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The Women's Land Army (1944): Vita Sackville-West's Non-Fictional Wartime Writing

Christine REYNIER

- 1 Recently, there has been a resurgence of interest in Vita Sackville-West's life, with the publication of a new biography by Matthew Dennison, *Behind the Mask. The Life of Vita Sackville-West* (2014), about thirty years after Victoria Glendinning's authoritative one, *Vita. The Life of V. Sackville-West* (1983). Her love life and her skills as a gardener have been explored by critics such as Sarah Raven, Suzanne Raitt or Karyn Sproles. However, her fiction and her non-fiction remain underexplored by academic criticism even if her novels *The Edwardians* (1930), *All Passion Spent* (1931), her poem *The Land* (1926) and her travel writing remain quite popular.
- 2 This paper means to focus on a little-known work of non-fiction Vita Sackville-West published in 1944, *The Women's Land Army*. The book, "widely reviewed" at the time (Dennison 4475), is rarely cited in bibliographies of Sackville-West whereas her poetry, novels, translations, biographies and travel writings invariably are. Sackville-West herself did not count it among her writings but regarded it as a work of propaganda commissioned by the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries (Dennison 4262). So do her biographers. Glendinning relates how Sackville-West met Lady Denman, the Honorary Director of the Women's Land Army and stayed at her house, Balcombe Place, Sussex, which had been transformed into the Women's Land Army headquarters (Glendinning 325). Dennison adds that "from early in the war she helped the Kent Committee with recruitment and administration" as a local representative for the Women's Land Army, and then donated the royalties from her book to the Women's Land Army Benevolent Fund (Dennison 4262).
- 3 This is the issue that this paper would like to examine more closely: is *The Women's Land Army* merely a book of propaganda? Taking into account the historical and personal context in which it was published, this paper argues that it goes beyond propaganda

and reads as a history book with feminist claims and that it echoes and exposes many features of Sackville-West's fiction.

1. *The Women's Land Army* as a book of propaganda

- 4 Despite its somewhat misleading name, the Women's Land Army (henceforth the WLA) was not part of the army but a civilian organization of volunteers run by the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries. Formed in the third year of the First World War, in 1917, it was disbanded in 1919 and re-formed before the beginning of the Second World War, in June 1939. Throughout the war, it recruited thousands of women, known as "land girls", who were employed in individual farms and were a mobile force. Additionally, in March 1942, the Women's Timber Corps, constituted of so-called "lumber jills", was formed and dealt with forestry. The aim of the WLA was to make up for the absence of the men who had been sent to war at a time when Britain needed to become more self-supporting as Hitler's U-boat campaign was trying to blockade imports of food and starve a country which relied heavily on vegetables, grain and meat from abroad. By June 1943, the success of the WLA was undeniable: it was producing 70% of Britain's food (Kramer in Cooke 50).
- 5 In April 1940, when the WLA was growing and had already attracted more than 4,500 women, it began publishing a monthly magazine, *Land Girl*.¹ In 1941, W.E. Shewell-Cooper published *Land Girl. A Manual for Volunteers in the Women's Land Army* which explains the reasons for the creation of the WLA in the First and Second World Wars and gives the necessary information to the volunteers about billeting, wages, working hours, insurance, training, and reproduces the forms they have to fill in as well as the reports the farmers have to make. Lavishly illustrated with flattering photographs, it also gives practical advice in its annexes. Shewell-Cooper's book came out when Churchill's wartime government allowed for the conscription of women: first, in December 1941, unmarried women between 20 and 30 were conscripted; later married women and unmarried women between 20 and 43 were.²
- 6 Sackville-West's book came three years later, in 1944, when 9 out of 10 single women and 8 out of 10 married women were engaged in war work, either in the forces, the WLA or in war industries, and 80,000 land girls had been recruited (Kramer in Cooke 50). By then the book might have been useless if recruitment had not had to begin again when it became clear that the WLA would be needed after the war. For this purpose (and because she had been commissioned by the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries), the author adopted the mission of the propagandist. In many ways, Sackville-West's book reads as a homage to the WLA and its efficient organizers as well as a vindication of the courage of the volunteers who left attractive or comfortable jobs in the city to join the Land Army and work hard in the fields doing jobs they had often known nothing about before enrolling. It presents the land girl as "the most cheerful of mortals" (40) "in the gayest possible spirit" (41) and paints an idyllic picture of the land girl in a farm, living in a house of plenty, in homely peaceful surroundings:

a genial kitchen at supper-time, when the white tablecloth is spread under the lamp and the table is set with yellow plates, and there is a huge loaf and a bowl of tomatoes and jade-green lettuce in the centre. The fire glows behind the bars of the grate, the kettle bubbles gently. The man of the house sits in his shirt-sleeves reading the newspaper while he waits for his tea, his children stare, the dog gets up, the housewife comes out from the scullery wiping her hands, and there is the

