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11

“Breeched, booted, and cropped”

A dress historical analysis of the uniform worn by members of Britain’s Women’s Land Army, 1917–19

Amy de la Haye

In *War Memories of David Lloyd George*, the former British prime minister, 1916–22, evoked the Land Girl (as they were known and described themselves) thus, “Breeched, booted and cropped, she broke with startling effect upon the sleepy traditions of the English countryside.”¹ His depiction of a dashing, somewhat dislocated, and solitary female figure is significant. Whereas many wartime service personnel were regularly viewed as part of an army *en masse*, members of the Women’s Land Army (WLA) often worked alone or in small groups, occupying geographic and socially isolated, rural spaces. Furthermore, their uniformed bodies rendered them entirely conspicuous. The mostly natural palette of the textiles from which the uniform was made might have camouflaged with the natural hues of the countryside, but the sight of women wearing leather-belted, tailored “elephant ear” breeches did not.

Uniform formed part of the Land Girls’ daily lives. It reshaped their bodies and identities and influenced how the public perceived them. This text analyses the design of WLA uniform, how it was worn, customized, and sometimes combined with luxurious personal garments, and the resulting implications.

Women, land workers, and war

From the late nineteenth century, the British countryside became steadily depopulated as agricultural workers were lured by new opportunities and higher wages offered in the towns and cities. Following the declaration of war, some 250,000 British men were redeployed from the land for war-related work. Lloyd George recorded how, “the military representatives cast covetous eyes on these sturdy sons of the soil and took every opportunity to slip them into khaki.”² By 1914, the industry had fallen into decline and the British population (comprising some 36 million people, 27 million of whom lived in urban areas) were dependent upon imports for over 50 percent of food consumed.³ It was imperative that the island nation became more self-sufficient and the role of women was to become critical.

In 1914, the Board of Agriculture formed The Women’s National Land Service Corps (WNLSC), whose initial remit was to recruit and train two thousand, “educated women workers of the right type” to organize 40,000 “village women” to work on the land. WNLSC leaders, like those of the WLA that developed from it, unashamedly privileged educated, middle and upper-class women, like themselves, whom they believed would lead by example.⁴ And, as volunteers had to be financially independent, working women were automatically excluded anyway.

From the outset, the WNLSC had to overcome ingrained attitudes within rural communities that farm work for women—other than traditional roles such as milking and feeding poultry—was degrading.⁵ A lack of suitable working attire was also an obstacle. Boots, in particular, were considered so prohibitively expensive that the government made temporary arrangements with the Co-Operative Wholesale Society (CWS) to provide a five shillings discount for women who worked on the land for twenty-four or more hours a week. In turn, the women had to contend with skepticism about their abilities and hostility from workers who perceived their presence as a threat to jobs for men. Besides which, there was a prevailing optimism that the war would not last long and the status quo would soon return.

During 1915, as more men and horses were requisitioned, and supplies of fertilizer diminished (potash was previously imported from Germany and nitrates were redirected to make explosives) the employment of women became essential. That autumn, a Women’s Branch of the Board of Agriculture, Food Production Department was formed with Miss (later Dame) Meriel L. Talbot (1866–1956) as Director. She divided women land workers into those who could undertake casual or part-time work, but could not leave their homes, and those who could provide full-time service and go wherever required. It was from this latter group that the WLA was subsequently formed.

Unsuitable clothing

Most urban dwelling WNLSC volunteers had scant, if any, experience of country life and they too lacked suitable utilitarian clothing. Attempts to introduce a regulation skirted outfit, via the CWS, proved unsuccessful, not least because of the thirty shillings price tag.⁶ A former volunteer called Joe (the masculine was used as opposed to Jo) wrote in *The Landswoman*, the monthly journal for Land Girls, that:

