

THE 'SHELL-SHATTERED FRENCH VILLAGE' IN TRAFALGAR SQUARE

By Todd Longstaffe-Gowan

Trafalgar Square has been the setting of many curious and ephemeral events since it was first thrown open to the public in 1844.¹ Few, however, have been as imaginative as the transformation in October 1918 of the piazza, usually awash with hurrying throngs, into a desolate, ruined landscape. This remarkable *mise-en-scène* was the backdrop to no less than two large public appeals – the *Feed the Guns Campaign* (from 7th to 15th October) (fig. 25), and latterly the *Camouflage Fair* (from 24th to 26th October)² (fig. 26).

The *Times* announced on 7th October 1918 that:

Trafalgar-square has been transformed into a shell-shattered French village. For more than a week workmen have been busily engaged in representing a section of the Western battle front, and yesterday as the finishing touches were being given to the ruined village, their efforts were being watched with intense interest by large crowds of spectators. The battle scene which has been reproduced represents what meets the eye in every direction at the front. It depicts a ruined farmhouse, riddled with shot and shell holes, and the garden torn up and irretrievably damaged. The building stands where the ornamental fountain used to play, and is surrounded by sandbagged trenches. The Gordon statue³ is entirely hidden in a ruined church tower. Close by are the trunks of old trees, hollowed by nature, which are being used for observation purposes, and standing on the basin of the west fountain is a windmill without sails. About 20,000 sandbags have been used to make the gun emplacements and trenches, along which the visitors will walk to feed the guns with Bonds and

Certificates. The breechloaders and howitzers are ranged along the north side of the square, facing the National Gallery, and each War Bond purchased will be specially stamped by a device fitted within the guns for this purpose. On the face of this wall is a huge painting representing "the land which has been completely devastated and desolated," ruined houses, and burning buildings.

A wireless station was also erected in the square, 'where news from the front will be issued immediately upon its arrival'. Sir George Welby, Mayor of Westminster, officially opened the event, and the Bishop of Kensington conducted a short opening service, the musical parts of which were performed by the 'full choirs' of Westminster Abbey and St. Paul's Cathedral, and the band of the Royal Artillery.⁴ 'Six-pounder shells [cases] ...standing nearly 20 inches high' were engraved to be presented to the individuals or firms making the largest investments during the week-long event, and twenty 'one-pounder shells' were 'suitably inscribed' to be given to the twenty persons whose purchases of War Bonds were next in order of amount. The 'ruined village' was by all accounts a remarkable success: it helped draw in £29 million from Londoners.⁵

Less well known, but equally compelling, was the Red Cross's Camouflage Fair, which took place nine days later in the same war-torn landscape in the square. The event was the last great 'flag day' held before the signing of the armistice on 11th November 1918, which marked the end of hostilities on the Western Front. 'Our Day', as it was also known, was the annual 'flag day' of the Red Cross.⁶ Flag days, or *flower days* as they were sometimes known, originated in 1912, and entailed organising respectable young women to sell representations of flowers on the streets in aid of reputable charities.⁷ The days proved very popular with the public, appealed to all sections of society, and raised considerable

