

5-4-2015

## "From thy tomb a thousand heroes rise": Re-evaluating the CWM's Bust of General James Wolfe

Laura Brandon

---

### Recommended Citation

Laura Brandon (2004) ""From thy tomb a thousand heroes rise": Re-evaluating the CWM's Bust of General James Wolfe," *Canadian Military History*: Vol. 13: Iss. 3, Article 6.  
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh/vol13/iss3/6>

This Canadian War Museum 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 administrator of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact [scholarscommons@wlu.ca](mailto:scholarscommons@wlu.ca).

# “From thy tomb a thousand heroes rise” Re-evaluating the CWM's Bust of General James Wolfe

Laura Brandon

Since 1967, in its present (and soon to be superseded) location at 330 Sussex Drive in Ottawa, the Canadian War Museum (CWM) has had a plaster bust of General James Wolfe on display in its ground floor galleries. A shadowy presence, never very highly esteemed, it was exhibited in an old, poorly lit case with a label that said it was based on paintings and illustrations and dated from 1770. At some point in its history the bust had even been painted to resemble bronze, which, if anything, detracts from the quality of the cast and lends credence to the second-class status that plasters had traditionally enjoyed. Recent investigation has cast new light on this sculpture, however, and has revealed it as being of much greater historical significance than was ever previously thought.

This research was precipitated by a brief reference to the bust in Alan McNairn's 1997 book, *Behold the Hero: General Wolfe & the Arts in the Eighteenth Century*. A reading of this book encouraged the CWM for the first time to undertake a serious investigation of its own Wolfe bust. McNairn showed that several Wolfe busts existed and demonstrated that there were enough loose ends to warrant a thorough exploration of their history to more securely place the museum's version within the established sculptural chronology. This article presents the results of this investigation.

On 13 September 1759, at the age of 32, General James Wolfe was killed by French musket fire



outside the walls of Quebec. This battle spelled the end of French rule in the northern half of North America. From relative obscurity Wolfe was catapulted into the role of one of Britain's greatest military heroes. J.F. Kerslake, a scholar of British eighteenth century portraiture, noted that Wolfe "became famous only in death." The popular response in

England to the news of the capture of Quebec was enormous and it soon became clear that images of Wolfe were a marketable commodity. The general's death spawned a Wolfe industry, with the hero's image appearing everywhere: in prints, on mugs, on tobacco jars, and in needlepoint.

The sources for the early depictions of Wolfe were limited in number, consisting of a few extant portraits, reconstructions from memory, and conjecture. Virtually no one had depicted Wolfe in his maturity. Written accounts varied widely. The French found him ugly while British accounts described him as manly. To allow the creation of serious memorials to the hero of Quebec, Wolfe's friends determined that an immediate likeness of the dead man had to be made in order to fix his appearance accurately for future commemorative use.

Soon after his return to England from North America in the fall of 1759, Wolfe's protégé and fellow soldier, the Duke of Richmond, commissioned Sir Joseph Wilton (1722-1803) to model Wolfe's likeness from the dead man's face. After the battle at Quebec, Wolfe's corpse had been shipped to England in a stone casket,



The Canadian War Museum's bust of Wolfe. In profile it closely resembles the Smyth pencil sketch, lacks the gorget of the other versions, and is consequently considered to be a cast of the first of the three versions completed by Joseph Wilton in about 1760.

Beaverbrook Collection of War Art,  
Canadian War Museum 88002.



National Portrait Gallery, London, 4314.

Joseph Wilton by Charles Grignion (1754-1804). This drawing was completed in 1773, the year that Wolfe's Monument was unveiled in Westminster Abbey.

arriving more than two months later, on 16 November 1759, at Spithead on the Isle of Wight. Wilton went down immediately to record the deceased general's features. However, on opening the casket, he found the face so badly decomposed that he could make no impressions from it. Some other model was needed, which, according to the recollections of contemporary novelist, Horace Walpole, was found in the face of a local servant, deemed to bear a remarkable resemblance to the late hero. The details were then corrected by one of the general's long-standing acquaintances. Wilton also had access to a portrait sketched at Quebec by one of Wolfe's aides-de-camp, Hervey Smyth, shortly before Wolfe's death on the Plains of Abraham.

