

Canadian Military History

Volume 5 | Issue 2

Article 3

1-20-2012

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Recommended Citation

Vance, Jonathan F. (1996) "Sacrifice in Stained Glass: Memorial Windows of the Great War," *Canadian Military History*: Vol. 5: Iss. 2, Article 3.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh/vol5/iss2/3>

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Sacrifice in Stained Glass

Memorial Windows of the Great War

Jonathan F. Vance

In the years following the Armistice of 1918, Canada was swept by a wave of commemorative activity unlike anything the country had ever seen. Motivated by a desire to retain the ideals of the war in the forefront of the public consciousness and ensure that the names of those who enlisted were preserved for eternity, businesses, schools, individuals, and towns of every size erected monuments to the men and women who had served during the First World War. Dedication ceremonies were held almost every week during the early 1920s and continued to dominate local social calendars well into the 1930s, while dignitaries like former Canadian Corps commander Sir Arthur Currie were swamped with requests for their services at unveiling ceremonies. By 1939, it was difficult to go anywhere in the settled parts of the country without encountering a war memorial in one form or another.

Some of the densest collections of memorials were found in Canada's churches; indeed, it is not uncommon to find dozens of separate memorials within the walls of a single church.¹ Of the welter of memorials, which included monuments, plaques, furnishings, tablets, and liturgical objects, the most striking were executed in stained glass. With these richly coloured and evocative windows, Canadians expressed their perceptions of the war and the sacrifice it entailed, and their feelings towards the men and women who had fallen. In doing so, they employed text and iconography which suggest that they emerged from the inferno with their traditional ideals intact.

For decades, however, we have been led to believe that this was impossible. First in the great anti-war novels of the 1920s and 1930s and more recently in Paul Fussell's influential

The Great War and Modern Memory, we have been told that traditional perceptions of human conflict had been destroyed by the machine slaughter of the First World War. Abstractions like glory and self-sacrifice, the notion that the war could be understood in simple terms of good versus evil, the idea that death in battle was something of a religious experience - all had been rendered meaningless in the space of four short years. Yet the memorial windows which grace Canada's churches confirm that these traditional ideals held sway. They suggest that Canadians of the postwar era continued to believe precisely what they had believed in 1914, that the war was fought to defend Christianity and western civilization from Hun barbarism. Four years of war had done little to shake their traditional assumptions; Canadians apparently had no difficulty in continuing to view the Great War as a just and righteous fight.

In the frenzies of hawkishness that punctuated life on the home front, some of the most strident voices were raised by Canada's churchmen.² In the effort to exhort members of their flock to enlist, to donate to patriotic funds, or to work harder for the Allied cause, they interpreted the war in religious terms, portraying it as a struggle for the very survival of Christianity. "The Muses march with Mars," thundered Dr. E.H. Oliver of Presbyterian College in Saskatoon. "Today we are fighting for civilization, we are fighting for Christ."³ In 1917, a pastoral letter from the Bishop of Huron affirmed that Christians had a duty to support the war, because it was nothing less than an epic struggle between Christian and pagan.⁴ The following year, Reverend J. Macartney Wilson of Knox Presbyterian Church in Calgary agreed. "No matter what foolish people among us may

