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**“Death knows but one rule of arithmetic”:
Discourses of Death and Grief in the Trenches**

by

Brittany Catherine Dunn

Honours Bachelor of Arts in History (CO-OP), University of Ottawa, 2015

THESIS

Submitted to the Faculty of Arts, Department of History

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Abstract

Death was ubiquitous in the First World War and while contemporaries acknowledged this, soldiers' experiences of death and grief have been largely ignored in the Canadian historiography. This thesis seeks to address this gap in the literature by examining how English-Canadian soldiers responded to and coped with death on the Western Front. It argues that combatants developed and adapted multiple methods of coping, which ranged from humour to emphasizing ideals of sacrifice to emotional distance, in response to the horrific conditions of the trenches. This thesis explores both private and public discourses of death using contemporary diaries, letters and trench newspapers. Men drew upon pre-war narratives and rituals, adapting them to suit their needs, but also developed new attitudes towards death, unique to wartime experiences, in their reactions to death in the trenches. While often contradictory in nature, soldiers used these various approaches to handle the overwhelming death of the front, employing whichever method they found appropriate and most useful at the time and in that particular circumstance.

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Introduction

Death was ubiquitous in the First World War – soldiers were surrounded by the constant threat of death as well as by the dead who existed alongside the living in the trenches. Over 600,000 Canadians served in the Canadian Expeditionary Force and nearly one in ten were killed.¹ “Death knows but one rule of arithmetic;” lamented H.J. Thornton of No. 4 Canadian Casualty Clearing Station in his unit’s newspaper, “he can neither subtract nor divide, but only multiply.”² This quote is indicative of the attitudes exhibited to the mass death soldiers faced during the war. Through his work at a casualty clearing station, Thornton would have witnessed death on a daily basis but being confronted with mortality was not exclusive to men in medical units as men died all along the front. In this environment, it was thus necessary for soldiers to adapt and develop means of coping with the death around them – and the constant reminders of their own mortality – to be able to continue fighting at the front. But how did soldiers grieve for their fallen comrades?

Although this must have been one of the central preoccupations of First World War soldiers, historians have paid surprisingly little attention to the issue.³ In the

¹ G.W.L. Nicholson, *Official History of the Canadian Army in the First World War: Canadian Expeditionary Force 1914-1919* (Ottawa: Queen’s Printer, 1962), 535.

² H.J. Thornton, “Four Graves in Flanders,” *Clearings*, December 1917, 12, Record Group [RG] 9 III-D-4, vol. 5078, Library and Archives Canada [LAC].

³ For a recent historiographical overview of the Canadian literature on the First World War see Mark Osborne Humphries, “Between Commemoration and History: The Historiography of the Canadian Corps and Military Overseas,” *The Canadian Historical Review* 95, no. 3 (September 2014): 384-397; Amy Shaw, “Expanding the Narrative: A First World War with Women, Children, and Grief,” *The Canadian Historical Review* 95, no. 3 (September 2014): 398-406; Mourad Djebabla, “Historiographie francophone de la Première Guerre mondiale: écrire la Grande Guerre de 1914-1918 en français au Canada et au Québec,” *The Canadian Historical Review* 95, no. 3 (September 2014): 407-416; Tim Cook, “Battles of the Imagined Past: Canada’s Great War and Memory,” *The Canadian Historical Review* 95, no. 3 (September 2014): 417-426; and Christopher Moore, “1914 in 2014: What We Commemorate When We

Canadian historiography, very little has been written on soldiers' reactions to death and grief. There are many general studies regarding the Canadian experience at the front in the First World War; however, these works often contain only limited references to soldiers' perspectives on and responses to death and grieving. Desmond Morton's *When Your Number's Up: The Canadian Soldier in the First World War* was the first work to study Canadian soldiers' experiences in detail from a social history perspective. Morton explores the experience of the ordinary soldier, noting how it changed throughout the war due to advances in tactics and technology and in a chapter on morale and discipline he notes the omnipresence of death at the front and the accompanying necessity of developing coping mechanisms. However, he only briefly comments on the use of fatalism, humour, religion and callousness as methods of handling death in the trenches. The emotional lives of the men who fought were not a part of Morton's analysis.⁴

Even works which claim to focus on the life of soldiers and so-called "trench culture" have dealt with death only in terms of its corporeal reality and the ways soldiers tried to cope with its reality.⁵ Tim Cook's two volume history, *Canadians Fighting the Great War*, examines "the full experience of combat in the Canadian Corps" and how it became an effective fighting force.⁶ Cook uses official documents as well as personal narratives to provide insight into the individual soldier's experience. Both volumes

Commemorate the First World War," *The Canadian Historical Review* 95, no. 3 (September 2014): 427-432.

⁴ Desmond Morton, *When Your Number's Up: The Canadian Soldier in the First World War* (Toronto: Random House of Canada, 1993), 228-233.

⁵ Humphries, "Between Commemoration and History," 384-397.

⁶ Tim Cook, *At the Sharp End: Canadians fighting the Great War, 1914-1916* (Toronto: Viking, 2007), 3-4.

include brief discussions of death, describing causes of death at the front as well as several coping methods such as fatalism, superstition and humour.⁷ Cook has also written a number of articles that examine life in the trenches for Canadian soldiers which focus on coping in general with death representing one of the multiple stresses they faced.⁸ While both Morton and Cook examine coping mechanisms, neither addresses grief. These works tend to focus on how the individual dealt with the possibility of his own death but do not sufficiently explore how men reacted to and grieved for the death of others.

Historians of the Canadian home front have studied grief in more detail but they have more often examined commemoration and memorialization rather than individuals' experiences of loss. Suzanne Evans focuses on the archetype of the sacrificial mother, arguing that mothers' sacrifice of their sons was politicized to support the war effort. The figure of the grieving mother was also given prominence in the post-war period as her mourning was privileged over that of others, demonstrated by creation of the Memorial Cross and the role of the Silver Cross mother in Remembrance Day ceremonies. While Evans examines wartime and post-war grief, she concentrates on discourses surrounding mothers and thus does not examine the experiences of individuals on the home front or

⁷ Cook, *At the Sharp End*, 255-270; and Tim Cook, *Shock Troops: Canadians fighting the Great War, 1917-1918* (Toronto: Viking, 2008), 219-234.

⁸ Tim Cook, "'More a Medicine than a Beverage': 'Demon Rum' and the Canadian Trench Soldier of the First World War," *Canadian Military History* 9, no. 1 (2000): 6-22; Tim Cook, "The Singing War: Canadian Soldiers' Songs of the Great War," *American Review of Canadian Studies* 39, no. 3 (2009): 224-241; Tim Cook, "Grave Beliefs: Stories of the Supernatural and the Uncanny among Canada's Great War Trench Soldiers," *The Journal of Military History* 77 (April 2013): 523-556; and Tim Cook, "'I will meet the world with a smile and a joke': Canadian Soldiers' Humour in the Great War," *Canadian Military History* 22, no. 2 (2015): 48-62.

overseas.⁹ Jonathan Vance also explores overarching narratives rather than individuals' experiences, studying how Canadians constructed the memory and myths surrounding the First World War in the 1920s and 1930s. He argues that contemporaries' understanding of the war in the decades after the Armistice developed out of a need to comprehend and make meaningful the war and Canada's sacrifices – to make, in Vance's words, "a usable past out of the Great War."¹⁰ He identifies the dead and the desire to honour their memory as the key motivation behind Canadians' memory and memorialization of the war as a justified and willing sacrifice. While analyzing commemoration and the development of a cult of the fallen, Vance does not explore individuals' or wartime experiences of loss and grief. So in examining the Canadian literature, there is a surprising gap in the literature considering that many historians have recognized that death was a significant feature of war experience. An unintended consequence of this approach is that it tends to reinforce the view that soldiers, especially in the Edwardian period, did not have fully developed emotional lives.

In comparison to the Canadian literature, the British scholarship is more developed in regards to both death *and* grief. Like their Canadian counterparts, British historians have taken two basic approaches, focusing either on the impact of the First World War on attitudes to death more generally or, again, focusing on the corporeality of death during the war. Still the scholarship, which centres on the inter-war period and the

⁹ Suzanne Evans, *Mothers of Heroes, Mothers of Martyrs: World War I and the Politics of Grief* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007). See also Suzanne Evans, "Marks of Grief: Black Attire, Medals, and Service Flags," in *A Sisterhood of Suffering and Service: Women and Girls in Canada and Newfoundland during the First World War*, ed. Sarah Glassford and Amy Shaw (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2013), 219-240.

¹⁰ Jonathan F. Vance, *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning, and the First World War* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1997), 9.

impact of the war, largely ignores the conflict itself even though it is identified as a watershed event. While historians agree that the First World War had a significant effect on attitudes to death in Britain, they disagree over the nature of that change with some arguing that the mass death event of the First World War led to an obsession with mortality and a consequent rise in spiritualism in the 1920s and 1930s while others think that British society became less focused on death and religion.¹¹ This debate stems from anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer's 1965 book *Death, Grief, and Mourning* which analyzes grief and mourning in contemporary Britain.¹² Gorer claims that the twentieth century witnessed a decline in public and ritualized mourning which made death a taboo subject.¹³ Due to this denial of death as well as the waning of mourning rituals, the bereaved lacked a coherent system of support to help them manage their grief and developed maladaptive practices to replace traditional customs. Gorer does not discuss when or why these changes occurred in the twentieth century although in his autobiographical introduction he identifies the later years of the First World War as the moment when he perceived public mourning as beginning to decline because the mass death of the war made traditional rituals and tropes of grief unrealistic if not impossible.¹⁴

¹¹ David Cannadine, "War and Death, Grief and Mourning in Modern Britain," in *Mirrors of Mortality: Studies in the Social History of Death*, Joachim Whaley, ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981), 187-242; Alan Wilkinson, "Changing English Attitudes to Death in the Two World Wars," in *The Changing Face of Death: Historical Accounts of Death and Disposal*, Peter C. Jupp and Glennys Howarth, eds. (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1997), 149; Pat Jalland, *Death in War and Peace: Loss and Grief in England, 1914-1970* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1; and Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain and the Great War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 210-252.

¹² Geoffrey Gorer, *Death, Grief, and Mourning* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1965; New York: Anchor Books, 1967).

¹³ *Ibid.*, ix, xxi-xxii, 63-65, 128, 130.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

British historians have largely followed Gorer's lead, contextualizing his argument but mostly affirming his basic findings and centering their analysis on the years following the First World War. One of the more influential scholars in the field, David Cannadine, sought to reassess the idea that Western society progressed from a culture which celebrated death in the nineteenth century to one which denied and hid death in the twentieth. Cannadine argues that historians have undervalued the effect of the First World War on attitudes towards death in contemporary Britain and the mortality caused by the war led to a cultural obsession with death. Due to declining death rates and a resulting glorification of the deceased in the decades before the war, Britons were shocked by the large numbers of dead during the war and found that Victorian rituals of mourning were insufficient to capture the type of grief associated with notions of wartime sacrifice. Cannadine highlights two forms which the obsession with death took: war memorials and the ritualization of Armistice Day as well as post-war spiritualism. These expressions of grief and mourning were developed to make mass bereavement manageable. Cannadine also briefly examined soldiers' coping methods, using mostly memoirs and secondary sources, noting that men's reactions to death were complex and multi-faceted and were defined by numbing, acts of aggression and sadness. Yet he provides a simplistic rationale for these responses, explaining them as the consequence of the infrequency of death in the early twentieth century. While identifying pre-war perceptions of death as important to wartime expressions, there are no references to other pre-war factors which may have influenced soldiers' grieving.¹⁵

¹⁵ Cannadine, "War and Death," 187-242.

Other historians have followed Cannadine's lead. Although not explicitly interested in the character of mourning in the inter-war period, Alan Wilkinson emphasizes the shock which the First World War caused in Britain largely due to the fact that Britain had not fought a major war in a century and "had forgotten what war was really like."¹⁶ He focuses his analysis on the multiple ideologies to which Britons turned to handle the death of both world wars. In regards to inter-war Britain's obsession with death, he highlights cemetery visitations by the bereaved throughout the 1920s and 1930s as an example of changing practices of grief and mourning, carrying forward the argument that the First World War was a watershed moment. As an Anglican priest, Wilkinson also understandably emphasizes the role that Christianity played in responses to death which he believes declined throughout the First World War and the inter-war period and was rare in the Second World War. However, his actual examination of specific coping methods and grief is limited, only discussing three ways in which soldiers might have approached their service and death in war.¹⁷ Both Cannadine and Wilkinson also focus almost exclusively on middle- and upper-class sources and therefore omit working-class perspectives. This is a significant omission as both historians base their conclusions on an assumption that death was becoming increasingly uncommon in the late-Victorian and Edwardian periods which, if it was the case, was surely a middle- and upper-class experience rather than a working-class one.¹⁸

¹⁶ Wilkinson, "Changing English Attitudes to Death in the Two World Wars," 149.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 149-163.

¹⁸ Pat Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 1, 144; and F.B. Smith, *The People's Health: 1830-1910* (London: Croom Helm, 1979), 197, 230, 231.

Differing from Cannadine and Wilkinson but still in line with Gorer, Pat Jalland examines the “silences surrounding death” in her book *Death in War and Peace: Loss and Grief in England, 1914-1970*.¹⁹ Like others scholars, she argues that the two world wars played a significant role in changing attitudes towards death in Britain, but focusing on the decline in religious devotion and the secularization of mourning rituals. While public memorials and commemoration expanded during the inter-war period, she suggests, private mourning customs declined; traditional Christian rituals were overshadowed by public memorialization which fostered a culture of silence regarding peacetime deaths. Regarding the First World War, both soldiers and civilians were encouraged to face the mass death stoically and Jalland argues that emotional suppression and numbing was the most common response of soldiers to the death of the trenches. Her discussion of death and grief at the front is again secondary to her focus on the home front and relies mostly on secondary sources. Where she does use primary materials, her sources have similar weakness to those used by Cannadine and Wilkinson in that she draws mostly upon officers’ narratives. However, Jalland acknowledges that the working class did in fact have distinct responses to death from the middle and upper classes, which is specifically addressed in a chapter on inter-war mourning, but this is ignored in her discussion on soldiers’ grief.²⁰

Historians are thus divided on the impact of the First World War on approaches to death, disagreeing on whether it provoked obsession or silence. While valuable for studying aspects of continuity and change, this literature tends to emphasize the transition

¹⁹ Jalland, *Death in War and Peace*, 1.

²⁰ Ibid.

from wartime to the inter-war period with limited references to the pre-war context and thus is only partially applicable to my study of the influence of pre-war customs on wartime responses to death. Focusing on the home front and war's aftermath, it is almost entirely silent on how soldiers themselves grieved while on active service.

The second approach within the British scholarship concentrates on corporeality and the physical body of the soldier and of the dead, dealing more directly with the experience of men serving at the front. In general, scholars of this school agree that the war was a watershed moment, but their work is grounded in the assumption that war must have provoked a change in attitudes towards male bodies more generally. Foremost in this field, Joanna Bourke's *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain and the Great War* examines the effect the First World War had on the male body and masculinity by exploring topics such as the war-disabled, malingering and male bonding, ultimately asserting that while the war was disruptive, men looked to their pre-war lives to reconstruct their post-war ones. The final chapter focuses on the dead, arguing that the bereaved turned to pre-war customs to find meaning in the death of loved ones. However, Bourke chooses not to frame her work through temporal divisions between pre-war, wartime and post-war, arguing that these boundaries are arbitrary and misleading.²¹ She suggests that due to the obscenity of death in war, the bereaved as well as the state sought to sanitize death through burial reform and simplified mourning, trends which had already started before the war. The bodies of the dead were also a site of conflict as bereaved families and the state debated over whom had ownership of the deceased. Although Bourke cites soldiers' descriptions of death and mutilation at the front, she

²¹ Bourke, *Dismembering the Male*, 26.

focuses on the experience of grieving families and provides little discussion of soldiers' reactions to the death of comrades and the dead which surrounded them in the trenches. In truth, her focus is on attitudes towards the living male body and thus the dead body is analyzed only as an extension of this approach. Interested in exploring the ways that masculinity was constructed and imprinted on the male body, this leaves little room for the study of emotional male grief which, in effect, runs counter to Bourke's thesis that men tried to embody so-called manly norms.²²

While Bourke looks at the body, Peter Hodgkinson analyzes the reactions of Imperial soldiers to death on the front, focusing on the way Imperial, although mostly British, soldiers reacted to and coped with human remains in the trenches, using a quantitative analysis of soldiers' personal papers, memoirs and oral histories. Hodgkinson questions the assumption held by many historians that soldiers became hardened towards death during the war. Instead, he argues that men did not become inured to the sight of death but developed methods of adaptation which allowed them to avoid confronting uncomfortable emotional realities. These methods of coping could break down but they were also usually rebuilt. While the majority of the thesis focuses on interaction with the bodies of the dead, the reaction of men to the death of friends is explored in one chapter and, while noting it was more emotional than responses to the anonymous dead, maintains that this was temporary. Hodgkinson asserts that the Edwardian cultural expectation of stoicism played an important role in men's coping mechanisms, claiming

²² Ibid., 210-252.

that “avoidance of expressed emotion was inherent.”²³ However, the ideal of masculine self-control is only discussed in the conclusion and is not addressed throughout the thesis.²⁴

The view of the British soldier as manly, stoic and unemotional dominates the field: whether historians like Bourke interrogate it or, like Hodgkinson, accept it at face value, there is little debate about how soldiers were expected to respond to death.²⁵ Due to their focus on corporeality and the soldier’s body, these works are more firmly based in the wartime period and present a fuller picture of wartime reactions to death than the scholarship which debates the impact of the war. However, this approach is limited by its lack of detailed discussion on soldiers’ grief and mourning. While the British literature is more developed, both the Canadian and British historiography of death and grieving during the First World War, particularly in regards to soldiers’ experiences, ultimately present a considerable gap which has yet to be extensively explored. As a result, much of what we “know” about the way soldiers responded to death at the front is extrapolated from a variety of sources mostly related to the home front and post-war civilian world. But how did soldiers actually grieve (or cope) with death at the front?

This thesis helps to answer this question by examining how Canadian soldiers reacted to and coped with death during the war.²⁶ It argues that due to the overwhelming

²³ Peter E. Hodgkinson, “Human Remains on the Great War Battlefields: Coping with Death in the Trenches” (Master’s thesis, University of Birmingham, 2006), 51.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ See also Ross Wilson, “The Burial of the Dead: the British Army on the Western Front, 1914-18” *War & Society* 31, no. 1 (2012): 22-41.

²⁶ It is important to note that this thesis will focus on the experience of English-Canadian soldiers on the Western Front and therefore the term “Canadian(s)” throughout the paper refers to English-Canadians. I have chosen to concentrate on English-Canada because Quebec was culturally and denominationally

presence of death at the front, soldiers were compelled to adapt and construct various means of coping to handle an unprecedented and horrific situation. Combatants developed multiple and diverse ways of managing their reactions to the death that surrounded them and these methods were often, but not exclusively, based on pre-war customs and narratives of death and grieving. As a mostly civilian force, men of the Canadian Expeditionary Force drew from their pre-war lives to deal with the death of war and the accompanying grief. However, the war also pushed men to construct new means of coping in response to their distinctive wartime experiences. While emotions such as grief and sadness are subjective, the expression of emotion is influenced and shaped by cultural and societal discourses as well as by one's lived experiences. In her study of Italian soldiers' emotions in the First World War, historian Vanda Wilcox asserts that "[t]he nature of warfare and conditions of combat [...] determine combat experience and hence influenced emotional reactions."²⁷ The conditions of the front, namely the omnipresence of death, affected how men reacted when their comrades were killed but their responses were also heavily influenced by pre-war and contemporary discourses and expectations. Reactions to death and grieving were complex and often contradictory as combatants expressed sadness and anger over the death of comrades, lamented their loss through sacrificial poetry yet also joked about it. While emotional detachment or

different from the rest of Canada and therefore the discourses and practices which may have influenced French-Canadian soldiers' reactions to death would likely be distinctive.

²⁷ Vanda Wilcox, "'Weeping tears of blood': Exploring Italian soldiers' emotions in the First World War," *Modern Italy* 17, no. 2 (May 2012), 172. See also Carol Acton, *Grief in Wartime: Private Pain, Public Discourse* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 6, 8, 107; and Michael Roper, *The Secret Battle: Emotional Survival in the Great War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 33.

numbing is assumed to be the common reaction, it was only one of many possible responses.

This thesis is divided into three sections which explore the various facets of combatants' experiences with and responses to death in the trenches. The first chapter examines pre-war attitudes towards and customs of death in Britain and Canada during the late Victorian and Edwardian periods. It describes the character of death at the front, highlighting the risks men faced and the constant presence of death, both physically and as an omnipresent psychological threat. Using contemporary diaries, which although an imperfect source are one of the few means we have to get at men's personal thoughts on the subject, the next section analyzes how soldiers privately wrote about their reactions to and expressed their grief over the death of comrades. The common forms of these responses were emotional distance, a reliance on ideals of duty to rationalize death, emotionality (by which is meant the expression of emotions) and emotional re-direction. The final section examines more public discourses of death in which men communicated with others regarding their grief and attempts to cope with death at the front. These narratives were uncovered through trench newspapers and letters and were often defined by the use of sacrificial language, emotionality, humour as well as a focus on the body. In both private and public narratives, men used these different approaches in multiple and conflicting ways, employing any or all of them at various times, to convey their reactions to and attempts to cope with death.

Exploring the inner lives of soldiers is a difficult task given that the available sources are almost all written, many for an external audience. Nevertheless, the key primary sources used were diaries, trench newspapers and letters. Diaries offer insight

into soldiers' experiences, thoughts and feelings during their service. They were often written with the expectation that they would not be read by others, but soldiers may still have self-censored, whether consciously or unconsciously, their writing. Men were influenced by contemporary expectations of what their war experience and their reactions to it were meant to look like and they used "ready-made" tropes and narratives to aid in their descriptions of the indescribable.²⁸ Many of the diaries which I have used in this thesis are also written by officers because officers, usually middle- or upper-class men, tended to be better educated and thus more likely to record their experiences than enlisted men – or at least their writings were more likely to be preserved by archivists as historically significant. Documents with a clear intended audience, such as newspapers and letters, are of limited use to examine the inner feelings of a combatant because the writer may have altered his account to meet expectations or protect loved ones on the home front.²⁹ The potential for alteration of the soldier's narrative to fit the audience is also why I have not used post-war memoirs or oral interviews.

Despite these caveats, trench newspapers and letters are still valuable for demonstrating how men publicly wrote about their grief as they shed light on common expectations of what were generally considered acceptable responses. In other words, they tell us something about the ways in which soldiers believed they were supposed to think about death and grieving and thus shed light on some of the expectations that

²⁸ Jeffrey A. Keshen, *Propaganda and Censorship During Canada's Great War* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1996), 155, 169; Jessica Meyer, *Men of War: Masculinity and the First World War in Britain* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 47, 49, 58, 72-73, 166; Hodgkinson, "Human Remains on the Great War Battlefields," 50, 51; and Acton, *Grief in Wartime*, 7, 8.

²⁹ Keshen, *Propaganda and Censorship*, 133, 153-154, 165; Meyer, *Men of War*, 16, 29, 46, 47, 161-162; Wilcox, "'Weeping tears of blood,'" 173; and Acton, *Grief in Wartime*, 9, 10.

shaped their inner emotional lives. Trench newspapers were published by soldiers to be read by soldiers and they also submitted most of the paper's content to a censor who vetted the material before publication.³⁰ Although censored, papers were often permitted to print a variety of content, including subversive material to allow soldiers to vent their frustrations.³¹ These papers provided soldiers with a space to communicate with others in their battalion, potentially anonymously, and contributors understood that their submission would be read by their comrades which may have caused men to reflect upon and be reserved about what they submitted for publication. Similarly, letters were also written for an audience and were officially censored. As well, many men may have practiced self-censorship in their letters as they hid the realities of life in the trenches from their families and sought to maintain a masculine image.³² As this is debatable, I have focused on condolence letters from friends and officers of the deceased to the families. These letters often provided information about the circumstances of death and were meant to console the bereaved. Soldiers may have felt constrained in these letters due to the desire to ease the bereaved families' pain.³³

Using these primary sources, we can examine how soldiers privately and publicly expressed their reactions to death and grief. Ultimately, this thesis will show the multiple ways Canadian soldiers reacted to the death of their comrades, adapting pre-war

³⁰ Keshen, *Propaganda and Censorship*, 134; and Cook, *Shock Troops*, 187, 189.

³¹ Cook, *Shock Troops*, 187-189; and Keshen, *Propaganda and Censorship*, 133-135, 148.

³² Keshen, *Propaganda and Censorship*, 153-154, 155-157, 159, 165; and Meyer, *Men of War*, 16, 17, 25, 29, 46.

³³ Keshen, *Propaganda and Censorship*, 167; Meyer, *Men of War*, 74-75, 79, 86, 96; and Roper, *The Secret Battle*, 213, 214.

approaches and discourses to wartime as well as developing new methods. Soldiers grieved, as Canadians on the home front did, but they did so in their own way.

“Quite a number of little crosses”: Death in Canada and on the Western Front

The Canadians who went to war between 1914 and 1918 took with them a whole host of attitudes, beliefs, and values that were shaped by their experiences before the war. Death was, of course, an inevitable part of life and the passing of friends and loved ones was marked by a variety of rituals and ceremonies depending on where a person lived, their ethnic and religious background and the language they spoke. The Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) was predominantly English-speaking and largely urban – indeed the first contingent was almost two-thirds British born.³⁴ This chapter thus focuses on pre-war attitudes to death and grieving in Britain and English-speaking Canada. While this leaves out a large portion of the Canadian population, specifically French Canadians and the vast number of immigrants who came to Canada in the decades before 1914, it reflects the culture of the soldiers examined in subsequent chapters.

