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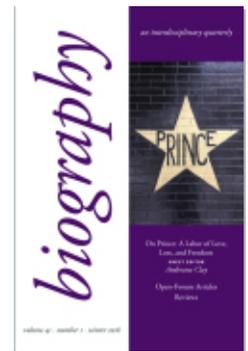
“The Experience Being My Own”: Identifying Life Writing
in Plays by Canadian Veterans of the Great War

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Biography, Volume 41, Number 1, Winter 2018, pp. 71-90 (Article)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/bio.2018.0009>



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“THE EXPERIENCE BEING MY OWN”
IDENTIFYING LIFE WRITING IN PLAYS BY
CANADIAN VETERANS OF THE GREAT WAR

ALAN FILEWOD

Some 630,000 Canadian soldiers served in the Great War between 1914 and 1919, of whom fewer than two thousand are known to have published some form of life writing after their return. In *The Canadian Experience of the Great War: A Guide to Memoirs*, Brian Tennyson lists 1,885 texts—memoirs, autobiographies, letters, diaries, poems, short stories, and novels—in his exhaustive list of life writing from the war. Tennyson makes the point that he included novels and poems (he does not explicitly mention plays, although there are two in his list) “on the grounds that they also constitute a creative form of memoir of their author’s war-time experiences” (xxv). These plays, and more that he does not list, are anomalous because most remained unpublished; those that were produced were staged by the playwrights themselves and never revived. In the context of dramatic literature, they are inexplicable because they have no relationship to producing theater culture and its structures of canonization. Viewed as drama, they are curiosities. But when viewed as life writing, as what Marlene Kadar and Jeanne Perreault call “unlikely documents” of “auto/biography,” they come into focus as powerful enactments of remembrance (Kadar et al. 2). The operation of life writing in these playtexts is not immediately apparent, and for this reason, when military historians have noticed them, it has been to dismiss them as trivial because of their “stock characters and improbable situations” (Vance 84). Genre conventions mask the reality of the text.

This paper explores the problem of theatrical playtexts that disguise the operations of life writing in conventionalized dramatic genres by identifying life writing in three plays written by returned soldiers in the years following the First World War. I ask how we might identify life writing in the theater

if auto/biography is neither overtly claimed nor foregrounded in content or performance. Dramatic representation has historically been a problem for life writing scholars because, as Evelyn Hinz has proposed, life writing and drama are intersecting and reciprocally informing narrative fields that share “a spacialization of time” (203). But while drama has always told life stories, the emergence of overtly and intentionally auto/biographical dramatic forms is a recent phenomenon.¹ The most obvious forms of life writing drama, such as the “biodrama” and autobiographical monologues that G. Thomas Couser notes, are recent developments that were made possible by modernism’s rupture of the classic plot-centered dramatic form (Couser 29–30).

Despite the long history of tragedies, chronicle plays, and romantic historical dramas that sought to personify the movement of historical forces in exemplary lives (Schiller’s *Wallenstein* is a useful example), theatrical genres of writing are products of modernism. By disrupting the poetics of the dramatic plot and supplanting the authority of the performing self over Aristotle’s privileging of plot as the “first principle” of drama, early twentieth-century modernism introduced new theatrical and dramatic forms capable of staging non-fictional actuality. These forms included the first researched biographies in dramatic form, as pioneered by Emil Ludwig, and the emergence of actuality-based documentary theater in the years following the First World War.² The development of contemporary life writing in the vortex of theatrical modernism produced a proliferating rhizome of genres and forms, from reenacted reminiscence (a form made famous in 1954 by Hal Holbrook in *Mark Twain Tonight*), to ponderous dramatic biographies (such as George Hulme’s epic *The Life and Death of Adolf Hitler*), memory plays, verbatim documentary plays, and an immense genre of what are clumped together as “solo shows,” often autobiographical or confessional performances by actors along the lines of Spaulding Gray’s *Swimming to Cambodia*. It is not too far a reach to say that life writing or life staging is one of the formative conditions of postmodern theatrical performance.

What, then, of autobiographical dramatic writing before modernism opened a space for it and gave it a theatrical vocabulary? Between the traditional concept of the history play, which since Aeschylus has invariably focused on the lives and deeds of individuals, and the modernist invention of auto/biographical performance, there is a lacuna in which the autobiographical compulsion has found dramatic expression in plays that were presented as conventionalized and genre-defined dramas, in which the operation of life writing is hidden by the scrim of genre. In the theater, a scrim is a curtain that can reveal a scene or conceal it behind another, depending on the direction of light upon it. In the plays I examine here, life writing is concealed by a scrim

of genre because the playwrights, far removed from the formal experiments of metropolitan theater cultures, had no models of non-fictive dramatic representation on which to draw and no access to an avant-garde theater culture that might have offered theatricalist solutions.³ Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson offer insight in the introduction of their influential *Getting a Life: Everyday Uses of Autobiography*, when they write that "*In telling their stories, narrators take up models of identity that are culturally available. And by adopting ready-made narrative templates to structure experiential history, they take up culturally designated subjectivities*" (9, emphasis in original). In dramatic writing, genre functions as one such narrative template and usefully decodes anomalous texts that can *only* be understood when they are analyzed as autobiographical life writing.

