

## Private and Public in Timothy Findley's *The Wars*

**T**he closer critics look at Timothy Findley's *The Wars*, the more we recognize how structurally complex it is. Scholars have demonstrated that the novel is almost poetic in the extent to which it is unified through language, symbol, and motif.<sup>1</sup> One of the novel's most important themes is the dramatic change both Robert Ross and the society in which he lives undergo, as World War I overturns the past and destroys the philosophical and moral foundations of the pre-War world. The change is reflected in a new attitude toward private and public: thanks to the war, characters lose their former sense of what is supposed to be kept private and what may be shared with others. Indeed, the private sphere seems to disappear altogether, as both joys and griefs become national rather than individual or family affairs, and secrets become almost impossible to keep. Findley has structured his novel in part through patterns of contrast between private and public.

Findley portrays the pre-War world as one in which there is a clear and proper distinction between the public and private. Pre-war society constrains people from revealing their emotions or calling too much attention to themselves; it obliges its members to communicate through established forms—courtesy, ritual, and so on—and to erect false fronts to hide their true feelings. Whatever emotions may be bubbling beneath, the public persona must be staid, decorous, polite. For example, the narrator/researcher observes that in the photographs taken before the war, “everyone at first seems timid—lost—irresolute. Boys and men stand squinting at the camera.

Women turn away suspicious. They still maintain a public reticence.”(11) To be photographed is to suffer an intolerable invasion of privacy.

Ross himself begins as someone who wishes to keep himself hidden, out of the public eye. He values his privacy and shuns the camera. One of the earliest photographs in which he appears shows him standing “on the sidelines with pocketed hands” (13), barely visible as he strives to stay out of the combatant and noncombatant war activities of his society. Rowena, too, shuns or is kept out of the public eye: “She is never in photographs that are apt to be seen by the public” (13). Ross feels this preservation of the family’s privacy is right, although his mother disagrees:

*Mother and Miss Davenport, wearing their canteen aprons, stand on the platform at Sunnyside Station handing out chocolate bars to the soldiers who are leaning out of trains. They do this every Thursday afternoon. Robert wishes his mother wouldn’t do such things because he’s shy and thinks she appears too much in public. But Mrs. Ross is adamant. (14)*

Her sense of duty overrides her natural shyness, although within her own family she tries to hide her emotions. After the death of her brother in a trolley car accident she conceals her eyes behind dark glasses. Later, she refuses to leave the Ross private train car to see Robert off, unwilling to let Robert see her grief at his departure.

But as Robert Ross notices on the train to Kingston, the war has changed this familiar world of decorum and order:

*Where were the streets with houses ranged behind their lawns under the gentle awnings of the elms? What had happened here in so short a time that he could not recall his absence?... Where, in this dark, was the world he’d known and where was he being taken to so fast there wasn’t even time to stop?(46)*

The rows of houses no longer provide safe refuge for their inhabitants; people can no longer hide behind the physical barriers of well-kept lawns and flourishing trees, nor the social ones of dignified appearances.

Both the Ross family and the society as a whole are forced to abandon their earlier insistence on privacy by the needs and enthusiasms of war. Compare the earlier photograph showing pre-War “public reticence” before the camera to ones taken after war is declared:

*Here is the Boys’ Brigade with band. Backyard minstrels, got up in cork, bang their tambourines and strut across a lawn on Admiral Road.... Everyone is waving either at the soldiers or the cameras. More and more people want to be seen. More and more people want to be remembered. Hundreds—thousands crowd*

into frame.... Women abandon all their former reticence and rush out into the roadway, throwing flowers and waving flags. (12)

War is a national, not a private, affair, and so the former social norms of propriety and dignity are discarded in favour of very public displays of patriotism. Those who formerly avoided the camera now try to be recorded forever on film. The Georgian world is turned upside down; as often happens in Findley's fiction, such as *Famous Last Words* and the short story "War," war causes an inversion of social mores—what used to be frowned upon is now encouraged, what used to be considered wrong is now considered right, and what used to be labeled insane is now viewed as normal.<sup>2</sup>

