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THE BRITISH WOMEN'S LAND ARMY: GENDER, IDENTITY,
AND LANDSCAPES

by

Hilary M.K. Anderson

A thesis submitted to the Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
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THE BRITISH WOMEN'S LAND ARMY: GENDER, IDENTITY, AND LANDSCAPES

Hilary M.K. Anderson, M.A.

Western Michigan University, 2014

The land girls who comprised the Women's Land Army in Great Britain during the Second World War challenged cultural assumptions regarding gender and femininity. Through their work in agriculture, social anxieties were provoked regarding proper notions of femininity and separate spheres, which left these women in conflicting positions as they carved a spot for themselves in a war torn society. In order to carry out their work in the Women's Land Army, land girls operated at the convergence of private and public spheres in a conjoined space. Living and operating in this conjoined space enabled them to blur the ideological boundaries of separate spheres and beliefs regarding femininity. This thesis relies on oral interviews, published land girl memoirs and diaries, and key primary and secondary sources to review and analyze land girls' experiences. It finds that, through their work in agriculture, land girls both challenged and ignored cultural values regarding femininity and separate-sphere ideology, while at other times they upheld these long established normative values. Through their agricultural experiences, land girls expanded their own identities, discovered new skill sets and desires, reshaped agricultural landscapes, and became more visible and active participants in the agricultural world.

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INTRODUCTION

Historical Context

The Land Army fights in the fields. It is in the fields of Britain that the most critical battle of the present war may well be fought and won.

— Lady Denman, Honorable Director of the Women’s Land Army, foreword to the *Land Army Manual*, 1941

By the spring of 1938, the conservative Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain and the British government were preparing for war against Hitler’s Germany in the event that appeasement attempts proved fruitless. Such preparations included contingency plans regarding food production and supplies. For if the country should be cut off from its imported food supplies through a German U-boat blockade, it would be unable to adequately feed its troops and civilians, and then, as Members of Parliament feared, the country would be starved into submission.

In April of that year, the Ministry of Agriculture approached the energetic and formidable Lady Gertrude Denman about organizing and serving as honorary director of the Woman’s Land Army (WLA), a voluntary and mobile agricultural workforce comprised of women. Lady Denman, known for her organizational skills, experience, and influential connections, was a natural choice for the job.¹ She had served as the Assistant Director of the Women’s Branch of Food Production for the Board of Agriculture during the First World War. In this role, she aided in the recruitment of

¹ Ann Kramer, *Land Girls and Their Impact* (Barnsley, UK: Remember When, 2008), 15.

women, who would become known as land girls, for the original WLA. Additionally, she was currently the chair of the National Federation of the Women's Institutes.

Demonstrating her leadership and organizational skills, in just over a year, Lady Denman had the WLA re-formed and ready to recruit and train women for service work in agriculture should another war develop. Under her direction, the WLA would operate as its own branch under the Ministry of Agriculture and be staffed and run by women along the guidelines she developed.²

Thesis

The land girls who comprised the WLA of Great Britain during the Second World War challenged cultural assumptions regarding gender and femininity. Through their work in agriculture, social anxieties were provoked, which left these women in conflicting positions as they carved a spot for themselves in a war torn society. Social anxieties focused on land girls' proper demonstrations of femininity as well as addressing what was the proper sphere for women to reside. In order to carry out their work in the WLA, land girls operated at the convergence of private and public spheres in an overlapping zone or a conjoined space. Living and operating in this union of spheres enabled them to blur the ideological boundaries of separate spheres and beliefs regarding femininity. However, land girls continued to operate, at times, within preexisting social constructions.

This thesis relies on oral interviews, published land girl memoirs and diaries, and other key primary and secondary sources to review and analyze land girls' experiences as members of the Women's Land Army. This thesis finds that, through their work in

² Ibid., 17.

agriculture, land girls at times challenged and ignored cultural values regarding femininity and separate-sphere ideology, while at other times they upheld long established normative values, which kept these women connected to the domestic sphere. Due to these experiences, land girls expanded their own identities and self-consciousness and discovered new skill sets and desires as they experienced more autonomy. Additionally, land girls further expanded their identities as they worked and reshaped the agricultural landscapes. This expansion of “self” helped women to become more visible and active participants in the agricultural world as they diminished the gendered nature of agriculture and its environmental spaces as integrated members of the labor force.

The Women’s Land Army

With British men drawn to the battlefields, British women began to serve their country in new patriotic ways. Thousands of women volunteered for the war effort through the Women’s Volunteer Services. In addition, Parliament conscripted thousands more into war-service jobs as the war lingered into 1941 and over 100,000 women voluntarily served in the WLA between its beginnings in 1939 to its disbanding in 1950. A mobile civilian organization, the WLA was directed to produce food for the country.

The WLA’s purpose, according to the Ministry of Agriculture, was:

to recruit, equip and supply girls and women from non-agricultural occupations between 18 and 40 for regular full-time employment in agriculture and in this way to supplement the ordinary sources of agricultural labour during the period of the emergency.³

The WLA promoted itself as one front where the victory of the Second World War would be fought and won.

³ Quoted in Margaret Hilary Bullock, “The Women’s Land Army 1939-1950: A Study of Policy and Practice with Particular Reference to the Craven District” (PhD diss., University of Leeds, 2002), 1.

The threat to Great Britain's food supplies during the Second World War through an Atlantic blockade was not a new predicament for the country. Given the island nation's preference for importing food, one target of attack by enemies during times of international crisis was Britain's imports. Such was the case during the Napoleonic Wars of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and during the First World War. Both crises forced the country to reevaluate its approach toward agriculture. Over the course of the Napoleonic Wars, for example, many bad harvests coupled with trade blockades, particularly Bonaparte's Continental System, limited Britain's export trade and left the country struggling to maintain its food supplies. Further compounding these problems were a growing population and an economy focused on industrialization. It seemed at times that Malthus' theory on population would prove correct. The government responded to food shortages in a variety of manners, including prohibiting the export of domestically produced corn, barring the use of grain for malt distilleries, promoting the use of whole-meal bread, and encouraging land enclosure. The government also urged agriculturalists to increase the amount of arable land under cultivation.⁴

Similarly, during the First World War, the country looked to expand the amount of arable land under cultivation, relied on price systems, and implemented food rationing. While German submarines disrupted some of Britain's food imports during the first two years of war, it was not until 1916 that the British government seriously began to examine the dire state of agriculture. It was during this period that the government formed the Food Production Department, which exercised power over agriculture. The

⁴ W. E. Minchinton, "Agricultural Returns and the Government during the Napoleonic Wars," *The Agricultural History Review* 1, no. 1 (1953): 35.

government's commitment to laissez faire and its belief in the superiority of the Royal Navy to protect imports slowly gave way to a more aggressive scheme to increase domestic food supplies. By 1917, the country faced the dismal situation of having roughly three weeks of food supplies available. The Board of Agriculture called for the formation of a women's organization, which would eventually become the original Women's Land Army, to recruit women to assist farmers in growing and producing food for the nation. During the Great War, approximately twenty-three thousand women served in the WLA and successfully helped to increase domestic food supplies before disbanding in 1919.

Twenty years later the Ministry of Agriculture once again called for the formation of the WLA. Women from all over the country and from all sectors of society joined the WLA of the Second World War for a multitude of reasons. The opportunity to escape their jobs, lives, or families or the opportunity to wear a uniform excited some. Others saw the voluntary WLA as a better option for employment than government conscription work and justified their joining in terms of patriotism in the People's War. Other women viewed the WLA and farm life as an adventure or an opportunity to meet service men. Still, others saw the WLA as an opportunity to work with animals. Such was the case for Lillian Smith who joined the WLA out of love for animals and the desire to avoid a desk job.⁵

Upon joining, recruits agreed to serve for the duration of the war, making it a complete gamble as to the length of their service. Being a part of a mobile work force meant that the recruits had to be flexible as to where in the country the WLA would station them and as to what type of farm work they would undertake. During the

⁵ Marilyn Johnson in discussion with the author, March 29, 2013.

enrollment process, the WLA had recruits indicate a preference for field, milking, or forestry work, as well as where they preferred to work, but there were no guarantees that the WLA would accommodate these preferences. As the *Observer* explained, “they [land girls] will be drafted wherever they are most required, and will be prepared to do whatever they are asked.”⁶ As a result, some women found themselves stationed far from home and as the only land girl in the area. Others found themselves working on farms next to their childhood homes and sharing the work with other land girls.

Once established at their agricultural posts, land girls carried out various jobs ranging from milking cows to eradicating rats, from threshing to mucking, from planting wheat to sawing lumber. The work was not for the faint of heart. It often began before sunrise and continued until sunset, rain or shine.

While on the job, land girls contended with societal prejudices about their abilities to replace men in the fields and the propriety of women working as farmhands. Hostility sometimes existed between land girls and farmers, farmers’ spouses, farmhands, and prisoners of war. Such hostilities included, but were not limited to, farmer’s wives feeling threatened by land girls working closely with their husbands, land girls displacing farmhands, or land girls teaching POWs farming techniques. These antagonisms often tended to reflect the tension created by the appearance of new characters (land girls) in a space with its own established community. On the other hand, many land girls successfully swayed some people’s opinions regarding social norms and values about women agriculturalists and lessened hostilities over time. Some land girls also cultivated meaningful and lifelong friendships with those people already caring for the land and created a stronger connection between the urban and rural.

⁶ “Women and the Call,” *Observer* (London), September 3, 1939.

Despite the vicissitudes of farm life, many land girls reflect fondly on their time in the WLA, often calling the period the best time of their lives. Through their work, land girls, similar to women in other war-service jobs, experimented with new personal freedoms. Working on the land gave many of these women a sense of worth, fulfillment, utility, and purpose. Not only were they serving their country, they were changing the way men viewed women and how women viewed themselves. Furthermore, many land girls believed that patience gained through their work with nature taught them to take life more in stride, for nothing was easy, but seeing the fruits of their labor was rewarding. If adventure was what these women sought, they surely received it while they contributed to Britain's food campaign.

As stated above, this thesis relies on many primary sources in the form of land girl memoirs and diaries. These types of sources tend to portray the WLA and land girls' experiences positively. However, not all land girls reflect fondly on their agricultural pasts. Many requested release from the WLA for a variety of reasons. Long hours working in conditions that were frequently less than ideal for low pay and limited time off left some women feeling exploited. Physically exacting chores that oftentimes resulted in injuries or constant fatigue led to other land girls leaving the WLA. Loneliness and separation from families encouraged other women to locate war jobs closer to home. Sexual harassment or intimidation by co-workers motivated some land girls to seek different forms of employment as well. While the land girls who had negative impressions of the WLA and farming do not form the focus of this thesis, their experiences are still important to the overall narrative of land girls and the WLA and contribute to complicating the boundaries of femininity and separate-sphere ideologies.

The State of Agriculture

By the start of the Second World War, British agriculture was in a state of deterioration. Scholars have demonstrated that in the eighteenth century, British agriculture gradually entered a general state of decline. Already by the latter half of the 1700s, Britain stopped being self-sufficient in grain and looked to foreign imports, especially grain from the United States and the Baltic region, to supplement home production.⁷ By the 1870s and 1880s, after the economic prosperity associated with Britain's golden age of high farming, agriculture went into an even more rapid decline. Additionally, with the opening of the western prairies in the United States, which enabled the US to produce large quantities of grain that could be exported relatively cheaply to Great Britain, British reliance on producing its own food further diminished. Additionally, Britain's empire supplied basic foodstuffs such as wheat, flour, and sugar. Improvements in railway transportation and the development of refrigeration also decreased Britain's reliance on domestic food production. Furthermore, because of Parliament's commitment to free trade, government officials saw Britain's future best secured by the exportation of manufactured goods and the importation of raw materials and food.⁸ All these factors worked together to weaken Britain's domestic agricultural outputs.

Except for a brief period of prosperity following the First World War, British agriculture during the interwar period experienced a profound depression.⁹ The 1.86

⁷ Minchinton, "Agricultural Returns," 29.

⁸ Sadie Ward, *War in the Countryside 1939-45* (London: Cameron Books, 1988), 8.

⁹ Alun Howkins, *The Death of Rural England: A Social History of the Countryside Since 1900* (London: Routledge, 2003), 42.

million acres of arable land that farmers cleared for the production of grains during the Great War were largely given up to pasture or were left unattended after the war. The termination of the Agriculture Act of 1921, which protected the prices of agricultural products and maintained the minimum wages of farmers, only encouraged farmers to reduce their expenditures. Additionally, the selling of large estates, underemployment, the decrease in the number of agricultural laborers, and increase in urban expansion contributed to the post-war agricultural depression.¹⁰ Between 1921 and 1924, the average number of full-time and part-time female and male agricultural laborers was 816,000. By 1938, that average dropped to 593,000.¹¹

The agricultural situation was so grim that by the outbreak of war in September 1939, Great Britain was domestically producing thirty percent of its food supply and importing the remaining seventy percent. For comparison, Germany was more than four-fifths self-sufficient by this time.¹² When the National Socialists obtained power in 1933, officials began to plan some of the country's food policies in the event Germany would become excluded from international food trade. The National Socialists implemented policies to increase domestic agricultural sufficiency and looked to their eastern neighbors, such as Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and Yugoslavia, for further food assistance.¹³

During the interwar period, Britain imported approximately 22 million tons of foodstuffs from its empire and neighbors. For example, approximately eighty percent of

¹⁰ Brian Short, Charles Watkins, and John Martin, "'The Front Line of Freedom': State-Led Agricultural Revolution in Britain, 1939-45," in *The Front Line of Freedom: British Farming in the Second World War*, eds. Brian Short, Charles Watkins, and John Martin (Exeter, UK: British Agricultural History Society, 2006), 4.

¹¹ Bullock, "The Women's Land Army," 7.

¹² Ward, *War in the Countryside*, 8.

¹³ Lizzie Collingham, *The Taste of War: World War II and the Battle for Food* (New York: Penguin Press, 2011), 67-69.

the country's wheat and flour came from Canada, Australia, and Argentina while Australia, New Zealand, Denmark, and Argentina supplied around eighty percent of Britain's meat. Two-thirds of the country's sugar supplies came from such places as Australia, Mauritius, Cuba, and San Domingo. About half of Britain's fruits and vegetables came from abroad as well.¹⁴ If Germany's U-Boat blockade proved successful in disrupting Britain's food chain, the UK would have to contend with the possibility of starvation. Therefore, it was imperative that Britain increase its domestic food production and to this extent, the WLA and land girls were important contributors in ensuring Britain's livelihood.

Improving food supplies and increasing farming's efficiency would require a re-working of the agricultural industry. Some of the implications of an overhaul meant that environmental landscapes would be re-shaped (including many areas that had not been cultivated since medieval times). The industry would become more mechanized through the increase use of such equipment as tractors, combines, and milk machines. The government would bring in more laborers in the form of land girls and casual workers along with giving male agriculturalists reserved call-up status. The government would also exert greater control over farming through such means as the County War Agricultural Committees to assist farmers in meeting production demands.

In order to help protect the well-being of Britain and reduce the country's reliance on imported food supplies, Parliament implemented an ambitious food plan in August 1939. The plan, known as the Battle for Wheat or Ploughing-Up Campaign, instructed

¹⁴ Richard Tames, *Feeding London: A Taste of History* (London: Historical Publications, 2003), 36.

agriculturalists to plow two million acres of grassland for the harvest of 1940.¹⁵ This was no small task with an already diminished agricultural workforce, coupled with male farmhands enlisting in the services or moving into better paying war-service work. The Ministry of Agriculture requested that Lady Denman and her land army assist in the implementation of the plowing campaign. By September 1939, approximately nine thousand land girls were ready to serve on the farms of Britain.¹⁶

When referring to those individuals who undertook work in agriculture, this thesis frequently uses titles such as farmer, farm laborer, farm worker, farmhand, and land girl. By farmer, the thesis refers to those people who were in charge of the management and operation of a farm. These people would most often have the decision making power over such matters as planting and harvesting, purchasing and selling, personnel, and so forth. While there were women farmers during the war period, farmers largely tended to be men. Those individuals that farmers engaged to carry out assigned agricultural duties and help with daily farming operations are referred to throughout the thesis as farm laborers, farm workers, or farmhands. While both men and women made up this category, men tended to outnumber women. The WLA prohibited women already engaged in agriculture from joining the WLA. The government instead encouraged these female agriculturalists to remain in their current farming positions. By land girl, this thesis refers to those women who were recruited members of the WLA, and employed by farmers for agricultural work and who the WLA prohibited from being utilized in domestic matters. Land girls were, in fact, farm laborers. Irrespective of these agricultural job titles, all these individuals had or would develop specialized skill sets and

¹⁵ Nicola Tyrer, *They Fought in the Fields: The Women's Land Army: The Story of a Forgotten Victory* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1996), 4.

¹⁶ "Women's Part in Emergency," *Times* (London), August 28, 1939.

knowledge regarding the agricultural discipline. They were all important and necessary caretakers of the land who worked together to increase the nation's food supplies.

Literature Review

Scholarly attention given to the WLA and land girls is growing, but there remains much room for further investigation. Interdisciplinary areas that could be further explored are the intersections between the WLA and gender and women's history along with environmental, agricultural, and rural histories. With many land girls' firsthand accounts published in the form of memoirs or war diaries, supplemented with hundreds of oral interviews and testimonials available through national and regional archives, there is a treasure trove of knowledge waiting to be explored by today's researcher.

To date, there have been limited secondary sources devoted exclusively to the WLA and land girls in Great Britain. Carol Twinch, Nicola Tyrer, and Ann Kramer's texts provide thorough backgrounds on the history of the WLA during both World Wars from the organization's infancy to its disbandment. They rely on land girls' testimonials and public record documents to highlight important issues regarding the experiences land girls had and situations the WLA encountered, which range from the organizations relationship with the government to the changing nature of agriculture, from women's roles in agriculture to societal prejudices towards women. These books clearly highlight ways land girls' experiences brought about a change regarding these women's self-perceptions and understandings of their roles in society. For example, Kramer writes in *Land Girls and Their Impact* that land girls discovered abilities within themselves that they were previously unaware of and that those abilities are reflected in their ongoing

self-assurance throughout life.¹⁷ Similarly, Tyrer indicates in *They Fought in the Fields, The Women's Land Army: The Story of a Forgotten Victory* that by working for the WLA, land girls grew into independent and capable women who understood their value to society.¹⁸ Twinch demonstrates in *Women on the Land: Their Story During Two World Wars* that the WLA helped to establish in many women a self-confidence to cope with the difficulties of the world as they undertook jobs in a male profession.¹⁹ She views the WLA as a fortuitous opportunity for women to challenge the status quo in terms of proper work for women.

Unlike the above three authors, Gill Clarke in *The Women's Land Army: A Portrait* takes an artistic approach in her cultural study of the WLA by using imagery in the forms of paintings, posters, and cartoons to depict the experiences of land girls. She supplements the artistic approach by also providing a history of the WLA in the First and Second World Wars.²⁰ In another study, "The Women's Land Army and its Recruits, 1938-50," Clarke evaluates the contributions and roles of the WLA and land girls in increasing food production. She concludes that the WLA was critical to the success of increasing and maximizing levels of land productivity through its ability to provide a flexible and invaluable labor force.²¹

A dissertation by Margaret Bullock on the WLA attempts to redress the issue of limited secondary sources and connect the organization with women's and agricultural history. Bullock uses a case study on the Craven district to understand and explore the

¹⁷ Kramer, *Land Girls and Their Impact*, 172.

¹⁸ Tyrer, *They Fought in the Fields*, 226.

¹⁹ Carol Twinch, *Women on the Land: Their Story During Two World Wars* (Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 1990), x.

²⁰ Gill Clarke, *The Women's Land Army: A Portrait* (Bristol, UK: Sansom & Company, 2008).

²¹ Gill Clarke, "The Women's Land Army and its Recruits, 1938-50," in Short, *Front Line of Freedom*, 114-116.

official policy of the WLA in such areas as recruitment, training, conditions of service, and accommodations. Bullock indicates that the policies were generally successful in their acceptance by land girls and in the overall way in which they allowed the agricultural industry to meet food targets.

