

Biog 11 Mrs Eliza Orr, formerly Hamilton, Tram Conductress

Morag Cross Dec 28 2013

***11.1

'Glasgow Corporation were the first [in Britain] to engage women ... as [tram] conductors when the ranks of the latter were depleted by the men's patriotism in joining the army, and the same enterprise has been shown ... in training the 'motresses' [tram drivers], as they are officially termed'. [Source: 'Women Drivers at Glasgow', *Tramway and Railway World*, 11 May 1916, p356].

***11.2

In the days before private car ownership, most ordinary citizens relied on public transport for every single journey they made that wasn't within walking distance. Entire industries relied upon workers being able to use buses or subway trains to reach shipyards, shops or factories. Consequently, the provision of such services was so vitally important that municipal authorities, including Glasgow City Council, took it very seriously. From September 1914 onwards, their male tramways staff, including cleaners, drivers, mechanics and maintenance men, enlisted in huge numbers or were conscripted.

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In 1914, their male staff numbered 4672 (omitting cleaners, for whom figures are not available), but by October 1915, 46% of the employees, or 2178 men, had enlisted (again, excluding cleaners). This left the Council facing a real crisis, as so many other parts of the national war effort required 'mass transit' of labour to munitions factories, docks and barracks. However, despite the remaining drivers and conductors 'work[ing] seven days per week', they couldn't physically cover the hours required, and services 'had to be considerably curtailed'. [Source: James Dalrymple, 'Tramway Labour Problems as Affected by the War', *Tramway and Railway World*, 14 Oct 1915, pp281-2].

***11.4

An unforeseen consequence of the national emergency was the opening of new opportunities for women, including jobs previously the sole preserve of men. Although the majority of single, and many married, working class women were employed out of sheer necessity to make ends meet, the roles viewed as 'socially appropriate' were very restricted. They were especially concentrated in domestic service, repetitive factory work, shops and piecework (assembling products, or sewing) which could be performed at home. This enabled them to continue childcare, washing and cooking on an open range (a coal-burning iron stove in the kitchen fireplace) which took an inordinate amount of time without any electrical or modern appliances. Family laundry could easily take the whole day in the wash-house in the tenement back court, as the water in the 'copper' or large metal bowl was slowly heated over an open fire. The whole process was mainly hard physical labour, as there was no alternative but to undertake it yourself, even in the coldest winter temperatures.

***11.5

Glasgow Corporation Tramways Department was forced to radically alter the way it organised its staff during the war, as their manager explained: In September, 1914, 'we had a uniformed staff [drivers, conductors, motormen] numbering 3,249 ... [but] 1,902 subsequently joined the colours ...

a larger proportion of the traffic staff ... have [enlisted] than of any other section'. This forced management to try 'how women could take the place of men ... by March [1915] we were at the end of our tether, and were compelled to try women as conductors'. [Source: James Dalrymple, 'Tramway Labour Problems as Affected by the War', *Tramway and Railway World*, 14 Oct 1915, pp281-2].

***11.6

Trials were successful. 'We have now [October 1915] over 800 women conductors, and are still engaging more ... this has been altogether satisfactory ... thousands of applications have been considered. We ... get women from 24 or 25 years of age ... strong physically, and who knew what it was to do a day's work. A large proportion ... are married .. the husbands are with the army.' Of the 818 conductresses, 300 were married, 55 widowed, and after training for 8 days, 'of course our women get the same pay as the men ... No difference whatever is made between conditions', which were 27/- for a 51 hour week. [Sources: James Dalrymple, 'Tramway Labour Problems as Affected by the War', *Tramway and Railway World*, 14 Oct 1915, pp281-2].

***11.7

One of these early women tram workers was Eliza Orr (1888-1953), born Eliza McNair Hamilton, one of twelve children of a housepainter, turned flour-miller, and his English wife, Maria Ruth Hamilton (née Beer). The Hamiltons were living in Commercial Road, Gorbals, by 1901, in a densely-populated area of working-class tenements. Maria was widowed in 1906, and the following year remarried, thereby becoming Maria Mann. The whole family continued to live together in Commercial Rd. Her documents show that Maria, unlike her children, was unable to write, and signed with an 'x' rather than her name. [Sources: Census 1911, Statutory Registers of Births, Marriages, Deaths, at www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk; Census 1881, 1891, 1901, at www.ancestry.co.uk].

***11.8

Eliza's elder sister Williamina also married, to Charles Ferries who erected shipyard scaffolding, which enabled platers and riveters to build the walls of new vessels upwards. The 1911 census shows the Ferries and Hamilton/Mann households living in adjacent closes, with Eliza, a brother and three other inhabitants in their common stairway all working for a local confectionary factory. This was almost certainly wholesale jam and candied-fruit peel manufacturers, John Gray Ltd, also situated in Commercial Road. [Sources: Statutory Register of Marriages, Census 1911, at www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk; *Glasgow Post Office Directories 1890-1912*].

***11.9

Eliza married William ('Willie') Orr, a journeyman lithographic printer, in 1911, and their first child arrived that year. Orr was a keen amateur rower and footballer (a more famous namesake played for Celtic during this period). When Glasgow began recruiting tram conductresses in January 1915, Eliza already had two small children. Her mother, Maria Mann, helped look after them so that, despite expecting her third child, Eliza could return to work. Her family recalled that Eliza was 'a proud and astute woman and a very hard worker ... a Socialist, a member of the Loyal Orange Order ... who had asked for volunteers from both women and men of their ranks'. [Sources: Statutory

Registers of Births, Marriages, Census 1911, at www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk; Personal Information: John Messner, Aileen Strachan, Riverside Museum, Glasgow].

