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Canadians in the Manichean Universe of War: The Novels of Ralph Connor

Abstract

The purpose of my article is an analysis of two war novels by Canadian best-selling author Charles W. Gordon, known to his readers under the pseudonym of Ralph Connor (1830-1937): *The Major* (1917) and *The Sky Pilot in No Man's Land* (1919). At the age of fifty-four, Connor was sent to the front as a preacher; only a fourth of his battalion survived, which made him determined to support the cause of the Empire in North America. His sentimental romances were written to support the war effort (*The Major*) or consolidate the myth of Canada's valorous sacrifice in the Great War (*The Sky Pilot in No Man's Land*).

In my interpretation, I intend to show how in *The Major* Connor uses Manichean dichotomies to oppose the Allies to German characters; as a result, the Great War is represented in this novel as a defence of Christianity and European civilization. Love relationships in the novel serve, additionally, to depict the binary opposition between the noble British and Canadian characters and the corrupted and aggressive German ones. Larry Gwynne, the hero of the novel, is a Quaker, opposed to violence and bloodshed, yet, in spite of his initial opposition to military conflict, he eventually supports the Sacred Cause. *The Sky Pilot in No Man's Land* in turn depicts Canadians competing to send money, resources, and soldiers to Europe when the war is declared. Connor's volunteers are only motivated by the desire to defend the Motherland - Britain; he fails to mention such factors as unemployment that, as we know today, had a huge impact on enlistment in Canada. The central protagonist, in spite of his physical weakness, joins the Canadian Corps at the front. In the portrait of Barry Dunbar, Connor refers to the concept of muscular Christianity, an ideal of physical and religious discipline, fusing honour, courage and manhood with a modernised conception of Christian love, responsibility and sacrifice, which was key to his earlier success. Barry is a charismatic preacher, who teaches the soldiers in his battalion to die peacefully for the sake of God and the Empire. Death in the war, represented as a sacred crusade, is the ultimate sacrifice Canadian soldiers, Christ-like, are eager to face, confident about the righteousness of the Holy Cause and their own immortality. In conclusion, I demonstrate, how, using nineteenth-century aesthetic models, Connor created the model of the Great War novel in Canada.

Keywords

Great War, Canada, Manichean, muscular Christianity, propaganda

Cover Page Footnote

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Canadians in the Manichean Universe of War: The Novels of Ralph Connor

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At the outbreak of the Great War, the Dominion of Canada joined the conflict immediately after Great Britain. August of 1914 united the Canadians, as thousands of men volunteered for the European front in spite of ethnic, social, religious, and political differences (Vance, *Death* 227-28). The familial, cultural, economic, and military ties with Mother Britain were still strong, but the imperial enthusiasm was “also premised upon the notion of demonstrating national qualities, gaining respect, and thus rising in status within the Empire” (Keshen 4). Consequently, as Jonathan F. Vance contends, the war awakened both Canadian nationalism and imperialism; intense national pride in Canadian achievements “remained within the context of the Empire” (*Maple* 65). A more mundane cause of the massive enlistment was unemployment among European immigrants: the war therefore provided a solution to the economic crisis (Morton, *Fight* 23; Cook 410). Gradually, however, and in spite of the chief censor’s efforts, news of European carnage reached Canada and the number of volunteers decreased, which forced the government to introduce conscription in May 1917 (Morton, *A Short* 172). By 1918, 619,636 Canadians had been recruited out of a nation of eight million. Sixty thousand were killed in action and more than 150,000 were seriously injured (Godefroy 169-173). Among the many victories of the Canadian Corps, the capture of the supposedly impregnable Vimy Ridge on April 9, 1917 gained momentous importance as a foundational battle, during which the four Canadian divisions fought together for the first time, and proved that Canada was not only a dominion at the service of the British Empire, but an independent nation (Vance, *Maple* 103).

The propaganda campaign in Canada, so distant from the front, was “extremely effective in moulding opinions through indoctrination and deception” (Webb 46). Propagandists presented the war as a chivalric adventure, a test of manhood, a learning lesson. They also painted it in Manichean terms, as a sacred mission in defense of Christianity, democracy, and Western civilization against the brutal hordes of the uncivilized Huns, led by the Beast of Berlin. Enforced by Canada’s War Measures Act, passed on August 22, 1914, censorship was harsher in Canada than in England. The chief censor, Lieutenant-Colonel Ernest J. Chambers, claimed that the Canadians were more vulnerable to news from the battlefields than the British; stories accepted by British censors were often banned in Canada. Journalists focused therefore on Canadian victories, avoiding gruesome details and depicting instead heroic Canadian soldiers motivated by the highest of ideals, happy and proud of their sacrifice for the righteous cause (Berton 162-64). The war was seen as a source of national regeneration that eliminated elements of dissent and discord and cemented the unity of Canadian peoples (Vance, *Death* 227). The enormous losses sustained by the Canadians were not meaningless. In contrast

to the British futility myth (see Hynes), the memory of the Great War in Canada has not been “only of muddy trenches and massive death but also of gallant men scaling the heights at Vimy Ridge . . . and thus producing the emotional/sentimental foundations of nationhood” (Keshen 20).

