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"From the darkness to the light"
Memoirs of blind Canadian veterans of the First and Second World Wars

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Abstract: This article is a study of the memoirs of three Canadian ex-servicemen who were blinded during the First and Second World Wars. It inquires autobiographical accounts as a source to understand disability both at an individual and a social level. I argue that autobiographies, as they reflect the individual experience of disability, also reveal concepts and prejudices concerning disability that are inherent to a society at a specific time. The authors hence can either challenge or confirm persistent ideas about disability. This paper is organized in three parts. In the first I present the autobiographies this study is based on, and summarize their main features. In the second I focus on the way blindness impacts individual's identity. I shall argue that the loss of sight is experienced as life-changing event, a death-rebirth process that deeply affects the veterans as well as their entourage. Blindness enhance hence a process of re-definition of the self which encompasses, on the one hand, blind individuals' perception of their own 'exceptionality' and, on the other, their desire for normality and social integration. In the last section I analyze how the three writers address Canadian society in order to challenge the existing ideas and prejudices about the blind. I argue that they deliberately choose to use autobiographical narratives as a device to point out and challenge common preconceptions about blindness.

Key-words: History of disability, Experience of disability, Canadian War Veterans, Visual Impairment, Autobiographies

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Memoirs of blind Canadian veterans of the First and Second World Wars

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On June 7 1917 Private James H. Rawlinson of the Ontario 58th Infantry Battalion of the Canadian Expeditionary Force was blinded by a fragment of shrapnel. He entered the St. Dunstan's Institute for Blind Soldiers and Sailors in London for rehabilitation; there he learned Braille, typing and carpentry before returning to his native Ottawa. In 1919 he published *Through St. Dunstan's to Light*¹, a book in which he describes the drama of his wound, his rehabilitation, and his return to the civilian society.

James Rawlinson is one of the several hundred Canadians who lost their sight in war, and one of the few who decided to tell their story in an autobiographical work. We can also mention *Blind Date*² by Private John Windsor, and *Wings of Courage*³ by Pilot Officer Neil Hamilton, both of whom fought in the Second World War. These books narrate individual journeys 'from the darkness to the light'; they provide insight into the experience of blindness and what it means – from a psychological and a practical viewpoint – to be suddenly deprived of sight as an adult. These works also testify to the care given to blinded veterans and their integration within civilian society, and so tell of the evolution of welfare policies for the visually impaired and general attitudes towards blind people in Canada during the course of the 20th century.

This article examines how disability is portrayed in auto-biographical accounts of Canadian war blinded. We will question how the authors display themselves and relate their experience, and how their memoirs reflect or challenge persistent ideas about disability. Scholarly literature on disabled veterans consists mostly of works of military or social

¹ Rawlinson, James H. (1919). *Through St. Dunstan's to Light*. Toronto: Thomas Allen.

² Windsor, John (1963). *Blind Date*. Sidney, BC: Gray's Publishing Canada.

³ Hamilton, Neil R. (2000). *Wings of Courage: A Lifetime of Triumph over Adversity*. Calgary: Nacelles.

history⁴. Although providing essential information about the return of maimed ex-servicemen to civilian society, these works have left some important issues unexplored: questions such as how veterans experienced their condition, how did their relatives cope with the impairment suddenly acquired by a family member, what ideas and prejudices there were about disabled individuals – are outside the purview of these works.

For a more comprehensive understanding it is useful to mobilize the theoretical and methodological frame of disability studies. That discipline analyses ideas about disability, the process of social exclusion or integration of impaired people examining their ideological and practical patterns. It can accordingly highlight several questions currently unresolved in the scholarly literature. My study will address three points: first, I shall analyze how blindness is experienced; secondly, I shall study blindness as a factor in identity; thirdly, I shall discuss ideas and conceptions concerning the blind within the Canadian society in the 20th century.

This paper is organized in three parts. In the first I present the three autobiographies this study is based on, equally providing some elements concerning the status of blind individuals in Canada during the 20th century. In the second I focus on the way blindness impacts individual's identity. I shall argue that the loss of sight is experienced as life-changing event, a death-rebirth process that deeply affects the veterans as well as their entourage. It enhance hence a process of re-definition of the self which encompasses, on the one hand, blind individuals' perception of their own 'exceptionality' and, on the other, their desire for normality and social integration. In the last section I analyze how the three writers address Canadian society in order to challenge the existing ideas and prejudices about the

⁴ See, among others, Whalen, Robert Weldon (1984). *Bitter Wounds: German Victims of the Great War 1914-1939*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press; Broadfoot, Barry (1985). *The Veteran's Years: Coming Home from the War*. Vancouver and Toronto: Douglas and McIntyre; Morton, Desmond, and Glee Wright (1987). *Winning the Second Battle: Canadian Veterans and the Return to Civilian Life, 1915-1930*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press; Prost, Antoine (1992). *In the Wake of War: 'Les Anciens Combattants' and French Society, 1914-1939*. Oxford: Berg; Gerber, David A., ed. (2000) *Disabled Veterans in History*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press; Cohen, Deborah (2001). *The War Come Home: Disabled Veterans, in Britain and Germany, 1914-1939*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

blind. I argue that they deliberately choose to use autobiographical narratives as a device to point out and challenge common preconceptions about blindness.

