

# ASSISTING MRS TOMMY ATKINS: GENDER, CLASS, PHILANTHROPY, AND THE DOMESTIC IMPACT OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN WAR, 1899–1902\*

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**ABSTRACT.** *Despite the well-established historiography examining the South African war's impact upon British society, little attention has been paid to the plight of British soldiers' families or to the charitable efforts mobilized to maintain them in the absence of adequate state support. This article, focusing on the key charity in the field, the Soldiers' and Sailors' Families Association (SSFA), examines the SSFA's wartime policies and considers how the Association's actions influenced subsequent state policy-making. It explores the motivations and attitudes of its middle-class, mostly female, volunteers, on whose sustained commitment the work of the SSFA depended. In analysing the sources of the SSFA's funding, it considers how class and regionality shaped public giving to patriotic philanthropy. Finally, it investigates how perceptions of soldiers' wives and mechanisms for their support in the First World War were affected by the South African war experience. Overall, the article aims both to demonstrate the importance of philanthropic aid to soldiers' families in understanding the domestic impact of this imperial war, and to trace the longer-term effects on the development of policies towards servicemen's dependants.*

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The impact of the South African war of 1899–1902 upon British society has exercised historians since the 1970s. The identity and motivations of Britain's volunteer soldiers; the imperial significance of the 1900 ('khaki') election; the meanings of the boisterous public celebrations of British victories; the membership and ideas of the British peace movement; the concentration camps controversy and British attitudes to empire; and most recently the memorialization of the British war dead, have all attracted historical

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attention.<sup>1</sup> Yet one profound effect of the war on British civilians has remained almost wholly unexamined: the removal on active service of the main breadwinner from some 200,000 working-class families, and the huge philanthropic effort required to support these families adequately for a period of up to three years. This social impact was acutely gendered, for the direct effects fell overwhelmingly on the wives, mothers, and children of soldiers while the volunteers who raised and distributed essential financial assistance were also mainly women. It is perhaps for this reason that ‘traditional’ imperial historians, notoriously afflicted with ‘gender blindness’, have overlooked its importance.<sup>2</sup>

As Andrew Thompson has commented, ‘the centrality of charity to many people’s experience of the South African War’ is still largely unrecognized.<sup>3</sup> Yet charity was certainly central to the families whose defining war experience was to find themselves reduced to dependence upon charitable aid; to the 12,000 volunteers who organized this vital war philanthropy; and to the innumerable donors from all classes and regions who raised £1.3 million (equivalent to around £110 million at 2010 prices) to finance it. Incorporating these experiences into our understanding of how the South African war affected British communities at home provides considerable support to the thesis that the impact of the war upon Britain was more ‘total’ than is commonly supposed.<sup>4</sup>

The South African war also represents a significant point in the development of British state policies towards servicemen’s dependants. The state–voluntary collaboration in supporting soldiers’ families seen in 1899–1902 marks an

<sup>1</sup> See e.g. R. Price, *An imperial war and the British working class: working-class attitudes and reactions to the Boer war, 1899–1902* (London, 1972); A. Davey, *The British pro-Boers, 1877–1902* (Cape Town, 1978); P. Warwick and S. B. Spies, eds., *The South African war: the Anglo-Boer war, 1899–1902* (Harlow, 1980), esp. essays by Blanch, Porter, and Spies; P. Krebs, *Gender, race and the writing of empire: public discourse and the Boer war* (Cambridge, 1999); D. Lowry, ed., *The South African war reappraised* (Manchester, 2000), esp. essays by Beaumont, Callaway and Helly, and Cuthbertson; P. Readman, ‘The Conservative party, patriotism, and British politics: the case of the general election of 1900’, *Journal of British Studies*, 40 (2001), pp. 107–45; D. Omissi and A. Thompson, eds., *The impact of the South African war* (Basingstoke, 2002), esp. essays by Laity and Thompson; G. Cuthbertson, A. Grundlingh, and M.-L. Suttie, eds., *Writing a wider war: rethinking gender, race and identity in the South African war, 1899–1902* (Athens, OH, 2002), esp. essays by Porter and Thompson; S. Miller, *Volunteers on the veld: Britain’s citizen-soldiers and the South African war, 1899–1902* (Norman, OK, 2007); P. Donaldson, *Remembering the South African war: Britain and the memory of the Anglo-Boer war, from 1899 to the present* (Liverpool, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> E. van Heyningen, ‘The voices of women in the South African war’, *South African Historical Journal*, 41 (1999), pp. 22–43, at p. 23.

<sup>3</sup> A. Thompson, ‘Publicity, philanthropy and commemoration: British society and the war’, in Omissi and Thompson, eds., *Impact of the South African war*, p. 106. This essay includes the most extensive discussion to date of the Boer war funds for servicemen’s families (pp. 106–13); the South African war work of the Soldiers’ and Sailors’ Families Association (SSFA) is also touched on in the studies of the First World War referenced at n. 5 below.

<sup>4</sup> See e.g. I. Beckett, *The Victorians at war* (London, 2003), ch. 21, ‘A question of totality’. This is not of course to suggest any equivalence between the wartime experiences of British and Boer women and children.

important transitional moment in the movement towards full state support, finally established during the First World War. State aid for servicemen's dependants as administered during the Great War, it has been argued, acted to reinforce regressive gender roles and ideologies. Susan Pedersen, for instance, locates the origins of female dependency in the welfare state in wartime separation allowances and, with other authors, highlights the state's moral surveillance of servicemen's wives and widows.<sup>5</sup> While the influence of the South African war on First World War policy-making is acknowledged, how these important precedents were established remains unexamined.

This article aims both to situate the charitable effort mobilized to support British soldiers' families between 1899 and 1902 as central to understanding the domestic impact of this imperial war, and to trace its longer-term effects in shaping state policies towards servicemen's dependants. The article begins by explaining why charitable support for soldiers' families became so important to the British war experience. The second section focuses on the key charity in the field, the Soldiers' and Sailors' Families Association (SSFA), examining the SSFA's wartime policies and considering how the Association's actions influenced subsequent state policy-making. The SSFA's work depended both on the sustained commitment of thousands of volunteers at grassroots level, and on the willingness of the general public to fund its operations: the third section considers the motivations and attitudes of its middle-class, mostly female, volunteers, and analyses how class and regionality shaped public giving to patriotic philanthropy. Finally, the article investigates how the South African war affected both perceptions of soldiers' wives and mechanisms for their support in the First World War.

## I

The welfare of British soldiers' families became a pressing public issue during the South African war for two reasons: the extent to which the war was fought by non-regular servicemen, and the late Victorian army's approach to marriage. Britain's largest war since the Crimea, the South African war mobilized not only regular British army troops but over 100,000 reservists and time-expired soldiers, while 100,000 civilians served voluntarily through the militia, yeomanry, and volunteers. Blanch calculates that over 14 per cent of the British male

<sup>5</sup> S. Pedersen, 'Gender, welfare, and citizenship in Britain during the Great War', *American Historical Review*, 95 (1990), pp. 983–1006; G. R. C. Thomas, 'State maintenance for women during the First World War: the case of separation allowances and pensions' (D.Phil. thesis, Sussex, 1989); J. Lomas, "'Delicate duties': issues of class and respectability in government policy towards the wives and widows of British soldiers in the era of the Great War", *Women's History Review*, 9 (2000), pp. 123–47; L. Bland, 'In the name of protection: the policing of women in the First World War', in J. Brophy and C. Smart, eds., *Women-in-law: explorations in law, family and sexuality* (London, 1985); A. Smith, *Discourses surrounding British widows of the First World War* (London, 2013). See also P. Grant, *Philanthropy and voluntary action in the First World War: mobilizing charity* (London, 2014), pp. 23–7.

population aged 18–40 was in uniform for at least part of the war.<sup>6</sup> The introduction in 1870 of short service (under which soldiers served for seven years followed by five years in the reserve) created a large pool of reservists in the civilian community – nearly 80,000 by 1899. As the reserve had never previously been fully mobilized for war service, a high proportion had married and started families assuming that their reserve status was a formality. Many had been earning skilled or semi-skilled wages, now replaced by the private soldier's nominal shilling a day. In December 1899, the militia (also predominantly working-class) were invited to volunteer for war service; fifty-nine battalions (over 45,500 men) served in South Africa while others were stationed elsewhere in the empire or in Britain and Ireland for home defence. Typically very young men, comparatively few were married but many were supporting aged mothers. In February 1900, time-expired soldiers, usually married and with larger families, were lured back to the army for home defence as 'royal reservists' with a £12 enlistment bounty plus a £10 bounty on discharge; over 24,000 had signed up by June. Civilians enlisted in the City Imperial Volunteers, through active service companies of the volunteers, or in the Imperial Yeomanry. Working-class enlistment in the regular army also soared.<sup>7</sup> The mobilization particularly of the reserves and of civilian volunteers greatly increased the proportion of servicemen with wives and families to support.

