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## ELIZABETH BISHOP AND WORLD WAR I



In 1964 Elizabeth Bishop wrote Anne Stevenson a long letter about her childhood memories of Great Village, Nova Scotia. Among them was a vivid recollection about World War I: "It was during the first World War—the village boys (a kilted regiment) would come to say goodbye and their clothes were wonderful, of course. Most of them were never seen again—almost every boy in that tiny place, from 18-22, was killed in one of the big battles—Canadians first, of course—and the whole village was in mourning" (23 March).<sup>1</sup>

When most scholars consider Bishop's response to war, they do so based on her experiences of WWII, during which she lived in Florida and New York City.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, when discussing Bishop's perception of war, scholars deal principally with poems written at this time, such as "Roosters"<sup>3</sup> and "Wading at Wellfleet," or poems post-dating the Second World War, which have military themes or imagery, such as "View of the Capitol from the Library of Congress," "Visits to St. Elizabeths," "Brazil, January 1, 1502," "From Trollope's Journal," and "12 O'Clock News."<sup>4</sup>

The first eight years of Bishop's life occurred concurrently with the lead up to, outbreak, progression, and conclusion of World War I. She wrote a great deal about her early childhood, and if these poems and stories are not directly about the Great War, she was keenly aware that "The War was on" (*CP* 161), not only subsequently with an adult's sense of history, but also in the moment with a child's sense of curiosity. Poems such as "Britannia Rules the Waves" (1935), "Casabianca" (1936), and "Sleeping on the Ceiling" (1938) offer military or imperial themes but pre-date WWII. A principal source must then be Bishop's encounter with "the war to end all wars." Moreover, an extensive

body of autobiographical writing (published and unpublished) is set between 1914-1918. Placed in chronological order (not of composition but of historical progression) this work charts her earliest memories: "A Drunkard" (1914), "First Death in Nova Scotia" (1915), "In the Village" (1916), "Reminiscences of Great Village" (1916),<sup>5</sup> "Sestina" (1916), "Primer Class" (1916-1917), "The Country Mouse" (1917-1918), "In the Waiting Room" (1918) and "Manners" (1918).<sup>6</sup>

This list reveals that the family drama Bishop so vividly remembered also occurred concurrently with World War I. When the time-lines are merged, it becomes clear that the private tragedy of Bishop's maternal family (the Bulmers) resonated with "the world tragedy of 1914" (Wells 849). Such was the case for countless other families in Canada—no part of the Dominion was untouched by the upheaval of these years. The Bulmer family did not send any sons to fight and die in the trenches in France (however, they knew well all the young men from Great Village who enlisted); but the devastating mental illness which overtook Gertrude Bulmer Bishop during this time, resulting in permanent hospitalization, speaks to the "madness" (Roper 85) which gripped the world. As so many young men went away never to return, as the entire country was in mourning and forever changed by "the years of agony" (Craig 1), so too did Gertrude Bulmer Bishop go away never to return; so too did the Bulmer family spend years in mourning and were changed forever: "A scream, the echo of a scream, hangs over that Nova Scotian village. No one hears it; it hangs there forever" (*CPr* 251).

It is not possible here to explore in detail Bishop's childhood memories or to analyze the full impact of World War I on Bishop's life and work.<sup>7</sup> Instead, this essay offers a chronology of private and public events in order to illustrate the convergence and resonance between them. Such a chronology provides only punctuation marks in complex texts, but it shows how individual and collective history interconnect to influence art. This essay concludes with a few observations about the impact of the war on Bishop's poetics and world view.

## Chronology

1905-1908— Incidents in the Balkans and Morocco cause tensions between Germany/Austria and France/Russia/Britain.

22 June 1908— William Bishop of Worcester, Massachusetts, and Gertrude Bulmer of Great Village, Nova Scotia, marry in New York; honeymoon in Jamaica and Panama. Bishop wrote Stevenson, "My father had married a poor country girl" (23 March 1964).

1911— Second Moroccan crisis. Tensions in Europe increase.

