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# "Time but the impression deeper makes"\*

## Approaches to Canadian Epitaphs of the Great War

Eric McGeer

This paper begins with a flight of fancy meant to put its subject in a novel perspective. Imagine archaeologists at some distant time in the future coming upon the British memorials and war cemeteries clustered along the old Western Front. Suppose, too, that although the written sources for the Great War no longer survive, the mandate of the War Graves Commission to maintain the monuments in perpetuity has ensured a good state of preservation. In the same way that archaeologists test the historicity of the Trojan War against the evidence from Bronze Age sites, or reconstruct the workings of the Roman army from its camps and fortifications, our imagined archaeologists would set about collating and interpreting the details in the commemorative monuments to form a reasonably coherent picture of the Great War. They would infer from the sheer density of the war cemeteries that it had been a very static conflict; from the dates, regiments, and nationalities incised on the headstones they could establish a chronology of events and a latter-day "Catalogue of Ships" listing the peoples drawn

**Abstract: Studies of the effects and memory of the Great War are sure to gain new impetus with the arrival of the centenary in 2014. This article outlines the approaches to a body of evidence not yet fully appreciated by scholars examining the impact of the war and the reaction to a tragedy of unprecedented proportions. The personal inscriptions engraved on the headstones of the fallen preserve a record of grief and consolation unique in history, one that forges a bond of sympathy between the Great War generation and our own, yet one that also exposes the profound differences between their thought world and ours. This preliminary survey of Canadian epitaphs reinforces the position that if studies of the myth and memory of the Great War are to flourish, it is imperative that we ground them in the cultural, literary, and religious traditions that guided the bereaved in their search for consolation and meaning.**

from all over the world into the British Empire's order of battle. The number of nameless graves, tallying with the registers inscribed on the memorials to the missing, would induce recognition of a frighteningly destructive war that inflicted not only mass death but mass annihilation. Some explanation for this would emerge from the insignia on the headstones identifying artillerymen, machine gunners, tank crewmen, and fliers, which bear witness to the

advances in military technology that made such a rigidly concentrated war so consumptive of human life. An archaeologist sensitive to the contradictory logic of human affairs might perceive the trap into which the belligerents worked themselves, that victory alone, at any price, could redeem the sacrifice that mounted with each year of the war.

The evidence responding to the basic questions of who fought the war, when and where and how it was fought, would naturally lead to more speculative inquiry. Anyone beholding these monuments would marvel at the herculean effort involved in creating them and at the scrupulous desire to commemorate every last one of the fallen by name, signs of the debt of remembrance which the survivors felt they owed to the dead. In seeking answers to the very human and very taxing questions as to how people at the time justified so costly a struggle, and how the victors rationalised the appalling price of victory, our future archaeologists would seize upon a body of evidence, unique in history, which historians of our age have been slow to exploit in their study of the memory of the Great War. Thousands of personal inscriptions, engraved on the headstones of the fallen, convey the grief of the families who suffered the loss of fathers, husbands,

\* From the inscription on the headstone of Lance Corporal Andrew Ramage, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry (Wimereux Communal Cemetery).

brothers, sons (and, lest we forget, daughters), and the consolatory themes by which they reconciled themselves to their loss. In their great abundance, cutting across all levels of society, and in their affecting simplicity, the epitaphs preserve the voice of the generation that bore the burden of the war and tried to find meaning in its terrible exactions. They invite us to explore the sources of comfort to which they turned in their distress, and – to do what our age finds it very hard to do with respect to the Great War<sup>1</sup> – to accord fair recognition to sensibilities and attitudes which we have long since discarded, and to beliefs and ideals which ever since the 1960s have come to have less and less meaning. “Our dear Daddy and our hero”; “Baby of the family. Mother still anxious for his return”; “Also in memory of his brother Samuel, killed at Courcellette, 16th September 1916”<sup>2</sup> – these are but three of countless examples reminding us of the claim of the bereaved on our sympathies and of our obligation in return to examine the epitaphs through the prism of their emotions, values, and sources of consolation.<sup>3</sup>

The personal inscriptions, let it be said, have not gone entirely unnoticed. The provision allowing next of kin to contribute short valedictions is duly noted in histories of the Imperial (now Commonwealth) War Graves Commission,<sup>4</sup> even if its significance as the first occasion in history that the general populace could add a private voice to the official commemoration of the war dead is not as emphasized as it might be. The poignancy of these inscriptions – and many truly are gems of compression – has inspired two anthologies, John Laffin’s *We Will Remember Them*, presenting Australian epitaphs, and Trefor Jones’s *On Fame’s Eternal Camping Ground*, a wider selection of British and Dominion examples.<sup>5</sup> Both fulfill the purpose of anthologies in providing a selection of memorable personal inscriptions; and it is not to detract from the value of these collections, particularly Laffin’s, to point out that neither ventures into the larger questions of the cultural context and provenance of the epitaphs. It is to say, however, that there has as yet been no attempt to situate the epitaphs of the Great War in the long tradition of sepulchral

inscriptions originating in Antiquity,<sup>6</sup> to identify and elaborate upon their sources,<sup>7</sup> and to integrate them within the cultural history of the Great War, a subject in which myth and memory have come to occupy the high ground. Such an undertaking lies beyond the remit of this paper, which proposes instead to outline the approaches to a deeper, and potentially more revealing, study of the personal inscriptions. Although the focus is mainly on Canadian epitaphs, the sense of imperial unity and the close cultural affinity between Great Britain and the English-speaking dominions make the observations offered here broadly applicable to the corpus of epitaphs from the First World War.<sup>8</sup>

Any discussion of the personal inscriptions must first balance their worth against their limitations as sources. Though they echo the sentiments of their time, they speak directly for only a small proportion of the dead and those who commemorated them, as some rough calculations will show. Of the 66,000 Canadians killed in the Great War, 11,000 have no known grave; of the identified graves, just under

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**Canadian graves at Niagara Cemetery, Iwuy, France.**

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half carry a personal inscription, many of which repeat formulae ("Rest in peace," "Gone but not forgotten," "Son of ... born in ...") of little more than fleeting interest. The number of inscriptions that offer insight into the minds of the bereaved, individually and collectively, comes to about 3,000 by my count, speaking for about five percent of Canada's war dead.<sup>9</sup> Their form and realm of expression, though not without variety, adhere to the restrictions imposed by the War Graves Commission and by the conventions of the time. Here the exceptions prove useful in illustrating the rules and, more importantly, the latitude shown in their application. When scanning the collection, for instance, it becomes clear that while most inscriptions stay within the prescribed length of 66 characters (including the spaces between words), a great many do not, the most striking example being a text of



Photograph by author.

