

Prefatory Note

This study of the men from MacKay Presbyterian Church (now MacKay United Church) who fell in the Great War had its origins in a suggestion by Tim Cook on Remembrance Day 1914, as we began to mark the 100th anniversary of this terrible conflict. Since a great deal of detailed information is now available on-line and in libraries and archives, he thought, we could do more than simply read out the names of the fallen. Bringing these men to life by telling their stories would not only be a more fitting tribute to them, but it would also highlight an equally important story – the ordeal of those sitting in the same pews a century before, as they waited for news and prayed for deliverance.

In all, 140 men and one nursing sister appear on the memorial plaque of what was then MacKay Presbyterian Church. Nineteen gave their lives. This is an astonishing record of service for a church with about 400 members and 173 families in 1918, but it is by no means unique in Canada. Why had these men joined up? What did they believe they were fighting for? How did the families and the community handle the stress of having so many of their sons away in a conflict that seemed to stretch on endlessly? Telling the life story of each soldier and his family, against the backdrop of a church and community at war, could be a small but useful contribution to the social history of the Great War.

Of course the research quickly became a rabbit hole and involved a widening range of sources. Besides service records and other information on soldiers available on-line, including the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, I used ancestry.ca to access documentary records such as birth, death, census, voters' and immigration records, on-line newspapers, records of the nearby Beechwood cemetery, city directories, and other sources to flesh out family stories; and I had church records including communion rolls and the minutes of the Session, the Trustees, and the Ladies' Aid. Websites such as the Canadian Virtual War Memorial, the Canadian Expeditionary Force Study Group, and others have been invaluable and one cannot speak highly enough of the gifted and dedicated amateurs who are delving into the records of regiments and people. For each of the fallen there were also specific sources such as regimental histories, war diaries, and other information, and some cases I have been able to contact family members who kindly provided information and pictures.

Of the nineteen MacKay fallen, twelve were infantry, three artillery, two Royal Flying Corps, one with the Borden Motor Machine Gun Battery, and one who served in Egypt with the British Army Service Corps. The first to fall died near Ypres in the fall of 1915; the last, a TB patient, was a victim of the influenza epidemic a few days before the end of the war. Together, their stories engage much of the history of the Canadian participation in the Great War and much of the social history of their community. My wife and I visited all the cemeteries where they are buried, or in the case of four who have no known graves, the memorials where their names appear. But many of the most moving stories were those of the families who in some cases had several sons at war. This is a story about war but it is above all about people. As it expands to encompass the 122 who came back, their families, their church, and the shaping of memory, it will become more so.

This remains very much a work in progress. These biographies are in no sense a publication and researchers should use them with caution. They are being posted in order to

share with the congregation of MacKay United Church, and others who may be interested, what I have been able to glean thus far about each of these men and their background. (I have omitted notes and sources, which I can provide for anyone interested.)

Indeed, since I presented the lives of the first group of men in 1915 and 1916, I have learned much more about them, including from descendants and fellow researchers as well as new records and further research. New information has fleshed out the portrait of some, added nuance to others, and in a few cases shown me that what I wrote four years ago was flat-out wrong. Therefore all these biographies have been completely reworked in 2018. It is my hope in posting them that others will provide further information that will refine this picture even more. In the meantime I wish to express my gratitude to the many historians who have written books, edited memoirs, and posted material on websites, and to descendants of some of these men who have provided me with information directly.

— Alan Bowker