

The Soldier as Novelist

Literature, History, and the Great War

We have become accustomed to disagreements over the nature of collective memory, and in few places have these disputes been so bitter as in the record of past wars. In January 1995, the Smithsonian Institution in Washington reconsidered elaborate plans for an exhibit discussing the necessity and morality of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki after veterans' groups protested that it did a disservice to the memory of the war. This incident probably seemed tame to Canadians, who witnessed a prolonged and frequently acrimonious battle involving veterans, historians, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, and documentary filmmakers Terence and Brian McKenna over the interpretation of certain events of the Second World War depicted in the McKennas' 1992 television production *The Valour and the Horror*.

This was not the first time, however, that Canadian veterans have led a spirited and very public campaign to protect their past. In the 1920s and 1930s, veterans of the Great War went to considerable lengths to ensure that their war retained a prominent and proper place in the nation's collective memory. In particular, they were determined to protect the image of their comrades, living and dead, from threats posed by a genre of literature which began to appear in the late 1920s. The veterans' case, however, was complicated by the fact that the authors of this competing memory were also ex-soldiers. In this sense, the struggle differed from modern examples in one very important respect: in the interwar years, the bitterest battles were not between veterans and non-veterans (or people with no personal knowledge of the events under dispute), but between ex-soldiers, all of

whom had first-hand experience of life at the front. The ensuing struggle between two contradictory strands of memory saw one group of veterans stake out their role, not simply as defenders of their comrades' image, but as the sole proprietors of historical truth.

Such struggles characterize the construction of a community's perception of its past; most often, a variety of interest groups, usually differentiated by class, gender, ethnicity, or political orientation, champion different versions of the past as a way to advance specific goals in the present and future. The Canadian veterans who took up their pens to defend the image of their comrades, however, were a very heterogeneous group. They were not linked by any economic or social factors, so it is impossible to describe them as members of a particular class. Nor were they a highly politicized body, like other groups (such as the *Stahlhelm* in Germany) which sought to fashion a certain image of the Great War soldier for political reasons. On the contrary, those veterans who became the staunchest defenders of the average soldier had little in common beyond their service at the front. It was a common past, rather than anything in the present, which motivated them.

This is not to say that all veterans remembered the war in exactly the same way. The private in the ranks did not experience the same war as his divisional commander, so the two could not possibly construct the same memory. Nevertheless, both versions were built on the same assumption: that the war possessed certain positive features which offered some compensation for its horrors. The most important of these was the comradeship of soldiers. The notion of comradeship was central to the veterans' memory of the war, and the deep and enduring bond between ex-soldiers was the dominant element of veteran culture in the 1920s and 1930s (Mosse 79; Vance 126-34). As one prominent veteran leader said, soldiers were forever bound "by ties that cannot be broken but are written in blood, ties that we formed in days of trial that cannot be broken now by anything else, ties that are sacred to those who have gone and to those who still live" (*Proceedings of the 4th Convention* 102). Respect for these ties dominated the activities of veterans, who celebrated comradeship as an "equalizing treasure," to use Will Bird's phrase, that compensated for the horrors they had endured at the front (343). Comradeship was not only shared by the living, however. The communion between the survivor of the war and the fallen soldier endured, the bonds between them only strengthened by death. The survivors were determined to ensure that the fallen were not forgotten, and gradually adopted the role of custodians of the memory of their dead comrades (Leed

212). Because the fallen could not speak for themselves, the survivors had to speak for them, to ensure that their memory was not impugned or their reputation tarnished.

They were drawn to battle in 1928, by a burst of publishing activity that has since become known as the war book boom. Over the next few years, there appeared the works which have become classics of Great War literature: in 1928, Edmund Blunden's *Undertones of War*, Arnold Zweig's *The Case of Sergeant Grischa*, R.C. Sherriff's *Journey's End*; in 1929, Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Richard Aldington's *Death of a Hero*, Robert Graves's *Good-bye to All That*; and in 1930, Siegfried Sassoon's *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, Henry Tomlinson's *All Our Yesterdays*, and Henry Williamson's *A Patriot's Progress*, to name but a few.

