted to be, although I was twenty before I decided to study history. My sister always keeps me on my toes, and reminds me that however busy I am, family is what gives my life meaning. To all the kids in my family, thanks for just having fun with cousin Elisa, and not pestering her with questions about what she will do after college (that still
remains to be seen!). And to Kyle, thank you for always being there, for stopping me every time I said this would never get done, and for actually believing that I am the One.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Lucy Maud Montgomery, of *Anne of Green Gables* fame, published the series’ final novel, *Rilla of Ingleside* in 1921. With the First World War in recent memory, Montgomery’s work provides one of the best contemporary works, albeit fiction, from a woman’s perspective. In the book, Rilla, the youngest daughter of fictional character Anne Shirley Blythe, comes of age during World War One. While Rilla’s oldest brother Jem, as well as her sweetheart Kenneth Ford, enlist, her brother Walter hesitates, as he is a pacifist against the war. Eventually, someone sends him a white feather where he is attending the fictive Redmond College. This devastates Walter, who writes to Rilla that he deserves this token of humiliation. In the letter, Walter shows his shame by writing:

“I felt that I ought to put it on and wear it—proclaiming myself to all Redmond the coward I know I am...Some days I almost make up my mind to do it—and then I see myself thrusting a bayonet through another man—some woman’s husband or sweetheart or son—perhaps the father of little children—I see myself lying alone torn and mangled, burning with thirst on a cold, wet, field, surrounded by dead and dying men—and I know I never can. I can’t face even the thought of it. How could I face the reality? There are times when I wish I had never been born.”¹

In response, Rilla says that she wishes Walter would not say such awful things about himself, because she knows he is not a coward. Walter simply will not enlist because of his beliefs. Sadly, Walter later gives in and enlists, but dies in the war.²


² Ibid., 188.
In a non-fictive 1985 interview, civilian Robert James Thelwell-Smith reflected on his childhood in London during the First World War. Seventy years later, he remembered the oft-repeated notion that the war would be over by Christmas, and how before the war, he “thought the Empire was doing good in the world.” But soon, his interview shifted to a darker aspect of wartime British society. Thelwell-Smith recalled a young woman publicly giving his cousin a white feather, in effect calling him a coward for not fighting for his country. What that woman did not know, however, was that Thelwell-Smith’s cousin was indeed a soldier, and he was home on leave after being shot. Because the woman saw him in civilian dress, she assumed he was not enlisted, but she was entirely wrong. To add insult to injury, the cousin had already lost two brothers in the war. How could a woman be so cruel to a man who had already experienced so much? The answer lies in wartime panic, nationalism, and citizenship.

Founded in August 1914, the Order of the White Feather consisted of mostly women who accosted men in civilian dress and gave them white feathers to denote them as cowardly “shirkers” who would not fight for their country. By shaming men in a public setting, they aimed to convince them to enlist to prove their true manliness. As only a semi-official group begun by Admiral Charles Penrose-Fitzgerald in the days after the declaration of war, it soon inspired many individual women to act on their own in similar ways. Over time, the Order of the White Feather has been closely associated with Great Britain’s collective memory of disillusionment over the First World War. With the more recent popularity of study of the war following its centennial and the airing of popular television shows like *Downton Abbey*, the white feather as a means of recruitment has come under increased scrutiny. Using their most notorious method to

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shame men into enlisting, certain women would approach supposedly unenlisted men in public and present them with white feathers to accuse them of cowardice. They also sent letters containing white feathers to such men, with postcards being the most shameful since mail carriers could easily read their content. This practice quickly spread to other nations in the British Commonwealth as they received news of its notoriety.

The connection between the British, Canadian, Australian, and New Zealand versions of the Order, as well as the societies of their respective countries, provides insight into their shared war effort, similarly to the way that historian John Darwin asserts that white settler societies throughout the British Empire often forged a common British identity with the United Kingdom as a result of shared race and cultural traditions.4 On the other hand, the public memory of these other Commonwealth nations entails commemoration of military achievements that cemented their individual national, rather than colonial, statuses.5 In fact, common opinion in the Dominions largely viewed the conflict as a chance to assert the autonomy of their individual nations, staying loyal to the British crown, yet not remaining submissive to it.6 The white feather movement closely relates to this idea as well, because it signified the deep patriotic and militaristic motives that underlay the war effort.

This transnational study will objectively analyze journalistic accounts to determine public perception of the Order of the White Feather and its effects on society during the First World


War. Recent research on the Order is quite limited, with most historians pointing to the work of Nicoletta Gullace, who notes that study of the group normally only receives “passing attention” from historians of the First World War, although it made a profound impact.\(^7\) Gullace’s studies of the Order, beginning with her 1997 article, “White Feathers and Wounded Men: Female Patriotism and the Memory of the Great War,” provide a valuable background of the culture that both influenced the formation of the Order and was influenced by its actions.

This thesis aims to expand upon this body of research by examining the variation in public opinion to evaluate its effect on societies throughout the British Commonwealth. Not only the government, but also the media proved instrumental in giving news and information that could influence how its readers perceived current events. Also, newspapers provide a sampling of individuals’ opinions, whether from journalists or from readers writing editorials. Overall, sources indicate that British public opinion was divided over the perceived usefulness of the Order’s social agenda, but especially after the institution of British conscription in 1916, the Order seemed to pointlessly utilize public harassment of men to make a statement. This thesis will demonstrate that the attention the Order received after conscription was mostly negative, since its \textit{raison d’être} no longer existed. There was no need to convince men to voluntary enlist if the government could make them do so anyway. Moreover, the movement was condemned for focusing on the drawbacks of men, such as self-consciousness and emasculation, rather than bringing out the best in men by encouraging patriotism, courage, and protection. As a result,

women encountered an assault on femininity as a response to their public assault on masculinity.\textsuperscript{8}

Additionally, this thesis will supplement studies of women in relation to the First World War. As the Order came to be viewed more negatively as the war progressed and ended, historiography has emphasized only women’s more ‘positive’ contributions to the war effort. While it is important to acknowledge women’s efforts in the public, agricultural, and manufacturing sectors, historians must also evaluate less mainstream efforts, such as the extreme measures taken by the Order, more objectively.\textsuperscript{9} Examples show that some men did indeed enlist after their shaming episodes. Thus, in some ways, the Order was successful, even though it often employed unsavory methods. Furthermore, although Nicoletta Gullace has extensively studied the Order in Britain, there is no definitive work on the transnational aspect of the Order’s spread throughout the Commonwealth.

The First World War in Great Britain resulted from numerous factors. Specifically, when Germany, as an ally of Austria-Hungary, violated Belgian neutrality by marching through the tiny country to shorten its campaign to France, the British government used a longstanding treaty with Belgium to justify entrance into the war.\textsuperscript{10} British propaganda, including the Bryce Report


of 1915, portrayed German soldiers as ‘barbaric’ Huns who terrorized and pillaged the Belgian people, caring nothing for human morality or political neutrality. Viscount Bryce's report, officially known as the *Report of the Committee on Alleged German Outrages*, claimed to find numerous instances of rape, often followed by murder. Whether this class of extreme atrocities allegedly committed by German soldiers ever occurred remains a source of debate. At any rate, historian Nicoletta F. Gullace argues that this “propaganda, advertising, and popular entertainment absorbed images of the war to promote new ideas about gender and civic participation.” Specifically for men, military service was the best form of civic participation because it legitimized men’s claims to national citizenship.

On the other hand, John Horne and Alan Kramer assert that Germans actually did commit “atrocities” in Belgium, but mostly not of a sexual nature, as the Allies had insisted. Instead, they show that German soldiers, often believing they were fired upon by civilians or francs-tireurs, executed accused civilians and burned their houses. At any rate, the British population feared the same consequences would occur if the Germans invaded their own homeland, especially that of alleged rape and murder against their innocent women and children, influencing many to support the war effort.


Whatever the reason for British involvement, men and women responded to Great Britain’s declaration of war on August 4, 1914, in various ways. At the outbreak of the war, Britain possessed the most advanced navy in the world, but its professional army was remarkably smaller than those of other European powers. As there was no military draft in Britain at the time, military enlistment relied on volunteers as the only legal avenue for recruitment. The British government employed propaganda such as E.J. Kealey’s famous “Women of Britain say—GO!!” (Figure 1) and Savile Lumley’s “Daddy, What did YOU do in the Great War?” (Figure 2) posters to encourage young men to volunteer for enlistment. The “Women of Britain” poster specifically portrayed women as weaker beings dependent on male military might for protection from a dangerous and barbaric enemy. In a similar manner, another poster sponsored by the Parliamentary Recruiting Committee with the headline “Men of Britain! Will You Stand This?” attempted to convince men to join the army in defense of their country, citing 78 women and children killed and 228 injured in the German raids on Scarborough.

