

2010

## New Theatres of War An Analysis of Paul Gross' Passchendaele

Tim Cook

Christopher Schultz

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh>



Part of the [Military History Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Tim Cook and Christopher Schultz "New Theatres of War An Analysis of Paul Gross' Passchendaele."  
Canadian Military History 19, 3 (2010)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Canadian Military History by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact [scholarscommons@wlu.ca](mailto:scholarscommons@wlu.ca).

# New Theatres of War

## An Analysis of Paul Gross' *Passchendaele*

Tim Cook and Christopher Schultz

*Passchendaele* (2008) is the first major Canadian motion picture in over 25 years to explore the subject of Canada's Great War. Paul Gross, one of the country's leading actors, spent nearly a decade trying to raise the necessary funds to make the film. Gross was most famous for his role as an iconic Mountie in *Due South*, a television series that ran for five years in the mid-1990s; in *Passchendaele*, which Gross wrote, directed and produced, he takes on another high profile Canadian subject wrapped in myth, legend, and layers of memory – the role of the Canadians in the Great War.

Like hundreds of thousands of Canadians, Gross has a personal link to the Great War. Gross's grandfather,

Michael Dunne, the name also given to the protagonist in the film, served in the Canadian Expeditionary Force with the 10th Battalion and fought at the 1917 Battle of Passchendaele. Paul Gross has spoken widely about this family connection, one of the reasons that impelled him to make this film.

In a Herculean effort, Gross raised nearly \$20 million, making *Passchendaele* the most expensive movie in Canadian history. It was also the highest grossing Canadian film of 2008, earning \$4.45 million on a mere 202 screens, sold an estimated 500,000 tickets, won six Genies and opened the prestigious Toronto International Film Festival in 2008.

For the record, there are a few other Canadian Great War major motion pictures. The short list includes Guy Maddin's surrealistic art film, *Archangel* (1990) and a 1981 film adaptation of Timothy Findley's 1977 novel, *The Wars*. The only other major film was Bruce Bairnsfather's *Carry on Sergeant* (1928), an expensive flop that nearly destroyed the emerging Canadian film industry. There was also an official film, *Lest We Forget* (1935), which employed Canadian, Allied, and German film footage, authentic and reproduced, but it is what we now think of as a documentary. Its release date of 1935 shaped the messages presented in the film, and sparked a lively debate in Canada.

Seventy years later, *Passchendaele* was less of a lightning rod for controversy, although a few critics tried to link Gross's film to Canada's long-term commitment in Afghanistan. The film received mixed reviews, which were generally restrained but tried to be positive. One got a sense that reviewers wanted to like the movie, even though the narrative is burdened by an agonizing love story that detracts from the film, and leaves us with far too much "passion" and not enough "Passchendaele." But this article is less interested in the form and narrative of the film, although that

