

HONOURING

WAR  
*Brides*



A Calgary artist's tribute

by Harry M. Sanders



As the Second World War begins its slow fade from living memory, an Alberta artist has begun to capture one of its key legacies. Her inspiration is personal.

**B**ev Tosh was born in New Zealand, where her Saskatchewan mother, Dorothy, had settled in 1946 to join the Kiwi serviceman she met and married during the Second World War. When her parents' marriage broke down, nine-year-old Tosh sailed for Canada with her mother and sister. She grew up in Saskatoon, graduating in psychology and fine arts from the University of Saskatchewan. Life and family brought Tosh to Calgary in 1973, where she taught at the Alberta College of Art and Design and the University of Calgary. She has exhibited nationally and internationally and is president of the Burns Visual Arts Society—the oldest artists' co-operative in the province.

For her mother's 80th birthday in 2001, Tosh decided to paint a portrait of her. "I had a sudden interest in honouring my mom," she recalls. But she was disappointed in the work. "It didn't even begin to say what I wanted to say," says Tosh. "I thought—she has to be big. There has to be a physical reaction when you see her." She painted the portrait again, this time on an eight-foot canvas.

Some years earlier, Tosh had already begun to take an interest in her mother's experience as a "war bride." She had never heard the term growing up, and her mother rarely spoke of the years in New Zealand or what had brought her there. But Tosh knew her mother had gone there on a "bride ship," and this had always intrigued her. "I had this image of a ship full of brides, all dressed in white. I found it a magical image," she says. She entered the term "war bride" on the Internet and was amazed at how much

she found. "The whole thing opened up for me," Tosh recalls.

Though a similar phenomenon occurred on a small scale during and after the First World War, the term "war bride" is mostly associated with the Second World War. Wherever Allied servicemen were stationed, hospitalized, or on leave—Britain, continental Europe, and, owing to the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan, Canada—they met, fell in love with, and sometimes married local women. These liaisons were officially discouraged because they created dependants and resulted in the eventual relocation of vast numbers of people. (In a few cases the genders were reversed, leading to the much smaller phenomenon of "war husbands.")

Although many war brides moved during the war to their husbands' country of origin, most had to wait until after the conflict ended. Available ships were initially needed to return demobilized servicemen and -women home. However, in 1946, those troop ships became bride ships (and, in some cases, "stork ships"). Approximately 48,000 war brides, most of them British, married Canadians during and after the war, and 44,000 of them moved to Canada. The federal government paid for their ocean passage and cross-country rail journey. Hundreds came to Alberta.

Though it was the start of an exciting new life abroad, departure was tinged with sadness for most war brides. They left behind parents, family, and friends and knew that they might never return. Many were young and had no experience of the wider world. During their courtships, these women had been within their element and the servicemen were in unfamiliar



circumstances. After their long voyage, the brides found the tables turned. Most were unprepared for conditions in their adopted homelands, and some discovered their husbands had been less than forthright about the life that awaited them. Many London girls ended up on remote prairie farms, where their cooking and other life skills proved alien or unsuited to the climate. Distance prevented them from finding solace and support from fellow war brides; even in towns and cities, the overwhelming responsibility of raising young families had the same effect. Early attempts to form war brides' groups in Alberta were short-lived, and only years later did they find each other and form lasting associations. (The Alberta War Brides Association [AWBA], established in the 1970s, is today an active organization with branches in Edmonton, Calgary, Medicine Hat, and Lethbridge.)

In previous waves of emigration, husbands went ahead to find work and

Left: Portion of *Wish Me Luck as You Wave Me Goodbye*  
Above: Tear bottles





Working wall of images in  
Bev Tosh's studio.

establish a home, then sent for their wives and children. War brides had no such certainty. Many knew they would arrive before their husbands, and dreaded their first encounter with in-laws on a distant railway platform. A few came as war widows, with no one but unknown in-laws to comfort them. Some found that their husbands or fiancés wanted nothing to do with them, and many did not have the means to return home. And for all the happy endings, a good many wartime romances ended in divorce or separation.

