

CANADIAN FICTION OF THE GREAT WAR

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FOR MORE THAN SIXTY YEARS John McCrae's "In Flanders Fields" has been memorized by Canadian schoolchildren or declaimed reverently at Remembrance Day ceremonies in Canada and around the world. It is almost the only Canadian poem, of whatever theme or type, that has achieved genuine fame or recognition. Practically unknown, by contrast, both in Canada and abroad, are several war novels which constitute the best fiction by Canadian writers about the experiences of Canadian fighting soldiers in the Great War of 1914-18. These novels and their authors — *All Else is Folly; a tale of War and Passion* (1929) by Peregrine Acland, *Generals Die in Bed* (1930) by Charles Yale Harrison, and *God's Sparrows* (1937) by Philip Child — deserve to be better known. For since the publication of Timothy Findley's *The Wars* (1977), readers have begun to realize that the war novel is a significant genre of Canadian fiction.

It is one of the ironies of modern history that the 1914-18 conflict — depending on how one sees it, either the last nineteenth-century or the first twentieth-century war — has been called by various names. First it was the "Great War," then the "World War"; since 1945, it has been dubbed the "First World War." This last name is both innocuous and foreboding, conveying both a colourless statistic and the suggestion of a series of ever more dangerous conflicts. The fact remains that it was a war fought primarily among European states and their allies, and was by no means universal in scope. Still, in terms of the casualties and devastation it involved it came to be regarded as the worst calamity mankind had ever committed against itself. Some hoped it would prove to be the final, ignoble cauldron of human madness which at last would teach man that his civilization must be strengthened or else he would be doomed forever. This was the sentiment expressed in H. G. Wells' *The War That Will End War* (1914) and *Mr. Britling Sees It Through* (1916), among other works of the period.¹ A later, more cautious observer, B. H. Liddell Hart, writing a history of the war in 1930, noted: "The historian's rightful task is to distil experience as a medicinal warning for future generations. . . . He would be a rash optimist if he believed that the next generation would trouble to absorb the warning."²

Yet, if few could discern the "warning," it was clear in the aftermath of war that the clock could not be turned back, that the world was launched into an uncertain future. For Canada, as for a number of the smaller nations, the prospect of genuine independence, free from the imperial demands of larger powers, seemed bright. Marshall McLuhan may be right when he says, "Canadian participation in past wars, whether in 1812 or 1914 or after, has never been on a scale to enable Canadians to identify with the total operation"³; but surely his comment begs many questions, and overlooks many realities, concerning Canada's role during and after the Great War. One historian has described Canadians as an "unmilitary people" who have always gone to war reluctantly, and have "as quickly discarded the skills of war to return to the farms and factories of peace."⁴ But in fact, although the Canadian Expeditionary Force was small in numbers compared to its British, French, and American allies, its record in battle — at Ypres, Mount Sorrel, Courcellette, and Vimy Ridge — attested to the valour of its citizen-soldiers and the often inspired leadership of its officers. No one would deny that such gallantry played an important, if not decisive, part in the victory, nor that the achievement was not fully recognized proudly at home and abroad. Clearly it was the nation's military contribution which earned it the right to be a signatory at the Versailles conferences, and thereby to become accepted in the international community as the maker of its own foreign policy. Moreover, the dramatic industrialization the nation had undergone during the war years — which in itself had contributed significantly to the victory — meant that Canada could confidently accept its post-war reputation as an emerging economic force in world affairs.

Nevertheless, it does even now seem surprising that Canadians in the 1920's chose very quickly to put the sacrifices of war behind them. An official history of the C.E.F. was commissioned soon after the end of hostilities, but it was not felt to be important enough to complete until after the Second World War. By and large people seemed resigned to accept British and American political and military assessments of the conflict as sufficient. For a brief period there was a flurry of public interest in an investigation of General Sir Arthur Currie's allegedly delinquent leadership of the army during the war — he was subsequently cleared of the charges — but it soon became the common view that the war was something one remembered ritualistically once a year and then forgot. This peculiar kind of reticence is a Canadian characteristic, one suspects. Actually, in terms of serious evaluation of the war, the situation in other countries was not much different. In England, in the early 1920's, there was a flood of memoirs, apologia, and diatribes by generals and politicians, each seeking to justify his wartime conduct. The tide of appraisal and revisionism was begun then and has scarcely abated. But as far as the emergence of a serious war literature was concerned, especially the novel, there was a delay of several years. As Walter

Allen puts it, "it still seems as though in the years immediately after the end of the war there was a general conspiracy of silence between writers, publishers and readers; as though by common consent, memories of the war were to be repressed."⁵ In view of what is now known about wartime censorship and the activities of the propagandists, it could hardly have been otherwise. The official lid was kept on as long as possible.