Although an important aspect of lived experience, the topic of death and grieving in Canada in the Victorian and Edwardian eras has not been fully explored by Canadian historians although it has been studied more fully by British researchers. To uncover the ideas, experiences and attitudes that would have shaped the world-view of CEF soldiers, it is therefore necessary to analyze and compare the British and limited Canadian literature on death during this period.

What do we know about death in the Victorian and Edwardian eras? Scholars argue that during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, death became a less common aspect of the everyday life of Britons, particularly those of the middle and upper

³⁴ Desmond Morton, *When Your Number's Up: The Canadian Soldier in the First World War* (Toronto: Random House of Canada, 1993), 278.

classes. In this period the death rate in Britain steadily declined, from 22 per 1,000 in 1868 to 18 per 1,000 in 1888 then to 13 per 1,000 by 1910.³⁵ Life expectancy consequently rose, from forty years in 1841 to fifty-two years in 1911;³⁶ with these changes death gradually became more associated with old age.³⁷ Yet these statistics must be treated with caution: the upper and middle classes generally had a higher life expectancy than those of the working class.³⁸ The working class also faced a greater risk of death from preventable diseases such as cholera, typhus and typhoid.³⁹ While the general death rate declined during the Victorian period, particularly after mid-century, infant mortality rates did not, remaining around 153 per 1,000. Infant mortality rates were not necessarily low in Britain, as infants under one year old represented a quarter of all deaths in England and Wales from the 1840s to the early 1900s, but they were one of the lowest in Europe.⁴⁰ Although admitting that Britain still faced a high infant mortality rate and continued deaths from preventable diseases, historian Anthony S. Wohl argues that “it was indisputable that at the end of Victoria’s reign England was an infinitely more

³⁵ David Cannadine, “War and Death, Grief and Mourning in Modern Britain,” in *Mirrors of Mortality: Studies in the Social History of Death*, Joachim Whaley, ed. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1981), 193; Anthony S. Wohl, *Endangered Lives: Public Health in Victorian Britain* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1983), 10-11, 116, 329; and Pat Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 5-6, 143.

³⁶ Cannadine, “War and Death,” 193; Wohl, *Endangered Lives*, 329; Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, 5-6, 143, 144; and F.B. Smith, *The People’s Health: 1830-1910* (London: Croom Helm, 1979), 197.

³⁷ Cannadine, “War and Death,” 193; and Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, 5-6, 143.

³⁸ Cannadine, “War and Death,” 193; Wohl, *Endangered Lives*, 5-6, 329; Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, 5-6, 143, 144; and Smith, *The People’s Health*, 197.

³⁹ Smith, *The People’s Health*, 230, 231.

⁴⁰ Smith, *The People’s Health*, 65-66; Cannadine, “War and Death,” 193; Wohl, *Endangered Lives*, 11, 39; and Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, 5.

sanitary and healthy place to live in than at the beginning, or in the middle, of her reign.”⁴¹ The decline in death rates throughout this period was largely due to public health reforms which began mid-century and improved sanitation, sewers and housing.⁴² During the Victorian period, death began to take on a more modern form: what epidemiologists call a U-shaped mortality curve in which the youngest and oldest members of the population were the ones that died most frequently.⁴³

As death became less frequent for young and middle-aged adults, funeral and mourning customs began to change so that mourning practices became more modest and less extravagant. At first this might seem counter-intuitive. While the common assumption is that the Victorian period was the peak of the celebration of death,⁴⁴ scholars point out that the extravagances associated with the early Victorian funeral were, in fact, continuations of the elaborate practices of the Georgian era.⁴⁵ Ornate state funerals, such as the Duke of Wellington’s in 1852, were exceptions rather than the rule. Beginning in the 1870s, funerals became increasingly modest for middle- and upper-class families and ostentatious funerals were perceived as being in poor taste. Funerals became

⁴¹ Wohl, *Endangered Lives*, 116.

⁴² Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, 5, 78, 143; Wohl, *Endangered Lives*, 116; and Smith, *The People’s Health*, 195, 198-199, 217-218, 226, 415.

⁴³ Mark Osborne Humphries, *The Last Plague: Spanish Influenza and the Politics of Public Health in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 4.

⁴⁴ See for example John Morley, *Death, Heaven and the Victorians* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1971); James Stevens Curl, *The Victorian Celebration of Death* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles Publishers, 1972); and Julian Litten, *The English Way of Death: The Common Funeral since 1450* (London: Robert Hale, 1991).

⁴⁵ Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, 194-195; and Ruth Richardson, “Why was Death so Big in Victorian Britain?” in *Death, Ritual, and Bereavement*, Ralph Houlbrooke, ed. (London: Routledge, 1989), 106-107.

less expensive and families increasingly sought quiet and simple burials for their loved ones. For example, the Funeral and Mourning Reform Association was established in 1875 and encouraged simplified rituals and reducing funeral expenses.⁴⁶ *The Lancet*, a British medical journal, praised the funeral reform of the last half of the century, writing that: “It is found that the expenditure of £10 to £15 will allow of everything being completed in good taste and reverence, but without any excess.”⁴⁷ In comparison, an ordinary middle-class funeral in 1843 would cost £50 to £70 while those of the gentry cost from £200 to £400 and from £500 to £1,500 for the aristocracy.⁴⁸ During the late Victorian and Edwardian periods, mourning rituals became less stringent and grieving became less outwardly expressive, increasingly tending towards stoicism, emotional reserve and private mourning.⁴⁹ Men in particular were expected to maintain control of their emotions and remain stoic in the face of death.⁵⁰ Historian Pat Jalland argues that these changes to Victorian attitudes towards death were caused by the decline of Evangelicalism and demographic changes, particularly a falling mortality rate and rising life expectancy.⁵¹ Historian David Cannadine suggests that, since the likelihood of death in old age became more common, death was increasingly considered as occurring at an

⁴⁶ Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, 194-195, 196, 197, 199-202, 304; Cannadine, “War and Death, Grief and Mourning,” 192-193.

⁴⁷ *Lancet*, 20 January 1894, as quoted in *Death in the Victorian Family*, Jalland, 200.

⁴⁸ E. Chadwick, *Report on the Practice of Interment in Towns* (1843), 50-1, the evidence of the undertaker, Mr. Wild of London, as cited in *Death in the Victorian Family*, Jalland, 195.

⁴⁹ Tony Walter, *On Bereavement: The Culture of Grief* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1999), 131, 132, 134; and Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, 54, 199, 202, 222, 371.

⁵⁰ Pat Jalland, *Death in War and Peace: Loss and Grief in England, 1914-1970* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 3; Walter, *On Bereavement*, 134; and Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, 5, 222.

⁵¹ Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, 2, 5-6, 143, 358.

“appropriate” and natural age and therefore death became less distressing and easier to forget.⁵²

The simplification of funeral practices was true for the upper and middle classes more than for the working class, however, who held onto traditional customs well into the Edwardian era. Members of the working class feared the stigma of a pauper’s funeral and thus funerals and their accompanying costs and rituals retained significance.⁵³ Yet all classes focused on the body of the deceased as an important aspect of mourning. Wakes and the provision of a proper burial were meant to facilitate a sense of closure for the bereaved.⁵⁴ These more simplified practices did not mean, however, that death was treated as less important: the bereaved of all classes still sought to remember their dead loved ones through a variety of means. The middle and upper classes still wore mourning clothes to show respect for the dead as well as to identify that one was in mourning. Recognizing the expenses associated with mourning clothes, funeral reformers encouraged moderation and economizing by, for example, no longer wearing expensive crape fabric or buying new clothes for every death.⁵⁵ Condolence letters too allowed mourners to share their grief with and receive sympathy from relatives and friends who

⁵² Cannadine, “War and Death,” 193-195.

⁵³ Ross Wilson, “The Burial of the Dead: the British Army on the Western Front, 1914-18,” *War & Society* 31, no. 1 (2012), 27; Ruth Richardson, *Death, Dissection and the Destitute* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), 274-276; Richardson, “Why was Death so Big in Victorian Britain?” 116-117; and Julie-Marie Strange, “‘Tho’ lost to sight, to memory dear’: pragmatism, sentimentality and working-class attitudes towards the grave, c. 1875-1914,” *Mortality* 8, no. 2 (2003), 147, 156.

⁵⁴ Wilson, “Burial of the Dead,” 27; Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, 210-212; Strange, “‘Tho’ lost to sight, to memory dear,’” 147, 156; and Julie-Marie Strange, “‘She Cried a Very Little’: Death, Grief and Mourning in Working-Class Culture, c. 1880-1914,” *Social History* 27, no. 2 (May 2002), 152-154, 155, 156, 159.

⁵⁵ Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, 302-307.

could not attend the funeral.⁵⁶ Families also often sought physical reminders of the dead to aid their grieving. They could commission portraits, photographs, busts, stained glass windows and tombstones to remember the dead, so-called *memento mori*. Keepsakes, such as a lock of hair or jewellery, were also physical reminders of the dead. Visiting and caring for the graves of loved ones served as a source of consolation and a way to remember and remain close to the deceased.⁵⁷ While rituals retained importance for the middle and upper classes, they became increasingly personal and private rather than public as they had been in the early Victorian era.

For the working class, funeral customs also continued to hold great significance. Traditions such as laying out and waking of the dead as well as visitations and funeral teas created a sense of communal mourning in which relatives and neighbours could offer condolences to the bereaved and share in their grief. Mourning clothes and funeral processions allowed mourners to outwardly express respect and grief for the dead. Families kept the memory of their loved ones close through physical mementos, such as clothes or a lock of hair, as well as by talking with others about the deceased. Verbal expressions could be impeded, however, by the inability to coherently communicate inexpressible grief. Although the working class were intimately familiar with death, they were not inured to it and stoicism in the face of death was often a pragmatic necessity when the hardships of everyday life required people to carry on; it is dangerous to assume that stoicism was synonymous with a lack of emotion.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Ibid., 307-316.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 288-299.

⁵⁸ Strange, “‘She Cried a Very Little’,” 144-161.

There were, though, broader social and cultural norms that shaped how grief, sorrow, and sadness were expressed by men and women. Men in particular were expected to be more restrained than women in their emotional expressions although that did not mean that they had to be unfeeling.⁵⁹ Regardless of its frequency or infrequency, death and the accompanying grief were still significant parts of life for Edwardian Britons of all classes which, as noted by historian Ross Wilson, “were met with a particular set of cultural responses.”⁶⁰ Women were considered emotional creatures and more vulnerable to outbursts and breakdowns when confronted with hardships such as loss. While in the late Victorian period women were expected to have better control of their emotions, their self-control was considered praise-worthy rather than a given expectation.⁶¹ In contrast, men were expected to maintain emotional control and remain stoic. Rudyard Kipling’s famous poem “If –” described the key attributes men were supposed to attain: self-control, pride, perseverance, pride and truthfulness. The emotional discipline expected of men was highlighted in the lines “If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster / And treat those two impostors just the same; / [...] Yours is the Earth and everything that’s in it, / And – which is more – you’ll be a Man, my son!”⁶² In both their lives and when handling death, men were to display self-control and resolve and reveal little emotion.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 144-148.

⁶⁰ Wilson, “Burial of the Dead,” 27.

⁶¹ Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, 221-222; and Strange, “‘She Cried a Very Little’,” 148.

⁶² Rudyard Kipling, “If –,” in *Rudyard Kipling’s Verse: Definitive Edition* (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1940), 578.

In the early and mid-Victorian periods, Christianity played an important role in attitudes towards death as well as mourning rituals although it was only one of many factors. Grieving families took solace in the idea that their loved ones might live on in heaven and that they would one day be reunited. Perhaps more importantly, Christianity provided a language of consolation for both mourners and sympathizers.⁶³ By the late Victorian era, Christian faith was becoming increasingly social rather than dogmatic. This “diffusive Christianity” was in essence more cultural more than religious: even as church attendance declined, many Britons retained familiarity with Christian teachings, values and motifs.⁶⁴ In particular, Christianity provided a language for mourners to express their grief and sympathizers to express their condolences – a comforting trope in a time of grief and familial turmoil. By the Edwardian period, this language was sometimes used out of habit, however, rather than as a matter of true devotion.⁶⁵

As death become less common for those in the middle of life, death in war became more glorified and idealized – a true sacrifice precisely because men of military age were increasingly less likely to die in civilian life. The image of the “soldier hero” who fought and sacrificed for his country became a dominant and idealized masculine figure in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁶⁶ Glorification of the dead did

⁶³ Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, 265, 270, 275, 283, 307, 309.

⁶⁴ Michael Snape, *God and the British Soldier: Religion and the British Army in the First and Second World Wars* (London: Routledge, 2005), 20-21, 22, 23; Alexander Watson, *Enduring the Great War: Combat, Morale and Collapse in the German and British Armies, 1914-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 96; Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, 339, 358; and Strange, “‘She Cried a Very Little’,” 158-159.

⁶⁵ Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, 270, 283, 314, 315.

⁶⁶ Jessica Meyer, *Men of War: Masculinity and the First World War in Britain* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 5, 6; Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of*

not focus solely on “great men” either, as ordinary combatants were increasingly integrated into and venerated in the mythology of war.⁶⁷ The Victoria Cross, for example, was created in 1856 in response to the Crimean War and the desire to recognize the bravery of all ranks. A total of 111 Victoria Crosses were awarded during the conflict.⁶⁸ The introduction of the Victorian Cross, an award which could be won by any man, regardless of rank, emphasized the importance of the individual in war and its association with heroic, selfless acts emphasized the link between death and glory in battle. A soldier’s death was glorified as something one should seek to attain or at least welcome if it occurred.⁶⁹ For example, at the unveiling of a Boer War memorial in 1905, General Sir Ian Hamilton said that soldiers who died for Britain met death “as a bridegroom who goes to meet his bride.”⁷⁰ As well, H.A. Vachell, in his novel *The Hill*, published in 1905, wrote: “To die young, clean, ardent; [...] to die saving others from death, or worse – disgrace – to die scaling heights; [...] is not that cause for joy rather than sorrow?”⁷¹ During the Boer War, the high numbers of deaths from disease rather than in battle might have led to questions regarding the glory of death in war. However, this issue appears to have been brushed over in popular memory of the war as demonstrated by memorials

Masculinities (London: Routledge, 1994), 1; and Michael C.C. Adams, *The Great Adventure: Male Desire and the Coming of World War I* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 7-8, 10.

⁶⁷ Alexander Watson and Patrick Porter, “Bereaved and Aggrieved: Combat Motivation and the Ideology of Sacrifice in the First World War,” *Historical Research* 83, no. 219 (February 2010), 150.

⁶⁸ Nigel Cawthorne, *VC Heroes: The True Stories Behind Every VC Winner since World War Two* (London: John Blake Publishing, 2012), 11,14.

⁶⁹ Cannadine, “War and Death”, 195, 196; and Jalland, *Death in War and Peace*, 16.

⁷⁰ G. Best, “Militarism and the Victorian Public School,” in *The Victorian Public School*, B. Simon and I. Bradley, eds. (London, 1975), 144-145, as quoted in “War and Death,” Cannadine, 196.

⁷¹ H.A. Vachell, *The Hill* (London, 1937 edition), 236, as quoted in “War and Death,” Cannadine, 196.

which venerated the conflict. The memorial in Winsford, which was erected through public subscription and unveiled in 1906, listed the names of those from the town who had died as well as those who had served. Also inscribed on the memorial was the phrase “Dulce et Decorum est Pro Patria Mori.”⁷² The memorial in Shrewsbury was dedicated to the memory of the officers and men of the King’s Shropshire Light Infantry “who were killed in action, & died of wounds or disease.”⁷³ This inscription recognized and memorialized those who died of disease, equating them with those who died in action and thus integrating them into the heroic ideal. As demonstrated by these examples, death was idealized as a glorious achievement, not as something dreadful or painful. While this concept of heroic, romantic death was mostly promoted in public schools, it was also absorbed by the lower classes.⁷⁴ The pervasiveness of this idea of the unrealistic, romantic death in battle was possibly because the wars Britain fought during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were considered merely colonial conflicts and they were not thought of as major wars. As well, as death became increasingly uncommon in peacetime, its occurrence in battle was a greater loss and a significant sacrifice.

Understanding the nature of and attitudes towards death in Britain in the late Victorian and Edwardian periods provides important context for Canada because of the nations’ cultural links and similarities. Yet we must be careful in assuming that the

⁷² Historic England, “War Memorial,” List entry number 1310406, <https://www.historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1310406>.

⁷³ Historic England, “Boer War Memorial,” List entry number 1059006, <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1059006>.

⁷⁴ Cannadine, “War and Death,” 196; and Jalland, *Death in War and Peace*, 16.

experience of Canadians mirrored that of their British counterparts. While mortality rates steadily declined in Britain during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Canada presented a less positive picture. Public health reforms, which had played an important role in declining death rates in Britain, were implemented later and often less effectively in Canada. For example, rather than encouraging local governments to implement public health measures, the federal government would take temporary action against epidemics, usually by enforcing quarantines, and thus did not encourage long-term public health reforms.⁷⁵ Only with the rapid industrialization and urbanization of Canada in the late nineteenth century did public health become of greater concern. Even still, reforms were slow to come as the living conditions of the working class deteriorated, actually leading to worsening health and higher death rates at precisely the time these measures were improving conditions in Britain.⁷⁶ In the decades before the First World War, the leading causes of death were tuberculosis, cholera and typhoid – diseases which could be considerably reduced by public health measures.⁷⁷

Charting changes in mortality over time in Canada is also not a simple matter. Whereas statistics had been collected in Britain since the mid-nineteenth century, the first comprehensive mortality statistics for Canada were only published in 1886. The report, published by the Department of Agriculture, found that Canadians were three times more

⁷⁵ Humphries, *The Last Plague*, 23-26, 31, 34-35, 52-53, 57, 189, 190; and Aleck Ostry, “Differences in the History of Public Health in 19th Century Canada and Britain,” *Canadian Journal of Public Health* 86, no. 1 (January-February 1995), 5-6.

⁷⁶ Humphries, *The Last Plague*, 34-35; Terry Copp, *The Anatomy of Poverty: The Condition of the Working Class in Montreal 1897-1929* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974), 30, 70, 88, 140, 148.

⁷⁷ Risa Barkin and Ian Gentles, “Death in Victorian Toronto, 1850-1899,” *Urban History Review* 19, no. 1 (June 1990), 19, 24.

likely to die from an epidemic disease than Britons. Even the Canadian city with the lowest death rate was twice as high as that of London.⁷⁸ The *Statistical Abstract and Record for the Year 1886* collected its statistics on mortality rates from nineteen principal cities and towns in Canada and the average rate was 22 per 1,000 whereas Britain's death rate around this time was 18 per 1,000. Infant deaths represented nearly a third of all deaths in 1885. The report acknowledged that its numbers for births and deaths were "very short of the actual rate" and were thus not completely accurate and likely too low.⁷⁹ Unfortunately, statistical data regarding mortality rates collected during the 1911 census was also seriously flawed, and was recognized as so at the time, and thus cannot be used to present an accurate picture. Nevertheless, these prewar figures suggest a death rate of 12 per 1,000, similar to Britain's in 1910, although it was likely higher.⁸⁰ Although death rates were high, life expectancy did gradually rise during the late nineteenth century. In Toronto, it rose from thirty years in 1851 to forty-two years in 1881 then to forty-eight years in 1901.⁸¹

While this might suggest an inherent similarity between Canada and Britain, these figures are aggregates from urban and rural areas. The story of Canada's largest city suggests the limits of public health reforms and their effects on mortality. Montreal in

⁷⁸ Humphries, *The Last Plague*, 37-38, 43; and Ostry, "Differences in the History of Public Health," 5-6.

⁷⁹ Canada, Department of Agriculture, *Statistical Abstract and Record for the Year 1886* (Ottawa: Maclean, Roger & Co., 1887), 87-88, 92-94. At this time, Canada consisted of Ontario, Quebec, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Manitoba, Northwest Territories, British Columbia and Prince Edward Island.

⁸⁰ Canada, *The Canada Year Book 1913* (Ottawa: J. de L. Tache, 1914), 99-102. For brief discussions on the flaws of census data regarding mortality rates, see Bruce Bowden and Roger Hall, "The Impact of Death: An Historical and Archival Reconnaissance into Victorian Ontario," *Archivaria* 14 (Summer 1982), 100-101; and Barkin and Gentles, "Death in Victorian Toronto," 14.

⁸¹ Barkin and Gentles, "Death in Victorian Toronto," 14-15, 24.

particular had a very high death rate – one of the highest in the world in fact. Montreal’s death rate was 54 per 1,000 in comparison to Toronto’s 21 per 1,000 in 1885. This particularly high rate was due to an outbreak of small-pox in Montreal that year.⁸² In 1895 the death rate in Montreal was 25 per 1,000 while London’s rate was 20 per 1,000. Infant mortality in Montreal was also quite high even into the 1920s, particularly for the working class; between 1897 and 1911, approximately a third of babies died before reaching one year old and even in 1926 this only dropped to fourteen percent.⁸³ Toronto also shared similar rates from 1850 to 1900 in which over a third of deaths were of infants under one year old.⁸⁴ While Montreal was not necessarily representative of the rest of Canada, it is illustrative of the serious and often deadly circumstances in which poor urban Canadians lived. Of course, these aggregate statistics also hide the fact that the death rate was exponentially greater for the poor than the wealthy. In Montreal, poor neighbourhoods of the city, such as St. Mary’s Ward, had death rates of over 30 per 1,000 while wealthier sections of the city such as St. Antoine Ward had less than 13 deaths per 1,000. A similar pattern of higher death rates in poor neighbourhoods can also be seen in the city’s infant mortality rate.⁸⁵ Our conclusion must be that while Canadians were also beginning to live longer and healthier lives, the discrepancies between the experience of the rich and poor may have been even more pronounced in Canada’s urban centres than it was in Britain.

⁸² Canada, *Statistical Abstract and Record for the Year 1886*, 93.

⁸³ Copp, *The Anatomy of Poverty*, 25, 26, 93-95.

⁸⁴ Barkin and Gentles, “Death in Victorian Toronto,” 19, 23.

⁸⁵ Copp, *The Anatomy of Poverty*, 25, 94, 95.

High death rates in Canada did not mean that funerals and mourning lacked meaning and significance. As in Britain, shared rituals provided comfort and consolation for the bereaved, offering a means of expressing grief.⁸⁶ After a death, families layed out the body, often dressing the deceased in their finest clothes, and held a wake to allow relatives, friends and neighbours to visit the dead.⁸⁷ These visitations, as well as the funeral procession, provided a sense of communal sympathy for the bereaved. The funeral service could be conducted either at the deceased's home or at their church.⁸⁸ A so-called "proper burial" with a marked grave was important for many families. Upper-class families especially erected elaborate headstones and memorials with extensive inscriptions for the dead; this occurred mostly in the early and mid-nineteenth century as ostentatious grave markers became less popular by the end of the century. While the wealthy could afford individual plots or possibly family plots, this was more difficult for the poor but they still sought to ensure their dead were properly buried. Mount Royal Cemetery in Montreal, for example, recognized this and offered "Free Ground" in which the poor, once the family proved that it was unable to afford a burial, could be interred. Marking the grave was very important for commemorating the dead. Even if a family could not afford a headstone, the grave was still marked with a mound which was a pile

⁸⁶ Sara Jamieson, "'A Sorrow of Stones': Death, Burial and Mourning in the Writing of Anne Wilkinson," *Studies in Canadian Literature* 35, no. 1 (2010), 202; and Gillian Poulter, "What's traditional about 'the traditional funeral'? Funeral rituals and the evolution of the funeral industry in Nova Scotia," *Journal of the CHA* 22, no. 1 (2011), 139-140, 141, 153.

⁸⁷ "A Time Honored Nuisance," *The Globe (1844-1936)*, 5 March 1887, 8.

⁸⁸ Poulter, "What's traditional about 'the traditional funeral'?" 136-137, 139, 140, 141, 152.

of dirt around eight inches tall which indicated the location of a grave.⁸⁹ Tombstones and monuments provided a site for grieving and physical objects such as locks of hair and photographs served as means of remembrance.⁹⁰

As in Britain, Canadians, although likely mostly the upper and middle classes, were becoming increasingly inclined towards moderation in funerals and mourning during the decades before the First World War.⁹¹ An 1887 article in Toronto's *The Globe* insisted that the "senseless display and tasteless extravagance" of mourning and funeral customs should be eliminated.⁹² Another article similarly argued that mourning clothes exacerbated grief rather than alleviated it, positing that grief be kept private rather than made public.⁹³ However, a 1908 editorial calling for funeral reform suggests that many Canadians continued to hold onto traditional funeral and mourning rituals regardless of cost or the insistence by reformers that these customs did not ease grief.⁹⁴ The Canadian Burial Reform Association, founded in 1897, lamented "the too common delusion that

⁸⁹ Brian Young, *Respectable Burial: Montreal's Mount Royal Cemetery* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003), xlix-1, 44, 47, 51, 54, 57.

⁹⁰ Jamieson, "'A Sorrow of Stones,'" 205, 208; J.M. Bumstead and Wendy Owen, "The Victorian Family in Canada in Historical Perspective: The Ross Family of Red River and the Jarvis Family of Prince Edward Island," *Manitoba History* 13 (Spring 1987), 16; and Francine de Montigny, Chantal Verdon and Kory McGrath, "Perinatal Death and Grief in Canada," in *The World of Bereavement: Cultural Perspectives on Death in Families*, Joanne Cacciatore and John DeFrain, eds. (Charm: Springer, 2015), 188.

