

THE OBSERVER IN CANADIAN RETELLINGS OF THE GREAT WAR

“THIS IS ALL WE KNOW”:  
KNOWLEDGE, REMEMBRANCE, THE AFFIRMATION OF LIFE  
AND THE OBSERVER FIGURE  
IN THREE CANADIAN RETELLINGS OF THE GREAT WAR

By  
HEATHER DEBLING, B.A.

A Thesis  
Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree  
Master of Arts

McMaster University

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MASTER OF ARTS (2003)  
(English)

McMaster University  
Hamilton, Ontario

TITLE: “This is all we know”: Knowledge, Remembrance, the Affirmation of Life and  
the Observer Figure in Three Canadian Retellings of the Great War.

AUTHOR: Heather Debling, B.A. (York University)

SUPERVISOR: Professor A. Bishop

NUMBER OF PAGES: v, 96

## ABSTRACT

In recent years, many authors have written fictional recreations or retellings of the First World War. It is a subject that has generated a great deal of interest and inspired texts by a variety of British and Canadian authors, such as Pat Barker, Sebastian Faulks, Timothy Findley, R.H. Thomson and Jane Urquhart. In this thesis, I consider some of the narrative techniques employed in three Canadian retellings, particularly ways in which authors who do not have the “benefit” of lived experience establish their authority. The main focus of this thesis is a figure I am referring to as the Observer -- a character who is distanced (like the authors) by time and, in some cases, gender, but who embarks on a quest to know or recreate the lived war experience. Observer figures in *The Wars* (1977), *The Lost Boys* (2001) and *The Stone Carvers* (2001) illustrate how a journey into the past raises questions about how we know and remember the war, particularly in terms of the way combatant writing and official memorializing of the war have influenced later generations’ perceptions of it. Because each of these works incorporates, in some form or another, the research process, these authors draw attention to the difficulty of not only knowing or defining the past, but also of constructing it as a narrative. The Observers’ journeys end, not with a satisfying of their desire to know, but rather with a denial of that possibility. They move beyond this, however, and instead learn the importance of honouring the past and integrating its lessons into the present. Their journeys are ultimately journeys of self-discovery, and all the Observers gain, by the end of their quests, a greater appreciation of life itself.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are many people who assisted me in this process and to whom I owe a great deal of gratitude. First, I wish to thank my supervisor, Dr. Alan Bishop, for his time and commitment to my project. I am very grateful to my first reader, Dr. John Ferns, for his continued support and suggestions and to Dr. Roger Hyman for serving as my second reader. I also wish to thank Dr. Janet Lewis of York University for her suggestions on this project and for drawing my attention to several of the works involved while I was an undergraduate. I owe a great deal to Dr. Stuart Robson whose course at Trent University initially introduced me to the history of the First World War and allowed me to see, for the first time, the greater story.

I would like to thank R.H. Thomson for his time and enthusiasm for my project – and for the Observer’s perspective.

Finally, I dedicate this to Mom and Dad, without whom none of this would have been possible. Thank you for your love, your support and your patience, but above all thank you for not only allowing me, but encouraging me to embark on my own Observer’s quest.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	iii
Acknowledgements .....	iv
Introduction: The Observer Figure.....	1
Chapter Two: Knowledge and the Observer.....	20
Chapter Three: Remembrance, the Affirmation of Life and the Observer.....	64
Conclusion: “Lest We Forget” .....	86
Works Cited and Consulted .....	91

## INTRODUCTION: THE OBSERVER FIGURE

Much of what is considered prominent World War One literature is written by former combatants whose textual authority arises from their participation and personal knowledge. Autobiographical or fictional accounts written by combatants are often accepted as truth or reality because of their personal experience. There is, as Evelyn Copley states, “a lingering conviction, exemplified in Paul Fussell’s writing on the two World Wars and Vietnam, that any commentary on war has to be grounded in firsthand experience” (“Postmodernist War Fiction” 98). In terms of this relationship between actual lived experience and an author’s textual authority, I find of particular interest the ways in which contemporary authors who do not have the authority of firsthand experience depict the First World War and its effects in their works. The enduring popularity of the First World War as a subject can be seen in recent fictional treatments such as Timothy Findley’s *The Wars* (1977), Frank McGuinness’ *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* (1986), Pat Barker’s *Regeneration* trilogy (*Regeneration*, 1991; *The Eye in the Door*, 1993; *The Ghost Road*, 1995) and *Another World* (1998), Sebastian Faulks’ *Birdsong* (1993), Kevin Major’s *No Man’s Land* (1995), Jack Hodgkin’s *Broken Ground* (1998), R.H. Thomson’s *The Lost Boys* (2001) and Jane Urquhart’s *The Stone Carvers* (2001). These contemporary retellings reveal a continuing preoccupation with the war and, also with how it is understood, constructed and narrated.

“The truth of historical narrative,” Simone Vauthier notes in her article on narrative strategies in Findley’s *The Wars*, “is always the limited truth of re-interpretation,” and, therefore, these contemporary portrayals raise several questions about the way these authors approach the topic of the First World War (16). How do these authors establish their authority and what similarities do they share with the accounts of former combatants in their portrayals of the war? Do these works, that have been influenced by the writings of combatants, share a common myth or collective memory of the Great War in terms of “what it was like” and what it meant? Since means of expression about the truth of the experience eluded many who did participate, how do these contemporary authors find a way to express the sheer destruction and devastation of the First World War?

For many former combatants the most appropriate response to the war was silence.<sup>1</sup> Others, motivated by a desire to relate the truth of the war, commemorate fallen comrades and warn future generations, sought to share what occurred in memoirs, novels and poetry. Some combatants described, in a documentary style, their personal experiences, while others tried to separate or distance themselves by ‘fictionalizing’ their

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<sup>1</sup> In “Saying the Unsayable: Problems of Expression in Great War Fiction”, John Cruickshank discusses the “widespread and traditional view that the true soldier remains silent,” and how, for many, the “horrors they had witnessed were so terrible that they regarded silence as the only decent response” (66, 65). In *A War Imagined* (1990), Samuel Hynes discusses the lack of prose about the war during the ten years following it. Hynes says of the many war books that emerged between 1926 and 1933: “Why did these war books come when they did, to break the conspiracy of silence? . . . One might simply say . . . that the past takes its time in becoming history, and that in the case of the First World War ten years was the necessary gestation period. Or that the horrors of the war had to be distanced in time before they could merge into narrative shape and become a story. Or perhaps one might argue that it is only after the passage of years that recollection can become an act of exorcism” (424-425).



experiences.<sup>2</sup> Those who did wish to share their experiences or speak of the war faced many difficulties, but first and foremost was the obstacle of describing an experience that was deemed by many to be indescribable. Those who attempted to render the truth of the war experience discovered the limitations of language for the “impulse to ‘set down what can be remembered’ is complicated,” as Cobley comments in *Representing War*, “by the recognition that the horrors of mass slaughter were ultimately beyond words” (6).

Former combatants could describe, in great detail, the physical aspects of the experience, but the reality or truth they sought to convey was impossible for someone who had not personally experienced the war to fully comprehend. Edmund Blunden, for example, makes this distinction clear in his “Preliminary” to *Undertones of War* (1928):

WHY should I not write it?

I know that the experience to be sketched in it is very local, limited, incoherent; that it is almost useless, in the sense that no one will read it who is not already aware of all the intimations and discoveries in it, and many more, by reason of having gone the same journey? No one? Some, I am sure; but not many. *Neither will they understand* – that will not be all my fault. (vii)

Many of the most celebrated accounts of the war were published several years after its end, and, therefore, the combatants’ attempts to convey the truth or reality of the war were also complicated by the passing of time. Reflection and hindsight influence these views of the war and no matter how realistic former combatants’ writings seem, this documentary style is, as Cobley argues, not a “guarantee of factual accuracy” because the

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<sup>2</sup> Cobley in *Representing War* (1994) examines how narratives about the First World War are read and present themselves as “autobiographically grounded” and she points out that while “Autobiographies and memoirs seem to be overtly based on the eyewitness’s personal experiences,” the novels by former combatants “are invariably thought to be thinly disguised retellings of the author’s life” (73).

accounts are constructed and “hence open to distortion or ideological manipulation” (*Representing War* 33). They were written by human beings, susceptible to distortions of memory and with personal perceptions that would have been influenced by what occurred after the war as well as during it. Even though these former combatants faced many difficulties in expressing the war in their writings, silence for many was unacceptable because they felt the need to both remember and remind. For many, writing was seen “as a transgression, as a parasitic exploration of human suffering,” but “silence would have implied an equally guilty indifference towards ‘all those dead comrades’” (Cobley, *Representing War* 7). Former combatants wrote their accounts to tell the truth of the war and to warn future generations, but they also wrote to remember and pay tribute to all those who never returned.<sup>3</sup> Regardless of the difficulties former combatants faced in narrating their experiences, their compelling accounts of the Great War have influenced how future generations view it.<sup>4</sup>

Considering the difficulties faced by former combatants, how then do authors who lack the benefit of firsthand experience narrate the Great War? The portrayal of the war

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<sup>3</sup> Herbert Read in *A Coat of Many Colours* (1956) discusses the combatants’ desire to warn future generations: “Young writers who took part in the last war came back with one desire: to tell the truth about war, to expose its horrors, its inhumanity, its indignity. They knew that it was no good crying over spilt blood, no good trying to console themselves or their contemporaries. But at least they might warn the coming generations. ‘All a poet can do to-day is warn,’ wrote Wilfred Owen. ‘That is why the true Poets must be truthful’” (72).

<sup>4</sup> In *Postcards from the Trenches* (1996) Allyson Booth discusses the blank spaces in Wallace Stevens’ “A Postcard from the Volcano” and how that space emphasizes the distance between the past and the present, but the line she cites at the start of her book “And what we said of it became/A part of what it is” speaks very much to how what was written about the war by former combatants influenced how the war is viewed and remembered (2, 16-17).

in these contemporary retellings is very much influenced by the view of war put forth in the writings of former combatants. What they said the war was, created what Samuel Hynes terms the “Myth of the War,” and contemporary portrayals rely on this myth for their image of the war.<sup>5</sup> The Myth was established through the writings that began emerging in the 1920s and, as Hynes points out, “No generation since then has questioned its validity, and it remains the accepted interpretation of the war, repeated in texts written by authors who did not experience the war, but who inherited its myth” (x). Lacking the authority of firsthand experience, authors such as Pat Barker, Sebastian Faulks, Timothy Findley, R.H. Thomson and Jane Urquhart rely heavily on the image of the war presented in the memoirs, novels and poetry written by combatants for their descriptions of the war experience, and their works make it clear that they have “inherited” the myth of what the war was and what it became (Hynes x). The main purpose of their texts is not, however, the describing or re-describing of the war; these authors are much more concerned with the impact of that experience on future generations and they attempt, through the works, to continue the awareness of that experience for future generations.

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<sup>5</sup> Hynes describes the “Myth of the War” as “a generation of innocent young men, their heads full of high abstractions like Honour, Glory, and England, went off to war to make the world safe for democracy. They were slaughtered in stupid battles planned by stupid generals. Those who survived were shocked, disillusioned and embittered by their war experiences, and saw that their real enemies were not the Germans, but the old men at home who had lied to them. They rejected the values of the society that had sent them to war, and in doing so separated their own generation from the past and from their cultural inheritance” (x). This has become, Hynes argues, the accepted version of the war and it has its roots in the combatant accounts that began emerging in the 1920s that documented primarily the British experience of the war on the Western Front.

Why this continuing preoccupation with telling and re-telling stories of the Great War in fiction? There is, of course, a natural curiosity about the past, but there are many different pasts that these authors could have selected. There is, also, as discussed above, the influence of accounts written by former combatants. The view of the war presented in those writings (and the Myth that they helped establish) emphasizes the overwhelming impact of the Great War on the twentieth century and reveals a legacy that is, perhaps, still unclear and problematic. Even though much has been written about the First World War, there is a great deal that is not said and probably never will be said. This, Margaret Atwood suggests in *In Search of Alias Grace: On Writing Canadian Historical Fiction* (1996), is the attraction for novelists: “For it’s the very things that are not mentioned that inspire the most curiosity in us . . . The lure of the Canadian past, for the writers of my generation, has been partly the lure of the unmentionable – the mysterious, the buried, the forgotten, the discarded, the taboo” (19). She also writes:

As for novelists, it’s best if they confine themselves to the Ancient Mariner stories, that is, the stories that seize hold of them and torment them until they have grabbed a batch of unsuspecting Wedding Guests with their skinny hands, and held them with their glittering eyes or else their glittering prose, and told them a tale they cannot choose but hear. Such stories are not about this or that slice of the past, or this or that political or social event, or this or that city or country or nationality, although, of course, these may enter into it, and often do. They are about human nature, which usually means they are about pride, envy, avarice, lust, sloth, gluttony, and anger. They are about truth and lies, and disguises and revelations; they are about crime and punishment; they are about love and forgiveness and long-suffering and charity, they are about sin and retribution and sometimes even redemption. (38)

For authors of these contemporary retellings, it is stories associated with the First World War that “seize them and torment them” (Atwood 38). They tell stories that must be told

and stories that must be heard. They are not about what the past *was*, but what it *is* and how what we make of it inspires who we are and who we become.

Many British and Canadian retellings are concerned with the impact of the war on the present and this preoccupation is clear from the narrative structure of these works. Rather than simply setting their narrative in the war period, many of these authors divide their story between the past of the war and the present of someone who is looking back on or researching the war. The narrative in many retellings is focused on a character in the present (the text's present) who is very distanced from the lived experience of the war. This figure, whom I will be referring to as the Observer, is the focus of my thesis and I will be examining the narrative function of this figure in three contemporary Canadian portrayals of the Great War: *The Wars* by Timothy Findley, *The Lost Boys* by R.H. Thomson and *The Stone Carvers* by Jane Urquhart. All three of these authors, I will argue, use the Observer to raise issues of knowledge, remembrance and narration. In each of these texts, the narrative is controlled by or focused on a character who, like the author, lacks firsthand experience as a result of being distanced from the war by time and, in the case of Urquhart's *The Stone Carvers*, by gender. This figure is very much a mirror for the author in this respect, and the Observer is a central narrative technique employed in all three texts to address the issue of firsthand knowledge. It is through the Observer that we, as readers, learn about the war in these retellings; all of these authors narrate the experience of the war through what the Observers learn about that experience. The Observer is a character who does not participate in the war, but who becomes

increasingly obsessed by a desire “to know.”<sup>6</sup> All three texts follow the journeys or quests of the Observers as they attempt to uncover the truth of the experience and submerge themselves in their own reconstructions of it. Even though there is an attempt by the Observer to get as close to the experience as possible, all three authors stress the apartness of this figure. They must, Findley, Thomson and Urquhart insist, remain narrators of the past and witnesses to its sufferings, rather than participants in it.

There are several different observers in combatant accounts, as well as in these contemporary retellings. In combatant writing, the protagonist is usually “a more or less sensitive character who, through his apartness from contemporaries and comrades, develops a more clear-sighted and more critical attitude towards the war” (Isernhagen 57). This “spectatorial attitude” in Great War fiction is one “that combines involvement and detachment, a sense of immediacy of a cultural crisis and the attempt to judge from a distance” (Isernhagen 57). This type of protagonist is both a participant and a witness; he is a character who narrates (or serves as the focus of the narrative) because he participates in the war, but he remains distanced enough to comment on the insanity of the war and his surroundings. In terms of observer figures, there is also the civilian experience of the First World War – someone who lived through the war, but was not a front-line combatant and, therefore, is confined to a witness role. The contemporary retellings I am

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<sup>6</sup> The term “to know” is one that I will be using throughout my thesis to describe the Observer’s obsessive quest for total knowledge and reconstruction. This desire “to know” the truth of the experience, I will argue, is denied by all of the authors because the Observer can never become a participant in the past. In my second chapter, I will highlight the difference between this desire “to know” (this desire for total knowledge) and the more reasonable, and less intrusive, awareness that the Observer figure ultimately arrives at.

discussing use both of these types of observers. In *The Wars*, for example, the war narrative is focused on Robert Ross, who embodies this tradition of the sensitive, observant soldier, while his mother, Mrs. Ross, reflects the civilian war experience. Similarly Thomson and Urquhart include the experience and the voices of both combatants and non-combatants. What makes the Observers I am discussing somewhat different from these other observers is their desire to break down the division between these roles. Separated by time and/or gender, these Observers are much closer to the civilian or non-combatant voice, but the journey they embark on is an attempt to completely re-construct the lived war experience of a combatant. These Observers do not want to be witnesses or observers; they want, at least initially, to be participants. It is this desire to know through experiencing, and the steps they take to try and achieve it, that separates them from the other type of observers.

There is a duality in the narratives of all three of these contemporary reflections; they are split between the present of the Observers and the past of the war. The narrative in these texts is removed from the immediacy of the battlefield and none of these works is solely set in the trenches. The war is not the *present* in these texts but the *past*, and the focus in each work is its influence or its ability to continue shaping the text's present. The reader is constantly reminded that any sections that do deal with life in the trenches or the immediacy of the battlefield are memories, and that they are being filtered through the perspective of the Observer's and the narrator's present. In making this division, all three authors draw even more attention to the fact that their texts are not just about narrating the war or a particular story associated with the war, but about how the present

reflects on or tries to remember that experience. In “The Grandfather’s War: Re-Imaging World War I in British Novels and Films of the 1990s”, Barbara Korte argues that in contemporary British fictional treatments of the First World War there is “a preoccupation with how the war can be remembered at all – not only from the point of view of the participants in that war, but from that of later generations. Writers here fictionalise their own problems in looking back to and re-presenting a war remote from their own lived experience” (127). The distance in time between the Observers and the period of the Great War and the challenges they face in knowing and narrating the event, reflect the position of Findley, Thomson and Urquhart; the role of witness that the Observers must fill, as they attempt to reconstruct and relate the experience of the war without the benefit of firsthand experience, mirrors the position of all three authors. Findley, Thomson and Urquhart insist on a distanced narrator and narrative focus to emphasize the difficulties of reconstructing the past. The space between the Observers and the war experience means that they can never fully re-construct, re-claim or re-live the combatant experience, but it does enable them to consider the impact of the past on the present and the impact of that past and that interpretation of the past on who they are.

