

Women, War Effort and Knitting for the Anzac Legend

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For this Symposium I wanted to take a broad look at what women were doing in war-time Tasmania. So, and in order to avoid crossing over into any of the papers we will hear today, I have considered some general aspects – comfort funds, fund-raising, general employment – in two World Wars, to demonstrate women's participation in the War effort.

Women worked for hospital auxiliaries, the Red Cross, St John Ambulance. Branches of such organisations were involved in fund-raising for a variety of war-related causes. They worked for the Red Cross during both World Wars, for example on social events such as the Red Cross Ball. Ella Dudley, nurse, who married John Ramsay, worked for the Red Cross during both Wars. She received a Certificate in recognition of five years of 'devoted service under the Australian Red Cross Society during the Great War 1914-1919' and the Certificate of Service 'in recognition of faithful service rendered to the Australian Red Cross Society during the World War of 1939-1945'.

During the First World War, the Voluntary Aid Detachments (VAD) were set up. These consisted of two sections: the 'first' or 'mobile class' or workers who could be called on in war time to give their services to other countries. (According to a 1935 newspaper item, there was only one such person from Launceston during World War One, and that person went to England) The second group was referred to as the 'immobile class'. Certain requirements were laid down for acceptance for service in the Voluntary Aid Detachments. Requirements stated that:

None other than fully qualified nurses are required for service abroad, and the women volunteers who are now being called for, are needed for service in Tasmania, and, for the most part, in their own special districts. Preference is given to those in possession of the first aid and home nursing certificates issued by the St John Ambulance Association. Those women who cannot produce these (on application) must undertake to do so within six months. The term volunteer aid signifies that such services are given, all Red Cross efforts being on a similar basis. It therefore follows that volunteers must comprise individuals who can spare the time for this humanitarian and educative work. If no adequate number of names are sent in without delay, it will be possible to organise two more classes of instruction this year, viz. one in first aid on Tuesday evenings under the honorary instruction of Dr John Ramsay and one in home nursing and hygiene under the honorary instruction of Dr Douglas Smith. Those desirous of being enrolled for these classes should forward by post full names and addresses to Mrs Styant-Browne, Lyttleton-Street and those desirous of joining voluntary aid detachments to the office of the Red Cross Society in the Tourists' Bureau. ¹

The VAD operated in Launceston between the two World Wars. During the Spanish Influenza epidemic 'the remnant' of the VAD second or immobile class who served in Launceston during the Great War got together and members helped in nursing and in providing nourishment for patients., and later continued their voluntary work with members carrying out work within reach of their own homes.² Before they could be admitted to the immobile class women had to have their first aid and home nursing certificates or be prepared to gain them within a year. Some of the variety of direction in which they may be employed according to their avocations in civil life can be obtained from the official list which mentioned pharmacists, ward orderlies, cooks, clerks, hospital store keepers, motor ambulance drivers, laboratory assistants, optical assistants and telephone operators.³ To ensure that a detachment could be ready for service at any time, members had to meet for practice once monthly under the supervision of a trained nurse. They also had to pass an annual efficiency test and attend an annual inspection. Ivy Hart, 83 Elphin Rd, saw the VAD as 'quite a separate

body to the St John Ambulance Association'.⁴ Even nineteen or so years after the end of the Great War, continuing the existence of the VAD was seen as important. At a talk to the VAD in Burnie (formed in 1935) around 1937, Colonel Sleeman, referring to the prospect of another war breaking out, informed his audience, 'I don't think we were ever nearer war than we are today'.⁵

Knitting

All over Australia women and girls knitted garments for servicemen. The Australian Comforts Fund (ACF) Tasmanian Division⁶ oversaw the knitting of such items and issued printed patterns for specified garments. The Tasmanian Division of the Australian Comforts Fund produced a 'Guide to Knitting' booklet (dated April 1941) for 'Standard Socks, Khaki stocking, Garters, Spiral Stockings (Navy), Balaclava Cap, Long-Sleeve Pullovers, Scarf Mittens, Cap, Airman's Neck Muff, Airman's Woollen Gloves for Active Service'. The General Directions specified that 'to ensure good results choose your wool and needles carefully, according to whether you wish to turn out a heavy or medium weight article'. Whether to appease experienced knitters or to reassure the less accomplished the guidelines continued: 'Knitters will realise that the following instructions are given for the average knitter ...'

