



Vera Brittain: A Feminist Life

By Deborah Gorham

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Editorial Review

From Library Journal

Brittain (1893-1970) was an English feminist and pacifist with some 20 books to her credit. She is remembered for a single book, however, *Testament of Youth* (1933). This famous autobiography covers the author's service as a Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) nurse during World War I. Brittain lost her only brother, her fiance, and two close friends in the war, and she credited the experience with turning her into a pacifist. *Vera Brittain: A Life* is a thorough biography that offers a comprehensive picture of its subject. Written by two authors who knew Brittain and her family, the work discusses her personal life, university education, war experiences, and later civilian career as a writer and lecturer. We learn about her great friendship with the writer Winifred Holtby, Brittain's marriage to political scientist George Catlin, and the pleasure she took in motherhood as well as the courageous pacifist stance she adhered to during World War II, which damaged her career as a writer. *Vera Brittain: A Feminist Life* is a well-written study that concentrates on its subject's commitment to feminism. Gorham, a Canadian academic, argues that Brittain's feminism was the "central organizing principle of her personality." The author uses feminist theory and scholarship in a sensible, evenhanded way to illuminate Brittain's life against the backdrop of English society in the first half of the 20th century. (Gorham rejects, for example, the argument put forth by some feminist scholars that the relationship between Brittain and Winifred Holtby was lesbian in a "broader," nonerotic sense.) Both works provide a full portrait of an important 20th-century feminist and pacifist and are recommended for public libraries. ?Caroline A. Mitchell, Washington, D.C.

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Review

"Gorham has written an important life of Vera Brittain that scholars and students of the period will not want to miss." *American Historical Review*, June 1997

"By far the most substantial product of academic interest in Brittain to have appeared to date." *Times Literary Supplement*

"Sensitive and compelling biography." *The Toronto Star*

"Gorham is to be commended for producing a balanced book, and for making extensive and intelligent use of feminist criticism. Gorham has been blessed with extensive source materials and has used them well in a fine, provocative, inspiring biography." *The Women's Review of Books*, July 1996

From the Back Cover

This is a biographical study of the English writer and social activist Vera Brittain, (1893-1970). Author of more than twenty books and a successful journalist, Brittain is best known for *Testament of Youth*. Her autobiographical account is remembered as the most important book of the First World War, written from a woman's perspective. In the interwar decades, Vera Brittain became a staunch advocate of equal rights feminism, an internationalist, and, by the late 1930s, a pacifist. In this book, Deborah Gorham focuses on Vera Brittain's struggles and achievements as a feminist. She contends that in both her public and private life, Brittain was representative of the group of educated middle-class women who brought to fruition the goals of Victorian bourgeois feminism in the years following the Great War.

Drawing on voluminous archival sources and recent feminist scholarship, the author provides an analysis of Vera Brittain which integrates the public and the private, the "personal" and the "political", to illuminate the

life, the work and the milieu of this important twentieth-century figure.

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Russell Pittman:

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