

**Title:**

The Women's Royal Indian Naval Service: Picturing India's New Woman

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**Abstract:**

Lack of research on the Women's Royal Indian Naval Service (W.R.I.N.S.) has led to the misconception that most of the women recruited into the Royal Indian Navy during World War 2 were either British or 'Anglo-Indian'. In reality, by far the majority of the 'Wrins', as they came to be called, were Indian. In this paper I follow two parallel lines of enquiry. The first inspects the material stored in British archives - official navy documents, illustrated promotional pamphlets, photographs, memoirs, oral history and letters - to offer the first comprehensive account of the W.R.I.N.S.' formation, operation and dismantlement. This provides the context for an examination of the visual material created to promote the service. More specifically, comparing the few surviving photographs of Wrins with Lee Miller's photos of Wrens, I argue that W.R.I.N.S. material mediated a specific and, for the time, new set of discourses about Indian women, ideas about women's role in a nation-in-making that may still speak to Indian women today.

**Key words:** India, Women, Navy, Word War 2, Visual Representation

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## **The Women's Royal Indian Naval Service:**

### **Picturing India's New Woman**

#### **Introduction**

On 15 November 1995, former Women's Royal Indian Naval Service (W.R.I.N.S.) officer Joan Campbell responded to a short article which appeared in the October issue of *The Wren*, the magazine of the Association of Women of the Royal Naval Services:

Although I have enjoyed being part of the Association immensely I know that some regard me with a bit of curiosity as no-one had ever heard of the W.R.I.N.S. here. I do have one friend who worked in Cyphers in Ceylon and I think she really does believe me!<sup>1</sup>

Not much seems to have changed since Joan Campbell's letter. In 2017, the National Museum of the Royal Navy in Portsmouth (UK) held an exhibition that sought to 'illustrate the role of women in the navy in the widest spectrum' and 'share lost histories to celebrate women in the Royal Navy.'<sup>2</sup> Entitled *WRNS100*, the exhibition also intended to mark the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the formation of the Women's Royal Naval Service (W.R.N.S.). Only three of the show's exhibits pointed to the presence of Indian women in the Royal Navy.<sup>3</sup> British archives hold a fair amount of material about the W.R.I.N.S.: a Royal Indian Navy (R.I.N.) report, the multi-volume memoir of Admiral

John Henry Godfrey, the official W.R.I.N.S. regulations, a recruitment booklet, a photographic book, a few W.R.I.N.S. officers' memoirs, and several Wrins' letters.<sup>4</sup> Yet no research has been carried out on this material to date with the result that little continues to be known about the British and Indian women who served in the W.R.I.N.S.<sup>5</sup>

Operational for about three years only, the W.R.I.N.S. may appear today as a mere glitch in the long history of the navy in India.<sup>6</sup> But as Walter Benjamin wrote in 1932:

He who has once begun to open the fan of memory never comes to the end of its segments. ... [R]emembrance progresses from small to smallest details, from the smallest to the infinitesimal, while that which it encounters in these microcosms grows ever mightier.<sup>7</sup>

Benjamin also famously argued that 'to articulate the past historically' means 'seiz[ing] hold of a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger'.<sup>8</sup> My aim here is to give an account of the W.R.I.N.S. by 'seizing hold' of the minutiae and specificity of the material available in British archives. A selection of this material was first presented to the public as part of *Meanings of Failed Action: Insurrection 1946*, a large installation by Indian artist Vivan Sundaram.<sup>9</sup> I worked on the project as a researcher and was struck by the public's enthusiastic response to the images of Wrins we unearthed in the process. In view of that response, here I review and examine this material while keeping in mind current debates about the position of women in Narendra Modi's India. It is an account inevitably defined by the particularity and limits of the archival and other

research, the material I consider and my own background in modern Indian visual culture. The documents were sourced from the India Office Records and Private Papers held at the British Library, the (online) British Newspapers Archive, the National Maritime Museum London, the Centre of South Asian Studies (University of Cambridge), the Churchill Archives Centre, and the Imperial War Museum (London). Searches in the National Archives in Kew (London), at the National Army Museum Templar Study Centre, and in the (online) Forces War Records produced no results.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, while British archives hold testimonies of a few British Wrins, they have none of Indian Wrins. The youngest among the Wrins signed up in 1944 at the age of seventeen. If any are still alive, they would now be in their late 90s but my attempts to locate living Indian Wrins in Britain and in South Asia have been, so far, unsuccessful. Only one of the women whose testimony I discuss below was Indian. Interviewed in the late 1990s, she died just a few months before I started my research on the W.R.I.N.S..

But this is not a paper on the Indian women who served in World War 2, not even on the women who joined the W.R.I.N.S. It is, rather, a study of representations of South Asian women who joined the navy in India during the war, as well as an account of the W.R.I.N.S. as the institutional framework within which these images were produced. The two W.R.I.N.S. publications I examine in this paper contain the only surviving photographs of Wrins at work. I have paid special attention to this visual material, partly because this is my primary area of interest and expertise, and partly because photographs, as indexical registrations of a place and time, can point to historical facets and layers that written material, though equally steeped in the here and now, does not explicitly refer to. Much is caught by the camera eye which, at the time the photograph

is taken, seems irrelevant, part of a reality that is assumed. It is only in retrospect, when the recorded moment has long passed and reality around us has changed, that elements of that past world, now at odds with the new reality we inhabit, become noticeable for the first time. I argue that in these few photographs of Wrins, taken by British and Indian photographers, a set of discourses about women emerge that were radically new at the time, that is, a set of ideas about women's role in a nation-in-making.

In recent years the consolidation of a particularly virulent form of Hinduism in the Indian political mainstream has undermined, if not explicitly attacked, the freedoms won by pro-women Indian groups and movements from the 1960s. Women's sphere of action in the public sphere especially has been put under threat. Over the years, Indian historians have produced a large body of work on colonial discourses about women, unpacking their instrumental, racialized and propagandistic nature. The images I discuss here should not in any way be exempt from that critique. I hope, rather, that this preliminary study of the W.R.I.N.S. and of images of Indian women produced in this context may encourage other scholars to investigate further a moment of Indian history when, despite British and Indian obstruction, opportunities did open up for women. It may just be that the significance of these images for Indian women today has 'grown ever mightier.'<sup>11</sup>

Through a detailed analysis of photographs of Wrins, I argue that these images verge, crucially, on the visibility of Indian women in the Indian public sphere, that is to say, in public spaces from which Indian women had historically been barred and from which they continued to be so, well into the 1950s. In the second part of the paper, I compare

photographs of Wrins and Wrens, and point to the precise features that characterise such visibility, the modalities by which Indian women are shown as publicly present, active, and in which type of public space. Before I do so, however, I outline in some detail the colonial and military institution within which these women moved.

### **Setting up the W.R.I.N.S.**

In 1942, when Roshan Horabin (née Visram)<sup>12</sup> applied to join the W.R.N.S., she was told that ‘they did not employ native girls.’ She was, however, soon recruited in the Prisoner of War (Intelligence) Division:

I was very upset when they would not let me join the Wrens, that they did not like native women. A year later they said I could join, but [the Prisoner of War (Intelligence) Division] said they were not going to release me. ... But my sister joined the cyphers, she joined the navy.

That was your sister Soona? ... The cyphers in the W.R.I.N.S.?

Yes.

And that would have been unusual, would it, for an Indian woman?

Well, I think they were so desperate for people...<sup>13</sup>

The W.R.I.N.S. was set up formally in January 1944 as the naval wing of the Women Auxiliary Corps (India) (W.A.C. (I)), nearly three decades after the W.R.N.S. was formed.<sup>14</sup> Discussions about the formation of an Indian women’s naval wing had coincided with a shift in focus of World War 2 to Asia, as the Japanese advanced across

South-East Asia and eventually into Burma, and with the R.I.N.'s need to increase recruitment as a result. By the time the W.R.I.N.S. began operations in 1944, the British-led Fourteenth Army had been formed and the Allies' tentative advances into Burma begun.

The W.R.I.N.S. was set up on the initiative of Admiral John Henry Godfrey, then Flag Officer Commanding R.I.N.. During World War 2, the R.I.N. had expanded in an unprecedented way, and regulations were changed in order to recruit largely among the Indian population. In this context, the recruitment of Indian women in the W.A.C. (I) and the navy was promoted as part of a well-rehearsed colonial discourse of modernisation: imperial Britain's contribution to the transformation of India, then on the verge of independence, into a modern society. Yet, in spite of the debilitating shortage of labour which confronted the navy at this point, and the urgent need to deploy to sea as many men as available by replacing them with women in those tasks, such as communications,<sup>15</sup> that could as well be carried out by female personnel, Admiral Godfrey encountered a high degree of opposition to the idea of a separate women's Indian naval wing.<sup>16</sup> Resistance came from high-ranking navy colleagues both in London and in India. Godfrey devoted a whole chapter of his multi-volume *Naval Memoir* to the W.R.I.N.S..<sup>17</sup> As he wrote there and also in his *Report on the Royal Indian Navy*,

With the help of Srinivasan and Jaya Sankar I produced a paper which I showed to Trivedi, Secretary of the War Department, in order to bring the matter onto the highest plane, and also to solve the difficulties which existed between the

Director of Recruiting and Brigadier Vinden, Director of selection of personnel. ... [A]lthough the Chief of Staff had given the Naval Wing the highest priority, there were still pockets of unexpected resistance. We had difficulties in getting approval for welfare officers and at this moment unexpected succour came in the form of a sharply worded admonition from Mr Churchill, who had heard that the Indian Army welfare organisation was deficient. A high power mission was coming out at once. Heads were to be knocked together. The appointment of a welfare officer on Mrs Cooper's staff was approved. ... Our woman power difficulties came to an end when Major General Tom Scott was appointed to the newly created job of Director of Manpower Priority, with highly executive powers. For the first time I had an ally ... . There were no more arguments. Instead General Scott issued directives and they had to be obeyed.<sup>18</sup>