Three Canadian blind veterans

James Rawlinson's *Through St. Dunstan's to Light* is the only autobiography by a blind Canadian veteran of the First World War. Little information is available about the author: we only know that he was born in Ottawa that he enlisted in the 170th Infantry Battalion of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, and that in the spring of 1917 he was in northern France⁵. In June he was injured during an air raid: a splinter hit his right temple causing a sudden and irreversible loss of sight. After two months in hospital – first in St. Omer and then in Boulogne – he entered the St. Dunstan's Hostel for Blind Soldiers and Sailors in London⁶. That institution had been founded in 1915 by Sir Arthur Pearson, a press magnate who was blinded by glaucoma and decided to devote himself to the cause of British eye-wounded veterans. The foundation's headquarters were a magnificent mansion – the biggest in London after Buckingham Palace – made available by the American millionaire and philanthropist Otto Kahn. St. Dunstan's patients lived there and received comprehensive training for their rehabilitation, including Braille, daily life skills (self-grooming, orienting), and also vocational training, mostly in crafts such as shoemaking, basketry and carpentry. Rawlinson stayed at St. Dunstan's for 16 months and then returned to Ottawa, where he found a job as a typist and stenographer. *Through St. Dunstan's to Light* does not relate its author's entire life story, but only the two years of it from 1917 – when he was injured – to 1919 when

⁵About the Canadian military intervention in the First World War, see Nicholson, G.W.L. (1964). *Canadian Expeditionary Force 1914-1919*. Ottawa: Queen's Printer; Freeman, Bill and Nielsen, Richard (1998). *Far from home: Canadians in the First World War*, McGraw-Hill Ryerson, Busch; Briton, Cooper (2003). *Canada and the Great War: Western Front Association papers*, McGill-Queen's University Press.

⁶On the history of St. Dunstan's see Castleton, David (1990). *Blind Man's Vision: The Story of St. Dunstan's in Words and Pictures*. London: St. Dunstan's, and the memoirs and biographies of the founder and administrators: Pearson, Sir Arthur (1919). *Victory over Blindness*. New York: George H. Doran; Lonsdale, Lord Fraser of (1943). *Whereas I Was Blind*. London: Hodder and Stoughton; id. (1961). *My Story of St. Dunstan's*. London: George G. Harrap; Dark, Sidney (1992). *The Life of Sir Arthur Pearson*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.

he went back to Canada. Apart from the first chapter describing the circumstances of his wounding, the book is entirely devoted to Rawlinson's training at St. Dunstan's and his description of the facility, its inmates and its staff.

Blind Date, published in 1962, is the autobiography of John Windsor, an officer of Lord Strathcona's Horse, a light cavalry regiment that fought during the Second World War as an armored unit. The book is a linear narrative from the author's early childhood to the age of fifty. Born in Calgary, Windsor attended the Royal Military College in Kingston (Ontario), and was mobilized in 1943. He left Canada for Europe (England), then North Africa (Algiers) and, lastly, Italy⁷. It was here, near the Melfa River in Lazio, that he received the wound that blinded him. A shell fragment destroyed his eyes and blew away half his face. After a long stay in hospital and several reconstructive operations he went to the training centre in Church Stretton, a St. Dunstan's facility opened in 1940⁸. Here he received vocational training as a personnel manager. In 1942 he returned to Calgary and joined the Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB), an institution created in 1918 on the model of St. Dunstan's to assist Canadian blind veterans returning to civilian society⁹. Struggling to find employment, he enrolled in a course on Industrial Relations at Queen's University in Kingston. After graduating he moved to Toronto and then to Vancouver, looking for a job that would enable him to maintain his family. Frustrated by the low-paid jobs on offer, for which he was over-

⁷ On the Canadian intervention in the Second World War, see Chartrand, René, Ronald Volstad (2001). *Canadian Forces in World War II*. Oxford: Osprey Publishing; Cook, Tim (2012). *Warlords: Borden, Mackenzie King and Canada's World Wars*. Toronto: Allen Lane.

⁸St. Dunstan's opened a second training centre at Ovingdean, Brighton, in 1938. From 1940 to 1946, it moved to Church Stretton (Shropshire), as being less exposed to air raids. More than 700 people were trained there during this period (see Crowe, Raynour, Tony, Barrie (2011). *Church Stretton through the ages*. Greengates, Church Stretton).

⁹ See McDonagh, Frank G.J. (1971). "The Vision of Eddie Baker." In *In Search of Canada*, 118-123. Montreal: Reader's Digest; Marjorie Wilkins (1965). *No Compromise: The Story of Colonel Baker and the CNIB*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart; Gerber, David A. (2001). "Blind and Enlightened: The Contested Origins of the Egalitarian Politics of the Blinded Veterans Associations," in *The New Disability History: American Perspectives*, ed. Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umanski, 313-34. New York University Press; Herie, Euclid (2005). *Journey to Independence, op. cit.*

qualified, he finally decided to settle with his wife and children in Brentwood Bay, a small town close to Victoria Lake, and to become a farmer.

Neil Hamilton’s *Wings of Courage* is the only book of the three that tells the whole life story of its author, from childhood to the age of 80. Born in 1920 in Regina (Saskatchewan) into a family of farmers, Hamilton was conscripted in October 1941 and entered the Royal Canadian Air Force. In 1942 he volunteered for fighting in the European battlefields. His squadron was based in England, from where it flew several sorties against Germany. It then moved to North Africa to fly raids over Italy. In 1943 Hamilton returned to England and became an officer-instructor. In November he suffered a haemorrhage of the eyes during a training flight, which left him with only 10% vision in each eye. He was demobilized and returned to Canada. In the years that followed he had several serious health issues – including tuberculosis – which aggravated his eye condition. In 1952 he attended the Canadian National Institute for the Blind facility in Regina. Here he was trained in Public Relations and management. He began a career in the CNIB, first visiting blind Canadians across the country and then becoming a manager at the organization’s Calgary office.

