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PHILANTHROPY IN BRITAIN DURING THE FIRST WORLD WAR

Peter GRANT

The First World War saw the greatest act of volunteering ever in Britain. Two-and-a-half million men volunteered to fight in a conflict that cost more than 700,000 of them their lives. But there was another act of volunteering between 1914 and 1918 on at least the same scale, though without the same life-and-death consequences. This was the voluntary effort at home especially to support the men at the front, in health and sickness, but also to aid numerous other causes. Yet this remains a phenomenon about which little has been written.

Even in the relatively few publications that cover the home front, it is not given significant space and the approach of the existing literature to philanthropy and non-uniformed voluntary action has been superficial at best.¹ Its tone is consistent and can be summed up as concluding that charitable activity mushroomed on the outbreak of war being primarily directed towards the National Relief Fund, Belgian Refugees and the Red Cross.

The claim is that it was mainly a phenomenon characterised by middle class ladies who undertook a frenzied spate of sock knitting. Overall so it is claimed, it was an amateurish exercise that had little real impact either on the home front or with the troops. These sources suggest that, as the war dragged on charitable activity significantly declined and there was little long-term impact either on individuals or upon the transition of social welfare from the private to the state realm.

This image of philanthropy in the First World War is yet another of the myths that surrounds that traumatic period of British history. In fact there was a massive increase in philanthropy and charitable action in Britain during the First World War. Around 18,000 new charities were created, a 50% increase on the number in existence pre-war. The value of their fund-raising was at least £150 million, (equivalent to £7.5 billion today) and their legacy was profound.²

Charitable activity in the war was, especially in many industrial towns and cities, a manifestation not of middle class “do gooding” but of working class solidarity with many more organisations run by ordinary women and men than by well-to-do matrons. It was easily the most significant charitable cause that has ever been supported in Britain and it had significant effects upon both the war effort and the relationship between voluntary organisations and the state.

WHO WERE THE PHILANTHROPISTS?

Was charity work as middle class an activity as is usually suggested? Well in some places it was, especially in rural areas and the South East. In suburban Croydon, the Mayor, Howard Houlder, chaired six of the borough’s thirty-eight registered charities while his wife, Mary, chaired two more. The town clerk, John Newnham, the Borough Treasurer, William Gunner, and the Borough Accountant, James McCall, served on a total of twelve committees. Overall, the impression is very much of a top down process: a small number of larger charities run by experienced, middle and upper-middle class office holders.³ Then, as in America, a number of wealthy individuals raised significant sums. For example the famous actress May Whitty helped raise £225,000 towards the new “Star and Garter” home for Disabled Sailors and Soldiers whilst theatrical impresario Sir Oswald Stoll topped this with £260,993.⁴

Some charities, such as Queen Mary’s Needlework Guild, were very exclusive but other parts of the country, especially the industrial north, the picture was entirely different. Possibly the most generous givers in the country were the people of Glasgow. Despite its reputation for radicalism, over the four years of war Glasgow raised an astonishing £3.5 million, or £4.46 per head.⁵ Blackburn was one of the major cotton producing towns of East Lancashire with a population of 133,000. Unusually cotton was an industry which employed both a large number of women and gave them equal pay

for equal work. Here, smaller charities based on a workplace or church / chapel were more characteristic. Of the 148 Blackburn charities, forty-one per cent were workplace based and thirty-nine per cent based on a church or chapel. The figures in Croydon were only five per cent in each category. This resulted in a remarkable geographical concentration of charity officials.

