

# Myth, Countermyth and the Politics of Memory: Vera Brittain and Madeleine Clemenceau Jacquemaire's Interwar Nurse Memoirs

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**Summary:** *This article examines the interwar memoirs written by two First-World-War nurses: Testament of Youth (1933) by British VAD Vera Brittain, and Les Hommes de bonne volonté (1919) by Madeleine Clemenceau Jacquemaire, daughter of the French prime minister and Red Cross nurse. It explores the ways in which these authors challenge the dominant stereotypes (both positive and negative) of the nurse prevalent during the war, before outlining the alternative images - or countermyths - that they construct in their own autobiographical writings. It argues that both authors make use of their nursing experiences as a means of endowing themselves with veteran status, thereby allowing them access to the almost exclusively male genre of war writing that gained in popularity during the interwar years. The article concludes that because of the double status of these women, who were both active participants in and passive witnesses to the war, their narratives remain necessarily ambiguous. This reflects more generally the uncomfortable position - between combatant and non-combatant status - in which many female war workers found themselves.*

**Keywords:** war, nurse, Brittain, Clemenceau Jacquemaire, interwar, memoir

**Résumé :** *Cet article examine les mémoires de l'entre-deux-guerres écrits par deux infirmières de la Première Guerre mondiale : Testament of Youth (1933) de Vera Brittain, VAD (infirmière bénévole) britannique et Les Hommes de bonne volonté (1919) de Madeleine Clemenceau Jacquemaire, fille du premier ministre français et infirmière de la Croix-Rouge. Il explore la façon dont ces auteures contestent les stéréotypes dominants (positifs et négatifs) de l'infirmière répandus pendant la guerre, avant d'exposer les images alternatives - ou les contre-mythes - qu'elles construisent dans leurs propres écrits autobiographiques. Il suggère que les deux auteures exploitent leurs expériences en tant qu'infirmières pour leur donner le statut d'ancien combattant(e), ce qui leur permet d'avoir accès au genre presque exclusivement masculin de l'écriture de guerre, genre qui est devenu de plus en plus populaire dans l'entre-deux-guerres. L'article conclut que grâce au statut double de ces femmes, qui étaient à la fois les participantes actives dans et les témoins passifs de la guerre, leurs récits restent nécessairement ambigus, ce qui reflète plus largement la position inconfortable - entre combattant et non-combattant - dans laquelle beaucoup des femmes qui ont travaillé dans la guerre se sont trouvées.*

**Mots-clés :** guerre, infirmière, Brittain, Clemenceau Jacquemaire, l'entre-deux-guerres, mémoire

As Gail Braybon reminds us, “women’s wartime history was, and often still is, overlaid with myth” (Braybon, 2003: 88), and this is especially true in the case of First-World-War nursing. Often responsible for women’s initial recruitment into the profession, popular wartime myths of nursing - both positive and negative - were also the blueprint against which they were obliged to define themselves in their later writings. In this article, I consider Vera Brittain’s *Testament of Youth* (1933) alongside a 1919 fictionalised memoir produced by Madeleine Clemenceau Jacquemaire, the daughter of the French Prime Minister, entitled *Les Hommes de bonne volonté*.<sup>1</sup> Despite significant differences between these two memoirs and the contexts in which they were written, they share common ground. Both women, who nursed for extended periods throughout the war, were highly literate, would-be novelists, were socially well-connected and became increasingly politicised. One of the aims of both their memoirs is to debunk common myths about women’s wartime roles in order to bolster the status of their own texts as “authentic” war narratives. Although the memoirs do not provide us with straightforward historical testimony from which we can extrapolate a generalised experience of military nursing, writing about nursing during the interwar period clearly provided Brittain and Clemenceau Jacquemaire with, on the one hand, a legitimised public voice and, on the other, an opportunity to deal through the process of writing with unresolved private ethical and personal crises brought about by the war. It is not my intention in this article, therefore, to contrast the “realities” of individual women’s experiences with myths and countermyths of nursing produced in propaganda and popular culture. Rather, I wish to explore the ways in which Brittain and Clemenceau Jacquemaire responded to and made use of such myths as a means of entering the predominantly male world of political war memoirs in the interwar period. Writing about nursing, in other words, not only gave them the opportunity to come to terms with their traumatic experiences, but equally provided them, as writers and political actors, with a platform and an audience, positioning them within a broader community of witnesses to war.