Separate clubs or affiliates associated with the Australian Comfort Fund kept records of names of knitters, materials required or used and of garments completed. The Jollity Club Branch, based in Tamar Street, Launceston, of the Australian Comfort Fund kept a list of names to whom wool was distributed, what members knitted and when garments were handed in. Knitters of this Branch included Mesdames Hart, Knight, Watchhorn, Buchanan, Peacock, Brownlee, Ramsay, Howe, Tabart, Faulkner, Bridley and Claridge. At least one member of this group, Ivy Hart, was married to a Great War veteran. Her husband, Oscar Hart, was an AIF Original, who had seen action as an artilleryman (gunner) in Gallipoli and the Western Front. She would have recognised the value of such work to the morale of servicemen – and service women.

The Comfort Fund allocated the materials. Lists of materials needed for particular garments were also kept. A balaclava needed four ounces, that is two skeins, of wool, one set of number 9 needles; points at both ends and a pair of longer ones with heads. Pullovers required five skeins, Sea Pullovers twelve skeins of oiled wool and mittens two skeins. Garments and materials were also donated. The first garments returned at the Jollity Club's second meeting in August 1940 amounted to twenty-four plus four donated; a total of twenty-eight items. The total for the first year reached 244 garments and in the following year 1942-43, 214 garments. Whether enthusiasm was waning or whether due to war time shortages, the number had dropped to 142 for the following year 1943-44.⁷

Fund-raising

The First World War

The aim of the Red Cross in Australia at the time was 'to aid Australian Sick and Wounded Soldiers'. In towns around Tasmania, Red Cross groups worked on a vast range of activities to raise funds. A series of public lectures was held at Latrobe, choir recitals at Lilydale, sacred concerts, refreshment booths at regattas, concerts, including a Madame Nellie Melba concert in Launceston (3 July 1915), fairs, exhibitions of Red Cross work, fruit auctions, afternoon (matinee) teas. In addition to their own fund-raising events, Red Cross women assisted other groups. 'The ladies of the Red Cross dispensed afternoon tea' at the Commercial Travellers' city procession and gymkhana at the Showground in October 1914. The tireless work and the extent of the honorary secretary in Launceston, Miss AE Miller's services to the Red Cross during the Great War were recognised when she was awarded 'the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire' in March 1918.

For France and the French Red Cross

Another fund, the French Red Cross Fund provided a further example of the fund-raising efforts of women, and of women in executive positions with Mrs JG Edwards of Montpellier Street, Hobart, as President and Mrs TK Robson as the northern representative. Their fund-raising efforts replicated those of other associations. For example in June 1918 Launceston members of this Fund organised a button day. Not only were buttons to be sold but various stalls were also organised, including four by Mrs Charles Youl, Symmons Plains. The Catholic Ladies Club also undertook to distribute and sell buttons for this occasion.

When a Miss Collins set about organising a concert in aid of the French Red Cross for Verdun Day commemorations, the British Red Cross declined to help. She was not discouraged however. She and her committee wrote to the Launceston Mayoress and nineteen other prominent women in Launceston. The Mayoress responded, called a meeting of these and other prominent women in the district. Through the combined efforts of the women the event in aid of the French Red Cross eventually took place.

The Belgian Relief Fund was one of the major funds during the Great War, with fund-raising events such as the Belgium Jumble Fair, Belgian Flag Day as well as ongoing work in the streets with flower and button selling. Other organisations were always willing to assist in the fund-raising efforts. The Mother Superior and nuns of the Presentation Convent and girls at Sacred Heart and St Mary's Schools ran a garden fete towards the 'relief of the starving Belgians' and raised £86 12s and 10d.

With the exception of the British Red Cross, there appears to have been a general willingness to share resources and for groups to assist others with similar aims, as in the case of the French Red Cross mentioned above. Many organisation raised funds with the intention of dividing the proceeds among other groups for distribution to the areas of need. The joint honorary secretaries of the AIF lounge in Elizabeth St, Hobart, Edith Peacock and Miss Jessie Sorell, wrote to the Launceston Mayor asking for donations of straight backed chairs for the AIF lounge. On the basis that members of the forces came from all parts of Australia and could be stationed anywhere at any time, the request was granted.