Queen's Road in Blackburn was an ordinary working class street comprising terraced housing occupied mainly by weavers. At 93 Queen's Road lived William Jones, Secretary of the Audley Range Congregational Church Charity. The Treasurer, William Oldham, lived at number 147 and another Committee member, Jones's brother Frank, at number 127. Between them, at number 107, was the Chairman of the Blackburn Parkside Manufacturing Company Soldiers Comforts Fund, George Burke, whilst a few doors down at number 31 resided William Howorth, committee member of the Chapel Street School Soldiers and Sailors Comfort Fund. At number 20 was Ellen Carr, chair of Daisyfield Co-Operative Society Women's Guild Soldiers and Sailors Comfort Fund; at 149 William Harrop, chair of the Furthergate Congregational Church and School Soldiers and Sailors Comfort Fund; at 63 Joseph Broughton, Secretary of Oxford Street Primitive Methodist Church Charity and, at 105, its Chairman Nathaniel Brown; at 111 Joseph Smyth, Chairman of St Jude's Blackburn Soldiers Comforts Fund; at 89 Charles Gregson, committee member of St Matthew's Blackburn Soldiers Comforts Fund and at 103 its Treasurer, John Swarbrick. No fewer than twelve charity officers in a quarter-mile long street. In two of the streets parallel to Queen's Road, Pringle Street and Audley Range, lived another nineteen charity officials, an astonishing concentration and a pattern very much indicative of a bottom-up approach.

In this case nearly all of the charity officials were men but this was unusual. Overall in Blackburn 11% of Chairs; 28% of Treasurers and 32% of Secretaries were female. Pretty much all of these people, male and female, were mill workers. Indeed 32% of larger registered charities and 76% of smaller non-registered ones were entirely working class led.⁶

When extrapolated these and other local figures indicate that something like 400,000 men and 1.2 million women were regularly engaged in working for wartime charities. The number of people

regularly volunteering for philanthropic causes would certainly seem to run to around two million; a figure that would compare favourably with the 2.6 million men who volunteered for the armed forces.

THE EXTENT OF FUNDRAISING

What did they raise funds for? Early fundraising efforts included the National Relief Fund for the support of servicemen's beneficiaries. Though it raised some £7 million it was heavily criticised for treating payments as charity, to be given only if working-class women met expectations of good behaviour. There was considerable debate and controversy as to whether benefits should be extended to 'unmarried wives' and whether they should be withdrawn if women were found to be spending too much time in public houses.

Not surprisingly many women resented this intrusion and the officious and patronising manner of some visitors.⁷

However, the initial NRF mistake of failing to include trade unionists and other representatives of working people was, generally, not repeated. As the war went on, working class membership of official committees, for example with conscription tribunals and war pensions committees, became the rule rather than the exception.

The second immediate cause was that of aid for the huge influx of refugees from Belgium of whom there were eventually 265,000. Despite official intervention, most organisations helping our "gallant allies" remained entirely voluntary; the great majority the spontaneous creations of local people. Very often an individual or group of friends and neighbours began by offering to take refugees and then enlisted the entire community to help.

This led to a mushrooming of activity with hundreds of communities across Britain establishing funds. It was again women who usually supplied the driving force for local activity and many of them had learned their trade in the pre-war campaign for the vote.

But not every charity was as philanthropic as they claimed. One of the largest funds aimed at overseas relief was the French Relief Fund. This promoted itself as the UK branch of the Secours National (the French equivalent of the NRF) to which it had gained affiliation in December 1914. Its high profile fund raising activities included a massive flag day held on Bastille Day, 14 July 1915. This involved 15

to 20,000 women selling millions of flags and it raised £60,000. Despite its impressive patrons list the fund was eventually placed under administration due to the self-enriching practices of its Secretary, James Hargreaves Dickinson, described by Lancashire Police as a man of 'distinctly doubtful character' and Treasurer, Sir Thomas Brooke Hitching who had been debarred as a City Alderman.⁸

Another massive national effort, this time entirely above board, was that run by *The Times* newspaper. Though many newspapers, both national and local, ran their own funds theirs was by far the largest, eventually raising a staggering £16m. The fund was created to aid the Red Cross and its most prominent event was the annual 'Our Day' a forerunner of television appeals like Comic Relief and Children in Need in the UK, a single day on which everyone was expected to do something for charity, the more unusual or eye-catching the better. Dressing up in silly clothes or performing prodigious feats of endurance for charity is by no means a modern invention.

