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»Sister Susie's Sending Soap to Soldiers«: Hygiene, Gender and Class Lines in First World War Britain

Mud, dirt and suffering are some of the ubiquitous tropes used for writing about the First World War. Thus, it might at first seem surprising that this paper asks the question of the role played by cleanliness, soap and hygiene during the war years. However, while the front lines exploded in a cacophony of mud and shellfire, an examination of the advertisements in the 1915 and 1916 issues of the highly popular *Illustrated London News* (hereafter ILN) demonstrates a near obsession with cleanliness, both of the body and the home. My argument, focused here primarily on the home front, is that these ads, and the attendant fetishization of cleanliness, served several purposes. These included the reinstatement of class and gender norms through a focus on the middle class woman in the domestic sphere, the retention, through the habitual cleansing of the body, of a »civilized« home front to contrast the savagery of war, and the belief in a moral superiority (cleanliness) of the British fighting troops.

At the time, home and body came to refer not only to constructions of femininity, but also to England and the national body. During the war years, the branding of soap was subsumed into an overarching branding of the nation as somehow cleaner, and hence better than Germany or even France, while within national borders, the status quo could be maintained through a hierarchy of good hygiene. This plays out in many areas: the threats of prostitution, of disease and death on the war front, a lack of servants due to a working class move to better paying work in the munitions factories, and the more personal need to maintain control over lives thrown into turmoil by the war.

Anthropologist Mary Douglas writes that dirt is an anomaly, and is hence perceived to be indicative of decay – the spread of dirt is associated with a society out of control.¹ The equation that might result here is that the imagined spread of dirt – in both descriptions of the conditions of the front lines, and with the perceived spread of moral dirt – led to a return to order and a consolidation of dominant class power through a focus on the clean body.² A separation is thus constituted through a series of oppositions that were firmly ensconced by the time of the First World War: cleanliness/filth, virtue/vice, morality/depravity, civilization/savagery, each separating along lines of class and gender – those who are clean versus those who do the cleaning.³

Within the pages of the ILN these ideas come together. In the years leading up to the First World War, ads for soap are centred firmly around a mother-child bond, and the teaching of good habits to future generations.⁴ In addition to ads like that for Colgate, which calls for a »toothpaste drill in every home,« is the establishment in the ILN of a bourgeois Englishness of both public and private spheres. All representation within the publication, notes historian Peter Sinnema, be it articles, illustrations or advertisements, play within growing ideas of the bourgeois nation, thereby collapsing the dichotomy of inside/outside or private/public space into an overarching space of middle class English nationality.⁵

By 1915, it was either the clean domestic servant, the pure middle class lady or the fresh-faced soldier who appeared in ads to do with hygiene and cleanliness. The racist soap ads of the 1860s, which often constructed white Britons as clean in comparison to »dirty« darker-skinned peoples, were replaced by ads showing the white woman within the already clean domestic space, and campaigns designed to »send soap to soldiers.«⁶ The clean and white bodies of the servants, soldiers and housewives symbolically represent the imagined nation as clean, strong and white.⁷ From this imaged stock could be drawn the fighting forces that would conquer the Germans – colloquially known as the »dirty« Boche. One ad makes this particularly clear – it shows a British soldier seated on top of the world, while the script reads, »Let us reason it out together! Did anyone say there was a GERMany-where? If so apply Sanitas disinfecting fluid wherever wanted.«

Within this context, the training of hygiene in youth takes on a different meaning from those ads in the 1912 edition of the ILN. By 1915 and 1916, the need to perpetuate the nation, to replace those who had died, was extremely strong, and if the nation could be reproduced in such a way as to perpetuate the symbolic values for which Britain had fought, so much the better. Though John Dewey pointed out in 1922 that habit was much more likely to repeat the conservative impulses of society, thus perpetuating inequality and the conditions for another war, during the war years, the easy conflation of cleanliness and morality as necessary for future generations played out in many ads.⁸ The Colgate ad reads, »Regular night and morning care is a duty (...) (Colgate) is so pleasant to use, that care of the teeth is an easily formed habit (...).« Pear's soap advertises its »fascinating transparency« which will »encourage children in their toilet,« while even Bird's Custard has a »clean fresh taste.«⁹

The »duty« to keep clean and beautiful, as seen in the Colgate ad, and in others such as the Ven-Yusa face cream ad »A Lady's Duty is to Always Look Her Best,« in turn lead to an analogy with the man's duty to defend his country. The implication is that women must tend to the hygiene of the nation, while men must defeat those who would threaten the domestic space.¹⁰ Essentially, a clean woman produces a clean house, which in turn produces upstanding men, who can then fight for the nation with appropriate morality and self-control.