This genre cloaking can operate in different ways, as can be seen in three plays by soldiers who all served in the trenches in the same general time and place, in the Ypres Salient and the area around the French town of Lens, which was the principal area of operations for the four divisions of the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) from 1915 to the breakout to Mons and the Rhine that ended the war in 1918.⁴ To identify these plays as life writing, this examination brings together two archives. The first is the texts themselves, which exist in microfilmed typescripts copied in 1982 from originals sent from Canadian addresses for deposit in the United States Copyright Office and found there by the late theater historian Patrick O'Neill, who secured the grant to have them filmed. The collection consists of some seven hundred manuscripts on forty-four rolls of microfilm. They are for the most part amateur attempts at playwriting: melodramas, religious plays, and comedies predominate, but twenty-eight are indexed under the subject heading of "World War One 1914–18." Of these twenty-eight, the three examined here can be identified as being authored by returned soldiers (Mount Saint 28–29). This identification is made possible by the second archive, the Soldiers of the Great War database compiled by Library and Archives Canada, which is well into a multiyear project of digitizing the service dossier of every soldier who served in the CEF. Thus the detailed service records of the playwrights can be read alongside the plays to determine whether these texts are in fact autobiographical life writings.

As a form of life writing itself, the dossier presents the subject as constituted by institutions. The archived dossiers of the CEF include attestation (sign-up) papers, discharge documents, exhaustive medical records (including x-rays, dental charts, medical board findings, and medical officers' remarks), and detailed pay records. Every time a soldier was transferred to a new unit, admitted into hospital, granted leave, or sent on course, a notation would be

added; from these notations we can trace each soldier's progress through the war. As life writing, the dossier records not what the soldiers (and the 1,880 Nursing Sisters who served in the CEF) did, but what was done to them.

As verified by the service dossiers, these three plays reveal three different registers of theatricalized life writing: testimony, allegory, and reenactment. The first is *The P. B. I., or, The Mademoiselle of Bullay-Grenay*, written by four veterans and staged by a cast of forty more in 1920. It is at first glance a melodramatic comedy that appears to replicate the vaudeville skits of the frontline Concert Parties of the war.⁵ The second, *Dawn in Heaven*, is an allegorical passion play (that is, a play about martyrdom) written and staged in 1934; the third, *Glory Hole: A Play of the Great War of 1914–18*, written in 1930 but never staged, is a remarkable example of naïve modernism that attempts to reenact the author's remembered experience with minimal dramatic distortion.⁶ In each case we can relate the theatrical strategies to the author's war experience.

THE P. B. I.

MATERIALITY AND COLLECTIVE WITNESSING

The P. B. I., or, The Mademoiselle of Bullay-Grenay has four authors, all of whom served at the front, and their composite experience gives the play its multiocular perspective. All were University of Toronto students and members of the university's Great War Association, the Varsity Veterans. They all had similar war experiences, differentiated by rank and service branch. The play was written and staged in 1920 at a point when many of the participants still retained a sense of military identity and camaraderie; following its premier at the university's Hart House Theatre, it went on tour; a year later a remounted production toured across Canada under the title *Mademoiselle from Armentieres*. A typescript is included in the O'Neill collection, and a much-abbreviated version was published serially in *Canadian Forum* in 1921.

The four authors all had intensive combat experience. Harold Scudamore, who initiated the project, was a divinity student who served for a year in England and then transferred to the infantry for service in France as a private in the 4th (Central Ontario) Battalion. He lost an arm at the Battle of Hill 70 in March 1918. Harry Dillon was a captain in the field artillery who served four years at the front, commanding an ammunition column and later a trench mortar battery. He won the Military Cross for rescuing an officer from no man's land and directing his battery under machine-gun fire. His dossier includes a record of a court martial acquittal in January 1919 for assaulting a German civilian in Cologne. Ralph Downie had gone overseas in the First Contingent in 1914 and saw action in the Second Battle of Ypres

when posted to a field engineering company. He served as a quartermaster sergeant and was later promoted to lieutenant and posted to an engineer-training depot in Quebec. William McGeary was a captain who fought at Ypres and Mont Sorrel with the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry. He received the Military Cross for gallantry in July 1917, at which time he was serving with the 38th (Ottawa) Battalion in the Lens sector. He returned home in 1918 with a wounded arm.

In another sense, *The P. B. I.* had more than four authors; it actually had closer to forty. The four nominal authors wrote the scenario and plot, but the entire cast of veterans contributed their own material, in the form of dialogue, jokes, characters, slang, jargon, uniforms, and memories, and, most importantly, their remembering bodies. The play expanded to embrace the people who needed to be in it. In this very important sense, *The P. B. I.* is a collective creation that assembles the shared experience of the cast and frames it in the cohering conventions of a melodrama about the coming of age of a young officer, a wartime romance behind the lines, and a German spy in the ranks. The skimpy plot is interspersed with comic sketches, dialect humor, and patriotic speeches; the overall form in effect replicates the front-line entertainments that the authors would have seen in France. Its mix of sentiment, nostalgia, and commemoration captured the post-war mood at a time when overt criticism of the war would have been publicly unacceptable.