The Observers may embark on quests for total knowledge, but their journeys are ultimately ones of self-discovery. On the surface, their quests seem intensely private; their focus is the past of family members, of loved ones or, as is the case in Findley’s *The Wars*, on one particular story of one particular soldier involved in the war. What they learn along the way, however, actually raises universal questions about how we view the war, how we remember the war and, most importantly, how the past influences who we



become. In *Representing War*, Cobley argues that the traditional ending or narrative closure of the war *Bildungsroman* is denied or subverted in many of the narratives written by former combatants. She points out that in these texts the “most obvious resistance to the *Bildungsroman* paradigm is the protagonist’s inability to progress past the point of his initiation into the theatre of the war” for there is nothing new to be learned after that initiation (*Representing War* 126). Endings of novels written by many former combatants, Cobley argues in *Representing War*, cannot give satisfactory closure: “Even the hero’s death usually resists the end-oriented structure of the *Bildungsroman*; it cannot give the story a satisfactory ‘point,’ because on the battlefield men are killed so haphazardly that their deaths cannot offer a retrospective rationale for what has preceded them” (*Representing War* 126). Narrative closure, however, is present in the contemporary portrayals I am examining, though it does not arise from the war experience itself; the closure in Findley’s, Thomson’s and Urquhart’s texts comes from their Observers’ agreement to act as witnesses to the sufferings of the past, rather than as victims of them. Instead of the subverted narrative closure that Cobley argues is typical of many narratives written by former combatants, these contemporary retellings end with a definite sense of closure and a new awareness of the past, the present and the future. The Observers are denied total knowledge but they do become aware of what has been sacrificed to ensure their existence. By the end of their quests, the Observers gain a new appreciation of life and they learn to value their own lived experience. There is a clear movement forward at the end of these texts and the closure arises from an acceptance of life and an acknowledgement that “I have come as far as I can. I’ve done as much as I

can. All that's left for me now is to be here" (*The Lost Boys* 70). Their quest "to know" ultimately leads to a new awareness of the war, the self and the need to live.

#### THE RESEARCHER: TIMOTHY FINDLEY'S *THE WARS*

In *The Wars*, Timothy Findley examines the brutality of war through the fictional story of Robert Ross and his personal experiences during the First World War. Mark Kuester argues that, even though on one level the novel deals with the "private life of Robert Ross and the response of this sensitive young man to the Great War," it should "first and foremost be seen as a historical novel about the inhumanities of war and the casualties it inflicts on human beings and nature, as a novel, too, which 'implicitly claims that it illuminates the past better than history' by showing how life (human and animal) is really affected" (66-67).<sup>7</sup> There are many witnesses in Findley's novel but it is the Researcher who is Findley's main Observer because of his attempts to piece together and narrate Robert's story. Even though much of what we know of Robert's story is compiled by the Researcher, we are given very little information about who he is.<sup>8</sup> What is clear is that Robert's is a story that must be told and that the perspective of the Researcher's present allows for a very different interpretation of Robert's actions. The

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<sup>7</sup> Here Kuester is quoting from Simone Vauthier's article "The Dubious Battle of Storytelling: Narrative Strategies in Timothy Findley's *The Wars*". She says, "the real authority of the novel . . . lies in the quiet confidence with which it implicitly claims that it illuminates the past better than history; that, though, through the textual construction of an imaginary life, it explores the extratextual, filling in the gaps that actually did not exist prior to the act of narration; in the assurance with which it proposes an investigation of history and the ways in which we know history" (Vauthier 15-16).

<sup>8</sup> Even though several critics have commented that the gender of Findley's Researcher is not stated, Catherine Hunter highlights the comment made by Marian Turner's sister towards the end of the novel --"Why don't you tell him, Mermie?" (*The Wars* 215) -- which reveals that the Researcher is male (Hunter 145).

Researcher, as Simone Vauthier notes, “belongs to a different generation with different cultural assumptions,” so he can re-examine Robert’s actions in a different context (15).

Even though Juliet says it is impossible to separate any great man or woman from the time they lived in and that “Their greatness lies in their response to that moment,” it is the prevailing image or myth of the war in the Researcher’s present that allows him and the readers to see Robert as a great man (Findley 114-115).<sup>9</sup>

Using transcripts, photographs and letters, the Researcher attempts to fully reconstruct, understand and explain Robert’s actions during the war. Robert is presented by Findley as very much “a watcher and a listener” and he does not or cannot tell his own story in the first person (Aitken 82). The Researcher, Marian and Juliet all try to speak for Robert in Findley’s novel. Diana Brydon argues that “Robert’s maimed and silent body becomes a cipher over which these various narrators write their readings of what Robert Ross means” (“Broken Dreamers” 57). The Researcher is the main reconstructor of Robert’s story, but Findley consciously undermines his Observer’s quest to fully understand by focusing on the subjectivity of his evidence and also the gaps within it. Findley, for example, writes:

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<sup>9</sup> Several critics address the issue of Robert’s heroism. Dagmar Novak, for example, in *Dubious Glory* (2000) examines how important the perspective of the last sixty years is in evaluating Robert’s actions for it is in the context of “the depression, the Second World War, the rise of the managerial state and the technological revolution in the post-war years that we can appreciate the dimensions of Robert’s heroism” (155). We also, Novak suggests, need to compare Robert’s reaction to those of Findley’s other fictional combatants, such as Rodwell, Taffler and Levitt: “Unlike his friends, Robert attempts to defy the forces which have overwhelmed them...he strives to overcome the inertia of the others and to resist the cumulative pressures to which they have given way” (150). Simone Vauthier makes reference to Marian’s affirmation that Robert was a hero, but that his actions seem more heroic in the present than in the past (15).

You begin at the archives with photographs . . . Boxes and boxes of snapshots and portraits; maps and letters, cablegrams and clippings from the papers. All you have to do is sign them out and carry them across the room. Spread over table tops, a whole age lies in fragments underneath the lamps. *The war to end all wars* . . . As the past moves underneath your fingertips, part of it crumbles. Other parts, you know you'll never find. This is what you have. (*The Wars* 3-4)

The attempts made by the Researcher “to know” Robert are only one part of Findley’s narrative. As readers, we are also given more personal accounts of Robert’s war experience – the type of materials and experiences that would be unavailable to Findley’s Observer in the research process. By using what Simone Vauthier terms the “I-You” second person narrative, Findley involves his readers in this quest “to know” Robert’s story (27).<sup>10</sup> In many cases, we, as readers, are able to go further than Findley’s Observer. Much of Robert’s story is intensely personal and these more private episodes are not narrated through the point of view of the Researcher. It is through what the war does to Robert on a personal level that Findley can reveal the collective inhumanity of the war, but it seems unlikely that Robert kept a record of or shared experiences such as the scene at the brothel or the rape by his fellow soldiers. It is here that the reader assumes the Observer’s role. Findley maintains the Observer’s quest in the present to understand and narrate the past through the Researcher, but by going beyond recorded facts and providing his readers with these private experiences, he implicates us in this desire “to know” the past.

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<sup>10</sup> Findley says in an interview with Johan Aitken of this reader involvement: “And then Robert runs on his horse – he rides his horse at you, down this avenue of billboards and the book keeps talking about you and in a sense, you isn’t me, you is you, the reader, and as you search for Robert, as you are doing by the mere fact that you are reading this book, you find a little of him here, a little of him there” (84).

### THE DESCENDANT: R.H. THOMSON'S *THE LOST BOYS*

*The Lost Boys*, a play by R.H. Thomson, was first produced by the Great Canadian Theatre Company in Ottawa in 2001. Using over 700 letters from his great uncles who fought in the war and other family members who were alive during that period, Thomson crafts from his private family history a universal story about the desire to know the past. By examining the impact and legacy of the war on his family, Thomson attempts to convey his great uncles' experiences during the war, but also how knowledge of that past enriches the present. Thomson says in his "Playwright's Foreword" to *The Lost Boys*: "I used to think that my great uncles, being dead, would have no meaning in my life. I now know that there is nothing without meaning" (*The Lost Boys* ii). Thomson's play is a very personal work, because he not only deals with his family's history but he records in the play his own private journey to understand his great uncles, the First World War and his place in relation to it all. His great uncles, Thomson found, needed a listener, but, as the play shows, that listening also involves a great deal of telling – once he has heard, he needs to share.<sup>11</sup> That telling, however, must be in the form of stories, not facts and the real power of a story, as Thomson stated in a lecture at the 2003 Association of Canadian Archivists Conference, lies in invoking rather than dictating it ("Letters from the Lost Boys"). We "wrap ourselves in stories," Thomson argues, "to tell us who we are," but also "why you are" ("Letters from the Lost Boys").

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<sup>11</sup> In a personal interview R.H. Thomson discussed this need for a listener and the way in which he attempts to fill that role with his play. "I will be there," he said, "to be their listener. I will be there to be their Observer" (Thomson, Personal Interview).

The Observer in Thomson's play is a character referred to in the text as the Man, who serves as a narrator for the stories contained in these letters as well as of his own personal journey towards understanding. Throughout the play, he attempts to return over and over again to what his great uncles experienced and to walk in their footsteps. It is an emotional journey for the Man, particularly in terms of guilt and anger for what he did not know or ask about when he was younger. In an interview, Thomson says of his own and our collective "blindness" to the past: "These guys came back in 1918 and they were in those hospitals for 50 and 60 years, in pieces and in wheelchairs, totally forgotten. Who was I not to go? What is that? What *is* that?" ("Men of Letters" R9). The Man constantly questions the past and attempts to reconstruct it because he desires to go "back to press against the heart of these moments" (*The Lost Boys* 56). The Man's journey "to know" and to reconstruct is an obsessive one and he finally acknowledges this himself after frantically examining and attempting to identify his great uncle George in some film footage of his regiment (*The Lost Boys* 56). In the play, Thomson uses sections of his great uncles' letters and reflects on them, but the Man acts out rather than merely reading the letters. He interacts with the letters; the Actor "plays" the roles of Art, George, Joe, and Jack but he also questions the truths conveyed in these letters.<sup>12</sup> He desires more than is there and attempts to impose a completeness on the narrative that is not and never will be possible. By having the Man assume the roles of the great uncles, Thomson blurs the

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<sup>12</sup> The Man does not act out Harold's story. He "*retrieves HAROLD's folder,*" but "*It is empty*" (*The Lost Boys* 32). He tells us, "Harold's story is short. Harold's story here is silent, because while waiting in winter camp to be sent to the European mud he became ill with pleurisy, pneumonia and later TB of the lung. Harold was invalided back to Canada" (*The Lost Boys* 32).

line between the narrator and the narrated, the past and the present and, most importantly, the Observer and the participant.

#### **THE SWEETHEART/SPINSTER: JANE URQUHART'S *THE STONE CARVERS***

The telling and sharing of a story, Jane Urquhart implies in *The Stone Carvers*, somehow makes one a part of it. Urquhart, in describing the legend that has been passed down and told about the establishment of Shoneval, writes “The nuns and the one spinster clung to the story, as if by telling the tale they became witnesses, perhaps even participants in the awkward fabrication of the matter” (*The Stone Carvers* 6). The spinster referred to in this passage is Klara Becker, the main Observer figure in *The Stone Carvers*. Klara begins the novel somewhat apart from those around her, and she is described many times as a witness, particularly a witness to the past. Klara is introduced as an eccentric spinster (whose main eccentricity is a demand for a war memorial), and Urquhart makes it clear that she is someone who has attempted to control or shut off her past, even though she acknowledges that she is just as alienated from the present.<sup>13</sup> The past, however, is not easily controlled and, though Klara will not allow herself any further “unpremeditated dives into personal memory,” she must acknowledge that there is “nothing at all one can do about something one can’t forget. The more it is pushed away, the more it stays stubbornly planted in the rich soil of a life’s narrative. Dormant,

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<sup>13</sup> Klara, before Tilman’s return, reflects on her apartness from those around her in Shoneval. Even though it was “She who had recorded the body measurements of everyone in town who knew their vanities, intuited their secret romances, could determine their mood during a fitting by gesture or posture,” Klara realizes she “left absolutely no trace of herself in the minds of those she encountered” (*The Stone Carvers* 169). She wonders, “What, beyond the most cursory, practical knowledge of fashion, had the present to do with her?” (*The Stone Carvers* 169).

perhaps, but ready with the smallest provocation to burst into full flower” (*The Stone Carvers* 32). Urquhart suggests that by attempting to control the past, Klara actually makes herself a captive of it. Though part of Klara’s story is set during the war, she is distanced from the war because of her gender and location and it is not until many years after the war that she finally embarks on her journey towards awareness and commemoration.

In *The Stone Carvers*, Urquhart is very concerned with the act of narration, particularly with how we narrate the past. There are multiple “pasts” in the text and Urquhart examines how the present of the narrator, and the knowledge that that narrator has in the present, influences how we, as readers, view what occurs in the narrative. Even the past before the war (many, many years before the war) is altered by the narrator’s awareness of it. One example is the narrator’s comment when describing the construction of Father Gstir’s church: “In early August of that year [1880] dozens of healthy young men – men who in Europe would have made fine soldiers – gathered at the site of the church and ascended a multitude of ladders” (*The Stone Carvers* 135). The reference to soldiers and Europe gives early August a different context and reveals the way in which the war and the narrator’s knowledge of the war influences all that the narrator is telling us. The narrator relates every event through the lens of the present – the result is that the past is constantly being influenced by the narrator’s knowledge of the characters’ futures. Phrases such as “Much later he would tell a friend . . .” and “Years later Klara would tell a middle-aged man . . .” emphasize what the characters will do and make clear the narrator’s distance from the war and from Klara (*The Stone Carvers* 195,



117). Urquhart uses this distance to stress the difficulties of knowing and narrating the past because the narrator's knowledge "now" of what happened "then" changes how we view the past. Urquhart also places more distance between her Observer and her narrator than the other texts, because much of the novel is concerned with how the war was memorialized and the lasting legacy of the war monuments.

Through the Observers' quests to uncover and re-construct the experience of the Great War, all three authors examine how we view the First World War and how we remember it. The main focus of my thesis is the narrative function of the Observer figure in these three contemporary reflections, and in the next two chapters I will be examining the ways in which these quests for understanding raise issues of knowledge and remembrance and ultimately end with an affirmation of life. I wish to consider the way in which the Observer obsessively submerges herself or himself in the desire "to know" but ultimately moves beyond this attempt to re-construct and re-live the experience into a reconciliation with his or her role as an observer.

## CHAPTER TWO: KNOWLEDGE AND THE OBSERVER

Knowledge of the past, specifically the past of the Great War, becomes in all three of these contemporary retellings a central concern for the Observers. Because there is a distinct division in *The Wars*, *The Lost Boys* and *The Stone Carvers* between the narrative sections that deal with the war and those that focus on the Observers' quests to understand it, these works stress the importance of the past while, also, rejecting the notion that it is something that can be really known. "The past," David Lowenthal argues, "is a foreign country" (xvii). Because of subjectivity, hindsight and distortions of memory, "Every account of the past is both more and less than that past – less because no account can incorporate an entire past, however exhaustive the records; more because narrators of past events have the advantage of knowing the subsequent outcomes" (Lowenthal xxii-xxiii). In its entirety, the past can never be saved or recorded, particularly private or personal histories and, because of this, there is a great deal of the past that is and always will be unknowable. Findley, Thomson and Urquhart construct their narratives in ways that draw attention to what is and will always be unknowable about the past – except in fiction.

Regardless of the difficulties and limitations involved in any quest "to know" the past, all these authors stress its importance. Findley, Thomson and Urquhart insist on the power of the past; they suggest that an awareness of the past is crucial to an

understanding of the present and of ourselves. The past, as James Fentress and Chris Wickham suggest in *Social Memory* (1992), influences our personal and collective identity and “we are what we remember,” because “a study of the way we remember -- the way we present ourselves in our memories, the way we define our personal and collective identities through our memories, the way we order and structure our ideas in our memories, and the way we transmit these memories to others -- is a study of the way we are” (7).<sup>1</sup> What we remember -- what we choose to remember and how we choose to remember it -- helps us define ourselves and our place within society. The past has an influence on how we perceive our present, just as the present has power over the way the past is remembered. As Paul Connerton argues in *How Societies Remember* (1989), it is difficult to extract the past from the present or the present from the past because “present factors tend to influence -- some might want to say distort -- our recollections of the past” and “also because past factors tend to influence, or distort, our experience of the present” (2). Though the Observers are quite distanced from the past of the Great War at the start of their journeys, they come to realize that what happened *then* has extraordinary power over *now*.