⁹¹ See for example "Funeral Reform: A Few Suggestions by the Ministerial Association," *The Globe (1844-1936)*, 19 April 1884, 15; "Funeral, Flowers, and Foolery," *The Globe (1844-1936)*, 11 December 1885, 4; "Funeral Reform," *The Globe (1844-1936)*, 11 January 1888, 4; "Funeral Reform," *The Globe (1844-1936)*, 18 April 1891, 8; F. Lawrence, Honorary Secretary Church of England Funeral and Burial Reform Association, "Funeral Reform," *The Globe (1844-1936)*, 3 June 1891, 6; "Notes and Comments," *The Globe (1844-1936)*, 11 April 1893, 4; and "Extravagance in Funerals," *The Globe (1844-1936)*, 17 June 1895, 4.

⁹² "A Time Honored Nuisance," *The Globe (1844-1936)*, 5 March 1887, 8.

⁹³ "A Tyrannical Custom," *The Globe (1844-1936)*, 1 March 1882, 6.

⁹⁴ "Funeral Reform Needed," *The Globe (1844-1936)* [extract from the Montreal Star], 15 August 1908, 11.

our sorrow for the loss of the departed, and our honor to them, is to be measured by the amount we spend on their funeral.” As well, it criticized the costs of funerals as excessive burdens on the poor who often attempted to imitate the wealthy.⁹⁵ An article entitled “A Tyrannical Custom” also disapproved of elaborate mourning customs which could cause a family to suffer financial hardship for a year after the death. It identified the fear “of being thought to fail in proper feeling or ‘respect’ for the deceased” as the reason for the continuation of these customs.⁹⁶ These criticisms suggest that funerals were significant and meaningful for the working class – and also perceived as hardships – as families might go into debt to pay for them. Regardless of calls for simple funerals and mourning, many Canadians appear to have continued using traditional customs which they felt adequately respected the dead and the bereaved. Clearly though it was a point of some tension and discussion.

These rites and rituals also remained decidedly Christian, although Christianity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Canada was becoming increasingly dominated by the social reform movement. During the Victorian period, organized religion was actually growing in Canada and unlike in Britain, church attendance rose. For example, in Toronto it increased from 45 per cent in 1882 to 55 per cent in 1896.⁹⁷ Churches offered Canadians social and cultural outlets as well as religious teachings. Attending church provided opportunities, particularly for the middle class, to network

⁹⁵ “For Burial Reform: The Canadian Burial Reform Association Incorporated – Its Aims and Methods Briefly Outlined,” *The Globe (1844-1936)*, 23 July 1897, 5.

⁹⁶ “A Tyrannical Custom,” 6.

⁹⁷ Brian Clarke, “English-Speaking Canada from 1854,” in *A Concise History of Christianity in Canada*, Terence Murphy, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 262, 276.

with potential clients, socialize with friends and court a potential spouse as well as to establish one's place in society. As well, religious organizations, such as the Young Men's Christian Association, focused on social and moral reform rather than doctrine and churches began to emphasize their role in social welfare at the turn of the century. As Canadians' strict devotion declined, Christianity transformed into a form of non-denominational "social religion" and Protestant culture continued to hold sway in the lives of many Canadians.⁹⁸ Yet Christianity or rather Christian imagery and ideals remained at the heart of both grieving rituals and the language employed by Canadians to manage death.

As in Britain, the concept of an honourable death and the "soldier hero" figure were increasingly idealized and romanticized in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. War was perceived as an adventure, a patriotic duty and "the definitive test of manhood."⁹⁹ Boys and young men were taught to face danger and death with courage and stoicism, modelled on chivalric knights and validated by adventurers such as Captain Robert Scott and his men during their fatal expedition to the South Pole.¹⁰⁰ While this idea of the noble death was generally instilled in middle- and upper-class boys of the public schools, it was also disseminated to the working class through literature. To

⁹⁸ Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau, *A Full-Orbed Christianity: The Protestant Churches and Social Welfare in Canada, 1900-1940* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996), xii-xiii, 3, 15, 18, 22, 23, 36, 244-245; Clarke, "English-Speaking Canada from 1854," 278, 282, 292, 309, 334-335; and Mark Moss, *Manliness and Militarism: Educating Young Boys in Ontario for War* (Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 2001), 14, 31.

⁹⁹ Moss, *Manliness and Militarism*, 23, 32, 41, 54, 56, 59, 75-76, 79, 143; Mike O'Brien, "Manhood and the Militia Myth: Masculinity, Class and Militarism in Ontario, 1902-1914," *Labour* 42 (Fall 1998), 115, 117, 119; and Carl Berger, *The Sense of Power: Studies in the Ideas of Canadian Imperialism 1867-1914* (1970; reprint, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), 235, 239, 257-258.

¹⁰⁰ Moss, *Manliness and Militarism*, 31-32, 41, 54, 56, 75-76.

sacrifice oneself for one's country and the British Empire was an honourable and admirable act.¹⁰¹ For example, the over 7,000 Canadians who served in the Boer War were romanticized as ideal men who had been strengthened by their war experience while contemporary accounts of the war emphasized individual heroism rather than casualties just as veterans recalled the adventure of the war more than its hardships.¹⁰² The *Canadian Military Gazette*, the official organ of the Canadian Militia, reported that of 224 Canadians who died, only sixty-three were killed and 127 died of disease.¹⁰³ The fact that a majority of deaths were caused by disease rather than enemy action was used to indicate that war was less bloody and more humane than ever before and therefore the likelihood of death was low – thus death in battle was portrayed as an exceptional and revered experience. Memorials were erected throughout the country to commemorate the war and were dedicated to individuals, units or all who served. Montreal's memorial was inscribed: "To commemorate the heroic devotion of the Canadians who fell in the South African War and the valour of their comrades." Toronto's monument held a similar inscription and was dedicated "to the memory and in honour of the Canadians who died defending the Empire in the South African War." A majority of the memorials were funded through public subscriptions, indicating that many Canadians felt that those who

¹⁰¹ Moss, *Manliness and Militarism*, 23, 31-32, 40-41, 54, 55, 56, 58, 59, 75-76, 79; and Berger, *The Sense of Power*, 254-256.

¹⁰² Amy Shaw, "The Boer War, Masculinity, and Citizenship in Canada, 1899-1902," in *Contesting Bodies and Nation in Canadian History*, Patrizia Gentile and Jane Nicholas, eds. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 97, 100, 108; Berger, *The Sense of Power*, 234, 236; and Carman Miller, *Painting the Map Red: Canada and the South African War, 1899-1902* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993), 424, 437-438.

¹⁰³ *Canadian Military Gazette*, XVIII (Feb. 17, 1903), 7, as cited in *The Sense of Power*, Berger, 236.

served and died in South Africa deserved to be honoured.¹⁰⁴ The glorification of the soldier and his sacrifice ignored the realities of the Boer War as well as those of peacetime Canada in which death was common, particularly for the urban working class who suffered from poor living and working conditions.

It is important to note that not all Canadians shared similar cultural backgrounds. French-Canadians as well as the various immigrant communities throughout Canada held different cultural and religious views from English-Canada. Due to their cultural differences, French-Canadians and non-British immigrants likely would have approached experiences such as death and grieving differently from their English-Canadian counterparts.

Although Canada and Britain differed in some respects, cultural responses towards death and mourning were likely similar. This is not surprising, given that Canada was strongly influenced by Britain during this period and often imitated its general cultural trends.¹⁰⁵ The chief difference between Britain and Canada was their mortality rates; while both countries had declining death rates throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Canada's numbers were consistently higher. Regardless of Britain's lower rates, however, both nations addressed death and mourning in similar ways. In particular, English-Canadian funeral customs, such as wakes and the importance of burial, were akin to those of the British working class. Although the British middle and upper classes began to simplify their mourning practices in the 1870s, some Canadians

¹⁰⁴ Miller, *Painting the Map Red*, 433-434.

¹⁰⁵ Bumstead and Owen, "The Victorian Family in Canada in Historical Perspective," 13; and de Montigny, Verdon and McGrath, "Perinatal Death and Grief in Canada," 181.

did not begin advocating for reform until the mid-1880s and their efforts do not appear to have been very successful. The similarity between British working-class and Canadian attitudes was likely due to their more constant contact with death than those of the upper classes. In regards to Christianity, both societies turned towards a social and cultural form of religion, relying less on dogmatic teachings. Lastly, both Britain and Canada idealized the image of the soldier and venerated those who sacrificed for their country and Empire. The Boer War, for example, which both countries participated in, provoked the construction of numerous memorials to those who had served and died. Death in battle was romanticized and considered an honourable sacrifice.

The view of death as comparatively rare for young men and potentially glorious when it took place in battle was seriously challenged by the reality and horror of the First World War. The war marked a dramatic shift in the circumstances of death for Canadians and Britons: large numbers of young men were dying away from home and their families in circumstances that could only be made to fit pre-war expectations of glory with significant embellishment. Over 420,000 Canadians served overseas in the First World War and about 60,000 were killed and 138,000 were wounded.¹⁰⁶ But death did not always take place in battle, as revealed by the 6,767 men who died of disease,¹⁰⁷ nor was it always clean and painless as poems, paintings and novels had implied. Death was omnipresent in the trenches and often gruesome. Bullets could inflict wounds as large as

¹⁰⁶ Tim Cook, *At the Sharp End: Canadians fighting the Great War, 1914-1916* (Toronto: Viking, 2007), 3. Tim Cook writes that over 61 000 Canadian soldiers died (*At the Sharp End*, 3; and Tim Cook, *Shock Troops: Canadians fighting the Great War, 1917-1918* (Toronto: Viking, 2008), 612, 619). Desmond Morton, however, states that 59 544 Canadian soldiers died (*When Your Number's Up*, 181). For a discussion on the difficulties of determining casualty rates, see Cook, *Shock Troops*, 611-620.

¹⁰⁷ Morton, *When Your Number's Up*, 181.

a fist and a shell could literally tear a man to pieces.¹⁰⁸ Artillery caused approximately sixty percent of casualties during the first three years of the war and, as observed by Captain Andrew Macphail, a doctor with No. 6 Canadian Field Ambulance, it was “quite common for the remains [of a soldier] to be gathered up in a sandbag and buried.”¹⁰⁹ Honour, glory and opportunities for traditional mourning were rare in the trenches.

Although there was a less than thirty percent chance of being killed in most battles for the common frontline soldier, a random death could strike anywhere, at any time.¹¹⁰ Even quiet sectors of the front were not free of death.¹¹¹ For example, from 1 December 1915 to 31 March 1916, a period of no major actions, 2,606 men were killed, wounded or reported missing in the two divisions of the Canadian Corps.¹¹² Soldiers recounted in their diaries the constant threat of death at the front.¹¹³ Sergeant William A. Alldritt, for example, arrived in France with the 8th Battalion in February 1916 but served for only a few months as he was taken prisoner in May of that year. Although only at the

¹⁰⁸ Cook, *At the Sharp End*, 198, 259, 261; and Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain and the Great War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 212-214.

¹⁰⁹ Cook, *At the Sharp End*, 257; Morton, *When Your Number's Up*, ix; and Library and Archives Canada [LAC], Manuscript Group [MG] 30-D150, Andrew Macphail fonds, vol. 4, folder 4, 5 April 1916. As far as possible, the rank of the soldier being referenced will be included in the text. If possible, the text will reflect the man's rank at the time the source was written otherwise the last known rank will be given.

¹¹⁰ John Ellis, *Eye-Deep in Hell: Trench Warfare in World War I* (London: Croom Helm, 1976), 106; see also *Death in War and Peace*, Jalland, 19.

¹¹¹ Morton, *When Your Number's Up*, 126; and Cook, *At the Sharp End*, 255.

¹¹² Library and Archives Canada, War Diary, Sketches and Locations – Extracts and Flank (handwritten notes from A.F. Duguid), Canadian Casualties, 25-6, as cited in *At the Sharp End*, Cook, 266.

¹¹³ Meyer, *Men of War*, 54, 57; and Tim Cook, “Grave Beliefs: Stories of the Supernatural and the Uncanny among Canada's Great War Trench Soldiers,” *Journal of Military History* 77, no. 2 (April 2013), 529.

front for a short time, he wrote often of the constant artillery fire as well as the danger of snipers.¹¹⁴ Alexander G. Sinclair of the 5th Battalion recalled how, in the front-line:

one couldn't expose oneself for a second or there was sure to come the whiz of a bullet very close at hand. All night long there was the intermittent roar of the big guns and the shorter range guns of the Germans, the continual whiz of the rifle bullets and occasionally the bang of a rifle or hand grenade, all too close.¹¹⁵

Soldiers had to react quickly to incoming shells and make sure to keep their heads down to avoid snipers and stray bullets. As Sinclair stated bluntly: "to expose oneself means almost certain death."¹¹⁶ Soldiers understood that they were surrounded by the threat of death and made note of the fact in their writing.¹¹⁷

Men would also write about their close calls with death. Jeffrey Macphail, who served with No. 1 Field Company, Canadian Engineers, and ended his service as a captain, noted the "fortunate chance that took me into H.Q. in a certain trench along which I was walking or I should have arrived at a certain corner just in time to meet an H.E. [high explosive shell] that dropped in."¹¹⁸ Alexander Sinclair remembered one march with his company back to their billets in which a sniper's bullet passed right

¹¹⁴ LAC, MG30-E1, William Alexander Alldritt fonds, 21 February 1915; LAC, MG30-E1, Alldritt fonds, 2 March 1915; LAC, MG30-E1, Alldritt fonds, 3 March 1915; LAC, MG30-E1, Alldritt fonds, 4 March 1915; LAC, MG30-E1, Alldritt fonds, 5 March 1915; LAC, MG30-E1, Alldritt fonds, 8 March 1915; LAC, MG30-E1, Alldritt fonds, 11 March 1915; LAC, MG30-E1, Alldritt fonds, 16 April 1915; LAC, MG30-E1, Alldritt fonds, 19 April 1915; and LAC, MG30-E1, Alldritt fonds, 22 April 1915.

¹¹⁵ LAC, MG30-E237, Alexander Gibson Sinclair fonds, 25 February 1915. Sinclair's diary lists his rank as Private but his attestation papers state Corporal.

¹¹⁶ LAC, MG30-E237, Sinclair fonds, 25 February 1915.

¹¹⁷ See also LAC, MG30-E42, John Peter McNab fonds, 11 December 1916; LAC, MG30-E237, Sinclair fonds, 10 March 1915; and LAC, MG32-B9, Gordon Churchill fonds, vol. 108, 3 May 1917.

¹¹⁸ LAC, MG30-D150, Macphail fonds, vol. 2, folder 4, "A Reminiscence," 4 September 1915, 5.

between Sinclair and the man in front of him.¹¹⁹ Private Gordon Churchill, who served with the 203rd Battalion (Winnipeg Rifles) and the 13th Machine Gun Company, also recorded several “narrow escapes” from death or wounding. On 4 April 1917, a piece of shrapnel passed three inches from his head while a month later he was hit twice in the leg by pieces of shrapnel and also had a piece of shrapnel break on his steel helmet.¹²⁰ While these men managed to escape death, many others were not so lucky.

Death at the front could happen to any man at any moment, whether he was in the trenches or behind the lines. A simple glance over the parapet could bring instant death from a sniper’s bullet as could seemingly safe activities such as resting in one’s billets. Captain John A. Cullum of the 28th Battalion, for example, had fought at the Somme, won the Military Cross twice and the French Croix de Guerre and remained unscathed. He was mortally wounded on 10 November 1916 when a shell hit his billets while he was playing cribbage.¹²¹ H.R. Bell was shocked and terrified when a shell hit a number of his comrades “who were laughing and joking,” and he saw these men, “with whom [he] had so often spoken, fall broken and dead.”¹²² Another soldier, writing in the *Shell Hole Advance*, newspaper of the 11th Canadian Infantry Brigade, shared a similar experience in which he was playing dice with some men in the trenches when a shell hit and killed one

¹¹⁹ LAC, MG30-E237, Sinclair fonds, 7 March 1915.

¹²⁰ LAC, MG32-B9, Churchill fonds, vol. 108, 3 May 1917; LAC, MG32-B9, Churchill fonds, vol. 108, 4 April 1917; and LAC, MG32-B9, Churchill fonds, vol. 108, 4 May 1917.

¹²¹ LAC, MG30-D150, Macphail fonds, vol. 4, folder 6, 11 November 1916; and LAC, MG30-E241, Duncan Eberts Macintyre fonds, 10 November 1916; and LAC, MG30-E241, Macintyre fonds, 11 November 1916.

¹²² H.R. Bell, “The Uncanny Fear: An Experience of the War,” *Clearings*, December 1917, 22, Record Group [RG] 9 III-D-4, vol. 5078, LAC.

of them.¹²³ Life at the front was uncertain and thus soldiers constantly faced the threat of death. Sergeant William Alldritt understood how quickly death could come to anyone on the front when he wrote: “Sunshine today with nothing to do but enjoy life. I am going to enjoy it too as what I have may be very short as we go back to the trenches tonight.”¹²⁴ These examples are indicative of the arbitrary nature of death which could strike without warning, proving that war, as Captain D.E Macintyre asserted, was “full of chances.”¹²⁵

Men were surrounded by death – not just its possibility but its physical presence, in the form of bodies and cemeteries.¹²⁶ Soldiers often commented on the presence of bodies in the trenches and cemeteries behind the lines. Although the war was often static, it could be difficult to bury the bodies of the dead in either cemeteries or makeshift graves. Many combatants made note of their own and enemy dead who lay unburied in the trenches and in No Man’s Land, sometimes for months on end.¹²⁷ In April 1916, Captain D.E. Macintyre’s comrade, Jukes, told him that “the dead were so thick he couldn’t help walking on them.”¹²⁸ Private John P. McNab of the 38th Battalion saw a similar sight in November 1917, writing in his diary: “The ground is all covered with

¹²³ “Extract from a letter written by Zippo,” *Shell Hole Advance*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 22 February 1917, 7, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5080, LAC.

¹²⁴ LAC, MG30-E1, Alldritt fonds, 14 March 1915.

¹²⁵ LAC, MG30-E241, Macintyre fonds, 4 December 1915.

¹²⁶ Wilson, “Burial of the Dead,” 23, 28; Cook, *At the Sharp End*, 270; Cook, *Shock Troops*, 223, 227; Cook, “Grave Beliefs,” 530, 532; and Jalland, *Death in War and Peace*, 19.

¹²⁷ See for example LAC, MG30-E42, McNab fonds, 11 December 1916, 4, 7, 8; LAC, MG30-D150, Macphail fonds, vol. 4, folder 3, 16 December 1915; LAC, MG30-D150, Macphail fonds, vol. 4, folder 4, 9 April 1916; LAC, MG30-D150, Macphail fonds, vol. 4, folder 7, 11 April 1917; and LAC, MG30-E1, Alldritt fonds, 15 April 1915.

¹²⁸ LAC, MG30-E241, Macintyre fonds, 4 April 1916.

dead as far as you can see.”¹²⁹ If a soldier fell in No Man’s Land, his body may be left there for days, weeks or months because of the risks involved in retrieving it. Another difficulty soldiers faced in burying their dead was artillery fire which often destroyed burial grounds and uncovered bodies. Captain Andrew Macphail recalled how No. 6 Canadian Field Ambulance’s chaplain, Captain Macdonald, had to bury a man from the Liverpool Scottish for a fourth time in January 1916 after the body had been brought to the surface by shells.¹³⁰ Burying a body multiple times was not uncommon as the front was constantly bombarded by artillery.

Men often became accustomed to the sight of bodies, meaning they simply became another feature of their surroundings. For example, during a visit to the trenches, Major Johnson L.R. Parsons, who served with the 2nd Canadian Division’s headquarters, recalled seeing that “[t]he top of the head of a buried soldier was just exposed in a trench. The continual brushing past it has worn the hair off and polished the skull like a billiard ball.”¹³¹ Captain Andrew Macphail also wrote of how familiar soldiers became with living with the dead:

In walking up the trenches one sees men digging a drain. They come upon a buried body, and they cut the limbs away as if they were roots of a tree. A trench will cave in and bring bodies with it. A man will build a comfortable dug-out for himself, and find when the work is nearly done that a part of a body is protruding from the floor. He sprinkles lime on it, and in the cold weather that helps.¹³²

¹²⁹ LAC, MG30-E42, McNab fonds, 1 November 1917, 18.

¹³⁰ LAC, MG30-D150, Macphail fonds, vol. 4, folder 3, 15 January 1916. See also LAC, MG30-D150, Macphail fonds, vol. 4, folder 4, 28 January 1916; and LAC, MG30-D150, Macphail fonds, vol. 4, folder 4, 2 June 1916.

¹³¹ LAC, MG30-E117, Johnson Lindsay Rowlett Parsons fonds, vol. 3, 11 November 1915.

¹³² LAC, MG30-D150, Macphail fonds, vol. 4, folder 3, 13 January 1916.

Macphail noted how discovering the dead in one's trench had become such a regular occurrence that it elicited little reaction and was treated as normal.

Cemeteries were also a common sight and served as another reminder of death and its omnipresence.¹³³ Captain Andrew Macphail in particular, possibly due to his position with a field ambulance, often noted cemeteries in his diary.¹³⁴ He described a cemetery in St. Eloy as “extensive as a forest” and as “endless” and recalled how he could hear “Last Post” “at all hours of the day” coming from the cemetery next to his field ambulance's lines.¹³⁵ The vast amount of death which surrounded soldiers pushed them to develop ways of understanding and handling the situation. Historian Ross Wilson states that, due to the presence of the dead at the front, “soldiers constructed a cultural response that incorporated death and the threat of fatalities into the world around them.”¹³⁶ Soldiers were compelled to adapt and create various approaches to coping with the ubiquity of death at the front.

The Canadian men who went to war in 1914 took with them attitudes and ideas about death that could not survive the realities of a gruesome war overseas unaltered. These pre-war approaches were influenced by the nature of death in the Edwardian

¹³³ Wilson, “Burial of the Dead,” 28, 30.

¹³⁴ See for example LAC, MG30-D150, Macphail fonds, vol. 4, folder 3, 22 September 1915; LAC, MG30-D150, Macphail fonds, vol. 4, folder 3, 12 January 1916; LAC, MG30-D150, Macphail fonds, vol. 4, folder 4, 28 January 1916; LAC, MG30-D150, Macphail fonds, vol. 4, folder 4, 2 June 1916; LAC, MG30-D150, Macphail fonds, vol. 4, folder 4, 20 July 1916; LAC, MG30-D150, Macphail fonds, vol. 4, folder 6, 11 March 1917; and LAC, MG30-D150, Macphail fonds, vol. 4, folder 7, 21 April 1917.

¹³⁵ LAC, MG30-D150, Macphail fonds, vol. 4, folder 6, 11 March 1917; LAC, MG30-D150, Macphail fonds, vol. 4, folder 7, 21 April 1917; and LAC, MG30-D150, Macphail fonds, vol. 4, folder 4, 20 July 1916.

¹³⁶ Wilson, “Burial of the Dead,” 31.

period in which death was not uncommon, often caused by poor living conditions leading to disease, but was treated reverently. Rituals, such as wakes and marking graves, were used by all classes, albeit in varying degrees of extravagance, to honour the dead, console the bereaved and express grief. Families also used physical objects such as locks of hair and tombstones to commemorate and remember the deceased. As well, Christian language was used in funeral rites and expressions of condolence. Although death was not rare in Canada, particularly for the working class, death became idealized when it occurred in battle. Predicated on the idea that death in war was unlikely, self-sacrifice was glorified as was the figure of the soldier who epitomized masculinity. These ideals and attitudes towards death, however, were seriously tested and ultimately found inadequate for the reality of the First World War.

The First World War overturned the dynamics of death for Canadians as both soldiers and those on the home front were confronted with the mass death of young men far away from home. Before the war, most Canadians died of diseases such as tuberculosis and cholera and receiving a decent burial attended by friends and family was a reasonable expectation. The war completely altered these circumstances for the men of the Canadian Expeditionary Force. While the presence of death was not new to many of these men, its magnitude and the forms it took were – thousands of men could be killed in a single day and bullets and shells became the common killers. How did soldiers respond to this type of death? While the extreme nature of death at the front posed a challenge, soldiers often turned to their pre-war conceptions but adapted them to understand, cope with and grieve for those that died around them.

“Such is war”: Private Expressions of Grief

“Death is my Familiar.”¹³⁷ While they may not have been as concise as Captain Andrew Macphail, many soldiers shared this notion because they faced death on a daily basis in the trenches. Macphail, who initially served as a doctor with No. 6 Canadian Field Ambulance before being transferred to the office of the Assistance Director of Medical Services in November 1916, had been at the front for eighteen months when he wrote this line.¹³⁸ He was examining the Second Canadian Division’s battle area to determine plans for the care and evacuation of casualties in preparation for the upcoming attack on Vimy Ridge and was reflecting upon the dismal conditions at the front. Constant encounters with death meant combatants needed to develop coping mechanisms to help them survive life at the front.

This chapter explores the various methods that men used to cope with loss and carry on with their duties, such as stoicism, humour and aggression, to handle the death around them. It relies almost exclusively on evidence collected from contemporary diaries. To examine these coping methods, other historians have looked at contemporary writings, such as diaries, letters and literature, as well as post-war publications and oral interviews. Yet contemporary letters and published works as well as post-war sources can be problematic as these documents were produced for an audience, sometimes long after the fact, meaning that soldiers may have shaped their narratives to shelter those at home

¹³⁷ Library and Archives Canada [LAC], Manuscript Group [MG] 30-D150, Andrew Macphail fonds, vol. 4, folder 6, 15 March 1917. Macphail used the same words in an earlier diary entry as well; see LAC, MG30-D150, Macphail fonds, vol. 4, folder 5, 30 October 1916.

