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Are There Voices Missing From the Anzac Legend?

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They also serve who only stand and wait.

John Milton, 1608–1674

The Anzac Legend has been built out of the qualities of resilience, courage and sacrifice displayed by the many young men who served in Gallipoli, Belgium, France and the Middle East in World War I. On the home front during this period, women, primarily mothers, dealt with the consequences of war – managing children and family responsibilities alone, shortages of resources and the grief and trauma of sending sons to war and losing loved ones as a result. In so doing, these mothers displayed the same qualities shown in battle by young men that forged the Anzac Legend, and are therefore just as relevant to it. The Anzac legend as it has evolved over time speaks with the voice of white European masculinity but has failed to acknowledge the voices of women, particularly mothers.

World War I had disastrous consequences, not only for those Australian men fighting in the war effort, but also mothers who endured the upheaval with dignity and pride on the home front. A prominent, typically male hero within the Anzac Legend is Padre T.P Bennet, who arrived at Gallipoli on 2 September 1915 and acted as chaplain; arranging burials, writing to families and comforting the men under shellfire. After evacuation from Gallipoli, he continued to comfort the men and families of those lost. He was, wrote Patsy Adam-Smith in *The Anzacs, 'the paragon among men'*.¹ Although Bennet is an archetypal male hero, he was motivated by the understanding of suffering of mothers at home. He acknowledged, '*war is about mothers searching for their sons amid the vast carnage.*'² Themes of endurance, courage and sacrifice have always been present in the story of the Anzacs, but the legend has developed to revolve around male bonding and mateship experienced in the trenches, for the most part disregarding the resilience displayed by those not fighting the physical battle, particularly mothers. The notion of 'sacrifice' has been reworked to mean sacrifice of men alone, and in doing so an integral part of the Anzac Legend has been lost.

The sacrifice of male soldiers was and is a fundamental element of the Anzac Legend, but sacrifice was also made by those mothers who surrendered their sons and subsequently endured great suffering,

¹ <http://www.slv.vic.gov.au/gallery/gallery.php?title=anzac-spirit>

² G Davison, J Hirst, S MacIntyre, *The Oxford Companion to Australian History* (Melbourne, Oxford Press 2001)

particularly if they were killed in battle. The suffering of these mothers should not be underestimated because it was not experienced in the trenches themselves; the relationship between a mother and her children is irrevocably strong. It has been noted that war strengthened the bond soldiers had with their mothers; *'as intense a focus for sentiment as mateship, and a closer, more established, more emotional and even more romantic tie than many marriages.'*³ The intensity of these bonds makes the severing of them all the more relevant to the Anzac Legend. The resilience of these women is epitomised in an excerpt of a letter from a Mrs Doig to her son, George – *'my heart yearns for a glimpse of my three dear brave boys. I can do so little for you, and say so little that I feel ashamed at the very little part I am doing in this great war.'*⁴ Sacrifice, suffering and the incredible resilience in the endurance of them are all foundations of the Anzac Legend, and these mothers whose sons were sent into battle displayed them, and are consequently relevant to the legend.

During the war and immediately thereafter, the crucial role of mothers to what would eventually become the Anzac Legend was acknowledged. Throughout the years 1914–1918 and directly following, the role of mothers in the war was firmly entrenched in both the media and celebrations. Motherhood was given an idealised status during the War and the 'sacrificial' mother was an archetypal symbol used as propaganda. When the numbers of volunteers plummeted, the Argus newspaper published a series on 'Mothers of Men' lauding the women who gave their sons such as Mrs Annie J. Williams who had four sons, all of whom served at Gallipoli.⁵ In 1918, the Daily Telegraph reported that Anzac mothers and widows were: *'clad in the deepest mourning, with eyes wet with tears, brave smiles forced upon grim set faces.'*⁶ During Armistice Day commemorations of 1920, the Centre for Soldiers' Wives and Mothers organised *'the route of the procession, which extended for a mile and a half [and] was crowded throughout, particularly with widows and bereaved mothers.'*⁷ The memorial gates at Woolloomooloo in Sydney represented the women's loss as each Anzac Day mothers and widows would gather to remember and commemorate the deaths of their sons and husbands. In 1925, motherhood was acknowledged in the commemorative celebrations: *'One could not study those sacred emblems and their messages without a lump rising in the throat. "In memory of my only son", and "In remembrance of my two sons" were samples of many similar tokens from "Mother".'*⁸ Through the original acknowledgement of the role of mothers in World War I it is apparent that they were and still are relevant to the Anzac Legend.

The Anzac Legend and Australian society have evolved in synchronisation, with the evolution of society leading to a focus on masculine mateship and male bonding during the battles themselves, disregarding the crucial role of mothers. The changing nature of the perception of the 'sacrificial' mother became clear in Melbourne in 1938, when a number of women were reported to have 'intruded' into the dawn service. Towards the end of the procession, nearly 100 women joined the double file of returned soldiers. *The Age* reported the dawn service as a male preserve into which women had no right to enter: *'Women have invaded walks of life, manners and customs ... and man has been the last to question their right. There are times, however, when he feels impelled to voice an objection. Such an occasion was the Dawn ceremony at the Shrine of Remembrance yesterday. In spite of many requests that the observance should be exclusive to men, several hundred women, singly, in groups and with male companions, attended an observance that is peculiarly that not merely of men, but of returned men.'*⁹ The mothers' active role of giving in the war was superseded

3 Richard White (1988) War and Australian Society, in Michael McKernan & M. Browne (Eds.) *Australia: two centuries of war and peace*, (Sydney: Australian War Memorial and Allen & Unwin).

4 Letter from Mother to George, 'Sunday Evening', n.d., MS 10229-1, MSB 193, George Cameron Doig Papers, La Trobe Library, SLV.

5 Argus, 12 July 1916, p. 12.

6 *Daily Telegraph*, 26 April 1918, p. 5.

7 *Ibid.*, 12 November 1920, p. 5.

8 *Ibid.*, 27 April 1925, p. 5.

9 *Age*, 27 April 1938, p. 2.

by a sense of ‘intrusion’ by women. The changing attitudes to the mothers who had lost their sons demonstrate that concepts such as ‘sacrifice’ are dynamic and change according to the state of society. The evolution of society led to a lack of acknowledgement of the role of mothers in the war, although the continuous progression Australia has made in gender equality makes it possible for a wider range of ‘heroes’ to now be acknowledged.

During the war that shaped Australia, mothers on the home front displayed the same qualities that the Anzac soldiers showed in battle. They made great sacrifice, experienced terrible suffering and showed immeasurable resilience. At one time they were acknowledged, but the changing role of women led to the loss of this acknowledgement. The Anzac legend as it has evolved speaks with the voice of white European masculinity but has failed to acknowledge the voices of women, particularly mothers. Australia was once and is now capable of acknowledging a wider range of heroes, including these mothers.

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