8 February 1911— Elizabeth Bishop born in Worcester, Massachusetts.

13 October 1911— William dies.

14 April 1912— *Titanic* strikes iceberg and sinks. This disaster had no direct bearing on the War, but the ship's designation as "unsinkable" symbolizes the optimism and arrogance of Europe and North America "still under the tranquil inertias of half a century of peace" (Wells 853). The calm waters of the Atlantic hid the iceberg more surely than if there had been a storm. Bishop's family was not involved in the disaster, but it "strongly affected" her maternal uncle, Arthur Bulmer, and through him Bishop. "When I was left alone in the parlor . . . I could scarcely wait to take out the *Titanic* books . . . and look at the terrifying pictures one more time" (*CPr* 245-46).

1912-1913— Gertrude and Elizabeth travel between Massachusetts and Nova Scotia. Gertrude, in deep mourning, is emotionally stable but restless. Elizabeth's earliest memories are of learning to walk in her maternal grandmother's kitchen in Great Village and riding with her mother in a swan boat in the Boston Public Gardens. A swan bites Gertrude's gloved hand; Bishop remembers, "The finger was split. Well, I was thrilled to death!" (Spire 126).

1912-1913— A “fragile equilibrium of European statecraft” keeps the lid on the “point beyond which none of them could see” (Stokesbury 21).

1914— Early in the year Gertrude has a breakdown and is hospitalized for about three months in a private sanatorium in Norwood, Massachusetts. Elizabeth is cared for by maternal aunts, Maude Shepherdson and Grace Bulmer, who live in Revere and Boston, respectively.

25-26 June 1914— Great Salem Fire. Gertrude and Elizabeth, together in Marblehead, witness the blaze across Salem Harbor. Gertrude assists refugees fleeing the burning “Witch City.” “A Drunkard” records Bishop’s memories of this event.

28 June 1914— Archduke Francis Ferdinand and his wife are assassinated in Sarajevo.

30 July 1914— Russia mobilizes.

1 August 1914— Germany declares war on Austria and begins invasion of Luxembourg and Belgium.

4 August 1914— Britain declares war on Germany. “When Great Britain is at war, Canada is at war” (Craig 50). Canadian mobilization begins immediately. The First Contingent leaves for England in October 1914 (Mathieson 3). Canadians no less than the other Allies believe the war will be over by Christmas and “march off to the great adventure” (Stokesbury 34).

1915— Late in April Gertrude and Elizabeth return to Great Village.

1915— Late in April “the six terrible days” of the Second Battle of Ypres (Gwyn 149), Canadian troops’ first major engagement and first encounter with mustard gas. The reality of war hits home: more than 6,000 Canadian casualties; 66 officers and 1,784 other ranks killed (Gwyn 160).

7 May 1915— *Lusitania* torpedoed off Ireland; 2,000 die, including “numerous Canadians” (Gwyn 157).

23 June 1915— Frank Elwood Bulmer, son of Arthur and Mabel Bulmer, dies at the age of two months. His death is the subject of “First Death in Nova Scotia.”

November 1915— Gertrude visits New Brunswick and Massachusetts. Elizabeth remains in Great Village.

January-February 1916— 193rd Battalion, authorized and designated a Highland Brigade Battalion, recruits from the six eastern counties of Nova Scotia: Cumberland, Colchester, Hants, Pictou, Antigonish and Guysborough (Hunt 130). Bishop refers to the 193rd in “The Country Mouse”: “In Nova Scotia the soldiers, some of whom I actually knew, wore beautiful tam-o’-shanters with thistles and other insignia on them. When they got dressed up, they wore kilts and sporrans” (CPr 28). The Battalion mobilizes in May and embarks in October (Hunt 131).

21 February 1916— Battle of Verdun begins. “Nineteen sixteen was the year when the war stopped being an aberration and turned into a constant, a nightmare” (Gwyn 295).

March 1916— Gertrude suffers a violent episode triggered by a “business paper,” probably relating to the custody of Elizabeth. In her illness Gertrude believes she is going to die for her country and that she is the cause of the war (NSH 21).

May 1916— Gertrude goes to Massachusetts for medical treatment. Elizabeth remains in Great Village.