Inside that light entertainment frame is a much more serious enacted memoir validated by the entire cast. This autobiographical component emerges not in the text but in the material conditions of its production and performance. In its stage descriptions, the play repeatedly stresses its authenticity, beginning with the character descriptions—which in the typescript version take up six pages. They are extraordinarily specific in minor authenticating details, as in this description of a common type in the CEF:

Private Marmaduke Meredith, known in the platoon as "The Duke", is a gentleman ranker with an excellent education, and a sarcastic and biting tongue. He wears the ribbon of the Military Medal and, being No.1 on the Lewis gun, is armed with revolver and wears the Lewis gunner's laurels on his sleeve. (i)

Some may be construed as composite self-portraits of the authors as they reflect on their own naïveté:

Lieutenant Edward Brock Green, is a young lieutenant who has been granted his commission in Canada. His training has been along the lines of peace-time "spit and polish" warfare and he has failed to grasp the fact that there are as good men in the ranks as anywhere in the army. He has a good heart and fine character, but it takes the hardships of the trenches to fit him into his niche. He is dressed regimentally and aggressively displays his rank on his cuff. (iii)

The speaking parts include not just the roles demanded by the plot, but what seems to be a deliberate attempt to stage a taxonomic variety of military types and ranks: the green lieutenant, an inspiring first-contingent major who has risen from the ranks, a crusty sergeant, sappers, a signaler, a surgeon, medical orderlies, staff officers, a gas corporal, an engineer officer, a comically fatuous brigadier general, a French officer, and so on.

Many sequences in the play seem designed only to demonstrate the accuracy of the representation. Platoon parade formations, drill commands, gambling games, and medal ceremonies all function as memoir and testimony. Even the program for the show documents something of the grim irony of trench humor with its dedication in “loving memory” to the defeated German soldier and its production credits: “Troops by Miss Canada,” “Costumes by the Army Clothing Depot” (P. B. I. Productions). The script is filled with stage directions specifying gear and equipment, which was likely provided by the cast. The play specifically calls for cultural artifacts and matériel of the soldier’s daily lives. Extracted from the stage descriptions, they include a crown-and-anchor dice game, specific service badges, ribbons, medals, wound stripes, revolvers, rifles, a steel mirror, a clasp knife, steel helmets, ID bracelets, bully beef, gas masks, a mouth organ, a Lewis gun, sandbags, a field telephone, a wind vane, a gas gong, trench signs, a periscope, bayonets, grenades, and ammunition.

This inventory of a soldier’s daily life is autoethnographic material culture. But the documentary aspects of the play are not just textual and material. Equally important are the scenographic authenticators and the unprecedented attempt to reenact the experience of combat on stage. In both versions of the text, scene descriptions are extremely detailed, from the signage in the estaminet to the names of the magazines on the officer’s dugout table, to the disposition of the platoons along the trench, to the trench itself, as described in the published text:

A fire-bay and part of two adjacent traverses is seen. The trench is in good repair, the bottom being provided with bath-mats and the sides revetted with “A”-frames and corrugated-iron while the batten of the fire-step is supported by expanded-metal and two-by-four uprights. On top of the traverse at the right flank of bay is a small roughly-whittled windvane. To the military left of this, there projects over the parapet a small box-periscope which has been camouflaged with a twist of muddy sand-bag (430).⁷

It matters to this play that these details are exact and complete, just as it matters that the character types are documented. These descriptions are not there to help future producers, as is normally the case with stage descriptions,

because no such future was planned. They are there to solidify, validate, and enact memory as evidence, confirmed by the collectivity of the cast. So, too, are the combat sequences. In the third act, a wiring party, including the hero and the green officer, goes over the top to fix a communications line in no-man's land, which is depicted as "a tangled mess of rusty barbed-wire in which numerous holes have been blown by enemy shell-fire. This wire, with the corkscrew stakes and wooden posts on which it is strung, is all that is visible above the parapet except for the blue sky" (430). Combat is depicted from the point of view of the men who stay behind in the trench, and its immediacy is achieved with sound effects. Again we see the imperative to get it right: "A distant German machine-gun away off on the right flank starts a continuous rat-tat-tat hammering and it is angrily answered by the scolding, staccato splutter of an equally distant Lewis Gun firing in short jerky bursts" (433).

Against this, the play stages the practiced routine of the men who live in this soundscape: "Percy finds the box and, taking out two grenades, holds one ready in each hand. Duke gives the pan on his Lewis Gun a slight twirl to make sure that the cartridge is engaged under the feed-arm and then he clicks back the cocking-handle. Percy makes a move as though he were going to pull the pin out of his bomb" (434). The subjunctive gesture, "as though he were going to pull the pin" is itself evidentiary, because it can only be recognized by someone familiar with that type of grenade. This level of gestural knowledge, of habituated movements, poses, and postures function as documentary evidence that authenticates the actors as veterans.