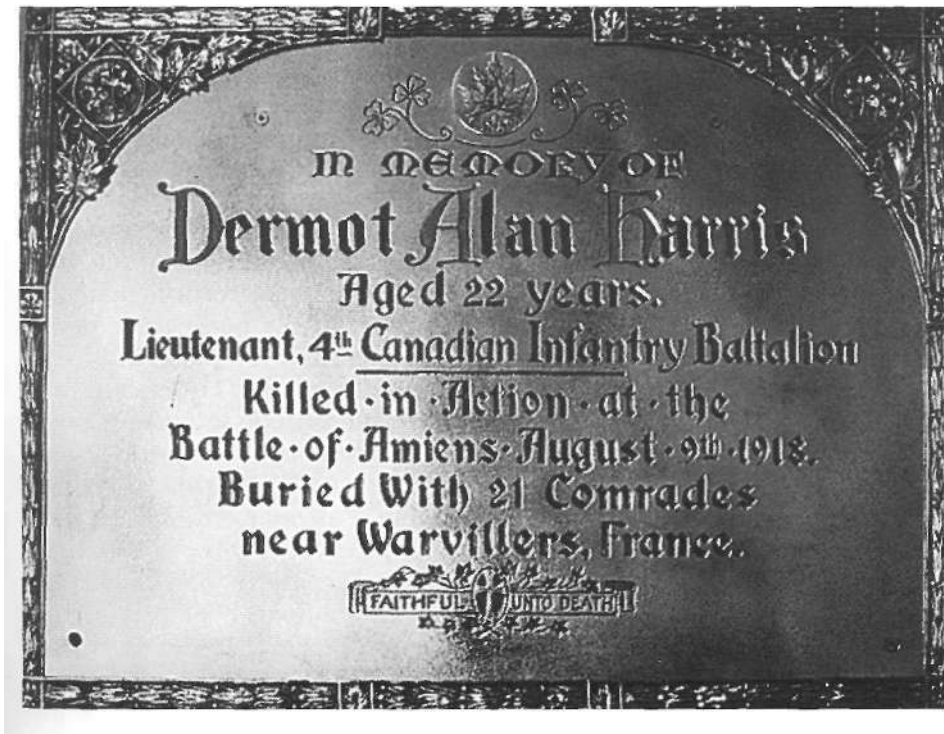
say, it is a righteous cause," he wrote in a sympathy letter to bereaved mothers. "It is the cause of truth and chivalry and honour; it is the cause of Christ against Satan."⁵

As Reverend Wilson recognized, however, the crusading fervour of some Canadians had been tested by the enemy's stubborn refusal to be defeated swiftly. The stalemate on the Western Front, the bloodbaths of the Somme and Passchendaele, and the German Spring Offensive of 1918, which brought Germany closer to victory than at any time since the first year of war, may well have given church-goers pause to think. Clear-cut victories seemed few and far between, the appetite of the military machine for soldiers was insatiable, and as late as the summer of 1918 there appeared to be no prospect of the war's end in the foreseeable future. Fears that the crusade had not proceeded as expected may well have planted seeds of doubt in the minds of the faithful. Had they been mistaken in investing the war and the sacrifices of the fallen with such spiritual significance?⁶

The Armistice erased any such doubts. The Allied victory verified that the rhetoric of 1914 had not been misplaced. "By the will of God you have won," Sir Arthur Currie told the Canadian

Corps after the capture of Mons in November 1918.⁷ The trial may have been long and severe, but that was only to test the faith of the Allies. Right had indeed triumphed over might, and God had eventually helped bring the victory. The Armistice allowed Canadians to return to the comforting belief that the war had indeed been a crusade; because the war had been won, they could now rest easy in the certainty that they had been fighting God's battles.⁸ The war's spiritual significance was confirmed, and it was now beyond dispute that the fallen had given their lives in defence of Christianity and western civilization.

This certainty was in the minds of many Canadians as they approached the task of commemoration in the months and years that followed the Armistice. For people who accepted the religious interpretation of the war, it seemed entirely natural that they could memorialize the dead by enriching the fabric of their own churches: what better way to pay tribute to these defenders of Christianity than by improving the house of God in which they had worshipped? So, St. John's Anglican Church in Victoria erected a reredos in commemoration of its members who served, while Murray Street Baptist Church in Peterborough, Ontario and St. Thomas Presbyterian Church in Saskatoon invested in



A typical memorial plaque to a young officer killed at Amiens in 1918, erected in St. Peter's Anglican Church in Toronto. Maple leaves figure prominently in the relief work, while the inscription 'Faithful Unto Death' affirms Harris as a soldier of Christ.

(Photo: Isobel Allen)



The memorial window in the Anglican Church of the Ascension in Montreal. The symbols of English and French power are intermingled, but are easily recognizable by their devices. Britannia stands to the right, and the Black Prince stands in the centre right, holding a shield.

(Photo: Peter Harper)

memorial organs. Other churches were memorials in their own right. St. John's Lisnagarvey in Endako, British Columbia (1922) was erected as a memorial to the men of an Irish parish who died in the war, while the Church of St. Mary and St. George in Jasper, Alberta (1928) was funded by an Englishwoman in memory of her son, who had been killed in action in Palestine.⁹

More frequently, grieving families turned to plaques or tablets to record the brief lives of their loved ones who were killed during the war. Usually of cast bronze, they offer simple tributes to fallen soldiers through the inclusion of a fitting epigraph chosen by the family. "He proved himself a man at all times and under most trying circumstances," reads a plaque in Trinity Church, Saint John to Sergeant William Samuel Hare (died of wounds 12 November 1917). Not far away in the same church, a tablet was dedicated to Lieutenant Herbert Daniel McDonald, MC (killed in action 28 April 1917) "in affectionate remembrance by his former associates in daily occupation." Such plaques, with their simple diction and touching epigraphs, abound in Canadian churches, sharing the walls with tributes to parish elders, former ministers, church benefactors, and local worthies.