That the maintenance of soldiers' dependants became largely a matter for private charity was due to the late Victorian army's antagonism towards marriage for other ranks. Under the short service system, the army steadily reduced the proportion of the rank and file allowed to marry (to 3 per cent in 1890) and introduced higher qualifications for individual soldiers wishing to do so. Many soldiers married in defiance of these prohibitions; the army treated men married without leave as single and officially ignored their wives and families. As Myra Trustram notes, military attitudes to soldiers' wives were ambivalent: most often characterized as drunken and immoral slatterns (an image often extended in wartime even to women whose husbands were reservists or volunteers), they were also seen as potential civilizing influences in an army attempting to redefine soldiering as respectable.<sup>8</sup> From the late nineteenth century, the army made some limited provision for families of soldiers married with leave ('on the strength'), including from 1871 separation allowances paid when soldiers were sent overseas without their families. In 1899 (following rates set in 1882), a private's wife received 8*d* a day separation allowance, plus a compulsory 4*d* 'allotment' from her husband's pay; children (girls under sixteen and boys under fourteen) received 2*d* a day from the government

<sup>6</sup> M. D. Blanch, 'British society and the war', in Warwick and Spies, eds., *South African war*, p. 229.

<sup>7</sup> See *Times*, 22 Feb. 1899; I. Beckett, *The amateur military tradition, 1558–1945* (Manchester, 1991), pp. 200–5; Beckett, *Victorians at war*, pp. 223–4; Miller, *Volunteers*, p. 57; *Army and militia: annual report of the inspector-general of recruiting for the year 1900* [Cd 519], 1901, p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> M. Trustram, *Women of the regiment: marriage and the Victorian army* (Cambridge, 1984), p. 40.

and a penny from their father's pay. This did not cover full living costs, nor was it intended to: soldiers' wives were expected to work. Military pay was so low that even 'on the strength' wives living in barracks needed paid employment (normally washing for the regiment) to supplement the family income. For 'off the strength' wives waged work was vital; in illness and unemployment their families were abandoned to the mercies of the poor law.<sup>9</sup>

During the South African war, the government extended separation allowances to the families of reservists, militia, and volunteers. But the wives and children of regulars married 'off the strength' received no state assistance, nor was any forthcoming for dependent relatives other than wives or children. Moreover, although the separation allowance for privates' wives was raised in January 1900 to 13*d* a day (the rate for children remaining unchanged at 2*d*), it remained inadequate for full maintenance.<sup>10</sup> This level of direct state support did mark a significant advance from the Crimean war, when soldiers' families had been maintained entirely by charity and the poor law.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless it left philanthropy with two essential roles to play: to furnish full financial support to women and children excluded from state benefits; and for those in receipt of the separation allowance to make up the substantial difference between the allowance and the actual cost of living. Conscious of public feeling that servicemen's wives and children should be adequately supported, yet reluctant to modify the state's traditional parsimony towards them, the government relied on private charity to maintain soldiers' families at an acceptable standard of living with minimal cost to state funds.

## II

Luckily, a charity for servicemen's dependants was already in existence: the Soldiers' and Sailors' Families Association. The SSFA had been set up to assist 'off the strength' families during the 1885 Sudan campaign by James Gildea, an Anglo-Irish colonel of militia. Though Gildea remained the SSFA's single most important figure, like most Victorian charities it was staffed largely by elite women.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Gildea specified that branch presidents and vice-presidents 'shall be Ladies' – as were the members of the SSFA's council, most of its executive, around one third of county honorary secretaries and most grassroots volunteers. A common pattern was that seen in the Alton division of

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, esp. chs. 3, 5, and 6; W. E. Cairns, *Social life in the British army* (London, 1900), pp. 74–6; E. J. Hardy, *Mr Thomas Atkins* (London, 1900), pp. 381–2.

<sup>10</sup> *Times*, 10 Jan. 1900. Reservists employed by government departments received half-pay during their army service (*Times*, 8 Nov. 1899).

<sup>11</sup> Trustram, *Women*, pp. 152–7, 170–7.

<sup>12</sup> R. T. Stearn, 'A great philanthropist: Sir James Gildea and the Soldiers' and Sailors' Families Association', *Soldiers of the Queen: Journal of the Victorian Military Society*, 142 (2010), pp. 3–9, at pp. 3–5; Trustram, *Women*, pp. 179–81.

Hampshire, where only the treasurer was male.<sup>13</sup> When the SSFA's efficiency was in question, this female predominance could appear detrimental, since women volunteers were considered particularly susceptible to fraudulent claimants, and Gildea sometimes attempted to downplay it.<sup>14</sup> More commonly, the Association's work was presented as 'work that could only have been undertaken by ladies', male speakers at SSFA annual meetings eulogizing the female volunteers as 'ministering angels' who became through self-sacrifice 'the helpers and saviours of your sisters'.<sup>15</sup>

This 'womanly' input was central because the SSFA adopted a casework approach which prioritized regular home visits to soldiers' wives. It therefore constituted a specialized form of that quintessentially Victorian and feminine philanthropy, district visiting, which aimed equally at the prevention of distress and at 'that persistent moral and social imperative, the defence of family life'.<sup>16</sup> The redeeming influence of SSFA volunteers was to raise soldiers' wives' 'morality and self-respect'. Peacetime policies emphasized self-help: the 'primary aim' was to find the wives employment, and assistance was given to 'those *only* who are ready and willing to help themselves'.<sup>17</sup> The SSFA also provided clothing for families and convalescent soldiers; assisted officers' widows and orphans; arranged district nursing for service families; and ran an Indian branch which during the war supported families of Indian stretcher-bearers serving in South Africa.<sup>18</sup> Bolstered by royal patronage, most importantly from its president Alexandra, princess of Wales, by 1899 the SSFA was well established with official military support. Though some officers feared it would encourage unauthorized marriages, both army and War Office recognized the value of the safety net it provided in promoting recruitment and raising morale.<sup>19</sup> At the beginning of the South African war, Lord Wolseley, commander-in-chief, and Lord Lansdowne, secretary of state for war, jointly recommended that all local efforts to assist servicemen's dependants should be co-ordinated through 'that excellent institution, the Soldiers' and Sailors' Families Association'.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>13</sup> SSFA, *Leaflet 6*, printed in SSFA, *Fifteenth annual report for the year ending 31 December 1899*; Winchester, Hampshire Record Office, Lucy Ogily papers, 38M49/E7/55.

<sup>14</sup> See e.g. *Times*, 9 Mar. 1900 – and the robust response from a female volunteer, 19 Mar. 1900.

<sup>15</sup> SSFA, *Annual report for ... 1899*, p. xix; SSFA, *Seventeenth annual report for the year ending 31 December 1901*, pp. 16, 19. The SSFA report for each year includes a report of the annual meeting held the following summer.

<sup>16</sup> F. Prochaska, *The voluntary impulse: philanthropy in modern Britain* (London, 1988), pp. 43–4; see also F. Prochaska, *Women and philanthropy in nineteenth-century England* (Oxford, 1980), ch. 4; A. Summers, 'A home from home – women's philanthropic work in the nineteenth century', in S. Burman, ed., *Fit work for women* (London, 1979).

<sup>17</sup> SSFA, *Leaflet 6*, printed in SSFA, *Annual report for ... 1899*.

<sup>18</sup> Stearn, 'Great philanthropist', p. 6; Soldiers' and Sailors' Families Association executive committee minutes (SSFA exec. mins.), 24 Mar. 1900, London, SSAFA – the Armed Forces charity.

<sup>19</sup> Trustring, *Women*, pp. 183–6; Stearn, 'Great philanthropist', pp. 4–5.

<sup>20</sup> *Times*, 1 Nov. 1899.

The SSFA, however, was still a small organization: in its first five years it had given financial assistance to only about 1,000 soldiers' wives.<sup>21</sup> The South African war presented the Association with a very different workload, as Table 1 demonstrates. In August 1900, the SSFA had 80,531 families on its books. Gildea calculated that across the war years the Association gave monetary assistance to '198,438 families, exclusive of children'.<sup>22</sup> Coping with this unprecedented challenge required the SSFA not only rapidly to expand its network of branches and volunteers but also to design and implement new policies adapted to wartime conditions. Many of these policies were subsequently replicated by the state in the First World War.

Soldiers' wives and children made up the bulk of the Association's workload. (Reflecting the youth and recent marriages of most servicemen, the number of children was comparatively low – 1.76 children per wife for 1900–1 – though many wives were pregnant when their husbands were called up.) SSFA policy in these cases was to maintain the family's standard of living at its pre-war rate: the soldier would return to find his family as he had left them. Better-off families thus received more charitable aid than poorer ones.<sup>23</sup> Relief was to 'place the wife and family in such a position that there should be no feeling of their having to "struggle" during the absence of the breadwinner'.<sup>24</sup> Gildea's formula for achieving this aim was to make up the family income to two-thirds of the soldier's civilian wage.<sup>25</sup> He thus demonstrated an awareness of that uneven resource distribution within the household noted both by Edwardian social investigators and by feminist historians.<sup>26</sup> Yet his estimate that the male breadwinner single-handedly consumed one third of his income seems excessive: many families would indeed have struggled to maintain themselves on this basis, especially as their housing – and therefore rent – was to remain unchanged. The formula was made possible by Gildea's proviso that neither the soldier's allotment from his pay nor any money earned by the wife should be included in the calculations. Both recommendations aimed to encourage 'thrift' and 'self-help': families were to benefit alike from male prudence and self-denial and from female enterprise and exertion.<sup>27</sup> The Association clearly hoped that many soldiers' dependants *would* work:

<sup>21</sup> Trustring, *Women*, p. 180.