**A little girl's farewell to her father: "Death is not a barrier to love, Daddy." The headstone of Private Peter Lapointe, St. Sever Cemetery, Rouen.**

over 450 characters covering the headstone of a Canadian lieutenant buried in France.<sup>10</sup> Similar discretion is evident in the content of the epitaphs. The Commission reserved "absolute power of rejection or acceptance" over the inscriptions submitted, yet there are several noteworthy examples giving vent to anger or resentment which demonstrate the range of acceptability. "He did his duty. My heart knoweth its own bitterness. Mother"; "A bursting

bud on a slender stem, broken and wasted, our boy"; "Another life lost, hearts broken, for what"; "Sacrificed to the fallacy that only war can end war"; "Many died and there was much glory."<sup>11</sup> The lengths to which the Commission was prepared to go in accommodating the wishes of next of kin stand out in one stark inscription, indescribably moving in its restoration of honour to the memory of a soldier executed for desertion: "Shot at dawn. One of the

first to enlist. A worthy son of his father."<sup>12</sup>

The taut, pointed simplicity of these examples proves yet again that economy of words makes for much greater impact than does prolixity, something that Rudyard Kipling and Frederic Kenyon well understood when they made their recommendations on personal inscriptions.<sup>13</sup> The infrequent but telling departures from the norm also bring out another point deserving of emphasis. Whatever control the Commission exercised over the personal inscriptions should be construed not as censorship but as a safeguard of propriety and dignity in the war cemeteries. The restrictions on length, and the small fee charged for an inscription, were deterrents against "the effusion of the mortuary mason, the sentimental versifier, or the crank," and are consistent with the opposition to inappropriate epitaphs that the proponents

of the cemetery reform movement of the nineteenth century had long made part of their programme.<sup>14</sup> They took the view that irreverent or semi-literate inscriptions undermined the moral benefits to persons visiting cemeteries to reflect on the vicissitudes of this life and the promise of the one to come. As this view took hold, collections of epitaphs judged suitable for sepulchral inscriptions proliferated throughout the second half of the 19th



century. The trend in civil cemeteries towards the spiritual edification of visitors was even more pronounced in the military burial grounds, in which the common aim of the architects and horticulturalists was to create the tranquil, contemplative atmosphere of an English garden, a setting designed to inspire reflection and meditation on the sacrifice of the fallen. We must also take into account the emotional restraint bred into a generation of parents born in the 1850s and 1860s commemorating sons born in the 1880s and 1890s – in other words, people deeply rooted in the Victorian Age – which surfaces in this epitaph, “Sadly missed, silently mourned by his wife and children,”<sup>15</sup> and many more referring to private sorrows, silent thoughts, or hidden tears – faultlessly Victorian in concealing the intensity of the grief behind the stoic façade presented to the world.

Few epitaphs represent original compositions. The Victorians preferred to select their gravestone inscriptions, and it seems to have been the assumption on the part of the Commission that next of kin contributing epitaphs would draw from venerable authorities. In the years immediately following the war, a canon of remembrance verse took shape, including such familiar pieces as Laurence Binyon’s “For the Fallen” and John McCrae’s “In Flanders Fields,” which supplied a number of apposite lines; but most of those seeking literary valedictions turned to the poets whose works they had learned in their schooldays when memory work and recitation were staples of pedagogy. A trawl through the University of Toronto’s calendars from the years before the war reveals that the poems most often quarried for epitaphs – Tennyson’s “Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington” (“The path of duty was the way to glory”), “Break, break, break” (“O for the touch of a vanished hand and



Photograph by author.

**“First Canadian Contingent.” Pride in Private Austin Keens’s readiness to do his duty. Headstone in Woods Cemetery, Belgium.**

the sound of a voice that is still”) or Shelley’s “Adonais” (“He hath outsoared the shadow of our night”) – were required reading for high-school matriculants in English who, like all students of the time, went through a thoroughly Anglocentric curriculum.<sup>16</sup> Sunday school, following or followed by church, immersed people from an early age in the hymns and writings, particularly John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* and John Henry Newman’s “Lead, Kindly Light,” which provided a plentiful source of spiritual comfort. But if the generation raised before the war entrusted the expression of its grief, acceptance, or hope to one book, it was to the King James Version of the Bible.

It is impossible to overstate the centrality of the Bible in Victorian culture. To paraphrase one scholar, Scriptural knowledge is a prerequisite for entering into the thought-world of

the generation that went through the Great War.<sup>17</sup> “(Assurance) What time I am afraid I will trust in Thee. Ps. 56.3”; “O Lord of hosts, blessed is the man that trusteth in Thee. Ps. 84.12”; “God hath delivered my soul from the place of hell for He shall receive me. Ps. 49. 15”; “My favourite reading, 1st bk. Cor. ch. 13”:<sup>18</sup> these are among the epitaphs that display the family’s awareness of the passages which the soldier read each day and to which he turned in times of trial. The annotated Bible of a Canadian soldier killed in 1918 contains a list of 18 passages, all from the New Testament, connecting the teachings, experiences, and tribulations of Christ and His followers to the various aspects of a devoutly Christian soldier’s life on active service – and in two texts frequently used as epitaphs, 2 Timothy 4: 5-8 (“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith”) and Revelation 21: 4 (“And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes”) – to the eventuality of his death and reward.<sup>19</sup> If these readings formed a kind of spiritual anchor for the men in the trenches, other standard selections supplied comfort to the bereaved. The very Victorian habit of reading one’s experiences through the lens of the Bible, and making sense of this earthly pilgrimage by identifying oneself with its stories or characters, guided the next of kin who in like fashion turned to familiar consolatory passages (“Blessed are they who mourn”) or sought reassuring parallels. The mother of a Newfoundland soldier killed on 1 July 1916 chose a line from Luke 7: 12, “The only son of his mother and she was a widow,” that movingly depicts the loneliness of her grief, eased, we can only hope, by the compassion which Christ shows to the sorrowing mother in the Biblical passage.<sup>20</sup>

