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## **(Re)Turning to Europe for the Great War**

### **Representations of World War I in Contemporary Anglophone Canadian Fiction**

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#### **Zusammenfassung**

*Abenteuerlust und auch die Meinung, dem Mutterland verpflichtet zu sein, bewog eine Generation junger kanadischer Männer dazu, 1914 und in den folgenden Jahren nach Europa aufzubrechen und dort an einem Krieg zugunsten von oder in Ländern teilzunehmen, die die Vorfahren einiger dieser Männer verlassen hatten, um in Kanada ein neues Leben aufzubauen. Viele junge Frauen folgten den Rekruten, um als Pflegepersonal ebenfalls einen Beitrag zu den Kriegsbemühungen zu leisten. Von den frühen Kriegstagen an wurde bereits das Erfahrene literarisch verarbeitet und wird bis heute von AutorInnen aufgegriffen. Mit seinem Roman *The Wars* führte Timothy Findley 1977 eine ironische Note in die bis dahin überwiegend idealisierende oder betont realistische Repräsentation des Ersten Weltkriegs seitens kanadischer Romanschriftsteller ein. Beeinflusst von Findleys implizit subversiver Verarbeitung des Themas „Krieg“ verwendeten kanadische AutorInnen in den folgenden Jahren eine Reihe innovativer und zuweilen experimenteller Ansätze in ihren Darstellungen des Ersten Weltkrieges. Im Folgenden sollen zeitgenössische kanadische Romane in Hinblick auf Themenfokussierung, Erzählstrategien und Zielsetzung untersucht und die Frage nach erkennbaren neuen Tendenzen gestellt werden.*

#### **Résumé**

*En 1914 et dans les années qui suivirent, l'attrait de l'aventure ainsi que le sentiment d'être l'obligé de la métropole incitèrent une génération de jeunes Canadiens à partir pour l'Europe pour participer à une guerre en faveur des pays ou dans les pays que les ancêtres de quelques-uns parmi eux avaient quittés pour bâtir une nouvelle vie au Canada. Beaucoup de jeunes femmes suivirent les recrues pour apporter leur contribution à la guerre comme infirmières. Dès les premiers jours de la Première Guerre mondiale, ces expériences étaient transposées en littérature et aujourd'hui encore, des auteurs reprennent ce sujet. Avec son roman *The Wars* (1977), Timothy Findley a introduit une touche d'ironie dans la représentation de la Première Guerre mondiale qui, dans la fiction canadienne, avait été plutôt idéalisée ou ostensiblement réaliste auparavant. Influencés par le traitement implicitement subversif du sujet de la guerre par Findley, des*

*romanciers canadiens utilisèrent dans les années subséquentes des stratégies innovatrices et parfois expérimentales pour leurs représentations de la Première Guerre mondiale. L'essai vise à analyser des romans de guerre contemporains canadiens quant à leurs sujets, à leurs stratégies narratives et à leurs objectifs.*

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“We all fight on two fronts, the one facing the enemy, the one facing what we do to the enemy.”  
(Joseph Boyden, *Three Day Road*)

## 1. Canadian Writing about World War I

The history of writing about the Great War started already when the war was being fought and it manifests itself in various phases, as Dagmar Novak has convincingly argued in *Dubious Glory: The Two World Wars and the Canadian Novel* (2000). Novak's text is the only comprehensive study of Canadian fiction on World War I and ends with her exploration of Timothy Findley's 1977 novel *The Wars*. While subsequent fictional recreations of the war are drawn attention to in a number of articles, there is no comparative evaluation of recent trends in the treatment of the subject, for example, studies of the choice of themes or of narrative techniques.

Novak identifies three phases of Canadian writing about World War I: the romance tradition, realism, and irony.

### 1.1 The Romance Tradition

Citing as examples the novels of Charles Gordon (i.e. Ralph Connor) and Robert James Campbell Stead, she contends that during the war years and for most of the 1920s Canadian fiction about the war was dominated by colonial heritage, and therefore Victorian idealism (Novak 2000, 7-10; 21-25; 29-34). The War itself was presented as an adventure and as a great cause which would lead to the nation's regeneration as well as a better and more democratic world. Novels featured idealized characters who were subjected to the transforming power of the war experiences which served to bring out the best in men. The actual conflict was rendered in terms of binary oppositions, that is, the juxtaposition of light and dark settings and good and bad people.

