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A Bestselling War: The Novels of Jennifer Robson

In early August, 2014, a hundred years after the beginning of the First World War, the CBC Books webpage examined the war's "lasting impact" ("Lasting"). The page provided links to discussions, interviews, and archival material (although all the clips from the archives dealt with the Second, not the First, World War). And, in keeping with its focus on things literary, it suggested "some great Canadian war novels everyone should read." First, it listed several "giants:" Frances Itani's *Deafening*, Joseph Boyden's *Three Day Road*, Timothy Findley's *The Wars*, and Jane Urquhart's *The Stone Carvers*. Then it listed "discoveries" of Canadian war literature (presumably meaning lesser-known but worthy books): among these were novels by five contemporary writers – Kevin Major, Jack Hodgins, Alan Cumyn, Mary Swan, and Allan Donaldson – plus two by authors who had lived through the war, Francis Beynon and Philip Child.

Both categories in the CBC list were squarely focused on literary fiction. Even though some of these novels – for example, those by Boyden, Findley, and Urquhart – have enjoyed best-seller status, their standing as serious books has not been tarnished by success. Absent from the CBC's list were books written to appeal to popular taste. Where, for example, was L.M. Montgomery's *Rilla of Ingleside*, the only book of the war era that has remained in print since its publication in 1919? And what about *The Major* by Ralph Connor (Charles W. Gordon), a best seller in 1917 and 1918 (Vipond 1979, 118-9)? Connor's brew of patriotism and muscular Christianity might not appeal to modern tastes, but if one wants a sense of what many Canadians thought about the war, then Connor is the man. Also missing was R.J.C. Stead, whose novel *The Cow Puncher* was a best seller in 1918.

Just a few months before the CBC assembled its list of "great Canadian war novels," a new book by a Canadian about the war was released. Jennifer Robson's historical romance, *Somewhere in France* (2014), soon became a best seller. A hundred thousand copies were sold in North America, and it appeared not only on the *Globe* best-seller list but also on the one published by *USA Today* (Medley 2016). Two years later, in January 2016, *Somewhere in France* was still on the *Globe* list, as were two other war-related titles by Robson. Publishers do not release sales figures, so it is impossible to make any firm assertion, but Robson's *Somewhere in France* may have outsold all other Great War novels by Canadians.¹ In other words, Robson's book may be a more significant treatment of the First World War – significant in terms of its impact on the reading public – than the novels listed by the CBC.

Should we care about best-selling books? Should Robson's historical romances ever be discussed in the same breath as, say, Major's *No Man's Land* or Child's *God's Sparrows* or Findley's *The Wars*? Maybe its true peers are those early books such as Connor's *The Major*, romances of the First War that were once so popular and are now forgotten, curiosities of interest only to literary historians. *Somewhere in France* and its sequel, *After the War Is Over* (2015), undeniably deliver the predictable pleas-

1 When contacted, PenguinRandomHouse, the current publisher of both *Three Day Road* and *The Wars*, would not release any sales figures.

ures that romance readers want.² But Robson's novels cannot be dismissed as trash, for she is a much better writer than the romance label might lead one to think. As A.S. Byatt observed of the Regency romances of Georgette Heyer, to which she was addicted as a young reader, the well-constructed, well-researched romance should not be disparaged, for it constitutes "an honourable escape" (1991, 258) from everyday life.

In any case, if literary quality alone (however defined) determines which books count, then our understanding of the Great War would be severely circumscribed. As critics have noted about Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory*, basing an argument about the meaning of war on the work of a few literary men skews the picture. Canadian historian Jonathan Vance, whose work on the First World War has included detailed study of literary sources, asserts that if we are to understand the relationship between literature and the society that produces it, "we cannot use aesthetic standards to decide which pieces of literature deserve consideration" (1997, 6). Claud Cockburn argues that the best seller is a peerless guide to the mentality of a given period:

[...] you cannot deny that if Book X was what a huge majority of book-buyers and book-borrowers wanted to buy or borrow in a given year, or over a period of years, then Book X satisfied a need, and expressed and realized emotions and attitudes to life which the buyers and borrowers did not find expressed or realized elsewhere. [...] of all indices to moods, attitudes, and, above all, aspirations, the bestseller is one of the most reliable. There is no way of fudging it. (1972, 2-3)

In other words, if large numbers of readers have bought and enjoyed Robson's novels, then these books have something to tell us about what the First World War means in the 21st century.