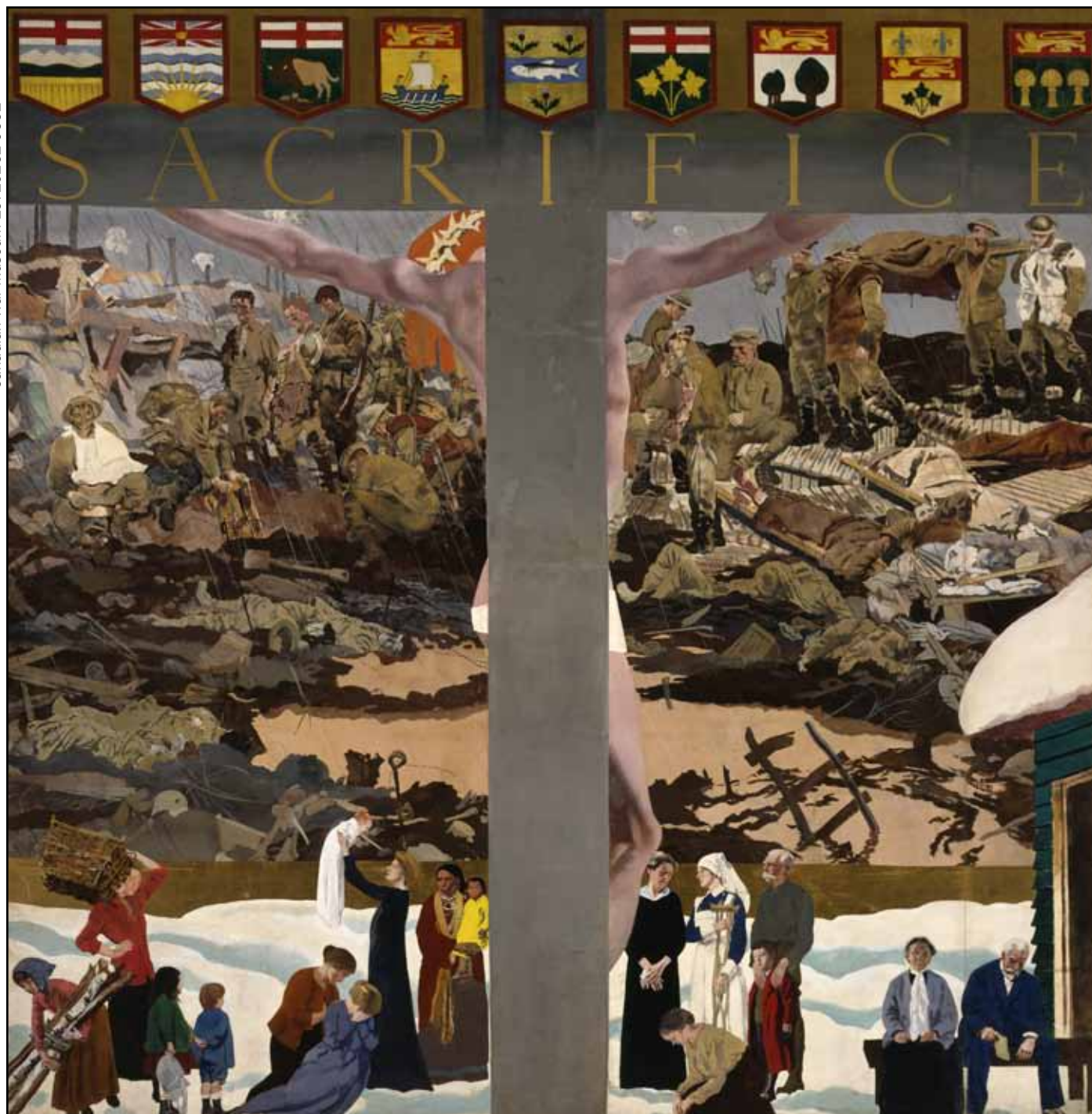
Epitaphs drawn from the Bible broadened rather than narrowed the range of expression. There are

examples to suggest that families selected passages to give voice to feelings which, phrased in less authoritative tones, might have been rejected as too contentious or excessive. "Young men, ye have overcome the wicked one. I John 2.13," represents a rare instance

of triumphalism that puts paid to the Kaiser and all his works without overtly hostile reference to the enemy, a practice discouraged by the Commission.<sup>21</sup> "By this I know Thou favourest me, that mine enemy doth not triumph against me" quotes Psalm 41.11 to imply that God

had denied victory to Germany; an epitaph drawn from Psalm 68: 30, "Scatter Thou the people that delight in war," issues a veiled call for divine retribution against a militaristic enemy held responsible for causing the war.<sup>22</sup> Those opposed to war were aware that no one could object to the

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In Charles Sims' *Sacrifice* (ca. 1918) Christ looks down from the Cross upon the agonies of the soldiers struggling to save a world in which their parents, wives, and children would dwell in peace, and the mourners find solace in the Christian heroism of Canada's soldiers. This painting was to be the centrepiece of Lord Beaverbrook's projected (but never achieved) memorial art gallery in Ottawa.

injunction against violence uttered by Christ, "They that take the sword shall perish with the sword. Matthew 26: 52," or His promise of benediction, "Blessed are the peacemakers."<sup>23</sup>

The depths of love between a wife and husband might find their most tender expression in Scripture, particularly in the oft-chosen *Song of Songs* ("Mine till the day break and the shadows flee away"; "Many waters cannot quench love"), or in this richly allusive passage: "My beloved is unto me as a cluster of camphire in the vineyards of En-Gedi."<sup>24</sup> The great number of personal inscriptions citing the *Song of Songs* should also remind the present generation, no longer on instantly familiar terms with the King James Version, not to overlook the significance of epitaphs that can sometimes pall through repetition. Though often interpreted in allegorical or mystical ways, the *Song of Songs* was for the people who lived at the time of the Great War the most

powerful expression of married love and the firmest pledge that this love was stronger than death.<sup>25</sup>

Where the study of Canadian epitaphs proves most fruitful, however, is in further elucidating the themes of consolation so thoughtfully explored by Jonathan Vance and in broadening our understanding of the meaning assigned to the Great War by those whose lives were blighted by loss and grief. Two inscriptions, "He gave his all for freedom, the whole wide world to save" and "I have given my life to promote peace between nations,"<sup>26</sup> encapsulate the



