

BOOK REVIEW ESSAYS

displaced persons and refugees (who in times past would have rapidly become casualties of war), one might argue the only “better angels” holding back the consequences of our otherwise violent behavior in this Long Peace are UN peacekeepers and the staff of the UNHCR and various international aid agencies.

As for “the better angels” themselves, moreover, there is nothing interesting about Pinker’s analysis. The better angels Pinker depicts – empathy, self-control, moral sense and reason (p. 668) -- have always been there, just as the darker ones have always been there. It becomes a matter of which ones we choose to follow, to which of the angels on our shoulder we choose to listen – and thus, we are back in the realm of ethics.

If we consider the moral strictures of all major religious and philosophical traditions, the choices associated with these “better angels” are neither new nor recent, nor are they dependent upon some neurobiological progress helpfully located in 21st Century Western culture. Humans have debated their ethical choices from the beginning of time; both individuals and societies have decided which direction to travel as a result of the choices they have made.

The only difference between our choices and the ones made by previous generations is the scale at which the consequences must be considered. We can literally and immediately affect large areas, even the earth itself, by individual decisions that otherwise, in the past, had at least seemed limited by local horizons.

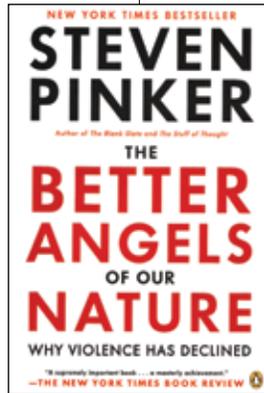
I believe Horgan is correct to say that better choices would lead to less violence of all kinds, and ultimately, to more peace. The potential to make those kinds of choices – with large-scale effects – makes our “ethical moment” the most crucial in human history.

We need to cast the question of war or peace in an ethical context, not one in which we are excused by accidents of fate, birth, or neurobiology from responsibility for what we decide.

We make choices for reasons and our reasons reflect our values or what we believe is most important. We can therefore work back from our choices -- our decisions -- to the reasons behind them, and thus, to the values, in their turn, that underpin our reasons.

The “ethical moment” is embedded in both our personal narrative and the narrative of the culture in which we live, narratives that are woven together out of our values and our reasons for making the choices that we do. Horgan, Goldstein, and Pinker explore those narratives, challenging us to reflect upon the roles we play and on what our choices say about what we believe to be the most important things in our lives and our world.

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Re-Examining the Bombers: A Book Review Essay

by Sean M. Maloney

Daniel Swift, *Bomber Country: The Poetry of a Lost Pilot's War*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 269 pages.

Richard R. Pyves, *Night Madness: A Rear Gunner's Story of Love, Courage, and Hope in World War II*, Red Deer Press, 319 pages.

These two books operate from different standpoints but are fundamentally about the same thing: Swift and Pyves are each on a quest, but their trails lead them to the same destination. They want to understand their forebears’ experiences as aircrew serving with RAF Bomber Command during the Second World War. Swift’s relation disappeared in 1943, while Pyves’ became lost in haze of alcohol and post-traumatic stress disorder until his death in 1987.

The distinction between the British approach (Swift) and the Canadian approach (Pyves) is almost a distinction in national caricature on several levels. *Bomber Country* is the more philosophical and literary of the two works. Swift is a poet, at heart and by profession, and that is his vantage point.

Where is the war poetry of those engaged in the strategic bombing offensive? That leads him to track down and uncover the circumstances of John Eric Swift’s short life, and by doing so, answers the question, what happened to his grandfather? Richard Pyves, on the other hand, wants to understand what the war did to his grandfather, and why it was so. *Night Madness* is more technocratic in the detailed explanation of each reconstructed mission, but it is not exactly bereft of literary merit: the letters back and forth between his future mother and Ron Pyves are intertwined in the tactical and technical narrative. Swift is about situating his grandfathers’ experiences in the larger schema of the war, history, and British society. Pyves ultimately reaches conclusions examining the injustice of Canadian society in shunting veterans to the side out of embarrassment until they die.

The larger issue of the morality *of*, and the ex-post facto moral debate *over*, Second World War strategic bombing is not ignored, nor is it ‘treated with kid gloves’ by both of our authors. Swift grew up in a guilt-riven society, where Air Marshal Sir Arthur Harris only gets his monument in 1992 and the Bomber Command Memorial is only constructed in 2012. Nobody visits the Pathfinder Force museum, and it is as much a tomb as the graveyard in which they find Richard Swift. Was his grandfather a war criminal? Pyves, on the other hand, has to confront the fact that Ron Pyves felt guilty about his role in

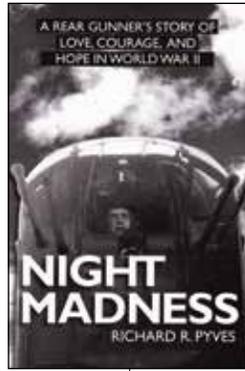
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the bombing of Dresden in 1945. Did his father believe he was a war criminal? If so, why?

