

The Best Soldiers of All Unsung Heroines in Canadian Women's Great War Fictions

If we keep on speaking the same language together, we're going to reproduce the same history. Begin the same old stories all over again. . . . Listen: all around us, men and women sound just the same. The same discussions, the same arguments, the same scenes. The same distractions and separations. The same difficulties, the same impossibility of making connections. The same . . . Same . . . Always the same.

—LUCE IRIGARAY 205

In the 1950s, Desmond Pacey remarked that war writing was the least examined area in Canadian literature, a comment still relevant today. To date, only one article on Great War fictions has appeared. Sweeplingly titled "Canadian Fiction of the Great War," it sounds inclusive, but is not. Although Eric Thompson declares his intention to analyze war novels "which constitute the best fiction by Canadian writers about the experiences of Canadian fighting soldiers in the Great War of 1914-18" (81), he discusses only fictions by Peregrine Acland, Charles Yale Harrison, Philip Child, and contemporary writer Timothy Findley. In exclusively considering male writers, however, Thompson succumbs to traditional patriarchal criticism, which assumes that the weaponless are wordless, and that war is none of women's business; hence he ignores several of the "best" wartime writers such as Gertrude Arnold and L. M. Montgomery, whose novels also include (albeit peripherally) the experiences of Canadian fighting soldiers. Thompson's failure to include women in his study is particularly glaring in light of the fact that Carl F. Klinck's *Literary History of Canada* mentions Evah McKowan, Francis Marion Beynon, and Nellie McClung as Great War fiction writers. (Surprisingly, the *History* overlooks Grace Blackburn and L. M. Montgomery.)¹ Aside from receiving brief mention in Klinck, however, women's wartime fictions have been completely ignored; a study of their response to the Great War is long overdue.²

One of the common threads which runs through these fictions—*Aleta Dey* (1919), by Francis Marion Beynon; *The Next of Kin: Those Who Wait and Wonder* (1917), by Nellie McClung; *Rilla of Ingleside* (1920), by L. M. Montgomery; *The Man Child* (1930), by Grace Blackburn; *Sister Anne! Sister Anne!!* (1919), by Gertrude Arnold; *Janet of Kootenay: Love, Life and Laughter in an Arcady of the West* (1919), by Evah McKowan—is women writers' awareness that their voices and values are marginalized in wartime. McClung points directly to this omission in *The Next of Kin* by having one of her characters complain that her husband has enlisted without first consulting her; the man's response is telling: "The country's business concerns men, not women. . . . Men are concerned with the big things of life" (177). Women, in his opinion, are "missing" from the subject of war. To be sure, at the outbreak of war, many women in these fictions feel that they have no role to play in wartime; with few historical or literary predecessors to tell them how to "occupy" themselves in wartime, they are characters without texts. The occasional women written into war literature provide unsatisfactory role models: Penelope weaves and re-weaves; Desdemona is a "captive" audience to her soldier's tale of fortune. Not surprisingly, then, Montgomery's youthful Rilla expresses bitter resentment at her lover's repudiation of her when the Empire calls, especially since she believes she has nothing (except tears) to substitute in his place: "Women . . . just had to sit and cry at home" (35). To her, war signifies absence and rejection.

Rilla's observation about gendered activities in wartime is astute; a man can respond to a "roll call," whereas a woman has to devise her own "role" without benefit of manuals or reference books which prescribe her duties. But once a man decides to enlist, the rest is easy: the military attends to his physical needs and dictates his movements thereafter. Moreover, a recruit knows (or thinks he knows) what going to war entails.³ Nancy Huston contends that the enlisted man can conjure up centuries of illustrious models from history which "reinforce his conviction to fight and justify his acts" (272). Correspondingly, several recruits in Canadian women's novels envision their participation in war based on the accounts of war they have read. Blackburn's inductee in *The Man Child* enlists because he has assimilated tales of "honour and glory" (234). One of Montgomery's conscripts, a medical man in training, is enticed to war because he has ingested the heroic actions of a doctor on the battlefield during the Balkan War (25). In going to war, draftees may be hoping to satisfy what Nancy K. Miller, drawing

upon Freud's theories on dreams and wish fulfillment, terms "egoistic and ambitious wishes" (346). In master narratives, the hero knows that he will be exposed to danger, undergo perilous adventure, but eventually emerge triumphant. Because history and literature are written by winners, and war narratives are "heroic," not "enemic" tales (Huston 273), he feels invincible: "Nothing can happen to me" (Miller 346). Should the young man not survive the conflict, he dies a hero "in action," making a sacrifice in the service of his country, making history. In answering the call to arms, he cannot lose; he faces what might be termed a positive Catch-22. But war absents women, renders them unimportant in the face of mighty concepts and the male anguish of battles. And at the time of the Great War, love and marriage are women's prime destinies, so adolescents like Rilla can have only "erotic wishes" (Miller 364). When her sweetheart vanishes, the message to Rilla is clear: "Nothing can happen to me" (Miller 346). Rilla suffers from what Sharon O'Brien terms "combat envy" (192), but not for long.

Anything can, and does, happen to Canadian women in the wartime climate, for the absence of men brings about positive results. While none of the texts expresses the kind of "invigorating sense of revolution, release, reunion, and re-vision" which Sandra Gilbert identifies in her study of British and American Great War women writers (201),⁴ it could be argued that Canadian writers are war profiteers, seizing the chaos occasioned by war to vanquish women's subordinate status. In their texts, they insist upon bringing an end to the image of women as care-givers and nurturers, and forcefully reiterate that women deserve a place in society alongside men, not as their subalterns. Writers express their anger that women have been denied access to public and political realms, caution that they can no longer afford to be onlookers in a man's world, and beseech their characters to make their presence felt during the war. With women's voices and values part of a "new world order," they argue, Canada will be a better place for all.⁵

Although it sounds callous, in *The Next of Kin* and other texts, there is a feeling of jubilation in the air, a sensation akin to the cliché, "While the cat's away, the mice will play." One of McClung's characters captures this statement, stating,

"I was like the mouse who timidly tiptoed out to the saucer of brandy, and, taking a sip, went more boldly back, then came again with considerable swagger; and at last took a good drink and then strutted up and down saying, 'Bring on your old black cat!'" (191)

Prior to the war, this woman was docile and submissive, obedient to her autocratic husband's every command. Thanks to the war, she learns to defy his dictates, and to stick up for what she believes in and what she knows is right. But that McClung, a well-known supporter of the women's temperance movement, should depict a woman drinking brandy, is remarkable. After a tiny sip, her character gains courage; she's back for more. Both drink and power ("swagger") are addictive. McClung thus urges women not to be dutiful myrmidons, but to be insubordinate, to "fight the good fight" against the patriarchal structures that imprison them. *The Next of Kin* issues a warning to men: Look out, it says, for the battle between the sexes is just beginning, and women are determined to win. This paper will outline some of the strategies, in word and deed, women writers like McClung used to turn absence into presence, to write themselves into the discourse of war; it will demonstrate the kinds of tools women marshalled in their defence, and illustrate the types of devices they used to attack their oppressors.

Throughout their texts, Canadian women writers emphasize that women are intelligent beings who have been prevented from developing their talents and mental faculties to the full, and stress that it is a foolish society which denies women's unique ways of knowing. In order to sharpen women's defenses, writers entreat their female characters to develop their intellectual might. One of the oft-repeated words in these texts is "think." The novels admonish women to eschew simplistic thinking, to recognize that most issues are complex, and to reject the notion that only men can lay claim to authority. McClung, for example, refers to the war as a "great teacher" (99), and in part what she means is that, without so many men around telling women what to think, they can learn to reason for themselves. Several novels deconstruct the notion of authority by refusing to tell readers what conclusions to draw, or what opinions about war to hold. Montgomery, for instance, explores the war from a variety of points of view, but leaves readers free to find their own answers.⁶ While historians assume that Beynon's fiction (like her journalism) argues in favour of pacifism,⁷ I suggest that, like Montgomery, she refuses to orchestrate her readers' opinions. Beynon simply counsels her characters to insure they are in possession of all the facts, for only then can they reach sound conclusions and make the best decisions. While she encourages her characters to read, she also recommends they trust to their basic instincts, for personal experience, she advises, is also a worthy basis from which to govern one's behaviour.

Blackburn has a similar “message”: like Beynon, she abhors the suppression of any voices or experiences, especially women’s.

