The “Hallelujah Lasses”

Women officers in the early Salvation Army in Wales

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Let’s start with a simple exercise. Would you please all conjure up in your minds an image, an image of what comes to mind when you think of a Welsh non-conformist preacher, a minister, in the late 19th century. Perhaps in a pulpit?

I bet this is NOT what you thought of.

My talk today is about the Hallelujah Lasses, the young women officers who founded and led many of the congregations of the Salvation Army in Wales. There were a lot of them – I’ve already recorded over 300 and the list keeps growing. These were women, usually young and single, placed in positions of authority in a major national organisation, nearly half a century before some of them could even vote, and a century or more before most other religious denominations recognised the validity of female ministry. Although there were occasional instances of female preachers before this time, it was the Salvation Army that turned them from being a sort of freak-show into the mainstream.

I first became aware of the role of women in the Salvation Army from a cutting in the Cambrian News in 1883:
It struck me that there was something unexpected – those were GIRLS names! A bit more digging showed they were by no means unique. In fact, during this period (and since) it seems that a majority of Salvation Army officers in Wales were female. I wanted to find out more about this. I must qualify my comments by pointing out that this is very much a preliminary report on what promises to be quite a lengthy piece of research.

Let's have a quick review of the early history of the SA.

The movement started with William Booth in 1865, after he split from the Methodists. He then established a Christian mission in East London, which started to expand throughout the UK, and changed its name to the Salvation Army in 1878, when William Booth became 'The General'.
The first meeting of the Christian Mission in Wales was in Cardiff in 1874, with occasional visits over the next few years, culminating in the arrival of Mrs Pamela Shepherd (of whom more later) in Aberdare in 1878. By 1900 some 125 stations had been established throughout Wales.

From the beginning of their work Booth’s wife Catherine Mumford was a critical figure in developing his religious views and the structure of the Salvation Army, in particular the prominent role of women within the movement. As early as 1859 she wrote a pamphlet “Female Ministry: Woman’s Right to Preach the Gospel” and in 1860 she started to preach in her husband’s chapel in Gateshead. From the earliest days the Army included the equality of male and female ministry as part of its basic principles.

“One of the leading principles upon which the Army is based is the right of women to have the right to an equal share with men in the great work of publishing Salvation to the world... She may hold any position of authority or power in the Army from that of a Local Officer to that of the General. Let it therefore be understood that women are eligible for the highest commands—indeed, no woman is to be kept back from any
position of power or influence merely on account of her sex ... Woman must be treated as equal with men in all the intellectual and social relationships of life.”

(The Orders and Regulations for Salvation Army Staff Officers)

These look like excellent principles – and extremely radical for the time. And the General reiterated them on a number of occasions:

“Shall we tell them (young girls in the Army) that they are to grow up and settle down to the idea that the back-door drudgery of the Corps is all that lies before them?—that they can Give and Collect and do Tea Meetings and Harvest Festivals? That they can have Husbands and Children, and keep their Homes in order with a little singing, and a prayer, and a testimony or two thrown in now and then? Or shall we say to them, “Come along and take your stand by our side on the Salvation Army platform?”

“Let it therefore be understood that no Woman is to be kept back from any position of power or influence merely on account of her sex.”

General William Booth, 1901

Quoted in Hill, Harold 'Saved to Save & Saved to Serve'

This all sounds marvellous – and was acted upon, at least to a certain extent. I will return to the point later to discuss how far up the ladder this equality actually went.

Let’s turn now to examine what was actually happening on the ground in these early years. The Army procedures were quite remarkable. Two officers, usually a Captain and a Lieutenant, more often than not both female (after a few early experiments, they were always of the same sex) would be despatched to a town – Dowlais, Merthyr, Porth, Aberaman, Aberystwyth- with perhaps £5 in their pockets and the instruction to save the people of the town. That was it. And usually these were young, single women, in their late teens and early twenties, generally working-class, often monoglot English-speakers. Perhaps prior to joining the Army they were in service, or worked in a factory. In 1881 in Ystradyfodwg Lt. Amelia Heath, born in Devon, and a former domestic servant, was 26, and her assistant Lt. Lily Jones, born in Cheltenham, was just 17. It is incredible to think of the enormous courage of these young women, very much thrown in at the deep end.

And did it work? Well, amazingly, yes. If we look at the example of Latimer & Hall, who established the citadel in Aberystwyth: by the time they moved on to Ebbw Vale after six months they regularly had 400-500 people attending their meetings to hear them preach, and sometimes the crowds exceeded 1000.

