

# PATRIOTISM SUBVERTING GENDER?: The White Feather Movement and the Female Emasculation of Men During the First World War

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Almost immediately after the national call to enlist in the First World War, patriotic British women up and down the country began handing out white feathers to men not in uniform, in what became known as the White Feather Movement (WFM). These women sought to strip away the militant masculine identity of these men. This was a time full of chivalric ideals where women were expected to support the masculine identity, through objectifying themselves as sexual incentives and rewards for soldierly heroes. The WFM instead reveals the story of how some women attempted to use their patriotism alone to emasculate male 'shirkers' and represents a radical inversion of gender roles.

In order to understand how men were affected by the actions of the WFM, it is important to first understand the ideal of masculinity on the eve of the First World War. Gender historians describe a militant masculinity, epitomised by the soldierly hero, with rare unanimity. The introduction of physical education and its rapid militarisation in schools—to some extent still seen as an escape from the feminine domestic sphere—deliberately blurred the distinction between the military and civilian worlds. It is no coincidence that the war poet Siegfried Sassoon later recalled being in the army as “very much like being in school.” Inspired by his experiences in the Boer War, Robert Baden-Powell attempted to instil chivalric values of honour and courage more overtly in his Boy Scouts from 1910. Thus, the military, including the process of recruitment, was certainly a man's world, and men were incentivised to engage with it. In fact, a key part of their identity, their gender, was seen as incomplete if they shirked from the military.

But ideals of gender interact, in the words of some historians, like two threads in a “double helix.” Women did play a role in the recruitment process, albeit one that was predicated almost exclusively on sexual terms. Propaganda posters featuring slogans like, “Is your best boy wearing khaki?” suggest that the role of women was to sexually lure men into enlisting. Reduced to their sexualities, women were not to play any rational or intellectual debate on conscription, nor were they to encourage anyone other than their lover to enlist. Further examples of recruitment propaganda demonstrate the prevalence of chivalric imagery, of knights rescuing damsels in distress, or as in Belgium, as “an innocent woman in need of a paternal male's protection.” Women were not only expected to be sexual incentives to fight, they were also rewards for those who scaled the heights of the militant ideal of masculinity.

By contrast, instead of pandering to male lust, the WFM distanced themselves from this female role and targeted men's masculine identities directly in non-sexual terms. As they saw it, they were simply reminding men of their duties, as any patriotic person, male or female should do. They encouraged men to fight not by upholding their masculine identity, but by bringing it down. The face-to-face confrontation where the woman's patriotism was stronger than the man's, showed an inversion of the gender ideals, dishonouring and emasculating the man, as the importance of the militant ideal of masculinity contrasted the reality of meeting the expectations of a man at the outbreak of a world war.

It comes as no surprise that the public and active role that the WFM played heightened gender tensions, particularly as the war progressed. The return of injured soldiers brought the reality of warfare to the home front and created a clash of both ideology and gender. Having experienced the brutal reality of the first total war, some wounded men began to doubt the nobility of warfare. Some personally knew men who had been pushed to enlist because of the aggressive efforts of the WFM and who had died or become wounded in action. What quite literally added insult to injury was how the WFM ploughed on with the recruitment activities well into 1918, still only relying on the single metric of whether the suspected shirker was in uniform. In reality, this led to visibly wounded or disabled men receiving white feathers which caused a crisis of gender. The WFM women were seen as incompetent to have ignored something so obvious—reinforcing older stereotypes of women—or else as deliberately inciting a gender-based conflict, something much more dangerous. For the wounded men, having perhaps faced a crisis of masculinity already, as their harrowing experience of attritional trench warfare crushed their means to demonstrate their manhood through chivalric, militaristic success, the confidence and authority of the WFM women added another dynamic to their gender crisis.

This is especially true when the wider context of gender roles during the First World War is taken into account. The WFM were a public representation of the female experience of the war, and the WFM was a tangible outlet for broader distrust of gender relations during the war. This was a time when women across the country were also facing up to men in the workplace, gaining new authority as they took on 'male' positions. The continuing activities of the WFM highlighted the chasm in male and female experiences of the war. Whilst men were risking their lives on the front, women were 'dancing on the home front', and keeping the jingoistic 'war fever' alive.

The First World War was certainly a gendered conflict, one in which both gender identities underwent a reckoning. On a large scale, the male experience of war threw the criteria into proving one's masculinity into question, whilst on a smaller scale, the activities of the WFM intensified this crisis of masculinity as these women still upheld chivalric values. At the same time, the WFM demonstrates how women were able to carve out a new interpretation of the female gender, whilst navigating the male-dominated recruitment process for the first time.

## Further Reading:

Gullace, Nicoletta F., 'White Feathers and Wounded Men: Female Patriotism and Memory of the Great War', *Journal of British Studies*, 36, (1997), pp. 178-206.

Hart, Peter J., 'The White Feather Campaign: A Struggle with Masculinity During World War I', *Inquiries Journal/Student Pulse*, 2, (2010), p.1.

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