

7-6-2015

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Recommended Citation

Craig Leslie Mantle (2015) "A Symbolic Return of Communitas William MacDonnell's Modernizing Mostar," *Canadian Military History*: Vol. 24: Iss. 1, Article 13.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh/vol24/iss1/13>

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CANADIAN WAR MUSEUM

A Symbolic Return of *Communitas*

William MacDonnell's *Modernizing Mostar*

CRAIG LESLIE MANTLE

Abstract: William MacDonnell's Modernizing Mostar, painted in 2001, is a potent metaphor for the wars of ethnicity and culture that swept much of the former Yugoslavia in the immediate post-Cold War years. A relatively recent addition to the Canadian War Museum's collection of war art, it depicts a temporary metal footbridge, a potential aid to reconciliation and healing, which was erected on the same spot where the Old Bridge once stood. Completed in 1566, the latter structure connected the different peoples of Mostar, Bosnia-Herzegovina, until it was destroyed in 1993 as a result of civil war.

Résumé: L'œuvre de William MacDonnell intitulée Modernizing Mostar, créée en 2001, est une métaphore puissante des guerres ethniques et culturelles qui ont dévasté une grande partie de l'ex-Yougoslavie dans les années qui ont suivi la Guerre froide. Récemment ajouté à la collection d'art militaire du Musée canadien de la guerre, ce tableau représente une passerelle métallique temporaire, une aide potentielle à la réconciliation et à la guérison, qui fut érigée à l'endroit où se tenait l'ancien pont. Ce pont, terminé en 1556, reliait les différents peuples de Mostar, en Bosnie-Herzégovine, jusqu'à sa destruction en 1993 pendant la guerre.

AT FIRST GLANCE, the reason behind the inclusion of William MacDonnell's 2001 painting *Modernizing Mostar* (CWM 20110001-001) in the Canadian War Museum's (CWM) collection of war art is not readily apparent. It does not include standard Canadian military iconography or easily identifiable individuals, it does not



An early German postcard depicting the Old Bridge, or *Stari Most*, in Mostar. Interestingly, the perspective adopted in both the postcard and the later painting is nearly identical. [Author's collection]

recount well-known Canadian triumphs, struggles or failures, and it does not clearly speak to Canadian national themes. In fact, there is nothing that is obviously Canadian about it. If it was removed from its immediate surroundings and displayed elsewhere, thus depriving it of context and the suggestion that it should be viewed as war art, its classification as such might seem tenuous at best, even impossible. Depicting an odd-looking structure and some dilapidated buildings in a place that is certainly not Canada, its relevance can initially be elusive.

Deemed cultural property in June 2012 by the Canadian Cultural Property Review Board because of its “outstanding significance and national importance,” the painting depicts the temporary bridge at Mostar that United Nations (UN) peacekeepers erected to replace the Old Bridge, or *Stari Most*, that was destroyed during the ethnic conflict between Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims) and Croats that swept Bosnia-Herzegovina in the early 1990s. *Modernizing Mostar* laments the loss of this world treasure and offers a powerful metaphor for the wars of disintegration that followed the end of the Cold War and affected the former Yugoslavia. What happened to a symbolically important bridge likewise happened to a country. Of importance, it

also documents a theatre of operations in which tens of thousands of Canadian military personnel served at various times over the course of two decades. In a way, therefore, all members of the Canadian Forces that deployed to the region, even if their service did not take them to Mostar specifically, have at least a tangential connection to this work and its embedded messages.

THE ARTIST

William MacDonnell was born in Winnipeg, Manitoba in 1943. His father served in the Royal Canadian Air Force in communications, and as a result, the family moved frequently. As a young man, he studied at the University of Manitoba, first earning a Bachelor of Science in 1966 and then a Bachelor of Fine Arts in 1977. Shortly afterwards, in 1979, he earned a Master of Fine Arts from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax. While working toward his first degree, in chemistry, he belonged to the Canadian Officers' Training Corps and later served briefly as a reserve officer with the Royal Canadian Corps of Signals. A teacher for some twenty-five years, he taught painting and art history at the Alberta College of Art and Design in Calgary. MacDonnell travelled overseas twice as a war artist to document Canadian military activity, first to Croatia in August 1994 as a guest of the 1st Battalion, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry (1 PPCLI), and then to Afghanistan in April and May 2007 under the auspices of the Canadian Forces Artists Program. He was elected a member of the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts in 1998 and later received a Canada Council Senior Artist Grant in 2001.