Farm-work meant—well—anything and the only idea we seemed to have about clothes suitable for farm-work was that the clothes must be *old*. Old skirts and blouses, tam'o'shanters and walking shoes. But some had visited Gamage's or some other shop where every need of a land-worker could be supplied. These arrived with shiny leggings, huge clogs, hats that looked like those of Boy Scouts and many other garments that they never used. The wealthy ones had visited Selfridges, and these had done the thing in style: silk skirts, smart corduroy breeches, brown leather leggings, elegant boots, sou'-westers for wet days, the latest thing in service gloves. Could they fail to be the admiration of us less fortunate ones?⁷

Joe noted that some rich women had arrived with the stated ambition of wearing breeches, but once achieved they became content to, “keep to fancy blouses and brooches, and saw nothing unfitting in finishing off with cashmere stockings and high-heeled shoes.”⁸ Although mostly well intentioned and hard-working, the Land Corps' representatives were often derided by farmers and agricultural workers as the “lilac sunbonnet brigade.”⁹ In turn, with only a badge and a green baize armlet featuring a red crown, to signify their patriotic allegiance, the women reported that they did not feel like “real” war workers (Figure 11.1).

The WLA: A uniformed force

National conscription for women was not introduced until 1917; Rowland Prothero (1851–1937) was appointed as Director of the Board of Agriculture that December. By this point, food supplies were critically low. The following month, the WLA was formed with Talbot as Director. In order to attract new recruits, at a time when competition for women's labor had become steep, WLA propaganda deftly extolled the restorative and redemptive qualities of the land (to the women) and their seemingly natural capacity to nurture (as opposed to destroy).

As the WLA was a paid and uniformed army, working women could now apply. The first Land Girls, just 7,000 selected from 40,000–50,000 applicants, were enrolled in March 1917. Demand for women's labor was great and Talbot rued that she was subsequently compelled to make a, “very wide

Figure 11.1 *Photographic portrait of member of Britain's Women's Land Army. The white overall the woman is wearing indicates that she was a dairy worker. Postcard, 1917–19. Orphan photograph. Collection: Amy de la Haye.*

appeal and bring in all and sundry.”¹⁰ Nonetheless, she stressed, “it was essential that only those who came up to a good standard in the matter of health and character should be accepted . . .”¹¹ New recruits could opt to work in Agriculture, Timber Cutting, or Forage (animal feed) and many undertook six-week training courses at a residential center. Souvenir photographs of newly qualified, pristinely uniformed, Land Girls record them as part of a collective. Thereafter they were dispersed to work the length and breadth of England and Wales (Scotland had its own WLA). Some resided in communal hostels, but many were sent to work and live with elderly couples, whose sons and workers had enlisted: the youngest were just 17 years old. When Nellie Owen went to work on a farm, she was accused of taking a man's job and driving him into the army.¹²

WLA uniform was manufactured under the auspices of the Army Clothing Department and issued by the training centers and County Secretaries. Many official WLA documents refer to outfits rather than uniforms. The service handbook included details of uniform allocation with tear-out receipts and application forms. Each Land Girl was ideally (it was not always available and the men's services

were invariably privileged) allocated a head-to-toe uniform comprising two overalls, one hat, one pair of breeches, one pair of boots, one pair of canvas leggings, one jersey, one pair of clogs, and one mackintosh. When training and one month's satisfactory work had been undertaken they were issued with the following additional items: one overall, one pair of breeches, one pair of boots, one hat, and one pair of leggings. A third outfit, issued a year after enrolment was expected to last one year consisted of: three overalls, two hats, two pairs of boots, one pair of clogs, one pair of leggings, and one pair of canvas leggings. Land Girls who worked with "Motor Tractors"—outdoors and in all weathers—were entitled to additional items: one mackintosh, coat and trousers; two pairs of bib trousers, two dungaree coats, one motor cap, and a pair of gloves.¹³

Four pairs of breeches were supplied for two years' wear—two were made of cotton corduroy and two of a "thinner material for summer wear."¹⁴ As with other services, hierarchies were made explicit. WLA Section Leaders wore a circular badge on the left lapel of their overall and an armlet with the word "Leader" to mark their rank. The Timber Corps wore an embroidered badge depicting a tree that was sewn on the left upper arm of their overall and a beret.