It is misleading, though, to imply that all women speak with “uniform” voices, or hold similar ideological positions about the waging of war, for McClung (unlike the others), takes a pro-war stance, and encourages men to fight. Prior to the war, McClung was, like Beynon, a pacifist, but in *The Next of Kin*, her narrator states that the sinking of the *Lusitania* convinced her to support the war effort:

Then I saw that we were waging war on the very Prince of Darkness, and . . . I knew that it would be better . . . to be dead than to live under the rule of people whose hearts are so utterly black and whose process of reasoning is so oxlike—they are so stupidly brutal. I knew then that *no man could die better than in defending civilization from this ghastly thing which threatened her!* (44-45)

McClung’s readers must have been shocked at this fictional betrayal of her staunch pacifist philosophy, forthrightly expressed several years earlier in *In Times Like These* (1915). Her friend Francis Marion Beynon certainly was. In *Aleta Dey*, the “big, aggressive woman, prominent in our suffrage movement” (211) is likely modelled after McClung. Challenged to defend her bellicosity, the suffragist makes several ridiculous statements: “I meant that [women] would be opposed to wars that are past . . . I never dreamed that women would be opposed to war in their own time or I wouldn’t have worked for the vote” (211).⁸ But the question is, why did McClung do such an about-face?

R. R. Warne argues that this radical shift came about because when McClung’s son enlisted, “maternal devotion triumphed over feminist certitude” (35). And, as Prentice et al. point out, McClung was not the only one to revise her pre-war stance; Flora McDonald Denison, another well-known pacifist, also changed her mind when her son joined up. Referring to McClung and Denison, Prentice et al. add that “the reality, as opposed to the abstraction, of war presented painful problems of personal conscience. Both had been against war; both had dearly loved sons who enlisted; both eventually came to support the Allied cause. Only a few Canadian women sustained their pacifist opposition to violence” (207). Moreover, Thomas P. Socknat asserts that, on the eve of the Great War, many Canadians vaguely thought of themselves as pacifists; at the outbreak of war, however, the liberal peace movement splintered into three groups: those “who supported the war effort while striving at the same time towards pacifist ideals and a progres-

sive post-war era”; a small number who “remained irrevocably opposed to war and militarism as antithetical to a Christian society”; but by far the majority of Canadians came to think of the war “as a crucible in which Christianity and the ideal of Christian peace were in danger of extinction at the hands of the enemy forces and they joined in the crusade against German ‘barbarism’” (31). I cite Socknat’s findings to demonstrate that McClung’s transformation was not especially unusual, as is often suggested.

Warne further observes that McClung was committed to “effective action rather than pious abstraction” (36), and the latter’s pragmatic approach led her to support efforts for an early end to war as the lesser of two evils. Moreover, Warne advances,

the fact remains that McClung was human. Faced with the slaughter of innocent women and children, [sic] in Belgium and in the sinking of the Lusitania, and with the increasing realization that her family, too, would be broken by war, she grasped for a justification. . . . “Conversion to the cause” was an underlying motive in all of McClung’s writing, and she said whatever needed to be said to get the job done, even if meant exposing her own human frailty. (40-41)

Accordingly, throughout *The Next of Kin*, McClung’s narrator takes a dim view of mothers who either prevent their sons from going to war (142-53), or give in to despair after their sons’ deaths on the battlefield.⁹

While McClung’s truculence cannot be denied, I believe that her major concern in *The Next of Kin* is to bring about long-lasting social change, which she envisions will occur once women become actively involved in Canadian society. For example, through her narrator, she urges members of her community to work together to counteract childhood poverty and death from disease, and to bring about an end to “extravagance” and “general shiftlessness” (95). The narrator pushes for prohibition, much-needed legislation in times like those, for when alcohol was cheaper than milk, men drank to excess, depriving their families often of ready cash, and battering their wives, as well (40). Identifying a number of social ills, McClung’s text throws down the gauntlet to Canadians, challenging them to restructure their society so that it includes women’s worth and experience. With so many men overseas holding up the pillars of Empire, McClung’s narrator urges that the time is ripe to take advantage of their absence. Once liberated from their homes, women can take up residences at important houses like the House of Commons and the House of the Lord. Both institutions (which hitherto have denied women access to important positions) will

benefit from women's independent thinking. She advises women to seize the day for reform, to ensure that, on the day of reckoning—war's end—there will be more to show for it than bloodshed and waste. In *The Next of Kin*, McClung sends her narrator on the warpath, exhorting women to disrupt and destabilize the patriarchal structures which imprison them.

One of the tactics Canadian women writers employ in order to emphasize that women are not men's inferiors is to show women "in action," functioning in the work place as effectively as any man. In Canadian novels, many women "enlist" in the public sphere, wear the pants in the absence of men on the homefront.¹⁰ Specifically, novels like McKowan's stress that women can succeed at any occupation they choose: anything a man can do a woman can do even better. McKowan's protagonist, who hates being trapped inside a house, has several times challenged the circumscribed nature of women's place in society. She has been a teacher, a reporter, and homesteader in Ontario, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan respectively. Moving "farther west," she arrives in British Columbia in 1917, where she intends to "do a man's work" as a mixed farmer (21). Initially, she faces harsh criticism: the men doubt her ability to farm at all (29); the women ridicule her for wearing riding breeches and leggings (20); and the members of the rural community assume that Janet has come to the region because she has "matrimonial designs" (39).

But before long, Janet wins the respect of the community because she survives so well on her own. With the war raging, and the plumbers, plasterers, and stone masons all away fighting Germans, Janet proves that she is far from defenceless. She "plumbs" from a book, lays her own dynamite, and handily erects her house and outer buildings by herself. To her correspondent, Nan (the novel takes an epistolary style), she expresses her jubilant victory: "Every man, I felt sure, expected me to end by calling in his superior masculine aid—and how I would loved to have done so—but I felt it was up to me to demonstrate my theories of feminine independence, then and there" (48). In quick time, Janet establishes herself as a superb market gardener, fruit farmer, and stock raiser, and thus serves as a role model for younger women in the community, who testify that they have gained inspiration from witnessing her struggle. As a result of Janet's influence, these "new women" wear pants and ride motorbikes (155). Janet's agricultural ventures burgeon to the extent that she eventually needs a partner; of course, she joins forces with another capable woman.

In making the claim that women can be effective co-workers in the labour

force, Canadian women writers also address the place of women within the institution of marriage. McKowan's Janet, for instance, is not against marriage per se, but she wants union with a partner on her own terms, as her non-traditional engagement attests. Janet herself proposes marriage to that rarest of creatures—a nurturing man—who has proven that he is attracted to, and not threatened by, an energetic, efficient woman. A British officer (significantly non-Canadian?) wounded at the Marne, he cheerfully goes along with Janet's plans. She furnishes a car, plans to drive it on their honeymoon, and quite rightly rejoices in the fact that her intended never once objects to her arrangements. "That should augur well for our future together," she writes Nan (277). Indeed.

In *The Man Child*, Blackburn also underscores the importance of work, and illustrates that a woman can live happily even after the death of her husband. Emma Winchester is distraught when she learns that she has insufficient funds to support herself and her newborn child. Only temporarily stymied, Emma takes in sewing and gives piano lessons, and thus raises her son without relying on others. Through dint of hard work, frugality, and resourcefulness, she manages to provide her son with a university education. Shortly after being widowed, Emma receives a proposal from a man she admires greatly; she declines the offer, even though marriage would make her life considerably easier. In suggesting that women can be self-sufficient and independent workers in the public sphere, in arguing that women can be fulfilled without husbands, Canadian women writers were re-writing the conventional marriage plot. Signalling their dissatisfaction with the general destiny of women, writers like Blackburn and McKowan were utilizing the homefront in their books as a radical site for social change.

McClung also maintains that women can cope well on their own when their husbands do not return from war. In *The Next of Kin*, her narrator takes a pleasant drive in the country, and observes how well a woman driving a mower fits into the peaceful landscape. The narrator is struck by the grace and skill with which the woman handles the machine (251), stops to chat with her, and learns that she has lost her husband. The farmer forthrightly confesses that at first she thought she could not go on living, but now takes pride in her accomplishments; she takes care of her children, tends the farm, boasts that her crops are in good shape, and declares that she can manage the harvest with an extra man to help her. When the narrator takes her leave, she tells the woman that through her struggles, she has

found “something far greater than happiness, for she ha[s] achieved power” (254). It is significant that McClung concludes her text with a story of a woman’s achieving might through independence, for throughout the collection, one of the narrator’s recurring tenets is that women will never be able to employ their energies and talents to the full if they remain shackled by the demands of domesticity. In the absence of her husband, this woman attains agency.