In a transnational study, Cecilia Gowdy-Wygant addresses the relationship between both the United States and Great Britain's WLAs with women's rights organizations and women's farm and garden associations in *Cultivating Victory: The Women's Land Army & the Victory Garden Movement*. She argues that while land girls initially set out to transform nature into victory, they transformed themselves as they challenged the social order to gain personally and politically.²² Stephanie Carpenter, in *On the Farm Front: The Women's Land Army in World War II*, writes about the US women's land army and demonstrates that American women in rural landscapes disrupted notions regarding gender roles as they successfully earned independent livings and fed the nation during war with limited assistance from men. She argues that women revealed their adeptness at performing farm duties beyond cooking and raising food, two jobs traditionally assigned to the women's sphere on farms. Consequently, the WLA challenged traditional gender roles through its empowerment of women.²³

Other scholars have investigated British agriculture in relation to war without specifically focusing on the WLA. For example, Sadie Ward's *War in the Countryside 1939-45* examines the transformation of farming landscapes during the Second World War from abandoned fields to productive food-producing fields. She concentrates her

²² Cecilia Gowdy-Wygant, *Cultivating Victory: The Women's Land Army & the Victory Garden Movement* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013), 7. Both the United States and New Zealand had Women's Land Armies modeled after Britain's WLA.

²³ Stephanie A. Carpenter, *On the Farm Front: The Women's Land Army in World War II* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2003).

study on the country people's responses to war and claims that rural residents were ready to do anything expected of them during the war, but at the same time were determined to carry on their lives as usual. As a result, many country dwellers were wary of land girls' intrusion into their country way of life. However, their opinions toward the WLA changed as land girls became workers that were more competent.

While studies that place the British WLA of the Second World War in a larger national context are limited in number, more scholarly attention has focused on women's general experiences during war or in particular wartime settings. These studies help situate women in the wider context of the nation, war, and national identity. They frequently reveal the contradictions of women in a culture that was traditionally patriarchal and reveal the continuities between women's pre-war and post-war lives, emphasizing that the wars did not fully emancipate women. Penny Summerfield, a well-known historian of women's wartime experiences in Britain, has written extensively on gender and the Second World War. In *Women Workers in the Second World War: Production and Patriarchy in Conflict*, she examines women's work during the war and explores state policy toward their work and pay. Summerfield demonstrates that official policies, such as childcare, actually reinforced women's unequal social positions, as employers were often hesitant to associate themselves with policies closely connected with domesticity.²⁴ Summerfield continues this theme in a joint effort with Gail Braybon in *Out of the Cage: Women's Experiences in Two World Wars*. They conclude that even though women experienced greater mobility and had a larger presence in the public sphere during the Second World War, this did not lead to greater emancipation for

²⁴ Penny Summerfield, *Women Workers in the Second World War: Production and Patriarchy in Conflict* (London: Croom Helm, 1984).

women afterwards. While there were changes for women, there remained throughout the war and afterwards an “undertow” that pulled women back into the domestic sphere.²⁵ Another study by Summerfield, *Reconstructing Women’s Wartime Lives: Discourse and Subjectivity in Oral Histories of the Second World War*, addresses women’s changing status during the war and examines the transformation of feminine identity. She finds that while women had more presence in the public sphere, gender subordination persisted in the sense that women’s war-service work was socially considered secondary and supplementary to that of men’s work and the fighting soldier. Women simply liberated men from their peacetime duties so they could partake in jobs more “direct and masculine” to the war effort.²⁶ This study also identifies that an identity polarization existed among women who undertook war-service jobs. Such polarization indicated that some women viewed their jobs as temporary—something to be endured—and that their work would not achieve equality between the sexes. On the other end of the polarization were women who saw the war as a place where change could take place. Summerfield argues that this identity polarization reveals there was not, and is not, a unified culture of femininity.²⁷

Along with Summerfield, other scholars, such as Sonya Rose and Lucy Noakes, examine gender in relation to identity in the context of war. In *Which People’s War? National Identity and Citizenship in Wartime Britain 1939-1945*, Rose investigates the role gender plays in the formation of identity and citizenship. She finds, for example, that women’s citizenship rested on a precarious notion of gender identity based on proper

²⁵ Gail Braybon and Penny Summerfield, *Out of the Cage: Women’s Experiences in Two World Wars* (London: Pandora Press, 1987), 281.

²⁶ Penny Summerfield, *Reconstructing Women’s Wartime Lives: Discourse and Subjectivity in Oral Histories of the Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 81.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 285.

displays of femininity and masculinity. For a woman to be a proper citizen in wartime Britain, she had to demonstrate commitment to her family by being a good mother/wife and to the nation by undertaking important war-service work, but she always had to appear virtuous in each commitment. Too much commitment shown to being a mother and she was accused of not supporting the nation, but too much attention given to the nation and she was accused of being an improper wife/mother. Contradictory messages and duties plagued women as they attempted to present themselves as worthy wartime citizens.²⁸

Lucy Noakes identifies in *War and the British: Gender, Memory and National Identity* that gender and national identity are closely linked. The Second World War is popularly referred to as the People's War in Britain, which projects an image of national unity. However, the collective identity formulated around war unity hides the way in which gender affected identities during the war. While war unity may have appeared to have displaced gender conflict by making gender boundaries more permeable, gender divisions still existed and were actually reinforced. When women moved into engineering and heavy industry jobs, for instance, men became soldiers who were fighting and dying for Britain. Men's jobs became associated with heroism and valor as the country became the nuclear family that men were now fighting for. Consequently, women's war jobs were secondary and supplementary. Gender division remained; it was only taking place in a new setting.²⁹

²⁸ Sonya O. Rose, *Which People's War? National Identity and Citizenship in Wartime Britain 1939-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

²⁹ Lucy Noakes, *War and the British: Gender, Memory and National Identity* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998).

While Summerfield's multiple studies, along with scholarship undertaken by Rose and Noakes, do not specifically focus on the WLA (although the WLA is mentioned occasionally), many of their observations and conclusions are applicable to the experiences of land girls. For example, many people believed that land girls were only supplementing the agricultural workforce, which reproduced gender stratification in the public sphere of agriculture. Additionally, many land girls negotiated the tensions and contradictions created between proper displays of femininity and proper commitment to war-service work. These scholars' observations, however, are not always applicable to the WLA, which is to be expected. For example, public policies directed toward working women, such as limited working hours to afford them time to carry out their domestic duties, were not always relevant for land girls. One reason is that the WLA prohibited farmers from utilizing land girls for domestic needs. Another is that governmental policies limiting women's working hours were difficult to enforce on an industry governed by nature.

This thesis demonstrates that while land girls worked as farmhands, they operated in the overlapping area of public and private spheres where they blurred the boundaries of separate-sphere ideology and ideas regarding femininity, but at times, they also operated within preexisting social constructions. Due to these experiences, land girls expanded their own identities and self-consciousness as they developed a greater awareness of the capabilities of their bodies and experienced more personal autonomy. In order to demonstrate this, the thesis focuses broadly on issues regarding gender, landscapes, and women's identities. Chapter 1 is broken into two parts that focus on separate-sphere ideology and women's identities in relationship to the farming environment. The first

part outlines the ways in which growing ideas regarding separate spheres and femininity expanded over the course of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries to become firmly entrenched in British society. One result of this was that they transformed the world of agriculture into a more distinctly masculine-gendered place, which, consequently, reduced women's visibility in that place. Women's reduced roles in agriculture created a challenge for land girls to find their space in this male-dominated career. The second half of Chapter 1 examines the multifaceted roles and duties land girls undertook in these farming spaces. Through these tasks, many land girls developed a close relationship with nature as they plowed, toiled, and cared for the land. Chapters 2 and 3 concentrate more specifically on femininity and gender in agricultural and bodily landscapes. Chapter 2 explores ways in which land girls confronted social prejudices regarding their work in agriculture, whereby they demonstrated their usefulness as farm workers. This enabled them to integrate themselves into the farming community. Additionally, this chapter addresses the gendered spaces of agriculture and the ways in which land girls helped to de-gender these locations at the overlap of two spheres. Chapter 3 examines societal issues concerning the female body as a landscape where issues regarding gender roles were played out. The second half of Chapter 3 explores how the WLA uniform became a battleground for the country's understanding of gender.

CHAPTER I

THE GENDERED WORK OF AGRICULTURE

*I saw a Land Girl working
Alone in an open field.
Her hard, once elegant, hands
A stalwart hoe did wield.
Her back was bent as she slew the weeds
That spoiled the potatoes' growth;
She never wilted, she never paused,
She had taken her silent oath...*

— “To All Land Girls” from an admirer of their work, as published in *The Land Girl*, July 1940

When land girls joined the WLA and assumed farming jobs during the Second World War, they moved out of the private, domestic sphere and into the public sphere of agriculture. During this process, they disrupted the tradition of British farming being a largely male endeavor, established new relationships with agricultural landscapes, experienced personal growth, and an expansion of identities.

Separate Spheres Dictating that Agriculture was Men's Work

In Great Britain by 1939, people had long understood that agriculture resided in the public sphere and was a man's job. Beginning already in the eighteenth century and continuing throughout the nineteenth century, changing cultural and economic values, such as the weakening of the household economy in favor of a market economy, gradually subordinated the position of women to one below that of men in terms of

women's monetary contributions. Increasing mechanization, industrialization, scientific applications, and enclosure fostered the development toward a capitalist society where productivity and economic profit ruled the day.¹ Such emphasis on productivity and profit marginalized women's economically productive contributions to society.

Consequently, the move toward a capitalist order altered the relationship between women and men and fostered the development of a separate-sphere ideology. Within this gendered ideology, women became firmly associated with the home, wherein they cultivated their domestic skills, demonstrated proper displays of femininity, and became dependent on male breadwinners. Men, on the other hand, became strongly associated with the public sphere, wherein many participated in politics, brokered economic deals, discussed and practiced the innovative sciences and technologies of the day, and earned a living in order to support their dependent families. Charles Whitehead, a nineteenth-century British writer, opined, "the man should be the breadwinner, the sole supporter of the house, the woman—the 'placens uxor'—solely occupied in domestic matters and with her children, and in endeavouring to make the husband's home her chief delight."² By the mid-nineteenth century, separate-sphere ideology was firmly in place in British society and many, men and women alike, perpetuated this ideology well into the twentieth century.

The practice of separate-sphere ideology within the agriculture-oriented family during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries changed a woman's roles and duties as

¹ For discussion on the subordination of women in favor of a scientific and mechanized world, see Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution*, 2nd ed. (New York: HarperOne, 1989).

² Charles Whitehead, *Agricultural Labourers* (London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1870), 52, <http://www.archive.org/details/agriculturallab00whitgoog>. The English translation of *placens uxor* is "acceptable wife." Whitehead's publications often focus on agricultural matters such as proper cultivation and the profitability of farming.

well. Where a woman previously operated as a partner to her husband and productively contributed to the maintenance of the household, changing social norms held that men's work was economically productive, and women's work was domestic and supplementary in nature. Ideas regarding proper female behavior arose, as well. A woman was required to display acceptable forms of femininity, such as appearing chaste and pure, while maintaining a clean and orderly domestic life. However, these notions of femininity frequently were at odds with agricultural-based living. For example, developing notions regarding women's proper farm work held, among others, that: women should not be in the fields far from home where they could fall victim to the vagaries of male laborers; women should not be plowing or undertaking heavy, manual labor because such behavior was at odds with their delicate natures; and women should avoid dirt since it was an indicator of impurity. In this new and growing gendered ideology, the main objective was for women to demonstrate femininity, which a domestic life offered the best chance at achieving.

During the early to mid-nineteenth century, British farming experienced the advancements of new technologies and farming practices, which reinforced the ideology of separate spheres. Such technology and emphasis on scientific farming practices discouraged women's participation in farm work for numerous reasons. For example, the introduction of steam powered machinery and reliance on chemistry for the development of fertilizers impeded women working as farmers.³ As members of the House of Commons indicated, "in agriculture, a knowledge of chemistry and natural science would be exceedingly beneficial to the farmer, and the need of it is becoming daily more and

³ Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850*, rev. ed. (New York: Routledge, 2002), 274.

more apparent.”⁴ An educational background in chemistry and the natural sciences was beneficial in this new farming realm; however, most women received limited, if any, training in such subjects. Furthermore, the public dialogue surrounding agricultural work often focused on physical strength and technological aptitude. These traits were generally not associated with women and were at odds with notions regarding femininity and the domestic, private sphere. Men predominantly designed agricultural mechanisms, such as plows, for men’s use, which further removed women from the farming equation. For example, many agriculturalists considered such mechanisms too heavy or too masculine in nature for women’s use. An agricultural writer from Gloucestershire observed that men used two-furrow drills while planting beans, but women did so by hand.⁵ Complimenting arguments regarding the physical strength required of agriculture, opinions that women were not sturdy enough for outdoor labor and that they would lose their femininity performing such labor were common. Whitehead captured these social fears in his tract on women agriculturalists. He claimed:

They are not hardy enough for out-door work, and their dress is quite unfit to withstand the inclemency of the weather, or to protect them from wet and cold...the majority of out-door work available for women in agricultural districts is too laborious, too hard and is calculated to affect their health, to make them prematurely old, to take away their soft feminine qualities.⁶

Furthermore, discourses, dating from at least the mid-nineteenth century, indicate that women would become “unsexed” if they worked as professional farmers.⁷ Reverend James Fraser wrote in his parliamentary report in 1868 that in the counties of Norfolk,

⁴ Great Britain, House of Commons, “Education,” *Accounts and Papers, 1867-1868, Scientific Education; Technical and Primary Education*, vol. 15, 11 March 1868, par. 3, p. 7, <http://books.google.com/books?id=4SpcAAAQAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source>.

⁵ John Bravendar, “Farming in Gloucestershire,” *The Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England* 11 (1850): 150, http://books.google.com/books?id=BIZiVQU_fpAC.

⁶ Whitehead, *Agricultural Labourers*, 50-51.

⁷ Nicola Verdon, “Business and Pleasure: Middle-Class Women’s Work and the Professionalization of Farming in England, 1890-1939,” *Journal of British Studies* 51, no. 2 (2012): 395.

Essex, Sussex, Gloucester, and parts of Suffolk, it was “universally admitted” that employment of women in agriculture “was to a great extent demoralizing” because “it almost unsex[es] a woman, in dress, gait, manners, character, making her rough, coarse, clumsy, [and] masculine.”⁸

Even though men were generally in control of English farms, women remained active farm workers, but they labored under a new gendered-farming system that dictated their roles were subsidiary to those of men’s. Such a system reinforced notions of separate spheres. For example, during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, men were in control of the daily management and running of farms where they took care of livestock, maintained fields, oversaw farmhands, and engaged in the buying and selling of livestock and other agricultural produce. These tasks were generally more physically demanding, supervisory in nature, and took men further afield from the farmhouse than their female counterparts. Women, on the other hand, tended to poultry and small animals, took care of milking and preparation of dairy products, assisted in the fields during harvest time, and sold goods at local markets. Their work tended to occur nearer to the home and was closely tied to the successful management of the domestic world, such as producing butter or raising chickens in order to make meals for the family, all of which reinforced gendered spheres of employment.⁹ Public discourse coded women’s farm chores, unlike men’s, as “subsidiary” and “light” in nature.¹⁰ Such designations also supported separate-sphere ideology.

⁸ Rev. James Fraser, “Report,” *First Report from the Commissioners; Commission on the Employment of Children, Young Persons and Women in Agriculture*, vol. 2, no. 4068, appendix part i (1868): par. 49, p. 16, <http://books.google.com/books?id=bipcAAAAQAAJ>.

⁹ Merry E. Wiesner, “Spinning Out Capital: Women’s Work in Preindustrial Europe, 1350-1750,” in *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, 3rd ed., eds. Renate Bridenthal, Susan Mosher Stuard, and Merry E. Wiesner (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1998), 211.

¹⁰ Verdon, “Business and Pleasure,” 402.

Due to these changing social values, developing notions of separate spheres, and advancements in agricultural techniques and technology, people widely considered farm work to be a largely male-dominated endeavor. By the mid-nineteenth century, the exclusion of women, particularly that of middle-class women, from participating in the productive management of a farm was largely complete.¹¹ These social beliefs and practices helped to reinforce separate-sphere ideology and carry it swiftly into the twentieth century. As a result, many land girls would learn to negotiate these social beliefs through operating within the parameters of separate-sphere ideologies and from without in order to be successful in their WLA careers.

Gendered Agriculture at the Outbreak of the Second World War

Many Britons associated farming with the male public sphere by the outbreak of war in 1939. As land girls entered the farming landscapes at the start of the war, they naturally encountered social prejudices concerning their wartime work as farm laborers. Many of the prejudices they contended with were similar to those reasons that previously pushed women out of farming back in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Social prejudices still held that women lacked the physical strength and technological expertise to work as farmers. Reminiscent of nineteenth century discourses, an editorial published by the National Union of Agricultural Workers in their periodical, *Land Worker*, from October 1939, focused on the farming requirements of knowledge and strength. The editorial states, “to-day it is being recognised that farm work requires a large degree of

¹¹ Leonore Davidoff, *Worlds Between: Historical Perspectives on Gender and Class* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 200.

technical skill as well as considerable physical strength.”¹² An editorial appearing a month later in the *Times* questioned whether land girls were strong enough for farm work and opined that the government should instead form a Boys Land Army, thus implying that young boys were stronger and more suited to agricultural work than grown women were. The editorialist writes, “there is emphatically the need for a strong and handy lad rather than for a woman” on the farms in Wales.¹³

Other social prejudices focused on women losing their femininity and being unable to carry out their natural roles as mothers if they worked as agriculturalists. In other words, female farmers and farmhands challenged women’s true natures: to be mothers. Audrey Manning recalls that a farmhand said that agriculture was improper work for women because they would be unable to have children.¹⁴ For this man, agricultural work threatened to unsex a woman.

More prejudices focused on women’s potential difficulties in relating to or handling animals. Since animal husbandry was a major component of farming, agricultural laborers needed to have an understanding of and respect for animals. Another land girl recalls that a male farmhand believed that women “never could ‘andle ‘orses” when she related to her superior that she had difficulties with her workhorse.¹⁵

Other prejudices focused on the appearance of new women from urban centers. The villagers feared these women would not appreciate or understand the country way of life. There was also concern that land girls took away valuable farm work from men and,

¹² Editorial, “The War and the Agricultural Worker,” *Land Worker* (London), October 1939, 8.

¹³ Doris W. Stapledon, letter to the editor, *Times*, November 6, 1939.

¹⁴ Joan Mant, *All Muck, Now Medals: Land Girls by Land Girls* (Stroud, UK: Amberley Publishing, 2009), 112.

¹⁵ Josephine Duggan Rees, *Corduroy Days: An Affectionate Portrait of Life in the Women’s Land Army During World War 2* (West Sussex, UK: Woodfield Publishing, 2000), 79.

subsequently, that they would not relinquish their farming duties after the war and the countryside would never be rid of them.

Lack of women's experience in farming jobs was an issue for some farmers. As one man explained, unskilled labor can be an expensive hindrance:

While a plentiful supply of unskilled labour is a tremendous asset to farming during the harvesting of any crop, for most types of agricultural production that same labour is often of very little use, sometimes more hindrance than help, always expensive, and its use often a very costly business indeed.¹⁶

The agricultural unions worried that employing land girls at low wages would bring down the already low wages of farm laborers.

Yet, remaining after all these years was the social prejudice that held farming was men's work and that women, especially city and town women, were impractical farmhands. An article in the *Picture Post* captures this sentiment: "the farmers who object to employing the land girls, state...women are of no practical use as farm labourers."¹⁷ It was not just men who believed this, women did so as well. An article published in the *Farmers Weekly* by a female agriculturalist explains that farmers could utilize land girls, but that farming was still men's work. The woman writes, "for she is trying to take on a man's job after a city stool."¹⁸

Most of these prejudices encountered during the outbreak of war were not new. The WLA and land girls had confronted similar ones twenty years earlier during the First World War. Encouraged by the government at the end of the war in 1918 to return to their pre-war lives that focused on domestic management and motherhood, many land

¹⁶ A.G. Street, "Amateur Farm Workers: and Why some Farmers are Reluctant to Employ Volunteer Workers," *Farmers Weekly* (Surrey), November 10, 1939, 21.

¹⁷ Douglas MacDonald Hastings, "This was the Women's Land Army," *Picture Post* (London), January 13, 1940.

¹⁸ Margaret McCowen, "The Farmer—and the Women's Land Army," *Farmers Weekly*, July 21, 1939, 43.

girls quickly abandoned their agricultural posts. Agricultural and economic depressions further encouraged the disappearance of women from the farming sphere. Quickly forgotten during the intervening years was the understanding that there was no true need to fear female land laborers. Additionally, once war broke out in 1939, many people believed the new war would be of a short duration and consequently, that there was no need to employ and train women as farm laborers. As people soon learned, that was not to be the case.