Unlike in Britain, where many eminent writers were employed by the War Propaganda Bureau, Reverend Charles W. Gordon (1860-1937), known to his readers under the *nom de plume* of Ralph Connor, was the only Canadian writer hired by the Canadian government in the middle of 1916 to enlist support for the war.¹ He was the son of a Highlander missionary of the Free Church of Scotland who immigrated to Canada in 1853. Gordon was raised in Glengarry County, Ontario and attended a pine log school. Having studied theology, Classics, and English at the University of Toronto, he was ordained as a Presbyterian minister in 1890. He spent three years on a mission, ministering in the mining and logging camps of Alberta, and in 1894 was moved to St. Stephen’s Church in Winnipeg. Throughout his life, he was a social reformer who preached to loggers, miners, and ranchers; helped immigrant communities; and got involved in the battle for prohibition as well as in industrial arbitration.² Deeply influenced by famous Scottish evangelist Henry Drummond, British and American religious fiction, as well as the adventure stories of Jack London, Rudyard Kipling, and Rider Haggard, he published twenty-three novels, largely based on his own experience. At the turn of the century, Connor became Canada’s best-selling novelist, famous for his warm, didactic evangelicalism, dramatic realism, and his evocation of the frontier experience in the Canadian West (Novak 11-13; Wilson 1-25; Lennox 4-8). According to John Lennox, “The West was the setting which fused faith and action, and which rapidly made ‘Ralph Connor’ a publishing phenomenon” (24). His “escapist romances” (Mack 149), combining gripping adventures with a progressive, Christian reform spirit, and an atmosphere of intense emotions, created the illusion that it was possible to preserve old values in a new industrial society. This optimistic vision and the author’s modernized faith were enthusiastically embraced by readers in Canada and elsewhere, who often placed Connor’s books next to the Bible on their bookshelves (see Mack; Karr 89). As Keith Wilson suggests, “To today’s readers, many of Gordon’s novels seem stilted, with the plots melodramatic, the characters stereotyped and the moral messages overpowering; but these very qualities were those which appealed to the readers of his own day” (30). The sales of Connor’s first three novels, *Black Rock* (1898), *The Sky Pilot* (1899), and *The Man from Glengarry* (1901), are estimated at five million copies, while total sales during his lifetime reached thirty million (Mack 140; Lennox 16; Wilson 30). Connor lost his popularity only in the decade after the Great War—his vision of Canada proving untenable—yet for a generation his success was a model to emulate (Karr 93; Lennox 41).

Connor was fifty-three at the outbreak of the First World War, yet he enlisted with the 79th Highlanders of Winnipeg and sailed to Europe with the rank of captain in May 1915. As Chaplain to the 3rd Division, he was present at

the Ypres Salient and at the Somme, where, on October 7, 1916, his battalion suffered huge losses. He then returned to Canada to look after financial affairs and spent the following years campaigning in support of the war (Novak 13; Wilson 33-36). He addressed audiences at public meetings in many Canadian cities, where he spoke in support of recruitment, and in the United States, where he attempted to encourage the Americans to join the war effort. According to Peter Webb,

Connor's wartime speeches were extremely well attended and covered extensively in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and the *Toronto Globe*. It would be difficult to overestimate the public impact, in an age before mass media, of a speaker and popular author able to evoke the scent of battle by way of ensuring listeners and readers anxious about a costly and deadly war that victory was forthcoming. (39)

Although Connor was a radical propagandist, as Lennox contends, "in his response to the war there was something much more than patriotism," for he sincerely believed "in the idealism that was at the root of the Allied cause" (45). The ideas he presented in two novels written while he was working for the government, *The Major* (1917) and *The Sky Pilot in No Man's Land* (1919), were consistent with his propaganda work (Novak 11). *The Major*, published to counteract declining enlistment (Novak 13; Buitenhuis 153), was a bestseller in Canada, "ranking fifth in 1917 and third in 1918" (Lennox 41); both novels were best-sellers in the United States (Karr 92).