The Aberystwyth Observer in September 1882 reported:

“" Capt Hall, who by-the-bye, will have charge of the work in this town, also delivered an address, remarkable for fervour and simplicity. She has great power over her listeners, although her English may not be the most grammatical but she has the gift of drawing a gloomy picture of what sin will and must do for its victims, while she can
paint in glowing terms the consolatory nature of a religious life. This was-very clearly shewn in the address which she delivered at the afternoon meeting, when she told some harrowing particulars of the death beds she had witnessed, and yet she tells the story with the utmost simplicity."

(apologies for the quality – the War Cry hasn't been digitised yet, so this is a photograph from microfilm!)

One of the first questions I wanted to answer was ‘Who were these women’? What was their background? I looked at their names - Mary Ellen Chevalier, Lavinia Shorrock, Rosina Meadon – the wonderful Faith Cornwell and Emily Heaven (honestly!) and Elystra Clinton. With names like that I wrongly assumed that they were perhaps a bit posh and middle class. I concentrated on trying to build a biography of at least some of them. The first was Elystra Clinton – who has a wonderfully unusual name and so was easy to trace in the papers. She seems to have joined the Army in about 1884. In 1885 she was a Captain in Wick, and shortly after in Stromness. In 1889 she was in Aberystwyth. In 1890 she married Major Myles Pickering and they moved to the USA, where they continued to serve until her death in 1939. Two of her children, a daughter and a son, were also officers as was her sister Minnie.
A niece, another Elystra, later became an Adjutant in the Army. But who was she? She was born in 1864, the daughter of an Irish miner in Cornwall, but who was also a minister of the gospel. The family soon moved to Durham where her father was a coal miner. A sister was a milliner, a brother a blacksmith. Prior to joining the Army she was a shop girl. So definitely not at all middle-class.

A report in the John o’Groats Journal tells some of her life story:

And now another couple of examples where I’ve managed to put some flesh on the bare facts:

Slide – Sarah Owen
Lieutenant Sarah Owen and Capt Nellie Morrell, both from Aberystwyth. They served together in Pembroke Dock before Sarah moved to Canada. Nellie served in Liverpool, Swansea, Llanelly & Penarth, was previously a governess, and played the Guitar. Her father was a painter and decorator.

So again, just ordinary people doing extraordinary work.

But let’s move on to the most interesting family. The Shepherds.

The first real operation in Wales (rather than a reconnaissance) was led by Mrs Pamela Shepherd in 1879. She was quite a character, and became known as the Mother of the Valleys.

Born in Talywaun, near Pontypool in 1836. Father active in Chartist movement, and, as a result, the family had to move to London when she was 3. She married and had a bad life - drink, husband in jail. In 1864 she planned to drown herself in the Thames, but on the way to the river she met a neighbour who took her and her girls in. In 1867 she visited the Christian Mission. She later started working for them as a hall-keeper.

Her potential was spotted by Booth and she was sent to Aberdare in 1878 – with £5 and 4 girls, the youngest 4! She started by hiring the Temperance Hall, with room for 1500 people, and packed it out. They got thrown out later as they were too noisy and so she just started preaching in the open. Helped by daughters Kate (16) and Pamela (14).

A slightly sceptical Cardiff Times 8 Feb 1879 reported
REVIVAL SERVICES in Aberdare are being conducted by Mrs Shepherd and her daughter. The former came here some months ago, and distributed handbills broadcast, announcing that if one desired to escape future torment, and learn the road to Heaven, he, or she, was invited to go to the Temperance-hall, and listen to Mrs Shepherd. Since her advent Mrs Shepherd has been in possession of either the hall or certain chapels, but latterly she has established a "Mission-hall" in a remote corner of the town, where she nightly attracts a large number of people, but females and young girls predominate.

It then added

Friday evening’s meeting was very interesting. It is time to consider the after effects of this emotional worship," for such it really is. Unfortunately such proceedings have no lasting impression. But for the advent of Miss Booth and her novel doings the excitement would have died out, for the "army" was fast dispersing.

We can find a bit more about her in the Army records. This is taken from a list of officers in 1883 in the Salvation Army Archives.

The ‘a’ means she established the station

How could I talk about the Salvation Army without mentioning tambourines? This is Mother Shepherd’s own.
Her daughter Kate grew up to be a formidable member of the Army as well

She served all over Wales – and Scotland and England

Here’s her entry in the list of officers

From the S Wales Weekly News August 1879:

“The Salvation Army, under the command of Miss Kate Shephard, has now taken up its abode at the Royal Pavilion Theatre, in Abergavenny, On Saturday night, a contingent of the Ebbw Vale Army, under the command of Captain Sister Thomas," came over, and after singing and parading the streets, adjourned to the pavilion. followed by a large crowd. Services were held, after which there were marching and counter-marching through the different streets, the rank and file ringing lustily. Miss Thomas beating the time with an umbrella.”