Land Girls at Work

Despite these prejudices, there was much need for agricultural laborers during the war. Heeding government and WLA calls for farm workers, thousands of women left their homes and jobs in favor of an open-air agricultural life over the course of the war and afterwards. Through their work experiences, in the face of what was initially a plethora of prejudices, land girls challenged social notions regarding separate spheres and femininity. During the process, they simultaneously expanded their own identities and self-consciousness as they developed a greater awareness of their physical and emotional capabilities, gained local and national recognition, matured both emotionally and physically, developed working relationships with the land, and experienced more personal freedom. In order to understand the above processes, a closer examination of the work land girls undertook and their experiences in that work follows.

As land girls entered the farming landscapes of Great Britain during the war, they undertook activities in a variety of agricultural areas. They cared for animals, drove tractors, delivered milk, plowed fields, maintained machinery, and performed any job that

was required of them. In their memoirs, land girls speak to the variety of work they carried out which was usually of a strenuous and dirty nature and at odds with notions of femininity. They also speak to the ways in which that work expanded their awareness of themselves both physically and emotionally. Because of that work, their sense of self expanded in a war-affected society.

When land girls first enrolled in the WLA, they could indicate a preference for field, dairy, or forestry work. There was no guarantee the WLA would give a land girl her preference, due to labor demands at the time. As a result, a land girl could potentially find herself working as a dairymaid, a general farm laborer, or a market gardener. Regardless of the type of work she assumed, her duties were vast, nearly always physically exacting, at times humorous, but always crucial to the war effort.

When appropriate, the WLA assigned those women who indicated a preference for forestry work to the Women's Timber Corps (WTC). A lesser-known, but vitally important branch of the WLA, the WTC offered women an open-air opportunity different from an agricultural life. The WTC sent women (frequently known as lumber jills) into the forests of England, Wales, and Scotland to work as foresters. Such work included, but was not limited to, harvesting and transporting trees, trimming branches and stripping bark, measuring and cutting planks to size, acquisition work, as well as planting new trees. Away from the hustle and bustle of the city, these women trudged through the quiet woods, oftentimes in less than ideal weather. As one forestry worker recalls, "in the summer it is a grand life, but in the winter it is no good leaving your sense of humour behind. Not a spectacular job, ours? Perhaps not, but we have fun, and we know we are

doing really essential work.”¹⁹ Essential work it was: coalmines needed timber for pit-props, communication networks needed logs for telegraph poles, and homeland defenses needed lumber for roadblocks to protect against invaders. One woman recalls that for several weeks she worked at sawing wood that British troops eventually used to fill in holes to allow tanks to pass over during D-Day.²⁰

While serving in the WTC, women frequently were required to stay in the forests for weeks at a time. There they carried on working and living more like their male counterparts than their former lives. The women in the Scottish branch of the WTC frequently lived in rustic camps as opposed to billets or in people’s homes, as was more common for their WTC counterparts in England and Wales. As a newspaper article made known, WTC women were “doing a man’s job, in a man’s time, and for mankind’s sake.”²¹ Women wielding axes and billhooks, operating circular saws, and running sawmills were jobs vastly different from those of women tending to domestic responsibilities and supportive roles granted to them by separate-sphere ideologies back home.

Before the war, there was a small contingency of female forestry workers, but those women, similar to women in agriculture, tended to carry out the lighter chores of forestry work. The timber industry reserved the heavier work, such as felling trees, hauling, and sawing logs, for men.²² This did not remain the status quo during the war.

Mavis Williams recalls that the first time she and her fellow mates saw a pile of axes:

¹⁹ Quoted in Vita Sackville-West, *The Women’s Land Army* (London: Michael Joseph, 1944), 60.

²⁰ V. R. Carnt, “Forestry Work,” Women’s Land Army Museum, Dover, UK.

²¹ Quoted in Mavis Williams, *Lumber Jill: Her Story of Four Years in the Women’s Timber Corps, 1942-45* (Bradford on Avon, UK: Ex Libris Press, 1994), 96.

²² *Meet the Members: A Record of the Timber Corps of the Women’s Land Army* (Bristol, UK: Bennett Brothers, 1945), 5.

they “gazed in horror, for to us they resembled instruments of torture, heavy and sharp.”²³ At that point, the women still carried with them social constructions regarding femininity and separate-spheres: axes were not intended for women’s use; rather they were masculine and heavy in nature and belonged to the public sphere. The axes did not remain symbols of masculinity for long, but rather became symbols of the very important work women undertook in this conjoined space. In fact, saws and axes became tools that blended femininity and masculinity. Through work with the tools, women even assumed socially deemed masculine markers: their hands went from soft and clean to calloused and dirty; biceps and triceps from weak and undefined to strong and distinct. Beyond the physical instruments of the job, nature also left its bodily marks on the women—marks that were still more associated with masculinity. The oak coppice from the trees stained skin, branches and brambles scratched and scared arms and legs, and slivers errantly punctuated hands and fingers.

When taken as a whole, a group of lumber jills travelling through town presented a unique spectacle. As Mavis Williams again reflects, while walking through a village one day with her fellow mates, they “were met with incredulous stares.” She goes on:

It must be admitted that we were no glamour girls, with tousled hair, red faces from the sun and wind, dungarees rolled up to our knees, coats slung over our shoulders and often singing as we walked. Perhaps we offended the local villagers’ idea of modesty?²⁴

The women most likely did, but simultaneously they also challenged the villagers’ notions of femininity regarding the appropriate appearance of and work for women. For not many Britons were accustomed to publicly seeing women in such an unfeminine state and taking on men’s work. However, being glamorous and domestic was not the intent

²³ Williams, *Lumber Jill*, 13.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 33.

of the WTC nor did the WTC offer many opportunities at achieving either. The organization instead afforded women the opportunity to step outside their ordinary lives, experience new adventures, and cultivate new interests. Williams recalls that in the early days of tree felling: “I don’t think that I have ever experienced such a thrill in my life as when that tree came down.”²⁵ As the tree fell, her self-confidence grew. In many cases, the WTC ended up not only sacrificing nature’s forests for the war effort, but also sacrificing those trees for women’s growing sense of self.

Sackville-West comments on the majestic nature of the forests and the sacrificial felling of trees in her profile of the WLA:

That is the tragic thing about a felled tree: the complete reversal of all its natural intention. It is being forced to do the exact contrary of everything it was meant to do. It was meant to stand up, not to lie down; it was meant to have a great spreading head, in which birds could sing and nest, and the wind blow; it was meant to stand so firm in the earth, through centuries longer than many generations of men, that nothing but another natural force, a gale, could uproot it.²⁶

In the case of the WTC, ironically, it was the force of women, which chopped down these majestic trees. The process of felling trees afforded women the opportunity to lead the lives that trees were intended to live. For WTC women, cutting trees gave them the opportunity to assert themselves after submitting to notions of femininity and separate-spheres, to use their intelligence to help the war effort, and to take a stand for their own autonomy. As one woman states, felling was a “highly skilled job, also a most interesting one, and I think quite a few of us will be rather sorry when the time comes to give it up, even if it does mean that better days have come.”²⁷ For this woman, chopping down trees offered her a skilled job. Her comment that she will be sad to leave reflects, to an extent,

²⁵ Ibid., 18.

²⁶ Sackville-West, *Women’s Land Army*, 58.

²⁷ *Meet the Members*, 17.

awareness that she appreciated the opportunity to challenge herself through skilled work; such a challenge may have been more difficult to come by in her former life.

WTC work could be challenging, awkward, and frustrating at times. Anstace Goodhart, an acquisition worker, relates that when instructed to find all the trees in a forest that had a girth of at least 14" and mark those with a painted-white "X," she had to crawl on hands and knees with the paintbrush awkwardly carried between her teeth. "The floor of the wood was one mess of brambles and briars...and when we eventually reached the tree it turned out to be 12½" or 13", and so the journey was useless."²⁸ Another WTC woman recalls that forestry work was done back to front—meaning that planting was done during the winter when the ground was cold and hard and "beautiful crackling fires" were lit in the summer. Nevertheless, she admits that they came to love being in the woods.²⁹ Despite the difficulty of the work, many came to enjoy the job and reflect upon it as a happy time in their lives.³⁰ For two lumber jills, the best part of being forestry workers was the free and open-air life.³¹

Women of the WTC also encountered situations that they were unlikely to experience in their previous lives as shop clerks, barmaids, and hairdressers. Anstace Goodhart recalls that work in the WTC's Acquisition Branch was never dull. She was "nearly murdered by an irate owner with a cut-throat razor; nearly shot when working in a wood close to a military range; and once arrested as a suspicious character when surveying woods on the outskirts of an aerodrome."³² For other women, the WTC offered personal recognition and promotion, two things that were more difficult to

²⁸ Ibid., 9.

²⁹ Carnt, "Forestry Work," Women's Land Army Museum.

³⁰ Betty Ruddick, "W.T.C. and War Experiences," Women's Land Army Museum.

³¹ *Meet the Members*, 15.

³² Ibid., 12.

achieve in their former jobs. M.G. Kinloch, who the WTC promoted to a forestry forewoman, writes:

I have always been glad that I was given the opportunity to do this work. I have not been trained to it, in the proper sense of the word, but have learnt on the way, by watching and listening, and gleaning information where I could. I have enjoyed it, and it has taught me many things. It has taught me to be self-reliant and make decisions, and has almost overcome my fear of facing new things, whether work or people. It has been worth while.³³

The lessons of learning to become self-reliant, make decisions, and overcome fears in the natural world, all influenced her identity, and doubtless was the same for many other lumber jills.

Like their counterparts in the WTC, those women who specifically were assigned to the agricultural branch of the WLA found themselves challenging notions of femininity and separate-sphere ideology in a variety of manners and all the while expanding their own personal awareness. Such was the case for the many land girls who were involved in dairy work during their WLA tenures. In her account of the WLA, Vita Sackville-West states that her commentary and analysis on milking comes first due to the fact that milking “is one of the most important jobs that the W.L.A. has undertaken... is also one of the most exacting...[and] is one at which the Land-girl has excelled.”³⁴ In addition to milking, dairy tasks included, but were not limited to, delivering milk, making dairy products, and the critical job of keeping the dairy clean. The specific assignment of working in the dairy barn was often arduous work. Anne Hall explains that her work in the dairy was an all-day affair. Rising from bed at 4:30 am, the milking shed had to be

³³ Ibid., 46.

³⁴ Sackville-West, *Women's Land Army*, 27.

tidy and clean before milking commenced.³⁵ Once the land girls brought in the cows and cleaned, milked, and released them, they finally enjoyed breakfast. After which, it was back to work. Hall removed the old straw from the stalls, washed down the shed, made up and distributed the cows' food rations, and filled the racks with new hay. Beginning sometime in the afternoon, milking commenced again and evening chores followed. Understandably, many land girls were exhausted by day's end.

The personal growth experienced by land girls working in the dairy was a common occurrence. Frequently noted in land girl interviews and memoirs were their initial fears of cows and bulls, which dissipated over time. Fear of such animals was reasonable, especially due to the animals' large statures. Cows could very easily deliver an injury with a swift kick or stinging flick of tail to those dairy workers not paying attention. Already afraid of cows before joining the WLA, Kathleen Ellis experienced the temperaments of the animal on her first day:

What a performance! I pulled and pulled at the teats but not a drop of milk could I get, the cow kept swishing her tail across my back, and then she did a great cow clap which splashed all over me. I was near to tears when one of the farm hands took pity on me and told me to pull and squeeze the teats, after a few attempts I managed to get a stream of milk, but by then the cow was so fed up it lifted its back leg and sent me flying.³⁶

Eventually Ellis found her rhythm through a growing knowledge and relationship with the animal, but admitted she preferred mechanical milking machines to milking by hand. Barbara Fowler quickly learned how to dodge the errant cow kick that sent her flying many times.³⁷ In many instances, however, the animals were gentle and the environment of the dairy peaceful. Dorothea Abbott remembers such, "the cows were all tied up and

³⁵ Anne Hall, *Land Girl: Her Story of Six Years in the Women's Land Army, 1940-1946* (Wiltshire, UK: Ex Libris Press, 1993), 35.

³⁶ Mant, *All Muck, Now Medals*, 146.

³⁷ Barbara Fowler, "Gosden Hill—Foot and Mouth Disease," Women's Land Army Museum.

were pulling away at the hay in their racks. There was a steady swishing and munching, the most satisfying sound in the world.”³⁸

In her memoir, *Lang Girls Gang Up*, Pat Peters recounts that she joined the WLA because she loved the countryside and had, like so many other land girls, “romantic visions” of milking cows.³⁹ Ironically, Peters was afraid of the animal. At one of her posted farms, Peters was responsible for giving the cows their allotted hay. She did so by standing as far away as possible from the large beasts. While throwing in the food, she took comfort in the concrete wall that separated them from her, and always made a quick retreat. The day came when the farmer insisted on putting a stop to her “fooching around” and required her to try milking. She recalls how ill at ease she was at the command. “My stomach perform[ed] a somersault and inwardly I panicked.” Peters begged the farmer to give her a quiet cow. As she began milking, Peters rendered a panicked cry as the cow repositioned. However, once the first trickle of milk appeared, her confidence increased. Peters excitedly recalls, “very slowly...the milk fell in odd drops and squirts. My vision had come true! Now I felt like a *real* land girl, now I could boast!”⁴⁰ For Peters, it was successfully milking a cow that transformed her romantic visions into a lived reality and made this former Londoner finally feel like a worthy land girl. Rather than being a consumer of milk that had shaped her physical identity while growing up, Peters became a producer of milk that shaped her emotional identity.⁴¹

³⁸ Dorothea Abbott, *Librarian in the Land Army* (Stratford-upon-Avon, UK: Greenhill Books, 1984), 29.

³⁹ Pat Peters, *Land Girls Gang Up* (Ipswich, UK: Old Pond Publishing, 2009), 14.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 179-181.

⁴¹ For further discussion on food fueling bodies and shaping identities, see Douglas C. Sackman, “Putting Gender on the Table: Food and the Family Life of Nature,” in *Seeing Nature Through Gender*, ed. Virginia J. Scharff (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003), 169-193.

Other land girls worked with animals, such as poultry, pigs, horses, rabbits, and sheep, where they ensured the animals' welfare by developing their own knowledge of and relationships with the animals. Their tasks included feeding, washing, grooming, medicating, birthing, raising, selling, and butchering animals. While caring for the animals, many land girls, not surprisingly, formed attachments with the creatures, whether it was with the plow horse or the milk cow. Gwenda Morgan recalls growing attached to a bantam cock, known for his tameness and perkiness, she was rather sad when he disappeared.⁴² Betty Campbell fostered a motherless lamb named Sammy who followed the land girl everywhere. Ultimately, the farmer sold Sammy.⁴³

While caring for animals had many rewards, land girls frequently were forced to deal with troublesome animals, but by the end, the difficulties these animals posed, helped the land girls to mature in their tenures and in their identities as farm laborers. Josephine Duggan Rees recalls that her milk-cart horse, Joey, was always troublesome. From running off with a cart full of milk to nipping at her arms, just about every moment spent around Joey had the high likelihood of becoming disastrous. As time passed, however, Rees grew to "regard the mad dashes up the main road, the hair raising turns into the drive and the near misses of gate posts and walls as just part" of her daily routine with Joey.⁴⁴ Pat Peters recalls that a supervisor entrusted her and another land girl, Pauline, with driving a heard of sheep six miles. She remembers the proudness she felt at the supervisor entrusting them with such a task given that they had no prior experience in the activity. Their supervisor chose them because they had previously displayed some

⁴² Gwenda Morgan, *The Diary of a Land Girl, 1939-1945* (Risbury, UK: Whittington Press, 2002), 20.

⁴³ Mant, *All Muck, Now Medals*, 250-251.

⁴⁴ Rees, *Corduroy Days*, 79.

farm “sense.” Tempering this proudness was a fair amount of nervousness. The women’s lack of experience and knowledge regarding sheep coupled with animal’s notorious reputation for gregariousness, held the recipe for disaster. Despite the farmer’s advice to the land girls “not to panic” while shepherding, plenty of anxious moments ensued such as when the flock detoured on their own accord from the road to visit flowerbeds, coal yards, and other fields full of sheep. At the end of the journey, Peters requested never to herd again, but the supervisor nevertheless rewarded the women with a smile, something they had never seen from him since arriving—the smile perhaps indicating amused approval at their completed task.⁴⁵ All the while dealing with animals in pleasant and difficult situations, land girls heightened their awareness for the creatures and strengthened their animal husbandry skills while learning about their own capabilities.

The majority of land girls worked as general farm laborers. As the *Land Girl Manual* indicated, jobs for general farm laborers varied and never ended:

In the summer...there will be the corn to cut, the sheaves to deal with, the stacking to be done...stubble to rake. Later there will be the potatoes to pick up and bag.... In the winter there will be the hedging and ditching, the manure-carting, the threshing and chaff-cutting, the fence repairs, the barbed-wire work, the dressing of the barley, wheats and oats.⁴⁶

Work as a general farm laborer, like that of a dairymaid, was difficult, but rewarding. Joan Williams, who worked on a mixed farm in Tenterden, fondly reminisces about the strenuous nature of general farm work, but the strain did not stop her from enjoying herself. “The work was *very* strenuous, with horse drawn implements, (no tractors), much the worse for wear, hand milked cows...being on top of the hay and corn stack

⁴⁵ Peters, *Land Girls Gang Up*, 107-118.

⁴⁶ W. E. Shewell-Cooper, *Land Girl: A Manual for Volunteers in the Women’s Land Army* (London: English University Press, 1941), 71.

until about 10 O'clock at night. Like so many others, I weathered it. I enjoyed it all and wouldn't have missed the whole experience for a ransom."⁴⁷

Fieldwork could be particularly demanding in both a physical and emotional sense, but also emotionally rewarding. Pat Peters recounts a variety of emotions she felt while serving as a land girl for three years in Cornwall where she spent much of her time in the field. She recalls that there were many days spent at the monotonous job of digging potatoes. Chilly days made the work all the worse when fingers became numb with cold as land girls fought against the cold ground to harvest the crop. However, on those precious warm and sunny days, when land girls rolled up their dungarees in order to work on a tan or to stay cool, the work seemed more rewarding.⁴⁸ Peters also recalls that there were many days spent in the field where distaste or boredom for the job got the better of her and others. Such was the case when she was required to thistle-dodge, which consisted of picking thistles from a barley field. Quickly tiring from the dull, back aching, and prickly work, she and the other women hid in the barley field to sneak frequent respites. As Peters recalls, "until lunch time we crawled, we sat, we stood, we moved a few paces and then went into hiding again."⁴⁹

Many land girls, despite the monotony of fieldwork, took great pleasure in the work. Josephine Duggan Rees thoroughly enjoyed using the scythe to make silage. "I took to the task like a duck to water and have ever since loved to use a scythe or watch its use in capable hands; the steady rhythmical movement, the blade held low to the ground and level."⁵⁰ In fact, many land girls enjoyed the rhythmical movement and orderliness

⁴⁷ Joan Williams, "Tenterden," Women's Land Army Museum.

⁴⁸ Peters, *Land Girls Gang Up*, 62.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁵⁰ Rees, *Corduroy Days*, 113.

of fieldwork, as if the repetition and order was in tune with nature and the land girls were simply nature's workers. Many land girls also enjoyed the physical manipulation of nature through digging, planting, hoeing, and harvesting such crops as potatoes, Brussel sprouts, cabbage, and wheat. Rees specifically recalls the fulfilment hoeing, like scything, gave her. "Soon I began to enjoy hoeing, seeing the clean, upstanding rows of kale while the weeds, left on top of the ground, withered in the sun."⁵¹ These simple interactions with the environmental landscapes empowered many. Rees eloquently captures the feeling:

I enjoyed those hours in the field in the fresh air and the hot sun. It is not possible to describe the happiness, almost exhilaration, shared by so many other girls in those early days on the land. Perhaps it was from an innate desire, not even realised but not fulfilled, to escape from the claustrophobic life of the town into the freedom and freshness of the countryside.⁵²

For Rees, and countless others, the openness of the countryside and the work itself, liberated a feeling of entrapment imposed not only by the closeness of town life, but by societal ideologies as well. On the farming landscape, many land girls cultivated with the hoe, scythe, and pitchfork their inner desires for lives beyond what they previously knew. The work allowed them to acquaint themselves with nature and through interacting with and shaping nature they shaped themselves beyond the molds of femininity and domesticity.