Land-girl³ in the midst of them, young, pretty, healthy, almost like the daughter of the family. (35)

- 7 The hard work that the land girl does is highlighted as performing a crucial patriotic role: "Taken all in all, the nation which has never gone short of a loaf owes much to the girls who have helped us to our unrationed bread" (70-1).
- 8 Because of this, it cannot be denied that the book is first and foremost a propaganda book, comparable to those which British writers like Ford Madox Ford had taken to writing in WWI when the Propaganda Bureau was created. In this respect, it is not so far from Shewell-Cooper's *Manual for Volunteers in the Women's Land Army* which enhances national pride and the role the land girls played in national defence and survival, at a time when the German blockade and starvation threatened England.
- 9 However, Sackville-West never adopts the tone of the recruiter, unlike Shewell-Cooper who writes, after the War Agricultural Committee has called for more land to be ploughed up:
The more intensive the production, the more labour is required.
It will be seen, therefore, that there is a great need for the Women's Land Army in this war, which we must win. [...]
The Women's Land Army needs [...] women from all walks of life, women who are anxious to help their country in a time of need and who are attracted to the open air. The Land Army member is bound to be mobile. She is willing to go where she is sent. (15-6)
- 10 Shewell-Cooper echoes the Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries, R.S. Hudson, who in October 1940 said:
Famine could achieve what no bomb or blitzkrieg or invading force will ever bring about. It is your vital task to see that such a thing could in no conceivable circumstance arise, and is driven even further from the realm of possibilities. (qtd in Shewell-Cooper 17)
- 11 Sackville-West never resorts to such phraseology. The tone she adopts on the whole is quite different.

2. The Women's Land Army as a history book

- 12 For today's reader, Sackville-West's book reads more like a carefully written history book. Beyond "the celebratory tone she uses to present Land Girls as 'heroines of the day'" (Watton), the author gives countless invaluable details and information about the organization. In the first chapters, we are told how the director of the WLA relies on Regional Officers who are in touch with a network of County and District representatives, themselves in contact with the land girls: "the big pumping heart at the centre and the ends of the arteries [...] reach out to every county office in England and Wales", in Sackville-West's own metaphorical words (21). The connecting role of the rep is particularly well described since Vita was one of them and knew they had
to visit every Land-girl in her district once a month, [...] to introduce the newcomer to her country neighbours; to the Women's Institute; to the Young Farmers' Club; and to tell her about the Land Army activities arranged for her benefit, the correspondence courses, the proficiency tests, and the clubs which numbered nearly six hundred by January, 1944. (37)
- 13 The author also points at the class divide between the reps, mostly women from the middle and upper classes,⁴ and the land girls, who came from the lower classes, as well

as the problems of understanding this occasionally led to (31). She evokes the conditions a land girl must fulfill in order to be recruited: she must accept to go where she is needed, not necessarily close to her home, she must submit herself to interviews and medical checks, and then she is trained in a dedicated farm. The author provides WLA Employment figures, a comparative table of the work-output of men and women, proficiency tests, a list of the courses available, a list of the WLA hostels, and so on. It thus reads as a book documenting the history of the WLA with an effort towards objectivity: it is a well-researched book, showing reliance on documents of the period and based on tables and figures that betoken the rigorous approach of the historian.

