

Commemoration, Cult of the Fallen (Newfoundland)

By [Sean T. Cadigan](#)

Summary

In Newfoundland, the cult of the fallen followed the military disaster that befell the Newfoundland Regiment at Beaumont Hamel on 1 July 1916. Newfoundland and imperial officials portrayed the tragedy as a glorious sacrifice, beginning a wartime tradition of honouring the dead as martyrs. While supportive of the veneration of the fallen, William Coaker, the leader of the Fishermen's Protective Union, was uncomfortable with their commemoration as crusaders for British "liberty," by which local elites meant liberal democracy and laissez faire, and which focused on remembering the dead with monuments. Coaker's views triggered a bitter debate about the meaning of the fallen, fostering divisive politics and the end of responsible government in 1934.

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Introduction

The cult of the fallen grew immediately following the disaster that befell the Newfoundland Regiment at Beaumont Hamel on 1 July 1916. The regiment had first gone into action in 1915 at [Gallipoli](#), but most of the approximately 350 men who became casualties in that campaign suffered from disease and exposure in the trenches rather than from enemy fire. Returned soldiers did their best to romanticize the horrible monotony of the campaign, but it was in 1916 that the image of gallant and noble martyrdom became central to a new vision of the fallen.¹ 801 men left their trenches to take part in the British offensive along the [River Somme](#) in [France](#). Hampered by poor planning and a misguided British faith in the effectiveness of their [artillery](#) bombardments and facing superior German defensive positions, these soldiers withered in the face of [barbed wire](#) and [machine gun](#) fire. When the

smoke of battle cleared, 324 men had been killed or were missing and presumed dead while another 386 were wounded. The casualties were staggering, producing a scale of death and tragedy that had not been experienced before. More was to come.² Although accounts vary, about 5,431 Newfoundlanders and Labradorians served on the battlefields of Gallipoli and the [Western Front](#) with the [Royal Newfoundland Regiment](#) during the war; there were 3,565 casualties, including 1,251 deaths. At least 3,000 more served with Canadian, British and other imperial forces.³ In [Newfoundland](#), the cult of the fallen grew out of an effort by authorities to provide an acceptable meaning for the tremendous loss of life and injury on the Western Front.

The Wartime Cult

It was not until 26 July 1916 that the disaster at Beaumont Hamel was fully made known in Newfoundland, allowing time for the local press and authorities to limit potential damage to Newfoundlanders' commitment to the war effort. Military leaders could not allow the losses of 1 July to be perceived as a defeat and it was hardly more glorious to suggest that the men of the regiment had been sacrificed for overall British and French strategic objectives. In consequence, the casualties were converted from a tragic loss of life to a noble martyrdom.

The theme of sacrifice imbued British 29th Division Major General [Beauvoir De Lisle \(1864-1955\)](#) later salute. He stated that the regiment had demonstrated true British heroism and, if it had failed in its assault, it was not because the men had quailed or shirked their duty, but rather "because dead men can advance no farther."⁴ By August of 1916, the local press was largely repeating the message that Beaumont Hamel was a moral victory rather than a strategic loss and it continued to portray the fallen as examples of Britons at their best: brave and loyal, determined, sanctified by a strong sense of Christian mission, and immortalized by sacrifice.⁵

[William Coaker \(1871-1938\)](#), who had formed the Fishermen's Protective Union's (FPU) Union Party and gained election to the Newfoundland House of Assembly in 1913, was the most vocal critic of the war effort by the Newfoundland government of Sir [Edward Morris \(1859-1935\)](#) and his appointed National Patriotic Association (NPA). On the eve of the war, Newfoundland's economy and society had remained dominated by its cod fisheries and seal hunts and by St. John's as the mercantile and political capital. Coaker had founded the FPU to challenge fish merchant firms' exploitation of rural fishing people. Morris's People's Party represented St. John's interests and gained broader appeal through the use of the NPA to conduct the war effort. Coaker remained aloof from the NPA, continuing to fight for the improvement of fishing people by better regulation of the fishing industry and public services

for [rural communities](#). Coaker and the FPU were on the left of the political spectrum, but they were not radicals. Coaker was a populist and ardent member of the [Church of England](#) who believed in the right of every hard-working, God-fearing individual to participate equally in the pursuit of wealth and that the big interests of St. John's – especially merchants, supported by the Morris government – impeded fishing people. The Union Party was part of a North American Progressive tradition, often associated with the Social Gospel in [Canada](#), which was committed to using some combination of state and voluntarist actions to remedy social and economic problems.

