

***“Faith Under Fire”:
Canadian Presbyterians and the Great War,
1914-1918***

by Tom Hamilton, Charlottetown

“The fighting is going on very hard, but God is good to me, and I tell you it is out here that we know there is a God.”

- Pte. Benjamin F. MacDonald,
25th Battalion, 11 March 1916.

When Benjamin MacDonald enlisted in the Canadian Expeditionary Force on 7 December 1914, he left behind his family and his church family at the Presbyterian Church in the rural village of Breadalbane, PEI. MacDonald had embarked on one of the greatest adventures and most macabre experiences of his life. He was not alone. More than 600,000 Canadians donned military uniforms and swore an oath of allegiance to King George V. It wasn't supposed to last long which was why the oath on each attestation paper was limited to one year, but also included the caveat of further service “should the war last longer than one year.” For four deadly years, the war dragged on until more than 9 million military personnel and an estimated 20 million civilians had perished. Canadian casualties amounted to approximately 67,000 dead and approximately 173,000 wounded as well as the 11,168 names which appear on the Vimy Memorial – those who have no known grave. There were also the tens

of thousands who spent the rest of their lives enduring the physical and mental scars of war. There were 10,000 diagnosed cases of shell shock (the First World War equivalent of PTSD), and countless more who never sought help and suffered wars mental scars the rest of their lives.

The Canadian experience in the First World War has received meticulous attention from numerous historians who have painstakingly researched and described the complexities of war. This has included the boredom and terrors as Canadian soldiers lived, fought, and died or survived trench warfare on the Western Front in northern France and Flanders.

While trench life and battles have been thoroughly studied, the role of religion in time of war has received much less attention. This is surprising considering the prominence of religion in early twentieth century Canada. Certainly, there were those who served in uniform with little thought of the importance of religious values, yet there were others who experienced quite the opposite. The purpose of this article is to try to illuminate some of those whose religious beliefs affected them deeply and profoundly despite the atrocities of war. In particular, this article will attempt to provide a glimpse of some of those

religious-minded Canadian Presbyterians whose faith, not merely helped them endure the carnage of war, but provided the basis of a new understanding of hope and redemption in the midst of such sacrifice and bloodshed. Furthermore, there are significant lessons which contemporary Presbyterians can learn from their forbears in uniform during the First World War who experienced "faith under fire."

In 1914, Canadian society overwhelmingly identified itself as a Christian society. According to the Canadian census figures for 1911, 97.8 percent of Canadians listed themselves as belonging to a Christian denomination. Of that total, Roman Catholics accounted for 39.4 percent, while the largest Protestant denomination was Presbyterians at 15.6 percent. It was an era of expansion and prominence in Canada for the Presbyterian Church.

Fueled by the dedication of diligent church leaders such as Rev. James Robertson, the church experienced such an increase west of Ontario that, by 1914, more than a third of all Presbyterian families lived in Western Canada. Canadian Presbyterian missions

were firmly established around the world, and at home Presbyterians were also leading the fight for moral reform in Canada's cities through the Social Gospel Movement. In addition, through the influence of devout Presbyterians such as J.A. MacDonald -- the managing editor of the *Toronto Globe* -- the opinions and actions of prominent Presbyterian leaders and Presbyteries was frequently reported on the front pages of Canadian local and national newspapers.

When war was declared on August 4, 1914, Canadian Presbyterians gave voice and action to their support of the conflict. As dutiful British Subjects loyal to King and Empire, their purpose

was clear -- to defeat German militarism. But militarism in Canada also had its advocates including noted professor and journalist Andrew MacPhail -- a devout Presbyterian -- who wrote in his weekly column across Canada that: "The school mistress with her book and spectacles has had her day in the training of boys, and sensible parents are longing for the drill-sergeant carrying in his hand a good cleaning rod or a leather belt...That is sovereign remedy for the hooliganism of the town and the loutishness of the city." For overwhelming numbers of Presbyterian Canadians there was no debate or second guessing the proper course of action -- war.

Some Presbyterians took the call to arms into their own hands -- literally. Col. John McCrae, a Presbyterian Elder from Guelph Ontario whose son would become renown through his poem "In Flanders Fields", was appointed new Commanding Officer of the newly formed 43rd Battery Canadian Field Artillery to secure recruits for his unit. Col. McCrae stormed the corridors of Knox College and

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enlisted thirty students into his unit. But he didn't stop there, he also solicited other seminary students, and they came to sign up from as far away as Princeton Theological Seminary.