Very quickly every section of society was involved in voluntary action none more so than schoolchildren. Boys at Harrow school made munitions, schools linked with local hospitals to provide supplies, older girls from London volunteered their time to work processing Belgian refugees whilst others translated newspapers for French-speaking refugees. Later on the Girls' Patriotic Union, mainly comprising young ladies from the public schools, supplied four recreation huts for France (one each for the army, navy, airmen and the women's army corps). They also became involved in the founding of 'Star and Garter' Home for which they raised the considerable sum of £5,500 (equivalent to £275,000 today), which endowed fourteen rooms at the new establishment in Richmond.⁹

But schools efforts were by no means confined to the upper classes. It was not long before every school in England was regularly and directly engaged in war work.

Even the smallest schools, such as Stanbury Board School in the Yorkshire village of the Bronte sisters, Haworth, with a roll not far above 100, played its part. In November 1914 30 shillings was raised by selling national flags painted by the children. In April 1915 a hamper of comforts for soldiers knitted by the children was despatched containing six large scarves, three wool helmets and seven

pairs of socks. The wool was provided free of charge by a local spinner and production soon reached an industrial scale. Knitted comforts were supplied to Keighley Military Hospital and, later in 1917, 60 soldiers from the hospital were entertained in the school. The programme included a whist drive, tea, a walk on the moors and a concert. The appearance of no fewer than fifteen motor cars at one time to convey the invalids caused 'quite a sensation' in the village.¹⁰

Children even contributed to the production of explosives. It was discovered that the humble horse chestnut could be used as an alternative to acetone (an essential element in the manufacture of cordite) and an experimental factory was established in Kings Lynn. The chestnut scheme spread nationwide. Rather more prosaic was the cultivation or collection of food products. By far the largest of the food schemes was the National Egg Collection to provide fresh eggs for wounded soldiers. Started in November 1914 it reached a peak of 1.4 million eggs a week. One hundred thousand honorary collectors, many of them from schools or members of the Scouts, Guides or Church Lads Brigade collected these at over 2,000 centres. Often the children wrote short messages or just their name and address on the eggshells and received notes of thanks back from the men on the receiving end of the gifts.¹¹

Some individual children went even further. In Burnley, Lancashire, two young girls performed heroic deeds on behalf of local charities. Amy Foster became known as the "Hieland Lassie" on account of the Highland costume she wore when collecting funds for soldiers parcels. One of 11 children of Teddy and Maud Foster, Amy also worked tirelessly for St Dunstan's Fund for the Blind both during and after the war. Jennie Jackson, daughter of a miner from Towneley Colliery, was born in 1907 and, as "Little Kitchener", became perhaps the best known child fund raiser of the war. Her mother Kate made a perfect replica military uniform for Jennie and, after gaining permission from the Chief Constable, Jennie began collecting coppers in Burnley but soon gravitated to touring local pubs, clubs and factories as well. Her phenomenal success was such that in February 1916 Jennie decided to collect for a field ambulance, which was built in Burnley, and handed over to the army by Queen Alexandra, with Jennie proudly present. In all she raised a total of £4,000 (roughly equivalent to £200,000 today) and received the War Medal of the British Red Cross Society. At the 1919 Great March of

Peace in London Jennie received her highest honour, becoming the only child to be permitted to join the march and witnessing the unveiling of the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior in Westminster Abbey. Her mother went on to become head of the women's section of the Royal British Legion in Burnley and Jennie herself lived to the age of 89, dying in 1997.¹²

In all, there was an enormous range of charitable activity undertaken, but with a significant bias towards comforts for troops and medical supplies. Between them these organisations used an astonishing range of fund-raising techniques.

Many of these are still in use today, such as flag days, which, though not invented during the First World War, mushroomed after 1914. Direct mail to potential donors was used for the first time to any significant extent and payroll giving, though again not new, increased significantly. In Birmingham weekly collections were made in most of the large factories and 50,000 people contributed over £20,000 to NRF. Those employed by the city council in Manchester utilised a similar method, the officials taxing themselves on the amount of their salaries, the taxes varying from 2¾ to 5 per cent.¹³

However this flourishing of charities and voluntary activity also brought its problems. Not least the lack of co-ordination and whether the items collected or sent matched the needs of the troops. There was duplication of effort and unfairness in distribution. Quality control was a further problem as not all charities produced their goods to high standards.