In *The Landswoman* article cited above, Joe recollected:

How we hailed the advent of the Land Army and its regulation outfit! How thankfully we discarded our make-shifts and dived into the white overalls, and stepped into the breeches, and fastened on the leggings! Even if their fit was not exactly tailor-made they seemed to give out a peculiar odour of utility and comfort!¹⁵

Although women had already been recruited to work in agriculture and farming, as *The Landswoman* made explicit: "Until they did it in uniform it was not noticed."¹⁶

Uniform, survival, and material evidence

WLA uniform from both world wars is variously housed within museums dedicated to war, local history, and rural life. However, items from the First World War are very rare. The Imperial War Museum (IWM) houses some un-worn uniform items, which were collected contemporaneously. The IWM was founded in March 1917 to create a record of "everyone's experiences during the war—civilian and military—and to commemorate the sacrifices of all sections of society." The museum also houses print media pertaining to the WLA; paintings, drawings, and photographs (commissioned, professional, and personal) and, undertaken more latterly, oral testimony recordings, which have variously informed this research.

Once the women had completed their service, the Land Girls were mandated to return their uniform, which comprised government property. (There are exceptions: Mrs. M. Harrold, whose

testimony is housed at the IWM, states that she was told she could retain her uniform when she left the WLA.) This partly explains why so few uniform garments from both wars, of the many tens of thousands manufactured, survive today and these are usually unworn. It is thus difficult to examine and explore garments that are imprinted with wear and have personal narratives. However, we can instead ponder the biography of the manufactured garment.

Cotton that was grown on the land, possibly picked in the US by American Land Girls, was shipped to Britain where it was woven into drill or corduroy and manufactured into multiple sized items of uniform. These were sent over land by train and road to various uniform depots for issue to Land Girls who, in turn, wore it to travel across the land and work upon it. Uniforms were not generously provided and were mostly worn out in the course of hard and dirty work. Any items that were returned that could be re-worn were re-issued. Otherwise they were sent to the Board of Trade, who sent it on to a depot in Dewsbury, West Yorkshire, where 3,000 women were employed to sort items for renovation, rags or those to be pulped for fertilizer. Like the changing of the seasons, these cotton and linen garments could be interpreted in the context of a cyclical process whereby they came from and were returned to the land.

One of the richest sources for researching the correct head-to-toe uniform and what was actually worn by the land girls on a day-to-day basis, are photographs taken by Horace W Nicholls (1867–1941) in his capacity as Home Front Official Photographer.¹⁷ Satirical cartoons, commissioned by postcard companies and editors of journals such as *Punch* and *The Graphic*, are also insightful (Figure 11.2). These illustrations parody, affectionately and mercilessly, the Land Girls for wearing masculine-style uniform, whilst displaying stereotypically feminine responses to the rigors of country life and animal reproduction.

WLA uniform design

Whereas women working in services such as the Women's Police Service, Auxiliary Force, Emergency Corps and the navy (WRNS) wore a feminized, skirted, interpretation of masculine military uniform, WLA uniform was based upon occupational agricultural and gardening dress.

The closest precedent for WLA uniform this author has identified is the uniform worn by students attending a private horticultural school, established by Viscountess Frances Wolseley (1872–1936), in Glynde, Sussex, in 1902.¹⁸ Her archive includes photographs of students wearing brimmed hats, similar to those worn by the Land Girls, shirts with ties and waist-tied cotton drill aprons, breeches and laced leather boots.

In an article called, "Concerning our uniform: A fashion article and short story," *The Landswoman* reported that:

Figure 11.2 Satirical postcard, 1917–19. Collection: Amy de la Haye.

One of the oldest of the War uniforms, and certainly the most significant is the smock and breeches of the land. It is almost more of a revolution that skirted women should honour gaited women, than that the conservative Army should share its greatcoat and A.S.C. badge with the weaker sex. It took a World-War to bring it about and this is its history.¹⁹

However, it is important to note that the traditional embroidered smock was replaced by a mass-produced khaki or white cotton overall. (Former Land Girl Margaret Brooks states in her testimony housed at the IWM that the buff colored overalls became white when washed multiple times.) This was significant in reframing farming as a modern industry. In her fictional narrative *A Land Girl's Love Story*, former Land Girl and author Berta Ruck mentions that they came in three sizes.²⁰ The design of these garments, that could be pulled in at the waist by self-fabric belts can be likened to daywear modes, such as the long, belted, jackets that formed part of contemporaneous tailored costumes and shorter jumper-blouses, also known as “blouse-coats,” from 1917.