The Major (hereafter abbreviated *M*) is an example of the "propaganda of damnation" which presented the Germans as pre-modern barbarians and tyrants intolerant of human liberty (Cooperman 23-24).³ Connor uses here simplistic Manichean dichotomies to convey strong anti-German ideas. The antagonism between Britain and Germany is vividly illustrated in a subplot of the novel. Kathleen, the sister of the hero, Larry Gwynn, has two suitors: a "German-American" (*M* 65), Ernest Switzer, and an Englishman, Jack Romaine. Although at the beginning of the novel, Kathleen seems to be fond of Ernest, a handsome, educated, and industrious young man, her feelings change soon and she falls in love with Jack. The Englishman, who used to work for the Diplomatic Service, is famous for his courage during the Boer War. He also spent much time in Germany, where he acquired a profound distaste of the Germans and, after a diplomatic breach, has come to Alberta to visit his sister. Jack develops a Manichean conception of the German "race," claiming that the Germans are endowed with a different mind and are devoid of ethical values. In his opinion, they do not aspire to peace and, because of their autocratic spirit, it is not possible to negotiate with them. While Jack has proven his valor fighting for the Empire, Ernest Switzer, who might have been Canadian in the past, became "terribly German and terribly military, heel clicking, ramrod back, and all that sort of things" after his studies in Germany (*M* 65). Although he has just

met him, Jack quickly forms the opinion that Ernest is like all the other young Germans; he finds in him all the pejorative features stereotypically associated with German militarism: “the same arrogant self-assertion, the same brutal disregard of the ordinary decencies” (*M* 74). The individual’s features thus fuse with the general evil of the German “race.” When Jack’s sister tries to defend Ernest, claiming that in Canada all nationalities “shake down into good Canadian citizens” (*M* 74), Jack remarks that this might be true of every nation with the exception of the Germans. He is proven right when Ernest’s treacherous plan to sabotage an Albertan mine with other German laborers is revealed. The approaching war is thus constructed as “a conflict between light and dark,” the British being the “bearers of political and social morality” (Novak 21), while the Germans are represented as the antithesis of civilization and a subhuman race.

The conflict between Ernest and Jack is also ideological and involves eugenic and imperial antagonisms. To demonstrate that Germany is dangerous, during a public assembly Jack reads extracts from a German book whose author claims that it is the Germans’ duty to control other—inferior—nations and thus civilize the world. Ernest in turn expresses his admiration for Germany, claiming that its prosperity, industry, and social development cannot be compared to any other country in the world. In Jack’s view, the Germans have the right to believe that they are the best nation in the world; however, they should not try to impose this idea on others. He agrees that Germany is a perfectly organized nation in terms of farming, industry, education, and trade, yet the goal hidden behind this perfect organization is war with the rest of Europe and above all with the British Empire. Ernest replies scornfully that the British Empire will fall to pieces during the first battle and Great Britain will have to return the countries that it has unlawfully stolen. This last argument makes him lose the respect of all his neighbors, for they believe that “nothing in the world from the outside can ever break the bonds that hold Canada to the Empire” (*M* 94).

The barbarity of the Germans is also illustrated by means of gender violence, which echoes the sexual atrocities utilized by the Allies as a propaganda resource (see Cooperman 25). Jack is deeply offended by the way the Germans treat women, in contrast to English gentlemen. Dorothea, Ernest’s sister, is afraid that Ernest might marry Kathleen, for she herself has been physically abused by her brother. While Larry treats his mother with love and reverence, Ernest expects his mother to serve him like a slave. The brutality of the Teutonic beasts is confirmed when Ernest assaults Kathleen, covering her with kisses in a moment of unrequited passion. Rejected by the young woman, having learned that she has got engaged to Jack, he swears revenge on “this schwein [sic] of an Englishman” (*M* 159). His fury transforms his facial features so radically that the narrator compares him to a wild dog. This animalization of the German protagonist is again proof of his beastly nature, which becomes evident in his confrontation with the noble Englishman.

Connor uses the figure of Larry Gwynn to show the evolution of the Canadians' attitude to war. The hero of *The Major* is a Quaker, who refuses to participate in war at the beginning of the novel because of the Sixth Commandment "Thou shalt not kill." He believes that the British common sense will not allow them to become involved in a "Mid-European quarrel" (*M* 228). He is also convinced that "we Canadians, peaceful and peace-loving," are too busy to get involved in a foolish war (*M* 179). At the outbreak of the war, Connor depicts Canadians occupied in fields and factories, on lakes and rivers, in forests and mines, thus highlighting "the contrast between a militarized Europe and a pacific Canada" (Vance, *Death* 140). However, Larry is shocked by the news of the invasion of Belgium, and the alleged atrocities committed by the Germans on civilians, which were trumpeted by propaganda and confirmed by the Bryce Report, enrage him.⁴ Larry's ethical code, like all Canadians', is altered now: "Dear as life was, there were things infinitely more precious to mankind, and these things were in peril" (*M* 219). For every human being in Canada, war must become a priority. Connor depicts Canadians "of all races and creeds" pledging loyalty to the Empire, ready to surrender their lives to a higher cause (*M* 219). As Dagmar Novak suggests, "In reconciling war with Christian pacifism, Larry displays the same sense of maturity and resolve which Canada must demonstrate in seeing the war to its end" (14).