Before the First World War blindness was a marginal social issue in Canada. At the beginning of the 20th century the country had almost no training institutions for blind adults, and the three schools for children born blind (in Brantford, Halifax and Montréal) provided only mediocre training¹⁰. The question of social and professional reintegration for the blind arose because of the high number of casualties in the Great War. Canada suffered almost 60,000 dead and 138,000 wounded. Some 140 soldiers returned home blind, and nearly 1,300

¹⁰ Thus Neil Hamilton on the Brantford School: “[...] Thirty or forty children living in just one dormitory. Crucial lessons in daily living skills were all but missed because these children were so far from their families and homes. There was no social interaction whatsoever, and the boys and girls were segregated from each other and from the rest of society”, *cit.*, p. 282. On the education of blind children in Canada at the beginning of the 20th century see Herie, Euclid (2005). *Journey to Independence: Blindness – The Canadian Story*. Toronto: Dundurn and CNIB, p. 17-30.

with severe visual impairment¹¹; those numbers rose in the following years because of further complications. According to the official figures the number of blind veterans had grown to 200 by 1920. The Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB) was founded in the aftermath of World War I by Edwin Albert Baker, an electrical engineer from Collins Bay (Ontario) who was injured in the Ypres Salient in 1915, at the age of 22. After being retrained at St. Dunstan's he returned to Toronto, where he found there were no organizations for the rehabilitation of the blind, nor any governmental assistance programmes. With Alexander Viets (also blinded at the Ypres Salient), Charles Dickinson and Schermann C. Swift – (general secretary and librarian of the Braille Library in Toronto, respectively), Baker decided to take up the cause of blinded Canadian veterans: in March 1918 they founded the CNIB as an institution to assist them. They also started to put pressure on the government about pensions and the extension of these benefits to blind civilians. In April 1922, they set up the Sir Arthur Pearson Association (SAPA), a social club and veterans' advocacy group.

The Second World War raised the public profile of blind veterans even further. Two hundred veterans were blinded in that war, their number rising to 460 in the following years¹². By that time the CNIB expanded, opening offices in Calgary, Vancouver, Regina and Ottawa, and broadening its activities to housing and work placement among other services. The CNIB continued to bring the issue of blind citizens to the attention of the Canadian government and civil society. Its members and SAPA's highlighted the lack of appropriate rehabilitation programs, without which it was impossible for blind men to regain their independence and find jobs to support themselves. They also stressed the greater needs of blind veterans compared with those with other kinds of impairment such as amputees.

CNIB's and SAPA's action toward the federal government had a measurable impact.

At the end of World War One, the government started taking responsibility for maimed ex-

¹¹ Durflinger, Serge Marc. *Veterans With a Vision*. Vancouver/Toronto, UBC Press. See also, England Robert (1943). *Discharged: A Commentary on Civil Re-establishment of Veterans on Canada*. Toronto, MacMillan.

¹² Durflinger, p.166-218.

servicemen's pensions and job placement by setting up the Department for Soldiers' Civil Re-establishment (August 1918)¹³. In the particular case of blind veterans Ottawa gave financial support to the CNIB, funding the Pearson Hall training center¹⁴ and covering the expense of accommodation and re-educational programs undertaken in the aftermath of war. Other steps were taken provincially, such as the Blind Workmen's Compensation Act introduced by the Ontario government in 1931 "to provide special protection for employers of blind workers and to encourage the employment of blinds in general industrial occupations"¹⁵. The federal government also covered the cost of the training activities of Baker Hall, a facility created in Toronto in 1940¹⁶ and though the Department for Veterans Affairs, founded in 1944¹⁷. Amongst the measures taken after the end of the war, we must recall the law voted in 1956, increasing pensions for war blinded and allowing widows of blind veterans to continue getting a full pension for a year following the veteran's death and, in 1970, the creation of the Exceptional Incapacity Allowance, entitling especially suffering disabled veterans – including blind ex-servicemen – to an attendance allowance of 3,000 dollars/year¹⁸.

By the middle of the 20th century, blind veterans had considerably improved their situation, notably compared to the beginning of the century. Thanks to the constant work of CNIB and SAPA, blind ex-servicemen had become a political matter that the public authorities should address and social issue that the community could no longer ignore. Although difficulties remained for blind ex-servicemen for laws was not always properly enforced and prejudices were not easy to overcome, they could at least benefit of the protection of a legislation ensuring financial help to them et their relatives.

¹³ The DSCR was created to deal with the veterans' return, medical needs, vocational training and placement.

¹⁴ Pearson Hall opened in Toronto on 7 January 1919. The premises cost CAD 38,000. The centre served as the primary training and rehabilitation facility for blind adults in Canada.

¹⁵ Herie, Euclid, *Journey to Independence*, op. cit., p. 117.

¹⁶ The site of Baker Hall was bought by Lady Virginia Kemp, widow of the industrialist and former Minister of Militia Sir Edward Kemp, for CAD 15,000. The facility closed in 1950.

¹⁷ On the politics of Canadian veterans see Neary, Peter, and J.L. Granatstein, ed. (1998). *The Veterans Charter and Post-World War II Canada*; Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press.

¹⁸ Durflinger, op. cit., p. 321.