A practically obsessive need for cleanliness can be seen in advertisements such as the one for Johnson's Prepared Wax (fig. 1). The ad shows an apparently working class servant on her knees scrubbing the floor. However, the ad reads »brings out the pattern and imparts a durable finish which any housewife can easily keep in good condition.« The clever wording insinuates



*Keep Your
Linoleum
Like
New.*

DIRT, dust, footmarks, and smudges on your linoleum won't bother you if you use Johnson's prepared wax. It will quickly transform your oilcloth from dull lifelessness to bright, glossy cleanliness.

JOHNSON'S PREPARED WAX

Brings out the pattern and imparts a beautiful and durable finish which any housewife can easily keep in good condition.

It does all this with one-quarter the usual work and time. The linoleum may be walked upon immediately—the finish won't become sticky or tacky, and the polish is

Sanitary, Durable, Disinfecting.

You have a hundred uses for Johnson's Prepared Wax round the house. Let it clean, polish, and preserve your

WOODWORK	LEATHER GOODS	GUN-STOCKS
FLOORS	PIANO	MOTOR-CAR
LINOLEUM	FURNITURE	GOLF-CLUBS, &c.

JOHNSON'S CLEANER

will remove spots and stains that other cleaners won't touch. Unequalled for use on badly stained floors, woodwork, furniture, bath-tubs, sinks—and, in fact, all wood, metal and enamel surfaces.

Removes Ink Spots

Johnson's Cleaner is particularly good for ink spots—try it where all other cleaners have failed. It is just the thing for white enamel of all kinds—woodwork, iron beds, etc. Also splendid for cleaning nickel, brass and copper. It contains no acid or grit—cannot injure or scratch the finest finish.

Use Coupon for Trial Tins.

■■■■■ **USE COUPON AND CONVINCE YOURSELF.** ■■■■■
 ■ S. C. Johnson & Son, 244, High Holborn, London, W.C.
 ■ I enclose sd. for generous trial tins each of
 ■ Johnson's Prepared Wax and Johnson's Cleaner—
 ■ sufficient for a good test.
 ■ Name
 ■ Address
 ■ L.L.N.

*Fig 1: Illustrated London News,
August 19, 1916; photograph by:
Photography Preservation
Services, Toronto Reference
Library, Toronto Public Library*

that the floor can be kept clean either through the housewife's overseeing of the maid or through the housewife's own labour.

Because so many domestics were leaving the home for war work, middle class women often had to take over the daily cleaning, and the necessity of purging dirt of its morally suspect connotations was brought to the foreground. The apparent squalor in which many working class families lived was widely believed to lead to a sexual depravity and lax morality that might transfer upwards, if middle class women were forced to take over the cleaning of the domestic space.¹¹ During the war, however, the transcendence of these connotations took place through the display of the pure and clean body in the pristine home. The stigma over »getting the hands dirty« was obscured through a growing consumer interest in hand creams, perfumed soaps, carefully advertised cleaning products, and over time the architectural separation of spaces for cleaning the body.¹²

The Johnson's ad adds another layer to the destigmatization of cleaning through the coupling of the upkeep of the house with the upkeep of the nation via a connection to the war front. The daily polishing of the floor was echoed in the compelled daily polishing of the brass buttons

on the uniforms of British soldiers. Further, the use of the terminology of war is found in many ads during the period, including this one »it will quickly transform your oilcloth from dull lifelessness to bright, glossy cleanliness (...) it cannot injure or scratch the finest finish.« The housewife is assured that lifelessness, injury and scratching, all threats of the front line, will have no place in her home. The housewife's work, the cleaning of the domestic space, which she may now have to do herself, is, on the one hand, conflated with the greater project of winning the war, and on the other, with the project of keeping the home, and the nation, clean.