**"A hero. He suffered and died for freedom's cause. Asleep in Jesus." The epitaph of Private George Fitch, 54th Battalion (buried in Abbeville Communal Cemetery Extension) is one of many that express in words what James Clark's *The Great Sacrifice* conveys in image – the community of sacrifice between Christ and the Glorious Dead.**

general belief that this had been "the war to end all wars." From our disillusioned perspective a century on, this idealism seems wishful and naive, but the people who had these epitaphs engraved on the headstones of their loved ones had grown up with the Victorian world view that suffering and death had purpose, all disasters had a moral, and progress came at a price.<sup>27</sup> They also belonged to the first generation to realise what kind of war the technically advanced armies of industrialised, fully mobilised countries could fight; and they saw in this harrowing

experience a warning to the future: "If death be the price of victory, O God forbid all wars"; "Break, day of God, sweet day of peace, and bid the shout of warriors cease."<sup>28</sup> The unquestionable sincerity of these pleas compels us to recognise the consoling vision of a better world which the people of Britain and the Dominions drew from the Allied victory. The losses, terrible as they were, had resulted in the triumph of one set of principles and values over another: "Right is stronger than might"; "For King and country thus he fell, a tyrant's arrogance to quell."<sup>29</sup> The defeat of autocracy and militarism which had brought on the war, and the moral obligation imposed by the horrendous cost to uphold the ideals of freedom, democracy, and concord among nations ("Justice owes them this, that what they died for not be overthrown"),<sup>30</sup> would ensure that such a catastrophe could never happen again. In the minds of contemporaries the

replacement of Tsarist Russia with democratic America in the Allied coalition had reinvigorated the Allied cause by transforming it into a crusade to create a better world (taking Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points as its blueprint) that would abide by a just and stable peace.<sup>31</sup> The belief that a husband, son, or father had given his life in what was surely a divinely sanctioned cause ("Yet remember this, God and our good cause fight upon our side")<sup>32</sup> found its way onto many a headstone: "He allured to a better world and led the way"; "We grudge not our life if it



give larger life to them that live"; "Liberty and freedom had to be won by the willing sacrifice of life"; "He died so that life might be a sweeter thing to all. He liveth."<sup>33</sup>

"Christ Jesus Who gave Himself, a ransom for all"; "By his death our life revealing, he for us the ransom paid"; "He died for others. Even so did Christ."<sup>34</sup> From casting a soldier's death as an offering towards a world made new, it was but a short step to hallowing the fallen as an elect who had died that their kin and country might live and, in the highest sense of sacrifice, laid down their lives for humanity: "Our soldier boy endured the Cross and won the crown" is one of many epitaphs assigning redemptive significance to the suffering of the soldiers who in remaining "faithful unto death" had given the ultimate proof of their devotion: "He gave his pure soul unto his captain Christ"; "Jesus died for me. I'm not afraid to die for Him."<sup>35</sup> As Vance has shown, after the Somme or Passchendaele, the established churches, which had wholeheartedly supported the war, were at a loss to explain the carnage in terms of historical theology or as the operation of God's providence.<sup>36</sup> The only explanation lay in passages emphasizing the Christian virtues of suffering and sacrifice ("Thou, therefore, endure hardness as a good soldier of Jesus Christ") which bestowed meaning and purpose on the deaths of so many soldiers whose sacrifice had led to victory (in itself confirmation of the righteousness of the Allied cause) and the prospect of a world purged of iniquity: "The blood of Christ, God's Son, cleanseth us from all sin," on one soldier's headstone, could not proclaim more forthrightly the belief that the fallen had done their part to redeem mankind by shedding their blood in willing emulation of the Redeemer.<sup>37</sup>

"It is finished," Christ's dying words in the Gospel of John, is inscribed on the headstone of a young

artilleryman who died four days after the Armistice.<sup>38</sup> The war was over, the long agony had ended, and death had been swallowed up in victory, leading many families to exalt their dead as "One of Christ's faithful warriors," "A volunteer for Jesus," or "A Christian hero,"<sup>39</sup> as they found solace in a conviction widely shared among Canadians that the battlefields of France and Flanders had been, in the words of John Arkwright's hymn "O Valiant Hearts," "a lesser Calvary." For those pondering the reward for the soldiers who had not lived to see the victory which their travails had helped to achieve, there were comforting reminders from Scripture of God's covenant with His



servants: "And I will restore to you the years the locusts have eaten"; "And their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more. Heb. 8. 12"; "If we suffer, we shall also reign with Him."<sup>40</sup> But where the soldiers' endurance and sacrifice had won them salvation and life everlasting, the mourners had to carry on along their own *Via dolorosa*: "I lift my cross each day and think of thee, brave heart"; "He wears a crown. I wear a cross. Mother."<sup>41</sup>

"For God and right. Let not a whisper fall that our hero died in vain."<sup>42</sup> Confronted by a death toll so terrible and benumbing, those left to cope with their grief were understandably inclined to embrace the idealism or religious faith that made the sacrifice meaningful and necessary. These were not the only barriers against the unwelcome – and unbearable – feeling of despair or futility at so great a loss of life. "I will give him a white stone and in the stone a new name – victory."<sup>43</sup> Canadians could also take considerable pride in the exploits of their soldiers which in many cases tempered the grief of the mourners. The same impulse that led Canadians to name schools, streets, geographical features, and even their children, after famous battles is apparent in epitaphs proudly noting soldiers' deaths in the feats of arms that made the reputation of the Canadian Corps: "Died of wounds received at Ypres"; "He fell at the

Photographs by author

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**Above left: The *Lusitania* sinking affected Canadians as well as Americans. The headstone of Driver Albert Morrison, Canadian Field Artillery, "Whose father, Kenneth John Morrison, was lost on the *Lusitania*, May 7 1915."**

**Below left: "Go on, I'll manage." Testimony to the self-sacrifice of Private Ernest Proven, mortally wounded at Vimy Ridge and buried in Boulogne Eastern Cemetery. His brother, Sergeant Harry James Proven, was killed in September 1918.**

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**Headstones of Canadian soldiers killed in the Ypres Salient, 1916. Rifle House Cemetery, one of three Commonwealth cemeteries in Ploegsteert Wood.**

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Somme. It is immortal honour"; "Mort à Vimy à l'âge de trente ans en combattant pour la grande cause"; "Killed near Passchendaele"; "Killed in action at Cambrai"; and one more that reflected the renown won by the Canadians in spearheading the war-winning offensive that began at Amiens on 8 August 1918 – "Tomorrow will be Canada's day."<sup>44</sup> Other epitaphs no less proudly record the soldier's courage in the performance of his duties or the esteem in which his comrades held him: "Died for King and country while keeping line open under shell fire"; "Killed leading an attack at Regina Trench"; "Mentioned in despatches for gallant and distinguished conduct;" "Beloved by officers and men"; "His captain said 'No braver soldier ever led men into battle'"<sup>45</sup> – this last being one of several examples indicating that letters of condolence to next of kin

inspired the inscription on a soldier's grave.

