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# Generic Experiment and Confusion in Early Canadian Novels of the Great War

Colin Hill

The Canadian novel changed dramatically in the years immediately following the Great War of 1914-18. In the 1920s and '30s an innovative, modern, cosmopolitan, and multi-generic literary realism began to challenge and supersede the nineteenth-century romanticism that had loomed large in the national fiction at least since Confederation. Two formative literary magazines were founded shortly after the 1918 armistice: *Canadian Bookman* in 1919 and *The Canadian Forum* in 1920. Both publications printed articles and manifestos that demanded a new realism capable of representing the modern and independent Canada that had emerged from the war. In these same years, Canadian writers from all regions began to produce modern-realist novels in various sub-genres, including prairie realism, urban realism, and social realism. These writers challenged the verbose and ornate styles of their predecessors with a language that was idiomatic and direct. They sought narrative objectivism and impersonality in accordance with the documentary approach they brought to their representations of contemporary Canada. The most ambitious and creative modern realists experimented with literary form and reworked innovative and international modernist devices to express their interest in exploring and representing human psychology. By the end of the 1920s, some of the best examples of these multi-generic modern-realist works had been published, and a few of them are still read today: J.G. Sime's *Sister Woman* (1919), Douglas Durkin's *The Magpie* (1923), Frederick Philip Grove's *Settlers of the Marsh* (1925), Martha Ostenso's *Wild Geese* (1925), Morley Callaghan's *Strange Fugitive* (1928), and Raymond Knister's *White Narcissus* (1929).

Canada's literary histories rarely draw an explicit link between the Great War and the emergence of a modern realism in the years that followed it, but they often note that the conflict marks a crucial point of

transition in national literary development. Most prominently, Desmond Pacey writes in *Literary History of Canada* that

> The First World War effectually obliterated in Canada whatever traces of 'high-colonialism' had survived the boom of the first decade of the twentieth century. . . . Just as in the decades immediately following Confederation there had been a conscious effort to create a literature worthy of the new confederacy, so now there was a conscious, at times a self-conscious, determination to create a literature commensurate with Canada's new status as an independent nation. ("The Writer" 3-4)

Canada's emergent importance on the world stage during and following the Great War invigorated nationalism, heightened awareness of international literature among Canadian writers, and awakened in Canadian readers an interest in books that explored large-scale social and political issues. The realities of modern life that became increasingly and often threateningly apparent to those who had lived through the war at home and overseas — modern technology, forces of urbanization and industrialization, modern ideological struggles, moral and religious questioning, evolving gender roles — dampened rampant idealism and spoiled Canada's appetite for literary romance. Accordingly, Canada's early modern-realist novels treat with naturalistic intensity the harsh settler experiences, urban life in Canada's rapidly growing and modernizing cities, and a whole range of modern social issues and concerns in various ideological contexts. While the Great War is often considered a catalyst of this generic shift toward realism, its role in the formation and definition of a modern-realist aesthetic remains unclear and unacknowledged, and almost no early Canadian fiction from the war is still read today. Canada's literary histories almost univocally consider war fiction of the period to be insignificant; *Literary History of Canada* mentions only a few scattered war novels of the period and stops far short of identifying a distinct "war novel" genre. Pacey writes, in his survey chapter of fiction published between 1920 and 1940, that it was our canonical "prairie writers," and not little-known war novelists, "who began the systematic transformation of Canadian fiction from romance to realism" ("Fiction" 676). A handful of novels that treat the war subject indirectly — including Robert J.C. Stead's *Grain* (1926) and Hugh MacLennan's *Barometer Rising* (1941) — remain in print today, but the

several dozen novels of the 1920s and '30s that treat the war directly have been all but forgotten.[1]

