

## Review of "War Memories: Commemoration, Recollections and Writings on War" edited by Stephanie A.H. Bélanger and Renée Dickason

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Stephanie A.H. Bélanger and Renée Dickason, eds. *War Memories: Commemoration, Recollections and Writings on War*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017. Pp. 432.

Cultural memory of war is a problematic discourse. Commemoration varies among countries and cultural groups depending on national popular sentiment, which war, which side, which actors, which events and which themes to address. As time passes, what to remember can change based upon how society views itself. As the editors point out in this collection of essays, "Monuments and the politics surrounding their creation often embrace the values of the present rather than that of the past" (p. 5). Often war commemoration devolves on post-war cultural ideas and contexts of interpretation rather than the ideas that the war was fought over. The editors have collected a wide variety of essays that illustrate their key argument that collective and individual memory receives reinforcement through multiple mediums whether monuments, books or artistic works. By exploring these various mediums, the editors also illustrate the complexity of war memory and its reflective importance to societies. To this end, the book meets expectations of achieving a multi genre and transnational approach.

This collection of essays expands the memory mediums from Paul Fussell's the *Great War and Modern Memory* focus on English literary figures writing about the First World War and complements Jay Winter's *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning* multimedia study of the First World War to include more conflicts.<sup>1</sup> It also complements Jonathan Vance's *Death So Noble* for the Canadian context with several essays on the First World War but through the transnational approach, explores mediums that Vance did not and time periods outside the First World War scope.<sup>2</sup> The collection, therefore, is a valuable exploration of the evolution of the discourse about commemoration and memory over the twentieth century and that cultural memory of war is more than just the First World War.

<sup>1</sup> Fussell, Paul, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975); and Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan F. Vance, *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning, and the First World War* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1999).

These essays cover multiple wars in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries including the First and Second World Wars, Korea, Vietnam, Zimbabwe and the War in Afghanistan. The types of wars covered include world wars, limited conflicts, wars of decolonisation and liberation, civil wars, genocides and post-war integration. Further, the book's transnational perspective explores the commemoration of conflict in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, United Kingdom, United States and Zimbabwe. The essays examine commemorative mediums including sculpture, art, literature, film, song, stage and comics. To prevent what could be an exercise in a dominant social group collective memory, this book has a fourth section to include viewpoints from the New Zealand Māori, Aboriginal Australians and Canadian First Nations. The actors examined in the essays range from the government, non-profit monuments committees, fictional actors—both combatant and non-combatant—to the personal perspectives of conflict participants. This collection is an outgrowth of a conference held in Rennes, France in 2014.

The editors limit this transnational analysis to an English language reflection on war commemoration. As such it is more a reflection of how the English-speaking diaspora chooses to remember (or chooses not to remember) conflict as opposed to how the “enemy” or non-English allies remember it. That aside, it is illustrative of the growing trend of historians of war to consider transnational lived experiences and how various countries have similar or different themes and experiences. Likewise, this new military history also places attention on those often forgotten in war: minorities, women, children, First Nations, racialised people, conscientious objectors and others not conforming to the norm of their times. Further, a greater range of evidence is often used other than government documents or personal diaries such media in contemporary popular culture. Therefore, assessing war commemoration requires examining all forms of media.

Several essays about commemorating the Korean conflict in the United States illustrate how the public loses its “memory” of a war and the long path Korean veterans had to take to erect a public war memorial in Washington that included a long debate about its aesthetic design. In contrast, Australia had an easier time of building memorials in France commemorating the First World War in the 1920s and 30s, whereas again American attempts to build war memorials post-Second World War became caught up in the Cold War. In various

essays about books as a medium for commemoration, essayists point out how two twentieth century genocides are remembered differently, how an American and a Vietnamese immigrant remember the war in Vietnam and the lost and regained memory of the My Lai massacre and how Canadian soldiers' knowledge of Canada's trench warfare in the First World War influenced their thoughts that the War in Afghanistan was not a "real" war.

The use of novels also explores the war of liberation in Zimbabwe and women's perspective on the home front and the blurring of gender roles. The third section of the book explores alternative mediums to the book format including comics, song, stage productions and film documentaries. For example, Renée Dickason shows how comics helped build support among young adults for the Second World War and act as a popular medium until the 1970s. John Mullen examines how First World War soldier songs show the degree of permissible soldier grumbling about the conditions of the war. Nicole Cloarec in an essay on stage productions about the First World War in the 1960s shows how society can change its collective memory when the themes of the plays took a decidedly anti-war perspective partly due to a general anti-war protest movement and partly reflecting the "Lions Led by Donkeys" interpretation.<sup>3</sup> The final section explores First Nations and New Zealand's separate indigenous units until the 1960s. In Australia, only in the last twenty-five years has there been an appreciation of the Aboriginal's role in war. Lori-Anne Duech-Rainville in the final essay explores a Canadian First Nations story of fighting for their country to return to residential schools using the "circle" literary style of First Nations.

The editors and essayists are to be commended for the breadth of their national coverage, the wars examined and the mediums of commemoration. This work is a valuable addition to literature of war and memory.

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<sup>3</sup> Alan Clark, *The Donkeys* (London: Hutchinson, 1961).