



# Writing New Histories of War and Women's Activism in Jamaica: An Interview with [Dalea Bean](#)

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**Reena Goldthree (RG):** In your new book, *Jamaican Women and the World Wars: On the Front Lines of Change* (2018), you explore the roles that Jamaican women played in World Wars I and II, tracing their efforts in Jamaica as well as overseas. What fuelled your interest in this topic and in the broader field of Caribbean women's history?

Dalea Bean (DB): So, I did my PhD a couple hundred years ago it feels like! Actually, it is a funny story in terms of how the topic came about. I went to The University of the West Indies, Mona for my undergraduate years and I just knew I wanted to do history. I didn't have a clue what I wanted to research, however. When I completed my graduate courses, I spoke to one of my lecturers and I had some ideas in mind. I wanted to do education, and he just said one thing that changed my mind.

He said, "During the war, women started to wear pants." I don't know how he even got there, but he said, "Yes, during the war, during the Second World War, that's when the fashion changed and women started to wear pants." I said, "Interesting." My mom had done an MA in History a couple years before on the ways in which Jamaica's *Daily Gleaner* newspaper fashioned the public response to World War II. So, I started going through her thesis, which I had at home, and wondered, "Okay, is there anything about women in there?"

She had a few little snippets – maybe overall about three pages of information on women – and that's where it started. And really the rest is history. At first I thought in terms of the same narrative that we have of European history during the Second World War in which men go off to participate in combat and women start working outside of the home. So, I thought that's what I would find for Jamaicans, too. I was pleasantly surprised to find something more complicated.

**RG: Your book contributes to a new wave of scholarship on women's activism in the interwar Caribbean. What important insights does your research provide about gender in Jamaica between World Wars I and II?**

DB: Before my book, there have been some papers and MA theses that deal with Caribbean women's involvement in conflict situations generally. For example, many people know about Mary Seacole and her unique role in the Crimean War as a Jamaica woman. However, my research for World Wars I and II opens up lines of inquiry that were previously unknown. Specifically, my book documents the fact that Jamaican women participated on various fronts during both wars.

Women from Jamaica are participating in the Global North. They're going to the United States. They're going to Europe. Crucially, they are contributing to the military mobilization effort in Jamaica by recruiting men for warfare. Women's active engagement with the war effort changes fundamental aspects of the gender discourse in Jamaica. We primarily see a public gender discourse during the wars regarding the changing expectations of men and women. My book provides detailed information about these women's lives and chronicles their efforts to organize public events for the war effort. Given the gender norms of the early twentieth century, we can't take for granted that middle and upper-class Jamaican women at this time would have previously have been organizing their own public charitable events or other patriotic activities. Planning military recruitment rallies and other war-related gatherings constituted a whole new type of activism for women on the island.

The war years also brought many women to the fore in terms of public writing, including poetry and literature. For instance, Jamaican Amy Bailey is well known for having written a great deal generally, but she also specifically wrote on World War II. During the First World War, a lot of elite white and near-white women were making their own voices heard. In my book, I wanted to acknowledge the role of these women in Jamaica's war effort because, in the field of Caribbean women's history and twentieth-century Caribbean history

more broadly, we tend to focus on black and other working-class women. This is understandable; however, there is a space for looking at these elite women who were also on the fringes of history, in a way. Certainly, when we study elite white women during this period, their activism was shaped by the construct of their class and by their own racial and gender contradictions. Yet, they were very present and important in women's wartime activism, even though we must situate their work in conversation with working-class women in Jamaica as well.

Overall, I think that my research addresses Jamaican women's experiences from many vantage points. Of course, my book couldn't do everything, and so I hope that it will encourage a new line of inquiry for scholars working on race and class in the interwar period generally. I also believe that many of the advancements made in the post-colonial era were shaped by women's forgotten labour during the interwar years. Scholars often include male Jamaican veterans as part of the political watershed of the 1950s and 1960s, but we do not think about the long-term consequences of World Wars I and II for women. We write about the role of men with the trade union movement and returning soldiers from the two wars, but there was a movement for women as well, and that is hardly spoken about.

**RG: One of the things that I found incredibly impressive about your book is the range of sources that you use to explore the lived experiences of Jamaican women during the world wars. Could you say a bit about the specific sources and archives that you found most useful as you were writing the book?**

DB: As you've said, I brought together quite a few different types of sources in my book. In terms of archives and repositories, I mainly worked at the Jamaica Archives in Spanish Town. I also conducted extensive research at the National Library in Jamaica and at The University of the West Indies' Mona Library. Outside of Jamaica, I found valuable sources in England at the UK National Archives in Kew and the Imperial War Museum in London. Most of the photographs for the book came from the Imperial War Museum, while I found a

great deal of private correspondence and other written materials at the UK National Archives. Finally, Jamaican newspapers were invaluable in terms of sources.

