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Citation: Wheelwright, J. (2013). Paxman/Adie reviews. The Independent,

This is the accepted version of the paper.

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Paxman/Adie reviews
By Julie Wheelwright
For *The Independent* (2013)

Jeremy Paxman, *Great Britain's Great War*, Viking, hardback, £25.00

Kate Adie, *Fighting on the Home Front: The Legacy of Women in World War One*, Hodder & Stoughton, £20.00

The First World War was regarded at its outset, in what now seems a tragic cliché because it so palpably failed, the 'war to end war'. The question of why tens of thousands of men and fewer women, volunteered their lives to fight a common enemy in this possibly pointless war, may be wrong-headed. Instead, argues Jeremy Paxman in his spin-off book from his five-part BBC television series, *Great Britain's Great War*, it is a prism through which we can begin to understand a generation that was irrevocably changed by its events.

It's an intriguing and important perspective for an introduction to the Great War and its historical significance: as Paxman writes, 'it is precisely because it changed so much that we understand it so little'. Rather, contemporary readers – and television audiences gearing up for next year's 100th anniversary – are like the poor souls attending séances in an attempt to commune with the dead, 'we lack the means to imagine what they thought they were doing'.

However, Paxman does his best to cover the huge territory of the war's historiography, starting with why the great conflict began in the first place. And he provides a useful overview by offering a counter to the contemporary view that men were mown down in the mud, led by a posse of old men intent on imperial glory. The political realities in 1914 were that the British political class believed that it had a special destiny in the world and could not allow Germany to realise its imperial ambitions, standing by while it moved through Belgium to attack France.

At the time, Britain's politicians (and the German ambassador) were aware of the potential for a ravaging conflict and Paxman disputes the comforting notion that there was widespread dissent. Instead, he offers an insight (albeit based largely on secondary sources), of a population brought up ideas of 'privilege and obligation' which made them respond to 'the call of duty'. The book then explores how soldiers, like Paxman's great uncle Charlie, who enlisted with the Royal Army Medical Corps and died in 1915, faced superior German technology and numbers to die botched operations in the Dardanelles, Ypres, the Somme, Vimy Ridge and others.

There is a central driving question, thoughtfully posed, about why the men continued to fight through such horrific conditions. It is only partly answered by the men themselves through what letters, diaries and testimonies written by the survivors who intimate that it was their commitments to their fellow soldiers that drove them forward. As one veteran recalled: 'We looked at each other wondering how long we should be together. Rough, often foul-mouthed and blasphemous, we were tied by the string of our experiences, past, present and future'.

Although Paxman's argument that this made Britain's fighting forces of the Great War unique, isn't entirely satisfying since other military historians, most notably Joanna Bourke in *An Intimate History of Killing*, have identified this sentiment in conflicts elsewhere. But this is a thoughtful framing for examining the bigger questions about the war and its consequences for British society that places Paxman's book beyond most coffee-table television accompaniments.

It is a little disappointing then that Paxman, despite his attention to the post-1918 dismissal of feminist causes and to exploding the myth of 'the woman in black', says relatively little about women's wartime experience. However, the antidote to this oversight won't be found in Kate Adie's *Fighting on the Home Front*, a follow up to her 2003 *Corsets to Camouflage: Women and War*. Although Adie does cover the women's domestic and frontline contribution at home – from the Land Army to munitions workers to the Volunteer Aid Detachment – her coverage is sorely lacking in detail.

Adie breezes through such a vast number of examples that what they meant to women then and for British society after the war, is hard to understand. A case in point is that of Flora Sandes, who moved from serving as a volunteer nurse with the Red Cross in Serbia to serving as a combatant when the regiment to which she was attached, retreated into Albania in 1915. Although Adie's version has Sandes asking 'the Serbian officer next to her if she might take up a rifle', it seems a missed opportunity to take up Paxman's quest to 'explore what they thought they were doing'. In Sandes' case, the fact that she had experience with a rifle, was a good horsewoman, a nurse and British, made her an excellent choice for the Serbs.

As the 100th anniversary approaches and with almost forty years of a feminist historiography on the Great War, a book that simply compiles a few examples of women's role on the home front really isn't good enough any more. One hopes that if television presenters rather than historians are going to top the best seller lists that, like Paxman, they have an awareness of what we still fail to understand about the Great War generation.

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