

### A Feminine Witness of the Great War: Marcelle Capy, the Nomad of Peace

*Margaret Goldswain*

“Certains osent parler des vertus moralisatrices de la guerre! Sont-ils sourds, aveugles, ou fous?” (Some dare to speak of the moralizing virtues of war ! Are they deaf, blind, or mad?)<sup>1</sup> This 1916 quotation from a now little-known French journalist and novelist epitomises her commitment to social engagement, feminism and particularly to pacifism. Marcelle Capy, born Eugénie Marie Marcelle Marquès in Cherbourg, Normandy in 1891, was the second daughter of a senior naval artillery officer and his wife, Jean Marquès and Marceline Capy, both of whom came originally from long established rural families in the Lot, where the young Marcelle spent many holidays with her maternal grandparents. Her grandfather was an *ancien combattant* of the 1870–71 Franco-Prussian war. He was a friend of the former French Prime Minister, Léon Gambetta, and taught his granddaughter the precepts of republicanism, engendering in her a great interest in humanity and an enduring belief in the futility of war. He impressed on her that war was starvation, cold and lice, sadness and pain. He reiterated, “C’est l’angoisse des pires tortures morales et physiques, c’est la ruine, c’est la mort. Honte à la guerre petite, aime la vie!” (It is the anguish of the worst moral and physical tortures, it is ruination, it is death. Shame on war, little girl, love life !)<sup>2</sup> This environment profoundly influenced her ideals, as very early in her life she came to question the importance of the military in French society. Marcelle Capy never forgot these heartfelt sentiments, and they would spur her on to contest the authorities when much of her first book, *Une voix de femme dans la mêlée*, was suppressed in 1916 by military censors who controlled publication during the Great War. In this paper, I discuss Capy’s contribution to the understanding of the position of women during the Great War by looking not just at *Une Voix de femme dans la mêlée* but also her novel, *Des Hommes passeront...* (1930), for which she was awarded the first *Prix Séverine*. In these two works, Capy offers a fascinating point of view on war and pacifism in France.<sup>3</sup>

---

Margaret Goldswain is a PhD student in History at the University of Western Australia.

<sup>1</sup> Marcelle Capy, *Une Voix de femme dans la mêlée* (Paris, 1916), 106.

<sup>2</sup> Dossier Marcelle Capy. Bibliothèque Marguerite Durand, Paris.

<sup>3</sup> Recently, Capy has begun to garner attention from historians. For an example, see Mary Lynn Stewart, ‘Marcelle Capy’s Journalism and Fiction on War, Peace and Women’s Work, 1916-1936,’ *Proceedings of the Western Society for French History* vol 39 (2011), 212-223. My account differs from Stewart’s in that she

Considering women's contribution to the overall war effort from 1914-1918, there were few concessions for women politically, although there were advances in education and commerce. It seemed as if writing was one of the only ways women could retain the memory of what had happened to them during the Great War. Yet until recently, French women's war writing has been overshadowed as women were not deemed to have fully participated in the Great War.<sup>4</sup> For example, the historian J. Norton Cru's classification of French war writing privileges direct "témoignage," or witness accounts, which meant that for war writing to be authentic, the author had to be a direct combatant, especially in the trenches.<sup>5</sup> Other historians, such as Nicholas Beaupré, have adapted and broadened the criteria for witness accounts, but still admit to excluding women.<sup>6</sup> I acknowledge the influence of scholars such as Nancy Sloan Goldberg and Catherine O'Brien,<sup>7</sup> who have pioneered research into French women's war writing and have inspired my interest in Marcelle Capy, a woman whose life and career bear feminine witness to the Great War and its aftermath.

After obtaining her *baccalauréat*, Marcelle Capy enrolled in Toulouse in the preparatory classes for the *École Normale Supérieure de Sevres*. During this time (1911), she attended a lecture given by the socialist politician, Jean Jaurès, on the life of Tolstoy, which appears to have crystallised her ideas for her career. Even though her choice of occupation was vehemently discouraged by her father, as writing and journalism were not seen as suitable careers for well brought-up young women, she nevertheless soon became an investigative journalist with a major interest in women's working conditions and, later, as war approached, in national and international pacifism. Jean Jaurès had dramatically evoked the ideal of a socialist world of which she had only been dimly aware but which appealed to her innate sense of humanity, nurtured by her rural surroundings and her grandfather's experiences. Her ambition was to assist in improving life for the less fortunate in society by writing to expose appalling working conditions.<sup>8</sup>

Most of Capy's early writing concerned the rights of working women. For her, the difference between literature and politics blurred and the printed word became a powerful tool to disseminate her findings in polemical journals of small circulation. She was a *journaliste engagée* and Séverine,<sup>9</sup> one of her professional mentors, described her as "jeune, robuste, frémissante d'amour pour la détresse humaine et de révolte contre qui l'exploite," (young, robust, trembling with love for distressed humanity and for revolt against those who exploit it)<sup>10</sup> qualities she never lost even under the difficult circumstances of the Great War.

