From Reel to Reality: Canadian Military Women's Representation in Early National Film Board films, 1939-1945.

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ABSTRACT

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Nikki Mosca

This thesis explores Canada's significant societal transformation during the Second World War by analyzing the representation of military women in two National Film Board (NFB) films. Following Canada's entry into the war on September 10, 1939, the demand for male recruits led to a labour shortage, opening unprecedented employment opportunities for women. These changes disrupted traditional gender roles, which had confined women to domestic responsibilities while men worked outside the home. In 1941, women became eligible for military service, marking a pivotal moment in Canada's evolving social norms. Simultaneously, the Canadian government established the NFB, which was tasked with shaping public opinion through cinematic propaganda, including addressing societal concerns about shifting gender roles. This research focuses on two NFB films directed by Jane Marsh, *Wings on Her Shoulder* (1943) and *Proudly She Marches* (1943), as case studies to investigate how Canadian cinema reflected and responded to wartime social changes. It examines the ideological messages in these two films, particularly themes of femininity and subordination, while also contextualizing these portrayals within broader media representations. By comparing the depiction of women in the Canadian Armed Forces in these films with contemporaneous advertisements in magazines like *Chatelaine* and *Maclean's*, this study highlights how Marsh's films, while propagandistic, could be interpreted as progressive for their time. The primary purpose of this thesis is to examine the representations of military women in wartime films, analyzing how their portrayals conformed to and diverged from pre-war societal norms, and how these depictions were used to influence public opinion by presenting women in new social roles.

For Isla and Kiwi

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> Soon, millions of mad women will get roused, forget they're afraid, ignore their lack of confidence and knowledge and lose themselves in the vastness of the need before them. It will be surprising how much they will accomplish.
>
> - Agnes Macphail, MP, 1939[1]

> The film industry has not changed much over the last twenty years; what has changed is women's consciousness of how the stereotypes in film oppress us and our growing determination no longer to bend ourselves to fit them. We still await the emergence of a significant number of film makers to whom women's experience is not an aberration but a simple reality.
>
> - Yvonne Mathews-Klein, Author, 1979[2]

Introduction

In 2017, the Canadian Government introduced the *Strong, Secure, Engaged Act*, establishing new recruitment efforts within the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) with particular attention paid to recruiting women.[3] The policy mandates Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA+) training for all personnel, aiming to foster an institutional culture change by "eliminating harmful and inappropriate sexual behaviour" and introducing initiatives "to help stabilize family life."[4] The goal is to increase women's representation within the CAF by one percent annually until

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[1] "Millions of 'Mad' Women Will Adjust World some Day, Agnes Macphail Predicts: Ottawa Group Told Land of Plenty should have no Hungry Mouths; Finance Minister WOMEN TOO HONEST." *The Globe and Mail*, March 21, 1939.

[2] Yvonne Mathews-K1ein, "How They Saw Us: Images of Women in National Film Board Films of the 1940s and 1950s," *Atlantis*, vol 4, no 2 (Spring 1979), 33.

[3] "Well-Supported, Diverse, Resilient People and Families," *Government of Canada, Department of National Defence,* accessed September 24, 2024, https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/reports-publications/canada-defence-policy/well-supported-diverse-resilient-people-families.html#1.1.

[4] "Annex C: Gender-Based Analysis Plus and the Defence Policy Review," *Government of Canada, Department of National Defence,*accessed September 24, 2024, https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/reports-publications/canada-defence-policy/annex-c.html

2026, bringing the total number of women to 25%.[5] So far, the increase has been slow, as women account for only 18% of total personnel as of May 2023.[6] Women's underrepresentation in the CAF can be traced back to its origins. The Canadian Army, the oldest of the three branches, was established in 1855, followed by the Navy in 1910 and the Air Force in 1924. Women were banned from enlisting - except as nurses - until the Second World War.

On July 2, 1941, the Canadian Women's Auxiliary Air Force - later the Royal Canadian Air Force Women's Division (WD) - was established, marking a watershed moment in Canadian history. It was the first time women were officially permitted to join one of the branches of the Armed Forces as regular working members of the military. One month later, the formation of the Canadian Women's Army Corps (CWAC) on August 13 followed suit, further widening the career opportunities within the military for women. Although it took another year, the Navy opened its ranks to women on July 31, 1942, completing the inclusion of women across all three branches of the CAF.

Canada entered the war on September 10, 1939, one week after Britain's declaration, and the need for recruits was high. As Canadian men were sent overseas, the gap in the labour force created new job opportunities for women. These changes significantly disrupted traditional gender roles, which typically confined women to domestic duties while men worked outside the home. Women's entry into the military marked a significant step in the social changes that had already begun with the war's onset brought on by the increase of women in the paid labour force. At the same time, another shift was afoot; the Canadian government established the National Film Board (NFB), a film division aimed to influence and sway public opinion through

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[5] Ibid.
[6] "Statistics of women in the Canadian Armed Forces," *Government of Canada, Department of National Defence,* accessed September 24, 2024, https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/services/women-in-the-forces/statistics.html.

cinematic propaganda. One of its mandates was addressing national questions and concerns about changing gender norms. This thesis investigates how two NFB-produced films directed by Jane Marsh, *Wings on Her Shoulder* (1943) and *Proudly She Marches* (1943), reflect these social changes and analyzes how the onscreen representation of women in the CAF aligns with three government policies (Order-in-Council P.C. #4798, P.C. #6289, and P.C. #56-6775) that allowed women to join the Armed Forces. It examines the ideological messages in these two paradigmatic films, focusing on themes of gender and patriotism. I also examine the broader societal attitudes toward women in the military – which, indeed, had a low acceptance rate from civilians and male soldiers alike - and study how these concerns are addressed in the films.

One purpose of this thesis is to contribute to the expanding field of "useful cinema," a term coined by Haidee Wasson and Charles Acland.[7] This term challenges the traditional focus on theatrical and art cinemas as the sole sites of significance. Instead, useful cinema refers to films designed to persuade audiences and propagate new ways of thinking, often serving specific institutions. *Proudly She Marches* and *Wings on Her Shoulder* embody the concept of useful cinema for two reasons: (1) at the time of their release, the films served as tools to enlist women into the military, shift social attitudes, boost morale, and promote national patriotism; and (2) in contemporary scholarship, the films act as valuable archival evidence which improve our understanding of women's roles during the Second World War. Thus, these two films were useful in both contemporaneous and contemporary periods and fit neatly into the category of useful cinema. Building on the term "useful cinema," this thesis examines the representations of military women in wartime films, analyzing how their portrayals conformed to and diverged from pre-war societal norms. Moreover, it investigates how these depictions were used to

[7] Charles Acland and Haidee Wasson eds. Useful Cinema. (Durham [NC]: Duke University Press, 2011), 2.

influence public opinion by presenting women in new, albeit temporary, social roles. This thesis demonstrates the inextricable link between the military and cinema as powerful vehicles for promoting and disseminating their ideological messages to the public.

Cinematic propaganda emerged as a highly influential and valuable means of communication for the Canadian government during the Second World War. It performed many functions, including spreading information about the war, building morale and patriotism, and fostering national animosity towards its common enemy. It was also instrumental in shaping national attitudes toward women's evolving participation in the war effort. The term "propaganda" took on a negative connotation after the French Revolution, but more so after the First World War, becoming synonymous with wartime activities that were viewed as misguided during the interwar period.[8] However, during the Second World War, the Canadian government and the NFB used the term "propaganda" interchangeably with wartime information, a type of "good propaganda." In this thesis, "propaganda" is not used pejoratively but refers to film and other media created by government institutions to educate citizens, disseminate information about the war, and promote changing social structures.

Founded in 1939 under the management of Scottish filmmaker and producer John Grierson, the NFB oversaw the creation of films whose purpose was, in part, to "(1) promote public encouragement and the maintenance of civilian morale, (2) […] keep Canadian opinion in close touch with national policy."[9] The NFB was the official film production arm of the Canadian government. All government departments were required by statute to use the NFB for

[8] For more information on the etymology of "Propaganda" see, Erwin W. Fellows, "Propaganda:' History of a Word." *American Speech* 34, no. 3 (1959): 182–89. https://doi.org/10.2307/454039 and Douglas Walton, "What Is Propaganda, and What Exactly Is Wrong with It." *Public Affairs Quarterly* 11, no. 4 (1997): 383–413. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40435999.

[9] John Grierson to "Mr. Marshall", September 15, 1939, 2, *John Grierson Archive, University of Stirling*.

all production and distribution purposes. As Jane Marsh notes, "If a government department didn't know they needed a film, Grierson persuaded them that they did."[10] The Board also created its own content, "filling the gaps the various departments may have left" and "doing the sort of purely educational work the others are apt to forget."[11] Between 1939 and 1945, the NFB created hundreds of documentaries, including two series that achieved worldwide distribution, *The World in Action* (1942-1945) and *Canada Carries On* (1940-1959). As author Gary Evans writes, Grierson became "Canada's propaganda maestro."[12]

The NFB established multiple divisions, all serving under Grierson's jurisdiction. These divisions made a wide array of films, including educational films about domestic and international politics, newsreels, animations explaining wartime bonds and food budgeting, and military enlistment films. The two films examined in this thesis fall under the last category. Both films were meant to entice women into the military by highlighting benefits such as dental hygiene, new uniforms and an increase in physical health. Both films also portray a diverse variety of jobs offered to military women, albeit not a diverse variety of women themselves. The race, age and social class of the women in both films – and in the majority of NFB films of the time – were white, middle or upper-class women between the ages of 18-35. In reality, there were outliers in each branch; however, early NFB films focused wholly on young white women.

The NFB cannot be completely faulted for this narrow representation, as Canadian laws at the time were ambiguous, if not outright exclusionary, towards Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), barring most from enlisting in the CAF. For example, to be eligible to enlist

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[10] Jane Marsh, "Four Days in May Transcripts," 93, The National Film Board Archives.
[11] John Grierson, "Relations of the Government to the Film Industry in Time of War," November 13, 1941, 64:30:6 P02.B5E/02, National Film Board Archives, 6.
[12] Gary Evans, *John Grierson and the National Film Board: The Politics of Wartime Propaganda* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), 50.

in the Air Force (WDs), women had to be between the ages of 18 and 41, be five feet or taller, conform to a "standard" weight and possess a "good character."[13] While there was no rule that expressly excluded BIPOC candidates, the enforcement of the last criterion was at the recruiter's discretion. Esther Hayes, a black woman living in Ontario during the war, recalls, "The youths would go up to the Hall and report of the troubles Black people were having in getting into the army or getting into the air force. They didn't want you in the army."[14] Despite the hardship, there were BIPOC women who successfully enlisted in the CAF, yet the NFB consistently portrayed young, white women as the ideal recruits. Moreover, NFB films presume a heteronormative, cis-gendered perspective, often promoting the military as an ideal place for a woman to find a husband. The noticeable exclusion of BIPOC and LGBTQ+ communities reinforces the idea that the NFB and the government's desire was to present a specific image of womanhood - one that aligned with dominant and traditional views of white femininity and heteronormativity. These exclusions are briefly addressed in the analyses of the two Jane Marsh films, however, both topics deserve more attention than the limitation of this thesis permits.

It is important to note that by 1941, the year women became eligible to join the military, it was not uncommon for Canadians to see women onscreen performing wartime labour duties. Since its inception, the NFB has produced films featuring women as volunteers or factory workers, encouraging them to step in for men who could be released to the front lines. Films like *The Home Front* (1940) and *Call for Volunteers* (1941) show the demanding work of women volunteers who sold victory bonds, organized scrap metal drives, and sewed uniforms. *Front of*

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[13] Carolyn Gossage, *Greatcoats and Glamour Boots : Canadian Women at War (1939-1945*). Rev. ed. (Toronto, Ont.: Dundurn Press, 2001), 53.
[14] Dionne Brand, "'We weren't allowed to go into factory work until Hitler started the war': The 1920s to the 1940s". in *We're rooted here and they can't pull us up: Essays in African Canadian Women's History*, ed. Peggy Bristow (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 180.

Steel (1940) and *Churchill's Island* (1941) show women working alongside men in factory positions. Moreover, the NFB had a still photography division that frequently distributed images of women working in factories independently or among men.[15] While women performing wartime labour was a common theme in NFB films, seeing women in uniform was rare. As a result, few films focused exclusively on women's military contributions, even once women became eligible to enlist.

Despite sharing the same director and release date, *Wings on Her Shoulder* and *Proudly She Marches* demonstrate two distinct approaches to presenting women in the CAF. *Wings on Her Shoulder* is meant specifically to recruit WDs, and *Proudly She Marches* targets a broader audience, emphasizing the benefits of joining any branch of the military. The formal structure of *Wings on Her Shoulder* follows a style similar to that of many other NFB films. These features include Lorne Greene's booming baritone voiceover, limited camera movement, and the use of stock footage. *Proudly She Marches,* on the other hand, is a scripted fictional film that makes use of a female voiceover. The camera movements are still rather limited in *Proudly*, but the upbeat tone of the film differs significantly from other, more authoritative NFB films like *Wings.* Though scarce, other NFB films promoted women in the military, most notably *Women Are Warriors* (1942), also directed by Marsh. *Women Are Warriors* is part of the *CCO* series and, like *Wings on Her Shoulder* and *Proudly She Marches*, depicts women joining the army, the recruits' camaraderie, and employs a similar shooting style to *Wings*. However, *Warriors* highlights British and Russian women, emphasizing their countries' more advanced acceptance of women in the military, while the other two films remain focused on Canada. While *Warriors*

[15] For more information on the NFB's still photography division see, Carol Payne, *The Official Picture : The National Film Board of Canada's Still Photography Division and the Image of Canada, 1941-1971*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013).

is a valuable film for analysis, *Wings* and *Proudly* both focus exclusively on Canadian women and have therefore been chosen as case studies.

Proudly tells the story of a Navy Officer (Wren) who is tired of women just being men's "ornaments" and wants to make a meaningful change. The film successfully portrays women as ambitious, independent, and fatigued with mundane home lives. Simultaneously, it emphasizes superficial "advantages" to enlisting in the armed forces, such as losing extra pounds with basic training and getting "crisp uniforms" - two benefits not promoted in male-focused films. *Wings* is slightly more problematic in terms of misogynistic messaging, but it, too, attempts to show women as capable workers. *Wings* follows a cohort of women who have a hard time adjusting to military life but ultimately become disciplined soldiers. The two works are crucial for this study because they were created to appeal to women and address the backlash women faced when joining the military. Moreover, both films reflect the complexities of women's roles during the war, which have been central to broader historical debates about the impact of the Second World War on women's rights.

