

‘A Better England’: Women’s agricultural labour and the National Association of Landswomen, 1919–1923

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Abstract

Marketed as a continuation of the recently demobilized Women’s Land Army (WLA), the National Association of Landswomen (NAL) sought to capitalize on its relation to the better-known wartime organization to bolster recruitment, but in doing so it failed to establish its own identity. As a peacetime organization, its mandate overlapped with both the Women’s Farm and Garden Union and the National Federation of Women’s Institutes, forcing it to compete for members with two established organizations that had the infrastructure in place to attend to the needs of rural women. In spite of these difficulties, however, the NAL did achieve a number of key objectives: it helped to establish a health insurance scheme for women agricultural workers, fought for standardized wages for women in the industry, and provided monetary support for women’s agricultural and horticultural education and for the purchase of smallholdings in an effort to keep women on the land.

The First World War resulted in important changes in women’s working lives. Not only was women’s labour valued for its contribution to the British war effort, but many women felt empowered by their wartime experiences and wanted to take advantage of new employment trends once the war ended. The agricultural industry was not immune to these changes, but the pace of change for women was slow, and in spite of the gains made by organizations like the Women’s Land Army (WLA), there persisted significant obstacles to women’s employment in the industry. The National Association of Landswomen (NAL) was created as a ‘sister’ organization to the WLA in 1919 to support the advancement of women in agriculture. Its objective was to increase the number of women employed in agriculture and to improve working conditions for women in the industry. Its organizers understood the patriarchal nature of agriculture and of rural communities and sought to further women’s work in the industry by working within preexisting structures and carefully considering how women’s labour would affect farming regions. In an effort to make women a key part of the revitalization of domestic agriculture, the NAL adopted a cooperative model that was attentive to the concerns of farmers, local government, and trade unions, but also women’s organizations like the Women’s Farm and Garden Union (WFGU) and the National Federation of Women’s Institutes (NFWI) that had similar directives to improve women’s working lives. Unfortunately, the NAL’s close association

with the WLA prevented it from developing its own identity and complicated relations with the WFGU and the NFWI. Throughout its brief years of operation, the NAL continually worked to amalgamate with both groups, but this led to a lack of operational independence, and amalgamation became its primary objective. While its goals were not always consistent, the NAL did help women find employment in agriculture at a time when the agricultural labour force was declining in many areas of the country. It also secured much-needed health insurance for a vulnerable workforce that was left unprotected by changes to government health schemes, and it advocated for a minimum fixed wage for women in agriculture at a time when most in the industry were focused on securing better wages and housing for male labourers. The NAL's work did not cease with the loss of its operational independence; rather, it had an enduring impact on women's organizations, and its former members continued to work on behalf of women in rural industries and communities through the NFWI and the Society for the Oversea Settlement of British Women (SOSBW).

I

The WLA was officially demobilized on 30 November 1919. Formed in January 1917 as part of a broader effort to increase home food production, this 'army' of female farm workers was given limited training in the early days of the scheme and quickly mobilized for work on farms across Britain to replace young men who had been called for military service. The WLA operated under the tutelage of the Board of Agriculture as part of the Women's Branch and under the direction of Meriel Talbot who served as both director of the Branch and as 'chief' of the WLA.¹ Although the Land Army was formed to relieve labour shortages in the agricultural industry and to help increase domestic food production, its organizers envisioned it as a way to create new jobs for women in the industry and to convince farmers, male farmhands, unions, and government – local and national – that women could be a vital part of the revitalization of the agricultural industry that had suffered in the decades following the agricultural depression of the 1870s. At its height, the WLA's membership stood at 27,000 members, a small part of the more than 250,000 women who worked in agriculture during the war, but on the eve of its demobilization, membership stood at 22,000 with only 13,000 trained and just 8000 employed on farms.²

Although Talbot knew in August 1919 of the Board of Agriculture's decision to demobilize the Land Army, she delayed informing the Organising Secretaries until mid-October.³ At that time, Talbot used the occasion to express her belief that, while the WLA would cease to exist after November, its work and success gave women in Britain new opportunities for employment in agriculture that had to be continued after the war.⁴ Talbot issued a letter to all active

¹ 'The New Land Lady: Miss Talbot, Revivalist', *Daily Chronicle*, 15 Dec. 1917.

² N. Mansfield, *English farmworkers and local patriotism, 1900–1930* (2001), p. 127; TNA, MAF 42/7, Meriel Talbot to Organising Secretaries, 12 Aug. 1919; TNA, MAF 42/7, Report on Enrolments from Organising

Secretaries to Women's Branch, 20 Aug. 1919.

³ TNA, LAB 2/172/LE/823/819, Report on the need for a new organization to replace the Women's Land Army, 30 Aug. 191.

⁴ TNA, MAF 2/7, Meriel Talbot to Organising Secretaries, 14 Oct. 1919.

members explaining the government's decision to cease Land Army operations and informing them of a new opportunity with the NAL. In the intervening two months between Talbot learning of the plan for demobilization and when she informed the Organising Secretaries, she had been engaged in talks with Lord Lee who replaced Rowland Prothero as President of the Board of Agriculture in August 1919. Like Prothero in 1917, Lee understood the need to carefully and strategically introduce a new women's organization dedicated to the placement of women workers in the male-dominated agricultural industry, and while he agreed with Talbot that attitudes towards women's work in agriculture had changed, he was also wary of how the continuation of the WLA under another name would be received by farmers and unions.⁵ Lord Lee expressed publicly that the position of agricultural labourers had to be improved, particularly wages, and he knew it was 'important at this time that nothing should be done to antagonize labour' and it 'would be a very bad day for agriculture if the Board should, in any way, become a sort of annex to any agricultural organization'.⁶ Lord Lee encouraged farmers to 'show a little more sympathy to the smallholder and allotment holder' and 'to newcomers on the land'.⁷ Lee was speaking specifically about ex-servicemen, but expressed his support for the position of women in farming and encouraged them to join the Association that was 'being formed to carry on its [WLA] traditions among all women land workers'.⁸ His words of encouragement, however, were accompanied by the reality that many Land Girls would not take to full-time permanent positions, even if jobs were available to them. Maggie Andrews has shown that interest in agricultural work declined among women in the 1920s and, while Lynne Thompson has demonstrated that women remained interested in agricultural work in some counties, there was a considerable degree of variation across the country.⁹ The work was hard, pay remained low, and the expansion of women's employment in the industry would depend on suitable training and education. The number of horticultural and agricultural schools was in decline after 1918, and women looking to move into agricultural work often turned to voluntary organizations like the NAL for details on the type and duration of training courses and programmes.¹⁰ Lee notified Talbot that the NAL could have no affiliation with the Board of Agriculture and that government-run training schemes would cease with the Land Army at the end of November.¹¹ In the immediate post-war period, the issue of women's work in agriculture remained contentious, and for Talbot there was no guarantee that former Land Girls would join the new organization or that farmers would be in a cooperative mood.

For the time being, however, the WLA was still operational, and the organization of the NAL was the responsibility of the Women's Branch in conjunction with the Women's County

⁵ TNA, MAF 42/7, Lord Lee to Meriel Talbot, 10 Aug. 1919. See Angus Calder, *The myth of the Blitz* (2002), pp. 18–4; M. T. Wild, *Village England: A social history of the countryside* (2004), pp. 135–8.