### Myths of nursing

The nurse - and especially the voluntary nurse - was promoted as the ultimate model of patriotic female identity during the First World War in all belligerent nations. It was a role that appealed to women keen to seek an acceptable female equivalent to mass male mobilisation, and that, at least on the surface, satisfied the demand for a suitably “feminine” wartime occupation. As well as being essential for the functioning of both military and civilian hospitals, the wartime nurse was taken up as an ideal by diverse political and ideological groups. In France, the success of the nurse as an iconic figure is partly due to the way in which it succeeds in uniting both Catholic and Republican ideologies of French womanhood, symbolically embodying the *Union sacrée*.<sup>2</sup> She is at once a modern Marianne and a timeless Virgin Mary, at the forefront of a righteous military struggle yet incarnating an idealised vision of chaste and virtuous femininity to which every French woman was encouraged to aspire. Similarly, in Britain, the image of the “lady nurse”, first created by the myth of Florence Nightingale’s “Lady of the Lamp”, was effectively instrumentalised in the First World War, producing the icon of a devoted and virginal nurse, an image that was further enhanced by the hagiographic propaganda that followed the execution of British nurse Edith Cavell in 1915.<sup>3</sup> While drawing on the Victorian values that associated femininity with self-abnegation and a maternal desire to care for others, however, the British recruitment material for VAD nurses in particular was also class-based, constructing a model recruit as a modern young woman who possessed

“character and breeding” (Ouditt, 1994: 20). Thus, VAD recruitment posters, as was the case with many of the images used in French recruitment material, contained “an amalgam of both emancipatory and traditional elements” (Donner, 1997: 688) designed to appeal to their target audience. Inevitably, as increasing numbers of women donned the uniform and began caring for patients, the myth of the “white angel” (the nickname most often used in France) failed to survive the war untarnished. In both nations, middle-class volunteers were accused of entering the profession for less-than-noble reasons - usually the glamour of the uniform and the lure of potential husbands among the doctors and patients - and more damning visions of nurses as sexual temptresses or sadists were occasionally evoked. Some of the nurses who published memoirs and fictionalised accounts of their experiences during and after the war also flagged up the gap between the gendered ideal and the harsh realities of wartime nursing. Indeed, it has been these Anglo-American, more hard-hitting narratives - by Ellen La Motte, Mary Borden and Enid Bagnold<sup>4</sup> as well as Vera Brittain - which, complementing as they do other influential pacifist representations of the war, have become the most discussed nurse memoirs. (In France, it should be noted, one rarely finds such out-and-out pacifist attacks on the war in nurse memoirs published either before or after the Armistice, one of the reasons perhaps why they remain little known and out-of-print).<sup>5</sup>

In her discussion of the myths that have functioned as the foundation of Britain's war story, Braybon points to the centrality of Vera Brittain's memoirs (Braybon, 2003: 8). Although to some extent she had an atypical experience, Brittain has become shorthand for women's experiences of the war more generally. Her first volume of autobiography, *Testament of Youth*, was republished in paperback by Virago in 1978 and swiftly became a bestseller, assisted by its adaptation into a BBC drama series in 1979.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, her story continues to attract attention, having been the subject of a recent BBC docudrama<sup>7</sup>, and is to be made into a feature film.<sup>8</sup> Its ongoing influence can also be seen in the fact that, as Dan Todman notes: “In two thirds of the novels [about the war] produced in the period from 1978 to 1998, the principal activity for the main female characters was nursing, usually in France as a VAD” (Todman, 2005: 183). The fact that the “rediscovery” of Brittain's text in the 1970s coincided with the second-wave feminist movement is equally significant. Although the war narrative in *Testament of Youth* is a bleak pacifist tale of loss, horror and disillusionment, what was often retained and reproduced in the popular fiction that followed in its wake was an exciting tale of female empowerment in which the war brought about a watershed for women - an interpretation of the war that has been attacked by historians but which lives on in popular culture. In France, too, the First-World-War nurse has remained an essential ingredient of many portrayals of the conflict since the 1970s. A telling French example is that of the film *La Chambre des officiers* (2001), directed by François Dupeyron, which achieved both box-office and critical success. In Dupeyron's film both central female characters are nurses, and they embody the two versions of the wartime nurse that have persisted in the popular imagination. The middle-aged Anais is a selfless, maternal *ange blanc* who helps to heal officer Adrien's physical and psychological scars. Her character is close, in effect, to the idealised images to be found in wartime propaganda, as well as to the nurse-as-sanctuary figure that features in many male interwar combat novels.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, Marguerite, a young former nurse who is a fellow *gueule cassée* for hero Adrien, is condemned by the patriarchal double standards of her bourgeois family, who see her as unmarriageable as a result of her facial injuries and therefore as worthless. She is thus representative of recent feminist revisionist interpretations of women's wartime roles,

