



Home Fires: The Story of the Women's Institute in the Second World War

Julie Summers

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Soon to be a PBS Masterpiece series starring Samantha Bond (*Downton Abbey*) and Francesca Annis (*Cranford*)

Away from the frontlines of World War II, in towns and villages across Great Britain, ordinary women were playing a vital role in their country's war effort. As members of the Women's Institute, an organization with a presence in a third of Britain's villages, they ran canteens and knitted garments for troops, collected tons of rosehips and other herbs to replace medicines that couldn't be imported, and advised the government on issues ranging from evacuee housing to children's health to postwar reconstruction. But they are best known for making jam: from produce they grew on every available scrap of land, they produced twelve million pounds of jam and preserves to feed a hungry nation.

Home Fires, Julie Summers's fascinating social history of the Women's Institute during the war (when its members included the future Queen Elizabeth II along with her mother and grandmother), provides the remarkable and inspiring true story behind the upcoming PBS Masterpiece series that will be sure to delight fans of *Call the Midwife* and *Foyle's War*. Through archival material and interviews with current and former Women's Institute members, *Home Fires* gives us an intimate look at life on the home front during World War II.

From the Trade Paperback edition.

Home Fires: The Story of the Women's Institute in the Second World War Details

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From Reader Review Home Fires: The Story of the Women's Institute in the Second World War for online ebook

Bloodorange says

"I would not rest until I could establish some movement that would give the women-folk a chance to express themselves free from the fear of being ridiculed by the men." - John Nugent Harris, 1915(?)

To give you the taste of what he was talking about - from the chapter "Digging for Victory", on women from a place in West Country taking over an elderly woman's allotment (with her permission, of course) to grow vegetables:

The entire allotment, all fifty square yards of it, was completely overgrown and the ground was hard and rough. They decided they needed to employ a man to break it up. '(...) One agreed to do it, but on seeing the ground said he would not do it for £5.00. Another said he had once had that piece of land, and wouldn't give us 5s for any crop we could grow on it. We even went outside our own village; but no man would touch it.'(...)

The women decided they would have to tackle the job of breaking down the ground and preparing it for sowing themselves. (...) Mrs Wilkinson observed the men on the neighbouring allotments looking down their noses at the WI handiwork. 'Some remarked that it looked as though a lot of old hens had been scratching about, and others said, "more like swine rooting". But we were convinced they were merely jealous.'

That was a quarter of century later.

Sarah says

I must congratulate Ms Summers on the tremendous amount of information on the WI she has collected together and written down for posterity. As a history book it is an effort worthy of praise. As a reading book it is as dry as a mouthful of wafer biscuits without any cream filling, and just as insipid.

It is a subject which interests me very much indeed, so I might as well congratulate myself, too, for persevering and slogging on to over nine tenths of the book before giving up. The extremely detailed study of sanitary arrangements in rural homes was just too much for me.

Zanna says

I bought this book when I saw Julie Summers speak at the 2013 Lincoln Book Fair, the same day I saw Tracy Borman. Julie was a wonderful presence, unassuming yet utterly compelling, thoroughly convinced that her story deserved our full attention. I was excited and enthused by what I learned from her talk, but for one reason and another it has taken me this long to finally read the book. My response, having read the whole thing rather than being treated to the highlights, is amazement and awe at what happened and how

people, countrywomen in particular, got on and pulled together during WWII.

I'm a bit embarrassed about this, because I'm suspicious of all the self-congratulatory back-patting we give ourselves here over the war. I strongly feel our history curricula reprise such 'victories' ad nauseam, focus on the boring details of royal reigns and elites at the expense of commoners' lives and above all present Britain as an altruistic, civilised and civilising country. In short, our education is in desperate need of decolonisation, and getting choked up about WWII 'spirit' isn't something I'm supposed to succumb to.