⁶ 'Lord Lee on the Future of Agriculture', *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, 10 Dec. 1919, p. 8.

⁷ 'Farewell Rally of the Women's Land Army', *The Scotsman*, 28 Nov. 1919, p. 7.

⁸ TNA, MAF 42/7, Lord Lee to Meriel Talbot, 10 Aug. 1919.

⁹ M. Andrews, *The acceptable face of feminism: the Women's Institute as a social movement* (2015), p. 58; L. Thompson, 'The Promotion of Agricultural Education for Adults: The Lancashire Federation of Women's Institutes, 1919–45', *Rural Hist.* 10 (1999), p. 217.

¹⁰ A. Meredith, 'Horticultural education in England, 1900–1940: Middle-class women and private gardening schools', *Garden Hist.* 31 (2003), pp. 67–8.

¹¹ TNA, MAF 42/7, Lord Lee to Meriel Talbot, 10 Aug. 1919.

Sub-Committees. These initial developments were vital to the success of the new organization. Once Talbot lost institutional support, the self-governing nature of the NAL meant it would be managed by volunteers – unless it could afford paid positions – and supported by its members.¹² With Lord Lee's backing, a provisional committee was formed to garner support for the new organization and to devise a scheme for its operations.¹³ Since the NAL would only be provisionally associated with the Board of Agriculture, it would have to be decentralized, with the bulk of the work conducted by county organizers but under the central structure of a national office in London. From the outset, the NAL adopted a similar organizational structure to the NFWI. County or regional committees (depending on membership numbers) would collect membership dues and provide support to its members, but the challenge was in determining what kind of support to offer and to what extent the NAL could establish a central mandate with so much of the daily operations left to individual organizers. Talbot envisioned a central body that would set and manage the terms of union for the NAL and its branches and a small office staff in London to coordinate operations, including collecting data on employment trends and raising funds to support women in the industry, specifically to assist with training and education. The Organising Secretaries supported the creation of a central office but were vigilant to ensure the counties would operate autonomously from the national body.¹⁴ In spite of disagreements, a tentative plan was presented to Lord Lee, who allowed the NAL to form a provisional body to prepare an operational plan and to begin marketing strategies in late November 1919. From the start, however, the NAL lacked clarity on who was making decisions and what the nature of the relationship was between the county branches and the central office in London.¹⁵

The creation of the NAL was as spontaneous as it was disorderly. The timing was undoubtedly a problem, and Talbot was acutely aware of how much work had to be done before the 30 November deadline. In fact, there was so little time between when the NAL was conceptualized and the launch of its marketing team that Land Girls had not yet been canvassed to determine the level of support for the new organization. Talbot hoped that the plan to tie the NAL to the WLA, promoting one as a natural extension of the other, would encourage Land Girls to look to the NAL for support and comradeship as they transitioned from wartime to peacetime employment.¹⁶ It was also important that the leadership team remain in place, as much as possible, as part of the NAL's effort to link the two organizations by more than simply the personal or sentimental connections between its members.

Meriel Talbot was the driving force behind the formation of the NAL and served as Vice-President along with Lady Denman and Lady Sandwich.¹⁷ It was not until June 1921 that

¹² Meriel Talbot to Women's Sub-Committees, 'National Association of Landswomen', 22 Nov. 1919.

¹³ *The Women's Farm and Garden Union Journal*, Oct. 1919, p. 5.

¹⁴ TNA, MAF 42/7, Meeting of the National Association of Landswomen Elected Members and Country Organisers, 5 Jan. 1920.

¹⁵ TNA, MAF 42/7, The National Association of Landswomen, Elected Members to Lord Lee, 20 Nov.

1919.

¹⁶ TNA, MAF 42/7, Meriel Talbot to the Organising Secretaries, 'The Good Work of the Land Army', 22 Nov. 1919.

¹⁷ See B. White, *The Women's Land Army in First World War Britain* (2014), pp. 150–2. Rowland Prothero served as President and H.R.H. Princess Mary served as patroness.

she and Gladys Potts, an inspector for the WLA and Secretary and Chairman of the Society for the Oversea Settlement of British Women (SOSBW), joined the Executive Committee. The role of the Vice President was largely advisory, but Talbot had a direct and deliberate impact on the overall direction of the NAL. As Woman Adviser to the Board of Agriculture, her opinion was sought on a number of matters pertaining to women's employment, including wages, education, and health insurance. The Executive Committee was chaired by Lucy Anne Streatfeild, who served on the Executive Committee of the WLA and would later be an active member of the Women's Institutes drama groups in the 1920s and 1930s. Louise Wilkins also served on the NAL's Executive Committee. She was a highly influential figure in women's agricultural work, having worked with the WFGU to support the advancement of women on the land and with the Trade Board that helped workers who did not have the organizational structure for collective action to secure better wages. Another crossover with the WLA was Miss Baker, who worked for both the WLA as an inspector and the SOSBW facilitating overseas migration for agricultural workers. The Executive Committee changed significantly over the few years of the NAL's operations, but this small group of influential women had connections throughout the various women's organizations that should have made cooperation easier.

Rather than encouraging a spirit of cooperation, the linkages and overlaps between people and organizations complicated cooperative practices as the various groups configured their responses to the problems facing women's labour in the interwar period and how employment issues intersected with the labour and women's movements. For the WFGU, it was not enough to simply find jobs for women in the agricultural industry; the fight for better wages and working conditions was essential to improving women's working lives, and the WFGU refused to bow to the paternalism of rural institutions, specifically regarding the gender divide of labour that determined who could work and in what jobs, but also the value assigned to that work.¹⁸ The NFWI was no less dedicated to improving the lives of rural women, but its connections to the women's movement was complicated by its unwillingness to pursue an agenda that contested the male-female divide that dominated food production in the early 1920s.¹⁹ The problem for the NAL was that the lingering influence of the WLA prevented it from developing its own identity, and from its inception the NAL had to negotiate with various other organizations to facilitate its own operations.²⁰ It adopted a middle ground, but this lack of operational independence significantly limited the NAL's ability to develop a clear mandate.

The official end of the WLA was as haphazard as the NAL's beginning. While a national ceremony was held in London in December 1919, the counties held individual ceremonies to formally mark the end of the Land Army and to recruit the now former Land Girls into the newly formed and officially inaugurated NAL.²¹ The effort to closely tie the two organizations together created immediate problems. Organising Secretaries were slow to demobilize due to their new task of setting up the NAL, and in mid-December they were cautioned that work

¹⁸ 'Women for the Farm', *The Times*, 24 May 1916; MERL, SR WFGA/A/2/1, Meeting of the Women's Farm and Garden Union, 9 Jan. 1920.

¹⁹ Andrews, *Acceptable face of feminism*, p. 55; C. Beaumont, 'Citizens not feminists: the boundary negotiated between citizenship and feminism by

mainstream women's organisations in England, 1928–39', *Women's Hist. Rev.* 9 (2000), pp. 411–29.

²⁰ *The Landswoman*, Dec. 1919, p. 272.

²¹ TNA, MAF 42/7, Meriel Talbot to the Organising Secretaries, 18 Dec. 1919.

on behalf of the NAL was voluntary and no longer supported by the Board of Agriculture.²² All work for the WLA was to cease immediately. By December 1919, the problem of closely linking the two organizations became apparent.²³ The NAL and WLA had to be seen as 'sister' organizations and not one as an extension of the other, but a clear distinction between the two was never fully achieved. Creating separation would not be easy: the NAL *was* an extension of the WLA in mandate and structure, and it was difficult to implement changes once the new organization was officially launched.

