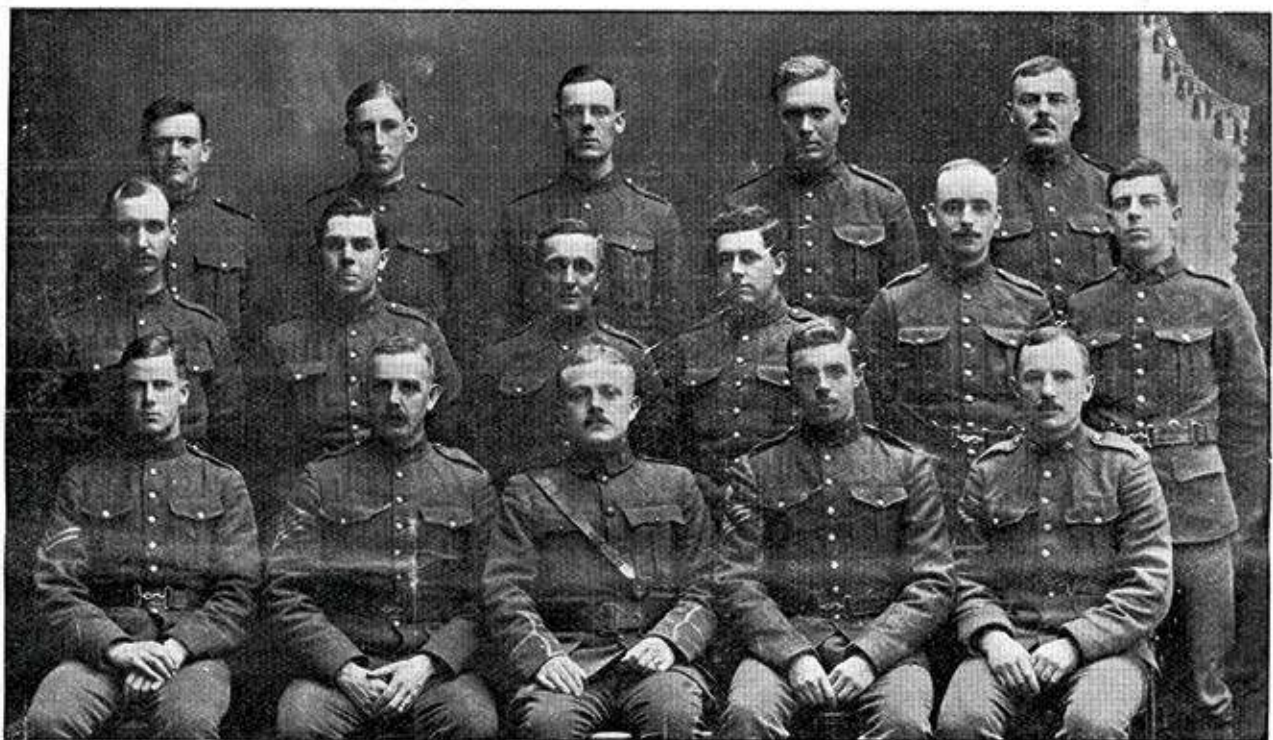


“War is No Longer a Thing of Pomp and Pageantry”: University of Saskatchewan Student Perspectives on the Great War

Louis Reed-Wood

In November 1914, University of Saskatchewan student John Ross Macpherson captured the mood of his fellow students when he lauded those who went forth to “hurl back to destruction ... the iron-toothed menace of a pseudo-civilization, founded upon a brute philosophy.”¹ By 1918, zealous pro-war rhetoric had all but disappeared from the writings of University of Saskatchewan students. The First World War drew student interest and opinion over the course of its duration, as the University of Saskatchewan became a centre for recruitment, support services, and rehabilitation.

University Group of 28th Battalion



The first considerable body of students and members of the staff to enlist after the outbreak of the Great War. They joined in October, 1914, and went to France in the late summer of 1915.

“University Group of 28th Battalion”: The Sheaf, April 19, 1928. PAS, R-1600.1, Charles Neil and Margaret Cameron fonds.

The students of the university held outlooks and perspectives on the Great War that were strongly and distinctively influenced by their identities as members of the campus community. As a community mostly composed of young men of military age, and as individuals under the influence of an institution wielding significant power over their lives, students faced different pressures and situations from the non-academic population. But far from simply absorbing and accepting campus war policy, they responded with their own opinions and, sometimes, their expressions of dissent. While students at the University of Saskatchewan generally supported the war effort and campus wartime policy, they opposed some specific policies intended to support the war effort, and their

perspectives on the war became increasingly negative over its duration. In particular, students took issues with policies that prioritized the war over their education. Students stopped short of criticizing the war outright, but some found overtly militarist oratory repugnant, while others objected to recruitment and military drill efforts on campus. Despite declining enthusiasm for the war in its later years, students separated their attitudes on the war from their opinions of soldiers; increasing negativity toward the war did not foster negativity towards enlisted men.

