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Journal article

Intimatopias and the queering of Australian war fiction

Riseman, Noah

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“Intimatopias and the Queering of Australian War Fiction”

ABSTRACT: This article examines how two works of fiction depict male same-sex desire in Australian military history. The protagonists in the novel *Bodies of Men* (2019) and the short story collection *The Boys of Bullaroo* (2018) do not identify as gay or bisexual, yet they develop intensely intimate friendships that become sexual. The texts come from different literary and popular genres, but they both represent what Elizabeth Woledge refers to as intimatopias: ‘a homosocial world in which the social closeness of the male characters engenders intimacy.’ Intimatopic fictions of war are queer texts that challenge binary and normative understandings of sexuality because the characters’ sexual identities are not defined by (homo)sexual acts. *Bodies of Men* and *The Boys of Bullaroo* are intentionally ambiguous about the protagonists’ sexualities, which are neither fixed nor fluid, but rather expressed as demisexual extensions of intimacy. The texts also challenge Australia’s digger and Anzac mythologies by presenting soldiers as sensitive, vulnerable and non-heterosexual. As such, intimatopic fictions of war reimagine Australian military history and offer new, queer conceptualisations of same-sex intimacy, mateship and desire.

British novels about the First World War, Clare Rhoden argues, have a long tradition of incorporating homoerotic and homosexual themes, but Australian war novels eschew this trend. Rhoden explains: ‘Although male tenderness exists, it is represented as being of a much lesser degree, at least in its physical manifestation. Male-male friendship – mateship – as represented by Australian authors may carry undertones of emotional and physical intensity, but this is usually expressed in curt, economical gestures’ (Rhoden 2014, 155). Rhoden and Robin

Gerster's studies of Australian Great War novels found that the most dominant themes from the interwar period were about the heroism of frontline soldiers, while more contemporary novels have combined the heroism trope with the theme of disillusionment (Rhoden 2015; Gerster 1987). Other studies of Australian war writing by Carolyn Holbrook and Christina Spittel have explored how interwar novels were sites of memory. Books often portrayed Australian soldiers as ordinary and flawed men who performed heroic acts, while also showcasing the horrors of war (Holbrook 2014, 57-90; Spittel 2007, 2011). Like Rhoden and Gerster, Spittel also points to the ways post-1970s authors have meshed the heroic tropes of the Anzac mythology with ideas about trauma, lost innocence and grief (Spittel 2014, 2009). Same-sex desire has not traditionally fit within any of these Australian mythologies of war.

In 2019 I was asked to review Nigel Featherstone's new novel *Bodies of Men*, which tells the story of a romance between two Australian soldiers in the Second World War. I was curious if this was the first Australian novel featuring soldiers in a same-sex relationship. Unable to find any examples through scholarly databases or Google searches, I posted on a Facebook group for Australian fans and authors of gay romance, erotica and male-male (M/M) fiction (explained below), asking if anyone knew of any Australian books with themes around homosexuality in the armed forces. After all, in the United States there is a strong tradition of incorporating military themes in gay male fiction (especially gay erotica), with such titillating titles as *I'll Be Your Drill, Soldier* (2009), *Bound By Honor* (2011) and *Code of Conduct* (2008). Most replies knew of no Australian texts, but one respondent who used to be a librarian identified seven books, all published since 2011: three novels with a protagonist who was a veteran of Afghanistan, one book set during the Second World War, one novel with a Second World War veteran as protagonist, another with a First World War veteran as protagonist, and one collection of short

stories which were all themed around Australian military history.¹ All of these texts – with the notable exception of *Bodies of Men* – are popular fiction (Gelder 2004), and are marketed as gay male fiction or M/M romance. These genres have contested definitions and meanings, but what they have in common is that their storylines centre around male same-sex relationships.

This article analyses the representations of same-sex desire in the Australian armed forces in the two most recently published texts, which are also the only books marketed as being about same-sex relationships in the Australian Army: Featherstone's novel *Bodies of Men* (2019) and Garrick Jones' short story collection *The Boys of Bullaroo* (2018). The books have very different publishing contexts, yet they present similar contestations of popular understandings of (homo)sexuality and intimacy in Australian military history. *Bodies of Men* is a work of literary fiction released by trade publisher Hachette. Featherstone is a professional author who has published several novels and short story collections with trade publishers. He has held writing residencies, including at UNSW Canberra (the Australian Defence Force Academy), where he conducted historical research to inform *Bodies of Men*. The book has been lauded by critics and was shortlisted for the 2019 Queensland Literary Awards prize in fiction.

