

# Bugging With History

## Sexual Warfare and Historical Reconstruction in Timothy Findley's *The Wars*

the past is the fiction of the present  
— MICHEL DE CERTEAU *The Writing of History*

In 1901, Henry James wrote to Sarah Orne Jewett: “The ‘historical’ novel is, for me, condemned . . . to a fatal *cheapness*.” However careful the historical background, says James, “the whole effect is as nought . . . it’s all humbug” (202-03). James’s unease with the cheapness and humbuggery of the “historical novel” evidences its position between seemingly opposing genres: a location at once liable to a certain fictional “cheapness” in its reliance on “fact” and catcalls of historical ineptness in its reliance on “fiction.” It is a genre between genres that will not make up its mind. But, as the epigram from de Certeau prefacing this essay suggests, history itself is by no means a stable base of fact, but is rather a fiction created by the subjective and thesis-driven ways in which we reconstruct the past into the history *we need* for the present. As Linda Hutcheon echoes: “The meaning of the past is not coherent, continuous, or unified—until we make it so” (16). And it is this “we” we must pay attention to. Astride this study of the relationship between the writer and his present epoch and how this relationship shapes his constructions of history—where the present, through the trickery of the past tense, becomes a “distant mirror” (Cowart 8)—I would like to discuss Timothy Findley’s *The Wars*.

Richard Dellamora, describing Findley’s unique position within the Canadian canon, states that “Writing from a minority subject-position has provided a location from which, without expatriating himself, Findley can contest the cultural and sexual politics of Anglo-Canadian hegemony” (177). Within this category of “minority subject-position”—what Findley himself

calls his “*aberrant*” position (“My Final Hour” 6)—I want to place the author of *The Wars* as a gay male writer. And although this categorization seems both lavishly vague and critically reductive, it remains vital that we understand the differing social responsibilities and weights of each of these words—“gay,” “male” and “writer”—and how they each, and collectively, contribute to Findley’s rewriting of the First World War. From this reconstruction of Findley’s own history perhaps we can appreciate and critically understand some of the sexual wars from which *The Wars* originates.

Findley’s purpose in *The Wars* is not the homosexualization of history, nor is it a fiction of recuperation whereby homosexuals from a previous time are “outed,” anachronistically, by the present. Rather, *The Wars* explores the queer erotics, both loving and violent, inherent in male-male bonds especially heightened in the greatest of “homosocial” (Sedgwick, *Between Men* 1) events, war. I want first to examine how the novel reveals an architectural break between pre-war male relations and war-time male relations and to document Robert Ross’s voyage through the novel and his slow accretion of “manhood.”<sup>1</sup> Secondly, I would like to investigate *The Wars* as a study in effacement whereby Findley posits his “fictional history” as generic, that is, the construction of an ahistoric and almost unknowable researcher. It is through this circuitous displacement that Findley escapes while covering his political behind, as it were. Yet, I would argue, this displacement leaves the novel scarred with an uneasiness that this “behind” may be uncovered and the novel exposed as a thesis-driven fiction produced by a gay male writer belonging as much to the 1970s as it does to the First World War.<sup>2</sup>

### **Findley’s War-Erotica**

In *Inside Memory*, Findley relates a discussion with Margaret Laurence over the problematics of the rape-scene in *The Wars*. Findley tells Laurence that “It has to be there because it is my belief that Robert Ross and his generation of young men were raped, in effect, by the people who made that war. Basically, their fathers did it to them.”<sup>3</sup> He argues further: “I cannot remove it. As a scene, it is intrinsic—deeply meshed in the fabric of the book as I first conceived it” (151). Findley’s insistence on the rape-scene and its significance to the total construction of the novel has been left, though not untouched, somewhat neglected.<sup>4</sup> However, Findley’s conception of violence and violation combined with the supposedly allegorical nature of his sexual metaphor (where rape reveals a “higher” social and moral injustice)

enmeshes the book not only in a constant play of what I would call war-erotica but also in a construction of male-male relations before and after the start of the First World War.