1. The square was 'still in a state of incomplection' when it opened in May 1844. *Age and Argus*, 4 May 1844, p.11.

2. Trudi Tate, *Modernism, History and the First World War* (Manchester University Press, 1998), p.132.

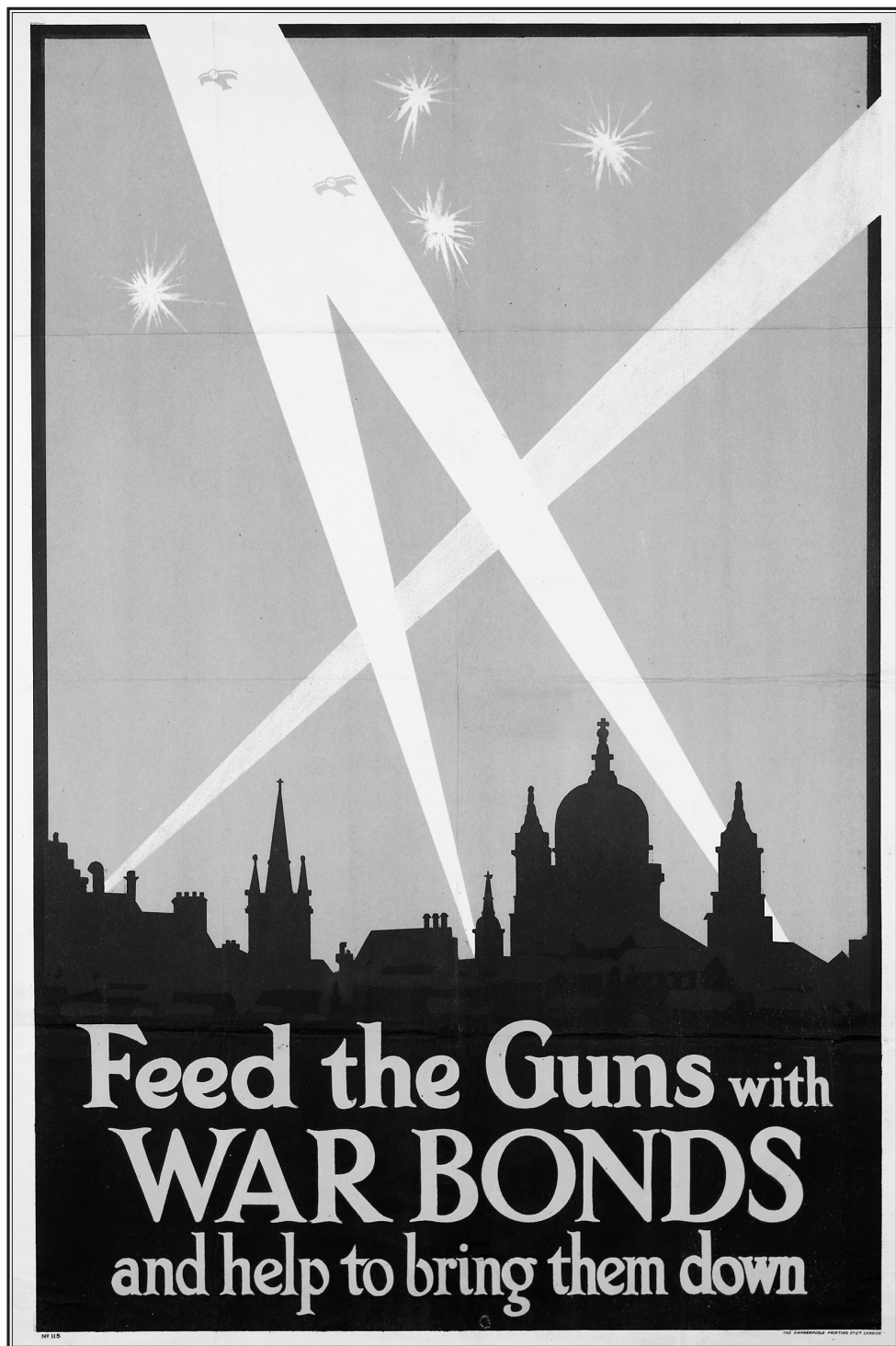
3. Hamo Thornycroft's statue of Major-General Charles George Gordon, also known as Gordon of Khartoum, was erected in 1888 and removed in 1943.

4. 'Feed the Guns, Opening of Campaign To-day, Trafalgar-Square as a Ruined Village', *The Times*, 7 October 1918, p.5.

5. Ian F. W. Beckett, *The Great War, 1914-1918* (2007), p.359.

6. The Red Cross was the largest and most important charity of the Great War.

7. Voluntary Action History Society, 'The Origins of Flag Days', posted on the internet 12 November 2005.



25. 'Feed the War' poster, October 1918
(COURTESY IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM, LONDON)

sums for the charities that adopted them. The Red Cross was a major beneficiary of this then new form of appeal, raising almost £22 million through these annual collections throughout the Empire during the period 1914-18, one third of which was raised during the annual 'Our Day' celebrations, and half of which was raised in 1918 alone.