Blindness as a factor in identity

In this section I will address the way in which the Rawlinson, Windsor and Hamilton experienced the loss of sight and how it impacted their personal identity. I argue that they depicted it as a process of "death and rebirth" that obliged both the victims and their relatives to start a brand new life. This encompasses a profound reshaping of the way the authors perceive themselves. Blindness becomes to them as a factor contributing to identity and self-determination. Broadly speaking, the existence of a "disable identity" is still a matter of debate among disability studies scholars and activists. Most argue that physical or mental impairments are not the main elements defining an identity. Individuals with disabilities characterize themselves in the first place through other markers such as gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation; identification as persons suffering from an impairment only comes second, or even third.¹⁹ The only case in which identity is directly linked to a physical condition is deafness. Inability to hear is an essential identifying factor for the members of the deaf community; they do not consider deafness an impairment but a characteristic. Deaf people think of themselves as a linguistic minority with their own specific language (the sign language) and their own culture²⁰. The question whether the same pattern might apply in blindness has not yet been addressed, and it would need extensive investigation going beyond the scope of this article. I shall therefore approach this question within the limits of my present study.

The present case study suggests that sensory impairment initiates a process of redefinition of individual identity. The loss of sight forced the authors of these three autobiographies to build new selves. Blindness became their new identity, the characteristic

¹⁹ On disability and identity see Davis, Lennard J. (2001). "Identity, Politics, Disability and Culture", in Albrecht, Gary L., Seelman, Katherine D., Bury, Michael (eds). *Handbook of Disability Studies*, Thousand Oak, London, New Delhi: SAGE Publications, p. 535-545; Rodas, Julia Miele (2015). "Identity" in Adams, Rachel, Reiss, Benjamin, Serlin, David (eds.). *Keywords on Disability*, New York and London: New York University Press, pp. 294-298.

²⁰ On this see Megan A. Jones, (2002). "Deafness as Culture: A Psychosocial Perspective", *Disability Studies Quarterly*, Volume 22, No. 2, pp. 51-60 and Carol A. Padden (2005), "Talking Culture: Deaf People and Disability Studies", *PMLA*, vol. 120, No. 2, pp. 508-513.

by which they primarily described themselves. That process encompasses a significant ambiguity: on the one hand they tend to emphasize the uniqueness of their condition, insisting on the specific features that only blind people have and which the sighted cannot understand; on the other, they show a deep longing for normality and social integration.

To the authors, losing their sight was in the first place a trauma. Each gives a detailed account of the circumstances of that episode, which occupies a key position in their books²¹. The very moment of the injury is recalled in dramatic detail. Thus Rawlinson writes "I felt a slight sting in my right temple as though pricked by a hot needle – and then the world became black. Dawn was breaking now, but night had sealed my eyes, and I could only grope my way among my comrades"²². And Windsor: "One moment, the world around me was full of vivid colors, green and blue, red and brown, yellow and golden, then suddenly, in the fraction of an instant, everything had turned to inky blackness"²³. The sudden awareness of blindness follows the injury. As Windsor recalls, "I think I knew right away what the trouble was. This was not the blackness of unconsciousness, nor the blackness of death. I was alive, that was certain, but I was blind"²⁴. The first reaction was horror, panic, and the desperate hope that it was only a temporary situation. After the doctors at the hospital of Boulogne removed his left eye – partially destroyed by the splinter – Rawlinson recalls "I was still vainly hoping that my right eye, which was remote from my wound, might recover its sight; but as the days crept by while the blackness of night hung about me I grew alarmed"²⁵.

Then, when they realize that there is nothing more that can be done, comes despair. After hearing from a doctor that he has had a double eye removal, Windsor feels completely lost: "My life, the worthwhile part of it, seemed to end at that moment leaving nothing but a

²¹ Rawlinson relates the event in the first chapter; Windsor and Hamilton in the middle of their stories (Chapter 6 of 17 and Chapter 18 of 30 respectively).

²² Rawlinson, *op. cit.* p. 2.

²³ Windsor, *op. cit.* p. 47-48.

²⁴ *Id.*, p. 48.

²⁵ Rawlinson, *op. cit.* p. 5.

husk, filled with despair and inner hurt"²⁶. Hamilton gives a similar account. After the ophthalmologist who visited him in Birmingham tells him that he has a permanent impairment, he cannot help crying: "I was overwhelmed with self-pity and fear. I [...] had nearly finished instructing and was almost ready to go home on regular leave. God, for this to happen now – it came as quite a jolt. I broke down into tears"²⁷.

These men describe losing their sight as the end of life as they knew it. Rawlinson depicts blindness as the end of any meaningful experience, for the only world he would ever see will be his memories²⁸. But if blindness is in one way compared to death, it also represents the beginning of a new life. Blindness obliges them to learn everything anew, as if they were new-born: "[The blinded man] at first has much to unlearn. All his old methods of work have to be forgotten. He is, in a sense, a child again, born the day his sight is taken from him"²⁹. Even trivial activities like eating are an entirely new experience: "Cutting and tracking down elusive pieces of meat and vegetables is a slow business when you can't see what you're doing, and the meal I ate that night was somewhat cold, but the rather stringy beef, the potatoes, and the Brussels sprouts held a new savour"³⁰.

These men seem sometimes experiencing anew the playful irresponsibility of teenagers. Windsor relate in those terms the time when he and one comrade of his once decided to leave St. Dunstan's facility without permission to get a drink. They quickly became lost but were lucky enough to bump into a policeman who kindly escorted them to a pub. "You know", dawdled Howard (Windsor's comrade) a little later, [...] "I never thought I would need a police escort to buy a glass of beer"³¹.

²⁶ Windsor, *op. cit.* p. 53.

²⁷ Hamilton, *op. cit.* p. 209.

²⁸ "The only world I see henceforth will be that conjured up by the imagination from memories of the past", Rawlinson, *op. cit.* p. 8.

²⁹ Rawlinson, *op. cit.* p.30.

³⁰ Windsor, *op. cit.* p. 56-57.