Findley makes explicit the connections between sex and violence when, near the start of the narrative, Robert Ross's beloved sister Rowena falls to her death while her "guardian" Robert "was locked in his bedroom. Making love to his pillows" (21). The juxtaposition of the sister's death with Robert's masturbation sets a discomfiting tone which much of the book will echo. Mrs. Ross's subsequent demand that Robert be the one to kill Rowena's rabbits—"BECAUSE HE LOVED HER" (24)—intensifies this psychological link: just as Robert's masturbation *seems* the cause of his sister's death, so his mother, in a similar psychological fusion, connects the rabbits with the cause or at least the result of her daughter's accident. This association between violence, death and sex becomes the filter through which Robert reads any ensuing sexual activity.

Only fifteen pages later this formulating link becomes a palimpsest in which sex and war become so intertwined as to leave little distinction between the two. During his training at Lethbridge, Robert encounters Eugene Taffler, a seasoned soldier who had already been wounded in France, who Robert quickly realizes is "the model he could emulate" (35). It is also at this time that Robert and some fellow soldiers make a trip to the nearby "Lousetown" and the brothel fittingly nicknamed "Wet Goods." Here Robert meets the prostitute Ella and, after some nervous dancing, they proceed "up the stairs" to the encouraging chant: "Enjoy. Enjoy" (40). After some initial complications and embarrassments—namely Robert's premature ejaculation—Ella reveals to Robert a hole in the wall through which they view the couple in the next room. Through this hole Robert watches his hero Eugene Taffler and "the Swede" (40):

There were certainly two naked people—but all he could see at first was backs and arms and legs. Whoever it was who was there was standing in the middle of the floor hitting whoever else was there. . . . He'd never even dreamed of such a thing—of being hit and wanting to be hit. Beaten. Or of striking someone else because they'd asked you to. (44)

Fittingly, Robert views this scene of sado-masochistic beating through a hole in the wall, like a camera's aperture or an orifice. Stunned and confused by the tangle of "backs and arms and legs" and two people willingly beating each other, Robert cannot imagine what is taking place before him.

Findley invites a comparison to rape by layering the scene with a sense of sexual violation. Ella physically “forces” Robert to watch: “[her] hand remained on the back of his neck so he couldn’t step aside, even if he’d wanted to” (44). In addition, this scene of sexual violation occurs on the night of Robert’s supposed introduction to manhood and the ceremonial loss of virginity, a ceremony interrupted by Robert’s “coming” up the stairs. Ironically, Robert does not lose his virginity with Ella, the “whore” (41), but rather he loses his already battered sexual innocence in his inverted position as viewer penetrated through a “camouflaged hole” by the disquieting image of Taffler and the Swede—“he wondered what it was she meant to do with him and what sort of perversion this was” (44). This episode is made even more violating through the use of what Victor Shklovsky calls the “naive observer focalization.” Writing of Shklovsky, Vladimir Tumanov states that “when a phenomenon familiar to the reader is presented directly through the eyes of a character unfamiliar with this phenomenon,” defamiliarization—that is, shock—is achieved (Tumanov 110). The reader, in effect, becomes surprised by what may not surprise him through a process of empathetic reading just as Taffler and the Swede are made all the more shocking by Robert’s reaction. The use of the naive observer cloaks this scene in an air of violation.

Findley’s use of the naive young viewer spying a scene of “preposterous pleasure” (Cleland 157) through a hole in the wall recalls another familiar scene of so-called male “sexual impropriety” in John Cleland’s *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*. The parallels between *The Wars* and *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* not only establish a literary link to the tradition of the *risqué* but also partially feminize Robert Ross (Ross’s fear of feminization entails much of his “horror” in the Taffler and Swede episode) and reinforce his sexual *naïveté*. Fanny Hill, that immortal libertine, spies “two young sparks romping, and pulling one another about” in what at first seems like innocent play but soon develops into amorous love. Fanny watches all she can stand before jumping down from her stool to “raise the house upon them” but she falls on her face and passes out long enough for the perpetrators of “so criminal a scene” to escape (159). Findley’s brothel scene not only alludes to Cleland’s but seems indebted to its very structures. Just as Fanny is overwhelmed by a confusion of faces, fronts and backs (Fanny suggests of one of the perpetrators that “if he was like his mother behind, he was like his father before,” that is, he was like his father’s *front* in the *front* and like

his mother's *front* in the *back*),<sup>5</sup> so Ross seems equally confused by the ever reversing roles of hero/enemy, top/bottom, passive/active, viewer/viewed, penetrated/penetrator, feminine/masculine. The homosexual scene presents such a distortion of binary logic as to render it almost impenetrable in its myriad of reversals. Findley gives both Ross and the reader, fused in their mutual roles as "viewer," an unsolvable conundrum of dissatisfied binaries.