### **Promoting the W.R.I.N.S.**

Regional Commander Margaret L. Cooper, then stationed in Bombay with the W.A.C. (I), was appointed in September 1943. Promoted Chief Officer and Deputy Director of W.R.I.N.S., Cooper began an intensive campaign across British India to recruit women for service in the navy.<sup>19</sup> Lack of research on the W.R.I.N.S. and, more generally, on Indian women's contribution to the war effort,<sup>20</sup> has led to the widespread misconception that most of the women recruited by Cooper were either British or

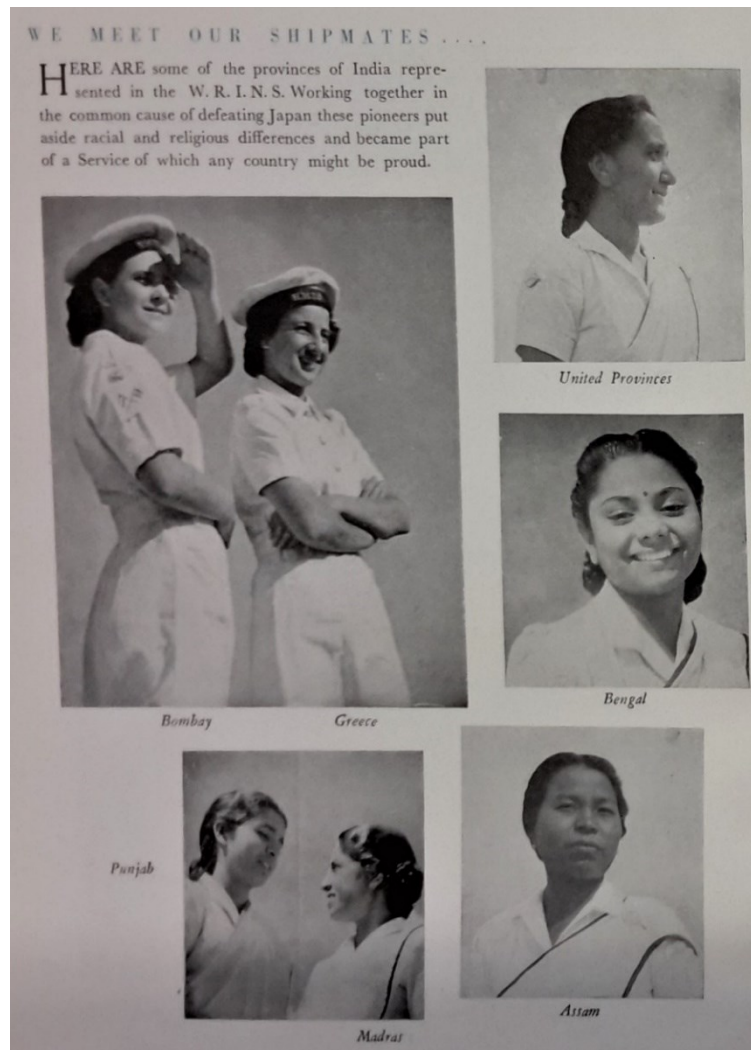


Fig. 1: 'Shipmates', from *Wrins and How They Served*, 18

'Anglo-Indian'. In reality, as John Henry Godfrey stated in his *Report and Memoir*:

Starting with forty-one officers and two hundred and four Wrins in January 1944, the strength of the Women's Royal Indian Naval Service at the end of 1945 was two hundred and forty-two officers and seven hundred and forty-six Wrins. 43% of the officers and 77% of the Wrins were Indian, and among the junior officers 80% were Indian.<sup>21</sup> (Fig. 1 and 12)

Chief Officer Cooper's blanket campaign proved particularly successful with middle- and upper-class Indian women. In spite of this, or perhaps because of it, Godfrey's difficulties continued. As he complained to Lady Carlisle, Director of W.A.C. (I),

I have broken every rule in order to provide material and amenities and such basic articles as fans and electric light bulbs for [W.R.I.N.S. quarters in] Vizagapatam and Cochin. Those were not forthcoming and never would have been from army resources ...<sup>22</sup>

Continued resistance within the army notwithstanding, the discourse of women's advancement was central to Godfrey and Cooper's recruitment campaign. In 'What the Naval Wing Means: a Suggested Lecture' 'to be given in schools and colleges by Indian ladies, recruiting officers and naval wing WAC (I) officers', recruitment in the W.R.I.N.S. was presented as offering:

opportunities open to intelligent and well educated women and girls when they pass out of their schools and colleges ... [for] cultured Indian girls and women ... who have the interest and well-being of their country at heart.<sup>23</sup>

Writing in 1945, Chief Officer Cooper claimed that 'for the Indian girls it was the experience of a life time and broadened their outlook considerably – helping towards emancipation'.<sup>24</sup>

As British archives do not contain testimonies of Indian Wrins, it is difficult to substantiate Cooper's claim but generally service did enable Indian women to take on 'all kinds of new responsibilities and living in all kinds of ways that challenged the usual gendered conventions of the Raj.'<sup>25</sup> The material on the W.R.I.N.S. in British archives, however, indicates that, whether British, Indian or from elsewhere in the British empire, the women who joined the W.R.I.N.S. did so when they were very young. Second Officer W.R.I.N.S. Joan Kilford, for instance, signed up in 1944:

My parents were in Calcutta, where my father was Chief River Surveyor of the Port Commissioners. ... . After finishing my schooling in Calcutta, I took a shorthand and typing course at the YWCA and joined the Divisional Sea Transport Office (DSTO), which happened to be a 5 minute walk away from where we lived by the River Hooghly. As it was a naval establishment and doing secret work, I had to join the Navy ... . So I joined Local Service and was enjoying my work with DSTO. I had to go to Bombay to take an Officers Training Course, and when I returned to Calcutta I was given much work in preparing reports covering men and supplies to be sent to Burma, etc. and the fitting out of hospital ships to be sent there. ... I was finally put in charge of water supply to the shipping in the port of Calcutta. This was fun as I had 2 tugs and several dumb barges under my control and I had to send messages to a Lieutenant R.I.N. in charge of the tugs to send supplies of water to the various ships in the port that needed it and then of course to bill the shipping companies concerned.<sup>26</sup>

In the promotional material, the emphasis was explicitly on education - both necessary for, and acquired through, joining the service - and, importantly, on Indian-ness. This is not surprising. As is also clear from naval documents, one of the navy's objectives at this point in the war was to recruit among the Indian population. Dorothy Lucy, who was on the Women Selection Board, mentions that :

I joined the W.A.C. (I) ... . Ordered to Ceylon, at the end of 1942 I was a Cypher Officer in the Naval Office, Columbo. ... After a year I was sent back to Bombay, to take my Commission in His Majesty Royal Indian Navy. ... Exams over, I was promoted to 2<sup>nd</sup> Officer to serve on the Women's Selection Board, India. Our main centre was Lonavla, near Poona, and there were eight of us on the Board. In order that the women we were selecting should not travel too far, we had three other centres all over India. ... We had every kind of woman and girl to interview: wives of officers and other ranks, Anglo-Indians, princesses of the Native States. For three days we tested them with many ingenious puzzles, finally making our recommendations. Being the only Naval Representative, it was interesting testing candidates who had come from the Punjab, or other Northern States, who had never even seen the sea!<sup>27</sup>

Dorothy Lucy does not explain what the 'ingenious puzzles' consisted of. She is, however, clear that the task at hand was to recruit among Indian women and from all over British India; that experience of the sea, let alone naval matters, was not necessary, but that education was. As I illustrate further below, most of the jobs the women were recruited for required good levels of literacy, numeracy and English. Lucy's

understanding of ‘every kind of woman’ therefore included only Indian women from the medium-high to very high social strata.

In her study of prostitution as a symptom of the renegotiation of interactions between both the military and Indian civilians and men and women in the empire, Yasmin Khan points to the discrepancy between the well-publicised propaganda of Indian women’s roles in the ‘war effort’ and the daily reality of Indian women working as cheap and disposable labour on the war infrastructure. She also reminds us that:

the way that women’s labour was harnessed to ... the war effort ... lock[ed] them into a patriarchal web of militarization and military intervention.

Importantly, this transcended race and meant that many women, from diverse places and backgrounds, had their welfare relegated to a secondary position; in every encounter the needs of the (male) military were privileged.<sup>28</sup>

Khan’s observations help contextualise the opposition encountered by Admiral Geoffrey, the architect of the W.R.I.N.S. They also corroborate Roshan Horabin’s testimony of racial discrimination. Even she, an upper-class Indian woman, encountered this both when she tried to join the W.R.N.S. and while serving in the Prisoner of War (Intelligence) Division. There are, however, indications that within the small and short-lived world of the W.R.I.N.S. the welfare of the women (Indian and not) who joined the service was not relegated to a position secondary to the needs of the men. On the contrary, as Khan also observes in relation to the WAC (I) and as we shall see below, it was not unusual for Wrins to take up roles that saw them in positions superior to that of

the male naval personnel they worked, with both managing and training them. Second Officer W.R.I.N.S. Joan Kilford, for instance, quoted above and at the time in charge of water supply in the port of Calcutta, was one such Wrin. Crucially, unlike Joan Kilford, several of the W.R.I.N.S. officers featured in *Wrins and How They Served* were Indian.

Unlike the W.R.N.S., women in the W.R.I.N.S. served exclusively in onshore establishments. A suitable symbol was thus chosen for the new service (Fig. 2):



Fig. 2: The W.R.I.N.S. crest, from *Wrins and How They Served*, 3

the Ganges tern, ‘a bird which is a feature of Indian river scenery, [which] is associated with water but does not go to sea.’<sup>29</sup>

Also a special uniform (Fig. 3) was selected. As Chief Officer Cooper put it,

As two thirds of the women who enrolled were Indian, two styles of uniforms were developed, one consisting of a white sari with blue border, to suit the

graceful Indian girls, and, for the British and Anglo-Indians, an attractive uniform based on that of the W.R.N.S..<sup>30</sup>



Fig. 3: White Uniform Indian Wrins,  
from *New Horizons...a Book about the W.R.I.N.S.*, [17]

A special recruitment booklet was also created, entitled *New Horizons...a Book about the W.R.I.N.S.* The cover features in broad brushes the faces of two women, one distinctly Caucasian,<sup>31</sup> with a navy hat and blonde hair, the other distinctly Indian or at any rate South Asian, with black hair, no hat and a red *bindi* on her forehead (Fig. 4). Against a broadly brushed blue background, the two faces are practically identical, were it not for their distinguishing ethnic marks and their position within the frame: the Caucasian woman occupies the top half of the page, the Indian woman the bottom half.



