

PUBLIC HISTORY PRIZE: WOMEN'S LAND ARMY



Cherish Watton discusses her research and website on the Women's Land Army (www.womenslandarmy.co.uk) for which she won the Undergraduate Student Prize at the 2018 Public History Prize awards

Over the last three years, I have expanded my website, on the Women's Land Army (WLA) and Women's Timber Corps (WTC) of the First and Second World War. It is now the national online hub for the commemoration of these civilian wartime organisations. I offer general histories on what it meant to be a Land Girl and Lumber Jill, as well as primary source material such as journals, photos, videos, and songs. My aim has been to democratise access to material which people can usually only access in physical archives. The website is used by a broad audience of family historians, schools, the media, and scholars. Beyond the digital sphere, I have enjoyed giving several radio and television interviews. I have used these opportunities to refute the 'warm-bath' history which can characterise discussions of women's war work.

During my degree, I developed the website (which had been running since 2011) in line with my new academic training. People contacted me with previously unseen source material, which I used in my dissertation on the Women's Timber Corps. Writing for websites such as HistoryToThePublic.org made me feel part of a bigger community of public historians and improved my writing. This experience was invaluable, as in some academic circles I felt public history could be somewhat frowned upon – and even to be avoided.

In the undergraduate programme, the 'Historiography, Argument, and Practice' final essay (worth 20 per cent of our final grade) gave students the opportunity to study 'History, Policy, & Public History'. This was one of 28 topics – and one of the most popular. Yet outside of Tripos, I was not aware of funding

bodies, nor training which I could draw upon to improve my public history work. It was a case of learning on my feet when appearing on radio and television, or receiving donations of archival material. I think more could be done to link up existing student public historians and to publicise the support available from the RHS, the Raphael Samuel Foundation, the Women's History Network, and other bodies.

Though it has only been a few months since winning the RHS Public History Undergraduate Student Prize, there has already been a greater recognition of my work in academic and non-academic circles alike. Within my MPhil cohort, we've had more conversations about public history and shared experiences of being a trustee for one of the world's oldest military history societies, volunteering at Duxford, and offering outreach on the histories of board games and gaming. Cambridge colleagues have also invited me to contribute to the public history blog, *Doing History In Public*, and to present with the other Cambridge RHS Public History Prize winners at our Public and Popular History Seminar.

If you're a student, please don't underestimate the public history work you are doing and do consider an application for the Public History Prize. Once my supervisor had told me about the award, it didn't take very long to write a summary of the work. It was a helpful, reflective (and enjoyable) process. Lecturers, please persuade students who are doing existing public history work to apply for the award. I wouldn't have applied for the award without my supervisor's suggestion; it was this initial push that made all the difference.

I extend my sincerest thanks to the RHS for this award and I hope it encourages other undergraduates to have confidence in showcasing their engaging and critical histories.

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THE WOMEN'S LAND ARMY

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National Call For Information: Land Girls & Lumber Jills

If you would be interested in filling in a questionnaire sharing memories of the Women's Land Army or Women's Timber Corps, please click here.

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Homepage

This website provides information on the lives and experiences of British Land Girls in World War One and World War Two.

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- 'You Realise Miss Marden' Cartoon, January 1940
- Happy Easter 2018!
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- 'Spring Modes' Punch Cartoon, 1941
- Women's Forestry Corps, North Devon, WW1
- Lilies on the Land, West Sussex, April 2018
- 'The Land Girl' Covers: March
- WW2 Book: 'Life in the Land Army' by C.Falcon