In the first decades of the twentieth century young women’s paid employment became a feature of upper- and middle-class family life; indeed, it was integral to the expansion of the middle class throughout the century. Women who were lucky enough to have access to automobiles were well positioned to take up emerging forms of employment as licensed taxi drivers, professional chauffeurs, garage proprietors, drivers in the military services, or auto mechanics in private business. It was not only financial independence and meaningful work that attracted women into professional work as motorists in those years but also the mobility and engagement in public life that automobiles offered. Although they were rarely well paid, numbers of privileged young women declared the work to be much more interesting and glamorous than office work. Dorothy Levitt, the author of The Woman and Her Car: A Chatty Little Handbook for All Women Who Motor or Who Want to Motor (1909), was among the first of the British upper-class women to become a professional motorist. She had been secretary to Selwyn Edge, the managing director of the British motor manufacturer Napier, until the company sent her to a mechanical training course in France in 1903. A talented and daring driver, she became one of their foremost works drivers in competitive racing and sales demonstration as well as a prominent commentator on women and motoring.

When Sheila O’Neil became one of London’s professional taxi drivers in 1908, she attracted a great deal of interest on both sides of the Atlantic. “I think the profession of motor-driving is a most suitable one in every way for women,” she declared to the press, and for the next two decades other young women echoed her sentiments, using whatever means available to turn her optimistic statement into
reality. In her mid-twenties and the daughter of a military officer, O’Neil was a trained nurse who had traveled extensively through India and Africa. She had served for two years in the Boer War and had been caught in the Siege of Ladysmith. Economic necessity may not have been her primary motivation in becoming a taxi driver, as within two years she was again the focus of press reports, this time announcing her plan to fly across the Irish Sea in a biplane of her own design. Instead, O’Neil cited her war service as well as her class entitlement and imperial privilege to support her actions. Her public stand for employment was as much a bid to expand the social possibilities open to her as a traveled, upper-middle-class and cosmopolitan woman as it was to earn her living.

Forced to operate privately from a large motor garage because Scotland Yard had refused to issue her with a license to work from a taxi rank, O’Neil wore the King’s and the Queen’s medals, awarded for her work in the South African war, on her sable fur motoring coat. She displayed her medals as affirmation of her civic status, a stamp of royal recognition that underpinned her claims to a continuing and visible place in public life. They proffered proof, furthermore, that she possessed the “steady nerves” thought necessary to drive motorcars through the congested streets of London. By the end of her first day Sheila O’Neil announced that she already had regular bookings to take ladies shopping and had been engaged by a doctor for two hours every morning to take him on his rounds. Her dramatic stand was recorded in admiring press articles that could not resist making jokes at her expense. Reporters declared that her training as a nurse would enable her to provide first aid to anybody whom she ran over. They named her as the first woman taxicabist, though a great many more women would be called that name throughout the following decades and no doubt had been called that before. Certainly, there had been women cab drivers in the horse-drawn era. In 1891 British papers noted the death of Betsy Collins, a widow from Gloucestershire, who had owned and driven the van omnibus between the village of Anst and the city of Bristol for more than thirty years, and in 1897 the London Cab and Omnibus Company announced plans to employ twenty-five women hansom cab drivers.2

More than a year before Sheila O’Neil had created a stir in the press, a British automobile journal published a letter sent to the Motor Drivers’ Employment Agency, noting that any of their readers who assumed the domain of the chauffeur was “safe from the encroachments of woman” should be prepared for a “rude shock.” The young woman seeking work as a driver wrote, “I can do all running repairs, and put tyres on, and am willing to make myself useful.”3 What struck the editor of Autocar as remarkable was how she wrote “in the most matter-of-fact kind of way, as though there were nothing at all extraordinary in her application, and
she was not at all conscious of introducing the slightest innovation.” Her letter caused the editor to accelerate toward an alarming future, “not merely of feminine chauffeurs, but of female mechanics and mechanical engineers as well, and mere man will be driven to seek fresh outlets for his powers.” His alarm, facetious though it may have been, hinted at the ways in which automobile technology implicitly staged sexual difference, offering a view of automobiles as a technology that delineated a distinct, but now contested, boundary between the proper activities of men and women.

