



Singled Out: How Two Million Women Survived Without Men After the First World War

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After the First World War a generation of women who believed marriage to be their birthright discovered that there were simply not enough men left to go round. Tracing their fates, Nicholson shows how the single woman of the inter-war years had to depend on herself and, in doing so, helped change society.

Singled Out: How Two Million Women Survived Without Men After the First World War Details

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From Reader Review Singled Out: How Two Million Women Survived Without Men After the First World War for online ebook

Jessica says

An absolutely fascinating examination of the "surplus women" of post WW1 England. At the time, many (most) were raised for two purposes - marriage and raise kids. After the massive losses in the war, there simply weren't enough men of "marriageable age," leaving two million women to face a future they had not prepared for.

I really enjoyed the exploration into individual lives of several women, scattered throughout the book are vignettes that introduce these ladies and tell their stories.

Some are heartbreaking, others inspiring, and all are interesting. A very worthwhile read!

Ainsley says

A fascinating read - I knew of this part of history, but had never really researched it or thought through any of the ramifications. I found it both moving and thought-provoking (imagine being told by your headmistress, at a time when it was so taken for granted that girls would marry that it was near impossible to think of any other way of life, that nine out of ten of them leaving school would remain single for life...not unlike a university graduate nowadays being informed that the job market was such that he/she would be guaranteed to spend the rest of life on the dole). My only objection is with some of the examples from popular culture of the time - Dorothy L. Sayers, for instance, is pegged as unsympathetic/mocking toward single women on the basis of one sentence in "Gaudy Night" about a badly dressed Oxford graduate, while recurring characters like Miss Climpson, Letitia Martin, Harriet Vane's friends Sylvia and Eilunedd, etc etc, are ignored. Yes, it's a small point, but when an author does this it makes me wonder a) what other 'facts' that I'm not so familiar with have been adjusted, and b) was the rest of the research that careless?

Srtapizca says

Ellas Solas. Un mundo sin hombres tras la gran guerra. Virginia Nicholson.

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En este libro Nicholson analiza la situación de casi dos millones de mujeres en Inglaterra que debido a la cantidad de hombres que murieron tras la PGM, pierden la posibilidad de casarse pasando a formar un grupo conocido como del excedente.

"La mujer de hoy en día exalta con frecuencia su independencia, su relación satisfactoria con la soledad y la libertad. Por el contrario, las mujeres de la generación de entreguerras se sentían ridículas. A la soledad se sumaba la pobreza y la alienación" (pag190).

A pesar de que la gran mayoría de estas mujeres se sintieron infelices, esta situación supuso para otra gran

parte de este grupo, la posibilidad de ocupar puestos de trabajo que antes eran solo para hombres, viajar, formar asociaciones, descubrir la sexualidad fuera del matrimonio, luchar por los derechos de la mujer, y en muchos casos ser conscientes de que el matrimonio no les habría hecho más felices.

" si la guerra hurto a dos millones de mujeres la posibilidad de contraer matrimonio también les facilitó el desempeñar un papel muy diferente... "(pag 143).

o

Me ha resultado una lectura fantástica, es verdad que puede parecer repetitivo en sus casi cuatrocientas páginas, pero es que Nicholson hace una labor de documentación admirable.

Samar Barakat says

Not a bad read, though often repetitive and sometimes idealistic. I could not escape the feeling that the author was often imposing her own (wishful) interpretation on the lives of the single women she chronicles. Concluding her brief narration of the life of feminist activist Cicely Hamilton, the writer states confidently, "...surely Cicely Hamilton never cast a backward glance at the kitchen, the nursery or even the drawing-room, or sighed for a married life that was never to be. Didn't that sense of a cause greater than herself, a glorious mission, suffuse her with idealistic passions every bit as heated as the ardour that burns between two lovers?" Surely, Ms Nicholson, you jest. Surely, you cannot in all seriousness reduce human needs to this either/or dichotomy that you try to convince us must, surely, work, for these bachelorettes of the early 1920's? And surely, you wouldn't dare draw out the same conclusion if you were chronicling the lives of bachelors who, by some accident in history, were forced to endure a life without women as spouses or partners? Despite the rich detail and seemingly arduous research that went into this book, the author shoots herself in the foot by trying too hard to convince us that out of hardship blossoms opportunity, and that perhaps the two million English women left without husbands or partners beginning the early 1920's ended up better off than those who married. She makes a convincing case that it was the imposed singlehood that allowed these women to pave the way for the changes that eventually led women in the latter part of the century to be emancipated. This may be true, but she cannot overlook the fact that these women must have paid a terrible price for this, in years of solitude and loneliness and fear for their futures. This kind of suffering is not easily uncovered in historical research, and although the author does quote extensively from the memoirs written by some of these women in their old age, the kind of suffering they would have endured is not such they would have readily admitted, not to their friends, companions, and relatives, and perhaps not overtly in their memoirs. Yes, the accomplishments of many of these women can be dug out, listed, and admired, but their real story, will, for the most part, never be told