In November 1916, news reached St. John's that the British (although not Newfoundlanders) had finally captured Beaumont Hamel. Nonetheless, this news fuelled local pride in the regiment and led to calls for more enlistments as the regiment's reserves were low following further losses at Gueudecourt on the [Ypres Salient](#) on 12 October 1916. Local newspapers called for more volunteers, but Coaker demanded that officials first explain what the tremendous loss of life was accomplishing. The response was simple: glory.⁶ Coaker's political opponents had previously accused him of many things, but the FPU leader was a staunch imperialist who was unwilling to be thought of being disloyal by not supporting the regiment. He joined the cause, proclaiming that the men who now lay dead overseas had "gone forth to fight for Liberty and Freedom... What noble boys! They went forth willingly at the Call of Duty and we rightly call them Heroes."⁷

As casualties mounted in further battles at Monchy and Arras, the cult of the fallen intensified and broadened. St. John's newspaper editors suggested that every loyal Newfoundlander shared in the heroic sacrifices made by the regiment on the Western Front. The first decade of the 20th century had witnessed a surge in a Newfoundland-centred patriotism, often associated with Prime Minister Sir [Robert Bond \(1857-1927\)](#) and with Sir [Cavendish Boyle \(1849-1916\)](#) "The Ode to Newfoundland."⁸ This locally tinged patriotism surged in the spring of 1917. The editor of one St. John's newspaper, the *Evening Telegram*, for example, exclaimed that, by their valour, the fallen had given Newfoundland a new prominence in the British Empire that "generations of politicians could not do. If we hold a higher and more honourable place than we have done among the dominions of our great Empire, it will not have been won for us in St. John's or London but on the fields of France."⁹

Still in opposition, William Coaker accepted the patriotic rhetoric, but argued that the fallen should be commemorated by the Newfoundland government controlling wartime inflation and profiteering. The government had already chosen the anniversary of the tragedy at Beaumont Hamel as Newfoundland's Memorial Day on 1 July 1917 (legislating it as a

permanent Memorial Day in 1918). Coaker commented on the day by claiming that the fallen of Beaumont Hamel served as “a beacon of light” for Newfoundland in its struggle against the Germans overseas and [wartime profiteers](#) at home.¹⁰ Coaker steadily pressured Prime Minister Morris to do more to control the negative economic consequences of the war, pointing out that volunteers could hardly be expected to come forward in greater numbers if the business community was unwilling to make sacrifices to control inflation and profiteering at home. By late 1917, voluntary enlistments were failing to keep pace with casualties, despite the regiment being honoured with the designation of “royal” for its contributions to the battles of Ypres and Cambrai that year. A conscription crisis induced Morris to form a National Government, including Coaker. Although the FPU membership opposed conscription, Coaker agreed to support the National Government in imposing it in exchange for the chance to enact social and economic reforms, particularly in the regulation of the fisheries.