The other Commonwealth nations developed their own gendered forms of propaganda in an effort to bolster male military recruitment. A French-Canadian poster containing a threatening image of a German soldier behind a dead woman and child urged men to act by reminding them: “Canadiens Soyez Hommes!” (“Canadians Are Men!”) (Figure 3). Another English Canadian poster indicated German barbarism with a male Canadian soldier rescuing a woman nurse from the sea, noting the stark contrast of “Kultur vs. Humanity.” An additional poster from the Canadian Patriotic Fund requested the public’s help with the war effort, imploring that “If you cannot join him [a soldier], you should help her [his wife and child]” (Figure 4). These examples and others showcase the man’s perceived role as protector and the woman’s supposedly vulnerable position if not protected from the Germans.
The Australian government effectively used striking images to convey the need for participation in the effort as well. One poster, containing a kangaroo in the foreground, reminded Australians that their country had promised to send Britain 50,000 men to fight, and asked potential men: “Will You Help Us Keep That Promise[?]”, indicating that men should stand behind their word and help their homeland and the British Empire when needed. Another image without words simply showed a German boot dripping with blood from earlier ‘barbaric’ campaigns, ready to crush frantic Australian women and children. One piece of propaganda showed a defiant woman representing Belgium, reminding Australian women that the alleged atrocities could happen to them as well. It ends with the demand: “Send a Man To-Day to Fight for You” (Figure 5).
Figure 1 “Women of Britain Say- 'GO!'” E.J. Kealey, Imperial War Museums, http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/14592.

Figure 2 “Daddy, what did YOU do in the Great War?” Savile Lumley, Imperial War Museums, http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/17053.

Figure 3 “Canadiens: C’est Le Moment D’Agir [Canadians: This is the Moment to Act],” C. David, Imperial War Museums, http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/5944.

Figure 4 “If You Cannot Join Him[,] You Should Help Her,” Imperial War Museums, http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/31061.
Other posters employed personal shame to convince men to join. One poster showed a man playing in the ocean, scolding him and others: “It is Nice in the Surf[,] But What About the Men in the Trenches[?] GO AND HELP.” Another poster divided in half between one image of a soldier and one of a man lounging in a lawn chair asked readers: “Which Picture would Your Father like to show his friends?” (Figure 6). This example of propaganda shows that not only men who stayed at home, but their families should also be ashamed of their lack of action. These images aimed to deter men from taking the shameful route of avoiding enlistment in defense of their country.

As other countries in the British Commonwealth entered the conflict, each of their societies formed its own opinion of the issues at hand. Citizens in Canada, Australia, and New Zealand alike postulated on the potential effectiveness of the Order’s activities as they received news of them from British publications. Noticeably, in Canada, some newspaper accounts of

![Figure 5 “Women of Queensland!” John Samuel Watkins, Australian War Memorial, https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/ARTV05632/](image1)

![Figure 6 “Which Picture would Your Father like to show his friends?” Harry J. Weston, Australian War Memorial, https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/ARTV00147/](image2)
white feather giving take place in large cities in Britain and Canada, but not nearly as much in more rural areas.

At the same time, most other Canadian articles debated the effectiveness and appropriateness of the White Feather Brigade in theory, while more Australian and New Zealand articles discuss individuals who put its agenda into practice. These island nations provided numerous accounts of men receiving white feathers in the mail or in public, even when they were employed by the government or the military, leaving them unable to enlist. This outbreak of widespread distribution indicates a widespread patriotic fervor, even if this specific method of persuading recruits did not prove to be a popular one.

To effectively show the publicʼs perception of the Order of the White Feather, this thesis analyzes journalistic accounts. Local articles from around these nations can better show how the entirety of these countries thought, rather than selections from more well-known London publications. This method allows for study of differing individual opinions, as well. Conversely, studying the press shows how published information could influence public opinion.

Newspapers throughout the Commonwealth postulated on the efficiency of the Order. Some papers were optimistic, believing that in this war women could increase military recruitment. Others decried the Order as a busybody organization that needlessly harassed men in public. Some even placed blame on the Order, as in the case of a man who committed suicide after being given a white feather, despite being classified as not physically fit for the army.14 George Bernard Shaw criticized womenʼs "pugnacity" as he wrote about "civilized young women

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handing white feathers to all young men who are not in uniform."\textsuperscript{15} Still other sources doubted whether the Order would even make a difference in recruitment, saying that if men did not want to join out of simple patriotic duty, these women could not make them feel ashamed of their inaction.\textsuperscript{16} This study will examine the media as a representation of public opinion toward the Order.

The British army solely relied on volunteers for the first half of the war, which possibly fueled such radical courses of action to inspire men to enlist. Without the legal provisions of a military draft, they had no legitimate way to forcibly compel men to enlist. However, more notably after the institution of the draft in 1916, support for the Order began to wane as critics accused its members, instead of their targets, of cowardice and hypocrisy. Soldiers on leave often complained of harassment from women who falsely accused them of shirking their military duty. Some men even committed suicide over being medically refused for service, then being publicly humiliated by women who knew nothing of their situations. As opposition increased, the Order lost ground, especially as the public became more aware of the staggering number of casualties. Humiliating men who did not want to be needlessly slaughtered increasingly seemed more and more inappropriate.

Interestingly, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand encountered their own controversies regarding whether to institute a military draft. While New Zealand passed draft legislation in


\textsuperscript{16} “White Feathers,” \textit{Sussex Express}, September 2, 1914.
1916,\(^{17}\) and Canada in 1917,\(^{18}\) Australia never imposed a draft on its citizens.\(^{19}\) This lack of a draft was blamed on women, who possessed the franchise at that time and who were supposedly passive beings who were naturally against war. As a result of the defeat of Australian draft legislation, occurrences of white feather giving appear in Australian newspapers well into 1918. With no legal backing, persuading voluntary recruitment was the only way to gain more fighting men.

After the war, the Order earned an infamous reputation after soldiers wrote memoirs describing their experiences with it and its devastating mental effects on men, soldiers or not. For example, a Canadian veteran later recalled younger women pinning “something white” on any man they met out of uniform.\(^{20}\) In *The Great War: An Imperial History*, John H. Morrow, Jr., cites soldier F.P. Crozier’s account of a white feather bearer forcing him to go to the army recruiting office while on leave. The recruiting officer, recognizing him as a soldier, asks him why he is there. Crozier replies that he does not know, and that perhaps the officer should ask the young woman accompanying him.\(^{21}\) Another account tells of a soldier who received a white feather, ironically shortly after being awarded the Victoria Cross for bravery on the battlefield.\(^{22}\)

\(^{17}\) Sheftall, *Altered Memories*, 120.

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 106-107.

\(^{19}\) Ibid., 118.

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 94.


\(^{22}\) Gullace, “White Feathers and Wounded Men”, 179.
Postwar accounts such as these have thus relegated the Order as a shameful group of bullies shunned by respectable society.

Recent historiography has examined the White Feather Campaign, but only in a limited manner. Nicoletta Gullace jumpstarted recent scholarship of the Order with her 1997 article, “White Feathers and Wounded Men: Female Patriotism and the Memory of the Great War.” In it, Gullace aims to describe the Order and how it carried out its methods. She criticizes the lack of scholarship on the Order, especially since it remains so engrained in public memory of the war. Instead, she notes that historians studied “feminist pacifism” rather than women’s pro-war efforts. She accuses feminist historians in particular for not wanting to remember women’s use of “sexual shame” to motivate men to enlist. This resulted from Britain’s method of voluntary recruitment, which encouraged women to send men off to war. Gullace includes numerous accounts of white feather giving, but notes that few women admitted to giving feathers after the war.23

Gullace writes that often, recruiters found that the threat of a white feather was enough to convince a man who was concerned about public humiliation.24 While shame seems to be the main goal of the Order, Gullace argues that its true objective was to change men and make them actually desire to enlist.25 Unfortunately, overzealous women often mistook soldiers in civilian dress, for whatever reason, as unenlisted men, causing immense resentment.26 For example,

23 Ibid., 179-182.
24 Ibid., 186.
25 Ibid., 190.
26 Ibid., 199.
British Able Seaman George Hempenstall was required to wear civilian clothes ashore to keep the activities of his ship undercover. Unfortunately, he would receive a white feather every time he went on land, making it necessary for him to wear a button labelled “On War Service” to denote that he was part of the war effort despite his lack of uniform.\textsuperscript{27} Additionally, enlistment was linked to masculine sexuality. As European society was gradually accepting the idea that women could be sexual beings, women could give or take away their bodies based on a man’s decision to assert his masculinity by defending his homeland.\textsuperscript{28} Gullace provides a wonderful introduction to this field of scholarship, but of course leaves much room for further study on the subject.

Expanding upon this work, Gullace emphasizes the context of patriotic service in relation to citizenship in “The Blood of Our Sons:” Men, Women, and the Renegotiation of British Citizenship During the Great War (2002). Overall, this book analyzes the changing social environment that equated British citizenship with service to the nation, rather than gender.\textsuperscript{29} The Order of the White Feather was part of this push for increased civic participation and support for the war, but its method of shaming backfired, especially during the postwar years as more memoirs cited the damaging psychological effects of their activities. Again, Gullace provides a


\textsuperscript{28} Gullace, “White Feathers and Wounded Men”, 191.

\textsuperscript{29} Gullace, “\textit{The Blood of Our Sons},” 3.

detailed account of the Order, but does not examine contemporary public opinion as closely as postwar opinions.