<sup>22</sup> SSFA exec. mins., 1 Nov. 1900; Sir J. Gildea, *Historical record of the work of the Soldiers' and Sailors' Families Association from 1885 to 1916* (London, 1916), p. 107.

<sup>23</sup> SSFA circular Transvaal War (TW) no. 2A (1 Dec. 1899); SSFA circulars TW, nos. 1–3 plus 2A and 2B are printed in Appendix J of *War Relief Funds Committee* (Cd 248), 1900.

<sup>24</sup> SSFA circular TW no. 2 (24 Oct. 1899).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* no. 2A.

<sup>26</sup> For Edwardian social investigators, see e.g. S. Rowntree, *Poverty: a study of town life* (London, 1902), p. 135; M. Pember Reeves, *Round about a pound a week* (London, 1913), pp. 68, 156. For an early example of feminist history, see L. Oren, 'The welfare of women in laboring families: England, 1860–1950', in M. S. Hartman and L. Banner, eds., *Clio's consciousness raised* (New York, NY, 1974).

<sup>27</sup> Cd 248, pp. 12–13 (Gildea's evidence); SSFA circular TW no. 2A.

Table 1 *Persons assisted and money spent on assistance by the Soldiers' and Sailors' Families Association during the South African War*

Year	Wives	Other dependent relatives	Children	Total	Spent (to nearest £)
Oct.–Dec. 1899	19,270	5,701	25,514	50,485	£41,362
1900	61,584	31,845	107,266	200,695	£680,379
1901	38,731	20,455	69,015	128,201	£353,491
1902		28,909*	34,118	63,027	£130,645
Total					£1,205,877

\* Figure for wives plus other dependent relatives.

Source: SSFA *Annual reports* and Sir J. Gildea, *Historical record of the work of the Soldiers' and Sailors' Families Association from 1885 to 1916* (London, 1916), p. 106.



volunteers' duties included finding employment for those not 'in delicate health, or with young children'.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, in choosing to act as if all wives were fully economically dependent upon their husbands, the SSFA set a significant precedent. During the First World War, the state replicated the Association's policy of paying support to wives 'without tests of the woman's own economic status', while requiring all other relatives to prove dependency. Pedersen argues that it was through this policy that the British state made its 'decisive commitment to the articulation of [the] gendered system of welfare provision', based on the male breadwinner and dependent wife, which would go on to shape the Beveridge Plan and the post-1945 welfare state.<sup>29</sup>

'Other dependent relatives', mainly soldiers' parents, made up a strikingly high proportion of the SSFA's caseload: almost one sixth of persons supported in 1900–1. Overwhelmingly, these were mothers, reflecting both the greater longevity of women and the particular economic pressures faced by them. In both Cheadle, Staffordshire, and Burton upon Trent almost one third of soldiers whose dependants were assisted had given financial support to one or both parents.<sup>30</sup> Suspected of making exaggerated claims regarding the son's previous support, parents were considered the most problematic part of the SSFA's workload. Charles Booth's 1894 finding that over 27 per cent of the aged poor were wholly or partly maintained by relatives suggests these suspicions may have been overplayed.<sup>31</sup> During the First World War, the state followed the SSFA's example both in extending separation allowances to parents and other relatives who could prove previous dependency, and in adopting a sceptical and inquisitorial approach towards them.<sup>32</sup>

Whether the Association should support what would later be called 'unmarried wives' proved controversial. Formally, the SSFA insisted that marriage was essential, but in practice the Association's attitude was inconsistent. Some branches took a hard line, prosecuting 'wives' found to be unmarried 'to prevent ... [women] living in adultery making a profit out of the fund'. Dulwich SSFA prosecuted Ada Ballard for obtaining 35s by representing herself as the wife of Private Jones, a reservist, though she was in fact married to another soldier, who had deserted her, and was 'undoubtedly in distress in

<sup>28</sup> SSFA circular TW no. 2.

<sup>29</sup> Pedersen, 'Gender', pp. 1005, 984–5. The state did not adopt the SSFA's approach of linking grants to the soldier's civilian pay, however, but paid allowances at a flat rate correlated to the soldier's rank.

<sup>30</sup> Register of cases, 1899–1902, Soldiers' and Sailors' Families Association, Cheadle Division, Stafford, Staffordshire Record Office, 5493/1 (Cheadle casebook); minutes of Soldiers' and Sailors' Families Association, Burton upon Trent Division, Lichfield, Lichfield Record Office, D34/1 (Burton mins.). The Cheadle casebook includes thirty-nine cases, but gives details for only thirty-seven; for Burton details are given of the dependants of 119 soldiers assisted by the SSFA.

<sup>31</sup> P. Thane, *Old age in English history: past experiences, present issues* (Oxford, 2002), p. 176.

<sup>32</sup> Thomas, 'State maintenance', ch. 4. During the First World War, parents of servicemen killed on active service also for the first time became eligible for state pensions.

consequence of Jones being called upon to proceed to the front'.<sup>33</sup> But Jane Wildeman of Croydon, prosecuted by the treasury for obtaining money on false pretences, had been assisted by the SSFA in full knowledge that she was not married to the reservist with whom she lived, on the strength of a letter from him promising marriage.<sup>34</sup> Many branches took a pragmatic approach. Gloucester's honorary secretary granted financial support on the basis that the SSFA's purpose was to 'prevent children and women who were dependent on soldiers from starving': 'the children were innocent, and ... the mother was the proper person to look after them'.<sup>35</sup> This policy, though censured by some volunteers as rewarding sin, was evidently widely applied. Later, the Association stated that 'the principle on which relief was granted ... during the Transvaal War' was that unmarried mothers and their children would be helped 'where there is a real home ... and the connection is not merely a casual one'.<sup>36</sup> In so doing, the SSFA set another important precedent for state policy in a later war: in October 1914, 'unmarried wives' were granted separation allowances by the government.<sup>37</sup>

How far were the SSFA's grants sufficient to support servicemen's dependants? Gildea relates that in areas where working-class men provided much of the SSFA's resources they disconcerted the Association's middle-class organizers by insisting on larger grants being made 'according to their views of justice and generosity'.<sup>38</sup> The small sample in the SSFA casebook for Cheadle, Staffordshire, suggests that soldiers' dependants receiving grants often also adopted well-established female survival strategies – moving in with their parents, self-employment as dressmakers or small shopkeepers, or taking in lodgers – to improve their economic position.<sup>39</sup> Those with the lowest pre-war incomes fared worst under the SSFA's two-thirds policy. Yet, though the welfare of soldiers' families was a high-profile public issue, criticism of the SSFA's scale of grants as too low was rare. Many – including some of the Association's own volunteers and key grant-providers – thought it over-generous. In November 1900, the lord mayor of London threatened to discontinue grants from the Mansion House Fund unless the SSFA reduced its allowances. Gildea successfully defended the Association's scale, supported by the first lord of the treasury, Arthur Balfour, who declared that ending SSFA allowances would be 'a national calamity'.<sup>40</sup> As in 1914–18, wartime allowances gave some

<sup>33</sup> Cd 248, p. 7 (Gildea's evidence); *Lloyd's Weekly*, 28 Jan. 1900; *Standard*, 5 Feb. 1900.

<sup>34</sup> *Times*, 21 Oct. 1901.

<sup>35</sup> Mary ('May') Ruth Lloyd-Baker, diary (Lloyd-Baker diary), 30 Oct. 1899, 4 Jan., 12 Jan. 1900, Gloucester, Gloucestershire Archives, Lloyd-Baker papers, D3549/31/1/3 Part 2.

<sup>36</sup> SSFA, *Thirtieth Annual Report, 1914–1915*, p. 1874 (Special General Meeting held 28 Jan. 1915); see also S. Grayzel, *Women's identities at war: gender, motherhood, and politics in Britain and France during the First World War* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1999), pp. 91–4.

<sup>37</sup> Thomas, 'State maintenance', p. 163.

<sup>38</sup> Gildea, *Historical record*, p. 86.

<sup>39</sup> Cheadle casebook (cross-referenced with 1901 census).

