

## TEACHERS NOTES

'The Land Girls' study guide is the sixth in our CINEMA & HISTORY series aimed at GCSE and A' level students.

### SYNOPSIS

'The Land Girls' is a spirited and poignant love story which looks at how ordinary lives are affected by extraordinary circumstances. Set in rural England in 1941 against the backdrop of the Second World War, three girls from very different backgrounds, are thrown together on a remote farm in Dorset. Prue (Anna Friel) is a hairdresser from Manchester, in love with love; Ag (Rachel Weisz) is an unworldly Cambridge graduate who plans to be a lawyer; and Stella (Catherine McCormack) who is engaged to Philip, a naval officer. As part of the Women's Land Army the girls replace farm workers who have gone off to war. Billeted with farmer Mr Lawrence they get to know Joe, his only son. Life becomes more complicated, passions are awakened, lessons learned and friendships formed which last a lifetime.

*Director David Leland*

*Certificate 12*

*Running time 111 mins*

The film 'The Land Girls', based on the novel by Angela Huth, looks at events of the Second World War from the perspective of women who 'fought in the fields'. The film is about the Women's Land Army. Women joined the Land Army to help carry out agricultural work and fill the shoes of the men from farming communities who had been called up for armed service.

Before we look at the ways in which the film deals with this subject we will look at the background to the film. We will look at the Women's Land Army and the ways in which it was presented at the time. We will also gain an insight into the life of the members of the WLA as to their experiences of working on the land.

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE WLA

The first Women's Land Army had been established during the First World War in 1917 in an attempt to fend off starvation in Britain. This threat of starvation was due to a number of factors. Ships carrying food were being systematically destroyed by the German Navy, British farming was in a pitiable state, and the Armed Services had severely depleted the number of men working on the land. In spite of the fact that work on the land was deemed an extremely unsuitable occupation for a woman, forty-three thousand women volunteered during the First World War although half were rejected as unsuitable because of the physical demands the work entailed.

In spite of the Land Army's successes during the First World War, the establishment of a new Land Army on the eve of the Second World War met with a great deal of opposition from Britain's farmers. The establishment of the Land Army was seen by its chairman, Lady Denman, as being essential to the war effort. British agriculture in the 1930s was in an extremely poor state, with the country importing seventy per cent of its food, as opposed to Germany which by then was producing four fifths of the food it consumed. Lady Denman, with her experience of the recruiting drives of 1917-18, realised the vital role that the WLA would have to play in winning the war.

*"Germany is attempting to starve the British people into submission. To win the war our country must defeat the blockade. This is the joint task of the British Navy and of Britain's great field force of agricultural workers."*

To satisfy the acute labour shortage on the land the Women's Land Army was reestablished in June 1939. Its initial target was to plough two million acres of grassland in time for the 1941 harvest, otherwise known as the 'battle for wheat'.

Lady Denman was a leading figure in the Women's Institutes movement and with her great interest in agricultural matters was the ideal figure to be the Director of the Women's Land Army. In August 1939, just five days before the declaration of war, the headquarters of the new WLA was established at Lady Denman's own home Balcombe Place, in the Sussex countryside.

Lady Denman's efforts to establish an effective Women's Land Army had been consistently blocked by government officials. By 1940 however, Germany's assault on Britain had begun in earnest. German bombers were sent each night in an attempt to destroy the country's industrial power, and German U-boats were extremely accurate in cutting off British supply lines. It was only in the face of these attacks that the government was at last prepared to take the WLA seriously.

At its height, in December 1943, the WLA could boast over 80,000 members. The women who were members of WLA were referred to as land girls. They worked on the land to replace the men who had been called up to fight. Women from all walks of life were encouraged to join the WLA, and although a few were drafted by the government, the majority were volunteers. A third of the WLA's members came from London or the northern industrial cities. Although the ranks did include a few girls from the gentry, and some farmers daughters, the majority of the land girls had left school early, and were expected by their families to earn their living. The *Journal of the Ministry of Agriculture* described the volunteers as 'workers from shops and offices, mannequins, actresses, domestic servants, and typists..'

The work of the land girl was extremely physically demanding. They had to work long hours, and many remember primarily the cold and discomfort of the experience and the often inferior and insufficient diet they were fed.

Although some land girls were lucky enough to be placed with farmers who were grateful for their assistance and who treated them kindly, there were equally as many who were treated very badly by their employers who resented them and were not at all grateful for the hard work they were doing.

Many of its members had joined the WLA for unrealistic reasons because they liked the uniform or thought the recruitment posters showed a glamorous lifestyle. Many were attracted to the perceived freedom of working in the country. The reality however could not have been more different. The majority of the land girls received only minimal training and the farmers immediately expected them to know how to milk cows, drive tractors and perform a whole multitude of unfamiliar and often extremely physically demanding tasks.

