United States Is to Violence as Canada Is to Peace: A Cursory Review of Literary Perspectives on How Americans and Canadians View Their Militaries

Jeff Koloze,
Kent State University and Cleveland State University

While the focus of The Conference of Defence Associations is "to study the problems of defence and security and to promote the efficiency and well-being of Canada's Armed Forces" (Windsor), my particular interest in attending this conference is to examine a more pedagogic implication of the militaries of both the United States and Canada, especially focusing on literary aspects. Studying one's national literature is as important as determining the cost of certain missiles or whether armed forces should or should not be delivered into an area of conflict. In fact, I think that literature studies are of prime importance. Students form their opinions of the military from a variety of sources: movies, songs, newscasts, and literature which professors in university designate as their reading assignments.

This paper will discuss contemporary American and Canadian views of the military as evidenced in specific works of literature. Although time constraints will consider only a cursory review of how the two peoples have viewed their militaries, the presentation will focus on American and Canadian responses to important representative fiction works, including the 1973 short story "The Village" by American author Kate Wilhelm and the 1977 novel The Wars by Canadian author Timothy Findley.

Brief Survey of Selected Fiction Works

First, however, a cursory review of some details from selected works of twentieth-century fiction is necessary to determine general attitudes of prominent writers toward Canada itself and Canadians.

At the beginning of this century the American author Jack London decided to set some of his more famous stories in Canadian environments. "The Call of the Wild" (first published 1903) and "Love of Life" (first published 1907) are two stories which feature wolves and dogs and the desperate struggle of one man trying to maintain his life in the frozen wastelands of Canada. London uses Canadian terrain as a motif for the struggle of the primitive in all humans.

Ernest Hemingway's 1926 novel The Sun Also Rises begins a long sequence of novels which define Canadian national characteristics for American audiences. The Canadian Mrs. Braddocks is a character who has "all their easy social graces", implying that Canadians have what Americans lack: manners, elegance, politeness (17).

John Steinbeck in his 1936 novel In Dubious Battle suggests another Canadian national characteristic: one of his main characters, Mac, the union activist, implies that the Canadian woods would be "too peaceful" for him; presumably, he appreciates the fast pace associated with American life (298).

Saul Bellow's 1944 novel Dangling Man is interesting for two reasons: the main character, Joseph, debates whether he should be active in the world by joining the military. His ruminations are especially potent because, at the time of publication, the United States had been at war for three years; Canada had been at war for five. The second reason that the novel is interesting is that Joseph is not American, but Canadian (11). Why would a master writer like Bellow want to identify his main character as this nationality? While I defer to other literary critics on this matter, I offer one possibility: Canada has always maintained an image of a peacekeeping nation, so it would be more proper for a man who is confused about militaristic solutions to life to be involved in something other than a Canadian military. [1]

Paul Goodman's 1963 novel Making Do begins a long series of works which identify Canada as a refuge. The Laurentians are the perfect break for the narrator of the novel, the "tired man", who implies that the fast pace of life in the United States is "so essential for the life of the Americans" (82-3).

A year later Saul Bellow's 1964 novel Herzog becomes more critical of the United States and, by implication, more reverent of Canada. The "fat gods of America" are unlike Canada, he writes (133). Herzog, the main character who gives his name to the novel's title, wonders what was wrong with Napoleon Street in Montreal. "Everything was there," the character affirms (140). Moreover, Bellow identifies Canada as "genuine cold" (315). By the rhetorical process of contrast, while Canada may be "cold", she is "genuine", unlike the United States which is the opposite: a "fake cold", perhaps, an artificiality which one would not find among Canadians.

Canadian editors David Helwig and Tom Marshall, in their 1971 collection of short stories, Fourteen Stories High, include one story which I will elaborate later, Phyllis Gotlieb's "The Military Hospital", which will be examined as a contrast against the American author Kate Wilhelm's short story "The Village."

Continuing the chronology would place Timothy Findley's 1977 masterly novel The Wars which will be examined further below. This novel is not only important for what it has to say about the military, but also for the mere fact that it is, as the recent second edition of The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature states, "a pivotal text for students of Canadian literary canonization in the years following the Centennial celebrations of 1967", the 1970s being a decade which saw a "newly reconceptualized Canadian `tradition'" (York, Wars 1168).

