Shooting Blanks at the Anzac Legend: Australian Women’s War Fictions

DONNA COATES

SYDNEY STUDIES IN AUSTRALIAN LITERATURE
Shooting Blanks at the Anzac Legend

Australian Women’s War Fictions

Donna Coates

UNCORRECTED PROOF

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# Table of Contents

**Acknowledgements**  
ix

**Introduction**  
xiii

## Part 1 World War I fictions

1. The Digger on the lofty pedestal  
   *Australian women’s fictions of the Great War*  
   3

2. “Guns ‘n’ roses”  
   *Mollie Skinner’s intrepid Great War fictions*  
   25

3. (Not) talking back  
   39

4. Lesbia Harford’s home-front warrior and women’s World War I writing  
   59

5. Sleeping with the enemy  
   *Patriot games in fictions by Lesbia Harford, Gwen Kelly and Joan Dugdale*  
   69

6. Demilitarising a military culture  
   *Brenda Walker’s The Wing of Night*  
   83

## Part 2 World War II fictions

7. Damn(ed) Yankees  
   *The Pacific’s not pacific anymore*  
   107

8. “Where Have All the Flowers Gone?” in the film adaptation of *Come in Spinner*  
   119

9. Country matters in the *Little (Southern Steel) Company*  
   135

10. Reality bites  
    153
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Loving thine enemies</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Representations of Italian prisoners of war in contemporary Australian</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>women's World War II fictions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Lies, secrets and silences</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prisoners-of-war in World War II Australian women's novels</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>No hell like peacetime</td>
<td>231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Going (down) under in the land of the “fair go”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Part 3: The Vietnam War</strong></td>
<td>247</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>The new “Anzacs two” make their debut in contemporary Australian</td>
<td>249</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>women's fictions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Coming home</td>
<td>273</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The return of the (Australian Vietnam War) soldier</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>“All we are saying is give peace a chance”</td>
<td>285</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Vietnam war protest movement in Australian women’s fictions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>by Janine Burke, Patricia Cornelius, Nuri Mass and Wendy Scarfe</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>’O what a lovely war</td>
<td>305</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No more shooting blanks in Helen Nolan’s Between the Battles: A Novel</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Conclusion</strong></td>
<td>319</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Boomerangs do come back</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Works cited</strong></td>
<td>326</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Index</strong></td>
<td>339</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Introduction

Over the years of my academic career, which I came to late in life, I have been frequently asked why I have chosen to teach and write about women’s responses to twentieth-century wars in both Canada and Australia (and occasionally New Zealand). It’s a story I have told several times (parts of which have already been published), so please accept my apologies for any repetition.¹

My round-about tale begins when I persuaded my (ex)husband, who did not like to travel, that we should take advantage of a teacher-exchange program to Australia, which would offer us and our sons (aged ten and sixteen) the opportunity to experience life in another country for a year. Surprisingly, he accepted, but only, I suspect, because we had recently attended a gathering of teachers where a good-looking blond, tanned young man had just recently returned from a one-year teaching stint in Queensland. Over the course of the evening, he repeatedly informed the crowd that his duties as an educator were far from arduous: at one point he claimed that he just “sent the kids to the beach” every morning and then delighted in basking in the sun and sand himself!

On the strength of that “evidence,” my husband agreed to go to Australia, but a few months before we were scheduled to leave, one of his relatives encouraged us to come to Ottawa for a few days because he had just landed a job which gave him entry to most of the city’s museums and he was keen to show us around. We duly travelled to Ottawa and went to quite a few of the museums, but the only one I remember vividly was the Canadian War Museum, and then only because the few staff members on the site kept apologising for the paucity of expositions, the overall shabbiness of the place and consequently the dearth of visitors. Historian Tim Cook refers to the war museum, created in 1942, as a “nondescript and inefficient building”² and adds that in 1998, the newly appointed director-general and CEO of the forthcoming new museum, J.L. Granatstein, also had little good to say about

¹ Cited in “All You Have to Do Is Look,” Nicolas Birns Interviews Donna Coates, Antipodes 43.2 (December 2020), 222–32.
the original, which he claimed was “stodgy, boring and dull. Its exhibits are tacky. As a museum, it's just appalling”\(^3\) (A much larger and more comprehensive new museum opened in Ottawa in 2005.)

We duly began the first leg of our adventure at the end of December, which was fortuitous because we were obliged to follow the Australian school year that would not officially begin until late February, thereby leaving us nearly two months to acclimatise and to travel around the country before tackling serious work. At the time, I lamented that the system was grossly unfair, given that our exchanges were compelled to arrive in Canada in early January and be prepared to teach within days, when the weather that month was frequently the worst of the year. Temperatures often dipped below minus twenty or worse, and the newcomers had virtually no time to adapt to the harshness of the cold. Accordingly, those of us heading Down Under were asked to leave our refrigerators full of food so that the new arrivals would not have to venture out immediately unless absolutely necessary. But unlike our counterparts, we were able to get off to a fine start by spending a few relaxing days in the colourful and exotic (to us) Fiji ahead of making our way to Sydney, where we planned to sightsee for a few days before touring Canberra and Melbourne on the way to Adelaide, where my husband would be teaching. (Not, notably, carefree, laidback Queensland.) After only a few days in Sydney I had fallen in love with everything in the city and the country: I revelled in its doggedly persistent hot weather; its sandy, readily accessible beaches; its friendly people; its dangerously delicious wine; its numerous good-looking men; and its dazzling architecture like the famous Opera House and the Harbour Bridge (best known as the Coat Hanger).

Strangely, however, almost everyone we spoke to in Sydney urged us to make the Australian War Memorial our first stop in Canberra, and because of their insistence, we obeyed. We learned it had opened in 1941, but unlike its dismal Ottawa counterpart of similar vintage which the historian Cook has already claimed resembled a dingy 1940s bungalow, the daunting Australian museum was a glorious art deco structure with spectacular spaces that others have described as part shrine, part world-class museum, but with plenty of additional features such as an outdoor sculpture garden. Clearly, funding had not been a problem. Accordingly, we watched as hundreds of people, including a surfeit of children, busily explored dozens of engaging exhibitions or quietly read through extensive archives. Because there was so much to see, both indoors and out – and even though no one in either of our families had ever expressed any interest in war or the military – we were so impressed that we spent part of the next day strolling along the lengthy Anzac Parade (with the Australian parliament buildings clearly visible

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\(^3\) Cook, *The Fight For History*, 396.
in the distance), where dozens of displays continued to pay tribute to the sacrifices Australians had made at the numerous battles they have fought (and died) in.

After our two visits to the museum, I began to ponder why Australians should pay so much attention to honouring their men (and occasionally women) who sailed away to war when Canadians, for the most part, did not. When Anzac Day (25 April), which commemorates the landing at Gallipoli (despite its having been declared a military disaster), rolled around, I was astonished because the event was so entirely unlike its Canadian equivalent, which reveres their veterans chiefly on Remembrance Day. On 11 November (a holiday in only a few provinces), Canadians gather typically in small groups (they are getting larger, however), listen to a few brief speeches, adhere to the required two minutes of silence, and then either witness or participate in the laying on of wreaths at memorials.⁴

But on Anzac Day in Adelaide, I watched as thousands of Australians attended the lengthy morning parade and then went on to celebrate further when the pubs opened and the solemnity of the morning gave way to boozy celebrations on the streets. I was unaware at the time that many of those thousands might also have attended the early morning dawn ceremony to commemorate the time of the landing in Gallipoli. I admit that I thought people were exaggerating when they tried to convince me of those facts, which I found inconceivable. It was not until some years later, on another visit to Australia, that I attempted to get to the dawn ceremony in Sydney, but I could not get near the site because crowds had assembled much earlier. And in case you labour under the impression that this custom must surely have waned by now, you would be very wrong indeed, as historian Anna Clark records that “the numbers of those who attended the Dawn Ceremonies are steadily increasing: an estimated 50,000 attended the ceremony at Melbourne’s Shrine of Remembrance in 2014”.⁵ But having come from a country where many continue to perceive of themselves as inhabitants of a “peaceable kingdom,” I thought it was time to begin seriously investigating why, given so many obvious similarities between the two countries, there should be such disparities in their treatments of war.