Another of writers’ main objectives was to document women’s responses to war, a task McClung takes up with gusto. In *The Next of Kin*, she sends her unnamed narrator to speak at a Red Cross function in a wind-swept northern Alberta town; the meeting quickly turns into a type of homefront military engagement. Before beginning her lecture, the narrator discerns that “[t]here was a distinct air of preparedness about everything” (5), and subsequently comments that the women have gathered to discuss “the affairs of the state” (6). After her talk, as the women air their views, one asks the narrator to accept a “commission” (14), to be the women’s historian and to record for posterity what Canadian women feel and say about the First World War. A written record, the woman argues, will remind women of their emotional response to the First World War: “We will forget this when it is all over and we will go back to our old pursuits and there will be nothing—I mean no record of how we felt” (13). She wants the chronicle in order to prove to future generations that women opposed the war, fearing not the question, What did you do in the war, Mommy? but the more serious charge, What did you do *about* the war? The narrator agrees to write what might be termed “counter” stories of women at war, tales not destined to make their way into “official” historical accounts or heroic novels. Similarly, in L. M. Montgomery’s *Rilla of Ingleside* (1921), Rilla keeps a diary of the war years, which her father observes “should be a very interesting thing to hand down to one’s children” (177). Like McClung, Montgomery was emphasizing the need for women to preserve their responses to war by writing them down.

Additionally, prior to writing *The Next of Kin* (1917), McClung had declared herself vociferously opposed to women’s omission from the subject of war. In *Times Like These* (1915) expresses her frustration with traditional, male-dominated accounts of history and literature which honour purely economic movements, political decisions, dates, and pivotal battles: “Invasions, conquests, battles, sieges make up the subject-matter of our his-

tories” (14). Ever optimistic, McClung expresses her hope that the future will bring an end to one-sided representations of history and literature:

Some day . . . there will be new histories written, and they will tell the story of the years from the standpoint of the people, and the hero will not be any red-handed assassin who goes through peaceful country places leaving behind him dead men looking sightlessly up to the sky. The hero [sic] will be the man or woman who knows and loves and serves. (16)

Never one to complain without proposing an alternative or positing a solution, McClung herself takes up the task of “talking back,” as bell hooks puts it, to the “official,” male-dominated histories and stories of war which traditionally exclude women’s voices and experiences. In 1917, she publishes *The Next of Kin*, a collection of woman-centered stories which radically reverse the notion of who speaks with authority in war; she displaces the voices of soldiers, of fathers, brothers, sons, renders them almost “missing” by putting their stories on the margins. Further, McClung refuses to write a conventionally plotted novel, her text calling for a re-definition of what constitutes a war story: *The Next of Kin* is a series of short stories, a chorus of women’s voices, McClung’s testament to her belief that “counter” stories of ordinary citizens and their experiences (especially women) are worthy of the telling.¹¹ In her text, she gives voice to mothers, wives, urban women, rural women, young women, middle-aged women; those who encourage men to go to war, those who prevent them; those who cope well with adversity, those who do not. And, as if to underscore the multiplicity of women’s stories, at one point in her fiction, McClung situates her narrator at a train station, where she watches troops depart for war. What strikes the narrator is that “men in uniform look much the same” (193) (thereby implying that soldiers’ stories are “uniform”), whereas the people waving goodbye at the station—Ukrainian women; heavily veiled women; sad-faced mothers; tired, untidy women; brave little girls and boys; babies; chattering young people; brides of the day—are “from every station in life” (emphasis added 193). All, she intimates, have stories to tell, and in *The Next of Kin*, she tells a range of them.¹²

In *Rilla of Ingleside* (1921), Montgomery, too, challenges the traditional concept that a war story is monolithically comprised of a hero in the trenches; she re-writes the term “total war” by arguing that war is a catastrophic event which affects every living creature. Like McClung, she does not allow men’s voices to drown out women’s, or men’s deeds and experiences to efface

them. Montgomery permits only those men who would naturally remain on the homefront—the middle-aged or elderly, pacifists, or ministers—to speak, and then only briefly. *Rilla of Ingleside* tenders a kaleidoscopic view of war; the text gives voice to a wide cross-section of the inhabitants of a small Canadian wartime community which commonly includes cats, dogs, babies and children, and imbues them with an extraordinary intelligence and perspicacity not customarily afforded such creatures. Her text, then, assures us that there are no innocent people or creatures in wartime; the assumption that those removed from the field of battle are unaffected by war is groundless.

Rilla of Ingleside also singles out women whose voices are traditionally silenced in wartime. Society sanctions the right of wives, mothers, and daughters to mourn, but deprives women not related to soldiers of that right. A young woman who had not publicly declared her love for her sweetheart before he went overseas cannot ask for sympathy at his death, but must bear her sorrow and pain alone (193). When another woman's fiance is killed, well-meaning folks in the community deny her the right to lament his loss. The text argues that she has a valid reason to grieve, and that her anguish may be doubly intense, for she is deprived not only of a future husband, but of the children who might have been born to her (169). And during conscription, the government sanctions only those women with relatives at the front the right to "voice" their opinions. *Rilla of Ingleside* argues against an unjust system which fails to recognize that many women, not just those with family members in the trenches, have made heavy investments in war, and that all should be able to cast votes (225).

Several of the texts also exhort women to make their views public, never an easy task for women conditioned by patriarchy into silence, but especially difficult in an intensely male-dominated period like war. As bell hooks maintains, "within feminist circles, silence is often seen as the sexist 'right speech of womanhood'—the sign of woman's submission to patriarchal authority" (6). Silent women do not question authority, or raise subjects deemed inappropriate to their sex. Women who dare to ask uncomfortable questions about who makes decisions in their society are considered abrasive, out of line. In speaking out, they are "unwomanly" or "unladylike," and run the risk of being considered fools should they turn loquacious. In *The Next of Kin*, McClung's narrator is rudely reminded of this danger marked "For Women Only" when she arrives at a town to give a

speech. The station agent who greets her declares with certainty that she will not gather a large crowd, although a few will turn out to hear her out of “idle curiosity” (2). Making no apologies to Dr. Johnson, he says, “it is great to hear a woman speak in public. . . even if she does not do it very well. It’s sort of like seeing a pony walking on its hind legs; it’s clever even if it’s not natural” (2). McClung’s narrator, confident in her role as public speaker, is non-plussed, but the agent’s remarks echo the kinds of prejudices women are up against should they choose to speak in public. Those who air their views are violating the expectation of female silence: like children, women are meant to be seen, but not heard.

Both *The Next of Kin* and *Rilla of Ingleside* provide role models for their readers, demonstrating by example that several women hold such strong convictions about the war they cannot be silenced: in each text, middle-aged women who have never spoken in public before rise to their feet spontaneously, and, without the advantage of prepared texts, make electrifying speeches which achieve their aims. These characters are neither placating audiences nor seeking male approval, but speaking against popular opinion (McClung 16; Montgomery 223). Montgomery’s housekeeper initially feels guilty about her “unbecoming conduct” and “unladylike behaviour” (223), and does not take pride in her success, even though her speech results in a record sale of bonds. Soon after, though, she throws off her apron, dons overalls, and takes to the fields to help in the war effort, a signal of her growing emancipation from confined women’s work, her ability to take on a man’s job. As bell hooks says,

Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of “talking back,” that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject—the liberated voice. (9)

Coming to speech is for the women in these texts a liberating moment from which there will be no back-sliding; as one of McClung’s characters says after making her first public speech, “I know I will never be scared again” (16). Thus both Montgomery and McClung use their texts as social and political tools to show women that speaking out is not difficult. Both texts urge women to recognize that patriarchy deliberately silences women, conditions them to believe that they are too irrational to speak in public.

The wartime texts by Francis Marion Beynon and Grace Blackburn focus

specifically on the need to include all voices, to suppress none. Beynon uses her central character to urge those who would be silenced to speak against their oppression, stressing in *Aleta Dey* (1919) that any woman who dares speak against the dominant culture's wartime ideologies must be fearless. In documenting the difficulties a woman faces in finding her public voice, Beynon's Aleta reflects a woman's quandary in any era, but the wartime climate is more intimidating and exacerbates her character's dilemma. At the outset, Beynon illustrates the conditions which force women into passive submission to authority, and then establishes the types of barriers a woman encounters should she wish to speak her peace in wartime.

Aleta's induction into cowardice begins in early childhood. In each institution she encounters—the family, the church, the school—she identifies inconsistencies or ambiguities in its teachers, but when she asks for clarification, she finds her questions ridiculed. Like bell hooks, who writes of her own silence and oppression as a woman in *Talking Back*, Aleta is “always saying the wrong thing, asking the wrong questions” (hooks 6), and, like hooks, her childhood is characterized by “intense confusion and deep anxiety” (hooks 7). [H]ooks claims that those who get on well in patriarchal society acquiesce; they speak, but “talk a talk that [i]s in itself a silence” (7). In *Aleta Dey*, Beynon makes a similar charge. Aleta's friend and sister are what Belenky et al. term “silent women,” girls who see authority figures as all-powerful, all-knowing, and submit blindly to their instruction (27-28).¹³ Unlike Aleta, they keep out of trouble by adhering unquestioningly to the directives of the masters.