All three authors discussed consider ways in which the past, especially the past of the Great War, refuses to remain buried. It is an event that has generated and continues to generate a great deal of interest and many narratives about it -- partly because it has

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<sup>1</sup> David Lowenthal also addresses the connection between the past and identity by arguing that “to know what we were confirms what we are” (197).

never been wholly explained or made sense of.<sup>2</sup> Also important is Hynes' "Myth of the Great War" because it is not only "a story of what the war *was*," but also "a myth of the world that the war had made" (439). Our understanding of who we are and the world we live in begins, as Hynes argues, with the Great War:

In our reality, here at the century's end, the First World War remains a powerful imaginative force, but perhaps the most powerful force in the shaping not only of our conceptions of what war is, but of the world we live in – a world in which that war, and all the wars that have followed it, were possible human acts. Our world begins with that war. (Hynes 469)

The memory of the Great War also refuses to remain buried in a physical sense and the authors of these contemporary retellings consider and describe the impact of the war on the earth. Urquhart and Thomson, in particular, are concerned with the physical reminders of the war that continue to emerge from the land.<sup>3</sup> Thomson, for example, says of the Iron Harvest:

The larger story was that everything beneath my feet was moving. Through seasons of rain and heaving frost, bits of rifle, detonators, barbed wire, helmets, artillery shells are slowly being pushed to the surface. There are a quarter of a million tons of unexploded shells still buried in the fields of Belgium. They will continue to surface for centuries. The larger

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<sup>2</sup> This idea or view of the war as inexplicable is discussed by Douglas How in *One Village, One War, 1914-1945: A Thinking About The Literature of Stone* (1995). He says, "Books without number have been written to try to explain what happened and why, and still they come. But even as I get deep into my 70s, I sense that those vivid and tragic times will never be totally explained" (14). He goes on to state that in his opinion the most powerful testimonials to Canada's involvement in the Great War are its war memorials.

<sup>3</sup> In his lecture at the 2003 Association of Canadian Archivists Conference, Thomson used the term "the earth archives" to refer to this history that dwells beneath the surface of the earth ("Letters from the Lost Boys"). In my interview with Thomson, he described his reaction to the battlefields. He saw them, on one level, as "extraordinarily mundane" but he also noted that they are a "time machine" because "mud is its own memory" (Thomson, Personal Interview).

story is that the earth is not at peace. The earth is reworking its memory of the war. (*The Lost Boys* 46)

Physical remnants of the conflict lie just beneath the surface, waiting to emerge one day and remind us of what occurred. These contemporary reflections of the Great War function in a similar way because Findley's, Thomson's and Urquhart's narratives also attempt to remind us of what occurred. They are stories of things that happened *then* that these authors clearly feel must be told *now*. What all these authors do in their respective texts is consider how we can tell those stories.

All three of these contemporary Canadian retellings of the Great War focus on what we know of the past, but a much more important issue for these authors is how we know it and how we construct it in a narrative. These texts are not so much about the war itself as contemplations of how "we know we know what we think we know" about the past and how what we do or can know is translated into a narrative (Atwood 8). These texts consider the problematic nature of history and the past, and *The Wars* and *The Lost Boys*, in particular, incorporate into the structure of their narratives the difficulties of knowing and writing the past. All three are examples of what Linda Hutcheon has termed *historiographic metafiction*, because they draw attention, in varying degrees, to the difficulties of knowing and narrating the past. A *historiographic metafiction*, as Hutcheon defines it, is a work that is "intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay[s] claim to historical events and personages . . . its theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs (*historiographic metafiction*) is made the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past" (Hutcheon 5). It "reinstalls historical contexts as significant and even determining, but in so doing, it

problematizes the entire notion of historical knowledge” (Hutcheon 89). Hutcheon points out several times in *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (1988) that the existence of the past is not in question in *historiographic metafiction*s, but rather our knowledge of that past and the ways in which we gain what knowledge of the past we can. The past, Hutcheon argues, is known only through what has been written about it: “After all, we can only ‘know’ (as opposed to ‘experience’) the world through our narratives (past and present) of it, or so postmodernism argues . . . The past really did exist, but we can ‘know’ that past today only through its texts” (128). Our knowledge of the past may depend on what has been written about it, but as *metafiction*s these works draw attention to the constructed nature of a narrative and, therefore, undermine the authority of sources that the Observers must rely on “to know” the past.

### **THE RESEARCH PROCESS**

Research into the war is important for all three authors and it becomes an important part of their Observers’ quests “to know” the past. They look to letters, journals, and photographs to uncover personal truths about the war, but these types of narratives call into question not what is known but how much can really be known and not what can be told but how much cannot be told. The sources that the Observer figures choose emphasize a perspective that is both selective and subjective, and this stresses the futility of quests, like those of the Observers, to discover a single universal truth about the war experience. One way in which Findley, Thomson and Urquhart draw attention to the difficult process of knowing and narrating the past is by incorporating, in a variety of ways, the research involved in the writing of a fictionalized historical narrative. The

research behind these texts is apparent in the detail and realism of any “historical” sections.<sup>4</sup> All three of these works present very similar images of the war. Their descriptions of “what it was like” reveal a shared perception or understanding of the war. In particular, any sections that depict the physical nature of the war, and any that make reference to the horror of it, evoke what is already known collectively about the war.<sup>5</sup> Even if the authors do not provide in-depth descriptions, the reader is aware of the meaning invested in a seemingly straightforward reference to a particular place or event. Something as simple as mentioning mud is influenced by our understanding of what mud means in the context of the Great War. The descriptions in *The Wars*, for example, are “economical” because they “allude to what is already known” and the “stock of knowledge Findley invokes is not that of the real world but of our familiarity with First World War literature, photographs, and film” (Cobley, “Postmodernist War Fiction” 103, 102). This “stock of knowledge” is apparent in the image of the Great War presented in all three of these contemporary retellings - even the words and actions of a character like Tilman in *The Stone Carvers* are familiar to us because that is how we expect a former combatant to talk and feel. We accept their version because it is the image of the war that

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<sup>4</sup> Geoff Dyer discusses in *The Missing of the Somme* (2001) the research involved in contemporary retellings of the Great War but he argues that this becomes a “problem” in many of them. He says that they “almost inevitably bear the imprint of the material from which they are derived,” and they seem like secondary texts because they “can never conceal the research on which they depend for their historical and imaginative accuracy” (Dyer 79).

<sup>5</sup> Dyer discusses the way in which every account of the war uses the phrase “the horror of war” and even though “War may be horrible,” it “should not distract us from acknowledging what a horrible cliché this has become” (27). The overuse of this phrase means that it “conveys none of the horror it is meant to express . . . The words have bleached themselves out, become an unnoticed part of the brand name” (Dyer 28-29).

is collectively held; these authors establish their authority with readers not because they lived the experience, but because they share an understanding of “what it was like” with us.

Research is not only apparent in the detailed realism of the war sections; Findley, Thomson and Urquhart incorporate the process of knowing the past into the Observer’s present. The Observer’s quest “to know” the war involves a great deal of research -- mainly an examination of the paper record, which includes letters, diaries and photographs. “The past is made of paper,” writes Margaret Atwood, but there is “no more reason to trust something written down on paper than there is now . . . if you are after the truth, the whole and detailed truth, and nothing but the truth, you’re going to have a thin time of it if you trust paper; but with the past, it’s almost all you’ve got” (32-33). For the authors and, therefore, for their Observers what has been recorded on paper is virtually all that is left of the past. To know the past, they must rely on the paper record, but there is not one definitive, universal truth documented there. While there are certain facts, most, if not all, of the sources the Observers turn to are open to multiple interpretations and, therefore, multiple truths.<sup>6</sup> They are also not enough in and of themselves; the Observers must gather information from many sources and they must often turn to larger historical accounts or records to provide context for any personal letters or photographs. By focusing on what is lacking in all the sources the Observers

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<sup>6</sup> According to Hutcheon, this is characteristic of *historiographic metafiction*s. She argues that these works suggest “that truth and falsity may indeed not be the right terms in which to discuss fiction” because they “openly assert that there are only *truths* in the plural and never one Truth” (109).



use in their quests “to know,” all three authors stress the incomplete and ambiguous nature of historical documentation.

The visual record of the war is important for all three authors. Urquhart, as I will discuss in the next chapter, is interested in the stories preserved in stone, whereas photography plays an important role in the research process for both Findley and Thomson. Findley uses photographic images in *The Wars* as one of the ways in which his Researcher attempts “to know” Robert Ross. Photography allows the Researcher to see both the public and the private, for the personal photographs of Robert and his family are now in the public domain. On one level, Findley uses photographs to stress how much history is hidden from view and how what is left is open to interpretation. Sometimes, he writes, “the corner of a picture will reveal the whole,” but more often part of the past “crumbles” as it “moves underneath your fingertips” (*The Wars* 3, 4).<sup>7</sup> By giving the reader only descriptions of the photographs (and not actual visual images) and by including captions on several of these photographs, Findley, as Lisa Salem-Wiseman argues, “further denies the reader any search for a ‘pure’ or ‘authoritative’ text; the reader must accept that the text he or she is given is always mediated by the narrator’s perception of it” (197). As an observer of the past, the Researcher cannot know the truth behind these images – he can only speculate. Provided with just an image, the Researcher must impose his own narrative on what he sees. Though his use of

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<sup>7</sup> Geoff Dyer also discusses the decay of the past as reflected through photographs. Dyer says of some photographs from the period, “Each of these photos is marred, spotted, blotched; their imperfections make them seem like photos of memories. In some there is an encroaching white light, creeping over the image, wiping it out. Others are fading; photos of forgetting. Eventually nothing will remain but blank spaces” (2).

photography emphasizes the fragmentation of the past, Findley does also stress the power of the visual image and its ability to preserve life. Lorraine York argues in “‘Violent Stillness’: Timothy Findley’s Use of Photography” that “The conception of the photograph as the preserver of all that is precious and alive is clearly connected with the researcher’s attempt to capture the essence of Robert Ross’s life” (84). The photograph Findley includes of Robert in his uniform illustrates this preservation: “I lived -- was young -- and died. But not real death, of course, because I’m standing here alive with all these lights that shine so brightly in my eyes” (*The Wars* 48). The photographs Findley incorporates into his narrative are a powerful reminder for the Researcher that Robert lived and that he continues to live in the photographic record of him.<sup>8</sup> Though the past is unknowable in a complete sense, Robert is preserved for the Researcher in the photographs, just as his personal experience of the war is preserved for us as readers in the fictional narrative Findley writes.<sup>9</sup>

Photography also plays an important role in Thomson’s understanding of the war. Thomson discusses in the playbill to the CanStage production of *The Lost Boys* his research in the photo archives at the Imperial War Museum:

I had to hear in images what was not spoken in letters. Hour after hour I turned the pages of frozen destruction.

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<sup>8</sup> This is something Findley himself discusses in an interview with Johan Aitken: “I still sit with a photograph and I think, if I could only get in there with you, I could walk in there, and that person is saying something, that moment in there, and one never, never, never dies” (83).

<sup>9</sup> John Hulcoop discusses Findley’s transposition of life and death in the novel: “Robert’s death is ‘not real’, because, of course, his life is only imagined (as a novel by Findley). What never really lived can never really die. He exists in a continuous fictional present” (36).

Only through the intimate did I sense the occasion of their passing. Bodies lay in sleep. Bodies lay in splayed abandon. They lay in nestled comfort and twisted agony. They lay in ghoulish delight, in boyish sadness. They lay English and German, Canadian and French; shocked, dismembered, wracked, driven over, eaten, undressed and punctured. Was their privacy for their families only? I kept looking.

I saw the chaos of shelled trenches, spreading woodchips and body parts evenly.

I saw the dead alone and some in crowds on the forest floor.

I saw the obscenity of war postcards sent home, pornographic in death.

I saw the effect of military fury as seen by the souls who had first come upon it.

I saw the dead who had been forgotten for years

I saw burying parties working their way through stacks of unruly bodies.

I saw graveyards re-opened by shelling.

I saw the deeply private faces of men as they looked across eternity.

I saw death in a hint of the way that my great uncles saw it.

I felt I had trespassed on a private world. I felt I had betrayed the solitude in which fathers and mothers grieve for the death of their children. Grief is intimate. But such is the journey of an artist. (2)

On the most basic level, these photographs provide Thomson with a context for his great uncles' letters. These atrocities are not spoken of in the letters; he must go elsewhere to frame his understanding of their experience. There are records and books about the war that could provide this context, but photographs offer a more powerful and more personal connection to the war. Many of the things Thomson says he saw are private images and yet, because the war was and is a collective event, they are open to public observation. Most importantly for Thomson, because *The Lost Boys* focuses so much on walking in his great uncles' footsteps, photographs allow him to see some of what his great uncles might have seen but could not speak of.

### THE BEGINNING OF THE QUEST “TO KNOW”

The Observers’ quest fits well with Wayne C. Booth’s discussion of the modern quest novel in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961). In these works, “a character or group of characters embark . . . on a quest for an important truth” and in many the character(s) and the reader(s) “do not discover until the end -- and very often not even then -- what the true meaning of the events has been” (Booth 286-287). It is the truth of the Great War, or more specifically the reality of that lived experience, that the Observers feel they need to find. Denied first-hand knowledge of the combatants’ lived experience, they must attempt to uncover what they can about the Great War. Considering how obsessive each journey becomes, it is important to consider what triggers each Observer’s desire “to know.” Prior to their quests, the Observers are in a state of innocence or ignorance about the war. Even though they think they have some conception of what it was, they lack a real connection to it. They do not have a *personal* understanding of it. The Observers may be aware that the war occurred and they may be familiar with the collectively held image of the First World War. They may have heard about the ‘horror of it’ and they may have seen or known survivors, but that, they believe, is the past and it has no bearing on the present. The past, these authors suggest, is waiting to show them otherwise; the Observers must learn to “*pay attention*” (*The Wars* 3).<sup>10</sup> There must be a moment for

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<sup>10</sup> Urquhart echoes Findley’s sentiments in her text. Klara whispers, to herself, at one point in the novel, “I have never paid enough attention” (49). Thomson, though not using this phrase, does also suggest that he feels the past has been waiting for him. He writes, “I feel now that these boys, these letters, the family have been waiting for me since I’ve been young, very young . . . just too many ‘markers’ in my path . . . like the breadcrumbs dropped by Hansel and Gretel in the woods. The path led somewhere but I never followed” (*The Lost Boys* 6).

each Observer when the war becomes real; something or someone must trigger their understanding that it is personal as well as historical. They are exposed to private, individual pasts within the larger history and after that moment they can never again see themselves as separate. Even though the Observers did not experience the war firsthand, it becomes a part of who they are and how they define themselves and the world around them.

In *The Lost Boys*, Thomson reflects on his younger self's unaware state. As the play progresses, we see Thomson stressing again and again the need to see the larger picture, mainly through the contrast between what he lacked in the past in terms of understanding and what he has since gained. The play opens with the Man remembering (or attempting to remember) the vigil he performed for the dead of the First World War when he was 16 in Belgium. He tells us:

Only once in my life did I hold a sword for real. I'm embarrassed to remember it . . . For twenty minutes in the middle of the night I knelt alone. That time was "my watch" but what was I watching for? Leaning along the wall were short wooden crosses, I remember their crudeness. They were the original crosses from the battle-graves, temporary graves, dug in haste, assembled in the millions, before the military grave stones were cut and the dead were gathered into the official cemeteries . . . 2500 cemeteries . . . nine and a half million dead.

But the reality of the First World War was dim. I mumbled my words, knelt for my vigil, gave back the sword and then stumbled back outside to the Belgian darkness. Standing there in the light of the stars I didn't get it, and of all the teenagers there, I should have been the one who did. Two of my great uncles were buried there. A number of my family were killed by that war. Did I have any idea of the story surrounding me? (*The Lost Boys* 4)

It is important here that the Man is reflecting back on his unaware state, instead of re-enacting it. What he can remember of the vigil and his lack of understanding is

contrasted with what he now knows, such as the number of cemeteries and the number of dead. He remembers seeing the crosses and the crudeness of them, but he did not know or even attempt to uncover the story behind them. Thomson stresses that this is what he should have seen, what he should have known, but did not. The memory of the vigil and his inability to see or become aware of the story surrounding him haunts the Man's quest throughout *The Lost Boys*. At the end of play, when reflecting on a return to the battlefields, he asks, "Have I come as far as I can? Is my vigil finally over? I don't want to leave here, as the 16-year-old young man left his half-understood vigil. Have I 'kept watch' this time?" (*The Lost Boys* 69). The Man's quest to uncover the stories and experiences of his great uncles not only allows him to know them, but also allows him the opportunity to make amends for the past and for his younger self.

Of the three Observers I am discussing, Klara is the only one alive during the war, but she is distanced from it by gender and physical location. The war, for Klara, is particularly personal because it is the war that deprives her of Eamon. Her father and grandfather want to protect Klara from the brutal reality of the war, but she cannot be sheltered from the news that Eamon is missing and assumed dead. After his death, Klara wants to remain unaware because any knowledge or mention of the war revives the memories of Eamon that she is constantly attempting to suppress. It is her brother, Tilman, who triggers her quest, because his return makes Eamon's death real for Klara. Klara, seeing a wounded veteran walking towards her house, believes that it is Eamon but the sudden recognition that it is not him returning seems to force Klara to fully comprehend, for the first time, that he is dead, that he will never return. Tilman's

physical return triggers this insight, but what he tells Klara about the war also makes the nature of Eamon's death real:

"Missing in action," she repeated.

"Yes, you know, the ones they never found, probably because they were blown to bits. We found some -- but only parts -- nobody could tell if they were Brits or Germans or even what colour their hair had been."

Klara dropped the thread in the box and slammed down the lid. Tilman, startled, jumped up and faced her. Then his eyes narrowed. "You have no idea how awful it was. Nobody has any idea."

"Don't tell me," Klara said. "Please, just don't talk about it."