Little did I know that my having signed up for a full-year course on Australian literature at the University of Adelaide would prove to be so momentous to my future career on the subject of war. The course, taught mainly by writers (poets taught poetry, playwrights taught drama, for example), was ideal. At the end of the second semester, I produced an essay on the Australian writer Shirley Hazzard’s *The Transit of Venus*, which my professor thought was first-rate. In his written comments, he claimed that I “wrote like an angel” (the kind of praise no one in Canada had ever given me), awarded the paper a very good grade, and suggested I submit it for publication at a small university press (which unfortunately had just

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⁴ Australian Remembrance Day observances are like those in Canada.
closed). I was thrilled with the professor’s comments, but troubled when I stumbled upon a brief interview with Hazzard in *The Bulletin*, where she declared that her novel was all about war, but because few people envisage that women writers ever tackle war as their subject, they tend to ignore that topic altogether. My quick re-reading of the novel demonstrated conclusively that there were references to war on virtually every page, but I, too, had barely noticed them (and obviously neither had my professor). Up until that point, I had been teaching as a poorly paid sessional instructor at several post-secondary institutions in Calgary; much as I enjoyed the teaching, I knew if I wanted to keep working as an academic (and now admittedly spurred on by a subject I wanted to pursue), I would have to get a PhD.

Before we left Australia, I asked the aforementioned professor to list a few war novels by Australian women worthy of study, but after a long pause, he mentioned only Dymphna Cusack and Florence James’ World War II novel titled *Come in Spinner* (1951), and then likely only because the unabridged edition had been recently re-issued and subsequently adapted into a popular television series. After returning from Australia, I was accepted into the PhD program at the University of Calgary, but my search for sources continued to be as challenging as they had been in Australia. When I asked a well-read Canadian professor to suggest a few titles on women’s wartime fictions, after giving it virtually no thought, he advised me to drop the topic because he could not identify any! On my third try, this time prepared to insist that it was unfathomable that women would have let three world wars – I intended to focus on the First and Second World Wars and the Vietnam War – go by (Korea remains the forgotten war) without writing a word, I had no need to worry when a much younger professor found my proposal intriguing. When I informed him that I had been told that I might not find any books, he replied that “They are there, and you will find them. You just have to look,” and of course, how right he was! But regrettably, he died not long after he had agreed to be my supervisor, and not surprisingly, I was assigned to someone who had no interest in or knowledge of the topic. It was again fortunate that the Head of the English Department insisted that because no one in the faculty was familiar with Australian writing, mine would have to be a comparative study and include Canadian women writers. I was not troubled by the additional work because I assumed that since both these countries were settler societies whose inhabitants spoke (mostly) the same language, paid tribute to the same monarch, and were equally comprised of small populations eager to rush to the defence of Mother England during her time of need in spite of being vast distances from the fields of battle, I would just be writing

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6 For a much lengthier analysis on why women’s voices have been suppressed on the topic of war, see my general introduction to a seven-volume series titled “Catch 22”, which I wrote for the first volume of Routledge Press’ *Women and War: History of Feminism* (xi–xxvii). My introduction, which appears in “Women and War from the Middle Ages,” is edited by Jaclyn Carter and Timothy Duffy (2020).
“ditto” much of the time. But comparative studies are useful for what they reveal: rather than similarities, I found, almost exclusively, differences.

Near the beginning of my studies at the university I was again fortunate to receive a small scholarship that enabled me to conduct research for a few months at the magnificent National Library of Australia in Canberra. Several of the librarians took an interest in my topic and cheerfully helped me find many of my resources, but before too long, I began to feel a bit at sea, largely disappointed by the several-dozen World War I books I had been reading, and then uncertain how to respond to them. My discomfort did not last long, however, because another stroke of luck occurred when an Australian academic at the Defence Force Academy recommended that I should read the work of the much-admired historian and war correspondent C.E.W. Bean (whom I had never heard of), and he was right. I learned then that Australian women writers did not write their own novels but had them written for them by the dominant ideology (that would primarily be Bean), which permitted only one voice, a single interpretation of the war which essentially glorified the Anzacs (which stands for the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps) participation in the hostilities. Bean worshipped “the noble bushman” (even though most came from cities), his physical appearance, temperament, democratic values, as well as his love of, and success on, the battlefield. Following Bean’s lead, more than a dozen women writers set much of the “action” of their fictions at Gallipoli, and because they were merely reflecting Bean’s vision of the men who fought in the war, included no strong women in their fiction. Regardless of Australian women’s prodigious output – they produced several-dozen novels – much of the majority reflected a unique form of powerlessness. As I have written elsewhere, unlike their female counterparts in Canada or Great Britain whose novels reflected women’s desires to loosen the patriarchal grip on their lives, Australian women’s Great War fictions were, like Bean, gripped by the performance of the Anzac, not with the emancipation of women or collective social reform. Rather than chronicling typical concerns over pacifism, prohibition or conscription (words not uttered even once in their fictions), women writers muted their own voices, took their orders from Bean, and marched away to war with their soldiers. Accordingly, their writing (if read at all), was risible; female characters sent letters and presents to their husbands and uttered ridiculous comments such as hoping that their husbands liked their smoking jackets or that they were not too close to danger on the front lines. It is important to stress that these absurd responses were not their fault: from a distance of approximately 12,000 miles, they could only mimic what Bean had informed them of.7 His popular Christmas book, titled The Anzac Book: Written and Illustrated in Gallipoli by the Men of Anzac (1916), depicted soldiers complaining about the weather, or “attacks” from flies or fleas.

7 Note that Bean was not alone in his worshipping of the “noble bushman”; several British writers such as John Masefield, Compton Mackenzie and Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett also wholeheartedly praised the Anzacs.
or feeling the pain of “glancing blows to their wrists.” Some labelled bomb attacks “inconvenient.” Once I became aware of Bean’s influence on women writers, I also began to re-read the many-fewer Canadian novels I had finally found, which promoted an entirely different perspective, and the comparative study began to take shape.8

My continuing search for women’s war fictions eventually led me to a few absorbing novels by Australian women writers who did not follow (or perhaps had never heard of) Bean’s work and hence produced unique anti-war books. One was M.L. (Mollie) Skinner, whose *Letters of a V.A.D.* (1918) features a nurse who privileges her career over marriage, and her second novel, the hilarious *Tucker Sees India* (1937), depicts a man who does not want to fight, but both novels have been unjustly neglected. I have argued elsewhere that both such atypical works deserve a prominent place in Australian war writing, as does Lesbia Harford’s *The Invaluable Mystery*, whose novel, written in the 1920s but not published until 1987, previous editors had rejected, at least in part, because there were no Anzacs in the book. Furthermore, Harford had the courage to suggest that in the absence of men, the home front could become a radical site for women.

But perhaps the best ways to elucidate how valiant these rebels were is to survey the works by Canadian women writers. Even though they produced a much smaller opus, none of their books privilege the life of soldiers; rather, these writers insisted that attention must be paid to women, whose female characters look to the future and visualise a better world where women are fully participating members of Canadian society. The best known of the Canadian writers at the time was L.M. Montgomery, whose *Rilla of Ingleside* (1920) incorporates the responses of those usually ignored in wartime such as children, animals, and even enemy Germans, and which I regard as the best Canadian wartime novel ever written. I also discovered another powerful novel by Nellie McClung, titled *The Next of Kin: Those Who Wait and Wonder* (1917), which insisted that women writers’ work shared a common purpose, which was to recognise the marginalisation of women’s voices in wartime, to show women how to write themselves into an intensely male-dominated discourse, and at the same time to teach women how to secure powerful positions in their society.9

Around the time that I was nearing completion of my dissertation, the head of the department who had insisted upon the comparative study came across an organisation titled the American Association of Australian Literary Studies (AAALS), which was holding a conference on Australian writing in Bloomington, 8  Once I was back in Canada, the head of the graduate department advised me to concentrate solely on the World War I fictions because there were so many emanating primarily from Australia.

9  For a thorough examination of the progressive ideas presented in Canadian women’s war writing, see my “The Best Soldiers of All: Unsung Heroines in Canadian Women’s Great War Fictions”, *Canadian Literature* 151, Winter (1996): 66–99. I have utilised material from this essay in my Conclusion, here titled “Boomerangs do come back.”
Indiana, and suggested I might be interested in attending. Indeed I was. It proved to be a terrific experience, especially since after the delivery of my first-ever conference paper, the Canadian scholar Tom Tausky immediately asked to publish it in a new journal he had started called *Australian and New Zealand Studies in Canada*, and he did. Sadly, Tom died not long after. But I was fortunate to have had the opportunity to participate at the gathering because I learned soon after that the conference experience is not always so collegial. I have been occasionally asked if I have encountered negative reactions from Australians who resent a Canadian telling them what they should think about their literature or who question my feminist approach; I am pleased to say, “only rarely.” I did, however, face a strong reaction the day I delivered a talk based on a paper recently accepted for publication at a conference being held at the war museum in Canberra. I had only begun to read it when a large man seated in the back row of the room leapt to his feet, shouted “Rubbish,” and then rushed to the door and slammed it. Perhaps in bad form, I shouted after him, “Have you read the books yet?” That got a good laugh and we proceeded without him. Surprisingly, the only other criticism I am aware of occurred in Canada at a conference in Kingston, Ontario. During the question period, a Canadian scholar who had done some good work on Australian literature suggested I was being unkind or perhaps even unfair to women writers, but as I pointed out again, since she had not read the books I was referring to, she had only my position – which I explained was reporting their dilemmas and not making fun of them – to rely upon. Otherwise, the scholars I have met Down Under are welcoming, friendly and generally pleased that I have continued to promote their literature.