20 June 1916— Gertrude voluntarily admits herself to the Nova Scotia Hospital, Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, where she remains until her death on 29 May 1934. Elizabeth does not see her mother again after June 1916. “In the Village” and “Reminiscences of Great Village” recall events from May 1915 to June 1916.

**July-November 1916**— The eight battles of the Somme, including an engagement by the Newfoundland Regiment at Beaumont-Hamel, in which only 68 of the 801 members of the Regiment survive (Gwyn 304). Bishop visits Newfoundland, still a British colony, in 1932. Newfoundland becomes a province of Canada in 1949.

**July 1916-September 1917**— Elizabeth lives in Great Village with her maternal grandparents, William and Elizabeth Bulmer. “Sestina” is about this period.

**Fall-Winter 1916-1917**— Elizabeth attends the Great Village school. “Primer Class” recalls this experience.

**February 1917**— Elizabeth sick with bronchitis.

**6 April 1917**— United States enters war.

**9 April 1917 (Easter Monday)**— Canadian troops capture Vimy Ridge. Some historians view this victory as a rite of passage to Canadian nationhood, “Canada became a nation” (Gwyn 343); but it came at great cost: 10,602 casualties, 2,600 of them fatal. The massive Canadian National Memorial at Vimy Ridge invokes “The Spirit of Canada,” “the cloaked and hooded figure of a woman, standing alone overlooking the Douai Plain” (Gwyn 343). In “Reminiscences of Great Village” Bishop re-names her mother, “Easter.”

**Mid-September 1917**— John and Sara Bishop arrive in Great Village.

**Mid-October 1917**— John and Sara Bishop and Elizabeth leave Great Village and return to Worcester. “The Country Mouse” recalls Bishop’s time living with her paternal grandparents, “Now I felt like a traitor. I wanted us to win the War, of course, but I didn’t want to be an American” (*CPr* 26).

**July-October 1917**— Passchendaele. “The Great War reached its nadir of horror” (Gwyn 389). Canadian troops see action in October with 15,634 casualties (Gwyn 400).

**6 December 1917**—Halifax Harbour Explosion. Most powerful man-made, non-nuclear explosion in history, caused by the collision of the French munitions ship, *Mont Blanc*, and the Belgian relief ship, *Imo*. Over 1,600 die instantly, more than 9,000 wounded; immediate area of destruction 325 acres; impact felt as far away as Cape Breton Island (Kitz 26). Nova Scotia Hospital, especially women's wards, heavily damaged but no deaths. It functions as a station for treating wounded. Massachusetts organizes largest single relief effort, sends a train loaded with supplies, doctors and nurses on the night of the 6th (Kitz 84). Blizzard hits the city on the 7th (Kitz 71). Newspapers headlines in Toronto, "HALIFAX CITY WRECKED" (Gwyn 411).

**5 February 1918**—Elizabeth visits dentist's office in Worcester and experiences highly disorienting identity crisis. "In the Waiting Room" recalls this event.

**May 1918**—A seriously ill Elizabeth ("I felt myself aging, even dying," *CPr* 31) taken to live with Aunt Maude in Revere, Massachusetts. She begins a slow, steady recovery to health. "Manners" is dedicated "For a Child of 1918."

**August-November 1918**—"The Hundred Days." Final assaults and breakthroughs by Allies.

**11 November 1918**—Armistice.

**Fall-Winter 1918-1919**—Spanish influenza epidemic, which "killed more than died in the war" (Gwyn 485). Bishop's Aunt Grace, a nurse, cares for the sick in Massachusetts during this epidemic. Bishop does not contract the influenza.

**1919**—Demobilization and return of Canadian troops from Europe.

**8 August 1919**—Elizabeth returns to Nova Scotia for the first time since her removal in October 1917. She and Aunt Grace travel aboard the steamer *North Star*, which grounds off Yarmouth, N.S. All passengers and cargo are safely removed. The ship is lost; Bishop's shipwreck.

The following discussion focuses on three themes: 1. patriotism, 2. tradition/modernity, and 3. grief/mourning. These themes further illustrate the way in which private and public realms intersected for Bishop, in both her life and art.