In the book *Six War Years* (1976), Barry Broadfoot presents women's war efforts as revolutionary, suggesting "the war did wonders for the cause of Women's Lib."[16] Broadfoot argues that before the Depression, working women were seen as "unladylike."[17] However, once the war started and women were needed to replace men, it became "patriotic," and women "flowed into the factories."[18] Broadfoot's assessment overlooks the post-war systemic removal of women from the workforce. Many contemporary scholars, including myself, argue that while the war temporarily catapulted women into unconventional roles, these changes were designed to

[16] Barry Broadfoot, *Six War Years 1939 – 1945: Memories of Canadians at Home and Abroad* (Toronto: New York, PaperJacks, Digitized by Internet Archive, 1976), 353, https://archive.org/details/sixwaryearsmemor0000broa.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.

meet temporary national labour needs rather than create a lasting women's liberation movement. In her book *They're Still Women After All* (1986), Ruth Roach Pierson argues that wartime government policies were designed to meet immediate labour needs rather than to establish a new social structure. She notes, "Women's obligation to work in wartime was the major theme [of the government], not women's right to work."[19] Once the war ended, the government removed many policies that had been put into place. For instance, during the war, working men received income tax breaks for their wives' salaries of up to $750. After the war, this reverted to the pre-war amount of $250. Similarly, government-funded day nurseries established during the war to encourage mothers to participate in the labour force were phased out, leaving working mothers with fewer work choices post-war. As Roach Pierson concludes, the "employment of women was not supposed to last."[20]

While Jeff Keshen agrees with Roach Pierson that women did not gain equal rights during the war, he argues that their experiences "cannot be written off as ephemeral."[21] In his article "Revisiting Canada's Civilian Women During World War II," Keshen stresses that women were given unprecedented positions of authority during the war. For example, Bryne Hope Saunders, editor of Canada's women's magazine, *Chatelaine*, was appointed head of the Consumer's Division at the Wartime Prices and Trade Board. Likewise, Fraudena Eaton led the women's division of the National Selective Service (NSS). Keshen notes that soon after Eaton's division was established, "44 female-run branches across Canada" produced propaganda "demonstrating the importance of women's volunteer activities."[22] Keshen asserts that while

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[19] Ruth Roach Pierson, *They're Still Women after All : The Second World War and Canadian Womanhood* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986), 23.
[20] Ibid., 61.
[21] Jeff Keshen, "Revisiting Canada's Civilian Women During World War II", *Social History,* no. 60 (Ottawa: 1997), 266.
[22] Ibid., 244.

post-war policies certainly sought to reinforce a patriarchal order, women's wartime experiences laid "a wider and stronger base" for future gender equity movements.[23]

Further evidence of the temporary nature of women's higher social status during the war appears in several post-war NFB documentary films, such as *Back to Jobs* (1945) and *To the Ladies* (1946). For example, *To The Ladies* unapologetically reinforces pre-war gender roles by romanticizing the domestic mother. The film uses an older man's voiceover to thank his daughter-in-law for her service in the military and then for returning to her "old job." He says, "My boy's family is looking forward to peace now, my daughter-in-law to her old job: a wife. But a better wife and a better citizen because of her wartime experiences." The film concludes with uplifting music, leaving women with the impression that they have fulfilled their duties outside the home and are now expected to return to their "old job" as a wife.

Although there is some debate on how much women's status changed post-war, the general consensus is that the government had no intention of raising the social status of women to equal that of men in the labour force. Instead, only temporary measures were implemented as a response to the wartime crisis. Therefore, I approach the film analysis sections with the understanding that the war merely *temporarily* elevated women's social status and comment as such when examining scenes from *Wings* and *Proudly* that either suggest a permanent social change for women or reinforce the temporary nature of their labour contributions.

Similarly, there has been much written about the NFB, which is no surprise given its rich history and importance in Canadian culture. In its first six years, the NFB produced over five hundred documentaries, which saw international theatrical distribution, significantly shaping public perception and educating international audiences during a critical time in world history.

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[23] Ibid., 266.

Since then, the NFB has produced more than 14,000 films, acquiring more than 7,000 awards showcasing its profound influence on both Canadian culture and global cinema.[24] The NFB is essential to Canadian culture, serving as a resource for understanding and reflecting on the changes in Canada's social, political, and cultural identity throughout its history. Given its historical importance and the extensiveness of its global and national influence, overlooking the NFB in a thesis that focuses on wartime propaganda and its effect on Canadian ideologies would undercut the value of the NFB and its contributions to both Canadian and film history.

Among many others, Forsyth Hardy, Zoë Druick, and Jack Ellis have written extensively about the NFB and its founder, John Grierson. In his article "John Grierson's First Years at the National Film Board," Ellis explores the creation of the NFB, Grierson's relationship with Prime Minister Mackenzie King, and his notable colleagues, including Stuart Legg, Ross McLean, Raymond Spottiswoode, and Evelyn Spice Cherry. While Ellis provides a solid overview of the NFB's early years, the article lacks the space to offer a comprehensive history of the organization. One of the most detailed accounts of the NFB and Grierson during the war era is Gary Evans' *John Grierson and the National Film Board: The Politics of Wartime Propaganda, 1939–1945*. Evans provides an in-depth examination of Grierson's period at the NFB. He covers its inception, objectives for wartime propaganda, distribution circuits, and the post-war Red Scare, which led to accusations of Grierson being a communist and ultimately forced him out of the NFB and the country. While Evans thoroughly documents the NFB's early history, his work largely overlooks the contributions of women, both behind the camera and onscreen. In contrast, Teresa Nash, the primary interlocutor for this study, not only highlights films made by NFB women during the war but also examines and analyses the films thoroughly.

[24] "About the NFB," The National Film Board, accessed October 8, 2024, https://www.nfb.ca/about/.

Nash's 1982 Ph.D. dissertation entitled *Images of Women in National Film Board of Canada Films During World War II and the Post-War Years (1939 to 1949)* examines House of Commons' debates between 1939 and 1949 with an aim to analyze women's socio-economic position during this period. She uses this information to review NFB films made by both men and women from the same era, highlighting differences in how women were represented depending on the filmmaker's gender (in this case, the binary of male or female). Her critique effectively identifies and analyzes the problematic content found in films like *Wings* and *Proudly.* Nash argues that these films, produced within male-dominated institutions such as the NFB and the Canadian government, do not depict real women in society but rather "how men, the controllers of the images, wanted to see women and how these men wanted women to see themselves."[25] However, while Nash's observations are compelling and accurately criticize patriarchal influences, her analysis overlooks the historical and cultural context of the films within the broader media setting, focusing instead on policies and political structures rather than on analyzing the films within their media-specific context. For example, Nash provides detailed accounts of debates and policies from the House of Commons, illustrating how even women-centred films like *Proudly* and *Wings* are plagued and constrained by the inherent patriarchal structures. However, in order to gain a full picture of the content in these films, it is necessary to examine other media and advertising aimed at women of the 1930s and 1940s to uncover the general messages they conveyed. This thesis examines *Wings* and *Proudly* more broadly and situates it within the contemporaneous media culture. It also asks if these two films can be considered feminist and, if so, in what terms.

[25] Teresa Nash, Images of women in National Film Board of Canada Films During World War II and the Post-War Years (1939-1949), PhD diss., (McGill University, 1983), 6.

There have been several films that have discussed women NFB filmmakers. Don McWilliam's film *A Return to Memory* (2024), Denys Desjardins' *Making Movie History: The Women* (2013) and Lucia Piccinni's *Her Voice, the Studio D Story* (2007) all focus on the women who created films at the NFB. They highlight pioneering women who fought for their right to make films about women, for women, yet the films themselves do not discuss the women on screen. Instead, these films focus on women behind the camera. Though the latter two films discuss women filmmakers and camera crew from the 1970s, McWilliams' film uses archival footage and interviews to discuss the women of the NFB during the Second World War. While his film is essential to women's studies and Canadian film history, it promotes women behind the camera, not in front. It does not discuss national ideologies or representation onscreen but rather the hardship and the resulting comradery that several NFB women employees shared during a global crisis. This thesis fills this gap, in part, by examining films that investigate women in front of the camera who are made to be seen as the paradigmatic women of the war.

Several authors have discussed the importance of Canadian women during the war.[26] For example, Jean Bruce's book *Back the Attack! Canadian Women During the Second World War – at Home and Abroad* (1985) compiles primary sources from newspaper articles, magazines and interviews, providing a comprehensive understanding of women's experiences as factory workers, volunteers, and members of the CAF. In the same vein, Ruth Roach Pierson, Barbara Dundas, and Carolyn Gossage discuss military women, highlight personal experiences and policy changes, and provide criticism on the rise and fall of women's influences on the Canadian

[26] Gossage, *Greatcoats and Glamour Boots*; Roach Pierson, *They're Still Women after All* and *Canadian Women and the Second World War : I'm Making Bombs and Buying Bonds!,* (Ottawa, ON, CA: Canadian Historical Association, 1983); Barbara Dundas and Canada Department of National Defence, *A History of Women in the Canadian Military*. (Montréal: Art global and Dept. of National Defense in co-operation with de Dept. of Public Works and Government Services Canada, 2000); J. L., Granatstein and Desmond Morton. *A Nation Forged in Fire : Canadians and the Second World War, 1939-1945*. 1st ed. (Toronto, Canada: Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1989) are a few of these titles.

military. Despite these valuable contributions to Canadian women's studies, none of these works are interdisciplinary in nature and do not engage with how women were portrayed in films. Nor do any of these works address the governmental influence of cinema on public attitudes toward gender roles. This thesis uses all of these essential texts in order to bridge the gap in discourse between film and women's representation *within* Canadian history.

I approach this thesis through a historical reception lens, drawing on Barbara Klinger's framework from her critical essay, "Film History Terminable and Interminable: Recovering the Past in Reception Studies." Klinger examines the debate between Tony Bennett's ambitious goal of including intertext in analysis to create a *histoire totale* and Anthony Easthope's critique, which argues that Bennett's approach is unachievable due to the ever-evolving cycle of new meanings in texts over time. Easthope suggests an analysis always has diachronic potential, meaning texts produce new interpretations over time and have multiple meanings upon original release, what he calls a synchronic meaning. Thus, for Easthrope, achieving a *histoire totale* becomes an elusive goal that risks undermining meaningful analysis.[27] Klinger, like me, finds Bennett's "utopian" goal of totality compelling despite its impossibility.[28] As Klinger notes, "While impossible to achieve, [totality] is necessary as an ideal goal for historical research."[29] Totality encourages a historian to explore the broader contemporaneous social, cultural, political, and economic conditions that influence a text's production, distribution, exhibition, and reception. This interdisciplinary approach provides a more panoramic understanding of a text, challenging traditional film studies methods that often focus solely on aesthetic features. While this thesis does not aim to offer a fully totalized view - nor do I believe any single work can - I

[27] Barbara Klinger, "Film History Terminable and Interminable: Recovering the Past in Reception Studies," in Screen -London- 38, no. 2, 1997, 107.
[28] Klinger, 108.
[29] Ibid.

seek to contribute to a *histoire totale* of the two Marsh films by analyzing their evolving interpretations over time.

My thesis examines two 1943 films and a 1982 critique from a present-day perspective, considering how each text reflects its social context and how their meanings may have evolved diachronically. For example, Nash's 1982 critique of *Proudly She Marches* reflects the social climate of her time. Her perspective was influenced by groundbreaking feminist critiques such as Laura Mulvey's 1975 essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," which introduced the concept of the "male gaze" into academic discourse. Nash critiques specific shots in *Proudly She Marches*, such as close-ups of a woman's leg and a scene where the protagonist wears a slip, viewing them as problematic representations of women. While her criticisms are valid, there is more nuance to these scenes, which I explore in my film analysis, demonstrating how interpretations of such elements have evolved over the past four decades. The approach to this thesis aligns with what Klinger calls a "radial flux of meaning," which, in simple terms, is the way a text's interpretations change over time. I aim to highlight how interpretations may have shifted over time, adding to a *histoire totale* for these two films.

My methodology is grounded in archival research, comparative analysis and film analysis. I examine archival material, such as newspapers, magazines, and telegraphs, to gauge the social climate of the 1940s. The comparative analysis evaluates prevailing gender ideologies of the time through media such as advertisements, comparing them with the representation of women in NFB films to demonstrate the progressive nature of the Marsh films.

My film analysis approach draws from foundational film studies texts by Kristin Thompson, David Bordwell, Jeff Smith, Timothy Corrigan, Jeffrey Geiger, and R.L. Rutsky. These works provide a crucial foundation for a scholarly approach to cinema. *Film Art: An*

Introduction by Bordwell, Thompson, and Smith and *The Film Experience: An Introduction* by Corrigan and White are seminal texts for introducing film analysis. I adopt the authors' film language and their approach to "think like a filmmaker" when analyzing film techniques.[30] Specifically, I consider how formal elements, such as voiceover and camera angles, uncover a range of interpretations and provide insight into a filmmaker's thought process. Geiger and Rutsky's *Film Analysis: A Norton Reader* builds on these concepts, emphasizing the value of analyzing not only formal elements but also thematic and cultural ideas that are otherwise hidden in the superficial level of a film. The author's aim, which I adopt, is to "discover latent or disguised meaning within the text," allowing the critic to ask questions and interpret the filmmakers' decisions.[31] In other words, film analysis, as articulated by all of these authors, encourages critics to delve deeper into a film's themes by examining and interpreting its aesthetic and formal elements.

While there has been significant progress in the representation of women in the military, twenty-first-century military women still face significant challenges in achieving equal rights, such as representation in executive-level positions. For instance, in 2023, only 20.69% of Navy members, including Officers and non-commissioned members (NCMs), were women. There are even fewer in the Air Force, with women making up only 20.25% of the total and just 13.92% of the total in the Army. Higher-level positions show an even greater disparity. Out of the 74,784 Canadians in the CAF as of 2023, there are *twelve* women who hold the rank of general or admiral.[32] Furthermore, women in the military continue to be disproportionately affected by

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[30] David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, and Jeff Smith, *Film Art : An Introduction*. 12th ed. (New York: McGraw Hill LLC, 2024), 401.
[31] Jeffrey Geiger, and R. L. Rutsky, *Film Analysis: A Norton Reader*. 2nd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2013), 7.
[32] For total number of personnel see "Personnel," *Government of Canada, Department of National Defence*, last modified April 8, 2024, https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/reports-publications/proactive-disclosure/nddn-supplementary-estimates-b-2023-2024/background-notes/personnel.html. For number of women in higher ranks, see "Timeline," *Government of Canada, Department of National Defence*,

sexual harassment and violence. The *Strong, Secure, Engaged Act* has implemented initiatives like "Operation HONOUR" that directly address sexual harassment and assault concerns. While statistics are unavailable for women's experiences of sexual harassment in the 1940s, we can reasonably presume that they faced similar, if not worse, conditions than contemporary women. Recent reports show that the most common forms of harassment include sexual jokes (61%), inappropriate sexual comments (31%), and inappropriate discussions about sex life (29%), with 3% of women reporting unwanted touching.[33] Although this thesis will not focus on sexual harassment or assault, it remains a significant factor contributing to the low enlistment numbers and impedes progress in creating equality within the military.

Studying the cinematic representation of military women provides valuable insights into the ongoing discourse on women's rights and demonstrates that cinema is a noteworthy avenue for historical research. I will demonstrate that studying films and critiques from the past is valuable not only to contribute to a *histoire totale* but also to illustrate how critiques of the same material evolve over time. Furthermore, this analysis highlights the persistence of gender inequality, demonstrating the relevance of historical reception studies in 2025.

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last modified March 5, 2024, https://www.veterans.gc.ca/en/remembrance/those-who-served/women-veterans/timeline#two-thousand

[33] "Department of National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces address the Statistics Canada 2022 Survey on Sexual Misconduct in the Canadian Armed Forces," *Government of Canada, Department of National Defence*, last modified December 5, 2023, https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/news/2023/12/department-of-national-defence-and-the-canadian-armed-forces-address-the-statistics-canada-2022-survey-on-sexual-misconduct-in-the-canadian-armed-f.html

Part One
Setting the Stage: Understanding the Context Behind the Films

Join in or Join up: Volunteers and Military Women

Throughout the Second World War, Canadian women made significant contributions to the war effort, both on the home front as volunteers and in paid military roles. On the home front, over three million women volunteered by selling victory bonds and organizing campaigns like the "Dig In and Dig Out the Scrap" drive, which collected metal, rags, rubber and other materials for military use.[34] Knitting circles made sweaters, socks, and hats for soldiers overseas, while women wrote letters and sent care packages to loved ones and strangers alike.[35] Women joined farming brigades to support female farmers while their sons and husbands were sent to the front lines. Women were involved in paid work, too. By late 1944, over one million women were in full-time employment, replacing men in munitions plants, manufacturing and industry jobs, and driving taxis, busses and streetcars.[36] While women took on these critical roles in civilian sectors starting in the late 1930s, those eager to serve the war effort more directly through service in the military had to wait until 1941, when the government finally allowed women the opportunity to enlist. Impatient to join and frustrated by the government's restrictions, Joan Kennedy (nee. Fensham), like many others, refused to accept these limitations, leading her to create Canada's first female paramilitary group.[37]

Following the signing of the Munich Agreement in which Hitler was given control over the Sudetenland, many feared this would not be the peace treaty Neville Chamberlain promised. Several days later, on October 5, 1938, Kennedy, along with nine other women, established the

[34] Granatstein and Desmond Morton, 37.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid.; Roach Pierson "They're Still Women After All," 9.
[37] Gossage, 31; Roach Pierson, "They're Still Women After All," 97.

