An Empty Grave: Grief and Mourning on the Canadian Home Front in the First World War

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master thesis

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An Empty Grave: Grief and Mourning on the Canadian Home Front in the First World War

by

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Abstract

The onset of the First World War forced significant changes to rituals surrounding death and to beliefs surrounding what constituted a “good death.” This thesis examines those changes brought to mourning rituals in Canada as a result of the massive number of deaths that occurred throughout the First World War, while arguing that the battlefield nature of death, the absence of the body of the deceased, and the inability of loved ones to access the graves of the fallen was at the center of these changes. The inability of Canadians to conduct traditional rituals which were dependent on the presence of the dead body of their loved ones, meant that it was difficult to accept the reality of those deaths. The absence of the body of the deceased, and the inability to perform rituals surrounding it, also meant that many bereaved Canadians struggled to process their losses and attain closure. The First World War changed the nature of consolation because without the bodies of the deceased, people did not gather to comfort the bereaved, instead providing their condolences through letters which often offered comfort by revering the dead and sharing precious memories. Canadians found new ways to process their grief and console the bereaved by creating myths which involved employing the language of sacrifice while performing various acts of commemoration, all of which has crafted the way the war, and those who fought and fell, have been remembered since.
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For the thousands of fallen Canadians who gave up their everything and endured the worst

so that we could have today.

and

For my family: Todd, Justin, Zoe, and Ava.

You inspire me every day!
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Introduction

Perhaps the most feared sight for families in Canada, Newfoundland, and Britain in the First World War was the sight of the bicycle messenger - a girl or boy coming through the front gate of a residence with the tell-tale yellow slip of paper that would change the recipients’ lives forever. On one hand, the waiting would be over, on the other, the grieving would begin. This was a grieving to be done in the private sphere – away from the view of prying but well-meaning eyes. There was no body to wash and dress, there were no visitations to be held, no vigil over the body, no funeral to be attended, and no grave to visit. Instead, the family would be expected to compartmentalize their grief and make a show of strength, lest the morale of those sons on their way to the front, and those families and friends left behind be shaken by earth shattering outpourings of public grief.

The First World War marked an era of significant change in the way that people experienced loss and grief. The war itself was unusual for the sheer and unexpected volume of death and the toll it took on almost every nation in the world. It is often said that the best of a generation was completely lost, and given the magnitude of the losses suffered by each combatant nation of its youth, it is understandable that each nation undertook its own search for meaning and justification for that loss. It is reasonable to assume that every battle engaged throughout the course of history has led to a certain amount of reflection and justification, especially by those who sacrificed a son, husband, father, brother, lover, or friend. The First World War was an unexpectedly long and drawn-out war of attrition that left more than one nation traumatized and looking to find a way to cope with a massive amount of death experienced by the combatants. It was also the first war where the focus of commemoration
shifted from generals and officers to every individual fallen soldier, regardless of rank or social standing.¹

Canada was not unique in its losses, yet its losses were unique to the society that found itself located somewhere in-between its largely British customs and traditions and its distinctly Canadian experience. The Canadian experience of loss in the Great War is the subject of this Master’s Thesis, and therefore this thesis will examine the topic of death on the battlefield and the resulting reactions on the home front, including mourning, commemoration, and the construction of new rituals of remembrance.

The end of the Victorian era and the beginning of the Edwardian era saw a great deal of change in the way that Britons and, by extension, Canadians regarded the end of a life and the way that they mourned that end.² Gone were the days of extravagant funerals and elaborate mourning customs. Instead, such rituals were performed in a much more subdued manner. One thing that did not change was the importance of the physical presence of the body of the deceased in such rituals. The body of the deceased was still washed, dressed, laid out, and visited. The body of the deceased was still carried to the church, prayed over ceremoniously, and then quietly and respectfully carried to the grave – its final place of rest – the soul having been committed unto God. Relatives could go visit the grave of a loved one after church on Sunday and place flowers or other small tokens on anniversaries or when such compulsion arose. The First World War quickly interrupted these rituals for families whose loved ones died at the front. Suddenly, the bereaved found themselves without access to the dead body of their loved one.

² Though Newfoundland did not join Confederation until 1949, soldiers from Newfoundland fought alongside Canadians and Britons and were part of the Empire’s fighting forces. Because of Newfoundland’s physical proximity to Canada, and its shared affiliation with Britain (many citizens of Newfoundland came from Britain), I use the term “Canadians” to encompass those living in Canada and Newfoundland throughout the First World War.
This lack of access to the body of the deceased is the key element that changed the way that Canadians mourned their losses. In her article, “Victorian death and its decline: 1850-1918,” Pat Jalland captures the magnitude of this absence when she writes:

Without seeing the body of their soldier-son or participating in his funeral, bereaved families could find the reality of death almost impossible to accept. Even where bodies were recovered and buried behind the trenches, relatives could be haunted by ‘the most terrible recurring nightmares that he had not been killed but was lost somewhere, insane and helpless.’³

In reality, the body of the fallen had become the property of the nation and was used by the nation to justify the sacrifices made.

In Canada, owing to the distance of the battlefields, correspondence to and from loved ones could be significantly delayed, causing increased anxiety.⁴ When a soldier fell, loved ones often received a somewhat cold and perfunctory notification.⁵ Then what? There was really nothing to be done but to wonder. How did the death occur? Was the death quick? Did their loved one suffer? Were they alone? Did they get last rites? And what of the body? Where is he buried? Did he have a funeral? Who was present? Who gave the final prayers? Where is his final resting place? What does it look like? And what of the missing? These are all important questions which will be addressed in this thesis, both from the battlefield and the home front. In this thesis I argue that the First World War brought significant and permanent changes to rituals surrounding death, and that the battlefield nature of death, the absence of the body of the deceased, and the inability of loved ones to access the graves of the fallen was at the center of these changes. The inability of Canadians to conduct traditional rituals which were dependent on

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the presence of the dead body of their loved ones, meant that it was difficult to accept the reality of those deaths. The absence of the dead body and the rituals surrounding it meant that many bereaved Canadians struggled to process their losses and attain closure. In response to the massive number of deaths throughout the First World War, Canadians found new ways to process their grief and console the bereaved by creating myths which involved employing the language of sacrifice while performing various acts of commemoration, all of which has crafted the way the war, and those who fought and fell, have been remembered since. These myths were carefully constructed by Canadians at all levels of society to justify the sacrifices being made, including the massive loss of lives at the front. To admit that Canadians were sending their men off to be slaughtered in horrific and unimaginable ways, would have been unbearable without the creation of myths which framed those sacrifices and deaths in a way which cast them in a noble, patriotic, and holy light.

The First World War changed the nature of consolation because without the bodies of the deceased, people did not gather to comfort the bereaved, instead providing their condolences through letters which often offered comfort by revering the dead while sharing precious memories. That so many people kept letters and keepsakes in memory of their fallen loved ones speaks to the value that was given to these items and the cherished memories they held. Letters and keepsakes were all that many families had left, and some were left with little more than the name of their loved ones and the memories it provoked.

The First World War took a specific element of class out of dying and mourning. In many ways it was the great equalizer. Rich, middle-class, working-class, or poor, soldiers on the battlefield died the same way, were buried where they fell, or were lost altogether. As the war drew on, officers and “other ranks” were eventually buried together and commemorated together regardless of social class or military rank. Joanna Bourke, in her extensive study, *Dismembering*
the Male: Men’s Bodies, Britain, and the Great War, observes that “the Great War prompted a revulsion from the celebratory nature of burial, encouraged great simplicity in mourning customs and stimulated a move towards personal hygienic practices (as opposed to the public health-hygiene arguments earlier in the century).”⁶ Regardless of social class, for all families in Canada who experienced loss, and almost all did in some way, the name of the fallen became central to the mourning process and to the process of commemoration which represented a focus on the personal and collective experiences of grief.

Chapter one of this thesis examines the pre-war rituals of death and mourning to highlight the changes brought by the First World War. This chapter includes a brief examination of the transition from elaborate early- and mid-Victorian rituals to the more subdued late-Victorian and Edwardian rituals that were present prior to 1914, and examines the changes to rituals surrounding death brought by the war. In The Hour of Our Death, Philip Ariès provides foundational work which highlights the changes in ideology surrounding death. His chapter titled “Death Denied,” reflects upon the cultural conventions of death in the pre- and post-First World War eras.⁷ His work serves to provide an understanding of the ways that beliefs and rituals surrounding death have changed over time. Pat Jalland’s studies on the subject of death in the Victorian era compliment and build upon Ariès’ work, and further supports the argument that the Victorian ideal of the “good death” could not be reconciled with the reality of the ugliness of death on the battlefields of the Great War.⁸ In fact, the circumstances of death and burial of soldiers in the First World War more closely resembled those of paupers, regardless of the social

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class or rank of the fallen. In “War and Death, Grief and Mourning in Modern Britain,” David Cannadine puts forth the argument that “the impact of the First World War on attitudes to death has been underrated by sociologists and historians; that its significance was profound for at least a generation; and that interwar Britain was probably more obsessed with death than any other period in modern history.” Cannadine’s work challenges the belief that death in the Victoria era was something of an obsession, by highlighting the way that the massive deaths in the First World War, and the commemoration movement which followed thereafter, contributed to an interwar society consumed by grief, mourning, and remembrance.

Chapter two examines the ugly realities of soldiers’ deaths at the front. Given the cultural diversity of Canadian soldiers in the First World War, it is important to acknowledge the participation and loss of Indigenous soldiers on the battlefield. Various Indigenous cultures in Canada held (and continue to hold) beliefs and rituals surrounding death which varied immensely from the Victorian and Edwardian rituals that were familiar to Canada’s largely British population. In his book, For King and Kanata: Canadian Indians and the First World War, Timothy Winegard explains that:

more than 68,000 Canadian soldiers gave their lives during the First World War, including approximately 300 Canadian Indians. They lie in cemeteries under white stones proudly bearing the maple leaf, or are simply remembered by their names etched into a memorial, war having sequestered their bodies to an unknown grave.

Winegard goes on further to explain that the cemeteries of France and Belgium, and the memorials found throughout all cities, towns, and territories of Canada reflect “the shared sacrifice, and the inescapable impact, of the First World War on all communities of the young

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9 Bourke, Dismembering the Male, 219.
nation.” The subject of the deaths of Indigenous soldiers in the First World War requires a separate study owing to the unique belief systems and rituals of Indigenous communities in Canada. Therefore, this study cannot possibly provide sufficient space to the study of Indigenous deaths in the First World War. Indigenous cultures are not a monolithic entity with a single belief system and a contiguous set of rituals and therefore it would be an injustice to try to capture each of the participating Indigenous communities in a study with the kinds of limitations imposed in this work.

The experience of death with respect to French-Canadian soldiers does not deviate from the Victorian tradition as much as it aligns with Roman Catholic rites and rituals surrounding death. To the extent that British soldiers sought to maintain as much tradition as battlefield conditions allowed surrounding the deaths of soldiers, French-Canadians attempted to maintain as much of the Roman Catholic tradition as was possible considering the circumstances. Again, the subject of the French-Canadian experience in the First World War is extremely complicated and should be addressed as part of a larger project, or as the subject of a thesis in its own right.

Chapter two examines the “innocent enthusiasm” with which Canadians went to war in 1914, and the ways that the massive number of deaths early in the war tampered that innocence and that enthusiasm. The First World War forced the reconfiguration of the Victorian ideal of the “good death,” and found traditional religious institutions struggling to justify the massive losses while providing comfort to the soldiers at the front and to the bereaved at home. This chapter

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12 Winegard, For King and Kanata, 5.
13 For further information on Indigenous soldiers and their contributions in the First World War, see also: L. James Dempsey, Warriors of the King: Prairie Indians in World War I, (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center, University of Regina, 1999).
14 Sandra Gwyn’s Tapestry of War: A Private View of Canadians in the Great War, (Toronto: HarperCollins Publishers Ltd., 1992), devotes significant space to the war experience of Talbot Mercer Papineau, including the circumstances of and reaction to his death in the Battle of Passchendaele. Papineau’s status as one of the missing is exemplary of the French-Canadian experience of a worst-case scenario death in the First World War.
examines the way that dying in war was given meaning, and the ways that soldiers learned to cope with the landscape of war as they walked the fine line between life and death in the constant presence of the dead.

Chapter two features references to the work of historians such as Jalland, Cannadine, Mosse, Ariès, and Tim Cook\textsuperscript{15} to name but a few, which provide insight into the rituals of the past while considering significant challenges to those rituals brought by war. Although the focus of these historians (with the exception of Cook) is European and British society, it matters not given that a large majority of Canadians considered themselves British subjects first and Canadians second. With respect to Canadian participation in both world wars, in \textit{Maple Leaf Empire}, Jonathan Vance notes that “many motives impelled Canadian men and women to enlist, but an attachment to British ideals, to the British connection, was one of the most common.”\textsuperscript{16} Canadians shared many cultural observances with their British counterparts and knowledge can be gained by looking at the Canadian experience of the Great War through a largely British lens.

Chapter three considers the reactions of loved ones on the home front to the deaths of loved ones at the front, and the interruption to traditional mourning practices when the body of the deceased was not present. This chapter explores the ways that the bereaved coped with the death of a loved one in the war. Women and children were often adversely affected, and this chapter briefly looks at their experience of loss in the war. Discussion is also devoted to the significance of the mother-son relationship which often deeply influenced soldiers and the commemoration movement which came during and after the war.


Chapter three also explores the rituals that loved ones at home developed to honour the memories of their fallen, because without a body there were no funerals, burials, or graveside visitations. Many soldiers lost in the First World War were missing, presumed killed, and therefore even if loved ones could gather the means to travel to Europe – there was nothing to visit. There was no closure whatsoever. Families and loved ones of the missing often had nothing to rely on except unreliable eyewitness accounts that silently begged the question “what if?” Questions and lack of closure saw churches struggle to provide explanations and comfort for the magnitude of loss and the horrors of the First World War. Throughout the war and into the interwar years, many of the bereaved turned to Spiritualism to find answers and closure. Sir Oliver Lodge’s detailed account of his experience with Spiritualism upon the death of his only son, Raymond, provides insight into the experience of bereavement and the use of Spiritualism in obtaining consolation in a situation where traditional methods could not be employed. Newspapers such as The Calgary Daily Herald contained notices for Spiritualist meetings in the same section as the regular church notices, indicating that the Spiritualist movement was as alive and well in Canada as it was in Britain throughout the war.\footnote{“Spiritualism – Calgary Independent Spiritual Society,” Calgary Daily Herald, 1 May 1915, 6, accessed 7 May 2021, https://www.newspapers.com/image/478935016.}

Chapter three also incorporates the work of many historians to provide valuable context and insight into the local reactions to the war in Canada. In A Township At War, Jonathan Vance discusses the experience of war in his hometown of East Flamborough, a small Ontario town located close to Hamilton, to demonstrate the home front experience from a rural perspective.\footnote{Jonathan F. Vance, A Township At War, (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2018).} In Hometown Horizons, Robert Rutherford offers a study which is somewhat broader, giving a glimpse into the home front experiences of Lethbridge, Alberta, Guelph, Ontario, and Trois-
Rivières, Quebec. In *For All We Have and Are*, James Pitsula examines the war experience on the prairies in his extensive study of wartime Regina, Saskatchewan, and in *Winnipeg’s Great War*, Jim Blanchard offers a complimentary look at Winnipeg, Manitoba throughout the war.

With respect to the relationships between soldiers and their families, Martha Hanna’s recent study *Anxious Days and Tearful Nights*, examines the ways that war affected the intricate relationships within families, including the experiences of loss and grief. In her book, *Mothers of Heroes, Mothers of Martyrs*, and in “Marks of Grief: Black Attire, Medals, and Service Flags,” Suzanne Evans provides perspective on the relationships that many soldiers had with their mothers as well as the consequences of loss within that specific dynamic. Each of these studies comes together to offer a picture of the similarities as well as the unique challenges faced by Canadians as they sent their sons, husbands, father, brothers, uncles, and friends off to a war with the knowledge that they might not return.

Chapter four of this thesis provides a brief examination of the postwar search for the missing dead on the battlefields of the Western Front, and the significance of the commemoration movement that began during the war and continued into the interwar period. The interwar period was known for acts of commemoration of the fallen, but falls outside of the specific era studied in this thesis. It bears noting that in Canada, acts of commemoration were undertaken in private and public domains in various ways. Although many Canadian towns and

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20 James M. Pitsula, *For All We Have and Are: Regina and the Experience of the Great War*, (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2008).
cities found ways to remember the war and their own fallen soldiers, a certain amount of Canadian commemoration remained tied to Canada’s identity as a part of the British Empire. What is perhaps most remarkable is the fact that over 100 years after the war, commemoration of the First World War is still reverently observed. In *Fallen Soldiers*, George Mosse has attributed such compulsion for remembering to be a product of what he refers to as “the cult of the fallen.” Jay Winter’s *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* and Jonathan Vance’s *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning, and the First World War* are nuanced studies of the ways that the war and the fallen were commemorated and in some cases, appropriated by local governments as methods of collective and constructive remembrance.

Battlefield tourism became another significant point of contention regarding the issue of tourism for the masses versus pilgrimage for the bereaved. David Lloyd offers a detailed study of what battlefield tourism meant to each individual visitor and pilgrim as well as the ways it became a new kind of ritual of mourning deeply embedded with meaning. According to Lloyd, “these journeys were not passive activities. Tourists and pilgrims assumed that at particular places and moments it was possible to renew, recreate or capture something of the war and the experiences which defined it.” Battlefield tourism remains alive and well today and speaks to the significance of the First World War in Canada’s history.

The lack of primary sources representative of the voice of the loved ones of the fallen ensures a particular difficulty in piecing together the local response to the death of loved ones on the battlefields of the First World War. In his introduction to *Fight or Pay*, Desmond Morton

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offers an important explanation for the lack of sources available from soldiers’ families and loved ones. According to Morton, soldiers’ letters home were often carefully preserved by loved ones, however, the letters sent to the front have all but vanished. This makes sense since the military required that once read, letters from home be destroyed lest they end up in enemy hands. Letters that were not destroyed were cumbersome to carry, and conditions in the trenches ensured that they were often destroyed by rain and mud. The lack of primary evidence representing the families of the fallen also indicates the presence of a private realm of mourning which has concealed many individual responses to loss and grief.

With respect to primary evidence, this thesis uses letters and images collected through Vancouver Island University’s Canadian Letters & Images Project to provide insight into Canada’s war experience, including the reactions of Canadians to the deaths of loved ones at the front. This thesis also relies on Canadian newspaper archives and personal memoirs, such as Will Bird’s Ghosts Have Warm Hands and Nellie McClung’s The Next of Kin, to support secondary sources and original ideas put forth herein.

The archives accessed in this study reveal that soldiers, officers, government officials, and Canadians at home all participated in forms of myth-making concerning the nature of the deaths of soldiers at the front, the character of fallen soldiers, and the importance of their individual roles within the units with which they served. These myths were constructed for several reasons including: consolation, coping, recruitment, maintenance of morale, and the careful construction of the memory of Canada’s experience of the war to be carried forward for

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26 Morton, Fight or Pay, xiv.
27 Morton, Fight or Pay, xiv.
28 Morton, Fight or Pay, xiv.
future generations.30 The letters to the families and loved ones of the fallen from the front consistently claim that deceased soldiers were brave, willing, and very valuable and well-regarded members of their units. They also indicate that the deaths were “instant” and “painless.” Historical records such as medical records, war diaries, and other letters from the front indicate that these details and sentiments were not always representative of the truth. Many soldiers died slow and agonizing deaths, many bodies were mutilated and obliterated, many soldiers were described with characteristics which were not necessarily accurate in terms of their performance, values, and behavior. However, there seemed to be no utility in truth-telling which would certainly add to Canadians’ suffering, and so many of these myths were constructed with the intention of providing a kindness while attempting to console the bereaved. These myths were not necessarily lies (some were), but instead contained elements of truth as most myths generally do. In his work, Death So Noble, Jonathan Vance explains that Canada’s memory of the First World War was constructed “from a complex mixture of fact, wishful thinking, half-truth, and outright invention,” which took place largely in the interwar years.31 Diverse forms of media (novels, plays, art, etc. …) “were used to convey the myth to those people who had not experienced the events themselves and to ensure that a certain version of the war became the intellectual property of all Canadians, not simply those who had lived through 1914-1918.”32 Essentially, Vance argues that Canada’s memory of the First World War is the result of many acts of myth-making and does not represent the true version of events.33 This myth-making also means that the archives themselves must be regarded as somewhat suspect, as what has been

32 Vance, Death So Noble, 3.
33 Vance, Death So Noble, 4.
included in them is often the result of censored and carefully curated items which have been chosen with the purpose of providing a specific version of events for the purposes previously mentioned.\textsuperscript{34}

It bears noting that at the time of writing, the world is in the midst of a global pandemic. The conditions of the current Covid-19 pandemic mean that once again Canadians are in a place that has often left the bereaved of the world without access to the bodies of their dead. Throughout this pandemic, funerals have not been possible and loved ones have had to endure an interruption in traditional mourning rituals. Even though the present situation does not originate from a battlefield, it does lend relatability and relevance to this body of work.

The Covid-19 pandemic has also led to considerable challenges regarding physical access to archives and other methods of research regarding primary sources. As such, this thesis is heavily reliant upon digital sources. Unless otherwise indicated, quotations from primary sources have been reproduced as they appeared, including errors, for the sake of authenticity.

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\textsuperscript{34} For more on the censorship of information in the First World War, see: Jeff Keshen, \textit{Propaganda and Censorship during Canada's Great War} (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1996). Keshen’s work provides relevant insight into the censorship of information coming from the front lines of the war, including information contained in soldiers’ letters to Canadians at home.
Chapter One: Death in the Victorian and Edwardian Eras

To understand the profound impact that the First World War had on the rituals surrounding death in Canada, it is important to address these rituals and their significance in the century immediately prior to the onset of the war – specifically, the Victorian (1837-1901) and Edwardian (1901-1914) eras. As a dominion of Great Britain, Canada was greatly influenced by Victorian British society. However, as Dr. Kathleen Arnup points out, “in contrast to Britain, Europe and the United States, industrialization came rather late to Canada,”¹ and therefore the trends surrounding death rituals in Canada were lagging somewhat behind those practiced in Britain. Further, death rituals in Canada had to be customized to accommodate its unique northern environment and the challenges it presented to diverse and sometimes isolated immigrant populations with specific regional differences and various religious practices. In A Better Place, Susan Smart discusses some of the challenges Canadians faced, especially when located in less populated areas such as the Canadian wilds. Smart identifies winter burials as particularly challenging, as pioneers often had to find creative ways to bury departed loved ones.² She relates the story of one pioneer woman whose husband passed, leaving her and her children alone in the isolation of the Canada backwoods. The woman was forced to bury her husband’s body under the woodpile at the side of the cabin as the ground under the woodpile was the only place sufficiently thawed to dig. It was also the only place that provided protection from wildlife.³ Smart indicates that “winter burials were potentially a problem, depending on the severity of the winter. If the ground was frozen solid, making digging impossible, people would

³ Smart, A Better Place, 44-46.
be forced to keep the bodies of their loved ones in the barn until the spring thaw.”⁴ In urban areas, receiving tombs were often built to store bodies until such time as the ground thawed sufficiently for burial.⁵ Aside from certain challenges that were unique to the Canadian experience, it is important to understand that the rituals practiced in Victorian Canada generally originated in Britain, were brought to Canada by predominantly white British settlers, and continued to bear a great deal of resemblance in terms of meaning and importance in many Canadian communities.

Human beings have been performing rituals upon death for centuries. In ““Death Abolished”: Changing Attitudes to Death and the Afterlife in Nineteenth-Century Canadian Protestantism,” David Marshall explains that “rituals were designed by the churches to impress the public with the cardinal truths of Christianity: the mortality of the earthly body and life everlasting of the redeemed soul in Heaven.”⁶ In the early part of the nineteenth-century, the ideal of the “good Christian death” offered an opportunity for the dying to make their peace with loved ones and with Christ, to accept their impending death, and to ensure their soul was sufficiently prepared for final judgment. A good Christian death was a last chance for redemption in the Protestant sense. Carl Watkins explains that, “the instinct that human beings could play a part in determining the fate of the dead through the rituals they chose for them was itself congruent with much that medieval Christianity taught about death.”⁷ Ruth Richardson argues that “the object of most customs associated with the corpse was to protect the body and

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⁴ Smart, A Better Place, 44.
⁵ Smart, A Better Place, 44. See also: Michael Bliss, Plague: A Story of Smallpox in Montreal, (Toronto: HarperCollins Canada, 1991).
soul of the dead from evil or danger.” Considering the belief that the living could somehow intercede on behalf of the dead through the performance of specific rituals, one can understand why these rituals were important, and why the inability to perform them might have been extremely distressing to the bereaved throughout the First World War.

The culture of death in the Victorian era has often been understood to be obsessive and all-consuming. It is necessary to consider that perhaps Victorians were not so much “obsessed” with death as they were constantly surrounded by it. Marshall explains that “in the Victorian era, death was an ever present reality or an obvious companion of life. Due to the perils of giving birth, the incidence of infant diseases, numerous outbreaks of infectious epidemics and the dangers involved in many workplaces, life expectancy was terribly uncertain and often short.” With so many perils abound, it is no wonder that death was a topic at the top of mind throughout the era. The mass deaths of the First World War only added to these ever-present challenges.

It appears that one of the defining features of the Victorian era included the Victorian “cult of death,” which was often understood by the elaborate mourning rituals of the middle- and upper-classes. The driving forces behind extravagant mourning rituals in the Victorian era, aside from grief, include dignity and respectability for both the deceased and the bereaved. There is an understanding among many historians that the elaborate rituals surrounding dying and death in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries served as a form of consolation and to process and come to terms with the loss of loved ones. In *Inventing the American Way of Death*, James Farrell explains that in the nineteenth century “when an individual died, sentimental survivors directed their private grief into public mourning,” and this was done through elaborate funeral

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9 Marshall, ““Death Abolished”,” 373.
rituals including ostentatious public displays of mourning.¹⁰ However, not everyone agrees that elaborate mourning rituals are imbedded with significant meaning. David Cannadine argues:

> that the conventional picture of death in the nineteenth century is excessively romanticized and insufficiently nuanced; that it makes assumptions about the functional and therapeutic value of the elaborate death-bed, funerary and mourning rituals which are unproven; and that it ignores significant developments – both ceremonial and demographic – at the end of the century.¹¹

Both Farrell and Cannadine reveal that there is a difference between grief and mourning – that they were really two distinct entities. Grief was a somewhat private and emotional response to loss that transcended class, religion, and the public realm of social convention; whereas mourning was a public and performative response to loss that was greatly influenced by class, religion, and social convention. One might conclude that while everyone grieved their losses with varied intensity, mourning was something of a luxury dependant on one’s ability to afford the required accoutrements and time for the public display of their grief. Cannadine’s argument further implies that historians tend to overlook the changes which occurred and those which were eventually forced upon the public with respect to funeral rituals – especially with the onset of the First World War.

