

## ‘VERY MUCH ALIVE AND KICKING’

*The Actresses’ Franchise League from 1914 to 1928*

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During the years between the outbreak of the First World War and the passing of the Equal Franchise Bill, the Actresses’ Franchise League (AFL) continued to open up new opportunities for actresses and female theatre professionals to become involved in political and feminist activism by extending its work as an organisation across a diverse portfolio of social, political and philanthropic projects. Although they could not have known it, the commencement of the First World War in August 1914 would change the way the AFL had been operating and campaigning almost beyond recognition. After six successful years of activism within the suffrage movement and the theatre industry, and with over 900 members, an affiliated men’s group and over a hundred Patrons, the organisation was confident and capable. Maintaining a strictly neutral stance on militancy despite strong feelings within its membership both for and against violent direct action, the AFL sustained its connections with both militant and constitutional suffrage societies and continued to take part in suffrage meetings, exhibitions and demonstrations after the outbreak of war. Many members were involved in a new society, the United Suffragists, which welcomed female and male members of all other suffrage societies, regardless of militant affiliation. Formed on 6 January 1914,<sup>1</sup> the United Suffragists hoped to be an organisation free from some of the toxic issues around leadership, partiality and violent activism that had plagued other suffrage societies, particularly the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU). The Actresses’ Franchise League provided entertainments at the United Suffragists’ Christmas Sale in December 1914,<sup>2</sup> was represented among other suffrage societies at a Women and Army Work Exhibition held in Caxton Hall in May 1915,<sup>3</sup> and had a stall at the United Suffragists’ Woman’s Christmas Sale

in Central Hall, Westminster in November 1915.<sup>4</sup> The AFL also joined established theatrical charities such as the Theatrical Ladies' Guild and the Actors' Benevolent Fund in financially supporting theatre performers and workers suffering wartime hardship, administering many other projects such as the Era War Distress Fund and the Three Arts Employment Fund that gave work to unemployed theatre professionals.

Two of the League's wartime satellite projects are explored in this chapter – the Women's Emergency Corps and the British Women's Hospital Fund. Both ventures moved the League into new areas of campaigning, and utilised the skills, generosity and resourcefulness of its members.

Aug 4 – All so strange, unreal – wild rumours of naval engagements, ships sunk – the streets as we walked home were full of excited people waving flags ... then the tension – the rumours – the hopes the fear ... and life went on ... the A.F.L. started organizing The Women's Emergency Corps, meetings every day – women came from all over the Country to register for Service, and here the work for Suffrage showed its value – women were organised trained, ready to face dangers.<sup>5</sup>

The foundation of the Women's Emergency Corps (WEC) by members of the AFL just two days after the outbreak of war on 4 August 1914 was 'one of the most remarkable initiatives undertaken during the War by members of the profession' (Sanderson, 1984: 164). Combining their social activism with their production experience, Lena Ashwell, Decima Moore, Eva Moore and the militant suffragette Eve Haverfield capitalised on their celebrity in both the theatrical world and the suffrage movement to start a national organisation that moved far beyond the scope of their previous theatrical activities. The WEC was 'devised to be elastic, unhampered by political or social prejudices, and prepared to undertake any work that should be useful, whatever that work might prove to be'.<sup>6</sup> *Votes for Women*, now the newspaper of the United Suffragists, reported that four days after the WEC's foundation, 2,000 women had volunteered at Gertrude Kingston's Little Theatre (Kingston, 1937: 191) 'to drive motor-cars, to ride or drive horses ... to take care of crèches, of kindergartens, to cook, to sew, speak several foreign languages, or serve in any other way'.<sup>7</sup> A month later, the WEC headquarters moved to seventy-nine rooms in the Old Bedford College on Baker Street.<sup>8</sup> Freed from any negative association with the suffrage movement in spite of the involvement of prominent militants such as Emmeline Pethick Lawrence on its committee, anti-suffragists were as welcome as suffragists to volunteer their

services. The Corps provided a safe space for such collaboration – united as it was around the war effort and the employment of women, rather than political activism. The WEC held regular and free public meetings in theatres and venues in across the UK to appeal for funds and update supporters, with high-profile speakers including Elizabeth Robins, Lilian Braithwaite, Constance Collier and G. K. Chesterton. The schedule often included simultaneous meetings across the country – thus, on 30 October Lena Ashwell spoke in Cardiff's City Hall and Eva Moore in the Theatre Royal, Manchester, and on 9 December Lady Tree and Emily Pertwee spoke in Bournemouth's Theatre Royal while Lena Ashwell and Eva Moore were at the Tyne Theatre, Newcastle.<sup>9</sup>

