

# GUNS 'N' ROSES: AUSTRALIAN WOMEN WRITERS' BOLD-AND-NOT-SO-BOLD JOURNEYS INTO THE GREAT WAR

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WHEN Great Britain declared war on Germany in 1914, thousands of young men from countries as far away as Australia rushed to defend Mother England in her time of need. Australian men were not the only ones who seized the opportunity to assist the war effort, however, Australian women also travelled long distances in order to stand by their men, or to enlist in history as volunteer war workers, nurses, or members of the Voluntary Aid Detachment (V.A.D.). Like men, many of whom joined up out of a need for change and a thirst for adventure, women, too, were similarly tantalised by the chance to play their part in international events, equally desirous of seeing the world, these courageous women wanted above all to be released from domestic confinement. But while we know the stories of the men who sailed away to war, we know little about the women who crossed the seas to serve behind the lines. We have been denied such knowledge because participation in war has traditionally been considered an exclusively male experience and, by extension, the narration of that experience, the genre of war literature, has been a male-dominated field, with tales of the battlefield privileged, and thus canonised. Yet the story of war is multi-faceted, and the notion of women as somehow removed from the arena of war and its story is erroneous.

In attempting to deconstruct the gendered polarities which equate men with war and women with something other than the 'real' or 'true' story of war, however, Australian women writers faced a more daunting task than did their Americans, British, or Canadian counterparts. Several important factors worked against women's attaining a strong voice in war. There was no large-scale munitions industry in Australia to propel women into the labour force as it did in other countries. As well, Australian women had attained suffrage at federation, which meant that there were few vocal women's groups to advance the feminist cause. But most significantly, the persistent glorification of the Anzac and his fighting prowess overshadowed women's concerns and made it difficult for them to compete for a space within the discourse of war.

Given the myriad of strikes against them, it is remarkable that so many Australian women attempted the wartime pen (they wrote twenty-odd texts, compared to seven in Canada, a country with a much larger population). What is not surprising, though, is that few women were sufficiently courageous to argue for a radical revision of the patriarchal structures which confined them, or to criticise their country's commitment to the war effort. Indeed, a number of women writers – Annie Rixon, Gladys Hain, Chrystal Stirling, Ray Phillips, Angela Thirkell, Linda Webb Burge – achieved only marginal authority through male mimicry or impersonation. Enacting paper sex changes, they nullified women's experiences on the homefront and told pro-war soldiers' stories which reinforced traditional assumptions that war was none of women's business. Granting their female characters barely speaking parts, they left them suspended in a holding pattern, their only 'activity' to wait, silently and passively, for news from the trenches of France or the cliffs of Gallipoli, or for their men to return home.

But not all women writers were content with the designated feminine role of powerlessness, resignation, and denial. Several Australian women who were able to travel overseas during the war were quick off the mark and wrote novels transporting their protagonists away from the all-restrictive homeland and focusing more specifically, although not entirely, on women's experience of war. As the titles indicate, the figure of the Anzac continues to loom large in these texts. Mary Grant Bruce's wartime trilogy – *From Billabong to London* (1915), *Jim and Wally* (1916), and *Captain Jim* (1919) – takes her character to England and Ireland. Mabel Brookes' three novels – *Broken Idols* (1917), *On the Knees of the Gods* (1918), and *Old Desires* (1922) – situate women in England, France, and Egypt. Although Ethel Turner remained on the homefront during the war, she sends her heroine to Belgium and France in *The Cub* (1915), *Captain Cub* (1917), and *Brigid and the Cub* (1918). But even though these female characters journey away from the familiar, they affect only flights of escape, not acts of rebellion. Rather than moving towards emancipation or autonomy, they merely tread water, and hence cause scarcely a ripple in the surface of the patriarchal structures which keep them submerged as subordinates in the war effort. Literally only the location changes, as writers continue to uphold the patriarchal regimes which condemn women as other.

