

# (Some) Canadian Women and War

Barbara Louder  
Halifax, Nova Scotia

It is easy to mistake women's militarisation for women's liberation.<sup>1</sup>

The Canadian War Museum in Ottawa marked the end of the United Nations Decade for Women with the exhibition "Canadian Women and War." It took place between June, 1984, and September, 1985. The exhibition was researched by freelance curator and historian Nancy Miller Chenier, and the installation was designed by Amber Walpole from National Museums.

I visited the Museum several times last year, to see "Canadian Women and War." With each visit, my sense of disappointment and anger grew. Initially, I had hoped that the exhibition would serve a number of important functions: obviously, a tribute to the Canadian women who have served in so many ways, during wartimes, but also, as a way of providing an archive upon which to base an exploration of the relationship of gender to militarism. I wanted to see an exhibition which would express a sense of historical continuity and complexity, as a context for better understanding the position we occupy today (whether we be peace activists or cadets). I think that "Canadian Women and War" functioned in a narrow way, as the validation of some of the wartime experiences of some Canadian women.

I write this review from a specific vantage point. I am a visual artist, interested in culture's relationship to social groups, the state, and processes of change. I am a peace activist, interested in the herstory of women peace activists before me. And I am a former "Army brat," trying to fill in the chilly silences of my Cold War past. It is, undoubtedly, these "prior experiences" that have focused my view on the role culture plays in the perpetuation of militarism, and the way militarist values permeate cultural life.<sup>2</sup> I place the exhibition "Canadian Women and War" on the same long list as the Changing of the Guard, the Nova Scotia Tattoo, cannons at noon, and celebrating Canada Day with a free ride in an Armed Personnel Carrier.

"Canadian Women and War," as a museum display, is a coded message in itself. State museums function as the institutional repositories, and at the same time, the visible expressions of the experiences, values and ideals most highly regarded by the state. They recreate the past every time they display the past. Their role as expressions of ideology makes

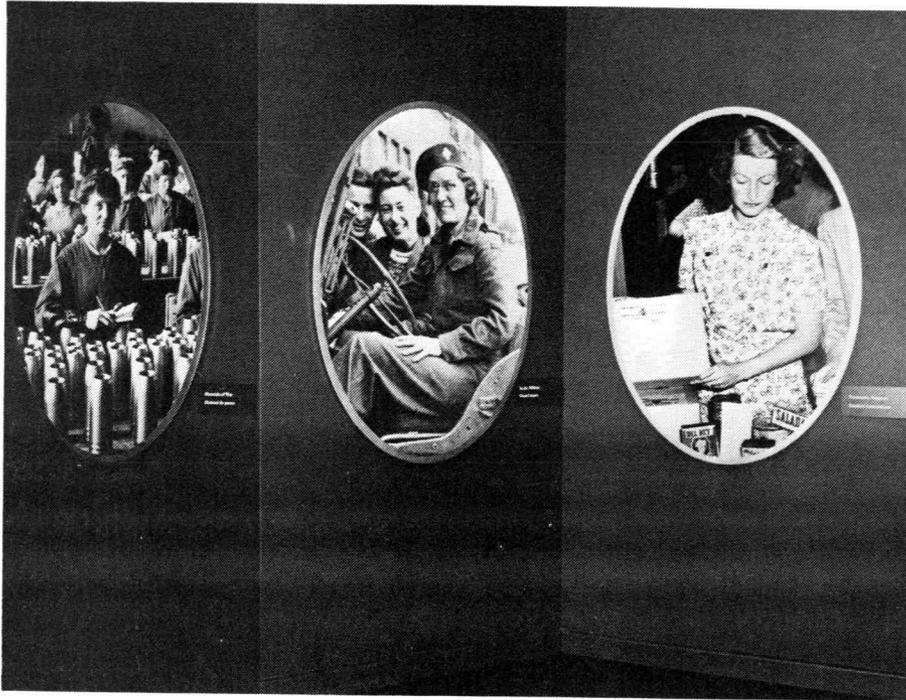
them far more active and powerful than their neutral floor plans would reveal. For every experience documented and collected, there are many more left out. History is written and rewritten from what is saved or plundered, collected and remembered.<sup>3</sup>