At the beginning of the First World War, Saskatchewan abounded with patriotism and support for the conflict. Saskatoon residents took part in a spontaneous parade the night that war was declared, waving flags and singing patriotic

songs in the streets.² Observers reported similar scenes across the province. A Saskatoon newspaper described the celebrations in Moose Jaw to its readers:

The local militia paraded and enlisted several hundred men all anxious to serve the empire should they be required. After the parade the military band marched through the city with a standard bearer carrying a huge Union Jack in front. Following the band was half the male population of the city who joined in singing Never before in the city was there such a display of patriotism.³

Recruitment in Saskatchewan was strong in the war's early days, and women made significant contributions by fundraising for the cause and donating fabric, often making medical supplies and clothing by hand. Enlisting was most popular with British immigrants who wanted to both support their mother country and strike at an enemy that they perceived to be a threat to democracy and civilization. In a more pragmatic sense, enlisting also offered many men steady employment in what had been a slumping prewar economy. Indeed, many hoped the war would reverse the province's economic prospects. Farmers were delighted by the immense demand and high prices for wheat brought on by the war, and many were willing to put aside their gripes about agricultural legislation in order to promote wartime unity. Saskatchewan's cities hoped to become mustering points for new recruits, since they expected that mass mobilization in their community would mean a return of economic good times.⁴

The mood at the University of Saskatchewan was not unlike that of the wider population, as students were enthusiastic to support the war effort. During the war's early months, students expressed great optimism about the Allied forces' chances of military success, extolled the benefits they believed war might bring for the world at large, and articulated strongly anti-German sentiments. Student John J. Fenton wrote in the October 1914 publication of *The Sheaf* -- the university's student newspaper -- that the Great War would bring Great Britain and Ireland closer together as a single people, thereby strengthening the ties of the British Empire.⁵ An article in the same issue, written by *The Sheaf's* editor John Ross Macpherson, invoked the poetry of authors like Alfred, Lord Tennyson, which glorified war and the fulfillment

"Died on Active Service": This listing of the University of Saskatchewan students who died in action was published in the War Memorial edition of The Sheaf, April 19, 1928. PAS R-1600.1, Charles Neil and Margaret Cameron fonds.