In Victorian and Edwardian Canada most people died at home. In fact, dying in one’s own home was central to the cultural experience of death and to the rituals that came immediately before and to those that followed. In *Death, Grief and Poverty in Britain*, Julie-Marie Strange explains that “locating the dead in a domestic context was integral to the performance of rituals associated with the dignity of the dead and the expression of sentiment.”¹²

The family was the central support for the dying and was present throughout the end of life,

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¹¹ Cannadine, “War and Death, Grief and Mourning in Modern Britain,” 188-189.
playing an enormous role in the rituals surrounding the death. In *Death in the Victorian Family*, Pat Jalland argues that “the family was the primary Victorian and Edwardian social institution in which the meaning of individual deaths was constructed and transmitted across the generations.”

According to Jalland, Victorians relied upon four main forms of consolation upon the death of a loved one: “religious belief, time, private and social memory, and the sympathy of friends and relatives: but most Victorian Protestants relied above all on their expectation of happy family reunions in heaven.”

This is important because though Jalland’s work focuses on middle- and upper-class Victorian families, she is discussing coping mechanisms relied upon by all classes of Victorians and Edwardians. Even those who were unbelievers or shared some belief outside of conventional Christianity, relied upon at least some of these forms of consolation to help them cope with the death of a loved one.

With respect to religion, Jalland claims that it “played a vital and pervasive role in the lives of the majority of Victorian middle- and upper-class families, for whom church attendance was not usually just a matter of convention.” This does not mean that religion did not play a part in the lives of the working-classes and the poor, but that the middle- and upper-classes had the luxury of prioritizing “piety, discipline, and duty,” the very foundations of Evangelical Christianity. The Evangelical revival of the late eighteenth century coincided with the Romantic movement and saw its greatest influence in the 1850s and 1860s. The influence of the Romantic movement can be seen in the way that men and women were encouraged to openly express the “intensity of their grief on the deaths of loved ones by weeping together.”

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Evangelicalism encouraged Victorians to meet suffering and death with the same composure, faith, and fearlessness with which Christ met His death on the Cross. Jalland describes the Evangelical ideal of the good Christian death, with all its romantic notions, as follows:

The good death required piety and lifelong preparation, as well as fortitude in the face of physical suffering. It should take place in a good Christian home, surrounded by a loving and supportive family, with the dying person making explicit farewells to family members, comforted by the assurance of future family reunion in Heaven. There should be time, and physical and mental capacity, for the completion of temporal and spiritual business. The dying person should be conscious and lucid until the end, resigned to God’s will, able to beg forgiveness for past sins and to prove worthy of salvation.

Although a Christian home and supportive family were not necessarily solely located within the realm of the middle- and upper-classes, wealth, space, and time most certainly were.

Obviously, for Christians in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, the more time a person had to prepare for their inevitable end, the better. This meant that a lengthy illness was considered favourable to a sudden death which could leave a person unprepared and their soul in a precarious state. Jalland explains that “dying was seen as a test of both courage and virtue, and a good death might go some way to compensate for a less worthy life. The state of the individual’s soul at the moment of death was deemed of vital importance, since there was an immediate divine judgement on each individual at death making constant preparation essential.” Marshall further explains that “with the belief that the unregenerate would suffer in hell forever, it was important to the bereaving to witness their loved ones experiencing a “good death” since that was a clear sign of redemption and life everlasting. The alternative of

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19 Jalland, Death in the Victorian Family, 21.
21 Jalland, Death in the Victorian Family, 17.
everlasting punishment was too much to bear.” The inability to bear witness to a loved one’s passing would have meant prolonged suffering for those left behind. Whether Catholic or Protestant, each religion included a distinct method for preparation of the soul. For Catholics it was the sacred rites of confession, absolution, the administration of the viaticum, the last Eucharist, and finally, extreme unction. Protestants closely followed the Catholic model with respect to the bidding of final farewells, tying up worldly affairs, and a public reading of the will, but simplified the last rites as practiced in the Catholic faith, sometimes choosing not to include them at all.

In *The Hour of Our Death*, Philippe Ariès explains that in the middle ages, “a sudden death was a vile and ugly death; it was frightening; it seemed a strange and monstrous thing that nobody dared talk about.” The vile and ugly death also included that death which was not necessarily sudden, but also “without witness or ceremony,” and that “Christianity tried to combat the belief that a sudden death was shameful, but it did so in a cautious and halfhearted manner.” This feeling of fear and antipathy toward the possibility or occurrence of a sudden death was revived with the Evangelical movement, because a sudden death without witness or ceremony meant that there was no time for preparation or acts of contrition.

Throughout the nineteenth century, the concept of heaven changed from a place wherein the deceased might find a reunion with God to a place wherein the deceased might find a reunion with family and other loved ones. In *Heaven: A History*, Colleen McDannell and Bernhard

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Lang explain that Protestant and Catholic reformers in the eighteenth century assumed that divine callings “ended at death,” and that John Wesley’s “theocentric heaven devalued anything which interfered with the soul’s knowledge of God.” This meant that all earthly relationships ended at death and the soul’s existence in heaven was solely focused on union with God. Romanticism’s emphasis on emotion and relationships saw nineteenth century Christians reconstruct their concept of heaven to include romantic love and familial relationships. According to McDannell and Lang, this did not mean that nineteenth century Christians were “losing belief in an all-powerful God,” but instead were choosing to prioritize reunion with loved ones in heaven over union with God. In her article, “From reason to regulation: 1760-1850,” Julie Rugg explains that there was a prevailing attitude that “for the afterlife to be meaningful, love must continue after death.” The belief in heavenly reunion with loved ones was extremely pervasive and carried on into the First World War. Considering that a loved one’s death in the war almost certainly meant that there was no opportunity for proper goodbyes or closure, many families clung to the hope that they would be reunited with their fallen loved ones in heaven.

Of course, the concept of heaven was marred only by the concept of hell, which Protestant preachers were only too willing to employ in their sermons, conjuring images of hellfire and eternal damnation, to induce conversions. According to Marshall, “moral meaning was attached to death. God’s purpose in bringing about death, many believed, was to correct sin and to strengthen faith. Death of a loved one was regarded as a test of faith.”

31 Rugg, “From reason to regulation,” 213.
32 Rugg, “From reason to regulation,” 215.
33 Marshall, “‘Death Abolished’,” 374.
fear of death in the Western world, particularly the imagined perception of damnation, Ariès claims, “this terror, was more of a didactic spectacle that brought about a few conversions and inspired proselytes and vocations among certain militant elites. It also deceived some people who took it literally, the most recent examples being the men of enlightenment and progress of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – and the historians of today.” Eventually, around the middle of the nineteenth century, these horrific images of hell and the prospect of eternal damnation were considered to be in direct conflict with a loving and merciful God. Marshall explains that “during the latter half of the nineteenth century, there was less emphasis on death being the final court of divine judgement, and fewer references to damnation and hell. Instead, there was growing assurance that there was, indeed, everlasting and better life after death.” It is unsurprising that Protestant religions, coinciding with the decline of Evangelicalism in the late nineteenth century, sought reformations to beliefs about hell and eternal damnation given that unlike Catholicism, wherein a belief in purgatory offered a chance for redemption, Protestantism held no such recourse. The belief in hell as a concrete place wherein there was no chance for redemption began to give way to a belief in a middle ground wherein there were opportunities for spiritual progress and redemption prior to the Final Judgment. Hell was no longer a place of brimstone, hellfire, and eternal torment, but instead came to be understood more simply as the “absence of God”.

Considering that the battlefront deaths of the First World War were quick and ugly and in no way resembled the ideal good Christian death, it is important to note that churches struggled

34 Ariès, *The Hour of our Death*, 405.
35 Rugg, “From reason to regulation,” 215.
36 Marshall, “‘Death Abolished’,” 378.
to reconcile their teachings of a loving and benevolent God with the massive amounts of death and carnage brought by the war. Marshall explains that:

> during the war clergymen struggled to offer a believable explanation of the cataclysm and provide comfort for the bereaved and confused. The haunting question that they struggled to answer and that became the topic of many sermons both at the front and in the churches at home was how could such sacrifices in human life be allowed by a loving, merciful God? What possibly could the divine purpose be in such carnage? These were pressing issues, for the very existence of God and therefore the truth of Christianity were being brought into question by the war in a much more profound and challenging manner than they had been by the doubts raised during the late nineteenth century by moral concern, science, critical inquiry, and comparative religion.\(^{40}\)

With respect to the situation on the home front, the inability of so many to bear witness to their loved ones’ passing, and the absence of the body upon which almost all death rituals centered, were likely at the core of the churches’ inability to effectively console their followers.

The rituals that were so essential to most families upon the death of a loved one prior to the outbreak of the First World War are described below:

**Laying Out the Dead**

The most important duty to be performed immediately upon the death was the laying out of the body of the deceased. Essentially, this task involved washing and dressing the corpse in preparation for the visitation. Laying out was also one of the gendered tasks that fell primarily to women as it occurred within the home – the domestic realm which was considered the domain of women.\(^{41}\) In *Ordinary Saints*, Bonnie Morgan explains that “women, who were expected to complete this work as part of the gendered division of labour, considered laying out a dead body to be “sacred ritual,” performed largely in silence and accompanied with prayer.”\(^{42}\)

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\(^{42}\) Morgan, *Ordinary Saints*, 132.
and upper-class Victorian families, this task would be carried out by the attending nurse or by “faithful family servants,” and in working-class Victorian families, the task would be carried out by the bereaved themselves or, alternatively, by a local woman who was either hired by the family or who offered such services as a means of conveying condolence and offering support. Strange explains that “assistance with laying out the corpse was frequently inextricable from a wider female culture of mutual aid where pragmatic support could also be construed as providing emotional succour. It might also be perceived as a form of paying one’s respects to the dead.” It is important to note that in certain places in Canada and Newfoundland, it was not uncommon for women to attend to the laying out of deceased women and men to attend to the laying out of deceased men. With respect to the gendered tasks completed upon death, Gillian Poulter notes that “while the body was being prepared by the women, a six-sided coffin was being constructed by a local carpenter or lumber mill. It was a full day’s work and might be done without charge since the maker saw it as his contribution to the community.” Poulter’s comments demonstrate that death in Canada and Newfoundland in the nineteenth century was very much a communal event dependant on the contributions and sympathies of its members.

Laying out was a very important ritual because people stayed with the deceased much longer than they do today. It was done immediately after death because within hours, the features of the body would begin to change, to stiffen and become less and less a resemblance of the deceased person as they were in life. Poulter explains that “washing the body had a practical

43 Jalland, Death in the Victorian Family, 211.
44 Strange, Death, Grief and Poverty in Britain, 73-74.
45 Strange, Death, Grief and Poverty in Britain, 75.
46 Morgan, Ordinary Saints, 132.
function, but it was an essential element in caring for the dead common to many cultures.”

Though laying out was not necessary for burial, it “was ‘crucially important for the correct observance of other funeral customs’ such as viewing the body.” The significance given to the task of laying out speaks to the essential presence of the body in nineteenth and early twentieth century rituals surrounding death.

**Visitation and Wakes**

Once the body was laid out, family and friends could spend time with the deceased, recalling memories, saying prayers, or simply trying to grasp a mental picture of their loved one before the ravages of decay began to take hold. With respect to the significance of the ritual of visitation, one historian argues that “constructions of the corpse at peace did, however, serve a practical function within the process of bereavement. Fixing the image of serenity in one’s imagination enabled the bereaved to draw a veil, real and metaphorical, over the death and achieve a degree of what the modern psychotherapist would call ‘closure’.” Strange holds that “viewing the dead equipped friends and neighbours with a reason to visit the bereaved and rendered logistical attempts to broach the subject of loss less awkward.”

Throughout Victorian Britain, the Protestant ritual of viewing the dead was a sombre occasion which occurred once the laying out was complete. People came, viewed the body, and then left. In some communities throughout Victorian Canada and Newfoundland, such as Conception Bay, this was not the case as Protestants held their own form of wake for the dead. Poulter points out that the body of the deceased remained in the home while awaiting burial for anywhere up to three days, but that

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48 Poulter, “What’s traditional about “the traditional funeral”?, 137.
49 Strange, *Death, Grief and Poverty in Britain*, 71.
50 Strange, *Death, Grief and Poverty in Britain*, 78.
51 Strange, *Death, Grief and Poverty in Britain*, 81.
52 Morgan, *Ordinary Saints*, 137.
sometimes, extenuating circumstances ("hot weather or a very obese corpse") meant that burial had to be completed sooner.\(^53\) It is also important to consider that the rituals that took place in the home while the body was present varied from place to place.\(^54\)

The ritual of the wake originated within the Roman Catholic faith and centered on the belief that "constant attendance upon the corpse would ensure its safe passage to the next world."\(^55\) The wake was also held for practical reasons such as to protect the corpse from body snatchers "and to address the popular fear of accidental live burial."\(^56\) Morgan explains that "in the Irish tradition, women and older persons would be the first to attend a wake, with visitors usually touching, kissing, or praying over the body. The wake was a time when much food and drink would be consumed, with women of the household primarily responsible for its organization."\(^57\) Wakes often involved activities such as playing music, dancing, hymn sing, storytelling, joking, and playing games. Because relatives and other mourners were expected to stay up all night these activities were engaged with the purpose of helping mourners stay awake and were not intended to convey disrespect or cause any harm.\(^58\)

The opportunity for consolation that wakes, and visitations offered would have served to provide essential comfort to the bereaved. Wakes and visitations were also meaningful because they offered an opportunity to demonstrate "that obligations to the care of the deceased had been fulfilled."\(^59\) The absence of these rituals in throughout the First World War meant that families had no way of knowing what really happened to the bodies of their loved ones after death and therefore could not obtain the kind of reassurance that rituals such as visitations and wakes

\(^{53}\) Poulter, “What’s traditional about “the traditional funeral”?", 139.
\(^{54}\) Poulter, “What’s traditional about “the traditional funeral”?", 139.
\(^{55}\) Strange, *Death, Grief and Poverty in Britain*, 87.
\(^{56}\) Morgan, *Ordinary Saints*, 137.
\(^{57}\) Morgan, *Ordinary Saints*, 137.
\(^{58}\) Morgan, *Ordinary Saints*, 137-139.
\(^{59}\) Strange, *Death, Grief and Poverty in Britain*, 81.
provided. Families and friends could only hope that the remains of their fallen loved ones were treated with care and respect.

**Funerals and Burial Rites**

As one of the final rituals upon death, Marshall submits that in the nineteenth century, the funeral sermon was one of the most important as it served as a memorial to the deceased and as an inspiration to survivors. He also maintains that funeral sermons were valuable indicators of changes in attitudes toward death.\(^6^0\) Several histories of death in the nineteenth century explain that in the earliest part of the century, the funeral sermon served to remind survivors of the impending peril that awaited them should they not adequately prepare themselves for their own imminent demise. Marshall explains that during this time, “the more foreboding aspects of death were an integral part of the clergyman’s message. In many funeral orations, clergy issued dire warnings that unless the unregenerate converted immediately, they would surely be cast into hell forever.”\(^6^1\) As previously discussed, these images were horrific enough as to elicit the exact amount of fear required to inspire such conversions. Funeral sermons conducted in the mid- to late-nineteenth century tended to focus less on narratives of hellfire and eternal damnation, and instead began to focus on consolation. In the late nineteenth century, funeral sermons were intent on inspiring hope for eternal happiness in heaven instead of fear of eternity in hell.\(^6^2\)

The funeral or burial service did not necessarily bring comfort to all mourners. Strange points out that “the exclusivity of Christian doctrine could exacerbate loss, especially for agnostic/atheist mourners or Christians who grieved for an unbeliever.”\(^6^3\) This makes sense, especially in the later part of the nineteenth century when funeral sermons emphasized family

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\(^{6^0}\) Marshall, “‘Death Abolished’,” 372.
\(^{6^1}\) Marshall, “‘Death Abolished’,” 372.
\(^{6^2}\) Marshall, “‘Death Abolished’,” 372-373.
\(^{6^3}\) Strange, *Death, Grief and Poverty in Britain*, 100.
reunions in heaven and eternal damnation for sinners and unbelievers. Strange further asserts that “for many, the burial service was a custom imbued with meaning extra to religion and spirituality: it signified community membership, expressed identity and was interpreted as a right of citizenship.”  

64 Strange, Death, Grief and Poverty in Britain, 100.

65 Strange, Death, Grief and Poverty in Britain, 103.

66 Morgan, Ordinary Saints, 143.

67 Morgan, Ordinary Saints, 143.

68 Cassell’s Household Guide, iii (1869-71), 344, quoted in Jalland, Death in the Victorian Family, 221.

Attendance at funerals and burial services was another aspect of mourning in Victorian society that appears to have been gendered. Morgan observes that in the Victorian era, women were considered “too emotionally fragile and physically delicate to attend funeral services (especially interments), although social expectations about women’s supposed delicacy were put aside when it came to the duty of preparing corpses.”  

66 This is an interesting observation, however it should be remembered that women of the middle- and upper-classes were not likely to have been performing the more laborious task of laying out in the first place. Morgan does note that American women were more likely to attend funerals than their British contemporaries.  

67 According to Jalland, even in the later part of the nineteenth century (1870) "Cassell’s Household Guide opposed the tendency among the poorer classes for female relatives to attend funerals: ‘This custom is by no means to be recommended, since in these cases it but too frequently happens that, being unable to restrain their emotions they interrupt and destroy the solemnity of the ceremony with their sobs, and even by fainting.’"  

68 This particular social convention was not always observed within Canadian communities. It seems that smaller
communities throughout Canada and Newfoundland welcomed women’s participation in funerals and burial services and in some communities, it was expected.\textsuperscript{69}

It is important to note that though religious rituals and burial rites were important in Victorian Canada, access to clergy proved to be somewhat problematic in rural and isolated areas. According to Smart, it was often Methodist circuit riders who were asked to attend upon the burial of the deceased. If the Methodist circuit rider was not available to perform the funeral, then the body would be buried, and the funeral service would take place when the preacher was in the area.\textsuperscript{70} Smart submits that the adaptability of pioneer Canadians with respect to facing the challenges that death in rural Canada presented, represents a cooperative and resilient spirit worthy of admiration.\textsuperscript{71} Of course, this resilient spirit would be called upon repeatedly throughout the years of the First World War.

**Mourning Expectations**

In the Victorian and Edwardian eras, the rules governing mourning were far stricter for women than for men, and even more so for widows than single women. Victorian widows were expected to remove themselves from society for the first year of bereavement, and maintain a state of mourning for at least two years upon the death of a spouse.\textsuperscript{72} According to Sonia Bedikian, “a widower could essentially remarry immediately, whereas a widow was subject to societal restrictions that called for much longer period of mourning and so had to signal her unavailability to suitors.”\textsuperscript{73} In the Victorian and Edwardian eras, and throughout the First World War, women wore mourning, or “mourning black”, to signal their bereavement. In the Victorian

\textsuperscript{69} Morgan, *Ordinary Saints*, 144.
\textsuperscript{70} Smart, *A Better Place*, 40.
\textsuperscript{71} Smart, *A Better Place*, 46.
\textsuperscript{72} Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, 301.
era particularly, mourning wear also served to ensure the governing of women’s behavior by signalling not only that they were in mourning and unavailable, but also to ensure that they were behaving in accordance with societal expectations (i.e., turning down social engagements immediately upon bereavement). Each stage of mourning wear (full mourning and half mourning) indicated the stage of bereavement and came with prescribed social behaviors.

Notably, the expected mourning period for deaths of other family members varied depending on an individual’s relationship with the deceased. Jalland points out that “the mourning period of a parent for a child, and vice versa, was twelve months, while six months was conventional for a brother or sister.”74 In his article, “Dust-to-Dust: Celebrations of Death in Victorian Britain,” James Walvin notes that the “duration became progressively shorter as the distance grew between the survivor and the deceased; a great uncle could command six weeks, a first cousin a month.”75 Living in the presence of so much death, as many Victorians did, it would seem that mourning would have been worn often and perhaps provided more burden than comfort.

Suzanne Evans explains that even though the customary practice of wearing mourning was in decline by the start of the First World War, the massive deaths in the war revived its use. However, the donning of mourning wear in the First World War was meant to convey not only grief, and status, but also “carried the mark of sacrifice.”76 This mark of sacrifice made wearing mourning somewhat more purposeful, and such purposes will be examined in a later chapter.

74 Jalland, Death in the Victorian Family, 301.
Conclusion

What the examination of Victorian funeral rituals shows is that Victorians and Edwardians valued the body of the deceased above all things, as the body was imperative to the performance of rituals in death. Throughout these eras families had physical evidence that their loved ones passed with dignity and were treated with due care and respect after death. For the most part, the bereaved knew where their loved one was laid to rest and could visit on occasion. Mementos such as jewelry, photographs, and death masks could be collected and connection to the deceased could be maintained. What is gained through the discussion of Victorian death rituals as presented in this chapter, is an understanding of the different ways that death was experienced according to class, an appreciation for gendered roles, and the significance of the physical body of the deceased to the rituals of grief and mourning which were strongly embedded in Britain and Canada in the time immediately prior to the onset of the war.

The massive deaths in the four years of the war left people in a position wherein they had to reconfigure their values, identities, and beliefs about what happened after death, especially when they were unable to complete the rituals which they often believed helped them to intercede on behalf of the dead. It is important to appreciate that the inability to access bodies, such as those lost on the battlefield, meant that the bereaved no longer had the opportunity to experience the final moments of their loved one’s life, could not experience the intimacy involved in laying out, did not have the reassurance that their loved one received the dignity and respect due, and could not be entirely convinced of the manner of death, let alone that sufficient care was taken to provide proper burial and religious rites. In the most extreme cases, when the body of the loved was missing, families and friends had a difficult, and sometimes impossible, time accepting the death. As this chapter has emphasized, the very act of viewing the corpse was an incredibly important part of coming to terms with the death of a loved one; and so, without
that opportunity, one could never really accept the death. Even if the bereaved were fortunate enough to be informed that their loved one was buried and did have a tangible grave, access to the grave was difficult, especially throughout the years of the war.

The following chapter examines the true nature of death on the battlefield and describes not only the circumstances of such deaths, but also the circumstances of burial, as well as the challenges related to both.
Chapter Two: Canadian Soldiers and the First World War

Immediately prior to the start of the war, in several cities and towns throughout the country, Canadians gathered outside of newspaper offices eagerly anticipating the news that Britain, and therefore Canada, was going to war. Canada’s involvement was a requirement by tradition and association rather than a matter of constitutional imperative, although many Canadians, especially those of British origin, considered it so.\(^1\) When Britain finally declared war on Germany on August 4, 1914, Canadians celebrated and mobilized. For many men, that meant that the rush was on for the nearest recruiting center or militia unit. Many men of European birth returned to places like France, Italy, and Great Britain to take up with their former reserve units or to enlist with the armies of their homelands.\(^2\) According to Jonathan Vance, hundreds of men of German and Austrian origin began their exodus back to their homeland prior to the declaration of war, but “faced arrest at the border if they tried to cross into the US to sail for Europe.”\(^3\) The initial celebrations over Britain’s declaration of war and the rush to enlist encompass what John Herd Thompson termed “innocent enthusiasm,” consisting of excited anticipation and sense of adventure about Canada’s participation in the war overseas.\(^4\)

There were several reasons that Canadian men rushed to participate in the Great War. According to Mark Moss, in *Manliness and Militarism*, patriotism and adventure mark the most common reasons for enlistment in 1914, but peer pressure, the prospect of regular pay, rumours

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\(^3\) Vance, *A Township At War*, 48.

of German atrocities, and coming to Belgium’s rescue, all served as sources of motivation for
Canadian men’s willingness to enlist.\(^5\) Further, Moss explains that:

> For the ‘Sons of the Empire’, the Great War was the culmination of a long tradition not only of Canadian patriotism but of love for English Canada’s mother country, Britain. This patriotism was supplemented by a vast array of role models, codes of conduct, and manufactured traditions that young men had to respect if they wished to be seen as upright, steadfast, and manly. The pressures to conform in this way came from numerous sources: the family, the church, the school, the various levels of government, the playing field, the press, even the toy shop.\(^6\)

Concepts of manliness, and by extension militarism, were clearly reinforced in Canadian society from a very young age, and the First World War provided a perfect opportunity for Canadian men to prove their manliness while performing their patriotic duty.\(^7\) Canada’s Governor General, Field Marshall H.R.H. the Duke of Connaught sent a cable to London on 4 August 1914, stating:

> Great exhibition of genuine patriotism here. When inevitable fact transpires that considerable period of training will be necessary before Canadian troops will be fit for European war, this ardour is bound to be damped somewhat. In order to minimize this, I would suggest that any proposal from you should be accompanied by the assurance that Canadian troops will go to the front as soon as they have reached a sufficient standard of training.\(^8\)

It appears that initially, Canadian volunteers were more afraid that the war would be over before they had a chance to fight, than they were afraid of dying in combat. Such excitement was quick to fade as the war dragged on and the reality of life and death in the trenches became a nightmare that spread from the battlefield to the home front in the form of telegrams informing of the missing and the dead. What Canadian enthusiasm did not account for and could not have anticipated was the long and drawn-out war of attrition that left thousands of Canadians dead,

\(^7\) Moss, *Manliness and Militarism*, 8-15
wounded, or mourning. The reality stood directly in the face of Canadians’ expectations of a short war over by Christmas. People searched in earnest to understand and contend with the toll that the war took respecting the deaths of so many men and women and terms such as ‘glory’ and ‘sacrifice’ were used to explain the losses and console the masses.

