Personal stories are powerful.

Every year, hundreds of schoolchildren make a trip to the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa to visit a small, hundred-year-old teddy bear. The bear belonged to ten-year-old Aileen Rogers from East Farnham, Quebec, who gave it to her father as a good-luck charm when he left to fight in the First World War. Aileen never saw her father again, as he was killed during the Battle of Passchendaele in the fall of 1917. The bear was found in Lawrence Rogers’s jacket pocket and sent back home to his family. For kids today, Teddy is not only a worn and familiar object but also a powerful reminder of the horrific ways in which war continues to affect families.

Like *A Bear in War* (Innes and Endrulat), which Brian Deines also illustrated and which tells the story of Teddy and the Rogers family, *The Vimy Oaks* is based on a true story. Leslie Howard Miller was a twenty-five-year-old teacher living in Scarborough, Ontario, when he signed his attestation papers in December 1914. In the portraits taken of him in uniform, Miller looks less like a soldier than a loving big brother. Indeed, like tens of thousands of other Canadian soldiers, Miller was a son, a brother, a young man with a life ahead of him. He chose to leave everything behind to serve in this overseas war.

Through Lieutenant Leslie Miller, *The Vimy Oaks* introduces young readers to the world of communications in the First World War, and to the work of the not-so-well-known Canadian Signal Corps. The book also depicts the daily experiences of Canadian soldiers, from the training and preparation that preceded the battle to the excitement that came with fighting—in this case in the Battle of Vimy Ridge—and then the return
to the calm before another storm of steel.

It was during a period of relative quiet, after the Battle of Vimy Ridge in 1917, that Lieutenant Miller gathered acorns from war-damaged oak trees near the trenches in France. The author states that he mailed those acorns to his family back in Ontario. As was often the case in First World War paintings and artworks, trees are central to this book. For many Canadian soldiers and nurses serving overseas who witnessed first-hand the devastation wrought by the war, trees and flowers were symbols of strength in the midst of battle, of survival, regeneration, and the hope for peace and brighter days. Many soldiers and nurses discussed trees and vegetation in their correspondence with loved ones at home. Researchers today still find flowers and leaves between pages of soldiers’ letters and in their diaries and photo albums.

Although sending flowers to dear ones at home was relatively common during the First World War, the next chapter of this story is unique. Leslie Miller survived the war and returned to Ontario. In the 1920s, he married Mary Isabel “Essie” Fraser, and together they built the Vimy Oaks Farm. According to Granfield’s research, this is where the Vimy acorns were planted and grew into magnificent trees. For Miller, the Vimy Oaks Farm was a safe haven where he reconnected with nature after years of devastation. It is also where, for four decades, Essie and Leslie Miller welcomed family, friends, and members of the local community, with whom he often shared his war stories. After the sale of the farm in 1965 and Miller’s death in 1979, the story of the oaks that had grown from Vimy acorns started slowly to fade from memory. But even as the site of the Miller family farm became the grounds of the Scarborough Chinese Baptist Church, the trees continued to grow wider and taller. The book ends with the author introducing the Vimy Oaks Repatriation Project, which aims to bring some of the oaks of Scarborough-Agincourt back to Vimy.

Granfield’s book is a touching tribute to an ordinary Canadian soldier with an extraordinary story. Brian Deines’s powerful illustrations bring the First World War and Leslie Miller’s story to life. As a military historian, I have seen thousands of black and white war photographs. The vivid and colourful works of art in *The Vimy Oaks* bring the viewer emotionally closer to an increasingly distant war. The pictures of Miller and the quotations from his wartime diary are also moving; they help the reader to understand what he went through during the war and how he rebuilt his life after that traumatic event.

The author does a good job of presenting the First World War to a younger audience, although the narrative of a single united Canada represents only one side of a complex story. The inclusion of some other First World War-related stories, the Vimy pilgrimage for example, although interesting, could be confusing to some readers. (In 1936, more than six thousand veterans and family members travelled to France to take part in the unveiling of the Canadian National Vimy Memorial, designed by Canadian sculptor and architect Walter Allward. The
pilgrimage was a large enterprise, one that took months to organize. For many veterans, it was a chance to get back together, to share memories of their experience and commemorate lost friends. But Leslie Miller did not take part in the 1936 pilgrimage, so the link to the main narrative is broken.

In today’s fast-paced world, where young people are constantly exposed to moving images, the book’s focus on trees, which are often perceived as inanimate objects, could seem trivial to some. But, like Aileen Rogers’s teddy bear, trees are part of children’s daily lives and can connect them to a past where boys and girls like them had to deal with the consequences of world events over which they had no control. I hope that they will look at trees—and maybe also at war—differently after reading this book.

**Works Cited**


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