References to women’s desires for motion—to “leave the office chair for the sunlit stretches of the open road, and the whirr of the motor,” as reporters liked to put it—were found in articles and advertisements scattered throughout the British press in the prewar years. They appeared with increasing frequency as World War I began to change the opportunities for women’s work and as enterprising women established businesses that catered to women’s desires to become expert motorists. The exclusive magazine Queen: The Ladies’ Newspaper and Court Chronicle noted in 1914 that there were several flourishing ladies’ motor businesses in London and the provinces. Miss Alice Hilda Neville had established a driving school and repair garage at Worthing, near Brighton, in 1913. Two years later the Honorable Gabrielle Borthwick had opened her Ladies’ Automobile Workshops in Brick Street and Grantham Place, Piccadilly, advertising her business with the slogan “Women Trained by Women.” In the same year Miss C. Griff, billing herself as a consulting engineer who offered expert advice on automobile, electrical, and mechanical engineering matters, opened a workshop on Dover Street, Mayfair. Miss Griff provided mechanical repairs and courses in “elementary and advanced motor mechanism,” with evening lectures on industrial and factory training available at “especially low fees” to prospective women industrial workers. In addition, there were at least three women’s garages in the wealthy suburb of Kensington in the early war years: Miss Amelia Preston, one-time chauffeur to Mrs. Pankhurst, was offering courses in “motor driving and running repairs” from her workshop in St. Mary Abbott’s Place; Miss Nora Bulkley, a former instructor at Miss Preston’s motor school, was providing a similar service at the Warwick School of Motoring; and by 1916 the Women’s Volunteer Reserve ran a garage in Cromwell Mews managed by Mrs. Charlesworth, who trained women to pass mechanical and driving tests on ambulances and commercial vehicles.

“Mechanism, driving and running repairs taught” was the typical language found in advertisements, indicating that early driving went far beyond simply learning to operate a motor vehicle but required consumers to understand the new machines and to be able to service and repair them as well. The courses were very
expensive, geared to the privileged woman of independent means. Twelve driving lessons, which included mechanical instruction, cost as much as five guineas. At a time when many female industrial workers, even under higher-paid wartime conditions, were earning little more than one pound per week, the price of an extended apprenticeship at Gabrielle Borthwick’s Ladies’ Automobile Workshops was a formidable twenty-one pounds, with a shorter course costing six pounds five shillings, still a substantial amount. Once qualified, a Women’s Legion driver in France could expect to be paid only one pound fifteen shillings per week, of which almost three-quarters was deducted for board, not to mention the cost of uniforms and kit. A woman entering private service in England as a companion-chauffeuse or a van driver for a commercial business earned slightly less.

The growth in women’s automobile training during the war years was underpinned by the acute shortage of skilled drivers and mechanics as Britain mechanized its military services and drafted qualified men. Private garage workshops were short-staffed; department stores such as Harrods and government departments, including the postal service, began recruiting female drivers; and women’s voluntary services—such as the Women’s Emergency Corps, the Women’s Legion,
the Women’s Volunteer Reserve, and various ambulance units such as the Scottish Women’s Hospital, the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry, and the Allies Field Ambulance Corps—all trained and mobilized female drivers. Gladys de Havilland, sister to the famous airman and airplane engineer, published *The Woman’s Motor Manual: How to Obtain Employment in Government or Private Service as a Woman Driver* (1918), which provided a thorough guide to the new forms of employment open to women. For the price of three shillings women could read about what kind of work was available—from taxi driving, private service, sales and demonstration, and military motorcycle riding to motor plowing—as well as find a list of motor schools, learn where to apply for employment, the hours and rates of pay they could expect, licensing laws, as well as the basics of driving, mechanics, and repair work.

