Sons of the Empire: How Boys Became Men in one Australian Town, 1900-1920

Peter West
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Abstract
This article based on a project on becoming a man, in one town, Penrith (about which more later), started as an oral history of Penrith. Earlier, I had studied another major centre in Western Sydney, the settlement of Parramatta. When I learnt that there was another major project based on a women's history of Penrith, I decided to take the unexplored territory of men's history. In short, I wanted to ask what it means to be a man - and how that has changed this century. As I examined newspapers and other sources, I became caught up in the men's movement and began re-examining my own life as a man, just as feminist friends were doing with their lives as women. I began to look at history in a new light. I recall the day I read, in the Australian National University's Library catalogue; 'for men, see sex'. That comment said a lot about how we expect men to behave.
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Oral history is always a history based on people who volunteer to talk. In the period 1900 to 1920, there were no volunteers. A search of nursing homes produced very few men at all — for men die earlier than women, on average. No man was found who grew up before the twenties. So the project had to rely on written sources, primarily the Nepean Times. This newspaper was a vital way in which a small town found out about crop prices, and all kinds of events: local, national and international. It also enabled people to keep a check on other people's misdeeds.

It was unfortunate that nobody survived from the early period to interview; but a historian, however brilliant, cannot interview the dead. As data emerged, it was sorted by themes: Fathers, Being a Boy, Being Different, Men and Their Relationships to Women. I believe I am taking part in a personal exploration of masculinity. An acknowledged part of the process is my own being as a father, and as a man engaged in current debates about gender issues. Every man — and woman — makes history in his or her own image.
The Town

The research site was a town called Penrith, apparently after a town in England situated in a similar terrain on the river near the mountains in Cumberland. Its appearance was clearly described by Miles Franklin, a well-known Australian female author:

a few lackadaisical larrikins upheld occasional corner posts; dogs conducted municipal meetings here and there; the ugliness of the horses tied to the street posts, where they baked in the sun while their riders guzzled in the prolific 'pubs', bespoke a farming rather than a grazing district; and the streets had the distinction of being the most deplorably dirty and untended I have seen.

Penrith was a railway town. It had been a set of farms scattered near the river, settled by families from the British Isles. The railway allowed residents to travel 50 kilometres east to the metropolis of Sydney. And it brought cattle from the vast western plains to cattleyards near Penrith. Boys grew up wanting to work on the railways, preferably driving a locomotive. Most boys left school after a primary education to work, generally on the railway or on the many farms which surrounded the town of about 2,500. In time, the town became a city. After the second world war it expanded with immigration and natural population growth, along with Australia’s population as a whole. It is now one of two main centres in Western Sydney. This region contains one-twelfth of the population of Australia. Penrith is the home of the Mighty Panthers, who won the Rugby League Grand Final in 1991. It also contains the University of Western Sydney, created in 1989 to spread over a number of sites scattered across the region. Many residents seem to think the first achievement more important than the second.

Boys and Empire

Penrith boys grew up as proud sons of the mighty British Empire. The Commonwealth of Australia had begun in 1901, but it was at first a weak form of government. State Governments remained strong, with the most powerful being New South Wales and Victoria. In many ways, the most important connections were with England. Documents and newspapers of the period are full of affectionate references to England, sometimes called the Old Country, or simply ‘Home’.

Much of the school day was spent reminding Penrith boys how lucky they were to grow up as sons of one of the greatest Empires the world had ever seen. In their classrooms, children looked at a map of the British Empire spread across the world. They were proudly told that it was an Empire on which the sun never set.

Then there was Empire Day. This was a day set aside from 1905 onwards for children to gather together to show their loyalty and
appreciation for the Mother Country. Children sang 'The Englishmen', 'Auld Lang Syne', 'Dear Little Shamrock', and 'Rule Britannia', all of which reinforced the boys' determination to be ready to serve their Empire and their King. Religion also encouraged this devotion to the Empire. For instance, at the Empire Day service in 1909 the Rev. O. Jones reminded the children that 'if they believed in God they would sustain the Empire'.

Even an advertisement for the Dreadnought Fund played on this need to be loyal subjects

to show our appreciation for the privileges and freedom we enjoy in this sunny land of Australia ... freedom given to us because of England's supremacy on the seas.

