

## Land Girls of New Zealand

Julie Clements

During WWII, many women took over the jobs of the men gone to war; in the factories, in the service and on the farms. When the men returned from overseas, these women, who were so heavily relied upon for six years just melted back into their traditional roles. I am sure that many employers expressed their gratitude for all their hard work at the time, however, this was not the case with the country as a whole.

Recently, there has been a push for government recognition of the 'Land Girls' and their contribution during the war. Matt Theunissen of NZPA in a recent article said, "They were the forgotten women of World War II. Go to any New Zealand small town and you are bound to see a statue to fallen soldiers of two World Wars, those who gave blood overseas in the battle for freedom. No such memorial has been bestowed on more than 4000 women of the New Zealand Women's Land Service, the "Land Girls" who toiled away on the farms to keep the country fed. They came in their thousands from towns and cities to take the jobs of men who were wearing khaki overseas. They kept the troops and the home front fed and, by all accounts, they worked like Trojans. Most had never experienced the hard physical work of farming, but during the war year's production of wool, mutton, milk and other necessities was not simply maintained, it thrived to record levels."

My own interest in this topic was sparked by my friend and neighbour Joyce Grieve, Joyce was one of the many Land Girls of Canterbury. Being an avid diary writer she has records of many stories of her life, including her time as a Land Girl. She said, "The Women's Land Service was formed to supply labour to keep New Zealand agriculture going during the war. From 1940, girls aged from 17, left cities, small towns and rural areas to assist on sheep, cattle, dairy, orchard and poultry properties. They learned to ride horses, train and whistle up dogs, muster sheep, plough and harvest crops and to master a myriad of other tasks often without electricity. After five years, women's lives were dramatically changed, some had given up their university education, careers and some never made it home, preferring to stay working the land. However, we never received any recognition. Rallies were

held in Britain and Australia, and progress made, but here, despite countless letters to the Ministry of Defence, the Women's Land service was the least recognised. We were told that we did not qualify as service-people as we were not allocated a number and did not live in barracks. Our war service would not be recognised as was the Waacs, Waafs, Wrens and nurses.

**"This service started without the support and recognition of the men it was formed to support and it ended the same way."**

The two NZ women campaigners, who most strongly challenged male conservatism in the National Service Department in Parliament, were Mary Grigg and Mary Dreaver. They were both MP's and Mary Grigg came from Surrey Hills Station in Mid Canterbury. She designed the uniforms and recruited the young girls, without her in the House of Representatives the service would not have existed past 1942, in the middle of the war! Liz Richards from 'The Point' in Glenroy, was a major contributor to the Land Service, training young girls on her farm before they were transferred to working farms.

Joyce wrote about her personal experiences for Anzac Day 2005, here are just a few examples.

At 16, I was working at the Railway Station Refreshment Rooms. Part of my job was preparing lunch boxes for the soldiers as the train paused at Ashburton. The carriages were crowded with uniformed men, happy faces hanging out of the windows on their way to training camps before going overseas. It was hard to watch them go, knowing that some would never return. After a few months I became a Land Girl, moving to Alford Forest. These were days of working dawn to dark, 7 days a week in all weathers. My friend June worked just across the river, we never got the chance to meet up. We were issued a uniform to be worn on all special occasions as well as shirts, overalls, boots and leather jackets. I wasn't impressed with our dress uniform, we were told to wear suspenders to keep our thick brown stockings from wrinkling and to make sure the seam at the back was straight. We were told to look smart at all times. I was more comfortable in my overalls.



I had no idea how hard I would be working during those years, milking cows, turning the milk separator for butter, feeding pigs, and that was before breakfast each morning. Then there was the continual tractor work, sheep mustering, lambing, shearing and harvesting. You got used to it though.

At first, after several discouraging weeks of not being able to please my new boss, I wanted to prove him wrong about my uselessness. With a well-trained horse and a borrowed dog, I set off to round up the sheep from several miles away. Nobody knew how many times I fell off or how sore I was for days after. He didn't say anything but must have approved as that became my job after milking each day during the lambing season.

Harvest time came and the oats were ripe, they looked so beautiful with their golden heads waving in the breeze. It seemed a shame to cut them down. The binder was brought out of the shed and taken to the paddock. I was thankful to have to churn the butter as it looked so complicated but as I started towards the dairy I heard, "Where the hell are you going, get out into the oat paddock."

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Out I went but had no clue as to what I was supposed to do, then he hollered "What the hell are you standing there for, get up on the binder." When it started I nearly fell off in fright and hung on for dear life. "Don't just sit there, lift that lever, pull this and pull that!" I had to work it out quick but once I got the hang of it I found it fun. Manipulating the levers at the right time and seeing the sheaves drop out the back in neat rows. There was also the twine box to check so it didn't run out. Perched up where I was I could keep an eye on all the works, it was a marvellous machine that is rarely seen today.

The next day after milking, the sheaves had to be manhandled into neat rows and left to dry, then carted by horse and dray to be stacked. The days were long and the boss was roaring, "No time for slacking, the weather won't stay fine till you're ready!" Then came the chaffcutter. With no phones, the whistle could be heard from the traction engine to let everyone know the threshing mill was on the way. This gave time for bags to be readied and many women would arrive with clean sacks to gather fresh straw for their mattresses. A bit prickly but clean and warm. When the time came for me to leave, my boss praised me for being so conscientious and said he always could rely on me. Seeing the surprised look on my face he said "Law and order never hurt anyone, it keeps you on your toes."

I am almost certain that the majority of these land girls would prefer not to have a huge fuss made about receiving recognition, as women of their generation rarely sought so much attention. However, I do believe they should be applauded for their individual achievements and their combined effort to keep New Zealand thriving during such a terrible time.