British Columbia Women's Service Corps (BCWSC) in an affluent neighbourhood in Victoria, B.C.[38] The women were trained in infantry drill, motor mechanics, anti-gas measurements, map readings, military clerical duties, signalling and de-coding, cooking, and revolver training, and they received lectures on hygiene and nutrition.[39] Their aim was to be the "Canadian version" of The Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS), Britain's official female branch of the Army.[40] Once the war began in 1939, other paramilitary groups were established across the country. The Women's Volunteer Reserve Corps, known as the Canadian Beavers, and the Canadian Auxiliary Territorial Service (CATS) were the largest groups. The Beavers had fifteen divisions, sprawled across Québec, Ontario and the Maritime provinces, while the CATS, though primarily based in Toronto, had divisions in Saskatoon and Vancouver.[41] These groups were self-funded and trained similarly to official CAF branches. By the time women were officially allowed to enlist in the military, 6,700 women were enrolled in paramilitary groups across Canada.[42]

Beginning in 1940, Kennedy travelled across Canada, gaining support for women's entry into the armed forces, collecting approximately 1,200 BCWSC by August.[43] On multiple occasions, she proposed the formation of an official women's division to the National War Services and the Department of National Defense, speaking directly with Prime Minister Mackenzie King and National Defence Minister J.L Ralston, but she was repeatedly denied. However, in 1941 and 1942, due to dangerously low manpower, the government and the CAF

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[38] Gossage, 31; Susan Wade, "Joan Kennedy and the British Columbia Women's Service Corps," in *Not Just Pin Money: Selected Essays on the History of Women's Work in British Columbia*, eds. Barbara K. Latham and Roberta J. Pazdro (Victoria, B.C: Camosun College, 1984), 408-409.
[39] Roach Pierson, "They're Still Women After All," 98; Susan Wade, "Joan Kennedy and the British Columbia Women-:S Service Corps" in *Not Just Pin Money : Selected Essays on the History of Women's Work in British Columbia*. Eds. Latham, Barbara, and Roberta Jane Pazdro. Victoria, B.C.: Camosun College, 1984.
[40] Wade, 409.
[41] Roach Pierson, "They're Still Women After All," 97.; Bruce, 22.
[42] Roach Pierson, "They're Still Women After All," 97.; Bruce, 21.
[43] Sarah Hogenbirk, "Women Inside the Canadian Military, 1938-1966," (PhD dissertation, Carleton University, 2017), 61.; Roach Pierson, "They're Still Women After All," 97.

finally conceded, and women's divisions were created. Women began to enlist in droves, with total enlistment exceeding 50,000 by the war's end.[44] Fittingly, Kennedy became the first-ever female Canadian soldier.

Selling Femininity: Women's Representation in Wartime Magazine Advertising

In 1944, *The House of Tangee,* an American cosmetics company, ran an advertisement in *Chatelaine* for their face powder and lipstick. In bold capital letters, the heading states, "We are Still the Weaker Sex" (Figure 1). [45] Small script announces a blonde-haired white woman with an unusually large neck and oversized eyes as Constance Luft Huhn, head of *Tangee*. Behind her, in individual rectangular boxes, sit seven women in military garb. The ad states, "Many of us may be serving shoulder to shoulder with America's fighting men - but we are still the weaker sex ...It's still up to us to appear as lovely and as alluring as possible." The ad introduces its products and clarifies, "Whether you're in or out of uniform, you'll want to be completely appealing and feminine."[46] This ad highlights the paradox of women's advertisements in the 1940s by simultaneously acknowledging women's contributions to the military while emphasizing femininity and subordination as its primary themes. Seven rectangular boxes depict women in military garb, yet these are overshadowed by a large portrait of a well-dressed, heavily made-up woman. This hierarchical presentation of femininity aligns with the broader wartime message urging women to maintain their femininity despite the rapidly changing social changes of the time.

This ad is not unlike the many others seen in *Chatelaine* and other women's magazines throughout the war. Various forms of media - magazines, newspapers, advertisements, and

[44] "Women at War," Government of Canada, Last Modified, November 11, 2017, https://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/classroom/fact-sheets/women; Gossage, 24.
[45] Constance Luft Huhn, "We Are The Weaker Sex," *Chatelaine* 17, no. 8 (August 1944): back cover.
[46] Ibid.

Figure 1: *Chatelaine* 17, no. 8. August 1944.

cinema - played a leading role in reinforcing traditional gender stereotypes by portraying women as domestic caregivers, which ultimately devalued their significant contributions to the war. Newspapers, for instance, offered advice on how women should dress for their body type and how to make the perfect stew.[47] Films across various genres reinforced traditional gender norms by portraying female protagonists as unemployed socialites, domestic caretakers focused on child-rearing or women whose lives revolved around the goal of marriage. It is important, then, to look at how Canadians viewed women in the broader scope of the media so that we can properly compare the two Jane Marsh films in the second part of this thesis.

Emily Spencer investigated the changing themes in *Chatelaine* throughout the war period and concluded that the overall messaging was complex and often contradictory. Spencer notes that the editors of *Chatelaine* were all female and that their "maternal feminist views … were evident in its content, particularly regarding career options for women."[48] *Chatelaine* promoted women's working rights, portraying them as equally competent as men and encouraging independence. Simultaneously, it upheld that a woman's primary role was that of wife and/or mother.[49]

During the Depression, the magazine celebrated women's competence and independence by applauding and encouraging working women. However, wartime coverage increasingly emphasized traditional femininity, subordination, and attractiveness - especially for women in the military, as seen in such ads as "We Are The Weaker Sex" - while simultaneously defending women who chose paid employment. The magazine reinforced middle-class ideals and gender

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[47] Josephine Lowman, "Hints to Help You Dress Flatteringly: Why Grow Old?" *The Globe and Mail* (1936-), Mar 16, 1939. "Page 20" *Toronto Daily Star* (1900-1971), Dec 30, 1940.
[48] Emily Spencer, *Lipstick and High Heels : War, Gender, and Popular Culture*, (Kingston, Ont.: Canadian Defence Academy Press, 2007), 170.
[49] Ibid., 176.

norms, suggesting that women's contributions were both necessary but, ultimately, temporary. For example, Spencer lists ample short stories, frequently published in the magazine, that have a similar trajectory: a woman is engaged in paid work, she meets a man, and she returns to the home. For those who are already married, the story goes something like this: a wife who works during the war returns home after the war. While the editors were happy to advertise women working outside the home, there was never a doubt that "women were first and foremost wives and mothers."[50] They emphasized the double duty that women must take on should they wish to work outside the home but insisted that the paid job was less valuable than domestic duties.

Another paradoxical approach was that the editors did not oppose women wearing pants to work if absolutely necessary, but they advised women to "continue to dress attractively for men, irrespective of practicality."[51] In *Chatelaine*'s view, a woman who wears pants to work is sacrificing herself for the good of the country – a patriotic sentiment. However, once she finishes her shift or is back at home, she should "dress attractively" for men's sake. Ultimately, *Chatelaine* responded to societal tensions with a paradoxical approach. They presented women as capable yet subordinate, independent yet domesticized – a feminist ideal bound by traditional constraints.

Moreover, the editors of *Chatelaine* promoted volunteer work over paid labour. We can see this more clearly in Susan Bland's qualitative analysis of all the ads presented in *Maclean's* magazine targeted towards women from 1939 to 1950. In the analysis, Bland identifies four distinct categories attributed to women: (1) Housewife, (2) Working Women, (3) Single Women and (4)"Any Women". Bland provides a helpful chart listing the percentage of ads directed to specific categories of women by year (Figure 2).

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[50] Ibid., 164
[51] Ibid., 177.

Table 1

Percentage of Advertisements
Directed to Designated Roles
of Women, 1939-50

Designated Role by Percentage (%)	Year 1939	'40	'41	'42	'43	'44	'45	'46	'47	'48	'49	'50
Homemaker	39.0	41.0	40.2	39.0	40.0	47.0	49.0	53.0	58.3	60.0	66.0	73.0
Wife	3.9	2.5	1.2	2.4	3.4	1.9	.9	1.6	3.5	3.25	2.9	1.3
Mother	19.8	19.2	8.8	10.9	9.5	9.6	12.0	8.6	8.7	5.7	8.7	3.8
HOUSEWIFE (total)	63.0	62.7	49.4	52.0	53.0	58.7	62.0	63.0	70.4	69.1	77.6	78.2
War Worker	1.3	0	0	4.8	14.0	10.6	0	0	0	0	0	0
Clerical Worker	0	0	5.0	2.4	2.0	1.9	0	6.25	2.6	0	0	0
Career Woman	0	2.5	0	0	0	2.9	1.9	.8	.9	0	0	0
WORKING WOMAN (total)	1.3	2.5	5.0	7.2	16.0	15.4	1.9	7.0	3.5	0	0	0
SINGLE WOMAN	6.5	7.7	11.0	7.3	8.0	2.9	4.6	5.5	1.7	5.7	3.8	0
'ANY WOMAN'	30.2	28.2	34.0	32.0	22.0	23.0	31.5	25.0	24.0	25.2	18.4	21.7

Figure 2: Table from Susan Bland, "Henrietta the Homemaker and 'Rosie the Riveter': Images of Women in Advertising in Maclean's Magazine 1939-50," Atlantis 8, no. 2 (Spring 1983): 72.

The first category, the "Housewife," encompasses 57.3% of all ads directed to women between 1939 and 1945. It is further divided into three subcategories: Homemaker, Wife, and Mother. Ads directed at the Homemaker category occupy the largest percentage of the Housewife category, at 42%. Ads targeting the Homemaker emphasize household maintenance tasks like cooking, cleaning, and gardening, with a focus on saving time and money and reducing "drudgery."[52] The next highest in the Housewife category is The Mother, which makes up 12.8% of all ads between 1939-45. Ads in this category highlight childcare products and promote the authority of doctors, dieticians, and scientists over a mother's intuition. Finally, ads directed at Wives only made up 2.3% of the total and focused on products that could enhance marital relationships, such as feminine hygiene products, recipes, and food items.

[52] Susan Bland, "Henrietta the Homemaker and 'Rosie the Riveter': Images of Women in Advertising in Maclean's Magazine 1939-50," *Atlantis* 8, no. 2 (Spring 1983): 67.

The second role, the "Working Woman," represents only 7% of all ads between 1939-45. It is also divided into three subcategories: the War Worker, the Clerical Worker, and the Career Woman. The War Worker category, which includes women in all war-related occupations, both factory and military, accounts for 4.3% of all ads between 1939-45 but has no presence in 1940, 1941 and 1945. This is unsurprising given that women were only allowed into the armed forces in mid-1941, and women's divisions quickly disbanded as the war was concluding. Ads aimed at War Workers tended to highlight femininity, usually in the form of cosmetics or pharmaceutical items.[53] The Clerical Worker and The Career Woman together comprise less than 3% of all ads during this period. Clerical Workers were depicted as stenographers, typists, and office workers, while the scarce representations of Career Women included roles like teachers, journalists, and nurses. Interestingly, these subcategories seem to have been aimed primarily at men, portraying these women as sexualized, poised, and confident helpers rather than directly marketing any products to women. When the ads did speak to women in this category, it was to ensure them that they could find a husband while at work.[54]

Similarly, the Single Women category also depicts themes of "catching a man" with frequent "promises of romance and marriage."[55] These ads only garnered 6.8% of all ads. Lastly, the "Any Women" category, which makes up the second-highest portion of ads at 28.7%, was targeted more broadly. It was directed to all women regardless of marital status or age. The main ad themes for this category were beauty products and the notion of maintaining youth.

When we look closer at the qualitative data, it becomes clear that the Housewife category dominated advertisements in Canada's leading magazines between 1939 and 1945. This

[53] Ibid., 77.
[54] Ibid., 77.
[55] Ibid.

dominance illustrates that, despite initiatives by the government and the National Selective Service (NSS), the prevailing cultural environment still viewed the Housewife as the primary role for women. After the war, the data shifted even further toward traditional gender roles, with the Housewife category skyrocketing to 73% of all ads, while the Working Woman category disappeared entirely after 1947. At its peak in 1943, ads for Working Women accounted for only 16% of all advertisements, predominantly featuring War Workers at 14%. Once women were no longer needed in the labour force or military, advertisements promoting domestic roles for women soared.

Like *Chatelaine*, *Maclean's* often reinforced traditional female roles by emphasizing beauty and femininity. For instance, one ad features a close-up of a woman holding a tool resembling a carabiner, gazing thoughtfully to her left (Figure 3). She is dressed in a work shirt and bandana and wears a full face of makeup. Behind her stands a smiling man in a worker's hat and shirt, embracing her. In bold black text reads, "Okay, Sugar… your time's rationed, but you look sweet to me."[56] Beside a dripping olive branch and a Palmolive soap package, the ad continues, "When I took this job at the plant, I figured I'd given up my complexion for my country. No time now for hours with beauty preparations! […] goodbye to glamour I thought … yet there was Ted, the handsomest man at the plant, asking for a DATE!" Further down, the ad assures readers it only takes two minutes, twice a day, to maintain healthy skin, making it "so easy to keep dainty all over." The ad concludes in a large font, "Now more than ever I trust Palmolive to keep me lovely - for him!" From a 21st-century perspective, this ad is overwhelmingly misogynistic. However, such advertisements were commonplace in the 1940s. They emphasized the need for women to maintain a quick beauty routine while working and

[56] "Okay Sugar… your time's Rationed, but you look Sweet to Me," *Maclean's Magazine* 8, no 2, March 15, 1943.

Figure 3: *Maclean's Magazine* 8, no 2, March 15, 1943.

portrayed male factory workers as prospective husbands, all while attempting to depict women as patriotic contributors to the war effort. In some respect, these ads were progressive simply because they promoted women as workers. They reinforced femininity to address real-life anxieties that have been well documented in Teresa Nash's study of House of Commons debates. Nash cites a 1943 argument made by M.P. Emmanuel d'Anjou, who warned that "women will ruin their chances for marriage by developing unfeminine behaviour from working in munitions factories."[57] Others, like Québec M.P. Frédéric Dorion, went further, calling all working women a "social disruption" that would be harmful to future generations.[58] In response, films and advertisements had to simultaneously defend women's right to work for the sake of the wartime economy and mask fears of a changing social order.

Against this backdrop, Jane Marsh's films were remarkably progressive for 1940. Unlike women in advertisements, Marsh depicts women actively participating in military drills and operating machinery, portraying them as competent contributors to the war effort rather than as overly made-up figures pandering to male egos – although elements of male pandering appear in her work as well. The difference is that, in cinema, the audience views more than one image, allowing for a more nuanced approach to women's contributions.

In my film analysis, I agree with Nash's observations that there are certainly blatant misogynistic references, but I challenge that this was the intended and sole takeaway. While I agree with Nash's feminist critiques and even expand on them, it is crucial to acknowledge that *Wings* and *Proudly* were groundbreaking feminist works for their time. Marsh's portrayal of women challenged prevailing stereotypes, like those in ads such as "We Are the Weaker Sex," offering, instead, an empowering vision of women.