The NAL was inaugurated at the end of 1919 and its first, and perhaps most important, decision was to target former Land Girls, which inevitably limited its pool of potential members. While it actively recruited women working in agriculture or those seeking agricultural or horticultural employment, the desire to recruit from an existing organization that was already trained and connected to its leadership team was the primary focus in the early days.²⁴ The importance of former Land Girls to the future success of the NAL was not unknown, and county branches reported that while former Land Girls were enthusiastic about the new organization, they were not shy about their expectations for the NAL. In February 1920 the East Kent and Wiltshire branches of the NAL, for example, reported 'strong pressure from ex Land Girls to secure milking and poultry work', expecting the NAL to pick up immediately where the WLA had left off.²⁵ This was promising news for the NAL, but its organizers were also anxious about the immediate pressure to quickly find positions for former Land Girls.

II

The NAL aimed for a membership of 8000, but to accomplish this it would need to recruit members who were not already connected to the WLA, and it would have to compete with other organizations dedicated to advancing the role of women in rural Britain.²⁶ Even before its formal inauguration, the NAL articulated that it would work closely with the WFGU and the NFWI and was hoping that members of both groups would be willing to join the NAL and pay membership dues to multiple organizations. The need for close cooperation was not simply that the three organizations shared a similar purpose, but because the NAL needed to utilize the operational apparatus of the other two groups to carry out its work, at least until its membership grew and it collected enough money through dues to pay for an office and staff.²⁷ While cooperation was an obvious benefit to the NAL, the WFGU and the NFWI were sceptical and their members expressed concerns about establishing a close relationship

²² TNA, MAF 42/7, Meriel Talbot to the Organising Secretaries, 23 Dec. 1919.

²³ TNA, MAF 42/7, Meriel Talbot to the Organising Secretaries, 'Termination of Work in the Counties', 30 Dec. 1919.

²⁴ 'Women's Land Army', *Essex County Chronicle*, 5 Dec. 1919. At the end of the war WLA essay competitions were won by those who expressed a desire to remain on the land, and *The Landswoman* was the

primary organ for recruitment to both the WLA and NAL. See S. Ouditt, *Fighting forces, writing women: identity and ideology in the First World War* (1993), p. 55.

²⁵ MERL, SR WFGA/E/2/2, Meeting of Organisers NAL, Oct. 1919.

²⁶ 'An Army of 8,000', *Morpeth Herald and Reporter*, 12 Dec. 1919.

²⁷ The Women's Library, 5FWI/1/3, 'Women's Committee on Agricultural Work, 22 Oct. 1919.

with the NAL, specifically regarding the impact collaboration would have on their own operations.²⁸

The WFGU was created in 1899 with the aim of creating an organization that would connect professional women in agriculture, to gather information about government legislation that affected land workers, and to influence public opinion toward accepting women in farming. The WFGU focused on education and training as well as the establishment of working relations with farmers and trade unions in an effort to combat some of the disadvantages women faced while looking for work. In 1917 and 1918, the WFGU had worked in tandem with the WLA in a joint effort to increase the number of women employed in agriculture, but their attentions had been different with the Land Army focused on recruiting and training women willing to commit to employment contracts, while the WFGU worked toward professionalization and worker independence. In the interwar period, the WFGU placed more than 3,000 women in jobs related to the agricultural industry and was the pre-eminent organization with the knowledge and resources to place women who wished to pursue such careers. In the 1920s and 1930s it operated with the understanding that the war had provided important lessons about the value of women on the land and that farmers' prejudices had largely subsided.²⁹ Neither did it submit to the gender dichotomy of agricultural labour, and the NAL accused the WFGU of placing women in men's jobs without regard for the potential displacement of male farm labourers, something the WLA had worked hard to avoid.³⁰ The Committee of Eight, formed in November 1919 to establish the NAL, indicated in its meeting with the WFGU Sub-Committee on Women's Labour its hope that 'women seeking work on the land do so not at the expense of male labourers or the trust won between the WLA and farmers' unions'.³¹ Land Girls were supplementing the male labour force, not supplanting it, and the NAL, while rejecting Lord Ernle's statement that women were best suited to 'particular branches of agriculture', felt the need to tread carefully in the still-patriarchal industry.³²

While the WFGU attended primarily to urban women who were interested in market gardening or smallholdings, the NFWI was dedicated to the role of rural women in agricultural regions either as paid workers or as members of farming families. Like the WFGU, the NFWI stayed informed about pay rates and boarding and lodging expenses and conditions, and it worked to improve rural life for women and children. Both organizations were concerned that an influx of urban women into the rural labour force would compete with country men and women for wages and housing. Conditions in rural areas, comparatively low wages in relation to other industries, and a limited number of cottages that were

²⁸ The Women's Library, 5FWI/E/2/01/05, *The Women's Farm and Garden Union Journal*, Oct. 1919, p. 5; General Meeting of the NFWI, 23 Oct. 1919.

²⁹ MERL, SR WFGA/E/2/2, 'Women on the Land', *WFGU Journal*, Apr. 1919.

³⁰ 'Meeting of the Staffordshire WI', *Staffordshire Advertiser*, 25 Feb. 1922; N. Verdon, 'Agricultural labour and the contested nature of women's work in interwar England and Wales', *Historical J.* 52 (2009), p. 124; *ead.*, 'Business or pleasure: middle-class women's work and the professionalization of farming in England,

1890–1939', *J. British Stud.* 51 (2012), p. 398. This was part of a broader response to the modernization of the countryside. See D. N. Jeans, 'Planning and the myth of the English countryside, in the interwar period', *Rural Hist.*, 1 (1990), pp. 249–64.

³¹ TNA, MAF 42/7, Meeting of the Committee of Eight and the WFGU Sub-Committee of Women's Agricultural Labour, 16 Dec. 1919.

³² 'Lord Ernle and the Land Army', *The Lands-woman*, July 1920, p. 146.

generally of poor quality and lacked modern amenities were factors leading to demographic changes that began before the war and resumed in the early 1920s.³³ For the NFWI the solution was not an influx of urban workers, but rather the rehabilitation of rural institutions and industries. The NFWI and WFGU also faced backlash from farmers and unions for their perceived interference in labour and were accused of inflating the value of and need for women in the industry.³⁴ Farmers continued to raise concerns about the value of women labourers and were convinced that women, including former Land Girls, were not worth the expense in terms of wages.³⁵

The NAL's mandate was situated between the WFGU and the NFWI, putting it in a difficult position for recruiting new members. Since it was open to all women interested in agricultural work, it competed directly with the other two groups but without clearly distinguishing itself from either. Marketing for the NAL indicated that its goal was to promote national comradeship among women land workers, to further agricultural efficiency among women, and to maintain goodwill between employers and employees that had been one of the key successes of the WLA.³⁶ Peter Dewey has argued that the agricultural trade unions were weak during the war, but Nick Mansfield argues that the trade unions grew steadily after 1916, and Nicola Verdon has shown that their growth continued in the interwar period when the National Union of Agricultural Workers became a force for organizations focused on advancing the position of women in the industry.³⁷ The NAL saw a continuing need to placate farmers and the trade unions by advocating for women as supplementary rather than competing labour. It also focused on the importance of education and training for women and the need to promote agriculture's value to the national recovery and women's key role in that process.³⁸ The NAL's 'A Better England Campaign', launched in December 1919, proved similar to the NFWI's mandate, proclaiming that there was 'honour in agricultural work' and that the revitalization of the agricultural industry was an act of patriotism that could only be accomplished by cooperation between men and women and the promotion and advancement of education and skilled work for women in the industry. While the NAL was less optimistic about the erasure of farmers' prejudices, it did encourage women to take up the mantle of the WLA by demonstrating their value through their labour.³⁹

³³ J. Saville, *Rural Depopulation in Rural England and Wales, 1851–1951* (1957), pp. 131–2. Saville's conclusion about the extent of rural depopulation in the period has been challenged by A. Howkins, 'Death and Rebirth? English Rural Society, 1920–1940', in P. Brassley, J. Burchardt, and L. Thompson (eds), *The English countryside between the wars: regeneration or decline?* (2006), pp. 10–25.

