The Romance of Reunion: Montreal War Veterans Return to Family Life, 1944-1949

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Article abstract

The narratives of homecoming told during the last years of the Second World War and the first few years of peace drew on the elements of a literary romance: valiant heroes, loyal heroines, and a period of hardship culminating in the hero’s triumphant return and the welcoming embrace of the woman he’d left behind. The moment of reunion, however, heralded the beginning of another story: veterans’ reintegration into family life in the wake of war and separation. This paper examines the renegotiation of relationships between male war veterans and their spouses, children, and parents. Using Montreal as a case study, it argues that although the family was promoted as an agent of postwar healing, veterans’ readjustment to family life was difficult. The fact that war had strained and sometimes shattered relationships was harder to bear given the rhetorical force of the reunion narrative for veterans and their families.
The Romance of Reunion: Montreal War Veterans Return to Family Life, 1944-1949

MAGDA FAHRNI

"They return with new cells, old eyes, to their strange children and older wives."
- Earle Birney, "Young Veterans" (1945)¹

This article is entitled "the romance of reunion" because the narratives of homecoming that were told during the last years of the Second World War and the first few years of peace included many of the elements of a literary romance. Like a romance, these war stories had young, valiant heroes and loyal, virtuous heroines who had suffered through a period of trial and tribulation. As in a romance, these heroes and heroines had vanquished evil and been vindicated by victory. These narratives of reunion, like romances, ended with the welcoming embrace between the returning hero and the girl he'd left behind. And, like romances, these stories had great popular appeal. "Integrating" myths, aimed at all classes and cultures, they were told in fiction and film, in song, in advertisements, and in magazine articles. They were also told in photographs: a couple embracing at a train station, or children on the knee of a father in uniform.²

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¹ Earle Birney, "Young Veterans" in Now is Time (Toronto, 1945), 55.
Historians have also told this tale. V-E Day and V-J Day meant the return of the armed forces. North America settled down into domesticity, into the suburbs, into relative affluence. And, one is left to assume, everyone lived happily ever after. Recent historical literature has challenged assumptions of postwar prosperity, suburban homogeneity, and contented nuclear families. The fifties are beginning to look more complicated. Historians of Canada have remained largely silent, however, about the period of transition in family life that was the late 1940s.

This paper, part of a larger project on the renegotiation of family in the wake of the Second World War, examines the reworking of relationships between, primarily male, war veterans and their families. The study focuses on Montreal, but its conclusions, I would suggest, apply more broadly. A city of at least three solitudes, French-Catholic, English-Protestant, and Jewish, Montreal provides an internal contrast of language, religion, and ethnicity. While Montreal itself was a particular, perhaps unique, juxtaposition of language and culture, the variety of relationships within the metropolis point to the possibilities elsewhere in the wake of the war. The conclusions drawn here underline the centrality of heterosexuality to the postwar renegotiation of relationships. They also suggest the benefits to be gained from examining military and family histories as linked, rather than isolated, experiences.

The metaphor of reunion resonated even for those who did not themselves have loved ones overseas. Indeed, governments and communities, as well as individuals and families, participated in the romance with Canadian veterans. Some of the elements of romance no doubt rang true for many postwar families, and I am not trying to posit a simple dichotomy between the sentimental ideal and a more pedestrian reality. But the moment of reunion, while it may have been the ending to one story, was the beginning of another. Suffering from wounds, illness, "battle exhaustion," or anxiety about the future, veterans and

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4 On "the constitution of heterosexual normality" in postwar English Canada, see Mary Louise Adams, The Trouble with Normal: Postwar Youth and the Making of Heterosexuality (Toronto, 1997).
their advocates looked to the family as an agent of postwar healing. Women, as wives, girlfriends, or mothers, were to ensure the "mental reestablishment of soldiers." Yet veterans found that returning home was often difficult, and that readjusting to civilian status and family life required considerable work. This gap between expectations and experience, aggravated by the fact that war had sometimes soured relationships, was harder to bear given the rhetorical force of the reunion narrative for soldiers and their families. The adjustment of male war veterans to family life in the late 1940s can be viewed through four different sets of relationships: those with prewar wives and girlfriends; those with war brides; those with sons and daughters; and those with parents.

**Wives and Girlfriends**

The romance of reunion emerged from the heightened idealisation of the heterosexual family during the war. Men posted overseas, single and married, had had plenty of time in which to romanticise ideas of marriage and parenthood. Veterans were returning to start their own homes, while girls and women were assumed to be eagerly anticipating weddings and children now that the boys were back. As one married French-Canadian sergeant told his chaplain in September 1944, "j'ai bonne espoir que tout cela sera fini bientôt et que je pourrai enfin reprendre la vie tranquille que je menais avec ma chère épouse avant la guerre."

Yet social service agencies, in Montreal and across the nation, discovered to their dismay that the soldiers' return produced "intimate and complex" domestic problems. Veterans suffering from "shattered nerves" found it difficult to readjust to family life. The fact that so many of these unions were

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6 "I am hopeful that all this will be over soon and that I will finally be able to take up the calm life I led with my dear wife before the war." Archives Nationales du Québec à Montréal (ANQM), P257, Mouvement des Travailleurs Chrétien (MTC), Vol. 11, File: Cent Mariés – J.M., C.G. Sgt J.M. to Rév. Père Victor-M. Villeneuve, 11 septembre 1944. See also NA, MG 30 C 92, Marion Creelman Savage papers, Vol. 7. *Consumers' News* (June 1945) : 7; (November/December 1945) : 2.


“mariages éclairs” — whirlwind weddings that had taken place immediately before enlistment, during wartime leaves, or in the first flush of homecoming — was part of the problem. The usual strains of new relationships were exacerbated by problems of inadequate housing, lodging with in-laws, and the attendant lack of privacy. Yet even long-established relationships suffered from the strains of separation. Many husbands found wives changed by the time apart, imbued with a new sense of independence and self-sufficiency. Other wives had suffered from loneliness and a lack of leisure activity while their husbands were away. Both parties had experienced serious problems of morale. Women were stretched thin by years of managing households and children alone, men by long periods of time away from home and family.

Separation by time and distance meant that a great deal of weight had been placed on letters that crossed the Atlantic, with consequent problems of miscommunication. Wives and mothers worried about a lack of news from husbands and sons in action. Military officials noted that the only thing as bad for soldiers’ morale as discouraging news from home was no news from home. Women were encouraged to write frequently to their companions, to eschew complaints, and to fill letters with good news. Not all couples wrote regularly to one another, however. Even among frequent correspondents, there was room for misinterpretation and for fretting over silences and omissions. The most potent source of worry had to do with infidelity. Wives and girlfriends worried about soldiers’ references to women met overseas. Friends and relatives took it upon themselves to keep soldiers and their partners informed of any misbehaviour, often without much evidence. As one young, unmarried sergeant overseas wrote to his Montreal priest in June 1944, “J’ai été les plus sincères avec

9 NA, RG 36, Series 18, Dependents’ Allowance Board (DAB), Vol. 12, File, Committees Local — General Correspondence. “Volunteer Citizens’ Committees”; Marion V. Royce, The Effect of the War on the Life of Women: A Study (Geneva; Washington, 1945), 71; Canadian Youth Commission, Marriage, Youth and the Family (Toronto, 1948), 46.


12 Robert England, Discharged: A Commentary on Civil Re-establishment of Veterans in Canada (Toronto, 1943), 325; La Presse, 22 avril 1944.

R—— et il me semble avoir fait tous les sacrifices pour me la garder, on est si loin l’un de l’autre! Je ne comprends pas encore qui a bien pu lui mettre dans la tête que j’étais attaché de quelque façon que ce soit à une autre fille. C’est parfaitement faux et vous pouvez me croire.”

The morale of servicemen and of their families was adversely affected, the Artillery Branch of the Montreal Soldiers’ Wives League noted, by “anonymous letters containing malicious information.”

Tales of wartime infidelity were common currency in 1940s Canada. Military Lotharios and ungrateful women who refused to wait for soldier-sweethearts had become stock characters in public discourse. The enforced mobility of married men and the increased visibility of women living alone fuelled the narratives of unfaithfulness. Determining how often rumours of infidelity were founded was difficult enough then; any attempt by the historian to quantify infidelity in the past is foolhardy. It is likely that war, through spousal separation, increased geographic mobility, and new work opportunities for women (which provided a measure of independence as well as new possibilities for romantic partners) did hasten the breakdown of some relationships. War also seems to have provided an escape from those relationships that were already rocky: there is a great deal of evidence to indicate that unhappy home lives were one spur to military enlistment. Although it is probably safe to assume that anxiety about infidelity was more common than actual instances of adultery, those instances that did come to light were enough to fuel a larger discourse of disloyalty.

The public concern about infidelity was paralleled by policy-makers’ more private negotiation of its consequences. Soldiers,’ and later veterans,’ personal

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14 “I have been most sincere with R—— and feel that I have made every sacrifice to keep her, we are so far from one another! I still do not understand who could have put the idea in her head that I was somehow attached to another girl. It’s perfectly false and you can believe me.” Emphasis in the original. ANQM, P104, Jeunesse Ouvrière Catholique (JOC), Container 250, File, Militaires. Sgt. G.L. to R.P. Victor Villeneuve, 24 juin 1944.


18 See NA, RG 36, Series 18, DAB, Vol. 50, File, Procedure 43. Gwyneth Howell to Ruth Harvey, 30 April 1943; Charles H. Young to R.O.G. Bennett, 20 October 1942. Young claimed that the number of unfaithful wives was “small compared with the total number of enlisted men,” but noted that “nevertheless such problems loom very large to the local groups who have to deal with them.”
lives were open to scrutiny in a way that those of most civilians were not. Candidates for military enlistment submitted their health, finances, and family relationships to examination by the various military bureaucracies; they were thoroughly “administered” citizens. At the same time, they had access to sources of state assistance that many civilians did not. Activities that had always taken place, then, came to the attention of state and private agencies more frequently during the War. The application process for Dependents’ Allowances, in particular, uncovered “irregular” relationships such as common-law marriages, adulterous unions, and illegitimate children.19 Social service agencies in Montreal and elsewhere, long used to dealing with the problems of unmarried mothers, now discovered the wives of soldiers giving birth to the children of men other than their husbands.20 Frequently, women in such a situation attempted to place their children for adoption, often before their husbands returned or learned of the situation. Other wives came to the attention of family agencies because they were deliberately neglecting their illegitimate children out of “guilt and anxiety over the husband’s re-action.”21 Wives’ infidelity was attributed to loneliness, to “disreputable” leisure pursuits such as frequenting dance halls and beer parlours, and to retaliation for their husbands’ own extramarital encounters overseas.22

The Dependents’ Allowance Board (DAB) suspended allowances to wives on evidence of their sexual infidelity. It was, the Board’s Chairman argued, “a general practice in welfare legislation to demand fidelity on the part of the wife in receipt of public funds.”23 Even questionable leisure activities, such as wives


23 NA, RG 36, Series 18, DAB, Vol. 50, File, Procedure 43, Suspension of Allowances for Wife on Ground of Improper Conduct. R.O.G. Bennett to Charles H. Young, 27 October 1942. The Chairman added that “Even in needy Mothers’ Allowance Regulations, where in most cases, the mother is a widow, the procedure is to declare her ineligible for a Government allowance is [sic] she has irregular relations with a man.” It appears that Mothers’ Allowances in other provinces were also cut off upon news of recipients’ “illegitimate” pregnancies. See “Report on the Visit to the Montreal Agencies, March 29 and 30,” by R. Harvey, DAB, 3 May 1943, in the same file.

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entertaining men in their homes, were cause for the DAB to assign the family
to the supervision of a social agency. Part of the concern over disloyal and
"immoral" wives was that they were perceived to be abdicating their "domestic
responsibility."24 The children of adulterous wives were sometimes removed to
the care of relatives or institutions, particularly when wives were living with
their new male companions.25 If the wife promised to mend her ways, her chil-
dren were allowed to remain in the home, and their dependents' allowances
were increased in order to compensate for the loss of their mother's
allowance.26

The unfaithfulness of soldiers and their partners inspired considerable
comment. Gossip played an important role in the public and private negotiation
of disloyalty. In addition to affecting the relationships in question, gossip fre-
quently had a tangible effect on wives' and children's material well-being. The
DAB relied heavily on rumours and innuendo to pinpoint unfaithful husbands
and especially wives. Neighbours and in-laws, in particular, took it upon them-
selves to inform the Board of sexual disloyalty.27 The Board insisted that the
allowances of unfaithful wives whose soldier-husbands were overseas were not
suspended without prior investigation. In the case of wives whose husbands
were posted in Canada, however, a husband's request was sufficient to have his
wife's allowance suspended until allegations of her infidelity were disproven.28
Moreover, private citizens used the Dependents' Allowance system as a means
of condemning disloyalty. One Montreal woman whose husband was having an
affair with the wife of a soldier, for instance, reported this "other woman" to the
DAB in order to have her Dependents' Allowance cut off.29 Such tattling

24 NA, RG 36, Series 18, DAB, Vol. 50, File, Procedure 43. R.O.G. Bennett to Charles H. Young,
27 October 1942; R.O.G. Bennett to Miss R. Robertson, 3 December 1943.
Lea, 14 June 1941; Vol. 28, File: Montreal Welfare Department, DAB 4-7. "Families referred
by D.A.B. to the Bureau d'Assistance Sociale aux Familles for supervision and re-education."
31 July 1944.
26 NA, RG 36, Series 18, DAB, Vol. 50, File, Procedure 43. R.O.G. Bennett to Charles H. Young,
27 October 1942.
27 See NA, MG 28 I 10, CCSD, Vol. 134, File 600 (II). Response to questionnaire from Local
Superintendent, Children's Aid Society of Huron County, Goderich, 15 June 1942; NA, RG 36,
Series 18, DAB, Vol. 28, File, Report on Conferences and Inspections. DND, Memorandum by
R. Harvey, 16 December 1941; File, DAB 4-3, Vol. 1, Investigations, Department of Pensions
28 NA, RG 36, Series 18, DAB, Vol. 50, File, Procedure 43. R.O.G. Bennett to Charles H. Young,
27 October 1942.
29 NA, MG 28 V 86, JFS, Vol. 11, File, Minutes of Case Conferences: Family Welfare Department
and Jewish Child Welfare Bureau, 1944-46. Case History to be presented at conference between
Child Welfare Bureau and Family Welfare Department, 26 December 1944. See also NA, MG
28 I 10, CCSD, Vol. 134, File 600 (I). Response to questionnaire from Family Service Bureau,
Hamilton.
reflected personal grudges, but also pointed to the larger question of who was perceived to be entitled to state support. In the minds of the public, like that of the DAB, the criterion for receiving military allowances was clearly loyalty: men’s loyalty to their country, and women’s loyalty to the men who were loyal to their country. As Nora Lea of the Canadian Welfare Council emphasised, the unfaithful wife who was not remorseful had “forfeited her right to consideration as the soldier’s wife.”

Yet gossip concerning sexual infidelity occasioned a certain backlash. The Dependents’ Allowance Board was criticised by representatives of some family agencies on a number of grounds, one of which was its reliance on gossip as sufficient evidence for withholding allowances. When it did undertake to investigate claims of immorality and infidelity, these agencies charged, the DAB and affiliated public bodies used “Gestapo” and “bullying” techniques. Montreal agencies complained “that information secured in this way was not treated as confidential and that before the investigation was completed a large sized scandal was public property in the neighborhood.” A family agency elsewhere in Canada likewise accused the Department of Pensions and National Health of taking “a murky satisfaction in the sexual delinquencies of the soldiers’ wives.” Furthermore, critics noted, the suspension of allowances harmed the soldier’s children as much as his wife by decreasing the family’s income. Married women pregnant with “illegitimate” children, moreover, were avoiding seeking medical care for fear that their allowances would be suspended. Certain Montreal social agencies were accused of keeping wives’ adultery a secret from the DAB so that allowances would not be withheld.

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31 NA, RG 36, Series 18, DAB; Vol. 28, File, Report on Conferences and Inspections. DND, Memorandum by R. Harvey, 16 December 1941; Vol. 50, File, Procedure 43. Gwyneth Howell to Ruth Harvey, 30 April 1943.
Others applied to the Board for the reinstatement of wives' allowances where they thought it warranted.37

Clearly, the reaction to women's infidelity was not monolithic. A concern for the morale of soldiers overseas, and a desire to preserve family units for the postwar period, meant that certain social agencies were willing to turn a blind eye, or at least a forgiving one, to sexual indiscretions. Some family agencies tried to prevent official reports from going to husbands overseas, particularly when wives appeared repentant. As one social worker explained, "Not that we wish to excuse them whatsoever, but we feel too, that if the matter could be kept quiet, we might be able to keep the family together for the sake of the husband who is Overseas."38 Many social workers, including some employed by public bodies, agreed that "a definite family break could be avoided" if husbands were not informed of wives' illegitimate children until the couple had a chance "to meet and talk things over."39 At the very least, family agencies pleaded, wives should be given the opportunity to tell their husbands themselves rather than have them receive the news from the DAB.40

The DAB also professed concern for the soldier's morale, but it took a different tack. Wives would "have greater peace of mind" if they confessed all, the Board argued, but regardless, husbands ought to be informed of wives' illegitimate children as soon as possible. As R.O.G. Bennett, Chairman, explained,

Careful as one tries to be in covering up the situation, the chances are the man will get word at some future time and distressing as the news will be to him now, it is thought by the Board that it is better for him to know when he has time to think over things while away rather than to return home and find out later. It is the attitude of the Board that to be fair to the soldier overseas, he should be informed how things are going at home.41

The differing attitudes of the DAB and the private family agencies are interesting. At one level, this was a difference between those who formulated policy and those faced with implementing it. But there were other reasons for

the contrasting approaches. Veterans of the First World War often filled key positions in federal departments such as the DAB and the Department of Veterans’ Affairs. 42 The “clients” of the DAB were members of the armed forces and, in a sense, the Board was standing in for the absent husband and father, while social agencies were concerned with the needs of various family members. 43 Local agencies had roots in their communities that predated the war, and intended to continue serving their clients once peace was secured. Federal bodies such as the Dependents’ Allowance Board and the Dependents’ Board of Trustees (DBT), on the other hand, took their direction from Ottawa and were intended to function only “for the duration.” It is worth noting that in the Quebec context, where enthusiasm for military enlistment was muted and opposition to conscription intense, the intervention of the DAB and the DBT in marital difficulties probably did little to improve French-Canadian families’ opinions of the federal government. 44

In general, agency workers were more willing to give erring wives a second chance, to keep in mind the difficulties of surviving without an allowance, and to think of the long-term consequences of confession. From the perspective of the DAB, women who chose not to remain faithful were traitors to their country as well as to their menfolk. The men they took up with were, furthermore, those who were not overseas: those who had either not enlisted, or who had volunteered but had failed to make the grade. The masculinity of such men, from the point of view of soldiers, veterans, and the Board, was undoubtedy somewhat suspect. 45

Women’s infidelity was interrogated to a far greater degree than men’s. The occasional lapse of judgement by men far from loved ones was not ideal, but it was tolerated and perhaps even expected. 46 As Ruth Jamieson has shown for Britain, for the military bureaucracies, the sexual fidelity of a soldier’s wife “was also taken to be an index of her commitment to the national interest.” 47 The question of soldiers’ own loyalty was slightly more ambiguous. Their loyalties to their families, to the nation, and to comrades-in-arms may have been reinforcing, but perhaps, as Susan Hartmann suggests, fidelity to fellow soldiers

44 My thanks to Denyse Baillargeon for this observation.
45 On returned Australian soldiers’ views of “the shirker” as a “non-man,” see Stephen Garton, “Return home: War, masculinity and repatriation” in Gender and War. Damousi and Lake, eds. 191-204.
took precedence. The result, she argues, was that in the United States, "The sexual double standard was reinforced on the grounds that the horrors of war both excused male infidelity and required female faithfulness."^{48}

There is no doubt that, as Jamieson and Hartmann show for Britain and the US respectively, women's infidelity was denounced in both public discussion and public policy. But the exposure of Canada's social service workers and government bureaucrats to wartime adversity may have developed in some of them a greater tolerance of "irregular" sexual relations, or at least, a pragmatic recognition that few marriages were uncomplicated.\(^{49}\) There was considerable debate within the DAB and the Department of National Defence over how to handle marital infidelity,\(^{50}\) as well as occasions on which the DAB demonstrated more flexibility than usual. As the war in Europe drew to a close and the soldiers' return appeared imminent, for instance, the Board shifted its focus from the punishment of wives to the preservation of households. The "necessity of considering the deterrent effect of Board decisions which existed in the past has now largely disappeared with the approach of partial demobilization," the Board noted. Past decisions revoking wives' allowances might be reconsidered more sympathetically, "providing the Dependent does her part." Like the family agencies, the Board increasingly counselled forgiveness and reconciliation, and insisted upon the importance of maintaining "home and family circles" for the postwar period.\(^{51}\)

How, then, did postwar couples deal with relationships that were at the very least strained, and often fractured? Most married couples probably stuck it out. It is possible, as one social service agency argued, that the impact of their wives' infidelity on soldiers' morale was less than might be supposed. Certainly some soldiers, despite "rather desperate" first reactions, took the news of wives' infidelity in stride. The DAB claimed that a serviceman's reactions would "depend a good deal on their marital relationship before he enlisted, on his behaviour since they have parted, and on the point of view of his relatives and their influence upon him."\(^{52}\) Some soldiers accepted their wives' "illegitimate" children as their own.

\(^{48}\) Hartmann, "Prescriptions for Penelope," 231, 236.

\(^{49}\) See Royce, Effect of the War, 59.

\(^{50}\) See, eg., NA, RG 36, Series 18, DAB, Vol. 50, File, Procedure 43. Memorandum from the Office of the Deputy Minister of National Defence to R.O.G. Bennett, Chairman, DAB, 30 August 1943; Memorandum re Erring Wives of Soldiers, 20 May 1941.

\(^{51}\) NA, RG 36, Series 18, DAB, Vol. 28, File, Report on Conferences and Inspections. Typed statement re: the DAB [no title, n.d.]. For the DAB's claims throughout the War that its aim was to preserve "home and family circles," see Vol. 49, File, Procedure 33, Watson Sellar to A. MacNamara, 30 September 1940; Vol. 28, File, DAB 4-5, Vol. 4, General Correspondence with Welfare Agencies. R.O.G. Bennett to Olive M. Snyder, 28 May 1943; George F. Davidson to R.O.G. Bennett, 28 June 1944.

One French-Canadian woman, for instance, gave birth to her eighth child during the War, a child fathered by someone other than her soldier-husband. The soldier and his wife were reconciled, however, and the family stayed together.\(^{53}\) Soldiers could request that dependents’ allowances be reinstated to their unfaithful wives and/or allocated to their wives’ illegitimate children. The DAB would agree to these requests if the wife showed signs of changing her “immoral” ways, and if the soldier agreed to raise the children in question as his own.\(^{54}\)

Evidence of formal or de facto postwar marital breakdown is substantial, however. Divorce, for instance, increased in Quebec in the immediate postwar period, particularly among servicemen’s families. Petitions to the Dominion government from Montreal residents rose steadily through the War years and jumped sharply in the immediate postwar period.\(^{55}\) Yet in a predominantly Catholic province with no divorce courts, where a divorce required the delay, expense, and notoriety involved in petitioning the Dominion government, legal divorce was but one form of marital dissolution. More common, especially for French Canadians, were legal separations of bed-and-board or informal separations. Catholic organisations warned Quebecers that civil divorce was not a valid way of dissolving Christian marriages, while even agencies that catered primarily to non-Catholic clients, such as Montreal’s Society for the Protection of Women and Children, advised judicial separation rather than divorce in “cases of marital discord.”\(^{56}\) Some soldiers simply chose not to return to their relationships. Social service agencies noted the large number of wives abandoned by soldier-husbands; military enlistment was occasionally tantamount to desertion.\(^{57}\) Some married Canadian soldiers formed second families in Europe


\(^{54}\) NA, RG 36, Series 18, DAB: Vol. 29, File, Children of Unmarried Mothers, DAB 5-5. R.O.G. Bennett to G.F. Thompson, 14 April 1943; Vol. 28, File, DAB 4-5, Vol. 4, General Correspondence with Welfare Agencies. R.O.G. Bennett to Olive M. Snyder, 28 May 1943.

\(^{55}\) La Presse, 6 avril 1946, p.32; CYC, Youth, Marriage and the Family, 52; NA, RG 36, Series 18, DAB, Vol. 36, File, Permission to Marry (Army) - DAB 7-24-102g, Vol. 1. Circular No. 103, 3 April 1944; Statutes of Canada 1944-45; 1945; 1946; 1947; 1948; 1949 (8 George VI - 13 George VI).

\(^{56}\) UM, P16, ACC, P16/H3/18/84. “Le Mariage Chrétien” (1946); NA, MG 28 I 129, SPWC, Vol. 6, File, SPWC Minutes, 19 February 1947 to 24 March 1950. Minutes of Meeting of Board of Directors, 19 October 1949. Approximately 20 percent of the parliamentary divorces awarded to Montreal couples between 1944 and 1946 went to couples where at least one of the partners had a French surname; clearly French-Canadians were under-represented. See Statutes of Canada 1944-45; 1945; 1946 (8 George VI - 10 George VI).

and elected to stay with them: a precedent established during the First World War a generation earlier.58 Meanwhile, soldiers who were unmarried but who had girlfriends or fiancées in Canada frequently came home with new wives, met overseas.

War Brides

Those who lived through the war were struck by the huge number of marriages hastily made, in Canada and overseas. The explosion of marriages after September 1939 has been attributed by one historian of Britain to a "last-dance" mentality that saw sexual tension heightened by the excitement of war and a reckless and romantic attitude in the face of an unknown future.59 In Canada, other factors no doubt forced the formalisation of relationships that might otherwise have remained unsolemnised: hopes of avoiding conscription, for instance, or the opportunity to allocate and receive dependents’ allowances. The improved economic situation, moreover, meant that couples who had courted in the depths of the Depression could finally afford to establish their own households. For many Canadian soldiers, a "last-dance" attitude would result in marriages to women met in Europe, primarily England. The subsequent arrival in Canada of close to 45,000 "war brides" and their more than 21,000 children captured the public’s attention and also encapsulates many of the peculiar difficulties of postwar marital adjustment.60

The immigration of British brides began midway through the war and was largely completed by 1947.61 Those who settled in Montreal were probably the lucky ones, benefiting at least from a city with all kinds of amenities. Some arrived while their husbands were still fighting overseas; many came with young children.62 Brides were greeted by spouses and by in-laws: the publicity accorded these reunions was extensive. The photograph of "Jane-Margaret et son papa" that appeared in La Presse on 7 March 1946, for instance, depicted the reunion at Bonaventure Station of M. Bérubé, former member of the Fusiliers Mont-Royal,

60 For statistics on war brides and their children, see Desmond Morton, 1945: When Canada Won the War (Ottawa: CHA Historical Booklet no. 54, 1995), 11. For the reminiscences of English war brides, see Joyce Hibbert, The War Brides (Toronto, 1978).
61 La Presse noted that the last boatload of war brides and children was expected to arrive in Halifax on 21 November 1946 and that after 30 November, dependents of Canadian soldiers wishing to come to Canada would have to pay their own way. Yet an article on 8 February 1947 observed that 400 Canadian soldiers had recently arrived in Halifax and that the ship’s passengers included 26 war brides and their children. See La Presse, 3 octobre 1946, p.4; 2 novembre 1946, p.28; 8 février 1947, p.35.
his English bride, and their one-year-old daughter, Jane-Margaret. Newspaper articles gushed about “heureuses Canadiennes,” “nouvelles citoyennes du Canada”: young English women who were being received with open arms and who would create comfortable homes for their veteran-husbands.63

In addition to the usual resources offered by an urban centre, English women found special provisions made for them, largely by the city’s Anglo-Protestant community. CN Rail and the Red Cross set up a canteen, a rest-area, and a nursery for British mothers and children arriving at Montreal’s Bonaventure Station. The Acorn Club, established “to welcome and help in any way possible all British brides arriving in Montreal,” sent “a letter of welcome to every member two weeks after her arrival” in the city. Members of the Local Council of Women were requested to do everything in their power “to help the British war brides to become happy and useful Canadian citizens.” The YWCA, meanwhile, offered to arrange French lessons for them.64

Not everyone was caught up in the romance of the British brides, however. Many French-Canadians looked askance at these English women newly arrived on their soil. L’Association Catholique de la Jeunesse Canadienne Française (l’ACJC) argued that English women were morally unworthy of young French-Canadian men, despite their often superior education. French-Canadian families would not necessarily extend a warm welcome to these brides, the ACJC warned, and furthermore, would the children of these unions be French or English?65

War brides themselves found much to adjust to. Canadian observers were surprised by reports of unhappy British wives, and tended to attribute their discontent to Montreal’s postwar housing crisis. The Victoria Rifles Ladies Association of Montreal felt it essential that the housing shortage be rectified so that “no Canadian or British bride will feel like returning home to mother just because we have failed to provide liveable homes for them.”66 Others blamed

63 La Presse, 7 mars 1946, p.4; 27 novembre 1944, p.4; 27 mars 1944, p.4; 2 novembre 1946, p.63.
65 ANQM, P104, JOC, Container 240, File, Commission Canadienne de la Jeunesse. Mémoires soumis par le comité central de l’ACJC à la Commission Canadienne de la Jeunesse, 27-28 janvier 1945. See also UM, P16, ACC, P16/04/52, Commission Canadienne de la Jeunesse, Comité provincial du Québec, Mémoire sur la famille, for similar worries about the linguistic and religious problems posed by war brides.
marital unhappiness on conflicts with in-laws. Montreal’s Society for the Protection of Women and Children (SPWC) reported in 1945 and 1946 that it was seeing an increased number of cases involving “marriages contracted overseas by service personnel,” including “numerous cases in which the War-bride is not accepted by the soldier’s family.” The SPWC noted “more or less acute marital difficulties” related to “culture, religion and race,” to the transition to urban living, and to situations where “the soldier has reverted to an attachment made prior to his departure for overseas service.”67 One woman’s story captures war brides’ frustrations with both housing and in-laws. The woman’s husband, a veteran, worked the nightshift, and the couple and their two children lived with the husband’s married sister. Not long after her arrival in the city, the woman wrote to the Montreal Soldiers’ Wives League, “Please can you refer me how to find out about returning home. I have two children and I am expecting another. We have one room here, and have been told that we must find another place. Whereas we can’t – places are hard to get and I wish to return to England.”68

Other war brides were also prepared to return home. Montreal service clubs such as the Oak Society for British War Wives perceived “this inability to settle down” to be widespread and problematic.69 Newspapers noted that English wives were returning to the UK because they found Canadians cold and unfriendly.70 Meanwhile, numerous instances of abandoned war brides were coming to the attention of social service agencies. A few women deserted by Canadian husbands overseas decided nonetheless to come to Canada.71 The conclusions to some of these stories can be found in the Statutes of Canada: each year between 1945 and 1949 saw parliamentary divorces awarded to


70 La Presse, 2 novembre 1946, p.28. Barry Broadfoot’s interviews with veterans also uncovered evidence of the poor reception given to some English wives and he notes that many returned to England after a very short time in Canada. See The Veterans’ Years: Coming Home from the War (Vancouver; Toronto, 1985), 87, 134.

Montreal residents whose marriages had taken place in wartime England. Yet as observers were quick to point out, those war brides who returned to Britain were the exception rather than the rule. *La Presse*, for instance, reported in November 1945 that only 29 of the 9,000 British war brides who had so far arrived in Canada had requested a return to England. Many wartime romances no doubt took longer to unravel. But most war brides probably, as their French-Canadian neighbours would have said, "se débrouillaient."

**Children**

Many returning soldiers met their children for the first time, or encountered them after a separation of several years. Wartime commentators had expressed considerable concern over Canada's temporarily fatherless children. Even worse was the prospect that this temporary state might become permanent. As the Association Catholique de la Jeunesse Canadienne Française worried, "Combien d'êufs ne connaîtront pas leur père et n'auront pas son aide pour se faire un avenir." The nation-wide perception that juvenile delinquency was flourishing was rooted in anxiety over women's paid work and "latch-key" children. Were the children of employed mothers and enlisted fathers under proper supervision? Mothers were seen to be incapable of enforcing the strict discipline that was the purview of fathers. Members of the Montreal Soldiers' Wives League felt that soldiers' children were deprived of "the steadying hand of a father in their guidance and upbringing"; veterans' advocates worried that soldier-fathers would return from overseas "to find incipient juvenile delinquency in the home." The effect of fathers’ absence on children’s emotional and (hetero)sexual development was also a concern. Observers worried about

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72 *Statutes of Canada* 1944-45; 1945; 1946; 1947; 1948; 1949 (8 George VI - 13 George VI). See also NA, MG 28 I 10, CCSD, Vol. 58, File 489A. Memorandum re: Wives of Canadian Servicemen Overseas Proceeding to Canada but either Widowed or Deserted, 1946.


daughters’ “future adjustment to men and marriage.” Sons, meanwhile, might become “overdependent” on their mothers as a result of being “thrown too much with women.” “The boys who are raised during the war years,” warned the Canadian Youth Commissioners, “must be safeguarded against becoming men who are ‘tied to their mothers’ apron strings.’”

Commentators were aware that relations between returned soldiers and their children might be strained. A federal government brochure reminded veterans to “tenir compte de la croissance des enfants durant leur absence.” Promoters of Volunteer Citizens’ Committees noted that veterans were often strangers to their children. Veterans interviewed by Barry Broadfoot recounted the disappointment on the part of children who had expected their returning fathers to be larger-than-life war heroes and who found instead only ordinary men. Awkward relations between veterans and children affected veterans’ relationships with their wives; likewise, strained marital relations affected children’s perceptions of their soldier-fathers. Children also suffered from the fall-out of marriages shattered by war; some children were taken into institutional or foster care after their servicemen-fathers returned and their parents’ marriages disintegrated.

Some idea of the pressure that both military service and the return to family life placed on men can be ascertained from the more extreme and tragic examples of veterans’ difficulties with their children. La Presse, for instance, published a photograph of a battered infant in March 1947, under the caption “Le pitoyable enfant d’un ancien combattant aussi malheureux.” A 39-year-old Montreal war veteran, Edmond O’Driscoll, had been charged with injuring his six-month-old daughter Maureen three times in three months, breaking her arms and fracturing her ribs and collarbone. O’Driscoll had undergone lengthy treatment at Ste. Anne’s Military Hospital for a head wound and apparently was not always conscious of his actions. Perhaps, the newspaper suggested, the baby’s injuries could be attributed to the fact that the six-foot veteran was not aware of his strength and held her too tightly. O’Driscoll was scheduled for a mental examination by the judge hearing the case. The journalist’s sympathy was clearly extended to the former soldier as well as to his child. Montreal’s Society for the Protection of Women and Children, meanwhile, described two

77 CYC, Youth, Marriage and the Family, 50-52.
79 CYC, Youth, Marriage, and the Family, 50.
80 NA, MG 28 V 86, JFS, Vol. 12, File, Minutes of Meetings, Case and Adoption Committee, Jewish Child Welfare Bureau, 1944-1948. Minutes, Meeting of Placement Committee of JCWR, 28 March 1944. See also Sutherland, Growing Up, 83, 106.
81 La Presse, 5 mars 1947, p. 3.
cases of incest involving Second World War veterans and their daughters in its submission to the Royal Commission on the Criminal Law relating to Criminal Sexual Psychopaths in 1956.\textsuperscript{82} Child-beating and incest were surely not the experience of most veterans. But such incidents do speak to the problematic nature of reunion and also to the ways in which veterans' troubles were framed in their communities.

**Parents**

Second World War veterans were "sons" as well as 'lovers'.\textsuperscript{83} Married veterans and their wives were often depicted as the heroes and heroines of the postwar romance of reunion, but, in fact, most Canadian veterans were young and single.\textsuperscript{84} Veterans were referred to in the popular press as "boys," often "our boys": in a sense, they were everyone's sons. Parents, and often siblings, were expected to contribute to the task of rehabilitation. The Department of Veterans' Affairs noted approvingly that Montreal parents were encouraging their sons to get "back to work."\textsuperscript{85} The Jeunesse Ouvrière Catholique Féminine reminded families and friends that young working-class men were returning much changed by their military experiences, often nervous and irritable. Women were to help them to readjust by reintroducing them to good habits, notably religion.\textsuperscript{86}

Yet while young soldiers were sons, they were often in the ambiguous position of allocating dependents' allowances to their parents and siblings.\textsuperscript{87} This was not necessarily a new situation, given Montreal's history of child and teen labour and given the working-class background of many soldiers.\textsuperscript{88} Parents of soldiers and veterans, used to relying on sons' earnings, had a clear sense of enti-
tlemont to state-administered allowances. As one woman reminded the Montreal Soldiers’ Wives League in January 1946, “After all, I am a veteran’s mother and entitled to my check . . . ”98 Moreover, parents across the country exhibited a marked preference for soldiers’ and veterans’ allowances over other forms of social welfare; military allowances were a source of pride rather than stigma.99

Those veterans who were young and unmarried but whose adolescence had ended abruptly with their period of service found the return to the nest frustrating after several years of absence and mobility. Montreal’s severe postwar housing shortage meant that veterans frequently moved back into overcrowded parental homes. Friction ensued as parents were forced to adjust to their young sons’ independence and resistance to parental authority.91 With regard to female veterans, the Canadian Youth Commission thought it likely that “once the first pleasure of returning home is over, the standards of the parents will appear more rigid than ever and the advice and restrictions more irksome than before.”92 Readers of the daily press were exposed to grim examples of the difficulties of rehabilitation. For instance, 25-year-old Laurent Leduc, a Montreal navy veteran, was charged in February 1946 with cutting his father in the back in a fit of hysteria, and with attempting to attack his mother and sisters.93

Well-known Canadian psychiatrist, Brock Chisholm, noted that “Many people still speak of our soldiers as ‘boys,’” but insisted that “It is very important that we should not regard our soldiers as boys but rather that we should see them clearly as they are – grown-up responsible men.”94 War’s function as a rite of passage was highlighted by the fact that these men often returned with new family responsibilities.95 The transfer of assigned pay and dependents’ allowances from mothers to new brides suggests one way in which the war transformed, and often strained, filial relationships. As soldiers and veterans


91 La Presse, 5 novembre 1945, “Idéal à mettre à la portée de nos combattants,” p.4; ANQM, P104, JOC, Container 216, File, Soldiers (Service). Memorandum of the J.O.C. To the CANADIAN GOVERNMENT in Favour of Demobilized Young Men [n.d.]; CYC, Youth, Marriage, and the Family, 43.


93 La Presse, 6 février 1946, “Accusé d’avoir tenté d’assassiner son père;” p.3.


transferred their allegiances and allowances from mothers to wives, mothers not only felt displaced, but suffered tangible consequences. Social service agencies noted the financial hardship caused to mothers by this switch, and by the fact that allowances to mothers were less than those to wives. Widowed mothers, in particular, often relied on their allowances to cover the costs of medical care. Conflict was aggravated in situations where new brides were living with their in-laws. Housing shortages, the increased cost-of-living, fixed incomes, and perceptions of respectable living arrangements meant that families often doubled up, particularly while soldier-husbands were overseas. The General Secretary of Montreal's YWCA observed that in such situations, "Disagreements often start regarding allowances, discipline of children, etc., between the mothers-in-law and wives, both of whom may be the official responsibility of the enlisted men." The heroine of an advertisement for Castoria, a young mother living with her mother-in-law while her soldier-husband was overseas, presumably spoke to a receptive audience when she complained "J'ai un emploi de guerre... et des ennuis avec belle-maman." Unfaithful spouses, unhappy war brides, unfamiliar children, and neglected parents were some of the darker elements of the postwar romance. As poststructuralist scholars argue, the telling of any story involves the suppression of other stories that might be told just as well; every narrative is built on omissions and exclusions. The silences in the romance of reunion are important. Most obviously, this was a resolutely heterosexual narrative. Despite, or perhaps because of, the military bureaucracy's exposure to homosexual relationships between armed forces personnel during the war, such relationships received no sanction in the dominant discourse of postwar reunion. Furthermore, sexual relation-

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98 "I have a war job... and troubles with Mother-in-law." La Presse, 7 avril 1945, p.15.

99 For a well-known statement of this position, see Joan Wallach Scott, Gender and the Politics of History (New York, 1988).

ships were privileged over others. More soldiers had parents than had wives, for instance, but it was the reunion of the male soldier and his female companion that attracted the most public attention.

Moreover, such was the commitment of the narrative to heterosexuality and to "traditional" gender roles that female veterans fit uneasily into the conventional story. The returning military hero was depicted as male; women's role was to wait loyally at home. The Canadian public was assured that women veterans, like their male counterparts, were eagerly anticipating establishing homes and families of their own. As historian, Ruth Pierson, has shown, servicewomen's marriages to servicemen were given extensive publicity. But it was difficult to reconcile the female veterans' wartime mobility, military experience, and (albeit limited) degree of sexual freedom with the romance of reunion. Certainly those unmarried servicewomen discharged for pregnancy played little part in postwar romances.

Narratives of reunion were also problematic given the anti-conscription, and sometimes antiwar, sentiment in Quebec. Indeed, the homecoming narratives coexisted uneasily with counter-narratives, such as those recorded by Pierre Vallières, of French-Canadian men "hidden in the woods, armed with their rifles," who had "mobilized their wives and children to organize resistance to the military police." In this case, the North American military hero met his match in the French-Canadian antihero resisting the coercive power of the state and British imperialism. The reunion tales also tended to elide questions of class: the differing experiences of officers and rank-and-file servicemen, or the particular difficulties of working-class family economies. The romance of reunion was produced and narrated in Quebec, as it was elsewhere on the continent. But given the dynamic of French-English relations and the political economy of enlistment within the province, it also met with greater challenges than elsewhere.

This examination of "domestic demobilization" blends social and military history in an attempt to bridge the gap between accounts of Canadians in wartime and histories of families in Canada in the 1950s. The romance of postwar reunion had a certain timeless quality, harking back to a mythical golden age of Ulysses and Penelope, and was no doubt told in the wake of other military conflicts such as the First World War, a generation earlier. Indeed, the strength of the narrative can be attributed partly to its familiarity. But the length of the war, Canadians' "total war" effort, the extent to which women had taken

101 Pierson, 'They're Still Women,' 159-61, 184.
103 Pierre Vallières, White Niggers of America
on “men’s jobs,” the homosocial nature of life for many Canadians in wartime, and the legacy of the Depression, ensured that these heterosexual reunion narratives had a particular resonance in the late 1940s. Veterans faced other difficulties upon their return: securing employment, for instance, or finding a home despite Montreal’s severe postwar housing shortage. Family strains were especially deeply felt, however, given that Canadian soldiers, like those pledging allegiance to other nations, had been encouraged to fight to preserve Home and Family, and given that the postwar years witnessed an intense pressure to rebuild households disrupted by war. Widespread evidence of troubled marriages and of women’s sexual autonomy was, in part, what lay behind the push for conjugal domesticity in the postwar period. Many of the seemingly tranquil nuclear families of the 1950s clearly had unsettled histories.