One seemingly unusual fund was The Purple Cross Service, which provided 'Aid for Troop Horses', stating the Service 'does for Sick and Wounded Horses precisely what the Red Cross does for men'. A group of women in Launceston, including Mrs George Reid of *Lumeah*, Mulgrave Street, and Daisy Coogan (at the time in October 1917, Acting Mayoress) were keen to assist in this cause and appear to have been in contact with the Victorian branch. (With the exception of the Chairman, the Honorary Treasurer and one committee members, all Victorian Executive and Committee members were women: the President, (Lady Hennessy) three Vice-Presidents (including Lady J Monash), the Honorary Secretary and eleven Committee members.



In

Ada Collins (1865-1945), Emily Collins MBE (1870-1934) and Jane Parker (died 1924).

These three ladies worked hard raising funds, knitting and cooking for the War Effort. (Photos taken by RJ Nicholas for the Tasmanian International Exhibition, Launceston, 1891, courtesy of Launceston Local Studies Collection, Tasmanian Archive and Heritage Office)

Launceston, Mrs Reid and Mrs Coogan, were among the organisers of a procession of horses in June 1918 as part of an effort to organise a 'Purple Cross Day', the date, 16 November 1917, already having been granted by the War Council.

While clubs and associations operated to assist the War effort, some women put in individual efforts to raise money for the cause. Miss Smith of *Pleasant View* St Leonards, opened the Tipperary Tea Rooms at *Pleasant View* every Saturday during the summer months, with the proceeds to go to the Red Cross and Belgian Relief Funds.

Mrs N Turner, wife of a Commercial Travellers' Association member, dressed as a wounded soldier in head and arm bandages, collected £10 in Launceston streets for the 'Australia Day' Fund.⁸ Joyce Baird was Honorary Secretary of a group organising a Patriotic Entertainment at the National Theatre in May 1917 and in August 1917, Miss Hogg of the Soldiers' Christmas Box Fund applied to members to sell Soldiers Christmas Boxes on Barclay's Corner in Brisbane Street. Mrs L Cleaver and Miss FM Thomson promoted a fair and applied for free use of the Albert Hall to raise funds to 'provide Christmas puddings for our soldier boys at the Front', while Mrs EM King organised a War Bridge Card Party in June 1916.

Fund-raising and War effort activities during the Second World War differed somewhat in their aims from that of the Great War. While funds raised during the First World War were generally intended to assist members of the AIF, they were also intended to aid those, such as Belgians citizens and French widows and children suffering as a direct result of the War on their soil. During the Second World War, with the war closer to Australian shores, activities were carried out and funds raised more with a home focus, that is, with the intention of supporting members of the Australian forces and assisting the Australian Government's effort at home.

A pupil at the all-girls Collegiate School in Hobart, Beth McDowell Downie Roberts, was invited to a Prisoners of War Fund dance at the RSSAILA Rooms in September 1942. This raised £22 in aid of the Red Cross Prisoners of War Fund. The Prefects' Jubilee Dance organised by four Collegiate leavers in aid of the Comfort Fund, and in August 1945 there was an AIF Ball. At least one Collegiate School House had a War Savings Group and the Collegiate School Junior Red Cross Circle, which had nearly thirty members, sent a parcel in second term 1942 containing knitted clothing for victims of bombing to Red Cross House as well as contributions to the Patriotic Funds including: the Special May Appeal £5 10s; Red Cross (sale of calendars) £3 12s; Prisoner of War Fund £1 16s 3d; the Penny Ambulance Fund 15 shillings.

The 111th Australian General Hospital (AGH) which was formed at Campbell Town on 25 November 1943 provided employment for women and men. Beth McDowell Downie Roberts joined the 111th AGH as a nursing orderly. The 111th produced an occasional magazine, the *111th AGH Newsreel*.⁹ Showing a drawing of a nurse on the front cover, the publication provides insights into aspects of life at the AGH. It appears to have been like a large family to staff and patients alike. The A.A.W.S. and A.W.A.S. social notes and gossip pages provide a glimpse into life there. The women who married while serving at the AGH appeared mostly to move away from the Hospital. When Polly Miller 'who lately returned from the mud and mess of New Guinea' married, 'both the A.A.M.W.S and the 2/12 Infantry Battalion have lost a worthy member'.¹⁰ 'Pop', after her marriage to Lyall Lodge, left for Tunbridge on a 'Horse Transport laden with presents from the patients'. Dr 'Spring' Reid departed after her marriage was 'greatly missed from the fireside coffee circle'.