Wilton, a London sculptor trained in Italy, worked in a neo-classical style and demonstrated a predilection for the tradition of the Roman bust in portraiture. The Wolfe commission made his career. In 1764, he was appointed sculptor to King George III and later, on the basis of his earlier studies of the hero, went on to win the competition for the monument to the general in Westminster Abbey. Completed in 1772, it shows

the influence of the more flamboyant Rococo style that he increasingly incorporated into his generally neo-classical approach to sculpture.

Wilton's initial plaster portrait no longer exists, or at least its whereabouts are unknown. However, Wilton is known to have made three secondary plaster sculptures based on this first version shortly afterwards. As far as can be ascertained, only one of the original secondary busts survives, in the collection of the National Portrait Gallery (NPG) in England. This is the oldest of the known Wilton sculptures. However, although the originals of the other two plasters are missing, there are three extant copies. One is a marble carving, presumed to be based on one of the missing secondary versions, in the collection of the National Gallery of Canada (NGC). The other two are almost identical casts of the third secondary sculpture. One, the finest in terms of surviving detail, is that in the collection of the Canadian War Museum (CWM) in Ottawa. The other is known to have been originally in the collection of Lord Simcoe, the first governor of Upper Canada. The Simcoe family retained it after the governor's death but it subsequently went missing. The author has only recently identified it as being in the Peter Winkworth collection in England. It differs from the CWM



National Trust Photo Library, England/John Hammond

Pencil profile of Wolfe by Hervey Smyth. Completed shortly before the general died. This drawing is on display at Quebec House, Westerham.

version only in that the plaster plaque at the base of the sculpture is not blank but bears the words "A True English General."

The bust in the National Portrait Gallery in London has no provenance prior to its acquisition in 1964. That in the National Gallery of Canada was acquired from the estate of the 6th Earl of Rosebery in Scotland in 1975 but its provenance prior to that remains unknown. Publisher Sir Leicester Harmsworth purchased the CWM bust in about 1930 from the grandson of the vicar of Wolfe's English parish of Westerham, Kent. Harmsworth later donated it to the National Archives of Canada, which in turn transferred it to the CWM in 1967.

Until recently, it was assumed that the CWM and the Simcoe (now Winkworth) busts were cast from the second of the three plaster portraits that Wilton completed immediately after the original. The English art historian J. L. Kerslake contended – when on the staff of the NPG – that his institution's portrait was the first on the basis of what he believed to be its greater naturalism. The NGC marble bust has always been deemed to be a copy of the third version on the basis of its comparatively more idealistic treatment of the general's features. Stylistically, it demonstrates a move on Wilton's part from a more strictly neo-classical approach to one more influenced by his growing acquaintance with the exaggerated arabesques and flowing lines of the Rococo. For this reason, the CWM bust has consistently been placed in the middle of the series. However, this re-evaluation suggests that it is, in fact, a cast of the earliest of the three.

The NPG, NGC, and CWM/Winkworth versions all depict Wolfe in the guise of a Roman general with wolfs-head epaulettes that make reference to his name. Modifications in the NPG and NGC



National Portrait Gallery, London, 44-15.

James Wolfe by Joseph Wilton (1722-1803). This plaster bust is believed to be the only surviving original of three dating to 1760. Note the gorget below the lion's head on the general's chest.

versions include the addition of a gorget, an eighteenth century symbolic holdover from a piece of medieval armour designed to protect the throat. A similar gorget appears in Wilton's 1772 monument to Wolfe in Westminster Abbey.



Here, however, it is one of the many elements that surround the dying man and is not an item of dress as in the two busts. The CWM bust, however, does not contain a gorget.

For a gorget to appear on the first and third busts in the series as well in the final monument of 1772, but not on the second bust, seems an illogical trajectory. The gorget, after all, signified status. It would have been inconceivable for any likeness of Wolfe not to bear this recognizable emblem of rank. In consequence, it is perhaps reasonable, to conclude that the CWM/Winkworth busts – which lack the gorget – are, in fact, cast from the first version the sculptor conceived, which subsequently had to be corrected by the addition of the missing gorget.

Another notable feature of the CWM/Winkworth busts is the carriage of the head, which seems to be held slightly more stiffly than in the other versions. In fact, these busts bear the strongest resemblance of all the versions to the life sketch of Wolfe completed by Hervey Smyth at Quebec. This lends additional weight to their being based on the earliest of the three secondary copies of the missing original sculpture.