Just how protective Canadians were of the heroic and morally bracing legacy of the Canadian Corps can be seen on the headstone of a soldier killed in May 1917, five weeks after the United States entered the war. "I raised my boy to be a soldier" states the epitaph supplied by his mother.<sup>46</sup> Her choice of words, baffling to our eyes, would have met with grim approval at the time. It is a Canadian retort to the popular American song, "I Didn't Raise My Boy to be a Soldier," which grated on Canadian nerves when the sanctimonious Yankees stayed out of a struggle that strained Canada to the limit, and again when the Doughboys began to claim all the credit for winning the war.<sup>47</sup> The doyen of Canada's military historians, Charles Stacey (1906-1989), recalled a joke passed around after the war which

had the American general Pershing annoyed about the late arrival of his cab in Paris. "When it did arrive, Pershing protested to the driver, who was a female, 'My good woman, you're three minutes late.' And the lady replied, 'My good man, you're three years late.'"<sup>48</sup> When borne in mind that the Dominion of Canada had lost a much greater proportion of her young manhood than had her far more populous, late-coming neighbour, both the levity and the epitaph make palpable Canadians' resentment at the diminution of their efforts in the Great War, not simply for patriotic but for intensely personal reasons.

A new appreciation of the composition of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, and of the assorted backgrounds and loyalties of the men in its ranks, emerges from the epitaphs. If the CEF is pictured as a pyramid, the "Canadians" born in

Britain would form the broad base of the structure, their origins indicated by the hundreds of inscriptions noting addresses or birthplaces in the United Kingdom, and by professions of allegiance to their native lands and empire: "A son of England – from Canada, given to the Empire"; "Mortuus est pro Scotia" (i.e. "He died for Scotland").<sup>49</sup> A sprinkling of epitaphs in Welsh ("Yn eich Duw coeliwch uchw dig gelyn all alw'n iach" – "Believe in God and even your enemy will respect you") and in Scots Gaelic ("G'un robh dia grasmhor ohuit a mhic" – "God be gracious to you, my son") show that English was by no means the mother tongue of all the British immigrants who made up half the CEF.<sup>50</sup> The next layer up would contain the men born in Canada, whose epitaphs display an increasingly self-conscious national identity. Many record Canadian birthplaces; and while declarations of loyalty to Britain and Empire abound ("One of Canada's gifts to the Empire, a life"), a swelling tide of Canadian sentiments ("Our lad is a hero, great Canada's pride") support the general consensus that the Great War marked the first step on the road from Dominion to nation.<sup>51</sup> Nor was all the patriotic phraseology penned in Britain, for we find an epitaph citing what would one day become the national anthem ("O Canada, he stood on guard for thee") and

another drawing attention to Canada's rediscovered war poets: "In years to come when time is olden, Canada's dream shall be of them."<sup>52</sup> Within the great cross-section of Canadian society represented in the epitaphs ("From a homestead, Quantock, Sask."; "Dearly beloved son of Maj. Gen. S.C. Mewburn C.M.G. Minister of Militia & Defence, Canada"),<sup>53</sup> we find faint but perceptible echoes of the trials and controversies as much

a part of Canada's experience of the Great War as the deeds of her soldiers. May we take, for instance, the many epitaphs emphasizing the soldier's voluntary enlistment or the ready acceptance of his duty ("I am going. My country needs me") as the last shots in the battle over conscription?<sup>54</sup> "Rejected four times, accepted the fifth"; "Discharged from N.Z. forces as unfit, having lost the sight of an eye. Re-enlisted at

Vancouver"<sup>55</sup> – what do these two extraordinary examples tell us about the standards for enlistment as the need for men became ever more desperate after 1916? The paucity of epitaphs in French testifies to Quebec's indifference to an English war, yet if few in number these *adieux* attest to the determination of the only French-speaking battalion in the teeming hosts of the British Empire to uphold the reputation of their people on the field of battle: "O Dieu, prenez ma vie pour Votre gloire et celle du Canada-français"; "A la fleur de l'age il sacrifia héroïquement sa vie pour son pays."<sup>56</sup> Also among the epitaphs that should spur interest in the groups which have until recently gained little purchase in the predominantly English-Canadian narrative of the war are the ones which commemorate native soldiers ("One of the many Canadian Indians who died for the Empire") and the men from non-

**The headstone of Private Victor Hugo Sorensen, a Danish volunteer "kept in loving memory by his loved ones in Denmark."**



Photograph by author.



British backgrounds (“He was the first Icelander to give his life for Canada”).<sup>57</sup>

As we move up towards the apex of the pyramid, the CEF begins to resemble the Foreign Legion. Not surprisingly, given the geographical proximity, we come upon Americans who headed “over there” by way of Canada long before April 1917. One acted on the outrage felt by Americans at an incident that nearly brought the United States into the war in 1915: “A volunteer from the U.S.A. to avenge the Lusitania murder.”<sup>58</sup> Some were students (“One of American Harvard vanguard, entering Canadian service in 1916”) motivated by the desire to help not Britain but a country much dearer to American hearts: “A citizen of the United States who fought and died for France.”<sup>59</sup> One wonders if this young man ever crossed paths with Private Victor Hugo Sørensen, one of a surprising number of soldiers identified by their inscriptions as a “Dansk frivillig” (Danish volunteer).<sup>60</sup> A handful, like Sørensen and the impressively named Count Ove Krag-Juel-Vind-Frijs,<sup>61</sup> had immigrated to Canada, yet most were Danish citizens motivated either by the strongly Francophile tendencies shown in Private Sørensen’s given names, or, as is more likely the case, by lingering anger at Bismarck’s craftily orchestrated annexation of Schleswig-Holstein in 1864 and concerns that the Kaiser’s Germany had the same regard for Danish neutrality as it did for Belgian. A handful of epitaphs in Dutch may hint that men from another traditionally neutral country bordering Germany shared these apprehensions. If the Danish and Dutch volunteers were 20 years ahead of their time, there were others whose motives to enlist in Canadian service had more to do with defeating Germany’s major ally. The epitaph of a Czech who died on active service with the Canadian Pioneers strikes the nationalistic note of a people longing to be free from

Austro-Hungarian rule: “Lehkou ti zeme Belgie chloubu matky čechie” – “May the earth of Belgium be light upon you, pride of the Czech motherland”;<sup>62</sup> that of a Serbian immigrant and volunteer leads us to shake our heads yet again at the incredible interplay of events that linked Canada in common cause with a country to which few Canadians can have given much thought before 28 June 1914: “Za otatsbinu i saveznika život svoj dao” – “For his fatherland and ally he gave his life.”<sup>63</sup>