<sup>40</sup> SSFA exec. mins., 24 Nov. 1900.

soldiers' wives unprecedented control over the household budget. A volunteer with the Birmingham reservist fund asserted: 'it has been no unusual thing for the women to tell us that they are better off than when their husbands are at home, "for you see, Miss, we get the money now"'.<sup>41</sup>

The SSFA saw itself as the 'guardian' of servicemen's families 'while those dear to them were fighting for their country', the position adopted by the state in 1914–18. In both cases, this role included moral surveillance of soldiers' wives.<sup>42</sup> Relief was conditional upon 'sobriety and good conduct', assessed by SSFA volunteers through weekly home visits. Those failing the sobriety test might still be assisted, but in food and rent payments rather than cash; if there were children, the SSFA employed National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) inspectors to check on their welfare.<sup>43</sup> In this emphasis on moral conduct, 'self-help' and assisting 'the deserving', as well as in its casework approach, the SSFA bore resemblance to the Charity Organization Society (COS).<sup>44</sup> As their brief and unhappy wartime collaboration demonstrated, however, there were important differences between them.

This collaboration was brought about by the fact that the SSFA in 1899 was simply too small to respond effectively to the challenge of war. With only 3,000 volunteers, its regional coverage was patchy even in military centres like Hampshire and in places non-existent.<sup>45</sup> It was particularly weak in cities. Indeed, several major provincial towns ran their own funds for local soldiers' families, organized by the mayor or local newspaper, without reference to the SSFA.<sup>46</sup> Most damaging to the SSFA's credibility was its weakness in the capital's poorest areas: in 1899, the Association had 'virtually no organisation whatever' in its North London district, which included much of the East End.<sup>47</sup> When at the outbreak of war the COS offered its assistance in London, therefore, the SSFA was in no position to refuse. By December, the COS had dealt with 2,300 SSFA London cases.<sup>48</sup> In the context of war, however, the approach of the two organizations was very different. Whereas the COS was notorious for its penny-pinching and inquisitorial policies, the SSFA stressed that soldiers'

<sup>41</sup> *Daily Telegraph* (Napier), 30 Sept. 1901.

<sup>42</sup> Cd 248, p. 10 (Gildea's evidence); Pedersen, 'Gender', pp. 985, 996–1000; Thomas, 'State maintenance', pp. 187, 227–8.

<sup>43</sup> M. Vane, 'Provision for our soldiers and sailors', *National Review*, 37 (1901), pp. 760–4, at p. 761.

<sup>44</sup> Trustram, *Women*, pp. 179–80; Lomas, "'Delicate duties'", p. 126.

<sup>45</sup> *Times*, 14 Oct. 1899; Cd 248, p. 5 (Gildea's evidence); Caroline Beach to Colonel Ogilvy, 16 Nov. 1899, Hampshire Record Office, Lucy Ogilvy papers, 38M49/E7/55.

<sup>46</sup> Including Birmingham (where the SSFA dealt with regulars' families only) and Manchester. In spring 1900, the Manchester fund was supporting 2,500 cases and the Birmingham fund 2,200; the total number of soldiers' dependants requiring assistance during the South African war is therefore greater than the SSFA figure. Cd 248, pp. 98–100, 138.

<sup>47</sup> Cd 248, p. 5 (Gildea's evidence). For voluntary organizations' difficulties in recruiting volunteers for East London, see Prochaska, *Women and philanthropy*, pp. 108–9.

<sup>48</sup> Cd 248, p. 90 (C. S. Loch's evidence).

families were ‘claimants for our help’ *not* ‘beggars for the doles of our charity’.<sup>49</sup> Volunteers were told to ‘err on the side of liberality ... there shall be no stinting’.<sup>50</sup> Investigation was to be restricted to establishing the identity of the serviceman, the fact of marriage, and (more controversially) the ‘good character’ of the wife, and the aim as we have seen was to maintain the previous standard of living.<sup>51</sup>

Though the Charity Organization Society had agreed to follow SSFA guidelines, COS attitudes were not lightly abandoned. Soon the press, especially the Liberal *Daily Chronicle*, began reporting abuses. One reservist’s wife with three children had been refused help after being ‘asked dozens of questions ... how she had managed to get along so far, how many pawn-tickets she had, how much rent was owing, where she was born, and whether her relatives could not assist her’.<sup>52</sup> A correspondent to the radical, working-class *Lloyd’s Weekly* complained that her sister, whose husband was fighting in South Africa, had been pressured by the COS to move from three rooms into two.<sup>53</sup> A Stepney soldier’s family was refused assistance because of the *husband’s* character, sparking protests from the local poor law guardians.<sup>54</sup> By January 1900, Princess Alexandra had had enough, telling Gildea

that she had had many previous complaints of the inquisitorial questions of the COS acting for the Association:- that she had seen many similar complaints in the Press, and had also received a Report of the irregularities carried on in the West London Divisions, and desiring that the Association should have nothing to do with the C.O.S.<sup>55</sup>

Gildea demurred but Alexandra insisted and the council – after a royal summons to Kensington Palace – agreed.<sup>56</sup> In mid-January, Gildea abruptly suspended the SSFA–COS collaboration, chivalrously shouldering the resulting public condemnation. For in breaking with the COS, the SSFA had only exchanged attacks from the left for attacks from the right. *The Times* accused the SSFA’s lady volunteers of being duped by ‘drunken, disreputable slatterns, crafty, hypocritical, greedy, and persevering’.<sup>57</sup> The COS attacked the SSFA repeatedly both in the press and in a forty-eight-page pamphlet.<sup>58</sup> Many of

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11 (Gildea’s evidence).

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13 (Gildea’s evidence).

<sup>51</sup> *Daily Chronicle*, 4 Jan. 1900.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 30 Dec. 1899; see also 2 Jan., 4 Jan., 6 Jan., 13 Jan. 1900.

<sup>53</sup> *Lloyd’s Weekly*, 14 Jan. 1900; see also 21 Jan. 1900.

<sup>54</sup> *Daily Chronicle*, 5 Jan. 1900.

<sup>55</sup> SSFA exec. mins., 17 Feb. 1900.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Times*, 26 Feb. 1900; see also *Times*, 16 Feb., 24 Feb. 1900. The *Daily Mail*, however, attacking the *Times’s* comments as tasteless and inaccurate, commended the SSFA’s break with the COS and continued to promote it as ‘The Best Fund’ (*Daily Mail*, 10 Mar. 1900).

<sup>58</sup> *Times*, 26 Jan., 19 Mar., 24 Mar. 1900; SSFA exec. mins., 17 Feb. 1900. Though the COS still bore a grudge a decade later, a similar situation in the First World War led to renewed

the SSFA's own London volunteers, conscious of having benefited from COS information and facilities, thought Gildea had behaved gracelessly in breaking the connection.<sup>59</sup> The Association felt under siege. 'The attacks on the S&SFA' wrote Princess Louise, president of the County of London branch, 'have been so constant I am anxious in every way to find out how to prevent any cause for this'.<sup>60</sup> Ultimately, however, the SSFA weathered the storm and, with a roster of volunteers now numbering 11,000 (eventually 12,000), maintained its position as the pre-eminent charity for soldiers' families.<sup>61</sup>

### III

The government was able to devolve responsibility for the welfare of servicemen's dependants onto a private philanthropic organization only because of the commitment of this network of mainly female volunteers, and because of the willingness of the general public to fund their work through charitable donations. For volunteers, the SSFA's natural recruitment base incorporated three overlapping groups: officers' wives; county gentry families with military links; and retired officers. At local level, its wheels were oiled by social influence and class cohesion. (Of the difficulties experienced by a new county secretary, a Hampshire worker wrote, 'I do not think he has quite enough of the "Gentleman" to smooth matters over'.)<sup>62</sup> Pedersen suggests that SSFA volunteers were motivated by a 'tangle of class and gender interests', embracing religious conviction, 'ideals of public service', a 'wider vision of social and moral reconstruction', and what they saw as cross-class sympathy 'from woman to woman'.<sup>63</sup> To this list, certainly for the South African war, should be added imperial patriotism and a desire to support the war. Elite women's activism in the imperial propaganda and emigration campaigns sparked by the war is now well recognized.<sup>64</sup> But patriotic philanthropy – organized largely at local level, conforming to feminine norms, and dependent upon extensive networks of volunteers – provided the most obvious route for

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SSFA–COS co-operation in London (H. Bosanquet, *Social work in London, 1869–1912* (London, 1914), pp. 380–6; Thomas, 'State maintenance', pp. 33, 36).

<sup>59</sup> *Times*, 19 Mar. 1900.

<sup>60</sup> Princess Louise to Lady Wolseley, n.d. [spring 1900], Hove, Hove Library, Wolseley papers.

<sup>61</sup> *Times*, 27 June 1900, 24 June 1901.

<sup>62</sup> Captain A. R. Hewitt to Mrs Ogilvy, 23 Feb. 1900, Hampshire Record Office, Lucy Ogilvy papers, 38M49/E7/55.

<sup>63</sup> Pedersen, 'Gender', pp. 992–3.