The authority figures in Beynon's text (teachers, preachers, fathers) think exclusively in black/white, right/wrong terms; unable to rationalize their positions intellectually, they demand utter obedience from their charges, and either verbally humiliate or physically beat transgressors like Aleta into silence. As a result of the severe punishment she suffers at the hands of patriarchal figures, especially her violent father, Aleta's confidence in her ability to think and speak is shaken; even as a mature journalist who knows how to use words, she stills her own voice, and allows others' to hold sway. Uncomfortable in her silence, often seething inwardly at others' irrationality, especially during the war, she remains deaf and dumb, a “coward” who adopts a “wait and see” attitude towards life.

To date, articles on Beynon have centered primarily on the anti-war views which she expressed while a journalist for the *Grain Growers' Guide*, but

several of these arguments for non-violence also surface in *Aleta Dey*. As the war years grind on, Aleta becomes increasingly disturbed by the reactions of her fellow countrywomen/men to war. She identifies their wartime ideologies as unimaginative, selfish, and bloodthirsty; she is horrified by their open declarations of hatred for the German people, appalled that they prefer to conscript men over wealth, angered that they fail to recognize the prevalence of both propaganda and war profiteering, and discouraged that pre-war suffragists and pacifists have suddenly turned litigious (207-13). It is not Aleta's abhorrence of these vengeful positions, however, which brings her the courage to voice her views, but the government's suppression of her right to speak against them which catapults her into "action." As she says, "I might have muddled along to the end had not the government begun to forbid us to discuss the war at all, except favourably" (216). Her telephone tapped, warned by the government censor not to oppose conscription, Aleta finds her "courage." Defiant, she takes to the streets, distributing pamphlets demanding that freedom of speech and of the press be preserved (217). This act of resistance challenges the dominant culture, and Aleta is thrown into jail. While incarcerated, she continues to wrestle with her cowardice. Although she cannot be certain that her pacifist views are infallible, she comes to the decision that she must "serve" humanity in the only way she knows; she must denounce violence publicly, and speak her pacifist opinions forthrightly (222). Uppermost is her belief that it is wrong to silence *any* voices.

At the end of the novel, Aleta foregoes meeting her beloved McNair, a soldier returning from combat, in order to make a public address against the war. Knowing she runs the risk of being jailed again, she willingly takes it, for "the whole point of the meeting is that it is to be addressed by one who has been in jail and who refuses to be silenced" (227). Her "fearless" deed proves her undoing, however, for her behaviour poses serious threats to the wielders of oppressive power. While exercising her freedom to speak, a soldier who is going overseas to fight for freedom (and to protect women), knocks Aleta off the public podium, and the blow eventually kills her. Hundreds of people with pacifist leanings, too "cowardly" to declare themselves openly, throng to Aleta's funeral. Here, Beynon uses her text didactically to address those who did not go along with the government's wartime injunctions, but who either lacked the courage to speak their peace, or on other grounds were reluctant to voice their objections. Joan Byles sets out one of the reasons many women had for remaining silent:

[Women] had a deep sense of loyalty to their men and were acutely aware of their sufferings and sacrifices. Not for the world would they say anything which would seem to undervalue their men, or suggest that they were offered for a wrong or mistaken cause. So that, in backing their men in the war in which they were actually fighting, many women seemed to be backing warfare itself, although most probably they abhorred it. They were caught in the classic situation of women when their men are away at war. (476)

Beynon's heroine has a loved one in the trenches, and so she is also caught in the "classic" situation. Nonetheless, she urges her comrades not in arms to speak with her: a lone voice can be suppressed; many cannot. Through Aleta, Beynon encourages Canadians to be fearless, and together, fight censorship and suppression.¹⁴

Similarly, given the time at which *The Man Child* was published (1930), it is another bold, or "fearless" fiction which questions the omission of women's voices, specifically by unveiling the secrecy surrounding one of women's most common experiences, childbirth. The text queries why we know so little about a woman's battlefield, the birthbed, and why records of suffering describe only men's pain. Blackburn's text focuses on a woman's view of the creation of life: it uncovers the range of a woman's emotional and physical responses to her pregnancy; it demonstrates the strength of the familial bond which develops between mother and child, and it exposes the sacrifices and hardships a mother willingly endures to raise a child. In focusing on life, not death, the text calls for a revision of patriotic ideals in order to emphasize the sacredness of human life, not its destruction. Blackburn's Emma also criticizes a man-made society. She objects that men brandish all the power, whereas women are told that giving birth "suffices." She laments that men perceive women to be children, lacking in "inventive faculty of analytical thought" (150). It is foolish, she insists, to overlook women's wisdom. Throughout *The Man Child*, Blackburn presents Emma as both inventive and analytical. For example, railing against a society which allows men to make "life hideous and death vile," (266), she devises a plan reminiscent of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, but without chastity as a weapon. Her thoughtful proposal emphasizes to what extent the war machine depends on women's efforts, and not just as producers of cannon fodder. Emma advocates that women should not cooperate with the war effort: they should refuse to nurse, knit, or work in munitions factories. If they "struck" (212), the war couldn't last more than a month. In her argument, the military meets the maternal. If women reveal the secrets of moth-

erhood, the rhetoric of maternity will help foster a belief in the sacredness of life; if women refuse to aid the military cause that depends on it, they will hinder the makers of war.

Blackburn's notice of the power of collective action points to another of the strategies that Canadian women writers utilize: their recognition that battles can only be won through strength in numbers. To that end, one of the most distinguishing and forward-looking features of McClung's text is her belief that "women are women's best friends" (86). In emphasizing that women must be one another's allies, not enemies, she anticipates Virginia Woolf, who laments in *A Room of One's Own* that literature rarely depicts women's friendships (86). Ahead of her time, McClung advocates sisterly solidarity; her gathering together of women, particularly in the Foreword to *The Next of Kin*, resembles an early consciousness-raising group where women come together and openly share their feelings with one another about the war. The atmosphere is non-combative, the terrain a supportive "all-woman's land." Women take their conversational turn in these groups and hear one another out in a non-competitive atmosphere; there are no men present to ridicule women's thoughts or demean their ideas. Through such groups, women can empower themselves; they can formulate strategies and develop tactics against male domination, and by engaging in "team-play" (19) make a difference. Australian critic Rita Felski's depictions of female friendships in contemporary novels echo McClung's visions of what women working together can achieve. When women befriend one another, writes Felski, they can "overcome the negative value which women have been conditioned to place upon their sex; recognizing other women serves a symbolic function as an affirmation of self, of gendered identity" (138). Such identification provides

a means of access into society by linking the protagonist to a broader social group and thus rendering explicit the political basis of private experience . . . [I]t also functions as a barrier against, and a refuge from, the worst effects of a potentially threatening social order by opening up a space for nonexploitative relationships grounded in common goals and interests. (139)

Group solidarity "inspires activism and resistance rather than private resignation, and makes it possible to project a visionary hope of future change" (139).

These are all arguments McClung's narrator makes in *The Next of Kin*. She emphasizes that because patriarchy encourages competition among

women, they wage civil war among themselves, dissipating their energies and diminishing the powers they can harness if they regard their sex favourably. One of the reasons McClung's narrator travels to rural townships giving speeches is to help break down women's isolation; when they come together to hear what the speaker has to say, they recognize that they share common concerns. Without opportunity to air their views collectively, they acquiesce to submission. But working together, pooling their energies and resources, they can make political change work to their advantage. Optimistically, the narrator says, "Discussions are raging in women's societies and wherever women meet together, and out of it something will come. Men are always quite willing to be guided by women when their schemes are sound and sane" (101). In *The Next of Kin*, McClung's narrator asserts that female solidarity, which helps bring about women's emancipation, will result in the creation of a better society for children and men, too. (McClung writes women's recent victories into her text, thereby instilling confidence in others that they can be winners at social change, but she also recognizes the dangers of complacency. Writing in 1917, one year after prairie women received the vote, McClung recognized that women's "worst troubles" were not over, for a "second Hindenburg line" had been set up to prevent them from entering the field of politics, and seemed harder to "pierce" than the first [*Next* 232]. But the narrator seems undaunted, almost eager to take up the challenge.)