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[57] Nash, 108.
[58] Nash, 402-03

Admittedly, the films contain problematic content, such as highlighting time for grooming and personal hygiene over the actual work the uniformed women will do. However, for women who had long been told their primary purpose was to be wives and mothers, Marsh's inclusion of some stereotypical "feminine" aspects was more than likely a strategic choice, if not a choice made in a patriarchal environment that normalized the importance of grooming for women over more important tasks. Without these concessions, the films risked being perceived as too radical and potentially dismissed. It is essential to remember that these were, above all, recruitment films, not feminist manifestos. To clarify, my critique, as outlined in my analysis, is not aimed at Marsh herself but, like Nash, at the patriarchal disposition of the Canadian government and the NFB, which shaped the production of these films.

Making Men Comfortable: Jane Marsh and NFB Politics

In 1942 and 1943, the Canadian military elected to use recruitment films (among other media campaigns) to boost female enlistment, as numbers dropped following the initial surge of women joining the military. Two surveys were conducted in the first half of 1943 to investigate the reasons behind the decline. The first, carried out by Elliot-Hayes Limited, surveyed 7,283 civilians across "both sexes, all races, all geographical regions, all age levels, all economic levels, all occupations and all classes of conjugal condition."[59] The second survey polled 1,100 CWAC members. In both surveys, the most common deterrent from enlisting was the disapproval of family and friends, with disapproval rates particularly high among French speakers, reaching 57%. When asked, "How can women best serve Canada's war effort?" only 7% identified the Armed Forces, while 45% believed that efforts from home, such as

[59] Elliot-Hayes Limited, "Report: An Enquiry into the Attitude of the Canadian Civilian Public Towards the Women's Armed Forces," *Library and Archives Canada*, (April 1943), 3.

"maintaining home life," "conserving food and rationing," and "buying war bonds and stamps," were the most important.[60] Of those who responded to the survey's question, "Why Women Don't Join the Armed Forces?" the primary objection, receiving 16% of the responses, was that it was "Unladylike" and would cause them to "lose self-respect;" the next highest (besides "other") was "home obligations, with 5%.[61] The survey summarized these findings by noting, "The public felt that women avoided the armed forces because it was an unladylike occupation in which they would lose their self-respect.[62] With these results, the military began recruitment campaigns highlighting women in the armed forces as feminine ensued, including two films from the NFB.

Jane Marsh (nee. Smart) was commissioned by John Grierson to make two military recruitment films in 1943: *Proudly She Marches* and *Wings on Her Shoulder*. Marsh came from Ottawa's high society, where she regularly mingled with influential figures like Lester B. Pearson and Prime Minister Mackenzie King at her mother's dinner parties. It was at one of these parties in 1941 that Marsh first met Grierson, who dismissed her as just another socialite not contributing to the war effort.[63] Perturbed by the insult, Marsh marched into Grierson's office the next day and demanded a job. She persuaded him to send her to Paris, a small town in Ontario, to highlight how small communities could support the war effort.[64] Although that film never materialized, Marsh impressed Grierson, leading to her new role as a writer and production assistant. Her colleague, NFB director Graham McInnes, noted that her "way-ward, unpredictable spirit" made her "as grimy and effective as any producer."[65] Marsh was granted

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[60] Ibid., 8.
[61] Ibid., 29.
[62] Ibid.
[63] *A Return to Memory*, directed by Donald McWilliams (2024; Montreal, Canada, The National Film Board).
[64] Graham McInnes, and Eugene P. Walz, *One Man's Documentary : A Memoir of the Early Years of the National Film Board*, (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2004), 152.
[65] Ibid.

significantly more freedom than other women at the NFB - a freedom that she even found surprising - since most women at the time were hired as secretaries, stenographers, or put in the negative room.[66] Marsh quickly worked up the ranks and became a producer on the *Canada Carries On* series (*CCO*), one of the two theatrical series made by the NFB, which was made for and released to movie theatres throughout the country. The other series, the *World in Action,* focused on international issues, while *CCO* focused solely on Canada's war effort. The short films were twenty minutes long and were distributed once a month to theatres. *Proudly She Marches* was part of the *CCO* series, while *Wings on Her Shoulder* was part of *The World in Action*.

Despite Marsh's early success, her relationship with Grierson deteriorated over time. In the spring of 1944, she left the NFB and went on to work for British Information Services in New York, where she made a series of films about the British Second Army.[67] In her resignation letter, she cited Grierson's decision to change the format of the *CCO* series as the primary reason for her departure. Grierson had changed the series from twelve two-reel films per year to twenty-six one-reel films - a change Marsh felt was detrimental to the quality of the films. She argued, "26- sub-standards do not equal one good film, nor can they do as much good."[68] It was later revealed that Marsh may have also resigned because she had been working on the *CCO* series in a producer role but was not given the official title. Grierson reportedly felt it was inappropriate to hire a woman as a producer, regardless of her qualifications.[69]

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[66] *A Return to Memory*, 00:17:36; Nash, 332-35. Marsh notes that Grierson gave her "freedom to do what was necessary" in "Four Days in May Transcript", Montreal: National Film Board of Canada, 1975
[67] Jane Marsh, "Four Days in May Transcript."
[68] Nash, 204.
[69] Marc St. Pierre, "Women and Film: A Tribute to the Female Pioneers of the NFB," *The National Film Board* (blog), March 4, 2013, https://blog.nfb.ca/blog/2013/03/04/women-film-pioneers/; Nash, 201-202.

While Marsh had a difficult time connecting with Grierson, other women at the NFB recall a more egalitarian environment. As director and producer Gudrun Parker recalls, "I never felt any self-consciousness or any handicap in being a woman. I think we were given pretty well equal opportunities."[70] In a similar vein, Allison "Red" Burns, a production assistant, remembers, "Nobody was very concerned with categories. There were women, there were men, there were young people and old people, and the fact was, we were all there for a single purpose. We were there to make films."[71] Marsh offered a more critical perspective, noting that the women "were so grateful to be working in interesting jobs that they didn't realize they were slaves."[72] The difference of opinion within the NFB stresses not only the dichotomy of women's mindsets at the NFB but also of the broader culture of the 1940s. That is, while some women fought for their position and challenged existing norms, others resigned themselves to the status quo. According to Marsh, years after leaving the NFB, she encountered Grierson, who commented on her denied promotion. He remarked, "You know, you were right at the time, but you really didn't expect me to give in to a woman, did you?"[73]

Despite her strong feminist views, Marsh had to balance her progressive ideas with the expectations of her time. Before making her first military film in the series *Women are Warriors* (originally titled *Work for Women*), Marsh educated herself by researching women's history and their place in society. Her unpublished report is found, in part, in Barbara Halpern Martineau's chapter, "Before the Guerillières: Women's Films at the NFB During World War II." The report states:

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[70] *Making Movie History: Wartime Women*, directed by Joanne Robertson (2014; Canada, National Film Board)
[71] Red Burns in *Making Movie History: Wartime Women*.
[72] Barbara Halpern Martineau, "Before the Guerillières: Women's Films at the NFB During World War II." ["Transcript of a speech delivered at the Conference on Canadian Film in Its Historical Context, November 13, 1976, Ottawa, Ontario."] In *Canadian Film Reader*, edited by Seth Feldman and Joyce Nelson. (Toronto: Peter Martin Associates, 1977), 63.
[73] Nash, 205; Halpern Martineau, 64.

> General consensus of opinion of women as expressed by men during the last six thousand years leads one to believe that although quite indispensable they are also dangerous because incomprehensible and unpredictable, and they should therefore be kept apart as much as possible, either by being
>
> 1) Put up on a pedestal and hypnotized into thinking they are frail, incompetent and dependent; or
> 2) Subjugated for the expediency of:
>   a. Lust
>   b. Cheap labour
>
> and that all of them have two duties which should occupy the whole of their lives, thoughts and ambitions, i.e.,
>
> 1) To make men comfortable
> 2) To bear children
>
> and that on no account should they be allowed to use their faculties for anything else as this would bring about disorder by upsetting the status quo.[74]

The report continues in a similar tone, outlining the ways in which women have been marginalized and underutilized throughout history. Marsh was particularly critical of the Western world's reluctance to appoint women in combat roles as they do in China and Russia, a criticism highlighted in *Women Are Warriors*.

This report provides crucial context revealing Marsh's yearning for gender equality and her desire to address it in her films. Despite this, however, Marsh's films seem to cater to male egos or aim to "make men comfortable." For example, in *Wings on Her Shoulder*, the first two

[74] Halpern Martineau, 63.

minutes focus on men training and then flying, while women are only shown once in supportive roles as factory workers, assuring the audience that women will not be flying. Similarly, in *Proudly She Marches*, the female narrator comments on women's weak muscles and how they enjoy a good cry. *Women are Warriors* is arguably the most overtly feminist of the trio because it highlights women as labourers (not only as domestic volunteer workers but as machinists, welders, and pilots) in their own right, avoiding the suggestions that they are only here to support men as is the case of *Proudly* and especially *Wings*. Even so, the film still emphasizes women's fragility by proclaiming that women receive protective cream for their hands before spreading strong fabric soap over the wings of an aircraft and emphasizing two 10-minute breaks they will receive per day.

The contradiction between Marsh's feminist intentions and what is portrayed on screen warrants a closer analysis to illustrate how her cinematic choices reinforce societal expectations of women while simultaneously challenging them. Especially when compared with other advertisements marketed towards women at the time, her films can certainly be credited as more progressive than the status quo. Her films were created with a double goal in mind: recruiting women and making men comfortable with women in the military.

Part Two: A Close Study of *Wings on Her Shoulder*

Challenging Norms Through Humour: Themes from Wings on Her Shoulder

> For men hitherto *tied to ground jobs* to win their wings as flyers and to *release these men* for duty in the sky; the call goes out for a *new force to take their places*. A new force *from the ground* to keep the bombs falling fair and square on Germany.

Lorne Greene's narration in *Wings on Her Shoulder* perfectly summarizes the film's central message. In just two sentences, he emphasizes three times that women are needed to replace men in the ground jobs that they are otherwise "tied" to. His phrases, such as "release these men" and "a new force from the ground," imply that women's primary purpose is to free men from less important tasks, subordinating their wartime contributions. By suggesting that men are "tied" to these jobs, he implies that they would rather contribute to the war effort in some other, more masculine manner. This frames women's involvement as a supporting role, suggesting that women are merely filling roles that are holding men back from more critical responsibilities. Beyond portraying women as supportive or secondary to men, *Wings* explores themes of femininity and impermanence. Embedded within these themes, however, is a delivery that is both humorous and audacious, complicating the voiceover mentioned above.

Early NFB films followed a similar stylistic structure: typically, they were black and white, comprised of a mixture of found footage and fictional narrative, and most had Lorne Green's deep authoritarian voice-over. Narrative themes often highlighted patriotism and resilience. *Wings* fit perfectly within these NFB parameters. The film focuses on a cohort of sixty-eight women recently enlisted in the Royal Canadian Air Force Women's Division (WD). Depicted as initially silly and unprofessional, the "girls" struggle through a new military routine

to eventually find themselves in their "rightful" place: behind men in a supporting role. Although this film aims to recruit women into the WD, it spends much of its time catering to men's egos by insisting that their more valuable jobs are finally within reach; women are here to simply take over the less desirable jobs. Indeed, this emphasis is repeated thirteen times in the film's short nine-minute runtime, with four mentions in the first two minutes. After all, it is not difficult to make this a central theme when the WD's motto was, "We Serve That Men May Fly."

Teresa Nash observes, "The constant emphasis on releasing men for more important work not only serves to make the work women do seem less important, but it also seems like an apology for the presence of women in the military."[75] This apologetic tone is evident not only in the repetitive narration but throughout the film's images, which, at times, certainly feels more like a reluctant justification for women's involvement rather than a celebration that presents women as able and willing bodies. For example, scenes show female lieutenants walking behind their male counterparts, further underscoring their subordinate roles. There are also scenes in which women require a man's help while trying to correctly place an engine part. Yvonne Mathews-Klein calls the latter example the "male tutor," a typical characteristic of Canadian films. Mathews-Klein examines how films like *Wings* compare to British-made propaganda films created by women, for women. She argues that British films "accept without question the competence of women," which contrasts significantly with Canadian films that portray their women as "secondary and temporary."[76] She says this is likely because British women were under direct siege while Canadian women were not. Although Mathews-Klein does not explicitly mention this, it is worth noting that British women had been involved in a broader range of

[75] Nash, 525.
[76] Yvonne Mathews-Klein, "How They Saw Us: Images of Women in National Film Board Films of the 1940s and 1950s," *Atlantis* 4, no 2 (Spring 1979), 24-25.

military roles - beyond nursing - since the First World War. This prior experience likely contributed to their portrayal as capable and indispensable in British propaganda films.

Moreover, the film is ripe with concerns about femininity. Reflecting on *Wings*, Mathews-Klein notes, "It is assumed that women will need to be reassured about questions of personal vanity."[77] Indeed, *Wings* encourages the importance of personal vanity by fixating on the new hairstyles and uniforms donned by recruits. Greene's voiceover reassures the audience that military hairstyles "will look just as good as the old civilian curls and glamour bobs" as scenes of male hairdressers cutting female recruits' hair and female soldiers fixing their colleagues' caps drone on underneath. Similar sentiments are found throughout the film in shots of women powdering their noses in the mirror, wearing curling rolls to bed and taking measurements for their uniforms. These scenes not only trivialize women's involvement but also promote vanity as a continuation from civilian life to military life and as a requirement rather than a possible or even incidental benefit. These depictions stand out even more when contrasted with the action-driven portrayals of men in NFB films like *Soldier All* (1941) and *Up from the Ranks* (1943), in which male soldiers train in the Army and RCAF. These films substitute scenes of personal vanity for espionage missions, driving tanks, shooting cannons and keeping watch on the "fighting front."

Lastly, Lorne Greene's voiceover claims that women are entering the military under no special circumstances. He says women "come prepared to accept the same conditions as the men." However, the conditions for women were quite different from the outset. Nash notes that women were paid two-thirds of what men were paid, offered lower benefits, and underwent significant job discrimination.[78] These are all true, but Nash fails to mention the sexual

[77] Mathews-Klein, 23.
[78] Nash, 522.

harassment and sexual assault women also faced. While statistics on harassment have not been published, it is not difficult to find references to harassment in diaries and personal accounts. A CWAC from Toronto recalls, "The men regarded CWACs as girls to be exploited. […] There was one handsome officer with a limp who got several girls pregnant. The Medical Officer knew but did nothing about it. In fact, he laughed."[79] This deeply unsettling retelling shows the institutional disregard for women's safety, exposing how far removed the reality was from the film's images of unity and respect between men and women. Another woman recalls that men found military women "difficult" for not going to bed with them. She writes, "Canadian servicemen found us to be very difficult at first because we wouldn't just go to bed with them."[80] The perception that a woman is "difficult" for not accepting sexual advances demonstrates that misogyny was ingrained in the military culture – not to mention how women would be treated if they *did* rush to bed with a man. Both accounts make it clear that women were not working alongside men in earnest collaboration, as the film's rosy portrayal of camaraderie might suggest. These issues went entirely unmentioned or addressed in NFB films, including Marsh's.