Fieldwork inevitably included the harvest and working with the threshing machine—both of which are prominently discussed in land girl testimonials. A most disliked job during the harvest was work having to do with the threshing machine. The machine separated grains from the stalks and husks of arable plants such as wheat, barley,

⁵¹ Ibid., 19.

⁵² Ibid., 27.

and oats. Farm laborers fed bundles of sheaves into the thresher's feeder, where upon the mechanism's separator tore apart the bundles and the grain kernels eventually separated from the plant. An impressive machine for the variety of tasks it simultaneously undertook, the thresher collected grain in a hopper, blew the chaff out, and formed the remaining straw into bales. While the machine made the process of grain extraction less arduous and less time consuming than threshing by hand, the work was still physically demanding, noisy, and dirty. As Enid Bennell colorfully explains:

Now threshing, what a hard mucky job! A smoke-belching steam engine moving belts that burnt you if you happened to touch them, dust off the chaff and cavings as we tried to rake it clear from the thresher. We really got filthy, it got into our eyes, down our throats, up our noses and in our clothes, not forgetting our hair. We looked like total wrecks by the end of the day and a bath at the end of it was heaven.

We took it in turns threshing, so the next thing was cutting the bonds up top and feeding the drum. The corn comes up and spits in your face which certainly stings. And lastly baling, that entails feeding wires through the machine, as the straw came out it was compressed into bales and the wires held them together. We girls carried these heavy bales to make a stack. When it got high we climbed a ladder with them...I tell you if we weren't tough to start with we were when we had finished.⁵³

Dorothea Abbott remembers that on her first day as a land girl she was required to assist with the threshing machine by hauling away the chaff. After getting a face full of dust, and later developing a nosebleed, she wondered what happened to her dream of an "open-air life."⁵⁴

The harvest was also a particularly exacting job that consumed entire days and weeks, but a number of land girls took pride in the difficult work and felt some sadness once the job was complete. Josephine Duggan Rees recalls such pride and sadness. "At 7 o'clock on the mornings when there was no dew...I got in a trailer load by myself,

⁵³ Mant, *All Muck, Now Medals*, 195.

⁵⁴ Abbott, *Librarian in the Land Army*, 15.

being pitcher, loader and driver by turns and I enjoyed this, taking pride in achieving a neat symmetrical, if not large load.” She goes on to recall that once the harvest was complete, emptiness permeated the farm. “Although we were glad that it was all over for another year, there was an emptiness, almost a sadness about the scene, perhaps because the end of harvest was the end of summer.”⁵⁵ Dorothea Abbott remembers that once the harvest was complete she would gaze over the empty fields with a sense of achievement and feel very much a part of the labor force. “I looked down the bare field with a sense of achievement. From time immemorial Warwickshire men had harvested their crops, and I felt one in an unbroken line of labour.”⁵⁶ For many years, men and women worked side-by-side during the harvest despite separate-sphere ideology. During this brief period, a sphere unity existed based on labor demands. For Abbott, a sense of belonging to a process greater than herself and a new awareness of where she belonged developed in this space. For both Abbott and Rees and doubtless other land girls, they integrated themselves with the natural environment through harvest work that produced food, which nourished them physically, but through the harvest process, they also found landscapes, spaces, and horizons that nourished them emotionally.

Another job that land girls reflect fondly on was the operation and maintenance of tractors. Such work was a job that many individuals believed women were not qualified for whether in terms of femininity or women’s lack of strength and/or technological aptitude. Even Sackville-West wrote that tractor plowing was simply not a job for most women.⁵⁷ One land girl recalls that her family and friends decried her intentions of driving a tractor for the WLA. Their reasoning: “tractor-driving was not a woman’s job.”

⁵⁵ Rees, *Corduroy Days*, 144-146.

⁵⁶ Abbot, *Librarian in the Land Army*, 58.

⁵⁷ Sackville-West, *Women’s Land Army*, 31.

Much to the land girl's delight, at her first posting the farmer left her in charge of the tractor. However, she quickly learned that "starkness, satanic simplicity and smelliness" characterized tractor work.⁵⁸ Jean Philpott who worked as a tractor driver for five years recalls from a twenty-first century perspective that the machines had few comforts unlike those of today. There were no canopies to protect the driver from weather, exhaust, or dust. Nor were many tractors outfitted with electric starters to assist in making the morning start-up go quickly and smoothly. Regardless of the lack of amenities, Philpott still enjoyed the work and she even attends tractor matches today.⁵⁹

Despite the drawbacks of operating tractors, land girls frequently comment on the overriding joy they felt while using them. Ellen Wood recalls that the trials and tribulations of operating the tractor were "well worth it" in order to look "over the land you've just worked."⁶⁰ Similarly, another land girl appreciated tractor driving because she enjoyed seeing a field nicely plowed. She also appreciated that it gave her the opportunity to be her own boss when she was hired out to different farms for tractor work.⁶¹ Yet another land girl relates that when she "saw those furrows stretching behind me, like the wake of a ship only brown instead of white, and knew I had done it all myself, I thought I should fall off the saddle with the thrill."⁶² Similar to the land girls who participated in manual fieldwork, the mechanized fieldwork completed with the tractor left many women inspired as they independently carried out the work and looked upon the neatness of the furrows and the openness of the landscapes. The mechanization of farming, which originally assisted in moving women more firmly into the domestic

⁵⁸ R. de Bunsen, "Harrowing Experiences of a Land Girl," *Land Girl* (Sussex), July 1940, 3.

⁵⁹ Jean Philpott, "The Land Army," Women's Land Army Museum.

⁶⁰ Mant, *All Muck, Now Medals*, 206.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 210.

⁶² Sackville-West, *Women's Land Army*, 32.

sphere, now was the same mechanization that moved land girls out of that sphere and built up a separation, at least temporarily, between land girls and the cult of domesticity. It was upon the tractor that many land girls found a new perspective.

Summary

After a long history of women gradually losing visibility in agriculture based on notions of femininity and separate spheres, land girls entered the farming world in force during the course of the Second World War due to labor demands. Their presence brought to the fore social prejudices regarding the appropriateness of women participating in agriculture. As land girls took to the forests and fields, they cultivated an expansion of their own physical and emotional identities in spite of these prejudices. Discussed above are only some examples of the various work land girls undertook while serving in the WLA. While their tasks varied, land girls proved to themselves that women were capable and useful farmhands. As one newspaper reporter pointed out to his readers in 1942 during the height of the war, “W.L.A. members...have given abundant proof that they are exceedingly keen and capable, and that there are few jobs on a farm to which they cannot turn their hands successfully.”⁶³ Such a statement was very different from pre-war statements arguing that women were unfit for such labor due to their delicate natures or lack of knowledge in agricultural matters. Given the opportunity to undertake agricultural work during a time of war, land girls demonstrated that women were far from the impractical farm laborers many in society felt women were.

Land girls’ experiences in these different work areas were vast and their emotions ranged from thrilling excitement to sheer boredom and to moments of panic. Two

⁶³ “E. Riding Farmers Should Engage W.L.A. Now,” *Daily Mail* (Hull, UK), March 3, 1942.

recurrent themes in many land girls' recollections are their journeys of maturation as they dealt with the intricacies of learning how to live and work in the agricultural world and the development of a greater awareness of and respect for farming landscapes. For many land girls, their WLA work experiences and interactions with the physical landscapes taught them memorable life lessons such as becoming self-reliant, purposeful, and independent as well as learning how to deal with and overcome fears. Such experiences allowed them to weaken many social prejudices focused on women being fragile, dependent, and, thus, unpractical farm laborers. As a whole, land girls' experiences helped to create in them a greater sense of identity beyond their pre-war lives. As Valerie Hodge aptly wrote in 1940, agricultural work "has so much freedom and scope for using one's initiative and self-reliance."⁶⁴ Using their bodies and minds in new and skilled ways by becoming producers for the country, land girls shaped and expanded their identities in a conjoined space. How land girls specifically challenged, but at times upheld, separate-sphere and feminine ideologies is explored in the next two chapters.

⁶⁴ Valerie Hodge, "Land Girl No. 1," *Land Girl*, April 1940, 14.

CHAPTER II

NEGOTIATING THE PREJUDICES OF AGRICULTURE AND ITS SPACES

Always there is this feeling of solid companionship with Nature behind me...All those little things which I had been worrying about for years lay exposed, dwarfed by the immense vista of life which had opened up before me.

— Jean Iddon, *Fragrant Earth: An Autobiography of a Landgirl*, 1947

As land girls moved into the world of agriculture due to the necessities of war, they confronted social anxieties and gendered spaces that were averse to women performing men's work. In order for land girls to secure a place for themselves, they had to negotiate these prejudices. Relying on techniques that supported social ideologies regarding separate spheres and femininity at times, and at other times using techniques that disregarded those ideologies, land girls weakened social prejudices and blurred the boundaries of the private and the public, feminine and masculine as they integrated themselves with the world of agriculture. The first half of this chapter examines ways in which land girls dealt with general social prejudices regarding their movement into a male career. The second half of the chapter addresses ways in which these women helped to de-gender agriculture's spaces.

Navigating Societal Prejudices

As discussed in the previous chapter, there were many prejudices land girls contended with as they moved into the world of agriculture. These prejudices ranged

from women's lack of strength and technological savviness to women's lack of farming knowledge; from loss of femininity to women not conforming, physically or emotionally, to the ideal farm laborer. A foremost prejudice centered on the social belief that farming and agricultural work was for men. In order for land girls to find a place for themselves within agriculture, they learned to negotiate social prejudices by simultaneously operating from within and from outside the ideological parameters of separate spheres and femininity. During this process, they blended the boundaries of these social ideologies and softened many biases regarding their agricultural work.

Prejudices regarding land girls' work in agriculture were highest at the start of the war. As the war waged on, prejudices began to diminish as farmers set aside differences of opinion upon realizing that if they were to meet government mandates for agricultural yields, they needed assistance from women. Everyone had a part to play in the war effort, whether everyone approved of those parts was a different matter. The more land girls assumed farming roles and demonstrated their capabilities, publicly and privately, prejudices increasingly weakened as people's eyes opened to the fact that women were capable of farm work. Achieving this acceptance, however, was an uphill battle and the WLA and land girls engaged in different techniques to make women acceptable farming companions.

While many land girls were anxious to do their part and quickly volunteered for the WLA during the early stages of war, farmers were not as anxious to hire these women. Prejudices focusing on the unsuitability of farming for women made many farmers reluctant to take on, and in many cases also to train, these unskilled workers. Many farmers still simply preferred skilled men to continue working the land. In fact,

farmers' demands to have male laborers available to them slowed the national call up of men employed in agriculture. Consequently, few land girls went straight to work after volunteering or even after receiving their training at agricultural institutes. During the first year of the organization's existence, the WLA frequently instructed land girls to return home and wait until farmers needed them. Such was the case for Josephine Duggan Rees. After volunteering in September 1939, her WLA representative told her repeatedly throughout the winter and spring to stay in her current position as a receptionist until the land army had a position for her. It was not until the following June that Rees was needed.¹

There were many reasons why farmers were initially reluctant to hire land girls during the fall of 1939. For example, farmers felt they did not need land girls since agricultural laborers had not been withdrawn in the quantities expected during that year's harvest. The government designated agriculture as a reserved occupation so the calling up of men from this profession was initially slow. Farmers also felt land girl labor was not necessary during the winter months since the main jobs at that time were specifically men's work. Furthermore, many farmers felt that WLA wages were much too high, especially when compared to wages earned by women already employed in agriculture. Two articles published in the fall of 1939 highlight these issues. One article, published by the National Union of Agricultural Workers, stated that:

When it is proposed to supply women and girls for farm work the employers point out that what they want just now is essentially men's work—ploughing, sowing, the handling of horses and machines, and the care of animals. Women may be quite capable of taking charge of some animals, cows, for instance, but it is for the heaviest and the most skilled work of the year, the duties of winter and spring, that labour is now required.²

¹ Rees, *Corduroy Days*, 9-13.

² Editorial, "The War and the Agricultural Worker," *Land Worker*, October 1939, 8.

The second article, published in the *Daily Mail*, relayed two farmers' concerns. One farmer stated that, "there are not a great many opportunities for the girls just now. Much of the work is ploughing, and few girls could be expected to handle a pair of horses in a plough. There may be more demand for the girls in Spring." Another farmer, who was also secretary of the East Riding Farmers' Union, stated that agriculture needed tough women to withstand a day's plowing and that farmers did not expect novices to achieve that. Additionally, he also indicated that the wages of the land girls were too high. At 28s 6p, they were higher than the 25s paid to women already employed in farm work.³

One way in which land girls appeased social prejudices was through carrying out farm work that women had traditionally performed. Such work included tending to poultry, small animals, and calves; planting, singling, and hoeing root crops such as potatoes, turnips, and beets; and maintaining fields by picking stones and spreading manure. Come harvest time, women were important workers as they assisted with reaping, raking, and winnowing.⁴ Several traits tended to characterize women's traditional farming chores: they frequently occurred near the home; were generally unskilled and monotonous; were associated with less monetary returns when compared to men's; and were physically lighter in nature. During the nineteenth and early twentieth

³ "No Winter Work for Land Army Girls," *Daily Mail*, November 14, 1939. When war broke out, male agricultural workers earned approximately 38s per week, which was much lower than that of unskilled workers in other fields of employment. Land girl wages were significantly less than that. Wage consistency was problematic among land girls partly due to a scattered workforce that made it difficult to ensure equal pay, but also because farmers paid land girls directly. As a result, many farmers paid what they thought women were worth. The WLA won a minimum wage for land girls that raised their pay to 28s per week, and this was eventually raised to 48s. However, throughout the war and depending on location, wages varied and remained meager. Comparatively speaking, while wages varied throughout the war-service industry, by 1944 the average weekly pay for women reached £3, which was far above that earned by land girls. For more information about wages, see Kramer, *Land Girls and Their Impact*, 76-77; and Braybon and Summerfield, *Out of the Cage*, 185.

⁴ For further discussion on women's traditional roles in agriculture, see Harriet Bradley, *Men's Work, Women's Work: A Sociological History of the Sexual Division of Labour in Employment* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1989).

centuries, those women who remained in agriculture saw their farming chores coded in a hierarchical language. For example, women's work became "subsidiary" and light in nature while men's work remained "proper."⁵ This unique language reinforced the normative values circulating within separate-sphere ideology that women were submissive, passive, and delicate creatures. The nature of "lighter" farm work, reflected women's supposedly delicate internal natures and, consequently, reinforced separate-sphere ideologies and maintained their femininity.

During the war, employers continued to use this hierarchical language. When land girls entered the farming world, they frequently carried out these traditionally "lighter" and "subsidiary" jobs. Such work lessened fears that women were disturbing the social order. The WLA and others could indicate that land girls were following in the footsteps of those women who came before them. As stated in Chapter 1, Sackville-West noted in 1944 that milking was a chore in which women had always excelled. Other land girls recall that farmers and farmhands told them they were more practically suited for the simple and undemanding jobs. Pat Peters recalls that while working with the thresher, the male farmhands supposedly gave land girls the "easiest" job, which was carrying dust into the barn.⁶ Land girls were merely carrying out "lighter" farm jobs, those that were more monotonous in nature, less physically demanding, and located near the farmhouse. By connecting themselves to a long history of female agricultural work, land girls were less threatening to the social order of the day and safeguarded some of their femininity. In this sense, they were upholding notions of femininity and proper sphere work.

⁵ Verdon, "Business and Pleasure," 402.

⁶ Peters, *Land Girls Gang Up*, 185.

For those jobs that were not light in nature or that women did not traditionally carry out, such as plowing, driving tractors, or hitching up a team of horses, land girls confronted social prejudices through a variety of methods, both privately and publicly. Oftentimes, land girls simply exhibited their own strength, perseverance, and dedication to the job and discarded notions of femininity and respect for separate spheres. Many land girls recount stories of farmers and other farmhands requiring the women to perform the most physically demanding work, but offering no assistance or instruction on how the land girls should go about that work effectively and efficiently. Evelyn Jenkin recalls that the male laborers “left us to do the heavy work, and anything they knew they kept to themselves.”⁷ Olive Pettitt recounts that two cowmen would not help her and another land girl lift corn-feed sacks because they were women. She and the other woman dragged instead of lifted the feed sacks and refused to ask the men for help.⁸ While it is difficult to determine whether male agriculturalists purposefully assigned physical and dirty jobs to women due to resentment of land girls in their space, social prejudices, or a device to exert their influence over land girls, the important point was such behavior did not intimidate every land girl. Instead, many women chose to get on with their jobs. In the act of innocently carrying out the work requested of them, land girls changed farmers’ and other farmhands’ attitudes toward land girls’ participation in agriculture. In fact, many land girls went on to develop strong friendships with their male co-workers. Lillian Smith maintained a lifelong friendship with the family who ran the farm where she worked. She would go on to bring her family back to visit occasionally after the

⁷ Mant, *All Muck, Now Medals*, 114.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 113.

war.⁹ Pettitt, the land girl who confronted two unhelpful cowmen, recounts that eventually she and the men became good friends.

Publicly, land girls negotiated social prejudices by participating in local WLA rallies and community farming competitions. At these rallies, land girls paraded through towns dressed in their uniforms and demonstrated the various agricultural tasks required of them. The WLA intended these rallies for recruitment purposes. The rallies portrayed publicly the professionalism of land girls, the seriousness of the WLA, while also providing important opportunities for land girls to exhibit their agricultural skills to curious audiences. A rally in Essex, attended by hundreds of local farmers and their families, included a parade and several agricultural competitions including potato dropping, beet singling, and milking. At other rallies, land girls drove tractors or plowed fields for an audience. These competitions eased social anxieties by demonstrating that land girls were avid and quick learners of technology and, more importantly, were capable farmhands. The rallies and competitions demonstrated that farmers should not fear employing land girls because they offered valuable farming assistance. As one farmer commented to the land girls at an Essex rally, “the whole standard of the British race will be improved the longer you stay in the country.”¹⁰ In Devon, Mr. J. S. Wroth was interviewed by the *Western Times* and asserted: “if any farmer wants labour he need not fear employing these girls” after he spent the afternoon watching them plow, pare hedges, and harness and lead horses at a local agricultural competition.¹¹

⁹ Johnson, discussion.

¹⁰ “Land Girls Make Good: Fine Tributes at Essex Rally,” *Essex Chronicle* (Chelmsford, UK), June 27, 1941.

¹¹ “Farmers Need Not Fear Girl Labour,” *Western Times* (Exeter, UK), November 1, 1940.

An important event at WLA rallies was the awarding of service armbands. For every six months of service and upon satisfactory review by employers, WLA officials awarded land girls a half diamond for their uniform's armband. Two half diamonds were paired together to form a diamond. Each complete diamond represented one year of service. Obtaining this recognition was important for at least two reasons. First, having an armband with multiple triangles was a point of pride for many land girls. It was proof to themselves of their perseverance and capabilities in a profession that had largely excluded women. Second, the armbands signaled to the public that land girls were growing in their experiences as agricultural laborers. The triangles publicly confirmed that land girls were worthy of the work they undertook and could be relied upon to take care of the important agricultural fields so imperative to the war effort—the same landscapes that were so important to England's national identity. In December 1945, Queen Mary held a Christmas party for 800 land girls who had completed six years of service. She recognized the important work land girls carried out in protecting England's countryside. "You have gained a great reputation by your skill and your selfless service...your long and arduous labours have earned their reward, and our dear land, which you have learnt to tend and to till...is once more at peace."¹² To an extent, not only were land girls shaping their identities through completing agricultural work as discussed in Chapter 1, they were also shaping the national identity to include women in agriculture.