But what does rankle with me are the numerous historians who persist in writing lengthy essays about how similar the two nations’ perspectives are on war. I tire of the academics who try to force the comparisons between Canada and Australia so that responses to World War I are almost identical, when they are emphatically not. Primarily, the Australians wanted to prove to the British that they benefited from having been sent to live in a beautiful sunny country which offered many opportunities for “the good life,” whereas Canadians had no need to feel beholden to supreme powers. Moreover, much as Australians continue to idolise the men who fought at Gallipoli (even though it was a catastrophe), Canadians celebrate only their participation at Vimy Ridge, an important battle they won after four days of fighting in 1917. But the continuing reverence for the Anzac is fuelled by the education system in Australia, which ensures that from an early age, virtually every child can offer a history lesson on what happened, what day, the importance of the day, and so on, at Gallipoli. By contrast, I have been teaching adult students for several decades and have only recently encountered a few students who know the basics about Vimy Ridge – where it was fought, what the issues were, and even which war it occurred in! But as of today, most students’ knowledge – if they have any at all – ends there. (To be fair, students are not the only ones who remain ignorant about what happened at Vimy: a recent survey revealed that numerous
Canadians thought Vimy was either a mountain range or a famous racehorse! Significantly, unlike young people in Australia who make their rites of passage through pilgrimages to Gallipoli, which some critics have suggested are now just drunken revelries and not tributes to the sacrifices Australian soldiers made, very few, if any, of my students have been to Vimy and rarely express any desire to go there in the future.

It’s also important to stress that while Australians have participated in every major twentieth-century war, Canadians did not sent troops to either Vietnam or Iraq. Although our reputation as “peace-mongers” has slipped, a substantial portion of Canadians continue to believe they live in a “peaceful kingdom” and want to keep it that way. This topic obviously requires much further investigation, but for now, I am repeating two anecdotes I wish to “share” because they are too good to resist. The first instance, which illustrates that even those Canadians who ought to know their war history do not, applies to then Defence Minister John McCallum, who attempted to atone for his lack of knowledge about the Dieppe raid, which took place on 19 August 1942 (another battle my students know nothing about) by writing a letter to one of the national newspapers, where he succeeded only in making matters worse when he confused Vichy, the seat of the French government that collaborated with the Nazis during World War II, with Vimy, the World War I battle fought at Vimy Ridge! The second example illustrates that while the Australian adoration of the Anzac continues, in Canada, newspaper writer Peter C. Newman reminds us that, “This is the only country on earth whose citizens dream of being Clark Kent instead of Superman.” And that, I will end by saying, suits me just fine.

10 John McCallum, letter to the editor, National Post, 1 September 2002.
Part 1
World War I fictions
The Digger on the lofty pedestal
Australian women’s fictions of the Great War

In his full-length study on Australian war writing, Robin Gerster states: “Australian prose of the Great War was based on one fundamental premise: that Australians excel, even revel, in battle”\(^1\). From this proposition, Gerster advances two related arguments: that Australian war writing is propagandist in its promotion of national sentiment and ideals; and that in its continuing glorification of war, it is anachronistic and out of step with European and American war writing. While I agree with Gerster’s theories, I take issue with his almost exclusive use of male war writers to support his thesis. In his examination of World War I prose, he mentions only four women writers – Mary Grant Bruce, Ethel Turner, Gladys Hain, and Angela Thirkell – and omits entirely from his discussion Mabel Brookes, Linda Webb Burge, Ray Phillips, Annie Rixon and Chrystal Stirling, several of whom wrote more than one novel, and whose fiction would have added ammunition to his argument. In overlooking women’s valuable contribution to Australian war writing, Gerster succumbs to traditional patriarchal criticism, which assumes that the weaponless are wordless.

Paradoxically, after omitting these important writers from his study, Gerster then gives women (along with a few expatriates and contemporary writers) credit for calling into question national sentiments, stating, “the debunking, anti-heroic, or demythologising literary territory has been with few exceptions occupied ... by women ... unimpressed by male histrionics” (20). But in offering only one novel by English war bride Angela Thirkell as evidence, he undermines his own argument. While he might have added to his discussion Mollie Skinner’s *Tucker Sees India*, which atypically features an Anzac who does not want to fight, Gerster is otherwise completely erroneous in his assumptions that women writers deflate national myths or deride heroic posturing, for in their texts, they not only stand by their men, but

\(^1\) Robin Gerster, *Big-Noting: The Heroic Theme in Australian War Writing* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1987), 2. All subsequent references are to this edition and appear in parentheses in the text.
fashion them into superhuman legendary figures who excel at combat. In *Broken Idols*, for example, Mabel Brookes elevates her Diggers to “lofty pedestals”.  

While Gerster notes that the tendency to “big-note,” which he defines as “the giving of extravagant praise to oneself or the exaggeration of one’s own importance” is “everywhere evident in First AIF literature” (3), he refers almost exclusively to those writers who either participated directly in combat, gave orders from behind the lines, or were male civilians who jumped on the Anzacadulation bandwagon. Women writers could not swap bayonets for pens, but they could sing the praises of the soldier. In their texts, the figure of the Anzac looms large, his dominating presence firmly establishing that women writers are equally propagandist in promoting cultural stereotypes. Furthermore, because women writers continuously laud the Anzacs’ participation in war, their fiction is also anachronistic and out of step with other literary traditions. That several of the most male-dominated texts appeared as late as the 1940s indicates women writers’ prolonged enthusiasm for the event, their slavish devotion to hegemonic tradition.

Whereas Gerster identifies these characteristics in Australian male writing as nonconformist, I suggest that when they appear in women’s writing they reflect a unique form of female powerlessness. In shoring up, not shattering, reigning ideologies, their texts differ significantly from those by British, American, or Canadian women writers, which foreground strong women determined to make their part in war matter. In her study of American and British women’s war writing, Sandra Gilbert argues that the Great War served to empower women psychologically, economically, and sexually; throughout her essay, Gilbert employs words such as “glee,” “exuberance,” and “triumph” to describe writers’ enthusiastic response to war, which (alas only temporarily) liberated women from cloistered environments, confining clothing, and tedious domestic chores. Canadian writers demonstrate in their texts a less jubilant, more subdued response, but they do reveal women seizing war as an opportunity to loosen the patriarchal grip on their lives. In their womencentred texts, heroines move out of the home and hearth and take up meaningful occupations which give them strength and confidence in their abilities. And amidst the chaos occasioned by war, they insist that the time is ripe to restructure society, to create a “new world order” which incorporates women’s voices and values into the design.


But in Australia, women writers are obsessed with hero worship of the Anzac, not with societal reform or the liberation of women. Several women writers – Hain, Burge, Rixon – undergo paper sex changes and send a man off to war, thereby replicating the master narrative of the soldier in the trenches and nullifying their own voices as women, to whom they hand barely speaking parts and walk-on roles in their texts. Other writers – Stirling, Grant Bruce, Turner, Phillips, Brookes – play out a tug of war, a “star wars” battle for centre stage between heroine and hero, from which the Digger inevitably emerges victorious; writers deem his story more worthy of the telling. Annie Rixon for example, begins *The Scarlet Cape* with the story of a resilient young woman who survives deprivation in the bush before courageously making her way to Sydney, where she becomes a nurse. In the first third of the book, the nurse offers a rigorous critique of her profession. But once war breaks out, without any advance warning to her readers, Rixon drops the nurse’s story and takes up the Anzac’s, to that point a minor character. The switch in point of view is frustrating, since Rixon also sends her nurse overseas, but tells us nothing about her journey, the kinds of duties she performs, or most significantly, how she responds to the death and destruction of the battlefield. In allowing her nurse’s voice to evaporate, Rixon denies the legitimacy of a woman’s story in war and reaffirms the central importance of the soldier’s story in Australian fiction.

