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# History of the Silver Cross Medal

Suzanne Evans

Each year on Remembrance Day the Silver Cross medal appears in the national media pinned to the lapel of a war-bereaved woman. When the Memorial Cross, as it is formally known, became official on 1 December 1919 it was “as a memento of personal loss and sacrifice on the part of the mother and widow of a sailor or soldier of Canada or Newfoundland who laid down his life for his country.”<sup>1</sup>

Times and cultures have changed. No longer can widows be excluded from qualifying for the medal on grounds of immoral behaviour as they once were and recent recipients are not necessarily female or even family. The medal was touched by politics early in its inception but for generations it has fulfilled a fundamental need for the state to publicly show respect for the

extraordinary and tragic service of individuals and families.

The medal as originally conceived was for mothers alone. The idea was first publicized through Toronto’s *Mail and Empire*. On 22 September 1916, the paper published a letter from Canadian novelist William Alexander Fraser urging that a silver cross be struck as a tribute to the mothers of slain soldiers. In the following days and months the letter drew favourable comments and was reprinted in some of the most popular and respected publications of the day.<sup>2</sup>

Fraser brought patriotism and popular storytelling to his idea. Well-known for his novels and widely published articles he was often compared with British author Rudyard Kipling. Both, for example, wrote children’s books filled with animal characters. Canadian right down to his animals, Fraser stuck to beavers and bears although, like the author of the *Jungle Book* he had spent time in the land of lions and tigers. His work as an oil prospector had taken him far from his native Nova Scotia to Burma, India and Afghanistan.<sup>3</sup> When ill health forced him to abandon the drill, he took up the pen and made a living with words.

Fraser’s letter to the editor of the *Mail and Empire* began: “Sir, - I should like to suggest that Canada might pay a beautiful and deserved tribute to the mothers of slain Canadian

soldiers, by having struck a medal named the Silver Cross.”<sup>4</sup> He used the common phrase of the day calling the medal the badge of the mothers’ “heroic sacrifice,” but he also used his creative skill as a storyteller. He contrived a simple street scene to convey the medal’s meaning in the everyday world of a war-weary country. “Men might take off their hats when they met a woman with this medal on her breast; they could get up, even if tired, and give her a seat in a crowded car.”<sup>5</sup>

Fraser knew words alone would not bring the medal into being so he enlisted the help of Prime Minister Robert Borden. He wrote to Borden enclosing the newspaper clipping of his letter to the editor and asked

**Abstract: Each year on Remembrance Day the Silver Cross medal appears in national media imagery pinned to a bereaved woman’s lapel. The Memorial Cross, as it is formally known, was made official on 1 December 1919. It was designed as a memento for the mother and widow of a sailor or soldier killed in battle. Through the years restrictions on the gender and morality of the medal’s recipients have changed, mirroring attitudinal shifts in Canadian culture at large. Through an examination of the medal’s ninety-year history, this article will outline these changes and show how the Silver Cross has continued to honour sacrifice and military service.**

**Résumé : Chaque année, le jour du Souvenir, les médias du pays publient l’illustration de la médaille de la Croix d’argent, épinglée à la robe d’une femme endeuillée. C’est sous l’appellation de « Croix du Souvenir » que la médaille fut rendue officielle, le premier décembre 1919. Elle avait été conçue comme memento destiné à la mère ou à la veuve d’un marin ou d’un soldat mort au combat. Avec les ans, les restrictions quant au genre et à la moralité des récipiendaires ont changé, reflétant en cela l’évolution des attitudes en matière de culture au pays. Fruit de l’analyse des 90 années d’histoire de la médaille, l’article mettra en lumière ces changements et montrera comment la Croix d’argent a toujours honoré le sacrifice et le service dans les forces armées.**



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**Silver Cross mothers at Vimy**