The boom encompassed a variety of responses, from the bucolic musings of Blunden to the stridency of Aldington to the horror of Remarque. Some were clearly fictional, others obviously autobiographical, but all were lumped together into the canon of anti-war literature, which contemporary observers and later scholars, most notably Paul Fussell (whose brilliant 1975 study *The Great War and Modern Memory* re-energized the debate), characterized by its negativity. The characters are victims, trapped in a war they do not understand and dominated by forces they cannot control. Their suffering is at once monumental and insignificant. The war strips them of everything, including the dignity to suffer as individuals: instead of identity, the war gives them anonymity. They lack even the consoling hope that good will emerge from their agony, and must exist in the horrific circumstances of the trenches until death or madness releases them. Any who survive can look forward only to a life of bitterness, regret, and painful memories.

Veterans around the world reacted to the anti-war books in various ways. Many of them approved of the vision they conveyed, for it fed their disillusionment with the postwar world (Eksteins 361). However, others reacted negatively, seeing the anti-war memory as a perversion of their experience. Britain's major newspapers were deluged with complaints from enraged veterans, and Douglas Jerrold, who had served with the Royal Naval Division at Gallipoli and in France, published a stinging pamphlet entitled *The Lie About the War* which attacked them for their pretensions to historical accuracy. In New Zealand, film versions of *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *Journey's End* were banned, and there was widespread sympathy for veterans, who viewed such works as a "foul libel" on their comrades. In Australia, the Returned Soldiers' League advocated censoring war books

which were deemed to defame Australian soldiers (M. Sharpe 10; Gerster 118). In the United States, the poet Archibald MacLeish (a former infantry officer whose brother had been killed in action with the Royal Flying Corps) railed against the canon for lacking totality and balance. Life at the front did mean discomfort, agony, and death, but it also meant heroism, friendship, and humour. To emphasize the former at the expense of the latter was to distort the reality of the war (Cooperman 189).

MacLeish's response identified what was at the heart of the veterans' campaign to defend the memory of their comrades. They judged any account, be it Canadian, British, or German, on the degree to which it captured the balance of the war experience as they remembered it. When Reverend Ephram McKegney, wounded in 1918 while serving as chaplain to a Canadian infantry battalion, reminded his listeners at a 1928 Armistice Day service that to recall the terrible life at the front was also to recall the wonderful spirit of fellowship that prevailed there, he was merely expressing what many veterans had accepted as the only criterion for evaluating any memory of the war ("C.N.R. Shopmen"). Those versions which gave equal emphasis to the harrowing artillery bombardments and the rollicking evenings drinking *vin blanc* were acceptable; those which dwelt only on the horrors were invalid.

This simple formula was implicit in the judgement that Canadian veterans passed on any personal account of the war, autobiographical (like Graves's) or fictional (like Remarque's). *Shrieks and Crashes*, a memoir published in 1929 by historian and ex-artilleryman W.B. Kerr, is a case in point. Kerr is no Remarque, and the soldiers he describes are nowhere near as bleak as those in *All Quiet*. Indeed, he took pains to point out that he was not writing to "shock readers by descriptions of horrors of a length and intensity disproportionate to the actual place these filled in the minds of soldiers" (Foreword). Yet Major J.F. Cummins, who served in the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) throughout the war, criticized Kerr for not moving far enough away from the anti-war school and being overly "sombre and serious" instead of giving "a reflection of the joyous hours off duty in the villages and towns behind the guns" (262). The same criterion was applied to another memoir, James Pedley's *Only This: A War Retrospect*, a fine book that captures the totality of the war experience in unusually realistic tones. But Pedley, too, missed the mark, at least in the eyes of some veterans. He had not committed Kerr's sin of being too gloomy, but rather had stepped beyond good, clean fun into an inappropriate bawdiness. Kerr him-

self lamented Pedley's lack of imagination which led him "to see so much of the flesh, and miss so much of the spirit, of the Canadian Corps" (Kerr, "Historical Literature" 420), while Major Hamilton Warren, formerly of the 38th Battalion, thought that Pedley "showed wretched taste in the brutal frankness and perhaps prejudice" with which he handled his subject. Major Cummins also found *Only This* a bit too fleshly, and questioned the author's judgement in relating "the intimate wartime details of carousals, flirtations, and courts martial" (250).