Both authors, incidentally, stumble over the role that the 1960s generation played and continues to play in aggravating their quests, as well as negatively impacting their respective relations. Ron Pyves has psychological issues brought on by incessant and negative media coverage of Vietnam in the 1960s which accelerates his condition. Daniel Swift is repeatedly confronted with a literature that presents insane moral equivalence arguments equating strategic bombing with the Holocaust. For Swift, there is an historical counter-literature in which he can take comfort, but for Ron Pyves, that historical analysis comes too late.

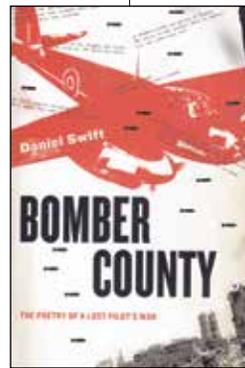
And in other cases, the desire within certain quarters of British and Canadian society to sweep away and ignore those who participated in such operations finds expression in both works. Canada's Veterans Affairs of the 1970s and 1980s is populated with a generation of dismissive, uncaring bureaucrats that emerge from the 1960s Zeitgeist, and they are led by a Prime Minister who was openly derisive of Canada's participation in the Second World War. Swift is confronted with deliberate literary amnesia by poets who did not serve, ignoring the poetry of those who did but did not make it home alive to publish. Or, in the case of squadron reunions, Swift relates a situation whereby those at the reunion were the ground crew. The aircrew members were all dead. One aircraftswoman, who married another bomb technician, tells him: "Most of us [women] steered clear of the aircrew because they weren't coming back."

Night Madness has a different take on personal relationships. Ron's future wife, Kay, maintains a voluminous correspondence, much of which is reproduced in the book. What the author does not quite comment upon is how divorced from the reality of Ron Pyves' war the letters actually are. He juxtaposes



these anodyne letters full of up-beat anachronistic language ('swell,' 'gosh,' 'snaps') with technical narrative: ('Outbound: 356 miles. Inbound: 462 miles, total distance flown: 818 miles. 434 Squadron: WL-D (KB 830) Bomb load: 18 x 500 pounds.') If Pyves' intent is to jar the reader with this approach, he succeeds. (Incidentally, my relations who served in Bomber Command during this time generally did not correspond with their families back home because their wartime reality was incapable of depiction to those who were not experiencing it.) Ron Pyves attempts to do so in one letter: "If you were to light a firecracker, or if a car backfired near me, I'd probably dive for the sidewalk or under a table. I suppose it takes time to get used to these things." And this is 1941. He has four more years to go.

After reading both works, it is difficult not to conclude that post-war British and Canadian society and their governments have behaved abominably towards those who participated in Bomber Command operations during the 1940s. Yes, there is a right to dissent, to disagree, to argue, and debate issues of policy, strategy, and application. And we should. However, to deliberately employ a current, or even a 1960s moral framework to judge the decision-making and activities of the 1940s remains a disingenuous approach at best. Those decisions were undertaken at a particular time, under specific conditions. The negative effects of that 1960s social and societal framework contributed to and will continue in the future to place barriers in the way of veteran's health and reintegration. It is not right that these men should have been moral pariahs and to be treated so by the societies whose elected officials asked them to undertake these physically, psychologically, and morally hazardous missions.



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Warlords. Borden, Mackenzie King and Canada's World Wars

by Tim Cook

Toronto: Penguin, 2012

464 pages, \$34.00 HC.

Reviewed by Bernd Horn

This is a significant book for those interested in Canadian history, particularly the period spanning the two world wars. Although it does not focus upon the details of the military campaigns themselves, it provides a captivating account of how the nation's prime ministers and their senior politicians navigated through the domestic and international issues to guide the nation through complexity and conflict. It is an

examination of our wartime leaders in an attempt to understand how they guided the nation through two of the most disruptive periods of our nation's history.

The core question Tim Cook zeroes in on is how did each respective prime minister lead the nation in time of war. Both Borden and Mackenzie King faced similar challenges, but at different points in Canada's evolution and maturation. As such, the author sheds light on each prime minister's wartime actions, as well as their respective character traits.

Not surprisingly, the book takes a chronological approach, starting with Robert Borden. Cook expertly summarizes Borden's life and career – particularly, his transition from lawyer to politician. The story is well written; fast flowing, and dynamic, the narrative is an artful mix of narration, quotes,