By January 1915 the Corps had fifteen branches across England and Wales<sup>10</sup> and eighteen departments including Clerical Work, Housecraft, Interpreting, Land Development, Medical and Nursing, National Food Fund, Needlework, Toy Industry and the Women's Volunteer Corps. The Corps organised the teaching of French and German in over forty military centres outside London, and published two booklets of French and German phrases, subtitled 'The Soldiers' "First Aid" to Foreign Languages', for English soldiers abroad.<sup>11</sup> The idea for the phrasebooks had come from H. M. Paull, playwright, novelist, journalist and honorary secretary of the Dramatists Club, whose gently comic suffrage monologue *An Anti-Suffragist or The Other Side* had been published by the AFL in 1910. Together with the Women's Imperial Health Association, the WEC published a wartime directory of societies engaged in war work,<sup>12</sup> and briefly opened a shop at 180 Oxford Street in which to sell the goods made in its workshops alongside 'Work done by Women of the Artistic Professions (Painting, Music and Stage)'.<sup>13</sup> The toy department in particular was a huge success, developing original designs and registering a trademark. The enterprise was widely reported in the press soon after it began:

At Old Bedford College the Women's Emergency Corps have for the past fortnight opened workrooms for the employment of women in this industry. The results even in that short time have been remarkable, and the big shops like Harrods, the Army and Navy Stores, Peter Robinson's and Selfridge's have given them large orders. One firm has ordered six gross of one toy alone.<sup>14</sup>

Keen to keep the Corps in the public eye, less than a month after the visit by *The Times* reporter, the WEC workrooms had produced the 'Guy-ser', a figure of the Kaiser to be stuffed with straw and burnt on Guy Fawkes night. Attached to each figure was the following verse:

We all shall remember  
 This Fifth of November  
 By Wilhelm's infernal plot!  
 We see no reason  
 Why Germany's treason  
 Should ever be forgot!<sup>15</sup>

The 'Guy-sers' were on sale at WEC public meetings in aid of another AFL satellite project, the Three Arts Employment Fund, as well as at a special stall in Selfridges on Oxford Street on 4 and 5 November, run by members of the Women Writers' Suffrage League (WWSL). Lena Ashwell told the *Daily Chronicle* that she took a hundred 'Guy-sers' to Cardiff for a WEC meeting and 'could have sold three or four times that number'.<sup>16</sup> Other caricatures of prominent wartime figures were made from designs by artist W. A. Wildman, and the WEC toy-making department also began working with the curator of the Tower of London Armouries, Charles Ffoulkes, to design a wooden model of Henry VII.<sup>17</sup> By February 1915 the number of women working in the toy-making department had grown considerably, with the WEC reporting that there were twenty branches across the UK employing 228 women workers, and that the number of girls making toys at Bedford College had grown from twelve to 111 in less than six months.<sup>18</sup> In March 1915 the WEC exhibited its toys at the British Industries Fair, held at the Agricultural Hall in London. *Games and Toys*, the trade journal of the toy industry, described the diverse range of goods at the WEC stand:

They are specialising in the manufacture of wooden toys, and are turning out in large quantities such lines as Noah's arks, model ambulances, Belgian dog carts, doll's bedsteads, etc. They are also making dolls ... Alsatian Peasants, Boulogne Fishwives and toy soldier dolls in khaki uniforms. Other lines they are making in wooden toys are bathing machines, doll's houses, engines, elephants, ducks, Boy Scouts, etc.<sup>19</sup>

They were not alone in representing women's labour at the fair, as the newly formed East London Federation of Suffragettes Toy Factory also had a stand, selling dolls and wooden toys.<sup>20</sup>

The WEC drew formal support from thirty different societies,<sup>21</sup> and both national and international support for its work in the press and at public meetings also helped to keep the organisation publicly visible. Actresses were personally involved with the work of the WEC – Eva Moore recalled spending her days at the Little Theatre and her evenings performing at the Vaudeville Theatre (Moore, 1923: 74) in August

1914,<sup>22</sup> and her sister Decima Moore, who had travelled extensively, ran the Interpreting Department, sending female interpreters to meet and assist refugees from the war upon their arrival in London.<sup>23</sup> These WEC interpreters were part of a large network of women's groups and societies helping Belgian refugees arriving at London stations to find accommodation, work, medical treatment and, if necessary, legal advice. These volunteers came from both suffrage and non-suffrage backgrounds, and 'from a portion of society untapped in earlier wars, the vast network of organised women's groups and associations that had been growing for several decades' (Vining and Hacker, 2001: 362).

One such group, the Women Police Service, was founded in September 1914 by anti-vivisection campaigner Margaret Damer Dawson and journalist and Women's Freedom League activist Nina Boyle. Boyle had thought it unfair that female victims of sexual assault had to give evidence to all-male courtrooms, and had been calling for the formation of a women's police unit to take statements and escort witnesses since 1912, centring her argument on questions of 'justice, dignity and legal rights for women and children' (Jackson, 2006: 17). A former rescue worker with the National Vigilance Association, Damer Dawson's initial motivation for setting up her Women Police Service was a concern for the dangers faced by young girls and women upon arriving in London, focused primarily around sex trafficking. Interviewed as part of the Home Office Inquiry into the addition of women to the Metropolitan Police Force in 1919, she said:

In August 1914 ... I formed a small body of workers to go to the stations to meet the refugees who were coming from the falling Belgian towns ... My work was concerned with the meeting of girls and women ... one night I lost two girls under suspicious circumstances ... a fortnight afterwards I came across a woman who changed her dress and the colour of her hair three times in the same night. I had seen her at the station, and I caught her trying to take from me two girls. I realised that it would be very difficult to do that kind of work, if there were attempts at white slave traffic, without having a body of uniformed and trained women, and I think that gave me the first idea of having women police. (Allen, 1925: 136)

A highly visible presence in London railway stations and outside military venues in the West End, there were at least ten uniformed members of the Women Police patrolling the area around the AFL offices on the Strand, stationed at venues including the Beaver Hut (Canadian YMCA), Eagle Hut (American YMCA) and Savoy Hotel.<sup>24</sup>

The white slave trade, 'one of the most talked about social and political issues in the years before 1914' (Nicholson, 2003: 105), and issues of prostitution and socio-economic realities for women had been of interest to suffragists and suffragist playwrights in the preceding years, although it was a controversial and difficult topic to stage. In July 1914 the AFL had announced that Cicely Hamilton was adapting a novel by Elizabeth Robins about sex trafficking into a play for the second season of the Woman's Theatre, a project Inez Bensusan had set up in 1913 to improve conditions for women theatre professionals, to help women develop skills in administrative and backstage theatre work, and to further both feminist and suffragist agendas through theatre. In Hamilton's stage adaptation of Robins's *Where Are You Going To?*, two teenage sisters, Honor and Bettina, travel to London from the countryside to visit their aunt, who they have never met. Upon their arrival at Victoria Station they are met by a woman who they assume is their aunt and driven in her car to what they think is her address. Over the course of the play it becomes clear that they have been taken to a brothel and have no idea where they are. Originally recommended for licence by the censor, it was due to be performed in December 1914, but the licence was ultimately refused because of the brothel scenes, and also because of the controversy surrounding Bernard Shaw's play, *Mrs Warren's Profession*, which had been refused a licence in 1894.<sup>25</sup> Squire Bancroft, when consulted about *Where Are You Going To?*, wrote to the Lord Chamberlain's Office, 'I fail to see how The Lord Chamberlain can grant his licence to the second act of this play and refuse it to "Mrs. Warren's Profession".'<sup>26</sup> The play had to be dropped from the Woman's Theatre programme, much to Bensusan's disappointment.

Although the 1914 Woman's Theatre week eventually had to be cancelled, Bensusan adapted and diversified the project in response to the changing environment brought about by the war, introducing a spin-off venture, the Woman's Theatre Camps Entertainments, to support the war effort and entertain the troops at home and abroad.<sup>27</sup> The AFL's president, Gertrude Elliott, became president of the Women's Theatre Camps Entertainments and their first performance was at Aldershot on 6 November 1914.<sup>28</sup> 1915 and 1916 saw demand for the AFL's suffrage propaganda fall, but its war work flourished, with the Woman's Theatre Camps Entertainments giving 300 entertainments in 1915,<sup>29</sup> and over 600 the following year in clubs, huts, hospitals and camps. Averaging six to eight concerts per week, the League employed 451 artists over this period.<sup>30</sup> The last performance of the Woman's Theatre

Camps Entertainments appears to have been in July 1917 at the Gables Theatre in Surbiton, and featured storytelling, short plays, songs and music recitals with a cast that included Inez Bensusan, May Whitty and Ben Webster. The programme for the performance proudly stated that over the first six months of 1917, 426 concerts had been given by the organisation.<sup>31</sup>

Katherine E. Kelly's essay on the AFL during the First World War (Kelly, 1994: 121) refers to the organisation as 'feminist theatre in camouflage', and as well as the Woman's Theatre Camps Entertainments, AFL members were involved in organising performances at a number of military venues, including the YMCA Shakespeare Hut on Gower Street and the Endell Street Hospital in Covent Garden. At the Shakespeare Hut, which had Johnston Forbes-Robertson, Gertrude Elliott and Israel Gollancz on its committee for Drama and Music, the entertainments featured a mix of plays, music, songs and recitations.<sup>32</sup> For a night of variety entertainment on 6 January 1917, Gertrude Elliott organised a packed programme of one-act plays, including J. M. Barrie's *The Twelve Pound Look* and Gertrude Jennings's *The Bathroom Door*, alongside songs and recitations from AFL members Irene Vanbrugh and Decima Moore.<sup>33</sup> The entertainment committee for the Military Hospital on Endell Street also included AFL and WWSL members Bensusan, Robins, Beatrice Harraden and Whitty.<sup>34</sup> League members also became involved in war work outside of their theatre-related projects – Cicely Hamilton spent most of the war working for the Scottish Women's Hospitals in France (Whitelaw, 1990: 138); Adeline Bourne served overseas as an officer in Queen Mary's Army Auxiliary Corps and worked as an acting paymaster in the War Office (Law, 2000: 32); while Olga Nethersole joined the Voluntary Aid Detachment and nursed at Hampstead Military Hospital, subsequently founding the People's League of Health in 1917.

