

Introduction: Daughters of war – Gender modernity and the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry

‘Call yourselves women? You’re a bloody disgrace!’
‘Gallivanting about in uniform. Who do you think you are?’
‘They’re not women, they’re bleeding suffragettes!’
‘Riding astride, like men! Really it’s shameful.’

London, 1909: six elite women dressed in scarlet uniform, with riding breeches underneath their divided skirts, were defying convention by not riding side-saddle. While this unsettled a group of jeering workmen, scandalised two upper-class ladies and prompted someone to throw stones at the horses, one fashionably dressed young woman, made ‘aware of the frustrating impediment of her own petticoats’ by the riders’ rational clothing, was enthralled.¹ So begins Hilary Green’s trilogy of historical novels that were inspired by the real-life experiences of Mabel St Clair Stobart and Flora Sandes, two women who made important contributions during the First World War and had formerly been members of an elite women’s mounted organisation founded in 1907 called the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry (FANY).² Green draws on the recollections of early members of the FANY who recorded similar experiences of being castigated for their gender transgressions, rebuked for their donning of military attire, reproached for riding astride, had items thrown at them and were mistaken for suffrage supporters, weaving into a fictionalised story real women, genuine episodes and dialogue taken from historical sources.³ Lead characters Leonora (‘Leo’) Malham Brown and Victoria Langford were independent, adventurous, athletic New Women who came from privileged backgrounds and relished the opportunity of serving the nation in a collective endeavour in a future war. Indeed, the women that enlisted in the FANY in real life came from the aristocracy and upper middle class: there were titled

ladies and debutantes who had been presented at court, and women whose parents had inherited considerable wealth, as well as those whose fathers had amassed fortunes in business. Their affluence enabled them to purchase costly Corps uniforms, pay hefty subscriptions and fees, and fund expensive hobbies. First World War FANY ambulance-driver Muriel Thompson, for example, had been a competitive motor racer, like Green's character Victoria. Victoria outlines the Corps's purpose to Leo, the captivated onlooker: 'Imagine a battlefield in the aftermath of a battle. The ground is strewn with bodies. Some are dead but many are just wounded ... [and] may bleed to death unless there is someone to staunch their wounds. Now imagine a corps of mounted nurses who gallop onto the battlefield to care for them. How does that picture strike you?' Leo thinks it sounds 'terribly romantic' and 'sparked a sense of new possibilities.'⁴ The notion appealed hugely to women in real life also, and over 100 women quickly enrolled, although membership within three years had dwindled to a dozen. Like so many women who enlisted in the Corps in its first few years, the fictional FANY led a life 'constrained and limited by circumstance and convention'. Consequently, she 'could not help envying [men's] freedom of choice' and saw the unit as 'offer[ing] a respite from the boredom of her normal routine'. Leo applies to join the Corps, ignoring the scorn of her military brother who primly asserts 'The battlefield is no place for a lady... [H]ow would delicately brought up young ladies, like yourselves, have the strength to lift a man and carry him back to the clearing station?'⁵ When asked by Sergeant Major Ashley Smith why she wishes to enlist, Leo replies 'I think it is a way of showing that women can be more than mothers and wives – and it shows that we are ready to serve our country if the need arises.' The recruiting officer, real-life member Grace Ashley-Smith, who joined the Corps in 1910 and went on to command it, is reassured, noting that 'if you had said that you thought it would be fun, I should have turned you down'. Leo embarks on the martial training, meeting for a few hours a week to ride, train and participate in competitions as did actual FANYs, horrifies her grandmother by going away with the Corps to camp 'like common soldiers', and despite 'never work[ing] so hard in her life ... loved every minute of it.'⁶ In 1912, during the Balkan Crisis, she follows Stobart across Europe, crops her hair and puts into practice her first aid training, and also serves during the First World War. Confronted with mechanised warfare and the horrors it can inflict on soldiers' bodies, she comes to realise her previous naivety: 'Her original conception had been romantic nonsense ... She had never imagined the filth, the stench, the sheer inhumanity of

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a war like this ... [C]ruel reality had imposed itself over what she had imagined.⁷

Clearly, *Daughters of War*, written by a retired drama teacher and published a century after the events it describes, ought not to be viewed as a historical source equivalent to contemporaneous accounts such as personal writings, newspaper articles or literary texts produced during the war and in its immediate aftermath, nor as a transparent window onto the past. It departs wildly from reality by locating Leo and Victoria in eastern Europe (where Stobart and Sandes were independently based, having left the FANY) rather than northern France, to which over 400 members of the Corps had navigated their way at their own expense in order to staff canteens and hospital wards and convey the wounded. My interest in Green's novel lies purely in the subject matter that inspired her: much of what she writes is underpinned by first-hand FANY accounts, as we shall see. The chapters that follow here flesh out and contextualise Green's fictional account outlined above. We consider the original idea and formation of the Corps under its male founder, a military man who recognised that upper-class women could play an important role in the defence of Britain's imperial supremacy; its recruitment of independent adventurous upper-middle-class New Women such as Mabel St Clair Stobart and Grace Ashley-Smith, who in their leisure time drove cars and played sport, and were determined to escape the confines of their privileged backgrounds; their military-style training, during which they used weapons, drilled, drove vehicles and rode astride; their participation in camps, parades, military tattoos and displays, where they exhibited their skill, stamina, physical prowess, efficiency and competitiveness – all behaviours culturally associated with masculinity; their martial uniform – first spectacular scarlet then functional khaki – and the responses that were provoked by their wearing of clothing that increasingly distanced them from conventional female attire; their ousting of the male founder and the increasing professionalisation of the FANY under female leadership; their deployment of innovative new technologies such as the motor car, the illustrated press, advertisements and cinematic film; their proactive involvement in impending civil war in Ulster; and members' making their own way to France during the First World War, whereupon they played a highly demanding, active and skilled role, driving motor ambulances and nursing men wounded in the first total war. Each aspect is illustrative of the very modernity of the Corps. *Women of War*, which utilises a diverse range of sources including FANYs' diaries, letters, memoirs and novels, the Corps magazine, and the

print media, presents the FANY, the earliest uniformed quasi-military female organisation in existence, as a case study of gender modernity, and it is to a consideration of these terms that we first turn.

'No more certain sign of the times': Modernity and the New Woman

'Modernity' is a concept that has long animated scholars.⁸ There is no fixed set of features nor a universally accepted definition of what constitutes the modern. It is a discursive category that is as imprecise and bland as it is contested. Scholars have deployed this culturally constructed analytical tool to consider the unfolding social, political and cultural transformations that took place between roughly the 1880s and 1920s (although some scholars would push these parameters further back and forward). While it is broadly useful as a category of historical periodisation, more crucial is its signalling of possibilities and perils in a time of rapid change. A prevalent tone of anxiety haunted this period of progress and advancement. Such tensions, contradictions and paradoxes evoke the very condition of modernity: as Marshall Berman notes, '[t]o be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and our world – and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are.'⁹

