

EXHIBIT REVIEW¹

“Beaumont-Hamel and the Trail of the Caribou: Newfoundlanders and Labradorians at War and at Home 1914–1949.” Permanent Exhibition, The Rooms Provincial Museum, St. John’s, NL, 1 July 2016– Ongoing.

The first of July 2016 marked the 100th anniversary of the start of the Battle of the Somme in northern France, a four-and-a-half-month industrial meat grinder that caused the deaths of over a million men. The centennial has sparked a fresh round of commemorations by Britain, its former dominions, and other combatant nations. In Newfoundland and Labrador, public memory of the battle and, indeed, of the entire First World War is dominated by that day’s action at Beaumont-Hamel, where the then Newfoundland Regiment was virtually destroyed. (King George V awarded the “Royal” title to the regiment on 17 December 1917.) Although shocking to a small country with no first-hand experience of war since 1814, Beaumont-Hamel would occupy a place in Newfoundland’s claims to nationhood comparable to Vimy for Canada and Gallipoli for Australia and New Zealand. Newfoundlanders and Labradorians have marked the centennial both at the Beaumont-Hamel Newfoundland Memorial in France and at home, thus begetting “Beaumont-Hamel and the Trail of the Caribou: Newfoundlanders and Labradorians at War and at Home 1914–1949,” the new permanent exhibit at The Rooms Provincial Museum.

The exhibit has received funding from philanthropist Elinor Gill Ratcliffe (\$3.2 million), Fortis, and other corporate entities. Its welcome panel describes the war as “a defining event for Newfoundland and Labrador,” and advises that the exhibit will “share the stories and

words of Newfoundlanders and Labradorians who experienced the First World War and all that our sacrifice brought us.” It is divided into eight sections that flow more or less chronologically: Faces of Valour, Home Front, Overseas, Beaumont-Hamel, The War Continues, Consequences at Home, Contemplative, Lest We Forget. These feature a full range of interpretive media, including didactic panels, costumed mannequins, recorded sound, still and moving images, filmed re-enactors, and original and reproduction artifacts. This, then, is a “big” exhibit in every sense of the word.

The Faces of Valour section focuses on some of the men and women affected by the war. These include Eliza Strong, who joined the Women’s Patriotic Association following her son Charlie’s enlistment in the then Newfoundland Regiment. After Charlie was killed in 1918, Eliza “withdrew from life. She died exactly two years later, to the day.” In keeping with the exhibit’s admirable inclusiveness, we also are introduced to Lance Corporal John Shiwak of the Newfoundland Regiment, an “Aboriginal trapper and hunter” from Labrador whose death on 20 November 1917 “had a profound effect on the Regiment.” The overriding themes of Faces of Valour, indeed, of the entire exhibit, are sacrifice and loss.

The introductory panel to the Home Front section states that “Everyone wondered about the enemy and how to defend our shores.” Although the Newfoundland Royal Naval Reserve’s role in home defence does get mentioned, greater attention is paid to the efforts of women who knitted articles of clothing for men overseas, which is also the subject of the exhibit’s first filmed re-enactment. Not mentioned is that the Royal Canadian Navy eventually assumed responsibility (under Admiralty command) for Newfoundland’s naval defence.

While the Overseas section does a superb job of describing the experiences of Newfoundlanders who served in the Royal Navy, the section named after Beaumont-Hamel forms the exhibit’s core. According to the panel entitled “Aftershocks,” Beaumont-Hamel became “part of our collective consciousness, deeply connected to our sense of who we are,” and 1 July 1916 “quickly became a symbol of our courageous

service . . . But at what cost?" The answer to that question comes courtesy of veteran Ken Goodyear: "The best of Newfoundland's manhood were killed that day . . . It was a terrific calamity to Newfoundland." Goodyear's romantic viewpoint is a familiar one that suffuses such books as David Macfarlane's cliché-laden *The Danger Tree: Memory, War, and the Search for a Family's Past*. Its appearance here is a signal that when it comes to assessing Beaumont-Hamel's "cost," the exhibit is going to choose sentiment over history. Indeed, the textual preference for "cost" rather than something less loaded — "impact," for example — is itself significant.

The War Continues returns to familiar ground, intoning that as the war dragged on, "Men were wounded and killed, replacements arrived, more men were wounded and killed." Consequences at Home considers the impact of the return to civilian life of veterans with physical and psychic wounds. This section boasts some of the exhibit's most compelling artifacts, including a wheelchair that belonged to Albert Chaffey of Musgravetown, who lost a leg in the war. Owing to his hometown's uneven terrain, Chaffey abandoned the wheelchair for crutches. That he also drove a modified Model A Ford speaks, inadvertently, to one man's refusal to feel sorry for himself.