The Times reported on 25th September 1918 that 'a novel feature of the celebration of "Our Day" will be the Camouflaged Fair, which is to be held in Trafalgar-square on October 24, 25 and 26th. The announcement was made on the eve of the Fifth Battle of Ypres (also known as the Advance on Flanders, begun 28th September). There was to be a 'hut' at the 'Sign of the Airship', superintended by Lady Sybil Grant, and a 'continuous cinema' to show 'interesting films, including the Red Cross film, "From No Man's Land to Blighty". The arms manufacturers Messrs. Vickers Ltd proposed to screen a film 'not seen before by the public', and there were to be 'concerts and entertainments, and a wonderful Dug-out for the sale of "dug-out" treasures'.⁸

The mastermind behind the event was Lady Sybil (1879-1955), born Sybil Myra Caroline Primrose, eldest child of Archibald Philip Primrose, 5th Earl of Rosebery, and one-time Prime Minister (1894-5). Although generally known as a writer, designer and artist, she also took a great interest in the activities of the Royal Air Force (Royal Flying Corps), and in airships in particular, which she believed would one day have a great future for special commerce.⁹ She was in fact warmly praised in the contemporary press for her 'strenuous airship work at the Admiralty during the War', and for her 'great efforts to ensure success of the Airship Exhibition "Airships at Peace and War"' at Prince's Gallery in Piccadilly in September 1919.

It is not known who designed the ruined landscape in the square, which was presumably intended to evoke the bleak and melancholy 'Old British Front' at Ypres in Flanders. Ypres

— known as 'Wipers' to English soldiers — had, on account of its strategic location, been the centre of intense and sustained battles between the German and Allied forces during the Great War, and after the First Battle in 1914, when the Germans were expelled from the town, it became a symbol of Allied defiance. A clue to the identity of the square's imaginary landscape is the windmill: the ramshackle wooden structure resembles a traditional Flanders archetype, and was probably intended to represent the mill atop Mount Scherpenberg, a 'small hill of sandy earth covered with undergrowth, very green in Summer, except on the crest', where 'an old windmill stood on a bare space of ground with sails creaking in the wind' — a windmill which a reporter in the *New York Times* thought might one day become 'as famous after the war as that other one in France from which the English King at Crecy watched the scene of battle'.¹⁰ Scherpenberg was one of three strategic hills (the others being Mont Noir and Mont Rouge), from which one gained a 'panorama of the Ypres battlefield which lay outspread before it, with the City of Ypres itself, white and woeful, in the distance, and the tall spire of Poperinghe as a landmark'.¹¹