Susan R. Grayzel focuses on the Order’s place in British society in *Women’s Identities at War: Gender, Motherhood, and Politics in Britain and France during the First World War* (1999). Grayzel believes that the war’s influence on gender “was more conservative than innovative,” as gender norms largely returned to their previous state after the war.\(^{30}\) For example, she cites contemporary arguments that the vote for women was not linked to war service, but instead to “their mothers, aunts, and grandmothers.” Only women over thirty initially gained the vote, but most women workers were in their twenties.\(^{31}\) This shows that most women workers were not represented when Parliament finally established a national system of suffrage for women.

During the conflict, one’s proof of masculinity largely depended on one’s enlistment to protect his country. Social ideas of wartime femininity were based on the maternal aspect of caring for soldiers, whether directly through nursing, or indirectly by working to support the war effort in some other way.\(^{32}\) Specifically, the battlefield was for the appointed area for men, while women represented the home front and civilian life.\(^{33}\) Grayzel notes that the Great War was the first conflict in which the term “home front” was used, meaning that women assisting the war

\(^{30}\) Grayzel, *Women’s Identities at War*, 246.

\(^{31}\) Ibid., 211.

\(^{32}\) Ibid., 2.

\(^{33}\) Ibid., 51.
effort at home were essential for success on the battlefield. She also emphasizes the need to examine the war as a “continuum” instead of dividing studies of the “front line” and the “home front,” because both are equally important. Since women were not allowed to fight, many women felt that their biggest asset was convincing other men to enlist instead, which of course included the activities of the Order. Even though shaming men in public was a radical departure from tradition, some women felt that desperate measures needed to be taken in such desperate times.

Additionally, women encountered difficulty with having their work taken seriously, as many in society believed that only men could sacrifice their lives for the nation, which gave them rights to citizenship. Grayzel also discusses other women’s paramilitary organizations, such as the Women’s Emergency Corps, the Women’s Volunteer Reserve, and the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps (later known as Queen Mary’s Auxiliary Corps), which aroused public suspicion that many women were becoming too masculine. Women in these groups responded that their aim was “to serve the men serving the nation.” Grayzel’s monograph serves as a great analysis of British and French gender roles during the Great War. At the same time, she includes very little information about the Order, relegating it to one sentence, when they in fact had such a large impact on British society.

34 Ibid., 11.
35 Ibid., 245.
36 Ibid., 192.
Later, Bonnie J. White discusses the Order’s place within a regional environment in her localized study, “Volunteerism and Early Recruitment Efforts in Devonshire, August 1914-December 1915” (2009). White demonstrates that while popular memory depicts the whole male population of Britain rushing to enlist, with recollections of passionate crowds, some areas were not as enthusiastic due to “occupational and geographical factors.” Rural Devonians actually resisted recruitment in some cases, widely departing from the popular image of urban crowds flocking to the streets in their war enthusiasm, for economic, demographic, and institutional reasons. For example, Devon largely depended on male labor in agriculture, forestry, defense, and construction. White further emphasizes the loyalty to local communities as an impediment to enlistment in the nation’s time of need. Daily worries simply were more important than patriotism.38

Also, recruiting stations only slowly expanded into rural areas, as they contained less people; instead, they preferred to mine the more populous urban areas first. When recruiting agents approached men, they often encountered harassment or cold shoulders. Furthermore, a scarcity of information about the war meant that the region did not understand the “true gravity” of the war’s potential consequences.39 To combat these serious issues, the Order gained a foothold in Devon, especially as shame over the region’s low enlistment numbers influenced women to shame possibly unenlisted men. However, by the end of the war, locals gradually accused these women of wrongfully harassing men while not even knowing of their


39 Ibid., 644-648.
backgrounds. White’s article provides a wonderfully detailed, localized account of recruitment during the First World War, but it could also include further analysis of how gender affected local enlistment.

In *Men of War: Masculinity and the First World War in Britain* (2009), Jessica Meyer examines how British soldiers “used their experience to define themselves as men, both in relation to other men and to women.” Meyer writes that because participation in war was viewed as a man’s activity, how they wrote about the war shows how they perceived their own masculinity. Meyer efficiently uses soldiers’ letters, diaries, and memoirs, as well as military and civilian letters of condolence for the dead to show their individual perceptions of themselves and the war around them.

As women in the Order threatened men’s perceptions and appearances of masculinity, it is necessary to understand how society, especially soldiers, constructed contemporary ideals of masculinity. Meyer writes that men developed a sense of both heroic and domestic masculinities. Additionally to fulfilling one’s masculine role, military experience could serve as a cure for widespread moral and physical degeneracy. Meyer excellently demonstrates the close link between military service and masculine identities, but more academic work still remains to be conducted concerning women’s participation in and perceptions of the First World War.

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40 Ibid., 662-663.


42 Ibid., 9.

43 Ibid., 2-3.
Karyn Burnham’s recent study, *The Courage of Cowards: The Untold Stories of First World War Conscientious Objectors* (2014), focuses on the complications that men faced when they declined to join the war effort. Conscientious objectors came from varying social and religious backgrounds. Burnham uses memoirs, letters, diaries, interviews, and other personal papers to present the lives of a selected group of conscientious objectors.44 Some conscientious objectors chose to find alternative methods of service, such as working for the Friends Ambulance Unit (FAU) or the Non-Combatant Corps (NCC). In this way, objectors could aid their country without compromising their beliefs or facing legal punishment. Other citizens often believed these men were truly cowards, but at least were placated by their assistance in the war effort.

Other conscientious objectors in Britain refused to take part in the war effort altogether, and some of them were arrested, even if they had committed no crime except for refusing to enlist. One young British man even died from pneumonia in a prison work camp for conscientious objectors as a result of the weather and the terrible conditions, in addition to having to sleep in a tent outside. Burnham presents these men as individuals who stood up for their beliefs, often knowing they would face adversity, such as incarceration or a loss of reputation. This account shows that there were men whose political and religious beliefs led them to depart from the opinions of the majority, and these reasons differed depending on the individual.

However, Burnham’s work is unfortunately overwhelmingly one-sided, as she presents her figures in an almost entirely positive light, while she describes most of those involved in the

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military or supporting the war as villainous figures. She never exposes any wrongdoing by the objectors, implying that they were always in the right, all the while portraying others as brutal bullies. This is problematic for most historians, who are aware that historical events are rarely divided into binary conflicts between ‘good’ and ‘evil.’ Additionally, this work is decidedly a popular, rather than academic, history, as Burnham includes no footnotes, with no way to examine her sources except for her diminutive bibliography. Therefore, further scholarly research is necessary to make further conclusions about the accounts of such men who were accused of cowardice.

In *Altered Memories of the Great War: Divergent Narratives of Britain, Australia, New Zealand and Canada*, Mark Sheftall analyzes the individual and collective memories of each of these countries. He argues that this work is the first to examine the “distinctive collective memories” of these Commonwealth nations. Also, he demonstrates that Commonwealth memory of the war, which focused on military achievements, differed from Britain’s, which centered on soldiers’ disillusionment. Specifically, Sheftall’s chapter entitled “The Wars at Home” examines the conscription controversies and their results in Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. In this discussion, he notes the gendered undertones of propaganda and public shame and emasculation as a persuasive method in the face of each country’s conscription crisis. This monograph provides marvelous insight into the war experience of each of these nations, which is especially important to the historical field in light of these places frequently being overlooked in discussions of the war.

The First World War inspired widespread, although not universal, disillusionment with human nature and warfare in its aftermath. At the same time, the nations involved, especially the Commonwealth nations outside Britain remain proud of their military achievements in the Great War. Both of these aspects of public memory can be linked to the motivations behind the Order of the White Feather. Patriotic fervor, not female cattiness, served as the reason for publicly shaming men. Contemporary understandings of gender implied that it was shameful for men not to enlist, so these women brought what they believed was shameful male cowardice into the public eye.

Resentment also fueled these embarrassing encounters, as almost all women knew someone abroad in the army or navy. Most of them had family members or sweethearts fighting, and seeing men at home supposedly shirking their duty and taking advantage of that protection made them angry. In short, while the actions of the Order of the White Feather may not seem admirable to the modern-day audience, it can be explained in the context of wartime nationalism, fear, gender, and duty.
CHAPTER 2
RUDDLED FEATHERS: THE ORIGINS OF THE WHITE FEATHER CAMPAIGN IN BRITAIN

The British government relied heavily on traditional patriotic and sexual mores to garner enlistment. Upper-middle class ideals encouraged men to be athletic, particularly at soccer, preparing for potential war as if it was a sport itself.\(^{46}\) In the words of Jay Winter, “Football did not stop; it just went overseas.”\(^{47}\) Additionally, British schools, which many of the upper classes throughout the Dominions attended, increasingly emphasized athletics over academics, citing the role of sportsmanship in building young men’s characters.\(^{48}\) Schools established local Officer Training Corps as well, although many participants doubted their effectiveness in later years.\(^{49}\) Furthermore, British role models for those aspiring to martial manhood emerged during the Napoleonic Wars and the relatively peaceful decades that followed. Glorious accounts of the lives and deaths of men such as General Horatio Nelson, General Charles Gordon, and Robert Falcon Scott provided examples of how men were expected to give their all for the nation if necessary.\(^{50}\)


\(^{47}\) Winter, “Popular culture,” 339.

\(^{48}\) Sheftall, *Altered Memories*, 27.