Eliza had several motivations for her new profession; 'She felt that by working on the trams she could personally contribute to the war effort . She had a strong conviction that [this] was a war like no other ... especially towards the end ... when such bad losses were reported. [Eliza] believed everyone was equal in God's eyes so women should be more responsible for their labour and toil [and] escape the chains of servitude by doing more responsible work. She was as capable as any man to do her job'. [Source: Personal Information: John Messner, Aileen Strachan, Riverside Museum, Glasgow].

***11.10a and ALSO either 11.10b or 11.10c [use a and one of either 'b or c' - b and c are alternates of the same picture]

The war had other effects on the Hamiltons. Eliza's brother-in-law, Charles Ferries had left the shipyards to join The Royal Scots Fusiliers, and was killed in France in September 1915, leaving a widow with a small child to support. The extended family were now heavily involved with the tramways department, and caring for the grandchildren. In 1915 the Orrs were living in Ballater St [then called Govan St], literally round the corner from her mother. Eliza's family recalled: Her 'life was a struggle from start to finish of a day. She had to get her children dressed, fed and ... to their grandmother's house [in Commercial Street] ... there was shift work as well ... she lost weight and sleep because of the stress of her work'. [Sources: Personal Information: John Messner, Aileen Strachan, Riverside Museum, Glasgow; *Valuation Rolls 1915*, Ward 18, pp45, 61, and *Deaths, Service Returns*, at www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk; 'Charles Ferries, 7RSF', *British Army WWI Medal Rolls Index Cards, 1914-1920*, at www.ancestry.co.uk; 'Casualty Details: Charles Ferries, L/Cpl ', *Commonwealth War Graves Commission*, at www.cwgc.org].

***11.11

In November 1915, 'as an experiment', Glasgow, began training six female conductors to drive trams, with surprising support: 'male employees have been too patriotic to raise any objection', seeing it as part of the general war effort. Six months later, in May 1916, Glasgow had '68 [women] actually driving or under training ... they have far fewer accidents than men ... they handle the cars very well'. Eliza Hamilton made the successful transition to driver around this time. [Source: *Tramway and Railway World*, 11 May 1916, p356].

***11.12

Eliza's husband, Willie Orr (1884-1935), as a 'older' married man, had been exempt from conscription until May 1916, when the categories of eligible draftees were extended to married men under the age of 41. He enlisted in July 1917, and by chance, continued his family's transport tradition. He served with some more unusual and specialised units, including the Inland Waterways and Docks Company of The Royal Engineers, which built quays and infrastructure on the English Channel coast, for loading supply ships transporting munitions to the European battlefields. Orr was posted to Chatham Naval Dockyard, and Richborough, Kent, before briefly serving with the short-lived 20th (Transport Workers) Bn, Scottish Rifles, also intended for home ports duty. [Sources: 'How men joined ... The Military Service Act 1916', and 'The Cameronians (Scottish Rifles)', *The Long, Long*

Trail, at www.1914-1918.net; 'William Orr, 372 George St, Glasgow', *British Army WWI Service Records, 1914-1920*, and William Orr, 20th Bn, Scottish Rifles', *British Army WWI Medal Rolls Index Cards, 1914-1920*, at www.ancestry.co.uk; 'Richborough Port During the World Wars', *History of Sandwich*, at www.open-sandwich.co.uk].

***11.13

Eliza's widowed sister Williamina Ferris became a tramway cleaner, as they were also in short supply. Some had 'left to engage in munition work', others had been 'bill-sticking', putting up army recruitment and advertising posters. It was probably at work that Williamina met her second husband, a 'tramway-car fitter's assistant', whom she married in 1917. Unfortunately, she was to become one of the victims of the 1918's great influenza epidemic, dying in Shieldhall Fever Hospital two days after the war ended. [Sources: Statutory Registers of Marriages, Deaths at www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk; James Dalrymple, 'Tramway Labour Problems as Affected by the War', *Tramway and Railway World*, 14 Oct 1915, pp281-2].

***11.14

It has been estimated that WWI cost 16 million lives, but that the disastrous influenza pandemic possibly killed 50 million. 'Within months, it had killed more people than any other illness in recorded history'. It was 'a cruel ending to the bloodshed of the Great War', especially for Glasgow, because the first British civilian cases probably appeared there, 'a major port ... a point of entry'. The city's death rate peaked in October, a fortnight before Williamina died, and altogether 70,000 Scots may have been killed 'by an invisible virus'. [Sources: A R Butler, J L Hogg, Exploring Scotland's influenza pandemic of 1918-19 ..., *Journal of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh*, 2007, pp362-4; 'The Deadly Virus: The Influenza Epidemic of 1918', *Regional History from the [US] National Archives* [American Website], at www.archives.gov].

***11.15

Eliza Hamilton 'was heavily criticised by her family members [for continuing to work], because they had suffered loss by the flu epidemic'. She had also been very ill after the birth of her fourth child in early 1918, but 'went back to work as soon as she could'. Eliza 'felt very proud to have [driven trams] and ... often spoke about it when women were later given the vote, and a chance ot have work experience outside the norms of domestic service and the poor house'. [Source: Personal Information: John Messner, Aileen Strachan, Riverside Museum, Glasgow].