Two sources that I discovered during my research were particularly revealing in terms of race, gender, and class. While conducting research at the UK National Archives, I reviewed the files dealing with recruitment for the Auxiliary Territorial Service during World War II. The files addressed the internal debate among officials in the UK concerning the enlistment of women from Jamaica and the wider British Caribbean. I don't think I've ever seen such blatant lies and cover-ups and retractions! Those files were my first introduction to what really happened among imperial officials and the impact of race and class prejudice in this time period. Of course, we know it's there. We speak about it, but to actually see them writing things and scribbling over it and changing correspondence – that was really an eye-opener for me.

The materials I found on wartime prostitution were also illuminating. They are actually my favourite body of archival sources, but I decided not to use them in the book. I had a chapter in my PhD thesis on wartime prostitution, but I left it out of this work because I would like to expand that as a separate follow-up project. In my next book, I will look at the way women's bodies were policed in countries that had U.S. military bases during the Second World War. Throughout the war, there was a discourse about which women were thought to have gonorrhoea and syphilis, and which women were spreading venereal diseases wantonly among military men, compromising military efficacy.

**RG: At its core, your research highlights the variety of roles that Jamaican women played in the war effort—both on the home front and overseas. You specifically challenge the gendered stereotype of women as pacifists by documenting how Jamaican women of all classes and races overwhelmingly supported military mobilization during World Wars I and II. What specific kinds of work did Jamaican women perform during the world wars on the home front?**

DB: On the home front, women mainly did what was called the making of “comforts.” It started very small, particularly during the First World War. We have to think of the general context – this is the first time that Jamaica would have been pulled into an international conflict of this magnitude. So, there was a little uncertainty as to how to lend support. The longings of empire would be very strong, and every loyalist – man, woman, boy and girl – wanted to find a way to lend their hand. We know the famous line: “Go ahead, England. Barbados is behind you.” It was important to the people of Barbados, and people in the region more broadly, that they were standing behind England.

There was this general interest in being helpful, and in being recognized as such. In their war work, women used skills that they were using anyway – such as knitting, sewing, making preserves and so on. They made a lot of warm garments and other comforts, which would have been sent to soldiers in cold climates. In order to produce and ship these comforts, women developed new networks and linkages with local manufacturers because they had to have shipping linkages and so on to transport the goods. Women also took a leading role in local fundraising campaigns through Empire Day parades and other events. They donated money for planes, ambulances, and other items for troops at the front.

During World War II, women once again made comforts for soldiers and organized fundraising campaigns. They also organized efforts to increase the production of food crops locally. There was a campaign to get women to help save the nation from starvation by using their private kitchen gardens to grow staple foods. Because shipping was severely curtailed, there were extensive shortages of food and women mobilized to grow crops to replace imported goods.

**RG: You also explore the gendered discourses around military recruitment and the ways in which recruitment—which is often understood as a male-centred**

**process—depended on women’s labour. Can you tell us about the Jamaican women who helped to lead the recruitment campaign?**

DB: Annie Douglass was a common denominator in several efforts. She was a nurse with the British Red Cross. She was a white/near-white Jamaican, and she would have been to previous conflicts on her own as a nurse. She embodied a contradiction because on the one hand she’s female and therefore has a second-class status in this male-dominated colonial milieu. But, on the other hand, she had actually been to war, and so she embodies the possibilities of glory and returning home with military medals. Interestingly, she does not use her power to recruit women for the war effort. Instead, she was particularly vocal about the need for men to join the army and shaming those who refused to do so.

For instance, she carried a skirt to a meeting in St. James and held it up and said: “I’ve carried this skirt to put on the noble men of St. James. Are you going to wear it?” And, of course, they cried, “No.” And she said, “No, I know you won’t because you’re brave men,” and so on. So, we see there that she is toeing the line between the deprecation of her own sex while also lording the fact that she has been to war and participated in the defence of the empire. She would also not only organize and speak at these rallies, but she went into the crowds, and she would pull men out of the crowd. You had an instance where, after one meeting, 12 men from a rural area were immediately sent to an urban military training camp. I can just imagine Annie Douglass there in her nurse’s uniform preaching to those men that they should be ashamed that they were not doing more for King and country.