Although Robson is Canadian, her characters and their war experience are British.³ Her first book, *Somewhere in France*, focuses on Lady Elizabeth (Lilly) Ashford, daughter of the Earl of Cumberland. When war breaks out and her brother Edward joins up, Lilly yearns to do something useful. However, her parents will not allow Lilly to work. If she is to contribute to the war effort, Lilly must renounce her privilege and become plain Lilly Ashford. She leaves home and goes to live in a boarding house with her former governess, Constance. After laboring as a painter in the bus yards and then as a conductor or clippie on London buses, Lilly volunteers for the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (founded in 1917) and ends up driving an ambulance on the Western Front. Posted through her own machinations to the Casualty Clearing Station where her brother's friend Robbie Fraser is working, Lilly at first pretends to herself and others that she is not in love with him. For his part, Robbie rebuffs Lilly because he does not want her so close to the dangers of war. After many stumbles and misunderstandings, they finally acknowledge their love, which is consummated at some length at the Ritz Hotel in Paris. Both Lilly and Robbie survive the war and, despite the opposition of Lilly's parents, become engaged. Their happiness is complete when Robbie finds Lilly's brother Edward, reported missing in early 1918, and brings him home.

After the War Is Over takes up the story of Constance, Lilly's governess. Constance studied at Somerville, though at a time when women could not earn a degree

2 Robson's third novel, *Moonlight over Paris* (2016), takes up the story of Helena, a minor character in the first two novels. Set in Paris in 1926, *Moonlight* deals only indirectly with the war; its main focus is the lost generation bohemian milieu of post-war Paris, so I have not discussed it here.

3 The exception is her short story "All for the Love of You," which features two Americans; it appeared in *Fall of Poppies*, a 2016 collection of romance-genre short stories set in the post-war period.

from Oxford.⁴ Faced with few employment opportunities, Constance answers Edward's advertisement for a governess for his sister. Edward appears to be a dissipated, feckless Oxford undergraduate, yet under the charming devil-may-care façade is a serious man. He wants his youngest sister Lilly to get an education even if their parents refuse to send her to school or university, and he engages Constance to tutor his little sister. Constance spends several years with the Ashford family, leaving when Lilly turns eighteen. She then becomes a constituency assistant to Eleanor Rathbone, a Liverpool city councilor, suffragist, and reformer.⁵ The novel moves back and forth in time, from Constance's service as governess in the Ashford household to her work for Rathbone before the war, then to her war work as a nurse in a London hospital for shell-shock victims, and then to her post-war work when she returns to Liverpool and Rathbone's office. Throughout, Edward is on her mind. She loves him, but considers herself too plain and serious-minded to interest him. When Edward comes home from the war, alive but with an artificial leg and a broken spirit, it is Constance who cares for him, bringing him back from the abyss of alcoholism and despair. Finally, they admit their mutual attraction and, against the opposition of his family, become engaged. By this time, Edward has succeeded to his father's title, and so Constance, a governess of lowly origins, will become a countess. Nonetheless, she remains dedicated to social reform. The novel ends not with a wedding but with a graduation, when Constance finally receives her degree from Oxford.

