

They came for love of an Aussie

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It is impossible to estimate without official records, but it is probable that almost 50,000 women came to Australia in the twentieth century because they fell in love with an Aussie during a time of war. Carol Fallows, whose own mother arrived in Australia in 1946 on assisted passage as a fiancée of an Australian airman, reveals some of their stories

The first of an estimated 15,000 war brides of Australian soldiers who had fought in the 1914-18 war landed on our shores in 1919. When Australia sent its bright young men overseas to fight in the First World War, there was no thought of how they would be brought home – and no inkling that they would want to bring their fiancées, wives and, in many cases, children back with them.

Meeting foreign girls

Australians fought in Europe and the Middle East and spent much of their leisure time in the United Kingdom. They had no difficulty finding girls to ‘walk with’ (their term for today’s ‘going out with’). Diaries and letters home describe these ‘foreign’ girls, often in glowing terms. Signaller Oliver Coleman wrote home in June 1917 about the girl he had met as ‘a fine girl as tall as me, lovely hair down past her waist, nice brown eyes and a good lively companion.’ Gunner Jack Duffel wrote to his mother about a ‘nice little girl … a real decent [sic] and quiet ‘Dorset’ lass’.

From April 1916 when the 1st Anzac Corp arrived in Flanders, Australian men also met both French and Belgian women. Local girls, refugees, nurses and others were behind the front, though to read the official histories one would think that there were few if any women about. The postcards with their saucy or sentimental messages and the songs of the times are a better indication of what life away from the front was like. Songs such as ‘Mademoiselle from Armentieres’, ‘Roses of Picardy’ and ‘Somewhere in France is a Lily’ are a lasting reminder.

Shipping brides and fiancées to Australia

Organising ships to transport up to 180,000 men who were overseas when the war ended, was not an easy task – there was a drastic shortage of shipping and many countries needed to transport troops home. Making space for women as well complicated the problem and the authorities under-estimated the number they would need to transport.

Some of the accommodation on board was well below expectations. The condition of the Wainama, for example, was reported in the London Times, as ‘scandalous. Violet Proctor, an English girl accompanied by her new husband

Chris, recorded that "The only toilet appointments were one small washing basin, which was broken in such a way that water would not remain in it, and one small mirror. Nearby was an electric globe which was kept burning as the only other light in the cabin was from one small porthole... the majority of cabins had no means of letting in the daylight" - and this in a cabin for six people.

Mixed welcomes

The reception the brides received on arriving in Australia was mixed. Some were made very welcome by their new families. These women would have found settling into this remote and very different country easier than those for whom the welcome was not so warm. A few ships were met with hostile crowds, many of them women who felt that these foreigners had stolen their men away. And a few for were not met at all. Though there were newspaper stories about brides and fiancées who arrived only to find they were abandoned, these were actually few.

Brides from many countries

At the end of the Second World War, the Australian government was no better prepared to transport brides, wives and children home than it was in 1919. Many Australians know that a large number of Australian women met and married American GIs when they were stationed in Australian towns and cities from 1941 to 1945, but few are aware that an even greater number of women from many countries came to Australia to start a new life with an Australian. These brides came from countries as far apart as Egypt, Canada, Switzerland, Italy and Japan. There could have been as many as 25,000 as there were around 550,000 Australian men and women who served overseas in that conflict.

The first war brides from the 1939-45 conflict arrived in Australia in 1941, having sailed through potential battlefields. Beryl Gehrig was among them and she was not happy "it was such a thoughtless and selfish thing to do... to send us off under such dangerous conditions. Just afterwards, regulations were relaxed and any personnel who were engaged or married could stay in England if they so chose to do so" she said.

Bride ships to Australia

Throughout 1946 ships carrying first wives and children and later fiancées arrived in the ports of Australia. Once again there were stories of unhappy reunions, or no reunions at all and of relationships that did not work out, but for the most part these marriages flourished.

The brides who came from Japan had a more difficult time. Australian forces were part of the occupying forces that arrived in Japan in 1946 and stayed for almost 10 years. Despite the non-fraternisation policy young Australian men met and fell in love with Japanese women and in most cases applied to bring their wives to this country. It was not until 1952 that Australian authorities allowed Japanese war brides to immigrate and they were given five year temporary visas - in 1956 they were allowed to become permanent citizens. Cherry Parker, who had married Gordon in 1948, was the first to arrive in 1952.

Japanese and Vietnamese brides

When Australians sent troops to Vietnam in 1962, once again young Australians fell in love. And once again Australian authorities made it difficult for Vietnamese wives – and some husbands to move to Australia. At the time Australians were aware of Australian girls falling for the American GIs who came to our cities for R&R (rest and recreation) but the stories of the Australians who had partners in Vietnam were kept very quiet.

There are thousands of untold stories about these ideal immigrants. As the Repatriation Commission wrote in their annual report of 1947-8 ‘What better immigrants could be imagined than those who had been ‘hand-picked’ as it were, by members of the services.’!

Photos: Top - A bride and her husband disembark in Sydney from an unidentified ship, around 1919. Photo from The Sydney Mail

Middle - a group of women and their children photographed on arrival in Australia, mid 1940s. Source: unknown.

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