Private Henry Harry Jackson voluntarily joined the Canadian Expeditionary Force from his home province of British Columbia on 21 September 1915, and served with the 72nd Battalion of the Seaforth Highlanders. Almost one year to the day he joined, on 16 September 1916, just weeks after arriving from training in England, Private Jackson met his death on the Belgian front. His platoon officer, Lieutenant S.B. Birds, wrote the following letter to Private Jackson’s father:

Dear Sir,

I wish to express my deepest sympathy and condolence to you upon the death of your son Harry Jackson, who was in my platoon No 5B. Company. He was killed in action at 4 p.m. on Saturday, Sept. 16 during a bombardment. It may interest you to know that his death was painless and practically instantaneous. The result of the explosion of a high explosive shell in the Trench he was in along with another of his comrades who suffered a similar fate. He was a fine, bright, and cheerful boy, and very popular with his platoon mates, and I am deeply grieved to lose him. I personally took charge of his personal effects and turned them over to the proper authorities to be forwarded on to you. His body was interred with military honours in the British Cemetery at Kemmel Belgium on Sunday, the 17th and the grave will receive proper attention.

If there is any further information you may require, I shall be very pleased to give you any assistance in my power.

It is the fortune of war for some to be taken and others left.

Yours in Sympathy
S.B. Birds Lieut.
72nd Can. Infantry Batt.

Lieutenant Birds’ letter contains all the consoling things a family would hope to hear about the
death of a loved one: his death was instant and painless, his belongings were secure, he was
well-liked and missed by all who knew him, and he received a proper burial with full military
honours in a cemetery with a grave that would be well looked after. However, the reality of
Private Jackson’s death may have had very little resemblance to the details provided in the letter.
In reading many similar types of letters from officers and comrades at the front to the families of
the dead, it becomes clear that officers and comrades alike tried to shield families from the harsh
realities of death at the front. In doing so it seems that they were trying to maintain some
continuity with the Victorian concept of the good Christian death. Many letters state that the
deaths were quick and there was generally no hint that the deceased suffered in any way. Those
who wrote as witnesses to such deaths often tried to create the illusion that the deceased was
prepared to meet his death, sometimes met it with a smile – but always bravely, and by virtue of
the fact that the deceased was a soldier, was headed to his great reward, earned solely through
his service and his sacrifice. It is likely that even those Canadians who knew (through news
reports and other letters from the front) that these details were somewhat fabricated, chose to
perpetuate the mythic deaths of their loved ones rather than admit that their loved ones died
unpleasant and fearful deaths.

Dying in the First World War forced a reinterpretation of the Victorian ideal of the good
Christian death, as well as the consequences of a quick and ugly death. Throughout the war, the
ideal of the good Christian death became imbued with the language of glory and sacrifice, and
these ideals were used to explain the massive loss of men and women in the war, to console the
bereaved, to inspire recruits, and to motivate those who were already facing death in the bloody
trenches overseas. This chapter examines those ugly deaths and often hasty, sometimes undignified, burials of the First World War and the rituals that fellow soldiers performed around the bodies of fallen comrades, or in their absence. Many of these new rituals were constructed to cope with the voluminous and horrific deaths particular to the circumstances of war. This chapter also examines the ways that soldiers confronted the reality of their own deaths as they lived among the dead. Such examinations reveal rituals and coping methods which could not be translated to the civilian world.

Death – The Great Equalizer

There were several ways the war made all men and women equal in death. For instance, all soldiers, nurses, and civilian participants were subject to the same modes of death. Most soldiers whose bodies were recovered were buried where they fell, or very nearby. Burial on the battlefield was, in some ways, no different from that of a pauper (that is, if the dead were lucky enough to be buried at all). During and after the war, soldiers were re-buried in cemeteries similar in design, with the same uniform headstones, regardless of rank. The state held dominion over the bodies of the fallen; and their bodies were treated according to the Imperial War Graves Commission’s policy of “Equality of Treatment.” This meant that every one of the fallen was commemorated on the same monuments – officers and “other ranks” together, and this holds true for the memorials to the missing. Death has never held any regard for nationality, gender, religion, or class; and, in the First World War and the wars that followed, death has held even less regard for rank.

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The potential for death was to be expected considering that men, women, and even children die in war, however the killing machines employed in the First World War represented new technologies that were extremely efficient in their tasks, often leaving behind corpses riddled with bullet holes or obliterated altogether. The mass deaths experienced by all combatant nations was shocking. Joanna Bourke states that, “in the 52 months of the war, 9.5 million men of all nations were killed.” According to G.W.L. Nicholson’s *Official History of the Canadian Army in the First World War*:

> Of those who did not return 51,748 Canadian soldiers and nursing sisters were killed in action or died of their wounds. The addition of 7796 who died of disease or injury, or who were accidentally killed, brings the total of fatal army casualties to 59,544 all ranks. For all services the total was 60,661, or 9.28 per cent of all who enlisted. The total number of Canadian army casualties of all categories in all theatres was 232,494.

The deaths meant that both military and civilian authorities were forced to negotiate several challenges to deal with their nation’s dead, while considering the families of the fallen who demanded a say in the handling of their loved ones’ remains.

Throughout the First World War, and into the interwar period, the responsibilities for the logistics of death fell to several military organizations, changing hands several times as needs evolved. At the beginning of the war, bodies were handled by the British Red Cross Society until the military took over responsibility with the Graves Registration Commission. The Graves Registration Commission was reorganized into the Directorate of Graves Registration and Enquiries, which was finally taken over by the Prince of Wales’ Committee, later known as the Imperial War Graves Commission. According to Jeremy Garrett, the end of the war saw the...

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13 Bourke, *Dismembering the Male*, 27.
16 Garrett, “Tribute to the Fallen,” 23.
creation of the Canadian War Graves Detachment (CWGD), which was “a purely administrative entity. Its duties were to supervise the War Graves Detachment in France and Belgium and the verification of records. Further, the CWGD also focused on photographing graves in France and Belgium.”\textsuperscript{17} The burial of soldiers at the front proved to be challenging but extremely important work as families of the fallen needed to know that whenever possible, their loved ones received this important rite of death.

**A Just and Holy War**

Many of Canada’s churches were initially supportive of Canada’s involvement in the war overseas. The war was viewed as a holy crusade – a battle of good against evil. To fight and die for God and Empire was the noblest sacrifice. According to Michael Bliss:

> Because the Canadian community was profoundly Christian before and during World War I, it is highly questionable whether its citizens could have endured the emotional nightmare of war without the sustaining belief that God was on their side, that their loved ones were only doing their duty to God and their country, and that death, if it came, was only *The Beautiful Thing That Has Happened to Our Boys*.\textsuperscript{18}

Further to this point, Alexander Watson and Patrick Porter contend that “Christianity was considered by most men to be perfectly compatible with active participation in the war in 1914. The sixth commandment forbade murder (i.e., illegitimate homicide) rather than all killing, and the Christian concept of the just war had been developed by divines such as Aquinas and Augustine.”\textsuperscript{19} Watson and Porter point to several influential factors which served to reinforce the relationship between Christianity and the military, including: “popular ‘muscular’ evangelism, imperialist sentiment, missionary activity, the American Civil War and its abolitionist

\textsuperscript{17} Garrett, “Tribute to the Fallen,” 231-232.

\textsuperscript{18} J.M. Bliss, “The Methodist Church and World War I,” *The Canadian Historical Review*, 49, no. 3 (1968): 213-233, 219-220. See also: David B. Marshall, ““Khaki has become a sacred colour,” 111.

dimensions, the memory of the Wars of Liberation against Napoleon and the role of the army in nation building and imperial defence.”

Stories of German atrocities had convinced many Canadians, including church officials, that “the Germans did not fight like other nations.” According to Bliss, most Canadians “believed they were fighting a people that inoculated its captives with tuberculosis, decorated its dwellings with human skin, crucified Canadian soldiers, and enforced a national policy of compulsory polygamy on its virgins.” If such stories seemed unbelievable, the use of poisonous gas by the Germans on the allied forces, the execution of British nurse, Edith Cavell, and the sinking of the British liner 

Lusitania while it was carrying civilian women and children, were enough to convince most Canadians and churches that the First World War was indeed a just and holy war.

While churches on the home front were vigorously supporting the war, because of the carnage that was occurring at the front, many chaplains overseas found it necessary to return to the Evangelical ideal of the preparation of the soul for death, and the emphasis of suffering as part of a good Christian death. This evangelical turn seemed only appropriate given the very real likelihood of death in battle. Alan Wilkinson notes that “Christian leaders frequently quoted J. B. Mozley’s sermon preached in 1871 during the Franco-Prussian war in which he argued that in God’s providence people have to suffer for one another.”

The specific passage to which Wilkinson refers reads:

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There is one side indeed of the moral character of war in special harmony with the Christian type – I refer to the spirit of sacrifice which is inherent in the very idea of the individual encountering death for the sake of the body to which he belongs. There is a mediatorial function which pervades the whole dispensation of God's natural providence, by which men have to suffer for each other, and one member of the human body has to bear the burden and participate in the grief of another. And it is this serious and sacred function which consecrates war. Without it, indeed, what would war be but carnage? with it, war displays in spite of its terrible features, a solemn morality.\(^25\)

Clearly, this passage would be useful to Christian leaders by helping them to justify Canada’s participation in the war, while encouraging able-bodied parishioners to enlist. Canadian churches relied heavily upon the language of sacrifice and crucifixion imagery to rally support for the war, and by way of explanation for the massive losses experienced by their parishioners. This same language and imagery was used to motivate soldiers, many of whom struggled to reconcile the atrocities of war that they witnessed every day with the loving and benevolent God they had come to trust.\(^26\) Jonathan Vance indicates that “by focusing on the parallels between Christ and the soldier, it allowed people to separate the means of death from the meaning.”\(^27\) This is an important point, since such language and imagery offered a way for loved ones and fellow soldiers to reframe their memories of their loved ones. Instead of picturing them as a mangled heap of flesh on the battlefield, they could envision their loved ones, or comrades, as gallant saviors rewarded in the presence of Christ.

The soldiers’ relationship with Christianity throughout the First World War was a complicated one. Alexander Watson maintains that “although recent research has highlighted the existence of extreme piety within some units and among certain individuals, the ‘diffusive Christianity’ widely agreed to have characterised Edwardian faith comprised little more than a


\(^{26}\) Marshall, “‘Khaki has become a sacred colour’,” 111-112.

vague belief in God and a practical attachment to the Church’s moral teachings.”

Religion did offer a certain amount of support and comfort to some soldiers. Watson explains that religious faith helped restore order to chaos, while providing “a reassurance of continued life and as a comfort in death.” Regardless of a soldier’s religious beliefs and observances entering the war, the awful conditions under which soldiers lived throughout the war presented many challenges, including challenges to many soldiers’ faith in Christianity and in the institutions of religion. There was a concern among many churchgoers and clergy at the home front that the temptations present in army life – such as drinking, profanity, gambling, and sexual promiscuity – would overwhelmingly challenge and corrupt churchgoing civilians-turned-soldiers, thus threatening their eternal souls. Marshall maintains that “for the battle-hardened soldier, moral transgressions – such as swearing, drinking, and gambling, or even sexual promiscuity – did not indicate that they had abandoned their faith in Christianity or rejected God.”

Many churches back home did not see it that way and worried that the military environment was a strong and negative influence causing soldiers to abandon their moral piety and turn their backs on God. Marshall further argues that “these soldiers had not abandoned their belief in God and many of them held a keen sense of the meaning and importance of Christ’s sacrifice.” What is most important is that while many soldiers may have abandoned the institution of religion, they did not abandon their faith in God. Faith in God – and a willingness to sacrifice one’s own life for what was considered a just cause, made death meaningful for the soldiers who lived in its ever-present shadow. Importantly, “the Christian notion of salvation through sacrifice” meant that a soldier’s

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29 Watson, *Enduring the Great War*
30 Marshall, “‘Khaki is a sacred colour’,” 104.
31 Marshall, “‘Khaki is a sacred colour’,” 104.
32 Marshall, “‘Khaki is a sacred colour’,” 104.
transgressions no longer mattered at the front because the soldier’s willingness to make the supreme sacrifice for a greater cause (God and country) guaranteed entry into heaven. In a letter to a friend, Private Robert Hainsworth wrote that while he knew “a good many [soldiers] who do not swear drink smoke or take the Soldiers issue of rum,” he “would not try to stop the soldier from having his issue of rum.” Private Hainsworth himself seems to have been in favour of prohibition but was angry when, after coming out of some very heavy fighting, he and his comrades “were handed some pamphlets headed “Dying on the battle field will not save you.”” In response to this pamphlet, Private Hainsworth wrote:

> When I saw it & I said to myself “Would the man who wrote that go thro’ & endure, pain & suffering of the worst & then death like many of those I saw.” “Would he give up everything for the sake of those at home who were helpless & in the cause of justness & rightness.” I have seen men climbing over the parapet to bring in the dead & wounded & have fallen with a curse on their lips but I say what of it “They died for others.” They made the biggest sacrifice and none of us are perfect.

To many soldiers at the front, faith and sacrifice mattered more than any moral transgression that occurred.

**Other Beliefs**

Many soldiers developed a strong belief in fatalism – the belief that if it was one’s turn to die, then there was nothing and no one who could stop it from happening. In a letter to his sister, Private Alexander Decoteau of the 49th Battalion wrote:

> Most of the boys turn (Fatalists). I don’t know if I’ve got it spelled right, after a few month[s] fighting. They believe that everything is prearranged by Divine Power, and if it [is] one’s time to die no matter what one does, one has to die. Their motto is “If

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33 Marshall, “‘Khaki is a sacred colour’,” 103.


35 Hainsworth, “Letter to Rebecca.” Note: A copy of the pamphlet Robert Hainsworth refers to in his letter could not be located for further reference.
my turn comes next, I can’t do anything to avoid it so “I should [not] worry”. They don’t worry either.36

Incidentally, Private Decoteau – an Olympian runner and Canada’s first Indigenous police officer - was killed in action during the Battle of Passchendaele on 30 October 1917. From Private Decoteau’s statement, it appears that many men used fatalism to cope with the anxiety related to the constant presence and possibility of death. According to Tim Cook, “more and more this attitude impressed itself on long-service soldiers at the front; and it afforded a certain amount of comfort, since it relieved one from the necessity of worrying whether this path or that path, this step or that step, this job or that job might lead the soldier into harm’s way.”37

Essentially, fatalism served as a coping mechanism which allowed soldiers to let go of the illusion that they had any control over their fate when it came to death and their inability to avoid it. Relieved of the burden of control, soldiers could devote their energies to their various tasks, and do their best to survive day-by-day.

When Christianity could not offer satisfactory explanation or consolation, many soldiers turned to spiritualism and other pseudo-scientific ideologies. According to Cook, “Canadian soldiers in England could turn to all manner of pseudo-scientific reading on the occult, including the Journal of the Society for Psychical Research, Occult Review, Harbinger of Light, The International Psychic Gazette, and The Psychical Research Review, and these could be taken overseas to the trenches.”38 One particular book which became as popular in the trenches as it was on the home front was Sir Oliver Lodge’s Raymond, or Life and Death: With Examples of the Evidence for Survival of Memory and Affection After Death. The popularity of the book

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38 Cook, “Grave Beliefs,” 5.
stemmed from Lodge’s apparent communications with his son, Raymond, via spiritual medium, after he was killed in battle in Flanders on 14 September 1915. Cook maintains that “Raymond, was a book to provide solace to the grieving families of the fallen soldiers.”39 In fact, in the preface to Raymond, Lodge wrote:

It is partly owing to the urgency therein indicated [in his communications with his friends on the “other side”] I have thought it my duty to speak out, though it may well be believed that it is not without hesitation that I have ventured thus to obtrude family affairs. I should not have done so were it not that the amount of premature and unnatural bereavement at the present time is so appalling that the pain caused by exposing one’s own sorrow and its alleviation, to possible scoffers, becomes almost negligible in view of the service which it is legitimate to hope may thus be rendered to mourners, if they can derive comfort by learning that communication across the gulf is possible.40

Though Lodge did face criticism (as he guessed he would), many people did find solace through the book’s denial of death and its reassurance that the soul carries on with its personality, emotions (such as love), and memory intact. Most importantly, the book reassured soldiers in the trenches, and their families, that they would one day be reunited with their loved ones in heaven.

Many soldiers also became extremely superstitious throughout the war. Such superstitions led to some soldiers conducting rituals before conducting certain tasks or before battle. These rituals included shaving in a particular way, or avoiding things like taking money into battle, etc.41 Many soldiers carried some sort of talisman or good luck charm to ward off harm and became extremely attached to such items.42 Sometimes these items would be something small and meaningful from home or something found on the battlefield. One such talisman was called a “fumsup” (a play on “thumbs-up”) or a “touchwood” (a play on “knock on wood”) and soldiers would often rub these handheld talismans to ward off bad luck while

39 Cook, “Grave Beliefs,” 5.
41 Cook, “Grave Beliefs,” 19.
42 Cook, The Secret History of Soldiers, 74-75.
reciting “silent incantations.”

According to Cook, “it was so common for soldiers to sew magic charms, protective crosses, medals, and badges into their clothing and uniforms that doctors would instruct staff as they prepared to open up men on the operating table to be alert for hidden material on their bodies and, if possible, to save it for an injured man if he survived the procedure.”

In his memoir, *Ghosts Have Warm Hands*, Will Bird recounts an incident when a fellow soldier became panicked when he lost his charm. According to Bird:

> Someone asked questions and we heard Giger’s high-pitched voice explaining that Binks, a fellow who had gone down the line sick, had given him the charm. It was a wrist-ring of hair that Binks had taken from a Heinie prisoner, who had begged to keep it as it brought certain good luck. Binks had worn it at Parvillers and at Jigsaw Wood and had never had a scratch. Then he had gone out sick. What more proof was needed of the power of the charm? It turned up a little later.

The day after Bird’s comrade found his charm, he was killed by a German soldier wielding an axe. Writing of the incident Bird recalls: “There was nothing we could do for Giger. As we reached him he raised the wrist with the hair-ring charm around it, and died with a gaze of startled incredulity. … It was a curious thing, but no one spoke about Giger as we went on.”

Birds’ account of the lucky charm speaks to the value that soldiers gave such items, as there was an understanding that these items were incredibly meaningful to those to whom they belonged. Giger’s death after recovering his charm, and the remaining soldiers’ hesitancy to discuss the death speak to the superstitious nature of incidents involving these items. These superstitions and rituals demonstrate that deep down many soldiers, even those who claimed to have fatalist leanings, tried to maintain some illusion of control, and assuage their anxieties through means other than prayer alone. On the field of battle and in the face of so much death, the eccentric

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44 Cook, *The Secret History of Soldiers*, 76.
45 Bird, *Ghosts Have Warm Hands*, 139.
46 Bird, *Ghosts Have Warm Hands*, 141.
became the norm. In the Victorian era, people imbued objects such as hair jewellery, post-mortem photographs, and death masks with meaning that was significant only to those who possessed such items. At the front throughout the war, soldiers held on to items that were imbued with individual meaning and maintained the belief that such items influenced their fate.

There are many stories told by soldiers who claimed to have supernatural experiences on the battlefield. Private Wallace Aubrey Reid of the 10th Battalion wrote to his mother telling her of one such experience when his trench was decimated by a shell:

My first thought was the certain knowledge that I was dead, also that I was glad of it. I think it was a hot stream pouring over my face and head that roused me. My head was pinned tight to the ground, a weight pressed terribly on my chest, I couldn’t move my arms, nor, at first, my feet. A few seconds’ working got my feet free, though. Somebody passed along the trench; I cried out in a voice I didn’t recognize as my own, but with head lowered, the man flew past that place of horrors, on the run. Ensued a frantic struggle on my part to rid myself of my burden of dead men. I succeeded, rose to my feet and stood still. The sight that met my eyes in the starlight will be with me as long as I live and breathe. In front of me the shell crater, six feet or more deep and blown clear of everything in the bottom, but around the top a score or more of stark, silent figures that had been men, but a short time before – whole bodies, single bodies, piles of bodies, all stark and still. Not a sound broke the silence while I stood there – not a shot, nor a shell. For a few seconds some magic hand held up all the hellish forces that were playing over that tortured land.

I waited, scarcely breathing, for something – waited, it seemed minutes that could only have been seconds. Then it came – invisible, intangible, but nevertheless, very real. Something came to that place of desolation, stopped a moment and passed on again, and I was the only living witness. 47

Given the constant companionship of death and danger, it is not surprising that many soldiers had experiences which they associated with the supernatural. Some experienced visions of angels (such as the Angels of Mons), 48 some had ghostly encounters (such as Will Bird who wrote of being visited and ultimately saved by the ghost of his deceased younger brother who

had been killed in battle),\textsuperscript{49} and some had experiences like the one described by Private Reid (the strong sense of something present but not seen). Regardless of the authenticity, or the effectiveness and reliability of rituals and superstitions, soldiers in the trenches had to find ways to deal with the very real possibility that they would be met with death at any moment and in conditions under which they had no control. In fact, Cook explains that:

Soldiers’ psychological coping mechanisms included turning to a higher power, magical thinking, and even writing-off one’s life in a bid to stay sane. Soldiers who lived on the razor’s edge between life and death created, invoked, and embraced superstitions, ghost stories, and supernatural beings to make sense of the bewildering and uncanny spaces of destruction.\textsuperscript{50}

Soldiers in the trenches had to manage their anxieties and those who did not fell under the category of “shell-shocked,” or were said to have “lost their nerve.”

**Going West**

The First World War differed from those wars that came before for several reasons. Unlike previous wars, the First World War was fought with civilian volunteers. These men were by no means professional soldiers. They left their regular civilian jobs to enlist with the sole purpose of fighting alongside professional soldiers in defence of God and Empire. Churches of many faiths, such as the Methodists, Presbyterians, Anglicans, and Roman Catholics,\textsuperscript{51} called on the men of their congregations to join the fight for the very sake of humanity, and over the course of the


\textsuperscript{51} While the role of the Methodists, Presbyterians, Anglican, and other Protestant churches is well known (See *Canadian Churches and the First World War*, ed. Gordon L. Heath (Eugene: Pickwick Publishing, 2014) – the Catholic story is often not included in the analysis of Canadian churches and the war because the strong French-Canadian opposition to the war has led to the assumption that the Canadian Catholic church was not supportive, or was at least indifferent. See: Mark G. McGowan’s ground-breaking revisionist study, *The Imperial Irish: Canada’s Irish Catholics Fight the Great War, 1914-1918*, (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2017). The Protestant-Catholic divide breaks down and indeed the co-operation between chaplains is reflective of how sectarianism could not stand up during the heat of battle.
war, 620,000 Canadians answered this call.\textsuperscript{52} It did not take long to realize that many of these men would not be coming home.

Desmond Morton points out that “front-line soldiers of the 1914-18 war endured more continuous danger than soldiers of most previous wars in which major battles might occur once or twice in a campaigning season.”\textsuperscript{53} Unlike British soldiers, who served on average 400 days of front-line service, or American soldiers who served approximately 200-240 days of front-line service, Canadian soldiers were required to serve the entire duration of the war while being entitled to only one week’s leave per year.\textsuperscript{54} Of course, it is not unreasonable to assume that a lengthy term of service in combat would only increase a soldier’s chance of being wounded or killed.

Each war leading up to the First World War included some strategic or technological innovation, such as the use of sulphur dioxide gas in the Crimean War and the American Civil War.\textsuperscript{55} Significantly, the weaponry of the First World War ushered in a whole new era of mechanized warfare. Weapons were produced on an industrial scale and new technologies meant that death was delivered even more brutally than could be imagined. Luc Capdevila and Danièle Voldman explain that “of the many consequences of these innovations – strategic, financial, tactical, medical – one is aware that they increased the numbers of dead and injured and extended the battle zone beyond the traditional front line.”\textsuperscript{56} Poisonous gas, artillery shells, and machine guns efficiently and effectively cut men down before they had a chance to comprehend what was happening, while increasing trauma to the bodies of the fallen and the injured. In fact,
according to Capdevila and Voldman, “during the two World Wars, 70-80 per cent of injuries sustained by operational troops and recorded by the medical services came from artillery fire, whereas wounds from bladed weapons accounted for less than 1 per cent of the total.” The psychological effect such warfare had on the men fighting changed the nature of war in ways that left soldiers traumatized and civilians struggling to comprehend such brutality and magnitude of loss.

Poisonous gas was particularly terrifying not only because of the horrific effects it had on the body, but also because it could not be outrun or avoided, unless of course a precipitous shift in the wind intervened. Describing its effects, Private William Stares of the 6th Canadian Reserve Battalion wrote:

The Gasses used are Chlorine & Phosgene. Chlorine, A very deadly poison, breathed for 3 minutes will cause death, works on the Lungs. The Lungs then produce a serum to mend the damage done and this Serum really causes death, the lungs begin to fill, breathing becomes harder, and the patient slowly suffocates, drowned within himself. A horrible death. The lungs burst, and the patient turns Black.

Phosgene, a scented smelling poison, Has delayed action, works on the Blood & Heart, turns the Blood to water, brings on exhaustion, patient finally collapse.

A patient may be Gassed and not know it at the time, and the next day fall down suddenly dead, or collapse in a heap. For this gass the only remedy is Rest, no exertion whatever, as this helps the complaint.

Both are stretcher cases. Means of sending Gass by cloud or Shell, the shell catches you unawares, (same as it did me) they sound like Duds, just enough explosive to burst the shell, the liquid is throw around and before you know-you get a few mouthfulls.

Private Stares’ account of a death by gas presents a terrifying picture of an unnatural means of death. Sadly, it would seem that the only “positive” aspect of a death by gas was that it left a body intact and therefore there was at least a good chance for identification and burial.

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57 Capdevila and Voldman, War Dead, 5.
Artillery shells were not only extremely deadly, the sound they made as they whistled overhead also bombarded the soldiers’ nerves. Writing to his mother from the front, Lieutenant Lynn Dudley described the following experience:

For five days and nights; it was nothing but one continuous bombardment all the time. Between our own guns firing and Heiney’s shells bursting, it was enough to drive any person ‘bug-house’, No doubt you have heard of the rum that is issued to the boys in the trenches. Well, if it was not for it the whole of us would certainly be ‘bug-house,’ No doubt the old girls and the temperance cranks think it is disgraceful. They should just spend a week under fire, then they would be glad to get a shot of it.59

As if the sounds of constant artillery bombardment were not terrifying enough, the craters left behind by artillery shells indicate that a successful artillery bombardment left little of the bodies of its victims intact. In fact, often there was nothing left to bury. Many of these men would be considered among those “missing, presumed dead.” Fragments from shells could do further damage, killing men who had the misfortune of being nearby. Several soldiers’ letters from the Canadian Letters & Images Project include accounts of death where a fragment from a shell had deadly consequences, the only difference being that shell fragments left more of a body to bury.