Just as Cleland's scene begins with some light foreplay, Findley's scene soon progresses from its strange "fight" to overt consummation:

One was lying on his back with his back arched off the mattress while the other sat astride his groin exactly like a rider. The one who played the horse was bucking—lifting his torso high off the bed, lifting the weight of the rider with his shoulders and his knees—and bucking, just like the mustangs Robert and the others had broken in the summer. . . . both horse and rider—were staring into one another's eyes with an intensity unlike any other Robert had ever seen in a human face. Panic. (44-5)

The image of horse and rider become inextricably confused with the image of "the Swede" astride Taffler's groin; Robert cannot deal with the shattering violation of his hero, Taffler, "the model he could emulate" (35), having sex with another man and so seems to couch the scene in a metaphor of militaristic coupling. And yet this metaphoric construction is not completely Robert's own but integral to the scene itself where "[t]he rider was using a long silk scarf as reins" and "a soldier's stiff-peaked cap [to] beat the horse on the thighs" (45). Findley advances this disturbing figuration by having Taffler, whom Ross earlier compared to "David" (35) ridden by "Goliath" (45), in a queer inversion of the David and Goliath story. Yet "Goliath," if I am reading the positioning right, is penetrated by "David." Ross's hierarchical imagining of Taffler as epitome of heroic manhood becomes completely reversed with the hero ridden by the "enemy" yet reversed again, if we attach any power to the passive and active positions (where passive "equals" feminine "equals" submissive), with the "enemy" penetrated by the hero. The register of the heroic becomes strangely reversed and re-reversed in a moebius loop of tops and bottoms.

A chain reaction of violent confusion ensues and, from the hierarchical complexities of the homosexual coupling, culminates in Ross's reaction of vehement and baffled disavowal. After witnessing Taffler and the Swede, Ross, in the fit of what Eva-Marie Kröller calls "a man driven to near-madness by vertigo" (70), throws his "boot across the room and shatter[s] the mirror" (45), just as, only pages before, Ross had witnessed Taffler "throwing

stones at a row of bottles lined up on a board” (33).<sup>6</sup> Taffler’s throwing parallels and unites Ross’s own in a “mirror” image Ross cannot understand and so must shatter and destroy. In effect, Ross uneasily *becomes* Taffler and mimics his positioning; he penetrates the sodomitical scene with his view but is in turn *overridden* by its disruptive confusion of roles and its destabilization of hero/enemy hierarchical binaries. Findley challenges the reader to explicate this scene: is Ross’s violence an expression of disgust or of repressed attraction? is Ross a “real man” though he has not lost his virginity or is he, by his witnessing of Taffler, something “other”? who is “winning” between Taffler and the Swede? who is, metaphorically, on top? David or Goliath? The homosexual scene effects a queer breakdown of meaning and the reading process is set on its back with this plurality of signification emanating from a climax of clashing symbolic structures. In this one scene, Findley gives us images of horses, warfare, love, photography, mirrors, broken glass, and throwing which are all symbolic structures expanded elsewhere.

This sometimes bewildering construction of war-erotica is employed again when, after his near death escape from a gas attack, Ross shoots a German sniper:

The shot that had killed him rang around and around the crater like a marble in a bowl. Robert thought it would never stop. He scrambled for the brink only in order to escape it and Bates had to pull him over the edge, falling back with Robert on top of him. The warmth of Bates’s body was a shock and the two men lay in one another’s arms for almost a minute before Robert moved. (130)

