WHEN World War I broke out, Ethel Turner and Mary Grant Bruce had already established impressive reputations as professional writers for the adolescent fiction market.¹ Their publishers, Ward Lock and Company, expected each of them to produce one manuscript a year on a theme likely to satisfy young readers and their parents. By 1915 both had completed novels, The Cub and From Billabong to London, dealing with war and more war novels were to follow. Nevertheless, neither woman has received much attention from scholars. None of the studies of World War I discusses them, while literary critics have focussed their attention on more exalted figures.² This neglect could be explained by the fact that they were women, their audience was adolescent and they favoured conscription. In different ways, each category has been regarded as marginal to the mainstream of Australian society. Yet novels such as From Billabong to London and The Cub are rich in observations which reveal the responses of articulate, patriotic women to an event of undisputed importance to Australian society. Both comment on what they felt were the particular disadvantages of being female. Related to their views on women's obligations are the qualities they expected to find in young men during a national crisis. In their turn, these preoccupations are woven into the more complex pattern of class, national and imperial loyalties which play so important a part in the lives of those called upon to respond to the outbreak of war.

As Stewart Firth has suggested, one of the more revealing sources for the historian is the literature intended for the young. His own study of this literature explores the thorough-going commitment to Empire loyalty, boldly stated for the benefit of young and perhaps inattentive readers.³ The novels of Mary Grant Bruce and Ethel Turner, while they belong to a genre of their own, also form part of a broader sub-literature designed to uplift and entertain school age readers. The novels create a world in which mildly unconventional behaviour was acceptable as a protest against stuffiness so long as the major virtues — loyalty, decency, fair play — are shown to advantage. In this world the qualities associated with the bush and the city are also clearly drawn, the bush enhancing good health and wholesome attitudes to authority, the city creating socially harmful behaviour.

Mary Grant Bruce was born at Sale in 1878, the third child in a family of five. Her father, Eyre Lewis Bruce, was an Irish-born land surveyor who emigrated to Australia in 1854. In 1870 Lewis Bruce married Mary Whittakers, daughter of William and Louisa Whittakers, owners of a pioneering and ultimately prosperous cattle run in the Snowy Mountains.⁴ Both sides of Mary Grant Bruce's family combined the strenuous life with a respect for good breeding, an emphasis which would re-appear in her fiction. After receiving her formal education at a private school in Sale, Mary Grant Bruce left for Melbourne, an act of spirited independence in that age of chaperones. She purchased a bicycle, another act of daring, and also set about becoming a journalist. She edited the children's page of the Leader, edited the Woman for a time and wrote a range of articles, paragraphs and stories for local papers. In 1910, when she was 32, a
collection of her short stories dealing with life on Billabong station was published as A Little Bush Maid. This proved to be the first of 38 books, 15 of them in the Billabong series. In 1914 she married her second cousin Major George Evans Bruce, who had served with the British army. During World War I Mary Grant Bruce joined the Red Cross and thereafter was the proud wearer of a small bronze badge which signified her participation in women’s work. The Bruces spent most of the war years in Ireland and England and after the war their time was divided between Australia and England, where Mary Grant Bruce died in 1958.

Ethel Turner was born in Doncaster, England in 1872 and came to Australia with her parents in 1881. She was educated at Sydney Girls High School. In 1896, two years after Ward Lock published Seven Little Australians, she married Herbert Raine Curlewis, a lawyer who later became Challis lecturer at Sydney University and a District Court Judge. During World War I Ethel Turner worked for the Red Cross and campaigned for six o’clock closing. She also edited, with Bertram Stevens, the Australian Soldiers’ Gift Book, a fund-raising effort published in 1918.

The backgrounds of the two women help explain the different emphases in their novels. Mary Grant Bruce concentrated on the adventures of station life and the evocation of rural Victoria, themes she was well equipped to handle from personal experience. On the whole, her novels avoid social issues, causes and the moral dilemmas of adolescence. Grit and cheeriness in a crisis enabled her young protagonists to live an adventurous, but wholesome rural life. The city, generally Melbourne, was a distasteful place which bred ineffectual types who required a spell in the country before they could be considered truly companionable humans.

Ethel Turner's novels are more frequently set in the city (generally Sydney) and commonly show adolescents grappling with the great questions of their day, like social justice and the drink question. This concern for issues required more sharply delineated characters, as the Bulletin recognised in a review which compared From Billabong to London with The Cub. The Billabong novel was no more than a ‘thrilling adventure’ whereas The Cub was a ‘quiet and interesting study of character’, although the reviewer noted that there were limits imposed upon a novelist of Ethel Turner's type: ‘There must be no love-making, no stirring of sexual attraction, which at the age of the Cub and the girl are such frequent psychological effects of our climate.’ An Argus review of the same novels agreed that Ethel Turner had been ‘even more successful than Mrs Bruce in indicating the changes that war has wrought, and is making in the outlook of people here as everywhere . . .’

Ethel Turner's greater concern with issues had drawbacks, since there were those who were ready to take offence. A Dunedin bookseller informed Ward Lock of an irate friend who had burnt The Camp at Wandinong, forbidding further works by the author to enter his house. ‘It is surely a pity’, the bookseller warned, ‘that having made a name for writing pure stories of Australian childlife Miss Turner would spoil herself by an unnecessary realism’. In July 1901 the publisher alerted Ethel Turner to expressions which ‘will offend some of the goody-goody people’, a warning she evidently took to heart, for a month later, William Steele of Ward Lock recorded his pleasure at ‘... your intention in future in your books to avoid using words and expressions which might cause offence to some’. Even so, Ethel Turner was the more ‘controversial’ of the two novelists. As late as 1924 her publishers summarily removed allusions to ‘marital unfaithfulness and divorce, subjects which, by general consent are absolutely banned from discussion in books for the young’.