The sudden visibility of uniformed, competent women on British roads was a spectacle that drew much commentary during the war years. It appeared in government propaganda, press reports, fiction, advertising, and entertainment. In 1919 the Clincher Motor Tyre Company, for example, published advertisements showing two uniformed women driving a department store delivery van on a busy city street, and a new feature of the Royal Naval, Military and Air Forces tournament at Olympia was a wheel-changing competition for female drivers in the military services. Numerous patriotic photographic exhibitions as well as articles and photographs in the popular and feminist press showed women service drivers doing repair work in the French mud, steering ambulances through devastated landscapes, or driving high-ranking military officers to the War Office in London. But, while the unexpected emergence of competent female motorists in the war years has been frequently noted, the broader context of women’s claims to automotive knowledge has received little attention. The antecedents to women’s wartime transport work, the ways that British women collectively organized to train and encourage each other, and the determination by many women to continue as professional drivers and auto mechanics after the war was over deserves more consideration. How did it happen that there were so many women already skilled and eager to take up motoring work at the beginning of the war? What were the terms through which motoring women represented their professional aspirations, and by what means did they attempt to maintain their precarious positions behind the wheel and their hands in the engine compartment in the postwar years?

Surprisingly, these questions have been neglected until very recently in both automobile histories and in histories of women. Perhaps that neglect represents a failure in historical imagination, as privileged women’s ambitions to work as professional drivers or in auto garages are now rather mystifying. Viewed through the
subsequent ubiquity of car ownership and the downgrading of the mechanical arts, taxi driving and automobile mechanics generally rank as low-status, male, working-class occupations. Current middle-class judgment renders those early women’s aspirations strange, making their actions all but invisible in historical accounts. But, for the British women whose hopes and identities revolved around automobiles and who derived pleasure, status, income, and mobility from their newly found knowledge, the immediate context was not that of downward social mobility. Instead, they expected the automotive exclusivity and class privilege that had obtained before the war to continue in the postwar period.

What we now recognize as the coming democratization of automobility through mass production and mass consumption was not yet a feature of the British motoring scene, as it was in the United States. In 1924, for example, there were seventy-eight residents per motorcar in Britain, while the figure in the United States was already an astounding seven residents per car. It was not until 1963, more than forty years later than the United States, that Britain attained the ratio of seven persons per car. So, at the forefront of privileged British women’s ambitions in the early decades of the century were the gendered dimensions of motoring within elite circles. The technology’s status as highly valued masculine knowledge, its promise to open out new ways for women to circulate freely through public spaces on terms similar to men of their own class, and its scope for opening out new kinds of experiences are crucial to understanding upper-class women’s interest in professional auto work in Britain during the years surrounding World War I.

As they climbed on, in, and under their dispatch motorcycles, ambulances, lorries, taxis, delivery vans, and touring cars, British women were exploring and exploiting the transformative possibilities of a new technology, through which they aspired to create themselves as new kinds of women. Apparently played out in the economic fields of business and employment, it was at the same time a struggle to redefine female identity at the level of everyday bodily actions and comportments. Fashion and styles of dress, far from being peripheral to their aspirations, were central concerns. Military-style clothing had become all the rage for well-to-do patriotic women during the war, though not without a great deal of public controversy. Exclusive sporting and military outfitters, such as Burberry or Derry and Tom, produced “National Service Suits” for well-off women engaged in active war work. Feminist journals such as Common Cause and magazines such as Graphic carried advertisements for corduroy bib and brace overalls in “useful shades” at about nineteen shillings, and a khaki waterproof suit—coat, breeches, leggings, and matching hat—cost just over two pounds.

Simply getting into masculine clothing released tremendous feelings of plea-
sure. When Vita Sackville-West first put on breeches, gaiters, and boots for her land work in 1918, she wrote, “I went into wild spirits; I ran, I shouted, I jumped, I climbed, I vaulted over gates, I felt like a schoolboy let out for a holiday.” Racing driver Christobel Ellis, no longer obliged to hobble her legs to maintain her modesty while she raced her stripped-down Arrol-Johnston, became head of the motor transport branch of the Women’s Legion during the war, organizing female motor drivers for the army. In that new role she took a great deal of care to design appropriate clothing styles for women’s active war work.

