

'Macho man' heroes created for war: Historian

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The veneration of macho men originates from concerns about the readiness of mollycoddled middle class men to stand up for their nations in the 18th and 19th centuries, an Australian National University historian argues.

“As the countries of Europe went to war against each other, there were urgent calls within nations like Britain, France and Germany to turn men who were perceived to be essentially overfed mummy’s boys into lean mean fighting machines,” Dr Christopher Forth from the ANU Faculty of Arts told the Negotiating the Sacred: Religion, Medicine and the Body conference at ANU today.

“Around this time the view developed that the strength of the nation lay in the might of its armies, and the might of the armies lay in the health of its male population.

“But it was also the beginning of a consumer revolution. Many elite men were focused more on the finer things in life, living among luxuries and refining their tastes, so it became a great concern to physicians as well as national leaders that these men could not be able to defend their nation in a crisis.”

According to Dr Forth, it was at this time that strong, brave men who were prepared to fight for the good of the nation gained a hero status. ‘Warrior men’ became the ideal for a society keen to defend its national pride. The luxury-loving ‘effeminate’ man of the middle class was

pilloried as weak and indulgent.

“The nationalist push was demanding bodies of a certain kind, men who were fighting machines. To become this ideal, men had to prove their toughness through enduring ‘pain’ in the form of military service.

“Getting physically fit, eating awful food, lacking sleep, marching through dirt and mud, adherence to authority – basically sacrifice and pain – was all part of toughening up the man of the 19th century. It had a dual effect on two psyches: it strengthened both individual identity and the national entity,” Dr Forth said.

According to Dr Forth, traces of this tension between the effeminate male and nation, and the strong male and nation can be seen throughout the 20th century and into the present.

“A modern-day example of the crisis of man is the metrosexual and its sharpening counterpoint, the ‘new lad’ – a rougher and tougher version. Gender characteristics are also being applied to nation states as they deal with international issues in different ways, for example, France’s more conciliatory approach to the Iraq war has been deemed by some commentators as ‘metrosexual’ compared with the tough ‘macho’ approach of the United States.”

Source: Australian National University

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