

## Women and War Two Case Studies

As we currently commemorate Australia's participation in wars we need to see what role women played. Women are part of all societies, but when those societies are under stress the roles that women traditionally play can be either reinforced, questioned or even changed, temporarily or forever, and undoubtedly a state of war places a society under stress. So what happens in one town or suburb can be replicated in another. Both of the women cited as case studies in this article had some connection with Carlton and are therefore important to CCHG, but both also made significant contributions to many areas of Victoria.

Various labels are assigned to the causes of wars, nationalism, imperialism, militarism or demands of alliances, yet when confronted by going to war most people would argue that wars result from trying to better a way of life or to protect a current way of life. Somehow justification is seen to lie in terms that the gains will outweigh the costs, or is a result of some failure in negotiation. Sometimes wars are also clearly about the distribution of land or other resources or about religion or ethnic cleansing. Whatever the cause, all wars have had differing effects on different groups, although the devastation of war, and its consequences, like fear for others, death and physical or mental illness can affect both male and female civilians and combatants.

While some women take an active part in the prosecution of a war, others are involved in seemingly peripheral ways. For example, during what we call the First World War, when men involved in active fighting were characterized as defending the nation and the families within it, the concept that women's work was in the home and that women's work was temporary, until they took on a family role, was reinforced. It was acknowledged that women could, and should, take on men's jobs in such an emergency, but *'she is a coward and a swindler and a little treacherous knave if she does not relinquish it'*, when the men returned.<sup>1</sup>

Although Australian women were not allowed to join the armed forces, or, unlike Britain, could not work in munitions factories, they nevertheless had to take up the slack created by the loss of men to those armed forces. In Carlton 2440 men and 9 women gave their address, or that of their next of kin, as Carlton and North Carlton. However some 3000 women went overseas as nurses, a job traditionally seen as suitable for women. They served in war zones and suffered casualties and illness even though their experiences were generally different from men on active service. However the women left at home had to continue to help maintain society and families and to work. Women ran farms and businesses, worked in factories, shops, schools or on public transport as well as undertaking voluntary work, like knitting socks or making comfort parcels and trying, as best they could, to make ends meet on salaries that were significantly lower than that of men, whether they remained in their own jobs or were replacing men.

Women were not necessarily of one mind when it came to prosecuting war as the recent *Victorian Historical Journal* illustrates. Interesting articles by Judith Smart, Rosalie Triolo, Carol Woods and Bart Ziimo highlight the ways women's roles were characterised. Smart shows that 'Within the National Council of Women of Victoria, 1914-1920, there were battles between feminist pacifists and imperial pro-war loyalists over questions of peace and free speech, recruitment and conscription, attitude to Germans, and between middle-class and working c-class housewives over reducing the cost of living' most of which reflected patriotic priorities.<sup>2</sup>

Two brief case studies, which have some apparently tenuous connections with Carlton, can show just how much work was undoubtedly involved as women's work took on additional demands. Delia Russell was a fiercely patriotic and comfortably off woman, whose only son went to boarding school, who had servants to cook and clean. As Lady Mayoress of Hawthorn, she established the Red Cross Kitchen, as a small group working from the Hawthorn Town Hall, with a budget of £10 a week, providing dainties, for wounded soldiers in 2 hospitals. While that initial work might seem low key, Delia Russell ran the Red Cross Kitchen which became a mass volunteer catering enterprise, in a purpose-built Defence Department facility providing 6,000 evening meals a month to 18 hospitals and special meals 3 days a week to 4 others. *The Argus* described the work as 'one of the most notable pieces of organizing ability achieved by our women'. Delia Russell was an extraordinary woman who was awarded an OBE in 1920 for that work. However her activities indicate just what some women could, and did, achieve.<sup>3 4</sup>

Over a number of years she became a member of the Red Cross Council, convened the Junior Red Cross. She founded the Talbot Epileptic Colony, just before the war, of which she was an executive member for 25 years. She was appointed a Justice of the Peace, a special magistrate of the Children's Court, an executive member of the Playgrounds Association and worked voluntarily on various committees of the Women's Hospital in Carlton, where she became President of its Board in 1933-35, where she took a leading role in the appointment of an almoner and became Vice-president of the Almoner's Board. It is important to recognize that in her work at the Women's Hospital she may have helped select royal wedding presents, but the bulk of the work was fund raising for nurse training, discipline and major building works, not work which was seen as women's work.