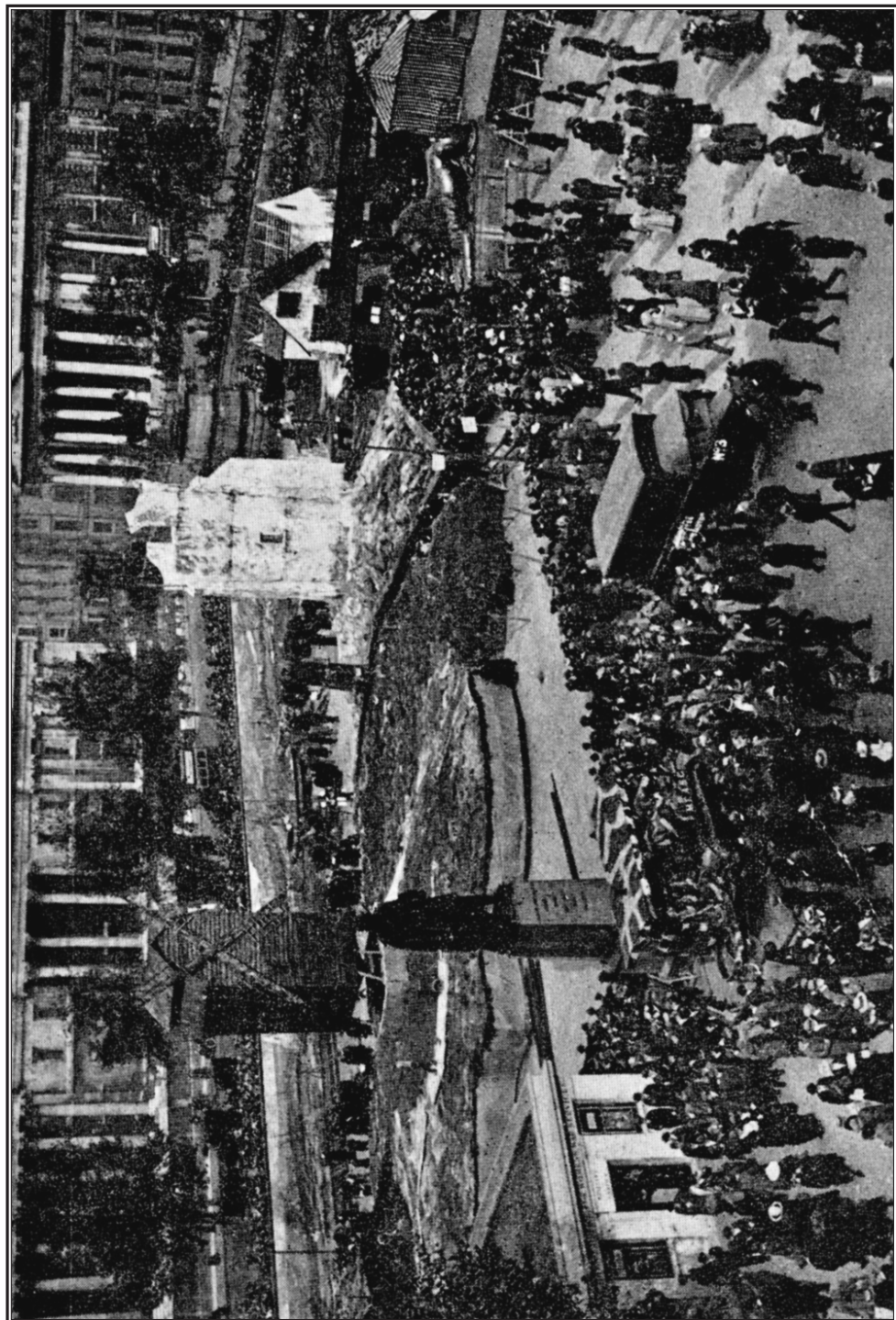
Photographs of the 'Sign of the Airship' were reproduced on postcards and in the magazine *Flight & the Aircraft Engineer* on 31st October 1918 (fig. 27). One shows W.R.A.F.s 'inviting a shower of pennies with which to cover the Red cross on the ground'; another shows 'Airship girls who collected', including 'a group of girls from Spencers, the balloon makers', as well as Messrs. Entract and Roth and Mr Allen (the Managing Director of Spencers), Lady Sybil Grant, Mrs Strickland and Admiral Parry; a third picture shows 'a few of the Armstrong girls', from the Aerial Department of the Sir W. G. Armstrong Whitworth & Company engineering group in Newcastle, among the ruins of Trafalgar Square; and the fourth depicts Beardmore girls from the Inchinnan Airship Constructional Station, 'who also joined in collecting "siller"

8. *The Times*, 25 September 1918. Other attractions were also organised to take place in different quarters of the Metropolis: Lady Drogheda was charged with 'At the Sign of the Aeroplane', Mrs Charles Craven with 'At the Sign of the Tank' (where she would sell 'lucky regimental posies'), and Mrs Gordon Campbell 'At the Sign of the Vindictive', who sold 'the whole Navy in miniature, made by wounded soldiers'.