\(^{49}\) Ibid., 29.

\(^{50}\) Ibid., 15-21.
In order to assert his masculinity, a man was expected to take his designated place as protector of his family and his homeland by enlisting in the army. Otherwise, he risked being publicly derided by women, and sometimes men, who deemed him a coward as the price for his lack of masculine action. Vera Brittain, most famous for her wartime coming-of-age account in Testament of Youth, was a young woman at the outset of war. At first, she attended Oxford, but later went abroad as a nurse in the Voluntary Aid Detachment. Her brother Edward was not old enough to join up without his father’s permission. Perhaps Edward was apprehensive of the stigma of not enlisting, as she wrote that following their father’s initial orders to stay home was “synonymous with everlasting disgrace.” Likewise, her future fiancé, Roland Leighton, declared in a letter to her that attending Oxford instead of serving in the war “would seem a somewhat cowardly shirking of my obvious duty.” He added that although his feelings for both Belgium and Germany were neutral, he felt he had to join to prove “heroism in the abstract.” Fear of humiliation, especially from female significant others and family members, convinced many men to enlist, even if they did not want to. Public propaganda implied that a man who


53 Ibid., 103.

54 Ibid., 129.
would not protect his country was not worthy of winning a woman’s love. In exchange for fulfilling his patriotic duty, a man could expect romantic or sexual favors as his reward.\textsuperscript{55}

Men often experienced an internal conflict between the natural instinct of self-preservation and the need to prove their masculine abilities.\textsuperscript{56} After all, as Joshua S. Goldstein writes, “Shame is the glue that holds the man-making together,” because the fear of humiliation motivated men to enlist, and therefore avoid emasculating public shame. Serving as a negative example for the rest of the local community proved undesirable for many.\textsuperscript{57} Years later, literary scholar J.R.R. Tolkien remembered the stigma of not immediately volunteering in a letter to his son Michael: “In those days, chaps joined up, or were scorned publicly. It was a nasty cleft to be in, especially for a young man with too much imagination and little physical courage.”\textsuperscript{58} Other men, such as conscientious objectors and pacifists, took the harder route, refusing to enlist for moral reasons. Although society labelled these men as cowards, Karyn Burnham remarks that these men possessed “immense courage” to follow their anti-war beliefs in the face of such hostile opposition.\textsuperscript{59}


\textsuperscript{56} Joshua S. Goldstein, \textit{War and Gender: How Gender Shapes the War System and Vice Versa} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 253.

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 269.


Men who voluntarily did not enlist could, however, find other ways to aid the war effort, even if the public did not support their lack of enlistment. For example, unskilled male labor often replaced skilled labor alongside women workers in munitions factories. Women either responded by encouraging soldiers or deriding other men to enlist. Many women also entered the paid workforce for the first time, employed in the war industries and the public sector. Many women gained work in tramways, railways, post offices, and other sectors for the first time.60 Gullace notes that as the First World War increasingly became a total war in which the home front was needed to secure success, women working outside the home as necessary manufacturers and workers created a political climate in which civic participation came to be based on service to the state instead of gender.61 These women war workers, deemed essential to the military effort, often faced complications with their expected maternal roles in the home, as one contemporary manual cites them as a "great army of women who have volunteered to fight the battle of industrial life, carrying with them also the burden of home anxieties and responsibilities."62

In exchange for male protection, women were responsible for the care of enlisted family members. To keep up morale, they sent correspondence that reminded them of the home they were protecting. Sometimes, women sent letters to soldiers they did not know but needed "someone to give them encouragement. Women often sent items such as photographs, …parcels, …

60 Manchester, Salford and District Women’s War Interests Committee, Women in the Labour Market (Manchester & District) during the War (Manchester: W. Morris Press Ltd., 1916), 5, 7, 13.


…newspapers and magazines” that gave them a tangible link to their homes. In a time of separation from everything familiar to them, men depended on this imperative connection to home. However, since soldiers usually only were given information that women wanted them to know, men often developed an idealized version of home that was much better, as well as unattainable, than reality. This made it harder for them to adjust to life at home after the war.63

Throughout the war, women carried out various roles in an attempt to convey female patriotism, and Susan R. Grayzel claims that British society continued to view women primarily in terms of their potential motherhood.64 With husbands off fighting in the war, women encountered difficulties providing for their homes. As housewives, their most important economic contribution was to convert income into food and other necessary goods.65 Women often struggled to provide food for their families because of food shortages, queues, and rationing in the later years of the war.66

Men often experienced psychological stress that resulted from fear of invasion (which can be partially attributed to government propaganda) and long, sometimes permanent, separations from family. If male family members went missing or died in action, the


64 Susan R. Grayzel, Women’s Identities at War: Gender, Motherhood, and Politics in Britain and France During the First World War (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 3.


‘breadwinners’ of the family would be absent after the war, leaving women with this responsibility. Society still expected men to primarily provide for families, but this put women without male heads of household in a bind. Because of this, voluntary and private charitable aid for widows soon gave way to government aid as a result of the rapidly increasing number of war widows.\textsuperscript{67}

Women also proved indispensable to the nation for their ability to give birth to the next generation of British citizens, knowing that their bodies were “the temple of life” and were “meant for the special duties of procreation.” The British nation could only endure if its mothers repopulated it, continually competing against the birthrate in “barbaric” Germany. Above all, women’s greatest priorities were bearing and raising children as “future mothers of the race.”\textsuperscript{68}

Even women who were not literally mothers often embraced caretaking roles to help with the war effort. Mothers expanded their maternal roles to accommodate soldiers away from home who needed to be taken care of. Influenced by upper- and middle-class values that women should provide voluntary service in their communities, numerous women participated in local and national charities, housed soldiers and Belgian refugees, and even became nurses in organizations such as the Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD).\textsuperscript{69} Nurses could symbolically fill a maternal role when a soldier’s own mother was far away at home, as they could care for him in a way that only a mother could do.


\textsuperscript{68} MacDonald, Simple Health Talks, 54-55.

Radical British women took support for the war in a new direction. Even before women began the White Feather Campaign, the symbolic meaning of the white feather was essentially that of being a coward. A.E.W. Mason’s 1902 book, *The Four Feathers*, shows that the white feather of cowardice was a well-known symbol of shame a decade before the war began. In the novel, a British soldier in Egypt must redeem himself after being given four white feathers for leaving the army in the face of danger. In it, he must prove himself to be brave in order to win back the affections of his sweetheart.\(^\text{70}\)

These popular book may have served as an inspiration for the Order twelve years later, as they performed a similar function. A few months before the war, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was quoted in the *Diss Express*, noting that “the white feather of cowardice is the greatest slur a man can wear.”\(^\text{71}\) In 1914, Admiral Charles Cooper Penrose Fitzgerald founded a new society for women known as the Order of the White Feather, gathering thirty women.\(^\text{72}\) Opening his campaign with a rousing speech against the dangers of slacking in a time of necessary war, Penrose Fitzgerald urged women to distribute white feathers to unenlisted men whom they felt were shirking their patriotic duties.\(^\text{73}\) Even sisters and significant others were encouraged to shame men into going to the recruitment office.\(^\text{74}\) Previously, the woman’s domestic sphere was the place to privately address men, but the Order expanded out of these ‘old-fashioned’ notions


\(^{71}\) “The White Feather,” *Diss Express*, March 27, 1914.


of gender. The founding of this organization implied a new method of shaming in which women could publicly shame men, which was fairly uncommon before this time.

Folkestone, a city on the southeastern tip of the English coast, became a hotbed for military recruitment following the declaration of the First World War. As throughout the rest of the nation, questions arose over how the British army could recruit the necessary men in such a short amount of time. The city’s close proximity to the European Continent made the issue of recruitment even more pressing, as this location made Folkestone susceptible to potential attacks. Additionally, Folkestone’s ports would be especially busy, as well as especially vulnerable, during the upcoming conflict. In response to these issues, Admiral Charles Cooper Penrose Fitzgerald proposed what he believed was the perfect solution for his local community to contribute to national defense.

Fitzgerald was a naval officer with a career spanning five decades, in which he became well-known for advocating the abolishment of sails, the development of signaling for communication, and writing naval biographies and informational pieces. In this way, he pushed for the modernization of the navy that would become instrumental in the coming war. An athletic man himself, he promoted the idea of athleticism in other men. After retiring from the Royal Navy in 1905, he spent the next decade writing a naval memoir and, more importantly, urging the British navy to bolster itself in the event of a potential, and very likely, threat from Germany in the near future.75

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When the long-expected war finally arrived, Admiral Fitzgerald soon took action. On August 30, 1914, Fitzgerald used his local fame to further his recruitment agenda, gathering a group of thirty women, whom he dubbed the “Order of the White Feather,” and charging them with the task of giving white feathers, a symbol of cowardice, to every unenlisted man they encountered. They would recognize these men by their lack of a military uniform. A Saturday edition of the *Chatham News* described a demonstration held in the nearby town of Deal two days later as the town crier announced: “Oyez! Oyez!! Oyez!!! The White Feather Brigade! Ladies wanted to present the young men of Deal and Walmer…the Order of the White Feather for shirking their duty in not coming forward to uphold the Union Jack of England! God save the

It became clear at this moment that the movement would not quickly pass into the shadows.