However, I did succumb, to a very severe case. Hopefully, this is because well-crafted social history is just awesome, and I'm allowed to love it. Summers presents stories that are almost always left out of writing and talk on GB's role and out of summary accounts of the WI's contribution, usually reduced to 'jam and Jerusalem'. I expect I had my mouth open when reading about evacuation in particular. After the introductory chapter giving the background herstory of the WI itself, which is necessary and interesting but unavoidably somewhat dry, this book wasn't just 'readable' but a bona fide page-turner that I struggled to put down and was sorry to finish.

Summers makes extensive use of first-person accounts from WI members and their daughters, nieces and other relatives, as well as diaries (some from Mass Observation, like that of Nella Last) and Institute minute-books, and seamlessly contextualises this material, managing a thematic structure (chapters on preparation, evacuation, rationing, food production, food preservation, knitting and other crafts, recreation and rebuilding) ideal for dipping in or using for reference, while at the same time constructing a flowing narrative that moves through the war years. Primary sources and Summers' empathetic, unobtrusively guiding voice convey the texture of daily life in the way that great novels do, but with much wider scope.

For example, in the section on evacuees, which as I mentioned completely blew my mind, we hear of mix-ups and bumbles, with, for instance, villages preparing for unaccompanied schoolchildren and receiving instead a busload of mothers with infants, and the kind of tales you might expect of children being greeted by a welcoming feast in the village hall and forming lasting bonds with their temporary carers, but also, I got an acute sense of how difficult it must have been for everyone involved on a day-to-day level. Women had to take new people into their homes and care for them when they already had too much to do, while others were uprooted from everything they knew. I had had no idea that the urban poor were in such a terrible state of health and poverty at the time – the children were apparently all infested with various parasites and some had evidently been taught to steal food for their families. Teachers were evacuated with their schools and Summers calls them unsung heroes of the evacuation. She quotes a letter from a teacher who laments that parents were taking their children back to the cities after just a few months, understandably missing them, but taking them out of an environment that was not just safer but much healthier and more enjoyable than their life in the cities. WI members were surveyed on their experience of evacuation, and while they were generally positive about it, there was much criticism of the mothers who were evacuated with their babies, who seemed to have no idea about childcare or housekeeping. Summers, infallibly ready with emotional insight, expresses sympathy for the mothers, fish out of water likely intimidated by being suddenly required to live in a stranger's house.

In all I was greatly struck by the degree of privation and restrictions people endured; I had never appreciated this before. I vividly remember whole-school drama work on the Blitz when I was 10 years old, my visit a few years ago to the Holocaust Museum including a talk by a Polish man who came to the UK as part of the *Kindertransport*, and a little of what my grandparents recalled and related to me about wartime, and I knew about rationing, but for the first time I have come to understand and respect the attitude of my grandparents' generation to waste and frustration with the selfishness and frivolousness of the young. I was truly humbled to understand how hard the WI and society generally worked to keep each other alive and well fed and sane.

Details such as the fact that an aristocratic lady got an onion for her birthday and that a lemon caused such a sensation at an event where prizes were given that the secretary underlined it three times throw into perspective the facts of the general picture: that everyone started to plant potatoes, that people who contributed fruit to be turned into jam by the WI weren't allowed to buy it, because it was rationed, that everything was salvaged and saved, even bones, because the war effort needed them. However, the WI became aware that the situation on the continent was incomparably worse, and extended efforts to help destitute people in Europe, such as sending warm clothing to Russia.

The WI took a pacifist stand officially (though many individual institutes defied the Federation position and raised money for weapons) and so the role it took was social, maintaining morale, keeping people going, organising and leading essential care. For me care is central to the whole book, and what impressed me most deeply. People really, really cared for each other, and themselves too: WI members and leaders understood that fun and relaxation were as vital as anything else they did, keeping up their social half hour of games in meetings, and trying hard to keep making cakes for their tea breaks through rationing and shortages. Attention is drawn to the often monotonous and limited lives of many rural women at the time, and it's easy to see why the WI inspired such passionate commitment and focus. Summers notes in several contexts the social mixing that WI meetings naturally enabled, clearly benefiting social cohesion, but the war 'spirit' enhanced the effect greatly, and the sense of 'all-in-it-together' feels genuine.