Before passing judgement on women writers for acting as publicity agents for the Anzac campaign, it is important to recognise that at the outbreak of World War I, Australian women were particularly defenceless on the home front. A number of forces operated to prevent them from achieving even limited emancipation, in spite of the fact that, as Carmel Shute observes, they were eager to fight for their country in any way they could. Like men, who hastened to enlist in “active” service, women, too, charged authorities’ offices and pleaded to be given “active” roles of any dimension, either on the home front or the battlefront. They were consistently counselled, however, to devote their energies to more “appropriate” causes such as knitting, making small domestic sacrifices, nursing the sick and wounded, or acting as society’s moral guardians, and to let men get on with the business of war. War offices also issued similar instructions to British, American and Canadian women, but were obliged to rescind the orders when it became apparent that women were needed either to take up jobs in industries created by the war, or those left vacant when men marched away. But in Australia women were compelled to obey male dictates, for, as Michael McKernan comments, there was no large-scale munitions industry in Australia to give Australian women the experience of factory work and no wholesale shortage of labour to force them to men’s jobs. Further, because Australian women had achieved suffrage at Federation, there were few vocal women’s groups at the outbreak of war to advance the feminist cause. It was

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not all quiet on the Australian home front, for although women were denied access to paid employment, Patsy Adam-Smith records that they threw their energies into providing comforts for Australian soldiers. Indeed, women undertook their volunteer tasks with such vigour and enthusiasm that, “as a result of their efforts, Australian soldiers became the best-cared-for body of troops in the Great War.” Anzacs truly sprang from “the lucky country,” for in real life, they were the best provided for troops among the Allied Forces, and among literary representations, most revered.

In committing themselves to Anzac aggrandisement, women writers did not go on the warpath to overcome women’s oppression, did not deploy their words as artillery to help overcome their marginalisation. Instead, they uphold conventional pursuits for women: rarely do they argue that women’s emancipation from marriage and motherhood is possible, or even desirable. Missing from the texts by Hain, Grant Bruce, Turner, Brookes, Burge, Phillips, Rixon and Stirling is a candid confession of women’s desire for power and control over their lives; consistently, female characters remain male-identified as wives, sweethearts, or sisters. Moreover, these texts consistently portray women suspended in holding patterns, waiting, in static and silent submission for their loved ones to return. While anticipating war’s end (and hence a return to prewar existence), women cling to traditional pastimes: they knit, nurture weep, and wait. Some female characters engage in occasional volunteer wartime work, but half-heartedly; they view their tasks as diversionary, something to fill in the time or to relieve anxiety, but not as significant donations to the war effort. Moreover, women’s volunteer tasks serve as opportunities for writers to give voice to the wounded, but never downhearted, Anzac. Other fictional characters concentrate on recruitment, on getting a man to the front, but their “white-feather” activities are devoid of intellectual underpinnings. No women in these texts emerge from the private sphere to wear the pants, to step into men’s shoes for paid employment, or to take up “brilliant careers.” Since marriage is the only profession open to women, it matters not if the soldier returns maimed, blinded, armless or legless, for in this society even a husband who cannot wear the pants is better than no husband at all. And because competition for a lifetime partner is stiff, women level much hostility at war brides; they regard one another as enemies, not allies, and routinely choose men as their confidantes. None works collectively to overcome subordination, and any woman who show signs of transgressing social codes is quickly punished and restored to

6 McKernan, The Australian People and the Great War, 66.

7 Only two novels assert women’s right to autonomy and independence. Skinner’s Letters of a V.A.D. was published initially in England. In her autobiography The Fifth Sparrow, she writes that, because she was nursing in India, she did not realise until the spring of 1915 that war was being waged, or that Australians were part of the war effort (95); thus she would have missed much “big-noting.” Lesbia Harford’s The Invaluable Mystery, an unusual woman-centered urban text written during the 1920s, failed to locate a publisher until 1987, when it was accidentally discovered by researchers in the Australian Archives in Canberra.
her proper place as wife and homemaker. As well, women writers create negative views of their sex, illustrating that they have internalised one of patriarchy’s basic tenets, misogyny: several characters refer to their sex as useless, and declare women too emotional and irrational to hold public office.

Throughout their brief history, Australian women had been conditioned to think of themselves as the second sex, for they inhabited a patriarchal society which had, since its inception as a penal colony, either ignored them or treated them with indifference and even enmity. A surfeit of critics – Beryl Donaldson Langer, Anne Summers, Miriam Dixson, Dorothy Jones, Susan Sheridan, and Kay Schaffer – have documented Australian women’s historically marginal status in their society. Beryl Donaldson Langer contends that women’s exclusion from Australian culture and identity became evident in the colonial period, but during the nationalist, myth-making 1890s their absence was explicitly confirmed. Prominent writers like Henry Lawson, Joseph Furphy, Banjo Paterson and Steele Rudd privileged the noble bushman’s values of rugged manliness, anti-authoritarianism, ready initiative in a hostile environment and irreverence; at the same time, these writers viewed women as agents of restriction and restraint, as inhibitors of male pleasure, and dismissed them as overly concerned with manners and fashion.\(^8\) Anne Summers writes that male writers of the period were anxious to transpose what they deemed positive male characteristics into a living legend, and they succeeded.\(^9\) And in this society, charges Dorothy Jones, where men mythologise themselves and exclude women, the latter’s only defence against isolation is to try to fit themselves into the myth, to be “myth-fits”.\(^{10}\) Some writers, like Barbara Baynton and Miles Franklin, became adept at camouflage; they chose the bush as their setting and depicted, in bush vernacular, typical egalitarian values. In accommodating their writing to the bush, writes Susan Sheridan, they earned approbation from such patriarchal figures as Henry Lawson and A. G. Stephens, editor of the influential and “offensively masculine” *Bulletin* magazine, who praised them for “transcending their female qualities and preoccupations” and contributing to “this masculine construction of ‘the Bush’”\(^{11}\). But Summers argues that, in writing within male tradition, “myth-fits” inevitably suffer: their situation becomes “precarious and almost inevitably dishonest, for by conforming to men’s ideals, they are denying something in themselves”.\(^{12}\) They cannot write about the bush as if they are men: rather, they

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are forced to “draw a wider canvas and to write about whole settlements or communities,” or to write about individual women as if they are somehow “separated from the norm”. Women writers dared not create strong females who might rival the bushman, nor dared they hazard writing honestly about what life in the bush looked like from their more familiar vantage point of the kitchen or child’s bedroom. Women were trapped in a Catch-22: if they failed to write about the bush and male experience, they found their work dismissed for being outside the range of serious subjects; if they examined subjects like marriage, pregnancy, sexual hypocrisy, their fictions were deemed not relevant to national literature. Sheridan argues that novels by the 1890s writers Cambridge, Praed and “Tasma” were published in accessible forms, widely circulated, and garnered a large readership, but because women wrote about social life in the cities and the relations between the sexes, they were discredited for writing inferior novels. Jones concurs, finding that women authors who did not extoll the virtues of mateship and the bush but chose instead to draw their matter from urban and domestic life found their work “criticized as lightweight, and even un-Australian”. Even though these “women’s books” were acclaimed on publication, they nonetheless fell rapidly out of sight, whereas those that upheld nationalist masculine values formed the traditional canon.

The advent of World War I compounded this already problematic situation for women writers, because the myth of the noble bushman, on the wane by the beginning of the twentieth century, did not die out as Australian society became increasingly urban, but like a boomerang, zoomed from bush to battlefield, and became entrenched as the myth of the Anzac soldier, or the Anzac legend. Writing against the bush myth had always been difficult for Australian women writers, but writing against this revised, more potent myth, was even more intimidating. In the brave new Digger figure’s reincarnation, he picked up some stellar new characteristics, while retaining the old. He was newly handsome, cosmopolitan, well-read, suave, charming to women, as well as a ferocious foe. Several critics – Marilyn Lake, Summers, Schaffer – have observed the progression from noble bushman into Anzac, but none has considered the negative impact this mythical figure had on women’s wartime literature. This larger-than-life warrior demanded attention, and got it; for in spite of the many obstacles in their path, many female “recruits” attempted the pen. Women writers sublimated their own needs and

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15 Langer, “Women and Literary Production: Canada and Australia”, 78.
18 Dorothy Jones, “Canon to the Right of Us, Canon to the Left of Us”, *New Literature Review* 17 (1989), 72.
20 Jones, “Canon to the Right of Us, Canon to the Left of Us”, 73.
desires, absented themselves from the war narrative, took the battlefront as their focus, and backed the Diggers' attack. In writing about men at war, they would have felt they were tackling serious subject material. But they lost the literary war, for their writing, which meticulously followed the dictates of the dominant ideology, was overlooked. Unlike women writers of the bush, who received praise for adopting the standards and preoccupations that patriarchal society defined for them, women wartime writers were completely ignored. Gerster's omission is proof of that neglect.