This constant emphasis on boys putting their masculinity in the service of the Empire would have brought before all boys the glorious life of the soldier or sailor willing to fight for England whenever the need arose.

**War: August 1914**

Thus when war broke out in August, 1914, the foundations for boys' enrollment as soldiers were already laid. Local newspapers carried news of a Recruiting Campaign by running an advertisement which proclaimed '50,000 Troops Wanted - BE ONE OF THEM'. The speeches and newspaper editorials played on the themes of the bonds of Empire and the scarlet thread of kinship. Young men were urged to be a man by fighting for hearth and home. A popular song ran

> Rally round the banner of your country  
> Take the field with brothers o'er the foam.  
> On land or sea, where ever you be  
> Keep your eye on Liberty.  
> But England, home and Beauty  
> Have no cause to fear.  
> Should Auld acquaintance be forgot?  
> No! No! No! No! No!  
> Australia will be there-  
> Australia will be there.

Young men who volunteered were highly praised. Masculinity was defined in terms of being the man the Empire needed, as we can see from this example:

Private Reg McLean, who is in his twentieth year, is a typically athletic, valiant young Australian of the true Gallipoli standard ... who can be relied upon to do his part valiantly against the foe ... in vindication of the principles of Human Liberty which are those of the Empire.
Men like this were good Australian boys, loyal to their wives and children, who came to aid brother Britons. Others were condemned as shirkers or poor types of men. Be a man in the desired way, or you’re not a man at all, the propaganda seemed to say. There were many ‘soldiers’ send-offs’ described in great detail in attempts to coax more men to join up.

Meanwhile, younger boys were not forgotten. The Boy Scouts movement helped to teach boys discipline through a military-style operation, particularly when participating in attack and defence games while camping. There was a constant reminder that England was the head of the glorious Empire, and boys must always be ready to defend her cause. Brothers, fathers, and uncles away at the war would have only served to heighten this awareness.

Several times the *Nepean Times* recorded the ‘Unveiling of Memorial Tablets and Honor Rolls’ by relatives of fallen soldiers. On 23 June 1917 the *Times* details the unveiling of a memorial tablet dedicated to the memory of the late Signaller A. Starling. The Rev. J.Tarn said of Signaller Starling

> he fought his way through life, and though his career had been cut short in his youth, he has, nevertheless, won through with honor, distinction and glory. In his youth, both at home and at school he was a pattern of neatness, gentleness and honor. As a comrade he was ever courteous, chivalrous and loyal to his mates ... his actions were brave, firm and decisive ... a real patriot — all the elements of goodness, greatness and heroism were well mixed in him.12

This description of courteous and chivalrous masculinity almost sounds medieval in comparison with the impoverished ‘action heroes’ portrayed by Schwarzenegger and van Damme on television and movie screens today. By praising such a fallen hero, authorities hoped other men would crowd in to take his place. But as more and more were injured, died, or occasionally came home with venereal disease, there were fewer and fewer Australians willing to volunteer. The authorities then decided to use force. The national government under Prime Minister Billy Hughes put two conscription referenda to the people, but they were defeated. Penrith voted against both. In a town like Penrith, men were needed on farms. A family which had sent one or two boys to the war could not afford to lose another. And so people began to question whether the town ought to sacrifice all its finest young men on the altar of the British Empire.

**Problem Boys**

Penrith’s civic leaders expected that males of any age should play a role in running the family farm and upholding community standards. But some boys failed to live up to these stern expectations of masculinity.
The local paper printed several articles in 1909 and 1910 about the problems of youth. It was indignant when boys got drunk, played tricks on shopkeepers or festooned a bridge with toilet paper. Sir George Reid’s ‘manful protest against the undue devotion of Young Australia to sport’ was noted on 22 January 1910. Sir George wanted boys to play sport, rather than standing on the sidelines and barracking, or yelling encouragement and boyish abuse:

Muscular strength and physical address are invaluable endowments if worthily employed and directed. But everything depends on the ‘if’. Moreover, it is difficult to see how even muscular strength or physical address are promoted by ‘barracking’ at a football or cricket or boxing match; and for one who plays or wrestles or boxes, there are hundreds who are simply limp and placid, though perhaps noisy, spectators. Devotion to mere pastime, when worthier work is called for, is bad enough. But merely to gaze at the pastime of others is a still lower depth of degeneracy.  