- 14 The most interesting chapters are those dedicated to the land girls and the work they undertake. Resorting to the figure of accumulation, Sackville-West describes the wide impressive variety of skills such women have acquired during the war:

She milks; she does general farm-work which includes ploughing, weeding, hoeing, dung-spreading, lifting and clamping potatoes and other root crops, brishing and laying hedges, cleaning ditches, haymaking, harvesting, threshing; in more specialised ways, she prunes and sprays fruit-trees, picks and packs the fruit, makes and lays thatch, makes silage, pulls flax, destroys rats, works an excavator, reclaims bad land, works in commercial gardens and private gardens, works in the forest felling timber, measuring timber, planting young trees... (45)⁵

- 15 The author expatiates on their competence and professionalism, often quoting their own words in their letters to their families or the broadcasts they made on the BBC. For instance, a land girl aged 19 explains on the wireless with a lot of technical details how she worked an excavator to widen and deepen the River Skerne in Durham “because annually it floods and lays thousands of acres waste” (72).⁶

- 16 But far from being a simple eulogy of the land girls and their work, the book points at their faults as well as the difficulties they encounter. Land girls can be exasperating as the author exclaims in chapter VIII: “Heaven knows that I have sometimes wished I might never see a Land-girl again” (48)⁷; but they may have a right to be so since they work hard, have no guaranteed holidays or week-ends, and face the harshness of the weather together with difficult working conditions. Throughout her work, Sackville-West is careful to confront the myth of the countryside with reality (39-40); when describing milking, for instance, she deflates the pastoral image that Thomas Hardy had created:

Not much of the novelist's sun-bonneted dairymaid here, when you come down to the real thing! Tess of the d'Urbervilles may have sat pressing her brow against the sweet-smelling flanks while a handsome young man courted her and the spurt of the milk-jets made a pastoral rhythm to the idyll, but the Land-girl knows that it isn't really like that. (50)

- 17 What is of particular interest, on the whole, is the type of history Sackville-West is writing. She describes the WLA as “the Cinderella of the women's services”, a less prestigious corps than the forces and war industries which became the “forgotten army”. She focuses on “the unseen unknown somebody” (46) who “has remained always behind the wings” (38), the ordinary land girl whose “story is not sensational. It is a plodding story, of endurance rather than heroics [...] away from the limelight” (38). She is the historian of what French philosopher Guillaume Le Blanc calls “the invisible ones” and hers is unheroic history. Following in the footsteps of French historian Jules Michelet rather than those of Thomas Carlyle,⁸ she makes the anonymous visible. However, where Michelet “invents the art of making the poor talk by shutting them

up”,⁹ according to Jacques Rancière, that is by filtering their own words, Sackville-West attempts to give them a voice by quoting their very words. She thus makes the land girls visible, voice (rather than face) being the first condition of social visibility, according to Le Blanc.¹⁰ By quoting their letters and broadcasts, Sackville-West makes sure the anonymous land girls will leave a trace in history. Trace is an essential concept for the knowledge of history that was developed in the interwar period by French historian Marc Bloch, the founder of the *Annales School*; for him history is “knowledge by trace”.¹¹ Paul Ricoeur confirms this and makes a typology of trace in *Memory, History, Forgetting*: he finds three types of traces – emotional, material and documentary imprint – and he makes a distinction between on the one hand, written traces, that is, written testimonies or archive and on the other hand, unwritten traces, that is, unwritten testimonies that consist of relics of the past (objects, fossils, tools, etc.) and traces of facts or events. Sackville-West resorts to both types of testimonies, written and unwritten ones, transcribing the land girls’ own words, the phrases they used in the 1940s such as “making a guy of herself” (44), their letters or their radio broadcasts, to construct the trace of the land girls’ achievements, which would otherwise have remained largely unrecorded or forgotten.¹² Just as Virginia Woolf in “Great Men’s Houses” highlights the trace Jane Carlyle rather than Thomas has left in history,¹³ or in *Flush*, the trace Elizabeth Barrett Browning rather than Robert has left, or again, in the unpublished “the cook sketch” written in 1931,¹⁴ the trace that the cook has left, Sackville-West focuses on the achievements of these women and the trace they would leave in history.

