

ANTHONY ENNS

## **CAPTURING THE GREAT WAR: AN INTERVIEW WITH SEAN HOWARD**

SEAN HOWARD GREW UP IN BERKHAMSTED, HERTFORDSHIRE, and received a Ph.D. in Peace Studies from the University of Bradford in 1992. From 1992-2003 he worked as a researcher on nuclear disarmament and international security issues for various non-governmental organizations, and from 1996-2003 he edited the UK-based arms control journal *Disarmament Diplomacy*. In 1999 he moved to Canada, and he now lives in the lobster-fishing village of Main-à-Dieu in Cape Breton. While working as an adjunct professor in the Department of Political Science at Cape Breton University he began a new career as a poet, publishing his first collection, *Local Calls*, in 2009 and his second collection, *Incitements*, in 2011. Many of the pieces included in these collections were “captured” poems that appropriate and manipulate material taken from existing sources. *Incitements*, for example, features poems composed of material from three sources: Nova Scotia writer Peter Sanger’s 2005 essay collection *White Salt Mountain: Words in Time*, Acadia University Professor of Biology Merritt Gibson’s 1982 book *Summer Nature Notes for Nova Scotians: Seashores*, and German writer Hans Fallada’s 1947 novel *Jeder stirbt für sich allein* (Every Man Dies Alone). Some of these “captured” poems were featured in *The Best Canadian Poetry in English* in 2011 and 2014, and Howard also received the Robin Blaser Prize from *The Capilano Review* in 2012 and the Ralph Gustafson Prize from *The Fiddlehead* in 2015. His winning poem in *The Fiddlehead*, “Cases,” was composed of material taken from the legal reports of the Nova Scotia Barristers’ Society, and Howard described his method of composition as “reading down the page, the first word of every line, or just skimming the text, seeing what words light up.” In doing so, his goal was “to evoke and distill the real human drama of the ‘cases’ being so prosaically summarized, and to interrogate and invigorate—open out from

inside—a language ‘encased’ in its own professional certainties.” His process was thus based on the idea that “every text...has an ‘unconscious,’ a range of implicit material the ‘surface’ language often contradicts or attempts to repress,” and his method of textual deconstruction and reconstruction served to expose this hidden layer of meaning, which he saw as “a literary variant of the return of the repressed in psychoanalysis.”

In 2006 Howard began a new project titled *Shadowgraphs*, which was funded by a grant from the Canada Council for the Arts. This project involved the “experimental rewriting, or rigorous subversion, of every Nobel physics lecture delivered in the twentieth century.” He explained his method in a web feature for *Arc Poetry Magazine*:

The procedure—which I call “downlining”—is simple: hand writing the text (of the lecture) onto a series of 10-word x 10-word grids, jotting down any images or associations spontaneously occurring, then carefully and slowly reading *down* each of the lines (diagonally, too, if I want to; any way but linear). While I happily pocket any “free” images or other gifts that appear, I also treat the scrambled text as material to meditate, transform, and work freely on. The aim of the method is to combine the systematic rigour of William Burroughs’ cut-up technique with the free-flow of C. G. Jung’s deliberately unmethodical “method” of *active imagination*, a kind of induced reverie comparable in some ways to Keats’ exercise of “negative capability.” In this way (in theory, and in my own experience) the writer gains access to *two* hitherto unconscious levels (repressed, latent, unsuspected) of expression: his or her own and the text’s.

Like his “captured” poems, therefore, Howard’s “shadowgraphs” similarly involve the deconstruction and reconstruction of existing material, which is intended to expose a hidden or “unconscious” layer of meaning.

Howard’s 2016 book *The Photographer’s Last Picture* contains twenty new poems inspired by the 1916 edition of *Collier’s Photographic History of the European War*—an album of photographs collected and arranged by Francis J. Reynolds. While Reynolds’ foreword asserts that the process of selection was impartial, as “every army and warring nation is depicted...in their daily life and strife,” *Collier’s Photographic History* was primarily intended to rally support for U.S. entry into the war. The propagandistic

function of the text is evident by the fact that only 9 of the 376 photographs feature corpses. The book also features a prominent photograph of the *Lusitania*—a British ocean liner that was torpedoed by a German submarine in 1915. The sinking of the *Lusitania* turned public opinion in many countries against Germany, and Reynolds' caption clearly sought to turn public opinion in the U.S. against Germany as well by emphasizing the number of American casualties. The selection and contextualization of the images in *Collier's Photographic History* was thus designed to present an implicit justification for the war, and readers in 1916 would not have been able to predict that the total number of casualties would be more than 38 million, making it one of the deadliest conflicts in history.

