

"Asleep beneath Sicilian skies..."

THE CANADIAN WAR CEMETERY AT AGIRA

The term D-Day has become synonymous with a single event in the Second World War, the great cross-Channel assault codenamed Operation Overlord that took place on June 6, 1944. So long awaited, and so decisive in the war's outcome, the Normandy landings have ever since assumed almost mythic status in public memory, thanks in no small part to films such as *The Longest Day* and *Saving Private Ryan*. The year 2004, like any major anniversary year, has seen a proliferation of books, documentaries, museum displays, and memory projects commemorating the battle of Normandy and describing the experiences of the soldiers, sailors, and airmen who took part.

The significance of the Normandy invasion makes it easy to forget that 'D-Day' refers to any day on which a major military operation is undertaken. There were over a dozen such days in the Second World War, including the six amphibious operations undertaken in the Mediterranean theatre. Five of these preceded the Normandy landings and yielded a number of useful lessons to the planners of Overlord. Foremost in this regard was Operation Husky, the Anglo-American invasion of Sicily (and thus the first Allied assault directly on the Axis powers), which took place on July 10, 1943. In scale and logistics, Husky rivals the better known Overlord. A series of convoys totalling over 3,000 ships converged from more than a dozen ports and carried 160,000 soldiers to the three main American landing zones in the Gulf of Gela and to the five British landing zones in the Gulf of Noto. As in Normandy, a massive air campaign involving reconnaissance and bombing prepared the way for the attack, while the seaborne landings were preceded by airborne assaults aimed at seizing control of vital points. Although the landings exposed some flaws in the planning and coordination of combined air, sea, and land operations, Husky achieved its objectives with fewer casualties than anticipated. Most importantly, it answered one key question for the planners of Overlord, namely, that the newly devised amphibious transports (DUKWs) could keep an invading force fully supplied over the beaches, thereby eliminating the need to capture a port in the initial attack.¹

¹On Operation Husky and the Sicily campaign, see Carlo D'Este, *Bitter Victory: The Battle for Sicily, 1943*. London: Collins, 1988.

Husky was the first of four seaborne operations in the Italian campaign. It was followed by the combined Operations Baytown and Avalanche, which brought the Anglo-American armies to southern Italy in September 1943; and by Operation Shingle, the Anglo-American landings at Anzio in January 1944. The anniversaries of these operations pass unnoticed, and it is richly ironic that the servicemen who took part in them came to be known as the "D-Day Dodgers" once the Normandy landings had relegated the Italian campaign to the status of a sideshow. In response to Lady Astor's infelicitous phrase implying that theirs was an easy lot compared to the plight of the soldiers fighting the real war, the soldiers of the British Eighth Army made up a set of verses, sung to the tune of *Lily Marlene*, jesting at the harsh conditions and fighting they had endured. The last verse, though, strikes a more wistful tone:

*Look around the mountains, in the mud and rain,
You'll find the scattered crosses, some that have no name,
Heartbreak and toil and suffering gone,
The boys beneath them slumber on,
They are the D-Day Dodgers, who'll stay in Italy.*

The 321,000 Allied casualties representing the final toll of the twenty-two months of the Italian campaign belie the conceit that Italy was a safer place to be than in northwest Europe. After the war, the temporary burial grounds with their scattered crosses were remade into proper military cemeteries; and today the remains of 45,000 British and Commonwealth servicemen lie buried in forty-two sites marking the trail of the Eighth Army from the tip of Sicily to the Po Valley. The task of designing and supervising the construction of these cemeteries fell to Louis de Soissons (1890-1962), the principal architect assigned to Italy and Greece by the Imperial War Graves Commission. De Soissons had studied in Paris before doing military service in the First World War, including time on the Italian front, and had made his reputation with the Welwyn Garden City project and a number of other civil architectural designs during the 1920s and 1930s.

The magnitude of his accomplishments on behalf of the War Graves Commission is all the more impressive in face of the difficulties confronting him at the outset. Not only did he have to contend with the number of dead and the dispersion of the burials, but also with a miscellany of local problems such as the negotiation of cemetery boundaries, adverse soil conditions, drought and water supply, availability of materials, and of labour, all vitiated by budgetary constraints. It is hardly surprising that the war cemeteries in Italy were not finished until the late 1950s; but where circumstances permitted, de Soissons exploited landscape and tradition to enhance the fixed monumental features of the Commonwealth war cemeteries. Even a cursory review of his work

reveals the skilful blending of locale with aesthetic effects to transform provisional burial grounds into monuments of lasting propriety.²