Fig. 4: Cover of *New Horizons...a Book about the W.R.I.N.S.*

In its thirty or so pages, *New Horizons...a Book about the W.R.I.N.S.* takes its intended reader - 'intelligent women, with a sense of responsibility and a good knowledge of English' - through every aspect of the service, from the characteristics sought in the ideal applicant to 'categories of service', 'pay and allowances', 'badges of rank', conditions of service (Fig. 5), 'training', 'accommodation and messing', 'uniform', 'promotion', 'general welfare', 'how to join', and finally the long list of offices where

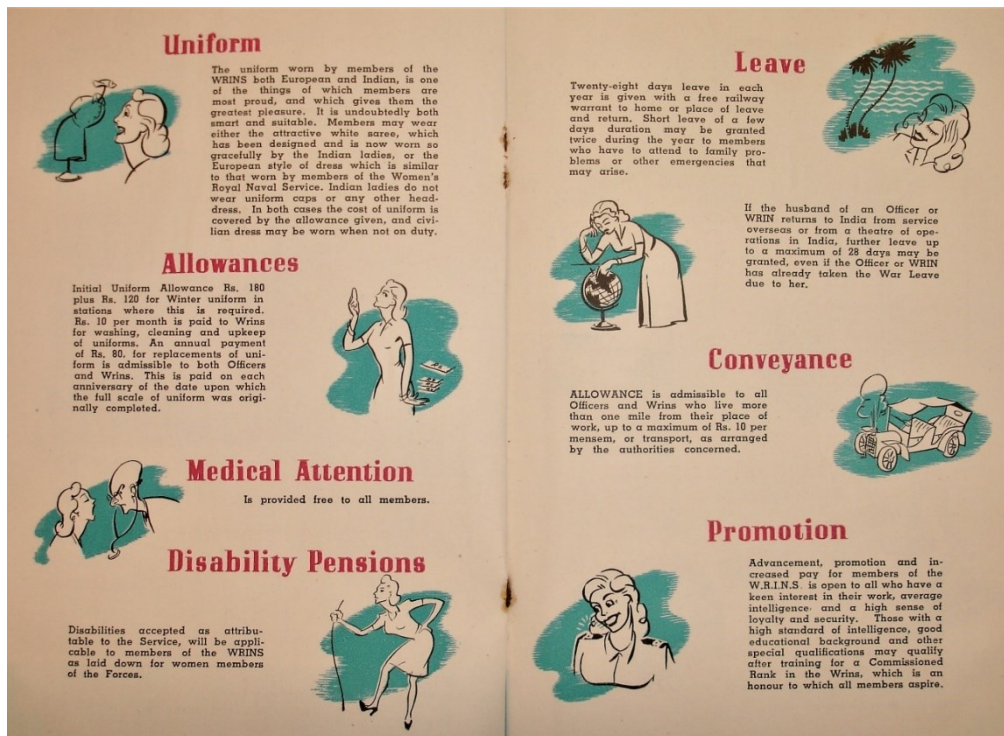


Fig. 5: *New Horizons...a Book about the W.R.I.N.S.*, [18-19]

to apply. It is interesting that 55 of the 85 recruitment offices were in the 'Northern Area' (of British India), with 'assistant recruitment officers' posted in small centres across a zone that extended from Quetta and Karachi all the way to Jammu and Kashmir and down to Gurgaon, south of Delhi. I have not been able to establish why W.R.I.N.S. recruitment was so diffused in this area but it does reflect the fact that Karachi, where many of the R.I.N. training and shore establishments were located, was the R.I.N.'s second most important centre of operation after Bombay. The profound demographic shifts of the war years are also likely to have played a role. As war demand boosted industrial production, a wave of migrants left the countryside for the cities, but migration also went the other way, as families living in cities fled to the interior for safety, and there was also the large-scale influx from Burma, mostly people of Indian origin who had left their homeland for better prospects in the British colonies of

Southeast Asia. Perhaps W.R.I.N.S. recruitment in small centres in the North were intended to target women caught in these shifts. British perceptions of different religious or ethnic communities and of the degrees of freedom granted to women within them may have also been a factor. Nevertheless, the promotional material presented the W.R.I.N.S as offering to everyone ‘without any distinction of race or creed a chance to serve their country and, at the same time, to improve their own material prospects and position’.<sup>32</sup>

Next to the text are the photographs of two women at work (Fig. 6), a Caucasian looking through binoculars ‘assist[ing] in training crews at a R.I.N. Gunnery School’ and an Indian woman ‘sorting mail ... in the Postal Clearing House’. I would argue that, far from being a coincidence, the difference in the nature of the task allocated to the Indian and Caucasian women in these two photographs was part of broader and contrasting discourses about women in India and in Britain at the time. I will return to this point below but note here that the Caucasian woman is shown operating technology, while the Indian woman is engaged in clerical duties.



Fig. 6: Appointments, from *New Horizons...a Book about the W.R.I.N.S.*, [2-3]

Except for another photograph - of Wrins reading and talking in the lounge of one of the 'well organised Wrens hostels' - the booklet's illustrations (drawings) consist of

RATES OF PAY AND ALLOWANCES FOR OFFICERS				
				per mensem
				Rs.
CHIEF OFFICER	..	..	..	500
FIRST OFFICER	..	..	..	380
SECOND OFFICER	..	..	..	220
THIRD OFFICER	..	..	..	175
FOURTH OFFICER	..	..	..	150
SPECIAL APPOINTMENT				
First Officer Employed as—				
2nd GRADE STAFF OFFICER	..	..	..	480
Second Officer employed as—				
3rd GRADE STAFF OFFICER	..	..	..	320
INSTRUCTOR IN COMMUNICATIONS BRANCH	..	..	..	280
CIPHER OFFICER	..	..	..	250
INTELLIGENCE OFFICER	..	..	..	280
SECRETARY	..	..	..	220

**WINTER UNIFORM—INDIAN OFFICERS**  
White shirt, long sleeves. White voile or mercerised cotton scarf. Navy-blue double-breasted coat.

Fig. 7: Rates of Pay, from *New Horizons...a Book about the W.R.I.N.S.*, [22-23]

Caucasian and Indian women engaged in specific categories of service and donning carefully drawn and described uniforms (Fig. 7). The uniforms and the women are on display, the drawings clearly conceived to address the reader in a frontal mise-en-scene. Indeed, *New Horizons...a Book about the W.R.I.N.S.* addresses itself explicitly to Indian women. Its modern graphics, reminiscent simultaneously of British wartime recruitment posters and the covers of popular women magazines like *Home Chat*,<sup>33</sup> lent the service a contemporary and demurely glamorous look but its tone, however, was serious. While this is to be expected, given the nature of the publication, it is worth noting that there is none of the 'gung-ho' quality that characterises, as a pertinent term of comparison, Lee Miller's *Wrens in Camera*, published only a year later.<sup>34</sup> I will return to *Wrens in Camera* below and compare it more closely to a very similar publication, *Wrins and How They Served*, the only book of photographs on the W.R.I.N.S. Here it should be noted, however, that in spite of the space devoted to uniforms in *New Horizons...a Book about the W.R.I.N.S.*, the focus was less on style and more on personal advancement. As the comparison of *Wrins and How They Served* with *Wrens in Camera* will also show, two very different ideas of modernity are inscribed in the W.R.N.S. and W.R.I.N.S. promotional material, each indicative of two historical configurations with different rhythms and needs. The modes of address of the photographs contained in these two photo books mediated two profoundly different horizons for women in their respective countries.

## **Training and tasks**

When enrolling in the W.R.I.N.S., women had the option of applying for either ‘General’ or ‘Local’ service. Those who joined for local service would carry out their duties while living in their own homes. They received a uniform, pay and allowances. Kathleen Culbertson joined soon after her seventeenth birthday in April 1944, on local service:

As I was living in India since 1934 when I left school in Ootacamund [Ooty] in December 1943 I cast around for something useful to do and, as my home, with my parents, was in Vizagapatam on [the] East Coast, and being a harbour port, there was a R.I.N. base there called H.M.I.S. Circars. ... I join[ed], strictly on a local basis as I was under 18 years of age. I lived at home but worked on shifts, ... and was the duty typist in the Signal Office ... . In 1945 I went to Bombay to do a Petty Officer Course ... . Soon after I returned to H.M.I.S. Circars in September or October ... .<sup>35</sup>

Unlike Kathleen Culbertson, women joining the general service were posted wherever needed. They were accommodated in naval wing hostels and ‘live[d] free of all expenses’, in addition to receiving pay, uniform and allowances. Yet whether on local or general service, Wrins were never posted outside British India. Onshore establishments employing Wrins were based in Madras, Cochin, Vizagapatam, Bombay, Karachi, Delhi and Chittagong. New recruits would undergo ‘three weeks’ preliminary

instruction in Service matters and ways'<sup>36</sup> at an establishment outside Bombay, either on the H.M.I.S. Jahanara in Ahmednagar, if from West or South India, or on H.M.I.S. Nalini in Calcutta, if from East India. A new entry's 'initiation to the service' included 'documentation, uniform fitting, explanation of orders and selection tests'<sup>37</sup> on the basis of which recruits were recommended for training:

[The course] consisted of an hour parade every morning and lectures on Naval subjects [Fig. 8] ... . The Rights and Privileges, Pay and Allowances, and the Discipline of the Women's Auxiliary Corps (India) were also explained, and a series of Medical lectures were given which stressed the importance of hygiene and health. Outside lecturers were frequently invited to give more detailed talks on Navy and Army matters of Topical interest.<sup>38</sup>

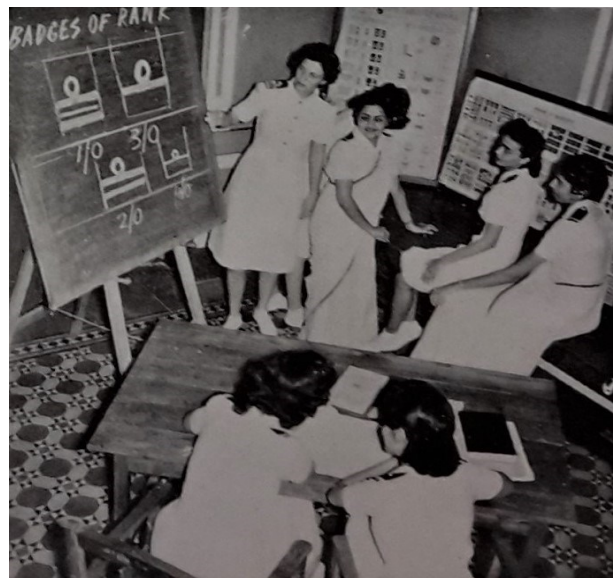


Fig. 8: Wrens in lectures, from *Wrens and How They Served*, 35

Not mentioned in the quote above is physical training. In fact, throughout the recruitment literature the emphasis is on education and on training for a particular set of tasks requiring specific knowledge whether that be administrative, clerical, etc. . Once the basic training was completed, the women were employed in ‘secretarial appointments, sea transport and mail offices, plotting and photographic duties, catering and other administrative appointments’<sup>39</sup> [Fig. 9].



