

# THE MORALS OF MUNITIONS WORKERS 1914-1918

Siân Roberts

The commemoration of the centenary of the First World War has focused attention on the role of women, particularly in the making of munitions and support for the war effort. The war itself similarly placed a spotlight on women. The popular press, women's organisations, and social observers turned their attention to working-class women. Their role in industry, working conditions and pay, and especially their behaviour and morality, became subjects of heated debate.



Reproduced with the permission of the Library of Birmingham

The number of women working in the making of munitions increased dramatically during the First World War.

**W**omen in industry was not a new Birmingham phenomenon. Carl Chinn argues that the number of women at work in the Birmingham area was regarded as abnormally high, totalling some 118,000 in the 1901 census.

Large firms increased their workforce dramatically – Birmingham Small Arms' (BSA) employees grew from 3,500 to 13,000, and Austin in Longbridge went from 2,800 in 1914 to 20,000 by 1918. By March 1918 Kynoch at Witton had 8,964 women in their employment, 1,298 of whom were undertaking tasks previously regarded as men's work. In addition, around 15,000 women came to work in the city, causing a crisis in rented accommodation.

## Women Workers: Moral Panic

As numbers increased, the morals and behaviour of the wives of soldiers who were away and women munition workers came under scrutiny. Many of the latter were young and this, together with their higher-than-average wages, prompted a moral panic in the press. Articles focused on how soldiers' wives spent the separation allowance granted to them by the government. There were allegations of heavy drinking, and of so-called 'khaki-fever': the supposed excitement that women and girls experienced due to the large numbers of soldiers billeted locally.

On 23 October 1914, for example, *The Birmingham Post* reported allegations of drunkenness among soldiers' wives, a situation the *Post* damned as:

depraving to the women, bad, unutterably bad, in its effects upon their children and home life generally, disloyal to men risking their lives at the call of their country, and prejudicial to the flow of generous sentiments on the part of the public.

Citing the evidence of the police, magistrates, school attendance officers and social workers, it feared that 'unfortunately, there is some foundation for the charges against a section of the women of Birmingham'.



Reproduced with the permission of the Library of Birmingham

Women workers at Mills Munitions.

## Cecile Matheson and Working-class Women

The *Post* sought the opinion of Cecile Matheson, Warden of the Birmingham Women's Settlement. Matheson argued that the accusations did not reflect the behaviour of most of the city's working-class women and that the separation money, which had initially been severely delayed, causing great hardship for soldiers' families, had gone on rent arrears and winter clothing. She admitted, however, that there was a minority who caused concern, commenting 'I don't say they get drunk, but they keep "on the soak", to the injury of themselves and the neglect of children and home.'

Matheson expanded on the theme in the December 1914 issue of *Women Workers*, the magazine of the local branch of the National Union of Women Workers (NUWW); it was not a trade union but a middle-class umbrella organisation for societies working with women and children. Here she argued that although the 'evil' existed it was exaggerated, and that

rather than condemnation, the women needed 'companionship, sympathy and interest during this time of loneliness and wearing anxiety'.

Matheson was one of the leaders of the local women's movement. Born in London in 1874 to a British father and Swiss mother, she was educated at Bedford College, London, before working as a teacher and a secretary. In 1904 she moved to Selly Oak where she worked for women's suffrage and with girls' clubs.

Her longstanding interest in women's industrial issues was reflected in her co-authorship of a social study of the lives of the city's working women and their children with local businessman Edward Cadbury and socialist councillor George Shann. Published in 1906, *Women's Work and Wages* provides a fascinating picture of local women's working conditions across a range of industries, supported by statistical information and a study of recreational and social welfare provision. Intended as an intervention to improve the lives of working women, it advocated reforms such as wages boards, a national minimum wage, and educational and welfare initiatives.

## The Birmingham Women's Settlement

Many of the suggested initiatives already existed at the Birmingham Women's Settlement in Summer Lane, one of the poorest areas of the city. There Matheson was sub-warden from 1906, and Warden from 1910.

The intention was that well-educated middle-class women should live among and befriend poorer women. The Settlement aimed to provide 'a centre for Resident and Non-Resident Workers for systematic study with reference to Social work and industrial conditions' and promote 'the physical, intellectual, and moral welfare particularly of the women and children of the neighbourhood'.

The Settlement's reports document its many activities. These included a kindergarten, girls' clubs for young working women, social and educational activities for married women

and mothers, excursions to the country, health provision for children, pensions for the elderly, a 'poor man's lawyer', an employment bureau for women and girls, rent collecting and housing improvement schemes, and a provident society to enable the poor to save. It was run by women for women and even after its name was changed in 1919 to the Birmingham Settlement, its committee and governance remained firmly in the hands of women.