³⁴ *The Women's Farm and Garden Journal*, May 1919, p. 1.

³⁵ Verdon, 'Agricultural labour', pp. 123–5.

³⁶ *The Landswoman*, Mar. 1920, p. 63.

³⁷ P. Dewey, 'Government provision of farm labour in England and Wales, 1914–1918', *AgHR* 27 (1979), pp. 110–20; N. Mansfield, 'Farmworkers, local identity and conservatism, 1914–1930', in Brassley, Burchardt

and Thompson (eds), *English countryside*, p. 179; Verdon, 'Agricultural labour', p. 125.

³⁸ 'Why we need an Association of Landswomen', *The Landswoman*, Jan. 1920, p. 6.

³⁹ 'Staffordshire Landswomen', *Staffordshire Advertiser*, 20 Dec. 1919, p. 2. Susan Grayzel has argued that the WLA's most significant contribution was changing attitudes about women's roles in rural life, and Birgit Van Puymbroeck has shown the value of *The Landswoman* in fostering a collective identity, but also a new dialogue about the value of women's labour. S. Grayzel, 'Nostalgia, gender, and the countryside: placing the 'Land Girl' in First World War Britain', *Rural Hist.* 10 (1999), p. 157; B. Van Puymbroeck, 'Becoming a Land Girl: reprinting Alice Meynell's 'The Shepherdess' in *The Landswoman*', *Victorian Periodicals Rev.* 50 (2017), p. 404.

The NAL was promoted as an organization that would continue the Land Army's efforts to provide training and agricultural education, but also support the cause of 'women in collective action'.⁴⁰ Its platform was broad enough to attract a variety of women from different backgrounds and with diverse skillsets, and while it promised its members a unique experience, its work overlapped with both the WFGU and NFWI but without access to the same resources or infrastructures thus limiting its ability to truly support 'women in collective action'. When the NAL was launched it used the offices of the Organising Secretaries of the WLA in the counties.⁴¹ After 1919 it relied on an arrangement with the WFGU to share office space in London and to employ a part-time secretary. The counties also entered into arrangements with local offices of the WFGU to share resources, which was a point of contention because the WFGU offices were already established and the nature of the arrangement between the two organizations was unclear.⁴² In 1921, the NAL shared resources with the NFWI and finally the SOSBW in 1923, and it was only in its final months that it was able to be truly independent.

The NAL's potential for success depended on attracting former Land Girls, but here its approach conflicted with the WFGU. While the WFGU believed that Land Girls would stay on the land, their numbers were declining, and a more sustainable option for women was smallholdings where they could exercise greater control over their working lives.⁴³ There was, however, an overall decrease in the number of women employed in agriculture after 1919. Between the end of the war and the launch of the NAL, more than 16,000 of the 34,000 women who worked in full-time, paid positions had left agricultural work. More specifically, the number of Land Girls employed on farms dropped by more than a thousand between April and July 1919 and the numbers continued to decline through the end of the year. Although women workers were in demand, most of the work was seasonal.⁴⁴ WFGU members expressed concerns that the NAL would recruit women in the larger towns and cities for work in rural Britain and wanted a commitment from the NAL that if the two bodies were to cooperate in the future, the NAL would not adopt a similar recruitment strategy used by the WLA by recruiting urban women seeking to leave domestic service work. In a joint meeting between Mrs Grosvenor, Mrs Balfour, Mrs Wilkins, Miss Pott, and Miss Baker, there had been considerable discussion about the types of women the NAL aimed to recruit. The WFGU expressed its preference that the

NAL should affiliate to arrangements that have the benefits of keeping women in towns and cities where there is much work to do in gardening. The benefits to be obtained are sufficient to justify this policy ... and is one adopted by the Board of Agriculture Women's Branch during the war.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ MERL, SR WFGA/E/2/2, Minutes of NAL Executive, 27 Feb. 1920.

⁴¹ 'National Association of Landswomen', *Essex Newsmen*, 7 Aug. 1920.

⁴² MERL, SR WFGA/E/2/2, 'Landswomen Association', Nov. 1919.

⁴³ MERL, SR WFGA/E/2/2, Minutes of the WFGU, May 1919; A. Meredith, 'From ideals to reality: the

women's smallholding colony at Lingfield', *AgHR* 54 (2006), p. 105.

⁴⁴ MERL, SR WFGA/E/2/2, 'Fewer Women on the Land', Oct. 1919.

⁴⁵ MERL, SR WFGA E/2/2, Circular Letter on negotiations for Amalgamation between WFGU and NAL, 17 July 1920.

The WFGU representatives were probably referring to the approach used by the French Unit of the WLA whereby women were trained in market gardening and horticulture for work in urban areas,⁴⁶ a tactic that supported women's work but did not relocate them to rural areas.⁴⁷ In 1919 the WFGU stressed the need for former Land Girls to remain on the land, but for those outside rural areas and with no experience in farming, there was the need for 'further training in agricultural and horticultural work'.⁴⁸ Information sessions were held to inform women about the profitability of homemade jams, bottled fruits, and growing vegetables, and representatives encouraged women in towns and cities to raise poultry.

In addition to worries about its recruitment strategies, the WFGU was also concerned about the longevity of the NAL. The NAL had few members, approximately 1,300 at the end of 1919, and limited resources. Its main source of income was the sale of women's workwear that had been left over from the WLA. This included smocks, jumpers, breeches, and boots (but not the official Land Army coats) that the NAL had been given exclusive rights to sell by the Board of Agriculture in a profit-sharing scheme. The NAL kept ten percent of all sales to cover the costs of storage and shipping, with the Board receiving the remainder of the profits.⁴⁹ The WFGU had to consider the extent to which the NAL would be a liability in terms of its aim to professionalize agricultural and horticultural work for women and the potential syphoning of members that would have financial repercussions for both organizations.

In November 1919 the NAL had approached the WFGU about cooperation and the possibility of amalgamating in the future. At the time, the WFGU was only willing to talk about cooperation, but not amalgamation until it became clearer where the NAL stood on key issues. NAL recruiting strategies was only one of the several points of disagreement. Connected to the NAL's reliance on former Land Girls was its refusal to allow members of the WFGU to purchase former Land Army uniforms if they were not members of the NAL. Mrs Bridgemen argued that since 'all the work and responsibility of securing the outfits had fallen on the NAL, [and] that the branches were having a hard fight to pay their way, [for the WFGU] to have the benefit of the clothes without paying for it' was unacceptable.⁵⁰ The WFGU argued that its members had been engaged in the same work as Land Girls and 'were entitled to the same benefits as the NAL'.⁵¹ The lack of Land Army status was not the issue; rather, the NAL was trying to secure a commitment of cooperation from the WFGU before altering its sales strategies. The NAL required that the WFGU's members also pay membership dues to the NAL if they wanted to take advantage of its services, but its real objective was the future amalgamation of the two societies.⁵² From the outset the NAL Executive knew that raising enough

⁴⁶ MERL, SR WFGA/E/2/2, Report on Cooperation between WFGU and NAL, 17 July 1920.