A prolific painter who has exhibited both in Canada and internationally, his work was recently included in two travelling CWM exhibitions, *A Brush with War: Military Art from Korea to Afghanistan* (January 2009 to December 2012) and *Canvas of War: Masterpieces from the Canadian War Museum* (February 2000 to January 2005). Of note, his was the only post-1945 painting included in the latter exhibition; the curator wished to convey the idea that the Second World War was not the definitive end of war art in Canada and that the story of artists recording military activity would indeed go on, as it has much to our national enrichment. His work has been

featured on the covers of numerous publications such as *Descant* (a Toronto-based literary magazine) and *Canadian Military History*.

Much of MacDonnell's *oeuvre* explores his deep interest in history and its relationship to both society's collective memory and the landscape. His work is concerned with how history is either selectively remembered or forgotten. Because of this, he often paints the aftermath of conflict, rather than the immediate moment, in order to explore the complexities of memory. What his paintings lack in activity, as compared to other war art that is often filled with action, he more than makes up for in quiet poignancy. To get at the mysteries of his subject, he often travels to places of historical importance to view first-hand what impact conflict has had—from the streets of Berlin to the jungles of Vietnam, from the brush of Rwanda to the countryside of France. His paintings are, therefore, both broad in content and international in flavour. In his own words:

The method is generally to visit and record the places where the historical events of the 20th century occurred, but where it is rarely commemorated officially, or at least seldom visited[,] and sometimes the places which are deliberately forgotten. The paintings which result depict these sites as historically active but unpeopled, places which were seen as sites of heroism or tragedy but with changing time can be seen only as ironic.

His continuing preference is for ruins of this type, rather than for ruins that are more romantic in nature like those that date from either classical Greece or ancient Rome.

THE BRIDGE

In 1994, MacDonnell answered an “artist wanted” advertisement at the Alberta College of Art and Design. On behalf of the PPCLI's Regimental Heritage Committee, Lieutenant-Colonel (Retired) Bill Bewick, a former soldier of thirty-two years and an aspiring artist himself, had advertised for someone who could record through art what the regiment was doing overseas as part of the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR). This undertaking was an entirely private affair and was not in any respect associated with the then-current art program, the Canadian Armed Forces Civilian Artists

Program. Together in August, MacDonnell, Bewick and Danielle Ethier, an art student, travelled to the Krajina, a self-proclaimed Serb state in Croatia. As might be expected, visiting a war in progress was unsettling. He remembered, "There was first a sense of unreality. We'd flown into a perfectly modern airport in Zagreb. Then the drive past town after town. All bombed or shelled and in complete ruin." Over the next ten days, MacDonnell "just followed soldiers around," taking photographs that would serve as the starting point for his paintings. He did not, like some war artists, paint *in situ*—think here, for instance, Charles Comfort at Ortona, Italy during the Second World War—but rather preferred to paint in his studio what he had first captured on film overseas. His photographs of interesting subjects were not taken haphazardly, but were rather "framed," much like a painting would be, in order to facilitate the transition between the two media. Commonly available postcards, which also provided attractive perspectives, sometimes served a similar purpose as his photographs.