In *The Major*, the conflict is depicted as a justified war in defense of Western civilization, justice, and humanity, yet the attachment to Mother Britain also appears to be an important motive to enlist. During Larry's stay in Chicago, Connor stages several heated arguments in which Canada's ultra-loyalty to Britain is presented as a source of superiority over the United States. Moreover, Larry's relationship with his mother, which is exceptionally strong and harmonious, gains a metaphorical meaning. His mother teaches him how to defend what he believes to be right. Her strength plays a major role in forming his character. Importantly, her pacifist ideas change in the course of the novel, which deeply affects her son. As Vance emphasizes, in Canadian war culture the son's "devotion to his mother extended into devotion to his country and symbolized the devotion of Canada to Britain" (*Death* 147). Finally, Larry is deeply impressed by his English brother-in-law's heroic attitude and ultimate sacrifice. At the outbreak of hostilities, Jack returns with his regiment to Europe and, encouraged by his beloved wife, enlists with his father and brothers; his sister works for the Red Cross and the family mansion is turned into a hospital. Soon, Jack is killed in action and he becomes a role model for Larry, who comes back to Canada and decides to enlist. The novel closes when Larry, having been promoted to major, leaves with his wife for Europe.

Significantly, the racial prejudice that fills the pages of Connor's novel is finally accepted by Larry himself. Although he still loathes the war, he believes that it is his duty to fight the Germans, having apparently espoused his brother-in-law's racial convictions: "the sooner that cursed race is wiped off the face of the earth the better," he declares (*M* 244). The horror that he feels at the loss of Belgian lives and his cold assent to the annihilation of the German nation

show that within the operative frameworks of war “we imagine that our existence is bound up with others . . . who conform to certain culturally specific notions about what the culturally recognizable human is” (Butler 42). Larry’s reaction proves that in times of war certain lives are not conceptualized as lives; violence against these creatures only confirms the conceptual dehumanization of the barbarian race. Larry’s acceptance of the radical ideas spread by propaganda is shocking to the reader—this humanitarian, vulnerable young man, who thus far had approached human life as sacred, comes to the conclusion that war is justified and desirable. He talks about the war with a “Righteous coldness [which] is not only what it takes to kill, but also what is required to look on the destruction of life with moral satisfaction, even moral triumph” (Butler xxiv). As a result, *The Major* might appear as “a recruitment speech in novel form” (Webb 39); nevertheless, it should be emphasized that in contrast to us today, Connor considered the use of propaganda justified. He “understood war to be a temporally and geographically limited phenomenon in which specific objectives—expulsion of one belligerent nation from the borders of another, reinforcement of universal values of human civility, restoration of justice and trade among diplomatically connected nation states—were both achievable and clear” (Webb 43). Yet, if readers a hundred years ago were convinced by Connor’s Manichean visions, to the twenty-first century reader *The Major* proves that “violence in the name of civilization reveals its own barbarism even as it “justifies” its own violence by presuming the barbaric subhumanity of the other against whom that violence is waged” (Butler 93).

In *The Sky Pilot in No Man’s Land* (hereafter abbreviated *S*) Connor refers in turn to the concept of muscular Christianity, an ideal of physical and religious discipline, fusing honor, courage, and manhood with a modernized conception of Christian love, responsibility, and sacrifice, which was key to his earlier success.⁵ According to Daniel Coleman, “The figure of the muscular Christian, with his untiring and virile physical body balanced by his spiritually sensitive heart, made a perfect representation of the ideal Canadian who could carry out the hard physical work of territorial expansion, as well as the equally important social work of building a new civil society” (Coleman 129). Charles Kingsley’s idea that manliness, stifled in the pleasure-oriented England, could be regained in the colonies (Więckowska 125), appealed to Canadian imperialists eager to construct “a sea-to-sea dominion” (Coleman 137). The muscular Christian Canadian’s endurance and piety differentiated him from his British ancestors and the American capitalists. His physical strength prepared him to wage battle with the forces of nature, while his piety and moral conviction fueled his social activism (Coleman 128-67). Consequently, the ethos of the masculine Christian seemed a perfect representation of Canadian masculine hegemony at the turn of the twentieth century and “was fundamental to the establishment of the British Protestant ethnic norm in Canada” (Coleman 130).

