

Introduction

For a war, the Second World War has had a good press. For American historian Studs Terkel it was *The Good War* and for Michael Adams, *The Best War Ever*.¹ For Canadian historians J.L. Granatstein and Peter Neary it was *The Good Fight*, and Michael Bliss called it “Canada’s Swell War.”² Although the upbeat mood implied in such titles often belies the substance of these works, these titles pay homage to a long-standing, still widely held, and in many respects understandable view of the Second World War. How could it be otherwise? Did not the Allies save democracy from totalitarian and expansionary powers, and, in the case of the Third Reich, a genocidal one? Did not the war supplant an economic depression with an economic boom? It is no wonder that pleasing nostalgia from the Second World War still reverberates strongly: Churchill’s defiant V for victory sign, Vera Lynn’s sentimental ballads, and the uplifting tempos of the big bands. Supposedly it was a better, simpler time, a time when patriotic people, making genuine sacrifices, put defence of country and freedom first. Everyone was a hero, whether he or she carried a rifle, riveted ships, bought or sold war bonds, or collected scrap for munitions. Whenever people lament the “materialism and moral relativism”³ of the present, or the lack of principled and inspirational leadership, somehow they think of lost innocence and noble purpose. Inherently they refer back to a golden age when people instinctively knew, and were prepared to defend, right from wrong, and when unity behind a great cause prevailed. Apparently, the “good war” was such a time.

Of course, not even the war against Hitler has had universal rave reviews. At moments of remembrance, commentators have recalled the war’s horrors, especially those that beg for guilt, like the fire-bombing of Dresden, the atom-bombing of Hiroshima, and the indifference to the Holocaust. Canadian discourse, both academic and popular, has also emphasized such events as the forced evacuation of the Japanese Canadians, the divisions over conscription, and military follies like the raid on Dieppe.⁴ The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, in its now-famous 1992 three-part documentary, *The Valour and the Horror*, chose to focus on the doomed defence of Hong Kong, the «murderous» air raids on Germany, and the waste of Canadian lives in the 1944 Normandy campaign. The fate of the series proved, however, that Canadians wanted to remember the Second World War as a good war, for the CBC took so much flack from military historians, veterans, and politicians that it never gave the sordid mess a second airing. The CBC’s

coverage of the fiftieth anniversary of D-Day and VE day was, as Canadians wanted, glowingly positive.

The aura of the “good war” pervaded such commemorations. In Parliament, MPs spoke of Canadians being “united in the struggle for a better world” and sacrificing as one for the “liberty and freedom of future generations.” Prime Minister Jean Chrétien, speaking at Courseulles-sur-Mer, France, on 6 June 1994, declared that those Canadians who had stormed the beaches where he now stood symbolized a country “united” in a common and “noble” cause, as “on their graves you will find names like McMillan and Cormier and Freedman.”⁵ Another prominent theme, also found in the work of many professional historians, was that the war “made» Canada: politically into a far more independent country, socially with the rise of the welfare state, and economically as a depression was replaced by an unprecedented, and lengthy, period of prosperity. As one reviewer said in summing up a spate of books in 1995, it was a “good war for Canada.”⁶

These pictures contrast with the sombre, often horrifying images typically called to mind by the Great War of 1914-18, images conveyed in the titles of such well-known academic works as *The Broken Years*, *Death's Men*, *Dismembering the Male*, and, from Granatstein and Desmond Morton, *Marching to Armageddon*.⁷ Recent work on the cultural legacy of the Great War has contested the belief that the carnage of those embattled years discredited romantic conceptions about combat.⁸ Still, the Second World War, though lengthier and causing far more death, has enjoyed a far better reputation. While the Great War is often seen to be rooted in shifting and self-serving European alliances, or in rival imperial ambitions, the reason for Allied participation in the Second World War remains clear-cut: saving democracy and freedom from tyrannical dictators.⁹ While the Great War is often pictured in terms of static trench warfare and appalling casualties, the Second World War, with its greater reliance on technology, projects as cleaner, and its battles as more fluid.¹⁰ People died, but at least it was for a good cause, and they did not die in the mud, amidst vermin and stench.