In the decades since the publication of *Literary History of Canada*, a few critics have begun to take inventory of the early Canadian novel of World War I. Eric Thompson, in "Canadian Fiction of the Great War" (1981), laments that "practically unknown . . . both in Canada and abroad, are several war novels which constitute the best fiction by Canadian writers about the experiences of Canadian fighting soldiers of the Great War," and he makes an argument for the historical significance of three novels of the period (81).[2] In "The Best Soldiers of All: Unsung Heroines in Canadian Women's Great War Fictions" (1996), Donna Coates significantly broadens the scope of Thompson's recovery work and considers neglected war novels by numerous women who wrote during the interwar years: "women's wartime fictions have been completely ignored; a study of their response to the Great War is long overdue" (1).[3] The most ambitious study of Canada's Great War fiction, Dagmar Novak's *Dubious Glory: The Two World Wars and the Canadian Novel* (2000), writes a forgotten chapter in Canadian literary history and provides a nearly complete bibliography of relevant primary and secondary texts. These critics have identified and reconstituted an important and neglected Canadian "war novel" genre, enumerated dozens of its representative works, and considered its themes, politics, philosophical concerns, and socio-historical relevance. I would like to take the discussion of this genre in a new direction and explore the role that the war novel played in the formation of a new, cosmopolitan, and multi-generic modern realism in Canada in the two decades following the 1918 armistice. Several recent critics — most notably Glenn Willmott in *Unreal Country: Modernity in the Canadian Novel in English* (2002)[4] — have offered inventive and convincing arguments that begin to negotiate the labyrinth of internationally derived "isms" that comprise early twentieth-century Canadian fiction: realism, romanticism, naturalism, and modernism. Such arguments have also demonstrated that standard definitions of these loaded and competing terms do not easily apply in the Canadian context. The generic experimentation and confusion that these critics interpret is perhaps most pronounced and interesting in several of Canada's best early war novels: Gertrude Arnold's *Sister Anne! Sister Anne!* (1919), L.M. Montgomery's *Rilla of Ingleside* (1920), Peregrine Acland's *All Else is Folly: A Tale of War and Passion* (1927),

and Charles Yale Harrison's *Generals Die in Bed* (1930). The narrative struggles and aesthetic tensions these neglected novels embody are exemplary of Canada's modern realism more generally. But the "weightiness" of their war subject, and the ethical and representational problems it poses, means that the various tensions these texts negotiate — between romanticism and mimesis, subjectivity and objectivity, fact and fiction, traditional realism and experimentalism — are compounded and pronounced relative to similar problems and tensions in works by other modern realists of the period. Canada's early Great War novels are therefore uncommonly and exceptionally revealing of the aesthetic and narratological challenges met by Canada's canonical modern realists. These novels also indicate the degree to which Canada's post-war realism was both modern and international: the affinity of Canada's Great War novels with works by writers such as Ford Madox Ford, Rebecca West, Henri Barbusse, Ernest Hemingway, Edith Wharton, and Erich Maria Remarque, among many others, suggests that Canada's war realism, and modern realism more generally, are necessarily considered in an international context, rather than within a cultural-nationalistic paradigm that sees realism as a conservative, mimetic, reflective, and often regionalist literary form. The reasons for and consequences of the persistent neglect of these Great War novels accordingly invite a re-examination of the development and reception of the modern-realist novel in early twentieth-century Canada.

Novels that dealt directly and veraciously with the experiences of Canadian men fighting in the trenches did not appear until more than a decade after the 1918 armistice. But even as victory celebrations were dying down, Canadian novelists were already writing with uncompromising realism about other aspects of the Great War experience. Gertrude Arnold's *Sister Anne! Sister Anne!* (1919) was among the first serious Canadian novels to treat the war in a sustained manner and to eschew the obligatory romanticism that contemporaneous writers brought to the subject. Novak writes that Canada's war novels written before the mid-1920s are "to a remarkable degree . . . similar in theme and tone and structural framework. Rhetorical, romantic, idealistic" (7). Thompson believes that "the first Canadian war novels were . . . clichéd romances by authors more interested in jingoistic patriotism than honest portrayal of life at the front" (84), but Arnold's novel resists such sweeping generalizations. It is only superficially idealistic, it strives

to represent the war experience realistically, and in a manner that is remarkably self-reflexive, it challenges the generic conventions of the literary romance. Debra Cohen, in *Remapping the Home Front: Locating Citizenship in British Women's Great War Fiction*, points out that criticism of war fiction "often tends to homogenize women's war writing" and "often underestimate[s] the range and complexity of home-front rhetoric and misrepresent[s] the resultant ambivalences of home front texts" (2). Like the British examples Cohen describes, *Sister Anne! Sister Anne!* is a deceptively complex and ambivalent home-front novel. It is episodic, documentary, and narrated in the first person by the Canadian nurse for whom the novel is named as she works in a military hospital in France. Sister Anne attends wounded and dying Allied and captured German soldiers, and she solicits and collects their war stories, philosophical musings on human suffering, and combat experiences. While the novel does occasionally offer up patriotic excess and platitudes, especially in its praise of the bravery of Allied soldiers — "You deserve to win out, old Canada, and I believe you will!" (10) — the novel is nevertheless highly critical of the war and eager to document its horrors. Sister Anne calls her wounded soldiers "wrecks of men" and finds herself, despite intense propaganda, unable to differentiate wounded Allied from German soldiers: "in hospital one does not distinguish between an enemy and a friend" (3, 8). Sister Anne frequently punctuates her descriptions of suffering, wounded, and dying men with philosophical anti-war commentary: "I wondered again why Hate could live on an earth to which Peace had come in the form of a little Child" (55). Arnold's novel posits recollections of wartime suffering — the exhaustion of the nurses, amputations, deaths — as an antidote to the post-war Canadian nationalism that was reaching new heights in 1919 when the novel was published. *Sister Anne!* is a protest novel in the best modern sense and participates in an international "movement" of women's anti-war writing that includes figures such as Edith Wharton, Julia Grace Wales, Virginia Woolf, Mrs. Humphrey Ward, H.D., May Sinclair, and Rebecca West.