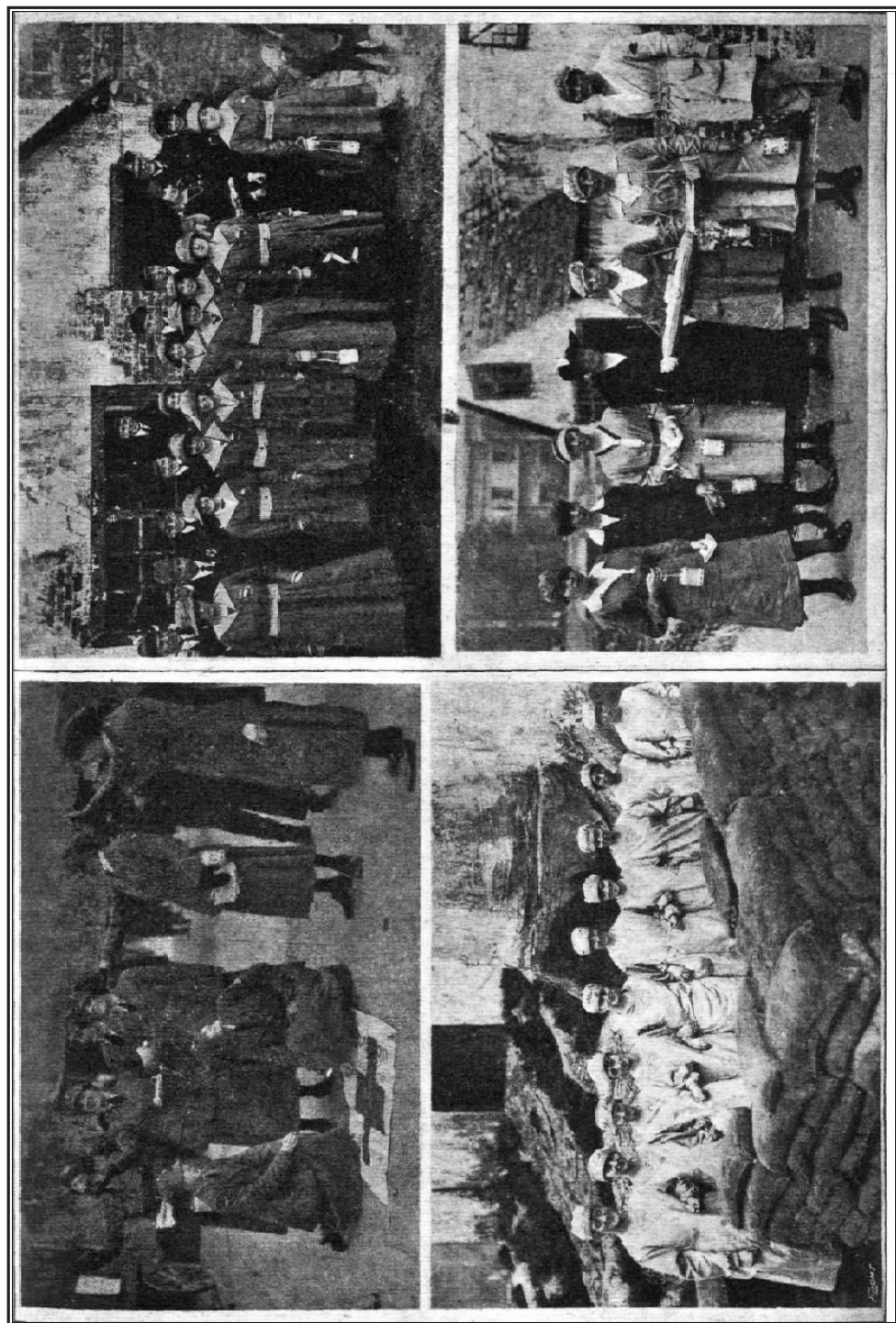
9. *Flight & the Aircraft Engineer*, 11 September 1919, p.1234.