DIED ON ACTIVE SERVICE

Hugh Carter Allingham, 32nd Bn. Killed in action, June 3rd, 1916.
 Renwick William Hunter Anderson, C.M.R. Killed in action.
 Reginald John Bateman, 23th Bn. and 46th Bn. Killed in action.
 Charles McVicar Bayne, 128th Bn. and 1st C.M.R. Killed in action.
 William Dobie Beaton, 196th Bn. and P.P.C.L.I. Killed at Passchendale, November 15th, 1917.
 Harold John Blair, (M.C.), 196th Bn. and 46th Bn. Killed in action.
 Charles Bremner, 196th Bn. and 46th Bn. Killed in action.
 James Brydon, 196th Bn. and 46th Bn. Killed in action.
 Frederick Burd, Princess Louise Bn. Killed in action.
 Thomas Caldwell, 5th Univ. Co. and P.P.C.L.I. Killed at Vimy Ridge.
 Gordon Mortimer Channell, 196th Bn. and P.P.C.L.I. Died of wounds.
 William Mansell Codling, 196th Bn. and 1st C.M.R. Killed in action.
 John Stewart Cowan, 1st F.A. Killed in action.
 James Douglas Cumming, 196th Bn. and 5th Bn. Killed in action.
 William Henry Davis (M.C.), Chaplain Service. Killed in action.
 John Kenneth Dawson, 196th Bn. and C.F.A. Killed in action.
 Reginald James Dillon, 196th Bn. and 46th Bn. Killed in action.
 William Drysdale, R.A.F. Killed in action.
 Henry Egar, 4th Univ. Co. and P.P.C.L.I. Killed at Sanctuary Wood.
 Lorne Burton Elliott, 196th Bn. and 46th Bn. Killed in action.
 Wilfred John Evans, 1st Univ. Co. and P.P.C.L.I. Killed near Courcellette, September 15, 1916.
 John Fisher, 1st Univ. and P.P.C.L.I. B.E.F. Died of wounds.
 Ernest R. Gilmer, C.A.M.C. Died of wounds.
 James Donald Graham (M.M.). Wounded November 5, 1916. Wounded March 27, 1917. Killed near Lens, August 30, 1917.
 Robert Carlton Grant, 1st Univ. Co. and P.P.C.L.I. Killed at Sanctuary Wood, June 2, 1916.
 Arthur Gordon Gruchy, 28th Bn. Drowned.
 Cyril N. Harrington, 1st Univ. Co. and P.P.C.L.I. Killed at Courcellette.
 James Gordon Hill, 196th Bn. Died of wounds.
 Lawrence Homer, 3rd Univ. Co. and P.P.C.L.I. Killed at Sanctuary Wood, June 2, 1916.
 James Shirley Heathcote, Coldstream Guards. Killed in action.
 Grenville Carson Hopkins, 196th Bn. and P.P.C.L.I. Killed at Passchendale, November 15th, 1917.
 Willis George Hunt, 196th Bn. and 1st C.M.R. Killed in action.
 William Yeates Hunter, 203rd. Killed in action.
 Franklin Mager Keffler, 1st Univ. Co. and P.P.C.L.I. Killed at Sanctuary Wood, June 2, 1916.
 Percy Dennington Kisbey, 1st Univ. Co. and P.P.C.L.I. Killed at Sanctuary Wood, June 2, 1916.
 Reginald Adolphus Frederick Lavers (M.M.) 5th Univ. Co. and P.P.C.L.I. Wounded September 15, 1916. Killed at Vimy Ridge.
 Skuli Gudbrandur Lindal, 196th Bn. Killed in action.
 Arthur Stephen Kenyon Lloyd, 19th Bn. Died of wounds.
 Clifford McConnell, 196th Bn. and 5th Bn. Died of wounds.
 Robert Peverol McCordick, 196th Bn. and P.P.C.L.I. Wounded Nov. 17, 1917. Killed near Monchy, August 26, 1918.
 Louis James McEwen, 196th and P.P.C.L.I. Killed at Passchendale.
 Michael Allan McMillan, 1st C.M.R. Killed in action.
 John Ross McPherson (D.S.O.) 1st Univ. Co. and P.P.C.L.I. Killed near Monchy, August 26th, 1918.
 Avard Yuill Mathews, 240th Bn. and P.P.C.L.I. Died of wounds.
 Enoch Andrew Mitchell, 10th Bn. Killed in action.
 John James Moore, 196th Bn. and 102nd Bn. Killed in action.
 Fred Nesbitt, 196th Bn. and 1st C.M.R.
 Joseph Lees Nicholls, 1st Univ. Co. and P.P.C.L.I. Killed at Sanctuary Wood, June 2, 1916.
 Angus Nicholson, 196th Bn. and 5th Bn. Killed in action.
 George Irving Paterson, 142nd and R.A.F. Killed in action.
 Arthur Edward Leeming Parlett, 1st Univ. Co. and P.P.C.L.I. Died of wounds received near Kemmel, February 18, 1916.
 Elwyn Robert Reid, 196th Bn. and 1st C.M.R. Killed in action.
 Thomas Ritchie, 5th Univ. Co. and P.P.C.L.I. Killed near Tilloy.
 Robert Rousay, 188th. Killed in action.
 Roy Eugene Shuttleworth (M.M.) 196th and P.P.C.L.I. Killed near Monchy, August 26, 1918.
 Hugh A. Silcox, 1st C.M.R. Killed in action.
 Ronald Charles Spence, 196th Bn. and 46th Bn. Died of wounds.
 Arthur George Starkings, 5th Univ. Co., P.P.C.L.I. and 38 Bn. Killed in action.
 George Swift, 188 Bn. Killed in action.
 Robert Sifton Turriff, 1st Univ. Co. and P.P.C.L.I. Wounded and missing. Presumed to have died of wounds received near Courcellette, September 15, 1916.
 Wellesley Tynley Wesley-Long. Killed in action.
 Edward West. Died in Hospital.
 Frank West, 5th Univ. Co. Died in Hospital.
 Walter Roy Whittingham, 1st Univ. Co. and P.P.C.L.I. 7th French Mortar Battery. Killed in action.
 Paul P. Wiklund. Killed in action.
 Geoffrey Wilson, R.A.F. Killed in action.
 Wilfrid Grant Wilson, 1st Univ. Co. and P.P.C.L.I. Died of wounds

of one's patriotic duty. Macpherson's article also matter-of-factly stated his belief that the war had been caused by "insolent German aggression which threatens Europe today."⁶ Nationalistic attitudes lasted well beyond the first few months of the war; a February 1915 article commenting on the war described how "our British pride is well and happily founded in a flower of natural sentiment and a noble patriotism."⁷ Another student wrote an article in February 1915 chastising the United States for remaining neutral in the first year of the war, arguing that their country placed profit above moral conviction.⁸

The student body's initial patriotism and support for the Allied war effort went beyond simple rhetoric. Between 1914 and 1918, a majority of male students expressed their support for

the war through perhaps the strongest possible endorsement: enlistment. The University of Saskatchewan's Great War Database lists 253 students who joined the Allied forces over the course of the war while enrolled as students. Of those 253 students, 206 to 208 enlisted in the Canadian army or its supporting services, including students who took on roles as chaplains, medics, and the like.⁹ Enlistment documents are digitally available for 190 of those 206-208 students. Of those 190 students, 151 (or 80%) volunteered for service in 1914, 1915, or 1916.¹⁰ Put into the context of a fairly small university, with an estimated male student population of 450 from 1914 – 1918, it is clear the university had a high enlistment rate -- though, as will be shown, different colleges of the university had meaningful differences in their rates of enlistment.¹¹ The

Enlistment at the University of Saskatchewan 1914-1918

<i>Date of Attestation</i>	<i>1914</i>	<i>1915</i>	<i>1916</i>	<i>1917</i>	<i>1918</i>	<i>Unknown</i>	
<i>Canadian Army - Volunteer</i>	23	58	70	20	4		175
<i>Canadian Army - Drafted</i>				6	9		15
<i>Royal Air Force (RAF)</i>						29	29
<i>Royal Flying Corps (RFC)</i>						9	9
<i>Unknown Service</i>						18	18
<i>British/American/Russian forces</i>						6	6
<i>Other</i>						1	1
TOTAL							253

Table compiled by the author; see source citations in endnote 10.