There is no denying that romantic love, including a fair serving of decorous eroticism, is the main ingredient on offer in these two novels. But along with the romance there is a remarkable amount of evocative and accurate period detail. It should be noted that research and romance are not inimical: readers interviewed by Janice Radway for her 1984 study of romance fiction "consistently referred to the 'facts' and 'truths' contained in the novels" (107). The instructional dimension of romances helped to justify their reading habits, and they believed that research was "an integral part of romance writing" (111). Of all the modern Canadian novelists who have tackled the Great War period, Robson may be the one who knows it best: trained as a historian, she earned a PhD in History from Oxford with a dissertation entitled "The Role of Clothing and Fashion in the Household Budget and Popular Culture in Britain from 1919-1949;" she worked as a guide at the Vimy Ridge Memorial; and, as it happens, she is the daughter of Stuart Robson, author of a standard history of the First World War. The clothes her characters wear, the food they eat, the vehicles they drive, the journeys they take, the books they read, and the songs they sing are right for the period. And while her books do not deal directly with the fighting, she describes soldiers' injuries and the field hospital's desperate work in sufficient detail that no one could accuse Robson of downplaying the horror of the battlefields.

But readers do not buy Robson's books because she has a doctorate in history or does such a convincing job describing amputations. Her books are popular because they deliver on the conventions of the romance novel, including well-researched period detail. Robson and her publisher eschew the tackier side of the romance market. There is no bare-chested man on the covers, and the advertising copy does not use words like torrid or steamy. At the back of each book is the "PS" section, designed to make these

4 Women were not full members of the university until 1920. Women who had completed their studies before that were admitted to the university and retrospectively granted their degrees ("First Woman Graduate").

5 Rathbone is not fictional. As a municipal politician in Liverpool city council and then as an independent MP, she was an indefatigable advocate for working-class women. See Pedersen (2004).

novels book-club-ready. Interviews, a glossary, a reading-group guide, and suggestions for further reading signal that Robson's novels warrant further reflection and discussion. But they are historical romances, and the war itself – militarily, strategically, politically – is secondary, its main function being to provide a stirring and tragic backdrop for love and personal development.

How can one reconcile the triviality of the romance novel with the seriousness or magnitude of the First World War? One might think that so catastrophic an episode in human history could never be made a subject for mere entertainment or escapism. However, as George Mosse has pointed out, the solemn and tragic side of war evokes its opposite: irreverence and frivolity. Societies at war require trivialization, the process of "cutting war down to size so that it would become commonplace instead of awesome and frightening" (1990, 126). By "commonplace," Mosse does not mean dull: he means domesticated, part of the scenery and furniture of ordinary life, rather than part of the nightmarish landscape of war. War-related "trivia" could be incorporated into everyday life, serving "the purpose of retaining pleasant, or, at least, thrilling memories" (ibid.) of the war. This helps to explain why Bruce Bairnsfather's cartoons, popular songs, war toys, and khaki-themed ladies' fashion could coexist not only with the high-minded rhetoric of clergymen, poets, and politicians but also with the terrible facts of the casualty list. And of course popular fiction about the war flourished. According to Cockburn, the Great War was ready-made for popular fiction:

For the novelist seeking mass appeal in the early nineteen-twenties, the First World War was a gift, a natural manna from heaven. It furnished him with a range of fictional and dramatic equipment such as had been ready to hand in the workshops of the Greek classical dramatists. [...] In this sense, the First World War had, for the novelist, the essential qualities of a great myth. Its general story-line was familiar to all. It could be approached from any angle the writer might choose, but a general knowledge of the basic material he was using was common to everyone. Also it had a beginning, a middle, and, within the vivid memory of all, an end. Like a myth, too, it afforded full opportunity for the dramatic use of hindsight, particularly ironic hindsight. (1972, 109-110)

These useful features of the war have not expired over the space of a hundred years. No one still lives who had personal experience of the war; even the children and grandchildren of combatants are dying off. Yet, while knowledge of the war and its pivotal battles has doubtless faded, most readers do know what Cockburn calls "its general story-line."⁶

