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978-0-521-80218-5 - Living with the Aftermath: Trauma, Nostalgia and Grief in Post-War Australia

Joy Damousi

Excerpt

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

‘I am a war widow’ explains Pat Medaris, whose husband, Jack had served in the Korean and Vietnam wars.

I think it fills me in with Jack because he was away so much at Vietnam and Korea, Malaysia, but I feel I’m part of that, you know what I mean? Part of his thing, by being a war widow ... By association I feel that I’m actually a war widow through him, so therefore what I am is part of him. It keeps me connected with him.¹

The role of this connection between the past and the present in shaping identity is one of the key concerns of this book. Through an analysis of seventy interviews conducted with war widows, my aim is to explore how memory and identity are linked. What does it mean to be a war widow? How have memories shaped that identity? How do women convey their life histories?

This study is based on interviews conducted with Australian war widows whose husbands died either during wartime, or afterwards because of a war-related injury. Using oral testimonies as the basis for a study of war widows opens up possibilities that official sources do not allow in the same way, for the emotional detail of widows’ experiences is not documented in such material. Rather than consider war widows primarily as welfare recipients – as others have done – I shift the attention to the emotional experience of widowhood during the post-war period.

Using interviews, this work extends the themes covered in my previous study, *The Labour of Loss*, and introduces other issues

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[More information](#)

through the use of oral testimonies. In the earlier book, I considered the ways that mothers, fathers and widows dealt with grief immediately after each of the two world wars. I used letters, diaries and newsletters to reconstruct the world of the wartime bereaved, and explore the ways in which grief and mourning mobilised these people.

Unlike these written sources, the interview is the *means* by which a narrative takes shape, in the interaction between the interviewer and interviewee.² It is in that relationship that historical memory is formed in a shape which is specific to time and place. The interviews conducted for this book were primarily arranged through advertisement in war widows' newsletters and through organisations such as the War Widows' Guild and the War Widows' and Widowed Mothers' Association. While the selection of widows may have been skewed in this way, the stories presented here cover a diverse range of experiences. Each interview was between one and two hours in length, and conducted in the home of the interviewee. In most cases, the widows are referred to by their names, but pseudonyms have been used if widows requested that their names be changed. Although informants were asked specific questions, the interview invariably became free-ranging and wider in scope as the conversation developed. It is also important to remember that these exchanges are informed by what people can tell us about their lives, and what they perceive their audience wishes to hear.³ An interview then is shaped by both participants, but, as Luisa Passerini points out, the narrative of memory is inescapably drawn from pre-existing 'ways of telling stories'.⁴

The use of these sources raises the question of how oral testimonies should be read. Oral history has been celebrated for allowing marginalised groups to find a voice. It has been seen as a means of retrieving those experiences of women that are eliminated from official documentation.⁵ The enterprise of oral history has often been conflated with women's history and the two have informed each other in retrieving women's untold stories.⁶ Oral history does however, offer more than a mere supplementation of the historical record. Historians have long claimed that its value lies not in 'revealing facts and events',⁷ but rather, in showing how the 'facts' are in the 'memory itself'.⁸ Portelli has argued it can tell us 'less about events as such than about their meaning',⁹ for 'it is always a work in progress, in which narrators revise the image of their past as they go along'.¹⁰ A life story has a life of its own. Yet these are fragmentary tales, for memory is not spoken as a coherent, organised whole.¹¹ In his autobiography, the writer Graham Greene reflected how 'memory is like a long broken

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

3

night ... the fragments remain fragments, the complete story always escapes'.¹²

Each oral testimony conveys only one of the many possible ways of telling a life history.¹³ We have 'only one life', observes the French analyst J.B. Pontalis, 'but we have innumerable ways of recounting that life to ourselves'.¹⁴ In oral testimonies we make meaning from our experiences, but that meaning is under constant revision.¹⁵ What is remembered is a highly selective process, as experience is organised to contextualise a sense of oneself.¹⁶ Memory is not simply a selective, interpretive exercise of what we remember.¹⁷ It also involves a method of forgetting, of disavowal of that which is undesirable.¹⁸ We remake our past by remembering and forgetting – it is not simply events which we recall, for the past we recreate becomes a repository of our defences, emotions, desires, and fantasies.¹⁹ The 'ambivalences, absences and inconsistencies' in oral accounts draw the listener to these aspects of the 'unexpressed story'.²⁰

In attempting to address these issues, my concerns in this book are threefold. First, I consider how widows internalised and absorbed the traumas of their husband's war experience through an examination of their memories of war, marriage and their husband's death. Trauma, grief and loss are not experienced as frozen, timeless emotional states. These emotions have a history, and are ever-changing as they are rewritten from the perspective of the present.