Demonstrating knowledge to the farming community was a crucial means for land girls to find their place in agriculture. The WLA provided many opportunities for land girls to expand and exhibit such knowledge outside of rallies. One opportunity was for

¹² "Land Army's Six Years' Work: The Queen's Tribute to Members," *Times*, December 8, 1945.

land girls to sit for proficiency tests in a variety of agricultural branches, which ranged from dairy work to pest destruction. Upon successful completion of the exams, land girls received certification, which relieved some farmers' anxieties regarding women being unknowledgeable in the world of agriculture. Barbara Whitaker, along with seven other land girls, participated in a "Practical Farm Work" exam. The exam tested the land girls on grooming, harnessing, and driving a horse and cart; demonstrating proper use of farm tools; loading a cart of dung; spreading manure; and cleaning out a ditch. An oral component of the test consisted of identifying signs of health and ill health in stock; naming parts of harnesses; and recognizing the common farm crops and weeds. The judges were quite pleased with the overall performance of all eight land girls. Their report states: "five out of eight candidates obtained 70% and over of the total number of marks." It stressed that the exam "was a very creditable performance by those concerned." In the areas where land girls scored low, which were in working with farm tools, cleaning ditches, and knowledge of crop rotation and stock feeding, the judges strongly encouraged the women to develop further those skills that were essential in farming.¹³ The proficiency exams, similar to obtaining armlets of good service, were a point of pride for land girls, but also established that land girls were knowledgeable in the jobs they undertook. Thus, they helped assuage social prejudices that focused on women lacking practical agricultural knowledge and skills.

Along with proficiency tests, the WLA encouraged land girls to enroll in correspondence courses and join local farmers' clubs in an attempt to make land girls more knowledgeable and to encourage raising the overall standard of English farming.

¹³ Barbara Whitaker's Women's Land Army Proficiency Test, March 23, 1944, D WHI A/1, Barbara Anne Whitaker Collection of the Women's Land Army Material, Museum of English Rural Life, University of Reading, Reading, UK.

The WLA's official magazine, *The Land Girl*, regularly published articles on topics such as how properly to maintain a tractor or how to clean sheds. The magazine also published "General Knowledge" quizzes to encourage land girls to continue learning and asking questions on the job. One such quiz asked how many stomachs a cow had and how much a gallon of water weighed.¹⁴ Once again, these various training schemes reinforced to farmers and the public that land girls were knowledgeable and keen farm workers.

Additionally, many land girls attended training at agricultural colleges, farm institutes, or on private farms in order to establish a baseline level of agricultural knowledge before their employment began. Such training combated farmers' anxiety over employing unskilled/untrained workers who would cost them valuable time and money. Training courses lasted approximately four weeks. An article appearing in *The Land Girl* outlined the general experiences land girls had at a training institute. While the author, Dr. W. A. Stewart, the Principal of Northamptonshire Institute of Agriculture at Moulton, was initially preoccupied with land girls' lack of physical strength, he indicated that the women would be as capable as any male farmhand with enough time. According to the article, after four weeks, land girls became "reasonably competent" at operating the tractor, but:

the drawback was that only a proportion [of land girls] could acquire the 'knack' and develop sufficient physical strength to start a tractor when the engine was cold in the morning. . . . It was clear from the outset that many of the girls required physical toughening, in order to make them strong enough for hard and sustained manual work.

Despite these drawbacks, the author commented that the land girls had good spirit and enthusiasm. "That's the spirit. And given anything like a reasonable chance, there is no

¹⁴ "General Knowledge," *Land Girl*, July 1940, 3.

doubt that the Land Girls are going to make a most valuable contribution to agricultural work.”¹⁵ Beyond providing training, which eased many farmers’ fears about having unskilled workers, the training scheme offered an opportunity for sorting out those women who were “not suitable” for an open-air life, but also in directing “suitable” land girls into proper agricultural specialties.

Beyond techniques to demonstrate land girls’ increasing knowledge and skills that transformed them from unskilled to skilled laborers, the WLA and land girls relied on wartime patriotism to weaken social prejudices. The popular expression, “back to the land,” heard frequently in reference to the WLA and land girls, recalls of a period when women were important and valued agriculturalists. The expression also calls attention to the fact that land girls were carrying out their patriotic duties during the war. The expression provides the sense that land girls’ farm work was temporary and brought about by extenuating circumstances. “Back to the Land” was even the title of the land army’s song. The first verse begins:

Back to the land, we must all lend
a hand,
To the farms and the fields we must
go.
There’s a job to be done,
Though we can’t fire a gun
We can still do our bit with a hoe.¹⁶

While the two land girls who composed this piece incorporated words and phrases that were popular at the time, these wartime phrases reflects an awareness of women’s secondary role and temporariness in agriculture. “We must all *lend* a hand” provides a sense that land girls were not permanent fixtures on British farms and would not displace

¹⁵ W. A. Stewart, “The Land Army in Training at an Agricultural Institute,” *Land Girl*, April 1940, 3-4.

¹⁶ Quoted in Shewell-Cooper, *Land Girl Manual*.

male farm laborers. Their presences were temporary. Closely related to this idea, “to the farms and the fields we *must* go,” implies that the government and WLA encouraged women into such work and that land girls were carrying out their patriotic duty. “Though we can’t fire a *gun* we can still do our *bit* with a *hoe*.” “Bit” portrays smallness about the work land girls undertook; awareness that women knew their work, albeit important, was secondary to the work soldiers and farmers undertook. “Gun” and “hoe” juxtapose not only soldier and laborer, but also masculinity and femininity. All these words work together in a way that reflects land girls’ subsidiary wartime roles, but also in such a way that honors and gives important recognition to the critical work land girls carried out. In the guise of patriotism and through using popular wartime phrases, land girls assuaged, sometimes inadvertently, many social fears that focused on women replacing male farmhands and losing their femininity.

Those prejudices that focused on land girls displacing male farmhands during and after the war were common. Joan Law recounts, “the old farm hands really hated us, made life hard in every way they could” partly because they believed she and the other land girls would take their sons’ jobs away.¹⁷ Employed farmhands also felt threatened by the presence of land girls. Anne Hall relates that after becoming good friends with her dairy boss, he suddenly turned cold toward her when the farm overseer put her in charge of the dairy on her boss’ day off. The boss became critical of everything she did. “He behaved so oddly and so out of character that life became difficult.” Eventually Hall learned that he feared she and another land girl were scheming to take over his job. In order to cope with the stressful and awkward situation, she requested a transfer from the dairy to general farm work. When Hall’s last day in the dairy came, she and her boss had

¹⁷ Mant, *All Muck, Now Medals*, 114.

once again become friends, but only after he realized she was not a threat.¹⁸ In situations such as these, some land girls, like Hall, removed themselves from the situation by looking for other work or requesting a transfer from their WLA representative to another farm. For land girls who could not sidestep situations such as these, many had to weaken the gendered spaces of agriculture in order to succeed. The de-gendering of agriculture will be the focus of the next section.

Confronting and working through prejudices was something nearly every land girl dealt with at some point in her career. Discussed above are only a few of the ways land girls worked to assuage social anxieties. Techniques ranged from land girls sticking to their jobs in the face adversity to demonstrate they belonged to undertaking jobs that were subsidiary or light in nature, which connected land girls to a long history of women working in agriculture. Some land girls focused on demonstrating their skills via knowledge achieved through agricultural institutes, certification tests, or local farming clubs. Other land girls relied on patriotism to justify their presences. These various techniques worked as a whole to demonstrate that with time and instruction, land girls could become skilled, qualified, and competent farm laborers. However, even if land girls became qualified, that did not imply they became accepted members of the farming community. Land girls used many means to negotiate positions for themselves in the gendered landscapes of farming.

Negotiating the Gendered Spaces of Farming

As land girls confronted and worked through social prejudices regarding their work in a male profession, they created a place for themselves to live and work more

¹⁸ Hall, *Land Girl*, 39-43.

successfully in agriculture's landscapes and spaces. A rite of passage existed as land girls entered this farming realm, which is a familiar phenomenon when new characters enter a world—especially a world where someone or something else is already well instituted and exerts influence. For the people already established in a place, a certain amount of natural anxiety or even resentment toward newcomers is common. This is precisely what many people already engaged in agriculture experienced as land girls entered the scene. These newcomers blurred ideological boundaries of separate spheres and femininity. In a work place that had been defined by these ideological borders, land girls created a space that diminished gender stratification.

Gendered spaces are places in which women are separated by the knowledge that men use to reproduce and maintain their privilege.¹⁹ These gendered spaces produce dividing lines, physical and invisible, between the safe (man) and unsafe (woman). The legitimate inhabitants are the people with power, which creates tension between the powerful and powerless.²⁰ When the circumstances of war necessitated land girls' entrances into agriculture, these women became refugees in a male-dominated space. In the process of moving from being refugees to accepted inhabitants, land girls helped to de-gender the farming landscape and deconstruct sphere dualisms.

Jean Iddon and Josephine Duggan Rees both recount times where they experienced segregation of the sexes, which left both of them as refugees on farming landscapes. Iddon recalls that when she first arrived, she very rarely worked with men. Rather, her early days were spent either in solitude as she plowed the fields with a tractor or worked with other women and children tending to root crops. Not until the foreman

¹⁹ Daphne Spain, *Gendered Spaces* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 3.

²⁰ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999), 25-26.

needed her assistance with making hay cocks did she begin to work regularly with men. In the process, she became good friends with them.²¹ Rees remembers that the men who worked on the farm where she received her training were some of the nicest men she had ever met, but the farmer preferred that she work away from the male laborers. According to Rees, the farmer instructed her to take her hoe and work alone on the far edge of a field. This segregation surprised her. “True, it was years before unisex and Womens’ Lib,;” she writes in retrospect, “but I was not prepared for such complete segregation of the sexes.” She worked her lonely way up and down the ceaseless rows of kale at one side of the field and watched the men work shoulder to shoulder on the other side. This segregation also continued at dinnertime when the farmer suggested Rees eat in isolation. She appreciated the farmer looking out for her, but felt he had taken it too far and wondered, “who he was protecting from whom?”²² Her experiences suggest that for the farmer, there was tension created by her presence on the farm and that segregation, in his opinion, was the best way to deal with the tension.

People learn from a young age to occupy space in gender specific ways.²³ For instance, in the domestic sphere leading up to the war period, women frequently enacted their femininity by caring for children, producing food, and seeing to domestic matters. These processes of enactment centered on nurturing and servicing skills. Men, on the other hand, enacted masculinity in the public sphere of farming by undertaking production-oriented and physically demanding jobs such as plowing. When land girls

²¹ Jean H. Iddon, *Fragrant Earth: An Autobiography of a Landgirl* (Worcester, UK: Ebenezer Baylis and Son, 1947), 26.

²² Rees, *Corduroy Days*, 17-18 & 23.

²³ For more information on how people occupy space in gender specific ways, see Linda McDowell, *Gender, Identity & Place: Understanding Feminist Geographies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999). McDowell provides an accessible overview of the historiography of gender, identity, and place through the lens of feminist geography along relevant case studies demonstrating theory in practice.

became farm laborers, they had already taught their bodies to occupy spaces in a feminine manner. This behavior was at odds within a space that required masculine behavior. Therefore, tensions existed between farming spaces and bodies that represented the domestic. For example, a radio broadcast aired with the intent of providing helpful advice to land girls on ways they could naturally blend in and be useful in agriculture. The land army subsequently published the broadcast in their monthly magazine. The narrator, a Mr. Carter, recommended the following on how land girls should appear:

Don't forget a pair of loose fitting gloves for the first day or two at any rate. And trim those long nails down a bit—otherwise you are likely to break them off short—and whilst you are at it I should leave the nail polish off for a day or two. It doesn't matter a bit, of course, but it does look a bit more workmanlike to turn out all natural for once.²⁴

His advice reflects an awareness of physical characteristics associated with women and femininity that were at odds with the masculine nature of agriculture. In terms of Mr. Carter's advice, in order to occupy an agricultural space, land girls needed to appear workmanlike, and to appear workmanlike was to appear natural. This left many land girls in conflicted positions. For the farming community to accept them, women had to appear manly, but for society to accept them, women also had to appear womanly. Contradictions existed between the social ideologies of gender. Nonetheless, Mr. Carter continued by advising land girls on how to behave:

When you get to the farm remember that, although you are probably a frightfully big noise in your own office, down on the farm you are just an office boy and conduct yourself accordingly. Keep your mouth shut and your eyes and ears open and when the farm workmen show you how to do a certain operation follow them explicitly. It is not a bit of good trying to invent short cuts, because they have proved over hundreds of years the best way to do that particular job. I said a moment ago, keep your mouth shut. Of course, I don't mean that you should be

²⁴ S. B. Carter, "Helping the Farmer," *Land Girl*, July 1940, 2.

absolutely dumb.... Keep both eyes open and watch the economy of effort by which they carry on the day's work. If you are working alongside them don't try and go at twice their pace.... Remember all the time that they know what they are doing, and do your best to imitate them.²⁵

“And do your best to imitate them” is particularly enlightening. It clearly indicates that if land girls were to succeed, they needed to imitate their male counterparts. In other words, they needed to occupy agriculture in a male-gendered manner as opposed to a feminine-gendered-domestic manner. Implicit in the directions was for women to operate just as men operated. Less implicit was the acknowledgment that women's assumed skills and patterns of behavior (that may have even produced helpful shortcuts or techniques to aid in the job) had no practical relevance in agriculture. Mr. Carter's statements indicate that farming is performative. Through people's social interactions, gestures, and language, they perform their jobs. Furthermore, if farming is both performative and a male-gendered career, then gender, by extension, is performative.²⁶

Mr. Carter also advised that land girls should keep quiet since farmers had little time to listen to what occupied their attentions before agriculture. “The farmer really has not got time to listen to your experiences on the pier at Brighton last year, or the wonderful time you had on the top of Snowdon in '37.”²⁷ For land girls to succeed, it was necessary for them to not only assume male appearances and behaviors, but also dialogue. While many farmers did not necessarily agree with Mr. Carter's advice (many farmers showed interest in land girls personal lives and had no problem with women's

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ For more information on gender as a performative action, see Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” in *Feminist Theory Reader: Local and Global Perspectives*, 2nd ed., eds. Carole R. McCann and Seung-kyung Kim (New York: Routledge, 2010), 419-430.

²⁷ Carter, “Helping the Farmer,” 2.

grooming habits), this radio broadcast demonstrates preoccupation with the appearance of an “other” on British farms that could disrupt gender norms.

As patronizing as Mr. Carter’s broadcast may sound, he ended on a somewhat backwards compliment:

If you will do what you are told without fuss and bother you are going to earn the respect of the farmer and his workmen...and, what to my mind is the most important thing of all, you are going to learn something about the countryman and the countryman is going to learn something about you, which will be of the utmost value when we come to adjust ourselves after the war.²⁸

His closing statements specifically opened the door for land girls to enter a male space.

He recognized that land girls were, in fact, important characters who could offer important knowledge. Furthermore, there was space for them in agriculture if they recognized that they were intruders and did not offend their superiors.

In order to overcome some of the tension between land girls and a male-gendered space, land girls occupied farming spaces and assumed roles, patterns, and behaviors closely resembling those of men. Both land girls and lumber jills eventually carried out the same work as male laborers and in similar manners. Where men may have initially given them secondary jobs, the women often eventually performed the same jobs as men and frequently just as well. Betty Ruddick, a member of the WTC, recalls that she and the other women helped the foresters by clearing the woodland, although the men, at least initially, gave them the lower status jobs of clearing and sawing cordwood for charcoal. However, eventually the lumber jills chopped down trees just as the male foresters did to make pit props and telegraph poles.²⁹ Jean Iddon remembers watching and replicating the work of her foreman, Reg, when she began working on the haystack for the first time.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ruddick, “The Women’s Timber Corps,” Women’s Land Army Museum.

“I watched Reg to see how he did it and then tried to anticipate his actions so that I could place the forkfuls of hay just where he wanted them.”³⁰ In the spirit of Mr. Carter’s radio broadcast advice about imitating men, she also kept quiet. Iddon recalls that while the men she worked with were kind and helpful, they showed little conversational interest in anything except farming. She concluded that it was pointless to talk about her own affairs. She subsequently began to keep her thoughts to herself except for “an outer shell which could laugh with them, talk about the weather and the crops and listen with interest to what they had to say.”³¹ She comments that she felt as if she represented two people. She, in effect, was two people. Iddon was enacting male-gendered behavior in order to fit in among her co-workers and was enacting female-gendered behavior that had circumscribed her identity since birth.

In order for land girls to carve a spot for themselves in a gendered space, they had to gain knowledge and experience. They struggled with this and found gaining knowledge and experience was not always easily accomplished. Even though agriculturalists eventually recognized the need for land girls and employed them, this did not necessarily precipitate willingness among those individuals already working the land to share and distribute their knowledge to these novice land girls. Many land girls recall that farmhands did not properly train them before assigning them work. Others remember that farmhands expected them to learn independently. Topsy Walker recalls such an episode. “It was quite obvious from the beginning that the cowman did not like women working on his farm. He gave me a bucket and stool and told me to milk a cow.

³⁰ Iddon, *Fragrant Earth*, 28.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 29-30.

Of course I had never been near a cow before and didn't have a clue."³² Walker was fortunate enough to have a boss who was more tolerant of women workers than his hired cowman was. The boss interceded and gave Walker her first lesson. Another land girl, Maisie Geraerts, reflects how a farmer was also initially unhelpful. "Being a Londoner I was, to say the least, apprehensive. The farmer wasn't too helpful, he gave us a bucket and stool each and said, 'Get on with it.' We sat there for ages not getting any milk until he showed us what to do."³³ Both these examples suggest that for these women, and certainly others, the lack of male instruction and assistance was a reflection of men and land girls negotiating the spaces they now shared. While necessities of war required male farmhands to work with land girls, their initial refusal to help them learn the tasks demonstrated that men still yielded a certain power and influence.

When land girls did receive proper instruction and training, which allowed them to succeed in the work they undertook, many male agriculturalists became appreciative of the women's assistance and rewarded land girls by assigning to them more responsibilities. Gwenda Morgan, for example, reveals her journey of maturation in her farm duties in her wartime journal. When she initially began land army work, she was responsible for feeding the poultry. As previously discussed, women traditionally performed such work. However, the more time she spent on the farm and as her knowledge grew, she eventually guided the horse while harrowing the fields, a job normally reserved for male farmhands.³⁴ While Morgan seldom references the farmer's acknowledgments of her increasing capabilities, the fact her responsibilities grew is an indication that she became a valued and trusted farmhand. Morgan's commentary on her

³² Topsy Walker, "Dairy Work," Women's Land Army Museum.

³³ Mant, *All Muck, Now Medals*, 147.

³⁴ Morgan, *Diary of a Land Girl*, 92.

successful and ongoing presence in a gendered-male space indicates that a woman was renegotiating this farming space.

Similarly, Shirley Joseph recalls that the farmer she worked for immediately put her in charge of the dairy. Due to Joseph's prior knowledge and experience with dairy work, the farmer felt she was a qualified candidate. Joseph took complete authority of the space. It was not long before she would not allow anyone to enter without first wiping his or her boots. She referred to the dairy as "her domain" and recalls that she "actually went so far as to chase one of the men out with a broom, threatening to turn the hose on him if he dared to cross [her] threshold again without cleaning his boots."³⁵ In Joseph's situation, her prior knowledge of dairy operations and understanding of the necessity of a clean dairy to ensure the safety of the animals and products enabled her to become an active member in this space. She admits that the position went to her head. Nonetheless, her confidence and knowledge secured her position and made the dairy her own domain. For Joseph and Morgan, as well as other land girls, through the successful completion of work gained via instruction, land girls grew in their maturity, which in return, opened up more spaces for them to occupy and, in many cases, led to strong working relationships between employer and employee.

The public recognized land girls growing capabilities as well. The National Farmer's Union, in particular, became a strong proponent of the WLA and fought for the organization to remain in existence as the war ended. As the WLA disbanded in 1950, many people felt that it should continue, which indicates land girls had penetrated social prejudices as well as the gendered nature of agriculture. "Members of the Women's

³⁵ Shirley Joseph, *If Their Mothers Only Knew: An Unofficial Account of Life in the Women's Land Army* (London: Faber and Faber, 1946), 12.

