

# ANZAC THEOLOGY AND WOMEN POETS UNDER THE SOUTHERN CROSS

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## ABSTRACT

During the Great War Australians lived within an emerging story of the Southern Cross. Faced with the reality of war, the churches hoped that the atonement story of innocent sacrifice and divine reconciliation could become Australia's story too. They encouraged enlistment with the thought that this new nation might redeem a sinful past through war for God, King and Empire. They dreamt that a nation built under a heavenly cross might fulfil the Christian destiny promised in its skies. These themes and more are explored in the poetry of two Congregationalist women who published prolifically in the church and the mainline press throughout the Great War and in the years that followed. Their poems were patriotic and pastoral, addressing both the landscape of home and the suffering of the women who remained. They wrote of sons and soldiers sacrificed, memorializing them as innocents through a mother's memory of boyhood. They brought images of suffering soldiers into proximity with Christ's cross, allowing poetic allusion to make their sons sacred in death. Finally, they sought and found reconciliation between the bereaved and their sacralized soldiers not in heaven but under the stars of the Southern Cross.

## KEYWORDS

Anzac, atonement, poetry, women's history, Australian history, Congregational Church

In the dark years of the Great War, those left at home in Australia needed a means to speak of bleak tragedy elsewhere. They found it in poetry. In rhyming couplets men and women attempted to reconcile the experience of home with a distant conflict. Their verses hinted at the conflict felt within families and within the hearts of the grieving. An outpouring of poetry appeared in city newspapers, church journals and locally published booklets.<sup>1</sup>

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1 For example: Private W. G. Lowrie, "Fovant Camp," *Footscray Chronicle* (February 10, 1917); A. W. Orchard, "To the Front: Recruiting Poem," *Examiner* (Launceston) (August 20, 1915); Margery Ruth Betts, "We would not have Thee in our streets to-night (first

Despite greater output by women, when anthologies came to be produced in the years that followed, the poems of soldiers and men who understood the business of war were preferred.<sup>2</sup> Even non-combatant men wrote of the soldiers' experience and set their poems in khaki, in the theatre of war. Women in the Congregationalist Church in Victoria and South Australia, whose poems vastly outnumbered those of the denomination's men, largely wrote about the landscape of home. This article will focus on the poetry of the two most prolific Congregationalist women, Beatrice Bevan and Margery Ruth Betts. Together they published almost a hundred poems about the war.

In the face of the Great War's enormity and significance, poets struggled with the limits of language and the demands of loyalty to empire.<sup>3</sup> Their verse was sometimes earnestly mediocre and reliant on romanticism's clichés of honour and heroism.<sup>4</sup> Many poems peddle a mixture of patriotism and politically compliant pastoral concern. However, the poetry of the Congregationalist women also reveals an awareness of theology and landscape. They actively grafted Australian identity onto religious belief, attempting to articulate spirituality for a new nation. Not only do these women poets demonstrate an increasing identification with nationalism and the self-conscious cultivation of the bush myth, they locate sanctity, redemptive sacrifice and reconciliation under the Southern Cross.

Examining poetry by Congregationalist women is interesting both for gender and denomination. Women had long used poetry as a socially acceptable means of religious expression, attempting to touch the numinous in language that is beyond everyday prose. It is not always theologically orthodox. Even when their poems were printed in denominational journals alongside sermons and editorials, they focused on spiritual experience rather than confessional concerns. Theologically they trod on no man's territory, and went unnoticed. The research of church historians too has tended to rely

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line)," *Victorian Independent* (Congregationalist journal) (June 1, 1916); N. J. Cocks, *The Betty Songs* (Sydney: W.G. Smith, 1919). The phenomenon of poetry prompted by war is explored in Gordon L. Heath, "Passion for Empire: War Poetry Published in the Canadian English Protestant Press During the South African War, 1899–1902," *Literature and Theology* 16, no. 2 (Dec 2002): 130–31.

2 Michael Sharkey, "But who considers woman day by day?": Australian Women Poets and World War I," *Australian Literary Studies* 23, no. 1 (May 2007): 64–65.

