



THE TESTING OF THE FAMILY AND THE GENDER MYTHOLOGY OF WORLD WAR II

by **Libby Connors and Helen Taylor**

Dr Libby Connors is a lecturer in history in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Southern Queensland. Mrs Helen Taylor is a Heritage Research Officer with Brisbane City Council and is completing her PhD concerning women in the war.

In an article in the *Australian* just before Anzac Day 1992, the military historian, Gregory Pemberton, urged Australians to re-assess our national-military tradition. "It should be asked why," he wrote, "that comparatively few Australians are aware of the significance of their soldiers' achievements in the actions in New Guinea. ... [There] Australian forces were combating the only real threat against Australian territory that the nation has faced."

It is not only imperial concerns that have overshadowed and moulded our national myths. Our national identity has focussed on masculine images. Literature has been an important medium for promoting this view. In *My Brother Jack*, George Johnston gives the Anzac legend a pre-eminent place in the central character's lives. Jack enlists as soon as possible in the Second World War in the hope of recreating the heroic mould of his father, a veteran of the Great War. Unexpectedly, it is younger brother Davy whose intellectual and artistic inclinations prewar had seemed so inadequate, even unmanly when compared with the Anzac heroes, who achieves heroic status in war. Davy as a foreign correspondent was a mere witness to the great battles, but he tours the globe in his official capacity and wins the admiration of his brother. While Australian manhood is thus redefined in World War II, the image of Australian womanhood degenerates considerably. Davy's wife represented the new sophisticated woman of suburban Australia. His absence on extended overseas missions provides her with welcome opportunities to improve her social life and entertaining skills including sexual liaisons with American officers in their home.

The theme of the sophisticated suburban wife betraying the heroic Australian male in wartime is made even more forcefully by Xavier Herbert in his novel, *Soldiers' Women*. Set in Sydney it is a savage and bitter indictment of Australian womanhood. Whether working

class or well-to-do, teenager or young mother, his female characters opportunistically live off the visiting American troops, irrespective of absent fathers and husbands and their families and children at home. In the climax, the chief character's children burn to death in her harbourside home, the fire starting from an ashtray overturned during a drunken party, while she is in the boatshed making love to an American soldier. On news of her husband's imminent return from service, she runs away with her American lover. The bitter condemnation that is evident throughout this novel was not just the product of Herbert's imagination. Both these novels reflect the resentment of many of the returning soldiers who felt that while they had been away fighting the good fight as expected of true Aussies, the home front had let them down.

It is ironic that another acclaimed novel about the home front experience, *Come in Spinner*, by Dymphna Cusack and Florence James, written from a feminist and left-wing perspective should contribute to this mythology built on masculine pride and resentment. In seeking to show the unequal class burden of the war effort, as well as the way sexual double standards and moral strictures victimised women, they produced a novel which also focusses on sexual permissiveness and ambivalent attitudes to the war effort in Sydney.

The oral record attests to the tensions and discord which marred marital relationships in Australia during the war. In an interview with a western Queenslander, the war veteran disclosed that his wife had left him for another man while he had been serving in New Guinea. Almost fifty years on he explained, "I think it all started when the Americans came. She found out that life was a bit better." This classic war experience was overshadowed by an even more moving interview with Mrs Toft, wife of a Methodist minister, who spent many of the war years running a children's hostel in north Queensland.¹ In late 1941 the church asked them to go to Herberton to take care of seven rural children who came to the town for their schooling. By the war's end over 200 children were in their charge, ranging from two year old toddlers through to 17 year olds, many from families which had disintegrated under the pressure of the war. Struggling grandmothers, lonely isolated mothers and deserted fathers came to the Tofts with children and grandchildren whom they could no longer care for and who might otherwise have been abandoned.

However, the oral record does not support the mythology of superficial Australian womanhood abandoning responsibilities for a three year fling with visiting troops. What is clear are the unprecedented demands that home defence and war production placed on the family unit. Primary biological bonds are tested in war when large numbers of men are required to serve away from home. In World War I, the division between battle front and home front was clearcut and

romanticized. In this second conflict, with the battle zone so close to Australia, the war effort frequently infringed the privacy of the family. All family members, whatever their age or gender, were affected by enforced and voluntary evacuations, rationing, and heavy loads of paid and unpaid war work. The burden on women as the mainstay of the family was a double one. At a time of great trauma they were expected to fulfill their traditional role of emotional and moral support for men and children as well as helping to sustain domestic and war production.

