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Jonathan F. Vance. *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning, and the First World War.* Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1997. xv + 319 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7748-0601-5.

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Historians have frequently seen Canadian culture and politics of the 1920s and 1930s as a response to the appalling slaughter of the First World War. Accepted wisdom suggests that this slaughter not only exhausted the nation's people, but scarred the national psyche and finally destroyed the imperialistic militarism of the late nineteenth century. The flowering of Canadian cultural institutions and Canada's increasing tendency to steer its own course in international affairs are conscripted to buttress such an interpretation of country's mood at the end of the "war to end all wars." Yet, according to Jonathan Vance, to advance such an interpretation "is to misconstrue the past. It is to assume that, simply because we judge the First World War to have been an appalling slaughter, people who lived through it must also have judged it in this way" (p. 4). Rather than make such an assumption, Vance has investigated Canadian perceptions of the war among its contemporaries. The results of this investigation he has published as *Death So Noble*, an amply illustrated and thoroughly researched history of Canadian memories of the First World War. Drawing from a wide variety of source materials, Jonathan Vance has produced a model for future students of collective memories to emulate.

This book says very little about the war itself. Indeed, Chapter One opens at daybreak on 11 November 1918–the day of the Armistice. Immediately, although Germany had not "surrendered" and this was really only a truce, Canadians took to the streets to celebrate the victory of the allied cause. Even at this point, it was a much anticipated celebration. Many people had rehearsed by taking to the streets to celebrate false reports of allied victory a few days earlier.[1] And why should they not have? Given the tone of wartime propaganda, Germany's decision to end the fight could only be construed as the barbarians giving in. Indeed, far from transforming Canadian attitudes, post-war memories reenforced pre-war conceptions of Anglo-Christian, Canadian civilization's superiority. Through a focus on Canadians' literary, artistic, dramatic, and commemorative invocations of the war, *Death So Noble* reveals these underlying attitudes that shaped post-war Canada's response to the war.

Vance insists that, for most Canadians, the end of the war was a victory for the allied cause; a "Cult of Victory" developed around memories of the war, shaping memorials, literature, and art. This is not, in itself, surprising. Even before the war was over, Canadian communities clamoured for captured machine guns and artillery pieces to display in local parks as trophies. Perhaps the book's mildly revisionist tone can be attributed to Vance's only fleeting attention to this common phenomenon, which can be readily followed in the National Archives (RG 24 and RG 37) and which Vance himself has discussed at greater length in the *Material History Review*.[2] But a more surprising phenomenon, given the tone of cultural history studies of the inter-war years, is the longevity of the Cult of Victory. Well into the 1930s, the Cult of Victory directed official war memories and, in defiance of all reality, portrayed Canada's soldiering efforts as a triumph of romantic individualism and heroism.

Although Vance's argument is convincing, in his efforts to demonstrate the Cult (in his words "myth") of Victory, he may have over-stated the case. Admittedly, he never suggests that this cult was unanimous or unambiguous, but its manifestations command the bulk of his attention. Yet, while many of the war memorials Vance cites portray messages of victory, many others do not. Memorial cenotaphs and Crosses of Sacrifice are the most ubiquitous monuments to the Great War. Most of these, such as both the cenotaph and the Cross of Sacrifice in Montreal, portray a downward pointing sword in cruciform shape symbolizing peace and Christian piety. In many of Vance's examples, victory is depicted without any traditional symbols of martial triumph. Herein lies the sophistication of the argument. As Vance reveals in later chapters, victory was most often perceived in terms of the triumph of the soldier's valour and honour, not as the martial victory of allied arms. Nonetheless, for main-

stream Canada, and especially for the political leaders, memories of the war emphasized a sense of victory.

Of course, not all Canadians joined this Cult of Victory. Yet, any criticism of the cult ended up feeding its growth. The assimilating influence of official memories of patriotic service drove alternative memories underground or forced them into conformity with the mainstream message. Vance's powerful and convincing account of Native-Canadian war-time patriotism and post-war experience is a case in point. Appreciation of Native valour translated mostly into more eager anticipation of the assimilation of Native communities and the destruction of traditional ways of life. The patriotism of such prominent Native soldiers as Tom Longboat and Cameron Brant did little to win acceptance from the mainstream.

However, while this study wisely looks beyond the English-speaking mainstream, it also tends to neglect French-Canadian memories of the war. Particularly in Quebec, attitudes towards the war were rather different from those of other parts of the country. Anti-war, and especially anti-conscription, sentiment in Quebec has been well documented by historians, but post-war memories have been less well followed. Quebecers rejoiced at the return of the fabled 22nd Battalion and took pride in its accomplishments, yet retained bitter memories of the Conscription Crisis and a war effort led by "les Anglais." Here Vance briefly stumbles. Although he has, quite correctly, surmised that "rather than laying the basis for a pan-Canadian nationalism, the memory of the Great War drove the two strains of nationalism apart" (p. 259), he seems less at ease in depicting either the divergences between the two or the development of French-Canadian collective memories. As a result (or possibly as a symptom) of this unease, the book examines French-Canadian memory for less than ten out of a total of 264 pages of text.

Such criticism aside, Jonathan Vance's book deserves to stand beside Paul Fussell's *Great War and Modern Memory* and Modris Eksteins's *Rites of Spring*. Fussell demonstrated the influence of the iconography of the trenches on later political, rhetorical, and artistic developments, and Eksteins focussed on the war's eery connection to modernism. Vance, on the other hand, has built on these works while revealing an underlying continuity between Canadian attitudes during the war and Canadian memories of the war. It is this subtlety that makes *Death So Noble* the strongest scholarly investigation of Canadian historical memories published to date.

Notes:

[1]. Desmond Morton, *A Military History of Canada*, (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1990), p. 165.

[2]. Jonathan F. Vance, "Tangible Demonstrations of a Great Victory: War Trophies in Canada," *Material History Review* (Fall 1995), pp. 47-56.

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