

'BIRTH OF A NATION,' LIFE OF A NARRATIVE: STEPS TO A
CRITICAL REMEMBRANCE OF CANADA'S 'GREAT WAR'

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The paper introduces the concepts of repressive and critical remembrance to illuminate contrasting approaches to Canada's Great War. Repressive remembrance is defined as the orchestration of commemoration to entrench a simplistic, authorized version of inherently complex events. "Critical remembrance" is defined as the destabilisation of received historical wisdom, in this case a denationalization of commemoration to reflect the human realities of modern total war. The myth of Canada's birth in Flanders Fields is treated as a case of repressive remembrance, and three examples given of the distortive effect of the narrative in current commemoration projects. The myth is then subjected to critical cross-examination by the works of art and literary witness collected in the 1977 anthology *A Terrible Beauty: the Art of Canada at War*. The paper concludes by identifying the aesthetic dimension—a fidelity to unmanageably complex truth—as an indispensable component of critical remembrance.

"We Canadians here today are a long way from home. But there may be no place on earth that makes us feel more Canadian. Because we sense, all around us, the presence of our ancestors."

—Then Prime Minister Stephen Harper, Vimy National Memorial

"Every man I have spoken to – German, French, English, Canuck – are sick to death of it... None of us are heroes. To read of 'Our Splendid Canadians' makes us ill."

—Stretcher-Bearer, Western Front

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INTRODUCTION: LISTENING TO THE DEAD

As Allied troops on the Western Front prepared for a war-winning offensive at the Somme in summer 1916, Will Bird, a twenty-five-year recruit in the 193rd Battalion, Nova Scotia Highlanders Brigade, was completing basic training at Camp Aldershot. Bird had joined against the advice of his elder brother Steve, killed in action in France the year before, who warned him “army life was far from ideal,” not least because “all the Army brass were incredibly stupid.”¹ Just how stupid, Bird learnt when he was first given two contradictory orders—not to drill with the battalion due to special duties with attending an instruction course and not to fulfil special orders but drill with the battalion—and then sentenced to seven days detention for not obeying both. The experience, Bird recalled in his Great War memoir *And We Go On*, “changed me from a soldier proud to be in uniform to one knowing there was no justice whatever in the army.”² As he progressed through six major battles, including Vimy Ridge and Passchendaele, Bird’s dismay only deepened: “We were all,” he lamented, “at the mercy of authority-crazed, overfed, routine-bound staffs, old fogies with a tragic lack of imagination and a criminal ignorance of actual warfare.”³ As for the *point*, the ultimate historical meaning of the suffering inflicted on the men—by the enemy and their own superiors—Bird’s careful choice of “one last story” speaks for itself:

A party of old crocks used as Pioneers was sent to an isolated area in Belgium during the last weeks of the fighting. No newspapers reached them and they knew nothing...until the morning after the signing of the Armistice, when a dapper British officer arrived, fell in the party, adjusted his monocle and read a copy of the all-important cease-fire message in grave and impressive tone. After he had finished there was a heavy silence, then an old Cockney stepped forward and saluted. “Beg pardon, sir,” he said, “but ‘oo’s won?”⁴

For nearly a century, generations of Canadians have been assured that their country won, earned respect, and forged unity in the Great War. Where would we be, who would we be, without the indomitable ancestors whose presence former Prime Minister Stephen Harper felt so strongly at the rededicated National War Memorial at Vimy on 9 April 2007, the ninetieth anniversary of a Canadian “creation story,” a victory so “spectacular” and “stunning” that “everyone immediately understood the enormity of

the achievement.” To make his point, Harper cited the famous reflection of Brigadier General Alexander Ross, one of Will Bird’s Olympian superiors, who remembered watching the assault and seeing “Canada from the Atlantic to the Pacific on parade”: “in those few minutes,” Ross declared, “I witnessed the birth of a nation.”⁵ Ross, though, coined the phrase not in 1917 or 1918, nor at the opening of the Vimy Memorial in 1936, but at age eighty-six in Canada’s centennial year of 1967. The “first reference to the birth of a new nation,” as Jean Martin, a historian with the Directorate of History and Heritage at National Defence Headquarters, points out, was actually made by Cabinet Minister Ernest Lapointe in 1936. Lapointe, however, “did not state that the Canadian nation was born at Vimy. Rather, he suggested that a new nation had already been formed from the marriage of the English and French peoples and that Vimy represented the zenith of its achievements. Such achievements presupposed that Canada had passed through the birth stage long ago.”⁶

Prior to 1967, no grand claim comparable to Ross’s is recorded, though assertions of Canada’s coming of age or maturity—only slightly less offensive to many in Quebec, among First Nations, and elsewhere—were routine. Ever since the Centennial, however, the birth “theme” has become “more and more firmly established with every passing year,” leading, for example, to the designation of 9 April as “Vimy Day” by the federal Liberal Government in 2003. Martin writes

Each time General Ross’s words are repeated, we become a bit more convinced that they actually reflect the general state of mind on the day of the battle. The legend has become a myth, and it has become more and more difficult to question the battle itself.⁷

Martin’s critique exposes the basic fissures in a propaganda edifice now as mighty as the Memorial at Vimy—a site originally chosen as much for logistical as symbolic reasons.⁸

Remarkably—or, as Martin says, “naturally”—“no Francophone was . . . invited” to the Prime Minister’s 2007 Vimy address.⁹ The irony of this exclusion is compounded by the design of the memorial itself, prominently featuring “twin spires of flawless Adriatic marble, each 226 feet high, symbols of Canada’s two founding races”¹⁰ The deeper irony, leaving aside the offensiveness of the concept of ‘founding races’ to Canada’s Indigenous population, is that a large majority of Quebec citizens were opposed to the

war being either fought or commemorated in their name.

"It is sometimes said," the Prime Minister told his carefully selected audience, "that the dead speak to the living,"

so at this special place, on this special day, let us, together, listen to the final prayer of those whose sacrifice we are honouring today. We may hear them say softly: I love my family, I love my comrades, I love my country, and I will defend their freedom to the end.¹¹

This paper both accepts and seeks to problematize the task the Prime Minister presents: listening to, rather than speaking for, the dead of a conflict continuing to shape us, consciously and subliminally, so profoundly. Doing so, we believe, will draw out the contradictory nature of the orders given by the Canadian state to its citizens with regard to the momentous task of Great War remembrance: the imperative, for example, to embrace the war at once as a tragedy and triumph, a bloodbath and a birth; to see it as a fight for two diametric opposites, freedom and Empire; to equate the nightmarish, mechanized routines of trench warfare—"a story," as Noah Richler says, "of disgraceful, senseless industrial murder"—with irreducibly human values, a tale of heroic "resourcefulness . . . in which living Canadians are able to take pride."¹²

To assume that remembering the war will make you proud, of course, is to guarantee that what and how you will remember—what you will hear the dead softly say—will confirm your opinion, prove that the bedrock of the nation you love is, indeed, the mud and blood of France and Flanders.

The use of such warrior rhetoric deploys what we term repressive remembrance—forsaking historical depth-perspective to paint a shallow picture of events and their significance—to entrench a conformist, triumphalist view of the First World War. Repressive remembrance is more than false consciousness; it acts to elude or ideally erase uncomfortable truths that, if brought into awareness, would serve to indict established society. To succeed, these highly selective, photoshopped memories, propagated by those who seek to shape and frame the contours of societal discourse, must also be received and absorbed—accepted as highly representative—by the general population.

To counter this tendency and subvert the selective, auto-suggestive memory of martial nationalism, a different mode of remembrance, what we term critical remembrance, is required. Critical remembrance can be defined

as the practice of investigating the way historical events are remembered, with a conscious and self-reflexive effort to uncover aspects of the actual experience that have been silenced or misrepresented in an effort to stabilize the contradictions of existing society. We are concerned with three levels of experience: the human realities of modern total war; the cultural reflection and representation of those realities, particularly in the arts; and the evolving cultural experience of remembrance itself. In the case of Canada, our contention is that the human realities of the Great War have been unduly nationalized, leading to a stunted cultural relationship to remembrance directly related to the neglect of artistic expression.

The goal of critical remembrance is to bring to light events, ideas, and struggles replaced in textbooks and much of the media coverage by a seemingly unchallengeable and, in this case, conveniently rousing depiction of the past. Perhaps nowhere is this task more important than in the context of nationalism and the narrative of nation-building, the narrow focus blurring what Jay Winter and Antoine Prost described as "the outlines of a real European or even global history of the war."¹³

Such a confrontation with the authorized narrative can be developed and exercised through a variety of ways but, perhaps most powerfully, through the aesthetic dimension. A deep engagement with the written and visual art of the First World War provides an opportunity to access a viscerally uncompromising version of the inhumanity and senselessness of the historical experience.