Marcelle Capy soon realised that, despite the masculine adulation of women as embodied by the Virgin Mary, Joan of Arc, Marianne, and La Parisienne,<sup>11</sup> there was a vast dichotomy between these mythical, idealised representations of women and the conditions of working women. Since her work often dealt with contentious subjects, and since women journalists were not universally admired, she adopted her mother's maiden name as her

---

focuses on Capy from the point of view of journalism whereas I see her as primarily a pacifist whose sustained literary efforts were directed to that end.

<sup>4</sup> Agnès Cardinal, Dorothy Goldman and Judith Hathaway, eds., *Women's Writing on the First World War* (Oxford, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> Jean Norton Cru, *Témoins: essai d'analyse et de critique des souvenirs de combattants édités en français de 1915 à 1928* (Nancy, 1993).

<sup>6</sup> Nicholas Beaupré, *Écrire en guerre, écrire la guerre. France, Allemagne 1914-1920* (Paris, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> Nancy Sloan Goldberg, "'Woman your hour is sounding': Continuity and Change in French Women's Great War Fiction, 1914-1919" (New York, 1999); and Catherine O'Brien, *Women's Fictional Responses to the First World War. A Comparative Study of Selected Texts by French and German Writers* (New York, 1992).

<sup>8</sup> Bernard Lecache, "Marcelle Capy," *Les Hommes du jour* (25 December 1931).

<sup>9</sup> Evelyne Le Garrec, *Séverine: une rebelle (1855-1929)* (Paris, 1982).

<sup>10</sup> Séverine, *La Vie féminine* (2 July 1916). Press clipping, Dossier Marcelle Capy in Bibliothèque Marguerite Durand, Paris.

<sup>11</sup> Philipp Blom, *The Vertigo Years* (London, 2008), esp. chap. 1.

professional identity, which also differentiated her from her sister, Jeanne, who also became a journalist and who later moved in similar anarchic and political circles.

Marcelle Capy was employed in 1913 by *La Bataille Syndicaliste*, the official journal of the *Confédération Générale de Travail* (CGT), as a journalist. She also wrote for the weekly feminist publication *La Voix des Femmes* and other small circulation journals, such as *Minerva* and *L'Oeuvre*, which questioned traditional sentiments and were conduits for minority views. From September 1913, Capy wrote a series of articles for *La Bataille Syndicaliste*<sup>12</sup> describing the environment for women workers in factories such as the Osram lamp factory. Capy questioned one of the women about why she did not leave because of the dreadful conditions and reported the reply: “C’est facile à dire. J’ai quatre enfants, mon mari gagne à peine cinq francs par jour. Que deviendrons-nous sans mon salaire?” (That’s easy [for you] to say. I have four children, and my husband earns barely five francs per day. What would become of us without my salary?), which reinforced Capy’s realisation that proletarian women did not have much power to determine their conditions of work.<sup>13</sup>

In another article she described the living conditions in the Roubaix *courèes*, which lacked privacy, were overcrowded, damp and a nest for disease.<sup>14</sup> Rampant alcoholism was another of the subjects discussed by Capy. It was very common for many men and women to drink cheap gin to overcome the effects of the pervasive dust from spinning raw flax without proper ventilation. This atmosphere made them susceptible to tuberculosis and other lung diseases.<sup>15</sup> The often unhygienic and dangerous working conditions were the concerns of the *syndicalistes*, but Capy’s articles also highlight the difficulties women had in joining or being part of the fledgling union movement. In the textile industry of northern France, women’s loyalties were often divided by sex and class, choosing feminism often meant rejecting socialism. There was constant conflict between opposing male groups, socialist and/or feminist groups and the employers. Women were seen by some men as a threat to male employment with their cheaper labour costs. As a female employee, it was almost impossible to align oneself in a specific group as being a woman, an employee and a socialist implied different allegiances and it was often hard to tell friends from foes. Working women preferred local, single-sex groups of activists who could address their specific requirements. In addition, the conjunction of the paternalistic attitude of the Church and capitalist employers was not conducive to improving working conditions for women. Poor women were frequently subject to petty fines and irregular domestic arrangements often meant that the most desperate women were not aided by charity from the Catholic Church. Capy’s exposure of these conditions are a stark reminder that proletarian women workers of the textile mills were far removed from the frenetic glamour of the Parisian *belle époque* so often evoked in novels of the same era.