Post-War Cult

Merchants, conservative politicians and newspaper editors opposed Coaker’s commitment to reform. These opponents claimed that *laissez-faire* principles lay at the heart of the sacrifice made by those falling in battle. When the war ended, Coaker’s opponents asserted that his interest in more regulation of society and the economy was “Prussian,” “Hunnish,” or, contradictorily, “Bolshevik.” Such attacks were in keeping with a variety of anti-modern liberal and conservative undercurrents in post-war commemorations of the fallen. Depictions of wartime casualties as Christ-like, crusaders for sacred causes were common. Elites in Newfoundland, like those throughout the British Empire, hearkened to wartime rhetoric about the justice of preserving traditional British values of liberal democracy against more modern German [imperialism](#) and [militarism](#). Coaker’s critics suggested that greater state intervention in the economy followed the German path of government encouragement of rapid industrial and urban expansion or, worse in the post-war world, Bolshevik plans for the overthrow of capitalism.¹¹ From 1919, St. John’s major daily newspapers, the *Evening Telegram* and the *Daily News*, regularly published editorials that claimed that anyone who was truly interested in honouring the fallen must oppose William Coaker. The *Daily News*, for example, claimed during the summer, that Coaker aspired to be a dictator, but that the “the sons of our Empire and those of our Allies in winning the war have swept into oblivion from the nations all individuals of arrogant traits, so that the possessors thereof will be powerless henceforth to do any further harm.”¹² This rhetoric reinforced the association of state intervention with Bolshevism, Prussianism, and disloyalty to the memory of the fallen.

Coaker continued to maintain that the finest memorial to the fallen would be a commitment to progressive post-war reconstruction. He believed the best Newfoundland monument that

could be constructed would be a memorial college as proposed by superintendents of the secondary school system early in 1919. Such a college would improve the training of teachers for rural communities, thereby engaging “in the work of educational reconstruction with the same desire to win as animated those in whose honor and to whom immortal fame the building will be erected.”¹³ Coaker had lost a nephew in the war and valued the commemoration of the fallen. He had supported Newfoundland’s champion in the Imperial War Graves Commission (IWGC), the Roman Catholic military chaplain [Thomas Nangle \(1889-1972\)](#), in his struggle with the Newfoundland government to provide better financial support for a series of memorials on what he called the “Trail of the Caribou” (the woodland caribou being the emblem of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment): Caribou Hill at Gallipoli; Beaumont Hamel, Gueudecourt, Monchy-Le-Preux and Marcoing in France, and Keilberg Ridge in [Belgium](#).¹⁴ Coaker returned to government later in 1919 and began planning for new fisheries regulations.

Coaker’s appeal to the imagery of the noble fallen was unsuccessful because of his new political partner, Prime Minister Sir [Richard Squires \(1880-1940\)](#). Squires was also sympathetic to Nangle, who was an important leader of the Great War Veteran’s Association (GWVA). The GWVA formed in late August 1918, under the presidency of [Harold Mitchell \(1891-1952\)](#), and represented every Newfoundlander who had served with a Newfoundland or Imperial military unit during the war. The GWVA sought to foster a special sense of national pride among its members by romanticizing their service and to encourage the people of Newfoundland to feel a special obligation to veterans because of the heroism and nobility of their military sacrifice. In 1919, the GWVA had taken over the organization of the Memorial Day program for 1 July, which remained the most important public observance for local veterans although Newfoundland observed 11 November as Armistice Day that year along with the other jurisdictions of the British Empire.¹⁵ They had also taken a special interest in planning for a Newfoundland war memorial in St. John’s, of which the FPU newspaper had initially been critical, stating that the people of Newfoundland would not benefit by “statuary” in St. John’s, and that money would be better spent on funding a memorial college, which would open its doors in 1925. The FPU newspaper supported the intensification of the cult of the fallen, printing special Memorial Day editions featuring articles on the “Crusaders of the Twentieth Century” – whose sacrifice at Beaumont Hamel was “the baptism of blood” that “changed the status of the self-centred colony to partnership with the Empire.”¹⁶ Nevertheless, Squires, as prime minister of a financially troubled dominion sinking into recession, regularly refused to increase pensions for veterans, earning the hostility of the GWVA even though, at Coaker’s prodding, he approved Nangle’s spending of up to \$10,000 to help purchase the Beaumont Hamel site for a memorial to the fallen of

