

'Maids of All Work'.¹ Women, Voluntary Labour and Australian Red Cross VADs

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Enid Singleton, from Belmore in Sydney's southern suburbs, joined the Marrickville Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) in 1958. As was commonplace for young women of her generation, she had left school at fifteen and secured a good job at the Sydney County Council (SCC) as a cashier. However, she had always wanted to be a nurse so she decided to join her local VAD at Marrickville and become a voluntary, untrained 'nurse' in her spare time. Every Monday night, Enid travelled from her home in Belmore to Marrickville on the '412' bus to attend classes. For six years, until 1964 when she married and gave up both her paid and unpaid work (and arguably took on more 'work' in the form of housewife and mother), Enid worked at Marrickville hospital, Callen Park (Rozelle hospital), and Canterbury hospital. Her VA duties included serving afternoon tea to ex-servicemen patients at Callen Park; assisting nurses at Marrickville hospital with their ward duties; and handing out books and reading material to patients from the Red Cross library at Canterbury hospital. All her voluntary work and training was carried out either in the evenings or on weekends.² For Enid, when reflecting on both her paid work at the SCC and her unpaid work as a VA, her memories of her VA work were especially poignant, not only in terms of the work but camaraderie and lasting friendship with other VAs.³

The importance and relevance of voluntary labour especially as it relates to women's experiences is a crucial, yet underplayed and not sufficiently understood, phenomena of the working lives of Australian women in the twentieth century.⁴ Generally the focus has been on paid work, and the interplay between the first and second spheres of our society – the government and the business sectors. More recently through the impact of feminist labour historians such as Rae Frances, Marilyn Lake, Ann Curthoys, Joy Damousi, and Ann McGrath, the domestic sector (or fourth sector) has been acknowledged, and its importance, especially for and on women, has been noted. The focus on women, both in paid and domestic work, and the crucial and often contentious issues of race have been identified and explored.⁵ Although more could be done, the result for labour history has been to provide the discipline with a much richer and more representative perspective, especially in terms of gender.

However, it has only been in the very recent past, through my work and that of Joanne Scott that voluntary work and the third sector has been identified and considered as a worthy topic for labour history.⁶ Australian labour history is now at the forefront of this debate, and the silence from American, British, Canadian, European or New Zealand labour historians on this issue is noted.

My broad definition of voluntary work is unpaid work carried out in the public sphere through structured, formal organisations. I have argued elsewhere that voluntary work is not only relevant for labour history, but is very important when considering the roles of women and their impact on the broad relations of work in our society. This occurs when 'work' is not only considered in purely economic terms or in terms of financial remuneration but involves equating paid and unpaid work together, and giving unpaid work the same 'value' as paid work.⁷

Two years ago at the 5th biennial national Labour History conference in Perth, Eileen Yeo suggested that there were difficulties and problematic notions of locating women within

the paradigms of 'class' because of the variety of 'interclass relationships' which exist between and amongst women. This is a very important point when examining the voluntary sector/voluntary sphere especially during the twentieth century when a definite blurring occurred, not only between the background of women doing unpaid work but also in the divisions between paid and unpaid work. It is all the more important because it is in this third sector – the voluntary sphere – where so much of the work of women is located, and hence why it is imperative for labour history to engage in this area.

I do not want to speculate about the reasons for the past neglect of voluntary work (I have articulated this elsewhere). But I do want to focus on the perceptions which are endemic and very difficult to dislodge – that is that voluntary work, and by implication, voluntary workers, are essentially middle class constructs, and by inference that voluntary work is the domain of the privileged in our society or those with time and money on their hands. From my research I conclude that this is simply not the case. Whilst there are always exceptions, voluntary work is not only a construction and practice of the middle classes. There is a rich and varied culture within the labour movement of unpaid work and unpaid workers ranging from the political – trade unions, collectives, and women's auxiliaries; to the cultural – through sport and other forms of 'leisure' such as workers educational groups; through to the social – such as co-operatives, soup kitchens and wartime patriotic organisations. Some of these areas have been explored in the past, others have not. Indeed, in terms of women's working experiences, the omission has been most evident.