Barbara says

What a fascinating book! Using letters, autobiographies, novels, and her own interviews, Virginia Nicholson explores the lives of the Surplus Women of the Great War. Of course, I've known about the huge numbers of war dead and the permanently wounded, but somehow I'd never spent much time thinking about the women they left behind. If I thought of them at all, I suppose I assumed they mourned their lost husbands/fiancés/boyfriends for a period of time and then moved forward in their lives. I'd never really considered that many would never marry simply because there weren't enough men available. Very interesting to read about their lives as (usually) underpaid workers, aunts who were expected to be free to babysit whenever called upon, lonely women who joined forces with other lonely women (perhaps lesbians, perhaps not, but usually assumed to be and made fun of for it). They were also resented for "stealing" men's jobs, even though they were forced into employment because they had to support themselves. There were a lot of sad stories in this book. However, there were also many stories of personal success--women who found great satisfaction in their lives as singletons, who became pioneers in careers and who helped change society in ways that have helped improve our own lives. A history that deserves to be told. I'm very glad to have read it.

Jenna says

This is both a well-written and interesting cultural history/gender studies history of women in the post-war years and also highlight some of the potential problems the besiege historians trying to accurately portray life during/after the war and how "accuracy" sometimes wars with perceptions and memories of the war.

I think, as far as I can tell, the *perception* that Britain had lost a generation of its best men (often cited as the civil servant class) is true. This was the view held both those living through the war/immediately after it and the way it is perceived in predominate cultural memory. Ms. Nicholson is able to pull excellent examples from period journals and articles that support this view.

However, some historians, notably Jay Winter, argue that this view, as cherished as it might have been, is not statistically supportable. In passing he noted that the idea that two million without husbands is "nonsense." As he argues in his seminal work, *The Great War and the British People: Second Edition*, more men actually left Britain (i.e. through emigration), than died in the Great War.

Finally, despite using a wide range of sources, this still is largely a history of middle-upper-class women, who were literate and, at least to a degree, educated. While this is not necessarily a draw-back, its bias (however unintentional) needs to be kept in the back of one's mind while reading.

The citation of sources, with a few exception, was good, and I appreciated the footnotes. It would be an interesting book to read in tandem with Jay Winters' book or other reassessments.

Laura says

Virginia Nicholson's true story of the generation of women left without husbands after the Great War. Read by Miriam Margolyes.

1/5. Virginia Nicholson's true story of the generation of women left without husbands.

2/5. Not all men are happy with the amount of spinsters after the Great War.

3/5. True story of the women left alone after the Great War. The 1920s was a brave new world.

4/5. True story of the women left alone after the Great War. Exclusion led women to pair up.

5/5. It takes a valiant woman to remain unmarried.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00jvy2t>