3 Dorothy Goldman (ed.), *Women and World War I: The Written Response* (London: MacMillan, 1993), 7; Janet Montefiore, "Shining Pins and Wailing Shells': Women Poets and the Great War," in *Women and World War I: The Written Response*, ed. Dorothy Goldman (London: MacMillan, 1993), 54–56.

4 Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (London: Bodley Head, 1990), 190.

on men's sermons, official statements, and documents that track the fault-lines of dispute.<sup>5</sup> The faith and humanity of these prolifically published poets is not on the record.<sup>6</sup>

The Congregational Church in Australia traced its origins to the English Reformation. There it had taken a stand on the scriptural authenticity of church government and, seeking a pure form of Christianity untainted by association with the state, separated from the established church. Congregationalists insisted on the autonomy of the worshipping congregation and their right to adopt the theocratic patterns of governance and authority that they witnessed in the New Testament.<sup>7</sup> But, exemplifying a nineteenth-century shift among Nonconformists toward greater engagement with government, the denomination found itself aspiring to be a part of the Establishment. In the fervour around Australia's Federation, they risked their cherished independence. Closer relationship with government coincided with what historian of Empire Hilary Carey has called the "high point of Christian patriotism."<sup>8</sup> Historian Roger Thompson observed that in 1914 Protestants staged "an enthusiastic rally to imperial Britain's side."<sup>9</sup> More damningly, Michael McKernan noted an early twentieth-century concern among churches with status and relevance that compromised the gospel and left them "content to echo the general platitudes" about war, God and Empire.<sup>10</sup> Most Protestant churches were behind the war effort and many were in favour of conscription.

In the Congregational Church there was support among the leadership for peace initiatives but, when war was declared, the leaders and the state Congregational Unions were careful to make public declarations in favour

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5 Michael McKernan, *Australian Churches at War: Attitudes and Activities of the Major Churches 1914–1918* (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1980); John A. Moses, "Was There an Anzac Theology?," *Colloquium* 35, no. 1 (2003): 3–13.

6 Geoffrey Lindsay Lockley, *Congregationalism in Australia*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. and updated by Bruce Upham (Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 2001); Patricia Curthoys, "Congregationalists," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion in Australia*, ed. James Jupp (Port Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2009): 299–304; J. Harold King, *Congregationalism Then and Now: A Brief Review of Congregational History and Principles* (Sydney: Congregational Union of New South Wales, 1947); John Cameron, *In Stow's Footsteps: A Chronological History of the Congregational Churches in S.A., 1837–1977* (Adelaide: South Australian Congregational History Project Committee, 1987).

7 Lockley, *Congregationalism in Australia*, 11.

8 Hilary M. Carey, "Religion and Society," in *Australia's Empire*, ed. Deryck Schreuder and Stuart Ward (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 206.

9 Roger C. Thompson, *Religion in Australia: A History*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (South Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2002), 57.

10 McKernan, *Australian Churches at War*, 3–4.

of the war effort.<sup>11</sup> In 1916, as the issue of military conscription became increasingly heated, the Congregationalist Unions responded with support. Sometimes, in deference to the denomination's historical commitment to individual freedom, such statements were hedged with a plea to conscience. In effect, this meant that Victoria's Congregational Union was openly in favour of conscription, and South Australia officially left the decision to individual conscience while publicly promoting enlistment, and prominent South Australian Congregationalists publicly campaigned in favour.<sup>12</sup> Few spoke against the war effort. Pacifist ministers were rare, and the ecclesiology of Congregationalism made them vulnerable as congregations had the power to dismiss their minister. Men such as Albert Rivett in New South Wales and E. Hope Hume in Victoria both lost their pastorates on account of their anti-war views. They also found themselves without a voice in the Congregational press.<sup>13</sup> Between 1914 and 1918 almost every poem published in the Congregationalists' *Victorian Independent* was about the war and was supportive of it.