Cleanliness, hygiene, morality, all were located within the person of a mystical pure woman who guarded a cult of domesticity for the eventual end of the war and return of the men. However, this cult of domesticity was threatened on several layers, primarily by working class female employment. Although female employment (even in factories) had been common before 1914, the sheer visibility of it during the war years, and the agency it granted to working class women, were seen as a distinct threat. Between 1914 and 1918, somewhere between 100.000 and 400.000 women left domestic service for wartime jobs.¹³ A way of dealing with this was to portray working girls as less clean than their non-working counterparts. Hence the middle class police officer Gabriella West felt it necessary to leave the massive Woolwich Arsenal, because she could not stand the »dirty, stinking, swearing people there.«¹⁴ West associates the dirt and stink of the female workers with »getting up strikes,« socialist speeches, and riots started by the singing of Irish nationalist songs.¹⁵

There are several things going on here – first is the equation of dirt with social upheaval, second is the threat of social climbing, and third is a fear of the camaraderie and assembly of working class women. All of these fears, voiced by West but widespread in society, were often accompanied by a »call to order« built on notions of moral and physical cleanliness. Though the wages of female munitions workers were not nearly so high as was believed, the purchasing of new clothes, jewellery, hair ornaments or stockings within a wartime economy was immediately seized as an example of moral degeneracy.¹⁶ The same regulations were not applied to middle class readers of the ILN, who in March 1916 were confronted with an ad for »Practical blouses for women workers.«¹⁷ Unlike the shiny jewellery and baubles aimed at working class workers, the middle class consumer was greeted with the demure yet becoming blouse »guaranteed to stand hard wear.« Labelled »an ideal blouse for war workers,« the advertisement constructs middle class consumption as necessary and patriotic rather than frivolous.

A barrier between clean and dirty played out in the architecture of the munitions factories as well.¹⁸ Munitions workers were forced to wash daily, go through clean underwear inspections and full body checks to make sure that they were clean. Upon crossing the threshold from the »dirty« outside world, to the »clean« manufacturing area, workers had to hand over their hair ornaments, jewellery, cigarettes, purses and ephemera, their markers as working class, before passing to the »clean« side, where uniforms were worn, hiding class affiliation, and where armaments, quite literally the defence of the nation, were produced.¹⁹ The forced cleanliness of factory workers, echoed in the forced bathing of the British infantry, was not found among some middle class volunteers, where dirt was a mark of heroism. »You wouldn't know me,«

proudly writes Canadian nurse May Bastedo in 1915, »I'm like a tough, dirty skirt, two sweaters, raincoat, old gloves and a sou-wester on, tied under my chin, mud on everything.«²⁰

Stationed on a hospital boat outside of Salonika, Bastedo's participation in the war is constructed through her letters home as exciting and heroic, but not particularly dangerous – once home at the end of the war, the mud is easily washed off.²¹ For munitions workers, difference was often marked directly on the body. Within the munitions factories, middle and upper class workers rarely worked in the »danger zones,« areas where dangerous chemicals such as TNT were stuffed into shells by human labour. The chemicals quickly turned the skin, eyes, nails, hair and teeth a bright brassy yellow, which could not be washed off. This was quickly seized upon by cosmetic companies, who marketed invariably unsuccessful products designed to remove the yellow from workers' skin. In working class magazines, Ven Yusa ads read »remember, that while it is patriotic for girls to help their country with war work, it is also patriotic for them to preserve the natural beauty of their skins and complexions with the help of Ven Yusa.«²²

Munitions work was particularly troublesome as not only was it marked directly on the body, but it also affected reproduction, creating a double bind for many working class women. On the one hand, they were encouraged to work in the munitions factories through government initiatives, but because it affected menstruation, working in the factories was seen as a physical obstacle to the pronatal campaigns under way in Britain at the time.²³ The need to replace the population was seen as greater than the eugenic need to lower birth rates in the working class, and thus, young women were harshly criticized for damaging the future of the nation even as they worked to ensure an end to the war.²⁴

Pronatal campaigns were closely tied to debates over prostitution and venereal disease. Under the Defence of the Realm Act, Victorian laws on the control of prostitution were reintroduced, allowing women to be forcibly examined and treated if they were found to be carrying a venereal disease. As laws were passed making it illegal for women carrying venereal disease to have intercourse with a serviceman, the spread of sexually transmitted diseases became common knowledge, but the second element, the individual suspicion that one's own brother, father, husband or lover might be engaging in illicit activity, was rarely acknowledged, but often suspected.²⁵ Centering blame on women allowed for a continued belief in the mythic heroism of soldiers fighting for the nation, while also further conflating women of a certain class as above pollution. I argue that this was one reason behind both recruitment campaigns playing on this suspicion, as well as the »send soap to soldiers« advertising campaign found in the ILN.