The cemeteries vary in size and setting. In some places a suggestive historical setting could forge a link between past and present, Britain and Italy. The Rome War Cemetery adjoins a portion of the Aurelian Wall, near the Pyramid of Gaius Cestius, and across the road from the Protestant Cemetery where the graves of Keats and Shelley recall the ties between the Romantics and Italy. More ancient ties were evoked by the placement near the Stone of Remembrance of a piece from Hadrian's Wall in commemoration of the English servicemen who came from what had been the northernmost edge of the Roman Empire. The largest of the war cemeteries, at Cassino, employs layout and setting to memorialise the British army which fought in Italy and to offer tacit recognition to one of the great tragedies of the campaign. The burial ground contains 4,266 headstones deployed in sections around a central portion in which the architect set up panels to record the names of the 4,044 servicemen "to whom the fortunes of war denied a known and honoured burial". The burial ground was in turn apportioned among the many nationalities represented in the ranks of the Eighth Army. The insignia on the headstones record the last great roll-call of the British Empire, which only sixty years ago could still summon a host of peoples from around the world to fight on her behalf. Cassino is but one of several war cemeteries containing Australians, New Zealanders and Maoris, South Africans of English, Afrikaans and native descent, Rhodesians, Cypriots Greek and Turkish, the Sikhs, Gurkhas, Hindus, and Muslims of the Indian Army, Jews of the Palestine Regiment, Newfoundlanders, French and English Canadians—an amazing array of languages, sects, and races whose mute presence makes Cassino into a reliquary of an empire now as seemingly remote as the Roman Empire. Atop the adjacent hill stands the restored Abbey of Monte Cassino, looming over the cemetery as a reminder that the cost of the war in Italy extended beyond the toll in human lives.

In other sites where setting and history were less dramatic, de Soissons used a variety of effects and features to distinguish the cemetery. At Gradara, the hillside was sculpted into terraces matching the site to its name. Elsewhere, as at the Sangro River cemetery, the landscaping was carried out on a grander scale. Here the rows of headstones stretch out in a wide arc across the hillside to create an amphitheatre overlooking the Eighth Army's arduous route along the Adriatic coast. The entrance to the Coriano Ridge cemetery displays the classicising

²Philip Longworth, *The Unending Vigil. The History of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission*. London, Constable and Company 1967; reprinted 2003 by Leo Cooper, Barnsley, Yorkshire, pp. 187-213.

and English garden traditions from which de Soissons drew. The gateway, flanked by façades in the style of Roman temples, gives onto a broad lawn leading to the burial ground through an elegant threshold. A raised platform, surfaced in geometric mosaic patterns, supports facing temples, also in Roman style, and stands opposite the Cross of Sacrifice at the end of the central aisle, whose great width is modified by the insertion of four pairs of flowerbeds.

Simple architectural features help to make cemeteries in unprepossessing locations more moving and memorable. In the little war cemetery at Foiano della Chiana (256 burials), south of Arezzo in eastern Tuscany, a short path leads from the entrance to the Cross of Sacrifice; to its left stands a small brick shelter rendered in the style of a Roman temple, but whose broken pediment and overhanging eaves nod at the region's Etruscan past. The 212 headstones in the Canadian war cemetery at Villanova stand well apart in three long lines spanning the width of the burial ground. The placement of a simple, temple-shaped gateway, built of white marble and axially aligned with the Cross of Sacrifice, establishes a strong vertical line by which to balance the extended horizontal perspective. At Ancona, a site without much inherent interest, the stately entrance and the symmetry of the headstones ascending the slope maintain an aura of repose and dignity even as the city sprawls out around the cemetery precincts.

Unlike the large war cemeteries, into which the fatalities of prolonged campaigns were gathered, and where the headstones record widely varying details pertaining to nationality, date of death, and regiment, the smaller cemeteries tend to be stories in themselves. The dates of death are concentrated within a limited period coinciding with a particular action, and the soldiers buried there are often of the same nationality. The setting and historical context of these cemeteries combine with the landscaping and architecture to lend them a singular poignancy. One such is the Agira Canadian War Cemetery, situated in the rugged terrain of eastern Sicily, where location, design, and intrinsic detail combine to form a moving testimonial to Canada's first major campaign in the Second World War.

The cemetery commands a fine position on a knoll between the towns of Agira and Regalbuto. It overlooks the concluding scenes of the Canadian campaign in Sicily, which began on the beaches near Pachino and wound its way through a series of towns whose names mark the stages of the Canadian advance on the left flank of the Eighth Army—from Ispica through Vizzini, Grammichele, Caltagirone, Piazza Armerina, Valguarnera, Leonforte, Assoro, Nissoria, Agira, Regalbuto, all the way to Adrano on the western foot of Mount Etna.³ The burial

³Good accounts of the Canadian battles in Sicily are found in Colonel G.W.L. Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy, 1943-1945*, Ottawa: The Queen's Printer,

ground was chosen by Canadian graves registration officers in September of 1943 as the most fitting place to concentrate 490 of the 562 Canadian dead of the Sicily campaign. Agira is one of three cemeteries in Italy designated as Canadian (along with the Moro River cemetery at Ortona and the aforementioned Villanova), but it holds the distinction of being the lone Second World War cemetery in which only Canadians are buried.

