

Forgotten women war reporters of the First World War: Avis Waterman, the London Times' Milan correspondent reporting from the Italian front (Stephanie Seul)

Abstract

During the First World War, the London *Times* – considered the newspaper of record in Britain – maintained a large network of foreign correspondents in Europe and around the world, who reported from the frontlines and provided the paper with eyewitness accounts of the fighting. The conservative daily was renowned for its reliability and fullness of coverage. Despite a rather small circulation – 278,000 copies per day in August 1914 and 136,000 in August 1918 – its influence was considerable as it was widely read in educated, journalistic and political circles in Britain and abroad. Reports from *The Times* were regularly reprinted by papers in Britain, Europe, the United States, and the British Empire by way of special syndication arrangements, thus making *The Times* one of the most influential papers in the world.

Little is known that *The Times* also employed a female war correspondent during the First World War: The American journalist Avis Waterman. She was assumed in May 1915 and served as Milan Correspondent until the end of the war. For more than two years she undertook dangerous visits to various sectors of the Italian front with permission from the Italian Supreme Command. Her war reporting focused on the military fighting and was not distinguishable from the writing of her male colleagues. In 1919 Waterman reported as Special Correspondent from Vienna, Bucharest and Prague. Her more than 400 shorter notices and longer reports in *The Times* remain anonymous and were usually labelled 'From our Milan Correspondent' or 'From our Special Correspondent'.

However, in the shorter reprints of her reports in Australian and New Zealand newspapers, her authorship was acknowledged as 'Mrs. Waterman, the "Times" correspondent at Milan', or 'Mrs. Waterman, the "Times" correspondent at the Italian Headquarters'. Waterman's dispatches largely shaped how the Italian war was viewed in Britain, in Allied countries, and around the world, and contemporaries praised Waterman for her exceptional courage and journalistic skills as a war correspondent. Yet, in the multi-volume "History of The Times" she merits no more than two sentences, and she is not mentioned in historical studies of (female) war correspondents.

My paper will present a portrait of Avis Waterman's remarkable career as *The Times'* only female war correspondent of the First World War and focus on the historical archives that have enabled me to trace this forgotten journalist: Digital newspaper archives from Britain, Australia, New Zealand, the United States, France and Italy; genealogical databases; and in particular the archive of *The Times* in London, which holds letters written by, and to, Avis Waterman. These documents reveal the exceptional professional opportunities offered by the war to Waterman, but also the harsh limitations imposed on her by a misogynistic environment at the front and by a boss in Rome, who seems to have become increasingly jealous of her success and annoyed by her independent spirit.

Bio

Dr Stephanie Seul is an historian and lecturer at Deutsche Presseforschung, Department of Cultural Studies, University of Bremen. She is also a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society (UK) and a co-editor of *Media History* (Taylor&Francis). Her research focuses on the history of media and communication in the era of the two world wars, and in particular on women war reporters of the First World War. She is currently writing the biography of Avis Waterman.