The first of the two Congregationalist poets is the faithful and patriotic Beatrice Bevan. She was born in 1876 into a high-achieving family that included sisters who worked in medicine and art. Their father, William Vale, was in the Victorian parliament.<sup>14</sup> Beatrice joined the poetry circle run by Louisa Bevan, wife of the Rev. Dr Llewellyn Bevan, Congregationalism's "Patriarch of the Churches." She met and married their son Willett, and thus joined one of the most influential families in the denomination. After marriage in Hong Kong in 1901, Beatrice and the Rev. Willett Bevan lived in China under the auspices of the London Missionary Society while Willett taught at Medhurst College in Shanghai. Their only child, Medhurst Llewellyn Willett Bevan, whose name speaks of the importance of religious and familial ties, was diagnosed with tuberculosis at a young age. Consequently, the family returned

11 "Congregational Union, A Business Session," *Observer* (Adelaide) (October 16, 1915).

12 "The Churches, Congregational Union Endorses Conscription," *The Age* (Melbourne) (October 14, 1916); "Out of Order, Congregational Union Does Not Discuss Conscription," *Daily Herald* (Adelaide) (October 20, 1916); "Congregational Union, A Business Session," *Observer* (Adelaide) (October 16, 1915); "National Service, Federal Act Advocated," in which Congregationalist and member of the House of Assembly for Torrens in South Australia, Major T. H. Smeaton, is noted as "expressing his entire sympathy with the objects of the meeting," *Observer* (Adelaide) (October 16, 1915).

13 Robert D. Lindner, *The Long Tragedy: Australian Evangelical Christians and the Great War 1914–1918* (Adelaide: Openbook, 2000), 78, 97; C. B. Schedvin, "Rivett, Albert (1855–1934)," <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/rivett-albert-8218/text14381> (accessed February 10, 2016). See also McKernan, *Australian Churches at War*, 153.

14 "Mrs. Bevan, Poetess, Resident of Gawler, New Verses to be Published," *News* (Adelaide) (September 11, 1928).

to pastoral ministry in Gawler, South Australia.<sup>15</sup> It was from here that Mrs Willett Bevan, as she was publicly known, published her self-consciously Australian poems. These were printed in the mainline newspapers of Adelaide and Gawler, and reprinted across the country. She also had a number of poems published in Congregational journals and produced small collections of verse which were patriotically received as “joyous songs of open spaces.”<sup>16</sup> She died in 1945.

Margery Ruth Betts, known as Ruth, was aged 23 and living with her widowed mother in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne at the outbreak of war. Her religious poems appeared in Congregational journals and her secular poems in the mainline Australian press. Like Beatrice Bevan, male relatives in ministry greatly assisted her recognition within the Congregational Church: her father, the Rev. Robert Arthur Betts, and both grandfathers had been Congregational ministers.<sup>17</sup> Ruth Betts did not marry and, after the Great War, returned to England which she had left as an infant.<sup>18</sup> Some of her wartime poems were published in English newspapers. Others appeared in Australian anthologies.<sup>19</sup> She also produced a book, *Remembering and Other Verses*, which led to her being reviewed as “far above” the many “little rhymesters of the suburbs [who] are turning out war-verses by the bushel.”<sup>20</sup> Betts’ poems were excerpted beneath chapter headings in Mary Grant Bruce’s popular Australian wartime adventure novel, *Jim and Wally* (1916). In 1918 her work became part of the state school curriculum when the Victorian Education Department’s *School Paper for Grade VII and VIII* set her poem “Remembering” for memorization.<sup>21</sup> But the poet herself is not remembered. Details of her life are poorly documented to date and she is entirely forgotten by denominational history.

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15 “Beatrice Bevan,” Auslit, <http://www.austlit.edu.au> (accessed February 9, 2016); “Bevan, M Llewelyn W.,” Now & Then (Gawler), [http://www.gawler.nowandthen.net.au/Bevan\\_M\\_Llewelyn\\_W](http://www.gawler.nowandthen.net.au/Bevan_M_Llewelyn_W) (accessed April 6, 2016).

16 “Mrs. Bevan, Poetess, Resident of Gawler.”

17 William Harnett Blanch, *Ye Parish of Camberwell: A Brief Account of the Parish of Camberwell; Its History and Antiquities*, originally published 1875 (London: Forgotten Books, 2013), 230–31; “Memorial to Principal Betts A.T.S.,” *Victorian Independent* (August 2, 1915).

18 FamilySearch, “England and Wales Birth Registration Index, 1837-2008,” <https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:2FMV-VMF> (accessed April 5, 2016).