Fig. 9: ‘Clerical Duties’, from *Wrins and How They Served*, 23

Some were placed at H.M.I.S. Himalaya, the Naval Gunnery Training Establishment, but even here they had:

secretarial duties, assisting Instructors in preparing syllabae, arranging courses and correcting confidential books and publications of modern theories of Gunnery. ... They also assisted in the actual training of officers and rating in Gunnery tactics [Fig. 10]. Theoretical lectures ... were taught with the aid of

cinema strips and some of the girls worked the projectors as qualified cinema operators.<sup>40</sup>

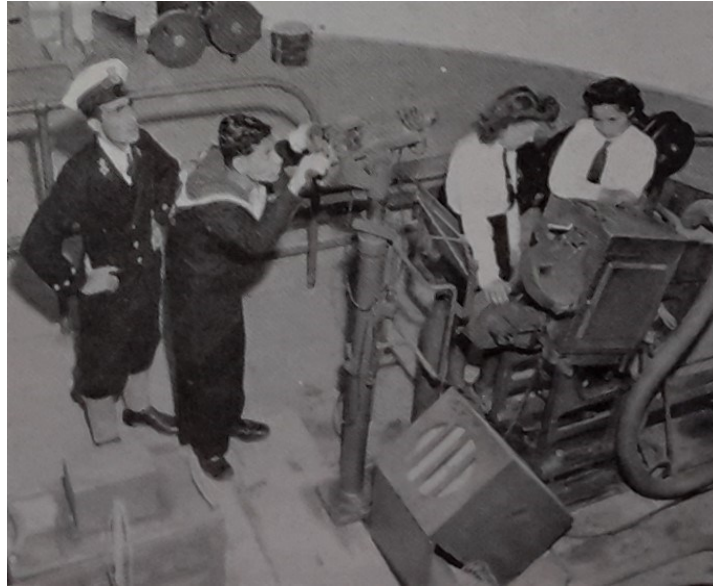


Fig. 10: Training in gunnery, from *Wrins and How They Served*, 28

This is a far cry from the type of activity foregrounded in the recruitment and other promotional material of the W.R.N.S.. There, as Eileen Bigland's *The Story of the W.R.N.S.* clearly shows, women were largely presented as engaged in manual and physically demanding tasks. By contrast, both in the W.R.I.N.S. recruitment pamphlet and the commemorative book, operating projectors, measuring and communication technology was, by and large, as manual as the Wrins jobs ever got:

Wrins were employed on Radio Telephones, passing messages to Aircraft from control positions, and passing orders to gun crews ... . They also worked the complex precision machines which calculate the speed, range, angle of sight and

height of ‘enemy’ aircraft ... . [T]he errors in ‘time-lag’ and ‘aim-off’ were analysed by the Wrin assistants and later explained to the classes.<sup>41</sup>

As John Henry Godfrey also observed in his memoir, the women were needed mostly for the communications branch. Virginia Hutchings, the daughter of an ‘Indian army officer’,<sup>42</sup> was one of them:

My seventeenth birthday, and I had to do something useful. ... I started by working at Naval HQ [...]. ... Here we were de-coding and de-cyphering Naval signals. There were no fans as they interfered with the reception, and being there all through the hot weather was very hard. Wrens who were straight out of England felt it very badly. ... Our groups was made Chief Petty Officers! ... The work, on clanking machines called Type-X, was interesting and at that time all the reports from the Philippines were coming through.<sup>43</sup>

Within the communications branch, those wishing to train in coding and cyphering, like Virginia Hutchings, had to undergo a further six weeks of training on H.M.I.S. Talwar, the Signal School of the R.I.N. in Colaba, Bombay. Communications Wrins acted as officers in charge of cypher watches. They worked as typists, telephonists, loggers, filers, message checkers and distribution clerks<sup>44</sup> (Fig. 11, 17, 18). On H.M.I.S. Talwar, training consisted of two weeks’ general signalling instructions. After successfully passing the examination at the end of the course, they started a more advanced training in coding and decoding.<sup>45</sup>



Fig 11: Communications Wrins, from *Wrins and How They Served*, 25

Importantly in her memoirs Virginia Hutchings claims that while ‘most of the officers were British ... there were a number of Indian Naval officers too. Some had done Oxford or Cambridge, but there were others who had never even seen the sea!’<sup>46</sup>

As the recruitment material promised, promotion ‘in rank and pay’ was not restricted to a certain class and creed but open to all and ‘those with a high standard of intelligence, good educational background, and other special qualifications’ could qualify after some training for a Commissioned Rank.<sup>47</sup> *Wrins and How They Served* includes photographs of officers to demonstrate that promotion was open to all (Fig. 12). In the short text accompanying the photographs, we can read that in 1945 ‘two thirds of the women who joined were Indians.’

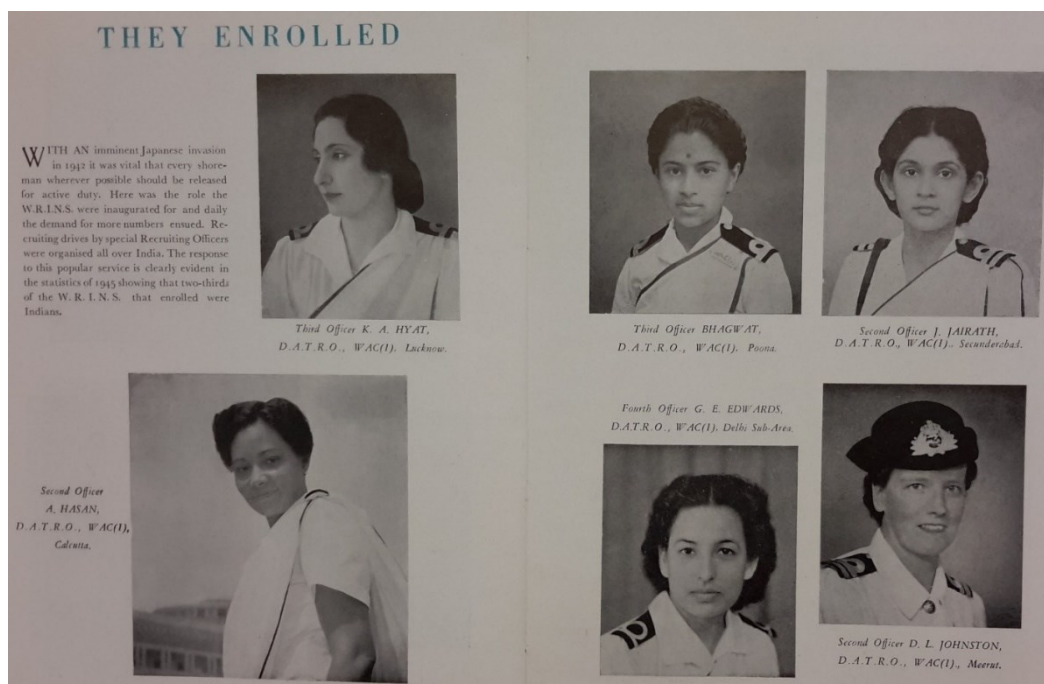


Fig. 12: W.R.I.N.S. Officers, from *Wrins and How They Served*, 12-13

Whether Indian, Anglo-Indian, British or from other parts of the British Empire, in order to become officers, selected Wrins were sent to a 'Divisional Course' at H.M.I.S. Feroze, the R.I.N. officer training establishment in Bombay, where they became 'Cadet Officers' and where even though they had their own class-rooms had to mix with male staff and students in the recreation room.<sup>48</sup>

The eight weeks' officer course involved lectures as well as 'instructional tours of the Dockyard of the Naval Training Establishments [and] a day at sea'.<sup>49</sup>



Fig. 13: 'On the Quayside', from *Wrins and How They Served*, 38

For most Wrins, these tours and day at sea (Fig. 13, 23, 27, 29) would be their only first-hand experience of the R.I.N.'s off-shore activities. Finally, W.R.I.N.S. officers were also employed in the R.I.N. Tactical Unit in Bombay (Fig. 14), where they assisted in



Fig. 14: 'Tactical Unit', from *Wrins and How They Served*, 51

the training of the R.I.N. Commanding Officers and where they would likely find themselves working on an equal footing with, if not as superior to, white male naval officers.

### **The photographs**

In the British World War 2 propaganda film *Millions Like Us* (Frank Lauder and Sidney Gilliat, 1943) the young protagonist, Celia (Patricia Roc), decides to volunteer.<sup>50</sup>

Waiting to be interviewed by a female army recruiting officer, she fantasises about the glamorous life awaiting her as a member of the W.A.A.F. and other forces: we see images of Celia next to an airplane, assisting a pilot, working as a driver and as a nurse. Her dream is interrupted when she is finally called in. Considering her options, Celia asks to join the W.R.N.S.. The only positions available there, she is told, are for cooks. But Celia doesn't want to cook:

“Have you thought of the industry, I suppose?”

