E.W.’s foreword to *Lingo of No Man’s Land* describes its author as ‘a typical son of Massachusetts ... fired by the newspaper reports of desecrated France and Belgium’. The foreword explains that he became so impatient with US reluctance to declare war that he crossed the border into Canada to enlist, serving for a year in the Westmount Rifles before a shrapnel injury brought his active military career to an end in Messines in April 1916. Lorenzo Napoleon Smith was indeed born in Massachusetts, in a town called Lowell, but he had returned to Canada with his Canadian family by the time of the 1911 census, when they were living in Montreal. On the 16th of February 1915, Smith left his job as an electrician to join the 23rd Battalion of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, giving Montreal as his place of birth (indicating that he considered himself fully Canadian despite being born in the US). He was transferred to the 4th Battalion on the same day and sailed from Halifax on the SS Missanabie six days later. After a short period in England, Smith arrived in France on the 7th of May and joined his Battalion in the reserve trenches at Festubert on the 23rd. Several days of heavy shelling and numerous casualties must have provided a shocking introduction to the realities of trench warfare. After a week in reserve, the Battalion returned to the front at Givenchy, where they suffered ‘Heavy bombardment all day ... [and] “Stood to” all night’ (War Diary of the 4th Canadian Infantry Battalion 14/6/1915). Smith reported sick with stomach pains and vomiting on the 26th, 27th and 28th of June when his Battalion was in billets in Bethune. He appears to have rejoined his unit in reserve in Ballieul around the middle of July and moved in and out of the trenches at Ploegsteert until the beginning of November. This stretch of the front line was ‘all fairly quiet enemy sniper moderately active’ (27/8/1915). Although the Battalion experienced ‘a few Whiz Bangs and Trench mortars’ (23/9/1915) during this period, they suffered relatively few casualties. The enemy were ‘inclined to conversation with us’ (17/10/1915) and a ‘General spirit of “live and let live” prevail[ed]’ while both armies bailed knee-deep water from their trenches as the colder months drew in (28/10/1915).

On the 2nd of November, Smith again ‘complained of vomiting’ (Medical Case Sheet 31/12/1915). His symptoms were variously diagnosed as gastritis, peritonitis, ‘La Grippe’ and gastric ulcers. He was never to return to the trenches. After a month in York House hospital in Folkestone, doctors were still speculating about the cause of his sickness: ‘an operation for appendicitis about 1912 ... gave him no trouble until he got into France. Then the pain got worse + vomiting increased. Certain foods caused vomiting. Bread would only stay down a few minutes, eggs would be vomited’ (Medical Case Sheet 31/12/1915). Smith was discharged to the 12th Reserve Battalion in Shorncliffe, although he was not strong enough to return to the front: ‘He is pale and poorly nourished and complains of being unable to eat the ration food. He weighs about 128lbs with clothes on, normal being about 162’ (Medical Report 25/1/1916). The recommendation was ‘discharge as permanently unfit’, with Smith’s disability attributed to ‘General Service conditions exciting latent mischief’. He returned to Canada on the 20th of March, but the ‘Medical Board at Discharge Depot’ report (16/3/1916) recommended further ‘observation in a Convalescent Home for diagnosis & treatment’. During an operation on the 11th of May, it was found that Smith’s stomach was ‘much lower than normal ... sutures were inserted ... and then stomach was ... drawn up and fastened in proper position’ (Medical Officer’s letter 17/5/1916). Following a lengthy convalescence, during which Smith ‘complain[ed] of general weakness at least exertion’ (Medical History 28/10/1916), he was finally discharged as medically unfit on the 13th of December 1916.

Seven months later, weighing a somewhat healthier 150lbs, Smith re-enlisted in the Railway Construction and Forestry Depot (Medical History 25/7/1917), having been categorised as fit for
sedentary duties. He was transferred on the same day to ‘No.3 Special Service Co.’ (later incorporated into the 3rd Battalion of the Canadian Garrison Regiment), but his health deteriorated again, and a further Medical History (28/5/1918) describes his on-going ‘debility’ ‘caused by eating greasy food’ during his time in France:

says that he feels weak all the time and lacks energy. Says that he has been losing weight, though his weight for the last four months has been around 120lbs. He states that he has no appetite but that he has no pain or vomiting unless he eats heavy food. Says that he becomes very depressed at times. ... Says that he was not improved by operation.