**W**ith the start of the war, Ross experiences an inextricable meshing of private, domestic concerns and the larger, public battle. The conflicts at home, notably between Mr. and Mrs. Ross, become reflected in the general struggle. As Lorraine York says, *The Wars* is "a war novel which is largely concerned with domestic strife." (*Front Lines* 30) Ross's motivation for joining the army is his guilt over his supposed dereliction of duty to Rowena; in other words, a very private and personal imperative drives him to participate in a public act of violence. (York, *Other Side* 83; Drolet 150) Findley sees no real distinction between what spurs us to family or international wars—as Coral Ann Howells says, he "sees the war as the focus for the same impulses enacted on the personal level in relationships and within the self." (132) In war we act out on a public scale the violent tendencies that drive us in our domestic conflicts. War, then, destroys the fragile peacetime barrier between private and public motives and actions.

Ross strives vainly to preserve his isolation, but like the rest of Canadian society finds it impossible to do so. While waiting for the train to Lethbridge he avoids the other new soldiers, "wanting to protect the last of his privacy" (18). At Lethbridge, we are told, "he watched the men around him from a distance. Some of them were friends from school. To these he was polite but he found excuses to keep them at bay" (28). But his blushes betray him, so in spite of himself Ross becomes part of the larger entity that is the army (29). We also learn that he is "shy of girls" (18), but the soldiers' visit to the whorehouse reveals that nothing—not even sex—is a private matter any more. The thinness of the walls means that one's most intimate secrets become public knowledge: "He thought: now someone knows about

me" (43). He is embarrassed by the overt sexual behaviour of the other soldiers. But he himself becomes a voyeur, ashamed yet compelled to watch Taffler's acts with the Swede (44-45). The war will not let him remain hidden or avoid seeing others.

One aspect of this theme that is especially relevant to the brothel scene is the contrasting imagery of clothing and nakedness. At key points in the novel Ross's state of dress or undress reflects his psychological state or sense of identity. For example, before enlisting he dreams of becoming a runner, emulating Tom Longboat, and when he comes down with jaundice stands naked before a mirror and imagines he has indeed succeeded in attaining Longboat's yellow colour (48). Immediately after this scene, we are shown Ross in his uniform; he has traded childish identification for an adult identity. At the same time he is forced to hide his individual dreams in favour of joining his society's larger purposes.

Perhaps the most well-known scene in the novel embodying this image and the theme of private *versus* public is the one in the Ross bathroom. After being beaten by Teddy Budge, Ross sits in the bathtub soaking his wounds. His mother enters and nonchalantly sits on the toilet. Ross is stunned by this intrusion into what is normally a totally private act: "His thoughts—that had seemed so consecutive and wise a moment before—began to stutter and shuffle to a halt. He sat there blank." (26) She talks about his bruises, which are completely visible to her, and reminisces about his childhood. Meanwhile, Ross tries to maintain his composure.

She set the empty glass on the floor and re-assembled herself—using toilet paper to wipe her eyes. After this she sighed and crossed her legs—looking as if she always came and sat in the bathroom with her son while he bathed. (27)

While Robert is the one who feels most exposed during this scene, both characters are revealing more of themselves than they wish:

His mother watched him—all the laughter fading from her eyes. If Robert had turned to look, the expression on her face might have frightened him. Yet people tend to look most often like themselves when no one else is watching. (27)

During wartime, one's physical and emotional condition is of concern to more than just the self. Here, Robert is forced to share both his pain and his efforts to relieve his pain with his mother. The stakes have become so high now—as Mrs. Ross knows that Robert is going to join the army and perhaps be killed—that no one can afford to be shy. Robert's bruises are the

physical counterparts to his emotional wounds over the deaths of Rowena and her rabbits; everything he is feeling, both physically and emotionally, is all too visible to others.