**RG: In some ways, Annie Douglass reminds me of the women who participated in the white feather campaigns in Britain during World War I. Women like Douglass played a crucial role in policing masculinity during the war years.**



DB: Definitely.

**RG: In addition to analysing the home front, your research also uncovers all of the ways in which Jamaican women served overseas, including as soldiers during World War II. How did women from Jamaica come to enlist in the British armed forces?**

DB: As I said earlier, one of my favourite bodies of sources that I used for the book dealt with the process of recruiting Jamaican women for military service. When I started my research and I looked for relevant literature, I found Ben Bousquet and Colin Douglas's book, *West Indian Women at War: British Racism in World War II* (1991). As I discovered in my own work, the actual origins of the recruitment campaign for the Auxiliary Territorial Service is muddled in terms of the exact sequence of events. Generally, posters would have been posted in urban areas in Jamaica and elsewhere in the British Caribbean asking for women to volunteer for the Auxiliary Territorial Service.

Significantly, military officials did not expect black women to enlist. They only wanted white women. The controversial question was: "How do we keep the white women and shelve the black women?" In my research, I uncovered that officials did not want black women in England and they also did not want black women as part of the army, even if they were serving at home in Jamaica or other Caribbean territories. Ultimately, some members of the Auxiliary Territorial Service and other units of the British Army did serve in their home countries. But there initially was this colour issue, and colourism really took centre stage as to whether British military leaders wanted black Jamaican women in uniform at all representing the army anywhere.

The female volunteers from Jamaica were young, middle-class women who had secretarial or teacher training and were ready for adventure. I had the opportunity to interview some of the volunteers, and I assumed that they would have been afraid to enlist, given the type of sheltered life most women would have had at that time in their class. However, they weren't afraid. They were

very ready to go experience the world, and the war was their opportunity to do so and to get higher education as well. They applied to the War Office to serve in the Auxiliary Territorial Service, and the initial applicants had to wait about a year before being accepted – again, because of this back and forth that was taking place behind the scenes, which they did not know, between the Colonial Office and the War Office. The Colonial Office, as you know, erred on the side of expediency because they didn't want another Morant Bay [rebellion] or a repeat of the Tramcar riots of 1912. In contrast, the War Office, being very distant from the kind of political massaging that it takes to keep the colony in its place, was very reluctant to mobilize black women from Jamaica. The war between the Colonial Office and the War Office took place for about eight months. What finally broke the stalemate was that there was a Bermudan woman whom they accepted into the Auxiliary Territorial Service thinking that she was white. By the time that they realized that she was black, it became too obvious and too difficult to keep black women out. So, they took black women into the army to serve in their home bases or in England, and they took white women for military duty in Washington, DC., and they blamed the U.S. colour bar for their inability to assign black Caribbean women to posts in America.

**RG: How did the experience of serving in the Auxiliary Territorial Service impact these women's understandings of the British Empire and of womanhood?**

DB: Jamaican women's experiences in the Auxiliary Territorial Service varied, and I was really pleased to have been able to speak to some of these women to gain a deeper sense of their unique reflections on military service. I interviewed six female veterans, and I got two or so other interviews that were published by the Imperial War Museum. Some Jamaican women had really awesome experiences in the Auxiliary Territorial Service in terms of limited racism and very little experience with sexism. Some went on to marry Caribbean men who were also serving, and they lived in England, and so on. As a result, their assessment of colonial military service was akin to their expectations—

acceptance and openness, inclusiveness, and making a life for themselves in that space.

There were others who faced discrimination, racism, and sexism. Connie Mark, for instance, swore until her death that she did not get a specific service medal because she refused to clean the houses of the white female officers in the Auxiliary Territorial Service. Some of the black women in the service had to do those jobs, and she refused to do that because she had a maid at home! Her experience with that sort of open discrimination within a space where she expected to be considered elite—not only because of her class back at home in Jamaica but now because she was serving in the British Army.

Ultimately, Mark was not accepted in the ways that she expected as a British subject from Jamaica. Then, she got married after the war and she encountered the racism and hostility that was typical for Caribbean people in England in the 1950s, where signs like “No Irish, No Blacks, No Dogs” appeared in London. For Mark, those experiences were a slap in the face, and they made her realize that England was not a “mother country.”