"You need to penetrate conventional history," Winter and Prost write, "to get to the Great War."¹⁴ Their immediate reference was to the radical form and content of what was, as late as 1992, "the first international museum of the Great War," the Historial de la Grand Guerre located in Péronne, German headquarters during the slaughter of the Somme. Such an effect, a piercing of the veil of conventional commemoration, is characteristic of the aesthetic dimension in general and certainly of the critical artistic remembrances of the Great War considered below.

RECONSIDERING REMEMBRANCE: WORKING THROUGH THE PAST

An exploration of different modes of remembrance was an important aspect of the investigations of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, an interdisciplinary project of social critique dedicated to exposing the repressive

contradictions, and rescuing the emancipatory potentialities, of modern society. While accepting the Marxist idea that economic development was the central factor in determining social relations, the leading members of the School, notably Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and Walter Benjamin, rejected “all forms of economic reductionism and attempt[ed] to describe the complex set of mediations connecting the economy, social and political institutions, culture, everyday life, and individual consciousness as parts of a reciprocally interacting social system.”¹⁵ The terms repressive remembrance and critical remembrance are ours, not theirs, and there are important differences in the way the Frankfurt School, for all its diversity of perspective, generally approached the subject. Nonetheless, we draw inspiration from the School’s critique of conformist consciousness and its understanding of the paths through which a critical consciousness may be developed.

While “thought as such,” Adorno argued, “is an act of negation, of resistance to that which is forced upon it,”¹⁶ the exercise of such independence in the face of prevailing social norms depended on the cultivated awareness of contradiction, alertness to the presence of other voices, and turbulent histories beneath the placid surface of self-evident truths. Such a stance is particularly appropriate when considering ways in which a distorted version of the past becomes accepted by individuals eager to act “in accord with the spirit of the times.”¹⁷

Having spent the Second World War in exile, Adorno was appalled by the failure of German society to “work through the past” in a meaningful way. He delivered his penetrating indictment in a radio lecture in West Germany in 1959, setting out the dangers of the “empty and cold forgetting” he was witnessing. Far from seriously confronting the past, he argued, the general intention seemed to be to “close the books on the past . . . even remove it from memory.”¹⁸ Indeed, the German public response to the atrocities of the Nazi era was more than an inability or refusal to remember; it was akin to the “destruction of memory.” The importance of Adorno’s critique extends beyond the German experience for, as Adorno himself argued, such destructive “forgetting . . . should be understood more in terms of the general situation of society.”¹⁹

“Essentially,” Adorno maintains, history “is a matter of the way in which the past is made present.”²⁰ No history can be realistically re-presented as a linear, univocal story, a narrative dispensing with breaks, disruptions, false

starts, and countervailing tendencies in order to present, for purposes of social control and conformity, an authorized version of who we are. The "birth of a nation" narrative so central to militarized Canadian national identity is at odds with the contemporaneous presentation of the First World War in letters, memoirs, artwork, and even history textbooks following the conflict.²¹ While sometimes hard to obtain, these accounts have not been banned, burned, or stolen. They do not need to be; so popular has the 'warrior nation' story of Canada become that any challenges simply fail to register with a public primed for, and often revelling in, pro-War conformity. Like Adorno's compatriots, it would seem that Canadians "would prefer to get rid of the obligation of autonomy"²² with relation to understanding their own past.²³

The rebranding of Canada as a "warrior nation," particularly since the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001, is a remarkable instance of the rapidity and ease with which a population can generally come to identify with a reformatted identity. The semi-deification of Canada's First World War soldiers—the relentless equation of our freedom with their sacrifice—has been central to the whole exercise, a flourishing of martial jingoism with deep, pre-9/11 roots displacing the long-established identification of Canada with multilateralism, multiculturalism, and peacekeeping.

As evidence of this process at work, we offer three examples drawn from our own province of Nova Scotia—one academic, one commemorative, one cultural—each demonstrating the deeply embedded nature of the birth of a nation myth now surrounding the presentation of the First World War: the War that made Canada Great.

REPRESSIVE REMEMBRANCE, TAKE ONE: VIMYTHOLOGY

On 7 April 2013, Dr. Mary-Kay MacLeod and Dr. Cheryl Bartlett of Cape Breton University delivered an illustrated lecture: "One Battle – One Victory – One Nation: Vimy Makes Canada."²⁴ The presentation fully subscribes to both the general warrior nation view of the Great War as the furnace in which modern Canada—industrialized, united, powerful, and respected—was born and the specific identification of Vimy as birthplace of that new, splendid entity.

From 1914-1918, we learn, a "rural country goes to war" and "becomes an industrial" one, a claim at once downplaying the existing extent of industrialization, even though the presentation also refers to Cape Breton Island

as “*the* industrial hub of Canada,” and implying that, without the War, Canada would have long remained a land of farmers, hunters, and fishers. Great emphasis is laid on the general level of support from communities “across Canada” for the war effort, and in particular the “contributions” of Cape Breton and settler and aboriginal communities.

In the slides accompanying the presentation, there is no reference to the causes of the conflict, the justification for Canadian involvement, or the actual military, as opposed to propaganda, value of the Vimy assault. Horrific photographs of the battle are shown, suggesting that the extent of the suffering, combined with success in storming the Ridge, vindicate the enterprise and sanctify its memory. “The French,” we learn, “said it was Canada’s Easter Gift to France,” while the *New York Times* enthused “Canada fielded a better army than had Napoleon.” A chronology is then presented, spanning the period from the 1907 Colonial Conference to the 1926 Imperial Conference, during which time Canada’s influence and independence on the world stage steadily grew, mainly because of Vimy. The presentation concludes with a tribute to Commander of Canadian Forces General Sir Arthur Currie, noting that, for reasons unexplored, “for years, the only statue” of the sagacious leader was in “the Mother Country,” where he was apparently a “hero,” while “little recognized at home until 2007 when a statue was placed in Ottawa as part of the Valiants Memorial.”

It is instructive to compare the MacLeod-Bartlett version of Vimy to that of popular historian Pierre Berton, the main purpose of whose classic 1986 study of the battle is to decouple the undoubted bravery and sacrifice of the Canadian forces from the myth of national virility constructed around it. We can honour the former, Berton argues, without buying the latter, forego the myth without forgetting the men. To build his case, he makes a number of salient points, now rarely repeated, about the actual nature of the “glorious victory.” The first relates to Prime Minister Harper’s 2007 evocation of the scene: “If we close our eyes, we can see them, dressed in their olive khaki uniforms . . . emerging from the filthy trenches . . .”²⁵ “They,” of course, are the infantry. At Vimy, Berton writes, “it was the gunners who were the real victors in the battle to seize the ridge,” the artillery “the service that made the capture . . . possible.” Machines don’t make good heroes, but they do kill good soldiers: “There had never been anything like it in history: fifty thousand tons of high explosives raining down on the demoralized and disoriented Prussian and Bavarian troops.”²⁶

The Germans called it "The Week of Suffering," maintained until, on the morning of the assault, "the world exploded" as "the greatest artillery barrage in the history of warfare" began.²⁷ "Indeed," Tim Cook notes, "along the Canadian front, the supporting artillery," much of it British, "represented the greatest concentration of guns per year of front to that point of the war," approximately double the density achieved in the week before the Somme offensive in July 1916. Cook quotes the simple observation of Canadian Sergeant Percy Wilmot: "Nothing human could stand it."²⁸ But where there is "nothing human," where are the heroes? In the wake of the barrage, the troops carved their way, with comparative ease as not much more than three-thousand died, through the shattered remnants of their foe, killing many who tried to surrender. Berton quotes a Major J.R.L. Perry, "a tough Boer War veteran," telling his recruits: "I don't want any *angels* in my battalion . . . I don't want you to take any prisoners! I hope you understand."²⁹ Some of them clearly did, Private W.J. Sheppard for example, quoted by David Campbell: "Fritz lambasted us right till we got right up to him, and they threw their hands up and said, 'Mercy, Comrade,' but I don't think they got much mercy."³⁰ As Cook insists in his landmark 2006 essay on "The Politics of Surrender," "it is time for historians" of the Canadian Expeditionary Force "to return to the harsh nature of war-fighting" in the trenches and acknowledge that the "poor bloody infantryman . . . was as much an executioner as he was a victim;"³¹ official reports from Vimy contain "shocking, but not surprising" descriptions of large-scale shooting and bayoneting of German troops attempting to surrender. One report reads simply that "it was necessary to kill them," referring to dazed and wounded survivors of phosphorous grenade attacks. "The Hague Conventions" of 1899 and 1907, establishing minimal codes of conduct for taking and treating prisoners of war, "were shunted aside in the grim reality."³²

What about the strategic reality and significance of Vimy? Despite the early "newspaper hyperbole" about the success of 9 April, for good reason it was only ever described as a battle—that is, a distinctive, contained, major engagement—in Canada. For the British, it was part of the far greater Battle of Arras, the capture representing, in Berton's candid assessment, "at best, a limited tactical victory." "Canadians," he adds, "made much of the fact that the ridge remained as an anchor point to protect the British flanks for the rest of the war. But it's hard to believe it greatly affected the outcome."³³ What did affect the outcome, of course, was the entry of the Americans in

combination with the drastic deterioration in the standards, health, and morale of German troops.

