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The women's voluntary services, a study of war and volunteering in Camden, 1939-1945

Ian C. Willis

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**THE WOMEN'S VOLUNTARY SERVICES, A STUDY OF WAR AND
VOLUNTEERING IN CAMDEN, 1939-1945.**

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

from

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

by

IAN COLIN WILLIS

History and Politics

2004

THESIS CERTIFICATION

Certification

I, Ian Colin Willis, declare that this thesis, submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the Department of History and Politics, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualification at any other academic institution.

Ian Colin Willis

18 February 2004

Date

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ABSTRACT

Camden is a country town whose history and development has been influenced by war. The town was part of Australia's homefront war effort, and from the time of the Boer War the most important part of this for Camden was volunteering. The Second World War was no exception, and the most influential voluntary organisation that contributed to the town's war effort was the Women's Voluntary Services [WVS].

The Camden WVS was part of the close cultural and emotional links that existed between Camden and Great Britain that began with the Macarthur family in the early nineteenth century. Camden saw itself as a 'little England' and the WVS used this feeling to great effect during the war, stressing notions of 'home' and a shared sense of identity and place with Britain. The Camden WVS was part of a strong tradition of Victorian female philanthropy in the town, which attracted, and depended on, middle class women socialised in Victorian notions of service, 'ideals of dependence', a 'separatedness of spheres', patriarchy, the status quo, and by the inter-war period, modernity.

Although the WVS was created specifically to meet the needs generated by the Second World War, it shared the characteristics of a number of British organisations that were established within Camden's female philanthropy by the female elite after 1900. These organisations did not compete with each other, and were characterised by overlapping membership, inter-organisational co-operation, conservatism, Protestantism, leadership by the Camden elite and a decentralised branch network. All of which was underpinned by parochialism. The women who founded these voluntary organisations gained valuable wartime experience from their efforts during the Boer and First World Wars, and this contributed to the eventual success of WVS in the town.

In essence, the Camden WVS was a war-specific British voluntary organisation that connected with Camden's Anglo-centric heritage and cultural origins. The central doctrine of the WVS was an ethos of service, which was based on altruism, imperial patriotism and British nationalism. Volunteering for the WVS, which involved self-sacrifice and dedication to duty, directed Camden's tradition of female philanthropy towards the moral imperative of a righteous war. Camden women willingly undertook voluntary service for the WVS in the belief that they gave their time and effort to help 'their boys', and in doing so, 'did their bit for the war effort'. Its influence was great enough to spill over into many other aspects of Camden's war effort, including those run by the men of the town.

This study of the WVS has allowed the teasing out of some of the main threads of Camden's wartime experience. In the process it has also illustrated that wartime philanthropy was bound up with class, gender expectations, intimacy, conservatism, patriarchy, parochialism (localism) and Camden's rural ideology. Deeply embedded in Camden, the WVS reflected its community.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AAMWS	Australian Army Medical Women's Service
ACF	Australian Comforts Fund
AIF	Australian Imperial Force
AWAS	Australian Women's Army Service
CBE	Commander of (the Order of) the British Empire.
CMG	Companion of (the Order of) St Michael & St George
CWA	Country Women's Association
MBE	Member (of the Order) of the British Empire
NRMA	National Roads and Motorists' Association
RAAF	Royal Australian Air Force
RAF	Royal Air Force
RSSAILA	Returned Sailors', Soldiers' and Airmen's Imperial League of Australia
VAD	Voluntary Aid Detachment
VDC	Volunteer Defence Corps
WVS	Women's Voluntary Services
YMCA	Young Men's Christian Association
UAP	United Australia Party

LIST OF CONVERSIONS

During the Second World War, and earlier, Australia used the Imperial System of weights and measures. Below are the equivalences:

12 inches	-	1 foot
3 feet	-	1 yard
1 mile	-	1760 yards
1 inch	-	25.4 millimetres
1 foot	-	0.3048 metres
1 yard	-	0.9144 metres
1 mile	-	1.61 kilometres
1 square mile	-	2.59 square kilometres
1 pound	-	0.45 kilograms
1 hundredweight (cwt)	-	50.8 kilograms
1 ton	-	1.02 tonnes
16 ounces	-	1 pound (lb)
112 pounds	-	1 hundredweight (cwt)
100 hundredweight	-	1 ton

Money equivalences at date of conversion in Australia, 14 February 1966.

1d (penny)	-	0.83 cents
1s (shilling)	-	10 cents
£1 (pound)	-	\$2
£1/1/- (guinea)	-	\$2.1
12 pennies	-	1 shilling
20 shillings	-	1 pound

Expression: £1/15/1 - 1 pound, 15 shillings, 1 penny.

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This thesis arose from my curiosity about Camden's wartime history while undertaking an undergraduate course in Australian History conducted by Dr Winifred Mitchell in 1980. On the completion of the course I started collating material relating to wartime activities in Camden, and first presented it a conference held by the Australian War Memorial in July 1989. After an initial meeting with John McQuilton in July 1992, I subsequently completed an MA(Hons) thesis on the Camden Red Cross under his supervision in 1996.

My interest in the Camden Women's Voluntary Services is an extension of that earlier work. My research has always been conducted on a part-time basis from my own resources, supplemented by small research grants from the University of Wollongong. The long gestation of this research has allowed me to refine my research and writing skills, and develop a sound theoretical framework for the thesis.

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