³¹ Windsor, *op. cit.*, p. 85

The apprenticeship of their new life is a speed-up process. Its ultimate goal is to make independent grown men out of them. In that sense, the training facilities they attend are incubators that have the ambitious purpose to achieve in a few months such a difficult transition. Friends and families actively participated in this process. Blindness affected them too involving both psychological and practical difficulties. Windsor's blindness was a life-changing experience for his wife, Pam: she had to move to England to help with her husband's rehabilitation and attend to him during his studies in Kingston, driving and seeing to many other tasks – in fact becoming her husband's "eyes"³². Hamilton's parents and siblings had to learn how to interact with him in view of his impairment. They managed to organize excursions, family parties and vacations in a way Hamilton could enjoy. There were also financial constraints to be faced because of the difficulty in finding a well-paid job for a blind person and uninsured medical expenses. Their attitude is always described as supportive and sympathetic, with no rejections or harsh feelings. The attitude of Hamilton's future in-laws is a good example: "When June first told her parents [...] that she was dating a blind man, they weren't too keen on the idea at all. Once [...] they met me, their opinion changed and I was warmly accepted into their family"³³. In one sense they represent an extension of the authors' own experience, as if they were fictional characters supporting his role as leading actor.

All three authors describe blindness as a condition that can only be understood by the blind, one that is impossible for an able-bodied individual to apprehend. "Since I have been sightless, two things have deeply impressed themselves on my mind. The first is that no person with sight can, or ever will be able to, see from a blind man's point of view; the second, that no man who can see can ever understand or gauge a blind man's capabilities or

³² "Pam is not only my wife but my eyes," Windsor, *op. cit.* p. 156

³³ Hamilton, *op. cit.* p. 167.

limitations³⁴". So loss of sight opens the door to a world accessible only to blind people. The authors' narrative is sometimes "elitist": they patronize the sighted and even complain of their "narrow view". "One of the annoying things to a sightless person is to have some sighted friend sit by him at a play, describing costumes and scenery. The blind have no need of such aids"³⁵. When Hamilton first visits the CNIB headquarters in Regina he is disappointed by the fact that it is a shabby building with no windows and very little light. "The builders had been oblivious to the fact that sight-impaired people have other senses as well and would rather not live or work in a dark, airless closet"³⁶. When he visits the CNIB headquarters in Calgary he notices the miserable state of the interior, its bare walls and dusty floor, and he complains that nobody has thought to decorate the interior. "The rooms were small, [...] there were no pictures on the walls or carpets on the tiled floor"³⁷. He decides then and there to make some improvements: "I secured donations from both blind people and outside donors to upgrade the rooms with carpets. When the carpets were laid, the blind residents were thrilled to feel the warmth on their feet. Touchable woollen wall sculptures in their rooms enriched their daily living by adding art they could appreciate"³⁸.

Spending time with people in the same condition also reinforces blindness as an identity. Although these books are written from the authors' perspective and focus on their individual experiences they devote many pages to the blind community. Rawlinson and Wilson have several pages on St. Dunstan's inmates and the spirit of solidarity and companionship they experienced during their stay. When they join the CNIB they feel a sense of shared identity. Such camaraderie not only provides moral support but allows them to explore their new condition and become more aware of their current abilities. Hamilton also

³⁴ Rawlinson, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

³⁵ *Id.*, p. 74.

³⁶ Hamilton, *op. cit.*, p. 271-272.

³⁷ *Id.*, p. 330.

³⁸ *Id.*, p. 330-331.

recalls the importance of the clubs and associations he joined after his injury³⁹. Here he first met some of his life-long friends and realized that "there is life after blindness"⁴⁰. By making the acquaintance of other blind people, learning their histories and sharing their own they start to feel they belong to a distinct social group, and to distance themselves somewhat from "sighted" society.

This sense of uniqueness is felt alongside a profound desire for normality. The possibility of becoming a worthy member of society again is in fact what motivates their commitment to training. As Rawlinson recalls: "To me, [St. Dunstan's] was the promised land, in which I was to be fitted to take my place as a useful, independent member of society"⁴¹. Their books express a desire to find a "normal" job rather than a sheltered one. A sheltered occupation "[...] by its nature, would be restrictive of outside contacts"⁴²; they want this kind of contact, "to be able to [...] compete in the world of the sighted"⁴³. In the same way, they show a desire to find access to "normal" leisure in the forms of lectures, music, sport, or dance.

This aspiration to normality and social integration is also apparent in the desire to start a family. Though we have no information on Rawlinson, we do know that both Windsor and Hamilton married and had children. Windsor was already married and about to become a father when his accident occurred. He and his wife Pam went on to have two more children. The description of family life is central to his autobiography, and also to Hamilton's. The latter met his wife June after being blinded, while in a sanatorium recovering from tuberculosis. They married and had four children. There are photographs of his wedding in the book, and several family portraits.

³⁹ He mentions in particular the ADANAC Dance Club and the AMECAS Club. Located in Regina, both clubs were active in the 1960s. They offered various activities for the blind and visually impaired.

⁴⁰ Hamilton, *op. cit.*, p. 266-272.

⁴¹ Rawlinson, *op. cit.*, p.12-13.