The publication of *The Photographer's Last Picture* was obviously timed to coincide with the centenary of WWI, although it took Howard several years to develop a new method of composition. He initially applied his earlier method by creating "captured" poems like "Day Job," which appropriates Reynolds' captions as source material:

This grim picture  
 shows the summary  
 execution of a  
  
 German spy caught  
 by the Belgians at  
 Termonde. It's  
  
 hardly light. The spy  
 is placed against  
 one of the ruined  
  
 walls of that devastated  
 town. He is blind  
 folded to  
  
 prevent his seeing  
 the leveled guns  
 of the firing  
  
 squad.

Over time, however, Howard developed a new approach, which involved detailed prose descriptions of the photographs followed by a seemingly random assortment of stream-of-consciousness associations and reflections inspired by the images as well as his own historical research. These associations then became the source material for the poems themselves, which allows readers to trace the development of the poems from the images that inspired them to the final product.

The following interview was conducted over e-mail in July 2017.

**Anthony Enns:** Before we discuss your latest book, I was wondering if you could say something about your academic career. How did you first become interested in nuclear disarmament issues? Was this interest inspired by the fear of nuclear proliferation or the hope for a peaceful transition to a nuclear weapon-free world in the post-Cold War era?

**Sean Howard:** I first became interested in or obsessed/traumatized by nuclear weapons as a young boy. When I was twelve, a teacher recounted that, at a certain range, the eyes of people who looked up at the Hiroshima and Nagasaki blasts would melt: they would literally cry their eyes out. While literature was my first love, and my strongest subject at school, I felt compelled to major in Peace Studies at university. There was, insanely, only one degree on offer in Britain—at Bradford University—but it was a very fine one, launching me on an unsteady course through the world of anti-nuclear NGOs and think-tanks. I began my BA in 1984 and received my Ph.D. in 1992—eight years that witnessed an astonishing swing from a nuclear war scare in Europe to (courtesy of the Gorbachev revolution and the fall of the U.S.S.R.) high hopes for a world free of the threat of nuclear destruction—hopes that have since been cruelly and unforgivably dashed by the strategic myopia of NATO expansion and a vicious, authoritarian, pro-nuclear backlash in Russia. Currently, these are the best of times and the worst of times for the peace movement: the best because of the recently adopted U.N. Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons—an act of revolt and resistance by the non-nuclear-armed global majority against the nuclear-armed and nuclear-dependent minority (including, alas, Canada)—and the worst because of the clear and present danger not just of further proliferation but the deliberate or accidental use of nuclear weapons or radiological bombs (by states or terrorists). A long answer, best finished by the American poet

Carolyn Forché (lines written after visiting Hiroshima): “The worst is over. The worst is yet to come.”

**Enns:** While you continue to publish academic papers with your wife, Lee-Anne Broadhead, who is also a professor of political science at Cape Breton University, it appears that your primary focus has shifted from political theory to poetry. Can you say something about this shift? Did you feel that academic writing was too limited and that you could better express your ideas through formal experimentation and innovation or was there a more fundamental break between your academic and creative work?

