

THE SHAPE OF THINGS TO COME

By Eric Koch

In February 1945, three months before the end of the war, I began work on the John Inglis assembly-line at the factory on Strachan Avenue in Toronto, making recoil pads for Bren guns. Canada had suffered far heavier casualties than had been expected. In fact, in the infantry there was a shortage of sixteen thousand men. The only possible source for reinforcements (other than me) was the home defence units of conscripts, popularly known as *Zombie*, mainly from Quebec. Most unwillingly, Mackenzie King had yielded to overwhelming pressure in English Canada to send them overseas to fight “for the English king,” whatever the political consequences.

Since, for medical reasons, I continued to be ineligible for active service, I decided to work in a factory rather than in some government office. One reason for doing this was that I hoped my conversations with a few of the hundreds of attractive women on the assembly-line would yield new insights into the kind of cultural revolution ordinary people expected to occur after the war. Seventeen thousand people were working for the company at the time I joined it. Surely I would run into one or two who had something useful to say. The company was one of the most productive in Canada and had recently, under the energetic leadership of its new owner, Major James Hahn, whom my parents knew socially, become a manufacturer of arms for the Canadian and British governments. By the end of the war, they had produced a quarter of a million Bren guns. Previously they had made marine steam engines and waterworks pumping machines.

Eileen McIntosh had sparkling brown eyes, delightful dimples and a sweet disposition. She was in her late twenties. Her husband, Dan, was in the navy, serving as a crewman on a corvette in the Atlantic. He had to be rescued twice, after two U-boat attacks. She proudly showed me a pre-war photograph of him. He was a rough-looking construction worker clearly unworthy of her, wearing his Sunday suit. She said he had been unemployed for three years before joining up. They had a three-year-old boy who was with her mother while she was at work. Eileen and I were good friends – nothing more. She enjoyed the attention I was paying her but was too well-behaved to ask me any questions about myself. To her I was a creature from another world.

“I keep thinking,” she told me one day over coffee, “if Dan makes it, he has to start all over again, looking for a job and not finding any.”

“There’ll be a housing boom,” I assured her.

“Where will the money come from? The government’s broke.”

“Governments want to be elected. They conjure up the money.”

“They didn’t before the war, when we needed it.”

I didn’t have an easy answer to that but I tried.

“Something had gone seriously wrong, I admit. There was a breakdown of some sort. But the Depression and the war have taught everybody a lesson. Don’t ask me how these things work. I’m not sure anybody really understands it. But I know it’ll be different.”

“I wish I had your faith,” Eileen sighed.

“Anyhow,” I continued trying to cheer her up, “we now have unemployment insurance. And next year they’ll start paying family allowances. And there’ll be a Veterans’ Charter. Dan will be able to start a business of his own.”

“My, you’re an optimist,” she replied. “You believe everything you read in the newspapers.”

“Yes, I do,” I laughed. “Especially the good news. But seriously, do you really think everything will be the same as before? Will people put up with it? Do you think Dan will put up with it, after risking his neck for five years?”

Eileen shrugged.

“Who knows? What matters to people like us is today, not tomorrow. Let others worry about that. Dan was already in the navy when we got married. We had more important things to do than waste our time talking about the future.”

In mid-June, on the first hot day of the year, a month after VE Day, after Dan had been demobilized, I invited both of them to lunch at Fran’s on College Street. Eileen and I had left John Inglis but that afternoon we still had to attend a Victory ceremony at the factory. It was to start at three o’clock. Only I knew that it was to be addressed by Archibald MacDonald, who I believed was some sort of parliamentary secretary. Eileen and Dan might have skipped the event if they had known that they had to listen to a boring politician.

In view of what Eileen had told me about her husband, I did not expect to learn very much from him at lunch about his thoughts on the forthcoming anti-Puritan revolution in Toronto and the anti-clerical and anti-English revolts in Montreal, but I thought it was worth trying to sound him out. As I had expected, I did not get very far. He was perfectly pleasant, and he clearly adored Eileen, but all he wanted to talk about was the way he and his fiends “took Halifax apart” on VE Day.

“Normally Dan wouldn’t hurt a fly,” Eileen explained to me. “But on that day he went wild. They all did.”

“I don’t blame him,” I said.

“What did they expect?” Dan exclaimed, suddenly flaring up. “Can you imagine? As long as a month before VE Day the police chief decided all the liquor stores were to be closed down on that day, to avoid trouble. And nobody told him that this was a sure way to have trouble, and trouble he got, in spades. All throughout the war these people have been treating us like dirt. So we let them have it. ‘No sailors and dogs allowed’ – were the signs on the doors of the restaurants. Well, we paid them back for that.”

“I know, I know.” Eileen tried to calm him down.

“You should have seen us taking over the central liquor store on Sackville Street. I must say, we had a lot of fun handing out the bottles.”

“Were you one of the men smashing those windows on Sackville Street?” Eileen wanted to know.

“I supervised,” he laughed. “And do you know something? After it was all over, we were still in our barracks waiting to be demobbed, one of those politicians from Ottawa came down to give us a lecture about tolerance and told us that our behaviour proved we were unworthy of the great things the government had prepared for us for the postwar world. I think his name was Archibald MacDonald. I’d never heard of such a performance. It was disgusting. If I ever see that man again, I’ll take care of him. He’d better stay out of my way.” I thought it expedient to take my friends to a movie instead of that boring victory celebration at John Inglis.