A further aspect of the birth myth is that Vimy was the first time all four Canadian Divisions fought as an integrated force, albeit as “Byng Boys,” under the command of British General Sir Julian Byng and other crucial “British elements of the force that fought in the battle” but were subsequently “airbrushed out of popular memory.”³⁴ What happened to those troops, who were never to fight together again, afterwards? As we consider below, eighteen months later their reward was carrying out the indefensible orders of British Expeditionary Force Commander Sir Douglas Haig at Passchendaele, where so many survivors of Vimy perished. In the famed “Last Hundred Days,” the Canadian Corps’ supposedly glorious string of victories under General Currie suggested, to many of the troops, far too high a price for any semi-independence. Of Canada’s 62,820 Great War fatalities, over two thirds—44,887—occurred from August–November 1918. In Propaganda and Censorship during Canada’s Great War, Jeffrey Keshen quotes the diary of Private Albert West (1880–1923) of Winnipeg’s forty third Battalion: “We hear he [Currie] has said that he will have Cambrai tho’ he will lose 75% of his corps. If so he is a fool and a murderer.”³⁵ Such sentiment, and such realities as Keshen notes, were almost unknown in a homeland daily spoon-fed “tremendous tale of victory and heroism”: “Among most Canadian civilians in November 1918, romantic imagery about the Great War and the role played by Johnny Canuck still swirled, thus making for many a traumatic reunion with those who left what was essentially an ideological cocoon.”³⁶ Johnny Canuck’s finest hour was Vimy Ridge.

The same month as the MacLeod-Bartlett presentation, Scott Taylor, Canadian army veteran and editor of *Esprit de Corps* magazine, described the “birth of a nation” narrative attached to Vimy as “purely fictional hyperbole:”

Vimy Ridge may have been a key German position, but its capture did not lead to any significant strategic breakthrough for the Allies. The static, bloody stalemate on the Western Front continued for another 19 months, before the American entry into the war (also in April 1917) finally tipped the balance for the Allies. While General Currie may have had tactical command at Vimy Ridge, he still answered to the British Imperial General Staff.³⁷

Many contributors to the landmark 2007 collection *Vimy Ridge: A Canadian Reassessment* suggest that Taylor is fully justified in this critique. Gary Sheffield, for example, finds it

difficult to avoid the conclusion that if Vimy Ridge had been captured by a British or French formation instead of the Canadian Corps, this action would not enjoy its current celebrity. While the Canadian Corps undoubtedly achieved a fine feat of arms on 9 April 1917, "Vimy Ridge" resonates largely because of its role in the growth of Canadian nationalism.

Due to this centennial propagandistic framing, there is "a failure to understand the Imperial nature of the force that captured Vimy Ridge; the importance of the Canadian Corps' capture of Vimy Ridge has been exaggerated; and the significance of the wider Battle of Arras has been underrated."³⁸ Likewise, Patrick Brennan³⁹ laments the "nationalist agenda of Canadian military history" which has no use for the critical British contributions to the engagement, while Michael Boire documents how, contrary to the storybook authorized version, "French blood and bravery were fundamental ingredients of the Canadian success at Vimy Ridge."⁴⁰ Most intriguingly, Andrew Godefroy notes that

Vimy Ridge was by no means perceived as a defeat for the German Army at the time, but simply a draw, and perhaps even considered a victory given the German defensive posture adopted in the Western Front in 1917. After all, no massive breakthrough followed this attack and perhaps to the German Army the loss of a few kilometres of vital ground meant little in the grand scheme of things. How different the perception was for the Canadian Corps⁴¹

As an alternative source of national pride, Taylor selected Prime Minister Mackenzie King's 1922 refusal of a British request for troops to intervene on behalf of Greece against Turkish forces: exactly the kind of imperial geopolitical game the European Empires played in the buildup to the cataclysm of just eight years before. King's refusal may have been shaped by the experience of Vimy but in a direction leading away from its repetition. "Personally," Taylor concludes, "I would like to think that Canada's political decision not to go to war in 1922 outweighs our army's successful capture of a single German strongpoint."⁴²

To share Taylor's preference is, however, to relinquish what Mark

Osborne Humphries aptly calls the “spiritually satisfying,” if factually “problematic,” interpretation of Vimy, drawing from the oversimplified premise “that the Canadian Corps began to come into its own” and the dramatic conclusion that “Canada’s national identity was born” there.⁴³ As Jonathan Vance concludes, such giddy ahistoricism not only can but must “be told as a stirring narrative,” “one whose religious, political and nationalist meaning superseded the mere historical details.”⁴⁴

Resorting to “mere historical details,” as Paul Dickson points out, “on the eve of the assault against Vimy Ridge, first generation British immigrants were still in the majority of the Canadian Corps,” while, at the introduction of conscription in October 1917, 49.2% of the CEF was British-born, with 44.3% of the Canadian-born troops still identifying primarily with the imperial homeland and cause.⁴⁵ In the 1920s, as Vance notes, “interest in Empire Day waned, a casualty of growing Canadian nationalism”⁴⁶ steeped in an interpretation of the war studiously ignoring the actual affiliations, sympathies, and prejudices of the national heroes themselves.

REPRESSIVE REMEMBRANCE, TAKE TWO: COMMEMORATIVE GIGANTISM

On 27 August 2013, the federal government announced its support for the construction of a “Never Forgotten National Memorial” at Green Cove, an ecologically sensitive and geologically significant site in the heart of the Cape Breton Highlands National Park.⁴⁷ The brainchild of Toronto businessman Tony Trigiani, president of Norstar Corporation, the project was indeed monumental in scope, dominated by a towering embodiment of warrior nation one-dimensionality: a 24-metre (79 feet) tall Mother Canada statue inflating and repositioning the “Canada Bereft” figure solemnising the Vimy Memorial. Where “Canada Bereft” stands head bowed, cradling her lost children, Mother Canada, looking across the Atlantic to France, will stand head high and “arms open in a ready embrace”⁴⁸ welcoming the war dead, heroes all, home at last. The statue, journalist Jane Taber wrote, was “meant to humble spectators” and it was “just the start.”

Mr. Trigiani is planning to place a “We See Thee Rise” Observation Deck in front of the Mother Canada statue, and behind it “The Commemorative Ring of True Patriot Love” . . . He’s also planning a “With Glowing Hearts” National Sanctuary, as well as a restaurant, souvenir shop and interpretive centre.⁴⁹

The August 2013 announcement threw the support and resources of Parks Canada and Canadian Heritage behind the efforts of the "Never Forgotten National Memorial Foundation" (NFNM) to raise private funds—an estimated twenty to thirty million—in time for a grand opening on Canada Day 2017, the 150th anniversary of Confederation and, by patriotically happy coincidence, centenary of Vimy. The Mother Canada complex, then Justice Minister Peter MacKay enthused, would "give Canadians a steadfast symbol . . . to honour the unsurpassed bravery in the name of freedom of liberty that Canadian soldiers displayed." The Environment Minister Leona Aglukkaq, responsible for Parks Canada, praised the desire of the NFNM Foundation to "rally their fellow citizens to remember the tens of thousands of young Canadians who gave their lives in many countries to make possible the cherished freedoms we enjoy today."⁵⁰ While the focus of the initiative is thus broader than Vimy, both its form and content are inseparable from Vimy; Vimy, in turn, is inseparable from the birth of a nation narrative bathing the battle in sanctified light.