However, the "great myth" of the War that Cockburn refers to is, more correctly, a mythology, not a single story. As Antoine Prost and Jay Winter have argued, "the meaning that different nations give to the war, the contents of this apparently simple term, differs in effect according to nations [...] but also according to era" (2004, 273; my translation). The best explication of the Canadian myth of the war appears in Jonathan Vance's *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning, and the First World War* (1997). Vance shows how literature, war memorials, popular songs, and educational materials reflected and reinforced a set of notions about the war. Canada had gone to war to defend the Mother Country and protect the Belgian refugees; Canadian soldiers had been happy warriors who gladly marched off to the battlefields; death in battle was a Christ-like sacrifice that would lead to a better world. As for the lasting effect

6 See Sherrill Grace's *Landscapes of War and Memory* for a discussion of the re-emergence of the First World War in recent Canadian literature. Grace dates this imaginative return to 1977, "a turning point or breakthrough in a general English-speaking Canadian awareness – or fresh reassessment – of the two world wars" (2014, 11), marked notably by the publication of Timothy Findley's *The Wars*.

of the war, the country's heroic war record would, it was believed, diminish ethnic or linguistic differences and create a stronger, more unified country.

While some historians have questioned just how pervasive or coherent this Canadian myth of war actually was, there is no denying that popular novels published during the war and in the early 1920s faithfully reflected it.⁷ In her excellent study of war and the Canadian novel, Dagmar Novak sums up their qualities:

Rhetorical, romantic, idealistic, and national, they are written for an Anglo-Saxon, Protestant community which enthusiastically embraced the cause of the Allied war effort in 1914. For these Canadian novelists, the war is a crusade in the fullest sense of the term. It is a call to glory, a struggle against the hosts of darkness [...]. They describe the war in a romantic rhetoric that emphasizes its importance as a learning experience, a test of resolve, and an opportunity to demonstrate acquired values and to learn new ones. While not totally ignoring the brutality of war, they choose to promote the positive themes of patriotism and honour, religious idealism and sacrifice. (2000, 7)

Novak uses romantic here in the literary-critical sense, finding in these Canadian war novels many of the elements of the romance: the chivalrous hero who performs extraordinary deeds, the descent into a realm of darkness, the struggle between absolute evil and perfect good. She points out how even the convention of the "calm and prosperity of a pre-industrial rural society," so frequently evoked in the opening sections of Canadian war novels, has its roots in the romance tradition (29-30). The novels Novak discusses – for example, Connor's *The Major* and Stead's *The Cow Puncher* – were best sellers in their day, presumably because they expressed the idealism and hope that readers needed. The tradition of the romance enabled writers and readers to conceptualize the war as a sacrifice or purification that would lead to a better society (32).

But by the 1930s, with the shadow of war once more lowering over Europe, readers could no longer interpret the losses of the war years as some kind of pre-payment for a better world. The redemptive myth of the Great War lost its power, to be overtaken by another set of beliefs about the war as a pointless bloodbath. In Canada, this revised myth of the war retained one consolatory feature: the belief that the First World War had brought Canadian citizens together in a common struggle (Fisher 2009, 224-5).

The mythic version of the war that underlies Robson's novels is certainly not the nation-building myth that Vance so convincingly identifies in the culture of wartime and post-war Canada. While Robson is Canadian, her characters are not. Nor is Robson working directly with the literary myth of romance that Novak discusses. Her books, far more worldly and realistic than those of writers such as Connor or Stead, are romances in the modern publishing industry sense, not the literary-critical sense. And although Robson uses quotations from Siegfried Sassoon as epigraphs in *After the War*, she is not writing in the tradition of "savage disillusionment" identified with Sassoon and other writers who came to the fore in the late 1920s and the 1930s (Bergonzi 1965, 213). The quotations from Sassoon are tucked into a fundamentally optimistic genre, the modern historical romance. This kind of book cannot deliver disillusion or irony or bitterness, for its *sine qua non* is a happy ending.