In contrast, the design of WLA breeches fell outside of fashions prevailing aesthetic and can be better likened to men's military and women's riding breeches. They were also unlike the trousers worn

by other war working women, such as those in munitions, who wore softer and looser cotton drill trousers, beneath an overall. As Jennifer Craik has observed, uniforms signify order and discipline, and they are also fetishized and eroticized.²¹ She writes that in contrast with men where there is, “a close fit between the attributes of normative *masculinity* as inscribed in uniform conduct and normative masculine roles and attributes. However, for women, there is a discrepancy between the gendered attributes of uniforms and normative *femininity*.”²²

At this time, only a few progressive women wore trousers in their daily lives. Although she never served as a working Land Girl, the aristocratic writer and gardener Vita Sackville-West (1892–1962) appropriated the style of the WLA uniform and breeches became associated with lesbian style. In her unpublished autobiography, she reminisced about the “transformative effect” she experienced when she first donned her, bespoke, breeches, “I had just got clothes like the women-on-the-land were wearing, and in the unaccustomed freedom of breeches and gaiters I went into wild spirits . . .”²³ In the following war Sackville-West was commissioned to write the official history of the WLA and served as a County Representative. She wore breeches for the rest of her life. As will be discussed below, not all women felt so comfortable wearing WLA uniform breeches.

Photographs, drawings and paintings of Land Girls working alongside local agricultural women workers show the latter wearing skirts and dresses. Such comparative analysis makes explicit just how very different the Land Girls looked. As single working women, living away from their families, wearing uniform that was interpreted as masculine, their behavior—as well as their dressed appearance—was scrutinized.

Uniform conduct

Whilst the Land Girls were not subject to military discipline, they were informed—in no uncertain terms—that they must conduct themselves in a manner that was considered by the organization to be exemplary at all times. Every recruit was told they must promise: “to respect the uniform and make it respected.”²⁴ As *The Women’s Land Army L.A.A.S. Handbook* exhorted:

You are doing a man’s work and so you are dressed rather like a man; but remember that just because you wear a smock and breeches you should take care to behave like an English girl who expects chivalry and respect from everyone she meets. Noisy or ugly behavior brings discredit, not only upon yourself, but upon the uniform, and the whole Women’s Land Army.²⁵

Precious and brief, their leisure time was also controlled: the Land Girls were forbidden to enter the bar of a public house, to smoke in public and were required to attend public worship. Of special interest in the context of this paper was the ruling that, “She should never wear the uniform after work

without her overall, nor walk about with her hands in her breeches pockets.” The wearing of different types of garments can alter posture and facilitate different gestures. In this instance, it would appear that the Land Girls were being warned to appear neither slovenly nor appropriate masculine demeanor. And, whilst they were doing a man’s job, they should not forget that traditional binary gender hierarchies remained. As the Land Army Song made abundantly clear, “The men take the swords, And we must take the ploughs.”²⁶

Dissimilar responses

The intention of uniform can be different from the individual experience of wearing it, as can the reaction it provokes in others. And, some people felt that women war workers were wearing khaki unnecessarily when it was needed for the troops. In September 1917, *The Globe* published an article called “Khaki Girl,” in which the writer protested: “it is almost unpatriotic for women to wear khaki. An armlet or badge should be quite enough to denote the women war-workers.” There were also anxieties about the “mannish woman” war worker and the implications of this in peace time.