In terms of womanhood, many female members of the Auxiliary Territorial Service did not think about gender roles at the time because they enlisted for adventure, not necessarily to prove themselves and their capabilities as women. But, in reflecting on their service after World War II, many did say that it changed the course of their lives. As I have said, they mainly were middle-class women. They would have likely got married and they would have had to leave the civil service if they had jobs. Most likely, they would have become housewives. But, because of this opportunity to work and then study in the United Kingdom, many became trained administrative assistants or professionals. One of Jamaica's first female judges, Ena Collymore-Woodstock, was trained in the United Kingdom as a result of her wartime exposure and experience. So in looking back she and others said, “Obviously, this would never have been my life.” And in her case in particular she did have this view like, “Anything men can do, I can do as well – if not better.” So, in reflecting, they do recognize that it was critical to their

advancement and liberation as women – but not necessarily so much when they were initially enlisting for service.

**RG: How did Jamaicans respond to seeing these generally middle-class young women go off to war as soldiers? What was the public reaction to women's participation in what has traditionally been a deeply masculine sphere?**

DB: I think that's an important question, and it's not something I've been able to gauge well enough. During the war, women became far more prominent in the print media as a result of various wartime exigencies. Many of these women writers are applauding their sisters who are going off to war – or who are involving themselves in this male-dominated space. If you review copies of the *Daily Gleaner*, which was appealing to an urban, middle-class readership, then you will find poetry by women lauding other women for their service. In terms of getting a feeling from the average person on the street, that is not forthcoming in the archival sources that I examined for the book. I suspect the newspapers at the time would have been focusing on either military strategy and outcomes or the economic and sociopolitical ramifications of the war in those periods, rather than popular opinion about female military service.

**RG: One consequence of women's activism in Jamaica during World War I is that some women are enfranchised. As you explain in your book, around 3,000 women gained the right to vote in 1919. How did the suffrage movement develop in Jamaica?**

DB: The context of women's suffrage in Jamaica has to be seen in light of the suffrage campaign in the United Kingdom before and during World War I. As scholars have noted, the suffrage campaign in the UK took a "nasty" turn with the suffragette vs. suffragist battles and the violent campaign that took place. In Jamaica, the *Daily Gleaner* had a habit of covering pretty much everything that happened in this campaign. The events of the British suffrage campaign

were portrayed in the Jamaican landscape very negatively. As a result, we see that powerful men actually initiated the campaign for women's suffrage in Jamaica, and that the fight for women's right to vote was not led by women in the initial stages. Two well-known men – councilman H.A.L. Simpson and *Daily Gleaner* editor H.G. de Lisser – were at the forefront of the effort.

On the one hand, these men wanted to recognize the important labour that women performed on the home front during World War I. On the other hand, they supported granting some women the right to vote to buttress the political power of their socioeconomic class. Furthermore, they did not want Jamaican women to mirror what was happening in England in terms of the suffrage fight. They knew if the demand for suffrage came organically from local women, then every class of women in Jamaica would be swept up in the campaign. It would not be an elite movement. Instead, it would be a mass movement and a movement for the masses of women. Therefore, Simpson and de Lisser wanted to nip it in the bud before the bud even started to grow.

Simpson and de Lisser made two arguments in favour of women's suffrage: women had performed crucial work during the war and they were taxed without any political representation. Simpson and de Lisser proposed that middle-class women who were at least 25 years of age and paid taxes annually should be able to vote.

Initially, Jamaican women were slow to respond to the local suffrage movement. It wasn't coming from a woman, and it didn't have any female leadership. Eventually, Nellie Latrielle, who was a white English-born woman who lived in Jamaica, roused some women to action and argued that, "Jamaican women need women leadership. If men are going to lead us, women are not going to respond." From that point, the movement really just snowballed.

In opposition to the movement, some men espoused negative views about women having the vote and argued that voting would be a slippery slope in terms of women's demands for political power. If women are able to vote,

opponents claimed, then it means they're going to want to be voted for, which is exactly what happened. Women's suffrage, which was enacted for middle-class and elite women in Jamaica in 1919, was one of the key political outcomes of the war years. By the end of the movement, it became a female-driven and gendered battle, but I argue in my book that it really did not start that way.