Women suffered more than indifference, however, for in “big-noting” the Anzac, they did not write their own texts, but had them written for them by the dominant ideology. Dutiful myrmidons, women writers took their orders from war correspondents C.E.W. Bean and Banjo Paterson and poet C.J. Dennis, and were their mouthpieces, or interlocuters, but not tellers of their own stories. Foregrounding the Anzac, they failed to take up issues considered of special interest to women, such as pacifism or temperance. No female characters discuss conscription, a curious omission since women were intensely involved in the heated debates that proved so divisive on the home front. 21 None challenges the makers of war; none questions how war affects women's lives; none interrogates why men go to war. Ideological discussions on war are brief and sketchy and take place primarily between soldiers. In spite of the fact that women could not have provided soldiers' comforts without superior fundraising, managerial and organisational skills, writers adhered to the patriarchal decree that women must be silent martyrs. Women were never to flaunt their activities, but to dress themselves in the “invisible crown of sacrifice” 22. They were to be “missing” from the accounts of war. Women writers contributed their own powerlessness by remaining silent in their literature about wartime subsidies and charitable contributions. Whatever male writers said about Australian men at war, women writers mimicked; they did not determine their own views of war, or try to come to terms with what it meant to them as women. Thus their novels are, for the most part, a working out in fiction of a male assessment of Australian soldiers – these men who displayed extreme valour and courage against overwhelming odds, and achieved “nationhood” for Australia.

While it could be argued (and often is) that the significant unifying event in Australian (war) history was the landing at Gallipoli, there is also evidence to suggest that Australian writers like bush poet-cum-war correspondent Banjo Paterson had begun glorifying Australian soldiers' participation in war before the turn of the century. Shirley Walker writes that Paterson's widely circulated

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dispatches from the Boer War “fostered a mythic view of Australian prowess in war based, as was the myth of the 1890s, on courage, equestrian skill, the ability to survive in rugged country, and an aggressive independence”.23 Walker further observes that Paterson’s reports reinforced pro-war sentiments at home, and persistently emphasised the value of Australian troops: Anzacs were usually placed in the foremost lines, displayed individual acts of courage, and demonstrated their strengths as bushmen. Paterson also stressed the skill and dedication of stretcher-bearers and doctors. What the correspondent omitted was equally important, however; he suppressed larrikin behaviour and downplayed violence, in particular muting mention of death and stressing grit and heroism instead.24 Walker concludes that Paterson’s writing “fostered the establishment myth – of war as a gallant and necessary enterprise in aid of the Empire, of Australia as a nation moving towards maturity and demonstrating this by the courage of its superior (if somewhat rakish) young men”.25 Bush legend, then, had begun to blur into warrior myth well in advance of World War I.

At the outbreak of war, other prominent myth-shapers like Paterson began to set down equally laudatory descriptions of the Australian male’s character and his superb performance in war. Not the least of these men was historian and war correspondent C.E.W. Bean, who was ultimately a journalistic reincarnation of the bush writers. Prior to the war, he had been sent by the Sydney Morning Herald to report on bush life, and he liked what he saw; though city-born, like the literary writers of the 1890s, he came to worship the noble bushman, his character and values. When he turned to writing his war dispatches (published at various periods and eventually collected into a twelve-volume set titled The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918), Bean transferred what he had observed (or thought he had observed) about the temperament and physical appearance of the Australian bushmen and re-created them as Anzacs. That many of the Anzacs were either British-born or hailed from cities, Bean conveniently overlooked.

One of the aspects of the bush Bean most revered was the healthy environment. Because of the open air, sunshine, and abundant supplies of good food, men from Down Under, Bean pronounced, were physically stronger, taller, better developed and more adventurous than Englishmen, who were cramped in stature as a result of their existence in overcrowded polluted centres. Bean further decreed that besides possessing large frames, all Australian men looked alike: “An active life, as well as the climate, rendered the body wiry and the face lean, easily lined, and thin-lipped.”26 This active life led Australian men to exhibit an independence of character which manifested itself in their aggressiveness, resourcefulness, and

vigorous initiative (5), all valuable qualities in time of war. Many of the skills required in combat, Bean further argued, were those that Australian men practiced in civilian (but always bush) life. Bushmen were often called upon to snuff out bushfires, and, more than any other experience, that activity resembled the “fighting of a pitched battle” (47). Bean concluded that “the Australian was half a soldier before the war” (47).

Further, Bean believed that the character of the Australian men that he so admired could be explained in terms of social experience. While bush life was crucial to the formation of character, so too was instruction in a state school system which abolished feudal class distinctions. As a result, socially, “the Australian people came nearer than perhaps any other to forming one class without distinction of birth or wealth” (5). This egalitarian principle found its way into the AIF, where men were promoted from within the ranks (54), and correspondingly took a great dislike to the traditional models of authority followed by the British army (48). The other “law” of behaviour which grew out of egalitarianism was mateship. Bean decreed that a man should at all times and at any cost stand by his mate (6). His central thesis was, then, that the Great War served as a testing ground through which the character of Australian men could be determined, and, according to Bean, they came through with flying colours. Their most significant contribution to the war effort was not destroying the Hun or the Turk, however; it was the “getting of nationhood.” Concluding his Introduction to The Official History, Bean states, in what is perhaps his most famous proclamation, that “in those days [World War I] Australia became fully conscious of itself as a nation” (xlviii).

When he put down his eyewitness accounts of Australian men at war, Bean had his audience of general readers on the home front firmly in mind; vivid and highly readable prose comes across more like a thrilling novel than a documentary account of military manoeuvres. That women writers read and absorbed his war messages is obvious, for in their texts, they replicate depictions of the Anzacs’ physical appearance, their temperament and philosophy, and their love of combat. Bean did not single-handedly turn Anzacs into heroes, however; there were a plethora of myth-shapers willing to “big-note” Australians at war. Other correspondents were equally lavish, arguably more so, in their praise of the Digger, both of his sabre-wielding skills and physical appearance. It is possible to speculate that Bean’s accounts of war might have held little sway with the folks at home had they not been supported by foreign journalists, whose reports were available as early as 8 May 1915. Gerster suggests that it was the English correspondent Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett who established the “fanatical tone” of Australian war writing with his “famous Anzac despatch describing a rampaging ‘race of athletes’ storming the Turkish cliffs and bayoneting everything in its path.”  

Geoffrey Searle notes that

(Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1934), vol. 1: 5. All subsequent references are to this edition and appear in parentheses in the text.

27 Gerster, Big-Noting, 13.
both John Masefield and Compton Mackenzie added to the deification process by paying cloying tribute to the Anzac physique. In the eyes and ears of the world, the Anzac soldier was a hero, a Greek God, a man more than worthy of the lofty pedestal. This excessive adulation, emanating from overseas correspondents, would have influenced gullible women writers who, situated 12,000 miles from the field of combat, were obliged to rely on second-hand accounts of war.

Their braggadocio about these astral Anzacs takes a variety of forms, but most prominent is his fighting prowess, his capacity for combat, said often to achieve both history for a new nation and international acclaim. In Broken Idols, Mabel Brookes, one of the troops’ most enthusiastic fans, creates a Digger who boasts to a “mate” that the “glorious” struggle at Gallipoli brought the nation “our first bit of history”, and her narrator contends that, even though many are dead and can never comprehend how their country appreciated them, those who return home will do so as the “idols of their land”:

Those men had gone to uphold Australia’s flag in the forefront of this world war, and were eminently fitted to symbolize their country in the great meeting of Empire on foreign battlefields. Alas! Some were dead, most of them were maimed, broken and war-wearied, but many would return, the idols of Australia, wounded and scarred though they might be through their service with the War God, as Egypt’s idols today bear the disfigurements of time. But also like Egypt’s idols, they would remain a symbol – erect – immovable – braving the elements – commanding the wonder and admiration of the world.

Brookes is only one voice in a chorus of approval, for in The Scarlet Cape, Rixon’s narrator also declares that “the name and fame of the Anzac had been flashed from one side of the world to the other”, and one of Burge’s Anzacs in Wings Above the Storm echoes Brookes, remarking to a war correspondent that, “we have no history up to now, and we begin with this war”. A common pattern in these texts is for a foreign journalist, whose voice adds weight and authority to the Diggers’ reputation, to report on the Anzac’s invincibility in combat. In The Scarlet Cape, a newsman applauds an Aussie’s evil spirit and tenacity in war, for in spite of incurring several wounds, he nonetheless fights at every important battle – from Lone Pine to Pozières – in which Anzacs take part. Whether bayoneting an enemy in the trenches or shooting down a German from his flying machine, Rixon’s Aussie distinguishes himself as a supreme (and flexible) marksman. The reporter deems the Anzac’s military might as “superhuman”.