Conceptualisations of modernity build upon discourses of eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century Britain as 'an age of improvement' that witnessed slow evolutionary (as opposed to revolutionary) progress in agriculture, transport and industry and, as the title of Eric Evans' influential book on Britain from 1783 to 1870 makes clear, 'forged the modern state'.¹⁰ The notion of the modern saturates the rhetoric of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and has been used as an umbrella term to signify the acceleration of changes that occurred. As Alan O'Shea acknowledges, it involves 'the practical negotiation of one's life and one's identity within a complex and fast-changing world'.¹¹ Positive attributes that denote that Britain was modern and dynamic include the extension of the franchise in 1867, 1884, 1918 and 1928, as well as the intensification of the campaign for female suffrage; expanding newspaper circulation figures, and the advent of photojournalism as a mass cultural form underpinned by increased literacy and new technology that replaced the power of the pulpit; the invention of novel machines, including the bicycle, the car and the aeroplane, which led to new forms of leisure; advances in advertising and photography and the rise of new forms of popular

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entertainment such as the cinema; changing patterns of consumption such as cigarette smoking; new welfare reforms such as insurance (1908) and old-age pensions (1911); and changes to women's status enshrined in laws such as the Married Women's Property Act (1882) and signified by the adoption of new styles of clothing and increased access to higher education and skilled 'white blouse' occupations. Britain's pre-eminence on the world stage was a key aspect of modernity: the Empire wielded a strong power over what it meant to be a modern nation, and a pervasive popular imperialism saturated British culture. Civilian life became increasingly militarised in the Edwardian period as martial organisations proliferated. Femininity too became battle-ready as women flocked to first aid classes and joined Voluntary Aid Detachments (VADs). The world's first truly modern, or 'total', war, which wrought unprecedented devastation, warranted the mobilisation of millions of men and women.¹² The modernity of martial service was illustrated both by the raising of a volunteer army and by women's work in a wide range of wartime roles. Publications by female authors during the war about the new opportunities it afforded consistently refer to modernity. In her 1916 account *The Flaming Sword*, ex-FANY Mabel St Clair Stobart noted that she was 'a modern woman', while Barbara McLaren, in her hagiographical account *Women of the War*, published in 1917, asserted 'there is no more certain sign of the times than the sight of women in khaki uniforms and military badges driving Army motors and lorries'.¹³ Indeed, the uniformed woman became firmly associated with the modern. Similarly, one of the chapters in Edith Barton and Marguerite Cody's 1918 book *Eve in Khaki* is entitled 'Modern Woman to the Fore' and they note the existence of a 'new genus – the "khaki girl"' in 'these modern days' of war. They celebrate the women who donned military clothing and served their country in various organisations, who they predict will 'stand out in history [as] a fascinating type of modern femininity' to 'rival' Cleopatra, Boudicca and Joan of Arc.¹⁴ With a restoration of prewar practices, codified in an Act of that name, the interwar period witnessed a spirited traditionalism as well as a popular avant-gardism that combined to shape a 'conservative modernity', as Alison Light has persuasively argued. Long-held discourses of modernity began steadily to recede in the twenties and thirties.¹⁵

To be modern was to: be enlightened, experimental, creative; support the notion of progress; reject unequivocally the prevailing principles of one's own generation; and be seen as ahead of one's time, as Rita Felski notes, 'to be modern is often paradoxically to be antimodern'.¹⁶ Modernity was predominantly an urban phenomenon, as it was metropolitan

culture that first witnessed many of the transformations, including the motor vehicle and the cinema, as well as providing the stage where the latest trends in fashion were exhibited. And it was inexorably classed and gendered, experienced differently by social groups and by men and women. While the upper classes had the leisure time and the wealth to afford the luxury of a car, for example, bicycles and the cinema were more democratic inventions. Modernity is often perceived as inherently masculine, in that it was connected to the public sphere, the city, technology, mass media, and the figures of the flâneur and the dandy. As an example, Marshall Berman equates modernity with masculinity, and tradition with femininity.¹⁷ Felski takes issue with this simplistic elision, however, making a compelling case for the interconnectivity between femininity and modernism and revealing how modernity is experienced in gender-specific ways by women.¹⁸ Indeed, modernity is nearly always represented as a woman: the quintessential modern female figure in the nineteenth century was the 'bluestocking', the *fin de siècle* witnessed the emergence of the 'New Woman', and following in the wake of the First World War was the 'flapper', each a by-word for the enlightened and liberated young woman.

Discourses of modernity are, however, manifold, diverse and multifaceted: as well as being seen by contemporaries as positive and inventive, change could also be feared as negative and detrimental, and such notions were troubled by (counter) reactions that ranged from ambivalence to anxiety. Thus modernity, note David Glover and Cora Kaplan, has a 'disquieting underside'.¹⁹ Transformations were experienced by some as deeply bewildering, destabilising 'the given' and raising the possibility of 'the unknown'. As Bernhard Rieger and Martin Daunton assert, 'to create the new, the old or the traditional had to be displaced or destroyed'.²⁰ The spectre of change for the worse haunted the modern. The early twentieth century was an epoch of transition and crisis: the clustering of the *fin de siècle*, the death of Queen Victoria (1901) and the end of the South African War (1902) amounted to a watershed signifying both the end of one era and the birth of another. The sense of exhilaration at the advent of the new age was offset by the fear of invasion and concerns over Britain's global position and economic decline. The First World War, another turning point, brought home to contemporaries the fragile base on which Britain's global status was grounded, as well as the notion that the modern age could also have a very dark undercurrent. Fears over the effeminacy of men and the masculinisation of women were stoked by the campaign for female suffrage, and the

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expansion of women's roles prompted anxieties about female modernity and challenged long-standing gender imperatives that fixed the limits of what was considered appropriate for women. Received notions of femininity and masculinity were destabilised further during the war, in which uniformed women lifted stretchers and drove ambulances conveying men who had sustained injuries in a devastating war of attrition. Elaine Showalter's 'crisis of masculinity' and Arthur Marwick's (much critiqued) 'emancipation of women' theses suggest that the war led to huge upheaval and a reconfiguration of gender roles.²¹ The war might be seen to have emasculated men by feminising the wounded, and defeminised women through the masculinisation of those who took on roles previously regarded as male. Newspapers stoked such anxieties.

Given that change could be embraced as well as feared, constructions of modernity are complex and never simply black or white. They entail an interaction of multiple disparate discourses that sit uneasily together. Indeed, commentators were often partial in their support or rejection of modernity. An organisation that prepared women for martial activities and dressed them in military uniform was thus simultaneously intriguing and troubling. Some of the earliest articles to be published about the FANY were contradictory in their reporting. In July 1909, articles appeared in newspapers in Texas, Indiana and Oklahoma reporting on their martial activities at camp. They reassured readers that 'being women, however, as well as soldiers, they have smuggled in some comforts,' and went on to note how they adorned their tents with rugs, easy chairs and a piano.²² Another article reproduced in several American newspapers noted, 'the swash-buckler novelty of the idea may repel some critics, but the majority is charitably withholding judgement until the time tells whether the movement has its root in a feminine fondness for smart tunics and jaunty caps, or in patriotic zeal and womanly sympathy.'²³ Similarly, an article published in a British newspaper a few months previously was equally ambiguous, exhibiting what Janet Lee calls 'titillation' as well as 'anxiety and condescension' and a 'desire to return to normal gendered relations.'²⁴ A 'mere male' journalist noted in 1909 how he had given a password to the 'pretty sentinel on duty at the door' and 'invaded the sanctum' of the FANY headquarters, which was replete with 'gaily-garbed' members who looked 'dashing' in their 'picturesque uniforms' and were engaged in activities that were 'not a child's play.'²⁵ Nowhere is the sense of the instability of modern times more apparent than in newspaper articles such as these that focused on the FANY's activities and described their appearance. In providing information about their destabilising activities,

such accounts fed both the public's fascination and fear. To invoke Erika Rappaport, the 'pretty sentinel' functioned as 'a trigger of male fantasy about modernity'.²⁶ This ambivalence, partly admiring, partly fearful, partly condescending, illustrates how fraught the navigation of an epoch frequently described as 'modern' was for contemporaries.