Fitzgerald cleverly knew that women could be used effectively to recruit men, because accosting them in public could call their manhood into question. Specifically, mothers, wives, sweethearts, and other female relatives could utilize their familial influence to convince men to enlist. Even before the Order was formally established, writers who were supposedly women published indictments of their acquaintances for being cowardly and effeminate in local newspapers. Public shaming was not the first tactic to use on an unenlisted man, but as the war drew on, it seemed necessary in order to convince them.

Public opinion also manifested itself through reactions to the popular English story from 1914, *The White Feather*. The story, written by Lechmere Worrall and J.E. Harold Terry, was reprinted in Canadian papers across the country. In this work, the main character, an English girl named Molly, falls in love with a spy. Within the plot, one character explains that pedigree gamecocks never have white feathers in their tails, and only the loudest and most arrogant crows have white feathers. The story was developed into a play that same year, starring English actor Albert Brown. The show became a huge hit after it toured in Canada, with *The Macleod*.

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Spectator calling it “the great play of the year” in April 1916.80 In British Columbia, another paper asserted the play’s nationwide appeal, claiming that this “high class” entertainment encountered success in western Canada as well.81 Basically, this work of fiction shows how far the idea of the white feather of cowardice permeated society, because it was very widely read.

Ideas regarding military service and male sexuality soon became closely linked in wartime Britain. If a woman gave a man a white feather, she marked him as a coward who was not worthy of sexual attraction from respectable, patriotic women. If he would not defend his country as a real man should, he did not deserve to have the chance to loaf about aimlessly while other brave men put their lives on the line for England. Additionally, such a man would be shamefully unpatriotic by not supporting his nation in its time of need. Even those who did not join for moral reasons, such as pacifists and conscientious objectors, would be included as targets of the Order. Interestingly, men sometimes gave white feathers to other men as well, showing that they found those who had not enlisted cowardly and unmanly. Richard Yorston, one such individual who served on the Western Front, later admitted to giving out white feathers with his friends. Although one friend accidentally gave a feather to a major, it seemed successful as other receivers “looked a bit sheepish.”82 Another man, E.A. Brookes received a mocking letter inviting him to join the local Bath Girl Scouts, “seeing that you cannot be a man not to join the army”83 (Figure 8).

80 “Local Items,” The Macleod Spectator, April 6, 1916.


Figure 8 Letter from Bath Girl Scouts “Scoutmistress” to E.A. Brookes, Imperial Was Museums, http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/1030005025.

During a conflict when, as Nicoletta F. Gullace argues, British citizenship became increasingly linked to civic participation rather than gender, various women chose such a radical route of action in an attempt to contribute to the nation—by means of war recruitment. Women who gave white feathers often reported feeling angry that alleged “shirkers” were not doing their duty when needed, while women were not allowed to prove their bravery and patriotic dedication through enlistment or similarly dangerous activities. British women had limited opportunities to provide service to the nation, and white feather giving was one of the options they chose, although it signified a deep departure from conventional gender norms. This was their way to make a difference, although postwar accounts mostly remembered them as negative differences in individuals’ lives.

Additionally, Susan R. Grayzel notes that the evolving concept of total war denoted the involvement of all able-bodied inhabitants of the nation, resulting in what she terms the “militarization of civilians.” First of all, as Peter Simkins suggests, Lord Kitchener created “the closest thing to a true citizen army that Britain has ever produced.” The increasing militarism impinging on civilian life, including the manufacture of wartime munitions and the exposure to a previously unseen number of wartime casualties, subsequently blurred the lines between the war front and the home front. By distributing white feathers, civilian women could influence the

actions, and possibly outcomes, at the war front. If women could not fight abroad, they could at least increase the number of British men who would do so.

The story of the Order spread almost immediately in the next few days after the first demonstration, with reprints of the original report published across the country by the first week of September. The media is so key to the account of the Order because without widespread coverage, the organization would not have become a national phenomenon so quickly. Instead, the Order would have been relegated as a local radical group. For example, the *Yorkshire Evening Post* already circulated an article on the Order by September 2 in a similar call for women to convince shameless shirkers to join the war effort.88 Other papers included more commentary, such as the *Sunderland Daily Echo*, which added another paragraph to the circulated story about women being able to effectively change the local lazy young men “lolling on beach and promenades.”89

These white feathers symbolized male cowardice, more specifically denoting the receiver as a ‘chicken.’ Initially, many government officials supported this method of recruitment. Similarly to the members’ actions, women outside the formal organization of the Order handed out white feathers and otherwise shamed men who they believed were too afraid to join the war effort. Before the war, the BEF was an entirely professionalized military, but in August 1914, it relied on large numbers of volunteers. The voluntary recruits of the BEF were simply not enough to cover losses and wage total war, showing that the British government needed to take further action to bolster its military. As a result, Britain instituted the draft in 1916, but the Order

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continued its activities even afterwards, when voluntary recruitment was no longer necessary, and its ideas expanded across to Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Although the draft was in place, these women could still target those they believed to be draft dodgers.90

Even the rich and famous were not immune to criticism from the movement. British film star Charlie Chaplin was residing in the United States when the war began. Instead of volunteering, Chaplin continued with his filmmaking career. In response, reports abounded of Chaplin receiving thousands of white feathers and angry letters for his lack of enlistment. Editorials publicly denounced him, chiding him for not serving as a good patriotic example for British men. One news writer stressed overwhelming influence, saying, “We shall win without Charlie, but…we would rather win with him.” Chaplin finally directed a response to his critics, stating that he had registered for the American draft, and if called, he would in fact join. In the meantime, he made donations totaling $250,000 to the American and British war efforts. 91 Tellingly, though, Chaplin commented little about the controversy in his autobiography. He noted that, for a man, “civilian apparel was a dress of shame,” as “a woman might present him with a white feather.” Notably, Chaplin never admitted receiving a feather himself, indicating his reluctance to associate himself with such a symbol of shame, especially since he considered his comedic film talents essential to the war effort by keeping up soldiers’ morale.92 However, film


Evans, Mothers of Heroes, 159.


critic and author David Robinson reports that Chaplin received numerous white feathers throughout the controversy.\textsuperscript{93}

Well-known figures of the women suffrage movement occupied a complicated role in the war effort as well. Suffragists, being more moderate, responded with the average amount of patriotism. Before the conflict, the more radical suffragettes vehemently opposed war in general. While leaders such as Christabel Pankhurst of the WSPU (Women’s Social and Political Union) and Millicent Garrett Fawcett of the NUWSS (National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies) opposed the war at its outset, much of their organizations’ leadership actually responded with enthusiasm. As a result, many women in the more extreme “suffragette” movement felt betrayed by leaders who put aside the fight for suffrage to engage in a war started among men. Soon after writing that the war was “God’s vengeance upon the people who held women in subjection,” Christabel travelled across the U.S. making speeches about the need to protect Britain and itself from the alleged German threat. Mrs. Emmeline Pankhurst and the WSPU, cooperating with David Lloyd George, mobilized a great amount of women for war work, making their organization the face of women’s suffrage in relation to the war effort. More moderate suffragist groups were not pleased at this misrepresentation. Mrs. Pankhurst even directed women to distribute white feathers at London rallies. Only Sylvia Pankhurst remained steadfastly pacifist throughout the war, citing her mother and sister’s betrayal of the movement and remaining an outcast in her family.\textsuperscript{94}

\textsuperscript{93} Robinson, \textit{Chaplin: His Life and Art}, 187.

\textsuperscript{94} Gullace, “\textit{The Blood of Our Sons},” 120-126.
The national press responded in various ways to the drastic agenda proposed by the Order. Many papers were ambiguous or increasingly spoke out against the Order’s activities. One paper reported the Reverend W. Hudson Shaw, who was enlisted, speaking at a recruitment meeting, but saying that pressuring young men in such a way “was nothing less than tyranny.”95 For example, a writer for the Sussex Express doubted whether it would make a difference in male recruitment, noting that if a man was not already ashamed of his unmanly lack of enlistment, no amount of public humiliation would change his unpatriotic attitude.96 Another piece from the Daily Record remarked that while the women of the Order, whom he referred to as “presumptuous hussies,” might have had good intentions, their behavior was “contemptible and unjust” to innocent, unsuspecting men.97 A later article from the Coventry Evening Telegraph expressed the hope that the British people, especially men of military age, would muster up enough courage so that organizations like the Order would not be needed for encouragement.98

How did the Order become so incendiary? First, British women were taking an unprecedented role in political affairs by participating in the war effort. As some women took more radical measures, society viewed them as ‘unwomanly’ in various ways. Women who publicly shamed men represented unbecoming aggressiveness that was not appropriate for respectable ladies. Also, when women joined semi-official war aid associations, they faced accusations of trying to become like men, especially when members wore uniforms that


96 “White Feathers,” Sussex Express, September 2, 1914.


resembled military wear. Rumors ran rampant about scandalous lesbian activity within these organizations. When women travelled abroad, as nurses for example, they were away from their parents’ supervision, supposedly leaving them with more opportunities to become promiscuous or otherwise sexually deviant. In the company of women, there was potential for homosexual activity, while caring for men who were temporary patients meant they could have heterosexual access as well.

