

Kitchener's Ladies
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"I have found the city [New York] to be wonderful and delightful. So many things have impressed me that I hardly know which ones to mention. I think, however, I am perfectly safe in saying that New York should be proud of her beautiful women." A few days earlier, the Los Angeles Herald reported under a heading "She cowed Kitchener", that "Rather than stand a siege from Lady Sarah Wilson, famous for her newspaper correspondence during the Boer War, Lord Kitchener cancelled his booking on the steamer Marama and will return to the Antipodes by way of San Francisco. Kitchener, they say, fears women more than he does bullets."

Kitchener is a man of contradictions and complexities. Had you asked me when I started looking into this man whose reluctance to bring Africa into the Great War of 1914-1918 would result in me exploring his relationship with women, I'd probably have laughed. I don't do women's history – I follow leads in my sources to explore relationships and how those impact on decisions concerning war. Well, learning never to say never, here we are – looking at the role of Kitchener's ladies (and ladies is used purposefully – most were addressed as 'Lady') their role in conflict and what they tell us about him.

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While Kitchener was well known for his dislike of women and his preference for unmarried men serving with him, there is sufficient evidence to suggest a different relationship and to proffer an alternative explanation to his preference for unmarried soldiers rather than him being homosexual. By 1910 when Kitchener was visiting the USA, he was already 60 years old, the best years of his career were behind him and as he had turned down being governor of the Mediterranean, he was without a job. He could afford to relax a little allowing his sense of humour to emerge (at one stage he called his hunting dogs – Aim, Shoot, Bang and Damn). Family talk of the twinkle in his eye as reported in this San Pedro Daily News article. But there was more to Kitchener than just a humorous take on women. Before his fame, he was engaged to Hermione Baker, the daughter of Valentine Pasher in Egypt. Hermione unfortunately died aged 18 of typhoid which left Kitchener devastated and it is said that he carried a lock of her hair with him until the weekend he left for Orkney in 1916. Later, in 1902 he proposed to Lord Londerry's daughter who turned him down. It appears he felt pressured to marry for his title, earned for his work in the 2nd Anglo-Boer war. They remained good friends and soon after she married. Another woman he was linked with from early on, probably even before Hermione, was Catherine Walters otherwise known as Skittles. She was a very good friend of Edward, Prince of Wales and later Edward VII. In her old age, Kitchener was recorded as 'walking proudly beside her' in her bath chair when taking her daily walk through Regent's Park.

But it is with officers' wives where we see Kitchener's softer side. His brother, Walter Frederick was a General in the 1899-1902 war, serving under his younger brother. Caroline or Carrie Kitchener, Walter's wife made a surprise visit to the front as she had been diagnosed with an illness which meant she would not see her husband again if she had to wait for him to return. Not to put pressure on the forces, she went to Pretoria as a nurse where she could get care without drawing unnecessary attention to her condition. After she'd had dinner with K, he sent his brother on three months leave. Nepotism, I hear you mumble... yes, perhaps, but he had previously done the same for others in Egypt, Rawlinson, and he was said to have "burst into tears" at the memorial service for

Lord Cromer's wife Ethel. Many of his "band of men" married, either whilst in his service or soon after remaining good friends with him. Each of his ADCs was to receive £200 on his death. His letters from India invariably end with "give my regards or best wishes to Mrs ..." and he became godfather to numerous of their offspring. What made these married men acceptable to K was their ability to distance themselves from their home worries and not let it impact on their risk taking on the battlefield. Lord Wolseley, one of K's nemeses, agreed with Kitchener's preference for unmarried men in his army.

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It was the pillow talk that concerned Kitchener. Rumours of affairs and the spreading of gossip and military information concerned him. When he refused to give the British Parliament in 1914 and 1915 military information, Asquith commented that ironically it didn't stop Kitchener telling Margot, his wife, what had transpired in Cabinet meetings. Cabinet decisions on politics were not the same as divulging military information where Kitchener was concerned. However, two women were incredibly close to Kitchener, being regarded as his best friends and yet with neither is there any evidence that they had anything more than a mutual meeting of minds. Ettie Grenfell or Lady Desborough as she became, would buy presents for people when K couldn't be around. She also found Broome House for him. Kitchener was known for spending weekends at their house every time he visited England and was godfather to at least two of her children. When Imogen was five he went to have tea with her upstairs in the nursery at her request despite an injury to his leg. But a more significant friend was Alice Cranborne, daughter in law of Prime Minister Salisbury and herself later Lady Salisbury. His correspondence with Alice is most revealing – whilst in India reforming the Indian Army, he would share his thoughts on what was needed with her and why. For anyone wanting to understand Kitchener's strategic logic, these letters are a rich source.