In the portrait of Barry Dunbar, Connor uses the hyperbole of the muscular Christian, based on “an association between physical strength,

religious certainty, and the ability to shape and control the world around oneself” (Hall 7). Although Barry suffers from asthma, he loves sports of all kinds and spends time outdoors. His outstanding physical agility allows him to take part in long outings in the woods, to save a drowning man, and to wrestle his father for fun. Connor uses “the myth of the West as the testing ground of true manhood” (Lennox 42), depicting his protagonist confronting Canadian wilderness; hiking, canoeing, and swimming are linked in the novel “with ‘self’-construction and a physical armor-plating to withstand various potential threats to religious belief, bodily health, and social stability” (Hall 7-8). What is more, Barry is a handsome, slim, and athletic young man, compared to an Apollo due to his “perfectly modelled body” (S 9). Yet, the perfection of body is only a mirror to the nobility of his spirit: “His face was beautiful with the beauty of his features, clean cut and strong, but more with the beauty of a clear, candid soul. He seemed to radiate an atmosphere of cheery good nature and unspoiled simplicity” (S 15). Moreover, as a true muscular Christian, he uses his masculine strength for higher purposes, working as a missionary with pioneers in the Canadian West. Barry knows that he is not a good preacher, yet, although his sermons are boring for his congregation, he is sincerely devoted to them. He spreads Christian values among tough laborers in the wilderness and has reformed several alcoholics and degenerates. At the beginning of the novel, his existence by the side of his beloved father is depicted as a life of harmony, simple moral choices, and self-discipline. He is a courageous man of action, yet generous, pure, and vulnerable.

The news of the outbreak of the war reaches Barry during an expedition in the Canadian backwoods, a motif that, according to Vance, recurs in Canadian remembrance of the Great War. With a group of men, Barry explores the woods by canoe, enjoying the Golden Summer of August 1914; they are “isolated from civilization for some time and . . . blissfully unaware of the coming tragedy as they commune with nature” (*Death* 138). The wilderness motif reinforces the image of “the Canadian soldier as a child of nature in harmony with his environment,” little interested “in the standing armies and power struggles that preoccupied Europe” (Vance, *Death* 140). Barry immediately decides to come back to Edmonton to enlist, believing that since his country has joined the war he should also fight “against the German hordes” (S 95). He covers hundreds of miles quickly along with other men equally as enthusiastic as him, for they all want to be part of the first Canadian contingent sent to Europe. Connor thus creates a vision of Canadian children of nature hurrying to help the Empire. His characters are “pure and rugged backwoodsmen” who have spent their lives “far from the stultifying influence of city and university,” an image popularized by propaganda (Vance, *Death* 159).⁶ These noble figures, determined to fight in the righteous cause, are contrasted with American businessmen who cannot understand their passionate interest in a remote British war.

In *The Sky Pilot in No Man’s Land*, the male body is used as a metaphor for both national and imperial unity. All of Canada, from Vancouver to Halifax,

is eager to contribute to the war, offering horses and oats to the imperial army and recruiting thousands of volunteers (S 99). In Edmonton crowds of men attempt to enlist, using their connections, lest the war should be over before they reach Europe. On the one hand, Barry can be seen as a personification of Canada; his youth parallels the youth of the nation (Vance, *Death* 147). When the young man meets Paula, a ravishing American, in the woods, he describes his young nation in eulogizing terms. He emphasizes that, although it is a small nation, the future belongs to Canada, drawing Paula's attention to its natural resources as well as its economic and industrial potential. The educational standards, legal system, civil liberties, religious privileges, but above all the Canadians' "character and *morale*" are the "foundations of a great nation" (S 21). Yet, on the other hand, Barry's true allegiance is to Mother Britain. Like other Canadians, he sees nothing heroic in his desire to defend Britain and the Empire; he considers it his natural duty (S 142). Although Canadians are not all from Britain, they are all British (S 141). Importantly, however, in *The Sky Pilot in No Man's Land*, the relationship is more equal than the parent/child bond in *The Major*; each nation has "unique attributes—the youthful vigour of Canada, the sage experience of Britain"—can be combined to "constitute a formidable force . . . the foundation of the British Empire" (Vance, *Maple* 2). In *The Sky Pilot in No Man's Land* the Canadian attitude is representative of millions of men in the Empire:

"And now for the march," said Barry, who seemed almost to assume command. Then removing his hat and lifting high his hand, he said in a voice thrilling with solemn reverence, "God grant victory to the right! God save the king!"