It is thus possible to contradict, with certainty, some aspects of E.W.’s account of Smith’s military career: Smith was Canadian, not American; in April 1916 the Westmount Rifles were in Messines, near Ploegsteert, but by this time Smith was in hospital in Canada. Moreover, although his doctors noted ‘Few shrapnel wounds in lower part of abdomen also in back of right shoulder’ (Medical History 28/10/1916) and ‘small scars on front of abdomen, front of right thigh and back from old Gun Shots Wounds’ (Medical History 28/5/1918), there is no evidence that Smith received any treatment for these wounds or that they contributed to his discharge. Indeed, the abdominal wounds appear to be in the same place as appendectomy scars that were noted when he enlisted.

Smith’s second period of enlistment may explain the inconsistencies in his story. He became one of the earliest members of the British-Canadian Recruiting Mission, which targeted Canadians and Britons living in the US. A New York Times article (22/9/1918) records that the Mission succeeded in recruiting 46,000 men through rousing military parades featuring Britannia ‘the first land-battleship ever used in the United States’ (see the entry for Britannia [sic]). The Mission also staged musical events and theatrical productions and wrote personal letters to every British and Canadian subject in the US as well as producing a range of posters (links are provided at the end of this introduction):

British subjects It is your duty to enlist in the British or Canadian army; ‘Are you answering the call?’ (the young lions of the Empire and Commonwealth rally around a British lion); ‘Britishers, you’re needed – come across now’ (a civilian and soldier shake hands across the Atlantic). French-Canadians were also addressed: a newspaper advertisement from the Mission, illustrated by a drawing of opposing lines of infantry, is captioned ‘Ces hommes arrêtent les Huns. Pourquoi ne les aidez-vous pas?’ (These men are stopping the Hun. Why aren’t you helping them?) The Mission also cast its net more widely: in association with the Jewish Legion, it exhorted Jews to ‘Help Britain Restore Palestine to Israel’, warning that ‘friendly aliens’ would soon lose the opportunity to enlist in Canadian forces. When the American draft was extended to other nationalities living within US borders in September 1918, the work of the Mission came to an end (New York Times 20/9/18).

E.W.’s introduction indicates that Smith gave recruitment talks drawing upon his own experiences of the front line. In this context, Smith’s digestive problems, genuine and debilitating though they undoubtedly were, may not have seemed heroic enough to inspire other young men to enlist. This may be why he was promoted to sergeant (by the end of January 1918) and his back-story re-written. Smith’s last Medical History (28/5/1918), presumably based on his own account, reports that he served ‘15/2/15-25/12/16 Westmount Rifles’, suggesting that he had internalized the Mission’s story, but no other official document supports this.

The first enthusiastic wave of Canadian recruits, in 1914, had largely been British born, motivated by loyalty towards their homeland, king and Empire. Throughout the war, French-Canadians continued
to volunteer at lower rates, suggesting that Smith’s original motivation was not peer pressure or mass emotion. The idealistic young man who volunteered in 1915 cannot have known what he was going to experience, but the re-enlisting veteran of 1917 braved the possibility of a recurrence of his health problems or even of being sent back to France. He clearly felt, despite this, that his contribution was not enough. Although he may have believed that the embroidered service history was justified by the objectives of the Mission, I suspect that he felt uncomfortable with it in later life. It appears that he requested an official Record of Service in 1956, perhaps to ensure that a truthful account was available to his family. Smith’s wife reported his death, in San Diego, on March the 6th 1965.