The Boys of Bullaroo, on the other hand, is a self-published gay romance. The author is trained as an opera singer and worked as a lecturer in music, before turning to writing gay fiction in retirement. His books have all been either self-published or published with niche LGBTIQ+ publishers. *The Boys of Bullaroo* had no media or critical attention and has primarily been sold online or through LGBTIQ+ bookshops, which is common for gay male fiction. Jonathan Allan – one of the few scholars of M/M romance – argues that it is methodologically important to

¹ Some scholars have also read David Malouf's First World War novel *Fly Away Peter* (1982) as having homosexual undertones. See (Barlow 2014; Indyk 1992). Two novels that have lesbian or bisexual First World War nurses or veterans are Tom Keneally's *The Daughters of Mars* (2012) and Tessa Lunney's *April in Paris, 1921* (2018).

examine texts which are not necessarily the ‘best’ or ‘strongest’. Instead, scholars should be open to analysing any texts which address the relevant topic/theme and are ‘accessible to a general reading public’. Self-published books like *The Boys of Bullaroo* are examples of ‘textual materials that readers consume and are part of the culture in which they live’ (Allan 2020, 70), and as such there is value in studying how such texts depict (homo)sexual relationships in the armed forces.

As this article reveals, despite their different publishing contexts, *Bodies of Men* and *The Boys of Bullaroo* have much in common in how they challenge popular understandings of (homo)sexuality in Australian military history. The central relationships in both texts revolve around protagonists who do not identify as gay/homosexual. Yet, they develop intensely intimate same-sex friendships that quickly become sexual. The stories represent what Elizabeth Woledge calls intimatopias: textual romances which centre less on the characters’ sexuality or identity, and instead on the interconnections between (homo)sexual acts, homosociality, emotional intimacy and romance (Woledge 2006). Australian intimatopic fictions of war reshape the traditional motif of mateship into an emotional and sexual connection which transcends sexual identities and, in the process, they offer a queer reconceptualisation of Australian diggers.

Challenging Genres: Intimatopia

Studies of popular romance novels in Australia and overseas have generally treated the genre as heterosexual and targeted at female readers (Flesch 2004; Allan 2016a; McAlister and Teo 2017; Radway 1991). Scholarship on gay male fiction – defined broadly by Les Brookes as ‘fiction [written] by self-identified nonheterosexual men, who may or may not choose to call themselves gay’ (Brookes 2010, 8) – has mostly focused on literary rather than popular fiction. While there

has been scholarly interest in gay pulp fiction of the 1940s-60s (Gunn and Harker 2013; Bronski 2014), there has not been any scholarly work on the genre's contemporary successors: gay erotica and gay romance. In gay romance, the protagonists are gay or bisexual men and the storyline follows romance conventions: 'a meeting of the heroes, a definition of society, and a point of ritual death when it seems like the relationship will never work out, a reconciliation, a declaration of love, and a happy ending' (Allan 2020, 71). Gay erotica has generally been discussed in the context of 'erotica and pornography', suggesting it represents a form of literary pornography. Scholars have found it valuable in studies about historical and contemporary ideas about sex, desire, masculinity and the body (Neville 2018; Barriault 2009; Isola 2013).

Although scholars have generally eschewed researching gay romance, one related, emerging area of research is in another romance subgenre featuring male same-sex relationships: M/M fiction. The origins of M/M fiction lie in slash: fan fiction which began in the 1970s, when female authors started writing popular platonic male characters (the classic example being Captain Kirk and Mr Spock from *Star Trek*) in homoerotic and homosexual scenes. A defining feature of slash fiction is that the characters initially identified as straight, but then develop feelings for another male. Over time the protagonists stop denying those feelings and face numerous obstacles until they forge a sexual, monogamous relationship (Strømli 2017, 56). By the 1990s the genre had evolved to original stories (instead of just fan fiction) about male same-sex relationships, combining the homosexual/homoerotic themes of slash fiction with the conventions of heterosexual romance. Yet, what sets M/M apart from gay romance is that the books are primarily authored by and targeted at women (Foster 2015; Allan 2016b; Driscoll 2006; Strømli 2017; Allan 2020; Neville 2018).