The Canadian War Museum gave me clues about the ideology it recreates before I even got to the third floor exhibition. It is located near the Canadian Mint, and is flanked on one side by the site for the new National Gallery. On the front lawn of the museum is a tank, and over the front door is the inscription "Peace is the dream of the wise; War is the history of man." The portals of medieval European cathedrals were often adorned with reliefs depicting scenes in hell. They were intended for the fearful eyes and spirits of the illiterate peasantry. The inscription from the War Museum is, in ways, more complex; less heavy-handed intimidation, more smooth assertion.

Just inside the entrance to the third floor gallery was a mounted text introducing the exhibition. It informed the viewer of the exhibition's intended scope and purpose, and of the way artifacts and documents had been organized.

This exhibition is about the life and work of Canadian women during periods of war. You will see women: defending home and country, *Fighters and Protectors*, nursing the sick and wounded, *Care for the Wounded*, preparing bombs, uniforms, and other war goods, *Materials of War*, serving with the armed forces, *In The Military*, maintaining a stable wartime society, *Economic Support*. Most of the material on display concerns the two World Wars of this century, but you will also see that Canadian women undertook similar activities throughout Canada's history. Selected primarily from the collection of the Canadian War Museum, the material highlights a few of the positive and diverse facets of women's wartime experience.<sup>4</sup>

The introduction to "Fighters and Protectors" represented, on one hand, the efforts of individual native women to block the advance of European colonists and traders, and on the other hand, the efforts of women settlers to defend their new territory against attacks by native tribes and European competitors. Two very diverse kinds of experiences were here sandwiched together under one generalizing title, with the



FROM "CANADIAN  
WOMEN AND WAR,"  
Canadian War Museum, Photo:  
Robert Bean.

implication that native women and white women colonists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were partners in the violent historical process of conquest. "Fighters and Protectors" also included women involved in home or civil defense during the Northwest Rebellion, the War of 1812, and the two World Wars. The text accompanying the WWII display ended with the statement that women home defense volunteers "posed a challenge to existing societal assumptions. Their very existence raised issues about the exclusivity of the male military."<sup>5</sup> Here was a small fissure that I longed to have opened up before me. What were the "societal assumptions?" Are they still with us? How was the challenge expressed, and how was it met? What issues were raised? Have they ever been addressed?

The second section of the exhibition was "Caring for the Wounded," and it traced the history of women nurses during Canadian wars. Cynthia Enloe, in her book *Does Khaki Become You?*, discusses the ways in which the military's inner contradictions are laid bare by the necessity of nursing care.<sup>6</sup> The distinctions between the "battlefront" and the "home front" become blurred, and the concept of "combat," which is so necessary to the masculinizing of violent conflict, is threatened. Men cannot function in their role as soldiers if women's role as the embodiment of all that needs protection is altered. The dilemma is resolved by admitting women to

the new area of endeavour, but then carefully controlling the meaning and value of the new role. As pointed out in the exhibition, forty-seven Canadian nursing sisters lost their lives during WW I. At the same time, Canadian women could not vote, nor be freely admitted to medical schools, for that matter. Nursing was not always accepted as an appropriate wartime role for women, and until the Boer War, many military officials spoke out vehemently against women's presence in battlefield hospitals. This is what is hinted at in the statement, "During the early years, women who cared for the wounded were outside the military establishment."<sup>7</sup> Admission into the military establishment is never unconditional, and women nurses are still expected to play certain roles: to be competent yet nurturant, strong yet emotional, spirited yet obedient. And, as some of the women veterans from Vietnam have pointed out, nurses are expected to be silent.

