

# Debunking Official History and Historical Narratives: *The Wars*, Canadian Great War Recruitment Propaganda, and Social Expectations

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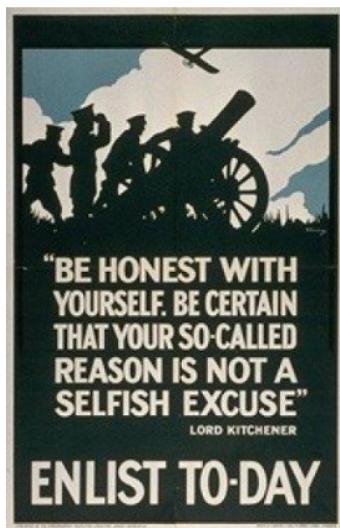
**Abstract:** This paper examines the historical moment and complex ideologies of early 20th century Canadian society to facilitate a deepened understanding of *The Wars* (1977) by Timothy Findley and its historical foundations. I argue that the novel's depiction of Robert Ross critiques official history and historical narratives by illustrating how Robert's character interacts with real societal expectations before and during the Great War. I situate the novel in its historical moment by demonstrating how Robert engages with constructs of gender, nationalism, and imperialism that are presented in recruitment propaganda for the Great War.

*The Wars* (1977) by Timothy Findley examines collective memory and official history by telling the story of Robert Ross, a fictional soldier in the Great War. His story is constructed through the efforts of a biographer who uncovers that the realities of Robert's lived experience conflict with collective memory and official history (Grace 51). Thus, the text presents a neglected historical account of an individual's experience in the Great War. I will examine the novel's historical moment and the complex ideologies of early 20th century Canadian society to facilitate a deepened understanding of the text's historical foundations. At the start of the 20th century, complex ideologies of gender, nationalism, and imperialism informed Canadian societal expectations produced by anti-modernism, the dominant ideology of the historical moment. Anti-modernist

rhetoric responded to industrialization and permeated Canadian society with the encouragement of British imperialism: “the basic premise being that the dull, unhealthy nature of modern life could be remedied only by a twentieth-century revival of chivalric ideals” (Maroney 79). The restoration of traditional attitudes and ways of living drew intimate connections between masculinity, guns, sports, and athleticism, and promoted nationalism, imperialism, and a sense of duty to society. Great War recruitment propaganda engaged with these anti-modernist ideologies and provoked shame in hesitant enlistees. Robert interacts with the themes in recruitment propaganda by failing to meet the social expectations they expound. His failures and wartime experiences jointly undermine and debunk the myths of war and the expectations of early 20th century Canadian society. Consequently, Robert’s story critiques how official history and historical narratives during and after the Great War depicted the conflict as a glorious battle between good and evil.

This paper examines three propaganda posters in conjunction with Robert’s character and his wartime experiences to argue that Robert provides a criticism of the novel’s historical moment. Recruitment propaganda appealed strongly to social and cultural expectations of early 20th century Canadian society, establishing their usefulness as documents that depict the pressure dominant ideologies placed on prospective soldiers like Robert. I use historical scholarship to construct the historical background of the propaganda posters, literary criticism of *The Wars* to supplement my analysis, and close reading to establish the relevance of my paper’s historical contextualization of the novel.

## Debunking Enlistment as a Self-Sacrificial, Glorious, and National Duty



“Be Honest With Yourself. Be Certain That Your So-Called Reason Is Not A Selfish Excuse, Lord Kitchener Enlist Today”

CWM 19880069-829 - Canadian War Museum

Robert’s reasons for enlisting in the army, heavily influenced by his relationship with his sister Rowena, fail to meet the imperialist and nationalist expectation of self-sacrifice. The responsibility and shame that Robert feels towards Rowena’s death shares an underlying theme

of selfishness with a recruitment poster containing nationalist and imperialist motifs. The poster quotes the British war minister Lord Kitchener: “Be honest with yourself. Be certain that your so-called reason is not a selfish excuse [...] Enlist Today” (“Be honest with yourself”). The imperialist and nationalist duty to serve one’s country circulated as a primary reason for enlisting in the Canadian Army. The essential message of these calls to arms asserted that men “owe it to Canada to uphold her honour and defend her from the Germans” (Maroney 81). Canadian and British propaganda glorified self-sacrifice by idolizing imperialist figures such as Lord Kitchener (81). Nationalist propaganda placed duty to one’s country above all else, even family. Rev. H.F. Woodcock, a recruiter at the outset of the Great War, voiced the nationalist sentiment permeating Canadian society, saying, “[L]ove of home and family was not to stand in the way of duty to one’s country” (86). Critics of *The Wars*, such as

Sherrill Grace, have asserted that “social and family pressure leads [Robert] to volunteer for Canada’s citizen army,” establishing the relevance of constructing an ideological backdrop to the novel’s setting (Grace 50).