Being such a small child at the time, Bishop, it might be assumed, could not have experienced the Great War as a political event. It is clear from her work, however, that she was affected by the public debate about Canada's roles in the British Empire and the war. An outline of these roles will set the stage. In 1914, the Canadian confederation was not yet fifty years old. As a nation, Canada was in its infancy. Domestic policy was more or less of Canadian invention, but Whitehall in London still controlled foreign policy for all its dominions and colonies. Thus when Britain declared war Canada, Australia, India, and the rest of the Empire, were automatically engaged. And, indeed, overall public opinion in Canada concurred; but not everyone agreed. Many historians<sup>8</sup> argue (with shades of variation) that Canada's involvement in the war, its immense sacrifice on the battlefields of France, fundamentally shifted Canada's relationship with Britain, "The relationship could no longer be one of mother and child: henceforth it would have to be an alliance between independent and equal partners" (Craig 9). This shift was not immediately absolute. Tensions between imperialists and nationalists continued for decades. The war also helped solidify internal divisions between French- and English-speaking Canadians. The climax occurred during the Conscription Crisis and Khaki Election of 1917: "By tragic miscalculation and misunderstanding we hardened ourselves into two solitudes" (Gwyn xviii).<sup>9</sup> The rhetoric of Empire, duty and sacrifice predominated during the war years, but many people in Canada and many Canadians in Europe questioned inevitability and debated limits. The war was a rite of passage to full nationhood for Canada; the tragedy changed Canadian identity profoundly.

Bishop undoubtedly witnessed active discussion about the Empire and the war in her grandparents' home. The Bulmers appear to have been "for the Empire." "First Death in Nova Scotia" notes the collection of royal chromographs hanging on the parlour walls. Such decoration was standard fare in the

homes of a Dominion still very much a colony of the “mother country,” but their presence does indicate a certain world view. Moreover, on the “home front” during the war, “there was just one great event every day—the coming of the mail” (Montgomery 80). It brought not only letters but also the daily newspaper. Reading it was a communal activity during which the progress of the war was discussed at length. In addition, every community held patriotic concerts, suppers, parades, sermons, and picnics.

When Gertrude and Elizabeth returned to Nova Scotia in April 1915, the war was well under way. It was inevitable in a climate of heightened patriotism that, for the years she lived in Great Village, Bishop received a conventional imperialist and nationalist indoctrination. “Primer Class” records her encounter with one of the most important tools of this pedagogy,

Over the blackboard, were two rolled-up maps, one of Canada and one of the whole world. . . . On the world map, all of Canada was pink. . . . I was so taken with the pull-down maps that I wanted to snap them up, and pull them down again, and touch all the countries and provinces with my own hands (*CPr* 10).

The pink of the British Empire—later Commonwealth—coloured maps well into the twentieth century.

Bishop also learned the songs of Empire (“God Save the King”) and nation (“The Maple Leaf Forever”). She also learned many war songs, reporting, “I liked ‘Tipperary’ and ‘The long, long trail’ and ‘Every nice girl loves a sailor’ much better than the Worcester songs. I particularly hated ‘Joan of Arc, they are ca-lllll-ing you’” (*CPr* 28). So thorough was her indoctrination that when she was taken back to the United States, Bishop horrified her paternal grandmother (whose ancestors fought for the patriots in the American Revolution) by declaring that she “didn’t want to be an American.” Interestingly, Bishop was removed from Nova Scotia, Canada, and the Empire and returned to Worcester shortly after the *deus ex machina* of American intervention, which many Canadians and Britons resented because they desperately needed it. Bishop was immediately debriefed and began indoctrination into the Republic:

Shortly after, I was presented with a white card with an American flag in color at the top. All the stanzas of "Oh, say, can you see" were printed on it in dark blue letters. Everyday I sat at Grandma's feet and attempted to recite this endless poem. (*CPr* 27)

This battle for Bishop's loyalty and patriotism, played out on public and private levels, may account for her adult ambivalence towards nationality ("Actually, I feel rather countryless," *Bross* 60) and exile and expatriation ("I am not, never, never an EX-PATRIATE," *One Art* 37; "Exile seems to work for me," *One Art* 312). Though she observed in 1966, "I am a completely American poet" (*Brown* 19), Bishop continued to regard herself as "half-Canadian" (*Ribeiro* 17), making this observation throughout her life in letters, interviews, and conversations.

