

MINEFIELDS AND MINISKIRTS: AUSTRALIAN WOMEN AND THE VIETNAM WAR.(Review) (book reviews)

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MINEFIELDS AND MINISKIRTS: AUSTRALIAN WOMEN AND THE VIETNAM WAR. By Siobhan McHugh. Sydney: Doubleday, 1993. 295 pp.

Helen Keayes, an Australian secretary, spent two years as an information specialist for the U.S. Army in Vietnam. During her stay in Vietnam she observed a peculiar system of discrimination by which Australian women earned a third less than American women doing comparable work but more than Asian women. Despite the army's professed endorsement of equal employment rights, Keayes also found that she lacked equal commissary, PX, and postal rights. Although she held a civilian job, she traveled extensively through South Vietnam and occasionally got caught in the combat. Once she visited an army base that came under rocket attack, and she received an unofficial Purple Heart for her wounds. Another time, a pilot friend smuggled her aboard a bombing mission over Hanoi (she wore a blue pilot's uniform with a female symbol pinned on her shoulder as her rank). Many years later, after she had returned home, she encountered a historian who was writing about Australia's involvement in the war. He reacted with indifference when she mentioned her experiences. "Well aren't you going to talk to me about it?" she asked. "Oh no," he replied, "I'm writing the official version of the war" (104). By contrast, Siobhan McHugh listened to Keayes's stories. McHugh's oral history of Australian women's involvement with the Vietnam War is no official history--it is much more real.

Americans too often tend to regard the Vietnam War as their ordeal alone, to the exclusion of almost everyone else, even the Vietnamese. Growing up in Ireland, McHugh had also considered Vietnam an American conflict until she moved to Australia in 1985 and discovered that Australians had conscripted men and sent them to Vietnam. Troops required medical attention, and as she explored the possibility of writing a book about Australian nurses in Vietnam, McHugh came to realize the greater complexity of women's direct and indirect connections to the war. Australian women went to Vietnam not only as nurses but as entertainers, secretaries, reporters, and consular staff. Women who remained at home had lost sons and husbands in the war or had to cope with the physical and emotional disabilities of the war's survivors. While many women supported the Vietnam War, others were caught up in the antiwar movement, which in turn led them to reevaluate women's role in Australian society. Finally, among the newest Australians were Vietnamese women who had arrived as "boat people." In these myriad capacities, women had rarely considered their experiences historical and would have perhaps left little record if McHugh had not interviewed them.

A major test of an oral history is how broadly it covers the terrain it set out to study. In *Minefields and Miniskirts*, McHugh presents the Vietnam War through a diverse sampling of women's observations and opinions. She weaves her interviews into a narrative, including both chapters which deal with groups of women nurses, entertainers, and journalists and chapters which relate the accounts of individuals. The interviewees range from women who regarded the war as a great adventure to those who were deeply seared by the horrors of the conflict, including women who suffered sexual harassment, rape, and post-traumatic stress disorders. Some of the women recalled the war's incongruities. Journalist Jan Graham described the lavish parties that wealthy Vietnamese gave. "I saw richness where you ate off gold dishes," she said. "I saw people who fed their children gruel and others who fed pate to their dogs." Graham felt guilty for dining on lobster and champagne when she could see flares and hear guns in the distance, but she remembered thinking, "I could be dead tomorrow--why should I not enjoy this?" (54).

McHugh devotes half of her study to the war zone and half to the homefront, both during and after the war. She interviewed emotionally and physically battered wives of traumatized Vietnam veterans. She also identified a variety of women who became involved in the antiwar movement and recorded how their activism led many of them into feminism. Although McHugh sympathizes with both the antiwar and women's movements, the diversity of her interviews helped her to recognize some inconsistencies. She became aware of the class differences between the soldiers who fought the war and the students who protested it, and she questioned why antiwar feminists talked so much about female solidarity but seemed so oblivious to the plight of so many veterans' wives. "It's not as if we didn't care about them," explained Ann Curthoys, an academic who had been an antiwar activist. "I just don't think they were in our focus" (248). McHugh found that hindsight had caused other demonstrators to regret the "moralistic" attitudes of their youth.

Some of the women McHugh interviewed had never recovered from the strains of the Vietnam War.

Others had found new confidence that propelled them into successful careers in everything from the university to national politics. Many of them saw the Vietnam War as a catalyst for change in Australia. "Life would never be the same again," psychologist Ann Michaelis told McHugh. "Vietnam brought everything together and made one conscious of the political and economic structure of the world." Australia's closed, traditional society of the quiet years after World War II was transformed into the more open and culturally diverse society of the present. "I think without the involvement in Vietnam," Michaelis reasoned, "we wouldn't have been able to have the multicultural society we do now. Australia is a very, very different place to what it was in the fifties!" (261).

A producer of radio and television documentaries, Siobhan McHugh has an ear for the different cadences of the voices she collected and a gift for weaving them together to tell a story. These talents make *Minefields and Miniskirts* as entertaining as it is informative. McHugh has illuminated an important part of Australian history and, at the same time, has offered American readers many striking parallels between the experiences of Australian and U.S. women in the Vietnam era.

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