In retrospect, of course, it is important to make distinctions between different kinds of war writing. One broad distinction is between works (published and unpublished) by civilians and soldiers. The former group, no matter how enlightened they might have been about the course of events, were seldom in a position to know about the war at first hand; the latter, by virtue of their experience on the front lines, were bound to have a very different perspective. It is just such distinctions as these which Paul Fussell examines in his literary study, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975). Brilliantly, he links "The Matter of Flanders" in the reader's mind with the previous "Matters" of Western literary history — of Troy, Rome, Britain, and France. And, just as those ancient and medieval battles spawned *chansons de geste*, legends, and myths, so, too, Fussell contends, did the writings of the Great War. In his survey of both the popular and serious — verse and poetry, music hall songs and sketches, slogans and letters, memoirs and fiction — he seeks to demythologize the war: in brief, to discover in what ways the writings preserve an illusion or distort the reality of war, and in what ways they may be seen as genuine examples of war art. He concludes, "The greatest irony is that it is only now, when those who remember the events are almost dead, that the literary means for adequate remembering and interpreting are finally accessible."⁶ Unfortunately, Fussell's study is limited chiefly to British writing and he does not discuss the war novel at any length.

To understand the emergence of the war novel in the twenties it is necessary to consider the mentality of both the wartime generation and the post-war writers. Herbert Read, whose literary career began during the war, later sought to explain his generation's naiveté:

It must be remembered that in 1914 our conception of war was completely unreal. We had childish memories of the Boer War, and from these and from a general confusion of Kiplingesque sentiments, we managed to infuse into war a decided element of adventurous romance. War still appealed to the imagination.⁷

It is in this light that Rupert Brooke's shocked response in *1914 and Other Poems* (1915) must be judged. An Edwardian man-of-letters, Brooke led a life before the war that furnished him with no accurate view of battlefield realities or adequate language in which to portray them. Nevertheless, to thousands of his readers he seemed a genuine hero, a modern knight-errant able to articulate the noble aims of his countrymen. It was not until the casualty figures mounted with sickening rapidity during the last two years of the war that the public mood began

to change, and this change was brought about in no small part by the incisive realism in the language and themes of poems by Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen. Notably, these poets had served at the front.

So, too, had Henri Barbusse, whose *Le Feu* (1916), little regarded at the time of its publication in France, exercised an influence on post-war novelists. Throughout the twenties, novels by Dos Passos, Ford, and Zweig, and memoirs by Graves, Blunden, and Sassoon, showed the extent to which the raw truths of war could be molded into a literature of sensibility. Theirs are realistic accounts of what happened from the recruit's or junior officer's point of view. All of their works appeared before 1929. But 1929 seems to have been the key year; despite the fact the war had been over for more than ten years, the public appetite for sensational exposés was far from whetted. In that year, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, published a year earlier in Germany, appeared in a faulty English translation; it became an overnight best-seller. It was soon joined on the lists by another hit, *A Farewell to Arms*. No two accounts of similar terrible events could be more unlike, yet each registered a sobering blow to readers. Erich Maria Remarque's savage, obsessional descriptions of war alternate with lyrical evocations of man's brotherhood under arms, while Ernest Hemingway's moody, solipsistic hero is a fugitive from both human conflict and passion.

All of these writers had had first-hand experience of combat. What they had seen and done left them embittered; they were not in the mood to romanticize. They were part of what Stein had called a "lost generation." Years later, Malcolm Cowley, writing of Second World War American novelists, made a comment which is applicable to the earlier writers:

War novelists are not sociologists or historians, and neither are they average soldiers. The special training and talent of novelists lead them to express rather special moods. They are usually critical in temper and often they are self-critical to the point of being burdened with feelings of guilt. They are sensitive — about themselves in the beginning; but if they have imagination (and they need it) they learn to be sensitive for others. . . . In military service many future writers . . . were rebels against discipline when they thought it was illogical — which they usually did — and rebels against the system that divides officers from enlisted men.⁸

The experiences of Canadian soldier-novelists were not dissimilar to those of other nations. War, it seems, is "another country," which makes all soldiers — even foes — brothers.

THE FIRST CANADIAN WAR NOVELS were, typically, clichéd romances by authors more interested in jingoistic patriotism than honest portrayal of life at the front. Captain S. N. Dancey, C.E.F., published *The Faith of a Belgian; a romance of the Great War* (1916), a strident *roman à clef* condemn-

ing Germany's violation of Belgian neutrality. The next year, Robert Stead used the closing pages of *The Cowpuncher* (1917) to make an opportunistic appeal to the moral fibre of young Canadians (then caught up in the passions of the conscription crisis): Dave Eldon, the cowpuncher-cum-Calgary businessman hero, enlists in the cause only to die in Flanders in the arms of his nursing-sister beloved. And Ralph Connor exploited the sentimental idealism shown towards the War still further by having his young Protestant chaplain die a sacrificial death in *The Sky Pilot in No Man's Land* (1919).

