

The Vimy Trap: Or, How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Great War by Ian McKay and Jamie Swift

Nathan Smith, PhD

Volume 110, numéro 1, spring 2018

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1044328ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1044328ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (imprimé)

2371-4654 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Smith, N. (2018). Compte rendu de [*The Vimy Trap: Or, How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Great War* by Ian McKay and Jamie Swift]. *Ontario History*, 110(1), 108–111. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1044328ar>

Book Reviews

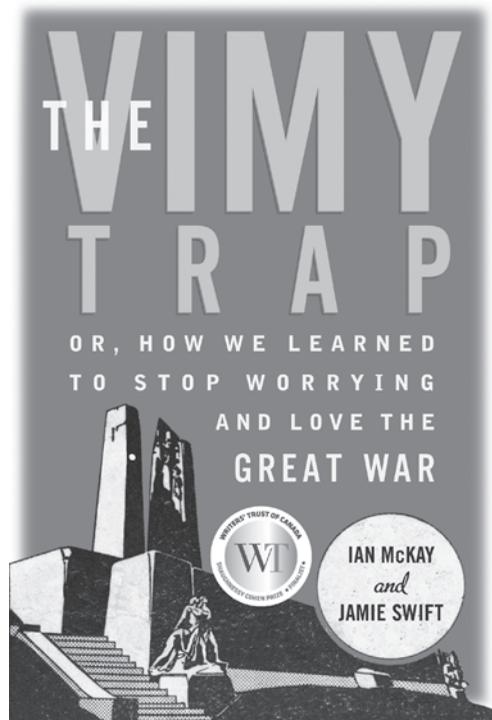
Spring 2018

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

By Ian McKay and Jamie Swift

Toronto: Between the Lines, 2016. 372 pages. \$29.95 paperback. ISBN: 978-1-77113-275-6 (www.btlbooks.com)

Ian McKay's and Jamie Swift's "Prologue" (1-3) to their book, *The Vimy Trap*, discusses aspects of the First World War experiences of Tom Thompson and members of what became the Group of Seven that are meant to prompt the reader into considering how contemporaries reacted to the First World War. The prologue's concluding point is a question, the one posed by the title of Fred Varley's moving 1919 painting of gravediggers on the Western Front, *For What?* The question, and the context in which it is asked, establishes a tone of war-scepticism that readers of their earlier work, *Warrior Nation: Rebranding Canada in an Age of Anxiety* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2012) will find familiar. Readers sympathetic to the view that war, and the First World War especially, is an unconscionable waste of life will find much to interest them in *The Vimy Trap*, such as the consistent peace activism of Alice Chown during and after the Great War, and the transformation of her brother Samuel from pro-war idealist to disillusioned



sioned peace realist (Chapter 3, 47-82).

Skillfully told as it is, the story of the Chowns is one example of why *The Vimy Trap* should also be recommended as a good read to anyone updating their book lists. The writing is fluid and engaging, the writers have a talent for capturing individuals in their times, and concisely dealing with complex historical and cultural texts. Those interested in the history of twentieth-century

eth-century Canada and First World War memory should give the book their attention too. As a history of the public memory and myth of Canada's Battle of Vimy Ridge, *The Vimy Trap* makes an important contribution to historical literature about Canada by emphasizing different interpretations of Vimy, and putting Vimy within a larger history of "the complex horrors and suffering of modern warfare" (11).

The book's first chapter explains the nature of the myth the book examines, using examples from different eras to illustrate what the authors call "Vimyism." The term, they explain, refers to a "network of ideas and symbols that centre on how Canada's Great War" was "glorious," that "anyone who fought and died in it should be unconditionally revered," and that the war "marked the country's birth" (9). The term, they elaborate, "encapsulates a form of martial nationalism that exalts the nation-building and moral excellence of soldiers," and normalizes war as essential for individual and collective development (10). Though comprising several parts, the meaning of "Vimyism" as a term is both clear and clearly useful. The chapters that follow contain many examples of Vimyism, and there is strong support for the importance of this lens for understanding Canada's First World War memory. The meaning of the term the "Vimy trap" is less clear, however, but McKay and Swift do state that Vimyism "tempts us to think that chivalric war somehow survived the coming of the epoch of mechanized warfare," despite the overwhelming evidence to the contrary (11). The myth of Vimy as an interpretive trap is sensible, and a useful literary device, but the authors do not seriously explore the "trap" metaphor.

Clearly, though, McKay and Swift aim to help Canadians struggle out of the Vimy

trap. The book begins its historical analysis, in Chapters 2 and 3, with substantial discussion of debate and differing views about the war in Canada, thereby showing that debating war's meaning has always been central to remembering the First World War and Vimy. In other words, the authors show shifts in understandings of Vimy's significance over time, but they also show that its significance has always been contested. This will be a familiar theme to many historians, but McKay and Swift persuasively argue that it deserves emphasis not only for the sake of accuracy, but because this historical pattern goes unrecognized in works by Jonathan Vance and Tim Cook, Canada's most prominent historians of the First World War, and of the historical significance of Vimy. Each chapter of *The Vimy Trap* engages with examples of how the war and Vimy have been remembered over time, but the critical engagement with Vance's, *Death So Noble* (214-220) and with Tim Cook's two volumes on Canada's military experience in the First World War (221-228), demonstrates this is a contemporary issue, and one involving scholarly historians as much as sculptors, novelists, politicians, and radio and TV producers.