If, as Cockburn asserts, "best sellers really are a mirror of 'the mind and face' of an age" (1972, 7), then what do Robson's novels reveal about the place of the First World

7 In their recent book *The Vimy Trap*, historian Ian McKay and journalist Jamie Swift argue that "[i]nstead of there being one big memory of the war – 'Canada's myth' – the remembered war was always a tangled mix of twisted, knotted, and often unsavory memories" (2016, 219).

War in modern consciousness? What mythic version of the war do they embody? The story of her journey to bestsellerdom may give us some clues. After the original manuscript of what would become *Somewhere in France* had been rejected about thirty times, Robson gave up. Then, in 2011, a friend encouraged her to try again (Medley 2016). This time it was picked up by an agent, who immediately placed it with HarperCollins in the United States.

What changed Robson's fortunes was the tremendous success of the British television series *Downton Abbey*. The chronicle of an aristocratic family in the first decades of the 20th century, *Downton Abbey* created an appetite for tales of love during the First World War, especially if stately homes, butlers, and lovely frocks were involved. Just as Georgette Heyer's novels and then those of Barbara Cartland popularized the Regency period (still being exploited for what the industry calls "Racy Regency Romps"), so *Downton Abbey* made the Edwardian era and the First World War a poignant and attractive setting for romance. Robson was lucky in that her own interest in the period coincided with a turn in popular taste.

In "Romance Unlaced," a column for romance readers at *USA Today*, Madeline Hunter discusses half a dozen successful authors inspired by *Downton Abbey*. Most of these writers are focused on the pre-war Edwardian period, and some move ahead to the 1920s, as *Downton Abbey* did. None sets her book during the war itself. Sharon Page, author of *An American Duchess*, explains the appeal of the period:

I adored the glittering beaded dresses, the finger-bowl-sized glasses of champagne, along with the English country life of riding and strolling in beautiful gardens. Then I learned how important the period was for women. Women bobbed their hair, got the vote and achieved greater control over their own money. (Hunter 2016)

Sherri Browning Erwin, author of *Thornbrook Park*, focuses on the pre-war period: "*Downton Abbey* presents the Edwardian period as a golden romantic time before the Great War comes and begins to change society at a more drastic pace. I definitely believe *Downton Abbey* brought the period alive for viewers and encouraged more interest in the setting" (qtd. in Hunter 2016). Note Erwin's emphasis on the war as a force for social change, not as an epochal event in its own right. And Page talks about social change without mentioning the war that initiated it. While one might not think of romance writers or their readers as feminists, it would seem that changing social roles for women constitute an important appeal of the *Downton Abbey* era and, by extension, of the Great War. In her study of romance fiction, Janice Radway noted that the readers she interviewed "invariably characterized" the heroines they liked "as 'extremely intelligent,' 'spunky,' 'independent' and 'unique'" (1984, 101). Radway did her research in the early 1980s, so it would seem that the independent woman has been a romance staple for a long time.

Is it possible that now, at least for some readers, the First World War is remembered primarily for its impact on women's lives? Like the myth of war described by Vance, this version provides consolation: even if the war was a futile waste of human life, a cruel demonstration of the power of industrialized warfare, it did (so the argument goes) help women to cast off their chains. There is of course some truth to this, for the war did alter women's opportunities. Women's experience of the war was a long-neglected dimension, but "in the last decade or so, the significance of [...] women's experience of the war has been revived both by academic work which has retrieved much forgotten or neglected writing by women and by the work of feminist historians who have identified different contexts for it" (Cardinal 1999, 5). Canadian literary critic Donna Coates, writing about war fictions by Canadian women, has

suggested that "Canadian writers are war profiteers, seizing the chaos occasioned by war to vanquish women's subordinate status. In their texts they insist upon bringing an end to the image of women as care-givers and nurturers, and forcefully reiterate that women deserve a place in society alongside men, not as their subalterns" (1996, 66). But while the new attention to women's participation both on the Home Front and on the battlefields has revised the "predominantly masculine myths" of the Great War (Cardinal 1999, 5), the result has not necessarily been a more comprehensive or balanced understanding of the war's impact. It would seem that, at least for readers of romance fiction, the war has been reduced to a way station on the road to greater autonomy for women. This distortion is evident not only in mass-market romance of the sort discussed in Madeline Hunter's column. The endorsements of Robson's books suggest that her readers also perceive the war through a narrow lens. Here, for example, is a review from *Inkstone Review*, a Canadian literary blog and writing consultancy:

Lily's [sic] strength pours from the page as she challenges her family and goes against everything she knows. Her strong nature inspires and exemplifies a contemporary feminist view of life and how it should be lived. Robson successfully adds to the important conversation of writing the female side of the story. Lily's character is relatable and passionate, but clearly still suffers from the societal restraints of the time. (Walsh 2016)

No writer is responsible for her readers. Robson's research is too good, her grasp of the period too sound, for her to give way to this kind of re-framing of the war to suit modern tastes. Nonetheless, it is apparent that the appeal of her books lies not in their evocation of the tragedy of war but in the independence and courage of Lilly and Constance. From the outset of *Somewhere in France*, Lilly is presented as a curious, intelligent girl, inspired by the achievements of Marie Curie, Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, and Beatrice Webb (12). She passionately wants to go to school and university, even though girls of her class are expected to be educated at home. Her determination to acquire useful skills and her willingness to put up with physically demanding work demonstrate that she is no empty-headed husband hunter. Equally strong and independent is Constance, Lilly's governess, who becomes the central figure in *After the War Is Over*.

The governess is a well-established stock character, dating back to Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, and Mrs. Henry Wood's *East Lynne*. By one reckoning, more than a hundred and forty 19th-century novels featured a governess (Hughes 1993, 2). Her popularity has endured: John Sutherland identifies the "governess novel" as one of the key sub-genres of modern British romance (2007, 90). In a column devoted to the governess heroine, Madeline Hunter shrewdly observes that the governess "provides a historical romance author with a woman who has a built-in problem regarding her status, in time periods when status mattered a lot" (2016). The governess is not quite a servant but not one of the family either. A romance writer interviewed for Hunter's column, Vivienne Westlake (her governess novel is called *Tempting the Governess*), notes the potential for interesting conflict in the governess's ambiguous position: "many governesses were scrutinized by the lady of the house [...] because she didn't want her husband or sons to become tempted by another young woman in the house." The frisson associated with the crossing of class lines – the upstairs/downstairs romance – lends a certain piquancy. And of course the Cinderella story of the governess's elevation from servant to great lady appeals to enduring fantasies of magical transformation.

Robson employs many of these "governess novel" ingredients in *After the War Is Over*. The Ashford household has a handsome heir, Edward. (He has a fiancée, but

from the outset it is clear that Helena has no deep hold on his affections.) Constance is poor but eminently respectable: her father is a canon at Wells Cathedral, and she grew up in one of the 14th-century houses in the Vicars' Close (304). (This detail in Constance's story doubtless appeals to the many readers who have toured the picturesque close and admired its well-preserved medieval houses.) And while she will later reveal that she was a foundling – abandoned in the cathedral and then rescued by the clergyman and his wife – this origin story only reinforces the governess-as-Cinderella plot. Constance wins Edward's heart not by flirtation or outstanding beauty but through intelligence, dignity, and tenderness. Her caring for Edward when he comes home, suffering from shell-shock and lingering post-concussion brain damage, is both deeply romantic and admirable. She takes him away to a remote cottage on his family's northern estate. They have a cover story so no one will know about this unorthodox and compromising situation. But of course, exactly what the gossips might expect does happen. As he regains his strength, Edward realizes that Constance is the woman he loves. They do finally embrace: Constance lies in his bed to comfort him after a traumatic nightmare of war. Her hair comes unbound, her nightgown falls open, yet, after a few passionate kisses, they restrain themselves. As an heir facing death duties, Edward must find himself a rich American wife (a situation familiar to viewers of *Downton Abbey*). He is saved from this fate, however, by the discovery that the family fortunes are not as dire as he had been led to believe, and he is free to marry the woman he loves.