The situation was most critical with regard to more costly, technological, items. The motor ambulances being supplied were all of different makes and types, meaning that maintenance was a serious issue. One fundraising group, from the clan Mcrae, wanted to provide an ambulance solely for clan members. This suggests a certain naivety about the organisation of the battlefield. Presumably the envisaged ambulance would be able to 'home in' on wounded clansmen while barring its doors to any casualties of inferior birth. Thus proving reality at least matched the satire of the *Wipers Times*.

THE DIRECTOR GENERAL OF VOLUNTARY ORGANIZATIONS¹⁴

Eventually in order to bring some much needed organisation to this chaos the War Office appointed a 'Director General of Voluntary Organisations' to oversee both the demand and supply ends of the system. This might have caused even more problems as imposing order from above on what was essentially a bottom-up surge of voluntary activity could have backfired. Fortunately the man appointed to the post, Sir Edward Ward, was an inspired choice. No one combined his knowledge of army supply, Whitehall politics and managerial competence. Yet he is today an almost entirely forgotten figure.

Ward was born in 1853 and in 1874 entered the commissariat of the Control Department, the precursor of the Army Service Corps (now the Royal Logistics Corps). He saw active service in the Sudan campaign where his work was commended by Sir Garnett Wolsey. In 1895-6, he was Assistant Adjutant General for the Ashanti expeditionary force in West Africa. In Ashanti, Ward demonstrated an early flair for innovative management, being particularly sensitive in his handling of the 100,000-plus "native" carriers. Ward achieved this by the simple, but effective, steps of giving "native" overseers greater responsibility for managing porters and by using local labour rather than 'trusted' workers from further afield who had less immunity to local diseases. Ward ensured that pay was fair and remitted to the labourers' families and insisted that it was imperative that all British officers dealing with the labourers should both speak their language and understand their culture.

Back in London, Ward was, for the next five years, given charge of the annual Royal Military Tournament. Under his guidance, the success and popularity of the Tournament went forward by leaps and bounds. In its early days the Tournament had made a loss but in the first year under Ward profits were more than £12,000 whereas when Ward relinquished his role in 1900 there was an immediate drop to just £2,000 and five figure profits were not achieved again until 1923.

On the outbreak of the Boer War Ward was appointed Chief Supply Officer for Natal and quickly found himself in charge of supplies during the siege of Ladysmith. To help raise morale Ward also took responsibility for editing the short-lived periodical the *Ladysmith Lyre*. Ward clearly had a good sense of humour as

demonstrated both in the punning title of the 'Lyre' and when a formal complaint was lodged with him by some ladies who were indignant about soldiers bathing naked in the river on Sundays. Ward sensibly suggested that the ladies not look. Without Ward's organisational expertise supplies would have run out and the garrison forced to surrender. Instead he was able to ensure that five weeks supplies lasted three and half months during which not a single person, black or white, civilian or soldier died of malnutrition. For this feat Lord Roberts dubbed him "the greatest supply officer since Moses".

On his return to England Ward became First Secretary and then, from 1901, Permanent Secretary at the War Office, the highest ranked civil servant. Over the next 13 years Ward helped oversee the greatest period of reform the British Army has ever undertaken. Though he didn't see eye-to-eye with the Unionist War Minister Hugh Arnold-Foster, Ward worked indefatigably alongside his Liberal Party successor Richard Burdon Haldane, and his involvement in many positive reforms was crucial. They included:

- The formation of the first Army Council and General Staff
- The re-organisation of the Army Medical Department and that of the War Office itself
- The mobilization plan that was initiated in 1914 and which worked like clockwork
- The production, with Douglas Haig, of a modern set of administration and training manuals
- Authoring the *Territorial Force Regulations* for the newly created reserve force
- Chairing the Committee on Civil Employment of Ex-Soldiers and Sailors, a cause close to his heart and demonstrating his keen humanitarian concern. This ensured that every soldier learned some kind of technical skill during his military career
- Founding the Union Jack Club, providing facilities and accommodation for 'other ranks' when in London, Ward was its President for 22 years.