Stained glass was a far more flexible medium than bronze, though, for it was better suited to the combination of text and iconography. A

congregation could select a scriptural passage as the theme of its memorial, and then embellish it with a rich collection of symbols for emphasis. Their feelings of the sacrifice of war, then, could be expressed in a very visual form. The dominant vocabulary they chose was one of Christian sacrifice, and was entirely consistent with the religious interpretation as it had been articulated during the war. Indeed, one is struck by the degree to which that vocabulary echoed the rhetoric of 1914. By focusing on the defence of Christianity, the war as a crusade, and the connection between the soldier and Christ, all strong elements of wartime discourse, congregations across the country affirmed that the four years of war had done little to shake the assumptions under which they had gone to battle in 1914.

The first of those assumptions was that Germany represented the enemy of Christianity and civilization. University of Toronto president Sir Robert Falconer, in his book *The German Tragedy and its Meaning for Canada* (1915), called Germany the "outlaw of civilization" and rejoiced that "thousands upon thousands prefer to die rather than that righteousness should perish from the earth."¹⁰ In this short but influential volume, Falconer enunciated what many Canadians accepted. For them, the choice was clear: unless Germany was faced and defeated, values like honour, liberty, truth and justice would be snuffed out. It was more than just the destiny of the British Empire which was at stake, said Sir Robert Borden in 1915; it was



an inscription that is found on countless secular memorials across the country; both note that the fallen of the congregations gave their lives "in defence of righteousness, justice, and liberty."¹² The splendid window in Carmichael United Church in Regina is more explicitly religious, reminding parishioners that the fallen "laid down their lives for freedom and a Christian civilization." Such inscriptions verify that the magic words of the war years still exercised a powerful influence. Canadians held fast to the belief that their sons and daughters had gone to war "as champions of...mercy against ruthlessness, of justice against iniquity, of decency

Another version of the crusading knight, from Central United Church in Colborne, Ontario. The knight, wearing armour that gleams almost as much as Christ's cassock, bears his standard into battle, taking with him the blessing of his Lord.

(Photo: Central United Church)

The memorial window to Captain Thomas George Bragley of the 14th Battalion (Royal Montreal Regiment) in the Church of the Ascension in Montreal. The departing knight prays at an altar before leaving for battle, his helmet and shield at the ready.

(Photo: Peter Harper)

"the future of civilization and of the world." In this struggle, Christianity was as vulnerable as anything, for, as clergymen reminded Canadians well into the interwar period, "a Christ-controlled Canada would have been impossible in a Prussianized world."¹¹

Memorial windows give no hint that Canadians came to doubt this assumption in the interwar period. On the contrary, they usually reiterate the principles which had been at the heart of the rhetoric of 1914 and express gratitude for their preservation. The windows in Hamilton's Zion Tabernacle (1919) and the Methodist Church in Dundas, Ontario (1919), for example, share



against shamefulness, of good faith against perfidy, of Right against Might, of peace against war, of humane and Christian civilization against savage and pagan barbarism."¹³

The most comprehensive statement of this notion exists in the former Anglican Church of the Ascension in Montreal, which served a working-class anglophone congregation until it was converted to the Mile End Public Library in 1993. The window, dedicated in February 1920, depicts Christ standing in front of a colonnade while representatives of France and England pay tribute to Him. St. George and the Archangel Michael, both symbolic of the struggle of good over evil, kneel on either side of Him, while Britannia, Joan of Arc, the Black Prince, Charlemagne, and a handful of other figures cluster around the steps below. The meaning of the window is clear: England and France represent the highest achievements of Christianity and western civilization, and they have allied to defend Christ, His faith, and the civilization that was fostered by His principles. Before doing battle against the forces of darkness, the symbols of Anglo-French greatness have assembled to render tribute to Him and receive His blessing.

