

THE WHITE FEATHER MOVEMENT FIRST WORLD WAR PROPAGANDA

The White Feather Movement was a propaganda campaign in England during WWI to encourage men to enlist in the army. White feathers (a symbol of cowardice and failure to fulfil their male duties) were distributed by women of the Order of the White Feather to any man they saw who seemed capable of joining the army that was out of uniform.

The idea was that men would be shamed by realizing women viewed them in this way, and other men would be so afraid of receiving a feather that there would be a great movement of men all over the country being persuaded and intimidated into joining the army.

The idea of the white feather as a symbol for cowardice and disapproval comes from a popular novel written by the British author A.E.W. Mason in 1902, during the Boer War. In the story, the main character decides to not follow his troop as they go to fight in Sudan, with a reasonable justification.



He receives three white feathers from fellow soldiers, and a fourth from his fiancé, who breaks up with him. He is so ashamed at what has happened, but eager to redeem himself he travels to Sudan, ends up saving his troop and becomes a hero. Proving his masculinity and bravery, he returns the feathers to the soldiers, earns the respect of his father and wins his fiancé back. This story was the base for what the White Feather Movement was supposed to create and stories like this would start taking place all over Britain.

On 30 August 1914, Admiral Charles Penrose Fitzgerald, deputised thirty women in Folkestone to hand out white feathers to men not in uniform. The purpose of this gesture was to shame “every young slacker” found loafing about, and to remind those “deaf and indifferent to their country’s needs” that British soldiers are fighting and dying across the channel.



Charles Cooper Penrose Fitzgerald (1841-1921)

Fitzgerald’s estimation of the power of these women was enormous, and he warned the men of Folkestone “there was a terrible danger awaiting them, far more than anything they can meet in battle” for if they were found “idling and loafing tomorrow” they would be publicly humiliated by a lady with a white feather.

As a completely volunteer based army, it was necessary to have very powerful recruitment campaigns in order to have enough soldiers. Women were already used effectively in propaganda to encourage men; however this took it to a whole new level. This was a very active campaign that was difficult to ignore; unfortunately much of it brought about negative consequences from the rash and unjust actions of the women.

The White Feather was a very effective idea, as it targeted the exact features of a man that they viewed highly. The culture in Britain during WWI put a lot of emphasis on masculinity, and to have women call you ‘coward’ and ‘a disgrace’ was very insulting. Especially with the younger men, knowing that women viewed them in such a way was especially shameful.

They were basically displaying their disappointment, and that they would not like to be associated with them. White feathers targeted specifically public shame and the disapproval by any potential wives or lovers to scare men into not receiving one.

Women of Britain were not given much to do during the war; they weren't allowed to fight and were required to stay home and wait for the men to return, so this allowed them to play a more active part in the war effort. Many women liked this idea because it allowed them to help the British army and to take part in the recruitment process, while promoting patriotism and fulfilling duties to the rest of the country.



ADMIRAL FITZGERALD AND MARY AUGUSTA WARD
CREATED THE WHITE FEATHER MOVEMENT IN 1914
AS A RECRUITMENT CAMPAIGN

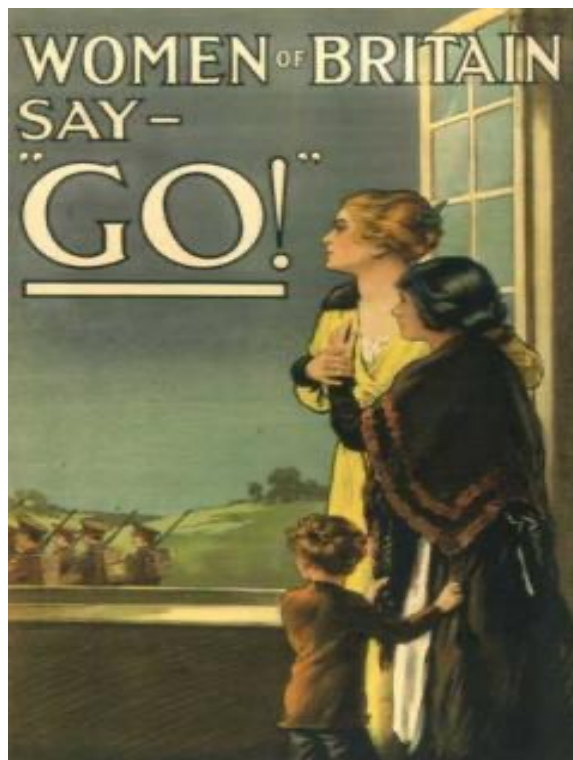
No longer were they powerless as thousands of men, including their loved ones, were dying in battle, but they were able to strengthen the army by recruiting more men and increasing the numbers, which also increased their influence and control in society. However, while the women enjoyed their new feeling of control, resentment towards them was growing.

The disgrace that they brought to men that were both rightfully and wrongfully given a white feather and extremist patriotism they displayed decreased the community's view of them.

This spurred a counterattack back on the women of the White Feather Order, as their delivering of feathers to very undeserving recipients caused anger and resentment throughout the society. The propaganda was telling the men that one of the main reasons they were fighting was to protect their women. However, it was these very same women that were attacking them at home.

There are many stories illustrating this exact situation – a man is seen out of uniform and it is assumed instantly that they deserve a feather, whereas they really have given great sacrifices and risked their lives in great acts of bravery for these exact women who are trying to bring them shame.

There are many stories of women who proudly approach men out of uniform and stick a feather in their coat, assuming they were shamefully shying away from their duties. However, in reality these men had been honourably discharged for injuries from war, with a very respectable award from the military for bravery, or were simply on home leave, among numerous possible other reasons why they were not in the army, not deserving a feather.



Sick relatives, being employed in important industries, trying to support their family, etc. There were reasons why men wanted to support and protect their nation, however were unable to, either because they were legally not allowed to (disabilities, etc.), or because it was an impractical decision in their current situation. Their situation was difficult enough, and receiving the public shame of a white feather on top of all that was terrible, especially because many of them were already upset about not being able to go fight.

It has been recorded that the look of disgust and disrespect women would wear when handing out white feathers really distorted the previous opinion of women. Even a recruiting officer for the British army has been quoted as saying “the sending or offering of white feathers, so far from witnessing to your patriotism, witnesses only to the fact that you are unpardonably ignorant, vulgar, and impertinent.”

Women took advantage of the power they were given in this war effort. Since then, they have never been given that much power. Women haven't encouraged large numbers of men to enlist, or have tried to shame men who didn't, but rather offer their support where necessary, especially in their own home.



The Silver War Badge was issued in the United Kingdom and the British Empire to service personnel who had been honourably discharged due to wounds or sickness from military service in World War I.

Basildon Borough Heritage Society
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