*Sister Anne!* is perhaps most interesting and significant for its exploration of the writerly anxieties and ethical issues associated with writing about war realistically. Arnold's documentary war novel contains romantic flourishes, yet it purports to be a credible representation of the details of life behind the front. At the same time, *Sister Anne!* is surpris-

ingly self-reflexive about its own documentary aims, and it repeatedly questions its own authority and credibility. As Sister Anne collects and recounts the stories of the men she nurses, she becomes increasingly self-conscious about the credulity of such stories and her ability to narrate them: "To-day, an incident happened, stranger than fiction. Is not all life now stranger than fiction?" (19). Her narrative also expresses an anxiety about its own subversive nature because it narrates a traditionally male subject from a woman's perspective and challenges official, idealistic, and nationalistic accounts of the war. Sister Anne and her fellow nurses remark on their need to escape the horrors of the sick wards by meeting covertly to exchange their own war stories, which they insist must be told despite resistance: "there is a kind of unwritten law — 'It is forbidden to talk of the War or the Wards.' 'We have enough of both through the day,' they say, 'We want a change at night'" (19). Her narrative affirms the necessity of bearing witness and telling the "truth" about the war and asserts the unheard voice of the female writer. Sister Anne loudly and unapologetically justifies her book and warns her reader, "I can't talk about anything else . . . and what is more I don't *want* to talk about anything else. The War and the Wards are my whole life and I just warn anybody who comes in here, that I'm going to talk about them as much as I please" (19). She affirms that her narrative has an imperative and topical function to communicate the truth about war to citizens on the home front who hear only sanitized and censored accounts. Accordingly, she becomes a spokesperson for the men in her ward: she listens to and records their stories, and acts as their "interpreter" when she writes letters home for them that they are not well enough to write themselves. She participates in what Coates calls "a wilful commandeering of the language of war, arising out of . . . [a] desire to problematize androcentric language and to disrupt conventional literary genres" (19). In Arnold's view, women nurses have special access to war stories that are not being told, and a unique perspective on the conflict. Appropriately, Sister Anne and her nurses consider it their particular talent and responsibility to become war narrators: "Patients always open up to her the secret places of their minds. . . . I suppose she has, what the novelists call, charm" (20). At the same time, Sister Anne voices anxiety about the appropriateness of recording these stories: "Sometimes I don't quite know, girls, just how much right we have to repeat these things the men tell us" (21). She also, perhaps like Arnold

herself, anticipates the new historicist's concern that in the process of recording and relating war stories, they become fictions and cease to be documentary in the truest sense. As one of her patients lies dying, he asks Sister Anne, "When are you going to write to my wife?" and she replies, "What shall I say to her? Tell me exactly what you wish her to know" (89). He replies that she should "tell her I'll soon be all right." Sister Anne knows the soldier will not make it through the night and she refuses to write the letter: "I waited, wishing I could penetrate his secret thoughts" (89). He dies before morning, and Sister Anne writes to the widow a compromise letter: "I wrote to the widow of the bravest man I had ever been honoured to know" (90).