Mary Grant Bruce and Ethel Turner were, and are, extremely well-known names. Billabong novels are still being re-printed, while the recently televised Seven Little Australians had been reprinted 40 times by 1960. However, from the comments of the publishers it would appear that sales began to slacken for both women in the 1920s and that neither of them was to regain the consistent popularity of the preceding years. In 1927 C. S. Bligh of Ward Lock attributed the decline in sales to the advent of wireless, the silent picture vogue, the appearance of Bumper Books and ‘the change in the class of books that young girls are at present reading’, but admitted that ‘the Trade’ was puzzled by the decline in sales and could offer no really satisfactory explanation for the problem. Even so, the Bulletin confidently asserted at this time that
Every school girl knows the books of Mary Grant Bruce for the Billabong series and her other stories are legion among the awards on prize day. She was not only a popular writer, but one approved by the educators of her day. Ethel Turner's novels were also familiar speech day prizes and were recommended school reading. In 1916 the Education Department of Victoria ordered 35,000 copies of Miss Bobbie as a continuous reader in a series to which Mary Grant Bruce had also contributed.

Sales figures for the novels are hard to come by, but figures in the Mary Grant Bruce papers indicate that the novels considered in this article were among her most popular works. Sales figures of selected titles to 1927 are: From Billabong to London (21,087), Jim and Wally (19,025), Possum (17,696), Captain Jim (17,882), and Back to Billabong (20,408). I would assume that Ethel Turner's sales in the period 1915 to 1920 were roughly comparable. In 1918 she asked her publisher for paperback editions of her work, but was put in her place by William Steele, Melbourne manager of Ward Lock, who told her that ‘London’ would not entertain the idea of paperback editions of The Cub and Captain Cub. He added: ‘I do not think these two books can be compared with Dennis's books'. This was no doubt true, but the fact remains that Ethel Turner and Mary Grant Bruce did maintain a large following year after year for over 30 years. Both women familiarised young readers in Australia and abroad with aspects of the Australian setting. Their loyalty to Australia and their reliance upon Australian themes cannot be questioned, even although their pronouncements may run counter to radical nationalist rhetoric.

On Billabong station mateship did not, as William Lane once claimed, mean socialism, but mateship of a kind was nonetheless often mentioned and frequently practised, as the most cursory reading of Mary Grant Bruce's novels would reveal. While unadulterated socialism was certainly unwelcome, both women express opinions, with varying emphasis, on the benefits of non-urban life and of democracy. Indeed, some of Ethel Turner's most ardent and admirable young people devote their energies to the great question of social reform, as did some of her followers. One of them wrote:

I read “Seven Little Australians” when I was quite a small boy. Curiously enough like all other boys, I had been indoctrinated by English books into the atmosphere and background of English life. At first, accordingly, a book with an Australian background astonished me and . . . did not attract me. Then came the growing sense of delight in getting to know the characters of your novels and realising here was the Sydney and the country I knew and all the rest of the pleasures that I and my brothers derived from the series.

The author of this generous tribute was Herbert Vere Evatt.

The outbreak of war in August 1914 came as an immediate challenge to both women. By mid-November 1914, Ethel Turner was two-thirds of the way through The Cub. The novel had been printed, distributed and reviewed in Australia by the following November. Mary Grant Bruce was just as quick off the mark, for the Argus carried a review of From Billabong to London in October 1915. There followed other war novels: Jim and Wally (1916), Captain Jim (1919), and Back to Billabong (1921); of the four remaining novels published in this period, Possum (1917) is the only one that need concern us here. Ethel Turner followed The Cub with John of Daunt (1916), Captain Cub (1917), Brigid and the Cub (1918), and St. Tom and The Dragon (1918).

The opening scenes of From Billabong to London are set on Billabong station in Gippsland, Victoria. While the station has a pointedly Australian name, it is soon evident that this is not the drought-ridden, informal, sometimes slovenly world of Lawson or Furphy. Billabong has a long winding avenue lined with pine trees, lawns, trim flower-beds and at the end of it all, a ‘smiling’ house. Moreover, the owner of the house, David Linton, his two children, Jim and Norah, and their friend in permanent residence, Wally Meadows, are the heroes of the story, not the station employees who are no more than shadowy figures in the background. Conveniently, there is no Mrs Linton. She died a number of years earlier, thereby solving the problem of what to do with a middle-aged gentlewoman in an adolescent world of bush amusements and stirring adventure. As it was, even Norah could feel out of place on Billabong and would rather have
been a boy than a girl. Loyal readers knew that she far preferred the stables to the drawing-room, ‘an apartment of gloomy, seldom-used splendour’.

From Billabong to London is a clear illustration of John Foster Fraser's observation that ‘... you drop from Imperialism to something like parochialism in Australia, with little of the real national spirit intervening — though it exists and must increase’. This prescient remark appeared in his Australia: The Making of a Nation, a book based on a tour of Australia in 1909. For the Lintons, Australia is virtually synonymous with Billabong station. Indeed, their Australian loyalties are expressed as loyalties to Billabong and its traditions. There are hardly any references to other parts of Australia, although the occasional visitor appears from Melbourne. When war breaks out there is a great enthusiasm for the Imperial cause. Wally Meadows, a robust, plain-dealing, good-hearted sort of fellow was impatient to volunteer; so too was Jim Linton. It annoyed Wally to learn that lesser fellows in the ‘fooer’ team had got in before him, while Jim was disturbed to hear that half-a-dozen Billabong stockmen had already volunteered. Belgian suffering and German atrocity had become intolerable; Mr Linton had to let the boys do their bit ‘in the biggest [job] the Empire ever had to tackle’.

Mary Grant Bruce may not have been altogether certain whether the boys should join up in Australia or go straight to England. Mr Linton favoured the latter course as he feared that Australian troops ‘might be shelved in some out-of-the-way corner of the earth’. Jim agreed, although with reservations: ‘I am an Australian, and rather think Australians ought to stick together’. The decision was a crucial one for in the sequel to From Billabong to London Jim and Wally were sitting in a trench in France while the Australian troops won renown at Gallipoli.

In the meantime, the long sea voyage to London on the blacked-out Perseus gave ample scope for adventure. There were constant rumours of German attack among the disconcertingly small group of passengers, one of whom proved to be a rotter. While searching for her toothache power in the early hours of the morning Norah noticed someone signalling from a darkened porthole. The culprit proved to be a German called Hans Schmidt who had tried to pass himself off as a Canadian with the unlikely name, Smith. After a close shave with a German warship, the Lintons eventually arrived in London, determined to serve the Empire: ‘London was nothing; England, nothing, except for what it stood for; the heart of Empire. And the Empire had called the boys’.