The scholarship on M/M fiction focuses primarily on how authors construct masculinity, embodied understandings of (homo)sexuality and debates over whether, as a genre written primarily by and for women, it adequately represents gay men's life experiences (Allan 2016b; Foster 2015; Lanyon 2008; Allan 2020; Neville 2018). Scholars also debate the intersections and tensions between slash fiction, M/M and more mainstream popular romance. It is within these debates that Elizabeth Woledge posed the concept of intimatopia to explore themes common across slash, M/M, popular romance and 'professionally published literature'. Woledge argues that whereas traditional romance novels separate sex and intimacy, intimatopias build a world in which same-sex desire and intimacy are intricately connected. In contrast to romantopias, where intimacy follows sex (Salmon and Symons 2004), in intimatopias the sexual acts are an expression of intimacy. The lines between love, friendship, sex and intimacy are not just blurred, but indistinguishably fused. As Woledge explains, 'Intimatopia is a homosocial world in which the social closeness of the male characters engenders intimacy...It is clear that in intimatopia, despite the diverse cultural and political backgrounds of individual writers, homosocial bonding is depicted as directly supportive of homosexual activity' (Woledge 2006, 100).

One might argue that intimatopias are also queer because they unsettle normative and binary understandings of sexuality. Characters do not necessarily identify with a particular sexuality, and their sexual identities are not defined by (homo)sexual acts (Sedgwick 2008; Jagose 1996). The characters' sexualities could even be read as fluid, with homosocial bonding being a pathway to facilitate the exploration of different aspects of their sexuality. Indeed, intimatopias also pose a challenge to understandings of homosocial bonding – as being strictly asexual – because all homosocial bonding is rendered at risk of generating desire which exceeds friendship. Intimacy becomes a force that cannot be contained, and categories like homosexual

and heterosexual become meaningless because they cannot contain desire. To borrow from Ian Henderson's queer readings of the male-male relationships in the films *Gallipoli* (1981) and the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001-03), same-sex relationships in intimatopias are fellowships: 'a unique way of one man relating to another for which sex acts are beside the point and which emerges, according to the male adventure romance, in moments of war. Fellowship denotes an imprecise, non-substantiating way of relating, provisional in that it is conditioned by the adventure, and variable over time: it is fundamentally queer' (Henderson 2005, n.p.). In effect, by queering same-sex intimacy, intimatopias create worlds where men are demisexual: 'a person who experiences sexual attraction only after forming an intimate bond' (Hille, Simmons, and Sanders 2019, 1; see also Decker 2015). Jodi McAlister argues that many romance novels represent a form of 'compulsory demisexuality' because sex is only pleasurable when female protagonists are in love (McAlister 2014). McAlister misconstrues the meaning of the term, though, because the female protagonists she describes are all attracted exclusively to men, making them heterosexual. What makes intimatopias truly demisexual is that the protagonists' attraction is blind to the gender of the partner – and this is also what makes them queer.

Woledge posited intimatopia as a concept to bridge amateur and professional fiction, so it is a good analytical lens to consider both *Bodies of Men* and *The Boys of Bullaroo*. Woledge outlines other characteristics of intimatopias which align with these texts' plots:

1. Intimatopias are often set in situations, including historical eras, which accentuate two men's intimate bonding (in these texts, the First and Second World Wars);
2. Texts do not engage with homosexual politics, but rather are 'homoindifferent' (Woledge 2006, 103);
3. The characters do not overtly identify as or are ever labelled as homosexual (or bisexual);

4. The characters develop an established, intimate relationship before it becomes sexual and maintain it, rather than the romance coming after sexual encounters;
5. Hierarchical imbalances within the relationships are a common feature (in the texts examined here, both military rank and class are hierarchical imbalances);
6. Hurt and comfort serve as a plot device to enable the emotional closeness of the characters.

In both *Bodies of Men* and *The Boys of Bullaroo*, the fellowships the characters forge in war do not change them into gay or bisexual men. The protagonists' sexualities are neither fluid nor fixed because, with the exception of two characters in *The Boys of Bullaroo*, they are tied to one person rather than reflective of broader physical attraction to men. That said, it is the particular terrain of the armed forces in war, in its elevation of close comradeship in an all-male environment, that provides the occasion for many of the acts of sexual intimacy. Therefore, reading these as intimatopic texts reveals new ways of thinking about sexuality, mateship and the Australian armed forces.