Peregrine Acland was another soldier-novelist who fell into this trap. Acland had sailed to Europe in 1914 as a lieutenant with the 15th Battalion, serving at the front until October 1916, when he was badly wounded and invalided home. In 1929 he published *All Else Is Folly*, the semi-autobiographical tale of an eastern Canadian university student and his ruination by war. Despite a number of ringing celebrity endorsements, critical commentary was mixed. The New York *Herald Tribune* and *Evening Post* and the *Times Literary Supplement* praised the battle scenes, but felt that the love scenes were ineptly handled. The *New York Times*, however, lauded it for "showing that the men who fought . . . were occasionally able to find some hilarity in their calling" (*Book Review Digest*, 1929). For some Canadian veterans, there was a little too much hilarity. Colonel Cy Peck, the Victoria Cross winner who had commanded the 16th Battalion at the front for over two years, also praised the book's descriptions of the battlefields but lambasted Acland for having his protagonist Falcon consort with prostitutes (the subtitle was, after all, "A Tale of War and Passion"). This, felt Peck, put the author "on a level with the filth-purveyors of other nations" (7).

But Peck did not stop with Peregrine Acland, and launched a general broadside in the pages of *The Brazier*, the newsletter of the 16th Battalion Association. After considering the modern war book as a genre, Peck was discouraged by what he found: they were shot through with "morbidness and hopelessness," and said nothing about the sterling qualities exhibited by the troops in France. He insisted that their authors were "ten minute warriors" who had only a superficial knowledge of conditions at the front, and for that reason dismissed virtually every work that is now recognized as a classic of the Great War. Sherriff's *Journey's End* was a libellous slander for including a scene in which an officer has to be driven into action at gunpoint. Graves's *Good-bye to All That*, which claimed that Canadian soldiers occasionally murdered prisoners, was "the product of an unstable and degenerate mind"; interestingly, Graves himself later referred to his own

book as “a reckless autobiography . . . written with small consideration for anyone’s feelings” (Graves and Hodge 217). *All Quiet on the Western Front* was worse still. Canadian soldiers fought just as hard as the characters created by Remarque, claimed Peck, “but it did not lower their spirits or throw them into a state of agonizing gruesomeness.” Mocking the book as something that was loved by the “smart set” who talk about its naughtiness and “think themselves quite the wickedest things that ever were,” he found nothing whatsoever redeeming in it. It was “printed putridness,” he snorted.

The most revealing comments on anti-war literature, however, came not from former officers but from two rankers. F.W. Bagnall, a native of Hazel Grove, Prince Edward Island, had enlisted in September 1914, rose to the rank of sergeant, and was wounded and invalided home before the end of the war. In a bitter and confused memoir which he published privately in 1933, he lashed out at the “continual calumnies and a succession of lies [*sic*]” contained in films about the war (he was likely referring to the screen version of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, released in 1930) (54). Bagnall felt aggrieved that he had fought “doggedly against every form of discomfort living in ditches, only to be held up to the eyes of even your own people as belonging to a group who were as pictured on the screen horribly depraved” (70). This point, if expressed rather clumsily, was central to the veterans’ argument. For Bagnall, it was not a matter of interpretation. The anti-war memory was not just a different perception of events; it was simply a series of malicious falsehoods that constituted a personal attack on the individual soldier. Each time *All Quiet on the Western Front* was sold or its film version screened, it was a libel upon Bagnall, and upon every Canadian veteran. There was no question of competing but equally valid memories; there was a right memory, and anything which did not conform to it was vicious, hurtful, and false.

Will R. Bird, who was decorated for gallantry as a member of the 42nd Battalion, felt the same frustration as Bagnall. Now known primarily as a folklorist, Bird had a thriving career in the interwar period as the unofficial bard of the CEF. He published five books and hundreds of short stories, articles, and poems about his wartime experiences, and his work shares some similarities with Pedley’s. He does not gloss over the horrors of war, nor does he suggest that his comrades were saints in khaki. He describes the abject terror of enduring an artillery bombardment and the bitterness of seeing officers dine from china and starched tablecloths while the soldiers ate cold, greasy stew from battered tins, yet he also recalls hilarious evenings spent in local *estaminets* and the idealism of soldiers who emerged from the inferno

with spirit and soul intact. The immense popularity of Bird's works among veterans suggests that he came closest to capturing the proper balance.

Like Bagnall, Bird had no time for anti-war books, which he claimed were "putrid with so-called 'realism.'" Such books, Bird wrote in his memoir *And We Go On*, portrayed the soldier

as a coarse-minded, profane creature, seeking only the solace of loose women or the courage of strong liquor. Vulgar language and indelicacy of incident are often their substitute for lack of knowledge, and their distorted pictures of battle action are especially repugnant. On the whole, such literature, offered to our avid youth, is an irrevocable insult to those gallant men who lie in French and Belgian graves. (5)

His own book strove for a more balanced picture. It showed that "the private in the trenches had other thoughts than of the flesh, had often finer vision and strength of soul than those who would fit him to their sordid, sensation-seeking fiction" (5).

