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Review of “Material Traces of War: Stories of Canadian Women and Conflict, 1914- 1945” by Stacey Barker, Krista Cooke and Molly McCullough

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Stacey Barker, Krista Cooke and Molly McCullough. *Material Traces of War: Stories of Canadian Women and Conflict, 1914-1945*. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2021. Pp. 336.

In his introduction to *Learning from Things*, David Kingery asserts that: "No one denies the importance of things, but learning from them requires rather more attention than reading texts."¹ Interest in what historians can learn from the things (i.e. the material culture) of modern war has been growing, and *Material Traces of War* offers a welcome addition to this literature. It does so by engaging with the diverse and moving accounts of Canadian women who experienced the First and Second World Wars, by showcasing via photographs the rich material culture that capture these experiences, and by providing ample historical context to help its audience learn how to pay attention to the intersections of things and stories, the stuff of history.

The volume's introduction lays out its origins in a series of exhibits at the Canadian War Museum that began in 2015 and highlighted the roles of Canada women at war. Then "inspired by the exhibitions," the study unfolds in sections that "reflect some of the common ways women responded to war: military service, wartime volunteering, paid civilian work, and worry and loss" (p. 9). While noting that overlap invariably exists among these categories, the authors nonetheless note that such framing allows for an appreciation of the many women who inhabited these significant and widespread wartime roles.

In the first chapter, "That Men May Fight," readers plunge into encounters with a range of Canadian women in uniform, including a young woman who joined the Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service in 1943 and a Montreal nursing sister who enlisted in the Canadian Army Medical Corps in 1915. The inclusion of Edith Anderson Monture, a member of the Six Nations of the Grand River reserve who had to go to the United States to train as a nurse and then served with the American Expeditionary Forces shows the transnational journeys of many of these women. The chapter helpfully allows us to see their wartime lives via the images (photographs, sketches) and/or objects that left material traces of their wartime service. Readers

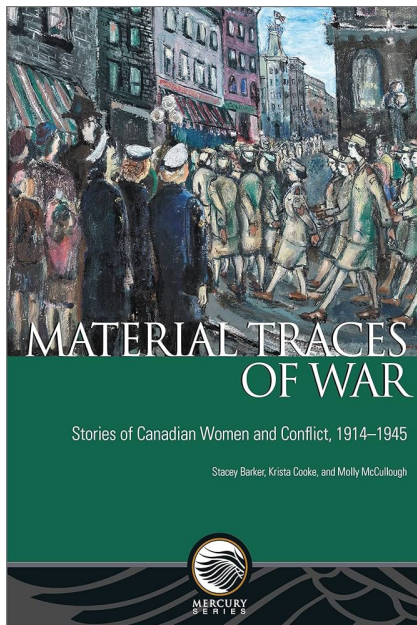
¹ W. David Kingery, "Introduction," *Learning from Things: Method and Theory of Material Culture Studies*, ed. W. David Kingery (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996), 1.

can thus both engage with Molly Lamb Bobak's stunning 1946 portrait of Black Canadian Eva Roy, member of the Canadian Women's Army Corps, and learn about Lamb Bobak's role as an official war artist capturing the mundane but essential tasks of Canadian women at war.

Moving beyond the more visible types of wartime women's work, the next two sections devote themselves to the myriad ways in which women serve wartime nations as unpaid workers and in civilian capacities. As the authors point out, "in both world wars, volunteering was arguably the most socially acceptable manner for women to support the war effort" (p. 82). This does not mean that such volunteering

was not work, and the preponderance of artifacts rather than personal histories to explain them in this chapter reflect the continued need to make such labor visible in the war story. The photographs and artifacts here provide ample evidence of the militarisation of women's domestic arts (sewing, knitting and cooking) as part of total war. In the subsequent section on women waged workers during these conflicts, the stories of women metal workers, clerks, and farmers, alongside the tools of their trade, provide vivid portraits of these essential roles.

Without delving into the emerging emotional histories of modern war, the volume's final section on worry and loss nonetheless demonstrates how deeply the war affected their lives. By discussing extensively the photograph album of Michiko Ishii, the authors engage with the traumatic history of Japanese-Canadian internment, making a potent statement about civilian as well as military experiences of grief, anxiety, and dislocation. Closing out this section are examples of wives, mothers, daughters and sweethearts coping with the missing and dead of the war in ways that invite readers to recognise the connections between Canada and the many places in which Canadians waged war.



There's much to admire in this fine volume. Those interested in the wide-ranging history of Canadian women at war will find that it contains familiar stories about their experiences undergirded by rich visual evidence of their material worlds. For those looking to understand how studies of material culture, military conflict and the lives of women might fruitfully intertwine to illuminate the history of war in a variety of geographic and temporal contexts, the authors have offered a fascinating place to start.

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