War and Historical Memory

A GOOD FRIEND OF MINE (and a fine historian) told me of his recent experience leading a group of Canadian university students on a battlefield tour of northwest Europe. Among the students' tasks was to "introduce" to the group a Canadian soldier who is buried or commemorated along the tour route. One student had decided to speak about a distant relative who was killed in the battles on the Somme in 1916. The cemetery was found, and the group gathered at the headstone. The student, however, became so upset that he could not speak. He just stood before a faded white stone in a French cemetery and wept.

Such common reactions are one consequence of what historian Jay Winter has called the "memory boom." It is a product of at least a couple of developments: a growth in identity politics (inspired in part from our understanding and commemorations of the Holocaust) and the aging of baby boomers who can afford to go on battlefield tours (or send their children) to satisfy a desire to fit one's family into larger historical events.[1]

For many Canadians, a simple nationalism is also at work. Some are satisfied knowing that Uncle John's name is inscribed on the Vimy memorial, where many believe Canada became a nation. This notion is one of the most enduring Canadian public memories of the First World War. But, as Jonathan Vance argues, such "public discourses" excluded certain groups, such as French Canadians, Native peoples, and immigrants. Carol Acton has recently explored how "publicly prescribed parameters" of remembrance also constrained women's expressions of wartime grief.[2] Even the soldiers were restricted in what experiences they could relate.

The recent popularity of the Dominion Institute's "Memory Project" and the "Canada Remembers" initiative of Veterans Affairs Canada is testament to the strength of the memory boom and the sense that many people – men and women, soldiers and civilians – still seek to share their experiences and their pain. Not everyone's great uncle fought at Vimy Ridge or died heroically on the Western Front. Not everyone's relatives returned home healthy in mind and body. Not everyone's relatives fought overseas or even fought. Yet younger generations still want to understand how traumatic events affected their families long after those events have passed. Like the student in the cemetery, the need to remember and grieve remains.

Grieving takes many forms. Acton notes that one way for a family to remember a soldier whose body was never recovered, or who was buried far from home, was to create a memorial album that preserved a soldier's letters, photographs, and war records.[3] Four recent books take the form of memorial albums, inspired by surviving relatives who wished to tell their family member's unusual and tragic story. James

1 Jay Winter, "The Generation of Memory – Reflections on the Memory Boom in Contemporary Historical Studies," *Canadian Military History* 10, no. 3 (2001): 57-66.

2 Jonathan Vance, *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning and the First World War* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1997), 258; Carol Acton, *Grief in Wartime: Private Pain, Public Discourse* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 5.

3 Acton, *Grief in Wartime*, 23.

Geoffrey Hayes, "War and Historical Memory," *Acadiensis* XXXVII, no. 2 (Summer/Autumn 2008): 140-7.

Robert Johnston's *Riding into War: The Memoir of a Horse Transport Driver, 1916-1919* (Fredericton: Goose Lane Publications/New Brunswick Military Heritage Project, 2004) is a memoir by a veteran who waited nearly 50 years before writing of his First World War experience. Bill Parenteau and Stephen Dutcher's *War on the Home Front: The Farm Diaries of Daniel MacMillan, 1914-1927* (Fredericton: Goose Lane Publications/New Brunswick Military Heritage Project, 2006) is an edited collection of diary entries from a farmer who never left New Brunswick, but who directly experienced the war nonetheless. The final two are edited collections of letters home: Brian Douglas Tennyson's *Percy Willmot: A Cape Bretoner at War* (Sydney: Cape Breton University Press, 2007) deals with the experiences of a soldier during the First World War while *Hurricane Pilot: The Wartime Letters of W.O. Harry L. Gill, D.F.M., 1940-1943* (Fredericton: Goose Lane Publications/New Brunswick Military Heritage Project, 2007) by Brent Wilson (with Barbara J. Gill) relates what happened to a Fredericton teenager who flew Hurricanes in England and India during the Second World War. All of the subjects were from the Maritimes, and though we see in these volumes the importance of their communities there is no reason to think that their experiences were any different than those from other parts of Canada.