<sup>64</sup> B. Blakeley, 'Women and imperialism: the Colonial Office and female emigration to South Africa, 1901–1910', *Albion*, 13 (1981), pp. 131–49; J. Bush, *Edwardian ladies and imperial power* (Leicester, 2000); E. Riedi, 'Women, gender and the promotion of Empire: the Victoria League, 1901–1914', *Historical Journal*, 45 (2002), pp. 569–99; E. Riedi, 'Options for an imperialist woman: the case of Violet Markham, 1899–1914', *Albion*, 32 (2000), pp. 59–84; J. J. Van-Helten and K. Williams, 'The crying need of South Africa: the emigration of single British women to the Transvaal, 1901–1910', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 10 (1983), pp. 17–38.

middle- and upper-class women to take part in the war effort. As Lady Violet Greville of Limehouse SSFA put it, 'I could not go out to the war myself, so I determined to do something here at home to help.'<sup>65</sup> Many SSFA volunteers were also involved in other forms of patriotic charity. The honorary secretary for Gloucester, May Lloyd-Baker of Hardwicke Court, organized 'soldiers' comforts' for Gloucestershire Regiment, assisted British refugees from the Transvaal, and was honorary secretary to the Gloucester Cathedral War Memorial fund – amply fulfilling a child's naïve description of her as '*the war lady*'.<sup>66</sup> For some SSFA workers, imperial patriotism also took more directly political forms. Lloyd-Baker subsequently became the Gloucestershire honorary secretary for the National Service League, campaigning for universal military training.<sup>67</sup> Burton upon Trent SSFA president Lady Burton's role as the 'reservoir of the energy of the local Unionist campaign' in the 1900 'khaki' election was marked by an illuminated address from her fellow 'lady workers in the empire's cause'.<sup>68</sup>

May Lloyd-Baker's diary is revealing about the ethos and workings of the SSFA at local level. A pillar of the county elite, Lloyd-Baker conducted much useful SSFA networking in the hunting field. She deliberately enrolled volunteers from the local gentry, rather than from Gloucester's middle class, because, she explained, 'I thought the women liked them better, & ... they were more likely to understand Army matters.'<sup>69</sup> The diary demonstrates how the SSFA's decentralized structure meant that central policy was not always followed. Both Lloyd-Baker and the Gloucestershire honorary secretary Margaret Curtis Hayward 'entirely disagreed' with the ruling that neither the soldier's allotment nor the wife's earnings should be counted in calculating grants – hence a note that one reservist's wife 'had had rather less than her full allowance, but that we had thought she ought to work'.<sup>70</sup> The influence of the Charity Organization Society was evidently felt far beyond the metropolis. At least one Gloucester reservist's wife was subjected to the full COS inquisition by Lloyd-Baker's assistants, including completely irrelevant questions on her husband's drinking habits:

Husband ... had been employed at Gen Post Office, London, but had been a labourer at Gloucester for over a year. Wife admitted he drank sometimes though not badly. 3 children aged 5, 3 ½, & 1 ½. Woman does one day a week charring for Mr Arnold & helps a neighbour's washing. Strong looking & might do more. Rent 4/- a week. Lodger who pays 1/3 per week.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>65</sup> *New Zealand Herald*, 21 Apr. 1900.

<sup>66</sup> Gloucestershire Archives, Lloyd-Baker papers, D3549/31/1/5 and D3549/31/1/6; Lloyd-Baker diary, 9 Dec., 15 Dec. 1900; *Western Daily Press*, 14 May 1903; *Gloucester Citizen*, 10 Feb. 1906.

<sup>67</sup> *Nation in Arms*, Jan. 1910.

<sup>68</sup> *Daily Mail*, 8 Oct. 1900; *Derby Daily Telegraph*, 9 Nov. 1900.

<sup>69</sup> Lloyd-Baker diary, 4 Jan. 1900.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 7 Dec. 1899, 14 Jan. 1900.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 18 Oct. 1899.

As a repentant Lloyd-Baker explained after Arnold had visited the family on a Saturday night to find ‘no coals or food in the house’, the volunteer responsible had not ‘quite understood abt the [SSFA] ... she had been working it on COS lines’.<sup>72</sup> For Lloyd-Baker and many of her fellow volunteers, it was axiomatic that working-class women could not be trusted with money. Lloyd-Baker fulminated against the ‘absurdly large’ and ‘exceedingly unwise’ allowances given to reservists’ wives by their husbands’ workmates. Her Cheltenham colleague Susan Christian nurtured plans for a compulsory savings scheme, ‘either taking off 2/- all round the Reservists, or putting it in the PO Bank for them ... Then in illness they can draw on that & not on us.’<sup>73</sup> Such attitudes typified the maternalism so characteristic of the SSFA.

Lloyd-Baker, in her late twenties, unmarried, energetic, and developing formidable organizational abilities, freely admitted she found the role personally fulfilling: ‘I am running it as a one-man job, & I love it.’<sup>74</sup> Nevertheless, as Princess Louise noted, volunteering for the SSFA could be ‘very arduous & exacting work doubly so in over crowded districts’.<sup>75</sup> Even identifying those in need of help was often difficult. Burton upon Trent branch began efficiently with a list of local reservists, only to discover that many had recently left the reserve, or were ‘not to be found’, or dead.<sup>76</sup> The continuing low status of soldiers in Victorian society posed particular problems. The working-class conviction that joining the army represented ‘the last step on the downward career of a young man’ remained strong, apparently undented either by recent improvements in army conditions or by the emergence in popular and literary culture of a romanticized image of ‘Tommy Atkins’ as swashbuckling hero of empire.<sup>77</sup> Margaret Curtis Hayward complained that identifying soldiers in any parish was ‘desperately hard’ because ‘they have always been looked upon as the black sheep of their families & have kept out of sight as far as possible’.<sup>78</sup> Enlisting under a false name was not uncommon.

Finding families quickly was important since the first weeks, before the separation allowance and allotment came through, were often the most difficult. As Burton SSFA remarked of a reservist’s heavily pregnant wife and ten-month-old baby, ‘it was a most distressing case, & the woman would have been starving

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 24 Oct, 26 Oct. 1899.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 4 Dec., 11 Dec. 1899, 15 Jan. 1900.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 2 Dec. 1899.

<sup>75</sup> Princess Louise to Lady Wolseley, n.d. [spring 1900], Hove Library, Wolseley papers.

<sup>76</sup> Burton mins., list of cases.

<sup>77</sup> H. O. Arnold-Forster, in 1898, quoted in A. R. Skelley, *The Victorian army at home* (London, 1977), p. 244; see also e.g. D. French, *Military identities: the regimental system, the British army, and the British people c. 1870–2000* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 248–53. For conditions, see e.g. Skelley, *Victorian army*; E. M. Spiers, *The late Victorian army, 1868–1902* (Manchester, 1992), ch. 5. For the soldier as popular hero in late nineteenth-century Britain, see e.g. J. M. MacKenzie, ‘Introduction: popular imperialism and the military’, in MacKenzie, ed., *Popular imperialism and the military, 1850–1950* (Manchester, 1992).

<sup>78</sup> Lloyd-Baker diary, 29 Nov. 1899.

unless the society had come to her aid'.<sup>79</sup> Setting grants was complicated by the fact that many wives did not know how much their husbands had been earning.<sup>80</sup> Meanwhile, funds had to be raised and new SSFA networks established. Lloyd-Baker criss-crossed Gloucester 'put[ting] pressure on the clergy to do SSFA work'; distributing posters and collecting boxes to shops, banks, railway stations, and factories; making house to house collections; and recruiting parish volunteers. Gloucester's mayor soon organized a local fund which went largely to the SSFA; he also provided a retired sergeant-major to act as Lloyd-Baker's right-hand man.<sup>81</sup> Nevertheless, the workload was sufficient to explain her response to the news that the War Office was increasing the separation allowance (so that the SSFA had to recalculate all its payments): 'I shd like to kick Lord Lansdowne.'<sup>82</sup>

This workload was greatly increased by the insistence that women should be paid weekly at home. Though Burton branch considered alternative methods (including postal orders, used by the state to pay separation allowances), the importance attached to 'friendly visiting' and moral oversight rendered regular home visits indispensable.<sup>83</sup> As Pedersen remarks, SSFA volunteers 'acted as the advocates, disciplinarians, troubleshooters, and morality police of soldiers' wives'.<sup>84</sup> Lloyd-Baker organized a Christmas party for the families, arranged for them to send Christmas presents to South Africa, and acted as their representative in difficulties with the War Office. The case of Trooper Holder, whose form allocating part of his pay to his widowed and rheumatic mother had been lost by the army, took a year's correspondence to resolve (Mrs Holder meanwhile, 'in a state of semi-starvation', being maintained by the parish and the SSFA).<sup>85</sup> Burton's interventions included brokering a debt arrangement for a woman left in charge of a loss-making pub; trying to obtain a separation allowance for a wife whose husband was in jail for failing to report to his regiment; and financing a summons (presumably for maintenance) against a reservist who had deserted his wife and new baby leaving them destitute. Special grants were made in cases of childbirth; to allow wives to move nearer their relations; for a child's funeral. Equally, volunteers might impose a

<sup>79</sup> Burton mins., 30 Oct. 1899.

<sup>80</sup> *Minutes of evidence taken before the royal commission on divorce and matrimonial causes* (Cd 6480), 1912–13, vol. II, p. 373 (Millicent Garrett Fawcett's evidence).