In June 1918, a writer for *The Queen* noted that perceptions of the Land Girls, from the farming community and broader public, had improved greatly following the introduction of uniform. She then observed:

It is odd how much stronger a woman looks when she wears breeches and gaiters than she does in a Bond Street gown: and one can ask a woman in leggings to do things that one would not dream of requiring from a lady in georgette. How fortunate that the fancy for extremely short petticoats coincided with the venture into a longish tunic! As a matter of fact, I believe that many of the village women in their bundly skirts can put in as good a day’s work as some of the Land Army girls, but they look neither as efficient nor as smart.²⁷

The author, Margaret Heitland, noted that there was a need to replace men on the fields at a rate of 10,000 a month—5,000 milkers, 4,000 field workers and 1,000 carters.²⁸

Compared to other women agricultural workers who wore long skirts the Land Girls certainly stood out. In her interview for the Imperial War Museum, Margaret A Brooks recalled how, attired in her new uniform, a woman in the street appraised her critically and then exclaimed “Hummmph . . . neither a man nor a woman!”²⁹ Another interviewee Olive Croswell stated that:

The people stared at us because we had breeches on, They’d never seen a girl in breeches and leggings before and mine were a pair of leather leggings which I thought was a great swank! Most of them wore puttees. . . . Yes we were treated very badly at first, but as they got used to us they were better . . .³⁰

Olive worked from 6 a.m. until 10 p.m. She recalled, “There was no kindness, it was work and nothing else.”³¹ A press clipping housed in the archive of the Imperial War Museum states that some agricultural women who had originally looked “askance” at the breeches came to realise how much more functional they were than their own heavy skirts and started to ask for them.³²

When a group of Land Girls marched into a small Northampton village to cut 2,000 fir trees for use in the mines, there was a veritable outcry. One resident recalled, “Just think of it: women in trousers! . . . in this small English village where concepts of decency and modesty were pushed to their extreme limit, it gave rise to a veritable outburst of indignation.”³³ Their uniform was decried as, “anything but feminine,” even “shameful”. Others recriminated, “If it can’t be done by women in skirts let it be done by men.”³⁴ When the land girls attended church wearing uniform, the villagers “indignation knew no bounds.”³⁵ However, as the days passed and the Land Girls demonstrated the utmost professionalism, the villagers became less partisan.

Whilst some land girls felt empowered by their uniform, others felt it drew unwanted attention to them. Eva Marsh disliked intensely being seen wearing her uniform in public. She particularly loathed participating in recruitment rallies, which involved marching through urban streets, accompanied by modern tractors and hay balers, to the rousing music of a band, calling other women to join them on the land. Historian Bonnie White notes, “She was distressed by the spectacle surrounding the organization.”³⁶ She enjoyed working on the land and proved capable but found the stress of performing as part of an army unbearable.

The Land Girls worked long hours undertaking work that was regularly grueling, sometimes harrowing, and invariably dirty. After work, they had to launder their uniforms, usually using small amounts of allocated cold water. They suffered with chilblains on their hands from cutting frosty vegetables by day and on their knees from wearing breeches that remained damp overnight. Some Land Girls also reported chaffing on their legs caused by unfinished internal seaming.³⁷

Dress historians search for research that references their subject, but absence can also speak reams. Oral testimonies housed at the IWM do contain references to uniform, but not all do and some just mention the uniform in passing. Clearly, they were more critical to some women’s experiences than others. Research undertaken on WLA uniform worn during the Second World War certainly reinforces this.³⁸

Uniform and democracy

Uniform, when issued as regulation wear, is intended partly to generate democracy. In the spirit of patriotism, women from all social groups were seemingly mucking in together. However, elitist social attitudes within the WLA were never subsumed as the editorial of *The Landswoman* made explicit. A

feature called, “Our cows” utilized anthropomorphic examples to stress that even on the land, the “natural” order of social distinction prevailed. “Our cows are ladies of both high and low degree. Wayward, gentle, hot tempered, submissive, homely, and beautiful, they are like every other mixed community of females.” Whilst Polly was “rude and rough and greedy,” Lady Betty was “quite above the status of the ordinary cow, both as regards birth, education, intellect, and social standing, and she wishes you to understand as much.”³⁹