Tasks for a land girl on a typical farm included ploughing, planting, feeding livestock, butter-making, digging potatoes, dispensing fertiliser, thatching, pitching sheaves of hay or crops onto wagons and carts, making wheelbarrow runs, cleaning poultry sheds and rat-catching. Generating timber was also a wartime necessity and called for a considerable variety of skills and so in 1942 the Women's Timber Corps was formed from the WLA.

One of the major ways that the Land Army differed from that of the other services is that its members were employed by the individual farmer and not by the state. Land girls therefore received no state payments. It was the land girls' employer, the farmer, who was expected to pay for their upkeep. Because the Land Army was so scattered and the nature of their work so varied, it was a struggle to win standardised conditions for the land girls. At the outbreak of war in September 1939, the WLA's members had to be content with a minimum wage and a minimum employment week.

By the summer of 1943 conditions had improved but in spite of Lady Denman's efforts, the Women's Land Army never achieved the same recognition or status as the other women's services. It was not recognised on the order of other national service organisations there not being either a pension programme or compensation.

Although the Second World War ended on May 8, 1945, the Women's Land Army continued to remain active until 1950, when it was disbanded.

#### POINTS OF VIEW

At the beginning of the war farmers were often openly hostile to the thought of women working on the land. An editorial in the *Land Worker*, the magazine of the National Union of Agricultural Workers in 1940 shows their contempt for the Women's Land Army.

*"In the House of Commons ... Mr Lloyd George referred to the 'bad days of Eden, when Adam was turned out because he was a bad farmer'. There is no evidence of bad calculation in the garden of Eden, the story of which contains an agricultural moral always overlooked. It was a successful holding utterly wrecked by the employment of women in the fruit-picking season."*

Because of the shortage of labour on farms it was important that the Women's Land Army recruited as many girls as they could. In their recruiting drive they had to present the life of the land girl in a particular way which would attract new recruits.

Look at sources A, B and C (below and on the following page).



'Lunch Time' Land Girls c 1940 ©Barnaby's Picture Library



Agriculture and Food WW2 Poster  
©Imperial War Museum



Gossiping and coffee and sandwiches ©Imperial War Museum

- *What impression of the life of the land girls do these three sources give?*
- *How do the photographs and the poster give a positive image of the life of the land girls?*
- *Do you think that the photographs are snapshots taken by land girls or are they professional photographs?*
- *What is it about the photographs that gives you this impression?*

### **WOMEN'S WORK IN WAR TIME**

From the very beginning of the war the English poet and novelist Vita Sackville-West's passion for the land led to her association with the Women's Land Army and she continued to work on their behalf until June 1945.

In November 1943 Vita Sackville-West began to write a handbook on the Women's Land Army which was published in September 1944. 'The Women's Land Army' (second edition published by the Imperial War Museum [1997]) is a unique account of what it meant to be a member of the WLA.

On the following page there are some extracts from the book. Read them carefully and answer the following questions.

- *What image does Vita Sackville- West give of the life of a land girl?*
- *In what ways does the description of the life of a land girl given by Vita Sackville- West echo the image given in sources A, B and C (above)?*
- *In what ways could her description be seen as giving a more realistic picture of the life of a land girl?*
- *In what ways does the style of writing differ from what one could term 'historical' writing? Because the extracts are taken from the WLA handbook, what questions would you ask concerning the accuracy of the descriptions given of the life of a land girl?*

**“She gets up at an hour when other people are still warmly asleep...she goes to bed with aching muscles after a dull evening, knowing that next morning the horrible alarm will shrill through her sleep, calling her back to her damp boots, her reeking oil-skin, and the mud and numbing cold outside. All this she has done, and is doing, so that we may eat. Nor has she always done it under the threat of a compulsory calling-up, but often voluntarily before her age-group was reached.**

**“Why did you chuck your good job before you need?”**

**“I just couldn’t bear to see other girls in all sorts of uniform and feel I was doing nothing but sell shoes in a lovely shop”**

**...it was astonishing to find that one-third of the Land Army volunteers came from London or our large industrial cities; and astonishing to note the tragic disappointment shown by those who could not be accepted for country work because they were more urgently needed elsewhere. This surprising fact does suggest that there are many townspeople who feel they would prefer the country, in complete contradiction to the popular view that the youth of to-day is wedded to the cities.”**