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for “kind consideration” of the matter.<sup>6</sup> The prime Minister enthusiastically replied seven days later promising to discuss the suggestion with his colleagues. In a subsequent memorandum Borden noted it was “a wonderfully taking idea” and “ought to be gone on with at once” when it mattered the most to the mothers who had “earned such recognition.”<sup>7</sup>

### Silver Token of Pride to Replace Depressing Cloak of Black

The publication of Fraser’s idea came when women’s mourning clothes, an obvious and at times extravagant symbol of loss, had become a subject of public debate. During the war this long-time custom was questioned for the negative impact it might have on support for the war. More than a year before Fraser announced his idea for the silver cross an editorial in the *Toronto Globe* on 8 May 1915 made reference to an appeal by the National Council of Women suggesting that instead of wearing depressing black women should “wear a band of royal purple on the arm, to signify that the soldier they mourn died gloriously for his King and Country.”<sup>8</sup> Notably, the editorial was published the day after the sinking of the *Lusitania*. News of the ship being torpedoed by the Germans had reached North America just hours after the event and filled the headlines the next day. The galvanizing effect on Canadian public opinion was palpable then and for long after. Even Canadian suffragist Nellie McClung, not known for her support of the war, later admitted, “It was the *Lusitania* that brought me to see the whole truth. Then I saw that we were waging war on the very Prince of Darkness.”<sup>9</sup> In this context it is not surprising that individuals would rally their support



The Memorial Cross

for the war in a wide variety of ways including calling for mourning black to be replaced with a band the colour of royal power.

The value of mourning clothes was questioned on both sides of the ocean and, interestingly enough, of the battlefield. On 30 January 1915, three months before the *Globe* piece, the London *Times* published a report submitted by the subject of an unidentified neutral country about life in Berlin.

In the matter of mourning, it is agreed that the wearing of black can only tend to depress the spirits of those who have relatives at the front – so an association has been formed which proposes to substitute for all mourning a little scarfpin, with the inscription, “Stolz gab ich ein teures Haupt fürs Vaterland” (Proudly I gave a beloved one for the Fatherland).<sup>10</sup>

After the United States entered the war in April 1917 the New York *Times* published a suggestion made by the Women’s Committee of the Council of National Defence that mourning women wear a black band on the left arm with a gold star for each member of her family killed in the war. The Women’s Committee explained, “The wearing of such insignia will...express better than

mourning the feeling of the American people that such losses are a matter of glory rather than of prostrating grief and depression.” President Woodrow Wilson supported the idea.<sup>11</sup>

The German scarfpin, the American gold star and Fraser’s suggestion of a Canadian silver cross medal offered a way to show respect to mothers while allowing private associations or the state itself to proscribe what mourning women were wearing – shiny tokens of pride rather than depressing cloaks of black.

### For More Than Mothers

Despite the original suggestion that the medal be for mothers alone, when it was struck in 1919 both mothers and wives of soldiers killed in the war were eligible. Soldiers’ wives were among the women Borden had been politically courting prior to the election of 17 December 1917. A major plank of Borden’s Union Party platform was the highly contentious issue of conscription. In the summer prior to the election, he canvassed women’s organizations across the country to see who would support his government’s policy of conscription. He asked Mrs. F.H. Torrington, president of the National Council of Women, Mrs. L.A. Hamilton, chairman of the Women’s Section of the Win-the-War League and president of the National Equal Franchise League, and Mrs. Albert Gooderham, national regent of the Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire for help gathering this information. On 2 August 1917 these women sent telegrams to the members of their organizations asking “Would the granting of the Federal franchise to women make conscription assured at the general election?”<sup>12</sup> They stressed that this information should be gleaned “as quietly as possible”

and a response returned within the next four days. Borden got his answer back: "granting of the franchise would imperil conscription."<sup>13</sup> He was advised, however, that women related to men in the military would vote for conscription. Acting quickly on that advice the government passed the Wartime Elections Act on 20 September 1917 to extend the franchise to the female relations of those who had served or were serving in the Canadian or British military or naval forces. The act selectively increased the voter lists by approximately 500,000<sup>14</sup> – a significant number of whom were mothers, wives and widows of soldiers. With the help of these women Borden won the election.<sup>15</sup>

There is no paper trail to prove that Borden extended the eligibility criteria of the Silver Cross medal to thank the women who had helped him win the 1917 election but his gratitude could well have mixed with a desire to respect those who would suffer the most emotionally

and financially from a soldier's death. In the end extending the eligibility to widows was good politics symbolically binding an even larger group of women to the government.