McKay and Swift also show that victory at Vimy was of secondary importance to Canadian First World War commemoration in the immediate aftermath of the war, and for decades after the 1936 unveiling of the monument on Vimy Ridge designed by Walter Allward. Well-received by Canadians and internationally, and among the most distinctive of Great War monuments in the world, the authors argue that it was conceived and interpreted as a monument to the need for peace, and did not alter a pervasive attitude that Vimy was significant as a reminder of the futility of war, as a symbol of needless suffering, and as a warning

against blundering into another war (Chapter 6, 131-166). According to McKay and Swift, this broadly accepted truth began to be challenged during the 1950s, when Vimy became useful for supporting Cold War arguments about the need to defend freedom and democracy at home and abroad by arming the nation and participating in military actions (168). In the 1960s, the conception of Vimy as nation-making began to take form, claim the authors, (182) likely in response to the centennial and to *Quebécois* nationalism. Finally, in the 1980s and 1990s, Vimyism matured, “nurtured by an enthusiastic and determined cohort of conservative nationalists” (174).

The book’s historical coverage is certainly not even. Scarcely anything is said about the 1940s or the 1970s, and the interwar era is examined from Chapters 2 through 6, more thoroughly than the decades in which Vimyism emerged, the 1960s, and became dominant, the 1980s and 1990s, which are surveyed in Chapters 7 through 9. The potential for variation in the Vimy myth is also not a significant issue for *The Vimy Trap*. The portrayal of Vimyism as a form of conservative nationalism may be fair as a generalization, for example, but it is surprising that Left-nationalist and liberal examples of the Vimy myth are not substantially dealt with in *The Vimy Trap*. Desmond Morton, a social democrat and Canadian historian, has called the First World War Canada’s war of independence. (See his *Military History of Canada* [Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1999 (1985)], 145, and his contribution to the National Film Board of Canada’s *Images of a Forgotten War* website at: <http://www3.nfb.ca/ww1/independence.php>.) Though his works do not glorify war this would seem to meet the standards of falling into the Vimy trap, but it also seems to compli-

cate the character of Vimyism.

The book draws on a variety of sources for insight into society, culture, and politics, but it is inconsistent in terms of the sources it tracks over time. For example, literature is important for what McKay and Swift have to say about First World War memory in the interwar period, but unimportant later on, despite references to Paul Fussell, and one to Timothy Findlay’s, *The Wars* (234). Published in 1977, *The Wars* would seem to be important evidence against a growing glorification of war and embracing of the birth of the nation in battle idea. Several other Canadian novels involving the First World War from the post-World War Two era, such as Jack Hodgins’ *Broken Ground* (1999) and Joseph Boyden’s *Three Day Road* (2005), also paint a decidedly non-glorious picture of the war, and are uninterested in the question of nation-making. On the other hand, *The Vimy Trap* does return to history textbooks periodically to assess their interpretations of Vimy and the Great War, and it keeps the opinions of the prime ministers in view.

As much as McKay and Swift have to say about the remembrance of Vimy, their book is not primarily a history of the memory of Vimy and construction of the Vimy myth. *The Vimy Trap* is in large part an argument against the mis-portrayal of the Vimy past, and the contemporary use and acceptance of this imagined past, elements that are most clearly visible in Chapter 1, which defines and addresses examples of the myth, Chapter 8, which discusses contemporary treatments of Vimy, especially by the Canadian War Museum (235-246), and Chapter 9, which acts as a reflective conclusion to the book. This type of historical writing is “presentist” in a good way. It is historical analysis that helps to directly explain, or de-mystify, the

present. Historians should welcome this approach as a way of demonstrating the usefulness of history, and for its potential to capture the attention of the media, the interested public, and academics in other social science and humanities disciplines. Those audiences might find the small print and style of the bibliographic essay that

ends the book (“Further Reading” by Ian McKay, 333-357) curious, but it is sure to draw in historians interested in the Great War and of the traps in Canadian historical interpretation.

Nathan Smith, PhD
Brock University

Unbuttoned
A History of Mackenzie King’s Secret Life

By Christopher Dummitt

Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2017. 326 pages. \$34.95
ISBN 978-0-7735-4876-3 (www.mqup.ca)

In opening lines of his Preface, Christopher Dummitt, an associate professor of history at Trent University, aptly summarizes his work:

I’m going to tell two stories.... One is the story of how Canadians came to learn about his eccentric private activities that long-serving prime minister William Lyon Mackenzie King had managed to keep secret while he was alive. The second story is about the transformation in Canadian culture from the 1950s to the 1980s that gradually allowed many Canadians to talk publicly and irreverently about the details of this former prime minister’s secret life.

Another tell-all King biography this book is not; it is a careful study of the shifting attitudes of his executors toward his private diary and it is a probing critique of the changing portrayals of King published after his 1950 death.

The disposition of King’s personal papers presented a problem. As we all know now, but almost no one knew then, King kept a daily diary begun during his Toronto student years in the 1890s. Written by him personally until the 1930s, and there-

after dictated to his private secretary, by the time of King’s death the diary consisted of thousands of pages, all carefully preserved in bound volumes and binders. His strict instructions were clear: after his death, the diary was to be destroyed, except the portions he indicated were to be preserved. He died leaving nothing so specified, so the entire diary must be destroyed. But it was not—indeed, after an extended series of strained decisions, well documented by Dummitt, its pages were finally transcribed and, in 1980 fully made public. The whole of it is now accessible on line—researchers can learn more about King than about any other prime minister (or indeed any public figure) in our history.

Dummitt offers (chapter 2) his own clear summary of King’s life. Subsequent chapters provide a historiography of works about King published during the three decades following his death. King himself had made little progress in writing his autobiography (despite a substantial Rockefeller Foundation grant to help make it possible), but much material had been assembled. King’s literary executors (four senior public servants) were