The novels begin optimistically enough, for long sea voyages provide much scope for action and adventure. En route to England, France, or Egypt, women thrill to shipboard romances, visit shops agleam with precious stones and metals, bazaars filled with alluring scents and silks in exotic ports-of-call like Colombo and Durbin, and observe foreign cultures which invariably pale in comparison to the Australian way of life. They face peril on the sea, too; at any moment, submarine attacks threaten to blow their ships sky high or sink them fathoms deep, and German spies infiltrate their vessels and threaten to take passengers as prisoners of war. The prevailing mood on these journeys is exuberance; while on board ship, sailing full steam into the unknown, female characters feel that anything can happen. Women's voyages are marred only in that they are made to feel nuisances who ought not to be 'allowed' to travel because they require men to be their protectors.

When these protagonists reach their destinations in England, France, or Egypt, the excitement of travel begins to wane, for they find it difficult to find meaningful jobs and, like their counterparts on the homefront, are often forced to take up 'waiting' as their major activity. In the case of the adolescent heroines who are plucky and eager to serve, their male guardians eventually select volunteer jobs for them which amount to little more than apprenticeships for their future roles as wives and mothers. Turner's Brigid works at a home for refugee children; Grant Bruce's Norah runs an establishment for wounded soldiers which she terms a 'Home For Tired People'. Brookes's protagonists take up untaxing duties serving in canteens or singing for the troops, the writer using these encounters to boast about the Anzacs' resilience and stamina in the trenches, not to suggest that women can contribute to the war effort in any significant way. Volunteer work is essentially diversionary, something to fill in the time between sight-seeing excursions; the protagonists are tourists, so that there is a blurring of genres. The texts read at times more like travel books than war novels.

One of the factors which inhibits women's emancipation is that they do not travel unencumbered, a large part of their baggage lies in their identification with men. They go to war, not as independent women, but as wives, daughters, sisters, or sweethearts, and are constantly reminded that their needs are subordinate to men's. Indeed, the young women in Grant Bruce's and Turner's novels are only 'allowed' to journey overseas because they might be needed to nurse their loved ones. Brookes's more mature heroines

travel for ostensibly the same reasons – to nurse sick husbands. As well as being male identified, these protagonists are also isolated from other women. Although Nina Auerbach argues that ‘friendships among women . . . are one of the unacknowledged fruits of war’ (187), she clearly has not read Australian women’s wartime fiction, where women are one another’s enemies, not allies. In Australian texts, women’s confidantes are routinely men, each writer thereby reinforcing the negative value women have been conditioned to place upon their sex. Congenial relationships between women do materialise, but commonly, an older woman, often a God’s Police or mother-figure, wise in the ways of the world, instructs a younger in the domestic arts, or restores an errant woman to her proper station in life – as wife. Brookes in particular severely punishes any woman who dares violate the social codes: in *Old Desires*, she subjects a transgressor – a spy who uses her sexual power to persuade men to give up official secrets – to disfigurement and finally death. Lacking camaraderie, the women in these texts are unable to call into serious question the social constraints which confine them, or to gain any insight into the asymmetrical power structures which govern relationships between women and men. As Rita Felski argues, women need supportive communities because ‘the exploration of subjectivity within a dimension of group solidarity inspires activism and resistance rather than private resignation, and makes it possible to project a visionary hope of future change’ (139). But the women in these texts remain isolated from one another, always travelling in the company of, and for the comfort of, men.

Moreover, because they are situated well behind enemy lines, women are protected from the harsh realities of war. Rarely do they come into contact with severely wounded or maimed men, so their nursing skills are never called into play. Brookes’s Anzacs who serve in Egypt suffer from childish ailments like measles and mumps, or minor afflictions like sore throats and skin rashes. In *Broken Idols*, her heroine travels to Cairo to nurse her husband who suffers from para-typoid. We should all be so lucky to get his disease. By the time she arrives, he is sufficiently fit to tango and fox-trot the nights away at the luxurious hotel where they reside for the duration of her stay, but not well enough to resume his duties as a soldier. Grant Bruce’s heroines are victims of gas attacks, but they recover nicely under expert medical care in the best London hospitals; unfit to fight in the trenches, they are nonetheless sufficiently healthy to spend six weeks touring Ireland. Convalescing at Norah’s rest home, too, are Diggers who have lost limbs but are nonetheless remarkably adroit, able to drive cars and play polo. For the most part, the war takes on the flavour of dangerous sport, so none of the heroines revises her feelings about war: each has set sail from Australia convinced that her country’s allegiance to Great Britain is sound, and nothing she sees or hears causes her to view war as brutal and barbarous. She is seemingly unaware that Gallipoli, meant to be a glorious conquest, ended in a disastrous stalemate, and therefore should only be regarded as a vast and tragic blunder. No heroine feels the need to denounce those responsible for the ruin and desolation of war, or to make passionate appeals for its end. Each continues to glorify war, and the Anzac remains her hero, a demigod in khaki.

