

## Book Reviews

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### **Mothers of Heroes, Mothers of Martyrs: World War I and the Politics of Grief**

Suzanne Evans.

Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007.

#### **Reviewed by Diana L. Gustafson**

Every Remembrance Day, as the television broadcasts solemn crowds gathering at monuments and cemeteries in a collective display of respect and honour, I pause with other Canadians to remember those who died in war and the veterans who survived past and current conflicts. As the daughter of a military man, I was taught to take pride in Canada's contributions to war efforts and peacekeeping. As a mother and grandmother, however, I am unsettled by images of women laying wreaths in honour of children lost at war. Thanks to a finely crafted book, *Mothers of Heroes, Mothers of Martyrs: World War I and the Politics of Grief*, written by academic and journalist Suzanne Evans, I am beginning to understand my mixed feelings about war and the role of mothers in the political agenda of war.

Evans offers a meticulously researched examination of the role that mothers play in nation-building during war times and in post-war commemorations. Although the focus of her work is World War I, Evans provides rich historical and cross-cultural context to show how governments have mobilized the image of the mother for political and military ends.

In the first chapter, Evans looks at the origins and shifting meanings of the concept of martyrdom in Christian, Jewish, Islamic, and Sikh traditions. She distinguishes between suicide—an act that is generally regarded as “unacceptable” in these religious traditions—and martyrdom—the discourse surrounding a hero's story of accepting death for him/herself or dying in the name of God or country (14). The telling and retelling of a hero's story influences how people think, strengthens collective pride and religious loyalties within a community (15). The mother who bears witness to her child's conviction

comes to represent the martyr whose quiet courage and sacrifice shock and challenge men in the community to act honourably by going to war. Evans introduces the stories of mothers, including the Maccabean mother of seven sons, the Virgin Mary, Fatima, Al-Khansa, and Mata Gujari, to illustrate the power and possibilities of exploiting the maternal relationship during times of conflict.

The second chapter examines the concept of the hero/martyr as it was variously represented in political cartoons and newspaper articles in World War I. Evans argues that the images and language of Christian sacrifice were key to constructing the German enemy as evil incarnate in opposition to peace-loving, self-sacrificing British and Canadian soldiers. Religious icons and nationalistic paintings—Charles Sim’s “Sacrifice”—along with stories of atrocities committed against women and children—including the execution of British nurse Edith Cavell—galvanized two messages: women, like children, were vulnerable and in need of protection, and the ultimate evil had to be countered by the ultimate sacrifice, a willingness to die for God and country.

In the third chapter, Evans shows how militancy and motherhood were amalgamated in World War I propaganda directed at Canadian women during enlistment drives. She draws on published sources and letters from women to illustrate how mothers were called upon to sacrifice their most precious possession, their children. Mothers were urged to serve God and uphold the honour and traditions of their country by encouraging their sons to serve as soldiers in defense of truth and nation. Thus, mothers became secular symbols of Canadian ideals and cultural teachers capable of showing a nation how to be honourable, uncomplaining, and unselfish contributors to the war effort.

Chapters four and five look at how maternal sacrifice in World War I has been commemorated in Remembrance Day rituals, commonwealth cemeteries, and by monuments such as Allward’s “The Spirit of Canada.” Evans shows how commemorative work preserves and shapes a particular unified public memory of war, uniting past and present political convictions in acts reminiscent of liturgical rituals. In these post-war spaces, the image of mothers “exists within the balance of remembering and forgetting,” converting grief and mourning into pride and joy in sacrifice in the interests of social stability (139).

One need not be a war historian to appreciate Evans’s artful and nuanced treatment of a subject that has received scant attention. Scholars and students of mothering and women’s studies, political science, history, and religious studies are among those who will be challenged by Evans’s argument. Her book offers a welcome reexamination of militarism and the mobilization of mothering discourses, the construction and exploitation of gendered boundaries, the memorialisation of mothers’ extraordinary loss as glory, and the inglorious language and images invoked in the name of God and nation to justify the horrific violence of war.