Sixty years on, it is still an isolated but highly evocative place. The eponymous town of Agira occupies the western slope of a sharply peaked hill. It was the home of the historian Diodorus Siculus, the sole source for Agira's ancient past, but the town was to dwell in obscurity until the twelfth century, when the Norman king William Roger consolidated his hold on the interior of Sicily by building a string of castles at strategic high points, two of which, Assoro and Agira, were to be etched into the memory of the Canadians who fought there in July 1943. The historical setting acquires added drama from the topography, for the whole site is framed against the bulk of Mount Etna.

The rustic setting and magnificent backdrop on eastern and western side alike hardly needed embellishment. The task faced by de Soissons imposed more practical problems, such as ensuring adequate water supply and checking soil erosion, which he solved by sinking wells and planting pines and almond trees around the sides of the knoll. The rough temporary crosses were replaced by headstones of Portland stone shipped from England; these were set up in four plots, two on the forward slope and two on the rear. The entrance to the cemetery, however, warrants attention, as it was here that de Soissons sought to magnify the natural beauty of the site. The gate is set within a limestone wall enclosing a mosaic patio. Once through the gate, the visitor faces a broad lawn leading upwards to the crest of the hill, where the Cross of Sacrifice stands in stark profile against the sky. Terraced bastions capped by plant beds flank the ascent and terminate in rounded bastions on either side of a mosaic platform placed halfway up the hill. As the visitor proceeds past this point, Mount Etna comes into view over the crest. The Cross of Sacrifice, mounted on a stone platform, marks the central point for the four quarters of the burial ground.

The stone shelters in the corners of the lower entrance area contain features linking them to their setting in the Sicilian landscape. The tiled roofs, and the stonework with its quoining in the walls and rusticated voussoirs over the doorways, evoke the feeling and traditions of the Italian countryside. Like the mosaic patterns adorning the platforms in the entrance way, the stonework is allusive rather than strictly imitative,

1956; and Bill McAndrew, *Canadians and the Italian Campaign*, Montreal: Art Global, 1996.

decorative rather than functional, but these touches enhance local context in a war cemetery whose principal features derive from British commemorative traditions and honour soldiers from a distant foreign land.

The cemetery, however, does more than perpetuate the memory of the soldiers buried within its precincts. Taken together, the details on the headstones—rank, name, regiment, date of death, and age—outline the saga of the Canadian First Division and First Army Tank Brigade which waged a 26-day campaign in the parched, dusty landscape against skilled and tenacious defenders. The dates read like a fever chart of the fighting, relatively light in the early days between the landings on July 10 and the first serious encounter with the Germans at Valguarnera on July 18, with the cost in casualties steadily mounting thereafter, peaking in correlation with the major attacks launched between July 21 and August 5. The division was withdrawn into rest on August 6; but the sprinkling of dates from late August to December of 1943 speaks for the soldiers who died of their wounds. In a closer context, the dates also trace the fortunes of particular regiments. July 21 and 29 stand out as costly days for the Seaforth Highlanders of Canada, July 27 for the Royal 22nd Regiment, or August 2 for the West Nova Scotia Regiment. The collocation of date and regiment often points to the place where the soldier lost his life, as for instance the members of the Loyal Edmonton Regiment who died in the fighting around Leonforte on July 21-22.

The sequence of details on each headstone conforms to the pattern established by the Imperial War Graves Commission after the First World War and maintained for the British and Commonwealth war dead of the Second. Also retained was the provision that the families of fallen soldiers could have a short valedictory inscription incised at the base of the headstone, beneath the cross. The Commission provided a list of suitable inscriptions to assist families in their choice of words, and it is clear from the recurrence of formulae that many families selected the epitaph they wished to appear on the headstone. Yet there is a wide variety among the inscriptions, indicating that just as many families elected to say farewell in their own words. As a result, within the officially prescribed memorials standard in all Commonwealth war cemeteries there exists a record, unique in history, of the response of the general populace to the deaths of soldiers, commemorated not collectively and anonymously, but individually as sons, husbands, brothers, or fathers whose loss cast a shadow over many other lives. What do these inscriptions, be they conventional or exceptional, have to tell us?

A number of epitaphs attest the regional affiliations of the regiments within the First Division and the strong regimental pride fostered in soldiers who came to look upon their regiment as a second family. The following groups of inscriptions illustrate the shared local origins and loyalties that knit each regiment together :

Born Saint John, New Brunswick. Requiescat in pace.

Captain Thomas Southall Porter, Carleton and York Regiment, 18.7.43 (29)
Son of Magloire Plourde and Annie Gagnon Plourde, Edmunston N.B. Canada.
Private Reginald Plourde, Carleton and York Regiment, 2.8.43 (21)



Rome War Cemetery

The Carleton and York regiment hailed from New Brunswick and drew many of its recruits from the Saint John river valley. It was one of three regiments making up the Third Brigade, which included another regiment from the Maritimes, the West Nova Scotia Highlanders. These two Maritime regiments were built out of the militia units mobilised when war broke out in 1939, whereas their fellow battalion in the brigade, the Royal 22nd Regiment, was a regular unit in the small Permanent Force maintained by Canada during the 1920s and 1930s. It carried a proud tradition reaching back to the First World War, and as the only French-speaking regiment in the First Division, its ranks were filled by men from Quebec :

Son of Captain Leo A. Tougas, Quebec Fire Brigade, and Amanda Angers.