The difference between women's experiences and the film's messaging suggests that it does more than downplay the actual conditions of women's labour. *Wings* ultimately reinforces the ideology of a male-dominated Canadian government - and, by extension, the patriarchal structure of the military and NFB - that views women as both replaceable and exploitable, despite being directed by a woman. So, if women "come prepared to accept the same conditions as the men," as Greene says, why doesn't Marsh depict women in the same conditions as men? Women are portrayed as "feminine" and secondary, while men are portrayed as superior and important. Given Marsh's clear feminist views, it is possible that she either was not granted full

[79] Bruce, 43.
[80] Bruce, 49.

creative freedom as she has claimed in the past or that *Wings* is, indeed, what a feminist film looked like in 1943. I believe the latter.

Undeniably, Marsh was limited by the social norms of her time, which required her to operate within the boundaries of social convention. Nevertheless, she challenges these norms through her use of humour, often poking fun at male pride throughout the film. For example, in one scene, a male pilot doubts the accuracy of a female officer's calculations, only to find she was correct. This scene is analyzed in more detail in the next section. Despite these constraints, Marsh uses humour as an attempt to question and challenge traditional gender roles. Ultimately, *Wings* reflects the complications of navigating feminist ideas within a highly constrained, patriarchal society.

The Women Behind the Wings: Film Analysis

The film begins with patriotic music, similar to that of a marching band, playing over the WD's logo, a cartoonish eagle in flight. The combination of trumpets, flute and drums with the image of an army badge immediately evokes a sense of national pride and military strength. The choice of music underscores the authoritative nature of the film and sets a tone of rallying support for the war effort. The deep voice of Lorne Greene introduces women in an ammunition plant, filling Blockbuster Bombs - named for their ability to destroy entire blocks – with explosives. At this stage of the war, the image of women working in factories was hardly shocking as they had been replacing men in munitions and industry jobs since the beginning of the war. By October 1, 1943, 1,075,000 women were employed – excluding farm workers and volunteers -compared to 638,000 in August 1939.[81] Marsh likely draws on familiar imagery of

[81] "The Labour Gazette," *Department of Labour* 44, 1944, 561.

women in factories to affirm their ongoing valuable contributions, setting the stage for the introduction of women in uniform.

The film transitions to men preparing for a bombing mission, showing fully suited soldiers, parachutes and all, boarding a plane without a woman in sight - a bizarre approach to a women's recruiting film. The clear absence of women further emphasizes the gender divide - men get to fly while women stay behind - reinforcing the WD's motto, "We Serve That Men May Fly." The repetitive shots of bombers taking flight combined with Greene's narration emphasize the difficult task that men must undergo, "night after night the aircrews in the thousands, visitors and Canadians climb aboard their giant planes" on their way to bomb Italy, Japan and Germany. This voiceover illustrates Canada's resilience and determination while maintaining that the only way to succeed in this war is through Allied collaboration.

The film's approach, at this point, seems to be targeted more towards men than women. Marsh confronts Germany head-on by addressing the major Anglo-American bombing campaigns that took place in Berlin between 1942 and 1945, in which roughly 200 million tons of bombs were dropped on Germany.[82] Greene warns, "We are coming every night, every day. Rain or slush or snow. You have no chance." Greene's ominous threats, combined with the montage of images of more than twenty planes taking off, create a sense of Canada as a relentless force. Once nationalistic attitudes are firmly in place, Marsh finally introduces women. Greene's voice-over answers the burning question on everyone's mind: who will fill these support roles? "A call goes out to a new force to take their places," assures Greene, as women march onto the screen in uniform, ending the first section of the film.

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[82] Randall Hansen, *Fire and Fury: The Allied Bombing of Germany 1942-1945* (New York : New American Library 2008), 279.

The cinematography plays a notable role in the first section. All of the shots of the bombers taking off are framed from ground level, positioning the audience among the women who are ineligible to fly. This framing suggests a metaphorical hierarchy, reinforcing the contemporaneous gender dynamics in which women are expected to remain grounded while men are permitted to ascend, both literally and figuratively. The visual separation of woman and man helps Marsh deliver the (perhaps intended) central message of the film, which is that despite the ground-level position, women will excel in the military. The film soon shows women as capable, eager, and striving to be on equal footing with men, but first, Marsh eases the audience into these points by posing two facts about the war. First, Marsh depicts women in factories who have already replaced men so that they can serve, reinforcing the observation that women have already taken over traditionally male roles. This could be an attempt to convince skeptical audience members to support the premise that women are fit to serve their country in a new military role as well. Second, Marsh notes the increasing need for male bombers and, therefore, a "new force" that is required to fill the ground-level positions. This sets the stage for the next section, where women in uniform are introduced, ensuring the audience is more receptive to their new military involvement.

When women in uniform are finally introduced into the film, the tone shifts. No longer authoritative, the film's visual language takes on a soft, light-hearted approach by changing the harsh sounds of departing planes for an uplifting melodic marching beat. Women, three-wide, march in formation towards the left of the screen as Greene answers definitively, "This is Canada's answer to the call!" A flurry of women stumble into the barracks, one dropping her clothes out of an overstuffed suitcase as Greene's narration lists the variety of everyday women who have come to join up: librarians, store clerks, young girls and mothers, suggesting that

anyone can join the military. One recruit struggles to climb onto the top bunk as her peers giggle like schoolchildren. As Mathews-Klein notes, the bunk was much too high for women, making them seem out of place in a world designed for men.[83] This portrayal of "goofy girls" is contrasted with the following scene, which shows stern-faced recruits learning to make their beds properly, balancing the lightheartedness with the more serious, disciplined side of women in the military. Marsh emphasizes the importance of discipline and camaraderie by showing the women bonding in the barracks and lining up for food in the canteen. Greene's voiceover then states women will have "four weeks to shake the leisure of civilian life and become airwomen." This line of dialogue implies that women are frivolous and accustomed to a leisurely existence. It not only diminishes the realities of women's home lives—working in factories, volunteering, managing households, and raising children – but by assuming women lead leisurely civilian lives, the film presupposes that all women are privileged enough to maintain a life of leisure, revealing its target audience: middle-class women with seemingly nothing better to do than "shake off" their comfortable lives and join the armed forces.

On the other hand, Marsh's use of humour, particularly in a scene where one woman wakes up her bunkmate by pressing her feet into the top mattress, adds a sense of relatability and comradery that could be enticing for potential recruits. At the same time, this comedic approach reinforces the ideology that women will enter the military wholly unprepared and unserious, making it a difficult balance. On the one hand, it may entice women who feel unprepared, making the military appear approachable and welcoming; on the other hand, it perpetuates the notion that women are juvenile and in need of discipline. Given the historical context, where women had only recently been allowed into the military, Marsh's humorous and relatable style

[83] Mathews-Klein, 23.

was likely the most effective strategy for recruitment. Moreover, humour was frequently used in wartime propaganda, including in newspapers, ads, and comics. In their study on humour in British comics, Jane Chapman, Anna Hoyles, Andrew Kerr, and Adam Sherif note that the government "employed humour to drive home informational themes," using it both as a form of rebellion and as a tool for education and entertainment.[84] Similarly, major Hollywood studios often used humour as a way to boost morale and poke fun at the Axis powers, as seen in the Three Stooges film *You Nazty Spy!* (1940) and Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator (1940)*. The Disney Corporation also embraced this strategy by making films that exaggerated Hitler's ego and by making Donald Duck a bumbling and clumsy Nazi protagonist.[85] For example, in *Der Fuehrer's Face* (1943), Donald Duck works in a German munitions factory and must give the "Nazi Salute" every time a portrait of Hitler is on the conveyor belt (Figure 4.1). When he is overwhelmed with the speed, he collapses on it and gets hit with the oncoming ammunition (Figure 4.2). Within this context, Marsh's image of a "bumbling girl" may seem to undercut the seriousness of women, but it can also be interpreted as a strategic means of fostering a more accepting environment towards women in uniform.

A fade-out signals a new day within the film's diegesis. A close-up of a WD blaring a trumpet like an alarm is followed by a male officer training the new recruits, who are still in their plain clothes. The tone remains light-hearted as the male officer shakes his hips during basic

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[84] Jane Chapman, Anna Hoyles, Andrew Kerr, and Adam Sherif. *Comics and the World Wars : A Cultural Record.* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 10.

[85] For more on the use of humor in American propaganda see, John Baxter, *Disney during World War II : How the Walt Disney Studio Contributed to Victory in the War*. First edition. New York: Disney Editions, 2014; Brandon Webb, "'Hitler Must Be Laughed at!': The PCA, Propaganda and the Perils of Parody during Wartime." *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 39, no. 4 (2019): 749–67.

Figure 4.1: Still image from *Der Fuehrer's Face* (1943), Walt Disney Productions.

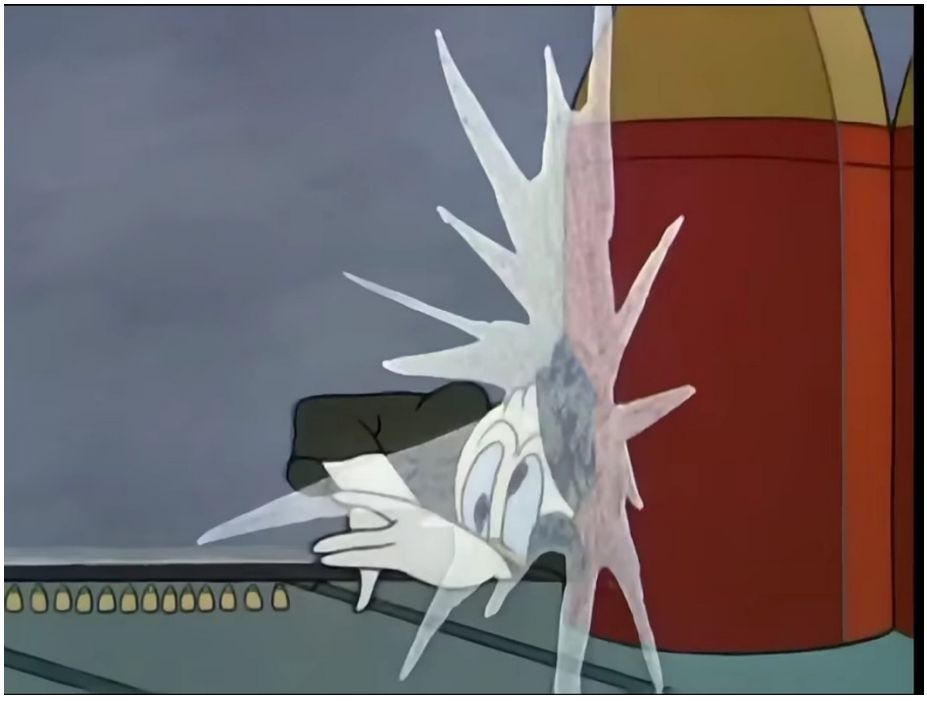

Figure 4.2: Still image from *Der Fuehrer's Face* (1943), Walt Disney Productions.

training, eliciting laughter from the recruits. Nash comments on this scene in her analysis, suggesting that the male officer is "obviously making fun of them."[86] I challenge this idea, however, as I see this scene as Marsh using humour to lighten the mood. The male officer adjusts his personality based on the sex of the participants, which in itself is inherently sexist. However, men and women had different jobs in the army. Women were never to see combat, so training was looked at as more of a behavioural adjustment than a practice in life-saving techniques. This tactic was, of course, to make men more comfortable with the idea of women joining the army in an administrative position, but it, too, was a tactic to make women comfortable. In an environment surrounded by aprons and beauty supplies, it would have been a refreshing thought to join the army, where you are being treated like more than a domestic worker.

The laughs shift to excitement once Greene announces it is "Red Letter Day," marking the time for the recruits to get their uniforms and new hairdos. An official WD notice fills the screen saying, "…hair must be worn clear of the collar of the tunic." Next, we are shown "an expert" – a man - who demonstrates how women's hair can look "just as good as curls" but "better suited to the times." Marsh's idea to highlight more superficial concerns may be easy to criticize at first look, but these matters were genuine concerns of women at the time. A survey conducted by the Combined Services Committee in 1943 noted that uniforms and discrimination due to looking masculine or "immoral" prevented women from enlisting.[87] According to Carolyn Gossage, a confidential report in August 1942 notes:

> Recruits naturally have a feeling of self-consciousness when first getting into service dress, which is always accentuated by an ill-fitting uniform, so that every care is to be taken to provide well-fitting garments. In order to ensure that all items of dress are smart

[86] Nash, 305.
[87] Pierson, "They're still women after all," 115-116; Hogenbirk, 226; Gossage, 37.

> and appropriate, a leading stylist is being commissioned to make any modifications of dress which may be considered desirable, the objective being to provide a Service dress which personnel will in all respects be proud to wear. Any items which do not measure up to the required standards will be altered or replaced by a more appropriate article.[88]

The concern for uniforms was spread throughout all three military branches. A former member of the CWAC joined the Army because she "liked the uniform best."[89] Likewise, a former Wren "thought the uniform was beautiful," so she joined up.[90] In one circumstance, a letter was written to Thérèse Casgrain, a political feminist activist in Quebec, requesting that she help convince the Women's Army Corp to change the uniform from the current Khaki, "a colour most unbecoming to almost every woman" to a "modern, smart, [outfit] in both design and colour."[91] With concerns about uniforms detracting women from enlisting, it is no wonder why Marsh included seemingly superficial concerns in the film.

The film returns to its initial serious tone, showing stern-faced women marching in unison as Greene highlights various roles available to women, including administration, radio work, meteorology, hospital and laboratory assistance, and pharmacy, noting that some of these positions were previously restricted to men. In an effort to emphasize the abundance of jobs open to women, Greene continues by listing roles such as equipment assistants, transport drivers, photographers, and riggers, showcasing the myriad opportunities now available. In February 1943, the same month the film was released, fifty positions in the army were open to women, an increase from the original thirty when women's divisions were first established in 1941. It is likely that the extensive list of jobs presented in the film was included to highlight these newly

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[88] Gossage, 123.
[89] Ibid., 73.
[90] Ibid., 76
[91] Ibid., 107.

available positions. However, it should be noted that these roles were mostly support jobs, and in some places, like Regina, "certain key positions such as those filed by senior clerks, operators, sergeant cooks," were still reserved for men.[92] While fifty jobs were technically available to women, approximately 70% of women in military trades work were placed in clerical or cooking roles.[93]

Another significant theme is the depiction of collaboration between men and women. In the film, men and women work side by side in hangars, fitting shops, and armouries, implying that gender is a secondary concern to the collaboration required for the war effort. However, this depiction is at odds with the reality of the time, as many uniformed women faced discrimination and were often viewed with contempt. As one woman recalls, "Nine out of every ten resent having girls in uniform, and my brothers said they would disown me if I ever join with such scruff."[94] Women in uniform were also marginalized in social settings, including military canteens. As another woman reveals:

> At the active service canteen, women in uniform were not welcome in the least, with or without an escort. That seemed ridiculous to me, but that was the way they wanted to run it. They'd have girls come down in their little smocks to dance with the men and they did have very good entertainment, but it was all operated for the benefit of the men. Women in uniform just weren't welcome on the premises.[95]

This exclusion extended beyond military spaces and into public life as well, where uniformed women often faced snubbing. As one CWAC member recalls, "If people saw a boy and a girl walking hand in hand down by the Rideau Canal together, they'd say 'oh look at that nice young

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[92] Roach Pierson, "They're Still Women After All," 105.
[93] Ibid., 110.
[94] Gossage, 85.
[95] Ibid., 183.

couple' but if the girl was an army uniform, they'd say 'oh look at that cheap CWAC.'"[96] *Wings* presents a cheerful, harmonious view of women's military labour, which was clearly at odds with what many women reported about their day-to-day experience as enlisted members.

