

1996

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Recommended Citation

Gittings, Christopher E., 'What are soldiers for?' Re-Making Masculinities in Timothy Findley's *The Wars*, *Kunapipi*, 18(1), 1996.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol18/iss1/17>

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Abstract

The unnamed researcher-narrator of Canadian writer Timothy Findley's 1977 novel *The Wars* sifts through archival, and interview materials to reconstruct Robert Ross, a man silenced by received history, and court-martialled for his rejection of a martial masculinity. 'What are soldiers for?' asks Robert, initiating the novel's inquiry into empire and hegemonic formations of martial masculinity during World War One.¹ Robert Kroetsch suggests that when we read *The Wars* 'what we witness is the collapse, for North American eyes, of the meta-narrative that once went by the name of Europe. Europa'.² I would argue that we also witness Robert Ross's collapsing of a dominant and destructive master code of masculinity. Robert's response to his sister Peggy's uniformed fiancée - 'bastard! You bastard! What are soldiers for?' - prefaces his encounter with the brutal and unthinking masculinity of Teddy Budge, and Robert's entry into the highly masculinized territory of the wars.

CHRISTOPHER E. GITTINGS

'What are soldiers for?' Re-Making Masculinities in Timothy Findley's *The Wars*

The unnamed researcher-narrator of Canadian writer Timothy Findley's 1977 novel *The Wars* sifts through archival, and interview materials to reconstruct Robert Ross, a man silenced by received history, and court-martialled for his rejection of a martial masculinity. 'What are soldiers for?' asks Robert, initiating the novel's inquiry into empire and hegemonic formations of martial masculinity during World War One.¹ Robert Kroetsch suggests that when we read *The Wars* 'what we witness is the collapse, for North American eyes, of the meta-narrative that once went by the name of Europe. Europa'.² I would argue that we also witness Robert Ross's collapsing of a dominant and destructive master code of masculinity. Robert's response to his sister Peggy's uniformed fiancée – 'bastard! You bastard! What are soldiers for?' – prefaces his encounter with the brutal and unthinking masculinity of Teddy Budge, and Robert's entry into the highly masculinized territory of the wars.

Upon the death of Rowena, his hydrocephalic sister, Robert's mother decides that her son must execute Rowena's pet rabbits 'BECAUSE HE LOVED HER' (p. 24). Mrs. Ross attempts to discipline Robert's gender identity to prepare him for the violent world of men awaiting him outside the domestic sphere.³ Robert considered himself Rowena's guardian and feels some responsibility for her death, as he was absent, masturbating, when her wheelchair fell over. To save his son the trauma of killing the rabbits, Robert's father conscripts Teddy Budge, a labourer in the family factory, to carry out Mrs. Ross's instructions. Robert attacks Budge to save the rabbits, and is met with a ruthless response; unaware of why he is under attack or who his assailant is, Budge beats Robert senseless with an Indian club. As Findley's narrator emphasizes, however,

Teddy Budge was a large and mindless man. There was nothing unkind or cruel in his nature – that was not the point. It was just that he would do what he was told. (p. 24)

Soon after his fisticuffs with Budge, Robert must negotiate other

dominating formations of masculinity; he enters the Canadian army to learn how to kill, to be disciplined, to do what he was told.

My discussion will focus on the British Empire's production of exemplary forms of masculinity such as the military, and boy's adventure stories as these are represented in *The Wars*. I will also investigate the metafictional play Findley's novel engages in to interrogate such fictional systems, thereby unmaking a hegemonic martial masculinity, and making alternative masculinities. As many critics have noted, *The Wars* enters into a self-reflexive and counter-discursive dialogue with prior representations of imperial conflict and masculinity.⁴ The novels of G.A. Henty, and Benjamin West's painting *The Death of Wolfe* are cultural texts that produce an exemplary masculinity in *The Wars*. The work of Graham Dawson⁵ and R.W. Connell⁶ argues convincingly that the military has been of fundamental importance to the definition of the soldier hero as a hegemonic form of masculinity in European and North American cultures. Discussing the situation of New Zealand, Connell provides a useful conceptualization for the production of exemplary masculinity in British colonies during World War I:

It was produced in an interplay between the changing social relations of a settler population, the local state, the British imperial system and the global rivalry of imperialist powers. (p. 213)

And as Connell notes 'the gender pattern was not a mechanical effect of these forces; it was nurtured as a strategic response to a given situation' (p. 30). The making and remaking of masculinities is an historical and political process (p. 44), they constitute gendered allegories of nation. Icons of British imperial identity such as General Wolfe, textualized by writers like Henty, come to define not only a masculinized concept of nation, but also the socially accepted definition for what constitutes a 'real' man. Dawson writes that British adventure/hero narratives impressed upon their readership that a real man 'was one who was prepared to fight (and, if necessary, to sacrifice his life) for Queen, Country and Empire' (p. 1). The horrors of the trenches brought these assumptions into question throughout the British Empire,⁷ and marked an increased decolonization of Britain's overseas territories, processes delineated by Findley in *The Wars*.