With the motto "Come . . . Be Humbled," the NFNM Foundation website⁵¹ takes visitors on a virtual tour, previewing myriad "interactive" features ushering "an exciting new era of commemoration, one allowing Canadians to honour and respect Our Fallen in a manner never previously experienced or possibly even imagined." What will be unimaginable on the tour is any critical or questioning relationship to past conflicts: Mother Canada "will stand tall with arms outstretched to embrace each and every one of Our Fallen" not least because they are all, it would seem, "courageous individuals" who willingly sacrificed their lives "in defence of this great nation and its never ending quest for international peace." The fight for the British Empire in World War I, a time when the Mother country for most Dominion troops was certainly not Canada, is blithely equated with the fight against fascism in World War II. Though the memorial seeks to generate a composite, ahistorical Warrior and War, the archetype of Johnny Canuck, the Great War saviour-son who rather cleverly gave birth to his mother, is clearly evident. When the Foundation pledges that the memorial "will be a place for visitors to reach back through the generations and forge a very real connection with this young nation's Fallen Heroes," where does the reaching take us back to if not our "creation story"? The Foundation's foundation is Vimy: mud and blood.

How real, in the Foundation's vision, does "very real" get? There are

four interactive dimensions, all built round a striking premise: the living can interact with the dead, welcome them home, even correspond with them. In the build-up to the scheduled Grand Opening on Canada Day 2017, a 'National Repatriation Day Homecoming Tour' will take place, with "repatriated soil and seawater capsules . . . brought to Ottawa for respectful public viewings before" a final tour of duty, coast to coast, ending with "a closing celebration" in Nova Scotia, a "grand arrival of the capsules in Halifax during the beginning of the last week of May. From there":

the last leg of the Tour will take the capsules to Sydney and Cape Breton Island. On the second Sunday of June, one week before Father's Day, Veterans and Canadian Armed Forces representatives will participate in a ceremony in which the capsules will be laid to rest at the memorial's With Glowing Hearts National Sanctuary at Remembrance Point.

Clearly, the point of such remembrance is to induce a mood at once celebratory and sentimental, fetishizing soil and sea made sacred by ideally bloody contact with Our Heroes. Although Father's Day is explicitly referenced, the central theme of Canada as Motherland is paid due homage with the observance of 'National Recognition and Gratitude Day' on the May Sunday prior to Mother's Day. The Foundation "will host a series of celebratory events to honour the numerous contributions of women on the home front in the Recognition and Gratitude Pavilion." One of the most important contributions made by women in the Great War was, with many exceptions to the rule, their general support for the cause, an enthusiasm sustained by the success of the Johnny Canuck propaganda offensive and the Oceanic and Continental divide between those lies and the far more complex and shocking reality. Ironically, Mother's Day in North America was started by Boston peace activist Julia Ward Howe in 1870 as a protest against the horrors of the Civil War. "Say firmly," Howe urged: "Our husbands shall not come to us, reeking with carnage, for caresses and applause. Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn all that we have been able to teach them of charity, mercy and patience."⁵²

Once the saint-stuff has been safely interred, the problem is to maintain the required intensity of devotion. The Foundation has two solutions, the first a Necklace of Tears, markers "specially manufactured to withstand vandalism and the harsh elements," to be strung "across a proud Canadian landscape" along "the iconic Trans Canada Trail." Each marker would

represent a "member of Our Fallen," "adopted by visitors to the website, free to choose the location of their "tear." "In addition," the Foundation enthuses, "symbolic 'link' stones will be placed between markers to resemble the links of a necklace, uniting each and every member of Our Fallen in a single chain across the places they held so dear." There is more: travellers "exploring the [Trans Canada] Trail will be able to scan these small monuments using a smart device for a full description of the fallen hero being commemorated." The presumption that a "full description" of each of the war dead is possible—that they can all be reduced without violence or offence to capsule-sized thumbnail sketches, all conveying the same set of moving, reassuring messages—may hold the key to the entire project's masterstroke, a quintessence of repressive remembrance: "Letters to Our Fallen." Such letters would be sent not just to them but from them, too.

To be based in homes, schools, clubs and libraries across the country, this program will provide a unique opportunity for young Canadians to actually compose heartfelt letters to Our Fallen. To be delivered directly to the memorial, each and every letter will be respectfully responded to in kind and mailed back by a dedicated volunteer member of the memorial staff.

One of the epigraphs to this paper is a quote from a letter by an anonymous stretcher-bearer on the Western Front. A fuller extract reads:

Every man I have spoken to—German, French, English, Canuck—are sick to death of it . . . And how on earth am I to tell you not to worry and all that; how on earth is a husband (like me) to write to a wife (like you) about his feelings on and before going into the front line of a war like this? None of us are heroes. To read of "Our Splendid Canadians" makes us ill. We are just fed up, longing for the end . . . Our main effort is to think and talk as little of the war as possible.⁵³

As it is quite possible that this man did not survive the conflict and ascended to the heights of the Fallen, it is also quite possible that, if the Foundation's vision had ever materialized, his name would have been chosen by a patriotic high school student; that he would have received a letter, telling him what a Splendid Canadian he was; and that he would have replied, in gratitude and humility, exhibiting a patriotic grace fit to comfort and inspire even a Prime Minister.

Much to the dismay of the project's proponents, including a long list of

Honorary Patrons drawn from business, political, media, and entertainment elites, the federal election sweeping the Liberal party back into power in October 2015 appears to have turned the tide of warrior nation rhetoric and remembrance. On 2 February 2016, Parks Canada announced it “had decided to withdraw from the MOU [with the Foundation] and the project” and would “no longer be working towards the realisation of the memorial.” “As a result,” Parks Canada added unequivocally, “the project will not be moving forward on Parks Canada land” in Cape Breton or elsewhere.⁵⁴

Why was the new government happy to wash its hands of Mother Canada? The official reason was that “too many key elements . . . remain outstanding for the project to be achieved by the planned date of 1 July 2017, including the availability of funds to the Foundation, agreement on the structuring of the funding for construction and maintenance, and a definitive final design plan.”⁵⁵ By the time of the 2015 election, however, the scheme had become a national cause celebre, provoking an overwhelmingly negative response to its indefensible location. Just a few days before Parks Canada’s withdrawal, it was critiqued as an extreme example of what journalist Roy MacGregor called “the Disneyfication of our national parks” in the Harper era.⁵⁶ Green party leader Elizabeth May identified “the rather obvious propaganda efforts”⁵⁷ at the heart of its design, the spectacular failure of its “*haute* patriotic kitsch,” to quote journalist Elizabeth Renzetti, to grasp that “the point” of a genuine memorial should be “not to celebrate, but to question.”⁵⁸

In a region of high unemployment, there was a measure of intense local support for the venture, a faith based largely on unsubstantiated and speculative claims by the Foundation of the number of jobs and visitors to be generated. One letter to *The Cape Breton Post*, however, written early in the saga, gave a sense of the wider public mood and coming furor by describing the statue as a “gaudy and potently outdated icon of a jingoistic military state”: “If it is national park policy to hand over coastal vistas for monuments, then I hope you’ll all join me in promoting my Kickstarter campaign to build a monument to Canada’s indigenous victims of genocide at the apex of the Skyline Trail.”⁵⁹ Although, at the time of writing, the NFNM Foundation continues to urge the government to reconsider its position, Mother Canada seems unlikely to ever work her miracle of welcoming back the war-dead to the bastion of freedom for they supposedly sacrificed themselves, as their letters-from-the-grave would doubtlessly have

confirmed. And not just on the "glorious" heights of Vimy Ridge: even in the darkest depths, and foulest pits, of the Great War.

REPRESSIVE REMEMBRANCE, TAKE THREE: CULTURAL ILLITERACY

On 30 September 2013, the Nova Scotia Adopt-A-Library Literacy Program, a collaboration of the province's nine public library systems and the Royal Canadian Legion, announced it was "giving away 6,000 copies of Norman Leach's award-winning 2008 book *Passchendaele: an Illustrated History*." The stated purpose of this extraordinary gesture is to "promote reading and to tell the story of those who fought for their country."⁶⁰ Donated by the publisher, the books were accompanied by a bookmark, funded by the Nova Scotia government, complete with an illustration of a soldier climbing out of a battlefield, up a staircase of books, toward the light, and toward the title: *Knowledge Wins*. But what knowledge, exactly, is being promoted? The subtitle of the book—*Canada's Triumph and Tragedy on the Fields of Flanders*—is arresting, rendering the unspeakably horrific conditions of Passchendaele, widely acknowledged the worst of the entire conflict, inseparable from the prize apparently gained. One reason the propagandists of "warrior nation" dwell so much on the victory, of sorts, at Vimy is that Passchendaele, costing sixteen thousand Canadian casualties, was no sort of victory at all. The excerpt on the back cover, however, ties the "triumph and tragedy" knot tighter:

Even before it was over, the Battle of Passchendaele had come to epitomize the horrors of WWI—brutal conditions and the senseless slaughter of trench warfare. But by the time it was over, it had also come to epitomize uncommon leadership and extraordinary heroism.