¹³⁸ Ian Ross Robertson, *Sir Andrew Macphail: The Life and Legacy of a Canadian Man of Letters* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2008), 181.

from the reality of the trenches or to fit expectations.¹³⁹ However, in the private confines of their diaries, they could record their reactions to the death which surrounded them without the pressure of an immediate audience. It is important to remember, however, that soldiers' diaries were not written in isolation but were influenced by pre-war and contemporary discourses on death and appropriate masculine responses to it. When discussing death and recording their own emotions, soldiers may have, consciously or unconsciously, censored their writing; therefore, men's written reactions were often not expressions of raw emotion but rather a filtered version of their feelings. Yet diaries still served as an important outlet for soldiers to record their reactions to life and death at the front.¹⁴⁰ This chapter examines the multiple ways in which men privately expressed their reactions to death on the Western Front and grieved for their fallen comrades.

There was no single way in which soldiers responded to death and each man's reactions also varied throughout his time as a soldier. One common response was to try and eliminate all emotion or at least to create distance between the survivor and the deceased – or the event of death itself. Soldiers tried to divorce themselves from grief and mourning to shield themselves from the overwhelming nature of death at the front. Soldiers could also console themselves by reflecting on ideals of duty, remembering their comrades as competent soldiers who had died in the performance of their duty. When it

¹³⁹ Jeffrey A. Keshen, *Propaganda and Censorship During Canada's Great War* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1996), 133, 153-157, 165; Jessica Meyer, *Men of War: Masculinity and the First World War in Britain* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 16, 29, 46, 47, 96, 161-162; and Vanda Wilcox, "'Weeping tears of blood': Exploring Italian soldiers' emotion in the First World War," *Modern Italy* 17, no. 2 (May 2012), 173.

¹⁴⁰ Keshen, *Propaganda and Censorship*, 155, 169; Meyer, *Men of War*, 47, 49, 58, 72-73, 166; Peter E. Hodgkinson, "Human Remains on the Great War Battlefields: Coping with Death in the Trenches" (Master's thesis, University of Birmingham, 2006), 50, 51; and Carol Acton, *Grief in Wartime: Private Pain, Public Discourse* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 7, 8.

came to the death of a friend, soldiers often recorded sadness at the loss of a close comrade and sometimes jotted down memories of the fallen.¹⁴¹ Men could also try to control their emotions through re-direction by transforming their sadness into another emotion, potentially finding humour in death or a cause for revenge against the enemy. Combatants often used a combination of these coping strategies to process and understand the death that surrounded them.

Self-control, particularly of one's emotions, was considered a masculine virtue and was often used as a coping mechanism by soldiers in the trenches. Although seemingly contradictory, emotional distance was in fact a way of expressing grief for many soldiers. Women were believed to be emotional creatures while men were perceived as the reverse and as more capable of managing their feelings. During the late Victorian and Edwardian periods, for example, funerals were organized by men while women were often excluded for fear of their excessive emotions. As the war encouraged emotional restraint for women, it further constrained men's expressions of emotions, such as grief, within a masculine framework.¹⁴² Self-control was a masculine ideal and "[t]o be masculine was to be unemotional," and thus overt displays of emotion were viewed

¹⁴¹ See for example LAC, MG30-E42, John Peter McNab fonds, 16 September 1917; LAC, MG30-E241, Duncan Eberts Macintyre fonds, 11 November 1916; LAC, MG30-E241, Macintyre fonds, 12 November 1916; LAC, MG30-D150, Macphail fonds, vol. 4, folder 5, 16 September 1916; and LAC, MG30-D150, Macphail fonds, vol. 4, folder 5, 17 September 1916.

¹⁴² Pat Jalland, *Death in War and Peace: Loss and Grief in England, 1914-1970* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 3, 15; Tony Walter, *On Bereavement: The Culture of Grief* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1999), 130, 134; Pat Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 221, 222; Julie-Marie Strange, "'She Cried a Very Little': Death, Grief and Mourning in Working-Class Culture, c. 1880-1914," *Social History* 27, no. 2 (May 2002), 148; and Brian Young, *Respectable Burial: Montreal's Mount Royal Cemetery* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003), 78.

negatively by many men.¹⁴³ Showing emotion was considered unmanly, effeminate and weak, an image at odds with the supposed masculinity of war and the soldier who was encouraged to act “like a man” and suppress his emotions.¹⁴⁴ Soldiers’ restrained emotional expression was one way in which these men expressed their grief and coped with death at the front, conforming to masculine norms and pre-war customs as well as distancing themselves from the gruesome deaths in the trenches.

Because death could occur at any moment, many men chose not to dwell on it, choosing to view it as simply another facet of life at the front. For example, when Captain D.E. Macintyre, intelligence officer for the 28th Battalion, learned of the death of his old scout sergeant, Sergeant George S. Turner, on a patrol near the German wire, he admitted to “feel[ing] very badly and so does everyone else,” but he added that “this is war and we have to take it as it comes.”¹⁴⁵ Major Henry D.G. Crerar of the 3rd Brigade, Canadian Field Artillery echoed these sentiments when a shell hit the farm next to his billet, killing one man. The survivors entered Crerar’s billet, visibly upset, but Crerar had limited sympathy for these men: “Such is war – a year ago, I would have been horrified [but] as it is, I say ‘tough luck’ and go on about my day’s job.”¹⁴⁶ Combatants realized that death

¹⁴³ Michael C.C. Adams, *The Great Adventure: Male Desire and the Coming of World War I* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 25; and Jessica Meyer, “‘Gladder to be Going Out Than Afraid’: Shellshock and Heroic Masculinity in Britain, 1914-1919,” in *Uncovered Fields: Perspectives in First World War Studies*, Jenny Macleod and Pierre Purseigle, eds. (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill Academic Publishers, 2004), 197.

¹⁴⁴ Jalland, *Death in War and Peace*, 15, 18; Michael Roper, *The Secret Battle: Emotional Survival in the Great War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 218, 219, 220; and Hodgkinson, “Human Remains on the Great War Battlefields,” 6, 51.

¹⁴⁵ LAC, MG30-E241, Macintyre fonds, 13 March 1915.

¹⁴⁶ LAC, MG30-E157, Henry Duncan Graham Crerar, vol. 15, 26 September 1915.

was a constant and consistent feature of war and thus accepted it as a feature of trench life which was not worth extensive concern.

Soldiers came to understand that death was an expected part of life at the front, particularly during battles. Rather than dwelling on this fact, many soldiers simply recognized that casualties were bound to occur. Sergeant William Alldritt, who served with the 8th Battalion (90th Winnipeg Rifles), was anxious, particularly after hearing rumours of an advance by the Canadian Division, for something to break the monotony of the trenches in March 1915, only a month after his arrival in France. “The next four days will surely bring big developments and many casualties to the 90th,” he wrote, “but action we must have and we must have it now.”¹⁴⁷ While acknowledging that casualties were likely to happen in an offensive, Alldritt still desired action nonetheless. During the Somme campaign, Captain Andrew Macphail was dining with Lieutenant-Colonel J.S. Tait of the 29th Battalion who informed Macphail that he anticipated 30,000 Canadian casualties at the Somme. Also at dinner were some of Tait’s subalterns and Macphail “looked upon them all as dead men.”¹⁴⁸ After being at the front for nearly a year, Macphail understood that these men were not likely to survive, particularly an offensive as bloody as the Somme. He did not lament the possibility of the men’s deaths but simply noted them in his diary, stating it as an inevitable fact. Soldiers’ recognition of the likelihood of death and wounding was a way of maintaining emotional distance. If death

¹⁴⁷ LAC, MG30-E1, William Alexander Alldritt fonds, 12 March 1915. See also LAC, MG30-E42, McNab fonds, 26 September 1917.

¹⁴⁸ LAC, MG30-D150, Macphail fonds, vol. 4, folder 5, 24 August 1916.

was expected, men could distance themselves from caring. By expecting death, it made the occurrence of death easier to bear and allowed men to develop a callous.

This expectation of death and casualties led to surprise and relief when casualties were in fact limited or relatively light. By remarking upon light casualties, soldiers revealed that they understood the serious possibility and likelihood of death. Since casualties were expected, it was with relief that men wrote of the limited number of men killed during their stay in the trenches. Private John McNab of the 38th Battalion, for example, recalled how “[w]e only lost about two or three men” while digging a trench on a bright moonlit night.¹⁴⁹ Although written in a letter to his brother Andrew and not a diary, Major James Alexander “Jim” Macphail also expressed his relief and his unit’s fortune when, after a month in the trenches, he had only had one man killed and a few minor casualties.¹⁵⁰

Soldiers would also speak of deaths in relation to the advance of an offensive. This allowed men to justify the number of casualties by comparing it to the gains, such as yards taken or enemy casualties caused. After a massive bombardment, Captain Henry Crerar wrote of how “[w]e lost many” but “in comparison, the number was not extravagant to the advantages gained and bigger losses inflicted.”¹⁵¹ Captain D.E. Macintyre made a similar observation on the first day of the Battle of Courcellette: “Our Div. took nearly 700 prisoners I should think. Of course, we had losses but they were not

¹⁴⁹ LAC, MG30-E42, McNab fonds, 11 December 1916, 4.

¹⁵⁰ LAC, MG30-D150, Macphail fonds, vol. 2, folder 5, letter from Jim to John, 19 March 1915.

¹⁵¹ LAC, MG30-E157, Crerar fonds, vol. 15, 21 March 1915.

heavy considering what we did.”¹⁵² He also noted that “[o]ur losses were comparatively slight, one Bn. only had fifty” on the first day of the Battle of Vimy Ridge.¹⁵³ This type of justification seems to have been used by officers more often than enlisted men, possibly because officers, often middle- and upper-class men, were taught to value the importance of the group over the individual and sacrifice.¹⁵⁴ With death such a familiar occurrence at the front, soldiers came to understand that it was an unavoidable reality and therefore some chose to accept it as merely the price of war.

Soldiers could become fatalistic about death due to death’s constant presence. Men would use concepts such as fate and luck to cope with the possibility of their death, believing that when it was a man’s time to die, he could not avoid it.¹⁵⁵ “Whether it be shell or machine gun bullet,” Joseph W.G. Clark wrote to his father, “if your number is on it. No matter how you avoid it, your time’s up.”¹⁵⁶ In a letter to his sister, Alexander Decoteau spoke of how many soldiers became fatalists who “believe that everything is prearranged by Divine Power, and if it one’s time to die no matter what one does, one has

¹⁵² LAC, MG30-E241, Macintyre fonds, 15 September 1916.

¹⁵³ LAC, MG30-E241, Macintyre fonds, 9 April 1917.

¹⁵⁴ Mark Moss, *Manliness and Militarism: Educating Young Boys in Ontario for War* (Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 2001), 15, 35, 56, 58, 59, 83, 137; and Adams, *The Great Adventure*, 29.

¹⁵⁵ Desmond Morton, *When Your Number’s Up: The Canadian Soldier in the First World War* (Toronto: Random House of Canada, 1993), 228; Alex Watson, “Self-deception and Survival: Mental Coping Strategies on the Western Front, 1914-18,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 41, no. 2 (2006), 251, 259; Alexander Watson, *Enduring the Great War: Combat, Morale and Collapse in the German and British Armies, 1914-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 87-88; Edward Madigan, “‘Sticking to a Hateful Task’: Resilience, Humour, and British Understandings of Combatant Courage, 1914-1918,” *War in History* 20, no. 1 (2013), 87-88; Ross Wilson, “The Burial of the Dead: the British Army on the Western Front, 1914-18,” *War & Society* 31, no. 1 (March 2012), 33, 34; and Tim Cook, “Grave Beliefs: Stories of the Supernatural and the Uncanny among Canada’s Great War Trench Soldiers,” *The Journal of Military History* 77 (April 2013), 539-540.

¹⁵⁶ Erindale College, University of Toronto, Mississauga, Joseph W.G. Clark Papers, Clark to father, 27 August 1916, as quoted in *When Your Number’s Up*, Desmond Morton, 228.

to die.”¹⁵⁷ An anonymous contributor to *The Iodine Chronicle*, newspaper of No. 1 Canadian Field Ambulance, wrote of his friend Sandy who believed “a man is safe until the shell comes with his number on, and then it’ll dodge round the traverse and turn a few hand-springs to get him.”¹⁵⁸ In preparation for the possibility of death, some men even wrote letters to be sent to their family if they died. Percy Scott, for example, wrote a letter each to his mother, his girlfriend and whoever found his body before the attack on Amiens in which he was killed.¹⁵⁹

While some soldiers turned to fatalism regarding their own deaths, they tended not to use the concept of fate when referring to the death of comrades. Instead, they considered the man responsible for his own death due to his recklessness. Captain D.E. Macintyre recalled how the death of a man in the 4th Brigade “was entirely due to his own carelessness. [...] One always thinks that no matter who may get hurt it won’t be him, but here was a fellow who probably had that idea and now he was dead.”¹⁶⁰ Macintyre pointed out that this man’s foolishness, and possibly the idea of his own invulnerability, was the cause of his death. Taking unnecessary risks could evoke little sympathy from comrades. Even during his first tour in the trenches, Private John McNab understood that a soldier always had to be wary of danger: “We had to stand still when the star shells went up, and drop flat when Fritz’s search lights were around, because anything that was

¹⁵⁷ Canadian Letters and Images Project [CLIP], Alexander Decoteau, letter to sister, 10 September 1917. Also quoted in Tim Cook, “‘I will meet the world with a smile and a joke’: Canadian Soldiers’ Humour in the Great War,” *Canadian Military History* 22, no. 2 (2015), 56.

¹⁵⁸ “Kismet,” *The Iodine Chronicle*, No. 16, July 1918, 6, Record Group [RG] 9 III-D-4, vol. 5080, LAC.

¹⁵⁹ Morton, *When Your Number’s Up*, 228.

¹⁶⁰ LAC, MG30-E241, Macintyre fonds, 24 September 1915.

moving got what was coming to him.”¹⁶¹ Captain Andrew Macphail chastised both officers and enlisted men for being unprepared for a gas attack: “The gas attack last night was upon the 29th Division north of Ypres: 115 dead were brought to Remi siding C.C.S. [Casualty Clearing Station] and 35 to Brandhoek. They would not keep their helmets at hand, and so they perished. These losses will not cease until an example is made of the officers responsible.”¹⁶² Captain Henry Crerar was also critical of men who took “unnecessary chances such as crawling out of the trench to bag a German helmet and such like stunts.”¹⁶³ By recognizing that men could die because of their own actions and not only due to chance, soldiers may have been trying to cope with the feeling of powerlessness caused by trench warfare.¹⁶⁴ As well, they may have been attempting to maintain a sense of control over their own fate by seizing upon the fact that a man’s own actions could cause or prevent his death and thus a man had some control over his chances of survival.

Since death was a common sight for men in the trenches, it frequently elicited little reaction. However, appearing indifferent to the death that surrounded them did not mean that soldiers were actually unfeeling and death had no effect on them. Rather, they were “putting on a brave face” so as to cope with the death of their comrades while maintaining a manly lack of emotion. “Everyone is cheerful;” wrote Captain Andrew

¹⁶¹ LAC, MG30-E42, McNab fonds, 11 December 1916, 2-3.

¹⁶² LAC, MG30-D150, Macphail fonds, vol. 4, folder 5, 9 August 1916.

¹⁶³ LAC, MG30-E157, Crerar fonds, vol. 15, 26 February 1915. See also LAC, MG30-E42, McNab fonds, 16 September 1917, 15.

¹⁶⁴ For a discussion of the disempowering nature of trench warfare, see Alex Watson, “Self-deception and Survival: Mental Coping Strategies on the Western Front, 1914-18,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 41, no. 2 (2006): 247-268.

Macphail in his diary, “but this air of cheerfulness, of irony, of cynicism is really an affectation adopted as a defence against the sadness of it all.”¹⁶⁵ Emotional distance and the suppression of emotions served as a coping mechanism for soldiers, leading to perceived callousness and detachment. The necessities of combat, as well as the sheer numbers and gruesomeness of death, enabled a degree of numbing in which soldiers had little reaction to death or appeared callous about it.¹⁶⁶ By averting the mind from death, a soldier could better cope with his surroundings. As observed by Tony Walter, “mass bereavement through war tends to lead to the dead being left behind: there are so many of them and there is a war to be fought.”¹⁶⁷

Death could become almost routine, meaning that sometimes the recording of the death of a fellow soldier may seem to be superficial and done with little thought.¹⁶⁸ A common feature of soldiers’ diaries was the perfunctory listing of deaths. Men would simply list the casualties of a particular day or action with little or no additional comment or detail. Sergeant William Alldritt, for example, noted the death of comrades throughout his diary with the only observation being their manner of death – “Today the only casualty was Borough of A Co. Hit by a shell in the trench and died almost instantly.”; “One man killed in 10 minutes[,] Curly his name[,] through head.”; “Another man shot

¹⁶⁵ LAC, MG30-D150, Macphail fonds, vol. 4, folder 4, 15 March 1916.

¹⁶⁶ Jalland, *Death in War and Peace*, 19-20; David Cannadine, “War and Death, Grief and Mourning in Modern Britain,” in *Mirrors of Mortality: Studies in the Social History of Death*, Joachim Whaley, ed. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1981), 206; and Walter, *On Bereavement*, 132.

¹⁶⁷ Walter, *On Bereavement*, 132.

¹⁶⁸ Meyer, *Men of War*, 58, 59; and Roper, *The Secret Battle*, 212.

dead this morning[,] Ingalls his name.”¹⁶⁹ During an action, such as during the Second Battle of Ypres, the list of names expanded: “Robertson and Roberts were killed within 30 minutes of arrival[.] [...] Frith Dead, Eccles dead. Robertson and Roberts and Burns of my [unreadable] gun teams killed[.]”¹⁷⁰ Alexander Sinclair of the 5th Battalion also recorded the death of a comrade with a brief description of how he died: “Bain of No. 3 Coy. was killed today and is being buried ce soir. He put up his head above the standbags [sic] the [sic – to] see our shells exploding and got shot thru’ the head.”¹⁷¹ Although brief, making note of the names of the dead served a purpose – it allowed soldiers to remember their fallen comrades without displaying overt sentimentality, helping these men retain emotional distance and masculine self-composure. This practice permitted men to mark and remember comrades’ deaths but not dwell on them.

Soldiers’ lack of emotional expression was also displayed as the need to move on as well as apparent callousness. It was necessary for soldiers, regardless of their feelings, to continue fighting. At the front and particularly during battles, there was little time to react to the death of fellow soldiers, let alone grieve. Therefore, men often simply carried on with their duties with no regard for the fallen soldier. This was a necessity of battle as soldiers had to continue moving forward toward their objective. It was also likely a coping mechanism so men could avoid dwelling on the death and simply carry on. On his first day in the trenches on the Somme, Private John McNab was returning to the reserve

¹⁶⁹ LAC, MG30-E1, Alldritt fonds, 10 March 1915; LAC, MG30-E1, Alldritt fonds, 14 April 1915; and LAC, MG30-E1, Alldritt fonds, 16 April 1915. See also LAC, MG30-E1, Alldritt fonds, 3 March 1915.

¹⁷⁰ LAC, MG30-E1, Alldritt fonds, 24 April 1915.

¹⁷¹ LAC, MG30-E237, Alexander Gibson Sinclair fonds, 12 March 1915. For further examples, see also LAC, MG30-E569, Charles Sumner Lund Hertzberg fonds, vol. 1, folder 16, 12 August 1916; and LAC, MG30-E569, Hertzberg fonds, vol. 1, folder 16, 26 August 1916.

area after collecting spare boxes of ammunition from the communication trench. A heavy German shell landed in a trench about thirty feet in front McNab and a comrade of his, destroying the trench. When McNab turned the corner into that trench he saw a soldier who he identified only as McDonald: "His head was shot off and his clothes torn nearly off, and he was buried to the waist. It was an awful sight, but we took a look at him and went on our ways. I was used to that by then so it did not bother me any."¹⁷² McNab had been numbed by the frequent sight of death at the front and thus simply carried on with his duties when confronted with such a scene.

The needs of the living took precedence over grieving for the dead. Captain D.E. Macintyre described how, at the advanced dressing station in his lines, soldiers with fatal wounds received little aid due to their serious condition and "some died while they lay there, [then] were promptly covered with a blanket and lifted off the stretcher which was needed for the living."¹⁷³ While the dead were properly handled, it was the concerns of the living, those who were wounded and needed to be evacuated by stretcher, which were given priority.

The concept of "moving on" from the death of a comrade can also be seen in soldiers' remembrance and commemoration of death in their diaries. While writing down a dead comrade's name memorialized his death and prevented it from being completely forgotten, soldiers often did not return to the death of friends. After a comrade was killed, soldiers rarely referred to the man again in their writings, indicating a desire to carry on

¹⁷² LAC, MG30-E42, McNab fonds, 11 December 1916, 5.

¹⁷³ LAC, MG30-E241, Macintyre fonds, 15 September 1916.

and move forward rather than dwell on the past.¹⁷⁴ Although it is impossible to know whether men thought of their fallen friends beyond the news of their death, many chose not to write those reflections down. This may have served as a coping strategy – by avoiding memories of the dead, soldiers could avoid become overwhelmed by the devastating number of lost comrades and the accompanying grief. The nature of trench warfare meant that men needed to constantly cope with the death of both known and unknown comrades. One way of coping with the vast amount of death which surrounded them was to become inured to the sight and maintain emotional distance. This method of coping was distinct to wartime experiences while at the same time reflective of pre-war practices. The mass death at the front compelled soldiers to maintain self-control over their emotions because they needed to continue fighting and so sought to avoid becoming overwhelmed. This emotional control also coincided with pre-war assumptions and ideals about the appropriate masculine response to grief since men were considered to be unemotional and stoic in the face of death. Therefore emotional distance was both a response to wartime conditions and an adaptation of pre-war attitudes. Emotional detachment was not the only way, however, of expressing grief which played into masculine ideals.

The concept of duty and the belief that a comrade had died as a good soldier was another key way soldiers comforted themselves. A sense of duty was an important feature of masculinity both before and during the war. Duty was a central component of the masculinity taught by schools, boy's literature and youth organizations. Boys and young men learned that loyalty was an important virtue and fighting for one's country was both

¹⁷⁴ Hodgkinson, "Human Remains on the Great War Battlefields," 29.

noble and necessary.¹⁷⁵ Soldiers remembered their comrades for their devotion to duty, writing about how the man had died doing his duty or by commemorating how he had been a good soldier.

The possibility of death did not diminish many soldiers' faith in the cause and determination to see the war through. Even though the "chances of living through each day are not so very good" and an extended break from the front would have been appreciated, Captain Henry Crerar insisted that, "there would be very few who would wish to leave the job of winning, permanently, to the others."¹⁷⁶ To die while doing one's duty was an important sacrifice and a worthy way to die. Captain Jeffrey B. Macphail, who served with No. 1 Field Company, Canadian Engineers, wrote that he hoped to "die in a manner that befits a Canadian and a soldier, and also that I may have a chance of doing something 'worth while' before that event takes place."¹⁷⁷ Although Macphail did not elaborate on what that "something" was, Alexander Sinclair hinted at it when he referred to gains made by the British army:

Ruin on all sides and quite a number of little crosses are to be seen marking the graves of a few of those who have fallen for their country. Obviously the British have made considerable progress around here for way behind us there are rows of old trenches filled in, and our present position is further advanced than any around us.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁵ Moss, *Manliness and Militarism*, 2-5, 52, 55-56, 59, 75-77, 79, 83, 90-91, 115-117; and Carl Berger, *The Sense of Power: Studies in the Ideas of Canadian Imperialism, 1867-1914* (1970; reprint, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), 256.

¹⁷⁶ LAC, MG30-E157, Crerar fonds, vol. 15, 23 June 1915.

¹⁷⁷ LAC, MG30-D150, Macphail fonds, vol. 2, folder 4, NOTES, n.d., 12.

¹⁷⁸ LAC, MG30-E237, Sinclair fonds, 5 March 1915.

Sinclair's juxtaposition of the crosses and British advances, as well as the fact that these men had died for their country, suggested a justification for the casualties. Dying at the front was considered admirable and casualties could be spoken of proudly. Captain Jeffrey Macphail, for example, noted with pride that the Canadian Engineers had suffered greater casualties than other arms of service relative to their strength.¹⁷⁹ Captain Andrew Macphail also believed that "[a] soldier should end his days on the Field. Anything else is anti-climax."¹⁸⁰

As we saw in the previous chapter, Canadians had grown up believing that death while doing one's duty was the noblest way for a soldier to die and that in this context, death itself gained meaning. As at home, men overseas sought to ascribe meaning to their comrades' deaths by memorializing the fallen albeit often in different ways than became common in Canadian cities and towns after the war. Captain Jeffrey Macphail wrote to his father, Andrew, of Major Wright of the 3rd Company, Canadian Engineers, who "was killed while directing the consolidation of the position gained in the Orchard."¹⁸¹ On the first day of the attack on Courcellette, Lieutenant-Colonel Roland P. Campbell, commanding officer of No. 6 Canadian Field Ambulance, was killed in the course of his duties. Captain D.E. Macintyre called Campbell "a very conscientious officer" and specifically noted that he "went up himself" to help evacuate the wounded from the frontline.¹⁸² Captain Andrew Macphail considered the death of Captain Fred

¹⁷⁹ LAC, MG30-D150, Macphail fonds, vol. 2, folder 4, NOTES, n.d., 12.