"No," said Tilman, "you wouldn't want to know. No one does." He turned his back and hobbled over to the door. "No one over here wants to know anything about it." (*The Stone Carvers* 243)

This rejection of the truth he offers causes Tilman to group Klara with all the other non-combatants, to group her with all those who wish to forget the war and cover up its unpleasantness.<sup>11</sup> She was not there and Tilman, throughout the novel, expresses his anger about all those who were not there "carrying on about the war as if they knew

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<sup>11</sup> Paul Fussell argues in *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975) that it is not that former combatants cannot find the words to tell their war experience, but rather, as Tilman expresses here, a reluctance by non-combatants to hear what they have to tell. He writes, "One of the cruxes of the war, of course, is the collision between events and the language available -- or thought appropriate -- to describe them. To put it more accurately, the collision was one between events and the public language used for over a century to celebrate the idea of progress. Logically there is no reason why the English language could not perfectly well render the actuality of trench warfare: it is rich in terms like *blood, terror, agony, madness, shit, cruelty, murder, sell-out, pain* and *hoax*, as well as phrases like *legs blown off, intestines gushing out over his hands, screaming all night, bleeding to death from the rectum*, and the like. Logically one supposes, there's no reason why a language devised by man should be inadequate to describe any of man's works. The difficulty was in admitting that the war had been made by men and was being continued *ad infinitum* by them. The problem was less one of 'language' than of gentility and optimism; it was less a problem of 'linguistics' than of rhetoric . . . The real reason is that soldiers have discovered that no one is very interested in the bad news they have to report. What listener wants to be torn and shaken when he doesn't have to be? We have made *unspeakable* mean indescribable: it really means nasty" (169-170).

something about it” (*The Stone Carvers* 253). It is not that Klara “does not want to know anything about it,” but that the particular knowledge Tilman is attempting to share makes the nature of Eamon’s death far too real (*The Stone Carvers* 243). Klara, as the novel goes on to show, does want to know, particularly about what Tilman has experienced. His return finally deprives her of the hope that Eamon might return, but his news of the Vimy monument allows Klara to finally envision a life outside Shoneval and a way to make amends to Eamon for their parting. He allows her to envision a different life, a different reality and their journey together to France allows Klara a “change of self” (*The Stone Carvers* 262).

At the start of Findley’s novel, the Researcher has already begun his quest for understanding. While both Thomson and Urquhart stress, though in different ways, their Observers’ ignorance of the war, Findley does not show his Observer in an unaware state. Findley does provide some suggestion of what triggered his Researcher’s interest:

*Robert Ross comes riding straight towards the camera. His hat has fallen off. His hands are knotted to the reins. They bleed. The horse is black and wet and falling. Robert’s lips are parted. He leans along the horse’s neck. His eyes are blank. There is mud on his cheeks and forehead and his uniform is burning -- long, bright tails of flame are streaming out behind him. He leaps through memory without a sound . . . You lay the fiery image back in your mind and let it rest. You know it will obtrude again and again until you find its meaning -- here. (*The Wars* 5-6)*

This vision of Robert haunts Findley’s Researcher; the “fiery image” is clearly embedded in his mind (*The Wars* 6). The Researcher realizes instinctively that this image contains an important truth, but it cannot speak its meaning. The Researcher must uncover that meaning and then translate it into a narrative -- he must essentially find its voice. Findley may not directly narrate the moment that the war became real for his Researcher, but this



image, this image for which meaning must be found, is his trigger. The Researcher believes that this image needs a story and this story is one that must be told.

This is what haunts all the Observers. There is a moment, usually triggered by an image, a letter, a poem, a person, that suddenly makes the war real, that makes it a part of them. It is the moment when they recognize the past is not something separate, but a part of who they are and, therefore, their quest is not only to know the past, but to know how that past, no matter how traumatic, has shaped them and the world they live in. Their desire to know the past is a desire to know themselves.

### ***THE WARS***

In *The Wars*, Findley's Researcher has a desire "to know" Robert's story, but this need to explain or justify his actions is inseparable from the need to understand the Great War and the atmosphere or circumstances that triggered the episode with the horses. The Researcher's task is to explain Robert's life and his death, to essentially piece together the remnants of a single life lived in the midst of exceptional circumstances. To do this, he must find what is left of Robert, mainly what has been recorded of him and what is remembered of him. The Researcher's attempts to extract Robert are complicated, however, by the distance between his past and the Researcher's present. Findley stresses throughout his novel, but particularly in its opening pages, the elusiveness of the past:

All of this happened a long time ago. But not so long ago that everyone who played a part in it is dead. Some can still be met in dark old rooms with nurses in attendance. They look at you and rearrange their thoughts. They say: 'I don't remember.' The occupants of memory have to be protected from strangers. Ask what happened, they say: 'I don't know.' Mention Robert Ross -- they look away. 'He's dead,' they tell you. This is not news. 'Tell me about the horses,' you ask. Sometimes, they weep

at this. Other times they say: 'that bastard!' Then the nurses nod at you, much as to say -- you see? It's best to go away and find your information somewhere else. In the end, the only facts you have are public. Out of these you make what you can, knowing that one thing leads to another. Sometimes, someone will forget himself and say too much or else the corner of a picture will reveal the whole. What you have to accept at the outset is this: many men have died like Robert Ross, obscured by violence. Lawrence was hurled against a wall -- Scott entombed in ice and wind -- Mallory blasted on the face of Everest. Lost. We're told Euripides was killed by dogs -- and this is all we know. (*The Wars* 3)

The ideas conveyed in this particular passage underlie the contradictory nature of the Researcher's quest. There are survivors of the experience who should be able to share personal memories with the Researcher, but they are unable, or unwilling, to do so. Their personal recollections are, perhaps, influenced by the passing of time, but more important is the issue of protection -- they must be protected from the past, while at the same time protecting their memories from the present. They must be sheltered from their own traumatic histories, from regressing into painful memories that might be unearthed by the Researcher's inquiries. They may also wish to shield their memories from the prying eyes of the present, to prevent those who can never truly understand because they have not lived it from imposing their own truths on the experience.<sup>12</sup> There is tension throughout Findley's text between the Researcher's conviction that Robert's story needs to be told, and the wish expressed by several characters that witnessed it firsthand or knew him personally that it remain buried. What they do share in this passage when

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<sup>12</sup> This issue of imposing contemporary values on the past is considered by Pat Barker in *Another World*. The character Helen interviews Geordie about his war experiences. She is interested in the way society's shifting perceptions of the war influence the way he views his personal experiences. Barker writes, "She tried to get Geordie to frame his war experience in terms of late-twentieth-century preoccupations. Gender. Definitions of masculinity. Homoeroticism. Homo-*what?* asked Geordie" (83).

asked about Robert (basically the knowledge that he is dead) “is not news” to the Researcher (*The Wars* 3). This rejection of what they are able or choose to tell him, reveals a pre-established expectation of what is important in Robert’s story and what they should be able to tell him. The survivors cannot, or will not, co-operate with the Researcher’s quest, so “It’s best to go away and find your information somewhere else” but that information, as this passage goes on to suggest, is public instead of private (*The Wars* 3). The Researcher can only find the public record of Robert’s life, but that, Findley suggests, through the way in which he structures his narrative, is not enough to truly understand Robert. The true justification for Robert’s actions is found in his private, lived experience that we, as readers, are able to see, but which the Researcher in his piecing together of the public record would be denied. We also see in this passage, the Researcher’s tendency to impose order, or a logical succession, on events. While he thinks “Out of these you make what you can, knowing that one thing leads to another,” the pervading sense of futility and disarray that characterizes our understanding of the Great War makes it difficult to view Robert’s experiences in this logical way (*The Wars* 3). This passage functions as an abridgement of this Observer’s quest for the thoughts and actions we see here characterize his journey throughout the novel. By focusing, in this passage, on issues of public and private and the (mis)interpretation of material, Findley explicitly draws attention to his Observer’s interaction with the past and the difficulties of knowing and writing it.

The structure of Findley’s book incorporates the process of writing the past and, as Geoff Dyer points out in *The Missing of the Somme*, the novel “depends on the

research that has gone into its writing” (82). Findley includes the types of sources that anyone attempting to research and write about the Great War would have to go to to find information. The Researcher uses photographs, diary entries and transcripts in an attempt to unearth and tell Robert’s story. The survivors in the above passage may not co-operate with the Researcher’s quest, but he is able to talk to two individuals who knew Robert -- Lady Juliet d’Orsey and Marian Turner. These are the most personal sources the Researcher can find. They are sources that he must seek out -- they are not recorded on paper before the Researcher talks to them and, like the past, the survivors of it are waiting, ready for someone to find them and listen. Marian’s confession that she offered to help Robert die is an excellent example of this need to seek out the survivors of the past to discover moments that exist in personal histories rather than the official record.

The transcripts of these conversations, which are part of the narrative, recount two important sections of Robert’s life and we are able to see him from someone else’s perspective. That perspective, however, is tainted. It is influenced or altered by the passing of time and is amended in Findley’s narrative by the Researcher. Marian and Juliet have personal memories of Robert and of the Great War, but the passing of time has an influence on these women and how they view their own pasts. These transcripts seem to capture voices from the past and yet that is precisely what is lost on the transition from audio to paper records.<sup>13</sup> In some ways, Marian and Juliet are distanced from their

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<sup>13</sup> The Researcher’s transcripts will preserve important information about Robert on paper, but even though new information about him will be recorded, there is a great deal lost in the transition to paper – and this is something the Researcher himself makes note of concerning Juliet’s voice. He says, “There is an aspect of this interview which, alas, cannot survive transition onto paper – and that is the sound of Lady Juliet’s voice.

pasts because of distortions of memory or hindsight, just as their age and experience separate them from the Researcher's present. Findley stresses the age of both women because it gives their accounts authority. Marian and Juliet were alive before the war, they lived through it, and they have survived all that has happened since it. Marian tells the Researcher in her first transcript:

'I've been through it all you know -- (LAUGHTER) -- the whole of this extraordinary century -- and it's not the extraordinary people who've prevailed upon its madness. Quite the opposite. Oh -- far from it! It's the *ordinary* men and women who've made us what we are. Monstrous, complacent and mad. Remember that. Even if I do sound a moralizing fool. I'll risk it. After all -- I'm pretty old. (LAUGHTER) I could be gone tomorrow! There may not be anybody else who'll say this to you.'  
(*The Wars* 10)

Age allows Marian to see things, but more importantly, to say things that others cannot or will not – though significantly in terms of lived war experience she and Juliet can only speak about the civilian experience. Age gives the accounts of Marian and Juliet a great deal of authority because they can speak about the past in a way the Researcher cannot because they were and are a part of it -- they lived it. Throughout the novel, Findley focuses on the division between those with some first-hand knowledge of the past (characters like Marian and Juliet) and those without it (such as the Researcher). This division is complicated though, because the women are, in fact, fictional creations. They seem authoritative, but these accounts are constructed by Findley. He uses, while at the

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As already stated, she is now in her seventies and a very large portion of her diet consists of gin and cigarettes. The voice, at times, sails off in what can only be described as *song* and its resonance causes the crystals dangling from the chandeliers to vibrate. The voice then quavers -- cracks and is reduced to a helpless whisper. The effect of this singing in the passages where Lady Juliet reads from the diaries she wrote when she was twelve years old is both magical and devastating -- for you know that what you hear is the voice of someone near to death – and the wisdom remains a child's" (*The Wars* 157-58).

same time questioning and undermining, the authority of the past through characters such as Marian and Juliet.<sup>14</sup>

The opportunity to speak to the Researcher about Robert allows both these characters the chance to reassess and reflect on their memories of him and that period, rather than just simply describing them. This amendment of the past is particularly evident in the record we are given of the Researcher's second interview with Juliet. This section recounts Robert and Lady Barbara's love affair but from the perspective of Juliet. She provides us with the only and very limited record of what occurred between Robert and her sister. She was a witness to what occurred, not a participant; she "*never took part*" in the intrigues of her family, she says, "*Not ever, I was a born observer*" (*The Wars* 162). As an observer she can only relate what she saw, heard and felt, but she cannot share with the Researcher what Robert or Barbara saw or felt -- she can only speculate. She tells the Researcher before she begins reading, "*These diaries will tell you what you want to know, I think. But I warn you -- I was ears and eyes and that was all. The conclusions are for you to make*" (*The Wars* 162-163). Findley structures this transcript so we are given sections of Juliet's diary, but those passages are framed by the moments (written in italics) when she pauses and comments on what she has read. The effect of this is that while Juliet may say "*The conclusions are for you to make,*" she does not, or cannot, allow the diary to stand on its own. She must provide material that is not

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<sup>14</sup> The postmodern tendency to use, while also undermining, a particular tradition is discussed by Linda Hutcheon in *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory and Fiction*. She argues that a novel, like *The Wars*, that acknowledges its "own constructing, ordering and selecting process . . . puts into question, as the same time at it exploits, the grounding of historical knowledge in the past real" (92).

within it; she must fill in gaps in the narrative and speculate about things that her younger self did not fully understand. The Researcher also inserts additional information when more background (when he feels more background) is needed and these additions to the diary and interpretations by both Juliet and the Researcher show the way memory or the past is always in a state of revision.<sup>15</sup>

The Researcher's addition to Juliet's diary is typical of his treatment of sources throughout the novel. In analyzing the material, the Researcher feels an urge to define, to explain, to clarify -- to essentially make whole the story told in these public sources. There is, however, a fine balance between logical interpretation and a more exaggerated and intrusive treatment of sources. One very obvious example of this is the Researcher's examination of a photograph of the ocean, taken by "one of the Rosses (it is not clear which)" (*The Wars* 8). The Researcher says:

Whoever it was, later drew an arrow -- pointing to a small white dot on the far horizon. The small white dot can barely be seen. Nothing else is visible but sea and sky. Just above the arrow, written in bold black ink is the question: 'WHAT IS THIS?' All too clearly, the small white dot is an iceberg. Why whoever took the picture failed to verify this fact remains a mystery. The thing is dated August 4th but no year is given. (*The Wars* 8)

There is a tone of superiority adopted by the Researcher here. He has been able to determine that the white dot is an iceberg -- that it is "All too clearly" an iceberg -- and the tone here indicates that he is somewhat surprised that whoever took the picture was not able to arrive at the same conclusion. But rather than being able to clarify the

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<sup>15</sup> This idea of revision and the memory of the First World War is discussed by Barbara Korte in "The Grandfathers' War: Re-imagining World War I in British Novels and Films of the 1990s". She says that "Despite the fact that it has been heavily mythologised, World War I has never been preserved as a static, unalterable myth: 1914-18 has always been a site of memory under construction and reconstruction" (121).

meaning of this photo, the Researcher's deductions leave more to be explained.<sup>16</sup> He provokes more questions than he is able to answer and the picture itself speaks to how much is hidden. The iceberg, an image which Findley also uses in *The Telling of Lies* (1986), symbolizes concealment because it is an object that stresses how much is hidden beneath the surface. The photograph is not able to tell the Researcher who took it, why they took it, or even exactly when it was taken, for Findley chooses to use the date of August 4th but does not provide a year. This would, of course, be a significant date to choose in any work that deals with the Great War and yet there is nothing in the picture, or written on it, to suggest that the missing year should be 1914; it is an assumption or connection we may make because of the meaning now invested in that date.<sup>17</sup> The Researcher's quest "to know" Robert and the sources he uses (like this photograph) only draw attention to how much will never be found or known.

The Researcher can never fully know Robert's story. The distance between Robert's time and the Researcher's allows, as discussed in the previous chapter, for a more heroic interpretation of that life, but it also means that he will never be able to understand what it was like. The sources that Findley's Observer turns to are fragmented

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<sup>16</sup> Diana Brydon in "‘It could not be told’: Making Meaning in Timothy Findley's *The Wars*" points out that the sources the Researcher finds and uses "reminds him that objectivity is always a myth. Every photograph reveals only one angle of vision. Every letter has a message to send, which may disguise or distort what the sender perceives to be the truth. Every witness sees things differently: when eye witnesses testify, we find the records are most contradictory" (66).

<sup>17</sup> This association is also evident in the names of places as Dyer discusses in *The Missing of the Somme*. He points out that it "takes an effort of considerable historical will to remember that before the war Thiepval, Auchonvillers and Beaumont-Hamel were just places like any others, that the Somme was a pleasant river in the *département* of the same name" (Dyer 83).



and open to interpretation. Survivors of the period, such as Juliet and Marian, insist in their transcripts that “what it was like” can never be known by someone who did not live it. Juliet tells the Researcher, “You cannot know these things. You live when you live. No one else can ever live your life and no one else will ever know what you know. Then was then” (*The Wars* 114). While we, as readers, are given Robert’s story and, therefore, get a fictional re-creation of “what it was like,” Findley uses his Researcher’s denied quest “to know” to explicitly comment on what “people who weren’t yet born can never know” (*The Wars* 45).

### ***THE STONE CARVERS***

Even though Klara’s journey is quite different from those experienced by the other Observers, Urquhart is able to address similar concerns about knowing and narrating the past. Because of the novel’s focus on the construction of the Vimy monument, the quest for knowledge is entwined in *The Stone Carvers* with Klara’s obsessive need to remember Eamon and make amends for their past. Tilman describes her desire to go as a “madness” and he compares her obsession with the monument to “religion” (*The Stone Carvers* 255). Klara does not recognize, or reflect on, her own need “to know” and yet Urquhart insists that her physical journey to France allows Klara insight into information about the war that was denied her at the time. As someone who was alive during the war, but distanced from it by place and gender, Klara, like the other Observers, is unacquainted with “what it was like.” She has experienced a much more direct personal loss than Findley’s Observer, but she knows just as little about the reality of the experience that took Eamon away from her as any of the other Observers at the

start of their journeys. Klara, though discovering the war in a very different way, must attempt to piece together and construct the fragments of the past like the other Observers to come to some understanding of the experience. Through this process, Klara begins to understand what she was not ready, or not willing, to comprehend before.

