One who has sacrificed: the use of 'high diction' in women's correspondence to Scottish newspapers during the First World War.

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‘One Who Has Sacrificed’: The use of ‘high diction’ in women’s correspondence to Scottish newspapers during the First World War

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This chapter uses as source material women’s letters to the editor published in Scottish newspapers during the First World War. Newspapers are a particularly important resource in accessing the otherwise unrecorded voices of ordinary men and women, and are becoming much more accessible to the historian via the many on-going digitisation projects of newspaper archives. This chapter focuses on letters published in Scottish newspapers 1914-18. In particular, it investigates letters written to the newspapers by correspondents using familial pen names by which the writer claimed to be the mother, wife, daughter or widow of a combatant. The chapter investigates the type of issues that roused such women to write – anonymously – to their local newspaper during the war, the power of the choice of such a pen name, and the language used in their correspondence. In particular, it investigates the use of the ‘high diction’ of sacrifice and heroism in the letters of women correspondents, many of whom were working class; how such language was used to frame the war experiences of both the soldiers and their female family members; and how the use of ‘high diction’ changed during the war as women reworked it for their own purposes.

Paul Fussell’s *The Great War and Modern Memory*[1] posits the First World War as the point at which the lofty idealism of the 19th century was replaced by a new age of irony and cynicism, forged in the mud and death of trench warfare. The myth of war as noble and chivalric – defined in such ‘high diction’ terms as ‘sacrifice’, ‘honour‘ and ‘just’ – was, according to Fussell, destroyed by the realities of 20th-century warfare. Both the Edwardian elites who led the troops and the soldiers themselves, on both sides of the conflict, had been inculcated into a heroic view of warfare through education, religion and literature: meaning that, at the outbreak of war in 1914, it was framed as a righteous war in the speeches of politicians, the sermons of the Church and the words of newspaper editors, and the soldiers’ personal sacrifice as worthwhile and necessary. However, according to Fussell, the ideal of a valorous and Christian warriordom was one of the early casualties of the war, blown away by the shelling of 1915. In his book he refers particularly to writers such as Wilfrid Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves and Edmund Blunden. In recent years, some cultural historians have started to question the total disappearance of ‘high diction’ and its concomitant values in the later years of the war. Winter, for example, argues that other soldier-writers continued to use more traditional

[1] Fussell, P., 1975. *The Great War and modern memory*. Oxford: OUP

motifs throughout the war and afterwards.[2] Watson and Porter agree that, for some officers and men, the ideal of sacrifice continued throughout war and might even exacerbate the violence.[3] While they agree that the use of 'high diction' declined, they argue that, for most soldiers, the conflict remained a just and necessary war of self-defence and that there was a strong conviction of the rightness of the struggle and the worth of individual sacrifice. Similarly, Bell argues that 'sacrifice' was the dominant trope throughout the war and that language developed in which making the 'supreme sacrifice', i.e. dying in battle, was not described as a passive act but as the product of a conscious decision to follow a path, such as enlisting in the army or taking a particular action in battle, that might lead to death.[4]

This 'high diction' of Sacrifice and a Just War was a product of a pre-war imperialist and Christian concept of patriotism and nationhood promulgated by the Church, schools and both high and popular literature. Bell points out that the education of both the officer class and the men serving under them would have included frequent experience of religious worship, Bible reading and hymns, and that a particular use of militaristic language was exemplified in hymns such as *Onward Christian Soldiers* and *Soldiers of Christ, Arise*. Watson and Porter agree that the ideals of sacrifice, suffering and redemption borrowed heavily from a Christian vocabulary, but also from a popular appetite for heroic tales. Authors such as H. Rider Haggard, Anthony Hope and Arthur Conan Doyle, plus hundreds of other pulp-fiction writers, flooded the late Victorian and Edwardian market with adventure stories in which the superiority of the British Empire and its white, male heroes was celebrated. Thus on the outbreak of war, appeals for national unity and volunteers were framed in terms of patriotism and the moral validity of a Just War, supported by the Church, while the ideology of sacrifice became shorthand for 'a diffuse body of values, concepts and themes extolling the laying down of your life for a greater good'.[5] In her study of popular responses to the outbreak of war in 1914, Pennell argues that ordinary people employed the same language about the war as found in official publication, using words such as honour, justice, defence and righteousness in order to justify British involvement in the war.[6] Robb has also noted that, throughout the war, British journalists used euphemistic language and formulaic expressions, such as soldiers offering 'splendid resistance'

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[2] Winter, J., 1998. *Sites of memory, sites of mourning: The Great War in European cultural history*. Cambridge University Press.

[3] Watson, A. and Porter, P., 2010. Bereaved and aggrieved: combat motivation and the ideology of sacrifice in the First World War. *Historical Research*, *83*(219), pp.146-164.

[4] Bell, S., 2014. 'Soldiers of Christ arise': Religious Nationalism in the East Midlands during World War I. *Midland History*, *39*(2), pp.219-235.

[5] Watson, A. and Porter, P., 2010. Bereaved and aggrieved: combat motivation and the ideology of sacrifice in the First World War. *Historical Research*, *83*(219), p. ?