Robert Ross, a young man who 'doubts the validity' of the 'martialling of men' (*The Wars* p. 13) before the death of his sister, and his encounter with Teddy Budge, considers enrolling himself in the hegemonic masculine by enlisting in the military immediately following her funeral (p. 24) and his altercation with Budge. Robert's experience, however is constructed by Findley as oppositional to the imperial soldiers represented by Henty and West. Marian Turner, the nurse who cares for Robert, marks his difference to conventional soldier heroes in

an interview with the novel's researcher-narrator: 'he was a hero. Not your everyday Sergeant York or Billy Bishop mind you ... You see he did the thing that no one else would even dare to think of doing' (p.16). The thing Robert does is to disobey a direct order from his commanding officer in an attempt to save 60 horses and mules from destruction. A week later, Robert suffers severe burns when the army set fire to a barn in which he is sheltering 130 other horses he has liberated from a bombed out train (pp. 183-184).

Robert's enlistment, and the socialization of basic training lend insight into the imperial production of a colonial masculinity. At the Alberta training camp Robert discovers a 'model' he could emulate in Eugene Taffler, a decorated, and athletic war hero (p. 35). Taffler, has also been modelled; he is textually determined by the master code of martial masculinity as this is produced in publications such as *Boy's Own Annual* and *Chums*. He looks like 'a *Boy's Own Annual* hero' (p.96). Taffler, the colonial who is written upon by the empire, who is translated into imperial masculinity, displaces an alternative colonial masculinity for Robert. Whereas Robert had previously identified imaginatively with the Canadian Aboriginal athlete Tom Longboat (p.22), this identification is destabilized by enlistment. In the trenches, Robert hopes to escape the violence of war by dreaming of running like Longboat 'but he kept turning into Taffler. Throwing Stones' (p. 93). Robert's identification with Longboat, however, is not unproblematic, and could be read as a white-settler romanticization of the indigene.

The formation of military masculinity involves a bodily performance of gender, not just athletically, but also sexually. Robert must demonstrate heterosexuality in the ritual trip of the young recruits to a brothel. Robert is 'shamed' into going to the prostitutes; 'if you didn't go you were peculiar' (p. 37). The military culture disciplines gender identity and sexual orientation. Ironically, Findley's brothel is a space where prescribed gender identity and sexual orientation dissolve; Robert fails to have heterosexual intercourse with the prostitute, but through a peep-hole in the bedroom wall learns of Taffler's homosexuality (p. 45). Taffler's violent penetration of the Swede is echoed in Robert's pelvic thrusting against the mud of the battlefield to save himself from drowning: 'He began to push again and to lift - thrusting his pelvis upward harder and harder - faster and faster against the mud' (p. 80). Robert's penetration of the mud constitutes a life-affirming parody of the death-dealing phallic shelling of the mud by the hegemonic masculine.

The textual production of imperial British masculinities is further elucidated aboard the troop ship to England where Findley establishes an intertextual dialogue between the Robert Ross narrative and the texts of G. A. Henty. Captain Ord, one of Robert's cabin mates, claims to lose his voice and spends the entire voyage reading Henty. When

informed by another comrade Clifford Purchass that such works are for young boys Ord responds ironically 'that since he was going to do a boy's work he must read the "stuff of which boys are made"' (p. 58). Ord's voice is lost, displaced by the narrating voice of British imperial masculinity, G.A. Henty, a voice that according to Ord's reading produces or makes boys. Clifford Purchass, however, does not appreciate Ord's ironizing of Henty. Perhaps this is because Purchass, who read Henty up until the age of twelve, has been determined by Henty's disciplining texts. For Purchass the war was:

a serious and heaven-sent chance to become a man. Every night before he went to sleep he stood on the bridge with Horatio – brought the news from Aix to Ghent and smiling, fell dead. (p. 58)