**Howard:** I appreciate, respect, and admire the contributions of many academics (in both their writing and the classroom) to broadening and deepening social understandings of (in particular) war and peace, and I’m grateful to Cape Breton University for allowing me to play a small part in the ongoing struggle against uncritical thinking and anti-intellectualism. As you noted, however, I am not and have never been a full-time academic, and poetry has always been my primary mode of personal *and* political expression. Interestingly, a recent hostile review of *The Photographer’s Last Picture* in *The Malahat Review* describes me as a “professor,” not an adjunct, and suggests that my choice of sources is limited to a handful of “theorists dutifully wheeled on stage,” who are all-too-familiar “for anyone who has spent time in a social sciences or humanities department” in the last 30 years. (The reviewer mentions two theorists in particular: Michel Foucault, who is cited twice in the book’s last section, and Walter Benjamin, who is not cited at all.) In fact, the book draws more often on an array of independent and distinctly non-mainstream intellectual figures, some of whom are considered *persona non grata* or even figures of ridicule within the modern academy, such as Robert Graves (in his capacity as a mythologist), C. G. Jung (generally regarded by modern psychology as a reactionary pseudo-scientist), and Oswald Spengler (for reasons considered later). It’s in this regard that creative writing does give me more conceptual and expressive freedom, as poetry allows me a level of compression and distillation (and self-destabilization) different in both degree and kind from prose (of any kind).

**Enns:** I was wondering if you could comment briefly on the technique of the “captured” poem. In particular, why were you interested in using insti-

tutional documents, such as the legal reports of the Nova Scotia Barristers' Society, which I imagine are incredibly boring to read?

**Howard:** For sure, I'm often rather masochistically drawn to the challenge of deriving poetic pleasure from the most painfully prosaic of sources! As I have publicly confessed in a number of readings, I often feel nervous and jittery, honestly not far from hysterics, in libraries and large bookstores, surrounded by billions of words, the vast majority of them prose (though not all, of course, prosaic). For eight years (1993-2001) I worked on an experimental project testing and refining various means of "raiding" texts to see what I could not so much capture as *release*: I called the resulting project (a few excerpts from which were eventually published in *The Antigone-ish Review*) *The Butterfly Nets* to try and evoke this sense of "unpinning" something real from something not. Apart from this general sense of prose ghostliness, though, I'm particularly haunted by the sinister, dehumanizing quality of "legalese" (and the language of military planning—the sanitization of the sickness of war). I see, in short, a disturbing parallel between the way "legalese" places people in "cases" and the way it places poetry under lock-and-key.

**Enns:** How did you first become interested in WWI? Was your interest primarily grounded in the politics of the war—that is, its underlying causes and consequences—or the discourses surrounding the war—that is, the way it was recorded, represented, remembered, etc.?

**Howard:** Both. My many childhood nightmares were mostly about being a young man—a daydreamer, poetically inclined—suddenly conscripted to fight in the Great War. The training alone seemed hell enough, let alone the trenches, and though I obviously didn't understand the politics of the conflict I knew, whatever they were, that they pointed to a deeper conflict—the Great War between such politics and the requirements and preconditions of truly human being. (I was trying to "remember my humanity and forget the rest," to quote the Russell-Einstein Manifesto.) Later, when I began to read pretty widely about the causes and conduct (math and aftermath) of the cataclysm, I came to see it in a broader context as the Great War against nature, which defined so much of Eurocentric modernity—a one-sided conflict that destroyed much of the countryside of my home county of Hertford-

shire. But remembrance of war is also part of war—a cultural battlefield factoring more than generally realized into debates and decisions over the acceptability of *future* armed conflict. Militarized remembrance can form part of the culture of recruitment, for example, while humanized remembrance can form part of the culture of peace. And one theme of my book *The Photographer's Last Picture*, diffused throughout, is that the more remembrance is militarized (“Death So Noble,” etc.), the less dimensional it tends to be. To think *critically* about modern war implies and requires a radical commitment to John Keats’ idea of “negative capability”—a refusal to think clearly or in a narrative-friendly fashion about something clearly unthinkable. In the 1920s, attempting to recover from his ordeal in the trenches (which would return to haunt and torment him at the end of his long life), Graves urged us (and himself) to learn to think “In Broken Images” and to abandon the utterly false, sentimental “clarity” of nationalism and militarism: “He continues quick and dull in his clear images; / I continue slow and sharp in my broken images— / He in a new confusion of his understanding; / I in a new understanding of my confusion.” The “he” is perhaps Graves’ own prewar self (Rupert Brooke in his sepia lucidity or Siegfried Sassoon before the turn to irony), but it’s important that we all ask ourselves whether we are dangerously clear in our own minds or just unthinkingly unbroken about an *ongoing* trauma that we can only either repress (be “positive” or even “proud” about) or (self-shatteringly) confront.

