

Introduction: 1918

Each year for the past three years we have been casting our imaginations back one hundred years, to remember and honour those men from MacKay Presbyterian Church who fell in the Great War. We now know that the war ended with the Armistice on November 11, 1918. But no one at the beginning of 1918 could have known that – indeed anyone who predicted it would have been thought mad. So to understand how this year unfolded for the people of the time we need to imagine ourselves in January, not November, of 1918.

It is a dark time for the people of MacKay. More than 130 men and one nursing sister have signed up for military service. Fourteen men are now dead and many more have been wounded in body and in spirit. There is not a family that has not been touched by loss or does not live in fear. They can see nothing ahead but suffering, hardship, and sacrifice. It seems as if the war will never end.

Certainly it has been going badly. In Russia the October Revolution has brought the Bolsheviks to power. Not only is Russia out of the war but the democracies now face the new threat of communist revolution and the dawn of an ideological conflict that will last for seven decades. The United States has entered the war but it may be some time before it can make a difference. France, Italy and other allies are wobbling. Only in the Middle East, where British forces have captured Jerusalem, is a clear victory in sight. The German Empire, its manpower depleted and its people starving, is moving troops from the eastern front to the west and is gathering its remaining resources for one last all-out assault against the British and French.

Canadian soldiers have won a reputation as shock troops with a succession of victories from Vimy Ridge to Hill 70. But it is Passchendaele that has established this reputation beyond doubt. Passchendaele has cost the British, Australians, and French hundreds of thousands of men killed, wounded, and missing. Now the Canadians have taken it, at a fearsome cost, in a battle fought in late autumn rains on ground churned to porridge by shells, with water-filled shell-holes concealing bodies from all armies, with artillery sinking into the glutinous mud and men confined to narrow paths mowed down by machine guns. Men huddled for survival and reduced to quaking fear, pushed to the limit in unspeakable conditions, have taken position after position in desperate combat often by raw courage alone. Passchendaele has staggered the British and has badly shaken the Canadians, and its memory will forever haunt those fought there. For the first time Canadians, including their Prime Minister, are questioning British leadership. Borden, his voice and body shaking with emotion, will declare to the Imperial War Cabinet in the summer of 1918 that if there is ever a repetition of this battle, not a single soldier will ever again leave the shores of Canada.

But for now Prime Minister Borden is resolved to contribute every last Canadian resource to the war, as much to keep faith with those who have already paid the price as to attain the final victory. His government has introduced conscription and a Presbyterian magazine has agreed with most of English Canada that “compulsory military service is the most equitable and just system of national defence.” A Union coalition government has won a majority in a bitterly fought election. But French Canada has been isolated and deep wedges have been driven into a country riven by class and regional tension. MacKay families already anxious about the fate of older sons in uniform now fear that their younger sons will be called

up. (In the end, only a handful of MacKay men will actually be conscripted – most of those who will go to war are already there.)

The protestant churches remain convinced that the war is part of God's plan and that the suffering and sacrifice of war will bring about a better world of peace and freedom – perhaps even the Kingdom of God on Earth. They have, indeed, become increasingly radical in their definition of what that better world would be. Near the end of the war the publication of the Social Service Council – which under the leadership of Presbyterian J. G. Shearer encompasses all the major protestant churches and a wide range of educational, philanthropic, and volunteer organizations – will issue a radical new "Lord's Prayer":

We are one and all to "Hallow Our Father's Name" and to pray and work for the new social order in which His will is done "as it is in heaven"; in which his children have "bread" (all needed material good), shared on a basis of brotherhood which will be according to the need of each, love – not selfish competition – governing the distribution; in which each shall be so disposed to all, that he shall seek forgiveness from God and grant it to his brethren; in which each shall prayerfully seek to shield all from temptation and evil; in which there shall be "universal righteousness and social justice through the evangel of Christ."

How far any of this entered the pulpit of MacKay Presbyterian or the thoughts of its congregation we do not know, but the idea of a new world that would be brought about by a war fought for God and civilization ran deep. What else would justify so much sacrifice and so many tears?

In March 1918 all these forebodings are realized as the Germans launch a desperate offensive which pushes back the Allies in a repeat of 1914. Only desperate rearguard action avoids total collapse. In the summer of 1918 Prime Minister Borden is told that the war will last at least until 1920. But then the tide turns with an Allied offensive that begins at Amiens in August. During the Hundred Days that follow, the Allies, with Canadians playing a prominent part, break the German defenses and roll on to final victory. But all these battles bring even longer casualty lists. Five more men are added to the list of MacKay fallen: John Marshall, Homère Joliat, Irwin Kelly, Alex Lyon McKenzie, and Arthur Frank Hawke.

Their stories are told in the order in which the men fell. This eliminates the need for repetition of background detail except when necessary for clarity in each essay. Reading them consecutively thus gives an idea of the course of the war for Canadian soldiers from the German offensive of March 1918 to the Armistice of November 11. Indeed, one of many ironies of this story of a church at war is that the last man on its Honour Roll to die was of German origin and did not die in battle but fought another dreaded enemy, tuberculosis. He was a victim of the Spanish Flu and was buried in Beechwood Cemetery just two weeks before the war to end wars came itself to an end, one hundred years ago.