Aside from urging their characters to document their feelings about war and to voice their opinions publicly, Canadian women writers also utilize militaristic language as a strategy for overcoming oppression. Their characters use combat-ese with ease, one referring readily, for instance, to the "Big Push" which will "soon see the finish of the Huns" (*Rilla* 141). There is, perhaps, nothing unusual about women writers employing fighting words; as part of the current vernacular during the First World War, they would be part of every citizen's vocabulary on the homefront. But in these texts, women illustrate they are well informed about the issues and events of war, learning about combat primarily through their careful reading of daily newspapers which "bristle with alien-sounding names like Mlawa, Bzura and Przemysl" (*Rilla* 83), sites of battle like Neuve Chapelle, Ypres, and Festubert (*The Man Child* 200-01), place names foreign to both the tongue and the ear. As their knowledge of geography extends, so does the range of their conversation, for in spite of their remoteness from the roar of the can-

nons, war is the only topic of conversation women engage in. One of Montgomery's characters remarks, "everything comes back to this war. . . . We can't get away from it—even when we talk of the weather" (*Rilla* 95). Prior to the war, women made small talk over domestic matters and chatted over local issues; now they speak of little but military tactics and diplomatic intrigue. They carry on heated debates about whether the Somme battles constitute defeat or victory, argue over how much the Russians have contributed to the allied effort, laud the competence of their military leaders, ridicule the ineptitude of the opposition's, and dispute what effect the Americans will have on the war if and when they enter the fray. Women also diligently chart the "progress" of war; they study maps, track the movement of armies, their emotions see-sawing between hope and despair as they await the outcome of crucial battles. Thus women do not feel distanced from battle, but "horribly near" the war, as a school-teacher attests (*Rilla* 73). Several, like Montgomery's house-keeper in *Rilla of Ingleside*, even display a keen interest in military strategy and tactics:

Lord Kitchener went to Greece, whereat Susan foretold that Constantine would soon experience a change of heart. Lloyd George began to heckle the Allies regarding equipment and guns and Susan said you would hear more of Lloyd George yet. The gallant Anzacs withdrew from Gallipoli and Susan approved the step, with reservations. The siege of Kut-El-Amara began and Susan pored over maps of Mesopotamia and abused the Turks. Henry Ford started for Europe and Susan flayed him with sarcasm. Sir John French was superseded by Sir Douglas Haig and Susan dubiously opined that it was poor policy to swap horses crossing a stream. Not a move on the great chess-board of king or bishop or pawn escaped Susan, who had once read only Glen St. Mary notes. (146)

So familiar are these women with the reported phenomenon of war that one of Blackburn's soldiers suggests in a letter to his mother that she probably knows more of what is happening at the front than he does (249). And she may, for distance provides an unobstructed point of view. In their novels, Canadian women writers demonstrate women's passionate preoccupation with military campaigns and their astute grasp of world affairs, and thus give the lie to culturally and historically ingrained beliefs that women on the homefront are either indifferent to, or unaffected by, war.

But it is possible to speculate that women writers have more on their agenda than simply demonstrating that they are informed about the events overseas, or that they are mere interlopers in a man's game. They also realize that the words and phrases used to describe warfare—"enlist," "commission," "last

reserves,” “mobilizing for home defense,” “heroic action,” and “sworn enemies”—could be considered gender-neutral or universal, but because we associate them directly with men in combat, they are heavily biased towards the male. (At the same time, it is difficult to think of any words we might align with women in wartime, other than the passive “nursing,” “knitting,” “waiting” or “weeping.”) McClung, Montgomery, Blackburn, Arnold, and Beynon not only illustrate that women can talk intelligent battle-talk (oxymoronic as this is), but these writers also deliberately and self-consciously appropriate masculine discourse, words with clout, and mark them for their own use. Although they may feel as if they are using an impoverished language, they do not allow wartime vernacular to crush them, nor do they silence their own voices by reproducing word for word the discourse of the master or espousing his phallogocratic ideals.¹⁵ Rather, I argue, theirs is a wilful commandeering of the language of war, arising out of their desire to problematize androcentric language and to disrupt conventional literary genres. Women are as affected by war as men, writers argue; and even though women’s experiences are dramatically different, there is no good reason to disregard them entirely, or denigrate them as inferior. High on these writers’ agendas, then, is the need to challenge women’s omission from the subject of war, and to claim a space for them in intensely male discourse. As the epigraph from Irigaray suggests, Canadian women writers may seem to be speaking the same language as men, but in using the masculine colloquy of war, they are not reproducing the same history, not replicating stories already written by the dominant ideology.

In *The Sex Which Is Not One*, Luce Irigaray proposes a solution to sexism in language which I submit Canadian women writers adopted. Irigaray advocates that a woman write in a way which expresses her knowledge of the sexist nature of language, and simultaneously signals her dissent from it. She recommends a concept which takes “mimesis” as its basis:

For how can we introduce ourselves into such a tightly-woven systematicity? There is, in an initial phase, perhaps only one “path,” the one historically assigned to the feminine: that of mimicry. One must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it. . . . To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. It means to resubmit herself . . . to ideas about herself, that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make “visible,” by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invis-

ble: the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language. It also means "to unveil" the fact that, if women are such good mimics, it is because they are not simply resorbed in this function. They also remain elsewhere . . . (76)

Irigaray's argument gathers its strength from her insistence that a woman writer "remain elsewhere," as several feminist critics have observed.¹⁶ Canadian women writers, whether they are pro- or anti-war, recognize that language is an important site of political struggle; through language, they grapple with the problem of their subjugation and devise strategies to deal with it. In their texts, they prove that they are excellent, playful mimics of masculine discourse, and can remain exterior to oppressive, male-dominated wartime language even as they use it to shift the focus from the militaristic to the domestic. Anticipating Irigaray, women writers *use* men's language, use sameness not to reproduce the same history, not to underscore their own subordination, but to convert marginalization into affirmation, and to speak from a position of power. Playfully appropriating military language in order to disrupt its logic and exploit its repressive nature, they do remain elsewhere. They use combat jargon to decentre strategically the war narrative, to write women into the discourse, and to signal their own philosophic and intellectual distance from the men who wage war.

One of women writers' central objectives is to re-interpret, or re-define war words to eradicate gender exclusivity. McClung specifically singles out for re-evaluation the term "national service" which, as her unnamed narrator in *The Next of Kin* notes, is at present restricted to the soldier who leaves home. Specifically, the narrator says, "if national service is taken to mean the doing of something for our country's good which we would not feel it our duty to do but for the emergencies created by the war, then there are many ways in which the sincere citizen may serve" (154). But at the moment, sincere citizens (read women), neither "called up" nor officially "called upon" to aid the war effort, are excluded from the official definition, and through no fault of their own, made to feel as if they are "slackers" (164). Women are keen to pull their weight, but the government, which the narrator argues can ill afford in wartime to squander any talent, foolishly refuses to conscript women, to put their energies and abilities to use (163). Much of the land in Canada is idle, the narrator argues, and those women who sit knitting socks or crocheting would gladly raise potatoes and chickens if only they knew how to begin (98-99).

The Next of Kin establishes women's abilities both to create jobs for them-

selves and to seize existing opportunities to “enlist” (89): one takes care of war orphans (190); another replaces a teacher-soldier (169-70); yet another signs on as a waitress (89). Moreover, the narrator observes that restricting the term “national service” to soldiers is erroneous, for women already serve the war effort; their labours go unnoticed and unrewarded, however, because the government takes women’s work for granted, and refuses to list or count their efforts in any systematic fashion (163).¹⁷ And not only do women already easily step into soldiers’ shoes, given a chance, the narrator upholds, they could perform some jobs even better than men: they could, ironically, write more comprehensible and humane death notices than do the men in the war office (204). Canadian writers also use military language to demonstrate women’s valour on the homefront in a variety of other contexts. Some use it to suggest that women are aware of the hardships soldiers in the trenches endure, and draw their ability and courage to withstand tribulation from that close identification. Montgomery’s protagonists refuse to be shirkers; like men in the trenches forced to perform duties they abhor, women on the homefront resolutely stick to jobs they hate. Rilla, for example, detests knitting socks, but keeps her needles flying nonetheless. In her diary, she confesses, “I have done so many things I hate since 4th of August that one more or less doesn’t matter. I just think of Jem joking about the mud on Salisbury Plain and I go at them” (89). While this example may seem trivial, it is worth keeping in mind that knitting was one of the few tasks adolescent girls were encouraged to take up; obviously, not all girls found knitting easy or satisfying. In another instance, a young bride declares that if her husband can “face the Huns,” she can stand up to tyrannical father, for “a soldier’s wife can’t be a coward” (162). Women on the homefront also feel that they can contribute significantly to the war effort. When the news from the front is discouraging, for example, Montgomery’s housekeeper intensifies her energies, clearly feeling that, even at a distance, she is a full-fledged member of the allied forces. Her use of masculine imagery underscores her belief that both women and men were fighting together: “we [women] must gird up our loins and pitch in” (76). And, like soldiers who survive combat, women on the homefront often feel a “sense of victory and achievement” in their accomplishments (which previous to the war would have seemed too intimidating), as Rilla does when she successfully engineers a fund-raising concert (114).