Instinctively, the men took off their hats and stood with bared and bent heads, as if sharing in a solemn ritual. They stood with millions upon millions of their kin in the old mother lands, and scattered wide upon the seas, stood with many millions more of peoples and nations, pledging to this same cause of right, life and love and all they held dear, and with hearts open to that all-searching eye, praying that same prayer, "God grant victory to the right. Amen and amen. We ask no other." Then they faced to their hundred miles' trek *en route* to the war. (S 84)

Connor's muscular Christians are therefore ready to sacrifice their lives for Canada, Britain, and the Empire. The imperialist creed is subtly sustained in the novel. Connor demonstrates that "[t]he children of Mother Britain have been scattered around the globe yet remain tied to England by bonds stronger than steel" (Vance, *Death* 150). When Canadian volunteers arrive in the Mother Country, so tiny in comparison with the Dominion, in spite of its "toy landscapes," England appears to them as "something mightier than they had ever known" (S 144).

According to David Rosen, "overt forms of muscular Christianity have been institutionalized on both sides of the Atlantic in attitudes towards the war"

(38). For Barry and his father, the transition from athlete to soldier is easy and swift. The suspicion that one of them could doubt the righteousness of the cause creates a temporary disarray in their otherwise harmonious relationship. Having learned, however, that both desire to defend Mother Britain with all their hearts, father and son are happier than ever, facing the war without fear, “as men” do (S 102). In spite of his age, Richard Dunbar joins the army as a sergeant major. Barry, however, is deeply disappointed to learn that, because of a heart murmur caused by asthma, he is pronounced unfit for service. Instead, he is offered the position of an army chaplain in a battalion of light infantry. Although he is dismayed by the loftiness of the task, he accepts this noble function. It is in Christianity that Barry finds a profound meaning in war. In his first sermon to assembled soldiers and families at the final church parade, he highlights the magnanimity of offering their bodies to God and their country in simple and moving words: “It is a war of souls, but the method of settlement is not that of reason but that of force—a force that finds expression through your bodies. . . . Offer your bodies—these living bodies—these sacred bodies—offer them in sacrifice to God” (S 110). For Connor, the body thus becomes the vehicle of a spiritual force in a sacred crusade. The allusion to Christ’s crucifixion in this sacramental vision offers consolation, as well as the promise of redemption and resurrection. According to Vance, Canadian soldiers often identified themselves with the figure of Jesus, “a fellow sufferer whose agonies could be a source of strength and comfort” (*Death* 72). They thus became soldiers *for* Christ and, in the view of non-combatants, Christ himself (Vance, *Death* 39): “The soldier’s suffering represented Christ’s; the sacrifice of the infantryman became one with the sacrifice of the lamb of God in atoning for the sins of the world” (Vance, *Death* 40). In *The Sky Pilot in No Man’s Land*, Barry also appeals to the soldiers’ families to help the sacred cause with their patience and acceptance of sacrifice. As a result, the recruits feel proud and exalted by a solemn sense of duty, whereas the women, who feared the moment of separation, grow stronger and ready to endure the pain of loss (S 111).⁷

The war rekindles Barry’s faith and causes him to change his attitude to his role as the battalion’s chaplain. Curiously, at the beginning of his mission he fails to gain his men’s trust. His uncompromising attitude to the consumption of alcohol and censorious disapproval of profanities isolate him from both officers and privates. He acts as “a moral policeman” (S189), “the stereotype of the padre who ministered to men’s morals rather than their souls” (Vance, *Death* 71), and becomes the object of ridicule and scorn. Gradually, however, Barry’s priorities change—he takes care of the soldiers’ food and comfort, provides them with entertainment by playing the violin and singing patriotic songs, and thus wins their hearts. He understands that by taking care of their bodies, with which they fight, he also protects their souls. In this sense, Connor’s hero must not only overcome external foes, but his own weakness, “conquering” himself (Dummitt 73-74). His devotion to justice and discipline is soon recognized by his superiors. Furthermore, his father’s death also functions for Barry as a catalyst of change. Dying in his son’s arms, Richard Dunbar confesses that he

felt scared and lonely during the attack; he asks his son to be less strict with the soldiers and to give them comfort in the moment of trial, reassuring them with their faith in God. His dying father's message causes a profound transformation and spiritual rebirth of the protagonist. A few months later, he is known as the "sky pilot" among his men, who treat him with respect and love. He is an authority figure to whom they confess their problems and spiritual dilemmas. Moral improvement and social reform are the muscular Christian's important goals in peacetime, yet on the front it is more important to instill in men the love of Christ. Barry becomes a charismatic preacher who teaches the soldiers in his battalion to die peacefully for the sake of God and Empire. His manly potential is thus fulfilled in a humble way, yet the tenderness with which he treats his men is "a natural capacity of masculinity" (Rosen 32).