In this case, Sister Anne's adherence to the "truth" means she refuses to communicate the idealistic words of a dying soldier. But she still reports of his death in a manner that evokes the romantic and celebratory language commonly used to honour the dead. She sees herself, perhaps as Arnold did, in a contradictory role: she is a documentary realist charged with the responsibility of offering a credible version of the almost apocalyptic war experience, but both her subjects (the soldiers themselves) and her public demand that she communicate the romanticized version of life at the front. The end product, she admits, confuses genres: "When you search for the missing . . . you find things tenfold stranger than fiction"; stories are made up of "a little fact, and a lot of fiction, a picture here, and exaggeration there" (82, 205). *Sister Anne! Sister Anne!* is remarkable as one of the first war novels to explore the experiences of women in the conflict and the roles they played in documenting it. Its metafictional and metahistorical interests gesture toward a larger aesthetic problem encountered by so many Canadian writers of the period who felt torn between mimesis and romanticism. For many Great War novelists — and this is true of international as well as Canadian writers — this meant negotiating contradictory demands that their novels both document and celebrate a bloody and pointless war. Other modern-realist novelists of the period who were not centrally preoccupied with the war — Grove, Callaghan, Ostenso, Stead — were caught in a similar predicament. In a nationalistic age, they sought to represent the difficult and often sordid conditions of Canadian life — including the travails of the homesteading experience and the social problems of the modern city — while their Canadian public usually demanded romanticized, idyllic, and nationalist celebrations of a country that was coming of age.

One year later, L.M. Mongomery's *Rilla of Ingleside* (1920) dealt

more openly and directly with the tensions between a traditional romanticism and the emerging realism. At no point in her long career did Montgomery ever fully embrace modern realism; *Rilla*'s romantic intrigues and verbose style are characteristically reminiscent of much nineteenth-century fiction. Yet Montgomery's war novel is among the most ambitious and intelligent of the period, and convincingly presents the war subject and its representation as challenges to lingering Victorian conventions in both literary and societal realms. The story follows Rilla, a precocious and naïve young woman living in Prince Edward Island, as she comes of age and her brothers and lover enlist and fight in the Great War. Montgomery, of course, built her reputation primarily as a writer of regional romances, and *Rilla of Ingleside* provides many passages that offer idyllic descriptions of Prince Edward Island: "It was a warm, golden-cloudy, loveable afternoon" (1). But *Rilla* is one of very few early twentieth-century novels, Canadian or foreign, to offer a sustained and sociological examination of the impact of the Great War on the life of an entire community. On the surface, then, the novel has two divergent aims. It is driven by a romantic plot in which Rilla moves from childlike innocence to marriage; at the same time, it strives to document the effects of the Great War with realism and accuracy. The early sections of the book concentrate on the immature musings of the central character: "I want everything — everything a girl can have. . . . I heard someone say once that the years from fifteen to nineteen are the best years in a girl's life. I'm going to make them perfectly splendid — just fill them with fun" (15). As Rilla offers such naïve observations, Montgomery introduces her war-weary audience to a structural irony and has various characters offer platitudes that fail to anticipate the coming war: "Who is this Archduke man who has been murdered? . . . What does it matter to us? . . . Somebody is always murdering or being murdered in those Balkan states" (11). As war is declared, and its harsh realities become apparent, the local boys leave Prince Edward Island for the trenches, and the women on the home front make sacrifices. Rilla's brother Walter is killed in action. A new sensibility overtakes the town: "How everything comes back to this war. . . . We can't get away from it — not even when we talk of the weather. I never go out these dark cold nights myself without thinking of the men in the trenches" (95). Montgomery accompanies this thematic change with a corresponding structural and generic shift. The war transforms the naïve and idyllic

lives of the characters while the novel evolves from a romance into a work of pioneering realism. Long, sentimental passages are increasingly displaced by documentary portraiture, sociological observation, and political commentary: "The Russian news is bad, too — Kerensky's government has fallen and Lenin is dictator of Russia . . . . Conscription is the real issue at stake. . . . All the women . . . who have husbands, brothers, and sons at the front can vote" (225).

Montgomery's shift from romance to realism was, however, problematic, and like Arnold she is self-reflexive about her generic experimentation. Her central character, Rilla, is a compulsive diarist, and passages of her writing make up substantial sections of the novel. Montgomery comments on her own narrative technique indirectly through Rilla's diary, and its entries parallel the generic shift in the novel as a whole. Rilla's entries begin as trite and idealistic musings on the nature of romance, but by the end of the novel, they reflect the intellectual seriousness and practicality she has acquired as a result of her war experience. A transitional point in her thinking occurs in a middle chapter, revealingly entitled "Realism and Romance," in which her lover, Kenneth Ford, departs for the front. From this point forward, Rilla's entries increasingly reveal a mature understanding of the larger world, the nature of human relationships, and the social, political, and historical dimensions of the war. Toward the end of the novel, Rilla writes in her diary that she has overheard her parents remarking on her transformation: "Rilla has developed in a wonderful fashion these past four years. She used to be such an irresponsible young creature. She has changed into a capable, womanly girl" (258). After the war, Rilla records in her diary a conversation she has with her brother Jem in which they discuss the death of their brother: "Do you know, Walter was *never* frightened after he got to the front. *Realities* never scared him — only his imagination could do that" (275). Rilla's personal transformation, the philosophical evolution of her diary, and the generic transformation of the novel all reflect the transition from romantic idealism to stark realism in Canadian literary circles during and following the war. But in *Rilla of Ingleside,* the generic transformation is ultimately incomplete. The novel ends with a gesture back to pre-war romanticism: though the family will never recover from the death of Walter, Rilla's lover returns unharmed, and their presumed marriage reinforces the novel's initial idyllic and romantic conventions. Like so many of her contemporaries, Montgomery resists making a clean