On the face of it, this is the stuff of mass-market romance, but Robson steers clear of the Scylla of schlock by investing Constance with such integrity and commitment to social causes that one does not begrudge her a happy ending. Back in Liverpool as the constituency assistant to Rathbone, Constance is troubled by the plight of returned soldiers and their families and decides to write a newspaper column to draw attention to the terrible poverty of the Liverpool slums. She tries to help through her work as Rathbone's assistant, but her columns, eloquent in their outrage, do even more good. Lest Constance be stereotyped as a privileged Lady Bountiful, Robson introduces a powerful scene in which an angry husband chastises her for offering aid to his pregnant wife.

"You do-gooders. You're all the same. Swanning about like God put you on this earth to fix everything that was wrong with it. You're not even from Liverpool, are you?" He sneered.

"Somerset, actually."

"Oh you are, are you? 'Somerset actually,' he echoed, imitating her polished accent. Well, you can go straight back there, you and your charity, and leave off meddling with my business." (273)

To the husband, Constance is an interfering upper-class girl who is undermining his role as the provider. And when Constance is invited to speak at a meeting of Liverpool trade unionists, a heckler makes the same charge: "What's a toff like you to know about our problems? Who are you to speak for us?" (319) Constance's spontaneous self-defence is masterful: she reveals the story of her origins as a foundling, which demonstrates that, accent and education notwithstanding, she has a legitimate claim to speak for the working class. Robson's knowledge of the post-war British economy, in which many returned soldiers could not find work and women lost their war-related employment, makes this aspect of Constance's story entirely convincing. As a counterpoint to the glamour of the Ashfords' lives and the romance plot, Constance's work among the poor redeems *After the War Is Over*. It might be a senti-

mental governess romance, but it is also a 'Condition of England' novel about post-war Britain.

With their rich period detail and engaging characters, Robson's novels may well prompt readers to learn more about the period. The "Further Reading" list in the "PS" section of both *Somewhere in France* and *After the War* includes Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth* (along with academic titles by authors such as Jay Winter and Margaret Higonnet). This was a formative book for Robson: "probably when I was 17 or 18, my parents gave me a copy of Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth*. I have re-read it countless times since and the moment when she learns of her fiancé's death still brings tears to my eyes" (Kelley 2014). Brittain's memoir has certainly left its mark. Lilly's beloved brother is named Edward, as Brittain's was. Lilly's desire for an education is thwarted by her parents' bland certainty that no girl needs to go to university; similarly, in order to get to Oxford, Brittain had to struggle both against her own lack of formal preparation and her father's opposition. Constance, the governess heroine of *After the War*, attends Somerville College, as Brittain finally managed to do in 1913-14. Constance's commitment to study and learning parallels Brittain's blissful absorption in university life, an idyll soon to be ended by the war. After the war, Constance devotes herself to reformist efforts; similarly, Brittain's war experience led her to become a socialist and a pacifist. Even Brittain's interest in fashion – she frequently describes the dresses, hats, and accessories she wore on important occasions – is reflected in the attention Robson pays to the clothes of her characters. And all three young women – Brittain, and the fictional Lilly and Constance – are in love with an officer at the front.

But there the similarities end. While the men whom Lilly and Constance love survive the war, Brittain's fiancé was killed, as were her brother and two close friends. The war, for Brittain, was the "smashing up of my own youth" (2014 [1933], xxv), and she felt that there was nothing left for her: "God, King and Country – that voracious trio had [...] deprived me of all that I valued most in life" (412). On the day of the Armistice she could not celebrate, for she felt herself "a lonely survivor drowning in black waves of memory" (422). This is a far cry from the joyous reunions and declarations of love that mark the end of war in Robson's fictions.