the Royal Newfoundland Regiment and the Royal Naval Reserve.¹⁷

Under Coaker's leadership, the FPU had constructed its own town, Port Union, to serve as the organization's headquarters. The town included an Anglican "Soldiers' Memorial Church of the Holy Martyrs" built as a monument to members of the FPU who had fallen in military service.¹⁸ Despite such commemorative efforts, Coaker continued to believe that reconstruction was the best way to pay homage to the fallen: the best form of commemoration was for the state to take more progressive economic and social measures to build a better world. In 1920, as Minister of Fisheries, Coaker established new, moderate fisheries regulations that would require standardized quality in production and more coordinated marketing by fish exporters to minimize glutting, which nevertheless earned him further accusations of Kaiserism, Prussianism, and Bolshevism. The GWVA preferred to see monuments constructed and regularly participated in unveilings, such as the 1921 ceremony for a Celtic Cross and plaque, which became known as the Sergeant's Monument, placed by the Warrant Officers and Sergeants of the 2nd Battalion, Royal Newfoundland Regiment in Anglican Cathedral Square in St. John's. Governor Sir [Charles Alexander Harris \(1855-1947\)](#) and other commentators spoke at the gathering, acknowledging the need for post-war reconstruction, but claiming that this could not be achieved by state intervention in the economy. Such intervention would betray the noble example of those who had fallen in defence of the high ideals of British civilization; monuments would inspire citizens to be inspired constantly by the example of the fallen.¹⁹

Cult versus "Corruption": 1923-1934

The unveiling of the Sergeant's Monument appeared in the same year that Coaker's fisheries regulations failed due to mercantile opposition. From the beginning, Coaker and his opponents were locked in vitriolic public debate, each side accusing the other of betraying the noble sacrifices of the fallen. Deepening post-war recession and political instability had led to overt patronage politics, accompanied by constant allegations of vote-buying and bribery. Coaker's opponents at the *Daily News* claimed that "the feverish post-war years have left behind a trail of greed and gracelessness, in public, industrial and commercial life alike. The high ideals of the war years have disappeared in callous disregard and the sacrifice of honesty and duty to expediency and ease."²⁰ Rumours of corruption involving Prime Minister Squires erupted into public scandal, his resignation, and a public investigation, the Hollis Walker Enquiry, in 1923-24. Coaker withdrew from the government in disgust and joined prominent members of the GWVA such as Nangle in openly admiring Mussolini's [fascism](#) as the best way to restore a selfless and patriotic national harmony that would live

up to the best ideals of the fallen.

At the same time, Nangle, who had been working on the St. John's and Beaumont Hamel war memorials, developed a clever funding appeal that allowed ordinary people to buy unlimited shares at \$1.00 each in the memorial for St. John's and provided certificates to purchasers in return. The appeal was popular, eventually raising \$20,000 for the monument and giving people a tremendous sense of personal attachment to the monument and, by extension, the fallen heroes of the regiment.²¹ Fuelled by the Hollis Walker Enquiry, a new conservative coalition led by [Walter Monroe \(1871-1952\)](#) successfully contested the general election of 1924. Its campaign firmly set the cult of the fallen in Newfoundland as laissez-faire, anti-progressive, and expressly anti-Coaker, all under the guise of anti-corruption. As one of Monroe's candidates, [W.J. Browne \(1897-1989\)](#) put it, the Monroe party was

...on the verge of warfare, a warfare such as they had so nobly carried on from 1914 to 1919 in the fields of Gallipoli and Flanders. Then they fought, aye even sacrificed health, and strength in the execution of their duty. Some of their comrades have even laid down their lives in the struggle to preserve their homes and loved ones from the inroads of terrorism and plunder. Today in 1924 they faced similar conditions. Their country had been desolated by the graft and plunder of its self-style patriots, and now the time has come when they must decide whether they should banish the oppressor from control, or not.²²

The GWVA professed political neutrality, but Harold Mitchell ran for Monroe and some of the material that appeared in its magazine was clearly aimed at Squires, Coaker, and other opponents of Monroe. Captain [Jack Turner \(1887-1948\)](#) poem "July First, 1916-1924" was a case in point. Its eight stanzas clearly expressed Turner's belief that the fallen members of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment would be turning over in their graves at the scandals afflicting Newfoundland. Veterans had no choice but to rally to Monroe in the fight against corruption, so that "our gallant dead may sleep."²³