Lance Sergeant Jean Paul Tougas, Royal 22nd Regiment, 27.7.43 (26)

De St-Narcisse, co. Rimouski, P. Québec, Canada. Priez pour lui.

Private Emile Banville, Royal 22nd Regiment, 27.7.43 (23)

Né à Montréal, P. Qué. Canada. Fils de M et Mde Narcisse A. Couture.

Private Gérard Couture, Royal 22nd Regiment, 30.7.43 (30)

The Second Brigade was composed of three regiments from western Canada. One of them was the Loyal Edmonton Regiment, which drew many of its recruits from northern Alberta. Another western Canadian unit, the Saskatoon Light Infantry, served as the division's support battalion:

Son of Wm. and Jessie McEwan, Barrhead, Alberta. Husband of Gladys McEwan of Oxted, Surrey, England.



Cassino War Cemetery with Abbey in background

Sergeant Robert McEwan, Loyal Edmonton Regiment, 5.8.43 (24)
Of Fort Garry, Manitoba, Canada. "Greater love hath no man than this"
 Lieutenant James Gordon Leggo, Saskatoon Light Infantry, 24.7.43 (26)

Where some regiments were drawn from rural areas, others had strong connections with cities. The 48th Highlanders of Canada was a longstanding, socially prominent militia unit from Toronto, and it is a sign of the 48th's cachet that in Agira and elsewhere we find families using the regimental motto as the soldier's epitaph. In another case of regimental loyalty, the family recorded the connection with the soldier's original unit :

'Fidelis'

Lieutenant Robert Free Osler, 48th Highlanders of Canada, 26.7.43 (32)
"Dileas gu brath" Faithful forever.



The Terraces at Gradara War Cemetery

Private James Howard Simmons, 48th Highlanders of Canada, 12.8.43
Formerly of the Royal Regiment of Canada. Son of John and Annie Chase,
Peterborough, Ontario, Canada.

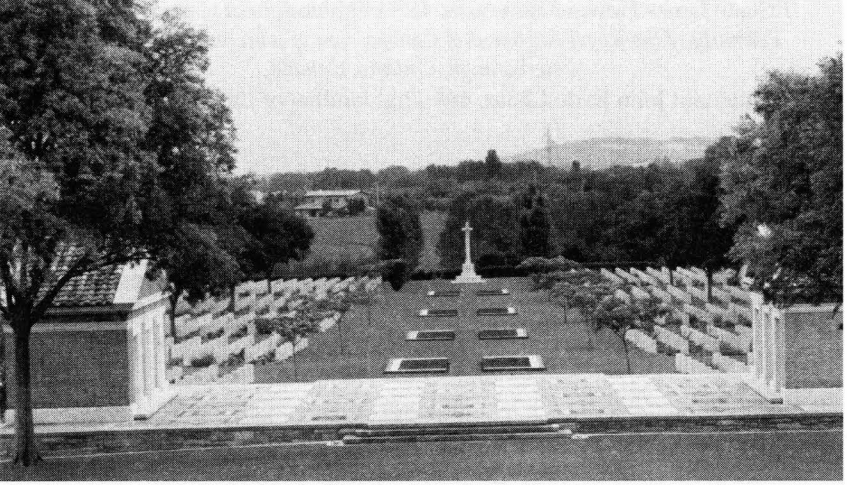
Lieutenant John Earle Chase, 48th Highlanders of Canada, 1.8.43 (29)



The Sangro River War Cemetery

Like the Pals regiments of the First World War, shared background and intense loyalty instilled a sense of pride and professionalism in the regiments of the First Division and kept its morale intact during the long period of inactivity in England. Pride in regiment is a leitmotiv in soldiers' accounts of the Sicily campaign, but it was also a double-edged sword, as shown in Farley Mowat's *And No Birds Sang* or Strome Galloway's *Bravely into Battle*, where the authors describe the dispiriting effect of seeing their regiments turn from bands of friends and familiar faces into collections of strangers as men from the reinforcement pools replaced the lost.

The First Division included men from all parts of Canada, who came from many walks of life. They had been among the first to go overseas, arriving in England in late 1939. One of the myths about the men who signed up holds that they joined the army to escape unemployment. In fact, nearly 80% of the men who volunteered in 1939-1940, before the imposition of the National Mobilisation Resources Act, left jobs or occupations to join the armed services. This is not to say that their motives were entirely idealistic, but there were men for whom religious conviction or a sense of duty, or the basic but firm belief that Nazi Germany and its allies represented a threat to their values or way of life, played a part in the decision to take up arms. A number of epitaphs state the principles for which the soldier fought, or the principles which his family felt had guided his choice to enlist :



The Treshold at Coriano Ridge Cemetery

He died for democracy, freedom, liberty and justice.