19 For example, David Holloway, *Dark Somme Flowing: Australian Verse of the Great War, 1914–18* (Malvern: Robert Anderson and Associates, 1987).

20 “Some Charm of Song,” *Sunday Times* (NSW) (January 13, 1918). “Australian Authors,” *Graphic of Australia* (November 23, 1917); Margery Ruth Betts, *Remembering and Other Verses* (Melbourne: Australasian Authors’ Agency, 1917).

21 “Margery Ruth Betts,” Auslit, <http://www.austlit.edu.au> (accessed February 9, 2016).

When Beatrice Bevan wrote “O Christ who died on Calvary, / Our cross is marked Gallipoli,” she brought two images and two places into proximity and thus accommodated an imaginative leap that orthodox theology could not make.<sup>22</sup> Congregationalists knew that salvation was achieved through Christ, not through the deeds of an Empire’s military. The populist idea of “dying ‘for Australia’” was an “unconscious Pelagianism” in which good works were substituted for faith.<sup>23</sup> It persists today in the civic religion of Anzac. Yet, in a religious age, Anzac soldiers were fighting for “God, King and Empire,” a three-fold cause that could not be disentangled. Ruth Betts described the religious experience of war in “Communion on the Battlefield.”<sup>24</sup> Unusually, the poem is set in the trenches; however, it is not fighting but faith that is depicted. The soldiers pause for Communion: both sacrament and mystical communion with Christ in suffering and death. In a moment of evangelical epiphany a young soldier speaks to the “Soldier-Christ” and commits to “follow Thee / Adown the immediate blood-stained track to death.” Christian patriotism was the poem’s most pressing demand and it overwhelms the last line’s poetic metre. In this poem death was for Christ, not Australia.

Theologian John Moses has noted that chaplains related the sacrifice of soldiers to the story of Calvary because the death and resurrection of Christ gave hope to the families of the fallen. With suffering inevitable and death a real prospect, talk of Christ’s resurrection had a pastoral rationale. The dead might wake in glory and, one day, be joined by their families. Sermons on such themes gave the bereaved hope that they might be reunited with the fallen in heaven because Christ had died to reconcile God and humanity, guaranteeing eternal life for the faithful.<sup>25</sup> The women’s poetry was pastoral too, but it is rather less otherworldly. Their hopes for reunion were immediate and bound up in a theology of place and belonging *under* the stars.

At the base of the popular idea that soldiers fought for God was the assumption that war was redemptive. Christians hoped that through sacrificial death and the shedding of innocent blood, a sinful *society* might be cleansed and reformed in Godly ways.<sup>26</sup> The scholarship is in agreement that this belief

22 Beatrice Bevan, “Via Crusis (for 25th April, 1916),” *Victorian Independent* (May 1, 1916).

23 Alan Atkinson, *The Europeans in Australia*, vol. 3 (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2014), 409; Michael Snape, *God and the British Soldier: Religion and the British Army in the First and Second World Wars* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 24.

24 Ruth Betts, “Communion on the Battlefield,” *Victorian Independent* (December 1, 1915).

25 Moses, “Was There an Anzac Theology?,” 13.

26 Nosheen Khan, *Women’s Poetry of the First World War* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1988), 40–44; Joan Beaumont, *Broken Nation: Australians in the Great War*

was widespread among the churches, and Moses has demonstrated that it is evidenced in sermons by Anglican, Catholic and Nonconformist ministers.<sup>27</sup> It is clearly present in *one* poem by a Congregationalist. Lieutenant Alan J. Kerr, who did not survive the war, hoped that “Humanity will rise from out the mire / To better, finer things; and thus will come / the glorious kingdom of the Lord our God.”<sup>28</sup> But the idea of Australia’s redemption is muted in the poetry of the women, Betts and Bevan. Bevan acknowledges that “though we crawl / And drag through wastes of misery, / The path of anguish leads to Thee” and that “To reach the rose, we grasp the thorn.”<sup>29</sup> But these sound more like rationales for suffering than hope for a great and Christian nation.