The study of the personal inscriptions, as this paper has attempted to show, touches on subjects ranging from the broad to the particular, casting light on national, cultural, and social history, and, above all, on the myriad experiences and stories submerged within the vast depths of the Great War. “Be ashamed to die until you have gained some victory for humanity”; “Son of my heart, live for ever. There is no death for you and me”; “It is well done, Dad”<sup>64</sup> – ennobling, saddening, austere, rarely bitter, never cynical, the epitaphs cannot fail to touch the hearts of sympathetic readers; however, to return to the flight of archaeological fancy with which we opened, it has been the purpose of this paper to take the reader below the layer of emotion and expose the strata where further investigations must begin if the epitaphs are to enhance our understanding of the memory of the Great War. It is no great revelation to say that the epitaphs speak with the voice of a very different time, not of artists or writers, but of a populace in mourning. It warrants saying only to point us in the direction in which further research should proceed – back into the nineteenth century, not forward into the twentieth, led by Jay Winter and other scholars who have rightly insisted on the durability of the cultural traditions which sustained the generation faced with the mass death of the Great War, and

would sustain a following generation faced with the mass evil of the Great War’s sequel.<sup>65</sup> Only by excavating, so to speak, down to the foundation of the epitaphs, unearthing clues to the reasons behind their choice and setting them firmly in the cultural context of their time, can we hope to retain our ever attenuating link with a generation whose response to the tragedy of the war is so rich in historical and human interest.

## Notes

1. The contrast between the attitudes of one time and those of another struck one historian at Tyne Cot War Cemetery as he compared the inscriptions on the headstones with the comments in the visitors’ book; see Paul Reed, “Vestiges of War: Passchendaele revisited,” in Peter H. Liddle, ed., *Passchendaele in Perspective. The Third Battle of Ypres* (London: Leo Cooper, 1997), pp.467-78, esp. 471-72.
2. Epitaphs of Private George Brignell, 54th Battalion Canadian Infantry [CI] (Cantimpré Canadian Cemetery); Private Albert Kick, 4th Battalion CI (Sancourt British Cemetery); Private Alec Feltham, 52nd Battalion CI (Nine Elms British Cemetery).
3. Best described by David Cannadine, “War and death, grief and mourning in modern Britain,” in Joachim Whaley, ed., *Mirrors of Mortality: Studies in the Social History of Death* (London: The Stanhope Press, 1981), pp.187-242, esp. 212-17. See also Jonathan Vance, “Remembering Armageddon,” in David Mackenzie, ed., *Canada and the First World War: Essays in Honour of Robert Craig Brown* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), pp.409-33, and Alan R. Young, “We throw the torch’: Canadian Memorials of the Great War and the Mythology of Heroic Sacrifice,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 24, no.4 (Winter 1989-90), pp.5-28.
4. Philip Longworth, *The Unending Vigil: A History of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission* (Reprinted Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Pen and Sword Books, 2003); Mark Quinlan, *Remembrance* (Hertford: Authors OnLine Ltd., 2005, pp.69-153). The cemeteries in which Canada’s Great War dead are interred are the subject of Norm Christie’s projected *Sacred Places: Canadian Cemeteries of the Great War* (Ottawa: CEF Books, 2011-).
5. John Laffin, *We Will Remember Them: AIF Epitaphs of World War I* (Kenthurst, New South Wales, Australia: Kangaroo Press, 1995); Trefor Jones, *On Fame’s Eternal Camping Ground: A Study of First World War Epitaphs in the British Cemeteries of*