¹⁸⁰ LAC, MG30-D150, Macphail fonds, vol. 4, folder 7, 25 May 1917.

¹⁸¹ LAC, MG30-D150, Macphail fonds, vol. 2, folder 5, letter from Jeffrey to Andrew, 29 June 1915.

¹⁸² LAC, MG30-E241, Macintyre fonds, 15 September 1916.

Shaughnessy of the 60th Battalion at Hooze as a worthy example: “He exposed himself unnecessarily at Hooze and was killed. That is the danger to young officers, – their personal courage destroys them; and yet the value of their example must not be lost sight of.”¹⁸³ Although noting that Shaughnessy had taken an unnecessary risk, Macphail also acknowledged that Shaughnessy’s, as well as other young officers’, bravery at the front was admirable and an example for others. Reminding oneself that a comrade had died in performance of his duties helped comfort men by giving that death meaning and purpose.

Combatants’ remembrance of their fallen comrades for doing their duty well and being good soldiers could also be a source of consolation. For Captain D.E. Macintyre there was no higher praise than that of being a “good soldier.” On 22 November 1915, two of Macintyre’s scouts were shot while examining the wire in front of the Canadian line. While one, Benson, suffered a non-fatal arm wound, the other man, Private Cecil J. Letherby, was shot in the leg and died soon after reaching the dressing station. Macintyre wrote in his diary that Private Letherby “was a good scout, I can’t say anything better of him.”¹⁸⁴ He also praised Sergeant George S. Turner, who was killed on a patrol in March 1916, for his prowess as a soldier: “A better Scout never breathed than he. He was full of ideas, always dependable and didn’t know what fear was.”¹⁸⁵ Upon the death of other comrades, Macintyre remembered these men variously for “great work at VIMY,” as “a

¹⁸³ LAC, MG30-D150, Macphail fonds, vol. 4, folder 4, 3 April 1916. Captain Alfred (Fred) T. Shaughnessy (incorrectly spelled as Shaughnessey by Macphail) of the 60th Battalion was killed by shrapnel on 31 March 1916.

¹⁸⁴ LAC, MG30-E241, Macintyre fonds, 22 November 1915.

¹⁸⁵ LAC, MG30-E241, Macintyre fonds, 13 March 1916.

natural scout and sniper” and “a fighter if we ever had one.”¹⁸⁶ It was for their skill as a soldier that Macintyre remembered these men, emphasizing their service and fulfillment of their duties. Captain Andrew Macphail also remembered a dead comrade, Lieutenant Charles S. McKenzie, for “his faithfulness, his efficiency, his fineness of nature” and as “the ‘best’ man in the Unit.” It was for these reasons that Macphail had encouraged and guided McKenzie towards a commission.¹⁸⁷

A man’s aptitude as a soldier was also highlighted when a man’s awards and commendations were referenced in the reflection upon their death. Captain D.E. Macintyre remembered Lieutenant Edwin A. Trendell of the 19th Battalion for winning the Military Cross with bar and the Military Medal.¹⁸⁸ Both Macintyre and Captain Andrew Macphail remembered Captain John A. Cullum for winning the Military Cross (twice according to Macintyre) and the French Croix de Guerre as well as being recommended for the Victoria Cross.¹⁸⁹ By recalling a fallen man’s decorations, the diarist highlighted the dead man’s bravery and skill as a soldier and chose to remember him for these deeds. Combatants used the concept of duty to frame the death of comrades by recalling how they had died in the fulfillment of their duty or how they were a

¹⁸⁶ LAC, MG30-E241, Macintyre fonds, 4 November 1917; LAC, MG30-E241, Macintyre fonds, 31 January 1916; and LAC, MG30-E241, Macintyre fonds, 11 September 1916. In these diary entries Macintyre is referring to Lieutenant Edwin A. Trendell, Corporal Stewart Conlin and Captain Ken Taylor respectively.

¹⁸⁷ LAC, MG30-D150, Macphail fonds, vol. 4, folder 7, 21 May 1917. Lieutenant Charles S. McKenzie originally enlisted with No. 6 Canadian Field Ambulance, received a commission in June 1916 then transferred to the Canadian Field Artillery. He was killed in action on 7 May 1917 (Macphail mistakenly writes the date of death as 9 May 1917).

¹⁸⁸ LAC, MG30-E241, Macintyre fonds, 4 November 1917.

¹⁸⁹ LAC, MG30-E241, Macintyre fonds, 11 November 1916; and LAC, MG30-D150, Macphail fonds, vol. 4, folder 6, 11 November 1916.

valuable soldier. Soldiers may have been influenced to remember the dead in this way by pre-war ideals which glorified death in battle and automatically imbued wartime deaths with honour. Framing a comrade's death as an honourable act invested it with meaning and value because death on the battlefield was considered the noblest way to die. The fallen could also be placed into the tradition of the glorious dead who loyally served and willingly sacrificed for Canada and the Empire. In a 1916 address to the Empire Club of Canada, Lieutenant George R. Forneret, who briefly served with the 10th Battalion overseas, praised the dead as men who "rank[ed] with the heroes and martyrs of all ages." He argued that death in war was more valuable than in peacetime because in death men achieved a worthy life by sacrificing to better Canada and the Empire.¹⁹⁰ This idea, as well as the concept of duty, appealed to pre-war ideals in which battlefield deaths were worthier and nobler than those in peace. Forneret summed up this perspective in the question "What better end could a man want?"¹⁹¹ The dead's masculinity was also reaffirmed since he was commemorated for dying in the course of serving his country, his manly duty. Soldiers remembered their comrades for more than fulfilling their duties, however.

As discussed above, self-control and stoicism were considered masculine virtues. Soldiers in particular were perceived as representative of the ideal man and those who enlisted may have felt constrained in their expressions in a desire to fit this masculine

¹⁹⁰ Lieutenant G.R. Forneret, "With Canada at the Front," in *The Empire Club of Canada Addresses* (Toronto), 13 January 1916, <http://speeches.empireclub.org/60485/data?n=1>.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

ideal.¹⁹² While combatants could become callous towards death, it was not the only response they turned to nor was it always possible. Death was a constant companion at the front but soldiers did not become completely inured to it and were still saddened by and grieved for the loss of fellow soldiers. In their diaries, men remarked upon their distress at the death of comrades as well as their memories of those men.

When referring to losses in general, men frequently employed the language of sacrifice. This concept idealized heroism, self-sacrifice and dying for one's country and Empire as a glorious deed.¹⁹³ The deaths of these men were perceived as justified, or at least expected, as the price of war. Men were well aware that war was dangerous and had few illusions about the possibility of death. However, death was given meaning by the fact that it was also seen as necessary. A month after his cousin, Private Gordon Macintyre, had been reported missing during an attack on Kenora Trench at Courcellette, Captain D.E. Macintyre received a telegram from his uncle, Colin Macintyre, asking him to look into the matter. Macintyre sought out his cousin's battalion, the 14th, and was told by officers and men of the battalion that Gordon and approximately one hundred others were still missing and they had no hope that they would return. Macintyre acknowledged that the news would be "a hard blow" for his uncle but wrote little of his own feelings, simply noting: "It is too bad that such fine young fellows are shot down, but it seems to

¹⁹² Keshen, *Propaganda and Censorship*, 133, 153-154, 155-157; Jalland, *Death in War and Peace*, 15, 18; Hodgkinson, "Human Remains on the Great War Battlefields," 5, 6, 51; and Meyer, "'Gladder to be Going Out Than Afraid,'" 197.

¹⁹³ Alexander Watson and Patrick Porter, "Bereaved and Aggrieved: Combat Motivation and the Ideology of Sacrifice in the First World War," *Historical Research* 83, no. 219 (February 2010), 147-148, 153, 154, 157, 159, 160; Moss, *Manliness and Militarism*, 2-3, 23, 29, 31-32, 52, 56, 59, 75-76, 143; Meyer, *Men of War*, 5, 6, 80; Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities* (London: Routledge, 1994), 1; and Jalland, *Death in War and Peace*, 16.

be part of the terrible price that has to be paid for war.”¹⁹⁴ While feeling pity for the losses suffered by the 14th Battalion and his uncle, Macintyre recognized that casualties were an expected part of war. Captain Andrew Macphail also understood the misery of war but saw it as a necessary evil. “As I looked upon the poor remains of his body,” he reflected at the autopsy of an unnamed soldier who had been torn apart by a shell, “I had a fresh apprehension of the evil in the world which required so dreadful a remedy as war.”¹⁹⁵ Although Macphail grasped the horror of war, he also felt it was a “remedy” which required sacrifices. These reactions betrayed little emotion and instead focused on justifying these men’s deaths. This form of rationalization appears to have been used mostly by officers, possibly due to the fact they, as mostly middle-class men, had greater exposure to the ideology of sacrifice and therefore may have turned to it more often than enlisted men of the working class.¹⁹⁶ However, these ideas were not always sufficient for understanding and coping with the death of a friend.

It could be difficult to maintain distance in the face of personal losses, regardless of pre-war and contemporary exhortations to remain stoic, and soldiers were often more emotional when discussing the death of friends. Soldiers wrote more poignantly about the death of close comrades, expressing sadness over their loss as well as reminiscing about the dead man. While men were likely more affected by the death of a friend than that of unknown combatants, their recording of the event could still be simple and restrained. Many soldiers would write, for example, that they felt “sorry,” “blue” or “terribly” at the

¹⁹⁴ LAC, MG30-E241, Macintyre fonds, 24 October 1916; and LAC, MG30-E241, Macintyre fonds, 25 October 1916.

¹⁹⁵ LAC, MG30-D150, Macphail fonds, vol. 4, folder 4, 9 March 1916.

¹⁹⁶ Moss, *Manliness and Militarism*, 15, 35, 58.

death of a friend.¹⁹⁷ This type of response was reflective of the stoic masculine ideal which urged men to be restrained in their emotions and limited in their expression. Upon hearing about or seeing the death of a friend, soldiers remarked on their feelings of loss by writing about how they missed their comrade and reminisced about him. Private John McNab remembered his friend, who had been killed by a sniper, as being “so full of life, and a big good-natured lad always playing and fooling with someone.” McNab seemed to have felt the loss keenly, writing: “I sure miss him here, for when we were here before he slept with me, and we used to go out souvenir hunting together, but he is gone.”¹⁹⁸ Even after nearly a year on the Western Front, McNab was stunned by the loss, finding it hard to believe that his mate was really dead.

For Captain D.E. Macintyre, the death of one of his men, Private Cecil J. Letherby, on 22 November 1915 was particularly upsetting because, as he noted in his diary, it was “the first loss in our happy little bunch.” Macintyre praised Letherby as a good scout and indicated that the loss was felt throughout the battalion.¹⁹⁹ Even as the war continued on and more losses were suffered, the death of a beloved comrade did not lose its poignancy. Captain John A. Cullum, initially the medical officer then a combatant with the 28th Battalion, died on 11 November 1916 from wounds caused by a shell the previous day. “No matter how tried [sic?] or hard worked he [Cullum] was,” Macintyre recalled, “he was always cheerful and the life of the mess. I used to share the same billet

¹⁹⁷ See for example LAC, MG30-E1, Alldritt fonds, 9 March 1915; LAC, MG30-E157, Crerar fonds, vol. 15, 20 April 1915; LAC, MG30-E241, Macintyre fonds, 31 January 1916; LAC, MG30-E241, Macintyre fonds, 13 March 1916; LAC, MG30-E241, Macintyre fonds, 11 November 1916; and LAC, MG30-E42, McNab fonds, 16 September 1917.

¹⁹⁸ LAC, MG30-E42, McNab fonds, 16 September 1917.

¹⁹⁹ LAC, MG30-E241, Macintyre fonds, 22 November 1915.

with him all last winter and grew very fond of him.” He also noted that anyone who knew Cullum would mourn the loss. The respect Cullum’s fellow officers and men had for him was demonstrated at his burial the next day. Approximately ten officers and twenty men of the battalion followed the waggon which carried Cullum’s body to the cemetery. After discussing the funeral, Macintyre remarked: “It was a sad business and we all felt we had lost a good friend.”²⁰⁰ Although Macintyre’s observations were not overtly emotional, he and the men in his battalion were obviously saddened by the death of a respected officer.

Captain Andrew Macphail expressed similar sentiments to Macintyre regarding the death of Lieutenant-Colonel Roland P. Campbell, commanding officer of No. 6 Canadian Field Ambulance. “There is grief and consternation throughout the Unit,” Macphail recorded in his diary. “He was the most honest, the most sincere, the most assiduous man I ever knew.”²⁰¹ Macphail was clearly distraught at the death of Campbell. When informed that Lieutenant-Colonel W. Webster of No. 4 Canadian Field Ambulance would be taking command of No. 6 Canadian Field Ambulance, Macphail apathetically wrote “I have no further interest in the present events.” At Campbell’s funeral the next day, his men displayed their affection for their late commanding officer by speaking fondly of their “dear little Colonel” and one man even placed a crucifix on Campbell’s chest before he was buried.²⁰² Both Macphail and Macintyre commented upon their own grief as well as that of others, indicating that men of a battalion expressed at least some

²⁰⁰ LAC, MG30-E241, Macintyre fonds, 11 November 1916; and LAC, MG30-E241, Macintyre fonds, 12 November 1916. See also LAC, MG30-D150, Macphail fonds, vol. 4, folder 6, 11 November 1916.

²⁰¹ LAC, MG30-D150, Macphail fonds, vol. 4, folder 5, 16 September 1916.

²⁰² LAC, MG30-D150, Macphail fonds, vol. 4, folder 5, 16 September 1916; and LAC, MG30-D150, Macphail fonds, vol. 4, folder 5, 17 September 1916. See also LAC, MG30-E241, Macintyre fonds, 15 September 1916.

emotion at the death of comrades and officers. These examples demonstrate that soldiers were not completely callous to the sight of death; while their language was not always overtly sentimental, these men were clearly distraught at the death of friends.

Grief is often associated with one common outward sign of sorrow – crying. However, tears are notably absent from soldiers’ personal narratives; only rarely do they mention crying in their diaries as it was perceived as weak and unmanly. Tears and outward expressions of emotion were feminized so a soldier presented himself as fitting into the masculine ideal by not crying, or at least not making a record of his tears. While it is impossible to know whether or not soldiers did cry at the death of comrades, the terms “tears” and “crying” were typically avoided in soldiers’ writings, displaying self-censorship in how they were willing to convey their grief. This self-censorship of one’s feelings demonstrated that soldiers prescribed, at least to a certain extent, to the belief that they, as men, should show little emotion. Men did not wish to appear unmanly and thus, even in their diaries, they avoided referring to tears.²⁰³ The desire to hide overt expressions of emotion shows that men accepted that crying was unavoidable in some circumstances but that it was still undesirable and unmanly.

Although they rarely explicitly mentioned the tears of others, there are some veiled references to crying in personal diaries.²⁰⁴ After the attack on Givenchy on 15 June 1915, Captain Henry Crerar recalled seeing Lieutenant-Colonel F.W. Hill of the 1st Battalion returning from the front lines the next day. The 1st Battalion had suffered heavy

²⁰³ André Loez, “Tears in the Trenches: A History of Emotions and the Experience of War,” in *Uncovered Fields*, Macleod and Purseigle, eds., 211, 214, 217, 218, 220. Although Loez focuses on the French Army, his arguments are applicable to the Canadian context.

²⁰⁴ Loez, “Tears in the Trenches,” 214.

casualties and Crerar noted that Hill was “very cut up over the loss of so many good officers and men.”²⁰⁵ Although Crerar did not specifically state that Hill was crying, the fact that he commented on Hill’s emotional state indicated that Hill showed some visible sign of emotion. The use of veiled language suggests the stigma associated with tears and crying. This sense of shame was likely heightened by doctors pathologizing crying as a symptom of shell shock, an illness perceived by many as antithetical to masculinity.²⁰⁶ In the official history of the medical services, Sir Andrew Macphail described shell shock as “a manifestation of childishness and femininity. Against such there is no remedy.”²⁰⁷

When tears were explicitly described, they were often framed, as Macphail stated, as childlike and effeminate. During the Battle of St. Eloi Craters, men of the 28th Battalion were decimated by severe shelling as they attempted to reach some of the craters. First, Lieutenant Bill Macintosh and his bombers attempted to find the craters but, after they had left, Captain D.E. Macintyre learned that the area was going to be shelled by their artillery. Macintyre sent three runners after Macintosh to inform him of the barrage but none of them were able to reach him in time. Macintosh and his men walked right into the bombardment. Although it is unclear how many men Macintosh had lost, Macintyre implied that he returned with significantly fewer men – “Eventually he [Macintosh] came back with what men he had left and cried like a child.” Lieutenant

²⁰⁵ LAC, MG30-E157, Crerar fonds, vol. 15, 16 June 1915. The 1st Battalion’s casualties for the action at Givenchy were 20 officers and 366 other ranks (G.W.L. Nicholson, *Official History of the Canadian Army in the First World War: Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1919* (Ottawa: Queen’s Printer, 1962), 107).

²⁰⁶ Mark Humphries, “War’s Long Shadow: Masculinity, Medicine, and the Gendered Politics of Trauma, 1914-1939,” *The Canadian Historical Review* 91, no. 3 (September 2010), 508, 515, 518, 530.

²⁰⁷ Andrew Macphail, *Official History of the Canadian Forces in the Great War, 1914-19: Medical Services* (Ottawa: King’s Printer, 1925), 273.

Gerald Murphy tried to reach the front lines next and he reached two craters which he mistakenly believed were Nos. 4 and 5. Murphy and his men were heavily shelled and so retreated but became lost. Macintyre does not note the number of casualties but they were presumably heavy due to the nature of the shelling. Also indicative of a serious loss was Macintyre's remark that "when he [Murphy] arrived he broke down and wept like a child from sheer rage, exhaustion and nerve shock."²⁰⁸ Lieutenants Macintosh's and Murphy's actions were explained by the extreme losses they had suffered but Macintyre still compared both men to children, stripping them of their masculinity. While soldiers often sought to maintain an unemotional façade in the face of death, emotional detachment was not always a possible or adequate response. Men recorded their sadness and grief when confronted with death, particularly that of close friends, although the level of emotion varied for each death. Soldiers' language could be restrained when referring to comrades' deaths, suggesting that, while they desired to remember their friends, they also sought to preserve some emotional self-control as was expected of men.

In instances where soldiers could be neither grief-stricken nor emotionally distant, men might choose to control and re-direct their emotions. Soldiers sought to re-direct their emotions into "productive" forms; instead of fearing death or grieving dead comrades, men would joke about death or turn their sadness into anger towards the enemy. This re-direction of emotions was a response unique to men's experiences on the front and did not draw from the more solemn attitudes towards death in the pre-war period.

²⁰⁸ LAC, MG30-E241, Macintyre fonds, 6 and 7 April 1916.

Men used humour too to cope with the miserable conditions of everyday life in the trenches and this coping mechanism extended to death and dying. Soldiers often used gallows humour to distance and shield themselves from the seriousness and harsh reality of death at the front.²⁰⁹ Referring to two of his officers who were sniping at the German lines, Alexander Sinclair wrote: “He [one of the officers] very apparently missed his mark for after he had finished the Germans signalled a miss. Yes, there’s a deal of humor in it all, even tho’ it is so serious.”²¹⁰ Sinclair recognized that humour and horror co-existed in the trenches.

Soldiers joked about the death of comrades to shield themselves from the pain of the loss. Upon hearing of the death of a friend to whom he had lent £20, Captain Jeffrey Macphail wrote: “Memo: When lending money to officers on active service, be sure and get acknowledgement in formal shape if there is any chance of their leaving an estate other than one composed of debts!”²¹¹ Rather than focusing on his friend’s death, Macphail decided to emphasize humour and joke about not being paid back. Instead of speaking of the dead with reverence, Macphail, as many soldiers did, used humour to distance himself from his friend’s death and the emotions it could bring with it. While taking a tour of his and nearby trenches, three of Captain D.E. Macintyre’s men were wounded, although not seriously. One man, Pinton, was hit by a bullet which went

²⁰⁹ Tim Cook, “‘I will meet the world with a smile and a joke’: Canadian Soldiers’ Humour in the Great War,” *Canadian Military History* 22, no. 2 (Spring 2013), 49, 51, 56; Tim Cook, *Shock Troops: Canadians fighting the Great War, 1917-1918* (Toronto: Viking, 2008), 222; Watson, *Enduring the Great War*, 90-92; and Alex Watson, “Self-deception and Survival,” 253-255.

²¹⁰ LAC, MG30-E237, Sinclair fonds, 25 February 1915.

²¹¹ LAC, MG30-D150, Macphail fonds, vol. 2, folder 4, Extracts from Intell: Summary, A Reminiscence, n.d., 7.

through a sandbag and then his cap – “He cried out ‘I’m dead’ and the boys laughed and looked and found the bullet lying inside his cap. Then Pinton said quite seriously ‘No, I’m not dead’. He only had a scratch but it was quite a close shave.”²¹² Macintyre acknowledged it had been a close call for Pinton but he emphasized the humour, rather than the danger, of the situation. During a heavy bombardment, Macintyre again joked at the proximity of death when one of his men, Private Henry A. Huartson, was buried by a shell then dug out, uninjured. Huartson had been cleaning his rifle, “a fact which would have been noted on his tombstone had he been killed, because during life he was never known to have had a clean rifle.”²¹³ These soldiers chose to laugh at death rather than allow fear or grief to overwhelm them.

Men could also find humour in the possibility of their own death. Captain Macintyre recalled a story in his hometown newspaper which reported that he had been killed although the story was apparently not widely believed. Macintyre thought that was a pity because he would have liked to see what people in Moose Jaw thought of him. He decided he would have to “send out a lot of field service post cards saying ‘I was killed in action but am quite well’.”²¹⁴ Rather than dwelling on the possibility of his death, Macintyre chose to find humour in the situation and potentially play a joke on his friends and family in Canada. Using humour, soldiers could distance themselves from the dangerous conditions of the front as well as the death around them. This response to death was uniquely based in men’s wartime experience and does not appear to have been

²¹² LAC, MG30-E241, Macintyre fonds, 24 October 1915.

²¹³ LAC, MG30-E241, Macintyre fonds, 30 November 1915. Private Henry A. Huartson would later be killed in action on 6 June 1916.

²¹⁴ LAC, MG30-E241, Macintyre fonds, 21 December 1915.

drawn from pre-war approaches to death which were often more reverent. Instead of dwelling on their grief at the death of comrades, men re-directed their feelings and found humour in the situation, turning their negative emotions into positive ones.

Grief could also be conveyed by expressing fierce emotions, those of anger and vengeance. With emotional control, soldiers could adapt their feelings of sadness into rage against the enemy and desires for revenge. In this way, grief could be used as motivation and turned into something “productive” – aggression.²¹⁵ One way in which soldiers expressed their grief over the loss of a comrade was writing about their anger. Private John McNab felt “sore at Fritz” upon hearing that a friend had been killed by a sniper while Captain Henry Crerar called the Germans “swine” and hoped that his battery’s artillery barrage had “made them pay a bit for the lives we’ve lost.”²¹⁶ Soldiers did not easily forget nor forgive German actions. On Christmas Eve 1916, for example, Captain Andrew Macphail feared “trouble to-night between our men and the Germans. Last year the 22nd Battn. were playing a game of baseball, and they were shelled by the enemy. Three men were killed, and the incident is not forgotten.”²¹⁷ This incident was likely viewed as especially grievous because it occurred on Christmas Eve. Anger towards the enemy could serve as combat motivation, encouraging men to act

²¹⁵ Watson and Porter, “Bereaved and aggrieved,” 161-163; and Tim Cook, “The Politics of Surrender: Canadian Soldiers and the Killing of Prisoners in the Great War,” *The Journal of Military History* 70, no. 3 (July 2006), 650.

²¹⁶ LAC, MG30-E42, McNab fonds, 16 September 1917; LAC, MG30-E157, Crerar fonds, vol. 15, 20 April 1915; and LAC, MG30-E157, Crerar fonds, vol. 15, 15 June 1915.

²¹⁷ LAC, MG30-D150, Macphail fonds, vol. 4, folder 6, 24 December 1916. See also LAC, MG30-E157, Crerar fonds, vol. 15, 21 March 1915.

aggressively. Captain D.E. Macintyre recalled the fervour with which some of his men sought to avenge the death of a comrade killed by a German sniper:

If I was Fritz I would hate to have ANDREWS or CONLIN after me because they will lay [as a sniper] for one fellow for a week. ANDREWS crawled half way across No Man's Land yesterday afternoon in order to get a shot in. I think he will get him [the German sniper] if he has to go over there and hit him with a club.

Macintyre himself was also anxious to get rid of the German sniper, asking a field battery to shell the sniper's position.²¹⁸ Soldiers did not only write of their anger but also acted upon it on the battlefield.

This anger and the desire to avenge the dead could manifest itself in the killing of prisoners on the battlefield. Soldiers felt that it was necessary to retaliate against the enemy for the death of comrades.²¹⁹ "Grief had turned to hatred," explained historian Leo van Bergen, "which expressed itself in a desire to kill."²²⁰ Some men acted upon their rage by killing surrendering German soldiers rather than taking prisoners. For some, the sight of German prisoners behind the lines could disgust them and remind them of the losses they had suffered. While overseeing a prisoners' sick parade, Captain Andrew Macphail remarked on his "feeling of horror as I reflect that these are the hands which fired the guns which have destroyed so many of my friends."²²¹ Men of the 28th Battalion

²¹⁸ LAC, MG30-E241, Macintyre fonds, 5 January 1916; and LAC, MG30-E241, Macintyre fonds, 7 January 1916.

