

Place and Masculinity in the Anzac Legend

BRYAN DWYER, DEAKIN UNIVERSITY

The Australian landscape has been a major factor in the various constructions of masculinity in Australian fiction about the First World War. In the reproduction of gender ideology it has been used to promote exemplars, to marginalise and exclude alternative versions of masculinity, and to subordinate the feminine. And to the extent that fiction challenges social constructions of gender, it reinterprets these relationships between human beings and their landscape.

The familiar Australian military legend of the manly Anzac is largely derived from the romantic imagery of the Australian bush. The events at Gallipoli in 1915 allowed writers, both English and Australian, to associate the Anzac with the rugged bushman who was tough and athletic enough to cope with the hardships of warfare. According to the diary of official Australian historian Charles Bean, 'the wild, pastoral life of Australia, if it makes rather wild men, makes superb soldiers'. The Englishman in contrast 'lacked the resourcefulness required for any activity in open country' (Fewster 83). In the *Official History*, soldiers in the trenches at Gallipoli are even likened to farm hands, their officers to station managers. Such accounts of the war owed much to an Australian literary tradition which romanticised rural experience, in a society which was becoming rapidly industrialised.

The bush tradition was almost entirely masculine in its imagery. When the troops endured a so-called 'baptism of fire' and were hailed by the English press as 'a race of athletes' Australian nationhood was expressed in masculine experience—and in a particular version of masculine experience, constructed in a language derived from a unique combination of historical forces. Men were commonly portrayed as 'ungendered representatives of humanity' (Johnson 12). The 'ungendered norm' was equated with male experience. Male experience, in turn, was equated with a romanticised, even nostalgic, representation of the warrior.

A particular construction of hegemonic masculinity relies on the promotion of the exemplar, the marginalisation of non-exemplary men, and the subordination of the feminine. These strategies are characteristic of the earlier literature, both fictional and non-fictional. In the patriotic rhetoric of the day, anyone who was not an Anzac, especially an eligible man who had chosen not to volunteer, could not claim the same manliness. Anyone who could not be an Anzac, a woman or a child or an aging man, could not claim the same degree of patriotism. Such a person was marginalised or subordinated within the complex cultural conditions of intersecting discourses (Cranny-Francis 16).

Fiction has played a significant role in this complex process. The narrator of Oliver Hogue's 1916 collections of stories *Trooper Bluegum at The Dardanelles*, Private James Bluegum, is one of the Light Horsemen, the most glamorous of soldiers, and perhaps also the most self-consciously masculine. He claims the stereotypical qualities of the confident, competent bushman.

In a huge marquee in Rosebery Park were a score of virile young Australians stripped for the fray. Sun-tanned bushmen they were for the most part, lean and wiry, with muscles rippling over their naked shoulders. Splendid specimens—

strong but not too heavy, rarely topping thirteen stone ... these were ideal Light Horsemen ... We reckoned we could ride as well, if not better than, any body of men in the world. (Hogue 19)

In Egypt the men are self-conscious of their superiority to the infantry where 'the heavier men' have been sent, literally the pedestrian soldiers.

The exemplar's dominant attribute is his willingness to fight, a capacity inextricably linked to rural manliness. His battle cry is in the form of a bush ballad:

We're rounding up the bushmen from the Darling to the sea
And we'll go marching through Germany (27).

Bluegum hopes that 'we would have the laugh at the other chaps if we could have first smack at the unspeakable Turk' (29).

Another major attribute of the Anzac is his sexual attractiveness. The Australian bush tradition's values of competence and improvisation apply neatly to sexual adventurism. In Gladys Adeline Hain's 1917 *The Coo-ee Contingent*, Queensland Jack has acquired his skill as a lover 'on Charters Towers'. As he escapes the strictures of the camp he is, predictably, on horseback: 'Plumed and spurred, riding his magnificent charger into the forbidden town' (9).

Historian Bill Gammage has noted the remarkable dominance of the Light Horsemen in the public imagination, in both fiction and non-fiction, although the campaigns the Light Horse fought, at Gallipoli (where they served without their horses) and in Palestine, were relatively minor both in the context of the war, and in terms of Australian casualties (Gammage 165). The imagery of heroic athletes and cavaliers, images more in keeping with the nineteenth century than the twentieth, survived Gallipoli and Palestine because the artillery bombardments in those campaigns were not severe enough to obliterate the romance of the individual soldier, as was the case in France. A major attribute of manliness, in this literature, is the capacity to dominate territory, precisely what cannot be done in the trenches.