Conclusion: Nationalist Legacy

Monroe won the election, but his government focused mostly on tax reform that benefited the business community. He quickly lost support as Newfoundland spiraled downward into a public debt crisis. Acrimonious political attacks continued to dominate public life, with every side portraying the others as betraying the noble principles of the fallen. Monroe resigned in 1928 and Squires and Coaker returned to power in the subsequent general election. Government retrenchment and growing unemployment led to rioting throughout 1931 and 1932, some of it fuelled by allegations that Squires had plundered funds intended for veterans. Contemplating default on its public debt payments, the Newfoundland government

secured Canadian and British assistance by agreeing to submit to a British-appointed joint commission of enquiry into Newfoundland's financial affairs, the commission to be composed of British, Canadian, and Newfoundland representatives, chaired by British Labour peer, Lord Amulree, Sir [William W. Mackenzie \(1860-1942\)](#). The Amulree Commission recommended that Britain take charge of Newfoundland's affairs by suspending responsible government and replacing it with an appointed Commission of Government, which took place in 1934.

Very few Newfoundlanders protested as most believed the new view fostered by the political rhetoric of the cult of the fallen: that politicians and people generally had been unable to live up to the sacrifice made by the fallen from 1915 to 1918. For Coaker, the ideals had been egalitarian; for his opponents, they had been for a particular form of laissez-faire liberty. Public memory of the fallen would be reimagined later as the Commission of Government came to an end with Newfoundland's entry into the Canada in 1949. Opponents of Confederation idealized the fallen as a blood sacrifice that had consecrated Newfoundland's growing national status as a dominion within the British Empire. Entry into Canada meant that the sacrifice had been for naught. The cult of the fallen consequently served as an enduring element of nationalist criticism of Newfoundland's place in the Confederation.²⁴ It is ironic that, while Canadians celebrate 1 July as Canada Day, Newfoundlanders observe it as Memorial Day, holding commemorative morning ceremonies in honour especially those who fell on that day in 1916.

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Notes

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15. Harding, Glorious Tragedy 2006, p. 11. ↑
16. Evening Advocate, St. John's, 2, 3 July 1920. ↑
17. Browne and McGrath, Soldier Priest 2006, pp. 88-93; Harding, Glorious Tragedy 2006, pp. 20-1; MacLeod, Bridge Built Halfway 1990, pp. 17-18. Coaker's intervention on Nangle's behalf with Squires may be found in Archives and Special Collections, QEII Library, Memorial University, Sir Richard A. Squires Papers, Coll. 250, file 9.08.010; Coaker to Squires, Ypres, 3 March 1920 (cable); Squires to Nangle, St. John's, 3 March 1920. ↑

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- [Baker, Melvin / Neary, Peter: 'A real record for all time'. Newfoundland and Great War official history, in: Newfoundland and Labrador Studies 27/1, 2012, pp. 5-32 \(Centre for Digital Scholarship Journals\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Beaumont Hamel: July 1, 1916 \(Newfoundland and Labrador Heritage Website\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Beaumont-Hamel Newfoundland Memorial \(Veterans Affairs Canada\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Harding, Robert J.: Glorious Tragedy. Newfoundland's Cultural Memory of the Attack at Beaumont Hamel, 1916-1925, in: Newfoundland and Labrador Studies 21/1, 2006 \(Newfoundland and Labrador Studies\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Newfoundland Regiment Part I: Before Beaumont-Hamel \(Newfoundland and Labrador Heritage Website\) \(Video\)](#)
- [Newfoundland Regiment Part II: At Beaumont Hamel \(Newfoundland and Labrador Heritage Website\) \(Video\)](#)
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- [The Newfoundland and Labrador Heritage Website, section on First World War \(Database\)](#)

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