**Enns:** Why did you choose *Collier's Photographic History of the European War* as your source material for this project? This seems to be a surprising choice considering the fact that your previous work relies exclusively on written rather than visual texts. How did the photographs provide something more than (or at least different from) written accounts of the war?

**Howard:** As soon as I saw the book—in 2009, in a short-lived antiques and collectibles shop in Lee-Anne’s hometown of Simcoe, Ontario—I knew that it would lead me into a maze from which I might never emerge. For many years I’d been planning on writing *something* creative during the Great War centenary, with no notion of what that would be and certainly no sense that it would involve *photography*—a medium that’s always profoundly unsettled me, which is, as I now see, exactly what I needed to happen. It took about five years of living with the book, letting it seep in, before I came up

with the basic “dark room” idea of developing the pictures—via prose—into poems, and throughout the project I felt an intense mix of impulsion and reluctance—of only going on because I couldn’t go back (to my “pre-book” self, I guess). *Collier’s Photographic History* gave me the key I needed and then locked me inside, shutting me in with the ghosts in the pictures (and the ghost, still with us, of the war itself). But I was careful not to attempt an exorcism by using poetry to purify the terrible air of that time—the brutal atmosphere we all still breathe. It’s our underworld, our prison house, and we all have to visit it and “do time” there.

**Enns:** While Reynolds presents these photographs as an impartial record of the war, there are several points in your book where you seem to reflect on how these images were used to promote certain political agendas—not only through what is depicted within the frame but also through the accompanying captions, which contextualize the images in various ways. I’m thinking, for example, of the “blatant distortion” you note in the caption accompanying the photograph of the airplane being rescued from the sea and the propagandistic function of the photograph depicting a wounded German soldier being aided by a French officer. How do you think these images shaped the way readers understood the war, and are you attempting to make a larger argument about the role of the media or the limits of journalistic objectivity?

**Howard:** The trick of propaganda is to shape (prime, train, etc.) unconscious responses—in other words, to make us unthinkingly supportive and formulaically reflexive. And Art, ideally, should act as an antidote to propaganda by asking us to examine our unconscious life—hence, perhaps, the intimate link between art and psychotherapy in the post-1914 era (though both art and psychotherapy sensed/saw the war coming). The example you cite of the caption to *Rescuing an Aeroplane from the Sea* is a perfect one: the caption says the crashed plane is being pulled from the sea by the crowds (which implies that the people are pulling for the war), whereas the picture shows civilians mainly just watching a military operation. Who knows how consciously the caption-writer was trying to distort the picture or how much he was responding reflexively? Albert Einstein reportedly told Werner Heisenberg that “it is the theory which decides what you can observe” as a scientist, but the role of the artist can often be to ask which theory is at work



and what effect it is having—how predetermined a given “perception” may be. Actually, though we may disagree about this, as a whole I think *Collier’s Photographic History* is not unthinkingly pro-entente; its pro-American bias, in fact, may lie in its periodic presentation of the war as a popular phenomenon (in all camps)—that is, an expression of collective consciousness and cultural will—which is exactly how America’s entry the following year was propagandistically sold.

**Enns:** Could you say something about your method of composition? Why did you move from “captured” poems (a technique inspired by Burroughs’ “cut-ups”) to “associative amplifications” that draw on individual as well as collective memory (a technique inspired by Jungian depth psychology)? Were you attempting to move away from the idea of hidden layers of meaning within the text in order to focus instead on hidden layers of meaning within the individual or collective unconscious?

**Howard:** I still deploy the “butterfly nets” of the word-grids to “capture” prose, but the difference is that, with the exception of the captions, I’m catching and releasing (in a new, unpinned form) my own writing rather than other texts. The whole process is *implosive*—a deliberate, radical compression of the prose to, I hope, a core of *fissile* poetic material. It is a kind of violently non-violent resistance to prosaic, sanitized, or sentimentalized representations of war. More broadly, I would say that all text, all writing, is a liminal interface between the individual and the collective or the conscious and the unconscious—even though that relationship is usually unacknowledged and unregistered. And it’s not just hidden layers of *meaning* that I’m seeking to expose, but also the meaninglessness of patriotic clichés—the gendering and sexualizing of heroism, modernist assumptions about the nature of progress, etc. Much text, viewed from the wings, is—like so much war—actually a theatre of the absurd.