Here is one example of a poster that was plastered all over London in 1914 and 1915:

TO THE YOUNG WOMEN OF LONDON: Is your »Best Boy« wearing khaki? If not, don't *YOU THINK* he should be? If he does not think that you and your country are worth fighting for – do you think he is *WORTHY* of you? Don't pity the girl who is alone – her young man is probably a soldier – fighting for her and her country – and for *YOU*. If your young man neglects his duty to his King and Country, the time may come when he will *NEGLECT YOU*. Think it over – then ask him to *JOIN THE ARMY TO-DAY*.²⁶

While this poster rather cynically equates the love of the nation with the love of the woman, it clearly insinuates that those fighting for the nation are somehow better than those at home. It also plays on fears of infidelity, although couching them within the notion that a »good« soldier, one who enlists voluntarily, is of a strong moral character, and thus more likely to remain honest. Could it be then, that the numerous soap ads, particularly those designed to get women to send soap to soldiers, play into these ideas?

What I want to suggest is that the disparate notions of the »good« soldier, a knowledge of the skyrocketing rates of venereal disease, and a half-formed knowledge of the terrible conditions of the front lines resulted in a desperate belief on the home front that through the sending of soap, soldiers would remain clean, that somehow the physical and moral dirt of the front line could be washed off. The support for the sending soap campaigns belies a belief that first, men could be incorporated back into the domestic space, that second, the manifest content of physical cleanliness embodied in the soap served also as a reminder of moral cleanliness, and third, that soap and bathing could somehow wash off the experience of war, returning men to the home front clean, intact, and unchanged. It should be remembered, however, that these ads were aimed at those on the home front and play partially on guilt (only send the best to your soldier), and partially on fear – on a need to believe that your soldier at least was clean, and perhaps that the magical properties already accorded to soap as a symbol of purification, civilization and progress, might also offer a superstitious protection against the metal of war.²⁷

Most soap ads were aimed directly at women, using lines such as »Sister Susie's Sending Soap to Soldiers,«²⁸ actually a play on the popular song »Sister Susie's Sewing Shirts for Soldiers«, and »Send Them More (Pear's Soap, K.R.)! Don't Let Them Go Short!« Most ads depict the smiling faces of clean, young, and white soldiers, while some use the soldiers themselves to advertise the soap (fig. 2). For example »I have a fine towel, will some nice person send along a box of Coal Tar Soap.« The send soap ads played into a belief of class unity on the front lines: »From Private to General, They All Enjoy a Wash With Wright's Coal Tar Soap,« and were careful not to overemphasize the dirt of the front lines, preferring instead to refer to it euphemistically »the need for soap at the front is constantly being emphasized.«

Certainly England was not the only country with soap ads aimed at soldiers. Juliann Sivulka, in her cultural study of hygiene in America, notes the Lever Brothers Company of New York ads using Army General Pershing's statement that American soldiers were »brimming with energy« because they were compelled to bathe with soap once a day.²⁹ Neither were soap ads the only campaigns aimed at soldiers. In the issues from January 1916, Colgate advertised its new shaving stick as being »packed in a handsome rust-proof nickelled box most convenient for officers' kits.« A young man dressed in civilian clothes has »Passed (the medical exam, K.R.) First Time Thanks to Beecham's Pills.« Meanwhile Horlick's Ration of Malted Milk Tablets are »sufficient to maintain strength and vigour for 24 hours without any other food, and in addition the tablets relieve thirst. Think in how many ways an emergency ration such as this would be useful to every soldier.« For the home front, the Adapta Bed Table put itself forward as ideal for recovering patients, while Foot's Adjustable Rest Chair, which had been advertised before