**RG: What are some of the other significant political consequences of women's participation in the world wars?**

DB: As we just discussed, there's a clear line between World War I and suffrage in 1919 for selected women in Jamaica. There's also a clear line between women's suffrage in 1919 and the election of Mary Morris Knibb in 1939 as the first female councilwoman in Jamaica. Her campaign was female-led and targeted female voters. So, there is a clear line between the political consequences of World War I and Knibb's initial venture into politics in the 1930s. Mary Morris Knibb's election offers a clear line that you can draw through history in terms of a landmark political outcome of World War I. But I think the lines that are a little more zigzag and blurry have less to do with deliberate political outcomes and more with shifting views because of women's work in the wars – particularly visibility. Some women gained visibility as public figures in Jamaica either because of their elite status or because of their particular profession. For example, Amy Bailey did social work and Una Marson came to prominence because of her literary and journalistic writings.

In a collective sense, the war effort made women far more visible than they had previously been in Jamaica. When you open a newspaper and you see women on a speaker's platform at a major recruitment rally, it shifts the narrative and the possibilities in terms of women having a political voice. Those are the types of political ramifications that are a little harder to track, but the impact of shifting conceptions of women as leaders and political actors was overwhelming by the 1960s and '70s.

Furthermore, I believe the fact that women were trained as soldiers had an impact on their work in the independence era of the 1960s. The first police women in Jamaica would have been trained in the Auxiliary Territorial Service and other branches of the British Army during World War II. In this regard, wartime service changed the labour market. It also changed women's aspirations. These labour shifts also would have political ramifications because if you're going to serve in the army or in the police force, then you are breaking into male-dominated fields. Again, these things are less perceptible in the archival record and are harder to trace, but I think equally important when looking at long-term political ramifications.

**RG: To what extent are Jamaican women's contributions to the war effort remembered today? Is there a sense of local pride and awareness about this history, particularly given the fact that some of the World War II veterans that you discuss in your book are still alive?**

DB: Many of the female veterans from World War II are still living, but that entire generation of women and men is fading quickly. In Jamaica, there are some specific groups that honour them and have annual services on Veterans Day. To raise funds, we always sell the remembrance poppy in November and February.

Beyond these events, public memory about the world wars is very scarce in Jamaica. I think the reason is multi-faceted. In the first instance, Jamaica generally is not a militaristic society. While we have a high rate of violence, and our police force is quite active, our army is sidelined in terms of national security. In fact, many will argue, "What's the purpose of Jamaica having an army?" The armed forces are not very well recognized or integrated into our daily culture, in contrast to the United States where celebrations of veterans and militarism are daily occurrences. It's not that for Jamaica.

The other thing is that our history, generally, is undervalued by the average person on the street – and even by our leaders. We have our national holidays – like Independence Day and Emancipation Day – where we publicly reflect on Jamaica's history. But, overall, we are very centred on current issues and the future. Looking back is not something we do very well or very often. Our culture comes to us through grandparents, our food and the way we speak, but in terms of a deliberate effort to be able to understand the forces that got us to this point, it is not very well appreciated. This context helps to explain why Jamaicans do not even know that there is such a rich history of women's involvement in the movements in support of World Wars I and II.

I really hope to change the lack of knowledge about women's roles in Jamaica's war efforts. I would love for the information to be accessible in interviews, documentary films, or in other visual forms like comic books for children. For little girls growing up in Jamaica, I think it's important to know that women made remarkable contributions during the world wars and they were determined to serve. There's so much more that needs to be done in terms of memorializing all veterans in Jamaica and, in particular, women.

**RG: Before we conclude, I have one final question. In your position as a Lecturer at the Regional Coordinating Office (RCO) at the Institute for Gender and Development Studies, UWI Mona Campus, you offer courses on feminist theorizing and contemporary gender-related issues in the Caribbean. What lessons can twenty-first century feminist activists in Jamaica learn from female activists from the interwar period?**

DB: That is an excellent question. It is not often a connection I give great consideration to, but I think there are many lessons that can be learned. Firstly, that activism can be expressed in multiple modalities. While some will physically participate in rallies and have a visible presence in the streets, others will use creative writing, newspaper articles or other forms of expression to make their voices heard. Once an issue is of import to you, it is vital to use your specific



strengths and aptitude to bring that message across. Theorizing about feminist and gender concerns is not relegated to an elite few; many young women have the tools, voice and vision to make their mark in determining their life chances. I believe the experience of those women who enlisted for service should serve as a reminder that the world is our oyster and that some risk and chances should be taken to ensure empowerment. This may not mean travel to fight a “white man’s war”, but the point is we should not be limited by current circumstances, which are often dictated by patriarchy, racism and classism. Opportunities should be created and seized. In so doing, further cracks to the proverbial “glass ceiling” will be made. There are many other take-away points, but I believe these are two critical lessons that can be learned from wartime and interwar activism.



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