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Posters and the Canadian War Museum

Hugh A. Halliday

Writing in *Canadian Military History* (Autumn 1993), Cameron Pulsifer reviewed several of the Canadian War Museum's collections, but listed posters as one department that would have to await further explanation. This is understandable, given the diversity of posters in general and the CWM's holdings in particular.

Posters have existed chiefly to influence public opinion, often under the guise of entertainment or information. They have been used for many purposes — to sell products (Soft drinks, cigarettes), announce events (athletic matches, rallies), promote political parties (notably during election campaigns), modify behavioral patterns (discouraging drinking and driving), or to encourage social action (donating to charities) — to cite but a few examples.

Printing presses, developed in the late 15th century, gave rise to the mass-produced handbill and broadsheet, some verbose, others brief. In the late 18th century came lithography, which allowed pictures to accompany the printed word. Through the 19th century the poster developed in form and application. By 1890 the poster had become an international art form associated with such names as Steinlen and Toulouse-Lautrec.



The "war poster" as we know it appeared about the time of the Spanish-American War, but the genre was not widely used until the First World War. This was "total war" in that nations went to unprecedented lengths to mobilize all their resources. Soldiers were conscripted, industries regulated, finances marshalled through taxes, bond sales, and state planning. Governments enlisted the talents of all their citizens, including artists' skills. Writers, painters, and poster designers were enroled as willing supporters of

their nations' war efforts.

Posters were striking, highly visible tools in both world wars, but their importance was greatest in the 1914-18 conflict, before the growth of radio and film as means to seduce and inform mass audiences. Some themes and techniques used in the First World War were adapted to the conditions of the Second World War; in other cases the posters of each conflict were unique to their times.

The uses of wartime posters were as diverse as their peacetime commercial applications. One may identify eight areas where they were most often employed:

Opposite: In a defamation case, Brigadier Dollard Menard introduced an example of this poster into court as evidence of his heroism and status as an authentic Canadian hero. The civil action had grown out of the Quebec Referendum debates when Menard was supporting René Lévesque and the "Oui" side.



1. Information (how to behave when air raid sirens sounded, how to extinguish fires).
2. Behavioral modification (Discouraging unnecessary travel, promoting blood donations).
3. Patriotism (recruiting, appeals to national pride)
4. Security (warning of possible spies, discouraging loose talk).
5. Economic (promoting bond sales, exhorting farmers and industrial workers to produce more).
6. Domestic morale (promoting national unity, forging sympathetic links between the fighting services and "home front" personnel).
7. International solidarity (praise of allies).
8. Hostile propaganda (preaching hatred or contempt for the enemy).

Some posters fell into two or more categories; a recruiting poster which mentioned enemy atrocities and the threat to civilization would be a case in point. Similarly, a poster might stress links between home and fighting fronts while selling war bonds.

Canadian experiences in "poster warfare" resembled that of other nations in some respects, and differed markedly in others. Few Canadian posters of either war dealt with international themes or promoted hatred of the enemy, although selected British posters incorporating these themes were brought to this country. In style and content, Canadian security posters (Cautioning against careless talk, particularly in seaports) closely resembled their British and American counterparts. On the other hand, some

designs were uniquely Canadian, such as Hubert Rogers' "Men of Valour" series. A few designs were copied by other countries. An example was a war bond poster showing a woman searching her husband's pockets; from the bed he winks and declares, "Sorry, Canada got it first!" This poster was produced in Australia with the same artwork; only the name of the country had been changed.

The Canadian War Museum currently holds some 6,550 posters, not all of which can be classified as "war posters." Some are examples of advertising used by the museum itself to promote its various exhibitions and projects; others are the product of the Department of Veterans' Affairs which has produced striking posters every Remembrance Day for the past fifteen years. The largest group (3,770) are of Canadian origin, followed by Great Britain (692), the United States (612), France (165) and Australia (147). Other countries represented in the collection include Belgium (100), Germany (92), The Netherlands (87), Russia (44 drawn from Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union), Italy (13), New Zealand (8) and Czechoslovakia (5).

The subject matter of these posters, however, may surprise readers; the largest single group (1,955) are classified as "Health and Safety" posters — most of which date from 1955 onwards and promote such goals as safe driving within the forces and proper workplace procedures. The next largest group (983) are dedicated to "Fundraising." Recruiting posters number 799. The following table illustrates the distribution of Canadian posters for three key periods:

CANADIAN POSTERS BY MAJOR TYPE

	1914- 1919	1939- 1945	1967- onwards
Total (all types)	337	865	2,269
Fundraising	209	266	1
Health & Safety		6	1,503
Recruiting	82	168	169
Propaganda	5	77	1
Proclamation	4	7	21
Production	1	149	5
Security		58	154

Opposite, clockwise from top left:

"NOTRE ARMÉE" - This poster was designed by Eric Aldwinkle, a notable Canadian artist who later became an official war artist with the RCAF.