What Ross learns as he sails to and fights in Europe is that privacy is no longer an affordable luxury. He must live, and perhaps die, in the trenches with the others. Everything he does, he does in the presence of his men, and so he must be careful how he looks and sounds to them. Despite his fears and insecurities he has to behave like an officer, as in the scene on board the ship to England when he has to reassure a soldier even though he himself is frightened (64). It is on this ship that he learns how difficult it is to maintain privacy in the army, even when it comes to bodily functions. For the men it is impossible:

Few of the men had ever been to sea and although they were tolerably used to the crowding of their barracks, nothing had prepared them for the airless jamming of their quarters underdecks. The makeshift latrines and showers were virtually open forums where privacy was unheard of. (56)

Conditions are little better for the officers:

Bathrooms were shared by all excepting the battalion commander. Privacy was desperately won but not an impossibility as down below. At least the cabinet doors could be closed on the w.c.'s and the showers had partitions. (57)

Everything the soldiers do and become is exposed to everyone else. As Ross learns in the hospital in England, even the soldiers' suffering is put on public display, as "philanthropists" like Barbara d'Orsey make periodic visits to "comfort" the men. It is noteworthy that during the description of the visit by Barbara d'Orsey and Taffler to Jamie Villiers, Taffler's hands are described as "naked" (97). (Compare this to how carefully the young Ross hid his hands in his pockets in the photograph discussed above.) The image suggests that Taffler is vulnerable; it certainly recalls the scene in the whorehouse. To Ross, Taffler has no secrets; indeed, none of the soldiers do.

On the other hand, the meshing of the private and public sphere results in a bizarre attempt to reconstruct a kind of domestic life in the trenches. The soldiers make their battlefield station into a perverted version of "home," with a stove, "a knotted rug on the floor," Levitt's books neatly shelved, and a table for their "banquet" (89). Only in the twisted, inverted world of war could such a scene be considered "rather commonplace" (83).

The novel continually sets up a sharp contrast during the battle scenes

between the individual perspective on the war—what we may consider the private war—and the larger picture. We see the war mostly through Ross's eyes, and therefore witness *his* war, but we are also treated to periodic overviews that place his experiences in context:

The Second Battle of Ypres had taken place in April of 1915 and from that time forward till the end of the war the city would remain in Allied hands. It was here that most of the Canadian troops were deployed. Their objectives were the towns and villages, ridges and woods for roughly ten miles either side of them. That was the larger picture. In terms of individual men and companies, their worlds could be limited to quarter-miles. In Robert's case, the furthest extent of his world was the four miles back to Bailleul. (83)

The war forces Ross to recognize and exhibit his own capacity for violence, and while he continues to try to hide that truth from others it is clear he is amazed by what he has revealed to himself. During his convalescence at the d'Orseys he is discovered in an act of wanton destruction. As Juliet d'Orsey says:

Robert I discovered was a very private man. His temper, you know, was terrible. Once when he thought he was alone and unobserved I saw him firing his gun in the woods at a young tree. It was a sight I'd rather not have seen. He destroyed it absolutely... he had a great deal of violence inside and sometimes it emerged this way with a gesture and other times it showed in his expression when you found him sitting alone on the terrace or staring out of a window. (152-53)

It is not merely his violence that Juliet manages to see when she spies on Robert.

**R**oss, then, becomes more and more exposed, both to himself and others. Later in the novel, he experiences the ultimate violation of his body and his self. Significantly, before the rape scene he is shown masturbating in the privacy of his room; Findley may be trying to establish a contrast between his initial idyllic seclusion and his later violation by the other soldiers and, by extension, the war itself. He is also without his kit bag, and its absence leaves him disoriented: "It was strangely disconcerting to have lost it. He felt as if he'd left his face behind in a mirror and the Webley in a stranger's hand" (159). He feels naked and helpless without it. The next morning he walks to the baths and is literally naked and helpless when he is raped by his fellow officers. Like his mother they have invaded the privacy of the bath, but to engage in—rather than help soothe him after—a violent act: "Hands and fingers probed and poked at every part of

his body” (168). This act represents the ultimate invasion of his private self: “the war rapes him, invading the intensely private frontier of the human body.” (York, *Introducing* 50) It is a violation of his spirit as much as, if not more than, his body. And his individual violation is symbolic of the spiritual rape of all the young men in World War I; defending the scene, Findley has said, “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.” (*Inside Memory* 151)

Even his subsequent act in freeing the horses threatened with death can be seen as a reflection of how private and public come together during war. When public events and imperatives impinge on the self, we can succumb to the pressures and deny our individual ethical and moral responsibilities. We can accept the destruction of our private selves and act as parts of the larger whole, thereby deflecting responsibility for our actions on the collective. Or we can assert private morality in the face of public immorality. As Ronald B. Hatch says, “an individual can refuse to follow the ‘forces of history’ through the power of his moral judgement”; by freeing the horses, Ross shows he “embraces the traditionally opposed masculine and feminine virtues, thereby linking private, domestic virtues with public action.” (93)