Despite such negative experiences, there is evidence that some men welcomed women into military ranks. J.L. Ralston, then Minister of National Defence, famously advocated for women's contributions, stating, "It will be the help of those girls, the help of the women coming into the Army, which will perhaps provide, so far as Canada is concerned - the decisive impulse which may carry us to victory."[97] Ralston's statement is significant because it shows women's participation in the war as equal to men rather than a purely supportive role. However, he says "the help" of the women, the emphasis on their role as "decisive" places women among men as a critical part of an Allied victory. While his statement is notable, it can also be read as a mere attempt to rally (male) public support that is now relying on women to replace men in factory and military jobs. Nevertheless, an endorsement from a high-ranking male official is an acknowledgment worth discussing as it contributes to the contradictory attitudes toward women in uniform.

Marsh's film reinforces this theme of collaboration by showing men and women working together in an effort to convey a sense of equality. In the spirit of collaboration, she, again, adds humour to reinforce the notion that women are equally competent as men in their new roles. A notable example occurs at the end of the film during a scene where a female officer provides geographical coordinates to a male pilot during target practice. From the aircraft, the pilot takes aim and shoots. When the pilot enters the office to check his accuracy, he is surprised to find that the woman's calculations are correct. Greene's narration adds a playful note:

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[96] Bruce, 43
[97] Dundas, 37.

> And afterwards, how gratifying to male pride to stroll into the plotting office in the certainty that that third verse was a direct hit. *And how disturbing to discover that airwomen, as well as mathematics, are accurate* and tough.

In this scene, Marsh playfully critiques male pride - an approach I have yet to encounter in other propaganda films or advertisements. Typically, such media instruct women to look a certain way or perform specific actions to please men, as seen in ads like *Palmolive* and *Tangee*. However, Marsh flips this narrative, cleverly depicting the woman as capable and, more importantly, equal to the man. The pilot successfully hits the target, demonstrating his skill, but his assumption that the woman's calculations would be wrong is proven incorrect. Rather than attacking the pilot's flying or firing abilities, the scene critiques his misplaced pride (and his lack of trust), suggesting that his supercilious attitude must change for true collaboration to work.

Lastly, Marsh's film makes an important, though ultimately inaccurate, attempt to solidify women's long-term placement in the workforce. Greene's narration optimistically says:

> … the girls who once were farm, and taxi workers who came from classrooms at college and leisured homes, will tell you that they have *no intentions when victory is won of returning to a life of privacy and personal ease*. For they believe that even if Canada needs their special skills to build her military air power now, also she will need it to build her civil air power in the *coming world beyond the war*.

These lines of dialogue suggest that many women, including Marsh, intended to continue working beyond the war, predicting a future where they could be free to work beyond their homes. However, Marsh's prediction did not align with the Canadian Government's policies, which were not focused on securing permanent jobs for women but rather addressing temporary manpower shortages. In some cases, legislation outright barred women from employment. For

example, married women were barred from holding federal jobs in the public service after the war, a restriction that was not removed until 1955.[98] This phenomenon affected not only those women performing industry work but also those who had lost their military careers, as all three branches of the women's division were disbanded in 1946. Public attitudes and advertisements emphasized women's return to domesticity, too. Bland notes that by 1945, there were no images of women in the military in *Maclean's* magazine, and only 1.9% of ads had working women.

The NFB's attitude toward women returning home was certainly the same as that of the Canadian government. At the end of the war, the NFB released a series of films that celebrated women's contributions to the war and encouraged them to return home. For example, *Back to Jobs* (1945) discusses the importance of veterans returning to the workforce, and *To the Ladies* (1946) thanks women for their help during the war but reminds them that men are returning from the front lines and women must resume their jobs inside the home.

A similar feeling arises at the end of *Wings.* Marsh emphasizes the significance of women's contributions through a series of montage images set to triumphant music: A man playfully pretends to cut a woman's hair, symbolizing cooperation; four women walk down a city street, chatting and smiling, representing camaraderie; men and women attend a boxing match together, illustrating that military life is not always serious; women play tennis and hit bullseyes with arrows at a target range, demonstrating their physical abilities.

However, the triumphant music contrasts sharply with the imagery in the closing shot, where five women gaze toward the sky as male pilots soar overhead. While the music seems intended to empower these women, perhaps even to inspire others to enlist, it instead evokes a melancholic metaphor; much like the film's opening sequence, this moment portrays women as

[98] Nash, 126-27.

being left behind while men ascend to greater heights. This juxtaposition between music and image captures the broader contradictions within the film. Marsh seeks to honour women's wartime contributions by showcasing their capabilities and hinting at the utopian promise of lasting social change. Yet, it remains tethered to deeply rooted social traditions, ultimately reinforcing the idea of women returning to supporting roles once the war ends.

Part Three: a Case Study of Proudly She Marches

The Paradox of Sexist Images: Themes in Proudly She Marches

Marsh's approach in *Proudly She Marches* is markedly different than *Wings on Her Shoulder*. *Proudly* is a scripted fiction film that follows an unnamed young woman, played by real-life Navy member (Wren) Janey Martin, who aspires to contribute more significantly to the war effort. The protagonist (Martin) reflects on her female friends' decisions to join the military while flipping through a photo album or observing still images on her wall. As she narrates, the photos come to life, and dramatized scenes of her friends' experiences unfold. Throughout the film, Martin is getting dressed, a tactic Nash interprets as an "objectification of women."[99] However, in the detailed analysis below, I challenge this reading, suggesting it is simply a narrative device that helps to move the plot forward since, at the film's end, Martin is revealed in a naval uniform, indicating that she has already joined up

While *Proudly* shares some of the same flaws as *Wings*, particularly in portraying women in supportive roles, it also exhibits a more problematic fault: it represents women as naïve and foolish, which reinforces the stereotype that men are the stronger sex. For instance, women are shown laughing when they ought to be taking things seriously; they hit each other with pillows; they are given time to powder their noses and get their hair done; they dance and look for husbands at the recreational center. Both Nash and Mathews-Klein observe that even while women are shown working or performing drills, they are portrayed as having fun, suggesting either that they are not engaged in serious work or that they cannot simultaneously be soldiers and enjoy themselves.

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[99] Nash, 307.

For example, in one scene, women enter a chamber filled with tear gas to familiarize themselves with its smell and sensation. They exit laughing as they wipe tears from their eyes as the voiceover comments, "Well, every girl likes to have a good cry now and again anyway." As Mathews-Klein observes, this lack of seriousness implies that women will never face such dangerous situations as these, and thus, the film makes the drill seem unnecessary.[100] However, men in NFB films were also depicted as unserious at times. In *Letters From Overseas* (1943), men are performing drills: lifting guns, stretching, and running. However, the montage ends with a man struggling to climb a muddy hill while crawling under barbed wire. His uniform gets stuck on the wire as the narrator jokes, "The courses are wrought with some pretty tough obstacles …we do 'em every day! Although to hear Joe Williams groan, you'd never think so."

Herein lies a paradox. While the tear-gas scene is successful in portraying an aspect of training that might be intimidating for new recruits, it undermines women's capabilities by suggesting that they cannot handle being tear-gassed or take the exercise seriously, ultimately reinforcing the stereotype that they are the weaker sex. If the same comedic tactic is used in male-dominated films, why has *Proudly She Marches* received this critical response?

The differing reception of comparable material can be attributed to the cultural context of the 1940s, 1980s, and even today. Social expectations for men and women shape how their actions are perceived in film, meaning that portrayals are already skewed before the images even appear on screen. As a result, even when humour is used in similar ways, it is received differently: humour directed at men is often framed as lighthearted camaraderie that reinforces their resilience, while humour about women perpetuates societal stereotypes of weakness or triviality. Criticism from Mathews-Klein and Nash – and indeed, at times, my own – show

[100] Mathews-Klein, 23.

concern with how women are portrayed as they can perpetuate existing stereotypes and undermine their contributions.

While *Proudly She Marches* has moments that reinforce stereotypes, it also includes scenes of women performing tasks that are typically associated with men, using humour to empower women. For example, in one scene, a daughter needs to take over a radio repair from her father. Another scene shows women working together and with men, working as mechanics and driving cars. These portrayals are contrasted with the images that were dominant in advertising platforms at the time, which emphasized women's beauty and domestic responsibilities. Despite including some stereotypically "feminine" characteristics in her films, Marsh succeeds, at least in part, at stepping out of the proverbial patriarchal box and representing women as independent and capable.

Marching to the Foreground: Film Analysis

Unlike the cacophony of instruments that opens *Wings*, *Proudly* begins with soft, gentle music reminiscent of a Grace Kelly romance film. The font, too, differs from the bold, all-capital letters of *Wings*. Instead, *Proudly's* title is written in a bubbly handwriting style, juxtaposed with an image of three stern-faced military women (one from each branch) at the bottom of the title card. The card fades to black, and a montage of images shows women in uniform, working in factories, and teaching children. Superimposed over these images, bold capital letters state:

> **WOMEN BY THEMSELVES CANNOT WIN THIS WAR.** ***BUT QUITE CERTAINLY IT CANNOT BE WON WITHOUT THEM.***

The images are replaced by a grey title card setting up the film:

> **BUT .. A MAN OF ANCIENT TIMES SAID…**

What follows is a short yet poignant sequence showing Japanese women performing slow, choreographed movements to the soft sound of a Fue (bamboo flute). Over this, bold letters declare:

> **IN THE HOME WOMEN ARE GOOD FOR EVERYTHING; OUTSIDE IT GOOD FOR NOTHING.**

Another montage of images fills the screen: a Renaissance painting of topless women; a drawing of a pin-up model in a lace see-through top; a lineup of women in bikinis walking arm in arm on a beach; women twirling in elegant dresses; a female acrobat gracefully descending down her male colleague, adorned in a tight, snake-like costume; a man and woman cuddle on a bench as they gaze over a lake; a man and woman share a passionate kiss; a close-up of a woman blushing; a woman painting on a canvas. The final image of the montage is a woman looking at an image of Veronica Lake in a magazine and immediately attempting to replicate her hairstyle. These images are meticulously edited to a rhythmic flow as a male narrator – notably not Lorne Greene – says:

> During the times of the Renaissance to the present day, women have taken their rightful place as the flower and ornament of the human race. To the amazing range of their physical features and grace, women have had those spiritual qualities we have all come to know and revere. Deity, affection, daring, modesty, intelligence and the ability to use their intelligence to further enhance their beauty. Making them the supreme object of man's admiration. Of men's esteem.

First, it is essential to recognize that the sequence purposely satirizes the male perception of women. Throughout the montage, romantic music plays softly as the male narrator speaks about the "intricacies of the female," balancing tones of sincerity and sarcasm. The sarcastic tone is

reminiscent of the scene in *Wings* in which the pilot underestimates the women recruit. The narrator is so over-the-top in their description of what a woman is that it interprets this opening as a sincere attempt at defining a woman.

Marsh's choice to begin the sequence with Japanese women is particularly noteworthy. Portraying women from an Axis power signals an enemy, and it results in a strong nationalistic defensive attitude in the audience. The Japanese women are portrayed as delicate, soft and docile, contrasting typical depictions of Axis powers as aggressive and power-hungry. Instead, Marsh's goal seems to show strong Canadian women by positioning the enemy as the antithesis, creating an opposition. By portraying Japanese women as passive, she invites Canadian audiences to view their own women as strong and resilient. This use of opposition was not only commonplace in propaganda but also used in political discourse. For instance, Ernest Lapointe, in defending women's rights in the House of Commons, compared restrictions on women's work in Canada to the oppressive laws of fascist regimes that barred women from public activities and condemned them to domestic roles.[101]

This short sequence leads into Janey Martin's bedroom, where she lies on her bed playing with a kitten. She rolls over and turns off the radio, silencing the voiceover, signalling to the audience that the sound is diegetic. Martin sits up on her bed, exclaiming how men make her tired. "Women may be flowers and ornaments alright, but they're a whole lot more than that these days, believe me," she claims. This seemingly small sentence struck a chord with Nash, who interprets the sentiment as contradictory. Nash argues that while Martin ostensibly shuts down the patriarchal voice of the radio, she ultimately agrees with its assertion that women are flowers and ornaments. According to Nash, Martin "seems to agree with the view that she has

[101] Nash, 376.

just rejected" by acknowledging that "women may be flowers and ornaments" instead of fully rejecting this notion.[102] Nash contends that Martin is disappointed in the narrow view of men but does not entirely disagree that women should be viewed and treated as flowers or ornaments.

While Nash's observations are not entirely incorrect, she overlooks the bigger picture: Martin shut off a man who was speaking derogatorily. In a society where men often had the final word - literally dictating whether women should be allowed to work outside the home – the film portrays an exceptionally feminist idea. Marsh's seeming use of satirical voiceover works as a catalyst, encouraging women to silence men's opinions of what a woman is and instead focus on what is best for themselves. This is exactly what Martin does.

As she sifts through a photo album, she lands on a picture of Beth Clarke. Martin's chirpy voiceover recounts Beth's story of becoming a CWAC: "She was telling me all about it only last week. About her first day as a recruit signing up for the recruiting office." Images of Beth entering a CWAC recruitment office fill the screen. Beth then gets sworn into the military, a serious and proud occasion, admittedly undermined by Martin's voiceover suggesting it is a "pretty solemn occasion." Beth places her hand on a book (presumably a Bible) while a male officer swears her in, and a female officer stands still and quiet in the back. The symbolism in this blocking is unmistakable, highlighting the male authority that still governs these moments of female advancement. Still, a female officer is present at the swearing, showing that their place has been solidified (temporarily) in the military.

Next, Marsh highlights one of the so-called "big thrills" of enlisting: the issuing of uniforms. Unlike Wings, which devotes significant attention to uniforms as a response to the anxiety surrounding women's femininity, *Proudly* spends very little time on it. The sequence,

[102] Nash, 536.

lasting only about twenty seconds, feels more like Marsh checking off a box rather than emphasizing it as a benefit. The voiceover simply states, “The issuing of uniforms and equipment is one of the first big thrills a girl gets when she joins up,” while images of Beth receiving her uniform and shoes play under. Certainly not the most female-empowering images and voiceover combination, but the fact that Marsh spends little time reinforcing the importance of a uniform is notable.

Similar to *Wings*, a new day is signalled with the sound of a horn playing a cheerful alarm. Beth hesitantly and sleepily tries to open her eyes as other women begin their day with, as Martin narrates, “joking and skylarking.” One image shows a woman playfully hitting another with a pillow, prompting retaliation as she is pulled down from her top bunk. While this scene could be critiqued for portraying women in a trivial and unserious manner, it also creates a sense of camaraderie that might appeal to women who had spent decades confined to domestic roles. However, when paired with the following section that shows Beth’s first day of training, this scene feels infantilizing.

The next scene is the first day of Beth’s training. A few dozen uniformed women march towards the screen in rows of three. It cuts to women lining up, receiving instructions from a female supervisor and then a close-up of Beth saluting. At the same time, Martin’s voiceover describes these three shots: “Her first morning of drills was a bit hard at first on her legs, and she was not used to it. A bit confusing for brains not accustomed to the split reaction to spoken command.” It is difficult to understand Marsh’s feminist viewpoint with demeaning sentences like these. The first sentence implies that women lack physical strength and require significant conditioning, while the second undermines their intellectual capabilities by suggesting they struggle with basic instructions like saluting. Given Marsh’s extensive research into women’s

history and her understanding of their systemic oppression – only being valued for lust, to make men comfortable, to bear children, and cheap labour- it seems unlikely that such demeaning commentary was her intention. Perhaps it might have been intended to motivate women who had been told all their lives that they were unintelligent, implying that even the least intelligent girl could join the army. However, if that was the intent, there are myriad other ways it could have been approached. By diminishing a woman's intellect, Marsh is agreeing that women are subordinate to men and is seemingly "making men comfortable" with the idea of women in uniform.