Finally, as the party returns, missing some of its members but with a captured German, the scenographic war intensifies in a stage description that itself stands as a powerful act of witnessing:

The Boche lays down a hurricane barrage. The shells go hurtling over, the big ones rushing at the supports with an express-train howl, the whizbangs zipping wickedly down on the front line. No Man's Land is leaping with heaving geysers of ugly black earth, shot through with swift tongues of flame. The Hun machine-guns start sweeping-around, roaring like a cataract and rattling like a flock of steam-riveters as they pour out a torrent of hissing lead that cuts through the air like a tremendous scythe. The Vickers and Lewis Guns soon take up the chorus and start their mad and frantic chattering while a fusillade of rifle-fire ripples and crackles along the front. Fritz is now shooting up flares of innumerable varieties—white Very-lights; ruby, green, orange and golden rockets, some of which are single balls of fire while others are clusters and showers of fiery stars. (435)

It is unlikely that the stage of the art deco Hart House Theatre at the University of Toronto could do justice to these directions, but they testify to the need to objectify and share the experience of battle and to offset the jocular

comedy with somatic memoir. During the war, the basement of the University of Toronto's Hart House student center, which was turned into a theater in 1919, had been used as a rifle range, complete with simulated trench and scenic backdrop of a Belgian village, for the Canadian Officer's Training Corps. For Scudamore and Downie, the two authors who had trained in the COTC, Hart House was the place where their war had begun and where it ended, in simulations of the war they survived.

DAWN IN HEAVEN

MARTYRDOM AND TRAUMA

The P. B. I. had been written when the flush of allied victory had not yet subsided and the memories of war were fresh. Over the course of the subsequent decade, grimmer, more critical memoirs challenged the discourse of camaraderie and valor. The classic example is Charles Yale Harrison's memoir-novel, *Generals Die in Bed*, which Arthur Currie, the celebrated general who commanded the Canadian Corps for the last two years of the war, denounced as "filth" because of its account of Canadian soldiers committing war crimes (380). This turn in cultural memory may be why it was possible for Simon Jauvoish, a physician and war veteran, to write and produce his play *Dawn in Heaven* in Winnipeg in 1934. In the scheme of scrimmed dramatic memoirs, *Dawn in Heaven* is an example of a text that is largely invented but exists to reenact one particular traumatic moment that the author experienced. It is a passion play, which in religious drama is a subgenre of the morality play that stages the martyrdom (passion) of a god or, in the Christian tradition, a saint.

Jauvoish was a rarity among the men who volunteered for the CEF. Most of them were British by birth or descent at a time when Canada was still a dominion of the British Empire. Many volunteered out of patriotism, whether for Canada or Britain (often both); some, like William Stabler Atkinson, who wrote *Glory Hole*, signed up because they needed work. But Jauvoish was neither British nor a patriot. He was a student at the University of Manitoba and a Jew who, as a child, had emigrated with his older brother and sister from what is now Lithuania. He joined the army because he was an idealist who believed that the war against Germany was indeed a war against war and that he had a duty to take part in the final war of human history.

Jauvoish signed up in March 1916 in the newly formed 196th (Western Universities) Battalion. The 196th had been approved in February 1916 after students petitioned the Minister of Militia in Ottawa for a fighting unit of university men. This petition was typical of the recruitment practices of the CEF, which encouraged the formation of affinity-based battalions only to disband them on arrival in England and disperse the troops as needed to the

line battalions of the CEF. In the nominal roll of the battalion prior to embarkation, Jauvoish was the only person who was born in a non-Anglophone country (Canada Ministry of Militia). As an idealist, a Jew, and a foreigner, he was an exception.

After two weeks in England in a reserve battalion, Jauvoish was part of a reinforcement draft to the 46th (Saskatchewan) Battalion, which by the end of war had earned the sobriquet "the Suicide Battalion" because of its exceptionally high casualty rate of 91.5 percent, with 1,433 killed and 3,484 wounded over the course of the war (Provincial Archives). In the winter of 1917, the Canadian Corps was in the final stages of its long preparations for the major offensive that would turn the tide of the war and establish the corps as the shock troops, the "sharp end" of the British forces (Cook). Within weeks of his arrival, Jauvoish was sentenced to three days of Field Punishment No. 1 for "refusing to give his name and number to an N.C.O." This incident is the core of *Dawn in Heaven*. Field Punishment No. 1, which the soldiers called "crucifixion," was the most common disciplinary action for minor offences. The prisoner was assigned heavy labor duties and was tied, with arms stretched out, to the wheel of an ammunition cart or field kitchen for two hours a day. This punishment was both degrading and brutal, particularly at the front in adverse weather and lice-infested clothing. Two months later, Jauvoish took part in the major assault on Vimy Ridge, a battle commemorated today in Canada as the most celebrated victory of the Canadian Corps. He took a bullet in his left shoulder, spent six months in various hospitals in England, and was invalided and sent home in 1918. His experiences may have left him disillusioned about war's capacity to end war, but they did not turn him into a pacifist. Five years after staging the play, Simon Jauvoish would be in uniform again, this time as a medical officer in the Canadian Army for the duration of the Second World War.

Dawn in Heaven is written as a naturalist drama with strong expressionist elements. It is set behind the lines in "March, 1917. Northern France" (3). At that point, the Canadian Corps was in the final stage of the intensive planning and training for the assault on Vimy Ridge. The play begins in the billet of "First platoon, A company, N-th Battalion," in a dark, leaky stable of an old chateau. As in *The P. B. I.* and *Glory Hole*, the author takes almost obsessive care to recreate his visual field. In the billet, the

wall is thickly engraved, in bold energetic hand, with the number, name of privates, battalions and regiments of French, British and Canadian Expeditionary forces that had passed through that zone since the beginning of the war. Dates and years go back to September, 1914. There are some engravings of overlapping hearts, pierced by arrows and initialled. There is no sign of any cynical or pornographic wisecracks. (3)

In this room, with its puddles and debris, the men engage in desultory bantering, clean mud off their puttees and trousers, and in one of the recurring tropes of these plays, pick off lice from the seams of their clothes. Again we see the specificity of a retained memory brought to life through reenactment. The action of checking for lice is authenticated by minute details: the “concentrated look” that “gives the impression of a man trying to solve a highly puzzling problem”; the “thick dark rim” at the top of a candle in a discarded bully-beef tin.