The decade of the eighties saw two important Native American fictional works. Michael Dorris, in his 1987 novel A Yellow Raft in Blue Water, identifies Canada as a refuge (64-5). Thomas King, whose novel Green Grass, Running Water was published in 1993, embodies several popular maxims about Canada. Almost from the beginning of the novel, Canada is equated with being a "good idea" (18). An avaricious American businessman is derisively portrayed. To show the man's greed and typical American attitude of land conquest, Bursum's store contains a wall of

television sets which is shaped like a map of Canada and the United States (later in the novel, the United States is identified as "Gold Mountain") (108-9, 116). Canadian tourists are depicted as "orderly" (131). There is a comical reduction of a typical Canadian border guard interrogation (197-9). The novel contains at least two sections comparing and contrasting the United States and Canada (134, 235-6). Finally, if a character seeks refuge, the logical place to flee to is, of course, Canada (114). [2]

Another 1993 novel, Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye, contains popular idealizations of Canada which are seemingly unnecessary for the dramatic torque. In one crucial scene, Lake Erie is described as "lapping all the way to Canada" (105). There is no need for the gerund clause identifying one of the common lakes between the two nations--that is, unless Canada is viewed in the American imagination as more profound or more secure. Later in the novel, fictional characters describe the setting of the city Lorain, Ohio as "this melting pot on the lip of America facing the cold but receptive Canada" (116-7). Once again, while Canada in the popular American imagination is in terms of temperature "cold", a countervailing force which equalizes the bare climatic fact is that of Canada as friendly and open. It must be remembered, too, that, since Toni Morrison is one of the United States' leading African-American writers, she may be tapping into a reservoir of affection for Canada which African Americans have had since the antebellum period. Canada was indeed the "true north," the land where blacks could be free from slavery. [3]

Finally, Stephen Dixon's sex-laden 1997 novel Gould: a Novel in Two Novels may not have anything to do with Canada or Canadian military, steeped as it is with documenting the extreme sexuality of the protagonist. It is interesting, though, that Gould, the main character, feels it necessary to note that one of his many children, Tim, whom he truly loves as a father should, has "left home for Canada" (118).

These titles I've mentioned should all be studied well for one crucial reason: they are required reading of professors who deem these works of so great an importance that today's students should read them, whatever category the professor will assign to them. The Native American novels I referred to, for example, fall under the multiethnic category. Many of the older, early twentieth-century works have reached the stage where they are permanently part of the canon not only of great American literature, but also of world literature. Finally, these works should be required reading for those interested in literature or the military simply because they can become bases for interesting future research studies contrasting the perceptions which Americans have for Canada with those of Canadians themselves.

Analysis of the Military Fiction

Timothy Findley's novel The Wars is a story of a man's disgust with military commands with which he violently disagrees. Robert Ross, the main character, through whose eyes the actions of the First World War are illustrated, is originally one who desires to go to war. Shipped off to Europe, he saves his band of Canadian soldiers from a nerve gas attack by the Germans. And yet, despite such bravery, Robert is quite naive. He finds that he can't perform sexually with a whore (he embarrassingly ejaculates before getting to her room; later in the novel, however, he is able to do the manly thing with a British woman). At the whorehouse he is disturbed to witness a man

whom he admired as a Canadian war hero engaging in homosexual activity. Moreover, Robert's naivete is best demonstrated by his rape: after bathing, innocent that anyone could see a sexual interest in him, Robert is brutally raped by none other than his fellow soldiers.

It is under these conditions that Robert performs his sole act of insubordination: after unsuccessfully pleading with his superior to release horses for which he has charge, Robert releases the horses anyway and becomes a criminal in the process (he kills a captain). Eventually, he is saved from the burning barn in which he is hiding, is cared for by the sister of the British woman whom he loved, and dies in Britain a few years after the war.