Regarding this sequence, Nash observes that the film "reassure[s] the viewer that women are still very feminine and not really all that serious."[103] Surprisingly, Nash's critique is not so much about the wording but rather about Martin's delivery. Nash observes that Martin puts on a "giggle" when she is referring to anything serious, which invites the viewer to dismiss the serious topic as unimportant. While I don't wholly agree with Nash in that the giggle is always problematic, it certainly provides the viewer with a sense that the narrator isn't taking things seriously, so why should we? Nash notes this is particularly problematic in a scene mentioned earlier where women trainees are being tear-gassed. As women put on gas masks and enter the room, Martin says that women must put on "those grim-looking contraptions for gas drills" so they will know what it feels like. Martin then giggles through, "Well, every girl likes to have a good cry now and again anyway." Nash argues that this whole sequence "suggests that the incident is a game for the women. Calling the gas masks 'grim-looking contraption' makes them seem unreal […] and implies a complete lack of seriousness."[104]

[103] Nash, 539.
[104] Nash, 539-40.

While I do not necessarily disagree with Nash, I, again, have difficulty interpreting this scene as entirely problematic. Considering the societal conditions in which these potential recruits lived before the war, the scene likely aimed to highlight the appeal of new experiences. Coming from domesticated lives, doing things out of the ordinary was certainly a benefit for these women. Carolyn Gossage, in her book on Canadian women in the military, notes that a significant motivation for women enlisting was "a spirit of adventure" or "even the opportunity of getting away from home."[105] One recruit recalled, "It was one hundred percent adventure for me. I wanted something new."[106] Another admitted she did not enlist for "King and Country" but rather "went for the adventure. There was an excitement to it."[107] So, while this scene surely portrays the tear gas drill as trivial, it is also a tactic used to show women a new worldly perspective.

In the next two scenes, Marsh seems to be conforming to the idea that women will join the army to find a husband. In one scene, Beth gets her teeth examined by a male dentist, as Martin's voiceover states, "You've got us *be right* as well as *look right* in the forces. It's part of your duty to be healthy." As Nash observes, "it is made clear that women who 'look right' will attract men," but her critique ends there. I believe this one sentence warrants further analysis. Beyond the superficial message regarding health, this quick scene reinforces the idea that women's physical appearance is not only a personal obligation but a professional one.

It is hard to understand what "be right" means in this case. The words "be right" are ambiguous, possibly referring to the need to have stable mental health associated with maintaining composure under pressure or adapting to the challenges of military life. However, it

[105] Gossage, 66.
[106] Bruce, 38
[107] Bruce, 98.

could also suggest meeting feminine societal expectations of behaviour, such as being polite, disciplined, and morally upright - qualities traditionally associated with "good character," a qualification for enlistment. However, the emphasis on "look right" is more striking. It is hard to imagine that a woman with imperfect teeth would be any less capable of performing a job than one with a perfect smile. This statement seems to reflect the military's concern with maintaining a certain image of femininity. This suggests that despite the military's need for women to contribute to the war effort, they also acknowledge that the military could be a potential place for women to meet a man or, at the very least, look appealing to a man. The same sentiment is displayed in a 1943 toothpaste ad from *Chatelaine*. The ad reads, "You're one of the prettiest girls at the canteen, Babs but you're letting our servicemen down. A sparkling smile is what they want to see!" The ad is split into four comic-strip-like boxes. The first has the two women chatting. Followed by two boxes that show "Babs" going to the dentist and then brushing her teeth. The last box is Babs dancing with a man, both of whom have big smiles. In the background, three other couples dance, two of whom ignore their dance partners and look at Babs. We are to assume that Babs smile is so "sparkling" that she is taking attention away from other men's dates.

The sentiment of finding a man is also prominent in the next scene, where Marsh highlights more enlistment benefits, this time through dances at the recreational centre. "With shining teeth and a crisp new uniform, there was their first services dance at the Recreational Centre," Martin boasts. "Good company and good music. Beth said she met some swell fellow there and enjoyed herself more that night than she had for many a moon." A long shot of Beth dancing with a man surrounded by other dancing couples transitions to a close-up of her twirling and laughing. The next shot is of her sitting down on a couch with her male dance partner, only

to be joined by another "swell fellow" who takes her hand as he cozies up next to her. This scene is significant because it reinforces the idea that the army is not always serious. While Nash and Mathew-Klein critique this lack of seriousness, I see it as an opportunity for Marsh to present the army as a place vastly different from home life, where women could find a sense of belonging.

However, what troubles me is that this scene suggests the military could be a venue for finding a husband. While women were meant to serve in the army temporarily, with the primary expectation that they would eventually marry, I ask, is it necessary to constantly remind women that finding a husband is the primary goal of their life? Especially when the purpose of the film is to advertise a life outside the home. Why emphasize meeting "swell fellows" as an advantage when this is likely a common experience in their home lives, especially when the film's aim is to present women with new opportunities? Ads targeted at women during the war frequently emphasized how single women could "catch a man," making this concept mundane in the context of the time. While this was a mainstream theme in the 1940s, it is important to remember that the main reason for women to enlist was for adventure, to be patriotic, and, most notably, not to find a man.

Beth's vignette concludes with her finding a job that she will keep throughout the war, unsurprisingly, in transportation. She takes a driving course with a male instructor, who shows her how to put the car in gear, a task she struggles with despite the voiceover mentioning that she has driving experience, including the ability to drive herself to the recruiting office in the opening scene. This is a perfect example of what Mathews-Klein deems as a typical Canadian film trait, the "male tutor," in which a man has to show a woman how to perform a mundane

task.[108] Although the male officer loses his hat, Beth passes the driver's test and is introduced to the male officer whom she will be replacing.

Beth's final scene depicts the driving test instructor saluting the soon-to-be-released male soldier, who salutes him back. At the start of the scene, the instructor is positioned directly in front of Beth, making her invisible; it is only when he steps to the side that Beth becomes noticeable. The departing soldier salutes the male officer once more before leaving the frame, entirely ignoring Beth's presence. This depiction arguably reflects a more realistic portrayal of men's attitudes toward being replaced by women in the workforce during the war. Martin's voiceover accompanies the scene: "Beth took over a full-time job from a man, releasing him for a more important job," once again reinforcing the notion that men's contributions were considered inherently more valuable than women's.

Although this scene may seem discouraging from a feminist perspective, Beth's vignette concludes on a positive note. The final shot features Beth driving down a road as Martin announces that Beth is now a fully-fledged CWAC and "a young woman *with a purpose."* While this line is brief, it signifies the transformative effect that working outside the home has on a young woman's sense of fulfillment. The fact that Marsh underscores the idea of finding purpose through work outside the home suggests that, before the war, young women were often perceived as lacking purpose beyond getting married. This line, though brief, effectively reflects the shifting societal norms of the era.

Once Beth drives off-screen, Sophie's story begins. Martin introduces Sophie, an ex-department store worker who has turned into a wireless technician. Sophie joined the CWAC "without an idea of what to do," claims Martin. After completing the CWAC aptitude test,

[108] Mathews-Klein, 25

Sophie was placed in the technical department, where she fixed walkie-talkies. She is shown fixing a walkie-talkie with a screwdriver as her male colleague tests the devices next to her.

The scene changes to Sophie, on a 48-hour leave, walking into her house to visit her dad, who is conveniently struggling to repair his radio. Luckily, Sophie has the skills from the army that she can use in a domestic setting. The audience then watches Sophie fix the radio as her father watches her. The music has changed significantly from the long strokes of stringed instruments, typically found in romance films of the era, to a bouncy drum beat mixed with short bursts of brass instruments similar to that of a Foxtrot or Quickstep. While I believe the music adds depth to the scene, Nash believes "the music makes what she is doing seem more like a ridiculous cartoon than an achievement."[109] I challenge this notion completely. The music actually helps the otherwise mundane scene progress. It gives the scene some rhythm and personality. It adds to the humour part of the scene that pokes fun – yet again – at an older male figure. Sophie's dad tries to be helpful by handing a hammer to her, but she laughs and rejects it, alluding to the fact that a hammer is not needed to fix a radio and that the father does not know this. Martin's voiceover highlights the father's error by laughing through her line, "him and his hammer."

Indeed, because of the music, the shot comes off as more charming. The music has a completely different tone than the rest of the film, and the fact that Sophie is independently fixing something at home while her father watches on is completely contradicted in the next vignettes in which women are frequently shown how to do things by men.

Nash also criticizes Sophie for fixing the radio too quickly, and therefore, the task must be easy. She argues, "The fact that she repaired the radio in only a few seconds implies that her

[109] Nash, 543

job couldn't be as complex and important as we are led to believe in the first sequence."[110] I wholly disagree with Nash's interpretation, which I believe undermines women's capability. First, Marsh does not suggest that the repair was quick or simple, and there is no indication that Sophie did not take her time. On the contrary, Marsh uses editing to convey that ample time has passed. A long shot shows Sophie adding some pieces to the inner workings of the radio and ends with Sophie in the middle of screwing in a component. It then cuts to a close-up of her closing the case over the top, finishing her repair. There is no continuity in these two shots, which implies that time has passed. Perhaps Nash is picking up on Martin's voiceover that says, "with a few deft twists to the wrist as the radio is working in no time." Theoretically, this could indicate that it did not take Sophie long. However, even if this was the intended implication, it could be easily interpreted as highlighting Sophie's new expertise in the field. To imply that if a woman can fix something quickly, it is, therefore, somehow not complex utterly undermines women by suggesting that women cannot perform tasks efficiently.

Nash makes one observation in this scene that I agree with. She notes that Marsh makes it clear that once the war is over, Sophie "will be able to repair household items in her own home." Nash is referring to Martin's voiceover, claiming that Sophie put her training to good use in the home. The notion that skills acquired in the military can be applied to household duties after the war, and vice-versa, is a recurring theme in early NFB films. For example, the narrator of *To The Ladies* indicates that skills learned in the army will not go wasted post-war. He says, "My boy's family is looking forward to peace now, my daughter-in-law to her old job: a wife. But a better wife and a better citizen because of her wartime experiences." Similarly, Marsh's *Women are Warriors* utilizes match cuts to highlight how women's work in the domestic sphere can be

[110] Nash, 543.

implemented in industrial contexts. For example, a woman moves her hands back and forth as she files a piece of metal secured to a table clamp, which is match cut with a woman moving her hands back and forth as she irons a shirt. Another woman tightens a vice, which is match cut with a woman spinning the balance wheel of a sewing machine. While the editing in Sophie's scene does not contribute to the idea that women's roles in the military are temporary, Martin's voiceover, combined with images of Sophie working on a radio at home, certainly reinforces the notion that women will return home, and changed for the better, after the war.

After Sophie's vignette concludes, the film transitions back to Martin's room, who appears to be pulling up her stockings while wearing only a slip. As Nash observes, Martin's lack of clothing makes her "somewhat of a sex object," which is further underscored by the camera movement.[111] Nash notes that the camera "travels slowly down her leg [...] sort of like the object she is supposedly trying to discredit" (Figure 5).[112] While this interpretation is valid, it is important to consider that Marsh likely uses the casual act of getting dressed as a narrative device which establishes continuity and drives the film forward. Moreover, the intimate setting of Martin's bedroom creates a welcoming atmosphere, fostering a sense of camaraderie and familiarity with the character.

The brief thirteen-second scene serves as a bridge between Sophie's vignette and the next one featuring Dorothy Brett. It comprises three shots. The first is a medium close-up of Martin sitting on her bed, shown deep in thought about Sophie and Dorothy. We do not see her exact action, but her movement suggests she is pulling up her nylons. In the background, her military jacket hangs over a flag reading "Halifax Navy," subtly signalling Martin's role as a Wren. The camera starts to tilt down but is cut before reaching her midsection and thighs, cutting directly to

[111] Nash, 544
[112] Nash, 308.

Figure 5.1: The beginning of the “leg pan” shot that Nash discusses. *Proudly She Marches* (1943). The National Film Board.

Figure 5.2: The end of the “leg pan” shot that Nash discusses. *Proudly She Marches* (1943). The National Film Board.

her calf instead. This shot resumes the tilt motion as it moves down her calf, landing on her foot, which points to a photograph of Dorothy. The final shot is a close-up of the photo with the camera pushing in until the picture comes to life, transitioning into Dorothy's vignette.

Nash's critique of objectification is convincing when looking through a feminist lens. As she concludes, this scene is especially ridiculous if you imagine Martin as a man; it is highly unlikely to see a man on camera in his underwear as the camera tilts down his calf. Nonetheless, while the act of dressing may carry sexual associations, Martin's actions and Mash's edits do not suggest an attempt to be overtly seductive. In fact, by 1942, it was not unusual to see women in their underclothes in film or advertisements - for example, a 1943 corset ad features a woman jumping in the air wearing only a bra and slip (Figure 6). Rather than aiming to sexualize Martin, the short scene appears to be designed for narrative flow.

The next vignette shows Dorothy Brett, an amateur photographer turned WD photographer. Martin notes that Dorothy used to spend most of her holidays snapping pictures. Some of them even got into exhibitions and "won a prize or two." When Beth was being sworn into the CWACs, Martin seemed to be a little too nonchalant about giving credit to a prize-winning photographer, suggesting that women's accomplishments are little more than hobbies. Unlike Sophie's story, in which her skills learned in the Army could be transferred to home skills, Dorothy's skills from her "hobbies" could be transferred to her role in the WD. Dorothy lines up in two parallel lines with a dozen or so other women in the photography division as two male officers stroll down the middle, ensuring that the women are checking exposure and focus properly – another case of the "male tutor." Martin notes that women learn how to work

Figure 6: *Chatelaine*, October 1943.

methodically and precisely. Once Dorothy received her training, her first assignment was to photograph the arrival of the Royal Dutch Airforce, which included Prince Bernard and Princess Juliana. Dorothy says something to make the Prince laugh, and they all seem to be enjoying themselves. The narrator joins in the laughter by asking, "What did she say to him that he wouldn't keep still."

Nash observes that in the film, female photographers are depicted snapping pictures of dazzling arrivals, while male photographers were sent overseas, thus framing the women's photography roles as "glamorous, frivolous, and not too taxing on the mind." While this perspective aligns with a feminist lens from the 1980s, Nash overlooks the progressive nature of women being portrayed as working photographers at all, particularly in the context of 1942. Moreover, Marsh gives Dorothy a personality. She is shown directing the men into place, snapping pictures, and ensuring the names are well documented, all while making the crew laugh. Although women were not permitted on the front lines, their portrayal in the film as independent and professional deserves recognition. There is no doubt that films produced in 1942 show sexism, but it is important to note that Marsh steps outside the typical confines. As Spencer and Bland remind us, most ads at this time were targeted toward housewives and those that were targeted towards working women or military women were aimed at ensuring they maintained a specific look – usually to impress men. Marsh, on the other hand, shows military women taking control and doing a job well.

That said, the Dorothy vignette unfortunately concludes with a notably eye-rolling sequence. Dorothy nervously develops her images in the dark room and passes them over to her male superior for approval. The music evokes a sense of suspense through its staccato notes. Martin's voice-over also plays into the drama by asking, "Had she covered that assignment well?

Would her pictures tell a good story?" The suspense builds as the voiceover is quiet, and the music rests on one long key... the supervisor pats Dorothy on the back, "Yes! They were ok!" gleams Martin. The music shifts to a jubilant tone, signalling Dorothy's success. The sequence culminates with Dorothy replacing her male superior, who has been reassigned overseas. While the dramatization - complete with exaggerated waves from a group of women bidding him farewell - leans heavily on theatrics, Marsh emphasizes the potential for women to advance in their roles rather than solely portraying them as secondary.