There is no dramatic action in this opening scene; it serves to establish place, routine, and a cheerless atmosphere of enforced camaraderie. The men kill time; a corporal arrives with deloused blankets; they squabble and tease one another. There is a tired, ritual quality to their banter. The mood is cold and dreary. A slow leak from the ceiling establishes a steady rhythm to the scene, with a counter-note from the rumble of distant artillery; together they give the scene a sense of expressionist, enhanced reality that conceals the literality of documentary reality behind a scrim of allegory.

The battalion is officially on a three-week “brigade rest,” but the men are kept busy with drills, training, and work duties. The main character of the play, with the allegorical name of Andrew Butt, is only peripherally in the scene, perceived as “a pair of shod sprawling feet under a blanket” (5). When one of the other soldiers tells the corporal that Butt is sick, he replies that the platoon is scheduled for predawn work duty in the morning, and that sick call is canceled. As the men jostle and clown around, “Private Butt moves clumsily round-about his bunk on his knees and elbows until he faces the audience. Looks about dazed and bewildered. Clasps both hands against his abdomen” (6). At the end of the scene he leaves the billet to undertake the journey to martyrdom that is the defining feature of the passion play.

The action that follows is dramatically simple. Butt’s feverish night journey takes him past a mobile field kitchen, where he encounters a foreshadowing of his own Golgotha: “As he walks by the left front wheel, the figure of a private soldier can be seen. His arms are tied across the spokes of the wheel, his feet to one of the lower spokes. His shoulders barely reaching the level of the rim of the wheel, his head is drooping so the chin rests upon his chest” (13). In a surreptitious conversation with a guard (who is forbidden to talk on duty), he learns that the prisoner was suffering from a kidney condition and had been sentenced to eighteen days of punishment for “breaking sanitary rules in the front line” (13). Butt is overcome by his illness and falls on his knees. This triggers the first of a series of hallucinatory scenes of home: he is a young man in a one-room farmhouse, arguing with his grandmother about the war that has already cost her one son and taken the leg of another. To her dismay he has decided to enlist because “there is a question of whether

the world shall remain free or become an army-camp. It's a question of saving man from the hands of Satan. It's the whole of human civilization that's at stake" (16).

From this point the play moves through states of consciousness as Jauvoish superimposes dream images over the documentary reality. Butt follows a downward path to his personal inferno; when he lines up for food before setting out on the work party, without his cap and puttees, a soldier that he does not recognize as a military police corporal accuses him of attempting to sneak food to which he is not entitled and demands his name and number. Butt takes offense; standing on dignity and expecting civility, he refuses to comply, at which point he is arrested for insubordination. As his case moves forward in the machine of military justice to his court martial, he continues to insist on his moral position. He wants to "open their eyes, draw their attention to what extent punishment and blind heartless discipline demoralizes an army where every member is ready to give up life and limb so that there would be no more wars" (34). But the army doesn't care, and he is found guilty and sentenced to his own turn at the wheel. There he succumbs to his illness and dies in an expressionist dream sequence that is rich in allegory and symbol.

Dawn in Heaven is a morality play, but its life writing core appears to have struck the audience when Jauvoish staged it in 1934. In attendance were the Premier of Manitoba and veterans—one of whom was the reviewer for the *Winnipeg Tribune*. He had little to comment on the metaphysics of the author's idealism and focused instead on the evocative accuracy of frontline life, which appeared to have brought to the surface his own trauma. Noting the all-veteran cast, he wrote that "each man's knowledge of the war from first-hand experience gave the play an authentic touch. There was nothing overdrawn and the army technique was absolutely correct. . . . The gripping scene of a shell-shocked soldier being brought back from the line by his tired companions brought out the sweat on the brow of an ex-soldier who has assisted in a like undertaking" ("War Play").

Jauvoish had set out to write a philosophical drama but in the end produced a play that was received as a reenactment drama. By displacing the autobiographical experience in the play into invented characters, it is plausible that he wanted to deflect attention from his own war experience to focus on the larger question of war and moral justice. If so, the decision to write an allegorical passion play may have been a deliberate choice to deflect the appearance of memoir while preserving life writing's imperative to testify. That imperative suggests that the central episode of the field punishment may have functioned less as the site of metaphysical argument and more as experiential evidence of authenticity; in effect, in *Dawn of Heaven* memoir occludes philosophy.

GLORY HOLE

THE EYE THAT SEES

The P. B. I. masks memoir in genre convention, and *Dawn in Heaven* wraps a trauma memory in an allegorical frame. In *Glory Hole*, William Stabler Atkinson takes this masking a step further by retaining the narrative arc of a drama but emptying it of almost all dramatic action so that dramatic plot is superseded by reenactment. In his preface to *Glory Hole*, Atkinson is explicit about the need for theatricalized documentation. He had begun writing the play in 1928 but ran into problems with the need to frame his memories in a narrative plot. In his author's note to the typescript, he writes that he took his characters "from actual persons for the most part, the experience being my own, except for the climax, my own battalion being withdrawn two days before it blew up, but the trench wasn't empty when it did, I was told, there being much loss of life—whether this is so or not I have no actual proof—only hearsay to go by" (i). Behind the thin scrim of the "ready-made narrative template" of a war drama, *Glory Hole* is a staging of memoir and reenactment.