Of interest from an art historical perspective is the fact that the CWM/Winkworth busts, without the gorget, are the most classical in appearance. This effect is less classical with the addition of the gorget in the NPG bust and especially so in the final NGC version, with its shift to a more Rococo style of execution. The NPG version may be the most significant of the four extant busts because it is the only survivor of the original secondary copies Wilton made from the original bust. However, it should not be assumed that it is the very first

---

Wolfe's Monument in Westminster Abbey, London, unveiled in 1773. The gorget can be seen in the middle left, just below the angel.

National Gallery of Canada 18376. Bequest of the 6th Earl of Rosebery, Dalmeny House, West Lothian, Scotland, 1975.



This marble copy of one of the three original plaster busts by Joseph Wilton (1722-1803) is deemed to be the last version completed. Note the gorget.

of the copies. This bust is certainly the oldest chronologically, but, as has been argued above, a good case can be made that the CWM/Winkworth busts, although actually made later, are based upon the earliest of the three copies, and hence reflect Wilton's initial thoughts on the depiction of the general.

There are also other versions of these sculptures known to exist now or recorded as having once existed. In 1872, artist George Scharf (1820–1895) drew the Rosebery marble, or at least one like it. It is therefore possible that another marble version may exist. Also, at some point after he acquired the CWM bust, Harmsworth had a number of bronze casts made from it. One of these is in the NPG collection and another is listed as being at Quebec House, Westerham. There may well have been more but their location is unknown. Curiously, both the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Vancouver Art Gallery also have plaster casts apparently made after one of Harmsworth's bronzes. The introduction of these copies in the 1930s is interesting as it coincides with a growth in national attention to commemorative aspects of Canadian history evidenced by the immensely popular and meaningful Vimy Memorial, unveiled in France in 1936.

Given context, however, the importance of the CWM/Winkworth busts becomes clear. As art, they are superb examples of the work of one of the finest of British eighteenth century practitioners working in the neo-classical idiom that was the preferred taste of the time. As history, they are probably as close as one can ever get to Wolfe's appearance at the time of his death. Nonetheless, they are also a product of their time, depicting Wolfe as the hero, the epitome of the type of character whose self-sacrifice was believed to have forged the British Empire. A record of the mentality of the period, they have functioned and continue to function as both constructors and constructions of the general's image. At the same time, though, their lack of the emblematic gorget, their plainer style, and their closer resemblance to the Hervey Smyth life sketch, may make

them a more accurate reflection of the artist's first thoughts on portraying Wolfe. Thus, they are, perhaps, somewhat less encumbered by the hagiographic idealism that quickly began to accumulate around Wolfe as the quintessential eighteenth century military hero, and the figure who, for a time at least, secured British hegemony in North America.

---

### A Note on Sources

Alan McNairn's *Behold the Hero: General Wolfe & the Arts in the Eighteenth Century* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's Press, 1997) provides detailed information on the various posthumous portraits of Wolfe. J. F. Kerslake's *Early Georgian Portraits* (London: National Portrait Gallery, 1977) is an authoritative basis for any study of Wolfe's portraiture and expands on his earlier essays: *Some Portraits of General Wolfe 1727–1759* (London: National Portrait Gallery, 1959) and "The Likeness of Wolfe," *Wolfe: Portraiture and Genealogy* (London: Quebec House, 1959). His work, of course, is indebted to some degree to J. Clarence Webster's *Wolfe and the Artists: A Study of His Portraiture* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1930). The origins of the Victoria and Albert Museum's plaster bust are given in Malcolm Baker, "General James Wolfe," in *Rococo: Art and Design in Hogarth's England* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1984). Margaret Whinney's *Sculpture in Britain 1530 to 1830* (London: Penguin Books, 1964) contains a very useful introduction to Joseph Wilton's career and the place of the sculptures of Wolfe within it. The information on the significance of the gorget is drawn from W. Y. Carmen, *A Dictionary of Military Uniforms* (New York: Scribner, 1977). The National Gallery of Canada and Canadian War Museum Curatorial Files were also useful references. The author would like to especially acknowledge her indebtedness to Alan McNairn whose book on Wolfe's imagery first drew her attention to the CWM's unsung masterpiece and whose diligent scholarship contributed immensely to the content of this article. She would also like to thank Franca Winkworth and the Toronto Public Library for providing the photographs that irrefutably proved that her bust of Wolfe was that once owned by Simcoe. The editorial contributions of Dr. Cameron Pulsifer are also appreciatively noted. The quotation in the title is from "Stanzas on the Taking of Quebec," by Oliver Goldsmith (1759).

Laura Brandon is the Curator of War Art at the Canadian War Museum.