It is evident in From Billabong to London that Mary Grant Bruce looked upon the Empire as the realisation of a co-operative ideal. The Lintons had their doubts about London and England; a crowded, wet and smelly island when compared to the spacious freedom they had become accustomed to on Billabong station, but this did not detract from the ideal of a partnership of like-minded peoples owing allegiance to Britain and responding to her call. Similarly, the spirit of nationhood was enhanced, not diminished, by the Imperial tie. Then again, those who participated in the nation's cause were also given an opportunity to experience a more acute sense of nationalism. Norah came to understand that: ‘The nation's honour was the individual's honour; therefore the individual became as never before, a part of the nation, and forgot his or her own concerns in the greater responsibility’. It was part of the burden of being a woman in wartime that Norah was unable to participate in this unique experience as fully as Jim or Wally. In an attempt to console Norah, Jim pointed out that the man's job was ‘ready waiting for him, but a woman has got to go and hunt hers up’. He maintained that if everyone did their bit the whole job would be done in no time. ‘It's the slackers that keep it going — and you never were a slacker, Nor’.

Mary Grant Bruce's second war novel, Jim and Wally, which was published in 1916, was a more explicitly propagandist piece than her first novel. She was now more insistent that it was a privilege for young men like Jim and Wally to serve the Empire's cause, while dismissive attacks upon ‘ slackers’ grew more frequent. The geographical location of the novel also changed, for Jim and Wally were sent to Ireland for health reasons. The new setting gave Mary Grant Bruce an opportunity to praise Ireland and Irish loyalty.
The trip to Ireland offered a foretaste of what was to come. The Lintons encountered an aged Irish priest whose chief regret was that he was too old to fight. ‘If I were young! If I were young’, he expostulated. He announced that it was ‘a great world just now for young men’, but despite the war there were still youths ‘standing behind counters and selling lace and ribbons; and some of them doing women's hair!’. Jim agreed that these were poor types, but insisted that any man who settled for women's work was not wanted ‘where there's work going’. All he asked was that he ‘have some sort of brand put on him, so that people will be able to tell him from a man in the future’!

The priest ‘chuckled appreciatively’ at this idea and suggested that petticoats would serve the purpose. These exchanges confirm the suggestion that there was a stigma attached to being a woman in wartime; a suspicion that however ardently patriotic they were, women could not wholly compensate for the weakness of their sex. That the suspicion was expressed by a woman makes it all the more potent.

The priest was an appropriate preparation for an astounding, aristocratic and fiercely loyal Irishman, Sir John O'Neill. The unfortunate Sir John was a hunchback who had hoped to serve at the Front, but finally had to settle for Red Cross work and recruiting until even this inadequate, ‘womanly’ substitute for the real thing proved too much for him. He confessed to Wally that it was ‘not easy to stand aside when all the lucky people — like you — are playing the real game’. Thereafter Jim and Wally were careful not to draw attention to their own good fortune in the presence of a man ‘whose whole soul longed to be out there with them’. Sir John's agonising was a sharp rebuke to ‘slackers’ whose reluctance to serve merely increased the distress of patriots like Sir John and Norah.

As it happened, Sir John died a satisfied man, although it took a bizarre plot to effect this outcome. The Lintons and Wally were taken on a chauffeured tour of Ireland in Sir John's vast Rolls Royce. In case there were suspicious readers it was made clear that the chauffeur had lost a leg at Ypres, and although his wooden one was ‘fairly satisfactory’ it was quite impossible for him to go back into the front line. While on tour Jim and Wally found evidence that a German submarine was about to refuel off the Irish coast. They agreed that Sir John should plan the capture: ‘We'll get lots of shows later on, if we've any luck . . . Anyway we're able to go to the Front and do our bit. And that poor chap isn't.' The O'Neill plan worked smoothly enough until the silly fellow tried to persuade Norah that capturing German submarines was not women's work. Norah protested: ‘. . . in Australia women always did help men when there was need, and they didn't talk about things being “women's work”. Women had to fight the blacks, too’. After insisting that they would have to do all in their power to stop the submarine before it went out ‘to sink other ships full of women and kiddies like the Lusitania babies', Norah was allowed to take part in the capture. All went according to plan, except that O'Neill was fatally wounded. Norah was distraught at O'Neill's passing, but he reminded her that he had been given ‘. . . a man's finish! That is a great thing, when one has lived a hunchback.'

Captain Jim and Back to Billabong introduce new situations, but the novels repeat the same repertoire of loyal emotions and wartime responses as in the novels already discussed. Sir John O'Neill left his spacious country property to Norah who turned it into a rural convalescent home. It was thought particularly appropriate that station people had established the home for they knew the benefits of country living, although Norah insisted that Australia had more to offer than England in this respect. She also found the English ‘more reserved, and stiffer’ than Australians. The other big event of Captain Jim was the report of Jim's death. All resolved to be plucky about his demise, and there were compensations for the Lintons knew that Jim had ‘died a soldier, not a slacker’. Of course, Jim eventually re-joined the family after escaping from the Germans.

The Billabong novels reveal an unambiguous relationship between manliness and the desire to fight and an easy reconciliation between Australian patriotism and love of Empire. Cheerfulness was highly esteemed and the sporting field was regarded as an ideal training ground for fair dealing and courage. Even in wartime, the Billabong novels presented a secure world uncomplicated by moral ambiguities or social inequality. There was a right code of conduct which all could understand and which all should obey. Those who thought otherwise were placed in the category of rogues and slackers. There was also a clear social
hierarchy. As landowners, the Lintons were at the top. They spoke to ships’ captains and doctors. Irish servants were low in the scale and non-European retainers were at the bottom. Lowest of all was Black Billy, the Aborigine, whose vocabulary was virtually confined to an indiscriminate use of the word ‘plurry’. He ‘worshipped’ the Linton children and obeyed Jim ‘with the unquestioning obedience of a dog’. If Black Billy was unimpressive his people were contemptible. On their way to Durban Jim and Wally had their first sight of Kaffirs; ‘a low set of animals’ in the opinion of the ship’s doctor. Jim Linton took this opportunity to point out that Australian Aborigines were worse: ‘They’re a most unpleasant crowd — the lowest, I believe, in the scale of civilisation. Useless, shifty, lazy, thieving — you can't trust many of them.’