29 Brookes, “Broken Idols”, 49.
31 Annie Rixon, The Scarlet Cape (Sydney: Criterion, 1939), 129.
except that her Parisian war correspondent praises not only a single champion, but the collective action of Australians. The journalist extolls the Anzacs’ courage and dogged determination and testifies that they “profoundly affected the course of the war.” Generously, he allows that although the Anzacs clearly won the battles, took the prisoners, and captured the guns, they were at times “aided” by Canadians and Americans! (Not, readers will note, Brits.) In other texts, soldiers themselves do the big-noting. Rixon’s Aussie observes, without a trace of humility, that the Germans feared the Diggers from Down Under more than troops from any other country. The soldier also acknowledges that the Aussies amassed a considerable death toll, but undercuts the notion of loss by suggesting they incurred few in comparison to the number of casualties they inflicted upon the enemy, often as high as 20–1. Nowhere in his account of the fighting does the Digger lament the loss of life, or concede that victory was achieved at a terrible price. Neither Brookes, Burge nor Rixon address suffering and death as by-products of war. In their texts, characters are more moved by Anzacs’ physical accomplishments and the getting of nationhood than they are by any destruction of human life.

In Chrystal Stirling’s Soldiers Two, victory and achievement take precedence over human loss in war. Her central character, Emily, knows that Australian men have sacrificed life and limb, but she believes that, having been tested and not found wanting, Australians have come to recognise unique strengths and abilities. Without the advent of war, Australians might not have discovered that they are a superior race. To her soldier-husband, Emily writes:

But, despite the sorrow, who shall say we have not come into our own. Always within us as we fought against fire and flood, against drought and thirst, as we dared a horse to do its worst with us, was the subconscious [sic] knowledge that we were made for greater deeds ...

And now has come Gallipoli … Pozieres, which you call “peculiarly ours,” and other places which we had scarce been conscious existed, and in some strange way we have emerged into the sunlight … Our hearts are broken, and yet there is a strange new cheerfulness about us; there is, if I may dare to say it, almost an optimism … We have lost our own, but we put that aside.

Stirling is responsible for the curious ellipses which permeate her text, but they are not necessarily the mark of a sloppy writer. Rather, the omissions mirror Stirling’s elliptical reportage of war. The absence of women is everywhere in these texts, especially in the telling of the story. When Emily fashions Australians into a

33 Rixon, The Scarlet Cape, 197.
34 Burge, Wings Above the Storm, 190.
35 Burge, Wings Above the Storm, 193.
36 Annie Rixon, Yesterday and Today (Sydney: Criterion, 1940), 109–11.
38 Chrystal Stirling, Soldiers Two (Sydney: Bookstall, 1918), 187–8.
“superior race” because they combat fire, flood, drought, thirst, and “dared a horse to do its worst,” aside from being poetic, she leaves out women, who were not likely to have fought the elements, or have been part of the “action” on the home front. (Undoubtedly they did fend off fire and flood, but would not have been perceived as equal participants.) On the battlefield, women are definitely “missing,” hence Emily’s discomfort (“if I may dare to say it”) in labelling Gallipoli as “ours,” or using “we” in the context of war. Women, absent from Gallipoli and Pozieres, could not share in the claim for nationhood. Only Arthur (“you”) can call the battles “ours.” There is no “we” possible in a country which insists that in war, and war discourse, women must be missing, absent, never participants. In Australia, only men constitute “the superior race.”

Other women writers echo Bean’s proclamation that the harsh Australian landscape produces exceptional human beings, but they are all men. The taxing bush environment produces soldiers who look so identical that they appear to have been fashioned on an assembly line or spewed out of a photocopying machine with perfect “Anzactitude.” No matter which text they appear in, all Anzacs are hatchet-faced, square-jawed, clear-eyed, and bronzed. One of Burge’s Diggers refers to an English soldier as “weedy” and “sicklooking,” and “about three feet higher than a duck.” The healthy Australian climate, replete with abundant sunshine and plentiful food, renders men physically huge, prepares them to withstand hardship and, by extension, the rigours of war. They can fend off bushfires on the home front or deflect bullets on the battlefield with equanimity. According to Stirling’s Anzac, their hulking physique makes them able to tolerate the cold in France better than the diminutive English Tommy. Women writers go one step farther than Bean in their big-noting, though. Life in the rigorous Australian bush has endowed the Anzac with extraordinary sensory perceptions. One of Brookes’ Anzacs has such superior hearing that he can detect impending air raids almost before they happen, and Grant Bruce’s soldier possesses such keen eyesight that he can see in the dark, a trait Grant Bruce would have us believe invaluable in war, for his unauthorised night raids are said to strike fear in the hearts of the Huns. That her fighting man marauds unsanctioned is evidence of the dash and initiative men develop surviving in the bush, the way of life so admired by Bean, for Australians who fend off floods and fires and resist droughts become hardy, resilient, and resourceful. Any other experience, even war, pales in comparison, and accordingly,

39 This word originated in a 1918 issue of Aussie magazine, illustrated and printed in France by members of the AIF. It was used to denote that under fire, soldiers forgot their reputed coolness, and “streaked to the nearest dug-out” (Gerster, Big-Noting, 26). Elsewhere in Aussie, however, “Anzactitude” was a praiseworthy term, as in “He faced the situation with superb Anzactitude” (27). I am using the term to describe “exactitude,” or similarity in appearance and personality.
40 Burge, Wings Above the Storm, 82.
41 Stirling, Soldiers Two, 155.
42 Mabel Brookes, On the Knees of the Gods (Melbourne: Melville and Mullen, 1918), 108.
43 Mary Grant Bruce, Captain Jim (Melbourne: Ward, 1919), 182.
the Anzac frequently refers to trench life as a “picnic.” In Brookes’ novels, nothing about war is too disheartening for a Digger, who routinely maintains “high spirits,” a “light-hearted manner,” and “the ability to enjoy the immediate present,” no matter where he might find himself. He is often heard cheerfully singing “Australia Will Be There.” This refrain, which reverberates throughout the novels, is another notice that women are “missing.” Only half of Australia (and in women’s minds, the better half) can be “there.” Stirling’s Anzac, too, emphasises the jaunty approach Australians take to war. In the following passage, her Anzac writes his wife about how cheerfully Aussies respond to combat: “They are in great glee, going into the fray as light-heartedly as to a cricket match.” Australian women writers appear to have been seduced by these demi-gods in khaki, for their depiction of them is so commendable and formulaic that their texts take on the flavour of Harlequin romances.

The pronounced tendency to big-note soldiers’ physical and temperamental suitability for war is a result of women writers’ craving to overcome the perception that Australians spring from lowly convict stock. Several of these novels, particularly those by Brookes and Grant Bruce, are in fact arguably less about war than they are about “writing back” to the Empire; their texts insist that Australians have achieved a cultural and physical superiority despite their inauspicious beginnings. In Brookes’ On the Knees of the Gods, set in England, it is never clear whether the Anzac’s enemy is the Turkish Johnny, the German Hun or the English Tommy. The major task she gives her central female character, Ernestine Lawry, is to speak in defence of Australians when they are attacked by members of the British upper-class. When an aristocrat insinuates that Diggers prematurely evacuated Gallipoli because they lacked stamina, Brookes brooks no slurs on her countrymen. Her central character exonerates them assiduously: “I doubt if any of them are of convict blood. That page of Australia’s history has long been turned over and is hidden beneath many others that are inscribed with records of golden deeds.” Ernestine then gets her own back, insisting that “Education and environment will produce a far finer man than can the average noble family of today. Take our Australians – very few have ancestral homes, and ancient names to burden them, yet you’ll find the finest men that God ever made among their ranks.” In turn, she insists that the English aristocracy has little to be proud of, for it does not produce men who are “good” at war, the criterion for success in Australia. (It will not be lost on the reader that she makes no mention of “fine women.”) Rather, Ernestine implies, a form of “tommy rot” has set in. The Englishwoman’s son has returned (prematurely, of course) from active service limping and suffering from

47 Stirling, Soldiers Two, 118.
49 Brookes, On the Knees of the Gods, 71; emphasis added.
shell shock. Brookes thus assures her readers that no English Tommy who is, after all, a product of a dismal English climate and social class which tolerates indolence and dissipation, can be a war hero.