²¹⁹ Tim Cook, "The Politics of Surrender," 639, 643, 645, 650, 651; Watson, *Enduring the Great War*, 69; and Watson and Porter, "Bereaved and aggrieved," 162.

²²⁰ Leo Van Bergen, *Before My Helpless Sight: Suffering, Dying and Military Medicine on the Western Front, 1914-1918*, trans. Liz Waters (Famham, England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2009), 421.

²²¹ LAC, MG30-D150, Macphail fonds, vol. 4, folder 5, 24 October 1916.

had no mercy for German soldiers who surrendered during a raid on German trenches – “The men were so wild about [the deaths of] [Corporal Stewart] CONLIN and [Sergeant Thomas] ARMSTRONG that they killed everyone, although they squealed and yelled ‘Please Mister’.”²²² On the first day of the Battle of Courcellette in September 1916, when Captain D.E. Macintyre asked one of his bombers why he had not seen any prisoners, the man’s simple reply was “We’re not taking any, they blew mines under us twice.”²²³ In a letter to his parents, Lieutenant R.C. Germain of the 20th Battalion also recounted how he and his men were not inclined to take prisoners after so many of their comrades had been killed:

We were held up by machine-gun fire from a ridge. ... I don’t know how I escaped because I was lying right out in the front. After losing half of my company there, we rushed them and they had the nerve to throw up their hands and cry, “Kamerad.” All the “Kamerad” they got was a foot of cold steel thro them from my remaining men while I blew their brains out with my revolver without any hesitation. You may think this rather rough but if you had seen my boys go down you would have done the same and my only regret is that too many prisoners are taken.²²⁴

These men wanted revenge for the suffering and death the enemy had caused. By seeking vengeance for their comrades, soldiers were using their grief to fuel battlefield aggression by strengthening the offensive spirit or killing prisoners. Turning grief into aggression and a desire for vengeance was a new method of coping distinctly related to soldiers’ wartime experiences. Peacetime deaths were usually caused by disease rather than by

²²² LAC, MG30-E241, Macintyre fonds, 31 January 1916.

²²³ LAC, MG30-E241, Macintyre fonds, 15 September 1916.

²²⁴ Buster to mother and father, 29 August 1918, 58A 1 67.6, Canadian War Museum, Ottawa, Canada, as quoted in “The Politics of Surrender,” Tim Cook, 638.

another person and therefore there was generally no person responsible for someone's death; death in war, however, provided an explicit actor (the enemy) to blame. Emotional control allowed men to transform their feelings about the death of comrades, converting them into "productive" forms which prevented them from becoming overwhelmed and allowed them to continue fighting.

As this chapter has shown, soldiers approached death and grief in multiple and conflicting ways during the First World War. Men sought to emotionally distance themselves from death and the dead by acknowledging that death was a common occurrence at the front. They came to understand that the presence and threat of death could not be avoided and often developed a callous towards death as a coping mechanism. However, an apparent numbing towards death did not preclude any emotion. Soldiers marked the death of comrades, even if simply with a name and date, which indicates a desire to remember the dead without being overwhelmed with emotion. Emotional control as a means of coping with death reflected the masculine ideal of stoicism and reserved emotions and thus fit into pre-war notions of masculine grief. Masculine ideals were also maintained when men's deaths were framed through the concept of duty. Death in the fulfillment of one's duties was honourable and friends could be comforted that a comrade had died a noble and meaningful death. Men were also remembered as good soldiers, highlighting this masculine skill as worth commemorating. The dead were also remembered for their friendship as soldiers felt the loss of close friends keenly. The death of friends elicited sadness and reminiscing about the dead but did not often provoke tears as they were physical symbols of a breach in manliness. Although men expressed deep emotion at the death of close comrades, they

still tried to keep some emotional control. Self-control could also manifest itself in emotional re-direction in which men sought to transform their grief. Humour and the ability to laugh at death allowed soldiers to change their sadness into a positive emotion. Men could also turn to anger and aggression towards the enemy, often seeking vengeance for the death of comrades; thus transforming grief into “productive” action. These diverse responses to death were employed variously throughout a soldier’s service, usually dependent on his relationship with the deceased and the manner of death.

A common thread throughout these private reactions to death was the influence of contemporary discourses on masculinity, particularly men’s emotional reserve and stoicism. Private expressions of grief often drew upon and were shaped by masculine ideals espoused both before and during the war which men, and especially soldiers as the epitome of manliness, were meant to emulate. Pre-war attitudes towards death were not as pervasive in wartime responses but were supplemented by new approaches developed due to the conditions of war. Conceptions of duty and restrained emotional expression drew upon pre-war assumptions of “appropriate” masculine responses to death – glorification and stoicism. Soldiers’ emotional detachment also fit into the pre-war ideal of emotional restraint but it represented a new approach as well since the mass death of the war had an important influence on the development of this coping method. Responding to death with humour and aggression were wartime developments as men sought new approaches which coincided with their experiences in the trenches. Ultimately, men adapted pre-war attitudes to death and grief as well as constructed new ones to handle their encounters with death at the front.

“Fallen on the field of honour”: Public Discourses of Grief

The constant threat of death as well as its physical presence was an experience shared by all combatants on the front. While it is impossible to reconstruct conversations between soldiers, trench newspapers and condolence letters show that they did discuss death with one another as well as with those on the home front. Funerals and grave visitations also served as physical acts of commemoration. In comparison to diaries, newspapers, letters and burials were written for an audience and were thus part of a larger public discourse on death. These responses to death were public expressions of grief and therefore men may have shaped their reactions to fit into what were considered appropriate forms of grief. What was considered an “appropriate” response was shaped by the intended audience.

This chapter examines the multitude of ways soldiers publicly expressed and discussed their reactions to death and grief. As we saw in the previous chapter, soldiers had a complex and often contradictory relationship with death, simultaneously perceiving it as a means of obtaining honour and glory and laughing at it in a nihilistic way while also respecting the bodies of those who had fallen. Combatants did not rely on one method of coping or form of expression but used multiple approaches to deal with death and share their responses with others. These methods generally drew from pre-war customs and conceptions of death and masculinity which were adapted to the wartime experience but new approaches were also developed.

Trench newspapers and condolence letters, as public sources, are indicative of how soldiers thought their grief was expected to manifest. Trench newspapers were published by soldiers for soldiers, particularly for enlisted men, and the majority of

content was also submitted by them. These papers printed a variety of subject matter, including poems, jokes and cartoons, and provided soldiers with a space to complain about life at the front. Subversive material, which mocked superiors for example, was printed but what was allowed to be published was ultimately decided by officers who censored the papers.²²⁵ As well, although the newspapers' audience was soldiers, contributors and editors chose what to submit and what to publish and contended with expectations and assumptions on what was appropriate to print. When soldiers wrote letters, they also faced an audience with expectations. While they were not shared publicly like trench newspapers, letters were still written with a reader in mind. Letters were officially censored by officers but many men also censored their own writing. Soldiers wanted to protect their loved ones at home from the horrors of war and also tried to present themselves as manly men who could endure the ordeal. Condolence letters sought to comfort bereaved families, usually by reassuring them that their loved one's death had been honourable and painless.²²⁶

The concept of sacrifice was an important means of understanding death for combatants. By infusing death with meaning, it would be easier to accept because it had served a higher purpose. Dying for "the greater good," for one's country, ideals or loved ones, is often referred to as the "ideology of sacrifice" or "sacrificial ideology."²²⁷

²²⁵ Tim Cook, *Shock Troops: Canadians fighting the Great War, 1917-1918* (Toronto: Viking, 2008), 187-189; and Jeffrey A. Keshen, *Propaganda and Censorship During Canada's Great War* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1996), 133-135, 148.

²²⁶ Keshen, *Propaganda and Censorship*, 153, 155-157, 159, 165, 167; Jessica Meyer, *Men of War: Masculinity and the First World War in Britain* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 16, 29, 74-75, 79, 80, 82, 86, 96; and Michael Roper, *The Secret Battle: Emotional Survival in the Great War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 213, 214.

²²⁷ Alexander Watson and Patrick Porter do not include the source for the term "ideology of sacrifice" in their article "Bereaved and Aggrieved: Combat Motivation and the Ideology of Sacrifice in the First World

Historians Alexander Watson and Patrick Porter defined the ideology of sacrifice “as shorthand for a diffuse body of values, concepts and themes extolling the righteousness of laying down one’s life for a greater cause.” This ideology glorified dying in war, using terms such as the “‘glorious dead’ [and] [...] heroic death” to describe those who were killed in battle.²²⁸ Ideas of honour, sacrifice and heroism were taught before the war in schools and were disseminated through sport, popular literature and boy’s clubs like the Boy Scouts.²²⁹ In the period leading up to the First World War, a “real man” was one who was prepared to fight and die “for Queen [then King], Country and Empire.”²³⁰ The ideology of sacrifice was used as a means to understand death by those on the home front as well as those overseas. Soldiers used sacrificial ideology and language to better understand and cope with the death of their comrades as believing that one’s friends had died for a higher purpose could provide a sense of consolation. Soldiers also memorialized their comrades through honour rolls and by vowing that the dead’s sacrifice had not been in vain but would be validated by the actions of the living. To die in battle was honourable and worthier than to die in peacetime. A poem by an anonymous

War;” hereafter, it will no longer be in quotation marks in this paper. The term “sacrificial ideology” [without quotation marks] was used continuously in Watson and Porter’s article; hereafter, it will no longer be in quotation marks in this paper.

²²⁸ Alexander Watson and Patrick Porter, “Bereaved and Aggrieved: Combat Motivation and the Ideology of Sacrifice in the First World War,” *Historical Research* 83, no. 219 (February 2010), 147-148.

²²⁹ Mark Moss, *Manliness and Militarism: Educating Young Boys in Ontario for War* (Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 2001), 2-5, 8-9, 16, 29-32, 54, 57-59, 61-62, 83, 90, 115-117, 125, 139; David Cannadine, “War and Death, Grief and Mourning in Modern Britain,” in *Mirrors of Mortality: Studies in the Social History of Death*, Joachim Whaley, ed. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1981), 196; and Pat Jalland, *Death in War and Peace: Loss and Grief in England, 1914-1970* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 16.

²³⁰ Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities* (London: Routledge, 1994), 1.

author in *The O. Pip*, newspaper of the 58th Battery, Canadian Field Artillery, summed up this ideal succinctly: “If I should die to-day – / Well, what does it matter? / Better battle’s clatter / To end all anyway, / Than slowly shuffle off / With old age and a cough...”²³¹ It was better to die as a soldier, fighting for a noble cause, than to die as an old man.

This readiness to lay down one’s life emerged from notions of the righteousness of the war and ideals of defending the nation as well as one’s home and family from foreign aggression. The ideology of sacrifice allowed men to make the death of their comrades significant and meaningful.²³² Contributors to trench newspapers reminded their fellow soldiers that they were fighting for a worthy cause – for Canada, the British Empire and higher ideals of freedom. Poetry in particular often used the language of sacrifice to express the author’s grief, commemorate the dead and imbue their death with meaning.²³³ Thaddeus A. Browne praised the Canadians who fought at the Second Battle of Ypres for their courage, determination and willing self-sacrifice:

Tell how they died, my brave, my pride, on that field battle-
torn.
They went not forth for gain or gold, ‘twas not for that they
died;
They fought for right, ‘gainst armed might that covenants
defied.

²³¹ “A Thought,” *The O. Pip*, Paris Number, n.d., 22, Record Group [RG] 9 III-D-4, vol. 5080, Library and Archives Canada [LAC].

²³² Watson and Porter, “Bereaved and Aggrieved,” 153, 154, 157, 159, 160; Carol Acton, *Grief in Wartime: Private Pain, Public Discourse* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 113; Meyer, *Men of War*, 80; and Cannadine, “War and Death,” 195, 196.

²³³ See for example S.G.H., “The Canadian,” *Trench Echo*, Christmas Number, 1917, 16, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5080, LAC; Thomas Harton, “The Last Trench,” *The Iodine Chronicle*, No. 2, 15 November 1915, 4, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5080, LAC; Joseph H. Shimmén, “A Simple Wooden Cross,” *The Iodine Chronicle*, No. 16, July 1918, 7, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5080, LAC; R.W.T., “The Supreme Test,” *The Dead Horse Gazette*, No. 3, June 1916, 35, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5078, LAC; “Good-Bye, My Hero,” *Clearings*, December 1917, 17, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5078, LAC; and “Sabaid,” *The Western Scot*, Commemorative Number, n.d. [1918], 38, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5080, LAC.

Pure was their quest, to serve the best, my banner they
unfurled
For that high plan, the rights of man, the freedom of the
world.²³⁴

Although it was written by a civilian, the editor of *The Dead Horse Gazette*, initially the 4th Battalion's newspaper before becoming the First Canadian Infantry Brigade's in June 1916, found "The Battle of Langemarck" appropriate to publish and the ideals it espoused relatable for a soldier audience. Commemorating the Battle of Vimy Ridge, S.G.H. honoured those "Who died for Empire, Liberty and Right, / And so inspired achieved the final height / Of sacrifice upon thy tortured crest!"²³⁵ In a poem entitled "Sacrifice," J.O. Todd reminded soldiers that, through their sacrifices, "the Flower of Freedom, / Its rootlets drinking blood, / Will bloom again triumphant, / The blasts of war withstood."²³⁶ Soldiers could find comfort in believing their comrades' deaths had been for the noble cause of defending the Empire and freedom and these men would be immortalized for their deeds: "Down the broad highway of the years, / In gold the deeds shall stand / Of those who died unflinchingly / For Home and Motherland."²³⁷ This willingness to risk, and sacrifice if necessary, one's life was an important ideal for many soldiers and it was adapted as a means of understanding comrades' deaths. If a man believed that his friend's

²³⁴ Thaddeus A. Browne, "The Battle of Langemarck," *The Dead Horse Gazette*, No. 3, June 1916, 30, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5078, LAC.

²³⁵ S.G.H., "Vimy Ridge," *Trench Echo*, Christmas Number, 1917, 2, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5080, LAC. The author, S.G.H., is possibly the editor of the paper Lieutenant S.G. Harrison.

²³⁶ J.O. Todd, "Sacrifice," *Clearings*, December 1917, 6, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5078, LAC.

²³⁷ "The Immortals," *The Dead Horse Corner Gazette*, No. 1, October 1915, 4, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5078, LAC.

death had been for “the greater good,” it could allow him to accept the loss more easily as it had been worthwhile.

Soldiers employed similar concepts when writing letters to the relatives of fallen comrades.²³⁸ The use of this language may have been influenced by men’s attempts to shield bereaved families from the obscenity of death at the front and the desire to provide comfort at the loss of a loved one.²³⁹ Onslow “Mac” Wood attempted to comfort Lance Corporal James “Jimmie” Fargey’s mother for “the loss of such a brave and noble son” by assuring her that he had died honourably: “How better could one die knowing he has down [sic] his bit to save his King and country like Jimmie has down [sic] Mrs Fargey!”²⁴⁰ Soldiers hoped to console a comrade’s bereaved family by using sacrificial language, assuring them that their loved one had died for a worthy cause. Lieutenant Gerald W. Guiou of the Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry told Lance Corporal Charles D. Richardson’s mother that her son’s “life and death were glorious examples worthy of the highest praise” while Private James W. McGill wrote similarly of Private William L. Campbell’s death as one “to be proud of, dying for the honor of his country.”²⁴¹ Lance Corporal Robert H. Hoover of the 58th Battalion understood the grief

²³⁸ Meyer, *Men of War*, 74-75, 80, 82, 83; and Acton, *Grief in Wartime*, 107.

²³⁹ Keshen, *Propaganda and Censorship*, 153-154, 159, 165, 167; Meyer, *Men of War*, 16, 17, 29, 47, 74, 79, 84, 85; and Roper, *The Secret Battle*, 213, 214.

²⁴⁰ Canadian Letters and Images Project [CLIP], James Henderson Fargey, letter from Mac [Onslow S. Wood] to Mrs. Fargey [mother], 14 November 1916. Lance Corporal Fargey served with the 43rd Battalion and died of wounds on 15 October 1916. Although it is unclear which unit Onslow Wood served with, he likely served with Fargey in the 43rd Battalion as both men were from Belmont, Manitoba and enlisted in Winnipeg.

²⁴¹ CLIP, Charles Douglas Richardson, letter from Lieutenant Gerald W. Guiou to Mrs. B.P. Richardson [mother], 18 April 1917; and CLIP, William Lockhard Campbell, letter from James W. McGill to Samuel Crampton, 1915. Lance Corporal Richardson served with the Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry and Private Campbell, who was killed in action in April 1915, served with the 2nd Battalion.

of Private Lawrence E. Johns's family but he reassured them that "what mother or father could wish their son to die a more honourable death – namely that of so valiantly defending the cause and uplift of the 'Freedom of Mankind.'" He also reminded them that "many a Mother's noble son has passed away fighting for Freedom."²⁴² Using sacrificial language, soldiers tried to comfort and console bereaved relatives by reminding them that their loved one had died a noble and worthwhile death, something of which they could be proud. Soldiers used similar language to that used on the home front, demonstrating some continuity between the two fronts. Bereaved families sought solace in believing the suffering and sacrifices of their loved ones were meaningful and for the greater good, preserving right and freedom from German aggression;²⁴³ soldiers' condolence letters complemented this interpretation.

The redemptive quality of death in battle was another aspect of sacrificial ideology which was highlighted by trench newspapers. Regardless of the man's beliefs, penitence or actions prior to death, death in battle was considered a redeeming act. Men could console themselves with the thought that, by his sacrifice, the dead soldier's soul was saved.²⁴⁴ This concept of the noble, redeeming death often used religious

²⁴² CLIP, Lawrence Earl Johns, letter from Lance Corporal Robert H. Hoover to Mr. and Mrs. Johns and family, 14 September 1917; and CLIP, Lawrence Earl Johns, letter from Corporal Robert H. Hoover to Mr. and Mrs. Johns and family, 3 December 1917. Private Lawrence Johns served with the 58th Battalion and was killed in action on 12 September 1917.

²⁴³ Jonathan F. Vance, *Death so Noble: Memory, Meaning, and the First World War* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1997), 36, 37, 39, 50, 72.

²⁴⁴ Vance, *Death So Noble*, 39, 40, 44, 49, 55-56; Alan Wilkinson, "Changing English Attitudes to Death in the Two World Wars," in *The Changing Face of Death: Historical Accounts of Death and Disposal*, Peter C. Jupp and Glennys Howarth, eds. (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1997), 150, 151, 155; and Jalland, *Death in War and Peace*, 22.

language.²⁴⁵ Joseph. H. Shimmen, for example, associated the sacrifice of soldiers with the death of Christ:

Was not Christ, the Son of Man, born
To die for the Freedom and Liberty of us all?
Did not He at Calvary answer the Call
On a simple wooden Cross?
God ne'er forgets you, Comrade!
And when the Herald Angels sound the last "Fall In"
On Judgment Day, Christ, Master of Sin,
From His throne in realms supernal,
Will give unto you Life Eternal,
For on earth you carried a heavy wooden Cross.²⁴⁶

If a soldier died in war, he did not truly die but gained well-deserved peace with God.

"What of Death? Can it be said / Perished those you gave?" asked R.W.T., a contributor to *The Dead Horse Gazette*. "No! Who falls in Freedom's cause / Triumphs o'er the grave."²⁴⁷ Poetry and condolence letters provided soldiers with spaces to justify and rationalize death, reminding themselves, as well as those on the home front, that the death of their comrades was honourable and meaningful.

Specific words, which implied ideals of patriotism, sacrifice and heroism, were associated with sacrificial language and their use in describing death and grief invested death with intrinsic value and meaning.²⁴⁸ In its 1915 Christmas issue, *The Iodine Chronicle*, No. 1 Canadian Field Ambulance's paper, reminded its readers to remember

²⁴⁵ See for example "Where Have Ye Laid Him?" *The Vics Patrol*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 15 July 1916, 19, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5080, LAC; and S.G.H., "The Canadian," *Trench Echo*, Christmas Number, 1917, 16, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5080, LAC.

²⁴⁶ Joseph H. Shimmen, "A Simple Wooden Cross," *The Iodine Chronicle*, No. 16, July 1918, 7, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5080, LAC.

²⁴⁷ R.W.T., "The Supreme Test," *The Dead Horse Gazette*, No. 3, June 1916, 35, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5078, LAC. The author, R.W.T., is possibly the editor of the paper Private R.W. Trowsdale.

²⁴⁸ Watson and Porter, "Bereaved and aggrieved," 156, 159, 160.

“our gallant comrades fallen on the field of honour, those who have made ‘supreme sacrifice,’ who have given the greatest proof of their love for their fellow men.”²⁴⁹

References to the “heroic dead” and a “glorious end” were meant to attribute men’s deaths with a sense of worth, reassuring soldiers that their friends’ deaths had not been in vain but were noble, honourable and valuable. Fallen comrades were commonly described as heroic and gallant and their deaths as glorious and the supreme sacrifice or gift.²⁵⁰ These words were intrinsically meaningful and their repeated use indicated a desire to frame the death of comrades as significant, meaningful and worthwhile.

Sacrificial ideology relied heavily on pre-war notions of war and its glorification. Just as the Boer War’s dead had been memorialized as gallant, the dead of the First World War were commemorated as valiant and integrated into this tradition of martyrs and heroes.

Sacrificial language provided a “ready-made” form of expression for soldiers to convey their grief.

One feature of trench newspapers which provides a useful indicator of how soldiers reacted to death was the publication of honour rolls. Many of the newspapers included honour rolls which listed the dead, missing and wounded of the unit during a

²⁴⁹ “Editorial,” *The Iodine Chronicle*, No. 4, 20 December 1915, 1, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5080, LAC.

²⁵⁰ “Editorial,” *Trench Echo*, Christmas Number, 1917, 2, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5080, LAC; “Good-Bye, My Hero,” *Clearings*, December 1917, 17, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5078, LAC; R.W. Trowsdale, “‘Somewhere in France’,” *The Dead Horse Corner Gazette*, No. 1, October 1915, 5, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5078, LAC; Private Archie Cronie, “The Answered Call,” *The Dead Horse Corner Gazette*, No. 2, December 1915, 26, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5078, LAC; Thaddeus A. Browne, “The Battle of Langemarck,” *The Dead Horse Corner Gazette*, No. 3, June 1916, 30, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5078, LAC; R.W.T., “The Supreme Test,” *The Dead Horse Gazette*, No. 3, June 1916, 35, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5078, LAC; “V,” “Vive L’Entente,” *The Dead Horse Gazette*, No. 3, June 1916, 40, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5078, LAC; Thomas Harton, “The Last Trench,” *The Iodine Chronicle*, No. 2, 15 November 1915, 4, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5080, LAC; Lieutenant-Colonel Lorne Ross, “‘Au Revoir’,” *The Western Scot*, Commemorative Number, n.d., 2, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5080, LAC; “Editorial,” *Trench Echo*, Easter Number, 1916, 1, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5080, LAC; and “Battalion Honours,” *Trench Echo*, Whitsun Number, 1917, 6, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5080, LAC.

given period. While *The Dead Horse Corner Gazette* simply highlighted the words “In Memory of Fallen Comrades,” other papers provided casualties’ names and sometimes the cause of death or wounding.²⁵¹ Some added commentary, such as a poem or editorial, after the roll of honour. In a brief forward to their honour roll, *The Vics Patrol*, paper of the 24th Battalion (Victoria Rifles), reflected upon the nobility of the battalion’s casualties:

In giving a list of those of our officers and men who have made the supreme sacrifice, no attempt will be – or, indeed, can be – made to offer any details of individual gallantry. Yet, as our list is perused slowly, it is strange how many names recall instances of personal bravery which would not be passed by unnoticed in any war of lesser magnitude. As it is, we revere and honour them all. They are our own – the heroes who have lived with us as comrades, and have won their rest.²⁵²

The Splint Record, No. 2 Canadian Field Ambulance’s paper, also praised its fallen comrades by including a poem in memory of those of the First Canadian Division who died at the Second Battle of Ypres: “What reck you whether your resting place / Be decked with the golden lilies of France / Or amidst the vine-clad hills of the Rhine, / The principles for which you fought are eternal.”²⁵³ This also served to remind soldiers what

²⁵¹ “In Memory of Fallen Comrades,” *The Dead Horse Corner Gazette*, No. 1, October 1915, 4, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5078, LAC; “In Memory of Fallen Comrades,” *The Dead Horse Corner Gazette*, No. 2, December 1915, 17, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5078, LAC; “Quo Fas Et Gloria Ducunt,” *The O. Pip*, Easter Number, n.d., 20, RG 9 III-D-4, vol. 5080, LAC; “Roll of Honour,” *The Splint Record*, Souvenir Number, December 1915, 2, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5080, LAC; “Our Roll of Honour,” *The Vics Patrol*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 15 July 1916, 10, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5080, LAC; “The Roll of Honour,” *The Western Scot*, Vol. 1, No. 45, 20 September 1916, 6, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5080, LAC; “In Memoriam,” *The Western Scot*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 18 November 1916, 4, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5080, LAC; “Roll of Honour,” *The Western Scot*, Commemorative Number, n.d. [1918?], 50-56, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5080, LAC; and “In Memoriam,” *Now and Then*, No. 1, 15 December 1915, 2, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5080, LAC.