break with literary tradition; as George L. Parker writes, Montgomery was "never comfortable with the frank realism of fiction after the First World War" (761). Her struggle parallels that of many of her contemporaries who, even as they approached their modern subjects with an uncompromising realism, were unwilling or unable to abandon tried and true romantic conventions. Works such as Grove's *Settlers of the Marsh*, Ostenso's *Wild Geese,* and Stead's *Grain* that offer harsh, naturalistic portraits of prairie settlers alongside their romantic intrigues suggest how widespread this generic confusion was in the national literary imagination after the war.

The first Canadian novel to deal realistically and uncompromisingly with the fighting man's experience in the trenches, Peregrine Acland's *All Else is Folly: A Tale of War and Passion,* appeared in 1929. It suggests that, a decade after *Rilla of Ingleside* was published, Canada's war novelists were becoming increasingly interested in writing a form of realism that had affinities with international modernist forms, and that generic experiment and confusion was still a hallmark of the modern-realist novel. In Acland's book, the protagonist, Alec Falcon, an infantryman in the Canadian forces who fights on the European front, becomes disillusioned with war in part as a result of the horrors he witnesses. Although Acland's narrative is more direct and explicit than Arnold's or Montgomery's, his book embodies many of the same tensions between romance and realism. *All Else is Folly* offers a confused combination of blunt documentary, war realism, nineteenth-century romance, and modernist experimentation. Falcon's front line experiences allow him to witness death and destruction first-hand, and his observations are rendered uncompromisingly: "It wasn't so pleasant to think of the rest of the hundred snoring Germans who had been surprised. . . . Left gasping, groaning, dying, body stretched over body, in the deep darkness at the bottom of their dugouts" (141). But interspersed with sections where Falcon fights on the front are lengthy chapters describing his leaves in England, where he enters into a love triangle with an English aristocrat, Lady Bendip, and a young American woman, Adair Hollister, whose husband is a prisoner of war in Germany. The scenes in which he travels through a decadent London and spends time in Lady Bendip's great house contrast vividly in tone and content to the battlefield scenes: "Every movement of her hands as she handled the tea things, every glance of her eyes, every ripple from her lips, fascinated Alec, cast a

spell over him" (175). On one level, Acland is certainly setting up this contrast to highlight the unfathomable suffering and horror of life at the front, and its disconnectedness from the "civilized" and decadent world that enabled it. But it is also clear that on another level Acland is, like Arnold and Montgomery, unwilling or unable to escape the romance genre and embrace a truly uncompromising war realism. His novel asks harsh and probing questions about the war — "And wasn't war, too, a pouring out of spirit into the gutters?" — but ultimately the war experience seems almost a complication in the love plot which becomes the novel's central concern, and most of the major questions the novel raises have to do with romantic relationships: "Then there rose before him the thought that had troubled him many times in the trenches. . . . Now, it flared up and burst in a shower of light over those memories of ruin and death: Does man fight only because he hasn't yet learned how to love?" (342, 345). Acland reflects the anxiety that Canada's early modern realists felt about abandoning romantic conventions, which were so established that it apparently was difficult to imagine creating even a stark novel about death and destruction without musings on love and romantic intrigue.

*All Else is Folly* emphasizes the multi-generic nature of the modern-realist novel when it brings into its aesthetic *mélange* an interest in exploring and representing human consciousness, both experimentally and epistemologically. Acland's omniscient, detached, documentary, objectivist, and impersonal narration is frequently punctuated with lengthy passages of stream-of-consciousness writing. This mode, almost unheard of in the Canadian novel of the period, was of course flourishing in recently published and acclaimed high-modernist novels by writers such as Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and William Faulkner, and may explain why Ford Madox Ford, the English modernist and author of *The Good Soldier* (1915), offered strong praise of *All Else is Folly* in his preface to the novel: "I wish I could have done it as well myself" (xii). Acland reflects the confused and ambivalent thoughts of his protagonist, and competing subjective perspectives on the war, within a documentary and objectivist account of life at the front. Accordingly, the third-person passages slip often into stream-of-consciousness mode:

> He hated the war but he loved the pipes . . . It has been fun, marching down to the Somme–hard fun but good. Rolling out at two in the morning . . . strong eggs and bad coffee by candlelight.