Although the trio planned to travel to Sarajevo, the war prevented their journey. He remembered, "Sarajevo was still under siege. We were supposed to fly into Sarajevo, but they were shooting up the airport." Frustrated that he could not see the city where only a short time ago Major-General Lewis MacKenzie had forged his reputation, MacDonnell returned to Canada and duly produced a series of fifteen paintings that depicted Canadian peacekeeping activity in Croatia. The collection was shown at the CWM as a solo exhibition in June 1996. Throughout these works, MacDonnell included the names of "watcher angels" in the sky. As he recalled, "I titled the whole series *The Grigori Series*, the *Grigori* being watcher angels. And it seemed to be the perfect metaphor for what the United Nations was doing there. Simply by watching certain places, bad things didn't happen in those places, not always but quite often." Taken from ancient Hebrew literature, specifically the Book of Enoch, the *Grigori* angels observed, and were thus witnesses to, human activity. Personally, he felt a connection to these spirits and saw in his own role something similar, "The Grigori or watcher angels hopefully represent another metaphor for the artist as a detached observer. As the writer or journalist knows, just paying attention can change the course of events." The CWM holds two paintings from this series, the 1994 *Sappers Clearing A Deadfall* (CWM 19970054-002) and the 1995 *The Wall* (CWM 19970054-001).



Sappers Clearing a Deadfall by William MacDonnell (1995). [Canadian War Museum 19970054-002]

MacDonnell was intensely disappointed that he could not visit Sarajevo when he was a guest of the PPCLI. As he mused, “Nothing makes one want to go somewhere more than being told that you can’t go.” Happily, his opportunity came later, between May and November 1999. Travelling independently in the region, his trip took him to Sarajevo, then to Dubrovnik, with a stopover in Mostar. MacDonnell later recalled:

I knew something of the bridge and the city [of Mostar], and it seemed to entail a great deal of the symbolism which helped to understand the conflict. I spent several days wandering both sides of the river, photographing war damage and trying to be fairly inconspicuous. The bridge, once a great tourist attraction, was, of course, the centerpiece. Even in its destroyed state the buttresses were most impressive. By this time a light metal footbridge had been built by UN troops ... some of whom were still in the area.

He visited Mostar as a tourist, not as an artist. Essentially, “I wanted to see what had become of the bridge.” MacDonnell was

more intent on satisfying his curiosity than actively seeking a subject for yet another painting. Much of what he had recorded in Sarajevo would serve that latter purpose all too well. Struck by what he saw, or rather by what he did not, he abandoned the idleness of a passive visitor and resolved to record his impressions on canvas.

Under the supervision of the Turkish architect Hajrudin, the original Old Bridge at Mostar was finished in 1566 on the orders of Suleiman I, the Magnificent, the tenth Sultan of the Ottoman Empire. A white limestone arch that towered above the beautiful teal-blue waters of the River Neretva connected Muslims with Christians, in effect linking East with West. At the time, and for centuries afterward, the bridge united the inhabitants of Mostar and indeed their cultures as well. Such unity, however, did not last. After a calculated artillery barrage on 9 November 1993, fired by the Croats on the left bank, the bridge gave way around mid-morning and quickly tumbled into the waters below. An icon disappeared in an instant. For many, the loss of this cultural treasure symbolised the passing of a multi-ethnic, multi-denominational Bosnia-Herzegovina. About the loss, one observer pointedly recorded:

We expect people to die. We count on our own lives to end. The destruction of a monument to civilization is something else. The bridge, in all its beauty and grace, was built to outlive us; it was an attempt to grasp eternity. Because it was the product of both individual creativity and collective experience, it transcended our individual destiny.

Canadians too lamented the wanton destruction of the bridge and both the internal and external fragmentation that it symbolised; not only was Mostar falling apart, so was the region. Lieutenant-Colonel (Retired) William R. Aikman, once a public affairs officer with UNPROFOR, admitted later that the loss of “one of the great works of art of the area” was nothing short of a “great tragedy.” And certainly, the fighting did not revolve solely around the bridge. Much of Mostar and the surrounding environs was “badly blown up” in the estimation of Master Corporal Rob Calhoun, a soldier with the 2nd Battalion, The Royal Canadian Regiment Battle Group. In MacDonnell's own opinion, the destruction of the Old Bridge was “a real tragedy, quite apart from the loss of life and the terrible war itself, but to destroy a piece of architecture seemed to bother a lot of people almost more than the human carnage.”