Barry is an exemplary muscular Christian who never abandons his post. His courage is outstanding: he brings comfort to the soldiers dying in No Man's Land and conducts funerals under artillery attacks. His comrades die one after the other; however, he forgets his own despair and exhaustion, while his sense of responsibility never falters. When the young chaplain is about to go on a well-deserved leave, the major expresses his admiration for him: "Remember that we all feel to-night that you are really one of us, and that we are better men because we have known you" (S 267). Having learned, however, that his battalion is to "go over the top" the next morning, Barry comes back to the front to assist his wounded and agonizing men. He refuses a position in a hospital behind the front lines and continues his work where he is most needed with serene detachment. Eventually, the protagonist dies during the Somme offensive, protecting an injured sergeant from shrapnel with his own body. His active experience of pain brings him closer to Christ. His last message for his men reinforces the Christian rhetoric of the novel: "God is good. Never be afraid but carry on" (S 343). If war has the power to transform men, it brings out what is best in them.

According to Coleman, the ideal of male sacrifice was proved to be absurd during the trench war, while the unprecedented carnage of Christians by Christians in civilized Europe undermined the authority of muscular Christianity dogma (159). Nevertheless, in Connor's novel, Barry is capable of imposing spiritual discipline on his muscular Christians who use their muscles in a constructive way—by killing Germans—instead of wasting them in self-destructive ways, such as alcohol and debauchery. Not a single soldier doubts the righteousness of the war's cause. The injured are more concerned with victory than their wounds; the dying are proud of their sacrifice for God, freedom, and justice. Vance claims that during the First World War, "[t]he ability to die smiling was assumed to be a general characteristic of Canadian soldiers" (*Death* 98). What is more, Connor shows that muscular Christians must help the cause with prayer, but also guns and action. The ideal of muscular Christianity allows him to combine contradictory elements; aggression and brutality never collide in the novel with the Christian values of the main protagonist. Violence thus "becomes a sanctified force of male behavior, a definitive quality of 'real' men" (Rosen 26). Fighting has divine sanction and

the soldiers' nobleness and loyalty are modeled on Christ's devotion to mankind. Through their wounds and death, they form a community of sacrifice (Vance, *Death* 41). Death in war, represented as a sacred crusade, is the ultimate sacrifice, which Canadian soldiers are eager to face, Christ-like and confident about the righteousness of the Holy Cause and their own immortality. As Vance suggests, this vision of the soldiers' union with Christ, promising salvation to the fallen, helped Canadians make sense of their enormous sacrifices (*Death* 44). Furthermore, not only does Connor stress the unity of the soldiers, who act as one body bound by their courage, Christian mission, and hatred for the Germans, but he also highlights the "homosocial character of useful work" (Więckowska 130). In contrast to later Canadian war novels, such as Charles Yale Harrison's *Generals Die in Bed* (1930), the staff in *The Sky Pilot in No Man's Land* show paternal concern and understanding to the privates, who treat them with respect, never questioning their wise decisions. Submitting themselves to their social superiors' guidance, they sustain the class hierarchy, an important characteristic of the ideology of muscular Christianity (see Hall 10). The bodies of muscular Christians in *The Sky Pilot in No Man's Land* function therefore as metaphors of religious unity, social harmony, and national integrity.

More complex and satisfying aesthetically than *The Major* (although not less sentimental), *The Sky Pilot in No Man's Land* shifts attention from the overt Germanophobia of Connor's first war novel to the plight of the Canadian soldier, represented in terms of Christian duty and sacrifice. Interestingly, one of the officials working for the chief press censor found the scenes of battle, drunkenness, and shell shock in *The Sky Pilot in No Man's Land* improper, "discreditable to Canadian troops," and "derogatory to Canadians" (Novak 46). The novel was also much less popular among Canadian readers.

Nevertheless, in *The Major* and *The Sky Pilot in No Man's Land* Connor set the basic formula for the war novel followed by other Canadian novelists, the most prominent of whom were William Benjamin Basil King, Bertrand Sinclair, and Lucy Maud Montgomery. The thirty Canadian novels about the First World War published by the middle of the 1920s are remarkably similar in tone and structure: "Rhetorical, romantic, idealistic, and national, they are written for an Anglo-Saxon, Protestant community which enthusiastically embraced the cause of the Allied war effort in 1914" (Novak 7). According to Novak, the early Canadian novels of the First World War, inspired by Connor's fiction, follow the convention of traditional romance. Set in remote, pre-industrial rural communities, they abound with idealized, virtuous heroes and heroines endowed with extraordinary courage and endurance. Central is also the device of Manichean polarization between light and dark, the world of good and evil: "the hero descends into a lower world where he battles against evil, then re-emerges victorious in life or in death" (Novak 29). His determination and glorious death provide a model for others to follow; if he returns home, "it is as a new man, dedicated to the creation of a better society based on a fresh set of values" (Novak 32). Like Connor's texts, this fiction uses the Christian rhetoric