Of course, it is not only Ross who has suffered a loss of privacy. The war has forced everyone to surrender his or her privacy in favour of the common good. Even the upper classes have not escaped the intrusion of the necessities of war. Lady Emmeline d’Orsey is a woman who values her privacy immensely:

she extended her energies to providing her husband and children with a life in town even though it was basically abhorrent to her because she believed it was her duty to keep every avenue of social contact open to them. (141)

But with the coming of war she has allowed her home to be used as a convalescent hospital:

In the end, despite the awesome invasion it would mean of her precious privacy it was the Marchioness herself who decided that her home could not remain a private sanctuary. (142)

For the d’Orseys as well as the Rosses, with war comes domestic conflict that parallels the world war: “Findley shows himself aware of the complicated family wars which engender private battles.” (York, *Front Lines* 40) Public image is extremely important to Barbara d’Orsey, but we see the pri-

vate reality behind it through the photographs the researcher uncovers. (York, *Other Side* 83) In general, no one can escape the demands of war; national needs override individual desires for privacy.

While Ross is recuperating at the d'Orseys we are presented with a scene that parallels his revelation at the whorehouse: he is not the only character in the novel who becomes an unwilling observer of sexual acts. A large portion of the second half of the novel is in the form of Juliet d'Orsey's childhood diary, in which she recounts the events surrounding Ross's visit to her home. She deliberately spies on her relatives, but is seldom pleased with what she sees and is shocked when she encounters Ross making love to her sister. Love, however, is hardly the word to describe what she thinks she sees:

I've blundered into everything I know. I've blundered into rooms and I've blundered into danger and I've blundered into other people's lives. . . . What I did was worse than blundering.... This was a picture that didn't make sense. Two people hurting one another. That's what I thought. I knew in a cool, clear way at the back of my mind that this was "making love"—but the shape of it confused me. The shape and the violence. Barbara was lying on the bed, so her head hung down and I thought that Robert must be trying to kill her. They were both quite naked.... Robert's neck was full of blood and his veins stood out. He hated her. And Barbara's hand was in her mouth. (154-56)

The similarity to the sexual violence Ross himself has been a witness to is clear. Returning to the image pattern of clothing and nakedness we traced earlier, it is worth noting that Juliet has long tried to catch her siblings naked. She compares what she sees with the time she saw her brother: "It wasn't like Michael where his being naked explained itself" (156). Like Ross, Juliet is forced to undergo some painful revelations. What should be private is now exposed, and the result is shock and a sense of shame.

While most of the characters in the novel reluctantly surrender their privacy, or are subjected to horrifying violations of their privacy, Ross's mother ceases to care. Early in the novel she attends church but can no longer stand listening to the Bishop rallying the congregation to support the war. She walks out, attended by Miss Davenport, and sits on the church steps, not terribly concerned about the way she might appear to passers-by:

"But—we can't sit here," said Miss Davenport.

"I can," said Mrs. Ross and did.

She even lighted a cigarette. Why should it matter? The only people passing were children—and they were all running after motorcars, slipping and sliding on the ice.... She drank and offered it to Davenport—but Davenport was afraid of censure, sitting so near the street, and she refused. (53-54)



It is only when a child sees her, and she worries about frightening the girl, that Mrs. Ross stands up. This has been her very public protest against the smug and thoughtless patriotism of the other churchgoers, who do not seem to mind sending their children off to be killed. As Findley has said, “Here she makes a great resounding peace, because she invites the strangers to look at her, to go back in there with her, and listen to the singing.” (Aitken 87) As in the bathroom scene, Mrs. Ross here discards her sense of social decorum; later, she seeks out storms so that she can experience the kind of hardship Robert is enduring across the sea, again not minding who might see her doing what her dignified neighbours would probably consider insane acts.