James Robert Johnston's memoirs were not written until the mid-1960s when he retired and re-visited the battlefields of Europe, including Vimy Ridge. Johnston's rekindled interest in the war coincided with the publication of G.W.L. Nicholson's *Official History of the Canadian Expeditionary Force*. Nicholson's account is thorough and accurate, but it gave little place to the soldiers' voice. Whether it was because of his trip marking the war's 50th anniversary, or because of what was in (or not in) Nicholson's book, Johnston decided to write his own manuscript chronicling his wartime experience. It stayed in family hands until his children transcribed it. It appears here designed like a memorial album, with an excellent introduction, brief but useful beginnings for each chapter, and a fine collection of photographs.

We may conclude that, written 50 years after the war, Johnston's memoirs are the most selective of the accounts examined here. But they are still important. First, there is the rich detail that fills out his experience. Johnston enlisted in Moncton, New Brunswick, on 24 April 1916. His attestation papers (which are online) report that he was born 25 December 1898 (not 1897 as the book suggests), that he was a labourer, and that he stood six feet tall and had blue eyes and brown hair.[4] That is a start, but Johnston's recollections help explain his reasons for signing up. He was getting "restless" working with his father in the woods, and "all conversation these days was regarding enlisting" (18). As the army would pay him more than he made cutting trees, he thought joining the army "should be a pretty good deal." Johnston named his mother, Mary, his next of kin. He recalled that he "dreaded going home, as I knew Mother was going to feel bad, and she certainly did" (19).

Johnston's account reflects a directness and perspective that come from long reflection. Training at Valcartier Camp through the summer of 1916, he struggled with the heat and the temptations of Crown and Anchor (a dice game). Surprising for

4 The first two pages of every soldier's attestation papers who enlisted in the CEF are available at http://www.collectionscanada.ca.

a young Methodist, Johnston became as adept at the dice as he was at liberating the army's supplies of liquor. In September 1916, Johnstone went overseas with the 145th Battalion, which was soon broken up to provide reinforcements. He spent just one month training in England before a "small cattle boat" took him to France. He saw his first airplane soon after. His first cigarette, smoked on Christmas Day, 1916, made him even sicker than his longing for home (34).

Johnston's "lucky break" came in January 1917 when he took over a horse team after he volunteered for the Canadian Machine Gun Corps. Historians have for too long overlooked the thousands of animals that hauled guns, ammunition, and supplies to the front; as Johnston notes, "what . . . [the animals] suffered is beyond all description" (54). Johnston's first trips to the front found his team on the muddy, clogged roads behind Vimy Ridge. His richly detailed accounts show a real affection for his animals: "I believe my saddle horse knew more than I did, and it is one of the reasons why I lasted as long as I did. He took care of me" (55).

Jay Winter reminds us that family histories often include "an underground river of recollection" as veterans and their families confronted the trauma of war. Wilfred Owen and Virginia Woolf gave dramatic voice to First World War veterans who suffered from what we now call Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a diagnosis that was not recognized by the medical profession as legitimate until 1980.[5] But Johnston does not use the language of literature or science when he admits being "badly shaken up" at Passchendaele in the autumn of 1917. Wounded and fearful that he had lost his horse, he later wrote "that was the nearest I came to breaking when I was over there. My nerves were not too good now. . . . I think the only thing that kept any of us going was our age. Youth had a great knack of snapping you out of depression" (58). Johnston decided to get drunk once out of the lines, and he confesses that on several occasions he depended too much on the rum issue before he went forward with his team. He later swore that he would "never go under shellfire again under the influence of army rum. I figured I might as well die by being scared to death as commit suicide by acting in so foolish a way" (68).

The strain lingered, however, for Johnston's memories of 1918 are far more episodic and grim. There is little here that is heroic. He relates how, when he was in hospital at Étaples, soldiers tossed grenades into German prisoner enclosures to get even for German Zeppelin raids on the hospital (75). He recalls betting on how long a man and his horse team would survive after being caught under a heavy barrage (83). He describes finding a group of dead soldiers, who by "someone's ignorance, stupidity, lack of information or something" were killed by a single machine gun. It was "about as pitiful a sight as I had seen in the war," but that did not stop him from taking the dead men's rations. Seeking to explain himself, Johnston confesses that what must "seem very crude and heartless . . . at the time did not seem that way" (86).

