

COMMENT

No. 3 1997

Responding To Issues Of Guns And Violence

INTRODUCTION

On April 28 1996, at Port Arthur in Tasmania, a young man armed with a military style rifle, killed 35 people and seriously wounded 18 others. The Australian community responded with grief, outrage, soul-searching, and collective action in the form of demands for new national gun laws. For some reason, the Port Arthur massacre became an opportunity for Australians to speak out about the directions in which we wished our country to head. It became an opportunity to make strong statements about violence and it's contributing factors. And importantly, it became a time when law makers responded in a bi-partisan way to the wishes of the electorate.

These seem significant foundations upon which to build our responses to violence on both a community and national level. This *Comment* is intended as a contribution to broaden the on-going discussion about guns and violence. It includes a number of differing perspectives on the events at Port Arthur, as well as considering further possible responses to guns and violence.

Chris McLean, Guest Editor

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HOMING IN ON PORT ARTHUR

by

Elizabeth Biff Ward

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A page of newsprint lies before me. It is dated five days after the shooting of thirty-five people by Martin Bryant. It is the front page of Australia's only national newspaper, and its major headline concerns the 'guns crackdown' being pursued by politicians. Under this headline are two pictures - one of a coffin covered in flowers, and another of a group of people at the graveside, with a lesser headline which says 'In the midst of all this are the families, hurting'.

Beneath this array of material about the aftermath of the shooting, the other major headline on the page says, 'ADF to pack a long-range punch'. The ADF is the Australian Defence Force. The first paragraph of this story reads: *Plans to reorient Australia's defence policy to project more firepower into Asia and increase the military's 'combat punch' by the turn of the century were unveiled yesterday.*

Was I the only reader whose skin crawled at this juxtaposition? What is 'combat punch' except for a euphemism for ways to kill people? Presumably Martin Bryant felt a need to 'project more firepower' into whatever situation it was concerning him that Sunday. Presumably 'projecting more firepower' and using 'combat punch' looked like a viable way of being to him, at that point in time.

Port Arthur is a tourist site because it was a convict gaol noted for its savagery. It is one of the most famous sites in Tasmania, an island state infamous for its near success in genocide against the Aboriginal inhabitants in the nineteenth century. Many of the first reports of the Bryant

massacre called it 'the worst shooting in Tasmania/ Australia'. Aboriginal people no doubt laughed hollowly. It was later amended in the press to 'the worst shooting by a lone gunman', without, as far as I saw, mentioning the many racial massacres that have occurred in this country with one or many gunman (we have few accurate records). Our history of invasion is steeped in mass shootings and violence: only the power of the weapons has changed - and, in the case of Port Arthur, the colour of the victims.

Deconstructing the violent/warring/man-as-protector image of men as central to men's way of being is, without doubt, the major task confronting us.

The Port Arthur massacre gave us a window on what it might be like for Aboriginal people as they contemplate the countless massacres carried out against their ancestors - the last in living memory was 1927, and 1938. Those days, immediately after the shooting, when people were in shock *en masse*, was a moment in which we could have taken a giant step forward into the process of reconciliation by considering the historical phenomenon of apparently random massacre. We appear, as a nation, to have missed the opportunity that was inherent in that moment.

I wrote a poem a while ago, after a friend had talked with me about his memories of growing up playing

'killing games' with other boys - it seemed to him it happened all day Saturday, and all day Sunday, on any 'normal' weekend.

Where might these violent ways of being come from?

On Becoming Tired

*All my life the sound
Gotcha! You're dead!*

*Boys crawling: in the bush
building sites the harbour wall
Sunny Saturdays prime time
for the killing game
their shouts like curlews' calls*

*I wore tomboy shorts
fought and died with the best
but a girl's bullet did
not kill them properly dead
I could never really join*

*Forty years on a man tells:
All day they played shoot /
kill / win. He cries.
I wanted to go home and rest
but was never brave*

*He might have lived two blocks
away - different gang, same war
It echoes through suburbs, homes
the news last night*

*boys who kill are good or bad
depending on who has died
but the method is always*

Gotcha.

Martin Bryant definitely killed the 'wrong' people, whereas Rambo, Bruce Willis, Mel Gibson, war heroes are lauded for killing the 'right' people. The whole point of the Rambo image of heroism is that it presents a hero who can kill people, especially large numbers of people, with calm dispatch, and still stay alive themselves. Just like Martin Bryant?

From where I sit, as a female, outside the direct line of fire of masculinist socialisation, it looks as though there is a continuum of responses by men to the injunction to be-prepared-to-kill-for-your-country. The extreme ends of the continuum are where the effects are most vividly demonstrated.

At the 'soft' end, there are pacifists, wimps, and stereotypic 'gays'. Homophobia, in its many-hued forms, is used to keep these men in line, as they teeter in danger of 'falling off' this end of the spectrum. Youth suicide research is suggesting that many of the young men who kill themselves do so because of a difficulty in coming to terms with the unfeeling ways of being that are central to the construct of hero-saturated masculinity, and some because they know they are gay and choose not to live with the manifestation of homophobia, especially in their families.

At the 'hard end', we find the Martin Bryants, the wife-bashers, the skin-heads, the macho men, and the men who feel too afraid to live without a gun in their possession. If half the human race is trained to be potentially violent (for Queen & Country & Family), then it is inevitable that some of that preparation for violence is going to 'overflow' into normal daily life.

Reflections

I was catching up with a friend, a young man of 26. He grew up with my kids, I know his parents still. He runs a gardening business and has been doing odd jobs for me around my new home. He began to talk to me about how his Dad puts him down. How his Dad seems unable to see that he is running his own life and doing it well. How his Dad will ring up and tell him that he's planned his expansion wrongly, that he's a fool. How his Dad says to him, 'When are you going to get a real job?'

I am assailed by echoes. When I was young, my husband, our male friends, told stories like this. Now, a generation

later, I hear this same story from other young men, including my son. All around me I see men, lovely well-meaning men, apparently unable to stop themselves giving their sons a hard time.

Where does this fit, I wonder, in the jigsaw of masculinity? We hear reports from sections of the men's movement of men sobbing for the lack of closeness they experienced with their fathers - do fathers, yet, sob for the lack of closeness they are experiencing with their sons?

I talk with another friend - a man in his early thirties - about his work in gender awareness with young males, my article on Port Arthur, masculinity.