### Margaret Ashley and Support for Women Workers

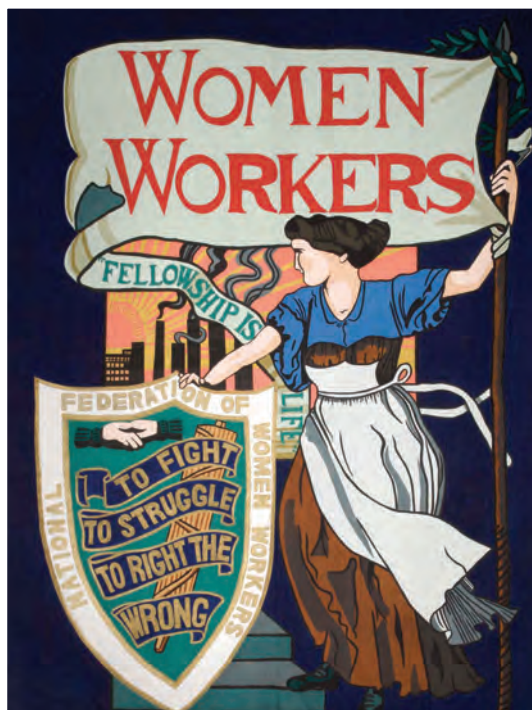
The negative perceptions of women concerned the middle-class Settlement leaders and the women's movement locally. Their responses are documented in the pages of *Women Workers*. The NUWW branch president, Margaret Ashley, had lived with her husband Professor William Ashley in Canada and America before settling in Birmingham. As the niece of Rowland and Matthew Davenport Hill, she came from a family with a tradition of local civic engagement. In June 1915 she countered the accusations made against munitions workers:

At night when most of us are sleeping, on Sunday when we are taking our rest, thousands of men, women, boys, and girls are toiling in our great munition factories, cheerfully and uncomplainingly working for England and for her Allies in a righteous cause. And in spite of their hard toil and the temptations that fatigue brings, and in spite of the high wages earned by overtime, this army of workers has remained steady and sober beyond the normal. We learn from the Chief Constable's recent report that there were 1,025 fewer cases of drunkenness in 1914 than in the previous year, and a decrease in offences of all categories of over 12,000.

### National Initiatives

The concern in Birmingham reflected the national picture. The Central Control Board appointed a committee of enquiry with the agreement of the Minister of Munitions, and Cecile Matheson was appointed as one of its members. Matheson's report was published in *Women Workers* in June 1916, where she concluded that 'the majority of working women are making good use of their incomes' and 'were doing well by their children, their homes, and their absent husbands'.

She documented the problem minority whilst pointing out that 'the drink problem is not only a women's problem'. As a remedy she advocated shorter public-house opening hours, women police, and regulation of night working and the number of hours worked by girls under 18.



By permission of the People's History Museum

A number of organisations representing women workers were set up from the late nineteenth century.



Reproduced with the permission of the Library of Birmingham

Cecile Matheson, a leader of the women's movement in Birmingham and Warden of the Birmingham Women's Settlement.

Many of these recommendations were already the subject of campaigning by the NUWW which participated in welfare initiatives to provide services for soldiers' wives and munitions workers whilst also exercising surveillance and influence over their behaviour. From late 1914 schemes were put in place to provide company and entertainment at women's club rooms 'where war news may be explained, maps exhibited, letters written and non-alcoholic refreshments obtained'.

### Birmingham Schemes

A 'Patriotic Club for Girls' was opened at 'cheerful premises' in 137a Suffolk Street, which recruited a membership of 166 girls in the first month. 'Ladywood Parlour', a club for the wives of soldiers and sailors opened at 118 Ledsam Parade at a subscription of 2 pence per week, with an attached nursery for infants.

The NUWW successfully campaigned to reduce the opening hours of public houses and a Women's Patrol Committee was established. By June 1915 a volunteer force of over 35 women patrolled local streets. This was the first step in the campaign for official women police,

and on 14 May 1917, the Birmingham Watch Committee recommended the appointment of Mrs Rebecca Lipscombe and Mrs Evelyn Myles as police officers. They were paid 35 shillings per week with uniform, but did not have power of arrest and were limited to duties with women and children for which, as women, they were deemed to have a natural aptitude.