### 1.2 Realism

From about the late 1920s on and under the influence of both Canadian prairie realism and novels like Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (trans. 1930) and Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), the realities of war began

to be represented in Canadian fiction, with Charles Yale Harrison's *Generals Die in Bed* (1930) probably being the best known example of this new trend (Novak 2000, 53-61). This novel and subsequent ones featured the conditions in the trenches, the brutalizing effects of war, the soldiers' sense of estrangement from those at home, and the noise, chaos, nervous breakdowns and mental disorders which were characteristic of wartime experiences on the front.

### 1.3 Irony

The example Novak gives of this phase is Timothy Findley's *The Wars* which, she argues, contains romance *and* realist elements but parodies and subverts both (e.g. the notion of heroism, the specificities of trench warfare and the self-serving morality of the home front). Among the innovative aspects of this novel are its cyclical structure and the repetition of crucial scenes as well as the use of letters, taped conversations and photographs to reconstruct the protagonist's life, all of these being elements which point to postmodernist techniques of writing (Novak 2000, 138-140).

There is a temporal gap of at least 20 years between the publication of *The Wars* and the oldest of the texts chosen for this survey of contemporary Canadian fictional treatments of World War I. The question of whether there is a continuation of one or the other of these trends or whether writers dealing with the war have begun to move in new directions will be pursued in the exploration of selected fiction published around the turn of the century. These fictional texts display a remarkable diversity in thematic approaches to the war. While Joseph Boyden's *Three Day Road* (2005) follows the development of two friends of Cree background who serve as scouts and snipers in France and Belgium, Jack Hodgins' *Broken Ground* (1998) is set in a Returned Soldier's Settlement on Vancouver Island in the early 1920s. Frances Itani's *Deafening* (2003) describes the diametrical perceptions of war of a hearing-impaired young woman who remains at home in Canada and her husband who joins the Canadian Army Medical Corps and is sent to the trenches. Mary Swan's novella *The Deep* (2003) focuses on twin sisters who enlist to work as nursing aides in France, find it impossible to return to Canada after the war and commit suicide on the voyage home. Jane Urquhart's two novels *The Underpainter* (1997) and *The Stone Carvers* (2001) are both concerned with the relationship between art and war (cf. Gordon 2003). While in *The Underpainter* the artist-narrator includes in the account of his own story the tale of two shell-shocked friends who are unable to adjust to life back home in Canada, in *The Stone Carvers* the protagonists, descendants of late 19<sup>th</sup>-century European immigrants to Canada, return to Europe after the war to participate in the artistic creation of Walter Allward's Canadian War Memorial at Vimy Ridge. A comparison of these texts with regard to thematic consistency and variation as well as narrative technique will provide insight in new roads taken and the innovative potential of recent fictional renditions of World War I.

## 2. Joining and Participating in the War

In the fiction explored the main incentive mentioned for the characters' sudden involvement in the war effort and their departure for Europe is their eagerness to be part of what was going on across the Atlantic. In the early phase of the war, a strong motivation was the wish for adventure, to get there quickly before all the excitement was over. The two Cree friends in Boyden's *Three Day Road* are eager to become soldiers because the war offers them an opportunity to leave their dreary and humiliating lives behind<sup>1</sup> and assert their First Nations identity in new ways through acts of courage and bravery (see also Bölling 2008, 257-258), while Eamon O'Sullivan in Urquhart's *The Stone Carvers* is lured to Europe through his fascination with airplanes, hence modern (war) technology. As the war continued, a sense of duty and the reminder of Canada's close ties with the motherland constituted strong incentives (Gordon 2003, 66), together with the belief that something must be done and that a new and better world would originate from all the destruction. Canada's involvement in World War I arguably did lead to the country's emergence as a nation;<sup>2</sup> on a more personal level, however, it changed forever the lives of those involved, as it had a dramatic impact on communities, families, and individuals.