⁴⁷ 'Women's Land Army: A French Unit', *Birmingham Post*, 30 May 1918; 'Girl Gardeners: French Land Army', *Daily News and Leader*, 29 June 1918.

⁴⁸ 'Women Land Workers', *Leeds Mercury*, 23 Jan. 1919, p. 6.

⁴⁹ MERL, SR WFGA/E/2/2, Minutes of meeting of Executive Officers of the NAL and WFGU, 19 Jan. 1919.

⁵⁰ MERL, SR WFGA/E/2/2, Minutes of NAL Executive,

27 Feb. 1920.

⁵¹ MERL, SR WFGA/E/2/2, Minutes of NAL Executive, 27 Feb. 1920. For more on the divisions between women agricultural workers see N. Verdon, 'Let out in the cold: village women and agricultural labour in England and Wales during the First World War', *Twentieth Century British Hist.* 27 (2016), pp. 1–25.

⁵² MERL, SR WFGA/E/2/2, Minutes of NAL Executive, 27 Feb. 1920.

money to maintain operations would be challenging and it would not be long before the NAL would have to pursue amalgamation with either the WFGU or the NFWI. The NAL's revenues came from membership dues, the sale of uniforms, and donations. Its budget was small, and without the goodwill of the WFGU it would not have been able to cover its operational costs, but the executive argued that the sale of uniforms generated the largest profits and because it had sole authority over the sale of WLA apparel, it had the right to set terms and prices. The dire nature of its finances is most clearly indicated by its decision to end its association with *The Landswoman*, the official publication of the WLA and the official publication and primary promotional tool of the NAL. In May 1920, *The Landswoman*, which was edited by Talbot, was operating at a loss, and Talbot made the decision to end the NAL's arrangement with the magazine. This was a surprising decision for the counties because the magazine was a central part of the NAL's marketing campaign and was used to promote work apparel for women, running full-page advertisements on the need for sturdy boots and proper smocks, sold exclusively by the NAL.⁵³ In its place the NAL tried to send representatives on a national tour, but insufficient funds meant the tour had to be cancelled.⁵⁴ Instead, the NAL had to request cooperation from the NFWI to run half-columns in *Home and Country* on a need basis, leaving it with no formal mechanism for recruitment or promotion.

III

Beyond the practicalities of whom to recruit and how, the WFGU was troubled about the NAL's position on women's farm wages, smallholdings, and farming colonies. The government had fixed wages for women in agriculture by county, but in many counties the wage minimums were not being enforced. The WFGU asked for a joint effort from the NAL to keep track of wages in the counties and to report discrepancies to the District Wages Board and the Board of Agriculture. The individual county organizations were free to engage with local authorities regarding wages, but the central office in London gave no direct assistance.⁵⁵ The NAL preferred to remain silent on the issue, arguing that it was 'impossible to demand a minimum weekly wage for women, and that the committee adhered to its previous decision that it would be unwise at the present time for the NAL to interfere in this matter'.⁵⁶ The immediate concern for the NAL Executive was that an official statement of policy would be viewed as too political. The NAL wished to avoid any potential relationship with Labour and was worried that if cooperation or amalgamation with the WFGU did not come to fruition, its only other option was a similar relationship with the NFWI where overt political statements would be damaging to a future partnership. In April 1920 the NFWI Executive warned the NAL that any future amalgamation of the two organizations required that the NAL avoid involvement with any political body.⁵⁷ The NFWI supported 'good salaries' for women farm workers, but there were tensions between the

⁵³ MERL, SR WFGA/E/2/2, Minutes of NAL Executive, 5 May 1920; *The Landswoman*, June 1920, p. 128.

⁵⁴ MERL, SR WFGA/E/2/2, Minutes of NAL Executive, 2 June 1920.

⁵⁵ MERL, SR WFGA/E/2/2, 'Potential for Cooperation between NAL and WFGU', 5 Feb. 1920.

⁵⁶ MERL, SR WFGA/E/2/2, Minutes of NAL Executive, 7 Apr. 1920.

⁵⁷ This warning came after the Middle Classes Union approached the NAL for support on the issue of excessive taxes and rates on the middle classes. MERL, SR WFGA/E/2/2, Minutes of NAL Executive, 7 Apr. 1920.

NFWI and the labour movement in the 1920s, and it was not until the early 1930s that the NFWI Executive actively advocated for better wages and working conditions for women.⁵⁸

The issue of wages was not easily ignored, however. In June 1920 women agricultural workers in Wiltshire threatened to go on strike if wage minimums were not met. During the war, similar action had been taken by one hundred women in South Shields when workers, distressed that wages guaranteed by farmers had not be paid, refused to return to work.⁵⁹ The issue was resolved when the Agricultural Wages Board issued a resolution that minimum rates be set on an hourly basis and minimums be determined by employment history.⁶⁰ During the South Shields strike, however, the Women's Branch had avoided comment and again in 1920 Meriel Talbot issued a rare recommendation to the county organizations that no action be taken, a reversal of her earlier recommendation that the counties should determine their own course of action. Talbot stated that 'in the event of a strike of agricultural workers the committee considers that the National Association of Landswomen should not identify itself with either side, but should maintain an absolutely neutral position, and further, that the committee strongly urges the branches to do the same'.⁶¹ Although the Executive could not dictate directives to the counties, Talbot recommended that women raise the issue of wages with their County Councils. Despite pressure from the counties (labour disputes emerged in Worcester in March 1920 over the issue of women's wages) and the WFGU, the NAL Executive did not want to antagonize farmers or the unions and recommended the matter be handled by the District Wages Board.⁶²

With regard to smallholdings and farming colonies the NAL was equally firm in its unwillingness to wade into the issue, although the decision had nothing to do with the future potential for amalgamation with the WFGU or the NFWI. The Executive Committee generally supported smallholdings, but because both required capital resources that most women did not have and the NAL was in no position financially to subsidize such ventures, it declined involvement. Farming colonies were a different matter because they interfered with the natural balance between male and female labour in farming.⁶³ All-female farming colonies were a worthy enterprise, but the NAL believed that it was ill-suited to its 'supplement not supplant' approach to women's farm labour.⁶⁴ The NAL was committed to this position and offered no recommendations for assistance. More significantly, it did not encourage women to look for support through the WFGU or County Councils, both of which were involved in a number of schemes for smallholdings and farming colonies. For the WFGU the issue of smallholdings was central to its future plans, even if opportunities for women were very limited in the years immediately following the war.⁶⁵ Even the NFWI was willing to provide women with

⁵⁸ *Home and Country*, July 1927, p. 277.

⁵⁹ 'Land Workers Dissatisfied', *North Mail*, 3 June 1918.

⁶⁰ 'Women Land Workers' Wages', *Daily Express*, 17 June 1918.

⁶¹ MERL, SR WFGA/E/2/2, Minutes of NAL Executive Committee, 2 June 1920.

