

## Annals of War

*The Memory of All That: Canadian Women Remember World War II*, comp. and ed. by Ruth Latta. Burnstown, ON: General Store Publishing House, 1992, 224 pp, paper (ISBN 0-919431-64-X).

### Review by Kathleen Tudor

Ruth Latta makes a useful introduction to *The Memory of All That* when she comments on the nature of oral history compared to written personal accounts. "I am not convinced," she says, "that a taped interview is a 'truer' story than one written by the individual who experienced the event. Taped interviews transcribed into book form sound candid, but in reality they are controlled by the oral historian. . . ." She goes on to say that only a "small part" of this book is "the product of taped interviews."

These are important observations when approaching this generally very readable book. The best of the stories, the most interesting ones, emerge from women who are good writers. They use many of the techniques of the fiction writer—lively images, dramatic events, interesting characters. One of the best of these is also the longest: "My Glorious Military Career" by Joy Trott, who, we are told, still "indulges her life-long interest in writing." Her story is set entirely in the UK, and although there were terrifying air raids and many discomforts, her situation was much the same as that of many non-combatants: routine office work, training, leaves, friendships, love affairs, and so on. And yet she makes a lively story of "all that." She is successful also partly because she is more candid about what she did and thus her personality emerges more strikingly.

But I think Latta wisely includes the experiences of women who were not in the services but contributed perhaps even more to the war effort than some of us who were. And got less glory and recognition for it. "War Work in Toronto" by Gwen Lambton is one of the most compelling stories in the book. In journal form, Lambton tells of being a single mother of two children, working factory shifts in Toronto, living in a boarding house, dropping her two small children off at a daycare in posh Forest Hill (but a great daycare and an understanding and thoughtful director), trying to sleep or even trying not to sleep because her children needed her. Although this is a short piece, it has several memorable small portraits—Marguerite Sweeney, who tries to organize the workers; Carol, mother of two small children, who, devastated by her broken marriage, smokes too much, and comes down with TB. For some reason Lambton's story ends abruptly: the

last entry is dated 1942. At the end of the other stories the writers or the editor up-date the lives to the present day. We wish to know more of how Gwen survived the war.

Some of the other stories are compelling not only because of the good story-telling ability of the writers, but also because of their tragic content. Vera (Pick) Gara, daughter of Austrian Jewish parents, tells in "A Part of My Life" of being sent to a concentration camp with her father and mother. Her father died there. This she calls "part" of her life, but it is a part that she "will never really get over" and her children, the second generation, she says, were affected as well by the loss of grandparents and an extended family.

Sybil Luke in her story "Memories of War in Malaya" describes growing up with brothers and sisters not far from Singapore. Her father was a doctor and, after the Japanese occupation, risked his life and finally lost it in his attempts to help refugees by hiding them in a hospital ward. He was beaten, tortured, shackled, and finally "he was shot and bayoneted right in front of the entire staff of the hospital. Their bodies [her father's brother was shot for trying to save his brother] were pushed in to a trench in front of the hospital." Sybil was only thirteen. Similar horrifying experiences are told by women who suffered through the war in Poland and Holland and Germany.

Most of us who were in the services (I was in the RCAF (WD)) led safe and colourless lives in comparison. But those ordinary lives of young women going far from home for the first time, meeting people well outside their usual experience, discovering unexpected abilities and potentials in themselves, profoundly changed the Canada that emerged after the war. *The Memory of All That* helps us to understand the source of some of the changes that women brought about, both those who grew up in this country and those who chose Canada after the war.

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