Private Martin Alleman, Loyal Edmonton Regiment, 3.8.43 (49)
*J'ai combattu pour l'honneur, la gloire et la justice. J'attends de Dieu ma
 recompense.*

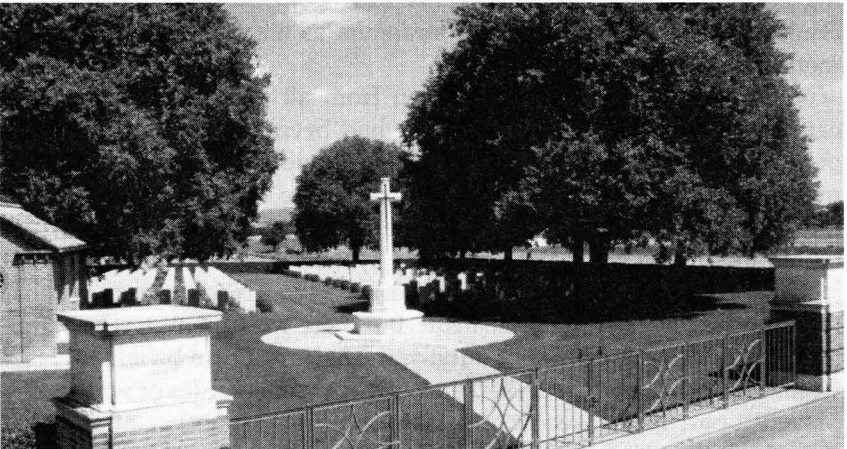
Private Albert Perreault, Royal Canadian Ordinance Corps, 25.7.43
In loving memory of an anti-fascist fighter. Helen and Mother.

Private Hugh Reid Anderson, Royal Canadian Regiment, 18.7.43 (28)
Joe. One of the best. Lost fighting for peace. God knows how mother misses you.

Private Patrick Joseph McKenna, Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment,
 25.7.43

He lived as he died, to keep peace in this world.

Private John Thomas Ferguson, Seaforth Highlanders of Canada, 21.7.43



View of Foiano della Chiana Cemetery

The question of motivation takes on a different aspect with soldiers of the Jewish faith. A Star of David marks the headstone of one young sol-

dier, Private Besserman, who was killed while rushing against a German position, driven by his hatred of the Nazis. Nearby lies another soldier whose family likewise extolled his service to his people :

For Israel and Canada. Ever remembered by Mother, Father, sisters and brother.

Private Jack Besserman, 48th Highlanders of Canada, 18.7.43 (29)

O Israel, here lies your servant; defender of truth, justice and brotherhood.

Private Iessie Bell, Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment, 25.7.43 (24)



Villanova Canadian War Cemetery

It is not surprising to find in the epitaphs of fallen soldiers patriotic sentiments such as the following :

In loving memory of our beloved brother who fought and died for his country.

Private Omar Burton Gallagher, Carleton and York Regiment, 22.7.43 (24)

"For thee, o dear, dear country"

Gunner Frederick Stewart Roberts, Royal Canadian Artillery, 25.7.43 (31)

Il est mort pour son pays.

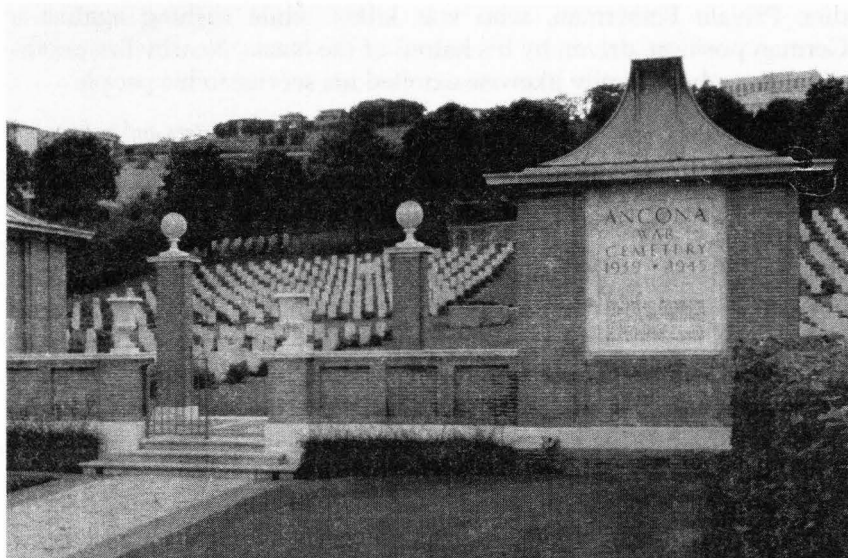
Private Napoleon Labrie, Royal 22nd Regiment, 27.7.43 (31)

Other epitaphs indicate that Canadians had yet to conceive of their country as a self-standing entity. At a time when Canada's population was half British in origin, and the country itself a dominion of the British Empire, many English Canadian soldiers were only a generation or two removed from Britain, still bound to the Mother Country by the links of family or marriage. Canada still saw itself in terms of her British heritage and connection, and had gone to war because Britain had. Although her soldiers had a primary allegiance to their native land, it is not unusual to find Canadian epitaphs expressing ties or pledging loyalty to Great Britain.