What becomes evident in the few accounts of the AFL's work immediately after the outbreak of war written by those who took part is the prejudice they faced as women wanting to assist, rather than challenge, the government. Initially, the voluntary work done by women was barely acknowledged, financially unsupported and undervalued by the very organisations the AFL was trying to help. Lena Ashwell remembered that 'Weekly lists were sent to the War Office, containing full particulars as to the numbers of women we could supply for transport, cooks, interpreters, and so forth; and each week a letter was received in acknowledgement, saying that women "were not needed"' (Ashwell, 1936: 75). The

Women's Emergency Corps saw this as 'ludicrous and shameful', noting that the Home Secretary had refused the offer of the services of women interpreters among others:

twenty-five women motor-cyclists, able to repair their own and other people's machines, has been similarly neglected. And how about the post-office work, the ticket-selling, the express-message carrying, and other useful and necessary employments that are now suspended or working short? Women could carry them on just as well as men, while men are in the field. But 'No women need apply' has been this narrow-minded Government's rule, whether for votes or anything else.<sup>35</sup>

The many satellite projects that the AFL was supporting meant that fundraising was a constantly pressing issue, and their experiences with the propaganda of the suffrage movement made members unafraid to appeal directly for help to potential supporters on feminist, suffragist, theatrical and patriotic grounds. League member Margaret Webster, daughter of May Whitty and Ben Webster, attributed the success of the AFL in wartime to the skills learnt through its participation in the suffrage movement:

Actually, the League was performing an educational function of much wider scope, though its members did not know it at the time ... they learned everything there was to know about how to run an organisation or a stage ... they learned how to raise money, how to run a public meeting, how to think on their feet, how to turn hostility or apathy into laughter and enthusiasm. (Webster, 1969: 249)

All too aware of the manipulation of the press and public by government, the AFL used patriotism for its own ends rather than as an ideology that informed its work. The use of patriotic allusions and appeals by the AFL is an example of its adaptability and awareness of the social and financial climate in which it wanted to succeed. This is particularly visible in the work of the British Women's Hospital Fund, another organisation based at the AFL's offices at 2 Robert Street.<sup>36</sup> Initially a sub-committee of the AFL, the first meeting was held on 12 August 1915, a year after the outbreak of war.<sup>37</sup> The advisory committee was made up entirely of AFL members, including Bensusan, Nina Boucicault, Madeleine Lucette Ryley, Decima and Eva Moore, Auriol Lee, Ashwell, Whitty, Bourne and Winifred Mayo, with the AFL's president, Gertrude Elliott, also president of the committee. The initial aim of the committee was to raise funds to start and run a complete hospital unit of 250 beds to be given to the French government 'for their sick and wounded

soldiers'.<sup>38</sup> The AFL advertised the scheme widely in the national and international press, asking for donations to be sent directly to the offices in Robert Street:

On behalf of the Actresses' Franchise League, of which she is president, Lady Forbes-Robertson is making an appeal to all parts of the British Empire to help, with their sympathy and their money, in the formation of a British Women's Hospital ... The committee have every confidence that the daughters of Britain and of her Overseas Empire will not refuse to come forward at the is supreme hour of need, and aid, to their utmost, a splendid work of mercy.<sup>39</sup>

A month later, the *Daily Telegraph* reported that the initial scheme had been postponed in favour of another – the refurbishment and conversion of the Star and Garter Hotel in Richmond, Surrey, into a home for permanently disabled soldiers and sailors.<sup>40</sup> The British Women's Hospital and the AFL organised a procession to advertise the first public meeting of the fund. Women marched with banners, posters and sandwich boards through the West End, accompanied by a number of smaller supporting groups, including an all-female band in uniform from the Church Nursing and Ambulance Brigade,<sup>41</sup> an event that seems to have been inspired by, and directly to reference, pre-war suffrage marches. Ever aware of the power of propaganda, Bourne wrote to Maud Arncliffe Sennett on 27 October 1915 to ask her to speak on behalf of the British Women's Hospital. Bourne was candid about the outcome she wanted: 'It is really a recruiting meeting, the subject to stir them is Edith Cavell.'<sup>42</sup> Cavell, a nurse stationed in Brussels, had been shot at dawn by the German army on 12 October for assisting the escape of Allied soldiers. International protests had followed her arrest and execution and her story and memory was potent with patriotic and moral power (Daunton, 2004). Bourne reported that the Committee of the British Women's Hospital had decided that to 'associate and perpetuate' the name of Edith Cavell, they should appeal to supporters to raise funds to name a wing of the Star and Garter Home for disabled servicemen after her.<sup>43</sup> An appeal was duly made in the press and Bourne publicly sought and gained the approval of Cavell's sister for their campaign.<sup>44</sup> The Star and Garter Home for disabled servicemen was one of the British Women's Hospital Fund's most successful ventures and they raised £150,000 (over £10 million at 2015 values) – three times the initial target – to restore and rebuild part of the building in Richmond to make it suitable for wounded troops (Figure 10).



