

The Great War, Modernism, and the Poets of “The Harsher Manners”

Joel Baetz. *Battle Lines: Canadian Poetry in English and the First World War*. Wilfrid Laurier University Press 2018. 180pp.

The centenary of the First World War witnessed a flurry of publications focused on its literary legacies. Joel Baetz’s *Battle Lines* offers a valuable addition to this conversation, concentrating upon five Canadian poets—Helena Coleman, John McCrae, Robert Service, Frank Prewett, and W.W.E. Ross—who, Baetz argues, have been marginalized in the literary history of Canada and whose work merits reevaluation. Critics who dismissed Canadian war poetry because of its perceived “colonial patriotism” (13) neglected to see in the work of these five poets the emergent seeds of modernist thought and expression, and the “loathsome,” “weird,” and “terrifying” (11) ambivalence of their war writings. Noting that, of the voluminous production of war poetry in the period, only McCrae’s “In Flanders Fields” has endured, Baetz’s work is largely recuperative, turning to newspapers, anthologies, diaries, letters, and previously unpublished texts to trace the complex and nuanced thread of Canadian writing about the war. In addition to recuperating the work of his selected poets, Baetz’s study also makes significant contributions to the scholarship of Canadian modernisms, and to an understanding of the transatlantic circulation of texts and ideas during and after the First World War, reminding readers of the importance of considering these poets in their international contexts.

Baetz identifies three “distinct but related assumptions” about the poetry of the period: “it is too patriotic, it is too simple, and it has had no influence since the end of the war” (8). This judgement has consolidated to such a degree as to pass unquestioned into Canadian literary history. *Battle Lines*, then, is positioned to disrupt this reputation and to unsettle assumptions about the character of Canadian war poetry. Offering an “alternative reading of the poetry and its place in Canadian literary history” (8), Baetz engages not only in the work of literary recuperation but in the needed interrogation of processes of critical reception and canon formation. Baetz’s ancillary goal is to “reveal the biases that

structure Canadian literary history—biases that caused a robust period of poetic production to almost entirely disappear within two decades” (12).

The introduction begins with a description of the Canadian War Memorials collection at the 1919 Canadian National Exhibition, offering a close visual analysis of John Byam Shaw’s *The Flag* (1918), the painting which received the most notice and reviews. Baetz’s reading of the painting anticipates a structure that will be repeated throughout *Battle Lines*, as he challenges conventional ways of seeing with a more nuanced and critical interpretation that allows even seemingly patriotic work to speak with a double voice. He notes how contemporary reviews privilege a particular way of looking at the painting, whereby the painting is conscripted to perform certain cultural and narrative work. Baetz challenges contemporary readings of the painting’s patriotism and its consolatory gestures by noting its “odd[ness]” (4), arguing that the iconography of Shaw’s painting is more complex and ambivalent than the contemporary audience could allow. At the centre of *The Flag*, raised above an assembled group of mourners, is the figure of a single fallen Canadian soldier, prone between the paws of the Imperial lion, tightly clutching a large flag with both hands. The Canadian Red Ensign cascades down to the level of the mourners, filling a central void in the painting with a crimson wave. The figure of the soldier at the heart of *The Flag* is also at the centre of Baetz’s study, and just as he adjusts the lens through which the viewer encounters the body of the fallen soldier in Shaw’s painting, so too does he repeat this characteristic strategy throughout the five chapters of *Battle Lines*. Arguing that poets wrote about the figure of the Canadian soldier “in ways that are more complex and more compelling than anyone has realized” (6), Baetz recuperates the war poetry of Coleman, Service, Prewett, and Ross, and offers vital and challenging rereadings of McCrae, Canada’s best known poet of the First World War.

Baetz adroitly moves from Shaw’s painting to poetic analysis, using the figure of the soldier as the hinge and, indeed, it is this body—corporeal and imaginatively constructed—that occupies the central field of vision in Baetz’s analysis. In these years of energetic literary production, the figure of the soldier appears repeatedly and without reducibility to a single finite meaning. While popular versions of the Canadian soldier as “Johnny Canuck” (21), an ideal of masculine rectitude, dominate in the poetry of the period, Baetz’s five poets offer a more “idiosyncratic” (20) iteration of the Canadian soldier. Baetz observes that “the Canadian soldier’s identity continued to be written and

revised” (18) throughout the war, marking this figure as a site of unstable rather than fixed meaning. Baetz’s analysis focuses on the individuality of the soldier in the work of the five poets, in contrast to more conventional poetic representations in the literature at large. Here, the soldier is not a synecdoche for the nation or a staging ground for mythic narratives of Canadian identity but instead a figure of independent consciousness whose experience is marked by rupture, fragmentation, dislocation, and discontinuity. There is some sense, then, that the poetry of the five authors seeks to realistically represent the trauma of war, rather than mythologizing or idealizing the experience. Baetz cites Eric Leed’s *No Man’s Land*, noting “the most consistent feature in [soldiers’] testimonies, journals, and other writings is ‘an experience of radical discontinuity on every level of consciousness’” (21). The experience of poets who served in the European theatre of war—including McCrae, a surgeon, Service, an ambulance driver, and soldiers like Prewett and Ross—undoubtedly shaped their representational strategies, but Baetz leaves any such speculation to the authors’ biographers, noting that his interest lies in how the discontinuity of the soldier’s self is manifested in poetic form. The historical commonplace about Canada’s identity as a nation being forged in the crucible of the First World War becomes complicated in the poets’ resistant figuring of the soldier who yields uneasily, if at all, to such interpretive ends. Baetz’s analysis aims “to expand and challenge the Canadian Great War myth of national emergence” (22), and it does so with careful attention to historical contexts and via dynamic close readings of his primary texts. The potential impact of this approach is significant, as an acknowledgement of the “radical discontinuity” of the war poetry allows for a simultaneous recognition of its emergent modernist character; consequently, accepted narratives of Canadian literary development are expanded and reconsidered throughout *Battle Lines*.