²⁵² “Our Roll of Honour,” *The Vics Patrol*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 3 June 1916, 2, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5080, LAC.

²⁵³ Sir S. Hughes, “In Memory,” *The Splint Record*, Souvenir Number, December 1915, 2, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5080, LAC.

they were fighting and sacrificing for. In a letter of appreciation to *The Vics Patrol*, former officer commanding of the 24th Battalion Brigadier-General E.W. Wilson praised the newspaper's excellent content. He was "particularly impressed with the Roll of Honour, the names of the heroes who have given up their lives in defence of Canada and the Empire in this great struggle. All honour to the dear boys who have made the supreme sacrifice!"²⁵⁴ Wilson expressed his pride in his former battalion through sacrificial language, memorializing the dead and the cause for which they had died. Honour rolls were printed in trench newspapers to honour and commemorate fallen comrades as well as to remind men why they were fighting.

The desire to ensure that their comrades' sacrifices had not been made in vain provided a motivation for soldiers to continue fighting. Men sought to reassure themselves that their friends' deaths had not been worthless by attributing value to death and believing one's self-sacrifice benefitted the greater good.²⁵⁵ Many soldiers felt that the sacrifices of their comrades needed to be validated so their deaths would not be meaningless; victory needed to be achieved so that these deaths could be justified. Private G. Dravton submitted a poem to his battalion's newspaper, *The Dead Horse Corner Gazette*, which called for perseverance until the enemy was defeated: "After Yprés came a rest, / And then another test / At Festubert, to avenge our many losses; / And every man is fit, / And he swears he'll never quit / Until we've put the kibosh on the Bosches."²⁵⁶ A

²⁵⁴ "An Appreciation," *The Vics Patrol*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 15 July 1916, 20, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5080, LAC.

²⁵⁵ Alexander Watson, *Enduring the Great War: Combat, Morale and Collapse in the German and British Armies, 1914-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 67, 69; and Watson and Porter, "Bereaved and aggrieved," 157, 161, 163.

²⁵⁶ Private G. Dravton, "Putting the Kibosh on the Bosches," *The Dead Horse Gazette*, No. 3, June 1916, 40, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5078, LAC.

contributor to *The Iodine Chronicle* echoed this determination to continue fighting as “our task here is to be completed, and we must settle the score of our brothers who have made the supreme sacrifice and gone before.”²⁵⁷

Many men felt that they owed a debt to the dead; to continue fighting was to honour those that paid the ultimate sacrifice and ensure that their death had been worthwhile. Commonly used today as a symbol of remembrance, Lieutenant-Colonel John McCrae’s “In Flanders’ Fields” urged soldiers to honour the dead through continued perseverance: “Take up our quarrel with the foe; / To you from failing hands we throw / The torch. Be yours to hold it high. / If ye break faith with us who die, / We shall not sleep, though poppies grow / In Flanders’ fields.”²⁵⁸ Padre Allan P. Shatford also sought to remind his former battalion, the Victoria Rifles, of this responsibility by recalling “the sad hours” in Belgium burying their dead “[b]ut from the spot made holy by their heroic sacrifices we went forth with renewed determination that the cause for which they gave themselves shall be carried boldly forward to victory.”²⁵⁹ Private R.W. Trowsdale, editor of *The Dead Horse Corner Gazette*, was particularly vehement in his call for vengeance against the enemy in honour of fallen comrades. “With Ypres still a poignant memory, can we afford or even dare to forget the record of the past year?” he asked his readers.

Hatred breeds hatred, and while British blood runs in our
veins we cannot but hope for the day that will bring us
closer to a final reckoning with the fiends who with

²⁵⁷ Centurion Ambulans, “Confederation Day,” *The Iodine Chronicle*, No. 16, July 1918, 1, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5080, LAC.

²⁵⁸ Lieutenant-Colonel John Macrae [sic – McCrae], “In Flanders’ Fields,” *The Vics Patrol*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 3 June 1916, 2, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5080, LAC. Also printed in “In Flanders Fields,” *The Growler*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1 January 1916, 9, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5078, LAC.

²⁵⁹ Allan P. Shatford, “Memories!” *The Vics Patrol*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 3 June 1916, 4, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5080, LAC.

poisoned gas murdered our brothers and comrades at Ypres and elsewhere. [...] And we are less than men, and unworthy of the name of comrades, if we forget our indebtedness – to ourselves and to the dead!²⁶⁰

Private Trowsdale desired to justify the death of comrades through continuing fighting. He encouraged his fellow combatants to “exact [a] heavy toll for each life that has been taken, and for every drop of Canadian blood that has been spilt in France or Flanders. *It is our own quarrel now.*”²⁶¹ Sacrificial language served to reassure soldiers that death was a worthy sacrifice; to view death as without value would have compounded soldiers’ difficulty in accepting the loss of a comrade. Perceiving death as purposeful helped soldiers better endure grief and console themselves with the thought that their friends had died for an important cause. The language of sacrifice was also reminiscent of the pre-war glorification of death in battle, demonstrating that men still found these traditional ideals useful in understanding and coping with death.

Regardless of whether a soldier perceived his comrade’s death as worthwhile or not, he was often still saddened by and grieved for the loss. Men sought to grieve, remember and memorialize the dead and share this with others who they believed held similar feelings. Both trench newspapers and condolence letters provided a platform for men to express and share their grief with others, whether it was with fellow soldiers or friends’ loved ones. Due to the public nature of these documents, soldiers may have felt restricted in their expression of grief by ideas of masculine stoicism and accompanying

²⁶⁰ Private R.W. Trowsdale, “Peace on Earth,” *The Dead Horse Corner Gazette*, No. 2, December 1915, 14, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5078, LAC.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.* Emphasis in original.

limitations on what constituted “appropriate” emotional expression.²⁶² However, combatants appear to have been quite willing to share their sadness and grief over the loss of friends with both their comrades and bereaved relatives.

In trench newspapers, soldiers wrote articles and poetry commemorating their dead comrades, thereby sharing their grief with the men in their unit in a public setting. Men wrote of their sadness at the loss of friends and remembered them in these publications. As most trench newspapers were battalion-specific, individuals were named and memorialized. *The Dead Horse Corner Gazette* lamented “the loss of a conscientious officer, a true sportsman, and ‘a gallant gentleman’” when Lieutenant E.R. Warburton of “A” Company died in hospital of wounds caused by a shell. News of Warburton’s death “cast quite a gloom over the Battalion.” This tribute was unnecessary, however, as the report of Warburton’s death was false and he was in fact alive and recovering from his wounds.²⁶³ Comrades were remembered as good friends whose presence would be missed in the unit. Private Judson H. Ellis of No. 3 Canadian Field Ambulance, for example, died of wounds received at Festubert on 21 May 1915. In the first edition of *Now and Then*, the unit’s paper, he, along with two others, was listed in a roll of honour. Ellis was also remembered in the paper’s sports section as a good baseball player who “had the interest of the game at heart, and no small credit is due to his efforts in the successes obtained.”²⁶⁴

²⁶² Keshen, *Propaganda and Censorship*, 133-134, 153-154, 155-157; and Roper, *The Secret Battle*, 214, 218, 219, 220.

²⁶³ “Editorial,” *The Dead Horse Corner Gazette*, No. 2, December 1915, 13, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5078, LAC; and “Notes and Comments,” *The Dead Horse Corner Gazette*, No. 3, June 1916, 31, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5078, LAC.

²⁶⁴ “In Memoriam,” *Now and Then*, No. 1, 15 December 1915, 2, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5080, LAC; and “Sport,” *Now and Then*, No. 1, 15 December 1915, 3, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5080, LAC.

Corporal J.M. Wright of the 58th Battery, who died two days after a shrapnel wound to the stomach, was described as “a willing worker, a smiling, happy-go-lucky, good-natured chap, and [he] will be greatly missed in the battery.”²⁶⁵ Newspapers might detail the fallen man’s life before the war, extend sympathy to the family as well as to the dead’s comrades and/or praise his qualities as a man and a soldier.²⁶⁶

Others paid tributes to the dead using poetry, with its accompanying sacrificial and emotional language, to express their grief. Private Archie Cronie of the 4th Battalion devoted almost half of his poem about the Second Battle of Ypres to Lieutenant-Colonel Arthur P. Birchall, commanding officer of the 4th Battalion, who fell in the battle:

Yet on we sped, our brave Colonel led,
With naught save a riding cane,
Urging his men – “Boys, at ‘em again!
Victory we surely attain!”
The cannons roared, the bullets soared,
But ten yards he kept ahead,
Through shot and shell – a very hell
Strewn with our dead!
He was wounded twice, and some say thrice,
But to the end was game;
A soldier brave, his life he gave
And earned a hero’s name.²⁶⁷

²⁶⁵ “Quo Fas Et Gloria Ducunt,” *The O. Pip*, Easter Number, n.d., 20, RG 9 III-D-4, vol. 5080, LAC.

²⁶⁶ See for example “The Supreme Test,” *The Dead Horse Corner Gazette*, No. 3, June 1916, 35, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5078, LAC; “C.S.M. [Company Sergeant Major] B. Hanford,” *The Dead Horse Corner Gazette*, No. 3, June 1916, 40, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5078, LAC; J.A. Gunn [Lieutenant-Colonel, Officer Commanding No. 3 Field Ambulance], untitled article, *Now and Then*, No. 1, 15 December 1915, 1, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5080, LAC; “Major Duval’s Death,” *The Iodine Chronicle*, No. 1, 25 October 1915, 1, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5080, LAC; “Editorial,” *The Iodine Chronicle*, No. 5, 20 January 1916, 1, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5080, LAC; “To Our Comrades,” *The Iodine Chronicle*, No. 16, July 1918, 10, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5080, LAC; and “Obituary,” *Trench Echo*, Christmas Number, 1917, 16, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5080, LAC.

²⁶⁷ Private Archie Cronie, “The Answered Call,” *The Dead Horse Corner Gazette*, No. 2, December 1915, 26, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5078, LAC.

Private Cronie depicted Lieutenant-Colonel Birchall as an example to emulate, encouraging others to fight bravely and without concern for one's own safety. Birchall was also clearly a respected officer as highlighted by Cronie's focus on Birchall's heroism as he died leading his men into battle. Also remembered fondly was Private Lionel B. Bryant, a stretcher bearer for No. 1 Canadian Field Ambulance, who was killed in action on 11 March 1918. His comrades appeared to have mourned his loss deeply as two separate poems dedicated to Bryant, "A Simple Wooden Cross" and "He was my Friend," appeared in the unit's newspaper *The Iodine Chronicle*.²⁶⁸

Another way in which soldiers honoured the dead was collecting money to fund a memorial. Sergeant F. Rotherby sought contributions for a memorial plate "to honor the gallantry of the late [Lt.-]Col. Birchall, former O.C. [Officer Commanding] of the 4th Battalion." Similarly, Sergeant J.B. Hathaway was taking voluntary subscriptions to build a tombstone over the grave of Corporal James May who died of wounds received while trying to save a wounded comrade.²⁶⁹ The money Sergeant Hathaway collected was sent to his family in Kentucky to erect a memorial stone or tablet there when War Office regulations prevented the original intent.²⁷⁰ Battalions were, however, able to erect memorials at the front in honour of a unit rather than an individual and thus commemorate their fallen comrades. The 85th Battalion (Nova Scotia Highlanders)

²⁶⁸ Joseph H. Shimmen, "A Simple Wooden Cross," *The Iodine Chronicle*, No. 16, July 1918, 7, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5080, LAC; and "He was my Friend," *The Iodine Chronicle*, No. 16, July 1918, 12, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5080, LAC.

²⁶⁹ "Ricochets by 'The Sniper'," *The Dead Horse Corner Gazette*, No. 2, December 1915, 19, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5078, LAC.

²⁷⁰ "Ricochets by The Sniper," *The Dead Horse Corner Gazette*, No. 3, June 1916, 33, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5078, LAC.

constructed a memorial outside of Passchendaele “in memory of the gallant comrades who gave their lives in the operation before Passchendaele at Decline Copse and Vienna Cottage” from 28 to 31 October 1917.²⁷¹ In September 1917 Major Andrew Macphail, who served in the office of the Assistance Director of Medical Services, noticed a stone and cement monument was being built at a crossroads in Vimy Village and, just north of the crossroads, a large cross had been erected “to the memory of the officers, N.C.Os. and men who fell at the taking of Vimy Ridge.”²⁷² Captain D.E. Macintyre of the 28th Battalion also remarked upon a cross at Vimy Ridge, possibly the same one, erected by the 60th Battalion. Its inscription was “Sacred to the memory of the 60th Cdn. Bn. Raised by Patriotism, killed by Politics.”²⁷³ Although the inscription bears marked cynicism, this memorial still honoured these men’s sacrifice. Trench newspapers, as well as memorials, allowed men to share their grief with fellow soldiers – men whom they assumed would understand their reaction to the death of comrades and experience similar feelings. While their language could be restrained or they employed the “ready-made” script supplied by sacrificial language, combatants appear not to have been apprehensive about publicly expressing their grief over the loss of friends and comrades. When soldiers shared grief with their comrades, they were simulating and altering pre-war customs of mourning which fostered community sympathy. The use of sacrificial language, which was often emotional in nature, may have been a particularly safe form of expression for men because it could express one’s deep feelings of loss while still being a traditional and

²⁷¹ Author’s visit to memorial, 16 May 2016.

²⁷² LAC, Manuscript Group [MG] 30-D150, Andrew Macphail fonds, vol. 4, folder 7, 25 September 1917.

²⁷³ LAC, MG30-E241, Duncan Eberts Macintyre fonds, 13 February 1917 (noted in the margin).

acceptable means of expression and thus avoided accusations of overt and effeminate emotion.

Condolence letters not only provided information to the dead man's relatives but also allowed combatants to share their own grief with the family over the loss of a friend.²⁷⁴ When a soldier was killed in combat, his next-of-kin would receive a condolence letter, informing them of the death of their loved one and providing information regarding the circumstances of death if possible. Official letters were written by commanding officers or chaplains while more personal ones were sent by comrades.²⁷⁵ "In writing these few feeble lines," Frank J. Whiting penned to the mother of Lance Corporal Charles Richardson who had died in the attack on Vimy Ridge on 9 or 10 April 1917, "I have tried to convey to you the place your son held in the hearts of all who knew him. You, his mother, will appreciate him best, I know, and grieve the most, but there are many of us who claim the honour to share that feeling." Whiting had admired Richardson as a man who "always typified everything that was straight and clean and worth while" so he felt the loss of his close friend deeply.²⁷⁶ Comrades recognized families' bereavement and reassured them that their loved one had been a good soldier and a loyal friend whose loss would be mourned in the battalion.²⁷⁷

²⁷⁴ Meyer, *Men of War*, 77, 79, 95; and Acton, *Grief in Wartime*, 107, 114.

²⁷⁵ Keshen, *Propaganda and Censorship*, 167; Desmond Morton, *When Your Number's Up: The Canadian Soldier in the First World War* (Toronto: Random House of Canada, 1993), 232; Tim Cook, *At the Sharp End: Canadians fighting the Great War, 1914-1916* (Toronto: Viking, 2007), 274-275; Meyer, *Men of War*, 78-79; and Roper, *The Secret Battle*, 210-212.

²⁷⁶ CLIP, Charles Douglas Richardson, letter from Frank J. Whiting to Madam [Richardson's mother], 8 May 1917.

²⁷⁷ See for example CLIP, Clifford Shaver, letter from Sergeant John A. Delaney to Mrs. Shaver [mother], n.d. [1917]; CLIP, George Albert Charles Broome, letter from O. Chubb to Mrs. Broome [mother], 9 November 1917; CLIP Henry Harry Jackson, letter from Lieutenant S.B. Birds to Mr. Joseph Jackson [father], 18 September 1916; CLIP, John Walter Ellis, letter from Fred E. Allin to Mrs. [Katherine] Ellis

Lieutenant Arthur G. Starkings found it challenging to write to Private Clifford Shaver's mother about her son's death:

It is with sorrow that I write to say how deeply I sympathize with you in the sad loss of your son Clifford. I find it difficult to do this however first because I feel that words are so cheap at such a time and again because although we shall miss him, we know that you will miss him more. Believe me when I say that he was loved and respected by all. His comrades valued his friendship and mourn his loss while for myself I can only add that he was one of my best and bravest men.²⁷⁸

Starkings was clearly emotional over Shaver's death and he willingly shared his feelings with Mrs. Shaver, possibly because he believed she understood his feelings of loss.

Soldiers recognized that these letters had an audience and therefore likely used language which they knew would provide comfort to the bereaved families. Families were likely comforted knowing how loved their father, son, brother or husband was in his unit and the ability to express these feelings provided consolation to the letter-writer as well.

Condolence letters were also reminiscent of pre-war grieving in which the community expressed sympathy towards the bereaved through wakes, visitations and funerals. As soldiers could not engage in these rituals, condolence letters served as an alternative to one's physical presence while retaining the communal aspect of grieving.

[wife], 17 June 1917; CLIP, John Henry Anderson, letter from unknown to Mr. F Anderson, 20 May 1917; CLIP, John C. Oxborough, letter from J.K. Moffat to Miss [Joy] Smith, 23 November 1917; CLIP, Lawrence Earl Johns, letter from Corporal R.H. Hoover to Mrs. Henry Johns and family, 3 December 1917; and CLIP, William Lockhard Campbell, letter from James W. McGill to Samuel Crampton, 1915.

²⁷⁸ CLIP, Clifford Shaver, letter from Lieutenant Arthur G. Starkings to Mrs. Shaver [mother], n.d [1917]. Private Shaver was killed on 30 October 1917.

Condolence letters often emphasized the close ties the letter-writer had with the dead.²⁷⁹ Onslow “Mac” Wood thought of Lance Corporal James “Jimmie” Fargey as a brother and was distraught at hearing of his death. He deeply mourned Fargey’s death and wished to have someone to speak to who knew him “so that I could talk of the many kind things he had done for me, as I miss him more than writting [sic] or words can ever tell.”²⁸⁰ Lance Corporal Robert H. Hoover was similarly upset at the death of his close friend Private Lawrence E. Johns on 12 September 1917 in action: “We all mourn the loss of our chum, Earl. He and I have stuck through thick and thin and you can imagine how keenly we feel it.”²⁸¹ These men seemed to have had little reluctance to share their intense grief and sadness over the death of friends in letters to the deceased’s family. They possibly felt that the bereaved family was a receptive and understanding audience who empathized with their distress and sorrow. Condolence letters allowed soldiers to mourn with those who shared the same loss.²⁸² As noted above, this may also have been an adaptation of pre-war customs which encouraged communal grieving. Rather than feeling completely constrained in their public reactions to death, soldiers were often willing to communicate with others about their grief. Trench newspapers appear to have elicited more restrained and subtle, albeit still emotional, responses while condolence letters provoked much more sentimentality over the death of comrades. Both of these

²⁷⁹ Meyer, *Men of War*, 75, 77, 78.

²⁸⁰ CLIP, James Henderson Fargey, letter from Mac [Onslow S. Wood] to Mrs. Fargey [mother], 14 November 1916.

²⁸¹ CLIP, Lawrence Earl Johns, letter from Lance Corporal R.H. Hoover to Mr. and Mrs. Johns and family, 14 September 1917.

²⁸² Acton, *Grief in Wartime*, 10, 107, 114. Acton uses the term “community of mourners” (10, 107).

sources provided men with audiences who they believed were open to and understanding of their feelings. However, sadness and solemnity were not always the response of soldiers to death.

As we saw in the previous chapter, humour was a common reaction amongst soldiers in miserable conditions and in response to suffering and death at the front. They shared this humour with each other and transformed it into another response to grief. Black humour was used a coping strategy for dealing with the harsh life of the trenches. It served as a “safety valve” to help the men handle the strain of war by distracting them as well as trivializing the dangers of the front. Men joked about anything and everything in the trenches including death and the dead. Trench newspapers were full of jokes and humour which mocked death and treated it irreverently.²⁸³ As death was an expected part of life, it became a source for humour just like other facets of trench life such as lice, the rum ration, parades and incompetent superiors.

Jokes and humorous poems filled the pages of trench newspapers and death was by no means an untouchable subject. For example, in *The Western Scot*, newspaper of the 67th Battalion, one anonymous soldier wrote some “Nonsense Rhymes” which lightly joked about two combatants’ deaths:

There was a bloke in our trench
And he was wondrous wise
He tried to catch a “rum jar”
It caused him great surprise!
A man who thought it would be fun
To throw a beef-tin at a Hun

²⁸³ Tim Cook, “‘I will meet the world with a smile and a joke’: Canadian Soldiers’ Humour in the Great War,” *Canadian Military History* 22, no. 2 (Spring 2013), 49, 51, 54, 56; Alex Watson, “Self-deception and Survival: Mental Coping Strategies on the Western Front, 1914-18,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 41, no. 2 (2006), 253-255; Edward Madigan, “‘Sticking to a Hateful Task’: Resilience, Humour, and British Understandings of Combatant Courage, 1914-1918,” *War in History* 20, no. 1 (2014), 93, 94; and Keshen, *Propaganda and Censorship*, 134-135, 148.

Exposed himself a mite too far
And now; for him its 'Gates A-Jar'.²⁸⁴

This poem did not lament the deaths of these men but rather joked about them and mocked the men for their foolishness. The 27th Battalion's paper, *Trench Echo*, also printed some light-hearted poems, entitled "Shrapnel Limericks": "There was a young man who was keen, / To pilot a flying machine, / And one day when in flight, / A shell hove in sight, / For what happened, see Luke ix. 17."²⁸⁵ These poems did not treat death solemnly but rather made a joke of it as they would any other feature of life at the front. While combatants recognized that death was a serious possibility, they chose to find humour in the situation to deal with the stress.²⁸⁶

Since the possibility of death was ever-present, soldiers increasingly came to associate it as something not worth worrying about. A story in *The O. Pip*, entitled "The Horrors of War," outlined a soldier's concerns on his way to headquarters:

Scotty cautiously made his way along the trench. Overhead woolly-bears broke with deafening crash! Occasionally a four-one landed a hundred yards away. Whizz-bangs cracked with disconcerting frequency and machine-gun bullets landed with a dull "pht" in the parapet over his head. Scotty was filled with terror. He dreaded that hazardous trip to Brigade Headquarters. As he stumbled along the winding trench he cursed under his breath. But shells and machine-gun bullets were the least of Scotty's worries. That morning he had forgotten to shave!²⁸⁷

²⁸⁴ "More Nonsense Rhymes By 'C'," *The Western Scot*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 18 November 1916, 3, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5080, LAC.

²⁸⁵ "Shrapnel Limericks," *Trench Echo*, Easter Number, 1916, 3, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5080, LAC. Luke 9:17 – "And they all ate and were satisfied. And what was left over was picked up, twelve baskets of broken pieces." <http://biblehub.com/luke/9-17.htm> (English Standard Version).

²⁸⁶ Watson, "Self-deception and Survival," 254, 255; Madigan, "'Sticking to a Hateful Task,'" 93, 94; and Keshen, *Propaganda and Censorship*, 134-135.

²⁸⁷ "The Horrors of War," *The O. Pip*, Paris Number, n.d., 14, RG 9 III-D-4, vol. 5080, LAC.

This story implied that death was not something to fear but was a trivial matter and something to laugh about. Rather than worry about the shells and bullets all around him, Scotty was more concerned about being reprimanded for his grooming – death or wounding was inconsequential. Another article in *The O. Pip* explained why there was no use in worrying about death:

In France there are two things concerning a fellow's whereabouts; he is either behind the lines or on the front. If behind the lines there is no need to worry. If on the front one of two things is certain: either he is in a safe place, or exposed to danger. If he is in a safe place there is no need to worry. If he is exposed to danger, one of two things is certain: either he is wounded or not wounded. If he is wounded one of two things is certain: either he is wounded seriously or slightly. If slightly, there is no need to worry. If seriously one of two things is certain: either he will recover or he will die. If he recovers there is no need to worry. If he dies he can't worry. So cheer up, fellers, you're a long time dead.²⁸⁸

This author found humour in the lack of control soldiers felt at the front and encouraged men to laugh at death. This article also sought to ease the strain of trench life, reassuring men that death was one less thing to worry about in the trenches because they were unable to control their fate anyway. When soldiers made light of death, they were attempting to cope with the death that surrounded them and make it less frightening.²⁸⁹ As they mocked death, soldiers were also proving that they were not afraid of it, demonstrating that they were brave men and not cowards. Joking about death was a new

²⁸⁸ "Phoolosophy," *The O. Pip*, Easter Number, n.d., 8, RG 9 III-D-4, vol. 5080, LAC.

²⁸⁹ Watson, "Self-deception and Survival," 253; and Cook, "Canadian Soldiers' Humour in the Great War," 55, 56.

method of coping: it was distinct from pre-war attitudes, which fostered solemnity, and unique to wartime experiences, making humour acceptable in the face of death.

Soldiers mocked not only death but its nobility in war and the associated ideology of sacrifice. This humour revealed some of the disenchantment and disillusionment with the war and high ideals that soldiers felt. It is important to note, however, that irreverent humour was printed alongside poems and articles which idealized war and the gallant soldier.²⁹⁰ Soldiers' humour pushed back against ideals such as the nobility and worthiness of dying on the battlefield. One joke, published in both the 14th Battalion's *The Growler* and the 4th Battalion's *The Dead Horse Corner Gazette*, scoffed at expectations of self-sacrifice:

Recruiting Officer to Pat: "And now, my lad, just one more question – are you prepared to die for your country?"
Recruit: "No, I ain't. That ain't what I'm joining for. I want to make a few of them German blighters die for theirs!"²⁹¹

With more than a hint of cynicism, *The O. Pip* told its readers that they should be consoled by "the thought that if you get napooed your picture will adorn the pages of your home-town daily. So you should [not] worry!"²⁹²

Death could hardly seem noble when a man died due to his own foolish carelessness rather than heroically in battle. "And His Day's Work Was Done," for example, portrayed the less than noble deaths that could occur on the front:

Bill Blinker he went out one day some souvenirs to find,

²⁹⁰ Madigan, "'Sticking to a Hateful Task'," 91; Cook, "Canadian Soldiers' Humour in the Great War," 57-58; and Keshen, *Propaganda and Censorship*, 148.