Certainly, the trope of the «good war» is not without some truth. The war's cause was just: Hitler was evil, the Japanese often unspeakably cruel, and Germany, Japan, and Italy had expansionist aims against people – the Slavs, the Chinese, and the Albanians – whom they deemed subhuman. At home, many of its consequences were beneficial: the Canada of 1945 was far stronger economically, had earned a greater presence internationally, and, with its welfare state, had become a more compassionate place than it had been in 1939. Moreover, for its size, Canada made a stellar contribution, both on the home front and in providing weapons and men for the fight overseas. The first part of this book will confirm that the myth of the good war has its basis in considerable fact. Here we will encounter passionate army recruits, tireless munitions workers, unflagging war charity volunteers, unsparing Victory Bond purchasers, ardent ARP wardens, and consumers who zealously followed the rationing rules.

But another, less familiar, story shows that just as emphasis on the «good war» comforts, it also clouds. Fifty years after it all started, Charles Lynch, a former war correspondent, felt it necessary to remind his readers that “not everyone was nice ... in Canada’s good war.”¹¹ In many ways the popular memory has sanitized and simplified a “complex and problematic” event,¹² whose legacies for Canada were not just profound, but also contradictory.

The not-so-good-war manifested itself in numerous domains. Many asked whether Canadians were working as hard as possible to back the war effort, and to what extent they were profiting illegally from the conflict. Before long the rapidly accelerating demands of the war created much criticism that many Canadians appeared unwilling to make needed sacrifices and were shamelessly placing self-serving and pecuniary interests above national needs. Such attitudes seemed demonstrated by the mixed responses to increased taxation, and by the sometimes hostile reactions from much of the farm belt and organized labour to the extra demands placed upon their services and to Ottawa’s implementation of a wage and price freeze in late 1941. Also fostering anxiety was the perception that many ordinary people were exploiting unique wartime conditions to make illegal wind-fall profits. One manifestation was rent gouging, often for rundown spaces, which was fuelled by extensive wartime migration to centres of war production, mainly from rural areas and small towns. Coupon rationing was implemented in 1942 and 1943 to ensure fair distribution at just prices; but besides obliging people to drive, drink, and eat less, it also precipitated extensive cheating and black market activity.

The war years also saw mounting alarm over perceptions of crumbling social decorum and the spread of debauched sexual conduct. In part, this view was a response to the behaviour of recruits, who attracted from civilians not only warmth and support but also indignation and disgust. Numerous servicemen imbibed and brawled excessively and adopted a predatory attitude toward women when letting loose from the rigours, pressures, and often, the tedium of training. It was also a way to express the bonding process among recruits and the rough masculine characteristics that they thought were expected from men in uniform. Apprehension also developed over the behaviour of women who reacted to the loneliness, strain, and uncertainties of these years by apparently throwing caution to the winds. Worries intensified over marriages undertaken in haste, rising wartime divorce, “loose” young women seeking out men in uniform, growing illegitimacy, and rampant infidelity, the latter the subject of often ill-founded rumours that, nonetheless, destroyed relationships.

Prostitution came into public focus. It was seen to be proliferating to serve a military clientele, among whom VD rates rose sharply. Moral and medical concerns sparked raids on red light districts and brothels in many areas. Action also intensified to control so-called promiscuous good-time girls especially since, at least initially within the military, neither lectures, nor the provision of prophylactics,

nor the threat of fines against servicemen who contracted the disease were able to stem VD infection rates. Soon, many women found themselves more carefully scrutinized and often harassed by authorities. Health officials initiated traces to locate the women named as having transmitted VD. They were then compelled to undergo testing and possible treatment. These expedients led not only to successful identifications but also to mistakes, embarrassment, and suffering. Nevertheless, there were other, more positive, reactions: franker discussion of and education about VD and improved treatment facilities, as governments endeavoured to deal with a problem still by and large considered taboo.

The anxiety of many Canadians in wartime was also fed by the large-scale migration of women into the paid workforce, namely into jobs then typically considered “male” in nature, as well as by women’s unprecedented inclusion in the military. The received interpretation of these trends in Canada stresses widespread social concern over women’s new roles, citing the supposed preponderance of sexist government propaganda and mass media content, the mistreatment of women on job sites and in the military, and, ultimately, their massive dismissal following the conflict. In this version, popular discourse portrays women as offering a short-term patriotic gesture to “back the attack” by releasing men for active service and projecting assurances that women’s new, and often “manly,” wartime jobs, would not compromise their appearance, femininity, or family-centred role.¹³ There is much evidence to back this thesis, but these were not the only messages delivered to or internalized by women. Media content and government propaganda not only influenced but also reflected popular trends and ideas. They lauded women for successfully assuming unconventional and highly skilled roles in the workplace and the military, as well as for running all aspects of the wartime home in the absence of men and managing monumental volunteer activities. Furthermore, both during and after the war, women often stressed their sense of accomplishment, growing confidence, importance, and independence.