- 18 In fact, the celebratory tone Sackville-West uses to talk of the land girls turns her work into a militant type of history that defends the role played by women during the war and shows how the war has been instrumental in promoting gender equality, giving women access to jobs (such as working in sawmills, driving tractors or working excavators, reclaiming land, draining fields, etc.) that were up to then reserved to men: theirs is “a real man-size job”, as a land girl says (74). Although, according to Glendinning, Vita Sackville-West hated the word “feminist” and (much as Woolf did) denied being one, “her every attitude – to domestic life, to her work, to the bureaucracy that insisted on labelling her ‘Mrs Harold Nicolson’ – belied her” (Glendinning 201). *The Women’s Land Army* goes the same way. Indeed, Sackville-West emphasises the achievements of these women, their adaptability to totally different jobs and surroundings, their physical strength, their endurance and their resourcefulness. She deconstructs the image of women as ninnies when she describes their efficient work as rat-catchers, adding with tongue-in-cheek that “it was rather a surprise to find it [the job] done by the very people who were traditionally supposed to mount a chair and scream whenever they saw so much as a mouse washing its whiskers” (98); or when she vaunts the sturdiness, resilience and courage of these 17- or 18-year-old girls who work in sodden fields, plough by night because of the urgency of war and go on working in the middle of air-raids, undeterred by the falling shells and bombs (49). She shows how the land girls defeated patriarchal reticence in Scotland where farmers, initially reluctant to employ women, came to acknowledge their worth and even wanted to keep them (135). Only in one place does the author fail the land girls when she accepts that there should be a difference in wages paid to men and women, men being physically stronger and more suited to the heavy work (165).

- 19 Sackville-West goes so far as to imagine the future of these women, the new jobs that will be available to them after the war, such as milk-recorders or vets (159), or jobs in the dominions (161). She indulges in a fancy of post-war female pioneers going abroad as free, liberated women, unlike their forebears (162). She even devises a utopian scheme where the best land girls would become responsible for “Government controlled holdings” (169), small model farms where they would carry out experimental schemes. On the whole, Sackville-West points out that the war has been for women “a real eye-opener” (164), which the land girls recently interviewed by Ann Kramer confirmed, talking of their experience as having had a liberating impact on their lives.¹⁵ In this sense, unlike a typical propaganda book, Sackville-West’s book seems to address not so much the land girls themselves or their contemporaries but future readers. Retrospectively, it reads in many ways as a monument to these women, the first ever to have been erected.
- 20 Six years after this isolated attempt at documenting the WLA was published, the WLA was disbanded and largely forgotten. It only reemerged in 1995 when 80 land girls marched in London to celebrate the 50th anniversary of VJ-Day.¹⁶ In 2000 the WLA was invited to the Remembrance Day march past the Cenotaph in London; and in 2007, the first memorial to the Women’s Timber Corps was unveiled in Scotland.¹⁷ As historian Carol Harris wrote in 2000: “the women of wartime Britain [...] still have no memorial statue or other acknowledgement that without their enormous and crucial contribution, the lives we live now would be very different” (VI)¹⁸; “these wartime roles were not commemorated in films and books. There is no official acknowledgement of the enormous and crucial contribution those British women made to the lives we live now” (Harris, blurb) and she set out to write *Women at War 1939-1945: The Home Front*. Ann Kramer, a freelance writer and historian, followed in her steps in 2008 with *Land Girls and their Impact*, a book specifically dedicated to the WLA; she worked from archive in the Imperial War Museum and interviewed the remaining former members of the WLA, collecting their first-hand memories. What is remarkable is that both Harris and Kramer rely on Sackville-West as their source and acknowledge her as the “historian of the WLA”. The Imperial War Museum itself endorsed Sackville-West’s book as a reliable source for the history of the WLA when it reprinted it in 1997.¹⁹ More recently, the WLA has attracted more attention: books and novels have been published on the land girls, films and TV series have been devoted to them.²⁰

3. The ambiguities of *The Women's Land Army*

- 21 Like most wartime writings, *The Women's Land Army* hovers between the public and the private sphere, the collective and the intimate. It reads as a book of propaganda that subverts what we could call the “propagandist pact” by going in a different direction to its commissioner’s ambition. Not only does it underline the difficulties of the work of a land girl, as seen earlier, but it also openly betrays in places the propagandist’s expected patriotism. Indeed, the author criticises what we would now call “industrial agriculture” (76) at the same time as she has been invited to help recruit land girls who can produce food on a large scale so as to feed Britain. She also moans the humiliating tragic felling of trees by machines while she is aware that trees are necessary in wartime to make telegraph poles or obstruction-poles for road blocks.