Despite the bravado, patriotic rhetoric and empty promises -- including a swift end to the war and assurances of being home by Christmas -- Presbyterians in uniform experienced the highs and lows of soldiers overseas. They endured the rigors of basic training at Quebec's Camp Valcartier and at British camps throughout southern England. They enjoyed the sights of London and also new adventures such as journeying to Scotland by train on the Flying

Scotsman. But once they crossed the English Channel and advanced to the Western Front, everything changed. Within its daily military scheduling the realities of trench life included: mustering for roll call in the early morning, filling sandbags and repairing trenches, enduring the gristle of “bully beef”, mouldy bread and other frequently “spoiled” military rations, waking up to rats walking across ones face, and popping lice that had eaten their way into the soldiers’ wool uniforms. Adding to these dailies duties was the ever present danger of sharpshooters, mortar rounds and enemy attacks.

In the midst of the horrors and carnage of war, religious-minded Presbyterians served with distinction and frequently turned to their Christian faith to strengthen and sustain them. One of those was Hugh Boulter. He enlisted in Port Arthur Ontario in March 1915, and served with the 52nd Battalion. He led his section “over the top” during the battle of the Somme and also during the fighting for Passchendaele. Having been in the trenches for eighteen months, and despite his longing for home, his faith was sustaining his morale. As he wrote in a letter to his sister:

I was feeling a bit down in the lip, I had visions of home sweet home, I could see your face, sister, and all the others were quite plain before me...I worked on digging a place to get cover from rifle and machine gun fire. I don’t trust a hole in the ground to keep me from danger. There is One higher than me who knows and I will trust in Him...I am not afraid to die Cora for I have offered my life more times than I have fingers and toes since I came over to France.

“I want to escape the utter destruction of the soul that overwhelms me when I think of Ypres and Passchendaele, the hell of Lens...The sheer havoc and appalling desolation of it all haunts me....We are learning today what sacrifice means, for the human race is marching to its Calvary.”

Hugh Boulter never saw his beloved home again. He died of wounds just before the end of the war.

It was not left to religious-minded Presbyterians to discover “faith under fire” for themselves because they had military chaplains, also known as “Padres”, to help show them the way. Presbyterian, Anglican, Methodist, Baptist, Salvation Army and Roman Catholic Clergy enlisted as military chaplains to help sustain the morale of Canadians in uniform and to provide religious ministrations. Of nearly three hundred military chaplains, some sixty were Presbyterian Padres. The Rev. Dr. John McNeil, Moderator of the General Assembly, described his encounter with some Presbyterian Padres in an article for the *Record* in which he noted:

The battalion to which he is attached is his congregation...He holds service with them when that is possible. He writes their letters when they cannot do so themselves...He goes over the top with them into the hail of death, carries back the wounded to the shelter of the trench, sometimes giving up his own life in the brave attempt to help

and save his men. He comforts the dying pointing them to the Saviour, takes their last messages and sends them to sorrowing homes far away.

McNeil’s description of Padres, including the dangers of serving under fire, proved to be all too true. During the Battle of Passchendaele in the autumn of 1917, Presbyterian Padres George Kilpatrick and Robert Thompson were ministering in the midst of enemy fire. They were forced to wade through knee-deep water and mud which proved to be deep enough for

wounded men to drown in. At one point during the German attack, Thompson was temporarily blinded by mustard gas. Kilpatrick was put in charge of running a medical aid post which had been set up in a pillbox, and he was also responsible for burying the dead. He sent out a group of men to act as a burial party, but only hours later had to arrange for their burials because they had all been suddenly killed.

In the midst of such carnage and horror, Presbyterian Padres experienced first-hand the importance of religious faith in times of danger and battle, but they also noted that the church had failed to teach religion in a practical and personally accessible way, as many Canadians in uniform discovered. In 1918, Padre Kilpatrick wrote his father that the experience of war was “forcing men to fall back on God, but when they did they discovered that they did not understand their faith and were reaching and groping for a coherent interpretation of their inner experience.” The Church’s creeds and theological statements were not enough. Kilpatrick believed that soldiers in battle needed “a more personal and direct interpretation of the presence and significance of Christ in their lives.” Kilpatrick was not alone. In a questionnaire distributed to military chaplains returning from overseas, the majority gave a ringing endorsement to Kilpatrick’s assessment of the Church’s need to better meet the “spiritual longings of contemporary society.”