Beloved husband of Margaret Rachel Cameron. Ardiersier, Inverness, Scotland.

Private Bruce Donald Davison, Loyal Edmonton Regiment, 28.7.43 (23)

For King and Country.



The Entrance of Ancona War Cemetery

Corporal Alfred Wilson Clements, Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment,
22.7.43 (32)

Here, my beloved, England lives; go tell the English why I died.

Captain Maurice Herbert Battle Cockin, Hastings and Prince Edward
Regiment, 21.7.43

British influences and sentiments appear also in the choice of literary quotations for epitaphs. The works of Rudyard Kipling were standard fare in school readers, anthologies, and above all in the prose and poetry commemorating the Glorious Dead of the Great War. Kipling, the father of the term "Tommy's", was the poet of empire and the lowly soldier who served it, and his verses were chosen more often than those of any other author. Two headstones in Agira carry quotations from his works, the first from the preface to *Barrack-Room Ballads*, the second from a poem written on the death of the Boer War hero Lord Roberts:

"They rise to their feet as he passes by, gentlemen unafraid" Kipling

Sapper Lloyd Alexander Johnston, Corps of Royal Canadian Engineers,
28.7.43 (23)

Glory is the least of things that follow this man home.

Lieutenant Edward Martin MacLachlan, 48th Highlanders of Canada, 15.7.43 (31)

Tennyson was another popular source of quotations, particularly for his threnodic *In memoriam*, from which this epitaph cites a line :

Fighting for humanity he fell. God's angels saw him and they wept. "God's finger-touched him and he slept"

Private George Nelson Towart, Royal Canadian Regiment, 24.7.43 (18)

The notions of duty and sacrifice which Kipling's and Tennyson's poems exalted ran deep in the commemorative pieces composed in the wake of the First World War. The Victorian diction in which such consolatory themes were phrased to give meaning to the hecatombs of the Somme or Passchendaele and to alleviate the pain of the bereaved was taken up again after the Second World War. Significantly, it was not to Owen, Sassoon, Graves or Blunden (all of whose work had long been published) that families turned for quotations, but to John Arkwright's *O Valiant Heart*, or to the anonymous inscriptions on Great War monuments:



Agira (centre) and Mount Etna

R.I.P. O valiant heart, no laggard thou. In remembrance your life shines on.

Private Cyril George Peck, Loyal Edmonton Regiment, 3.8.43 (22)

He died as few men get the chance to die, fighting to save a world's morality.

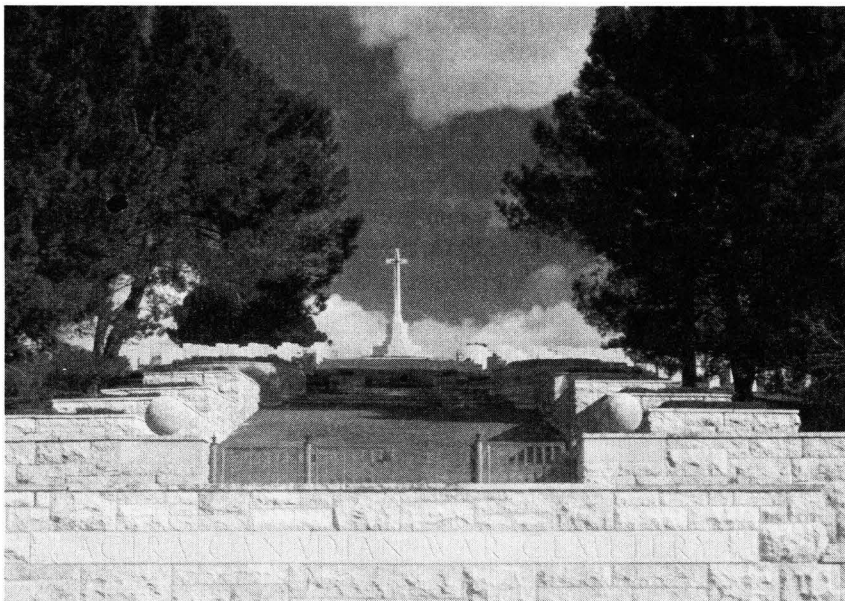
Captain George Turnbull Whitelaw, 48th Highlanders of Canada, 1.8.43 (23)

The themes of sacrifice and redemption are even more pronounced in the passages from Scripture or hymns which families selected to portray the soldier's death as an offering for peace, democracy and freedom, or for a better world.⁴ It had been a common response after the First World War to liken the soldier's sacrifice to that of Christ, a comparison also made explicitly in the first inscription given below, found on the headstone of one of the two 17-year old soldiers buried in Agira:

"I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd layeth down his life for the sheep"

Gunner Leigh MacKay, Royal Canadian Artillery, 11.12.43 (17)

His life was given, a sacrifice for others.