Tosh's personal interest led her to attend a monthly luncheon of members of the AWBA in Calgary. She had already completed the portrait of her mother and had no further objective in mind. But once she felt comfortable with the women, Tosh began asking them about their life stories. Then serendipity intervened. In January 2002, Tosh travelled to New Zealand to teach a short course in figure painting. She also intended to research her mother's bride ship, the *Wanganella*, and to meet and interview another war bride. A local newspaper did a story on her as a former New Zealander-turned-Canadian artist. But the reporter and photographer—both young women—were intrigued with Tosh's interest in war brides, and the front page feature story, accompanied by an illustration of Dorothy's portrait, highlighted the war bride angle. Dozens of war brides contacted Tosh to offer her their stories.

On her return, Tosh's interest in war brides became a passionate, creative pursuit which has evolved into the Herstory project. "For me it brings together many aspects in my life, through my mother's life," she now observes. "Perhaps I've reached that age when acknowledging those who have gone before us, and reflecting on their experiences and their lives, allows us to move on and to experience our own." For Tosh, the connection to war brides like her mother is even deeper. When she left New Zealand at the age of nine, Tosh exactly retraced her mother's earlier journey as a war bride—but in reverse. She too saw her native shore recede into the distance, and left behind



family and the only home she had ever known. That wrenching experience forms a bond between artist and subject.

Expanding on her mother's portrait, Tosh developed a triptych of three equally-sized canvases titled *String of Pearls*. Glenn Miller's wartime song evokes the era, and its title provides a metaphor. Through their shared experience as war brides, the three women in the canvases—Dorothy, Vera, and Terrie (all of them real women, whom Tosh refers to only by first name)—are linked like a string of pearls. In her portrait, also titled *String of Pearls*, Vera wears a pearl necklace. The three subjects represent a range of feeling and experience. Terrie wears her Royal Canadian Air Force uniform and cap and looks hopeful; the RCAF motto, *Through Adversity To the Stars*, captures her high hopes and gives the piece its title. Dorothy's portrait, *One-way Passage*, represents the voyage, a period of transition in the women's lives. She also looks upward and hopeful, and the names of bride ships line her hair in silver leaf—a foil that, like memory, tarnishes and fades over time. The

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Detail from portrait *Muriel*



*Elly's Wedding Day*, projected on parachute.

shimmering pattern of the background suggests the ocean surface, and both stands out from and fades back into Dorothy's flesh. Vera, who is now deceased, looks more serious in her portrait. She was a poet, and her poem *Bad News for Someone* is superimposed: "We deeply regret that your husband is missing / How coldly the telegram shows / They deeply regret. . . / but what's missing? / Sure 'tis only a wife that knows. . ." Tosh projected Vera's manuscript onto the canvas and traced the poet's own handwriting onto the portrait in silver leaf. The words are superimposed over the portrait and also appear in the background behind Vera's figure. Chance determined which of the words would stand out clearly ("husband is missing...you and I...pain...that I might live...repeats again...a foreign land...think you dead...future with no fears...") and which would fade or sink back into her skin.

*String of Pearls* was only the first component in Tosh's growing Herstory project. She has interviewed scores of war brides in Canada and abroad, including dozens of Albertans, many of whom still attend the AWBA's annual province-wide reunions. She has prompted her subjects to write down their experiences or share them

in recorded interviews, and has collected hundreds of photographs and items of memorabilia, including locally-produced copies of the *British War Wives News Journal*, previously unknown to librarians in Alberta. Tosh's filing cabinet bulges with the by-product of her research: the documentation of a phenomenon and those who experienced it. Women who initially told her that they had nothing interesting to offer later thanked Tosh for the opportunity to finally write down or otherwise express their life stories. Once Herstory is completed, Tosh's files will prove a valuable source for historians and might become the basis for a book—probably written in collaboration. "I don't see myself as an historian," Tosh says, "although I know I'm collecting stories that have never been collected before. I am collecting precious memories, and weaving a new cloth, a new fabric out of these memories." She also provides copies of her material to grateful war brides and their children.