In asserting that vulgarity was a substitute for knowledge, Bird made an explicit claim for the veracity of his own memory: because he had seen action himself, his memory of the trenches was accurate. When conflicting memories emerged, there was only one possible explanation: their authors had not experienced life in the trenches, so their memory must be fabricated. Bird also introduced the notion that there was only one memory of the war that could honour the dead. His book, because it was true, was a fitting tribute to Canada's fallen. The memory contained in anti-war novels, because it was fabricated, was akin to spitting on their graves. If that was not enough, this memory was fabricated for commercial reasons; its authors were "sensation-seekers" willing to defile the name of the dead for fame and fortune, an accusation that may have had some merit (Bance). In contrast, Bird's memory was the truth, and truth, not profit, must be the real goal of any writer.

The various threads of the veterans' critique of anti-war literature came together in the response to the novel *Generals Die in Bed*, written by an obscure Jewish American novelist named Charles Yale Harrison. The novel is widely regarded as the finest Canadian example of the genre, and is often cited as an authentic and evocative description of the trench experience (Novak 60-70). Yet when it first appeared in 1930, it immediately became a lightning rod that drew Canadian veterans into a bitter debate over the relationship between literature and history.

Since the book's first publication, some confusion has surrounded the background of its author, confusion that has been perpetuated by recent

publicity materials. A native of Philadelphia, Harrison emigrated to Canada before the beginning of the war; the biographical sketch that has long accompanied the novel claimed that he joined the staff of a Montreal newspaper, but on his enlistment papers, he gave his occupation as student. In January 1917, Harrison volunteered for the 244th Battalion, proceeding overseas in March. He was posted to the 14th Battalion in France in December 1917. Reviews have also noted that Harrison was decorated for gallantry; he was not, although he did have a few brushes with military police over minor infractions before being wounded at Amiens in August 1918 and returning to Montreal. Harrison spent only a short time in Canada after the war, before moving to New York City in the early 1920s. He then began a manuscript which he entitled *Generals Die in Bed*. Extracts from it were serialized in various magazines as early as 1928, but the entire manuscript was rejected when Harrison first offered it to New York publishers. It was eventually accepted by Williams and Norgate, a small English publisher, which released it on 13 May 1930. The American edition, published by William Morrow, appeared on 12 June 1930.

The novel begins in a Montreal barrack room, where the narrator and his fellow recruits are recuperating from a bender before embarking for Britain. The scene then shifts immediately to the trenches, where the characters undergo a succession of ordeals, each more brutalizing than the last—an artillery bombardment, a trench raid, and finally the major offensive in which the narrator is wounded, and thereby escapes from the trenches. Along the way, the narrator watches his pals die in horrific circumstances, joins in a looting spree in the deserted city of Arras, and bayonets a German soldier, only to discover that he cannot dislodge the blade from his victim's chest. Through it all, Harrison writes in uncompromising prose—sharp, staccato sentences, visceral descriptors, and powerful imagery.

But these were the characteristics of much of the anti-war canon, and some critics believed that Harrison said nothing that had not already been said by more capable authors. The *New Statesman* called *Generals Die in Bed* “a poison memory which the author had to expel from his system,” while *Outlook* decided that it suffered from “constant literary explosiveness” (*Book Review Digest*, 1931). Henry Williamson, who had himself contributed a better book to the canon, called it a “hotch-potch . . . which out-farted the curtain pole to such an extent that the *Daily Mail* in a leading article called for its withdrawal”; Williamson admitted that he did not quite understand his own phraseology, which he had borrowed from elsewhere (qtd. in Onions, 50). The book,

however, was guaranteed a rougher ride in Canada. Because it alleged that members of the 14th Battalion had pillaged Arras and often murdered prisoners, *Generals Die in Bed* was bound to raise the ire of Canadian veterans.

