

SWEAT, SACRIFICE AND FRESH-FACED DECENCY

The Drouin Collection



Kathleen Fisher showcases beguiling images of a small town during World War II that are contained in the Drouin Collection

Pastoralists haggle at a cattle sale, a school boy and his pony meander along a country road and a farmer's wife bakes a cake using eggs from her own chickens—images of Australian rural life are not generally associated with propaganda. However, 88 photographs of the small dairy town of Drouin, some 100 kilometres south-east of Melbourne, provide an insight into how the Australian government used representations of humble, hard-working folk to boost the nation's standing with its allies during World War II.

In 1944, the award-winning war photographer Jim Fitzpatrick snapped what is now known as the Drouin Collection for the Department of Information—Australia's official wartime censorship and publicity body. As described by Michelle Hetherington in 'A Small Town at War: The Drouin Collection', Fitzpatrick's assignment was part of the department's propaganda initiative to boost Australia's international image. Put simply, John Curtin's government aimed to bolster the nation's postwar bargaining power



by showing to our allies, particularly the United States of America, Australia's support for the war on the home front through sweat, sacrifice and fresh-faced decency.

The year they were taken, 27 of Fitzpatrick's images of Drouin appeared with an essay by Dave Stevens in *South West Pacific* magazine, a Department of Information publication sent to international media offering stories to reproduce for free and without acknowledgement. The result was a rosy portrait of the impact of war on country Australia, a story of returned heroes and an absence of death and deprivation.

War aside, the Drouin Collection is a powerful tale of Australian identity, which locates an essential Australian 'spirit' in rural life using themes of wellbeing, community, prosperity and good old-fashioned toil. Fitzpatrick's vision both embraces and rejects clichés of rural identity. He taps into the notion that Australia 'rides on the sheep's back' by eulogising the ordinary people who quietly feed and clothe a nation. At the same time, he dispels the myth that country dwellers are 'bush hicks' by

above left:
Jim Fitzpatrick
On the Way Home from School, Drouin, Victoria c.1944
gelatin silver photograph;
15.9 x 21.5 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an24229656

above right:
Jim Fitzpatrick
Aerial View of Drouin Town Centre, Victoria, During World War II c.1944
gelatin silver photograph;
15.9 x 21.5 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an24164325



above from left:
 Jim Fitzpatrick
Three Unidentified Men at the Warragul Cattle Sales, Victoria c.1944
 nla.pic-an24377136;
Sergeant Ernest Brough Shows Students the Correct Way to Punch a Football at Drouin State School, Victoria c.1944
 nla.pic-an24171439;
Students at Drouin State School, Victoria, Tend the School's Garden c.1944
 nla.pic-an24171669;
Wes Colquhoun and Fred Phair Talking to the Girls at the Ball in the Soldiers Memorial Hall, Drouin, Victoria c.1944
 nla.pic-an24340443;
Mothers and Babies at the Drouin Infant Welfare Centre, Victoria c.1944
 nla.pic-an24358358;
Josephine Smith Digging a Grave at the Drouin Cemetery, Victoria c.1944
 nla.pic-an24219358
 gelatin silver photographs;
 various sizes
 Pictures Collection

depicting smart, organised people bursting with business flair.

Most of the collection is people-centred, inviting viewers to peek into the homes, workplaces and personal lives of the subjects. Fitzpatrick introduces the town of Drouin through half-a-dozen sprawling aerial images, showing its fertile rural context. He frames these so the viewer gazes over lush paddocks in the foreground before focusing on the town. From this heavenly perspective, Drouin is unified and orderly; homogeneous buildings are pristine white in the morning sun and generous backyards are neatly clipped or planted with fruit and vegetables.

Fitzpatrick's representations of school children provide a close-up of this unity and order, highlighting wellbeing and diligence through a discourse on education. A sporting motif in images of boys playing cricket reveals key attributes of a wholesome childhood—the determined bowler, the eager fielders and the entire team absorbing the teacher's batting instruction.