- Organising the War Office Sports Club, where officers, private soldiers and civilians mixed as equals.

- The creation of the Officers Training Corps which, in most accounts, is credited to Haldane but was quite definitely Ward's brainchild as Ward had first made the proposal in 1903 before Haldane's tenure.

- The London School of Economics Administrative Course for Army Officers through which Ward became the first to introduce management training for civil servants and the armed forces and one of the first to apply business methods in Whitehall, some nine years before Lloyd-George utilised similar principles in his wartime coalition.

These reforms, and the Army administrative course in particular, demonstrate that many of the senior administrative officers and several of the senior commanders of the First World War, not least Douglas Haig, were well-versed in modern business management principles, including the latest thinking from the United States on scientific management. Perhaps this information further weakens the argument that all British First World War Generals were dyed-in-the-wool reactionaries, out-of-touch with the modern world.

Ward left the War Office in January 1914 expecting to spend his retirement in comparative ease but the war quickly changed that. 1915 saw a 'comforts scandal' erupt in the British press with numerous reports of shortages and lack of co-ordination. Questions were asked in Parliament and both Army and War Office were desperate to find a solution. They turned to Ward. He had suddenly become a busy man again, because as well as taking on the role of DGVO he was during the war:

- Chairman of the Council of the RSPCA where he ensured liaison between them and the Royal Army Veterinary Corps contributing significantly to the welfare of horses in the army and directly involving himself in cases of animal cruelty in the UK.

- Honorary Treasurer and a member of the General Purposes Committee of the West Indian Contingent Committee.

- Assistant Inspector of Shells for the Ministry of Munitions.

Commandant-in-Chief of the Metropolitan Special Constabulary
(seen here)

and

– Organiser of the ‘Camps Library’ which distributed the astounding total of sixteen million books to the troops during the war.

In 1916, the Army Council added the task of providing comforts from Britain for the troops of Allied countries to Ward’s list of duties and this included the US troops who began to reach Europe in late 1917. This was achieved smoothly and he and the voluntary organisations under his department received especial thanks from the officer commanding US forces in Britain, Major General John Biddle. Ward even ensured that the DGVO’s office continued some of its work after the war by asking the various depots to assist in aiding the devastated areas of France with donations of clothing and other essential items.

The DGVO scheme was clearly needed and it overcame many of the supply problems encountered at the outbreak of war when a localised approach to comforts and medical supplies was all that existed. Such co-ordination required great skill and diplomacy if it was not to alienate the mass of philanthropic activity that had been generated. In this, the appointment of Sir Edward Ward was a masterstroke. He was probably the only person who combined an intimate knowledge of the armed forces, with a commitment to efficient management and a compassionate understanding of voluntary effort.

THE IMPACT OF PHILANTHROPY

However, Ward’s remit was coordination of supply, not regulation of abuses, such as that of the French relief Fund and in 1916 the government reacted to this and other scandals by bringing in the first regulation of non-endowed charities through the War Charities Act. State intervention therefore occurred due to a failure to integrate the dual charitable impulses of mutual aid and philanthropy with the requirements of a budding state welfare

So what are the main conclusions about philanthropy and voluntary action in Britain? Well, all of them are in complete opposition to the received opinions about wartime charity:

First, the war provided a new impetus to voluntarism based upon the principle of mutual aid. There was a profusion of small, local organisations providing support for the troops of their town, village or workplace.

Second, the First World War contributed towards an increased professionalization of the charity sector. Many modern fund-raising techniques were invented or expanded.

Thirdly, there was then a greater movement towards democratisation in the voluntary sector as well as moves into new areas and greater use of business principles. These changes were clearly influenced by what had happened during the war, not least through Edward Ward's DGVO.

Finally, and most importantly, charitable and philanthropic activities played a major role in helping Britain win the war. It provided Britain with a distinct advantage over her main adversary, Germany, in the reservoir of social capital on which it was able to draw.