Members of the First University Company lined up at the back of the Old Armouries in Saskatoon, March 1915. PAS Photo R-A28495-55.

reasons behind voluntary enlistment are complex and, for any given student, could have resulted as much from social pressure to join up as from genuine support for the war. However, the university's high enlistment rate indicates that either most students held favourable views on the war at some point or that their qualms about fighting in the war were not significant enough to cause them to rebuff social pressure and refuse to enlist.

Though students initially expressed enthusiastic support for the war, their support for the war effort and pro-war oratory had limits. On October 25, 1914, following his enlistment and shortly before leaving the university, English Professor Reginald Bateman gave a speech expressing his view that the war represented not just a necessary evil but a positive good. Bateman's speech appealed to notions of chivalry, social Darwinism, traditional masculinity, and nationalism. "Most of those who speak of the 'horrors of war' fail to recognize that it is those horrors which give war its great, its inestimable value," Bateman told his audience. "To endure gladly the most severe labour and hardship, to grapple with a mortal foe in deadly strife ... and to do all this, not for pay, but for one's country, this is, perhaps, the very climax of human endeavour."¹²

Bateman's speech and his departure from the campus were not universally well-received, even amongst students who supported the war. In the subsequent November 1914

publication of *The Sheaf*, editor John Ross Macpherson condemned both Bateman's words and his actions. He began his criticism by describing the lecture as an "insufficiently considered address, reflecting the color of a magazine article, hastily composed," and suggesting that it revealed "Mr. Bateman's viking-like thirst for glory."¹³ Other Saskatonians criticized Bateman along similar lines; both *The Saskatoon Phoenix* and the pastor of Wesley Methodist Church decried Bateman's militarism.¹⁴

But the bulk of Macpherson's criticism of Professor Bateman focused on Bateman's decision to enlist and depart from the University of Saskatchewan partway through the term. Indeed, Macpherson believed Bateman's speech was "unwisely designed to justify the abandoning of a professorship at an awkward time."¹⁵ Macpherson went on to argue that both Bateman and another enlisted professor, Professor Brehaut, were shirking their obligations to their students and to the university. Students had paid their tuition with the expectation of receiving instruction from Bateman and Brehaut. The university had a very small faculty in its early years, and Macpherson felt that their hastily appointed replacements would surely prove to be inadequate substitutes. Macpherson informed his readers of his view that "it is time that we learned to consider the economic factor in recruiting our contingents for war."¹⁶



Macpherson was by no means against the war or against campus initiatives supporting the war. In the same article, Macpherson commended students who had participated in voluntary military drill at the university and encouraged other students to do the same.¹⁷ Macpherson also enlisted in the army within a year of publishing his article denouncing Bateman.¹⁸ Rather than opposing the war outright, Macpherson's views were representative of students' qualified support for the war. Students supported the war but were not willing to support it at all costs. His article exemplifies their support of their country and the British Empire, but also their outlook that outright militarism was distasteful. Macpherson presumably also spoke for a wider body of students who were displeased with the university faculty and administration for allowing the war to impinge upon the quality of their education. They perceived their education as a service for which they had paid; in return, they expected faculty members to meet their implicitly contractual obligations by treating students and their education as their first priority, rather than granting the war pre-eminence or abandoning students on a personal quest for glory.

Macpherson's views were not unique to the University of Saskatchewan. Similar complaints about university faculty and administration placing the war before its economic and educational obligations to students arose at the University of Toronto.¹⁹ One University of Toronto student felt that university wartime policies that reduced student free time represented "a raw deal for the boys" who worked while in university and revealed that "the authorities wish[ed] to keep the University for the sons of the rich."²⁰ As students raised comparable concerns at other Canadian universities, Macpherson could not have been alone in his economic-based opinions at the University of Saskatchewan.

The enlistment and departure of faculty was not the only source of student criticism of wartime behaviour raised in the war's early years. Amid a publication filled with articles extolling the war's expected positive outcomes, an article in the November 1914 edition of *The Sheaf* called for recognition and awareness of the horrors war would bring. Written by a student with the initials A.M.F.,²¹ "The Romance and Reality of War" criticized the enthusiastic rhetoric of honour, gallantry, and social betterment associated with the conflict. The unusually prescient article proceeded to describe how modern technology would contribute to a far more horrific war than many expected, and closed with the author's hope that the war's conclusion would bring lasting peace.²² Like John Ross Macpherson's article in the same publication of *The Sheaf*, A.M.F. did not express opposition to the war in a general sense. Instead, the author took issue with specific ideals and rhetoric being forwarded by proponents of the war. Both A.M.F. and Macpherson seemed to believe that the war was not inherently bad, but disavowed some of the war's more zealous advocates' motivations for fighting. Together, these

two examples suggest that some students supported the war because they believed it necessary but opposed the idea that the war should be zealously pursued as a positive good to catalyze social progress. Indeed, Canadians -- including writers with *The Saskatoon Phoenix* -- associated enthusiastic militarism with their German enemies, and at least some students believed in the stereotype of Germans as an aggressive, hateful people. Like some other Saskatonians, some students probably believed that to express excessive zeal or enthusiasm for war was to abandon the antimilitarist ideals that they believed Canada and the British Empire were fighting to uphold against bellicose Germany.²³