[6] Pennell, C., 2012. *A kingdom united: popular responses to the outbreak of the First World War in Britain and Ireland*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

and ‘brilliant counter-attacks’, thus elevating the most ordinary and squalid engagements to the realm of myth and chivalry.[7] He argues that journalists resorted to the use of such ‘high diction’, and the language that had been educated into a whole generation through the adventure stories and the poetry of Tennyson and Bridges in their careful and censored reports of action at the front.

Thus there is growing agreement that, whilst they might be less articulate, the common soldiery was just as likely as to be embued with a heroic understanding of the war as its public-school officers at the start of the war and that, although there was a decline in the use of ‘high diction’, it did not entirely disappear. The continuing popularity at the front of a book such as John Hay Beith’s *The First Hundred Thousand*[8] (published under the pseudonym Ian Hay), assembled from a series of articles written for *Blackwood’s Magazine* and incorporating a humorous look at life in the army from a captain in the 10th Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, attests to the appreciation of the common soldier for the type of patriotic heroism, exemplified by Hay’s poem *K(1)* which ends with the line ‘*He did his duty – and his bit!*’

As Darrow points out, this was above all a male myth of war experience.[9] War was noble, chivalric and masculine, while women were frequently framed as anti-militaristic, pacifist or even spies. She suggests that one of the only ways women could lay claim to some part of the war experience was to volunteer as nurses, although such war service was seen as a personal, rather than an abstract, national, service. While the soldier served the nation, the nurse served the soldier. The same romantic literary tradition found in the letters and diaries of officers can be seen in the similar output of middle-class nurses,[10] and Watson notes that volunteer nurses were often compared to volunteer soldiers in popular patriotic literature, although she makes a distinction between the ‘service’ of middle-class volunteers and the paid ‘work’ of working-class women.[11] Thus some women could also aspire to a vision of war service framed in the same chivalric terms of sacrifice and valour. They could even be heroes, as the death of Edith Cavell showed, although Robb points out that, in the framing of her death, Cavell, a 50 year-old unmarried principal of a nursing school, was consistently represented as a delicate ‘girl’ and powerless victim.[12]

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[7] Robb, G., 2014. *British Culture and the First World War*. Macmillan International Higher Education.
[8] Hay, I., 1916. *The First Hundred Thousand: Being the Unofficial Chronicle of a Unit of" K (1),"*. Houghton Mifflin.
[9] Darrow, M.H., 1996. French volunteer nursing and the myth of war experience in World War I. *The American historical review*, *101*(1), pp.80-106.
[10] Hallett, C.E., 2014. *Veiled warriors: Allied nurses of the first world war*. OUP Oxford.
[11] Watson, J.S., 2004. *Fighting different wars: experience, memory, and the First World War in Britain* (Vol. 16). Cambridge University Press.
[12] Robb, G., 2014. *British Culture and the First World War*. Macmillan International Higher Education.

However, what of women who did not perform such specific war work as nursing or working in the munitions factories? How did they perceive their role in the war and did they make use of the 'high diction' of sacrifice and patriotism to frame either the parts played by their men-folk or their own lives during the wartime emergency? An analysis of women's letters published in Scottish newspapers during the war suggests that they not only made use of such language, but also adapted it to suit their own ends, particularly to justify criticism of the conduct of others during the war emergency, including the government.

Mass-circulation newspapers started to appear in Britain during the 1890s, and soon surpassed older newspapers in terms of sales because of their lively and sensationalist reporting style, and use of interviews, photographs, massed headlines and introductory paragraphs to offer 'stories' rather than merely a straightforward retelling of events. This new type of newspaper was exemplified in Scotland by the *Daily Record*, which was established in Glasgow by Alfred Harmsworth in 1895. Key to this new journalism was the encouragement of readers to become involved in news-making, through a variety of mechanisms for sharing their opinions, including correspondence columns. Despite the introduction of censorship imposed by the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA) in August 1914, newspapers were still seen as an important source of information during the war, and a thirst for news meant that sales continued to increase, with over 6 million newspapers sold every day.[13] Newspapers were also used for propaganda purposes such as encouraging men to volunteer and, as noted above, frequently used 'high diction' and euphemistic language in the reporting of military action. In Lewis Grassic Gibbon's novel *Sunset Song*, set in rural Kincardineshire during the First World War, it is the 'right fierce' urging of the newspaper editors that leads the socialist crofter Chae Strachan to enlist: 'Chae Strachan came up to Blawearie one night with a paper in his hand and a blaze on his face, and he cried that he for one was off to enlist.' Gibbon mockingly suggested: '*Man, some of those editors are right rough creatures. God pity the Germans if they'd their hands on them!'*

As Pennell notes,[14] newspapers can provide an excellent foundation for establishing popular reactions to the war, although they need to be used critically. Individual newspapers might contain political bias and inaccuracies, but the use of correspondence columns from a variety of Scottish newspapers can help to identify the issues that stimulated public debate during the war and the types of rhetoric used to discuss such issues. Letters to the editor offer the opportunity to access the opinions of ordinary readers who might have left no other written record of their thoughts, and there is evidence to suggest that the opinions of letter-writers can be considered broadly

[13] Robb, G., 2014. *British Culture and the First World War*. Macmillan International Higher Education.
[14] Pennell, C., 2012. *A kingdom united: popular responses to the outbreak of the First World War in Britain and Ireland*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

representative of non-writers who read the same newspaper.[15] The letters discussed in this chapter were accessed via the use of digitization projects such as *The Scotsman Digital Archive* and the *British Newspaper Archive.* Both allow advanced searches enabling the researcher to focus on material published during a particular time period in one country (Scotland), a particular region or even a specific newspaper. Correspondence columns were then searched for letters from women using familial pen names. In the case of some newspapers whose archives have not been digitised, such as the *Aberdeen Free Press*, hand-searching of the newspaper archives was undertaken.

