

The Study of War

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In his memoir *A Padre's Pilgrimage*, Colonel George Fallis recounts the origins of his ambition to build a national memorial chapel for Canada's war dead. At a funeral in the Ypres Salient in 1915, one of the soldiers present said, "Padre, after the war is over some chaplain should build a memorial in Canada in memory of fellows like these who have given their all." When Fallis became the minister of a Vancouver congregation in 1920, he determined to build a memorial chapel. Eight years later, after an energetic fund-raising program that took him into the offices of tycoons, premiers, and cabinet ministers across the country, Fallis presided at the opening of Canadian Memorial Chapel (now Canadian Memorial United Church). The crowning glory of Fallis's memorial project is the sequence of stained glass windows. Ten along the transept and nave represent each of the nine provinces plus the Yukon. The chancel window, designed to represent youth and sacrifice, was donated by the widow of the Victoria candy manufacturer, C.W. Rogers, who during the war had sent "thousands of pounds of his choice candy to the B.C. soldiers overseas." Above the north entry is the All Canada window, depicting the work of "all men and women of Canada throughout the war." Some time after the building of the chapel, several smaller windows dedicated to the branches of the service (including the nursing sisters) were added in the vestibule.

The architects had determined that each provincial window should have a religious motif; below would appear the provincial coat of arms, flanked by two historical scenes. The ten religious motifs, selected by Fallis, range from the nativity and the Call of the Disciples ("symbolizing Enlistment")

to the Sermon on the Mount (“symbolizing Blessed are the Peacemakers”). The final scene is the empty tomb of Christ (“symbolizing The Immortality of those who made the Supreme Sacrifice”). The only overt reference to war appears in the caption running across each provincial window—“To the Glory of God and In Memory of the Men of . . . Who Gave Their Lives in the World War.”

Fallis’s memoir does not record who chose the historical scenes, but, like the religious tableaux, they embody a series of messages about the war. The window for Manitoba features a scene of Thomas Scott’s trial, and another of La Vérendrye building Fort Rouge; the British Columbia window depicts Vancouver’s ship in Nootka Sound and Simon Fraser overlooking the river that bears his name; the Quebec window has Maisonneuve landing on the island of Montreal in 1642, and Frontenac making a treaty with the Aboriginal people. What unites these various scenes is a common emphasis on discovery and conquest. Canada was a new-made land, born out of trial and struggle; World War I, though it had exacted losses far worse than any previous conflict, would not destroy the nation. Like the events depicted in the All Canada window—the driving of the last spike, the fall of Wolfe on the Plains of Abraham, and the return of the Loyalists—the First World War would be remembered as a formative event in Canadian history, one that had tempered the raw youth of the nation into a formidable adulthood.

The memorial chapel, with its windows and its replicas of the Books of Remembrance from the Peace Tower, has endured as a beautiful if sometimes unrecognized monument both to the war dead and to the attitudes of their contemporaries. A less enduring record of those attitudes is to be found in the war literature chosen for school readers of the time. The 1927 *Ryerson Book of Verse and Prose* (Book One), edited by Lorne Pierce and Arthur Yates, places John McCrae’s “In Flanders Fields” in a section entitled “Master-Builders,” alongside biographical sketches of Marie Hébert and Alexander Mackenzie. Like Hébert and Mackenzie, the Canadians buried in Flanders were to be remembered as builders of our nation. Book Three, in its section “War and Peace,” presents (in the company of works by Byron, Scott, and Carlyle) Sir Arthur Currie’s “Backs to the Wall,” an excerpt from his Special Order to the Canadian Corps on March 27, 1918:

Under the orders of your devoted officers in the coming battle you will advance, or fall where you stand facing the enemy. To those who will fall I say, “You will not die but step into immortality. Your mothers will not lament your fate, but will be proud to have borne such sons. Your names will be revered forever and ever by your grateful country, and God will take you unto Himself.”

This, presumably, was what Currie's soldiers needed and wanted to hear on the eve of battle; after the war, its value as a specimen of martial rhetoric lay in the nobility it conferred on the fallen. But reading it now, in 2003, one cannot help but detect in Currie's promise of eternal reward a disquieting similarity to the words that inspire suicide bombers. Also in this anthology is "Our Glorious Dead," delivered by Arthur Meighen at the unveiling of the Cross of Sacrifice at Vimy Ridge on July 3, 1921. Because it emphasizes loss, not martyrdom, Meighen's speech has worn better than Currie's:

We live among the ruins and echoes of Armageddon. Its shadow is receding backward into history.

At this time the proper occupation of the living is, first, to honour our heroic dead; next, to repair the havoc, human and material, that surrounds us; and, lastly, to learn aright and apply with courage the lessons of the war.

In his preface to *A Book of Modern Prose*, published in 1938, editor W.L. Macdonald asserted that "war means more to this generation than it has ever meant to any previous age." Evidently even twenty years on, the Great War was regarded as a very present shadow over the lives of the young. Among the texts selected by Macdonald to reflect this concern are Meighen's speech at Vimy; a *New York Times* article on the 1920 unveiling in London of the memorial to the unknown soldier; a description by Winston Churchill of Armistice Day in 1918; and "Birds on the Western Front" by H.H. Munro (Saki), a droll piece that coolly describes the birdlife to be observed midst the carnage.

