

## Eulogy for Canada's Unknown Soldier

**W**ars are as old as history. Over two thousand years ago, Herodotus wrote, "In peace, sons bury their fathers; in war, fathers bury their sons." Today, we are gathered together as one, to bury someone's son. The only certainty about him is that he was young. If death is a debt we all must pay, he paid before he owed it.

We do not know whose son he was. We do not know his name. We do not know if he was a MacPherson or a Chartrand. He could have been a Kaminski or a Swiftarrow. We do not know if he was a father himself. We do not know if his mother or wife received that telegram with the words "Missing In Action" typed with electrifying clarity on the anonymous piece of paper. We do not know whether he had begun truly to live his life as a truck driver or a scientist, a miner or a teacher, a farmer or a student. We do not know where he came from.

Was it the Prairies whose rolling sinuous curves recall a certain kind of eternity?

Was he someone who loved our lakes and knew them from a canoe?

Was he someone who saw the whales at the mouth of the Saguenay?

Was he someone who hiked in the Rockies or went sailing in the Atlantic or in the Gulf Islands?

Did he have brown eyes?

Did he know what it was to love someone and be loved back?

Was he a father who had not seen his child?

Did he love hockey? Did he play defence?

Did he play football? Could he kick a field goal?

Did he like to fix cars? Did he dream of owning a Buick?

Did he read poetry?

Did he get into fights?

Did he have freckles?

Did he think nobody understood him?

Did he just want to go out and have a good time with the boys?

We will never know the answers to these questions. We will never know him. But we come today to do him honour as someone who could have been all these things and now is no more. We who are left have all kinds of questions that only he could answer. And we, by this act today, are admitting with terrible finality that we will never know those answers.

We cannot know him. And no honour we do him can give him the future that was destroyed when he was killed. Whatever life he could have led, whatever choices he could have made are all shuttered. They are over. We are honouring that unacceptable thing—a life stopped by doing one's duty. The end of a future, the death of dreams.

Yet we give thanks for those who were willing to sacrifice themselves and who gave their youth and their future so that we could live in peace. With their lives they ransomed our future.

We have a wealth of witnesses in Canada to describe to us the unspeakable horror and frightening maelstrom that war brings. What that first world war was like has been described in our poetry, novels and paintings. Some of our greatest artists came out of that conflict, able to create beauty out of the hell that they had seen. The renowned member of the Group of Seven, F.H. Varley, was one of those artists. Writing in April 1918 he said,

You in Canada . . . cannot realize at all what war is like. You must see it and live it. You must see the barren deserts war has made of once fertile country . . . see the turned-up graves, see the dead on the field, freakishly mutilated—headless, legless, stomachless, a perfect body and a passive face and a broken empty skull—see your own countrymen, unidentified, thrown into a cart, their coats over them, boys digging a grave in a land of yellow slimy mud and green pools of water under a weeping sky. You must

have heard the screeching shells and have the shrapnel fall around you, whistling by you—seen the results of it, seen scores of horses, bits of horses lying around in the open—in the street and soldiers marching by these scenes as if they never knew of their presence. Until you've lived this . . . you cannot know.

It is a frightening thing for human beings to think that we could die and that no one would know to mark our grave, to say where we had come from, to say when we had been born and when exactly we died. In honouring this unknown soldier today, through this funeral and this burial, we are embracing the fact of the anonymity and saying that because we do not know him and we do not know what he could have become, he has become more than one body, more than one grave. He is an ideal. He is a symbol of all sacrifice. He is every soldier in all our wars.

Our veterans, who are here with us today, know what it is to have been in battle and to have seen their friends cut down in their youth. That is why remembrance is so necessary and yet so difficult. It is necessary because we must not forget and it is difficult because the pain is never forgotten.

And the sense of loss, what this soldier's family must have felt is captured in a poem by Jacques Brault, the Quebec poet who lost his brother in Sicily in the Second World War, and wrote *Suite Fraternelle*:

I remember you my brother Gilles lying forgotten in the earth of Sicily . . .  
I know now that you are dead, a cold, hard lump in your throat fear lying heavy in your belly  
I still hear your twenty years swaying in the blasted July weeds . . .  
There is only one name on my lips, and it is yours Gilles  
You did not die in vain Gilles and you carry on through our changing seasons  
And we, we carry on as well, like the laughter of waves that sweep across each tearful cove . . .  
Your death gives off light Gilles and illuminates a brother's memories . . .  
The grass grows on your tomb Gilles and the sand creeps up  
And the nearby sea feels the pull of your death  
You live on in us as you never could in yourself  
You are where we will be you open the road for us.

When a word like Sicily is heard, it reverberates with all the far countries where our youth died. When we hear Normandy, Vimy, Hong Kong, we know that what happened so far away, paradoxically, made our country and the future of our society. These young people and soldiers bought our future for us. And for that, we are eternally grateful.

Whatever dreams we have, they were shared in some measure by this man who is only unknown by name but who is known in the hearts of all Canadians by all the virtues that we respect—selflessness, honour, courage and commitment.

We are now able to understand what was written in 1916 by the grandson of Louis Joseph Papineau, Major Talbot Papineau, who was killed two years later: “Is their sacrifice to go for nothing or will it not cement a foundation for a true Canadian nation, a Canadian nation independent in thought, independent in action, independent even in its political organization—but in spirit united for high international and humane purposes . . . ?”

The wars fought by Canadians in the twentieth century were not fought for the purpose of uniting Canada, but the country that emerged was forged in the smithy of sacrifice. We will not forget that.

This unknown soldier was not able to live out his allotted span of life to contribute to his country. But in giving himself totally through duty, commitment, love and honour, he has become part of us forever. As we are part of him.



## Éloge funèbre au soldat canadien inconnu

**L**a guerre est aussi vieille que l’histoire. Il y a plus de deux mille ans, Hérodote écrivait : “en temps de paix, les fils enterrent leur père; en temps de guerre, les pères enterrent leurs fils.”

Aujourd’hui, tous ensemble réunis, nous ne faisons qu’un, afin d’ensevelir le fils de quelqu’un. La seule certitude que nous ayons à son sujet, c’est qu’il était jeune. Si la mort est une dette que nous devons tous payer, ce fils l’a payée avant même de l’encourir.

Nous ignorons de qui il était le fils. Nous ignorons son nom. Nous ne savons pas si c’était un MacPherson ou un Chartrand. Il aurait pu s’appeler Kaminski ou Swiftarrow. Nous ne savons pas s’il était père lui-même. Nous ne savons pas si sa mère ou son épouse reçut le télégramme portant ces mots marqués sur un bout de papier anonyme mais avec une clarté électrisante : “Disparu au combat.” Nous ne savons pas s’il avait vraiment commencé à vivre sa propre vie, comme chauffeur de camion, scientifique, mineur, enseignant, fermier ou étudiant. Nous ne savons pas d’où il était.

Était-il des Prairies dont les courbes vallonnées et sinueuses nous rappellent une certaine forme d’éternité?