In past years there was a certain dignity and beauty, as well as tragedy, [...] in the sight of a great tree being taken away by great horses; [...] there was something of the same quality in both, which made the dragging away of the tree less humiliating somehow than this mechanized removal on lorries, this easy defeat of the strong, the old, the beautiful, by something stronger, newer, and far less beautiful than the glossy team. (108)

- 22 There the environmentalist's nature-friendly feelings are at odds with the patriotic discourse expected from the propagandist. Similarly, the author praises English forests and compares them to those in Germany, which are said to be "vast" and beautiful (106). Refusing to adopt a vindictive attitude and to endow the enemy nation with all sorts of evils even in times of war, Sackville-West betrays her ingrained cosmopolitanism, at odds with her similarly ingrained nationalism. *The Women's Land Army* thus reveals Sackville-West's ambiguities and contradictions, which are also palpable in her fiction and travel-writing: the author of *The Land*, a highly popular award-winning poem (1926) written in praise of England and Englishness,²¹ was also a great traveller, open to other cultures and people, as *Twelve Days in Persia* shows; the author of *Grand Canyon* (1942), a "defeatist" novel imagining the invasion of the United States by the Nazis,²² could also take part in the war effort with *The Women's Land Army*; the aristocratic descendant of Lord Sackville was also able to write with empathy of the land girls, help them and even dress like them – in breeches and gaiters – for most of her life, identifying with them by claiming their manly uniform as a token of liberation as well as an ambiguous dress code that fitted her own sexual choices. Like Harold Nicolson, her husband, she could have said: "I have always been on the side of the underdog, but I have also believed in the principle of aristocracy" (Rose 190).²³ Such ambivalence shows in the posture of the narrator who can now patronize the land girls, now empathise with them, acting both as a (patriarchal) aristocrat looking benevolently at the lower-class so-called "girls" and as a feminist claiming to defend the women's extraordinary achievements.
- 23 A similar tension can be observed in Sackville-West's book between objectivity and subjectivity. Indeed, the author abandons at times the objective posture and the assertive tone of the conventional historian to resort to supposition and imagination, for example, when dealing with the land girls' origins, their knowledge or absence of knowledge of the country: "Perhaps she didn't always know how hard the life was going to be. Perhaps she had visions of herself teaching gentle little calves to suck her finger in a bucket of milk" (38). The writer then has the upper hand and can allude to William Wordsworth or Thomas Hardy, quote poems by land girls (124-5), and adopt here an iambic rhythm to convey the repetitive task of milking (46), there Churchillian accents with the recurrent phrase "They fight in the fields" (148). Resorting to the singular pronoun "she" (rather than the impersonal word "the volunteer" that Shewell-Cooper adopts in his *Manual*), Sackville-West focuses on one specific land girl, who is both emblematic of all the land girls and singular, thus acknowledging their personality and humanity. She now empathises with them, imagining their fear in the empty countryside at dawn (46) or when ploughing a field on a moonless night (56); now adopts a more censorious attitude, disapproving of their tampering with their hats, which some wear askew for fun, and disgracing the uniform (42-3).
- 24 At other times, the author of *Country Notes in Wartime* (1939) and *The Garden* (1946), who is also the gardener and creator of Sissinghurst Gardens,²⁴ and the author of a series of talks on gardening broadcast on the BBC, takes over. She gives advice about hedging or

pruning, expatiating on the satisfaction and pleasure that can be derived from cutting a hedge (62) and making a bonfire at the end of the day's work or from fruit-picking: "Many a town-girl, [...] must have experienced a real revelation of beauty when first she found herself in the orchards heavy with fruit on some gold-dusted morning" (82). The author creates a picture in words or ekphrasis to describe the fruit-pickers, the harmony of colours and the sensuality of the scene (82-4). If fruit-picking is presented as a way of experiencing beauty, hedging and pruning amount to artistic creation. The voice is then very close to that of the broadcaster who gave talks on gardening on the BBC every Friday evening in 1933,²⁵ to that of the poet as well as to that of the essayist. Meant to be "morale-boosting" columns (Dennison 4297), the essays in *Country Notes in Wartime*, initially published in *The New Statesman* from August 1939 to October 1941, read as a series of snapshots of life in the countryside in wartime. Poetic evocations of the romantic beauty of the countryside, the warm weather or the snow, the lushness of the crop, the abundance of flowers and trees contrast with the sinister "prospect of devastation" the war brings, with its searchlights, its sirens and black-out. The author mentions the changes the war brings to farming, gives her opinion on farming methods or refers to the Londoners' children evacuees and the land girls. In "September 1939", they are described for the first time as follows:

Then there are the Land-girls, an unfamiliar sight in the orchards and among the cows, picturesque in their brown dungarees, tossing their short curls back and laughing. I came across two of them picking plums; very young they were, and standing under the tree loaded with the blood-red drops, their arms lifted, the half-filled baskets on the ground beside them, they could scarcely have looked prettier in their lives than on that sunlit morning.