Sally George says

I felt compelled to read this book when I came across this paragraph in the Family Tree Magazine - "In 1917, the senior mistress of the Bournemouth High School for Girls made a sobering announcement to the sixth form assembly: 'I have come to tell you a terrible fact,' she began, ominously. 'Only one out of 10 of you girls can ever hope to marry. This is not a guess of mine. It is a statistical fact. Nearly all the men who might have married you have been killed.' On a positive note, the mistress explained that 'the war has made more openings for women than ever before,' but she cautioned that, 'you will have to struggle'. Unwilling to 'marry down,' many of the young girls would indeed end up as elderly spinsters." After reading the book, I thought of my own family and my Great Aunts. In Scotland, on my father's side Aunty Annie never married and it was said that there were not enough men to go round. She took over the family fish and chip shop business and looked after her disabled brother. All the Aunts on my mother's side in the Lincolnshire fens got married, in fact my Grandmother found a man because of the War. Her brother died in the army out in India from dysentery. The man in the next bed brought his belongings home to the family and my Grandmother married him. This book explains amongst other things how hard it was for women to take a man's job in order to survive. They were looked upon as selfish, even thinking about it, as a man would have a wife and family to provide for.

Robert says

"I should prefer to have been a man: then I could have had a career and marriage too", said Dame Evelyn Sharp, one of the first women to head a government department. Almost two million women more than men left over in Britain after World War One. Most had no hope of marriage, but back then there was so little choice and even women were saying a woman without a husband and children was a failure. Despite that, as Dame Evelyn showed, this was the real era when women's liberation took off. Those that had had jobs and responsibilities during the war did not want to be sent back to the kitchen or nursery, and so, despite all the obstacles, many assumed tasks that were once restricted to men and opened the at for others.

Melanie Baker says

An interesting look at the consequences of history-shaping events. In this case, due to the carnage of WWI, after there were ~2 million "Surplus Women" in Britain -- a major gender disparity due to the number of men killed in the war. As a result, few of these women would ever marry and have families (which was what

women were *for* in those days).

Additionally, the numbers of dead were much higher in certain echelons of society, i.e. the young men of the upper classes were more likely to become officers, and thus more likely to die, being at the front of so many charges with their men. As a result, marriage prospects were even more bleak for upper class young women who, even more than working class women, were expected to marry, bear children and... well, not really do much else of anything.

Societially spinsters were often derided, seen with pity or contempt, mocked, and viewed with suspicion. Often they were even blamed for their spinster states, which makes about as much sense as you'd expect from "society". The wealthy had some freedom from this that money brings, though in the upper classes they had their own prisons of opinion given that expectations were generally even more rigid.

However, the lack of availability of traditional lifestyles meant that, for some women at least, they could pursue careers and lives unthinkable even 20 years before. Earning PhDs, running companies, travelling the world... Of course, at the same time, many, many women lived in poverty, earning little and working endless hours in often deplorable conditions at the low-end jobs (often clerical or retail) that they were qualified for, and living in what was frequently squalor in rented lodgings.

All these things led to vast societal change, however. Women crusaded for pensions for spinsters -- before, you could work your whole life and be entitled to nothing on retirement, when a woman who was married for even one day was entitled to a comfortable pension if her husband was killed in the war. The suffrage movement really became a force at this time as well.

And, of course, simply being tired of war and death and the still-clinging tendrils of Victorian society, people -- but women especially -- cast off many restrictions, and hiked their skirts, cropped their hair, got educated and built careers, and went drinking, dancing, and had love affairs. (And basically once the horse was out of the barn, there was no putting it back...)

All in all, there's a fair bit of repetition in the book, about the prejudices the women faced, about the loneliness and longing many never really got over, etc. And it can be a really depressing read. Especially when you realize that, in certain ways, not that much has changed in nearly 100 years.

However, given that time period is History now, that any of those women left are centenarians, and that it's been over six decades since the end of WWII, it's fascinating to try and wrap your brain around that world and what normal life looked like compared to now.

Roberta says

Libro molto interessante e molto godibile che racconta l'esperienza di tutte le donne che si ritrovarono in surplus dopo la Prima Guerra Mondiale - al giorno d'oggi sembra quasi imbarazzante, ma in un'epoca in cui la società voleva le donne sposate e non le voleva lavoratrici, ritrovarsi statisticamente impossibilitate al matrimonio per i troppi decessi avvenuti in guerra risultò in una vera e propria 'piaga' sociale.

Da un lato questa situazione agevolò l'indipendenza delle donne, dall'altra si vorrebbe che la realizzazione di poter vivere una vita piena anche senza un marito e dei figli avvenga per propria libera scelta, e non a causa di un tragico evento storico...