Scottish newspapers published several different types of letters within their pages. The letters of serving soldiers were eagerly consumed and could be found in both national newspapers like *The Scotsman* and more local newspapers, which often featured columns of front-line soldiers' correspondence, although such letters might be subject to censorship.[16] Newspaper correspondence columns were also used by the vast array of official and semi-official organisations that blossomed during the war and used letters to newspapers to communicate with, and appeal to, the public. Such correspondents included lady organisers fundraising for charities, arranging the collection of comforts for the armed forces, and highlighting opportunities of war work for women.[17] Their letters are valuable as sources for a history of the involvement of women in the organisation of the war effort, and the increasing militarisation of the home front. The letters discussed here, however, are not those submitted for publication by charities or other women's organisations. Instead, this chapter focuses on the letters from individual women, whose letter to a local newspaper might be their first or indeed only step into the public sphere. In particular it makes use of letters from women who requested publication under familial pen names associated with male members of their family serving at the front. The focus is therefore on the writing of ordinary women readers rather than articles aimed at women or about women's contribution to the war effort. These are women whose voice is otherwise only partially heard in the history of the war. Women who left no diaries or reminiscences and who are otherwise not represented in official archives – the wives of working men, crofters, farm labourers and soldiers and sailors. The majority of work that has been undertaken on the role of women in wartime Britain has focused on those who became involved in war work such as nursing, land work, in the munitions factories or – by the last year of the war – as part of the new women's armed services. As Hughes and Meek note, the history of women's engagement in the war has mainly been evaluated through their entry into what had been

[15] Ruddin, L.P., 2014. The "Firsts" World War: A History of the Morale of Liverpudlians as Told through Letters to Liverpool Editors, 1915–1918. *International Journal of Regional and Local History*, *9*(2), p. 80.
[16] Pennell, C., 2012. *A kingdom united: popular responses to the outbreak of the First World War in Britain and Ireland*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
[17] Pedersen, S., 2015. Ladies 'doing their bit' for the war effort in the north-east of Scotland. *Women's History: The Journal of the Women's History Network*, Vol. 2(2), pp. 16-20.

considered men's jobs and in their role in medical and nursing professions.[18] This chapter instead investigates the writing of women who were unable or unwilling to undertake such war work and whose main contribution to the war was perceived to be the support of their menfolk in the armed services and in keeping the home fires burning.

There is little evidence of editorial gatekeeping in the Scottish newspapers of the period.[19] Letters might be held over for a day because of a lack of space, and editors published apologies for this practice, but otherwise letters seem to have been published as soon as possible after they had been received. As the war continued and paper rationing introduced, editors requested correspondents to limit the length of letters, but there is little evidence that these requests were heeded. Letters were published as long as the correspondent supplied their name and address – but they could choose to remain anonymous in print through the use of a pen name.

Pseudonyms that depicted the writer as a soldier's mother were particularly popular – 'A Soldier's Mother', 'Lad's Mother', 'A Prisoner's Mother', or 'Widowed Mother of an Only Son Lying Ill in France'. Even if the writer was the wife of a soldier, the choice of pseudonym frequently emphasised her maternal role, for example listing how many children she had – 'Mother of Three', 'Mother of Four', 'Mother of Eleven' and even 'Mother of Nineteen'. Such correspondents used their identity as mothers to legitimise their criticism of the organisation of the war effort as it impinged on themselves and their families. This criticism might be levelled at individuals, such as the 'very fussy person who calls herself a "lady" visitor';[20] the Government itself; bodies that were in charge of separation allowances and pensions, or landlords who refused to rent to soldier's wives and families.

The letters were written in aggrieved tones, and the use of a maternal pen name legitimised these grievances by drawing upon the trope of the patriotic mother, who had given her sons for the good of the nation. For example, the mother who wrote to the *Dundee Evening Telegraph* in November 1914: 'I have only one son, a soldier in the Black Watch, but if I had six I would say "Yes, with a mother's blessing."'[21] The patriotic mother was a well-known and admired image in British iconography during the war, and women who did not wish to reveal their identity to the newspapers' readers used their motherhood to justify their recourse to the press. Their motherhood bestowed on them the right to question or complain about some aspect of the army or government's policies that affected themselves or their sons. It legitimised their concerns and gave them a status without which they might not have had the courage to write to the press. Writing such

