



HEARTS AND MINDS: CANADIAN ROMANCE AT THE DAWN OF THE MODERN ERA, 1900-1930

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Love and War

On June 28, 1914, a university student assassinated the heir to the throne of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, setting off a chain of events that culminated in the outbreak of the First World War five weeks later. Britain was among the leading belligerents and Canada, as one of her colonies, was automatically at war as well. But she was not a reluctant partner. Driven above all by a burning Anglo-British patriotism, Canada responded willingly and enthusiastically to Britain's call for help. Between 1914 and 1918, over 600,000 Canadians served overseas with the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF). Many more did their duty at home, replacing enlisted men in the work force, producing war materiel, buying war bonds, conserving scarce materials, and raising money and supplies for the troops. It was a total war effort and, for a nation of only eight million, an impressive one.

More important, Canada's participation had serious repercussions. This was especially true for the thousands of Canadians killed and maimed, but it was no less true for Canada itself. Among other things, the war exacerbated the country's already wide ethnic, class, and regional divisions, extended the reach of government, abrogated civil liberties, produced new rights for Canadian women, solidified Canada's sense of nationhood, and advanced its status as an independent country. These were significant changes, and historians have documented them well. Less apparent, however, are the war's *romantic* effects.¹

THE DECLINE OF ROMANCE

It is often said that the first casualty of war is the truth. More likely, it is romance. The war did not kill romance, of course, and for some Canadians it actually *created* romance. But, generally speaking, it did decline. How could it not have? With so many Canadians now preoccupied with “doing their bit,” this was inevitable.

Enlistment was the first problem. With thousands of men signing up to go overseas, the opportunities for new romance to develop or for existing relationships to flourish – at least on the home front – were much reduced. Over one-third of eligible men aged eighteen to forty-five, 80 per cent of them single, enlisted; one-quarter went overseas.² This represented a significant dislocation or absence of husbands and eligible bachelors on the home front. Many young women told readers of the personal columns that, because of the shortage of men in their area, few dances or parties were being held. A Saskatchewan woman’s comment that “I am very fond of dancing, but we do not have many dances now as all the boys have gone to the war” was typical.³ And when such activities did take place, including tennis parties in summer and skating parties in winter, females now dominated.⁴ The shortage of young men was especially acute in rural areas. Farmers’ sons who did not enlist would, by 1915, leave to take up jobs in urban factories. Or they found work in the bush. “My home is about twelve miles from town,” wrote another sad Saskatchewan maiden, “and we generally have a pleasant time during the winter, but this year all the boys who have not gone to the front have gone to the lumber woods. So you see it leaves the girls quite handicapped.”⁵

Romantic opportunities were just as limited on the battle front. The average soldier spent most of his time in or close to the front lines, where women were naturally scarce; he often went months without seeing a civilian, let alone an eligible bachelorette. He was also constantly on the move – from training camps to the front, and then from one sector of the front to another – which made it difficult to forge any deep romantic relationships. Regular female contact was limited to the middle-aged *mademoiselle* and her teenage daughter who offered him beer (and usually nothing more) at the local French pub or *estaminet*, or sold him fruits and chocolate in baskets close to his camp; if he was in quarantine or a prisoner of war, even this limited heterosexual contact was impossible. Occasionally he met the



Soldiers overseas had some contact with local women. Here a French woman sells oranges to Canadian troops returning to camp. *Courtesy Archives of Ontario, C 224-0-0-9-49.*

daughters of the farm families he billeted with behind the lines, but these girls were usually just that – girls – and he rarely stayed very long in one place anyway.⁶ “I only wish to heaven there were some nice women that I could hang up for tea out here,” complained one officer. “One gets so tired of the constant society of the male.”⁷ Enlisted men complained too. “Dear Editor,” wrote “A Lonely Westerner” from the trenches,

I would like to correspond with someone who is a reader of your paper, preferably of the feminine persuasion.... The past few years I spent in Manitoba and Saskatchewan, and what recollections I have of good times spent out there, dancing, skating and fall suppers filled in many of the lonely evenings. You can quite understand how we feel out here. No girls, shows, or an evening at the Orpheum! No! Nothing but war, war, war!⁸

Romantic opportunities were greater for men who required extended hospitalization, but their injuries often limited romantic activities, like strolls and outings. So did frequent changes of hospitals.⁹

Only when a soldier went “on leave” could he pursue romance. Unfortunately, leaves were rare and short. Enlisted men received weekend passes once a month and extended leaves once a year. Furthermore, the extended leaves never lasted more than ten days – too little time, in other words, to form more than superficial attachments, especially if some of that time was spent visiting relatives in the British Isles.¹⁰ One soldier told his brother about a nurse he had visited in London on his way back to the front. “Say, Ramsey, she is one of the nicest girls I have seen in a long, long time and I wish I could have seen more of her.”¹¹ Another complained to his sister of having little time to spend with his new bride. “I was granted a week-end pass to visit Gertie last Sat.,” he wrote, but “it was only from Sat. noon till 10:30 Sunday night, so that was not very long, was it? Especially when I had to ride the thirty miles there on a bicycle.”¹² Some men defied such restrictions, but not many: unauthorized leaves or a tardy return from an *authorized* one could mean anything from being tied to a wagon wheel to facing a court martial.¹³ So few were the opportunities for heterosexual contact, in fact, that at army- or YMCA-sponsored events soldiers spent much of their time dancing with each *other* or admiring female impersonators. Indeed, some of the latter cross-dressed so convincingly, said one soldier, they “caused many a gallant heart to flutter.”¹⁴

Distance was another problem. Many enlisted men left behind girlfriends, fiancées, and wives, and for such couples normal romantic relations were badly disrupted. Obviously they could no longer spend time together. “There was such a thing as just doing nothing but going to afternoon teas and dances and parties,” recalled one Red Cross volunteer, “[but] that was *out!* In the first place, all our beaux were overseas.”¹⁵ What’s more, couples with no plans to marry anytime soon suddenly faced a difficult decision: marry right away, before the man left for overseas, or delay it until he returned, *if* he returned. Many chose the first option. “I was surprised to hear of the many weddings among M.A.C. [Manitoba Agricultural College] people,” wrote a former student to his girlfriend. “I did not know that Salkeld & Miss Park were even thinking of such a step.”¹⁶ For such couples, premature marriage was a chance to experience one of life’s special rituals – including sex – in the face of an uncertain future. This same uncertainty, and the inability of soldiers to provide for or attend to their wives in the



‘Marie’ and ‘Tony’ of “The Dumbells” – a much-loved troupe of performing soldiers in France – stirred the hearts of many a lonesome member of the Canadian Expeditionary Force. *Library and Archives Canada, Canada Dept. of National Defence Collection, PA-005738.*

usual way, led other couples to *postpone* marriage.¹⁷ Either way, the physical separation caused by the war altered plans and forced Canadians to put their romantic relationships on hold, usually for years.

Correspondence bridged the distance between couples somewhat. “I want you to know that I write to you so often because it seems a little like being with you,” wrote one soldier to his sweetheart. “It seems the same way when I hear from you”; men also sent gifts or battleground “souvenirs” to their partners.¹⁸ Under wartime conditions, however, such exchanges were a poor substitute for personal contact: mail to the front was often delayed or lost, as troops moved from place to place, and soldiers had trouble finding writing paper or keeping it clean (and dry) in their overloaded packs. “Have not had a letter from you since I last wrote,” complained one soldier to his wife, “probably owing to the fact that we have been on the move & the mail has not caught up.”¹⁹ Knowing their letters home were being read by security-minded censors did not help, as it made soldiers less honest about their feelings.²⁰ Even the letters soldiers received from their sweethearts were but fleeting reminders of their long-distance relationships. Mushy letters might fall into the wrong hands – and sometimes did – and soldiers had no space to store them anyway. And so, after reading them over a few times, they destroyed them.²¹ Meanwhile, many relationships that hadn’t reached the correspondence stage before the man went overseas ended entirely, since Canadians considered correspondence a prerogative of couples in serious courtship only.²²

A less common way for couples to reduce the distance between them was to get closer to one another. Before the Canadian government removed this option in 1917, for safety reasons, 30,000 girlfriends and wives (usually officers’ wives) followed their men overseas, where they stayed with their English relatives and contributed to the war effort in some way.²³ These couples were undoubtedly happier than most, for at least they saw each other when the boyfriend or husband was “on leave,” or more frequently, if he was stationed in an English training camp or recuperating in hospital. But most couples were not this fortunate.