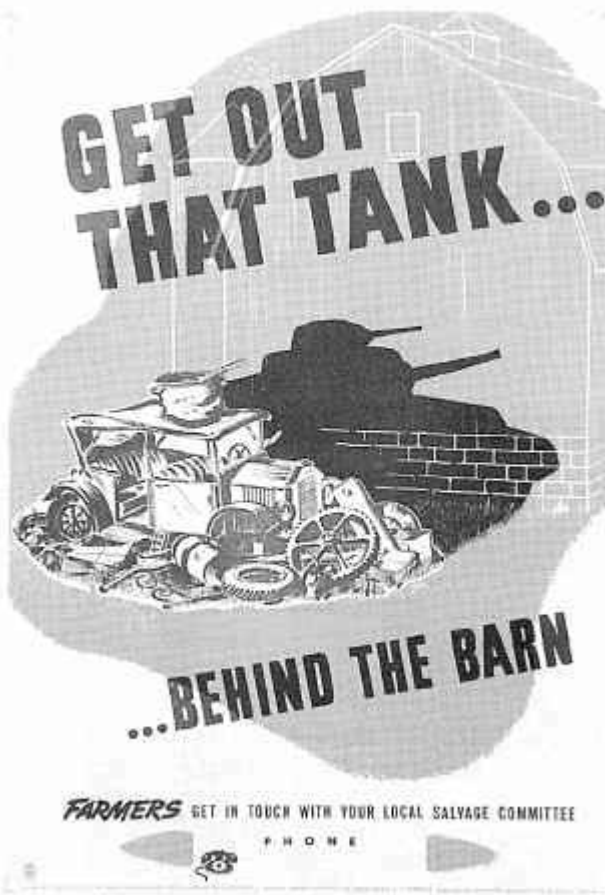
"GLVE/DONNONS" - Most Second World War Canadian posters appeared in French or English editions. This example was unusual for its day in being a bilingual poster.

"THE WOUNDED SOLDIER'S RETURN" - A powerful design related to the rehabilitation of First World War veterans.

"THAT'S WHY I BUY VICTORY BONDS" By 1994 standards, this is the most "politically incorrect" poster in the museum's collection, embarrassing for the racism that was accepted so readily 50 years ago.

Posters reflect the times in which they were produced, and some may move the viewer to embarrassment or amusement ("That's Why I Buy Victory Bonds," featuring a caricature of a black railway porter, is a horrible example of what would now be judged racist). Others, however, can still move and inspire ("The Wounded Soldier's Return").

Posters provide many opportunities for study. One Doctoral student, Ms. Bonita Bray (Vancouver) is currently looking at them as expressions of masculinity and femininity in wartime. Any study of A.J. Casson's artistic career must include some reference to his wartime poster, "Give Us The Tools." Similarly, an account of Eric Aldwinckle's experiences as an official war artist must consider his exceptionally creative work as a poster designer in 1942-1943. Those interested in modern recycling may wish to consult the posters which, 50 years ago, urged Canadians to provide used rubber, scrap metal and household waste for war production.



A three-year moratorium on collecting at the Canadian War Museum will limit but not end the search for posters. In some cases the museum possesses only one example of a historic design — and that in very poor condition. An example is the Canadian Patriotic Fund poster, "If You Cannot Join Him — You Should Help Her." The museum holds one copy which was dry-mounted many years ago; it is now deteriorating and a search is on for another. For similar reasons, the museum continues to watch for a good example of a 1915 recruiting poster for the 178th Battalion; our sole copy is a damaged example. Such searches may be lengthy; we conducted a four-year search before acquiring a copy of Hubert Rogers' "Men of Valour" poster featuring Dollard Menard; we still do not possess a French copy of this design, which is especially interesting because, to our knowledge, it is the only poster ever to have been introduced as evidence in a Canadian court of law. This is but another hint of the many historic angles available for study through the Canadian War Museum's poster collection.

"GET OUT THAT TANK..." - Recycling is not new; during the Second World War scrap drives were aided by posters such as this.

Hugh A. Halliday has worked at the Canadian War Museum in various capacities since 1974. He has to his credit a number of books including *Typhoon and Tempest at War: The Canadian Story*, *The Royal Canadian Air Force at War 1939-1945* (with Larry Milberry) and *The Tumbling Sky, 242 Squadron: The Canadian Years*.

The poster artwork has kindly been provided by the Canadian War Museum.