Ironically, Marcelle Capy’s credentials as a militant feminist and socialist writer were enhanced by her liaison and subsequent marriage to Fernand Desprès (1879–1948), who served as editor of *La Bataille Syndicaliste* writing under the name of Amédée Desbois. He was considered sufficiently dangerous by the authorities during the War for his name to appear on the *Carnet B*, according to which he would be arrested if suspected of encouraging anarchy. Later, he wrote for *L’Humanité* where he was the Communist Party spokesman and

<sup>12</sup> These articles were accompanied with drawings by Raleter and published in *La Bataille Syndicaliste* between September 1913 and May 1914.

<sup>13</sup> Marcelle Capy, “A l’usine de la lampe Osram. Ce que j’ai vu,” *La Bataille Syndicaliste* (29 September 1913 and 3 October 1913).

<sup>14</sup> Marcelle Capy, “Industrie textile. Mal logés, mal nourris,” *La Bataille Syndicaliste* (16 April 1914).

<sup>15</sup> Marcelle Capy, “Industrie textile. Pour oublier,” *La Bataille Syndicaliste* (19 April 1914).

leading film critic.<sup>16</sup> When war broke out, he and Marcelle Capy were forced to leave *La Bataille Syndicaliste* as the journal strongly supported the government's stand on the *Union Sacrée*, and they represented the anti-war minority on the editorial board. The journal then became fully subsidised by the government, supporting right-wing *syndicalists* who at this time were the majority leaders of the CGT. By 1915, Capy had become convinced that pacifism was a necessary adjunct to her socialist and feminist philosophy and activism.

It was not easy to remain a feminist pacifist in France in 1915, as the majority of feminist women became fervent nationalists when the War erupted. Susan Grayzel noted that pacifism was more common amongst radical left-wing feminists than mainstream feminists, since for most women pacifism was secondary to their feminist ideals.<sup>17</sup> The feminist majority, like the emancipationist, Julie Siegfried, president of the *Conseil national des femmes françaises*, called on women to unite behind the government.<sup>18</sup> The prestigious Jane Misme<sup>19</sup> similarly condemned all pacifism in the journal *La Française* and reiterated that there could be no peace without complete German withdrawal from France.<sup>20</sup> In short, to question the war effort meant being branded a traitor. Christopher Prochasson remarks that ardent patriotism "sealed off" dissent, muting any intellectual discussion from either left- or right-wing elements.<sup>21</sup> Most women felt that French soil was under siege and had to be defended, so their drive for emancipation and gender equality was put aside for the duration of the war. Only a few, like Marcelle Capy, remained true to the ideology of "la mère pacifiste" (the pacifist mother),<sup>22</sup> which was also the argument at the trial of Hélène Brion, a feminist, pacifist, school teacher and trade unionist who was accused of "defeatism" in November 1917.<sup>23</sup> Although her trial was not as prolonged as that of Alfred Dreyfus, it created a media furore, which had a significant effect on the view that many women were in fact "the enemy within." The right-wing press depicted Brion as a traitor and a German spy and the left wing was fragmented with a minority of feminist pacifists.

Shortly before the outbreak of the Great War, Marcelle Capy had met Romain Rolland, whose views on pacifism she came to admire, as he too challenged the majority opinion on the conduct of the war. Like him, Capy decried the romanticisation of the patriarchal values of duty, honour, sacrifice and glory that became associated with official war propaganda. Although the government's aim was to promote cooperation in the war effort, she did not believe the half-truths and misrepresentation disseminated by some of the general press, which became known as "bourrage de crane," to foster enthusiasm for the war effort and support from the home front.<sup>24</sup>

Without work after leaving *La Bataille Syndicaliste* in 1915, Capy was fortunately assisted by Séverine, a well-established journalist, to compile her own polemic book, *Une*

<sup>16</sup>See P.E. Salles Gomes, *Jean Vigo* (Berkeley, 1971). Jean Vigo's father, Miguel Almeyda, anarchist and anti-militarist, was a close friend of Fernand Desprès. After Almeyda's suspicious death, many of his friends supported the young filmmaker financially and morally. Capy and Desprès, divorced and he died in Algiers in 1948.

<sup>17</sup>Susan Grayzel, *Woman's Identities at War: Gender, Motherhood, and Politics in Britain and France during the First World War* (Chapel Hill and London, 1999), 161.

<sup>18</sup>See *Feminisms of the Belle Époque: A Historical and Literary Anthology*, ed. Jennifer Waelti-Walters and Steven C. Hause, trans. Jette Kjaer, Lydia Willis, and Jennifer Waelti-Walters (Lincoln, Neb., 1992).

<sup>19</sup>Jane Misme (1865–1935). See Dossier MIS, Bibliothèque Marguerite Durand, Paris.

<sup>20</sup>Sandi E. Cooper, "French Feminists and Pacifism 1889–1914: The Evolution of New Visions," *Peace and Change* 36, 1 (2011): 5.