The portrait of the military which emerges in this novel is interesting for several reasons. First, it is not the military per se which is the cause of Robert's anxiety for the care of the horses; Robert reacts so violently because of the insensitivity of one superior officer. Secondly, this is not a novel decrying the futility of war. While Robert's mother bemoans the fact that Canadian soldiers going to fight in Europe are lost, the consensus opinion is that the soldiers are fighting for a just cause. Thirdly, the universal respect for Canadians, even in war, is manifested in an interesting dialogue which Robert has with a Flemish peasant. The peasant, mistaking Robert for an Englishman, becomes irate, saying "ce sont tout les assassins!" ("they are all assassins!"). The peasant becomes mollified somewhat only when Robert says "je suis canadien" ("I am Canadian") (Findley 80).

If anything, this novel is more concerned with the valid non-erotic friendship which develops between men in the military. It is, in today's terminology, a "male-bonding" novel. [4] The novel does not undermine the status of the military. The narrator of the story, ostensibly a researcher trying to reconstruct the facts of Robert's life, concludes the novel, not with a stinging denunciation of military control over one man's life, but rather a sorrow that Robert seems to have had a lapse in obedience, a lapse which affected not only him but, more importantly, the woman who deeply loved him. In fact, the nurse who cared for him in his last years deflects patriotic criticism not by saying that the generals or the people who fought were crazy, but by saying that "it was the war that was crazy" (Findley 12).

Although I'm moving in slight reverse chronological order (Findley's <u>The Wars</u> was published four years after the publication of this next story), Kate Wilhelm's 1973 short story "The Village" has a seemingly simplistic plot. Moreover, I need to contrast the Canadian literary perception of the military with the American.

The story weaves between episodes in the village's life and episodes of soldiers preparing for their "action." Mildred Carey, one of the villagers, opens the story with a comment about the weather. Immediately after this, two soldiers talk about this latest "search-and-clear maneuver": "one fucken village is just like the others" (Wilhelm 277). Mildred shops at a number of stores. One soldier talks about how cold it is where he comes from (Vermont) in distinction to the eighty-six degree heat. Mildred meets a friend and they talk about how slow a government committee does its work. The soldiers continue their march, knowing that the temperature will hit one hundred degrees. Mildred buys milk and cottage cheese.

Suddenly, helicopters fly in over the village and begin shooting; people scurry for cover. Mildred sees her fellow townspeople killed. The author comments that the soldier "spoke again, but the words were foreign to her" (Wilhelm 285). Mildred shouts "I'm an American! For God's sake, this is America! What are you doing?" at which she is hit with the soldier's rifle and told to join the other villagers who have been rounded up (Wilhelm 285). She continues to see people beaten up, raped, killed. As the action winds down, perhaps the most chilling episode in the story commences. The villagers are driven to the edge of town, where the highway department had dug a ditch for a culvert that hadn't been laid yet. The sergeant closed his notebook and turned away. The firing started. (Wilhelm 287)

What does this short story say about the attitude of Americans toward their military? I would like to provide several summarizations which can contribute to the literary view which Americans have of the military. First, Americans are ideologically capable of seeing that their own military could possibly engage in actions against them which are typically described of military actions against Third World peoples. Secondly, although they think that a military action such as that described in the story can become possible, I believe that Americans would still think that such an action is improbable, unless a "foreign" element was involved; this may account for the fact that the soldiers who kill the villagers apparently speak a foreign language. Thirdly, not American politics, but American literature seems to be the venue to broach an issue which Canadians have long become accustomed to: the idea of separation. Canada has had the longstanding tradition of competing claims of separation not only from Quebec but also other provinces. In Wilhelm's story, the village, apparently set somewhere in the southern United States, is invaded by troops some of whom hail from Vermont. Has the United States finally fractured into its constituent nations? Have the various regions which constitute what is still called for the sake of convenience "The United States" finally given up on national unity and split? [5]

These revolutionary matters seem best suited in a story like this which is, tellingly, called a piece of "speculative fiction". "Speculative fiction," Wilhelm writes, "as I define and use it involves the exploration of worlds that probably never will exist, that I don't believe in as real, that I don't expect the reader to accept as real, but that are realistically handled in order to investigate them, because for one reason or another they are the worlds we most dread or yearn for." (12)

The coupling of "most dread" with "yearn for" (with the superlative "most" understood as distributed to this adjective) is further evidence that, through their fiction, Americans may be preparing for the worst. [6]