### Cutting Criteria

While the criteria for recipients of the medal were extended to widows, it was done so with an interesting exception. Privy Council Order 2374 of 19 December 1919 stated that no widow who "is known to be of dissolute character" would receive the medal. The ultimate arbiter of a widow's morality was the minister of Militia and Defence. The archived files of the department concerning the Silver Cross medal give no explanation of "dissolute" behaviour nor mention any woman denied a medal because of it. To discover what moral issues the Privy Council might have been anticipating we can look at another

organization that dealt with the same group of women and similarly judged their ethical standards. The Canadian Patriotic Fund (CPF) was a government-organized private charity set up to provide financial support to soldiers' families. It worked with and supported the mothers and wives of soldiers. Women volunteers organized as Ladies' Auxiliaries took on the task of visiting families in receipt of Fund money. According to the CPF guidelines their job was merely to see that the bi-monthly cheques arrived and to make sure there were no problems.<sup>16</sup> Unfortunately the relationship between the visiting ladies and the recipients was, in the words of the CPF itself, a "tug-of-war."<sup>17</sup>

Nellie McClung provides a contemporary description of this tension in *The Next of Kin: Those Who Wait and Wonder*. Although this book, published in 1917, is described as an autobiographical novel, McClung presents herself not as the "author"

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#### Canada's Mothers Awaiting His Majesty's Arrival for Vimy Memorial Unveiling, 26 July 1936.

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but as the “historian” commissioned by Red Cross Society women to record their thoughts and feelings. If written today this book might be considered a work of creative non-fiction: truth – or as close as one can get to it – told in a literary style.

In the chapter entitled “Surprises,” McClung nicely sums up the “dissolute” behaviour of one CPF recipient. In the eyes of her neighbours and the CPF visitor the rouged-up Elizabeth Tweed known as Trixie, wife of Private William Tweed, was a disgrace for:

giving trouble to the Patriotic Society. It was bad enough for her to go out evenings with an officer, and dance in the afternoon at the hotel *dansant* in a perfect outburst of gay garments; but there was no excuse for her coming home in a taxi-cab, after a shopping expedition in broad daylight, and to the scandal of the whole street, who watched her from behind lace curtains.<sup>18</sup>

The disgrace of her sexual looseness exhibited by her dancing with a single man was only surpassed by the horror of her spendthrift nature. The one sin Mrs. Tweed managed to avoid – important when prohibition was a major social and political issue – was drunkenness. She did enjoy, however, setting a bad example and not putting up with visitors from well-meaning organizations, as McClung describes:

The D.O.E. visitor who called on all the soldiers’ wives in that block had reported that Mrs. Tweed had actually put her out, and told her to go to a region which is never mentioned in polite society except in theological discussions.<sup>19</sup>

Helen Reid, director-general of the CPF Ladies’ Auxiliaries, commented on meetings such as this but from the other side of the equation and with

purity movement active in Canada from before the war. The movement, strong among the middle and upper classes, adhered to the belief that moral perfection was essential to the survival of society. Underscoring this movement was the prevalent fear that the central institutions of society – the family, marriage and the home – were breaking down.<sup>21</sup> Historian Joan Sangster notes that during the war, when the world seemed to be falling apart, the need to protect the values of marriage and family was seen as a patriotic duty.<sup>22</sup> It was a duty, however, that could become an excuse according to McClung. No matter how good Trixie might be underneath her behaviour, her actions gave others reasons not to give money to the CPF. One virtuous woman in the story flatly stated, “That woman is not going to the devil on my money.” While another explained, “I scrimp and save and deny myself everything so I can give to the Patriotic Fund, and look at her!”

