THE WAR MEMORIALS — EXPLICIT AND IMPLICIT — OF A. Y. JACKSON

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Remembering and commemorating the First World War is a grim business. So many millions of deaths, so much potential extinguished. It's depressing. For many Canadians brought up and educated to remember the conflict annually on 11 November, the years 1914-1918 are encapsulated in John McCrae's 1915 poem, mass-produced red poppies, and the Vimy Ridge monument. These are primarily memorials to the dead — in McCrae's case to his friend, Alexis Helmer, in whose memory he wrote *In Flanders Fields*. Drawn from the poem's imagery, poppies notably commemorate Canadians killed in the First World War. Even the Vimy monument, unveiled in 1936 as a memorial to the 11,285 Canadians who died in France, includes the figure of Charity distributing poppies. None of these commemorative icons encourages a more uplifting perspective on the conflict. None reveals any alternative ways of thinking about the consequences of battle. More than 100 years after the First World War began, with the exception of some recognition of greater political independence for Canada, any possibility of more positive outcomes from the struggle drowns in the long-established rituals and symbols of mourning.

I would like to put forward for consideration recognition of another kind of Canadian war memorial. This one already exists, albeit unacknowledged as such. Since 1917, the life's work of an individual who survived the Great War has publicly honoured the conflict in art and deed. Painter A. Y. Jackson was not killed, but he was wounded, an event that largely directed his post-war career. Unlike the Vimy monument and McCrae's poppies, which draw us to sorrow once a year, in Jackson's paintings such as *Winter, Quebec* (1926) Canadians are reminded of the rugged beauty of Canada in all its seasons, unblemished by the ravages of war. *Winter, Quebec*'s glittering white panorama centred

on a church steeple perhaps deliberately evokes notions of stability and permanence. Nevertheless, it is fashionable to dismiss Jackson's paintings as so much chocolate-box art, so it is important that we recollect what event it was that drove him to paint and promote his country on wood, paper and canvas so assiduously. Beginning in 1917, he did it for nearly 60 years, until he died in 1974.

It is not a huge stretch to imagine Jackson's body of work as a war memorial. Certain of his war paintings — House of Ypres, for example, and A Copse, Evening, from the First World War, and his Alaska Highway paintings from the Second World War — are essentially thought of as war "memorials" in a fairly conventional sense already. They depict memorable places and actions related to the wars of those two eras and were produced as part of two official war art programs — the Canadian War Memorials and the Canadian War Records — both consciously designed to capture images of the conflict for future generations. But we should see all of Jackson's life achievements — his advocacy for art and his entire oeuvre of artistic works (including the famous Canadian landscape pictures of snowed-in Quebec farmhouses and of the radiant tundra in Fall — Northern Landscape, Great Bear Lake (1938-39), for example) as an unconventional war memorial. Everything that came after he was wounded at Maple Copse during the Battle of Mont Sorrell in 1916 is really a result and celebration of surviving that moment in that horrific conflict.

Both the Vimy monument and McCrae's poem can claim the burgeoning pre-conflict Canadian arts as a foundation: Canadian poetry in the case of McCrae and Canadian painting in the example of the monument. Before Canada had the Group of Seven, it had the Arts and Letters Club in downtown Toronto, founded in 1908. There, Walter Allward, up and coming Toronto sculptor and eventual designer of the Vimy monument, engaged with artists, poets, writers, architects, musicians and academics. When he designed the memorial he drew on the richness of knowledge and experience about the arts that the club had nurtured. Before the war, John McCrae was a member of Montreal's equivalent organization, the Pen and Pencil Club, formed in 1890 to promote the arts and letters in Montreal. There he regularly dined or lunched with artists, architects and designers and exchanged ideas with other poets, such as William H. Drummond and Charles Gill. Not surprisingly, Jackson at various times was a member of both clubs.Indeed, after the Great War he was a stout defender of Allward's vision for the Vimy monument. His views on McCrae's poem are not known.

Jackson did not design a national memorial nor did he write a world-famous poem, but his post-war life and career in art arguably comprise a memorial. The difference between his memorial and those of Allward and McCrae is one of understanding. Our myopia is rooted in what we think war memorials should be. If we are prepared to consider Jackson's art as the most notable aspect of his war memorial activity, then, rather than sorrow, we will feel pride and affection for Canada. These are not emotions normally associated with commemorative monuments of war. But why should we exclude positive feelings? Indeed, I would argue that Jackson — once he stopped feeling gloomy about the war (around 1920) — consistently presented as his war memorial his joy at being alive in a country as splendid and free as Canada. Think of 1924's *Lake Superior Country* with its almost psychedelic colours and jazzy dan-

cing lines. In the past, I have suggested, like many others, that his dedicated proselytism in the interests of Canadian art was a form of nationalism, but I would now like to nuance this conclusion to argue that Jackson's nationalism was his way of paying tribute to the sacrifices he witnessed.