She was effective – another report:

There can be no question but that Miss Shepherd has been instrumental in effecting great good. She and her young companion are beloved by the people; through Miss Shepherd's agency, men who formerly were bad specimens of the Welsh miner - drunkards, careless fathers, neglectful husbands - are reformed.
Unusually, one report even gives us an example of her style:

"My dear friends, I thank God that He has saved me, pardoned my sins, and given me that peace that passeth understanding. I likewise thank Him for enabling me once more to appear in His sanctuary to warn poor sinners to flee from the wrath to come. He will wash you in His blood - His precious blood - blood that was shed for you all. Come, then, to-night, you drunkards, you blasphemers, you wife-beaters, you Sabbath breakers; come to-night. It may be too late to-morrow. Hell may be waiting to receive you. Oh, come to Jesus, you poor drunkard. Oh, He IS waiting with outstretched arms. Blessed be His name, He died for you. His spirit will strengthen you. You shall experience the new birth, without which none can be saved. Oh, come. Oh, come."

So, I've mentioned that there were a lot of these young women, a majority even. Let's look at some of the numbers.

As early as 1879 the Weekly Mail reported that:

General Booth has called most of his captains, principally young women, in South Wales to Mountain Ash for the purpose, apparently, of assisting at the "hot sharp straight shooting at Beelzebub".

The 1891 Census records 166 salvation army officers in Wales, of whom 110 are women - 100 of them unmarried. An interesting pattern of Army life was that officers often married each other, and continued to work as a team, with the same rank. And never ones to miss a trick, these weddings were heavily advertised and the public invited – admission 6d!
In the same Census in the UK as a whole, there were 1329 women and only 902 men recorded as Salvation Army officers.

An analysis of local records in Abergavenny showed that between 1893 and 1900, of the 23 officers stationed there, 19 were women.

One particular feature of life in Wales meant that working here was not the same as working in the slums of the East End in London – the language. This is an area for further investigation, but it seems that in some cases officers were chosen for Welsh stations on the basis of their knowledge of Welsh. It’s easier to convert someone using their first language. Penetration into the North was much later than in the south, and the language seems to have been a factor in this. For a period there was even a separate Welsh-speaking corps in the north with a separate training college in Carnarvon, and a Welsh version of the War Cry was published for several years.
“The deed has been signed under which we take possession of our new barracks, the Turf-square Chapel, on the 4th of September and **two female officers, one of them thoroughly acquainted with the Welsh language**, will be down here on the same day to take charge of the local work”

And here is some of the Caernarfon corps in 1887

So, what of the impact of these women and their work?

The fact that many Salvation Army stations are still open, after nearly 150 years, suggested that they sowed some very vigorous seeds.
Whilst it is difficult to separate out the impact of male and female officers, the women do seem to have made an impression. Perhaps it was the novelty of hearing a female preacher? Perhaps drunkards were less likely to pick a fight with a young woman?

The Salvation Army has always been known, and respected for, its dual emphasis on saving the soul and saving the body. The Salvation Army changed the lives of thousands of people in Wales. Unlike many religious groups, they didn’t just talk the talk, they ‘walked the walk’. They left the pulpit and went on to the streets. They visited people who were literally in the gutter, with nowhere further down to go. People who would never have been welcome in the parish church, if they even thought to go there. People for whom religion and faith were largely unknown.

A contemporary report said

“The men were for the most part of the roughest and rudest description as far as appearance went. Those who wore the red and lettered jerseys, who kept the doors and gangways, and who sold the War Cry and the hymn-book, seemed to have been collected from the ranks of the hobbles, odd-jobmen, and pugilists, and not a few of the faces bore traces of the blows received in old encounters. But they conducted themselves decently and orderly, and joined with great apparent cordiality in the singing, praying, and shouting. **Hundreds of the women were unwashed and unkempt, with equally neglected infants in arms, and noisy children hanging to their skirts. Of these British mothers, too, it must be said that they were sedate and attentive to what was going on, and they joined in the hallelujahs loudly.** “

Weekly Mail 8 Nov 1879
The Army were not afraid to get their hands dirty with their people, and to visit the sinners in their own environment, to encourage them to save their physical selves by saving their souls. They provided food and other practical assistance, they went out down the rough streets:

There is a lengthy report in the Cardiff Evening Express, 13 Oct 1893, of a late-night visit to Tiger Bay.