<sup>81</sup> Lloyd-Baker diary, 11 Oct., 23 Oct., 30 Oct., 3 Nov., 6 Nov., 10 Nov. 1899.

<sup>82</sup> Lloyd-Baker diary, 10 Jan. 1900.

<sup>83</sup> Burton mins., 23 Oct. 1899. Because of the volunteer shortage, in some London districts soldiers' dependants instead collected their allowance weekly from a central office (see Lady V. Greville, 'Reservists' wives at home', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 24 Feb. 1900, for a sentimentalized description). This method was criticized both as a failure of supervision and as forcing undesirable social mixing between 'decent, self-respecting' reservists' dependants and 'rude coarse soldiers' wives' (*Times*, 24 Feb. 1900).

<sup>84</sup> Pedersen, 'Gender', pp. 992–3.

<sup>85</sup> Lloyd-Baker diary, 23 Nov., 28 Dec. 1899; Gloucestershire Archives, Lloyd-Baker papers, D3549/31/1/3 Part 1.



variety of restrictions on how aid was given. A Burton volunteer ring-fenced part of one woman's grant to be 'expended in milk for the children'; to another woman, 'thrifless & careless', she gave food but not money.<sup>86</sup> The SSFA also encouraged its workers to 'make the lives of these poor people less solitary' by visiting with illustrated papers or 'news from the Seat of War'. Marc Brodie suggests that contacts between 'lady visitors' and socially isolated 'respectable' working-class wives contributed to East End Conservatism; conceivably, SSFA volunteers bearing jingoist reading matter helped bolster support among soldiers' wives for this imperial war.<sup>87</sup>

Behind the work of the Association's volunteers lay a far wider public commitment to the task of supporting soldiers' families. The plight of these families was effectively publicized by Rudyard Kipling through his poem 'The absent-minded beggar', first published in the *Daily Mail* in October 1899 as the focus of the *Mail's* war fund.<sup>88</sup> Reprinted in newspapers across the world, sold in facsimile copies by the tens of thousands, set to music by Sir Arthur Sullivan, recited and sung to wild acclaim at London and provincial music halls, the poem created in John Lee's words a 'perfect cultural storm'.<sup>89</sup> By far the most influential contemporary cultural representation of servicemen's dependants, 'The absent-minded beggar' depicted the families sympathetically as pathetic yet dignified, suddenly reduced to life in the shadow of pawnshop and workhouse but 'far too proud to beg or speak'. Its appeal to the public at home to take part in a cross-class imperial effort through charitable donation was phenomenally successful. In the event – though the *Mail* gave £12,700 to the SSFA in 1899<sup>90</sup> – the majority of 'The absent-minded beggar' fund went to meet the needs of the soldiers themselves rather than their families. Nevertheless Kipling's poem, often quoted at local SSFA meetings and performed at innumerable fund-raising concerts, gave valuable publicity and emotional impetus to the SSFA's cause.

In total, the SSFA received some £1.3 million in voluntary donations during the war, of which £1,205,877 had been distributed by the end of 1902.<sup>91</sup> All classes of the community, and all parts of the country, had contributed to

<sup>86</sup> Burton mins., 13 Nov., 20 Nov. 1899.

<sup>87</sup> SSFA circular TW no. 2; M. Brodie, *The politics of the poor: the East End of London, 1885–1914* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 115–24.

<sup>88</sup> R. Kipling, 'The absent-minded beggar', *Daily Mail*, 31 Oct. 1899.

<sup>89</sup> J. Lee, 'Following Rudyard Kipling's "The absent-minded beggar"', *Kipling Journal*, 85 (2011), pp. 6–26, at p. 6. The poem did, however, attract some criticism for its curious pinning of blame for the families' situation upon the soldiers themselves, allegedly 'absent-minded' about their domestic responsibilities – see e.g. *Shields Daily Gazette*, 19 Feb. 1900.

<sup>90</sup> SSFA exec. mins., 24 Mar. 1900.

<sup>91</sup> *Times*, 9 Aug. 1902; Gildea, *Historical record*, pp. 106–7. Gildea boasted that under 1 per cent – itself a substantial amount – was spent on administration and advertising: a skeleton staff ran the central office and local committees hiring offices or secretarial assistance were severely reprimanded (Gildea, *Historical record*, pp. 101, 107; SSFA exec. mins., 2 Mar., 29 Mar., 3 May 1901).

raising this enormous sum. The central war charity, the Mansion House Fund, directed all subscriptions for soldiers' families through the SSFA: nearly £200,000 (including some £23,500 raised in January 1900 through church collections made 'by command of Queen Victoria') plus a further £110,000 from the Lord Mayor's Discretionary Fund.<sup>92</sup> As in Gloucester, many local war funds turned over money for reservists' wives to the SSFA. Regular appeals were made in the national and local press. A nationwide appeal in January 1901 from Princess Alexandra backed by the new commander-in-chief of the British forces, Lord Roberts, was said to have raised £300,000.<sup>93</sup> £5,000 came from a huge 'National Bazaar' in May 1900; over £14,000 from a three-day 'Great County Sale' at Earl's Court in June 1901.<sup>94</sup> The Football Association made a series of grants; a National Cricketers' War Fund raised almost £2,300.<sup>95</sup> Though all the numerous war charities were more or less in competition with one another, the SSFA sometimes benefited from money raised for other patriotic purposes: between them the two Scottish private military hospitals donated £11,300 of surplus funds to the Scottish SSFA.<sup>96</sup>

Support for soldiers' dependants was strikingly cross-class. Many large firms indirectly subsidized the Association by making weekly payments to the families of their reservist employees.<sup>97</sup> Working-class mutuality, the 'charity of the poor to the poor', was equally significant.<sup>98</sup> Amongst numerous others, workers from the Durham and South Wales coalfields, the Crewe railworks, and the Clyde shipyards raised significant sums for the SSFA at a few pennies per man per week. Despite occasional objections from organizations such as Glasgow Trades Council, they appeared generally content to work through the SSFA. The Association acknowledged the importance of working-class contributions by inviting the Staffordshire miners' representative Albert Stanley to speak at its 1901 annual meeting; Stanley lyrically endorsed its work, particularly emphasizing the 'delicacy and tact' with which lady volunteers persuaded families there was 'nothing humiliating' in accepting help.<sup>99</sup>

<sup>92</sup> *Times*, 25 May 1903; SSFA exec. mins., 24 Mar. 1900.

<sup>93</sup> *Times*, 1 Jan., 5 Jan. 1901; Gildea, *Historical record*, p. 94.

<sup>94</sup> SSFA exec. mins., 1 Nov. 1900; Gildea, *Historical record*, p. 99.

<sup>95</sup> *Derby Daily Telegraph*, 25 May 1901; *Times*, 26 Aug. 1900, 25 Feb. 1902; SSFA, *Eighteenth annual report for the year ending 31 December 1902*, pp. 23–4.

<sup>96</sup> *Dundee Courier*, 29 May 1901; *Edinburgh Evening News*, 10 May, 28 May 1901.

<sup>97</sup> But not all: in Burton upon Trent the major breweries granted reservists' families 10s a week but the Midland Railway, another important local employer, refused even to 'allow men to be kept in benefit of their club' (Burton mins., 29 Jan. 1900).

<sup>98</sup> For the importance of 'working-class to working-class' charity generally, see Prochaska, *Voluntary impulse*, pp. 27–31; for the First World War, see P. Grant, "'An infinity of personal sacrifice": the scale and nature of charitable work in Britain during the First World War', *War & Society*, 27 (2008), pp. 67–88, at pp. 71–2.

<sup>99</sup> Gildea, *Historical record*, p. 86; SSFA, *Annual report for ... 1900*, pp. xiii–xv. For Glasgow Trades Council's protests both against allowances being determined by the man's wages rather than by need, and against 'ladies, however well intentioned, going into houses making inquisitive inquiries', see *Glasgow Herald*, 16 Dec. 1899.

Appeals often framed working-class contributions as a patriotic responsibility: “Tommy” is doing his duty gallantly in South Africa. Surely “Tommy’s” mates at home will not fail in their duty!<sup>100</sup> Yet support for soldiers’ dependants did not necessarily equal support for the war, and some distinguished sharply between the two. For William Abraham, Welsh miners’ representative and Lib/Lab MP, feelings of reciprocal working-class obligation over-rode his ‘pro-Boer’ sentiments:

whilst they hated the war, they loved the warriors. The Welsh Regiment had in the past made a levy of sixpence per man to assist relief funds after explosions in South Wales, and ... all the collieries in the district should now make a similar levy to assist the fund for the soldiers’ families.<sup>101</sup>

Most likely, the over-riding motivation for working-class contributions was to assist local families often known personally as work-mates or neighbours. The context of war dissipated that contempt still felt by many ‘respectable’ working-class people towards regular soldiers and ex-regulars, while the conflict was brought home to local communities through the enlistment of citizen-soldiers as volunteers. As Fred Gresswell remembered of his Lincolnshire village, when a Digby man enlisted for South African service, ‘it became Digby’s war’.<sup>102</sup>

Indeed, while national appeals could be highly effective, especially if endorsed by royalty, fund-raising for the SSFA, as for most war charities, was marked by an intense localism. As Andrew Thompson notes, ‘the war funds are testimony to the dynamism of provincial philanthropy’ and ‘the strength of civic pride’ in this period as well as to ‘the depth of public sympathy and solidarity with British soldiers’.<sup>103</sup> The pattern of donations for servicemen’s dependants offers support for Brad Beaven’s suggestion that, in a context of an increasingly populist local press and developing civic identities, ‘the empire became significant only when imperial issues were fused with the local’.<sup>104</sup> Many large towns established autonomous war relief funds, raising and spending locally tens of thousands of pounds separately from any national organization.<sup>105</sup> The SSFA too found invocation of nation or empire most powerful

<sup>100</sup> *Burton Mail*, 12 Feb. 1900.