After the war, the public, seemingly unanimously, viewed the Order’s activities as “an emblematic act of feminine betrayal.”99 Problematic activities conducted by radical groups like the Order suddenly became representative of soldiers’ disillusionment with women who they felt heartlessly sent them off into a bloodbath, even though only a minority of women participated in the Order.100 Other patriotic leagues avoided public shaming methods to distance themselves from the controversial organization.101 Soldiers’ memoirs written after the war reflect their disappointment with the ugly reality of war compared with what the public, specifically women, had told them.102

Many soldiers were angry that women who knew little about war subjected men to such horrible experiences.103 Most civilians only experienced war when they witnessed homecoming

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100 Ibid., 204.
101 Hendley, Organized Patriotism, 158.

However, soldiers across Europe often wrote candid accounts in their letters home that went into graphic detail. See Martha Hanna, Your Death Would Be Mine: Paul and Marie Pireaud in
veterans or German air raids.\textsuperscript{104} When men faced death and disfigurement in the trenches, they blamed women for sending them there in the first place.\textsuperscript{105} The disenchantment caused by the war made it seem that the Order represented the most obvious disadvantages of female patriotism, especially when accounts surfaced of women accidentally giving white feathers to enlisted men.\textsuperscript{106} Such a story was reprinted in Canada about a white feather given to a Victoria Cross recipient.\textsuperscript{107} Another soldier recalled a woman marching him to the recruitment office. When the recruiting officer asked him why he was there, he replied, “I don’t know, I’m sure. Better ask the lady.”\textsuperscript{108} As a result, soldiers viewed women in general as hypocritical beings who sent them off to war without having to risk paying the ultimate price themselves. This negative association with “feminine betrayal” is a possible factor of why so little secondary research exists on the Order. By the 1960s, few women would admit to being white feather givers, so researchers could collect only a small number of accounts from their point of view.\textsuperscript{109} Therefore, most of the evidence that exists comes from the perspective of one who received a white feather or witnessed one being given.

\textsuperscript{104} John H. Morrow, Jr., \textit{The Great War: An Imperial History} (London: Routledge, 2005), 157.
\textsuperscript{105} Gullace, “White Feathers and Wounded Men,” 203.
\textsuperscript{106} Ibid., 187.
\textsuperscript{108} Morrow, \textit{The Great War}, 66.
\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., 181-182.
The Order of the White Feather left a lasting impact on widespread public memory of the First World War. As so many post-war accounts mention the humiliating effects it often had on men, society largely remembers it as a group of uninformed ninnies who wanted to garner attention for themselves. Fears of being taken over by ‘uncivilized’ Huns fueled the need for action. In the context of total war, in which civilians were required to bolster the war effort, perhaps these women thought this was their best course of action. After all, more women than just those in the White Feather Society were angry at men who would not enlist to defend their country. Some women may have liked to hand out white feathers, but did not because they found that it went too far or could bring unwarranted negative attention upon themselves. Whatever the case, the actions of the Order serve as a chapter of First World War and gender history that cannot be ignored.

During the war, fear and fervent patriotism combined to inspire ideas that made sense at the time. In the uncertain times of a war unlike any other before it, more soldiers were needed to fight in battle than ever before. Since the British government did not initially enforce the conscription of soldiers, a vast number of volunteers were necessary for the war effort to succeed. The desperate need for more British soldiers persisted, resulting in legal conscription anyway. At the same time, even after conscription, the cause was still portrayed as a voluntary one, adding to the moral aspect of the British cause.\textsuperscript{110} Even when men did not receive white feathers, others hoped that they would at least respond to fliers calling for soldiers to defend their country.\textsuperscript{111}

\textsuperscript{110} Winter, “Popular culture in wartime Britain,” 330.

For conscientious objectors, the Order symbolized the mainstream harassment of them over their attempt to follow their personal beliefs. Joyce Eileen Eames, a young girl at the time, recalled the following story in 1990. Two of her male cousins received white feathers for being conscientious objectors for religious reasons. To respond to such an assault on them, the two became stretcher-bearers, often venturing into no man’s land to retrieve the wounded. Each of them became injured themselves on separate occasions—one in the head and one in the foot. The first cousin died at a young age, but Eames stated that the second was never the same after his experience. Thus, although those who objected the war did not fight, many men still felt the need to prove their bravery in other ways.

Figure 9 “This little pig stayed at home,” Frank Holland, Imperial War Museums, http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205133178.
For an island nation at war, those in favor of it cited the pressing need for more soldiers. For soldiers in civilian dress mistaken for civilians, it magnified soldiers’ existing perception of the gross misunderstanding of the military experience back at home. At every facet of this issue, emotions flared. Postwar memories of humiliation by the Order would never go away for many. Even if a white feather giver’s accusation was false, a man would find it hard to live down such public emasculation, especially if the public did not know he was a soldier. Whatever the case, the Order remained in the minds of soldiers and civilians alike decades after the Armistice. Their impact on men’s lives would remain with them, often for the remainder of their lives.
CHAPTER 3

‘COWARDS’ IN CANADA: THE WHITE FEATHER FLUTTERS ACROSS THE ATLANTIC

During the Order’s heyday, numerous women presented white feathers, a sign of cowardice, to men not in military uniform. This practice soon spread across the Atlantic to Canada. Similarly, women outside the formal organization of the Order handed out white feathers and otherwise shamed men who they believed were too afraid to join the war effort. However, the Order in Canada was not a formal organization. Instead, women made their own individual initiatives to hand out white feathers. The Order continued its activities even after the institution of the Canadian draft in 1917.

However, public support for the Order began to wane as more and more critics accused these women of cowardice and hypocrisy. Contemporary newspapers show how the public viewed issues like the Order at the time. As opposition to such tactics increased, support for the Order quickly waned. After the war, the Order became infamous as soldiers wrote memoirs describing its members’ devastating mental effects on men.

Over time, the ideas emphasized by the Order spread throughout the British Commonwealth, most notably in Canada. The connection between the British and Canadian Orders is linked to their shared war effort, similarly to the way that John Darwin notes that white settler societies throughout the British Empire often forged a common British identity with the United Kingdom.\footnote{John Darwin, \textit{Unfinished Empire: The Global Expansion of Britain} (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2012), 191, 390.} Canadian historian Suzanne Evans further supports this idea of Britain’s lasting influence on Canadian society, writing that Canadian war support stemmed from
“Canada’s devotion and fidelity to the memory of its founders.”113 As it had before the war, during the conflict, Canada continued to follow Britain’s lead.

Canadians also understood the shameful meaning of the white feather. For example, one poet believed that men who showed the “White Feather” would not achieve glory, but instead shame.114 Also, in a 1917 newspaper article, one writer wrote that Canada must copy Britain’s stoic defense of its homeland, and even as far as its conscription policy, believing that “Canada will not show the white feather in this time of stress.”115 Many Canadians supported the war because of their belief that the British Empire was “engaged in a tremendous struggle for its very existence.”116 The existence of the Order in Canada is further proof of Britain’s lasting influence on Canadian society. World War I itself is so important in the course of Canadian history because Evans believes it to be “the birth of Canada on the international stage.”117 In fact, Canada actually attended Versailles as an independent entity from Britain.118

At the onset of war, the Canadian government realized it could gain more autonomy in its foreign affairs if it pledged to help the British war effort succeed.119 As a British dominion,

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114 “Boys Do Your (Bit),” The Western Call, April 7, 1916.


117 Evans, Mothers of Martyrs, 139.

118 Ibid., 57.

Canada was automatically at war when Britain declared war on August 4, 1914. Both the British and Canadian societies defined masculinity by a man’s ability to aid in the defense of his homeland through fulfillment of his duty. At the time, the idea of the “nation” was much more localized, but it came to signify the whole country as a result of the war effort. Specifically, the British viewed men from the Dominions as outdoor, pioneer types, even though much of the populations in Canada, Australia, and New Zealand were urbanized. Mark Sheftall notes that Commonwealth men represented Britishness “untainted by the degenerative effects of industrialization.” Citizens of these countries often agreed, as “romantic nationalism” influenced their desire to create a distinct identity from the metropole, which they felt looked down on their semi-foreign cultures. If a man was not physically fit for enlistment, he could still fulfill his patriotic duty in some other way, and society would excuse him from active military duty.

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122 Sheftall, Altered Memories, 51-52.

123 Sheftall, Altered Memories, 42.

124 Sheftall, Altered Memories, 37.

125 “Record in Patriotism,” The Islander, July 24, 1915.
Popular culture specifically exhibited the closeness between Britain and its Dominions. Andrew Horrall argues that Charlie Chaplin was such an example of this shared culture, as he influenced Canadian soldiers as “a talisman of civilian life.” At the same time, Chaplin “represented a distinctly North American cinema culture.” As an unprecedentedly successful film star, many military men swarmed camp theaters for the chance to watch a Chaplin movie. Soldiers even imitated Chaplin’s famous style of mustache, making military leaders uneasy considering his growing reputation as a socialist. Eventually, Canadian soldiers were banned from shaving and styling their mustaches in October 1917, in a thinly veiled attempt to specifically prohibit the Chaplin mustache. Men knew of the wartime controversy surrounding Chaplin, as a Canadian trench newspaper wrote: “They say as Charlie Chaplin ain’t/A doing of his bit,/Yet all the same with all the boys/He sure has made a hit.” At the same time, this shows that they considered Chaplin to be “doing his bit” through his film work.