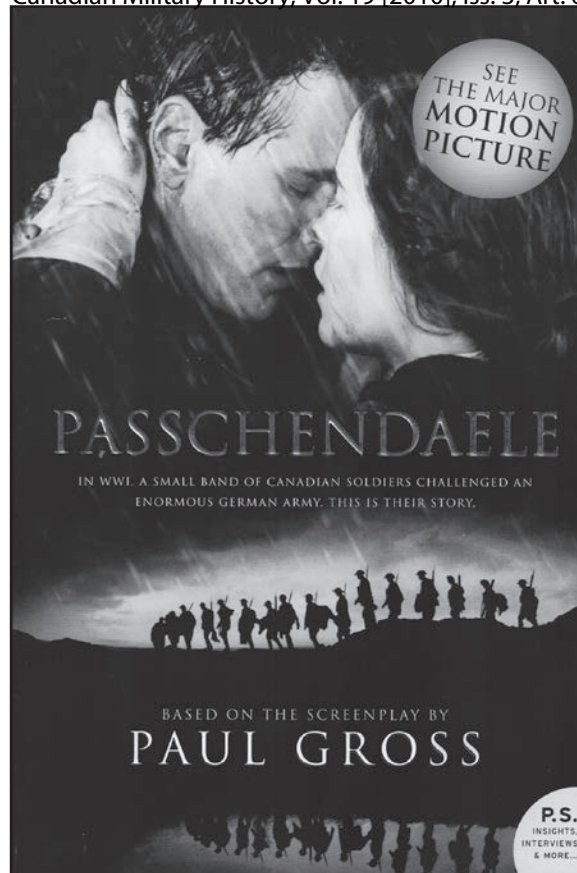
**Résumé :** Réalisé par Paul Gross, *Passchendaele* est le film canadien qui a connu le plus de succès au pays en 2008, attirant des centaines de milliers de spectateurs. L'un des rares films sur la Première Guerre mondiale produits au pays, et diffusé au moment où on est particulièrement préoccupé par la guerre, la mémoire et le souvenir, il importe que les historiens se livrent à l'analyse des messages véhiculés par l'oeuvre. Le présent article ne se veut pas une recension du film, mais une étude sur la manière dont les historiens pourraient l'utiliser, car quelques-uns d'entre eux ont souligné le fait que la validité historique du film avait été compromise par le caractère romantique de l'intrigue choisie par Gross. Ces jugements soulèvent la question de savoir si l'on peut utiliser, ou non, les superproductions comme des documents historiques et si celles-ci peuvent contribuer à des échanges sur l'histoire.

**Abstract:** Paul Gross' *Passchendaele* was the most successful Canadian film of 2008, reaching hundreds of thousands of viewers. As one of Canada's only Great War films, and released during a period of heightened awareness about war, memory, and remembrance, it is important for historians to analyse the messages presented in the film. This article is not a review, but a critique of how the film might be used by historians, at least some of whom have suggested the film's historical validity has been compromised in favour of Gross's romantic narrative. Such accusations beg the question of whether or not big-budget films can be employed as historical documents and what they might contribute to historical discussions.

is important, than in examining how it can be viewed as an historical document.

Before addressing the challenges of assessing *Passchendaele* as an historical record, one cannot help but be struck by the film's title and focal point. It is *not* Vimy Ridge. With Vimy having become a mythologized space, one linked intimately to the war, ingrained in the nation's consciousness, and even fused to aspects of Canadian self identity, Gross resisted the temptation of placing the better recognized Vimy as the hinge battle of the film. One is certainly not surprised that the Hundred Days campaign in 1918 is ignored, since it is virtually unknown to Canadians despite the work of some historians in pleading for its importance over that of Vimy or Passchendaele. With the on the Battle of Passchendaele, which raged from the end of July to November 1917, the film, and to some extent the viewer, are left drowning in the muck and filth of the shattered Western Front battlefield that is synonymous with failure.

Even though the Canadians succeeded in capturing their objectives at Passchendaele, they were left floundering in the swill and forced to engage in brutal hand-to-hand combat with an equally slime-splattered enemy. The battle as portrayed in the film is shorn of much of its contextualization within the greater scope of the war effort and, through the necessity of budgets and even of creating a link with the viewer, *Passchendaele* is reduced to a company fighting for its survival. While it may be too much to ask for a Hollywood-style film to place the story of the Canadians into a larger context of the war – although there are some attempts to do this in the film through clumsy dialogue and throw-away lines – viewers plopped



in the middle of *Passchendaele* are given no other choice but to recognize the futility of the war.

The narrative supports this message of futility, or at least of brutality. The viewer's first encounter with the protagonist, Sergeant Michael Dunne (Paul Gross), is in a French town near Vimy, sometime in the aftermath of the April 1917 battle. Dunne and his fellow Canadian section members are inexplicably separated from the rest of their unit and have the misfortune of encountering a German machine gun post amidst the ruins. A firefight ensues and losses are taken on both sides. Dunne and his surviving mates try to surrender to the Germans, but the mixed signals from a scared and shellshocked Canadian leads to his death by the German machine gunners, who riddle his body with bullets. Dunne barely survives, finds cover, and tosses a grenade that destroys the machine gun emplacement. A lone German soldier, a severely-wounded teenager, feebly extends a hand to Dunne in search of

mercy, whispering "*Kamerad.*" Dunne's exhausted expression hardly changes as he drives his bayonet through the boy's skull.