Baetz borrows a phrase from E.K. Brown’s *On Canadian Poetry* that becomes central to his own project. Brown “suggested that there were only a few lofty beauties and exquisite laments that served the nation [among the poems of the period]; the rest—and especially what he calls ‘the harsher manners’—had been ‘swept aside’” (12). This phrase—poets of “the harsher manners”—is picked up as a descriptor that links the five poets in Baetz’s study under a common rubric, and is used to reclaim them from the wholesale critical dismissal in the decades following the war. The “harsher manners” manifest themselves in the poets’ focus upon “dissolution and dissidence” (138), “disappointment” (84) and

“discontinuities” (94), and “communal dislocations and alienated and fragmented individuals” (114). The poets of the “harsher manners” may stage mourning but they do not offer consolation.

Baetz uses John W. Garvin’s *Canadian Poems of the Great War* (1918) as a matrix to determine the dominating themes, motifs, and representational strategies of Canadian First World War poetry. Baetz notes that despite its variety—representing the contributions of seventy-five Canadian poets, and containing nearly three hundred poems—the “defining feature” of the poetry in Garvin’s anthology is its privileging of “a single image of the soldier, one that reminds us that he is yearning for or basking in the glow of Mother England’s approval and is connected to, supported by, and a product of his fellow-soldiers and home-front supporters” (28). Douglas Leader Durkin’s poetry is examined as symptomatic of the anthemic approach to war poetry seen more generally in Garvin’s anthology, and Baetz concludes that his image of the soldier as a “communal and frequently colonial national figure” (31) is so much a part of the conventional pattern of First World War poetry as to appear paradigmatic. It is against this representational monolith that Baetz seeks to position his poets of the “harsher manners.” For example, focusing on Coleman’s “refigur[ing]” of “the sharp-eyed mother and the would-be female soldier,” Baetz argues that her poetry emphasizes “disjunction and disruption” (44), offering a counterpoint to the dominant strain in Canadian war poetry. Approaching the performance of masculine and feminine identity with strategies of subversion and thematic rupture, Coleman’s work undermines the claim of a univocal or singular vision of the Canadian war experience. Similarly, Ross’s poetry diagnoses “the gaps and failures of wartime communal fantasies” and explores the soldier as a figure of “obsur[ity]” and “aliena[tion]” (121).

Much of Baetz’s analysis is actively transatlantic in focus. As he notes, Canadian poetry in the period is written in the context of “transnational encounters and experiences, mixing with or even challenging images and ideas particular to Canada” (16). He traces the long shadow of Rupert Brooke in Canada, describing the poet’s visit to Canada in 1913, his impact on admirers like Duncan Campbell Scott and John Daniel Logan, and the enthusiastic reception and emulation of Brooke’s themes. Baetz observes that McCrae’s “In Flanders Fields” is “the only poem to come close to the popularity of Brooke’s ‘The Soldier’” (59). Using mourning as a theme to stage textual comparisons, Baetz moves from the “normative mourning” (53) of “The Soldier” to the “non-consolatory mourning” (62) of Wilfred Owen’s “Anthem for Doomed Youth,” and

locates in McCrae's poem a closer affinity to the non-consolatory modern elegy that "leaves the reader in a state of postponed mourning" (62). Noting that McCrae's poem has "survived many readings and misreadings" (60), Baetz emphasizes the poem's interpretive flexibility, even as his own re-reading unpacks its "harsher manners": its "expressions of disjunction, disruption, fragmentation, [and] fractiousness" (62). Similarly, Baetz frames Prewett's initially idealized view of the war in relation to Brooke's poem "Peace," before charting the rupture in Prewett's poetic expression in the aftermath of his war service. Tracing the connection between the transnationalism of McCrae, Prewett, Service, and Ross, Baetz recognizes the internationally situated work of these poets, involved in transnational literary movements (Prewett is associated with Georgianism, Ross with Imagism), publishing in international venues ("In Flanders Fields," for example, first appeared in *Punch*), posted with international organizations (Service worked for the American Red Cross as an ambulance driver), and immersed in transatlantic textual transmission and exchange.

Baetz's study begins the work of unpacking the complicated and ambivalent textual relationship with a war that has come to be treated as foundational, and even originary, in its mythic significance. Baetz offers insightful close readings of individual poems and marshals a complex literary history to productively open up the canon of Canadian modernist poetry. Building upon key critical works, including Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* and Jonathan Vance's *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning, and the First World War*, Baetz's work maps new critical terrain and builds productive networks of meaning and connection. His poets of the "harsher manners" are given space and airing for their fragmented, eccentric, and alienated soldier figures, and for their ambivalent responses to the emerging mythologies of the Great War. Rigorously researched and cogently argued, *Battle Lines* delivers on Baetz's promise to reimagine a critical history for poetic texts that were, alternately, submerged, marginalized, or rejected. This recuperative work provides new avenues for reading and interpreting the poetry of the First World War and enriches the possible approaches to Canadian literary modernism.