Unlike Jauvoish and the authors of *The P. B. I.*, Atkinson was an experienced playwright, albeit for a theater profession that barely existed. He had some significant successes: his comedy *So This Is Canada* (about three returned soldiers trying to make a go of fruit farming in the Okanagan Valley of central British Columbia) ran for six weeks in Vancouver and was picked up by the impresario John Shuburg, who promoted it as "World's Funniest Show" and gave it a Western Canadian tour in October 1926 ("*So This Is Canada*"). Atkinson had a follow-up success in 1931 with his comedy *The Man from Saskatchewan* at the Dominion Theatre in Winnipeg. By profession, Atkinson was a clerk, and later in life he ran an insurance business. He had immigrated to Canada in 1910 to take up a homestead grant in Saskatchewan; the homestead failed, and Atkinson was knocking about the prairies looking for work in the building trades when the war started. He missed the first recruitment drive, which reached its quota very quickly, but enlisted as soon as a second drive commenced at the end of 1914. He joined the Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders of Canada in Winnipeg, which was one of the feeder units for the 16th Battalion CEF, "The Canadian Scottish."⁸ That was the unit made famous by the British war artist Eric Kennington in *The Conquerors*, his portrait of exhausted kilted soldiers slogging through a mire of death and mud.

Atkinson's dossier is particularly full because he saw service at the front as an infantryman and, in England and Canada, as a military hospital staff-sergeant. He actually enlisted in the CEF twice; after being discharged with pneumonia and pleurisy in 1917, he signed up again in 1918 to serve in a military hospital in Vernon, British Columbia, where he resided for the rest of his life with a woman he had met and married in England.

From the 138 pages of his service record we know that when he enlisted in 1915 at the age of twenty-four he stood five foot, eleven inches tall and had no tattoos; when he was discharged he had a tattoo of a snake on his right leg and his chest expansion had shrunk an inch and a half. He had a "Very Good" military character, but once had his pay suspended for five days for gambling. He was "tall, erect, not rugged but fairly well built," his complexion was fresh, his eyes were blue, and his hair was fair, but he would not stay healthy for long. He was recurrently sick during his nine months in the trenches of Ploegsteert and the Ypres Salient, suffering from lice-induced trench fever, influenza, bronchitis, appendicitis, and inevitably pleurisy. Atkinson's dossier confirms the events of the play as memoir and its affect-producing narrative structure as reenactment; the play he wrote reenacts the experience of sharing cramped, dangerous space with men he knew and the experience of watching their interactions, entrances, and exits. The autobiographical "I" that speaks is, in memoir reenactment, the eye that watches.

Glory Hole is life writing as life staging, but it is not a reenactment of what Atkinson did; rather it is a restaging of what he saw and heard. The play recreates his visual and aural fields with exactitude and is filled with scopic detail. The play is set in a dugout, a small room dug into the face of a traverse trench immediately behind the front line. The detail of his description is holographic:

The dugout is a sandbag earth affair, with one step down into it from an entrance at rear. Dirty scraps of paper on the floor which should be of earth. Some loose sandbags and two bundles of new ones, also a couple of empty long ammunition boxes and old iron flat bottomed dish pan which can be used for candles as some pieces of wood stuck out from the walls as candle brackets. There is a small hole on the wall at LEFT with some metal lath in front to form a grate—this is for a charcoal fire—at right there is a hole in the wall which is a listening sap—a pile of earth to the side gives impression of the excavation. This sap is for listening in on enemy operations which consist at this time of a mine under this sector stretching along under a hundred yards or so of front line. (iii)

Atkinson includes a drawing that shows the listening sap—the glory hole—as a vertical shaft accessed through a hole dug into the wall; in his sketch we can see the top rung of a protruding ladder. The effect of the description is one of claustrophobic and wretched containment, which is intensified by the call for "an impression of heavy or drizzling rain" to underline "the misery of the mud and continuous downpour" (iii).

The action of *Glory Hole* never leaves that mud, and the plot is as spare and bleak as its setting. The play begins with a squad of soldiers settling into the dugout as they relieve British troops. There are six men crammed into the dugout that is their home, and Atkinson is extremely specific about their

appearance, their kit, their voices, and their manners. We are seeing what he saw. As in *The P. B. I.*, the character descriptions are a recalled ethnography; they include a character who echoes *The P. B. I.*'s Marmaduke Meredith:

PRIVATE MONTEITH . . . "MONTY": Public school education—morose until gets his rum. Sort of ne-er-dowell. DRESS: steel helmet—usual pack and equipment—greatcoat—rubber sheet over shoulders. He is a middle aged man and a philosopher—a distinct type of remittance man. UNIFORM can be Seaforth kilt—gas helmet—khaki hose tops—has bottle of wine with and other sundries as may be referred to during action of play. (iv)

The specificity of the Seaforth Highlanders kilt is an authenticator that locates the play in time and place: these are men of the 16th Battalion, Atkinson's unit, and they have just moved into the Salient after a relatively quiet but miserably wet and muddy winter near Bailleul, twenty kilometers southwest of Ypres, rotating between divisional reserve and trench duty. In the nine months that Atkinson had been in the unit, the Canadian divisions had undergone extensive changes in tactics, training, organization, and weaponry as they transformed into the professionalized fighting force that a year later would take Vimy Ridge.