- 25 Finally, the voice of the poet we can hear at times in *The Women's Land Army* will come back after the war in *The Garden*, a long symbolic poem, divided according to the four seasons which are also the seasons of life, where the pleasure of gardening is set against the tragedy of war: "Small pleasures must correct great tragedies".²⁶
- 26 Thus, in many ways, *The Women's Land Army* ties in with its author's fictional and non-fictional work at large and exposes its variegated nature as well as its underestimated modernist touch, through its vision of history and its feminist slant, comparable to Rebecca West's or Virginia Woolf's, and its collages. The book is indeed nothing but a collage of various documents belonging to various genres and media: transcripts of radio broadcasts, letters and poems by land girls together with the official Land Army song "Back To The Land", feature in the text;²⁷ furthermore, 62 black and white photographs presenting the different types of jobs undertaken by the land girls – milking, haymaking, excavating, and so on – are inserted in the book.
- 27 Finally, *The Women's Land Army* challenges our vision of modernity. It is not only that Sackville-West's own life and work are connected with the land and the countryside but also that the countryside is still very much present in the British people's minds in the war years and still very much appreciated. The author shows how thousands of women who were working in London or in Northern cities left their employment not only to participate in the war effort but also to live a different life in the countryside, and enjoyed it immensely. With a few lines by Wordsworth about solitude and a letter of a land girl in Wales voicing her love of the wilderness (130-4), she challenges the reader's disbelief that a modern girl can love wild spaces, the serenity and freedom they give. The land girls' phenomenon, as evoked by Sackville-West, yields in the end a different version of modernity, as not necessarily urban. In her own words:

Thus it was astonishing to find that one-third of the Land Army volunteers came from London or our large industrial cities [...]. This surprising fact does suggest that there are many townspeople who feel they would prefer the country, in complete contradiction to the popular view that the youth of today is wedded to the cities. (13-4)

- 28 Her book brings to the fore a tradition that some writers such as E.M. Forster or D.H. Lawrence promoted but which has tended to be overshadowed by other more prominent modernist writers such as T.S. Eliot or James Joyce. This tradition, which has now been labelled pastoral and nostalgic, now utopian, still matched in the 1930s and 1940s the reality of a surviving rural world.
- 29 On the whole, *The Women's Land Army* is a work which reveals the many-faceted character of its author, and above all, her attraction to the humble work of the land in spite of her aristocratic background. Beyond its propagandist make up, it is a somewhat experimental work preoccupied with collage, one of the hallmarks of modernist art, which also "responds to the scenario of our chaos", wartime chaos, which is the very definition Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane initially gave of modernism (qtd in Mao and Walkowitz 3). As such, it reveals the talent of Sackville-West and how strong a grip she had on her own troubled times – its class divide, its awakening to feminism, its tension between nationalism and cosmopolitanism as well as between the urban and the rural world.
- 30 Regarded as marginal in her own work by its author, I would argue that *The Women's Land Army* deserves to feature today among her writings for the light it sheds on them and the way it resonates with them. I would also suggest that it challenges today's reader and the sometimes narrow definitions of modernity and modernism s/he may have as, for instance, necessarily urban. The power of Sackville-West's book, in the end, is that of a non-conforming modernist.

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NOTES

1. <https://www.womenslandarmy.co.uk/archive-material/world-war-two-archive/>
2. See Kramer or Harris on this subject.
3. The spelling is Vita Sackville-West's; we shall retain it when quoting from her book.
4. This hierarchical divide implicitly points at the mission the upper classes believed in and undertook, that is, educating the poor, the lower classes.
5. In the original Uniform edition, these skills are illustrated with black and white photographs.
6. As Sackville-West indicates, "the extracts from this talk are reproduced by kind permission of the BBC" (75).