Yet Brittain's very despair led her to a feminist position not so different from that of Robson's heroines (and of the heroines in many lesser period romances). Brittain, like Lilly and Constance, emerged from the war with experiences and freedoms she had not possessed before:

[...] dimly I perceived that it was these very handicaps and my struggle against them which had lifted life out of mediocrity, given it glamour, made it worth while; that the individuals from whom destiny demands too much are infinitely more vital than those of whom it asks too little. In one sense I was my war; my war was I; without it I should do nothing and be nothing. (602)

Brittain's story can be read as a feminist narrative in which girl meets hardship, discovers inner strength, and emerges triumphant. This is Lilly's and Constance's story too, but their struggles are swiftly rewarded by the love of a good man. More importantly, the war does not diminish their capacity for hope and joy as it most certainly did Brittain's. The shaping of Brittain as a pacifist, feminist, socialist, and writer is a more profound and painful process than any transformation wrought in Robson's characters. Her memoir, powerful, affecting, and inspiring, does not comfort the reader with any assurances that love will be the reward for suffering, which is, of course, the inescapable generic requirement encoded in the romance novel.

Does the war romance create "inappropriate memories" (to use George Mosse's phrase) that obscure the terrible human cost of the battlefields (1990, 144)? Perhaps the modern romance novel has invented a new way to trivialize the Great War. Once, its horrors were made tolerable by coarse portrayals of the soldier as buffoon or farces about handsome lieutenants or soothing images of nature or mass battlefield tourism; these forms of relief and comfort and entertainment domesticated the war, blurring the boundary between the sacred world of the dead and the profane world of the living. Now the same work is being done by subsuming the war in an optimistic account of women's journey towards autonomy. As I remarked above, the war most assuredly did play a part in opening to women the public realm of politics and employment. But to make the war merely a background for that change is trivializing, however high-minded and earnest the feminist account may be.

I do not think that Robson is a trivial writer: she does understand just how terrible industrialized warfare was, for she has studied the war, worked on one of its battlefields, and taught it to history students. Still, I feel uneasy about having enjoyed her books. While immersed in them, I was able to forget the cruel truths that a writer like Vera Brittain never obscures. Sherrill Grace has asserted about Great War literature that "the demands *placed by the subject matter* on both those who create and the rest of us who receive and respond are ultimately ethical" (2014, 19). Perhaps the many readers who have enjoyed Robson's books will respond to this ethical challenge implicit in war literature by reading other stories of war, stories that do not have happy endings.

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From the internationally bestselling author of *Somewhere in France* comes an enthralling historical novel about one of the most famous wedding dresses of the twentieth century. In *The Gown*, Jennifer Robson takes us inside the workrooms where one of the most famous wedding gowns in history was created. Scroll down to start reading! Chapter One. Ann Barking, Essex England. January 31, 1947. It was dark when Ann left work at a quarter to six, and darker still when she reached home. Jennifer Robson first learned about the Great War from her father, acclaimed historian Stuart Robson, and later served as an official guide at the Canadian National War Memorial at Vimy Ridge, France. A former copy editor, she holds a doctorate in British economic and social history from the University of Oxford. From the internationally bestselling author of *Somewhere in France* comes an enthralling historical novel about one of the most famous wedding dresses of the twentieth century—Queen Elizabeth’s wedding gown—and the fascinating women who made it. Millions will welcome this joyous event as a flash of color on the long road we have to travel. She’d finished that first novel, *Somewhere in France*, in 2009 when she was at home, in the Junction area of Toronto, freelancing and taking care of her two children. “I felt that I just needed something a bit more fulfilling for me and something my kids could say, ‘This is what my mom does for a living’ and have a sense of pride,” she says. Her father is the Canadian historian Stuart Robson. “I don’t think it’s really possible to overstate the influence my dad has had on me,” she says. Her interest in the First World War is one she’s pursued in different ways, including as a teenager becoming a guide at the Canadian memorial at Vimy Ridge, at her mother’s urging. The experience stuck with her. It was 1989: that’s when there were still veterans visiting the monument.