

THE PORTRAYAL OF WAR IN THE NOVELS OF THOMAS KENEALLY

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Abstract

A war novel or military fiction is a novel about war. It is a novel in which the primary action takes place on a battlefield, or in a civilian setting, where the characters are preoccupied with the preparations for, suffering the effects of, or recovering from war. Many war novels are historical novels. The author of the novel situates her analysis in the context of historical research on the First World War and the Australian Anzac myth, illuminating the specifically Australian elements in Keneally's portrait of the Durance sisters. She demonstrates that *The Daughters of Mars* celebrates the achievements of "Anzac girls", negotiating a place for them in the culture of commemoration. Yet, at the same time, Keneally attempts to include his female protagonists in the "manly" world of Anzac values, privileging heroism over victimization. Consequently, they become "misfits of war", eagerly accepting imperial and nationalist ideologies. Thus, in a way characteristic of Australian First World War literature, *The Daughters of Mars* fuses the tropes of affirmation and desolation.

Keywords- Concept of War Novel, Health situation during WWI, bonding of siblings

Thomas Keneally was the most distinguished writer of Australian Literature. He wrote twenty-nine novels, seventeen works of non-fiction and many plays. He was a recipient of many national and international awards and honours. In 1982, he was awarded Man Booker Prize for his most popular novel, *Schindler's List*. The other novels such as *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, *Gossip from the Forest* and *Confederates* were shortlisted for Man Book Prize respectively in 1972, 1975 and 1979. His popular novels are – *Bring Larks and Heroes* (1967), *The Widow and Her Hero* (2007), *Angel in Australia* (2000), *Blood Red*, *Sister Rose* (1974), *The Cut-Rate Kingdom* (1980), *Towards Asmara* (1979), *The People's Train* (2009), *A River Town* (1995). Two of his novels – *A Dutiful Daughter* (1971) and *The Daughters of Mars* (2012) are his favourite novels. War, Civil War, Civil Disturbance, the human conflict, the racial discrimination, the gender dimensions, and search for identity are his favourite themes.

The Daughters of Mars, a war novel, is a glowing tribute to Naomi and Sally Durance, the sisters, who actively played the role of nurses in Egypt and then France during the first world war. Prior to *The Daughters of Mars* (1912), Keneally wrote 29 novels, 17 works of nonfiction and many plays. At the age of 77, he published *The Daughters of Mars*. Keneally has always been a novelist who writes and lives in the big sweep of epic history. He took on the end of the First World War in *Gossip From the Forest*, the U.S. Civil War in *Confederates* and the Eritrean War of Independence in *Toward Asmara*. He won the Booker Prize for *Schindler's List*, his account of one good German saving lives during the Holocaust. In *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, he gave us the story of racism and violence set amid his native Australia's founding as an independent nation in 1901.

At the same time, Keneally, as a leader of the Australian Republican Movement, has been working for decades to cut ties to the British commonwealth and reestablish his country as a completely independent state. So, it comes as little surprise to find Keneally taking up the themes of history

and national identity. With this account in view, let us see his new novel which reflects history about two nurses who join the Australian military in World War I.

There are two strong influences on Keneally that inspired to undertake this work. To quote Keneally:

Since World War I is such a fountain of national myths, I decided to focus on the physical damage and the people who dealt with it, Keneally said by telephone from Sydney. A lot of the nurses, especially, were good keepers of diaries. (Los Angeles Times, 8-6-2013, 1)

The result of the influences is a new novel, *The Daughters of Mars*. Asked why he was so much interested in the two sisters, Naomi and Sally Durance, Keneally answered:

I was very interested in the way these young women from very callow backgrounds dealt with this incomprehensible situation: how they kept it up, how they dealt with hundreds of young men every week suffering from every conceivable obscenity, mental and physical, the effects of gas... (Los Angeles Times, 8-6-2013, 1).

The Daughters of Mars is a significant title. The daughters are Naomi and Sally Durance, and “Mars” refer to the god of war. The novel tells the story of sisters. As volunteer nurses, they are sent off to the Dardanelles, where Australian troops face the Turks at Gallipoli. We see not the battle but its aftermath on the bodies of the men who come under the sisters’ care. One of the most moving chapters in the book is the wait on the hospital ship for the very first casualties. All these girls are county hospital nurses; the doctors used to uneventful ward rounds. Everything is neatly set up, the sheets are starched, it is quiet and orderly. Then this vast horror arrives, this calamity out of all proportion. Shipload after shipload of boys injured with devastating wounds: shattered limbs, lungs filled with blood, hours from agonizing deaths. It is chaos. It is about making life or death decisions on the spot: choosing who can have surgery and who can not.

They run out of morphine, there is mess, blood, excrement and vomit everywhere. The nurses’ aprons are covered in blood. It is hell, a brutal, shocking initiation. Keneally, a pacifist who is fascinated by war, says: “I’m always asking myself, how would I behave in a great moral crisis? Would I be brave or not?” (Online, 2). The sisters are sorely tried : their ship is bombed, their sweet hearts disfigured or jailed. They have to treat the victims of gas attacks. The mercy killing of their mother becomes a tiny crime compared with these horrors.

Keneally, always at pains to be accurate, read many diaries for this novel and gives us different voices from the war. There is a rape of a nurse, we read about dysentery wards black with flies, patients who survive the fighting only to die of influenza. There are the harrowing suicides on the ship home of boys who could not bear the shame of their injuries or their venereal diseases; families waiting on the harbourside for heroes who get broken boys back. Rather than being forgotten, he worries that the world wars will be glamorized in the future. He wants to remind us of the brutal realities. Commenting on *The Daughters of Mars*, James Walton writes in the *Telegraph*: “Not only is *The Daughters of Mars* one of the most ambitious novels in a career that stretches back to 1964, but it might even be the best” (Los Angeles Times, June 02, 2013, 1).

The book is one of those proper epics that traverses continents, hemispheres and world history, and tells the story, not only of sibling rivalries, family obligations and small-town jealousies, but of what it was like to go to the other side of the earth to nurse the men so horribly maimed and injured, first in the Dardanelles, then on the Western Front. Keneally brings to life so much of that brutal conflict.

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