What I want to do in this paper is to examine some of these issues through a necessarily brief case study of one voluntary organisation which has been a site of women's voluntary labour for much of the twentieth century. The Voluntary Aid Detachment or VAD forms part of one of the largest philanthropic organisations in Australia, the Australian Red Cross. In order to put the VAD into perspective, a brief outline of its origins is pertinent.⁸ The VAD developed under the auspices of the Red Cross and St. John's Ambulance during the Great War. The Australian Branch of the British Red Cross Society was formed on the outbreak of war, in August 1914, by the wife of the Governor General, Lady Helen Munro Ferguson. Modelled on the British organisation, VADs were formed soon after and provided an invaluable source of unpaid labour for the Red Cross and the Australian government's military machine during the war. Although some men did become VAs, the vast majority were women – younger women. One of the best known British VAs was novelist and journalist Vera Brittain who wrote about her experiences in her hugely popular autobiographical study, *Testament of Youth*.⁹

During the Great War, VAs were essentially women and girls of 'independent means', broadly middle class who wanted to assist in the war effort. Unless they were trained nurses and could enlist in either the Australian Army Nursing Service or travel to England and enlist in the Queen Alexandra's Imperial Nursing Service (which many hundreds of Australian women did), the only way for women to actively participate was to join in one of the many patriotic funds which sprang up all over Australia – or join

the Red Cross, and specifically, in this instance, the VADs.

Those of you who have read *Testament of Youth* will know that essentially the work of a VA was that of an untrained nurse. Their training consisted of attending a series of first aid lectures and working for one month in one of the major hospitals in Sydney, such as Sydney Hospital in Macquarie Street. VAs worked in Red Cross convalescent homes and in military hospitals as nursing orderlies – they carried out menial tasks which included the cleaning of wards, scrubbing and polishing floors, washing and feeding patients, cleaning bedpans, rolling bandages, sorting linen and essentially anything else the matron or other trained paid staff required of them.¹⁰ As one VA remarked, 'Our work consists mainly of housework on a large scale'.¹¹

However, VA work extended further, indeed they were often the public face of the Red Cross. VAs worked at the Anzac Buffet in Hyde Park where returning troops were reunited with their families after disembarking at Woolloomooloo. Here VAs provided refreshments for the men and their families, all of which was funded and organised by the Red Cross. The provision of morning and afternoon teas was also carried out on a daily basis by VAs at the Randwick 4th Australian General Hospital (AGH) (the main military hospital in New South Wales) and at the Victoria barracks in Paddington. Once again all produce and labour was provided by the Red Cross and the foodstuffs were made at the specially created Red Cross Kitchen in Ash Street, Sydney. By 1918, the Red Cross Kitchen has a staff of over 100 women – the large majority of whom were unpaid VAs – who worked on a rostered basis seven days a week from the various VAD detachments around the city and suburbs. The Kitchen supplied morning and afternoon teas to the Anzac Buffet, the Randwick 4th AGH, and also provided hot lunches and dinners for 'Rose Hall' a major Red Cross convalescent home in Forbes Street, Darlinghurst. VAs also provided voluntary labour at the Red Cross Pickle Depot, the Red Cross Jam Factory and the Red Cross Fruit and Vegetable Depot.