The selected texts depict individuals as engaged in the war effort in very different capacities. While most male protagonists, Eamon O'Sullivan in *The Stone Carvers*, George Kearns in *The Underpainter*, and most of the men in *Broken Ground*, usually serve as ordinary soldiers, exceptions are made in *Three Day Road* with the specialization of Xavier Bird and Elijah Weesagechak as scouts and snipers and in *Deafening* with Jim Lloyd taking up the position of stretcher-bearer.<sup>3</sup> The few women who are shown as participating in the activities on the front are usually nurses or auxiliaries, as, for example, the twin sisters Esther and Ruth A. in Swan's *The Deep*. What all of the protagonists have in common is that their experiences in France and Belgium

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- 1 Boyden describes the First Nations dilemma of that time in the following way: "[...] there was a quiet war being fought at home, in Canada, during World War I: the Native people were being forced on to reservations, their language taken away, customs taken away, religion taken away, children taken away to residential schools. So there was this really insidious battle going on, involving Native people and the government" (qtd. in Wyile 2007, 221).
  - 2 This somewhat mythical notion of World War I as a shaping force in Canada's development as a nation is also presented by Novak (2000, 48-49) but seen critically by Vance (1997, 11) and Bölling (2008, 253). Tim Cook, in his study *Clio's Warriors: Canadian Historians and the Writing of the World Wars*, reveals in detail how the myth that "Canada was forged during the Great War" (2006, 253) had been constructed not only by popular narrative (2006, 209) but in particular by the works of military historians "who produced nationalistic histories that focused on the operational success and well-earned reputation of the Canadian Corps" (2006, 253).
  - 3 The focus on Jim's working with injured men enabled Itani not only to show the cruelties of war but also to use her first-hand knowledge of the human body acquired during her time as a nurse in an emergency ward.

propel them forward to pass from a stage of innocence to knowledge, and through that to a great sense of disillusionment.

### 3. The Impact of the War

Most of the texts under discussion present individuals who still suffer after they have returned home from the War in Europe, who continue to try to make sense of what they have experienced, and who are daily subjected to physical pain and trauma. The visible, or at least clearly noticeable, effects of the war on those who participated in it are shown to vary: there are a few individuals who are described as suffering from permanent bodily hurt, among them disfigured minor characters in Itani's *Deafening* and Hodgins' *Broken Ground* (in both cases young men have lost part of their face and continue to live in a semi-hidden, veiled way). Xavier Bird of *Three Day Road* is among the few protagonists depicted at length as suffering from a physical injury. He has lost a leg and is shown as consequently suffering from a morphine addiction and a seriously inflamed stump. His grave physical condition necessitates the three-day canoe trip up north which his Aunt Niska undertakes with him to save his life and free him from the haunting memories of having had to kill his friend Elijah in order to survive the war.

It is the invisible effects of war, that is, trauma in its many forms, that contemporary fiction most frequently dwells on. In Hodgins' *Broken Ground* haunting images of what the men have experienced in France seem to make a normal life impossible. They ensure that ordinary incidents again and again bring back the past, while events of more serious and tragic proportion, such as the death of the narrator's father through an accident with explosives or the forest fire which threatens the settlement and causes the death of young Elizabeth, raise the spectre of destruction and the end of their project. In *The Deep*, trauma is responsible for Esther's and Ruth's inability to return home and face everyday life back in Canada. It induces them to commit joint suicide on their voyage home. A similar impossibility of coping with the life one has known before the War is shown in Urquhart's *The Underpainter*: here the former soldier George Kearns and the nurse Augusta Moffat, who meet after the War in an asylum in Northern Ontario where they are both treated for their shell-shock symptoms, take solace in sharing their misery.

In some novels the trauma necessitates a return to Europe to revisit the fields of destruction. The reasons given for this return vary. Matthew Pearson, arguably the protagonist of Hodgins' *Broken Ground*, leaves his family and travels to France both to verify the existence of the battle-grounds, which keep haunting him, and to expiate what he considers to be his sins, that is, having fathered a child in France and taken her to Canada where she met with an accidental death, as well as having been unable to help his former students, after they had been sent off to Europe. In France he meets other (returning) visitors, some of whom are there to visit places where

their friends had died or have come searching for the graves of loved ones, sometimes with the intention of bringing the dead back to Canada. And yet others travel to Europe after the war to ensure that those who died there will be remembered (as can best be seen in Urquhart's *The Stone Carvers*).