Men, probably even more easily than women, could escape family obligations under wartime conditions. One of the sad cases Mrs Toft experienced was the arrival of three small children brought by their father. It turned out he had abducted them from their home in Victoria, an action made all the easier by their mother's wartime work at a clothing factory and the difficulties of searching for them with interstate transport and communications for civilians a low priority during the war.

Another woman, a newly-married soldier's wife, recalled of the temptations of the period:

only my deep love for my young husband helped me to weather that storm. There were ... propositions from some of the older men in town, who saw a lonely young bride as fair game; I thought them pretty contemptible.¹

At the time the loosening of moral constraints and the creation of new roles and opportunities for Australian women were a dramatic change from prewar expectations. In hindsight, the continued commitment of Australian women to the family and to conventional sexual mores under very trying circumstances was even more remarkable.

Other oral evidence affirms a more sexually-innocent and publicly-moral Australia. For example, although blackouts and sudden increases in the male population provided many opportunities and led to official concern about crime rates in the "garrison" towns,² they were not of the same order as violent and sexual offences fifty years later. This point was made effectively by one New South Wales woman who remembered that:

in all those years I never had a bad or frightening experience in a town which was teeming with men. Often troop trains stopped over [and] American troops were stationed sometimes... We nurses had a long and lonely walk to and from hospital ... many times I walked those streets alone. I just wish one could be as trusting and feel as safe in our streets today.³

Women had also been imbued with the Anzac Legend and while manpowering forced them into new duties in the Second World War they continued to perceive their role as secondary and supportive to their “boys” away. A Western Australian woman remembering her youth spent in wartime Brisbane commented:

Although we certainly wished things were different at times, we always felt our inconveniences were trifling, considering what the boys in the services were doing, and there was a wonderful unselfish spirit among the people. The war effort was uppermost.⁵

Work rather than sexual indulgence was the most prevalent experience for Australian women. For some, it was hours and hours of unpaid voluntary work. For others it was long hours of overtime in arduous and sometimes dangerous jobs.⁶

Unfortunately Australian soldiers expected to return to “homes fit for heroes”. Instead they returned to children who did not recognise them and to women for whom family life was no longer the sole preoccupation. Many veterans suffering poor health and the psychological effects of war could not settle back into family life.⁷ It seemed that those who had stayed behind had let them down.

As the military historian Jeffrey Grey has pointed out, although the Australians were the first to defeat the Japanese on land, the United States military leadership of the South West Pacific Area relegated the Australians to peripheral campaigns.⁸ The most important Australian contribution to the defeat of Japan was our service and supply role. This success was built on the labour of the young and the old, women and men, Aboriginal, white and ethnic Australians, sometimes paid, often unpaid, always at a personal cost.

By acknowledging the heavy personal toll of the home front alongside the feats of the Australian Soldier, the war between the sexes which the war provoked might be laid to rest and a more positive national tradition forged.

NOTES

1. Interview with Mrs Lillian Toft by Libby Connors for the Queensland During World War II Oral History Project.
2. Cited in Betty Goldsmith and Beryl Sandford, *The girls they left behind*, Ringwood, 1990, pp. 71-72
3. L. Connors, L. Finch, K. Saunders and H. Taylor, *Australia's Frontline*, St. Lucia, 1992, p.159.
4. Cited in Betty Goldsmith & Beryl Sandford *The Girls They Left Behind*, Ringwood, 1990, p.33.
5. Cited in *The Girls They Left Behind*, p.36.
6. *Australia's Frontline*, pp.47-55.

7. Australia's Frontline, pp.199-203; *The girls They Left Behind*, pp.82-83; Daniel Connell, *The war at home*, Crows Nest NSW, 1988, pp.138-39.
8. Jeffrey Grey, *A military history of Australia*, Melbourne, 1990, p.182.



Women Ice Vendors in Brisbane in 1942 — John Oxley Library