Many of them took Bird's lead and denounced Harrison's divergent memory as complete fabrication, while other ex-soldiers took up Bagnall's argument that the book's falsehoods constituted a kind of libel. Veterans' groups deluged politicians with complaints and demanded that the government ban the book on account of its "many libellous statements" about Canadian soldiers; distribution of the book in Canada was indeed delayed after the Minister of National Revenue, W.D. Euler, agreed to launch an enquiry into allegations that it slandered Canadian soldiers. Sir Archibald Macdonell, a former divisional commander, became almost apoplectic with rage when he read it. "I hope to live long enough to have the opportunity of (in good trench language) shoving my fist into that s-- of a b-- Harrison's tummy until his guts hang out of his mouth!!!" Macdonell fumed to Sir Arthur Currie, the former commander of the Canadian Corps.¹

Currie's initial reaction was a little calmer. Shortly before the book appeared in Canada, he had won a libel judgement against an Ontario newspaper, an action he had pursued in part because he believed that allegations about his conduct of operations around Mons in November 1918 reflected badly upon the men who had served under him in the Canadian Corps. The trial took a toll on his health, yet Currie considered it worthwhile because it put to rest decade-old insinuations that had cast a cloud over the CEF's achievements. When Harrison's book appeared and threatened to tarnish the reputations he had struggled to defend, he must have been much distressed. However, Currie usually declined to respond to allegations contained in novels. Earlier, the editor of the *Presbyterian Witness* had requested an article refuting the charges made in Graves's *Good-bye to All That*, but Currie replied that "the reputation of the Canadian soldier stands too high for me to rush into print to defend them, not from charges, but from certain insinuations made in a novel." When *Generals Die in Bed* burst on the scene, Currie refused a similar invitation from a Toronto newspaper, observing that Harrison "most probably wrote the book for the sole purpose of making money and therefore has provided sensational chapters, knowing that that is what appeals to the public, who prefer always to hear the evil rather than the good" (Letter to Oliver).

Currie's reply was evidently written before he had actually read *Generals Die in Bed*. Having done so, the general could scarcely contain his anger. It

was “a mass of filth, lies and appeals to everything base and mean and nasty,” he raged to Macdonell. “A more scurrilous thing was never published. . . . It appeals to the worst appetite that can be found. . . . The book is badly titled, has a weak style, no worth while matter, is full of vile and misrepresentation, and cannot have any lasting influence.” While Currie was perhaps not the soundest authority on literary style, he certainly had a right to comment on the title, and was likely thinking of two old friends and fellow commanders who had not died in bed: Major-General Malcolm Mercer, killed in action at Mount Sorrel in June 1916 while leading the 3rd Division; and Major-General Louis Lipsett, killed in action in September 1918 shortly after leaving the 3rd Division. This may explain the personal edge to Currie’s bitter comments on *Generals Die in Bed*. “There is not a single line in it worth reading, nor a single incident worthy of record,” he wrote. “I have never read, nor do I hope ever to read, a meaner, nastier and more foul book” (qtd. in R. Sharpe 76).

Why did Canadian veterans, from the lowly ranker to his Corps Commander, react so strongly against *Generals Die in Bed*, and against all those books which comprised the canon of anti-war literature, even those which made no reference to Canada? It seems unlikely that they united to defend establishment values or the social hierarchy against threats posed by these books. It would be difficult to find any social, political, or economic factors that could have drawn together such diverse individuals as the bitter ex-sergeant F.W. Bagnall, the small-town cleric Ephram McKeegney, and the revered old soldier Sir Arthur Currie. Nevertheless, these veterans, regardless of their social status or economic situation, criticized the anti-war canon in strikingly similar terms.

In the first place, they invariably dismissed the books as falsifications of history: because anti-war books failed to recount the good times along with the bad, their vision of the war experience was untrue. The fact that their authors had, in general, as much experience in the trenches as their strongest critics was irrelevant; because it was divergent, their memory could only be fabricated. In this regard, Harrison’s book, which so riled Canadian veterans, can serve as a useful case study. Ex-soldiers alleged that much of the book was complete fabrication. To what degree were they right? Did the incidents that Harrison described so vividly spring from his own experience, or were they invented, perhaps inspired (as alleged by some European critics who dismissed Harrison’s work as derivative) by other war novels he had read?