Ascension's window is also an expression of a second assumption that was inextricably linked to the conception of the war as a defence of Christianity and western civilization, and just as persistent in wartime rhetoric: the war as a crusade. Those who volunteered to face German militarism on the battlefield were made analogous to the soldiers of Christ who had left their homes in medieval Europe to liberate the Holy Land from the infidel. Canadian soldiers, like the crusading knights, fought to defend good against the pagans of the world; their cause, as J.W. Dafoe put it in 1917, was "the holiest cause for which men had ever fought and died."¹⁴ This assumption gave a medieval flavour to much of the war's rhetoric. "All Hail to the Knights of the Grail / As they march on their way," exhorted a poem dedicated to soldiers leaving Brant County, Ontario for the front. Using the same metaphor, the mayor of Cambridge, Ontario told a returning soldier in 1915 that "no knight ever wore upon his sleeve the badge of truer or nobler deeds than you have performed."¹⁵ Time and time again, Canadians returned to medieval and crusade imagery to describe the struggle in which they were locked.

Given the dominance of this imagery, it is not surprising that one of the most frequently used figures in memorial windows is the medieval knight. He exists in many different variants in Canadian churches. In some windows, like the memorial to Thomas Harold Fennell (killed in action 17 May 1916) in St. Paul's United Church in Carp, Ontario, he is preparing to depart to join the crusade against the infidel. A similar memorial to Captain Thomas George Bragley (killed in action 9 August 1918) in the Anglican Church of the Ascension in Montreal shows the knight kneeling before an altar with his helmet and shield by his side; in front of him he holds his sword, the shape of the weapon echoing the symbol of his faith. Other windows depict the crusader returning to receive his reward after the battle has been won. The Cyril Ansell Evans window in St. Paul's Church in Halifax, for example, depicts a young knight in armour about to receive the crown of life from the angel of the Lord. In each instance, the message is the same: the soldier, as symbolized by the medieval knight, had been engaged in a holy war in defence of Christianity.

A splendid window in Knox United (formerly Presbyterian) Church in Calgary offers a more sustained commentary on the soldier/crusader relationship. The focal point is the Risen Christ but in the centre ground, spanning all five panels, are medieval knights representing the virtues of fidelity, nobility, honour, humility, devotion, patience, sincerity, brotherly love, and charity. Below them are the Canadian soldiers: one is tended by a nurse, another gazes up at Christ, and a third covers his face with his hands. The battlefield in the background is dotted with the dead and dying, a smoking artillery piece, a village in ruins, and a penitent figure praying at a wayside shrine. This striking window, dedicated in 1921, affirms the identification of the infantrymen as soldiers of Christ and draws a direct parallel between the knights and the values they typify, and the Canadian soldiers of the Great War.¹⁶ Both groups shared the same Christian virtues, and both were fortified by those virtues as they fought God's battles. As a bereaved father in Montreal wrote in July 1915, the fallen soldier was in all respects like "a knight of old... on his high emprise / Questing the Grail, or 'gainst the Infidel / Fouling the Holy Shrine."¹⁷



The memorial window formerly in Carmichael United Church in Regina. When the church was closed, plans were made to move the window to the armouries in Regina, where it is to be unveiled on Remembrance Day 1996. (Photo: Carmichael United Church)

The constant repetition of the figure of the medieval knight was reinforced by frequent reference to certain suggestive phrases from the Bible. "Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life," from Christ's Revelation to John, appears on the Evans and Fennell windows to remind parishioners of the piety of the soldier.¹⁸ The verse constitutes a warning to the faithful that they will be tested by trial and tribulation, but also an assurance that the ultimate triumph will be theirs in the end. The same notion is implicit in the Bragley window, which refers to a passage from Paul's second letter to Timothy ("I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith").¹⁹ Again, the parallels are direct and carefully chosen: just as Paul faced his death calmly in the knowledge that the crown of life awaited him, so too did Captain Bragley face death with the same comforting certainty.

But memorial windows did not stop at merely asserting that Canadian soldiers had been modern-day crusaders. They went well beyond this to perpetuate the notion of a unity between the individual soldier and Jesus Christ. This had been another of the most potent metaphors of

the war, with poems like John Oxenham's "Christ's All" asserting that the infantryman was nothing less than Jesus in khaki. "Yes, you are Christs," Oxenham wrote in 1915, in a poem addressed to the soldiers at the front. "We know you Christs, when, in your soul's redeeming / The Christ-light blazes in your steadfast eyes."²⁰ Like Jesus, the soldiers fought to defend their faith and were willing to sacrifice their lives to save humanity. "They, like the Christ Himself, are the messengers of God to us," said an Ontario clergyman, and they "set themselves to go forward as steadfastly as the great Captain of