## 4. Techniques of Representing the Great War

### 4.1 Juxtaposition of Canada and Europe

Among the recurring techniques of representing World War I in fiction is the contrast of Canada and Europe, with England often being included as a stage along the way. This juxtaposition is usually set up as the contrast between heaven and hell, with England serving as a kind of limbo, as it provided the training camps for recruits, that is, the stop before they were sent off to France or Belgium, and as it hosted the hospitals to which soldiers were sent to recover before they were ordered back to war or, in a few fortunate cases, sent home.

While in the fiction of earlier phases the focus had clearly been on war settings (Novak 2000, 21-35; 53-93) placed in opposition to the fleeting memories of idealized and idyllic homes in Canada, in contemporary texts equal attention is given to Canadian settings which are often grim and do not remain untouched by the atrocities across the ocean. In Hodgins' *Broken Ground*, for example, the difficult clearing of the stump-ridden land given to the returned soldiers and their families as well as the 'Great Forest Fire of 1922' repeatedly evoke in the settlers memories of traumatic war experiences (cf. Zacharasiewicz 2009) and thus make it difficult for them to put the past behind. In Swan's *The Deep*, by contrast, the quietness of Canada is reassessed by the twin sisters from the vantage point of being in the midst of war and being surrounded by noise:

On our last morning at home we woke early and went to sit in the silence on the kitchen porch. A cold morning, the grass rimed with frost that was beginning to glisten as the sun touched it. The distant line of silent, colored hills. We didn't speak, just tried to take it in, our stomachs in nagging, queasy knots that eased a little as the sun reached the spot where we sat. It was completely still, no sound from the sleeping house behind us, no bird or animal.

But then there *was* a sound, we gradually became aware of it, a wrenching, tearing, rattling sound, becoming louder and more constant as we listened. It sounded like – something, yet like nothing we'd heard before. Then we saw a flicker of movement and understood what was happening. As the sun warmed the frosted yellow maples that ringed the back garden, the leaves began to detach with a snap, fall with an icy clatter.

First one, then another, then more and more, a shower. On our last morning we realized that we had been living in a silence so absolute that we could hear the sound each leaf made as it fell.

It can never be like that again. This is the sound of the modern world, the world we are fighting for. The *tramp-tramp-tramp* of a thousand feet marching, the jingle of harnesses and medals. The shriek of train whistles, the rattle of a clean gun being assembled, the howls of men in pain. (Swan 2003, 48-49)

These harrowing external sounds described here are increasingly accompanied by the noise inside their heads, that is, symptoms of shell-shock which will ultimately make it impossible for Esther and Ruth to return home.

In Boyden's *Three Day Road* and Urquhart's *The Underpainter* the juxtaposition of Canada and Europe is presented in the form of an opposition between the natural environment of Northern Ontario and the destruction of nature (and human life) in the battlefields of France and Belgium. Both novels feature the memories of those who have returned from the Great War and are badly traumatized as a result. Unable to speak about the atrocities he has witnessed, many of them committed by his close friend Elijah, Xavier Bird is taken by his aunt in a canoe through the wilderness back to his roots, he is made familiar again with the old Cree traditions and he is taken to the *matatosowin*, the native sweat lodge which brings out in him the good and bad spirits in the form of visions. While the close contact with nature and the exchange of life stories have a healing effect on him and he begins to recover, the former nurse Augusta Moffat in *The Underpainter* does not succeed in regaining her mental and emotional stability and, after sharing her experiences with the narrator, commits suicide. The attempts to confront the horrifying past again by talking about it, this time in a Canadian surrounding, is shown in these texts to have quite opposite consequences, recovery for one of the affected and death for the other.