in that her character both blurs the line between combatant and non-combatant, and implies that the war led middle-class women to bitterly reject the limitations of pre-war gender norms.

### Vera Brittain (1893-1970): voice of the “Lost Generation”

So how did Brittain and Clemenceau respond to and make use of myths of nursing that were prevalent during and after the First World War? One of the best known images of Vera Brittain is one in which she is wearing her First-World-War nurse's uniform (Brittain, 1981: 202). Yet she did not see herself primarily as a nurse, but as a politically committed lecturer, novelist and journalist who had nursed during the war. Motivated by its author's ideological beliefs and literary ambitions, and a product of her class and education, *Testament of Youth* is not a typical example of a First-World-War nurse memoir. Indeed, the limitations of her largely critical portrait of the nursing profession in the war have been highlighted by recent critics. Sharon Ouditt, for example, argues that Brittain's narrator “betrays her elitism in this contemptuous portrait of a ‘backward profession’ which had failed to recognise the, in her view, superior qualities of ‘educated women’” (Ouditt, 1994: 29). The accuracy of Brittain's representation of the conditions of German prisoners and mortality rates at Étapes has also been questioned by historians.<sup>10</sup> As a portrait of a profession Brittain's text is more revealing of the (class) tensions that existed between VADs and professional nurses (a debate that was also carried out in the pages of the *British Journal of Nursing* throughout the war) than of military nursing *per se*. When read side by side with memoirs of professional nurses, such as Kate Luard's less well-known but compelling *Diary of a Nursing Sister on the Western Front 1914-15* (1915) and *Unknown Warriors* (1930), Brittain's 1933 narrator is markedly uninterested in the work she was doing and focuses instead on her own political, ideological and psychological development. The principal aim of her text was not, in short, to offer insights into wartime nursing (this, after all, is only a part of her autobiographical trajectory as detailed in *Testament of Youth*), but to write her own version of the now familiar interwar pacifist narrative of the journey from naive idealism to bitter and painful disillusionment. She wanted her text to be an important additional voice of the (much mythologised) “Lost Generation”, the equivalent of a male veteran's memoir. Thus, in her Foreword to *Testament of Youth* she divides British society along generational rather than gender lines:

I have wanted [...] to write something which would show what the whole War and the post-war period [...] has meant to the men and women of my generation. [...] It is only in the light of that past that we, the depleted generation now coming into the control of public affairs, the generation which has to make the present and endeavour to mould the future, can understand ourselves or hope to be understood by our successors. (Brittain, 1978: 11)

It should be noted that Brittain tends to position her autobiography as *the* representative voice of women's war experience. This assertion undervalues other female-authored war narratives of this period such as Irene Rathbone's *We That Were Young* (1932) and Evadne Price's *Not So Quiet...Stepdaughters of War* (1930). It equally points to the driving force of Brittain's literary and political ambitions to be, in her words, “the woman [...] who by presenting the war in its true perspective in her own life, will illuminate its meaning afresh for her generation” (quoted in Berry and Bostridge, 1995: 241) - even if, as Marisa Joannou argues, this project necessarily “effaces other versions of war experience” (Joannou, 1995: 28). Brittain was passionate about the prospect of writing; she had had five attempts at

