



UNIVERSITY OF
SAN FRANCISCO

Gleeson Library |
Geschke Center

April 2017

Warring Spirits (Timothy Findley's *The Wars*)

Peter Stevens

Follow this and additional works at: <http://repository.usfca.edu/ontarioreview>

Recommended Citation

Stevens, Peter (2017) "Warring Spirits (Timothy Findley's *The Wars*)," *Ontario Review*: Vol. 9 , Article 24.
Available at: <http://repository.usfca.edu/ontarioreview/vol9/iss1/24>

For more information, please contact southerr@usfca.edu.

Warring Spirits

THE WARS by Timothy Findley. Toronto: Clarke, Irwin (New York: Delacorte Press), 1977. Pp. 226. \$9.95 (\$8.95 U.S.), hb.

In a 1973 interview Timothy Findley passionately condemned man's despoliation of his world: "I really believe that we're at war with nature, and we have declared war on a defenceless enemy. . . . Perhaps, man is almost done evolving. And in fact this is the subject of my next novel." This sense of ecological apocalypse suffuses his third novel, *The Wars*, probably the "next" novel referred to in this interview.

Its hero, Robert Ross, leaves a somewhat sheltered home life in Ontario to join the army, and his experiences in the 1914-18 War are nearly always connected figuratively or literally with animals. These creatures, particularly horses, are all trapped in senseless catastrophes, caught in the human slaughter which seems equally senseless, man killing man, officer ordering inferiors into impossible missions, man losing his grasp of himself, his decency, his sanity. The apocalypse places ordinary men in grotesque situations, heroism wavers into perversions, the human spirit is constantly brutalized.

The animals are presented as passive recipients of man's destructive tendencies, and Ross is almost always put into the position of acting as their saviour. The climactic scene of humans gone mad in the pursuit of outmoded notions of honour and duty describes not only the frightening deaths of horses but the mutilation of Ross himself, leading to his eventual death four years after the end of the war.

Such a furious vision of man's destruction of his world and its creatures leads Findley into a style that emphasizes the grotesque terrors of both external action and interior griefs. His style is heightened realism, at times strained in its insistence on inhuman and frightening detail, though some scenes manage to focus on the ludicrously horrifying details with a telling mixture of realism, symbolic inference and garish, almost surrealistic description. The final scene of maddened men and horses blazing towards extinction is one such moment, the account of a reconnoitering patrol that turns into the nightmare of a gas attack is another (though here the realism is stretched at times beyond its limits).

The finest evocation in this manner is the scene in which Ross blindly leads a convoy of horses mistakenly onto a dyke, surrounded by fog and the muffled sounds of battle. Here is literally and figuratively no man's land, with man and beast struggling to find their way,

and crows, omens of blackness, raggedly lifting into the broken air around them.

Running parallel to these devastatingly manic scenes of war are scenes depicting Ross's growing awareness of sexuality and love, as he moves from the commercial crassness of a brothel (meeting there yet another sympathetic whore), witness to the perverse pleasures of his idolized hero, through the brief ecstasies of human love to his own dark, dehumanized and vicious rape at the hands of unknown soldiers.

This theme of brutalized love as a further measure of the violence of human warfare does not evoke the same apocalyptic fervor as the war scenes. The account of these experiences is staggered through the novel, fragmenting the chronology and often dissipating the energies of Findley's vision of war. The central experience of love is presented through the account of it given in the diary of a twelve-year-old, who, however precocious, simply would not have this vocabulary or the capacity to wonder about the adult world. Such writing militates against the heightened realism of the other scenes, and the account is further weakened by distancing it in contemporary London with the twelve-year-old now an old woman recalling these events.

This intrusion of the present occurs throughout the novel to the detriment of the objective delineation of Ross's experiences in the war. Findley falters by pulling in sections of documentary matter-of-factness, as if he cannot let go some of the details his researches have turned up.

But this information has not been assimilated into his fictional world. Findley falls back on the device of having a shadowy personage (interviewer for the taped accounts of the old woman in London and a nurse who cared for Ross in his final years, researcher examining artifacts and newspaper accounts, novelist assembling details) intrude on the realism of the novel. He even has the twelve-year-old make gratuitous references to the D. H. Lawrences and Virginia Woolf — perhaps the girl would not know these figures then but in her present age she would surely comment, as she comments on other events in her memory. So this personal account, presumably included for its immediate and subjective truth, together with present-day recognitions, misses the point.

Indeed, in spite of the novel's undeniable power in its presentation of Ross's involvement with war, the scenes of the human wars of love and betrayal (apart from the successful portrayal of the gradual disintegration of Ross's mother) defuse Findley's fervent denunciatory delineation of the terrifying waste and brutalization of the human spirit his novel attempts.

PETER STEVENS