10 'Haven', poster for the Star and Garter Home and British Women's Hospital Fund, 1915.

Members of the AFL continued to take part in public fundraising days and performances, demonstrating their patriotic visibility on the streets and in the theatres, much as they had previously demonstrated their suffragist affiliations. Friday 12 May 1916 was appointed 'Lamp Day' to commemorate Florence Nightingale's birthday, and the British Women's Hospital asked for funds to be sent to support its own project, as well as the Women's Service Bureau and the Women's Emergency Corps. *The Times* reported that 6,000 women were on the streets of central London on 'Lamp Day' selling small cardboard lamps at a penny, threepence and a shilling each, and the London County and Westminster Bank in Victoria Street stayed open until midnight to receive collection boxes.<sup>45</sup> Actresses Nina Boucicault, Gertrude Kingston, Janette Steer and May Whitty sold lamps outside the Star and Garter Fund offices in Bond Street, while Lilian Braithwaite, Gladys Cooper and Marie Lohr were stationed in Harrods. The amount raised for the societies was over £5,600.<sup>46</sup>

The British Women's Hospital organised a number of fundraising performances, including a star-studded matinee at the London Coliseum in June 1916. Produced by Lillah McCarthy, the matinee was well

supported by the theatre industry, with over sixty performers, including Adeline Genée, Nigel Playfair and Gertrude Kingston, volunteering to sell programmes in the auditorium.<sup>47</sup> The programme featured *The Admirable Crichton*, four topical comic sketches by J. M. Barrie and some musical performances.<sup>48</sup> The sketches were presented together under the heading *Irene Vanbrugh's Pantomime*, and included a monologue performed by Mrs Patrick Campbell and a duologue between Johnston Forbes-Robertson and Gertrude Elliott which referenced their interest in the Endell Street Hospital:

LADY F: (*to audience*) It is about an extraordinary thing that happened at the hospital to-day. (*troubled*) Forbes, I oughtn't really to tell it before them, it's so frightfully personal!

SIR F: Well, I wasn't there, so it can't be personal to me.

LADY F: Oh can't it! It's just the sort of thing dear that might wreck a happy home.

SIR F: Woman, you are trying to work upon their feelings, like some play-actress. Out with it.

LADY F: (*to audience*) You see it's *he* who insists, so if anything unpleasant comes of this, you'll take my side won't you? It began two days ago, when a soldier was brought to the Hospital suffering from nerve-shock. It had deprived him of the power of speech, as you know sometimes happens.

SIR F: Yes.

LADY F: The doctor was most anxious to make him speak, and he begged me to help – and all day yesterday I sat beside the poor man's bed talking and talking and trying to get a word out of him.

SIR F: Are you sure you gave him a chance, my love?

LADY F: Ungenerous! I repeated a 100 times "The one thing I want to know in the world is what regiment you belong to! Oh, if only you would tell me what regiment you belong to" – and one could see he wanted to tell me, but he couldn't do it. This morning I began again. I said "I couldn't sleep all last night for wondering what regiment you belong to, I'll never sleep again if you don't tell me what regiment you belong to!" and, so it went on, and he was obviously frightfully anxious to tell me, he kept opening his mouth but no word would come, I was so sorry for him I began to cry – (*she cries now*) and that did it. He spoke!<sup>49</sup>

The duologue continues, and Gertrude Elliott sends her husband offstage in search of her handkerchief, using the opportunity of his absence to confess to the audience that she kissed the invalid soldier because when he did finally speak he said she looked like his mother. The audience is left to decide if the soldier was genuinely confused, or was just taking

advantage of her good nature. However, Barrie is careful not to mock the inarticulacy of the shell-shocked soldier, but rather to gently poke fun at the happy marriage of the Forbes-Robertsons.

The British Women's Hospital Fund also held fundraisers for other related projects that involved League members. After a successful charity matinee performance on 23 March 1917 at the Coliseum,<sup>50</sup> *The Passing of the Third Floor Back* transferred to the Playhouse for a three-week run, with the entire proceeds going to the Scottish Women's Hospital Fund. The cast, who all appeared voluntarily for eight shows a week, included Elliott and Whitty. This generosity was matched by Frank Curzon, who lent the Playhouse for free for the run, and Jerome K. Jerome, who waived his author's fee.<sup>51</sup> At the matinee performance on 18 April 1917 'organized by the British Women's Hospital Committee in Aid of Scottish Women's Hospitals Abroad', many performers including Eva Moore and Adeline Genée worked as programme sellers inside the auditorium alongside the daughter of the Prime Minister, Elizabeth Asquith,<sup>52</sup> who was by then on the committee of the British Women's Hospital Fund.