Lingo of No Man’s Land contains a mixture of technical language and slang that would have been unfamiliar to prospective recruits. For example, the detailed explanations of blind bay, observation post and reconnaissance wouldn’t have been out of a place in an official manual, although Smith provides the perspective of the man on the spot rather than the military strategist behind the lines. Alongside technical words, Smith also explains the meanings of slang, including doggo ‘quiet’, jake ‘good’ and turtle ‘a German hand-grenade’. During the period 1917-1918, shorter glossaries like this were appearing in trench journals, in biographical accounts and in newspaper reports (see Coleman 2008). Some were written by serving soldiers for the amusement of their comrades, and these often explored disparities between the apparent and real meanings of official terms. Others were written by serving soldiers for potential volunteers, usually by and for Americans and Canadians. After the war, the documentation of trench terms was often driven by a desire to memorialize the sacrifices of the fallen or to exorcize the author’s own experiences. Post-war dictionaries were generally more substantial and often focussed on slang to the exclusion of technical language, but Smith’s has the distinction of being the first WWI dictionary to appear as a separate (albeit slight) volume. Unlike Fraser and Gibbons’ officially sanctioned account and Brophy and Partridge’s rejoinder to it, Smith provides a single-authored first-person perspective. The raw honesty of his voice, which might be considered counter-productive, is in stark contrast with the British and American propaganda glossaries produced during WWII (see Coleman 2010). It’s hard to believe that a young man might have been induced to enlist by reading that the concussive effect of mortar shells is ‘so great that a man’s insides burst like a kernel of popcorn’ (flying pig) or that anyone near the blast is ‘literally crushed to pulp’ (concussion), but potential recruits may have been reassured to know that, in the event of injury, there wouldn’t be time for physical suffering or emotional weakness.

We might expect that an officially sanctioned recruitment dictionary would depict the allies in positive terms, and Smith doesn’t disappoint. He alludes to the ‘supremacy of the British air fleets’ (aerial photography), the motor machine gun batteries that ‘almost invariably succeed in turning an enemy success into a rout’ and to the enemy being ‘practically annihilated’ by allied artillery (second barrage). He repeatedly describes allied intelligence, artillery, communication and defensive measures as precise, accurate, specific, exact or clever (aerial photography, camouflage, zero time). Whatever military advances the Germans made, the allied forces found means to overcome them (gas helmet, “secret” scout, tank).

Although Smith generally uses we to refer to the allied forces collectively, he also distinguishes between them. Tommy is a ‘happy-go-lucky’ fellow ‘blessed with a keen sense of the ridiculous’ who doesn’t always treat his equipment with respect (bandolier, entrenching tool, tank) and greets a minor wound with delight (blighty, package). New recruits might complain about minor
inconveniences, but ‘Tommy got used to it’ (grousing). Despite the inadequacy of French beer, Tommy enjoys the estaminet with his colleagues until ‘the fair Mademoiselle’ declares ‘Nap peu, fini’ and then he catches up with his sleep on the firing step. Smith notes that officers’ conditions are sometimes better than the men’s (billet), but there is no rancour in this: he remarks that morale is high (shiv) and that old man is the ‘universal term of affection’ for one’s Colonel. He sometimes places the word authorities within inverted commas (blighty, boche), but this is probably to indicate a healthy scepticism in relation to the wisdom of self-appointed experts. Smith himself appears particularly knowledgeable about changing conditions on the front (liquid fire, sneeze gas, Ticker’s artillery) and certainly seems to draw on his own experience in the definitions for clearing station, dressing station and slacks, which all provide a first-hand perspective on military medical care.

Among the other allied forces, the French and Irish are characterized by bravery in the face of extreme danger (blue devils, Irish die-hard), as are the Canadians (mad fourth, no man’s land). Gurkhas are ‘the wonderful soldiers from Nepal’ (kukri) and Indian soldiers use unfamiliar weapons with ‘skill and force’ (steel ring). Only the Americans are lacking in experience (jawbone), but ‘Sammy will learn soon enough what a jam tin is’ (jam tins).