One of the key ways that modernity was symbolised was through the figure of the New Woman. A term first used in 1894 by the writer Sarah Grand in her article published in the *North American Review*, it soon gained wide currency as a label for the self-reliant, independent, confident, assertive, active, educated, modern young woman who battled against the constraints of prescribed femininity – the 'Cult of True Womanhood' and 'the Angel in the Home' – and posed a challenge to established Victorian norms. This powerful cultural icon who surfaced in the 1890s was a discursive response to changes to women's lives, a fictional character drawn in the imaginations of journalists and authors. Over 100 novels were published about the New Woman before the *fin de siècle*, mainly by female authors, with titles such as *The Woman who Wouldn't*, *The Woman who Didn't* and *The Woman who Did*.²⁷ She was the free-spirited Sue Bridehead in Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* and Nora Helmer in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, both independent, intelligent and rejecting aspects of the conventional feminine role. The contemporary discourses about these new liberating forms of femininity that were in circulation were positively saturated with notions of modernity. As Sally Ledger notes, 'the New Woman was nothing if not modern', her 'newness' denoting her as someone 'committed to change'.²⁸ And like modernity, the New Woman defies easy definition. Of course, class further fractured women's experience of the modern: the New Woman largely figured in the popular imagination as a product of the upper and middle classes, having benefited from expanded educational opportunities and legal rights, and having a taste for freedom, mobility and action. A Mrs Humphrey, writing in the *Isle of Thanet Gazette* in 1906 about 'The Restlessness of Modern Woman', noted that 'It would seem to be a necessity to be always going somewhere and doing something'.²⁹ Certainly, the New Woman was not to be a 'sidelined spectator' and was most likely to be found adopting rational dress and clothing tagged as male, inhabiting the public sphere, playing tennis, cricket or golf, riding her bicycle or horse, or driving her motor car.³⁰ *Punch* found the sportswomen who were riding, pedalling or driving their way to freedom an irresistible target.³¹ The trope of depicting modern women as strapping Amazons was also widespread, both in Britain and abroad. An early French poster

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advertising 'Liberator Cycles and Motorcycles', for example, depicted a bare-breasted female warrior wearing a winged helmet, her arm looped through a round shield and the other holding a sword that stood as high as her head, dressed in a chainmail skirt and with leather straps bound around her legs, which are clothed in close-fitting breeches. But while the New Woman was often depicted as an Amazon, she was not one discrete figure but many, and was also portrayed, often less positively, as the spectacled intellectual, the thin embittered spinster and the professional career woman, who rejected marriage and motherhood, demanded social and political reform, and dared to envisage an alternative future for herself. Women campaigning for the vote made particularly easy targets, and were frequently the subject of media attacks, which depicted them as imperilling the status quo, emasculating their husbands, neglecting their children and abandoning their duties in the house.³² The modern woman, with her politicisation, occupation outside the home, shorter hair, masculine clothing and sporting achievements, was read as a sign that femininity was on the wane.

In the first decade of the new century, gender was a highly unstable category, in flux and in crisis, and there was a preoccupation in print with the New Woman. One of the more measured articles appeared in *Church Weekly* in 1900: 'the "modern woman" [is] seiz[ing] all the opportunities that are now so freely offered to her, of developing her intellect, strengthening her mental calibre, and enlarging her outlook and sphere of usefulness'. This positive acclamation, however, was undermined by a pressing concern that, in 'emulat[ing] men' in clothing, sport and intellect, she was in danger of losing her 'truest glory', her 'meek and quiet spirit'.³³ A far more potent illustration of gender conflict is seen in Léon Blouet's 1901 diatribe *Her Royal Highness*. The New Woman, who he asserted was found only in Britain and America, not his native France, was 'the most ridiculous production of modern times, and destined to be the most ghastly failure of the century'. Personified by 'ugly women, old maids, and disappointed and neglected wives', she can be identified by her 'thin, sallow complexion, eyes without lustre, wrinkled, mouth sulky, haughty, the disgust of life written on every feature'. He castigated those who were in danger of ceasing to be women in their desire to adopt manly pursuits: 'I hate the woman who appears in public ... I hate the woman who speaks about politics ... I hate the scientific woman who lectures on evolution ... I hate the lady physician, the lady lawyer, the lady member of the School Board ... I hate the prominent woman.'³⁴ British newspapers reported on Blouet's book and could be equally

disparaging of the 'shrieking sisterhood of to-day' that destabilised dominant gender taxonomies.³⁵ Yet the New Women who were the target of such misogynist attacks did not passively tolerate them: an article about men written five years later by 'a spinster', who is proudly assertive of her marital status and reclaims the derogatory term, serves as a feisty riposte.

Man, as we are all aware, has no words strong enough to express his contempt for the new woman. He sneers when she obtains a scholarship that will send her to college; he sneers more when she takes her degree; and he positively gibes when she sets up practising as a physician. Her independence, her manly self-assurance, her sensible clothes, all come in for a share of his scorn.

She wrote of the women who had been 'named "new", "advanced", "progressive" "pioneers"', and of the 'modern amazon' who declares "'I will be free and throw off the yoke!" ... revolts from the fireside and goes forth, armed with diplomas and a splendid courage ... into the battlefield of life to fight, ostensibly side by side with him, but actually ... against him!'³⁶ As these descriptions suggest, the New Woman was largely a product of (heated) discourse that came to life on the pages of novels and newspapers, rather than a flesh-and-blood female. The FANY, however, was both a textual creation (both at the time, in newspaper articles, and subsequently, in novels such as Hilary Green's trilogy) as well as a real woman, and can be regarded as indicative of the modern. Accordingly, we shall examine both her configuration in text in order to scrutinise how she was thought of by others, and also her self-representation and lived experience. The case study of the FANY, which serves as a barometer of Edwardian and wartime society, reveals explicitly how modernity and gender are interlinked in myriad ways.

'England's New Woman: A Woman of War': the FANY and gender modernity

Anxieties about Britain's status in the world and its war readiness, which we shall examine in Chapter 2, coupled with concerns brought on by the headline-grabbing activities of the suffragettes, many of whom came from elite backgrounds, warranted the creation of a new type of woman from the leisured classes. The FANY was a very modern organisation formed by a military man who recognised that upper-class women could play a much bigger role in the defence of Britain's imperial supremacy. Women who enlisted in the newly founded Corps were

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products of an age in which gender roles were being redefined and were living through a period of considerable flux. The context of the New Woman enables an appreciation of the impulses behind their enrolment. Dissatisfaction with their constrained leisured lives and a desire to break free of restrictive norms propelled these elite women into this innovative organisation, which offered a colourful escape from a dull routine, and the possibility of adventure, new skills and to be of service to their country. Many had previously driven cars, ridden horses, fenced and shot, and they enlisted in an organisation that prepared them to serve in war, ride astride and drill, all behaviours culturally associated with masculinity. Members were dressed in a functional martial uniform, one of the most powerful symbols of modernity, first spectacular scarlet then functional khaki, which increasingly distanced them from conventional female clothing.