As for Jim and Wally, they are clearly to be admired for their wholesome outlook upon life, their physical prowess and their willingness to serve the Empire’s cause. It is equally clear that in Mary Grant Bruce's eyes the war called upon qualities which were integral to life on Billabong station, a proposition which coincides with some of C. E. W. Bean's observations about bush virtues and the A.I.F. It is well-known that Bean invokes the regenerative power of Australian conditions in explaining the fighting prowess of the Australian soldier. The Australian, in Bean's argument, was basically an Englishman whose native courage had been perfected by a challenging environment. Vigour, initiative, independence and energy were terms Bean lavished upon Australian soldiers and which he invariably linked with the bush. Bean certainly exaggerated the numerical importance of bushmen as Lloyd Robson's statistics on the A.I.F. have demonstrated, but this bias reflected Bean's belief that bush people deserved to be more highly regarded than city dwellers. Similar assumptions pervade Mary Grant Bruce's writing. Jim and Wally stand as her embodiment of the initiative and physical hardihood required of bush living. They also represented the type of young Australian this Imperially-minded author wanted to publicise. That Mary Grant Bruce, writing at great speed for a children's audience, should advance propositions so closely related to Bean's suggests how pervasive and politically malleable the idea of bush prowess must have been.

It must be stressed that Jim and Wally are not brilliant fellows. Hard work, health, horsemanship and hearty breakfasts explain their prowess and in turn explain why Australians turned out heroes rather than weedy little fellows unsuited to the demands of war. Much of the bitterness Mary Grant Bruce felt for ‘slackers’ and ‘shirkers’ arose from the fact that Australia had manhood in abundance, but also a trouble-making element who failed to see, or refused to see, the greatness and urgency of the Imperial cause.

The exasperation in Mary Grant Bruce was all the more intense because she felt relatively powerless as a woman. There can be little doubt that she saw women’s work as important, but it is equally clear that the war demanded more from men that from women. Those women who wanted to participate to the full were forced to endure a life removed from the centres of conflict. What was worse, the outward circumstances of their lives were disquietingly similar to those of the ‘shirkers’ and ‘slackers’ they so roundly deplored. It is as well to bear in mind the pressures acting upon such women, for they may help explain both the massive involvement of women in charitable works during the war and some of the darker tides of patriotic excess which swirled around the conscription referendums, the trial of the I.W.W. and the great strike of 1917.

Mary Grant Bruce's insistent criticism of ‘slackers’ must also be seen in the light of the long-established debate over the likely effects of the Australian climate on the British type. It was a subject that visitors of the better sort were particularly fond of discussing. In the late 1860s Sir Charles Dilke attributed the ‘superior energy’ of Victorians, as compared with New South Welshmen, to the fact that they were of more recent British stock and that Melbourne's climate was less tropical than Sydney's. Climate was not the only source of concern. It was also feared that convict degeneracy was an inheritable condition which might weaken the moral and physical fibre of the Australian colonist. As Bill Mandle has shown, evidence of sporting prowess was used to refute this theory in the 1860s and 1870s. In 1910 the tactless Fraser could still declare that each new generation reared in Australia was less energetic than the preceding one and went on to quote a Victorian doctor who believed that the Australian population would inevitably degenerate unless it was replenished by a regular influx of Europeans. Fraser warned that the Australian
people were losing their pioneering ‘doggedness’ and that the ‘languorous climate’ created a ‘consequent slackness of energy’.43 This ‘slackness’ did not affect physical performance alone, but the capacity and willingness of Australians to act patriotically. The Rev. W. H. Fitchett, author of the best-selling Deeds That Won the Empire, issued a number of warnings to the same effect in the years before World War I. He feared for the survival of a patriotism which had been won in a ‘sterner time than ours’.44

The urge to strengthen the moral and physical fibre of Australian youth was one of the aims of the universal compulsory training scheme so strenuously advocated by William Morris Hughes.45 Professor Anderson Stuart had this scheme in mind when he hoped in 1912 that ‘. . . our young men may gradually break away from their present recreations and turn with even greater zest to this stern game of soldiering’.46 Jim and Wally were all-round sportsmen; they were also products of the universal training scheme. Taken in context, ‘sternness’ was an antidote to the ‘slackness’ which was thought to threaten Australian society. Mary Grant Bruce was squarely located within the tradition of universal training, physical prowess and fighting efficiency as the basis of national strength and loyalty to the Empire. Conscription Australians of her type were distressed at the thought that the moral fibre of their nation might be found wanting in war. They feared that the term ‘Australian’ might become a by-word for indolence and irresponsibility.

Rural wholesomeness, the theme of Mary Grant Bruce's 1917 novel, 'Possum, was thought to be one cure for slackness and urban falsity. William Steele pointed out to Ethel Turner that the novel ‘has got right away from war matters’ and was getting ‘good notices’ and ‘nice orders’, a heavy hint perhaps that the war, for the time being at least, may have lost some of its popularity.47 The novel develops Mary Grant Bruce's view that the city was a stunting environment, physically and spiritually, a belief which was central to her depictions of the bushman soldier in From Billabong to London and Jim and Wally. The novel opens in the plush suburban home to Tom McLeod, his fashionable wife Aileen and their only son, Garth. Servants enabled the McLeods to enjoy expensive seats at the theatre and ‘little dinners at the Savoy’. Yet all was not well. The family doctor ruled that Melbourne would weaken Garth, but country living might yet turn him into a ‘decent man’.48 Fresh milk, the outdoor life and tight knickerbockers had a speedy effect, for within a week of moving to a Gippsland farm Garth was no longer a delicate ‘city boy’ but a rejuvenated young fellow destined for decent manhood.49 The superiority of farm life is also intended as a ‘democratic’ message since privileged Toorak is dismissed as a wastefully undemanding, ease-loving world. Towards the end of the novel Aileen declares: ‘I feel part of the world now, not just a drone . . . Now I’m part of the world’s workers.’50 The society woman with servants had become a worker, or so we are led to believe.