The narrative structure of *The Stone Carvers* may not comment as overtly as *The Wars* on the past as a construction, but Urquhart does use Klara's treatment of her past to comment on the way memory can be revised or altered. Urquhart, for example, writes:

Years later Klara would tell a middle-aged man who listened carefully to each word she said that at that moment Eamon had waltzed with her in the kitchen, such was his happiness at seeing the misery on her face, misery that told him she had fallen in love with him. It was right then that the young man had pledged himself to her, right then that he had used the words "forever more." It was an odd moment, Klara would explain to the large, grey-haired man -- the misery, the joy, the words, the waltz . . . What she never admitted, not to the grey-haired man, not to herself, not to anyone, was that there had never been a waltz, there had never been a declaration, that all the pain and delight she later thought of as dancing was made known to her simply by the expression on the young man's open face. (*The Stone Carvers* 117-118)

Here Urquhart is using a narrative voice that spans past, present and future. This is what, the narrator tells us, this moment between Eamon and Klara will become. In memory what actually happened (what the narrator tells us happened between them at the time) becomes something quite different. The narrative structure of this passage allows Urquhart to contrast the reality of the past with the re-presentations of it because, as readers, we are told what actually happens between Klara and Eamon and, then, what it becomes in her re-telling of the moment. In her fictitious version, Klara is able to create a more satisfying and complete moment. This dancing, this declaration never occurred, and yet for Klara and for those she tells this narrative to, it becomes real. The past can be

a lie -- something that never happened, something that was never said can creep into memory and change the reality of the past. Urquhart uses Klara's attempts to control, alter or revise her past to reflect on the larger issue of memory and the past as a construction.

Klara's journey, like those of the other Observers, involves a desire to understand more, but the gaining of knowledge is associated throughout the novel with danger. Urquhart stresses that an understanding of certain human truths involves a great deal of pain. This knowledge must be gained through experience, not words; those that know these truths are unable to speak of the knowledge they have gained. This is first stressed through the relationship between Klara and Eamon and the knowledge she gains about love. Klara's relationship with Eamon teaches her a great deal, but a greater understanding of him and of her love for him is usually followed by a devastating event. After spying unobserved Eamon's "oddly delicate naked self" for the first time, Klara hears a "catastrophic noise" and she knows even before she sees the airplane that "A great calamity had occurred . . . Something fierce and dire had fallen from the sky" (*The Stone Carvers* 123). Observing Eamon's interest in the airplane, Klara realizes for the first time that "intrusions from the outside might be capable of removing him, of taking his mind and then his body permanently away from her" (*The Stone Carvers* 124). These painful revelations are not thoughts she is able to share with Eamon. She cannot speak the truths she knows, just as later in the novel former combatants cannot put into words the truths the war has taught them. Urquhart uses Klara's relationship with Eamon to reveal the painful process of loving another person but, significantly, there is always

some type of association with war in their interactions. For example, Urquhart describes an incident that happens when Klara and Eamon are ice skating together: “Klara had turned suddenly and they had crashed together, had fallen, as if killed in combat. Then they had lain quite still on the ice, mysterious, and knowing something neither could speak about” (*The Stone Carvers* 35). Urquhart is describing the moment when Eamon and Klara first realize their feelings for one another but her decision to use the phrase “as if killed in combat” to describe their fall connects unspeakable knowledge to war. This phrase “refers not only to the violence of the emotions they will arouse in each other, but also to the carnage to come” (Adams 236). Everything in Urquhart’s text is influenced by the war -- even before it occurs.

Urquhart also uses the character of Tilman to highlight the pain of knowledge. Wounded at Vimy, Tilman carries physical as well as emotional reminders of the knowledge he has gained in battle. The knowledge he has been granted through combat is unwanted and he carries in the place of his lost limb truths that he would rather not know. It is not knowledge that he is able to put into words -- at least for Klara. He can talk of Vimy to Klara but only in a very broad and impersonal sense. He can tell her about how it was fought and about the overwhelming casualties, but he cannot share with her his personal experiences and reactions. Klara wants to understand Tilman and what he has experienced and this desire “to know” him, “to know” what has personally happened to him, allows her to open up to a reality that is unfamiliar to her. Klara is not as distanced from the war in terms of time span as Findley’s and Thomson’s Observers and she is able to interact with survivors of the experience in a way that is denied both the

Researcher and the Man. Though this may seem to suggest that she has more insight into the combatant experience, Klara, like the other Observers, is denied the opportunity to gain the knowledge firsthand. It is Tilman's return that triggers Klara's journey, but he is unwilling, or unable, to share his war experiences with her. Klara's inability to understand Tilman is clear from the moment of his return, for she cannot understand why he would not want to return to Vimy. She imposes her own desires on Tilman because she has no concept of what Vimy was and is for him. Even being where he was does not allow Klara to truly understand what he felt and continues to feel at Vimy. Klara, for example, is shocked by the sheer number of headstones and crosses on their way to Vimy, but Tilman "stared straight ahead as they lumbered past these inappropriately tidy reminders of tragedy, these gardens of the dead" (*The Stone Carvers* 300). He tells her, "I can't look at them yet . . . Just, please, don't make me talk about it" (*The Stone Carvers* 300). Klara cannot be told about the truth of the experience and just like the other Observers she must look elsewhere for her information.

In her attempts to discover more about Walter Allward years after her experiences at the Monument, Klara turns to the paper records:

Klara would begin a trek from library to library of the cities she was able to reach in a day's journey, reading back issues of magazines and the publications of Veterans Affairs, taking notes, examining the indistinct grey reproductions in art books published in the first decades of the century. There was never enough. (*The Stone Carvers* 263)

Klara intensively researches Walter Allward because she wants "to know" him, though, like Findley's Researcher, she discovers, "There was never enough" (*The Stone Carvers* 263). She may have met him and she may believe that he "transformed her life" at Vimy,

but Klara clearly feels that what has been recorded of him on paper will provide her with a fuller understanding of him (*The Stone Carvers* 264). She embarks on this research many years after her experiences at the monument and not when she departs with Tilman for Vimy. The sources Klara turns to on her journey “to know” are quite different from those of the other Observers because very different sources are open to her. Urquhart is aware of and shares the societal or collective perception of “what it was like” with us, but when Klara embarks on her journey, the “Myth of the War” is not established in the same way it is for Findley’s and Thomson’s Observers and she does not have the same types of resources open to her. She must make the physical journey to France to see firsthand the knowledge preserved in the earth and in stone. The past that Klara needs, that she searches for in France is not written on paper; she is limited to what she sees in front of her, to what is recorded on the body and on the landscape.

Throughout her novel, Urquhart focuses on how the destruction of war leaves scars on both the earth and the body. Even though there is a sense of re-growth or regeneration by the time Klara arrives in France, the land retains reminders of what has occurred. One of the most striking examples of this is Urquhart’s narration of the road that needed to be built to the site of the memorial. The narrator tells of Chinese workers, who were “young enough to have but scant knowledge of the European war,” being killed by mines, “the noise of the fatal explosion like an insistent letter of reminder from the past” (*The Stone Carvers* 271). When the trees that attempted to take root on the battlefield are removed to make way for this road, “bits of stained cloth and human hair and bones were found entangled in the roots” (*The Stone Carvers* 271). Urquhart uses an

interesting image here. The trees – trees that symbolize the renewal or regeneration of the landscape – have taken root in the destruction and decay of the past. The true story lies beneath the surface in Urquhart's text, both physically and metaphorically. The tunnels, for example, preserve the true memory of Vimy in a way that has been altered or covered up on the surface with the renewal or regeneration of the land. It is in the tunnels that Giorgio can truly sense the spirit of the men that fought there: "The rusting military detritus underfoot and the names and images scratched into the chalky walls recalled so vividly the human activity that had taken place there they caused his eyes to fill with tears" (*The Stone Carvers* 282). The re-growth prevents Klara from seeing the destruction that Tilman remembers and associates with Vimy, but there are many reminders of what occurred there to help her understand, at least, the scale of the battle. Klara can see the number of cemeteries and the number of gravestones and crosses within them. She can see the sheer size of the monument and the number of names being carved on it. She can see the scars still evident on the land and she can go down into the tunnels with Giorgio and hear from him about the bodies and remnants of war that have been unearthed every year since its conclusion (*The Stone Carvers* 347). This does not allow her to really know "what it was like," but it does allow her some insight into what occurred and the experience helps her realize some important personal truths. Klara can never know what former combatants, like Tilman, saw or experienced at Vimy during the war, but what the earth reveals to her allows her to sense the sheer enormity of the experience.

For Urquhart, the body, like the land, has a story to tell.<sup>18</sup> Klara, for example, watches Tilman; she looks at his face for the knowledge he is unwilling or unable to reveal. However, she cannot read his face -- his “blank eyes and neutral mouth” do not provide her with the type of information she wants or needs (*The Stone Carvers* 299). There is a story on Tilman’s body but Klara is unable to read it because she lacks the necessary shared experience. Tilman is only able to talk about his experiences with Recouvrier and that is because the Frenchman understands very little of what Tilman says. In this way, Urquhart says, he is a “perfect listener” (*The Stone Carvers* 325). Tilman is only able to put his experience into words when the listener is unable to understand those words. Recouvrier and Tilman may not share the same language, but they do share a similar war experience:

“Shrapnel,” he said, knocking twice on Tilman’s wooden leg. “Verdun,” he added. The Canadian understood then that this kind man carried in his body fragments of the catastrophe of the battle of Verdun, fragments that

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<sup>18</sup> Urquhart focuses on the stories recorded on the body, but another central concern in *The Stone Carvers* is bones and their importance in the structure of monuments and sculptures, as well as in terms of what we remember – or what is left us to remember. Joseph Becker tells his granddaughter, “Always remember the bones...They last the longest and explain the life history of people, monuments, sculpture. Without them everything else falls apart. With them the inner secret of each structure survives. Too many carvings have no bones, so termite and woodworm can destroy them utterly . . . or weather, or war. Think always when you are working of the strong ribcage of your abess, think of the long bones in her thighs. If you don’t keep them in mind they won’t be there and then she will be nothing more than drapery and skin, beautiful in its folds and gathers but always verging on collapse” (*The Stone Carvers* 54). “The bones,” he tells her, “are what we remember” (*The Stone Carvers* 54). Urquhart returns to this idea further on in her novel. Eamon’s body is lost and destroyed by war, and all that remains of him is his “bones and teeth scattered who knew where” (*The Stone Carvers* 168). Klara dreams of collecting these “remnants” from distant battlefields, but “in the dream she was always searching because although she carried the miraculous package close to her heart, there was always a rib or a thigh bone she couldn’t find” (*The Stone Carvers* 168).



now and then, like Tilman's own memories, worked themselves to the surface. He touched the plate where the blood was drying, then brought his fist down on his artificial leg. "Vimy Ridge," he said. "Vimy." (*The Stone Carvers* 325)

Their physical and emotional scars reveal Tilman and Recouvrir to be "fragmented individuals" and one of the main themes Urquhart explores in *The Stone Carvers* is the way "the fragmented individual may be made whole again" (Adams 230). In this case, it is through each other. Their physical scars and the meaning endowed in "Verdun" and "Vimy" allow Tilman and Recouvrir to truly understand and heal one another. These words, even if Tilman did share them with Klara, do not hold the same meaning for her as a non-combatant. Tilman's body retains the narrative of his war experience, but Klara is denied that knowledge because she was not there, because she did not personally experience Verdun or Vimy and, therefore, does not understand all the meaning behind these names.

In *The Stone Carvers*, Urquhart uses Klara to stress the impossibility of knowing the past. Klara goes to Vimy, to the land still scarred by battle, but she is still not able to fully comprehend what occurred there. Her brother fought and lost a limb at Vimy, and yet Klara is unable to truly understand what he suffered there. She is also denied knowledge of Eamon. She does feel a closer connection to him in France: "Now that she was standing on the soil of the country whose air he had last breathed, in the vicinity of a memorial that would bear his name, the memory of Eamon often came painfully alive in her mind" (*The Stone Carvers* 315). Going to France allows her to feel his presence and yet she will never know what happened to him. She will never know where in the country his life ended and where his bones are buried. She will never know the end of

his story. Klara, however, learns to accept all of these “nevers” and by the end of the text, she understands that her journey was not for “them” but for herself.

### ***THE LOST BOYS***

The Observer’s quest “to know” has its fullest exploration in R.H. Thomson’s *The Lost Boys*. Though much of the play examines his great uncles’ experiences during the war, the focus of *The Lost Boys* is Thomson’s journey to discover who they were. His great uncles’ stories are important but it is really his quest to uncover their stories and experiences that is at the heart of the play.<sup>19</sup> Thomson’s play is about the process of knowing – the process of knowing the past, knowing the people who inhabited it and knowing what impact that past can have on the present. But just as with the Researcher and Klara, there are many difficulties and impossibilities involved in any quest “to know” the past. The letters are virtually all that is left of Thomson’s great uncles; it is only through this particular source that he can begin to know who they were, what their stories were and, most importantly, who and what they are to him. The content of the letters for Thomson, however, proved somewhat problematic initially. He says that he “never connected with them when [he] was young” because “Their reality seemed unfathomable. It was too long ago” (“Five Brothers from Brantford”). Thomson incorporates this initial frustration into the play. At the start of the play, the Man provides reasons for his

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<sup>19</sup> In “Men of Letters” Thomson discusses the workshop reading he gave for Eric Peterson and Richard Rose: “Both told him bluntly that the material ‘isn’t as interesting to us as it is to you. But why are you interested, Robert?’ And when Thomson offered up reasons why he was alternately intrigued, fascinated and moved by his uncles’ letters, they said: ‘*That’s* interesting . . . Your connection to those stories is the actual glue’” (R9).

younger self's inability to read all of the letters: "I kept getting their names mixed up . . . and the repetition. 'Could you send me a couple pairs of socks?' 'Could you send moth balls?' 'The Belgium mud is something fierce.' 'I could do with another pair of socks'" (*The Lost Boys* 4). The *vignette* that occurs towards the beginning of Act Two echoes this earlier speech and it features brief, seemingly mundane sections of the letters from the great uncles to their mother -- including George's repeated requests for socks. Information from other sources, however, helps frame Thomson's view of their experience. It is "history" that provides the context for what his great uncles say (can say) in their letters. A greater historical understanding of the war, however, leads to frustration about what his great uncles did not or could not say:

Is this all you can say George? You are fighting the battle of Passchendaele . . . For each metre gained 35 men were lost. That is one son per inch . . . and so little said Geordie . . . The bombardment was continuous for a week. That week reduced the fields to a diarrhea of mud and slime. I try to imagine what it would be like to drown in it, because they did. I try to imagine drowning in mud at night. At least Geordie, you managed to write, "This Belgium mud is something fierce." (*The Lost Boys* 49)

What the Man saw as repetitive in his initial attempts to read the letters, actually takes on much greater meaning at this point in the play. His research allows him to now recognize the significance of a phrase like "This Belgium mud is something fierce" (*The Lost Boys* 49). While his research allows him a greater appreciation of what his great uncles had to and did endure, the context he is able to establish for their letters also angers and frustrates him. A greater understanding of the war shows this Observer how much he will never know, how much was never said or recorded.

His research also allows him to challenge the past and the “truth” recorded on paper. By playing every role, Thomson acts out the letters, but he also interacts with them. This is particularly evident in the Man’s questioning of George. The *vignette* discussed above ends with a letter from George to his mother telling her why he has been admitted to hospital. George tells her it is his feet, but the Man’s research uncovers a different explanation -- the casualty form lists V.D.S. and V.D.G. (venereal disease syphilis and gonorrhoea). This discovery is followed by the stage direction, “*The actor now begins to realize how much is hidden from him in the letters*” (*The Lost Boys* 45).

He, then, says:

The first level of deception in these letters is the triviality, the off-handedness. There was so much they could not write about . . . The next level of deception is the nature of the deaths. But of course, why would anyone tell a mother how horrible some of the deaths were . . . Then there is the simplest kind of deception. In his hospital bed with syphilis George again writes his mother. (*The Lost Boys* 44-45)

This time George tells his mother that he is hard of hearing and needs to remain in hospital. The Man “*addresses his dead relative*” and says “‘Liar.’ And why not? What would you write your mother? As if this war were not bad enough” (*The Lost Boys* 45). Thomson chooses to have the Man “*address*” George directly and to call his relative a “Liar” (*The Lost Boys* 45). Even though he excuses or understands the lying, it is a powerful moment on stage and stresses the Observer’s attempt to blur the line between the past and the present. He continues to question George about what happened and with whom until he realizes he has “*reached a dead end*” (*The Lost Boys* 46). He attempts to force certain possibilities based on what he knows of George. He looks once again to what he has learned from the letters, even though he is aware of their fragmented nature

and the possibility of deception. The Man begs his great uncle, "Help me George. You were on leave in London a month before, was she English? Was it anyone I would have read about in the letters?" (*The Lost Boys* 46). George, however, is silent, for he can only say on stage what he has written in the letters. The Man is not satisfied with what George has said because it does not give him the complete story or truth that he seeks. This particular interrogation of the past reveals the way in which the Man places his own priorities on what should have been recorded. Confronted with George's silence on this subject and frustrated by this denial of knowledge, the Man says, "there's nothing in the letters, George, nothing. It's a world unspoken" (*The Lost Boys* 46). Thomson's Observer wants to make the story complete, but the truth he seeks is not recorded on paper. It is knowledge that only George has and he can no longer share that knowledge with the Man. Thomson's interrogation of George makes it clear that, while the past can be questioned, it simply will not answer.