⁶² MERL, SR WFGA/E/2/2, Minutes of NAL Executive Committee, 7 Apr. 1920; MERL, SR WFGA/E/2/2, Minutes of NAL Executive Committee, 2 June 1920.

⁶³ 'Women in Agriculture', *Ripon Observer*, 19 May 1921.

⁶⁴ MERL, SR WFGA/E/2/2, Minutes of NAL Executive Committee, 27 Sept. 1921.

⁶⁵ Meredith, 'From ideals to reality', p. 108. The colony at Lingfield was reminiscent of the nineteenth-century 'back to the land' campaign. See D. L. Opitz, 'Back to the land: Lady Warwick and the movement for women's collegiate agricultural education', *AgHR* 62 (2014), pp. 119–45.

information on cooperative buying and selling and data pertaining to the markets, but the NAL stated that 'it was impossible for the NAL to undertake this, especially as this was the work undertaken by the Women's Institutes'.⁶⁶ The NAL's failure to act on the issue of women's wages or employment trends that directly impacted women in agriculture severely undermined its commitment to support 'women in collective action' and was a growing source of tension between it and the WFGU.

The NAL's approach to women in agriculture was certainly influenced by its predecessor, but its refusal to act on matters directly affecting women in agriculture was also due to inadequate staffing. For example, former Land Girls working in remote villages requested that the NAL arrange for books to be sent to members, but the Executive determined that it did not have the human resources to support such initiatives and the matter should be brought before the County Councils or the Education Authorities.⁶⁷ The NAL had to decide where to focus its limited energies and despite the broad message of its 'A Better England Campaign', its agenda was dominated by its clearing sheets and health insurance schemes. The clearing sheet scheme was operated by the counties but monthly clearing sheets, a record of who was employed where and where there were labour shortages, were compiled by the central office in London. Members looking for agricultural work could register with the county office where organizers would match women with employers. While census figures show an overall decline in employment in agriculture in the interwar years, Alun Howkins showed that there was significant variation in employment trends across counties, and the clearing sheets were designed to help direct women to counties/districts where work was more plentiful.⁶⁸ Employers paid a small fee for the service, whereas in most counties the women were covered by their membership fees, although this was not always the case and some counties charged both the women and the employer a fee. Employment information was sent to the central office where the NAL tracked employment trends. Positions for women were more plentiful in Kent than in Devon, for example, and the NAL was able to coordinate with the counties to maximize work placements. This was particularly important in areas of the country without an NAL branch.

In early 1920 the NAL had branches in 46 counties. Of those, 25 had more than 100 members, while 21 had fewer than 100 members. Ten counties – four in England and six in Wales – had no branches at all. In mid-1920 the NAL had just over 4000 members.⁶⁹ The success of the work registration scheme was limited. Untrained women had little chance of finding employment, and the NAL did not have its own training facilities or specific relationships with agricultural colleges. In some counties, like Kent, the NAL branches had arrangements with farmers for short practical training courses and facilitated the process for training and work terms, but there was no certificate of completion or skills test administered, and employers often wanted evidence of training beyond just recommendations from former employers. In 1919, Talbot had worked on a plan to secure agricultural training at a centre

⁶⁶ MERL, SR WFGA/E/2/2, Minutes of NAL Executive, 7 Apr. 1920.

⁶⁷ MERL, SR WFGA/E/2/2, Minutes of NAL Executive, 27 Feb. 1920.

⁶⁸ Howkins, 'Death and Rebirth?', p. 16.

⁶⁹ Minutes of NAL Executive, 11 Aug. 1920, MERL, SR WFGA/E/2/2.

in Worcestershire through the Education Authorities' Grant for Ex-Service Women, but the number of spots was limited, and the scheme for practical training in agricultural subjects at Cuming Farm in Hindlip had yet to be approved by county officials.⁷⁰ This left many women stuck in the loop of seasonal employment or looking to smallholdings or farming colonies, work that was not facilitated by the NAL. Such services were provided, however, by the WFGU, but only to its own members. The WFGU also had its own networks and was far more successful than the NAL in coordinating work terms. In the spring of 1920, for example, the NAL had just 41 applications for work but nearly 100 vacancies. The WFGU offered to assist with filling the vacancies, but only if NAL members paid membership dues to the WFGU.⁷¹ The problem for the NAL was not that there were not enough women to fill the vacancies, but that women had not sought the services of the NAL, indicating a clear preference for the better-organized and more influential WFGU. The need to amalgamate was more pressing than ever, forcing the NAL to adopt a new strategy.

IV

By June 1920 amalgamation with the WFGU appeared unlikely and the Executive Committee conveyed to its membership its belief that the NAL's interests were more closely aligned with the NFWI. The objectives and priorities of the NAL and WFGU overlapped leading to competition for members and resources and yet their goals remained too far apart to be easily reconciled. Cooperation and possible amalgamation with the NFWI, however, proved no less difficult. The NAL had always embraced the need for cooperation with the NFWI, and in the years after the war there was much talk about the possible amalgamation of all three groups. The NFWI was specifically concerned about wage competition between men and women, as was the NAL, and both were concerned that the WFGU was providing inaccurate information about the state of agricultural employment for women.⁷² In her work on women's agricultural labour, Nicola Verdon has shown that although attitudes had changed and continued to change in the interwar period, the 'presence of women workers produced a number of conflicting responses from a range of rural groups and organizations'.⁷³ Competition between groups was not unexpected, but the NAL Executive was doubtful that it could maintain operations without the support of either the WFGU or NFWI.

In August 1920 representatives of the Executive Committees of the NAL and NFWI met to discuss the matter of amalgamation. One point of contention was the NAL's health insurance scheme. In early 1920 the NAL Executive had reached out to the National Deposit, The Hearts of Oak, The Ancient Order of Foresters, the Agricultural Labourers' Union, and the National Federation of Women Workers (NFWW) to inquire about health insurance for women agricultural workers. The National Deposit and the Ancient Order of Foresters were

⁷⁰ Londonderry to Talbot, Agricultural training in Worcestershire, 24 Mar. 1919, MERL, SR WFGA/9/5.

⁷¹ The NAL operated from 1919 to 1923, coinciding with the largest decline in agricultural labour in the interwar period. See B. White, 'What to do with the girls? The legacy of women farm workers in Britain,

1919–1939', *Historical Reflections* 42 (2016), pp. 103–4.

⁷² MERL, SR WFGA/E/2/3, Report on Joint meeting of the Executives of NAL, WFGU, and NFWI, 8 June 1920, Minutes of NAL Executive, 10 July 1920.