The reasons some were willing to deny CPF funding to women who behaved like Trixie would likely have been the same as for those willing to deny widows a Silver Cross. However, in the absence of any historical record of a woman being refused a medal because of her dissolute character we will never know exactly what the Privy Council feared nor why they sought to protect the reputation of the medal in this manner.

The restriction on behaviour was only placed on widows, not mothers of soldiers. Why the moral character of widows was an issue but not that of mothers can be



none of McClung’s humour. She dismissed complaints made by some wives of the intrusive nature of the home visitors and noted in her first annual report the kind of behaviour that would put a CPF applicant on her black list. “In several suspicious circumstances it has been found that the women who have applied cannot produce their marriage certificates and are unworthy applicants.”<sup>20</sup>

The CPF ladies’ auxiliaries and those who watched from behind lace curtains as well as the authors of the orders of the Privy Council were likely influenced by the social

answered by looking at how mothers of soldiers were represented. In recruitment posters, for example, they are often elderly, white-haired women in need of protection. A prime example is the poster created for the Irish Canadian Rangers Overseas Battalion, Montreal.<sup>23</sup> A woman sits in profile wearing a black dress and lace cap with the words below demanding, "Fight for Her." Although not specifically labelled "Mother" this is her most likely relationship to the potential recruit. The same image was used as a British fundraiser with the caption, "Old Age Must Come – So Prepare for it in British War Savings Certificates." This is not a woman one easily imagines dancing at a hotel in the afternoon, going on an extravagant shopping spree, or quaffing down malt whisky. Besides seemingly being too elderly for these activities, it would also have been assumed that mothers of soldiers would have, if not too old, husbands to control them.

While mothers were not restricted in their receipt of the Silver Cross based on their behaviour they were limited by their physical motherhood. Only those who had birthed the son they then mourned were eligible. The file on Silver Cross communications covering the period after the war and extending into the Second World War contains many letters pleading for the eligibility of the medal to be broadened so that foster or adoptive mothers could receive the memento. Most were poignant hand-written appeals from women with a wide range of literacy skills, but one supplicant tried a more formal tactic. This typed letter came through the office of the solicitor G.M. Bleakney on behalf of his client,

William Fry, who wanted his wife to receive the medal. His first wife had died when his son was an infant and his second wife had since cared for the boy. Bleakney argued that the departmental interpretation of mother was "fundamentally fallacious in that it seems to assume that heredity was the only contributing cause to the shaping of the character which produced, in this case, a volunteer."<sup>24</sup> Other arguments as clear and well stated as this one followed but the government's answer was the same. Any broadening of the class of those to whom the medal may be given would have the effect of "lessening the sentimental value of the Cross."<sup>25</sup>

There was one other limiting criteria set by the government for awarding the medal that was not stated in the original Privy Council order. The paper trail of this sad restriction is brief. A memorandum to the minister from Air Vice-Marshal J.A. Sully dated 4 December 1942 begins with the explanation, "Up to the present time Memorial Crosses have not been awarded to the widows and/or mothers of officers or airmen who have died from self-inflicted casualties."<sup>26</sup> Sully contended that this policy should change. The widows and mothers were innocent, he said, and often unaware of how

the soldier died. To withhold the memorial cross would be "an extreme embarrassment."<sup>27</sup> With considerable understanding and heart he argued that the personnel involved had in most cases made a great contribution to the war effort before their death and their "mental unbalance would not have occurred had the individual been living as a normal citizen."<sup>28</sup>