⁴² Windsor, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

Another sign of the desire for "normality" can be seen in the constant concern to display masculinity. Since the first studies addressing the intersection of gender and disability⁴⁴, masculinity and disability have been described as in conflict with each other because disability is associated with being childlike and vulnerable whereas masculinity is associated with being autonomous and powerful. That is particularly true for men with acquired impairment, who have experienced the sudden and unexpected loss of their able-bodiedness. Losing the able-bodiedness, which is an inherent characteristic of the "hegemonic masculinity"⁴⁵, projected them into the realm of the "marginalized masculinity"⁴⁶, obliging them to find a way to negotiate with the conflictive intersection of masculinity and disability. In their autobiographical accounts, our three authors constantly refer to the implication of normative expectations of masculinity. They have no intention to decline their male identity because of their impairment. To resolve with such an embodied dilemma, as they identify themselves as blind, they refuse however to identify as disabled exhibiting instead masculine attitudes. This is evident from several signs, starting with the place accorded to war in their narratives. Six chapters of Windsor's book and seventeen of Hamilton's describe their military training and operations. It is also easy to find a certain "fighting rhetoric" in their books: the rehabilitation is described as a "battle" against blindness, the new enemy they have to defeat. Rawlinson recalls how he felt after learning about the training he could receive at St. Dunstan's: "Gloom vanished, for the moment at any

⁴⁴ Ash, Adrienne, and Michelle Fine (1988). "Introduction: Beyond Pedestals." In *Women with Disabilities: Essays in Psychology, Culture, and Politics*, edited by M. Fine and A. Ash, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, p. 1-7; Hahn, Harlan (1989). "Masculinity and Disability." *Disability Studies Quarterly* 9: p. 1-3. See also (Shuttleworth, Russell, Wedgwood, Nikki and Nathan J. Wilson (2012). "The Dilemma of Disabled Masculinity", *Men and Masculinities* 15:2, p. 174-194 and Loeser, Cassandra, Crowley, Vicki and Barbara Pini (2017), *Disability and Masculinity. Corporality, Pedagogy, and the Critic of Otherness*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

⁴⁵ The concept of "hegemonic masculinity" was formulated by Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell. For Connell, hegemonic masculinity is a culturally exalted definition of masculinity that legitimizes and stabilizes men's dominant position in society, and other marginalized ways of being a man (Connell, Raewyn (1995). *Masculinities*, Cambridge: Polity Press; Sydney: Allen & Unwin; Berkeley: University of California Press)

⁴⁶ Gerschick, Thomas and Adam Miller (1994). "Gender Identities at the Crossroads of Masculinity and Physical Disability", in *Masculinities*, 2, 34-55

rate, and my whole being was animated by a great resolve – the resolve to win the battle of life, even though I had to fight against fearful odds”⁴⁷.

Masculinity is also highlighted by the space devoted to sport in these books:

Rawlinson describes the rowing and tug-o-war tournaments at St. Dunstan's; Hamilton talks about the softball team he played for before the injury and the golf and curling teams he set up afterwards. Their family role is of a piece with this: their determination to be the breadwinner proves the point, and the subordinate position of their wives. The authors do not hide the dependency caused by their loss of vision and the fact that they cannot avoid their wives' assistance in some things; but the way in which these situations are described never gives the impression that the man is in a subordinate position. On the contrary, their wives acquiesce in all their husbands' decisions. Pam agrees to move to Kingston, then to Toronto and finally to the countryside, going along with her husband John's decisions without argument. June follows Hamilton across the country to his various job locations. Despite his blindness, the man hence remains the head of the family.

This display of masculinity emerges also in the description of their rehabilitation. Authors' "re-birth" is described more as a physical/practical process than an emotional one. The importance of psychological training is not denied: Rawlinson, for instance, recalls how much the dedication of the St. Dunstan's staff meant to him: "I have already dwelt at some length on the patient self-sacrifice of the teachers of Braille: the spirit they display animates the entire staff. The work of the VADs [Voluntary Aid Detachment] is beyond praise"⁴⁸. Nevertheless, learning how to live without seeing was something achieved essentially through action. The authors' narratives are basically accounts of their unrest, their activities: the rehabilitation, the move from city to city searching for employment, the various jobs. In these

⁴⁷ Rawlinson, *op. cit.*, p. 21-22.

⁴⁸ Rawlinson, *op. cit.* p.42.

books, blindness is experienced and described through action; there are very few pages about emotions, thoughts, or feelings. It represents a 'masculine' reaction to such a misfortune.

To summarize, the loss of sight is to the three authors a dramatic and life-changing experience. Blindness changes forever their lives as well as those of their relatives. After their accident, they embark upon a path of a redefinition of their own selves. Starting with the rehabilitation and the experiences that follow (finding a job, doing community service, traveling, meeting new people, facing financial and health issues, interacting with the sighted society), they learn "how to be blind". They become new men, whose identity is defined in the first place by blindness. The process of reconstruction of the self they go through contains some ambiguities. On one hand, the authors put forward the exceptionality of their condition; on the other hand, they show a profound desire of normalcy, pointed out by their desire of founding a family and the display of their masculinity. Their attitude exemplifies well that dynamic tension between the "extraordinary" and the "normal" which is a typical feature of a "normalized" society trying to cope with disability⁴⁹.

Reshaping the representation of the blind

In this section I shall analyze the way Rawlinson's, Windsor's and Hamilton's books try to challenge ideas and stereotypes about blindness and blind people. I shall argue that by the early 1900s, a negative, stereotypical image was dominant within the Canadian society. After the Great War, blind veterans start challenging that representation and arguing for a different, more positive one.

At the beginning of the 20th century a blind man was considered as an individual whose impairment excluded him from society. Blind people were frequently the objects of pity or derision⁵⁰. The luckiest might get low-income jobs as basket weavers or broom

⁴⁹ See Davis, Lennard J. (2014). *The End of Normal*, Ann Arbor : University of Michigan Press 2014.