In making her Diggers superior to Tommies, Brookes also strives to eradicate the “bad strain,” or larrikin reputation which dogged the Australian abroad. Hain joins Brookes in fending off undeserved attacks on soldiers’ morality by creating few who fall off the lofty pedestal or heroes who turn hooligan. Yet both writers had their work cut out for them, for, as Alistair Thompson points out, in real life, Anzacs deserved their ruffian reputation. Many of the soldiers sent home from Gallipoli had procured VDs, not VCs. Women writers stringently protect their heroes from the charge of moral degeneracy, and either downplay the licentiousness of the troops, or struggle to explain it away. In Broken Idols, a woman excuses Aussies for having climbed a harem wall or two or become inebriated because they might be dead the next day. Hain’s male narrator suggests that womanisers are only performing favours for lonely, loveless women, whereby bringing a unique interpretation to the refrain, “Australia Will Be There”. He further argues that British women are predators, rushing defenceless Anzacs in uniform, whom they apparently find irresistible. In other texts, the rowdy man may simply not have associated with the right people. On the Knees of the Gods recounts an instance where an accused murderer (insufficient evidence sets him free) meets a sensitive poet in the trenches; the Anzac laureate teaches the criminal socially valued skills, such as how to fight. Once under a proper influence, the desperado learns patriotic commitment and is cured of his antisocial behaviour. Fearful that their Diggers will be accused of debasement, women writers will not permit them to be less-than-perfect for long; larrikins are either falsely charged or blameless victims of circumstance, which the war helps overcome.

By placing a poet in the trenches with a social outcast, Brookes points to another positive characteristic of Australian men – their espousal of an egalitarian philosophy. According to Bean, whether men were wealthy and educated or rough and poor, they went into the ranks together, unconscious of any class distinction. Hain, Stirling, Phillips, Grant Bruce, Rixon and Brookes follow Bean’s lead; in their literary contingents, men enlist without concern for class or rank. One of Brookes’ Anzacs, a professional man, earns a substantial income, yet as a private in the army, he peels potatoes in a rough camp. He does not mind taking his

50 Alistair Thompson, “Passing Shots at the Anzac Legend”, in A Most Valuable Acquisition: A People’s History of Australia Since 1788, eds Verity Burgmann and Jenny Lee (Ringwood, VIC: Penguin, 1988), 196.
51 Brookes, Broken Idols, 189.
53 Hain, The Coo-ee Contingent, 97.
55 Bean, Official, 45.
56 Brookes, On the Knees of the Gods, 57.
orders from a civilian who blacked his shoes in civilian life. After a short interlude, having proved himself a capable leader, he is promoted from within the ranks, and receives a commission. In these texts, an Australian commanding officer is a fighting man’s mate, never an officious authority, as among the English rank and file. Typically, officers remain with their men on the firing line rather than retreating to safety, as British officers are wont to do. In *The Scarlet Cape*, Rixon’s officer (a colonel, of course), works alongside his men “manning” a shovel in mud, and surrenders his uniform on the battlefield for bandages. This democratic system, which negates the division between soldier and officer, makes for happy troops. An egalitarian philosophy is also part of the mateship credo; it is customary, Bean pronounced, for well-qualified men to turn down promotions because they do not want to desert their mates. In Brookes’ *Broken Idols*, an officer asks a private why he does not try for a commission. The private’s response, that he does not want to desert his mates just for the sake of promotion, bounces directly off of Bean’s philosophy. The one law that Bean decreed the good Australian [man] must never break was that a man should at all times and at any cost stand by his mate, especially when that mate is wounded. No matter what transpires on the battlefield in these texts, men stay with their mates. In *The Scarlet Cape*, Rixon exaggerates the compelling power of mateship, and combines it with the principle of egalitarianism. A colonel and his dresser are tending the wounded at Gallipoli when a bomb falls at his dresser’s feet. Without hesitating, the dresser kicks the bomb several feet away, and then deliberately throws his body on it. His wounds are terrible beyond description. In spite of the obvious danger to himself, the colonel stays by his subaltern’s side, leaving him only temporarily to ascertain the whereabouts of reinforcements. While the colonel is absent, the young man rips the bandages from his wounds in order to make the blood flow faster and shorten his life; then the colonel can be released from the responsibility of caring for him and can escape.

Another aspect of Bean’s mateship held that Anzacs would, with disregard for their own safety, stay by their wounded friends until they could be carried off the battlefield. The credo extended to stretcher-bearers who, according to Paterson’s dispatches, exhibited extreme selflessness for the wounded. Rixon’s Anzac, functioning temporarily as a stretcher-bearer, testifies to the endurance of these medical men by working dozens of hours without relief. Here, Rixon reflects Bean’s declaration that Australian bushmen were accustomed to working sixty to seventy hours without closing their eyes, especially when putting out raging bushfires. Rixon’s narrator implies that only Anzacs would have sufficient stamina

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to sustain wartime duties. The narrator overlooks, however, the fact that if stretcher-bearers were required for extensive periods of time, they would be conveying staggering numbers of wounded. But the waste of human life in these texts is never as significant as the intrepid feats Anzacs perform on the battlefield.

Women writers took their assessment of the fighting man’s character from Paterson and Bean and gleaned their knowledge of trench life and combat from Bean, too. Most instructive in their literary training was the immensely popular *The Anzac Book*, written by the men at Gallipoli, which Bean edited. According to Gerster, the collection was “something of a manifesto which sets out a thesis of Australian heroism. It is the first real unveiling of the ‘official’ literary portrait of the Digger.” David Kent writes that Bean wished above all to preserve the good name of the Anzac, and thus rejected any submission which might tarnish the soldier’s reputation. His editorial pen toned down much of the danger and allowed the spirit of adventure to predominate; he removed references to “death-dealing bullets,” to savage shellfire and snipers. Further, Bean rejected any notice of cowardice or malingering, and refused any writing which adopted a cynical view of war. Correspondingly, no writer in *The Anzac Book* makes anti-war statements; none questions the Gallipoli operation; none recounts the savagery and brutality the men experienced, and none depicts the landing as the heinous, bloody slaughter it was. What Bean did include led to a facile and misleading account of war, for the overall impression that emerges is that war is a slightly dangerous but exhilarating adventure. To be sure, there are minor discomforts like flies and fleas, but the soldiers recount these annoyances with ironic detachment. After reading *The Anzac Book*, I find it difficult to be critical of the way women portrayed war, for in their texts, they were merely mimicking what they believed were first-hand versions of combat. They had no way of knowing what Bean rejected, or how much editing and revising he had to do to make the war seem like a sporting event.

The landing at Anzac Cove is a crucial event that several women writers recreate in their texts. A.R. Perry’s account which opens *The Anzac Book* (and which Bean carefully sanitised), sets the tone the correspondent desired. Perry emphasises the importance of a hearty meal before battle; he gives a breezy testament to the high spirits of the men who, before disembarking, laugh and joke as though “picnicking”; he makes their wounds trifling (one Anzac receives a “bruising blow on the wrist”) and insists that the landing was a “great adventure” that he “would not have missed for all the money in the world.” In *The White

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Feather (which might have been more aptly titled It’s a Wonderful Life), Phillips apparently secures her depiction of the landing from Perry. Her Digger perceives the landing as a “wonderful business,” and observes that it’s “wonderful” to see all the ships. In a letter to his sweetheart, he describes the spirit of the men as follows:

It is wonderful to think that our infantry-men cleared the cliffs and hills as they did – and got so far inland. The Turks were waiting for us on the beach. Nearly all the men in the first boat were killed. The men in the other boats were fearfully angry at that, and as soon as they could they jumped out of the water, and rushed at them, yelling “Australia! Australia!” for all they were worth.69

The Anzac does not say that he would not have missed the landing for all the world, but he implies it. The exact phrase appears, though, in Stirling’s Soldiers Two70 and in Brookes’ Broken Idols.71 No women writers avouch to the soldiers’ fears or confusion, or to serious wounds. Reproducing the depiction of combat faithfully from The Anzac Book, women writers make of it a “game” which their fighting men tackled with great spirits.

Although admittedly writing for a juvenile audience, Grant Bruce was obviously influenced by The Anzac Book, describing war, especially in Jim and Wally, as if it were a “lark.” While in the trenches, her two soldier-figures engage in much discussion about the type of food they should consume before heading into battle. When not flashing their bayonets, the mates sit around the campfire telling bush yarns, playing board games, and recounting anecdotes about the Huns’ stupidity. Throughout the trilogy, Grant Bruce euphemises combat, describing it as “jolly good work” or “business,” and fighting against the Huns as “hating.”72 Taking their cues from Paterson, Dennis, and Bean, Australian women writers unfailingly obscure what the purpose behind war is – injuring and killing opponents,73 for there is little notice of serious affliction or death in these texts. Anzacs endure childish ailments like measles and mumps, or suffer the heartache of calloused hands and sore throats. Should they lose limbs, they are never downhearted, consistently maintaining their sunny dispositions. Occasionally soldiers refer to “inconveniences” such as being bombed – “Goodness me there was a mess”,74 says Stirling’s Anzac – but serious complaints of any nature are rare. More routinely, soldiers gripe about the weather, or about “attacks” from flies and fleas.