The means of death in the First World War also led to questions regarding resurrection of the physical body in the afterlife. Marshall explains that “the circumstances of many soldiers’ deaths – being mutilated or torn apart beyond recognition or simply being lost in action in the carnage and chaos of battle – led many at the battlefront and at home to wonder if the war-torn bodies would be restored in the afterlife.”60 This concern helps to explain the popularity of memoirs such as Lodge’s Raymond, in which he explains that the body is restored to its former state not out of necessity, but simply so that the soul can be recognized by the living.61

61 Lodge, Raymond, 322-324.
book includes transcripts of his communications with his son, Raymond via various mediums, which purportedly reveal that the soul takes on a bodily form closely resembling one’s earthly appearance (including scars and other markings), and when a limb is lost prior to death it is eventually regenerated in the spirit world. Even if the body was completely decimated on the “earthly plane,” it can be restored to its previous appearance. The concept of restoration of the body would have been very reassuring to the many soldiers who witnessed their comrades die horrible and gruesome deaths.

Disease was another instrument of death with which soldiers and other military personnel had to endure. Of the 2,845 nursing sisters who served with the Canadian Army Medical Corps in the First World War, 61 died as a direct result of their service. Of those 61 women who died:

- approximately 21 succumbed to pneumonia or influenza (or, more commonly, the flu), most being the result of the devastating Spanish flu pandemic at the end of the war. Another 21 nurses were killed in action, most within the space of a few months in 1918 during the German spring offensive and the Last Hundred Days. The rest succumbed to other illnesses.

The miserable and unsanitary conditions of trench living also contributed to disease and illness which also took the lives of many soldiers. According to Morton, “influenza and pneumonia killed 4,000 Canadian soldiers in the war.” These deaths are important because though they did not occur in the heat of battle, they contributed to the mass number of war dead, and to the grief of Canadians. As with soldiers, the bodies of fallen nursing sisters were not repatriated to Canada and their deaths contributed to the additional suffering caused by the absence of the body of the deceased.

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62 Lodge, Raymond, 194-195.
64 Dodd, “Canadian Military Nurse Deaths,” 329.
65 Morton, When Your Number’s Up, 138.
Death in the First World War (sometimes referred to as “going west”) presented challenges to those who witnessed it, and to those who attempted to care for soldiers as they lay dying. Aside from the battlefield, where many deaths were witnessed by comrades first-hand, casualty clearing stations saw an unprecedented amount of death. In her article, “Can One Grow Used to Death?” Deathbed Scenes in Great War Nurses’ Narratives,” Alice Kelly maintains that nurses at casualty clearing stations worked tirelessly to heal the sick, but also performed the “culturally constructed role of primary mourner usually attributed to women.”

However, unlike the primary mourning role of women in the Victorian era, the nurses and volunteers who attended at the deathbeds of mortally wounded or ill soldiers were keeping vigil by men whose bodies were often gruesomely shattered by shells and bullets, and in no way did the experience resemble the romanticized deathbed scenes of the nineteenth century. Writing on nurses’ accounts of deathbed scenes at casualty clearing stations, Kelly notes that:

> The nurses narratives demonstrate the changed nature of dying that arose as a direct result of the war. Many of the soldiers died in pain far from home and apart from loved ones, and many of the anonymous dead depicted by nurses left corpses broken or incomplete and therefore difficult to accommodate to Victorian convention.

Although nurses and volunteers became somewhat accustomed to the broken bodies of the men they treated and in many cases, watched die, they went into the experience unprepared and often emotionally ill-equipped. According to Kelly, “the war was an unexpected assault on traditional aesthetics of death.” Clearly the circumstances and conditions at the front and in the casualty clearing stations meant that there could be no true observance of pre-war death customs in terms of rituals surrounding the bodies of the dead. The sheer inundation of injured and dying men did

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67 Kelly, “‘Can One Grow Used to Death?’,” 331.
68 Kelly, “‘Can One Grow Used to Death?’,” 337.
69 Kelly, “‘Can One Grow Used to Death?’,” 337.
not allow for the luxury associated with pre-war deathbed vigils. Nurses and volunteers tried to
manage and comfort the masses of dying men they attended, but clearly, the deaths of men and
women in the First World War shattered the romantic illusions so deeply valued in the previous
century.

In the Land of the Dead

Living among the dead was something that a soldier in the First World War had to learn to
endure. Several of the soldiers’ letters home make mention of the awful sights and smells of the
dead. In a letter to an unknown recipient in 1915, Captain James Ross observed, “the country
fairly reeks with foul odors. Refuse, dead horses, and stagnant pools of water lend a marvellous
touch to a fine air like this of Belgium.”

Captain Ross’s letter describes what might seem an unbelievable and hellish landscape, and is one of many such letters which arrived back in Canada. In a letter home, upon arriving on Salisbury Plain, Private John Davey of the 1st B.C. Regiment wrote:

They say the regts [regiments] going out there for the first few weeks get the pleasant job of burying the dead & burning dead horses to harden them up before going to the firing line. That’s what the Territorials have had to do out there I believe. If we get that I guess we shall see some pretty bad sights.

Regardless of any pre-conditioning, it is unlikely that any soldier could ever have been completely prepared for the constant presence of the unburied dead.

Fear and violence were common companions of most officers and soldiers on the Western Front. For the most part, soldiers were resilient and were able to cope with the difficult conditions presented by modern warfare. Alexander Watson has determined that “contrary to the

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impression given by some historiography, resilience not collapse was the norm among men on the Western Front.\textsuperscript{72} In \textit{The Secret Battle: Emotional Survival in the Great War}, Michael Roper examines the relationships soldiers had with their families, particularly with their mothers, indicating that the earliest relationships a soldier had often had the most influence on him and his ability to endure the hardships and horrors of the battlefield.\textsuperscript{73} While the mother-son relationship is explored in more detail in the next chapter, the emotional endurance of the soldier is what is important here. According to Roper, every soldier on the Western Front, no matter what his circumstance, was fighting a “secret battle” for emotional survival.\textsuperscript{74}

It is important to consider the effect that prolonged exposure to violence and death had on the men serving on the Western Front, because it is ultimately this experience that changed the way they saw the world and, for the purposes of this study, the way that they came to see death. When soldiers first arrived at the front, many had not seen a dead body outside of the serene confines of the home or mortuary. The bodies of relatives carefully laid-out for the purpose of viewing bore no resemblance to the multitude of corpses laying in the mud, or to the fragments of human remains strewn about the shell holes of the Western Front. Roper points out that “both fear and fascination impelled the soldier, newly arrived in the trenches, to take a close look at a corpse, which was for many, their first face-to-face encounter with the dead.”\textsuperscript{75} The mixture of fascination, horror, and disgust would have been quite disorienting.

The \textit{Canadian Letters & Images Project} contains hundreds, if not thousands, of letters from soldiers to friends and loved ones back in Canada. What is most remarkable about these

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{72} Watson, \textit{Enduring the Great War}, 232.
\bibitem{74} Roper, \textit{The Secret Battle}, 3.
\bibitem{75} Roper, \textit{The Secret Battle}, 18.
\end{thebibliography}
letters is that so many of them talk about encounters with the dead. Writing to a friend while in hospital in England, Lance Corporal Charles Richardson took the opportunity to unburden himself of the horrors he had witnessed just prior to being wounded. His letter reads:

As I lie here though I cannot but have constantly in my thoughts, those other fellows whom I have come to know so well who were less fortunate than myself. The great majority of them I shall never see again and when I think of the sadness that their absence will mean over in their Canadian homes, it brings to me more fully the tragedy of war.

I have seen sights that persons who have read and heard all that was ever written about this war, could never realize, without seeing for themselves. To see the battalion of over 1000 men, all in the pink of health and spirits in a few hours reduced to a scattered mass of dead, maimed, or suffering with every conceivable manner of wounds, until only 150 were left able to walk, was my experience with our own regiment. And they were as fine a lot of fellows as I have ever seen.

... When a shell would kill three or four and wound half a dozen, the dead would be laid out of the way and the wounded bandaged up and helped in every way possible. ...

There are so many that will always be classed among the missing that we shall never know what happened to them. There were so many attacks over such a large area that they are scattered everywhere. Such a great many were buried by shells filling in trenches and smashing down parapets that they will not all be found. As I walked along both front and support lines I came across the most terrible sights. There would be arms or legs lying around with no sign of the rest of the bodies, and the blood was in pools and spattered over trenches, [illegible] and in fact everything. 76

Lance Corporal Richardson’s letter provides significant insight into the experiences that all soldiers on the front line endured. The extremely detailed account of Lance Corporal Richardson’s experience, with the bodies of the dead prominently featured throughout his letter, indicates that these deaths had a profound impact on him. The presence of the dead led Lance Corporal Richardson to deep contemplation about the conflict and sacrifice in which he was a participant. His letter reflects a reverence for the dead while, at the same time, it reveals his

struggle to reconcile the dead with those same men who were once alive and “in the pink of health.” Lance Corporal Richardson’s letter reveals that his experience of living among the dead has led him to see the war as a tragedy. Unlike the people back home in Canada, he has seen the ugly dead, he knows the true fate of the missing, and he truly understands the fragility of life in a way that those who have not been in battle could ever possibly know. Though many letters make mention of the dead, they do not necessarily provide such vivid accounts of the state of the bodies encountered. That the dead are mentioned so often, speaks to the fact that their presence is an important and impactful feature of the battlefield landscape which left a lasting impression upon those who lived among them.

Soldiers developed coping mechanisms and rituals which would have appeared as macabre and disrespectful at worst, and highly inappropriate at best, to those on the home front. Soldiers seemed to become somewhat desensitized to the death that surrounded them. Men shook hands with exposed corpses and even hung their kit on skeletal arms sticking out of trench walls. 77 It was also not uncommon for soldiers to loot the bodies of the enemy (and in some cases friendly) dead, looking for souvenirs and other items that would prove valuable to the living and utterly useless to the dead. Private George Hatch of the 81st Battalion wrote: “while in Canada I was a little shaky when I saw any dead body. Here it is like walking over rye straw. Germans by the thousands lying dead. Every one of us were hunting for souvenirs.” 78 According to Cook, “with the hollow-eyed and filthy soldiers looking like the living dead and living with the recently – and not so recently – killed, it is not surprising that trench soldiers developed a familiar acquaintance with the bodies of the unknown slain. Such soldiers’ actions seem

77 Cook, The Secret History of Soldiers, 66.
shocking in their callousness, but they were one way to cope with living in the land of the
dead.”\textsuperscript{79} To this point, in a letter to his father, Second Lieutenant Richard Good wrote, “one
doesn’t mind seeing Bosche stiffs, but seeing your own boys down sort of turns you prickly.”\textsuperscript{80}
Clearly, the callousness and irreverence for the dead did not extend itself to fallen comrades. In a
letter to his sister, sent from his hospital bed in England, Private William MacDonald described
the following scene from his experience at Passchendaele:

It discouraged me very much to see one of my chums, Dan Ross, Valleyfield
(machine gun, too) laying there quite dead, shot through the head. …

Dear Marie, you can’t imagine the misery. There was a pool of water in the shell
hole red with Ross’ blood and my own. I really thought and hoped my end would
come any minute, but then I suddenly realized how sweet life really was and I just
determined I would try and live. I lay in this miserable shell hole for hours afraid to
try and look up for fear “Fritz” would have another try at me. At last one of our own
boys came along and I called him and told him to get the stretcher bearer. He
bandaged me and started me for the dressing station and then more misery. The mud
was actually up to my waist and several times I sank right down in it but of course
there was a lad helping me, a kid about 17 and a good kid he was. The dressing
station was 2 miles away. But alas new dangers awaited me. In order to get to the
dressing station I must go through the enemy’s barrage. This I did and oh! what
greusome sights: pieces of arms, legs, intestines, hearts, etc., scattered out just like so
many leaves, Ah! what a pity – all good Canadian blood.\textsuperscript{81}

Private MacDonald’s letter to his sister describes a scene that must have played out frequently
on the battlefields of the Western Front. His reflections on his experience show that Canadian
soldiers found the sight of their own dead to be grievous and demoralizing, especially when
trying to gather the courage and strength to continue on.

Many of the soldiers when writing letters home or writing in their diaries, made mention
of the unburied dead. Writing in his diary on 17 July 1917, Private Lawrence Johns observed,

\textsuperscript{79} Cook, The Secret History of Soldiers, 66.
\textsuperscript{80} 2Lt. Richard Good, “Letter to Mr. H.L. Good - Published in Nanaimo Daily Free Press - September 16, 1918,”
\textsuperscript{81} William Alexander MacDonald, “Letter to Mary (sister) – dated January 5, 1918,” The Book of War Letters: 100
Years of Private Canadian Correspondence, eds. Audrey Grescoe and Paul Grescoe, (Toronto: McClelland &
Stewart Ltd., 2003), 156-157.
“Up on Vimy Ridge to-night saw much evidence of terrible fighting on April 8 Battle field not cleaned up like our old one many dead still un buried.” Private Johns’ entry was made just two short months before his own death on 12 September 1917. In a letter to a friend, Private Charles Stenner of the Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry (P.P.C.L.I.) describing the conditions in the trenches, wrote:

I can’t tell you where we are as I would like to. All I can say is we relieved a French regiment from the trenches. Say, they are trenches, too – knee deep in mud and water and dead bodies lying everywhere and impossible to bury them as they lie between us and the German trenches. Show yourself and you are as good as dead.

Private Johns’ diary and Private Stenner’s letter both indicate that the unburied dead left an indelible impression on their experiences at the front.

Soldiers were known to risk life and limb to bring back dead comrades with whom they had fought. According to Cook, “it was considered beyond the pale to treat one’s own slain mates callously. Bodies were wrapped in blankets and buried behind the lines, where possible. Informal wooden crosses were erected, sometimes with a tin metal plate attached, inscribed with a killed man’s name.” Actions such as these speak to the reverence given to the familiar dead. Attempts to bring back bodies and to ensure a proper burial also speak to an attempt to maintain traditional rituals surrounding death.

Jeremy Garrett contends that there is an important distinction to be made in terminology respecting a “proper” burial and a “Christian” burial. According to Garrett, “these two terms were used in a conflated sense to mean the same thing; however, this is far from true today.

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86 See: Hainsworth, “Letter to Rebecca.”
During the war a proper burial was akin to providing a decent, respectful, or dignified burial. It was in this way that the two terms were conflated – respectful and dignified were interpreted as religious, and therefore, in Britain and Canada, with Christian rites.\textsuperscript{87} The ritual of burial and the inclusion of Christian rites (prayers said over the deceased, ideally by the Chaplain as an ordained authority) was often the very best that could be hoped for without having to worry about a burial on consecrated ground (which would define a Christian burial by modern standards).\textsuperscript{88} In writing letters of condolence to the families of fallen comrades, many soldiers were sure to include details regarding not only the manner of death, but also whether the deceased received a proper burial. This point was often included as a form of consolation. When Private Herbert Cunliffe was killed on the front lines, his brother, Bandsman William Cunliffe wrote to their sister: “herb was buried in the cemetery here there is some [?] knowing he was decently buried.”\textsuperscript{89} In another letter to their aunt, Bandsman Cunliffe wrote, “he has been buried here in a cemetery and if you was here you would know that is something to be thankful for.”\textsuperscript{90} Bandsman Cunliffe’s letters to his sister and his aunt reveal that not only was Private Cunliffe fortunate enough to receive a “decent” burial in a properly marked grave, but also that many were not so fortunate.

Captain John Kirkpatrick had the unfortunate task of informing the widow of Major George Rothnie that not only was her husband killed, but his body was missing. In his letter, Captain Kirkpatrick wrote:

\textsuperscript{87} Garrett, “Tribute to the Fallen,” 2.
\textsuperscript{88} Garrett, “Tribute to the Fallen,” 2.
You have no doubt been advised that your husband has been officially reported missing since Oc. 21st and have not as yet been able to find any trace of him, and from what I can learn from the other officers and men who were near him at the time, we have almost given up all hope of finding him.

The only hope we have is that he may have been taken prisoner by the Germans.

I have been informed that he was the first officer over the parapet and was gallantly leading his men on to victory when last seen.

To a person acquainted with conditions in the trenches, it is very difficult to locate a man who is lost, as the ground is blown up into deep holes.

We all regret his untimely loss, as he was one of our best officers, and was loved and respected by all ranks and particularly by those who knew him best.91

If one reads between the lines, it is clear that the greatest likelihood is that Major Rothnie is believed to be dead, but without a body there is no certainty. The experience of officers and soldiers in the trenches lends to the implication that he is forever lost (Major Rothnie was eventually recorded as killed on 21 October 1916 – his name is included on the Vimy Memorial).92 Captain Kirkpatrick’s letter contains just enough information to offer hope to Major Rothnie’s widow that there is a remote possibility that has survived.

The widow of Private Roy Gullen received two letters from the Department of Militia and Defence, the first advising that her husband was missing and the second advising as follows:

I beg to further refer to previous correspondence, and regret to advise you that exhaustive enquiries have failed to discover any grounds which would justify the assumption that the marginally noted soldier may still be alive. Owing, therefore, to the length of time which has been allowed to elapse since he was reported “missing” his death must now be reluctantly accepted, and for official purposes he has been presumed to have died on or since the 3rd day of May, 1917.93

The letter from the Adjutant-General initially seems somewhat perfunctory. However, if one reads closely, words such as “exhaustive,” “reluctantly,” and “for official purposes,” hint at the

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knowledge that there will never be any real certainty or closure for the bereaved. The letter acknowledges that while the family may find it difficult to accept the reality of Private Gullen’s death, the military has to move on. Private Gullen’s file in the Canadian Letters & Images Project, contains over one-hundred letters, the majority of which Private Gullen wrote to his wife and children. Private Gullen’s file reveals a family that would have been utterly devastated by his loss and tormented by the fact that his status as missing meant that they would never have any real knowledge of his fate or closure regarding his loss.94

Many families of soldiers lost with no known grave could not find the closure brought by the reassurance of a dead body with a tangible grave. The torture of not knowing speaks to one of the biggest disruptions in death rituals that Canadians experienced throughout the First World War. When the body was missing, there was little that could be done to console the family and loved ones of the fallen. The circumstances of a death in battle where the body of the fallen was never recovered meant that in many instances, there was nothing left of the soldier’s possessions to return to his family. In many cases, all they had left of their loved one was a name.95

It is important to note that in many instances, and by necessity, bodies that could be recovered in battle were often unceremoniously buried where the soldier fell with the intention of returning to exhume them and provide a proper burial when it was safe to do so. Unfortunately, subsequent fighting and artillery bombardments could decimate the marked graves of soldiers, thereby leaving them lost forever. When Lieutenant Eugene Drader was killed on 16 September 1916, his close friend, Lieutenant Harry Balfour wrote to Lieutenant Drader’s parents telling them:

He was game to the very last; he was a soldier every inch; he died a soldier’s death.

He was buried near where he fell—a real soldier’s burial, not the parade style of military funeral, but the short hesitating prayer that was said over his grave, with our heads bowed very low on account of the machine gun fire, was the most sincere prayer ever offered up.\footnote{Lt. Harry Balfour, “Letter to Mr. and Mrs. Drader dated September 21, 1916,” \textit{CL&IP}, VIU, accessed 15 Nov. 2020, https://www.canadianletters.ca/document-61746.}

Lieutenant Drader’s body was later lost, and his name appears on the Vimy Memorial. Although Lieutenant Balfour’s letter offers the consolation that Lieutenant Drader had the benefit of a burial and perhaps most importantly a prayer, the fact remains that the loss of his body and grave would have brought additional suffering to his family as it did to so many at the war’s end.

Funerals in battle took on a whole new meaning. As mentioned, they were not always possible, and sometimes they were hastily conducted. When time and circumstance allowed, officers, chaplains, and fellow soldiers did their best to keep to the traditional format observed by many faiths. Morton maintains that “morale demanded that the remains [of the fallen] be respected, even if, in the case of Gunner Angus MacLeish, all his comrades ever found was his paybook and a boot with his ankle protruding.”\footnote{Morton, \textit{When Your Number’s Up},” 231.} Morton also makes mention of the fact that soldiers took great risks to retrieve their dead, noting that, “in quiet periods, men volunteered to bury their comrades.”\footnote{Morton, \textit{When Your Number’s Up},” 231.} Of course, when there were so many dead that a unit was nearly wiped out, the burial of the dead would be left to the Canadian Corps Graves Registration unit whose job it was to recover the bodies of the dead, collect and record personal items to be returned to the next-of-kin, and ensure the burial and registration of graves.\footnote{Morton, \textit{When Your Number’s Up},” 231.}
Ultimately the post-battle roll call became a sad sort of ritual. Major (Reverend) William Beattie, Senior Chaplain of the Second Division, in a letter to his parish in Cobourg, Ontario described the following scene:

Just now, a Battalion, or what is left of one, is calling the roll on the opposite side of the street from where I write. As a man’s name is called, he takes a few paces forward. I have been watching the proceedings. It is pathetic to hear sometimes three or four names in a group called with no response. The fact that these names are on roll together shows that they were in the same platoon, probably chums who lived together, fought to-gether, and died to-gether.

Although part of standard operating procedure, the roll call would have been a somewhat sombre occasion as men listened for the names of their comrades, noting their absence, and perhaps quietly mourning their loss.¹⁰⁰

Conclusion

War changed the way soldiers in the trenches saw death. As opposed to the earlier Victorian and Edwardian eras, death at the front ceased to be in the purview of women, especially when it came to dealing with the bodies of the dead. Soldiers were constant witnesses to the deaths of their leaders and their friends. They were also the instruments of death to countless others. Often, these same men became responsible for the handling of the bodies of their comrades. They risked life and limb to retrieve the bodies of their fallen from No Man’s Land when the occasion allowed to ensure they could have a proper burial. When this was not possible, these same men searched for the pieces of their comrades, collecting whatever they could so that there was something to bury. Unlike in the Victorian era, throughout the First World War, it was mainly men to who attended to the bodies of the fallen. They searched the bodies of their friends for the personal belongings that would go back to the family, and many sent letters to those

families providing them with the carefully edited, and sometimes fabricated, “details” of their loved one’s death. They wrapped their dead comrades in blankets, burying them as respectfully as possible, and they carved or wrote the names of their friends onto wood fashioned into crude crosses. Soldiers comforted each other when the mental strain from living in the constant shadow of death became too much to bear. Officers and soldiers had the burden of the responsibility of life and death not only for themselves but also for those with whom they served. They lived among the dead while praying for their safe deliverance from death, and they contemplated the state of their souls while some questioned the institutions that encouraged them to enlist. They questioned God’s purpose, and some turned their backs on the institutions of religion while maintaining their faith. Some abandoned both. For those who continued to observe their faith to varying degrees, Communion took on a more immediate importance. Suddenly death was not a distant possibility, but a very immediate concern. Other rituals surrounding death also took on different meanings. A decent burial was considered any burial where a body could be located, identified, buried, and prayed over – all the better if a chaplain could preside. When a body was missing, there was not much to be done. The roll call stood as the final ritual for those who could not be found, and the name of the soldier took the place of the body and the grave.

The next chapter of this thesis examines the home front reactions to the mass deaths at the front and what those deaths meant to the performance of traditional rituals surrounding death.
Chapter Three: Grief and Remembrance on the Home Front

Seeing loved ones off at the train station as they headed for a training camp, and then overseas, was a bittersweet occasion filled with pride, tears, and in many cases, some apprehension about what lay ahead. In her memoir, Next of Kin, Nellie McClung reflects on her own son’s send-off and cannot quite bring herself to describe the moment except to state:

We played it to-day. We had to, for the boys went away, and we had to send our boys away with a Smile! They will have heartaches and homesickness a-plenty, without going away with their memories charged with a picture of their mothers in tears, for that’s what takes the heart out of a boy. They are so young, so brave, we felt that we must not fail them.¹

Of course, any apprehension felt could not be spoken lest it dampen morale while appearing unpatriotic. The early send-offs for recruits of the Great War often began with a ceremony which included a march-past and ended in embarkation. Robert Rutherdale indicates that aside from the pomp and circumstance, the novel element of organized prayer and the halt of the march to the train to allow for final embraces and goodbyes demonstrates that there was a consciousness that Canadians were off to a war from which many would not return.² According to Rutherdale, “ritualized as an embrace, a handshake, and a few conventional phrases of encouragement, these gestures served to encapsulate what was most feared – a final parting.”³ Sadly, fears of a final parting were quickly realized in April 1915, with the mass casualties resulting from the Canadian engagement in the Second Battle of Ypres.

There were 6,036 Canadian casualties in the Second Battle of Ypres, which marked Canada’s first official engagement with the enemy. Second Ypres was a brutal battle which wiped out “fully half the infantry strength of the First Division.”⁴ It was also the first battle of

¹ McClung, The Next of Kin, 46.
² Rutherdale, Hometown Horizons, 56-57.
³ Rutherdale, Hometown Horizons, 56-57.
⁴ James M. Pitsula, For All We Have and Are: Regina and the Experience of the Great War, (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2008), 57.
the war where poisonous gas was unleashed on the Allies by the Germans. As the war lingered on with no end in sight, and as Canadians were confronted with the reality of sacrifice that moved beyond language and ideal, the occasion of the send-off evolved to become a somewhat sombre occasion. Unlike the send-offs at the start of the war, there was less fanfare as the war dragged on and Canadians were confronted with the reality that victory would be hard fought and very costly. For thousands of families and loved ones on the home front, the ritualization of the send-off became something of a replacement for the earlier death-bed scenes of the Victorian era. Prior to leaving, many men set their affairs in order and said what was for many, their final goodbyes. For those left behind, the long vigil began and for thousands of Canadians, those vigils would never end.

Waiting for news from the battlefront, in the form of casualty lists, telephone calls, and letters from soldiers overseas, caused a great amount of anxiety for family and friends on the home front. In L.M. Montgomery’s *Rilla of Ingleside*, Montgomery addresses this anxiety as her title character, Rilla writes in her diary:

> The casualty lists are coming out in the papers every day – oh there are so many of them. I can’t bear to read them for fear I’d find Jem’s name – for there have been cases where people have seen their boys’ names in the casualty lists before the official telegram came. As for the telephone, for a day or two I just refused to answer it, because I thought I could not endure the horrible moment that came between saying ‘Hello’ and hearing the response. That moment seemed a hundred years long, for I was always dreading to hear ‘There is a telegram for Dr. Blythe.’ Then, when I had shirked for a while, I was ashamed of leaving it all for mother or Susan, and now I make myself go. But it never gets any easier.