Fortunately, Harrison's service record and the war diaries of the 244th and 14th Battalions allow us to answer these questions by comparing the historical record to the events described by the narrator. Clearly, portions of the book do correspond with what Harrison experienced. The general description of the 244th Battalion's departure from Montreal rings true, given the unit's history. It was not an especially successful battalion, and the officers may well have had difficulty rounding up the men for embarkation; when it left Montreal, it was only about sixty per cent of its authorized strength. And, while the novel's chronology does not match Harrison's (the narrator reaches the trenches in September 1917, but Harrison did not enter the lines until 15 December 1917), it is certain that he did experience a number of the events he describes, including the trench raid, the bombardment, and the major offensive. All of these occurred while Harrison was with the 14th Battalion, and his descriptions have a vividness that is ultimately convincing, even if we admit that Harrison actually spent very little time (forty-three days) in the front lines.

However, a number of other elements are clearly invented. Although the relevant chapter is plausible enough, Harrison never enjoyed leave to London from the trenches; he simply did not put in enough service in the lines to merit leave. It is also worth noting that, while he used the real names of men from his unit in the novel, he changed their identities, probably to open up dramatic possibilities by filling his fictional platoon with a broader range of personalities. Furthermore, there is no evidence to support two of the most contentious elements of the book: the description of the looting of Arras by Canadian troops, and the accusation that the hospital ship *Llandovery Castle*, torpedoed in June 1918 with a full complement of medical personnel on board, was carrying military cargo in contravention of international law. These elements of the novel, it must be admitted, are completely fabricated. Finally, the narrator's wound that puts him out of action is rather more serious than the wound which knocked Harrison out of the war. As the narrator describes it, "My right foot feels numb. I look at it; it is spurting a ruby fountain . . . an artery must be cut" (259-60). Harrison did take a bullet in the foot at Amiens in August 1918, but his medical records characterize it as merely a minor flesh wound; "slight" and "superficial" are the adjectives used.

But so what? This exercise merely confirms that Harrison wrote like a novelist, combining his own experience with the products of his imagination to produce a dramatic narrative; indeed, condemning novels like

Generals Die in Bed for not adhering to historical fact seems to be missing the point. But within the contemporary debate as it was structured by veterans on both sides, this was precisely the point. On the one hand, the novelists and their publishers claimed that these works were historically accurate. They purported to tell “the truth about the war,” something the press generally took at face value. The reviewer for the *New York Times*, for example, was non-committal about the enduring literary merit of *Generals Die in Bed*, but was certain that it would live on as “a burning, breathing historical document” (Woodman 55). Indeed, when the novel first appeared in the paper’s “Latest Books Received” section, it was listed under History and Biography, not Fiction (“Latest”). The book’s most recent publisher has continued this trend: its website offers suggestions for using the novel in history classes as historical document (“Teachers Guides”).

Yet the war novelists did not see themselves as constrained by the conventions of history, feeling at liberty to exercise, in the words of one modern critic, “fiction’s teleological right to exclude ordinary everyday elements which are redundant to its theme” (Onions 64-66). Joyous nights in Belgian *estaminets* undoubtedly occurred but were irrelevant to a novel dedicated, as Harrison’s was, to the “bewildered youth” of all armies. So, he felt warranted in omitting them. For many veterans, such omissions were unacceptable. Because this genre of literature pretended to be history, they felt quite justified in judging it as such. The literary merit of the books became irrelevant; they were simply bad history. Furthermore, suggestions in the press that “people prefer to take their histories of the war in the form of fiction” made the veterans’ choice appear all the more sensible (McAree). Since novelists were going to claim their works were history and since readers were going to use fiction as history, veterans felt justified in criticizing fiction as history.

The other common thread in the veterans’ critique was the assertion that the anti-war books were libellous. They offended Canadian veterans for the same reason that they impressed later critics: because they universalized the experience of the trenches. Harrison’s Broadbent and Remarque’s Paul Bäumer might have served in any army, for they represented the suffering of millions of soldiers from all nations, including Canada. This, of course, was precisely the objection. As Bagnall had argued, universalization was in fact defamation: these books tarred Canadian soldiers with the sins of others by claiming that, like all soldiers, the men of the CEF had been brutalized and dehumanized by war. The anti-war vision suggested that the war stripped

soldiers of their identity, transforming them into pawns whose life, suffering, and death were of little consequence to anyone. Many veterans found this vision unpalatable. Instead of rational, purposeful human beings, it made them dupes of forces they could not hope to understand, much less control. They did not want to be identified as anonymous victims sacrificed in a pointless slaughter, nor did they want to share guilt by association in crimes committed by their semi-fictional counterparts.