The armed forces may get nervous when nurses start telling their stories because they reveal so much about the nature of war itself. Not only the military gender structure is being protected by military nurse's silence; the basic legitimacy of the military as a pillar of civilized society is being protected by their silence. A nurse who talks of war as seen from a military hospital or a MASH unit is a dangerous woman.<sup>8</sup>

The third section of "Canadian Women and War" was concerned with women's labour in war-related production. The text accompanying this section included references to the double-standard thinking involved in getting women into factories "for the duration," but did not delve into the ways in which policies and propaganda were used to get women out of the labour force at the end of the World Wars. Neither did the text express any of the ambivalence that some women must have felt about what they were doing, women who wanted to help their country in a time of need, and who needed paid work themselves, but who felt a deep personal responsibility for the weapons they were constructing. And such women did, and do, exist. Jo Vellacott, now a Canadian historian involved in the peace movement, was a munitions worker, a mechanic, and later an Air Engineer Officer in England during WW II. She has written of these experiences, "I never did kid myself that I was not killing people when I made anti-tank mines or serviced training planes. Nor was I able to depersonalize the enemy I helped to kill. I knew they were people, and the cheering when a German plane and crew were shot down chilled me."<sup>9</sup> Today, countless women around the world are producing the materials of war, from raising children to making micro-chips. As our economies, as well as our politics and culture, become more deeply militarized, a sense of banality exists where the "chilling" should be. A thorough examination of how women's patriotism and economic dependency has been engendered in the past would stand us in good stead now.

At the end of the "Materials of War" section was a corner devoted to "Peacemakers." This corner, consisting of a small display of photographs and texts, was in the far end of the exhibition gallery; a more remote and marginal location was hard to imagine. The section included information about several Canadian women negotiators and petitioners of the past, and concluded with a single panel representing peace activists of the 1940s. Nancy Miller Chenier attributed the small size of this section to the insufficient archive of the Canadian War Museum.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, more information is available elsewhere, and it could have been presented. Research done by Kandace Kerr in British Columbia has unearthed valuable information about the activities of anticonscription suffrage and labour activists during WW I.<sup>11</sup> Conscription was a major issue in the 1917 federal election, and women organized along class and national lines on either side. In B.C., anticonscription forces organized into such groups as the Pioneer Political Equality League, the Anti-Conscription League (begun in 1917 by over 800 founding members) and the Vancouver Trades and Labour Council. While obviously outnumbered by war and conscription supporters, their membership was considerable enough to provoke response

from the IODE and the National Council of Women (who stated their support for the political party which was dangling women's suffrage in front of them). Canadian women were involved in the International Congress of Women at The Hague in 1915, a meeting later dubbed the Peace Congress. Representatives from Vancouver also attended the Congress in 1919, when the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) was founded. A Vancouver chapter of WILPF was founded in 1921 by three women who later became active in the early C.C.F. The herstory of women peacemakers is hard to locate at times, but it is there!

The fourth section of "Canadian Women and War" was about women in the military. The traditional exclusion of women from the military, and then from "combat" in the military was acknowledged. Information about how "support services" are designated as separate from, and less important than "combat" roles, might have illuminated some of the features of military hierarchies. The existence of service corps poses dilemmas not unlike those seen in the integration of women nurses into the military. Shortages of young men make women's participation essential, and at the same time, traditional gender roles must not dissolve, if men are to fulfill their roles as soldiers. The sexual division of labour is as necessary a component of modern warfare as it is of modern society itself. The hierarchy of the military is characterized by distinctions of gender, race and class, which function to include some groups and exclude others. Traditionally, a specific group may be excluded, until demographic changes necessitate recruitment from it. A view of women in the military is incomplete without a discussion of the "camp followers" excluded in official records and policies. In this group are the prostitutes of garrison towns and the R & R havens, whose labour has always been essential to military "morale" and "combat readiness."

As with nursing, women in service corps have been subject to stringent definitions of their role as women. The Canadian military's persecution of enlisted lesbians (and homosexual men) has more to do with the need to balance patriarchal notions of "femininity" with militarist mythology than it has with considerations of "national security." On an individual basis, women have indeed enlisted for reasons of "patriotism, adventure, personal advancement, and job training."<sup>12</sup> Such decisions are made within a social order that proscribes, defines, and limits choices.