Their occupation of urban public space was distinctly modern: indeed, theirs was a modernity that was literally fashioned in the most public manner, on the streets of London, at military tournaments and overseas in wartime, and we can map their participation in rides, displays, parades and on the battlefield onto the spaces of modernity. They undertook martial-style training and went to camp, where on occasion they drank alcohol, socialised with men and smoked, their class privilege enabling them to behave in a manner that otherwise would have generated disapproval. Prewar FANY Bannatyne recalled 'an invitation to one of their [officers'] smoking dinners in their mess. It was a strictly male smoker, but there were ten of us girls and Captain Baker ... So we sat, smoked and joined in the sing-song and had a wonderful time.'³⁷ Smoking, which had virtually been the sole preserve of men, had become increasingly more prevalent among upper-class women after 1880, and in the Edwardian period was a modern symbol, much like the motor car, that exemplified the 'spirit of the times'. As the *Standard* noted in 1914, more women had taken up smoking and 'old social traditions and laws of etiquette are dying out'³⁸ Smoking was a distinctly gendered proclamation of modernity for elite women, signalling a form of 'gender rebellion' as they rejected conventional modes of passive, domesticated femininity. Smoking epitomised 'a claim to equality', asserts Penny Tinkler, and could be 'used to symbolize acceptance into male society'.³⁹ Photographs of uniformed women undertaking activities such as chopping wood with an axe, jumping over obstacles and carrying soldiers on stretchers were also emblematic of FANYs' modernity and featured frequently in the press: they were shown to be strong, fit, independent and mobile. Indeed,

their use of the media, both written and illustrated press as well as cinematic film, was in itself highly novel.

The frequent probing into the governance of the male founder by female members and his later removal by Grace Ashley-Smith, who sought in myriad ways to professionalise the Corps and make it fit for service, is testament to female agency. Under her command, they proactively sought involvement in the Balkan Crisis, impending hostilities in Ulster and the First World War. While the first two failed to come to fruition, the Corps was mobilised in the autumn of 1914 and travelled to northern France. They subverted conventional gender norms by sharing with men the burden of overseas national service, being located on occasion in dangerous proximity to the battlefield and engaging in strenuous work carrying stretchers and driving motor ambulances.

In such ways, FANYs embodied the modern woman, a challenge all the more emphatic in an era of rapid transformation and anxiety in gender relations. Commentators (not only journalists writing in the local, national or international press but also members recording in their private diaries and memoirs produced for public consumption) described their present as a period of change, of innovation, of modern ways. That contemporaries regarded FANYs' achievements as explicitly modern is illustrated by American newspapers, which informed readers in Texas, Indiana and Oklahoma in July 1909 of 'England's New Woman: A Woman of War', from which this book takes its title. It pictured members of the Corps at camp riding side-saddle in their 'natty' uniforms with pitched tents in the distance, and applauded these 'women fighters' who in a future conflict 'will play a conspicuous part. Not as casual visitors giving tea for the officers, but as actual members of the army'.⁴⁰ As Anne Phillips asserts, the modern is often represented as being typified by men's increased respect for women, as evidenced here, as well as by women's greater self-esteem.⁴¹ One such example of this heightened personal assurance is FANY Enid Bagnold who, in her autobiography published at the time of Second Wave Feminism, used language that denotes modern forms of subjectivity: 'I thought I was emancipated, just as girls think now'.⁴² She had been an art student under Walter Sickert, had two drawings included in an exhibition, one of which was mentioned in *The Times*, was a prolific, popular and critically acclaimed author, and had love affairs before her marriage to a peer. Another example of this enhanced self-image is Grace Ashley-Smith's marvelling at her new experiences, which confirms that FANYs understood at the time that their activities were new and progressive: 'Here we were, girls of the twentieth century in this atmosphere of

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storm and war living what surely few women ever dreamt in their wildest fancies until this war began. This was life!⁴³ It is statements such as these revealing aspects of their interiority that suggest they understood themselves as possessing a modern gendered identity.

FANYs were, then, New Women embodying modernity, challenging the limits of convention and pushing back the boundaries of what was considered appropriate for women in terms of behaviour, dress and role. But while they absorbed the rhetoric of modernity and the New Woman, reproducing them in personal and public accounts when it suited them to draw themselves as radical progressives, they also on occasion eschewed such discourses and adopted more conformist ones, emphasising their role as one of 'succouring' the wounded and thereby 'gain[ing] fresh laurels for the brow of womanhood'.⁴⁴ As Jay Winter notes, 'modernists reconfigured conventions; they didn't discard them'.⁴⁵ As well as deeply progressive forms of modernity there are also decidedly conservative ones: the FANY embraced a moderate version of avant-gardism and were highly paradoxical, full of ambiguities and contradictions, and are open to multiple readings. The Corps was thus an expression of gender modernity as well as an illustration of old-fashioned class conservatism, and we shall consider the fascinating interplay of conformity and deviance throughout the book. Alison Light's notion of conservative modernism is pertinent here.⁴⁶ While she was writing about the interwar period, this concept can equally be applied to the FANY in the Edwardian era. The dominant mood then was largely conservative in rhetoric and yet often modern in the form it took, as we shall see. A mentality prevailed wherein the superiority of the upper classes, the jingoistic revelling in Britain's imperial supremacy, the deference to State and Church, and conventional notions of femininity as innately caring and nurturing were secure, and yet simultaneously there were the imaginative opportunities to forge new, more martial modes of femininity and to side against the Government (in relation to the issue of Irish Home Rule). The FANY case study thus offers a multiplicity of intriguing interpretative possibilities.

Moreover, the Corps is ripe for a gendered analysis as it was one of the earliest women's organisations to be formed, its constitution, drafted the following year in 1908, confirming the FANY as the first British women's voluntary troop. It was the first self-styled military female force, the first to wear military uniform, the first to prepare for war service, possibly the world's only mounted women's unit and a forerunner of the many uniformed women's organisations that proliferated in the two world wars. Moreover, some of its members were pioneers in their own right: Mabel

St Clair Stobart, who left the Corps in 1910, formed a unit called the Women's Sick and Wounded Convoy Corps, which had a very similar remit, uniform and training to the FANY. By setting up and running a hospital for sick and wounded soldiers in the Balkan War of 1912, it became the first exclusively female company to go abroad and undertake service during wartime.⁴⁷ Another ex-FANY, Flora Sandes, enrolled in and fought with the Second Serbian Infantry Regiment during the First World War without attempting to pass as male (as previous female combatants had been compelled to do).⁴⁸ Muriel Thompson, who joined the Corps during the war, had been a champion motor-racer, winning the inaugural Ladies' Bracelet Handicap at Brooklands in July 1908 in her car 'Pobble', travelling at an average speed of 50 m.p.h. over the three-mile course.⁴⁹ Grace Ashley-Smith, the first woman to receive the Mons Star, was also the most highly decorated woman of the war, with ten awards bestowed on her by grateful Belgian, French and British Governments.⁵⁰ Moreover, the Corps remains the world's longest-running organisation for women, celebrating its centenary in 2007, is the only all-women unit left in the country and still assists in national emergencies today.⁵¹