While some students opposed militaristic rhetoric that associated a sense of romanticism with the war, others held more practical objections. In October 1914, the University of Saskatchewan established an extracurricular, voluntary company with the purpose of providing students with military drill and practice.²⁴ However, support for military drill on campus was by no means unanimous. According to a proponent of participation in the company, the decision to create such a program had attracted "a good deal of discussion on the project, both favorable and adverse."²⁵ Once the company had been established, the student body's turnout to the first drill sessions was very low. As of November 1914, only 60 of the university's 286 Arts students had signed up for military drill, and only 10 of those 60 actually showed up every week!²⁶ Clearly, students were not interested in participating.

By 1915, the University Senate mandated student participation in physical and military drill.²⁷ Students could no longer oppose drill by choosing not to go, and social pressure probably made speaking out on the issue unpopular. Though the documents left behind rarely talk about drill once it became obligatory, students' overwhelming reluctance to participate in drill when it was voluntary implies that they resented having to participate. Moreover, according to historian Mary G. Chaktsiris, some students at the University of Toronto also vehemently opposed a similar program of mandatory military practice. Chaktsiris argues that some University of Toronto students criticized the required drill regimen because they felt it imposed unfairly on male students, infringed on students' free time for no academic credit, made balancing work and education difficult for students with jobs, and seemed concerningly reminiscent of German militarism.²⁸ Though fewer written sources exist from Saskatchewan students, Chaktsiris's article helps to situate their hesitations about military drill in a broader intervarsity framework. Given University of Saskatchewan students' earlier aversion to participate in drill exercises, and when contextualized by opposition to mandatory drill at another Canadian campus, it is very likely that some students at the University of Saskatchewan opposed the imposition of military drill, whether voluntary or mandatory.

Just as some students resisted military training on campus, others felt recruitment efforts at the university went too far. It is crucial to recognize that the University of Saskatchewan had a large number of rural students from farming backgrounds.²⁹ According to historian Adam Crerar, rural rates of enlistment and donations to patriotic funds in Ontario were significantly below their urban equivalents. Though Crerar's explanation specifically addresses Ontarian farmers, many of his explanations for their dampened war enthusiasm could easily apply to Saskatchewan. Some of the factors Crerar outlines for lessened rural engagement with the war effort include the risks associated with losing agricultural labourers, the way in which recruitment initiatives primarily targeted urban residents, and that the Patriotic Fund allowances, intended to financially support soldiers' families, were more useful for urban residents.³⁰ Canada's farmers also represented one of the largest demographic groups who initially opposed conscription and only warmed up to the idea when promised exemptions for their sons.³¹ Historian Chris Sharpe suggests that these national patterns and trends for other regions hold true for Saskatchewan, arguing that Saskatchewan's enlistment rate was proportionally low compared to more urbanized provinces because Saskatchewan's population was more rural. Only 26.7 per cent of Saskatchewan's 1911 population was urban, compared to a national average of 45.5 per cent. Sharpe argues it is not a coincidence that only 23.9 per cent of men eligible

for military service in Saskatchewan volunteered, the second-lowest provincial rate in Canada after Quebec.³²

An additional factor potentially impacting rural Saskatchewan's support for the war was the region's substantial number of non-British immigrants. Saskatchewan had a significant non-British immigrant population, including over a fifth of its population claiming German or Austro-Hungarian heritage.³³ While British and Canadian settlers (who were more nationalistic and therefore more likely to support the war than eastern or northern European settlers) formed the largest ethnic groups in Saskatchewan generally, English immigrants were proportionally more likely to settle in urban areas than less nationalistic ethnic groups.³⁴ Though students who came from eastern or northern European backgrounds were a fairly small minority of the total student body, their ethnicities dramatically impacted their wartime experiences.³⁵ Given the context of both ethnic and settlement factors, University of Saskatchewan students from farming backgrounds were less likely to support enlistment and conscription than their urban counterparts.

Students from agricultural backgrounds seemed to share their fellow farmers' trepidations about enlistment. While the overall student enlistment rate was high, students enrolled in the College of Agriculture enlisted at a significantly reduced rate compared to students from other colleges. For example, only about half of the Agriculture students enlisted from the class of 1917, compared to about three-quarters of the class of

Two students in residence, studying at the University of Saskatchewan; the student on the left is Charles Cameron.
PAS Photo R-A28495-61.