Itani's novel *Deafening* also includes a juxtaposition of Canada and Europe, this time along the lines of the home front versus the trenches. The author furthermore adds the oppositions of deaf versus hearing person and female versus male perceptions respectively. Yet the distance between the two sides is presented as bridgeable through the shared experience of delayed perception, as the male protagonist Jim suggests when he explains (in his mind) to his wife Grania: "One day you told me [...] the way understanding for you is sometimes delayed. I know more about that now. More about the gap between what happens and what is understood. What is there and what is not" (Itani 2004, 260). Grania's lack of knowledge concerning her husband's experiences is shown to resemble the lack of comprehension Jim feels in the face of the cruelties of war he encounters.

In Urquhart's *The Stone Carvers*, a novel focusing on the experiences of immigrants from Germany, Ireland, and Italy in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the World War I layer of the story is concerned with those soldiers who lost their lives in

Europe and will thus never be able to return home. The need to understand their wartime experiences and to remember them compelled both Jane Urquhart, the author, and Walter Allward, the historical Canadian sculptor and a figure in the novel, to evoke the past imaginatively and reshape it in art. In this novel, too, there is a link between Canadian and European landscapes, between the efforts of early Bavarian settlers to build a church of their own, which would house traditional wood-carvings, and the later loss of one of their community's young men in the Great War. In order to memorialize her sweet-heart, the young Irish lad Eamon O'Sullivan, the protagonist, Klara Becker, travels to France and applies the old Bavarian carving skills to Allward's war memorial.

Walter Allward's war memorial at Vimy Ridge matches in vision the Bavarian priest's church in the wilderness (see also Glaser 2008, 72-74). It was built on the 250 acres of land given by the French to Canada in perpetuity and it was completed only in 1936 after more than 15 years of lobbying, fundraising, and carefully selecting material and artisans. The memorial contains the names of the 11,285 Canadians who went missing in action in France and whose bodies were never recovered (and it is meant to commemorate the 67,000 Canadians who died in World War I). The monument is deliberately endowed with characteristics that are suggestive of Canada:

Allward wanted white, wanted to recall the snow that fell each year on coast and plains and mountains, the disappeared boys' names preserved forever, unmelting on a vast territory of stone that was as white as the frozen winter lakes of the country they had left behind. Or he wanted granite, like the granite in the shield of rock that bled down from the north toward the Great Lakes. So sad and unyielding, so terrible and fierce in the face of the farmer. (Urquhart 2002, 267)

Allward's clear intention was, as Urquhart aptly describes it, to evoke in visitors the notion of distinctively Canadian landscapes, white and austere, hence quite the opposite of the idyllic description of Canada as a pleasant home that is found in some of the other novels (for example, in Itani's *Deafening* or Urquhart's *The Underpainter*). Now the 'idyllic' setting is constituted of the fields and meadows surrounding the monument, an area planted with trees from each province, one tree for each lost man. Allward's objective of "turning the historical moment into allegory" (Gordon 2003, 72), and thus distancing it from the actual participants in it, is undermined, however, by Klara Becker's insistence on personalizing the memorial. Urquhart's protagonist adds part of her life-story to the monument when she endows one of the young men of Allward's sculpture, *The Spirit of Sacrifice*, with the face of Eamon O'Sullivan. As a result, the figure of the dying soldier supported by his comrade comes to signify one particular man and at the same time all the others who died. Only by finally accepting Eamon's death and leaving *it* and *him* behind her,



literally in the form of art, can Klara look forward to her personal future. Similarly, Urquhart implies, Canadians must know and accept their past, comprehend the country's losses and gains, and thus come to acknowledge the extension of Canada's mental and physical landscapes beyond its geographical borders.

#### 4.2 Multiple Perspectives

What several of the novels concerned with representing World War I share is the use of multiple perspectives, either in the form of alternating focalization or different voices. These techniques are employed to present not only those individuals who have first-hand experience of the war but also those who remained in Canada and will never know what being involved in the war action really meant. The diametrically opposed perspectives mirror the above-mentioned juxtaposition of places. This huge gap between 'here' and 'there' is, for example, addressed by Jim Lloyd in Itani's *Deafening*: "I see now that no civilized person would understand how we live. It would be pointless to try to explain. No one would believe. *Over there* is a life invented by and known only to ourselves" (Itani 2004, 261).