> . . . "Companee–'hun!" before dawn. The battalion rendezvous . . . whinnying horses . . . the beats of the drums . . . the wailing and rejoice of the pipes. Then the long khaki-kilted column swinging down the cobblestone road, between the rows of poplars, through the golden morning hours. A pageant of the lust of youth. Youth sweeping forth to spend itself lavishly, riotously . . . to what end? (343; original ellipses)

Although Novak concludes that Falcon's ambivalence to war "is a dilemma Acland is unable to resolve" and "the novel's major flaw," such a dilemma exists only in the mind of the central character who feels nostalgia and regret simultaneously (73). The rest of the novel, including the impersonal third-person narration, does not express such an ambivalence. Acland, who was himself a Great War veteran, appears, like Arnold, uncomfortable with realist accounts of the war that purport to be factual and documentary. His psychological portraiture and stream-of-consciousness passages have the dual and paradoxical effect of heightening narrative authority by supplementing the central narration with first-person testimony, while they simultaneously undermine narrative authority with dissonant multivocality. Acland's aesthetics are so intermingled and confused that the unity of the novel is mitigated and its anti-war message diffused. But his generic blurring in *All Else is Folly* is evidence that the post-war years not only witnessed a new realism emerging from an outmoded romanticism; writers of the period were also participating, however peripherally, in the modernist revolutions that were winning critical acclaim and stimulating experimental writing on both sides of the Atlantic. The most innovative of Canada's writers of the post-war era, like Acland, drew eclectically from various modernist schools and adapted, reworked, and approximated their techniques: stream of consciousness, centre of consciousness, reportage, allusive symbolism, and impressionistic writing, among others. Acland, like other writers of the 1920s and '30s — Grove, Knister, Baird, Callaghan, Ostenso — is a *modern* realist. In other words, he is writing a form of literary realism that borrows freely and idiosyncratically from the experimental literatures of Europe and America.

Canada's best early novel of the Great War, *Generals Die in Bed*, was written by Charles Yale Harrison and published in 1930. It has received muted and intermittent praise from critics as the most uncompromising indictment and vivid recreation of the Canadian experience at the

front.[5] In this novel, an unnamed first-person narrator, a soldier in the Canadian Expeditionary Force, relates his graphic experiences: the gory deaths of his comrades, the filth of the trenches, visits to prostitutes, the looting of a French town, killing a German soldier with a bayonet, and being wounded and hospitalized. Unlike his forerunners, Harrison is in no way held back by an attachment to romantic conventions or a desire to mitigate his criticism of the war. *Generals Die in Bed* could not be more starkly documentary, and Harrison's depictions of battle and atrocity are vivid and rendered in a direct, almost imagist style, as these six short paragraphs demonstrate:

> A shell lands in front of us.
> Fry's legs from the knees down are torn from under him.
> He runs a few paces on his gushing stumps and collapses.
> As I pass him he entwines my legs with his hands.
> "Save me," he screams into my face. "Don't leave me here alone."
> I shake him off and run towards the woods with Broadbent. (132)

Novak calls *Generals Die in Bed* "the first of the Canadian novels which consciously sets for itself the task of telling 'the truth about the war'"; it is "replete with scenes depicting the deplorable conditions of the front line, sketches of soldiers whose basic instinct is survival, and stories detailing the atrocities of Canadian troops" (60). Its documentary elements are so pronounced, in fact, that early criticism of the novel, was vocal in condemnation of aspects of war history that Harrison appeared to be fictionalizing. Readers challenged his assertion that Canadian soldiers looted the French town of Arras and that the allied hospital ship *Llandovery Castle* "was carrying military cargo in contravention of international law" when it was torpedoed in 1918. As Jonathan F. Vance writes, "Canadian veterans . . . react[ed] so strongly against *Generals Die in Bed,* and against all those books which comprised the canon of anti-war literature . . . they inevitably dismissed the books as falsifications of history" (31-32). Such criticism testifies that the novel reads almost as journalism intended to communicate first-hand war experience. Accordingly, readers might easily be forgiven for forgetting that it is a novel rather than a history or a memoir. But the fact that Harrison so freely intermingled "fact" and "fiction" suggests that he had other impulses informing his modern realism. He may have been exaggerating the war in order to make his indictment of it more powerful and

unmistakable. But he was not striving solely for narrative objectivism. Like Acland, he infuses his objectivist narration with subjective perspectivism, and the most remarkable structural device of the novel is not its journalistic style but rather its unconventional narrator: *Generals Die in Bed* is among the very few Canadian novels of the period narrated in the first-person voice. Harrison's narrator tells his story in a direct and immediate fashion, and somewhat implausibly in the present tense:

> Something moves in the corner of the bay. It is a German. I recognize the pot-shaped helmet. In that second he twists and reaches for his revolver.
>
> I lunge forward, aiming at his stomach. It is a lightning, instinctive movement.
>
> The thrust jerks my body. Something heavy collides with the point of my weapon.
>
> I become insane.
>
> I want to strike again and again. But I cannot. My bayonet does not come clear. I pull, tug, jerk. It does not come out.
>
> I have caught him between his ribs. The bones grip my blade. I cannot withdraw.
>
> Of a sudden I hear him shriek. It sounds far-off as though heard in the moment of waking from a dream.
>
> I have a man at the end of my bayonet, I say to myself. (76)

On the surface, this unconventional form of narration lends the text an immediacy and authenticity that it might otherwise lack. The narrator effectively "bears witness" to atrocity and provides readers with a riveting first-hand account of combat. But if this device is meant to heighten the credibility of the narrative, then it ironically undercuts authority as the psychological perspectivism competes with Harrison's reportage: "I remember that I do not believe in God. Insane thoughts race through my brain. I want to catch hold of something, something that will explain this mad fury, this maniacal congealed hatred that pours down on our heads. I can find nothing to console me, nothing to appease my terror" (26). *Generals Die in Bed* offers one of the first Canadian examples of unreliable narration: "From the stories I heard from veterans and from newspaper reports I conjure up a picture of an imaginary action. . . . I feel elated. Then I try to fancy the horrors of the battle" (23). Harrison's first-person narrative gives us the war filtered thorough the consciousness of one man, and is Harrison's

declaration that he is not a historian and that realism is not the same thing as objectivity. Regardless of Harrison's reasons for writing from an unconventional point of view, his choice creates aesthetic problems and certain passages in the novel are strikingly awkward when one imagines them spoken just as they are occurring: "A befurred young woman puts her soft arm around my neck and kisses me. . . . I am only eighteen and I have not had any experiences with women like this. I like this girl's brazenness" (17). *Generals Die in Bed,* is nevertheless, revealing of struggles faced by modern realists of the period who felt bound to mimesis because they were representing the war, or a region of Canada, or a Canadian national thesis, but at the same time wished to explore the same subjective states that interested international modernists in novels such as *The Good Soldier*, *Ulysses*, *The Waves*, and *As I Lay Dying*. The modern realism of Harrison is like that of so many Canadian writers of the period: it involves a precarious and experimental balance of objectivist narrative and documentary with representations of human consciousness.

Canada's best early war novels, including the four I have briefly reintroduced here, invite a reconsideration of the aims, origins, aesthetic ideas, and international affinities of the modern realists who emerged in the 1920s and '30s. While none of the many forgotten Canadian novels of the Great War is a masterpiece, several demand consideration alongside, and provide an important and largely unacknowledged international context for, the most sophisticated canonical works by Canada's leading writers of the period. Furthermore, these early war novels help to situate more recent and acclaimed works such as Timothy Findley's *The Wars* (1977) and Joseph Boyden's *Three Day Road* (2005) in a long national tradition with international affinities and influences. Given the importance of the Great War to Canadian history, the role it played in national literary development, and the canonical centricity of war novels in some international modernist traditions, it seems remarkable that only recently has a Canadian "war novel" genre been reclaimed and that none of its early representative works is widely read today. What does the neglect of these novels reveal about how Canadians have traditionally imagined their literature and their formative realism of the early twentieth century? The neglect of Canada's war fiction is a reminder of the extent to which a romantic nationalism has informed the kinds of texts Canadians prefer to read. Robert Lecker argues that

> the formation of the English-Canadian literary institution was driven by the desire to see literature as a force that verified one's sense of community and place. . . . Ever since the nineteenth century, canonical activity in Canada has been driven by different applications of the national-referential ideal, and by the assumption that a country without a national literature is not a country at all. (4)

Canada's Great War novels, with their harsh political criticism and graphic descriptions of human suffering, were (and are) perhaps incompatible with the canonical forces that Lecker identifies. They are also at odds with how historians have often represented the war. As Graham Carr writes,