The patriotic emotions of the times spurred the sales of these novels; but, a decade later, in the wash of excitement surrounding the Remarque-Hemingway successes, few noticed the work of Acland or Harrison. Certainly Child's work, appearing in 1937, was all but ignored. Yet what made these post-war novels significant was not just their hard-hitting realism but even more their pursuit of themes deeply embedded in the Canadian experience of modern life. For Acland, the strain of war brings man's divided nature, his animal instincts and his spiritual being, into sharp conflict. Acland's hero may also be seen as emblematic of the Canadian male's struggle to rid himself of his frontier identity (necessary in the conquest of the northern wilderness) so as to adapt himself to the social responsibilities of urban society. For Harrison, however, the ordeal of fear and killing serves but to emphasize the brutish environment his hero is forced to accept. Thus Harrison's vision runs counter to Acland's, and in seeing it we are made aware of an existential absurdity in the modern world. For Child, finally, the relation between the Great War and the Anglo-Saxon-Protestant heritage of his heroes is the central issue: the scourge of guilt is what drives them on in a futile attempt to find peace of mind on the field of battle. Of course there are various common elements in these novels, but perhaps the most striking are the way each novelist perceives that the bravery of the fighting Canadian soldier is founded on stoicism and an almost inarticulate commitment to endure, and the way each novelist reveals the unresolved conflicts within the hero's mind and spirit. These elements later recur in *The Wars*, which is preoccupied with similar themes but which presents the hero's conflicts in a more profound and convincing manner.

Acland, formerly a major in the C.E.F., drew his title from Nietzsche's cynical epigram, "Man shall be trained for war, and women for the recreation of the warrior; all else is folly." Among other things, the phrase suggests the chauvinism bred in young men who are perforce cut off from normal relationships with women and who must also live in uneasy society with their own sex. Acland, employing a tradition as hoary as Homer, alternates scenes of war with scenes of peace as he chronicles the adventures of Alexander Falcon (the pun on the author's first name is surely deliberate) from his enlistment in Alberta through his service in France and furloughs in England.

In a preface to the novel, Ford Madox Ford praises it as a "convincing, mourn-

ful and unrelieved account of a simple soul's sufferings in the late War."⁹ He goes on to cite "wonderfully rendered" scenes of "Canadians going through their jobs, with stoicism, without apparent enthusiasm, with orderliness, discipline and with what endurance!" He concludes (speaking of Acland's style): "I wish I could have done it as well myself." Considering Ford's own achievements as a war novelist in the *Parade's End* tetralogy (1924-28), this is highly complimentary — if too generous. Still, Acland does portray, convincingly, the stoicism of Canadian troops, an attitude they reveal both during the interminable foul-ups preceding offensives as well as in the hot fury of battle. Indeed, the fact that Falcon is able to keep his sanity — and even a kind of innocence — in the midst of the maelstrom is testimony to the real-life bravery of the soldiers on whom he is modelled.

Acland's drama of passions, of war- and sex-lust, however, is almost marred irretrievably by sentimentality and a hackneyed love-plot. After his training on the Salisbury Plain and his initiation to war on the front near Festubert, Falcon is invalided back to England with a slight leg wound. While convalescing on the estate of Lady Bendip (who tries to seduce him), he falls in love with a young American beauty, Adair Hollister, whose husband is a prisoner of war in Germany. It is in these chapters of the first part of the novel that Acland develops his "sex" theme, but his descriptions of society women as "demi-mondaines" and as "column[s] of white marble crowned with fire" seem little more than contrived pastiches of Decadent diction. Moreover, teasing passages such as "With light touches of deft hands the lovers fashioned moments that were undying," are unintentionally embarrassing both in sound and context. Disappointed in his unrequited pursuit of Adair (who, in the fashion of a cruel mistress, tells him she will not accept him until "after the War"), Falcon has a brief affair with a hardened Russian emigrée before returning to the field of honour. His treatment of heterosexual sex in a wartime setting, then, leaves us with the conviction that the author has nothing fresh to say on the matter, and certainly nothing of consequence to his war theme.

The novel achieves more success when Acland concentrates on characterizing his hero in relation to (what Fussell calls) the "Troglodyte World" of the trenches. As his tours of duty drag on, in weeks of fear, cold, and fatigue, Falcon becomes increasingly despondent about the "gigantic futility" and "world-embracing insanity" he is engaged in. His responsibilities as an officer weigh heavily: in the words of the narrator,

When you are nearly crazy, when the men around you were nearly crazy, when crazy men with gray faces and staring eyes were crawling past your feet, you had to make jokes, however rotten they were, to keep yourself sane. And you had to keep sane when you were in command. When, if the enemy attacked, you were responsible for holding that hard-won bit of front-line trench at all costs. . . . You

might let a private, a non-com., even a junior officer, crawl out shell-shocked, but you, the company commander, had to keep sane.