novels before the age of eleven. Her traumatic experiences of loss and suffering, both as an individual (she lost her brother and close friends as well as her fiancé Roland Leighton) and as a nurse, gave her “a growing sense of urgency” (Brittain, 1978: 11) after the war to write “a lamentation of David over my generation’s dead and a brave Odyssey of its survivors” (quoted in Berry and Bostridge, 1995: 257). To some extent, as several critics have shown, the writing of *Testament of Youth* constituted an act of mourning, voicing the ongoing trauma of bereavement.<sup>11</sup> But at the same time it remains a political text. Brittain, as she stated in *Testament of Experience* (1957), wanted women to be taken seriously as witnesses of war, rather than feature simply as the various stereotypical “others” that peopled male war fiction and memoirs: “Didn’t women have their war as well? They weren’t, as these men make them, only suffering wives and mothers, or callous parasites, or mercenary prostitutes.” (Brittain, 1979: 77) The role of the nurse, bolstered by wartime propaganda, was vital for Brittain in this literary-political enterprise. The fact that she nursed (and did not, for example, remain at Oxford), and especially the fact that she nursed overseas, close to the front, becomes an entry ticket into what was for Brittain the much coveted and largely male world of published literature and public debate about the war in the interwar years. Nursing gave Brittain, as soldiering gave male politicised writers of her generation such as Edmund Blunden, Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves and Richard Aldington, the benefit of “having been there”, an air of authenticity, and a concomitant right to speak. On its publication, *Testament of Youth* was admired by the majority of critics for its moving frankness, and many single out for praise the sections on nursing, especially at Étaples. I. A. Williams writing in the *TLS*, for example, described it as a “tragic and noble” tale lacking in “irreverence and theatricality”, thus elevating it to the level of a “wise chronicle” of the war (Williams, 1933). In this sense, Brittain was successful in distancing herself from the clichés of women and the war, and placing herself on a par with male war writers (which was clearly one of her goals, at least at this stage in her career). There were some critical reviews, and they tended to base their attacks on gendered assumptions about women, war and writing. Thus, the reviewer in the *New Statesman* questions the value of “the typical reaction [to the war] of the vigorous provincial young woman” and argues that Brittain lacks “a sense of humour which may give an immortal twist to the commonplace” (Anon., 1933), and James Agate, writing in the *Daily Express*, dismisses it as “a book for blue stockings by one of them”, attacking Brittain’s (feminine) inability to “refrain from fussing” about the tragedies that befell her (quoted in Berry and Bostridge, 1995: 263). If her all too obvious literary ambition and desire to be taken seriously as a witness to war and its consequences have often been commented upon - P. D. James’s *TLS* review of the 1978 reprint of *Testament of Youth* rebukes her for having “lived each day with too calculating an eye on posterity” (James, 1978) - it is important to take into account fully the interwar context in which she was writing, in which the right simply to talk about the war was considered by most to belong only to those men who had fought.

While making use of her status as a “nurse-veteran”, Brittain debunks popular myths of the nurse. Indeed, this a key way in which she presents her account to the reader as an authentic, realist antidote to idealised stereotypes propagated behind the lines. When Roland Leighton’s father read an early draft, he advised her to tone down her account of nursing because of the “belief that all doctors in our casualty stations are gentlemen and all sisters and nurses of saintly purity” (quoted in Berry and Bostridge, 1995: 237). Brittain not only dwells on the discomfort of the nurses’ living conditions and the suffering of the soldiers, but is also keen to expose sordid realities behind the myths

of devoted wives, heroic soldiers and angelic nurses. In one episode describing gassed cases in Étapes, for example, she comments: "One of the dying men had his wife beside him for two or three days; she didn't much enjoy her vigil, and had already begun to flirt with the orderly sergeant before he came to superintend the removal of her husband's body. I wondered whether she knew that the dead man had been syphilitic as well as gassed" (Brittain, 1978: 405). She also comments during her time on Malta that "we too had our sex-incidents, and some of them were crude [...] a VAD and a naval officer had been surprised late at night in a disused tent beside St George's Bay" (327). If nurses' saintly purity was questioned, so was the belief that VADs were frivolous middle-class girls who merely played at being nurses:

Only a short time ago, sitting in the elegant offices of the British RC Society in Grosvenor Crescent, I read in the official Report [...] that 'The VAD members were not [...] entrusted with trained nurses' work except on occasions when the emergency was so great that no other course was open.' And there, in that secure, well-equipped room, the incongruous picture came back to me of myself standing alone in a newly created circle of hell during the 'emergency' of March 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1918, and gazing, half hypnotised, at the dishevelled beds, the stretchers on the floor, the scattered boots and piles of muddy khaki, the brown blankets turned back from smashed limbs bound to splints by filthy blood-stained bandages. (Brittain, 1978: 410)

At the same time, Brittain exploits her experiences of nursing as the means to fulfil her pacifist mission, and deliberately structures her story and colours her descriptions in order to do so.<sup>12</sup> In the same passage, for example, the wounds are described as "obscene horrors" - this is not the perspective of the trained nurse she argues she was, but of the pacifist writer persuading her audience of the futility and horrors of warfare.

