

Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Death so Noble: Memory, Meaning, and the First World War* by Jonathan F. Vance

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Source: *The International History Review*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (Jun., 1998), pp. 434-436

Published by: Taylor & Francis, Ltd.

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40108248>

Accessed: 23-03-2017 18:29 UTC

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JONATHAN F. VANCE. *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning, and the First World War*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1997. Pp. xv, 319. \$39.95 (CDN).

THE HISTORICAL LITERATURE on the cultural consequences of the Great War is rapidly approaching torrential proportions. As the distinguished Australian historian Ken Inglis put it to one of the first international meetings on the history of Great War war memorials in Paris seven years ago, appropriately enough in Les Invalides, he studied war memorials in the 1960s as one of a small group of consenting adults in private. In 1990, he was 'coming out', and doing so with dozens of scholars by his side.

Joining him now is Jonathan Vance, who has ransacked many collections of archival and other primary sources on how Canadians remembered the Great War. The study has much of value in it. His interpretation of Canadian commemoration follows the work of Inglis and, in particular, the distinguished German historian George Mosse, who was the first to write of the 'Myth of the War Experience' as a political force in the inter-war years.

Vance's argument is that the search for positive meaning helped survivors to forget about the worst of the war. Following Mosse, Vance sees the overwhelming majority of Canadian images of the war as sanitized. 'In the early 1920s', he writes, 'no one in their right mind wanted to wallow in the horrors of the war just ended'; instead, 'Canadians wanted to remember the war in light-hearted and disarming ways' (pp. 109-10). The narrative they constructed was an elevated one, wherein sacrifice was sanctified and put to uplifting purposes. Many of these were political, aiming at a unified Canada. The story of the war took the form of an 'assimilationist' myth (p. 260), one whose aim was to 'solidify the nation's social and political status quo'. It imagined a Canada in which 'the old power structures were bolstered' (p. 261).

This was no élite plot, but the result of a widespread search for meaning among people shocked by the war and determined, even desperate, to find some redeeming message in it. Vance cautions against ignoring the grief left in the wake of the war, but feels that many Canadians turned away from it, and accepted the High Diction of sacrifice and honour, not because they were told to do so, but because they had to do so.

The strengths of this study lie in its wide range of sources and in its careful construction of the multiple forms of commemoration in the aftermath of the war. For a scholar clearly aware of the international literature in this field, though, there are surprisingly few comparative remarks. Some mention is made of Australian and New Zealand nation-building, but very little about British commemoration, where motifs of sadness and the absence of triumphalism seem to contrast sharply with the picture provided by Vance. As such a large proportion of Canadian veterans were British-born, we have to ask the question: why the difference? The same is true with respect to French commemorative forms, which celebrate the

peasant-soldier's heroism, but frequently with the poignant form of his grieving wife holding his empty greatcoat at his grave. Why the contrast?

A third contrast was initially noted by Mosse. He shows that the myth of the war experience so powerful in inter-war Europe as a narrative of the 1914-18 war did not return after 1945. Again, is this true in Canada and, if so, why? Surely the Dieppe raid was as hopeless and heroic as many Canadian attacks at Passchendaele. Myths don't just vanish; once again, Vance's argument seems to raise at least as many questions as it answers; there is material here for much further work.

Perhaps the political destination of the argument is to blame for some of the limitations of this study. It would be absurd to deny the force of narratives about the war in political discourse, but it would be equally absurd to treat the political domain as the only or the primary one in which commemorative forms must be located. Vance avoids treating everything as political, but his book points to and ends on a political note.

One regret is that Vance's approach has relatively little to say about family history. Mourning started there, but unlike the discussion in David Macfarlane's *The Danger Tree: Memory, War, and the Search for a Family's Past* (1991) or other such works of family narrative, Vance's point of view emphasizes what he calls 'social memory' as the construct of a society as a whole. Where are families in this process? He is too good a scholar to ignore the contested nature of commemoration, but he offers too little in the way of linking families and local social networks to wider groups with a more clear-cut political agenda.

To do so would have led Vance to offer his myth as one possible construct, rather than the national story of the war. By unifying discourse about the war into a single redemptive narrative, he tells us much about the cultural history of the inter-war years, but in a form which is a bit too neat, without the messiness which is the real hallmark of such a stormy period in personal as well as national history.

Both the strengths and the weaknesses of this study are those of much contemporary writing about 'collective memory'. Vance has advanced our knowledge of the inter-war years and has done much to throw doubt on the argument that the 1914-18 war was a caesura in cultural history. But his treatment of 'collective memory' is unsatisfactory. The assumption that such an entity exists is hard to justify without an account which links the familial with the local, and both to the nation. It cannot be assumed that they naturally form one organic entity.

Such discussions need to locate memory work in the lives of small groups of people who pass up other things to ensure that important deeds and sacrifices are not forgotten. When these people get old or sick or bored or just too busy, they cease to act. When that happens, 'collective memory' ceases, too. It doesn't exist in the air, like some inert gas. When Vance writes about the presence of anti-Americanism in the 'Canadian psyche' (p. 179), he offers a comment about a current of thought which may indeed exist, but if it does, it is difficult to see where it is. National stereotypes do not rely on evidence, but on faith alone. The strength

of this book is not its interpretation but the evidence of local initiatives which it highlights. It is to be hoped that Vance will draw upon this rich reservoir to tell us more about the agents of memory work; the people who really create that fragile reed, 'collective memory'.

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MICHAEL BERKOWITZ. *Western Jewry and the Zionist Project, 1914-1933*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997. Pp. xvi, 305. \$59.95 (us).

FOR THE TOTALLY committed Zionists of eastern Europe and their contemporary descendants in Israel, those who call themselves Zionists in the democratic West pose an exasperating problem. How could they consider themselves Zionists without feeling themselves bound by the ideological imperative to settle in Zion? Now Michael Berkowitz, who four years ago wrote a well-received study of these 'non-Zionist Zionists', *Zionist Culture and West European Jewry before the First World War* (rev. *ante*, xvi [1994], 374) continues his research into the years between 1914 and 1933.

He is interested in discovering how 'cultural' Zionism, the term used for that kind of vicarious Zionism by American Zionist leaders such as Horace Kallen, affected German, British, and American Jewry which, he believes, are cut from the same historical cloth. A social historian who focuses on culture, Berkowitz is primarily interested in how Zionism was imagined by its Western followers. How did they reconcile their new-found nationalism with loyalty to their host nations, and, more important, what happened to the Judaism that many were in the process of abandoning, when they became Jewish nationalists?

We learn that the Zionist variant of Jewish ethnic identity was generated through youth movements, summer camps, and dozens of annual meetings and conventions held all over the Jewish map. That sense of communalism was reinforced by a pictorial language in which the pioneering image of the halutz and the kibbutz was central. The images, transmitted in word, photographs, and song, not only created a racial memory where little had existed before, it fed into the dearly held Western belief that progress could solve even the most ancient problems. The effect of a photograph of a modern agricultural landscape, looking as if some crazy-clean hausfrau had 'putzed' it or pictures of new cities such as Tel Aviv and Haifa populated by athletic, muscular, young people, had an enormous impact. But it was an image, not reality. The images rarely dealt directly with the Arab problem. Western Zionists succumbed to the popular notion that the rising standard of living would also improve the lot of the Arabs. It did, but it was not sufficient to mute the hostility.

Zionist propaganda, let us call it that, also produced a constellation of heroes, Arthur Balfour, Louis Brandeis, Albert Einstein, and Chaim Weizmann, and the towering figure of Theodore Herzl who, before he died at the age of forty-four,