Second, I reflect on how attitudes towards, and experiences of, death and grieving have changed from the mid to the late twentieth century. These two themes are related, for the ways that widows dealt with loss, grief and domestic trauma in post-war Australia were predicated, to some extent, on the culturally acceptable ways they could publicly express these emotions. These interviews suggest a significant shift from a mid-twentieth-century sense that grieving was not spoken of in the community and was restrained by obligation and duty, to a late twentieth-century consensus that we can articulate grief, that it is desirable and necessary to do so and that we *need* to grieve.²¹ The women in this book have lived through these changes in the ways emotions are dealt with, and have been affected by them. They articulate a grief in the late twentieth century that did not find expression earlier in their lives.

The changing nature of attitudes towards death has generated debate among historians. The pathbreaking scholarship of Philippe Airès – which has since been contested and challenged²² – still offers insights which enhance our understandings of the experience

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

of mourning by war widows. Airès argues that throughout the twentieth century ‘death has been banished’,²³ and mourning has become ‘an extension of modesty’.²⁴ Death has been accompanied by a ‘system of constraints and controls’ which has ‘unified mass society against death’.²⁵ Others like John Dollimore argue that the implication in Airès’ work – that earlier cultures accepted death better and were therefore more fully integrated – is a dubious and questionable proposition.²⁶

The memories of war widows documented in this book confirm that a denial of death informed the experiences of widows during the immediate post-war period. Many widows who lost their husbands in war believe that their mourning and grief was not allowed full expression. I argue that there has been a discernible shift at the end of the twentieth century towards an openness, and a return to a nineteenth-century frankness in mourning and grief.²⁷ Others have conceptualised this shift in terms of an emergence of a ‘pathological public sphere’ in the late twentieth century, where individual and collective trauma and loss have found increasing expression and legitimacy in the public arena, exposed through media such as television.²⁸

Another dimension of this historical shift is the increasingly secular nature of Australian society. The influence of institutional religion has diminished as more Australians have chosen not to follow the rituals of denominational religion.²⁹ While there may be a more open expression of grief, there has been no revival of the heavily ritualised practices of the nineteenth century which characterised public mourning.³⁰ Nineteenth-century practices which have been relinquished by death-denying generations cannot be revived because the religious underpinnings which sustained these rituals have also disappeared. In recent years, the collapse of the distinction between the public and the private in the expression of loss and grief – most notably reflected in public testimonies – has characterised contemporary expressions of grief.

Third, these oral testimonies challenge a sharp periodisation of the war and post-war period. In many historical accounts of the Second World War, the lasting psychological impact of war on wives and children is only beginning to emerge. These interviews dramatically challenge the stereotype of the post-war period as an idyllic time when Australians became entrenched in the suburbs. While Australian studies have concentrated on the experiences of returned soldiers, the trauma that others endured remains unexamined. Accounts of the home-front have concentrated on protesters or domestic responses to particular wars, and on women’s participation in protest movements

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

5

or home-front activities, such as munitions industries. 'Public' rather than 'private' events continue to dominate in the narratives of war. The memoirs told in this book take the story into the private, domestic realm, offering another perspective to collective, national memories.³¹ In attempting to 'publicize rather than privatize' these memories, this work seeks to move beyond a single version of war experience.³²

One of the striking themes that emerges from this oral material is how the psychological impact of war remains well after the event, not just for soldiers, but also for those around them who also have to absorb the legacy of war. While this has been the focus of clinical studies, few historians have contemplated the implications of this for understanding historical change.³³ Stephen Garton, Judith Allen and Joan Beaumont have discussed the phenomenon, but it is deserving of closer interrogation.³⁴ I have considered the ways that these oral testimonies can make us reassess our understanding of the impact of war, and how its history is written. Just as the inter-war years cannot be understood without reference to the long shadow cast by the First World War, so too the post-war years need to be reassessed in light of the unexamined psychological impact of the Second World War. The schematic and stereotyped periodisation between war and post-war periods, and the tendency to prioritise public sacrifices over private griefs have denied war widows a legitimate voice and presence in post-war narratives. This study is also a part of the ongoing reassessment by historians of the post-war period as one which was unstable, uncertain and permeated by anxieties. As John Murphy has eloquently argued, these years were 'more contrary and more dynamic than our contemporary imaginings of a flat, complacent and largely uneventful period'.³⁵

The use of oral narratives marks this research in distinctive ways. Oral history has been widely used in Australian history across a range of themes and topics,³⁶ yet there have been surprisingly few oral history accounts of the spouses of servicemen.³⁷ Alistair Thomson applied the insights of oral history to offer new perspectives on the impact of the Anzac mythology on the memories of ex-soldiers after the First World War.³⁸ John Barrett drew on questionnaires in his examination of soldiers who returned from the Second World War.³⁹ Kate Darian-Smith interviewed women to explore how they romanticised memories of the home-front during the Second World War.⁴⁰ In other oral histories of women and war, grief and loss have not been the focus of these interviews, nor of how aspects of grief have shaped women's subjectivity.⁴¹