²⁹¹ "Not Prepared to Die," *The Dead Horse Corner Gazette*, No. 2, December 1915, 28, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5078, LAC; and untitled joke, *The Growler*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1 January 1916, 3, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5078, LAC.

²⁹² "The O'Pip," *The O. Pip*, Christmas Number, n.d., 13, RG 9 III-D-4, vol. 5080, LAC.

The bullets whistled round him, but old Bill he didn't mind;
These little things ne'er worried him, he never knew any
fear,
He said he wasn't going back without a souvenir;
He got one very shortly: it was a bullet from a Hun
That gave him a shock that stopped his clock,
And his day's work was done.²⁹³

The same poem also noted a similar fate for a soldier who put his head above the parapet and "was spotted by the ever-watchful Hun: / [and] An electric shock went through his bloc."²⁹⁴ Men who fooled around with shells were also shown to suffer the consequences.²⁹⁵ This type of humour may have reminded men that they had a measure of control over their own fate and could at least lessen their likelihood of dying by being cautious.

Yet combatants still often felt insignificant and powerless and trench newspapers allowed them to vent their frustration. "It's obvious, so be content," went one poem in *The Strafer*, paper of the 66th Battery, Canadian Field Artillery, "That a horse is expensive, costs fifty or so, / And a man doesn't cost a damn cent."²⁹⁶ The poem "Additional Verses to 'The Young British Soldier'" emphasized the passive nature of trench life: "When you're at ---, and the craters you hold, / And to get back to billets you'd give all your gold, / Remember the others have feet quite as cold, / And wait to be

²⁹³ "And His Day's Work Was Done," *Trench Echo*, Easter Number, 1916, 8, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5080, LAC.

²⁹⁴ Ibid.

²⁹⁵ Untitled joke, *The Strafer*, Vol. 1, No. 1, August 1917, 20, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5077, LAC; "Shrapnel Limerick," *Trench Echo*, Christmas 1915, 7, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5080, LAC; and "More Nonsense Rhymes By 'C'," *The Western Scot*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 18 November 1916, 3, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5080, LAC.

²⁹⁶ "Just Mokes," *The Strafer*, Vol. 1, No. 1, August 1917, 11, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5077, LAC.

killed like a soldier. / Killed – killed – killed like a soldier, etc.”²⁹⁷ Soldiers’ frustration with fighting and life at the front was summed up by an untitled poem published in

Trench Echo:

When we’re all dressed up to go over the top,
We look back at our dugouts, and wish we could stop.
Oh, the low humming whine,
Of the five-point nine,
The whiz-bangs, and rum jars, and the funk-compelling
mine,
And the gas-shells sickly “plop”!
In that unhealthy land, where the nightmares crop,
Put some nice brown crosses, and write up on top,
“They were all fed up and they wanted to stop.”²⁹⁸

This poem suggested that soldiers were tired of fighting and refuted the idea of that all soldiers were willing to sacrifice themselves. Soldiers mocked and joked about death, minimizing its ability to evoke anxiety and fear. By joking about death, soldiers were also reaffirming their masculinity, proving their toughness and ability to laugh in the face of death.²⁹⁹ Humour and mockery were developed as a new approach to death, eschewing traditional reverence and representing a distinctly wartime reaction.

Although humour was an important aspect of grief and coping, men were also aware of the corporal reality of death and decay. That joking was but a coping mechanism is clear from the way the bodies of fallen friends were actually treated – in sharp contrast to the bombast and bluster of dugouts and estaminet conversations. “A Corporal Sapper spoke to me in great distress, seeking an order to protect himself,” wrote

²⁹⁷ “Starbuck,” “Additional Verses to ‘The Young British Soldier,’” *The Vics Patrol*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 3 June 1916, 5, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5080, LAC.

²⁹⁸ Untitled poem, *Trench Echo*, Christmas Number, 1917, 3, RG9 III-D-4, vol. 5080, LAC.

²⁹⁹ Cook, “Canadian Soldiers’ Humour in the Great War,” 54, 56, 59.

Captain Andrew Macphail in his diary. “He said that three dead men had been left on his dump. He could not put them in the trench, because they would be walked on. We could not leave them at the dump because the Sappers would unload material on them.”³⁰⁰ This sapper’s dilemma was indicative of a common concern of many soldiers at the front, namely respecting the dead to the utmost extent that battlefield conditions allowed. The focus soldiers placed on the bodies of their comrades, both known and unknown, was reflective of pre-war death customs which concentrated on the body as the centre of mourning and on the funeral as a part of the grieving process.³⁰¹

Soldiers frequently mentioned retrieving and burying bodies in their diaries. While written about privately, burials were a public act which exhibited a man’s concern for his comrades and his desire to ensure they were properly buried. Reverend G.G.D. Kilpatrick, chaplain of the 42nd Battalion, wrote to his parents about how he and a burial party attempted to reach the dead in the frontlines three times before finally succeeding and locating two dozen bodies. The burial party also sustained casualties during their task due to heavy enemy artillery.³⁰² Private John McNab of the 38th Battalion also recalled how men risked their lives to try to retrieve their dead after a raid: “The boys went out to

³⁰⁰ LAC, MG30-D150, Macphail fonds, vol. 4, folder 6, 15 March 1917.

³⁰¹ Gillian Poulter, “What’s traditional about ‘the traditional funeral’? Funeral rituals and the evolution of the funeral industry in Nova Scotia,” *Journal of the CHA* 22, no. 1 (2011), 136-137, 139, 140, 141, 152; Brian Young, *Respectable Burial: Montreal’s Mount Royal Cemetery* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2003), xlix-l, 44, 47, 51, 54, 57; Ross Wilson, “The Burial of the Dead: the British Army on the Western Front, 1914-18,” *War & Society* 31, no. 1 (2012), 26-27, 29; Julie-Marie Strange, “‘Tho’ lost to sight, to memory dear’: pragmatism, sentimentality and working-class attitudes towards the grave, c. 1875-1914,” *Mortality* 8, no. 2 (2003), 147, 156; Julie-Marie Strange, “‘She Cried a Very Little’: Death, Grief and Mourning in Working-Class Culture, c. 1880-1914,” *Social History* 27, no. 2 (May 2002), 152-154, 155, 156, 159; and Pat Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 210-212.

³⁰² LAC, MG30-E158, George G.D. Kilpatrick, letter to father and mother, 6 November 1917.

get the two bodies last night but could not get them as they were too close to his [the German] trench, and he opened up on them.”³⁰³ Retrieving a body and being able to give it a proper burial was important for many men, perceiving it as the last thing they could do for a friend, and they would even risk their lives to do so. Men also sought to ensure a comrade’s burial because of the nature of death on the front in which soldiers’ bodies could be lost or completely destroyed.³⁰⁴

Funerals were a frequent occurrence and were often noted in soldiers’ diaries. However, soldiers reacted to funerals in contrasting ways. Captain Andrew Macphail described the solemn procession which followed the coffin of Major Warren H. Belyea, second in command of the 26th Battalion, who was killed by shrapnel on 20 March 1916.³⁰⁵ He heard “the opening bars of the Dead March from Saul. I came out [of his quarters] and saw our men ‘at attention’, as the procession passed. It was rather a formal affair, officers mounted and on foot, a full band, a coffin on the G.S. [General Service] waggon.”³⁰⁶ Captain D.E. Macintyre also noted the reverence of the funeral for a fellow officer, Captain John A. Cullum. About ten officers and twenty men of the battalion, “[a]ll the old crowd of the 28th that could be got together,” followed the waggon carrying Cullum’s body to the cemetery. Macintyre remarked that “[a]s we passed through the

³⁰³ LAC, MG30-E42, John Peter McNab fonds, 26 April 1918, 23.

³⁰⁴ Peter E. Hodgkinson, “Human Remains on the Great War Battlefields: Coping with Death in the Trenches” (Master’s thesis, University of Birmingham, 2006), 31-33; Jalland, *Death in War and Peace*, 20; Cannadine, “War and Death,” 207; Morton, *When Your Number’s Up*, 231; Wilson, “Burial of the Dead,” 29, 35, 36, 38; and Roper, *The Secret Battle*, 208, 209.

³⁰⁵ Macphail incorrectly identifies Major Belyea as Major Barriet (who does not appear to exist). His reference to Barriet is likely Belyea due to the date and manner of death as well as the battalion noted.

³⁰⁶ LAC, MG30-D150, Macphail fonds, vol. 4, folder 4, 21 March 1916.

town [toward the cemetery] all soldiers, French as well as English saluted and every Civilian took off his cap.”³⁰⁷ Combatants showed respect for these fallen men as they were taken to their final resting place.

Although usually important, burials were not always treated with the reverence and solemnity customary at home because, given the frequency and scale of death at the front, it was not always practical nor always desirable. Even if they were formal, funerals were not necessarily sombre and reverent affairs. Captain Andrew Macphail described the funeral of George Taylor of the 3rd Company Field Engineers on 21 October 1915 as a rather banal event. At the cemetery in Locre, the chaplain complained that the grave had not already been dug and he chose to wait inside the church until the grave was finished as he had a bad cold. Soldiers who had “sauntered over” to the scene sat down and smoked cigarettes, seemingly uninterested, until the padre began the burial service when they did stand up and remove their caps. Macphail himself was also uninterested in the proceedings of the funeral; while waiting for the grave to be dug he entered the church which was being used as a school. Observing the apparently incompetent teacher, Macphail wrote: “It was a sad spectacle, much more sad than the burial of a soldier.”³⁰⁸ For the funeral of Captain Matthews of the 27th Battalion on 28 February 1916, Macphail’s unit, the No. 6 Canadian Field Ambulance, provided the G.S. waggon to carry the body and “our harness and chains, shining in the sun, excited more comment than the burial itself. Death is not spoken of here, and the dead are buried out of sight as quickly

³⁰⁷ LAC, MG30-E241, Macintyre fonds, 12 November 1916.

³⁰⁸ LAC, MG30-D150, Macphail fonds, vol. 4, folder 3, 21 October 1915.

as it can be done.”³⁰⁹ Macphail likely pointed out the reason for this lack of reverence in his final comment – funerals were simply a common occurrence and thus often elicited little reaction or sombre reflection. Soldiers may also have been more indifferent to the burial of anonymous combatants because they were not men they had known in life and thus their death held less meaning and emotional connection. As well, the circumstances of the funeral could have an effect on its atmosphere. In the cases of Major Belyea and Captain Cullum, for example, their coffins were carried to the cemeteries on waggons and followed by sizeable processions, suggestive of a much more formal affair with numerous mourners. In comparison, George Taylor’s funeral was attended by the working party that dug his grave and the few soldiers that had appeared while the sappers were doing their work. When comrades and friends attended a funeral it was more likely to be a reverent event in contrast to a burial attended by strangers.

Although soldiers were not always reverent at funerals, it seems to have been fairly common for soldiers to visit the graves of comrades when they had the opportunity.³¹⁰ This was likely a continuation of pre-war practice in which visiting and caring for the dead’s grave played an important part in grieving and remembrance.³¹¹ Captain Andrew Macphail recorded in his diary several instances where he visited cemeteries and the graves of men he had known. In June 1916 he visited the grave of “Macnaughton’s boy,” who was buried in Dickebusch, during an artillery bombardment

³⁰⁹ LAC, MG30-D150, Macphail fonds, vol. 4, folder 4, 28 February 1916.

³¹⁰ Hodgkinson, “Human Remains on the Great War Battlefields,” 35, 36.

³¹¹ Young, *Respectable Burial*, 44, 47, 51; Sara Jamieson, “‘A Sorrow of Stones’: Death, Burial and Mourning in the Writing of Anne Wilkinson,” *Studies in Canadian Literature* 35, no. 1 (2010), 205, 208; and Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, 291, 292, 294, 299.

and, although he did not stay long, he was there long enough “for an act of piety towards the son of my old friend.”³¹² He also visited the graves of other friends and comrades, such as Lieutenants J.C. Morrow and Charles S. McKenzie and Captain Beaubien.³¹³ Numerous soldiers wrote in their diaries and letters of visiting cemeteries and friends’ graves.³¹⁴ Leslie D. Smith, for example, reassured Mrs. Fargey that he would visit her son Jim’s grave at “the first opportunity.”³¹⁵

Along with visiting graves, men might also ensure the grave of a comrade was being properly cared for. Captain D.E. Macintyre sought to maintain a cemetery in Belgium where several of his men were buried, planning to send a party to “fix it up.”³¹⁶ Captain Andrew Macphail recalled placing flowers on Captain Newton’s grave which was already decorated with a wreath of twigs.³¹⁷ He also ensured careful attention was

³¹² LAC, MG30-D150, Macphail fonds, vol. 4, folder 4, 2 June 1916. Macphail’s reference to “Macnaughton’s boy” likely refers to Lieutenant I.R.R. Macnaughton of the 24th Battalion who died on 26 April 1916 and was buried in Dickebusch.

³¹³ LAC, MG30-D150, Macphail fonds, vol. 4, folder 4, 9 July 1916; and LAC, MG30-D150, Macphail fonds, vol. 4, folder 7, 27 May 1917. Lieutenant J.C. Morrow likely refers to Lieutenant James C. Morrow of 3rd Field Company, Canadian Engineers who was killed in action on 26 April 1916. Captain Beaubien likely refers to Captain (referred to as Lieutenant in some documents) Louis A. Beaubien of the 22nd Battalion who was killed in action on 4 June 1916.

³¹⁴ See for example LAC, MG30-D150, Macphail fonds, vol. 4, folder 4, 1 April 1916; LAC, MG30-D150, Macphail fonds, vol. 4, folder 5, 25 September 1916; LAC, MG30-D150, Macphail fonds, vol. 4, folder 8, 15 September 1918; LAC, MG30-E1, William Alexander Alldritt fonds, 27 March 1915; LAC, MG30-E241, Macintyre fonds, 12 February 1917; LAC, MG30-E241, Macintyre fonds, 9 November 1917; CLIP, John Walter Ellis, letter from Fred E. Allin to Mrs. Katherine Ellis, 17 June 1917; and CLIP, Lawrence Earl Johns, letter from Corporal R.H. Hoover to Mrs. Henry Johns and family, 3 December 1917.

³¹⁵ CLIP, James Henderson Fargey, letter from Leslie D. Smith to Mrs. Fargey, 31 December 1917. The letter writer is likely Leslie Duncan Smith from Belmont, Manitoba, the same town as Lance Corporal Fargey.

³¹⁶ LAC, MG30-E241, Macintyre fonds, 9 November 1917.

³¹⁷ LAC, MG30-D150, Macphail fonds, vol. 4, folder 4, 1 April 1916. Captain Newton likely refers to Captain Denzel O.C. Newton of the Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry who was killed in action on 9 January 1915 and was buried in Dickebusch.

paid to Lieutenant-Colonel Roland P. Campbell's grave, asking his brother Jim, who served with the Canadian Engineers, to construct a cross and railing for the grave. Two years later, Macphail returned to the cemetery and "[b]y some strange instinct" knew where Campbell's grave was even though the graves were no longer in straight rows but "were like a regiment broken in battle." He noted that the cross and grave were untouched although the railing was no longer there. It seems the grave was tended to by other soldiers as a rosebush, which Macphail had not planted, was flowering over the grave.³¹⁸ Corporal Robert H. Hoover also noted that his friend's grave had been cared for by other soldiers: "I visited his grave a month afterwards and much to my delight, it was beautifully fined up and decorated in various ways."³¹⁹ Soldiers took careful care in maintaining and tending to their comrade's graves as a sign of respect and as one of the final things one could do for a friend.

The focus on ensuring a soldier's burial and care for his grave appears to have been a concern for both comrades and relatives on the home front. In condolence letters from friends and officers to the deceased's next-of-kin, soldiers frequently reassured the family that their loved one had received a proper burial and their grave would be tended to. Lance Corporal Robert H. Hoover reassured Private Lawrence Johns's family twice that "[a]ll due rites were accorded him" and he had "received a descent [sic] burial in a

³¹⁸ LAC, MG30-D150, Macphail fonds, vol. 4, folder 5, 25 September 1916; and LAC, MG30-D150, Macphail fonds, vol. 8, 15 September 1918.

³¹⁹ CLIP, Lawrence Earl Johns, letter from Corporal R.H. Hoover to Mrs. Henry Johns and family, 3 December 1917.

soldiers' grave yard."³²⁰ Lieutenant S.B. Birds of the 72nd Battalion informed Private Henry H. Jackson's father that his son's "body was interned with military honours in the British Cemetery at Kemmel Belgium on Sunday the 17th [17 September 1916] and the grave will receive proper attention."³²¹ Leslie D. Smith was also careful to point out to the mother of Lance Corporal James Fargey that there was "a special society in France to keep soldiers graves tidy so I have no doubt that all the cemeteries [sic] where Jim's body is are will [sic] kept."³²² It was important for both soldiers and kin to know that the dead were properly cared for. Ed Banbury assured the mother of Lance Corporal Charles Richardson that "your son is buried in a very nice spot with 780 boys." The cemetery was "fenced with a strong iron fence and beautifully treed" and overlooked "a beautiful valley."³²³ Even if they did not provide the detail of the burial site that Banbury did, many soldiers made sure to note the fact that a relative's loved one had in fact been buried. This could also include mentioning that the grave had been marked with the man's name and regimental number,³²⁴ ensuring a grave was properly identified was a

³²⁰ CLIP, Lawrence Earl Johns, letter from Lance Corporal R.H. Hoover to Mr. and Mrs. Johns and family, 14 September 1917; and CLIP, Lawrence Earl Johns, letter from Corporal R.H. Hoover to Mrs. Henry Johns and family, 3 December 1917.

³²¹ CLIP, Henry Harry Jackson, letter from Lieutenant S.B. Birds to Mr. Joseph Jackson, 18 September 1916. Private Jackson served with the 72nd Battalion and was killed in action on 16 September 1916.

³²² CLIP, James Henderson Fargey, letter from Leslie D. Smith to Mrs. Fargey, 31 December 1917.

³²³ CLIP, Charles Douglas Richardson, letter from Ed Banbury to Mrs. Richardson, n.d [1917].

³²⁴ See for example CLIP, Charles Douglas Richardson, letter from Frank J. Whiting to Madam [Richardson's mother], 8 May 1917; CLIP, Albert Edward Roscoe, letter from Lieutenant L.T. Page to Mrs. C. Bateman, 29 May 1915; CLIP, John Walter Ellis, letter from Stuart Robinson [chaplain] to Friend [Mrs. Katherine Ellis, wife], 14 May 1917; CLIP, John Walter Ellis, letter from Lieutenant [unreadable signature] to Mrs. Ellis [wife], 14 May [1917]; CLIP, Clifford Shaver, letter from Sergeant John A. Delaney to Mrs. Shaver [mother], n.d. [1917]; and CLIP, Clifford Shaver, letter from Lieutenant Arthur G. Starkings to Mrs. Shaver [mother], n.d. [1917].

pre-war practice which many Canadians felt was important as an unmarked grave showed disregard for the dead.³²⁵ Informing a family that the dead's grave was marked reassured them that their loved one would be commemorated and not forgotten. By paying careful attention to the bodies of the dead, particularly those of friends, soldiers were returning to pre-war funeral customs in which the body played a key role. Attempting to maintain this ritual provided some peace of mind for the dead's bereaved relatives and likely for the soldiers as well since they had done their utmost to pay proper respect to the dead.

Soldiers' reactions to death and expressions of grief took multiple forms, each of which offered very different approaches but were employed variously by combatants throughout the First World War. Men turned to traditional language which emphasized the nobility of sacrifice to imbue the death of comrades with meaning and provide comfort to the bereaved. Sacrificial language was intrinsically meaningful and thus its use to commemorate the dead automatically gave the loss a justification and value. It was also connected with pre-war romanticization of war and the soldier and thus represented continuity in rhetoric regarding death. The emotional sentiments of soldiers in trench newspapers and condolence letters appear to be a break from the pre-war expectation of male stoicism. However, by sharing their grief with comrades and bereaved families, men were actually continuing, in an adapted form, the community mourning which was so prevalent in the Edwardian period. Combatants willingly shared their sadness over the loss of friends in their unit's paper as well as in letters to the families of the deceased, hoping to encounter a receptive audience who felt the same grief. In contrast to the solemn reactions to death, soldiers also reacted with humour and irreverence. Men

³²⁵ Young, *Respectable Burial*, xlix-l, 51, 57.

mocked death and the dead to distance themselves from the harsh reality and ease the anxiety of life at the front. Humour was also a masculine outlet as men portrayed themselves as laughing at death rather than fearing it and thus proving themselves brave. Funerals could also be treated with contradictory responses – as sombre events or as just another day. The frequency of death and burials meant that many soldiers had little reaction. The death of a close comrade, however, elicited attempts to retrieve the body and give it a proper burial. Many men also visited the graves of friends and cared for them if possible, demonstrating a sign of respect for the dead which was used in pre-war mourning practices. Ultimately, men negotiated with the death that surrounded them in numerous, and seemingly conflicting, ways, responding to death with sacrificial language and deep emotion as well as with humour and irreverence. These reactions to death were shaped by the expectations of the audience and by pre-war discourses on death, grief and the “appropriate” responses as well as by the distinctive conditions of trench warfare.

Conclusion

Canadian soldiers sought to cope with the mass death of the First World War by adapting pre-existing discourses and customs to fit within their war experience as well as by developing new means of coping. These men adjusted their peacetime civilian experiences with and approaches to death to understand and cope with death in the war; in particular they turned to traditional mourning customs and ideals of masculinity. However, pre-war approaches to death were not always sufficient and thus soldiers also created new attitudes towards death which were unique to the war and their experiences. The nature of death at the front forced soldiers to develop several approaches to handling death and grief. While Canadians in the Edwardian period were no strangers to death, the war caused a dramatic shift in the type of death men faced. Rather than dying from disease or workplace accidents, men were killed by bullets, shells and gas. The danger of the front also often prevented the dead from being properly buried in a cemetery with a religious ceremony; some were denied a proper grave, being interred in a shell hole, or even a grave entirely if the body could not be recovered. Even though death in war had been idealized in the decades before the First World War, this glorification relied on the idea that very few men would actually die in battle. The First World War quickly shattered this assumption as over 60,000 Canadians died in the war. Soldiers constantly felt the presence of death: the possibility of death hung over every man and they were also often surrounded by physical reminders of death – bodies and cemeteries. The omnipresence of death at the front compelled combatants to develop means of coping with the loss of known and unknown comrades alike to enable them to continue fighting.

Soldiers' coping methods and reactions to death and grief can be seen in both the private and the public spheres of life at the front. In soldiers' personal writings, four types of reactions commonly appeared. Emotional distance, in which men suppressed their emotions, was a common response to the mass death of the war and the need to continue fighting. Soldiers also sought solace in the ideal of duty which attributed worth to the death of comrades, sustaining a belief that they had died honourably doing their duty. As well, men noted their feelings of loss at the death of friends and reminisced about the dead. Lastly, soldiers would re-direct their grief towards humour or aggression. Even within the privacy of their own diaries, men were influenced by contemporary discourses on death and masculinity and their reactions to death were shaped by pre-war approaches to grief and masculine ideals. Soldiers' public responses to death and grief were shared through trench newspapers and condolence letters. Men framed comrades' deaths through the ideology of sacrifice which imbued the death with meaning. Soldiers were sentimental and emotional regarding the death of friends and they willingly shared their feelings with other men in their unit as well as the deceased's loved ones. In contrast to this, combatants also mocked death and the dead, distancing themselves from the terrifying reality of death in the trenches. However, soldiers did not always distance themselves from the dead, particularly in the case of friends. Men sought to bury their comrades and visit and care for their graves if possible as a sign of respect and remembrance. These public expressions emphasized the communal nature of grief that had existed in the pre-war period and how soldiers attempted to recreate this community in wartime by communicating with others about death and mourning.

In private and in public, men used these different approaches in multiple and inconsistent ways, employing any or all of them at various times, to convey their reactions to and attempts to cope with death. The presence of coping mechanisms, such as humour and emotional sentiment, in both private and public approaches to death and grief suggests that these methods may have been more effective but the fact remains that soldiers still relied on multiple discourses to adapt and cope with their war experience. Although many of these coping methods were contradictory, they each provided a different narrative and framework through which men could construct their reactions to the death around them, using the approach they found most suitable and appropriate for that particular situation. While emotions are personal and subjective, pre-war and contemporary social and cultural discourses offered a means of expressing the inexpressible by providing a familiar language and framework. These narratives could, however, also limit expression to within that structure. Ultimately, soldiers adapted the multiple discourses available to them to fit their particular needs and experiences, choosing whichever model helped them cope most effectively with the death and grief that surrounded them. As Carol Acton reminds us, “[l]oss and the grief that attends it are intrinsic to the experience of war”³²⁶ and therefore it is important to explore and understand how soldiers managed their experiences with death, loss and the accompanying grief.

³²⁶ Carol Acton, *Grief in Wartime: Private Pain, Public Discourse* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 1.

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