Entrance to Agira Canadian War Cemetery

Private William Blaylock, Loyal Edmonton Regiment, 22.7.43 (18)

With his life blood he paid our debt. A brave boy, a noble son.

Private Ferdinand Leonard Nash, Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment,
19.7.43 (20)

They died that we might live.

Lance Corporal Rupert Rhoades Story, Seaforth Highlanders of Canada,
29.7.43 (25)

*My dear husband James, so young, so strong, so brave. He died not in vain. He gave
this life to save.*

Private James Alexander Mailman, Carleton and York Regiment, 1.8.43 (22)
He chose him out of all men living to offer sacrifice to God.

Lance Corporal Leon Joseph Richard, West Nova Scotia Regiment, 2.8.43 (25)
Faithful to duty, called into higher service from glory unto glory.

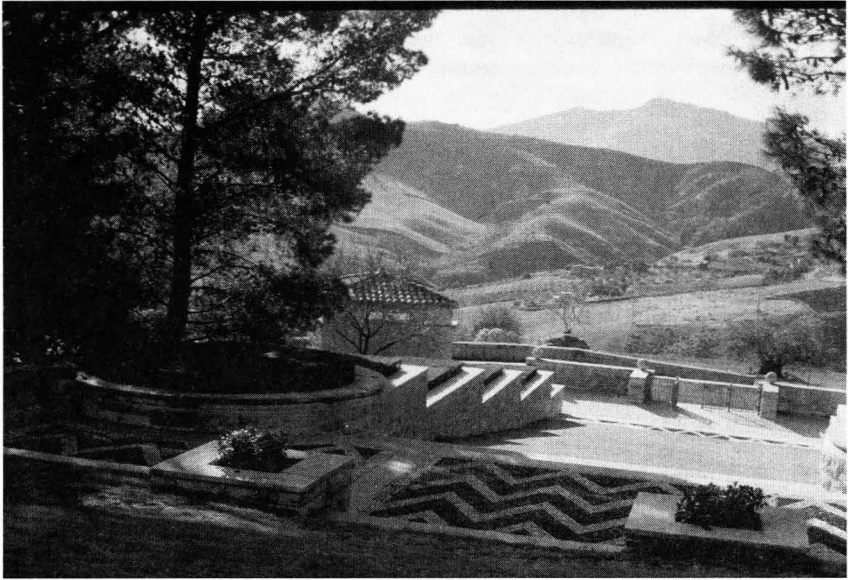
Gunner Orvil Edward Brown, Royal Canadian Artillery, 31.7.43 (23)
He made the supreme sacrifice for the love of God and humanity.

Private Arthur Morton, 48th Highlanders of Canada, 25.7.43 (25)
Que son sacrifice apporte la paix au monde.

Private Albert Harrisson, Royal 22nd Regiment, 18.7.43 (29)
Sublime sacrifice. Puisse ton immolation ne pas avoir été faite en vain.

Private Jean Yves Hamel, Royal 22nd Regiment, 27.7.43 (23)

⁴The Canadian response to the losses of the First World War and the reliance on themes of sacrifice and redemption are discussed by Jonathan Vance, *Death So Noble. Memory, Meaning and the First World War*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1997, esp. chapter 2.



The Ascent to Agira

The final pair of epitaphs show that French Canadians too were the heirs to the uplifting consolatory sentiments of the Great War. But French Canadians, who made up a third of Canada's population at the time, could not be expected to feel the same commitment to an Empire from which they felt estranged by their language and faith. Those who volunteered for active service—and there were more of them than is commonly supposed—came from a tradition-oriented society which predicated its survival on the pillars of Church, language, and family. The epitaphs of French Canadian soldiers therefore tend to focus more closely on the defining traits of French Canada and to emphasize the soldier's loyalty to his Church and to his own people. They are also more prone to invite fellow Catholic passersby to assist in the work of the soldier's salvation by saying a prayer for his soul :

Frère bien aimé. Mort pour Dieu et patrie. Repose en paix au ciel. Une prière.

Private Jules Gagnon, Royal 22nd Regiment, 1.9.43 (33)

Qu'il repose dans la paix du Seigneur. Il a sacrifié sa vie pour les siens.

Private Gerald Joseph Doucette, West Nova Scotia Regiment, 2.8.43 (20)

A tout ami Catholique, une prière s'il vous plait.

Private Marcel Arsenault, Royal 22nd Regiment, 19.10.43 (23)

For the glory of God, my country, my family. Marcel.

Private Joseph Marcel Ducharme, Royal 22nd Regiment, 18.7.43 (21)

The names of the soldiers buried in Agira reflect the predominantly British and French composition of an older Canada. In any Canadian war cemetery, however, glimmers of the demographic changes that set



Stone Shelter at Agira

pre-war Canada apart from its post-war descendant are visible in the number of foreign languages in which inscriptions appear – Ukrainian, Polish, Russian, Hungarian, Finnish, Swedish, Danish, Icelandic, Dutch, Italian, as well as in two examples in Agira, one of a Jewish soldier whose Hebrew epitaph is given in translation,⁵ the other of a soldier of Czech ancestry:

In memory of my good and beloved son's soul. Joseph, son of Alter Attis, who was killed on the sixth day of Av 5703.