Then there was the question of time. The great effort Canadians undertook to win the war necessarily limited the time they could spend pursuing or cultivating romance. Many young women, for example, took up positions in the work force vacated by enlisted men; especially in the war-related industries, like munitions and farming, these jobs involved long hours and hard labour, which left less time and energy for romance.²⁴ And



This Canadian sentry at his post in France was lucky enough to get mail. Many soldiers did not, or not frequently enough, and their romantic relationships suffered. *Courtesy Archives of Ontario, C 224-0-0-10-11.*

young women in rural areas, whose brothers went off to war, now had more work to do around the farm, to the detriment of their social lives.²⁵ Older women, meanwhile, turned their attention to volunteer work; they used their free time to raise money, encourage enlistment, and above all, prepare bandages and articles of clothing for the troops. “One thing this war is teaching us,” wrote “Isabel” in the spring of 1918,

[is] that the Canadian men and women are noble and brave. The men are gone to fight for liberty and righteousness, the women are bravely keeping the home fires burning, and in every spare moment are knitting. Formerly on the streets of any city you would meet women with a dog under their arm, or led by a string. But now it is the knitting bag.²⁶

One young woman put the matter more succinctly: “the time I used to spend skating I now spend knitting.”²⁷

Men doing their bit on the home front also faced longer hours and heavier responsibilities. This was particularly true in the countryside, where farmers lost much of their help when their hired hands enlisted. Young female volunteers from the cities and towns – “farmerettes” – alleviated the problem somewhat by picking fruit and vegetables during the summer, but it wasn’t enough. Even before the war, most struggling bachelor-farmers lacked time for romantic pursuits; with the wartime labour shortage and higher demand for food to feed the troops, they had even less. “Your account of Field Days and Picnics ... makes me almost envious,” wrote one farmer to a female friend, “as I have answered the call from the land rather than that from social gatherings this summer, much though I would have preferred the latter.”²⁸ And when advised by *Prim Rose* readers to go East in search of a wife, an Alberta farmer replied, “this is all easy enough to say, but how can a man go East when help is so scarce?”²⁹

Soldiers were equally pressed for time. When they weren’t fighting in the front lines, or moving from one battle location to the next, or trudging to and from their billets, they were kept busy with chores: digging and repairing trenches, fixing roads, burying dead comrades, transporting supplies, cleaning weapons, drilling and parading. Amidst this flurry of activity some soldiers did manage to keep up a regular correspondence with wives and girlfriends, but most did not, and they were always apologizing



A vigorous day or night's work at the front, digging tunnels or repairing trenches, often left soldiers with little energy to write to sweethearts or to even *contemplate* romance. *Courtesy Archives of Ontario, C 224-0-0-10-15.*

for it. “You have lately had good reason to give me a calling down for not corresponding very regularly,” wrote one soldier to his girl:

I have not written very much lately. Yesterday I wrote my first letter home since I wrote to you last so you see how negligent I have been. Since coming out of the trenches for our divisional rest as it is called I have been busier than when in actual soldiering life and I have not done all the writing I expected to do.³⁰

In lieu of letters, busy soldiers resorted to sending “field cards” – short, non-confidential postcards necessarily devoid of sentiment.

Romance not only declined as a fact during the war – for purely logistical reasons – but it also declined *culturally*: as Canadians turned their thoughts to serving king and country, their interest in romance fell. “The whole country was in flames about the war,” recalled one woman. “You couldn’t talk about anything else... Everything was subservient to the war.”³¹ This cultural shift was apparent in the decision of some Canadians to give up courtship activities like dances, dinners, and movies in order to concentrate on the war effort. No one expressed this attitude more forcefully in the personal columns than a woman calling herself “Pocahontas.” For “Pocahontas,” the war came before personal pleasure:

I work from 8 in the morning till 10 or 11 at night for a man whose sons are all in khaki, no holidays either and I take no wage. What is money, pleasure, or anything when all our loved ones are fighting and dying for us? Can we enjoy it? No. My only pleasure is working for the Red Cross and writing to our dear lads, who ... are the roof that protects us.³²

Many Canadians also considered it disrespectful for normal courtship activities to continue while others were making great sacrifices for the war; they stopped going to dinners, dances, and other amusements and urged others to do the same.³³

Some even favoured the postponement of marriage until war’s end, or at least until couples had done their bit. “We have had years of prosperity and happiness until the awful war came upon us,” wrote one B.C. woman. “Many were careless and frivolous and even today one often finds a careless style of living... The object of life is not completed in marriage, as many of our men and women seem to think,” but in service to a higher cause.³⁴ Those who did opt for wartime marriage, meanwhile, were careful to keep it simple. As one Toronto woman told her soldier fiancé, who planned to return to Canada for their wedding, “it will not be necessary, Dearest, to have a ‘best man’ at a quiet wedding like ours will be. I certainly would not like any fuss. It would put me out completely. Also it is very bad form in these times.”³⁵ Another wartime bride recalled that “like so many war time marriages, we were married very quietly,” while on leave in Ottawa, at the home of a superior officer.³⁶

The cultural subordination of romance to war was most apparent in the willingness of so many women to surrender their boyfriends, fiancés,



image not available

Many Canadian couples who married during the war did so with little fanfare. The solemn expressions of newly-weds Edward and Ivy Buckwell of Fort Mcleod, Alberta, convey the gravity of the times and the uncertainty of their future together. *Courtesy Glenbow Archives, NA-5617-8.*

and husbands, and those of others, to the battlefields of Europe. Eagle-eyed patriotic women roamed the streets of many Canadian towns and cities searching for “slackers”: men in civilian clothes who appeared to be shirking their duty. When found, they thrust white feathers into the hands of such men and pinned white ribbons to their lapels – badges of cowardice.³⁷ More common were their pronouncements urging other women to persuade their boyfriends and husbands to don the khaki. Patriotic women filled the pages of the *WHM* and *Family Herald* with their admonitions: “We girls should aid our brave lads in every way we can,” declared “Patriotism” from Nova Scotia, “and never, under any consideration, say anything to keep them from doing their duty. Rather let us applaud them for giving their best for the sake of their country’s honor.”³⁸ From the other end of the country, B.C.’s delightfully named “Tipperary Mary,” agreed. “There is no time like the present,” she wrote,

for a young man to show that he is made of the right stuff. After the war is over, and our boys come back victorious, will not the ‘stay-at-homes’ feel humiliated ...? Are there any girls who are influencing their [boy]friends to stay at home? Will they like you better for being the cause of their humiliation? Does your own conscience not bother you? There is a duty for us right here.³⁹

Nor did women have any patience for those who felt otherwise. When one correspondent, “Miss Pride,” dared sympathize with women who discouraged their loved ones from enlisting, an incredulous “Maid of the North” demanded to know “Is ‘Miss Pride’ a Canadian?”

I hope not. I dislike to think that any of our Canadian girls would be so devoid of love for country as to say she did not blame girls preventing young men from going to the war. Oh, Canadian girls, do you not realize that the very existence of our native land is threatened with destruction? ... It is up to us to show our true womanhood by giving up loved ones, if necessary, for our Canada, our Motherland.⁴⁰

What she and many other women were saying, essentially, was that their romantic attachments meant very little compared to the greater cause their sweethearts would be fighting and dying for.