7. "Her letters to Harold include details of 'bad land girls giving a good deal of trouble'" (Dennison 4259).
8. Jules Michelet is one of the first French historians who has focused in his *History of the French Revolution* (1847) on the people, and not only on great men, as Thomas Carlyle does in *Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (1888).
9. Jacques Rancière writes that Michelet "invente l'art de faire parler les pauvres en les faisant taire" (96).
10. Taking his cue from Levinas's disquisition on the face, Guillaume Le Blanc argues that social invisibility is synonymous with the loss of voice and "the erasure of the voice entails the erasure of the face" ("l'effacement de la voix engendre l'effacement du visage", 55).
11. Marc Bloch writes: "[l]'histoire est une] connaissance par traces" (56).
12. Only recently have the former land girls or their families been encouraged to share traces of their wartime work; postcards, photographs, and letters can now be seen and read on the Imperial War Museum website: <https://www.womenslandarmy.co.uk/archive-material/world-war-one/> and <https://www.womenslandarmy.co.uk/archive-material/world-war-two-archive/>
13. On this subject, see Reynier.
14. On this subject, see Jones.
15. On this subject, see Kramer, chapter 11.
16. On this subject, see Kramer, chap 11. VJ-Day or "Victory over Japan Day" commemorates the day when Japan surrendered, bringing WWII to an end.
17. On this subject, see Kramer in Cooke 50.
18. After considerable pressure, an official monument "To the Women of World War II" was unveiled in Whitehall in 2005.
19. See the Imperial War Museum website: <https://www.womenslandarmy.co.uk/world-war-one/> and in particular, <https://www.womenslandarmy.co.uk/new-edition-the-womens-land-army-by-vita-sackville-west-with-a-new-foreword-by-hrh-the-countess-of-wessex-gcvo/> See also Cherish Watton's reviews of Sackville-West's book in which she writes: "For any person interested in the Women's Land Army, this book is the perfect starting point for gaining a greater knowledge on the organisation, understanding the varying backgrounds to how a Land Girl came to work in agriculture, the different types of work they undertook and the post-war career opportunities available to them" (20 September 2013), <https://www.womenslandarmy.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/WLA-VitaSackvilleWest-Review.pdf> and 4 September 2015: <http://historytothepublic.org/review-the-womens-land-army-by-vita-sackville-west/>
20. Recently, books such as *Holding the Home Front: The Women's Land Army in the First World War* by Caroline Scott (2017) and novels such as *A Dot on the Landscape* by Ray Evans (2018) have been published on the WLA in WWI or WWII; for more, see <https://www.womenslandarmy.co.uk/new-book-holding-the-home-front-the-womens-land-army-in-the-first-world-war/>; films (David Leland's *The Land Girls*, 1998) and TV series (*Land Girl*, 2009-2011) too have been made on the WLA.
21. The pastoral epic *The Land* was awarded the prestigious Hawthorden Prize. *The Land* and *The Garden*, like the previous novels, *Heritage* (1919) and *The Heir* (1922), distil a similar love of England and Englishness.
22. The narrative is set in a hotel in the United States a few years after the Second World War, when Europe has been taken over by the Nazis; a surprise attack by the Axis powers, with the complicity of the hotel manager wipes away the hotel – a prelude to what happens to the whole of the United States. A few refugees from Europe staying at the hotel manage to escape to the Grand Canyon and bear witness to the catastrophe. This dystopia echoes in some ways Mary Bosanquet's *Saddlebags for Suitcases* (1939) where the author, while riding across Canada, is suspected of being a Nazi spy helping to prepare a German invasion of Canada. But if Bosanquet

is the spokesperson of the current fear of Nazi invasion, Sackville-West goes further by imagining a grim future in the light of a nightmarish present. This work of speculative fiction could be compared with more recent ones, such as Philip Roth's *The Plot against America* (2004). Leonard Woolf refused to publish it in the Hogarth Press on the grounds that it was "profoundly defeatist" (Glendinning 318).

23. In her life, Vita could similarly disapprove of the NHS but help poor people in need when they were ill. The social class divide is a recurrent theme in her novels, in particular in *Family History* (1932).

24. Interestingly enough, Vita Sackville-West was helped by a land girl for the upkeep of her garden in wartime.

25. The BBC talks were printed in the *Listener*. "The cottage garden at Hurstmonceaux" was "planned entirely according to her broadcast gardening talks" (Glendinning 301). In 1946, Sackville-West began "the weekly gardening articles in the *Observer* that were [...] to make her widely known and more eagerly read than anything else she ever wrote" (Glendinning 347).