Contrast Wilhelm's short story with another short story on a similar theme: the Canadian Phyllis Gotlieb's "The Military Hospital." The main character, DeLazzari, supervises the Control Room of the military hospital he works in; he likes his job there "because it was clean, roomy, and had very few patients" (Gotlieb 84). The city experiences a revolution of sorts: "on the fifth day the people of the city rose up against their government and it fell before them" (Gotlieb 91). The act of revolution, DeLazzari knows, will repeat itself again (Gotlieb 94). DeLazzari, safe in his military hospital, is "devoutly thankful that he was not stationed in City Hospital" (Gotlieb 91). After his three weeks are over, DeLazzari leaves the hospital for a revolt-torn city.

What is most obvious about this story is that the enemies are not the military forces, but Doctors. They are encased in protective armor, it seems, and protrude sensors only when necessary to determine what is happening in the real world. There is no protest against the military establishment, as would be elicited by Wilhelm's story. There is no overt social commentary, either, which compares with the slaughter of innocent civilians as would be found in Wilhelm's story. The Canadian fictional account of a militarized hospital cannot compare with the aggression of an American counterpart: it contrasts.

What does all this have to do with literature students? What are my responsibilities as a literature instructor? These works encapsulate several important and controversial ideas about the respective militaries of the United States and of Canada, especially for students of both literatures. Perhaps the most important fact to present to my students is that the stereotype of the United States as more open to aggression than Canada still holds. A theme of anti-militarism is noticeably absent from the Canadian literature I have highlighted. Moreover, the works discussed present me with a challenge: how does one encourage students to maintain respect for their country when it has failed to protect basic human rights at home and abroad? (Remember that Canada was a refuge for thousands of American young men who did not want to fight in Vietnam. Moreover, while Canada's abortion laws may equal those of the United States, at least Canada can boast that one of her own, Louise Summerhill, tried to help mothers in need by establishing the abortion alternative organization Birthright; American abortion activists, in contrast, merely agitated for a "right to abortion" not found in the American Constitution until judicial activism "discovered" it there, thus legalizing abortion throughout the nine months of pregnancy.)

Finally, it is challenging if not difficult to encourage American students to love a country vilified in fictional literature. American students may not compare with those in Montreal in 1968, but two years later the United States had four killings at Kent State University. Moreover, signs of the disenchantment of today's students are clear: not many would fight for their country; few vote; many adopt the rap or alternative culture. Perhaps, instead of hopelessly trying to forge them into American superpatriots, I should instead offer them peaceful and polite Canada as their refuge.

Endnotes

1 The peaceful reputation of the Canadian is further documented in a recent book review by J.L. Granatstein: *The Military History of an Unmilitary People*. That was the subtitle G.F.G. Stanley gave his book Canada's Soldiers, the first--and for a long period--the only complete study of Canadian military history from the earliest days to the modern era. Of course, Stanley was right: Canadians are the very essence of an unmilitary people. Protected by two oceans and a sea of ice against invasion from overseas, sharing a continent with an ordinarily friendly giant, we have tended to doze in the sureness of our security. Protected by our myths and certainties, we have eschewed arms until danger impinged very closely upon us or our friends. Then we have usually reacted with a vigour that belied our unmilitary nature. (41)

Recent accounts that Canadians are even questioning the need for an army tell as much to those south of the border as any great work of fiction. See, for example, Robin Brunet's article. Although 75% of Canadians surveyed in April of this year thought positively of the armed forces, the journalist states that:

It is anyone's guess what the public thinks now, after years of scandals--including the military cover-up of torture and murder in Somalia--and two high-profile Maclean's cover stories alleging a systemic military culture of rape and sexual harassment. (11)

Perhaps, too, the psychology of the gun accounts for Canadians' reputation as peacemakers:

There's a marked distinction between our nation and our nearest neighbour in the way we think about guns. To Americans, gun ownership invokes powerful sentiments about civil liberty: to Canadians, guns are, for the most part, just useful implements. (Simonds 44)

A related article cites startling statistics about killings from guns in the United States; for example, while 31,000 Americans were estimated to have been killed in military combat from 1968 to 1995, 1,300,000 Americans "died violently" ("United States" 25).