Salvation set himself to go to Jerusalem."²¹ When they fall in action, wrote the Nova Scotia poet and ex-infantryman J.D. Logan, they "shall be called Saviors and they shall be blessed in the sight of the Lord forever."²²

The image of Jesus in khaki was derided by later critics for its obscene religiosity, yet it nevertheless retained considerable strength and popularity in postwar memorializing. Indeed, there is only one figure which appears more frequently than the medieval knight in memorial windows: the figure of Jesus Christ. The congregation of St. Andrew's Anglican Church in Cowichan Station, British Columbia chose as its war memorial a window depicting a crucified Christ flanked by the Virgin Mary and a Roman soldier. This simple image related the suffering of Jesus directly to the suffering of the soldiers; by using the figure of Christ to commemorate the church's fallen, the window admitted the clear parallels between the two. The father of Captain Allan Gray (killed in action 29 September 1918) erected a memorial window in Holy Trinity Anglican Church in Burford, Ontario which took as its theme the baptism of Jesus. It is the inscriptions, however, which affirm the unity

between soldier and Christ: "This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased" and "Behold the Lamb of God [that taketh away the sins of the world]." The window is at once personal and universal. It expresses the pride of a grieving parent as well as the faith that Captain Gray, like Jesus, died to atone for the sins of the world.

A particularly striking enunciation of the unity between soldier and Christ is the memorial window of Carmichael United Church to Regina, dedicated on Armistice Day 1928. It is a stained glass rendering of James Clark's painting "The Great Sacrifice," and depicts a dead soldier lying at the feet of Jesus. Peace and composure are reflected on the face of the soldier. His hand covers the wound on Christ's foot, affirming the link between his own suffering and that of the Saviour. Above the soldier stands Jesus, His palms facing out to display His stigmata. With this gesture, He recognizes in the soldier's wounds and death a community of sacrifice: His struggle is the soldier's struggle, and vice versa. Surrounding the central figures is the detritus of war: to the right of Jesus, the ruined tower of the Cloth Hall in Ypres and behind the soldier, the remains of the market square of Loos, near Lens. In the distance, two airplanes hover over the desolate landscape.

It is a remarkable image, more effective in stained glass than in the original painting, and reveals the persistence of the religious interpretation of 1914-1918 in postwar Canada. It confirms the belief that the war was indeed a struggle for the survival of Christianity, and that each soldier who died shared a special bond with Christ. The sacrifice of Jesus may have been "solitary and unique," as a Toronto clergyman said in 1919, but the sacrifice of the soldiers was "after the manner of Christ and also according to his purpose."²³ All were saviours because they had suffered to save humanity from eternal darkness.

During the war, the religious interpretation had played an important role in sustaining Canada's effort. The notion that Christianity and western civilization was imperilled by Germany became a tool to explain the issues at stake in the struggle, to boost recruiting, and to ensure that

Canadians remained committed to the cause. The emphasis on the unity between soldier and Christ may also have aided recruiting, but more significantly it provided much-needed consolation for grieving relatives in search of the meaning behind the death of a loved one. After the Armistice, this hunger for meaning and consolation remained. As a consequence, it should come as no surprise that the religious interpretation retained its appeal and utility. By viewing the war as a simple struggle between good and evil, it clarified the issues at stake and allowed parishioners to avoid any troubling questions about the war's economic or political causes. Furthermore, by focusing on the parallels between Christ and the soldier, it allowed people to separate the means of death from the meaning; the ugly physical realities of death in battle became irrelevant in light of the fact that the sacrifices were made to save humanity.²⁴ In short, for the typical Canadian congregation, the religious interpretation offered both a plausible explanation and welcome consolation for the losses they had endured. There was little need to question the assumptions under which they had entered the war in 1914; those assumptions remained just as convincing and just as relevant when it came time to commemorate the fallen.

Notes

My gratitude goes to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council for financial support which made this research possible. I would like to thank Peter Harper of the Université de Montréal and David Wilson of the *United Church Observer* for their assistance, and the many parish historians and archivists across Canada who contributed information about their own church's war memorials. I would also be delighted to hear from *CMH* readers with information or photos of their church memorials of the First World War.