History and Same-Sex Encounters in the Australian Forces

As historical fiction, both *The Boys of Bullaroo* and *Bodies of Men* are imaginings of (homo)sexuality in the First and Second World Wars. There has been little research on homosexuality in the First World War mainly because a dearth of sources. Peter Stanley's work on discipline and punishment found a handful of cases of men charged for sodomy and fragments of other references to gay encounters among soldiers in Australia, Egypt and the United Kingdom (Stanley 2010, 141-144). There is much more evidence of same-sex encounters in the Second World War. Indeed, as Yorick Smaal has uncovered, it was during that conflict

that the Army first developed a policy to deal with homosexuality (Smaal 2015). Yet, there are two important findings from Stanley, Smaal, and post-Second World War historians Noah Riseman and Shirleene Robinson (Riseman and Robinson 2020). First, until the mid-1970s, authorities often turned a blind eye to male homosexuality so long as the men were discreet. Military police were not usually searching for homosexual men until the mid-1970s, but that said, when men were caught or indiscreet, they faced discharge. Second, same-sex encounters rarely became anything beyond friendship and short-term sexual release. In intimatopias, by contrast, the servicemen are engaging in sexual acts and forge fellowships with each other *because* platonic friendship cannot contain their levels of intimacy.

Still, *Bodies of Men* and *The Boys of Bullaroo* are important because they challenge dominant ideas around the armed forces, hegemonic masculinity and digger mythology. Numerous historians (Lake and Reynolds 2010; Crotty and Stockings 2014) and even ex-military officers (Brown 2014) have critiqued the Anzac legend: the idea that Australia's national identity was born through the brave sacrifices of First World War soldiers in 1915 on the shores of Gallipoli. Linked to the Anzac legend is the digger mythology, described by Graham Seal as 'the stereotypical representation of the ideal Australian [soldier] as a tall, tough, laconic, hard-drinking, hard-swearing, hard-gambling, independent, resourceful, anti-authoritarian, manual labouring, itinerant, white male' (Seal 2004, 10). As Seal and other scholars such as Fiona Nicoll and Jane Ross explain, masculinity is very much the core of the digger identity (Nicoll 2001; Ross 1985). Yet, diggers were also sentimental men, and it was this soft side and the importance of homosocial bonding which provide openings for intimatopic readings of war.

Unspoken in all the constructs and analyses of the diggers is that they were heterosexual (and cisgender). Mateship constituted an acceptable form of homosocial bonding among diggers.

Yet, as Rhoden observed about Australian First World War novels, mateship is not a coded masking for homosexual relations, but rather becomes the medium through which diggers can negotiate their intimacy *without* it becoming sexual (Rhoden 2014). Indeed, any attempts to be explicit about the presence of gay servicemen have, until the mid-2000s, met with opposition from conservatives who saw themselves as upholders of the Anzac legend (Riseman 2017). The idea of a more inclusive Anzac legend which can embrace diverse ideas of ‘diggers’ instead of ‘the digger’ is a recent phenomenon through which Indigenous, multicultural, women and LGBTI groups have challenged dominant constructs of Australian military history (Nicol 2001, 100; Bongiorno 2014; Riseman, Robinson, and Willett 2018).

Bodies of Men and *The Boys of Bullaroo* also challenge the digger mythology by queering and subverting it. Garrick Jones, the author of *The Boys of Bullaroo*, based the characters and storylines on the war histories of family and friends and even weaved in some of his own personal history (Jones 2019). Featherstone explains that one objective in writing *Bodies of Men* was to challenge:

the very simple version of the soldier: the ‘digger’, that lovable larrikin who, when push comes to shove, does courageous things for the country. With *Bodies of Men* I wanted to explore masculinities that are not usually expressed in the official history: that of desertion and sexual intimacy between soldiers. In that way, I hope the novel reveals that Australian men, even during wartime, are complex and contradictory creatures, that they can sometimes surprise us with their tenderness, compassion and warmth (Lazaroff 2019).

Many of the soldiers in both books still embody stereotypical characteristics of the digger: they are rebellious, brave, loyal, manual labourers and resourceful. But they are also sensitive,

respectful of authority, professional and, most importantly, have romantic and sexual relationships with other men. The texts do more than just say 'gay men also served'; they suggest that mateship could be queer and transcend categories of sexual identity.