Canadian men were no less patriotic. Bombarded with patriotic propaganda at every turn, eager to prove their manliness, and convinced the war would be a short, glorious affair, they rushed to join the colours. "When the war broke out," recalled one soldier, "the country went mad! People were singing on the streets and roads. Everybody wanted to be a hero, everybody wanted to go to war.... I wanted to be a hero too."⁴¹ A young teacher in Toronto, having just been granted a leave of absence to enlist, was delighted. "How wonderfully the way has been opened for me towards the final realization of my desire to enlist!" he confided to his diary. "What seemed an idle dream a year ago will soon be an accomplished fact."⁴²

Nor did many men later regret having enlisted. Even when their initial enthusiasm for war had waned, their original sense of duty and manly obligation remained. Most felt like Private Robert Hale, who, after nearly three years in uniform, told his girlfriend that "I am glad ... I came over here with one of the first bunches Alice, because as you say, I would not have been happy at home and men were needed here."⁴³ Their conviction was fortified by the patriotic songs they sang while in uniform. A popular tune with Moncton's 145th Battalion included the verse,

Oh, I'm so happy in my prime, and I'm merry all the time.
but it's not a soldier's life for to have a steady wife,
So give me Canada for mine.⁴⁴

Another song, often sung at recruitment meetings, was even less apologetic:

Fare you well, I must go, little darling,
For this hurting is hard, dear, to bear,
For the boys in the trenches are calling,
I must go, my duty calls me there!
Dry those tears from your eyes, little darling,
You must smile and be brave while I'm gone,
For I'll come back to you
When my fighting days are through
And the war for our liberty is won.⁴⁵



A Toronto soldier kisses his girlfriend (or possibly wife), goodbye at the train station. *City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 1244, Item 830.*

By their eagerness to enlist and their lack of remorse, Canadian men proved they were as willing as Canadian women to put their nation's interests ahead of their romantic interests.

Once they reached the battlefield, moreover, the realities of war ensured that romance remained a secondary concern. A soldier in the line thought mainly about staying alive, keeping warm, burying dead comrades, and getting enough sleep. And while he prepared for attacks and raids across the unforgivable terrain of “no man's land,” he tried to suppress thoughts of home and loved ones; he had to focus on the life-and-death task at hand. Listening one evening to his men sing songs about “the land of their dreams,” the Senior Chaplain of the First Canadian Division, Reverend Canon Scott, struggled to keep his emotions in check. “I took care not to let the men know that I was ever moved by such sentimentalism. We were out to fight the Germans, and on that one object we had to concentrate all our thoughts to the obliteration of private emotions.”⁴⁶

Only *behind* the line could a soldier afford to let his thoughts wander farther afield, especially in the evenings, when he wrote to his sweetheart, read and re-read her letters, and gazed at her photograph. But more mundane concerns always intruded: finding a place to sleep, taking the long-awaited bath, securing clean clothing, looking for food and refreshments, cleaning his pack, polishing his buttons for inspection, and getting a decent night's sleep. This busy routine sometimes left him at a loss for words. "Can hardly know how to write without talking of war," wrote a soldier to his sister. "It seems that everything I can think of here has something to do with war and it is a fact, the little town we are now in and all the towns around here have all been taken over by the Military authorities."⁴⁷ Even in his *dreams* of home he sometimes found it hard to keep images of war at bay. "I don't dream very much," one soldier told his girlfriend, who confessed she dreamt of him occasionally, "but when I do I am generally dodging whiz-bangs [i.e., shells] and trench mortars."⁴⁸

No matter where a soldier was, the death and destruction that surrounded him and the dismal, almost surreal conditions of trench warfare were hardly conducive to making future plans or even harbouring romantic thoughts. Determined to take one day at a time and frequently filled with despair, many soldiers turned their backs on romance. Some did this by refusing to marry their fiancées or by denouncing the idea of marriage in wartime; Private Hale's declaration that "it is just madness for a fellow to think of getting married now," reflected a common attitude.⁴⁹ Others spurned romance by refusing to discuss future plans with their sweethearts.⁵⁰ Or, to minimize their loved one's potential grief, they deliberately kept their romantic feelings in check and advised their mates to do the same. "I am a dangerous one to be serious with," one soldier warned his new fiancée. "There is no reason why this evening or tomorrow I should [not] get in the way of a shell and so cause unnecessary regrets. I want you to love me, ... but I don't want you to really care. I want in return to amuse and interest you. I don't want to cause you any anxiety or sorrow."⁵¹ In this instance, regrettably, the advice was sound.

For some soldiers, the harsh conditions and their sheer exhaustion conspired to sap whatever sentimentalism they once had. "I am often amazed at the way our feelings have been dulled," wrote an officer to his father in Montreal. "One hears that all these poor fellows [i.e., his comrades] have gone ... and [we] carry on as usual."⁵² At the same time he told his sister that "these days I see sunset and sunrise nearly every day, but one is

nearly always too weary to notice the beauties of the latter.”⁵³ For others, like Private John McArthur, conditions at the front produced bitterness and irritability. “Some of my letters may seem very cool,” he apologized to his girlfriend, but “it isn’t easy to write loving letters over here when one’s moods are not always the sweetest and the conditions we live under somewhat rotten. However I . . . hope you are sometimes able to read love between the lines.”⁵⁴ And sometimes soldiers tried *not* to let their thoughts wander into the romantic realm. Commenting on the Reverend Canon Scott, recuperating in a hospital bed next to his, Lieutenant-Colonel Agar Adamson told his wife that “he really is a charming old snob of the old school. He calls his dog ‘Bitch Billy,’ as he considers female names distracting in war time”; for the same reason, Adamson himself thought it unwise for men to have their wives or fiancées nearby, as this was bound to render them less effective.⁵⁵ Only on leave or when hospitalized could men devote more than a passing thought to romance.⁵⁶

A small, but vociferous group of Canadians went one step further. To these people romance wasn’t simply of secondary concern, it was intolerable. At a time when thousands were giving their lives on the killing fields of France and Belgium, many civilians considered romance a distraction and an extravagance. They demanded, therefore, that in addition to rationing scarce materials like butter and sugar, Canadians also ration romance, starting with visits to dances, movies, and restaurants. After all, expenditures for such “foolish frivolities” deprived needy soldiers of food and money. “One would think every expensive dish or selfish tea would, and should, choke you,” said a “Win-the-War” pamphlet seeking aid for POWs, “if you could visualize those gaunt, hunger stricken, forsaken forms, waiting like famished animals for the food you waste.”⁵⁷ Contributors to the personals were equally concerned. “Walking along two of the main streets, one night,” wrote an Ontario woman, “I counted more than a dozen moving picture shows, and people were streaming in and out by hundreds. . . . Should we not endeavour in some way to help in the Great Cause rather than spend time and money on our own amusement?”⁵⁸ A “Soldier’s Friend” from B.C. agreed. She urged her fellow bachelorettes to encourage enlistment even though it would mean less romance. “We will sacrifice all our good times in the winter evenings,” she declared. “This is not time for pleasure, but to be serious”; some even insisted the war would not end until *dancing* ended.⁵⁹ True, the patriots did not object *entirely* to heterosexual amusements. Many agreed they were a necessary outlet for war-related tension,

anxiety, and overwork, and a way of maintaining morale. Amusements for patriotic purposes, such as dances and card parties to raise money for the Red Cross – they usually condoned these as well.⁶⁰ But, generally speaking, many considered romance inappropriate in wartime.

In some quarters, even the mere mention of romance could provoke a strong reaction. Witness the tirade unleashed by “A City Girl” in the February 1916 issue of the *Western Home Monthly*:

At a time like this when the very existence of the Empire is threatened, it is remarkable to note the general sense of empty-headedness which appears to prevail amongst a large number of the readers who contribute to your columns. In the December issue, for instance, we have a man worrying because he escorted a young lady home in a thunderstorm, and she did not thank him. I very much doubt whether this particular piece of information is of any particular interest to anybody except himself. Surely, in times like these, the other readers of your magazine should not be forced to read such piffle.... Surely it would be more fitting for your correspondents to take a more serious tone, and write and tell us just exactly what they are doing for their country, instead of babbling about dark eyebrows and fluffy hair. The average individual is too serious minded now-a-days to be irritated by reading ridiculous sentiments, and it does not seem fair that a few shallow-minded boys and girls should be allowed to thrust their views on unimportant matters upon the rest of *The Western Home Monthly* readers.⁶¹

Most members of the personal columns were not nearly as scathing. But they agreed with the message.⁶²

VICTORS AND CASUALTIES

Although the war caused a general decline in romance, it did not affect the love lives and romantic prospects of Canadians equally. Certain groups were affected less than others. Some even benefitted. There were, in other words, relative winners and losers.