The contrast between the therapeutic bush and the unhealthy civilisation of towns was a well-established theme in Australian thought, but was by no means a uniquely Australian phenomenon.51 Edward Carpenter's immensely popular tract Civilisation: Its Cause and Cure, first published in 1889 and reprinted many times thereafter, gave the argument an English setting, while historians have noted similar developments in Germany and America. John Higham has argued that American culture in the 1890s shows increased impatience with gentility and confinement. The new stress on the regenerative powers of physicality and the outdoor life coincided with dramatic increases in manufacturing industry and rapid urbanisation.52 Another American historian, Roderick Nash, author of Wilderness and the American Mind, declared: ‘Appreciation of wilderness began in the cities’.53 By the 1890s and early 1900s the wilderness ‘cult’ had resulted in activities ranging from the Boy Scout movement to the further preservation of wilderness areas as national parks. The common feature of these movements was a growing anxiety at the urban degeneracy which could develop in a nation removed from the physical hardihood of its pioneering past.

The frivolous lives of fashionable women was a far more insistent theme in Ethel Turner's novels than in Mary Grant Bruce's. The Cub, Captain Cub and Brigid and the Cub from a popular trilogy on war and its consequences for the female sex. The Cub, John Calthrop, was the wayward young son of a wealthy north-shore family. His English girl-friend, Brigid Lindsay, was the daughter of a mining engineer and his wife
who immigrate via Sydney to the ‘dry’ irrigation district of Yanco in New South Wales. Both the Calthrop and Lindsay families were dominated by women. The predominance of females in Ethel Turner’s novels is strikingly different from the male dominance in Mary Grant Bruce's and further emphasises the different intentions of the two women. Ethel Turner shows how her various women characters were converted to a saner mode of life, whereas Mary Grant Bruce is generally content to divert her readers with bush adventures which lie outside the accepted sphere of ‘womanly’ concerns.

The Cub is divided between opening scenes in Belgium, shipboard life and Sydney’s north shore. In Belgium Brigid Lindsay becomes the guardian of a five-year old Belgian girl whose parents died of German atrocity. The small girl emerges as a symbol of what the Germans had done in Belgium, a subject of lively public concern in the early stages of the war. Later, Brigid meets the Cub — so-called from the ‘uncompromising attitude he adopted to the shams of life’ — onboard ship to Australia.54 One prominent sham was the Cub's mother, although his two sisters play powerful supporting roles.

The Cub is a young man with Australian roots, firmly Australian identifications and no time for the niceties of polite society. His mother provided him with a deluxe cabin onboard ship, but he preferred to sleep on deck. He also ate simply despite the fancy food offered the first-class passengers and he affected a shabby suit on the grounds that it was offensive to display finery in the presence of those who were less fortunate. That was not all; the Cub spoke to third-class passengers as if they were human beings like himself. Back home in Sydney the Cub had cultivated the friendship of Harry Gale, ‘a lad of the working classes’ who worked in a bottle factory. Harry was an electrical genius whom the Cub sponsored at the rate of five shillings a week, believing that it was a sad waste to allow Gale to stagnate in poverty while others wasted their money. Charitable and paternalistic though these views are, they nevertheless represent a persistent reformist strand in Ethel Turner’s writing.

At another level, the Cub is both a model of middle-class concern about the plight of the deserving poor and a warning. He is a model because his considerate behaviour defuses class antagonisms and a warning in that parental insensitivity towards the Cub could so easily have turned him into a loathsome radical. The behaviour of the Cub’s mother was particularly un-Australian since Ethel Turner expected the privileged classes of Australia to cultivate an air of self-sacrifice, particularly in wartime. She hoped that such gestures might remove a prominent, but quite avoidable cause of working-class discontent and correct a regrettable tendency to excessive idealism among middle-class Australian youths.

Social reform so pre-occupied the Cub that he at first refused to volunteer for the war. Brigid was aghast. She knew that the Cub was Australian and odd, but surely not that odd. She also grew resentful at being born a girl. If she were a man, there would have been no stopping her from volunteering. But the Cub would not be shaken. His first loyalty was to his vision of a better world. He had vowed to stop ‘this rich-and-poor business’, declaring that he was ‘going to build things up in the world, not destroy them’.55 While adamantly pro-war and pro-conscription, Ethel Turner was more prepared than Mary Grant Bruce to hint at selfless reasons for not volunteering, although the Cub soon changes his tune about the war. Reading ‘things’ in the papers about ‘the women and the children’ convinced him that ‘individual principles’ in time of war were untenable.56 Stubborn and falteringly opinionated though the Cub was, he too came to see the need to volunteer. When it came to farewelling the Cub, Brigid temporarily lost some of her enthusiasm for an army comprising decent young men: ‘If I were God . . . I’d empty all the prisons and get all the deadbeats and slum people, and I’d make an army of them . . . ’57 But these thoughts were unavailing. The Cub was totally committed to the war: ‘I haven't one thought in me that isn't for the war. I breathe England and sleep England.’58 With that, he sailed off to the war with Harry Gale.