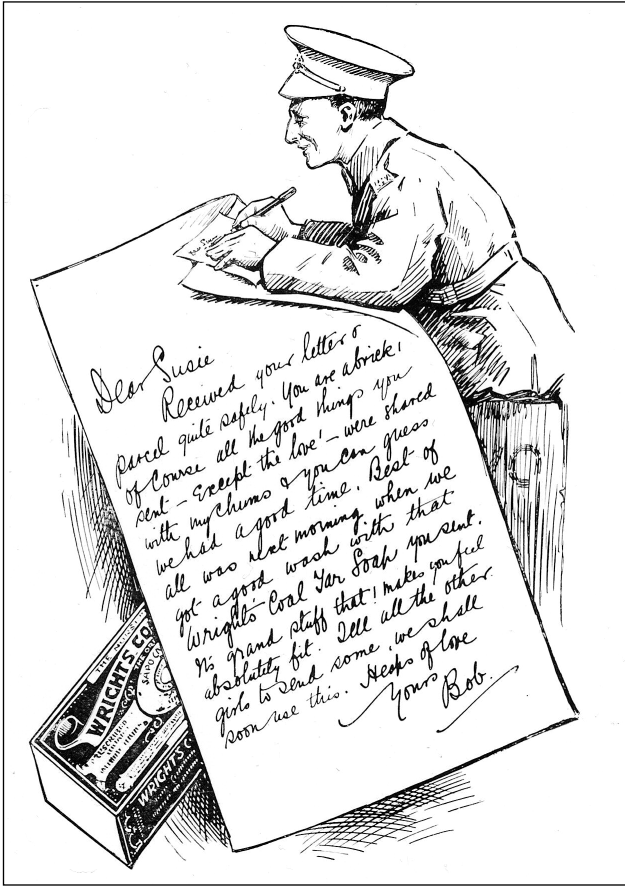


Fig. 2: : *Illustrated London News*, August 28, 1915; photograph by: Photography Preservation Services, Toronto Reference Library, Toronto Public Library

the war with an older man enjoying a pipe, now showed a bandaged and smoking soldier. Bovril gives »strength to win,« and young men are advertised to follow the Motor Transport Officers' lead and always get Dunlop Tires.

It should not be seen as surprising that many companies tried to play on guilt and worry to get people on the home front to consume, and to send items to soldiers. However, it is the soap ads that are most pervasive within the ILN, and while soldiers receiving parcels were often happier to receive chocolate and cigarettes, an emphasis on cleanliness and bathing pervades front line memoirs and letters home. Though I lack the space to explore this in detail, a strange sense of domesticity pervaded the front lines as British soldiers tried to create a national and domestic space at the front.³⁰ This was in part based on the strong nationalistic ties involved in signing up to fight, but also, I would argue, that the complete lack of control that front line soldiers had over their conditions had an effect of translating into a need for the comforts of home. Not surprisingly, one of the main tropes for imaginatively configuring the home

front was through cleanliness. One officer wrote home to his mother »You all struck me as so beautifully clean. Don't smile. Out here cleanliness doesn't come next to godliness. It's a luxury, not a virtue.«³¹

Bathing came to be seen as a way of connection to, but also separation from the home front. There are hundreds of mentions of bathing in High Diction poetry, in memoirs, in letters home, in recreations of the war, paintings, and illustrations. The cleaning of the dirty body, the caressing with soap, and the white flesh of the fit bodies of soldiers is both homoerotic and morally constraining. The bathing rituals also took place to maintain a sense of »civilization« among the fighting soldiers. In part this was a portion of the military control exacted on the soldiers body. A guide for Officers and Soldiers from 1915 stated:

And remember, parade ground work requires, not so much use of the brain – but control of the brain – to think and act – instantly and correctly (...). We can reach that state of discipline only by the loyal and cheerful co-operation of each and every one of you. In training yourselves to reach that state you will be astonished to find to what a remarkable degree it adds to your own comfort and well being.³²

Somewhat later in the pamphlet soldiers are told to »wash regularly – clean feet and person – brush teeth – and by all means inform, and keep informing, men that what causes most illness and trouble comes from not having regular bowel movement (...) dirty underclothing – dirty socks.«³³

The undertaking to change habits among soldiers belies a belief in cleanliness again as morality, but also as a way of maintaining a connection to the world of the home front. The danger of not doing this is outlined in the following quote from soldier H. S. Clapham, »One lives here in a way which upsets all one's old ideas of life. One does things without a qualm – latrine fatigue, for example – which would have made one physically sick in England.«³⁴

It was widely believed that the man who had killed was somehow polluted and stained, someone who needed to undergo a ritual cleansing.³⁵ The constant dirt and mud, the rats and corpses, the inability to distinguish between where the body ended and where the dirt began is an element often noted in soldier's diaries and letters, and provided one of the largest transgressions of the distinction between cleanliness and filth since the advent of commercialized soap. The sending of soap to soldiers can thus be seen as a desperate retention of the belief that after the war things would return to normal, the dirt really could be washed off.