The final vignette I will discuss in detail features Myra Lockbridge. She is shown teaching young children math, but the scene quickly transitions to her as a student in a classroom learning aircraft recognition alongside male peers. Martin's voiceover observes, "One day a schoolteacher, the next a pupil." Unlike the male students, who presumably advance to become pilots, Myra assumes the role of the aircraft recognition instructor, tasked with training the next group of men. In an attempt to convey the urgent call for men on the front line, the male instructor, much like in Dorothy's vignette, hurriedly leaves for war now that he is replaced by his student. However, unlike in Dorothy's vignette, where the male instructor is given a glowing send-off, Myra is the one receiving the applause - not for her skills or contributions, but for freeing the male instructor to join the war effort. However, this ovation inadvertently diminishes Myra's contributions. By celebrating Myra as a replacement so enthusiastically, the vignette reinforces the notion that women's contributions were most heroic when they replaced a man for more important, front-line duties.

In reality, men were not always happy when a woman replaced them in a safer, administrative job. One soldier recalls the resistance she faced when coming to her new job, "The Sergeant in my section said to me on day one: 'if you think you are going to put me out of

here, you have another thing coming, girl.'"[113] Rather than celebrating the transition, men were often wary or outright dismissive of women taking over these positions. The film, however, glorifies the replacement process, portraying the standing ovation as a symbol of acceptance and respect, which most likely never occurred. The vignette sold women on the notion that their contributions were celebrated and meaningful, making the film misleading in the realities of social perceptions.

The last three vignettes are brief, with only a few sentences and shots dedicated to each. Before going into the first vignette, Martin is seen rushing to her mirror to finish getting dressed before her friend comes to pick her up. Despite her hurry top dress, her voiceover still tells the audience about three more women who have joined up. Their stories are intercut with each other and do not have as much detail as the previous stories. Marsh's quick edits and rapid-fire storytelling in the final moments of the film is a technique that conveys both Martin's realization that she is going to be late for her shift and her eagerness to share the stories of the many women who have enlisted. This pacing leaves the audience with the impression that Martin does not have time to list every woman but that there are plenty more.

While the three vignettes align with the same themes as the others, there is one line that stands out. As the three women arrive at the training facility, they step off a bus, collect their suitcases, and head toward the entrance. Martin suddenly and randomly remarks, "there's nothing like basic training for taking those few extra pounds off your hips," delivering the line with a giggle, suggesting it is an unintended benefit of military service. This off-handed comment caters to the existing social norms – still present today – that women have to conform to a certain body type. Between the pages of *Chatelaine*'s ads for corsets and beauty products

[113] Bruce, 48.

lays an advice column written by Beauty Editor Adele White called "My Day…" White describes her daily routine, always starting by weighing herself. To her dismay, she is up half a pound, which means she will have to watch what she eats for the next week to prevent more weight gain. She suggests using "your prettiest tray, best china, and a bowl of flowers" to make this week's calorie restriction feel "less painful."[114]. This obsession with weight and appearance was predominant in the culture of the time, making it unsurprising, though still troubling, to hear in the film. The line's inclusion emphasizes how women's bodies were, and continue to be, subject to public analysis, even in contexts unrelated to beauty, like joining the military. While the film certainly has progressive elements, this line, in particular, diminishes the focus on women's wartime contributions by reducing their value to their physical appearance.

A close-up of a Wren jacket takes us back to the bedroom scene and the final scene starring Martin. Looking in a mirror, she wraps the jacket around herself, smooths out any creases in her uniform, adjusts her hair, and places her hat just so. When her female friend arrives, Martin cheerfully declares, "Well, here, go two more ornaments of the human race… to work!" While I believe the irony of the call-back to the radio announcer from the beginning of the film is well placed, Nash critiques this line. She says that despite this line meaning to be ironic, "the 'irony' is in itself ironic, for the vignettes seem to have taken great pains to emphasize traditional and stereotypical aspects of 'femininity,' thus confirming an idea of women as 'ornaments of the human race.'" In other words, Nash argues that the line of dialogue is ironic because, while Martin appears to use the radio announcer's words against him, the film's portrayal of women as overtly feminine undermines her sarcasm, ultimately aligning her with the announcer's sentiment.

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[114] Adele White, "My Day…," *Chatelaine* 16, no. 10, (October 1943): 12.

However, Marsh sought to craft a film that, to audiences in the 1940s, might have felt exceptionally progressive, especially when viewed in the context of other types of advertising. Compared with beauty ads targeting women before and even during the war - ads that emphasized domesticity, physical appearance, and male subservience - the depiction of women in this film stands out as remarkably progressive. The film shows women stepping out of the home and into roles of responsibility, an image far removed from the passive, ornamental roles depicted in magazines of the era. While it does not completely escape portraying women as ornaments in certain moments, the overarching message of the film is one of independence, capability, and fulfillment through meaningful work.

This would be an excellent moment to end the film. However, in a somewhat jarring transition, Martin leaves her room, and the scene abruptly cuts to a high-angle shot of a marching band, accompanied by a male voiceover announcing, “Activity. Interest. Variety. These are the keywords to the life of 25,000 women in Canada’s armed forces.” The abrupt shift gives the impression of an epilogue, tacked on to summarize the film’s message. It suggests that the film could not be taken seriously by male audiences if it maintained a female narrator throughout. Moreover, the themes are not different than what Martin has just relayed, reflecting the film’s own implications that a man is needed to oversee a woman’s work to ensure it is done correctly.

The male voiceover, though not as deep or authoritative as Lorne Greene’s, feels disconnected from the narrative. In contrast, Martin’s voice and presence on screen made her character relatable and engaging, creating a stronger connection with the audience and, presumably, the female target audience. Nash notes that Martin’s presence onscreen is grounds for “visual manipulation,” while the male narrator is not succumbed to scrutiny since he is never

on camera.[115] She says that Martin is easily trivialized because she is shown onscreen daydreaming in her slip and nylons, holding a kitten, and being concerned with her personal appearance, while the male narrator is never shown. While this is true of the male narrator, it is not for the other male characters in the film, who are also subject to visual manipulation. Moreover, having Martin speak directly to the audience makes her more relatable, especially given that the film's primary goal was to encourage women to enlist in the military.

For example, the father in Sophie's vignette is rendered useless, and he sits and watches her fix his radio. Similarly, in multiple scenes, men stand around aimlessly as a woman comes to replace them for work. These portrayals are not the same as the "masculine" depictions of men seen in other NFB films directed by men, where male characters are often shown either hard at work or enjoying a well-deserved break. In this context, it is inaccurate to claim that only Martin is subject to visual manipulation, while there are other male characters in the film whom Marsh purposely places in situations that invite scrutiny.

The emphasis on keeping fit and recreational time is, again, reiterated to ensure that military women can still be seen as feminine and attractive. The male narrator states, "Bodies are kept fit by scientifically planned physical training and group exercises. To the CWAC, the Wren, and the WD, these are as important as her job." His voiceover is accompanied by visuals of women engaged in various exercises: stretching on a lawn, performing somersaults through each other's arms, running, and skipping rope. The theme of physical fitness is reinforced further with the next line: "Sports, too, play a very big part in the training of all three services. Almost any sport she played in civilian life, a girl may follow up when she's in uniform." Scenes of women playing tennis, basketball, lacrosse, softball, swimming, and synchronized diving are shown. The

[115] Nash, 550

images of women performing physical activities take on a different connotation with a man's voiceover than a woman's. On their own, the visuals show women simply engaging in healthy and enjoyable activities. However, when viewed alongside the voiceover, the images take on a different interpretation: they seem less about personal enjoyment and more about the women's responsibility to maintain their fitness for the benefit of men.

This interpretation extends to the depiction of recreational activities. In one scene, sailors greet uniformed women on beach chairs and take them on a speedboat ride. Three couples wave at the camera as their boat drives by the marina. The next shot shows women gathered around platters of donuts and coffee, laughing and enjoying the camaraderie. These images might suggest that everyone is having a good time, but the narrator's voice, with its seemingly neutral statement, "The spare time of our women is well provided for, " adds a layer of male control to the scene. Rather than simply depicting women in a relaxed moment of camaraderie, the voiceover turns their enjoyment into something provided to them by their male superiors.

A blaring trumpet refocuses the narrator, who, over a long montage of images, says, "But today, a prime interest to the women of the services are their jobs." As Martin noted earlier in the film, there are plenty of jobs available to women, regardless of previous experience; however, it is somehow important for the male narrator to list a variety of jobs. From gardening to stenography and more technical work on machines that were once meant for men are all "performed equally well by women,' he boasts. He emphasizes cooking as an "activity dear to the hearts of all women" as a scene unfolds where woman place multiple pies on an oven. Transportation, a "man-sized job" is also available for women, he boasts.

On the other hand, while some of the language used is repetitive and completely unnecessary, the accompanying visuals largely focus on women in each frame: a couple dozen

women walk with wagons toward the garden where they work in a vegetable patch, with no men overseeing their efforts. Other scenes show women fixing machines, driving cars, and reading barometers, all without the “male tutor.”

Despite the focus on women, there are a few notable moments in this montage where men are still present. For instance, while discussing office work, a few men appear in the background, but close-ups of the women create the illusion that the office is entirely female until the mirage is broken when a man looks over the work of a Wren, reigniting the “male tutor” role. However, there are notable moments that counter the “male tutor.” For example, in one scene, a man hands a gun to a woman as she attaches it to an airplane, illustrating a more collaborative dynamic. Similarly, another scene shows a man handing a woman a screwdriver while she works on the underside of a plane. These moments of cooperation depart from the traditional narrative of women only in support roles, as we saw in *Wings*. Instead, the images reflect a sense of mutual collaboration, with men and women working together as equals to accomplish their duties.

The film concludes on a cheerful yet contradictory note, suggesting that the war’s impending victory is thanks, in part, to the contributions of women. The narrator proclaims, “Today, with victory for the United Nations almost within sight, with a great upsurge of confidence in our armed forces strike at the crumbling Nazi wall encircling Europe, our women are marching shoulder to shoulder with their brothers in arms.” While this statement appears progressive, the narrator quickly backpedals, perhaps finding "shoulder to shoulder" too bold a claim. He clarifies in the next line, “Behind the great embarkations of troops with the fighting fronts, […] Behind them are the women of our nation.” This line is reinforced with the visuals of men carrying huge sacks aboard a ship flashed on the screen, the imagery ensures viewers understand that women are not literally "side by side" but instead behind the men, supporting

from the rear. Loud cheers erupt as the men's ship departs, and the film transitions to its closing shots: women marching toward the camera from a high angle, positioned *behind* a line of male soldiers carrying rifles. While much of the runtime is dedicated to women's roles in the military, the ending reaffirms the traditional hierarchies, also seen in *Wings*, through the scene's blocking of women behind men. It is unfortunate that the film had to include the male voiceover in its final minutes. The film as a whole, although problematic in some places, can certainly be argued for its progressive qualities. However, the final low-angle close-up of Martin smiling off-camera summarizes a message inherent in the contemporaneous culture: women's service is celebrated, but only within the constraints of a supporting role on the ground level.

Conclusion

The establishment of women's divisions in the Canadian Armed Forces during the Second World War marked a pivotal shift in gender roles, both within the military and society. This thesis demonstrates how two NFB films, *Wings on Her Shoulder* and *Proudly She Marches*, reflect these changes. They served as government recruitment films that simultaneously reinforced and challenged traditional gender norms. Jane Marsh's films illustrate the tension between progressive feminist ideals and the constraint of working within a patriarchal society. By examining other media, such as advertisements, this thesis provides a more holistic view of how women were represented in the 1940s, offering a foundation – and invitation – for future research on the evolution of these portrayals.

Part One of this thesis examined wartime advertisements in *Chatelaine* and *Maclean's,* revealing the complex and often contradictory representation of women. Ads for cosmetics, household cleaners, hygiene products, and garments suggested that women could support the war effort while still reinforcing the expectation that women's primary role was to maintain their femininity as housewives or volunteers. Especially ads targeting military or working women focused on beauty products or waist-slimming techniques reinforcing the expectation that women maintain femininity.

In Part Two and Part Three, this thesis analyzed how Marsh's recruitment films mirrored the same contradiction - promoting women's independence within a patriarchal social structure. Marsh's films, while progressive for their time, reveal the complexities and contradictions of depicting empowered women in a patriarchal society. Through her use of humour and moments of sharp rejoinder, Marsh challenged traditional gender roles; however, her work remained restrained by societal expectations of femininity and subordination. This paradox reflects the

broader wartime social environment in Canada, where women were celebrated as supporters rather than equals in the war effort. Despite contemporary efforts made toward gender equality, many of the issues seen in Marsh's films and in the critiques of Nash and Mathews-Klein continue to persist.

In some ways, Marsh depicts women as competent contributors to the war effort, contrasting sharply with contemporary advertisements like Tangee's "We Are Still the Weaker Sex." She uses humour to openly satirize male pride and shows women as capable workers. Yet, these moments of subtle rebellion are weakened by the film's blatant emphasis on traditional femininity. Scenes of women styling their hair, adjusting uniforms, and applying makeup trivialize their contributions, especially when compared to the action-packed portrayals of male-centred NFB films. This fixation on providing time for military women to ensure their hair and make-up are "right" aligns with the contemporaneous societal expectations that women must maintain a sense of femininity, even if there is a war. In fact, *especially* because there was a war.

This thesis applied Barbara Klinger's diachronic approach by analyzing critiques of Marsh's films from Teresa Nash (1982) and Yvonne Mathews-Klein (1979), who argue that Marsh's portrayal of women falls short of feminist ideals. While compelling, these critiques must be understood within the historical context of the 1980s, when women's rights were central to political discourse. For example, Nash and Mathews-Klein were writing while significant legal milestones were afoot, such as the U.S. *Roe v. Wade* decision (1973) and Canada's 1982 *Constitution Act*, which guaranteed equal gender rights. This historical context underscores the importance of a diachronic approach to understanding how critiques of gender representations continue to influence contemporary discussions.

In 2025, significant strides have been made in both women's rights and cinematic representation. For example, in 2023, the CAF produced a recruitment ad entitled "This Is for You," which shows men and women performing the same tasks and working together while also presenting a diverse range of BIPOC individuals - a stark contrast to the all-white cast in *Proudly* and *Wings*. Despite these positive portrayals, there is still ample work to be done to achieve gender equality. While Canadian military women now receive equal pay to men, civilian women still face a substantial pay gap. In 2022, women earned, on average, 83.3% of what Canadian-born men made, with the gap widening for immigrant women who landed as adults (71.6%) and Indigenous women (73%).[116] The discrepancies in civilian leadership roles are also significant. In 2020, women held just 20.5% of board seats in Canadian businesses, with a staggering 59.7% of boards having no women at all.[117] The numbers are even lower for women holding executive positions, where they only held 23.7% of top roles.[118] These statistics reveal that, while cinematic representations like the *This Is for You* ad show progress in how women are portrayed onscreen, the structural barriers they face - both in the military, civilian workforce and society in general- remain strikingly similar to those of 1943. The portrayal of women in Marsh's films, competent yet constrained by societal expectations, mirrors the ongoing struggles for gender equality today. Marsh's films stand as a testament to the progress and limitations of feminist ideals in cinema, underscoring the persistent challenge of achieving true gender equity in both cinematic representations and reality.

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[116] Marie Drolet and Mandana Mardare Amini, "Intersectional perspective on the Canadian gender wage gap," Statistics Canada, Last Modified: September 21, 2023, https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/45-20-0002/452000022023002-eng.htm.

[117] "Representation of Women on Boards of Directors and in Officer Positions, 2020," Statistics Canada. May 29, 2023. https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/230529/dq230529b-eng.htm.

[118] Ibid. Executive roles include: chairperson, president, vice president and executive vice president.

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