Canadian writers argue that the relative absence of the word “heroine” in

wartime discourse functions to obscure women's participation in war. In writing heroines into their texts, they were anticipating Rachel Brownstein, who argues that "To want to become a heroine, to have a sense of the possibility of being one, is to develop the beginnings of what feminists call a 'raised' consciousness: it liberates a woman from feeling (and therefore perhaps from being) a victim or a dependent or a drudge, someone of no account" (Introduction xix). Canadian texts insist that the homefront abounds with women who display exceptional courage, fortitude, and enterprise. "Not all heroes are war-heroes. . . . The slow-grinding, searching tests of peace have found out some truly great ones among our people and have transmuted their common clay into pure gold" (73), states McClung's narrator. McClung places this statement near the beginning of her story "Surprises"; after briefly commenting on a soldier's heroism, her narrator follows with a lengthy account of a woman's conversion from a pleasure-seeker into a resourceful wartime worker. McClung's "heroine" takes on a strenuous job which enables her to save for the future without drawing upon her soldier's allowance (91). In writing heroines into their texts, Canadian women writers were also subverting narrative structures, and redefining heroic action.¹⁸

In *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*, Teresa de Lauretis argues that the work of narrative is one of mapping differences into text, and hence "into the universe of meaning, fiction and history" (121), sexual differences foremost among them. Sexual difference constructs the subject of the narrative movement as "male," its object "female." Using Soviet semiotician Jurij Lotman's work, de Lauretis suggests that "narrative endlessly reconstructs" the world

as a two-character drama in which a human person creates and recreates *himself* out of an abstract or purely symbolic other—the womb, the earth, the grave, the woman; all of which, Lotman thinks, can be interpreted as mere spaces and thought of as "mutually identical." The drama has the movement of a passage, a crossing, an actively experienced transformation of the human being into—man. (121)

If narrative can be consolidated into a drama with only two functions, an active, "male" subject and the "female" space through which he moves, then women who write confront in narrative structure the same ambivalence and ambiguity they face on the semantic level—their status as human beings. On the semantic level, the generic "man" complicates the question by telling women they are and yet are not men; accordingly, they cannot be female

heroes, or heroines. Thus both language and narrative structure silence and alienate women by excluding them, by making their participation appear impossible, oxymoronic. Does this mean that women cannot be subjects? In Canadian women writers' texts, obviously not; by declaring women on the homefront "heroines," by speaking in their own voices about women's experience, they break both the hold of narrative structure and the silence.

Montgomery, like McClung, refuses to limit the designation "heroic" to purely male endeavour. *Rilla of Ingleside* features several women who boldly declare (perhaps in recognition that no one else will) that they are "heroines," their homefront activities "heroic." At the outbreak of the conflict, while organizing a Junior Red Cross committee, Rilla announces to her parents that she intends to be as "*brave and heroic and unselfish*" as she can possibly be (53). They receive her pronouncement as adolescent posturing, but as the war continues, and she assumes ever-more challenging tasks which propel her into the wider community, her parents revise their views, and begin to see her as hardworking and courageous. More important than what Rilla accomplishes, however, or what impression of her duties she conveys to others, is that she perceives of herself as a heroine, and of her wartime efforts as "heroic" (60). Her confidence increases by leaps and bounds. Gloria Steinem might argue that, thanks to the war, Rilla is developing an externalized, or "situational" kind of self-esteem of the sort that

comes from knowing we are good "at" something, compare well with others, meet other people's expectations, and can complete ever more challenging and interesting tasks for the sheer joy of it. In this phase comes satisfaction with new abilities, a new sense of interaction and community with others, and increased curiosity about the world . . . (66)

Furthermore, women on the homefront, Montgomery suggests, possess, like soldiers, strong allegiances to duty. Declaring herself a "heroine," the housekeeper Susan boldly declares, "We have just got to grapple with whatever we have to do whether it is weeding the onion patch, or running the Government. *I shall grapple. Those blessed boys have gone to war; and we women . . . must tarry by the stuff and keep a stiff upper lip*" (58). The text argues, too, that women's tenacity renders them as indomitable and indefatigable as soldiers. Montgomery's narrator interprets that the housekeeper, who has always sworn that she would give the "last drop of her blood for King and country" (231), manifests the same kind of vigour and intensity that a soldier requires to defeat his enemy: "the spirit that ani-

mated [Susan's] gaunt arms was the self-same one that captured Vimy Ridge and held the German legions back from Verdun" (217). Without women's efforts on the homefront, Montgomery's narrator insists, the allies might have lost the war: "[Susan] was one of the women—courageous, unquailing, patient, heroic—who had made victory possible" (247). In creating characters like Rilla and the family housekeeper, Montgomery stresses that not all war heroes are found in the trenches; heroines are located in kitchens and nurseries.

Many are located overseas, too; nurses, like soldiers, are devoted to their jobs, and like fighting men, are called upon to give up their lives for others. In Gertrude Arnold's *Sister Anne! Sister Anne!!*, when a hospital suffers a bomb attack, a young nurse is hit; yet by insisting that the men be taken out of the ward before her, she performs her duties heroically. One of the senior nurses, who had initially doubted the nurse's abilities, pays her tribute:

That child is a heroine—if ever there was one. From the first moment of the reports of the gun she ran from one to the other of the patients, cheering them, and "carrying on" as if nothing at all were happening. . . . Had she lost her nerve or become frightened, or hysterical, it is quite possible the Ward would have followed suit. Instead that girl . . . was as calm as if she had been under shell fire all her life. . . . (169-70)

Commonplace assumptions hold that women become overwrought in the face of danger; in creating a woman who coolly puts the needs of others ahead of her own, Arnold underlines the notion that women are incapable of acting fearlessly under duress.

Several texts argue that heroism takes many forms: central to any war effort are mothers. *Rilla of Ingleside* insists that every mother who sends a son to war is a "heroine," as Mrs. Blythe declares herself when her first-born departs (63). And through her central character, Montgomery reminds readers that we need prompting to recognize what tremendous sacrifices mother-heroines are called upon to make. When Rilla speaks unkindly about a neighbour, for example, her mother quickly reminds her that the woman has sent three sons to the front. Instantly, Rilla recognizes her mistake, and records her guilt as follows in her diary: "I was ashamed—for it is true that all her boys have gone and she was very plucky and loyal about it too; and she is a perfect tower of strength in the Red Cross. It's a little hard to remember all the heroines" (148). As well, through her housekeeper, Montgomery further demonstrates that heroines need not be biological

mothers; any woman who sends a loved one into combat is a heroine (207). And although women's renunciations are traditionally perceived to be secondary to soldiers', Rilla argues that *all* women, even sisters of soldiers, make enormous sacrifices, and firmly rejects the notion that her beloved brother Walter's oblation is supreme. To her mother, she says, "*Our sacrifice is greater than his. . . . Our boys give only themselves. We give them*" (120). While women are not required to surrender their own lives, they are forced to relinquish the lives of those they cherish. One of McClung's mother figures stresses that women, primarily mothers, have "given up everything" for their country (85, 87).

Canadian women writers also employ militaristic language to advance another closely related argument: that women's sorrow and hardship in wartime are equal to men's. This is an observation Nosheen Khan makes in her study of British women's poetry of the First World War. Although Khan does not construct her argument around women's appropriation of military language, she does, nonetheless, insist that women's suffering in war is frequently overlooked:

The claim that war makes upon women is, in comparison with that made upon men, more hidden and more difficult; for it is easier to be active than passive, easier to place oneself under obedience in a time of crisis than to serve by silent anxiety. Courage is manifest not only in brilliant attack, but also in patient waiting and patient endurance. In war-time, women, too, go to battle; they battle with the slow torture of fear and suspense, the long agonies of anticipation; the sleepless nights and fevered imagination; the pitiless hours usurped by visions of battered bleeding bodies. (138)

Khan's comments echo those which appear in *Rilla of Ingleside*. One of the most excruciating absences for women on the homefront arises when their loved ones are reported missing. Montgomery's Rilla describes the ordeal of waiting for news as "torturing, agonized hope" (241), and the teacher, too, describes the experience of waiting for news from the war office as torturous: war is "this horrible rack of strained emotions, when every day brings a new horror or the dread of it" (144). Answering the telephone or the doorbell is so stressful that Rilla speaks guiltily of "shirking" her responsibilities (99), leaving them to her mother or the housekeeper. Even something as casual as reading newspapers becomes a form of torture: Rilla scans them anxiously, fearing that her loved ones' names will appear in the casualty lists.