Land Army have demonstrated their usefulness and capabilities in so many ways that people, and not the least among them the farmers, feel their organisation should be continued,” wrote one reporter in the *Devon and Exeter Gazette*.³⁶

With training and experience, many land girls worked to de-gender the farming world. Another way in which land girls gained acceptance in this space was through participating in initiations oftentimes organized by other farm laborers. These initiations forced the women to demonstrate their worthiness. Una Stewart was one such woman. She recalls that the men conducted a test for the new land girls, wherein each woman pushed a wheelbarrow full of turnips over the cavity between two cattle courts connected by a narrow plank of wood. Even though Stewart regarded herself as quiet and reserved, she had great determination to succeed:

I gritted my teeth, took a grip of the handles and started over. All the men leaned on their graips [forks] and watched. With all the care in the world, I placed one foot precisely in front of the other and, inch by inch, made my way over the plank. As I reached the other side, clapping broke out. My career as a Land Girl went up a notch.³⁷

Similarly, Anne Armstrong describes how the men instructed land girls to feed a bull. First, the women were to give the animal water. Next, they were to wait until the bull finished. Finally, they were to take the bucket away. It was critical, however, for the women to remove the pail as quickly as possible in order to prevent the bull from kicking and flattening it. The land girls precisely followed these directions for fear that the large beast would flatten them in the process. Not until later did the women learn that this was unnecessary. Instead, the men gave such directions to determine which land girl was

³⁶ “Women’s Land Army,” *Devon and Exeter Gazette* (Exeter), November 24, 1950.

³⁷ Elaine M. Edwards, ed., *Scotland’s Land Girls: Breeches, Bombers and Backaches* (Edinburgh: NMS Enterprises Limited, 2010), 104.

bravest.³⁸ Stewart and Armstrong's experiences could be interpreted as harassing and unkind, but they were necessary in allowing women to demonstrate their worth and gain a foothold in the agricultural world. In the process of performing these rites, they earned a certain amount of respect from their co-workers, which allowed these men and women to coexist in the same space.

As land girls developed farming skills and increased their knowledge, they worked to de-gender agricultural landscapes. Knowledge is power that can break down gendered spaces. As land girls grew in knowledge, they worked to re-define the farming landscapes as places where women and men could work equally side by side. Additionally, by assuming male behavior in place of a constructed femininity, many land girls demonstrated that gender was merely performative and what was more important at the end of the day, was whether they could successfully undertake farm work. As they did, land girls created a space for themselves in the agricultural world and left an enduring mark.

Summary

In order for land girls to find a place for themselves in a constructed masculine domain, they negotiated prejudices through techniques that at times upheld separate-sphere and feminine ideologies and through techniques that, at other times, challenged those beliefs. For example, many land girls participated in work that was lighter in nature and that left them in more passive and submissive roles, which, according to separate-sphere ideology, allowed women to maintain their femininity. At other times,

³⁸ Anne Armstrong, interview by Bekky Moran, October 18, 2005, transcript, Museum of English Rural Life.

land girls entered the public sphere by participating in rallies and farming competitions. As land girls worked to de-gender farming spaces, they at times followed advice directing them to imitate their male counterparts and at other times demonstrated that gender was merely performative. Through negotiating prejudices and gendered spaces, land girls blurred the boundaries of social ideologies, which allowed them to create a place for women to live and work in the agricultural world.

CHAPTER III

LAND GIRLS' UNIFORMS & BODIES

*Oh, how I'd love to see a saucy Paris hat
Perched on my well-groomed curls— just like that.
But my breeches lack a crease,
And my glamour's out on lease
Till the day they sign the Peace.
I'm a Land Girl.*

— Mary Cass, “Temporary Eclipse,” March 1942

As members of the Women's Land Army took to the fields as farmhands, they lived and worked in a space created by the overlapping of private and public spheres. When working as farm hands, land girls blurred the boundaries of separate-sphere ideology and challenged ideas regarding femininity. At other times, however, they operated within these two belief systems and upheld social boundaries. Two areas where this observation can be witnessed are in the physical changes their bodies underwent and the uniform worn by land girls. This chapter examines the ways in which land girls' bodily transformations and the WLA uniform challenged and at times upheld social constructions pertaining to the constructed gender order and femininity.

The Body: A Changing Landscape of Femininity

As land girls spent more and more time working for the WLA, their bodies transformed into hardened, muscled, and roughened physiques and thus challenged social notions regarding femininity. While working for the WLA, land girls assumed manual

labor jobs, which often required physical strength beyond what they generally experienced during their peacetime lives. Whether the jobs pertained to guiding a team of plow horses back and forth through the fields, hefting hay into the threshing machines, or hauling milk crates, strong muscles were required, and if those muscles did not exist, they soon developed. Josephine Duggan Rees recalls that her bodily transformation happened quickly. “I had become accustomed to long hours of manual work—there were calluses now where blisters had been. A brunette, I tanned easily and had changed colour in the first week; I even had the beginnings of muscles.”¹ Isabella Rankin refers to herself and other land girls as “just little city girls with no muscles.”² However, she goes on to state that they soon developed muscles after undertaking heavier agricultural work.

Numerous land girls testify to the physical changes their bodies underwent and the injuries endured due to the new work they were now performing in the agricultural world. E. M. Barraud eloquently explains in her memoirs, written not long after the war ended:

When I have time to look in the glass nowadays I see a figure that is two stone lighter, hair that the sun has bleached, arms that the same sun has tanned, hands rough and horny. Over my shoulder I see dimly the pale fuller face of the insurance clerk I was, and shall never be again because I know now that, having beaten my typewriter into a ploughshare for the duration, I shall never be able to face going back to town life.³

Barraud reflects upon the fact that every new farm job meant discovering new muscles. “Those were the days when every fresh job meant a fresh set of unused muscles to break in, till I began to think I should never come to the end of the possible pain and be able to

¹ Rees, *Corduroy Days*, 23.

² Edwards, *Scotland's Land Girls*, 123.

³ E. M. Barraud, *Set My Hand Upon the Plough* (Worcester, UK: Littlebury, 1946), 10.

say, ‘Now there isn’t another inch of me to discover.’”⁴ Like those on farms, women who worked in the forestry branch of the WLA, experienced physical changes. One woman recalls that she and her co-workers became “very brown, with muscles like prize fighters from swinging axes and pulling cross-cut (*sic*) saws.”⁵ Other land girls report on the various injuries that plagued them. These ranged from backaches to chilblains and blisters to broken bones. Jean Forbes Paterson recalls the physical ailments of the work:

By the time the thaw came we were worn out shoveling, gritting, moving crates, sliding, slipping and slithering up and down garden paths. We had blisters and hacks on our hands and chilblains on our feet, which itched and burned as we sat at the fire in the evenings trying to dry clothes for the next day’s trek.⁶

Yet, a severe injury incurred from a falling pulley wheel that resulted in cracked vertebra, broken ribs, a concussion, and a long recuperation, could not prevent Josephine Duggan Rees from returning to farm work against her doctor’s orders.⁷

Barraud’s statement, “there isn’t another inch of me to discover,” reflects that through agricultural work, land girls expanded their knowledge of their bodies through the physical discovery of muscles. They became familiar with their bodies in ways they had never experienced nor probably even imagined such as the lumber jill who compared her body to that of a prizefighter. These discoveries encouraged land girls to own the physical landscape of their bodies more completely. In other words, land girls began to own their bodies and have more consciousness of their bodies in ways beyond the inherent qualities of femininity—such as their bodies being important in ways beyond reproduction. Rather, their bodies were also important entities in the public world of production. Just as their muscles were growing, so was their sense of self.

⁴ Ibid., 11.

⁵ Carnit, “Forestry Work,” Women’s Land Army Museum.

⁶ Edwards, *Scotland’s Land Girls*, 41.

⁷ Rees, *Corduroy Days*, 184-188.

As land girls' bodies changed and became more muscular and rough, their physical appearances challenged social beliefs regarding femininity. Social constructions pertaining to femininity held that women had inherent feminine qualities: women were emotional, passive, submissive, and dependent.⁸ Women were chaste and clean, but also reproductive. Additionally, women were the weaker of the two sexes. These imagined qualities supported the long-held social and biological beliefs that women's primary roles were to support their husbands and produce children. Social constructions, on the other hand, held that hardened and muscular bodies were qualities of masculinity, which reflected dominance, independence, and authority. Furthermore, strong healthy men were symbols of a nation's manhood and virility. Such qualities upheld the notion that men were the leaders of households and defenders of the nation.⁹

Anne Hall recalls an interchange between a farmer and his wife that reflected these gendered qualities. Hall relates that the farmer's wife chided him when he suggested to Hall and another land girl to rub soil into their hands to harden the skin. In the wife's opinion, rubbing soil into the hands was unfeminine and something more appropriate for men to do. A woman having tough skin did not fall into the parameters of femininity. According to Hall, the wife went on to state that the girls, "have such nice soft white hands...[they] don't want to spoil them, I'm sure."¹⁰ Another land girl, Pat

⁸ Susan Kingsley Kent, *Sex and Suffrage in Britain, 1860-1914* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 30.

⁹ In an interesting study by Neil Maher on the United States' Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), he demonstrates that CCC enrollees became strong, fit, and healthy young men after engaging in outdoor conservation work. Maher indicates that the young CCC enrollees, who were both in the prime of their lives and physically weak, challenged the notion of masculinity. By engaging in hard labor and transforming their weak bodies into physically fit bodies, they safeguarded their masculinity. Such social notions demonstrate that the physicality of a body was a marker of masculinity. For more discussion of the bodies of CCC enrollees, see Neil Maher, *Nature's New Deal: The Civilian Conservation Corps and the Roots of the American Environmental Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

¹⁰ Hall, *Land Girl*, 11.

Peters, recalls that on the second day of work she and another land girl looked in the mirror and were “dismayed to see our hair in a dirty, tangled mess.” She goes on:

The coastal wind and dust from the potato field had played their parts well. Never had our hair looked so unclean and untidy. Wrapping our heads in scarves, turban fashion, we glanced at our dirty, engrained hands and shuddered. Just one day on the land and we both looked and felt like tramps!¹¹

Peters believed that uncleanliness was associated with undesirability at that time. In both of these situations, and many others, land girls’ changing bodies became the landscape for acting out femininity and masculinity, but also the location for challenging gender difference in this conjoined agricultural space.

In a society where gender norms were pronounced and rigid, it was not surprising that some individuals feared that muscular and rough women would lose their femininity and upset the status quo. Muscular and toughened women challenged the societal belief that women were of a delicate and fragile nature—the very nature that reflected femininity—which men through their coarser and rougher natures helped to safeguard. As land girls became roughened and toughened, they crossed into the boundaries that defined masculinity. If land girls contained both feminine and masculine characteristics, did male farmhands become superfluous? In a larger national sense, if women represented the chasteness and virtuousness of Britannia, but also the physical strength of the country, what did men represent? For whom and for what reasons were men fighting? This was problematic—especially since soldiers were motivated to fight for their country in order to protect Britain’s wellbeing as well as their womenfolk.

¹¹ Peters, *Land Girls Gang Up*, 51-52.



Figure 1. Join the Women's Land Army. <http://www.popartuk.com>.

land girl is watching the British fighter planes overhead. While the poster displays the work of the WLA, also prominent is the farmer standing on the back of his truck where he oversees the women. Furthermore, the fighter planes remind the viewer that fighting soldiers are still protecting the countryside. The arrangement of the characters on this poster reflects a social hierarchy reminiscent of Britain's long history as a patriarchal society. At the top are the strong soldiers representing the strength of the nation, in the middle is a farmer and farmhand keeping the social order balanced, and at the bottom are the land girls performing the menial chore of picking potatoes. One can see a similar

WLA recruitment posters, as well as war posters in general, were a tool that protected and safeguarded masculinity by reinforcing the gender order. These posters made it clear that even while land girls were growing in strength and capabilities, the farmer—the man—was still in charge. In the poster, “Join the Women’s Land Army,” for example, one land girl is driving the tractor, another is hard at work harvesting potatoes, and a third



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www.collectionscanada.gc.ca

Figure 2. Come and Help with the Victory Harvest. UK Government [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons.

situation in the “Victory Harvest” recruitment poster. Prominently featured in the foreground is a land girl with that desired sun-kissed tan. In the background, again is the farmer who is strategically located on top of the hay cart. His position reflects one of superiority, whereas the land girl’s position on the ground reflects a lesser stature. Evident in both posters is that even while land girls were gaining physical strength and acclaim on

England’s farms and challenging notions of femininity and

masculinity, men were still in charge and located at the top of the hierarchy.

For all the land girls who took pride in their new muscles and battle scars, many focused on maintaining their femininity. Land girls turned to tools such as make-up and fashion. Many relied on the sun to tan their new muscles and give them that desirable and luminous bronze look. By the 1940s, tanned skin was already becoming a sought-after feature for women. As Sylvia McGonagle remembers, the land girls with their tanned skin had no problems finding dancing partners at the local army camps as opposed

to their ATS sisters who remained wallflowers.¹² Pat Peters also remembers how wonderful it was when the sun finally shone after nearly a month of working in steady mist and rain, which enabled her and the other land girls to work on their tans:

At last we could work without macs on, we could take off our heavy green jumpers and even our shirts. Wellingtons were discarded for old shoes, enabling us to roll the legs of our dungarees up above the knees. At long last our skins began to turn a lovely tan, making us feel that at least we had achieved some reward for enduring the long, horrible spell of dampness.¹³

As Peters notes, there were land girls whose reasons for joining the WLA consisted of getting the perfect tan.¹⁴

Developing muscles and exhibiting manly strength was one way land girls challenged the definition and boundaries of femininity. These physical changes confronted the social constructions of gender that inscribed their bodies with femininity and challenged individuals to redefine and revision the female body in a broader sense. At the same time land girls acquired masculine characteristics, they raised the question of what role men had in society. This was problematic, because during wartime both genders had specific roles to play and because British culture was partly based on gender difference.

Challenging and Upholding Femininity through a Uniform

From one memoir to the next, land girls frequently discuss their uniforms and reveal that the outfit played an important part in understanding gender roles and women's contributions to the war effort. Generally, there had been no specific uniform worn by agriculturalists, but even so, WLA Director, Lady Denman, believed that land girls

¹² Sylvia McGonagle, "Come in land girls, go home soldiers!" *Kent Life*, August 1987.

¹³ Peters, *Land Girls Gang Up*, 62.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 63-64.

required a special outfit to demonstrate to the public that these women were, in fact, an important uniformed service provider.¹⁵ The uniform, which Lady Denman helped design, encompassed clothing styles associated with men's wardrobes, namely breeches and dungarees. Additionally, the outfit incorporated muted and neutral colors that were particularly associated with the outdoors. According to one land girl, the uniform's primary shades of fawn and green helped land girls blend in with the countryside.¹⁶

As presented in the *Land Girl Manual*, the uniform consisted of the following articles of clothing:

- (a) A serviceable rainproof mackintosh.
- (b) A khaki overall coat.
- (c) Two fawn shirts with turn-down collar.
- (d) A pair of corduroy breeches.
- (e) A pair of dungarees.
- (f) A green knitted pullover.
- (g) Three pairs of fawn stockings.
- (h) A pair of heavy brown shoes.
- (i) A pair of rubber gum boots.
- (j) A brown felt hat.
- (k) A green armband with red royal crown on it.
- (l) A badge of the "button-hole" type to wear in civilian clothes.¹⁷

While the manual indicates the uniform was free of charge, land girls were required, due to wartime rationing, to submit clothing coupons in order to obtain their WLA attire and any subsequent replacements. As the war years progressed, so did the uniform.

Eventually, the WLA designed a special winter great coat intended for fieldwork.

Two of the incorporated design elements, the breeches and dungarees, immediately set the uniform apart from many of those worn by women in other service work. The Women's Royal Naval Services uniforms, for example, paired skirts with trim

¹⁵ Kramer, *Land Girls and Their Impact*, 48.

¹⁶ Dorothy Margaret Bain, "Women's Land Army," Women's Land Army Museum.

¹⁷ Shewell-Cooper, *Land Girl Manual*, 47.

fitting jackets. Land girls needed a “practical” outfit—one that allowed for all forms of movement ranging from picking potatoes to scrubbing stalls. The uniform also had to be suitable for work during variable weather and seasons ranging from staying cool in the hot, dusty fields of August to staying warm in the cold, frozen fields of January. The dungarees and breeches paired with the rest of the outfit were, for the most part, adequate for farm work. Even a manufacturer of Lifebuoy Toilet Soap commented on the very practicality and attractiveness of the WLA attire in an advertisement appearing in the *Picture Post*.¹⁸

Land girls seem to describe the uniform as more practical than attractive, though a consensus is difficult to ascertain. Land girl Betty Arbon recalls, “we were issued with a very practical uniform. We were measured very carefully; it was made to fit so whatever your size or shape it looked nice.”¹⁹ Another land girl described the outfit as “wonderful” and was pleased that it accentuated the modest curves of her body.²⁰ Yet another land girl, while skeptical of the boots and rigid shoes, still enjoyed the attire. “I liked myself in the walking out uniform, and I put that hat on the back of my head and thought I looked great.”²¹ Some land girls recalled never quite having a properly fitting or complete outfit. Such was the case for Maisie Geraerts who recalls, “the uniforms were enormous and I had to take my breeches in two inches all round. They hadn’t any size three shoes so I had to wait for them, the boots were all right with two pairs of socks.”²² Other land girls, along with members of the public, felt the ensemble was far from

¹⁸ Advertisement for Lifebuoy Toilet Soap, *Picture Post*, October 30, 1943.

¹⁹ “Joining the Women’s Land Army,” Women’s Land Army Museum.

²⁰ Pauline Cole, *Transitions to Arcady: A Story of Two Years Spent in the Women's Land Army - '47 to '49* (Devon, UK: Arthur H. Stockwell, 2001), 8.

²¹ Mant, *All Muck, Now Medals*, 38.

²² *Ibid.*, 39.

glamorous. One reporter writing in the *Devon and Exeter Gazette*, suggested that a more glamorous walking-out uniform be obtained for the WLA. “If the W.L.A. should ever be re-formed, I hope the ‘powers that be’ will provide a walking-out dress or uniform for the girls. Breeches and green jerseys may be suitable for a working outfit, but they are far from glamorous.”²³ Sackville-West, a proponent of the WLA, commented in her WLA profile that one “cannot look fashionable in uniform; you can usually look only trim, neat and correct,” but she went on to admit, “the Land-girl’s uniform does offer the other alternative of looking picturesque.”²⁴

The resulting look of a land girl in full WLA dress could be quaint and charming as Sackville-West noted. A land girl roaming around town in her walking-out uniform, which consisted of corduroy breeches with knee length fawn socks, a green V-neck sweater worn over a fawn aertex shirt, and topped off with a felt hat, could reflect an image of a healthy countryside girl doing her bit for the war effort on the home front. The land girl wearing her dungarees rolled up into shorts during the hot summer days also could reflect a youthful and romantic image of a hardworking girl tending to the English countryside.

The land girls’ uniformed look raised social anxieties and questions regarding women’s femininity and proper displays of such femininity. As noted above, people were concerned about land girls not looking glamorous or feminine. What was at stake for society was the undermining of gender roles, the very gender roles that motivated soldiers to carry out their “masculine” duty of fighting the enemy in order to protect their “feminine” womenfolk back home. These were the same gender roles that during

²³ “Sad Farewells to W.L.A.: Regrettable Despite Need for Economy,” *Farmers’ News Letter, Devon and Exeter Gazette*, November 24, 1950.

²⁴ Sackville-West, *Women’s Land Army*, 25.

peacetime directed wives to be domestic and husbands to be breadwinners. All Britons had specific roles and those individuals who were carrying out their duties as helpful wartime citizens were expected to do so within the existing parameters of femininity and masculinity.²⁵ Even though land girls were carrying out their war-service jobs, the outfit they wore called into question societal assumptions and beliefs about femininity and gender roles regarding physical appearance. While a uniformed woman was socially understood to be a crucial component of the war effort, she simultaneously challenged existing ideas of gender.²⁶ According to the guidelines of femininity and gender roles, women represented all that was wholesome about a culture ranging from the nation to the individual family. In this role, women were passive and represented the normality of life focused on hearth and home. Therefore, when land girls put on the WLA uniform, lived, and operated in a merged space, they no longer appeared passive, but rather active. Their uniformed bodies did not reflect normality at a time when normality was desired and important during a war.

Within different cultural forms and practices, femininity is judged by appearance.²⁷ This feminine appearance was important in Great Britain during a time when gender roles and spheres directed peoples' daily lives. In England during the 1940s, the physical location of where one spent the greater part of one's daily life was often a marker of gender difference. For women this was in the domestic sphere where they carried out their duties as devoted wives and mothers and obliging daughters. To a lesser extent, women were also in the public sphere where unmarried women frequently worked in low-paying and unskilled positions below their male counterparts. For men,

²⁵ Noakes, *War and the British*, 52.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 99.

²⁷ Philomena Goodman, *Women, Sexuality and War* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), Ebrary, chap. 4.

conversely, this meant working outside the home in the public sphere where they earned an income to support their families.