Sir George did not like boys who were limp and placid. Perhaps like many similar comments this would be interpreted by some modern readers as urging boys on to manic displays of heterosexuality. Unfortunately Sir George did not take his own advice, as so often happens with these types who exhort young people to do this and that. Indeed, one historian records Sir George as memorable for his fatness. On one occasion he lifted his vast stomach onto a balcony rail for support, probably on the upper storey of a country pub, often used for political meetings. A member of the crowd yelled ‘What are you going to call it, George?’ He replied:

If it’s a boy, I’ll call it after myself. If it’s a girl, I’ll call it Victoria, after our queen. But if, as I strongly suspect, it’s only piss and wind, I’ll call it after you.  

People spent a lot of time trying to make boys conform to their ideal of good sons of the Empire. In June, 1902 an article appeared in the *Times*, complaining of what boys did. Unfortunately, ‘a harmful custom of sitting at street-corners, spitting and talking without object, except to kill time’, was becoming apparent, resulting in ‘mere lads, fresh from school’ becoming ‘careless in habit and speech, forsaking study ... classed as larrikins, ultimately becoming drunken and dissolute’. It would have been more profitable if these lads had spent this time in a more ‘suitable place with dumbbells or Indian clubs’. Like Sir George Reid, the author wanted strong boys who could be useful to the Empire in time of attack.

The local paper carried regular reports of young men being charged with drunk and/or disorderly conduct. In June, 1917, two youths, 17 years and 18 years respectively, ‘were charged with having used indecent language within the hearing of persons passing by in Queen
Street’, while a 21 year old was charged with being drunk. In 1917 four young fellows were charged with having conducted themselves in a riotous manner in High Street, Penrith on the evening of 8 March 1917. The defendants ‘were in town for the show and indulged in a bit of skylarking in High Street ... growing a bit too boisterous. However, the semi-indulgent tone suggests that boys would always be boys. It might have been more upset if the boys had been effeminate.

**Males and Females**

Women in this era were seen mainly as spouses, wives and mothers. Girls and boys lived very different lives. A later generation still said ‘Girls worked inside, boys worked outside’. An athletic sports gathering was held in Perry’s Paddock at St. Mary’s on Saturday afternoon, 3rd March, in aid of the Catholic church: ‘500 or more persons were present, and a real “bonsar” day’s sport and competition resulted’. Men’s sports on Boxing Day, 1905 were cricket, cycling, buck jumping, high jump and throwing at the wicket. Women and children were given less energetic sports to play: they guessed the weight of the pig, stepped 100 yards or took part in floral exhibitions. Many races for boys and girls were held as well as ‘Catching Rooster’ and ‘Throwing Sheaf of Hay’ presumably for the men. Most sports days were affiliated with a local hotel where the sportsmen drank. The two sexes sometimes came together for a dance in the evening.

Miles Franklin’s novel suggests that women still wanted men to be muscular. This female author wrote under a man’s name. She suggests that muscular men make the best husbands in a comment on ‘muscle’ which seems to talk about a man’s biceps and triceps, but might apply also to his penis:

> the wholesome athlete is generally more loveable [than an intellectual]. When his brawn is coupled with a good disposition, he sees in woman a fragile flower that he longs to protect.

> His muscle is an engine a woman can unfailingly command for her own purposes, whereas brilliance of intellect ... is too liable to be too sharply turned against wives, mothers and daughters to be a comfortable piece of domestic furniture. On the other hand, the athlete may have the muscles of a Samson, and yet, being slow of thought and speech, be utterly defenceless in a woman’s hands. He cannot bring brute force to vanquish a creature so delicate.

Today there would be a different view taken of brutal, muscular husbands, with references to domestic violence. Franklin was a feminist and wanted votes for women, but seems to admire men for their masculinity, and gives some erotic descriptions of the hero, Ernest, with his strong, beefy arms and powerful back. And in contrast, she portrays girls as soft, passive, almost weak. But there were some who asked if being a pretty wife was all a girl could be. In 1908 the *Times*
published an article as to ‘Why Don’t the Men Propose?’ The writer believed it was one of the signs of the times in that there was an apparent superiority of the female sex. The girls are beating the boys in industry, in application, in good behaviour, and in general reliability. There are exceptions, of course, but they only prove the rule. Why should a self-respecting girl, who is able to earn her own living, take up with a young fellow who stinks of tobacco, whose language is bad, who seems to have no thought beyond his own diversions which range from picking the winners through every fashionable fad.