The Boys of Bullaroo

The collection of six short stories is all linked through two themes: a connection to war, and a link to the fictional regional New South Wales town of Bullaroo. The six stories proceed chronologically from the First World War through the Vietnam era, with the final story connecting several characters across the stories. The stories are told from different points of view; some are first person, while others are third person with a narrator who moves closely with the protagonists. The first story, 'Sergeant Jack', follows injured First World War hero Arthur Taylor on his train journey home to confront his estranged family. He flashbacks to a relationship with Sergeant Jack: the love of his life whom he met in the war and who died after a tragic train bombing in France. In 'Cross My Palm with Silver', veteran-turned-cop Stanley Archer meets and falls in love with male sex worker Whalan in 1920s Sydney. The two must navigate an underworld ring of prostitution, murder, sex parties and revenge before they can settle safely together in Bullaroo. 'The Boy Who...' centres on Donald: a young man who works for the local doctor as a triage technician, giving medical exams for enlisting men. He begins a relationship with the other technician, Parker, before they both enlist and are sent to Malaya in 1941. They die as prisoners of war on the Thai-Burma Railway. The central character in the fourth story, 'The Stock Route to Starlight', is not himself a veteran, but has numerous sexual relationships with Second World War veterans. Set in 1949, Derrick has an open relationship with former POW Patrick, but he is unsatisfied because Patrick will not top him because of

something that happened during the war. Derrick then meets the mysterious stranger ‘Gyppo’ and must decide whether to leave Bullaroo with Patrick or the Gyppo. ‘The Connaught’ is the only story that is mostly divorced from war. Taking place in 1959, it follows Robin and Fergus: two boys born in 1939 after their fathers had gone to war. Robin craves a real relationship with Fergus, but for devout Catholic Fergus, they are merely friends who regularly have sex. Eventually Robin falls for Italian immigrant Ettore, and the two leave Bullaroo to settle in Sydney.

The final story, ‘Charlie and Me’, is ostensibly about a whirlwind romance between Tony, who is about to go off to Vietnam, and American soldier Charlie, who is visiting Sydney on R&R leave. The story links the generations and characters from across the book. Tony’s uncle is Patrick from ‘The Stock Route to Starlight’, who still misses Derrick but has since forged a new relationship. Patrick reveals what happened to him in the German POW camp: to survive, he agreed to a sexual relationship with a German guard and was also raped repeatedly by two other guards. Tony’s Great Uncle Arthur – the protagonist of ‘Sergeant Jack’ – also tells Tony about his lost love Jack. There are minor mentions of characters in the other stories, and Arthur effectively summarises the key message behind the entire book:

Did you think you'd be the first man to fight for his country who loved another man? Or that Patrick was, or that I was? Love is love, Anthony. We don't get to choose who we've given our hearts to while we serve – love comes unbidden. We only get to choose why we fight. We might fight for our country, but we die for those we want to protect, be it man, woman, or child. No one gives up their life gladly for an ideal, no matter what they tell you or what you read in the tabloids. In the backs of our minds, we are only fighting for the survival of the person, or

the people, we care most about – our comrades and our loved ones. Some of us are lucky enough to have both, in the same person, standing right next to us (Jones 2018, 227).

As a series of intimatopias, the relationships across the stories all treat sex and emotional intimacy as interconnected and as a queer expression of mateship. In the first story, Arthur and Jack meet when they are paired together during induction into the Light Horse Brigade. What begins as a close friendship escalates when sexually inexperienced Arthur admits to having never wanked, so Jack teaches him. For several nights they engage in mutual masturbation, initially not touching each other, but then escalating the physical contact until at last they kiss and Jack blows Arthur (Jones 2018, 17-22). Homosocial bonding rituals such as mutual masturbation were not uncommon among soldiers, serving as a release of sexual tension. Yorick Smaal has uncovered examples of same-sex activity among Australian and American soldiers in the Pacific War (Smaal 2015), while oral histories from the Vietnam era recall ostensibly straight soldiers using expressions like ‘Any port in a storm’ to justify same-sex behaviour (Riseman, Robinson, and Willett 2018).

Arthur and Jack’s fellowship was more than just two friends pleasuring each other. Arthur remembers it as transformative: ‘I knew at that moment I would never be the same person I was before Jack Hastings kissed me – but I didn’t care. I realised that what had broken was the wall I’d put up around my heart to protect me from the truth – I didn’t just care for him as a buddy, I loved him with every ounce of my being, and I had done for a very long time’ (Jones 2018, 23). Importantly, Arthur’s realisation is not that he loves *men*, but rather that he loves Jack specifically. He never identifies as gay (or homosexual or camp, to use the language of the time), although the closest he alludes to this is in a comment to the train valet: ‘The war’s robbed me of

any chance of settling down with anyone – and one thing I realised while I was away is that I'm simply not a man for the ladies' (Jones 2018, 14). In this sense the story represents Woledge's description of intimatopia as 'a world separate from our current realities, a world defined and shaped by its own rules and codes— a world of male intimacy, yes, but not the world of the modern homosexual' (Woledge 2006, 103).

