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Happy is the Land that Needs No Heroes

Abstract

This essay interrogates two articles by the Canadian historian Jeff Keshen and the Australian historian Mark Sheftall, which assert that the representations of soldiers in the First World War (Anzacs in Australia, members of the Canadian Expeditionary Forces, the CEF), are comparable. I argue, however, that in reaching their conclusions, these historians have either overlooked or insufficiently considered a number of crucial factors, such as the influence the Australian historian/war correspondent C. E. W. Bean had on the reception of Anzacs, whom he venerated and turned into larger-than-life men who liked fighting and were good at it; the significance of the “convict stain” in Australia; and the omission of women writers’ contributions to the “getting of nationhood” in each country. It further addresses why Canadians have not embraced Vimy (a military victory) as their defining moment in the same way as Australians celebrate the landing at Anzac Cove (a military disaster), from which they continue to derive their sense of national identity. In essence, this essay advances that differences between the two nations’ representations of soldiers far outweigh any similarities.

1. Warrior Nations?

In “The Great War Soldier as Nation Builder in Canada and Australia,” Canadian historian Jeff Keshen argues that influential historians and war correspondents such as the Canadian expatriate William Maxwell Aitken, director of the Canadian War Records Office in London, and the Australian historian and war correspondent Australian C. E. W. Bean, helped to create “pumped-up” or glorified views of their soldiers, whose courageous battles at Vimy Ridge and Gallipoli reputedly achieved nationhood for their countries. Keshen cites historians J. L. Granatstein’s and Norman Hillmer’s description of the attack on Vimy as “a stupendous triumph that forged a national spirit that ‘made Canada into a nation’” (qtd. in Keshen 3), and then reports that according to the “standard story,” the Australians, through “stupendous feats of arms, particularly at Gallipoli [...] transformed the new federation into a true nation” (4). Throughout his essay, which draws upon both historical and literary works (although almost exclusively by men), Keshen continues to render analogous the representations of soldiers, ultimately finding

few, if any differences between Anzacs (Australian and New Zealand Army Corps) and members of the Canadian Expeditionary Forces (CEF) or their concomitant contribution to the shaping of issues of national identity.¹ In his conclusion, Keshen reiterates that

[i]n Canada and Australia the modern memory of the Great War is one not only of muddy trenches and massive death but also of gallant men scaling the heights at Vimy Ridge or the cliffs at Gallipoli and thus producing the emotional/sentimental foundations of nationhood. The fact that both countries entered the Great War as colonies intent upon demonstrating their worthiness within the Empire predetermined that monumental significance would be placed upon their battlefield encounters. (20)

But my research (which also utilizes both history and literature, but mostly by women) reveals that any sentiments about “monumental significance” in “battlefield encounters” apply solely to the over-the-top veneration of the Anzacs’ landing at Anzac Cove on April 25, 1915, and of the legend which persists to this day, even though it was a military disaster. By contrast, the Canadian soldiers’ storming of Vimy Ridge over the Easter weekend of April 9–12, 1917, although considered a military victory, has never had the same potency as the Australian single unifying myth, but is rather, as Canadian historian Tim Cook puts it, “a layered skewer of stories, myths, wishful thinking, and conflicting narratives” [arguably including his own] (qtd. in Everett-Green).

Keshen is not the only critic to suggest that there is little difference between the representations of Anzacs and members of the CEF during the First World War and throughout the interwar period, however. In his abstract to “Mythologising the Dominion Fighting Man: Australian and Canadian Narratives of the First World War Soldier, 1914–39,” American historian Mark Sheftall observes that “*Canada [...] saw the emergence of a ‘Myth of the Soldier’ that paralleled the Anzac legend in many ways*” (81; emphasis mine). Although Sheftall’s essay purports to stress similarities between these two groups, he consistently undermines his own arguments by stressing differences between the two nations’ mythologizing of their fighting men. He writes, for example, that “the Anzac legend remains one of the most potent popular myths in Australia” (81); that it is “one of the most exhaustively explored aspects of Australia’s First World War experience” (81); and that “the power of a myth [is] crucial to the emergence of a national identity perceived as distinctly Australian” (81). Even though none of these observations has a Canadian counterpart, Sheftall presses on with another comment that also has no Canadian equivalent: “what *is* perhaps unique about Australia’s pre-eminent First World War mythology [is] its resilience and longevity within that society as a central component of the dominant construction of Australian identity” (82). But having stressed the uniqueness of the Anzac legend, he then claims that “a narrative such as the Anzac legend is fundamentally not unique

to Australia, but conforms to analogous mythologies that emerged at the same time in other British Empire settler societies [such as Canada] for a variety of similar reasons” (81–82). Throughout his essay, while continuing to emphasize “remarkable congruencies” (93) between Canadian and Australian narratives but without specifically identifying them, he concludes that “the stereotypical image of the First World War fighting man that emerged in each Dominion, though it varied in some specific details, was more or less identical” (98).

Why both of these historians insist on similarities when differences clearly carry the day is puzzling. In attempting to come to terms with why each writer insists upon commonalities, I begin with my suspicion (that is, no evidence) that neither historian has personally witnessed the manifest differences between Canadians’ and Australians’ commemorations of the war now and in the past. To underscore the disparity, I draw upon an anecdote concerning Eric Bogle, the Scottish immigrant who claims his iconic Australian anti-war song, “And the Band Played Waltzing Matilda,” was inspired by a comparison with Britain’s commemorative war practices. According to Michael J. K. Walsh, the song was “conceived in 1971, only two years after [Bogle’s] arrival in Australia at the Anzac Day parade in Canberra” (239). Of that event, the songwriter has said,

I’d not seen anything quite like it before because in Britain it’s one minute’s silence once a year – a quick perfunctory prayer and that’s it. There are individual small parades to lay wreaths but not a national day. So I saw this parade in Canberra – it wasn’t a big one by national standards and it was right in the middle of the Vietnam War. (240)

Once the parade was over, Bogle reputedly “sped home and, armed with a bottle of whisky, wrote frantically for seven hours until the task was complete” (241). Sometime later, asked if he thought it was “ironic that a newcomer to the country should be the one to capture the spirit of Gallipoli and the futility of war,” he replied that “being a migrant and not being involved in the Australian culture, I could see a lot of things Aussies couldn’t see” (242). Bogle’s story resonates with me because his description of the British commemoration, which closely resembles the Canadian, sounds familiar. (Significantly, Bogle’s impressions in the 1970s and mine in the 1980s were formed when the Anzac legend was, according to many historians, on the wane.) Hence as someone from a country often referred to as “the peaceable kingdom,” on my first trip to Australia, I was truly staggered by the Australians’ adulation of the Anzac, which I first glimpsed at the numerous (albeit sanitized) exhibitions in the daunting War Memorial in Canberra. I was once again flabbergasted when I joined the tens-of-thousands attending the 4:15 a.m. Dawn Ceremony in Sydney² and then further astonished by the hours-long parade that followed. I admit to being mildly perplexed by the solemnity of the previous events, then undercut by boozy celebrations on the streets. While I was not, like Bogle, motivated to produce an anti-war song, I was,

like him, so astonished by the amount of attention paid to war, and specifically to the almighty Anzac, that I felt compelled to investigate why Canadians' and Australians' responses to war – and specifically the Great War – should have been and continue to be so dissimilar. But because it became obvious that only those who were mired in the “blood and muck” of the battlefield had acquired a compelling legitimate perspective, I felt the need to examine women's roles, particularly in terms of what they contributed to the formation of national identity, even though their interpretations had been elided from the canons of war literature in each country. Hence I conducted my study through the lens of Canadian and Australian women's war fictions which emerged either during or shortly after the war: not surprisingly, I found only differences.

2. At the Outbreak of War, Some Similarities Existed

At the outbreak of war, both nations' initial responses to war admittedly ran parallel, but as post-colonial cultures located vast distances from the fields of battle with populations eager to support Mother England during her time of need, they were, nevertheless, only following orders because, as members of the British Empire, when Britain declared war against Germany on August 4, 1914, they were automatically bound to follow suit. While it was up to individual governments to determine how much support each would send the Mother Country, there was never any doubt that both countries (Australia's population fewer than five million, Canada's fewer than eight) would rush to her assistance. At the outbreak, parliamentary members approved an overseas contingent of 25,000 men, with Canada bearing the full cost (Morton and Granatstein 6). Similarly, the Australian government immediately declared, also without consultation, that it would send a contingent of 20,000 soldiers to any destination required by the war office (Macintyre 142). Enthusiasm and unanimity for the imperial cause were evoked, and the song “Australia Will Be There” rang throughout the land (Turner 317). Recruitment in both countries was clearly unnecessary, as supply quickly exceeded demand, in part because a large number of men in both countries were either of British origin, British born, or recent arrivals. Their leaders' willingness to go to war also correspond, with financial hardship playing a key role. Robert Everett-Green notes that “the collapse of a land-speculation boom, a terrible wheat crop, and a surge in unemployment” (“Vimy”) resulted in what Morton and Granatstein have labelled the nation's worst depression since the 1890s (1). In Australia, economic conditions were equally deplorable, with severe drought and the rate of employment dramatically on the rise (Macintyre 146). Opportunities to enlist in a war that was to be over in a matter of months must surely have seemed fortuitous to the unemployed, who made up a considerable part of the first contingents (Morton and Granatstein 10; Macintyre 146). Early

pro-war rhetoric, too, was comparable, with both countries decreeing that the issue was one of civilization against barbarism.

