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"Boys and Girls in No Man's Land: English Canadian Children and the First World War (Book Review)" by Susan R. Fisher

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Boys and Girls in No Man's Land: English Canadian Children and the First World War. Susan R. Fisher. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011. Pp. 296.

In *Boys and Girls in No Man's Land: English Canadian Children and the First World War*, Susan R. Fisher argues that historians have tended to ignore the experiences of Canadian children, as if they “simply went about the business of being children—studying, playing, doing chores” (p. 3). But how did a war that was fought in distant continents manage to “pervade” the lives of English-Canadian boys and girls (p. 7)? There were certainly a number of underage recruits in the Canadian forces, but most Canadian children never saw conflict.¹ Instead, “the war came to them” (p. 4). They were sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, who as an extension of their families’ experiences in combat were thrust into the war’s influence. Some came of legal age during the war years and enlisted, and some became orphans and wards of the state. Many more knew someone in their extended family or community who enlisted. In various ways, total war extended to children. They not only felt its effect in the domestic sphere but also were called upon to do their part. Confining her study to the classroom and children’s literature, Fisher demonstrates that children were treated as the future of the nation and therefore subjected to the war’s cause and responsibilities.

Influenced by Audoin-Rouzeau’s study of the French context, *La Guerre des enfants, 1914–1918*, Fisher argues that how the First World War was communicated to children represented a simplified core message and set of “truths” about the war as it was understood by adults. Children’s literature specifically “reveals the essence of national thinking more plainly than does other war writing” (p. 24). During and in the immediate aftermath of the war, that message was individual sacrifice for the nation: “doing one’s duty at home, at school, at church was presented as the highest virtue” (p. 26). This is in contrast to contemporary children’s writing on the war, where child characters are far more sceptical about the war’s cause, and

¹ In *La Guerre des enfants, 1914–1918: essai d’histoire culturelle*, Stephané Audoin-Rouzeau argues that the content of children’s literature on war contains “the hard kernel of national cultures of war, what each nation judged to be the most indispensable to teach children and to make them understand.” Quoted in Susan R. Fisher, *Boys and Girls in No Man's Land: English Canadian Children and the First World War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 12.

individual suffering and loss are emphasized over communal sacrifice. Hence the thesis of Fisher's book: that the modern understanding of the Great War has also been represented in children's literature, thus obscuring wartime children's historical experiences.

In order to demonstrate this, Fisher divides her book into three parts. The first portion examines children's war work and the classroom to show that messages contained in children's literature were not isolated to fictional stories. Textbooks like the *Canadian War Book* included lessons such as "Why Canada Entered the War" and "What Germany Stands For" (these were militarism, tyranny, treachery, organized cruelty, murder, slavery, and robbery) (p. 44). In addition to textbooks, Fisher examines educational magazines such as the University of Toronto's *School: A Magazine Devoted to Elementary and Secondary School*, which included recommended lessons and examination questions about the war. Letters to the editors also commented on the educational value, the patriotic importance, and student enthusiasm for war content in the classroom. Supplementing this material with surviving exams, Fisher identifies that questions about the war were included and logically deduces that war content must have been integrated into classroom teaching.

Students also engaged in fundraisers for the troops and the Red Cross that helped promote self-sacrifice. Some students sold candy to buy wool and in turn knitted socks for the troops. In 1917 Saskatchewan schools raised \$24,888.69 for Belgian relief (p. 35). To officials, these activities had benefits beyond the practicalities of money and clothing. Some school inspectors commented in their annual reports that lessons promoting "patriotism, loyalty and service" in the classrooms had succeeded (p. 49). Fisher's evidence is much more speculative when considering why students engaged in war work. The influence of instructors and the role of propaganda are not discredited but she also argues that children were self-motivated. In their letters sent to Sunday-School papers (the only magazines printed for children in Canada) children revealed a sense of compassion for Belgian refugees and soldiers on the front and their families. These letters do indicate that some students were enthusiastic participants, but to the extent that they can represent the bulk of experiences of English-Canadian children seems far less certain.

The second half represents most of the book's material and is a fascinating and well-documented analysis of children's war-literature. What were children reading about the war and how did the content

mirror their social and educational engagements? Fisher extends her analysis beyond Canadian sources, looking at popular wartime American and British books and identifies four types of genres: those intended for younger readers, animal stories, the boy's adventure tale, and girls' stories. The images of the Great War in these novels and short stories consistently portrayed it as a noble cause and worthy sacrifice. For boys', war was depicted as a great adventure and healthy expression of masculinity. The war was also honourable and noble, especially when contrasted with outlandish stories of unwarranted sadistic attacks on animals and Belgian children by German soldiers.

For girls, the genre was more complicated. There were stories similar to the boys' adventure tale that saw girls catching spies, and acting as strong independent women. However, they almost always reverted to highlighting the perceived ideal female qualities during wartime, including caretaking of soldiers, or depicting the war as an opportunity to meet a husband (p. 204). Independence was not progressive, but was rather a reflection of the wartime reality that, while the men were away fighting, women had increased responsibilities (p. 184). When war stories were not indulging children's fantasies they were offering practical lessons that were relevant to their duties: behave properly and be willing to sacrifice time, money, and material possessions to help win the war.

The final chapter contrasts this portrait with the messages and themes of modern children's literature such as individual suffering, irony, and disillusionment. Fisher points out that representing wartime children as sceptical of the war's cause and the worthiness of the sacrifices obscures the historical context. Even if a child was a pacifist, they faced "terrific pressure...to support the nation's cause." Such a "position would have been difficult" to form independently and even more so to state it publicly (p. 225). Fisher's study therefore contributes to the growing historiography since Jay Winter's *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning* (1998) that has called attention to the ways in which people understood and found meaning in the war effort. These historians have questioned the origin of the modern discourse on war that rejected the patriotic high diction of duty and sacrifice. This is the book's greatest strength and it is an important contribution to the historiography.

The book is heavily focused on literature, and what impact these books had on their audience is unclear. Readers might question whether or not the author identifies "[w]hat children really thought

and felt and experienced during the war” (p. 13). Those looking for how children experienced or dealt with loss, or what their domestic situation consisted of when their fathers’ were fighting abroad, will be disappointed. To the author’s credit, much of the book’s limitations stem simply from a lack of source material. Fisher is well aware of these evidential limitations, stressing when necessary that it is simply impossible to know for sure what impact literature had on readers’ perception and understanding of the Great War (pp. 174–175). In the few cases where the evidence is available, the author does provide some children’s commentaries on the books in question (p. 17).

These limitations should not detract from the otherwise exceptional qualities of the book. The content as provided in the educational material, children’s literature, and those letters that have survived, do suggest that the noble and sacrificial qualities of the war were abundant in children’s surroundings. It is certainly probable but far from certain that children were to view the war and their own personal losses within these parameters. The limits of the analysis and the fascinating findings should encourage historians of the First World War to consider the child’s perspective and draw attention to any newfound evidence on the subject.

There is little disputing that the messages about the First World War that contemporary authors provide to children are substantially different than those of the period, and unlikely to have found their way into those classrooms. These findings raise important questions as to how the war should be taught to new generations of Canadians. On the one hand Fisher certainly does not want us to return to the glorification or trivialization of war found in the various children’s stories of the period (p. 258). On the other hand, the proper historical perspectives make sense of the nation’s response to war. In addition to being an important book for anyone interested in the Great War’s memory or homefront studies, the conclusions are significant to novelists and educators. They stress the importance of fostering proper skills such as historical perspective in our students.

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Boundless Optimism: Richard McBride’s British Columbia. Patricia Roy. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2012. Pp. 411.