Shatterlings says

I really enjoyed this, these women were remarkable characters with their passion for life, their cats and their eccentricities. I would have liked to have met them. I will now say that " marriage would have eclipsed my unusual talents". Or " that anyone can get married but it takes a good valiant woman to remain unmarried".

Kathryn says

I just realised that I forgot to do a review for this one when I finished it a couple of weeks ago. It was an interesting, if at times sad, read. It made me very grateful that I live now, with life being better in general for both married and single women.

It was sad to read about the women who wanted a husband and family and felt that they had lost their sense of purpose without this path. But it was also inspiring to read about the women who viewed the lack of men as an opportunity to succeed in their chosen areas of work, against all the odds, and mostly without the approval of society.

Aitziber says

Wartime has a way of causing social change, particularly before nuclear warfare, when soldiers did a lot of the fighting. As such, the death of thousands of British soldiers of prime marrying age in World War I resulted in around two million women who would never find a husband. There simply weren't enough men to marry.

That was a generation of women who had been brought up to see marriage as the only option for a decent woman, whose only examples of single women were sexless, unfulfilled, buttoned Fräulein Rottenmeiers. It was now up to them to figure out how to fit in a country that would rather see them leave England and marry abroad, before they'd cease to ostracize them, start paying them living wages, or allowing them to study alongside men.

Nicholson's book covers the gamut of female experience. From the working class women who had to care for their parents on a meager salary, to the trailblazing women who made strides in careers previously reserved to men, and made it easier for women that came after them. Social activists such as Florence White, and the nannies of the titled class who sublimated their desire for children into their charges. If you want to read about a whole lot of women working and living on their own, this is your book. Writers, models, teachers, engineers, it's got them all.

As a look into how hard women in the 30s had it, *Singled Out* is great. It paints a very complete picture of the way these women were oppressed. For instance, teachers were paid a lot less than men per year, because it was assumed that men had to take care of a family, while paying single women too much may drive them to spend what remained after bills in useless stuff, such as dresses. The possibility that women may also have a family of their own to feed was non-existent. Female teachers were fired when they married, which drove many of them dating men of little means to have to live in sin. They risked exposure and scandal, which

would have led them to be fired anyway.

I found it to be a very inspiring book. While possibilities for women have certainly improved, we still live in a culture that's enamored with marriage and babies. Reading *Singled Out* will, I'm sure, give any woman thinking of staying single (or divorcing!) role models, confidence that it can be done, and even a wide variety of careers and lifestyles to consider. (Unless you want to be a wet nurse. I don't know that those are in such high demand anymore.)

If there's anything to reproach *Singled Out* for, and other reviews have mentioned it, is how repetitive it is for a good chunk of the book (easily one third, perhaps even half). The reader will be constantly reminded that hundreds of thousands of men died or disappeared, that there was a national debate about the Surplus Women, and that women were inconsolable when the man they envisioned marrying died in service. On the other hand, I was hoping that the book would not ignore lesbian women, and it did not disappoint. There's a long section about women such as Radclyffe Hall and how they dealt with a society that both pushed women to share living arrangements (see: lower salaries for women), while very much looking down on homosexuality.

For those interested in Women's Studies, this is a good book with some tortured prose.

Antonomasia says

This book isn't exactly short of faults, but it's incredibly companionable.

Problems

- As several others have said, it's repetitive. I read the book in two chunks almost a year apart which reduced the effect - though by no means completely. Nicholson, a great-niece of Virginia Woolf, has tried to organise the book into themed chapters, but in order to try and present a rounded picture of life for many women, some ordinary diarists, others [semi] famous, who feature, details already mentioned under one theme keep appearing in other chapters.

-Despite information about some of these ladies being repeated, there was still frustratingly little about many of them: people about whom I wouldn't necessarily want to read a whole biography, but easily 20+ pages. Perhaps the strangest material to leave out was about Victoria Drummond, the first female marine engineer, who began her maritime career just after WWI. Whilst it was possible to understand how everyone else achieved their careers, I couldn't imagine sailors of that period accepting a woman as part of the crew, no matter her personality or talent. They did, with a little grumbling - but I had to find out the longer story from Wikipedia. There is less information online about Beatrice Gordon Holmes, the first female stockbroker, another great character from this book I'd like to hear more about, though at least there's a little more about her in the pages of *Singled Out*.