70 Stirling, Soldiers Two, 120.
71 Brookes, Broken Idols, 97.
72 Grant Bruce, Captain Jim, 23.
73 In The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World (New York: Oxford UP, 1985), Elaine Scarry argues that “the central activity of war is injuring, and the central goal is to out-injure the opponent. The fact of injuring tends to be absent from ... descriptions of war” (12); so, too, does the object of war, which is “to kill people” (61).
74 Stirling, Soldiers Two, 92.
On the rare instances in which Australian soldiers are seriously wounded, none yearns for a “Blighty”; all want to get well enough to return to battle, to take another crack at the bestial Boche. Australian women's novels are full of stories of men who won't give up fighting, no matter how serious their wounds are. Phillips' hero recounts an Anzac's tenacity at the Gallipoli landing as follows: “Shot in one hand – he kept on! Shot in the other – he kept on! His leg shattered – he kept on; till he fell from a crack on the head.” Additionally, one of Rixon's enlisted men refuses point blank to go home when he loses an arm, and, on account of his commission, cannot be forced to do so. Previously an extremely accurate but right-handed marksman, he teaches himself to shoot left-handed, and becomes almost as good as formerly. Throughout women writers' texts runs the notice that Australian men like to fight. Several overcome staggering obstacles just get into battle. One of Rixon's soldiers travels eight hundred miles (traversing the last two hundred on foot) to enlist. Rixon is likely parroting The Anzac Book, for in “Anzac Types,” Wallaby Joe rides a thousand miles over sun-scorched, drought-stricken plains to enlist. Once at the front, Anzacs eschew contemplation, preferring action to inaction. So anxious are Diggers to fight the Hun that they reject the opportunity to retreat to safety. Aside from taking the character of the Australian male directly from The Official Story and the casual AIF slang and accounts of trench warfare from The Anzac Book, women writers also reproduce phrases and incidents from Bean's writings and from C.J. Dennis' The Moods of Ginger Mick. One of the most faithful mimics is Mabel Brookes. In Broken Idols, Brookes' heroine argues that the men who enlisted in the first contingent possessed special qualities which set them apart from other recruits. Listen, now, to Bean: “The first fine rush to enlistment brought to the 1st Australian Division a class of men not quite the same as that which answered to any later call”. Further, in his Introduction to The Official History, Bean contends that “to the Allies, and to our own country among them, the war was of the nature of a crusade. Not merely was their independence threatened or invaded; a new creed was being thrust upon the world, a creed utterly repugnant to the humanity of Christian civilization". Now hear Brookes' character: “They [Anzacs] should look upon this war in the light of a Crusade. They are modern Crusaders fighting for the Christian ideals of the world". This is the only time the subject of religion comes up in these texts. Bean declared in The Official History that the Australian was “seldom religious in the sense in which the word is generally

76 Rixon, The Scarlet Cape, 205–6.
77 Rixon, The Scarlet Cape, 141.
78 Bean, The Anzac Book, 45.
79 Bean, Official, 43.
80 Bean, Official, xlvi.
81 Brookes, Broken Idols, 189.
used”. Bean and his writing were the Bible: all women's texts follow his sermons. He leaves religion off the agenda; so do they.

A careful reader, Brookes cribs an event directly from The Anzac Book. In “The Raid on London: A Modern Chronicle,” Private Pat Riot attends a London theatrical production. Before anyone else, he hears Zeppelins and, anticipating a panic, rises to his feet, and shouts to the patrons to keep their seats. Riot thereby prevents a riot. Brookes’ Anzac performs an identical feat, but with an added gibe at an English Tommy, who cowers in fright while the intrepid Australian calms the audience.

Brookes also plagiarises from Dennis’ The Moods of Ginger Mick. The account of the fugitive-turned-hero in On the Knees of the Gods echoes the storyline in Dennis’ extremely popular verse narrative. She shortens the episode considerably, but the similarities – both outlaws are reformed by the sensitive poets they meet in the trenches, and both die gloriously on the battlefield – are too marked to be coincidental. Brookes, reading Bean’s and Dennis’ prose hot off the press, wasted no time in replicating the incidents quickly in her texts. This emulation comes out of these writers’ adulation, their lack of critical thought for their male heroes, real or fictional. The desire to replicate, to enact a pseudo-male position, is a real mark of insecurity, of self-doubt, and speaks to the extent to which these writers had internalised the expectations that Australia and her heroes had of them.

Further evidence of women writers’ timidity about their subject matter arises in the number of times authority figures turn up in their texts. Brookes’ central character visits Egypt in Broken Idols, and is taken to meet “a famous Australian poet,” obviously Banjo Paterson, who crows that the Australian Light Horse performed an unprecedented feat in “droving” four hundred horses through the crowded streets of Cairo. Paterson’s proficiency with animals is greeted with “polite incredulity” by the British. If Paterson tells the story himself, it is “true,” believable; if Brookes transfers it into her woman character’s voice, the story lacks authenticity. Thus the appearance of Paterson adds weight and authority to her text. Moreover, Paterson is a man of the bush; Brookes contributes to the blurring of bush legend into Anzac legend by injecting him into her text. In The Scarlet Cape, Rixon has Bean as his historical self visit the trenches and observe the men trying to relieve their monotony. He writes a letter describing the soldiers’ activities, ultimately eulogising Rixon’s hero. But the inclusion of Bean himself represents the extent to which she wishes to validate her version of the trenches with the man who has validated his version of the trenches. By using him to authenticate her reading/writing, she reveals the extent to which women writers were actually replicating

82 Bean, Official, 6.
85 Brookes, Broken Idols, 106.
86 Brookes, Broken Idols, 107.
a male story. Bean’s presence in the novel is an act of mimicry, an attempt to substantiate the female-created story.

In making Anzacs super-heroes, tenacious and indefatigable good “mates” and savage fighters, Australian women writers were repeating the master narrative, retelling Bean’s “official” story. But their worship of the Anzac estranged women from their own experiences, for they could not reflect them while mimicking a man’s view. Women writers, forced to celebrate an event they could not attend, were unable to use their writing to record their frustration at being handed passive and trivial roles on the home front; unable to be the stars of their own home-front wars, they could only shoot blanks at patriarchy. In foregrounding male adventure, disseminating values they did not help formulate, they produced inauthentic art, and wrote dangerous and distorted views of war. More seriously, their writing reinforced traditional perceptions that women’s experiences are unworthy material for a national tradition, and ironically, in their adulation of the Anzac, they bolstered the power of the patriarchal culture which denounced them as other.

In loyally promoting the Anzac in their texts, Australian women writers lost the home-front war, the battle between the sexes, for as Patrocinio P. Schweickart asserts, women writers who tell men’s stories do not gain virile power; on the contrary, they double their oppression, for they continue to equate maleness with universality:

> Androcentric literature is all the more efficient as an instrument of sexual politics because it does not allow the woman reader to seek refuge in her difference. Instead, it draws her into a process that uses her against herself. It solicits her complicity in the elevation of male universality and, accordingly, the denigration of female difference in otherness without reciprocity.  

In extreme cases, as in the texts by Hain, Rixon, and Burge, they allowed their narratives to be completely usurped. Thus they fell prey to what Mark Schorer terms women’s ultimate anonymity, to be “storyless.” Elaine Showalter, analysing women writers who tell men’s stories, puts the case even more strongly: “to deny that they are affected by being women at all is self-delusion or self-hatred, the legacy of centuries of denigration of women’s art.” In succumbing to what Sharon O’Brien terms “combat envy,” Australian women writers facilitated their own domination, and left no path for future women (writers) to follow.

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88 Cited in Carolyn Heilbrun, Writing a Woman’s Life (New York: Ballantine, 1988), 12.
That so many Australian women writers meticulously replicate the narratives of the dominant patriarchal discourse is singular, and for this reason, I would argue that their writing is of unique literary interest. In making this claim, I differ from Jan Bassett, who contends that “[p]oetry and verse, personal narratives, and popular novels written by Australian women about the Great War are generally of much greater historical interest than literary significance”91 But no other sources inform readers of the extent to which women were oppressed in Australia during the war. Historians like McKernan document that Australian women failed to hunt up paying jobs; social historians like Patsy AdamSmith apprise the fervour with which women threw themselves into volunteer work. Only women fiction writers, especially those who efface their own stories, confirm how insignificant the dominant culture considered women to be. Only Australian women writers’ texts, which reveal women’s intense and cloying adulation of the Anzac, inform us how easy it was for the bastards to win the home-front war.

91 Jan Bassett, “‘Preserving the White Race’: Some Australian Women’s Literary Responses to the Great War”, *Australian Literary Studies* no. 12 (1985), 223. Bassett did not apparently notice the dominance of Anzacs in women writers’ texts, for she does not mention it in her article.