In time, UN peacekeepers erected a temporary light metal footbridge, a symbolic act in itself of the UN's impartiality and desire to facilitate peace, and more important, of potential reconciliation and healing between the warring sides; it is this bridge that is shown in MacDonnell's painting. The stone bridge was gradually rebuilt too, a new Old Bridge as it were, and in 2005 the "Old Bridge Area of the Old City of Mostar" was listed on the UNESCO World Heritage List. And there is a Canadian connection to the story as well. After the bridge collapsed, Major Jane Thelwell, a Canadian engineer, helped salvage as much of the original stone as possible so that it could be put back into position and once again serve as a link between the river banks and their peoples.

For MacDonnell, "Bridges, the notion of crossing over, their destruction and reconstruction, seemed to me to be the strongest and most hopeful metaphor for the conflict." What was once physically united was violently divided but would become physically united once again, although not necessarily in its precise original form. The bridge metaphor applied not only to the conflicts that swept parts of Eastern Europe following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Communist bloc more broadly, but also to Mostar itself. How easily and completely the inhabitants of the city would associate with their former neighbours and enemies in the aftermath of the war was another matter altogether. Such emotional reconnection may have been more difficult given the hatred that fuelled the conflict and led to unspeakable atrocities, both human and cultural, but at least the bridge was a symbol of reconciliation and a means by which members of one side could, if they were so inclined, peacefully travel to the other in a spirit of détente.

Returning to Canada from his second trip to the former Yugoslavia, MacDonnell began work on yet another series of paintings, this one titled *If You Can See The Hills...*, an oft-quoted phrase in Sarajevo that ends, "...the hills can see you." *Modernizing Mostar* was the largest work of the collection and, indeed, the centerpiece.

THE PAINTING

The painting itself is massive. At eight-and-a-half by eleven feet, and comprised of two individual segments that must be bolted together, *Modernizing Mostar* is an impressive and overwhelming composition.

Because of its size, if approached close enough, it has an immersive quality that makes one feel present at the bridge in person. A smaller study at five-and-a-half square feet that likewise dates from 2001 also exists, but is not owned by the CWM. Incidentally, many of MacDonnell's works are large since a standard roll of canvas, at six feet in width, is commonly employed; his particular size preference dates to his days in art school when he aped the abstract paintings of the time, many of which were of considerable dimension.

At centre, a temporary bridge skirts across the canvas and is naturally the focal point. Being painted from a slightly oblique angle, the bridge can be seen to connect the buildings on the right bank, which are plainly evident, to those on the left bank, which must to a certain extent be imagined. MacDonnell chose to orient the painting in this fashion simply because it offered the best view and perspective of the area where the Old Bridge once stood. The base of an arch both near the large tree and directly opposite it indicate the position, and suggest the form of, the original stone bridge that straddled the river. A mosque's minaret at extreme right underscores the ethnic and religious overtones of the conflict, as does the obvious damage to one of the more imposing buildings. Owing to the absence of people and visible activity throughout—a recurring feature of MacDonnell's style—the scene is quiet and tranquil, idyllic even, yet it belies the human and cultural tragedy that occurred there only a short time ago. The platform that Thelwell placed stones upon during her salvage efforts is depicted in the absolute centre of the painting and can be seen through the structure of the footbridge itself, although its precise details are somewhat indistinguishable. The lush and vibrant colours used throughout, evoking ideas of life and growth, similarly stand in visual counterpoint to the city's recent history.

The empty yet clean *café*, with its pergola and curved wall, is intriguing. While it could certainly be viewed as a symbol of loss and absence, the conflict having claimed the lives of so many that few are now left to enjoy the space, it could also be seen as a symbol of renewal and promise, ready to once again cater to patrons and their fancies as they watch the foot traffic cross the bridge. Given the overall theme and message of the painting, the second is a somewhat more attractive interpretation. The upright chairs and cloth-covered tables that wait in anticipation of use, both of which must have been recently prepared given their neat and orderly appearance, reinforce such a perspective.