Alternate focalization may be found in Itani's *Deafening* and Boyden's *Three Day Road*, where it functions as the means of rendering disparate experiences and the difficulty (in each case on the woman's part) to understand what the returned soldiers have gone through. By contrast, Swan's *The Deep* and Hodgins' *Broken Ground* make use of different 'voices' or "memory pictures" (Swan 2003, 41) signifying the uncertainty about as well as the variety of possible interpretations of the events in Europe. The use of multiple voices, such as those of father, brother, headmistress, friends, former nurse or even strangers in *The Deep* or those of the many inhabitants of the 'Portuguese Creek' settlement in *Broken Ground*, allows for the presentation of a variety of experience, informed by aspects of gender, class, location, and generation.

Multiple perspectives and alternate focalization furthermore reinforce the use of circularity or of transitions in space and time. Boyden's *Three Day Road*, for example, juxtaposes Native and white culture through the repeated change of perspective (Niska, Xavier) and setting (northern Ontario, the trenches). At the same time, it takes readers through the progressive involvement of the two Cree friends in World War I as well as Xavier's eventual return, in his thoughts, his stories, and his journeying, to the place and the culture he started out from.

#### 4.3 Foreshadowing

A further recurring technique is that of foreshadowing the often tragic outcome of a life marked by the experience of World War I. Foreshadowing usually occurs through the authors' spreading a finely woven web of allusions. In her novel *The Underpainter* Urquhart uses intricately painted china as a metaphor for the fragility of civilization. George Kearns visits the Sèvres porcelain factory and museum several

times while he is in France. For him the images and patterns on china represent the culture, beauty and fragility of a world he sees coming to an end through the war:

It was curious [...] but as time passed I couldn't dispel the idea that we were all in it together, that we were just vandals, really, bent on destroying western culture. Finally it seemed to me that Europe was one vast museum whose treasures were being smashed by hired thugs. We weren't making history, we were destroying it ... eliminating it. Churches that had been lovingly maintained for seven hundred years were being obliterated in an afternoon. Simple men – farm boys who could trace their families back to the time of the Saxons and the Gauls or the Hun – were dying at eighteen and leaving no heirs. There will be nothing left, I kept thinking, when this is over, nothing at all. (Urquhart 1998, 186)

In Swan's *The Deep* the story of the Sea King and his beautiful lost daughters as well as the twins' diving deep both into the pond at home and the sea in France point to their eventual death by drowning. In Boyden's *Three Day Road* the two earlier tales of the killing of the *Windigo*, that is, a person who has turned to eating human flesh, foreshadow not only Elijah's descent into committing the most repulsive atrocities but they also prepare for and justify Elijah's death at the hands of Xavier.

## 5. Revisionist History-Writing

The need to keep alive memories of the past and the wish to draw attention to those parts of history which seem to have been forgotten or have been suppressed most frequently range among the reasons given by authors when asked about their objectives in writing about World War I.

In an interview, Urquhart revealed that her concern about Canadian ignorance regarding history had served as a starting-point for her novel *The Stone-Carvers* (Richards 2001). She had been shocked to find that Canadians no longer knew how the small town of Formosa, Ontario, had come by the big stone church built on its hill and that they seemed to have forgotten who Walter Allward was and what the memorial at Vimy Ridge was all about. *The Stone Carvers*, putting faces on and around the two monuments, mediates different phases of Canadian history and in the process reveals the contribution of immigrants of diverse backgrounds to the formation of a new society. Urquhart ingeniously connects different periods and places, in the process suggesting a reversal of the movement from the old world to

the new:<sup>4</sup> when thousands of Canadian men lose their lives in Europe, a part of Canada itself is exported back to the old world and later becomes a landscape composed of the bones of these men and the memorial. When Canadians then come to look at this landscape, they find a part of their own country on the other side of the ocean. Yet in addition to foregrounding the war-induced reverse movement of people, this time from Canada to Europe, Urquhart, herself of Irish background, moves beyond enclave interests in her pronounced consideration of German and Italian immigrant communities.<sup>5</sup>