The impact of the war and imperialism/nationalism is found in one of Bishop's most haunting poems, "First Death in Nova Scotia." This poem is about Bishop's initiation into the rites of death and grieving on a very private level. It records the death of her infant cousin, Frank Elwood Bulmer (Arthur in the poem), in June 1915. However, "First Death" is also a war poem. It offers an intriguing representation of the changing relationship between Britain and Canada brought about by the war.

The poem begins "in the cold, cold parlor," the official room for visits and ceremonies in Nova Scotian homes—the interspace between private and public realms. The pictorial entourage represented Empire for most Nova Scotians. The royal family oversee, indeed, tower over, the room, where the dead son and loon reside. The "cold and caressable loon" and "little cousin Arthur" in his "little frosted cake" coffin are profoundly fascinating objects for Bishop, herself a child witness. The loon and son are figures of sacrifice and the first three stanzas imply that such a state is not only inevitable but also "much to be desired." The flower of young Canadian manhood rushed to do their duty for Empire and were sacrificed to the cause.

In the fourth stanza Bishop introduces "Jack Frost" and "the Maple Leaf (Forever)," hints of a national consciousness.

The ordinary soldier (“Jack Frost”) served not the Empire but his country. This allegorical figure puts his indelible mark on the literal son of the family: “Jack Frost had dropped the brush / and left him [Arthur] white, forever” (*CP* 126). Significantly, Bishop stresses this color, “all white,” “white, forever”—a color related to purity, innocence, death; but also during the war to cowardice. White feathers were given to men who hesitated to do their duty. Bishop’s context is highly ambivalent.

The poem concludes with a subtle but powerful shift. The acceptance of duty is questioned, “But how could Arthur go, / clutching his tiny lily, / with his eyes shut up so tight / and the roads deep in snow?” Here, she questions the blind, automatic acceptance of following the Empire, implying that the cost is too high. Such questioning was not absent in Nova Scotia during the war. One observer in the *Truro Daily News* wrote in 1917,

Looking at the long lists of casualties, and thinking of the weight of woe that the war is causing, one can only hope that, in addition to the securing of any nation’s liberty, there may be other great and lasting benefits born in the throes of this immense anguish; benefits that would compensate in some measure for the fearful price being paid, in blood and treasure. (5 January: 3)

“First Death in Nova Scotia” is a remarkable exploration of how the private and public merge; an examination of the debate about sacrifice, loyalty, duty, and death, which took place in Canada during World War I (Canada was no longer willing to be “the smallest page at court”); and a complex evocation of the impact of the war on Bishop’s and the Canadian psyche.

World War I is generally regarded as a cataclysm which altered the public and private realms fundamentally. Many political, cultural, economic, and literary historians view the war as a rift, a distinct break with the past. The horror of “this immense anguish” shattered the sense of continuity people had experienced for much of the nineteenth century; ushered in an unstable, discontinuous dynamic; destroyed innocence. Historians argue that the war undermined, even eradicated, tradition, fueling what has become known as modernism. However, some historians

attempt to go beyond this paradigm “of the Great War as a phase in the onward ascent of modernism” (Winter 3) and show how tradition and modernity were not so much an opposition—an either/or—but were a complex interaction, processes which complemented, informed and critiqued, rather than excluded each other.