His post-conflict career is viewed through a nationalist lens largely because he is so closely associated with the Group of Seven, which is so closely identified with Canadian post-war nationalism. The Group was a surprisingly short-lived exhibiting phenomenon, surviving for only 11 years, yet it had an enduring impact in Canada, in many ways determining the country's ongoing visual understanding of itself. It was the Group's success that gave Jackson as an individual artist a lifelong reputation — and, after 1931, when the Group disbanded, a public platform from which to disseminate his ideas. Examining his much longer post-war life and career as a veteran and social activist rather than as a member of the Group of Seven allows us to reevaluate his significance to Canadian society, and not just to art history. While there is no doubt he was a Canadian nationalist, his art advocacy had a broader mandate that encompassed a highly positive and life-affirming recognition of what victory in the First World War meant for Canada.

His early letters, written at a time when he was travelling and studying in Europe between 1905 and 1913, give little inkling of the national proselytizer and arts activist he would become. By the time the war was over, however, he seemed genuinely to have believed that art could transform society for the good. In this he was undoubtedly influenced by his growing acquaintance with the social philosophies of the British Arts and Crafts movement, exemplified in the figures of William Morris and, earlier, John Ruskin and much discussed and admired in his circle, which saw the arts as transformative. Shortly after the Armistice of 1918, and in reference to the Winnipeg General Strike that had just concluded, for example, Jackson wrote in the 30 August 1919 edition of the *Canadian Courier* that art could become "one of the most potent factors in overcoming the problems of social unrest."

Also beginning in 1919, the success of the post-conflict Canadian War Memorials exhibitions in which his work and that of many other Canadian artists featured prominently had a huge impact on his recognition of art's power. One can cite, for example, the fact that the catalogue for the Group's first exhibition in 1920 at the Art Gallery of Toronto made use of the same quotation that had appeared in the lavishly illustrated volume that accompanied the opening exhibition of war art in London in 1919. "Great nations," Hungarian art impresario Paul Konody (quoting John Ruskin) had written: "write their autobiographies in three manuscripts: — the book of their deeds, the book of their words, and the book of their art." "The greatness of a country," wrote the Group in its first catalogue, "depends on three things: 'its Words, its Deeds and its Art.'" The message that art can play a part in nation-building as much as the deeds of war is clearly understood but is not directly stated.

By 1936, the Group, five years disbanded, had re-emerged as a pan-Canadian art organization — the Canadian Group of Artists — with Jackson as its vice-president. With the outbreak of war in 1939, Jackson was indefatigable. Amongst numerous endeavours, he successfully helped lobby for a new military art scheme and undertook most of the

responsibility for the choice of artists and the selection of works that went on exhibition. The Canadian War Museum houses the nearly 8,000 artworks that resulted from that program. In fact, Jackson himself again became a war artist, sketching and painting along the Alaska Highway. To encourage soldiers to paint in their spare time when training or waiting to go overseas, he wrote a "how to paint" book and regularly judged the art competitions organized for the troops. He lobbied for, and participated in, Canadian wartime poster production, organized a scheme to get thousands of reproductions of Canadian art onto the walls of barracks in Canada and overseas (one of his own featured the rolling Alberta Peace River country), and published many articles on the importance of war art. Throughout the Second World War, Jackson clearly demonstrated his mission to put art to work in society's interests. He would have had much support from fellow artists in this undertaking. Many in the arts world of his time shared the conviction that artists had a social responsibility to work in their country's interests.

The importance of the First World War in Jackson's post-war life is rarely discussed and yet the memory of that conflict was a constant impetus to his career going forward. His life was divided in two by that struggle and all his life he kept the markers of that division, the bullet and shrapnel piece that wounded him in the hip and shoulder at Maple Copse in Belgium in June 1916. Recovered, Jackson's probable future annihilation at Passchendaele in 1917 was avoided when he became an official war artist. Thereafter, art became this bachelor's wife, child, friend, muse, passion and salvation. For the rest of his long life, he put his talents to work in the service of his country. Personally saved by art, in the form of the Canadian War Memorials scheme, from inevitable death, he believed art could make people feel better and help create a stronger nation. Isn't it time we recognized his life and work as a war memorial?

NOTE

Library and Archives Canada, the McMichael Canadian Collection, and the National Gallery of Canada hold much of A. Y. Jackson's copious original correspondence. His autobiography A Painter's Country (1958 & 1967) and Wayne Larsen's biography *A. Y. Jackson: the Life of a Landscape Painter* (2009) are helpful and engaging resources. In terms of Canadian war art in general, I refer readers to my web site www.laurabrandon.ca, which includes an extensive publications list on the subject.