Revisionist history-writing seems to figure prominently with two of the female authors who also bring a particular gender-related slant to bear on their chosen subject. Both Jane Urquhart and Mary Swan draw attention to women's participation in the war (which in itself is nothing new). The innovative aspect of their rendition of nurses' experiences on the front is, however, that nurses were equally affected by shell-shock. While the twin sisters of *The Deep* are driven to suicide because they feel broken by the war and suffer from a "terrible racket in their heads" (Swan 2003, 70), Augusta Moffat in *The Underpainter* can also no longer bear the images she is haunted by, such as the bombing of the hospital in which she worked: "They unravelled everything we had stitched together" (Urquhart 1998, 295), she comments when she describes the death of a fellow nurse and close friend.

The revisionism of *Three Day Road* consists in Boyden's focus on First Nations participation in the war and was inspired in particular by the life of Ojibwa Francis Pegahmagabow, the legendary World War I sniper who is also mentioned several times in the text.<sup>6</sup> Boyden, who is partially of Métis and Micmac ancestry and says of himself that "[...] all my life – I've had an Anishnabe vision of the world" (qtd. in Nurse 2005), attempts to reconstruct a part of Canadian war history that has been suppressed: "Native soldiers are not recognized for their accomplishments. When you look at the number of native soldiers that actually volunteered for World War I and World War II, it is an incredibly high rate. Oftentimes full reserves were cleared of eligible aged men" (qtd. in Nurse 2005).<sup>7</sup> He attributes this high number of First

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4 Urquhart explicitly identifies this reverse movement in her novel: "All over Ontario boys were being worshipped and wept over as they covered themselves in khaki and marched toward a collection of similar brick train stations, part of a massive reverse migration. As if engaging in an act of revenge, Europe had demanded that the grandsons of the impoverished hordes that had left her shores a few generations before now cross the ocean to mingle their flesh with the dust of their ancestors" (Urquhart 2002, 152-153).

5 In a review of *The Stone-Carvers*, David Staines comes to a similar conclusion: "The past belongs to those who claim it, and until now it was each individual section of Canada and immigrant Canada for itself. But with Urquhart's *The Stone Carvers* we are entering a new dimension where those willing to explore the past no longer see it as sectarian, but as uniquely whole, waiting now to be explored by the Canadian writer" (Staines 2005, 44).

6 For more information on the historical Pegahmagabow and his fictional rendition in *Three Day Road*, see Bölling 2008, 255.

7 Boyden affirms this statement in an interview Herb Wyile conducted with him (Wyile 2007, 222).

Nations men to sign up for the war to their sense at that time of having lost their identity, owing to their relegation to reserves and Western cultural values being imposed on them. In *Three Day Road*, Elijah Weesageechak is shown to become morally corrupted through the encouragement of fellow white soldiers who urge him to take the scalps of the men he has killed and to feed on them.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, Elijah is depicted as a victim of the residential school system which denigrated his language and culture and left him emotionally neglected and physically and sexually abused. Boyden thus clearly suggests parallels between the war-driven destruction in Europe and the destruction of Native cultures in Canada.<sup>9</sup>

## 6. New Trends in Writing about the Great War?

The novels explored are strikingly different from the examples given in Novak's study of Canadian fiction on the two world wars. Novak's first phase, the romance tradition, seems to have been truly overcome by now. There are still remnants to be found, though, of Novak's second phase, realism, especially in those novels which present detailed accounts of trench warfare (such as Boyden's *Three Day Road*) or descriptions of the injuries caused by explosives or sniper-shooting (to be found in Itani's *Deafening* and Urquhart's *The Underpainter*). Yet the focus of these novels is clearly elsewhere. Elements of Novak's third phase, of which she argues that irony is the dominant characteristic, are also rare. There are a few typical features of postmodernist writing to be found in Hodgins' *Broken Ground*. Here, some passages point to the metafictional layer of the text which undermines the notion of reliability.<sup>10</sup> These are, however, placed in opposition to Matthew Pearson's letters from France about the war, that is, that part of the text which represents factual evidence of war experience.