Social status was rendered immediately visible by the wearing of bespoke or high-quality ready-made garments in place of, or combined with, standard issue uniform. The Cleveland Manufacturing Company (based at Fitzroy Square, London W1) regularly advertised “Land Outfits, Overalls, Blouses etc.” in *The Landswoman*. Garments advertised in the August 1918 issue included the “coat smock,” “a very smart Farm Overall with a tailor-made effect. It can be worn with the standard outfit.” Offered in a choice of five different fabrics, the cheapest in “Amazon” cost 11/9; the most highly priced was “Munition Brown Jean” at 14/11. The design is similar to standard issue, whereas “The Yoke Smock” was smock-stitched and offered in the same fabrics and price range. “Tailor-cut breeches” cost 10/11 and a cambric shirt cost 6/11.⁴⁰ Exclusive London department store Harrods also placed an advertisement in this issue, offering breeches for 10/9 and a showerproof overall coat for 16/9. “Bedford breeches” for 15/9 (“Bedford cord” is a tough woven fabric similar to corduroy and worn for hunting).⁴¹ A pair of good quality “Mayflowa war work boots” cost between 39/11 and seventy-five shillings.⁴² By comparison, the Land Girls were paid twenty shillings a week and many paid eighteen shillings on board and lodgings.

The Landswoman “Exchange Column” advertised individual worn items and complete uniforms for sale. In March 1919, a “Board of Agriculture Uniform for Officers of the Women’s Branch; nearly new, coat lined silk; large size £5”; “Wellington Boots, size seven, nearly new, 30s” and “Khaki overcoat, £3 or offer” were offered.⁴³ Wealthier Land Girls could thus purchase extra items which alleviated the burden of laundering garments that were often mud-laden; trying to dry them overnight and all too often wearing damp clothing early the next morning. It also facilitated more leisure time after a long day’s work.

Awards of merit

The acquisition of awards of merit were perhaps more democratic than uniform accumulation. The Good Service Ribbon, equivalent of the Good Conduct Medal won by British soldiers, was awarded to Land Girls who had completed at least six months service and had no complaint brought against them—either on or off duty. Some 8,000 of these were awarded in the two-year duration of the WLA (Figure 11.3). These badges were shield-shaped and made of dark green cotton embroidered, in yellow and orange wool, with a crown motif above three rows of lettering: WLA, GS, and LAAS.

Figure 11.3 *Photographic postcard. A group of dairy workers (they wear white overalls) with their unit leader (front row, left); some wear arm bands, denoting a year of more work experience. Collection: Amy de la Haye.*

Most prestigious was the Distinguished Service Ribbon, which was often referred to as the “Victoria Cross of the Land,” which was bestowed following, “an act of gallantry and devotion to duty against extraordinary odds.”⁴⁴ In October 1919, the *Landswoman* commended Miss L. M. Fisher from East Sussex who received this:

For great courage and presence of mind shown in saving a fellow-worker when attacked by a bull. The animal was loose in the stall when the cowman entered. He was about to chain the animal up when it knocked him down and began to gore him. Hearing his cry, Miss Fisher rushed in and, jumping the barrier, attacked the bull, kicking his nose. The bull backed from her kicks and the man was able to get up on the manger and attract the bull’s attention whilst Miss Fisher made her escape!⁴⁵

Commitment was also rewarded. The Land Girls received a service armlet after thirty days work or 240 hours and a stripe for every six months worked. When four stripes were earned, they could be exchanged for a diamond shaped award.

Uniform, uniformity, and dissent

The word uniform is derived from the Latin *una* (one) form: its function is to reinforce the collective, rather than the individual. As the Land Girls were not subject to routine inspections, they had more leeway, than other service personnel, to adapt, for utilitarian and stylistic purposes, and personalize their uniforms. These practices caused considerable chagrin to WLA officials. After all, the rules of uniform transcend the individual garments and regalia: it is implicit that it should be worn unvaryingly—or *properly* (Figure 11.4).