Over Here

On the home front, the main beneficiaries were single men who did not, or could not, enlist.⁶³ With so many young men going off to war, a dearth of eligible bachelors emerged, and soon the number of single women far outnumbered the number of single men, an imbalance accentuated by the rising number of war widows. This meant that any remaining bachelors – provided, of course, they were not “shirkers” – suddenly found themselves in high demand and with a greater pool of potential mates from which to choose. For this group of men, the war years must have been paradise. One young factory worker recalled asking that a telephone to be installed in his Winnipeg boarding house,

because all the girls used to have to call me up at work. And I was very popular because, with all the men in the army, any sixteen- or seventeen-year-old boy had so many girlfriends he didn't know what to do with them all. So girls I didn't know at all would call me up at work and talk to me and kid me along in the hope that I would make a date with them and take them to the show, because ... girls just didn't go to the show alone.⁶⁴

His recollection, and the comments of bachelors in the personal columns, also suggests that bachelors didn't need to work as hard to attract women, a fact corroborated by several female correspondents in the *Family Herald*. “It seems to me,” wrote one, that “in most cases today it is the girls who do the courting, not the men.”⁶⁵

The sudden surplus of single women was particularly welcome to the “lonely western bachelor” of pre-war days, whose isolation and work had long hindered his romantic prospects. Granted, wartime production consumed much of his spare time, as mentioned, but his chances of finding a partner, either on his days off in town or through the correspondence columns, were now much better. Browsing the *Prim Rose* column in May 1918, for instance, he would have been pleased to read the following solicitation from a farmer's daughter in New Brunswick:

Fifteen of the young men of this town have already paid the supreme sacrifice and are sleeping somewhere in France or Belgium, while ten others are in military hospitals and the

remaining few are somewhere on the western front doing their 'bit.' I would be pleased to correspond with Western Bachelors between twenty and twenty-five.⁶⁶

At the same time, western men who wrote to the column and were suspected of being single found themselves swamped with unsolicited female correspondence.⁶⁷ Another Maritime maiden summed up the happy condition of the western bachelor: "There is so much work, they surely cannot be very lonely, and if they are, there are so many maidens these days that they need not be so for long."⁶⁸ Older bachelors benefitted too. Many had given up hope of ever marrying, but the wartime surplus of women – including thousands of war widows closer to their own age – gave them a second chance. War widows sent many letters to the personal columns, and the older bachelors were quick to respond.⁶⁹

A select group of home-front *women* also benefitted romantically from the war, despite the shortage of eligible bachelors. Perhaps the most fortunate were those who lived close to army training camps. In addition to the main camp at Valcartier, just north of Quebec City, the federal government established forty-four smaller camps across the country (and seven aerodromes), each containing between 200 and 12,000 men.⁷⁰ For single women in nearby towns, it was a bonanza. A woman from Pembroke, Ontario, recalled that when the First Canadian Tunneling Company set up camp in nearby Petawawa, "the soldiers were received with warm hospitality by the people of the town, particularly the local girls, who were delighted to find so many fine-looking young men in uniform on the streets."⁷¹ What's more, the girls enjoyed close contact with these men: in the camp's canteens, where they volunteered to sell them "comforts" like pie and ice cream; at soldier's clubs in town, also staffed by volunteers; at movie theatres and dances; at regimental concerts; and even in their private homes, when their parents entertained soldiers. Local service clubs augmented romantic opportunities by setting up specialized recreational facilities for the men. In Port Elgin, New Brunswick, for example, where the 145th Infantry Battalion was training, the local IODE (Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire) established "entertainment rooms" that, according to one soldier, "provided a popular, cozy, meeting place for Major Wood's boys and Port Elgin's female population."⁷² From such brief encounters, including the officers' "farewell dance" at the town hall, romances developed.



The war created romantic opportunities for some, including men and women working side by side in the munitions industry. *Courtesy Archives of Ontario, C 334-1-5-0-18.*

Young women who entered the work force for the first time also reaped romantic benefits, particularly in jobs involving greater contact with male co-workers and customers. This was especially true for the thirty-five thousand, mostly single, women who replaced enlisted men in the metal industries and munitions plants of Ontario and Quebec, and for the thousands more who entered war-related industries like steel and cement production. Granted, the noisy and busy factory floor wasn't the ideal setting for romance to flourish, especially when safety required strict attention to one's work. Opportunities for forging such relationships multiplied nonetheless, as they did for the thousands of women who moved into the service sector, as bank tellers, street car conductors, and office clerks.

Unfortunately, we know little about the romantic lives of these women. Few left diaries or memoirs, and the letters they sent brothers, cousins, and



The wartime influx of “farmerettes” into rural areas was undoubtedly welcomed by lonely farm boys. *Courtesy City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 1244, Item 640A.*

sweethearts at the front, describing their experiences on the job, did not survive. But we do know a few things. We know that new relationships were formed, sometimes of an illicit nature, as between factory men and female co-workers with husbands overseas, and that bosses sometimes caught male and female munitions workers “fooling around” on site.⁷³ We know that men sometimes made advances on women in their new positions. An article in Kingston’s *Daily British Whig* on female streetcar conductors, for example, observed that “they are very business-like in appearance, and in the performance of their duties they will stand no nonsense from any of the male passengers who are of a ‘flirty’ nature, which responds to the attractiveness of the Limestone City’s conductorettes.”⁷⁴ And we know that the patriotic efforts women made – both as paid employees and as volunteers – drew the admiration and romantic attention of many men. “I would like

to receive letters from some of our fair members around my own age who are doing their bit towards production,” wrote a B.C. bachelor to the *Family Herald*, while from the trenches “Gunshot Bill” informed readers that “the farmerettes in overalls have a big place in my heart and I am proud to see the way the Canadian girls are coming forward to help and do their bit in the great war”; nor did such women shy away from emphasizing their patriotic efforts when it came to soliciting male correspondents.⁷⁵

Over There

There were winners on the war front as well. Soldiers, despite the romantic limitations they faced – the frequent moves, the infrequent leaves, a lack of time – benefitted in several ways. The biggest was probably their sudden desirability to the opposite sex. To many, if not most home-front women, the Canadian soldier embodied virtues they found irresistible: strength, courage, honour, and patriotism, not to mention smartness of appearance. And so they sang his praises in the pages of the personals and requested his correspondence. “I would be glad to hear from ... any laddies in Khaki,” wrote one young woman from Manitoba. “They’re the lads for me.” Often coupled with comments like “I greatly admire the boys in khaki,” and “every boy in khaki is a hero in my sight,” such requests were common.⁷⁶ To the average woman, the ideal man was now the *fighting* man.