Bombardier Joseph Wilfred Attis, Royal Canadian Artillery, 7.8.43

V ?izine se narodil, v ?izine mlad? svùj ?ivot za demokracii polo?il.

(He was born in a foreign land, and in a foreign land he lay down his young life for democracy)

Private Steve John Slavik, Royal Canadian Regiment, 24.7.43 (30)

There are no generals or famous names to be found in the register at Agira. Two Lieutenant Colonels bear the highest rank among the fallen. There are also majors, captains, and a handful of lieutenants, but for the most part the soldiers are mere privates and corporals whose names rarely if ever appear in the histories of the battle for Sicily. Among them were men who performed heroic actions, such as Private Sidney Cousins who singlehandedly destroyed two German machine gun positions on the heights above the town of Leonforte, only to be killed by a shell shortly afterwards; but the majority were ordinary young

⁵I wish to express my thanks to Professor Libby Garshowitz of the University of Toronto for translating this epitaph for me.



Headstones in Agira

men who died carrying out the orders given to them, and whose names are known to no one but the families who bore the blow of their loss. These simple, plaintive inscriptions are reminders that for countless families the issue of the war was not victory or defeat:

In loving memory of my boy who is sadly missed.

Gunner James Osborne, Royal Canadian Artillery, 21.7.43 (17)

Our only son whom we have sorely lost. Sadly missed by his father and mother.

Lance Corporal John Frolis, Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment, 3.8.43 (23)

We thought his life too soon done; ended, indeed, when scarcely yet begun.

Private Daniel James Murray, 48th Highlanders of Canada, 25.7.43 (20)

He may be dead but my sister and I will never forget him.

Private Adolphe Louis Poulain, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, 23.7.43 (22)

Dear Ken, rest in peace from the roar of battle. Love, Aunt Mary.

Private Kenneth John Earnshaw, Royal Canadian Regiment, 1.8.43 (21)

We are waiting, Frankie lad. Mother and Dad.

Sapper Oscar Frank Foster, Corps of Royal Canadian Engineers, 4.8.43 (22)

Others serve notice that the consequences of obscure, forgotten battles and campaigns will be part of many lives for some time to come:

A memory dearer than gold of a daddy we loved and will never forget. Phyllis and Sylvia.

Sapper Clement Irwin, Corps of Royal Canadian Engineers, 31.7.43 (33)

"He was ours and we remember" His loving wife and daughters, mother and Dad.

Corporal Hugh Mercer, Seaforth Highlanders of Canada, 20.7.43 (36)

In loving memory of a dear husband and daddy. Ever in our thoughts.

Private Thomas Fowler Simpson, Seaforth Highlanders of Canada, 21.7.43 (32)

The Canadian involvement in the Italian campaign was to go on for another eighteen months after the capture of Sicily. By the end, the ranks of the D-Day Dodgers held 93,000 Canadians, of whom 26,254 became casualties, a final tally that includes 5,964 dead. Canadians are not used to thinking in terms of their country's place in the history of Europe or the Mediterranean, tending instead to see the influences and effects of the Old World upon the New; but the Canadian role in Italy from 1943 to 1945 represents an important chapter in the national experience of both countries in the Second World War. The materials assembled by the army field historians, the soldiers' memoirs, the war art and photographs, the accounts of the war correspondents, and the reports of the battle psychiatrists are among the sources retailing the history and the multifaceted individual experiences of the Italian campaign.⁶ To this record the war cemeteries add a tragic, human perspective, preserving some memory of soldiers who were not just faceless pawns on a tactical chessboard but young men wrenched from their lives at home and inserted into the alien, lethal world of war. The war cemeteries stand as permanent witnesses to the links between Italy and the Commonwealth nations whose soldiers fought there, and it is fitting to close with two epitaphs from Agira which, like de Soissons's Italianate touches, connect a soldier from a faraway country to the land where he is buried. The first is taken from Shelley's *Adonais*, the elegy written in memory of his friend Keats, and the second is a valediction from Italian-Canadian parents who in all likelihood never saw the grave where their son was laid to rest :

*"And that unrest, which men miscall delight, can touch him not, and torture not
again"*

Trooper Frederick Sturdee Jarvis, Ontario Regiment, 25.8.43 (28)
*Asleep beneath Sicilian skies in an honoured soldier's grave is the son we loved and
miss. He rests among the brave.*

Corporal James Michael Vincent Dilio, Three Rivers Regiment, 5.8.43 (21)

St. Clement's School, Toronto

⁶W.J. McAndrew, "Recording the War: Uncommon Canadian perspectives of the Italian Campaign," *Canadian Defence Quarterly*, vol. 18 (Winter 1988), 43-50.