Strongly evangelical, Ruth Betts was more concerned with personal morality and individual salvation, than with hope for society’s redemption. In ‘The First Night,’ a mother speaks to her dead soldier son saying, “there was no more need that I should say / Your name, nor ask your sins might be forgiven / ... And *you* were cleansed and healed, / Cleansed and healed and shriven.”<sup>30</sup> This is not about innocent blood shed to redeem a nation, but about a mother praying for her son who sins for Empire. The evidence in the poems of Betts and Bevan does not support recent scholarly readings of the relationship between war and hopes for society’s redemption.<sup>31</sup> For these women poets, thoughts of sacrifice and redemption led elsewhere.

#### THE CROSS AND THE TREE OF LIFE

Salvation is made personal in a poem by Bevan. The poem is about Nurse Edith Cavell, whose death early in the war provoked, and was heavily used by propagandists in order to provoke, a great depth of feeling.<sup>32</sup> Cavell was an English nurse who had been running a medical clinic and training centre for nurses in Brussels when war broke out, but was arrested by German occupying forces. She confessed to having aided the escape from German territory

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(Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2013), 180; McKernan, *Australian Churches at War*, 110.

27 Moses, “Was There an Anzac Theology?,” 10–12. See also the report on a sermon by Congregationalist minister in North Adelaide, the Rev. Alfred Gifford, *Daily Herald* (Adelaide) (January 4, 1915).

28 Alan J. Kerr, “At Sea,” *Victorian Independent* (July 1915).

29 Beatrice Bevan, “Lord God of Empires” (first line in absence of title), *Register* (Adelaide) (May 24, 1917).

30 Ruth Betts, “The First Night,” *Victorian Independent* (December 1, 1917).

31 Moses, “Was There an Anzac Theology?,” 12; McKernan, *Australian Churches at War*, 88.

32 Jane Potter, *Boys in Khaki, Girls in Print: Women’s Literary Responses to the Great War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 69; Tammy Proctor, *Female Intelligence: Women and Espionage in the First World War* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 104–5; Beaumont, *Broken Nation*, 98 and 386.

of Allied prisoners of war as well as Belgian and French citizens. Convicted of treason, she was sentenced to death by firing squad in October 1915 at Belgium's national firing range.<sup>33</sup> But Beatrice Bevan poetically relocated Cavell's martyrdom from Belgium to Golgotha.

On Golgotha their guns they set –  
[...]  
Where our dear Lord in anguish hung  
They raised their battle cry;  
And in a garden fair and sweet  
They led you forth to die –  
Edith Cavell!  
[...]  
Like Him, you served, were slain like Him,  
By those for whom you bled –  
Edith Cavell!<sup>34</sup>

Belgium's shooting range was overlaid with the sacred geography of Golgotha as Bevan situated Cavell's death in the redemption narrative. Indeed, the martyred nurse embodies the Christological centre of the Anzac legend, and the poem is punctuated with her name, "Edith Cavell!" in the manner of a responsive reading in which the people speak a sacred refrain. While enlistment propaganda rallied for the avenging of Cavell's execution, Bevan's orientation to feminine suffering found that a woman could represent divine sacrifice.

Many more women's wartime poems were set in "a garden sweet and fair." Perhaps the most common setting for Congregationalist poetry was the garden and the Australian countryside. Unlike male poets, they rarely described the perilous terrain of Gallipoli and the Western Front. Instead, thousands of miles from their soldier sons, they wrote of unspeakable loss in places "sweet and fair," in bittersweet landscapes where beauty and sadness cohabited. In Betts' poem "The Route March" (1916) a mother watches the troops parade, maintaining her public fortitude. But she cannot bear to hear a blackbird "a-singing in her garden there, / Pouring, it seems, your very heart away."<sup>35</sup> Courageous forbearance was so fragile that it might be unmasked by a bird.

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33 Proctor, *Female Intelligence*, 100–103.