Each country also faced bitter and divisive crises over conscription. Australian troops who enlisted did so voluntarily, but by 1916, pressured by the British government for reinforcements, Prime Minister William (Billy) Hughes held a referendum which asked the Australian people to require men undergoing compulsory military training but required to serve only within the Commonwealth and Commonwealth territories (introduced in 1911) to send them overseas. The opponents, primarily associated with labour movements and unions, also included Archbishop Daniel Mannix, an influential leader for many Irish Catholics and recognized as anti-British. The “No” vote held sway at that time and again in 1917; this second campaign, even more acrimonious than the first, was also contested by Anzacs in war zones. The issue of conscription was not raised again during the war (“Australia’s Conscription”). In Canada, the 1917 conscription debate was equally fierce and contentious, with French-Canadians opposing conscription on the grounds that they had no loyalty to either Britain or France, and clearly they did not: “of the 400,000 Canadians who volunteered for service in WWI, fewer than one in 20 were French” (“Crisis”).³ French-Canadians also felt they had been betrayed from the outset, since Prime Minister Robert Borden had promised in 1914 that there would be no “obligatory military service known as conscription” (“Crisis”). Accordingly, when Borden introduced conscription in August 1917, French-Canadians believed they were being unfairly targeted. Farmers, too, were equally bitter when Borden broke his promise after the election to exempt their labouring sons. In 1917, the conscription bill provoked a general outcry and incidents of street violence, with one man killed. But on Easter weekend in 1918, “an effort to arrest suspected draft dodgers [...] resulted in several days of rioting and street battles in Quebec City [...]. The violence left four civilians dead and dozens injured, and shocked supporters on both sides” (“Conscription 1917”). The fallout of the conscription crisis continued for decades, with the Conservative Party failing to get votes; moreover, “memories fueled the flames of growing French nationalist passions and created a permanent wedge in Canada’s linguistic divide” (“Crisis”), with French-Canadians certain they would always be a minority within Canada (“Legacy”), and hence their subsequent (failed) attempts at separation during the 1980s and 1990s.

3. Historical and Literary Differences Abound

A few minor differences existed: Australian military leaders’ insisted that Australian troops be used together whenever possible (Turner 330), and stipulated that Australians would not fight well in cold climates – hence the decision to send the first contingents to Egypt (Turner 319). Although Sheftall claims that “aspirations

for ‘national’ ascendance coexisted with strong sentimental and material bonds that ensured continued loyalty to, affection for, and membership in the Empire” (83) and Keshen concurs (4), historian Ramsay Cook posits that Canada did not respond to the Empire’s call to arms as a colonial power in the manner it had done during the early days of the South African War (“Nationalism” 10–11) because, in essence, they had nothing to prove. Like Cook, historians Paul Stevens and John Saywell maintain that “the nation’s reaction was one of a people conscious of their maturity [...] and anxious to demonstrate that Canada deserved to be recognized as a nation in her own right” (xiii–xiv). Canada entered the war, then, not as an inferior or adolescent dependent, but as an ally fighting shoulder to shoulder *with* the British, not so much *for* the British, an attitude also reflected in women’s novels of the time, which accepted that Canadians went to war as part of the *allied* forces, opposing a common enemy together. In L. M. Montgomery’s 1920 novel *Rilla of Ingleside*, for example, the adolescent Rilla acknowledges that the struggle for victory is shared between “the British navy and our Canadian boys” (91). By contrast, as Geoffrey Serle asserts, Australians responded as if colonials; they looked to the Mother Country with the undertone of a child staking its claim for parental recognition of maturity (150). To Australians, writes C. E. W. Bean in *The Official History*,

Great Britain was a fabled country, of which they had learned at their mother’s knee, the home of wonderful things – of the many stories of childhood, of snow and lawns and rivers and castles and wonders seen only on Christmas cards. In the common language the motherland was still often spoken of as “home.” (16)

Although Bean declared that Australians regarded Britain as “an old friend in danger” to whose side they automatically hastened in time of need, he also noted that Australians went to war because they aspired to convince their ancestors that, out of their inauspicious beginnings as a penal colony, they had forged a superior culture. Contemporary Australian historian Carolyn Holbrook agrees; she points out that “though Australians belonged to the great British race, they felt deeply the shame of their convict heritage. It was gallant performance, rather than the peaceful means by which nationhood had been achieved in 1901, that would redeem the original sin of convictism” (51–52). And as Robert Hughes also observes, while “the convict vestige” had been slowly dying out, “it was part of English attitudes before 1960 and especially before World War Two”: when mentioned, it would “send upper-middle-class Australians into paroxysms of social embarrassment [...]. [C]onvict ancestry was a stain to be hidden” (158). But despite the seriousness of the issue of the “convict stain,” neither Keshen nor Sheftall mention it. Once again, literary women reflected the thinking of the time. In her novel *On the Knees of the Gods*, set in England, Brookes vehemently underscores Bean’s dictum that Australians had indeed become an incomparable race. Her

upper-class Ernestine takes umbrage when an English aristocrat suggests that Anzacs evacuated Gallipoli because they lacked stamina, and swiftly replies that few, if any of them “are of convict blood. That page of Australia’s history has long been turned over and is hidden beneath many others that are inscribed with records of golden deeds” (71). Ernestine insists that “you’ll find the finest men that God ever made among their ranks” (71). It appears that Australians wanted the British to “sit up and take notice” that those from Down Under were not only as British as the British, but in fact *better* than them. Annie Rixon, another writer taking Bean’s cue, records in her novel *Yesterday and Today* that while Australian soldiers wished to see England, which they still considered “home,” they wanted more than anything to be *seen*:

All the soldiers thought of, all they talked about, was what they would do when they reached the old country. They had already heard and read so much about it and were so eager to get there and to see it: so brimful of history and tradition. How they would hold up their heads and push out their chests as they marched through the streets of London, that wonderful city which seemed to regulate the pulse of the whole British empire. They would prove to the people of Old England that Australia could rear sons just as fine as she. (53)

The amount of and type of attention paid to war writing in each country further highlights the differences in colonial outlook. Australian writers insisted upon lauding their soldiers’ participation in combat, whereas Canadian writers displayed no equivalent desire to extol their soldiers who joined the fray. In fact, Canadian historian Syd Wise writes that a gross imbalance exists. In his comparison of military and historical writing in each country, he argues that Canadian literature on war has, historically, been sadly lacking. As evidence, he furnishes a brief account of the attempt in Canada to publish an official history of the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) in the First World War and laments that it covered the events only until September 1915. Although Keshen acknowledges that the proposed eight-volume official history of Canada in the Great War resulted in the production of only one, which did not appear until 1938 (12–13), he does not explore the impact of such neglect on Canadians, as does Wise in the following passage:

What this means is that the Canadian people between the wars obtained no official account and precious few other accounts of the Canadians at the Somme, at Vimy Ridge, at Passchendaele, or of the junction of the Australian Corps and the Canadian Corps on 8 August 1918 as a spearhead which broke through the German lines and created what Ludendorff called the “black day of the German army,” or any record of the succession of Canadian victories in the hundred days which ended the war. Given the size and nature of the national effort (not to speak of the nearly 70,000 men who lost their lives during it), the failure to produce the CEF history was grievous and irreparable. (4)

Moreover, no separate history of the Royal Canadian Navy in the First World War or a history of the Royal Canadian Air Force appeared (5). In spite of the fact that over 20,000 Canadians took part in the first air war, and some, such as Billy Bishop, William Barker, Raymond Collishaw, and Wop May were among the most outstanding of all Allied fighter pilots,⁴ Canadians left the history of these famous flying men to the British, and consequently, in the six-volume official British History, *War in the Air*, there are only six references to Canada (5).