Yet despite its longevity and pioneering status, a national amnesia precludes awareness of the Corps and there are surprisingly few books about it. While the Corps has been a rich source for novelists,⁵² only two books have chronicled the organisation from its inception in 1907 to the respective dates of their publication (1955 and 1984).⁵³ They have been written with a non-specialist audience in mind and appeal to the general reader: these are not scholarly texts equivalent to those produced by historians researching other organisations. However, such a text has been written by Janet Lee on the First World War FANYs' negotiations of gender. She adopts a chronological structure closely examining different FANY units that were operational in France during the conflict. She concludes her book by noting that 'The FANY used traditional notions of femininity while aspiring to heights beyond their confines and therefore faced the cultural paradox of both using and reworking existing discourses on class and gender.'⁵⁴ She examines one of the ways that members played upon conventional norms in an article about their furnishing of billets with cushions, divans, sofas, chintz curtains and tapestries. In her application of Foucault's concept of heterotopia to this case study, she asserts that they established feminine sites of domesticity within the masculine space of the front. These served as 'crises heterotopia', 'diffus[ing]' the subversive nature of their hard physical wartime work by softening its brutalising effects and reflecting genteel femininity. Such recreations

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of home functioned as a 'spatial imaginary', Lee argues, juxtaposing the 'material practices of femininity' with the seemingly incompatible 'sites of combat'.⁵⁵ Lee's monograph and four articles are the only scholarly work focusing on the Corps.⁵⁶ A few other scholars have, however, referred to the unit in their broader analyses: the prewar FANY feature in Lucy Noakes' study *Women in the British Army*, the First World War FANY ambulance-drivers figure in Laura Doan's *Disturbing Practices*, and there are passing references to the FANY in a number of influential scholarly texts including Angela K. Smith's *The Second Battlefield* and Janet Watson's *Fighting Different Wars*.⁵⁷ We shall return to each in the course of the book.

My study, which builds on this excellent body of feminist scholarship, interrogates these ideas about gender and class further through an application of the concepts of modernity and the New Woman. It uses a multi-method approach. Archival research was carried out at FANY Headquarters, the Imperial War Museum, the Liddle Collection held at the University of Leeds's Special Collections and the British Library. Online international newspaper repositories were also utilised. While few FANYs left accounts of their time with the Corps and formal records are patchy, documents are available for the early days and the First World War, enabling us to piece together their history. Several minutes of early meetings have survived, as have private letters from 1909 written by the early FANY recruits to headquarters, some letters written home to family from northern France throughout the First World War and a few diaries. While not highly educated, the women who joined the Corps were extremely literate and left some revealing correspondence, as well as diaries, poems, published memoirs and unpublished written testimonies in which they self-consciously reflected on their lives.⁵⁸ In building a picture of the FANY as an organisation and an experience, we can use these literary sources alongside other contemporaneous documents such as personal scrapbooks, autograph books, photograph albums, the FANY magazine and Corps ephemera. Together, they present a picture, albeit an incomplete one, of how members bestowed meaning upon their experience at the time: their motivations for joining, their prewar activities, their uniform and their wartime adventures, all lived out against the backdrop of a hugely transformative period of gender relations. While contemporary accounts form the base upon which this historical analysis is founded, they are supplemented with later sources, including novels and memoirs written by FANYs after the war and oral recordings conducted in the 1970s. Such retrospective accounts are even more explicitly

mediated and reveal as much about the time in which the accounts are constructed as they do about the historical past they are reconstructing. Occasional reference is also made to popular fiction about the Corps between 1928 and 2015 to reveal dominant representations of the FANY as pioneering women of war. A wide range of different sources, both published and unpublished, constructed by and about FANYs, produced across a number of decades – some highly mediated, others less explicitly so – speak to the multiple aspects of FANY life, representation and memory. It is worth us exploring these ideas of memory, memorialisation and media in more detail.

Witnesses of war: FANYs' contemporaneous and retrospective accounts

The Corps's unprecedented trespassing on male terrain and members' status as witnesses to and co-participants in war gave FANYs narrative authority, facilitating their chronicling of their experiences, as well as interesting journalists enough to write about them. Three First World War FANYs, Grace Ashley-Smith, Pat Waddell and Enid Bagnold, published personal accounts of their wartime experiences. Their decision to compose accounts about their war service speaks to a conviction that their histories were worthy of being told, of being heard, of being preserved. These testimonies are another indicator of the Corps's modernity, not least because, as Janet Butler observes, very few women wrote about their lives in the early twentieth century.⁵⁹

Grace Ashley-Smith captured in diary form her daily experiences. On more than one occasion, she 'fell into bed more dead than alive, but even then burnt my candle low jotting the events of the day in my diary in case of forgetting what occurred'.⁶⁰ These entries, recording dialogue and feelings, were later expanded upon and transformed into a public text, *Nursing Adventures: A F.A.N.Y. in France*, which was published anonymously in 1917. Her novel status as a woman who was an eyewitness to the fighting permitted her to construct a public persona. As the *Evening Standard* reported, Ashley-Smith 'must possess the spirit of Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons, the gaiety of Ellen Terry, and the endurance of a farm labourer's wife (old style) with a large family and 15 s a week'.⁶¹ It received wide press coverage, both nationally and regionally.⁶² The *Yorkshire Observer* noted the book's very modernity, with concomitant admiration and anxiety, regarding it as 'a curious commentary on what women – mere girls – can accomplish nowadays, in comparison with

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the dead and gone age before the war.⁶³ Like other socially privileged women who sought to attract the attention of publishers and interest potential readers, including Millicent, Duchess of Sutherland, Mabel St Clair Stobart and May Sinclair, whose accounts of their overseas work we shall come across in the course of the book, Ashley-Smith's testimony conforms to the war memoir genre and is infused with what Janet Lee calls 'the sentimental high diction of the Great War'.⁶⁴ First, she deploys archetypal tropes including navigating her own way to the front, being fearless in a dangerous wartime setting, stoically witnessing the horrors of battle, risking being shot as a spy and escaping from an occupied city, all experiences she presumed her reader wished to hear about. It is peppered with heroic deeds and she emphasises her proximity to the front and her experience of danger. Secondly, she writes in a register that is fast-paced – what *Punch* called 'a rather breathless style' – and deploys literary conventions, such as hyperbole and cliché: for instance, 'death came bringing freedom in her hands'.⁶⁵ The use of such highly stylised language renders the content so contrived and impersonal that it conceals (as opposed to divulges) the author's subjectivity. But instead of dismissing such formulaic language and clichéd expressions as hopelessly old-fashioned and insincere, Penny Summerfield urges historians to acknowledge that they provide the author with a way to convey complex issues as well as to assist readers who recognise the expression as shorthand.⁶⁶ Thus, we might interpret Ashley-Smith's seemingly insouciant response to being threatened with arrest ('I swanked out through that courtyard filled with Germans as if khaki had never before been fittingly worn!') as an articulation of British arrogance and superiority borne of her class privilege that would be well-received by her patriotic (and xenophobic) readers.⁶⁷