Beynon also describes Aleta Dey's suffering on the homefront in military terms. In so doing, she redefines the front, and shifts the nature of battle from physical to mental. Aleta does not make the claim that women pay the biggest price in war, but she acknowledges that their part is "hard enough" (202). Both women on the homefront and men on the battlefield respond in kind to threats of death and dying, though one fears for himself, and the other for her loved one. In the trenches, the warrior lives with the constant apprehension that at any moment he may be severely wounded or killed; on the homefront, Aleta never receives telegrams or answers the door without feeling terror: "A ring at the door early in the morning. I started up in bed in a cold sweat—was it a telegram? A telephone call late at night and my heart was in my mouth; called out from a meeting I went white" (202). In describing her anguish, Aleta mimics the terminology of war: "A strain such as that slowly wears away one's nervous energy, so that the shock, when it does come, finds one with reduced powers of resistance. And it always comes in the end with the suddenness of a bomb explosion" (202). When Aleta hears, via telegram, that her loved one is wounded, she collapses, then takes to her bed; her fevered imagination transports her, as Khan suggests it might, onto the battlefield where, in a nightmarish delirium, she searches for McNair through trenches crawling in vermin, piles of dead bodies saturated in blood. When she finds him, he has an arm and leg blown off, half of his face shot away, and he is stone blind (204).²⁰ Later, struggling to describe her tortured traverse over the green fields of France, Aleta finds the memory so devastating that she can only put the "lesser horrors" into words (205). That she (a journalist) cannot locate words to depict the wartime atrocities she witnesses is reminiscent of the dilemma literary soldiers faced. Paul Fussell observes: "the . . . inadequacy of language itself to convey the facts about trench warfare is one of the motifs of all who wrote about war" (170). And, since McNair returns from the war relatively unscathed, having endured little, if any, of the suffering Aleta envisions (significantly, Beynon does not delineate McNair's wounds), it could be argued that, in having undergone such intense anguish on the homefront (and vicariously on the battlefield), Aleta has, indeed, experienced "the hardest part" of war.

Beynon uses military language throughout *Aleta Dey* to underscore her belief that wars need not occur if adversaries can learn to reconcile their differences through peaceful measures: negotiation, mercy, kindness, and ultimately love, which she considers "the only conquering force" in the world

(191, 216, 235). In order to prevent war, Aleta insists, people must learn to “love their enemies.” The novel turns, in fact, on the tolerance which unfolds between two people who, from their first meeting, are “sworn enemies” (87). Beynon deliberately makes the couple antithetical in every respect—physically, morally, philosophically. The Scotsman McNair is huge, the Canadian Aleta tiny. He smokes cigars and has a drinking problem; she is non-smoker and belongs to the women’s temperance league. She is a virgin, a “clean” woman, whereas McNair has, like Niels Lindstedt in Grove’s *Settlers of the Marsh*, married an “unclean” woman (read prostitute) as penance for one night of sin. Ever since his “fall,” McNair has taken a vow of chastity, frustrating to Aleta, a passionate woman longing to be involved in a sexual relationship. McNair is egocentric, beginning most sentences with “I,” whereas Aleta puts the needs of others, including McNair, ahead of her own. McNair is a regular church-goer, whereas although Aleta retains her belief in God and Christianity, she rejects what she calls “churchianity.” McNair is an arch conservative; Aleta is a social democrat. McNair enlists; Aleta is an ardent pacifist.

It is significant that both are journalists (although for rival newspapers), making their living through words. Through casual conversation, intellectual discussion, and even heated argument, each learns respect for the other, to be supportive of what each perceives to be the other’s weakness. McNair dislikes the suffragist movement, but defends Aleta’s right to “stick to what she believes in” (123). Aleta deplors McNair’s alcoholism, but she stands by him, deeming his fault a “mistake,” not a “crime” (160-61). In spite of their obvious differences of opinion about Canada’s involvement in the war effort, McNair encourages Aleta to overcome the “spirit of cowardice” (211) that plagues her, and to “come out strong” against the war (140).

Several critics have disregarded the importance of McNair as a figure who tests Aleta’s tolerance. In her play *The Fighting Days*, Wendy Lill seems to miss the point of Beynon’s novel, upon which her script draws heavily. Lill shows Aleta and McNair often in heated disagreement, but she does not make them opposites who must learn the true meaning of democracy, to leave “each the other one to choose his [sic] path” (*Aleta* 255). In not sending McNair off to war, Lill destroys the complexity of Aleta’s arguments. Anne Hicks also misreads Beynon’s depiction of McNair, finding it seriously flawed: he is “domineering and discreditable,” his “political arrogance presents too obvious a contrast to Aleta’s humane uncertainty,” and his “senti-

mental portrayal becomes irritating” (Introduction vi). Ramsay Cook as well finds that Aleta is

torn between devotion to her cause and her love for an older man whose alcohol problem, conservative and nationalist opinions obviously represented the old order. The conflict is never resolved before Aleta dies of injuries sustained while distributing pacifist literature . . . (201)

(Cook also errs in suggesting that Aleta is killed while distributing pacifist literature. She voices her opinions from a public platform.) Both Hicks and Cook fail to comprehend Beynon’s intention completely: the conflict(s) between Aleta and McNair are never meant to be resolved. Their relationship is founded on disagreement, as Aleta’s declaration to McNair attests: “as long as we both live I shall be your friend, and I’ll argue and argue with you to your heart’s content” (151). McNair and Aleta are perfect examples of strong-minded individuals who learn to reconcile their differences, not through violence, but through peaceful means—words. The text argues that mental battles, fought through verbal sparring, are the only ones worth waging, and that the only “power” worth possessing is that of the mind (109).

Ultimately, Canadian women’s novels are, in subtle ways, pleas for peace, instructions on how to avoid war. Although women writers cannot fight war itself, they can expose war mentality: they point to the dangers of propaganda, and make their characters cognizant of the hype generated by war. They warn them to be wary of slogans that “get” men to enlist, and encourage them to see through patriotic fervour, to recognize that soldiers will find neither glory nor glamour in the trenches. One of the strengths of these novels lies in their promotion of non-violent ways of solving problems. Writers encourage their characters to be tolerant of others’ beliefs, and to solve disagreements by exploring differences of opinion through mediation. Montgomery depicts her characters making compromises, occasionally swallowing large slices of humble pie, but always more anxious to foster a harmonious environment than to exact small victories or take revenge over minor matters.

Finally, one of the most effective strategies Canadian women writers employ is humour, pervasive in novels by McClung, Montgomery, and McKowan. Montgomery’s description of a decidedly unromantic war wedding, which features a flat-faced and commonplace bride and a groom who sobs uncontrollably throughout the ceremony, is a howler, as are McClung’s

not-so-subtle digs at men who postulate that only they are capable of running the world. By utilizing wit, Canadian writers dispel the myth that women have no sense of humour. Further, their use of humour makes the subject of war accessible, and thus an appropriate vehicle for social reform.

To date, critics have done our literary heritage (often considered a vigorous and healthy tradition which gives women a prominent place), a disservice by ignoring writers like McClung, Blackburn, Arnold, McKowan, and Beynon, and Montgomery. As Woolf writes, “we think back through our mothers if we are women” (*Room* 79). But in assessing why Canadian women have such a strong place, critics like Howells have thought back, but they have looked to our grandmothers, or great-grandmothers Catharine Parr Traill, Susanna Moodie, or Sara Jeanette Duncan, not the women writers who, in this century, in modern memory, were showing women how to write themselves into an intensely male-dominated discourse, and at the same time, teaching women how to secure powerful positions in their society. In the current agenda to dissolve or expand the boundaries which exclude women writers, critics have argued for the admittance of marginalized genres like memoirs, diaries, and autobiographies. To that list, I would add women’s Great War writing. Not only will such a re-reading have implications for how we read the fiction women produced in subsequent wars, it will inform us how Canadian women writers managed to gain small victories during a turbulent historical period. Forewarned is always forearmed.

NOTES

- 1 The editors also overlook J. G. Sime’s short-story collection *Canada Chaps* (Toronto: Gundy, 1917). I overlook the collection, too, because I am discussing only women’s wartime novels in this article.
- 2 In this article, I am concerned primarily with English-Canadian women writers’ response to the Great War. For French-Canadian women writers’ responses, see Christ Verduyn’s “La prose féminine québécoise des années trente.” Verduyn finds that few works explicitly consider issues of war or economic crises: “De façon générale . . . ni la guerre ni la Crise économique n’exercent de grande influence sur la vie des personnages présentes dans ces romans” (60). Verdun cites Laetitia Filion’s *Yolande la fiancée* (1935), the action of which takes place during the First World War; the titular character repeatedly asks: “Qu’est-ce que cela pourrait bien nous faire à nous, ici au Canada, s’il y avait la guerre en Europe?” (59 - 60 n.9).
- 3 In *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell writes that “every war is ironic because every war is worse than expected” (7). The Great War, however, was more ironic than any before or since; eight million people were destroyed because two persons, the

Archduke Ferdinand and his Consort, were shot (8). Based on their knowledge of previous wars, enlisted men could not have foreseen what an inhuman(e) slaughter this war would be.