The section towards the end about planning for the future was particularly fascinating, because Summers goes into detail about a questionnaire WI members distributed and completed about housing. Evacuation had focussed attention on the terrible conditions facing the urban poor, but rural women now had a chance to make their voices heard on their own living environments. I was surprised to learn that over 30% of villages had no running water and more than half had no mains drains, and it's evident from the survey that housing was poorly designed in many ways; difficult to clean, lacking storage facilities, inefficient to heat. The survey was really influential and made a big difference to post-war house-building. WI members reported that they loved doing the questionnaire and many submitted designs.

This book complemented my reading of Nicola Tyrer's book *They Fought In The Fields* about the Women's Land Army, and the two organisations were linked by Lady Denman, chair of the WI Federation as well as head of the WLA, and by their occasionally overlapping work in the countryside. There are only a few mentions of WLA members here, mostly to note the help WI members gave them such as hot baths! I enjoyed both books, but I much preferred this one, partly because it has, I think, more of a feminist consciousness. Like Tyrer's book, this includes a collection of photos. I was amused by how picturesque they are, but then I realised that baskets, wagons and handpainted signs were just what people were actually using, not cutesy props brought in for press benefit. It's great to see some of the faces behind the voices too.

I'm now completely besotted with social history. This is one of the best books I've read about anything ever and it completely changed my mind about many things. I even have high hopes it might help me be a better, more caring person. Thank you Julie Summers for your brilliant and noble work <3

Caroline says

This is an inspiring and charming book about the gutsy ladies of the Women's Institute during World War II.

I knew little about them - although of course I have seen their jam, cake and plant stalls.....these have graced market days in small towns all over England ever since my childhood.

Think small. The only qualification for setting up a women's institute was that a village had to have a population of less than 4,000 people.

Think Canada. To my surprise I learned that the WI movement started in Canada in 1897. It didn't really take off here until 1915.

Think unpronounceable. The first meeting here was held in Wales - in a village called (and I kid you not...) Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrobwlllantysiliogogoch!

Rural Britain in the early 20th century was very much in decline. In the last 30 years of the nineteenth century two million acres of arable land had been allowed to go out of production, and there was a mass exodus to the cities for an easier way of life. Many rural villages were sparsely populated and the people living there were often very badly educated .

With the coming of World War II hundreds of thousands of young farmers and farm workers signed up. ...and suddenly the Women's Institute became vitally important to the government and to the country. The difference between the WI and other organisations was that the WI had a pacifist philosophy, and did not - well not usually - support the war effort in ways which blatantly facilitated fighting.

Members of the WI were called upon to support their country in various ways: (view spoiler)

*Jam-making, bottling and canning fruit and vegetables was very important too. It enabled all sorts of fruit and veg to be preserved and eaten that would otherwise have rotted and gone to waste. WIs all over the country worked frantically hard to make sure that the most was made of orchard harvests. Factories were also producing jam, but the WI said that in the first year of the war it saved some 450 tons of fruit from rotting. When sugar became scarce, jam was made with Golden Syrup, or more skilfully, without any sugar at all.

*Organising parties and dances for soldiers based in army camps in England. (hide spoiler)]

I got the sense from this book that before the coming of the WI many women in the countryside led fairly isolated lives - but the WI brought them together. This camaraderie was increased enormously with the pressures of war, and the sense that they were all in it together. There were many descriptions of wonderful teamwork initiatives, where everyone rolled up their sleeves and joined in.

Their meetings were fun and inspirational as well as being educational, or opportunities for group work. There was singing, or plays were put on, and that deeply moving hymn 'Jerusalem' was sung at most meetings.

After the war the National Federation of Women's Institutes commissioned a large embroidery to celebrate the WI's work in the Second World War. It took over 400 embroiderers four years to complete. A suitable monument for all those women who put their domestic skills into such great service.

Carol Rogers says

I read this on my Kindle where it was called Home Fires - just like the tv programme. I wanted to read it because I enjoyed the programme and expected it to be the same story. That was in fact an incorrect assumption but in fact I found that it was an account of the history of the W.I. and in particular an account of the W.I. during WW2. I am the child of parents who grew up in this time period and I have heard all their accounts of what life was like then. I have also watched many documentaries about life during the War also. So I expected this to be full of stuff I already knew. In fact I found it was full of things I never knew.