The reference to a steel helmet pinpoints the exact date and place of the action. As noted in the battalion's war diary, the soldiers of the 16th Battalion had been issued steel helmets for the first time on March 28 and moved into the Salient to relieve the British 50th Division (*War Diary*). This was one day after British and Canadian sappers had blown a six-hundred-meter section of German trenches at St. Eloi, five kilometers south of the 16th's position; as described in the Canadian Army's official history, "the eruption blotted out old landmarks and collapsed trenches on both sides like packs of cards" (Nicholson 139). For the next three months, the Salient would be the scene of some of the bitterest fighting in the war as both sides fought desperately to control the seven craters and the heights of Hill 60 and Mont Sorrel. In the time Atkinson had been in the unit, from July to March, the 16th had 158 casualties; in the ensuing five months they would lose another 653 (Urquhart 405). As the soldiers of *Glory Hole* move into the Salient they are about to experience a new, bloodier war.

Much of the literature of the war by its veterans emphasizes the camaraderie of the trench, but in their muddy hole the six emotionally numb men of the section treat each other with rough disinterest. Half of them are British (as was Atkinson)—two Englishmen and a Scot—and their lines are written in dialect. They crack jokes, insult each other, and argue as they man an underground listening post to monitor German miners who are planting explosives

to blow up the trench. One of the men rarely speaks but coughs incessantly, as Atkinson did, as we know from his medical records. By the end of the play three of them are dead. The sparse plot, which begins late in the procedural action of the play, focuses on a teenager, "about 16 or 17 years old," who has just arrived with a draft of reinforcements and remains in misery and terror throughout the play.

Glory Hole is a play about conjuring an abject space, populating it with memory and gradually emptying it. Contained in this space, the plot functions not as narrative but as affective pressure. In the trenches, the men are always waiting—for the next work party, for the next explosive or gas shell, for the next to die—and the procedural routines of trench life are intensified by that waiting. In *Glory Hole*, the countdown to the explosion is both an evocation of that pressure and the device that provides forward momentum in the plot. That plot is itself a reenactment of the trench experience: nothing happens in the dugout except daily life and work; men come and go to live another day or die until the inexorable logic of war leaves a young teenager to die alone in the mud.

This skeletal plot, "based on hearsay," is the only obvious invention in the play. Its anti-sentimental minimalism is a remarkable theatrical achievement because it foregrounds the activities rather than the dramatic actions of the characters. We witness rather than feel and, in that way, reoccupy Atkinson's visual and aural field of memory. The actors embody that memory through ethnographic stage descriptions that recreate the rituals and patterns of trench life: how men watch each other closely as they take turns sipping rum from a tin cup, how they fold their kilts as bedding on the mud floor, how they play soccer in the cramped dugout with a ball of muddy paper, and the play of light from explosive shells and flares. At the same time, Atkinson recreates the aural field: the sound of incessant rain, intermittent artillery and machine-gun fire, the bits of doggerel the men recite to make conversation, their accents, and the tempo of their speech.

More successfully than *The P. B. I.* or *Dawn in Heaven*, *Glory Hole* strips the artifice of genre and stage convention from restaged memory because Atkinson was experienced enough a playwright to understand how minimal a plot can be to do its work and to apprehend, perhaps, that to restage life experience, dramaturgy must break through the fictive boundaries of the Aristotelian plot. For William Stabler Atkinson, writing for theater in a small town in western Canada, *Glory Hole* was a theatrical exorcism, and the only politics in it are the negotiations of men struggling to survive. Atkinson's notable innovation in the play is the theatrical testimony of trauma through precise reenactment of the experience of living and witnessing it.

A vaudeville musical, a passion play and a memory reenactment: these three plays are not the only ones written by returned veterans, but they are unique in that they can be identified as life writing rather than invention or patriotic fantasy. They were written during a brief window of time when theatrical memoirs had to be cloaked in genre convention because there were no dramatic models that offered other solutions. (At least, there were none in Canada: elsewhere those models were emerging at the same time, especially in Germany, where Irwin Piscator, another veteran of the trenches, was experimenting with a new form of staged actuality that he called documentary theater.) Genre was a culturally available template, but the choice of particular genres expressed the compelling reasons that lead the authors to use the medium of the theater to re-embody their memories. There is a direct relationship between the authors' purposes and their dramatic models. In the case of *The P. B. I.* the medley of comedy, melodrama, and commemorative nostalgia is a triumphalist victory cry that evokes the gaiety of war-time entertainments. But by the end of the 1920s, the rush of victory had given way to acrimony and disillusionment as the world slid into a global depression. The austere minimalism and grief-laden rejection of dramatic artifice in *Glory Hole* is made possible by the template of the memory play, in which we occupy the author's field of vision, devoid of sentimentality. By the mid-1930s, at the height of the Depression, at a time when Canadian politics had become radically polarized and the discourse of the Great War had become politicized, Simon Jauvoish found in the passion play a powerful dramatic template to express his moral anger in *Dawn in Heaven*.