The legacy from these years points beyond a traditionalist backlash triggered by anxieties over changing gender roles and their perceived threat to conventional family life. In the context of the times, it also indicates significant and progressive shifts: increased participation rates and growing rights of women in the workplace; greater access to government benefits, particularly to those established by the Department of Veterans Affairs; and a generally growing acceptance of women in new roles, including, relatively soon, the postwar military.

Still, concerns over the stability of Canadian families in wartime, especially over the growing numbers of working mothers, exaggerated negative depictions of Canadian children through an overly attentive scrutiny of child neglect and juvenile delinquency. Contributing to this sense of crisis – though they were not publicized like alarmist assumptions about working mothers – were new pressures on underfunded, understaffed, and easily overwhelmed provincial and local child welfare services. These agencies had the new and onerous obligation to undertake

investigations for the federal Dependents' Allowance Board, adjudicating appropriate financial support for women with husbands in uniform. Despite blame for wartime increases in juvenile delinquency being laid at the feet of working mothers, it can be shown that demographic forces are more responsible. The rise in the proportion of adolescent youths among the general population, in combination with the large-scale migration into the military of the most crime-inclined demographic cohort, seems to offer a more convincing explanation. The latter trend provided civilian police forces, even understaffed ones, with the time to prosecute petty crimes perpetrated by youth. Yet wartime discourse remained typified by headlines about latchkey children and street gangs, and the consequent need to reconstitute so-called traditional values and structures as soon as possible after the war. This reaction not only pushed many working women back into the home but also, in several parts of the country, served to bring about initiatives such as more religious instruction in public schools. On the arguably more progressive side, action also intensified to upgrade community recreational services; to create more comprehensive, inclusive, and professionally run schools that could better retain and train youth; and to increase the presence and professionalism of the juvenile justice system.

While the departure of many fathers and older brothers for overseas added to worries over the conduct of the youth left behind, it was among these men and others – those who actually fought the war – that behavioural problems became most evident. Many citizens were aware that those in uniform, in keeping with the sometimes errant conduct they had already demonstrated while in training in Canada, shed inhibitions even more overseas. Those who fought in the Great War, and many family members who welcomed them home, understood that war frequently transformed participants drastically and, all too often, for the worse. But many Great War veterans were silent about their time overseas, or if they did speak, refrained from dwelling on the horrors or suggesting in any way that so much death was in vain. They tended, rather, to recount the amusing anecdotes, to stress the camaraderie of those years, the sacrifices of their comrades, and their participation in a noble cause. Also, by 1939, a generation had elapsed since the Great War. Nearly all the volunteers in this fight against fascism had no direct memories of that event. One study of those joining the Canadian army found their average age to be just nineteen and a half.¹⁴ Although some men enlisting in 1939 sought to escape the Depression, and though many considered themselves realistic about the brutal experiences that might lie ahead, far more prevalent were idealistic notions about patriotism, duty, solidarity with the Empire, and the desire for adventure.

The conditions many confronted would forge attitudes and release conduct that increasingly distanced them from the moral and social norms of their communities in Canada. In contrast to the impression conveyed by morale-raising media accounts and letters home, which generally portrayed a positive picture thanks to censorship regulations and men's desire not to distress loved ones, numerous war

participants shamelessly cheated or plundered from desperate civilians; drank excessively at every opportunity; and exploited the loneliness or destitution of women in devastated countries to obtain sex. Among the men overseas, significant numbers succumbed to battle exhaustion and returned home broken in body and spirit – altered, sometimes, forever.

The planning to re-establish these men in civilian life eventually began within weeks of the decision to wage war, to ensure that veterans would be brought back quickly and provided with generous programs to help them thrive in the postwar world. These plans were in large part devised by politicians and mandarins who were Great War veterans. Many recalled only too well the widespread anger among their former comrades and the potentially destabilizing force that numerous veterans came to represent when they lingered overseas while awaiting repatriation or later when provided with what they considered niggardly postwar support programs.