The strange thing is that it was so very readable. How a book full of descriptions about how W.I. helped to win the War could be so entertaining is hard to explain, but it was. I felt amazed at how these country women who had so few aids that we take for granted to help us in the kitchen, could make all that jam, bottle all that garden produce, and worry about whether the labels were all on straight and the string was knotted correctly, as well as caring for their own families as well as a couple of evacuated children as well as coping with such things as air raids, billeting soldiers and everything, just amazes me.

This book is a history lesson without trying. It is full of facts that have been unburied from letters and diaries found in attics and dusty archives. It is the history of how women who had lived under the constraints of 30s marriages where they were expected to be under their husband's authority, are suddenly left on their own to look after their homes, nurture their children, and fulfill the role of fighting the War from the firesides of the homes that the men who had gone to War would hopefully return to. These women were forced into roles which would change them forever and probably eventually become a factor on the rise of feminism in the 60s and 70s. These country women had discovered strengths they hadn't known they possessed and weren't going to lose them in the peace and austerity of the late 40s and 50s.

One of the biggest surprises I had was that the government actually wanted the W.I. institute to do these things and expected them to do them well.

I highly recommend this book to anyone who wants to read something a little different from their usual material. Whether you like history or not, this book is an interesting account of something we all know a little about and may just whet your appetite for more. It may even make you want to join your local W.I. also!

Val says

What could and should a patriotic, pacifist, rural, woman's organisation do during wartime?

This was the question facing the Women's Institute in the Second World War. What they did do is a very great deal: lobby government ministries, look after evacuees, distribute seeds, grow and preserve food, organise market stalls, pig clubs and savings schemes, collect recipes to make the wartime diet less monotonous, educate, entertain and above all organise and bring together women from rural areas into communities where they felt less isolated and over-burdened and could work together.

Julie Summers' book tells the stories of some of the wartime WI groups, using minutes of committee meetings, diaries and interviews. Some books which attempt to tell history using several people's experiences in different times and places end up being disjointed and failing to give any coherent account of the history they are trying to tell (and not getting many stars from me). This book does not have that failing; it is entertaining, informative and well organised, like the WI.

The book is not a history of the WI, although the first chapter gives the story of its origins, so how important and life-changing the organisation was for the many women in rural areas who joined is perhaps underplayed. It does show how much they could achieve when the country needed them. This crusading role continued after the war and improvements in rural housing undoubtedly owe a lot to input from the WI. It is sad that most of these improved houses, with mains water, sewerage, electricity etc. are no longer lived in by the people for whom they were designed, but this was certainly not the fault or intention of the WI.

QNPoohBear says

This book talks about the activities of a rural British women's organization known as the Women's Institute (WI) during World War II. The WI was expected to be in charge of the country's food during the war and be involved in making, mending and styling wartime clothing. A huge amount of work was expected of them but they also took time for socializing with each other and with members of the Armed Forces stationed nearby.

This book did not meet my expectations. I was expecting personal stories of the women, like the TV show, but there's basically no connection between the book and the show. The book starts with a lengthy drawn out history of the WI from the first World War to the 1930s. These few chapters are very slow. The rest was only a little better. Making jam, as in the original title of the UK edition of the book, is only one small part of the WI's activities and warrants only one chapter. A few individual stories are told but nothing really detailed. This book is about the nationwide WI as a whole and not about specific women.

I really liked reading about Eleanor Roosevelt's visits to the WI. I don't think we had anything like that here in America.

I was appalled by the primitive conditions the women of the WI lived in before, during and just after the war. As a cityfied/suburbanite American, I've never used an outhouse, cooked over an open fire or had to hang laundry outside. The work the women accomplished is even more incredible given the conditions they were forced to live with.

Overall, I don't think an entire book was necessary. A picture essay would have sufficed.

