

BOOK

Mothers of Heroes, Mothers of Martyrs: World War I and the Politics of Grief.

Suzanne Evans. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007; ISBN 978-0-7735-3188-8; \$34.95 (paper).

In 1936, as part of the pilgrimage to honour the commonwealth soldiers who gave their lives at Vimy Ridge, Charlotte Wood was chosen to lay a wreath on England's tomb of the Unknown Warrior in Westminster Abbey. Wood had been selected for this honour because the British-born Winnipeg mother had sent eleven sons to fight for god, king, and empire between 1914 and 1918, five of whom gave their lives to the cause. In *Mothers of Heroes, Mothers of Martyrs: World War I and the Politics of Grief*, Suzanne Evans examines the iconography of grieving mothers and their soldier sons, as epitomized by Wood's sacrifice, to understand the origins and significance of this gendered pattern of male heroism, paired with female pride and grief. Through an analysis of diverse forms of war propaganda, ranging from recruitment posters to gravesites, Evans demonstrates how the powerful bond between mothers and sons was used to boast faltering enlistment, generate financial support for the war, characterize an enemy's evilness, and immortalize victory and remembrance in peacetime.

Although Canada's experience and memory of the First World War is the book's focus, Evans's most important contribution is how she reveals the long history of war mothers and their presence in contemporary culture. She traces the important role mothers have played in developing their sons' military sacrifices in Ancient Greek epics, the Bible, Shakespeare, and Hollywood films, and shows how the language of martyrdom in these diverse sources is echoed in recent political crusades in Ireland, Palestine, Iran, Ecuador, and Israel, as well as in Canada's modern tradition of peacekeeping. This transnational comparison, set along a lengthy timeline, challenges readers to think about how the meaning of sacrifice has been historically and culturally constructed.

Evans also demonstrates the importance of religion and faith in grounding the political responsibilities of martyrs and their mothers. Given how fascinating this cross-cultural comparison is, it is surprising that Evans devotes no time to interrogating how the complexities of ethnicity and nationalism caused a good portion of Canadian mothers to refuse to let their sons become martyrs in the First World War. A discussion of the role Francophone Catholic mothers potentially played in the reduced enlistment of soldiers from French Canada would have brought a richness to Evans's argument about the influence mothers had over their sons and the culturally specific causes triggering tropes of martyrdom. Even with this gap, *Mothers of Heroes, Mothers of Martyrs* is a creative

analysis of how gender and kinship have special meaning in wartime, and demonstrates the value of comparative historical research.

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