Changes in women’s fashions were significant, as privileged women’s clothing became detached from Edwardian associations of leisure and conspicuous consumption and became identified with patriotic sentiments, robust physical activity, competence, modernity, and professionalism. Women wanted “out” of femininity, and their outfits served as a visual sign of their determination to take a more active part in public life. Their clothing was an aesthetic stance through which they indicated to themselves and others their changing identities and modern consciousness. Through their actions, words, and appearances motoring women articulated a modern desire to fashion new versions of sexual difference. Masculine styles of dress continued after the war ended and even became high fashion for much of the 1920s, inspiring the famous “boyish” look of short hair (the shingle or the Eton crop), tweed skirts, Oxford bags, monocles, ties, and tailored suits.

In the early 1920s images of energetic and accomplished young women were used by the automobile industry to announce the reinvigoration of a manufacturing sector that was slowly emerging from wartime production and struggling to refashion its image to meet postwar expectations of private consumption, abundance, and pleasure. “Good times ahead for the lady who drives her own car,” predicted May Walker in 1919 in “A Woman’s Point of View,” her column in Autocar. “Though prices have risen enormously since 1914,” she wrote, “we want to forget the strain of the last four and a half years.” The invocation of a female presence helped to shift automotive technology away from its recent associations with cataclysmic destructiveness. Images of attractive young women motorists, often in stylish motoring uniforms, put an optimistic spin on the future of technological progress. The November 1919 issue of Graphic published a full-page poster sketched by popular war illustrator Balliol Salmon of two smiling uniformed women, one in an open touring car and the other riding a motorcycle with sidecar, chauffeuring children on a country road. The poster bore the caption “A War Product: The Motoring Girl.”
“Good times ahead for the lady who drives her own car.” British advertisers anticipate the end of the war. *Sphere*, 5 August 1915. By permission of the National Library of Australia.
Some automobile advertisements in the interwar period referred to women’s war work by using images of uniformed women drivers dressed in tunics, breeches, and high boots to sell their products. Postwar images of female chauffeurs, however, were distinctly different from the images of women transport drivers that were common during the war years. Rather than women in loosely cut, utilitarian tunics or rugged in heavy coats and boots for the front—a serious and brave response to a national crisis—images of uniformed female chauffeurs during the 1920s were more likely to be stylish and highly sexualized. The more glamorous postwar images suggested professionalism, crisp efficiency, and progressive modernity, but they also evoked the sense of a fresh beginning, excitement, and more than a hint of sexuality to the automobile industry as it struggled to meet the rising demand for private motoring. The exclusive outfitters Burberry produced a modish leather motorcycle suit in 1920 reminiscent of dispatch rider’s uniforms, with a three-quarter-length coat, leather breeches, leggings, and a matching hat, and for many years after the war the large automobile accessory manufacturer Stewart-Warner used the image of a glamorous, uniformed female chauffeur, “Miss Stewart Custom-built,” to advertise its products in Britain, Australia, and the United States. Warland Dual Rim Company also used the image of a uniformed chauffeuse to publicize its system for repairing punctures. The power of these sexualized images, viewed so soon after the end of the conflict, drew upon the ongoing aspirations of technologically accomplished young women, whose lives had been fundamentally changed by war.