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

The relationship between war, memory and oral history has been more comprehensively examined in relation to the impact of the colonial wars. It is by examining the 'narrative strategies' of Aboriginal people, argues Heather Goodall, that we can 'trace out the shape of change, resistance and conflict' in Australia's colonial past.⁴² Oral accounts of the impact of the cultural decimation of Aboriginal communities, and of the lingering legacy of colonialism, are a reminder of the grief and loss which continues to haunt Australia's history.⁴³ Beyond Australia, the literature which most exhaustively explores the relationship between war, loss and oral histories is that of the Holocaust, which despite ever-growing attention, defies our powers of understanding.⁴⁴

This book is organised according to the different experiences of war widows. In attempting to capture the diversity of their experience I have used a range of life stories, rather than focusing on a few interviews from which to create a narrative of the testimonies. This is to stress that there cannot be one experience of war widowhood: widowhoods are many and varied. Indeed, the term 'war widow' became a contested category among the war widows themselves. What constitutes a 'war widow' is disputed, with those who lost husbands in wartime claiming exclusive ownership, and those whose husbands have died since arguing for a more inclusive category. This difference is mirrored in the significance a widow attached to the war in explaining her husband's behaviour.

Chapter 2 considers the mobilisation of war widows during the immediate post-war period, when they organised themselves against what they perceived to be a lack of remuneration and a denial of justice. The emphasis is on the ways in which women maintained their memories of their husbands after the war, and how they attempted to articulate grief through anger, thereby challenging the prevailing image of war widows as passive victims. In particular, this chapter considers the role of two leading organisations, the War Widows' Guild of Australia and the War Widows' and Widowed Mothers' Association, which both campaigned for better provisions for widows. The trauma of death in war was expressed through ritual and memory, which shaped a sense of community and cohesion around the identity of 'war widow'. Despite the growth of services provided by social workers and psychiatrists at this time, war widows were of the generation that sought comfort for loss in community networks rather than through the new professionals.

Chapter 3 examines how women remembered the absence of their husbands during the wars. One of the powerful themes to emerge from

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

7

these testimonies is that women internalised the sacrifices of their husbands. A slight on the behaviour of their husbands is a comment on their own sacrifice. They perceived themselves as contributing to the wars their husbands fought. Absence becomes an important motif in these narratives, and the women's views on war shape their senses of themselves as soldiers' wives. Their 'waiting' was never an empty exercise: they established networks, reared children, and entered paid employment. The different wars created particular circumstances which produced a range of experiences between widows of the Second World War and the wars in Korea and Vietnam. Given the magnitude of total war, the Second World War provided more avenues than later wars through which women could become part of support networks. In retelling these experiences, women convey the message that their own sacrifices are undermined when their husbands' contribution remain unrecognised.

The shock of losing a husband at the time of war is explored in chapter 4. The women who experienced this pain retell their stories in nostalgic terms. Their narratives are shaped around ideas of romance, lost opportunities and perfect love. A memory expressed through nostalgia allows them to explain why they did not remarry and why it was not possible to do so. In some instances, their stories are a response to trauma caused by an inability to mourn completely, and with that repression, a denial of death and grief.

Chapter 5 looks at the silences that faced women when their husbands returned from war. Silence has been a motif in many accounts of war and this chapter explores how it often defined relationships between returned soldiers and their wives. Such silences symbolised the denial of the impact of war, and also of grief, since what is remembered is the suppression of grieving. The wives, too, maintained a silence of what they experienced, as cultural mores negated an expression of *their* trauma. Paradoxically, a plethora of recent memoirs by returned soldiers has finally broken this silence. It is significant that these accounts have emerged in the late twentieth century when discussion of grief and death has become less constrained.

Chapter 6 examines the ways that women witnessed and experienced the trauma around them. It reflects on how they relate their experience trauma and, in some cases, internalised their husband's survivor guilt. The shadow cast by the war over the post-war period is clearest in this chapter: the narratives women tell do not fit easily into the familiar representation of the 1950s as a period of domestic tranquillity.

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[More information](#)

In chapter 7 I consider similar themes in relation to the Korean and Vietnam wars. Portrayed as ‘forgotten’ wars and overshadowed by the greater conflict of recent total war, memories of Korea and Vietnam and their aftermaths are conveyed very differently. But they reveal further that women absorbed their husband’s anguish and angst, so that it became a part of their own identity. This chapter shows that the effect of remembering ‘smaller wars’ was no less profound on the wives and children of returned servicemen. The ‘battler’ motif which emerges is suggestive of the cultural emphasis on moving on and not dwelling on grief, let alone expressing it in public.