<sup>21</sup>Christopher Prochasson, *Les intellectuels, le socialisme et la guerre: 1900–1938* (Paris, 1993), 151–152.

<sup>22</sup>Françoise Thébaud, "Penser la guerre à partir des femmes et du genre: l'exemple de la Grande Guerre," *Astéris* 2 (July 2004): 179–194, phrase at 188.

<sup>23</sup>Grayzel, *Woman's Identities at War*, 165.

<sup>24</sup>Joanna Shearer, "Dressing up for War," *Minerva: Journal of Women and War* 1:2 (Fall 2007): 66.

*Voix de femme dans la mêlée*, based on her investigative experiences.<sup>25</sup> The title was an acknowledgement of, and tribute to, Romain Rolland's humanist appeal for peace in *Au-dessus de la mêlée*, published in Switzerland on 22 September 1914, but which did not appear in France until 1916.<sup>26</sup> Rolland wrote a very complimentary preface to Capy's work, praising her mature clear-sightedness and commitment to the pacifist movement at such a young age and referred to her as "l'alouette gauloise" (Gallic lark).<sup>27</sup> *Une Voix de femme dans la mêlée* was harshly censored, but, as a notable form of protest, Librairie Ollendorf took a great risk with the first edition in 1916 by publishing the table of contents marked only by asterisks and with dozens of blank pages indicating to readers the passages the government would not allow.<sup>28</sup> In a review, J. Ernst-Charles remarked, "la censure n'a pas voulu que cette voix fut retentissante.... Il y a beaucoup de taches blanches qui sont très significatives" (censorship does not want this voice to be heard ... the large amount whited-out is very significant).<sup>29</sup>

Many years later, in the Introduction to *Vingt ans après* (the 1930 edition of the book), Capy informs the reader that wartime censorship was enforced because the work was written by a woman, and the censor declared "si ce livre avait été écrit par un homme, je vous accorderai l'autorisation car, cela prendrait une allure politique et l'on sait bien qu'en politique tout est relatif" (had this book been written by a man, I would have authorized it, that would have taken on a political air and everyone knows well that in politics all is relative).<sup>30</sup> As the book consisted of a series of essays, the censor considered that Capy had "assemblé ces gouttes [de poison] et me présentez un flacon de poison" (gathered up these droplets and presented me a flask of poison).<sup>31</sup> Even though each short article was but "une goutte," the censor would not allow these provocative articles to be placed before the public all at once in a single volume. By comparison, it is interesting that Henri Barbusse's *Le Feu*, published in the same year and in much the same vein as Capy's work, was not censored in France, although it was originally published in serial form in a major newspaper.<sup>32</sup> Although partly reportage and partly opinion, Capy's images of women have a vividness and immediacy which contrast markedly with the insipid portraits in official propaganda, which have been outlined by historians such as Joanna Shearer.<sup>33</sup>

*Une Voix de femme dans la mêlée* is not a linear narrative but, instead, consists of five separate sections, each containing short essays on wartime topics, especially those affecting women. It is written in journalistic style, confrontational in some of the "gouttes" and yet entirely empathic towards those she considers the victims of discrimination. The overall tone is polemical and forceful, exposing issues such as rampant militarism of the press in the first section, "Ceux qui se battent" (Those who fight),<sup>34</sup> women's sorrow in the second "Ceux qui pleurent" (Those who weep),<sup>35</sup> which argues that all women are the creators of men so there

<sup>25</sup> Marcelle Capy, *Une Voix de femme dans la mêlée* (Paris, 1936). The original censored version was published in Paris by Librairie Ollendorf in 1916; all references in this paper are drawn from the 1936 edition.

<sup>26</sup> See Romain Rolland. *Au-dessus de la mêlée* (Geneva, 1915; Paris, 1916).

<sup>27</sup> Romain Rolland refers to her work as "le cri de foi et d'espérance d'une seule conscience libre, le chant de l'alouette gauloise qui monte vers le ciel!" (the cry of hope and faith of a single liberated conscience, the birdsong of a lark rising to the heavens); see his Preface to *Une Voix de femme*, 21. The wings on the helmets of the Gauls in the Roman era were representative of lark wings, and the lark has been a symbol of loyalty to France and sympathy for the unfortunate members of society since the Middle Ages.

<sup>28</sup> Margaret Higonnet, *Lines of Fire: Women Writers of World War I* (New York, 1999), xxiii

<sup>29</sup> J. Ernest-Charles, "La Vie Littéraire," *La Grande Revue* (March-June 1916): 756-763.

<sup>30</sup> Capy, *Une Voix de femme*, 12.

<sup>31</sup> Marcelle Capy (1936), 12.