“But I don't want to go in a factory, if that's what you mean.”

“There is nothing to be afraid of in a factory. Mr Bevan needs another million women, you know. And I don't think we should disappoint him at a time like this. ... You can help your country just as much in an overall as you can in a uniform these days.”

Lee Miller's photographs in *Wrens in Camera* were originally commissioned by *Vogue*, for which Miller had been working throughout the war, and emphasise a similar set of discourses. *Vogue*'s editor, Audrey Withers, sent Miller and staff writer Lesley Blanch to Greenwich to photograph the women of the Royal Naval Service (W.R.N.S.) (Fig. 15).



Fig. 15: Lee Miller taking photographs of Wrens,  
from Thomas and Bailey, *W.R.N.S. in Camera*, iv

This was 1941, the year clothes rationing came into effect, and some of Miller's photos appeared in *Vogue* of November 1941, one of the magazine's issues designed to promote 'the tailored look' that war time and limitations on the use of fabric were deemed to call for. Thus, as Miller's biographer Carolyn Burke observes,

Blanch assured readers that the Wrens took care to look "pretty and feminine";  
Lee's shots of these competent women on the bridge of their ship, tracking

planes and conferring with their male counterparts, stress their seriousness while confirming the widespread belief that of all the auxiliaries' uniforms, the Wrens' (two well-cut suits in navy, a matching coat, and stockings) was the most becoming.<sup>51</sup>

In 1945, a larger selection of Miller's photographs appeared in *Wrens in Camera*, published by Hollis & Carter with words by K.M. Palmer and an introduction by W.R.N.S. director Vera Laughton Mathews. Although both a publication promoting the service and an *auteur* photography book showcasing Lee Miller's art and her progressive stance on women, *Wrens in Camera* retained, to some degree, the kind of iconicity that one may expect from a fashion shoot, especially a fashion shoot with a propagandistic agenda. The book consists of separate sections: the introduction, photographs of W.R.N.S. officers, training, tasks carried out by the Wrens, and finally recreation. By far the largest section, however, is 'Technicians'. This is indicative: throughout the book, Miller's choice of photographs emphasises hands-on, manual jobs - activities traditionally associated with men, such as operating heavy duty machinery and technology, cleaning guns, welding, maintaining torpedoes and engines etc. Women in these photographs are indeed wearing overalls. While in the book's other sections Wrens are shown engaged in less manual tasks and wearing the coveted W.R.N.S. uniform, on the whole it is clear that Miller aimed to show mostly women operating industrial technology.<sup>52</sup>



Fig. 16: British World War 2 poster, Philip Zec<sup>53</sup>

Clothes and activities in *Wrens in Camera* are in sharp contrast to those featured in *Wrins and How They Served*. The two publications' structure is essentially the same. Like *Wrens in Camera*, *Wrins and How They Served* opens with two short introductions: by the Countess of Carlisle, Chief Controller of the W.A.C. (I) and W.R.I.N.S., and by Chief Officer Cooper, Deputy Director W.R.I.N.S.. This is followed by photographs of senior and junior officers, several among them Indian (Fig. 12); a section on training - including a page (Fig. 1) devoted to 'shipmates' from the different 'provinces of India represented in the W.R.I.N.S.';<sup>54</sup> a section on the diverse tasks carried out by the Wrins; and a concluding section with details about accommodation and recreation.

*Wrens in Camera* is not the only source of images of Wrens, far from it. I compare its images of Wrens with images of Wrins in *Wrins and How They Served* because the two

books are effectively companion pieces. Published only one year after Lee Miller's book and reproducing its size, structure and address very closely, *Wrins and How They Served* clearly sought to emulate the English publication. But *Wrins and How They Served* was a commemorative not a promotional publication. It was published once the decision to dismantle the service had already been taken, and, unlike *Wrens in Camera*, is written in the past tense. Even so, *Wrins and How They Served* sets out a particular agenda which can be gleaned from its central section, devoted to the type of activities the Wrins undertook during the service's short life-span. Two aspects of that agenda are worth noting here. The first is that while *Wrens in Camera* emphasised the adjacency of women and industrial technology, often in enclosed spaces, by far the majority of the photographs in *Wrins and How They Served* shows them engaged in clerical, administrative or strategic tasks. This is not to say that Wrins were not deployed in physical activities. On the contrary, although Wrins worked onshore and never went to sea, it is evident from the text of both *Wrins and How They Served* and other W.R.I.N.S promotional material that many were posted, for instance, to the naval gunnery training establishment H.M.I.S. Himalya, in Karachi, or taught to operate a film projector, to carry out ordnance duties, cleaning and maintaining guns, and so forth. In *Wrins and How They Served*, however, these activities are given none of the visual prominence they have in *Wrens in Camera*. If in Lee Miller's book the women are displayed in images that show them deploying physical labour, in *Wrins and How They Served* the tasks carried out by the Wrins are presented as requiring primarily, if not exclusively, mental labour.



Fig. 17: Communications Wrins, from *Wrins and How They Served*, 20



Fig. 18: Communications Wrins, from *Wrins and How They Served*, 25

This is reflected in the promotional booklet *Horizons...a Book about the W.R.I.N.S.*, which lists, in the tasks carried out by Wrins, nearly exclusively activities involving

primarily conceptual work (Fig. 19a/b). Promotion to officer is also given more space in

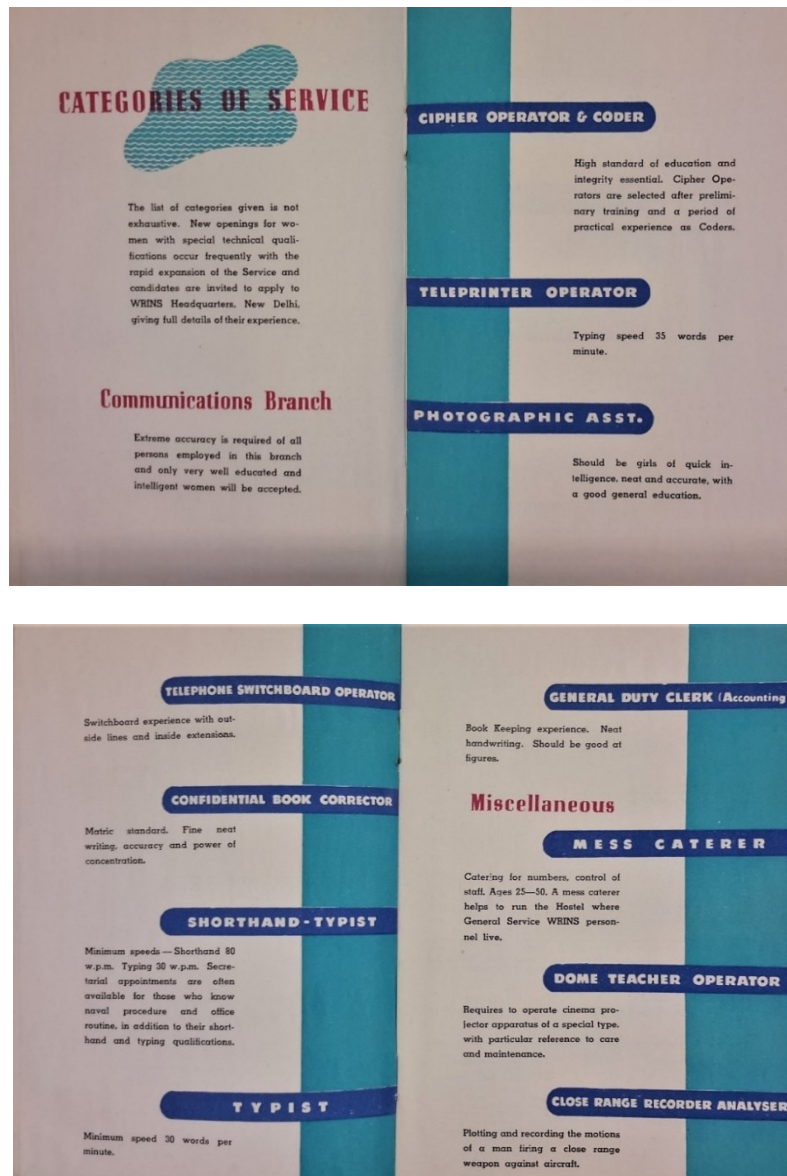


Fig. 19a/b: 'Categories of Service', *Horizons...a Book about the W.R.I.N.S.*, [4-7]

*Wrins and How They Served* than in *Wrens in Camera*, the training for which (Fig. 8 and Fig. 20) involved learning of, and specialisation in, a range of non-manual tasks.

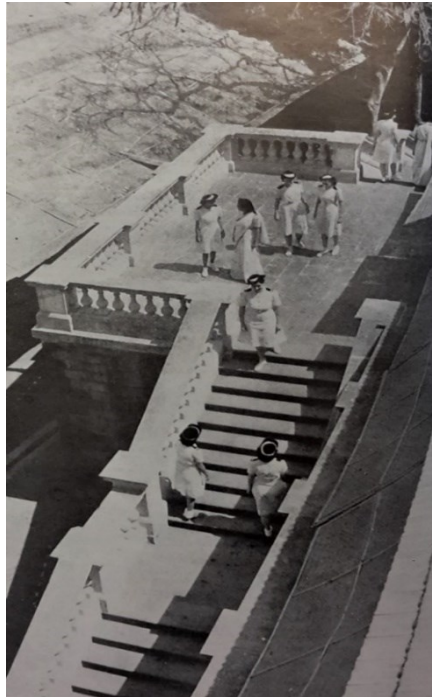


Fig. 20: Officers attending lectures at H.M.I.S. Feroze,  
from *Wrins and How They Served*, 34

The second aspect of *Wrins and How They Served* worth considering here comes across particularly well in the book's second section, entitled 'Day Out at Sea', though it is not confined to it. In this section especially, and elsewhere in the book, Wrins are shown not in enclosed spaces, as is the case in many of Lee Miller's photos of working Wrens, but out in the open: at the dockyards (Fig. 13), talking to male ratings (Fig. 22) or boarding a ship (Fig. 23), on parade, lined up for inspection in the training establishments' courtyard, cleaning guns on deck of a moored ship (Fig. 30), taking a break or playing badminton in the hostels' gardens (Fig. 24), on a launch off Bombay harbour (Fig. 21).