Her selection (and rejection) of linguistic structures and narrative frameworks from a range of available scripts (such as the 'rush to colours' and 'khaki fever' motifs) constitutes the very process of telling her fresh and unique story. Such romantic rhetoric and language became increasingly out of step with the times, however, as the horrors of the war unfolded. Nevertheless, this memoir can be read as an act of female agency in that she constructed herself as a fearless and audacious pioneer who played a significant role in the war and whose exploits are of interest to the public. In utilising her wartime escapades as the raw material for her account, she offered readers what Alison Fell terms 'the authority of direct experience'.⁶⁸ That fifteen photographs are included in the publication (captioned 'Ruins of a church', 'Life in the front line') serves to

emphasise the notion that this is a genuine account by a woman who is right in the thick of it. And her use of direct dialogue further enhances the perceived authenticity of the dramatic events being narrated. Her status of active participant in the war, which endowed her with a professional military identity, brought with it a significant degree of cultural capital.⁶⁹ Hers is an authentic, valid voice. But that is not to say that we can treat *Nursing Adventures* uncritically, of course. It is an illustration of 'life writing', a term that Summerfield describes as emphasising 'the fictional techniques deployed to shape the story to make it matter to others'. Such devices include the insertion of dialogue, vivid description, a distinct plot and personal musing in order to construct an account that is part autobiographical, part fantasy.⁷⁰ Thus the woman who is fashioned in text is as much the product of imagination as she is of reality. Summerfield cautions the historian to understand the factual content of memoirs within a broader context of the production of the self for a public audience.⁷¹ A memoir is not an unmediated tale of an individual's 'true' experiences and ought not be seen as a transparent window onto the past but rather one that is misted over, the patina tarnished and encrusted with time, and is a constructed account replete with the narrator's selections, some of which are conscious, others unconscious. The writing of a memoir does not occur in a void; dominant public discourses breathe air into the telling of personal narratives. Such forms of self-(re)presentation are contingent upon public discourses circulating both at the time at which they are written and the time that they are written about. Events are thus interpreted through the prism of the present and made sense of through the intervening period. Moreover, we also ought not to dismiss her agenda in writing the account: to raise the profile and fundraising activities of the Corps.⁷²

Hilary Green undoubtedly drew on Ashley-Smith's (as well as Stobart's and Sandes') accounts for her fictional trilogy, but while such sources provide fascinating material for novels, using them in scholarly research has been criticised by some historians: A. J. P. Taylor dismisses autobiographical accounts, noting that 'written memoirs are a form of oral history set down to mislead historians' and are 'useless except for atmosphere', and Paul Thompson, in his robust defence of oral history, asserts that autobiographical accounts are, unlike interviews, a one-directional communication that follows the conventions of a literary genre, the content intentionally selected to appeal to readers.⁷³ Certainly, Ashley-Smith's account is patently both atmospheric and replete with tales of exploits at the front to whet the appetite of a reading public hungry for

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adventurous war stories. But this self-representation also reveals much about the way she wanted to portray herself, and can be read as actively constructing selfhood. The composure of subjectivities in life-story telling has been the subject of much research. Popular memory theorists such as Graham Dawson, whose ideas have subsequently been developed by oral historians Alistair Thomson and Penny Summerfield, consider the dual meanings of the term: narrators *compose* accounts about themselves for intended audiences, and this in itself often, but not always, provides a sense of equanimity or *composure*.⁷⁴ Memoirs such as Ashley-Smith's are, in both senses of the term, composed. As Katie Barclay and Sarah Richardson note in an analysis of female selfhood, autobiographical accounts are 'constructed narratives in which narrators perform a range of rhetorical acts in the process of producing an understanding of the "meaning of life"'.⁷⁵ Indeed, writing may well have been cathartic, facilitating a quest for composure: prior to writing, Ashley-Smith, as well as another FANY author, Pat Waddell, had recently experienced trauma.⁷⁶ Waddell had had a leg amputated after she sustained an injury while driving a motorised FANY ambulance in northern France, as we shall see in Chapter 5. Ashley-Smith, who wrote her anonymous published account while in Canterbury recovering from an appendix operation and a near-perforated ear drum, had by 1916 lost two much loved brothers, and according to another FANY was 'very cut up'.⁷⁷ Moreover, Ashley-Smith wrote a further account of the Corps as well as a novel at a time when she had become disillusioned and bored by her new (postwar) life in Rhodesia. Her son, Desmond McDougall noted that writing 'went a long way to alleviating the unhappiness' of his mother.⁷⁸ The act of crafting her account may have become a way of coming to terms with the changing pace of postwar life. Ashley-Smith wrestled with this later account, returning again and again to it: the first was 'too long, too [sic] intimate and too frank to be passed on, it was [a] necessary outpouring of all that happened, in truth and in detail'; the second account was 'too long, too prosy, too badly arranged' but 'for the purpose of a real account it is the most suitable', while in the third version 'I cut out too much and by that time had lost interest in the task'. She was unable to find a publisher for her manuscript, the thirst for stories about the war having been quenched: '[I] have been told by all publishers to whom I have submitted it that it is too long after the war to be of interest to the Public'.⁷⁹ She deposited the unpublished manuscript, entitled 'Five Years with the Allies', at the Imperial War Museum in 1938. Ashley-Smith was, however, successful in finding a publisher for her novel *The Golden Bowl*,

which came out in 1926 and drew heavily upon her experiences during the war and her subsequent depression when living in Rhodesia with her husband. The opening pages are filled with 'khaki girls': the novel's first line refers to 'a girl in khaki, shirt and skirt, slim, silk-clad khaki legs and brown brogues', while a few pages in the reader is informed of Marion O'Hea's war service: 'The khaki-clad English girl with her double row of war ribbons, her four years' chevrons of service ... [A] F.A.N.Y. ... that splendid women's corp [*sic*].'⁸⁰ We also read about Doris, a FANY driver working with the French army, who, finding herself frightened in a forest at night-time, takes off her skirt so that she can pass as a man in her leather coat and long boots.⁸¹ The wartime experience of being in the FANY, however, serves as background context, and it is Marion's attempt to carve out a life after the war that takes centre stage. Her lover has just died and she is pregnant with his child when her husband, who has been missing presumed dead for two years following a marriage of just three days, unexpectedly resurfaces, 'a stranger ... morose, moody'.⁸² They move to Rhodesia to farm and she passes the child off as his. She descends into despair, 'the monotony of life on the veldt' resulting in her becoming 'morbid and depressed', and she experiences the kind of 'awful loneliness ... that may drive women to suicide or immorality'.⁸³ It is her husband, however, who embarks upon an adulterous relationship, and she leaves with her child, named Desmond after the author's son, who is later taken by the woman with whom the father is having an affair. Marion is reunited with both her child and her husband, with whom she falls in love. Weaving into her narrative the highly modern tropes of marital infidelities, an illegitimate pregnancy, depression and suicidal thoughts, Ashley-Smith reveals herself to be thoroughly progressive.

While her publications wrestled with some very modern storylines, conformed to the grand narratives of war and painted her as an adventurous, athletic, audacious young woman, another published FANY adopts what Angela Smith calls 'alternative dimensions to cultural memory' that do not imitate key features of the war genre.⁸⁴ Enid Bagnold, the great-grandmother of Samantha Cameron, the ex-Prime Minister's wife, deployed explicitly modernist techniques in her writing, of which there was much, as she was highly prolific. Her poems appeared in the *New Statesman* and *Nation*; she published a book of poetry in 1917, and she went on to write eight plays, an autobiographical account, an autobiography (which frustratingly omits her time in the VADs and the FANY as she felt she had covered those experiences in other publications), a children's book and five novels.⁸⁵ Her most lucrative