It is important to reiterate, finally, that Brittain's desired role of active participant in the war, which bestows on the interwar narrator the right to act as a pacifist harbinger of impending doom if the same catastrophe were to occur for the current generation, is always combined with another, more private psychological narrative. Like writing, nursing was at least in part a coping mechanism for dealing first with her separation from the men she loved, and then with their death. The problem for Brittain in the early 1930s is that the goals of her *Testament* as elegy clash with those of her *Testament* as intervention in a public debate about (the) war, for the former enfolds her back in the more familiar female wartime role of grieving lover and sister. First World War propaganda often interpellated nurses by referring to their role as an extension of their "natural" domestic roles as carers and nurturers; nurses were the soldiers' replacement wives, mothers and sisters. In her wartime diary, Brittain confides that her initial attraction for nursing was that she might better look after her fiancé if he were to be wounded: "That is one dream of mine - that he should come home wounded not too seriously, & that I should have had a little practice in nursing first, & be able to look after him & thoroughly spoil him" (Brittain, 1981: 178-9). When she begins nursing she states similarly that "when I look after one of [the British Tommies], it is like nursing Roland by proxy" (230). Brittain herself was thus influenced by the populist myths of nursing in her own conceptions of her wartime role and in her attempt to prove herself "worthy" of her soldier fiancé and brother. This is underplayed in Brittain's 1933 text, which concentrates instead on the debunking of populist myths and offers a vision of the horrors of war that equates it with other (male) pacifist war memoirs. While the image incarnated in popular postcards of the devoted nurse offering feminine solace to the soldier-hero that we find in the diary is demystified in *Testament of Youth*, it is replaced by another, equally idealised representation of the nurse as active war-worker,

gladly accepting “the strain, the burden and the small rewards” and “throwing off [the] parasitism” of bourgeois life (Brittain, 1929). And it was this countermyth, I would suggest, that greatly appealed to second-wave feminists (re-) reading Vera Brittain in the 1970s.

### **Madeleine Clemenceau Jacquemaire (1870-1949): the limits of *jusqu'au-boutisme***

Madeleine Clemenceau Jacquemaire's experience of nursing was closely bound up with her father's political career, and in places her 1919 memoir reads as a justification for his policy of “la guerre jusqu'au-bout”. In 1914, she was a widow in her forties, and had one son - René, who, like his grandfather, was training to be a doctor when war broke out - and a brother at the front. She had run a literary salon before the war, and went on to publish several novels and historical studies in the interwar years. Although undoubtedly autobiographical, and accepted as such by reviewers, however, Clemenceau Jacquemaire deliberately effaces herself from her memoirs, dedicating her book via its title to the men she nursed, and narrating it from the perspective of a fictional nurse, “Mme Berton”, rather than using the first person. As Ruth Amossy has shown in her detailed analysis of the narrative dynamics of the text, this is a strategy which endows the author with “une fonction de représentante et de porte-parole du groupe” (Amossy, 2006), and gives her the stamp of authenticity. At the same time, it allows her to construct a positive image of the women who nursed. Clemenceau Jacquemaire is highly critical of stereotypical propaganda images of nurses:

Une certaine littérature s'alimente du type de la belle infirmière. On n'en voit guère aux armées que dans les journaux illustrés comme la *Vie Parisienne*. Il est possible qu'ailleurs, des femmes adroites aient su cumuler les personnages contradictoires de l'infirmière et de la jolie femme. Là-bas les infirmières ont beaucoup de peine à être propres, simplement. Elles n'ont pas de salle de bains. Elles n'ont pas de coiffeur pour entretenir leur chevelure qui s'abîme sous le voile. Le blanchissage est un problème toujours posé, jamais résolu. Une blouse par semaine, deux tabliers, une chemise, c'est un idéal souvent chimérique. (Clemenceau Jacquemaire, 1919a: 41)