Chaffey's positive example is a relief from the exhibit's funereal tone, which escalates in the last two sections, Contemplative and Lest We Forget: we are told that "a heavy awareness of war's cost blankets daily life — and the cost grows as time passes. . . . Many people lay the blame for our failure to prosper in peacetime at the feet of the Great War." Actually, except for a post-war downturn that was part of a short-lived global recession, the economy performed adequately until sideswiped by the Great Depression — another global phenomenon, and one that had nothing to do with the war — then flourished during the Second World War. When Newfoundland entered the Canadian Confederation in 1949, it brought a surplus with it. War-related debt undoubtedly contributed to Newfoundland's struggles during the Depression, but it is simplistic to suggest, as the text does, that the war led to the loss — there's that word again — of democracy in the 1930s;

and unblushingly linking it to Confederation, which it also does, is sentimental nonsense. Thus, in assessing Beaumont-Hamel and the war, the exhibit text advances what historian Robert J. Harding has called the concept of a “fatal national wound” that triggered a “tragic avalanche.”² By enshrining this ahistorical perspective in a permanent exhibit, The Rooms Provincial Museum has all but guaranteed its continuance for another generation.³

The exhibit winds down with a look at the memorials that proliferated after the war, and the last panel describes how the forget-me-not became Newfoundland and Labrador’s flower of remembrance. Visitors are encouraged to write their own thoughts on construction-paper forget-me-nots and to post them on a “wall of remembrance.” On the day I was there, a child had written on one: “Thank you for your sacrifice, which gave us the gift of freedom.” That, at least, is something.

As William Philpott and others have documented for Britain, and Robert J. Harding for Newfoundland and Labrador, the manner in which the victors have remembered the war has evolved with the passage of time. (Naturally, the losers saw things differently.) The earliest paradigm, which exalted death as noble sacrifice, would subsequently be joined by a vision of the war as a tragic exercise in futility, with the British high command being censured for sending men to almost certain slaughter. More recently, historians have begun to appreciate that heavy casualties were unavoidable in an industrial war of attrition, and that victory could not have been achieved by any other method. Viewed in this light, the Battle of the Somme was both a moral victory and a turning point in the conflict. This perspective is nowhere to be found in the exhibit.

In a review of Kevin Major’s fictional account of Beaumont-Hamel, *No Man’s Land: A Novel*, Stuart Pierson criticized Major for conflating the “noble sacrifice” and “exercise in futility” paradigms, which Pierson rightly saw as contradictory, since sacrifice, by definition, begets a greater good.⁴ A similar contradiction stalks this exhibit, which glorifies sacrifice yet bemoans the supposed “cost” in the economic and political realms. The focus on sacrifice and loss is understandable to a point,

since the men who died were grieved by families, communities, and the nation. Unfortunately, it makes for a very static, one-dimensional visitor experience that, except for the indomitable Albert Chaffey, oozes victimhood.⁵ I am surprised and disappointed that The Rooms Provincial Museum has adopted the fatal national wound concept in assessing Beaumont-Hamel's impact — surprised because its selective amnesia more rightly belongs to historical fiction, and disappointed because more fruitful lines of thought have been ignored.⁶

Why the fatal national wound concept persists is a good question. Could it be that novelists write better than historians and thus exert more influence? Certainly, the current crop of Newfoundland and Labrador novelists, among whom historical fiction is all the rage, boasts some excellent writers, and I disagree with Pierson for berating the best of them, Wayne Johnston, for his lack of historical accuracy.⁷ As Robertson Davies put it, "if I were a better historian I would be a lesser novelist. The imagination is a cauldron, not a filing cabinet."⁸ That is overly harsh on historians, who need imagination too, but the point is taken. There are nonetheless fine writers among the province's historians (and archaeologists), and Robert J. Harding and Edward Hollett are the best observers of Beaumont-Hamel in any genre. Sadly, their efforts have been wasted on the people behind "Beaumont-Hamel and the Trail of the Caribou," as has relevant work by other historians. I cannot accept that the fatal national wound concept endures because novelists write better than historians, or even because readers or exhibit-goers prefer history lite. As exemplified by this exhibit, Beaumont-Hamel still dominates our cultural memory not only because it honours the dead and provides a national foundation myth, but also because it simplifies complex historical processes and absolves us of blame for the loss of democracy and independence. It is a potent brew from which, apparently, we will drink for many years yet.

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Notes

- 1 Thanks to Jerry Bannister for helpful advice.
- 2 See Robert J. Harding, "Glorious Tragedy: Newfoundland's Cultural Memory of the Attack at Beaumont Hamel, 1916–1925," *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies* 21, 1 (2006): 3–40.
- 3 Or longer. Parks Canada's interpretive offer at Cape Spear Lighthouse National Historic Site, for example, dates from 1982.
- 4 The review can be found in *Tickle Ace* 31 (1996): 105–11.
- 5 On Beaumont-Hamel and victimhood, see Edward Hollett, "Two Solitudes," *Dorchester Review* 6, 1 (2016): 14–17.
- 6 I am aware that some historians, notably John FitzGerald, subscribe to the fatal national wound concept. Theirs is a small club.
- 7 Stuart Pierson, "Johnston's Smallwood," *Newfoundland Studies* 14, 2 (1998): 282–300.
- 8 Robertson Davies to Judith Skelton Grant, 17 April 1986, in Judith Skelton Grant, ed., *For Your Eye Alone: The Letters of Robertson Davies* (New York: Penguin Books, 2002), 156.