As one reviewer has noted already, this unflinching approach to the horrors of war and the brutality of person-on-person violence is precisely where the film remains effective as a cinematic piece. Though arguably not breaking a lot of new ground in the popular and contemporary First World War meta-narrative of tragedy, Gross should be credited with showing that our protagonist, a Canadian, is capable of such actions. Of course there are consequences to such behaviour in cinematic logic: protagonists committing wrongdoings must be punished according to a long tradition of Hollywood-style filmmaking. Dunne's ultimate

punishment comes much later in the story when he returns to the Western Front for the titular battle; in the meantime, however, Dunne's actions leave him psychologically scarred.

The next incarnation of Dunne is a shivering, sweat-covered man having nightmares about the war, as he convalesces in a Calgary hospital. It is a fairly stern departure from the confident and calm section commander the viewer encountered in France, even if his alleged shell shock appears to be a minor case at best, and one that would not have had him released from England. It should be observed here, though, that shell shock is forever linked to the Great War, though soldiers have always succumbed to the strain of service and the brutality of the battlefield, even if it was rarely recognized in the past. Sustained combat drove even heroes to mental ruin, and captured the imagination of a transfixed and horrified public, continuing to do so to this day. But in the film, Michael Dunne does not really seem shell shocked. A

severely shell shocked soldier would have been reduced to a gibbering invalid, with shaking, palsied hands, suffering nightmares and bed-wetting, and perhaps even plagued by hallucinations, uncontrollable tears, and paralyzed limbs. All of this would have been hard to see on film, and Gross evidently felt that he could not confront the viewer with an emasculated hero, though one might wonder why he did not provide the viewer with a proxy portrayal of the condition – perhaps a new arrival, still in full thrall of his disorder? Speculation aside, we receive a gentle version of the war's horror which is more of a plot device to get the soldier home than an exploration into the madness of battle.

The home front scenes are among the highlights of the film. Calgary is festooned with war posters and wartime era imagery. Gross presents the war as a crusade, but reminds us that some of the crusading Canadians, in turning freely to their anti-German bias, are little more than vicious thugs. Dunne's love interest, a nurse born to a German father, Sarah Mann (Caroline Dhavernas), is also conflicted, having been driven to morphine addiction, likely through the stress of having to work on the broken survivors from the front, but equally likely stemming from the conflicting nationalisms in her family tree. The drug abuse, again, seems an unlikely plot twist, and one that seems derivative of Joseph Boyden's award-winning novel, *Three Day Road*, where his protagonists are also morphine-addicted. Both film and novel offer a reading of the Great War through the lens of the 1960s, and especially the drug-abuse by American soldiers in Vietnam rather than a grounding in the early 20th century combatant and non-combatant experience. While Nurse Mann is a conflicted and damaged character, she is of course redeemable, as all must be in films like this. But there is an added twist. Her father has left Canada to serve

on the Western Front, but with the Germans, and he is later reported killed defending Vimy Ridge, an interesting twist on the sacrificial cost of the battle.

Without running through the entire narrative, Gross offers some non-traditional views of the home front, and hints at how the crusade for victory both galvanizes and sharpens the patriotic to push forward at almost any cost, but also to find the enemies in the midst, deserving or not in the case of Nurse Mann, who loses her job because of her German heritage. Her younger brother, David Mann (Joe Dinicol), has externalized his inner conflict in contradistinction with his sister's; in his rage against his father, and to prove his own manhood, David wants to enlist in order to kill Germans. The malevolent recruiting colonel, a more-British-than-the-British type of blimpish officer, Dobson-Hughes (Jim Mezon), is only too happy to ignore the boy's severe asthma in order to fill the ranks and punish Dunne for his burgeoning affection for Sarah, neither of whom he likes. As an aside, the so-named Dobson-Hughes must also be a shot at Sir Sam Hughes, the Canadian minister of militia defence from 1911 to 1916, who has been much maligned – often for good reason – by historians.