<sup>101</sup> *Weekly Mail* (Cardiff), 18 Nov. 1899. But in 1901, incensed by the imposition of a coal tax, Abraham ‘protested against the district any longer being made a tool to collect any money in connection with the war’ (*Cardiff Times*, 18 May 1901).

<sup>102</sup> J. Rose, *The intellectual life of the British working classes* (New Haven, CT, and London, 2001), pp. 336–8.

<sup>103</sup> Thompson, ‘Publicity’, p. 112.

<sup>104</sup> B. Beaven, ‘The provincial press, civic ceremony and the citizen-soldier during the Boer war, 1899–1902: a study of local patriotism’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 37 (2009), pp. 207–28, at p. 216.

<sup>105</sup> Notably the *Birmingham Daily Mail* Reservist fund which raised nearly £56,000 (‘mainly ... by the weekly subscriptions of over 50,000 working men and women’) and the Manchester, Salford, and District War Fund, which raised over £75,000 (Col. C.J. Hart, *The*

combined with an appeal to parochial responsibilities towards local men and their families. Most direct subscriptions to the SSFA were collected locally – almost two-thirds (amounting to nearly £600,000) in 1899–1900 – often in small sums through church collections, patriotic concerts, collecting cards, and collecting boxes in shops. Local feeling could be very local indeed: Burton upon Trent's inhabitants were ready to fund Burton SSFA but an appeal for the whole of Staffordshire fell flat.<sup>106</sup> Many areas were self-supporting, London and Ireland being the main exceptions. In endorsing the SSFA's work, the War Office hoped that each county would particularly assist 'that portion of the Army which is peculiarly its own'. It seems likely that wartime philanthropy did help to create the stronger sense of territorial connection between regiments and their localities at which the Cardwell–Childers reforms had aimed.<sup>107</sup>

Despite this huge and broad-based support, however, the scale of the task was such that the SSFA frequently experienced financial crises. As the war dragged on, and war enthusiasm diminished, local papers printed urgent appeals from SSFA branches rapidly heading for bankruptcy. In March 1901, the SSFA urged branches to economize by tightening procedures. All cases should be reviewed; any scale of allowance more generous than the official SSFA scale should be diminished; wives with no children should be pressured to work; support to dependent parents 'must cease, except to those who can produce *positive* proof that they have been *regularly* dependent on their sons'.<sup>108</sup> That April, 'Wife of a Yeoman', a mother of two whose SSFA grant had been reduced, complained in the press: 'surely the Government ought to do something for those of us who are beginning to suffer so acutely from the prolonged and enforced absence of our bread-winners'.<sup>109</sup> While her class position ('a lady by birth and education') was atypical, her situation was not. The small sample in the Cheadle, Staffordshire, casebook demonstrates a clear trend of individual weekly payments diminishing through 1901 and 1902.<sup>110</sup> Many soldiers did not return home until September 1902, four months after the peace. The SSFA's South African war work thus extended over nearly three years. That charitable donations were sufficient to maintain so many families for so long is striking evidence of the public commitment to soldiers' dependants. The financial

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*history of the 1st Volunteer Battalion, the Royal Warwickshire Regiment, and its predecessors* (Birmingham, 1906), pp. 232–3; *Manchester Guardian*, 9 Apr. 1902).

<sup>106</sup> *Report from the Joint Select Committee of the House of Lords and the House of Commons on charitable agencies for relief of widows and orphans of soldiers and sailors* (289) 1901, p. 104; Burton mins., 11 Mar. 1901. The similarly provincial focus of much First World War charity is emphasized in S. Pedersen, 'A surfeit of socks? The impact of the First World War on women correspondents to daily newspapers', *Scottish Economic & Social History*, 22 (2002), pp. 50–72.

<sup>107</sup> *Times*, 1 Nov. 1899; see also French, *Military identities*, pp. 244–5, and for the difficulties in establishing this local connection, *ibid.*, esp. ch. 9.

<sup>108</sup> SSFA exec. mins., 29 Mar. 1901; SSFA circular TW no. 9.

<sup>109</sup> *Daily Mail*, 2 Apr. 1901.

<sup>110</sup> Cheadle casebook.

pressures experienced by the Association in the latter half of the war suggest, nevertheless, that the conflict pushed to the limit the ability of private philanthropy to maintain soldiers' families at a level acceptable to public opinion.

#### IV

The experience of soldiers' families in 1899–1902 thus represents a central part of the British history of the South African war. It also played an important role in shaping policies towards servicemen's dependants, public perceptions of soldiers' wives and of the state's responsibilities towards them, and mechanisms for their support, in the Great War which followed twelve years later. We have already seen how policies adopted by the SSFA during the South African war served as precedents for the state's response to soldiers' wives, parents, and 'unmarried wives' in 1914–18. The South African war experience also contributed to negative perceptions of soldiers' wives in ways which fuelled the 1914–15 'moral panic' around drink and immorality.<sup>111</sup> As a Manchester magistrate warned in 1915, 'thousands of men would return ... just as they did after the Boer War, to find their wives dishonoured and drunkards'.<sup>112</sup> During the South African war itself individual cases of soldiers' wives being prosecuted, usually by the NSPCC, for alcohol-induced child neglect, prompted rumours of widespread drunkenness. Prosecutions were reported under such headlines as 'How War Funds Are Imposed On' and 'Soldiers' Drunken Wives. How the Relief Money Went'.<sup>113</sup> Though children were at the centre of these cases, sentencing comments suggested that women were being punished for their failings less as mothers than as wives or recipients of charity: the emphasis on motherhood as defining women's national duty and identity stressed by Susan Grayzel for the First World War had not yet materialized.<sup>114</sup> A Sheffield coroner (after inconclusive medical evidence prevented a verdict of fatal neglect) declared: 'a more disappointing case than this for a husband was impossible to imagine ... You take my advice, and reform ... and when your husband comes back don't let him see such a state of things in your house.' A Liverpool woman was told that her case demonstrated 'how abominably ... these public war funds ... were being abused'.<sup>115</sup> Though NSPCC policy favoured committing 'inebriate mothers' for treatment in licensed inebriate retreats (permitted under the 1898 Inebriates' Act), cases involving soldiers' wives normally ended in

<sup>111</sup> Thomas, 'State maintenance', ch. 5; Pedersen, 'Gender', p. 996. Subsequently dismissed as unfounded, these allegations nevertheless prompted the government to subject servicemen's dependants to a system of state surveillance.

<sup>112</sup> *Manchester Evening News*, 5 Apr. 1915; see also e.g. General Booth's comments, *Aberdeen Evening Express*, 16 Nov. 1914.

<sup>113</sup> See e.g. *Derby Daily Telegraph*, 8 Aug. 1900; *Gloucester Citizen*, 14 Sept. 1900.

<sup>114</sup> Grayzel, *Women's identities*, pp. 2–8. For the development of this ideology in the aftermath of the South African war, see A. Davin, 'Imperialism and motherhood', *History Workshop Journal*, 5 (1978), pp. 9–65.

<sup>115</sup> *Sheffield Evening Telegraph*, 30 Jan. 1902; *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 8 May 1901.

imprisonment. Their children meanwhile were often sent to the workhouse.<sup>116</sup> Involving only a tiny minority of servicemen's dependants, these cases sparked much broader concerns: a Newcastle constable's claim that 'there never was more drinking among women than prevailed just now' was widely reported.<sup>117</sup> Such rumours – stemming both from pre-existing fears of rising female intemperance and from wartime anxieties about working-class women freed from masculine control – helped set the stage for the moral outcry about women and drink in the Great War.

