HOW THE YEARNING FOR PEACE AFTER A TRENCH WAR'S HORROR GAVE WAY TO VAPID "VIMYISM"

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Like so many combat veterans, Harold Innis didn't talk much about his war. He had enlisted as a humble private because of his devout Baptist beliefs, but the war destroyed that faith. A devastating shrapnel wound to his thigh put the artilleryman and Vimy Ridge veteran out of action.

His peripatetic "dirt research" of the 1920s took him to the remotest parts of the country, enriching Canadian economic history with new understandings of early resource industries. His staples studies and subsequent analysis of communications made Innis one of most influential intellectuals Canada ever produced. Even though the ceremonies unfolded a few steps from his office, he attended Armistice (later Remembrance) Day events at the University of Toronto but once, when he spoke about the Depression in the 1930s.

Innis bore the Great War's psychic scars until he died in 1952. Hence the subtitle of John Watson's comprehensive 2006 biography, *The Dark Vision of Harold Innis*. (The cover photo of Private Innis in his tin hat is almost as mournful as Walter Allward's *Canada Bereft* statue on the Vimy Memorial.) Here was a scholar who had been brought up when the glory-of-empire tales of G.H. Henty and Rider Haggard were popular among the boys of late Victorian Canada. The lads absorbed schoolroom history that told tales of great men striding across great battlefields, achieving monumental feats of valour. And building nations by vanquishing Aboriginal peoples then routinely labeled — and reviled — as "savages".

Innis would develop a different understanding of the forces that shape nations. And he was clear about the Great War. As Innis lay dying, the

veteran confided in his close friend, the prominent journalist George Ferguson, discussing the war.

"He regarded it as the ultimate obscenity," recalled Ferguson. "He talked to me in those last months for the first time in his life about the war... All he could say about it was the horror of the performance... The more he thought about the thing, the more he thought of young men being destroyed, who would have been so valuably useful. And he would speak with real bitterness... bitterness I've never seen in another man about the stupidity of the whole performance which he had embarked on *himself*!... By God he had come to some pretty violent conclusions about it... about the idea of war."

Some Canadian ideas that had emerged 50 years later would, we can safely assume, leave Harold Innis utterly aghast. This is the notion constantly bruited about by journalists, politicians, schoolteachers and a host of other opinion makers that World War I — and particularly the Battle of Vimy Ridge — was somehow the formative moment for Canada. That Canada came of age on battlefields from Ypres to Mons. That we should return to Victorian-era reverence for valiant soldiers and remember them as the true founders of our nation. That World War I was indeed a "great" war — for democracy, civilization, freedom.

This is "Vimyism," a virulent form of martial patriotism that obscures Great War reality. Vimyism emerged as the Official Story after those who could directly and personally remember the magnitude of the war's tragedy were no longer alive. The mourning and sadness of the postwar period — not to mention anger like that of Innis — was replaced by something quite different. The war was wrapped up in a gauze of chivalrous soldiery and patriotic certainty.

One prominent war historian felt able, by 2006, to refer in passing to the Battle of Vimy Ridge as a "coming of age battle." In 2007, at the 90th anniversary of the battle, a former *Canadian Military Journal* copy editor came out with a book called *Valour at Vimy Ridge: Canadian Heroes of World War I.* It included a dose of Vimyist mythology: "Legend has it that when a French officer heard of the victory, he replied, *C'est impossible*. Upon learning it was the Canadians who captured the ridge, he added, *Ah! Les Canadiens! C'est possible!*"

When the Canadian government unveiled the restored Vimy Memorial that year, it was accompanied by a three-day creeping barrage of Vimy retrospective. "A nation's pride restored," headlined the *Ottawa Citizen*. "A 'proud nation' is honoured" chimed in the *National Post*. CBC television reporter Adrienne Arseneault contributed to the CBC's coverage (later released as a 90-minute DVD) of the rededication by reporting from the streets of Arras, the staging point for much battlefield tourism. "Walk through the streets, you'll get a sense of the anecdotes and stories that are passed on for generations. Like the tale of a French soldier who, when he was first told that Vimy Ridge had been taken, said 'No it's impossible'. But then when he was told that it had been taken by the Canadians, said 'Oh! The Canadians. Then it *is* possible.'"

Ms. Arsenault's coverage included shots of Canadians walking through Arras with a banner reading. "Keeping the memory alive."

Which memories are kept alive? For whom? Why?[1]

In 2014, at the centenary of the war's beginning, the venerable *Canadian Geographic* magazine produced a glossy edition describing the hundred ways that the Great War "shaped Canada." Editors described Vimy Ridge as "A battle to unite us." Yet a visit to the Vimy Memorial to inspect the names of the Canadians killed in France but without a known grave (the so-called "missing") reveals some 40 men by the name of Taylor. But one lonely Tremblay. There *was* a modest conscription sidebar. The popular magazine devoted as much space to "women hockeyists" and Winnie the Pooh as it did to the Conscription Crisis that tore the country apart. A three-page splash heralded the heroic battlefield deeds of three Winnipeg men who lived on Pine Street and won medals for heroism. Pine Street, we learn, became Valour Road.