[18] Hughes, A. and Meek, J., 2014. State Regulation, Family Breakdown, and Lone Motherhood: The Hidden Costs of World War I in Scotland. *Journal of family history*, *39*(4), p. 365.
[19] Pedersen, S. 2017. *The Scottish Suffragettes and the Press*. London: Palgrave Macmillan
[20] 'Mrs C.' *Edinburgh Evening News*, 14 November 1917
[21] 'Stir Up', *Dundee Evening Telegraph,* 4 November 1914

a letter, and thus raising the issue in the public sphere, was also frequently seen as the utmost such a woman could do - a recurring theme in such letters was: 'Hoping someone with more education than I will take the matter up'[22] or 'Trusting someone in authority will take this matter in hand'.[23] Others wrote in the hope that their letter would stimulate more correspondence on the subject from others in the same situation, like 'Distracted Mother' who trusted that 'some other poor sorrowing mothers may have the courage to back me up'.[24]

The 'high diction' of sacrifice is very much to the fore in these letters – throughout the war period. This is particularly seen in women correspondents' descriptions of dead or injured soldiers: A 'Soldier's Widow' described the death of her husband – 'he made the supreme sacrifice over a year ago'[25] – while 'Yvonne' described the son of the manse in her village as having made 'the great sacrifice'.[26] Both of these letters were written in 1917, demonstrating that the concept of the supreme sacrifice remained a useful shorthand throughout the war. As we have seen above, Watson and Porter argue that the ideology of sacrifice survived and remained relevant in determining how men interpreted their experiences throughout the war. It is clear that was also supposed to help the interpretations of loved ones left behind at home. In Lewis Grassic Gibbon's *Sunset Song,* the death of Chris Tavendale's husband is described by several of those attempting to support her as 'fine': 'he's died like a man out there, your Ewan's died fine', 'he'd died fine, for his country and his King he'd died'. Ironically, as we find out later in the novel, Ewan Tavendale was actually killed by a firing squad for desertion. However, Chris was not supposed to be told this.

Women were expected to support the war effort by stoically sending their men to war.[27] In a letter to the *Dundee Courier* in 1917, 'A Mother' described how it is 'the bravest women who bid Godspeed to their men. Though their hearts are breaking, they control eye and lip till their dear one is out of sight.'[28] The death or injury of a soldier might also be framed by some correspondents as the woman's sacrifice, almost suggesting that the choice to join the army was made by his mother or wife rather than by the man himself. The death of a loved one was therefore framed as both his sacrifice and that of his wife or mother. 'Soldier's Mother' wrote to the *Aberdeen Daily Journal* of 'the sacrifice the mother has made in letting her son to join the colours'[29] while a correspondent to

[22] 'A Soldier's Mother', *Aberdeen Evening Express*, 15 March 1915
[23] 'A Worried Mother', *Aberdeen Daily Journal,* 10 January 1916
[24] 'Distracted Mother', *Hawick News*, 17 May 1918
[25] 'Soldier's Widow', *Dundee Evening Telegraph*, 5 February 1917
[26] 'Yvonne', *Fife Free Press and Kirkcaldy Guardian,* 10 November 1917
[27] Rayner, J., 2018. The Carer, the Combatant and the Clandestine: images of women in the First World War in War Illustrated magazine. *Women's History Review*, *27*(4), pp.516-533.
[28] 'A Mother', *Dundee Courier*, 2 May 1917.
[29] 'Soldier's Mother', *Aberdeen Daily Journal,* 12 March 1915

the *Edinburgh Evening News* noted 'I, too, have been called upon to make that great sacrifice'.[30] As Robb explains, 'the Christian ideal of self-sacrifice gave the war a deeper meaning for soldier and civilian alike. They spontaneously employed an idealised vocabulary, without any prompting from above.'[31] The concept of heroic sacrifice, therefore, could be applied to the mother or wife as well as to the soldier. A correspondent who explicitly described herself as 'One who has Sacrificed' wrote to the *Dundee Evening Telegraph* in 1917 stating: 'I have voluntarily given dependents out of my home to the army – two of my sons in August 1914 and my husband and remaining dependents in the first months of 1915'.[32] However, this letter also gave agency to the son who had died: 'one of my sons making the supreme sacrifice'.' The sacrifice a woman made was not only related to the death of her husband and son, it might also be seen in the impact of the war on her life style: 'A Soldier's Widow' recounted:

> I would like to say that before the war my husband had a good wage, and we were comfortable. He left his work and answered his King and country's call at the outbreak of war without a penny from his employer, and without waiting for a call from Lord Derby. He made the supreme sacrifice over a year ago. I get 10s a week having no family.[33]

The women who used familial pen names in letters to the newspapers often wrote in complaint about the way in which the war had impacted on their lives. One thread that runs throughout wartime correspondence columns relates to the policing of working-class women's lives and morals. The letters make it clear that, while their male relatives were away at the front, these women perceived themselves as being monitored in a variety of official and non-official ways and were aware that their standard of living might well depend on their perceived standards of morality. Writing in support of a widow complaining about the size of her pension, 'A Soldier's Wife' argued, 'A widow and her children are required to live a respectable life, but without a respectable sum they cannot possibly do so.'[34] The women had learned that their claims to better housing and sufficient funds to feed and clothe themselves and their children depended to some extent on whether they were judged to be deserving or undeserving. This is made very clear in letters about the allowances and pensions paid to wives of soldiers and sailors, a topic that stimulated frequent letters throughout the war.