Any man who did not do his part properly could face being labelled as a shirker, as discussed in the previous chapter. One Canadian writer called for women to “white feather” any man at home who was a “farm slacker.” Conscientious objectors could be placed in the unpatriotic category as well. One Canadian story targeted these men as menaces to society, noting that whether they were “agents of the enemy” or “active participants in a socialist


127 Ibid., 40.

128 Ibid., 32-37.

129 “White Feather Farm Slackers,” The Lethbridge Telegram, April 23, 1918.
propaganda whose creed is no war,” they were still “the King’s enemies and must be so treated.” In effect, British society, ever so influential on Canadian society at this time, evolved to expect service as a mark of citizenship, rather than maleness alone. This allowed women to lay greater claims for citizenship, especially after the war.

The issue of patriotism was quite complex in Canada. French-Canadians encountered a distinct set of issues. As they felt less closely tied to Britain and Europe than English-Canadians, they were often accused of lacking in patriotism. In reality, they simply identified themselves as North Americans rather than Europeans. Furthermore, French emigrants had not come to Canada in large numbers since the eighteenth century, unlike the large British immigrant population in the country. This meant that their allegiance to France was less powerful than the British immigrants who were less far removed from their original home country. Extreme nationalists, such as Henri Bourassa, who opposed the war particularly garnered attention, earning the French-Canadian population a somewhat unwarranted disloyal reputation. Other less liberal French-Canadian politicians aimed to inhibit conscription rather than war service itself. For example, Canadian Member of Parliament J.A. Barrette of Quebec campaigned to postpone the conscription bill for six months. Many French-Canadians still believed that voluntary service

130 “Matters as We View Them,” The Lethbridge Telegram, June 24, 1915.


132 Sheftall, Altered Memories, 97-98.

133 “Quebec Man in Move to Kill Draft,” The Winnipeg Evening Tribune, June 21, 1917.
was the more effective means of recruitment for the war effort. Over time, though, language used to advertise recruitment shifted from that of “Empire” to that of “liberty.”\textsuperscript{134}

Women, on the other hand, were to primarily occupy themselves with maternal duties to the state, specifically through “emotional work” in which they were to be “supportive and inspirational.”\textsuperscript{135} While men fought on the front, women either remained at home or travelled to the front to work, mostly as nurses or caretakers. Some women became “godmothers” who sent letters and packages to soldiers without families.\textsuperscript{136} Others made socks, scarves, and other clothing, practicing “maternalistic philanthropy.”\textsuperscript{137} In effect, as Susan Grayzel puts it, “women were granted agency as mothers.”\textsuperscript{138} When soldiers were encouraged to enter the military, they often were persuaded by propagandists’ efforts to portray the war as one to protect the nation’s mothers.

Women could also participate through military recruitment, whether moderate or radical.\textsuperscript{139} By giving a man a white feather, a woman essentially was assaulting his masculinity, implying that he was staying at home in the same way that a woman would. He would become a

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{134} Sheftall, \textit{Altered Memories}, 104.
  \item \textsuperscript{135} Susan Grayzel, \textit{Women’s Identities at War: Gender, Motherhood, and Politics in Britain and France During the First World War} (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 12, 25.
  \item \textsuperscript{138} Grayzel, \textit{Women’s Identities at War}, 83.
  \item \textsuperscript{139} Ibid., 192.
\end{itemize}
sort of “mock woman,” which was significant in an age in which being called a woman was often an insult. Some women even proposed distributing petticoats to these men who supposedly acted like women. Also, simply being a civilian was equated with femininity, as opposed to martial masculinity. This emasculating “sexual shame” caused psychological scars that would last long after the war was over. However, shaming a man was not the main goal— the Order’s primary aim was to persuade a man to change and become brave soldier in khaki. To influence a man to take his proper place in society could, in fact, be interpreted as an act of love. If the man was ashamed of himself, hopefully he would realize that he should be doing more for his country.

The Order’s methods proved very controversial in Britain. As papers reported daily on British and Canadian military efforts, so they discussed the Order’s relation to recruitment. Although Canada did not encounter the Order directly until 1916, newspapers reported on its creation in Britain in 1914, with one paper calling it a “remarkable league” that found “singular success” in recruiting men for the cause. The Canadian writer even wondered: “Are our girls patriotic enough to start a White Feather League?”

As Britons had debated the Order’s legitimacy, Canadians too formed differing views on the effects of the Order in their own country. Canadian citizens wrote in to various newspapers,

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140 Gullace, *The Blood of Our Sons*, 44.


142 Grayzel, *Women’s Identities at War*, 158.


airing their opinions on the good or bad aspects of the Brigade. For example, a writer from Innisfail Province decried the use of white feathers to shame soldiers in the *Wetaskiwin Times*. In this article, the writer focuses on the importance of doing what is best for Canada. The author noted that distributing white feathers “is one of the silliest methods of attempting to obtain recruits.” In contrast, a Canadian man could ‘do his bit’ while staying at home, knowing that “True patriotism consists in doing one’s duty to his country, his neighbor and his family.”145 However, the writer did note that unmarried men were needed to bolster the Canadian forces at the front.

A married soldier writing to the *Winnipeg Evening Tribune*, however, offered the opposite reaction to unenlisted men in light of white feather giving. In his article, “Enlistment and Civic Employees,” this man deplored men who he thought had gained government jobs to avoid fighting. While married men were fighting away from their families, many single men were cowards still enjoying the comforts of home. The soldier wrote that he would love to see members of the I.O.D.E. (Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire) distribute white feathers to all men who did not possess a “rejected and unfit” ticket.146 In this way, the writer showed that simply threatening to hand someone a white feather could be an effective method as well.147 The writer hoped that these men will turn away from their selfishness, because enlisted men arriving home after the war “will know how to treat them.”148 At the same time, if these men were truly

cowards, they would prove unfit in battle anyway, so it might prove hard for the government to find a solution to this problem.

Another writer provided a scathing opinion of the Order. A Merritt, B.C., paper reported that a man who had one brother killed and another twice wounded was sent a white feather from an anonymous letter writer. The author of the article threatened to expose the alleged author’s name in the newspaper if they did not provide him with a sufficient explanation. Interestingly, the man who received the letter was not a soldier, but allegedly had paid money to assist the cause instead, which probably made the author believe that the individual was a coward hiding behind his money. Perhaps the writer held resentment against the sender, because that person was likely a woman who could never fight, so she would never face such public ridicule. In such a small town, no one’s names were exposed in the incident, perhaps to avoid unwarranted attention. At any rate, the writer perceived the sending of this white feather letter as a grievous injustice.149

In conclusion, the Order of the White Feather was a World War One-era organization that prompted Canadian society to evaluate cowardice and war service in relation to masculinity and femininity. Men who were shamed for the lack of service were accused also of a lack of manhood, thus being feminized by women. Society expected men to come to the defense of their homeland, particularly for mothers and their families. Women, on the other hand, were supposed to fulfill maternal roles that would foster success for the British and Canadian forces. Throughout Great Britain and its empire, citizens responded differently. While some Canadians exhorited the Order as a patriotic effort that bolstered necessary enlistment, others denounced it

as a group of bullies that sanctioned unwarranted and unnecessary harassment in public. Over the course of the conflict, the Order’s ideas of shaming men into enlistment spread from Britain to Canada, resulting in a repeat of an earlier debate in Britain which was further complicated by its imperial ties. As in Britain, Canadians differed in opinions over whether the Order was effective or harmful to their own society. In essence, the Britain’s ideals during the Great War served as a driving force for Canada’s involvement in the conflict as many native-born Britons felt the need to defend their original homeland with the help of their native Canadian brothers.
CHAPTER 4
CHICKENS, KOOKABURRAS, AND KIWIS: SPREADING TO AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND

Meanwhile, on the outskirts of the Empire, news of the Order of the White Feather spread farther to Australia and New Zealand as well.\textsuperscript{150} By early 1915, the practice of giving white feathers expanded with Australian women engaging in the practice, continuing up until 1918.\textsuperscript{151} The same happened in New Zealand, despite its institution of the draft in 1916. With the entry of Commonwealth soldiers into the war, the Australian civilian population faced the same kinds of issues as people in Britain. Notably, though, Australia never passed legislation on the draft, as Australians voted against it in a referendum. Critics often blamed women, who now had the right to vote, unlike in most other countries, for letting their emotions get in the way of the necessary recruiting of men to protect the Australian homeland. At the same time, those against conscription counted on women’s votes, as they hoped that their emotions would prohibit them from allowing the government to forcibly recruit men from their homes.