He mentions throwing rocks - how all boys do it - what fun it is to try to be accurate, fast, throw a long way. He tells me how he 'symbolically gave it all up' by taking his .22 rifle in his early twenties and shooting his school sporting trophies to pieces and then getting rid of the gun he had been given at 16. And yet, he says, I like throwing rocks still - is it violent to want to throw rocks hard - for fun, for skill?

Why did he do it?

Back in the newspapers in the week or two following the Port Arthur shooting, there were frequent articles about 'what causes someone to do this?' Many of them ran through the 'lone-nut theory', the 'guns-are-too-available theory', and the 'media-culture of violence theory'. Generally speaking, they all chased their tails to the conclusion that there was no clear answer.

And yet, most of them, somewhere in the article, noted that it is actually men, not 'people' at large, who are the shooters. A few spent some lines on the gender issues inherent in this perspective.

One reminded us that the only significant dip in the Australian homicide rate occurred during World War II when 700,000 men (almost 10% of the population) went overseas. Another mentioned, in the context of the 'lone-nut theory' that *men who have grudges or doubts about masculinity and potency or kind of feel that they're entitled to something that they haven't got, increasingly use guns to solve their problems.*

In a sense, I agree with the shooters' lobby: it's not guns that kill, it's the person using the gun. While the government has opted to deal with the gun

part of the equation, and the gun lobby would attempt to identify the 'lone nuts' and eradicate the 'problem people', a gender perspective makes clear that the image of the violent he-man is the problem - and is central to why a 'gun culture' exists at all. The current dominant ways of being for men that valorise toughness, fighting capability, lone individualism, and isolation from others in solving problems, are the problem. These ways of being are the cause of shootings like Port Arthur.

We can look at it as an equation. Human socialised into masculinity + particular circumstances distressing or threatening to the male human's view of himself as a man + gun = the possibility of death by shooting. Remove any one of these and the result is avoided. The government has opted for trying to remove the 'worst' guns - the easiest part of the equation to act upon. The gun lobby, feeling victimised, has logically pushed for identification and removal of the particular males who may respond with violence to extreme distress - a relatively difficult and potentially extremely discriminatory thing to do. What neither have even mentioned is socialisation into masculinity as a problem affecting the whole of society - the hardest thing to address.

The Four Corners' (ABC TV 1 July 1996) examination of 'people like Martin Bryant' drifted inexorably into touching on masculinity. The program ended with a psychologist suggesting that, as a society, we need to change the way we perceive and speak about the Martin Bryants among us. As long as we label such men 'monsters' and 'psychopaths', we are feeding into the very stream that must have captured Martin Bryant: a 'monster', by definition, has power, potency, and strength. It looks as though this image operates sometimes for men as an invitation to violence because they will feel better about themselves - stronger, bigger, more powerful. The reality is that all the Martin Bryants are, to use the psychologist's words, 'inadequate, sad and pathetic'. When we start labelling the Martin Bryants thus we are refusing to collude with the potency of the monster image.

Using the name 'monster' for men who transgress also leads to denial that the massacre has anything to do with us. Martin Bryant lived and grew amongst us. Identifying what it is amongst us that can create a Martin Bryant is the challenge he has placed before us. Thus deconstructing the violent/warring/man-as-protector

image of men as central to men's way of being is, without doubt, the major task confronting us. However, addressing gender issues is never easy. The issues are so deeply embedded that we feel our ways of being as gendered humans are 'natural'. But, just as all women have to come to terms with the Male Gaze (presenting oneself as an object of attraction/desire), so do men have to come to terms with being trained to be violent.

As I put it in another poem:

*because we live in a
world of war & mayhem*

*deconstruction of what
it means to be a man*

*is actually as imperative
as remembering to breathe*

*even when events quite
take your breath away*

The factors that construct Martin Bryant are within ourselves, within our community of Australia. It is only by recognising these and coming to terms of peace with them that we will learn from the carnage of that quiet Sunday afternoon. The angelic-looking Martin Bryant has shone a light on the nature of violence within our society. His light shows us the beginning of the way down a very long road - a road which already has some journeyers on it. It is the only road we can take.

Young Men, Guns and Violence

An excerpt from an interview with Rob Hall*

Recently I was working with a young man who told me a story about how he and a couple of mates had "rolled" a kid for his shoes. After the event he became terrified of the same thing happening to him. He began carrying a knife but the police took it away from him. So now he said that he was going to get a gun because that way he would be safe. I talked with him about that for a while and he said that he'd seen the power of a gun. He'd been present when two gangs were about to have a fight, but then a car pulled up, a young man pointed a gun out the window, and everybody ran away. This really impressed him and he thought that this way he would be absolutely safe.

I was really jolted by the sense of inevitability that this young man had about the increasing use of guns in our society.

I did a whole lot more inquiring about other issues of safety and it was quite clear that he believed that this was the only thing that was going to make him feel safe. The possibility that it might be used against him or that he might end up killing someone was met with complete denial. What I found very interesting was that he believed that it was inevitable that gang violence and guns were going to become more and more a part of everyday life in Australia. He really felt quite impotent against this, and any

suggestion that he might stand against this cultural trend was like madness to him. His response was "Why would you for god sake? You are just leaving yourself exposed."

So that really worried me. He really seemed to believe that he had no other option. So I brought in another young man as a consultant. He was a "retired" street kid who had run away from home because he had been abused. He then left the streets because of the violence there and went to a foster mother. So I decided to ask him what he thought about this kid's ideas about guns. He said that they were absolutely stupid. All it would do was bring down even more trouble on him. Those sorts of behaviours didn't make you safer, they made things far more dangerous. I asked him if he would mind if I recorded his thoughts so that they could give some advice to this kid. I then played the tape back to the young man who had first raised this issue. At the end of the tape it was intriguing because the young man was saying "Yeah I knew all that. I wasn't going to get a gun anyway."

One of the things that came out of this experience for me was the impact that media images of violence had had on him. I was really jolted by the sense of inevitability that this young man had about the increasing use of guns in our society, and the fact that this had largely come from the images he had been exposed to in the media, and in particular from his knowledge of what was happening in the USA. I think we need to be concerned about the dominance of these sorts of images in the media generally, and in youth culture in particular. We really need to be looking at the messages our society is endorsing - and it's all very well for us as adults to get our ideas clear about guns - but what are we telling the kids?