⁵⁰ Herie, op. cit.

makers, jobs that kept them just one step ahead of poverty. Rawlinson, Windsor and Hamilton recall that before their injuries they shared these ideas: "Up to this time, my idea of a blind man was just what is or was that of the average sighted person: a man groping his way about the streets or standing at some conspicuous corner with a card hanging on his breast telling the world that he could not see⁵¹". Windsor recalls the pity he felt for a blind beggar one day when he was in Oxford during his honeymoon: "Poor devil, I have everything, and he has nothing"⁵². The popularity of exceptional blind individuals only reinforced ideas of that kind, as the case of Lorne Mulloy demonstrates. Lorne Mulloy was a schoolteacher from Winchester, Ontario, who volunteered in the Boer War. In December 1899 he was wounded by an enemy bullet that penetrated from temple to temple, leaving him blind at the age of twenty-four. On his return Mulloy became a public figure: known as "the blind trooper", he was decorated and celebrated as a national hero. He went to Queen's University in Kingston and then Balliol College in Oxford, and had a successful career as Professor of Military History at the Royal Military College of Canada. Yet his example did nothing to change the idea that blindness deprives a man of all capacity to support himself. Mulloy was considered as a man whose achievements were the products of extraordinary determination⁵³. His life story was hence different from the destiny of an average blind man.

Associations such as the CNIB and SAPA were committed to challenging existing stereotypes of the blind. When the first blind veterans returned to Canada after the Great War, they found a country with no facilities or policies for them. They set up their own associations to provide support to blind veterans and raise awareness in government and society of the situation facing blind people in general. They used the press, liaised with philanthropic organizations and charities, and conducted information campaigns across the country for that

⁵¹ Rawlinson, op. cit., p. 31.

⁵² Windsor, op. cit., p. 31.

⁵³ See Durflinger, op. cit., p. 17-19. On Lorne Mulloy see Carman, Miller, *Painting the Map Red: Canada and the South African War, 1899-1902*, Montreal, Kingston, London, Ithaca: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992.

purpose⁵⁴. One of the aims of the CNIB's founders was to persuade the government and society that with adequate resources and training a blind man could become a worthy member of society, capable of working and enjoying life.

The reasons why Rawlinson, Windsor and Hamilton decided to write their autobiographies are similar: they were aware that such prejudices disadvantaged people in their condition, and that challenging them was the first and most important step towards social integration⁵⁵. Autobiographical narratives such as Rawlinson's, Windsor's and Hamilton's are a means of achieving this goal. Biographies of individuals with disabilities tend to be inspirational success stories in which the protagonists overcome their handicaps thanks to their strong commitment and steady resolve⁵⁶. Disability studies scholars and disability activists are generally critical of such narratives, as depicting exceptional individuals with an undefeatable force of will rather than describing the real life of people suffering from a physical or mental impairment and the daily struggles and discrimination they face. Furthermore, this kind of narrative enforces the idea that impairment is a problem that needs to be fixed through a "return to normal"; this makes disability a person's own problem and a person's own responsibility. Of the three books, Hamilton's and Rawlinson's biographies definitely fall into this category. In writing his personal narrative, Rawlinson says, his main thought is "to show the man himself, suffering from a serious handicap, that [...] there is nothing that a man cannot do, if he *has to*"⁵⁷. At the very beginning of his book Hamilton mentions the guiding principle of life which he wants to teach to those who are in his condition: "No matter how severe life's storms [...] one must never quit"⁵⁸.

⁵⁴ See Durflinger, *op. cit.*, p. 154-290.

⁵⁵ See Rawlinson, *op. cit.* p. 89: "[A blind man] must not be made to feel that he is a object to be set in a corner".

⁵⁶ See Couser, *Thomas, Signifying Bodies: Disability in Contemporary Life Writing*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009, and *id.*, "Disability and Life Writing" *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 5.3 (2011), 229-242. Newman, Sara, *Writing Disability: A Critical History*, Boulder: First Forum, 2013.

⁵⁷ *Id.*, p. 85.

⁵⁸ Hamilton, *op. cit.* p. 16.

Windsor's autobiography is more nuanced. Although in the end he finds a happy life for himself and his family, he is forced to give up his ambition to find a job in Human Resources. Graduating successfully from Queen's University does not open up the career he has qualified for, and his endless attempts to find a job result in disappointment. "Normal" society, then, has rejected him; but he concludes with a positive view of his life: "Certain doors such as the army and industrial relations were closed against me, but because of that I was forced to try others [...]. If by some miracle my sight was restored to me I know now that I should not want to go back to the armed service, or the world of business, for I am one of those fortunate ones who have found contentment and a sense of purpose in my life"⁵⁹.

In a general way, our three authors want to shift the perception of blindness as a devastating calamity to "just" a handicap⁶⁰. They point out that vision is a process that does not involve the eyes alone. "They merely carry sights to the seeing brain, and the hands, and even the feet, can perform the same duties"⁶¹. The description of daily life at St. Dunstan's clearly serves this purpose. The inmates live a normal life: they work, read, practice sport, play music, hang out with other people. The blind people they meet during their rehabilitation are by no means men whose lives are over. "There was Colin, who after finishing the training at St. Dunstan's was planning on going up to Oxford to continue his education, and Ted, who had been blinded with the R.A.F. He was training for a new career in personal management"⁶².

In the attempt to change minds, autobiography is undoubtedly a useful device⁶³. This kind of narrative is highly accessible, and it is easy for readers to empathize with the author.

⁵⁹ Windsor, p. 191.

⁶⁰ This was Sir Pearson's main intention: "I want them to be led to look upon blindness not as an affliction but as a handicap, not merely as a calamity but as an opportunity". Durflinger, op. cit., p. 25.

⁶¹ Rawlinson, op. cit. p. 29.

⁶² Windsor, op. cit. p. 67.