Donald and Parker's relationship in 'The Boy Who...' similarly grows out of mateship and represents an intricate connection between romance, friendship, intimacy and sex. Donald early on realises that Parker is "'that way" inclined' and, upon reflection about his own sexuality, never comes to identify in any particular way. Their fellowship turns sexual after Donald gives Parker a perineum massage and Parker reciprocates by giving Donald a blow job. For the next two years, even as they are posted to Singapore together, their relationship continues as they escalate to kissing and then penetrative sex. After years of analysing their relationship and his sexuality, Donald at last concludes:

It was during our time in Singapore that I'd finally understood my relationship with him. I wasn't interested in other men, nor had I developed 'homosexuality' because of what he and I had done. I realised it was because I'd grown to love him not long after we'd first met, and that our physical intimacy had arisen as the result of our close emotional bond. He loved me too, and wasn't as reluctant as I was to tell me so, but the reasons behind his physical desire came from his already-established sexuality. For me, though, as far as I was concerned, there was only ever going to be one physically intimate relationship in my life, and it was with Pekko [Parker] Laine (Jones 2018, 133).

Donald's description suggests that he is demisexual because the sexual encounters are less about same-sex attraction, and more about intimate attraction to a specific person: Parker.

Across *The Boys of Bullaroo*, there is a sharp contrast between the positive associations with same-sex encounters where the characters are in love, versus the negative portrayal of sexual acts devoid of intimacy. This is evident in Derrick's casual encounters in 'The Stock Route to Starlight'; Whalan's sex work in 'Cross My Palm with Silver'; and most dramatically in Patrick's wartime trauma in 'Charlie and Me'. Derrick, like many men of the 1940s-50s, begins his homosexual encounters by visiting beats, or public cruising places (Willett 1997). Yet, it is only the relationships with Patrick and then the Gyppo which Derrick finds fulfilling – to the point that he gives up casual sex with others. Whalan's sex work includes being pimped out to ex-soldiers in what is called the 3 / 9d racket: soldiers put three coins on the counter, and the coin value and whether it is heads or tails reveals their sexual desires (e.g. give/receive blow jobs; kissing allowed/not allowed; top or bottom). The story is not anti-sex work per se, but still there is a sharp contrast between that impersonal, transactional form of sex and the emotionally connected, positive relationship between Whalan and Stanley.

Patrick's back story contains the clearest negative portrayal of same-sex encounters devoid of intimacy. While in a German POW camp, Patrick agreed to have sexual relations with a German officer named Helmut in exchange for food. Patrick describes Helmut as treating him well, but the situation deteriorated when two other guards joined Helmut in a pack-rape. This became a regular occurrence, with Patrick explaining: 'I just got "used to" whatever they wanted – I always got something in return: camp booze or vegetable scraps. Leo [guard] always had access to meat, and invariably gave me a small parcel afterwards – I shared everything I got with the other blokes in my barracks, who pretended I got it some other way. But they all knew what I

was forced to go through' (Jones 2018, 213). Even while telling this story, Patrick distinguishes between the (relative) kindness of Helmut and the other two men, suggesting some level of intimacy, even though he is explicit that he did not love Helmut. Patrick was traumatised by these rapes, and it was only through his post-war relationships with Derrick and eventually Michael that he could truly open up to love and intimacy and enjoy sex in all of its dimensions.

Patrick's point about the other POWs accepting his same-sex behaviour is a sentiment that also transcends the stories. Stanley's war mate Eddie knows all about his sexual relations with men including Whalan; other soldiers have no problem with Parker and Donald sleeping in the same bed. Smaal's research found that commanders and other soldiers were often tolerant of homosexual relationships in the Second World War (Smaal 2015), and this pattern continued for men until the 1970s so long as they were discreet (Riseman and Robinson 2020). In that sense *The Boys of Bullaroo* suggests that society was historically more tolerant of homosexuality than one might think (but within certain, often unspoken, boundaries). This also challenges many of the common tropes in gay or queer fiction: family rejections, difficult coming out journeys, gay community building, tensions between assimilationism and radicalism (Caserio 2006; Brookes 2010).² Indeed, because the relationships in the stories are so divorced from any identity politics, *The Boys of Bullaroo* effectively subverts assumptions about the armed forces, military history and the history of sexuality in Australia.