Fig. 21: On a launch, near the Gate of India, from *Wrins and How They Served*, 42



Fig. 22: With R.I.N. Seaman at Bombay dockyards, *Wrins and How They Served*, 54

The background of most of the images in *Wrins and How They Served* is provided by open, public spaces, a large share of the photographs being outdoor shots. Given that



Fig. 23: Boarding a ship, from *Wrins and How They Served*, 14



Fig. 24: Playing badminton, from *Wrins and How They Served*, 56

Wrins did not go to sea and, above all, in view of the low visibility of women in the public sphere in 1940s India, this is a dimension of the book that should not be overlooked, or its novelty dismissed.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, Wrins here are shown not simply as being part of a public sphere; they are also seen occupying that sphere as working

individuals. The extent to which this was new, even daring, in 1940s India is evident when we compare these images to, for instance, Satyajit Ray's film *Mahanagar*. Released in 1963, nearly twenty years after these photographs were published, and set in 1960s Calcutta, *Mahanagar* features Arati (Madhabi Mukherjee), the Calcutta wife of a middle class clerk who takes up a job as a door-to-door saleswoman. The large joint family, including the clerk's sister and Arati's young son, is horrified at the thought of a working woman in their midst.<sup>56</sup> The public nature of Arati's new occupation makes matters even worse. Wrens, more so than the fictional Arati, were decidedly middle class. The public spaces within which they are shown carrying out activities of a primarily mental and organizational nature offer a different narrative about women than that proposed in Lee Miller's book. Two distinctive horizons are envisaged in the two publications, each novel in their diverse historical configurations. *Wrens in Camera* is firmly set in an industrialising world and features middle-class women as part of industrial growth. *Wrens and How They Served*, on the other hand, presents a distinctly Indian and urban public sphere within which middle-class women are a constitutive and very visible dimension, the central elements of an administrative structure for a new India, complete with a clerical middle class to run it that included Indian women.

### **The address**

The different historical specificity of the two horizons comes across particularly well in the photographs' mode of address. Lee Miller's images are characterised by what I would call 'iconic realism'. 'Iconic' because the photos are carefully choreographed: women in medium shots or close-ups are shown carrying out tasks that involve

movement and physical action (Fig. 25 and 26). Such actions and the industrial machinery used are caught by the camera at short distance, as if to lift them out of their surroundings for special contemplation. Women and machinery are immortalised. 'Realist' because the mise-en-scene shows such actions as if frozen in time, like in photo reportage.<sup>57</sup> Miller's tight framing emphasises the fragmentary nature of the instant.



Fig. 25: 'And Still More Guns', from *Wrens in Camera*, 56



Fig. 26: 'A Steady Hand and a True Eye', from *Wrens in Camera*, 56

Moreover, with the exception of two photos, none of the women featured looks at the camera, as if it were invisible to them, even though it could clearly not have been at such short distance.<sup>58</sup> All this lends Miller's photos of Wrens a kind of demonstrative, even propagandistic, dimension, though one that draws on a century-long tradition of photographic documentarism. These photos seem to say that women at work with industrial machinery are an attractive proposition, and they do so with all the iconic force of fashion photography; that is, with a type of photography that simultaneously deprives them of any sense of movement and spontaneity. A tension or contradiction is thus at work in Lee Miller's photos of Wrens: on the one hand a sense of dynamic industrialism is paired with the pictorial principles of European realism,<sup>59</sup> while on the other, the immediacy and dynamism associated with realist photography is undercut by the need to present the women's actions and their proximity to (and use of) industrial machinery as exemplary.

In sharp contrast to Miller's 'iconic realist' address is the style adopted in *Wrins and How They Served*. The section entitled 'Day out at Sea' is indicative of such a style, though it characterises each of the book's photographs. A glance is enough to realise that the British and Indian army, navy and air force photographers who took these pictures<sup>60</sup> had none of the privileged access to their subject that Lee Miller was given (Fig. 15). A large share of the photos are medium or long shots, often at a high angle. Most were clearly taken from a distance, as if the photographers had been called in as a second thought, on no particular day, and were allowed to take pictures as the women went about their activities, though somewhat at a remove from the action (Fig. 8, 10, 11,



Fig 27: In the engine room, from *Wrins and How They Served*, 47



Fig 28: Raising the flag, from *Wrins and How They Served*, 32-33

13 17, 20, 23, 24, 27, 28). This lends these photographs a strangely genuine immediacy; strange because it is effected not by the photographers' proximity to their subject, but by their distance. There is little that is staged for the camera here. In the section 'Day

out at Sea' one often has the impression of intruding into a group of friends' outing (Fig. 29).

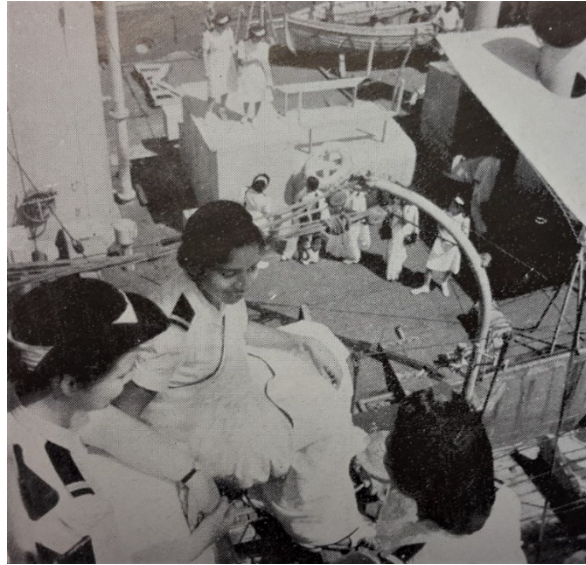


Fig. 29: 'From the Searchlight Platform', from *Wrins and How They Served*, 47

More generally, unlike in Lee Miller's photographs, which seem premised on a certain complicity between photographer and subjects, throughout *Wrins and How They Served* the camera really is a voyeur, occasionally acknowledged by one or two of the women who return its look (Fig. 21 and 30) with their own sideways, somewhat questioning glance. The immediacy of these medium and long shots, combined with views of the surrounding environment - outdoor Indian locations, some more iconic than others - results in a juxtaposition that was, for the time, quite extraordinary: women are seen in Indian public spaces and, what is more, the women are Indian, unaccompanied by men, and engaged in professional activities. Taken by official British and Indian photographers, the images in *Wrins and How They Served* convey a genuine sense of

Indian women's visibility. They lend verisimilitude and legitimacy to Indian women's active participation in the public sphere. This, for that time and place, was very new.



Fig. 30: 'Stripping and Cleaning an Oerlikon Gun',  
from *Wrins and How They Served*, 27

### **The new woman**

British discourses of women's advancement in India should evidently not be taken at face value. At best extremely patronising at worst glaringly racist, they were part of a colonial project that can hardly be said to have improved, as these discourses claimed to do, the lot of Indian women. That said, judging by the few surviving testimonies of former Wrins, joining the W.R.I.N.S. did make for a better life, if only temporarily. It is not a coincidence that when the communications ratings of the R.I.N. mutineered in February 1946, initially to complain against poor service conditions and slow demobilisation,<sup>61</sup> none of the Wrins joined the strike. Veronica Smith (Fig. 31), who

was one of the Wrins serving during the uprising, claimed in her memoir that ‘we were stoned driving in and out of the docks.’<sup>62</sup>

**R.I.N. FORM No. 148**  
 Serial No. **A 003389**  
 (a) Name in full **VERONICA SMITH**  
 (b) Rank at time of Issue **4<sup>th</sup> OFFICER**  
 (c) ~~W.R.I.N.S.~~ **W.R.I.N.S.**  
 (d) Date of birth **14<sup>th</sup> JAN. 1927**  
 (e) Signature **V Smith A/O**  
 Left Thumb Print of Holder **V Smith A/O**  
 Signature and Rank of Witness **H. A. Johnson Rsm R.I.N.O**  
 Date **11-12-45**  
 Height **5 Ft. 3 Ins.**  
 Colour of Hair **LIGHT BROWN**  
 Colour of eyes **BLUE**  
 Visible Identification Marks **Mole on the left side of neck**  
 Photograph: Rank **4/O**, Name **SMITH**, Age **Years**

Fig. 31: Veronica Smith’s R.I.N. Identity Card, from Private Papers of Miss V. Smith

**No. 181**  
 This is to Certify that **Miss V Smith** has served as **the sea transport organisation** in **Bombay** under my command, from the **15<sup>th</sup>** day of **October** 19**44**, to the **1<sup>st</sup>** day of **April** 19**46**, during which time she has conducted herself **satisfactorily**  
 Signed **Keayhole** **Chief Officer, D.D.W.R.I.N.S.**  
 \* Here the Chief Officer, D.D. W. R. I. N. S. is to insert in her own handwriting the conduct of the Officer.  
 R.I.N. 254

Fig. 32: Veronica Smith, conduct slip, from Private Papers of Miss V. Smith

Not unlike Arati’s job in *Mahanagar* but nearly twenty years earlier, joining the W.R.I.N.S. had given the women the chance to do things they would not normally be allowed to do. Unsurprisingly, many of them hardly welcomed a return to ‘normality’. As former Wrin Virginia Hutchings reminisced:

In between working really very hard in dreadful conditions, there was plenty to do. Dances every night at several places ... Delhi was very full ... So many men were on their way to Burma... We berthed at Southampton in January 1945 ... I was detailed to go to the India Office, in Whitehall, to do the same type of work on Type X machines... I stayed on at the India Office for a while, but we were all slowly being released, and so my five very interesting war years were over.<sup>63</sup>



Fig. 33: R.A.F. Dance at Government House, New Delhi, 1946.