Much of the Observer's journey in *The Lost Boys* takes the form of walking in someone else's footsteps. This idea is first introduced through his great uncle Art and Thomson's attempt to find the place where he was wounded: "I went back to Belgium. When I read this letter I had to find the place where Art was hit. I had to walk in his footsteps. Why? I don't know why. Who can answer these questions? And I realized that I would have to do it at night because that was Art's experience of it" (*The Lost Boys* 19). After finding the spot where Art was hit, the Man says, "I stand here in the wet darkness, I actually stand here . . . with Art. The rain. The mud. The night. I feel as if I am watching history with my skin" (*The Lost Boys* 20). It is a desire that he cannot

explain at this point in the play, but the Man clearly feels a need to be where Art was and to see what Art saw and through that feel and see, at least, a fraction of what his great uncle saw and experienced. It is not enough to be where Art was, he must also attempt to recreate the conditions under which Art experienced that moment. He follows the same sort of process at the end of the play with Joe. This journey is more complicated though, because he is not only finding the spot where Joe was killed and buried, but retracing Rick's journey in 1923 to find and visit his brother's grave. As a non-combatant and, therefore, an observer rather than a participant of the war, Rick's story is very important to the Man. Rick may have lived through the war but he did not experience the front firsthand and he, like Thomson, lacks that lived experience. The description of his vigil at Joe's grave gives Thomson some insight into not only where he needs to go, but also what he needs to do when he is there. Walking in Rick's footsteps allows Thomson to move from the need "to know" to the process of remembering.

One other very important section where Thomson uses this idea of walking in or retracing someone's footsteps is the passage which details his father's death in a car accident. This section does not deal directly with the war, but it is important in understanding his desire throughout the play to walk in his great uncles' footsteps and retrace their final moments. This particular Observer's quest "to know" is obsessive, and it is in this section, rather than those dealing directly with the war, that Thomson attempts to explain this fixation. Throughout the play, the Man *needs* a physical connection. He needs to stand where they stood, to see what they saw, to hear what they heard and feel what they felt. The section detailing his father's death is no different. The focus in this

passage is not specifically on his father's death, but rather on his attempts to make sense of it, just as the play is not just about his great uncles, but about his own journey "to know" and to tell their stories. What his father might have seen or heard comes through Thomson's retracing of that experience. He questions his desire or need to be there, just as he wonders why he needs to find where Art was wounded or Joe killed. This section, however, provides some explanation for this need. Thomson says, "I've come as far as I can. I am as close to him in his last instant that I can be. I have placed my feet in his footsteps, to know him, to be there, to be here. That's all I can do. Witness" (*The Lost Boys* 57). Being physically close to their experiences allows the Man to bridge the gap between past and present -- "to be there" and "to be here" in the same moment (*The Lost Boys* 57). In the case of his father and Joe, it also allows him some physical connection to their deaths, because he is finding the places where they lived their last moments.

In *Postcards from the Trenches*, Allyson Booth discusses the distance between combatant and non-combatant in terms of the distance between "the territory of corpses from the territory of corpselessness" (30). Because, during the war, there was no corpse for a burial on the home-front, "the days immediately following news of a death were days spent reading about and interpreting death, instead of confronting and commemorating physical evidence of it" (A. Booth 27). This concept might have some bearing on the Man's desire to find these spots. His father, he says, "died away from us all and we didn't see his body until four days after at the funeral home" and it is only through the words they wrote that Thomson really knows his great uncles and learns about their lives and begins to mourn their deaths (*The Lost Boys* 56). Being in these

locations allows the Man the opportunity to physically confront their loss. Thomson comes as close as he possibly can to those moments because he tries to be physically there. This section also reveals Thomson's understanding and acceptance of the limitations between the past and his journey in the present to understand that past. It is in this section that he first admits that he has "come as far as [he] can" and that the only role he can occupy is that of "Witness" (*The Lost Boys* 57).

Thomson, like Findley and Urquhart, focuses on the denial of complete knowledge. One of the main ideas Thomson explores in *The Lost Boys* is the limitations on how much we are able to see and comprehend. Thomson, for example, discusses the peaceful fields that he sees when he visits the battlefields versus what he knows about the Iron Harvest and the "dance of the dead soldiers" (*The Lost Boys* 46). As with Urquhart, the larger stories dwell beneath the surface:

A hundred thousand skeletons lie unclaimed beneath the surface of the battlefield. They too are moving. Their bones dance . . . ever so slowly in the shifting of earth and mud . . . stepping with the frosts for more than eighty years. And as the dead men dance the decades away . . . a few break company each spring . . . Up to 40 of these forgotten soldiers appear each year . . . and the other thousands return to their dance. This is the larger story. That story was never told me by my senses.

My senses are veiled. It's as if I'm only allowed to see and hear as much of the world as my mind can bear. I'm only allowed to see and hear as much of the world as is comfortable. But the dance beneath my feet in the darkness of the earth is a greater story. Above my head is a greater story . . . the light dances of the stars and galaxies. The worlds unspoken in my uncle's letters is the greater story. (*The Lost Boys* 47)



Here Thomson suggests that there is only so much that we are able to see and handle.<sup>20</sup>

There is a great deal that lies just beneath the surface of our perception, such as the reminders of the First World War that move beneath the peaceful landscape that Thomson sees. His senses do not allow him to see, to hear, to smell what he cannot cope with, and yet Thomson wants to be exposed to the greater story. To open ourselves up to these kinds of truths, “takes a suspension of what we believe makes sense. And surely it takes courage to see the larger story beyond the comfortable ideas” (*The Lost Boys* 47). It, also, as Thomson shows throughout the play, requires a great deal of questioning. His younger, unaware self did not ask the important questions and, therefore, he did not see the stories around him. The play illustrates the way in which he learned to question -- questioning both the past and himself. Thomson wonders, “Who am I now that I can’t stop asking? Everywhere I look I ask: up to the stars, back to my uncles’ letters, into the fabric of the human heart. I ask and I receive more and more wonder” (“Upcoming at the Berkley Street Theatre” 16). By the end of the play Thomson realizes and accepts that there are questions that never will be answered, just as he realizes and accepts by the end of the play that he will not know or see all of the larger story. He realizes, however, that the importance lies in the asking.

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<sup>20</sup> In *The Missing of the Somme*, Dyer quotes a section of Henri Barbusse’s *Le Feu* (1916) (translated into English as *Under Fire* in 1917) in which a combatant expresses very similar sentiments: “And everything we’ve seen was too much. We’re not *made* to hold it all. It takes its bloody hook in all directions. We’re too little to hold it” (17).

## THE DENIAL OF KNOWLEDGE

As much as the Observers are able to find and understand about the war, there is no way for them to achieve complete knowledge of the experience. Their attempts to learn more about the Great War are important and admirable, but, as Findley reveals through his Researcher, there can be an element of intrusion in the obsessive desire “to know.” The Observers attempt to impose a completeness on the experience, but this is futile because “Life doesn’t make sense, although we are constantly trying to deny this insight by inventing connections to explain the inexplicable” (Brydon, “It Could Not Be Told” 73). What the Observers must learn to accept is the fact that they can never have total knowledge of the experience, and they must move from their intrusive desire “to know” to a more balanced awareness of what occurred.

These Observers and their authors cannot fully understand the experience precisely because they cannot and do not have to live it. “The position of the civilian speaker will always be suspect,” Allyson Booth argues in *Postcards from the Trenches*, “because it will always be relatively safe” (169). One very interesting connection to this is the account Findley gives in *Inside Memory* (1990) about his attempt to survive outside for twenty-four hours to gain an understanding of what daily life would have been like for the combatants. His goal is to “do all the things that they had had to do . . . in weather and conditions matching theirs” (*Inside Memory* 148). In doing this, Findley does gain some insight into the physical difficulties the combatants would have experienced on a daily basis, and also the emotional isolation, but he can never accurately re-create the experience. Findley himself refers to this impossibility: “No one was firing at me -- I

was not being shelled. The mud was only ankle deep” (*Inside Memory* 148). This is as close as he can come to the physical experience of the war and yet, even this, he cannot survive for as long as he had hoped. Findley says, “I don’t know when it was that I decided I could not stay down all night. But sanity at some point said: *you don’t have to die for this* . . . .So I knew I would come back here to the house before my allotted time and this was my defeat” (*Inside Memory* 149). Findley is unable to endure for twenty-four hours what was daily life for the combatants. Researching the experience does not involve a re-living of the experience. The Observers may become obsessed with a desire “to know” about the war, but it is not and does not become their reality. A researcher, Geoff Dyer argues, can turn the war on and off: “This is what the war is like for us. We can stop it at will. We gaze at photographs of soldiers in trenches. Snow, dirt, cold, death. When we have been there long enough, we get up and leave, turn the page and move on” (57). While I would argue that what they learn of the war does influence their daily lives and outlook, the experience, as Dyer points out, is not one that is lived by the Observers. What they will never be able to grasp is the mortality of the situation; they do not “*have to die for this*” (*Inside Memory* 149).

All three of these texts focus on how much the Observers cannot know. The past is the past and no matter how much the Observers would like to completely understand what happened *then*, there is no way for them to fully re-create it. The historical record does not and cannot contain the entire past. The sources that the Observers turn to stress the selectiveness of history. These authors also stress in various way the fragility and degeneration of the past. Instead of extracting an entire period and presenting it whole,

all three authors stress in their narratives how much is lacking in any account of the past. They incorporate into their narratives concerns about the past they are writing; they explicitly question the possibility of knowing and writing history. The Observers, these authors insist, cannot know the past to its full extent, and yet, paradoxically, the type of truths about the experience that are denied the Observers are given to readers. The Observers' quest for total knowledge is denied, but the reader is often able to go further and see more than they are. Through fictional recreations, we can discover the stories that all three authors insist history does not record.

“Our fictions have power,” argues Lynne Hanley, because “they shape our memories of the past and they create memories of pasts we have never had, of experiences not even remotely like anything that has ever happened to us” (3-4). Fictional retellings have the power to re-create and illuminate the past in a way that factual historical accounts cannot. Findley, Thomson and Urquhart all suggest that it is through art, not history, that the past can be best preserved and then re-discovered. Findley, for example, includes public sources (diary entries, transcripts and descriptions of the photographs) in his narrative, but he moves beyond the fragmented and limited story they tell to a more private narration of episodes from Robert's life. This “unsourced” material provides Robert's personal story or his private experience, but it is the type of story that is not preserved on paper, except in fictional re-creations. The research that went into the writing of *The Stone Carvers* is obvious in the realism of Urquhart's descriptions, but she makes that knowledge seem very personal by conveying it through Tilman. For us, as readers, the history of the battle becomes his private

memories of Vimy and we see the horror of that battle from his perspective. Most importantly, we are given the knowledge that Klara is denied. By privileging the position of the reader in both of these novels, Findley and Urquhart undermine the authority of history, while stressing the power of fiction. In *The Lost Boys*, we do not see more of the story than the Observer, but Thomson is able to re-create his great uncles by assuming those roles. His great uncles come to life again, not only for Thomson but for his audience. Thomson says the process of speaking their words onstage allowed him to hear them: "By uttering their words each night, speaking their rhythms, their turns of phrase, their images, their preoccupations, I was being spoken to" ("Five Brothers from Brantford"). These contemporary retellings may not be entirely factual or accurate writings of the past, but they allow for a much more relatable and complete envisioning of the past. These imaginative recreations have a great deal of power, particularly the power to make history live and breathe again.

### **CHAPTER THREE: REMEMBRANCE, THE AFFIRMATION OF LIFE AND THE OBSERVER**

Considering the ways in which these contemporary retellings problematize the concept of historical knowledge, an important question to consider is how the Great War was and is remembered and what we do (or should) remember of it. The way in which the war was memorialized is a central concern in all three of these works, particularly in terms of how later generations have come to view the war and deal with the legacy of the physical and literary monuments to it and the generation who fought it. Total knowledge is denied by all three authors, but the Observers do achieve a greater awareness of what occurred in the past that makes it impossible for them not to see themselves as products of that past. The Observers will never have the lived experience of the war and there is a great deal that they will never know but they are changed in profound ways and they are aware of a great deal more than they were at the start of their journeys. First and foremost, they recognize how much has been lost and how much needs to be remembered, but, more importantly, how many people and stories there are to remember. Though all three authors stress that the Observers cannot fully know the past, they do insist that the war must be remembered, that its lost combatants must be honoured for their sacrifice and they insist that the lessons of the past must not be forgotten. By the end of these works, the Observers do not “know” but they have learned, and, perhaps, the

most valuable things they gain on their journeys are greater understandings of themselves and a much greater appreciation of life itself. We must, all three authors insist, be aware of the past to understand who we are, and we must live in the present, hope for the future and remember the past, but not be consumed or held back by it.

Even before the war's end, many people were concerned with how it and its dead would be remembered, particularly in terms of physical tributes and reminders of what occurred.<sup>1</sup> The difficulty that both Geoff Dyer in *The Missing of the Somme* and Allyson Booth in *Postcards from the Trenches* discuss was making physical in monuments and ceremonies a remembrance that is based in absence. The public's urgent insistence for war memorials to the dead and missing "suggests that the commemoration of absence demands at least a representation of presence" (Booth 41). Booth argues that several cemeteries and monuments use empty space to create presence. The Thiepval monument, for example, uses "a sequence of stacked arches framing empty space. The walls of the memorial, thus, give the names to be remembered a material but not an anthropomorphic form: absence is rendered in a way that constitutes gigantic presence" (Booth 36). In *The Missing of the Somme*, Dyer also considers how absence might be translated into presence, but he looks specifically at the Armistice ceremony in London in 1919. He

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<sup>1</sup> The first memorial activity of the First World War was the street war shrines. Before the official ritual of remembrance was in place these shrines "reflected a desire to turn the sublime and abstract emotions of grief, pride and hope into tangible symbols... The shrines were set up because people wanted them and needed to feel that they were doing something to remember their dead, and to provide some sort of superstitious protection for those still serving at the front" (Connelly 25). In *The Missing of the Somme* Geoff Dyer discusses "For the Fallen" by Laurence Binyon which was written in September 1914, "before the fallen actually fell" (7). This, Dyer argues, makes it "a work not of remembrance but of anticipation, or more accurately, the *anticipation of remembrance*: a foreseeing that is also a determining" (7).

discusses a photograph that shows a group of soldiers marching past the temporary Cenotaph. These soldiers, however, are not marching for themselves, but for the dead, for the missing. Even though they were combatants, these survivors, Dyer argues, can only fill the role of witness to war's greatest sacrifice:

The role of the army is not to celebrate victory but to represent the dead. This is an inevitable side-effect of the language of Remembrance being permeated so thoroughly by the idea of sacrifice. In honouring the dead, survivors testified to their exclusion from the war's ultimate meaning – sacrifice – except vicariously as witnesses. The role of the living is to offer tribute, not to receive it. The soldiers marching past the Cenotaph, in other words, comprise an army of the surrogate dead. (Dyer 22)

These monuments and ceremonies are part of an attempt to record and honour the lost and endow the loss with meaning for those left behind. The monuments, in particular, are for the dead but also for the living; a war memorial is not only a tribute to the fallen but a reassurance for those left behind. In *A War Imagined*, Hynes argues, "Monument-raising is an attempt by society to deal with certain fundamental needs of those who survive a war. A monument records the dead, and so gives dignity to their undignified death. . . . They reassure non-combatants that the dead died willingly and do not resent or repent their sacrifice" (270).

One issue that several authors make note of is the beauty and peace of the battlefield cemeteries and the monuments. Paul Fussell says that the "cemeteries are both pretty and bizarre, fertile with roses, projecting an almost unendurably ironic peacefulness" (70). Dyer, in his description, notes the maintenance of the cemeteries, pointing out that in them "there is no ageing: everything is kept as new. Time does not exist here, only the seasons" but the effect of this is somewhat "strange" because



“cemeteries, after all, are expected to age” (15). Florence Murdoch, whose brother was a Great War veteran, participated in the 1936 Vimy Pilgrimage and she says of the Canadian cemeteries she visited that “really they are far more beautiful than I ever thought they could be. I had heard that they were beautiful, but I’ll never forget them. The horror of so many graves is taken away by the beauty of the cemetery and the flowers were marvelous” (qtd. in Beatty: 23). Vera Brittain also comments on the beauty and peace of the monuments and cemeteries in “Illusion on the Somme” but her reaction is quite different from Murdoch’s. After reading the inscription on the Thiepval monument to the Missing of the Somme, Brittain comments:

Grave and beautiful words, you say, which bring tears to the eyes and a sob to the throat? Yes, no doubt – but let’s have the truth. They are all a cheating and a camouflage, these noble memories, with their mown, scented lawns, these peaceful cemeteries filled with red roses and purple pansies, these harvest fields which help to create the illusion that war is a glorious thing because so much of its aftermath can be rendered lovely and dignified. They do not compensate the young men for the lives that they laid down, and they do not recompense you and me for having to go through the long years without them. (“Illusion on the Somme” 214-215)

In this passage, Brittain expresses a great deal of anger at the war memorials. In her view, they are not fitting tributes to the war and those lost during it; they do not provide proper closure for the dead or for those left behind.<sup>2</sup> Above all, the beauty and the peace of these places disguise, for Brittain, the reality of the war experience. There is no

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<sup>2</sup> R.H. Thomson expressed a similar sentiment in my interview with him. The name of his great uncle George is written on the memorial at Hart House and also on the Menin Gate, but Thomson does not feel that these memorializations provide proper closure. “The monuments were meant to complete the stories,” but “they didn’t” (Thomson, Personal Interview). Thomson went on to say that his play is an attempt to provide that closure or that completion of his great uncles’ stories: “Their stories were not complete. It is up to me to complete them” (Thomson, Personal Interview).

denying the enormity of loss documented on the monuments or in the cemeteries, but Brittain sees them as somehow masking the war's true face and its futility. According to Hynes, monuments "embody, in permanent form, ideas about war – heroic, romantic, historic, occasionally tragic. . . . They belong to the discourse of Big Words, and by existing they affirm the meaning and value of those words, in spite of all the dying" (270).<sup>3</sup> This is precisely Brittain's argument against the memorials she sees. Even though the monuments and cemeteries stress loss and sacrifice, they do not condemn "the discourse of Big Words" and, therefore, in some ways do "help to create the illusion that war is a glorious thing" (Hynes 270, Brittain 215). By not preserving the "truth" of the war, these monuments are just as involved in the process of forgetting, as they are in the process of remembering.