34 Beatrice Bevan, "Edith Cavell," *The Register* (October 22, 1915).

35 Ruth Betts, "The Route March," *Victorian Independent* (August 1916); reprinted in Betts, *Remembering*, 42–43.

But now she must not hear that song you sing  
 About the sweet blue eggs, the mate's warm breast,  
 About the innocent glad things of spring,  
 About the folded bud, the dear, safe nest.  
 [...]  
 And while you carol from that blossoming tree,  
 How can she dare her glory, know her pain?  
 How can she loose her thoughts and set them free  
 From those small feet that will not come again?<sup>36</sup>

The mother's stoicism is undone in the privacy of the garden with its "blossoming tree." Overwhelming emotion is laid bare in her Eden with its Tree of Life. Her son, who has blossomed into manhood, once played there in safety and innocence. In his absence the garden is no longer a play space but a sacred place. Betts wrote, "Here in the garden where he used to play / Here where her memory has a hallowed place." The bodies of Australian soldiers killed in the war were not repatriated and families lacked a physical focus for their grief.<sup>37</sup> This eventually led to the establishment of public war memorials. But as the women's poetry reveals, in the absence of a grave to visit and tend, a childhood garden could become a place of private memorial, grief and communion. They located their sons and husbands there.

Images of the "blossoming tree" recur in Betts' poetry. In "The Homecoming," an injured soldier experiences a moment of hush before death in which he "heard once more / A blackbird sing," and was transported to his mother's garden to "hear beneath the blossoming tree, / The lure and passion of his mating-call."<sup>38</sup> The promise of new life inhabits death's threshold, calling to mind the tradition in which the Tree of Life and the "tree" of Calvary occupy one sacred place. Even upon crossing through the veil, a dying soldier promises his mother saying Spring "shall bring you news of me / In every dew drop and blossoming tree."<sup>39</sup> Each beautiful symbol of life represented absence and hope.

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36 Betts, "The Route March."

37 Joy Damousi, *The Labour of Loss: Mourning, Memory and Wartime Bereavement in Australia* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 10.

38 Ruth Betts, "The Homecoming," in *Remembering*, 45.

39 Ruth Betts, "The Unforgotten," in *Remembering*, 16-17.

While Betts wrote of blossoming trees, Bevan employed the patriotic imagery of the Golden Wattle, *Acacia pycnantha*, for religious purpose: “The golden wattle marks the men who ‘crossed.’”<sup>40</sup> Acacia has a long religious association with immortality. The burning bush is traditionally represented as an acacia which is not destroyed by fire but lives on.<sup>41</sup> Its prevalence across the Australian continent also made it a popular contender for national floral symbol. From 1910 an annual Wattle Day was formally observed in Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney, and enthusiasm for wattle as a national emblem grew rapidly in the early days of the Great War.<sup>42</sup> In 1919 wattle was incorporated into the design for a badge that the Federal government issued to widows and mothers of fallen soldiers. In gold thread on black silk, “sprays of wattle-bloom, the words ‘for Australia,’ and the rays” of the military crest combined to represent women’s patriotic mourning.<sup>43</sup> The flora of immortality served a nation’s purpose too.

The Congregationalist women readily combined wattle and war, immortality and patriotism, in their poems. Betts used wattle to evoke Australian soil. For her it spoke in shorthand of the nation’s youth and orientated the reader to the particularity of a young nation’s landscape.

Oh! the Spring is here again, and all the ways are fair,  
The wattle blossom’s out again and do you know it there?  
Does its scent wind through the night, the trembling stars between,  
And breathe a sigh at Heaven’s gate for earth so dear and green?  
Wattle blossom is for youth whose songs are yet to sing.<sup>44</sup>

Betts was careful to articulate the meaning of her poetic allusions: “Wattle blossom is for youth.” Her cultivation of Australian religious and patriotic imagery was quite self-conscious.

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40 Beatrice Bevan, “A Tribute to the ANZACS: The Deathless Army,” *Bunyip* (Gawler, SA) (April 21, 1933).

41 Richard Taylor, *How to Read a Church* (London: Rider, 2003), 231.

42 Wattle Day Association, <http://www.wattleday.asn.au/about-wattle-day-1> (accessed February 3, 2016).

43 “For Mothers and Wives: In Memoriam Badge,” *The Argus* (January 9, 1919); Australian War Memorial, “Mothers’ and Widows’ Badge,” [https://www.awm.gov.au/encyclopedia/badges/mothers\\_widows/](https://www.awm.gov.au/encyclopedia/badges/mothers_widows/) (accessed October 19, 2016).