Criticism of women in Ethel Turner’s war novels derives both from the Cub and, after some agonising, from the women themselves. The message was a simple one: the unchallenging lives of well-to-do women turned them into trivial creatures, obsessed by fashion. She described the war, for example, as a conflict between ‘The Dragon of Dress’ and the ‘still more baleful breath of the Dragon of War’.59 Some of the urgency of these views can be attributed to her concern that the excesses of prosperous women provided an
all too convincing case for the radical discontents which disturbed the lives of idealistic young fellows like the Cub. Characteristically a number of Ethel Turner's women also discovered that austere country living was a truer statement of what Australian life should be than city living, particularly on Sydney's frivolously elegant north shore. 60

Two set-piece ‘speeches’ convey the flavour of Ethel Turner's attacks upon the fashionable life. First, the Cub in a letter to Mrs Lindsay:

There's been too much ‘taking care’ of women — well-to-do women, I mean. (Goodness knows I don't mean the workers and the strugglers who could do with a lot more cherishing than they get, and not be hurt). But the women of our own class are taken care of, and bolstered round with cushions and furniture and cars, till half of them grow as sleek and slack and soft and soulless as cats. 61

Mrs Lindsay later succumbs to this point of view herself:

. . . the reason we so often become trivial-minded creatures, we women, after we have finished bringing up our families, is that we never get the chance to employ more than half of the energies that we possess. 62

While the Lindsay women (who were less well off than the Calthrops) discovered the simple life, Eva, Constance and Mrs Calthrop stopped being selfish and became lavishly charitable instead. The conversion of the Calthrop girls was linked with their engagements to two wealthy squatters who had enlisted for overseas service. The prospect of marriage ‘filled to overflowing the purposeless lives of these young girls'; it also guaranteed that Eva and Constance were wealthy enough to be able to pluck the needy from the jaws of distress. 63 Was with its high rents, inflation, bereavement and loneliness provided excellent charitable opportunities for the idle rich to appear worthwhile people: ‘Oh, the blessed power of wealth, the blessed, blessed consciousness of the power of it!'

To drag a worn looking woman and her half-dozen children out of a crowded room or two in a slum, put them into your car, and whirl them out to a sunshiny piece of land, with a pretty, roomy cottage on it, and to push the woman over the threshold forcibly and tell her it was her own from front to back door and floor to ceiling. 64

The righteous compulsion in these sentiments is all too clear; so is the naivety about what a ‘worn’ woman would actually do once installed in her cottage, beyond improving her suntan. Needless to say Eva and Constance had no intention of whirling themselves into a cottage on the outskirts of the city, although this would have been more practical since neither of them worked and both had transport. For those in doubt, this pre-occupation with home building was easily explained: ‘. . . it was the natural home creating instinct let loose in their hearts at the touch of love, and made immensely wide in its sweep at the touch of war'. 65

By the time she came to write her third war novel, Brigid and the Cub, Ethel Turner seemed convinced that there were ‘two Australias', the loyal section and the rest. She had a prominent French was worker declare: ‘You fight if it pleases you and if it does not please you you stay away and continue to be happy . . . I like not Australia'. 66 Brigid tried to retrieve Australia's reputation, but she would have found her task much easier had conscription been introduced. The issue arose again in conversation with Harry Gale, the worker:

“Miss Lindsay, them fellows back home surfin’ and footballin’ and racin’ an’ never comin’ to lend us a hand here—d'ye know what we do to them in our thoughts?”

“No,” said Brigid, heavily. What could it avail what the brave half of Australia did in their thoughts to the shirking half?
“Miss Lindsay,” said Gallileo, very earnestly, “we spit them out of our mouths.”

While divorce was unthinkable in an Ethel Turner novel, partisan political views were evidently quite acceptable.

Ethel Turner's St. Tom and The Dragon, her next novel after Brigid and the Cub, dealt with ‘the drink question’, a lively war-time issue. Like the King, Lloyd George and the Tsar, Ethel Turner was convinced that the defeat of alcohol was an essential part of the war effort. In October 1915 she was elected convener of the press committee for the Women's National Movement for Stopping the Sale of Intoxicants at 6 p.m. No longer one of the ‘comfortable multitude’ on the question of early closing, she was now a ‘burning fanatic’. She had undergone a conversion experience which had taken her from complacency to caring, an experience which occurs often in Ethel Turner's novels. The early closing campaign proved a great political success. The New South Wales Premier, W. A. Holman, was forced to recognise that early closing had considerable public support, enough to carry a clear majority for six o'clock closing in the referendum of June 1916.

St. Tom and the Dragon was set in the fictitious Sydney suburb of Rockton and tells the story of a talented schoolboy, Tom St. Clair, and his growing outrage at the drink traffic. After seeing a classical scholar brutalised, his young daughter grossly ill-treated and the profits of the drink traffic turned to useless ostentation, Tom becomes a vocal temperance advocate. Although dressed in faded pink pyjamas, a handicap for a public speaker, Tom finally manages to convert a school audience, including the brewer's son, to the temperance cause: ‘Chaps, we'll never be any wiser on this point than we are this minute, or any pluckier or any better-spirited.' The brewer stopped brewing whisky and his wife turned to slum clearance. She pulled down some terraces and introduced trees, scientific draining, lime-wash and red-roofs: ‘... now the small slum dwellers would get patches of sunlight upon their lives to help towards a sweetening and strengthening of their characters'. Mrs Warner, like the Calthrops before her, did not bother to consult the 30 families whose lives were transformed by her sudden interest in their affairs.

Mrs Warner's charitable endeavours were conducted on an extremely impressive scale, but historical parallels for her Rockton involvement can be found in Sydney's kindergarten movement of the 1890s and later. The movement comprised educated, middle-class women who saw their educational mission as part of a wider campaign against inner-city areas like Woolloomooloo, Newtown and Surry Hills. Involvement of this kind was also looked upon as a particularly appropriate way of using motherly instincts, which were so much in evidence in Ethel Turner's Lindsay girls, and which had sadly stagnated in Mrs Warner once her own family had grown up.

Mrs Warner's concerted attack upon terrace housing, alcohol and demoralisation fits neatly into Ethel Turner's belief that rural wholesomeness was good for the individual and for society. The desire to extirpate the degenerate, morally unsound element in Australian life by slum clearance has a relatively long history particularly among upper middle-class professional people of Sydney like Ethel Turner. C.E.W. Bean was prominent among this group. In the novels, as in reality, many of these efforts to help the urban working class, or placate them, were flawed by high-handed middle-class assumptions about what was best for the inner-city working class. Certainly, the novels reveal a persistent authoritarian dimension to reformist thinking, a tendency which becomes still more insistent when taken in conjunction with attacks on ' slackers' and a coercive approach to conscription.