In her desire to bring to her audience's attention the hard work carried out by flesh-and-blood nurses during the war, however, Clemenceau Jacquemaire, like Brittain, replaces one stereotype with another, with what Amossy terms “un nouvel imaginaire social où la femme apparaît comme douée de toutes les qualités qui peuvent en faire une professionnelle toute à sa tâche, compétente, adroite, maître de ses émotions” (Amossy, 2006). Furthermore, although the nurse-narrator is unstinting in her patriotic admiration for the heroic *poilus* who suffered during the war, she takes care to equate the nurses' role with that of the combatants. In an episode entitled “Rentrants”, for example, the nurses, waiting for a convoy of wounded to arrive, are described as “lasses, courbaturées, avec des pieds brûlants. [...] Certaines ne sont pas allées en permission depuis sept mois et ce soir le cafard fait son mauvais travail dans plus d'un cerveau surmené” (Clemenceau Jacquemaire, 1919a: 234). Here, the women are deliberately aligned to soldiers, suffering from the same complaints (no leave) and psychological symptoms (“le cafard”). Despite its title, Clemenceau Jacquemaire's narrative is as much a tribute to the nurses as it is to the soldiers they cared for, and is implicitly a plea for public respect and recognition for their war work.

Throughout the text, the nurses are defended against accusations of sexual immorality, frivolous vanity or sadistic cruelty - accusations that frequently appeared in the French press during the war years.<sup>13</sup> The health services and medical authorities, in contrast, are singled out for criticism. When she began nursing in Bordeaux in 1914,<sup>14</sup> it was

to a large extent the information that Clemenceau received from his daughter about the inadequacies of the French wartime health services, particularly the long delays before wounded soldiers were treated, which led him to write a scathing article in his journal *L'Homme libre*. This ferocious journalistic tirade against the Ministry of the Interior, for which Clemenceau was famous, was part of the future premier's ongoing crusade for French preparedness. The attack on the deficient care of wounded French soldiers, however, proved too much for the exiled French government, and his journal was suspended for a week (he subsequently changed the name to *L'Homme enchaîné* to express his opposition to wartime censorship).<sup>15</sup> In *Les Hommes de bonne volonté*, Clemenceau Jacquemaire's narrator extends her father's attack on the French army's record in its care of the wounded in the early years of the war. Soldiers' suffering was unnecessarily worsened, she argues, by the red tape that the authorities insisted upon. The "bulletin 46", for example, is scornfully described as an exam that the soldiers have to sit before they are treated:

Enfin ! enfin ! [le blessé] est arrivé à l'ambulance. Il rêve d'un lit blanc, d'un accueil amical, d'une boisson chaude. Mais non ; son brancard, descendu à grandes secousses (il n'y a pas moyen de faire autrement), est déposé à côté d'autres brancards et il attend, il attend encore dans l'indifférence générale. [...] D'un ton catégorique ils posent au malheureux paquet de terre et de sang vingt questions importunes. [...] Pendant ce temps le pouls s'affaïsse, la résistance diminue, toutes les souffrances assaillent du même coup ce corps qui leur est livré sans défense. Qu'importe ? Le bulletin 46 avant tout, n'est-ce pas ! (242).

Thus, like Brittain, Clemenceau Jacquemaire's nurse memoirs have a political agenda - a desire to uphold her father's attack on the failings of the French government in the early years of the war, and a reinforcement of his *jusqu'au-boutisme* as Prime Minister. The nurses are accordingly described as determinedly optimistic and patriotic: "Toutes sont pleines d'espérance. [...] Il n'y a pas de meilleur moral que le leur. Un rien les remonte et, le plus inquiétant communiqué, elles l'enfouissent sans rien dire dans un coin secret de leur mémoire, attendant, dans la foi française, que leurs défenseurs aient rétabli." (264) Yet the political message of the text often clashes with unsettling descriptions of suffering and loss, which suggests that her experiences of front-line wartime nursing did not always sit comfortably with her espousal of her father's political aims. The final paragraph of the text, for example, is decidedly ambiguous in its message:

Nous voyons souvent des hommes qui ont été blessés cinq ou six fois. Ah!...éloignez, éloignez l'affreuse vision qui voudrait s'imposer à moi... Ces chevaux de courses espagnoles à terre dans le sang [...] [Le valet de cirque] les remet debout à coups de fourche pour les ramener au taureau dont il faut épuiser la fureur... Est-ce la même chose que nous faisons? Oui, car il faut acheter la victoire. (265)