Still, despite their jubilant welcome home, the road back to civvy street and family life was an arduous one for many Second World War veterans. They were often unable to settle down and hold jobs, and were either emotionally distant or overly belligerent. Many felt comfortable only around fellow veterans, considering civilians naïve, parochial, or pampered. Many resented wives or girlfriends who had grown too independent, and others could not reconnect with their children. Divorce rates spiked soon after the conflict and further fuelled anxiety over the moral impact of the war. Indeed, many Canadians even worried about the initial explosion in postwar marriage rates, fearing a continuation of the wartime pattern of quick, ill-conceived unions, a large proportion of which, it was predicted, would end in failure.

Yet the greatest desire of people who by then had lived through a devastating depression and a world war was stability. After years of loneliness, strain, and turmoil, countless Canadians yearned for greater predictability in their lives, a calm and secure future that marriage, home, and traditional family life seemed to promise. Canadian men in large numbers, many with new war brides, quietly eased into this model. For many others, the return to civilian life involved varying degrees of painful readjustment.

A key to the re-establishment of postwar family life was what became known as the Veterans Charter, a program that, like the much-heralded American G.I. Bill of Rights, justifiably contributed to the picture of the Second World War ultimately being a “Good War.”¹⁵ Arguably the most comprehensive benefit package in Canadian history, its architects were motivated by the perception that too many veterans of the Great War had failed to reintegrate. Moreover, there was strong public support to do right by veterans this time around; and bolstering this trend was the demand from most Canadians for more government planning and social security to avoid a repeat of postwar turmoil or a reassertion of the Great Depression. Through programs that included generous cash awards, widely available and free vocational training and university education, and extensive grants to start a farm

or business, the Veterans Charter did more than just get men back on their feet. Its legacy was to have provided millions of Canadians who had come of age during the bleakness of the depression and endured a world war with the means of realizing optimistic social mobility, greater financial security, and in many cases a traditional patriarchal family life – though to rather mixed responses from women.

This synthesis seeks to fill several gaps in the social history of Canada's Second World War.¹⁶ Though some works singling out specific groups – namely, women, organized labour, and servicemen – have addressed fears about wartime immorality and social instability, there is no overall assessment of this troublesome, even sordid, side of Canada's war experience. The political and military story is well known.¹⁷ Not adequately addressed, however, are the multitudes who reacted with alarm, and sometimes panic, over what they perceived as the war's role in unleashing socially and morally destructive trends. Such a story has interested historians elsewhere.¹⁸ But while British and American scholars have written much about war's strains – namely, the suspicions millions had that their countrymen and women were using the war for personal gain or pleasure – there is relatively little on the subject in Canadian literature. Canadian historians have not reminded us that even a good war can have lots of bad people, or at least people who could be perceived as bad when seen through the prism of wartime anxiety or prudery. Yet this story looms very large in the records of scores of national, provincial, and local government departments and agencies in Canada; in the papers of key national politicians to local social service workers; in both urban and rural newspapers and magazines; in films and radio broadcasts; and, closer to the present, in more than seventy-five personal interviews, covering Canadians from coast to coast, all of which form the foundation for this book.¹⁹ Told from a national perspective, the story that unfolds in these pages will leave some exceptions and nuances unexamined. No doubt, studies honing in on West Toronto, say, or Chicoutimi, Medicine Hat, or Pugwash, would produce slightly different accounts, and in time those local tales must be told and a new synthesis may well emerge.²⁰ In the meantime, it is crucial to know the national picture, not only because general patterns are more important than anomalies but also because local departures can be properly assessed only by understanding broad trends.