Voluntary action in Britain during the war acted as an integrating mechanism between social classes that helped initiate changes in the relationship between 'top-down' philanthropy and 'bottom-up' mutual aid and this trend continued into the post-war period. Voluntary action contributed significantly both to maintaining morale at home and overseas with troops and prisoners of war. Contrary to received opinion, through war writers such as Siegfried Sassoon and Robert Graves and more recently Paul Fussell, the vast majority of troops welcomed charitable efforts on their behalf and were kindly disposed towards benevolence on the home front.

In contrast German social control of voluntary action strengthened under an increasingly militaristic government and this led to a serious weakening of social capital as the government prioritised military supply over civilian and took over direct control of voluntary organisations, alienating most charity workers and soldiers alike.

Though the war did not, perhaps, usher in a deluge of social change in Britain there were many advances, especially psychological change in the consciousness of many ordinary women who assumed positions of responsibility in wartime charities.

Philanthropic activity in Britain was a demonstration that the vast majority of people maintained a resolute determination to ‘see things through’ to victory. In every sense the First World War was a ‘people’s war’ and, however, small their individual contribution, those working for charities had done their bit.

NOTES

- [1] Examples include: Arthur Marwick, *The Deluge: British Society and the First World War* (Boston, Little Brown, 1965); Gerard DeGroot, *Blighty: British Society in the Era of the Great War* (London, Longman, 1996); Jay Winter, and Jean-Louis Robert (eds.), *Capital Cities at War: Paris, London, Berlin 1914-1919* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997); Trevor Wilson, *The Myriad Faces of War: Britain and the Great War, 1914-1918* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1986); Ian Beckett, *Home Front 1914-1918, How Britain survived the Great War*, (Kew, National Archives, 2006); Peter Cooksley, *The Home Front: Civilian Life in World War One* (London, NPI Media, 2006); E. S. Turner, *Dear Old Blighty* (London, Michael Joseph, 1980); Richard Van Emden, and Steve Humphries, *All Quiet on the Home Front: An oral history of life in Britain during the First World War* (London, Hodder Headline, 2003) and Diana Condell, and Jean Liddiard, *Working for Victory? Images of Women in the First World War* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987).
- [2] Peter Grant, *Philanthropy and Voluntary Action in the First World War: Mobilizing Charity* (Abingdon and New York, Taylor and Francis, 2014).
- [3] Alderman H. Keatley Moore (ed.), *Croydon and the Great War: Together with the Croydon roll of honour* (Corporation of Croydon, Croydon, 1920).
- [4] Deborah Cohen, *The War Come Home: Disabled Veterans in Britain and Germany, 1914-1939* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2001), pp. 135-6 and 119.
- [5] John S. Samuel, *European War: Statement of the funds raised in Glasgow for war relief purposes from August 1914 to December 1915 prepared for the Lord Provost* (Glasgow, City Chambers, 1916). “War Philanthropy: Glasgow raises £4,000,000,” *Glasgow Herald*, 26 December 1919.

- [6] National Archives Kew, CHAR 4/1 TO 4/21, Registers of individual charities.
- [7] Grant, *op. cit.*, 2014, p. 25.
- [8] Grant, *op. cit.*, 2014, pp. 104-8.
- [9] "Girls' Patriotic Union of Secondary Schools", First Report, November 1914, Imperial War Museum WWC ED 4/5.
- [10] Diary or Log Book, Stanbury Board School, Haworth, Yorkshire at Haworth village website http://www.haworth-village.org.uk/history/school/stanbury_school.asp, accessed on 20/09/06
- [11] Grant, *op. cit.*, 2014, pp. 42-3.
- [12] Grant, *op. cit.*, 2014, pp. 43-6.
- [13] Alderman W. H. Bowater, Lord Mayor of Birmingham, "Busy Birmingham: Equipping the Allied Armies", *TP's Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 28, 24 April 1915, p 31. Alderman Daniel McCabe, Lord Mayor of Manchester, "Manchester's Motto", *TP's Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 21, 6 March 1915, p 203.
- [14] Grant, *op. cit.*, 2014, pp. 61-82.



“Little Kitchener”, Miss Jennie Jackson.