Tracie says

These women were indomitable and resourceful! What a history! For the first half of the book, Ms. Summers does an information dump--the minutiae is overwhelming. My little take is that because of her emotional proximity to the WI movement, she couldn't bring herself to edit a single detail! The second half of the book, starting with "Boil, Bubble, Toil and Trouble" is infinitely less dense and ever so interesting.

I simply cannot begin to wrap my mind around how these women kept Britain afloat in a myriad of ways.

AntKathy says

The non-fiction inspiration for the ITV (PBS) drama "Home Fires", "Jambusters" tells the history of the uniquely English organization for women living in rural areas, the Woman's Institute. Established about the time of WWI, this book focuses on the pacifist club and how it grew into a major force in supporting England and Wales during WWII. It discusses food production, refugee evacuations from British coastal towns to the interior of the country and other aspects of daily life for primarily farmer's wives during the war. It is NOT the story told in the TV drama, but does have amusing anecdotes, diary entries, meeting minutes and memories of the Woman's Institute as told by those who experienced it. It is not a novel, but a non-fiction history, so a little drier than fiction, but still fascinating.

Also published in the US under the title "Home Fires".

Susan says

To begin with, this book must get some kind of credit for having the best title I have seen in some time. Indeed, the women of the WI during the Second World War were 'Jambusters' and this is their story. It tells of the remarkable role played by ordinary women in rural Britain during the war and how the government looked to them to organise evacuees, organise collections and, in effect, feed the nation. Using records, archives, letters, diaries and interviews, the author tells the story of women who rose to the challenge and of how important the Women's Institute was, not only to the country, but to the women themselves - many of whom lived in remote areas and would have been isolated without the support and friendship of other women.

With the outbreak of war the population of the countryside almost doubled, with evacuees, military camps,

key workers moved to the countryside away from the bombs, etc. The country had to adapt and women were central to organising that adjustment. For the Women's Institute had the largest grass-roots membership of any women's organisation in the country and was bigger than all but the largest of men's trade unions. However, when war was declared, membership actually fell. Younger women entered the forces or war work, or joined the Women's Voluntary Services. The WI had an anti war stance and they imposed restrictions on the participation of WI's in war work. However, they wanted to find a role and that included protecting and preserving the nation's larder. Before the war, Britain had imported twenty million tons of food annually, but eventually exports from the continent ceased. Everything not eaten immediately had to be bottled, jammed, canned or pickled, as food was scarce. The WI was asked to do much of this work, although crucially they were not entitled to extra petrol rations, which made the job much harder - to many eyes it looked impossible - but these women rose to the challenge.

This entertaining and interesting read covers all aspects of the WI's wartime life. The 'Dig for Victory' campaign, in which the WI was central in utilising every possible piece of land available. The author, for example, tells the story of one group taking over an elderly residents abandoned allotment. No men would help clear the land and made fun of the women who turned up to dig it - remarking they looked like 'hens scratching'. Jeers turned to surprise as the allotment eventually began to produce excellent quality fruit and vegetables. Even more amazing was that the food produced was not for the women themselves - but unselfishly sold at market or given to the country as a whole for purchase on the ration. Yes, these women made jam - tonnes of jam, often under dangerous conditions, with bombing raids overhead. They collected wild herbs and fruits - as well as many, many other items for the war effort. They knitted, sent packages to Prisoners of War (among whom were often their own menfolk), to refugees and those suffering the blockades in Russia. They always saw their role as to help and, after the war, turned their attention to aiding women in 'Austerity Britain' and to those in Europe, including those in Germany who had previously been 'the enemy'. For women are always at the forefront of war and these women intended to help their country, their menfolk fighting and, after the war, as many people as had been affected by the war as possible. Their skills, commitment, hard work and organisation was essential for the war effort and this book tells their quietly heroic story wonderfully. If you enjoy this, and I am sure you will, you may also like *A Force To Be Reckoned With: The History of the Women's Institute*.

The Lit Bitch says

I am a sucker for anything about WWI or WWII and women! This book totally caught my eye from the title alone and I knew instantly that I had to read it!