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MEN'S WAYS OF BEING

C. McLean, M. Carey, C. White (eds)
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Men's Ways of Being is a collection of papers by Australian men and women, which explore hopeful ways forward in dealing with issues of masculine culture. It blends personal, theoretical and political approaches in addressing issues of power, inequality and oppression. It also includes practice based papers exploring ways of working with men who are violent. It offers an empathetic understanding of the predicaments faced by men in their everyday lives, without compromising women's struggles for gender justice.

Authors include: Maggie Carey, Laurence Carter, David Denborough, Rob Hall, Alan Jenkins, Ian Law, Peter Lee, Chris McLean, Gregory Smith, Kiwi Tamasese, Charles Waldegrave, Biff Ward, Michael White.

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FATHER CHRISTMAS SAYS NO TO GUNS!

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I played with toy soldiers as a boy. I remember being absorbed in imaginative play setting up two opposing armies on the floor. When it came time for the armies to conduct their wars I remember feeling deflated that something that had taken so long to set up was so easily destroyed. On reflection this now seems to me that this was my masculine parallel of doll play where the focus was killing rather than on caring.

I was brought up with the idea that violence ought to be part of men's behaviour, under control until released by necessity. This capacity, even affinity for violence was lurking beneath the surface of every 'real man'. This was supposedly my connection with the primal, untamed base of masculinity. We as men learned to live with our 'testosterone poisoning'. Our holy quest in life was to protect, honour and control through the use of force.

Three decades later these ideas of masculinity are still strong in our society. I now have children who along with other experiences, provide constant doorways to re-experience my childhood and its dilemmas. As I watch my sons tackling the opportunities and challenges of emerging as adults in the late 1990's, my childhood memories of the 1960's come flooding back.

For many years I have asked myself: 'How can I promote the boys in my life to choose ways of being masculine that entail empathy and negotiation rather than intimidation and annihilation?' Within the everyday practices of my life, for better or for worse, I have included my children in political action as a strategy of education.

This led to one of the most successful actions I was involved in that took place in the early 80's. At that time I was involved with the beginning of the Adelaide Men's Contact and Resource Centre, as well as with the Movement Against Toys of Violence.

I had heard of an action in Scandinavia where people went into a toy store and pulled all the war toys off the shelves as a part of their stand against militarism, violence and its effect on children, particularly boys.

Influenced by their idea we planned to use a similar strategy in an Adelaide department store in December and relate it to Christmas, our commitment to peace, our commitment to challenging dominant portrayals of gender, and something about rampant consumerism.

We chose to get dressed up as Santas to show that Father Christmas said "no" to guns and was prepared to get arrested for peace and good will on earth.

We called a meeting and advertised it through our men's and social justice networks, to ask who would be interested. A group of men got together and we soon found ourselves volunteering to dress as Santas, to be spokespeople or to contact the media.

We chose to get dressed up as Santas to make a statement against toys of violence made by adult men to sell for profit primarily to boys. Our main hope was to be arrested. We wanted to be arrested as Father Christmases with police taking us off and putting us into jail. We wanted to have the media portray department stores as defending their right to sell toys of violence in opposition to Father Christmas who said no and was prepared to get arrested for peace and good will on earth.

We rehearsed what we would say whilst we removed toys from the shelves. We hoped that Father Christmas would be arrested as he said *I didn't make these toys - how come these are here? Let's take these off the shelves, there are lots of other*

toys around that you kids can choose, but these shouldn't be here!

Twelve men involved in the action and their supporters entered John Martin's (a major department store which was well known for sponsoring the city's annual Christmas pageant).

Three of us found a small cleaners' room to change into our Santa suits. We then headed off to the toy department next to the Magic Cave, where other Father Christmases were employed by the store to sit children on their knees and ask them what they wanted for Christmas. We then got busy HoHoHo-ing, walking around taking guns off the shelves and making quite an enormous pile on the floor.

As it turned out we didn't manage to get arrested. The police arrived but watched on. A small army of store detectives, managers and sales staff harassed us and attempted to stop our action. We had arranged our supporters and the media to make everything very public. A number of our supporters began to sing peace songs.

I think the people in the toy department realised that they were stymied, that they wouldn't be able to arrest us because of the bad publicity of Santa arrested in John Martin's outside the Magic Cave, the then home of the Christmas Pageant. One of the store detectives accosted me in the back aisles each time I went to get another toy. He gave me a push and swore at me and said "you'd better stop doing this, you are in enormous trouble". And of course I just HoHoHo'ed him, wished him seasons' greetings and kept on going.

We could see that the store management personnel were conferencing while this was happening, and it was quite an important decision by John Martin's management as to whether they would arrest us - and they made a choice not to. So they let us stay in there for quite a while and we made an enormous pile of toys of violence, covering quite a big floor

space. They actually closed the Magic Cave while it was happening. The fake Father Christmases were put out of work for a while, whilst the real ones were quite busy! The next day the major daily newspaper supported our action by including a photograph of us and our pile of toys on the front page.

Recently in July 1996 our group now called Men Against Violence, associated with the Men's Contact and Resource Centre in Adelaide planned a further community education action. We were particularly concerned that the Port Arthur murders were not being analysed with any gender perspective and Martin Bryant's actions were not being reviewed in any relation to dominant beliefs and practices of masculinity.

To begin our actions we surveyed the major department stores and found there were only three stores in central Adelaide that continued to sell toys of violence. It was a positive surprise that other department stores had stopped selling these items. They no longer stocked gun replica toys, toy soldiers, toy weapons and they had stopped selling fantasy and science fiction toys. The only guns we found in these stores were in kits like Lego and water squirters variations.

Video violence games though, were still being stocked in the stores. We knew that one major South Australian department store had stopped selling toys of violence in the early 1990's in response to community concern and action. However, two of the major city retailers, one of them being Toys R Us, a multi-national toy chain, continued to keep an extensive array of toys of violence and video violence for young consumers.

In order to coincide with tougher national gun laws after the shocking massacre at Port Arthur, Men Against Violence and their supporters held a vigil against the continued sale of toy guns, toy weapons and video violence outside Toys R Us in Adelaide.

We told the media and the community that the same sorts of guns, that are being restricted across the nation continue to be sold in toy version to boys. We emphasised that reducing the availability of real guns is only one small step towards stopping violence in Australia. The next step must be to draw community awareness to the link in our culture between maleness and violence.