1917's Arts students, two-thirds of Law students, and virtually all of the university's engineers-in-training.³⁶ Whether students from farming backgrounds opposed the war, feared combat, or possessed a genuine desire to support their family farms, the wartime need for agricultural produce offered a justification (albeit one that was only barely socially acceptable) to reject joining the army by helping to feed it instead. Some agriculture students' families strongly protested what they considered to be egregiously aggressive campus recruitment efforts, and argued that their sons were contributing greatly to the war effort by producing food.³⁷ When the Dean of the College of Agriculture wrote just after the war to students' parents, hoping to obtain information on student military service in order to compile a roll of honour, he received some hesitant and defensive replies.³⁸ One father's response sought to justify his son's decision not to enlist and to counter potential accusations of cowardice, informing the dean that his son "had to take charge of it [the farm] very much against his wishes and last year I applied for exemption for him which was granted."³⁹ A similar letter from another father sought to assert his son's patriotism and participation in the war effort, describing how his son "did not take part in the War in any capacity, except helping to win it by helping to produce food, he simply Registered & if the War had continued till next year doubtless he would have been called up."⁴⁰

Though few sources offer a perspective on enlistment explicitly stated by Agriculture students themselves, some key information can still be gleaned about the mindsets of students from farms. At the very least, some students from farming backgrounds found aggressive recruitment efforts on campus distasteful. Some parents wrote letters to University President Walter Murray suggesting their sons' choice to return to the farm was partly motivated by a desire to evade recruitment efforts on campus and in the city of Saskatoon. One father, George Taylor, passed along his son's frustrations with campus and urban recruitment to Murray:

Now he says he must either enlist or give up his studies and come home. He says the place has gone 'crazy' over enlisting and from all accounts I think he has used the right word. What with pickets standing at every street corner hailing young lads as they go on their way and silly girls waving white feathers, no other word would describe such conditions ... I do not consider it a fair deal on your part to allow the agricultural students to enlist until you find out at least if they can be spared from the farm.⁴¹

The remainder of Taylor's letter exemplifies how students who returned to their family farms during the war believed (or at least argued) that non-military contributions to the war effort, such as food production, were also important.⁴² In their minds, those making such contributions were being unfairly ostracized. But Taylor's letter also suggests that some students

from agricultural backgrounds did not want to enlist and chose to return to farming. For these students, farming provided a potentially defensible reason for explaining why they did not enlist, and returning to farming meant they could separate themselves from the aggressive recruitment campaigns on campus and in the city. Crucially, Taylor and his fellow critics accused the university's administration of complicity in the fanatical recruitment efforts, which President Murray himself privately acknowledged had caused students to "become so unsettled ... that they simply cannot do justice to their studies."⁴³ Like John Ross Macpherson's criticism of Reginald Bateman, some parents and students felt the university was putting the war before its students' educations. The choice to farm during the war was, therefore, an action imbued with meaning, asserting one's perspectives on recruiting efforts and one's attitudes towards wartime agriculture. While students may have been drawn by high wartime wheat prices and soaring wages for farm labourers,⁴⁴ some of the students who chose to farm during the war seemed to have done so because they wanted to avoid expectations to enlist. Some may have even morally opposed the war, though the available sources are not detailed enough to strongly connect the students who returned to work on farms with pacifist beliefs.

Sources directly criticizing campus recruitment efforts are limited to a small number of letters written to Walter Murray, but there are more numerous sources that reveal a more general transition in student attitudes about the war. While students maintained a high level of interest in the war throughout its duration, articles published in *The Sheaf* reveal the emergence of increasingly negative views as the war dragged on. Students fell short of criticizing the war effort in a general sense, but by 1915, an emerging sense of solemnity began to nuance what had earlier been more unqualified enthusiasm. "War is no longer a thing of pomp and pageantry," wrote an anonymous student, "War has become for the most part a very prosaic business."⁴⁵ Students also began publishing poetry in *The Sheaf* that expressed grief, suffering, and a sense of loss. One student-authored poem included the following mournful verse:

*Does any force exist which may restrain
The grief which like a millstone drags me down
In dark unfathomed misery to drown?
A sable pall by melancholy thrown
Enshrouds my being lest I should refrain.⁴⁶*

Falling enthusiasm for the war was not a trend unique to the University of Saskatchewan. Enlistment throughout Canada dropped and continued to drop from partway through 1916 onwards. The most enthusiastic men -- including a very large proportion of British-born Canadians -- had already volunteered, leaving behind an ever-growing proportion of men who had reasons not to do so. Those who remained were further put off by news of the immense casualty rates at the

front.⁴⁷ The situation became so dire that Prime Minister Robert Borden and his government passed a conscription bill in August 1917.⁴⁸ The federal election of December 1917 subsequently became a referendum on the conscription issue. Saskatchewan, like most of English-speaking Canada, voted resoundingly in favour of conscription and Borden's government, though not before his party pledged to grant exemptions to farmers' sons. Every federal riding in the province voted for Borden's Union government in a province that had elected almost entirely Liberals in the prior federal election. Historian Bill Waiser characterizes Saskatchewan's mood towards the war as sapped of enthusiasm, but holding onto "a grim determination to see the struggle through to the end."⁴⁹