**“Somebody in the dark country, splashing her way down a muddy lane with the little yellow spotlight circle of her torch on the ground to guide her. She may not be feeling too good that morning, but, still she has to go. She is young tender; and the bed she has left was very warm. She exchanges this, very often, for a long walk or bicycle-ride in the morning black-out between her billet and the farm. Sometimes she is even frightened: town- people are notoriously alarmed by the silence and emptiness of the country, and the country before anyone else is astir can be very silent and empty indeed. She is quite alone. The hedges on either side of the lane are lined with sinister shapes. A twig cracks, and she nearly screams. But the people in England, and the children of England, must have their milk. She trudges on”**

**“She (the land girl) is the important thing in the whole story. Except in the (fortunately rare) instances where she has been called on to meet danger and emergency, her story is not sensational. It is a plodding story, of endurance rather than heroics, and she should be richly honoured for having chosen her vital and exacting role so thoroughly away from the limelight. In this war-drama with its innumerable cast and its gigantic stage, she has seldom had the chance to strut within view of the audience. When she took up her job she knew quite well that this would be the case, she knew quite well that she wasn’t going to be showy?’**

**“Yet here she is. She is in the bumping seat of the tractor, looking carefully over her shoulder to make sure she is getting the furrow straight. She is cold, and the rain drives in her face, for there is no protection on a tractor against the weather. Now she is stooking, and this time she is hot; too hot; so hot that she wonders how long she can go on; for it is full summer and there is no shade out in the harvest field. She is pitching the heavy sheaves up on the cart. She is in the stack-yard, the threshing-machine grinding and clanking; her head is tied up in a scarf; she wears a cellophane shield over her eyes, the grit and chaff fly all around her, up her nose, down her throat; she is dirty as a sweep; the machine proprietor swears at her... Or she is out in the snowy forest, her fingers numbed with handling the slippery frosty logs. Or she is up to her ankles in water, clearing a ditch.**

**...A gloomy picture? It might seem so, but the outstanding thing about the Land-girl is that she isn’t gloomy at all. On the contrary, anyone who has seen her about, in her few hours off duty, must concede that she looks the most cheerful of mortals....there can be no question that the vast majority of these girls, with their youth, their resilience, and their health to carry them through, take it in the gayest possible spirit.”**



## THE WORKING LIFE OF LAND GIRLS

Read the following testimonies from land girls about their working life. Contrast what they say with both the photographs, poster and the extracts from the WLA handbook.

A land girl recalls her first day potato planting with six other new land girls:

*“Each of us was given a rough hessian sack to tie round our necks and were sent to the end of the field where potatoes from a cart were tipped into our sacks bringing us nearly to our knees. Plodding up the drill, bent double with the weight, we sat down when we reached the end, only to spring up when a great shout came from the far end, ‘Get off your backsides. This is no holiday camp.’ The dust and grit got into our eyes and hair and when the planting was finished, our next job was to muck out the byres where cattle had been all winter. . At 6pm we staggered off duty, green-faced and strongly-smelling.”*

Another land girl recalls how she was not allowed into the farmhouse:

*“When I had finished milking I had to wash my hands at the cold tap in the yard. The farmer would go in and have a cup of tea and then the wife would come out and pour the tea left in the teapot down the drain in front of me. I arrived at that farm at 5 am and didn’t have a drink until 12 when I had my pack lunch. Later I learned that when some land girls, including me, walked past, the farmer and a friend had watched us. The friend had said something perfectly innocent like ‘If only we were twenty years younger we’d be all right there ...’ The farmer’s wife had overheard them and decided there was something going on. It all came to a head when the farmer asked me to have a word with his wife. According to him, she thought we were having an affair. I was shocked and embarrassed. He was sixty and only had one tooth.”*

Here one land girl recalls:

*“You were a land girl so you got all the worst jobs, all the dirty jobs. Then, after a hard day, you’d be expected to baby-sit for your employer in the evening. Once I even had to work on Christmas Day as it was too far to go home for lunch and be back for milking the next morning.”*

Another land girl recalls:

*“Our last meal was at 6.30 pm after milking and there wasn’t even a drink before bedtime. Each day the farmer’s wife gave us tea in a small bottle (a lemonade bottle) which of course was cold when we drank it mid-morning in the field, and two slices of bread and cheese wrapped in newspaper. In the afternoon we had the same out in the field but with jam instead of cheese. We all sat for meals in the kitchen (except Sundays when the farmer, his wife, son, Joe and daughter, Sue, disappeared into the front room for their dinner and tea - I expect they had nicer food than us).”*

## RESEARCH

***The Women's Land Army was not the only contribution that women made to the war effort during the Second World War. Try to find out about the role of women in the armed services and also within industry. What other jobs did they undertake due to the shortage of male workers?***

### TASK

***Looking back at the sources you have read so far which do you think would be most useful for a historian? Which do you think would be most useful for someone who is making a film based on land girls? Give reasons for your answers.***

## PRE SCREENING

Having looked at the history of the Women’s Land Army and the source material which relates to it think about the possibilities offered by this subject to a filmmaker. What themes would you want to get across about land girls? What sort of story could you create about them? Create as many stories as your imagination conjures.