**Enns:** In your introduction you also describe your method of composition as a kind of “telegraph system” that links the prose passages to the poems. Could you say more about the relationship between prose and poetry? Do you conceive of the poems as an attempt to speak back to the prose texts, thereby exposing their inherently ideological bias?

**Howard:** I was certainly inspired by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's description of the prisoners' telegraph system in *The Gulag Archipelago* (1973), which was based on "attentiveness, memory, chance encounters." Such telegraphy is "wired" deep into poetry: rhymes are chance encounters between sounds, metaphor is the reward of attentiveness to relationships and the overlap between levels of meaning and being, and creativity is always in part a recapture. Readers are also like prisoners, who have to make their stand in the face of power and authority. I wrote (found) a line years ago in *The Butterfly Nets*: "The tiny part of the prison where they keep the prisoners." We spend a great deal of our lives imprisoned in many interlocking institutions. War, for example, is fundamentally an institution that underlies global "order," which is destructive to the planet, and our capacity even to conceive a radically more peaceful world is horribly stunted by our conditioned veneration of soldiers and "sacrifice." *Prose*, too, is a key institution that routinely presents (culturally symbolizes) an image of *solidity*; prose is, *as we speak*, seen and accepted as an exercise in the respectable and reasonable representation of reality. I don't believe reality can be described prosaically, and poetry is one way to expose this charade—to bring not reality but its "common-sense" misrepresentation into *disrepute*. In a talk I gave to a wonderful creative writing class at Dalhousie University in March, I said that my aim in the book was to be as "transparent, unmasterful, and unpolished as possible," subscribing as I do to Russian writer Osip Mandelstam's view of poetry as an incomparably "rougher" manner of speaking "than ordinary everyday speech." This view, of course, runs counter to the usual dismissal of poetry as pretty and refined, as Mandelstam insisted that it is actually an abrasive and generally unwelcome "disturber of sense." As T. S. Eliot asked, "do I dare disturb the Universe?"

**Enns:** In another interview you mentioned that your view of language as "revelatory and inexhaustible" was inspired by James Joyce. Could you say more about your literary influences with regard to this project? How were you influenced by Joyce's use of language?

**Howard:** Samuel Beckett once said that Joyce tried to translate "language" into "Language." As in Shakespeare and Blake, language is the trickster's serious joke. It is a constant self-disruption of consciousness as classical, narrative flow, a revolt against the prosaic, a return of repressed (uncon-

scious) poetry, and an attempt to dis-establish order, which is why a book like *Finnegans Wake* (1939) was considered by some to be revolting and dis-graceful. *Finnegans Wake* was also a parody epic, which was surely intended in part as a violently non-violent recoil (postscript) to the Great War, the epic farce subverting its own conventions and refuting its own contentions.

**Enns:** You also mentioned that Matsuo Bashō inspired your “love for ‘micro’ poetry.” How were you influenced by non-western poetic forms?

**Howard:** To the western ear, haiku is also a radical, counter-cultural refutation of the epic mode—a reduction (absurd to some) of language to nature (real Language) rather than an appropriation or assimilation of nature to language. Where Joyce is explosive, Bashō is implosive. In each section of the book, I guess, I follow that same sequence: unpacking and then compressing.

**Enns:** You also mentioned that you were inspired by free jazz and the musical compositions of John Cage, Karlheinz Stockhausen, and Anton Webern. Could you say more about these influences? How are your poems similar to music?

**Howard:** Jazz, too, sometimes unpacks (e.g., the Joycean explorations of John Coltrane) and sometimes compresses (e.g., the haiku of Miles Davis) the “tune,” de-classifying the messages (decrypting the notes) hidden in the established order. Free jazz is less subversive in that it doesn’t seek to explore and express the implicit (dis)order of an explicit musical text, but more subversive in its direct engagement with subclassical (quantum) sound itself—the “grammar of sound” (to refer to the title of Ornette Coleman’s astonishing 2009 album), which is, incidentally, distinctly non-Indo-European in its elevation of verb over noun, energy over entity, and becoming over being. Stockhausen once said that the lyric form was rare in western musical traditions, which tend to emphasize sequentiality, but more common in eastern musical traditions, which tend to emphasize instantaneity. For all their striking differences, the compositions of Cage, Stockhausen, and Webern are more concerned with what Stockhausen called the “moment-form” (form as flux) than the false, epic intelligence of coherent, classical unity.