She became president of the Housewives Association in 1929, and she split that organization by arguing that the issue of temperance should be dealt with through education, rather than prohibition. She retained not only a loyal following in the Victorian Housewives Association, which she subsequently founded, in competition to the Housewives Association. She advocated that women should move 'From chattel to man's equal' in an article she wrote for their magazine, *The Housewife*, on women in politics. It apparently did not matter that her skills were wide ranging and formidable, somehow she was still seen as doing women's work. That almost certainly applied to many other women in the many roles they took on during that war.<sup>5</sup>

During the Second World War, women were actually recruited to new jobs for them in the defence forces and industry, women demonstrated that when so employed they could replace males and marriage was not treated as a bar to employment. But when the war ended the old attitudes quickly resurfaced, a woman's place was in the home. It should be understood that while married men and single men received one wage for the same job, a woman, doing that job was paid a lesser amount, because she might marry, whether she did so or not.

*"Proud man, henceforth it is your doom  
To be on needles and on pins;  
Lest on all top most rungs the room  
Be occupied by Julia Flynn's."*

*Source: Extract from poem published in  
The Argus, 22 September 1928*

A typical case was Julia Flynn, a brilliant teacher for 50 years with excellent qualifications, experience in primary and then secondary education, the first woman to be appointed an inspector of schools, the first woman to become Assistant Chief Inspector and then Chief Inspector of Secondary Schools. Hers was an impressive career but she had a distinct disadvantage. She

was a woman and as such, even when she did exactly the same job as a man in her position she was paid less, considerably less, because the establishment was not prepared to acknowledge the concept of equal pay for equal work. In fact, as Chief Inspector she received less than the man who filled the role of Assistant Chief Inspector.<sup>6</sup>

While the work of women during the world wars demonstrated their capacity, as these two case studies show, they also highlight clearly the relationship between the sexes. At the heart of the matter was the question of whether women could, or should, exercise authority over men and boys. Had that question been answered positively, it would have supported equal pay for equal work. It was to take until 1972 for that principle to be applied in teaching. Yet even today there is a gap between the jobs women and men do, and what women and men earn. Gender segregation in the workforce is extremely persistent even with a number of anti-discrimination laws.<sup>7</sup>

A recent article in *The Age* suggests socio-economic status still helps construct the way individuals feel about work. Interestingly married women are more inclined to fill in forms about their work status as 'not in the labour force' rather than 'unemployed', although they could, and would, work if jobs were available. It is not only men, but women too, who have to rethink what men and women can, and should, do. We tend to smile benignly at young fathers pushing prams now, a remarkable change from the war years, but there are still significant differences in the way in which women and men are treated in relation to their work and much remains to be done.

**Judith Biddington**  
**Carlton Community History Group**  
**August 2015**

**References:**

- <sup>1</sup> Mark Anderson and Paul Ashton, *Australia in the Twentieth Century : Working Historically*, quoting *The Triad*, 10 February 1919.
- <sup>2</sup> Smart, Judith, 'Women Waging War;:The National Council of Women of Victoria, 1914-1920', *Victorian Historical Journal*, Vol. 86, No. 1, June 2015, p.61-82
- <sup>3</sup> Red Cross Annual Report 1915-16, Red Cross Archives, Melbourne
- <sup>4</sup> The Argus, 8 June 1929, p. 28
- <sup>5</sup> Russell, Delia, 'Women in Politics', *The Housewife*, vol.1, no. 2, p. 2
- <sup>6</sup> Public Records Office, Victoria, VPRS 892, Special case 1215
- <sup>7</sup> *The Age*, 10 August 2015, p. 15