There is little doubt that much of the VA work was simply an extension of the domestic work carried out by women in the private sphere. This is evidenced by the cooking, cleaning, preparing and serving of food. Indeed VA work also included what we now know as 'social work', welfare and rehabilitation, and many VAs in the post-war period assisted with the Red Cross After-Care Department which was operated out of 'Rose Hall' for much of the 1920s. The After-Care Department cared for dependents of returned soldiers from the poorer areas surrounding Darlinghurst. Despite the existence of the Department of Repatriation, formed in 1917 to help returned servicemen, it appears that the need for the services of the After-Care Department was considerable in the post-war period especially regarding the fight against tuberculosis. Formed in 1919 by Rosa Piper and Nancy Consett Stephen, the After-Care Department was at the forefront of rehabilitation, social welfare and the development of social work – long before governments became involved. Always struggling for funds, despite the use of volunteers, the After-Care Department was regularly assisted by appeals run in both conservative and labor presses, such as the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Labor Daily*.¹²

A key point to make here is that although the work of the VA did not necessarily change significantly in the inter-war period and into World War II, the background of women or girl attracted to the VAD movement certainly did.¹³ This is where our perceptions of voluntary workers, in this case represented by VAs, have stalled – been caught in a 'time warp' so to speak. A vast majority of VAs during World War II (certainly those from urban areas) were young women who worked in full-time paid employment. They were 'business girls' and worked in banking, clerical, typing, and

telephonist positions. These women represent the well documented shift and expansion of women's occupations which occurred during the interwar period.¹⁴ Many of them were 'manpowered' and were unable to leave these paid jobs during the war. As a result they joined their local VAD and worked, in an unpaid voluntary capacity at night and on weekends. Indeed many of them later joined the women's auxiliary services such as the Women's Auxiliary Army Air Force (WAAAF) and formed the basis for the Australian Army Medical Women's Service (AAMWS) from 1943.

Not only was the representation of women attracted to the VAD movement significantly broadened by 1939, there is direct evidence to reveal that young, active Australian women were primarily attracted to VAD work. Indeed during World War II, over three quarters of VAs were under 40 years old. In 1941, a complete listing of VAs was compiled and included the number of VAD detachments, type of training undertaken, whether the VAs were 'mobile' or 'immobile', that is able to work away from home, and the broad age groupings of VAs currently enrolled in detachments. In New South Wales, over 4,600 women were members of detachments at the time. Sixteen per cent of these were over 40 years of age; eighteen per cent were under 21; and the vast majority – more than 65 per cent were between the ages of 21 and 40.¹⁵ To take a specific example, Newcastle in 1941 had three detachments with a total of 163 members. Thirty were under 21; 120 were between 21 and 40; and 13 were over 40 years of age.¹⁶

Truda Davis' experiences reflect these younger women attracted to VA work during the war. She was manpowered and worked at Mascot in the Government Aircraft Factory which made the Beaufort Bombers. Truda joined the Stanmore detachment and had a rigorous schedule. Waking at 5 am every morning to catch her bus from Marrickville, she worked a nine hour shift from 7 am to 4 pm. She then spent her evenings and weekends at Concord Repatriation Hospital carrying out a variety of VA duties which included washing out blood bottles – her most vivid memory.¹⁷ Nina White who joined the Vaucluse VAD in 1942 described her VA work as producing 'bedpans, bedpans and more bedpans'. Working at a series of hospitals in the eastern suburbs, Nina wrote that it was at the RAAF home, 'Rona' in Bellevue Hill, where a VA was asked for a bottle by a patient, to which the VA replied, 'What flavour, Sir?'¹⁸

In many ways the tasks for VAs in the various hospitals and Red Cross convalescent homes were arduous, domestic in nature, and at times unattractive as the following extract reveals:-

...arrive at nurses quarters...report to Sister in Charge...sign on...shown how to make various beds...given twenty-five beds to keep in order during the day. Watch Sister attend to surgical dressings...stitches removed...hold kidney dishes...ear syringes...shown diet chart by sister... allowed to admit patient with nurse...collect all belongings of patient... Allowed to go with a doctor to the operating theatre and watch deflation of a lad's lung...roll bandages for sister... help serve dinner...feed helpless patient...dress ward for afternoon inspection...help with casualty burns...car accident... cut off clothing..wash etc...make dressings...make orange drinks, jellies, junket, egg flips etc...watch patients coming to from anaesthetics... hold vomit bowls. Put beds out on the airer, bring in clean beds and make. Sterilize dishes and instruments, clean sterilizer....¹⁹

Country VAs, especially those on major train lines, sometimes had different jobs. Mrs Irene Hicks from the Gloucester VAD recalled how there were days when up to five troop trains stopped at Gloucester on their way either north to Brisbane or south to Sydney.