Australians, by contrast, more than accounted for their own contribution to the war effort. F. M. Cutlack's one-volume history of the Australian Flying Corps has no Canadian equivalent (5), nor is there anything comparable to Bean's comprehensive twelve-volume *The Official History*, which took him twenty-three years to complete (4). Although Keshen asserts that it was Bean who "initiated a campaign to construct a national, unrivalled testimonial in Canberra," which opened in 1941 and which also appears to be, as he intended, "'the finest war memorial' in the world" (17), he fails to mention that prior to 2005, if Canadians wished to learn how their stories of war had shaped the nation, they could only visit what Tim Cook describes as "the dilapidated Canadian War Museum. Established in 1942, it had suffered for decades from an inadequate budget, and was in desperate need of an upgrade. Its exhibitions were stale and out-dated, and it was less a museum and more a mausoleum" (353). Norman Hillmer adds that the Canadian War Museum was "one of the most neglected of federal institutions. Its usual fate was pedestrian quarters, meagre financial resources, and a miniscule staff" ("Canadian" 19). He notes that a "magnificent new Canadian War Museum building rose up in the national capital" in 2005 (19). While the new museum is a vast improvement over the old, it is nowhere near the "finest" in the world; nor can it boast, as does the imposing war memorial in Canberra, that it is the most-visited tourist attraction in the country.

4. The Anzac Legend: Australians' Unifying Myth

Whereas Canadians' national division into two linguistic and cultural communities has historically sharply divided, not unified the country, as French Canada still feels that it was conscripted into a British war, the story of war in Australia is surprisingly unified. While it is often argued that landing at Gallipoli was the significant event, literary critic Shirley Walker has argued that writers such as bush poet-cum-war correspondent Banjo Paterson had begun glorifying Australian soldiers' participation in war before the turn of the century. His widely circulated dispatches from the Boer War reinforced pro-war sentiments at home such as the soldiers' superb abilities as bushmen, and often cited individual acts of great courage, many of which concerned men well known in civilian life. Although Paterson suppressed incidents of larrikin behaviour and downplayed violence, his writing "fostered

the establishment myth – of war as a gallant and necessary enterprise in aid of the Empire of Australia as a nation moving towards maturity and demonstrating this by the courage of its superior (if somewhat rakish) young men” (209). As early as the Boer War, then, bush legend had begun to blur into warrior myth.

While Paterson was a powerful myth-shaper, there were other, even more dominant male writers whose work reinforced a unified view of the Australian male character who liked to fight and was good at it. Not the least of these shape-shifters was Bean who, in many respects, was himself a reincarnation of the bush writers. In the early 1900s, the *Sydney Morning Herald* had sent him on a journalistic assignment to New South Wales, and his findings, published in *On the Wool Track* (1910) and *The Dreadnought of the Darling* (1911), honoured the Australian countryside and became the source, or the foundation, of his writing. According to Robin Gerster, Bean idealized its “almost mystical capacity to invigorate both body and spirit,” and termed it “the real Australia” (74). A city-dweller himself, Bean was clearly in awe of the bush, where he observed *men* had to live the lives of strong *men* (emphasis mine). (Whether or not women had to live the lives of strong women in the bush Bean did not address.) Ultimately, like the revered bush writers of the 1890s such as Henry Lawson, Joseph Furphy, Steele Rudd, and Paterson, Bean worshipped the Australian male character; his reports on the noble bushman and his values echoed these writers’ depictions formerly set down in prose and poetry, but with one major difference: according to historian Peter Stanley, for Charles Bean, “nationhood stood at the core of what Gallipoli meant” (217).

It is important to stress that Bean was not the only war correspondent eager to turn Diggers into idols, however, particularly after the momentous landing at Anzac Cove. In fact, it is possible to speculate that Bean’s reporting might have cut little ice with the folks at home had it not been corroborated by other correspondents, particularly those from Britain. The seasoned London journalist Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett gave high praise to the Anzacs when he stated that “there has been no finer feat in this war than this sudden landing in the dark” (19), words that were flashed to the home front via the *Argus* on May 8, 1915. Serle notes that “[t]ributes by military historians and the fulsome, cloying eulogies of John Masefield and Compton Mackenzie were widely quoted and well known during the war” (151). Several of these are worth re-producing because they illustrate the excessive, even fanatical verbiage those on the home front were exposed to. Masefield labelled the Anzacs “the finest body of young men ever brought together in modern times. For physical beauty and nobility of bearing they surpassed any men I have ever seen; they walked and looked like kings in old poems” (19). Mackenzie’s praise, if possible even more laudatory, also likens Anzacs to Homeric heroes:

There was not one of those glorious young men I saw that day who might not himself have been Hector or Achilles. Their almost complete nudity, their tallness and majestic

simplicity of line, their rose-brown flesh burnt by the sun and purged of all grossness by the ordeal through which they were passing, all these united to create something as near to absolute beauty as I shall ever hope to see in this world. (80–81)

In the eyes and ears of the world, not only to women on the home front, the Anzac was a Herculean hero, an antipodean Achilles, a man more than worthy of the ‘lofty pedestal’ writers such as Mabel Brookes, Ray Phillips, Annie Rixon, Mary Grant Bruce, Ethel Turner, Gladys Hain, Chrystal Stirling, Linda Webb Burge, who collectively produced more than fifteen novels in praise of the Anzac, placed their soldiers on.⁵

While it might seem logical to assume that Australian women writers would have used their pens to record their frustration at being handed passive roles as mothers and copers on the home front or to lament that there was no large-scale munitions industry and no shortage of labour to force them into men’s jobs (McKernan 55–56), they did not: rather than using their words as tools to overcome their oppression,⁶ to write their issues and concerns over prohibition or conscription or pacifism into the discourse, they became the women with the pens behind the men with the guns. To be fair, it is easy to see how the glowing reports of both home-grown, but especially foreign correspondents, would have lured women writers into Anzac adulation. Like their male counterparts (who wrote surprisingly little fiction about Gallipoli), they portrayed their Anzacs as a splendid new race of larger-than-life characters who readily transferred their abilities from the bush onto the field of battle, and effortlessly achieved victory. In these wartime novels, each fighting Australian is tall, bronzed, and handsome, and always a superstar, never a colonial inferior. Because Australian women writers had so clearly imbued the notion that a nation which could produce such a great race of *men* (emphasis mine) could not have much wrong with it, their novels stress that the status quo had to be preserved and innovation opposed. In resisting societal restructuring which would have doubtlessly occurred had they taken advantage of men’s absences from the home front, writers failed to recognize that they were shoring up national ideologies which oppressed them as women, and which kept them ensconced as second-class citizens in their own country.

5. Time for Change: Canadian Women’s Great War Fictions

In Canada, however, women writers, although far fewer in number, had no desire to safeguard the status quo, as the winds of change blow through their texts. In L. M. Montgomery’s *Rilla*, women are fully aware that “the beautiful yesterday [...] never come[s] back” (227); nor do they want it back. Female characters in novels by Montgomery, Nellie McClung, Grace Blackburn, Francis Marion Beynon, Gertrude Arnold, and Evah McKowan look to the future and visualize a better world where women are fully participating members of Canadian society.

In part because there were no influential writers like Bean or Paterson aggrandizing members of the CEF, no reporters fashioning them into superhuman legendary figures, in Canadian novels, women are everywhere present. Because they had not been subjected to such biased, propagandistic, and downright misleading reporting, Canadians were more accurately informed about their troops' participation, and about the war, than were Australian women writers. Peter Buitenhuis relays that when Max Aitken went to France in 1915 to document the activities of the CEF, the reports he sent back to be printed in Canadian and British newspapers regularly gave the names of units and of officers and men engaged in battle in defiance of censorship rules (98). Buitenhuis acknowledges that although Aitken glossed over failures in allied strategies, he also admitted mistakes and acknowledged casualties (98–99), whereas Australians on the home front received principally glowing praise of the Anzac.

Canadian soldiers' war efforts did not go completely unrecognized, however, and while some of the admiration of the men in the CEF even issued from high places, it failed to capture the Canadian imagination the way similar comments did in Australia. Both Buitenhuis and Keshen note that Aitken accorded soldiers excellent publicity in France. In the first volume of *Canada in Flanders* (1915), Aitken wrote that Canada's "gallant sons" proved their manhood: "the wave that fell on us around Ypres [...] has baptised the Dominion into nationhood – the mere written word 'Canada' now glows with a new meaning before all the civilised world" (qtd. in Buitenhuis 99). But the flames were quickly extinguished, for as Morton and Granatstein stress, "the Great War did not forge a nationality for Canada, as it did for Australia" (1). Rudyard Kipling did, however, single out Canadians for special praise. On his 1914–1915 tour of the camps of the New Army, the British poet claimed that Canadian soldiers "were all supple, free and intelligent; and they moved with a lift and a drive that made one sing for joy" (qtd. in Buitenhuis 25). Witnessing a group of soldiers digging a trench, he commented first on their physical appearance, but then made a more telling comment about their demeanour: "They were young [...] they were beautifully fit, and they were all truly thankful that they lived in these high days [...]. It was their rigid humility that impressed one as most significant" (qtd. in Buitenhuis 25). If Canadian women writers absorbed anything from Kipling's commendations, it was "rigid humility." Accordingly, they do not place their soldiers on lofty pedestals, bolster their egos, or act as magnifying mirrors to enhance their fighting prowess; nor do they write as if they are publicity agents for the CEF. Women writers never depict their soldiers as "beautifully fit" or exalt them as magnificent fighters. In their fictions, soldiers do not declare they like to fight, nor do they boast of being "good" at combat. Most go to war half-heartedly, some even reluctantly, seemingly aware they were facing a daunting task, not a "picnic" or a "lark," as Australian women writers often suggested, and these Canadian soldiers return, as soon as possible, to the farms and factories of peace.