The final sentence, reminiscent of Clemenceau's *jusqu'au-boutiste* speeches, rings hollow in relation to the disturbing image that precedes it of nurses patching up soldiers only to send them to their death. The nurses in *Les Hommes de bonne volonté* often play a maternal role. This mirrors both populist propaganda and the author's personal circumstances: like Brittain nursing Roland "by proxy", the narrator explicitly positions the soldiers as stand-ins for her own son at the front. But in the final paragraph this maternal role is questioned, in that the nurses are implicitly positioned as cruel or "unnatural" mothers, healing their sons only to send them to their deaths. Amongst the critique of the medical services, and despite the patriotic justifications of the war effort that pepper the text, there thus



remain hesitations and doubts about the ethics of nursing - doubts that underscore the traumatic nature of the experience of nursing on the front line.<sup>16</sup>

*Les Hommes de bonne volonté* was first published in March 1919 as extracts in a number of different journals, including *L'Illustration*, and preceded by an editor's note stating:<sup>17</sup>

Les pages inédites que Madame Clemenceau Jacquemaire a bien voulu détacher [...] combleront une lacune dans notre collection de guerre. [Nous avons] un peu négligé les admirables infirmières françaises de la zone des armées. Madame Clemenceau Jacquemaire fut l'une d'elles. C'est avec ses souvenirs du front qu'elle a écrit les chapitres de ce livre [...] que l'on rapprochera de la *Vie des Martyrs*, de Georges Duhamel. (Jacquemaire, 1919b: 350)

These comments are designed to lend an air of authenticity to the extracts: the author's status as nurse-veteran is confirmed, and the comparison with Duhamel presents the account as an equivalent of male war memoirs. Clemenceau Jacquemaire's memoir, like that of Brittain, is testament both to the traumatic nature of some of her experiences as a Red Cross nurse, and to her literary ambitions, political ideals and desire for a public voice. Clemenceau Jacquemaire envisages her account as a representative one, and uses her nursing experience (and, perhaps, her famous surname) as a badge of honour that will allow her voice to be heard. However, whereas Brittain's text had resonance both for 1930s readers, many of whom would have sympathised with her version of events, and for later 1970s and 1980s second-wave feminist readers, Clemenceau Jacquemaire's text did not sell well, either on its publication or in later decades. Abel Hermant, reviewing the text in *Le Figaro*, is full of praise for both Clemenceau Jacquemaire's style and wartime nursing work, and draws flattering parallels with celebrated male war writers. But he also states: "Ce que Mme Clemenceau-Jacquemaire trahit à chaque ligne, c'est le caractère féminin de sa sensibilité" (Hermant, 1919). In France in 1919, it would seem that a woman writing about the war remained first and foremost a woman, however laudable her war service.

A comparison of these two nurse memoirs thus reveals interesting similarities in terms of their goals, narrative strategies and representations of wartime nursing. For both writers, the role of the nurse is exploited as a means of accessing the male-dominated sphere of political war writing. As Amossy observes, it was generally the case that: "Seuls les hommes - les combattants - sont autorisés à témoigner sur la guerre [...] le récit d'infirmière [...] tente de modifier un ostracisme d'autant plus puissant qu'il est tacite" (Amossy, 2006). If the aims of these women writers were similar, however, clear differences emerge in their critical reception and popularity with readers. While Brittain's text was widely read and debated (even if some of the reviews were negative), Clemenceau Jacquemaire's text was published in popular journals, politely reviewed, but was evidently little read and certainly made no contribution to France's national war story, despite her famous name and numerous contacts in literary and political circles. The very different receptions of these nursing memoirs can be explained, at least to some extent, by the differing political contexts in which they were produced. As Brittain chronicles in *Testament of Youth*, there were important advances made in the post-war years in Britain in terms of women's rights, culminating in the granting of full voting rights in 1928. There was a market for tales of middle-class female independence, as well as one for pacifist accounts of the war. In contrast, in France in 1919 the suffrage movement lost momentum and support, and French women remained disenfranchised throughout the interwar period. It is telling in this respect that Hermant's review of *Les*

*Hommes de bonne volonté* praises the nurses' qualities of care-giving, self-abnegation, domestic labour and practical good sense, thereby equating their nursing practice with the work carried out by women in the home:

Elles distribuent et elles prodiguent toutes les ressources de leur sensibilité, sans rien garder pour elles-mêmes : tout retour sur soi serait du temps perdu. Et voici où nous reconnaissons enfin le vrai signe de la femme, car elles sont des femmes fortes, mais non pas des femmes viriles : ce qui est féminin, c'est cet admirable sens pratique, cette faculté de ne jamais perdre la tête parmi l'encombrement d'une ambulance où toute une nuit les grands blessés affluent, cette intelligence vive et soudaine de l'utile et du possible, cette juste mesure de l'effort et cette économie de la charité. (Hermant, 1919)

In emphasising the differences between the sexes in this way, nurses are no longer equated with ordinary soldiers, but are elevated to a superior status, embodying all the qualities of a timeless femininity which renders them effectively apolitical. Hermant's review thus reflects the widespread assumption in post-First World War France that despite their admirable contribution to the war effort, female identity was ultimately incompatible with full citizenship. In contrast, while the condemnation of Britain as a "bluestocking" reveals the persistence of ongoing assumptions about politicised or literary women, the battle for full political rights for British women had nevertheless been won, and her nursing memoir allowed her to participate in political and literary debate.

To conclude, I would argue that both of these texts crystallise the ethical ambiguities and liminality of women's position as female war writers. As former participants, Brittain and Clemenceau Jacquemaire write as veterans claiming their right to speak and to have their war work recognised. As witnesses to men's suffering, they present themselves as channels for communicating male heroism, or for lamenting the dead. As mothers, sisters and/or lovers who were forced to wait and worry, they are civilians representing the experiences of millions of those left behind the lines. They therefore illustrate what Dorothy Goldman calls the "different and complex double function" of women war writers, being simultaneously "actors in their own war and spectators of the soldiers' war" (Goldman, 1995: 102).

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This was followed by a sequel, *Les Hommes de mauvaise volonté*, published in 1931.
- <sup>2</sup> On the iconography of nursing in First World War France see Darrow, 2000, Fell, 2007, Thébaud, 1986.
- <sup>3</sup> On the image of the VAD nurse see Das, 2005, Donner, 1997 and Ouditt, 1994. For an analysis of the propaganda surrounding Cavell see Pickles, 2007.
- <sup>4</sup> See Bagnold, 1978; for extracts of La Motte's *The Backwash of War* (1916) and Borden's *The Forbidden Zone* (1929) see Higonet, 2001.
- <sup>5</sup> See Amossy, 2008.
- <sup>6</sup> Paul Berry and Mark Bostridge remark in their 1995 biography of Brittain that sales in Britain alone of *Testament of Youth* amounted to "close to three-quarters of a million" (Berry and Bostridge, 1995: 2).
- <sup>7</sup> *A Woman in Love and War: Vera Brittain*, first broadcast 9 November 2008.
- <sup>8</sup> 'Vera Brittain to be made into film', *The Daily Telegraph* 13 February 2009.
- <sup>9</sup> Françoise Thébaud notes, for example, the postwar reoccurrence of the "mythe de la femme salvatrice et consolatrice" (Thébaud, 1992: 43).
- <sup>10</sup> See Gill and Putkowski, 1996.
- <sup>11</sup> See for example Badenhausen, 2003, Das, 2005, Parkins, 2007. See also Peterson, 2004 for an analysis of Brittain as a case study of civilian post-traumatic stress disorder.
- <sup>12</sup> Lynne Layton notes further parallels between nursing and pacifism in Brittain's writing, arguing that nursing formed part of a "semi-religious discourse of sacrifice and suffering to express [Brittain's] feminism and pacifism" (Layton, 1987: 80).
- <sup>13</sup> See Darrow, 2000; Fell, 2007.
- <sup>14</sup> She nursed against the advice of her father, who wrote in a letter: "Je ne crois pas qu'elle puisse résister à la fatigue" (Duroselle, 1988: 590).
- <sup>15</sup> See Burnett, 1973: 708 and Newhall, 1991: 313.
- <sup>16</sup> See Hallett, 2010 for an analysis of the ways in which nurses used their writing as a means of dealing with trauma.
- <sup>17</sup> Further extracts were published in *La Revue de Paris* and *Le Figaro* in March 1919.