> properly, any analysis of the 1920s should begin by reflecting on the impact of the First World War. In the Canadian situation this requirement is especially apt, but in an ironic way. For one of the comparatively peculiar things about the English Canadian historiography of the war is its romantically optimistic and celebratory tone. . . . The war is seen as both the wellspring of national self-identity and the capstone of national constitutional achievement. (7)

Even some of the earliest war novels, like Arnold's and Montgomery's published shortly after the 1918 armistice, are unmistakably critical of the war, despite the occasional platitudes they offer on subjects such as the bravery of Canadian soldiers; in this sense they participated not in uncritical celebration but rather in the international anti-war movement that informed novels such as Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms,* Dos Passos's *Three Soldiers*, and Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room*. The most widely read realist works of the period about the settling of the west or Canada's developing cities foreground not large-scale death and destruction, but the construction of Canada, and are, therefore, far more compatible with a "celebratory" and idealistic Canadian nationalism. Readers of the period, including those Vance mentions, apparently were uninterested in novels that implicated a young Canada in the crimes of older nations. It is ironic that the same event historians have so often identified as the moment Canada emerged as a modern nation is all but absent from the same nation's modern literature. Canada's forgotten Great War novels are a reminder of the extent to which nationalist biases have influenced and probably misinformed literary histories and canon formation.

These same Great War novels are also a reminder of the extent to which regionalist demands have shaped Canada's literature. If Canadians have looked to their literature to offer a referential and recognizable portrait of their country, then it is not surprising that their war novels, set in Europe, focused primarily on international events, and presumably remote from the experiences of the majority of Canadians, have failed to provoke sustained interest. Almost without exception, Canada's war novels show little interest in representing Canada: Montgomery's novel surely passes the regionalist test (and has been read far more widely than the other texts I have discussed), but those by Acland, Arnold, and Harrison say almost nothing specific about Canada when they mention it at all, and usually express a sensibility more British than Canadian. Furthermore, Canada's neglect of war fiction has helped to perpetuate the stereotype of the isolated Canadian writer who is disconnected from international cultural movements and trends, and the notion that realism arises, not from deliberate experiment, contact with modern themes and subjects, or awareness of literary trends in other countries, but rather as a default and deterministic aesthetic for writers interested in regionalism, nationalism, and representing Canadian geography. It is just as plausible, however, that the war experience, with its ethical demands for documentary representation, is at the root of the mimetic impulse in the modern Canadian imagination. Canada's Great War novels are, if anything, more starkly realistic than most of their prairie-realist, urban-realist, and social-realist counterparts. Modern realists are perhaps most accurately cast as creative artists who experiment with genre and form as they seek to represent the major international subjects of the modern age, not as passive reflectors of region, nation, and geography. The best Canadian novels of the Great War deserve reconsideration as some of the most important and formative works of their period, and recognition for the uncompromising and largely unnoticed contribution they have made to history by representing the Canadian and international war experience. They demand acknowledgment as creative works that helped to shape Canada's formative modern realism and participated in the transatlantic modernist revolution. And they invite re-examination of some of the most entrenched notions of Canada's literary development and the relation of its literature to those of other countries.

## Notes

[1] Dagmar Novak writes that "Canadians published over thirty novels about the First World War by the middle of the 1920s" (7).

[2] Thompson's article analyzes Peregrine Acland's *All Else is Folly* (1929), Charles Yale Harrison's *Generals Die in Bed* (1930), Philip Child's *God's Sparrows* (1937), and Timothy Findley's comparatively contemporary novel of World War I, *The Wars* (1977).

[3] Coates pays significant attention to Gertrude Arnold's *Sister Anne! Sister Anne!* (1919), Francis Marion Beynon's *Aleta Dey* (1919), Nellie McClung's *The Next of Kin: Those Who Wait and Wonder* (1917), L.M. Montgomery's *Rilla of Ingleside* (1920), Grace Blackburn's *The Man Child* (1930), and Evah McKowan's *Janet of Kootenay* (1919).

[4] See also John Moss's *Modern Times: A Critical Anthology* (1982), Donna Bennett's "Conflicted Vision: A Consideration of Canon and Genre in English-Canadian Literature" (1991), and T.D. MacLulich's *Between Europe and America: The Canadian Tradition in Fiction* (1988).

[5] See Jonathan F. Vance's "The Soldier as Novelist: Literature, History, and the Great War" for an account of the early reception of Harrison's novel and for its discussion of Sir Arthur Currie's accusation that *Generals Die in Bed* falsifies history and denigrates the reputations of Canada's veterans.

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