1. St. Paul's Church in Toronto, for example, has more than 30 separate memorials from the First World War, including windows, chancel screens, tablets, panels, and artifacts.
2. On the church's response to the war, see Duff Crerar, *Padres in No Man's Land: Canadian Chaplains and the Great War* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995); David B. Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith: Canadian Protestant Clergy and the Crisis of Belief, 1850-1940* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992); Michael Bliss, "The Methodist Church in World War I," in *Canadian Historical Review* 49/3 (1968), pp.213-227; George Russell, "The Church Must be the Church: The Attitude of the Methodist/United Church of Canada

- towards War, 1899-1942" (Honours BA thesis, Wilfrid Laurier University, 1978).
3. Quoted in Marshall, p. 158.
 4. Quoted in Richard E. Ruggle, "Some Canadian Anglican Attitudes to War and Peace, 1890-1930," in *Journal of the Canadian Church Historical Society* 35/2 (October 1993), p. 137.
 5. Reverend Macartney Wilson, quoted in Kate Reeves, "By Its Beauty and Significance: The Memorial Window, Knox United Church, Calgary" (undergraduate paper, University of Alberta, 1993), p.4.
 6. On the decline in religious zeal for the war in one context, see John S. Moir, *Enduring Witness: A History of the Presbyterian Church in Canada* (Toronto: Bryant Press, 1974), p.209; Brian G. Fraser, *The Social Uplifters: Presbyterian Progressives and the Social Gospel in Canada, 1875-1915* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1988), pp.160-162.
 7. Quoted in J.E. Wetherell, *The Great War in Verse and Prose* (Toronto: King's Printer, 1919), p.141.
 8. The literature on the war as crusade is considerable. See, for example, R. Matthew Bray, "A Twentieth Century Crusade: The Canadian Periodical Press and World War I," *Laurentian University Review* 6/1 (November 1973), pp.23-37; Edward T. Linenthal, *Changing Images of the Warrior Hero in America: A History of Popular Symbolism* (New York: E. Mellen, 1982); Albert Marrin, *The Last Crusade: The Church of England in the First World War* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1974).
 9. Correspondence with Patience Taylor, White Rock, BC, 12 October 1993; Cyndi Smith, "A Parish History of the Church of St. Mary and St. George, Jasper, Alberta" (Jasper-Yellowhead Historical Society, 1985), pp.49-55.
 10. Robert Falconer, *The German Tragedy and its Meaning for Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1915), pp.19, 45.
 11. Speech at the London Guildhall, in *Canada at War: Speeches Delivered by Rt. Hon. Sir Robert Borden* (Ottawa, 1916); Rev. J.S. Sutherland, quoted in *Daily Gleaner* [Fredericton], 13 November 1923, p.3.
 12. In the interests of brevity, I have simply chosen representative examples of each of the themes I discuss. Similar images can be found in windows in other churches across the country.
 13. H.J. Cody, introduction to Wetherell, *The Great War in Verse and Prose*, p.xii.
 14. *Manitoba Free Press*, 18 December 1917, quoted in Leslie M. Frost, *Fighting Men* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1967), p.40.
 15. Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto: "On the Banks of the Noble Grand," in *The Voice of the Knight and his Lady, St. George and Waneita; Other Poems and Historic Truths* (private, n.d.); City of Cambridge Archives: City Hall scrapbook, J.B. Hett to Cpl Edgar Wackett, 15 October 1915.
 16. Knox United Church Archives, Calgary: "Memorial Service on the occasion of the unveiling of the Window erected in memory of the men of Knox Church that fell in the Great War, January 2nd, 1921."
 17. Samuel Mathewson Baylis, "The Crusaders," in *Echoes of the Great War* (Montreal: Witness Press, 1919).
 18. Revelation 2:10.
 19. II Timothy 4:7.
 20. John Oxenham, "Christ's All! (Our Boys Who Have Gone to the Front)," in *"All's Well!": Helpful Verse for These Dark Days of War* (London: Methuen, 1915), pp.15-16.
 21. John McCrae House: Matthews Family scrapbook, Rev. S. Buchanan-Carey, quoted in "Veteran Leader Unveils Tablet to 43rd Battery," undated clipping; Principal Grant at UCC memorial service, 7 April 1918, quoted in A.H. Young, ed., *The War Book of Upper Canada College* (Toronto: Printers Guild, 1923), p.xxvi.
 22. Acadia University Archives: J.D. Logan Papers, box 8, file 58, note on "Nanine: A War Incident of the Souchez Valley, France, 1917."
 23. *Canadian Baptist*, 13 February 1919, p.7.
 24. James M. Mayo, *War Memorial as Political Landscape: The American Experience and Beyond* (New York: Praeger, 1988), p.88.

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