Wearing masculine clothing was not, however, only a matter of a stylish look or fashion statement for motoring women. It flagged and augmented their claims to be taken seriously as skilled professionals—people who were legitimate participants in the working world and entitled to earn their living. Their desire for professional recognition was sanctioned and given meaning by feminist agitation for women’s rights to equal employment, which had become the major focus of most factions of the British women’s movement after activists suspended suffrage campaigning in favor of participation in the war effort. Motoring women were able to frame their personal aspirations, sometimes expressed in collective terms, within the wartime “right to work” campaigns formulated by patriotic feminists. The National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), for example, established the Women’s Service Bureau to help train and find employment for women in skilled war work. Other organizations, such as the Women’s Industrial League and (after the war was over) the Women’s Engineering Society, were also staunch campaigners for women’s access to all forms of technical employment at equal rates of pay.
Feminist groups set up employment agencies and training courses to encourage women to gain accredited qualifications in fields of work that, unlike most munitions work, were likely to grow in demand after the war was over—be it in oxy-acetylene welding, marine engineering, auto mechanics, electrical engineering, or taxicab driving. Their publications, *Common Cause*, *Vote*, *Women’s Industrial News*, and *Woman Engineer*, were filled with such schemes and highlighted that, in the words of activist and automobile enthusiast Ray Strachey, “the amazing aptitude of women for mechanical work has been one of the facts brought to light since the war.” Both Miss C. Griff of the Ladies’ Automobile School and Gabrielle Borthwick of the Ladies Automobile Workshop predicted that the employment opportunities for women trained in technological fields would be sustained and would even increase at the end of the war.

The London branch of the NUWSS attempted to organize a union, the Society of Women Motor Drivers, similar to the Society of Women Welders, which they had established earlier in the war. All female drivers and garage employees were eligible to join, but the scheme, organizers admitted, was less than successful because privileged women were averse to unionism. The NUWSS’s plans to establish a residential club and dining room in central London for women chauffeurs, however, generated greater interest. The government forced the Licensed Vehicle Workers’ Union to open its membership to women in 1918, and it soon absorbed the Society of Women Motor Drivers, though professional women motorists continued to enjoy the society’s residential club and restaurant in Piccadilly for another ten years.

The Honorable Miss Gabrielle Borthwick, one of the principal organizers of the Society of Women Motor Drivers and owner of the most prominent and long-lived of the women’s garages, first established a motor garage in Slough and then Northwood in West London, where she taught women owner-drivers as well as trained women as chauffeurs and mechanics for business and private service. When the demand for professional training rose at the beginning of the war, she moved to central London, setting up a workshop and driving school near Hyde Park Corner and a branch in Camberwell. She claimed that hers was the only London school able to teach women to drive and maintain ambulances that had been converted to run on coal gas. Borthwick was proud that former heads of her workshop were serving in France and in Scottish Women’s Hospital field hospitals in Serbia. Gabrielle Borthwick echoed Sheila O’Neil and Miss Griff’s belief that motoring offered a “most suitable” occupation for women. In 1917 she declared, “I think two or three women joining together to run a garage can do very good work at the present time and there is no reason why they should not continue after the war.” She con-
continued, with a hint of frustration at her well-to-do clientele, that it was difficult, however, to make her pupils understand that “you cannot jump at once into a profession, and that there must be drudgery in learning the rudiments before attempting to take down and assemble any part of a car.”

Women demobilized from motor transport units continued to open new garage and chauffeuring businesses in the years immediately following the war, hoping to capitalize on the skills they had developed during their military service. In 1920 Frances Hodgson and her partner, reluctant to give up the freedom and mobility of their war work, set up a small garage, which they named the Remy Car Service. Hodgson declared that the war had provided a great impetus for women such as themselves to “strike out on lines hitherto deemed the prerogative of men.” It was the varied life and the independence of the work that had drawn them to that business, Hodgson wrote in a lengthy article in the *Woman Engineer*. She detected more prejudice against women drivers in civilian life than there was in the military services by the end of the war and noted that it created a problem for women’s businesses, especially in London, where there was greater competition. Success, she advised prospective small garage proprietors, depended on three factors: business experience; a minimum of two cars and sufficient capital to cover running costs for at least the first year; and mechanical knowledge to help keep repair expenses down. “The great thing is to carry on, however dismal the outlook,” she counseled other hopefuls. “It naturally takes time to establish a clientele, and the initial expenses are heavy, so it is wiser not to expect too great a success during the first year.”