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While he did not seem to use Alice to convey concerns to the Prime Minister, he did Salisbury's other daughter-in-law – Violet Cecil who after Edward Cecil's death married Lord Milner with whom she would go riding during the 1899-1902 war. Violet was in charge of one of the hospitals in Cape Town during the war. She had tried to get more medical equipment and staff for the British Army in 1899 but to no avail. Neither the War Office nor Milner would sanction it. So, once Kitchener, a family friend who would spend at least a weekend if not a week at Hatfield House each visit to England, arrived in South Africa with Lord Roberts she invited them to see matters for themselves. Whilst Roberts took up the matter with the War Office and sanctioned more nurses, Kitchener would visit the hospital regularly at Violet's invitation. This way she knew the building would at least be cleaned thoroughly contributing to somewhat better care. Kitchener obliged. His experiences in the 1870 Franco-Prussian War, his visit to the Balkan fronts during the Russo-Turkish wars in the 1880s and Egypt had reinforced for him the necessity of good health – although getting the balance right within budget could be a challenge. He had met Lady Wantage during his march on Khartoum when she offered Red Cross assistance to his forces. Having initially declined her assistance, he later accepted it transporting men on the *May Flower* from Assouan to Cairo along the Nile. At the start of the 1914-18 war, she made her house in Carlton Gardens available for Kitchener so he didn't have to travel far to get to the War Office. Lady Wantage's work in Egypt focused mainly on the British troops in the theatre, Kitchener having advised Gatacre, the British Commander that his medical stores were insufficient. Those overseen by Kitchener, that is the Egyptian Army were. He had learnt his lesson during the attack on the Omdurman. The outcome was the Royal Medical Corps standardising terms and conditions of service.

In India, too, he was concerned about medical matters and developed a close relationship with the Viceroy's wife, Mary Curzon. As a result of Kitchener talking to her 'like a man', she turned from being an hostess to being a political wife researching tropical medicine to improve the lot of the Indian. Kitchener was understanding where her husband was not, and on 4 July he hosted her to dinner with the flag of her homeland flying – her dream come true. As an American she had dinner with a British General. Kitchener was also the one to console her when she gave birth to a daughter rather than a son as Curzon had hoped for, bridging the gap between the new parents. As the feud between the Viceroy and his Commander in Chief increased, so Mary tried to reconcile the two men but failed and on Curzon's resignation, K was said to have said not a word but stood stoically watching them leave. For those who know K, this explained how affected he was by the rift and Mary's departure. Within a year of their arrival back in England, Mary had died, but the groundwork for the Indian army and its medical services had been set.

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While mention has been made of Violet Cecil's use of K to improve medical facilities in South Africa in the 1899-1902 war and his support of volunteers such as Carrie Kitchener – he did not want Lady French around as she just got in the way following her husband - Kitchener's reputation has suffered over the camp issue. While not denying the deaths and horrors of the camps, a reading of Millicent Fawcett's autobiography and report on the camps suggests it wasn't all the fault of the British military – and Kitchener. Millicent having tried to convince Milner to improve the food supply at the camps eventually went to Kitchener, Milner having passed the buck. Humorously recording K's concern about being invaded by numerous women in this meeting, she went on to record that it was one of the most business-like she'd had and after he invited her and her fellow commissioners to dinner. Although he could not do much to help improve matters as his own soldiers, for whom he had greater responsibility, were suffering from food shortages, he would agree to an additional carriage being added to each train to carry rice etc for the camps. Reading Millicent's interviews with some camp internees where they mentioned purposefully not telling camp commandants about issues and how they were not used to living in such close proximity contrasts with Kitchener's other dealings of large groups of women. Whilst in Sudan, he allowed his Egyptian Army, against regulations, to have their wives as camp followers. This helped maintain discipline and ensured the men were fed etc. However, the women were to make no demands on the army. They looked after themselves in a camp about a mile away from his military forces, providing a first line of defence at night. Their cries if attacked would alert his force. However, when their camp burnt down, he offered assistance to rebuild it, but not contribute costs. His natural assumption therefore was that the Boer women would sort themselves out in the same way the Sudanese women had – it took time to realise the cultures were different and by then it was too late. Another added factor not many are aware of is that Kitchener was having to deal with the camp issue around the same time that Milner took three months off to travel to England to have Kitchener removed as Commander in Chief. Kitchener was therefore responsible for both the army and civil administration – Lord Roberts having said on leaving that the country was too large for one officer to manage militarily. Now K was responsible for everything...he couldn't micro-manage as he was wont to do where he didn't have trusted people in place. Perhaps a closer look is needed at the politics concerning the camps – of both sides.