<sup>32</sup> Henri Barbusse, *Le Feu* (Paris, 1916), which was awarded the Goncourt Prize. See Charles Sowerwine, *France since 1870: Culture, Politics and Society* (New York, 2001), 113.

<sup>33</sup> Joanna Shearer, "Dressing up for War," *Minerva: Journal of Women and War* 1:2 (2007): 66-76.

<sup>34</sup> Capy, *Une Voix de femme*, 23-46 [page numbers for each section are provided in relevant footnote].

<sup>35</sup> Capy, *Une Voix de femme*, 47-68.

should be a natural solidarity amongst women pacifists, as “leur cœur est en perpétuelle révolte contre tout ce qui détruit leur œuvre, tout ce qui crée de la mort” (their heart is in perpetual rebellion against everything that destroys their creation, everything that creates death).<sup>36</sup> Particularly acute are the vivid depictions of poverty-stricken women, widows and families, especially mothers, waiting for news of their sons or husbands who are carelessly and often brutally treated by bureaucrats.<sup>37</sup> Capy exposes the inhumanity of officials and profiteers who do not see that the deaths on both sides of the conflict are catastrophic.

In section three, “Ceux qui sauvent” (those who save),<sup>38</sup> Capy describes those who are doing the hard work on farms, feeding the hungry, and praises the caregivers at the *Colonie d’Etretat*, where children are sent to safety during the War. The fourth section, entitled “Les Grottesques”<sup>39</sup> was the most heavily censored part of the book. Capy inveighs against the belief that war is necessary to purge society and that there will be greater happiness after it.<sup>40</sup> She questions the value for those who die in the war, the young sacrificed for this heinous belief. She condemns exploitation, cowardice and rumours about the Germans, reminding the reader that there are German mothers who are also mourning their sons.<sup>41</sup> Capy is disdainful and critical of the frivolous woman who enjoys the drama of nursing the wounded wearing a glamorous Red Cross uniform.<sup>42</sup> Capy felt that this type of behaviour detracted from the valuable nursing done by many dedicated women.

In section five, “Temps de guerre” (Times of war / Wartime),<sup>43</sup> Capy highlights the dilemma of French women who are raped by German soldiers. Should the foetus be aborted or accepted? Abortion as a mortal sin was not condoned by the Catholic Church, but, if allowed to live, are such children penalised for life by their unfortunate origin, by their very existence? Capy reiterates that these women and children are as much victims of war as the soldiers who have to fight and die. She focuses on women’s endurance and fortitude under conditions of hardship and uncertainty because she realises that women have no point of reference for trench warfare, and therefore they experience a qualitatively different war to that of the men at the Front. As noted, writing such as Capy’s has not been considered to be genuine *témoignage de la guerre* by some critics, since the writing did not stem from trench experience, but Capy’s writing is an important adjunct to understanding aspects of the war previously ignored by critics.<sup>44</sup>

During the Great War, Capy continued to debate women’s working conditions and pacifism by writing articles in *La Vie féminine*<sup>45</sup> and *La Voix des femmes*.<sup>46</sup> She also worked incognito as a *munitionnette* in a Paris armaments factory, and although the work was well paid, she was horrified at how difficult and heavy it was.<sup>47</sup> As a socialist and pacifist she was ambivalent about women having to produce armaments but did not denigrate women who did, unlike Louise Saumoneau, as pacifism was no longer a philosophical stand, but a

<sup>36</sup> Capy, *Une Voix de femme*, 24.

<sup>37</sup> Capy, *Une Voix de femme*, 60.

<sup>38</sup> Capy, *Une Voix de femme*, 69-80.

<sup>39</sup> Capy, *Une Voix de femme*, 89-124.

<sup>40</sup> Capy, *Une Voix de femme*, 94.

<sup>41</sup> Capy, *Une Voix de femme*, 106.

<sup>42</sup> Capy, *Une Voix de femme*, 84.

<sup>43</sup> Capy, *Une Voix de femme*, 125-180.

<sup>44</sup> Cru, *Témoins*, ignores women’s accounts, whereas Cardinal, et. al., *Women’s Writing on the First World War* emphasize such perspectives.

<sup>45</sup> Marcelle Capy, “Femmes de peine,” *La Vie féminine* 2 (14 March 1916).

<sup>46</sup> Marcelle Capy, “La femme à l’usine,” *La Voix des Femmes* (28 novembre 1917; 5, 12, and 19 December 1917; 2 January 1918).

<sup>47</sup> Marcelle Capy, “Quinze jours comme ouvrière de la défense nationale,” *Le Petit parisien* (19-27 July 1916).

political issue and a cause of national anxiety.<sup>48</sup> Most women's work in these armament factories was low-skilled and repetitive, but for many it was essential because their income had diminished with so many men away fighting.<sup>49</sup> Trade unionists complained about women doing this work, but more to preserve wages for men after the War than out of consideration for women's conditions.