Just as Ella Dudley, later Mrs John Ramsay, had been a young woman working in nursing during the 1914-1918 Great War and just as Mrs Ivy Hart as the wife of a Great War veteran had seen the effects of war and dedicated much of their time to assisting the War effort, so too did Mrs SR Robinson of Mowbray. She lost her

husband to the Great War. When War was declared in September 1939, she and her sister wasted no time setting up the Mowbray War Service Fund to support servicemen and women who came from the Mowbray area. Soldiers and others appreciated the women's efforts and their appreciation is revealed in the stack of thank you notes and some lengthy letters sent to the Fund workers during the course of the war.

The percentage of women working in some male-dominated areas of activity was barely detectable. The Northern Tasmanian Advisory Committee (Board) for Military Hospitals and Convalescent Homes, which had been established in 1915, concerned itself with facilities such as beds, heaters, wire mattresses and flyscreens through the District Staff Officer of Works based at Anglesea Barracks, Hobart, and the Minister for Defence in Melbourne. The board consisted solely of men, only one of whom had been a serving soldier. Women served on the general committee in an informal capacity and did other work.

The proportion of women to men working in the medical field was much greater than in other areas. The 12th Military Hospital, (the 12th AGH), Launceston, in October 1916 had twenty-eight patients, six nursing staff (presumably including the matron), five ward maids, five orderlies and Sergeant, three in the office and four 'Surgeon Majors', that is eleven, in a staff of twenty-two, a rate of fifty per cent.

By late 1917 to early 1918 the urgent need for additional accommodation for 'Invalid Soldiers' caused concern. It was 'quite usual for 95 persons to be present at the Hospital for meals and that 30 have to sleep elsewhere,' wrote the Advisory Committee to the Minister for Defence. However, there was no mention of any need for more staff. Perhaps female volunteers were already filling the need.¹¹

While women were busy on the home front and their contribution to the war effort absolutely vital and generally recognised, (particularly during the Second World War) they were not always included or recognised at the 'top levels'. When the Commonwealth Government organised its War Census in August-September 1915, lengthy rationale and information sheets – foolscap size – signed, or more correctly, stamped in large letters, 'WM Hughes, Attorney-General', were sent to the following groups of people: Editors etc (War Census Form WCF) No. 32, Friendly Societies etc (WCF No. 11), Mayors & Presidents of Shires etc (WCF No. 14), Clergymen etc (WCF Form No. 33). This contrasted with the very brief letter sent to 'Women's Organisations' (WCF No. 50) which offered no explanations and was signed not by WM Hughes but in standard type by the Commonwealth Statistician, GH Knibbs.¹² Even so, some women were eager to help in the distribution of the forms. Nellie Robson, secretary of the Bass Division of the Tasmanian Liberal League, and Mrs Mary (or May) Robson were among the women who wrote to the Launceston Mayor offering their services for the Census.

Occasionally women's efforts were pushed or brushed aside. But the women persisted. When, in November 1915, the Evandale Red Cross Society offered the Launceston City Council two electric heaters for the use of returned soldiers at the AGH (Base) Hospital in Launceston, they were informed that there was no need as the City Council was taking care of the matter. However, when no heaters had been forthcoming by June 1916, winter, Nellie Hawley followed the matter up, politely demanding that (we) 'would like to hear further from you on the matter as we know that the men suffer considerably from the cold.'

Mrs RL [Jane] Parker was a member of the Advisory Board of the State War Council. As such she used to meet boats and trains with returning servicemen and visited twice weekly sick and wounded men in the 12th AGH in Launceston. In 1919 she lodged

complaints about two matters with the Department of Defence in Melbourne: one about lack of repairs at the 12th AGH; the other about nurses having to attend patients with venereal disease (VD) against the instructions of the Officer in Charge. Needless to say the Acting Secretary of the Department of Defence sought to reassure the Honorary Secretary of the Hospital Advisory Board in Launceston that both matters were in hand and that if any VD cases were attended by nurses, 'it was against his instructions'. That appears to have been the end of the matter.

As it became clear by July 1918 that the Great War was drawing to an end, repatriation became the subject of discussion and consideration for Commonwealth Government and local authorities. Women do not appear to have been (formally, at least) included or involved in the formation of local committees set up under the auspices of the Department of Repatriation. The Commonwealth Minister, Senator ED Millen, appointed two nominees for the municipality of Launceston, JM Heritage, solicitor, and AW Joscelyne, accountant, to assist in 'securing a representative Committee'.¹³ No women were appointed to the Launceston committee. The final committee consisted of men only (at least including a military man, Captain James Ernest Newland VC, Military Officer, of 96 High Street.