Having realised the opponent he was up against as a result of his encounter at Paardeberg, K looked to find an honourable way to bring about peace as quickly as possible. In this he was to be thwarted, again, by Milner. Already in February 1901, Kitchener made overtures to Louis Botha to see on what grounds they could conclude a peace – their go-between being none other than Annie Botha, the

Boer General's wife. Where there was a will, he would find a way and he had no issue with women being involved so long as they operated along his principles. He comes across to me as one of the most egalitarian people I've encountered of the time.

So, how do we account for his not leaving his niece Fanny Parker any heritage, not wanting the title to go to women and his berating Fanny for having brought the family into disrepute? Fanny Parker also known as Janet Arthur was the daughter of K's sister Millie. She grew up in New Zealand but attended Cambridge University which Kitchener paid for. There she became interested in women's rights and the suffragette movement. In July 1914, she tried to blow up the Scottish poet Robert Burns' house in Ayr and having been arrested went on hunger strike. Either her brother or Kitchener organised for her release which led to the armistice and the WPSU getting involved in the war. Fanny Parker went on to receive an OBE for her war services with the WPSU but did not seem to reconcile to her uncle. He was not against equality, as can be seen in his dealings with other women, but was against their violence to the state. Already in late 1914, he was talking about the need for women to take over men's jobs to see Britain through the war and had no hesitation sanctioning women going to the base camps to entertain the men with theatrical performances. Kitchener understood the value of theatre having been invited to direct a military scene back in the 1880s and having been a founding member of Drury Lodge, the Freemason lodge for actors.

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Ian Hamilton, one of Kitchener's closest male friends commented that women were powerful, before they put themselves on the pedestal and looking at the women Kitchener had dealings with and what they achieved seems to echo this statement. He had many female friends and, as with men, if he trusted them to be capable of the job needing to be done, he left them to it and was loyal no matter their reputation. His house at Broome, found by Ettie Desborough, was being remodelled whilst he was Agent-General in Egypt. This work was overseen by his favourite niece, Nora, the daughter of his brother HEC, who was to serve in the East Africa campaign of 1914-18. The Countess of Jersey, another frequent host to Kitchener on his visits to England, allowed him to relax and be himself rearranging her porcelain and picking strawberries in her summer house. She in turn tackled Philip Magnus for printing that Kitchener was homosexual, a statement he admitted to her he had wrong. And he was a loyal friend, as noted by his regular visits to Gertrude Tennant in her tea shop on Richmond Terrace. He had met her shortly after Stanley, her son-in-law had been rescued in Egypt; this despite her reputation and running a tea shop, the same as Skittles. Rosa Lewis who was to be the first woman to own a hotel in London, the Cavendish in Jermyn Street got to know many of the well-to-do and well-known in London. Having noted that Kitchener preferred sweet peas and geraniums as table decorations as you could see over them, she insightfully noted the different kind of men, Kitchener she continued, saw things differently, and was "too absorbed in interests of the world, and [his] country to get married." There was no space, time or interest in women. It was at her establishment that Kitchener supposedly had his last substantial meal before his fateful journey on HMS *Hampshire*.

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This has been a quick journey looking at some of the women whose names came up in connection with Kitchener. There are various others and no doubt, more tucked away – I hadn't come across Lady Sarah Wilson (nee Spencer-Churchill aka Winston's aunt) as a journalist before this talk. She had been employed by the *Daily Mail* to report on the siege of Mafeking and her memoir *South African memories* (1909) seems to provide an interesting insight into the hospitals during the war.

Each opens a new window onto the man such as the singer Dame Albani recording that Kitchener requested her to sing 'Home sweet home' when she had dinner with him in Barrackpore, India.

For all Kitchener's concern at having a female heir especially if it was to be someone like Fanny Parker, in 2012, Queen Elizabeth II sanctioned a law which allowed Kitchener's great grandniece Emma to take the title of Lady Emma Kitchener, the previous Earl having died in 2011 and ostensibly with him, the title. And having met her, I've no doubt K1, as I affectionately refer to him, would approve.