**T**he war, then, is an elemental situation that eliminates our “civilized” notions of what is properly private and what is acceptably public. As Lorraine York has shown, the entire novel is structured around an alternation between domestic and battle scenes, with both sorts usually being violent, as Findley demonstrates that during war the distinction between the private and public spheres fades. (*Introducing* 41) York sees this “modulation” most clearly reflected in the photographs the researcher-narrator pores over:

Findley uses photography in *The Wars* to underline one of the most important ideas in the novel: the necessary interpenetration of the public and the private in any complete understanding of a war.... Private violence serves to enlarge in our minds the overwhelming horror of the 1914-18 carnage. (*Other Side* 81)

As the researcher continues his/her study, the photographs portray a more private world, moving away from efforts to capture an entire way of life and drawing the focus most closely onto one family and its tragedy.

The researcher’s goal, in fact, is to see the public event, World War I, through the experiences of one man and one family. Beyond the public “truths” as defined by the history books—the facts and statistics of battle—lies the private truth of each soldier who fought in the war. Findley mixes history and fiction “to show the human lives which traditional history, with its accounts of battles and treaties, tends to ignore... he is interested in shifting some emphasis away from the ‘great names and events’ of history and toward the history of individuals.” (York, *Introducing* 37-38) History distorts the truth not only because the big picture obscures the individual human reality, but also because the present continually reinterprets the past;

as Hatch says, “the past is something shaped in the present and in continual need of reshaping.” (93; cf. York, *Introducing* 32) To understand the public tragedy we focus on one man’s story: “the private story of Robert Ross illuminates the tale of an entire generation.” (York, *Other Side* 84) Thus, the “interpenetration” of public and private during the war helps reveal its true horrors.

Once the war is over, and the world returns to “normal,” the former reticence returns. No longer do people share their joys and pains; they attempt to cover up the scars that they had previously displayed, voluntarily or otherwise. The entire novel, in fact, is in the form of an effort by the researcher-narrator to break through this public reticence to discover the real Robert Ross beneath. The narrator strives to learn the truth, but can never really do so, because too many people, like his nurse and Juliet d’Orsey, want to forget, or hide, who he was and what he did. The narrator recognizes early that he can never really see the whole picture; he must rely on publicly available fragments that only partially reveal the private truth:

It’s best to go away and find your information somewhere else. In the end, the only facts you have are public. Out of these you make what you can, knowing that one thing leads to another. Sometime, someone will forget himself and say too much or else the corner of a picture will reveal the whole. What you have to accept at the outset is this: many men have died like Robert Ross, obscured by violence.... As the past moves under your fingertips, part of it crumbles. Other parts, you know you’ll never find. This is what you have. (10-11)

History, as Simone Vauthier has shown, hides as well as reveals, because it omits the personal: “History... generally excludes the private... The links between the private and public sides of Ross’s experience are precisely what the reader must puzzle over, what is of significance to the reader.” (15)

Essentially, then, the researcher’s efforts constitute the most pervasive attempt in the novel to violate someone’s privacy. What he/she tries to do is locate the real Robert Ross, to penetrate the screens erected by the passage of time, the need by Ross and others to preserve a public image, and the inevitable barriers of understanding that exist between different people. To understand Ross we would have to be Ross; failing that, we can only violate his privacy so far. After that, what we are left with is guesswork—in other words, imaginative reconstruction.

Of course, it is not merely the researcher who engages in that reconstruction. As numerous critics have pointed out, the novel is itself a series of

fragments we as readers must piece together, just as the documents and photographs become the discontinuous primary material for the researcher's work.<sup>3</sup> The very act of reading the novel is therefore an attempted violation of Ross's privacy as well.

The novel is thus an imaginative search for the private realities behind the public documents. (Kröller; Findley, "Alice"; Aitken 84) Like the war itself, the novel breaks down barriers between people who jealously guard their separate existences. World War I, Findley shows, opened our eyes to the evil, the capacity for inflicting—and enduring—pain, that we try to hide from each other and ourselves. Privacy is a luxury of peacetime, when we can isolate ourselves in our homes and our minds, certain that life is rational, orderly. For Findley, war is a cataclysm in which secrets are revealed, in which—despite all our efforts—what is private becomes public.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> See, for example, Pirie; Klovan; York, "A Shout"; and especially Hulcoop.
- <sup>2</sup> For discussions of the inversion of society's norms, see, e.g., Ricou, and Brydon.
- <sup>3</sup> E.g., York 79, and *Introducing* 26-27; Duffy 64; Aitken 84; Kröller 68.

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