We encourage toy stores, such as Toys R Us, to stop selling toys of violence, adults to boycott their purchase and young people to be discerning about what they are offered.

There were about twenty of us standing outside the store and we were very pleased to have the support and participation of the Women's Electoral Lobby and WILPF (Women's International League for Peace and Freedom). Our children were also prominently involved in the vigil.

The response from the public was very positive. As people passed by they overwhelmingly gave us their support. In response to the vigil and its media coverage a national current affairs television program produced a news item on the issue to be shown right around Australia.

I was taken into the Toys R Us store by a reporter who had a secret camera in his little bag. I was invited to give a clandestine commentary of the toys of violence on display.

Men Against Violence and their supporters held a vigil against the continued sale of toy guns, toy weapons and video violence outside Toys R Us in Adelaide.

Following this we went to a video arcade in order to observe other sorts of toys of violence that appeal mainly to older boys and young men. I asked some of the young men if they felt that video games such as Streetfighter and Mortal Combat lead to violent behaviour. They all said "No". When I talked with them further, however, they all said that while they, personally, were not influenced towards violence by playing these games, other young men might be.

In late 1996 we organised a toy-gun amnesty in time for the national gun buy-back program. The media coverage for the event was very biased. We were presented as being the extreme "gunophobic" fringe in opposition to the extreme "gunophilic" lobby.

I was surprised that the interviewers generally were quite aggressive and ridiculing saying "here is the lunatic fringe of the anti-gun lobby. There is a lunatic fringe of the pro-gun lobby, now this is the other extreme!" They accused us of representing a culture

of banning, a culture of censorship. We responded by saying this was an important opportunity for community consultation, debate and education. We talked about how the Port Arthur massacre was not just about a man going berserk and the need for gun control. It was an example of one extreme practice of masculinity inside our culture and the opportunity for all of us to talk more widely about the link between violence and men's health, about lowering levels of violence in the community through recognising the gender aspect to violence. We brought in the idea that one of the main groups of people who die from guns in Australia are young men committing suicide. This succeeded in changing the tone of the interview on one occasion, but not on another.

On the day we had 25 guns handed in by boys and their parents. Most of the toy weapons handed in were brought by seven to ten year old boys who seemed a little bewildered and shy about their participation. All their parents were very keen for them to participate. The children, mainly boys, who handed in their toy weapons were given a tree seedling by children associated with our group.

My younger son was there with other children to accept the toy guns from kids who brought them in. I found it amusing, and we laughed at ourselves, that despite our stand against toy guns here we were providing him with an opportunity for exposure to them on a massive scale. My son was fascinated by them and wanted to do "research" and examine them! He wanted to know what we were going to do with them afterwards. This provided me with a very funny opportunity to talk through these issues in a joining way rather than me being more of a censor.

These activities and actions as mentioned have provided me with ways to join with other men to promote respectful relationships and to include and encourage my children to question *what is normal, when is it normal and why is it normal?*

Guns and the Culture of Violence

Christopher McLean*

Critics of gun control have been quick to point out that Australia is not, by world standards, a particularly violent society. While this is true in many ways, it does not mean that we have no problem with gun-related violence, or that we have no need to examine our own values and social practices.

If we find ourselves thinking that violence is someone else's problem, and not our own, we only need reflect on the extent to which guns and violence provide the material for an extraordinary number of commonly used expressions in the English language. We "shoot from the hip" and get "shot down in flames"; when the going gets tough we "bring out the big guns", and "go in for the kill". Business people "make a killing" on the stock exchange, while sports stars "massacre" their opponents.

And of course, the place of killing and guns in the movies and on television is unmistakable. It seems rather contradictory to be so upset by the Port Arthur massacre, and yet to remain oblivious to the fact that dozens of people get shot every night on television, and that violence is presented both as entertainment and as the most natural of human interactions. This is not to suggest that violent movies "cause" violence in any direct way, but that if we want to oppose violence in all its forms, we need to think carefully about the meanings and values we are creating and endorsing in the public media. If we spend millions of dollars every year celebrating the culture of violence, it is scarcely surprising that some people will decide to act out these values in reality.

Rarely, however, do we stop to think about what this cultural obsession with guns and violence says about our community values, and the part we play in creating them. "Real" violence is something other people do. Hopefully the shock of Port Arthur and the resulting community discussion, will enable us to see things differently, to ask ourselves different questions, and perhaps to find some new answers.

An important part of this is to look seriously at the reasons why a small, but significant minority of people - mostly men - feel the need to be armed. Since the events at Port Arthur a number of people have suggested that this means challenging dominant constructions of masculinity which glorify

the use of violence and treat it as a proof of manhood.

However, while it is suggested that violence is central to the construction of dominant masculinity, this does not mean that "maleness" and violence are identical or inseparable. There are many men who actively challenge violence and work for peace, both in their own lives and in the world around them. So while it is important to focus on issues of masculinity in order to understand violence in our society, it is also necessary to look further afield. In particular we need to look at the structures of class and race, and the way they manifest in state and corporate violence.

These larger questions, however, do not reduce the immediate importance of gun control legislation. It remains vitally important, and in addition the arguments of the pro-gun lobby need to be taken seriously and addressed. The recent legislation, which removes semi-automatic and automatic weapons from the community is a positive step forward, but it is only a beginning. Possible next steps could now include extending this legislation so that people who use firearms in their employment, or for "sporting" purposes, be required to leave them in armouries, and not bring them into the family home. This would go some way to addressing the experience of numerous women, for whom the mere presence of a weapon in the home is a source of fear when combined with ongoing physical and emotional abuse. It would also go some way towards addressing the high level of gun-related suicide among young men.

However, I believe that the way in which we raise these issues is of central importance. One of the main reasons that guns have such widespread appeal in our society is the dominance of cultural metaphors emphasising battle, conflict and victory, rather than co-operation, negotiation and peaceful resolution. These dominant metaphors encourage us to demonise our "opponents", and to believe that no common ground exists between "them" and "us". In this context it is important that we find ways of resisting these dominant ways of being, while still making a strong stand against guns and those groups which promote their use. Perhaps we could begin by examining the ways in which our own ideas and actions either contribute to, or act against, the building of a society based on respect for others and a commitment to peaceful and caring community relationships.