By 1918, Marcelle Capy was also writing for the weekly socialist magazine *La Vague*, which she had founded with her second husband, Pierre Brizon. She was co-editor and wrote for the feminist section of the journal. It was a four-page edition mainly denouncing capitalists, such as the motorcar companies Schneiders and De Dion, which were making a fortune from armaments. *La Vague* became very popular with a circulation of 200,000 at its peak in 1922. However, in 1923 Marcelle Capy seems to have had a sort of neo-spiritual, Christian episode where she divorced Pierre Brizon and *La Vague* folded. Capy continued to write feminist, pacifist articles and spent a great deal of time on the lecture circuit in France and Germany promoting her pacifist ideals and appearing as a speaker at many pacifist meetings in Germany, Canada, and the United States. She had an attractive manner and made a great impression on people who heard her speak against the re-arming of belligerent nations. Although professionally a journalist and lecturer, Marcelle Capy felt that she needed to incorporate her pacifist ideals into a novel in order to reach a wider audience. The result was *Des Hommes passerent...* which was published in 1930.<sup>50</sup>

The setting for Capy's novel, *Des hommes passerent...*, is the small provincial village of Pradines, in the Lot, and the novel takes place before, during and after the Great War. The novel charts the story of Madeline, the daughter of a successful peasant farmer during the War. Written in 1929 it has the advantage of hindsight, encompassing the full horror of four years of deprivation and loss by portraying the prolonged misery of *les civils* and the destruction of village life. Capy's simple but ironic language and measured tone enhance the narrative and foreshadow the inevitable tragic outcome. It evokes the sounds and odors of the countryside, the expected cycle of life contrasted with the ruptures caused by the War. Capy shows that there is a direct link between the struggle in the trenches and struggle *à l'arrière* (the rear / the homefront), but much of the life at the rear was as incomprehensible to men at the Front as their experiences in the trenches were to village women. This divide became worse as the War dragged on and is shown in the novel by Madeline's slowly fading expectations and her fiancé Sebastian's ultimate disregard for her welfare.

Madeline is clever and charming, with good marriage prospects as the family have a small farm unencumbered by debt. Although she has a school certificate, her father does not encourage her to read, remonstrating that "[l]es livres, donnent des idées de grandeur et troublent le jugement" (books fill heads with grandiose ideas and disturb the judgment).<sup>51</sup> He thinks women should know their place as men are in charge, and he believes the government knows what it is doing. Madeline is engaged to Sebastian, who is good-looking but is said in the village to lack spirit.<sup>52</sup> He expects that they will inherit the farm. War is declared, and Sebastian leaves for his unit so their marriage is postponed. He is excited, never having left the area before. The narrator remarks, "[l]a force virile des villages roulait vers le nord dans un délire d'enthousiasme" (the virility of the villages rolls northward [on the rails] in a

<sup>48</sup> Margaret H Darrow, *French Women and the First World War: War Stories of the Home Front* (Oxford, 2000), 186.

<sup>49</sup> Payment of a small military allowance had been granted to conscripts to aid their families while they were away but not paid directly to the woman, a discrepancy that Capy points out in *Une Voix de femme*, 53.

<sup>50</sup> Marcelle Capy. *Des Hommes passerent...* (Paris, 1930).

<sup>51</sup> Capy, *Des Hommes passerent*, 11

<sup>52</sup> Capy, *Des Hommes passerent*, 16

delerium of enthusiasm),<sup>53</sup> and the villagers are fascinated by the added spectacle of trainloads of black soldiers passing through on the way north. They are acceptable because they are going to fight with the village men.

As news of the War is scarce, the villagers make their own peace. People no longer criticise each other as rumours abound that the German army is advancing on Belgium, and the awful realisation sinks in that their men are dying. Six villagers die in the Battle of the Marne, and Madeline dreads the long days. She is angry that as a woman she cannot do more. With young men gone from the country, Madeline's father, Gary, feels it his duty to help all the villagers. He has a stroke and Madeline takes over his work. She begins to lose her youthful looks, working outside in all weather conditions but thinks Sebastian will be proud of her when he returns. However, for both Madeline and Sebastian, the War changes everything.