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and widely known publication was *National Velvet* (1935) which was turned into an award-winning film starring Elizabeth Taylor. This was a fairytale updated for a modern generation: the lead character, Velvet Brown, who is the daughter of a butcher and a mother who had swum the Channel in her youth, rejects a future of domestic drudgery in favour of the fantasy of winning at Olympia and the reality of disguising her sex by cropping her hair and riding to victory at the Grand National. In this deftly written novel, Bagnold uses richer, more original prose than subsequent books published in the pony-girl genre. Her artistry, in particular her novel manipulation of language – what Lenemaja Friedman equated to a ‘talent for the use of words, a fondness for aphorisms and elliptical utterances, and a flair for wit and horror’ – can be noted in her first full-length and most critically acclaimed publication, *A Diary without Dates* (1918).⁸⁶ While never achieving the public recognition of Vera Brittain’s *Testament of Youth*, it is heralded as a significant account of being a volunteer nurse in a VAD at a military hospital, and was reprinted by the feminist publishing house Virago in 1978. H. G. Wells, a personal friend, made reference to it in an article, and it was widely reviewed. One literary critic, however, was loathe to review it: writing disparagingly to her sister Vanessa Bell about the ‘disagreeable chit’, Virginia Woolf observed:

She has written a book, called as you can imagine ‘A Diary Without Dates’, all to prove that she’s the most attractive, and popular and exquisite of creatures – all her patients fall in love with her – her feet are the smallest in Middlesex – one night she missed her bus and a soldier was rude to her in the dark – that sort of thing ... The question is, am I a match for Bagnold?⁸⁷

In exposing the horrors of war and the insensitive and uncompassionate behaviour of the professional nurses, *A Diary without Dates*, which led to Bagnold’s dismissal following its publication, provides a highly impressionistic and modernist rendering of events that are literally undated and neither meticulously factual nor verbose. For example, she unsettles the essential femininity of the trained nurse, the quintessence of ideal womanhood, writing of the ‘strangely unsexed women’⁸⁸

The tropes of modernist writing are also apparent in her novel *The Happy Foreigner* (1920), which is even more germane to a discussion of the FANY. Bagnold’s principal reason for going to France after the Armistice and driving with the Corps had been to get material for a novel. She planned to keep a diary of her experiences, but short of time, she instead wrote daily numbered letters to her parents and her mother diligently typed them up and filed them for future use. These

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letters formed the basis of her novel, and thus are a synthesis of personal thoughts and something always intended to be made public. The frank honesty of her letters facilitated by their very immediacy can be seen in one that she wrote to her parents after being in France just ten days: 'Isn't it disappointing . . . I don't believe I can stick to it . . . I can't think how the others stuck to it. Of course, I can't think or write or get any impressions at all.'⁸⁹ She did persevere, however, and the resultant novel, according to Stella Deen, ought to be regarded as one of the finest, if lesser-known, examples of women's war literature; it too was reprinted by Virago.⁹⁰ Informed by Bagnold's wartime experiences, which included a love affair, the novel's protagonist, a driver wryly named Fanny, meets Julien Châtel, a French artillery captain. '[T]he fictional worlds that she created were so close to the real world as she knew it that they became as one,' notes Anna Sebba. 'There were elements of Enid in every woman she wrote of.'⁹¹ Her novel displays modernist tendencies as she experiments with both form and technique, adopting a minimalist style that is the hallmark of modernist writing. The reader learns little about Fanny's background and there are few markers to ground the story in a specific time. Fanny's daily routines are monotonous, rising early to drive through the rain, sleet and mud, and returning late too exhausted to do anything but desire to be alone: 'the eight crept back to their boxes and sat again by the lamps to read, to darn or write. They lived so close to each other that even the most genial learnt to care for solitude, and the sitting-room remained empty.'⁹² And there's a bleakness to the landscape caused by the weather that is one illustration of the 'impressionistic technique' that Friedman identifies Bagnold as deploying: 'boundless rain, the swollen rivers, the shining swamps, the mud which ebbed and flowed upon the land like a tide.'⁹³ In her *New Statesman* review, Rebecca West noted Bagnold's 'eye for landscape, not made glassy by any moral preoccupation . . . a uniquely vivid and impressive picture of the desolation of the war ravaged areas.'⁹⁴ The novel is neither pacifistic nor hawkish and does not reproduce the dominant discourses that were circulating in this period, and while it does not shy away from describing the horrors of the aftermath of war that effect its protagonist, it also offers a positive optimism. In such ways, it is strikingly different from Evadne Price's *Not So Quiet . . . Stepdaughters of War*, with its blistering critique.⁹⁵ Bagnold draws Fanny as extraordinarily independent and self-reliant, and she subverts the romance genre by ending the book not happily ever after, the conventional denouement of a heterosexual love story, but with Fanny resilient, recognising herself as 'a green bough which bursts into leaf' and acknowledging that

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her happiness lies within herself and not with Julien.⁹⁶ As Deen notes, it is 'a self-discovery narrative dramatizing Fanny's growth towards self-sufficiency in this wider world ... her gradual self-definition as a solitary human creature who ... does not derive her essence from her role in a heterosexual pair.'⁹⁷

While the narrative style adopted by Bagnold in *A Diary without Dates* and *The Happy Foreigner* points to an experimental modernism, even more explicitly modernist was 'Base Notes', an unpublished (undated) diary kept by FANY driver Muriel Thompson. Her prose, much of which was pared back, abstract, detached, fragmented and divorced from familiar functions of language and conventions of form, maps onto the indicators of modernist stylistic practices that Eugene Lunn identifies: aesthetic self-consciousness; simultaneity, juxtaposition and montage as an alternative to linearity; paradox, ambiguity and uncertainty; and defamiliarisation.⁹⁸ For example, she writes about a ship that is 'a twisted, distorted mass – tubes, wheels, cogs – blades – incredible, misshapen remains of what was but a few hours back, a living destroyer.'⁹⁹ She brings together an assortment of startling observations on the theme of suffering and despair, often not specific occurrences that she had personally experienced, that, through the use of light, colour and image, convey atmospheric tone that is frequently Gothic in style. One note written in badly faded pencil is highly evocative in its use of multiple senses:

Black darkness all around – the smell of the sea and the rain – just in front a semi-circle of light thrown by the ship's lamps, showing up the wet rails on the quay and shining on the dark space below. Twinkling in the distance other lights, and at regular intervals ambulances arriving and stopping by the gangway, while slowly – carefully, four limp forms on stretchers are drawn out one after the other, lowered for a moment to the ground, then raised, & carried on board ... Not even the darkness hides the white head on the next stretcher, it shows up startlingly as the lamp strikes it – no particle of human face is seen – only holes in a white mask ... They hop, limp, hobble and crawl up the gangway and take their place in the semi-circle of light, showing up the black darkness of the early winter morning. 4am on a chilly November day, with a Channel crossing before them, and, like as not, a Boche souvenir inside them.¹⁰⁰

Language is used here with poetic precision and the effect is highly visual. Such observations, in which she has not written herself into the narrative but remains outside it, seemingly removed and impartial, have led Smith to note that Thompson's 'Base Notes' exhibit literary characteristics, possibly not consciously, that at a later date will be considered modernist.¹⁰¹