Even though the monuments were constructed to retain our collective history, the twentieth century, Margaret Atwood argues, was "on the whole more interested in forgetting – forgetting as an organic process, and sometimes as a willed act" (11). "Something has happened to the theology of monuments," Douglas How notes in *One Village, One War, 1914-1945: A Thinking About the Literature of Stone*, with more cities and towns opting for "memorials of a more practical kind" (such as libraries and parks) (How 16). This, How argues, represents a deeper problem about our faith in ourselves

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<sup>3</sup> Hynes differentiates monument-making from the anti-monuments. Monuments (not just the physical monuments but also books, painting, music) may refer to the tragic losses, but in these "the Big Words sound out again, as though they had never been doubted" (277). In anti-monuments we see "works that rendered the war without the value-bearing abstractions, without the glory, and without the large-scale grandeur. Often they were conscious, aggressive rejections of the monument-making principles; they turned away from celebration in search of war's reality" (283).

and our predecessors: “some skepticism or bewilderment in the 20<sup>th</sup> century mind seems to have numbed the urge to erect memorials to human beings, perhaps as part of a doubt in man about man himself” (16). There is a desire to see ourselves as somehow separate from the past, not simply because of the terrible things that occurred in it, but also because that is what each generation attempts to do. “Every generation,” Stephen O’Shea argues in *Back to the Front: An Accidental Historian Walks the Trenches of World War I* (1996), “is said to dismiss the experience of its predecessors as a sort of tedious overture humanity had to endure before the real divas stepped onstage” (2). He argues that “Ignoring, even forgetting, the past is much better than the alternative: being trapped by it, condemned to viewing current events as recurring events and thus fighting the same feuds and wasting time in learning how and who to hate” (O’Shea 2). The construction of monuments to the dead and the missing and the writing done by many former combatants were attempts to “warn coming generations”; they were attempts to preserve their experience in a way that would prevent those in the future from repeating their mistakes (Read 72). The monument at Vimy, Walter Allward said in his address at the unveiling, honours “the men who gave their lives for it,” but it is also “a protest in a quiet way against the futility of war” (qtd. in Beatty: 31).<sup>4</sup> This desire to warn has fully permeated our understanding of the First World War, partially because we see it as a warning that was not and still is not heeded. We see this warning but we also see all the

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<sup>4</sup> Beatty concludes his book, by quoting an editorial about the Vimy Pilgrimage that appeared in the Toronto *Globe*: “Deep down under the spirit of thankfulness and humble pride which marked each tribute, lay another emotion, a sort of fear . . . It was the feeling that one Vimy Ridge might not suffice, as if men gathered there suddenly saw through their memories that new generations had not learned and could not understand” (qtd. in Beatty: 46).

wars that followed it, even though the monuments and war books showed and told us the outcome.<sup>5</sup> The warning, however, is still there. By insisting on the importance of the past and our need to remember it (even if we cannot fully know it), Findley, Thomson and Urquhart continue to warn us about humanity's destructive tendency as a sign not of despair, but rather of a continuing "cautious hope" that, finally, one day we will learn and that there is something worth preserving in spite of all that has occurred (McKenzie 397).

Geoff Dyer's *The Missing of the Somme* is an important text because, while he discusses the monuments, cemeteries, photographs and poetry of the Great War in an attempt to understand the way in which the war and post-war generations attempted to pay tribute to the fallen, he also considers in great detail how later generations (using his own reactions to make these points) perceive the Great War and its remembrance. He argues:

the war seems, to us, to have been fought less over territory than the way it would be remembered, that the war's true subject is remembrance. Indeed the whole war – which was being remembered even as it was fought, whose fallen were being remembered before they fell – seems not so much to be tinted by retrospect as to have been fought retrospectively. (Dyer 32)

"*They are going to have died*" is the tense that Dyer argues applies to the poetry of Wilfred Owen, but also to photographs of the Great War (35). Pictures, for example, of "young men queuing up to enlist in 1914 have the look of ghosts. They are queuing up to

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<sup>5</sup> Herbert Read discusses in *A Coat of Many Colours* the failure of the war books in preventing another war (he is thinking specifically of the Second World War). He says, "the suspicion now grows upon me that such writing was fuel to the inner flames of the war spirit. If we human beings have an irresistible urge to destruction, including an urge to self-destruction, then the imagination will feed ravenously on any vivid description of the processes of destruction" (75).

be slaughtered: they are already dead” (Dyer 6). These young men “seem wounded by the experience that is still to come; they are *tinted* by the trenches” (Dyer 37). According to Dyer, we cannot see photographs like these and not see the horror that is to come. We cannot see these young men without also seeing Verdun, Passchendaele and the Somme. We cannot see these young men without also seeing the battlefield cemeteries and the monuments to the fallen and the missing such as Vimy and Thiepval. We cannot see these young men without the words of Owen or Sassoon echoing in our ears. It is impossible, Dyer suggests, for us to separate the war from the way in which it was officially memorialized. Dyer includes in his book an account of his personal reaction to this official remembrance of the Great War. Remembrance functions in a similar fashion in the contemporary retellings of the Great War I am examining. In all three works, memorials play some role, though this issue of how the war is remembered or memorialized receives its fullest consideration in Urquhart’s novel. These retellings use the official and physical memorials of the war to consider how an individual, decades after the end of the war and lacking any lived experience of it, deals with the enormous legacy recorded there.

### ***THE WARS AND THE LOST BOYS***

In both Findley’s *The Wars* and Thomson’s *The Lost Boys*, knowledge of the war is inseparable from remembrance of it. These two works do not deal extensively with the monuments or military cemeteries, but that is because all the sources these Observers turn to are involved in the process of remembrance. The photographs in Findley’s novel and the letters Thomson uses in his play “are *tinted* by the trenches”; it is impossible for the

Observers in these two works to separate the lived experiences recorded there from the greater historical context (Dyer 37). They begin by wanting “to know” and in many ways re-create or re-live the war, but they move away from this initial desire and begin to become involved in the act of remembrance. Findley does not tell us whether the Researcher’s quest to know took him out of the archives and over to the battlefield cemeteries and monuments, but Findley does describe Robert’s burial and the inscription of “EARTH AND AIR AND FIRE AND WATER” that Juliet chose for his gravestone (*The Wars* 217). In *The Lost Boys*, the Man does go to the battlefields and the military cemeteries because, as discussed in the previous chapter, he attempts to walk in his great uncles’ footsteps – he must physically attempt to be where they were and see what they saw. He also finds the grave one of his great uncles occupied until 1954 and he recognizes that his journey must end here: “In the ancient light of the universe I stand an hour over Joe’s grave of 36 years. His blanket of earth pulled over him, his friends buried in the earth on either side...I have no further to go. I am exhilarated yet sadness is in my bones. Having come this far I now know how little of the world I see” (*The Lost Boys* 69). In both texts, these are brief but important moments because they describe places where people who want to remember, who want to pay tribute (like the Observers), can go. They are places where one can go and say in a sense *I have seen, I have heard and I know as much as I can know and now I want to remember and to acknowledge and to pay tribute to the past and its inhabitants*. This acknowledging of the past can take the form of a physical journey, but, as these retellings suggest, it is also possible to remember and honour the past by telling and retelling its stories. What

becomes clear by the end of these texts is that their journeys to understand are the most fitting tributes the Observers can offer the past. By wanting to know and to remember and by seeking out the stories of the past and giving imaginative life to them again, these Observers and these authors are very much involved in the continuing memorialization of the Great War.

### ***THE STONE CARVERS***

Remembrance is somewhat different in Urquhart's novel, because, with her focus on the carving of the Vimy monument, she attempts to portray how the official memory of the war and those lost during it was constructed at the time. Klara's personal journey to remember and make amends for her past with Eamon is mirrored in the equally obsessive, but more collective desire for remembrance that consumes the figure of Walter Allward. Allward, like Klara, is an observer, but he is consumed not by the desire "to know," but rather the desire to remember. He wants to create a memorial that cannot be ignored, that will not be overlooked like his previous sculptures and he searches for a stone that is flawless, that is untouched to record the names of those that never returned (*The Stone Carvers* 269).<sup>6</sup> He says, "*I have been eating and sleeping stone for so long it has become an obsession with me . . . and incidentally, a nightmare*" (*The Stone Carvers* 270). He searches not only for the perfect stone, but also for the perfect figures, pleased only when he knows "he had caught them just as they were letting their individual

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<sup>6</sup> Allward's fear about the memorials being forgotten is something, Dyer suggests, that has happened with the monuments of the First World War. He writes, "Over the years, passing by in a bus or on a bike, I have seen the Cenotaph so often that I scarcely notice it. It has become part of the unheeded architecture of the everyday. The empty tomb has become the invisible tomb" (Dyer 19).

personalities go, beginning to understand that they were part of a collective, moved by the lunatic actions of war” (*The Stone Carvers* 350). It is his obsession that fuels the carving of the monument, but even before it is completed the world outside begins to forget and Allward feels as if he were “a vessel into which the world’s diminishing sorrow was poured for safe-keeping, and the weight of it was heavy on his bones” (*The Stone Carvers* 351). Allward is consumed by the need to remember, not for himself but for everyone. He embodies, for Urquhart, collective grief and collective remembrance, but also the lost, the dead. Allward has no existence away from or outside the monument and in his attempt to properly honour the dead, he abandons life and in a sense becomes one of the lost. He thinks, “I will be emptied . . . when this is over. I will have put every drop of my life’s blood into this already blood-soaked place” (*The Stone Carvers* 272). In death, the men lose their individuality for Allward, and it is Klara who ultimately gives the monument back its individuality and its life. The face she carves on the torchbearer is a portrait of Eamon, but “beyond that the expression had about it the trustfulness of someone who did not know he would ever be missing, lost from the earth. This woman had brought a personal retrospection to his monument, and had by doing so allowed life to enter it” (*The Stone Carvers* 340). Allward is obsessed by collective remembrance, but what Klara represents is the personal loss that is part of that larger grief. Whereas Allward is consumed by the enormity of the loss he must record, Klara seeks only to honour one individual, to set in stone her memory of the man she loved and lost. Urquhart stresses how important Klara’s personal grief is alongside the greater loss. It is



her memory, her attempt to remember that gives the monument -- this monument to overwhelming loss and death -- life.

Central to Urquhart's presentation of the Vimy monument are the names of the missing men carved on it and the power that these markings have to recall an individual life. Throughout her novel, Urquhart uses the character of Giorgio to highlight the importance of these carvings. He believes not only in the power of words, but also in the eternal nature of those words once they are carved in stone. He develops a "passion" for the look of words in stone, but he admires "most of all their permanence" (*The Stone Carvers* 277). He also understands the power that carved words can have for the living, particularly the carving of a name. When working on village memorials, Giorgio notices that relatives or friends or sweethearts stand, watching him carve and then, when he is done, they run "their fingers over the marks" and sometimes weep (*The Stone Carvers* 278). These markings do not restore the lost, but they do provide some comfort because they are a record for these relatives or loved ones that he existed, and it is particularly important for the missing whose bodies were never recovered. Giorgio tells Klara, "There is absolutely nothing . . . like the carving of names. Nothing like committing to the stone this record of someone who is utterly lost" (*The Stone Carvers* 347). These marks, Giorgio realizes, are all that is left of a life. He and the other stone carvers at Vimy commit to stone, "Lines, circles, and curves corresponding to a cherished, remembered sound called over fields at summer dusk from a back porch door, shouted perhaps in anger or whispered in passion, or in prayer, in the winter dark. All that remained of torn faces, crushed bone, scattered limbs" (*The Stone Carvers* 274). They

are only names, but in those names reside the stories of each individual life, even if the stories themselves cannot be committed permanently to stone.

### THE AFFIRMATION OF LIFE

Death and loss dominate the Observers' journeys. In learning more about the war, they are exposed to death and destruction on an overwhelming scale. The names carved on the monuments and headstones that the Observers see or visit represent human lives. Each name engraved on a monument, each name engraved on a headstone (even those known only as "A Soldier of the Great War"), represents an individual life. This truth is overwhelming and devastating, but almost impossible to truly comprehend because of the sheer enormity of the loss. Even though the cemeteries and monuments attempt to record every loss, it is hard to see them as individual losses – the vastness of the memorials stress instead collective loss, collective grief. What Findley, Thomson and Urquhart do in their texts is try to make these losses personal, to make them individual. They tell these stories to stress these men's and this generation's humanity. We need to remember, all three authors suggest, our common humanity. In *The Wars*, for example, Juliet says:

*Someone once said to Clive: do you think we will ever be forgiven for what we've done? They meant their generation and the war and what the war had done to civilization. Clive said something I've never forgotten. He said: "I doubt we'll ever be forgiven. All I hope is – they'll remember we were human beings." (The Wars 180).*

By the end of their journeys, the Observers learn to see the inhabitants of the past as human beings, and even though this recognition stresses the enormity of the loss, what ultimately awaits the Observers is life, not death. They know by the end of their journey

that simply by living -- by making the choice to fully live life in the present with an awareness of those who are no longer alive and a desire to share their stories -- they are honouring the past.

Many of the characters in *The Stone Carvers* are attempting to exorcise the past. Characters like Klara and Tilman carry within them a great deal of loss and anger, but also guilt, particularly because they are, in one form or another, survivors of the past. Participating in the carving of the monument is a way in which Klara can honour and mourn the past, but it is also a way for her to move beyond death and suffering. When she first learns Eamon is missing in action, Klara begins remaking his waistcoat because she believes that "once she was involved in the act of reconstruction, some of her anguish would abate" (*The Stone Carvers* 164). By remaking the waistcoat and by carving his face on Allward's torchbearer, Klara ensures there is some physical reminder of Eamon's existence, and this not only preserves his memory, but also diminishes her grief. Klara feels she needs to go to France for Eamon, to somehow make amends for their parting, but Urquhart makes it clear that Klara needs to go for herself. It is Klara, not Eamon, who needs closure, for it is only by saying goodbye to him and their past that Klara can start living again. Klara realizes, when she carves his name, that "this would be the last time she touched Eamon, that when they finished carving his name all the confusion and regret of his absence would unravel, just as surely as if she had embraced him with forgiving arms" (*The Stone Carvers* 376). Klara, at the end of her journey, has paid tribute to Eamon and also found a way to move forward. Klara must learn to both live and love again, and she learns to do both at a site of profound loss. Giorgio says, "Love,

in such a place as this,” and yet it is that place and that love that gives Klara an appreciation of life (*The Stone Carvers* 355). In his review of Urquhart’s novel, Robert Adams writes:

In a world of impermanence, all we can cling to, it seems to me, is love and the joy of creation. We know that both are ephemeral and that for some people they are not enough, even temporarily . . . but they really are all that we have, and Jane Urquhart has done a great service in reminding us of that essential truth. (Adams 245)

There is, Urquhart suggests, healing power in both love and art because it is the monument and Giorgio that allow Klara to make amends for her past and also find her future. Before her trip to France, Klara inhabits a space between past and present, refusing to live in or abandon either, but, like Findley and Thomson, Urquhart insists that the Observer cannot ultimately live in the past. It is important that Klara acknowledge her past, but she must not, Urquhart suggests, be imprisoned by it. Love and art are important to Urquhart because they represent the inspiration and achievement of human life. “The impossible,” she writes, “happens as a result of whims that turn into obsessions,” and “the windows and statues and towers” that are the result of it are maintained, not forever, but “longer than you might think in the face of autumn’s bitter winds and winter’s frantic storms” (*The Stone Carvers* 390). People achieve the impossible, in Urquhart’s view, because they dream, they hope and, most importantly, they live and love.

In *The Wars*, Findley affirms life in both the past of Robert’s war narrative and in the Researcher’s present. At the end of the novel, Robert, as several critics note, acts as an individual against the insanity of the war, but it is important, as Simone Vauthier

suggests, to consider the role of the dog and horse because his dedication to their preservation shows that Robert “affirms life in the midst of death and possibilities of commitment beyond the self” (Vauthier 13).<sup>7</sup> Findley’s use of fire, Peter Klovan argues, is also a “symbol of the life-process” because “it forever consumes and renews itself,” and he relates this cycle to Robert by arguing that Findley presents his protagonist’s life as “part of a continuum including the eternal, cyclic processes of nature” (Klovan 66, 59).<sup>8</sup> Perhaps the most important affirmation of life that Findley includes in Robert’s story is his response to Marian Turner’s offer of death. Marian tells the Researcher:

I’m a nurse. I’ve never offered death to anyone. I’ve prayed for it often enough. But I’ve never made the offer. But that night -- surrounded by all that dark -- and all those men in pain and the trains kept bringing us more and more and more -- and the war was never, never, never going to end -- that night, I thought: *I am ashamed to be alive*. I am ashamed of *life*. And I wanted to offer some way out of life -- I wanted grace for Robert Ross...I said: ‘I will help you, if you want me to.’ And I knew he understood -- because he said: ‘Not yet.’ Not *yet*. Do you see? He might have said ‘No.’ He might’ve said ‘never.’ He might’ve said ‘Yes.’ But he said ‘not yet.’ There, in those two words in a nutshell -- you have the essence of Robert Ross. And perhaps the essence of what it is to be alive. (*The Wars* 215-216)

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<sup>7</sup> McKenzie, for example, considers Robert’s act as an individual one and says that the outcome of Robert’s rejection of the war (which she relates to Sassoon’s protest) “suggests how vague and doubtful are the chances of success when an individual protests, while the fact that these protests were made reasserts the freedom of the human spirit to reject evil and its destructiveness even though the personal cost may be great” (409).

<sup>8</sup> Both Copley in *Representing War* and Bruce Pirie in “The Dragon in the Fog: ‘Displaced Mythology’ in *The Wars*” consider war as a cycle. Pirie argues that Robert’s experiences “remind us that we expect life to have four seasons -- youth, maturity, age, and death -- but part of the horror of *The Wars* is the realization that this natural cycle has been drastically accelerated” (71). Copley argues that combatant writers often use metaphors of natural disasters to describe the war: “The tendency to view the war as part of a natural cycle permits war writers to cling to the conviction that after the cleansing through fire and water a better world would emerge” (*Representing War* 116).