As a subaltern, Falcon had felt "war lust" surge through him as the thirst for a great adventure. Now, as a major, with the memory of a dozen hopeless raiding attacks in mind, he is obsessed with his own — and his company's — survival. During the Somme battles, when Canadians were continuously in action, he begins to feel like a "hollow" man. He has long since lost faith in the tactical decisions of senior officers. To his weary eyes, the battlefields have become "an undulating waste," where, to his historical sense, knocked-out tanks lie "like dead elephants [at] Cannae." Gradually, as attack and counter-attack are played out with senseless regularity and bombardments take a grim toll day and night, Falcon feels something new within himself: a "state of such intense exhilaration — an exhilaration not of delight in killing, but of cold terror that if he did not kill he would be killed — that he had no thought of safety." Shortly after this, during an advance, Falcon receives a severe chest wound, and is sent back to England until the armistice. But even some years after the war, recovered from his wound and back in Canada, he still experiences occasional bouts of war lust. Plaintively he wonders: "Does man fight only because he hasn't yet learned to love?"

Charles Yale Harrison's *Generals Die in Bed* presents a strong contrast to the unresolved romanticism of Acland's novel. The narrator speaks from the beginning of his story with the cynical wisdom of someone who was born old and for whom neither the butchery of war nor the dullness of ordinary life holds any surprises. Like Acland, the American-born Harrison served in the C.E.F., but as a private soldier rather than as a junior officer.¹⁰ This fact alone explains why his approach to war is different. For Acland's hero, leaves in England are possible and offer welcome relief from war; not so for Harrison's hero who is forced to endure months of filth as one of the war's typically second-class citizens. When he does get a chance for a furlough, his week-long liaison with an English shop-clerk is not a hearts and flowers affair but rather the simple pleasures of healthy sex.

The most interesting aspect of Harrison's novel is its resemblance to Remarque's book. There is no flag-waving patriotism; each soldier-narrator lives his own hellish existence. Each is aware that he and his mates are regarded as cannon fodder by mindless military establishments on either side. One begins to wonder why such intelligent protagonists continue to put up with their lot. To answer that they have no choice — to desert would be to risk summary trial and execution by firing squad — is an obvious but hardly satisfying answer. Why would battle-hardened veterans fear such a relatively "clean" death in the face of the far more horrible ways of dying they experience every day? In fact they don't fear the consequences of desertion, no matter how ardently they wish to have done with war. Clearly, Remarque and Harrison are anti-war novelists: preoccupied

with giving as accurate and damning a portrait of war as possible, they deliberately use their narrators as personae for the millions of *poilus* who could not speak in their own defence. To these authors Militarism is the *real* enemy of the common soldiers; rather than have their heroes submit with indignity to an unjust system, they ask us to accept their silent protest against it. Each novel echoes with the roar of bombardments, the cut and thrust of raids, and the unbelievable squalor of the trenches. The effect on the sensibilities after reading page after page of harsh description, presented with I-am-here immediacy, is unforgettable. Such strong meat is not to everyone's taste. But, to dismiss it as merely intended for shock-value or as only anti-war propaganda, and to deny that these books have literary quality, is surely shortsighted.

Harrison's hero is certainly plebeian, but he is not soul-less. He is concerned about self-preservation, but he is no coward and he does care about the lives of his comrades. He is heroic, really, not in deeds (for he is entirely typical in the performance of his duties) but in mentality. It is the sheer toughness of his outlook, his honesty about himself and his situation, and the intensity of his sensory responses that characterize him. In these respects he is like Camus's characters in *La Peste* (1947), whose collective suffering in the plague-infested streets of Oran is an absurdist statement of human dignity.

Many passages illustrate Harrison's ability to portray his unnamed soldier-narrator, a man whose matter-of-fact exterior cannot quite mask a sensitive spirit. Early in his experience of the trenches, he encounters a rat in his dugout, scarcely three feet from his face: "There is still a little light from the stars and this light shines faintly on its sleek skin. With a darting movement it disappears. I remember with a cold feeling that it was fat, and why."¹¹ The narrator's recognition of "why" the rat is sleek and fat is typical of the author's effective use of *meiosis* in handling character, creating a point of view, and establishing mood. Beneath the ironic underplaying of the incident lies a pattern of symbolism which runs through the novel, as the ambiguous world of "light" (above the trenches, where man is exposed both to death in No Man's Land and life in the open air) is contrasted to the subterranean obscenity of enforced co-existence with rats (who prey on man as man preys on his kind). Similar scenes and images — a bloodied nose caused by the force of shells bursting, daily battles with lice, the smell of putrid corpses, the sight of a wounded lorry driver being kicked to death by terrified horses, the screams of the dying — crowd upon each other as Harrison develops his narrator's consciousness of war. There is no plot as such, only the relentless alternation between trenches and rest camps across muddy and bombed-out fields from month to month and year to year. Boredom, anxiety, constipation, and a thousand other minor discomforts become normal. Yet, the narrator's personal struggle to survive does not deaden him to the suffering of others. When he tries to extricate his bayonet from the chest of a dying German — and it will not

come out, being wedged between the man's ribs — he shoots the man, thus freeing the weapon, relieving his own anguish, and ending his enemy's pain. Later, he kicks off the attempts of a fallen comrade to grasp his legs, so as to be able to run back to the safety of his own lines; but on this occasion his guilty feelings are not assuaged by the knowledge he has obeyed orders in not stopping to help the wounded. There is no heroism in these actions, but there is frank exposition in recording them. Words that journalists use, such as "camaraderie" and "esprit de corps," are not part of the soldier's vocabulary. Rather: "We fight among ourselves" — for bread, for protection, for existence. "Who can comfort whom in war?" he asks. "Who can care for us, we who are set loose at each other and tear at each other's entrails . . . ?" Who, indeed?