Do these heroines’ excellent adventures serve any purpose at all, then? Minimally, yes. For the young women in Grant Bruce’s and Turner’s novels, the advent of war acts as a rude awakening, for they are suddenly brought to the realisation that their gender is a liability in wartime. More at home in the paddock than the pantry, these protagonists have been, until the war, unaware of gender imbalances. But while their male counterparts get to go into ‘action’, to test their mettle through the metal of the bayonet, the best these young women can do is reach for their knitting needles or fountain pens. Brookes’s mature heroines suffer from combat envy, but the best they can do is travel to escape

meaningless lives. The conflict serves, then, to bring women to an awareness of the circumscribed nature of their roles, and encourages them to seek alternatives to entrapment and enclosure. But in the end, the war strengthens, not relaxes, cultural definitions of gender, for the protagonists retreat willingly from Mother England to the fatherland, that un-homely place, when the war is over. Cheerfully picking up their brooms and dustpans, they sink back into their pre-war existences, grateful to have had any experiences at all, their not-so-bold journeys into war will have to last them a lifetime. Turner's and Grant Bruce's adolescents will marry their Anzac sweethearts, the war having only temporarily interrupted their limited trajectory from parental to marital home.

Were there any women novelists who wished to bring an end to female passivity, dependence, and subordination? Two, but only one I'd recommend. The first, an unusual text, deserves brief mention because it shows a woman who takes up an unequivocally aggressive role in wartime. She's Catherine, a minor character in Doris Manners-Sutton's novel *A Marked Soul* (1923). Catherine receives news that her husband is missing: she immediately travels to France to find him, and while she searches, supports herself by working as a ward attendant at a small hospital close to the front. By accident, she discovers that the Germans have crucified her husband for interfering in the rape (referred to in the novel as 'an old tale', 181) of a French woman. Without hesitation, Catherine takes revenge by stabbing fourteen German prisoners of war in her hospital – one for every nail driven into her husband's body. The bloody butchering completed, she takes one last look at her 'hideous handiwork' and declares 'I have been just' (181). When the commanding officer hears of the slaughter, he calls her 'adeuced fine woman' (187). For obvious reasons, Manners-Sutton's text is not one that I advocate as emancipatory reading.

Mollie Skinner's *Letters of a V.A.D.* (1918) is another exceptional text because, true to the feminist agenda, it resists reigning ideologies, and on a variety of fronts. At the outset, it's worth noting that Skinner was an avowed champion of women's rights; according to Mary Durack, Skinner possessed a 'spirit of unusual courage and independence that led her, against all the conventions of her age and class, to complete nursing training' prior to 1900 ('Foreword', ix). Moreover, Skinner was ahead of her time, routinely asserting that 'women no less than men, should use to its fullest extent any talent given them' (x). Like her creator, Skinner's protagonist, R.X., a talented and dedicated nurse, a member of the V.A.D. who is *in* uniform, but not a uniform heroine. She's a woman who writes, not a woman who waits. Using what Linda S. Kaufman would term an 'amorous epistolary discourse', a discourse which combines 'writing and revolt, defiance and desire' (20), Skinner's R.X. tells the story of war from the inside, detailing for her readers what we are not supposed to know about the nature of war; she describes the endless procession of mangled bodies across operating tables, and speaks of the suffering and death of its victims. R.X. does not dwell excessively on graphic descriptions of wounded men, but she does acknowledge that, more than once, both she and the male orderlies faint at the horrific sight of men's mutilated bodies, and thanks God that morphine and chloroform are available to alleviate suffering. In permitting us to enter the forbidden zone with her, R.X. is a dangerous woman, for she breaks the codes of silence and invisibility war offices counted upon women to obey in wartime. She and the other nurses single handedly save the lives of several men, yet according to the rules of the war game their actions must pass unacknowledged and uncommemorated. *Letters of a V.A.D.* records the courageous deeds for which the nurses will receive no medals.