Typical of Canadian humility, fighting prowess is never recorded as a characteristic of the Canadian soldier, nor are there any overseas correspondents highlighting their fighting ferocity: as I have pointed out elsewhere,⁷ the most praiseworthy act a soldier performs in a Canadian novel comes through ink, not blood. Montgomery's Walter Blythe writes a poem which is published in the *London Spectator*; within a month, it carries (flashes?) Walter's name to every corner of the globe:

Everywhere it was copied – in metropolitan dailies and little village weeklies, in profound reviews and “agony columns,” in Red Cross appeals and Government recruiting propaganda. Mothers and sisters wept over it, young lads thrilled to it, the whole great heart of humanity caught it up as an epitome of all the pain and hope and pity and purpose of the mighty conflict, crystallized in three brief immortal verses. A Canadian lad in the Flanders trenches had written the one great poem of the war. “The Piper” by Private Walter Blythe was a classic from its first printing. (167)

This Canadian soldier distinguishes himself and his country with the point of a pen, not the tip of a bayonet.

Moreover, in Canadian texts, heroes are poets and thinkers; brain, not brawn, is acclaimed. Before he goes to war, Walter openly confesses that he is a coward, but Montgomery makes his fear of fighting more meritorious than any display of aggression and masculinity. No Canadian writers celebrate, much less “big-note” (Australian for excessive praise) one man's ability to kill another. Moreover, Canadian women writers staunchly resist the notion of either individual or collective heroism. Montgomery's Rilla refuses to countenance that her brother Walter, who died performing a courageous deed, deserves to be singled out for attention: “He was just one of many fine and splendid boys who have given everything for their country” (194), she declares. Although Walter writes home to tell his family that he has earned a medal, he does not consider his act of heroism worth recounting. Only later does the family learn from a comrade-in-arms that Walter dashed from the safety of the trenches to drag in a wounded comrade, thereby risking his own life (166), and ultimately proving that Bean's much-touted mateship was not unique to Australians. Another of Montgomery's soldiers receives the D.C.M. and writes his family about the award, but does not tell them what he earns it for. Meaningfully, Montgomery does not inform her readers why either.

Unlike their Australian counterparts, Canadian writers refused to privilege the voices of soldiers; they insisted that it was women to whom attention must be paid, that their stories from the home front were of equal importance to men's on the battlefield, and that their perspectives were vital to a complete, not partial, view of war. Hence in Canadian novels, soldiers' tales are merely background to the main events, which routinely take place on the domestic front; women replace the soldier as mouthpiece for war. They are the active presence in the novels. Theirs are “counter” stories to war in part because they had no role models to

obey. There were no influential writers eulogizing members of the Canadian Expeditionary Forces, no ideologies insisting that Canadian soldiers were superior fighters, and no mutual admiration society equivalent to the Digger Fan Club. As a result, Canadian women, unfettered by tradition, were free to invent their own images of war. They used their imaginations to depict what it would have been like to be a soldier in the trenches, how it felt to face combat, how men regarded their participation in war. Because women writers were fabricating, not mimicking men's first-hand reports of war, readers might assume that their portrayals would be unrealistic, lacking in credibility, but the reverse holds true: it is Australian women writers who create fatuous depictions of international warfare.

The accounts of the Canadian soldiers' bravery at Vimy Ridge, which neither the French nor the British had succeeded in taking from the Germans is, as Montgomery's narrator observes, "written in crimson and gold on the Canadian annals of the Great War" (208). But even though the conquest earns a well-deserved place in history, because of the loss of life required to earn the victory, the battle represents tragedy rather than triumph to the villagers. Here, Montgomery reminds readers that mastery in battle is only partial, good news only to the survivors. In sending its young men off to war, even though they fight in defense of a noble cause, as a nation, Canada is making a tremendous sacrifice. Unlike Australian women writers, who uniformly perceive of the gains as 'our country's good,' Canadian women writers evoke a different metaphor which signifies loss, not profit. In order to underscore the tragedy war brings, women writers fashion their soldiers into nearly perfect specimens of humanity. As McClung's narrator bemoans in *The Next of Kin*, "the blood of our brightest and best [is] being poured in out [our country's] defense" (41). At the same time, there is no hint in any text that Canadian soldiers are superior on any playing field; there is no competition waged for cultural supremacy, no desire on the part of Canadian women writers, as there is in Australian women's texts (again following Bean's lead) to demean the English as stunted, inferior, or cowardly, or as products of a blighted industrial landscape.

Canadian writers do stress, however, the intellectual superiority of their young men. Montgomery underscores her young men's future promise as professionals and community leaders by opening her novel in early August (at the start of war), but also just as the summer is drawing to a close, and the boisterous, fun-loving denizens of Glen St. Mary are preparing to return to college. Several of the crowd are completing medical degrees, others studying English literature; some are heading off to their first posts as teachers. The tiny village seems permeated by scholars; even the news that the war has officially begun is announced by a McGill medical student (32). Attractive, intelligent, and well educated, all seem assured of brilliant careers and destinies as pillars of their communities. The two central young men in Grace Blackburn's *The Man Child* are of similar makeup to Montgomery's male figures: both inhabit a tiny Ontario village and are enrolled in

medical school when they enlist. Jack, “the man child,” wooed by Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, is one of the country’s best doctors in training. When he joins the army, he displays a special aptitude for military service and quickly becomes an officer (218). Like other Canadian soldiers, he is tall, physically fit, “matinee-idol” good looking, and popular with women (252). But in contrast to Australia, where writers often stress the sunny climate and abundance of good food, in Canada, writers like Blackburn make only passing reference to the notion that the backwoods of Canada produces hearty, healthy men (101). The Canadian landscape does not then produce a race of Sampsons; more commonly, particularly in the fiction of Montgomery and Blackburn, it is a place of beauty and serenity where prior to going to war, young men read or write poetry.

Both Blackburn’s soldier figures are, like Montgomery’s, dutiful, devoted sons, and mentally gifted. Well informed about current events, steeped in history, these young men are also versed in Greek tragedy, Shakespearean drama, and classic novels; their lively debates range over topics like free will or the struggles of the English suffragettes, their arguments bolstered by literary passages they recite at will. In creating these superlative young men, writers are emphasizing the loss a nation suffers when it sends its sons to war, not arguing that Canadians are culturally or racially superior to the British. Because Canada was never a penal colony, there is no need for writers to fear, or disprove, that cultural and moral degeneracy has set in; moreover, there are few larrikins, or rowdy men, in Canadian women’s texts. While it may seem that the fictional Canadian soldier appears to be stamped from an incomparable die, Canadian writers freely own that soldiers have flaws in their personalities: Beynon’s recruit, a well-known Winnipeg newspaperman, possesses a passion for the Demon Drink (*Aleta Dey* 165), and one of Montgomery’s recruits is absent-minded in the extreme: a blue-collar worker, he enlists without informing his family he has gone to war. Like their Australian counterparts, some Canadian soldiers may be redeemed by their participation in war, but within Canadian women’s texts, a pattern cannot be forced: the representation of the soldier is far from uniform.

Additionally, Canadian women novelists are cognizant that men suffer more than glancing bruises to their wrists in combat (which Bean insisted was the case, as he carefully sanitized the soldiers’ submissions in *The Anzac Book* [1916]), and that Australian women writers then carefully copied. But in *The Next of Kin*, McClung’s narrator speaks poignantly of the “scattering remnants” that came home from war: “Empty sleeves, rolled trouser legs, eyes that stared, and heads that rolled pitifully appeared on the streets. On the sunshiny afternoons many of these broken men sat on the verandas of the Convalescent Home” (150). Beynon’s *Aleta*, too, refers to the mutilation which occurs during conflict: “It broke our hearts to read of men with their legs and arms blown off; with their faces shattered to pieces; men who would go on living under the most horrible physical limitations” (164). Montgomery’s fighters suffer keenly: one loses the sight of an

eye; another has a leg amputated, and the narrator bemoans that “none of them came back just as they went away, not even those who had been so fortunate as to escape any injury” (272–273). Three of the village’s young boys sleep permanently under the Flanders poppies (185). The housekeeper’s trenchant remark that “four hundred thousand of our boys gone overseas – fifty thousand of them killed” (247), is a powerful reminder of the horror and pity of war.