We can identify the scrim of genre in these plays and perceive the life writing through it from historical distance, but it is more difficult to determine how the authors' contemporary audiences might have perceived this play of genre and memoir. Scrimms work both ways; they reveal and conceal, depending on the position of the viewer. From our vantage point, familiar with a modern practice of life writing drama and theater, we can see in these plays a point of emergence where life writing disrupts the containment of genre, but for the producers of *The P. B. I.* and *Dawn in Heaven*, on the other side of the scrim, genre was a means to stage experiences that audiences recognized as authentic. And even in those audiences, there were those who saw past the scrimming effect more clearly than others. The eminent drama critic Hector Charlesworth reviewed *The P. B. I.* twice in the national magazine *Saturday Night*. When it premiered at the University of Toronto's Hart House Theatre in March, 1920, he made the point that, "I must confess that some of the hits which won an immediate response from the returned men in the audience were beyond my experience, a fact which bespeaks the fidelity

with which the episodes were written" (20 Mar. 1920). Three months later, when the show moved to a commercial theater, he elaborated on that point, which he clearly saw as important: "The fact that it is played by real soldiers gives a verisimilitude or bearing to the characters entirely untheatrical, but in essence dramatic. As such it makes a very potent appeal to the demobilized soldiers. Every one of thousands of returned men who have seen the play has been wildly enthusiastic about it because it brings back to him with a strong sense of reality scenes in which he himself has participated" (5 June 1920). An anonymous reviewer who saw the play in Ottawa on its national tour provides further evidence that audiences were drawn to the play because of its testimonial witnessing, writing that "old soldiers find the play true to war times and enjoy it and to those who were unable to reach the fields of battle it gives an opportunity to gain a knowledge of what Canadian soldiers went through in the trenches. The trench scene is particularly accurate and more than one expeditionary force man felt like ducking under his seat when the 'silent susans' commenced to fall" ("Crowded Houses"). His response was virtually identical to the Winnipeg reviewer who had broken out in a sweat while watching *Dawn in Heaven*.

These memoir plays by returned soldiers are evidence of a transitional moment in dramaturgy, in which the urgent need to create a theater of the real and the lived, haunted by trauma, forced the emergence of theatrical forms that moved beyond fiction. We cannot quantify how many similar plays remain to be found, in large part because the unproduced (or not-yet-produced) and unpublished play is a problem for theater historians, if less so for life writing scholars. The identification of life writing plays masked by convention in the particular context of war memoirs suggests that there must be other memoirs hidden in scrimmed plays written out of other domains of experience.

NOTES

1. One sign of the historically troubling relationship between theater and life writing is that neither drama nor theater is included in Smith and Watson's "Sixty Genres of Life Narrative" in *Reading Autobiography*.
2. The pioneer of the modern biographical drama was Emil Ludwig, whose prose biographies of Napoleon, Lincoln, and many others were international bestsellers. His dramatic trilogy, *Bismarck: The Trilogy of a Fighter*, published in English in 1927, was his attempt to circumvent the German government's ban on the third volume of Bismarck's autobiography. A court action brought by the deposed Kaiser Wilhelm produced a judgment that the play was "historically accurate and absolutely objective" (Ludwig viii).
3. "Theatricalist" refers to genres of dramatic performance in which theatrical techniques function as textual elements; this term includes various forms of meta-theatrical drama

and what is now referred to as “devised” performance, in which the performance text is created in the rehearsal process.

4. The Canadian experience of the First World War had a transformational impact on the development of autonomous Canadian nationhood and for that reason continues to loom large in cultural memory. Canada was drawn into the war in 1914 automatically as a British dominion, but the Canadian government insisted that Canadian troops take the field as separate formations rather than be dispersed into British divisions. By 1917 the four field divisions of the Canadian Expeditionary Force were brought together to form the Canadian Corps, which spearheaded the British advances of 1917–1918. For a general history of the Canadian army in the Great War, see Tim Cook’s two-volume history, *At the Sharp End: Canadians Fighting the Great War 1914–1916* and *Shock Troops: Canadians Fighting the Great War 1917–1918*.
5. The Concert Parties were soldier vaudeville troupes organized at the local unit and divisional levels in the British and Canadian armies of the Great War. The Canadian divisional troupes were organized by the YMCA. Their repertoire consisted of satiric skits, songs, and “female impersonators.” The most famous Canadian troupe, the Dumbells, had a successful post-war career, playing in London, New York, and several national tours in Canada. See Jason Wilson, *Soldiers of Song: The Dumbells and Other Canadian Concert Parties of the First World War*.
6. By “naïve modernism” I refer to the fact that modernism was culturally asymmetrical, often emerging from local and self-discovered solutions to the crisis of realist representation in the early twentieth century. Along with the “high” modernism of the metropolitan avant-garde art world, there were other, diverse expressions of modernism, as James Harding and John Rouse argue in *Not the Other Avant-Garde: The Transnational Foundations of Avant-Garde Performance*.
7. All textual quotations from *The P. B. I.* are taken from the published version.
8. The 16th Battalion was initially comprised of recruits from four feeder reserve regiments of the Canadian Militia: the Queen’s Own Cameron Highlanders (Winnipeg), the Seaforth Highlanders (Vancouver), the Gordon Highlanders (Victoria), and the Argyle and Sutherland Highlanders (Hamilton).

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