Written in 1921 in the immediate aftermath of the First World War, Montgomery’s *Rilla* was the first book written by the author with the purpose of advancing “a specific point of view.” In

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5 Rutherford, *Hometown Horizons*, 86.
1921, Montgomery wrote to a friend that, “It [Rilla] is really a ‘story for girls’-the heroine being a young girl who lives her girlhood in the years of the great war and I wrote it as a tribute to the girlhood of Canada. So it’s my only ‘novel with a purpose’”.\(^8\) Amy Tector maintains that “Rilla reflects Montgomery’s struggle to chronicle the impact of the First World War within the expected parameters of the Anne series.”\(^9\) Regardless of the fact that the novel is fiction, it is a valuable primary source for the language and ideals it portrays, and for its illustration of life in Canada during the First World War. The novel provides a wealth of information regarding the chosen perspective of many Canadians in the aftermath of the war, particularly with respect to the language and meaning of sacrifice as a way to justify such massive loss of life.\(^10\)

Montgomery’s novel portrays Canadian society in the First World War in such a way that the novel itself is demonstrative of Canada’s postwar myth-making regarding the narrative and remembrance of the war.

Newspapers also offer a valuable resource in terms of piecing together Canadian lives, deaths, and influences throughout the First World War. For instance, Canadian newspapers tried to frame soldiers in idealistic ways to distract from the realities of high casualty numbers\(^11\) After the Second Battle of Ypres, on 26 April 1915, the front page of the *Calgary Daily Herald* included “Alberta’s Casualty List.” Obviously, this list was not as large as the official casualty list found on page ten of the same issue. The remainder of the front page included a large headline reading “Canadians Mowed Down Like Sheep,” but the focal point of the page is a large photograph of Lieutenant-Colonel R.L. Boyle, the fallen Commanding Officer of the Tenth

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\(^8\) L.M. Montgomery, quoted in Tector, “A Righteous War?,” 72.
\(^9\) Tector, “A Righteous War?,” 72.
Battalion out of Calgary. The tagline above the photograph reads, “Brave Alberta Soldier Dead.”12 Clearly, the *Calgary Daily Herald* attempted to pull focus from the large number of Canadian casualties by featuring Alberta casualties (which makes the list look relatively small in light of the dire headlines), while drawing focus to the idealized commander and his “brave” sacrifice. Another tagline on the page includes, in larger lettering, “Rush of Recruiting Follows The News of Fighting at the Front.”13 The front page of the paper was designed in such a way to take the focus off the high casualties, while motivating readers to take up Lieutenant-Colonel Boyle’s torch, follow those who rushed to enlist, and help out their fellow Canadians who were in desperate need of help. The high number of casualties after the Second Battle of Ypres would have cast an almost immediate damper over the enthusiasm for the war to which Canadians had so eagerly volunteered to fight, and provided an ominous portent of things to come.

When casualty lists were finally published, Canadians scanned them carefully for news of loved ones, while dreading the sight familiar names. To this point, Rutherdale notes that casualty lists served as a yet another way to chart the course of the war, and that “as the war dragged on, simply reading newspapers, or overhearing word of the names, gave many on the home front a deepened sense of the losses suffered in local communities and by the country as a whole.”14 Further, Jonathan Vance points out that seeing a familiar name on a casualty list brought the war home and made its consequences real. Recognition of a name on a casualty list meant that “now, the casualty was more than just a name in a newspaper column or a grainy photography in a newspaper. Now, it was a name you knew and a face you recognized. He had worked on the next farm, or bought nails in your store. You had gone to school with him or seen

12 *Calgary Daily Herald*, April 26, 1915, 1, 10.
him in church. He was one of you.” Private Hadden Ellis was 22 years-old when he enlisted in April 1916, serving first with the 13th Regiment Canadian Mounted Rifles, and then with the Canadian Light Horse until his death on 24 September 1917. Upon news of Private Ellis’s death, a relative wrote the following letter to his family:

we received Lillie’s letter telling us about Hadden’s death though we saw it in the paper a few days before hard to realize that it was really Hadden I have been watching the casualty list for some time & he was always in my mind & his name appeared at last which I suppose is nothing more than one might have expected but it is hard to feel that he is gone & made the sacrifice that so many are making in this terrible war & they all belong or are especially dear to some person many a surrounding heart is left to morn the loss of a loved one.

R. Ellis’s letter indicates that the daily scanning of casualty lists became something of a ritual for many Canadians throughout the war.

Owing to Canada’s physical distance from the front, Canadians enjoyed a certain security from the economic and material hardships experienced by many Europeans. This did not mean that Canadians did not face restrictions and other challenges relating to material goods, they did. However, the restrictions that Canadians dealt with throughout the war in no way destabilized the economy in the way that material deprivations did in Europe. Canada’s distance from the front did present other hardships which served to increase stress and anxiety on both sides of the Atlantic. Unlike British and French soldiers, husbands and sons at the front could not return home on leave, which meant that separation often lasted for years at a time. Unless they were willing to relocate, Canadians could not rush to the bedside of a sick or wounded soldier, and

15 Vance, A Township at War, 91.
18 Hanna, Anxious Days and Tearful Nights, 5.
19 Hanna, Anxious Days and Tearful Nights, 5.
sometimes had to wait weeks to receive any letters from soldiers overseas, and *vice-versa*. 

Many soldiers’ letters home include pleas for long and frequent letters from friends and family. Private Herbert Cunliffe’s letter to his mother-in-law read:

> I write these few lines in a hurry as we are preparing to move to France, so I guess my next letter to you will bear a French postmark, and I don’t think they will allow us to write more than one letter a week, and it is just probably that you will have to wait quite a while for a letter after you have received this one, but you can write just the same, as often as possible…

In a letter to his sister, Private Robert Galloway complained, “I have received no letter from you for a long time so I thought I would write and find out what is wrong I have got one letter in five weeks.” Several other soldiers’ letters express concern and anxiety if they were not in regular receipt of letters from home.

For those on the home front, a lengthy gap between letters from a loved one at the front could mean so many things. At best, the letter was lost (ships carrying mail overseas were at risk of being torpedoed), but it is almost certain that families feared the worst – a fear that could not be assuaged until the receipt of the next letter. In some cases, when soldiers did not have time to write, they could send a Field Card where they could check boxes to let their family know they were alright. Obviously, any interruptions to mail service would significantly increase anxieties already keenly felt on both sides of the ocean.

**Dreaded News**

The arrival of a telegram informing that a loved one had died in battle was something that no one could ever quite steel themselves for. There was no amount of prayer or preparation that could spare a spouse or loved one from the shock of receiving the dreaded news of a loved one’s death.

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at the front. The circumstances of death at the front, sudden and violent, with no body and no traditional “ritual of bereavement,” compounded the shock and psychological trauma experienced by the bereaved. One of the psychological effects of bereavement without access to the body included an inability to accept the reality of the loss.

Private Cunliffe served in the 75th Battalion - Canadian Infantry. He enlisted in September 1915, and was killed just over one year later, on 18 October 1916. At just 30 years old, Private Cunliffe left behind a wife, Mary, and two young children. Upon the news of Private Cunliffe’s death, his aunt, Ellen Cunliffe sent the following letter to his brother, Will, who was also at the front, serving in the same unit:

On Saturday morning I was just combing my hair. When my lan lady came upstairs and called out) miss Cunliffe I am sorry but I have some bad news) for you) Herbert is killed I went to work) out o the pain) I thought you all alone poor boy) I feel heartbroken about you. I suppose it’s a cross we must try and Bear It’s a very hard Blow Mary [Private Cunliffe’s wife] went to the post office for the telegram Friday night pays for it) came home) with it thinking it was from) her mother) who is now on the water) and when she did read it) and saw were it was from) and the sad news it contained She Just dropped on the floor unconscious) for 2 hours) they had to stay up all night with her I am trying my best to soothe my sorrow) by trying to Cheer her up) poor girl) she feels it hard I went straight down to Sam Lillies) where she is boarding till her mother Lands back Shes got her house fixed up but she was lonely She expects them either Monday or Tuesday mother and sister while I was at) sam Lillies) who should come in) But your father and mother: I dont know which was the worse) your father or Mary) it certainly is a very hard blow to all of us.

The telegram informing of Private Cunliffe’s death had a particularly perfunctory tone and simply read:

23 Hanna, Anxious Days and Tearful Nights, 208.
24 Hanna, Anxious Days and Tearful Nights, 208.
Deeply regret to inform you 163047 pte Herbert Cunliffe infantry officially reported
killed in action Oct 18th 1916 – Officer in charge record office

Obviously, the news of her husband’s death came as a terrible shock to Mary Cunliffe, and this was likely compounded by her expectation that the telegram she was going to collect was from her mother and sister who were returning to Canada from England. While it is somewhat difficult to decipher, Ellen Cunliffe’s letter demonstrates the way that news of a death in the family might travel from the recipient to other family members. The letter also reveals the different kinds of reactions each individual might have to such news. Ellen Cunliffe felt the need to go to work, to distract herself from the awful news, while worrying about her nephew who remained at the front. She also felt it was her duty to keep Private Cunliffe’s widow company while trying to cheer her and soothe her pain. That Private Cunliffe’s wife had been staying at a boarding house due to loneliness, instead of in her own home, indicates that she was not handling the separation particularly well. Ellen Cunliffe’s letter also acknowledges the deep pain felt by Private Cunliffe’s parents, particularly that of his father. The letters left behind are essential to piecing together the individual grief experienced by Canadians in light of so much death. Private Cunliffe’s file does not contain any correspondence from his wife to any family member upon his death, so it is impossible to know how she managed to recover from her shock and move forward. Without the ability to perform the traditional rituals of bereavement, it is possible that Mary Cunliffe suffered prolonged grief and suffering. What is known, from Ellen Cunliffe’s letter, is that Mary Cunliffe had some familial support in the form of her husband’s family.

While Canadians were publishing news of battles as they were occurring, casualty lists were not immediately available as it took time to compile lists and send telegrams. Soldiers serving at the front had no choice but to hope that should something happen to them, word would reach their families as quickly as possible. However, soldiers were also aware that there was a possibility that mistakes might occur, given that several men shared the same, or similar, names, and that rumours and misinformation abounded. Obviously a mistaken report of a death in action or a rumour concerning such a death could have dire consequences, causing immense and unnecessary shock and grief should it make its way to the home front. There were instances when families were erroneously informed that loved ones had been killed. Private Edward Clarke’s wife, Frances, received a telegram informing her that he had been killed in action on 20 January 1916. In fact, it was Ernest Clarke, who had been killed and not Frances’s husband Edward. Looking at the facts, it is somewhat easy to see how such a mistake could have been made. Both men had very similar names, served in the same unit, and had regimental service numbers which were nearly identical – in fact, only the last number differed. It is easy to imagine the shock and despair that Frances Clarke felt at the news of her husband’s death. Although she was certainly relieved to learn that the telegram had been sent in error, sadly, she was to receive the horrific news again, when Edward Clarke was killed in action on 2 October 1916. The Clarke example demonstrates that clerical mistakes regarding notifications did

29 Hanna, Anxious Days and Tearful Nights, 209.
30 Hanna, Anxious Days and Tearful Nights, 209.
31 Hanna, Anxious Days and Tearful Nights, 209.
34 Edward Clarke – Personnel File.
occur, though hopefully they were rare; and also speaks to one of the potential issues created when the bereaved do not have access to the body of their loved ones upon death – a lack of certainty that a loved one is truly dead. Perhaps Frances Clarke wondered if the second notification was yet another mistake? After all, it had happened once before.

Though the news of a loved one’s death in battle was a constant dread, there were attempts made by the officers and comrades of the fallen to soften the blow and to provide some comfort to the bereaved. On occasion, a letter from the chaplain or the fallen soldier’s unit commander would be sent to the next-of-kin to inform of the death, and these letters were often more consolatory than the short, sharp telegram. Methodist Chaplain George Fallis wrote the following letter to the family of an unnamed soldier who had fallen in battle:

You will have heard before this reaches you of the death of your dear one in the big battle that has just closed a good many of our gallant heroes fell & yours was amongst them. He was killed in action & died with his face to the foe. There are dark days for many individual hearts but in the night of death hope sees a star & listening love can hear the rustle of a wing. Out of the dark there are beams of light. First of all he died in a great cause. The cause of righteousness truth & final triumph was his side & for that cause he gave up his life. And again he did not die as a coward letting the issue go by default but he died a hero fighting fearful odds of shot & shell. He laid down his life for his friends. Jesus said “greater love hath no man than this that a man lay down life for his friends. Your loved one has actually done this very thing. He really laid down his life for others I believe he has fulfilled the Law of Love & am sure that our Father will crown his valour & self sacrifice in Immanuel Land. Jesus said “In my Fathers house are many mansions” I am sure he has one.

He was buried lovingly by the kind hands of his comrades & his spirit has gone to the Homeland. He died not alone but with hundreds of his fellows in one of the biggest fights the Canadians have ever been in before. May our Father bless & comfort you & give you strength to sustain this dark hour.35

It is not difficult to see how a letter from a chaplain, or an officer who was in the same unit as the fallen soldier, would be far more consoling than the perfunctory telegram. Families often had

a desire to know as much about the details of the death as could be given. Furthermore, when possible, families wanted reassurance that their loved ones did not suffer. Further on in Ellen Cunliffe’s letter to her nephew, she wrote, “did Herbert die instantly) do let me know all about it).” Her request is not at all unusual, and the number of letters written to families from comrades providing specific details shows that the desire for details was anticipated.

Upon Lance Corporal John Oxborough’s death on 31 October 1917, Joy Smith received the following reply to a letter she had sent seeking the details of his death. The letter reads as follows:

Dear Miss Smith

Your very kind letter was most welcome and I do appreciate your past esteem and consequent sorrow at the loss of our gallant comrade John C. Oxborough. To properly put together a letter extending sympathy and condolence have ever considered beyond my efforts, and as in most cases, we find it a great boon to hand our padre the known facts of each casualty, by doing so we feel assured that those who mourn are informed and possibly comforted. Where you so bravely ask for the bare facts of how it happened: you remove the greatest difficulty coupled with a natural desire to do everything possible when it has to do with “little Chauncey.” I shall do my best do oblige. Oct. 31st Wed – about 5:30 PM Vapour Farm, P________ Ridge. In an advanced outpost. A 4.5 Howitzer shell landed on the ground about three feet distant. A small particle of shrapnel penetrated the head. The body was otherwise unmarked. Death was instantaneous. At the time we were expecting a counter-attack on that (then newly-won position). About two hours later when the bombardment had quieted down we buried our dead. I found it extremely difficult to remove the identification disk and other personal effects from my splendid pal. Possibly you can understand. The body was in a kneeling attitude with the left arm encircling the head. The moon came out clear from behind the dark cloudbank. Getting down beside him in the hastily erected breastworks in the mud. I turned the body over, the eyes were closed. His dear kind face that ever bore a sunny smile was strangely white and calm. When we lifted him up could not believe it possible that he was gone from us, and lest there should be any possible mistake, we took ten minutes or so to make sure. We had gone through so much together, when we came back to find him still kneeling, it seemed so awe-inspiring and in such perfect keeping with his life and spotless ideals. When no longer he could serve in the body, he could make supplication in spirit. True indeed he was a genuine favourite wherever he went. So clean living, clean minded, and willing to serve others. It is one of our most highly cherished memories that shall ever remain fresh
and green. Yours sincerely for his sake – with burning pride J.K. Moffat shall try to locate the diary. So far have had no success. J.K.36

While it is impossible to determine J.K. Moffat’s position within Lance Corporal Oxborough’s unit, he portrays himself as a very close friend. It is most telling that Moffat took every care to carefully construct the details of Lance Corporal Oxborough’s death to ensure that his letter provided the utmost comfort to the bereaved Miss Smith, leaving no room for further inquiry, while likely leaving out the ugly realities of the death. Soldiers, like Moffat, were aware that they were crafting a final memory for a loved one. The reference to Joy Smith’s letter indicates that there was a need to identify with the final moments of a loved one’s passing. Pat Jalland explains that “they [the bereaved] needed all the information available to help them relive in their imagination the final days of their sons’ lives and deaths.”37 Again, the need for details indicates the desire for a mental image in the absence of the experience of actually being present at the moment of death, and speaks to the difficulty such deaths presented with respect to an absent body and the need for closure.

**Condolence and Consolation**

A review of countless letters of condolence from the front lines indicates that correspondence which came from government and military officials, such as those received from the King, the Minister of Militia, and commanding officers, tended to be formulaic, carried a particularly formal tone, and often made references to the soldier’s brave sacrifice for the Empire and excellent performance in the field. These letters also tended to indicate a lack of personal relationship with the fallen soldier, but did convey respect for the soldier’s duty and bravery in


battle which would have been most meaningful to the bereaved. Upon the death of Private Ellis, his commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Leaunand wrote the following missive to Private Ellis’s father:

Dear Mr. Ellis:

On behalf of the Officers, N.C.O.’s and men of the Canadian Light Horse, I wish to express our very deep sympathy with you in the death of your son from shell fire during the last few days. His Squadron Commander has arranged to have a nice cross made and will have it erected at an early date. His Troop Officer is also writing you with full particulars about the sad event.

I wish to put on record the good work done by your son while with the Regiment. He will be very much missed indeed by all ranks. You have my deepest personal sympathy.

It is important to note Lieutenant-Colonel Leaunand’s mention of the details of the death (and indication that further details would follow), the grave, the fallen soldier’s character, and the fact that the soldier would be missed. These details are important because they are carefully constructed to bring consolation to the bereaved by making mention of those things that mattered to the family and placed the deceased in a favourable light. Martha Hanna maintains that “thousands of miles from the fighting front, deprived of the ordinary rituals of burial and bereavement, a newly widowed wife would have cherished the carefully chosen words of her husband’s superior.” Again, this comfort would have extended to any next-of-kin, regardless of his or her relationship to the deceased. Officers and comrades writing to family almost always described the deaths as “instant,” implying that there was no fear or pain. It did not matter if this detail was not true, as it was more important to spare the bereaved any further pain caused by their loss. The term quickly became a regular part of the language of consolation and served to create a mythic picture of death in battle.

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40 Rutherford, Hometown Horizons, 231.
Letters from the men who served with fallen soldiers at the front (section commanders and comrades) were far more detailed, personal, and consolatory. A further letter received by Private Ellis’s father from Sergeant H.J. Johnson speaks to this point:

You no doubt will have received by now the sad news of your boys death. You will be glad to know a few particulars. He was killed instantaneous by H.E. shell, a piece entering the back of neck. His gang his commanders carried him out last night & buried him at Villers-au-bois in the cemetery there.

He had only been with us a short time. He will be greatly missed, as he was of a very cheerfull nature & had made many friends.

I cannot explain to you the uneasy feeling we have with our reinforcements until seeing them under fire for the first time. But your lad had [?] his Captain & had made good, in fact could trust him on any mission, he was fearless & very willing. I know it must be hard losing a son but [?] have one consolation he died doing his duty bravely, with his face to the foe & no sign of wavering …

Sergeant Johnson’s letter would have been more consoling simply because it contains specific details which not only indicate a far more personal relationship with the deceased, but also brings the bereaved even closer to those final moments which were so important to those left behind. Finally, in a letter to Private Ellis’s mother, Private Stu Brown, a fellow comrade wrote:

Dear Madam,

I am taking the liberty of writing you on the hope that these few lines may be of a little comfort to you at this time. Having lost a Brother myself in the war and not having any news (definite) about him for some months I know it was a source of great worry to my parents so considered this rather as a duty than anything else. However I thought probably you might not get the few details that I might give you from any other source. I was not present when your son was killed but have since spoken to one of the boys that was and you may rest assured that there was no pain with his passing out as he was killed instantly. I happen to be one of his pals, as was one of the four others and a trumpeter detailed to attend his funeral. You will be able to see it almost as we did if you can picture a beautiful September evening in a large military cemetery and just as the sun was going down behind the western horizon we carried him from the little chapel enshrouded in the Union Jack and laid him to rest, the Chaplain reading the burial service and afterwards the trumpeter blew the “Last Post” as everyone stood at attention and the salute.

I might also say that the Authorities deserve great credit for the way these cemeteries are kept each in a separate grave and a nice whole wooden cross with full detail and is supplied by the soldiers Regiment. And in closing all I can say is that Private Ellis gave his life for the best cause for which a man ever donned khaki and that His Duty is done, and well done. Again hoping that you may find a spark of comfort from this information and sending you my and all the rest of the boys deepest sympathy.  

The very specific details offered to Mrs. Ellis in Private Brown’s letter left little to wonder and likely provided additional comfort to Private Ellis’s loved ones as intended.

It is important to remember that not all families of the fallen were provided with the same amount of information about their loved one’s passing. In some cases, there simply was not enough information to reveal, or officers and comrades left to provide answers and details.

Private Robert Galloway enlisted in Swift Current, Saskatchewan in April 1916. He was killed during the attack on Vimy Ridge on 9 April 1917, and his body was never found. His file contains several replies to his father’s requests for information regarding the location of Private Galloway’s final resting place. The final letter in the file, dated 29 June 1921, reads as follows:

With further reference to my letter of February 11th [promising to find out where the Private Galloway was buried], I would advise that I have today received the following letter from Ottawa.

“I regret to inform you that the location of the above noted Comrade is not yet known to the Director General of Graves Registration, and Enquiries. The late batter area in which this Comrade was killed is now being carefully searched for any unmarked graves and reports, in this connection, are being periodically received at Militia Headquarters, and any information which may be received in respect of Pte. Galloway will be communicated to his next-of-kin.”

Upon receipt of any further information, I will advise you.

Yours truly,

J. Melna
REGISTRAR WAR MEMORIAL

Some families had such a difficult time accepting the news that loved ones were lost, that they put advertisements in the newspapers searching for information. An advertisement posted in *The Victoria Daily Times*, on 8 July 1915, read:

MISSING SOLDIER.

Pte. Christopher Stafford, 16th Battalion, Was Probably Member of 30th.

A name which appears among the missing soldiers recently in action is that of Pte. Christopher Stafford, 16th battalion. This probably means Pte. C. Stafford, who enlisted last August with the 88th Fusiliers and left Victoria with the 30th battalion. He was unmarried and 31 years of age.\(^{45}\)

In *The Province* (Vancouver), on 22 August 1919, the parents of Private Robert Smith placed an advertisement including his photograph, which read:

SEEK WORD OF MISSING SOLDIER

The above is a photo of Pte. Robert Smith, No. 1015419, 72nd Battalion, who was reported missing August 18, 1917. Any information regarding the missing soldier will be thankfully received by his parents, Mr. and Mrs. James Smith, who reside at 1174 Broadway west, Vancouver.\(^{46}\)

Throughout the war and for years after, people sought information about the missing. Several newspapers published articles describing the procedures followed when a soldier was reported missing. On 2 September 1916, the *Edmonton Journal* published the following:

MISSING SOLDIERS AND HOW THEY ARE LOCATED

Anxious relatives frequently ask what method is adopted by the war office in ascertaining the ultimate fate of soldiers reported “missing.” According to an official letter just received in Winnipeg from the Canadian record office, London, the method is as follows:

“List of missing soldiers are forwarded by the war office, through the foreign office, to Germany for circulation among the hospitals and internment camps there, and in the event of a soldier being reported a prisoner his next of kin would be promptly notified.”\(^{47}\)

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Other articles similar in subject matter were published throughout the war to try to help families understand the process. An article in *The Ottawa Citizen*, published on 23 February 1916, quotes a statement made by Wentworth Sarel of the Canadian Records Office, wherein he stated, “if, after six months, the ‘missing’ soldier is not located by the Red Cross Society, then his relatives may give him up as dead.” The article is meant to highlight the efforts of the Red Cross Society and the good work they were doing in assisting with the location of the missing. However, it is unlikely that any loved one could so easily have given up hope. The advertisements placed in the paper, such as the one posted by Private Smith’s parents in 1920, indicate that when bodies were missing, loved ones continued to suffer and hope. It certainly would have been difficult to provide condolences if the family themselves were not convinced of their own bereavement.

The letters of condolence that came from friends and family were intended to provide as much emotional comfort as possible. Unlike in the Victorian and early Edwardian era, family did not gather upon the death of a loved one, as with no body to bury, there would be no funeral. Unlike letters from government and military officials (excepting chaplains), which did not necessarily focus on religious references so much as they did on Empire and duty, letters of condolence from family and friends tended to rely heavily on religious references as part of the language of consolation. It is important to note that many letters of condolence to the bereaved make mention of sacrifice. Again, the language of sacrifice implied a worthy death, for a worthy cause.

Upon the death of Private William Bell in the Battle of Vimy Ridge on 10 April 1917, Chrissie Lecocq wrote the following letter of condolence to Private Bell’s mother:

I was awful sorry to hear of your loss, and it will seem more sad and hard for you so far away from where he is laid and among strangers and all, when Alice wrote me about him enlisting I could hardly believe it I never could picture him only the little Billy boy, but Mother said you wrote her that he had grown so tall he would make such a fine soldier, but it seems to bad to think he won’t never be home again, but I suppose when they go away we must prepare ourselves for that but we always have a hope that they will come back, The soldiers always make me sad when I see them marching, but when you think what true noble men they are giving up everything to go and fight for us we should be proud of them, and I know it is proud you were of your soldier boy, and I only wish he had been spared to you, but it must have been Gods will, but he will comfort you isn’t it wonderful sometimes when things seem that you can’t stand any more how some little ray hope will brighten the way and it helps so much in times of sorrow, we have never forgotten you Mrs Bell how good you were to us in our trouble I only wish we were closer to you as a talk is so different, but we must do the best we can and live in hopes of meeting some day.49

Another letter to Mr. and Mrs. Bell from “Cousin Laidlaw” also contained important points of consolation when she wrote:

My dear Cousins I received your very sad news about two weeks ago it was the first I heard so I send you my deepest sympathy its late but none the less sincere my heart goes out to you in your great sorrow I wish I was beside you for I feel that your grief is mine you stayed with me in our great loss and I will never forget your kindness to us at that time I feel for all of you from the bottom of my heart no one knows what it is till the go through it just feels as if your sense’s was numbed the war seems awful as it never did before when it comes home in the loss of a beloved boy it was kind of the ministers of the cabinet to send words of sympathy but to them it is one among the others to you its your boy. But say Isabell did you ever think when we have great trouble it might have been worse isn’t it a blessing you have John and the others to help hear it and when we look around we can always see someone has worse trouble than us oh how many sorrowing mothers broken hearted widows and fatherless children and all through the war why there is no doubt at all but Willie has gone home Greater love hath no man than this than a man lay down his life for his country and friends but say you must not lose your interest in life I know its hard and it seems harder when you don’t even have a grave to go to …50

These letters are markedly different from those letters of condolence received from the front. It is interesting to note that both letters reflect on personal memories of the deceased, both convey regret at an inability to be physically present with the bereaved, both letters attempt to identify

with the bereaved, and both letters reference the pain of not having a grave to visit close by.