Since cleaning up the blood and muck of the battlefield is traditionally a woman's

chore, *Letters of a V.A.D.* may seem to offer limited scope for women's liberation. As well, R.X. frequently refers to 'mothering' the soldiers under her care, a stance patriarchal authorities find acceptable. According to Nosheen Khan, 'portrayal of the nursing profession as an extension of mother-love allows patriarchy to exploit women-power for its own purposes – the patching, mending and caring of wounded heroes – whilst ensuring that women remain firmly tethered to their time-honoured roles of carers and nurturers' (117). But Skinner only partially embraces the analogy between nurse and mother. Khan describes so disparagingly: Skinner often places the word 'mothering' in quotation marks, indicating that she uses the term self-consciously in full knowledge of the patriarchal approbation it carries. Further, one of the Red Cross sergeants R.X. works with, a gentle healing man, also refers to the men as his 'sons'; like R.X., he uses these terms of endearment to facilitate the healer/patient relationship. Nor is R.X. merely a ministering angel who provides pills and injections to wounded men: she has an easy-going camaraderie with the soldiers and, recognising their need to talk about their experiences in the trenches, becomes their willing confidante. She is also the men's intellectual equal, carrying on heated debates with them over issues such as the merits of faith in wartime. Placed in charge of her unit, R.X. refers to the men somewhat cavalierly as the 'puppets in my little show,' indicating that she does not see herself in a subordinate position (247). R.X. also claims that she felt God's guiding hand on her shoulder, and believes he called her to play a vital role in the war as a healer; she nurses, then, not out of the presumed 'woman's natural inclination' to self-sacrifice and nurturing. R.X. regards nursing as 'work,' a skilled vocation which brings her not only happiness, but an 'intense sense of joyfulness' (230).

In several other respects, R.X. is an unusual heroine. Unlike the protagonists in the aforementioned novels who view the war from the perspective of tourists and accept unquestioningly their country's commitment to it, R.X. is ever mindful of the 'ineffable sadness and sin and pain of the world' (19), and never fails to question the meaning of war. Her beliefs, with their strong Christian overtones, provide moral frameworks for justifying the war and proffering comfort to those who participate in it. R.X. locates virtue in pain and suffering, believing ultimately that men's sacrifice is redemptive, and will purge society of its complacencies. While these values may not sit well today, they did hold some currency during the First World War. Additionally, although Skinner begins *Letters of a V.A.D.* with an epigraph by Billy Hughes which pays tribute to the Anzacs' 'glorious valour', her protagonist R.X. does not expend her energies shoring up the Anzac myth which marginalises women in the other texts. R.X. does express affection for the Diggers; but she admires their fun-loving natures and mateship practices, not their wartime bellicosity, as other women writers do. And unlike other writers, who routinely depict English soldiers as weaklings or cowards, Skinner's R.X. praises Tommies and Anzacs equally. Although I hesitate to introduce biographical material, I need to mention that Skinner remarks in her autobiography, *The Fifth Sparrow*, that because she was living in India, she did not hear of the outbreak of war until April, 1915. Thus she would have missed the exemplary reports on the Anzacs' fighting prowess emanating from overseas by C. E. W. Bean, Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett, and John Masefield. Without male views of war to mimic, Skinner was free to devise her own impressions of the conflict and the composition of the soldiers.

The major difference between Skinner's text and those by Grant Bruce, Turner, and Brookes, however, is that her protagonist goes to war as an independent woman who claims the right to an identity not determined by sexual or maternal roles. R.X. openly confesses that the desire for adventure in the 'uttermost parts of the earth' (255) is part

of her incentive, and her brother and fiancé having been killed in the trenches, she is free to carve out her future as she sees fit. But because she is both attractive and capable, R.X. receives several proposals of marriage. The women of her outfit, most of whom have enlisted in the war as nurses to find husbands, regard her as a threat, and have her removed from her position out of jealousy and spite, even though she rejects the offers.