In a recent Historical Studies article Michael Roe pointed to the ideological pre-suppositions shared by Australian health reformers of the early twentieth century and some of their progressive counterparts in America in the years from around 1902 to 1917. Similarly, while it may seem natural to seek English parallels for Ethel Turner's writings, it would be wrong to overlook similarities between her concerns and the reformist drive of muck-raking literature associated with the progressive impulse in America. As one would expect, much of this American literature was more aggressive and critical than Ethel Turner's novels, but some of the targets of criticism, like the widening of class divisions, particularly in the cities,
were shared pre-occupations. Then again, Ethel Turner's hostility to alcohol has much in common with one of the great ‘achievements’ of progressivism, prohibition. More important perhaps was the Protestant emphasis in muck-raking literature on guilt and ‘the ethos of personal responsibility’, impulses which lie at the heart of those startling conversions to charitable endeavour which occur so regularly in Ethel Turner's war fiction. 

However, it should also be noted that charitable endeavour enables middleclass women to exercise power. When Mrs Warner bought a street of terrace housing and established a ‘Homely Food Depot’ she became a person of more than mere social importance in the community. She emerged as an efficient business woman who made important decisions. And this was her salvation. The insistent message emerges: women will sink into stagnation and boredom unless they find responsible work. While involvement with the ‘business’ of social renewal was an approved occupation, particularly for older women, ‘home-making’ was also important women's work. In fact, it was not work, so much as an ‘instinct’ which had to be obeyed, although there are occasional ambiguous hints that it could be obeyed too thoroughly: ‘Strange, strange ways of women that have been since the world began: strange instinct, shared with the birds of the air, to weave and broder so patiently, so tediously, the linings of the nest.’ Home-making saved young women from the frivolity of fashion but it was not fulfilling enough to become a life-time's vocation. The social dangers of boredom among middle-class women were compounded by the fact that they often failed to provide challenging enough lives for their growing daughters. Mrs Calthrop and Mrs Lindsay both erred in this way and for a time lost the respect of their children. The theme of women's work also emerges in Mary Grant Bruce's novels; Aileen McLeod of 'Possum appreciated farm life since it had made a worker of her, while Norah once explained that she could not really appreciate English country life: ‘It seems all play to us: and in Australia, we work.’

While Ethel Turner, and to a lesser extent, Mary Grant Bruce both insisted that women be allowed to use their energies to the full, they did not appear to believe that the range of opportunities available to women needed to be greatly broadened. Home-making and charitable involvement were looked upon as the key areas of female concern, although it was clear from their war novels how much more important the soldierly life was thought to be. While Mary Grant Bruce could approve of careers for women, she also ‘hoped the number of girls bent upon careers will always be very much smaller than their sisters whose destiny is home-making’. When she was still a single author in her mid-thirties she wrote: ‘No one looks askance at the woman who tries to carve out a way for herself; she excites only interest and respect, together with a chivalrous desire to help.’ The burden of these observations was that while women's place was in the home, determined women who thought otherwise would find respect and encouragement. However, literature, even children's literature, may say more than an author intends. There are constant references in the novels of Ethel Turner and Mary Grant Bruce to how cramped, tedious and illused the lives of many women had become.

Despite pukka references to ‘chaps', ‘fellows', and ‘footer', conversations sprinkled with ‘By Joves’ and characters who do not reply, but ‘ejaculate', neither woman wants to dispel the illusion that Australia is a democratic country imbued with youth, hope and health. The bearers of this democracy were the middle classes, particularly the socially well placed, who were required to show a willingness to help the deserving poor. If help was not needed, the better sort were merely cheerful and friendly in the presence of well behaved members of the lower orders. In Ethel Turner's novels help was invariably dispensed in a high-handed fashion and where the ordinary people showed signs of dissenting from the value system of their superiors there was no hesitation in passing laws to control their behaviour. Both women regarded conscription as an excellent cure for ‘slackness'. And they both saw ease and city-living as forces which would devitalise Austrian democracy, whereas rural life was a tonic which quickened the democratic spirit and strengthened character. The point hardly needs to be made that for Mary Grant Bruce and Ethel Turner respect for ‘the bush' and ‘Australian democracy’ was perfectly compatible with anti-Labor politics. Indeed, ‘the bush’ in their writings can be taken to signify a eugenic preference for well-bred stock purged of urban depravity and discontent, a preference that was evident in their writings before the outbreak of war.
Finally, the writings of Mary Grant Bruce and Ethel Turner must cast doubt upon the persistent notion that there is a single, coherent bush legend or bush tradition. There are a series of bush legends and bush traditions serving different ideological functions and appealing to different audiences. The plurality of these traditions and the interests they serve are of greater consequence than their supposedly common characteristics. In fact, while there is considerable common ground between Mary Grant Bruce and Ethel Turner it will be apparent that they approach their subject matter differently. Mary Grant Bruce rarely strays from a blandly patrician and horsy world in which the best people strike an impeccable balance between innocent pleasure and duty. The Lintons were an Australian royal family. Ethel Turner, living in Sydney and in the presence of an articulate labour movement, did not feel so certain that the best people could ignore working-class Australians.

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NOTES

1 Much of the biographical information about Mary Grant Bruce was supplied by Mr Jonathon Bruce from the Mary Grant Bruce papers in his possession. I would like to thank Mr Bruce for answering my enquiries about his mother and kindly allowing me to consult her papers which are now housed in the La Trobe Library, Melbourne. I would also like to thank Alison Pillinger who allowed me to read her B.A. honours thesis, 'The Australia of the Billabong Books', University of Tasmania 1974.

2 Most surprisingly, both women are omitted from J. T. Laird, Other Banners: An anthology of Australian literature of the First World War, Canberra 1971. However, Mary Grant Bruce and Ethel Turner are discussed in a review article by R. Auchmuty, 'The Schoolgirl Formula', Meanjin, vol. 36, no. 3, Oct. 1977 and in H. M. Saxby A History of Australian Children's Literature 1841–1941, Sydney 1969.


4 Further details on William and Louisa Whittakers are available in W. K. Hancock, Discovering Monaro: A Study of Man's Impact on his Environment, Cambridge 1972.