Canadians often refer to the final months of the war as a great triumph of Canadian arms. Johnston describes that time with real pessimism, for "after a couple of false alarms we lost hope of an early end" (89). The only admiration he expresses is for a "cool" Salvation Army officer, who handed out chocolate during the fighting, and for a lone piper whose courage roused him one morning (87-9). The war ended as

5 Jay Winter, "The Generation of Memory," 64.

Johnston was on leave trying to get to London. His mother had "a real big dinner" when he returned to Moncton in June 1919, but the war had not left him: "I believe I came home as well physically as when I went away, but my nerves were not too good and I remember a lot of nights I would get up and when no one else was around and have to go for a long walk. After some time this seemed to wear off and soon I was back to a new life again" (98).

Academics tell us that memoirs are a more "distanced and mediated narrative" since authors can choose the structure of the stories they wish to tell.[6] We might also conclude that it took half a century for Johnston to find the words to tell his story. Daniel MacMillan had no such choice. His diary entries from 1914 to 1927 offer a very sobering view of the home front both during the war and after. In another fine introduction, the editors of this volume admit that they have done a great deal of editing, reproducing just one-fifth of MacMillan's entries.

Daniel MacMillan was a 51-year-old farmer living in Williamsburg, New Brunswick, when the war broke out in 1914. MacMillan never married. His ailing parents and brother had died, leaving him to tend the family farm and to contribute to the war effort any way he could. In October 1914, for instance, 17 of the 70 bushels of potatoes he dug up went to Belgian relief (27). Such efforts were typical of the time. MacMillan led the local Sunday school that organized patriotic services in July 1915. He wrote of how he enjoyed the "entertainments" organized by the Orange Lodge and the Ladies Institute that raised money for machine guns and Red Cross relief respectively (33, 44). He also carefully recorded the worsening war news in 1916. Though well overage, he considered a request to enlist in March but concluded "I really think I can do my bit better here on the farm than any other place" (39). The work was difficult; a lack of help, poor crops, and ailing livestock added to his chronic debt.

MacMillan, though, remained firmly committed to the war effort. On 1 January 1917, he resolved "if there is any other thing I can do other than I am doing, which will serve my country better, why I will do so if I can" (46). The war was by then even more personal, as both his nephew and brother were overseas. MacMillan turned down a generous offer for his farm in August 1917 in the hope that he might someday offer it to his nephew Jim: "He spent most of his boyhood days here and always thought there was no place like it and as he is now fighting to protect it, I will do all in my power to hold on" (51-2). The autumn of 1917 brought even more hardship. A close female friend who often cooked for him died suddenly in September, prompting MacMillan's longest diary entries of the war. In November, he lamented that he had to fend for himself – "I have had quite hard living lately, potatoes and carrots for dinner and nothing else for several days" – even though "I am aware there are people who have less" (56). The next month he was apprehensive about how the upcoming federal election could divide Canadians by race and creed over the conscription issue. Then in December the papers reported the "terrible catastrophe" of the Halifax explosion. MacMillan and his neighbours had little to share, but they were soon planning to "send relief to the sufferers" (57).

Debts forced MacMillan to sell much of his livestock during the winter of 1918, but his nephew's return from overseas in April offered some consolation: "[Jim's]

6 Acton, *Grief in Wartime*, 7.

nervous system somewhat shattered and his right hand badly disabled, otherwise smart and active" (62). The brightening war news in the summer was darkened by the threat of potato rust and bad harvests. And the Spanish Influenza in October claimed seven neighbours in one week alone: "There are very few families who are not affected less or more" (66). On 14 November 1918, MacMillan's diary entry marked the end of hostilities: "Germany accepted and signed the armistice terms of the Allies . . . so the war is over" (70).

But the war was not over for Daniel MacMillan and his family. In October 1919, MacMillan sold the farm, not to his nephew, but to his brother Charle, who had returned from overseas the previous June. MacMillan then found work in a lumber mill, but it closed in March 1920 and jobs were hard to find throughout the region due to the recession. In the spring of 1921, while MacMillan led the effort to install a local war memorial, the behaviour of his nephew and brother became a real concern. Jim's drinking and smoking offended Daniel's Presbyterian sensibilities, but only to his diary did he complain. Stomach ailments had forced Charle into the Fredericton Convalescent Hospital soon after he came home. In June 1921, Daniel noted simply that "Charle took a notion yesterday and walked away" (88). This became a familiar pattern. Five years later, Daniel wrote that his brother "of course as usual is wandering about somewhere, I know not where" (98). A year after that, in 1927, MacMillan lamented that nephew "Jim is wandering about without thought of anything, same of course as usual" (99). Daniel MacMillan did not fight in the First World War, but its effects at home were profound, personal, and lasting. Despite personal hardship, he remained committed to its success and the memory of those who died in it. He also endured. His brother Charle died in 1939, Jim a decade later. Daniel MacMillan died in June 1960 at the age of 97.