- Whilst Nicholson does highlight and criticise the ways in which media disparaged unmarried women in the interwar period (quite illogically as they had access to population statistics which would indicate it wasn't possible for a lot of them to marry) I felt that at times she leant too much towards pity in the narrative. Most of the women of the WWI generation had of course been brought up to expect marriage to be at the centre of their lives; some, of their own accord, didn't agree and for them the war was always massively liberating. Some grew to love a different way of life. Many others did experience a sense of loss and dislocation. It may be kind of tricky to reflect the times well and not feel sorry for them, but I would have opted for less of that

kind of commentary whilst not omitting direct quotes to explain how these women felt.

- Nicholson appears to consider maternal instinct and the desire for children as a biological norm. (There are still women featured here who said they never felt any maternal instinct and they are not in the least criticised.) Okay, this isn't a sociology book, but she never speculates as to what extent it was the result of conditioning - of being brought up to expect to have children, or would have been there regardless, and whether the extent of this may vary between individuals.

- I think she actually *adds* pity to the stories of women who never had or loved another man after their beau / fiance died, or in a few cases, jilted them. Regardless that they did plenty of other things with their subsequent lives, this way of being seems to be looked down on now as a failure - for no good reason other than social convention. Ladies who eventually settled with someone else seem to get more praise - yet they are all people who lived their lives in a way that they felt best.

- I would have liked to see more material about competitive sportswomen.

Positives

- Simply, it was great hearing about a lot of interesting women - and often their own writing about their lives - who were either entirely unfamiliar, or whom I only vaguely knew of (e.g Winifred Holtby, a couple of the archaeologists. Though I'd already heard a lifetime's worth about Gladys Aylward *yawn* at school.)

- I find everything to like about the feminism of this period, and it was nice and almost odd to get misty-eyed about some of these women's achievements - such contrast with the anger I often feel towards current internet feminism and its infinitely petty squabbles.

As well as various individuals in pioneering careers, I admired those who campaigned for statutory rights, such as the Spinsters' Pensions Association (and felt disappointed in contemporary feminists' failure to exert more pressure over practical issues that would make a difference to a lot of ordinary women, such as childcare provision and lower fees on a par with many other European countries).

- Nicholson does her best to cover the experiences of women of all classes, and appears to make the most of the smaller amount of evidence about those in manual occupations.

- The book acknowledges the evils of the colonial era at various points, but understands the spirit of its subjects and the times by creating a sense of adventure, far more than guilt, around travel.

- It's never twee and isn't part of frilly neo-domesticity.

- Whilst there are a few people discussed who must have been very difficult to live with, the author never labels them. Perhaps the implication is that commentators of the period made enough criticism of women who didn't fit in, without adding to it.

- There is really quite a lot of material about lesbian (and a few bisexual) women, both those who were as out and proud as you could be in the twenties, and those who simply appeared to live together as two respectable ladies sharing expenses. There are a lot of very interesting women among the famous names and the big achievers and I found myself wishing I'd heard more about these when I was younger - absolutely excellent counterexamples to Camille Paglia's characterisation of the lesbian scene as intellectually and aesthetically dull, which had a disproportionate influence on me in my teens and early twenties.

- The achievements of the generation of "Surplus Women", who broke down many barriers, makes it evident just how instrumental the First World War was for British feminism. (This is an entirely British, and 99%

English, book.) Not only via women's work during the war - but all these women afterwards who, unable to marry, had to have jobs and create an independent way of life. They took the ball and ran with it.

- All the stories of the women who lived on a shoestring, the "business girls" and teachers and carers are incredibly companionable if you are sitting reading whilst eating special offer cheese on toast, sitting by the tumble dryer to keep warm and such. For all that I've written more here about the women who had extraordinary lives, the majority gets more space. And regardless of its faults, *Singled Out* presents a sense of 'how to be' that works if, for whatever reason, you don't have the kind of single life that's likely to conform to glamorous contemporary ideals. Its resolute focus on real experience rather than image is part of that.