When the Canadians were called to the front line in the fall of 1917, the battle for Flanders had become a stalemate. Repeated assaults by Allied armies had gained nothing while costing tens of thousands of lives. Sixteen days later, the Canadians had accomplished what many had believed to be impossible. They had prevailed—and written a defining chapter of the nation's history with their courage and their blood.⁶¹

For many historians, the "accomplishment" was the definition of disaster, uncommonly stubborn leadership and extraordinary waste, a grim refutation of the theory, propounded, for example, by Gary Sheffield, that

Britain and her allies had “benefited greatly from the experience” gained on the Somme the previous year.⁶² In the terse riposte of Winter and Prost: “Where is the learning curve here? A year after the Battle of the Somme, the British Army repeated the mistakes of frontal assaults on heavily fortified German positions.”⁶³

The final British infantry attacks on the ridge overlooking the village came on 9 and 12 October. As David Stevenson writes in *Cataclysm: The First World War as Political Tragedy*, they were “expensive failures”; “the British barrages failed, for the first time in the campaign, to cut the enemy wire. At this point, all commentators agree, Haig should have stopped. But he insisted on carrying on . . .” Haig wanted something to show for another ruinous offensive, so he lowered the bar and whistled for Johnny Canuck:

In the final phase he limited the objective, in effect, to the ridge. During this phase the Canadian Corps under Sir Arthur Currie took the leading role, and insisted on longer intervals and more thorough bombardments before each attack. In successive bounds on 26 and 30 October and 6 and 10 November the Canadians took Passchendaele but suffered at least 12,000 casualties.

“By this stage,” Stevenson continues,

the battlefield had become the wilderness of brimming shellholes, perilous duckboards, shattered forests, and obliterated villages that were reproduced in photographs and paintings by British war artists to become emblematic of the Western Front as a whole. Even the Somme, Guy Chapman was told when his unit moved up, was by comparison a “picnic.”⁶⁴

What was it like to be one of the picnickers? Will Bird remembers the first roll-call of his company, little larger than a platoon, after the “triumph”:

Captain Arthur was kind to us. He stood and gazed at our pitiful ranks, gazed without speaking, and I saw in his eyes things of which no man speaks – the things that words would kill. We had little drill, but rested and slept and had good food until finally we were more like human beings. But every man who had endured Passchendaele would never be the same again, was more or less a stranger to himself.⁶⁵

When one recalls the horror of the Somme, the scale of the new achievement becomes clearer. Captain Robert Clements recalls the first

contact of the 25th Nova Scotia Battalion with the "shattered remnants" of British forces returning to "the back areas"

On one occasion some men from the 25th met what appeared to be a badly under-strength battalion moving northward along a road. In response to usual "Who are you?" the reply came back "Yorkshire Regiment." To the second question, "What battalion?" the almost unbelievable answer was "seven battalions."

"The word 'zombie,'" Clements notes, "is of more recent origin but it could easily have applied to many of those men that day. ... They simply kept going because they lacked the will to stop. Stopping might mean thinking and that they desperately wanted to avoid as long as possible."⁶⁶

For Leach, however, Passchendaele is "the defining moment in Canada's history,"⁶⁷ a view also expressed in the Foreword by Paul Gross, writer, director, producer, and star of the acclaimed 2007 film *Passchendaele*, widely shown in high schools across the country. Both the film and book unabashedly seek to redefine and reshoot the low point of the war as fundamentally good news, part of the Warrior Gospel of Worthwhile Slaughter. To the tune of Auld Lang Syne, the real Canadian troops of the time would sometimes chant, "We're here because we're here because we're here because we're here . . ."⁶⁸ What Leach and Gross hear, however, is something far more and far too simple: "Because we're here we're heroes." As Gross told the *Toronto Star* in 2008: "Who we are was actually forged in those battlefields." And who were, and are, we? "Ferocious fighters, the most feared of the Allied troops."⁶⁹

The motto of the "Adopt-a-Library Literacy Program" is fighting crime one book at a time. However, given the extremity of the Leach-Gross position, each of the six thousand copies of *Passchendaele* distributed across Nova Scotia is arguably a victory for repressive remembrance, a crime against historical literacy.

RESISTING CONFORMITY: CRITICAL REMEMBRANCE AND THE AESTHETIC DIMENSION

How to counter the obedient conformity—the conscription of consciousness—fostered by such projects of repressive remembrance? In the view of the Frankfurt School, a particularly useful site of resistance resides in the aesthetic dimension.⁷⁰ "Art cannot change the world," Marcuse argued, "but it can contribute to changing the consciousness and drives of the men and

women who could change the world.”⁷¹

Not all art, of course, serves this function. Nevertheless, as we consider below, in the case of much of the Canadian art of the First World War, we confront the contradiction between the realities of the conflict and the narratives masking these truths. “Art,” Marcuse insisted, “subverts the dominant consciousness” and can rightly be called “revolutionary”

if, by virtue of the aesthetic transformation, it represents, in the exemplary fate of individuals, the prevailing unfreedom and the rebelling forces, thus breaking through the mystified (and petrified) social reality and opening the horizon of change (liberation). In this sense, every authentic work of art would be revolutionary, i.e., subversive of perception and understanding, and indictment of the established reality, the appearance of the image of liberation.⁷²

This is very much the spirit of Robert Graves’ poem “In Broken Images,” written shortly after his harrowing time in the trenches. “He is quick,” Graves writes, referring to the type of man unshaken in worldview even by world war, “thinking in clear images; I am slow, thinking in broken images.” But he “becomes dull, trusting to his clear images,” while “I become sharp, mistrusting my broken images.” After the Cataclysm, in other words, words are different: the fragmentary has become fundamental, sharp subversion the only alternative to dull subservience, dutiful obeisance to outmoded clarity and wholeness. By adhering to outworn modes and mores, Graves concludes, “He” ends “in a new confusion of his understanding; I in a new understanding of my confusion.”⁷³

Stephen Harper would perhaps be well cast as the “He” in Graves’ poem, standing at the Vimy Memorial and managing to request and receive a set of the clearest, dullest possible images of heroism, sacrifice, and glory from the souls of tens of thousands of war dead: “We may hear them say softly: ‘I love my family, I love my comrades, I love my country, and I will defend their freedom to the end.’” Another candidate for the role would be the American art critic and collector Duncan Phillips, who wrote in the June 1918 issue of *American Magazine of Art*:

We need the pleasure which the beauty of art can bring to refresh us when we are tired and cheer us when we are dispirited and discouraged . . . We need art in our business of winning the war. We need Art to clarify our understanding of the ever-changing

situations of the conflict. We need art to help us create a single mind out of the many minds which confuse our country.⁷⁴

We need "Art," in short, to help us mend the "broken images" left by the War, magically reassembling the fragments, actually constituting the War's fundamental legacy, back into a familiar, reassuring, cheering whole. Such "Art," the "clear thinkers" hope, will enable us to become what Graves and Marcuse loathed and feared most of both left- and right-wing movements: single-minded again.

THE ARTS OF REMEMBRANCE: BREAKING THE HABIT OF NARRATIVE

In 1929-30, a series of international seismic literary shocks threatened to shatter the trite official narratives of noble sacrifice surrounding the Great War. Three works, in particular, stood out in terms of impact: one German, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, by Erich Maria Remarque; one American, *A Farewell to Arms*, by Ernest Hemingway; and one Canadian, *Generals Die in Bed*, by Charles Yale Harrison, an American-born, Quebec-raised machine-gunner with the Royal Montreal Regiment. Though the American press lauded Harrison's work as an achievement of the highest class, a concerted effort was made in Canada to trash the book and vilify the author. From the perspective of *repressive remembrance*, one can see why; dedicated to "the bewildered youths—British, Australian, Canadian, and German—who were killed in that wood a few miles beyond Amiens on August 8, 1918,"⁷⁵ the work constituted a withering depiction of a criminally callous and incompetent Canadian military command, a culture of vicious depravity unimaginable on the cossetted home front. According to Sir Arthur Currie, Harrison was purveying "a mass of filth, lies and appeals to everything base and mean and nasty," dwelling on the worst of war to the exclusion of the best; "He talks of nothing but immortality, lice, and other not only disgusting but untrue things."⁷⁶ The real danger of Harrison's book, though, lay not in its focus on the grim and sordid but in its puncturing of the self-inflated image of Canadian leadership and soldiership. For while Currie, in Harrison's view, had a vast amount of Canadian as well as German blood on his hands, he makes no attempt to sanctify or sanitize the job of carrying out the godlike orders from above. In a passage that doubtless particularly repelled Currie, the narrator spends a week's leave in London in the company of a prostitute, confessing at one point:

"I am a criminal. Did I ever tell you that I committed murder?"