In spite of the plethora of Australian texts, however, Anzacs remain invincible: only two die. In Canadian texts, the deaths of Montgomery’s Walter Blythe and Blackburn’s Jack Winchester move readers to tears because, even though these fighting men are not the focus of the novels, they seem like genuine, flesh-and-blood characters who are aware, as Elaine Scarry insists, that “the central activity of war is injuring, and the central goal is to out injure the opponent” (12). She also emphasizes that “the object of war is to kill people” (61), a “fact” routinely obscured in Australian war writing, but not in Canadian novels. Montgomery’s Walter tells Rilla that when he “sees [himself] thrusting a bayonet through another man – some woman’s husband or sweetheart or son – perhaps the father of little children,” he knows “[he] never can,” because he could never “face the reality” (81). Blackburn’s reluctant recruit, too, argues that if people used their brains to think about what war truly is, they would realize it is “nationalized murder” (126). Even though Montgomery, like Australia’s Mary Grant Bruce and Ethel Turner, writes for a juvenile audience, she refuses to shroud the realities of war in euphemism. In the Canadian novel, then, the coward, or the man who does not want to fight because he comprehends what war means, is the real hero. Notwithstanding their awareness of the horror and suffering they will face in the trenches, they set aside their own fear and loathing, and willingly sacrifice their lives for others. Moreover, Montgomery’s soldiers are free to admit their fear, their loneliness, their sense that they are involved in a tragedy too horrible to comprehend, as their letters home frequently convey. They can scarcely fathom that they inhabit a planet – familiar yet strange – in which men deliberately destroy one another.

In Australian women’s texts, however, writers do not have sympathy for men who refuse to fight, in part because they had no real understanding of what war was like, and no expressed desire to find out. Thanks to war correspondents like Bean and Paterson and home-front versifiers like Dennis who painted war as a quixotic romp, women writers were convinced that men were off to a thrilling adventure, a “contest,” a “stunt.” Hence they had no compassion for shirkers or deserters, those not game to play the “game.” They seemingly did not comprehend that a man may not want to fight because he finds killing reprehensible. In *Broken Idols*, Brookes’ heroine treats a deserter with disdain (76), and in Rixon’s novels and Mary Marlowe’s 1918 *The Women Who Wait*, those who avoid the colours are deceitful good-time Charlies who prefer to exercise their physical prowess on the footie field, not the battlefield. Grant Bruce is especially hard on shirkers, condemning them as “unmanly.” But in making these cruel judgments

that only war can make the man, that only a man who revels in action can be a man, women writers were once again not thinking for themselves, but following Bean's interpretation of the character of Australian men as their guide. At the end of the first volume of *The Official History*, Bean declared that what sustained the stalwart Diggers on the shores of Gallipoli was the idea of Australian manhood. Here, he evokes the heroic war myth which decrees that manhood is best tested on the battlefield; outmoded as the notion was, Gerster suggests that "the much-vaunted virtuosity of the First AIF was that of the Latin *virtus* – a manifestation of pure physical force and energy, of male strength, wilfulness and comradely resolve" (20). In Bean's view, "real" Australian men liked to fight, and hence in their fictions, women applaud the belligerence of the Anzac.

It would be foolish to suggest that Canadian women's wartime fiction was widely praised; like Australian women's writing, most of which sank immediately into oblivion, it, too, was largely ignored by the male canonizers, although works by L. M. Montgomery and Nellie McClung were best sellers and enormously popular. Nevertheless, Canadian women, at liberty to criticize their society, were obviously writing from a more powerful place within their literary tradition. Unlike women writers, who had to write (shoot?) back to a clearly defined patriarchal tradition which excluded them, Canadian women profited from writing out of a culture which lacked a particularly readily identifiable identity. Literary critic Coral Ann Howells asserts that the lack of a fixed Canadian identity has aided women writers: "the Canadian problem of identity may not be the problem of having no identity but rather of having multiple identities, so that any single national self-image is reductive and always open to revision" (26). Since multiplicity refuses to privilege one set of cultural values over another, women writers have been at liberty to rewrite male myths from the woman's point of view; they have not had to be "myth-fits" or restricted to telling "official" stories of soldier-heroes, for there were no "myths" in this peaceable kingdom about war and warriors.⁸

6. Origins of the Anzac Legend

According to historian Marilyn Lake in her 2010 *What's Wrong with ANZAC? The Militarisation of Australian History* (co-edited with Henry Reynolds), because the landing at Gallipoli was a defeat followed by an evacuation, Bean's "nationalist myth-making had to focus on a different sort of triumph" (6–7). What he chose, she asserts, was "the demonstration of 'manly character' now known in more gender neutral terms as 'the spirit of Anzac'" (7). Lake records K. S. Inglis' summary of the roots of the legend as follows:

It was at Gallipoli on 25 April 1915 [...] that the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZACS) made good: a nation was born on that day of death. War

provided the supreme test of manhood. As the official war historian, C. E. W. Bean wrote, the Great War served as a test of Australian national character and the men of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) had passed that test triumphantly. Despite the Gallipoli campaign ending months later in military defeat, for Australia its triumph lay in the mettle of the men themselves. To be the sort of man who would give way when his mates were trusting to his firmness [...] to live the rest of his life haunted by the knowledge that he had set his hand to a soldier's task and had lacked the grit to carry it through – that was the prospect which these men could not face. Life was very dear, but life was not worth living unless they could be true to their idea of Australian manhood. In proving their manhood – brave, firm, loyal and steadfast – these men (so it was said) had proven our nationhood. (2)

Lake further observes that while there have been periods when the attention paid to the Anzacs' storming of Gallipoli has waxed and waned (14–15), in recent decades, "the relentless militarisation of [their] national history" has resulted in an "Anzac spirit [...] now said to animate all of [the country's] greatest achievements, even as the Anzac landing recedes into the distant past" ("Preface" vii). The "militarisation" of Australia, Lake argues, has taken place over the last decade: "the federal government has invested millions of dollars in the project of shaping historical memory, through the expansion of war memorials, the proliferation of plaques, annual pilgrimages to battlefields, the development of war-focussed curriculum materials for schools, massive subsidies for book and film production and most importantly, the endless ritual of public commemoration" (2006, 15). She attributes the "endless supply" of money to Prime Minister Howard's "personal interest in promoting military history" (2006, 15).⁹ Lake further asserts that the "entry of the Department of Veterans' Affairs into the business of pedagogy and curriculum design" has worked to "sideline different stories of nation-building" such as "visions of social justice and democratic equality" (10) in favour of military prowess.

Lake also attests that "schoolchildren are now conceptualised as the inheritors of the Anzac spirit and its custodians. They have been bombarded [some even as early as pre-school] in recent years and throughout the year with every aspect of the history of our engagement in overseas wars" (137). But they are not taught, as Patricia Grimshaw, Marilyn Lake, Ann McGrath, and Marian Quartly stress in *Creating a Nation, 1788–2007*, that

In determining the meaning of men's deeds [...] the metaphor of men's procreation involved a disappearing act. In this powerful national myth-making, the blood women shed in actually giving birth – their deaths, their courage and endurance, their babies – were rendered invisible. In determining the meaning of men's deeds – their Landing at Gallipoli – women's procreative capacities were at once appropriated and erased. Men's deeds were rendered simultaneously sacred and seminal. Through women gave birth to the population, only men it seemed could give birth to the imperishable political entity of the nation. (214)

Nor are they taught that the history of Australians at war did not begin on April 25, 1915. According to Matthew Bailey and Sean Brawley, “considerable gaps in public awareness about [other] foundational events” such as the frontier wars which, “despite a wealth of [...] scholarship documenting the violence and dispossession that characterised European colonisation,” are not on school curriculums. Recent scholarship suggests that the prominence of the Anzac legend “has served to mask other, important histories of the continent, including frontier conflict” (19). Much of the recent scholarship on this glaring omission has been done by Henry Reynolds, whose *Forgotten War* queries whether “Australia was a site of genocide” (148).