The exemplary is usually contrasted to images of a subordinate and marginal masculinity. For example, Bluegum notes that in England there are 'many young men still in mufti' while 'thousands and thousands of miles away, two hundred thousand Australians ... rally to the Flag' (Hogue 217). Common motifs of marginal masculinity are the English factory worker, a puny and an incompetent soldier, the arrogant and effete English officer, the padre, unskilled in outdoor work, and the eligible, the man who might have volunteered but chose not to; represented in *The Coo-ee Contingent* as a city-dweller, cowardly in avoiding risk, greedy in taking other men's jobs, and lecherous in seducing women. Queensland Jack, in contrast, the text suggests, can provide what Egyptian husbands can't provide. 'It's love they want, and mostly they're married to the blokes that were saved from the Ark' (10).

William Baylebridge's *An Anzac Muster* (1921) continues to define the exemplary masculine in terms of the male bushman/warrior. The muster of the title is a meeting of returned men on the property of a squatter. They meet outdoors, 'in a retired gully' where, they notice, the land is reminiscent of Anzac cove. Baylebridge's text is full of images of exemplary manliness, comparisons to shirkers and English officers, and denigration of women.

Indeed the misogyny of *An Anzac Muster* is startling. The squatter declares himself ready to join the muster, telling the men, 'I am no woman' (Baylebridge 66). The female characters are mainly the sexually frustrated wives of English officers. To commit adultery is to 'ride in the saddle the gods lent to another' (188). The publisher of

the 1962 edition recommends the book declaring that it is 'not for school-girls'.

There are notable comparisons between the landscape and the woman. Both are alien, mysterious, either passive or treacherous, needing to be subjugated, conquered, to be fulfilled by the masculine. As Kay Schaffer observes, what is devalued in this literature is feminised domesticity and lack of combat experience. And the rural myth, Schaffer has argued, relied upon a construction of the landscape as 'a feminine other against which the bushman-as-hero is constructed' (7).

Looking upon this country again, the Squatter thought it indeed fair beyond others—his country. Here, where the Earth, treeless except for small belts of timber, uncovered her breast to the close embrace of the sun. (Baylebridge 249)

This feminisation of the land is not consistent (elsewhere the text likens the returned soldiers to the soil) but it serves to reinforce the insistence upon human experience as masculine, and human contact with the land as the kind of relationship a single, lonely, melancholy man might have with a desirable woman. In a landscape notorious for its hardship, this madonna image reveals a particular strategy which Michelle Barrett has identified in the reproduction of gender ideology as 'compensation': the use of 'imagery and ideas that tend to elevate the 'moral value' of women' (91). The technique is evident in the familiar binary of the virtuous woman of elevated moral value and her opposite, the stereotypical whore. The binary of the loyal and the treacherous woman is prominent in the Australian literature about the First World War.

Such identification of landscape with a problematic femininity is a major characteristic of D.H. Lawrence's 1922 novel *Kangaroo*, one of the first novels of Australian life to challenge the nexus between militarism and masculinity. In *Kangaroo* the alleged Australian national type is not a heroic bushman but an apathetic city-dweller, whose moral turpitude can be attributed largely to the landscape, and therefore to the feminine.

Richard Somers, the narrator of *Kangaroo*, wants nothing to do with militarism, or socialist solutions (Europe has been corrupted by them), but he flirts with the fascist order offered by the secret organisation of ex-diggers led by Kangaroo. But Somers's romantic vision of a new society dominated by non-military masculine exemplars like himself has to overcome the hypnotic effect of the Australian landscape.

The sky is open above you, and the air is open around you. Not the old closing in of Europe. But what then? The *vacancy* of this freedom is almost terrifying. (32)

In Australia there seems to Somers to be 'A colonial hopelessness', 'No inner life, no high command, no interest in anything, finally' (33). The men may be warriors but to the authoritarian Kangaroo, Australians (again men are presented as the ungendered norm) are 'marvellous and manly and independent and all that, outside. But inside, they are not. When they're quite alone, they don't exist' (146).

In 1962 Harry Heseltine identified this melancholy vision in Australian literature, in which male sociability 'makes bearable the final emptiness, the nothingness of the honestly experienced inner life' (92). He went on to declare that:

Our 19th Century writers skirted around what they instinctively guessed to be their true subject, the individual human being confronting the primal energies at the centre of his being on the stage of the Australian continent. Instead they took refuge in the defence of sociable yarning with a group of mates. (95)

In this interpretation, the myth of the egalitarian bushman/warrior disguises a more melancholy pre-occupation. The land is dangerous and treacherous, exactly as the women are represented by Lawrence. To Somers, Australia is a place of male lotus-eaters and female sirens. Somers has to escape the seduction of Australian apathy and the landscape, in much the same way as he has to escape the power of a lover. In *Kangaroo* the land is, to borrow a phrase from Miriam Dixson, 'like the body of an unloved woman' (23). For Lawrence's alter ego, Somers, to stay in Australia would be, 'like giving in to a woman' (382).