Once the war ended, the send soap to soldiers campaigns ended immediately, although soldiers were not all returned home at once, and many were forced to linger in Europe until 1920. By 1919 in the ILN there are many ads concerned with nervous exhaustion »Oxo Calms the Nerves«, numerous ads for frivolous goods to be purchased, and several for wheelchairs, special invalid beds, and supposed treatments for neurasthenia (shell shock). Women were quickly returned to the role of »little mothers,« through ads such as Glaxo food supplement's appealing to »Little mother with your first sweet Baby cuddling in your arms.«³⁶ Though women

quickly secured the vote, within the advertising pages of the ILN, the focus turned from cleanliness to replacing the population. An increasing number of ads aimed at men redirected focus from keeping the nation clean in the uncertain times of war to celebrating a bourgeois English culture focused on the joy of life and consumer culture. Ads for cars, tobacco, chocolate, pearls, cutlery, travelling, cigars, whisky, clothing and dancing lessons fill the back pages of the issues. In effect, what occurs is a reinstatement of pre-war gender and class norms, with the fetishization of cleanliness replaced by a fetishization of male spending power and the consequent erasure of war-time national/social concerns.³⁷

Notes

- 1 Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, London 1966, 2.
- 2 There are numerous social histories of the First World War that describe changes at the time, Eric Leed, Arthur Marwick, Angela Smith, J. M. Winter, and Angela Wollacott have written some of the most well known books on the topic.
- 3 Frank Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities: Medico-Moral Politics in England Since 1830*, London and New York 1987, 41.
- 4 *Illustrated London News (ILN)*, vol. 129, January 1912.
- 5 Peter Sinnema, *Dynamics of the Pictured Page: Representing the Nation in the Illustrated London News*, Aldershot 1998, 7-9.
- 6 For an analysis of commodity racism in early British soap ads see Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, New York and London 1995, 211.
- 7 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London and New York 1983, 8.
- 8 John Dewey, *Plasticity of Impulse*, in: idem, *Human Nature and Conduct: an Introduction to Social Psychology*, New York 1922, 96-97.
- 9 *ILN*, vols. 132-133 (1915-1916).
- 10 Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars and Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture*, Cambridge, MA 1996, 78.
- 11 Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities*, as in note 3, 38; Phyllis Palmer, *Domesticity and Dirt: Housewives and Domestic Servants in the United States 1920-1945*, Philadelphia 1989, 140.
- 12 Juliann Sivulka, *Stronger Than Dirt: A Cultural History of Advertising Personal Hygiene in America, 1875-1940*, Amherst 2001, 14.
- 13 Deborah Thom, *Nice Girls and Rude Girls: Women Workers in World War One*, London and New York 1998, 45.
- 14 Quoted in *ibid.*, 36.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 36.
- 16 Eric J. Leed, *No Man's Land: Combat and Identity in World War One*, Cambridge and London 1979, 45.
- 17 *ILN*, vol. 133, March 25, 1916.
- 18 Gail Braybon and Penny Summerfield, *Out of the Cage: Women's Experiences in the Two World Wars*, London and New York 1987, 75.
- 19 Thom, *Girls*, as in note 13, 151.
- 20 May Bastedo, *First World War Archives*, Canadian War Museum, Vimy House, Ottawa, 58 AI 2.1 19780041 001,008,009, Nov. 26, 1915.
- 21 Thom, *Girls*, as in note 13, 15.
- 22 Quoted in Claire A. Culleton, *Working Class Culture, Women, and Britain, 1914-1921*, New York 1999, 82.
- 23 Braybon and Summerfield, *Cage*, as in note 18, 16.
- 24 *Ibid.*

- 25 Culleton, Culture, as in note 22, 138.
- 26 Ibid., 11-12.
- 27 Sivulka, Dirt, as in note 12, 102.
- 28 ILN, vol. 51, January 1, 1916, 7.
- 29 Sivulka, Dirt, as in note 12, 13.
- 30 See for example Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Oxford 1975.
- 31 Anonymous, *From Dug-Out and Billet: An Officer's Letters to His Mother*, London 1916, 110.
- 32 Robert Benjamin Code, *Spirit of No. 2 Company*, a typewritten guide for officers and soldiers, Canadian War Museum, Vimy House, Ottawa, MM, MC, 1897-1967 file 58AI 8.10 acq 1992 0165/1992 0165/070., 1-2.
- 33 Ibid., 2.
- 34 Quoted in Andy Simpson, ed., *Hot Blood and Cold Steel: Life and Death in the Trenches of the First World War*, London 1993, 37.
- 35 Leed, *No Man's Land*, as in note 16, 13.
- 36 ILN, vol. 136, January 25, 1919.
- 37 I would like to thank Dr. Aron Vinegar, the Canadian War Museum (Vimy House) and the Toronto Public Library.