

*This Small Army of Women: Canadian Volunteer Nurses and the First World War* by Linda J. Quiney

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# Book Reviews

Autumn 2018

***This Small Army of Women  
Canadian Volunteer Nurses  
and the First World War***

By Linda J. Quiney

Vancouver: UBC Press, 2017. 288 pages.  
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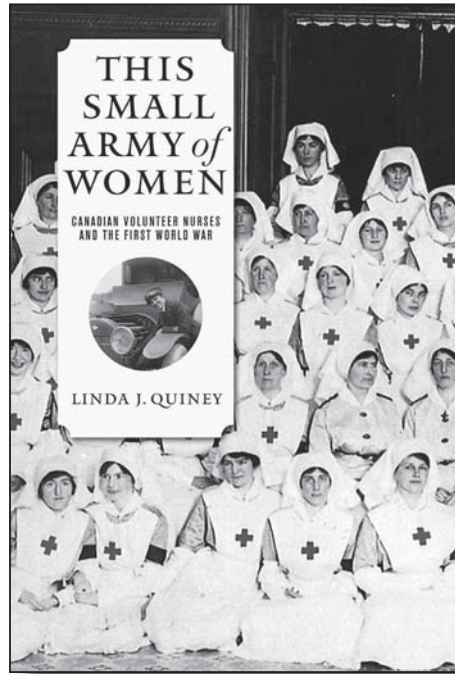
For the better part of a century, “VADs”—female members of Voluntary Aid Detachments who served as unpaid nursing aides in military and Red Cross hospitals—have been among the most iconic, and the least understood, female participants in the British Empire’s First World War military medical system. In *This Small Army of Women*, Linda J. Quiney’s goal “is to uncover the work and experience of both the Canadian and Newfoundland VAD volunteers and to explore their work as nursing assistants in Canadian military hospitals at home and in the British military hospitals overseas”

(4). The book joins a growing body of early twenty-first century Canadian historical scholarship on Canadian and Newfoundland women’s involvement in the First World War. Collectively, this work is revealing the long-overlooked place of women at the heart of wartime society, as well as their integral roles in the civilian and military-medical support systems that made twentieth-century “total war” possible. Quiney’s monograph is a valuable addition to this corpus.

Based upon Quiney’s PhD dissertation, the book unfolds in an introduction and five chapters that move roughly chronologically through the creation of the VAD movement and its wartime mobilization, the image of the VAD, VADs’ work experiences, and post-war developments for the VAD program and its members. Four appendices containing VAD training and



conduct guidelines join the end notes and a good index. Plenty of photographs enliven the text, while a handful of tables and graphs help display the results of one of Quiney's most significant contributions: her painstaking work tracking down Canadian and Newfoundland VADs in censuses, city directories, and archives across Canada and in Britain. The database of information she constructed enabled her to analyze the VADs' demographic profile in some detail. Predominantly white, anglophone, and middle-class, North American VADs did not quite fit the upper crust profile of British VADs, although daughters of elite Canadians and Newfoundlanders did join. Ontario boasted the largest number of VADs sent overseas: forty-four per cent of the total (Table 2.1, 50). More than 1,500 Canadian and Newfoundland VADs served in home front convalescent hospitals, while some 500 are known to have been sent overseas by the St. John Ambulance Association between 1916 and 1918 (11). Others travelled to Britain on their own and joined VAD programs there, many of them organized late in the war under the Canadian Imperial VAD program's banner. Regrettably, the book does not clarify the muddiness of the system as much as it might, in its early chapters, and saving the discussion of the Canadian Imperial VAD program until the end of the post-war chapter, instead of



dealing with it much earlier, adds somewhat to the confusion. The fault is not entirely the author's, however: the VAD system was anything but straightforward, and perhaps defies any clear explanation.

During the war years, propagandists lacking concrete details spun a romanticized image of VAD nursing that has endured; one that frequently conflated trained nursing, voluntary nursing, and other forms of female caring work. This conflation was of great concern to trained, professional nurses at the time: decades of struggle to elevate nursing to a professional status seemed vulnerable to an onslaught of untrained, unpaid VADs in this era before the existence of a recognized trained nurse registration system. Quiney builds on Susan Mann's biography of Canadian Army Medical Corps (CAMC) Matron-in-Chief Margaret MacDonald to show that not only did this fear lead MacDonald to bar VADs from working in CAMC hospitals overseas, but it also fuelled a post-war attempt by the Canadian National Association of Trained Nurses to control the peacetime future of the VAD program (essentially turning VADs into trained nurses), and a successful drive to create provincial nurse registration legislation across Canada in the 1920s. However, the worst fears of the nursing profession were ultimately unfounded, Quiney argues, because they failed to recognize that young

women's basic motivation to volunteer as VADs was not a desire to nurse, but a desire to perform patriotic wartime service. The staggering volume of wartime casualties required more assistance than the ranks of trained nurses could provide, and young, untrained women stepped in to fill the breach.

Readers familiar with Cynthia Toman's work on CAMC military nurses, or Christina Bates' work on nursing uniforms, will notice similarities in Quiney's discussions of the VAD image (chapter 3) and VAD work (chapter 4). In particular, an emphasis on respectable femininity, as well as a desire to stick it out even in the face of trying conditions, gruelling and gruesome work, and physical/emotional/mental strain appear to be nearly universal elements of wartime nursing in any form. Another pattern that emerges is the importance of location in shaping professional experiences: much as Toman found with her nurses, Quiney concludes that whether one worked in a hospital in Canada, England, or France influenced the degree of friction between "colonial" VADs and British matrons, the types of duties performed, relationships between trained

nurses and VADs, and VADs' degree of satisfaction with their work. Of special note is chapter 4, where the voices of the VADs shine through in discussions of their work on the wards, alternately plucky or dispirited, joyous or frustrated.

One disappointing absence is that of a sustained examination of why VADs disappeared from Canadian/Newfoundland memory and history of the First World War. Quiney hints at reasons throughout the book, and chapter 5 is even subtitled "Forgetting, Remembering, and Moving On." However, it focuses on the post-war lives of the VAD program and individual members, rather than connecting back to Quiney's observations in the introduction that "the public memory of their contribution soon faded" (14). It feels like a missed opportunity. Nevertheless, as the first Canadian monograph on VADs, *This Small Army of Women* makes a valuable contribution to the ongoing reshaping of Canada's First World War historiography into a more robust body of work that includes gender as a significant category of analysis.

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### *Claire L'Heureux-Dubé: A Life*

By Constance Backhouse

Vancouver: UBC Press, 2017. 740 pages. \$49.95 hardcover, PDF, e-pub. ISBN 978-0-7748-3632-6 (ubcpres.ca)

This biography of Claire L'Heureux-Dubé was a colossal undertaking. The result of nine years of research and writing, it is based on over 200 interviews with the subject, her family, friends, former classmates, colleagues and law clerks, fellow judges, journalists, and politicians,

as well as privileged access to her closed records at Library and Archives Canada. It documents and contextualizes the life of Canada's second female Supreme Court justice from childhood to her retirement, while reflecting on her reputation as the "Great Dissenter."