Webern's early pieces, for example, were often extremely condensed, some of them lasting for only twelve or twenty seconds, and Stockhausen thus described them as a form of "extreme concentration." My book, I hope, is a series of "extreme concentrations" or momentary meditations on not just the Great War but war itself as the quintessence of dramatic and strongly directional epic activity—the classical music of "history."

**Enns:** Your book also contains numerous references to myths and legends, such as your description of French soldiers as knights on a quest and the description of a wrecked zeppelin as a slain monster. You also refer to "*Le Cri de Merlin*" in the final paragraph, which seems to draw a direct connection between WWI and the legend of King Arthur. What is the significance of these references? Are you attempting to critique a distinctly British way of understanding the war or are you attempting to make a broader statement about the nature of war in general?

**Howard:** When I say that the whole war was Merlin's cry, I'm not just saying that it was caused above all by the imprisonment ("disappearing") of the mythic, aesthetic, and spiritual dimensions of reality, which Merlin represents. I'm also asking us to hear and heed that call—to return to deeper ways of being human that we are all, some of us consciously, crying out for. This is both similar to and radically distinct from David Jones' vision of the war, particularly in *In Parenthesis* (1937), as both a crucifixion of humanity and a (potential) resurrection of the "dead God" of Roman Catholic Christianity. For me, as a lapsed Catholic, the war spells the end of that God—by which I mean the Jehovah war-chief parody of God that Blake satirized as "Nobodaddy"—and (potentially) the return of a repressed, pre-patriarchal paganism. (The tragic tension in Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* [1485] is rooted in and dramatizes precisely this Christianizing of paganism.) I'm also enormously influenced by Graves' dazzling deconstructions of the established order of patriarchal, Olympian myth, as he heard through the racket (pun intended) of the Great War the outcry of the Goddess that Blake's "God" thought he'd killed. And although Graves was, in the process, deconstructing (reconstructing) what it means to be "British," it's far deeper and broader than that.

**Enns:** You also refer at several points to the legend of Faust—the scholar

who made a pact with the devil in order to acquire unlimited knowledge. While this legend has inspired numerous works of literature, you primarily focus on Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's play *Faust* (1808-1832) and Oswald Spengler's book *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (The Decline of the West, 1918-1922), which employs the term "Faustian" to describe European culture and its yearning for scientific progress and territorial expansion. Both of these works seem to reflect a pessimistic view of western civilization, and Spengler's book was particularly popular in Germany after the signing of the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, as many people accepted his premise that civilization was in a state of decline. What is the significance of these references in your book? On the one hand, Faust seems to represent Germany's expansionist tendencies, which are seen as the underlying cause of the war. On the other hand, however, you also seem to use this legend as a shorthand for scientific, technological, and military development, which inevitably leads to global disaster.

**Howard:** The point I was trying to make was that it was "a core Nazi assumption" that transformative Faustian restlessness was a defining racial, Aryan characteristic—that it was Germany's destiny to tame the tide of history and turn it in *its* favour. This was not, of course, what Goethe believed, or even Goethe's Faust, who ends up in *Faust, Part Two* (1832) as a psychotic, havoc-wreaking real estate developer (Sad!) with the self-image of *humanity's* Messiah, dreaming in his violent blindness of a world made free for Man by his tireless labours. This was the shadow of the Enlightenment—the disease deep in the Age of Reason—that Goethe tried to alert us to in his drama and in his tellingly-neglected science of "delicate empiricism" (rather than brutal, atom-splitting and -smashing reductionism), but it wasn't only a German shadow. Nor did Kaiser Wilhelm II believe that Hitler's Wagnerian, Aryan Faustianism was logically genocidal and exterminative in extent and expression. (The Kaiser's regime *did* favour German imperial expansion in and beyond Europe—a "destiny" that it believed Britain, France, and Russia—all expansionist imperial powers—were determined to forestall.) Hitler knew that he was fighting the Great War, Part Two, but the Great War itself can be seen (as I think Spengler saw it) as *Faust, Part Three*—a continuation of Goethe's European, or better Eurocentric, tragedy.