7. No Birthing of the Nation in Canada

Although Tim Cook is correct in thinking that *Historica Canada*’s polls designed to find out how much Canadians know about their past are “not the most effective way to gauge knowledge” (347), they are, nevertheless, one of the few tools at a country’s disposal. While I have never read the results of any polls which inform Australians how many are aware that they attained nationhood on April 25, 1915 (perhaps because such polls are unnecessary), numerous surveys have been undertaken recently in Canada, all with revealing results. In the “Historical Notes” to his 2007 play *Vimy*, Vern Thiessen insists that even though it has been “argued aggressively by noted historians and average citizens alike that Vimy Ridge was the symbolic birth of Canada as a nation” (221), Canadians are not familiar with the story. Here, Thiessen draws upon a poll conducted by the *Globe and Mail* in 2002, which found that “only 36 per cent of Canadians could name Vimy Ridge as the most significant Canadian victory of the war” (221). Moreover, journalist Anthony Jenkins observes that “there is a pervasive and persistent ignorance about the battle of Vimy Ridge” (“Why”). For example, when asked to identify “Canada’s most famous single victory in the First World War which consisted of the capture of a key ridge on the Western Front,” even the obvious clue failed to elicit an accurate answer, as only “one-third of Canadians, and only 25 per cent of Canadians between the ages of 18 and 34” were able to identify it as Vimy Ridge. (The results are precisely the opposite in Australia, as Anna Clark’s recent interviews revealed that “younger respondents [aged thirteen to thirty] more often exhibited an abiding, uncritical fealty to Australia’s Anzac legacy than their older counterparts. That youthful interest in and engagement with Anzac history is confirmed by studies of school-children, who, with the *exception* of Anzac topics, generally loathe learning Australian history” [25]). Nicole Thompson points out that in a 2014 survey, only forty-seven percent of Canadians could correctly identify that Vimy Ridge “was fought in the First World War”; eighteen percent were unaware that Vimy Ridge was one of Canada’s “most notorious battles”: nine

percent thought Vimy Ridge was “a Canadian mountain range”; and three percent believed Vimy Ridge “was a famous Canadian racehorse” (“Looking Back”).

In my experience, however, even some of those figures seem high. Over many decades, I have taught hundreds of university students in both junior and senior English courses, many of which focus on Canadian war literature, and I can verify that over that vast period of time, only a handful of my students have been able to identify the military or historical significance of Vimy Ridge or even what war it was fought in: to date, none have suggested that it was the first time all four visions of the Canadian Corps fought together as a national army; none have declared that soldiers captured an impregnable fortified German position that French and British troops had, over two years, failed to win, despite their many losses; none have mentioned the extensive preparation and training which employed new tactics and techniques (many admittedly devised by the British) that contributed to the soldiers’ victory; none have mentioned that success came at a price, with over 10,000 casualties, including 3600 deaths; and none have reiterated the familiar claim that military historians such as David Bercuson like to assert, which is “that the sacrifices, and triumphs, of the Canadian Corps gave prime minister Borden the leverage to win constitutional equality for Canada within the empire” (qtd. in Keshen 1). Clearly, the events at Vimy Ridge are not on many school curriculums at any level, a fact that historians have been bemoaning for years: as Granatstein informed Douglas How, “the history of the Canadian experience ‘has all but disappeared from the school curriculum’ and the university situation is just as bleak” (92). Moreover, I cannot resist noting that even politicians who ought to have made it their business to know their history did not: according to Arthur Weinreb, when former Defence Minister John McCallum attempted “to answer criticism for his apparent lack of knowledge about the raid on Dieppe that took place in August 19, 1942” by writing a letter to the *National Post* on September 1, 2002, he succeeded only in making matters worse when he confused “Vichy, the seat of the French government that collaborated with the Nazis during World War II, with Vimy, the World War I battle of Vimy Ridge”! (“Vimy”).

Another factor that contributes to Canadians’ lack of awareness about Vimy is that few have visited the memorial site in France. Even though Brian Bethune claims that there is no shortage of people who make the trip, “only three percent of the 750,000 annual visitors to the site of Canada’s greatest military triumph are Canadian. The rest are British and French, mostly schoolchildren, who come to see the battleground” (“Sublime” 31). Once again, the situation is drastically different in Australia. Whereas it remains unusual to meet a Canadian student who has been to Vimy, it is equally uncommon to meet young Australians who have not yet journeyed to Gallipoli or are planning to soon. As Bruce Scates asserts in *Return to Gallipoli: Walking the Battlefields of the Great War* (2006), a work which documents the long history of Australian pilgrimages, contrary to all expectations, the memory of the war has not faded with the “last of the diggers”

(214) as some expected; rather, “the Anzac mythology and the pull of the Peninsula has grown even stronger” (214). He concludes that “Anzac Day has become fashionable, especially at Gallipoli and especially amongst the young” (214). (Lake takes a dimmer view of these pilgrimages; she suggests that Anzac Day is no longer a “day of solemn remembrance,” but has instead “become a festive event celebrated by backpackers wrapped in flags, playing rock music, drinking beer and proclaiming their national identity on the distant shores of Turkey” [3]). Significantly, there is no Canadian equivalent to Scates’ book on pilgrimages, nor is there any Vimy Day public holiday. There is, however, a Vimy Ridge Day, which is “an annual observance on April 9 to remember Canadians who victoriously fought in the battle of Vimy Ridge [...]. The day is also known as the National Day of Remembrance of the Battle of Vimy Ridge” (“Vimy Ridge Day”). But the short list of “what Canadian people do” on this day – museums may hold “special activities” such as inviting people to tell stories about the battle or dressing up in costumes to explain soldiers’ equipment; people may lay wreaths at memorials, while students attend classroom lessons on the history of Vimy – seem trifling when compared to Anzac Day rituals and ceremonies (“Vimy Ridge Day”).

8. Once Upon a Time, Vimy Mattered

Journalist Michael Valpy asserts that there was a time when the taking of “Vimy [Ridge] was recognized as a *Canadian* victory in places that mattered then, as now, to Canadians – the American and British press. Canadian Prime Minister Robert Borden, in London at the time, wrote in his diary: “All newspapers ringing with praise of Canadians.” *The New York Times* declared that the battle “would be in Canada’s history [...] a day of glory to furnish inspiration to her sons for generations [...]” *The New York Tribune* declared in an editorial: “Well done, Canada. No praise of the Canadian achievement can be excessive” (“Vimy”). On the home front, however, it did run to excess, as historian Jonathan Vance observed that “across English-speaking Canada,” there was a “phenomenal, even bizarre, outpouring of poetry. Most of it was doggerel and much of it pointedly weaved together the sacrifice of the Canadian young men with the Easter crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus” (“Making”). But after those initial bursts of public pride, publicity, and poetry, the Battle at Vimy was nearly forgotten: “the British military historian Basil Liddell Hart awarded it only a paragraph in his authoritative account of the war” (“Vimy”). Valpy further notes that “Canadians, and only Canadians, call it the Battle of Vimy Ridge [...]. In everyone else’s historical lexicons, it was a limited tactical victory in the First World War’s horrendous Battle of Arras, which the British and their allies lost” (“Vimy”). While it is often argued that the Battle of Vimy Ridge altered the course of the war, Valpy insisted that “it had a negligible effect on the war’s outcome. The Canadians had

equal casualties and more strategic successes in other battles, such as Amiens and Passchendaele” (“Vimy”).

Soon after the conflict, however, one meaningful event contributed to keeping the Vimy story alive in the hearts and minds of Canadians: that was the awarding of the Toronto sculptor Walter Allward’s design for a national memorial. As Cook observes, the Vimy site, which France had ceded to Canada in 1922 “freely and for all time” (Carrigg) in gratitude for its sacrifices and for the victory achieved by Canadian troops in capturing Vimy Ridge, was ultimately chosen because it was “awe-inspiring in conception, size, and design, and regarded by many as one of the finest war memorials of the Great War” (Brown and Cook 39). The project, begun in 1922, was not completed until 1936. At that time, the stunning memorial, unveiled to an audience of tens of thousands, including several thousand Canadian veterans who made the pilgrimage overseas, served to remind Canadians and their allies of the young country’s sacrifice and success. At the unveiling of the memorial, Canada’s Minister of Justice, Ernest Lapointe, reinforced the peaceful messages carried by Allward’s magnificent sculptures when he remarked that “Humanity desires [...] justice and truth, and is eager for a Peace founded in conscience and international solidarity, on the will of nations to co-operate for the greatest good of the greatest number of men and peoples” (Brown and Cook 48). Similarly, as Jacqueline Hucker insists, “in contrast to earlier war memorials, the monument made no reference to victory. Instead it spoke to national and universal goals for good in the world. It also alluded to the ancient cyclical myth of death and resurrection” (283).¹⁰

With the onset of the Second World War, however, the general safety of the memorial became a cause for concern for the Canadian government, as rumours flew that the Germans had destroyed the memorial. Such speculation eventually led the Germany Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda to publish denials that Adolf Hitler, who “reportedly admired the memorial for its peaceful nature, was photographed by the press while personally touring it and the preserved trenches in June 1940. The Welsh Guards who captured Vimy Ridge in 1944 confirmed that it had not been desecrated” (Canadian National 9). Ironically, after such an intense desire and commitment to preserve Vimy Ridge, little attention was paid thereafter either to the battle or the memorial, both having been overshadowed by more contemporary events. Only when the Vimy anniversary coincided with the birth of Canada celebrations in 1967 were turnouts more numerous (although neither Prime Minister Lester Pearson nor French President Charles de Gaulle attended), but tended to dwindle again until the 125th anniversary of Canadian Confederation and the 75th anniversary of the battle coincided in 1992, when both PM Brian Mulroney and French President Francois Mitterand attended (Carrigg). The largest crowd at the site since 1936 appeared on the 90th anniversary of the battle in 2007, with Queen Elizabeth II, who “rededicated the site,” and Prime Minister Stephen Harper in attendance (Carrigg). Prior to the 90th anniversary,

however, evidence that government officials had been allowing the monument to crumble came to light when in 2000, the *Globe and Mail's* European correspondent, Alan Freeman, wrote that it was falling apart (“Disgrace”). Only after he documented its decay on the newspaper’s front page – which included that names carved on the monument were starting to disappear – did the Canadian government announce a restoration plan for all of Canada’s Great War memorials in in France and Belgium, with the bulk of the money earmarked for the Vimy memorial. Or as Valpy puts it, “our dismissal of our own mythology,” as well as “our contempt for the dead,” shamed the government into action (“Setting”).