Written overleaf: ‘To the left the majority are W.A.C.(I.), to the right the majority are Wrins, including myself [Dorothy Lucy] (eyes shut).’<sup>64</sup>

These Wrins’ letters and memoirs were written mostly in the 1990s, some fifty years after the events. Each is characterised by a vivid sense of looking back at a time that had seemed to open up the real possibility of being a fully enfranchised, active individual in a public sphere that had, until then, relegated them to marginal roles, if not entirely excluded them. There is no sense of colonial nostalgia in these testimonies. What transpires, rather, is a muted incredulity at the retrospective realisation that, the war

over, the ground closed up again, in Britain and in India, pushing women back into the customary roles of wife, mother, nurse or teacher.

## **Conclusion**

On 29 December 1945 Admiral Godfrey, then near retirement, wrote to Commander-in-Chief, India, Claude Auchinleck:

My dear Chief,

I am not at all happy about the decision at the India War Committee to wind-up the W.R.I.N.S. in peace time. ... The Adjutant General ... had been under the impression that Anglo-Indian officers predominated over Indian - as indeed they do at present if Second Officers and above only are considered. My point was that among the more junior 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Officers ... we have some really first-class material which will develop into good senior officers if given the chance. ... Is it really necessary to do away with this enthusiastic young service, which ... within two years can be completely Indianised?

With the exception of yourself and the A.G., I was the only person at this morning's meeting who has had practical experience of raising a Women's Service and I still do not know on what data the others based their opinions that the scheme would not be a success. ... I should have thought that it was our duty to help Indian womanhood to achieve emancipation... .<sup>65</sup>

Godfrey argued that continuation of the W.R.I.N.S. in whatever guise would enable 'Indian womanhood to play a fuller role in the life of the nation'.<sup>66</sup> But, Godfrey's arguments notwithstanding, the W.R.I.N.S. was dismantled. *Wrins and How They Served* is situated somewhere between the time remembered and the act of recollection, between active service and the memoir. By the time it was published, the service had come to an end. Women would not be allowed back into the Indian Navy until 1992, and then only on short commissions, up to a maximum of fourteen years, a limit that effectively deprived them of a pension.

The W.R.I.N.S. was a short-lived experiment that was put to an end once the war was over. As Geraldine Forbes, among other historians, has documented, with Indian independence and partition women were allowed to and did 'come out because the house was on fire. The expectation was that once the fire was out, women would go back inside the house.'<sup>67</sup> The W.R.I.N.S. was a life-changing episode for the women who served in it, however briefly. In India and Britain, many of them did 'go back inside the house', but held onto the memory of active public life until the end. The most fortunate, like Roshan Horabin, continued pursuing a very active life. How radical an image of Indian womanhood is proposed in the photographs I examined, and how important this image may be to Indian women today is brought home by the fact that, in stark contrast to Bangladesh, which has seen both a steady rise in female labour-force participation (58 per cent, against the world average of 50 per cent) and significant improvements in women's social standing, in India women's participation in formal work is at a paltry 27 percent, nor has the current government advanced strategies to reverse this situation.<sup>68</sup>

The reality is that most Indian women do work. However, as many as 94 per cent of Indian female workers are employed in the informal economy - a sector that, although officially unaccounted for and notoriously difficult to measure, is estimated to employ more than 90 per cent of India's workforce and responsible for about 50 per cent of the country's national product.<sup>69</sup> Women's (in)visibility in the public sphere formed the focus of early Indian feminism. It continues to be an urgent issue in India today and carries with it a long list of lethal side-effects, including discrimination against girls in health and nutrition, and sex-selective abortion. As Amrita Chhachhi and Thanh-Dam Truong have observed, however, a younger generation of feminists has pushed forward a research agenda that allows for a different mode of gender analysis by emphasising, among others, women subjectivity and agency.<sup>70</sup> There is much in the archival and other sources discussed here that, beyond the constrictions imposed by colonial, military and societal protocols, and the absence of direct testimony, points to the women's subjectivity. They joined the W.R.I.N.S. out of an awareness of their abilities, forward direction and desires that flew in the face of colonial and nationalist patriarchal conventions. Future research, including in personal archives across South Asia, will perhaps one day generate sufficient material to delineate these women's experiences in greater detail. I hope that bringing their story and photographs to light here may have made a small contribution to this line of feminist enquiry.

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## Endnotes:

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<sup>1</sup> ‘The collection of letters from ladies who served with the W.R.I.N.S. during the Second World War, written to Mrs D.M. Massey, in response to an article in *The Wren*’, Imperial War Museum, 13(540).91 [Women’s Royal Indian Naval Service]/5-2) Cat No. K 96 / 2501.

<sup>2</sup> *Pioneers to Professionals: Women and the Royal Navy* at <http://www.historicdockyard.co.uk/news/item/705-pioneers-to-professionals-women-and-the-royal-navy-special-exhibition-shares-lost-stories-to-celebrate-women-in-the-royal-navy> (accessed 31 May 2019).

<sup>3</sup> These were the cover of a book entitled *Wrins and How They Served*, which I discuss below, a photograph of W.R.I.N.S. 2<sup>nd</sup> Officer Kalyani Sen visiting Rosyth on 3 June 1945, and the reproduction of a photograph of a Wrin cleaning a gun, originally published in *Wrins and How They Served*.

<sup>4</sup> I have adopted the same nomenclature as I found in the documents and publications examined: W.R.I.N.S. and W.R.N.S. refer to the service, Wrin and Wren to the women serving.

<sup>5</sup> Literature on the W.R.N.S., including Eileen Bigland, *The Story of the W.R.N.S.* (London: Nicholson & Watson, 1946), Marjorie H. Fletcher, *The W.R.N.S.: A History of the Woman’s Royal Naval Service* (London: Batsford, 1989), Neil R. Storey, *W.R.N.S.: the Women's Royal Naval Service* (Oxford: Shire, 2017), and Hannah Roberts, *The W.R.N.S. in Wartime: The Women’s Royal naval Service, 1917-1945* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2018), has consistently failed to mention the W.R.I.N.S. Even Lesley Thomas and Chris Howard Bailey, *W.R.N.S. in Camera: The Women's Royal Naval Service in the Second World War* (Stroud: Sutton, 2002) and Ursula Stuart Mason, *Britannia’s Daughters: The Story of the W.R.N.S.* (London: Leo Cooper, 1992), which

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do cover the W.R.N.S. operations overseas, omit the W.R.I.N.S. entirely. While this may have to do with the fact that the W.R.I.N.S. was formally part of the W.A.C. (I), rather than of the navy, it would seem logical that histories of the British women's naval service during World War 2 mention the Indian women naval branch. Mason's *Britannia's Daughters* lists several 'Other Women's Naval Services', including the W.A.N.S. (Australia), the W.R.N.Z.N.S. (New Zealand) and the S.A.W.A.N.S. (South Africa), but not the W.R.I.N.S. Only Yasmin Khan, *The Raj at War: A People's History of India's Second World War* (London: The Bodley Head, 2015) contains a few paragraphs on the British, Anglo-Indian and Indian women who served in the navy during World War 2.

<sup>6</sup> The navy in India has its origins in the East India Company's Marine, set up in 1612. Its name and function changed over the centuries. It was finally named the Royal Indian Navy in 1934, but remained a relatively small force until World War 2.

<sup>7</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Berlin Chronicle', in *Selected Writings, Vol. 2 Part 2: 1931-1934*, eds Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith, transl. Edmund Jephcott (Cambridge, Mass. and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 597.

<sup>8</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, transl. Harry Zohn (London: Fontana, Collins, 1973), 257.

<sup>9</sup> *Meanings of Failed Action: Insurrection 1946* opened in Mumbai at Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya, 17-25 March 2017 and in New Delhi at Kiran Nadar Museum of Modern Art, 8 February 2018. See <https://insurrection1946.wordpress.com/> (accessed 29 September 2019). See also

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Valentina Vitali, 'Meanings of Failed Action: a Reassessment of the 1946 Royal Indian Navy Uprising', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 41, no. 4 (2019): 763-88.

<sup>10</sup> The records of a few men who served in the Royal Indian Navy can be found in the latter but none of Indian women. Documents relating to the history of the Royal Indian Navy rarely cover the W.R.I.N.S., and if so, only in passing. Admiral Godfrey's official reports and memoirs, discussed here, are the only sources to do so at some length. The same is true of service newspapers. The Imperial War Museum's collections contain a few Wrins letters and private papers, all cited here, but no newsreels. Regarding the absence of newsreels featuring Wrins, see Yvonne Tasker, *Soldiers Stories: Military Women in Film and Television since World War II* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 41.

<sup>11</sup> Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', 257.

<sup>12</sup> Born in Bombay in 1923 from an upper class and well-connected Bombay Muslim secular family, during World War 2 Roshan Erica Faith Horabin (née Visram) was a civilian welfare worker with No 3 District St John Ambulance Brigade, and, from 1942, in the Prisoner of War (Intelligence) Division in Bombay. She married R.I.N.V.R. Sub.-Lt. Ivan Horabin (son of British MP Tom Horabin) in Bombay in 1945 and emigrated to England in 1946, where she continued to led a very active public life, most recently as director of Prisoners Abroad. She died on 8 March 2019, aged 95.

<sup>13</sup> Roshan Horabin, interviewed by Lyn Smith in 1999 (Imperial War Museum, Oral History Collection, no. 19607). Unfortunately I was unable to find information about Roshan Horabin's sister, Soona Visram, who joined the W.R.I.N.S.. For an interesting account of the contradictory gender and racial discriminations suffered by women in the

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Women Auxiliary Corps (India) and other colonial voluntary army services, see Khan, *The Raj at War*.

<sup>14</sup> Formed in 1917, the W.R.N.S. was disbanded in 1919 and revived in 1939.

<sup>15</sup> In his annual *Report* Admiral Godfrey wrote: 'As the battle area moved from Europe into the Pacific, so the importance of the wireless communications link through India increased.' John Henry Godfrey, *Report on the Royal Indian Navy 1943, 1944* (New Delhi, 1945), 2.