By the late 1940s and early 1950s, the attention of anthologizers had shifted almost completely to the second war. Harold Dew's 1946 *Poems Past and Present* includes none of the Great War poets. In their stead are E.J. Pratt, with an excerpt from *Dunkirk*, and the American poet Robert Nathan, with a poem on Dunkirk and an elegy for a soldier who died on Luzon. The 1947 reader *Proud Procession*, authorized for Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario, includes an essay on Dunkirk from the *New York Times*, and "The Little Boats of Britain: A Ballad of Dunkirk" by Sara Carsley, an Irishwoman who had emigrated to Alberta. There is also an uncaptioned drawing of the monument at Vimy Ridge—so familiar an image that even schoolchildren would recognize it? "In Flanders Fields" makes its inevitable appearance, alongside a biographical sketch of McCrae by Helen Palk.

An anthology from the 1960s, *Man's Values*, shows a shift away from Canada's wars and the old imperial connection. The section entitled "Man

and War” contains fifty-one selections, ranging from a description from the *Mahabharata* of the warrior Arjuna to Wilfred Owen’s “Dulce et Decorum Est” and Rupert Brooke’s “The Soldier.” Canadians are represented by two works: a poem by F. R. Scott entitled “Conflict,” and Mordecai Richler’s “Benny, the war in Europe, and Myerson’s daughter Bella.”

In contemporary high school readers, war writing no longer occupies much space. Heroism still matters, but it is illustrated by stories of individuals triumphing over adversity, not soldiers sacrificing themselves for the nation. *Crossroads 10*, published by Gage in 2000, includes the short story “War” by Timothy Findley, but this piece, despite its title, hardly deals with war at all. Set in the 1940s, it describes the confusion of a young boy who learns that his father has joined the army. The boy runs away and hides, and when he is discovered, he throws stones at his father, injuring the beloved parent whom he is afraid of losing. Even though it might be possible to read this story as an allegory of the origins of violence, the accompanying study questions ignore the topic of war.

Echoes: Fiction, Media, and Non-Fiction (12), published by Oxford in 2002, does acknowledge war writing, but there are no Canadian selections. For the First War, there is Ezra Pound’s “These Fought in Any Case,” denouncing the “old men’s lies” that sent soldiers to their death. For the Second War, there are Ernie Pyle’s “On the Road to Berlin” and a translation from Hungarian of Agnes Gergely’s “Crazed Man in Concentration Camp.” More recent conflicts are introduced through “A Story of War and Change,” written by a young Iranian who was a medic during the First Gulf War, and “The Dead of September 11,” a eulogy by Toni Morrison that first appeared in *Vanity Fair*. Canadian involvement in war is recognized only through two “visuals”: *Dressing Station in the Field* by the Belgian painter Alfred Bastien, which was commissioned by Lord Beaverbrook’s Canadian War Memorials Fund, and a group of Canadian propaganda posters from World War II, including one captioned “Get Your Teeth in the Job.” It features a beaver gnawing into a tree, in the upper branches of which perches a nervous-looking Hitler.

Imprints, published by Gage in 2002, similarly neglects Canada’s involvement in war. It includes two stories about the Vietnam War: Bao Ninh’s “A Marker on the Side of the Boat” and Tim O’Brien’s “On the Rainy River.” Like *Echoes*, it refers to the terrorist attacks: “Artists Respond to September 11, 2001” presents a range of images that students are asked to comment on and evaluate.

Clearly, Canadian students are no longer expected to learn about the nation's wars (or at least not through the medium of literature). To the students of today, the trenches of the Western Front have become as remote as the windy plains of Troy. Ernest Renan, in his famous address "Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?" asserted that "in terms of national memories, sorrow is worth more than triumph, for it imposes duties, it demands some common effort." But is it reasonable to expect Canadian students of today to feel some kinship with the boys from Unity, Saskatchewan or Foremost, Alberta who fell in the First World War? I recently asked a class if anyone had a relative who had fought on the Western Front. Of the few who could answer the question, one replied that her great-grandfather had fought as a German soldier, and another said that his had been a sepoy in the Indian Army.

War is, as one scholar put it, a "dismal study." Why inflict it on our students, especially when much Canadian war literature, it must be admitted, never rises above sentimental versifying or bellicose rhetoric? One good reason is that this material is an invaluable repository of attitudes towards nation and empire, gender and race, individual and state. I would like to think that another good reason for teaching Canadian war literature is that our students might thereby become better Canadians—more committed to maintaining civil order, more ready to contribute to the common good, more determined to preserve our national patrimony—but it would be naïve to believe, as I think early anthologizers did, that the literature of war could instill such values. Perhaps we should teach Canadian war literature because it reminds us to cherish peace and a quiet life, and to forget neither the men and women who died nor the human folly that caused their deaths. The Canadians of Colonel Fallis's generation believed unshakeably in the importance of this duty to the fallen. They believed too that remembrance would ensure a lasting peace. We can no longer share this optimistic conviction, but we can at least remember the fallen and how and why they died, if only for the reason that, as a nation, we promised that we would.

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