9. Who Cares About Vimy in the Twenty-First Century?

Recently, numerous constituencies have echoed a similar kind of “who cares?” attitude towards Vimy. Journalist Graeme Hamilton reports that in Outremont, a leafy suburb of Montreal, Parc de Vimy, so named for more than eighty years, was suddenly re-named Jacques Parizeau Park. Ironically, while Vimy Parc had been named as a tribute to soldiers who fought to defend Canada, it was now being renamed for a man who fought to break it apart. The then-Montreal mayor of Montreal, Denis Coderre, who voted in favour of the name change, promised to find another park by 2017 and name it Parc de Vimy, but no announcement has been forthcoming (A3).¹¹ Arguably, many of the 25,000 Canadians who eagerly accepted the federal government’s invitation to apply online to attend the centennial anniversary celebrations at Vimy Ridge on April 9, 1917 (their presence thereby marking the largest assemblage ever at the site), had good reason to wonder if their government cared about them or the events at Vimy at all. Many who attended (me among them) were surprised to learn that the government’s report of the event, apparently issued at the end of June, described Vimy as a “rousing success”: all events ran on time, on budget and virtually without incident” (A6), when we were aware that they didn’t, and it wasn’t. It took several months before journalist Tom Spears, who obtained documents through an access-to-information request, was to tell the “real” story, which detailed the event as “a total disaster. Appalling” (A6). His article, which appeared in December 2017, charged that “provisions for safety, basic human needs and crowd control were dangerously inadequate” (A6).

10. Attempts to Militarize Canada

But what prompted so many Canadians to want to celebrate an event they had largely ignored for decades? Cook attributes the “renewed interest” in Vimy to the Conservative government of Stephen Harper, which had been emphasizing a “more aggressive version” of Canadian history, one that “highlighted Canada

as a proud member of allied forces,” and to that end “resurrected the War of 1812 as an event that shaped the destiny of the future Canada” (*Vimy* 373). He further stresses that “Vimy was one of the icons used by the Conservatives to support the notion that Canada was a country not just of peacekeepers but also of warriors” (373). On what Cook terms the “politicized” ground of Vimy, Harper used his speech during the 2007 Vimy celebration to justify the war in Afghanistan by linking it to the sacrifices and values of the fallen heroes of the Great War and making it emblematic of our heroic military tradition (362). Another of Harper’s initiatives was to rewrite the citizenship guide, which now focused on Vimy:

The Canadian Corps captured Vimy Ridge in April 1917, with 10,000 wounded or killed, securing the Canadians’ reputation for valour as the “shock troops” of the British Empire. One Canadian officer said: “It was Canada from Atlantic to the Pacific on parade [...]. In those few moments I witnessed the birth of the nation.” (373)

It is useful to compare this description to what appeared in the former guide. According to Noah Richler, the previous government, in its description of Canada as a “gentler, more accepting, multicultural idea of the country” (41), more accurately reflected the mood of the country, which at the time

aspired to be a peaceful society in which respect for cultural differences, equality, liberty and freedom of expression is a fundamental value. Canada was created through discussion, negotiation and compromise. These characteristics are as important today as in the past. (41)

According to Cook, these lines of attack (which Richler notes included thirty-five references to the word “military” but “peacekeeping” only once) worked, as Vimy “stormed back” into public consciousness in 2007, and apparently with Cook’s approval. In the conclusion to his recent book on Vimy, Cook cites Harper’s insistence that “Every nation needs a creation story to tell, and the First World War and Vimy are central to that story” (364), but following immediately on those words, Cook himself asserts that

All nations have them. All nations need them. They are forged over time, codified in cultural products and political discourse, and passed down from generation to generation. Vimy is one of Canada’s most long-lasting of these narratives, even though it is one that has ebbed and flowed over several generations, taking on new meanings and shedding old ones. (364)

On page 379, Cook repeats that “All nations have founding myths and enduring narratives. Vimy is one of our strongest,” and then reiterates on page 381 that “all nations seek out, create, elevate, and actively shape narratives on which to hang national stories of aspirations.”

Among the numerous detractors do not share Cook's (or Harper's) views about Vimy as a persistent narrative is historian Jamie Swift, who summarizes the problems in a short essay. He insists that those who want to make Vimy the "formative moment" for Canada (37) are slamming the door on "the indispensable historical insights that social and cultural historians have developed since the 1960s on the gendered, racialized and class-based dynamics of power. It replaces history with patriotic fantasy" ("Yearning" 39). The Vimy mythology, he argues, "constitutes a regressive return to the Great Man Theory of History, with all of its gender-specific simplicities" and also "minimizes and exiles Quebec" ("Yearning" 39). Furthermore, he insists that any notion that the Battle of Vimy Ridge was somehow Canada's coming of age smacks of what he calls "vapid Vimyism," a virulent form of martial patriotism that obscures Great War reality. He claims that Vimyism emerged as the Official Story after those who could directly and personally remember the magnitude of the war's tragedy were no longer alive to dispute it ("Yearning" 37). Swift suggests, too, that in 1936, when the Vimy Monument was unveiled, it did not celebrate militarism, but "conveyed the widespread yearning for peace – which is how most people interpreted Allward's majestic towers and mournful sculptures, unveiled with a minimum of militarism and an abundance of peace symbolism" (38). Swift and his colleague Ian MacKay have recently produced several books which debunk any notion that it is possible to find positive meaning in the Vimy Ridge conflict which, in their view, was a devastating and appalling battle, not an event that defined the spirit of an emerging, modern Canada. (It is worth pointing out that while McKay and Swift do not mince words in their declaration that Canada has never been a "solely Warrior Nation" [*Warrior Nation* xii], or in their more recent claims that the "standard version of Vimy is a highly dubious, mythologized narrative," that it is "akin to a fairy tale for overaged boys who want their history to be as heart-thumping and simplistic as a video game" [*Vimy Trap* 7], they have not, to my knowledge, ever been accused of being "un-Canadian" or courted any charge of treason.)

While the Harper government openly disparaged that the peacekeeping mythology never completely died out, it failed to acknowledge that the sentiments it reflects have deep roots. Many Canadians continue to believe that former Prime Minister Lester Pearson seemed to personify Canada, that his diplomacy at the United Nations won him, and us, the Nobel Prize for peacekeeping. Moreover, history books tells us that Canada invented peacekeeping, and although we are no longer the world's pre-eminent peacekeepers, we are the only country that has sent soldiers to every important mission since the UN defined its peacekeeping role. For many Canadians, the image of Canada as international do-gooders is part of the national mythology. Even though Canadians have lost faith in their military and in their peace-keeping forces, many still regard themselves as "peacemongers." While Richler admits that the country has experienced some peacekeeping disasters (47), he also claims that "peacekeeping is a core myth"

which has been an integral part of our character for more than fifty years (58), and recent polls confirm it. Not long after the Trudeau government was elected in 2015, journalist Chris Selley declared that Canadians “love the peacekeeping thing” (A8). An Angus Reid poll conducted during the election campaign “found that 74 per cent preferred that Canadian troops be ‘focused on peacekeeping’ instead of ‘combat preparedness’ – among Liberal-intended voters, it was 82 per cent” (A8). While Selley rightly points out that Canada has not been a “major player in peacekeeping” for many years, Richler claims there are other means of maintaining the peace: we call upon treaties and negotiation as the Canadian way, we achieve political ends without the use of force, we have never relied upon guns to solve conflicts, and we tend to resolve issues through discussion and compromise, all of which contribute to the greater good, to a fair and just society. Richler further acknowledges that Canadians do fight for democratic causes and claims that we have never invaded another country for territorial gain (28–33).