William MacDonnell's *Modernizing Mostar*, painted in 2001. [Canadian War Museum 2011.0001-001]

All of the above is set against a ruggedly mountainous, yet picturesque, background. Within the dirty white sky, the names of *Grigori*, such as Sariel, Penemue, and Armaros, are stenciled on the canvas; like an avalanche, they generally follow the contour of the mountain's outline downward. Such elements—the unique colour of the sky and angelic references—appear in MacDonnell's earlier works that draw on his time in Croatia, that is to say, *The Grigori Series*. He reused the *Grigori* motif again in *Modernizing Mostar* because he had been unable to find another “perfect example of a kind of hidden witness” that would serve an identical symbolic purpose as the angels.

And finally, the painting is also one of stark contradiction. A profound sadness permeates the image given the loss of the Old Bridge. What had stood for more than 400 years through many of the world's greatest historical events was destroyed in a mere blink of an unthinking eye. Yet, happiness and renewed promise are also pervasive for the temporary bridge has physically reconnected the opposite banks. Reconciliation and the creation of a new future are, at the very least, suggested.

FINAL THOUGHTS

William MacDonnell's *Modernizing Mostar*, in which little artistic license was taken, throws light on a bridge, a city, a country, and a region at a time of profound transition. The Old Bridge was a monumental achievement of engineering and craftsmanship, and for these reasons, was easily identifiable, popular amongst tourists, and a cultural treasure of global significance; the same might also be said of the new Old Bridge, steeped as it is in tragic history. Yet the light footbridge that was temporary and wholly insufficient—the transition between the two stone bridges—is perhaps the most important of the three structures that occupied the area. Being more functional than aesthetic, it symbolised so much: the eventual return of a permanent structure, the gradual creation of a new normalcy in whatever form that might happen to take, the arduous process of healing, and perhaps most important of all, hope for the future. Had MacDonnell visited Mostar and saw either of the stone bridges, it is doubtful whether his resulting painting, if he even chose to paint one at all, would have encapsulated the same symbolism and meaning as his masterful *Modernizing Mostar*.¹



The Canadian War Museum is currently planning an upgrade to the latter portion of *Gallery 4: A Violent Peace: The Cold War, Peacekeeping, and Recent Conflicts, 1945 to the Present*. The section that deals with recent deployments—the Persian Gulf, Somalia, Rwanda, Yugoslavia

¹ Primary sources used in this article include: CWM Oral History Program, 31D 8 and 31D 15, William W. MacDonnell, and 31D 6, William R. Aikman; CWM acquisition file AQN 20110001; CWM artist file (W.W. MacDonnell), 3 vols.; and CWM Corporate Records, 2007-020 #1 and 2013-011 #1. Secondary sources used include Michael Ignatieff, "When A Bridge Is Not A Bridge," *New York Times Magazine* (27 October 2002); Slavenka Drakulić, "Falling Down," *New Republic* 209 (24), 13 December 1993, 14–15; Jennifer Morse, "Canada's War Art William MacDonnell," *Legion Magazine* 83 (May/June 2008), 56–57; Nancy Tousley, "Focus on William MacDonnell," *Canadian Art* (Winter 1989), 88; Dick Avers, "The Vanguard War Art of William MacDonnell," *Canadian Art* (Fall 2006), 116–119; Carol J. Williams, "Bosnia's Hopes Fall With Historic Bridge in Mostar," *Los Angeles Times* (12 November 1993); Randy Adams, "War (Peace) Artists – Three Alberta artists confront the realities of Croatia," *Bridge* (October 1994), 8; and Sean M. Maloney and John Llambias, *Chances for Peace – Canadian Soldiers in the Balkans, 1992–1995 – An Oral History* (St. Catharines: Vanwell, 2002).

and Afghanistan—will receive particular attention. *Modernizing Mostar* is being considered for inclusion in the Museum's permanent exhibition as part of this improvement.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

When this article was written, **Dr. Craig Leslie Mantle** was the acting post-1945 historian at the Canadian War Museum. He is the principal editor of *In Their Own Words: Canadian Stories of Valour and Bravery from Afghanistan, 2001–2007*, a collection of first-person narratives from 23 Canadian soldiers who received some of the nation's highest honours for their actions during the mission in South-West Asia.

I should like to thank Mr. Bill MacDonnell of Kingston, Ontario, and Dr. Laura Brandon and Dr. Andrew Burtch, both of the Canadian War Museum, for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this article.