Two images contemplate possible futures for these children. Sergeant Brough is an adult to aspire to be in *Sergeant Ernest Brough Shows Students the Correct Way to Punch a Football at Drouin State School, Victoria*. As a coach and, according to Fitzpatrick's accompanying notes, a local sporting and war hero, he represents honour and dedication to community and country. *On the Way Home from School, Drouin, Victoria* lacks such optimism, drawing on the symbol of the crossroad to suggest a time of crisis and choice. Read in a war-time context, a happy future for the two boys pictured depends on people like Sergeant Brough.

The future may be uncertain, but the present belongs to boys in Fitzpatrick's vision of rural childhood. His notes for *Students at Drouin State School, Victoria*

Tend the School's Garden make clear the value of boys, with a nod to the conventional male role of provider. Boys learn practical agricultural skills, the photographer writes, selling the vegetables they grow in the school garden for profit. In contrast, girls have the decorative task of merely tending flowers.

During World War II, with men fighting overseas, women's roles in Australian society were revolutionised and resulted in an increased participation rate of 31 per cent in the workforce between 1939 and 1943. This, however, is reflected to only a limited extent in the Drouin Collection, which shows women mostly in domestic and nurturing roles. A lifecycle of caring for others—family and community—emerges.

Single women desire to become wives, filling their unmarried years with work that mimics motherhood, such as teaching, nursing and clerical duties. Helen Johns, for instance, is an 18-year-old clerical worker at the local Farmer's Co-operative Milk Factory, but really wants to be a farmer's wife, Fitzpatrick writes. Conveniently, her boyfriend is a farmer.

Moreover, dancing is one of Helen's two hobbies and apparently a prime means of courting in Drouin. Young romance is about active men and passive women in *Wes Colquhoun and Fred Phair Talking to the Girls at the Ball in the Soldier's Memorial Hall, Drouin*. With connotations of testosterone-fuelled animal instincts, Fitzpatrick describes local war heroes Wes and Fred as the 'pride of the stag line'. Clad in pretty, pale gowns, five potential partners sit in a line against the wall—unnamed, giggling and waiting to be chosen.

The outcome of courting is babies, who are associated with precious jewels and health. The local infant welfare centre



becomes a parade ground rather than a medical venue in *Mothers and Babies at the Drouin Infant Welfare Centre, Victoria*. A mother holds aloft her plump, smiling baby for proud display against a poster for child dental care—'rare like pearls' reads the caption over a baby in an oyster shell.

For women, family means a domestic routine of ironing, cooking, cleaning and shopping, which is underpinned by service, resourcefulness and thrift. A woman who is presumably Mrs Hamley, for example, serves tea like a maid in *Afternoon Tea with the Hamley Family and Visitor June Wellwood, Drouin, Victoria*. She entertains the family's guest, while her husband and son prefer to read the newspaper and a book. An afternoon tea theme continues in *Mrs Robert Wharton Making a Cake in Her Kitchen, Drouin, Victoria* where a farmer's wife overcomes war rations to procure bountiful butter and eggs with which to bake for her family.

Notably, as with many women pictured in the collection, these two subjects are either unnamed or defined by the men in their lives. In his notes, Fitzpatrick names Mr Lesley Hamley and his son Bryan, yet leaves a blank on the woman we assume is Mrs Hamley. Likewise, Mrs Robert Wharton is only known by her husband's name (as was customary). The result is reduced significance and limited identity for women.

Older women, whose children are presumably grown, return to mothering the community. For example, Fitzpatrick writes, there hasn't been a customer Mrs James Gleeson couldn't handle in her 23 years at the Drouin Hotel, which her husband owns. The quirky and somewhat curious photographs of Mrs Josephine Smith grave-digging in the local cemetery complete the lifecycle of nurturing with a compelling

metaphor. Strong enough to shovel dirt at 84, she signifies endurance: how fitting that those who give birth are present at life's end.

Members of the Australian Women's Land Army (AWLA)—who filled gaps left in the manual labour market by men away at war—are among the few empowered women. Fitzpatrick shows 'land army girls' winnowing flax in the heat and dust of the local mill. Used to make soldiers' clothes and equipment, flax fibre was perhaps Australia's most important home-front contribution to World War II. Significantly, these women look boyish, their long hair and curves disguised under scarves and baggy overalls. Notably, AWLA volunteers were generally from the city, living in rural areas only for the war's duration. An opposition between city and country emerges—local women have domestic roles, while temporary residents engage in masculine tasks.

