

Review: *The Vimy Trap: Or, How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Great War*

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McKay, Ian and Swift, Jamie. *The Vimy Trap: Or, How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Great War*. Toronto: Between the Lines, 2016. 372 pages. ISBN 978-1-77113-275-6

This is a year of commemorative significance and reflection for Canada. Not only is 2017 the 150th anniversary of Confederation, marked with a rather mixed public reaction, it is also the centenary of landmark events related to Canada's participation in the First World War - the Battle of Vimy Ridge, the Conscription Crisis, the Halifax Explosion, and the introduction of the temporary Income Tax. Major anniversaries are also opportunities to revisit sacred cows and contested legacies, with the public more aware of and open to examination of the past.

Published in 2016, Ian McKay and Jamie Swift's *The Vimy Trap: Or, How We Learned To Stop Worrying and Love the Great War*, focuses the argument presented in their 2012 *Warrior Nation: Rebranding Canada in an Age of Anxiety*. While *Warrior Nation* raised the alarm over the perceived recasting of official history to emphasize the martial nature of our past, *The Vimy Trap* argues that positioning the Battle of Vimy Ridge as a great victory and foundational myth is a misguided interpretation of the historical record and a possibly malicious invention, one that willfully promotes the valorization of conflict and the nobility of sacrifice. McKay and Swift identify Vimyism as a recent recasting of symbolism that asserts the idea that Canada came of age on 9 April, 1917, when all four divisions of the Canadian Corps fought together, successfully, for the first time, under the partial leadership of Canadian major-general Sir Arthur Currie. The unprecedented success in capturing and retaining the strategic Vimy Ridge after past failures by other Allies demonstrated the grit, smarts, and courage of the Canadian soldier, secured Canada's reputation and influence on the international scene, and cemented the image of the ideal soldier as a paragon of unquestionable bravery and moral virtue fighting for the ideals of the democratic West (9).

The *Vimy Trap*'s prologue and nine chapters are supplemented by almost 90 pages of notes for further reading. The prologue sets the tone, opening with the perspective of a unique set of combatants, members of the Group of Seven. Fred Varley's painting, '*For What*' sets the context for the authors' views on the militarism and misguided valour to follow – on gravediggers burying the dismembered remains of their comrades in a nihilistic wasteland. This is followed by Chapter One's outline of commonly held interpretations of Canada's First World War experiences, where Vimy is positioned as the pinnacle of

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ingenuity and bravery, setting the stage for a confident new nation to take her earned place among the nations, loyal to, but separate from, the Empire she was a part of. This is highlighted as a British/Canadian perspective of commemoration as a means to support present day ends, versus alternate approaches “to reflect critically on war and peace in the present, which is less open to manipulation” (24).

Chapter Two offers an overview of Great War action and causation, stressing the international scale of the conflict. The authors note the dangerous practice of hiving-off Canadian participation as a “collective selfie,” (36) ignoring the more catastrophic experiences of other nations. Chapters Three to Five outline shifting attitudes during the conflict and in the following decades. Primary sources trace the evolution of the debate from notions of imperial duty and chivalric valour to horror at the industrial killing machine and the general failure of humanity that lead to the gas, piss, and blood of the trenches. While the dead were in general respected for their sacrifice, the rationale for the conflict was no longer grounded in the moral plane of religion, freedom, and sacred honour. This is reinforced by the general public’s reaction to the publication of war photo essays that exposed those on the homefront to a visual barrage that “might well be censored in a twenty first century publication” (84). This understanding of the horror of modern warfare is demonstrated in the reaction to the declaration of the Second World War, where sombre consideration of the conflict ahead contrasts with the cheering and flag waving of 25 years previous. No one saw this as an opportunity to relive the glories of Vimy or referenced another opportunity for Canada’s rebirth through conflict.

Chapter Six focuses on the creation of the Vimy monument and contrasts the memorialization of Vimy with other treatments in Canada. Post-war conventions produced monuments of general condolence, reassuring the bereft that death in conflict was for the greater good, referencing glory and the fight for freedom/democracy etc. As the scope of commemoration extended to the state level, memorials adopted a more conceptual approach, guided by the hands of political masters such as Mackenzie King. Canada’s national war memorial and Vimy were distanced from militaristic braggadocio to honour the concept of sacrifice - the commitment of the actual soldier without the focus on the disputed machinations of the conflict. Walter Alward’s design for the Vimy monument epitomized this approach, gravitating to the sense of loss represented by the centrepiece sculpture, Canada Bereft, featuring the engraved names of the dead, documenting the human cost of war. Notably absent from the monument’s formal unveiling were portrayals of Vimy as the apex of Canadian exceptionalism or the birthplace of the modern nation. The monument was a token of thanksgiving to those who had (needlessly? uselessly?) been lost in the European conflict as a whole, a monumental focal point for national loss.