Newspapers and magazines noted similar small enterprises in those years. In 1920 a photograph in *Ladies’ Pictorial* showed three women “recently demobilised from war service” who had opened a garage in Kensington. Pictured in front of a large touring car, efficient in their Women’s Legion uniforms of collar and tie, belted tunic, long skirt, and high boots, Miss Ellington, Miss Mayo, and Miss Parbury, the caption said, did all the work and adjustments on the cars themselves. Ivy Cummings, the well-known racing driver, ran a repair garage and used car lot on the Pultney Bridge Road throughout the 1920s. Gabrielle Borthwick’s garage was listed as a Royal Automobile Club agent and a member of the Motor Trade Association. Borthwick was still providing motor services in 1928, advertising “bargains” to professional women in secondhand and small cars from the same Piccadilly premises that she had occupied during the war.

As Frances Hodgson indicated, the success of small garage and rental car businesses relied not only on qualified women wanting to take up motor work but also on the support of the men and women who patronized them. In part women’s mo-
tor garages based their appeal on traditional values, seeking to cater to Victorian notions of middle-class female respectability, it being considered more “suitable” for women to be chauffeured or taught to drive by other women. But there were also distinctly forward-looking and modernist elements to their enterprise. Female chauffeurs and mechanics suggested progressive social change, and their customers, the men and women who hired them, implicitly bought into those associations. When the Independent Liberal Party candidate in the Hornsey by-election of 1921 hired a female chauffeur for his campaign, he found that he gained as much publicity for the way he moved around his electorate as for any of the policies he stood for. That publicity, however, did not always translate into permanent job opportunities for women. His chauffeur, Miss P. McOstrich, an ex-servicewoman demobilized from an ambulance corps and known as a racing driver on the Brooklands track, subsequently placed numerous classified advertisements for her services in London newspapers under the banner “Equal Opportunity for Both Sexes.” The text of her advertisement hinted at women’s disappointments and thwarted ambitions in those postwar years: “Ex-service woman, ambulance driver, with 24 hp landaulette, appeals for work. Contracts especially wanted; lowest terms. Drove Liberal candidate throughout Hornsey election. McOstrich, 186 Buckingham Palace Rd, Victoria.”

Her advertisements evoke the climate of bitter disputation over women’s continuing presence in the workforce, particularly in areas considered men’s work, and reflected the fragility of women’s place in professional automobile work.

Women’s desire to remain within what had been considered masculine territory became an important element in the ethic of gender experimentation and sexual libertarianism that characterized the most daring and progressive social circles in Britain in the immediate postwar years. Public acknowledgment of an active female sexuality was becoming more commonplace, and for the first time it appeared possible that same-sex love might be considered in sympathetic terms. In that changing climate female motor drivers and mechanics provided an important imaginative resource for the lesbian networks that were tentatively emerging into public life. In one of the first literary accounts of lesbian experience in England during the first two decades of the century, *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), novelist Radclyffe Hall invoked the motorcar as an important vehicle of her heroine’s sexual awakening. At the turn of the century Hall’s protagonist, the aristocratic Stephen Gordon, graduated from accomplished horsewoman to competent motorist, at the same time as her inchoate sexual longings crystallized into a recognition of her same-sex desire. Owning a motorcar, which she herself was able to chauffeur and maintain, was central not only to Stephen’s encounter with her first
lover, Angela Crossby, but also to engineering their escape from the surveillance of Angela’s husband. Stephen’s car enabled the women to meet frequently, alone, and to travel to “places where lovers might sit.” A decade later, during the war, Stephen’s work as an ambulance driver on the French front led her to Mary Llewellen, her great love, with whom she lived in Paris when the fighting was over. More than merely a new means of transport, Hall used automobiles in The Well of Loneliness to highlight the possibility of women’s sexual autonomy from men. But it was not only in fictional accounts that early associations between automo-

bile independence and lesbian desire were expressed.