Harrison's subject is the brutalization of man by war. Despite their well-earned record as "shock troops" — or, perhaps, because of it — Canadian soldiers were not immune from the disease. Whether he is describing a long queue outside a brothel in Béthune, a food riot and internecine fighting between fed-up soldiers and MPs in Arras in the spring of 1918, or Canadians firing on surrendering Germans at Amiens, Harrison unsparingly attacks violence. From his worm's eye view of such events the narrator suggests the hopelessness of lonely, bitter men: "Our lives are stolen — taken from us unawares." Or, as Remarque put it (speaking also for both sides): "And all men of my age, here and over there, throughout the whole world see these things with me. . . . Our knowledge of life is limited to death."¹²

PUBLISHED A GENERATION AFTER the Great War and in the gathering shadows of World War II, Philip Child's *God's Sparrows* is also a novel deeply concerned about the effects of so much death on the lives of its protagonists. Though it lacks the passionate intensity of Acland's and Harrison's accounts, it is more ambitious and reflective in theme. Described by an early reviewer as "a synthesis of the family saga and the war novel,"¹³ it attempts to do for Canadian social history what Ford's epical *Parade's End* had done for British society, that is, to chronicle a family's pre-war and war-time experiences in the light of the general ordeal of Western civilization. But, for such a Tolstoyan enterprise, Child's smaller-scale narrative proves inadequate. Despite the fact that the first third of the novel is devoted to a description of the two old Ontario families, the Burnets and the Thatchers (from whose homes spring the soldier-heroes, Daniel Thatcher and his cousin Quentin), the reader never gains a coherent impression of the totality of "Upper Canadian civilization and its discontents"¹⁴ because the necessary links between family and filial experience are either missing or diffused. There is some confusion, for instance, about Daniel's motive for enlisting. Is it because he feels ashamed he has not followed Quentin's example earlier? Is it

because he is finally able to overcome his father's pacifist objections? Is it because his guilt in being the accidental cause of his sister's handicapped condition is assuaged by her? Aside from these and other personal pressures to act, there are perhaps altruistic reasons, such as the persuasiveness of a speaker at a recruiting meeting or his sense of duty. That there exist a multitude of motives is not surprising, and even plausible, given Daniel's phlegmatic nature. But one of the chief flaws of *God's Sparrows* is Child's failure to integrate his family saga with the characterization of Daniel at war, in such a way as to illuminate more clearly the crises within him and the socio-cultural milieu of the time. (In comparison, Robertson Davies's briefer mention of the pressures in war-time society in *Fifth Business* is far more penetrating; and Findley's *The Wars* is a more successful exploration of this larger theme.)

Undoubtedly, Daniel and Quentin manifest in part the author's own tormented recollections of front-line experience. They may even (as Dennis Duffy believes) illustrate a "typical pattern" of Child's fiction and poetry: the way he manipulates his unhappy characters "from a motif of suffering-as-expiation-for-crimes-and-guilt to a practice . . . of suffering-for-its-own-sake. . . ." ¹⁵ Seen in this light they are, perhaps, to be pitied as unconscious victims of masochistic guilt feelings, bred into them by centuries of Puritanism. Alternatively, they may be seen as actors in a romanticized, mythic drama, which assumes that sensitive, WASP-ish, fair-haired lads of the Canadian aristocracy shall rise like Parsifal to smite the vicious Hun and win redemption for a society morally incompetent to acknowledge its part in initiating enmity between the nations. Once again, then, problems exist as to how to interpret the novel: is its meaning to be found in terms of disguised autobiography, or psychology, or religious fiction? There is no reason, of course, to suppose any or all of these aspects of form and meaning may not cohere in a narrative; it is simply that, in *God's Sparrows*, they do not.

But there is a way out of these difficulties, and that is to respond to it as essentially a war book, which, in the view of one critic, "contains the most effective scenes of the First World War in Canadian fiction."¹⁶ While this view is arguable, it is nevertheless true that it is in their internal and external struggles with the antagonistic forces produced by the War that the spiritual dilemmas of Daniel and Quentin are revealed most clearly. A good example of this occurs when Quentin, in a letter to Daniel from France, writes that he has been decorated for bravery in bayonetting German prisoners during a trench raid. Far from boasting of the incident, he is, rather, shocked by the irony of a deed whose horror has haunted him since; but in his anguished need to confess his feelings, he bluntly accuses his cousin of pacifism for refusing to become involved in "this whole dirty business."¹⁷ Daniel is, naturally, angered by Quentin's charge, though ultimately it is one of the factors contributing to his decision to enlist. Yet two points need to be made about the passage. First, it is unlikely that such a detailed,

frankly contemptuous and, in the eyes of some, defeatist letter would ever have been cleared by the military censors. But, even granting dramatic license, a more serious objection can be made concerning *Child's* point of view in setting the scene for the incident:

To have set up one's puny ego against the atmosphere of excitement, of desperate sacrifice, of bravely supported fear, of stoic grief, of fearful hope — to have pinned oneself, for instance, as a "conscientious objector" (that new sort of martyr, or of coward, or of crank, view it how you would) would have seemed an insufferable presumption to the battalions of eager and earnest young men of twenty, who were not at all presumptuous for all their swagger, but conventionally and rather humbly anxious to "do the right thing" even as their fathers and elder brothers were doing it.