Despite its success, the AFL discovered again that, as with the WEC, even when women were attempting to assist the war effort and gaining national press coverage, the government and established institutions obstructed their participation at every level. May Whitty found that the British Women's Hospital 'encountered enormous difficulties from the British Red Cross who were still very prejudiced against women's work' and would only allow female nurses, not doctors, to travel.<sup>53</sup> The Red Cross benefited from the work of the British Women's Hospital, WEC and other organisations set up by the AFL in spite of its lack of support for them. Without genuine government support for its initiatives, the League's projects relied on sponsorship, gifts in kind, fundraising and appeals to those in positions of power and influence. Unhindered by pre-war debates around the effectiveness or appropriateness of suffragette militancy, it was easier for League members to garner high-profile support, and their many wartime projects, including both the WEC and the British Women's Hospital, had titled ladies as members and patrons – the beginning of formal and overtly publicised connections with the upper classes that would go on to characterise much of their later charitable work. The success of the Star and Garter Fund and the work of the British Women's Hospital prompted an invitation for Whitty and Lady Cowdray, as chair and treasurer of the Fund, to join the previously all-male Red Cross Committee of the Star and Garter, and although

reluctant to accept the title from the Lloyd George government, Whitty became the first actress to receive a damehood when the Red Cross recommended her for a DBE in 1918 (Webster, 1969: 255). The Women's Emergency Corps was formally disbanded in November 1919, a year after the First World War ended, having been the foundation organisation for many other groups including the Women's Volunteer Reserve.

Theatre ownership and management structures, particularly in the commercial West End houses, were very different after the war. Actor-managers had largely given way to syndicate ownerships that some argue had 'little or no interest in theatre as an art form' as opposed to a commercial proposition, and the costs of mounting and attending shows had increased due to higher rents and the introduction of the Entertainment Tax in 1916 (Gardner, 2008: 76). Wartime restrictions had also adversely affected provincial theatres and touring theatre companies, and the regional repertory theatres that had been established before 1914 had struggled to remain active and successful. The AFL continued to campaign not only for the equal franchise but for equality for women in all areas of social and political life, using its experiences during the war as well as from the pre-war suffrage campaign to maintain a political presence. As Karen Hunt and June Hannam have noted, 'the interwar era saw new "women's issues" cohere and seek space on the wider political agenda' (Hunt and Hannam, 2013: 133), and the AFL after 1918 had a broader portfolio of connections in industry and politics than before the war and just as fervent a desire to agitate for change. Thus an AFL meeting with the theme 'The Artist's Place in Reconstruction' was held at the St James's Theatre on 20 June of that year. Whitty chaired the meeting, saying:

On account of the war they had lost touch with members and friends ... but they had all been trying to do their bit, and ... the League's bit had been pretty extensive ... they had not lost sight of the fact that the League was a suffrage society first and foremost. They were very much alive and kicking, as of old, against injustice and inequality, and trying to better conditions.<sup>54</sup>

Maud Arncliffe Sennett reiterated Whitty's comments, suggesting that 'they had not got complete equality of the sexes either in Parliament or out of it, and until they did she could not believe there would be a really settled world'.<sup>55</sup>

The 1920s saw the AFL continuing its constitutional campaigning with suffrage societies and newly formed groups, and although it does

not seem to have produced or commissioned suffrage plays after the end of the war, AFL members were able to use their wartime experiences of women's social, political and legal inequality directly in the ongoing campaign. In 1921 a number of AFL members and supporters became part of the Six Point Group, a non-party political organisation founded by Lady Rhondda to establish equality for women. The Six Point Group and the AFL continued to share membership and fundraising opportunities as well as building on the success of the AFL's networks and skill-sharing experience. The executive committee, social committee and vice presidents included Clemence Dane, Eva Moore, Elizabeth Robins, Nina Boucicault, Una Dugdale and Ethel Smyth, with Winifred Mayo as the organising secretary.<sup>56</sup> The Six Point Group was one of the forty-nine societies affiliated to the Consultative Committee of Women's Organisations, first formed in 1916 by the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) and then reorganised by Lady Astor in 1921 to promote 'networking ... among women activists and politicians, seeking to draw women into the normal processes of political lobbying' (Thane, 2013: 61). During the fifth annual meeting of the Consultative Committee of Women's Organisations, Winifred Mayo announced that the AFL would be giving half the funds raised by its 1926 December birthday party to the committee.<sup>57</sup> Held at the Hyde Park Hotel, the event's twenty-three hostesses included Madge Kendal, May Whitty, Decima Moore, Ruby Miller, Clara Butt and Gladys Cooper.<sup>58</sup>

Earlier in 1926, the AFL, dressed in its colours of pink and green,<sup>59</sup> marched in London in the Women's Equal Political Rights procession on 3 July.<sup>60</sup> Forty women's societies took part in a procession reminiscent of the pre-war suffrage campaign, walking in formation from Charing Cross to Hyde Park.<sup>61</sup> The press had not forgotten the League's role in demonstrations before 1914:

The procession took ... a route full of memories for the veterans ... the Actresses' Franchise League ... remembering that since they marched in the last great procession they had set going the schemes of service that led to the wide development and organization of women's war work.<sup>62</sup>

A year later, the AFL was a signatory to a letter from Lady Rhondda – who had first petitioned in 1920<sup>63</sup> for the right to take her place as a hereditary peer in the House of Lords, based on the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act 1919 – on behalf of the Equal Political Rights Campaign Committee to the government to demand that votes for women at the age of 21 would be included in the King's speech at the opening of

Parliament in 1927.<sup>64</sup> Again the suffrage societies joined to show support for the Equal Franchise Bill, and the Women's Freedom League (WFL) held a mass demonstration in Trafalgar Square in July 1927 calling on the government to pass an Equal Franchise measure 'so as to ensure the inclusion of the new women voters ... in time to vote at the next General Election'.<sup>65</sup> Adeline Bourne represented the AFL and spoke to remind her audience 'that, before the war, people were full of reasons against giving women the vote; after the war, no one could find any reasons against'.<sup>66</sup>

Alongside members of the WFL, the NUWSS and WSPU, May Whitty, Decima and Eva Moore and Edyth Olive represented the AFL at Emmeline Pankhurst's funeral, held in St John's Church, Westminster on 18 June 1928.<sup>67</sup> The Equal Franchise Bill was passed a month later,<sup>68</sup> and the AFL was part of the evening victory reception of the Equal Political Rights Campaign Committee on 24 October 1928 at Caxton Hall. Nearly twenty years after the original production, Winifred Mayo and Kitty Willoughby produced *How The Vote Was Won* at the victory reception, 'with some members of the original cast and in the fashion of 1908'.<sup>69</sup> The first General Election at which women could equally vote with men was held in May 1929.

1914 had begun with the hope of a successful second season of the Woman's Theatre and a commitment to the continuation of suffrage campaigning, but despite the halting of the production and commissioning of suffrage plays later in that year, the AFL, the Woman's Theatre and the Woman's Theatre Camps Entertainments sustained a feminist and suffragist presence, space and visibility onstage and off throughout the war years. Unafraid to try new ventures and to work hard to develop them, the AFL responded to the challenges of the war by utilising and trusting the strengths, instincts and experience of its membership. The Women's Emergency Corps was a project with a significant national reach that sought to practically transform the lives of women and girls left out of work by war, teaching them new skills, harnessing existing ones and encouraging their creativity. Started as it was by actresses used to working at the top of their profession, it is perhaps not surprising that the WEC was a confident, outward-looking organisation – or that the toy-making department, for example, exhibited among well-known makers and competed for sales successfully at a national level just a few months after its formation. Despite the unwillingness of established institutions and systems of government to fully support and recognise the contribution made by the WEC, the Corps became part of a network

of women's organisations working at grassroots level to effect positive change in the lives of British subjects as well as refugees from the war. The British Women's Hospital Fund also raised significant sums of money through applying many of the successful elements of the public-facing propaganda of the constitutional suffrage campaign to its own projects, by utilising the AFL's existing networks within the theatrical profession and reacting quickly to changing circumstances.

During the war, suffragist actresses familiar with the intimidation of female campaigners by the government came to see clearly that it was not their specific participation in the suffrage campaign that most antagonised and threatened the male establishment. The vocal presence of women from every class wanting to move freely and equally in society and industry, even the hundreds of thousands of women volunteers who worked both at home and abroad assisting the war effort, was both passively and actively discouraged and resented, highlighting the unequal position and status of women in society. After the war, the presence of female Members of Parliament created opportunities for feminist and suffragist campaigners to access and contribute to committees that were part of the working process of government, welcoming women into physical and political spaces that they had been prevented from entering before 1914. AFL members keen to remain actively involved in feminist campaigns now had greater opportunities for participation and more resources to draw on. While many original AFL members continued to work in the professional theatre industry after 1928, others such as founder member Adeline Bourne devoted all their time to charitable and philanthropic work, using their performance skills and their organisational experience to continue to campaign for equality for women directly and in collaboration with established and newly emerging groups. Having thrived and expanded during the period 1914–28, the Actresses' Franchise League would continue as an active campaign group and network for a further thirty years, through another world war and a new wave of feminist activism.

## Notes

- 1 Lena Ashwell was a committee member and Maud Arncliffe-Sennett, Beatrice Harraden, Charlotte Shaw, Ben Webster, May Whitty and Laurence Housman were all vice presidents. *Votes for Women*, 6 February 1914, p. 281.
- 2 *Votes for Women*, 11 December 1914, p. 52.
- 3 *The Times*, 11 May 1915, p. 5.