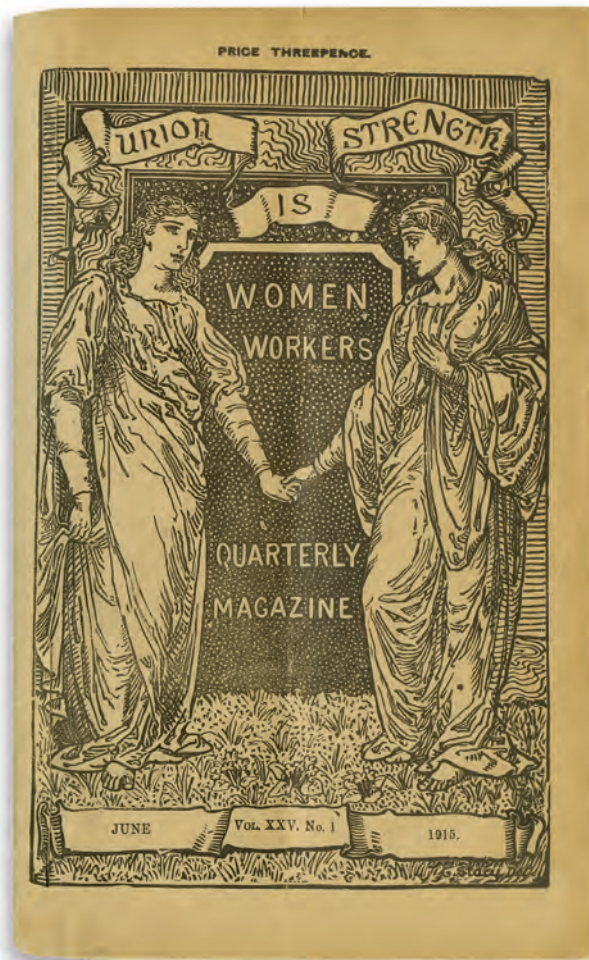
A sub-committee of the Young Women's Christian Association led by Elizabeth Cadbury established a munitions workers' hostel in St Mary's Vicarage on the corner of Whittall Street and St Mary's Row. With temporary accommodation for 35 women, it opened on 1 January 1916, and 91 women passed through its doors within the first two weeks, including 70 from Jersey.

In November 1916, a Civic Recreation League was formed at the instigation of the Lord Mayor, Neville Chamberlain. In his proposal he described Birmingham as a 'veritable hive of munitions workers', young women whom he defined as drawn from 'the domestic-servant and shop-assistant classes' who were subject to long hours, fatiguing work, crowded lodgings, and the 'nervous strain of it all'. The League aimed to provide moral and healthy alternatives to the 'streets, the cinema, or the public house' through sporting and educational activities.

War-time crèches for the children of married munitions workers were established in Handsworth, Sparkhill and Saltley by June 1917. Canteens were formed by voluntary workers to provide affordable food. 'Edgbaston ladies' supported a canteen at Elliott's Metal Works in Selly Oak, the Women's Voluntary Reserve ran the canteen at Birmingham Metal and Munitions Works, and the Birmingham Women's Suffrage Society managed the canteen at BSA.

## Social Workers for Women

Large firms such as BSA and Kynoch introduced 'Lady Superintendents' to supervise women employees, all of whom needed training. Matheson was an advocate of rigorous training for future social workers based on a course of academic study and practical experience living at the Settlement. In 1907 she had instigated a formal course of Social Study, based at the Settlement and validated by the University of Birmingham.



The pages of *Women Workers* countered the many negative perceptions of women working in the munitions factories.

Reproduced with the permission of the Library of Birmingham

In 1916 Matheson was consulted by the Ministry of Munitions on the training of Welfare Supervisors and a training course was held at the Settlement in conjunction with the University. The women were taught by Matheson, Dr. Beatrice Webb and Professors Ashley, Kirkaldy and Tillyard. An extended version of the course was held in 1917. Matheson resigned from the Settlement's Wardenship and public life in Birmingham in December 1916, citing exhaustion.

## After the War

The war is often credited with changing the social position of women, but many of the gains were short-term. As men were demobilised it was assumed that women would 'naturally' return to domestic roles.

Many of the thousands of munitions workers in the city became unemployed as the firms which had expanded their workforce wound down. In January 1919 discharged women workers queued for hours outside

the Central Employment Exchange in Corporation Street and extra clerical staff were engaged at temporary labour exchanges in Curzon Hall, and Kent Street, Nechells and Monument Lane Baths.

Women did receive the right to vote in 1918, an occasion celebrated in *Women Workers* with the headline 'At Last!' accompanying an article by veteran local suffragist Catherine Osler. She summarised the long campaign women had fought to reach this point but also drew attention to the fact that women still could not vote on the same terms as men. Ironically, as Osler pointed out, the women who remained disenfranchised were those under the age of 30. The young women who had flocked to the munitions works, or undertaken war work as voluntary nurses, had to wait another ten years until 1928. ●

**Dr. Siân Roberts** is a Collection Curator at the Library of Birmingham.

### Further Reading

Edward Cadbury, George Shann and M. Cecile Matheson, *Women, Work and Wages: A Phase of Life in an Industrial City* (T. Fisher Unwin, 1906).  
 Carl Chinn, *They Worked all their Lives: Women of the Urban Poor in England, 1880-1939* (Manchester University Press, 1988).  
 Siân Roberts, *Birmingham: Remembering 1914-18* (The History Press, 2014).  
 Angela Woollacott, *On Her Their Lives Depend: Munitions Workers in the Great War* (University of California Press, 1994).

Voices of War and Peace: [www.voicesofwarandpeace.org](http://www.voicesofwarandpeace.org)

The First World War: [www.libraryofbirmingham.com/firstworldwar](http://www.libraryofbirmingham.com/firstworldwar)