The destructive ramifications of such glorified imaginings of masculinity – the painless and serene death in battle – are adumbrated in the fall of Henty's *With Clive in India* from Ord's bunk onto Purchass' head. Ultimately, Purchass' experience of war cannot be correlated with Henty's fictive heroic code and he is shot in the back while attempting to desert (p. 176). As the Kleinian concept of phantasy would suggest, Purchass's Henty-influenced phantasies are 'not merely an escape from reality but a constant and unavoidable accompaniment of real experiences, constantly interacting with them'.⁸ Even Ord, who might seem to be reading Henty as a means of escape from the regimented reality of the troop ship (Brydon p. 69), and who self-consciously ironizes his reading, is engaged in the phantastic introjection of Henty, and a subsequent projection of that reading experience onto the external world. The political value of boy's adventure narratives, their disciplining and indoctrinating nature is evident in Ord's projection of Henty's *With Wellington at Waterloo* onto Ypres. While packing his books prior to disembarking Ord gestures to the Henty textualization of Waterloo and says to Robert: 'That's where we're going, you know. I mean – it's sort of the same thing. Ypres is only sixty miles from Waterloo. Makes you feel better, doesn't it ...' (*The Wars* p. 67). Robert, however, silently questions why this should make them feel better (p. 67). Although Ross is sceptical of Ord's projection of Henty, he also measures his experiences in the military against the empire's representations of military life. When scattering his friend Harris' ashes he thinks: 'I've never seen this done or read about its being done – not even in *Chums* or Joseph Conrad, so I don't know what to say' (p. 107). The recruiting texts of empire have selected out the burial of slain comrades, leaving their readers without a script.

Henty's *With Wolfe in Canada; Or the Winning of a Continent*, one of the texts read by Ord (p. 59), and a colonizing narrative of British imperialism is an important intertext for Findley's parodic and counter-discursive dialogue with Henty. If we read *With Wolfe in Canada* as the

inscription of a hegemonic imperial masculinity on the colonial imagination, then Findley's narrative of Robert Ross undoes this authoritative writing. At this point I would like to delineate Findley's dismantling of Henty in a brief comparative reading of *The Wars* and *With Wolfe in Canada*. Henty's narrative tells the story of young Jim Walsham who becomes a man through his participation in British Empire's invasion of New France. The structure of Jim's journey is reflected in the distorting mirror of parody held by Findley. Similar to Robert Ross and some of his colleagues, Henty's Walsham is indoctrinated/recruited by glorified images of British imperialism. A retired officer's travelling peep-show affords the boys and girls of Walsham's village visions of 'great battles by land and sea, where the soldiers and sailors shed their blood like water in the service of their country'⁹ for one penny (p. 19). Conversely, Robert Ross's glimpse through a brothel peep-hole reveals a war hero and role model practising a sexuality that interrupts and does violence to the metanarrative of a heterosexual martial masculinity encoded in Henty. Henty's exemplar of idealized masculinity, Jim Walsham, adheres to the Sergeant's advice that 'the bravest men are always the most courteous and gentle with women' (p. 22), and 'not to grumble whatever comes; we all got to do our duty' (p. 18). Jim rescues the sergeant's granddaughter from a near drowning. Upon his return from the British North American field of battle, where he distinguishes himself by following orders, Jim's wounds are rewarded by the hand in marriage of a wealthy young woman who has waited for him faithfully. Robert Ross fails to satisfy these tenets of the dominant masculinity. His experience is an inversion of Jim's. He fails to rescue his sister Rowena, is rejected by his girlfriend, falls in love with a fellow soldier, is raped by his comrades, disobeys and kills his commanding officer, is court-martialled, disgraced, and finally dies in ignominy.

Heather Lawson breaks with Robert because he does not adhere to the dominant understanding of what it is to be a man; he refuses to fight a rival who has professed his love for Heather (*The Wars* p. 18). Heather along with Barbara D'Orsey – who is only capable of having relationships with the socially scripted masculine of the athletic and handsome soldier hero – exemplify how women and gender relations are socially constructed by a dominating masculinity. Robert leaves the domestic sphere for the army and the world of men where instead of keeping a torch burning for Heather, he falls in love with a man, Harris (p. 103). Robert, although he allows himself to be recruited by the military, cannot be recruited by its code of masculinity. Findley remakes the dominant. The researcher-narrator reconstructs alternative masculinities with the assistance of female voices who testify to Robert's difference. In addition to Marian Turner's testimony to his difference from the conventional hero paradigm, Lady Juliet D'Orsey's

words tell us about Robert's feelings for Harris. As Lorraine York has noted Robert's very name is a reference to 'one of Oscar Wilde's closest and most constant lovers' (*Front Lines* p. 39). Concerning the significance of female voices representing Robert, I agree with Simone Vauthier's suggestion that as 'the two interviewees never shared in the male code of war' they are well positioned to re-define Robert Ross's gesture (p. 15).

The codes of military honour, and brothers in arms exemplified by Henty's Jim Walsham are further challenged by Findley in the violent rape of Robert Ross by his own men in the baths at Desolé. Like Donna Pennee and others¹⁰ I read this scene as the symbolic and literal rape of Robert by the 'conventional rhetoric of war' (Pennee p. 47), by the destructive rhetoric of the soldier hero. Findley's journal entries reveal his belief that 'Robert Ross and his generation of young men were raped, in effect, by the people who made that war. Basically, their fathers did it to them'.¹¹ When Robert surveys the carnage wreaked as a result of the insane Captain Leather's order he thinks 'If an animal had done this-we would call it mad and shoot it and at that precise minute Captain Leather rose to his knees and began to struggle to his feet. Robert shot him between the eyes' (*The Wars* p. 178). Robert's murder of Leather is tantamount to the symbolic destruction of his rapists and martial formations of masculinity. At this point Robert pulls the lapels from his uniform and leaves behind him both the battlefield and hegemonic masculinity (p. 178).