Moreover, the anti-war books cast doubt on the very thing that many soldiers valued most highly from their wartime odyssey: the gift of comradeship. Especially as the interwar years passed, when the material rewards for service were few and society seemed to have little concern for the values that the war had ostensibly been fought to defend, the soldier could look upon the comradeship of the trenches as a reward in itself. However, by averring that the soldier took nothing of value from his trench experience, the anti-war books threatened to deny that one bit of comfort that remained. Instead of characterizing veterans as a band of brothers whose comradeship and courage triumphed over war and death, Harrison's narrator observed sourly that "*camaraderie—esprit de corps—good fellowship—these are the words for journalists to use, not for us. Here in the line they do not exist*" (91). Instead of recognizing the "equalizing treasure" of friendship, to use Bird's phrase (343), the anti-war books spoke of "a generation of men who, even though they may have escaped its shells, were destroyed by the war" (Remarque, dedication). In this vision, there could be no happy evenings spent in Belgian *estaminets*, no days passed lounging in the sun as they rested in a rear-area billet, none of those memories which dominated the culture of the veteran movement in the interwar era. For denying everything that they celebrated, many ex-soldiers considered the anti-war vision to be beyond the pale.

In May 1930, at the height of the storm over *Generals Die in Bed*, Charles Yale Harrison was asked to comment on the backlash against his book. When the Toronto *Daily Star* located Harrison, he was working for the *Bronx Home News* in New York City, "as a newspaperman, not a journalist," he said revealingly. The "youthful author" denied that he had slandered Canadian soldiers, insisting that to do so "would be to smear at myself." On the contrary, he wanted it noted that the Canadian Corps was the finest fighting unit in the field: "Vimy Ridge, Passchendaele, Ypres, the Somme, Cambrai and Mons speak for themselves." As for the allegations that Canadian troops had looted Arras, Harrison stood by his story, but added a

significant caveat: “realizing the circumstances under which the town was looted, I did not consider that this in any way reflects upon the heroism and courage of the Canadian troops” (“Denies New War Book”).

In this interview, Harrison implicitly conceded what his harshest critics had been arguing all along: that there was a balance missing from his book, and by extension from anti-war literature generally. No one, least of all a veteran, denied that the soldier at the front had endured horrors which surpassed the imagination. But, they insisted, the war had not been without positive features; the success of the Canadian Corps in battle was one, the heroism and courage of Canadian soldiers was another. Although his novel contains no hint of these compensating factors, Harrison recognized them in this short interview, using phrases that would never have been uttered by the characters he created.

Harrison’s admission did little to quell the outrage, but he and the other authors who wrote in the same genre had the last laugh. Were they alive today, Will Bird, Cy Peck, and Arthur Currie would be dismayed by the literary landscape of the Great War. Bird’s *And We Go On*, widely regarded by veterans as the most authentic of Great War memoirs, virtually disappeared after it was first published in 1930. Clarke Irwin released a much less interesting version, entitled *Ghosts Have Warm Hands*, in 1968, but the original remains all but unobtainable. The anti-war books, on the other hand, have held sway for more than seventy years. *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *Good-bye to All That* are enshrined as modern classics, and *Generals Die in Bed* has become a staple of undergraduate literature, and indeed history, courses. More notably, it has recently been released in a new edition for teenagers, and has been favourably reviewed as a powerful, evocative, and informative work for young readers.² Debates over the veracity of these books now seem quaint and outdated, rendered irrelevant by the recognition of their literary qualities. And yet the story of the Great War novel is a cautionary tale, reminding us that the relationship between literature, history, and memory is far more complicated than it often appears.

An earlier version of this paper was presented to the Centre for the Study of Historical Consciousness at the University of British Columbia. The author would like to thank Richard Holt for access to his research on Harrison’s service career, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council for financial support.

NOTES

- 1 I have engaged in a more detailed discussion of the reaction of ex-soldiers to Harrison's work in *Death So Noble* (193-96).
- 2 The Annick Press website (www.annickpress.com) quotes from various reviews praising *Generals Die in Bed*.