11. Canadians Resist the Single Unifying Myth

Although Australians can pinpoint their “getting of nationhood” to the Anzacs’ dawn landing at Anzac Cove at precisely 4:26 on the morning of April 25, 1915, Canadian literary critic Robert Kroetsch has asserted that “in Canada we cannot for the world decide when we became a nation or what to call the day or days or, for that matter, years that might have been the originary moments” (360). Our indecision is an advantage, argues Kroetsch, because “if we can’t be united, we can’t be disunited. Our genealogy is postmodern” (360). In making his claim that Canada is a “postmodern country,” Kroetsch draws upon French critic Jean-Francois Lyotard’s definition of *postmodern* as “incredulity toward metanarratives [...] The narrative function of metanarratives is losing its function, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal” (356). Again following Lyotard, Kroetsch emphasizes that our “willingness to refuse privilege to a restricted or restrictive cluster of metanarratives becomes a Canadian strategy for survival. We must, in Mikhail Bakhtin’s terms, remain polyphonic” (357). History has, in its traditional forms, for too long “insisted [...] on a coherent narrative” (357). But since Canadians “cannot agree on what their meta-narrative is,” Kroetsch insists, “in some perverse way, this very falling-apart of our story is what holds our story together” (355). Moreover, Kroetsch contends that “at the centre of any metanarrative is a traditional hero. Canadians, uncertain of their metanarratives, are more than uncertain of their heroes” (361). Unlike Australians, who remain doggedly eager to elevate their Anzacs to the realm of myth and heroism, Canadians have been notoriously famous for our lack of interest in heroes.

A number of other writers and historians have also noted the faltering Canadian narrative, and like Kroetsch, they regard it as desirable. When queried recently

why Canada “does not have a foundational story for artists to tell,” for example, Charles Foran suggested that “instead of possessing a strong cultural identity,” we are an “experimental nation” that promotes “something different – a culture that is many cultures, many stories, in a place that stretches across a continent and is richly occupied” (“Searching”). Foran recalls Justin Trudeau’s remark to the *New York Times* shortly after his election in 1915 that he was now prime minister of the “first postnational state”: “There is no core identity, no mainstream in Canada” (“Searching”). Yet as Foran points out, Trudeau was merely echoing Marshall McLuhan’s avowal half a century earlier: he declared then that “Canada is the only country in the world that knows how to live without an identity,” a “condition” he did not regard “as a negative” (“Searching”).

Nor does historian Charlotte Gray believe that “living without an identity” is a negative position. In the “Introduction” to her 2017 *The Promise of Canada: 150 Years – People and Ideas That Have Shaped Our Country*, she confesses that when she first immigrated to Canada [from England], she was “stunned to discover the wobbly sense of national identity” here. She then began to ask her “new compatriots” about what being “a Canadian” meant, but the replies she received were “often a stuttering medley of generalizations about what it did *not* mean (Canadian meant not being American, or British, or like residents of other former colonies such as Australia)” (xiii–xiv). Intriguingly, whereas Marilyn Lake writes that “there are now more books published on Australians at war than ever before, hundreds during the last two decades alone,” and that “the shelves of bookshops groan under their weight and military history is usually given its own section of the shop” (14), Gray suggests that she has “acquired a bookshelf of titles” including *The Search for Identity, On Being Canadian, What is a Canadian?, The Canadians, The Unfinished Canadian*, and *Nationalism without Walls: The Unbearable Lightness of Being Canadian* (xiv). She claims to have found some hilarious definitions of Canadian definitions of Canadian identity in them, such as Peter C. Newman’s quip, “This is the only country on earth whose citizens dream of being Clark Kent instead of Superman” (xiv).¹² In line with Kroetsch and Foran, Gray notes that this country “defies definition. There is no master narrative for Canadian history: there are too many stories to package into a tidy, tightly scripted identity” (xiv). Gray applauds Canadians’ lack of identity, advancing that it

exerts a sense of endless promise because over the years it has successfully managed so many competing pressures: parallel identities, layers of allegiance, deep-rooted hostilities, overlapping loyalties. This country has reimagined and embellished its self-image in every generation since the proclamation of the British North America Act in 1867, which means that each of those books has had a limited shelf life. (xiv)

Gray has also recently admitted that “it was moving to observe the centenary of the Battle of Vimy Ridge in 1917, but Vimy was not the most important military engagement that Canadians fought during the First World War, and the idea

that it was the carnage at Vimy that constituted the birth of modern Canada is straight mythology” (F3). At the end of *The Promise of Canada*, she calls Canada “an unfinished and perhaps unfinishable project” (F3).

Recently, historian Erna Paris made a similar observation when she wrote that when Pierre Trudeau introduced his policy on multiculturalism to the House of Commons in 1971, his single most important statement “may have been that no singular culture could, or would, define Canada [...] in other words, that there would be no overriding cultural identity to assimilate to” (“Multiculturalism”). Trudeau then predicted that our famous lack of identity would become the root of our contemporary success in the world. Paris adds that it is this “deliberate looseness” that will “help to protect us,” but only if we “remain vigilant” (O5), and apparently we have, as Canada remains a happy land that needs no heroes.

Notes

- 1 My title is a riff on a conversation that takes place between Galileo and his former student Andrea in Bertolt Brecht’s play *Galileo*. Here, Andrea suggests that “unhappy is the land that breeds no her, but Galileo replies, “No, Andrea: unhappy is the land that needs a hero” (Scene Twelve, *Galileo*, 1938).
- 2 In “The Place of Anzac in Australian Historical Consciousness,” historian Anna Clark records that the numbers of those who attend the Dawn Ceremonies are steadily increasing: “an estimated 50,000 attended the ceremony at Melbourne’s Shrine of Remembrance in 2014” (*Australian Historical Studies* 48: 19).
- 3 A little-known aspect of Canadian history indicates that French-Canadians fought so well at the Battle of the Somme – in this case at in the northern French Village of Courcelette in September, 2016, that when British Commander Douglas Haig noticed what excellent fighters they were, he vowed, ironically, that “Canadians would be allowed to have a try at Vimy Ridge” (“Conscipation Crisis”).
- 4 In “‘Dancing in the Sky’: *Billy Bishop Goes to War* and Our Most Famous Canadian War Hero,” Steve Lukits notes that “Canadians have a special place among the errant knights of the air. Of the 863 British Empire aces – those fighter pilots who shot down five or more enemy aircraft – Canadians number 171, and three of them are among the top ten” (*Queen’s Quarterly* 124. 2: 201).
- 5 For a much longer examination of the many ways Australian women writers backed the attack, see my “‘The Digger on the Lofty Pedestal’: Australian Women’s Fictions of the Great War” (*Australian & New Zealand Studies in Canada* 10: 1–22). Several insubordinate women writers did manage to write against the grain, however. For further information on these writers’ novels, see my “Guns ‘n’ Roses: Mollie Skinner’s Intrepid Great War Fictions” (*Southerly* 59. 1: 105–121); and “Lesbia Harford’s Homefront Warrior and Women’s World War One Writing” (*Australian Literary Studies* 1. 5: 19–28).

- 6 For information on how women writers deployed language against themselves, see my “(Not) Talking Back: Australian Women Novelists Lose the Great (Linguistic) War” (*Australian Studies* 18. 2: 179–206).
- 7 See my “‘The Best Soldiers of All’: Unsung Heroines in Canadian Women’s Great War Fictions” (*Canadian Literature* 151: 66–99).
- 8 For an examination of how the depiction of soldiers in both Australian and Canadian women’s and men’s Second World War writing continues these same patterns, see my “War Writing in Australia, Canada, and New Zealand” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of World War II*, ed. Marina MacKay, Cambridge University Press, 2009, 149–162.
- 9 According to Holbrook, “Australia is vastly outspending other combatant nations on commemorating the Great War centenary (50). Prime Minister Julia Gillard’s declaration on the eve of Anzac Day that “the 2012–13 budget had allocated 83.5 million over seven years to funding initiatives relating to the Centenary of Anzac and the 100th anniversary of the First World War” would seem to support Holbrook’s claim. See also Marty Harris, “Funding the Centenary of Anzac.” https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Department
- 10 Given these comments, it is surprising that Cook insists that “to link Vimy with peace is simply wrong, and to link peacekeeping with the memorial is utterly incoherent” (338–339).
- 11 According to reporter Randy Boswell, the French in France seemed to have lost their respect for the splendid Vimy Monument as well, having sullied the memory of the dead in 2009 by turning the parking lot into a place for cruising, swingers, and French citizens looking for kinky sex. See “Two Couples Convicted for Vimy Striptease” (*National Post* 9 April 2009: A2).
- 12 Gray has used this quip before, and I have followed her lead because it is such an appropriate comment on Canadians’ famous lack of heroes.

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