This was, in fact, obvious from the moment a man enlisted. Photos of soldiers alongside their beaming girlfriends or fiancées betrayed the intense pride women felt for their “soldier boys.” Crowds of admiring women looked on as raw recruits paraded through the streets of their towns and cities. And throngs of young women stood on train station platforms and piers to give their heroes – in addition to rousing send offs – their mailing addresses and generous servings of affection.⁷⁷ A member of the First Canadian Siege Battery that left from Halifax in 1915 told his mother that “of course the sweethearts of the battery were there to see the last of the temporary loves, and I have a picture of Pony Moore going down the gang plank at least six times to kiss his girls goodbye.”⁷⁸ Nor were soldiers oblivious to their new desirability. “Should any eligible young man read this letter who had not as yet thought of ‘joining up,’” wrote a recent enlistee to the Prim Rose column,

let me strongly advise him to do so at once. It is surprising how different one feels directly [after] one 'gets into the clothes'... You feel better and cleaner, and more a man in every way. And it may have been my imagination, as I am by no means a ladies' man, but I thought the girls seemed to regard me more approvingly than hitherto.⁷⁹

Prim Rose was quick to confirm his suspicions. "Congratulations on your enlistment," she replied. "Of course the girls approve."⁸⁰

The adulation continued after the men disembarked in England. Many young women writing to the *WHM* and *Family Herald* said they preferred to correspond with soldiers overseas. A "Khaki Girl's" request – that "I would like to correspond with a 'A Soldier' and any other soldier who would care to write to me ... as I am very fond of the boys in khaki" – was typical.⁸¹ They also besieged soldiers with letters. "You must have published my name around there something terrible," one soldier told his sister, "by the way the girls have been swamping me with letters lately."⁸² It's true that many of these letters (and the "comfort parcels" women sent as well) were inspired by feelings of patriotism: women wanted to boost the soldiers' spirits and ease their discomfort. Often, however, they were a sign of romantic interest. As Private Robert Brown explained to his mother, about a parcel he received from a girl he barely knew in his hometown of Brockville, Ontario, "You will probably wonder at my getting such a parcel from such a source ... but I believe she has more than one friend at the front in whom she takes an interest, and like other girls I have heard about, she seems to make much of the soldier part of it – anyone at the front fighting seems to appeal."⁸³ A girlfriend of Brown's sister, after hearing tales of his battlefield exploits and seeing a photo of him, wrote to him as well, and requested a photo for herself: "She *must* have one of these pictures, so, as Gladys [his sister] would not part with one, she ... must help herself to one. She has also written to me two or three times and sent a picture of herself... That is another example of this sort of hero worship I spoke of."⁸⁴ Private Brown's situation was hardly unique. It also highlights the purely *physical* appeal of soldiers. Many young women who saw photos of their girlfriends' dashing brothers or cousins in uniform took a sudden romantic interest. "Oh! how I admire the boys in khaki," confessed one such woman. "They look so manly."⁸⁵ Not everyone was pleased. With a discernible note of envy, one farmer told readers of the *WHM* that "some of the young ladies think more

image not available

The man in uniform held great romantic appeal. These two Alberta members of the 31st Battalion, CEF, would soon find themselves the centre of much female adulation, both at home and in the cities of England, Belgium, and France. *Courtesy Glenbow Archives, NA-3456-4.*

of the looks of a suit of khaki than of the thing it stands for. The uniform is what gets their eye.”⁸⁶

The desirability of the uniformed Canadian male helped offset some of the barriers he faced to overseas romance. In addition to lack of opportunity and time – the main obstacles – the average soldier had to contend with the language barrier between himself and local women (except in England, of course), a certain “coolness” from Belgian women for some reason, and, worst of all, a reputation for being wild – European citizens often mistook Canadian soldiers for natives on the warpath. On top of all this, many soldiers had a low opinion of both English and French women, whose enthusiasm for consuming alcohol in public they found particularly distasteful.⁸⁷

These hindrances aside, Canadian soldiers enjoyed certain romantic advantages. The biggest, without question, was their appeal to European women. Perhaps it was their “spiffy” uniforms, adorned as they were with flags, badges, and polished buttons. Perhaps it was the shortage of male competition, with so many of the youngest and fittest French and British soldiers already dead. Or maybe it was the high esteem in which all soldiers were held, particularly colonial soldiers, who risked their lives for England and France. One Saskatchewan veteran remembered with fondness the English women he met while recuperating from his wounds. “I was only a few days in the hospital and knew dozens of ’em. ‘Over There’ the girls thought any man wearing ‘Canada’ on his shoulder straps was ‘Jake.’”⁸⁸ Private Bertram Cox reported a similar phenomenon. “Next to the ever present subject of ‘war,’” he told his mother, “the topic of the moment, is ‘leave.’ The boys are going and others coming back, every day, with great accounts of their trips. Evidently, the girls are just as keen on ‘*les soldats*’ as ever.”⁸⁹ Some of these women simply wanted someone to pay for their lunch or silk stockings – the proverbial “gold digger” – or a “trip to Canada” as the wife of a Canadian soldier.⁹⁰ Still, Canadian soldiers were popular.

English women found them especially appealing. Writing of his experiences in London, Lieutenant Bert Drader told his aunt that “it would take about three months to see all through the place, and it don’t make any difference which way you turn, the girls are as thick as mosquitoes and quite as affectionate.”⁹¹ Escorting her soldier-brother through London’s busy streets, Pembroke’s Grace Morris noticed this too. “Sometimes, as we walked about London, I found it necessary to act as a sort of bodyguard for my handsome brother,” she wrote in her diary, as “the streets seemed to

be awash with eager females anxious to comfort lonely soldiers.”⁹² These comments also suggest that single women were abundant in European cities. And they were. Canadian soldiers, on leave from training camps in England and from the front lines, encountered them everywhere: in stores, theatres, restaurants, hotel lounges, boarding houses, YMCA canteens, on their sight-seeing tours, and in the streets. Visiting London for the first time, one soldier couldn’t help notice that the streets were full of “khaki, khaki everywhere, always attached to a woman,” and “women, women, women... [I] never knew there were so many.”⁹³ Another described London as “a bachelor’s paradise for sure.”⁹⁴

Inevitably, the combination of so many women eager to be with Canadian soldiers and large numbers of war-weary soldiers hungry for female companionship produced an abundance of romantic encounters. Usually these took the form of an evening outing, where a soldier escorted a woman to dinner, a dance, or a show, or simply accompanied her on a moonlit stroll; picnics in the countryside were also common. Many encounters, however, were unplanned. A soldier might meet a woman on a sight-seeing tour or in a public place and strike up a conversation or offer to share a drink or meal with her; often she asked him back to her home for dinner or tea. Such encounters were necessarily brief and usually superficial, but sometimes they led to more lasting relationships. On their return to the front, for example, many soldiers began writing to the women they had met on leave, or visited them again; one soldier’s observation, that “most soldiers had a girl at every corner,” was not far off the mark. And sometimes they fell in love and married.⁹⁵ Whatever the outcome, for Canadian soldiers on leave, the opportunities for romance – not to mention paid sex – were abundant and close at hand. For the typical Canadian serviceman, in his mid-twenties and fresh off the farm, it was one of the few silver linings of his time overseas.

Meanwhile, soldiers who found themselves in an English hospital recuperating from their wounds – known as “picking up a Blighty” – had the advantage of regular contact with young nurses and sympathetic female visitors. Granted, the typical army hospital wasn’t the ideal setting for romance: the sickly odour of gangrene hung in the air most of the time, nurses were usually swamped with work, and soldiers were not in the best physical or mental condition to woo a nurse or any other woman. Furthermore, stays were usually short.⁹⁶ But bedside romances did develop, as nurses took their patients on “walks” through the hospital grounds and

accompanied them to shows in town; they also mingled with them at hospital dances and parties. Such budding romances were usually discreet. But not always. Writing for *Maclean's* magazine about his experiences at Epsom Downs convalescent camp in England, Private George Pearson told readers that,

even the British nurses forsook all attempt at decorum and openly romped with their charges. A nurse holds commissioned rank in the army. But at Epsom, as the night grew on, it was no unusual sight to see a skirted officer hugging the shadows of the wall as she gave a leg up [i.e., a kiss] to each individual of a long queue of convalescent Canadians returning from an evening's deviltry in the town. And these officers usually giggled in a very unsoldier-like manner.⁹⁷

Hospitalized soldiers also benefitted from the visits of sympathetic women; these women usually had some connection to the hospital and volunteered to take patients on drives through the English countryside. Many of these hospital courtships ended in marriage, perhaps because convalescing soldiers had more time than soldiers on leave to fall in love. "It appears 'wounded, Blighty, marriage' is becoming a popular pass time with our fellows," wrote one soldier in his diary.⁹⁸

Of course, romantic opportunities on the war front cut two ways: opportunities for soldiers were at the same time opportunities for certain women. And, in fact, the other group that fared well under the circumstances was Canada's overseas nurses. These were either full-fledged nurses, more commonly called Nursing Sisters, or their untrained assistants, known as Voluntary Aid Detachment nurses or VADs. About 2,500 Nursing Sisters, all single and over twenty, served overseas. They worked mostly in general hospitals but could also be found at training camps in England, on hospital ships and trains, and in the Casualty Clearing Stations near the battlefields.⁹⁹ Like the soldiers they cared for, these women benefitted romantically in two ways. First, they were extremely popular with men because of their patriotic and often heroic efforts to bring comfort to, and facilitate the recovery of, the hundreds of wounded men that passed under their care each day. Nurses were highly dedicated to their jobs and unfailingly kind and helpful to their patients. Soldiers noticed. In a note his

nurse asked him to write in her journal, one Canadian summed up his own feelings and those of his comrades:

Just a ray of sunshine
Given by a look,
From the kindly owner
Of this little book.