Importantly, both letters make specific reference to familial reunions in heaven – in this regard, Cousin Laidlaw’s letter included the following poem:

In loving Memory of Willie [Bell] Sleep on dear Willie in a soldier’s grave T’is been your fate to fall You gave your life for those you loved And for your country’s call Some where in France in peace you lie The spot we cannot tell But in our hearts of days gone by Fond memories ever dwell The midnight stars will ever shine On loved ones where they lie, Yet there is hope to meet again And never say good-bye Deep down in our hearts his fond memory is cherished He oft fills our thoughts as in silence we sit But we are proud when we think of the way that he perished He died for his country in doing his bit.  

Letters of condolence offer insight into ways that the First World War changed traditional forms of grief, mourning, and consolation, as several make mention of the rituals that are missing (i.e., gathering together to comfort the bereaved and visiting the grave of the deceased). Condolence letters served not only to console the bereaved, but they also memorialized the deceased while often reminding that death was a temporary parting with happy reunions in heaven to come.  

Throughout the war, Canadians had a difficult time reconciling the slaughters on the battlefields of the Somme and Passchendaele with a benevolent, loving, and omnipotent God. Canadians found themselves questioning God’s ultimate plan, the purpose of the war, and the necessity of such suffering and slaughter. The churches’ response was to emphasize “Christ’s journey through suffering and sacrifice to redemption and salvation.” The association of the soldier’s sacrifice at war with that of Christ’s sacrifice for the redemption of all mankind was the only consolation the church had to offer. The image of Christ and the belief that soldiers would be redeemed through their sacrifice offered comfort to many Canadians.  

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51 Cousin Laidlaw, “Letter to Mr. and Mrs. Bell.”  
53 Vance, Death So Noble, 36.  
54 Vance, Death So Noble, 36.
Baynes-Reed wrote the following letter to the brother of Private Thomas Jackson upon his death at Amiens on 9 August 1918:

Dear Sir,- It is with regret that I write to confirm the death of your brother, Pte. T. Jackson, No. 669224, 75th Batt., Can. He was killed in action on Aug. 9th in the capture of Le Quesnel in our successful advance, and buried next day in the military cemetery in that place, Row A, grave 8, A cross with his name, number, etc., marks the grave.

It will be a satisfaction to remember that your brother gave his life, and thereby made the supreme sacrifice while discharging his duty to the full to king and country and humanity in their great need.

Surely to those who fall there must be a high place of honor in the next world, and surely also there must be some great blessing coming in the world to compensate in a measure for all the sorrow and suffering and sacrifice involved in this cruel war.

On behalf of the officers, N.C.O.s and men of the battalion, I tender you our sincerest sympathy, and with the earnest prayer that you may be sustained by the consolation which our Christian faith affords.55

The chaplain’s letter gave the next-of-kin the satisfaction of knowing that Private Jackson received a proper burial, and confirmed that his sacrifice, and the sacrifice of his loved ones, would be rewarded. By virtue of his sacrifice, while carrying out his duty to king, country, and humanity, the chaplain reminded that Private Jackson’s death had purpose. To question the war’s purpose and the soldiers’ sacrifice was to question Christ’s sacrifice, and thereby rendering all deaths at the front meaningless. The consequences of such questioning would have been unbearable to those who found themselves grieving for a fallen loved one.

**Spiritualism and Consolation**

As Canadians were struggling with the circumstances of their grief and the lack of closure that came with not having a body over which to conduct traditional funeral and burial rituals, many Canadians turned to spiritualism hoping to find some reassurance that their loved ones were truly at peace. According to Tim Cook, “spiritualism had been embraced in Canadian, British,

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and American society,” approximately fifty years prior to the start of the First World War.  

Cook further explains that “the Great War marked an important turning point for spiritualism. The mass death in the trenches, which fell disproportionately on the young, left thousands of families grieving and seeking closure.” The extraordinary circumstances of a war which brought so much suffering and grief to Canadian homes seems to have called for extraordinary measures in terms of finding consolation and some form of closure.

Jay Winter argues that there are two forms of spiritualism: secular and religious. Secular spiritualism encompasses the belief that the human personality persists after death and therefore it is possible to communicate with the dead. A belief in God is not necessary as this type of spiritualism has nothing to do with theology. Religious spiritualism is entirely dependent on belief in God and involves the contact with, or visions of, “apocalyptic, divine, angelic, or saintly presences in daily life.” This contact is believed to occur “at the margins or outside of the confines of traditional churches.” Both secular and religious spiritualism “flourished during the war and in the 1920s, as thousands confronted mass deaths and sought to contact the fallen.” The spiritualist movement pre-dates the war, but the mass deaths at the front, the inability of traditional religion to offer any comparable kind of consolation, and the endorsement of the spiritualist movement by popular figures such as Sir Oliver Lodge and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, helped to see the movement flourish throughout the war and into the interwar years.

Secular spiritualism was often met with opposition by representatives of Canada’s traditional religious institutions. An article in Vancouver Daily World on 12 March 1917,

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57 Cook, The Secret History of Soldiers, 58.
59 Winter, Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning, 54.
60 Jalland, Death in War and Peace, 24.
61 Jalland, Death in War and Peace, 24.
featured a sermon on Spiritualism given by Baptist minister Reverend Dr. Campbell, titled “Spiritualism, or Do the Souls of the Dead Communicate With Us?” In the article, Dr. Campbell is quoted as stating: “I reject Spiritualism because it is a system of falsehood. It has not even a prima facie case to present. It rests upon tricks, frauds and delusions which have been again and again swept aside. Anything that is left to it is of satanic origin.” 62 Dr. Campbell went on to comment on Sir Oliver Lodge and his book, Raymond, claiming that Lodge had been deceived and deluded by mediums who preyed on his grief over the loss of his son. While Dr. Campbell did not hold Lodge entirely accountable for his alleged gullibility, he did maintain that Lodge believed the mediums because he wanted to, and labelled those who fell prey to charlatan mediums as “foolish.” 63 Further, Dr. Campbell claimed that spiritualism had been around for ages, but that:

Modern Spiritualism had spread its dark shadow over the whole of the western world, and a pathetic phase of it was that hundreds of poor women whose husbands, lovers, sons or brothers were at the front, were daily being led by their anxiety for the safety of their loved ones to seek these soothsayers to see if forsooth they could not get some information regarding how they were going on. 64

Though this article, including Dr. Campbell’s “sweeping denunciation of spiritualism in general,” 65 appeared in 1917, criticisms of spiritualism continued to appear in newspapers into the interwar period. In an article in The Gazette titled “Spiritualism a Menace,” which appeared on 24 November 1919, Reverend F.A. Pratt of the Church of the Good Shepard shared similar sentiments to those expressed by Dr. Campbell. Reverend Pratt denounced spiritualism as evil and mediums as being influenced by “evil spirits.” 66 Interestingly, in a somewhat lengthy letter

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63 “Is An Offshoot Of Materialism.”
64 “Is An Offshoot Of Materialism.”
65 “Is An Offshoot Of Materialism.”
to the editor which ran in the 6 December edition of *The Gazette*, one concerned citizen came to the defence of spiritualism claiming, among other things, that Reverend Pratt was most uninformed. The writer, known only as “Reason,” advised that:

Mr. Pratt before condemning any new thought ought to investigate thoroughly the teachings and creeds to which its followers subscribe. Regarding Spiritualism particularly, I would suggest he consult the books and articles on this subject of such men as Sir Oliver Lodge, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Sir William Crooks, Professors Lombrosi, Hyslop, Flammarion and the Right Hon. A.J. Balfour, late Prime Minister of Great Britain, who is president of the Psychical Research Society of Great Britain. All men who have staked their reputations in admitting the truths of Spiritualism, Intercommunication of the two worlds and the continuity, of life.67

The writer took particular issue with Reverend Pratt’s argument that spiritualism was a denial of God and Christianity. Interestingly, according to Winter, Conan Doyle “did accept the truths of Christianity, which were in his view entirely compatible with spiritualism.”68 It is entirely possible that Conan Doyle’s position regarding Christianity and spiritualism served to encourage Christians who might have found themselves conflicted when it came to seeking assistance in the spiritualist movement.69 In any regard, despite the disapproval of many mainstream churches, people still sought the aid of spiritualists to help them communicate with the dead. Winter maintains that for the most part spiritualists were “honest and true believers,” but that there were also some who were “unbalanced,” or “charlatans.”70 Again, regardless of the potential of being conned, which was never denied, Canadians were willing to take the risk for a chance to communicate with the fallen and to obtain some comfort and closure.71

70 Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, 55.
While soldiers at the front often described having supernatural or uncanny experiences, there were some individuals on the home front who claimed to have premonitions and visions concerning the fate of their loved ones in the trenches.\textsuperscript{72} Ellen Ewen claimed to have had a strange premonition on the night of her husband’s death at the front.\textsuperscript{73} Ewen claimed that while at the movies she became extremely frightened and anxious (she maintains this feeling lasted for about an hour).\textsuperscript{74} According to Hanna, such claims regarding the psychic connections between a husband and wife or a mother and son, were not to be taken lightly.\textsuperscript{75} L.M. Montgomery saw fit to include the topic of premonitions in \textit{Rilla}. In the first instance, the teacher and boarder, Gertrude Oliver experiences premonitory dreams which cause the characters both anxiety and relief as it is believed that her dreams reveal certain outcomes of key battles in the war. In the second instance, Dog Monday (who belongs to Rilla’s brother Jem), has a howling fit the night their brother Walter is killed in the battle at Courcelette.\textsuperscript{76} That Montgomery chose to include these premonitions in her novel speaks to the pervasiveness of the phenomenon throughout the war. In \textit{Anxious Days and Tearful Nights}, Hanna includes several examples of women and children claiming to have had premonitory experiences or visions right before learning of the death of loved ones at the front.\textsuperscript{77} It is difficult to know whether these premonitions and visions were real or if they were reactions to prolonged stress and grief. Regardless, at the very least,


\textsuperscript{73} Hanna, \textit{Anxious Days and Tearful Nights}, 210.

\textsuperscript{74} Hanna, \textit{Anxious Days and Tearful Nights}, 210.

\textsuperscript{75} Hanna, \textit{Anxious Days and Tearful Nights}, 211.

\textsuperscript{76} Montgomery, \textit{Rilla of Ingleside}, 211-212, 241-243, 319.

\textsuperscript{77} Hanna, \textit{Anxious Days and Tearful Nights}, 211.
these claims reveal a strong desire to have some sense of presence or connection with the fallen in their final moments.

**Women and Loss in the First World War**

The story of loss in the Great War is deeply entwined with the story of women. In *A Sisterhood of Suffering and Service*, Sarah Glassford and Amy Shaw inform that “throughout the war women also played active roles in recruiting men to enlist. Women and girls were an important audience and motivation for men’s heroism, so women’s efforts to recruit soldiers became a central element of wartime discourse and, subsequently, of the collective memory of the First World War.”\(^7^8\) In March 1916, *The Gazette* published an article titled “Appeal to Women for Recruiting: Men Know Duty, Women Must Send Them, Said Capt. Gillmor.”\(^7^9\) The article placed the onus for recruiting on women, and Captain Gillmor is quoted as stating: “‘the fight is just as much for you women as for the men, and I leave it with you to see that your men do their share in the work.’”\(^8^0\) There appeared to be an acknowledgement that women had power in the decision to send men to war, and they were urged to use that power to ensure their men retained their manhood.

Sending men off to war presented an enormous burden to many women. Not only did they have to learn to manage their homes and families on their own, but there was also the obligation of voluntary war work, not to mention the paid work that some women had to take on to keep their families fed, clothed, and housed in the absence of the “man of the house.” Women were often left to deal with the reality of death at home and at the front, some with very little

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80 “Appeal to Women for Recruiting.”
support. If a child or other relative passed away, husbands and sons away at the front were not available to offer any kind of comfort or assistance. Unlike in the Victorian era, women throughout the Great War were not afforded the luxury of languishing in their grief. Widows could not step away from society for two years, nor could bereaved mothers of the fallen - the obligations brought by the war would not allow it. Instead, these women were often left alone to deal with the emotional and financial burdens of that death. The death of a husband or son at the front often had detrimental consequences for the family back home, again, presenting a huge emotional and financial burden.

Women had to mediate their grief while continuing to perform vital roles within the family and within a society at war. John Gillis and Melissa Zielke maintain that historically, women have been assigned roles as memory keepers and as “the nation’s chief mourners.” This makes good sense because historically it was women who adorned themselves with hair jewellery and other forms of memento mori upon the death of a loved one. It was also women who were associated with having extremely emotional responses to death, and it was women who were encumbered with the burden of wearing mourning black and heavy crepe, and sequestering themselves from society when a loved one passed. Suzanne Evans explains that “the end of the Victorian era, in combination with the First World War, changed how families coped with and marked death. What did not change is that physical sites of remembrance – women’s bodies and the homes that were their sphere of influence – continued to be used to experience grief over dead soldiers.” Clearly, throughout history leading up to the First World War, women were integral to important rituals surrounding death – from laying out the dead to

82 Melissa Zielke, in Evans, “Marks of Grief,” 220.
83 Evans, “Marks of Grief,” 220.
decorating their bodies in mourning black to mark their bereavement. According to Evans, “by 1914, the long-lasting tradition of women’s wearing mourning black had begun to decline. War losses called it back into use, but this time with a reframed meaning. Where formerly mourning black had held the status of class, in the war it also carried the mark of sacrifice.” Mourning wear was useful not only to the women who adorned themselves in their grief, but it was also useful to the war effort.

Women’s grief was appropriated by the government during the war to encourage able-bodied men to enlist by demonstrating that women were willing to sacrifice that which was most precious to them for a righteous cause. This display was meant to appeal to the masculine sense of duty and encourage eligible men to take up the torch of the fallen. Evans claims that “within many of the combatant nations there were individuals and groups who worried that the sight of mourners dressed in black would scare young men and dissuade them from enlisting.” This also makes good sense as there were a vast number of Canadians in mourning, and such visible marks of grief would have served as a tangible measure of the massive losses at the front, as well as the risk involved for considering enlistment. In June 1918, The Province published an article titled “Deep Mourning Discouraged by Patriotic Women.” The article claimed that women were discussing the elimination of mourning wear in favour of arm bands in black or purple for two primary reasons: “one is because it is less depressing to see many black sleeve bands than to see the same number of persons dressed in deep black. The other is economy.” The article goes on to claim that if black mourning wear were to continue to be worn, it should at least be

84 Evans, “Marks of Grief,” 220.
88 “Deep Mourning Discouraged by Patriotic Women.”
affordable and less extravagant. Regardless of several appeals from different newspapers such as *The Times* and the *Globe*, groups such as the National Council of Women of Canada, and even individuals of influence such as American President Woodrow Wilson, which called for women to put away their mourning clothes and adopt more subtle marks of grief – such as arm bands – many women refused to do so. In February 1916, *The Gazette* published a plea for black clothing which was desperately needed by families of the fallen. The small article states:

While after the outbreak of the war the militia authorities decided that the wearing of black was not essential to showing respect to those who have fallen in the present war, there are many in Montreal who feel that a display of black garments is in better keeping with their grief, and The Gazette has been asked to make the above appeal.

Considering the copious amounts of advertisements from stores such as Eaton’s, Goodwins, and Murphy Gamble, featuring such items as mourning veils, collars, waists, and dresses in black silk and other appropriate colours of mourning, it appears that many women across Canada desired to display their grief with this particular display of sacrifice. This persistence in displaying their grief by wearing mourning black demonstrates that many women sought to retain some semblance of traditional mourning rituals at a time when they were being forced to make significant adjustments to those rituals which, in the past, had brought meaning and comfort. In her article, “The Death of Mourning: From Victorian Crepe to the Little Black Dress,” Sonia Bedikian explains that trends in mourning wear changed to accommodate the special circumstances brought by the war. According to Bedikian:

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89 “Deep Mourning Discouraged by Patriotic Women.”
93 Evans, “Marks of Grief,” 228.
The idea of mourning clothes not being depressing was entirely new; mourning was inherently supposed to denote the pain of its wearer. However, the mass suffering endured by women during World War I made the notions of social isolation obsolete. These women did not wear mourning to stand out, to communicate their loss, to be marked as sexually unavailable.  

With so little that could be observed in terms of traditional mourning rituals, it makes sense that Canadians would cling to what few rituals remained available to them, even if those rituals had to be slightly modified to suit the specific circumstances of bereavement from mass deaths in war.

**Mothers and Sons – A Sacred Bond**

There was significant emphasis on the influential relationship between mothers and sons throughout and after the war. In *Death So Noble*, Jonathan Vance maintains that “two characteristics stand out in reflections upon the nature of the Canadian soldier: his youth and his attachment to a mother figure.”  

Much has been made of this special bond, and this attachment has drawn parallels between the Canadian soldier’s attachment to his mother, or a mother figure, and Canada’s attachment to Mother Britain.  

There are a multitude of letters from the front addressed simply “to mother,” as it was his mother who was often a dying soldier’s last thought and word. The case of Lance Corporal James Fargey is one which best illustrates the special bond between mother and son. Lance Corporal Fargey was from Belmont, Manitoba. He enlisted in Winnipeg in 1915 when he was 17 years-old, and served with the 43rd Battalion until he died in hospital in France from wounds received in battle in October 1916. At the time of his death,

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94 Bedikian, “The Death of Mourning,” 44.
95 Vance, *Death So Noble*, 147.
96 Vance, *Death So Noble*, 147.
Lance Corporal Fargey was just 18 years-old. In his last letter to his mother Lance Corporal Fargey wrote:

My Dear Mother
Sister told me she has written and explained the nature of the wound. Now mother I expect you will have heard of me being wounded long ago as they took my name and number at battalion dressing station but this letter will satisfy you more.
I am under the best of treatment and there is no danger at all. It will be some time before I get any of your mail but I will write regular myself.
It is nice to be lying in a place with beds again and being fed on the best of food.
I had porridge this morning the first for months.
I hope that Lance Corporal hasn’t confused you as I just got made one a couple of days before I went up to the trenches.
Well Mother this is all for now.
With love to all
From your loving son.
Jim
P.S. Now Mother Dear don’t worry much about me as I will get alright.
I thought I was going to send this letter away with Sister. Still address the mail to the battalion until I write and give you the address when I get in Eng.
No need to send anymore parcel as I would never get them and we get fed good.
The Preby Chaplain was in to-day and gave me a splendid little talk.
Jim

Clearly, Lance Corporal Fargey wanted to reassure his mother that he was being well cared for, and it appears that he was also more worried about her anxiety than the reality of his own dire condition as he appeared to downplay his injuries. The letters written to the mother of Lance Corporal Fargey upon his death confirmed that his she was indeed his last thought. Mrs. Fargey received the following letters from the nurse attending her dying son in France:

98 “James Henderson Fargey – Military Service Record,” Library & Archives Canada, accessed 11 Jul. 2021, https://central.bac-lac.gc.ca/item/?op=pdf&app=CEF&id=B2991-S027. Attestation Record lists age at enlistment as 18 years 7 months – this is incorrect as soldier’s birth date indicates that Lance Corporal Fargey was 17 years, and 4 months. He was 18 years, and 9 months at the date of his death.
You will be grieved to hear that your son has become much worse & now his condition is very grave, he is very quiet & has no pain but I feel I must let you know that the doctors fear that the end is very near. He is having every attention & is still quite conscious.

Your brave son continually speaks of you & sends his love to all. He has had his minister to see him & he seems quite happy and peaceful.\textsuperscript{100}

The nurse’s next letter read:

Your grief will be great when you know that your son passed quietly away this morning. He was so good & brave & did not murmer once. He was anxious that you would receive his Bible & just a few things he had with him. He sent his love to all and peacefully gave himself up.

He was one of the finest lads I have ever seen & an absolute hero. I am afraid your sorrow will be great as he spoke continually of you & hoped it would not worry you too much. It may be a little comfort to you to know that everything that was possible was done for your boy & now that all the soldiers graves are well kept I shall put flowers on your boys cross with your love.

With sincere sympathy for you in your great loss.\textsuperscript{101}

Each of these letters offered Lance Corporal Fargey’s mother reassurance that her son was well cared for in his dying moments, that his grave would be well cared for, and that the nurse herself would place flowers on the grave for the mother who could not. The details of her son’s final moments, and the nurse’s attention to important details about the dying young man give the impression that he was not just one of many dying soldiers, but that his death mattered.

The letter that Mrs. Fargey received from the chaplain who attended to her son in his final days further confirmed the son’s affection for his mother and her influence in his life. In his letter, Chaplain Craig wrote:

Dear Mrs. Fargey, I have no doubt that by this time you have heard the very bad news of the death of your son L/C Fargey, who passed away in Hospital 26 yesterday forenoon. I saw him for the first time on Friday, and shall long remember with pleasure and thankfulness my visit with him. He did not seem then to be very seriously ill, and he talked to much about his home, and how you have brought him


up in the love of Christ and of which was proper and good. He said it was that that had kept him pure and strong to [?] the many temptations of army life. Before I left he asked me to read him a passage of scripture, & on my taking out my own testament he begged me to read it from the Bible his mother had given him which he said he never failed to read day by day. On Saturday I had to be away from here all day and yesterday (Sunday) morning. I received a message that your boy wished to see me. I came immediately and found him evidently near his end. He was however quite conscious, and asked me if I would, when this was over, write to you and say that he died happy & that his last thoughts were with you. After prayer with him I had to leave him as it was the hour of my morning service and, by the time I got back, he had passed away. May I confess my deep and warm sympathy with you in the great sorrow that has come over you – and my hope and prayer is that, amidst your grief you may be comforted and cheered by the thought that your boy laid down his life a sacrifice in the noblest of causes, that he died in the faith and peace of Christ, and that now he has gone to receive the reward that awaits a good soldier of Jesus Christ.

I am, yours sincerely & sympathetically

W. Petearson Craig, Chaplain

The chaplain’s letter confirms that Lance Corporal Fargey was spiritually strong and prepared for his death. Mrs. Fargey also received a letter from a very close friend of her son’s at the front which conveyed a great amount of grief and lamented all the kindnesses her son gave that could now never be repaid. The letter went on to reassure Mrs. Fargey that her son was well liked and an excellent soldier – these things appear in many letters from friends at the front. What is unique about this particular letter is the following sentiment: “God help and give you strength Mrs. Fargey to bear the loss of such a brave and noble son who always thought of his mother and did exactly as she new she wished him to do.” This particular sentiment was exactly the kind that would elicit a great deal of pride and comfort as it spoke directly to the influence that Mrs. Fargey had on her son and the way he lived. In fact, each of the letters Mrs. Fargey received from the front were careful to mention that she was her son’s last thought and his

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biggest influence. These were important sentiments that reinforced Mrs. Fargey’s sacrifice, and likely went a long way to consoling her in her loss. That these letters are addressed to “Mrs. Fargey,” and not to both parents is telling and speaks to a recognition of the special relational bond between a mother and son and the reverence that relationship was given throughout the war. In fact, the letters Mrs. Fargey received from the front after her son’s death are solely addressed to her, even though Mr. Fargey was alive. This brings to mind the possibility that the writers of the letters from the front were thinking of their own mothers and what it would be like for them should they be called to make the same sacrifice.

The Canadian Letters & Images Project contains a multitude of letters from soldiers to their mothers, soldiers to mothers-in-law, officers to mothers of fallen soldiers, and comrades to the mothers of fallen soldiers, all of which indicate that the mother was a central influence in the lives of many soldiers. The letters that sons sent to their mothers were, more often than not, somewhat mundane in the requests made for necessities and little luxuries. Soldiers asked for news from home and promised to try to find and visit other soldiers from the same hometown. However, many soldiers did write to their mothers about the horrible experiences they were enduring, especially when a close friend was killed. In many ways, a mother was her son’s best confidante. Private William (Howard) Curtis wrote the following to his mother upon the death of his best friend:

Bert Carpenter was lying asleep in his dugout when a shell exploded at the top of the trench. A piece of shell hit him on the head and he died without a murmur. I want you to convey the news to his mother the best way you can. Bert and I had agreed that, in case one of us got hit, the other would write home to break the news. Bert was well thought of in the Second Battalion. Everybody speaks highly of him. This news will bring great sorrow to his family. One never knows when time will be up out here. Sorrow has come to many a heart in the past nine months and I hope these

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brave men have not died in vain. The German Empire will have to be smashed to bring peace to the world.

I haven’t much news to write. You can assure Bert’s father and mother that no man could have done his duty better than their son. The Second Battalion lost one of their best men when Bert was killed.

The shells are flying over my head as I write this letter. Away to my right the French are engaged in heavy artillery bombardment. It was good news to hear that Heber Rogers was a prisoner in Germany and not killed in action as was first reported.

I must close now Mother but will write and tell you more when I come out of the trenches. Please convey my deepest sympathy to Mr. and Mrs. Carpenter.105

Private Curtis’s letter related his grief over the loss of his friend while revealing his own vulnerable position. It is interesting that he entrusted his mother with the task of contacting his dead friend’s parents to offer consolation instead of sending a letter himself. It is possible that Private Curtis did this because he felt that one mother could console another better than anyone else. It is also possible that he felt intimidated by the task and therefore turned to the one person upon whom he could always rely. In a following letter to his mother written a couple of weeks later, Private Curtis wrote:

I miss Bert Carpenter. For the last month or so I was with him nearly every day. No. 1 Company is a lonesome place now without him. The boys buried Bert behind the trench and when I saw his grave it had some flowers on it and two neat wooden crosses. We were going to put a fence around the grave but were called away to another trench …

I read the account of Heber Rogers’ memorial serve at St. Luke’s church but knew before then that he was a prisoner of war. His service will answer for many other poor lads who have fallen. I would like to have attended Bert Carpenter’s service. It’s no use wishing anything like that out here.106

Private Curtis’s second letter is incredibly melancholy and clearly reveals his grief – a particular kind of emotion that would not have necessarily been appropriate on the battlefield considering the constant presence of death. Private Curtis’s letter also reveals a deep regret at his inability to

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have attended his friend’s service, which speaks to the significance of such rituals – even in the
unique conditions at the front. Whether Private Curtis would have revealed such emotional
vulnerability to anyone other than his mother is not likely.\textsuperscript{107}

Sadly, Private Curtis was killed in action on 8 October 1916, and in a strange twist of fate his close friend Private Stanley Garrett wrote the following letter to his parents upon Private Curtis’s death:

Just a line or two in answer to your most kind and welcome letter which I just received. Well Mother, you have likely heard before now the bad news of Howard Curtis’s death. He was killed the last time we were in the trenches. We just came out now for a rest that we certainly will enjoy. Howard was my best pal. We stayed together like brothers ever since Bert Carpenter was killed. Howard and I were on pass together in England and we came back to France at the same time.

