

Jonathan F. W. Vance, *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning and the First World War*

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Vance, Jonathan F. W. *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning and the First World War*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997. 319 pp., 81 illus., cloth \$39.95, ISBN 0-7748-0601-X.

Death so Noble: Memory, Meaning and the First World War describes how a tragic First World War tally of 60 000 Canadian dead, and 170 000 wounded, was transformed very quickly into a positive national experience. In Canada, as author Jonathan Vance explains, major events such as the Battle of Vimy Ridge, despite its enormous casualty list, increasingly became viewed as milestones on the country's road to nationhood.

Vance's book is about memory. As he puts it, "It is about constructing a mythic version of the events of 1914–18 from a complex mixture of fact, wishful thinking, half-truth, and outright invention, and expressing that version in novel and play, in bronze and stone, in reunion and commemoration, in song and advertisement." It is not about the war itself. The first chapter centres on the transformation of what was in essence a difficult experience for many into a drama of heroic sacrifice. Subsequent chapters explore how this sacrifice was equated with Christian principles, how the soldier became a hero, and how, out of stories of Canadian courage, a nation was formed in the minds of many.

The book's importance derives from Vance's research and the use he makes of it. His sources include novels like L. M. Montgomery's *Rilla of Ingleside*, and commemorative stained-glass windows in churches across the country. Public sculpture provides another resource, as do war trophies. The material he uses is that of commemoration and memorial. Canadians remembered and honoured their war experiences in literature, poetry, theatre, art, sculpture, and through the ceremonies associated with Armistice Day and particular battles. Much of this material has been studied in the context of other disciplines such as art history or Canadian literature. Weaving this fresh, under-used or differently used research material into the history of the First World War understandably alters the fabric of that subject as it has hitherto been understood.

That being said, the methodology is not entirely unique. Jay Winter's ground breaking

1995 study, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, examines the comparative process of memorial and commemoration in England, France and Germany in the aftermath of 1918. However, Winter's concern, more so than Vance's, is to document the search for a language that would express loss. Nationhood, in the countries he considers, was not an issue, but the loss of millions of lives was. Winter's cultural study is therefore centred on bereavement. As such, the role played by his sources, which are relatively similar in type to Vance's, results in a different ending, one that cannot be viewed in quite the same Whiggish terms as the Canadian's.

Winter's ongoing study of the Great War has been criticized for marginalizing the role of politics and strategy in its pursuit of the cultural interpretation. Vance's approach can also be questioned in this context. For example, the issue as to why Mackenzie King's government distanced itself from much of the early commemoration is not satisfactorily addressed. Specifically, Lord Beaverbrook and his Canadian War Memorials Fund expended much energy and money on creating a visual record of Canada's experience in the Great War. These paintings, sculptures, and even the designs for a building to house them, were gifted to the Canadian government in 1921. King's government let the project die. Even when extenuating circumstances are taken into account — the postwar economy, the cost of rebuilding the fire-destroyed Parliament buildings — the reasons for King's inaction are more fundamental. While for English Canadians the war might have made a nation out of its largely British-born veterans, conscription in 1917 consolidated French-Canadians' sense of betrayal. Faced with a domestic crisis of significant proportions, King was politically unable to actively lead, promote and support Canadians' need to mourn and memorialize. Thus, the process remained a largely private act, supported by clergymen, intellectuals, regimental associations and veterans groups.

Vance suggests that the process of mourning and memorialization stressed the traditional. Winter, too, is unequivocal in his defence of the traditional as the dominant voice of memory. However, where Vance documents the public

enthusiasm for the traditional, in his discussion of war art in particular, and almost in contradiction of his thesis, he supports the modern. In so doing, he is reiterating the interpretations put forward by authors such as Modris Eksteins, from whose conclusions he purports to differ, that the war saw the triumph of modernism. In discussing the art of the First World War, for example, Vance consistently asserts that only the modernist painters could capture the horror of modern warfare. The distinguished artist, J. W. Beatty, is dismissed as a landscape artist lacking the appropriate vocabulary for depicting battle. Arthur Lismer's and A. Y. Jackson's criticisms of traditional war art are also quoted to support the value of the modern and to dismiss that of the traditional. Their views, however, are not put in context. As nascent proselytizers of modern art in Canada, how could they have been anything but derogatory of its traditional cousin?

The above observations highlight one of the problems facing historians who chart a course through waters that ebb and flow through many discrete disciplines of research. The enormous expansion in the university world in the past thirty years in Canada has produced a commensurately huge body of research. Combine this with thirty years of generously funded archival practice, the wonders of microfilm, and other technological innovations, and the ability to amass material becomes formidably achievable. It is not always possible, however, to digest this material as thoroughly, and it would seem that his study would have benefited from a more critical analysis of the sources. If these concerns about Vance's use of war art apply to other material, concern naturally arises in regard to other areas. This should not, however, detract from the volume's unquestionable significance in shedding new light on a well-known period of history, and on an evolving topic of historical debate.

Alfred W. Crosby, *The Measure of Reality: Quantification and Western Society, 1250–1600*

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Crosby, Alfred W. *The Measure of Reality: Quantification and Western Society, 1250–1600*. Cambridge, New York and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1997. xii + 245 pp., 19 illus., cloth, US\$24.95, ISBN 0-521-55427-6.

There is always a danger in reviewing a book immediately after having read a particularly fine work. The book I was reading covered a similar period to Crosby's. This was Edward Grant's *Planets, Stars and Orbs: The Medieval Cosmos, 1200–1687*, a masterpiece of research, analysis and thought, and the culmination of forty years of original scholarly effort.

At the same time, a colleague also drew my attention to a paper by Richard Sorrenson, "The Ship as a Scientific Instrument in the Eighteenth Century."¹ This elicited an image of two Aristotelians philosophizing on cosmogony and the relative positions of the Earth and Sun — exactly the type of "science" Galileo so disdained. As amusing as Sorrenson's idea may be as a thought exercise, it is not based in reality. Likewise, I found Crosby's thesis provides an interesting perspective but one that fails under scrutiny.

What is Crosby's hypothesis? Quoting the dust jacket, "*The Measure of Reality* discusses the epochal shift from qualitative to quantitative perception in Western Europe during the late Middle Ages and Renaissance. This shift made modern science, technology, business practice, and bureaucracy possible. It affected not only the obvious — such as measurements of time and space and mathematical technique — but, equally and simultaneously, music and painting, thus proving that the shift was even more profound than once thought." Crosby further postulates that it was the European "utilization of thought that would in time enable them to advance swiftly in science and technology and, in the meantime, gave them decisively important administrative, commercial, navigational, industrial, and military skills."²

Crosby, a professor at the University of Texas, believes that Western societies have excelled because of the way we have come to process information, and that the achievements of non-Western and preceding societies were limited because they did not have the required thought and analytical skills associated with measurement. For historians who have argued that our