A soldier's letters home to his sister form the basis of a book heavily researched by historian Brian Douglas Tennyson. A detailed introduction tells us Percy Willmot was born in the United Kingdom, but that he arrived in Cape Breton with his brother Arthur in 1895 when his widowed mother could no longer look after them. Percy remained in close touch with his natural family. Soon after he enlisted in Nova Scotia's 25th Battalion in 1914, Percy began writing his younger sister Dorothy who had joined Percy in Sydney three years before.

Percy's vantage point from the battalion orderly room offers a keen view of the unit's activities. From Halifax he wrote that the "boys are becoming very discontented and impatient. Quite a number are taking 'French Leave' (without a pass – go home for a few days)" (56). The battalion sailed to England in May 1915 and began training as part of the 2nd Division. After an exercise in August, Percy boasted of a "night-march" that "was one of the wonderful experiences of my life. The sky was almost clear overhead but the earth was shrouded in mist and made one realize what Tennyson meant by 'muffled moonlight'" (81). Percy was not as eloquent after the division's first action in France, at Loos in October 1915. Brian Tennyson argues that the battalion fared badly, but Percy wrote Dorothy that "our fellows have come out of a very severe week—as cheery—and as sure of victory as ever" (97).

Tennyson's wider narrative of the war seeks to balance Percy and Dorothy's narrow world. Through the months the siblings exchanged reports on relatives, Sydney boys overseas, and battalion politics. In 1916 they considered how Percy might gain a suitable reference to apply for officer training. Percy also complained of

how his commanding officers were trying to remove him from the orderly room: "They are determined to get clear of me and have adopted some contemptible methods. My astonishment is great that they expend so much effort on little me" (126). Percy was an intelligent young man, though a bit too eager to impress his younger sister. On hearing that Dorothy was reading the works of Omar Khayyamm, Percy advised that she "consign . . . the volume to the dust and silence of an upper shelf and solace yourself with the more modern philosophy . . . as found in that pearl of modern magazines – 'The Ladies Home Journal'" (116, underlining in original).

Percy remained in the relative safety of the orderly room through 1916, but filling out casualty reports began to wear on him. In October he confessed that "I am fast becoming a hardened and calloused old Soldier. The loss of dear friends is a matter of every day occurrence and awakens little deep feeling" (142). A ten-day trip to Rouen in December, however, offered some consolation. Four months later Percy wrote of how he was deeply moved walking the Vimy battlefield after the Canadian victory of April 1917. Like so many, it stirred in him an intense feeling of nationalism: "As the guns spoke, over the bags they went men of CB, sons of NS & NB—FC's [French Canadians] & westerners—all Canucks" (161).

Percy was finally chosen for officer training in England in the fall of 1917. He returned to France in June 1918, and rejoined the 25th Battalion in August. In October he wrote Dorothy from an officers' hospital in Cheshire. After assuring her that his leg wounds "are by no means serious," he described his final action near Cambrai: "A shell landed within a few yards and gave me this lovely 'blighty'—I had four stalwart Huns carry me to the dressing station" (196). The letters remained cheerful, but his injuries were more serious than he let on. He returned to Halifax in the summer of 1919, but convalesced at Camp Hill Military Hospital. In August Dorothy joined her brother in Halifax for a unit reunion. A photograph shows much tension – even pain – on Percy's face. His last letter to Dorothy in November 1919 contained troubling thoughts: "My nerve is not what it was. I feel fearfully down in the mouth these days and tearful. I feel sure I shall kill someone on the street someday. Anyone that bumps me does so at their peril though they don't know it" (217-18). Percy Willmot returned to Sydney for Christmas. He died suddenly on 27 December 1919.

Brian Tennyson has done much good work to offer context for this tragic story, and to identify the scores of people Percy and Dorothy mention in their correspondence. At times, however, both the book's formatting and the research interfere with the letters. It is annoying that Percy's many letters are in italics and that the many references are hard to follow in the endnotes. There are also some factual errors: the second battle of Ypres took place in April 1915 and not June 1916 (127). Long discussions of battles such as Passchendaele also seem unnecessary since Percy did not fight there (164-6). A stronger editorial hand was needed here.