We buried Howard in a graveyard and he has a quiet resting place. I carved a small tombstone out of hard white chalk and placed it on his grave. I would write to Mr. and Mrs. Curtis but there is nothing I can say that would help. When you see them you can tell them their son died a hero. His bravery will never be forgotten in the history of our good old battalion and the glory of the Peterborough boys. Howard was well liked by his comrades. Now my brave pal sleeps peacefully, his duty done for his God and his country, free from danger and harm. May God rest his soul. – You will express my deep sympathy to Mr. & Mrs. Curtis.\textsuperscript{108}

Though Private Garrett’s letter is addressed to both “Father and Mother,” he appears to have specifically entrusted his mother with conveying condolences to Private Curtis’s parents. Private Garrett’s letter is significant not only in its similarity to Private Curtis’s own letter to his mother on the death of Bert Carpenter, but also because he provided at least some explanation for his assignation of the difficult task to his mother. He clearly felt his mother could offer more comfort to the bereaved parents of his friend than he could. This makes sense because mothers

\textsuperscript{107} Private Curtis often wrote to his sister, but those letters tend to be quite humorous, especially when describing close calls and “narrow escapes.” There is a machismo in Private Curtis’s letters to his sister that is not present in his letters to his mother. See: “Curtis, William Howard, M.M.,” \textit{CL\&IP}, VIU, https://www.canadianletters.ca/collections/war/468/collection/20652.

(or mother figures) have often been considered a source of comfort in a way that others are not. It seems that soldiers could express emotional and physical vulnerability to their mothers without having to worry about maintaining a constant façade of brave masculinity. All three of the previous letters (from Private Curtis and Private Garrett), make no attempt to hide the soldiers’ grief, or “put on a brave face.” The ability to write about grief and fear while surrounded by constant danger and death would have been a valuable source of consolation for the soldier who could not openly grieve for fallen comrades, lest he be in a constant state of morale destroying melancholy.

The mother-son relationship has been sanctified in a way that the marital relationship was not, especially throughout the First World War. In *Mothers of Heroes, Mothers of Martyrs*, Suzanne Evans implies that “mother love” is the crucial element of the mother-son relationship which makes it different and sacred above all others. This “mother love” is best explained as the strong and indelible love that a mother carries for her child. With the rhetoric of sacrifice and the religious interpretations associated with the terms, Canadians tended to elevate the status of the mother who gave her son(s) to the service of the Empire. The mother’s sacrifice came to hold a much deeper meaning. Whereas the soldier who fell at the front shared in Christ’s sacrifice, the mother who lost her son at the front was seen to have shared in the sacrifice of the most noble and sacred of mothers, Mary.

As with other forms of women’s grief, the mother’s grief became particularly useful to Canada’s recruitment and commemoration efforts. After all, if a mother could give her most precious possession, her child, to the Empire with the knowledge that he might never return,

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110 Evans, *Mothers of Heroes, Mothers of Martyrs*, 78.
surely others could answer the call.111 When a mother did lose her son in battle, she had to bear her burden of grief in such a way “so as not to damage the morale of others, or after the war so as not to damage the peace or amnesty that the state then supports.”112 Mothers were thought to have a powerful influence over their sons’ lives, and their grief was thought to hold the potential to upend the state’s fragile position regarding not only enlistment, but also the very outcome of the war.

Private Versus Communal Grief During the War

Importantly, community connections were formed through grief and mourning, and consolation came to take on a different form as many Canadians shared their own personal experiences of grief with others who found themselves experiencing similar losses. It is likely that this experiential form of consolation was more effective because it came from a place of sincere empathy. Families, and particularly women, formed bonds over the mutual experience of loss instead of feeling alienated from the rest of society as they might have done before the war.

Upon the death of Private Wellington (Murray) Dennis in August 1918, his fiancée, Margaret Munro, received the following letter from her friend, Elsie:

So you too have been called to ‘kiss the cross,’ and yet I know how bravely you are facing it. Words fail me, Margaret to express the admiration I feel for the truly soldierly way in which you could give me the message. Really, my dear, I felt that I was in the presence of a sacred being – I shall never forget the calm, even tones of your voice. For days during the present drive I have been thinking of you and hoping you might be spared the dread message – but it was not to be, and I’m sure the strong faith that Murray possessed, that whatever is, is best, will help you all along the way. He has fought the last fight and gone to the reward of a true soldier and truly, It seems we are the dead who stay behind. You know how my heart aches for you Margaret and how I long to be with you. You and I have one great bond of suffering have we not, Margaret. I wish I could mean half to you what your friendship has meant to me in my sorrow. As I said, Margaret, there are many compensations, and as the days go on, time will reveal many more. How proud you must be Margaret, to have made the great sacrifice for one who believed that

111 Evans, Mothers of Heroes, Mothers of Martyrs, 7-8.
112 Evans, Mothers of Heroes, Mothers of Martyrs, 7-8.
“Because right is right to follow right where wisdom in the scorn of consequence. In heartfelt sympathy, I am your friend Elsie”

Elsie’s letter of condolence appears to be extremely sincere and speaks to a bond that can only be forged between those who share in the suffering of loss. This sincerest form of consolation would have helped to reassure Margaret that there was purpose to her loss, and that her sacrifice would only be rewarded in time.

Throughout Canada there was an emphasis on pride of sacrifice, and one of the ways that Canadians came to display their sacrifices, outside of wearing mourning, was through the display of a service flag. The service flag came to Canadian homes relatively late in the war – announced in the Spring of 1918 – and was modelled after the American service flag. Evans relates that though the service flag came into use in the last few months of the war, it was quite popular. Women were encouraged to display the flag in their windows. The authentic service flag was to have a red border with a white panel and blue maple leaves – each leaf was meant to represent a soldier serving in that family. Red maple leaves were meant to represent fallen soldiers.

Toward the end of the war, two medals were created to honour the sacrifice of mothers whose sons had made the ultimate sacrifice. The first medal was created by the Associated Kin of the Canadian Expeditionary Forces and was referred to as the bronze IOAMS (International Order of Allied Mothers in Sacrifice) medal. According to Evans, the Associated Kin of the Canadian Expeditionary Forces “believed the family was the centre of a moral society and that

117 Evans, “Marks of Grief,” 231.
the mother was the core of that centre.”\textsuperscript{118} It was also an organization with political ends, largely focused on recruitment and strongly in favour of conscription and disenfranchisement for conscientious objectors and all men who were fit but who refused to bear arms.\textsuperscript{119} Evans proposes that these reasons might explain why the IOAMS medal was not looked upon as favourably as the Silver Cross medal, and has since faded from Canada’s history.\textsuperscript{120} The IOAMS medal was first rewarded to mothers in Exeter, Ontario in April of 1918.\textsuperscript{121} At the war’s end, the IOAMS medal lost its momentum and the last ceremony where it was awarded occurred on Mother’s Day in 1919.\textsuperscript{122}

The second medal - the Silver Cross (also known as the Memorial Cross), was not announced until the winter of 1919, though its inception came about during the war in 1916.\textsuperscript{123} Unlike the IOAMS medal, the Silver (Memorial) Cross “had the credibility of the national government behind it and it did not come with a stated recruitment agenda.”\textsuperscript{124} In that way, the Silver Cross medal was meant for a more diverse group than the IOAMS medal. Of the two medals, the Silver (Memorial) Cross was not only awarded to mothers, but also to widows, and is the only medal of the two still awarded today.\textsuperscript{125}

Families of fallen soldiers were also provided with a bronze Memorial Plaque, sometimes referred to informally as a “Dead Man’s Penny,” along with a commemorative scroll which contained the name of the fallen soldier and acknowledgment of the enormity of his

\textsuperscript{118} Evans, “Marks of Grief,” 232.
\textsuperscript{119} Evans, “Marks of Grief,” 232.
\textsuperscript{120} Evans, “Marks of Grief,” 232.
\textsuperscript{121} Evans, “Marks of Grief,” 231-232.
\textsuperscript{122} Evans, “Marks of Grief,” 232.
\textsuperscript{123} Evans, “Marks of Grief,” 233.
\textsuperscript{124} Evans, “Marks of Grief,” 232.
\textsuperscript{125} Evans, “Marks of Grief,” 221, 235.
sacrifice in service of “King and Country.” These two particular commemorative items were produced by the British government and were awarded to the next-of-kin of all British service members who died in the war. The service flag, memorial medals, memorial plaque, and commemorative scroll are significant because they represent attempts to create new rituals surrounding death which were meant to incorporate sacrifice and a shared experience of loss. These new rituals were not remotely dependent on wealth or social standing, but did serve to perpetuate the myths regarding Canada’s First World War experience by acknowledging and rewarding the sacrifices made by Canadians.

As previously mentioned, for the most part, bodies of Canadian soldiers who died at the front were not repatriated. In the absence of a body to bury, this often meant that there were no funerals. Families had to find other ways to mourn their dead. In Rilla, Montgomery’s Rilla is sitting at her desk and in her journal, she writes:

over my desk hangs Walter’s picture, looking at me with his beautiful deep eyes; the Mona Lisa he gave me the last Christmas he was home hangs on one side of it, and on the other a framed copy of ‘The Piper.’ It seems to me that I can hear Walter’s voice repeating it – that little poem into which he put his soul, and which will therefore live for ever, carrying Walter’s name on through the future of our land. Everything about me is calm and peaceful and ‘homey.’ Walter seems very near me – if I could just sweep aside the thin wavering little veil that hangs between, I could see him – just as he saw the Pied Piper the night before Courcelette.

The scene that Montgomery has crafted is Rilla’s reflection on the death of her older brother in battle at Courcelette. At her desk, Rilla has created a memorial shrine to her brother which holds not only his picture but also those items (the Mona Lisa and the poem) which help her to feel connected to him. This small personal shrine gives Rilla a place to be where she can reflect on

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127 “Memorials in Canada: Personal Memorials.”
128 Montgomery, Rilla of Ingleside, 302-303.
her brother and feel close to him in the absence of a grave to visit. In *The Quick and the Dead*, Richard Van Emden features a photograph of one such “private shrine” kept in the home of a family who had lost a son in the war.\(^\text{129}\) It seems likely that there were many families who created such visible reminders of their war dead in the absence of a grave.

The copious amounts of private letters and other memorabilia (pieces of a soldier’s kit and other personal belongings) which are now held in archives such as the *Canadian War Museum* and the *Canadian Letters & Images Project* indicate that letters, pictures, and other personal items of the fallen were kept and cherished throughout and after the war. Private Cunliffe’s family kept the box containing his personal belongings which were returned to them after his death, as well as all correspondence. Interestingly, among Private Cunliffe’s personal belongings returned to his family, was a belt buckle which contained two bullet holes.\(^\text{130}\) It is not clear if this was his belt buckle – worn when he was killed, or if it is a souvenir he took while on the battlefield. While some items returned may have caused some distress (especially if the item was a stark reminder of the way the soldier met his death), I would argue that these items became sacred objects – a special kind of *memento mori* – because they were the last tangible connections to the dead of the First World War. In essence, they served to connect the bereaved with the moment of their loved one’s passing, as well as the grave. Without access to the body and the grave, the personal belongings, correspondence, and photographs were all that remained and gave the bereaved something to see and touch when they needed to feel close to those who had passed.


In Canada, throughout the war, several communities conducted memorial services to commemorate their fallen. These services were held in the absence of individual funerals to help the communities come to terms with their losses and to emphasize the importance of the sacrifices being made. There were also occasions where memorial services were held for individual soldiers – usually officers – though these appear to have been less common. For the most part (with rare exception), repatriation was only permitted if the soldier died on English soil. Such was the case regarding the body of Captain Robert Clifton Darling, who died in hospital in England from wounds received when he was shot by the enemy in March of 1915. Captain Darling’s body was brought back to Toronto, Canada, by his wife, Phyllis, in May of 1915.

Discussing Darling’s repatriation and funeral in his book, Our Glory & Our Grief, Ian Miller claims that although Darling was an officer from a wealthy and prominent family, his social status and rank did not matter to the thousands of Canadians who turned lined the streets or packed the church to participate in his funeral. According to Miller, “what mattered was that he, like so many from the city, had served his country and died in the line of duty.” Miller makes a good point when he observes that the entire city of Toronto was in mourning over the numerous losses in the Second Battle of Ypres, and that as people crowded the streets and church for Captain Darling’s funeral, they were remembering their own soldiers lost on the battlefield in France. Where families and loved ones could not conduct familiar rituals for their own dead, they could take some part in the rituals commemorating Captain Darling’s death,

131 Vance, Death So Noble, 60.
133 Ian Hugh Maclean Miller, Our Glory & Our Grief: Torontonians and the Great War, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 41-42.
134 Miller, Our Glory & Our Grief, 42.
as he became a sort of proxy for the masses of dead lost at the front. Later commemoration movements in the interwar years would further acknowledge this need.

**Conclusion**

Canadians left behind on the home front had to endure difficult challenges and they had to do so while sporting a brave face. The letters which they carefully preserved have left behind an invaluable archive which indicates that families were aware of the hardships in the trenches and the brutal ways that men died in the many battles of the First World War. Canadians turned to each other for support and comfort while trying to avoid adding to the burdens of loved ones at the front. Throughout the First World War, Canadians endured the constant news of mass death as they feared and faced the dreaded news that their own beloved soldiers would never return home. They clung to their faith and to other forms of spirituality to find comfort and solace in their losses.

Women and children bore the brunt of home front hardships as they struggled to manage tasks inside and outside of their traditional gender roles. The need for women to take care of their families, carry out important war work, and in some cases, work outside the home to provide the basic necessities of life, meant that women could not maintain many of the previous century’s social conventions surrounding death and mourning. As many Canadian women became widows and many children became orphans, they had to learn to carry on in the knowledge that life as they knew it before the war was over. As men went off to fight, mothers sacrificed that which was most precious to them, their precious sons, for what they believed was the noblest of causes. The sacred bond between mother and son could never be broken, not even by death, and this bond was sanctified through the rewarding of medals to the women who gave their everything for God and Empire, while strengthening the narrative of purposeful and just sacrifices made.
Throughout the war, Canadians found ways to memorialize their fallen loved ones. They displayed service flags, attended memorial services, created small shrines in their homes which included loved ones’ pictures and personal possessions, and they used their own losses to empathize with and comfort friends, family, and even strangers who faced the same immeasurable losses. The nation used the grief and mourning rituals of Canadians, particularly wives and mothers, to gather recruits and garner further support for the war effort. Families of the missing continued to hope and suffer long after the war, and many never stopped looking for answers – often refusing to accept their loss without the dead body of their loved ones.

Chapter four of this thesis briefly examines the ongoing search for Canada’s war dead in the immediate postwar period, and the commemoration movement that carried on into the interwar years. The Imperial War Graves Commission policy of “Equality of Treatment,” which included a strict rule against repatriation of Canadian war dead, and the massive number of Canadian soldiers missing with no known grave meant that Canadians were forced to reinterpret traditional rituals surrounding death, while finding meaningful ways to commemorate Canada’s fallen soldiers.
Chapter Four: Postwar Searching and Commemoration

Search for the Missing Dead

Perhaps one of the most important concerns people had throughout the war and in its aftermath was for the proper burial of their dead. As explained earlier in chapter two, there was an emphasis on ensuring that the nation’s dead received a proper burial. Importantly, by the end of the war, there were literally thousands of Canadian soldiers who were unidentified and laid to rest in graves, their identities “known only unto God,” or who were missing and therefore had no grave at all. Valiant efforts were put forth by the Directorate of Graves Registration and Enquiries (DGR&E) – later taken over by the Imperial War Graves Commission (IWGC) to search for the bodies and graves of those dead.¹ According to Jeremy Garrett, with respect to the search for the missing:

the influx of manpower at the end of the war allowed the Army and the Directorate to coordinate search efforts for the bodies. Each week, these ‘lost bodies’ were being found at a rate of approximately 600 a week, which continued until the Directorate’s personnel strength was reduced. Even after that, bodies were still being found at a rate of 200 per week.²

Regardless of these efforts, thousands of bodies were never recovered. Jalland explains that “thousands of soldiers had no known burial place because their bodies were shattered by shells or scattered by subsequent engagements … it was almost impossible for families to come to terms with the reality of their soldier sons’ deaths without a body and an identified grave.”³ Not knowing was problematic in many ways. Because there could be no closure, there was always a presence of hope. As the interwar period wore on, this hope began to fade and give way to an emptiness that could only be understood by those who endured it.

¹ Garrett, “Tribute to the Fallen,” 215.
³ Jalland, Death in War and Peace, 50.
When possible, many officers wrote to the families of fallen soldiers to reassure them that their loved ones received a proper burial. In a letter to the father of Private Reginald Paul, one chaplain wrote:

I have recently recovered the remains of Pte Reginald Paul, which have been lying out since he was killed about a year ago. I have buried the body in one of our military cemeteries quite near to where he fell. The War Office will be writing to give you full particulars when they have received our list. I have found on the body the letters I now enclose. These are awfully sad days and I am very sorry you have been called upon to give up the one who has died the Hero’s death for King and Country & in support of Right and Honour.  

The chaplain’s letter to Private Paul’s father granted his family some small degree of comfort, and reveals that even when the dead had been missing or ‘lying out’ for a long period of time, work was still being done to provide a proper burial and suitable final resting place.

Photographs of graves were extremely important to family members who were lucky enough to have a fallen relative identified and buried. Graves were photographed by Grave Registration Units (later taken over by the DGR&E and the IWGC), and could be sent to families who requested them. Gwen Fisk, whose son was killed in action at the same time as Private Hadden Ellis and was buried beside him in a cemetery at Villers-au-Bois, visited her son’s grave in 1921. At that time, she took a series of photographs of the cemetery and in August of 1923, she wrote to the relatives of Private Ellis describing the beauty of the cemetery, the excellent conditions of the graves, and enclosing the photographs. Fisk’s initial letter sparked a reciprocal correspondence with Private Ellis’s mother, and in subsequent letters dated 25 January 1925, and 4 November 1927, Fisk included further photographs of the cemetery and

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surrounding country, while reassuring that the cemetery was well looked after. These letters were likely of great comfort to Private Ellis’s family as they provided tangible evidence that their son was properly laid to rest and that his grave was being well cared for.

**Battlefield Pilgrimage and Commemoration**

While traditional religion may have had a difficult time consoling those Canadians who struggled to reconcile a loving and benevolent God with the mass deaths which occurred throughout the war, in the interwar period, it was precisely traditional religion which offered the best language and imagery for commemoration. Art and design historian Catherine Moriarty argues that “in the face of mass death Christian symbolism ‘provided an accessible and palliative language’ for a nation in mourning.” This argument makes sense considering Canadians went to war bolstered by Christian language and symbolism, such as the declaration of khaki as a sacred colour and the image of the soldier as Christ. In *Death So Noble*, Vance explains that by the war’s end, “the battlefields of Belgium and France were no longer Flemish fields or Picardy orchards; the blood of Canada’s youth had sanctified the very earth, transforming the Western Front into a new Holy Land.” This very sentiment is reflected in an article which appeared in the *Saskatoon Daily Star* on 9 July 1920. The article declared the battlefields of Europe “Holy Ground,” stating:

> Who can remain unmoved as he drives into Ypres by the Menin Gate and reads the notice which the Burgomaster, M. Colaert, has set up in three languages here, as at other prominent points in the ruined city:

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7 Lloyd, *Battlefield Tourism*, 5

8 Catherine Moriarty, quoted in Lloyd, *Battlefield Tourism*, 5. Note: Catherine Moriarty is a Professor of Art and Design History at the University of Brighton.

9 Vance, *Death So Noble*, 56.
The Burgomaster and the City Council of Ypres urge you to remember that the ground you walk on is hallowed by the sacrifice of 250,000 British officers and men, who were killed or wounded in four terrible years of battle endured in the Salient of Ypres, and whose heroism Belgium can never forget.

And when at last the traveller stands in silent awe before the majestic ruins of the Cloth Hall, he will read a second notice put up by order of the Town Major of Ypres:

This is holy ground. No stone of this fabric may be taken away. It is a heritage for all civilised peoples.

This is holy ground, not Ypres alone but Armentieres, Lens, Arras, Albert, Peronne, and the broad lands which stretch in front and on either side of the once fair cities whose names will be linked for all time with the valour of the British race.10

This same article went on to declare the “long line of cemeteries,” the holiest of shrines of the British race, and called for better commemoration at these sites so that future generations of Belgians, French, Britons, and Americans would not forget the four hard years of battle fought from 1914 to 1918.11 This article demonstrates the way that the memory of the war was framed in religious terms to help sanctify not only the memory, but also the very ground on which soldiers of many nations lived and died. Surprisingly, an article in The Gazette, published in July 1920, noted that:

Canadian travellers to the battlefields are comparatively few thus far; or perhaps those who have come pass unnoticed in the great tide of American travel that is sweeping into France.

... The majority of these tourists of the battlefields seem to be actuated by natural curiosity to see the scene of the titanic warfare. A few, only a comparative few, seek the soldier’s grave in which a loved one lies.12

It is not surprising that the number of Canadians visiting the battlefields of Europe was relatively low. Cost and distance would have served as significant barriers for many Canadians, and those who did not spare the expense were more likely pilgrims – those who travelled to the battlefields

to stand at the grave of a fallen loved one or on the battlefields were loved ones vanished. Pilgrims seemed to have had personal attachments to the sacred battlefields, perhaps more so than those who toured the battlefields out of curiosity.\textsuperscript{13} According to Vance, it was a dream of many Canadians to visit the hallowed ground where their loved ones fell, look upon their graves, and honour their sacrifice.\textsuperscript{14}

 Europeans and officials from all combatant nations expected that people from all over the world would make the trip to visit the battlefields and the graves of their fallen soldiers. An article published in \textit{The Vancouver Sun} on 10 February 1919 claimed:

 Europe is looking forward to one of the biggest American touring seasons on record, when peace is signed, and normal traffic conditions are resumed. Thousands of people in the United States, in Canada and in the British Isles are already contemplating, for various reasons visiting the battlefields on the continent to see for themselves where the great fights for freedom took place.

 Of course, a very large number of people will come to see where their beloved ones fought and fell in the war against the Huns.\textsuperscript{15}

 In light of this expectation, it was important to ensure that when families did arrive, those who had a grave to visit had a positive encounter, satisfied that their loved ones were laid to rest in cemeteries befitting of their sacrifice. It is hard to believe, given the sheer number of war casualties, that many battlefield visitors would not have had at least some small connection to these sites, as most of the population of combatant nations lost, or knew someone who lost a friend or relative to the battlefields of the First World War.

\textsuperscript{13} To learn more about debates surrounding battlefield tourism and battlefield pilgrimage see: David W. Lloyd, \textit{Battlefield Tourism: Pilgrimage and the Commemoration of the Great War in Britain, Australia and Canada, 1919-1939}, (Oxford: Berg, 1998).
\textsuperscript{14} Vance, \textit{Death So Noble}, 56.
It was up to the IWGC to determine how the cemeteries of Imperial soldiers would be cared for after the war.\textsuperscript{16} It was eventually decided that the wooden markers which originally marked the graves of the fallen would be replaced with standardized headstones.\textsuperscript{17} The IWGC had a policy of “Equality of Treatment,” and this was the “defining principle among IWGC officials for how soldiers’ bodies were to be treated after death.”\textsuperscript{18} This meant that there was to be a uniformity in commemoration of the dead regardless of rank.\textsuperscript{19} Garrett explains that “the Dominions widely supported Equality of Treatment and unanimously accepted its adoption. Robert Borden, Prime Minister of Canada, stated that it was “entirely appropriate that among the ranks of the dead there should be no distinction.””\textsuperscript{20} Imperial cemeteries were turned into memorial gardens conveying an atmosphere of peace and beauty. In fact, Vance claims that there was a determination by the IWGC to deter visits to battlefields and cemeteries overseas until such time as they had been “beautified,” and that this was done to ensure that cemeteries would be rendered so appealing as to discourage demands for the repatriation of bodies.\textsuperscript{21} Vance also maintains that “once the cemeteries were completed, few relatives could have wished for better resting places for their loved ones.”\textsuperscript{22} According to Vance, “by turning the soldiers’ graves into gardens of the dead, the commission helped the relatives of the fallen to avoid the reality of death in battle. The ordered and charming cemeteries meant that visitors never had to confront the ugliness of their relative’s death.”\textsuperscript{23} Given the horrific circumstances of death at the front, \textsuperscript{16} Garrett, “Tribute to the Fallen,” 220. \textsuperscript{17} Garrett, “Tribute to the Fallen,” 220. \textsuperscript{18} Garrett, “Tribute to the Fallen,” 221. \textsuperscript{19} Garrett, “Tribute to the Fallen,” 221. \textsuperscript{20} Garrett, “Tribute to the Fallen,” 222. \textsuperscript{21} Vance, \textit{Death So Noble}, 64. \textsuperscript{22} Vance, \textit{Death So Noble}, 63. \textsuperscript{23} Vance, \textit{Death So Noble}, 65.
and the inability of families to conduct funeral and burial rituals at the home front for their war
dead, this seems a kindness to the bereaved more than an act of deception.