What had begun as a shooting ends with something like a post-coital embrace. Findley collides the two registers of war and love so that the two, *vis-à-vis* each other, become as indistinguishable as the image of Ross on top looking at Bates. The proverbial act that makes Robert finally a soldier and, therefore, a man, the killing of the enemy, is closely followed by an act that almost undoes everything the previous scene had tried to create. Robert makes himself a soldier but comes dangerously close to crossing the “shocking” line between a social and sexual embrace, a line which for Ross has not yet become firmly entrenched. As Ross states after his rape at Desolé: “[He] wished with all his heart that men could embrace. But he knew now they couldn’t. Mustn’t” (171). In his progression through the novel, Ross slowly learns the architecture of what he understands to be manliness: manliness is fighting “Tom Bryant” (19), a man he’d never seen, for a woman Ross didn’t love; manliness is not writing “love” on a letter, “It seemed unmanly” (51); manliness is

having sex with a “whore”; manliness is knowing the strict lines that exist between social and sexual interests; manliness is, after his rape, knowing what else men could not only do to each other but do to him.<sup>7</sup>

Yet *The Wars* not only documents Robert Ross’s learning of manliness, but also constructs an opposition between pre-war and wartime male-male relationships. Findley engineers a structure in which a large gap exists between the ideal homosocial relationships among men before the war and violent homosexual relationships after its start.<sup>8</sup> Homosocial relations in the novel before the war, such as those between Robert and Harris (they were both soldiers but had not yet been to the front) and Jamie Villiers and Clive d’Orsey, where every action seems to be on the verge of the sexual yet sex is never mentioned, seem never to have the same atmosphere of violence around them. If anything they are pseudo-portraits of the “bourgeois homosexual” exposed and established by the trials of Oscar Wilde at the turn of the century;<sup>9</sup> the clichéd “sensitive men” who loved men as an expression of some heightened sense of aesthetics. As Lady Juliet d’Orsey states: “the fact is that extremely physical men like Robert and Jamie and Taffler are often extremely sensitive men as well”: they “seek beauty through perfection” (103). This highly idealized vision of pre-war male relations, of course, belies many of the repercussions that sex scandals had on the labelling and control of “perverse” male sexuality; a sexuality which had only recently, according to Foucault, been given the medicalized taxonomy of “species” (43). Yet, this idyllic view changes drastically when Findley actually presents us with men having sex, and it should be noted that all homosexual encounters in the book occur between “soldiers,” such as Taffler, and Ross, who had been to the front or are at the front; sex itself becomes synonymous with war.

Findley’s novel conflates war and sex on different allegorical scales: one takes place on the human body, the other on the social. Pages after Robert’s rape where “[a]ll he could feel was the shape of the man who entered him and the terrible strength of the force with which it was done” (169), the narrator describes what “was to be the most determined push the British had made on the salient” (172): “penetration” becomes both a sexual endeavor and a military maneuver. In the same way, Frank Davey describes how the penis in *The Wars* is continually figured as “a misfiring gun, a weapon that kills unpredictably and indiscriminately” (119).<sup>10</sup> The body becomes the site of a dialectical tension between its function *in* the war and its function *as a*

figuration of the war. But also, and problematically, violent sex seems predominantly a product of homosexuality, a sexuality, as Robert learns, that must be feared. Or, perhaps, the violent homosexual encounters we see in *The Wars* result from a violence inherent in any war-time expression of male sexuality. When Juliet D'Orsey witnesses Robert and Barbara making love, "hurting one another" (156), it becomes clear that the violence of the heterosexual encounter is decidedly one way. The two lovers are not hurting *one another* but it is Robert who, as Juliet states, "must be trying to kill her. . . [h]e hated her" (156). Although violence seems intrinsic to these expressions of male sexual desire, it is a violence intrinsically male and largely—and this makes sense since most relations in the book *are* between men—homosexual. Again, Davey states that, "The only sexual possibility constructed by the novel remains an immensely destructive homoeroticization of society" (122), yet this construction of an "immensely destructive homoeroticization" may be less of a "construction" and more an intrinsic corollary of any representation of homosexuality than we may first think.