Robert’s sense of duty to his country is lacking, seemingly replaced by his loyalty to his sister and reinforced by his aversion to violence. Robert fails to fulfill his duty of protecting his sister. When Rowena falls from her wheelchair and dies, Robert is nowhere to be found. A passage recounting the day of Rowena’s fall presents the “selfish excuse” that Robert has for neglecting his brotherly duty of protecting her from harm (“Be honest with yourself”): “It was Robert’s fault. Robert was her guardian and he was locked in his bedroom. Making love to his pillows” (Findley 18). The guilt and selfishness Robert feels are established by the word “fault” (18); the incomplete sentence, “Making love to his pillows” (18); and the indirect responsibility Robert associates between his self-indulgent pleasure-chasing and his sister’s death. In the aftermath of Rowena’s death, Robert lacks purpose: Robert’s “hands felt empty. In his mind, they kept reaching out for the back of Rowena’s chair” (21). Literary critic Anna Branach-Kallas discusses Robert’s imperative for enlisting, saying, “He does not share his nation’s enthusiasm for the war and enlists for reasons that remain unclear to the reader” (276). However, when reading Robert’s actions in the context of the social expectations of his time and with an awareness of his inability to meet such standards, Robert’s implicit and explicit reasons for going to war are ascertained. Ultimately, Rowena’s death gives Robert a subconscious reason to enlist as a soldier: to fill the emptiness that his sister left. Robert’s inability to kill Rowena’s rabbits after she dies provides him with a conscious reason to join the army: to learn how to “kill as an exercise of will” (Findley 26). Robert’s enlistment is not born from allegiance to his country, as the referenced propaganda poster expects and insists. Instead, his enlistment is motivated by his severed bond with his sister and a self-indulgent goal, anticipating Robert’s failure to meet

societal expectations.

Robert's inability to meet the social expectations of the Great War period enables his character to undermine the glory and self-sacrifice of war. Robert's reasons for enlisting are self-serving. Thus, his motivations refute the pre- and post-war historical narratives that uphold an "idealized image of [...] collective sacrifice" (Branach-Kallas 274). Robert's decision to enlist, prompted by his sister's death, demotes the importance of defending one's country to a secondary obligation. This contrasts recruitment rhetorics like Rev. H.F. Woodcock's proclamation "that love of home and family [is] not to stand in the way of duty to one's country" (Maroney 86). Additionally, Robert's stated reason for becoming a soldier—to kill as an act of will—is not achieved, as is shown in the scene where Robert involuntarily fires his gun, killing a German soldier (Findley 132). The story's narrative describes the gunshot as "sudden" to Robert, prompting Robert's frantic response to his own misfire (132). The description of Robert's reaction to the event associates his character's agency with a sense of helplessness due to his inability to control his body. His involuntary firing establishes his failure to achieve his conscious reason for enlisting. War did not teach Robert to kill as an act of will; instead, he killed accidentally due to the chaos of war. Robert's shame, his felt selfishness, and his involuntary killing of an enemy soldier refute the characterization of soldiers as glorious, self-sacrificing, and dutiful. Rather than being glorified, Robert is presented as pathetic and ashamed, as a figure who does not always have agency over his actions. Therefore, Robert's story subverts the Canadian government's historical depictions of soldiers in the Great War.

## Debunking Athleticism and Sport as Preparatory for the Game of War



“Why Don't They Come? Why Be a Mere Spectator Here When You Should Play a Man's Part in The Real Game Overseas?”