In stark contrast, the Germans are ‘wild beasts’ (cage) and ‘the cruelest [sic] animal known’ (hun). Their ‘fiendish’ nature (shell shock) is expressed in ‘fanciful and deceptive bombs looking like lost personal articles which explode when picked up’ (mopping up) and in attacks on ‘children and civilians’ (mustard gas) in ‘unfortified cities and towns’ (Zep). Tommy greets surrendering German soldiers with a cigarette and a drink of water ‘then they grab a rifle and shoot you in the back’ (kamerad). Despite his animal cunning, the ‘over-trained, wooden-headed Hun’ (flare) is ‘dazed’ by allied attacks (mad minute): ‘when it comes to hand-to-hand fighting he is not capable of putting up a stubborn resistance’ (intense bombardment). In fact, lice ‘worry us more than the Huns on many occasions’ (coote [sic]). Even a German ace is less impressive than his allied equivalent, having merely forced his opponents to descend rather than disabling them. More subtly, Smith generally presents fear and danger only as they affect the enemy: Fritz is ‘worried’ by anti-aircraft guns, can only ‘attempt’ to cross barb wire entanglements and fires ‘without a good cause’ when he is getting wind up. Smith’s descriptions of concertina wire and blind bay also imply that these inconveniences only affected the enemy.

Despite its clearly partial position, we have already seen that Smith’s dictionary doesn’t pull any punches in describing conditions in the trenches, including mud and the weather (billet, communication trench, trench feet), lice (chatting, coote [sic]) and rats (poisonous gas, rat poison). Death is ‘the fate that overtakes comrades and may momentarily overtake’ any soldier (gone west) in ‘all sorts of ways’ (click). These include poisonous gas (‘both very painful and suffocating’), the sniper (‘any soldier who forgets to duck his head ... is a fair target’) and, at least in the early part of the war, the limitations of the allied artillery (curtain fire). Even when a man doesn’t suffer physical injury as a result of concussion, ‘something seems to break in the brain’. Shell shock is the result of ‘one of the most fiendish inventions for which the Germans have been notorious in this war’.

Alongside this unvarnished honesty, the dictionary is also characterized by its humour. Smith writes that Tommy can throw a Mills bomb about 35 yards ‘For results, ask Fritzie’. This works both ways: if a coal-box shell ‘bursts too near you, you don’t see the cloudy effects’. If a heap of coal dust is displaced by an explosion, anyone standing near it will ‘immediately look like one of the Gold Dust
Twins’ (Stag [sic] heap), referring to the cartoonish African-American children used as the trademark for Gold Dust washing powder. Smith also comments that ‘a sandbag full of Bully Beef makes splendid material for roofing a dugout or building a road, which use it is put to, unless Tommy is very hungry’ (bully beef).

The illustrator was Elizabeth F. Gibson, whose works were included in the annual exhibition of the Art Students’ League of Chicago in 1915 and 1916 (‘Past Exhibitions’). The boxed initial at A depicts infantrymen throwing grenades; B sees a pipe-smoker reading or writing; C a line of men apparently awaiting the order to attack. These three prints serve for all 23 initials that are illustrated. These initials each begin on a new page, and some of the resultant spaces are filled with portraits of smiling soldiers of various ranks (pp.27, 50, 82). The tea-drinkers on the front cover appear to be having a jolly time and the soldier with bayonet fixed (p.96) seems determined, but not cowed. Only the lone man crawling across No Man’s Land (p.66) looks at all ambivalent about his situation.

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Links to posters and advertisements from the British Recruiting Mission:

‘Are you answering the call?’, University of Minnesota <http://umedia.lib.umn.edu/node/44297>

‘Britishers you’re needed’, Ira and Larry Goldberg Auctioneers, Sale 18, Lot 1440
   <http://images.goldbergauctions.com>

‘British subjects it is your duty to enlist’, University of Minnesota
   <http://umedia.lib.umn.edu/node/44306>

‘Ces hommes arrêtent les Huns’, Marianopolis College
   <http://faculty.marianopolis.edu/c.belanger/quebechistory/pictures/recruit.htm>

‘Jews fight for Palestine’, National Library of Australia