Not only is this overbearing in tone and specious in logic, it also has the effect of undermining the credibility of his characters. As a result of the incident, Quentin *does* become a conscientious objector, and for reasons fully consistent with his concept of human honour and dignity. He tells Daniel:

"I'm not afraid of death. . . . Only thing I'm afraid of — and hate — is this damned unreality we live in here and now: not knowing what we are, or what we are here for; desiring, — and not knowing why we have to; wanting life, more and more life, and getting death; wanting some *law* behind it all of form, and style, and beauty, and always bumping up in the end against the God-forgotten *machine*."

Quentin is imprisoned for his beliefs, maltreated by his fellow soldiers, and sent back to the lines to die a broken man. As for Daniel, his initiation to war comes in the 1917 battles on the Somme salient, as a subaltern serving with a Canadian siege battery. Predictably, he undergoes a similar process of demoralization as his cousin and others had before him: "Somehow many of them existed and survived; but they were not the same men afterwards, for they had seen more than death, they had faced corruption of the soul, and despair." Finally, there was for him "no longer any horror [in the sight of bloated corpses in No Man's Land]; it had become simply an accepted part of one's environment, like insanity, slums, and prostitution in civil life." Daniel survives the War, but with no more understanding of himself, of his society, or life, than if he had stayed at home.

In sum, in presenting Quentin, Child has created an amorphous spirit into which he has poured all of the *angst* of a man bent upon a metaphysical quest; by contrast, in presenting Daniel, he expresses the worldly dilemmas of a much more ordinary individual. But neither characterization is fully successful in terms of Child's conception. Part of the problem may lie with a style which is remote in its omniscience, and sometimes irritatingly Anglophilic in tone. Still, for all its faults, *God's Sparrows* remains an honest novel by an author whose compassionate understanding of his subject cannot be gainsaid.

MORE THAN A GENERATION was to pass before another novelist made a substantial attempt to deal with the Great War and Canadian experience.¹⁸ Yet Findley's *The Wars* is firmly in the "tradition" of the genre inaugurated by Acland and Harrison and developed by Child: he employs its characteristic motifs — such as gritty descriptions of battle and the love affair in England — which had become almost requisite conventions. But he does more with the form than his predecessors, in particular by creating an enormously poignant drama of *personal* heroism in the midst of war.

Perhaps some of Findley's attraction to his theme may be understood from two interviews he gave before the book was published. In the first, with Graeme Gibson, he reflected on the lack of an aristocracy in Canada: "We've never had a chance to have that happen in this country, because the rise [of an upper class] came at a moment of cataclysmic change: the turn of the century. War brought it down; we then became, after the First World War, a cultural eunuch; we were neither male nor female, but we had the propensity of feeling one thing and of being another."¹⁹ Robert Ross, the protagonist of the novel, belongs to that doomed class; however, in a very special sense, his true class is of the spirit rather than of earthly power structures built on wealth and breeding. The second interview, with Donald Cameron, is even more revealing of what the novelist might have been preoccupied with in writing the novel. In speaking of man's "war with nature"²⁰ — our seemingly inexhaustible capacity to destroy the environment — Findley went on to say: "But you see, unknown to me, and unliked by me, in myself, I'm sure there is a fascination with violence. And I'm a very violent person myself, inside. I'm sure that I'm more violent in my heart and mind than half the people I criticize for being *overtly* violent, and that makes me hypersensitive to what violence is all about."²⁰ Certainly we as readers are made aware of Robert's hypersensitivity to the latent violence within himself. His attempt to master his aggressiveness, and to save something of value in himself and in the living world around him from senseless destruction, constitutes the theme of the novel.

(In passing, it is also of interest to note that about the time of the interviews — the early 1970's — Findley co-scripted the television adaptation of Mazo de la Roche's *Jalna* series which, in part, told of the inter-linked adventures of Ontario gentry during the 1914-18 period. And, himself the scion of a once-prominent Toronto family, the author apparently modelled some of the *mise-en-scène* of *The Wars* on the real experiences of his relatives.)