The next phase of Herstory is part visual arts and part performance. To prepare the images, Tosh has developed a working wall in her studio, a collection of images and objects affixed in apparently random order. (The working wall has itself been exhibited

and forms a component of Herstory.) Using Polaroid photography and a slide printer, Tosh transfers the images onto handmade paper, vellum, or parachute silk. She often stains the paper with tea—perhaps inspired by the love of tea that she shares with many of her subjects. Chance things happen in the staining and image transfer process, affecting the images in unpredictable ways. "I want a loss of control," Tosh says. "It's about their lives, about not being in control—outside factors affected their destiny. Just a photograph doesn't speak to me." She sometimes combines images or layers them over themselves, representing the layering and softening of memory. Another element of the working wall is a set of "tear bottles"—small vials filled with salt water and a curled portrait, placed on the shelf of a mirror that was accidentally (and fortuitously) cracked. "Every war bride I've ever talked to spoke of tears, of homesickness and the loss of everything up to that time in their life," Tosh says. "They cried oceans of tears."

Tosh's presentation is never the same twice. She projects slides of the transferred images onto a 24-panel, full-sized wartime parachute, which evokes a wedding gown. The parachute acts as a scrim—both a



screen for projection and a partly transparent veil. The projection accentuates the chance elements of the transferred images, and the pattern of the parachute's folds, unique in each presentation, add to the motif of layering. The use of recorded interviews, songs, and dramatic voicing round out what is in effect a multi-media experience.

Unlike her research files, which document entire lives, Herstory makes no attempt at biography. "It's more about taking the fragments of memory," Tosh says, "little anecdotes, things that made them laugh or cry." Each filament contributes to the collective experience that her presentation unfolds. With great sensitivity to her subjects, Tosh uses these fragments to witness the poetry and pain of their lives.

The latest component of Herstory, which Tosh has nicknamed Bride Ship, is officially titled *Wish Me Luck As You Wave Me Goodbye*. Using equally-sized panels of cut plywood (1' x 4'), Tosh is creating an array of portraits that emphasize the uniqueness of individual war brides and the lives they have led. While the three canvases of the triptych appear to support each other, the panels of Bride Ship actually do; they lean in a zigzag pattern, partly against the wall and partly against each other, symbolizing the emotional support war brides offer one another. Each figure is painted in isolation from the collective work, and each expresses a subtle difference in body language. "I don't want them to be



Bev Tosh

a matching set," Tosh explains. "I want a sense of a group, as random and individual as a group or crowd would be." They appear in tonal colours, suggesting the sepia photographs from which they are inspired.

"It's more important that the figures 'feel like' the women than that they look like them," Tosh says. "Otherwise it's just a painted photograph." She deliberately uses rough lumber, allowing the random flaws and cracks to determine the image that will be painted on it. The grain of the wood both stands out and sinks back into the portrait. It becomes a veil through which the past must be seen, filtered through a mass of subsequent experience and feelings. The faces are clear, but the portraits fade toward the bottom. "I don't think memory is finely focused," she explains, "and I don't think it has crisp edges." In one panel a bride named Muriel, who now lives in Calgary, holds a bouquet in which the knots in the wood determined the position of the flowers; her hair and veil follow the grain of the wood. "With

coronet of orange blossom," a quaint descriptive excerpt from her wedding announcement, appears at the bottom. In another panel, a knot in the wood became the most important element of the piece. A subtle knot forms Betty's right eye, faintly suggesting the wink that initiated her first conversation with the Calgary Highlander who later became her husband.

Despite her love of teaching, Tosh has taken a leave to work on Herstory full time, self-financed, with only partial support by grants. Owing to the advancing age of its subjects, the project has taken on a sense of urgency. Ultimately, Tosh predicts, Herstory will expand considerably, and she is still looking for stories from war brides. She senses that the 60th anniversaries in 2005 and 2006, of the war's end and the bride ships' journeys respectively, will mark Herstory's completion. Her presentation has already generated enthusiastic interest at the Edmonton Art Gallery, the Aerospace Museum in Calgary, artists' groups, and among war brides themselves at the AWBA provincial reunion. The Portrait Gallery of Canada in Ottawa has expressed interest in exhibition and acquisition.

Inevitably, the war bride phenomenon will fade from living memory. Tosh has already ensured that, in this province, it will not be forgotten. \*

**Harry Sanders** is a freelance writer in Calgary. For more information about Tosh's project, visit [www.warbrides.com](http://www.warbrides.com).

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