Visits to the battlefields and cemeteries of the fallen were almost certainly sombre, reverent, and reflective occasions. Vance explains that “even before the peace treaty had been signed, tourists began arriving on the battlefields, as many as 60,000 in the summer of 1919 alone.” Again, the 10 February 1919 article in The Vancouver Sun confirms that this influx of tourists was anticipated. The mass of visitors to the battlefields speaks to the fact that people from many combatant nations sought to process their losses by visiting, at least once, the graves of the fallen and the sights of the battlefields which consumed four long, dark years of their lives. In Battlefield Tourism, David Lloyd explains:

> Pilgrimages were among a range of ceremonies and rituals of mourning and commemoration which brought consolation to many people in the aftermath of the war. Implicit in the act of making a pilgrimage was an instinctive spiritualism which expressed itself in the belief that it was possible to get closer to the spirit and even the spirits of the dead by visiting sites associated with the war.26

This statement compliments Vance’s assertion that “visiting a war graves cemetery became a religious experience more profound than anything possible in church or chapel.” The presence of the spirits who made Christ-like sacrifices and therefore sanctified the very ground on which they died explains the meaning behind the religious experience of the pilgrimage. With that in mind, it can be understood how battlefield pilgrimages helped those who, in the absence of the ability to be present at the death of their loved one, sought connection with the moment they were ultimately denied by the war.

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24 Vance, Death So Noble, 57.
25 “Battlefield Tours Being Arranged,” 5.
26 Lloyd, Battlefield Tourism, 5.
27 Vance, Death So Noble, 65.
Lloyd explains how “religious imagery, rituals and belief played a significant role in many pilgrims’ visits to battlefields, cemeteries and memorials.”\(^{28}\) According to Lloyd, “religious belief offered many pilgrims solace through the knowledge that they would be united with their loved ones in the afterlife.”\(^{29}\) Religious belief also offered the chance to return to rituals and traditions that had been denied by the circumstances of the war, and pilgrimage offered one way to continue the ritual of visitation of the dead, though in an altered format. Of course, there are debates concerning the role of religion in the commemoration movement, including battlefield pilgrimage. George Mosse argues that beginning with commemoration, “the memory of the war was refashioned into a sacred experience which provided the nation with a new depth of religious feeling, putting at its disposal ever-present saints and martyrs, places of worship, and a heritage to emulate.”\(^{30}\) Essentially, Mosse believes that religion was appropriated to justify the war experience and to craft a new memory of the war where no death could have possibly been in vain. It could be said that the use of religious language and imagery in commemoration meant that there would not be any demand for accountability for the mass casualties of victorious and failed combatant nations, as sacrifices made in a Holy War could not be questioned. Regardless of the reasons that religious imagery was employed, it cannot be denied that it helped the bereaved to come to terms with their losses and gave them an outlet for the expressions of their grief.

The commemoration movement began during the war, but picked up momentum in the aftermath of the war when people had a chance to devote to it the attention they felt it deserved. Vance claims that Canadians were “motivated by a desire to retain the ideals of the war in the


forefront of the public consciousness and ensure that the names of those who enlisted were preserved for eternity.”31 According to Vance, “by 1939, it was difficult to go anywhere in the settled parts of the country without encountering a war memorial in one form or another.”32 The fact that these memorials were so prevalent speaks to the significance of memory and to have some tangible place to go to remember loved ones buried or lost at the Western Front. Jim Blanchard explains that:

The monuments were important because most people who lost someone in the war could not make the trip to visit their graves in the vast cemeteries in Belgium and France. As well, of the 750,000 British and Dominion troops who were killed on the Western Front, fully 300,000 had no known grave. Many were buried under the tons of earth thrown up by shelling, while some simply sank into the filthy mud. They might have been hurriedly buried in mass graves or their battlefield grave might have been obliterated in the fighting.33

Blanchard makes an important point because though significant memorials were erected at the front to honour the sacrifice of Canada’s war dead (such as the Vimy Memorial and the Menin Gate to name just two), the unlikelihood that most Canadians would ever have the chance to see them and to touch the graves or names of their dead, made the local response to commemoration all the more important. Essentially, monuments served as proxy graves for the fallen on the home front. It seems that Canadians were not willing to forego the ritual of having access to a physical reminder of their loved ones.

There were many ways that individual families undertook to preserve their loved one’s memory. According to Vance, “some of the densest collections of memorials were found in Canada’s churches; indeed, it is not uncommon to find dozens of separate memorials within the walls of a single church.”34 As many of Canada’s churches supported the war and encouraged

33 Jim Blanchard, Winnipeg’s Great War, (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2010), 263.
enlistment of eligible parishioners, it makes sense that memorials would be found in the places where many of their journeys began. Throughout the war, some families erected memorial plaques for their fallen soldiers on the walls of their church. St. Stephen’s church in Calgary, Alberta, has several of these individual memorials to the parish’s fallen lining their walls. The memorial plaque of Claude McMullen reads as follows:

To the Glory of God  
And in Loving Memory of  
Sergt. Claude C. McMullen  
Killed in Action in the Battle  
Of the Somme at Courcelette  
Sept. 26, 1916  
Aged 35 Years

These plaques resemble the same kind of inscriptions and formatting that would have been seen on a gravestone and were meant, in some sense, to take the place of one. These would give the family some comfort as they sat in church on Sunday, when they were able to see a tangible reminder that their loved one had lived and would be remembered. In Rilla, Montgomery’s Rilla sits in church and looks upon her brother Walter’s memorial plaque and “is filled anew with courage.”36 Again, Montgomery’s inclusion of memorial plaques speaks not only to their prevalence, but also to their purpose – they were meant to keep the memory of the dead and to invoke a certain emotional response, depending upon who viewed them. The placement of these plaques within the church also further connected the sacrifice of the soldiers commemorated with that of Christ, as the memorial plaques were placed along the same walls which often contained an image of the crucified Christ.

35 J. Brownlee and C. Bain, “Program: Second Sunday in Lent – February 25, 2018” St. Stephen’s Anglican Church. Each Sunday throughout Lent, St. Stephen’s Anglican Church has two church historians (John Brownlee and Chris Bain) research and publish information on a fallen soldier from the Great War whose plaque hangs on the walls of the church. This is an annual tradition and J. Brownlee and C. Bain have been kind enough to provide the writer with copies of several of their memorial profiles.  
36 Montgomery, Rilla of Ingleside, 305.
Throughout the interwar years, memorials in stained glass were popular projects undertaken in many churches. According to Vance, “with these richly coloured and evocative windows, Canadians expressed their perceptions of the war and the sacrifice it entailed, and their feelings towards the men and women who had fallen. In doing so, they employed text and iconography which suggest that they emerged from the inferno with their traditional ideals intact.”37 Again, the language of sacrifice and religious motifs present in the commemoration movement served to reinforce the values that drove so many Canadians to go to war in the first place. For those sacrifices to retain their value, they had to remain front and center in the commemoration movement.

Service rolls were incredibly important to Canadians and speak to the importance of immortalizing the names of the fallen. The compilation of service rolls has a long history in Canada, dating back to the 1800s.38 Vance refers to Canada’s history with this commemorative endeavor as creating a sort of “cult of the service roll,” indicating that recording the names of soldiers had become something of an obsession in Canadian society.39 Of course, the mass deaths suffered by Canadian soldiers in the First World War made the commemoration of individual soldiers something of an obligation. According to Vance, “the successful defence of Christianity and Western civilization made it even more imperative to record the names of those Canadians who had served the cause. As a consequence, the compilation of rolls became and important ritual in postwar Canada.”40 Many institutions throughout Canada published service rolls, created honour rolls, and published memorial volumes as a way to honour those who

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38 Vance, Death So Noble, 115.
39 Vance, Death So Noble, 116.
40 Vance, Death So Noble, 116.
served and those who fell.\textsuperscript{41} Vance claims that honour rolls and memorial volumes were “in part consolatory; the ability of the bereaved to speak the name of the dead signified a coming to terms with the death, after which the emotional healing could begin.”\textsuperscript{42} To see a loved one’s name in print, or to hear it spoken in ceremony, could serve to fill the silence created by the absence of the physical body of the dead and those rituals which could not be performed without it.

Armistice Day, which would later become known as Remembrance Day, was particularly significant to Canadians in the interwar years, especially to those Canadians whose loved ones had made the ultimate sacrifice. Armistice Day ceremonies represented an opportunity for communities throughout Canada to come together and grieve the fallen. Vance explains that:

The eleventh of November was a day to pay tribute to the men and women who had laid down their lives in a just cause and to reflect upon the nobility of the sacrifices made for Christianity and Western civilization. It was not an occasion to wonder if Canadian soldiers had died needlessly or to recall that many of them had suffered dreadfully in the trenches. It may have been a day to pray for peace, but it was not a day for pacifism. On the contrary, it was a day to honour those people who had been willing to fight for peace.\textsuperscript{43}

To have an annual commemoration of the war was one way to keep the war, its lessons, and the individual sacrifices made front of mind for Canadians, serving not only to help the bereaved process their grief, but also to remind Canadians that it was important to preserve the ideals that were believed to be worth dying for. In \textit{Rilla}, Walter sends a letter to Rilla the night before he meets his death at Courcelette. In it he writes:

And will you tell your children of the Idea we fought and died for – teach them it must be lived for as well as died for, else the price paid for it will have been given for nought. This will be part of your work, Rilla. And if you – all you girls back in

\textsuperscript{41} Vance, \textit{Death So Noble}, 117-118.
\textsuperscript{42} Vance, \textit{Death So Noble}, 119.
\textsuperscript{43} Vance, \textit{Death So Noble}, 219.
the homeland – do it, then we who don’t come back will know that you have not ‘broken faith’ with us.\textsuperscript{44}

Clearly, Montgomery crafted Walter’s letter in a way which indicates that in the aftermath of the war, Canadians understood exactly what they were being asked to remember.

Memorials to the missing held a special kind of significance that was less political in nature and more consoling. The Tomb of the Unknown Warrior at Westminster Abbey in London, England, was meant to represent the Empire’s missing soldiers. The appeal of this particular form of commemoration was that it was meant to be both collective and personal. On a collective level, the anonymous soldier represented the thousands of missing dead with no known grave.\textsuperscript{45} On a personal level, he could be anyone’s husband, son, father, or brother.\textsuperscript{46} Jalland explains that “the impressive burial of the Unknown Warrior in Westminster Abbey on 11 November 1920 carried special meaning for the relatives of those other Unknowns – the huge army of missing soldiers, unidentifiable, lost in mud, or blown to bits.”\textsuperscript{47} It seems likely that many families of the missing would have wondered if he could perhaps be their own missing loved one, explaining why so many bereaved lined up along Whitehall awaiting their chance to view the tomb when the funeral of the Unknown Warrior took place on 11 November 1920. Jalland notes that within one week, one million people visited the tomb of the Unknown Warrior thus creating an important ritual for those who might have worried that there would be no commemoration for their missing loved ones.\textsuperscript{48}

On 25 May 2000, the journey began for Canada’s own Unknown Soldier, starting with a hand-over ceremony at the Vimy Memorial, 72 hours of “lying in state, replete with a round-the-

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext{44} Montgomery, \textit{Rilla of Ingleside}, 249.
\footnotetext{45} Vance, \textit{Death So Noble}, 43.
\footnotetext{46} Jalland, \textit{Death in War and Peace}, 61.
\footnotetext{47} Jalland, \textit{Death in War and Peace}, 61.
\footnotetext{48} Jalland, \textit{Death in War and Peace}, 61.
\end{footnotes}
clock military vigil and visitation in the Hall of Honour of the Centre Block of Parliament;”

and a committal service ending in his entombment at the National War Memorial Plaza in Ottawa on 28 May 2000. In a letter to the Corporate Secretariat of Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC) on 7 August 1996, Daniel Wheeldon, Secretary-General of the Canadian Agency of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission wrote:

You will be aware that after World War I the remains of an unknown British warrior were repatriated and placed in Westminster Abbey, representing the loss of all the Empire and symbolizing the Commonwealth brotherhood in times of adversity. Great care was taken at the time of choosing to ensure the anonymity and the remains could indeed be those of a soldier of any of the Commonwealth forces; however[,] Canada may feel that, with the passage of time, this no longer fulfills Canada’s needs.

As with the Unknown Warrior who lies entombed at Westminster Abbey, Canada’s Unknown Soldier also remains anonymous. What is known is that he fell at the Battle of Vimy Ridge, as was recommended by Major General Dallaire (spokesman for the Canadian Armed Forces), and his identity is to remain anonymous in accordance with conditions of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. In her article, “What Remains: Repatriating and Entombing a Canadian Unknown Soldier of the Great War in the Nation’s Capital,” Katrina Bormanis asserts that “the installation of Canada’s Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in the face of the National War Memorial transformed an existing memorial site into a sepulchral space that simultaneously commemorates and concretizes war losses in the service of nationhood.”

The repatriation of Canada’s own Unknown Soldier is an evolution of a ritual which allows Canadians to

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commemorate their own missing war dead in light of their independence from Britain, and as a nation in their own right.

**Conclusion**

While the search for the fallen took place during and after the war, it was after the war that the Imperial War Graves Commission, and all of its concerned nations, could truly devote the manpower and time to locating, identifying, and burying the dead. This task would not have been a pleasant one, but the efforts were likely more than appreciated by families whose loved ones were still missing at the war’s end. Though the postwar period is beyond the scope of this study, it represents an important time in terms of commemoration and the mythic creation of Canada’s collective memory of the four years of horror now known as the First World War. Canadians undertook many different endeavors to solidify and sanctify the memory of the fallen in the absence of traditional death rituals which were highly dependant on physical access to the bodies of the dead. The justification of that absence through the language and commemoration of sacrifice attempted to alleviate the suffering caused by the absence of the physical remains of the dead.
Conclusion

The First World War ended 103 years ago, but the war had a powerful impact on the way that Canadians came to understand death and the rituals surrounding it. In particular, the shocking number of deaths in the First World War forced Canadians to reinterpret their understanding of a good death. Prior to the war, in the early nineteenth century, Victorians of all classes engaged in specific rituals surrounding death. Each of these rituals was dependent upon the possession and presence of the body of the deceased. First, the aspiration for a good death was paramount, and a good death was one in which suffering was meant to be endured with the same grace and courage upon which Christ endured his suffering on the cross. A good death was a redemptive death that was not quick, but allowed time for reflection and acts of contrition. The family would be present, keeping vigil over the deathbed, and Christian rites would be administered to ensure the soul’s heavenly departure when the time finally came. Families would come together and comfort each other. They would share stories and precious memories. The body was carefully laid out so that everyone could be reassured that proper care was given and the dead were treated with the appropriate reverence and respect. In middle- and upper-class Victorian homes, more elaborate rituals were performed. Women donned mourning black, heavy black crepe and paramatta, jet jewellery and jewellery made from the hair of the deceased, and men were also suitably adorned in black suits with hats and capes (later replaced by armbands). Even as mourning displays were simplified toward the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century, the most important rituals – the deathbed, visitations and wakes, the funeral cortege, the burial, and the visitations of the grave remained. The body of the dead remained central to these rituals, even as beliefs surrounding heaven, hell, and the afterlife in general underwent changes. Heaven became a place where families would be reunited, and hell was not the brimstone, fire, and torment it had been in the earlier centuries. Hell was the absence of God.
The First World War saw everything change, and change rapidly. Suddenly, hell was a trench in France infested with stench, lice, rats, and the rotting corpses of men not-so-long dead, and for some, death became a welcome reprieve. In fact, the battlefields of the First World War were littered with the unburied dead, many of whom would never see a proper burial, let alone a funeral with Christian rites. Canadians enthusiastically entered the war believing it would be short and victory would be easily won. They quickly realized they were wrong. Canadian soldiers endured four long years of brutal, life altering conditions, forced to live like animals among the dead while trying to make sense of the awful sights of seeing men suffer and die in the most gruesome and horrific ways. All the while, soldiers at the front developed ways to cope with the inevitability of death (either theirs or their leaders and friends). Many Canadian soldiers risked life and limb to recover the bodies of their fallen comrades and provide them with some kind of proper burial. They wrote letters to families of the fallen, carefully worded, providing often fictitious details of dignified, painless, and instant deaths, while unburdening themselves of the truth in the letters they wrote to their own families. While some soldiers turned to their religion and clung to their faith, other soldiers turned away from the church and kept their faith, and some abandoned both. Soldiers looked to fatalism to help relieve the anxiety of the unknown, and many turned to spiritualism while clinging to the idea that death was not the end, that they would see their families in heaven, and that their personalities would persist beyond death. The population of Canada at the time of the First World War was not quite eight million people.¹ The deaths of over 60,000 soldiers created unimaginable grief in homes across the country, touching almost every community.² With the horrors of the First World War, came a

² Cook and Morrison, “Longing and Loss from Canada’s Great War,” 60.
reinterpretation of the good Christian death. A soldier’s death became a good death by virtue of the sacrifice of life willingly made in service to God and country. Sacrifice became redemptive, and it was through sacrifice, that the soldier became one with Christ, sharing in Christ’s eternal reward. This language of sacrifice helped Canadians at all levels to accept the insurmountable losses, while continuing to support the war.

On the home front, Canadian families bravely sent their men off to fight. Send-offs at the railway quickly took the place of the deathbed vigil as families said goodbye with the understanding that they might be saying their final farewell. The send-off was where the deathbed vigil began for Canadians all across the country. Canadians made a ritual out of scanning the daily casualty lists for familiar names with dread and anxiety. Thousands of next-of-kin received the awful news, often via perfunctory telegrams, informing them that their loved ones had been “killed in action,” and would never return. For some Canadians, the news was even worse, as they were informed that their loved ones were “missing, presumed dead.” Without access to the bodies of the dead, Canadians could never be one hundred per cent sure that their loved ones were really gone, and they had difficulty accepting their bereavement. They wrote letters begging for details to reassure themselves that it was indeed their loved one who had fallen. If they were fortunate, they received letters providing accounts of the last moments of their loved one’s life and death. These letters were meant to offer confirmation and comfort, but they could never replace the experience of being present. When there was a burial, letters were often sent by the officer or chaplain in order to reassure that the proper Christian rites had been administered and that details of the grave would be provided when allowed. This did not mean that these bodies were safe. Continued fighting and shelling meant that many of these bodies were lost, and were later counted among Canada’s thousands of missing soldiers. For the
families of the missing there could be no closure. They would always wonder about their lost loved ones, while imagining the worst.

When a notice of death came to families and friends on the home front, women tended to bear the brunt of the news. They donned their mourning black, but without the ability to indulge in any real period of isolation and mourning. They had to continue to do their war work, raise and support their families, and support other bereaved friends and families when they too were “called to kiss the cross,” all the while suffering from immeasurable grief. In the cases where families had seen more than one member off to war, the fear, anxiety, and grief, was constant. As previously mentioned, in the Victorian and early Edwardian eras, families gathered for funerals and offered support to the bereaved. Throughout the First World War, gathering at the news of a death often did not happen since funerals did not take place without the body. In light of so many deaths, Canadians would have found themselves in a constant state of bereavement. Instead of gathering, people wrote letters of condolence meant to provide consolation and comfort to those who were bereaved. They often lamented the inability to be “there in person,” but without a funeral, there seemed to be no reason to make the journey, especially since so many Canadians were left alone to care for their own families, while committed to their war work, and likely worried about missing any news about their own loved ones at the front. Many Canadians who had faced losses were able to offer a special kind of experiential comfort to friends and family who found themselves bereaved. This kind of consolation was likely more comforting than the kind that came without personal understanding. Mothers willingly sacrificed their sons to the war, and when those sons fell, sharing in the sacrifice of Christ, mothers of the fallen shared in the sacrifice of Mary. The special bonds between mother and son meant that

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mothers faced an unbearable and unending grief when those sons were lost. Theirs was a strange kind of grief mixed with pride. This particular sacrifice was acknowledged by Canadians in the form of the bronze IOAMS medal and the Silver (Memorial) Cross. Many mothers proudly donned these “marks of grief,” while their hearts were forever broken. Given that Canadians could not hold funerals for loved ones whose bodies were buried or lost at the front, they were forced to find other ways to express and process their grief. Toward the end of the war, families displayed service flags in their home indicating how many men in the family were fighting, and how many men had fallen, while demonstrating their support for the war. Families created shrines in their homes that contained the pictures and personal belongings of loved ones, they carefully preserved letters and other mementos, and they attended memorial services and commemoration ceremonies at the local level, which often served as proxy funerals for their own fallen loved ones, while reinforcing the myth that the First World War was a holy war and the sacrifices made were justified. In this way, private grief often became communal.

Early in the postwar period, the search for the bodies of the missing continued. Many bodies were found and buried, and those who could not be identified were laid to rest with headstones indicating that they were “known only unto God.” Canadians that could gather the means to travel embarked on battlefield pilgrimages to stand in the places where loved ones fell and, if possible, to visit and place flowers on the grave of a fallen loved one – at least once. For their part, the Imperial War Grave Commission did its very best to provide the war dead resting places that were made beautiful, in some ways to make up for an ugly death, and in many ways to ensure that the ugliness of those deaths was not felt by the families who came to visit their dead. For families whose loved ones were without a final resting place, efforts in the interwar period ensured that at least their names were recorded on monuments to the missing.

Remembrance of the dead took on a new significance as a result of the war, especially when
dead met their ends in service of others. Throughout the interwar period, the dead became the focus of commemoration movements and served to remind Canadians that the war and its losses were justified.

David Cannadine’s assertion that the interwar period was marked by an obsession with death, makes sense, since the First World War had brought an unprecedented number of dead who were denied a “traditional” death at home, in their beds, surrounded by loved ones. They were denied their families, and the opportunity for one last chance to make amends, at least in person. They died knowing they were leaving their families to mercy of the Canadian government, and there was nothing they could do about it. So many of these men were denied final religious rites, they were denied funerals, and many were buried where they fell, never to be recovered. Those whose bodies were recovered and buried in cemeteries would lie with their comrades, but would do so in far away graves that could not be regularly visited by loved ones. The soldiers whose bodies were lost or so destroyed that they ceased to become anything but blood and human effluence mixed with mud, would consecrate the very earth that consumed them. In all cases, the men who died on the battlefields of the Western Front would never return home and would remain a permanent part of the landscape scarred by the ravages of war.

In turn, families were denied the opportunity to be present at the death of their loved ones at the front. They were denied the opportunity to comfort them and to care for them. They could not look upon their dead one last time as they were carefully laid out in the home. Canadians on the home front had to rely on the kindness of officers and friends at the front to provide final details so that they could soothe their own imaginations and feel some kind of connection to the moment when their loved ones passed. Without access to the body of the deceased, Canadians

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4 Cannadine, “War and Death, Grief and Mourning in Modern Britain,” 189.
had to make death meaningful in other ways. Replacement rituals became important not only to mark the lives and deaths of the fallen, but also because they served to perpetuate the myth that the war was just and therefore the deaths resulting from that war were just. To believe anything else was to render such deaths meaningless, and would create unbearable suffering among those Canadians who had so willingly sent loved ones off to die.

Perhaps one of the most important and lasting changes to the ways that Canadians understood death, grief and mourning can be seen in the way that people came to understand the idea of a “good death.” No longer was a good death dependent on dying at home surrounded by loved ones with a clear mind and a clear conscience. Throughout the First World War, a good death came to include a sudden death, when the death was met with courage and occurred in the spirit of sacrifice. Family reunions in heaven gained importance as many Canadians lost husbands, sons, brothers, and fathers in the war. When the churches could not offer satisfactory consolation and struggled to answer questions regarding how a benevolent and loving God could allow such carnage and death to happen, spiritualism and other forms of belief offered ways for families to make some sense of their losses, or at least find some comfort.

Another important way that ideas surrounding death changed in the First World War was with the realization that death was the great equalizer. In the First World War, men met their deaths in a variety of ways that had nothing to do with social standing, wealth, rank, religion, or race. Gas, shells, bullets, and bayonets did not distinguish between officers and other ranks. Generals and privates died the same way. As the war endured, the policy of Equality of Treatment meant that not only did men die in the same manner, but they were also buried in the same manner, their graves displaying uniform headstones – the only distinction being the information carved into them: rank, name, unit, and an inscription carefully chosen by the next-of-kin. The bodies of many officers went missing just as did the bodies of other ranks. Finally,
the dead of the First World War were commemorated in the same manner and on the same cenotaphs and monuments – officers and other ranks together, were made equal by their sacrifice. The name of the dead, and the character of the individual attached to the name – especially in their final hours - took precedence over the body because the body became an object that did not determine where the individual ended up after death. The body disappeared, but the name was captured on monuments and the character was captured in the many letters of condolence – from officers and friends at the front, and in the memories of friends and families left behind. While some families had means to create monuments to individual soldiers, one important fact remained, the nation held dominion over the dead of the First World War and by that point, the dead of the First World War became the dead of the nation.

Throughout the war, Canadians were certainly trying to maintain some semblance of the traditional rituals surrounding death, and this was seen in the way that soldiers at the front attempted to provide as many of the rites of death on the body as could be performed under the circumstances. This attempt to maintain tradition was also seen on the home front as Canadians continued to display their grief by donning mourning wear, despite calls to leave such rituals behind. Yet Canadians proved themselves to be resilient and were able to alter critical ways of thinking about death and the fate of the dead, and make adaptations as necessary in those circumstances required by the war. It is evident that some of the changes made to rituals surrounding death endured long after the war. The medicalization of death (meaning fewer people died at home), the rising popularity of cremation after the war (which meant that an intact body or a grave with a headstone were no longer entirely necessary for consolation and closure), and the changing priority of religion in the lives of many Canadians, speak to some of the enduring changes brought to Canadian society in the aftermath of the war. Essentially, for many
Canadians, the body was no longer central to rituals surrounding death. Pat Jalland and Joanna Bourke both emphasize the effect that the war had on the way returned soldiers in particular viewed death. According to Jalland in *Death in War and Peace*, “the horrors of trench warfare violated faith in the sanctity of the body and the grave. Many soldiers were sickened by memories of makeshift burials on the Western Front, and piles of unburied rotting bodies in no-man’s-land.” It seems that returned soldiers no longer had a desire to see any corpse – no matter how nicely laid out it was. The desire to sanitize death was bolstered by the horrors of the trenches. In the aftermath of the war, funerals were generally smaller, less elaborate affairs, and cremation became a reasonable option throughout the twentieth century. The First World War led Canadians to reflect on their beliefs about what constituted a good death. The circumstances of death in the First World War led many Canadians to conclude that a good death could be achieved even if it happened suddenly, and that the traditional rituals surrounding death could be altered to cope with loss and to keep dearly departed loved ones close by.

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5 Bourke, *Dismembering the Male*, 221.
6 Jalland, *Death in War and Peace*, 103.
7 Bourke, *Dismembering the Male*, 222.
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