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Chapters Seven and Eight deal with the popularization of ‘Vimyism.’ A tour of the historiography is telling. Post-war school texts and scholarly treatments document success in the Battle of Vimy Ridge, but as part of a failed larger initiative with no long-term impact on the war’s outcome and with no overarching narrative of nation building. It was 1967’s Centennial, corresponding with the 50th anniversary of Vimy, that saw a shift in focus. With nationalism peaking and coinciding with separatist threats, Vimy was used as a tool for cohesion, presenting a suitably distant creation story for a country fractured along linguistic and cultural lines. Populist historian Pierre Burton’s 1986 *Vimy* solidified this view in public memory, presenting a story of “mythic quality in a country short of myths” (199). Hopscotching on his public celebrity, school textbooks and the media diffused these easily accessible and unchallenging assertions, which a Royal Military College historian damned as “execrable ... (and) distorted this battle beyond anybody’s ability to repair the damage” (200). When a leading military historian affiliated with the Canadian Forces describes your work as literally shitty, there is a problem.

As McKay and Swift approach the current date, the argument becomes needlessly politicized. The authors reference the august Don Cherry as a mouthpiece of historical thought, spotlight the conservative government of Stephen Harper as radical re-framers à la *Warrior Nation*, then castigate other historians as insufficiently denunciative of militarism and the negatives of war. Historians are accused of not being critical of the process of sacralization that makes the soldier and therefore the war they engage in a heroic concept; surely McKay and Swift have made the leap to current ideological and political concerns. Not fully adopting the authors’ perspective and highlighting peacemaking, disarmament, and the horrors of conflict renders one a militarist by default. This perhaps explains the *Dr. Strangelove* reference in the *Vimy Trap*’s subtitle, an overly dramatic gesture beyond the historian’s purview.

The final chapter ramps up the hyperbole and tosses needlessly hostile barbs to make points that the authors have already established. Yes, Vimy has been exaggerated as victorious battle unifying Canadians, the birth of the nation. Yes, a more nuanced understanding of the conflict is important to convey. But to say that Vimy has been “mythologized with a zeal worthy of Homer” is overkill (248). ‘Vimyist patriots’ are identified and denounced on the following pages, and even the Vimy Foundation comes under suspicion for elbowing out competitors for a commemorative market share. The British-Canadian population is accused of retooling Vimy as a narrative to retain historical control of a changing country, while the authors assert that insufficient attention is paid to imperialist machinations and war crimes (Kenyan concentration camps are mentioned). In their view, the global complexity and dehumanization of modern industrial warfare is swept under the carpet. ‘Vimyists’ are accused of silencing dissenters, distorting and falsifying the historical record, and endorsing

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“official ...celebration of a bloody and mismanaged war” (263). The chapter and book end on more measured notes, putting forward examples of contemporary commemorative practice that removes nation from consideration, highlighting loss independent of state affiliation.

Well-written and researched, and supplemented by a wide variety of primary and secondary sources, the authors present clear and valid arguments that, in light of the fuller picture of the Great War, the Battle of Vimy Ridge was no strategically significant victory. Although a win for (mostly) Canadian forces fighting together as a unit for the first time, the achievement was not presented as a unifying national moment until some 50 years after the fact. To this extent, the *Vimy Trap* is a welcome counter-balance to more the exaggerated portrayals of events in this centennial year. Even the Prime Minister fell into the commemorative snare during his address on the 100th anniversary at the Vimy site where he made the by now discounted points that:

these ordinary, yet extraordinary, men of the British dominion fought for the first time as the people of one country. Francophone, Anglophone. New Canadians. Indigenous Peoples. Side by side, united here at Vimy in the four divisions of the Canadian Corps.

It is by their sacrifice that Canada became an independent signatory to the Treaty of Versailles.

In that sense, Canada was born here.¹

Other points raised by the authors are more politicized and open to challenge. McKay and Swift are under the impression that the Great War is still being taught as a glorious enterprise rather than a needless disaster and slaughter, and that the spectre of militarism haunts the Canadian psyche. Labelling people who see things differently as ‘Vimyists’ or militarists at heart is counterproductive. Though they would likely challenge the precise conclusions, I think McKay and Swift would appreciate the Canadian War Museum’s current re-evaluation, ‘Vimy: Beyond the Battle,’ which documents the changing interpretations of Vimy over the century, the growth and development of the myths surrounding it, and links to the human compulsion to remember. With its deliberate approach to consciousness of historical mythmaking and its role in the national psyche over time, it is this exhibit that presents a mature discussion of Vimy, one that is worth having.

¹ Trudeau, J. “Address of the Prime Minister Commemorating the 100th Anniversary of the Battle of Vimy Ridge.” Delivered at Vimy Ridge, France, April 9, 2017. Retrieved from <http://pm.gc.ca/eng/news/2017/04/09/address-prime-minister-justin-trudeau-commemorating-100th-anniversary-battle-vimy>

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