With over 500 men on each train, meals and refreshments were served to all. Almost 850,000 meals were served at Gloucester during the war.²⁰

In the post-war years, the VAD movement continued on in New South Wales whilst in most other states detachments were disbanded. The focus shifted to emergency assistance with the Civil Defence and later the State Emergency Service (formed in the aftermath of the devastating Maitland floods of 1956). Floods, bushfires, and other natural disasters kept the detachments busy, alongwith continuing to provide a supply of voluntary labour to a myriad of local community organisations such as Meals of Wheels, and specific Red Cross activities such as the convalescent homes and especially Concord Repatriation Hospital and the Blood Bank.

A major impetus to change direction came in the mid 1960s when official ties between the Australian Army Medical Service and VADs was terminated. This relationship between the military and the VADs had originated in 1928 and although it was a rather representative one, and more symbolic than anything else, these official ties with the military had been most useful to the VADs during World War II.²¹

In the light of this decision, one of the ways of reinvigorating the movement was to focus on the delivery of first aid training. From 1914, First Aid had always been one of the key features of basic training for VAs. This can be seen in the training requirements for all new VAs recruits which Enid Singleton and others carried out in the 1950s. In 1957, the basic VA training consisted of eight home nursing lectures at Crown Street or Sydney Hospital (or the equivalent country hospital), plus an exam; nine first aid lectures (by qualified senior VA instructors) plus exam; four lectures on resuscitation; two lectures on mothercraft; between two and four lectures on canteen cooking; and a minimum of one lecture each on hygiene, nutrition, care of the aged, fire brigade instruction, training in civil defence, emergency midwifery, sanitation methods, and the Geneva Conventions and what they mean.²² VAs had to undertake regular refresher courses too.

It was in this context that Phyll Bennett, who originally joined the City Central VAD in 1938 as a young women, suggested to the Red Cross that a VA Training Department be established. The central premise was that there was an increasing public demand for professional first aid instruction and that the VADs could facilitate and staff such a department. Along with the St. John's Ambulance who also ran first aid courses, Red Cross First Aid Certificate courses became a feature of the Red Cross. Run by a combination of paid and unpaid staff, the VA Training Department expanded to include home nursing certificated courses, emergency casualty care courses and the production of Emergency Car Kits (initially these kits, approved by the Roads Safety Council, were put together by VAs).

The courses became very popular with organisations such as the Girl Guides and Boy Scouts, the State Emergency Services, the Duke of Edinburgh Scheme and associated groups. The VA Training Department became a lucrative operation for the Red Cross. Initially these classes were free of charge but gradually fees were introduced. As with so many areas of public health and welfare, the state gradually became involved in the area of first aid for both industry and community. With the introduction of Workcover legislation in 1987 by the New South Wales government and occupational health and safety provisions regarding first aid in the workplace, first aid instruction became professionalised. Control of the program was taken from the VAs by a specially formed Health and Safety Education Department within Australian Red Cross, and volunteers were replaced by paid professionals.²³