CWM 19880262-001 - Canadian War Museum

Robert's athleticism, detailed in the chapters before he reaches the front lines, contradicts the conception of war as a game saturated in the masculine social expectations. The theme of athleticism that Robert interacts with appears in a propaganda poster appealing to the masculinity heavily

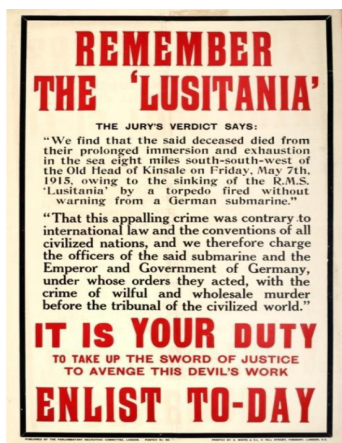
associated with sports. The poster, depicting a soldier looking at an image of a hockey rink that appears within his gun smoke, says, “Why don't they come? Why be a mere spectator here when you should play a mans [sic] part in the real game overseas?” (“Why don't they come?”). The poster's idea of a “real game” alludes to anti-modernist ideologies, which promoted “[m]ilitary drill and rifle shooting, like hunting, ... [as a response] to concerns that modern urban life threatened the masculinity of men and youth” (Brown 203). Anti-modernists believed that “[e]xercise and participation in martial activities could stem moral and physical decay and encourage good character” (203). Consequently, governments encouraged school-aged children to train in shooting due to the perceived value of guns as tools to rekindle traditional masculinity (198). Many schools encour-

aged boys to participate in organized sports, adhering to a tradition of associating athleticism with the social project of British and Canadian public schools that aimed to shape boys into men (Bennett 255). While Robert adheres to the expectation of athleticism in some ways, demonstrated by his idolization of marathon winner Tom Longboat and Robert's solitary runs outside his training compound in Lethbridge, he fails to meet societal expectations in other ways (Findley 20, 27). Despite how heavily guns permeated masculine culture in English Canadian youth (Brown 197), "Robert had never aimed a gun at anything. It was a foreign state of mind" (Findley 26). Therefore, Robert's failure to meet societal expectations is demonstrated by his lack of knowledge on how to operate a gun in a society where shooting saturates masculine life.

Robert's battlefield experiences debunk the idea of war being a "game" by establishing war's unglorified and dangerous nature. Additionally, the futility of athleticism to a soldier's survival undermines social ideologies advocating for the use of sport in preparing for war. During Robert's trek to the front line, the narrator notes that "[s]ometimes the roads were shelled," but "[r]unning was pointless ... here in the open any attempt to run in darkness led to drowning" (Findley 72). The undignified death of drowning in war—dying before even reaching the front line—argues against the battlefield being a game. The futility of athleticism to aid one's survival refutes the idea that sport was "'ideal training for the manly game of war'" (Brown 201). Running cannot help one escape death on the trek to the front lines—it may even lead to premature death. The dangerous and unglorified nature of war, which rejects its characterization as a game, is exemplified by the gas attack that Robert and his comrades experience. Lacking gas masks, Robert instructs his companions to urinate on torn pieces of cloth to save them from the chlorine gas (Findley 126). The imagery of men "fumbl[ing] with [their] flies" discredits any rhetoric of glory in war (127). Holding urine-soaked cloths to their faces, some of which are soaked with the fluids of another man, establishes the indignity of war. The revelation that life or

death relies on the ability to urinate on command rather than athletic prowess defames the idealized depiction of war as a game. Robert's experiences in war undermine and debunk the period's social expectations of masculine athleticism and the rhetoric of war being a game, critiquing official history and historical narratives that are propagandized by recruitment posters.

### Debunking War as Fighting Evil and Enacting Justice



Remember The 'Lusitania' Enlist To-Day  
CWM 19670086-007 - Canadian War Museum

The revenge-seeking narrative in *The Wars*, which relates to Rowena's death, shares with a recruitment poster the theme of upholding justice. The poster implores readers to "Remember the 'Lusitania'" ("Recruitment Posters - Remember the 'Lusitania.'").