**Enns:** Another theme in your book is the relationship between WWI and

Canadian national identity. At one point, for example, you cite British historian Gary Sheffield, who argued that the importance of the Battle of Vimy Ridge has been exaggerated for political purposes. Could you say more about the ways in which the war was used to construct a particular version of Canadian identity (and one that was distinctly Anglocentric)?

**Howard:** Not least because it is Anglocentric to do so, the Canadian state has not always traced the source of its “greatness” to Flanders Fields. The “birth of a nation” fantasy-version of Vimy did not begin to take hold until decades after that inconclusive and bloody engagement, which actually triggered conscription and nearly broke the country apart. From the time of the Boer War, Anglocentric Canadian Nationalists like Sir Robert Borden and Sir Samuel Hughes were anticipating a general war as the moment when Canada would emerge as an indispensable colony. Sir Wilfrid Laurier, on the other hand, spoke for many other Canadians in warning of the “vortex of European militarism,” which threatened Canadian unity and development. Laurier was right, but Borden “won,” and in 2018 Canadians will once again be primed and expected to celebrate their country’s contribution to the massively destructive battles of the war—a recklessly bloody rush to glory that was bitterly resented by many of the troops.

**Enns:** You also describe the creation of the fictional character “Johnny Canuck” as a “scam” used to increase recruitment by promoting the “endurance, courage, and cheerfulness” of Canadian soldiers despite the fact that they actually suffered tremendous losses.

**Howard:** The ridiculous action figure of Johnny Canuck—a kind of Terminator Tommy—was the centrepiece of an elaborate and relentless propaganda effort led by Max Aitken (Lord Beaverbrook), who said (in a Trumpian vein) that while “it may not be pleasant to issue false news,” Canadians “would endorse our scheme” if they “could be taken into our confidence.” But the scheming hasn’t stopped, and during Stephen Harper’s administration it reached new heights (or depths) of jingoistic one-dimensionalism in the bizarre form, for example, of the hair-raisingly kitschy “Mother Canada” statue and the war-glorification complex—a fetishistic shrine to Johnny (Jesus) Canuck (Christ)—that was planned for Green Cove, Cape Breton, and that was mercifully terminated by Justin Trudeau’s administration. Howev-

er, Trudeau himself then gave a Harperesque, maple-syrup speech to mark the “birth of a nation” a hundred years ago at Vimy.

**Enns:** You also describe the remembrance poppies used to commemorate those who died in the war as the “opium of the people,” thus implying that one of the nation’s most beloved symbols actually functions as an instrument of ideological manipulation.

**Howard:** Not long before the Great War, poppies were closely associated with Claude Monet and the Impressionists, who were intent on both increasing the depth of perception and inducing a hallucinogenic “trip”—a narcotic meditation on and mediation of natural reality. But in John McCrae’s 1915 poem “In Flanders Fields,” the drug is nationalism—a narrowing and blurring of perception down to “the point” of the war: to carry on until good triumphs over evil. That’s “remembrance” as recruitment, solemnity as sentimentality, and poppies as pap.

**Enns:** The final photograph in the collection, which is reproduced in the following excerpt, was reportedly found in a camera set up by a photographer who was killed by a shell at the very moment the photograph was taken. The barren landscape of the battlefield provides a vivid illustration of the consequences of war, and the body falling across the bottom of the frame clearly serves as a reminder of death and the nature of mortality. However, the haunting synchronicity of the photographic exposure and the photographer’s death seems to imply another potential significance—namely, that the photographic apparatus is itself an agent of destruction, a harbinger of death, and a preserver of ghosts. What does this image signify to you, and why did you choose it for your final chapter and for the title of the book?