## POST SCREENING

Now consider whether the film ‘The Land Girls’ simply uses the theme of the Women’s Land Army as a background to a story or whether it tells us anything about the experiences of women who worked the land during the Second World War.

WOMEN IN HISTORY - WOMEN IN FILM  
ACTIVITY 1

***In the textbooks that you are using in your study of the Second World War list all the references to the work of women during the 1939-1945 period. Now list the references to men and their work, other than the services. which is the greater number? What does this imply about women's roles during the war? Now choose a different period of history that you have studied and repeat the same exercise.***

***Do you think that the role of women during these two different periods is accurately reflected in the history books?***

It is difficult to say "What aren't we told?" because if it is not recorded in sources available to us then it is almost impossible to come up with an answer. However, we can ask why sources about women are not made available to us.

One of the key comments made by many land girls and also by ministers at the time was that without their contribution to the war effort the Home Front would have collapsed.

Britain needed farmers to be as productive as possible in order to help feed the nation. Without this the country would have starved and there would have been no possibility of a final victory.

ACTIVITY 2

***From your study of the Home Front is it possible to write an alternative history of the Second World War which would redress the balance of the way in which historians traditionally represent it? Which areas would you stress in your new history?***

In the film 'The Land Girls' the central characters are women. Now consider women's roles in other films and, then particularly, in 'The Land Girls'. The film is unlike others that we may see in that the central characters are all women. Does this make a difference to the ways in which we understand the film? Think about the type of characters/roles that we normally associate with women in film.

TASK

***In groups of four consider your thoughts on the types of characters/roles that women normally play in film. You could break this down further into different genres. Think about the roles for women in horror and romantic films. Think of as many genres as you can including war films as one of them.***

**Think about other media. Do other media - television for example offer us different types of characters?**

**Consider the 'qualities' attached to these character types. Below are a list of adjectives. Which would you apply to male characters and which would you apply to female characters?**

**sensitive - trusting - thinker - rebel - loner - loving friend**

**tough - decisive - mean - beautiful - warm - excitable**

**rugged - cold - sensitive - devious - prejudiced**

**For each word that you have classed as either male or female try to think of the word which would best describe the character 'quality' of the opposite sex. For instance, if you decide that 'beautiful' describes a female then what would be the equivalent word for a male?**

**When you have completed your classifications you should have a list of expectations of the type of characters that you might meet in a film. Beyond this think about which parts male and female characters play within the development of a story. Who will resolve a story? Who will be the central character and who will be typical victims? Again, go back to your list of genres and think about the types of activity that male and female characters would play in each genre.**

## THE LAND GIRLS

Having looked at character qualities apply them now to the three central female characters and the two central male characters in the film 'The Land Girls'. In the chart on the following page describe each of the three land girls and then Joe and Mr Lawrence.

*Why do you think that the three girls come from different backgrounds? What is the filmmaker trying to tell us about land girls?*

*In the relationship between the three land girls and Mr Lawrence what ideas are we given about the reception the land girls are given by the farming community? How does this tie in with the various sources you have read?*

*Character*

*Characteristic Features or qualities*

**STELLA**

**AG**

**PRUE**

**JOE**

**MR LAWRENCE**

## THE EVENTS

What is the story that is told in the film 'The Land Girls'? Think back to what happened in the film. Which parts of the film gave us ideas about what it was like to be a land girl during the Second World War and which parts were telling a different type of story?

*Why do you think that the film ended in the way that it did?*

*Was this the ending that you expected?*

*How was it different or similar to other film endings of this particular genre?*

*What does this tell us about the three main female characters in the film?*

## ASSIGNMENTS

***1. Explain the ways in which the film 'The Land Girls' would be useful to students studying the Home Front in the Second World War. State any reasons why you think it might not be useful.***

***2. Compare the ways in which the life of members of the Women's Land Army is presented in the film 'The Land Girls' to the ways in which it is shown in the various sources that you have been given.***

***3. Write a letter to the filmmakers explaining how they could have approached 'The Land Girls' film in a different way and what this could have shown.***

## FURTHER READING

**'They Fought In The Fields'** by Nicola Tyrer (*Mandarin 1997*)

**'The Women's Land Army'** by Vita Sackville-West (*Imperial War Museum 1997*)

**'Women on the Land'** by Carol Twinch (*The Lutterworth Press 1990*)

**'The People's War: Britain 1939-1945'** by Angus Calder (*Pimlico 1997*)