Meanwhile, Drouin's men are celebrated in images of achievement through community and military service, sporting prowess and gruelling physical work. Police, lawyers, senior local government officials, the vicar of the Church of England and the principal of the state school—'pillars of the community' are shown making decisions to develop the town.

A series of individual portraits focuses attention and prestige on local war heroes, sports stars and burly labourers. Sergeant Ernest Brough features again, this time as a military medal-winning escapee from a

below:
Jim Fitzpatrick
Land Army Girls Employed at the Drouin Flax Mill, Drouin, Victoria
c.1944
gelatin silver photograph;
21.0 x 16.0 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an24345444





above left:
 Jim Fitzpatrick
*Portrait of Ernest Edwards,
 Blacksmith of Drouin, Victoria*
 c.1944
 gelatin silver photograph;
 15.9 x 21.5 cm
 Pictures Collection
 nla.pic-an24166489



above right:
 Jim Fitzpatrick
*Cheeses for Allied Servicemen
 at Drouin's Co-operative Milk
 Factory, Drouin, Victoria* c.1944
 gelatin silver photograph;
 15.9 x 21.5 cm
 Pictures Collection
 nla.pic-an24284419

below right:
 Jim Fitzpatrick
*Mrs Josephine Smith and an
 Unidentified Man in Connolly
 Colquhoun's Butcher Shop,
 Drouin, Victoria* c.1944
 gelatin silver photograph;
 15.9 x 21.5 cm
 Pictures Collection
 nla.pic-an24358529

German prison camp. The camera gazes up to Reverend William McSpedden, who is a Victorian bantamweight boxing champion. Captured mid-strike as he pounds metal, blacksmith Ernest Edwards makes perhaps the most poignant subject. Fitzpatrick compares him with the illustrious blacksmith in *The Village Blacksmith* by popular nineteenth-century American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, the epitome of an honest, hard-working family man.

Gender issues aside, the Drouin Collection overflows with images of abundance. Fitzpatrick devotes numerous photographs to dairying, the town's main agricultural industry and primary source of wealth. The cows at the cattle sale in nearby Warragul are fat and shiny, the perfect specimens to produce the hat-box sized cheese wheels in *Cheeses for Allied Servicemen at Drouin's Co-operative Milk Factory, Drouin, Victoria* and to supply a quarter of Melbourne's war-time milk. What's more, the factory is community-owned with profits shared; while Fitzpatrick and Stevens persistently stress that the town's produce contributes to the allied war effort, it appears that locals are making a tidy sum in the process.

As such, it is not surprising to discover that 'the standard of living of [Drouin's] 1100 workers, business and professional people, and few retired oldsters, is high', according to Stevens. The town's retail trade is certainly booming. For instance, customers are flanked by an abundance of fresh meat in *Mrs Josephine Smith and an Unidentified Man in Connolly Colquhoun's Butcher Shop, Drouin, Victoria*, while a

series on the local department store, Bell and Macaulay's, reveals walls stacked so high with food, homewares and clothes that a shop assistant climbs to the top of a tall ladder to retrieve them.

The immaculate appearance of Drouin's residents matches this abundance. Women wear stockings around the house in a time when, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, war rations allowed an average of just four new pairs a year. Men wear three-piece suits and hats when such items were barely available. And everyone—from school boys giving each other

piggy backs to 'old dears' at the Red Cross—is neat, clean and perfectly coiffed. An ideal community of white, well-bred people emerges. Conveniently, the nearby Aboriginal shanty-town of Jackson's Track is not mentioned.

Under Fitzpatrick's keen eye, Drouin becomes a dream of faithful servants who have been given an Eden for their efforts. But this paradise is not a one-off in rural Australia, Stevens tells us, for the town 'differs in no essential particular from a thousand neat little settlements all over the continent'. Country life throughout the nation glows, it seems, with the same charm, industriousness, prosperity, health, nurturing and community spirit, along with a gender power imbalance that is glaring only to modern eyes.

KATHLEEN FISHER is a Canberra-based writer and photographer with interests in visual arts, travel and Australian identity