Lee Edelman states in his discussion of the historical connections between homosexuality and violence that "[sodomitical relations] constituted, more than an assault upon the flesh, an assault upon the logic of social discourse" (94). *The Wars* literalizes the violence inherent in the tense interlining of homosocial and homosexual and the queer disruption of binaries in which homosexuality seems to exult. The presence of homosexuality within social discourse, according to Edelman, is inherently violent not because of the binaristic battle of an "other" trying to get in but precisely because of homosexuality's murky operations *within* accepted social discourse; it is an "other," an outsider, already in. Precisely because homosexuality is an unknown insider, it accrues an imaginative guerilla warfare-like stigma of suddenly attacking or being suddenly attacked. Because Robert Ross cannot know the meaning or intentions of the men around him after the rape, not knowing becomes violence itself. As Diana Brydon states: "The narrator [of *The Wars*] is obsessed as much by the paradoxes of how we know as by the horror of what we know" (76) and, I would append to this, the narrator is also concerned with the horror of not being able to know and the violence that any unknown seems to harbor.

While Findley portrays pre-war male relations in an idyllic light, signifying the possibility of camaraderie and friendship, his portrayal of male war relations seems based on violence and predation. On his way back to the



front Ross stops at Bailleul and, during his short stay there, decides to go to Desolé, a nearby psychiatric asylum that also functioned during war-time as a military bath-house. It is here, upon being trapped in his dressing room after his bath, that Robert is gang-raped:

He struggled with such impressive violence that all his assailants fell upon him at once. . . . Then he was lowered onto his back and held there by someone who was lying underneath him. His legs were forced apart so far he thought they were going to be broken. Mouths began to suck at his privates. Hands and fingers probed and poked at every part of his body. Someone struck him in the face. (168)

The fact that Robert's "fellow soldiers" (169) rape him is an irony emblematic of the paradoxical nature of male relationships in war that the novel has already constructed. Just as men fight with men for their country so *The Wars* also shows men of the same country fighting each other to save themselves, as when Robert's men "turn" on him during the German gas attack (124) or, as when Robert is raped, for other men's sexual pleasure. This predation seems a construction integral to a war where men are used—in the Somme offensive "*between 7.30 a.m. and 7.30 p.m. 21,000 British soldiers were killed—35,000 were wounded and 600 taken prisoner*" (103)—at such an alarming rate as to render their lives disposable. Soldiers begin to use other soldiers as they themselves are being used; as Diana Brydon suggests, "[m]odern warfare, like the rape, is impersonal, anonymous" (79)—it renders life into a play of statistics. Yet this internal predation must also result from the intense metamorphosis that the soldiers go through from killing an "enemy" to embracing a fellow soldier within seconds; Findley highlights this living paradox just before the rape when Ross, entering Desolé, comments that he "had seen them [the nuns] throw the inmates up against the walls and batter them senseless with their fists. Then they would kneel and sweetly attend to the wounds they had inflicted" (165). Findley's war is such a battle of contradictions and contradictory emotions, such a toss-up of binaries, where beating and healing are accomplished almost in the same swing, where, during war time, sex and violence become one and the same and fellow soldiers become rapists. This portrayal is a marked discontinuity when compared to the pre-war male relations Findley has shown us.

Having considered the structure of sex and violence in *The Wars*, we can perhaps now see the importance of Findley's reply to Margaret Laurence's question about his inclusion of the rape scene. The war, Findley seems to argue, had changed male relationships irrecoverably; if men were loving

fathers and sons before the war, they were abusive and molesting ones after. Just as Robert comments after his rape that he “wished with all his heart that men could embrace. But he knew now they couldn’t” (171), so the war itself was a rape which would forever change the way men related to other men. Men could no longer be trusted because they had learned to kill in such great numbers that the act itself became trivial. Just as Sasoon argues that “an ordinary human being has a right to be horrified by a mangled body” (104), so we too have the right to be horrified by what Findley shows us of men (and I mean specifically men, especially given the almost heroic nature of many of the female characters—such as Mrs. Ross, Juliet d’Orsey and Marian Turner) and what they have done to each other. Findley’s portrayals of men are not here to comfort us. Rather, they “are like statements: ‘pay attention!’ (11); these are the things they, or we, have done.