- the Western Front* (Trowbridge, Wiltshire: Cromwell Press, Ltd., 2007).
6. The study of the epitaphs and the standard themes of consolation which have endured in western culture from Antiquity down to the present day begins with Richmond Lattimore, *Themes in Greek and Latin Epitaphs* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1962), esp. pp.215-65, and Joshua Scodel, *The English Poetic Epitaph: Commemoration and Conflict from Jonson to Wordsworth* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).
  7. This cuts both ways, since scholars writing on the epitaphic tradition have not taken the personal inscriptions of the two world wars into consideration. They have no place, for example, in Karl Guthke's otherwise valuable study, *Epitaph Culture in the West: Variations on a Theme in Cultural History* (Lewiston-Queenston-Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2003), pp.325-58.
  8. British, Canadian, Newfoundland, Australian, and South African epitaphs would come together within this corpus. The New Zealand government forbade personal inscriptions on the grounds that not all families would be able to afford the cost involved. Though one can appreciate the egalitarian spirit of this decision, it must be reckoned a great loss to posterity that the families of New Zealand soldiers – so highly regarded for their performance in both world wars – could not add their voice to the commemoration and popular memory of the Kiwis.
  9. Jones estimates that about 45 percent of identified graves have an inscription, noting that the percentage on officers' graves is much higher since their families could afford the fee charged by the Commission (which was eventually made voluntary, but too late for poorer families who had declined to submit an inscription). The issue of cost did not affect Canadian families since the Canadian government covered the cost of inscriptions. See *On Fame's Eternal Camping Ground*, pp.11-12; Longworth, *The Unending Vigil*, p.44.
  10. Lieutenant Alfred Evans, buried in Bailleul Communal Cemetery Extension. In full it reads: "In loving memory of Lieutenant Alfred James Lawrence Evans. B.Sc. McGill. 1st Canadian Division 7th December 1915. Aged 26 years. Born at Quebec. Died of wounds received on 23rd November 1915 while in command of 1st Bde Mining Sec. 3rd Btn. front line trenches, Belgium. Mentioned in despatches for gallant and distinguished conduct in the field. 'The brave die never, being deathless they but change their country's arms for more, their country's heart.'"
  11. Private Reuben Haley, Duke of Wellington's Regiment (Puchevillers British Cemetery); Private Thomas Quinlan, Royal Warwickshire Regiment (Ration Farm Cemetery); Private William Rae, 20th Battalion Australian Infantry (Villers-Bretonneux Cemetery); Lieutenant Arthur Young, Royal Irish Fusiliers (Tyne Cot Cemetery); Sergeant William Clegg, Canadian Army Medical Corps (Bramshott Churchyard).
  12. Private Albert Ingham, Manchester Regiment, (Bailleulmont Communal Cemetery); on his execution and his father's insistence on having the details of his death inscribed on his headstone, see Cathryn Corns and John Hughes-Wilson, *Blindfold and Alone: British Military Executions in the Great War* (London: Cassell and Company, 2001), pp.256-60.
  13. The recommendations on personal inscriptions were set out by Sir Frederic Kenyon, *War Graves. How the Cemeteries Abroad Will Be Designed* (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1918) (reprinted in Quinlan, *Remembrance*, pp.245-63 (the relevant passage on pp.251-52); Rudyard Kipling, *The Graves of the Fallen* (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1919), *passim*. See also Jones, *On Fame's Eternal Camping Ground*, pp.8-14, and Laffin, *We Will Remember Them*, pp.24-27, with examples of the inscriptions suggested by the Commission.
  14. See John Morley, *Death, Heaven and the Victorians* (London: Studio Vista, 1971), pp.42-44, 52-57; Guthke, *Epitaph Culture in the West*, pp.67-81; Karen Sanchez-Eppler, "Decomposing: Wordsworth's poetry of epitaphs and English burial reform," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 42, no.4 (1988), pp.415-31.
  15. Private Alfred Cogan, Canadian Army Medical Corps (Oxford Road Cemetery).
  16. On the reading material in Ontario schools before and during the war, and the values it imparted, see the illuminating, well-judged new study by Susan Fisher, *Boys and Girls in No Man's Land: English-Canadian Children and the First World War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), pp.15-27, 51-103.
  17. Timothy Larsen, *A People of One Book: The Bible and the Victorians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp.1-8, 295-98.
  18. Private William Barnes, 19th Battalion CI (Warloy-Baillon Communal Cemetery Extension); Private James MacDonald, 1st Canadian Mounted Rifles (Menin Road South Military Cemetery); Driver Charles Maxted, Canadian Engineers (Lijssenthoek Military Cemetery); Private Alfred Blackmore, 46th Battalion CI (London Cemetery and Extension).
  19. Michelle Fowler, "Faith, Hope and Love: The wartime motivation of Lance Corporal Frederick Spratlin, MM and Bar, 3rd Battalion, CEF," *Canadian Military History* 15, no.1 (Winter 2006), pp.45-50. Lance Corporal Spratlin died on 8 August 1918, and lies buried in Toronto (Demuin) Cemetery. Given the strength of his character and convictions, the inscription on his headstone, "I died that truth and honour might live," is no empty sentiment. The evidence of the epitaphs also throws light on the religious beliefs of Great War soldiers studied by Richard Schweitzer, *The Cross and the Trenches: Religious Faith and Doubt among British and American Great War Soldiers* (Westport, CN and London: Praeger, 2003), pp.84-117, 129-39; see also Duff Crerar, *Padres in No Man's Land: Canadian Chaplains and the Great War* (Montreal-Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995), pp.161-65.
  20. Private Arthur Jones, Royal Newfoundland Regiment (Knightsbridge Cemetery).
  21. Private William McGreer, 47th Battalion CI (Cérisy-Gailly Military Cemetery). The Australian historian Bruce Scates gives an example of an epitaph rejected by the Commission ("His loving parents curse the Hun") and again when resubmitted ("With every breath we draw we curse the Germans more"); see *Return to Gallipoli: Walking the Battlefields of the Great War* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp.48-53.
  22. Private Vernon Earle, 27th Battalion CI (Lijssenthoek Military Cemetery).
  23. Private Eugene Smith, 2nd Canadian Mounted Rifles (Bouchoir New British Cemetery); Private William Harpham, 50th Battalion CI (La Chaudière Military Cemetery).
  24. Private Kenneth Neil MacDonald, 13th Battalion CI (Rue-Petillon Military Cemetery).
  25. The interpretative approaches to the *Song of Songs* in Jewish and Christian exegesis are reviewed by Marvin H. Pope in *The Anchor Bible: Song of Songs. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1977).
  26. Private Adon Smith, 87th Battalion CI (Adanac Military Cemetery); Private Emanuel Fulton, 31st Battalion CI (Passchendaele New British Cemetery).
  27. It is very striking to compare reactions to the First World War with reactions to various catastrophes in the Victorian Age. To take one example, the collapse of the Tay River Bridge in 1879 was seen as a regrettable but acceptable accident in the great march of progress. As one contemporary put it, "life is not lost which is spent or sacrificed in the grand enterprises of useful industry." See John Prebble, *The High Girders* (London: Pan Books, Ltd., 1959), p.59.
  28. Private John Wray, Lancashire Fusiliers (Authuille Military Cemetery); Sergeant Wellesley Taylor, 14th Battalion CI (Chester Farm Cemetery).
  29. Private Albert Boustead, 15th Battalion CI (Bruay Communal Cemetery Extension); Private Harrison Allen, 16th Battalion CI (Villers Station Cemetery).
  30. Private George Hargrave, 29th Battalion CI (Brussels Town Cemetery).
  31. The ideological contest of the Great War, and the issues at stake in the minds of contemporaries, are well expounded by John Bourne, "The European and International consequences of the Armistice," in Hugh Cecil and Peter Liddle, eds., *At the Eleventh Hour*.