She looks up with a jerk. Her eyes look at me with suspicion.

"It was some time ago. I came into a place where an enemy of mine was and I stabbed him and ran off," I explain.

Her eyes are wide open. She is horrified. She does not speak.

I laugh and relate that the murder took place in a trench and that my enemy wore a pot-shaped helmet.

Her faces glows with a smile.

"You silly boy. I thought you had really murdered someone."⁷⁷

In Harrison's depiction, Canadian soldiers were not only dutiful killers. They were also, under tacit direction, notoriously merciless, sadistic, and unprincipled ones, including with men surrendering or taken prisoner. The claim is repeated in numerous German accounts as well as Robert Graves' 1929 memoir *Goodbye to All That*, in which a Canadian soldier is quoted as boasting "Bang, bang, bang! No more bloody prisoners. No good Fritzes but dead 'uns."⁷⁸ More generally, Graves writes that the "troops with the worst reputation for acts of violence against prisoners were the Canadians (and later the Australians)," and that "most overseas men, and some British troops made atrocities against prisoners a boast, not a confession."⁷⁹

This openness, as Cook details, was scrupulously scrubbed from a "war book for the masses" compiled from soldiers' accounts published by the Canadian government in 1916. The phrase belongs to Canada's arch-propagandist Sir Max Aitken, later Lord Beaverbrook, who packed the book with "stories emphasizing an ability to endure or display coolness under fire," and so "glorify Canadian deeds."⁸⁰ Cook argues that such denial has proven remarkably long-lived and culturally tenacious. In the 1960s, for example, none of the numerous accounts by CEF veterans of "the execution of German prisoners" recorded by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation were featured in the popular, 17-hour radio series *Flanders' Fields*.⁸¹

The Canadian reputation for atrocity is the unspoken—and, as we have seen, the officially unspeakable—subtext of Lloyd George's oft-quoted comment, made in reference to the Somme, that "the Canadians played a part of such distinction that henceforward they were marked out as storm troops . . . Whenever the Germans found the Canadian Corps coming into the line, they prepared for the worst"⁸²—and speaking it was the principal

crime-against-mythology of which Harrison was convicted by Currie and many others.

Harrison's novel features prominently in Heather Robertson's landmark 1977 anthology, *A Terrible Beauty: the Art of Canada at War*, perhaps the high-water mark to date in Canadian critical remembrance of the conflict.⁸³ The book was published to accompany an exhibition of paintings, drawings, and writing which toured Canada—Ontario, Quebec, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, British Columbia, Alberta, and Manitoba—from November 1977 to February 1980. Though it features poetry, fiction, and prose, the aesthetic heart of both book and exhibition are the works of war art housed at the Canadian War Museum and The National Gallery of Canada. A "great collection," Robertson writes, "ignored and neglected, almost censored" for decades. Could this be explained in part by the very quality—atmospheric, rather than technical—of much of the work, its dangerous visual critique of the prevalent narrative? "The Canadian paintings," Robertson concludes her Introduction, bluntly entitled "The Killing Ground"

are exceptionally quiet, understated, still, frozen in a kind of enchanted sleep. They have a great clarity and precision of detail, costume and light, the acute, heightened perception of a visit to a magic, macabre planet. Their mood is not one of swagger or hate or frenzy, but rather of peace, compassion and love, a mood which perfectly expresses the eternal tragedy of war.⁸⁴

We suggest that such art provides what Adorno refers to as the "counterimage of enchained forces"⁸⁵ or what his colleague Herbert Marcuse called "a counter-consciousness," inducing a "negation of the realistic-conformist mind."⁸⁶ Thurston Topham's spectral *Moonrise over Mametz Wood*, revealing *Earth* as a dead, distant planet, or his *Guns, Dust and Moonlight*, reducing men to incidental detail, shrouded by their own "progress,"; H.J. Mowat's *Trench Fight*, its pencil medium caricaturing black and white accounts of battle, or his *Stretcher Bearers*, where tenderness acquires more meaning, in a moment, than "manliness" ever can; F.H. Varley's *The Sunken Road*, with an ironic rainbow after a manmade storm—in these paintings, for examples, we find ourselves in the presence of different ancestors to Harper's heroes. We witness a trauma deeper and truer than any narrative and experience what Adorno called "the shock aroused" by all "important works" of art, producing "the movement in which recipients forget themselves and disappear," the "movement of being shaken" out of single-vision: "The recipients

lose their footing; the possibility of truth, embodied in the aesthetic image, becomes tangible.”⁸⁷

A *Terrible Beauty* appeared just ten years after the “birth of a nation” myth in 1967. The phrase is not cited and, though Robertson writes that “the nation we live in today was created at midnight, 4 August 1914,” the *creation myth* of a crisis uniting all Canadians is summarily dismissed, both in her own words—“War created a chasm between Quebec and the rest of Canada, a wound which has never healed”⁸⁸—and historian Desmond Morton’s—“If war is one of those shared experiences which transform a people into a nation, Canada indeed became a country of two nations.”⁸⁹ Robertson suggests that Anglo-Canada was duped too: “Raised on the romance of Walter Scott and Tennyson and the imperialism of Kipling, the young troops were filled with martial enthusiasm; they soon discovered, when they arrived in Belgium in the spring of 1915, that they were, in fact, cannon fodder.”⁹⁰ By 1917, Robertson adds, soldier and war artist A.Y. Jackson “summed up . . . the mood of the country” when he wrote: “The hero’s job is a pretty thankless one. There are lots of institutions and big fatheads in this country not worth laying down one’s life to preserve.”⁹¹ The flag-waving “fatheads,” however, always need and love their “heroes,” lapping up war art in the clichéd, valiant vein of Richard Jack’s *The Second Battle of Ypres*, about which Maria Tippett, in her classic, recently re-issued study *Art at the Service of War*, wrote: “The scale of Jack’s picture, some twelve feet by twenty, was as heroic as the saving of the salient itself. But the approach was unimaginative in the extreme. In order to glorify the Canadian troops Jack employed every hackneyed nineteenth-century battle art convention . . .”⁹² In *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning, and the First World War*, Jonathan Vance places such art, of which *The Second Battle of Ypres* is only the most notorious example, in the broader context of efforts led by Sir Max Aitken to establish an internalized, unbreakable image not so much of a Great as a Grand Old War:

By lumping the experience of the Western Front with every battle the British Empire had ever fought, the First World War was firmly placed in a Victorian context. Gallipoli, the Somme, and Passchendaele could take their places alongside the Charge of the Light Brigade, the relief of Batoche, and the Battle of Paardeberg. The same adjectives and superlatives were applicable, for in Canada’s memory the Great War belonged more to the

nineteenth century than to the twentieth.⁹³

The Canadian war artist Eric Kennington falls somewhere between Jack and Jackson. His harrowing painting *Mustard Gas* puts a face on the real suffering of the front simply by covering or bandaging the face of its stricken subject. However, *The Conquerors* shows an indomitable, almost Stalinist "breed of manly men," which was the nickname of the Nova Scotia Overseas Highland Brigade, striding in regimental, kilted regalia through a blighted, blasted, Daliesque deathscape: the realistic nineteenth-century making great strides into a surrealist Future. Ironically, at least in *The Conquerors*, in his determination to preserve the individuality of the men he met, Kennington partially created a kind of nationalist superman wildly at odds with the grim, often subhuman realities they endured. As Tippett observes:

While Kennington made it his business to "pursue heroes," Jackson insisted "we have no heroes." Sitting on the line as a private in the spring of 1916, he did not "feel heroic in the least." "We don't know nothing," he wrote to J.E.H. MacDonald, "except what we see in the newspapers, and we know that's not true."⁹⁴

Beaverbrook's propaganda blitz had some unintended consequences. "Cabling from the United States where he was setting up the British War Mission," Tippett writes, the British media magnate Lord Northcliffe "complained that 'the boosting of the Canadians' was not only affecting American opinion but discouraging recruitment in Canada; the Canadians, he claimed, felt 'their young men are being sacrificed and the British troops are being spared.'"⁹⁵ Overall, though, Beaverbrook's gamble paid off; half action-man, half Christ, the popularity of his greatest fictional creation, Johnny Canuck, allowed for the construction of what Keshen calls a "fire-proof house" of censorship and propaganda. It is a clear, indeed dazzling, image enduring "to this day," where "alongside" the real "world of dirt and death" stand "sacred names such as Ypres and Vimy Ridge," invoking "romanticized images of heroic warriors whose unparalleled exploits almost single-handedly transformed Canada from colony to nation."⁹⁶

Not everyone, of course, can see the triumph in the tragedy or hear the victory cry of the Conqueror in the death cry of the man. In her Afterword to *We Wasn't Pals*, a 2001 anthology of Canadian WW1 poetry and prose, Margaret Atwood writes of the false post-Armistice normality that prevails in the Canadian social psyche. Although "we have other things to think

about, we have lives to get on with,” although “in the spring regatta the young men *row on, row on*, as if nothing has happened since 1913,” “below all that there’s another sound, a ground swell, a drone, you can’t rid of”:

It’s the guns, which have never stopped, just moved around. It’s the guns, still firing monotonously, bored with themselves but deadly, deadlier, deadliest, it’s the guns, an undertone beneath each ordinary tender conversation. Say pass the sugar and you hear the guns. Say I love you. Put your ear against skin: below thought, below memory, below everything, the guns.⁹⁷

Her statement subverts itself, allowing the subterranean “undertone” to surface. Recalling the Prime Minister’s 2007 Vimy speech, a more dramatic illustration of the chasm between repressive and critical remembrance can hardly be imagined; where Harper claims to be able to listen to the dead, Atwood is unable to stop hearing the killing.

