

The Great War and National Mythology

Alan R. Young

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THE MYTHOLOGIES THAT ARE APT TO DEVELOP in the wake of a nation's experience of war can be a particularly difficult obstacle for any historian who challenges them. So much appears to be at stake in terms of national self-image. One need only think of recent responses to reappraisals of Canadian involvement in certain facets of the Second World War as presented in the film series "The Valour and the Horror". Why was it that surviving veterans' groups were so distressed? What was it that made the Canadian Senate act in such an undignified and inappropriate manner, if not the discomfort caused when prevailing mythology is undercut by alternate points of view? Even in the case of the First World War, though few veterans now survive, the powerful myths engendered in Canada by that conflict still live on — in Legion halls, in Remembrance Day ceremonies and in the popular consciousness at large.

Perhaps this explains Canada's apparently unabated fascination with the Great War and the way each year still brings forth its crop of memoirs (most of these now published posthumously), editions of diaries, commemorative accounts of famous battles and survey histories. The majority of these tend unconsciously to perpetuate the national mythology, which, crudely put, may be summarized as follows: 1) the sacrifices of Canada during the Great War were noble and justified, for they were in defence of the virtuous mother country and the values of Western civilization at large against an evil enemy intent upon imposing a rule of dictatorship and darkness; 2) Canadians, rugged individuals imbued with the free spirit of the pioneer and frontier life, showed themselves in the Great War to be a special people, capable of the highest military attainments and heroic virtues; and 3) Canadians so demonstrated their worthiness and virtues in the conflict that they earned the admiration of the other Allies and hence the status of a distinct and separate nation.

Moving against the tide of those writers who in some way subscribe to this vision are those authors whose works endeavour to eschew myth and confront the realities they portray. Desmond Morton is such a writer. Author of a number of books on Canadian participation in both the First and Second World Wars, Morton has done much to expose the darker realities that are generally ignored by those who perpetuate the national mythology at its most simplistic. To his earlier books on Canadian military history,¹ Morton has recently added *Silent Battle: Canadian Prisoners of War in Germany, 1914-1919* (Toronto, Lester Publishing, 1992) and *When Your Number's Up: The Canadian Soldier in the First World War* (Toronto, Random House, 1993). Among the various books to be reviewed here, these two seem written with the most consciousness of the potential of their material to demythologize. This is particularly so, I would suggest, in *Silent Battle*. As Morton explains in its opening pages:

Canada's war prisoners posed a problem for those who took pride in this

1 See Morton, *A Peculiar Kind of Politics: Canada's Overseas Ministry in the First World War* (Toronto, 1982), *A Military History of Canada* (Edmonton, 1985), (with Glenn Wright) *Winning the Second Battle: Canadian Veterans and the Return to Civilian Life* (Toronto, 1987), and (with J.L. Granatstein) *Bloody Victory* (Toronto, 1984), *Marching to Armageddon* (Toronto, 1989) and *A Nation Forged in Fire* (Toronto, 1989).

country's military achievements during the First World War and who wanted that pride to remain unadulterated. In their official histories of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, encyclopedic in their scope, neither Colonel A.F. Duguid nor Colonel G.W.L. Nicholson made any significant reference to prisoners of war. Prisoners were a flaw in the heroic myth of men fighting to the death rather than surrendering (pp. ix-x).

In addition, as Morton points out, there was the collective desire of many Canadians to bury hateful memories of the war, while others held the view that "prisoners of war had nothing to be proud of and, if they had suffered for defying their captors, they had largely been the authors of their own misfortune or they had exaggerated their ordeal" (p. x). Furthermore, at the end of the war, the public's willingness to accept tales of German atrocities (all too often false tales generated by the allied propaganda machine) had swung to a resolute scepticism about all "atrocities tales". That Canada buried the history of its soldiers who had been imprisoned during the First World War, viewing their plight as a disgraceful blemish on an otherwise heroic record, was not without consequences. Those Canadians later captured at Hong Kong or Dieppe, for example, had no access to the histories of those who had preceded them when it came to explaining the long-term effects of their ordeal. Furthermore, scepticism about "atrocities tales" did not cease for many Canadians until, as Morton puts it, "the gates of Belsen were opened in 1945" (p. 4).

In *Silent Battle* Morton details the fates of 3,842 Canadians taken prisoner in the First World War. Those captured were theoretically protected by the terms of the Hague Convention of 1899 and the 1907 amendments. Prisoners, for example, were entitled to humane treatment; they were to receive the same standards of food, shelter and clothing as their captors' soldiers; and they could be given work only in accordance with their rank and aptitude, and such work, which was to be paid for, was not to be of direct service to the war effort. What the Canadian prisoners in German camps often experienced was very different. Capture was often a brutal and frightening experience, and prisoners were often maltreated or physically harmed by their guards or by advancing German soldiers. After capture came the journey to a camp and a period of enforced quarantine, a time of depression, disorientation and painful subsistence on a less than adequate camp ration. Once they were released to the main camp, conditions did not necessarily improve. Near-starvation, especially for those who did not receive supplementary food parcels from families and friends, poor medical care and overcrowded living quarters all contributed to the neurotic symptoms of prolonged idleness and captivity — "barbed-wire disease". To such miseries often were added those of enforced labour (an effective antidote to "barbed-wire disease" if humanely administered), whether in agriculture, factories, or, the most feared fate, in coal and salt mines. Those who resisted the work squads, often out of a patriotic desire not to assist in the enemy's war efforts, were subjected to brutal reprisals and punishments. Those who worked often did so to an accompaniment of beatings and generally inhumane treatment. Late in the war, Canadians captured at Vimy, Fresnoy, Lens, Passchendaele and in the battles of 1918 were for some months put to work, illegally according to the Hague Convention, behind the German lines in conditions far worse than those in the camps in Germany.

Of course, a few Canadian prisoners escaped (Morton calculates 99 soldiers and a single officer), but this often led to reprisals against those left behind. Furthermore, as Morton explains, whereas soldiers in the Second World War were urged to escape if possible, that was not how the Hague Convention intended prisoners to behave. Indeed, apart "from immunity from punishment if they successfully escaped, the Convention subjected prisoners to the full military authority of their captors" (p. 114). But this was not the pattern of Edwardian children's literature, with its typical motif of the boy hero's bravery and resourcefulness in defying and escaping from a wicked captor. Though Morton does not spell out the point, such inherited cultural baggage, though it may have helped motivate the escapees, also no doubt explains some of the negative attitudes adopted by many back in Canada at the end of the war towards those who had remained in the camps.

Morton's final chapter shows how Canadian ex-prisoners tended to fare when repatriated. Few had any large role in veterans' organizations and old comrades' associations, for they had little in common (especially if captured in 1915 and 1916) with the "heroes" of the Canadian corps. At the same time, the huge number of those dead acted as a standing reproach to those who had survived in the camps, while ex-prisoners attempting to make disability claims on account of German medical neglect or cruelty were often disbelieved. In general, it appears, the prisoners of 1915-18 were soon forgotten, and their experiences were ignored in official records, while their own memories were supplanted by the understandable desire to forget.

Though he does not develop the thought implicit in his concluding chapter, Morton's account of the returning prisoners shows how the emergent national mythology at the end of the war, so central to the ideology of veterans' associations, was by definition antithetical to the experience represented by those who had survived often years of privation in German camps. The Canadian experience of the Second World War was very different indeed, although the "forgotten" prisoners from Hong Kong or the Dieppe raids might with some justice argue it was not. Instead, a fresh tentacle of the quasi-official myth of the heroic veteran sprang up with the many stories of escapees and resisters.² By contrast, Morton's *Silent Battle* reminds us of the essential humanity of those in 1914 who went off to a great adventure, as they thought, but instead suffered physical and psychological degradation and, ultimately, lack of recognition by a nation embarrassed by the nature of their experience because it did not fit the preferred mythic pattern.

The revisionist approach so evident in *Silent Battle* and in much of Morton's other writings on the Great War is further evident in *When Your Number's Up: The Canadian Soldier in the First World War*. When in his introduction Morton says that "this book has been on my mind for thirty years" (p. ix), one grasps immediately what he means if one is at all familiar with what has preceded it. Having written about armies and people in the mass, the focus of this work, Morton explains, is deliberately upon "the people I got to know on the way" (p. vii). In his 11 chapters, Morton confronts such questions as why the men joined up, what the war was *really*

2 This was a favourite theme of the movie industry and one given the customary treatment in Emerson Lavender's and Norman Sheffe's recent book *The Evaders: True Stories of Downed Canadian Airmen and their Helpers in World War Two* (Toronto, 1992).

like for them in the trenches, what they learned that transformed them into soldiers, who their officers were, how they fought, what happened to them when they were wounded or captured or killed, what helped them to endure their ordeal and what became of those who survived.

As this sequence of concerns suggests, Morton offers a broad chronological structure that unifies the discrete topics represented in each chapter. A number of his topics Morton has covered before (Canadian prisoners of war being an obvious example), but in many instances there is new material, much of it drawn from detailed first-hand and previously unpublished accounts by the soldiers themselves. As Morton himself concedes, his own understanding of some matters previously dealt with has evolved and sometimes changed over time. Nowhere is this more evident in his presentation than in the importance attached to tactics, a matter concerning which he owes much to Bill Rawling, whose recent book on trench warfare is discussed below. In his successive detailing of life in the training camps and the trenches, the workings of the casualty stations and hospitals, the treatment of Canadian prisoners, the matters of morale and the enforcement of discipline, and the experiences of those who returned home — all recounted with telling use of first-hand testimony — Morton reveals once again his refusal to drift into any pre-determined mythology. At the same time, he reveals as strongly as ever one of his great strengths as a historian of the Great War, an ability to reveal in a moving way the essential humanity of those thousands of individual Canadians who suffered the enormities that, with the advantages of developments in technologies, the human race was able to perpetrate upon itself.

Bill Rawling's *Surviving Trench Warfare: Technology and the Canadian Corps, 1914-1918* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1992) offers an account of the nature of the industrial warfare that emerged during the First World War. With such a subject, one expects a sombre image of the horrors produced by emergent technology so very different from Canadians' previous experiences of war, and Rawling's opening pages seem to move in this direction. We are told that "The First World War deeply marked those who experienced it, mainly because it was such a departure from the popular and mythical view of war as an opportunity for glory". He quotes the words of a French soldier who commented that "Our men were not driven on . . . by the chimera of glory — they died in obscurity and unknown — nor by the assurance given in times past by a strong arm and an intrepid heart — progress in armaments had overwhelmed the valour of old". He notes, too, Edmund Blunden's vision of the war as an "induration from a personal crusade into a vast machine of violence" (p. 4). In the course of his study, Rawling softens this chilling spectre by having as his sub-theme the resourcefulness and bravery of trench fighters who often successfully strove to control their environment. Although the consensus of historians might be that the gains of the war were not worth the cost, he argues:

we must remember the soldier, who had to face shelling and machine-gun fire and barbed wire, who carried out his task the best he could, unable to have any impact on the policy-making and decision-making that had put him on the battlefield, but who was sometimes able to affect his own destiny through his choice of tools and his ability to learn (p. 223).

As Rawling's book unfolds, it is this sub-theme that tends to take hold. This is probably the result of Rawling's structuring his material in chronological fashion. We are thus taken through the familiar narrative of the Canadians' war (Valcartier, to Second Ypres, to the Somme, to Vimy, to Passchendaele, etc.). The rationale behind this appears to be Rawling's desire to detail the succession of "lessons learned" as each major action unfolds. The effect of this is to stress the narrative line, the weary progress towards victory and the Canadian role in the achievement of the final outcome. Given the central subject, one wonders whether the reader might not have been better served by chapters dealing instead with discrete aspects of the technology itself: the infamous Ross rifle, machine guns, artillery, poison gas, tanks, barbed wire, bombs, trench mortars, rifle-grenades, Bangalore torpedoes, air power, communications, mining, etc. As it is, somehow the opportunity for thinking about the full historical significance of the emerging technology and the philosophical and psychological implications for Western civilization is missed in favour of a story of the brave and resilient soldier whose spirit somehow resisted even the worst of the new inventions for killing. That said, Rawling's book remains fascinating for the detailed look it provides at how the actual fighting in the trenches was affected by, and in turn influenced, technological developments and associated tactical strategies, this last concern with tactics being a particular and valuable strength of the book.

A somewhat different focus on the war is offered by Daniel G. Dancocks in *Welcome to Flanders Fields. The First Canadian Battle of the Great War: Ypres, 1915* (Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1988). The publishers' blurb that accompanied the review copy of this work refers to the so-called Second Battle of Ypres as one of Canada's greatest military achievements. According to the publisher, this concentration of engagements in April and May 1915 provided the First Canadian Division with its baptism of fire and (in the words of Sir Arthur Currie) set "the future standard for Canada's fighting forces" by displaying the unrivalled fighting abilities of the Canadians. The publishers' release also bizarrely describes the First World War as being unlike later wars because it was "fought by individual soldiers in man to man confrontation". The publishers, no doubt, were responsible for the book's cover design which reproduces the well-known but ludicrously romantic painting by the British portrait painter Richard Jack of "The Second Battle of Ypres". Jack's huge painting, commissioned in November 1916 and finished late in 1917, one that very much pleased Sir Max Aitken (later Lord Beaverbrook) and evidently suited the needs of his London-based propaganda organization (the Canadian War Records Office), offers a conventional 19th-century representation of war: a wounded upright officer waving his men on in full view of the enemy (where are the machine-gun bullets?), the evil faces of the enemy in contrast to the grim but noble faces of the Canadians and the brave sacrifice of a wounded Canadian soldier supported by his comrade. It is also misleading in quite another way, in that it portrays the Canadians fighting from a knee-deep trench behind a low parapet. Immediately following the events of April-May 1915, Aitken was very successful in publicizing the role the Canadians had played. His vivid report of Second Ypres, datelined 30 April (though since questioned as being a truly "eyewitness" account since Aitken was invalided back to England on 24 April), was carried on the front pages of newspapers in Canada and the entire English-speaking world and shaped all

future responses to the conflict with its romantic overstatements such as the following: "But as long as brave deeds retain the power to fire the blood of Anglo-Saxons, the stand made by the Canadians in these desperate days will be told by fathers to their sons".

Partly on account of this reportage and partly on account of such lasting propaganda as Jack's painting, Second Ypres became a key event in Canadian national mythology. It was during this battle that the Germans made use of poison gas for the first time. The gas caused the French-Algerians to retreat but the Canadians, fighting in their first major engagement, were initially able to hold their positions despite severe casualties (the Canadians lost 6,036 men, approximately half the infantry of the Canadian Division, and in addition some 1,410 were captured on 24 April alone). The special heroism of the Canadians, so central to Aitken's story, has since entered the Canadian consciousness as a kind of symbolic rite of passage in the story of Canadian nationhood. No longer a dependent "child" of "mother" England, Canada had come of age. Typical of the process of mythologizing that followed Second Ypres was the place within our culture afforded to John McCrae's famous poem, "In Flanders Fields", which was composed at the end of the battle. With its high diction ("Take up your quarrel with the foe" and "If ye break faith") so appealing to later generations as a way of sanitizing the reality of what happened and as a way of ordering meaningless experience according to the old and familiar romantic language and ideals of war, the poem continues to have a wide appeal. As the cover of the book explains, "Because of this battle — and John McCrae's poem at its conclusion — we wear poppies in November, in remembrance". Dancocks' book concludes with a two-page Epilogue in which he describes the composition of the poem and then concludes by quoting it as "a lasting legacy of the terrible battle..." (p. 251).

Fortunately, Dancocks is more judicious and insightful than the pride of place he gives to McCrae's poem would seem to suggest. Dancocks' account, notwithstanding the book's cover and the publishers' excesses, avoids blind subscription to national mythology. It is notable, however, that while stressing the high numbers of those killed, the author virtually ignores the fact that more Canadian prisoners were taken by the Germans at Second Ypres than at any other time during the war. Also ignored is any opportunity to discuss Max Aitken's role in making propaganda out of Second Ypres and the enormous impact of his supposed "eyewitness" description of events upon the Canadian consciousness. Though Dancocks shares the general view that Canada's role at Second Ypres was ultimately rewarded by full nationhood, he admits that "the price in bloodshed and heartache" was "perhaps exorbitant" (p. 249). He notes the view that, because of the slaughter in 1915, Montreal declined as Canada's leading city, that city having lost at one blow so many prominent young men. He quotes, too, the survivor who could only remember "that I was in a [dugout] for about three days and three nights and now I am told I am a hero. Isn't that fine?" (p. 239), and he summarizes Second Ypres in his conclusion as "a relatively minor affair so far as the Great War was concerned" and certainly not the "decisive" struggle some historians and wartime allied propaganda suggested (p. 238). His book offers a detailed account of Canada's entry into the war, the training (or lack of it) of the first contingent of Canadians to be sent to Europe and the events leading up to

April 1915. The actual account of Second Ypres begins on page 112, and the details in the pages that follow are what make this book of value, for Dancocks draws upon a wide variety of sources to recount with considerable skill the whole miserable affair that cost so many thousands of lives in defence of a salient that common sense should have acknowledged was, in strict military terms, not worth defending. As Dancocks points out, the Ypres salient could be shelled by the Germans from three sides with impunity. Strategically of little military value, it was defended at such cost because it stood in the one small area of Belgium still in Allied hands, and as such it was of great symbolic value.

Whereas a great deal of writing on the First World War may be concerned with events, other works, attempting to indicate the impact of those events upon Canadians, concentrate upon the stories of individuals. Sandra Gwyn's *Tapestry of War: A Private View of Canadians in the Great War* (Toronto, HarperCollins, 1992) is such a work, one that concentrates not upon military leaders or politicians (though they are by no means absent) but upon the lives of citizens of all kinds. The format of the book is, as may be inferred from its title, a weaving together of the life stories of a number of Canadians who experienced the war. Gwyn has selected ten main characters, three of them women, all of whom left diaries, letters or personal memoirs, detailing "an intimate and unguarded record of what they were doing and of what they were thinking and feeling *at the time* [Gwyn's italics]" (p. xviii). But this is no mere collection of documentary source material. Gwyn has selected carefully and herself created a narrative framework for her portraits, within which she offers her own interpretive commentary.

The book begins with a Prologue that unfortunately utters some all-too-familiar commonplaces:

the Great War...marks the real birth of Canada. Thrust for the first time upon the world's stage, we performed at all times creditably and often brilliantly — holding the line under gas attack at Second Ypres in 1915, capturing Vimy Ridge in 1917 and Passchendaele Ridge later the same year, performing in the vanguard in 1918 during the Hundred Days of the astonishing counter-attack that ended, abruptly, in the Armistice (p. xvii).

However, the detail in the body of the book largely avoids such conventional hearty generalization. Rather, we discover a wealth of fascinating material, some of it culled from other published works, but much deriving from primary sources. Memorable among these latter are the papers of Ethel Chadwick (particularly her diaries), Talbot Papineau, Agar Adamson and Brooke Claxton in the National Archives, the Beaverbrook material in the House of Lords Record Office, the privately-owned diaries of Anthony Beckles Willson and Grace MacPherson, and the papers of Harold Adams Innis in the University of Toronto Archives.

Gwyn's vividly-created portraits of her varied cast of characters reveal, in often intimate detail, the human side of war and range among the Ottawa socialite Ethel Chadwick; the politically-ambitious Quebec nationalist Talbot Papineau (the tragic hero of Gwyn's account who died at Passchendaele); the devious and power-seeking master-propagandist Max Aitken, who, among other feats, was almost single-

handedly responsible (behind Sir Robert Borden's back) for the dismissal, according to Gwyn, of Lieutenant-General Edwin Alderson; the now nearly-forgotten popular historian and propagandist Beckles Willson (another casualty of Aitken's ruthless climb to power); the Vancouver secretary Grace MacPherson, who turned ambulance driver in France; John Gallishaw, a member of the Newfoundland Regiment and author of the remarkable first-hand account of the Dardanelles Expedition, *Trenching at Gallipoli*; Agar Adamson, author of almost daily letters to his wife, a man comfortably well-off and imbued with more than his due share of charm who went off to war in search of glory and miraculously returned in one piece, only to have his marriage fail; and Mabel Adamson, who followed her husband to Europe and then threw herself into relief work in what remained of Belgium behind the firing lines.

Gwyn's skilful and sensitively-written narrative takes us through the events of the war, with its characters acting as "prisms of history" (in Barbara Tuchman's phrase). Though, as already mentioned, its Prologue uses some familiar and conventional rhetoric, the richly-textured work that follows has quite another dominant tone. The book is especially moving in its delineation of the human price paid by its characters, and it is uncompromising in its presentation of the Great War as "the most monumentally stupid of all wars, achieving nothing more than to make certain another 'great war' would succeed it" (p. xxii). It is an honest account too. For Gwyn, "the only truth about the Great War that ultimately matters [is] that it was a monstrous and futile Valley of Death, if also an extraordinarily heroic one" (p. xxii), but, aware that all but two of her principal characters survived the war and that a number even did well out of it, she willingly admits that she is troubled by the discord between the content of the war and the particular circumstances that many of her characters encountered. It is typical of Gwyn's sensibility that, whereas Dancocks used McCrae's "In Flanders Fields" as epilogue to his book, she chooses to use as epigraph a little-known poem by W.D. Woodhead that she considers superior to McCrae's in its expression of the pain and sorrow forever to be associated with memories of the war.

David Pierce Beatty's *Memories of the Forgotten War: The World War I Diary of Pte. V.E. Goodwin* (Port Elgin, New Brunswick, Baie Verte Editions, 1988) leads to the consideration of a more familiar and perhaps less imaginative formula for documenting the history of the First World War than that employed by Gwyn. Beatty's contribution to the already great wealth of documentation and source material is to have interviewed at length and over a period of time a surviving veteran, Vincent Goodwin, who assisted in Beatty's enterprise by providing his personal war diary, his maps, photographs, letters and postcards. Other memorabilia and private documents were also consulted, but, rather than provide a transcript of either the diary or the interviews, Beatty himself has created the narrative framework and accompanying commentary, interweaving throughout quotations from Goodwin's diary and from the interviews with him. This perhaps makes a more readable text (one has no way of knowing), but the reader then remains unclear about the degree of selectivity that Beatty has imposed. Beatty presents Goodwin's story as a "Story of Courage and Service to Country" (p. v) and "a mighty achievement, a brave tale of endurance, perseverance and indomitable courage" (p. 203). This may or may not have been how Goodwin himself viewed matters. It certainly matches the

tone of the Baie Verte "Home-Coming Committee" that welcomed him back in 1919 with a large gold locket and a hand-written letter that speaks of the "daring and intrepidity" and sacrifice of those who went to war, and then goes on to say:

We congratulate you because you and your fellows have written Canada's name high on the scroll of honour, and as British subjects we are very grateful to God that he has given us men like you, men who could do and dare, men whose deeds of valor far overshadow any feats of arms we read of in brave days of old when knighthood was in flower (pp. 282-3).

Beatty allows this letter, fascinating from a historical point of view for its rhetoric, to act as a kind of epilogue at the end of his story, and he introduces the document with his own summing up:

Canada experienced tremendous growth to nationhood during the years 1914-1918. She entered the war a colony. By war's end Canada was almost a sovereign nation. Canada had matured in the national political sense. She had proved her worth on the battlefield, and would sustain that achievement record by participating in the Peace Conference at Versailles (p. 282).

One listens for a critical voice, a historical perspective that places the war and Goodwin in something other than such a familiar package. That Beatty has not done this is all the more surprising because, even with those selections that one has, one can see that Goodwin's war had little to do with any of the sentiments expressed by his "Home-Coming Committee" or, for that matter, by Beatty in the passage just quoted. When asked why he joined up, for example, Goodwin replied, "because I wanted to fight" (p. xiv). His experiences appear to have been decidedly low-key and unheroic, and certainly were so in his own eyes. Training in Britain (he spent two Christmases there before reaching France on 25 March 1918) seems to have involved a lot of eating and drinking. Once in the trenches, he experienced the usual miseries and dangers, but, typically, when under fire on one occasion, he recorded that "Our only alternative was to lie motionless and enjoy a little afternoon sun. My small stature provided a comparative advantage" (p. 102). After witnessing the "last great cavalry charge of the war", he recorded it as "a seemingly pointless slaughter of gallant men and magnificent horses" (p. 114). When he got the flu, another potentially life-threatening hazard of the war years, he felt obliged to "report off sick", but he did not report to a field hospital: "If you really wanted to get sick, you checked into a hospital. I never reported to one all the time I was overseas — that way I kept my health" (p. 109). Such deadpan humour and understatement endears this man to the reader and has the ring of truth about it. Though Goodwin obviously suffered long-term psychological scars due to the deaths of those close to him, the metaphor he used to describe the experience of death is homely rather than heroic and unconsciously very telling: "There I was sitting right beside him when he was hit. As in similar close encounters, I marvelled at the odds. It was like playing a roulette wheel at the exhibition grounds except in this game of chance one staked life itself" (p. 132). Involved in the final 100 days of vicious fighting, Goodwin

commented after one particularly intense period when the machine-gun unit to which he belonged had “fought all day from shell hole to shell hole with Fritz shelling point-blank” that “It was certainly four days’ work” and “more luck than judgement on the CO’s part that the losses remained so low” (p. 140). The armistice, when it arrived, “left one a bit stunned, befuddled and slightly numb”. He attended a parade in Valenciennes, but “That was my last Armistice Day parade. I have never marched in one since. By the time I arrived home, I figured I had done my share of standing on parade” (p. 201).

The remainder of Goodwin’s war seems to have consisted of a continuous round of drinking, hearty eating (whenever possible), theatre-going and sight-seeing (Bonn, Cologne, Paris, Nice, San Remo, London and Bristol). Miraculously he had survived without a scratch. As the doctor who gave him his final medical examination remarked, “Look at this record! You have served since 1915, seen eight months’ combat, participated in the occupation, and have never been ill [not quite true], wounded, or required hospitalization. Where have you been all the time you were over here?” Goodwin’s characteristically laconic response was to smile and say “Yes Sir,” before walking away with “‘A-1’ stamped on my papers” (p. 273). Upon his return to Baie Verte after two years and eight months away, Goodwin records quite simply that the next day he “went to work in father’s store, so that he and mother could take a long overdue vacation...” (p. 281). It is in the revealing implications of such details that the chief value of first-hand accounts such as Goodwin’s is to be found. Beatty’s commentary does well enough in filling in the familiar landscape of the larger historical context, but he frequently fails to explore the implications of such mundane personal details. He misses some exceptional opportunities, since in this instance, as was often the case one suspects, the actual experience of an individual soldier may qualify the broad assumptions of historians who have passed on to us the “big picture”.

Beatty’s *The Vimy Pilgrimage, July 1936, from the Diary of Florence Murdock, Amherst, Nova Scotia* (Amherst, Acadian Printing, 1987) is a far less ambitious production than *Memories of the Forgotten War*, but its style and technique has much in common with this latter work. It employs as chief sources an unpublished diary, that of the sister of a Great War veteran, and interviews with those who experienced the war first-hand. The diary is unusual in that it records the details of a journey to France to attend the unveiling of the Vimy Ridge Memorial on 26 July 1936. Beatty’s book, published in 1987, was designed to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the Canadian taking of Vimy Ridge on Easter Monday in 1917. Beatty provides the very briefest account of the original assault, giving lengthy quotations from his interviews with two Amherst men. He then recounts the extraordinary pilgrimage that occurred in the summer of 1936 when some 6,000 people boarded four ships in Montreal and sailed down the St. Lawrence accompanied by Canadian, French, Belgian and British destroyers, a kind of re-enactment of the original armada in 1914 when five liners took the first Canadian contingent to meet their military escorts in Gaspé Bay. Everyone who had served in the Canadian Corps, together with family members, had been invited. They travelled once more as an army, and in France they billeted as units. Florence Murdock, who accompanied her brother Ward, then recounts the camaraderie of the journey, the welcome they

received in France, their visits to various Canadian cemeteries, the ceremonies at Vimy, the tour to England and visits to Westminster Abbey and Buckingham Palace and the subsequent visits to Paris, Edinburgh, and Glasgow.

Florence Murdock's diary is an interesting record of an extraordinary national event; however, it expresses the typical responses of a wide-eyed tourist, and Beatty lets it stand as such without a shred of critical analysis. He then concludes the short book with a couple of pages of commentary, complete with the expected reminder that the bloody sacrifice represented by the Vimy Memorial was no guarantee of peace, since three years later Europe would once again be in flames. More could have been made of that irony, and something surely could have been said about the current place of the Vimy Memorial in our culture. How are these stones and what they represent to be "read" as this century approaches its close?

Beatty's book on Vimy is clearly commemorative in intent, and as such it matches a large body of literature on the Great War. Like other re-tellings of the Great War story, such material can all too easily tend to reinforce established mythology, especially when the original voices of eye-witnesses are somehow stage-managed or "packaged" by the editor/historian. Brereton Greenhous and Stephen J. Harris' *Canada and the Battle of Vimy Ridge 9-12 April, 1917* (Ottawa, Minister of Supply and Services, 1992) is, like Beatty's book, commemorative history, but, judiciously structured and thoughtfully presented, it does its best to avoid some of the questionable tendencies of its genre. Lavishly illustrated with photographs and colour pull-out map, large in format with wide margins and print, *Canada and the Battle of Vimy Ridge* follows in the footsteps of earlier and more detailed accounts such as Kenneth Macksey's *The Shadow of Vimy Ridge* (1965), Alexander McKee's *Vimy Ridge* (1966), D.E. MacIntyre's *Canada at Vimy* (1967) and Pierre Berton's *Vimy* (1986). It does not go out of its way to break any new ground, but it is careful to acknowledge the sparsity of published source material in French, and it very effectively supplements its reliance upon the relevant volumes of the British and German official histories and G.W.C. Nicholson's *Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1919* (1962) with selections from the rich archival material in the National Archives and the Department of National Defence's Directorate of History. Unfortunately, but in keeping with the apparent intention to create a book worthy of any coffee table, the authors have not been required to provide either bibliographical citations or an index.

As might be expected of a commemorative work sponsored by government, the authors' version of the story of Vimy is prefaced by some conventional rhetoric (from the pen of General A.J.G.D. de Chastelain) about how the battle honours won at Vimy "gave Canadians a sense of being Canadian", about how Canada won "a seat at the peace conference in Versailles" and about how Canada subsequently rose to nationhood. We are told, too, that "Canadian Forces have continued to foster this sense of nationhood through three more wars and a number of peacekeeping operations". One is surprised, then, to find the actual account that follows largely free of such platitudes. Indeed, it begins where most of the historians discussed in this article seem most comfortable — with the experience of the individual private soldier, in this instance a 36-year old bricklayer, Jack Harris. This representative commoner, to whom the authors return in the closing pages, "had not yet [in March

1917] heard shots fired in anger, and...could hardly have known that he was about to participate in an apocalyptic battle" (p. 15). A few quotations from Harris' diary describing the fateful Easter Sunday then lead into the customary re-telling of Canada's earlier entry into the war and the events leading up to Vimy. Greenhouse and Harris (the grandson, it turns out, of Jack Harris) make a considerable effort to record the involvement of francophone Canadians, and in their account they confront the dismal realities of what Canadians like Jack Harris actually experienced: the casual and bungled recruiting process, the unimaginative thinking of the Allied generals that cost so many lives (particularly during the Somme campaign) and the manic activities of Sam Hughes, the Canadian Minister of Militia until his dismissal in 1916. In counterpoint to these matters are the authors' discussions of the gradual improvements made in tactics and training, the generally beneficial changes of personnel among staff officers, the nature of German defensive tactics and the curious anomaly presented by the arrangement of the German defences at Vimy (all these matters having a role, so the authors imply, in the ultimately successful assault). The attack itself receives a skilful and vivid account, one that makes further use of a number of eyewitness records, including those of German soldiers. As the authors point out, there is often a clear difference between the kind of description provided by a fearful infantryman and that of the "urbane historian at his desk, years later", and even an unsophisticated first-hand narrative can give a "better feel for the occasion than the more polished prose of the historian" (p. 130).

Canada and the Battle for Vimy Ridge concludes with a description of the Vimy memorial, with its statues of Peace, Truth, Knowledge, Justice and Sacrifice, and a quotation from the 1936 dedicatory speech by King Edward VIII that refers to the "Canadian warriors", the "feats of arms which history will long remember" and the "deeds of valour done" (p. 140). But juxtaposed with this and the references to the subsequent careers of some of the higher ranking veterans is yet another quotation from a nameless private soldier who returned to Vimy for the 1936 pilgrimage and tersely remarked in his diary: "Speeches well heard through the amplifiers. Unveiling by King well done" (p. 140). Though the two authors then return to the "rise to nationhood" theme as a way of concluding their book, it is the low-key statements of the common soldiers they have quoted throughout, so free of the conventional high rhetoric of commemorative history, that remain in one's memory. Perhaps, if there is one unifying collective message from this latest group of Great War books, it is that the reality and enormity of what happened cannot be mythologized without uncomfortable distortions and cannot be packaged in the pre-1914 diction once so acceptable as the appropriate language for dealing with war. Eric J. Leed has argued that the experience of the First World War "was something that could *not* be resolved, reintegrated, and covered over with the exigencies of civilian existence".³ The task of the historian is to search for a solution to this problem. Some historians come closer to an answer than others, but the elusive goal remains.

ALAN R. YOUNG

3 *No Man's Land: Combat and Identity in World War I* (Cambridge, 1979), p. xi.