- Reflections, Hopes and Anxieties at the Closing of the Great War, 1918* (Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Pen and Sword Books, 1998), pp.315-326. The impetus given by American churches to the notion of a Crusade for a better world has been analysed by Richard M. Gamble, *The War for Righteousness: Progressive Christianity, the Great War, and the Rise of the Messianic Nation* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2003), pp.163-79, 209ff.
32. Private Sydney Turner, 2nd Battalion CI (Fosse No.10 Cemetery); Private Reginald Aldridge, 5th Battalion CI (Bully-Grenay Communal Cemetery, British Extension).
  33. Company Sergeant-Major Arthur Dunlop, 2nd Canadian Mounted Rifles (Nine Elms British Cemetery); Captain Alexander MacGregor, 28th Battalion CI (Rosières Communal Cemetery and Extension); Private William Stanley Mills, 5th Canadian Mounted Rifles (Maple Copse Cemetery); Private William Sime, 29th Battalion CI (Adanac Military Cemetery).
  34. Private Mackie Stewart, 102nd Battalion CI (Lijssenthoek Military Cemetery); Private Alexander Dunn, 78th Battalion CI (Barlin Communal Cemetery); Lieutenant Thomas MacKinlay, 29th Battalion CI (Boulogne Eastern Cemetery).
  35. Private Charles Everett Clark, 5th Battalion CI (Maroc British Cemetery); Lieutenant Guy Drummond, 13th Battalion CI (Tyne Cot Cemetery); Private Alexander McDonald, Canadian Machine Gun Corps (Bac-du-Sud British Cemetery).
  36. Jonathan Vance, *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning, and the First World War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997), pp.35-48.
  37. Private Ernest McClelland, 1st Battalion CI (Chester Farm Cemetery).
  38. Driver Alex Henderson, Canadian Field Artillery (Etaples Military Cemetery).
  39. Lance Corporal Colin Broughton, 5th Battalion CI (Railway Dugouts Burial Ground); Private John Reid, 52nd Battalion CI (Nine Elms British Cemetery); Private Leslie Unthank, 18th Battalion CI (Ridge Wood Cemetery).
  40. Corporal William Bowyer, 7th Battalion CI (Bailleul Communal Cemetery Extension), citing Joel 2: 25; Corporal Alfred Jones, 20th Battalion CI (Ridge Wood Cemetery); Sergeant David Hunter, 102nd Battalion CI (Givenchy Road Canadian Cemetery), citing 2 Timothy 2: 12.
  41. Lieutenant William Clipperton, 8th Battalion CI (Lapugnoy Military Cemetery); Private Charles Ainslie, 8th Battalion CI (Brookwood Military Cemetery).
  42. Lieutenant Lloyd Scott, 38th Battalion CI (Bourlon Wood Cemetery).
  43. Private Hal Bowers, 47th Battalion CI (La Chaudière Military Cemetery).
  44. Private Eusèbe Loiseau, 22nd (French Canadian) Battalion (Wimereux Communal Cemetery); Private James Stickels, Royal Canadian Regiment (Contay British Cemetery); Private Arthur Goyette, 22nd (French Canadian) Battalion (Bruay Communal Cemetery Extension); Private Edward Beldam, 2nd Canadian Mounted Rifles (Tyne Cot Cemetery); Private William Bartling, 52nd Battalion CI (Canada Cemetery); Lieutenant-Colonel Elmer Jones, DSO and Bar, 21st Battalion CI (Longeau British Cemetery). It is worth noting that references to the battles of the war set the corpus of Canadian epitaphs apart from British and Australian collections, in which one finds comparatively fewer specific mentions of the engagements where the soldier lost his life.
  45. Sergeant Harold Flynn, 38th Battalion CI (Albert Communal Cemetery); Lieutenant Willoughby Chatterton, 3rd Battalion CI (Adanac Military Cemetery); Major Edward Norsworthy, 13th Battalion CI (Tyne Cot Cemetery); Corporal George Brown, Canadian Field Artillery (Brandhoek New Military Cemetery No. 3); Lieutenant Eric Lane, 85th Battalion CI (Vis-en-Artois British Cemetery).
  46. Private Mostyn Scott Sands, 28th Battalion CI (La Targette Military Cemetery).
  47. Vance, *Death So Noble*, pp.176-80; see also Paul Litt, "Canada Invaded! The Great War, Mass Culture, and Canadian Cultural Nationalism," in *Canada in the First World War*, pp.323-49, esp. 333-40.
  48. C.P. Stacey, *Canada in the Age of Conflict: A History of Canadian External Policies*. Vol.1: 1867-1921 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), p.234.
  49. 2nd Lieutenant Francis Lawledge, Royal Flying Corps (Bailleul Road East Cemetery); Private Harry Walker, 29th Battalion CI (Wulverghem-Lindenhoek Road Military Cemetery).
  50. Private Llewellyn Jones, 1st Canadian Mounted Rifles (La Targette Military Cemetery); Lance Corporal Alexander MacDonald, 72nd Battalion CI (Nine Elms British Cemetery).
  51. Private William Smith, 49th Battalion CI (Raillencourt Communal Cemetery Extension); Private Wilfrid Spicer, 2nd Canadian Mounted Rifles (Caix British Cemetery).
  52. Private Reginald Box, 16th Battalion CI (Sancourt British Cemetery); Gunner Donald McKinnon, Canadian Field Artillery (Aubigny Communal Cemetery Extension). The line is taken from a poem by Helena Coleman (1860-1953), "Autumn, 1917," which appeared in her *Marching Men: War Verses*, first published in 1917 and republished in 2008 by Dodo Press. The themes and diction of Canadian war verse would make for an interesting comparative study with the epitaphs; see Jonathan Vance, "Battle verse: Poetry and nationalism after Vimy Ridge," in Geoffrey Hayes, Andrew Iarocci, and Mike Bechthold, eds., *Vimy Ridge: A Canadian Reassessment* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2007), pp.265-77. On the resurgence of interest in Canada's war poets, see Joel Baetz, *Canadian Poetry from World War I: An Anthology* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2009).
  53. Private Ayrton Wragge, 13th Battalion CI (Puchevillers British Cemetery); Lieutenant John Mewburn, 18th Battalion CI (Courcelette British Cemetery).
  54. Private Edward Panabaker, PPCLI (Nine Elms British Cemetery).
  55. Private Charles Turner, 10th Battalion CI (Lijssenthoek Military Cemetery); Private Arthur Hackney, 29th Battalion CI (Rosières Communal Cemetery Extension).
  56. Lieutenant Joseph Hudon, 22nd (French Canadian) Battalion (Tranchée de Mecknes Cemetery); Captain Maurice Buset, 22nd (French Canadian) Battalion (Sunken Road Cemetery, Contalmaison). On the 22nd Battalion as the standard-bearer of French Canada's martial reputation, see Jean-Pierre Gagnon, *Le 22<sup>e</sup> bataillon (canadien-français) 1914-1919* (Ottawa et Québec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 1986), pp.301-307.
  57. Private Lawrence Marten, 52nd Battalion CI (Wimereux Communal Cemetery); Private Magdal Hermanson, 8th Battalion CI (Wimereux Communal Cemetery).
  58. Driver Leland Fernald, Canadian Field Artillery (Lijssenthoek Military Cemetery).
  59. Lieutenant Phillip Comfort Starr, Royal Engineers (Bedford House Cemetery); Private Roy Marshall, Canadian Army Service Corps (Lapugnoy Military Cemetery).
  60. Private Sørensen, 4th Battalion CI, is buried in Quatre-Vents Military Cemetery. His name is incorrectly rendered on his Canadian attestation paper and in the Commonwealth War Graves Commission database as "Sorenson."
  61. Buried in Kimmel Chateau Military Cemetery; his inscription in Danish would read in English: "Now my eyes are closed, Father in Heaven, and I enter the care of the world above."
  62. Private Dominick Naplava, Canadian Pioneers (Tyne Cot Cemetery).
  63. Private Chris Meti (Metič), Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry (Bois-Carré British Cemetery).
  64. Lance Corporal George Edward Pike, Royal Newfoundland Regiment (Y Ravine Cemetery); Private Hal Sutton, 5th Battalion CI (Hinges Military Cemetery); Private Richard Boughton, 21st Battalion CI (Courcelette British Cemetery).
  65. The reliance on Great War precedents in the epitaphs commemorating Canada's Second World War dead is discussed in my book, *Words of Valediction and Remembrance: Canadian Epitaphs of the Second World War* (St. Catharines: Vanwell Publishing Ltd, 2008), pp.44-54, 57-91.

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