Garage women’s air of progressive modernity in the postwar years was one ex-

pression of the fashion for female masculinities and gender-bending identities in which, as Laura Doan put it in her study of the emergence of a lesbian subcul-
ture in those years, “deviation became entangled with the chic.” To those “in the

know,” associations between sapphic desire and automobile technology added an exhilarating frisson of sexual indeterminacy to women’s motor garage work. Gabrielle Borthwick, the leading female garage proprietor in London and a sister of Lord Borthwick, who founded the Theosophical Society, was a member of Lon-
don’s “Upper Bohemia.” A spiritualist and occultist, she had been associated with lesbian literary and artistic circles since the turn of the century. For those wanting to see it, garage women and their customers represented the nucleus of an emerg-
ing lesbian identity, sometimes producing a rakish vision of sapphic love that bor-
dered on the avant-garde in its performative dimensions.

The most notorious of these garages was named “X Garage” in joking reference to its indeterminate quality, set up in a lane off Kensington’s Cromwell Gardens, by four friends demobilized from the Women’s Legion Mechanical Transport Section. Standard Oil heiress Barbara “Joe” Carstairs was the principal financier, and her friends and lovers lived in a flat above the workshop, pooling their funds to buy luxurious Austin touring cars. The women put their wartime experience in Ireland and France as well as their knowledge of Italian, French, and German to good effect and advertised chauffeured holiday tours throughout Britain and the Continent. The garage specialized in taking sightseers and grieving relatives to France to view the battlefields and visit war graves. Although advertisements placed for X Garage boasted that the company’s drivers would travel any distance for the lowest tariff in London, a four-day return trip to Edinburgh carried a hefty price of forty-eight pounds. A two hundred–mile weekend journey cost fourteen pounds ten shillings. Customers could store their cars and have them cared for in the X Garage workshop for twelve shillings and sixpence per week. The press published photographs of the women in overalls doing their repair work and recounted ad-
miring stories of the celebrities they claimed as clients and their adventures on the road. The women had an arrangement with the Savoy Hotel to chauffeur guests to theaters and shows, and they were familiar figures in London’s West End louche circles. Joe Carstairs, who the *Evening News* reported could dance a Charleston that few people could partner, sported the fashionable “boyish look” of Eton crop and Oxford bags and pursued affairs with various stage performers, including Tallulah Bankhead, the star of Noel Coward’s *Fallen Angels* (1923) playing at the Globe Theatre.

By mid-decade, however, such privileged women’s enthusiasm for motor repair work was in decline, and the public was beginning to view the ethic of gender experimentation with a great deal less tolerance. X Garage closed in 1925, and the flamboyant Joe Carstairs took up a successful career as a speedboat racer and leisured playgirl. Other women’s garages, marginal businesses even in the best times, were in trouble, and those that survived beyond the mid-1920s were more modest enterprises, quietly operating without the benefit of admiring press articles or family fortunes. Borthwick Garages Ltd. was forced into receivership in 1928, but women such as Miss Ibbotson of Hampstead still posted advertisements for their chauffeured car services in the women’s press. Alice Neville had closed her garage to enlist as a military driver during the war but returned to Worthing after her marriage and ran a taxicab service as Mrs. Frank Booth until 1936. Miss C. Griff, who had opened a motor garage service in London during the war, optimistically recorded in late 1925 in her aviation and motoring column in the *Woman Engineer* that the business side of women’s motoring was growing in her hometown of Birmingham. She noted that a Mrs. Whitcombe had opened a garage and rental car service at Hall Green with a “nice little fleet of cars and large premises.” Mrs. Whitcombe ran the business entirely herself, and, Griff claimed, she was booked up for months ahead.16