She always made me happy
When in my little cot,
Her ever-smiling countenance
Will never be forgot.¹⁰⁰

If soldiers agreed on anything, it was that the “angels in white” who cared for them were heroines, pure and simple.

Canadian nurses also benefitted from their close contact with many single men, wounded or otherwise. This contact took place mainly in the recovery wards, as nurses changed dressings on wounds, administered morphine, gave soldiers cigarettes, wrote letters for them, talked with them, and held their hand. It is no surprise that many a soldier, already predisposed to worshiping the saintly figure who attended his every need, quickly fell for his caring and always pleasant nurse. “Patients had a habit of falling in love with you,” recalled one nurse. “They were so glad to ... have young girls around who weren’t too hard to look at and who were kind, who helped them.”¹⁰¹ Sometimes the nurse-patient interaction occurred in more congenial settings, as when nurses invited recovering soldiers to tea or dances in their mess tent or took them on picnics or for walks. Either way, the result was the same: smitten soldiers. One such soldier recalled the time he spent at a convalescent hospital in England. “I was given the use of a pony & cart,” he told his aunt, “and every nice day was taken for a drive, accompanied by a V.A.D. Sister to whom I grew very much attached. She was an angel, and the boys all called her their Little Ray of Sunshine.”¹⁰²

Nurses also spent time with men other than those under their care. They worked closely with the male orderlies in their wards, for instance, and with the doctors (“medical officers”), who often chaperoned them on their sight-seeing tours.¹⁰³ It was also common for a soldier on leave to visit a convalescing comrade or a female relative working at the hospital, who in turn introduced him to nurses. One nurse recalled the day a “very



Two nursing sisters tend to a wounded Canadian soldier at the No. 2 Hospital in France but would not have been oblivious to the soldier's handsome male visitor at his bedside. *Library and Archives Canada, Edward Kidd, W. L. Kidd Collection, PA-149305.*

handsome Canadian Army Officer” walked into her ward and offered his hand. He was the brother of a friend of hers from Owen Sound, and “like a flash I remembered the broad shouldered defenseman of the Wiarnton Redmen Hockey team.... I had just met my future husband.”¹⁰⁴ They also mingled with soldiers and officers from nearby camps, at hospital dances and Sunday afternoon teas, concerts at divisional headquarters, and battalion sporting events; Christmas and New Year’s Eve dinner-dances were particularly gala events, involving a festive concoction of nurses, officers, and soldiers.¹⁰⁵ Nurses benefitted further from the camaraderie they shared with soldiers, and from often being the only women that soldiers came in close contact with between leaves. Nurses went on leaves too, of course, to Paris, Boulogne, London, or whichever city was closest to their posting; those lucky enough to be stationed in or near large cities were able to visit them in the evenings or on their days off. These cities were usually brimming with soldiers and officers on leave, and here, too – at cafés, restaurants, concerts, and tourist attractions – they met men.¹⁰⁶

The high esteem in which nurses were held by most men, combined with the many men they met during and after working hours, created ample opportunities for romance. It's true that the army supervised and restricted the social activities of its nurses more so than its soldiers, to safeguard their physical and especially *moral* well-being – in at least one hospital, nurses needed permission slips to go shopping in town.¹⁰⁷ But military authorities could not prevent romance. Nurses regularly accepted offers from patients, soldiers, and officers to see movies or plays in town or to dine with them.¹⁰⁸ One soldier remembers walking home with his buddies after a movie in a French village and noticing the “scenes of philandery along the road at nightfall” between VADs and officers.¹⁰⁹ Former patients dropped by to visit their nurses and ask them out. And some pilots dropped love letters from planes to their amused nurse girlfriends below, telling them, as one nurse recalled, “where they had been, and when they’d be back, and ‘hope you’d be at a little dance,’ or something like that.”¹¹⁰ Romances and life-long partnerships developed from such encounters, often enough that it became a running joke that wounded men invariably fell in love with and married their nurses, particularly if they were good-looking.¹¹¹

Casualties

If some Canadians survived the war romantically, however, or even prospered by it, many more did not. There were casualties, in other words. Chief among them were the wives and girlfriends Canadian soldiers left behind. These women experienced a range of emotions during the war, few of them positive. They were certainly lonely. “I am one of the girls left behind in a quiet little place, now half empty because of the war,” wrote a young domestic servant. “Not that I am not happy with the people I am with, but at times I feel so lonely.”¹¹² Ontario’s “Lonely Girl” felt the same. “Many of the young men in this town have enlisted,” she wrote, “and so many moving away makes us feel very lonely”; each was hoping for some male correspondence to cheer them up.¹¹³ Also from Ontario came this anguished and oft-repeated complaint from a soldier’s wife:

The soldiers’ wives are not credited enough for their bravery, let alone the hardships they go through.... If they had the aching heart of the soldier’s wife, it would do them not to speak of the other trials. I often think I can’t stand it any longer, then I

think of what my dear husband is going through for us, and it gives me heart.¹¹⁴

Even when (or *especially* when) they attended social functions, like showers, weddings, and outings with other couples, or moved into their parents' home, wives missed their husbands terribly; the loneliness was strongest for those without family nearby, for new brides not yet accustomed to living on their own, and for women in remote rural areas, where loneliness was *already* a problem.¹¹⁵ Sadly, many women remained lonely for the rest of their lives. "So many of the boys were sacrificed in that war," recalls one widow, "that my chances of having another husband were just not there. I was lucky to even have *one* husband. Hundreds and hundreds of women my age and a bit older never did get married, never had the opportunity to be married, because the loss was so bad."¹¹⁶

Many women complained, as well, that they were bored, that with all the boys off to war, "times are dull" – a familiar refrain among young women in particular. "I have done quite a bit of skating this winter," wrote an eighteen-year-old Toronto girl to her aunt, "and am only sorry we won't get much more. Things are getting shocking when the youngest in the family goes to rinks, shows, and concerts with the same boy. Such is my case."¹¹⁷ Working women, accustomed to having more men around the office, shop, or bank, also found life less exciting.¹¹⁸ And soldiers' wives were particularly hard-pressed, lacking even the *option* of another man's company, unless they were willing to flout societal norms and their marriage vows – few were.¹¹⁹ Nor could women relieve their boredom by attending social events alone. The etiquette of the day, though weakened by the turmoil of war, still prescribed that men escort women to and from such events. Married women, in particular, became virtual prisoners of war.¹²⁰

But above all, Canadian women were anxious. When they soon realized that the war was no great, glorious adventure, but an insatiable meat-grinder, claiming and maiming young men at a phenomenal rate – the average life span of front-line infantry was twelve months – women spent many waking hours worrying about their sweethearts.¹²¹ Writing to the *Family Herald*, "A Very Lonely Girl," with her fiancé at the front, summed up the feelings of most: "so many of the boys I knew are listed in the 'killed in action' columns these days, it makes me tremble for the safety of the one who is dearer to me than my own life."¹²² They worried when they didn't hear from their men regularly, a common problem given the inconsistency

of the mails. “My Own Dearest Hubby,” wrote one woman, “I was so glad to get your letter last Monday morning to say you were in rest camp, but my dearest I have had no news since then. I am sure you have been in the trenches dear again. I do hope I shall have news in the morning. It is so worrying love.”¹²³ And most of all, they worried about receiving word their men had been killed. Girlfriends trembled as they perused the casualty lists in their local paper or on the telegraph office window, and wives lived in mortal fear of receiving a condolence letter or official telegram with the dreaded opening, “I sincerely regret to inform you...” Just spotting the “telegraph boy” walking down the street was terrifying, and many women were “absolutely ... petrified every time the telephone rang.”¹²⁴

Canadian women also had more prosaic, if no less troubling worries. Would their men continue to like or love them, for example? This question tormented them, and soldiers were forever trying to reassure their partners. “Do you really think, Alice, that I don’t like you as much as I used to?,” asked one soldier. “Well dear, you are making a great mistake, because I love you now just as much as I did when I was at home.”¹²⁵ Soldiers also had to reassure their sweethearts that they were not seeing other women or being unfaithful in other ways. “I want you to know that I am not fooling with any girls in England,” Private Hale told his girl, straight out. “You are my own little girl and, dear, one is enough for me. I have not seen a girl in England who could compare at all with my little Canadian rose. Now do you trust me dear?”¹²⁶ Rumours of infidelity on the war front were rife, and Canadian women worried.