Despite such negative stereotypes, the experience of 1899–1902 also created new public attitudes about the state's responsibilities towards servicemen's dependants. Victorian military philanthropy presumed that that state aid was degrading to its recipients, private charity 'ennobling and purifying'.<sup>118</sup> During the South African war, the reverse case began to be made. As 'Mrs Thomas Atkins' put it in a riposte to Kipling's 'The absent-minded beggar': 'charity's a hinsult (don't you think so?) to the wife/ ... Of the sojer wot is ready to lay down 'is blessed life/ ... And I'd sort of choke to eat the bread of grace./ It's the Government I want,/ For to make a proper grant,/ And 'elp me look the world in the face.'<sup>119</sup> Demands for increased state support came from across the political spectrum. Liberal, Irish, and even Conservative MPs highlighted the plight of soldiers' mothers and called for 'off the strength' wives to receive separation allowances while their husbands were on active service. In the Lords the duke of Bedford argued that 'service in the Reserve would be cruel, indeed impossible' unless families were properly supported – a duty that should be 'discharged, and liberally discharged, by the State from taxation'.<sup>120</sup> A resolution circulated by Poplar poor law guardians calling for 'adequate maintenance' for servicemen's families (as well as for their widows and orphans and for disabled soldiers) was widely adopted by boards of guardians across the country.<sup>121</sup> The Conservative *Times* deplored the 'social degradation' (which, it warned darkly, would no doubt mean moral degradation also) of reservists' families accustomed to 'respectability and decency'. This was a question which 'concern[ed] the dignity, and almost the honesty, of the Empire'. The Liberal *Manchester Guardian* agreed: maintenance for

<sup>116</sup> For the NSPCC and alcoholism, see G. K. Behlmer, *Child abuse and moral reform in England, 1870–1908* (Stanford, CA, 1982), pp. 179–80; and NSPCC, *Inebriate mothers and their reform: being the report for 1902–1903* (London, 1903).

<sup>117</sup> See reports on 12 July 1900 in e.g. *Morning Post*, *Dundee Courier*, *Western Mail*, *Birmingham Daily Post*. For a 'Reservist's Wife's' indignant rebuttal of allegations of widespread drunkenness and defence of soldiers' wives as 'sober respectable women ... doing their best to keep intact the homes that Tommy left behind him', see *Edinburgh Evening News*, 15 Oct. 1900.

<sup>118</sup> Trustram, *Women*, pp. 186–7.

<sup>119</sup> 'Mrs Thomas Atkins on the war', *Isle of Wight Observer*, 25 Nov. 1899 (reprinted from *To-day*).

<sup>120</sup> *Hansard's parliamentary debates*, HL Deb., 25 June 1901, vol. 95, c. 1358.

<sup>121</sup> See e.g. *Northern Echo*, 6 Dec. 1899; *Bristol Mercury*, 6 Dec. 1899; *Cambridge Daily News*, 7 Dec. 1899; *Burnley Express*, 16 Dec. 1899.

servicemen's families should be recognized as being 'as much a war charge as the provision of rifles'.<sup>122</sup> This shift in public opinion would bear belated fruit in 1914.

In the short term, however, the war confirmed the state in its refusal to accept full responsibility for servicemen's dependants. The government's one major innovation, pensions for soldiers' widows, fell far short of full maintenance and explicitly excluded 'off the strength' wives.<sup>123</sup> Despite public pressure, it consistently refused to raise the separation allowance. The competence of the SSFA seemed to validate the government's decision to leave the welfare of soldiers' families largely in the hands of private charity – an assessment which subsequently seriously delayed the state's establishment of mechanisms equal to the demands of total war. The SSFA itself did not join the clamour for full state support for servicemen's dependants. It *was* prepared to argue that provision for soldiers' widows and orphans (with which the SSFA was only tangentially involved) should be 'in the main a national charge, and not a charge on the rates or wholly upon charity'.<sup>124</sup> But the SSFA was jealous of its privileged position – 'semi-official, almost indispensable, very powerful, & yet *not* under War Office authority except so far as we wish to be' – and resisted attempts to undermine its influence.<sup>125</sup> When Burton upon Trent board of guardians passed a resolution calling for full state maintenance, the local SSFA declared it 'very ungracious': 'as the work was so well & so cheerfully done by the ladies who were working for the Soldiers' & Sailors' Families Association all over the country, there was no need for alteration'.<sup>126</sup> At the 1903 annual meeting, SSFA executive member and Conservative MP William Hayes Fisher conceded that in future wars government support would have to be increased. But he insisted that the state could not provide what the SSFA saw as central to its work, 'the human element – the heart and the hand – the personal contact', for which the input of 'ladies' was essential.<sup>127</sup> The efficiency of the SSFA's South African war work, and its eagerness to reprise its role in any future conflict, allowed the government to continue evading full responsibility for servicemen's dependants. A 1903 War Office committee rejected any change in the rates of separation allowance, and endorsed reliance on the SSFA.<sup>128</sup> In

<sup>122</sup> Editorials, *Times*, 9 Apr. 1901, *Manchester Guardian*, 30 Apr. 1902.

<sup>123</sup> State pensions for widows of soldiers dying in action or from wounds or disease on active service since 11 Oct. 1899 were introduced in 1901. Widows of privates received 5s a week plus 1s 6d per child; pensions were withdrawn on remarriage or 'misconduct' (*Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, HC Deb., 29 Mar. 1901; *Times*, 12 June, 26 June 1901).

<sup>124</sup> SSFA exec. mins., 17 July 1900. A draft version (exec. mins., 16 June 1900) had been stronger, omitting 'in the main' and 'wholly'. Charitable support for soldiers' widows was administered through the Royal Patriotic Fund.

<sup>125</sup> Lloyd-Baker diary, 29 Nov. 1899.

<sup>126</sup> Burton mins., 30 July 1900.

<sup>127</sup> SSFA, *Annual report for ... 1902*, p. 13.

<sup>128</sup> Report of committee on separation allowance, &c., 1903, London, The National Archives, WO 33/2895.

August 1914, separation allowances remained at the 1901 rate; and while they were soon increased, for the first two years of the war the War Office remained largely dependent on SSFA volunteers to act as its agents at local level.<sup>129</sup>

## V

The South African war therefore significantly shaped the future treatment of servicemen's families, and in a number of ways. The conflict triggered the decisive shift in public opinion towards full state support for servicemen's dependants which finally became policy in the Great War. In treating all wives as though they were wholly dependent upon male breadwinners; in extending support to other dependent relatives and to 'unmarried wives', yet treating both with suspicion; and in positioning itself as the 'guardian' of working-class women in their husbands' absence, thus making them subject to its moral scrutiny, the SSFA in the South African war set precedents which fundamentally shaped the state's response to servicemen's families in the First World War and after. Wide reporting of the small number of cases of alcohol-induced child neglect helped set the scene for the 'moral panic' around soldiers' wives in 1914–15. The state's failure, because of its complacent Edwardian reliance on the SSFA, to construct in the first half of the First World War a mechanism adequate to cope with the vast numbers of servicemen's families requiring assistance left the distribution of state moneys largely in the hands of the same volunteers who had distributed charitable funds twelve years earlier.

Soldiers' families must also be central to our understanding of the domestic impact of the South African war itself. Together, the reservist system and civilian volunteering brought this imperial war into the daily lives of communities across Britain to an extent then unprecedented in recent history. Beyond the fates of the fighting men themselves, this social impact was felt most profoundly through the plight of servicemen's dependants and the huge philanthropic effort mobilized to support them. Both sides of this equation were strongly gendered. Though working-class women are strikingly absent from the British history of the South African war, among British civilians it was soldiers' wives and mothers (and of course children) who bore the brunt of the conflict, their situation exacerbated by the state's refusal to provide full maintenance. Between them, the War Office separation allowances and the SSFA and local funds finally removed soldiers' wives and children (though not necessarily their other dependants) from the poor law.<sup>130</sup> The SSFA's policy that families

<sup>129</sup> P. Simkins, *Kitchener's army: the raising of the new armies, 1914–1916* (Manchester, 1988), pp. 106–7; Pedersen, 'Gender', pp. 992–5; Thomas, 'State maintenance', pp. 29–48.

<sup>130</sup> Across the Boer war years, only about a hundred 'wives of soldiers, sailors and marines' were in receipt of outdoor parish relief in England and Wales (*Pauperism (England and Wales) (half-yearly statements)*, 1900 (136), p. iii, 1901 (73), p. iv, 1902 (121), p. iv). For soldiers' families and poor relief see Trustram, *Women*, ch. 8.



should be maintained at their pre-war standard of living produced adequate grants for most dependants – too generous thought critics, though the insistence of working-class donors on higher rates suggests a different picture. Soldiers' families were, however, exposed to the vagaries of local policy-making in the SSFA's decentralized structure, and to the maternalist attitudes and value judgements of the SSFA's volunteers. The reliance on public donations gave families no security that their allowances would continue, or remain at the same rate, and many found their finances squeezed as the war dragged on. Overwhelmingly, it was middle- and upper-class women who staffed the charitable networks supporting soldiers' families. The 'womanly' qualities of personal sympathy and moral uplift were seen as central to this work, and the SSFA resisted expansion of the state's role on precisely these grounds. For elite women, military philanthropy offered the opportunity to make a real contribution to the empire's struggle in South Africa. The huge sums donated for servicemen's dependants testify to a far wider community engagement in which local loyalties were as important as imperial patriotism. It was above all through soldiers' families that the South African war brought the empire home to the towns and villages of Britain.