<sup>16</sup> This is corroborated by Yasmin Khan who, referring to documents about the formation of the WAC(I) found at the National Archives Kew, writes: 'Although treated patronisingly by some menfolk and barely remembered by history, these women plugged the gaps in skilled labour and performed urgent and essential tasks. [...] British and Indian women could join on equal terms and the plan to give British and Indian women equal status caused consternation in Whitehall, as, technically, Indian women officers might be able to command white men and this was seen as potentially inflammatory for white Tommies.' Khan, *The Raj at War*, 154.

<sup>17</sup> John Henry Godfrey, *The Naval Memoirs of Admiral J. H. Godfrey, 6 1943-1946* (1964). Deposited on 24 April 1966. GDFY 1/8 Churchill Archive, Churchill College, University of Cambridge, 81-96: Chapter 9 'Women's Royal Indian Naval Service, 1944'.

<sup>18</sup> Godfrey, *Report on the Royal Indian Navy*, 3-4.

<sup>19</sup> See Margaret Cooper's obituary 'Family Mourns Pioneer Peggy', *Navy News* (October 2016), 15. (<https://issuu.com/navynews/docs/201610/17>, accessed on 30 May 2018). Margaret Cooper's father was Inspector General of Police in Orissa, her brother was in the Royal Indian Air Force and her sister in the Intelligence Corps.

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<sup>20</sup> Studies of India's contributions to World War 2 include Indivar Kamtekar. 'A Different War Dance: India 1939-45', *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 61 (2000): 648-659, Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper, *Forgotten Armies: The Fall of British Asia, 1941-1945* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), Yasmin Khan's *The Raj at War* and, by the same author, 'Sex in an Imperial War Zone: Transnational Encounters in Second World War India', *History Workshop Journal*, 73, no. 1 (2012): 240-258. Christopher Bayly wrote that during World War 2 at least ten million Indian men and women were mobilised for war-related service and labour, in addition to three million men for active warfare. Although Bayly does not specify how many of those ten million civilians were women, he gives figures showing that nursing had become a patriotic duty for many middle-class Indian women after 1939. Christopher Bayly, 'The Nation Within': British India at War 1939-1947, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 125, (2003), 266, 279. According to Yasmin Khan, by the end of the war, some 11,500 Indian, Anglo-Indian and European women had enlisted in the WAC (I). 'Sex in an Imperial War Zone', 242.

<sup>21</sup> Godfrey, *Report on the Royal Indian Navy*, 2.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>23</sup> John Henry Godfrey, 'What the Naval Wing Means: a Suggested Lecture', *R.I.N. Publications* (National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London, GOD/50, [s.a.]), 1.

<sup>24</sup> Godfrey, *Report on the Royal Indian Navy*, 2.

<sup>25</sup> Khan, *The Raj at War*, 272.

<sup>26</sup> 'The collection of letters from ladies who served with the W.R.I.N.S. during the Second World War, written to Mrs D.M. Massey, in response to an article in *The Wren*',

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Imperial War Museum, 13(540).91 [Women's Royal Indian Naval Service]/5-2) Cat No. K 96 / 2501.

<sup>27</sup> Private Papers of Mrs D. Lucy, Imperial War Museum, Documents.23364.

<sup>28</sup> 'Sex in an Imperial War Zone', 242

<sup>29</sup> M. Afzal, *Wrins and How They Served* (Bombay: Royal Indian Navy Public Relations Directorate, [1946]), 3.

<sup>30</sup> Godfrey, *Report on the Royal Indian Navy*, 1.

<sup>31</sup> I use the term Caucasian to refer to Wrins who were not South Asian because not all non-South Asian Wrins were British. One of the Wrins photographed in *Wrins and How They Served*, for instance, is Greek (Fig. 1).

<sup>32</sup> Royal Indian Navy, *New Horizons...a Book about the W.R.I.N.S.* (National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London, GOD/64, [s.a.]), 2.

<sup>33</sup> In existence from 1895 until 1956, *Home Chat* was a widely available British weekly. It was 'cheap enough to be bought and read by the better-off working class and the lower middle class', and it aimed 'to provide women with practical advice about all aspects of their daily lives, from the traditional concerns of fashion and beauty, marriage and children, to the more contentious issue of women's aspirations beyond the home.' According to Buckley, *Home Chat* 'exposed tensions around class and gender which were particularly evident during wartime' and 'provided a crucial space during wartime in which representations of women were redefined. Fashion played a large part in this.' Cheryl Buckley, 'De-Humanized Females and Amazonians: British Wartime Fashion and its Representation in *Home Chat* 1914-1918', *Gender & History*, 14, no.3, (2002), 517.

<sup>34</sup> Lee Miller, *Wrens in Camera* (London: Hollis & Carter, 1945).

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<sup>35</sup> ‘The collection of letters from ladies who served with the W.R.I.N.S. during the Second World War, written to Mrs D.M. Massey, in response to an article in *The Wren*’, Imperial War Museum, 13(540).91 [Women’s Royal Indian Naval Service]/5-2) Cat No. K 96 / 2501.

<sup>36</sup> Godfrey, ‘What the Naval Wing Means’, 3.

<sup>37</sup> Afzal, *Wrins and How They Served*, 16.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 16-17.

<sup>39</sup> Godfrey, ‘What the Naval Wing Means’, 3.

<sup>40</sup> Afzal, *Wrins and How They Served*, 27-30.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 27-30.

<sup>42</sup> Given that Hutchings was her maiden name, I assume she meant an ‘officer of the Indian Army’.

<sup>43</sup> Private Papers of Mrs V. K. Franklin (née Hutchings), Imperial War Museum, Documents.6804.

<sup>44</sup> Afzal, *Wrins and How They Served*, 19.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>46</sup> Private Papers of Mrs V. K. Franklin (née Hutchings), Imperial War Museum, Documents.6804.

<sup>47</sup> Godfrey, ‘What the Naval Wing Means’, 3.

<sup>48</sup> Afzal, *Wrins and How They Served*, 33-34.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>50</sup> I would like to thank David Chapman for drawing my attention to this film.

<sup>51</sup> Carolyn Burke, *Lee Miller: on Both Sides of the Camera* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), 209.

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<sup>52</sup> For an analysis of four Lee Miller's photographs from *Wrens in Camera*, and the tension of co-existing discourses of femininity in them, see Janet Harrison, 'Lee Miller's *Wrens in Camera*', *Women's History Review*, 26, no. 4 (2017): 621-33.

<sup>53</sup> Imperial War Museum *Posters from the Second World War: a Book of Postcards* (London: IWM, 2014), 17.

<sup>54</sup> Afzal, *Wrins and How They Served*, 18.

<sup>55</sup> For a discussion of public space in Indian photography and women, see Sabeen Gadihoke, 'Journeys into Inner and Outer Worlds: Photography's Encounter with Public Space in India', in *Where Three Dreams Cross: 150 years of Photography from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh*, eds Sunil Gupta and Radhika Singh (Göttingen: Steidl, 2010): 34-45.

<sup>56</sup> *Mahanagar (The Big City)*, Satyajit Ray, India, Bengali, 1963) can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a6x0lbhLA2U> and, with English subtitles, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LT41pIZnjP0> (accessed 25 August 2019). For the film's protagonist Arati going door-to-door selling knitting machines opens up a new world that includes, among other figures, Edith, a lower middle class Anglo-Indian friend. Earning money radically changes Arati's status in the family, much to the consternation of all family members.

<sup>57</sup> Not all photographs freeze actions in time. Early photography required long exposure times, photographs were conceived as posed tableaux well into the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and static posing continued to characterise even the late (1920s) work of early realist photographers like Eugène Atget. It is only with the advent of documentary photography in the 1930s that photographers, building on the so-called 'straight' photography of Paul Strand, set out to catch the 'hic and nunc'. There is a direct line

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that connects the social orientations of realist art and photography during the period of the Depression. Arnold Hauser points, for instance, to Naturalism and Impressionism's foregrounding of what he calls 'the dominion of the moment over permanence and continuity, the feeling that every phenomenon is a fleeting and never-to-be-repeated constellation... Everything stable and coherent assumes the character of the unfinished and fragmentary... the feeling of a stirring, dynamic, constantly changing reality ... a world in constant flux and transition.' Arnold Hauser, *The Social History of Art, Volume 4: Naturalism, Impressionism, the Film Age*. Transl. by Stanley Godman. (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 159-60.

<sup>58</sup> In the two instances when the photographed women do look at Miller's camera their direct address is part of the photo's intended mise-en-scene, its staged composition.

<sup>59</sup> For a seminal discussion of European realism, see Arnold Hauser, *The Social History of Art*, 156-167.

<sup>60</sup> Acknowledged in *Wrins and How They Served* as Capt. Mansbridge, British Army Official Photographer; Lieut. R.K. Spurr, Official Photographer R.I.N.; and Ft./Lt. S[ita] R[am] Mullick, Royal Indian Air Force, Official Photographer Indian Public Relations. Afzal, *Wrins and How They Served*, 1.

<sup>61</sup> For more information about the 1946 Royal Indian Navy uprising and the ratings' motivations, see Vitali, 'Meanings of Failed Action'.

<sup>62</sup> Private Papers of Miss V. Smith, Imperial War Museum, Documents.9979.

<sup>63</sup> Private Papers of Mrs V. K. Franklin (née Hutchings), Imperial War Museum, Documents.6804.

<sup>64</sup> Imperial War Museum, Private Papers of Mrs D. Lucy.

<sup>65</sup> Godfrey, *The Naval Memoirs of Admiral J. H. Godfrey*, 92-93.

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>67</sup> Geraldine Forbes, *The New Cambridge History of India. IV2. Women in Modern India* (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 156.

<sup>68</sup> Manali Desai, 'Gendered Violence and India's Body-Politic', *New Left Review II*, 99 (2016), 74-75.

<sup>69</sup> Kamala Kanta Mohapatra, 'Women Workers in Informal Sector in India: Understanding the Occupational Vulnerability', *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 2, no. 21 (2012), 197.

<sup>70</sup> Amrita Chhachhi and Thanh-Dam Truong, *Gender, Poverty and Social Justice* (The Hague: International Institute of Social Studies, 2009), 4.