But the mood at the University of Saskatchewan did not quite seem to fit with that of the general population. While students showed no signs of giving up or abandoning the war effort, frustration, exasperation, and exhaustion with the war became a recurrent (albeit sporadic) theme in *The Sheaf* over the war's final years. Students' writings reflected a feeling of futility surrounding the war, and students took an increasingly antimilitarist stance as they turned their attention to establishing a lasting peace through disarmament. One student wrote in 1917 that in order for peace to survive after the war, an international body that acknowledged "a common European and universal interest that is superior to any particular national interest" needed to be established.⁵⁰ The student called for large-scale disarmament on the part of all belligerent nations, not just Germany and its allies.⁵¹ This article's author clearly believed that Allied militarism was at least partly to blame for the war. Another student, writing after the Armistice in April 1919 (though before the formal peace in June), held similarly critical views about the war. John Cameron called for the University of Saskatchewan to reject federal funding put forward to maintain their branch of the Canadian Officers' Training Corps and advocated for the university to dismantle its branch of the institution. Cameron had abandoned all romantic characterizations of the war, defining it by "the waste, the futility, the absolute idiocy of the whole performance," and suggesting "that there is something wrong with our boasted civilization."⁵² Cameron argued that keeping the Canadian Officers' Training Corps was keeping a remnant of militarism, which would only serve to inhibit peace and to insult the causes for which soldiers had fought and died.⁵³

Cameron's assertion that every man at the university desired peace and felt the war had been futile was certainly exaggerated.⁵⁴ But although antimilitarist stances like Cameron's were outliers, *The Sheaf* reveals a more general shift in student attitudes on the war. Prior to 1916, students published articles that generally featured pro-war, patriotic sentiments. From 1916 onward, opinions took a much more sombre tone. Dissenting opinions became increasingly common, and even articles supporting the war were less enthusiastic. The increasing frequency of pessimistic publications correlated with a rapid decline in voluntary enlistment. Of the 190 students whose enlistment documents are readily available, 151 volunteered for military service between the outbreak of war until the end of 1916; only 20 did so in 1917, a number further reduced to four in 1918.⁵⁵ The relationship between increasing negativity and dwindling enlistment is no coincidence. The war's most ardent advocates had already enlisted in the war's early years; thus, as the war proceeded, a greater and greater proportion of students remaining on campus held more hesitant or even negative views about the war. Increasingly, articles pondered how society would reconstruct itself after the war. W.W. Swanson, for example, wondered in March 1918 how western Canada would reconfigure its agricultural production



Top: Ten University of Saskatchewan students; the pennants they hold seem to indicate they are from the College of Agriculture. It is believed that Charles Cameron is in the middle of the second row. Cameron enlisted, served, and returned to teach at the university as a chemistry professor. PAS Photo R-A28495-3.

Bottom: Future Canadian prime minister, John Diefenbaker, in uniform; Diefenbaker was a University of Saskatchewan student when he enlisted in the war. PAS Photo R-A7841.

after the war.⁵⁶ A similar article published in April 1918 pondered how returning veterans, perhaps no longer physically capable of farming, would receive vocational training and find employment.⁵⁷ Although no single viewpoint on the war dominated, sombreness, negativity, and uncertainty became increasingly common themes within student publications.

While students were prepared to see the war through to its completion, their criticisms set them apart from the rest of Saskatchewan's population. Resolute in their decision to fight to the finish, Saskatchewan's population was ready to do what they believed necessary to win the war. Students' articles in *The Sheaf* revealed a focus on peace and postwar reconstruction, with some even going so far as to condemn the war; Saskatchewan residents supported measures that escalated Canada's war effort. In addition to voting for Borden's Union government and conscription -- albeit with exemptions for farmers' sons -- few protested when Borden later cancelled those same promised exemptions. Many Saskatchewanians were also pleased when Borden's government revoked the right to vote from immigrants who had arrived in Canada from belligerent countries in the past 15 years. Saskatchewan's satisfaction partly resulted from strong discriminatory attitudes that had persisted throughout the war, but partly because those groups were more likely to vote against conscription.⁵⁸ Indeed, the only strong voice of opposition in Saskatchewan to the decision to disenfranchise the "enemy aliens" came from women writing in *The Grain Growers' Guide*; since women publishing in *The Grain Growers' Guide* were active in the

women's suffrage movement, perhaps they were better able to empathize with the victims of the government's antidemocratic decision.⁵⁹ Students at the university generally did not explicitly condemn the war, but their attitudes were more uncertain and forlorn than the general population's more resolute opinions. While the general public seemed focused on winning the war, students appeared more interested in the postwar peace.

When expressing negative views on the war and its associated policies, students sometimes felt it necessary to either suppress their views or express them covertly. A number of authors criticizing the war in *The Sheaf* chose to publish anonymously, and students who returned to their farms explained their decisions by arguing that their actions supported the war effort.⁶⁰ While the university established no official censorship policy, the social pressure favouring pro-war sentiments was extreme.⁶¹ Students probably shared their critical views anonymously or suppressed them in order to avoid being considered cowardly, anti-Canadian, or pro-German. Despite the rarity of dissenting sources with an identifiable author, it is possible that more students (particularly amongst those who chose not to enlist) may have held similar views but kept quiet. Identifiable critics like John Cameron had often enlisted themselves, and criticism from a soldier -- who had demonstrated patriotism and whose firsthand experience made him an authority on the war -- was generally more socially palatable than criticism from someone considered to be shirking his duty.⁶²

"B Company of the Western Universities' Unit": *The Sheaf*, April 19, 1928. PAS, R-1600.1, Charles Neil and Margaret Cameron fonds.