The practical help took many forms – they founded Rescue Homes in the big cities, for men and for women, to get them off the streets and give them a chance at a new start. One particularly interesting project was the establishment of the Womens' Metropole in Moira Street, Cardiff.
Staffed by women officers, under Mrs Goldsmith, this was a new idea – saving young women before they had fallen into sin. A common problem would be for young women to lose their jobs, which usually meant losing their accommodation, and they would soon fall prey to kind souls down the docks offering them ‘help’. The Metropole was basically a hostel, for respectable young women. It offered cheap, clean, safe accommodation – 4d night shared, 6d single –

They also offered an employment agency and training.

One nice fact – the old building is now home to some sort of Womens Resource Centre:
There was a personal cost to all this. Officers went to jail for their beliefs – the first in Wales was Louisa Lock.

The Salvation Army Heritage Centre in Camberwell even has a loaf of prison bread given to one of their many prisoners!
The law wasn’t the only problem. The work was often physically dangerous, with assaults not unknown. It was said that the bonnet was designed specifically to withstand a brick!

She was also known popularly as ‘The Hallelujah Pickler’

Another example from 1891:

Kate Smith, a married woman, living at Quarella-street, Cadoxton, Barry, was charged with assaulting Caroline Downes, an "officer" in the Salvation Army. The complainant stated that, on the previous Monday evening as she was going home from a Salvation Army meeting the defendant rushed up to her in Quarella-street and hit her in the face and kicked her in the stomach. - The defendant pleaded guilty, but said she was not sorry for it.”

The work was hard, the conditions poor. Accommodation and food depended on the collections.
The hours were long, and many became ill and were forced to leave their posts.

Sadly, that wasn’t the end of it.

So what was the impact of their work on public opinion. Attitudes changed over time. Initially many were scornful, and some openly hostile. But from initial doubts the Hallelujah Lasses and their male colleagues fast became respected. In the early years many
newspapers mocked their military structure, and ostentatiously put quotation marks around their ranks.

In Llanelli in 1880 we hear:

“The male part of the audience made themselves conspicuous by using blasphemous and revolting language, while others contented themselves with loud guffaws“

And in 1882:-

A detachment of the Salvation Army, under the command of Captain Miss Denning, arrived in Chepstow, on Saturday last and held services in the Bible Christian Chapel. The roughs of the town behaved disgracefully. Not content with hooting and yelling they hustled the female members of the army, and it was not until the police interfered that the women could enter the chapel.

But by 1891, in a report on the Newport & S Mon Womens Liberal Assoc:

"There were many paths in which women could help on the social movement. They had figured prominently in religious life but the Salvation Army had been the first body to give them an equal responsibility with men. In other bodies they had simply been allowed to do the drudgery, with- out being given any participation in the administration. (Hear, hear.)"

And in 1893, at the Barry Young Wales Society:

Miss E. P. Hughes. in acknowledging the vote of thanks, said it was incumbent upon women to learn the duties of citizenship, and said no doubt the success of the Salvation Army movement was due to the fact that women took such a prominent part in its operations. (Cheers.) Amongst audiences of working-men, she always found a disposition to give fairplay to women. (Hear, hear.)

But let’s return to the position of women within the Army. I spoke of the declarations of equality, the right of women to hold the highest offices in the army. Did this actually happen? Well, no, not really. Up to the present day, of the 21 generals, only 3 have been women. And one of those, the fourth general, Evangeline Booth, was one of William Booth’s daughters. A small proportion did attain higher ranks, but they were a definite minority. There definitely seems to have been a glass ceiling. Why was this? That’s a question for another day – but the habit of officers marrying seems to have been a factor. It was acceptable for a married man to be a leader, but a married woman faded into the background. Perhaps it was simpler for a married couple to work together equally in a local citadel, but harder once they moved up into administrative positions. Could two people share command?
Another factor to investigate is whether class and education was a factor in enforcing the glass ceiling.

I hope this brief introduction to a fascinating topic has whetted your appetites for more, perhaps next year? There are so many more delightful stories and incidents – jokes even – which I’ve had to omit. As with so many aspects of women’s history this seems to be a rich topic, but one which has been largely neglected, not just in Wales. There has been some good work, but the bulk of the extensive research on the Army tends to skim over the role of women. Part of the explanation for this seems to be that a large proportion of the work has been written from the viewpoint of Salvationists – they naturally tend to focus on the spiritual angle and the results of the work, more than the people involved. Hopefully at some stage I will be able to add to the corpus!

I would like to thank the staff of the Salvation Army Heritage Centre at the William Booth College in Camberwell for their assistance – they’re very nice people – and of course the National Library for their work in digitising the Welsh Newspapers, for which we are all eternally grateful!

And to finish, a (possibly apocryphal) quotation from William Booth: “Some of my best men are women!"