To meet the spiritual longings of returning veterans and the families back home, many Presbyterian Church leaders forged ecumenical ties with renewed energy believing that church union would provide religious direction and meaning. But other Presbyterian Clergy turned to another, more spiritual theme, which resonated with Canadians afflicted by war -- sacrifice and redemption. Padre E. H. Oliver who would become principal of Presbyterian College, Saskatoon declared: “I want to escape the utter destruction of the soul that overwhelms me when I think of Ypres and Passchendaele, the hell of Lens...The sheer havoc and appalling desolation

of it all haunts me.” Oliver’s faith propelled him to declare the solution to the spiritual longings of contemporary society: “redemption through a cross, life through death...We are learning today what sacrifice means, for the human race is marching to its Calvary.” Christ’s incarnation and sacrificial death on a cross resonated with Presbyterian leaders like Oliver and, in light of the carnage of the war, served as a powerful and poignant reminder that even the most horrible sacrifices could lead to personal redemption and even the eventual regeneration of society.

There are significant lessons to be drawn from the experiences of Canadian Presbyterians during the First World War. Firstly, despite the horrors of the war, faith provided a significant source of comfort and strength for religious-minded Presbyterians. Secondly, the sheer magnitude of the destruction and the struggle for existence quickly simplified religious experience and revealed the importance of spiritual experience over dogma. Thirdly, the crisis revealed a religious opportunity to make a difference. Church attendance may ebb and flow, but genuine spiritual experience is life-changing and often affects someone throughout their entire life. The horrors of the First World War swept aside the institutional veneer of the Church and revealed a stuffy and, in some ways, irrelevant religion at odds with the horrors of trench life and the sacrifices of war. But out of the ashes, many Presbyterian padres and ministers reminded the Church of the relevance and importance of redemption, which provided hope. The reality of Christ’s redemption is just as powerful today as it was for the first century church, and for religious-minded Presbyterians during the First World War as they experienced “faith under fire”.

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BOOK REVIEWS

R. Paul Stevens, *Work Matters: Lessons from Scripture*, (Eerdmans, 2012), 176 pgs.

Stevens, professor emeritus of marketplace theology and leadership at Regent College, Vancouver, has thought and written extensively about Christians in the workplace. He has called the church to recognize that those who work in secular jobs are no less called to ministry in their work than are professional clergy.

In *Work Matters* Stevens gives readers reflections on twenty Biblical texts or characters who provide examples of various types or aspects of work. Ruth is a sign of “Survival Work” and Daniel of “Exilic Work”. Not all the work described is praise worthy – The Sluggard of Proverbs shows up in “Slothful Work” and Cain is a sign of “Degraded Work”.

Among the temptations Joseph faced as he did “Vocational Work”, Stevens’ notes, was the temptation to “locate his identity in his occupation.” Stevens seeks to strike an important balance when he writes, “We can allow ourselves to be totally absorbed by the work dimensions, whereas calling is much, much more....God has summoned us to participate in his grand plan of renewing everything and bringing shalom. Our work is part of this but only part.”

Each of Stevens’ reflections is five to seven pages long and end with questions for discussion and reflection. The book could be helpful used in study groups in church or even better across denominational lines in workplace settings

Daniel L. Migliore, *The Power of God and the gods of Power*, (Westminster/John Knox Press (W/JKP), 2008), 141 pgs.

All theological writing is contextual, that is it is rooted in time and place. Written in a post-911 North American context, Migliore’s book on power is no different. Having said that does not mean the book has nothing to say, it is worth

reading; however while reading the book it is worth asking, for example, how would this book sound different if written by Rwandan refugees living in a camp in Congo? Migliore himself suggests the importance of such questions when he writes, “The pilgrimage of faith requires honest examination of our understandings of God in the light of the gospel. It involves asking whose interests our understandings of God and the church are serving and what way of life they are supporting.” (72)

Migliore highlights the power of God which is revealed in weakness and humility, a pattern of life all the followers of Jesus are invited to follow. The cross is the power of God as Paul boldly proclaims, and until we have grasped the weakness and humbling impact of the cross, we cannot authentically speak of its power. Recently I tried to make this point in a study group with people who had been in the church a very long time, the response I received made clear that people were uncomfortable thinking about the cross as weakness, as foolishness, as scandal -- it was “God’s plan.” God’s plan to be weak, broken, and humble in a world addicted to power and prestige.