26. *The Eagle and the Dove* (1943), the biography of S^t Teresa of Avila and S^{te} Thérèse de Lisieux, was also written during the war. If wondering what is a mystic seems to be far from wartime concerns, the author's reflections on the Roman church, its intolerance, and on the Spanish Inquisition, which is compared with Nazism for its doctrine of "racial purity" and its persecution of Jews, are related to wartime issues.

27. "In 1945 Vita Sackville-West put together a selection of poems written by land girls, which was published as *An Anthology of Verse* by members of the Women's Land Army. Most of the poems had already appeared in the *Land Girl* magazine but also in journals such as *Poetry Review*, *Country Life*, *Outposts*, and the *Children's Newspaper*. The anthology was reprinted by the Imperial War Museum in 1997, together with Vita Sackville-West's *The Women's Land Army*" (Kramer 279).

ABSTRACTS

Recently, there has been a resurgence of interest in Vita Sackville-West's life, with the publication of a new biography by Matthew Dennison (*Behind the Mask*, 2014), about thirty years after Victoria Glendinning's authoritative one, *Vita* (1983). Her love life and her skills as a gardener have been explored by critics such as Sarah Raven, Suzanne Raitt or Karyn Sproles. However, her fiction and her non-fiction remain underexplored by academic criticism even as her novels *The Edwardians* (1930), *All Passion Spent* (1931), her award-winning poem *The Land* (1926), her travel writing (*Twelve Days in Persia*, 1927) and her work on her garden, Sissinghurst, remain quite popular.

This paper means to focus on a little-known work of non-fiction Vita Sackville-West published towards the end of the Second World War, *The Women's Land Army* (1944). It came out two years after *Grand Canyon* (1942) – a work of speculative fiction staging the victory of the Nazis in the United States after they had won the Second World War – and three years after *Country Notes in Wartime* (1941), a collection of essays that were first published in *The New Statesman and Nation* from August 1939 until 1941. *The Women's Land Army* draws our attention to the lives of the women who joined the WLA during the Second World War. The status of this book is discussed here: is it mere propaganda, a historical document, or a piece of modernist writing? Raising such questions about the status of this non-fictional narrative helps to place the author within a modernist literary context.

Ces derniers temps, on a pu assister à un regain d'intérêt pour la vie de Vita Sackville-West avec la publication de la nouvelle biographie de Matthew Dennison, *Behind the Mask* (2014), une trentaine d'années après celle de Victoria Glendinning, *Vita* (1983), qui avait fait autorité. Sa vie amoureuse et ses talents de jardinier ont été explorés par des critiques telles que Sarah Raven, Suzanne Raitt or Karyn Sproles. Cependant, ses œuvres de fiction et de non-fiction demeurent encore insuffisamment étudiées par la critique universitaire même si ses romans, comme *The Edwardians* (1930), *All Passion Spent* (1931), son poème *The Land* (1926) qui fut récompensé par le prix Hawthornden, ses récits de voyage (*Twelve Days in Persia*, 1927) et ses travaux sur son jardin de Sissinghurst sont très populaires.

Cet article se propose de se pencher sur une œuvre non-fictionnelle peu connue de Vita Sackville-West qui fut publiée vers la fin de la Seconde Guerre mondiale, *The Women's Land Army* (1944). Elle parut deux ans après *Grand Canyon* (1942), œuvre de science-fiction qui imagine la victoire des nazis aux Etats-Unis après qu'ils ont gagné la Seconde Guerre Mondiale, et trois ans après *Country Notes in Wartime* (1941), recueil d'essais qui furent initialement publiés dans *The New Statesman and Nation* entre août 1939 et 1941. *The Women's Land Army* attire notre attention sur la vie des femmes qui s'enrôlèrent dans la WLA pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale. Le statut de cet ouvrage est examiné ici: s'agit-il d'un simple ouvrage de propagande, d'un livre d'histoire ou d'un écrit moderniste? Poser ces questions à propos de ce récit non-fictionnel permet de reconsidérer la place de l'auteur dans le contexte littéraire moderniste.

INDEX

Keywords: The Women's Land Army, propaganda, history, women, invisibility, modernism

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