

The Women's Land Army by Vita Sackville-West (1944)

'The Women's Land Army', written by Vita Sackville-West (under the auspices of the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries) was published in 1944 and reprinted by the Imperial War Museum in 1997. Published when the Women's Land Army was still active, the book provides an insight into the work undertaken by the Land Girls and provides the chronological context to its formation and part played in both world wars. In addition to a range of first-hand Land Girl recounts, Sackville-West brings together 62 photographs presenting the scope of work undertaken by Land Girls in a variety of different settings. Also included towards the end of the book is the sheet music and lyrics to the song 'Back To The Land', the official Land Army song. The book was dedicated 'to the Patron of the Women's Land Army: Her Majesty the Queen'.

This book was the first self-conscious attempt to highlight the efforts of the organisation in saving the country from starvation and introduces from the outset the concept that the Land Army was the 'Cinderella of the women's services'¹. The book was aimed at the general public, designed to inform them of the agricultural work carried out by women during both world wars and celebrates the impact they had. However, it is clear that the book was also aimed at former Women's Land Army members, evidenced particularly in the final chapter 'Suggested Post-War Careers For Women' which provides advice on the different career paths available to women at the end of the war.

Sackville-West was commissioned by the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries to write an account of the Women's Land Army. Sackville-West had authored a number of books and as Virginia Nicholson Nicholson comments in 'Millions Like Us', 'with her love of the land and keen appreciation of young women clad in boots and breeches, [Vita Sackville-West] would appear to have been the perfect choice of author for such a work.'² A somewhat celebratory tone is employed throughout the book to present Land Girls as 'heroines of the day'. Her agenda of writing a record for a government ministry would no doubt have contributed to her use of overly positive language when describing the Land Girls and their actions. Highly descriptive language is used effectively to make it easier for readers to vividly picture the different situations a Land Girl might find herself in, from the milking of a cow to the ploughing of a field.

The information in the book is sourced from Vita Sackville's insight in working with the Land Army through her gardening background, in addition to drawing on official government statistics, documents, forms, course profiles, proficiency tests and individual Land Girls accounts. The book provides a detailed insight into the more official side of the organisation, such as the organisation and uniform requirements, but still retains a personal slant with individual Land Girl accounts on their different types of work – something of which Women's Land Army members can relate. Sackville-West also dedicates a chapter to the Timber Corps, highlighting the differences in their work as compared to the Land Girls, in addition to discussing their differing employment arrangements with the Ministry for Supply as opposed to individual farmers. Chapters are also dedicated to individual regions (Wales, Scotland, Isle of Man, Northern Ireland), which look into a how a Land Girl's geographical location can affect the type of work they carry out.

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.

Synopsis written by Cherish Watton

¹ Sackville-West, Vita (1944) 'The Women's Land Army', p7. Michael Joseph

² Nicholson, Virginia (2011) 'Millions Like Us', p153. Viking