At the other end of the stylistic spectrum are the eight small pocket diaries, three inches by two, each labelled 'Boys Scouts Notebook and diary', that were kept by FANY driver Mary Marshall. It is difficult to read these for signs of subjectivity, as they are frustratingly factual and non-descriptive, often with just one word recording what she did: 'drill', for example, featured several times a week in 1913 when she was training with the Corps. Her diary of 1915, by which time she was working at Lamarck hospital in Calais, records things such as 'Night duty', 'slept 2 hrs', 'felt rotten'.¹⁰² Marshall was a close friend of Grace Ashley-Smith, but even Ashley-Smith's marriage to Ronald McDougall, purportedly the first wedding in which the bride wore khaki, elicited only 'Gracie's wedding'. She herself noted that 'My diaries were rather dull because I was always scared of saying something I shouldn't'.¹⁰³ On occasion she writes more but much of the pencilled handwriting has since faded and become largely illegible. They are, however, useful as a batch, as one can piece together how she was feeling over the course of nearly a decade: her 1915 diary records frequent bouts of depression, fatigue and sickness; the 1917 diary, when she is stationed at Port-à-Binson near Rheims, which was much quieter than the hub of Calais, notes her isolation, and there are numerous references to melancholy ('frightfully depressed all day', 'Absolutely miserable all afternoon', 'slack day', 'Not very busy morning').¹⁰⁴ By contrast, she appears much happier in her 1918 diary, where 'ripping' and 'topping' appear often. Her diaries from 1921 and 1922, when she is back with her family, reference playing bridge, doing jigsaws and knitting, and there is a palpable sense that she is bored and wishing to do more ('very depressed, hate most things'; 'I am not sorry to see the end of '22. So many illnesses and deaths and not a great deal of happiness in it for me.').¹⁰⁵ The war had given a form and meaning to her life that had left a gaping void, as it had for Grace McDougall (née Ashley-Smith) stranded out in Rhodesia. Marshall also wrote regular letters to her family, and these provide more detail of her daily work and her mental health. At Easter 1918, for example, she wrote, 'One gets the blues badly sometimes, you know ... I am not so sociable yet. I believe it really is because I do find the people one's meet [*sic*] here so impossible and uncongenial ... I haven't got a real friend amongst them – it has never been like that with me before'.¹⁰⁶ The immediacy of the diaries and letters revealing her loneliness and depression (as well as less savoury attitudes¹⁰⁷) can be contrasted with an interview conducted by the Imperial War Museum nearly six decades later. With the distance of time, she came to regard her experiences in France quite differently – 'The whole thing was very

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interesting you know' – and, laughing at a recollection, she remarks 'what times we had'.¹⁰⁸

While published and unpublished first-hand accounts such as memoirs, poems, diaries, letters and oral interviews cannot give us direct access to personal experience, they do provide a revealing entry point to an examination of the Corps and its members as an example of gender modernity. By foregrounding the FANY's own self-representations, we insert 'real' women's experiences into the analysis and get a sense of whether these elite women considered themselves as in any way 'modern'. Another key source heavily drawn upon throughout *Women of War* is the contemporary print media, what Adrian Bingham regards as 'an invaluable window into popular culture'.¹⁰⁹ The FANY was a product of a modernising society in which textual and pictorial newspapers catered for the appetites of a public hungry for information about an elite group of martial women. The nation's gaze was very much focused on the Corps, as they were the subject of extensive press coverage. They featured prominently in popular national papers such as the *Daily Mail*, one of the most influential dailies with over a million readers; pictorial journals, including the *Illustrated London News* and *Daily Graphic*; the highbrow dailies, for instance the explicitly Conservative *Morning Post*; publications with a working-class readership such as the *Workers' Paper*; regional leaders such as the *South Wales Daily News* and the *Western Morning News*; local newspapers including the *Croydon Guardian*; society papers such as *Lady's Pictorial*; magazines such as *The Queen*, read by upper-class women, and the *Gentlewoman*, purchased by the aspirational social climber; *Vogue*, the glossy fashion publication; *Punch*, the satirical magazine; and *Home Chat*, targeting working-class women. They were thus deemed to have appeal across the social spectrum. News of their activities also spread throughout the United States, and they featured in publications in Wisconsin in the north, Utah in the west, Colorado in the centre, Alabama in the south and Massachusetts in the east. Articles and photographs were culled from one publication and reproduced in others in later issues. They featured in 'hard news' sections, such as on the front page and in leading articles, news columns and editorials. Placement on the upper-left-hand corner of a page, the closer to the front page and the more space ('column inches') articles about the FANY covered, the more newsworthy the Corps was considered to be, and the higher the status awarded to it by the editor. The FANY also appeared in other parts of newspapers, such as feature articles written by journalists as witnesses and by 'expert' writers, book reviews, cartoons, advertisements and letters

to editors sent in by readers, which serve as a barometer of contemporary attitudes.¹¹⁰ Their extensive newspaper coverage, which amassed cultural capital, resulted in the FANY gaining widespread legitimacy. Scrutiny of textual and visual representations of the Corps in the local, national and international press enable us to explore the construction of their public identities.

The newspaper, the market for which had exploded in the late nineteenth century encouraged by the growth of literacy, had by 1907 replaced the pulpit and the pamphlet as the most influential form of communication. Roughly one adult in every five read a daily, and about one in three read a Sunday publication.¹¹¹ The Corps's activities would have been read about by a large proportion of the British public and, by serving as a model for identification, encouraged some women readers to consider the ways in which they might contribute to the nation, even inspiring some to join. Representations of the Corps may or may not have reflected lived 'realities' but the messages they conveyed, which were symbolically loaded, are fascinating. While the extent to which newspapers shaped the public's attitudes toward the Corps is impossible fully to ascertain, we can conclude that articles largely reflected the views of their paying readership, publishing what they thought people wanted to read (not least because readers could purchase competitor newspapers if they disagreed), and providing 'interpretative frameworks' by which readers 'made sense of their world,' while simultaneously sculpting those views through the articles they published.¹¹² As Gail Braybon notes, newspapers are both 'a reflector and arbiter of opinion.'¹¹³ Moreover, articles reveal much about contemporary attitudes toward gender. At a time when suffrage campaigners were showing that women could assume behaviours more commonly associated with men, an anxiety about the need to preserve conventional passive femininity can be detected. During the war, editors and journalists acting out of patriotism underscored the positive features of women's war work. This was blatant propaganda. Membership of the Corps thus brought women into the public gaze in a novel and highly visible way.

Bringing both public and personal representations into dialogue, *Women of War* sits at the crossroads of British, social, gender and women's history, drawing upon literature in the diverse fields of military history, animal studies, trans studies, dress history, sociology of the professions, nursing history and transport history. It reconstructs the formation of this novel organisation, its adoption of martial clothing, its increased

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professionalisation and its wartime activities of first aid and driving, focusing specifically upon the significance of gender modernity. While the FANY were radical progressives, New Women embodying modernity, challenging the limits of convention and pushing back the boundaries of what was considered appropriate for women in terms of behaviour, dress and role, concurrently, they held deeply conservative views, upholding Unionist, imperial and antifeminist values. That the Corps was a complex mix of progressive and conservative elements, simultaneously conformist and reformist, gets to the heart of the fascinating complexity surrounding the organisation: as a senior British army officer noted during the First World War, the FANY were ‘neither fish, flesh nor fowl but damned good red herring’¹¹⁴

Notes

- 1 Hilary Green, *Daughters of War* (Sutton: Severn House, 2011), pp. 1, 3.
- 2 Hilary Green, *Passions of War* (Sutton: Severn House, 2011); Hilary Green, *Harvest of War* (Sutton: Severn House, 2012).
- 3 Mabel St Clair Stobart, Grace Ashley-Smith, Lilian Franklin, Betty Hutchinson, the Gamwell sisters and Mary Baxter Ellis, whom we will come across in the course of this book, all feature in Green’s stories.
- 4 Green, *Daughters of War*, pp. 11, 8.
- 5 *Ibid.*, pp. 6, 8, 16–17.
- 6 *Ibid.*, pp. 14, 16, 20.
- 7 *Ibid.*, pp. 62, 67.
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