WORKS CITED

- Bagnall, F.W. *Not Mentioned in Despatches*. Vancouver: North Shore, 1933.
- Bance, A.F. "Im Westen Nichts Neues: A Bestseller in Context." *Modern Language Review* 72 (1977): 359-73.
- Bird, Will. *And We Go On*. Toronto: Hunter Rose, 1930.
- The Book Review Digest: Books of 1929*. New York: H.W. Wilson, 1930.
- The Book Review Digest: Books of 1930*. New York: H.W. Wilson, 1931.
- "C.N.R. Shopmen Hold Memorial." *Free Press* [London] 9 Nov. 1928: 4.
- Cooperman, Stanley. *World War I and the American Novel*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1967.
- Cummins, J.F. Rev. of *Shrieks and Crashes*, by W.B. Kerr. *Canadian Defence Quarterly* 7 (1930): 262.
- Currie, Sir Arthur. Letter to Douglas Oliver. 7 June 1930. Sir Arthur Currie Papers, vol. 12, f. 37. National Archives of Canada.
- . Letter to *Presbyterian Witness*. 14 January 1930. Sir Arthur Currie Papers, vol. 8, f. 23. National Archives of Canada.
- . Letter to A.C. Macdonell. 25 June 1930. Sir Arthur Currie Papers, vol. 11, f. 33. National Archives of Canada.
- "Denies New War Book Slanders Canadians." *Daily Star* [Toronto] 31 May 1930: 3.
- Eksteins, Modris. "All Quiet on the Western Front and the Fate of a War." *Journal of Contemporary History* 15 (1980): 345-66.
- Fussell, Paul. *The Great War and Modern Memory*. New York: Oxford UP, 1975.
- Gerster, Robin. *Big-noting: The Heroic Theme in Australian War Writing*. Melbourne: Melbourne UP, 1987.
- Graves, Robert, and Alan Hodge. *The Long Week-End: A Social History of Great Britain, 1918- 1939*. London: Faber, 1940.
- Harrison, Charles Yale. *Generals Die in Bed*. 1930. Waterdown, ON: Potlatch Publications, 1975.
- Jerrold, Douglas. *The Lie About the War*. London: Faber, 1930.
- Kerr, W.B. *Shrieks and Crashes: Being Memories of Canada's Corps, 1917*. Toronto: Hunter Rose, 1929.
- . "Historical Literature on Canada's Participation in the Great War." *Canadian Historical Review* 14 (1933): 412-36.
- "Latest Books Received." *New York Times* 15 June 1930: BR11.
- Leed, Eric. *No Man's Land: Combat and Identity in World War I*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1979.
- Macdonell, A.C. "The Canadian Soldier—As I Knew Him on the Western Front." *Queen's Quarterly* 28 (1921): 339-50.
- . Letter to Sir Arthur Currie. 26 June 1930. Sir Arthur Currie Papers, vol. 11, f. 33. National Archives of Canada.

- McAree, J.V. "Recalling Exploits of Canada's Army." *Globe and Mail* 15 July 1938: 6.
- Mosse, George. *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990.
- Novak, Dagmar. *Dubious Glory: The Two World Wars and the Canadian Novel*. New York: Peter Lang, 2000.
- Oliver, Douglas. Letter to Sir Arthur Currie. 4 June 1930. Sir Arthur Currie Papers, vol. 12, f. 37. National Archives of Canada.
- Onions, John. *English Fiction and Drama of the Great War, 1918-39*. London: Macmillan, 1990.
- Peck, Cyrus. "Modern War Books." *The Brazier* 18 (1930): 7.
- Pedley, James. *Only This: A War Retrospect*. Ottawa, ON: Graphic, 1927.
- Proceedings of the 4th Convention of the Army and Navy Veterans in Canada, Toronto, Ontario, October 25th to 29th, 1921*. [Toronto, 1921?].
- Remarque, Erich Maria. *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Trans. A.W. Wheen. Boston: Little, Brown, 1929.
- Sharpe, Maureen. "Anzac Day in New Zealand: 1916 to 1939." *New Zealand Journal of History* 15 (1981): 97-114.
- Sharpe, Robert. *The Last Day, The Last Hour: The Currie Libel Trial*. Toronto: Carswell, 1988.
- "Teachers Guides." *Annick Press*. 28 May 2003. <<http://annickpress.com/forteachers/generalsdieinbed.html>>.
- Vance, Jonathan F. *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning and the First World War*. Vancouver: U of British Columbia P, 1997.
- Warren, Hamilton. Letter to R.B. Viets. 14 December 1927. R.B. Viets Papers, f. 5. National Archives of Canada.
- Woodman, Lawrence. "And Still the Great War Thunders in Literature." Rev. of *Generals Die in Bed*, by Charles Yale Harrison. *New York Times* 30 Aug. 1930: 55.