Pursuant to these various plot twists, Dunne and the Mann siblings all return to the Western Front in time for the Canadian phase of the Passchendaele battle in October 1917. With the ground reduced to a bog, Michael and David have improbably ended up in the same platoon, while Sarah has somehow been commissioned again as a nurse and found her way to a field hospital in the same sector of the front. Amidst the carnage and destruction, Michael and Sarah finally consummate their love in a strange, verging on absurd, sex scene accompanied by the 18-pounders, visible in the background, banging away at the

enemy. Michael makes two promises to Sarah: that he won't die and that he will return David home safely.

Gross depicts the Western Front in all its squalid brutality, which he brilliantly recreated at Canadian Forces Base Suffield, Alberta, the site of much weapons testing and training over the last century. The fighting at the front is shattering and chaotic. No war movie can ever be the same after the first 20 minutes of *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), with the breath-taking violence captured in the D-Day landing, and Gross offers similar devastating treatment, which at times verges on pornographic violence in its stabbing, shooting, and face-smashing cruelty.

While the combat captures the cruelty of war, notably absent are any generals – although there is a quick shot of a fat staff officer riding in a car as the troops march in the mud, and Canadian Corps commander Sir Arthur Currie is mentioned positively, if briefly. It is intriguing that Gross did not take the easy shots at Sir Douglas Haig, the architect of the mad battle in the mud. The lack of generals is due, no doubt, to Gross's focus on the fighting men, but rare is a Great War film since the 1960s that refrains from hammering the already shattered reputation of the generals.

In building to the battle's climax, Gross offers us two conflicting views on the war and its constructed meaning. Before the battle, Dunne gives a disillusioned speech to David, remarking on man's ostensibly natural cruelty toward man:

[Forests] burn because they have to. Oceans go up and down because they have to. We're no different. If you want to get through this you better start seeing it for what it is: it's something we do all the time because we're good at it and we're good at it because we're used to it and we're used to it because we do it all the time.



His speech, in the driving rain, powerfully strips away the glory of war, although surely the viewer has already come to this conclusion at this point in the war and the film.

Yet Dunne's disillusionment is qualified by the actions in the film's climax, which are about redemption instead of disenchantment. Central to the battle and the film is the motif of the crucified Canadian. The story of the crucified Canadian circulated throughout the Canadian forces from 1915 to 1918, and centred on how German soldiers caught and crucified a Canadian during the Second Battle of Ypres in April 1915. Subsequent investigation by Canadian authorities could not verify the act, with multiple witnesses offering conflicting versions of what they saw and where they saw it. The rumour was nonetheless codified in bronze in a postwar sculpture, *Canada's Golgotha*, now on display at the CWM, and the story has periodically resurfaced over the last 90 years, with several investigations or references in radio programs, television documentaries, and novels.

The rumour plays a key role in the film, where Dunne is continually telling frothing Canadian patriots on the home front that the act did not happen. Despite Dunne's front-line experience, the patriots do not seem to care, as the crucifixion is one more example of why the crusade against the Hun needs to be pressed forward with vigour. But in the climatic battle scene, Gross presents for the viewer a crucified Canadian, David Mann, Sarah's younger brother who has somehow been blown up by a shell and thrown into a crucified position, lashed with barbed wire to duckboards fused together in the form of a cross. Upon seeing the vulnerable

Mann, Dunne races across the shell-cratered, wasteland to save him, driven forward by his love for Sarah, the promise of keeping her brother safe, his desire to reduce the suffering of all soldiers, and perhaps even redemption for his earlier execution of the German soldier who was no older than David. The dramatic crossing of no-man's-land is followed by a far more emotional scene, verging on the ludicrous, whereby Dunne carries his crucified comrade across the battlefield, cross on his back, with the Germans watching in awe, and eventually downing arms in a replay of the Christmas 1914 Truce. The cross-carrying scene is straight out of the *Passion of the Christ*: the soldiers died for our sins, or in this case died to give us a better Canada.