⁷³ Verdon, 'Agricultural labour', p. 130.

both able to offer advice on savings and money care for working-class women, while the Hearts of Oak and the Agricultural Labourers' Union could provide practical advice about health insurance, but it was the NFWW that offered to create a Health Section for women agricultural labourers so long as the NAL had a minimum of 5000 members registered for benefits. While the NFWW offered the most robust policy options, the NFWI rejected any affiliation with trade unions.⁷⁴ The NAL had to decide whether or not to commit to the NFWW knowing that the matter would be trivial if its Executive was unable to gain the support of the NFWI's membership. The NAL was facing pressure from its own members who wanted to abandon any arrangement with the NFWW in order to placate the NFWI, opting instead to find support through the Friendly Societies that could assist members with savings, insurance, and cooperative banking.⁷⁵ If the issue was not resolvable through the Friendly Societies, an organization that 'stimulated a sense of class solidarity of encouraging a spirit of friendship and sociability among equals', several branches expressed support for a savings plan through the Slate Clubs, rather than a specific health insurance plan.⁷⁶

Changes to unemployment and health insurance took place in the interwar period, but the Unemployment Insurance Act of 1920 did not cover agricultural workers and modifications to the old Poor Laws were underway after 1919, but the most significant changes came with the introduction of the Local Government Act of 1929.⁷⁷ Cathy Hunt has shown that the National Insurance Act (1911) did not protect those employed casually or those who received irregular wages. Collective bargaining and insurance protections were available through the NFWW, which had the ability to put pressure on dishonest employers who evaded the Act, failed to provide insurance, or who violated wage rates, but only for registered members.⁷⁸ The extension of national health insurance in 1911 expanded benefits for working-class men, but few women received coverage. In most cases, women had to find alternative sources of insurance, either through the Friendly Societies or some other organization.⁷⁹ The NAL Executive was not willing to alter what it believed would be its signature contribution to women's agricultural labour, a health insurance scheme specifically for its members. In a series of negotiations with the NFWI the NAL made clear 'that the NAL would have no connection with its [NFWW's] political work' and that the health insurance plan was simply for the benefit of women workers who had no other source of income if they were injured while working.⁸⁰ The specific issue was that the NAL had been fielding a number of requests for financial assistance from former Land Girls who had sustained injuries while working and had to be absent from work for a number of weeks. The NAL was unable to offer financial support and Streatfeild was adamant

⁷⁴ MERL, SR WFGA/E/2/2, Minutes of NAL Executive, 7 Apr. 1920.

⁷⁵ MERL, SR WFGA/E/2/2, Letter of Concern from NAL branches on Health Insurance Scheme, 12 Apr. 1920. See F. Bédarida, *A social history of England, 1851-1975* (1979), pp. 67-8.

⁷⁶ Ibid, p. 71; MERL, SR WFGA/E/2/2, Minutes of NAL Executive, 7 Apr. 1920.

⁷⁷ D. K. Benjamin and L. A. Kochin, 'Searching for an explanation of unemployment in interwar Britain',

J. Political Economy 87 (1979), pp. 441-78.

⁷⁸ C. Hunt, *The National Federation of Women Workers, 1906-1921* (2014), p. 54. See also, M. Glucksmann, *Women assemble: women workers in the new industries in interwar Britain* (1990), pp. 40-1.

⁷⁹ I. Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Women in twentieth century Britain* (2001), p. 92.

⁸⁰ MERL, SR WFGA/E/2/2, Minutes of NAL Executive, 5 May 1920.

that a health insurance plan was the only way to offer meaningful assistance.⁸¹ Insurance became the predominant matter on the NAL's agenda, but the health scheme faced criticism from within the NAL's ranks. Opposition took two forms: those who believed that any type of financial assistance would be beneficial and would ultimately fulfil the NAL's desire to increase supports for farming women, and those who felt the matter should not be to the detriment of the NAL, fearing that continued discussions with the NFWW would cause the NFWI to cease amalgamation negotiations.⁸²

The Executive delayed deciding on how to proceed with regard to health insurance and turned its attention to the two proposed options for amalgamation set by the NFWI. In September 1920 two schemes had been drawn up by a Joint Committee for consideration by their respective memberships. Under Option A, the NAL would be incorporated into the NFWI with a Guild of Agricultural Workers (the former NAL) formed and open to all women interested in agricultural work. Each county branch of the WI would have a representative from the NAL and the WI Agricultural Sub-Committees would comprise an equal number of representatives from the NFWI and the NAL. Work specific to the NAL would be carried on by its existing members, and the NAL would be responsible for the management of the Guild of Agricultural Workers. Under Option B, the NAL would be taken over by the NFWI, and all members invited to join the WI. The Agricultural and Horticultural Sub-Committees of the NFWI would have representatives from the NAL to carry out work specific to the NAL's mandate, including clothing sales and clearing sheets.⁸³

NAL members immediately objected to what they saw as a piecemeal takeover by the NFWI, whereby Landswomen activities would be gradually subsumed by the WIs, and believed that the NFWI was not committed to advocating for women's work in agriculture (the NFWI was focused on horticulture). Maggie Andrews has argued that it was not until the 1930s that the WIs embraced farming for women as an act of independence and empowerment.⁸⁴ The challenge, however, was that the number of NAL branches was in decline, with several positions unfilled and branches requesting financial support due to a lack of membership.⁸⁵ Donations also declined and the only alternative to raise funds was through the sale of uniforms which the NAL opened to members of the WFGU at the same price paid by NAL members in the fall of 1920. In Lancashire and Cheshire members protested that 'it was not practical for members of the NAL to become members of the Women's Institutes when they live 12, or more, miles away from a Women's Institute, or it they lived in or near big towns'.⁸⁶ Miss Ellis from the Lancashire branch wrote that 'it was felt among all members that it would be most unwise to take up a plan for amalgamation on the stated terms as it would diminish current members' participation at meetings that would be under the chairship of the National

⁸¹ For more on health and welfare schemes in interwar Britain, see M. Gorsky, 'Public health in interwar England and Wales: did it fail?', *Dynamis* 28 (2008), pp. 175–98; H. Jones, 'Employers' welfare schemes and industrial relations in interwar Britain', *Business Hist.* 25 (1983), pp. 61–75.

⁸² MERL, SR WFGA/E/2/2, Minutes of NAL Executive, 2 June 1920.

⁸³ MERL, SR WFGA/E/2/2, Minutes of NAL Executive, 8 Sept. 1920.

⁸⁴ Andrews, *Acceptable face of feminism*, pp. 55–6.

⁸⁵ MERL, SR WFGA/E/2/2, Minutes of NAL Executive, 6 Oct. 1920.

⁸⁶ MERL, SR WFGA/E/2/2, Minutes of NAL Executive, 14 Dec. 1920.

Federation of Women's Institutes', essentially turning the NAL's operations over to the WIs or to new members of the NAL who would have limited knowledge of the organization and its goals.⁸⁷ There was also no mention of the NAL's proposed health insurance scheme. As part of the negotiation process, the NAL promoted the insurance plan as part of its 'A Better England' campaign that was not fundamentally different from or in opposition to the nineteenth century 'back to the land' campaign that had been influential to both the creation of the NFWI and the WLA during the war.⁸⁸

While the NAL vacillated between asking for amendments and outright rejection of both options, the NFWI membership voted against the amalgamation plan presented by its Executive Committee.⁸⁹ Unfortunately for the NAL, it had already received notice in early January from the WFGU that association between the two organizations would end on 20 January 1921.⁹⁰ Also in 1921, the NFWW amalgamated into the National Union of General Workers; rather than a separate health insurance plan, NAL members could enroll as general members or secure insurance through the Rural Approved Societies. Talbot considered having individual branches advocate on the NAL's behalf with their NFWI branch counterparts but feared it 'might be misconstrued and considered propaganda to influence the vote of the Annual Meeting of the National Federation of Women's Institutes'.⁹¹ Instead, Talbot recommended limiting contact between the two organizations for the time being with the hope that a suitable arrangement could be made in the future.