Some further points to consider with relation to debates over gun control:

- The concentration in debates over gun control on semi-automatic and military-style weapons obscures the fact that most gun-related deaths are either suicides or the result of domestic violence, and are carried out by single-shot weapons. These will not be significantly affected by the recent legislation introduced by the federal government in response to community concerns.
- focus on exceptional events, such as the massacre at Port Arthur, may encourage explanations of violence which focus on alleged moral and psychological deficiencies within individuals. This can obscure links between violence and dominant cultural practices and values, particularly those associated with masculinity as well as class and race-based oppression.
- By focusing exclusively on guns, to the exclusion of a wide-ranging examination of violence in our society, we run the danger of demonising and scapegoating gun owners, while ignoring the violence perpetrated by many other people and institutions in different ways. By creating an "us" and "them" dichotomy, we are in danger of ignoring the fact that Australia's history is based on gun-related violence and massacres, perpetrated on this country's Indigenous peoples, and hidden under the blanket term of "settlement".

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WOMEN, GUNS AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE:

excerpts from a conversation with

Molly Claire, Margaret Wild and Tracy Grime

One of the major issues in domestic violence is the unpredictability that seems to happen. One moment the man may be perfectly fine and happy and relating okay and then within a period of anything from one to five minutes they can be really violent, reverting to name calling, pushing, the whole lot. For a woman who knows that there's a gun in the house with someone who is being unpredictable it just adds to that real weight of intimidation and uncertainty of not knowing how he's going to use that weapon. It may be that the man has a gun and has never threatened to use it, but she's aware that it's there and she's aware that he's unpredictable and that he's used other forms of violence towards her. This unpredictability is also an issue for us as workers - it makes us even more concerned about the woman's safety.

I find that women's experience of guns is continually minimised or ignored. It is only the recent events that have brought women's experience of guns out into the open.

I find that women's experience of guns is continually minimised or ignored. It is only the recent events that have brought women's experience of guns out into the open. Women continually feel that their fear is their own fault, that guns are quite normal, that the men's behaviour is quite normal and that it is their problem that they find it so terrifying. They buy the story that the men have no intention of actually using them - so why are they so scared? I think it is really important that these issues get raised. And it also seems to be leading to a much greater focus on the issues of domestic violence generally. I find it quite amazing to see politicians talking about domestic violence and how important it is to address it. That seems to have come from the debate over gun control.

The main thing about the new gun laws is that they ban semi-automatics, but most women I've worked with are threatened with single-shot weapons, which will still

be legal. Also, men can find ways around the new laws if they really want to. For example, I've been working with a woman who was involved in a violent relationship, and left her husband 12 months ago. He had thousands of dollars worth of guns, including semi-automatics. Now, 12 months down the track, he continues to stalk her and harass her, and she's really concerned about the guns. The law requires that they be confiscated, but her husband has put in a report to the police that they have been stolen. This woman is sure that he has just hidden them and she is really afraid. She has moved out of her home and is staying with a friend, but her husband has access to the child and she is very concerned for her safety.

There's also another whole area that the law is not dealing with. I come across a lot of women whose partners, or the man who is abusing them, has a "legitimate" reason to carry a gun - police officers, men in the trucking industry, corrections officers, security officers, farmers. There's a legitimacy associated with these men's roles and the way they earn their money that gives them an unquestioned right to carry a gun. For some reason that legitimacy extends into their right to bring their guns into the house. There is an assumption that these men will use their guns in appropriate ways at all times. And my experience is that that's not the case. They may use it appropriately for their work but then they can, and do, continue to use that gun as a tool for intimidation within their relationships. So I am really concerned about the assumptions inherent in the current legislation that says that men who need guns for their employment will automatically be able to have them - and presumably be allowed to take them home.

Molly Claire is a counsellor who works in the area of women's health, and she has talked with many women about the effects of violence in their lives. She can be contacted c/o Women's Health Statewide, 64 Pennington Tce, North Adelaide, SA 5006.

Margaret Wild is a feminist counsellor whose passionate commitment to social justice is reflected in her work with women. She can be contacted c/o Women's Health Statewide, 64 Pennington Tce, North Adelaide, SA 5006.

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A TARGET SHOOTER'S PERSPECTIVE

Excerpts from a conversation with

Karen Willis - Administrator of WILMA Women's Health Centre

Karen Willis is the administrator of a Women's Health Centre in outer metropolitan Sydney. Karen also comes from a family of target shooters, and has been actively involved in the sport as well, winning a number of junior championships. She can be contacted c/o W.I.L.M.A. Women's Health Centre, 298 Queen St, Campbelltown, NSW 2560.

In my work in women's health I see, on a daily basis, how violent men can be in our society and the damage they can do to women and kids. And I now see guns in a different light. While we saw them just as a sporting activity as kids, as an adult I can see the damage that those things can do and the way they can be used to instil the most incredible fear in people. And let's not get it wrong - guns were made to kill people. They weren't made so people could go and shoot square pieces of paper and have picnics, they were developed to kill people. They are the extreme end of our violent society.

While I still enjoy target shooting I can see the other side of the story. I'm also a bit of a leadfoot and I could think of nothing more exhilarating than sitting in a car doing 350-400km/h. I think that would be a buzz - I'd really enjoy that. But because I know how dangerous it is, and also for environmental reasons, I accept that I cannot do that. We may enjoy explosions and bangs and firecrackers but because we realise the danger that this can cause in the broader social context then the individual access to that has to be restricted.

I think we have to look at the safety of our community. I accept that, with the new legislation, if my gun becomes illegal then for the broader good I can no longer do target shooting. It's a small price to pay really. I accept that I can't drive my car fast because of the danger that it can cause. I would accept that I can't do this shooting because of the danger that those sorts of weapons cause in our society to women and kids particularly.

Disarming the Police

*A personal view from Senior Sergeant Bernie Morgan of the South Australian Police Force**

My personal view is that it would be a good idea to build upon the current climate, in which we as a community are talking about gun control, to consider carefully whether it is necessary for our police forces to be armed with guns. It would be most desirable, I believe, to have a situation where most police don't carry exposed firearms as a matter of course. There is a need for police special tactical response groups to carry guns at all times, and there is a need for police to have access to guns. However, my view is that most police do not need to carry guns.

The average citizen in Australia has no need for a firearm, and that includes, in my view, the average police officer most of the time.