The article suggested that there was an artificial standard of living which was as much the fault of the girls as the boys. ‘If the girls can’t have a home of a certain style they prefer to remain single’. However, most sources suggest that people wanted women to complement strong men’s muscularity, and support their role in the war. In the war years, women were enrolled in ‘Win-the War-Leagues’ and the Red Cross. There were women in the ‘Would-to-Godders’. ‘Would to God I were a man’ and ‘Would to God I were Strong Enough to Fight’ were the slogans of this group. Some women sent white feathers to men who would not enlist. There was the strong suggestion
that girls would only consort with a man who would do his duty for King and Empire.

In sum, males of this time grew up in a society in which boys lived in one sphere, girls in another. Males were expected to be tough and physically strong; a male who did not test his strength was condemned by the usual array of do-gooders. In the war years these people were reinforced by urgers and 'Would-to-Gidders'. Being a man meant you had to protect your loved ones and the Empire by going off - perhaps to get killed. Women watched their loved ones go, and sometimes gave them a white feather if they refused. They had the horrors of childbirth in a local hospital to contend with. Looking back, it seems amazing that so few men did refuse to die for loved ones and Empire. But Penrith was a place tightly bound by kinship and religion as well as affection for the Empire.

Conclusions

This essay has given us some glimpses of how boys became men in the period around the First World War in Penrith. It appears that males grew up with a strong sense of responsibility. They had to turn over soil, tend crops, and feed animals. Some had the privilege of working on the railway, which seems to have been an envied occupation, particularly for the locomotive engine-drivers. Boys were expected to care for mothers, other family members, and farm animals. When war came, there was little questioning of the idea that they would protect loved ones in the Empire's hour of need. We could call this a dominant or sanctioned masculinity. Men were liked if they were strong and muscular and took charge in a difficult situation. These were the men who would come to aid Mother England in her hour of need. As Bob Connell suggests in the quotation at the head of this article, some men might commit war atrocities, but many men also died on the battlefield. Men were both the majority of the killers and the killed. And men had little room to move - they had to go to war or face all the horrors that society could throw at them for daring to resist. It seems very few did.

There is another thread running through the sources studied, especially the newspaper. Boys played tricks, got drunk, acted as larrikins and scallywags. There seems to have been more tolerance of boys' misbehaviour than of girls. The phrase 'boys will be boys' captures something of the feeling expressed. The people of the town seem to have clucked their tongues, but were resigned to the idea that boys did get up to tricks. They received a good deal of education based on the premise that they were lucky to be sons of the mighty British Empire. In time these boys, too, would grow up to become her soldiers and sailors.

The biggest question has not been answered. What of the males who
did not subscribe to dominant forms of masculinity? What did a male do if he found himself attracted to other men, or if he did not want to spend his weekend playing sport? There are no answers in the newspaper, nor in documents examined. We have to assume that there were men who for various reasons did not subscribe to dominant forms of masculinity. We might imagine that they could have become priests or clergymen. Perhaps they lived out their lives as bachelors attached to one of the family groups in the town. Some must have left for Sydney, where sources in a later era point to undercover sex among males. But history has never been good at describing the lives of people who live unobtrusively. Perhaps the answers might appear when masculinity becomes a more respectable field of study.

NOTES

The data for this project was collected with assistance from Andrew Martin, Sandra Rutter, and Kirsten West. Advice and encouragement were provided by Gar Jones and Jim Power.


7. Unpublished interview with Ruth Paget. All names have been changed to preserve anonymity.

8. In 1905 the Sydney Daily Telegraph enthused about ‘the great Empire which binds together in an Imperial brotherhood about one-fourth of the human race ... To the meanest man among the hundreds of millions who live under its world-embracing folds the British flag guarantees that full measure of rational freedom’. It went on to talk about the need for Australians to maintain the British connection as they were living next to a volcano. The rise of Japan and its success against Russia in the war of 1905 caused much anxiety in Australia. The Colonial Laws Validity Act of 1866 declared that British colonies could not enact a law repugnant to relevant laws enacted in England. Both documents are included in Peter West and Alan Dwight, eds., Australia: From Empire to Asia (Sydney: Science Press, 1980), p. 20 and p. 22 respectively.
10. West and Dwight, p.20.