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## Documenting history of war resistance in Canada



By [Wayne Grady](#), Kingston Whig-Standard  
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**KINGSTON** — Lara Campbell, a Queen’s University graduate and now a professor of history at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, was back in Kingston earlier this month to talk about the book she co-edited for Between the Lines press. The book, *Worth Fighting For: Canada’s Tradition of War Resistance from 1812 to the War on Terror*, is a collection of 17 essays documenting the history of war resistance in Canada from the historic “Peace Churches” attended by Mennonites and Quakers in the late 18th century, through the rise of feminist pacifism and the anti-conscription movements coinciding with the First World War, to Canada’s sometimes fierce opposition to the Cold War and the Vietnam War, and the recent storm of protests over Canada’s involvement in the American conflicts in the Middle East.

“The experience and waging of war has always been a fundamental part of Canadian history,” Lara said at the event, held in a large, white room in the recently opened Tett Centre, “but the current government has put a whole new spin on it, saying that Canada has a strong tradition of militarism, which is only half the story. Canada has an equally strong historical tradition of anti-militarism, and that history has not been told until now.”

The launch was part of a plenary session presented by PeaceQuest, a national organization co-founded by Kingston writer Jamie Swift to emphasize the peacekeeping side of Canada’s long relationship to war. While we waited for the main event to begin, the PeaceQuest mission statement was projected onto the wall in front of our chairs: “Inspired by the 100-year anniversary of WWI, PeaceQuest is a catalyst and forum to engage Canadians in discussing important questions of peace and war.”

The forum was introduced by PeaceQuest co-chair Broniek Korczynski, who pointed out the irony that in the 1960s the Tett Centre was the eastern headquarters of the Canadian Army, and now was hosting an event designed “to foster peace as a core value in our shared Canadian identity.”

Campbell began her talk by pointing out that the government has already spent \$110 million commemorating Canada’s involvement in military events such as the War of 1812, the Anglo-Boer War of 1899, and the First World War, and is planning to put more money into celebrating the upcoming anniversary of the Battle of Vimy Ridge. Such flag-waving, she said, “ignores the corollaries of a war mentality such as the fight against conscription and the internment of Japanese-Canadians.”

Worth Fighting For is intended to correct that imbalance. Essays by Jonathan Seiling, Ross Fair, Amy Shaw and Conrad Stoesz outline the role of conscientious objectors to war throughout our history, from the pacifist sects in Upper Canada who demanded exemption from military duty in 1793 to faith-based conscientious objection to the Second World War in the 1940s.

Historian David Tough, an expert on the First World War and one of the authors in attendance, spoke briefly about his essay, “A Better Truth: The Democratic Legacy of Resistance to Conscription, 1917-1921,” pointing out that war resistance helped expand Canadian democracy: “Before the First World War,” he said, “the only people allowed to vote in Canada were white males. By the end of the war, the government had extended voting rights to women and to several ethnic groups,” largely to counter pressure from anti-conscription protests.

Another section of the book is devoted to essays chronicling various peace movements that have helped to shape modern Canadian history, including Cynthia Comacchio’s work on the Cadet Training controversy between the wars. Although many people applauded the idea of spending millions of dollars on military training in our public schools, she writes, “a number of Canadians challenged the benefits of compulsory military drill for schoolboys.” The resistance met with some success: while I clearly remember dressing up in a hot, woolen army-cadet uniform in summer and learning to fire a rifle in my high school basement, I don’t remember it being compulsory.

Other essays detail the role of women’s movements — such as the Voice of Women in the 1960s — in resisting war, conscription, and even the prevalence of war toys. Queen’s history professor Ian McKay’s essay profiles anti-war activist Margaret Ells Russell and the Women Strike for Peace movement in 1961, inspired by a very real fear of impending nuclear annihilation.

“It’s easy to get discouraged,” McKay told the PeaceQuest gathering, “when you see how much effort is being misspent on emphasizing the importance of war in forging Canadian identity, but there are some hopeful signs.” For example, this is the first time in some two centuries of U.S. history that America is not actively involved in a war somewhere in the world. “The notion of war as an

arm of statecraft may be going the way of the dodo.”

In the milling about after Lara’s talk, over glasses of cranberry juice and slices of pound cake, I asked Korczynski how he became active in the PeaceQuest movement.

“My father was in the Polish Army during the Second World War,” he said, “and emigrated to Canada after the war, when the Russians were still in Poland. He didn’t speak much about the war, but one day when I was eight I saw a man at a Memorial Day celebration, and I asked my father why that man had numbers tattooed on his arm. My father took me aside and told me about the Holocaust. I think I have been opposed to war ever since.”

“PeaceQuest,” added Swift, who is also one of the principals of Between the Lines, “is in good measure about culture.”

“In what way?” I asked him.

“Books, music, theatre and film,” he said, “stimulate our imaginations, including our collective imaginations. Movements like PeaceQuest and books like Worth Fighting For encourage Canadians to form a balanced collective imagination, and therefore a more all-embracing concept of Canadian culture.”

Last year, PeaceQuest sponsored two plays about the First World War at the Thousand Islands Playhouse in Gananoque, and gave free tickets to families from CFB Kingston. It also presented an on-stage conversation between CFB’s commanding officer and Sister Pauline, who for several years has been leading a silent vigil for peace in front of Kingston City Hall, about what Remembrance Day means to them.

“Our present government,” Jamie says, “wants us to imagine war as a glorious adventure in nation-building, with things like valour and comradeship at the forefront. I prefer to imagine it for what it really is — a monstrous, murderous tragedy.”

There is, as Lara Campbell says, validity in both views. But in a true democracy, both views need to be given equal consideration.