The question of how to support the families of enlisted men was a new problem for the wartime government. Before 1914, the vast majority of ordinary soldiers had not been officially permitted to

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[30] 'Mrs C', *Edinburgh Evening News*, 14 November 1917
[31] Robb, G., 2014. *British Culture and the First World War*. Macmillan International Higher Education.
[32] 'One Who Has Sacrificed', *Dundee Evening Telegraph,* 5 February 1917
[33] 'Soldier's Widow', *Dundee Evening Telegraph*, 5 February 1917
[34] 'A Soldier's Wife', *Aberdeen Evening Express*, 12 December 1917

marry at all, although many had unofficial wives and families. However, with the need for volunteers at the beginning of the First World War, followed by the introduction of conscription in 1916, it became impossible for the Army to continue to disregard army wives and widows. In 1885 the Soldiers' and Sailors' Families Association (SSFA) had been founded to assist both official and unofficial wives and families. On the outbreak of war, Asquith announced provisions extending the minimum level of separation allowances and war widow's pensions to unofficial wives and the wives of all volunteers, and the government turned to the SSFA for assistance in administering allowances and pensions. However, as Lomas points out, although soldiers' families were in theory entitled to compensation for the temporary or permanent loss of the main wage-earner, the use of a charity's volunteers as administrators meant that servicemen's families were dependent on the personal judgement of these volunteers, who were used to judging cases – and withholding funds – on moral issues.[35] Hints of these attitudes can be found in the many letters of complaint sent to Scottish newspapers throughout the war. For example, a series of letters in the *Aberdeen Daily Journal* in the first months of the war complained about the way in which officials attempted to bargain down the allowance:

> Under the new scale of allowance, the mother of a soldier would be entitled to 12s 6d if there were no children; but the official comes and asks if 8s or 9s would do. If a protest is made to the effect that the sacrifice the mother has made in letting her son to join the colours entitles her to more, the officer advances the proposed allowance of 10s. On the mother remarking that that is not much coming into a house from which the breadwinner has gone, it is said she may be offered 11s, and obliged, as, it is said, others have been, to accept this curtailed payment.[36]

This letter was signed 'Soldier's Mother'. The correspondent was supported by several other letters signed by women using the same pen name. While the bureaucracy of the war machine became far more organised in later years of the war, complaints about allowances, and in particular the need for increases in the sums awarded in the face of rising food and housing costs, continued throughout the war. In 1916 'Still Another Tommie's Wife' argued, 'The way we "Tommie's wives" are treated is a disgrace to our country and an insult to our men'[37] while 'A Soldier's Daughter', who had been unable to find employment and relied on the allowance made to her mother, admitted: 'I am painfully aware of the struggle to make ends meet'.[38] As the war continued, similar letters of

[35] Lomas, J., 2000. 'Delicate duties': issues of class and respectability in government policy towards the wives and widows of British soldiers in the era of the great war. *Women's History Review*, *9*(1), pp.123-147.
[36] 'Soldier's Mother', *Aberdeen Daily Journal,* 12 March 1915
[37] 'Still Another Tommie's Wife', *Aberdeen Evening Express,* 2 December 1916
[38] 'S.M.L.', *Aberdeen Evening Express,* 2 December 1916

complaint appeared from widows in reference to pensions. In the *Edinburgh Evening News*, 'Soldier's Widow' complained about her access to a pension from the Tramway Company: 'Well, my husband had 15 years' service as conductor, and he was killed in Gallipoli two years ago. I was left with 11 children, nine of them dependent on me. My husband was among the first of the men to pay to this fund every month and I have never received any relief from it.'[39] 'A Tommy's Loved One' wrote bitterly 'We are told it is an honour to be a soldier's widow. I fail to see where the honour comes in.'[40]

Chivalric concepts such as honour, gallantry and knighthood are evident throughout the women's correspondence to the newspapers, even in the later years of the war. Women were concerned with their own honour, that of their husbands, or the wider honour of nations. Writing about the possibility of the introduction of conscription, a nurse wrote 'for the sake of Nurse Cavell, let us all do our best to keep the blot of forced service off our country's escutcheon',[41] a chivalric term for a shield bearing a knight's coat of arms. A letter to the *Dumfries and Galloway Standard* in August 1914 referred to 'our gallant soldiers, Regular or Territorial'.[42] For a correspondent to the *Aberdeen Daily* Journal, Serbia was gallant, with 'loveable qualities and fine ideals' while, in contrast, Austria was treacherous and cruel.[43] Writing to the 'married shirkers' who had not yet joined up, 'A working man's wife' urged them to 'makes a bold attempt to don the khaki, and accomplish some heroic deed' before they died.[44] Another correspondent felt that those who did not join up were 'a disgrace to Scotland'[45] while 'Girl War Worker' described the words of a conscientious objector as 'utterly unworthy of a Scotsman'.[46]

The wives and widows of soldiers were also concerned with their own respectability. The editor of the *Dundee Evening Telegraph* added a postscript to a series of letters that suggested too many soldiers' wives spent their allowances in the public houses by assuring readers 'It need hardly be pointed out that the correspondence in the *Telegraph* and *Post* has been directed not at respectable soldiers' wives – whom all will join in honouring'.[47]

The framing of Edith Cavell as a young female victim has already been mentioned. Soldiers themselves were often referred to as innocent 'boys' or the more colloquial 'laddies'. A letter to the