The deaths of Harris, Purchass, Leather, and others are a response to the romantic and heroic representations of death in Henty and Benjamin West. Findley's researcher-narrator conflates Henty's written text *With Wolfe in Canada* (Henty p. 373) with West's painting *The Death of Wolfe* to suggest how death might be imagined by young men like Ross and his comrades who have consumed the popular images of military martyrdom:

Oh I can tell you sort of how it would be like to die. *The Death of General Wolfe*. Someone will hold my hand and I won't really suffer pain because I've suffered that already and survived. In paintings – and in photographs – there's never any blood. At most the hero sighs his way to death while linen handkerchiefs are held against his wounds. His wounds are poems. *I'll faint away in glory hearing music and my name. Someone will close my eyes as I'll be wrapped around in flags while drums and trumpets-bagpipes march me home through snow ...* (p. 49).

Henty's Wolfe is shot in the wrist, but continues to advance wrapping a handkerchief around his wound. He is struck twice more before he finally sits down. Informed that the enemy is retreating, he says 'Now, God be praised, I will die in peace!' (p. 373).

Findley's novel challenges established masculinity. Von Clausewitz's *On War*, a foundational text in modern masculinity (Connell p. 192) is

shown to be ineffectual in the trenches, and is literally scorched by the flames of combat it inspires. Findley provides alternative masculinities to the dominant in characters like Robert, Harris and the artist/soldier Rodwell. These men are more concerned with nature and preserving the lives of animals than with the mass destruction they have been recruited to participate in. And yet the novel also represents the erasure of these men by the dominant; all of them die in the imperial enterprise. This it would seem is what soldiers are for: eradicating difference and preserving the status quo. Like a good deal of Findley's fiction the moral cores of his novel, Robert Ross and opposition to the brutish power struggles of empire, are figured as entities that are written out of our pasts, elements that must be recovered if we are to interrupt the production of death-dealing masculinities. One intertext left unexplored in this paper is Diana Brydon's reading of *The Wars* with Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as a revelation of the 'irrational heart of European rationality and the violence marked by western civilization'. She writes that as a Canadian Robert Ross must travel to Europe to find his 'heart of darkness' (Brydon p. 75). Findley's 1993 novel *Headhunter* further explores Conradian constructions of masculinity and empire in Canada's invader-settler culture.

NOTES

1. Timothy Findley, *The Wars* ([1977]; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), p. 25. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
2. Robert Kroetsch, 'Disunity as Unity: A Canadian Strategy', *The Lovely Treachery of Words: Essays Selected and New* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 21-33 (p. 23).
3. For more on the tensions between public and domestic spheres in *The Wars* see Lorraine M. York, *Introducing Timothy Findley's The Wars. A Reader's Guide* (Toronto: ECW Press, 1990), pp. 45-58.
4. See the following: Diana Brydon "'It could not be told': Making Meaning in Timothy Findley's *The Wars*", *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 21 (1986), pp. 62-79 (p. 64). All further references are to this issue and are included in the text; Martin Kuester, *Framing Truths: Parodic Structures in Contemporary English-Canadian Historical Novels* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), pp. 56, 67. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text; Donna Palmateer Pennee, *Moral Metafiction: Counterdiscourse in the Novels of Timothy Findley* (Toronto: ECW Press, 1991), p. 47. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text; Simone Vauthier, 'The Dubious Battle of Story-Telling: Narrative Strategies in Timothy Findley's *The Wars*', *Gaining Ground*, eds., Robert Kroetsch and Reingard M. Nischick, (Edmonton: Newest Press, 1985), pp. 11-39 (p. 27). All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
5. Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 24. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.

6. R.W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Cambridge, U.K.: Polity Press, 1995), p. 213. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
7. See Lorraine M. York, *Front Lines: The Fiction of Timothy Findley* (Toronto: ECW Press, 1991), p. 34. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text. See also Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century Volume 2: Sex Changes* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 263.
8. See Hanna Segal, *Introduction to the Work of Melanie Klein* (Oxford: Hogarth Press, 1973), p. 14. Also quoted in Dawson, p. 32.
9. G.A. Henty, *With Wolfe in Canada; or the Winning of a Continent* ([1886]; Glasgow and London: Blackie and Son, 1958), p. 20. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
10. See Kuester, p. 65 and Vauthier, p. 12.
11. See Timothy Findley, *Inside Memory: Pages from a Writer's Workbook* (Toronto: Harper Collins, 1990), p. 151.