Worse than the constant anxiety, of course, was the sadness and grief women felt upon hearing of their partner’s death. Society expected women who had lost loved ones to present a brave front and “carry on” – to hide their grief, at least in public, so as to not lower the morale of others.¹²⁷ But some simply couldn’t do it, like the twenty-year-old Nova Scotian who in 1917 poured her heart out to the *Family Herald’s* readers:

I come to tell you I have received that dreaded message saying my dear husband was killed in action ... at Vimy Ridge. Oh! I am so heart-broke. For where is the silver lining to this dark cloud? ... I have the consolation of knowing my husband died a noble death. And when I think of the other sad hearts in Canada it makes it easier to bear. Our future prospects were

bright, as we had a nice farm to move on when he returned.
But now all these plans have vanished.¹²⁸

Many more women suffered privately and, despite the soothing words of friends and relatives, were often inconsolable. “I feel as though my heart would break,” confessed a British Columbia girl to her mother, for “he was all the world to me.”

I have never given a thought to another man – and oh how dearly I loved my boy. I cannot realize that I shall never see his bonny face again and that he will never hold me in his arms again and call me his little sweetheart. We have loved each other for a long time now, and in his last letter he said he would be back very soon and claim me for his wife. How happy it made me – and now I can never be his wife. I feel as though life is worth nothing to me now. I long to go to him. He wants me – I can hear him calling me in the night when all is quiet. Oh, how it hurts me to think of my darling, my Percy – lying out there, so far from those he loves.¹²⁹

Some grieving women were able to distract themselves by keeping busy with war-related activities. But this was simply grief deferred, and on Armistice Day, when the bells rang and the whistles blew in towns and villages across Canada, announcing the end of the terrible conflict, many women were faced with the painful and final realization that their loved ones would not return. “In little rooms all over the land,” wrote a nurse in her diary that day, “mothers, sisters and sweethearts were silently weeping for those who would not come back.”¹³⁰

Soldiers felt such emotions, too. As preoccupied as they were with war-related matters, and as much as they tried to suppress romantic thoughts, they did experience moments of longing for the wives and girlfriends they had left behind, or craved female correspondence. Bored with trench life and the constant company of other men, they, too, desired heterosexual companionship. And like the women at home, they often felt anxiety. Would there be any eligible women left to marry when they returned? Would their girlfriends or fiancées get impatient with waiting and leave them for another? Were their sweethearts being faithful to them? And if so, would they still want them when they returned? “Won’t it be hell if I have

changed so much for the worse that she won't like me any more?," Private Douglas Buckley asked his brother-in-law. "I hope I haven't." Others felt bitterness and guilt at having to postpone marriage or at not being around to "care for" their wives.¹³¹ Soldiers were romantic casualties, too, in other words. But not to the same extent. They did not have to worry, for example, that the lives of their mates were in danger, and few soldiers were concerned about infidelity, especially with young men so scarce on the home front.

In one respect, however, the war made casualties of soldiers and home-front women in equal measure: it damaged relationships. The main problem was trying to sustain romance over a great distance and over many months, if not years. The lack of personal and regular contact was bound to weaken existing relationships, especially if either party encountered desirable alternatives close at hand; it meant that couples could not express or reaffirm their feelings towards one another as regularly or personally as before. Correspondence helped little. In fact, it often made things worse. The unreliability of the mail, for example, produced misunderstandings. Delayed or lost letters were often interpreted by one partner as proof that the other no longer cared as much; this sometimes provoked an unwarranted "calling down" from the aggrieved party, creating further tension.¹³² Or when a sent letter wasn't received, the intended recipient might interpret this as a desire on the sender's part to discontinue the relationship and would stop writing. The sender would, in turn, assume the same, resulting in a break-up – either temporary or permanent. This is exactly what happened to Private Nelson Campbell and his girlfriend Muriel Macfie. "I never dreamt of hearing from you again," he wrote in 1918. "You say you answered my last letter, well I never received no reply and I thought you had found something better to do with more sport attached to it than writing to one of the [*Hun straffers*]... So you think I was seeing so many girls in England that I forgot about you. Oh, nothing like that."¹³³ And sometimes the letters themselves were misunderstood. Because couples often suppressed romantic sentiments, this was occasionally misinterpreted by one partner as a change in feelings of the other.¹³⁴

Wartime pressures strained relationships too. The great sacrifices Canadians made for the war effort left many men and women angry and irritable, and sometimes they took out their frustrations on their partners. One officer admitted as much to his wife: "It may be the irregular hours for eating and sleeping," he told her, referring to his fellow officers, but

“we all agree that we are much more irritable and annoyed at little things. [Colonel] Buller says it would be a gallant act for any girl to marry him.”¹³⁵ Several letters later, he gave first-hand evidence of his own foul disposition. Sleep-deprived, bitter about being in the line during Christmas, and annoyed with his wife’s whining about what he considered minor problems – like “the Daughters of the Empire cannot agree upon the proper method of running a soldier’s soup kitchen on the home front” – he lashed out in uncharacteristic fashion: “I have rather pounded the subject to death, my dear old girl, but you must not worry me for a short time. I want your affection and to say pretty things. If you don’t feel like saying them, then don’t write to me till you can.”¹³⁶ In other instances, partners felt they were getting insufficient recognition or understanding from each other for the sacrifices they were making and the hardships they were enduring.¹³⁷ The very fact of men *enlisting* caused tension in some cases. Most women supported their partner’s decision to enlist, but some felt their men were abandoning them – placing personal glory ahead of love – and told them so.¹³⁸

Infidelity was another sore point. Couples separated for long periods and lonely for the company of the opposite sex occasionally succumbed to temptation. This seems to have been common among soldiers, and it took various forms, from simply flirting or going out with other women, to visiting prostitutes and committing bigamy. Out of guilt, or because their sweethearts had gotten word through a third party, soldiers often confessed their transgressions. Or perhaps it was the *soldier* who received news of his partner’s infidelity – this happened too. Either way, it caused wounded feelings and anger for the aggrieved.¹³⁹ Even *suspicious* of infidelity were enough to cause irreparable damage. “It is sure good to hear from you often,” wrote one soldier to his sister, “especially since Marion [his fiancée] has quit writing. I do not know the reason.... I expect someone has been telling her yarns about me, and she believed them rather than me, so I intend to write soon and tell her to break our engagement.”¹⁴⁰

Under normal circumstances, many couples would have resolved their differences; under wartime conditions, they often proved fatal: broken engagements, and even divorce, were not unheard of.¹⁴¹ More often, relationships ended because girlfriends and fiancées simply grew tired of waiting and worrying, or because they had met someone they liked better. Others lost hope of ever again seeing their husband or boyfriends alive, or healthy, and decided to end the relationship for these reasons. The result was usually a “Dear Johnny” letter to some unfortunate soldier, or a letter from

a relative or close friend telling him his girl had married someone else. Soldiers sent letters, too.¹⁴² “There must be a large number of girls and fellows who have been parted by this scrap,” wrote Private Hale to his girl, Alice. “I think some of them will patch up their troubles don’t you think? ... Please let us mend ours.”¹⁴³ He and Alice did eventually mend their troubles, marrying in 1920, but many did not.