No response was saved in the file but we do know that the government's restrictions changed over the years. No longer were the crosses awarded just to mothers and widows of soldiers and there is no question about a widow's character whether "dissolute" or not. In 1976 a father could be awarded a Silver Cross but only if there were no mother, widow or child of the soldier. When Sergeant Marc Léger was killed on 17 April 2002 in Afghanistan his parents Claire and Richard Léger requested that they both be awarded the Memorial Cross. Claire Léger reasoned that, "Richard was just as involved in bringing up Marc as I was."<sup>29</sup> At that point the government was not ready to reflect cultural changes in gender roles. But the ground soon shifted when Captain Nichola Goddard, Canada's first female combat soldier to be killed in battle, died in Afghanistan

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**Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II, greets members of the Silver Cross Women of Canada Remembrance Association during her Royal Visit of 1959.**



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**Left: Captain Nichola Goddard, the first Canadian female combat soldier to be killed in battle, died in Afghanistan on 17 May 2006. Her husband, Jason Beam, was awarded the Silver Cross by a special Order-in-Council. Here, Her Excellency the Right Honourable Michaëlle Jean, governor general and commander in chief of Canada, presents Mr. Beam with a posthumous Sacrifice Medal awarded to Captain Goddard. The Sacrifice Medal was created to provide a tangible and lasting form of recognition for the members of the Canadian Forces and those who work with them who have been wounded or killed by hostile action and to Canadian Forces members who died as a result of service.**



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**Middle left: Her Excellency the Right Honourable Michaëlle Jean, governor general and commander in chief of Canada, and this year's National Silver Cross Mother, Mrs. Wilhelmina Beerenfenger-Koehler, stand together on the dias as the parade marches past for the National Remembrance Day Ceremony at the National War Memorial in Ottawa, 11 November 2007. Mrs. Beerenfenger-Koehler's son, the late Corporal Robbie Christopher Beerenfenger, was killed near Kabul, Afghanistan in October 2003.**

**Middle left: Mrs. Beerenfenger-Koehler places a wreath at the National War Memorial.**

**Opposite page: Commemorative stamp showing Silver Cross in centre, issued on the occasion of the opening of the new Canadian War Museum, 2005.**



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on 17 May 2006. By a special Order-in-Council her husband Jason Beam was awarded the medal. The criteria for recipients were then extended by a Privy Council order in 2008 retroactive to 1 October 2007.<sup>30</sup> Soldiers are now asked to choose up to three names of anyone they would like the medal to be sent to in the event of their death.

Neither females nor family have a hold on grief over a loved one's death. Whether at home or in the field all can suffer from the shock caused by warfare. The Royal Canadian Legion selects one Silver Cross woman each year to represent all recipients in a



variety of activities, most notably for Remembrance Day. She stands second only to the Crown and ahead of the government as she lays her wreath at the cenotaph. When it is a mother, the symbolism points to our past and when, one day, it is a man, he will reflect the shifting gender roles in how we raise our children, who fights in the name of Canada and how we grieve our soldiers.

When William Alexander Fraser died in 1933, his obituary, by chance published on Remembrance Day, noted that the famous novelist was remembered as much for his writing as for his "sympathetic imagination" that gave rise to what was considered then and is yet today thought of as the mother's Silver Cross.<sup>31</sup>

In a scene much like Fraser's imaginary one of 1916, Silver Cross mother Wilhelmina Beerenfenger-Koehler of Embrun, Ontario experienced an emotional display of respect in 2008. Four years after the death of her son Corporal Rob Beerenfenger on 2 October 2003 in Afghanistan she was chosen to be the national Silver Cross mother. She recalled a moment in an otherwise ordinary day not long after Remembrance Day. "I was sitting at [Ottawa's] Hurdman bus station waiting for my bus and this woman came up and stopped dead in front of me and said 'You're her! You're the Silver Cross mother!' She started to cry and hugged me."<sup>32</sup>