CONCLUSION

This paper has presented a candidate framework—critical versus repressive remembrance—for assessing what is truly worth remembering about Canada’s Great War and, conversely, for exposing those “things,” like the extravagant “birth of a nation” claim, which represent a false consciousness of the nation’s deepest trauma. In her study of conscientious objectors (COs) in Canada in 1917-18, Amy Shaw writes that, in “failing to behave like other men . . . COs were not simply being cowardly or lazy: they were privileging an individual, contemplative response over one of group loyalty and action” —the very “crime” against normality of which the creative artist, as celebrated by Adorno and Marcuse, was guilty. “This,” Shaw continues, and “*the encouragement of conformity that wartime promotes*, amplified the Canadian public’s suspicion of those determined to assert an individual voice, the stubborn conscientious objector among them.”⁹⁸ To paraphrase Chesterton, the goal of the “ordinary,” obedient citizen is “to conform to the definition of conformity”. We suggest that the principal objective of repressive remembrance is to reproduce in peacetime—or to the drumbeat of lesser wars like Afghanistan—the permanently conformist atmosphere invariably accompanying major conflict. Conversely, then, the goal of critical remembrance is to conscientiously object to, and attempt to break the spell of, this narrative-hypnosis: to hear the guns but not the speeches.

Berton’s account of Vimy was published in 1986, a time, he wrote,

when "Vimy fever has cooled" and "a new generation sees the Great War for what it was." "Was it worth it?" he asks:

There was a time, less cynical, more ingenuous, when most Canadians were led to believe that the answer was *yes*. Nations must justify mass killings, if only to support the feelings of the bereaved and the sanity of the survivors. In Canada, long after the original excuses were found wanting – the Great War, after all, was clearly *not* a war to end wars – a second justification lingered on. Because of Vimy, we told ourselves, Canada came of age; because of Vimy, our country found its manhood.⁹⁹

It is interesting that Berton, an unabashed patriot, cannot bring himself to number the "birth of a nation" fantasy among those things we tell ourselves about the War; yet, in the eighteen years since his book appeared, and particularly in the fevered, hyper-conformist post-9/11 opening to the 21st Century, it is that narrative above all which has emerged as the fable-of-choice, the indispensable narcotic, of repressive remembrance.

Vimy ends with a conversation between a "forty-five-year-old Canadian and the eighty-two-year-old German who had been his father's enemy, both members of a clan that had sent out one of its branches to help found the town of Lunenburg, Nova Scotia, more than two centuries before." "Neither" man

had any stomach for the kind of war that had seen the Rehffuss descendants pitted against each other. It was, they agreed, "a terrible waste of human life brought on by greedy people and tolerated for too long by silent majorities."

Was it worth it? The answer, of course, is *no*.¹⁰⁰

The "truly dreadful secret" repressive remembrance seeks to keep hidden this intolerably brutal, monstrously squalid, criminal enterprise.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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2. Bird, *Ghosts Have Warm Hands*, 2.
3. Will Bird, in Heather Robertson, *A Terrible Beauty: The Art of Canada at War* (Toronto: James Lorimer and Company, 1977), 81.
4. Bird, *Ghosts Have Warm Hands*, 175.
5. Ross quoted by Stephen Harper, "Prime Minister Commemorates the 90th Anniversary of the Battle of Vimy Ridge," 9 April 2007, www.pm.gc.ca/eng/news/2007/04/09/prime-minister-stephen-harper-commemorates-90th-anniversary-battle-vimy-ridge.
6. Jean Martin, "Vimy, April 1917: The Birth of Which Nation?" *Canadian Military Journal* 11, no. 2 (2011): 36.
7. Martin, "Vimy, April 1917," 36-7.
8. See Martin, "Vimy, April 1917, 34-5. As Martin notes, however, for one very prominent Canadian, Prime Minister Mackenzie King, Vimy, "one of earth's altars," (35) was the clear choice on symbolic grounds.
9. Martin, "Vimy, April 1917," 37.
10. Pierre Berton, *Vimy* (Anchor Canada, 2001 [1986]), 302.
11. Harper, "90th Anniversary of the Battle of Vimy Ridge."
12. Noah Richler, *What We Talk About When We Talk About War* (Fredericton: Goose Lane, 2012), 81.
13. Jay Winter and Antoine Prost, *The Great War in History: Debates and Controversies, 1914 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 193.
14. Winter and Prost, *The Great War in History*, 187.
15. Douglas Kellner, "Introduction: Herbert Marcuse and the Vicissitudes of Critical Theory," in *Towards a Critical Theory of Society: Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse Volume Two*, ed. Douglas Kellner (London: Routledge, 2001), 11.
16. Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 19.
17. Theodor Adorno, "The Meaning of Working Through the Past," in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005 [1959]), 92.

18. Adorno, "The Meaning of Working Through," 89
19. Adorno, "The Meaning of Working Through," 91.
20. Adorno, "The Meaning of Working Through," 100.
21. By way of snapshot, the 1921 Ontario Public School *History of Canada* (Toronto: the Ryerson Press), 350. About Vimy: "...the Canadians fought near Arras, to drive back the Germans from the dominating position of Vimy Ridge, and in April, 1917, in a great combined British movement, the Canadians were so fortunate as to carry the Ridge." Interesting, the *History of Canada*, 351-2, nominates 8 August 1918—the "day the Canadians played an important part in driving back the Germans before Amiens"—as "in some respects, the most memorable date in the war."
22. Adorno, "The Meaning of Working Through," 92. Adorno was discussing what he considered to be the "effacement of memory" in post-WWII Germany and his arguments deal for the most part with the particular example of a "forgetting of what has scarcely transpired." We would nonetheless argue that his insights have great relevance for the current deepening of the myths of national character central to the "warrior nation" rhetoric. For the purposes of this article, we are "inhabiting" Adorno's critique rather than utilizing all its myriad facets. Our critique is inspired by his categories but not limited to them.
23. Adorno, "The Meaning of Working Through," 99.
24. Mary Kay MacLeod and Cheryl Bartlett, "One Battle – One Victory – One Nation: Vimy Makes Canada" (public presentation, Cape Breton University, 2013). PowerPoint slides available at www.integrativescience.ca/News/81. We do not intend the presentation to be regarded as representative of serious contemporary Canadian scholarship on Vimy Ridge, but rather as a striking example of a presentation to the public of what we are terming "Vimythology"—the assault's elevation to national origin myth—as *serious history*. Some notable historians, of course, would agree with much of the gist of the presentation; it is beyond the scope and beside the point of this paper to survey the current state of sentiment in the discipline. For the record, while MacLeod's academic discipline is history, Bartlett's is biology.