Physical appearance was another indicator of gender difference and norms. Clothing fashions were a pronounced area in which the two sexes portrayed differences in masculinity and femininity. Women typically wore frocks and skirts while men wore trousers. Some women did wear fashionable trousers, but the sight of women in pants was still relatively uncommon during the 1940s.²⁸ In fact, many land girls report in their memoirs that they had never worn trousers until they joined the WLA. Their initial responses to the uniformed trousers ranged from exhilaration to embarrassment. As Lucy Shanks recalls, the corduroy pants were not very fashionable, but were worn.²⁹ Additionally, Shirley Joseph wrote during the war, “it is a bit of an ordeal, even in these enlightened days, to put on breeches for the first time.”³⁰ Not only was it an ordeal for land girls, but for some members of the public as well. “Backs to the land” was a vulgar expression directed at land girls and implied that uniformed land girls lacked moral restraint.³¹

The very style of the WLA outfit, with its breeches and dungarees, upset the status quo of women’s clothing trends. The uniform, which combined fashions from both genders, appeared somewhat androgynous. When wearing the dungarees or breeches, land girls did not look completely masculine, but they did not look entirely feminine either. Therefore, their uniformed bodies challenged one marker of gender difference. In this sense, land girls’ outfitted figures questioned whether femininity was dependent upon

²⁸ Summerfield, *Reconstructing Women’s Wartime Lives*, 91.

²⁹ Lucy Shanks, interview by Kate Arnold-Forster, October 19, 2005, transcript, Museum of English Rural Life.

³⁰ Joseph, *If Their Mothers Only Knew*, 9.

³¹ Braybon and Summerfield, *Out of the Cage*, 165.

physical appearance.³² Many land girls certainly believed femininity was dependent on appearance and for these women, their ideas of femininity had to change.³³

Living in a society where gender roles directed women to appear attractive and feminine made the sexless appearance of the uniform difficult to cope with for some land girls. Many land girls modified their outfits to make them more feminine in appearance by tailoring them to fit their bodies better or adjusting the felt hat to perch on the back of their heads. Kathleen Ellis indicates that when she first received her uniform she did not know whether to laugh or cry. Wearing such attire challenged her understanding of what women should look like. She resorted to having a dressmaker alter it in order to make her pass more for a woman.³⁴ Doreen Liebrandt indicates that she was proud of her WLA uniform, but that did not prevent her from modifying it to improve its look as well.³⁵ For these women, and many others, by altering their uniforms to make their outfits appear more feminine, they were upholding social values and beliefs regarding femininity. However, because they wore the uniform, they simultaneously challenged such values and beliefs and disrupted the notion that women's bodies should reflect femininity.

Women were not the only ones who believed fashion styles were markers of femininity; many men believed so as well. In a letter to the *Picture Post's* editor, one writer asked the question of whether land girls were unfeminine while in their uniforms. He stated that he, as well as many other men, would be excited when they saw land girls looking feminine again since they, at present, had lost their grace and appeared

³² Rose, *Which People's War*, 135.

³³ Goodman, *Women, Sexuality and War*, Ebrary, chap. 1.

³⁴ Mant, *All Muck, Now Medals*, 39.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 36.

“ungainly” and “unattractive” in uniform.³⁶ The writer, however, did not comment on the more feminine appearing outfits belonging to the Women’s Royal Naval Services or the Nursing Corps. The letter reflects the societal belief that femininity was connected with grace, which could be demonstrated through fashion. Since land girls were ungainly and unattractive in uniform, their grace, and hence, femininity was lost. Not surprisingly, many land girls made the extra effort of altering their ensembles, such as cinching in the waist, to safeguard their femininity and uphold gender roles.

The uniform’s look, however, did not threaten all land girls. Many did not fear their loss of femininity. In fact, many women found the prospect of wearing special attire exhilarating. Being able to wear a uniform was an intriguing prospect—so much so, that countless land girls report that they joined the WLA for that very reason. Pauline Cole recalls that the outfit enticed her to join. Referring to a WLA recruitment poster, Cole writes in her memoirs:

She beguiled me from the first moment I set eyes upon her during a wartime shopping trip to Oxford Street. She could not have been much older than myself, at that time a gauche, sixteen-year-old; an unhappy business school student. I stopped at the double-fronted window display, and she remained still, smiling at me with perfect teeth, blonde, sunkist hair carefully disarranged, shirt unbuttoned to reveal a tantalizing glimpse of a tanned cleavage, slim legs clad in clinging corduroy breeches, standing astride a stook of corn holding onto a hayfork; she was everything personified I wanted from life—and, formed from cardboard!³⁷

When Cole finally received her uniform and tried it on for the first time, she determined that it looked wonderful and that she felt great wearing it. Once she left for her first day of work, Cole recalls that she felt “inordinately proud of [her] new, peacemaking and

³⁶ J. Evans, letter to the editor, *Picture Post*, June 12, 1943.

³⁷ Cole, *Transitions to Arcady*, 5.

most comfortable uniform.”³⁸ Sylvia McGonagle recalls that the outfit captivated her as well:

Perhaps the Land Army was a strange ambition, but I had always pictured myself in the corduroy breeches, bright green jersey, long woollen socks, brown shoes and, of course, the obligatory and famous felt bush hat, tied under the chin with cords.³⁹

Elizabeth Lowe wrote to her mother that the uniform allowed her to do things she normally would not be able to do. “Remember there’s a war on and one can do things while in uniform that one wouldn’t dream of doing in normal times!”⁴⁰ For these land girls, the personal exhilaration and freedom they experienced while wearing the ensemble was more profound than the fear of losing their femininity. For Lowe specifically, the uniform was her pass to venture into a world where she could disrupt the notions of femininity and use her attired body in ways that it was not foremost an emblem of femininity.

For many land girls, the uniform gave them confidence in their own abilities as agriculturalists and contributed to their greater self-awareness. The uniform, in other words, helped justify land girls’ presences on the land, gave validation to their work, and provided many women with the confidence they could be farm laborers and one day maybe even farmers. For example, Veronica Rattray remembers that she and other land girls took great pride in their outfits even though they knew little about farming and agriculture—that the uniform gave them courage and legitimacy.⁴¹ Iris Newbould recalls that, “no one taught us how to ride or even harness a horse, they presumed we knew all

³⁸ Ibid., 8-9.

³⁹ McGonagle, “Come in land girls.”

⁴⁰ Edwards, *Scotland’s Land Girls*, 85.

⁴¹ Veronica Rattray, *My Land Girl Years, 1939-1948* (London: Athena Press, 2009), 20.

these things, because we wore the uniform.”⁴² The WLA outfit signaled to the public that these women were qualified to work in agriculture and, in return, provided land girls with confidence in their work. As Agnes Boyle recalls, “there was a certain amount of respect shown to them when in uniform.”⁴³

Even though the uniform helped justify land girls’ presences on the farms, many in British society feared that women in uniform would lose their femininity and challenge the gender order by diminishing gender differences. To assuage these social fears, media outlets, such as popular magazines, as well as the Ministry of Information, relied on glamor, beauty, and clothes to reinforce the compatibility between women’s war-service work and femininity. The War Department, for example, recognized that it needed women to perform service jobs, but its leaders also recognized that women undertaking men’s work and wearing men’s uniforms disrupted social norms. These different outlets, whether it was the Department of Information, the War Department, or the media, attempted to demonstrate that gender norms remained in proper order despite women working in men’s jobs. Historian Sonya Rose refers to these sources as developing a “sexualized femininity.” Sexualized femininity focused on ways in which women could maintain their femininity while remaining productive in their war-service jobs. According to Rose, “[it] was a crucial component in the construction of gender difference, under threat by the movement of women away from their families and into work and service that previously had been the preserve of men.”⁴⁴ Sexualized femininity reinforced the idea that women should take care of their bodies by appearing attractive

⁴² Ian Billingsley, “Memoirs of a Land Girl,” WW2 People’s War: An Archive of World War Two Memories-Written by the Public, Gathered by the BBC, accessed September 11, 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/stories/09/a3996309.shtml>.

⁴³ Edwards, *Scotland’s Land Girls*, 116.

⁴⁴ Rose, *Which People’s War*, 134.

even while working in men's jobs. Furthermore, appearing attractive would increase productivity. Therefore, women would continue to preserve the traditional notions of femininity through such means as applying make-up or tending to their hair before leaving for work. By doing so, women retained a portion of their femininity and were, thus, more socially acceptable. Sexualized femininity, Rose argues, made apparent that gender difference was marked upon the body and that femininity remained visible despite masculine attire.⁴⁵

The WLA and land girls incorporated the practice of sexualized femininity. Many land girls recount beautifying before leaving for a day's work on the land by curling their hair, applying make-up, or wearing a stylish blouse under their overalls instead of the plain aertex shirt. However, the very nature of farm work, which included waking before dawn and then becoming increasingly dirty throughout the day, discouraged many land girls from continuing in these preening activities. Eventually, appearing as dirty and unkempt as possible "to show what hard work" had been done, became "a point of honour with every land girl," according to Shirley Joseph.⁴⁶

The administrative side of the WLA promoted a sexualized femininity through propaganda campaigns. While the WLA posters presented highly idealized, aggrandized, and perfected images of farm life that more often than naught misrepresented the realities of rural life, they also displayed images that placated social anxieties concerning femininity. The recruitment poster shown on the next page, for example, displays a lean and trim land girl with an impeccably clean uniform looking back over the land she so dutifully cares for under the calm blue sky. The poster projects the image that land girls,

⁴⁵ Ibid., 135.

⁴⁶ Joseph, *If Their Mothers Only Knew*, 11.



Figure 3. For a Healthy, Happy Job. Museum of English Rural Life, D83/2.

while working as agriculturalists, were still feminine. The woman's hair is carefully coiffed with a headband delicately holding the hair out of her eyes. The land girl still looks feminine with a trim waistline and plentiful bust despite wearing breeches and holding a hayfork—two items that were traditionally masculine. The poster projects the idea that even though land girls wore a uniform, they remained feminine because they were glamorous. Even the poster's language caters to the idea of sexualized

femininity by calling attention to the fact that women could continue to care for their bodies through a “healthy” and “happy” outdoor life.

Regardless of land girls' and the public's opinions toward the WLA uniform, wearing the outfit was another way in which women challenged the definition of femininity. By putting on the outfit, land girls challenged the social structure of mid-twentieth-century Britain that inscribed and circumscribed women's bodies in femininity through clothing styles. Land girls, simply by wearing the uniform, challenged British society to redefine and revision the female body in clothing that was not feminine.⁴⁷

Such was the case for Josephine Duggan Rees who recalls that after wearing the uniform

⁴⁷ For more discussion of the social construction of femininity and how one may begin to re-vision it, see Sandra Lee Bartky, “Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power,” in McCann, *Feminist Theory Reader*, 404-418.

for so long, returning to civilian clothing was a strange experience. Rees remembers when she put on a dress, “the full skirt felt strange round my legs which for months had been clad in breeches or dungarees” and when she saw her friends in dresses, they looked “unusually feminine.”⁴⁸

Summary

The WLA uniform and bodily changes played important roles in upsetting ideological beliefs regarding femininity and gender. By wearing the outfit, land girls challenged the societal belief that gender was dependent on physical appearance and thus, disrupted societal beliefs surrounding femininity. However, by altering the uniform to suit the personal tastes of individual land girls, women also succumbed to preexisting notions regarding femininity. Additionally, as land girls spent more and more time working for the WLA, they again challenged notions regarding proper displays of femininity as their bodies transformed from being soft and weak into hardened, muscled, and roughened physiques. These new bodies reflected physical traits more associated with men than with the “gentler” female sex. As land girls became mentally and physically stronger and more skilled in agricultural work, instilled in them was a sense that they were valuable and capable farm laborers in this conjoined space. Furthermore, land girls identities expanded as they developed a new sense of self regarding their internal beings and outward bodies while challenging preexisting social ideologies.

⁴⁸ Rees, *Corduroy Days*, 44.

CONCLUSION

*The boist'rous wind is my familiar playmate,
The beauty that the dawns and sunsets bring,
The chattering streams are mine, and I am happy—
For, having nothing, I have everything.*

— Audrey Hancock, as published in *Poems of the Land Army*, 1945

The Changing Nature of Agriculture in the Years following War

British agriculture seemed to do its part successfully for the war effort. Farmers, with assistance from farm laborers, land girls, and others, added millions of acres of land for food production. This involved, but was not limited to, turning pastureland into arable fields and reworking hedges and ditches to maximize land productivity. In 1939, there were 8.3 million acres of land under crop production in Britain. By 1945, there were 13 million acres. Between 1940 and 1944, farmers drained approximately four million acres of land. In Leicestershire, approximately 86% of farmlands were grass in 1938, but by 1943, 51% of farmlands were under plow.¹ The crossover to high-input arable farming during the war resulted in increased food yields. Wheat production went up by 90%, potatoes by 87%, vegetables by 45%, and sugar beets by 19%.² However, recent studies examining the productivity of farming during the war indicate that while food production increased, there was no major increase in yields. Increases were rather

¹ Howkins, *Death of Rural England*, 124; Peter Dewey, "The Supply of Tractors in Wartime," in Short, *Front Line of Freedom*, 96; Christopher Dyer, David Hey, and Joan Thirsk, "Lowland Vales," in *The English Rural Landscape*, ed. Joan Thirsk (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 96.

² Howkins, *Death of Rural England*, 124.

due to better availability of labor, capital for mechanization, management, and greater acreage under plow.³ Nevertheless, what is remarkable about these expansions was that they were primarily the result of increased human labor as opposed to machinery. At the start of the war, horses still outnumbered tractors 30:1 (this ratio declined during the war in favor of mechanization).⁴

To supplement domestic production, the nation relied on food imports throughout the war. While imports of food decreased during the war from pre-war levels, Britain was still able to maintain imports from places such as the United States, Canada, Argentina, New Zealand, and Australia. Imported grain and meat continued to supplement domestic supplies along with imported compact foods such as dried milk and eggs, canned meat, and processed milk. These compact foods not only added important calories to Britons' diets, but saved on shipping space as well.⁵

Increased food production left its mark on domestic animal production and the natural environment. Production levels for beef, pork, and mutton fell as animal feed became harder to obtain and pastures transitioned into arable land. The environmental landscapes, such as grasslands and fens, were converted to human-made arable fields. In the chalk downs of southern England, for example, fields that were once home to flocks of sheep before the war became wheat and barley fields, many of which remain so today.⁶ In the fens, agriculturalists claimed many acres of wetlands for cultivation through

³ For more information, see Short, *Front Line of Freedom*.

⁴ Paul Brassley, "Wartime Productivity and Innovation, 1939-45," in Short, *Front Line of Freedom*, 53. The decline of horses used in farming decreased rapidly following the war. In 1945, there were still more than 436,000 working horses in England and Wales. Fifteen years later, there were less than 20,000. For comparison sake, in 1950 there were approximately 295,000 tractors and by 1958, approximately 430,000. John Martin, *The Development of Modern Agriculture: British Farming Since 1931* (London: MacMillan Press, 2000), 106.

⁵ Alan F. Wilt, *Food for War: Agriculture and Rearmament in Britain before the Second World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 224.

⁶ Joseph Bettey, "Downlands," in Thirsk, *English Rural Landscape*, 48.

building banks, cutting drains, and installing pumping machinery.⁷ Land girls and other agricultural laborers transformed these grasslands and fens by employing the environmental landscapes in new and different ways, which oftentimes brought profit to long-depressed areas.

Despite the government's keen interest in and support of agriculture during the war, the farming community was wary of a second "great betrayal" following the war, as happened after the Great War when Parliament repealed the Agriculture Act in 1921, which terminated price guarantees and essentially ended the national minimum wage. A second betrayal did not ensue as Parliament declared its ongoing support for farming in the Agriculture Act of 1947. This Act guaranteed markets and food prices, regardless of quantity, for such items as cereals, meats, sugar beets, and potatoes. The legislation enabled the government to follow a "cheap food" policy while also allowing farmers to continue receiving stable incomes.⁸

After facing two major food crises in the first half of the century, the country made a commitment to maintaining a prosperous and healthy agricultural community. For much of the remainder of the century, the government followed a production-based agricultural policy, continuing the trend toward agriculture's intensification. Through the further adoption of and advancements in technical and scientific methods, agricultural production expanded in the following years. In terms of science, new varieties of cereals, greater use of artificial fertilizers, adoption of herbicides and pesticides, new breeds of animals, and artificial insemination encouraged greater production on many British farms. In terms of technology, which led to increased efficiency, horses vanished in

⁷ Christopher Taylor, "Fenlands," in Thirsk, *English Rural Landscape*, 186.

⁸ Ward, *War in the Countryside*, 183; and Howkins, *Death of Rural England*, 144.

favor of combine harvesters and tractors; milking machines replaced hand milking.⁹ However, one result of these farming methods was the decrease in the number of required farm laborers. A second result was the structural basis of agricultural work changed as noted by former land girl Patricia Detmold. Muscular strength was no longer the main consideration when entering agriculture. Now deftness and intelligence were more important.¹⁰ Farm laborers now had to retool their agricultural skills to become deft drivers, machine operators, and mechanics.¹¹

To curtail the loss of farm laborers after the war, the government continually raised the national farm wage. Wages stood at 48s in 1940 and increased to 70s in early 1945. By 1950, they were approximately £5 per forty-seven hour workweek.¹² However, the increase in wages could not stem the tide of laborers leaving the land, as the gap between agricultural earnings and those wages earned by unskilled workers in the industrial sector of the economy widened. Approximately 150,000 full-time laborers left the agricultural industry during the 1950s in favor of jobs in the towns and cities.¹³

Farm laborers were not the only individuals leaving the land; the number of farm proprietors decreased as well. At the end of the war there were approximately 500,000 farmers and by 1970, approximately 233,000. However, while the number of actual farmers decreased, agricultural holdings during this period were re-characterized.¹⁴ With the intensification of farming to achieve greater productivity and profit, larger farms came to dominate the landscape. Those small-scale farmers who stayed true to traditional

⁹ For more information on the technical and scientific changes in agriculture following 1945, see Howkins, *Death of Rural England*, chapter 8.

¹⁰ Patricia Detmold, "Women on the Land," *International Women's News* (London), 5/40, 1946, 56.

¹¹ Martin, *Development of Modern Agriculture*, 107.

¹² Ward, *War in the Countryside*, 185.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 186.

¹⁴ Martin, *Development of Modern Agriculture*, 130.

methods of farming had a more difficult time competing against larger, specialized farms and farmers who entered into commercial schemes. In the first few decades following the war, British agriculture continued to grow and prosper due to government support and developing technologies and sciences based on a production-based approach despite the loss of farmers and laborers.

The WLA and Land Girls after the War

When fighting ended for the United Kingdom in May of 1945, the battle for food continued. The government determined that rationing would continue for quite some time. In fact, many products were restricted after the war that had not been subject to rationing during the preceding five years. These included bread, cakes, flour, and oatmeal. With food still at critical levels as the war was winding down, the Ministry of Agriculture entered into discussion with the WLA about the organization's continuation after hostilities ceased. Realizing that various military duties would occupy many British soldiers overseas, which would prevent men from immediately filling the vacancies created in agriculture by the repatriation of prisoners of war (many POWs assisted with farming operations during their imprisonment), the government recognized they needed an additional thirty thousand land girls to assist in agriculture. The government and WLA decided to continue recruiting new land girls and encourage those fifty-four thousand land girls already employed to remain on the land.

The WLA continued to operate as it had during the war, albeit at lesser numbers, until it disbanded at the end of 1950. Similarly, the WTC continued to operate until 1946. Ironically, when the land army finally demobilized, the people who rushed to its

support were frequently those individuals who had exhibited anxiety toward the organization in 1939. Farmers and agricultural unions were saddened to see the WLA close its doors. They encouraged land girls to continue working in agriculture. James Turner, president of the National Farmers' Union, stated that:

Their [land girls] efforts were magnificent and they have indeed good cause for satisfaction and pride in having been members of an organisation which has not only 'done what it set out to do'...but very much more, as all who are connected with the industry know.