Finally, as an interesting irony, although her article primarily examines Trudeau's role in developing military procurement policies which would strengthen federalism in the country, Edna Keeble reports that "Canada's bilingual military is considered a major asset to the state, allowing Canada, for example, to operate in peacekeeping missions in French-speaking areas of the world, as in Haiti" (561).

[2] Perhaps the friendly attitude toward Canada in Native American writing can be based not only on the fact that Native Americans have felt themselves as the ubiquitous "other" in American society, but also that they have been treated much differently from their Canadian counterparts. Combining historical criticism and rhetorical studies of major American texts, one anthology widely used in American universities credits the French settlers of Canada with instituting a methodoloy of converting native peoples vastly superior to their American (English) counterparts further south on the continent:

Unlike other missionaries (such as the Roman Catholics in Canada), the Puritans were convinced that the Native Americans had to be "reduced to civility," that is, converted to a "civilized" English way of life, before they could be Christianized. (Bizzell and Herzberg 15)

[3] Of course, this cursory study omits numerous other references to Canada which may determine African-American perceptions of Canada. For example, James Baldwin's 1963 essay on race relations in the United States, The Fire Next Time, doesn't lapse into epideictic praise for Canada; he lumps both the United States and Canada into one entity called "white America" (89).

[4] I think that The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature mistakenly identifies this novel as one which "revisits some by-now recognizably `Findleyan' concerns (defiance of authoritarian ideologies, the punishing of `deviance'--homosexuality)" (York, "Findley" 404). Although various episodes show tension between male relationships and although Robert is raped by his fellow soldiers, the heterosexual normativity of the novel's main character is unquestionable; Robert's affection for his fellow men is just that--affection, not erotic desire.

[5] I can recount several classes where I suggested to my students that the United States should be split up; this would, so I asserted, be the perfect solution to the problems besetting the United States (nine-month legal abortion in a land committed to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness"; an employment policy where white heterosexual males are passed over because they do not meet certain individuals' perception of affirmative action criteria; rampant racism--not only of whites against blacks but also blacks against whites). My students divided the country successfully and quite easily within the remaining half hour of class. The state of California, already a sizeable chunk of the nation in terms of population, was sliced off. So, too, were the traditional six New England states, whose cultural background and history are decidedly different from the Southern states, which were similarly lopped off from the rest of the nation. The Midwest was generally considered its own nation state, as were the states of the Great Plains. The Pacific Northwest states were given nationhood. Texas was restored as a separate republic (it had been so until it was admitted into the "Union"). Hawaii was restored as a separate kingdom (as it was before American agricultural interests forced it into American jurisdiction. Alaska was restored to Russia from whom it was bought. Significantly,

an African-American enclave was created out of the Chicago metropolitan area spreading to Gary, Indiana as a refuge so that blacks could have a land of their own.

Of course, while this was a student exercise, it was surprising to see how quickly these American students could cut their country apart. If these future active citizens of the United States could do that so easily, then the various separatist movements in the United States should not, therefore, be dismissed: they have an audience receptive to such a political final solution.

[6] In this same Introduction it is interesting that, while she comments on the circumstances of the writing of other stories in the collection, Wilhelm does not comment on this story. Thus, stable interpretations of the story can be left to literary critics. (I wish to thank one audience member at the conference who pointed out to me after the question-and-answer period that the story could signify American writers' disgust over their country's policy on Vietnam. However, it should be pointed out that the method of killing innocent villagers was carried out by other groups as well.)

If this definition of speculative fiction reads similarly with that of science fiction, there may be a basis for the comparison, as well as a basis for why the military shows up in such fiction. First, Kate Wilhelm is a science fiction writer. Second, according to Ursula K. LeGuin, who recently edited a science-fiction anthology which contained another Wilhelm story, the 1960s were productive years for science fiction writers. They were also a period of intense anxiety; the genocidal posturings of the cold war, the escalation of the Viet Nam war, the realization that prophecies of overpopulation and ecological disaster were being fulfilled, and the strains of dissidence from the left, from blacks, from women--all were reflected in the dark mirror of science fiction. Optimism, the often rather blustering faith in American Know-how and the technofix, became rarer; science fiction increasingly explored failures, limits, ends, final things. (18)

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