Finally, chapter 8 considers recent widowhood. Here, I argue that, in recent times, an understanding has developed that the full expression of the anguish and pain that results from death is necessary for a resolution of grief. This understanding that a release of grief, rather than its denial, is necessary, marks an important shift in late twentieth-century perceptions and practices.

This book attempts to correct the absence of war widows from Australian history. Through their memories, I explore the ways in which they absorbed their husbands’ traumas and attempted to maintain a connectedness with the past. This can be seen through their need to sustain their memories; through their feelings of being slighted when their husbands have been attacked or forgotten; in the trauma of the denial of death and a retreat into nostalgia; in the effect of absorbing the anguish of silence; in dealing with domestic violence and carrying survivor guilt; and in experiencing the loss of the man they once knew. In admitting to these experiences, we can come to a new understanding of the legacy of war beyond the public arena, and of women’s place – long neglected – within national narratives about war. Oral testimonies powerfully challenge conceptions of the post-war period, and show how the legacy of loss unsettled post-war calm in a period long assumed to be untainted by the lingering presence of psychological disturbance and anguish. In charting the memory of grief and its expression, we can also discern a shift away from the denial and silence which shaped attitudes towards death during the mid-twentieth century towards a much fuller expression of grief and mourning and, perhaps, a new way of dealing with death and loss, at the beginning of a new century.

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[More information](#)

CHAPTER TWO

WAR WIDOWS REMEMBER

[T]he husband has given his life for his country and that wife has given her husband so I don't think she really should have to be burdened with anything to do with money. I think anything she gets she deserves.¹

In 1954, the Melbourne branch of the War Widows' Guild of Australia broke with the tradition and custom of the day, and took the radical step of organising a Remembrance Day service exclusively for war widows. This dramatic gesture was a protest against the dismissive treatment it believed war widows had received on a number of public occasions earlier that year. Jessie Vasey, the Guild's founder and president, asserted that war widows had no choice but to organise a ceremony which would be inclusive of their mourning and their grief. They decided to hold:

a service in praise of and thankfulness for our own men's sacrifice, with a few words of comfort and advice to us in our problems and sorrows, would bring help and satisfaction to many war widows, bereaved mothers and other bereaved relatives because I think we should ask all bereaved folk to share the service with us.²

Vasey was motivated by events during the Royal Visit to Melbourne in 1954, when the Queen had delivered a dedication to fallen soldiers at the Shrine of Remembrance, the iconographic war memorial in Melbourne. The slight they had received at this event had become a source of anguish for some war widows:

I think few things more hurtful have been done to the war widow or the bereaved relatives. On that day there were two groups of

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

widows; those who had a distant view of the ceremony and could hear a little of it and so felt they had taken part ... and those heart-broken widows and mothers who were pushed round to the east steps and could neither hear nor see and who felt as they watched the hundreds of people massed on the steps and around the Queen that to suggest the service was in honour of the fallen was a mockery.³

The feeling of public humiliation on this and on other occasions made these war widows believe that they 'have no alternative but to make it clear that if the Anzac Day Service gives you any personal help you should go to it'. However, to those for whom it was 'hurtful', and 'to the thousands of you who never go near it', Mrs Vasey proposed 'an alternative':⁴ their own independent Remembrance Day commemoration, which would provide them and their dead husbands with due acknowledgement and recognition.

Why had war widows become so incensed? How was their agitation received and what does their public outcry suggest about the place of public expressions of grief in post-war Australia? In this chapter I consider the climate within which war widows attempted to grieve publicly, and suggest that during the immediate post-war period a culture of reserve limited the extent to which they could articulate their loss.

THE DISTINCTIVE SACRIFICE

During the 1950s, the war widows felt extremely slighted at being marginalised from the significance and ritual of Anzac Day ceremonies. They became angry because not one officer of the Guild received an invitation to the Anzac Day Service; those in the Guild had difficulty accepting that survivors had priority over the widows of victims. This marginalisation undermined the particular and distinctive sacrifice of these widows. The slight was expressed symbolically through their placement on the reserve, when they were 'steadily being pushed away from the centre to the side until last year we were placed on the side'. Vasey made a plea for the relatives of the men: 'If Anzac Day is to be anything but a mockery to our way of thinking, the relatives of the dead who are their only relatives should sit in the seats of honour'. It was her honour and pride that were so dramatically threatened. Vasey experienced pain, hurt and anger when she had 'the pleasure of watching my husband's juniors and barrack soldiers and their wives sailing with much aplomb into seats ahead of us'.⁵