Capy demonstrates in her novel how the social hierarchy in small communities altered dramatically with the death of so many young men. Women had to take up men's work just to survive on the small farms, as during the Great War, rural men suffered a greater proportion of deaths than any other group.<sup>54</sup> The enforced separation of men from the stability of home and familiar surroundings often led to the disintegration of longstanding relationships. Uncertainty and inactivity in the trenches, wounding and care by Red Cross nurses and the influence of the *marraines de guerre* (war godmothers) increased men's alienation from the women at home, whose lives they felt were easy and unchanged. In particular, *marraines de guerre* were an exclusively French response to the War. The scheme developed in 1915 through newspaper appeals, and women were asked to write to *poilus* at the Front. It was presumed that this support would encourage these *filleuls* or godsons on the battlefield. Soldiers and their *marraines* were usually unknown to each other personally, but they often met later on.<sup>55</sup> This practice, endorsed by the State, mainly benefitted bourgeois women, to the detriment of the aspirations of working class women, and often caused relationships like that of Madeline and Sébastien to fail. In the novel, Sébastien is very pleased with his *marraine's* attention, humiliating Madeline as she cannot compete with the sophisticated ministrations of a city woman, the generous food parcels and implied sexual favours.

For Madeline, change comes to the village. German prisoners are billeted on the inhabitants to work on the land. Not only are these men a source of conversation but the village women can justify using their labour in order to supplement the food parcels for their men at the Front. Madeline has Otto billeted on the farm. He has a wife and four children, and Madeline is envious of her. To her astonishment, Otto and the others are "cultivateurs" and not "monsieurs" as they had thought.<sup>56</sup> The Germans, kind and good workers, are hardly the savages they had been led to believe by propaganda. This barbarisation of the enemy was very much part of official propaganda of which Capy disapproved. She describes the Germans as serious and conscientious and that they too have had to obey the call to arms not really knowing what it is all about, just like the conscripted French villagers: "La paix régnait au village—entre Françaises et Allemands—tandis que la guerre continuait au front. Le travail en commun, la réalité de chaque jour, l'habitude, rendaient à la vie ses couleurs familières" (Peace reigned in the village—between French and Germans—while the war

<sup>53</sup> Capy, *Des Hommes passerent*, 25

<sup>54</sup> Gabriel Perreux. *La Vie quotidienne des civils en France pendant la Grande Guerre* (Paris, 1966), 142.

<sup>55</sup> The *marraines de guerre* relationship was often beneficial but sometimes led to fraud and exploitation on both sides; see Margaret Darrow, *French Women and the First World War*, 79–89; and Perreux. *La Vie quotidienne des civils*.

<sup>56</sup> Capy, *Des Hommes passerent*, 211.

continued at the front. Shared work, the reality of each day, habit, all brought back to life its familiar colors).<sup>57</sup>

As the war ends in the novel, Russians are sent to the village where they are initially regarded with suspicion, but the people realise that, while different to the Germans, the Russians have ideas similar to their own. This image of co-existence is radical and a quite different view of the enemy and of foreigners from most wartime writing. It was, however, consistent with Capy's pacifist philosophy that people have more in common than divides them. By co-operating with the German prisoners and the Russians, Madeline shows their mutual humanity.

The War has a profound impact on Madeline. Instead of a quiet village life she has had to learn to work the farm, loses her fiancé when he experiences life away from the village, and faces minimal prospects for marriage with the death of so many men. Madeline has time to read again and finds new understanding in the old magazines and books she bought as a very young girl before the War. She is still young and independent but country women must have physical strength to work and "il faut une raison d'être—un but: les enfants" (it's necessary to have a reason for being—a goal: children)<sup>58</sup> This may reflect the official policy in the post-war years for women to repopulate France, but also reiterates one of Capy's great passions as a pacifist: she believed that maternal grief at losing a child would ensure that all mothers were pacifists.

At thirty years of age, Madeline is already pitied as a spinster by the village. She faces an uncertain future and with the death of her father, whom the stroke had paralyzed; she loses his reassuring presence. Before the burial and after a night vigil watching over his corpse, Madeline looks at him for the last time: "[p]auvre père ... tu me laisses sans m'avoir appris ce qu'il aurait fallu savoir... mais tu ne le savais pas toi-même" (poor father ... you leave me without having taught me what I should know ... but you did not know it yourself).<sup>59</sup> He could not have anticipated the aftermath of the War and its consequences for France, especially for his daughter. The sombre ending is in line with Capy's own realisation that most women were still bound to traditional norms, not recognized as autonomous beings despite their invaluable contributions during the Great War. In the novel, Madeline's growing understanding of her lonely isolation is realistic and subtle, as Capy does not force hindsight to unsustainable limits.

*Des Hommes passèrent...* has not received wide recognition, not because it lacks literary quality, but because the Great War is still seen as a predominantly masculine entity. Yet the novel deserves recognition for its realism, conveyed by a simple sentence structure and vocabulary that paint an atmosphere of uncertainty and despair. As Catherine O'Brien remarks, "women writers succeed in expressing their responses to war which are ignored or marginalised by the established male authors of the First World War," and this neglected novel renders women like Madeline more visible in French cultural history.<sup>60</sup> Capy is most often recognized by historians for her articles in *La Bataille Syndicaliste* and her essays in *Une Voix de femme dans la mêlée*, written as a young woman with their polemical and didactic style. However, I would argue that contemporaries' interest in *Des Hommes passèrent...* should raise Capy's visibility for historians of French culture. Today neglected, in 1930 the novel was awarded the Prix Séverine by an eminent contemporary jury, who

<sup>57</sup> Capy, *Des Hommes passèrent*, 223.

