The Return of the Padre: Chaplain Studies since Padres in No Man’s Land

When Padres in No Man’s Land was published in 1995, scholarship centring on the Great War padres was thin. Yet in hindsight, it is clear that in World War I studies, the era of the chaplain had already begun. In Canada, Jonathan Vance, David Marshall, Michel Gauvreau, and Mark McGowan had already reconsidered Canadian religious and cultural history at least partially through the prism of the padre. Marshall’s influential study of secularization, Gauvreau’s revisionist study of Protestant thought, McGowan’s examination of Irish-Canadian Catholics, and Vance’s study of the construction of post-war memory and metanarrative all drew on the utterances and writings of Canadian Great War chaplains.¹ Scholars of Canadian religious history, theology, and social discourse would never again think about the Great War, or Canada, in quite the same way.

Since the 1990s, Canadian scholars have deepened and enriched our knowledge of Canadian churches and chaplaincy. The Great War built on a tradition of militant idealism and church-led social Christianity – a national gospel metanarrative that had its roots before Confederation – eventually proving to bear the grief and suffering while still mobilizing for a powerful public role in total war. Gordon Heath illustrated how the script followed by church leaders, their presses, and most chaplains of 1914–18 had been written by the optimistic theodicy of the South African War, a “war with a silver lining.”² His study of the Canadian South African War chaplains put vital flesh on the bones laid out in Padres, just as his
subsequent book draws together a new generation of Canadian scholars assessing the impact of the Great War on churches and chaplains of Canada. Padres suggested that the twenty-odd years of peacetime struggle and disappointments in the 1920s and ’30s generally swallowed up chaplain idealism and energy. It seems clearer now that the chaplains were dismissed by the government, shut out of the Permanent Force, and suppressed by their own church hierarchies within two or three years of their return. Denominational leaders, fearing that time spent overseas had ruined their clergy for peacetime work and suspicious of any calls for radical reforms, ignored and dismissed their own chaplains’ views.

Canadian religious scholars have been hard at work examining religion and military chaplaincy in both Canada’s Second World War and the contemporary chaplaincy of the Canadian Forces, with more publications pending. The contemporary researcher can now locate scholarly research on padres through almost the entire national period, including the early days of the Afghanistan deployment. Among historians, though, acceptance of Padres has been restrained. Since the 1960s, scholars of Canada’s armed forces have tended to snort and sniff at padres, though recent military writers have acknowledged that the chaplains worked hard, took risks, and offered practical support to the troops. Padres provided the chaplaincy research that confirmed Desmond Morton’s thesis that Canadian political and military leaders overcame their amateurish and uneven record by facing up to challenges at the professional, operational, and tactical levels. Tim Cook has probed soldiers’ metaphysical world, and credits padres for having the guts to try and help, but is skeptical about claims that morale hinged on conventional religion or its military representatives. To him, soldiers blended fatalism, superstition, numerology, amulets, lucky objects, obscure biblical prophecies, and a wide variety of irrational psychological mechanisms to get through their tours of duty. Like many other historians, he observes that soldiers could be profanely sarcastic about cheap theologizing and simplistic portrayals of a loving God and a benevolent Christianized world to come. Their Christianity, if any, was expressed in the rule of doing good for one’s pals and not being hypocrites.

Where the military and morale-building accomplishments of Canadian padres first found sympathy and support was in studies on Australian chaplains by Michael McKernan, and more recent
British chaplain studies by Edward Madigan, Michael Snape, and Linda Parker. Madigan’s book about the Church of England’s chaplains at the front demolished the persistent myth of the “disillusionment school” of soldier-writers (and most historians) that padres were cowards, class-bound hypocrites, and the laughingstock of the British Expeditionary Force. Parker re-examined the Church of England chaplains, arguing that their relevance, idealism, militancy, and service under fire, despite their many divisions and internal bickering, has been misrepresented. Snape’s two studies of religion in the British army brought to light the wider religious world of the army during the world wars, one inhabited by devout senior officers, ubiquitous padres, and soldiers robustly religious, if at times theologically inarticulate. His account of the British army’s Chaplains’ Department found parallels to the Canadians’ disorganization, plucky operational service, and crusading message (at a magnitude which dwarfed Canada’s). Snape corrects some claims made in Padres about Canadian trend-setters, pointing out that, like Julian Byng and Arthur Currie, senior officers in the British army removed the ban on chaplains in trenches, increased their numbers, and supported the religious work in the trenches as a vital aspect of fighting spirit. He argues that never before had the British chaplaincy been positioned (and exploited) by leaders of the army to boost morale, and that the chaplaincy drew from the influence of a “diffusive Christianity” (based on Christian social ethics), in the ranks and in wider British prewar society. Madigan, Snape, and Parker, with a growing cohort of British scholars, have created what amounts to a new school of research in the United Kingdom, as seen in annual symposiums held by the British Armed Forces Chaplain School at Amport House.

Scholars in France and the United States have also reassessed their own Great War chaplaincies. Jonathan Ebel’s and Richard Schweitzer’s studies of chaplains, crusading US churches, and religious faith in the army reassert the powerful role of personal faith and the chaplains who promoted it. Xavier Boniface has explored the French army’s chaplains and their post-war emergence from the social and political margins where state secularization had positioned them after 1905. New studies include a recent chronicling of the rabbis who served in the German Imperial Army, bringing to light the similar experiences and nationalist statements as their Christian chaplain counterparts on both sides of the trenches. The field rabbis proved their dedication and loyalty to Germany and its
Jewish soldiers, but sadly were unable to escape from Nazi anti-Semitism. Those who did not die before 1939 met their end in the Holocaust.\textsuperscript{16}

In November 2012, almost fifty scholars gathered in the vault of the old Abbey of Verdun for a scholarly conference on religion during the First World War. The papers overwhelmingly documented the power of wartime crusading nationalism in all the religious groups of the belligerents and military representatives, strong enough in Catholic circles to confound Vatican mediation. Raberh Achi presented a new perspective on Muslims in various imperial contingents, laying the basis for comparative chaplaincy studies with Muslim religious workers of the war.\textsuperscript{17} Though no consensus will be achieved on whether or not the churches and padres should have so enthusiastically endorsed the war, the chaplains have emerged with more credit for their efforts, sacrifices, and influence at the front.

By the time this essay reaches the public, the centenary of the beginning of the First World War will have come. The soldiers, the captains, and the kings have departed, and our questions will never again be answered by living voices. Today the roar of heavy traffic mars the peace of the cemeteries in Flanders, Artois, and the Somme. From time to time a new breed of archaeologist uncovers souvenirs of war, including devotional artefacts, religious trench art, and sodden scraps of sacred writings. The war haunts us, and when we view the sepia-toned faces of the men and women in digital archives and family albums, and gather at the memorials, we honour their hope that they and their sacrifices will not be forgotten. In spring, larks will be heard, in summer, poppies will blow, and in the autumn and winter the iron harvest will rise through the soil, wan sunlight breaking through the mist and gloom, bringing out in stark relief the world we have almost, but not quite lost. In times like theirs, and places like these, they needed all the hope they could get. Perhaps so do we, and \textit{Padres}, accompanied now by a family of new scholarship, will reconnect us with the missing men who were Great War chaplains – and hope.

\section*{Notes}

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6 Desmond Morton, A Peculiar Kind of Politics: Canada’s Overseas Ministry in the First World War (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982).


8 For Australia, see Michael McKernan, “Clergy in Khaki: The Chaplain in [the] Australian Imperial Force,” Journal of the Royal Australian Historical