## Historical Reconstruction

### A Tergo

from the backside of Dallas her mind drifts back to other days  
—JEANNIE C. RIELY “The Backside of Dallas”

In his 1993 book, *Talk on the Wilde Side*, Ed Cohen discusses the process of reconstructing the 1895 Oscar Wilde trials:

The more I read the newspapers, the more I realized how amazing it was that they had engendered the meanings now attributed to them; the more I pondered the underlying assumptions that made the stories cohere as stories, the more I understood that in order to prize apart their narrative frames I would have to delve back into the meaning and events that preceded them. And, given what was centrally—if unarticulably—at issue in the case, perhaps this regressive process was ultimately the most appropriate way to proceed, i.e., ass-backward. (5)

Cohen’s process of delving back into the history of the Oscar Wilde trials is itself engendered with a larger metaphoric motif of getting at the problem in an “ass-backward” fashion. Yet, what does Cohen mean by “ass-backward”? The phrase itself seems an interesting double reversal of what must obviously be “ass-forward” which, by the switching of the posterior to the anterior, seems backward already. Is it that the “normal” anthropomorphized vision of historical reconstruction is this “ass-forward” technique whereby the face looks back and the back faces forward? Cohen states that previous accounts of the Wilde trials by H. Montgomery Hyde were faulty and that “[u]nfortunately, while the social and sexual dynamics crystallized by Wilde’s numerous courtroom

appearances quickly emerged from my reading of this incredibly engaging material, they were disturbingly unaddressed by Hyde's text itself" (2).

Cohen, a gay man, accuses Hyde of leaving "unaddressed" precisely what Cohen hopes to find by going "ass-backward." It appears that Hyde has left much unaddressed precisely because he is "dressed," faces the wrong direction and lacks the propensities and acute vision of Cohen's uncovered ass.

In this long preamble I hope to engage a certain allegorical structure of historical reconstruction that is necessarily "ass-centred," or, as Cohen puts it, "ass-backward." Cohen seems to suggest that the only way to get at the "truth" behind the Oscar Wilde trials is through a necessarily ass-backward historiography. With this ass-backward historiography in mind, I want to suggest that Findley's *The Wars* is also necessarily ass-backward. Although Findley's approach may be the ass-backward view of a gay male writer, his book is a literal breeding ground of backside paranoia.

Findley's historical reconstruction is appropriately ass-backward not only because it is the product of a gay writer but because *The Wars*, as I hope to have shown in the preceding section, deals with the tensions and complications in the social and sexual interactions between men—interactions that, as so many recent theorists have pointed out, lead to a sometimes homophobic fear of what exactly the backside means.<sup>11</sup> Findley's rewriting of the First World War, while simultaneously investigating its sexual nature, seems a process very much akin to Cohen's getting "at the bottom of things" in the Oscar Wilde trials. However, this gay historiography (if I can in fact group both books into this category) is also very much a product of the sexual "warfare" of the late 1970s (and the present) and the increased public attention gays had only recently garnered in what can be sweepingly called a Post-Stonewall discourse.<sup>12</sup> Yet, I would argue, Findley, unlike Cohen, has tried to erase the gay from his gay historiography. He has tried to displace the narrative from that of an openly gay man to an almost genderless and unknowable researcher. The reasons for this procedure are multiple.

Findley mentions in *Inside Memory* how all-pervasive the issue of book banning had become when *The Wars* was originally published; to have an openly gay narrator would not only have brought the book more controversy than it had already received but would probably have led to the all-too-easy categorization of the novel as being more interested in gay politics than in creative writing.<sup>13</sup> But Findley's use of the metafictional narrator is not only a panicked attempt to write himself out of the novel—just as

George Bowering uses his narrator in *Burning Water* to, in effect, write himself into the novel; it is also part of the book's subversive nature. Even a straight audience cannot easily pass *The Wars* off as being a too-subjective look at history only interested in how "gay" it was, because, other than a few scenes and an overall thematic concern (only one of many), the novel does not posit itself as being gay at all but decidedly straight. Although I would argue that Findley's novel *is* decidedly gay, the fact that this has not been openly argued before evinces the novel's almost convincing drag.