Dunne, of course, dies too. We write "of course" because it is nearly inconceivable that the protagonist in a Great War film would survive. The war is a tragedy and no one gets out alive, unless you are lucky enough to be crippled for life or to be driven insane. No one makes films – and no one would want to watch

them – about the soldiers who had good wars. The clerks, or forestry corps, or bayonet instructors, and the tens of thousands of other soldiers who were not in a front line fighting unit have had their stories hidden under a sea of mud and death.

In the end, this is a work of fiction, or perhaps more accurately a re-imagination of the Canadian experience of war. Can it be used as an historical document? Is it dangerous for non-experts to view the film and receive a misconstrued view of the war with some of the flaws mentioned above? In short, how should historians assess this work?

Historians are critical of history books and even primary source material, seeking out errors of fact and, equally important, of interpretation, but we generally understand that novels and films are artistic pieces. Most Canadians will never care, and will certainly not lose sleep over the impossible time line of having Dunne fighting at Vimy, being shell-shocked, convalescing, presumably training, and then arriving back at the front for Passchendaele. Should anyone worry that the 10th Battalion, from the Calgary area, did not recruit in Calgary after the unit had gone overseas? Should we be concerned that it is highly unlikely for a commissioned nurse to cavort and have sexual relations with a non-commissioned officer?




---

**Canada's Golgotha**  
by Francis Derwent Wood

**During the Second Battle of Ypres, rumours circulated that a Canadian soldier had been crucified on a Belgian barn door, a story the Germans denounced as propaganda. Whether truth or fiction, Canada's Golgotha illustrates the intensity of wartime myths and imagery. The crucifixion remains unproven.**

Canadian War Museum 19710261-0797

---

There are other historical problems and anomalies, but they would surely not resonate with any but the most serious scholars of the Great War. While students of film studies will no doubt engage differently with the film, one wonders, in a journal for military historians and the historically-minded, at what level should historical accuracy be important in a film? And, more importantly, should the historian simply be willing to allow inaccuracies under the broad rubric of artistic licence? To what point are we comfortable in letting the history slide, and possibly slide far down the slippery slope? No one is suggesting that Gross will arm Germans with laser guns or that the Canadians will ride dragons into battle, but artistic licence, from how soldiers spoke and acted to the nature of tactics and weapons, have an impact on how the war is constructed 90 years later. There are problems with all of these issues in the film. However, this is not to suggest that Gross fails entirely here, as there are some very fine scenes about how soldiers coped on the Western Front. For example, when the decorated hero Dunne stands before a crowd in Calgary and is expected to deliver a patriotic or revealing speech, he instead talks about the importance of keeping matches dry, so that the soldier can turn to his all-important cigarettes when in need. This rings true, even as there are other scenes and plot lines listed above, that are more difficult to square with the historical record.

While acknowledging that a film is different than an academic book, in the end, if the historians do not care about accuracy, will anyone? Surely it is the role of the historian to highlight difficulties with fictional pieces of history, especially when they begin to find their way into classrooms and are employed by teachers who may be relying heavily

on them to convey key messages. This is a dialogue that the profession must have, especially with more and more Canadians accessing their history through History Television and films like *Passchendaele*. Increasingly, historians are having less of a voice in defining the present, as they are content to unearth the past but then hand that knowledge over to journalists, novelists, television and film-makers, with whom they have little engagement or influence.

In critiques like these, one is often drawn to what is wrong or lacking in a cultural product. Let it be said, then, that there is much to admire about the film, from its depictions of the home front to the stunning brutality of the battlefield. This is not a movie of the week – Gross had an enormous budget and he put it to good use. The story is gripping and compellingly told, and even if the romantic engagement detracts from the message, it provides another element of character development. And while the authors here refrain from passing judgement on why almost all war movies in the last decade require a love story to run as a supporting narrative to the war-fighting, the developing relationship between Michael Dunne and Sarah Mann reminds us that in times of war, ordinary Canadians that serve and sacrifice overseas leave behind loved ones, have lives interrupted, and never return. That is not a mawkish message, and it is one that needs to be highlighted, something that Gross has done and achieved, if in perhaps a more traditional, romantic interlude.