In a final chapter Migliore seeks to start a conversation between Christianity and with Islam about power. While his insights into Christianity are telling, his comments on Islam do not bear the same incisive tone. While understanding his desire to tread carefully regarding a religion that is not his, I found Migliore’s reticence of offer deeper insights into Islam’s understanding of power unsatisfying.

Michel Cool, *Francis: A New World Pope*, (trans. Regan Kramer) (Eerdmans, 2013), 120 pgs.

Pope Francis through his actions and words has created a new kind of conversation about the church. In this slim book, Cool, a French journalist who covers religious matters including having watched Cardinal Bergoglio does four things:

provides us with a brief biography of Francis, describes the challenges Francis faces as pope; publishes excerpts from some of Bergoglio's speeches and homilies both as a Cardinal and more recently as pope, included is the now famous "Pray for me" address; and finally gives space for people to tell of their interactions the Bergoglio before he became Pope. These last two sections are the most interesting part of the book.

Reading Francis in his own words gives a sense of his thought and pastoral heart, below are three quotes which give a flavour of his writing and speaking.

In an address marking the 20th anniversary of Universidad del Salvador, a Jesuit University in Buenos Aires, in 1995, Bergoglio noted "Like those first Christians, we should announce, not only with our convincing messages, but above all with our lives, that the Truth founded on the love of Jesus Christ for his Church (i.e. for all those who believe in him) is truly worthy of belief." (60-61)

In a homily from April 2011, he said, "We have been sent to preach the truth, to do good for all,

and to bring joy to our people. It is not enough for our truth to be orthodox and our pastoral action efficient. Without the joy of beauty, truth becomes ruthless, cold, and prideful, which we see in the speech of the many bitter fundamentalists." (80)

Finally in a homily from August 2012, Bergoglio stated, "That our Father gives us our daily bread and work is a blessing. Crying out against the injustice that this bread and work are not available to all is part of the blessing. Working with others to share and distribute our bread is another part of the blessing that we ask. This desire and this struggle do our hearts good." (78)

The personal reminiscences are drawn from people who had pastoral contact with Bergoglio or met him in church meeting settings. These memories enhance the picture we get of the man.

While not an exhaustive study in any way of Francis I's life before becoming Pope, Cool's book provides readers with a series of entry points into a deeper engagement with the words and actions of Francis I.

HISTORICAL VIGNETTE

The Church and "Graft" in Business and Politics

(Board of Social Service and Evangelism, *Acts & Proceedings of General Assembly*, 1915, p. 360)

The following is from a report to the 1915 General Assembly commenting on those seeking to profit financially as a result of Canada's World War I war effort:

"All worthy Canadians have suffered a severe shock as a result of the revelations of graft in connection with the purchase and supply of boots, horses, wound-dressings, etc., for the brave men who are thrilling the Empire with their courage, skill, and self-sacrifice in blood-soaking Belgium.

Graft is called by the people treason. It *is* treason. But not in war time only. It is always treason. It threatens the stability of our institutions, the foundation of our free democracy.

The grafter is a thief stealing the money of the sovereign people, – an assassin letting the life-blood of the reigning demos. He should be treated as a traitor and so deprived of his franchise or his liberty, if not of his life....

All Canada honoured and applauded the Right Honourable the Prime Minister, when he from his high place in Parliament rebuked two of his followers in the House who had been convicted of graft or criminal negligence in connection with the purchase of wound-dressings and horses....

Leaders have seldom had as favourable an opportunity to strike a deadly blow at this form of treason – treason alike against king and country, and as well treachery to the brave boys who safety and efficiency the grafters imperiled for filthy lucre."

BOOK NOTES

Presbyterian History has an embarrassing large backlog of books waiting review. A backlog we will never catch up on, therefore we run these short book notes.

Christopher H. Evans, *The Kingdom is Always but Coming: A Life of Walter Rauschenbusch*, (Eerdmans, 2004), 348 pgs., index.

Rauschenbusch, son of German-American immigrants, ministered in the tenements of Hell's Kitchen in New York, an experience that formed his influential teaching and writing. The biography provides new insight into the split that took place within Protestant Christianity in response to the social gospel.

David A. Weir, *Early New England: A Covenanted Society*, (Eerdmans, 2005), 460 pgs, index.

"The idea of covenant was at the heart of early New England society....Weir explores the origins and development of covenant thought in America by analyzing the town and church documents..."

Mark Ellingsen, *The Richness of Augustine: His Contextual and Pastoral Theology*, (Westminster/John Knox Press (W/JKP), 2005), 216 pgs., index.