Patrick's character says to Tony in the final story: 'You wouldn't be the first and you won't be the last. The army will value you for what you are and how you do the job, rather than who you think of when your blood's hot in your ears. They'll see you as I do – clever, courageous, kind, and intelligent' (Jones 2018, 219). Indeed, the protagonists across the stories

² The other common theme is about HIV/AIDS, but given *The Boys of Bullaroo* takes place pre-HIV/AIDS, it is not surprising that it is not a theme. Still, it was written with the sensibilities of HIV/AIDS in the author and audience's minds.

embody these values so entrenched in the digger and Anzac mythology. Yet, the men are also emotionally vulnerable and physically and sexually intimate each other. Thus *The Boys of Bullaroo* queers the digger and Anzac mythology not just by saying ‘some of them were gay’, but by (re)imagining the fluid boundaries between mateship, intimacy and sexuality.

Bodies of Men

Set in Second World War Egypt, *Bodies of Men* follows two star-crossed lovers, Lieutenant William Marsh and Private James Kelly. The book begins during a battle between the Australians and Italians, which has psychological effects on both protagonists. James subsequently goes AWL and recklessly gets in a motorbike accident in Alexandria, where he is rescued and nursed back to health by a European couple with their own secrets. William eventually winds up at the same house; he decides not to turn James into the authorities, and the two men form a friendship that quickly turns intimate and sexual. It is also revealed that the two men had briefly known each other as teenagers, but class differences (reflected now in their different statuses as officer versus grunt) and unspoken anxieties about sexuality kept them apart. Their romance happens in secret when William visits the house in Alexandria. Meanwhile, James becomes entangled in the secrets of his benefactors and William continues his duties at a desert outpost. James and William only meet four times before being separated indefinitely – James arrested by military police and then escaping, and William sent back to Australia. At the novel’s end we learn that James moved to Wales after the war to evade arrest while William married and then divorced. As the novel concludes, James is visiting Australia in the 1980s and is en route to search for William at a hotel in the Blue Mountains.

Unlike *The Boys of Bullaroo*, the sex scenes in *Bodies of Men* are quite subdued and lack explicit sexual details. This is not surprising: as a gay romance *The Boys of Bullaroo* adheres to genre conventions and formulas (Gelder 2004), including sex scenes, whereas *Bodies of Men*, as literary fiction, has no set genre expectations. Still, it is appropriate to classify *Bodies of Men* as an intimatopia because the characters' sexual identities are ambiguous and the sexual relationship evolves out of mateship. Yet, unlike the characters in *The Boys of Bullaroo*, William initially resists the physical and sexual intimacy because he judges same-sex relations as wrong. The following dialogue follows their first kiss:

'I shouldn't be here,' said William.

James put his hand on William's shoulder. He said, 'But you are.'

'What we did just then was wrong.'

'What if it's not wrong?'

'It is, James. You know that.'

'It was only a kiss.'

'Between men. Between soldiers.'

'So?'

'I'm going to sleep now.'

William got up and went to the other couch.

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Sometime later, James woke to find that William was beside him once more, their bodies pressed together, and the kiss was continuing (Featherstone 2019, 144-145).

William equates homosexual acts with being homosexual, which he fears. He cannot fathom a sexual or romantic relationship with James without applying a homosexual label to himself. He thus seeks to deny both the relationship and the identity, but the attraction to James is irresistible. This follows the narrative trend of slash fiction and intimatopia as outlined by Anette Vedal Strømli: a character tries to deny his feelings for the other, but eventually he comes to accept the attraction. Then new obstacles arise that the lovers must overcome if they are to become a monogamous couple (Strømli 2017, 56).

The closeness between William and James happens very quickly, and it is borne out of the hurt/comfort trope that Woledge identifies in intimatopias. James bears the physical injuries from his motorcycle accident, but the real hurt that makes both William and James vulnerable is their emotional scars after the skirmish at the novel's opening. William froze rather than shoot an old Italian soldier; James then shot him (living up to the myth of the brave Anzacs), and in an exchange of gunfire, an Australian orderly was killed. The memory of that encounter lingers for both men, and their discussion about the battle is the comforting moment that presages their first sexual encounter. William says, 'I can't shake it. It never leaves me alone...You're the only person I can talk to about this.' The text then turns to James' internal thoughts: 'He had to keep making sure the most violent minute of his life was buried deep inside him. If he gave in to it, he believed, it would be the end of him: the wounded soldier he had sometimes seen standing in the bedroom doorway would rush in and strangle him... He didn't want to see William so disturbed; he wanted Alexandria to be a place of healing for *both* of them' (Featherstone 2019, 141; original emphasis). The lingering psychological trauma of war became part of the Anzac mythology in the 1980s (Twomey 2013), and this view into James' psyche reflects that construct of the digger.