The final section of the exhibition, "Economic Support," was primarily devoted to showing how Canadian women worked as volunteers to support the war effort. The exhibition concluded with a moving display entitled "Wives, Moth-

ers, Sweethearts," in recognition of the ways in which "war brings a great shadow over the lives of women."<sup>13</sup> The display included photographs, letters, banners and small mementos acknowledging some of the emotional realities experienced by women touched by war. I say "some," because I was struck by absences as well. Many women's experience of war includes sexual assault, and the history of Women and War will not be complete until this is acknowledged. Neither should we avoid the fact that the wives and children of men in the military have suffered as much, if not more, from domestic violence as women in general. Joyful returns have also signified drunken rampages on the "home front," as the V.E. Day Riots in Halifax testify. Victory has brought bitterness to some women, and a change of consciousness to others. The section "Wives, Mothers, Sweethearts" was located at the far end of the gallery from "Peacemakers," as if the two are exclusive of each other. It is often from women's experience of war that the commitment to struggle for peace has come. Sheila Brown grew up in a British military family, and is now a Canadian peace worker. She wrote of her dream for peace in a letter to CBC Morningside on Remembrance Day, 1983, "Now in my fifties, I too have had friends killed, felt pain, seen evidence of man's atrocities and seen 'man's cruelty to man.' I've also seen these same cruelties encouraged by cheering crowds, music, flags and prayers. I've borne sons and know how very precious they are."<sup>14</sup>

Women who supported and participated in Canadian war efforts have waited a long time for the recognition that is their due, and the War Museum's exhibition works best on this level. Our recognition of the role of Canadian women, and men, in the two World Wars does not confer exemption from consideration of developments since 1945. The Allied efforts of World War II broke Hitler's control, but they did not win peace. Since 1945, there have been over one hundred wars and military occupations around the world. We are now witnessing the rise of antisemitism and neoNazism, and genocides

have occurred in a number of countries. Military regimes and fascist dictatorships continue to flourish, often with the support of western democracies. Unprecedented military spending creates violence in the lives of millions, by diverting the resources needed to fulfill basic human needs. The nuclear arms race brings us closer every day to total destruction. There is a pressing need to break through the nostalgia and myth-making around war, and begin questioning the political order behind the cultural representations. Until we have a clear understanding of how war is reproduced through our culture, we will not be able to develop other means of conflict resolution.

## NOTES

1. Cynthia Enloe, *Does Khaki Become You? The Militarization of Women's Lives*. South End Press, Boston, 1983. p. 99.
2. By militarism I mean the acceptance and celebration of force and coercion as legitimate means of conflict resolution.
3. An excellent summary of the concept of museums as "ideologically active environments" is found in the introduction to "The Museum of Modern Art as Late Capitalist Ritual: An Iconographic Analysis," by Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach, *Marxist Perspectives*, Winter, 1978. Descriptions of various European museums, cemeteries and memorials from WW I are found in Donald Horne's *The Great Museum. The Re-Presentation of History*, Pluto Press, London, 1984. Ch. 15, "The Imperialist's War."
4. Text from the introduction to the exhibition "Canadian Women and War," Canadian War Museum, June, 1984-September, 1985.
5. Text from section 1 of "Canadian Women and War."
6. Enloe, Ch. 4. "Nursing the Military."
7. Text from section 2 of "Canadian Women and War."
8. Enloe, p. 113.
9. Jo Vellacott, introduction to "Women, Peace and Power," in *Reweaving the Web of Life*, Pam McAllister, editor, New Society Publishers, 1982.
10. From "Women and War exhibit poses feminist dilemma," by Kirsten Kozolanka, *Goodwin's*, Spring, 1985.
11. From "B.C. Herstory. Patriots and Pacifists," by Kandace Kerr, in *Kinesis*, November, 1983.
12. From "Canadian Women and War. A Long Tradition," by Nancy Miller Chenier, *Oracle*, 1984, No. 54, p. 6.
13. Text from Section 5 of "Canadian Women and War."
14. Sheila Brown, in a letter to Peter Gzowski, CBC Morningside, November, 1983.