I believe that if we as police did not carry exposed firearms it would make a significant difference to the culture of the police force as well as to the daily interactions between officers and the general public. I don't think that a lot of younger police realise the effect that their wearing an exposed firearm has on their communication with the general public. In my experience 90% of the people we talk with during our working day are normal citizens going about their normal business. A lot of the work we do is not about 'catching criminals'. It ought to be more about 'peace keeping'. Police culture, however, is very much about being 'criminal catchers'. There is a sense that we live in a very dangerous world and the wearing of an exposed firearm reinforces this sort of mentality. It also reinforces that whole mentality of 'them' versus 'us'. Wearing a gun makes a statement that we are the powerful people. The gun is a symbol of that power. I don't think that a lot of younger police realise the implications that has for the way they relate to people on a day-to-day basis.

Firearms reinforce the perception that it is a dangerous world and we are out

here as the police force to maintain the upper hand. There is a belief that we must have even better fire power than the 'opposition'. The trouble with this argument is that it just keeps escalating and where do you stop? Martin Bryant in Tasmania had a high power military weapon, and the only place we've got those is within tactical response groups. If we were to try to apply the argument that we needed better weapons than those we might come across, then all police would be carrying military weapons.

At one stage we used to believe that we had to have faster police cars than the average person. It took a few years to realise that this was leading us down a very dangerous way of thinking that led to high speed chases and could even lead to deaths. We learned that it is better to have average cars and use better methods to reduce car crime. In my view much the same is true in relation to firearms. Instead of escalating the violence we should be looking at reducing it. The approach we take in a siege situation is not to try and 'take out' the offender. It is to contain the situation, stop it getting any worse and to try and negotiate with the offender.

The mere fact of having a gun means that less effort will be put into developing alternative ways of dealing with potentially dangerous situations. If you haven't got any weapons then you are going to be putting all of your energy into containment and remaining safe. So, in other words, making sure that you are not in immediate danger yourself and then trying to contain the situation to stop anyone else getting involved.

Recently an officer was telling me about a situation where he was chasing an offender who turned and picked up a spade and started advancing. So the officer took out his gun and said "OK, put down the spade or else..." I kept thinking to myself "why?" If a gun hadn't been present there would have been a lot of other options available. I

think this represents a classic situation where police have to make decisions on the run, when adrenalin is high. Having a gun and threatening to use it can actually escalate violence, making the situation less safe for everyone concerned.

What is often ignored is that, when police draw their guns, they have put themselves in a position where, in a split second they have to make a possible life and death decision. Quite often it doesn't matter which decision you make, it will cause you a lot of heartache for a long time afterwards. I think that we need to be talking about these sorts of things. It's a very different level of conversation to some of those I heard after the Port Arthur killings where people were saying that if everyone in the restaurant had been wearing a gun then Martin Bryant wouldn't have been able to shoot so many people.

I don't think that a lot of younger police realise the effect that their wearing an exposed firearm has on their communication with the general public.

That whole argument ignores the effects that the presence of guns has in a community - even if they are not fired. They generate a sense of fear. One of the biggest factors in resistance to police wearing exposed firearms is the sense of fear that it creates, that sense that things are so much out of control that people have to wear guns in order to feel safe. People feel a lot safer when no one is wearing guns. The average citizen in Australia has no need for a firearm, and that includes, in my view, the average police officer most of the time.

**Bernie Morgan has been a police officer since 1968, and he has been particularly involved in police education. He can be contacted c/o the South Australian Police Department.*

SUICIDE AND GUNS

*Excerpts from a paper by Melissa Raven**

The following are points taken from a major paper by Melissa Raven. It has been accepted for future publication in XY Magazine. It is an excellent resource as it covers the area in depth and contains detailed references to research on suicide. For publication details contact Ben Wadham, XY Magazine, PO Box 473 Blackwood SA 5051.

- In many countries most gun deaths are suicide. Ironically, the people most likely to be killed by guns are also their main advocates: gun owners and their families, especially their sons. In Australia in 1994, of the 522 people killed by firearms, 90% were male and 85% of these were suicide cases. Between 1968 and 1989 over 10,000 Australians, many of them young men, deliberately killed themselves with firearms.
- Suicide by firearms is more likely to occur when availability is high. Guns used in suicide are generally not specially bought for that purpose, and those who survive self-shooting often comment on the ready availability of the gun they used. The greater risk of self-shooting in rural areas is at least partly the result of greater availability.
- Overseas, the preventive effects of strict gun laws in some areas in the US have been documented, and the 1978 Canadian gun control law resulted in a decrease in both firearms suicides and total suicides, with no evidence of method substitution
- Despite the carnage and the strong association between availability and suicide, a number of arguments are commonly cited against reducing the availability of guns.

They will do it anyway. While it is true that some people persist until they succeed, many people live long and even happy lives after one or more suicide attempts. More importantly, there is evidence that many cases of suicide and attempted suicide are impulsive. In many such cases, alcohol is involved. However, it is often acute intoxication rather than long-term dependence - coupled with ready availability of firearms - which is

particularly important. A common scenario is that a young male with a personal problem which has reached crisis point gets intoxicated and makes an impulsive decision to shoot himself. A suicide note is rarely left; if there is one, it is often garbled and illegible. The use of a coherent, legible note occurs more often in a planned suicide.

There are other readily available methods. It is not difficult to find a car in which to either poison oneself with carbon monoxide fumes or crash at high speed. However, it requires more planning and takes longer to do either of these things than to pull a trigger, and there is more chance of changing one's mind or having someone intervene, accidentally or intentionally. Ambivalence is in fact very common, and an attempt delayed is often an averted attempt. Many more people consider suicide than attempt it; often what makes the difference is the immediate availability of a firearm.

In many countries most gun deaths are suicide. Ironically, the people most likely to be killed by guns are also their main advocates: gun owners and their families, especially their sons.

- In suicide the type of gun is of relatively minor importance. Unfortunately, the proposed laws do not consider the possibility of banning gun storage in the home. Therefore, unfortunately, changes in legislation to remove automatic and semi-automatic weapons from the community will probably have little effect on suicide rates. Additional strategies are required, such as education and social action to encourage voluntary relinquishing and perhaps the establishment of community armouries.
- There is a very weak connection between psychiatric disorders and violence, to oneself or others, and the majority of people who kill themselves with guns do not have a psychiatric history. Instead, there are usually major life-stresses, often occurring shortly beforehand. Relationship problems are the most common, followed by job loss, family conflict, financial and legal problems,

all of which are more common than psychiatric illness. In an English study domestic disputes were the most common precipitants. Men are less likely than women to seek counselling or to discuss such problems with friends or relatives, and suicide often seems to occur without warning.

