

Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant's *Shadow Shapes* and American Women War Correspondents during the First World War (Patricia Loughlin)

Abstract

A founding contributor to the *New Republic*, Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant served as a war correspondent in France during the last years of the First World War until she suffered a traumatic injury while touring a battlefield. This presentation analyzes her perspective as a war correspondent and her seven-month recovery in the American Hospital of Paris in Neuilly, as reflected in her book *Shadow Shapes* (1920).

In October 1918, just weeks before the Armistice, the French military had arranged for a small delegation of American and French women war correspondents to visit the front, to Rheims and the American battlefields of the Marne. By this time Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant had been covering the war for more than a year. The group included two other American women journalists, Cecil Dorrian of the *Newark Daily News* and Eunice Tietjens of the *Chicago Daily News*. They were joined by French press officer Germaine de la Vallette and Margaret Conger, the wife of Col. Arthur L. Conger, American Expeditionary Forces.

In *Shadow Shapes*, Sergeant tells the story of her experience covering the war as a woman journalist, her accident while touring the battlefield, and her recovery and rehabilitation in France. The book follows Sergeant from the accident on the battlefield through her early diagnosis, surgeries, and her own war experiences. The story also follows the conclusion of the war and the peace process from her point of view from her hospital room and filtered through the news she received from staff and visitors during her seven-month recovery. The work emerged first as a series of articles in the *North American Review* in January, February and March 1920 before her account was published as a book by Houghton Mifflin the same year.

Recently a whole new generation of feminist scholars have been introducing their students to Sergeant's *Shadow Shapes* as a firsthand account of her work as a wounded woman war correspondent during the First World War. Literary scholar Diane Prenatt, for instance, calls *Shadow Shapes* "an extraordinary contribution to the literature of witness" and "unique among World War I memoirs" as a personal account of a woman wounded on a battlefield. Military historian Chris Dubbs notes that women journalists, including Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, "carved out a distinctive role and voice for themselves," during the First World War.

Sergeant's life allows us to examine the past to shed new light on contemporary issues and conversations in the humanities concerning gender, race, democracy, and nationhood during the early decades of the twentieth century.

Bio

Patricia Loughlin is Professor of History at the University of Central Oklahoma and specializes in the North American West, Native American history, and women's and gender history. She has written three books and co-edited two, including *This Land is Herland: Gendered Activism in Oklahoma, 1870s-2010s* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2021) with co-editor Sarah Eppler Janda. Currently, Loughlin is writing a biography of journalist Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant.