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Review of "Anxious Days and Tearful Nights: Canadian War Wives during the Great War" by Martha Hannah

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Book Reviews



Martha Hanna. *Anxious Days and Tearful Nights: Canadian War Wives during the Great War*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020. Pp. 328.

Many readers of this journal will know Martha Hanna as the US-based author of influential studies of letter-writing and married life in France during the First World War. More recently, however, Hanna has turned her attention to Canada—the country where she grew up—producing a welcome and highly anticipated addition to historical scholarship about family life on the Canadian homefront.

Anxious Days and Tearful Nights seeks to answer two questions: what was it like to be the wife of a Canadian soldier during the Great War and how can looking more closely at these women's lives help us to better understand the war's "disruptive and often tragic effects" (p. 4)? Using personal correspondence, the popular press and military service and census records, Hanna paints a memorable collective picture of the wartime and postwar lives of the nearly 90,000 women whose husbands served in all ranks of the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF). Her main argument, discernable in the book's title (itself a reference to a 1917 quotation by Arthur Meighen) is that the war "marked and marred" the lives of Canadian war wives with constant and "unrelieved psychological stress" (p. 22).

The sources of this stress were many and included caring for children, struggling to make ends meet in the midst of wartime inflation and singlehandedly looking after farms and family homes—all while fearing their husbands' lives and safety. In contrast to their counterparts in Britain and France, Canadian war wives also had to contend with prolonged periods of separation across vast distances. Letter-writing, Hanna demonstrates, was therefore critically important

to spouses on either side of the home/front divide and her careful reading of soldier-husbands' letters (which survived in far greater numbers than did missives from wives) provides valuable insights into the limits of official censorship and the many practical and emotional difficulties involved in conducting a "marriage by correspondence" (p. 56).

In many ways, the coping strategies Canadian war wives used while worrying, writing and waiting for letters were shaped by social status and the availability of extended kin. In urban and rural settings across the country, many women moved in with their parents and in-laws and the book also includes an interesting discussion of the thousands of wives who packed up and moved to England to be nearer to their husbands and (in many cases) to the relatives they had left behind when they emigrated to Canada. The final section of the book makes it clear that many of these women continued to face difficulties after the war. Widowhood, divorce, desertion, alcoholism, venereal disease and the weight of veterans' physical and psychological wounds are some of the issues covered here and the book treats these often unhappy individual stories with thoughtfulness and care.

Hanna, of course, is not the first historian to have written about how distance shaped homefront life in the British dominions and the book would have benefitted from more engagement with work in this area by Antipodean scholars like Bart Ziino and Kate Hunter. Given Hanna's focus on the affective and psychological costs of war, this reviewer was also surprised by her lack of engagement with historical scholarship about emotions. Emotions are neither natural nor universal and they need to be historicised. The book's arguments would only have been enriched by a more in-depth consideration of the insights offered by this field. Ultimately, *Anxious Days and Tearful Nights* is a clearly written and compelling study that will appeal to historians interested in women, family, gender, epistolarity, homefront life and understanding the CEF as part of the British diaspora.

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