Julie Summers has written a lot on the subject of women and WWII especially (I have my eye on one of her other books, *Fashion on the Ration*, as well!) and her book *Jambusters* (AKA *Home Fires*) was the inspiration for the new PBS series *Home Fires*.

This book was absolutely wonderful! I have lately been so focused on things like Nursing in the Civil War (all part of my History MA) that I haven't read a lot about women in other wars or other parts of the world and what they contributed. This book, though non-fiction, did not read like a non-fiction academic book. While Summers provided lots of historic research in her narrative, it wasn't 'boring' by any means.

These women were an inspiration. They literally were the most tenacious, resourceful, and enduring women that I've read about. It really opened my eyes to aspects of the war that I didn't really give much thought to.

For me, the interest is often women on the battle field, that I forget about the behind the scenes women and what they were able to contribute.

I found Summer's writing to be excellent and her research was extensive and impressive. I think this book would be a wonderful read for academics as well as 'arm chair' academics. It's not so thick with history and scholarly references that it would put the average reader to sleep, but it has enough well research material to satisfy academics too. Her passion for the subject was evident and I was thrilled to read about such a unique group of inspiring women!

Well, well done! I highly recommend this book. For me personally, I was more interested in the personal, individual stories of the women rather than the overall history but I think that combining both was brilliant and offered a lot in the way of variety for women's history fans. As I mentioned before, I am excited to read some of Summer's other works as I was extremely impressed with her writing and her research skills as well as her topic choices so bring on more books by Summers! I am also excited to watch the PBS show too, I love stuff like this and set in that period.....plus PBS does such a great job with period pieces that I simply must watch this show!

See my full review [here](#)

Karyl says

Having seen the drama of the same name on PBS here in America, I was excited to see that this was also a book. However, please be aware that the show was based on the experience of some of the fictional members of the Women's Institute during WWII, while this book is a factual account of the WI from its beginnings through the difficult years of WWII and postwar Britain. As such, I would have preferred to have a bit more in the way of personal accounts, with more in depth anecdotes about the women whom the author focused on. I felt that there were a few stories, but nothing to really set each woman apart throughout the book.

It's amazing to me how much the British women of WWII banded together in the war effort. Obviously the women had to maintain the home front once the men left to fight, but not only did they have to take care of their homes and their families, and do many chores that had once been done by their husbands, but in the rural villages, as WI members they were asked to contribute to the well-being of the nation by making jam in order to preserve fresh fruit and vegetables in an age where most people still did not have electricity in the home, knitting for refugees and servicemembers, keeping up morale with programs for children, hosting evacuees from cities at risk from bombing, and learning to Mend and Make Do with their clothing and everything else that was rationed. The WI gave women an outlet to get together with other women who were going through the same hardships, and to learn from women who had expertise in various skills that they might never have been exposed to otherwise. It was an amazing source of emotional support for many women in rural villages, and gave women a voice that they might not have had without the WI.

I have to wonder if we experienced a war on the same scale as WWII if we would be so cheerful about all the extra work, even if it meant the difference, as many WI members felt, between defeat and victory.

While dry in some places, this is at times a truly fascinating look at an amazing British institute, and one I wouldn't mind being a part of if we had something like this in the States.

Bonnie says

I enjoyed the fictional Brit TV drama, Home Fires, and it is taken from the real life experiences of the Women's Institute during World War II detailed in this book. The courage, the inventiveness, and the power of women working together is displayed very well in this factual and well-researched book.

Donia says

I give 5 stars to this book for the compilation of facts lest we as a society lose the valuable details of the WI but as a read the book was dry as a desert sand storm. It was repetitious, dull and had no life to it. I wanted the women about whom it was supposedly written to feel human but they did not. We could have assigned them numbers instead of names for all the characterization that was devoted to them. I noticed there are about 6 different publications with this same title...some have photos etc. Perhaps various editions differ. I loved, loved, loved the PBS series about WI...I just found the book dry.

Mom says

Extremely interesting book about the women that worked so hard keeping Great Britain and other countries going while World War II was happening. Good information but a little dry at times.