B Company of the Western Universities' Unit



The University combined with Brandon College to form B Company, which was commanded by Professor Bateman. The Battalion was unfortunately broken up in England and the men served with various units in France, many with the Princess Pats.

While students were less enthusiastic about the war and aspects of campus war policy towards its conclusion, they still continued to support their enlisted classmates throughout the war. In this regard, University of Saskatchewan student responses to the First World War starkly contrasted with their American counterparts during the later years of the Vietnam War, and were more akin to the attitudes demonstrated in both the United States and Canada during twenty-first century conflicts in the Middle East.⁶³ The University of Saskatchewan's students, faculty members, and staff continued to support soldiers abroad by sending care packages. In doing so, students continued to support the war effort by supporting its participants. A February 1918 letter from Saskatchewan student-turned-soldier Gilbert J. Waite to President Murray is but one example selected from a large volume of letters sent from student soldiers to Murray, thanking members of the campus community for their generosity: "I am wishing to thank you, the staff and the students of the University of Saskatchewan for the kindness extended to the students overseas. I received a parcel sent by the Soldiers Comforts Associations at your request."⁶⁴ Waite's letter and the many others like it came in response to strong student support for sending wartime gifts to soldiers. An editorial appearing in the November 1915 issue of *The Sheaf* told its readers that "We can scarcely do too much for the boys who are doing so much for us. Any student who this year refuses to contribute anything ... has no right to sign after his name, 'University of Saskatchewan.'"⁶⁵ The temporal distribution of thank-you letters and relevant articles in *The Sheaf* -- both persisting into 1918 -- suggest that sending parcels to soldiers remained important to students throughout the course of the war.⁶⁶

Care packages were not the only way University of Saskatchewan students asserted the connection between the campus and its soldiers. Students cared a great deal about their enlisted classmates and about what was happening to them during the war. *The Sheaf* chose to devote an entire section of its publications to updating students on what happened to their enlisted classmates. The entries included obituaries of students who were killed in action, as well as letters written by the student-soldiers and brief updates on individual soldiers' activities, promotions, and other aspects of their lives.⁶⁷ Soldiers' letters that were published in *The Sheaf* rarely focused on the exciting and unusual events they were taking part in during the war, but rather prioritized glimpses of their everyday lives. Publications included letters about soldiers' church services at the Western Front, their observations on farming practices in France, and their struggles communicating with the local French population.⁶⁸

Continuing to support enlisted students in these ways may seem innocuous, but they held a great deal of meaning.

Actions like reporting on how the university's enlisted students were doing and sending them care packages strengthened a psychological and emotional connection between the University of Saskatchewan and its soldiers. If students had detested the war as a whole, they might have chosen to cut off all connections to the war and to enlisted students -- either as a form of protest or as a way to mentally distance themselves from the war. Instead, students who remained on campus reasserted the connection between distant soldiers and their home. This reveals that while students believed aspects of the war to be unsavoury or distasteful, they felt that continuing to support their enlisted classmates (and perhaps soldiers more broadly) was important. Emmanuel College student E.H. Maddocks captured what was the prevailing sentiment on the university's enlisted students when he wrote that "although we miss the men who have gone away from us more than we can say, we do not wish that they had not gone... We long and pray for the day when they shall return that we may once again grip their hands and from our hearts say 'Thank you.'"⁶⁹ The importance of supporting enlisted students and the quality of soldiers' characters were not matters which students considered open for debate.

The University of Saskatchewan contributed its fair share of soldiers to the war effort. About 280 of the University's faculty, staff, and enrolled students joined the Allied forces and their supporting services over four years of war.⁷⁰ There can be no doubt that this high proportion of enlistments related to the fact that the student body was predominantly composed of men in the target age range for military service. But this statistic masks how the tone of University of Saskatchewan student opinion shifted from enthusiastic to increasingly sombre over the war's duration. Within the framework of general support for the war and for soldiers, some students took issue with unabashed militant rhetoric, university faculty placing the war above their responsibilities to students, campus recruitment efforts, and the university's military training regimen. Students with farming backgrounds couched their reservations about aggressive recruitment in language praising the patriotic merits of agricultural production, while some other students felt the need to publish their own criticisms of war policy anonymously. University of Saskatchewan student W.W. Swanson recognized the historical magnitude of the past four years of war, writing in March 1918 that "the world can never be again what it was in August 1914; and it behoves us therefore, to investigate as thoroughly as may be the cause and results of these changes."⁷¹ Though the war catalyzed political, social, and economic change worldwide from 1914 to 1918, it also left University of Saskatchewan students with dramatically altered outlooks and attitudes.

Endnotes begin on page 58.

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