The only other sizeable group to lose ground during the war, romantically, were home-front men deemed “slackers.” Urged by patriotic organizations and individuals to shun men who avoided doing their bit, and influenced by their own burning patriotism, most Canadian women made it clear that they wanted nothing to do with “shirkers,” that such so-called “men” were unworthy of their attentions or affections.¹⁴⁴ For many women who wrote to the personal columns, a slacker was a man not in uniform, and they cheered the uncompromising views of B.C.’s “Francisco”:

If any soldier boy or anyone who in the near future intends wearing the ‘khaki’ should chance to see this letter and feel that a letter occasionally from me while doing their duty for King and Country might cheer them up, I shall be glad to write them. But no one who is not or does not intend being a soldier need write, as I have neither time nor inclination to write to them.¹⁴⁵

“Pocahontas” from the prairies was just as adamant: “I would not be seen with a civilian unless he wore the rejection button or had a reasonable excuse for being here.”¹⁴⁶

Such attitudes were widely shared – particularly among women with brothers at the front – and bachelors without uniforms felt the effect. “We read many letters on your page about young ladies telling boys they ought to be at the front,” wrote one luckless B.C. bachelor. “I have been told this more than once, and many of my old [girl]friends have quit writing because I have not gone.”¹⁴⁷ Many others complained, often bitterly, that women were discriminating against them because they were not in uniform. “I think some of the girls are very unfair to those that are left at home,” wrote “Sunny Joe,” a heartbroken farmer from New Brunswick.

We have no chance where there are soldiers around. The soldiers will get the girls every time. I have had some experience

in that line myself. There was one I would have started my life on. We were engaged to be married in a short time but she was taken by a uniform. So now it is all off. I try to keep up heart but it is pretty hard.¹⁴⁸

Many of these men were western farmers and ranchers, the same individuals women had applauded (and desired) before the war for their patriotism as nation-builders. The new state of affairs must have been devastating to them. As western bachelors they continued to face many liabilities, and now Canadians were accusing them of disloyalty, cowardice, and profiteering. Once again, the “Western Man” was on the defensive.¹⁴⁹

Of course, not all women drew the line at men in uniform. Many, especially in rural areas, knew full well that farmers and ranchers were serving the war effort and did not deserve to be called slackers. “It is ridiculous,” wrote Manitoba’s aptly named “Spitfire,” in her defence of these “soldiers of the soil,”

for some girls to say they would not be seen with a civilian and ‘He ought to be wearing khaki.’ Of course, there are exceptions, but there ought to be a decided difference made between the boys and men doing their bit on the farm and the real ‘shirker.’ Boys under twenty-one (I think) are physically unfit and are better at home helping the Empire here.... [The] Allies have to be fed, and is it not our farmers who are doing it?¹⁵⁰

Other women argued that men had other legitimate reasons for not enlisting, like a physical disability or having to care for dependent parents and siblings.

One thing all women agreed on, however, was that the man who did absolutely *nothing* for the war effort was truly the most objectionable. “The real slackers,” declared another outspoken Manitoban, “are the idle loafers who hang around the towns and attend all the ball games and hockey matches and try to win the affections of some girl whose soldier-boy has left all to go and fight.... For them I have nothing but contempt.”¹⁵¹ As a result, any physically fit bachelor thought to be shirking his duty found himself at a distinct disadvantage. If he had a girlfriend or fiancée, he lost esteem in her eyes, if not worse, and, if unattached, he was deprived of female company and correspondence. He could not appear at social functions

or public amusements without women asking “Why are you not at the war?” He could not even walk down the street without receiving their cold stares and shoulders. “I was coming home from work a few days ago,” wrote a returned soldier from Ontario, “and met a lassie coming in the opposite direction. She wore a badge so I could see that she had some dear one overseas, but the way she looked at me seemed to say: ‘You’re a slacker.’ Tonight we met again, and this time I had a service button, and you would have smiled to see her changed expression.”¹⁵²

Aware, as always, of the romantic calculus of the moment, bachelors writing to the personal columns – and no doubt *most* bachelors – responded to the situation by either playing up their wartime service or emphasizing their intention to enlist soon (“after the harvest,” for instance). And if they were *not* in uniform they defended themselves against charges that they were shirkers and pleaded with women to understand.¹⁵³ It is remarkable, in fact, just how much a man’s romantic success in these years depended on his patriotism – how the ideal man came to be defined so narrowly. But it was, and men who failed to measure up suffered accordingly.

The foregoing list of romantic casualties is not exhaustive. It excludes several groups we know little about. What about *female* shirkers, for example? Did men shun women who did not appear to be doing their bit or, even worse, who refused to give up their extravagant, “frivolous” ways while others were making sacrifices? Commenting on the fashions of some women in his prairie town – large feathered hats, tightly laced dresses, high heels – one man asked *Prim Rose* readers, “Is it civilized to dress up in this kind of garb? Where is the old-fashioned girl with the good, plain ideas of dress?”¹⁵⁴ “Who are the real shirkers?,” asked another. “I have heard some of my girl friends discussing the ‘boys at home,’ and condemning them for not enlisting, while they, themselves, are simply worrying over styles and fashions; they simply couldn’t find time to knit a pair of socks for their friends who are already fighting.”¹⁵⁵

And how did the war affect the romantic prospects of Canada’s many veterans? How many relationships were pre-empted, cut short, or strained by the physical and emotional disabilities many soldiers incurred overseas, or by the drinking problems some developed? Did eligible women come to see soldiers differently once stories of their heavy drinking, smoking, and gambling began making their way back to the home front? How did the legendary restlessness of veterans affect their desire and ability to hold down a steady job and “settle down” to married life? And what about their

awful memories of the war? “I knew that whatever fortune was to befall me in my efforts to re-establish myself in civilian life,” recalled one veteran, “the burden of memories which the past years had imposed upon me, could never again be dropped.”¹⁵⁶ Did such memories, along with the irritability and impatience they produced, affect their romantic relationships? These are intriguing questions, the answers to which await further research.

More certain is the war’s impact on other groups and on romance generally. This impact was substantial. The heavy demands of war separated thousands of men and women for up to four years and left them with little time to pursue or enjoy one another. This was one of the hard realities of total war. To most Canadians, however, it mattered little, for they were willing to put matters of the heart behind them for the time being. After all, larger issues were at stake – the Empire, freedom, civilization itself. And so, men marched willingly off to war, with their sweethearts’ blessings and encouragement; soldiers and civilians gave less thought to romance; patriots urged Canadians to devote their energies to war rather than romance; and some demanded an end to romance altogether, until victory was secure. Welcome or not, these developments amounted to a withering of romance for the years 1914 to 1918.

But the effects of war are never even, and so it was with romance as well; within the context of romantic decline, some Canadians won and some lost. Patriotic bachelors facing less competition at home; single women near training camps or entering the work force; soldiers and nurses on leave and in hospitals – these Canadians did better than most. Women with men overseas; couples separated by time and space; and men on the home front deemed slackers – these individuals, and possibly others, lost out.

Whichever side of the ledger they had ended up on, however, most citizens welcomed the return of peace as a chance to resume their love lives. With the signing of the Armistice, thoughts on both sides of the Atlantic turned quickly to romance. Soldiers made bets on how long it would take before they married. Couples spoke about their plans for the future. And soldiers like Private Blom, writing from France, imagined what it would be like seeing their “girls” again:

I am just coming out of the train now and I have seen a little girl who is looking around for me on the platform – and I am going to give her one long kiss and then hurry my baggage into a taxi so that we can get away to a place where we can be

alone... And then I will take you in my arms and you will put your arms round my neck and I will hold you very tight and look into your eyes ... and I will put my lips to yours and close my eyes and I will stay like that.¹⁵⁷

With the return of Canada's soldiers and nurses to Canadian soil, old relationships resumed, long-deferred weddings were celebrated, and new relationships – some begun by correspondence during the war – flourished. Romance may have been a casualty of the Great War, but the patient seems to have recovered quickly.