The tension between tradition and modernity was central to Bishop’s poetic program, and she learned a good deal about their complexities in Great Village during the war. In the private realm Bishop struggled with the (dis)continuous events of her mother’s illness and encapsulated the impact of those events in “In the Village,” in a manner which reflected the global impact of the war: “The dress was all wrong. She screamed. The child vanishes” (*CP*r 253). The child—and the world—vanished in many ways between 1914-1918. The loss of innocence was real. No one could be and behave in the same way ever again. The poem “In the Waiting Room” explores the devastating realization that purpose, identity, relationship and perception are unstable and subject to disintegration. It offers much discontinuity. Yet, at the same time, Bishop clearly realizes that she is connected to her history—her family’s and humankind’s. She was and was not of them in the same instant: “How—I didn’t know any / word for it—how ‘unlikely’” (*CP* 161). Yet it was likely that she could be at the same time both separate from and connected to something. Indeed, this experience was characteristic of many people on the “home front,” who at once felt that the war was alien and distant yet appallingly close and oppressive. Bishop’s “big black wave, / another, and another” resonates with others’ experiences. For example, L.M. Montgomery writes, “There were moments when waiting at home, in safety and comfort, seemed an unendurable thing” (144).

For Bishop tradition and modernity were often reflected in other dualities such as rural/urban and home-made/mechanized. “Manners” (set in 1918 at the close of the war) exemplifies the way these dualities played out in her childhood and how she incorporated them in her poetics. The poem describes Bishop’s apprenticeship in manners with her beloved maternal grandfather. Travelling around the village on his horse-drawn wagon, Bishop received a home-made education in human relations, which emphasized courtesy, consideration, and good

cheer. The passengers in the automobiles rush by (on the road and on the page) ushering in technology and mechanization, which leaves the wagon behind in the dust.<sup>10</sup> World War I brought major technological advancement to Canada and intensified the already general movement (since the turn of the century) of population from rural areas to cities. “Manners” suggests the inevitability of this shift and lightly parodies grandfather’s old-fashionedness—but it is a sympathetic parody.

Throughout her life Bishop preferred rural to urban environments (“I don’t much like the city,” Bernlef 64), but she often lived in cities (New York, Paris, Rio, San Francisco, Boston). She wrote about countrysides, but she also wrote about the metropolis. Bishop valued and honoured the hand-crafted and the primitive (“Home-made, home-made! But aren’t we all?” *CP* 164), but she was also fascinated by and used modern technology (e.g., typewriters and airplanes). Bishop employed traditional poetic forms (sonnets, sestinas, villanelles, etc.), but often subverted them. The point of this list is to show that Bishop experienced and engaged in what she would late in life call a “dazzling dialectic”—the past was not supplanted by the present; rather, past and present were in constant dialogue and merged to create “those years between,” an interstitial space where tradition and modernity complemented, informed, and critiqued each other. Bishop extracted what she needed from tradition and modernity and created “interspace” in her art.

Perhaps the most important point of convergence between private and public tragedy occurred in the realm of grief, in the simultaneity of individual and communal mourning. “In the Village” is an elegy for the bewildered child and for the deeply grieving mother who simply cannot surface out of her mourning:

“There’s that mourning coat she got the first winter,” says my aunt.

But always I think they are saying, “morning.”  
Why, in the morning, did one put on black? How  
early in the morning did one begin? Before the sun  
came up? (*CPr* 254)<sup>11</sup>

These words prefigure a late poem, “Five Flights Up,” in which an unnamed speaker imagines the questions of an “unknown

bird” and “little dog,” which arise at night (in mourning?), and are answered by morning: “Questions— if that is what they are— / answered directly, simply, / by day itself” (CP 179). For the speaker, however, answers are problematic burdens, “— Yesterday brought to today so lightly! / (A yesterday I find almost impossible to lift.)”

Gwyn observes of the impact of the war, “Remarked upon less often is the fact that the experiences Canadians underwent during the Great War cut a pattern for their society for roughly the next half-century. ‘Why is he dead? And why, when he is dead, do I remain alive? Why?’” (xvii-xviii). Such questioning is endemic in Bishop’s art. Its source was principally the mystery of her mother’s illness and disappearance. In “Reminiscence of Great Village” Bishop assessed the impact of these circumstances in a way which also characterizes the response of many Canadians to the war and its aftermath:

The hardest thing about it now— the sadness of it must be borne, of course— but harder to do— is to realize that it ever happened. Sad things[, ] sudden things, awful things— seem always, a minute afterwards, so *unnecessary*, so unreasonable. What I had done before, & have done since, and what has happened to us all— it is understandable— if you think about it long enough it makes sense and you feel [it] . . . like a light moving behind a window pane at night, a certain reason, to it— an illumination— or like an inscrutable aloof face, lit up by a smile. But this— what happened to her— throws the picture all off— . . . the music all out of key. Denies the answer to every question. (10)