[39] 'Soldier's Widow', *Edinburgh Evening News*, 6 August 1917
[40] 'A Tommy's Loved One', *Edinburgh Evening News*, 28 August 1917
[41] 'T.E. MacWilliam', *Aberdeen Daily Journal*, 25 October 1915
[42] 'Isabel Hutcheon', *Dumfries and Galloway Standard*, 26 August 1914
[43] 'Dorothy Grierson Jackson', *Aberdeen Daily Journal*, 29 March 1915
[44] 'Working Man's Wife', *Dundee Courier*, 18 March 1916
[45] 'Widowed Mother of an Only Son Lying Ill in France', *Aberdeen Daily Journal*, 14 April 1916
[46] 'Girl War Worker', *Aberdeen Daily Journal,* 18 April 1916
[47] The Editor, Letters Page, *Dundee Evening Telegraph*, 18 November 1914

Edinburgh Evening News from 'Scot' complaining about the behaviour of women who turned out to cheer soldiers as they marched through the city stimulated an indignant reply from 'Territorial's Mother'.[48] This correspondent defended the actions of women like herself who liked to think of her own son as she cheered on the marchers and suggested that 'Scot' was a 'sour old maid'. She described the Territorials' 'pure simple conversation' and referred to their officers as 'refined gentlemen', suggesting that 'Scot' 'should be thankful that our dear boys, the Territorials, are doing all in their power to guard her. Otherwise she might be carried off by a German officer as the poor Belgian women were.' This reference was to propaganda that had started circulating early in the war about German troops' treatment of Belgian women and children. Such stories also had the useful effect of offering a more human justification for Britain's entry into war rather than treaties and border disputes, and made it a matter of honour in the face of the inhumane torture of women and children. Thus 'A Simple Woman' stated in a letter in 1915 that the cause of the war was 'because a little country had been trampled by a mighty tyrant'.[49]

It is clear that the stories about the horrors perpetrated on Belgian women had a deep impact on Scottish newspaper correspondents. The fate of the Belgian women was not only discussed in September 1914 when 'Scots Mother' felt 'it would be a good plan for as many women as possible to learn how to shoot, especially after reading of the horrible manner in which the brave Belgians have been treated'[50] and in November 1914, when it was used as a threat by 'Stir Up' who wrote to the *Dundee Evening Telegraph* urging young men to join up: 'Think of it seriously, men, I implore you for the love of your country, and for the love of the kiddies. You don't want to see your mothers and sisters sharing the fate of our poor Belgian sisters.'[51] Similarly, in Lewis Grassic Gibbon's *Sunset Song* Long Rob of the Mill refers to the newspapers' reports of the Germans 'raping of women and their gutting of bairns'.

The fate of Belgian women was also used as a warning in 1916 when 'Girl War Worker' warned that women in Scotland might be subjected to the 'same shameful treatment as were our poor Belgian sisters' if conscientious objectors were allowed to refuse to serve.[52] Pennell argues that such stories were not just a clever method of vilifying the enemy but also provided a language in which women could express some of their fundamental reactions to the outbreak of war, particularly the fear of

[48] 'Territorial's Mother', *Edinburgh Evening News*, 2 February 1915
[49] 'A Simple Woman', *Dundee Evening Telegraph*, 13 October 1915
[50] 'Scots Mother', *Daily Record*, 4 September 1914
[51] 'Stir Up', *Dundee Evening Telegraph,* 4 November 1914
[52] 'Girl War Worker', *Aberdeen Daily Journal,* 18 April 1916

invasion.[53] However, it may also be that – as with some of the uses of the story mentioned above – the Belgian atrocities were used as a way to control women and make them fall into line. Women were threatened with similar treatment if they did not support the war effort and its soldiers or if their menfolk did not 'do their bit'.

It is also clear that, for many correspondents, the war was a just one and God was on their side. As Bell points out, on the declaration of war Britain was seen as the new Israel, with God on her side, and physical and spiritual war were conflated in the speeches of politicians and the sermons of clergymen.[54] In *Sunset Song* the minister Gibbon 'had fair become a patriot' at the outbreak of war. He preaches a sermon denouncing German sympathisers and suggesting that men who have not yet joined up are 'tinks and traitors' and 'a shame to Kinraddie'. In Nan Shepherd's *The Weatherhouse,* set in wartime Aberdeenshire, Garry Forbes, a soldier home on leave to recover from his terrible experiences in the mud of the trenches, can still argue: 'I believe we are in some way fighting the devil. Have you no belief in the sanctity of a cause?' Similarly, correspondents to the Scottish newspapers made associations between Christianity and the righteousness of the war. In April 1915, just before the second battle of Ypres, 'Minister's Wife' took it upon herself to write to the *Aberdeen Daily Journal* to answer what she claimed as a constant 'parrot cry' asking 'Is Christianity a Failure?' Her letter made explicit a connection between the sacrifice of the soldier and that of Christ:

> To our brave young heroes who are going forth at this Easter season, I would say that, in following the example of their Lord, in offering their young lives for their religion, their King and their country, they will be forever absolved from all stains of the past, for, 'without shedding of blood there is no remission'. And in that agony of loneliness which each one hides in his heart, under cover of brave smiles - that agony which is worse than death itself - may it comfort them to remember, when all else fails, that they are sharing in that most awful agony of Gethsemane, and may this remembrance be indeed 'an angel sent to strengthen them'.[55]

Whilst this correspondent's role as a minister's wife would of course lead her to such public sentiments, she was not the only letter-writer to make this connection. 'A Simple Woman', writing to the *Dundee Telegraph* the following October, clearly saw the war as not being between two

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[53] Pennell, C., 2012. *A kingdom united: popular responses to the outbreak of the First World War in Britain and Ireland*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[54] Bell, S., 2014. 'Soldiers of Christ arise': Religious Nationalism in the East Midlands during World War I. *Midland History*, *39*(2), pp.219-235.