The second collection of letters under review comes from the pen of Fredericton native Harry Gill. A high school graduate in 1939, he enlisted in the Royal Canadian Air Force in August 1940 and was immediately sent to Toronto where he wrote his mother: "It makes a person feel awful small to stand beside some tall building and look up at it" (15). Harry began his flight training at the Eglington Hunt Club that fall. Harry's rich descriptions detail a routine familiar to thousands of others during the war. By Christmas of 1940, Harry was learning how to land a Fleet Finch at a training school near present-day Trois-Rivières. After recounting his first bumpy landing to

his mother, he noted with a youthful glee: “It sure was a lot of fun, but now I can bring it in with only one small bump, so I think I am doing OK” (39). Gill never lost his enthusiasm. He also seems to have been a natural pilot, learning quickly on Yale and Harvard aircraft at Uplands in Ottawa through the winter of 1941. In April he excitedly sent a telegram home: “Received wings yesterday. Will be home in a few days” (62).

The stay was short. Harry went overseas in May 1941. The next month he wrote to his father from Durham, England: “I now am flying Hurricanes and . . . boy oh boy, do they ever go places in a hell of a hurry. I have been going over four hundred m.p.h. in one and believe me a fellow is going places quick, eh” (72). A year after he enlisted, Harry began his operational flying. At first he was the only Canadian attached to RAF No. 607 Squadron in southern England, which was then patrolling the English Channel. Some Canadians resented the attitudes of their English commanders, but Gill’s easy personality made him popular: “The ground crew are also a great bunch of fellows and they will do anything for me because they think there is no one else like me (just because I ask them instead of ordering them to do anything, I can get more work out of them than all the rest of the boys put together)” (87, underlining in original).

Perhaps his British commanders saw things differently. Gill admitted to his father in February 1942 that he had not received the commission he had expected. His air officer commanding had “turned [him] down until I had more confidence in leadership. This interview only lasted three minutes and how any one man can tell what another fellow is like in only three minutes is a mystery to me but nonetheless I am not an officer, but I won’t give up yet” (101). Harry wrote modestly in the same letter of a “little argument with the German fleet last week” (102). For his “initiative and keenness” in his attacks on a German surface vessel and an aircraft, Harry was awarded the Distinguished Flying Medal (122).

By April 1942 Harry’s squadron was en route to India. The young Canadian was shocked by the sight of young, topless, black women in Durban, South Africa, and “beggars and cripples of all descriptions” in Karachi (117, 127). In one of his last letters, dated November 1942, Harry reflected on his adventures, and dared to think of life after the war: “I have been living such a high, wide and handsome life for the last couple years that I want to quiet down a bit and I think the only place to do it would be on a farm, so I won’t expect money for what work I do, just my board and keep” (129).

Harry Gill never made it home. On 21 January 1943, Harry’s parents received the dreaded telegram that began “Deeply regret to inform you . . . that Flight Sergent [*sic*] Harry Lewis Gill D.F.M. was killed on Active Service.” Gill had died four days before, on 17 January, at the age of 20. His body was laid to rest in the Maynamati War Cemetery in modern-day Bangladesh. Like any memorial volume, this book of Gill’s letters home includes copies of the telegram, a photograph of Harry’s grave and a short sympathy card from King George VI. Also included is a short comic book tribute to Harry that appeared in August 1944 under the title “Canadian Heroes.” Harry Gill, though, remained modest despite his accomplishments; as he stated in a letter to his father in July 1942: “So, as you can see, just because someone was fool enough to give me the D.F.M. it doesn’t mean that I have done anything real brave because I know different and I hope that you do too, because it is all a big mistake” (123). Heroes talk like that.

The editors of the New Brunswick Military History series and the Cape Breton University Press should be commended for publishing work that academics too often dismiss. The subjects of these memorial albums were not famous novelists or cynical journalists, but average people whose stories were articulate and powerful. They remind us that many stories have yet to be told. Thousands of men handled horses, not guns. Soldiers did things they later regretted, and they sometimes died of seemingly minor wounds soon after their return. Some people on the home front came close to starving, and most had to cope with the psychological trauma suffered by family members returning from the horrors of the frontlines. And young Fredericton boys died far from home flying in British squadrons. Their stories may not have fit into the collective memory of Canada's wartime experience, but they are worth remembering.

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