- 4 *Votes for Women*, 12 November 1915, p. 50.
- 5 May Whitty diaries, Library of Congress.
- 6 Women's Emergency Committee Half Year Report, January 1915, p. 3, British Library.
- 7 *Votes for Women*, 14 August 1914, p. 692.
- 8 Women's Emergency Corps Half Yearly Report, 1915, p. 22.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 18.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- 12 *The Lancet*, 24 June 1916, p. 1282.
- 13 Leaflet advertising the Women's Emergency Corps shop, c. 1914.
- 14 *The Times*, 3 October 1914, p. 11.
- 15 *Daily Chronicle*, 3 November 1914.
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 *Pall Mall*, 30 October 1914.
- 18 Women's Emergency Corps Half Yearly Report, 1915, pp. 12–13.
- 19 *Games and Toys*, 1.9, March 1915, p. 362.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 374.
- 21 The Women's Emergency Corps Half Yearly Report lists thirty societies including the Young Women's Christian Association, AFL, WWSL, Women's Institute and American Women's War Relief Fund.
- 22 Moore was performing in her husband's play *Eliza Comes to Stay*, which had transferred from the Criterion Theatre to the Vaudeville on 6 July 1914.
- 23 *Votes for Women*, 9 October 1914, p. 13.
- 24 The Women Police Service report, 1919, pp. 14–15, British Library.
- 25 The play would not be passed for public performance until 1925.
- 26 Lord Chamberlain's Correspondence, 1914/2, British Library.
- 27 *Woman's Theatre Mission Statement*, War Relief matinee programme, 1915.
- 28 *Observer*, 5 November 1914.
- 29 *Votes for Women*, March 1916, p. 151.
- 30 *The Times*, 7 January 1915, p. 5.
- 31 Programme for Woman's Theatre Camps Entertainments, 13 July 1917, Bristol Theatre Collection.
- 32 For more about Gertrude Elliott and the Shakespeare Hut, see Grant Ferguson (2013).
- 33 Programme for the Shakespeare Hut, 6 January 1917.
- 34 Programme for the Military Hospital, Endell Street, 29 December 1916.
- 35 *Votes for Women*, 4 September 1914, p. 719.
- 36 Gertrude Elliott was the president of the advisory committee; other members included Lena Ashwell, Inez Bensusan, Gertrude Kingston, Auriol Lee, Winifred Mayo, Decima, Eva and Mary Moore, Madeleine Lucette Ryley, May Whitty, Lilian Braithwaite, Janette Steer and Miss Compton. Ashwell

- and Edyth Olive were joint honorary treasurers, the honorary secretary was Nina Boucicault and the honorary organising secretary was Adeline Bourne.
- 37 British Women's Hospital Committee minute book, Wellcome Library.
- 38 Letter from British Women's Hospital, Wellcome Library.
- 39 *Daily Telegraph*, 28 August 1915.
- 40 *Daily Telegraph*, 25 September 1915.
- 41 *Morning Post*, 27 September 1915.
- 42 Letter from Adeline Bourne to Maud Arncliffe Sennett, 27 October 1915, Arncliffe Sennett Collection, British Library.
- 43 Ibid.
- 44 *Manchester Guardian*, 1 November 1915.
- 45 *The Times*, 13 May 1916, p. 3.
- 46 *Evening Standard*, 7 June 1916. This is over £340,000 at 2016 values.
- 47 Programme for performance in aid of the Star and Garter Building Fund of the British Women's Hospital, 9 June 1916.
- 48 Ibid.
- 49 J. M. Barrie, *Irene Vanburgh's Pantomime*, LCP 1916/13, British Library.
- 50 *Daily Mail*, 24 March 1917, p. 3.
- 51 *The Times*, 31 March 1917, p. 9.
- 52 Programme for Playhouse, 18 April 1917, Wellcome Library.
- 53 May Whitty diaries, p. 75, Library of Congress.
- 54 *Stage*, 26 June 1919, p. 16.
- 55 Ibid.
- 56 *Time and Tide*, 5 January 1928, p. 21.
- 57 Minutes of Fifth Annual Meeting of the Consultative Committee of Women's Organisations, July 1926, p. 3.
- 58 Actresses' Franchise League Birthday Party notice card, 1926.
- 59 *Vote*, 9 July 1926, p. 210.
- 60 *Stage*, 17 June 1926, p. 12.
- 61 *The Times*, 17 June 1926, p. 11.
- 62 *Manchester Guardian*, 5 July 1926.
- 63 Despite petitions in 1920 and 1948, bills in 1924, 1925, 1926, 1927 and 1928 and a vote in 1930, there was no official acceptance of the principle of admitting women to the Lords until 1949. Lady Rhondda did not live to see the admittance of women to the House of Lords. On the passing of the Life Peerages Act in October 1958, three months after her death, women became eligible to take their places in the Lords.
- 64 *The Times*, 4 February 1927, p. 10.
- 65 *Vote*, 22 July 1927, p. 225.
- 66 Ibid., p. 227.
- 67 *Manchester Guardian*, 19 June 1928, p. 12.
- 68 Parliamentary Archives, HL/PO/PU/1/1928/18&19G5c12.
- 69 *Manchester Guardian*, 13 October 1928, p. 17.

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Shakespeare Hut programme

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