**Howard:** I cannot understand why this photograph is not world famous—an incessantly reproduced emblem or distillation of the tragedy and incapability of modern war. To answer your broader question, though, I quote in the book’s opening section the British war poet Charles Sorley confessing to a friend his “elemental and irrational, yet violent, disapproval and abhorrence of photography”: a *poetically* rational, I’d prefer he’d said, sense of capture—the *netting* of something essential (the soul) by something not (a machine). (He particularly hated the official “shot” of himself in uniform, in

which, indeed, his eyes fire back at the photographer/viewer.) In my reading at Dalhousie University in March I noted that “a common reaction of what were for so long called ‘primitives’ to being photographed was the conviction that the camera was stealing the light of their lives, radically downsizing or *minimizing* their selves and their world.” In this sense, though I hesitate to say it, the photographer was Faust, although the Great War was unfortunately *not* his last picture.

**Enns:** I’m not sure how much you were involved in the design of the book, but the physical packaging of your work is extremely beautiful and seems to add an additional quality to the text. I noted, for example, that the font used for the headings was developed for a headstone commemorating the life of Canadian war artist Alex Colville, which seems to enhance their solemn appearance. Is this the effect you had in mind? How important are the material properties of the book?

**Howard:** Attention to form and content has always been central to the ethos and aesthetic of Gaspereau Press, and I think Andrew Steeves, publisher and master-craftsman, took this project as a particularly demanding and engrossing challenge, to which he rose superbly. The credit, as well as the craft, is entirely his, and I cannot address (because I cannot comprehend) the many technical aspects of his achievement. But the achievement is artistic, too. The way all twenty photographs are broken images of themselves—reproduced in blocks over several pages—shatters or segments the mirror of the single picture just as my prose amplifications seek to do and just as the war did to the “official pictures” of nation, empire, heroism, religion, etc. My favourite example is the photograph *Ruined Church at Dixmude*. At first all the reader sees is a damaged column with a young man sitting hunched at its base, which is itself a column of photograph on the right-hand margin of an otherwise blank page. The overleaf, in a violent silence, then depicts a cultural landslide spilling across the whole page, sweeping two drunk-looking (stoned) angels into a corner, past the decapitated body (broken raft) of Christ on the cross.

**Enns:** By way of conclusion, I was wondering if you could speak briefly about the relationship between this book and your *Shadowgraphs* project. While they are obviously about different historical moments, these two



projects seem to be connected through the theme of war and the premonition of global disaster. At one point in *The Photographer's Last Picture* you also describe WWI as “a disaster cutting deep into our culture, breeding even fouler monsters...and still shadowing our movements.” What seems to be the enduring legacy of the war, and how is it casting a “shadow” over our contemporary political situation?

**Howard:** In my recent presentation at the Canadian Pugwash Conference ([www.pugwashgroup.ca/nuclear-disarmament-80/580-if-war-goes-on](http://www.pugwashgroup.ca/nuclear-disarmament-80/580-if-war-goes-on)), in which I argued that the Great War “continues to haunt and distort our geopolitics,” I drew on Hermann Hesse’s 1917 essay “Soll Friede werden?” (Shall There Be Peace?), in which he wrote that the “bigger, the bloodier, the more destructive these final battles of the World War prove to be, the less will be accomplished for the future, the less hope there will be of appeasing hatreds and rivalries, or of doing away with the idea that political aims can be attained by the criminal instrumentality of war.” The war, in fact, “ended” with a vicious “peace” treaty, which made its resumption at even higher levels of violence almost certain. “The Third Reich,” as Rudolf Hess said, “comes from the trenches,” and the Great War, Part Two gave birth to “Little Boy”—the nuclear monster that represents the apotheosis of ruthless, exploitative efficiency by manipulating and militarizing the basic energies and structures of life itself. The war and the bomb are thus superimposed for (and in) me: I do, as I write, see “A Mushroom Cloud over Sarajevo.” And the War goes on everywhere, as so many who endured the 1914-1918 maelstrom came to grasp: if *that* wasn’t the war to end all war, then war would soon seal the fate of the earth. It’s the same war heating up again in Europe and elsewhere today, and it still threatens to settle the main issue of our “post”-Cold War times: whether human civilization and “the criminal instrumentality of war” can co-exist. The war goes on, but it cannot continue for much longer, and the climax to the whole wretched drama can only be either global disaster or radical (nuclear and conventional) disarmament.