Yet, I would also argue, Findley's eliding of the narrator's (and his own) sexuality from the novel has characterized it with a behind-sighted paranoia, a paranoia stemming from the fear of being found out, the fear of realizing that this is not "normal history" as we have learned it. Hardly can we turn around without running into some character worrying about his behind. As Robert Ross lies with the prostitute Ella, the narrator tells us: "Robert wanted to cover himself but he didn't know how to do that without making it look as if that was what he was doing. He thought of rolling over—but that would expose his backside" (43). What does exposing the backside mean for Robert Ross here? Is it not that exposing his backside to Ella would characterize him as someone who thinks of his backside like he thinks of his frontside? *The Wars* lies, as Robert Ross does, in an uncomfortable position of exposure; it revels in male sexuality (much of the novel is decidedly male-focused) yet keeps this focus tempered and somewhat dis-solute. It is a straight novel (front facing) that wants to turn around, that wants to be openly ass-backward yet knows that it cannot do so without larger social consequences. The narrative fear of the backside has marked almost every male character with a fear all their own, as if each were a living projection, a simulacrum, of the novel's closeted nature.

The backside becomes a place of possible and likely attack. Robert attacks Teddy Budge from behind: "Robert regained his feet and lunged, butting his head like a battering ram between the giant's shoulder blades. Teddy only knew that he was being attacked. He couldn't see who by and he couldn't imagine why" (25). Teddy cannot imagine why he is being attacked from behind just as Ross is "confused" by what Taffler and the Swede are up to—their "behind" the scenes play—something of which he had "never even dreamed" (44). And just as Teddy is attacked from behind, so Robert enters his cell at Desolé and hears the door "swinging closed behind him" (167) and, during the rape, the "shape of the man who entered him" (169) from

behind. And Robert is finally caught by Major Mickle when he “sent four men around behind the barn by a route Robert cannot have seen—behind the wall” (185).<sup>14</sup> The behind, the route that “cannot be seen,” or “imagined,” or “even dreamed,” becomes the site of violation. If there is any route through which the novel can be attacked it is one leading to the backside in that the novel has been *too* sexually violent, *too* homosexual, *too* ass-centred, *too* behind-sighted, *too* ass-backward. *The Wars* manifests a fear of the backside, a fear that the novel, like Robert Ross, and its front-sided history might not be front-sided at all.

In a sense, my “outing” of Findley’s narrator as gay and the constructor of a gay historiography is a critical violation—a violation stemming from a conscious confusion of narrator and author or author and speaker; yet it is only through this violation that we can attach a real (homo)sexual/political nature to the novel. It is a novel not only about war but about sex *and* war and about the ways in which war has irreversibly changed the social construction of male sexuality. In effect, I want to label *The Wars* as a necessarily ideologically-led narrative to rescue it from the somewhat empty and dangerous category of the post-modern, a categorization all too often seen as textually playful yet socially useless. Findley’s novel is necessarily political and the implications of this cannot and should not be ignored.

First, Findley’s novel is partially a fictional examination of male relations in the first half of this century and, simultaneously, a tracing of one character’s progression to “manhood.” Second, Findley’s examination is itself reflective of the political and historical moment out of which the book was written, a moment that has effectively left its marks on the construction of the novel. Although this has been a very male-focused critical examination of the novel, the idea that this “ass-backward” process of historical reconstruction may have applicability outside of gay male writers seems certain from Jeannie C. Riely’s country song “The Backside of Dallas.” Evidently, the backside, even if it is of Dallas, seems the surest way from here to whatever is meant by those “other days.”

## NOTES

- 1 Critical work coming closest to this approach has been Allan Weiss’s examination of the evolving constructions of public and private space before and after the First World War (91) and Frank Davey’s “Homoerotic Capitalism” which discusses *The Wars* as a “recon-