While feminist advocates continued to celebrate and publicize these businesses, they were in truth tiny enterprises, marginalized within an industry that was undergoing a British version of restructuring to Fordist production and vertical integration. Women’s garages were undercapitalized and easily pushed to the fringes of an emerging fraternal network of automobile distributors, gas stations, and repair shops. Chauffeured rental car work made up the core of their business, but the demand decreased as automobile technology became more reliable and familiar, cars became more affordable, and people learned to drive themselves. Furthermore, the style of youthful female masculinity that had been associated with women’s garages during the war years and early 1920s fell out of favor and became redefined in ways that were unsympathetic to female experimentation.
The clothing favored by garage women was similar to the military uniforms adopted by women during the war—collar and tie, tailored jackets with big pockets, sturdy boots, peaked caps, and boiler suits for repair work. But, as Laura Doan has argued, that boyish look, initially an expression of postwar high fashion through which women of all classes were able to flirt with new social freedoms without the imputation of sexual deviance, gradually came to take on more disreputable overtones.

At the height of the popularity of the masculine style the outfits, along with cropped hair and accessories such as monocles, were read as admirable expressions of modern femininity and not necessarily as markers of a lesbian identity. Heterosexual and lesbian women alike adopted the style, and masculine women were not automatically stigmatized as deviant. The joy of that sartorial toleration was precisely its playful ambiguity and the way it could confound sexual certainties. Fashionable female masculinity meant that nobody knew for certain just where any particular woman stood, creating a favorable climate for the quiet emergence of a lesbian culture. But ten years after the end of the war that tolerant climate was coming to an end. Particularly after the infamous *The Well of Loneliness* trial in 1928, in which Radcliffe Hall’s novel was judged obscene and banned in Britain, such gender-bending expressions of female identity suddenly appeared much less lighthearted. Photographs of Hall and her lover, Una Troubridge, dressed in a style that had previously been considered the height of modern fashion, were now published as evidence of scandalous deviance. The boyish look not only fell out of fashion, but it was unambiguously stigmatized in public forums as the “lesbian look.”

That constriction in the meaning of female masculinity was a major liability for women’s motor businesses. It announced the end of the admiration and tolerance for the wartime blurring of sexual difference. Female androgyny was no longer in vogue, and garage women could no longer claim to be at the forefront of stylish modernity. Images of women as accomplished and confident motorists became much less frequent in the second half of the 1920s, almost disappearing by the 1930s, and automobile manufacturers ceased to advertise their products with images of stylish female chauffeurs. The women’s organizations that had previously provided the discursive and organizational resources to support women’s garage work were subjected to antifeminist reaction. By the mid-1920s feminist organizations were turning away from campaigns that advocated the equality of men and women in public life, increasingly choosing to define female citizenship in less confrontational, maternalist terms. Feminist campaigning focused on women as wives and mothers, rather than skilled workers or qualified professionals. While campaigns that advocated women’s equality in all forms of technical employment did not dis-
appear altogether, by the late 1920s even the fragmentary records of professional women motorists that I have been able to assemble here are no longer evident. In her 1935 book, *Careers and Openings for Women*, feminist activist Ray Strachey, who had earlier helped to organize the Society of Women Motor Drivers, revised her wartime optimism for the future of women in technical work and noted that motor driving “is not a career which offers any prospects, and the conditions of employment are always individual.”

This was a tremendous change from the confidence that Gladys de Havilland had expressed in *The Women’s Motor Manual* of 1918, in which she had anticipated ongoing careers for women motorists in the postwar era.

Some women continued to work as professional motorists, of course, but without the public profile of earlier years, and, in the absence of a discursive climate that made their work visible and admirable, it became easy to stigmatize garage women as “unnatural,” illegitimately in conflict with men over scarce jobs. By the end of the 1920s women motorists increasingly came to be represented in advertisements as wives and mothers, usually occupying only the passenger seat of the family car, rather than as competent drivers in their own right. As debate in Britain turned away from sympathetic interpretations of women’s motoring ambitions, women who hoped to use their mechanical talent to earn their living had to take a backseat until the beginning of the next war, when’s women’s technological competence again became “speakable.” Although their public success was short-lived, British motoring women’s determination to push the boundaries of women’s engagements with technological objects and create new ways to express a female bodily vitality constitutes an important element in twentieth-century feminist struggles to redraft the everyday, commonsense terms of masculinity and femininity.