But however personal or biographical the sources were, it is clear that the strength of the novel derives chiefly from Findley's inspiration and craftsmanship in bringing Robert's story to life on the page. As narrator, he functions as archi-

vist-interpreter: selecting and arranging imaginary tape-recorded interviews, memorabilia, clippings, maps, and other souvenirs, he reconstructs the age and its troubled people. The character of Robert takes shape slowly from the dusty records. Externally, the characterization seems typical of the genre; we follow Robert through his initial training to his experiences at the front, and his growing hatred and fear of war appear to be no different from those of the earlier protagonists. But the reality is different: not so much because Robert is more sensitive or morally aware than others, but rather because Findley probes his inner life more deeply than Acland *et al* had done in developing their heroes. Moreover, in linking Robert's psychological dis-ease with the separate tragedies — the Wars — of other characters, the author is able to show the progression of madness in him which ultimately explodes in an act of fury.

To illustrate this rising tide of violent passion, it is necessary to focus on at least seven episodes and relationships which occur sequentially in the novel. The death of his hydrocephalic sister, Rowena, the killing of her pet rabbits, and the strain of parting from his mother, are the first steps in the pattern of circumstances which culminates in Robert's courageous, foolhardy, and mad attempt to save a herd of frightened horses from bombardment. (Those first events take place, symbolically, during the Easter weekend in April 1915, immediately before Robert enlists. The latter incident occurs the following year in mid-June, at a place called Magdalene Wood in France.) During training in Alberta, Robert meets the convalescing war hero, Captain Eugene Taffler, which initiates the second stage of his psychic development. "What he wanted was a model. Someone who could teach him, by example, how to kill."²¹ But the only lessons he learns from Taffler are negative, and the scars of the latter's impotent homosexuality cast long shadows over Robert's subsequent relationships with men and women. Similarly, the episode on board the troopship when Robert is forced to shoot an injured horse, serves both to intensify his loathing of violence and to foreshadow his motivation for his later act of mercy. Experiences at the front — narrow escapes from death in a flooded field and from a sniper's bullets; and Captain Rodwell's suicide after he learns crazed soldiers had eaten rats he tried to protect (notably, Rodwell's animal drawings contain facial features which bear an uncanny resemblance to Robert's) — add to the anguish in the hero's mind. Robert's savage love-making with the callous Lady Barbara d'Orsey — here, and elsewhere in the novel, Findley echoes similar situations in Acland and Child — and the brutal sexual assault made upon him by unknown soldiers at Desolé (symbolically, just after he has bathed himself) are the final key episodes in this pattern of violence.

Paradoxically, when it seems his psyche can no longer absorb the guilt, the cruelty, and the violation of war, Robert finds the mental strength to strike back. In seeking to save the horses, he sets in motion his private war against a collective insanity that respects no creature's right to live in peace and dignity. His action

is inevitable; it is foreshadowed and reinforced by bird and animal symbolism throughout the narrative which underlines Robert's own strong desire to live as well as to protect the innocent. However, equally inevitable, his heroic deed degenerates into a murderous rampage. Horribly burned, Robert is captured, court-martialled, and officially disgraced.

In trying to assess the rightness of his conduct and the meaning of his life, the reader is wise to note the narrator's cautionary remark in the closing pages that Robert's "mythology is muddled." To most of his contemporaries, Robert's defiance of orders is the act of a maniac. Yet, when asked to speak about him, they say they don't remember, look away, or change the subject, suggesting by their discomfort the mixed feelings they harbour about him. But to Lady Juliet d'Orsey, whose childhood diary provides vivid recollections of his personality, he is remembered fondly as a man who craved love and strove for perfection. She also remembers, however, the words of one of Robert's friends who, when speaking about his generation's responsibility for waging the War, said: "I doubt we'll ever be forgiven. All I hope is — they'll remember we were human beings." These words do not refer specifically to Robert, but they do offer a perspective within which we can gauge his actions. There is also the recollection of Marian Turner, the nurse who cared for him after the incident in Magdalene Wood; she believes he was a hero because "he did the one thing that no one else would even dare to think of doing. . . . It's the *ordinary* men and women who've made us what we are." Set against her view, though, is Robert's attitude: "(We're all strange, Robert thought. Everyone is strange in a war I guess. *Ordinary* is a myth.)"

Unsuspectingly, perhaps, Robert provides us with the answer. To agree with him that "ordinary" is a myth, we are only acceding to the noncritical meaning of the word myth and thereby accepting the notion that war makes ordinary people experience extraordinary sensations and perform in extraordinary ways. At the same time, the novelist permits us to interpret his phrase in the critical sense of myth, and thereby to see the deeper significance of human life. In either sense, then, the meaning is clear and persuasive. Moreover, Robert is a representative figure of his time and of his people, and in this he is not unlike the other protagonists I have been discussing. Each is representative not because he is like everyone else, but rather because he contains within himself so many of the virtues and vices of common humanity.