[55] 'Minister's Wife' *Aberdeen Daily Journal*, 5 April 1915

nations but between good and evil:[56] 'War is because there is evil, and so long there is evil there will be war. Nothing but Christianity can make matters better. Rather die honourably than live a laggard and a dastard. Up, men, every one who can join the ranks and sing "Onward, Christian Soldiers"—not only against our enemies, but against the devil!'[57]

The enemy might not only be in the ranks of the opposing forces. Writing to the *Aberdeen Daily Journal* in April 1916 about the encampment of conscientious objectors at Dyce near Aberdeen, 'A Soldier's Lass' used the Biblical denunciation of false prophets: 'By their deeds ye shall know them'.[58] Such letters demonstrate a growing trend amongst women correspondents to Scottish newspapers as the war went on – while the use of 'high diction' and religious imagery did not disappear, it was repurposed to criticise or attack groups other than the enemy, such as conscientious objectors, those who refused to enlist, or the Government. Thus in 1918 'A Wife and Mother' might write to the *Dundee Courier*: 'The miserable inadequacy of the sum granted by the Government to the dependents of our gallant soldiers makes my "woman's soul" burn with righteous indignations'[59] while 'Distracted Mother' could demand of *Hawick News* 'Surely if the winning of this awful war depends on our poor 18 year-old boys to finish it, where are our manly men? In the name of the freedom and righteousness for which we are fighting, save our boys!'[60]

The continuance of the language of sacrifice throughout the war does not, however, mean that a more realistic appreciation of the horrors of war did not also appear in women's correspondence. Descriptions of 'our brave sons up to the waist in mud and water and suffering untold hardships'[61] or 'boys lying quietly in France, with nothing to mark their resting-place but a little wooden cross'[62] demonstrate a clear understanding of some of the realities of war. However, the realities of dealing with men broken by the war might be more brutally phrased since here women were writing of their own experiences. A mother wrote to the *Dundee Evening Telegraph* in November 1916 to describe her own situation:

> I gave my only son to my King and country soon after the war started. After being in the army about nine months he was invalided home and given his discharge. He has been under

[56] Bell, S., 2014. 'Soldiers of Christ arise': Religious Nationalism in the East Midlands during World War I. *Midland History*, *39*(2), p. 221
[57] 'A Simple Woman', *Dundee Evening Telegraph*, 13 October 1915
[58] 'A Soldier's Lass', *Aberdeen Daily Journal,* 19 April 1916
[59] 'A Wife and Mother', *Dundee Courier*, 5 August 1918
[60] 'Distracted Mother', *Hawick News*, 17 May 1918
[61] 'A Soldier's Mother', *Aberdeen Daily Journal,* 19 September 1916
[62] 'A Soldier's Wife', *Aberdeen Daily Journal,* 4 November 1916

> the doctor's care since coming home. I have had to feed him, dress and wash him, as he is not able to help himself.[63]

Another correspondent worried that 'The glamour of war and the admiration of every true girl for a boy in khaki or blue' led too many girls to a hasty marriage and warned that the 'warrior may return perchance maimed for life, helpless burden to himself, and in the long run to his wife'.[64] In such letters 'high diction' phrases such as 'warrior' and concepts of 'giving' your son to King and country were enmeshed in darker messages about the price such families might pay in long-term care for once-healthy men.

Such bitterness frequently led to criticism of the men who had not volunteered, either because of their conscience or because they were in reserved occupations such as farming. In some of these letters another type of mother emerged – the woman who refused to allow her son to enlist. As Zeiger points out, this was the negative side to the image of the 'patriotic' mother.[65] The patriotic mother sacrificed her sons willingly to the army, but the unpatriotic mother was 'selfish' and overly – probably unhealthily – attached to her children. Such a mother was described in a letter to the *Aberdeen Free Press* by 'One Who Has Given Each of Her Sons':

> Again, I regret to say, there have been mothers so utterly selfish that they have put their trifling individual interests in the balance against a nation's. They said – 'My boy cannot join; it would interfere with his studies or his ambitions in life'.[66]

'A Farmer's Wife' wrote in March 1916 that she was proud of her sons, who had enlisted, but that many of their contemporaries had claimed to be indispensable because of their work. Had her sons acted in such a way, she remarked, 'in my secret soul I should have been ashamed of them'.[67]

The Military Service Act of January 1916 introduced conscription for men aged 18 to 41, although men employed in essential work could not be conscripted. Farmers were exempt from conscription, but their sons and labourers were not. The government left it up to local tribunals to decide what was and was not essential work – a system that was easily open to abuse. As 'Widowed Mother of an Only Son Lying Ill in France' pointed out bitterly, it was not surprising that farmers and their sons were being given 'wholesale exemption' by the tribunals in Aberdeenshire 'seeing they are as to