- 4 In her study of American and British women's war writing, Sandra Gilbert argues that the Great War served to empower women psychologically, economically, and sexually; throughout her essay, Gilbert employs words such as "glee," "exuberance," and "triumph" to describe writers' enthusiastic response to war, which (alas only temporarily) liberated women from cloistered environments, confining clothing, and tedious domestic chores. Gilbert's essay should be read, however, in light of the critics who argue that her thesis is biased and her use of examples cavalier. See Jane Marcus 49 - 83; Claire M. Tylee 199 - 210. My own research reveals that Gilbert disregards Mary Marlowe's *The Women Who Wait* (London: Simpkin, 1918) and Helen Zenna Smith's *Not So Quiet . . . Stepdaughters of War* (London: Marriot, 1930; rpt. London: Virago, 1987), possibly because they do not fit her thesis.
- 5 Canadian women writers' texts also differ significantly from those by Australian women writers, who are obsessed with hero worship of the Anzac, not with social reform or the liberation of women. See my article, "The Digger on the Lofty Pedestal: Australian Women's Great War Fictions," *Australian and New Zealand Studies in Canada* 10 (Dec. 1993): 1-22.
- 6 I disagree in part with Alan R. Young's claim that "ideologically all . . . [Montgomery's] voices concur" (110), including the voices of mothers and fathers with sons at the front. Young does not take into account that their reactions to their sons' enlistment differ sharply. The responses of men are similar to those propounded by Sarah Ruddick, who argues in *Maternal Thinking* that "abstractness . . . characterizes military discourse as a whole. In militarist thinking, human bodies are subordinated to abstract causes" (146). Montgomery makes no effort to depict her male figures as militaristic thinkers, but they are, nevertheless, of the gender which wages war. In *Rilla of Ingleside*, fathers conjure up abstract ideals of patriotism and sacrifice, and describe their sons' engagement in war as a collective enterprise or brotherhood. Several of Montgomery's mothers express pride at their sons' enlistment, but rarely and reluctantly. Significantly, they proclaim their pride only in public, thereby signalling their enforced complicity with the social order, but one they do not necessarily embrace. And while fathers regard their sons' enlistment in abstract terms, the most common reaction for a mother is to revert, almost instantly, to memory, to picture her beloved son either as an infant or child. Mothers' thoughts, then, are not abstract, but concrete, as Ruddick points out. She asserts that mothers have a "concrete cognitive style," and that such concreteness can be seen as "a mix of interwoven responses to a growing, changing child"; in raising her child, the mother will "eschew generalization" ("Preservation" 249). Montgomery's text stresses, too, that mothers recognize more than fathers the emotional costs of war, and thus have a firmer grasp of what war means than do men. Almost from the moment their sons announce that they have signed up, Montgomery's women graphically visualize war for what it really is—the maiming and killing of young men, as Elaine Scarry argues in *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. But patriotism has a firm hold on fathers, for only after his third son has gone to war does Montgomery's Dr. Blythe verbalize his desolation. Even though he is a doctor and thus aware of the sacredness of life, his response to all three sons' enlistment is an unemotional and unequivocal expression of "pride" (207).

- 7 See Ramsay Cook, "Francis Marion Beynon and the Crisis of Christian Reformism," *The West and the Nation: Essays in Honour of W. L. Morton*, eds. Carl Berger and Ramsay Cook (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976) 187-208; Barbara Roberts, "Women Against War, 1914-18: Francis Beynon and Laura Hughes," *Up and Doing: Canadian Women and Peace*, eds. Janice Williamson and Deborah Gorham (Toronto: The Woman's Press, 1989) 48-65.
- 8 According to Barbara Roberts, the friends also had a falling-out over McClung's having urged Prime Minister Borden to exclude foreign or alien women from the vote and give it only to the British; she told him all suffragists agreed (53).
- 9 In "Men and Money: A Story With a Purpose" (*Maclean's Magazine* Sept. 1919: 15-17, 99-100), McClung leaves little doubt that she felt strongly that it was a family's duty to send their sons off to war. In writing *Three Times and Out: A Canadian Boy's Experiences in Germany* (Toronto: Thomas Allen, 1918) for Private Simmons, a Canadian soldier who had been a prisoner in Germany and made several escapes, McClung was also indicating her support of the war effort.
- 10 J. G. Sime's "Munitions" exemplifies that women were ecstatic once released from private homes and propelled into jobs in a munitions factory. Sime asserts that, prior to the war, women led dull and quiet lives. The conflict brings them into contact with other women and provides them with a strong sense of pride and self-worth.
- 11 In "Nellie McClung and Peace," R. R. Warne observes that although McClung "articulates the complexity of the war experience from a variety of perspectives . . . her own understanding is always present" (40). For example, the women in the Foreword (Warne incorrectly refers to it as the Preface) phrase their concerns in ways which echo statements from McClung's *In Times Like These* (40).
- 12 In giving voice to a variety of women, *The Next of Kin* is typical of McClung's style. See Misao Dean, "Voicing the Voiceless: Language and Genre in Nellie McClung's Fiction and Her Autobiography," *Atlantis* 15.1 (1989): 65-75.
- 13 Significantly, the only person in Aleta's growing-up years who openly defies authority is male. Belenky et al. argue that during adolescence, males challenge authority, whereas females do not (64). During the war, Aleta's male friend openly declares his pacifist views, and although he is ostracized by his friends, he does not suffer the same fate as Aleta; she is incarcerated for her outspokenness. Beynon thus underscores that girls (more than boys) are socialized into passive obedience, and further, that Canadian society might tolerate a man's contestation of the war effort, but never a woman's.
- 14 No doubt Beynon was speaking from the heart in this novel, for as Hicks notes in her Introduction to *Aleta Dey*, Beynon was forced to resign as women's editor of *The Guide* in 1917 due to her public opposition to male conscription; Hicks speculates that the tapping of Aleta's telephone is probably biographical fact (xiii). Roberts writes, too, that Beynon may even have feared physical attack, for at anti-war rallies, several activists had been beaten up, and right-wing vigilantes staged brutal riots all over the west from 1917-1920. According to Roberts, Beynon moved to New York in 1917, writing *Aleta Dey* while in exile (52).
- 15 For a further analysis of how military discourse subordinates women, see Claire A. Culleton, "Gender-Charged Munitions: The Language of World War I Munitions Reports," *Women's Studies International Forum* 2.2 (1988) 109-16; Carol Cohn, "Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 12 (1987) 687-718; and Margaret R. Higonnet, "Not So Quiet in No-Woman's-

- Land," *Gendering War Talk*, eds. Miriam Cooke and Angela Woollacott (Princeton: PUP, 1993): 205-226).
- 16 See also Mary Jacobus, "The Question of Language: Men of Maxims and *The Mill on the Floss*," *Writing and Sexual Difference*, ed. Elizabeth Abel (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1982) 37-52; Mary Russo, "Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory," *Feminist Studies/ Critical Studies*, ed. Teresa de Lauretis (Bloomington: U of Indiana P, 1986) 213-29; Tanya Modleski, "Feminism and the Power of Interpretation: Some Critical Readings," in *Feminist Studies / Critical Studies*, 121-38.
- 17 Somewhat ironically, McClung's narrator observes that men do recognize women's contributions, but only when it suits their purpose. For example, a recruiter tries to convince a reluctant conscript that he must not let his wife stand in the way of his enlistment. She will be well taken care of on the homefront, the recruiter insists (hypocritically, since he denies his own wife an "active" role), because "women are the best soldiers of all" (186).
- 19 Coral Ann Howells, in *Private and Fictional Worlds: Canadian Women Novelists of the 1970s and 1980s* (London: Methuen, 1987), does not go far enough in her claim that, in their stories about the lives of girls and women between the 1970s and the 1980s, Canadian women writers were redefining heroism (Introduction 5). Obviously, Canadian women were reinterpreting the term as early as the Great War.
- 20 Descriptions like Beynon's of the atrocities a soldier would witness on the battlefield should counter the commonly held belief that women know nothing about war. I am reminded of a quotation which appears in Sarah Ruddick's *Maternal Thinking*, attributed to suffragist Anna Shaw: "Looking into the face of . . . one dead man we see two dead, the man and the life of the woman who gave him birth; the life she wrought into his life! And looking into his dead face someone asks a woman, what does a woman know about war? What, friends, in the face of a crime like that does a man know about war?" (151).

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