- struction that violently condemns the phallic authority on which nearly all the 'official transactions' of Canadian culture are conducted (124).
- 2 My figuration of the Canadian gay liberal moment of the 1970s owes much to Kinsman (179-97) and to an extrapolation from gay history in Britain and the United States (for example, Weeks's "The Permissive Moment" in *Sex, Politics and Society* and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's introduction to *Epistemology of the Closet*).
  - 3 This comment perhaps seems just as, if not more so, applicable to Findley's later novel, *Headhunter*, where we are presented with the rape and murder of the adolescent George Shapiro by his father and others during an after-hours session at the infamous "Club of Men" (419-20).
  - 4 For different aspects of sexual violence and warfare in *The Wars*, see Diana Brydon (79-80), Allan Weiss (96-97), Frank Davey's "Homoerotic Capitalism," and, especially in the realm of what she calls Findley's "gender wars," Lorraine York (34-45).
  - 5 I am indebted to Lee Edelman's reading of this scene and all its confusions of placement. Edelman deduces that "The sodomite, therefore, like the moebius loop, represents and enacts a troubling resistance to the binary logic of before and behind, constituting himself as a single-sided surface whose front and back are never completely distinguishable as such" (105). It is also important to point out that Findley's scene is moebius-like. In it, in fact, there exists no behind, that is, Ross states that "everything was flat and undimensional" (44). Ross's peek behind the scenes of sodomy is, seemingly, all up front.
  - 6 Also, as Bruce Pirie reminds us, "We may remember the mirror-smashing scene that begins Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*" (77).
  - 7 In an interview with Alan Twigg, Findley states that "Maybe we have to get rid of the word *manhood*. It's done a lot of damage to both men and women. I don't know why, but I always associate the word manhood with killing" (86). Findley's concern with manhood is also key to the historical setting of the novel in the early half of the century and that era's reevaluation of Victorian sensibilities, of which manliness was a central term.
  - 8 In my distinctions between homosocial and homosexual relations I am borrowing from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Between Men* in which Sedgwick states: "'Homosocial desire,' to begin with, is a kind of oxymoron. 'Homosocial' is a word occasionally . . . applied to such activities as 'male bonding,' which may, as in our society, be characterized by intense homophobia, fear and hatred of homosexuality" (1-2). Sedgwick further describes what she calls the "homo-social continuum" as existing between "'men-loving-men' and 'men-promoting-the-interests-of-men'" (3) and how this continuum has been radically broken since the ancient Greeks.
- My calling the pre-war male-male relationships "homosocial" can be somewhat misleading, I fear. What I mean to signify by this categorization is that though these relationships may be homosexual there is no "sex"—or none, at least, as far as I understand it, even allowing Juliet d'Orsey's warning that "'Love' has so many ways of expressing itself outside the physical" (*Wars* 103).
- 9 For more on the Victorian "bourgeois homosexual," see Ed Cohen's *Talk on the Wilde Side* where he discusses the Wilde trials as the simultaneous point of homosexual persecution and dissemination of what, exactly, a homosexual was. The trials led to the

coincident oppression and “emergence in England of ‘the male homosexual’ as a distinctly counternormative category” (211). Also see Jeffrey Weeks’s “The Construction of Homosexuality” which discusses how “male friendship became more suspect” between the turn of the century and the First World War (108).

In addition, the importance of Oscar Wilde as a “type” and euphemism of homosexuality can be seen in Barbara d’Orsey, who can only understand Clive and Jamie as “*Oscar and Bosie*” (102). Also see “‘These Things may Lead to the Tragedy of our Species’: the Emergence of Homosexuality and Lesbianism in Canada” in Kinsman (81-107).

- 10 Lorraine York also describes another blending enacted in *The Wars* where “the domestic shows signs of military activity, and the battleground becomes strangely homelike” (34). Although my argument focuses mainly on the body, it is important to realize that all of these fusions—whether between the social and the physical body or between the battlefield and the domestic front—are part of the more general aim to clash together opposing symbolic structures.
- 11 For example see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s “Is the Rectum Straight?” in *Tendencies* or Leo Bersani’s “Is the Rectum a Grave?”
- 12 In June of 1969, Stonewall signalled the start of large-scale gay demonstrations and open outcries against government and police oppression. The events surrounding Stonewall are often cited as the origin of the “gay liberation” movement. This is of course “American History,” yet a history with results and mythical importance which were not strictly American.
- 13 In his journal entry for July 1977, Findley mentions the effects book banning had on two other Canadian writers, Margaret Laurence and Alice Munro (*Inside* 150).
- 14 The sexual nature of this rear attack becomes even more apparent given the various connotations of “taken” in Robert Ross’s emphatic “We shall not be taken” (185).

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