The phrase “not yet” is central to Findley’s understanding of life and death.<sup>9</sup> Marian sees all the death around her and she is ashamed of life, but Robert, who has come much closer to experiencing death, values it. They are, Pirie suggests, “the words of a man who has been profoundly educated by his journey to the lower world. He fully knows the presence of death and he holds onto life. Knowledge of death feeds his human impulse to survive” (76). Robert does not say a definite “yes” or “no” to life or to death, but he does choose to continue living, despite all he has seen and experienced during the war.<sup>10</sup> He chooses to live in spite of, or perhaps because of, his intimate knowledge of death, and Findley suggests that there is something heroic in Robert’s quiet refusal of Marian’s offer. Robert recognizes (and Marian recognizes through his words) that the “essence” of being alive is quite simply living -- especially making the choice to continue living when

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<sup>9</sup> Findley returns to this phrase in *Elizabeth Rex* (2000). “Not yet” is spoken several times throughout the play, especially by the character of Ned Lowenscroft who is dying of the pox (the role of Ned was played in the original Stratford production by Brent Carver who also, interestingly, played the role of Robert Ross in the film version of *The Wars*). In one scene (that particularly recalls *The Wars*), Findley writes:

ELIZABETH: You cannot avoid your death any more than Essex can in the Tower. Do what you will, it will come.

NED                    No. Not yet.

ELIZABETH: Not yet. *Not yet*. I predict these will be your last words. (71) Further on in the scene, Elizabeth stresses how much of a life Ned has had. She says “To have been so alive! Master Lowenscroft, here we are learning how to go on living – by learning how to die. But to die – even at your age – is not to have failed to have a life” (72).

<sup>10</sup> In *Inside Memory*, Findley discusses how this novel says “yes” by including William F. Whitehead’s memory of how the book began: “*Oh, said Tiff, it’s great! And guess what -- it’s positive! No more doom and gloom. This book says yes!*” (*Inside Memory* 136). Findley describes the book, in brief, to Whitehead, saying, for example, “*he does something that everyone thinks is insane, and after that he’s horribly maimed in a fire and finally he dies!*” (*Inside Memory* 136). Whitehead then says, “It wasn’t until the following year, when I first read the manuscript of *The Wars*, that I had to agree that Tiff was correct on all counts. Dreadful things happened to Robert Ross, the hero of *The Wars* -- but still, the book did end up saying *yes*” (*Inside Memory* 136).

surrounded by death (*The Wars* 216). It is, Findley insists, all that we can do. Robert's words are an acceptance of both life and death or, perhaps more specifically, an acceptance of life and an acknowledgement that death, one day, must also be accepted.

Findley's novel ends with the Researcher glimpsing one final photograph of Robert and Rowena: "Rowena seated astride the pony – Robert holding her in place. On the back is written: 'Look! You can see our breath!' And you can" (*The Wars* 218). Photography, as I suggested in the previous chapter, is used throughout Findley's novel as a way of preserving life and, in some sense, making people immortal. This final photograph with its focus on the preserved breath of Robert and Rowena furthers this idea and it "affirms that human life, like the frozen breath of Robert and Rowena, may be captured by the processes of memory and writing, and shown to be, paradoxically, both ephemeral and everlasting" (York 86-87). This photograph, Gilbert Drolet argues, is "the fitting climax to all the signposts along the way" such as the quotation from Euripides and Robert's "not yet" that "point to the palpable preservation of life" (155). It is appropriate that Findley concludes his novel this way because of his insistence throughout the novel that people and their stories and even breath can be preserved and made immortal in art and literature. It is also an important concluding image because this photograph is the last thing the Researcher sees before he moves from Robert's past to his own present. We must, Findley insists, keep the stories and the people of the past alive through writing, but he is equally insistent about our inability to live in or through the past. We can and must learn from the past and, perhaps, the most important lesson Robert's story should teach the Researcher is the importance of living. At the end of the

novel, the Researcher must leave the archives; he must stop living in the past, for a little while at least, and begin living in the present again. The Researcher will hopefully carry what he has learned of and from Robert with him, but he cannot remain in the archives with Robert.

Thomson concludes *The Lost Boys* with a similar message. The Man's journey takes him to the battlefields, to the grave of his great uncle Joe and yet he recognizes that this is as far as he can go. His journey ends at the grave and he acknowledges "I have no further to go" because he cannot cross that divide between life and death – he cannot "live" his great uncles' deaths (*The Lost Boys* 69). Throughout the play, he speaks their words and walks in their footsteps in an attempt to understand them and their war experiences, but at the end of his quest lie their deaths and his need to move forward. By the end of his journey, the Man has not gained complete knowledge of his great uncles' lived experience, but he has learned some important truths about them and about himself. Thomson wants to acknowledge those truths and how much the experience has given him, particularly in terms of the way in which it has made his great uncles live again.<sup>11</sup> The question, however, that arises in his play and in the other contemporary retellings is how to properly mourn and honour the past and those lost to it and during it. An image of dancing concludes Thomson's play and relates directly to this need to both remember and move forward -- this need to live in the present while also balancing the demands of

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<sup>11</sup> In the article he wrote for *Beaver*, Thomson discusses the way in which the writing and acting the play has allowed him to know his great uncles and sense their personalities. He says, "it is as if I feel his breath. This letter is no letter. This is not history. It is a voice. Jack's loneliness is my loneliness. Jack's anger is my anger. Jack's loyalty is my loyalty. There are no strangers here" ("Five brothers from Brantford").



the past and the future. In the last letter Thomson includes from Art, he mentions his inability to write about his reaction to news of his brother Joe's death, but then Art talks about a mourning dance he witnessed for one of his soldier's brothers. He says:

At dinner we heard the tom-toms going so we went up to see what was doing. There were three drums going as hard as the men could pound them and the dead man's next of kin were dancing about a huge fire...I woke up about midnight and as the drums were still going, I went up again to have a look. The onlookers had all gone, so had the women, the rain had put the fire out and there was only one man left dancing. The others had collapsed on the ground. The last man was about all in too but he was still shuffling about in time to the drums. (*The Lost Boys* 65)

It is this image that Thomson returns to at the end of his play. The mourning dance, which Art does not or cannot participate in for his own brothers, is danced by the Man.

He recognizes:

What is absolute is the motion, lives come and lives gone. The motion is all that is left me . . . the turn and dance of my uncles and the stars that are no longer there yet exist just the same . . . So I can only dance, as I might have danced through the vigil of my youth, sword in hand to tell life from death, illusion from reality. And for Joe and George and Art and Jack and Harold, my dance will go on till the rains put the fires out for good. My dance will go on till I am the last brother standing. I pick a pansy off a grave from such a precious piece of earth. I have come as far as I can. I've done as much as I can. All that's left for me now is to be here. (*The Lost Boys* 70)

In this passage, Thomson makes a clear connection to the mourning dance described in Art's letter. The dance allows him to mourn and honour his great uncles – to make amends for the honour and attention he did not give their stories in his youth. The dancing, however, is also motion -- it is movement. The Man realizes by the end of his journey that the only constant, the only "absolute," is motion, but that movement is portrayed as circular (*The Lost Boys* 70). Thomson uses the dance to symbolize the

circular nature of life (the cycle of life and lives) and even though he dedicates his dance to the dead, to the lost, it will take place throughout his life. Thomson affirms life at the end of his play by accepting life, by recognizing that “All that’s left for me now is to be here” (*The Lost Boys* 70). This final dance makes a powerful statement about our connection to the past or history and the way in which we must always move forward, even though we may carry with us into the future the burden of the past. In the cycle of his dance, Thomson continually has one foot in the past, one in the present and he is stepping towards the future.

Geoff Dyer concludes his book with a personal and moving response to what he has seen and realized during his visit to the cemeteries and monuments in France and Belgium. His reaction, I would suggest, applies directly to what the Observers realize at the end of their journeys. He writes:

I have never felt so peaceful. I would be happy never to leave.

So strong are these feelings that I wonder if there is not some compensatory quality in nature, some equilibrium -- of which the poppy is a manifestation and symbol -- which means that where terrible violence has taken place the earth will sometimes generate an equal and opposite sense of peace. In this place, where men were slaughtered they came also to love each other, to realize Camus’s great truth: that ‘there are more things to admire in men than to despise.’

Standing here, I know that some part of me will always be calmed by the memory of this place, by the vast capacity for forgiveness revealed by these cemeteries, by this landscape.

At this moment I am the only person on earth experiencing these sensations, in this place. At the same time, overwhelming and compounding this feeling, is the certainty that my presence here changes nothing; everything would be exactly the same without me.

Perhaps this is what is meant by ‘loneliness’ – knowing that even at your moments of most exalted emotion, you do not matter (perhaps this is precisely the moment of most exalted emotion) because these things will always be here: the dark trees full of summer leaf, the fading light that has

not changed in seventy-five years, the peace that lies perpetually in wait.  
(Dyer 130-31)

The Observers, particularly Klara and the Man because we are told that they go to the battlefields and the cemeteries, arrive at a similar understanding of their existence and of their place in time and the universe. They are confronted with the beauty and the peace of the monuments and the military cemeteries and with the earth's ability to regenerate itself – even in places of such overwhelming human destruction. The earth, they discover, has a way of renewing itself, regardless of what humanity has done to it and to itself. The Observers are confronted with their own insignificance and they realize, like Dyer, that their “presence here changes nothing,” and that in the grand scheme of things they “do not matter” (Dyer 130-131). This realization does not depress the Observers, for even though their journeys do not change the events of the past or the course of the future, they do change each Observer in significant ways. These texts end with an affirmation of life, because the Observers learn that the most important thing separating them from the past and its inhabitants is life. They see themselves not as something separate or apart, but rather as part of a larger cycle. Those in the past lived and died and those in the future will live and die and those in the present are living and dying -- whatever else separates us, all three authors insist that this one truth unites us. The best way to honour our past and show our hope for the future is to live -- to live in a way that combines our dancing for the past, our attempts for the impossible in the present and our striving to create something eternal for the future.

## CONCLUSION: “LEST WE FORGET...”

In the monuments and battlefield cemeteries and in the literature written by former combatants is the message that the war must not be forgotten. Even though several former combatants present their novels or autobiographical accounts as “attempts not to remember but to forget,” there is running throughout combatant writing a fear that what occurred will be forgotten by future generations and even by those who lived through the war (A. Booth 150).<sup>1</sup> Even though, on a personal level, combatants might wish to forget their experience, there is an insistence that the enormous sacrifice must be remembered, as well as a constant fear that it is already being forgotten or the “truth” of it being altered by the passing of time.<sup>2</sup> Siegfried Sassoon’s “Aftermath” clearly speaks to these issues:

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<sup>1</sup> The example Booth uses for this “forgetful motive” is Robert Graves’ *Goodbye to all That* (1929). She cites a quotation (from Graves’ work that she found in Hynes) that highlights Graves’ “paradoxical desire both to remember and to forget” because “Once it is all written down, ‘it need never be thought of again’” (A. Booth 150). It is, however, a passage only included in an early edition and the result of this omission from subsequent editions is that “Contemporary readers are thus presented with a title that seems to refer to a dismissal of the war and a text that seems to reanimate it, lacking Graves’ explanation that by shoving his experience of war into the space of public imagination he is attempting to clear it out of the space of his own memory” (A. Booth 150).

<sup>2</sup> In “A Poppy For Her Cot” Vera Brittain considers how the passing of time alters perceptions of the war – particularly the way in which it has come to mean something very different to younger generations. Brittain reflects in this article on a conversation between her nurse and her children about the poppy. Brittain is “outraged” that her nurse would consider attaching “that symbol of grim death to the frill of yellow muslin which shielded my baby daughter’s innocent head,” but she realizes that there is a generation

*Have you forgotten yet? . . .*

For the world's events have rumbled on since those gagged days,  
Like traffic checked awhile at the crossing of city ways:  
And the haunted gap in your mind has filled with thoughts that flow  
Like clouds in the lit heaven of life; and you're a man reprieved to go,  
Taking your peaceful share of Time, with joy to spare.

*But the past is just the same, - and War's a bloody game. . .*

*Have you forgotten yet? . . .*

*Look down, and swear by the slain of the War that you'll never forget.*

Do you remember the dark months you held the sector at Mametz, -  
The nights you watched and wired and dug and piled sandbags on  
parapets?

Do you remember the rats; and the stench  
Of corpses rotting in front of the front-line trench, -  
And dawn coming, dirty-white, and chill with a hopeless rain?  
Do you ever stop and ask, "Is it all going to happen again?"

Do you remember that hour of din before the attack, -  
And the anger, the blind compassion that seized and shook you then  
As you peered at the doomed and haggard faces of your men?  
Do you remember the stretcher-cases lurching back  
With dying eyes and lolling heads, - those ashen-grey  
Masks of the lads who once were keen and kind and gay?

*Have you forgotten yet? . . .*

*Look up, and swear by the green of the Spring that you'll never forget.*

(Sassoon 65-66)

It is, as Paul Connerton argues, up to the older generation to educate and they should not neglect to transmit what should be remembered to younger ones (38). Writers who participated in the war and survived attempted to do this through their writing, but the monuments also represent a desire to share knowledge with future generations. The

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gap between herself and the nurse and that the poppy "has very different associations for someone that was only a child when the war ended" (209). She writes, "This tale, however, has a moral, for it shows very clearly that memorial celebrations are not enough. Time has a deceptive habit of blurring our pain while preserving the glamour of our larger-scale tragedies...And Nature herself conspires with time to cheat our recollections" (209-210).

monuments were built “to ensure that the names of the dead did indeed live for ever more” (Connelly 4). The monuments across Canada to the war dead and missing, Robert Shipley notes in *To Mark Our Place in History* (1987), were attempts by former combatants to “bequeath their hard-won wisdom to future Canadians. It is very much a fulfillment of the effort they began, therefore, for the children and the children’s children to inquire after the meaning of the stones” (Shipley 15). And yet we must ask; we must look for the meaning and the stories behind the stones. If we do not, it is all too clear “how easy it is for men to be forgotten, even when their names are chiseled into stone so they won’t be” (How 76). This fear of forgetting has become part of its remembrance, even for those generations that did not live through the war, but still attempt to come to grips with its legacy.<sup>3</sup> We are always one generation away from forgetting the war even though “the dates 1914-1918 have come to mean ‘that which is incapable of being forgotten’” (Dyer 18).

There is something fragile and transitory about these monuments -- the monuments that were constructed to record and retain our history forever. Urquhart, for example, writes in *The Stone Carvers*:

The larger, the more impressive the monument, the more miraculous its construction, the more it seems to predict its own fall from grace. Exposed and shining on elevated ground, insisting on prodigious feats of memory from all who come to gaze at it, it appears to be as vulnerable as a

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<sup>3</sup> Dyer writes of the way in which he has internalized the fear of forgetting: “Constantly reiterated, the claim that we are in danger of forgetting is one of the ways in which the war ensured it would be remembered. Every generation since the armistice has believed that it will be the last for whom the Great War has any meaning. Now, when the last survivors are within a few years of their deaths, I too wonder if the memory of the war will perish with the generation after mine. This sense of imminent amnesia is, has been and – presumably – always will be immanent in the war’s enduring memory” (18).

flower, and its season seems to be as brief. And who among us does not imagine the stone crushed, the altars taken away to museums, the receding past vandalized. The day arrives when there is no one left to climb the tower, pull the rope, ring the bell of the magnificent improbable church. Names carved in stone become soft and unrecognizable under the assault of acid rain. No one knows any more what the allegorical figures represent.

No one cares. (*The Stone Carvers* 378)

By writing this novel, however, Urquhart shows that she does care. All three of these authors, show they care very much about the stories these monuments are meant to preserve and through their writing they try to generate more interest in the Great War. Many combatant accounts identify themselves as a “true War Memorial,” and these retellings, I would argue, are involved in this tradition of monument-making and remembrance (Cobley, *Representing War* 7). We can never fully know what happened in the past, but that does not mean that the past is not important or that it has no bearing on who we are. What Findley, Thomson and Urquhart attempt to do is keep the stories of the past alive or preserve them in a way that the “literature of stone” has not been able to (How 14). The Observer’s quest provides an important guide or framework for a journey that we must all take into the past, even if it is just through literary reconstructions or reconsiderations of the past. Herbert Read suggests in *A Coat of Many Colours* that we need to continue telling and retelling, but we need, first and foremost, to move away from this need for lived experience. He argues:

We must continue to tell the truth about war, as about all things. But the telling must be a confession of shame and failure. After a second world war either we perish as a civilization or a new generation will create a new literature. Not a literature of reportage, of pride in experience, of vicarious suffering. But a literature of constructive imagination, of social idealism, of positive morality. To learn by experience – that is the method of the animal. In so far as we hope to be more than animals we must learn

by what is greater than passive experience – by imaginative experiment.  
(Read 76)

All three of the works I have been discussing tell stories about who we are and about our collective past that need to be heard, even if we and those telling the stories will never be able “to know” past lived experiences. “The past,” Margaret Atwood declares, “no longer belongs to those who lived in it; the past belongs to those who claim it, and are willing to explore it, and to infuse it with meaning for those alive today. The past belongs to us, because we are the ones who need it” (39). These contemporary retellings of the Great War are essentially about our need for the past to understand ourselves in relation to the greater story. It is in the telling and retelling of our stories, all three authors suggest, that our power and our identity ultimately reside. It is through our stories that we can remember our past, preserve our present and look towards the future. It is through our stories, through our imaginative recreations of the past, that we can record our impressions of who we were, who we are and who we might one day be.



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