I trust that the influence of the W.L.A. will continue for the benefit of the industry. It has in these past years made not only the contribution to agricultural production, but has demonstrated that women workers of the type found in the W.L.A. can find a suitable career in agriculture and horticulture. I hope that many of the present members will remain 'on the land' and induce others to follow their example in choosing an agricultural career, and so carry on the tradition of the W.L.A.¹⁵

Gratitude for the WLA poured in from around the country. Farmers in Wiltshire erected a plaque outside the Agriculture House to recognize and honor the work of the WLA.¹⁶

In London, the Minister of Agriculture, Tom Williams, stated that the future success of agriculture rested on the qualities of the women and men already working in it. "It is you, and those working alongside you, who will determine the measure of success, and if you tackle the job as you have done so far I am in no doubt of the ultimate result."¹⁷

Despite the outpouring of public and government gratitude, the WLA received little support from the government in terms of post-war gratuities, which left many land girls feeling as if the government had ill-used and underappreciated them. Already in 1942, the Ministry of Agriculture announced that there would be no support for land girls in terms of post-war education and training. Lady Denman began her long battle to

¹⁵ James Turner's letter of appreciation, *Land Army News* (London), March 1950, 1.

¹⁶ "Wiltshire Farmers' Tribute to W.L.A.," *Land Army News*, November 1950, 3.

¹⁷ Thomas Williams, "Message from the Minister," *Land Army News*, November 1950, 1.

ensure that the government would give land girls the same post-war benefits as those women who were members of other service organizations. She argued that it was unreasonable that a civilian nurse should be entitled to post-war training schemes that would allow her to become a veterinary surgeon while a land girl was denied similar support.¹⁸ Despite Lady Denman's protests, land girls were not included in the Reinstatement in Civil Employment Act. To make matters further unpleasant, the government announced in February 1945 that it would offer £150 resettlement grants to auxiliary and Civil Defense workers, but not to land girls. There were a number of arguments offered for the exclusion of the WLA from war gratuities. For one, the government argued that the organization, even though it was comprised of mobile, uniformed service members who agreed to serve for the duration of war, fell under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Agriculture whereas other service organizations fell under the purview of the War Cabinet. Additionally, offering the WLA post-war gratuities was inappropriate because if the government were to do so, they would be required to offer gratuities to other industry workers. As the Minister of Labour and National Service reasoned during a cabinet meeting:

if any grants were made to the Women's Land Army or any workpeople who had been receiving the recognised rates of wages in the industry in which they worked, there would undoubtedly be claims for similar grants...from thousands of other workers which...would be most difficult, if not impossible, to resist.¹⁹

Lady Denman felt forced to resign due to the mistreatment by the government toward the WLA. She tendered her resignation in February 1945 stating, "it is this latest decision

¹⁸ Tyrer, *They Fought in the Fields*, 214.

¹⁹ "Conclusions of a Meeting of the War Cabinet," War Cabinet 24 (45), February 22, 1945, 143, The National Archives, Kew, CAB/65/49/24. A compounding factor in regards to gratuities was that land girls were paid by their employers at industry rates, whereas members of the armed forces were paid by the government.

[regarding resettlement grants] which has led me to feel that I must resign my present appointment, and that I can no longer appear to be responsible for a policy with which I do not concur.”²⁰

In the end, the government offered some concessions. In May 1945, the Minister of Agriculture announced that land girls were to receive some post-war training similar to that given to Civil Defense and auxiliary workers; a grant of £150,000 was to be made to the WLA’s Benevolent Fund; and land girls were allowed to keep their shoes and great coats provided that they dye the coats navy blue.²¹ Later on through the Agriculture Act of 1949, the government provided land girls with a vocational training scheme to allow for their continued access to agriculture.

Despite the meager gratuities, land girls remained, for the most part, diligent in their jobs. There were a few episodes of strikes and parades organized by land girls in protest over their mistreatment. The administrative side of the WLA along with the National Union of Agricultural Workers, which many land girls had joined, disapproved of direct action and stated that protests did not serve useful purposes, even though land girls were justified in their discontent.²² More important was for land girls to continue working the land to ensure the nation’s wellbeing when food production was still critical. As Margaret Pyke, editor of *Land Girl*, stated: “if the rest of us went [striking], the Government would not suffer but the country would. It would be the people we have helped to feed...who would go short.”²³

²⁰ Quoted in Twinch, *Women on the Land*, 127.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 129.

²² Tyrer, *They Fought in the Fields*, 221-222.

²³ Margaret A. Pyke “Rewards and Values,” *Land Girl*, April 1945, 1.

When the WLA officially disbanded in November 1950, approximately five thousand land girls remained working in agriculture.²⁴ For many of these women, a love affair with nature developed over the course of their WLA service that prevented their departure. For others, the thought of returning to an office desk was incomprehensible after experiencing work in wide-open spaces. For instance, when Pauline Cole left the land army to take care of her mother and brother, she recalls that her head remained in the countryside while her body went dutifully through the motions of serving as a loving daughter and sister at home.²⁵ Marriage reunited her body and mind when she wedded an agriculturalist and was able to return to the country. For her, farming and its spaces were her arcadia as opposed to the domestic spaces of her youth. Other land girls remained in agriculture after recognizing that the foundational structure of agriculture was changing in ways that allowed them to continue to serve as farm laborers. Patricia Detmold comments that since the operational basis of agriculture had changed, there was more room for women to find a space for themselves in the industry.

Quite a number [of land girls] have told me that they would like to stay on the land. This will be possible for some of them, because the operational basis of agriculture has altered, and it seems as though the social basis has done so, too. Women have played a prominent part in agriculture during the war.²⁶

The government and WLA offered some training assistance to those land girls who decided to remain on the land. Issued by the Ministry of Agriculture, the WLA provided a booklet, *To the Members of the WLA Staying on the Land*, which offered valuable knowledge to the women who would begin their careers now as ex-land girls. The Agriculture Act of 1949 allowed for some vocational training in agriculture as well.

²⁴ Tyrer, *They Fought in the Fields*, 203.

²⁵ Cole, *Transition to Arcady*, 31.

²⁶ Detmold, "Women on the Land," 56.

The WLA's *Land Girl* offered suggestions on post-war careers as agriculturalists and recommended land girls could earn a suitable living in horticulture or dairy work. However, the magazine strongly encouraged land girls to consider "pioneering" a new agricultural profession, that of farm secretary. The author reasoned that with on-going government support for farming and price control in the years following, paperwork and form filing would increase. Since "form-filling is a job heartily detested by farmers," land girls could offer their assistance.²⁷ Ironically, work as a farm secretary, horticulturalist, or dairy worker were all jobs that were traditionally feminine in nature. The WLA was, to an extent, indicating that the appropriate positions for women were those jobs in the lighter branches of the industry.

While many land girls remained working in agriculture after 1950, the vast majority of WLA recruits withdrew from the farming industry. Many land girls were anxious to return to their old jobs and families. Excited to leave the land and escape from long days of work, more lucrative paying jobs in cities and towns enticed some land girls to leave the land. Other women married soon afterwards and began their lives as wives and eventually mothers. Social norms at this point in the United Kingdom indicated that it was preferable for married women with children to remain at home rather than carrying on with their work in the public sphere. Even those land girls who married farmers and were able to remain on the land often saw a decreased role in their actual undertakings of farm work during their childrearing years.

While many land girls left the agricultural industry, some of those women still maintained a connection with nature by growing vegetable gardens. Marilyn Johnson recalls that her mother, Lillian Smith, married soon after her tenure in the WLA and

²⁷ A. B. Lane, "Farm Secretary: A Post-War Career for Land Girls," *Land Girl*, January 1945, 2.

began her own family in the city, but was still able to continue a relationship with the land through gardening opportunities.²⁸ As Johnson relates, many land girls had to rebuild not only their domestic lives after leaving the WLA, but their physical homes as well. In those areas of the country affected by bombing, new housing developments afforded ex-land girls the opportunities to create and landscape their own gardens and homes using some of the skills developed during their land army days.

The WLA offered various forms of assistance in readjusting to civilian life for those women who left the land. The WLA's *Land Girl* provided recommendations on possible future employment, which ranged from becoming teachers to writers and librarians to nurses—many of which had a gendered quality to them. The WLA's Benevolent Fund offered financial assistance to women in need and ways in which the women could transition into their pre-war jobs or undertake new careers. The fund also provided educational assistance by offering home craft courses. As outlined in *Land Army News*, those land girls desiring to undertake “responsibilities of a different and domestic nature,” home craft courses allowed them to “get practical and theoretical instruction” on such domestic skills as cooking, cleaning, and childrearing.²⁹

After cheering on land girls to assume men's jobs to ensure peace, the WLA now encouraged women to assume domestic duties after the war. Women's traditional domestic duties were characterized as duties that protected the family and nation from social evils. An article in the *Land Girl* published in August 1945, states that the most vital task of a woman was building a home and raising children. For in the home, she was the guardian of peace. “There is no career which can compare with this one, and the

²⁸ Johnson, discussion.

²⁹ “Homecraft Courses,” *Land Army News*, June 1947, 1.

woman whose talents are all centred round the home is able to do work of vital importance.”³⁰ The author builds on notions that would help shape the formation of a welfare state, which focused on freedom from want, disease, ignorance, and insecurity. In the home, women could be soldiers against these enemies of peace. However, the author stresses that women needed cooperation and partnership with their mates in order to be successful. It was this partnership, which developed between the two sexes during the war that men and women would carry into peacetime to overcome further the rivalry of the sexes—the rivalry that could propagate social evils. The message, while most likely well intended, indicates that the accomplishments land girls achieved through their agricultural jobs, such as knowledge and confidence, were now more important to maintain in the domestic sphere to achieve peace rather than in the public sphere. For some land girls, such a message was disappointing after experiencing personal growth while serving in the WLA.

With the government and the WLA encouraging land girls to consider returning to domesticity, despite opportunities for these women to remain in agriculture, the two groups appear to have used, to a certain extent, land girls as tools of war. More important to the government, for example, was to have mobile farm laborers who could supplement agricultural labor needs during wartime, rather than a mobile group of women who could work to deconstruct social ideologies. While the government appreciated the hard work land girls undertook and were genuine in their praise and support of land girls, they did not appear to have entirely viewed the strides these women made in creating a place for themselves in agriculture as a priority in peacetime.

³⁰ M. Hicklin, “Growing Up and Being Grown-Up: A Woman in the World,” *Land Girl*, August 1945, 3.

There were land girls who joined the WLA out of patriotic reasons and understood they were only temporarily replacing farm laborers for the duration of the war. However, other land girls viewed or came to view the WLA and agriculture as a means through which to diminish gender stratification, to obtain more personal freedoms, and to expand their settings in life. For this group of land girls, being encouraged to return to the private sphere was discouraging. However, despite land girls being encouraged to return home, they challenged gender norms by participating in work that was deemed men's work. They demonstrated that sex-typing of jobs was irrelevant in agriculture and that farming chores had less to do with gender and more to do with performative actions. Similarly, land girls demonstrated that femininity and masculinity were not based on physical appearance, but were performative in nature as well.

The Significance of the WLA and Land Girls

During the war, the WLA and land girls gained a foothold for women in agriculture. Through their work, land girls questioned traditional gender roles and challenged social assumptions pertaining to separate spheres and femininity. Whether by wearing uniforms, changing the physicality of their bodies, owning and operating their bodies in different ways, undertaking men's jobs, or de-gendering spaces, land girls called attention to the fact that gender/femininity was not based on appearance or by the work individuals carried out. During this process, land girls operated in an overlapping area of public and private spheres. By the simple fact that land girls were female, their bodies brought the domestic sphere to the public sphere and through the act of undertaking men's work, their bodies also brought the public to the domestic. Through

successfully working in agriculture and gaining the approval of those already in the field, they challenged separate-sphere ideology and called attention to the ideology's often-performative nature.

However, while land girls directly challenged social norms, they also upheld such norms by working within traditional gender values. By feminizing their uniforms, applying make-up, searching out the sun for a tan in order to maintain beauty, undertaking lighter farm chores, or imitating their instructors, land girls succumbed to social ideologies that women were domestic, passive, and submissive. To this end, they upheld some of the social ideologies that guided British life at the time.

Whether they were perpetuating or challenging social norms, many land girls expanded their identities and self-consciousness via agricultural avenues. By engaging in work with plows and horses to prepare fields for planting and with tractors and threshing machines to harvest crops, to rise early in the mornings to milk cows and feed the animals, to cut down magnificent trees, or to be alone with oneself in nature, land girls revealed to themselves and the public their adeptness, perception, intelligence, and strength in a male-dominated industry. A certain amount of maturation, independence, and empowerment developed in these women. Few probably realized what impact their work would have on them physically and emotionally when they joined. Jean Iddon reflects that the first time she was ever truly alone was when she became a land girl:

I remember my first day on the tractor and the peculiar state of mind I was in. I suddenly realized, as I began to drive up and down the field with nobody in sight, that I had never been really alone before. I had often dreaded loneliness, but during the course of the next few days I discovered that to be entirely on one's own is to be in touch with something big and all-embracing. Real loneliness is only felt in an uncongenial crowd.³¹

³¹ Iddon, *Fragrant Earth*, 13.

In time, Iddon recalls that she found happiness in the beauty of the countryside and in “the stimulation of being completely alone, finding my worth on my own merit.”³² Iddon had recently called off her engagement and was experiencing life anew while riding upon a tractor in the countryside, which made her aware of the value of being her own person—something she may not have found quite as easily through marriage.

Land girls were participants in transforming the physical landscapes of the British countryside and the foundational structure of agriculture. Wielding axes to fell pine trees, driving the tractor-plow to furrow the potato fields, dredging the ditches to maximize arable land acreage, land girls transformed the natural landscapes into human-made and production-based environments. They, along with farmers and farm laborers, commoditized nature for victory. Additionally, land girls represented some of the laborers who implemented the greater use of farming machinery—the same machinery that would transform agriculture’s foundation. With growing numbers of tractors, binders, combines, and milking machines, land girls were oftentimes the individuals operating those machines to achieve greater agricultural productivity.

Land girls also brought the countryside to the urban and the urban to the countryside. On the one hand, many land army recruits came from the metropolitan centers of Britain and initially held unflattering views of the people who lived in rural settings. Through their engagement with rural communities via agricultural avenues, many land girls began to appreciate and understand the manners and customs that guided rural life. These women returned to the cities and towns and shared stories about the hardworking and dynamic individuals who lived in the countryside. Additionally, ex-land girls brought knowledge to city peoples about agriculture as they grew and

³² Ibid., 25.

maintained their own gardens or allotments. While land girls transformed agricultural landscapes in the countryside, now they transformed urban landscapes by bringing nature to the city. On the other hand, many country folks held their own prejudices about land girls who came from cities. Such city women were supposedly “loose” and unappreciative of the rural way of life. As these land girls learned how to operate within these agricultural settings, rural communities learned that city women could adapt, appreciate, and contribute to country life, thus bridging the disconnect that sometimes existed between the rural and urban.

Land girls further strengthened women’s access to agricultural careers. By the late nineteenth century, women from the upper classes, particularly the Countess of Warwick, already were working to create an arena for educated women to participate in agricultural schemes. Lady Warwick was a founding figure of Studley Horticultural & Agricultural College for Women, which offered training in the lighter branches of agriculture. Additionally, new women’s organizations, seeking to increase women’s status, were forming during the same era such as the Women’s Agricultural and Horticultural International Union, which eventually became the Women’s Farm and Garden Union (WFGU). The WFGU was crucial in moving women into the WLA during the First World War. After the WLA’s success during that war, the government once again called upon it to do the same during the next war. Little by little, women moved away from lighter agricultural work undertaken by the educated to work in all branches of agriculture undertaken by women from a variety of backgrounds. With government schemes to allow for land girls to undertake post-war training, along with access to agricultural schools, such as at Wye College, an agricultural school that opened

to women following the Second World War, women received more and more agricultural opportunities. The land girls, who represented the WLA during the Second World War, carried on the fight for women's access to agriculture.

A study focusing on women in British agriculture after the war, finds that the number of women working in farming increased and that in 1950, the same year the WLA disbanded, approximately one in seven farm workers were female and that by 1978, the ratio was approximately one in four.³³ In another study of women in agriculture, women were found to represent 24% of agricultural laborers by 1975.³⁴ However, these increased numbers of female agriculturalists hide the fact that agricultural census categories changed to include women working as seasonal and part-time laborers and even farm secretaries. Therefore, the overall increase in the number of female agriculturalists may not be as high had these other categories originally been included in the census. The fact that the census categories became more encompassing may be an indicator that female agriculturalists were becoming more visible in the industry.

While women's presence increased, these numbers do not reflect that those women seemed to have undertaken jobs in farming's lighter branches, which were less specialized and skilled and were more traditional in nature. Women undertook tasks such as fruit picking, market gardening, and occasionally fieldwork. In 1981, only 0.6% of female laborers operated farm machinery.³⁵ A study on employment trends of female graduates from three agricultural colleges in the UK during the 1970s reflects a similar pattern. The study finds that fewer women than men obtained farm management posts;

³³ Ruth Gasson, *The Role of Women in British Agriculture* (Colchester, UK: Women's Farm and Garden Association, 1980), 9-10.

³⁴ Quoted in Bradley, *Men's Work, Women's Work*, 91.

³⁵ Bradley, *Men's Work, Women's Work*, 91.

more women were employed in large non-commercial organizations; and women were less likely to find jobs relevant to their qualifications.³⁶ Notwithstanding these women's agricultural educations, employers seemed to have favored men in terms of awarding them higher status jobs in the industry. Women were more likely to become part-time or casual workers and perform the least skilled tasks even when having the same qualifications as men.³⁷ The reasons for this include employer attitudes, sex differences in abilities and aptitudes, marriage and family life, structural changes in the industry, and the socialization of women into feminine roles.

These reasons are familiar. They represent many of the hurdles land girls had to overcome while serving in the WLA such as employer attitudes, sex differences, and femininity. If the study's findings are correct, that means the achievements land girls overcame during the war in breaking down stereotypes regarding gender difference were only temporary. They indicate that social prejudices and traditions have strong roots. Changes born out of crisis can be fleeting once peace returns as seen by the return of women into less prestigious aspects of farm work.

Studies undertaken by scholars, such as Summerfield and Noakes, who focus on women's wartime roles in other sectors, reveal similar patterns. Findings indicate that while British women may have experienced greater access to the public sphere during the war, their post-war lives were remarkably similar to their pre-war lives. During the war, women's jobs were socially considered secondary to the heroic jobs men undertook in the military and generally more supplementary in nature. Women were "helping" their menfolk. Their war jobs did not displace their domestic duties nor erase gender

³⁶ Ruth Gasson, "Career Opportunities for Women in British Agriculture," *Agricultural Administration* 8, no. 4 (1980): 248.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 242.

stratification. Women, while important contributors to the war effort, were still marginal figures in the public arena, but their experiences in this sphere during the war often left many of them with hopes of a better future.

Such observations are applicable to women in agriculture. As men came to repopulate pre-war occupations, employers frequently gave agricultural women jobs supplementary in nature. With women's farm work coded as supplementary, men and women were once again negotiating the presence of both sexes within the same career—a career where the number of positions were decreasing with increasing mechanization. For many land girls who became permanent agriculturalists, their job duties expanded into the domestic world, which was a change for many of them. While serving in the WLA, land girls were prohibited from engaging in domestic responsibilities on behalf of farmers. Farmers were not allowed to use these women to undertake meal preparation, laundry, shopping, or other household chores. Land girls could only be employed for agricultural tasks. To this end, they escaped the double burden that many other women experienced during the war. When the WLA disbanded, these women now had to balance agricultural work with a domestic life that frequently involved marriage and children. For many of them, this limited their availability to undertake higher-skilled and full-time work and thus, allowed more men to take these positions. Therefore, women working in subsidiary roles was not entirely based upon the resurfacing of gender stratification, but sometimes based upon women being needed in multiple locations.

While land girls and the WLA located a platform within the space created by the overlapping of two spheres to challenge cultural ideologies, those ideologies were not entirely broken down, but were blurred. Land girls kept their positions in the domestic

sphere, but also gained a stronger foothold in the public agricultural sphere. While some land girls remained working in agriculture in some fashion, whether that was through employment, education, or marriage to a farmer, the majority of land girls left agriculture and returned to roles that were more traditional. Despite this, many land girls experienced greater freedom through their agricultural work and cultivated close affinities with nature as they transformed the countryside and the agricultural industry, which offered them the opportunities to develop their own initiatives, their own sense of selves, and their own ideas of where they belonged. They called attention to the fact that social ideologies were just that, ideologies, beliefs that people could negotiate in the circumstances of war. While national appreciation for land girls has been late in coming, the fact that recognition is now arriving in the twenty-first century indicates that land girls left an enduring and important mark on the British countryside.

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