of battle with the devil and the motif of sacrifice, portraying the war as a sacred crusade, an approach that reflects the opinions of most Canadians at the initial stages of the war. There is no space here for irony or the soldier's bitter disillusionment—to die for Canada and Britain is the ultimate privilege, while the notion of military glory is of little significance (Novak 21-48). The relation between the devilish Germans and the angelic soldiers of the British Empire is represented in terms of simplistic Manichean antagonism, as Canadian writers aim to prove “the absolute righteousness of the British cause” (Novak 21). Patriotism and religious idealism are the most important themes of this fiction, conveying a sense of triumph and heroism to enlist the Canadians' support for the war, whereas the portrayal of combat is of secondary importance (Novak 7-11). This literature might therefore be “ethically troubling and aesthetically displeasing reading by today's standards” (Webb 32), yet “to ignore these works is to overlook an important and uncomfortable aspect of the cultural history of modern war in Canada” (Webb 47). Importantly, early First World War novels in Canada maintained the illusions of their readers about the war and thus contributed to the formation of the Canadian myth of the Great War (see Vance, *Death*), which, in spite of the more realistic war novels published in the 1930s, dominated in Canadian culture till the 1970s.

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Notes

1. For a detailed discussion, see Buitenhuis. Gilbert Parker, another prominent Canadian writer, joined the War Propaganda Bureau at Wellington House (Webb 35).
2. Connor's desire to assimilate immigrants and the aboriginal population into a Christian, Anglo-Saxon culture might be understood as racist and reactionary today, yet it expressed the point of view of many Canadians at the turn of the twentieth century (Lennox 35). This might explain why, although Connor was Canada's most spectacularly successful novelist, most of his novels are out of print today. See Dummitt for an interesting discussion of Connor's ethics in the context of historical transformations in our attitudes towards morality.

3. The Allies' propagandists wrote more radical racial propaganda and disseminated it more systematically than their German counterparts (Cooperman 23; Tate 41).

4. As Buitenhuis points out, atrocity stories in Great War fiction often cause the main protagonist to abandon his pacifist or indifferent attitude (153). In the Canadian context, this is also true of Walter, one of the protagonists of Lucy Maud Montgomery's *Rilla of Ingleside*.

5. Often scornfully misunderstood as a synonym of brutal, hyper-masculine, "macho" behavior, muscular Christianity contains "a deep structure" that combines both the rougher and gentler aspects of masculine performance (Rosen 17-19). While it is true that the ethos of the muscular Christian developed in England in response to Victorian anxieties concerning class, gender, nation, and religion as a desperate, if idealistic, attempt to preserve the status quo, in their writings Thomas Carlyle, Charles Kingsley, and Thomas Hughes stressed the importance of morality as the foundation of true masculine strength (Hall 8-9). They thus combined virility with humbleness, pride with modesty, and endurance with tenderness, fusing physical perfection with the excellence of spirit. Importantly, influenced by the New Testament and Christ's model of sacrifice, these thinkers claimed that God gave men strong bodies to fight for justice and social progress (Coleman 134). In this way, they also translated the Medieval concept of chivalry, combining physical prowess with religious devotion, "into socially useful heroism, an important part of which was the rejection of indolence and irresponsibility, and endorsement of sympathy for the weak and unjustly wronged" (Więckowska 131). The "muscularity" of the Christian warrior therefore was not simply a superficial surface behavior, but a form of self-development for the sake of society and nation.

6. Propaganda disseminated romantic images of inhabitants of woods, mountains, or prairies who covered hundreds of kilometers to find the recruitment point. In reality, there were not many farmers, fishermen, loggers, or hunters among the volunteers, as the majority of them were manual workers and clerks (Vance, *Death* 161). Due to the efforts of the Canadian official press emissary, William Maxwell Aitken, later Lord Beaverbrook, the image of Canadians as a people toughened by a rough climate, and thus able to make substantial contributions to imperial campaigns, was strengthened during the war (see Keshen 3-8). I analyze these issues in detail in *Uraz przetrwania*.

7. Vance emphasizes that the image of Jesus-in-Khaki, a term coined by Stanley Cooperman in his discussion of American First World War fiction (Cooperman 18), was more important and elevated in Canada in view of the country's enormous losses. It persisted long after the war, crossing the boundaries of region, class, and generation and became central to Canada's memory of the Great War (*Death* 39-40).

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