44 Ruth Betts, “The Dreamers,” in *Remembering*, 13–14 (originally in *The Australasian*). See also, Ruth Betts, “Peace Night,” *Victorian Independent* (August 1, 1919); Ruth Betts, “The Ghost,” *The Australasian* (August 2, 1919).

Bevan, always patriotic, used wattle with a variety of theological intent. She invoked its healing power: "O! could I keep the golden blooms ... my heart might then forget its pain."<sup>45</sup> She called on the ennobling and enlightening power of wattle when she described men who came from darkness and, "Into the light, looked up, and saw the Wattle bloom."<sup>46</sup> Lamenting, with Betts, that Australian soldiers were buried so far away, she associated the true place of sacred rest within Australian soil: "No golden of our wattle bloom / Sheds light above that far-off tomb!"<sup>47</sup> The elision of the acacia's sacred immortality and patriotic associations are most evident in Bevan's 1915 poem "Wattle Blossom and Southern Cross." Here she named wattle as "the symbol of this nation's heart."<sup>48</sup> The same poem calls on the Southern Cross constellation, an emblem which had patriotic associations in Henry Lawson's poem "Flag of the Southern Cross," the Eureka flag and various colonial ensigns.

Bevan turned the Southern Cross to religious purpose. She described it as a burden in the Christian tradition. She wrote that "the Cross upon this land" symbolised how "By pain, by agony, shall she be tried."<sup>49</sup> For her the Southern Cross was a representation of suffering, and a signifier of the Christian nation's painful destiny. The feminine pronoun was commonly used for the nation and for the Empire's female personification, Britannia, but in Bevan's writing it also always speaks of female suffering. In a poem for the first anniversary of the landing at Gallipoli, "Via Crusis (for 25<sup>th</sup> April 1916)," Bevan lamented that the "land of Southern Cross / Has learned by bitter, bitter loss." Her vision was theological. She described a nation of mourning women under the Southern Cross. Like the women in the synoptic gospels who watched Jesus' death on the cross from a distance, Australia's women watched the death of sons and lovers from Australian shores.<sup>50</sup>

Poetic allusions to landscape and sky in the Great War are almost always about distance and loss, and the rupture of family relationships. Ruth Betts wrote of the youth who stepped "Over the edge of the world / And past the stars."<sup>51</sup> Although Betts never openly questioned the war or the worth of fighting, she regularly portrayed women who did not want their sons and their husbands to enlist: women who had no say and who remained silent

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45 Beatrice Bevan, "Wattle Blossom," *Register* (Adelaide) (September 7, 1915).

46 Beatrice Bevan, "The Vision Splendid," *Register* (Adelaide) (September 4, 1920).

47 Bevan, "Via Crusis."

48 Beatrice Bevan, "Wattle Blossom and Southern Cross," *Register* (Adelaide) (September 6, 1915).

49 Bevan, "Wattle Blossom and Southern Cross."

50 Matt 27:55–56; Mark 15:40–41; Luke 23:49.

51 Ruth Betts, "Gallipoli," *The Australasian* (December 25, 1915).

as their homes were divided.<sup>52</sup> The theme recurs in Betts' poems "The Day You Went," "Called" and "The Route March." The women in Betts' poems call for the return of their sons. Political protest is absent from Congregationalist poetry but, in verse, mothers regularly remind their sons that they are boys and not men with all that men have to do. In their insistence on boyhood we see quiet resistance.

In a poem titled "Called" (1916), Betts presents a dialogue in which a mother speaks with her son who is at once a child and a man, present and absent. The mother calls her son in from play, but he does not listen. Instead he hears the call to serve his country. The mother sees her son "Coming up the valley road, with twilight closing in, / ... Hasten, you, and cross the threshold, ere the goblin-hours begin."<sup>53</sup> But her son is not scared of goblins anymore. The Australia that Betts described was overlaid with European folklore and the relative safety of childhood it evoked. It was a place of imaginative belonging in which mothers and young wives waited out the war years on the threshold, and to which they called their boys home. The women in the poems of Betts and Bevan long to be at-one with their sons in the landscape of boyhood innocence and belonging, in their hallowed place.