10. Philip Gibbs, 'French Gains Important, Flanders Advance Toward Kemmel Strengthens the Allied Defense...Scherpenberg, Mont Rouge, and Mont Noir Now Made More Difficult to Approach', *New York Times*, 22 May 1918. Edward III watched the Battle of Crecy (1346) from a windmill on the summit of a small eminence overlooking the battlefield.

11. *New York Times*, 22 May 1918.



26. Postcard depicting the Camouflage Fair in Trafalgar Square, October 1918
(PRIVATE COLLECTION)



27. 'At the 'Sign of the Airship' in the Trafalgar Square Red Cross Camouflage Fair',
Flight & the Aircraft Engineer, 31 October 1918, page 1215
 (PRIVATE COLLECTION)

[silver] for the good cause'.¹²

What are we to make of the ruined landscape created for these fund-raising campaigns of October 1918? It was not, in fact, unusual for official and semi-official events during the war to have had a theatrical quality about them. Paul Fussell remarks in *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975), that 'the devices of the theatre were frequently invoked at home to stimulate civilian morale and to publicise the War Loan'.¹³ Trudi Tate concurs, suggesting in *Modernism, history and the First World War* (1998) that these elaborately staged events encouraged civilians to enact a 'fantasy of the war as circus, or fairground, replicated in bizarre simulacra in Trafalgar Square'.¹⁴ Whilst some people objected to what they called 'the circus business' in connection with national finance', implying that the state's money should be treated with greater dignity, they were, nonetheless, of the opinion that 'the end has justified the means', and these events served to make the British recognise their 'individual responsibility' to pay for the War.¹⁵

Regardless of their aims, there can be no doubt that both *Feed the Guns* and the *Camouflage Fair* were remarkable and costly productions, and their importance in the war effort to raise much-needed money and boost public morale is underscored by the fact that they took place within Trafalgar Square - the rallying point of the nation and the cross-roads of the Empire.

THE PRODUCTIVE 'UGLY SISTER'¹ OF GARDEN HISTORY: THE CAPITAL'S NINETEENTH-CENTURY MARKET GARDENS AS DEPICTED BY THOMAS MILNE'S LAND UTILIZATION MAP.

A Possible Visualisation for a Contemporary Urban Agriculture?

By Mikey Tomkins

The purpose of this paper is to bring Thomas Milne's defining, yet neglected, *Land Utilization Map of The London Area in 1800* to a wider audience and place it within a current debate surrounding growing food locally within cities. This subject area is increasingly classified as 'urban agriculture' (UA). The article asks what impact UA practices would have on London's parks and public landscape if they were (re)introduced on a scale evident in Milne's map. Would they feed a current London population as in Milne's time and would they be able to co-exist with current land use patterns?

Definitions of Urban Agriculture arrived out of academic and policy initiatives of the mid 1980s. These quite rightly tried to produce clear understandings of the way the urban poor, mostly in developing countries, used self-grown food or market gardens to increase food security and in some cases to provide economic diversity. This area of academic study has now come full circle, with developed countries looking to install urban 'edible landscapes'. The potential for UA should not be seen as a drive for self-sufficiency but as a multifunction of agriculture as a whole, where some part of the food producing industry (re)locates itself closer to the consumer. Within the UK, notable examples are the current 'Capital Growth' project run by Sustain, as well as longer term economic projects such as Growing Communities in East London, who cultivate three Soil Association-certified organic sites. Key to these initiatives is an underlying understanding of the environmental damage caused by industrial food production, its processing and packaging, refrigerated distribution and waste disposal.

1. Malcolm Thick, *The Neat House Gardens: Early Market Gardening Around London* (Prospect Books, 1998).

12. *Flight & the Aircraft Engineer*, 31 October 1919, p.1215; Trudi Tate, *op. cit.*, p.132; Trevor Wilson, *The Myriad Faces of War* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986), p.647.

13. Jim Aulich and John Hewitt, *Seduction or instruction?: First World War posters in Britain and Europe* (Manchester University Press, 2007), p.102; Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975), p.194.

14. Trudi Tate, *op. cit.*, p.132.

15. 'The Outlook', *Land and Water*, 14 March 1918, p.4.