The poster's extensive text describes the Allied jury's verdict on the German's act of sinking the British ocean liner Lusitania, and includes comments that vilify the Germans for the "crime of wilful and wholesale murder." ("Recruitment Posters - Remember the 'Lusitania.'"). At the bottom of the page, the poster states in a large, red font, "It is YOUR duty to take up the sword of justice to avenge this devil's work [...] Enlist today." ("Remember the 'Lusitania.'"). As a dominion of the United Kingdom, Canada felt allegiance to the mother nation, which imperialists viewed as "the 'highest secular instrument' for freedom, justice, and peace that the world had ever known" (Maroney 86). Therefore, to protect all that is good, Canadian men were encouraged, if

not expected, to do their part in fighting evil by enlisting. Neglecting the national duty of enlistment was not only a slight against the mother nation but was a show of immorality. Idealistic propaganda posited that the Great War “was not simply a war between nations; it was a war between right and wrong” (84–85). In this war, the allies of the United Kingdom were good, and the allies of the Germans were evil. The theme of revenge in Robert’s story is established when his mother insists that Robert kill Rowena’s rabbits after her death. After the rabbits’ execution, which Robert refused to enact, he explains, “All these actors were obeying some kind of fate we call ‘revenge.’ Because a girl had died—and her rabbits had survived her” (Findley 23). The innocence of the rabbits, whose deaths were merely acts of retribution, introduces the concept of killing individuals tangentially associated with the tragedy at hand: the rabbits had to die because their owner, Rowena, had died. Robert’s refusal to partake in the meaningless deaths of innocent beings to satisfy a need for revenge establishes his failure to meet social ideologies that characterize violence as justice against evil.

Robert’s encounter with a German soldier debunks the myth that all Germans are evil by displaying the enemy soldier’s humanity. Additionally, Robert’s wartime experiences reject the Lusitania poster’s proposal that a soldier can wield the “sword of justice” on the battlefields of the Great War. After surviving a gas attack that hit Robert and his comrades while in a crater on the front lines, he noticed “a German soldier with a pair of binoculars staring right at him” (Findley 130). In response to Robert and his comrades moving to escape the crater, the German nodded in approval, as if “to say: *get up*” (131). Robert soon understood that “the German obviously intended them to go free” (131). Just before Robert escaped the crater, the German made a sudden movement and “[w]hat happened next was all so jumbled and fast that Robert was never to sort it out” (132). Robert’s involuntary act of shooting the German was in response to their sudden movement, which had only been the German

soldier reaching for his binoculars. Upon escaping the crater, Robert was shocked to discover that “[l]ying beside the German was a modified Mauser rifle of the kind used by snipers. He could have killed them all. Surely that had been his intention. But he’d relented” (133). Robert had originally thought the German soldier was not armed, which explains Robert’s shock (131). On the contrary, the German had the exact tool to eradicate Robert’s entire squad. His act of humanity, having the option to kill but deciding against it, opposes the propagandized depiction of Germans as “devils.” The civil interaction between enemies demonstrates how “[t]he army functions in *The Wars* as a structure of organized murder and violence, which disrupts the bases of civilized coexistence” (Branach-Kallas 277). In the aftermath of the German’s death, a haunting reality sinks in for Robert that the Germans are people fighting and dying for their country in a battle far removed from the conflict’s origin, and that they are no different than Robert and his comrades. Robert’s experience in war exhibits that, like Rowena’s rabbits, soldiers are merely innocent figures dying because of their tangential relationship with the main forces in the conflict, discrediting the generalized view of the Great War as a fight between good and evil.

Contextualizing the social and cultural expectations leading up to the Great War helps to place *The Wars* within its historical backdrop, facilitating a deeper understanding of the ideological constructs interacting with Robert character. Examining Great War recruitment propaganda posters that interact with the ideological themes in the novel—masculinity, nationalism, and imperialism—grants insight into a historical narrative that this novel attempts to critique. Robert’s wartime experiences and failure to meet these ideological ideals enable his character to subvert the societal expectations of early 20th century Canadian society, the myths about war perpetuated by recruitment posters, and constructions of the war in official history and traditional historical narratives. Robert’s story and the criticism that his character advances against the ideologically constructed social expectations of the book’s setting accu-

rately depict an individual experience within the Great War, one that had been forgotten due to the Canadian government's official historical account of the event. While present audiences may be well acquainted with commentary that is critical of war and violence, *The Wars* was one of the first Canadian novels to oppose the Canadian government's construction of a pro-war historical narrative of the Great War. The novel recognizes the reality many soldiers faced in the trenches and on the battlefield, which often is lost to the generalized picture of the Great War and the pro-war sentiments that epitomized the early 20th century.

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