Vance Palmer's 1932 novel *Daybreak* and Martin Boyd's *When Blackbirds Sing* represent the land as innocent, and as providing an opportunity for men to be innocent. But despite the rejection of militarism, masculinity is still constructed against the metaphor of the land as 'a passive, pliant virgin awaiting consummation', to quote Schaffer (8).

David Malouf's fiction about the Australian experience of war is a conscious re-working of the Anzac legend. It is re-worked in at least three ways; the contradictions of previous exemplars are exposed, the formerly marginal figures are central to the work, and the politics of gender are exposed. And it is all done in terms of landscape.

When I took up the subject in *Fly Away Peter* I was again dealing essentially with the present, attempting to create (in terms of present feeling and understanding) a document that the past had neglected to pass on to us. It was a work of restitution. (ALS 267)

The novels explore 'how the elements of a place and our inner lives cross and illuminate one another'; and 'How we mythologise spaces and through that mythology (a good deal of it inherited) find our way into a culture' ('A First Place' 261).

But in Malouf, the landscape is not used to construct the masculine as an un-gendered norm. Malouf writes about men as men. Some people might see this as a way of privileging the male experience, of normalising it, but I think that the opposite occurs; it is the very contingency of each individual's life which is explored.

First the exemplar of military masculinity is exposed. In *The Great World* Billy Keen's adventurism is his only way of defining himself.

Billy Keen had run off to France when he was fifteen ... he continued to live in spirit, since he was barely out of his lively boyhood, at that intensified pitch of daring, terror and pure high-jinks that would forever be his measure of what a man's life should be when he is at full stretch. (13)

A poor father and a worse husband, Billy is doomed to live forever in a restless no-man's-land, embittered by feminine domesticity. He advises his son Digger to avoid women: 'I mean they got *their* world, son, and we got *ours*, an' the two are chalk and cheese' (25). He is unable to recapture any strong sense of self. For Billy, like Vic, 'change, risk, action, were essential.' Unlike the sympathetic characters such as Digger and Jim, who develop a strong sense of personal identity, they have, the narrative tells us, 'never got properly hold of the world' (36).

Malouf exposes the politics of these two worlds of masculine and feminine, very real worlds of physical presence in places. Digger's mother and sister are confined to the house while the men discover their entities by travelling. Jenny complains that, as a consequence, 'Men had mates. She had never even had a friend.' (6). In *Fly Away Peter* this capacity to negotiate space is revealed as an essential component of gender. Jim Saddler, mulling over his dilemma of whether to enlist, meets a 'warm-sandy-

headed girl' in a Brisbane hotel (37). She envies his discretion to choose. Jim's companion, the photographer Imogen, is as comfortable and competent in the outdoors as he is, but she does not have the option to enlist.

The third way in which Malouf re-writes the legend is to bring formerly marginal figures to the centre. His fiction is about what is deeply felt and might otherwise go unrecorded: all those unique and repeatable events, the little sacraments of daily existence, movements of the heart and intimations of the close but inexpressible grandeur and terror of things, that is our *other* history, the one that goes on, in a quiet way, under the noise and chatter of events and is the major part of what happens each day in the life of the planet ...' (*Great World* 283-4).

In *Fly Away Peter*, Jim Saddler is an infantryman, subjected to all the humiliations of the 'the army's deep and awful wisdom in these matters: the logistics of battle and the precise breaking point of men' (109). Like the hero of Roger McDonald's *1915*, he is bullied, exploited and victimised, and Jim is finally killed in an artillery bombardment. Unlike the exemplars of the fiction circa 1920, Malouf's hero is powerless. 'The time would come when he wouldn't be able any longer to resist ... he would slide with the rest. Down into the pit' (*Fly Away Peter* 55).

In *The Great World* the heroic ideal through which men relate their experience to themselves is not available to Digger and Vic. They find themselves in Asia, at the periphery of the world they had imagined war to exist in. They also find themselves captives.

There are so many worlds, and the process of discovering, even inventing both one's own identity and that of the those worlds, is the subject of Malouf's fiction. The processes of journeying, exploring and creating are always associated with places. Landscape has therefore always been central to the construction of gender in our war fiction, as it is essential to any attempts to re-define or to contest the prevailing gender ideology.

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