Moreover, we wonder if perhaps the historical profession may not have the tools to critique the decisions made by an experienced actor and film producer. Even historians must make compromises in their books and articles – from reacting to reader's reports to the demands of publishers – and the world of filmmaking, especially in Canada, is fraught with

enormous challenges, some of which are how to appeal to a broad section of the population. Someday Gross will reveal the compromises that he had to make, and we'll have a better understanding of the hidden context behind this cultural product.

*Passchendaele* will remain the iconic Canadian war film for this generation, and likely the next. It is exceedingly difficult to make big-budget films in Canada and one can imagine few other celebrities than Gross who would have the clout to raise \$20 million. But this begs the question: when will Canada get a proper Second World War film? If we leave it to the Americans and the British to tell the story of the Second World War, we should not be surprised that Canada has little more than a walk-on part. The story of Canada's Great War is intensely focused on the Western Front, even though Canadians served in the Mediterranean and the Middle East, on the oceans, and of course in the British army, navy, and flying services. Yet the Great War for most Canadians is that of the muddy trenches with their unending strain and horror. But what is the fulcrum upon which Canada's Second World War turns? To focus solely on the ground-pounders in Italy or Northwest Europe would leave out the enormous contributions of the Royal Canadian Navy and the Merchant Marine, of Canadians flying in bombers and fighters, of women in the three services, and of course the enormous exertions on the home front, such as the British Commonwealth Air Training Program, war production, and home defence. Surely one narrative strand – no matter the number of contrived romances – would not be sufficient. But to unleash historians on this project would likely result in a jumble of multiple characters and story lines, intersecting, standing alone, and ultimately leaving the viewer



confused and unsatisfied. A film is not a 20 chapter book. Narrative arc, compelling characters, and emotions all come together to push the story to a climax, rather than a documentary style coverage of all aspects of the war. That said, historians have much to bring to the director's table, and one hopes that when a brave film company, director or producer attempts to tackle this complex story, that he or she is ably supported by the historical profession, which can bring to bear knowledge and authenticity in terms of understanding everything from the mores and mentalité of the time, to key questions of equipment, kit, weapons and tactics, while providing important balance between the intensely personal and the larger, strategic scope of the war. But again, if a Canadian does not take on this project, we will be consigning our stories to others, and they are under no obligation to tell them.

To return to *Passchendaele*, whatever the film's strengths or weaknesses, Gross has brought the history of the Great War to hundreds of thousands of people. Canadians who would never have picked up an academic history book, might have been intrigued enough after seeing the film to push further into the past. Certainly 2007 and 2008 were a high water mark for Canadians and the Great War, with the 90th anniversary years marked by the re-unveiling of the Vimy Memorial and the pilgrimage of several thousand Canadians to the site, but also an avalanche of novels, new history books, and ongoing media interest in the last of the Great War veterans. Some of this interest must be attributed to the popularity of *Passchendaele*.

*Passchendaele* has become and will remain an important tool for future historians in assessing one of the

ways that Canadians have accessed their shared past. It is an important pillar in our ongoing, shifting, and constructed memory of Canada's Great War. More than 90 years on, Canadians still care about the war, and this, at the most basic level, should fortify historians. Now, with the loss of all Canadian Great War veterans, the torch of memory has not gone out but has been passed to new generations of artists, filmmakers, documentarists, and historians. And these memory-makers will continue to fight and refight the old battles in new theatres of war.

Dr. Tim Cook is the author of several books, including *The Madman and the Butcher: The Sensational Wars of Sam Hughes and General Arthur Currie* (Allen Lane, 2010).

Christopher Schultz has degrees in History and Film Studies from Carleton University, and is presently working on his PhD in History at The University of Western Ontario.

**A lone Canadian soldier walks across the desolate landscape of the Passchendaele battlefield.**