One of the most interesting features of the VA movement in the post-1960s period was the number of detachments which continued on/or were formed in the west of Sydney. Once again, the reasons for this are unclear and more research is needed. However, the hypothesis is that VA detachments can be found

in areas which were most affected by the vast suburban sprawl of post-war Sydney, and reflect the ensuing lack of general services which accompanied the expansion. From the 1950s onwards, the VAD movement (or the Voluntary Aid Service Corps – VASC – as it became known from 1967) became strongest in western Sydney with detachments formed at Nepean (1957), the Hills, and Mount Druitt (1977). In 1987, there were detachments at Bankstown, Blacktown and Districts, Campbelltown, Fairfield, Hawkesbury, Hill and District, Holroyd, Hornsby, Metropolitan (city), Nepean (2) and Nepean Cadets for children, Ryde, St. George Central, and Sydney Mobile. Country detachments were located at Coffs Harbour, Denman, Gunnedah, Leeton, Lismore, Muswellbrook, Scone, Springwood, Uralla, Wagga Wagga, Warradale and Wingham.²⁴ Some of these detachments have merged and new ones have formed including an Illawarra VAD. Most recently the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander VAD was formed in 1997 which provides both sports medicine and first aid to indigenous and non-indigenous organisations. The focus for VADs today is very much on providing specialist sports first aid and advanced resuscitation on a regular basis, and voluntary labour in exceptional crises. Another key feature of these detachments has been the active encouragement and inclusion of men into the VASC movement.

It may come as a surprise that the VADs or VASC still exists today. Most recently, alongwith other Red Cross workers (and other emergency services), both paid and unpaid, VAs were involved with the Thredbo landslide disaster of 1997, the devastating Wollongong floods of August 1998, and most recently, in 1999, with the Kosovar refugees. Maintaining an arguably lower profile than St. John's Ambulance, the other main traditional first aid organisation, VAs still continue to provide voluntary assistance when required.

From 1901 and federation, there have been significant and lasting changes in Australia both from cultural, racial, social, economic and political perspectives. There have also been profound shifts in workplace relations, in the patterns of employment, and in the gender dimensions of labour processes. The VAD movement has also developed and changed. As was common with many of our social and cultural institutions, the VAD movement, under the auspices of the Red Cross, was a British movement, introduced and adapted for Australian conditions, and it very quickly developed a peculiarly Australian identity. Up until the 1970s, the VAD movement was almost exclusively a women's organisations and was part of the rich fabric of women's voluntary work.

As outlined earlier in this paper, VAs were integral to the medical sphere providing voluntary unpaid labour to convalescent homes, hospitals, the blood bank, and to the Red Cross. This work was rudimentary and largely domestic including cooking, cleaning, caring, and nursing. Voluntary work during this period was also gender specific. After World War II, which was, in many ways, a high point for VADs and indeed the Red Cross, the movement adapted and changed to meet the different needs of a post-war society. The focus became more on local community requirements, and on developing active citizenship through voluntary work. Today, the organisation actively encourages both men and women into its detachments; the focus is on Sydney's greater west and rural areas; and much of its day to day work revolves around providing first aid to sporting events.

This paper is a very brief attempt to outline the history behind, and influences of, one voluntary organisation which has provided a small contribution to the mosaic of working lives of women, and most recently men, in Australia this century. Indeed in examining the VAD movement, many more questions are raised than answered. Why have organisations like the VADs, and particularly the unpaid work carried out within them, been

absent from labour history (indeed all history)? What has that omission done to our understanding and comprehension of labour relations in the past, the present and into the future? As work patterns and the structure of paid work changes, and those in paid work decrease, with our ageing population and increasingly limited access to public funds – how will these issues impact on both the study of paid and unpaid work? If labour history practitioners consciously think about aspects of voluntary labour and how voluntary labour relates to paid labour when undertaking their varied research studies, these questions may begin to be answered.

