

A Small Town at War

The Drouin Collection

IN 1939 the Department of Information was established to 'undertake the large publicity campaign necessary to support Australia's war effort'. This campaign was centred on increasing and sustaining the people's faith in the cause for which they were fighting, and sought to gain support for the government's security and fund-raising activities and to distribute 'sound' facts on the war and its progress. The activities of the department were extensive and various, and when, in 1981, two packets of 'historical' photographs of a rural Victorian town were returned to Australia by the New York office of the Australian Information Service, a small but fascinating example of those activities came to light.

The photographs were taken by Jim Fitzpatrick, an official war photographer with the AIS, who was sent in 1944 to document the impact of the war on the population of the dairying town of Drouin. Now held by the National Library and recently digitised and available from the Library's website (nla.gov.au/apps/picturescatalogue), the eighty-eight photographs that comprise the Drouin Collection focus on the townspeople as a community and also on a more personal level. There are portraits of individuals and family groups, photographs of people socialising and going about their business. We learn from the extended captions still attached to most of the photographs people's names, ages, occupations, their fathers' occupations, whether they were married or not, and what their hopes were for the future. The social standing of those photographed is plotted with precision and humour, and the wealth of sociological information is remarkable. The people of Drouin are portrayed with an unusual degree of freedom and candour, made possible, perhaps, because Fitzpatrick knew that his portrait of the town was not intended for Australian eyes.

Fitzpatrick's assignment was part of an extensive publicity campaign to convince our allies, particularly the Americans, that we were 'shouldering our full share of the burdens of war'. A few months after he took them, twenty-seven of Fitzpatrick's photographs, accompanied by an essay and captions by Dave Stevens, appeared in the bimonthly *South West Pacific* magazine, under the title 'A Small Town at War'. *South West Pacific* was produced by the Department of Information as an information and copy resource, and provided free of charge to overseas press and radio editors.

With the end of the war in sight, the Curtin government wished to improve Australia's bargaining position in postwar negotiations and to establish the grounds for a closer economic relationship. To do this, Australia needed to be recognised abroad for more than our highly improbable flora and fauna, and *South West Pacific* was one way to

're-brand' the country by emphasising the values and strong cultural bonds we shared with our allies, and the sacrifices made by the Australian people in support of the war.

Placing the contributions and sacrifices to the forefront, 'A Small Town at War' bristles with facts and statistics on the town's war effort. The first two sentences inform the reader that, out of a population of only 1100 people, 150 of Drouin's men were away fighting the war. Those few younger men who do appear in Fitzpatrick's photographs were either on leave from the armed forces, working in essential industries, or too young to join up. The town's patriotism was matched by financial generosity, for Drouin had exceeded its war loan quota of £20,000 and donated generously to the Red Cross and to the Spitfire fund.

Stevens's goes on to provide information on Drouin's other contributions to the war through its local produce — flax, butter and cheese — and on the shortages and restrictions faced by residents due to the rationing of butter, meat, sugar, spices, bacon, tea and petrol, and the suspension of normal manufacturing in favour of war production. But readers of 'A Small Town at War' were being appealed to on much more than a factual basis. The detailed descriptions of people's lives are intended to convey a sense of small town intimacy, and serve to make the people of Drouin real to us. Stevens's text constantly articulates the parallels between Australian and US society and values, and makes an emotional claim that, at heart, we are the same people.

Similarly, the freshness and candour Fitzpatrick achieves in many of his images reinforce the impression that Drouin is a rather quaint, unworldly place, but they also testify to his charm in dealing with his subjects. As the clever photograph of a group of older women captured chatting away beneath the sign 'Talkies' clearly shows, these pictures are anything but unplanned. The humour of this and other photographs serves to leaven the rather earnest propaganda message as we smile in recognition of our common frailties. Fitzpatrick's close-ups of young women smiling unself-consciously are beguiling. In the US, images of beaming girls had been selling all manner of products for fifty years and more. Fitzpatrick uses these attractive girls to help sell the idea that Drouin is a charming town whose people deserve the goodwill and support of all our allies.

Sixty years on, the Drouin Collection reveals how effective war propaganda can be when created by a talented photographer. Just as fascinating is the way the collection allows us to see how the government wished others to see us.

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