If only a few of the characteristics of Novak's three phases of Canadian writing on war can be found in recent fiction, how are these novels to be typified? Are there features they share? In what way do they differ from novels of earlier decades? Although all of the selected works may be categorised as fictions of World War I, they are more than just that. Each of these texts is concerned also with at least one other

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8 "Avoid what happens to Peggy [i.e. Francis Pegahmagabow] [...] Do what we do. Collect evidence of your kills. Do what my people taught your people a long time ago. Take the scalp of your enemy as proof. Take a bit of him to feed you. [...] They will buy you honour among us [...] And we are honourable men" (Boyden 2005, 188).

9 Bölling also refers to the connection between "the near destruction of Native cultures in Canada" and the large-scale destruction underway in the battlefields (Bölling 2008, 256-257).

10 Hodgins has his central narrator remark on the fact that the documentary about the Returned Soldier's Settlement, hence major parts of the text, is based on interviews conducted by a minor character who "then wrote it up the way he imagined we might have told it if we had told it at all at once after the fire" (Hodgins 1998, 256). This statement made on a text included in a tale told by an octogenarian whose memory is fading puts the reliability of the whole narrative in doubt and furthermore comments ironically on the act of turning fact into fiction.

major topic, for example: the values of indigenous cultural traditions as opposed to mainstream Canadian culture; the difficulties of asserting oneself as a physically challenged person; living in a multi-ethnic community; placing one's art above one's personal life; growing up in a condition of emotional deprivation; or art as a means of keeping alive the past and thus showing the way to the future.

Not only has the scope of themes accompanying fictional renditions of World War I been widened but the angles from which war experiences are now presented have also become more varied. Apart from Boyden's pioneering account of the war as experienced by First Nations people, it is especially the female perspective which has over the last 15 years been moved to the fore. Women writers (Itani, Swan, and Urquhart) and a male writer (Boyden) have emphasized the hitherto excluded or marginalized female perceptions of the war and, in doing so, have introduced other spheres and a new range of psychologies as equally important next to the traditional male-dominated set of experiences. Among these psychologies are occasionally also those of the enemy, included to indicate a shared humanity and, by implication, the absurdity of warfare (cf. Bölling 2003, 310).<sup>11</sup> In addition, the explored texts may also be viewed as a final phase of decolonisation, in the sense that they draw attention to the fact that if an event like World War I did indeed play such a formative role in Canada's process of nation-building, it was certainly also shaped by individuals other than white English-Canadian males (cf. Bölling 2008, 264). Several of the novels contribute in fact to the subversion of the colonial myth that "Canada was forged during the Great War" (Cook 2006, 253; cf. also Gordon 2008, 119; 126)<sup>12</sup> and participate in what Herb Wyile has described as the recovery of "previously neglected and marginalized histories, underlining that what is historically significant has been narrowly defined and ideologically overdetermined" (Wyile 2002, 6). Hence they are very much part of the recent trend in Canadian fiction to emphasize "the plurality of Canadian historical experience, thereby rejecting totalizing accounts of Canada's history as a nation" (Bölling 2003, 295). This 'plurality' includes, next to ethnic diversity, gender-related variety in narrative perspective and thematic considerations of private (versus public) life as well as family and generational histories that are set against the background of national and world histories. This significant departure from previous conventions towards a greater inclusiveness

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11 In Urquhart's *The Stone Carvers*, for example, Tilman Becker remembers trench conversations of German soldiers in the following way: "You know [...], it was peculiar, but they were talking about precisely the same things that the men beside me were talking about: girls, hometowns, food. Sometimes I would forget I was listening to German because what they were talking about was so familiar" (Urquhart 2002, 253).

12 In an ironic move on the part of Boyden, this notion is also voiced by Xavier Bird at the height of the Canadian success, the battle of Vimy Ridge: "We've taken the place where hundreds of thousands of Frenchmen and Englishmen died in their attempt to do the same these last years. We are an army to be reckoned with suddenly, no longer colonials, as the Englishmen call us" (Boyden 2005, 222).

may well prove encouraging to future writers wishing to explore new territory when rendering World War I in fiction.

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