- The asserted 'right' of access to firearms is a predominantly male 'right'. Men who insist on having guns (along with those who use alcohol and other drugs to excess, and those who drive vehicles at high speed) are exercising 'negative rights' - the right to use their privileged access to resources in unhealthy ways. Men are much more likely than women to own guns, and more likely to have disposable income to spend on alcohol and illicit drugs, and are more likely to harm themselves with them.
- Toughness is seen as necessary for the survival of men, yet men are dying of toughness. The tough macho outdoors image is used to sell guns (and other dangerous commodities such as cigarettes, although their advertising and marketing increasingly target women) to city and country dwellers alike.
- Guns are often seen as solutions to problems, and gun controls are perceived as a threat, a violation of the right to solve problems manfully. What is often overlooked is the fact that gun ownership itself is a threat to the survival of those who believe they have to be tough. In a society in which guns are glorified and explicitly linked with masculinity in countless movies, songs, novels, and comics, it is hardly surprising that a young man feeling disinherited and alienated, experiencing uncertainty about his sexual identity, might choose a potent weapon loaded with masculine imagery as a method of suicide: 'I may be a failure, but I will die like a man!'. The fact that gun advocates insist on the right to 'protect' themselves and their families, despite the fact that most gun deaths are suicide, is a macabre irony. Perhaps there is a place for a bumper stickers reading: PROTECT YOUR SON. DON'T BUY A GUN!

**Melissa Raven is a lecturer in Addiction Studies at the National Centre For Education and Training on Addiction at Flinders University of South Australia.*

Responding to Opponents of Gun Control

Christopher McLean

In this piece I have listed a number of the arguments commonly put forward by opponents of gun control, and presented some suggested responses.

Mental illness is the problem, not guns.

Research into the link between homicide and violence demonstrates the following:

- The mentally ill have a lower rate of involvement in homicide than the general population (National Committee on Violence 1990, p 76)
- There is no good evidence that mental illness accounts for any substantial proportion of violence in the community (National Committee on Violence 1990, p 74-6)
- There is an exceptionally low percentage of homicidal acts carried out by people with schizophrenia (McNair 1996 p 2)

The alleged link between mental illness and violence has a very negative impact on the lives of the mentally ill and their families.

- According to Bernard McNair, president of the Schizophrenia Fellowship in NSW, "we know from our own connections of at least three suicides of people who are either carers or have mental illness as a direct result of the Port Arthur reporting" (1996 p 3).
- The stigma associated with mental illness, and the resulting isolation from the community, are already one of the major problems facing people experiencing mental illness. The unwarranted link between mental illness and violence seriously increase this stigma and isolation. Community ignorance and fear of mental illness is increased by the way in which the media sensationalises any event in which a mentally ill person is involved in violence. As Bernard McNair says "We do not see the headline 'Another Licensed Gun Owner Commits Mass Murder' even though 84% of mass murders are committed by licensed gun owners" (1996 p 2).
- The way in which the alleged links between mental illness and violence are presented in the media contributes to dominant and unhelpful stereotypes about mental illness, which suggest

that people experiencing mental illness are totally controlled by that illness at all times. This seriously disempowers people struggling with the effects of mental illness, and discredits their attempts to reclaim their lives. It also hides the fact that people experiencing the effects of mental illness do not suddenly become exempt from the effects of larger social structures such as gender. Conversations with therapists and counsellors suggest that, just as violence in the general community is overwhelmingly perpetrated by men, so is violence among the mentally ill. It would seem that the real issue is the link between masculinity and violence, not mental illness and violence.

Applicants for Gun Licenses should be psychologically tested and a register kept of mentally ill people who should be prohibited from owning guns.

As stated above, there is no established link between mental illness and the likelihood of violence. In addition to this, there is little evidence that psychological testing practices are capable of predicting who is and who is not likely to commit violent offences (National Committee on Violence 1990, p 74-5).

Licensed shooters are law-abiding people. It is only unlicensed gun owners who commit firearms offences.

In mass shootings, more victims are shot by licensed gun owners than by people with a mental illness, unlicensed offenders and violent criminals combined. Out of 14 mass shootings in Australia and New Zealand over the last ten years:

- 67% of the killers had no previous history of mental illness
- 87% had no previous history of violent crime
- 67% of the killers were licensed gun owners (Alpers 1996).

Guns kill people whether they are registered or unregistered

So do cars, explosives, dangerous chemicals and dangerous drugs. We accept the necessity of registration and controls in all sorts of areas, and

registration of guns has several important functions. For example, it will make it much easier for police to know whether weapons are present in a house before intervening in domestic violence situations.

If registration is introduced, people will just hide guns

It is difficult to combine this argument with the claim that gun owners are law abiding citizens. If they are law abiding citizens, they will not hide their guns. If they are not, it is even more important that strict gun controls are introduced.

Guns don't kill people, people kill people. If we remove guns from the community, violent people will simply use other means.

Guns are a technology specifically designed to make killing more reliable. Military weapons are designed to kill large numbers of people extremely efficiently, and they cause massive injuries, quite unlike the "in one side and out the other" bullet hole of the movies. Other means of killing are likely to be less reliable and unable to be used at a distance (eg. knives) and more dangerous to the perpetrator and requiring more thought and preparation (eg. home-made explosives).

Dr Trevor Duke, research fellow at the Paediatric Intensive Care Unit, Royal Children's Hospital, writes as follows:

At the Royal Children's Hospital we recently cared for a child who, along with two other family members, was savagely attacked with a knife. This girl suffered life-threatening injuries, but along with her mother and brother, survived. I thought at the time that, had the previously law-abiding attacker owned a gun, all three would now be dead (The Age, 1/5/96, p A16).

If gun laws are made stricter, there will just be a black market. Criminals will always be able to get guns, leaving law abiding citizens defenceless.

One of the main ways that criminals get hold of guns is from the homes of

licensed gun owners. (Chapman 1996, p 2). Removing all guns from private homes and requiring them to be kept in secure storage would greatly decrease the availability of illegal weapons.

What about Switzerland? There are military style guns in almost every home in Switzerland, but almost no gun problems.