#### RECONCILIATION IN THE LAND OF THE SOUTHERN CROSS

In the poetry of Ruth Betts, the distance between the dead and the bereaved was imaginatively bridged in the act of "calling": a word rich with religious association. Jesus called his disciples, congregations called their ministers, preachers employed the antiphony of call-and-response, and the country called young men to war. In Betts' poems mothers call their sons, and men call to their sweethearts. In "The Recall" (1915), a dead soldier requests that he be summoned from his place of rest. The soldier says that he may be found "in Heaven or Hell, / Or sleeping in my shroud." But he asks to be called home to the familiar landscape of the Australian countryside:

Call me up the valley road,  
And call me up the hill;  
Though I'm a million miles away,  
Your voice shall find me still.<sup>54</sup>

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52 Ruth Betts, "The Day You Went," in *Remembering*, 35; Ruth Betts, "Called," *The Australasian*, (August 19, 1916); Ruth Betts, "The Route March," *Victorian Independent* (August 1916) (reprinted in *Remembering*, 42–43).

53 Betts, "Called."

54 Ruth Betts, "The Recall," *The Australasian* (August 14, 1915).

It was the act of calling, with all the connotation it carried, that would bring the distant dead back to the living in Australia. In the poetic imagination, it was on Australian soil that mystical reconciliation between women and their soldiers might take place. Similarly, in “The Ghost” (1919) Betts wrote,

Call to him, oh!  
Call to him,  
Beside the bend he knew.  
Beneath the fairy wattle-tree,  
And there I shall be for you.<sup>55</sup>

Again, it was a call to boyhood innocence, to the safety and sanctity of Australian soil.

Beatrice Bevan called to the fallen men of her town of Gawler. “Are you coming back to Gawler, to the hill-encircled town, / Where you dreamed and worked and lived in olden days?”<sup>56</sup> Anticipating the town’s sceptical response to the minister’s wife, she went on:

“They will never come again,” you say!  
But listen to the Bells!  
“Lo, I am with you always,” One has said.  
And your hero may be at your side, unseen ...  
“Not dead!”

Alluding to Christ’s promise to be eternally present, she suggested that those killed in war might occupy a place between the living and the dead that allowed them to return somehow to where they belonged. The eternal was summoned in parochial scenes as Bevan asked which roads the soldiers might take and what landmarks they might pass on their return:

Will you take the Bentley Road [...]   
Will you stand upon the crest there, looking over Gawler South,  
Where the gardened houses cluster down below?<sup>57</sup>

She might have asked, will you take the Emmaus Road? And will we meet you there? The poem was written for the unveiling of the Gawler Memorial,

55 Betts, “The Ghost.”

56 Beatrice Bevan, “Gawler Memorial,” *Bunyip* (Gawler, S.A.) (September 16, 1921).

57 Bevan, “Gawler Memorial.”

a place designed to hold the memory of the town's fallen. But in naming and describing each place where the fallen might pass on their mystical return, Bevan associated the particular landscape of the town and countryside with the memory of its own sons. In this way she invested the local Australian landscape with sacred memory, and made it a place of reconciliation.

The poetry of Congregationalist women offers theologically-informed perspectives not available through the analysis of sermons, editorials or men's wartime poetry. As women left at home while war raged elsewhere, Beatrice Bevan and Margery Ruth Betts wrote of a nation burdened but not redeemed. In a time when resistance could not be voiced, they located women's suffering in the quiet places of the heart: the garden with its "blossoming tree." The two-in-one nature of the Tree of Life under which the women dwelt was mirrored in the poets' representation of the country's sons. Just as the tree of Calvary is one with the Tree of Life, the soldiers were at once men and boys, they were obedient unto death and innocents in the garden. This tension demanded resolution. It demanded reconciliation, and in rhyming couplets young soldiers were transformed into immortals and were willed, like Christ, to return home. This reconciliation between soldiers and their mothers and sweethearts did not take place in heaven (as the chaplains said), nor in the Imperial War Cemeteries of Europe where the grieving made pilgrimage to be with their dead. Instead soldiers and the women left at home came to be at-one through mystical encounter in the garden and on the road, in the land of their belonging under the Southern Cross.