Most notable among historians to assess the implications of the “not-so-good-war” is John Costello, who focuses on Britain and the United States. In two books, *Love, Sex and War* and *Virtue under Fire*, he describes societies being catapulted toward more lenient, or modern, attitudes. Demonstrating this shift, he cites the generally enthusiastic responses given in 1948 to the appearance of Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* and Irwin Shaw's *The Young Lions*, books by veterans that were “brutally honest ... sexually explicit.” Such writers, especially Mailer, made generous use of profanity to elucidate the destructive and cruel as well as to convey the liberating impact of war or military life on those it touched most directly.²¹

Canadian veterans were also soon producing literary accounts of the Second World War. Like those by Mailer, Shaw, and a little later on, James Jones, they cast many of those fighting for the “right side” as ordinary, flawed people, capable of, for example, uttering Nazi-type vitriol against Jews as in Hugh Garner’s 1949 novel, *Storm Below*, or giving into carnal temptation, as did Edward Meade’s married protagonist, infantryman Bob O’Rourke, in *Remember Me*, published only a year after the war ended.²² Even more provocative was Earle Birney’s *Turvey: A Military Picaresque* (1949). Here, the author used his experiences as an army personnel officer to produce a representational central character: a simple-minded sad-sack private who was always getting into trouble, and whose escapades satirically exposed an often mad military machine that “persecutes” and “buffets around” the lowly. Birney describes, for instance, a full-fledged military court martial to prosecute the trivial, a military psychiatrist more removed from reality than his patients, the heavy involvement of soldiers in black marketing, their insatiable desire for liquor and sex, and their propensity to speak in “raw language.”

But did the publication of such works really signify a new and more promiscuous postwar? Meade’s book was essentially ignored until 1965, when McClelland and Stewart rediscovered it and made it part of its New Canadian Library Series. *Turvey* initially sold some 7,000 copies, a decent figure but hardly a blockbuster. Also, being the most daring in its use of language – with terms such “lover’s nuts” – Birney’s book proved problematic for its publisher, McClelland and Stewart. Jack McClelland insisted on changes to accommodate community standards, urging that exclamations of “Jesus Christ” by soldiers be misspelled, and that references to “cunt” or “crunt” be removed. In his defence Birney referred to Meade’s use of “horse’s arse and dirty bastards,” but McClelland called this language gratuitous and said it denigrated *Remember Me*. While many reviewers praised *Turvey* for its realism, others, focusing on the profane and salacious, produced conservative- or even prudish-sounding critiques about an over-reliance on “barrack-room humour” and “bodily functions,” and the book was banned in libraries across Canada.²³ Also worth noting is that *The Naked and the Dead*, though remaining on the US best seller list for two months, was censored in several reviews, including in the *New York Times*, for its “excesses in obscenity and attention to sexual matters.” And while words like “bitch” and “ass” punctuate the text, Mailer, after protracted battles with his publisher over the use of “fuck,” finally resolved the issue through the creation of a soldiers’ dialect that resulted in terms like “fug” and “fugging,” which appeared more than 400 times in the book.²⁴

But clearly there is far more than misgivings over avant-garde literature to challenge the picture of a more liberal-minded postwar. Indeed, the late 1940s and ’50s are often portrayed as projecting the very antithesis to loosening values. Popular images include the stay-at-home wife, the baby boom, clean-cut kids, and a burgeoning middle-class migrating to family-centred suburban neighbourhoods. Such trends are often linked to the yearning for stability after decades of uncertainty

and, especially during wartime, to troubling social changes. They are also buttressed by the Cold War, particularly in the United States but also in Canada, which forged a conservative political consensus and the promotion of traditional family life as a source of protection and comfort against the external and internal threats posed by Communism.²⁵ Yet obviously the postwar years cannot be summed up in terms of ticky-tacky homes, moms in aprons, or *Father Knows Best*. They also saw, for instance, steadily increasing numbers of working mothers, the scandalous Kinsey reports on sexual conduct, and screaming headlines about the juvenile delinquency, or JD, problem.

But how can this period have both these sides? Clearly, the contention here is that much of the explanation lies in the implications of the “bad war,” or at least in many of those things that people saw as being bad. In many ways, the war was a social accelerator, quickly thrusting people into situations that boldly challenged their moral and social conventions. On the one hand wartime change charted paths toward greater lenience; on the other it precipitated fear of fragmentation when cohesion was essential, and of a chaotic and morally debased postwar. As such, it also produced much in the way of reaction and recoil.

Saints, sinners, and soldiers all had their starring roles in “Canada’s war” and peacetime reconstruction. Not only the patriotic but also the problematic – the real, the exaggerated, and even, arguably, the imagined – solicited tremendous attention. Through the responses they garnered, they helped produce major legacies in law, society, and culture that echo to this very day. Indeed, one could conclude that in large part this was a “good war” for Canada because so many Canadians fretted over and grew determined to prevent their fellow citizens from going “bad.”