Switzerland is not a privately armed society. The military weapons which are kept at home by reservists are not owned by the house owner, they are property of the Swiss Government. Each rifle is issued with a strictly limited amount of ammunition, and it is kept in a sealed container that must not be opened without army approval. It is impossible to remove a cartridge without it being apparent that the container has been opened. It is against the law to fire a weapon except on the order of the commander of the armed forces. There are severe consequences under both military and civilian law for unauthorised use of these weapons. This is a totally different situation than that proposed by the pro-gun lobby, which advocates minimum government regulation of firearm ownership. (Crook 1996, p 15; Information package from Swiss Consulate, Melbourne)

Gun laws violate basic freedoms and the human right of self defence.

- In Australia there is no legal or constitutional right to own weapons. As Robert Richter QC, president of the Victorian Council of Civil Liberties has said: "Owning a gun is neither a right nor a liberty. Easy access to guns, on the other hand, has deprived too many Australians [of] their fundamental right to life." (The Age, 4/5/96, p A24)
- Even before the recently proposed legislation no state in Australia accepted "personal protection" as a legitimate reason for owning a gun. The only acceptable reasons were those associated with employment and sporting purposes. (Peters 1995 p 118-9)
- A University of Queensland project which examined every gun death recorded at the Brisbane coroner's court during the 1980s concluded that "parents who keep firearms for reasons of family protection should realise that if their guns ever did kill someone the most probable victim would be their young adult son dying from his own hand. The statistics also

suggest that it is more likely that all family members will shoot each other dead before any external aggressor is killed." (Peters 1995 p 120).

We Need More Guns, Not Less

In the days following the Port Arthur massacre, the following arguments were regularly put forward:

- *We need more guns, not less. If someone had drawn a pistol and terminated the Port Arthur maniac immediately he started shooting, over 30 lives could have been saved. Incontestable logic.* (Letter to the Editor, The Age 1/5/96, p A16)
- *No legislation would have stopped this man...The only thing in the world that was going to stop him was someone with a gun. My initial reaction was, didn't anyone in Tasmania have a gun? Wasn't there a single person in the area that had a gun and could defend themselves and protect all those people?* (Bob Catter, National Party MP, The Age, 5/5/96, p 1)

Such arguments ignore the following:

- The high degree of fear and uncertainty that is generated in a community through the widespread presence of weapons
- There is no way of guaranteeing that gun owners will use their weapons in responsible and appropriate ways (whatever they might be).
- The widespread availability of weapons, plus the attitude that gun owners are the legitimate protectors of public safety, encourages a vigilante attitude which is potentially highly dangerous.

We need a population familiar with the use of weapons as a means of national defence.

This argument is best summed up by the following statement by Ted Leong, the competitions director of the NSW Rifle Association:

The Australian soldier was equipped with a strong heritage of the bush and of marksmanship; from rabbit shooting to the Saturday afternoon at the little country rifle range. Marksmanship is one of our national assets...When the next generation of Australians have to wear the uniform to protect our nation, they will not have the pre-military service heritage to stand by them. (Letter to the Editor, Guns Australia, July/August 1996, p 8)

Even on a purely military level this argument is flawed. According to one ex-soldier I interviewed:

When I went into the army I hadn't ever touched a gun before, but I got one of the better shooting scores in our platoon. I remember my instructor saying to his offside "the ones who haven't shot before are the easiest to train". I ended up training the police in the use of military weapons. I mean, its a gun, there's nothing too complicated to do. You've just got to shoot it, and obviously practice makes perfect. But there's no similarity between the kind of shooting that people do in rural situations and what you have to do in the army. The things you are firing in the army are 3 times the size and give you that much more punch. That's your average weapon - and then there's your full on automatic weapons. There's just no comparison.

More importantly, however, arguments such as the one by Ted Leong regard wars as an inevitability. They completely ignore other ways of resolving conflict, and encourage foreign policies which actually make wars more likely. The best way of defending Australia is to encourage our governments to actively engage in peace-making on an international and local level, rather than trying to defend our own little patch. Given the current level of destructiveness of weapons technology, to continue thinking in terms of military solutions is to invite disaster for the whole planet.

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This is the third issue of *Comment*, a publication initiated to provide a forum for responses to topical social issues. *Comment* aims to be flexible, open to readers' suggestions, and to be of practical value to health and welfare workers. It is produced on an irregular basis, as need arises. Everyone is welcome to offer suggestions, topics, thoughts, plans, etc. and to actively join small groups to work together to produce it. *Comment* is intended to be used - we encourage people to photocopy it and to distribute it widely.

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Books Available From Dulwich Centre Publications

If you are interested in further exploring the links between masculinity and violence, as well as ways of addressing this problem, the following books are available for sale from Dulwich Centre Publications:

Men's Ways of Being, edited by Christopher McLean, Maggie Carey and Cheryl White. Westview Press, Boulder Colorado, 1996. This book is a collection of papers which explore hopeful ways forward in dealing with issues of masculine culture. It blends personal, theoretical and political approaches in addressing issues of power, inequality and oppression. It also includes practice based papers exploring ways of working with men who are violent. It offers an empathetic understanding of the predicaments faced by men in their everyday lives, without compromising women's struggle for gender justice.

Beyond the Prison: Gathering Dreams of Freedom, edited by David Denborough. Dulwich Centre Publications, Adelaide 1996. This book is a heartfelt invitation to look beyond our taken-for-granted notions of crime, punishment and imprisonment. It is a passionate expose on the politics of imprisonment, as well as an inspiring account of alternatives. The author draws primarily on his work with men in a maximum security prison, as well as on conversations with a range of people in Australia, New Zealand and North America.

Men and Sexual Politics: Towards a Profeminist Practice, by Bob Pease. Dulwich Centre Publications, Adelaide 1997. This book is a moving and engaging account of the author's personal, political and intellectual journey as he confronts the social construction of white, western masculinity. It addresses a range of important dilemmas facing men attempting to build a pro-feminist politics and practice. Bob Pease is a senior lecturer in Social Work and also teaches courses on men and masculinity at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology.

Invitations to Responsibility, by Alan Jenkins. Dulwich Centre Publications, Adelaide 1990.

This influential book explores ways of working with men and adolescent boys who are violent or abusive. It gives practical examples of how they can be helped to discover more sensitive, respectful and personally rewarding ways of relating to others. Alan Jenkins is a therapist and teacher who is highly acclaimed in Australia, New Zealand and North America.

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