<sup>58</sup> Capy, *Des Hommes passèrent*, 327

<sup>59</sup> Capy, *Des Hommes passèrent*, 339.

<sup>60</sup> Catherine O'Brien, *Women's Fictional Responses to the First World War. A Comparative Study of Selected Texts by French and German Writers* (New York, 1997), 172.

acknowledged the book's importance in promoting reconciliation among nations and praised Capy's pursuit of pacifism.<sup>61</sup>

Feminist pacifism in France, never united, diverged further with the advent of the Second World War. Marcelle Capy remained politically active, publishing journal articles and continuing her speaking tours as a "peace professional."<sup>62</sup> She was named by Françoise Blum as one of the leading pacifist intellectuals of the inter-war period. She was a founding member of the *Comité international des femmes pour une paix permanente (CIFPP)*, better known as the *Comité des femmes de la rue Fondary*, whose members included female intellectuals such as Madeleine Vernet, Madeleine Rolland, Jeanne Halbwachs and Marguerite de Saint-Prix.<sup>63</sup>

Capy was denounced as a Communist in 1943, and her home in the Lot was raided by the Gestapo. In 1944, she returned to Paris in desperate need of funds where Claude Jamet, founder of *Germinal*, a pacifist, collaborationist journal invited her to write "human interest articles." At the end of the War, she was accused of collaboration with the Nazis because of these articles but the charges were later dismissed.<sup>64</sup> However, in 1947 when she went to register as a voter, she was refused a voting card as a second dossier of information about her activities had been created. She discovered she had been condemned to *indignité nationale* in absentia.<sup>65</sup>

Capy continued to write, and she spent time travelling to Egypt with her sister Jeanne Marquès, which resulted in *L'Égypte au coeur du monde*,<sup>66</sup> which had limited success, as did *La vie tient à un fil*.<sup>67</sup> She retired to the house, *Malte*, in the Lot, in the late 1950s and became a devout Christian in her last years, forgotten by the contemporary literary and political spheres she had inhabited. However, she could look back on a career dedicated to raising awareness of women's conditions and one marked by passionately held pacifist convictions. She died in 1962 and is buried in the cemetery at Pradines with her parents and grandparents. Villagers show intense civic pride in her contribution to their town's history; in 1995, the local dignitary Dr Pierre Gayet said of Capy: "[c]e qui donne un sens à cette vie, ce sont la force, la sincérité, la constance d'une généreuse conviction, servie par le talent d'une véritable femme de lettres" (what give meaning to this life is the power, sincerity and constancy of a generous conviction, assisted by the talent of a true woman of letters).<sup>68</sup> A fitting tribute to a unsung feminine witness of the Great War.

---

<sup>61</sup>Fernand Corcos, *L'Oeuvre* (27 November 1929). The Prix Séverine was inaugurated for three years by Madame Yorska to recognise "une oeuvre féminine consacrée à l'idée de paix" (a feminist work dedicated to the idea of peace).

<sup>62</sup>Siân Reynolds, *France between the Wars: gender and politics* (New York, 1996), 217.

<sup>63</sup>Françoise Blum, "D'une guerre à l'autre: Itinéraires d'intellectuelles pacifistes," in *Intellectuelles. Du genre en histoire des intellectuels*, ed. Nicole Racine and Michel Trebitsch (Paris, 2004), 229–244.

<sup>64</sup>Marcelle Capy to Michel Alexandre, Paris (13 January 1947) and "Témoignage de Michel Alexandre" (22 January 1947) in BNM, Ms801/V.5; quoted in Norman Ingram, "'Nous allons vers les monastères.' French pacifism and the crisis of the Second World War," in *Crisis and Renewal in France, 1918-1962*, ed. Kenneth Mouré and Martin Alexander (New York and Oxford, 2002), 151.

<sup>65</sup>Ingram, "Nous allons vers les monastères," 146.

<sup>66</sup>Marcelle Capy, *L'Égypte au coeur du monde* (Paris, 1950).

<sup>67</sup>Marcelle Capy, *La vie tient à un fil* (Paris, 1948).

<sup>68</sup>Dr. Pierre Gayet (September 1998), summarised from a public lecture (*conférence*) originally delivered on 21 October 1995 at the *Bibliothèque Municipale de Pradines*. <http://www.quercy.net/hommes/mcapy.html> [accessed 15 October 2013]