Military historians of the War, such as Colonel Nicholson, have written enormously detailed descriptions of actual events. From such "factual" material it is not difficult to conclude that Canadian soldiers *earned* their fine reputation. And probably most readers of Nicholson's account would agree with one of his conclusions: "They fought as Canadians, and those who returned brought back with them a pride of nationhood that they had not known before."²² But war

novelists, who are not so constrained by "fact," and who in any case want to create "fictional" accounts, lay particular emphasis on individual experience. For them, character becomes the datum point for measuring the human response to one of the great mysteries of existence. In Canadian war novels, the initial naiveté of the citizen soldier, the shock of combat on foreign soil, and the manner in which the soldier learns to cope with his personal conflicts and dilemmas, are the areas of concern for the writer. And, just as in actuality the War proved to be the remorseless enemy of human hopes — precisely because it was the product of human hatred — so in fiction it came to represent the great antagonist which the soldier protagonist had to confront, and seek to conquer.

NOTES

- ¹ Peter Buitenhuis, in a recent article — "Writers at War: Propaganda and Fiction in the Great War," *UTQ*, 45 (Summer 1976), 277-94 — revealed the manner in which Wells and other famous authors (Bennett, Galsworthy, Kipling, Buchan, and the Canadian-born Gilbert Parker, among others) were recruited by the British Department of Information to write pro- and anti-war propaganda, specifically to blacken German militarism or to whitewash Allied policies. It is necessary to distinguish, of course, between the personal motives of a writer and the political use to which his work could be put: Wells's *Mr. Britling* is clearly patriotic and seeks to justify British participation in the War on religious grounds; on the other hand, writers such as Bennett and Kipling were willing to exaggerate, distort, lie or use half-truths in their fictional and non-fictional accounts of campaigns on the Western front. Hilaire Belloc was perhaps more honest than some in confessing in a letter to Chesterton in 1917 that he had found it "necessary sometimes to lie damnably in the interests of the nation. . . ."
- ² From the original preface to *The Real War, 1914-1918*, in B. H. Liddell Hart, *History of the First World War* (London: Pan, 1970), p. ix.
- ³ "Canada: The Borderline Case," in *The Canadian Imagination*, ed. David Staines (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1977), p. 242.
- ⁴ George F. G. Stanley, *Canada's Soldiers: The Military History of an Unmilitary People*, rev. ed. (Toronto: Macmillan, 1960), p. 417.
- ⁵ *Tradition and Dream* (London: Phoenix House, 1964), p. 140.
- ⁶ *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1975), p. 334. This comment has particular relevance to our understanding of Findley's *The Wars*. Stanley Cooperman's *World War I and the American Novel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1967) also provides an excellent, detailed discussion of war literature and its socio-literary effects.
- ⁷ From *Annals of Innocence and Experience* (1940), quoted in J. M. Gregson, *Poetry of the First World War* (London: Edward Arnold, 1976), p. 9.
- ⁸ From *The Literary Situation* (1954), quoted in Allen, p. 293.
- ⁹ Preface to Peregrine Acland's *All Else is Folly; a tale of war and passion* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1929), p. vii.
- ¹⁰ Humphrey Cobb, also an American, enlisted in the Canadian army in 1916 and was later wounded and gassed in the fighting. His *Paths of Glory* (1935), based on events involving the French army, probably influenced William Faulkner when

- he wrote *A Fable* (1954). Faulkner enlisted in the Royal Flying Corps in Canada but did not see action overseas because the War was over before his training was completed.
- ¹¹ Charles Yale Harrison, *Generals Die in Bed* (1930; rpt. Hamilton, Ont.: Potlatch, 1975).
- ¹² *All Quiet on the Western Front*, trans. of *Im Westen nichts Neues*, by A. W. Wheen (1929; Frogmore, St. Albans, Herts; Triad/Mayflower, 1977), p. 173.
- ¹³ J. R. McGillivray, "Letters in Canada: 1937. Fiction," *UTQ*, 7 (April 1938), 351.
- ¹⁴ The phrase is Dennis Duffy's in "Memory = Pain: The Haunted World of Philip Child's Fiction," *Canadian Literature*, 84 (Spring 1980), p. 45.
- ¹⁵ Duffy, p. 43.
- ¹⁶ William H. Magee, "Philip Child: A Re-appraisal," *Canadian Literature*, 24 (Spring 1965), pp. 29-30.
- ¹⁷ Philip Child, *God's Sparrows* (1937; rpt. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1978).
- ¹⁸ In saying this, I am not overlooking the achievement of Hugh MacLennan in *Barometer Rising* (1941). But MacLennan's character Neil MacRae is a returned soldier, and notwithstanding the dramatic use of the explosion in Halifax harbour (which undoubtedly is an image of the War brought home to native shores) the novel is not directly concerned with the experience of a fighting soldier at the Front.
- ¹⁹ In *Eleven Canadian Novelists* (Toronto: Anansi, 1973), p. 134.
- ²⁰ In *Conversations with Canadian Novelists*, Part One (Toronto: Macmillan, 1973), p. 61.
- ²¹ Timothy Findley, *The Wars* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1977).
- ²² Col. G. W. L. Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1919* (official History of the Canadian Army in the First World War) (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1964), p. 535.

FOR THE WIFE OF JOHN MILTON

Irving Layton

To go with genius
 the whole distance
 is to walk straight in to Thanatos
 with a greeting smile
 to match his own.

Hard to come that near to death;
 harder still
 not to frown.