5 Biographical entries for Ethel Turner and Herbert Raine Curlewis can be found in Fred John's Annual, London 1914. See also, F. T. Macarthey (ed.), Australian Literature, Sydney 1956 for further notes on Ethel Turner.

6 Red Page, 11 Nov. 1915.

7 22 Oct. 1915, p. 5.

8 H. H. Driver to Mr Steele, 20 July 1901, Ethel Turner Papers, Mitchell Library MSS 667, bk. 6, p. 516.


10 C. S. Bligh to Mrs Curlewis, 17 April 1924, ibid., pp. 127–9.


12 20 Jan. 1927, p. 28.


14 There are no reference numbers for these figures since they were found in Mary Grant Bruce's papers at Frankston, Victoria. They have since been transferred to the La Trobe Library, Victoria.

15 A letter from William Steele to Mrs Curlewis, 26 Sept. 1917, Turner Papers, bk. 7, p. 165 would suggest that Mary Grant Bruce was the better seller at this time: ' . . . frankly, let me tell you, Mrs Bruce's newer books are selling better than your own . . .
The name Ethel Turner helps us considerably, but I am sure these shorter length books will be noticed by reviewers before long, and it will have a tendency to prejudice sales, which is what all of us wish to avoid.'

16 William Steele to Mrs Curlewis, 11 June 1918, ibid., bk. 8, p. 3.

17 H. V. Evatt to Mrs Curlewis, 9 Feb. 1949, Judge Adrian Curlewis Papers, Mitchell Library, MSS 2159, folder one.

18 William Steele to Mrs Curlewis, 18 Nov. 1914, Turner Papers, bk. 7, p. 117. In this letter William Steele noted that Ethel Turner was working on chapter 16 of The Cub.

19 22 Oct. 1915.

20 A Little Bush Maid, Sydney 1974, p. 11. Two pages later: ‘Norah wished dismally that she had been born a boy’. This novel was first published in 1910. Many years later, in Billabong's Daughter, London 1924, p. 8 Norah was still ‘hampered by remembering that she was a girl’.


22 Mary Grant Bruce, From Billabong to London, London 1915, p. 31.

23 Ibid., p. 38.

24 Ibid., p. 306.

25 Ibid., p. 313, (my emphasis).

26 Ibid., pp. 316-7.

27 Mary Grant Bruce, Jim and Wally, London 1916, pp. 61-2.

28 Ibid., p. 143.

29 Ibid., p. 134.

30 Ibid., p. 228.

31 Ibid., p. 236.

32 Ibid., p. 240.

33 Ibid., p. 256.

34 Mary Grant Bruce, Captain Jim, London 1919, p. 134.

35 Ibid., p. 202. Several pages (p. 205) later Norah tried to console her father: ‘I am only a girl', said Norah. ‘No girl could make up for a son: and such a son as Jim. But I'll try'.

36 See, for example, A Little Bush Maid, London 1974, p. 28 for Billy's English and p. 76 for his obedience. His obedience is still commented upon in Billabong Adventurers, London 1927, p. 63. However, this story offers some favourable portraits of the Chinese. The Jews come in for criticism in Hugh Standford's Luck, Sydney 1925.

37 From Billabong to London, p. 182. Earlier, (p. 181) Norah had said of the Aborigines: ‘There are not so very many of them left now, you know, especially in Victoria; they are dying out fast, and the remaining ones are principally kept in their special settlements. And I never remember enough of them to make it seem they were really the people of the country'.

Some idea of the scale of these activities can be gained from The War Workers’ Gazette: A Record of the Organised Civilian War Effort in New South Wales, Sydney 1918.

Charles Dilke, Greater Britain: A Record of Travel in English-speaking Countries during 1866 and 1867, London 1870, p. 304.


Fraser, op. cit, pp. 54–5.

Ibid., pp. 8–10. The Argus reported on 15 Aug. 1910 that Sir Timothy Coghlan wrote a letter to the Westminster Gazette, 12 Aug. 1910, refuting Fraser's allegation that the third generation of Australians were declining.

The quotation came from the preface to Deeds that Won the Empire, London 1897. Fitchett's views on the subject are also discussed in the author's Dream and Disillusion: A Search for Australian Cultural Identity, Canberra 1976, pp. 79–81.


G. Inglis, Sport and Pastime in Australia, London 1912, pp. 2–3.


Ibid., p. 91.

Ibid., p. 311.

For an interesting discussion of the literature of bush and city see S. Glynn, Urbanisation in Australian History, 1788–1900, Melbourne 1970, chap. 4. The bush ethos is also discussed in the context of resource management in J. M. Powell, Environmental Management in Australia 1788–1914, Melbourne 1976, pp. 100–17.


R. Nash, Wilderness and the American Mind, New Haven 1969, p. 44.


The Cub, p. 148.

Ibid., p. 215.

Ibid., p. 253.

Ibid., p. 248.

Ibid., p. 228.

Ethel Turner's distaste for the north shore was not so profound that she refused to live there herself. Fred Johns's Annual for 1914 listed her address as Mosman as did Who's Who in Australia 1933–34. Her recreations included golf, surfing and motoring.

Captain Cub, pp. 103–4.
62 Ibid., p. 150.

63 Ibid., p. 220.

64 Ibid., p. 221.

65 Ibid., p. 222.

66 Brigid and the Cub, p. 85.

67 Ibid., p. 170.


70 Ethel Turner, St Tom and the Dragon, London 1918, p. 249. Clause 6 of a draft agreement about broadcasting rights for Ethel Turner’s novels reads: ‘The A.B.C. will agree that sponsors for broadcasts shall not be taken from the Vendors of Alcoholic Beverages or other goods which should not be brought to the special notice of children’, Albert Leich (solicitor) to Adrian Curlewis (Barrister-at-law), 21 Sept, 1937, Turner Papers, bk. 8, p. 175.

71 St Tom, pp. 195–6.


76 Brigid and the Cub, pp. 180–1.

77 Captain Jim, p. 134.

78 ‘School for Wives’, vol. V of the Mary Grant Bruce cutting book in the Mary Grant Bruce papers.