Making the decision to remain single does not come easily to R.X. She claims to love the colonel, but because he is divorced, and she is in training to become a Catholic, she cannot marry him. But R.X. has other, more deep-seated, reasons for rejecting the colonel's offer. She wants children, but her autonomy more. R.X. takes a cynical view of wedded bliss, arguing that while women are conditioned to think they want marriage, children, and men to protect them, they are inevitably disappointed by the outcome. She draws upon images of caged birds and trapped rats to signal her awareness of the circumscribed nature of women's situation within marriage, and in the end, recognises that she can maintain her identity best through her uncomplicated relationship with her 'little sister', the catholic nurse who trained her, and for whom she professes in her letters a deep and abiding love. Skinner is not, I believe, writing of lesbian love; rather, she places her faith in women's support and encouragement of one another. Accordingly, R.X.'s friend does not ask her to relinquish her identity, or to subordinate her needs. Instead, she functions as R.X.'s mentor, teaching her to behave charitably, to take pride in her profession, and guiding her along the 'difficult path' to independence (274). In suggesting that women should think well enough of femaleness to care for other women, Skinner was offering a unique view.

Throughout the novel, R.X. is constantly on the move, but never as a tourist. Her sea crossing to the front is brief and uneventful; she does not engage in a shipboard romance, but gets seasick instead. And when the ship calls in at exotic ports, R.X. delights in cultural difference, and makes no racist comments. Arriving at base camp, she tends soldiers who are leaving for Blighty, but is soon transferred to the hospital nearest the front, well within the range of shot and shell. At the end of the novel, she is asked to go with the Head of the V.A.D. to 'an uncertain indefinite place', where the work will be 'hard', and the life 'trying' (273-74); undaunted, R.X. continues to swim against the tide, and moves full steam ahead into uncharted waters.

Although I am reluctant to evoke the words of D.H. Lawrence in a feminist paper, I will acknowledge his discernment in praising *Letters of a V.A.D.* for its 'vitality, freshness, and originality' (cited in Durack, x). It is unlikely that he comprehended how original an novel it was, however, for he could hardly have recognised the enormous battles an Australian woman faced if she wanted to write a novel which challenged dominant ideologies. In writing this novel, Skinner utilised some curious 'camouflage' techniques. In her autobiography, Skinner confesses that she published *Letters of a V.A.D.* under a pseudonym because she 'could not bear to be unloved by those about [her]; that everything [she] wrote made them scoff . . . ; that [she] was scared of writing what went on about [her]' (115). Since her parents regarded both her writing and nursing careers as 'common', she perhaps wanted to protect them from being identified with a novel based loosely on their daughter's nursing experiences in India and Burma. That she chose 'Leake' is curious, for it was her mother's birth name, and also the name of her uncle, a West Australian premier. Whatever her motivations, the novel is replete with maddening omissions and ambiguities, perhaps signalling Skinner's dis-ease at writing a novel which 'kicks against the pricks' (312). Among the gaps are notices of what country R.X. nurses in, what years she serves, or even what nationality she is. Nonetheless, Skinner's novel is a triumph of inventiveness, for while Grant Bruce, Turner, and

Brookes dimly recognised that women were oppressed within male-defined environments, they were unable to articulate the possibility of even partial liberation from those social and ideological constraints. Skinner's *Letters of a V.A.D.* is the only wartime novel I have found which disrupts the traditional heterosexual romance plot. Her R.X. is the only heroine in Australian women's fiction written and published during or immediately after the war to reject psychological and emotional dependence upon a man, the only one who can see herself in terms other than nurturing and supportive. As the only woman writer to 'call the shots' in wartime, the only one not at a 'loss' for words in defense of her gender, Mollie Skinner is the only writer to attempt to score a literary victory for women during the First World War. Regrettably, her novel sank immediately into oblivion.

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