Endnotes

- 1 'Maids of All Work', *Salt*, 15 January 1945.
- 2 See Melanie Oppenheimer, *Red Cross VAs. A History of the VAD Movement in New South Wales*, Ohio Productions, Walcha, 1999, pp. 142-143.
- 3 Telephone interview with Edith Canning (nee Singleton), January 1999.
- 4 This also applies to the voluntary work undertaken by men.
- 5 These historians have published widely over the past fifteen years. Example of their work include Rae Frances, *The Politics of Work. Gender and Labour in Victoria, 1880-1939*, CUP, Melbourne, 1993; Joy Damousi, 'Gendered Meanings and Actions in Left-Wing Movements', in Terry Irving (ed.), *Challenges to Labour History*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 1994; Ray Frances, Bruce Scates and Ann McGrath, 'Broken Silences? Labour History and Aboriginal Workers', in Irving, *ibid.*; Marilyn Lake, 'The Constitution of Political Subjectivity and the Writing of Labour History', in Irving, *ibid.*; and Ann McGrath and Kay Saunders with Jackie Huggins, *Aboriginal Workers*, Special issue of *Labour History*, no. 69, November 1995.
- 6 Joanne Scott, 'Voluntary Work as Work?: Some Implications for Labour History', *Labour History*, no. 74, May 1998, pp. 10-20. Melanie Oppenheimer, 'The "Glory Girls". A Study of a Red Cross Relief Unit and the Volunteer Aids (VAs) who served on HMS Glory during the Repatriation Trips, September – December 1945', M. Litt. thesis, University of New England, 1988; 'Volunteers in Action: Voluntary Work in Australia, 1939-1945', PhD thesis, Macquarie University, 1997; 'Voluntary Work and Labour History', *Labour History*, no. 74, May 1998, pp. 1-9; 'Extending the Boundaries:

Labour History and Voluntary Work', *Locality*, (Centre for Community History, UNSW), vol. 9, no. 2, 1998, pp. 16-20, and 'Voluntary Action on the Australian Home Front during World War II', in Carl Bridge (ed.), *Ranging Shots: New Directions in Australian Military History*, SRMCAS, University of London, 1998, pp. 45-65.

- 7 For the seminal study on this issue, see Marilyn Waring, *Counting for Nothing. What Men Value and What Women are Worth*, Bridget Williams Books, Wellington, 1997 (first published 1988).
- 8 For a history of the VADs in New South Wales, see *Red Cross VAs, op. cit.*
- 9 See also her biography, Paul Berry and Mark Bostridge, *Vera Brittain. A Life*, Pimlico, London, 1996.
- 10 For a discussion of the relationship between the trained nurse and the untrained VA, see Melanie Oppenheimer, 'VAs: Australian Voluntary Aids during the Second World War', *Journal of the Australian War Memorial*, no. 18, April 1991, pp. 28-34.
- 11 *Red Cross VAs, op. cit.*, p. 23.
- 12 *ibid.*, pp. 57-59.
- 13 The reasons for this shift are not clear and more work is required.
- 14 See Desley Deacon, *Managing Gender: The State, the New Middle Class and Women Workers, 1830-1930*, OUP, Melbourne, 1989.
- 15 *Red Cross VAs, op. cit.*, p. xxii.
- 16 See Appendix 2, Commonwealth Directory of Voluntary Aid Detachments, 1941, cited in *Red Cross VAs, ibid.*, pp. 181-184.
- 17 *Red Cross VAs, op. cit.*, p. 74.
- 18 *ibid.*, 70.
- 19 Description made by VA Edith Monk in 1939, and quoted in *ibid.*, p. 68.
- 20 *ibid.*, p. 93.
- 21 The Army, through a Joint Committee which included Red Cross and St. John representatives, actually controlled the VADs nationally during the war.
- 22 *Red Cross VAD Syllabus of Training, 1957*, 7 January 1957, Red Cross VAD Collection, Australian Red Cross NSW, Sydney, cited in *Red Cross VAs, op. cit.*, p. 144.
- 23 See VASC Newsletter, vol. 5, April 1987, pp. 1-3 and *Red Cross VAs, ibid.*, pp. 153-155.
- 24 *VASC Newsletter*, vol. 5, April 1987, pp. 10-12.