Bishop’s experience of World War I is inseparable from her experience of Nova Scotia and her family. Though not equivalent (the dialectic is not a linear equation) the progression of private and public history were parallel, and their nexus was Gertrude Bulmer Bishop. As a child, Bishop absorbed a multitude of sensory stimuli in her environment. She remarked about childhood, “You are fearfully observant then. You notice all kinds of things, but there’s no way of putting them all together”

(Spires 125). As “In the Village” records, her world comprised many beautiful and terrifying events, people, places, objects, textures, sounds, smells, and sights. Bishop’s engagement with this highly complex mix was perhaps embodied in a gift:

On the bureau is a present that has just come, from an uncle in Boston whom I do not remember. It is a gleaming little bundle of flat triangular satin pillows— sachets, tied together. . . . Each is a different faint color; if you take them apart each has a different faint scent. But tied together the way they came, they make one confused, powdery odor. (CPr 266)

In many ways, growing up is a lesson in ordering the “confused powdery odor,” in putting things together and taking them apart. (For the adult this process devolves to the realm of memory; for the writer it devolves to the realm of language.) Bishop’s private experiences take precedence in her autobiographical stories and poems— this context was the focus of her “infant sight”— and affected her artistic development most directly. Her engagement with and understanding of two of her most central themes, love and loss, originated in her relationship with her mother. However, the larger cultural and political contexts were important conditioners of her memory and vital (re)sources for her art. The Great War of 1914-1918 profoundly influenced Bishop’s world view; it was, as Jay Winter describes, a “site of memory, site of mourning.” ☞

## Notes

1. Of the seventy men from Great Village who enlisted between 1914-1918, 21 were killed. The number of non-fatally wounded is not known (*History* 104-05).
2. She also spent time in North Carolina and Mexico during WWII.
3. Written in the early 1940s, “Roosters” is a response to the military presence in Key West and to militarism generally. In 1956 Bishop told May Swenson, “I started it and wrote all the beginning, and bits here and there, much more directly at 4 or 5 a.m. in the back yard in Key

West, with the roosters carrying on just as I said" (*One Art* 316). However, a brief passage in an unfinished novel about her childhood in Great Village, written in the mid-1930s, shows that the rooster also had a much earlier source: "At half-past twelve a silly rooster had crowed . . . [a] yawning sort of crow to begin with, then a convinced loud one, then a third which broke off abruptly. Had he been dreaming? His wives were probably tittering, nudging each other . . . up and down the length of the perch" ("Reminiscences" 23).

4. Dickie traces Bishop's interest in war to World War I, but does not explore this source in detail. Schweik focuses entirely on the impact of the Second World War and subsequent wars on Bishop's work.

5. This title was supplied when the document was catalogued at Vassar College and for convenience will be used here.

6. "Gwendolyn" also has an indirect link to World War I. Gwendolyn Patriquin's brother, Clyde Patriquin D.C.M., was a casualty of World War I. Bishop would have known him.

7. I offer further exploration and analysis in my forthcoming biographical study, *Lifting Yesterday: Elizabeth Bishop and Nova Scotia*, and it is hoped other scholars will more fully examine this subject.

8. See Craig, Gwyn, and Mathieson.

9. Not all English-speaking Canadians were imperialists. Many were federalists and strongly nationalistic. Moreover, not all Francophones were absolute anti-imperialists or avid *nationalistes*. Labels are necessarily simplistic. Reality was much more subtle and complex.

10. This onset of technology affected others in Nova Scotia at the time: "The past twelve months has seen Canso and vicinity invaded by the automobile" (*Truro Daily News*, 5 January 1917, 3).

11. Gertrude Bulmer Bishop's mourning pre-dated the war, but by 1915 it coincided with a mounting communal grief: "By now [1915], many Canadian women were wearing mourning, or at least, eschewing bright colours. . . . Yet it was frowned upon to show pain in public" (Gwyn 162).

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