The Second World War presented different circumstances in Australia. Although in some areas of employment women continued to be in the minority, the demands of the Second World War required the organised and widespread participation of women in the workforce. While, for example, only one of the eleven officers photographed as late as 1945 at the 111th AGH at Campbell Town was a woman, the Commonwealth Government quickly realised in the early 1940s that women's labour would be needed in a wide range of occupations to fill the vast number of vacancies left by men enlisting for active service. There was also the recognition that to free up still more men for service, even more women would be needed to fill their places.

When a census of persons, vehicles and available accommodation in and around Launceston in early 1942 was ordered for the purposes of formulating an evacuation plan by the Civil Defence Legion for the city in case of attack, approximately thirty-seven young women and nine men were keen to participate in distributing forms and assisting residents in filling them out. There appears to have been also an additional fourteen female and two male office staff employed on this task. The women and men concerned were thanked on behalf of the Launceston City Council for 'the valuable' and 'important work' they carried out. 'It was an undertaking of considerable magnitude and was well organised and completed.'¹⁴ And no doubt that when the order was sent out for an inventory of crockery, cutlery and cooking utensils held by churches, halls, etc and that could be made available in the event of evacuation came through, women did the counting.

Under the Commonwealth's Department of War Organisation of Industry, employing women in former male workplaces involved some obvious building changes. When a female clerk replaced a male member of the Stores Staff the Launceston City Council made a building application under the National Security (Building Control) Regulation 31A, to provide lavatory accommodation at the Corporation Stores in Charles Street. This involved a new partition, installation of a WC pan, hand basin etc. at the cost of £53 16s 6d plus £4 for sewerage and using second hand materials.¹⁵

Grief

And finally a note on grief as it affected women. Relatives of men wounded, killed, missing or held as prisoners of war found themselves grieving or waiting desperately for news, any news, about the fate of their soldier. Mothers waited, hoping against hope that 'missing' meant their son was still alive. Widows with children wondered how

they would manage without the bread winner. Caroline Ridge lived at Boat Harbour, but was staying with her sister in Innes Street, Launceston, when the news came through that her son had been killed in the first dreadful day at Bullecourt in 1917. Caroline spent the next three years trying to get her son's belongings – his Bible, his diary and a German belt – only to be told that they had disappeared when some bags were stolen in Cairo on the way back to Australia. Hers was a common story as mothers and widows wrote desperate letters, sometimes corresponding with government departments for several years in vain in their heart-rending attempts to gain some sort of closure over the loss of a son, sons or a husband or brother. Some families managed to travel to the site of their son's grave after the War. Most, of course, were not able to go to the other side of the world and had to deal with not ever being able to attend their son's grave or memorial. Some women (and men) became so overwhelmed by their grief that they were institutionalised in mental asylums.

The experience and contribution of women to War effort in Australia has not been part of the traditional Anzac legend. Yet as the Commonwealth Government during both Wars called on the population to contribute to the War effort, women did more than knit socks and pack parcels for soldiers fighting at the front. They formed an impressive body of volunteers and carried out vital paid and unpaid work as they sought not only to support the fighting force, but also to maintain the Home Front.

¹ *The Daily Telegraph*, 4 Nov 1915.

² *The Examiner*, 7 February 1935, QVMAG CHS 59 7/1.

³ *The Examiner*, 7 February 1935.

⁴ Correspondence, 11.12.1937, QVMAG CHS 59 7/1.

⁵ *The Examiner*, undated cutting in QVMAG CHS 109 8/8.

⁶ QVMAG CHS 59 7/3.

⁷ QVMAG CHS 59 7/3.

⁸ QVMAG LCC 2 Patriotic Funds – Miscellaneous.

⁹ The May 1945 issue was Vol. 1, No. 3. in QVMAG CHS 110 4/1.

¹⁰ *Newsreel*, Vol. 1, No. 3, pp. 13-14.

¹¹ QVMAG LCC2 File Military Hospital, Correspondence, 12 March 1918.

¹² LCC 3, Correspondence, The War Census 1915.

¹³ QVMAG LCC 3, File, Repatriation. Correspondence 25 July 1918.

¹⁴ Launceston City Council to Mr TA Lay, QVMAG LCC 3 57/1.

¹⁵ QVMAG LCC 3, 56/4.