In an article titled, “Woman & khaki: A distinctive touch desired,” the *Newcastle Daily Journal* reported that, “The average woman loves a uniform, as long as it is not a uniform, for into the uniform she must always bring something that is her own, and distinctive and personal.”⁴⁶

Headwear was especially subject to individual expression. An article in *The Landswoman* called, “Concerning our uniform: A fashion article and short story,” reported that:

Figure 11.4 Studio portrait of a uniformed member of Britain's Women's Land Army, 1917–19. Orphan photograph. Collection: Amy de la Haye.

Our hats showed great variety. There were shady summer-hats that would not stay on, in spite of ornamental hat-pins. There were hats begged from fathers or brothers. There were the Boy Scout kind and schoolday tam o'shanter; there were sun-bonnets, and coloured handkerchiefs. The great thing about our fashions was their variety—an entire lack of uniformity.⁴⁷

As photographic evidence reveals, and conflicting with Lloyd George's memory of cropped hair, most women had shoulder length or longer hair. Headscarves added a touch of individuality, a dash of color and were eminently practical. A chalk and pencil drawing on paper by Randolph Schwabe called "In the Fields" depicts a land girl wearing a bright red head scarf and numerous official and personal photographs provide evidence that the land girls often donned a headscarf in place of the regulation brimmed felt hat.⁴⁸

Horace Nicholls' photograph of two members of the Forestry Corps grinding an axe on a sharpening stone, shows one woman in regulation uniform.⁴⁹ The other wears a white embroidered voile blouse with her breeches and stylish, shaped, low-heeled boots are more conventionally feminine than the robust, front-lacing footwear that was standard issue. She also wears a wrist watch, which was a hard-to-come-by item that until the First World War was worn only by the military—civilians mostly wore fob watches.

Historians and book publishers have, in turn, expressed their own preferences for "non-uniform" uniform. Two key texts have as their chosen cover image, photographs of land girls wearing subverted uniform. Bonnie White's entirely rigorous history of the WLA in the First World War features as its cover image a photograph of a solitary land girl ploughing.⁵⁰ She is wearing—what was presumably considered more visually arresting than regulation uniform—a light-colored knitted jumper with a large collar, a rather flamboyant patterned tie and a dark-colored narrow waist belt. Her WLA overall is worn open and she wears regulation hat, breeches and boots. Similarly, the cover of the 2007 reprint of Nicola Tyrer's (1996) erudite history of the WLA in the Second World War shows two Land Girls wearing shorts made from breeches, which had presumably become worn out at the knees.⁵¹ As broader photographic and surviving garment research reveals, this was not uncommon in spite of the fact that this explicitly contravened rules that forbade strictly any adaptation of government property.

Conclusion

In its two years' existence, the WLA recruited, often trained, and coordinated the placing of some 23,000 Land Girls.⁵² (They were amongst the 113,000 extra women who worked on the land during war.)

The Land Girls were shaped by their wartime roles experientially and physically—many became physically stronger and enlarged their body frames. Certainly, the Land Girls who worked in the Second World War attribute their good health today to working on the land during the war and the impact it

subsequently had upon their lives. However, rarely were their achievements and sacrifices recognized and even contemporaneously they were sometimes described as “Cinderellas of the Soil” and the organization as the “The Cinderella Force.” Whilst they were not dressed in rags like their fairytale namesake, their uniform undoubtedly highlighted their difference. Sometimes, it commanded respect, but it also provoked ridicule and derision. Many Land Girls wore it with pride, for some it was barely noteworthy, and others intensely disliked the attention (of whatever sort) it attracted. In its issue of December 27, 1919, *The Queen* published an article titled, “The passing of Britain’s Land Army,” in which the writer H. P. Cummings rued: “The English country-side will certainly miss the picturesque figure of the land girl in her dust-colored breeches, her white overall and wide-brimmed hat.”⁵³

There was an increase of 822,000 tons of wheat and 619,000 tons of potatoes grown between 1917 and 1918. And, the numbers of women working on the land in England and Wales rose from 70,000 in 1911 to 230,000 in 1918. More and more families started to grow their own food: in 1918, there were more than 800,000 allotment gardens than before the war in 1918, each producing about a ton of food each.