In 1936, when the Vimy Monument was unveiled, the same magazine had struck a very different tone. Rather than celebrating militarism, it conveyed the widespread yearning for peace — which is how most people interpreted Allward's majestic towers and mournful sculptures, unveiled with a minimum of militarism and an abundance of peace symbolism.

Twenty-first century Vimyism, by contrast, is all about war as the foundation of the nation. It is the kind of mythologizing that masks the horrors that Harold Innis witnessed. Looking at myth and modern war, the historian Eric Leed explained in *No Man's Land: Combat & Identity in World War I* that this sort of story serves as a "flight from contradiction." Repeating the tale of Vimy Ridge with liturgical regularity "mediates the contradictions, tensions, and conflicts inherent in the real world of social relations." (119)

Vimyist narratives of individual valour and patriotic achievement can become particularly pervasive when backed by the state. Canada's Citizenship Guide, complete with full-colour illustrations of gallant soldiers on horseback and missing even the emblematic word "trench" — eminent Canadian documentary film maker Donald Brittain called them "ditches of death" in a 1964 war retrospective prepared for Veterans Affairs — tells a tale of sanitized war and individual heroism. As Canadian philosopher Joseph Heath explains, the guide was strongly influenced by a politician with a world view tinged by nostalgia:

> *"In this day and age, the romantic militarist is a bit of an odd duck, despite the fact that it used to be a very popular view. Consider the passages in Tolstoy's* War and Peace, *where Count Rostov expresses his fervent desire to die for the Tsar. This is the sort of romanticism that the mechanized slaughter of the First World War largely put an end to. At the same time, you can still find echoes of it, particularly among those who are intensely patriotic, or committed to the virtue of 'sacrifice' – which always seems to mean dying rather than, say, paying taxes – or who think that war helps the nation to achieve 'moral clarity.'"*

1 For a fine exploration of these themes, see the outstanding *Landscapes of War and Memory: The Two World Wars in Canadian Literature and the Arts, 1977-2007* by the prominent Canadian literary critic and teacher Sherrill Grace, University of Alberta Press, 2014.

The Vimyist story echoes loudly, telling us an anti-modern lie about the nature of industrialized killing, encouraging us to think of modern war as a clash of arms, not as a clash of economies and political orders. The harsh truth that Vimy made little difference to the Great War is obscured in the Victorian-individualistic reverence for the valiant soldier, the singled-out battle, the inspiring military leader. Far more decisive than Vimy — and far more revelatory with respect to the real world of modern war — was the economic blockade of Germany. Modern war is an impersonal clash of orders driven by impersonal logics. It is not decided by deeds of valour on the battlefield. A myth-symbol complex that claims otherwise is an exercise in willful denial about the world in which we live, a demonstration of an utter disregard of the lessons of the 20th century: an immature and irrationalist form of adolescent anti-modernism. Moreover, the harsh lesson of the 20th century is that there are no longer any significant borders between civilians and soldiers.

The Vimy Trap (the title of a forthcoming book I am writing with historian Ian McKay on contending political cultures of commemoration) mythologizes the Great War in a way that attempts to paper over contradiction and conflict. It preserves in amber the antiquated ideals of the white dominion, by anchoring Canadian national identity on a war that, as Jack Granatstein explained so well in 2005, was in reality a "battle of rival imperialisms." Making the war the foundation of Canada minimizes and exiles Quebec. It constitutes a regressive return to the Great Man Theory of History, with all its gender-specific simplicities. It deliberately slams the door on the indispensable historical insights that social and cultural historians have developed since the 1960s on the gendered, racialized and class-based dynamics of power. It replaces history with patriotic fantasy.

Certainly, the Great War changed Harold Innis, just as it transformed Canada. Innis recognized that modern war required state manipulation of public opinion and the manufacture of jingoism. This would inform his understanding of communications. World War also strengthened his sense of Canadian nationalism, though it wasn't patriotism of a Vimyist caste. He recalled his resentment, not only of military authoritarianism, but of English feelings that he had come to "help the Mother Country. We had felt that we were concerned with fighting for Canada and Canada alone. It was this feeling which strengthened my determination to work in the general field of Canadian Economics." Innis's economic nationalism has come in for critical reevaluation and his staples thesis is now but one of many with which Canadian historians work. But with respect to a terrible war he personally experienced, his was an outlook whose maturity and subtlety is light years removed from today's puerile propaganda.