The characters' response to that trauma, though, represents a queering of the digger. That evening, the men seek physical comfort with each other: first lying next to each other, then with William resting his head on James' chest, then the two facing each other and kissing, and finally with a sexual act (the text is unclear as to what). This scene reflects the hurt/comfort motif common in intimatopias because, as Woledge explains, 'when the hero is hurt, he is at his most vulnerable. The element of hurt permits him to share intimacies that would otherwise be kept private' (Woledge 2006, 110). Sex becomes *one* way of expressing that intimacy, and in intimatopias sex is one part of the trinity of friendship, intimacy and sex. As James and William seek comfort in physical contact, they forget and disregard ideas about normative sexuality and desire. It is a queer interpretation of the diggers because these are not necessarily gay or bisexual men; rather, vulnerability and the need for comfort makes mateship sexual.

As James and William's connection grows into a fellowship where emotional, physical and sexual intimacy become intricately connected, William continues to fear the homosexual implications of their relationship. Friendship then becomes a tool which William deploys to deny their love:

[James:] 'I think you're a very, very fine man.'

[William]: 'We're just friends.'

'Do you really think that?'

William put his arm around his waist, clutching himself. 'I don't know what I think.'

'Let's not think anything.' James ran a finger down the midway point of William's chest (Featherstone 2019, 190).

Because sex and intimacy are intricately linked, William cannot repress one without repressing the other. Woledge argues that intimatopic texts reveal that societal condemnation and expectations around homosexuality repress love, rather than sexual or physical desires (Woledge 2006, 100). It is only by turning off any thoughts or discussions about what their fellowship means for their sexual identities that William and James let go of societal ideologies and experience emotional and physical pleasure together – reinforcing the reading of intimatopias as queer texts. Their fellowship exceeds the need for a sexual identity: it is about this particular relationship, rather than the relationship having broader meanings, significance or connotations for the men's sexualities.

Bodies of Men also follows *The Boys of Bullaroo*'s depiction of society and the military as not universally condemning of homosexuality. William and James keep their relationship secret for two reasons: because it is (homo)sexual, and because James is wanted by military police and William would also be in trouble for aiding and abetting a deserter. The only characters who know about the relationship are the couple who house and protect James, and towards the end an Army captain who was a friend (and possible lover) of William's mother. The captain obtained a movie camera which had footage of James and William together in Alexandria but had it destroyed. He says, 'When I heard that you were spending considerable time in Alexandria, when you asked to go there to look for malingerers, when you demanded to have one last spot of leave, well, I figured I knew what was going on' (Featherstone 2019, 302). The captain never threatens disciplinary or other action against William, and in this sense his reaction aligns with Smaal's research about how many Second World War commanders proved tolerant or turned a blind eye to homosexuality (Smaal 2015). This is not to say that James and William could have had an enduring, open and loving relationship. Rather, it opens a space to

question assumptions about society and homophobia alongside the challenges the novel poses to ideas about intimacy and sexual identity.

Conclusion

The coda to Les Brookes' *Gay Male Fiction Since Stonewall* (2010) points to the changing dynamics of gay and queer identity in the new millennium and the resonance of these changes in gay fiction. As the rainbow alphabet, societal attitudes and people's identity constructions keep changing, some commentators have argued that we have entered a post-gay or post-queer era: one where people do not find it so necessary to define and/or limit themselves by their sexualities (Brookes 2010, 191-194). While post-gay and post-queer are highly contested concepts, they have an important resonance when looking at intimatopic fictions of war: the characters may forge same-sex relationships and commit homosexual acts, but they broadly do not define themselves as homo/bisexual. Indeed, the texts are intentionally ambiguous about the protagonists' sexuality, with the central romances not defining the characters' sexual identities.

Both *Bodies of Men* and *The Boys of Bullaroo* go a long way towards challenging dominant understandings of military history, sexuality and mateship. The characters and their relationships (re)imagine the digger as someone who was vulnerable, intimate and not necessarily heterosexual. The relationships depict an intricate connection between friendship, intimacy and sex which is not defined by, nor defines, the men's sexuality. It is never clear whether these characters are gay, bisexual, sexually fluid, or heterosexuals who had a one-off same-sex relationship. But more importantly: it does not matter, and perhaps that is what makes these intimatopic fictions of war so remarkable.

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