Soon, events in British newspapers became widely circulated around the Commonwealth as well, such as that of a recently decorated soldier wrongly receiving the token of cowardice from an anonymous woman. Australian papers also circulated an English taxi driver’s suicide after being judged medically unfit for the army but still receiving a white feather, leaving him unable to deal with the humiliation. As it became more obvious that the war would last longer than previously expected, tensions led to verbal accusations of cowardice from politicians and other civilians. One Senator Millen believed that most in opposition to conscription were men who were actually “afraid to fight,” some born with “nervous instability,” some with mothers who did not pay enough attention to their domestic duties. Some writers to Australian and New Zealander newspapers commended the Order for its activities, seeing a need for it each time

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they saw a ‘coward’ out of uniform. One woman bluntly wrote that “lily-livered young bloods”
took advantage of frivolous luxuries at home while soldiers were fighting in conditions of the
utmost discomfort. Additionally, she wondered how the men’s “sweethearts” felt about their lack
of enlistment. In light of the men’s frivolity, she hoped the White Feather Brigade would soon
take action.155 The New Zealander Free Lance noted the popularity of white feather giving, but
commented that giving white feathers to men was “the very quintessence of meanness unless you
are sure of your facts.”156 Thus, the public had to acknowledge that more than a few feather
demonstrations had gone awry.

Many newspapers openly criticized the distribution of white feathers as an act of
hypocrisy. Some papers stated that, in fact, the givers were the actual cowards since they did not
have the courage to openly accuse men of cowardice, but instead sent anonymous letters
containing white feathers.157 One such letter was signed by “An Admirer of a man not a Shirker,”
in an attempt to more openly emasculate the recipient. One journalist responded to this act,
writing that “Black as are the Huns in our eyes, through their deeds of unexampled cruelty, we
would prefer to risk our wives and children in their hands rather than leave them to the mercy of
such contemptible curs,” as the sender of such a cowardly and hypocritical letter. If this person

155 “White Feather Brigade,” The Wingham Chronicle and Manning River Observer, July 10,
1915.


was in action, the writer believed that they would not have the leisure to write such harmful and useless pieces of correspondence.\textsuperscript{158}

Others used different methods of argumentation to discredit the white feather givers. Civilian L.C. Cable wrote that his decision to avoid voluntary enlistment affected no one, so those with white feathers should keep their opinions to themselves.\textsuperscript{159} A medical reject in Egypt also sent in a letter that criticized women who gave white feathers for engaging in such a useless activity instead of doing work abroad themselves.\textsuperscript{160} J. Milligan of Awahuri, NZ, used a sarcastic approach in his letter to the editor, wishing to “convey my fullest sympathy to the poor ignorant wretch” who sent him a white feather.\textsuperscript{161}

Humiliation also served as a useful tactic. Another article sarcastically mocked a female sender’s seeming lack of manners, noting that as her handwriting indicated that she was a “very nice young lady,” she should surely be able to send a man who unjustly received a white feather “a nice little note of apology.”\textsuperscript{162} In a similar manner, one newspaper decried the radical act of distributing white feathers because the practice “could easily be converted into a persecution more abhorrent and degrading than actual conscription,” adding that the line between “voluntarism and compulsion” was already thin enough.\textsuperscript{163} A particularly scathing article derided

\textsuperscript{158} “The White Feather,” \textit{Queanbeyan Age and Queanbeyan Observer}, April 7, 1916.


\textsuperscript{160} “The White Feather,” \textit{The Rosedale Courier}, September 14, 1915.


white feather women as “unthinking girls” and a “band of flappers,” indicating that such women knew nothing of serious political affairs since they consistently attempted to shame men who were needed to conduct domestic military affairs. A New Zealand paper derided one giver as “devoid of her proper senses,” since she persisted in pointlessly giving white feathers after the institution of the draft, when men would be forced to join up anyway.

There were many reasons men decided to remain at home instead of fighting abroad. Many patriotic men wanted to serve, but simply were unable or were not allowed. For example, many men who received white feathers had in fact been refused for medical reasons. Somehow, a man wearing an eye-shield received a feather from an overly enthusiastic woman, replying that such people had “a vulgar craving for cheap and nasty notoriety.” One paper cited the giving of white feathers without knowledge of one’s background as “illogical and unfair” because many people appearing to be in perfect health could still have serious medical issues. New Zealander Robert Greaves had recently received an anonymous white feather, although his medical condition would have been unsatisfactory for service. When he died soon


165 *Woodville Examiner*, August 24, 1917.


after, his landlady blamed the sender because being medically unfit, he could never fulfill his
duty in the way other men could.  

In one case, two Australian officers received letters in the post containing white feathers,
apparently for remaining at home while the fighting continued abroad. Officials responded that
important military jobs remained to be carried out in Australia proper, and these men were both
chosen to stay and fulfill their duty, although both had applied to go and fight. They also noted
the cowardly anonymity of the senders, who even took the care to disguise their handwriting.  
Even the whole of Australian Permanent Forces stationed domestically received a package
containing a white feather, even though they were directed to stay at home, some of them against
their wishes. At another time, the mayor of St. Peters, a city outside of Sydney, received a
letter, and publicly responded that he would serve if needed, but he was not a coward, since he
was organizing the war effort from home. Similarly, an agent from the Moree Recruiting
Association received a feather from someone who admonished him to “not hide behind
recruiting meetings any longer.” The sender even wrote that they would rather leave Australian
women and children in the hands of the “Huns” than under the protection of such allegedly
cowardly civilians.


In yet another Australian case, one man who received a feather was seventy-three years old, obviously too old to be of military use, showing how some writers thought the Order was venturing into ridiculousness. One man received a feather in the post despite his activities in the local recruiting association and the fact that he was waiting to be called up to serve by the dental corps. New Zealander Harry McManaway received a feather despite his alleged “liberal” donation of funds, even though he had not been drafted. Family ties could sometimes count as a legitimate excuse as well. Another article defended a man who received a letter, although he only stayed home to support his mother and seven other children, who had no one else to rely on. Such examples of cases prove that, albeit in few cases, Australians and New Zealanders believed that legitimate reasons existed for men to not enlist for active service abroad.

Fictional accounts of white feather giving appeared in Australian newspapers as well, noting the sexual shame associated with the practice. In one story, a woman sends her sweetheart a white feather with her engagement ring attached, writing: “When I marry, I will marry a man.” The man had only hesitated to enlist because he was the only person to care for his mother, but after receiving the humiliating package, he soon joined up, never again replying to her repeated correspondences after she changed her opinion of him. After being mortally wounded at


Gallipoli, the man asked a fellow comrade to return his blood-stained feather to her, driving her insane with grief.\textsuperscript{180} Clearly, the writer of this account presents the Order in a negative light because of the needless ruin it caused all parties involved, especially since the man in the story was never even a coward in the first place.

Although some individuals believed that the white feather could be used to inspire cowards to enlist, the movement met a large backlash from the press. Many articles from employees and letters from readers indicate that many believed the white feather movement was a useless way to contribute to the war effort. Instead, writers proposed that women do work that was actually valuable instead of criticizing others for doing nothing, even when they were barred from enlisting.

CONCLUSIONS

As death took its toll, we see that the cruel humiliating tactics employed by the White Feather Campaign became ever more subject to scrutiny. As the ideas of the White Feather Brigade spread throughout the Commonwealth, so did resentment of it in reaction to its actions. The Commonwealth, like Great Britain, initially responded with lukewarm support of the idea of the Order, but largely hated it as the war progressed. While Canadians often discussed white feather giving, more accounts of this actually occurring are reported in Australia and New Zealand. Friends and family members of soldiers killed in the war often blamed the women who gave those men white feathers, spurring them to join the army to begin with. Decades later, many civilians, including veterans, remembered the effects of these women on their loved ones, even if they survived the war. Within a patriarchal society, questioning the masculinity of men was seen as a harsh move by women who by default of their biological sex could never qualify for contemporary men’s roles.

In the context of anxieties about sexual and gender identity, such issues persist today. Few schoolboys do not find it insulting to be told they look or act like a girl. Sayings such as “be a man” and “grow a pair” are still used to get boys and young men to be tougher in certain situations. Although American society has generally become increasingly accepting of those who do not conform to traditional ideas of gender and sex, some anxieties remain. Those who cross gender lines as being transgender are the butt of jokes and, all too often, the targets of violence. Men who were perceived as acting like women by staying home in the wake of the conflict faced embarrassment and verbal harassment. Additionally, controversies over how to deal with homosexuality continue into the present day. Similarly, if these men were supposedly effeminate in any way, they could be accused of homosexuality, which was still a crime in British lawbooks.
Although popular culture remembers the White Feather Campaign quite negatively, people still attach a stigma to gender or sexual nonconformity, because these anxieties present themselves in different ways across time.

Thus, although the White Feather Campaign came across as a radical movement at the time, it employed a more conservative type of feminism than what we think of today. Women began to publicly advocate their political agendas when they distributed white feathers, which was still against the norm. However, they used traditional ideas about gender in their attempts to convince men to be ‘real’ men by enlisting and protecting their country. But, these women actually influenced a change in gender notions since many members of the public believed they went too far with their methods, which meant that the White Feather Campaign’s plans largely backfired.

Encountering studies on such subjects usually produces strong opinions. While the Order’s agenda did not last, it still shows that women were trying to exert political influence in whatever way they knew how. These women took the more radical route, but studies must be objective in order to discern the true meaning and purpose behind it. Thus, while the White Feather Brigade often carries a negative connotation, it still remains a valuable piece of British history during the First World War.
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*Inquiries Journal/Student Pulse* 2, no. 2 (2010),