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[63] 'Montrose', *Dundee Evening Telegraph*, 9 November 1916
[64] 'Kathryn', *Aberdeen Evening Express*, 4 October 1916
[65] Zeiger, S., 1996. She didn't raise her boy to be a slacker: Motherhood, conscription, and the culture of the First World War. *Feminist Studies*, *22*(1), p.6.
[66] 'One Who Has Given Each of Her Sons', *Aberdeen Free Press*
67 'A Farmer's Wife', *Aberdeen Daily Journal*, 7 March 1916.

three-fourths composed of farmers, with factors as chairmen'.[68] Dakers reports that some farmers 'ostensibly retired from business and announced that their sons had taken over the farm' in order to persuade the tribunals that theirs was essential work.[69] Not only were farmers' sons exempted from service, but they weren't even working hard on the farms. 'A Soldier's Wife' asked: 'Why should the young bucks of farmers be allowed to trot about as they do, clothed in fine linen, when the only son of a poor widow is in khaki and fighting hard for life and for his country's liberty?'[70] Perhaps because of such criticism some farmers volunteered for war service despite their exemptions. In *Sunset Song*, Ewan Tavendale joined up because he was 'sick of it all, folk laughing and sneering at him for a coward'.

It is noteworthy that few farmers or their sons dared to write in to defend their behaviour. Instead, letters of defence were written on their behalf by their womenfolk. 'A Farmer's Daughter' pointed out that farmers were 'putting forth all their energies to keep their bushels brimming to feed their country'[71] while another 'Farmer's Daughter' wrote to the *Aberdeen Free Press* in December 1917 with a long list of all the sons sacrificed to the war by farmers in the Banffshire area.[72]

Conclusions

While the majority of research that has investigated the use of the language of sacrifice and a just war during the First World War has focused on the writing of male combatants, women might also make use of such language. Work on the writing of nurses at the front has established that these female middle-class volunteers used similar language as their officer equivalents – influenced by a similar education and the popular literature of the period. Recent work has also established the use of such language by the common soldier, supported by the popularity of writers such as Ian Hay in the trenches throughout the war. However, little work has been undertaken on these soldiers' womenfolk, mainly because of the lack of evidence – these women rarely left diaries or published works. Letters to the editor of local newspapers, however, allow us a glimpse of the concerns of working-class women on the home front, and the language that these women used to phrase their complaints.

The mothers, wives, widows and daughters of male combatants during the First World War used a variety of linguistic tropes to frame their experiences in their letters to Scottish newspapers. The

68 'Widowed Mother of an Only Son Lying Ill in France', *Aberdeen Daily Journal*, 14 April 1916.
69 Dakers, C. 1987. *The Countryside at War* London: Constable, p. 138.
70 'A Soldier's Wife', 'Letters to the Editor', *Aberdeen Daily Journal,* 4 November 1916.
71 'A Farmer's Daughter', 'Letters to the Editor', *Aberdeen Daily Journal,* 11 October 1917.
72 'Farmer's Daughter', Aberdeen Free Press, 14 December 1917.

majority of the letters published from such women were complaints about the situation in which they found themselves. They felt that, as the families of men on active service, they deserved better treatment by the state, its officials, and their fellow members of the home front.

The women mostly chose to use pseudonyms in their correspondence with the press – for many of them this would have been the first time they had stepped so clearly into the public sphere and they were happy to use the convention of pen names in order to preserve their anonymity. However, by presenting themselves as the wives and mothers of members of the armed forces, their chosen pen names became more than a shield of anonymity and instead augmented and amplified their right to be heard. Some correspondents chose names that were more than simply statements of their relationship to a soldier. Pen names such as 'One Who Has Sacrificed', 'Widowed Mother of An Only Son Lying Ill in France', and 'One Who Has Given Each of Her Sons' carried within the signature deeper messages intended to influence the reader and stir their emotions. Such names – and many of the letters discussed in this chapter – made use of what has been termed 'high diction'.

Many of their letters make use of 'high diction' terms such as sacrifice and concepts of a righteous war. Their menfolk are conceived as pure heroes, young men sacrificing their lives for the good of the nation. However, the women also frame themselves in this way in their letters – they too have sacrificed, whether that is in sending their sons and husbands to the war or in a reduction of household income and concomitant standards of living. Thus the language of sacrifice was applied to the home front as well as the trenches, and women claimed their own experiences as part of a righteous and even holy war. As the war continued, this language was also used by the women correspondents to justify their criticisms of those who were perceived as internal enemies – whether that was conscientious objectors, shirkers or even officials of the government who were not working to support the families of fighting men. In their use of this 'lofty vocabulary',[73] women correspondents demonstrated both their internalisation of the tropes of a just war, but also their abilities to reshape and reuse such tropes for their own ends. Women on the home front saw themselves as making their own sacrifices in a righteous cause. Theirs, however, were less acknowledged and certainly perceived as lesser sacrifices than those of their menfolk, and did not become part of the official record of the war.

[73] Bell, S., 2014. 'Soldiers of Christ arise': Religious Nationalism in the East Midlands during World War I. *Midland History*, *39*(2), pp.219-235.