Notes

- 1 David Lloyd George, *War Memories of David Lloyd George* (1933–1936), reprint (London: Odhams Press, 1938), 770.
- 2 Ibid., 772.
- 3 Bob Powell and Nigel Westacott, *The Women’s Land Army* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1997), 5.
- 4 *The Times*, July 1, 1916.
- 5 H. P. Cummings, “The passing of Britain’s Land Army,” *The Queen*, December 27, 1919.
- 6 Carol Twinch, *Women on the Land* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 1990), 37.
- 7 *The Landswoman*, April, 1920, 74.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Lloyd George, *War Memories of David Lloyd George*, 772.
- 10 Meriel C. B. E. Talbot, “The Women’s Land Army,” *The Queen: The Lady’s Newspaper*, February 15, 1919.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Imperial War Museum (IWM), London, “Leaves from organizing secretary’s diary,” October 19, 1917, 1.
- 13 *Women’s Land Army L.A.A.S. Handbook* (1917), 13.
- 14 Ibid., 14.
- 15 *The Landswoman*, April, 1920, 74.
- 16 Ibid., November, 1918, 240.
- 17 See, for example, portraits of women in uniform at the IWM: Q30614, Q30622, Q30627, Q30352.

- 18 Wolseley had written two books: *In a College Garden* (London: John Murray, 1916) and *Women and the Land* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1916) and was subsequently appointed Organizing Secretary for the East Sussex branch of the WLA.
- 19 "Concerning our uniform: A fashion article and a short story," *The Landswoman*, November, 1918, 240.
- 20 Berta Ruck, *A Land Girl's Love Story* (New York: A.L. Burt Company, 1919), 116.
- 21 Jennifer Craik, *Uniform Exposed: From Conformity to Transgression* (Oxford: Berg, 2005), 3.
- 22 Ibid., 12–13.
- 23 Nigel Nicolson, *Portrait of a Marriage* (London: Phoenix, 1973), 15.
- 24 *Women's Land Army L.A.A.S. Handbook*, 6.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Ibid., 1.
- 27 Margaret Heirtland, *The Queen*, June 1918.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 IWM, Interview, Reel 2.
- 30 IWM, Interview, Reel 1.
- 31 IWM, Interview 7482, Roll 1.
- 32 IWM, Press Cuttings, Women in Agriculture, Supplementary Material, 40/52: 2.
- 33 Maurice Thomas, *Do You Remember What Granny Told You about the Women's Land Army?*, T. Holmes, trans. (Abthorpe: R.J. Chapman, 1999), 12–13.
- 34 Ibid., 13.
- 35 Ibid., 15.
- 36 Bonnie White, *The Women's Land Army in First World War Britain* (Houndmills and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 83.
- 37 Twitch, *Women on the Land*, 24.
- 38 See the exhibition and accompanying catalogue by Amy de la Haye, *The Land Girls: Cinderellas of the Soil* (Brighton: Royal Pavilion Libraries and Museums, 2009), catalogue of an exhibition at the Brighton Museum, Brighton, October 3, 2009–March 14, 2010.
- 39 "Our Cows," *The Landswoman*, January 1919, 1.
- 40 *The Landswoman*, August, 1918, inside cover.
- 41 Ibid., 174.
- 42 Ibid., 176.
- 43 Ibid., March, 1919, 74.
- 44 Ibid., October, 1919, 244.
- 45 Ibid.

- 46 IWM, Press Cuttings, n.p., “Women & khaki: A distinctive touch desired,” *Newcastle Daily Journal*, November 1, 1919.
- 47 “Concerning our uniform,” 240.
- 48 IWM, Art/WM ART 3923.
- 49 Ibid., Q30719.
- 50 White, *The Women’s Land Army*. The image can be consulted at IWM, Q54607.
- 51 Nicola Tyrer, *They Fought in the Fields: The Woman’s Land Army* (Stroud: History Press, 2008 [1996]).
- 52 Cummings, “The Passing of Britain’s Land Army.”
- 53 Ibid.

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