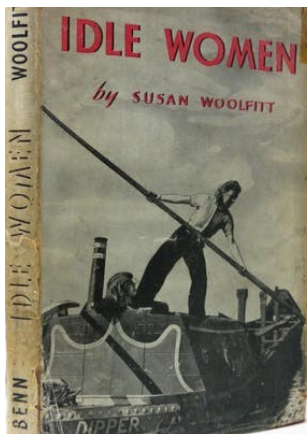
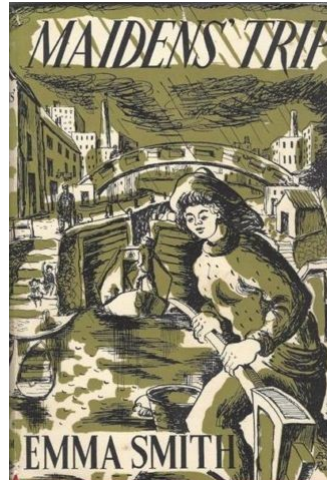


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Four Books about Wartime Women Trainee Boaters
by Janet Gascoigne

I was interested to read in the November 2020 Ripping Reads the article by Susan Hill that mentioned *Maidens' Trip* by Emma Smith. This is one of four books written by the “trainee” women boaters on the canals in the Second World War. It was published soon after the war ended (1948) and is written in a semi-autobiographical style. Emma's real name was Elspeth Halesmith and she went on to write several other books. She dives straight into the narrative, with no back story about how she came to be working on the boats. The three main protagonists, Emma, Nanette and Charity, were all from comfortably off backgrounds, as were many of the women trainees, who saw working on the boats as an escape from their humdrum domestic lives as well as contributing to the war effort. The three women plus Cleopatra the rescue kitten started with two training trips and then ran their own pair of narrow boats. The book doesn't glamorise the incredibly tough life of the working boater - harsh weather, hard physical work including loading and



unloading coal, shoving the boats off the mud with the pole, bow-hauling the unpowered butty through locks, filthy conditions and the poverty of the working people they came across. It's hard to believe that this all happened within living memory. The working narrowboat community is truly a lost world and the book does not portray the romantic image many have of the working waterways. This is a lovely book written at a rattling pace that conveys the enthusiasm of its author for the life that she lived for a few brief years in the 1940s.

Also written just after the war is *Idle Women* by Susan Woolfitt. The title comes from the apocryphal story that this nickname was given to