25. Harper, "90th Anniversary of the Battle of Vimy Ridge."
26. Berton, *Vimy*, 170, 267, 183.
27. Berton, *Vimy*, 212.
28. Tim Cook, "The Gunners at Vimy," in *Vimy Ridge: A Canadian Reassessment*, ed. Geoffrey Hayes, Andrew Iarocci, and Mike Bechthold (Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2007), 117.
29. Berton, *Vimy*, 287.
30. David Campbell, "The 2nd Canadian Division," in *Vimy Ridge: A Canadian Reassessment*, ed. Geoffrey Hayes, Andrew Iarocci, and Mike Bechthold (Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2007), 182.
31. Tim Cook, "The Politics of Surrender: Canadian Soldiers and the Killing of Prisoners in the Great War," *The Journal of Military History* 70, no. 3 (2006): 665. The above-cited 2007 collection *Vimy Ridge: A Canadian Reassessment*, to which Cook contributed, is a good example of the kind of "new history" he advocates. Politically, of course, it was just at this time that the federal government was veering in the opposite, uncritically nationalistic, hero-worshipping direction.
32. Cook, "The Politics of Surrender," 643.
33. Berton, *Vimy*, 293, 296.
34. Gary Sheffield, "Vimy Ridge and the Battle of Arras: A British Perspective," in *Vimy Ridge: A Canadian Reassessment*, ed. Geoffrey Hayes, Andrew Iarocci, and Mike Bechthold (Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2007), 27.
35. Jeffrey A. Keshen, *Propaganda and Censorship During Canada's Great War* (Edmonton, AB: University of Alberta Press, 1996), 174.
36. Keshen, *Propaganda and Censorship*, 125.
37. Scott Taylor, "Vimy Ridge, Chanak Crisis and Nation Building," *Halifax Chronicle Herald*, 16 April 2013.
38. Sheffield, "Vimy Ridge and the Battle of Arras," 17.
39. Patrick Brennan, "Julian Byng and Leadership in the Canadian Corps," in *Vimy Ridge: A Canadian Reassessment*, ed. Geoffrey Hayes,

Andrew Iarocci, and Mike Bechthold (Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2007), 95.

40. Michael Boire, "Vimy Ridge: The Battlefield Before the Canadians, 1914-1916," in *Vimy Ridge: A Canadian Reassessment*, ed. Geoffrey Hayes, Andrew Iarocci, and Mike Bechthold (Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2007), 60.
41. Andrew Godefroy, "The German Army at Vimy Ridge," in *Vimy Ridge: A Canadian Reassessment*, ed. Geoffrey Hayes, Andrew Iarocci, and Mike Bechthold (Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2007), 234.
42. Taylor, "Vimy Ridge, Chanak Crisis and Nation Building."
43. Mark Osborne Humphries, "'Old Wine in New Bottles': A Comparison of British and Canadian Preparations for the Battle of Arras," in *Vimy Ridge: A Canadian Reassessment*, ed. Geoffrey Hayes, Andrew Iarocci, and Mike Bechthold (Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2007), 66.
44. Jonathan Vance, "Battle Verse: Poetry and nationalism After Vimy Ridge," in *Vimy Ridge: A Canadian Reassessment*, ed. Geoffrey Hayes, Andrew Iarocci, and Mike Bechthold (Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2007), 268.
45. Paul Dickson, "The End of the Beginning: The Canadian Corps in 1917," in *Vimy Ridge: A Canadian Reassessment*, ed. Geoffrey Hayes, Andrew Iarocci, and Mike Bechthold (Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2007), 33.
46. Jonathan F. Vance, *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning, and the First World War* (Vancouver, BC: UBC Press, 1997), 239.
47. In the interests of full disclosure, it should be noted that both authors were active in *Friends of Green Cove*, the main citizens' action group formed to oppose the project.
48. Bruce Champion-Smith, "New Memorial Envisioned to Honour Canada's War Dead," *The Toronto Star* (Toronto, ON), 30 December 2013.
49. Jane Taber, "The Battle Over 'Mother Canada,'" *The Globe and Mail*, 8 March 2014.

50. MacKay and Aglukkaq quoted in "Foundation Presents Vision for Never Forgotten National memorial to Commemorate Canada's war Dead Wherever They may Lie," *Parks Canada News Release*, 27 August 27 2013.
51. *Never Forgotten National Memorial Foundation*, www.nfnm.ca.
52. See "Mother's Day Proclamation: Julia Ward Howe, Boston, 1870," www.peace.ca/mothersdayproclamation.htm.
53. Quoted in Robertson, *A Terrible Beauty*, 78.
54. Daniel Watson, "Never Forgotten National Memorial Media Statement," Chief Executive Officer Parks Canada Agency, Government of Canada, 5 February 2016.
55. Watson, "Never Forgotten National Memorial Media Statement," 5 February 2016.
56. Roy MacGregor, "The Disneyfication of our National parks," *The Globe and Mail*, 23 January 2016.
57. Elizabeth May, letter to Sean Howard, 23 September 2015.
58. Elizabeth Renzetti, "Mother Canada in Cape Breton – So Many Questions, So Little Restraint," *The Globe and Mail*, 15 March 2014.
59. Donald Calabrese, "Green Cove No Place for Monstrous Cenotaph," *The Cape Breton Post*, January 31, 2014.
60. Adopt-a-Library Literacy Program, "Public Libraries & Royal Canadian Legion Work Together for Literacy This Remembrance Day," Press Release, 30 September 2013.
61. Norman Leach, *Passchendaele: An Illustrated History* (Regina, SK: Cocteau Books, 2008), back cover.
62. Gary Sheffield, *The Somme* (London: Cassell Military Paperbacks, 2004), 157.
63. Winter and Prost, *The Great War in History*, 79.
64. David Stevenson, *Catachysm: The First World War as Political Tragedy* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 275.
65. Bird, *Ghosts Have Warm Hands*, 65.
66. Captain Robert N Clements, "Merry Hell: The Story of the 25th

Battalion," ed. Brian Douglas Tennyson (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2013), 125.

67. Leach, *Passchendaele: An Illustrated History*, 47.
68. In Robertson, *Terrible Beauty*, 84.
69. In Richler, *When We Talk About War*, 84-85.
70. The uses of the aesthetic dimension by the various members of the Frankfurt School varied enormously. The scope does not exist to establish the diversity – indeed the oft-times contradictory nature – of these views. For the purposes of this paper, we are drawing on the arguments made about the potential of art to stand in “opposition to society”—Theodore Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 225—and thereby “subvert the dominant consciousness, the ordinary experience” as Marcuse argued. Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Towards a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1977), xi.
71. Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension*, 2-3.
72. Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension*, xi.
73. Robert Graves. *Robert Graves: Poems Selected by Himself* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1972), 57.
74. Phillips quoted in Maria Tippett, *Art at the Service of War: Canada, Art, and the Great War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013 [1984]), 6.
75. Charles Yale Harrison, *Generals Die in Bed* (Richmond Hill, ON: Annick Press, 2012 [1929]).
76. Currie quoted in Ian McKay and Jamie Swift, *Warrior Nation: Rebranding Canada in an Age of Anxiety* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2012), 75.
77. Harrison, *Generals Die in Bed*, 94-5.
78. Robert Graves, *Goodbye To All That*. (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1983 [1929]), 154. Currie dismissed the example as a “yarn” (quoted in McKay & Swift 2012, *Warrior Nation*, 74).
79. Graves, *Goodbye To All That*, 154.

80. Cook, "The Politics of Surrender," 660.
81. Cook, "The Politics of Surrender," 639. Cook states that, out of over 600 interviews, "dozens" contained testimony of executions.
82. Quoted in Richler, *When We Talk About War*, 83.
83. Though outside the scope of this paper, it is interesting to speculate as to why the late 1970s was a time when, to quote Adorno again, the "general situation of society" allowed for the kind of radical revisioning of Canada's Great War represented by the exhibition. By then, certainly, the domestic and international association of Canada with peacekeeping rather than war-fighting had become firmly established. In addition, officially promoted multiculturalism and bilingualism may have seriously diminished the allure of "Johnny Canuck." And the threat of a *third* world war, one allowing no scope for heroism, may have engendered a new mistrust of the meaning and legacy of WW1.
84. Robertson, *Terrible Beauty*, 15. Four of the WW1 artists featured—A.Y. Jackson, F.H. Varley, Arthur Lismer and Franz Johnson—became founding members, in 1920, of the Group of Seven.
85. Theodore Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 226.
86. Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension*, 9.
87. Robertson, *Terrible Beauty*, 244.
88. Robertson, *Terrible Beauty*, 9.
89. Morton quoted in Robertson, *Terrible Beauty*, 11.
90. Robertson, *Terrible Beauty*, 9-10.
91. Quoted in Robertson, *Terrible Beauty*, 10-11.
92. Tippett, *Art at the Service of War*, 26.
93. Vance, *Death So Noble*, 94.
94. Tippett, *Art at the Service of War*, 68.
95. Tippett, *Art at the Service of War*, 21.
96. Keshen, *Propaganda and Censorship*, 125-6.

97. Margaret Atwood, "Afterword," in *We Wasn't Pals: Canadian Poetry and Prose of the First World War*, ed. Barry Callaghan and Bruce Meyer (Toronto: Exile Editions, 2001), 212. Italics in the original, alluding to John McCrae's *In Flanders Fields*.
98. Amy J. Shaw, *Crisis of Conscience: Conscientious Objection in Canada During the First World War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2009), 126.
99. Berton, *Vimy*, 307.
100. Berton, *Vimy*, 308.