A change in circumstances came with the Corn Production Repeal Act (1921) where both the NAL and NFWI agreed that a woman should be appointed to the Conciliation Committee. The NAL sent a letter to the Minister of Agriculture in August 1921 stating that 'In view of the necessity of safeguarding the interests of women under the new Conciliation Committees, this Association speaking for the Agricultural Women wage earners, asks that a Clause shall be inserted in the Corn Production Acts (Repeal) Bill providing for the inclusion of women on the Conciliation Committees'.⁹² In September 1921 the NFWI 'decided to support the action of the NAL with regard to the appointment of women on the Conciliation Committees and had agreed to circulate the same letter to the branches'.⁹³ The Conciliation Committee was established in July 1921 when government abandoned the Agriculture Act (1920). Its purpose was to mediate between employers and employees with regard to wages and price guarantees for agricultural products, but they had no real power to implement change.⁹⁴ Women's agricultural wages declined from 46s. per week in 1921 to 36s. per week by December 1922, and while the NAL had been unwilling to advocate for women a year earlier, with the completion of its health insurance scheme, it now had some resources available and

⁸⁷ MERL, SR WFGA/E/2/2, Minutes of NAL Executive, 14 Dec. 1920.

⁸⁸ MERL, SR WFGA/E/2/2, Minutes of NAL Executive, 3 Nov. 1920. See A. Howkins, *Reshaping rural England: a social history, 1850-1925* (1991), pp. 277-8.

⁸⁹ MERL, SR WFGA/E/2/2, Minutes of NAL Executive, 8 Feb. 1921.

⁹⁰ MERL, SR WFGA/E/2/2, Minutes of NAL Executive, 18 Jan. 1921.

⁹¹ MERL, SR WFGA/E/2/2, Minutes of NAL Executive, 8 Feb. 1921.

⁹² MERL, SR WFGA/E/2/2, Minutes of NAL Executive, 26 July 1921.

⁹³ MERL, SR WFGA/E/2/2, Minutes of NAL Executive, 27 Sept. 1921.

⁹⁴ MERL, SR WFGA/E/2/2, Minutes of NAL Executive, 26 July 1921.

felt encouraged by the support it received from the NFWI.⁹⁵ The work of the Conciliation Committee was relatively futile and real change did not come until Labour passed the Agriculture Wages (Regulation) Act in 1924, but the issue of wage reductions and agricultural protections created an opening for renewed negotiations between the NAL and NFWI. By the autumn of 1921 major branches of the NAL had closed, including Cambridge and East Kent, while Worcester and Oxford had already amalgamated with the NFWI branches in those counties. The NAL Executive now relied on the negotiating skills of Meriel Talbot and Gladys Potts to draft a statement of aims, objectives, and advantages to amalgamation. This included interaction with the Lingfield colony to encourage NAL members to broaden their approach to women's agricultural work and a presentation by Miss Fawcett on the benefits of health insurance for single women working in agriculture. The health insurance scheme continued to be a point of contention, but not one that would not be overcome. The NAL was asked to 'state their position with regard to the Health Section', including any liabilities stemming from its association with the NFWW. The NAL issued a final statement that 'it recommended the scheme for insurance because they thought it a sound scheme, and because it gave the kinds of benefits the members require. The NAL is under no financial obligation to the NFWW'.⁹⁶ A Guild of Landswomen would be created within the NFWI for those who wanted to identify specifically with the agricultural side of farm labour as opposed to the general horticultural option that was popular among NFWI members. The Guild of Landswomen would continue its work on the Conciliation Committee to advocate for fixed wages for women and would also have representation on the Consultative Committee on Women's Organisations that was dedicated to improving women's legal status and independence.⁹⁷ The only matter left unresolved was the clearing sheets, which the NAL asked the NFWI to adopt. It declined with the hope that the work would be carried on by the Women's Farm and Garden Association, but no formal arrangement was ever established.⁹⁸

As a final act of compromise, the NFWI agreed that the NAL's funds would remain separate from the NFWI and 'That the money derived from the sale of clothing at Headquarters shall be entrusted to certain Trustees to invest and the income be used as required from time to time for the benefit of individual agricultural and horticultural women workers and that prior claim be given to ex members of the Land Army'.⁹⁹ The Committee insisted that NAL funds should only be used to support women in agriculture, with priority given to former Land Girls. Men would not be eligible for assistance. The NAL Executive was dissolved in February 1923. In its place a trust was established to deal with the remaining funds collected during its tenure. The trustees were Lucy Streatfeild, Meriel Talbot, and Alice Franklin, who used what money remained to assist women interested in agricultural work, but without interference from the general membership or competing organizations. Most significantly, it provided interest-free loans to women who were otherwise unable to secure the down payment for a

⁹⁵ MERL, SR WFGA/E/2/2, Minutes of NAL Executive, 27 Sept. 1921.

⁹⁶ MERL, SR WFGA/E/2/2, Minutes of NAL Executive, 22 Nov. 1921.

⁹⁷ MERL, SR WFGA/E/2/2, Minutes of NAL

Executive, 11 Jan. 1922.

⁹⁸ MERL, SR WFGA/E/2/2, Minutes of NAL Executive, 3 Jan. 1923.

⁹⁹ MERL, SR WFGA/E/2/2, Minutes of NAL Executive, 29 Aug. 1921.

smallholding and loans for agricultural training and education. The trustees found a home at the headquarters of the SOSBW in May 1923, where they remained until they completed their work in July of that year.¹⁰⁰

V

The NAL was envisioned as a continuation of the Women's Land Army and its mandate was to support women working in the agricultural industry. From the outset, the NAL knew cooperation with the WFGU and the NFWI would be important to its operations, not least because it did not have the organizational infrastructure necessary to support its work by the time the WLA was demobilized and the NAL was officially launched in 1919. It was also practical to assume that the three organizations interested in promoting the role of women in rural communities and farming industries would have shared goals that would afford opportunities for collaboration and even amalgamation. The NAL's close ties with the WLA and its commitment to viewing women as supplemental labourers jeopardized relations with the WFGU, while its recruiting tactics and commitment to making health insurance its signature contribution put it at odds with the politically ambiguous NFWI. Despite its limited years in operation, however, the NAL did secure options for women's health insurance, providing vital protections for a workforce that had been largely overlooked by government programmes. It also provided an important service through its clearing sheets that connected women with various employment opportunities across the country, allowing women farm workers to take advantage of posts beyond their own communities or counties. In its later years, the NAL advocated fixed wages for women through the Conciliation Committee, an important contribution to women's longevity on the land given that rural depopulation often resulted from uncompetitive wages and unfavourable working conditions for agricultural workers. It should not be overlooked that the NAL helped to make agriculture a more central part of the NFWI's mandate, and in its final days, contributed resources toward the development of women's smallholdings and agricultural education and training. These accomplishments were distinctively rural and should be seen as part of a larger movement that worked to advance women's agricultural education and improve conditions for women in rural industries. Its Executive Committee may have been disbanded in 1923, but its members went on to play important and influential roles in the Women's Farm and Garden Association, the NFWI, and the SOSBW, three organizations that continued to campaign on behalf of rural women and to broadcast their vital role in national revival.

¹⁰⁰ MERL, SR WFGA/E/2/2, Records of the Trustees of the NAL, Mar. to July 1923. For more on Meriel Talbot's work with the SOSBW, see B. White, 'Meriel Talbot and the Society for the Oversea Settlement of British Women, 1919–1929, *Britain and the World* 10 (2017), pp. 32–52.