⁶³ On autobiography and disability see G. Thomas Couse (2009), *Signifying Bodies. Disability in Contemporary Life Writing*. The University of Michigan Press; David T. Mitchell (2009). "The Singular Subject of Disability Autobiography", *American Quarterly*, vol 52, 2, pp. 311-315; Sara Newman (2013). *Writing Disability: A Critical History*. First Forum Press, 2013.

Such books deliberately address a sighted readership: Rawlinson's and Hamilton's include photographs; Windsor's has a drawing at the beginning of each chapter. To the best of our knowledge there are no Braille or audiobook editions. Nor are we given any details about the writing process. Did these authors dictate their books? Did they write in Braille? How did they raise the money for publication? How did they find an editor? This kind of information is irrelevant for the readership they want to reach. So-called "blind writing" is also remarkably absent from these books⁶⁴. There is a kind of storytelling that uses descriptions that are not visual (hearing, touch, and so on). These books, on the contrary, use a visual language. They describe memories of a time before the injury, like those of the Italian countryside Windsor passed through in the spring of 1944: "All around us in the valley were orchards and vineyards and fields of ripening grain, while on either side blue and grey mountains ran northward to the horizon"⁶⁵. But they also tell of things or events which occurred after the loss of sight. Windsor describes a trip he and his wife took from Kingston to Vancouver after his graduation: "The well-tended farms of the north east and the prosperous small towns that served them; towns full of fine-looking old homes, each comfortably settled in a tree-shaded garden"⁶⁶.

Prejudices about blind people seem to remain, however, throughout the 20th century in Canadian society, as Windsor's and Hamilton's biographies point out. Windsor recalls the first job interviews after his training: "I would explain, as best I could, how St. Dunstan's had successfully placed some of their war blinded in that field [Human Resources] [...] I was always given a very good hearing [...] 'however, with you the problem is lack of experience' [...] but none of them seemed in a position to be able to help me get experience"⁶⁷. And he adds: "It was not that I blamed them, for they were good men, but they too were in a difficult

⁶⁴ On the concept of blind writing see Thompson, Hannah (2017). *Reviewing Blindness in French Fiction*. London : Palgrave Macmillan.

⁶⁵ Windsor, op. cit., p. 46.

⁶⁶ Id., p. 123.

⁶⁷ Windsor, op. cit. p. 104.

position [...] They could not afford to gamble on a blind man who might, but yet again might not, be able to handle the work"⁶⁸. Even after his graduation from Queen's things did not change: "I spent most of my time down at the university going from one interview to another along with the other members of the class [...] but from none of them could I get anything definitive. 'We'll certainly keep your name in mind, and if any suitable opening should turn up on our staff, we'll get in touch with you'"⁶⁹.

Hamilton relates similar experiences. He struggled to find and keep a job because of his impairment, and frequently faced discrimination. His first steady job was in a canteen organized by the CNIB, and the career he had was within that institution. During the years he spent visiting blind people across the country he came to realize how deep-rooted prejudice and discrimination still were. People generally were indifferent to the needs of the blind, and he often encountered cases where they were victims of abuse⁷⁰. That situation was due in part to the fact that unlike European countries Canada suffered a comparatively limited number of casualties during the two world wars. As Windsor recalls at the end of his autobiography: "It is not that people over there [in the United Kingdom] are more sympathetic [...] but merely that they have been much closer to war"⁷¹". The majority of retrained Canadian veterans were accordingly unable to find a non-sheltered occupation: this was true for blind veterans of both World Wars. Most of them worked in administrative positions within the CNIB, or ran CNIB-funded kiosks⁷².

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ id, op. cit. p. 117.

⁷⁰ He mentions among others the case of a blind old Ukrainian woman living outside Regina with her mentally impaired son, who was a victim of discrimination and abused by her neighbours, and that of a visually impaired teenage girl whose parents would not let her go to high school because of her poor sight. Hamilton, op. cit., p. 292-295.

⁷¹ Windsor, op. cit., p. 147.

⁷² Working in a CNIB-funded kiosk is one the most common occupations for blind Canadian war veterans. They first get "stand training" after which they are put in charge of a kiosk, selling newspapers, cigarettes, coffee and soft drinks. Kiosks are usually located in public spaces such as train stations, post office buildings and hospitals. The job does not provide a high wage, but a reasonable standard of living when combined with a disability pension. See Durlinger, op. cit., p. 185-190.

Conclusion

In this article I have demonstrated the relevance of autobiographical narratives to provide an understanding of disability both at an individual and social level. I have in particular disclosed their capacity to highlight the tension between exceptionality and normality that characterizes the way disabled individuals live their condition.

Autobiographies address issues concerning their authors and their impairment, a multifaceted life-changing condition that impacts also their entourage and their community. They show hence that disability is both a personal and a social concern. Disabled people are not excluded from society because of their impairment. On the contrary, it is the fact of still being part of a society that pushes them through the path "from the darkness to the light". Autobiographical narratives are the means they choose to share their experience, and to state an example. In doing so, they tend to write successful stories, just as most of the biographical accounts of disable individual.

Nevertheless, they do not appear as adamant, iconic figures. Nuance and contradictions, and ambiguities are part of their stories. So, the exceptionality that they display goes hand-in-hand with their desire of normalcy. Finally, those autobiographies let us know how prejudice and ideas about visually-impaired people can be influent and deep-rooted, and give the proportion of the value of the actions undertaken by individuals and organizations against them. Scholarship on disabled veterans should hence pay greater attention to autobiographical accounts and, more in general, move beyond the approaches of military and social history, revisiting this topic through the methodological lenses of disability studies.