This introduction to Augustine's diverse theology is ecumenical in its scope. Ellingsen locates Augustine within his African cultural and ethnic roots.

Rowan Williams, *Why Study the Past?: The Quest for the Historical Church*, (Eerdmans, 2005), 129 pgs., index.

Williams, the 104th Archbishop of Canterbury, argues good historical writing helps engage with the "strangeness of the past" and thereby find "more varied and resourceful analogies about our identity in the often confusing present."

Norman A. Hjelm, ed., *Faith and Order: Toward a North American Conference*, (Eerdmans, 2005), 50 pgs.

A study guide prepared leading up to a hoped for conference involving the full ecumenical range of Christian denominations. The conference did not happen.

Jonathan R. Wilson, *A Primer for Christian Doctrine*, (Eerdmans, 2005), 127 pgs.

Wilson, who teaches at Carey Hall, Vancouver, provides readers with a defense for Christian doctrine and then demonstrates that need by mapping out the main topics of Christian belief. The book could be used in small groups as an introduction to theology.

Stanley J. Grenz, *The Named God and the Question of Being: A Trinitarian Theology*, (W/JKP, 2005), 386 pgs., index.

Published posthumously, this is the second volume in Grenz's *Matrix of Christian Theology*. Grenz begins by analyzing the historical development of concept of Being, before turning to an exegesis of the Biblical "I AM" texts, which allows a return to the question of Being, this time rooted in the conversation of the divine name.

Stephen Tomkins, *William Wilberforce: A Biography*, (Eerdmans, 2007), 238 pgs., index.

Wilberforce has become linked to the outlawing of the slave trade in the British Empire. This is the story of how that came to be, and in the process readers witness the transformation having a passion can make in a person's life.

Stephen Tomkins, *A Short History of Christianity*, (Eerdmans, 2005), 256 pgs., index. Tomkins, who J.I. Packer says, “could not write a dull sentence if he tried”, gives readers a bracing journey through 2,000 years of church history which Packer says is, “all thoroughly serious and all great fun.” Terry Jones, of Monty Python fame, says, “the sort of book I wish I’d read fifty years ago.”

Susan J. White, *Foundations of Christian Worship*, (W/JKP, 2006), 245 pgs., index. The book asks two central questions: “What is Christian worship?” And “Why do Christian worship the way they do?” White explores how worship nourishes the Christian life and questions of ecumenism, pluralism, and worship language.

Brevard S. Childs, *The Church’s Guide for Reading Paul: The Canonical Shaping of the Pauline Corpus*, (Eerdmans, 2008), 276 pgs., index. Childs’, in his final book, argues theological shape of Paul’s letters, presented in the New Testament, was designed to serve successive generations of Christians in continuing the evangelical traditions of the Church.

Jason E. Vickers, *Invocation and Assent: The Making and Remaking of Trinitarian Theology*, (Eerdmans, 2008), 215 pgs., index. English-speaking Protestants’ understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity changed significantly during the 17th century. Vickers tracks this change. The chapter on Charles Wesley’s hymns and prayers reminds readers theology is taught as much by hymns and prayers as through preaching and teaching.

F. LeRon Shults and Andrea Hollingsworth, *The Holy Spirit* (Guides to Theology Series), (W/JKP, 2008), 156 pgs, index. The authors of this introduction outline “the major movements and figures in the historical unfolding of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit...showing how historical developments have shaped contemporary trends” in the understanding of the Holy Spirit.

John S. Kloppenborg, *Q: The Earliest Gospel: An Introduction to the Original Stories and Saying of Jesus*, (W/JKP, 2008), 170 pgs., index. Q, supposedly the earliest gospel, has never been found. Kloppenborg, a world authority on Q, describes its content and distinct character in comparison to the canonical gospels.

Thomas G. Long and Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Teaching Preaching as a Christian Practice: A New Approach to Homiletical Pedagogy*, (W/JKP, 2008), 239 pgs. The 14 contributors, all gifted preachers, argue there is more to preaching than writing and delivering a sermon. There are “habits of mind, patterns of action, and ways of being...integral to the ministry of preaching.”

Gregg A. Ten Elshof, *I Told Me So: Self-Deception and the Christian Life*, (Eerdmans, 2009), 142 pgs., index. If the examined life is a life worth living, then as Ten Elshof demonstrates much of the time we skillfully avoid living worthwhile lives because we fail to examine them. His discussions of what it means to believe and the power of group think are helpful. The book is easy to read and understand, even as it challenges readers to examine their lives.