## Notes

1. PC 2374 of 1 December 1919.
2. *Toronto Mail and Empire*, "Heroine of the Trenches," 22 September 1916. The letter was subsequently published in the *Toronto Star*, "Cross For Mothers: Suggestion by Canadian Author, W.A. Fraser," 23 September 1916 and reported on in *The Globe*, "A War Cross for Mothers," 21 October 1916, p. 6 and in *Everywoman's World*, "Silver Cross for Bereaved Mothers," December 1916, p. 3.
3. For biographical details on W.A. Fraser see: Eugene Benson and William Toye,



eds., *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature*, (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1997); *Who Was Who Among North American Authors, 1921-1939*, (Detroit: Gale Research Co., 1976); Clara Thomas, *Canadian Novelists, 1920-1945* (Toronto: Longmans, Green, 1945); W. Stewart Wallace, ed., *The Macmillan Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1978); Norah Story, *The Oxford Companion to Canadian History and Literature* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1967); W. Stewart Wallace, *A Dictionary of North American Authors Deceased Before 1950* (Detroit: Gale Research Co., 1968).

4. *Toronto Mail and Empire*, "Heroine of the Trenches," 22 September 1916.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Library and Archives Canada (LAC), Robert Laird Borden, MG 26H, Vol.213.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Globe*, "When Bowed Head is Proudly Held," 8 May 1915, p.10.
9. McClung, *The Next of Kin: Those Who Wait and Wonder* (Toronto: Thomas Allen, 1917), p. 15.
10. Quoted in Lou Taylor, *Mourning Dress: A Costume and Social History* (London: George Allen, 1983), pp.269-70.
11. *The New York Times*, "President Approves War Mourning Bands," 26 May 1918, p.18.
12. *Globe*, "Women Sounded on Franchise," 22 September 1917, p.10.
13. Gloria Geller, "The Wartimes Election Act of 1917 and the Canadian Women's Movement," *Atlantis* 2 (1976), p.102.

14. Elections Canada. *A History of the Vote in Canada* (Office of the Chief Electoral Officer of Canada, 2007), p.67.
15. This was not Borden's only ploy used to ensure victory. The Military Voters Act gave the vote to nurses serving in the military – a group also likely to support conscription. Many who had the vote were disenfranchised by the new legislation such as conscientious objectors and those born in enemy countries that had come to Canada after 1902.
16. Philip H. Morris, *The Canadian Patriotic Fund: its objects, methods and policy*. (Ottawa: The Fund, 1915), p.10.
17. *The Canadian Patriotic Fund: A Message to the Canadian Soldier's Wife*. 1915, p.2.
18. Nellie McClung, *The Next of Kin: Those Who Wait and Wonder* (Toronto: Thomas Allen, 1917), p.71.
19. *Ibid.*
20. Quoted in Desmond Morton, *Fight or Pay: Soldiers' Families in the Great War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2004), p.112.
21. For a description of the purity movement and its implications in state control see: James G. Snell, "'The White Life for Two': The Defence of Marriage and Sexual Morality in Canada, 1890-1914," *Histoire sociale - Social History* 16, no.31 (mai-May 1983): pp.111-28 and John P.S. McLaren, "Chasing the Social Evil: Moral Fervour and The Evolution of Canada's Prostitution Laws, 1867-1917," *CJLS/RCDs* 1 (1986), pp.125-165.
22. Joan Sangster, "Mobilizing Women for War," in David Mackenzie, ed., *Canada and the First World War: Essays in Honour of Robert Craig Brown* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), p.175.
23. Recruitment poster for the Irish Canadian Rangers Overseas Battalion, Montreal CWM 19830224-029
24. LAC Honours and Awards and Special Commendations – Memorial Cross Vol. 2221 File 54-27-94-6
25. *Ibid.*
26. LAC Honours and Awards Honours for Next of Kin of Casualties – Memorial Cross Vol. 24664 File 386-5 Pt.1
27. *Ibid.*
28. *Ibid.*
29. Author's Interview with Claire Léger, 19 October 2008.
30. PC 2008-1924 of 12 December 2008.
31. *The Globe*, "Noted Novelist, W.A. Fraser Dies," 11 November 1933, p.4.
32. Author's Interview with Wilhelmina Beerenfenger-Koehler. 15 November 2008.

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