

## **“EDDIE AND US,” OR REFLECTIONS ON A CLASS PROJECT TO COMMEMORATE A FALLEN SOLDIER OF THE GREAT WAR**

Graham Broad

King's University College at the University of Western Ontario

In September 2006, I challenged the members of my senior seminar class at the University of Western Ontario to research the life of a student from their school who fought and died in World War I. For the students, what began as a straightforward class project rapidly transformed into something much more profound. They devoted far greater effort to it than I had expected; some even continued their research long after the course had ended. For many, the project marked their immersion into “doing” history in the manner of historians. They chased small leads through primary sources, worked in archives, conducted interviews, wrote grant proposals, and experienced, as one student put it, “the disappointment of the dead end and the excitement of a new and unexpected find.” Along the way, they illuminated the remarkable and tragically brief life of a forgotten young man who, in his own time, had been a star athlete, hometown hero, and, for a very brief moment in 1916, one of the most famous soldiers in the British Empire.

The story of the class project began several years ago. In March 2001, while working as a teaching assistant at the University of Western Ontario, I gave my first lecture in a university classroom, shaking and sweating my way through a fifty-minute overview of Canadian participation in the First World War. It was not a good lecture, and my clip-on microphone, which I probably didn't need in the first place, kept cutting in and out. After about thirty minutes, all the telltale signs of a classroom lost were there: The pens were down, eyes had glazed over, and heads were beginning to droop. I stumbled on. Near the end of my time I played the only significant card I had. I encouraged students to consider that Canadians who fought and died in the Great War were mostly young people like themselves. “And this is one of them,” I said, clicking to my PowerPoint slide of Eddie McKay, a Western student who had been killed in 1917. I had discovered him in a footnote in a book about the university's history, and then found a grainy photograph of him in a crumbling clip file about the school's rugby team. I told students the bare-bones facts that I knew about McKay. He had been a student at Western in 1914, had played left wing on the rugby team, and served overseas, but his youth and athleticism had not saved him from being killed in the mud and blood of the Western Front. I thought I detected a moment of renewed attention and reflection in the classroom, and I let it linger for a few moments before dismissing them. Afterwards, a student told me that he was on the rugby team, too, and that the end of my lecture was “the first time I've ever thought about anything.”

Eddie McKay remained in the back of my thoughts for several years. I was puzzled to discover that his name did not appear on the campus cenotaph that

commemorated Western students killed in the war.<sup>1</sup> When the Library and Archives of Canada put digitized copies of the attestation papers of all 619,000 members of the Canadian Expeditionary Force on line, I was puzzled further to find that McKay was not among them.<sup>2</sup> But I conducted no further inquiries into his life until 2006, when, employed as a professor (and much improved as a lecturer), I offered an upper-year seminar entitled "Canada in the Two World Wars" at King's University College, a small teaching college affiliated with Western. While preparing the course, I hit upon the idea of conducting a class project in which students could research Eddie McKay's civilian life and his military career, and, if they saw fit, to find some suitable means of commemorating him on campus. Admittedly, there was a degree of self-interest in all this. Satisfying my own curiosity about the past was the reason I became an historian in the first place, and the project would serve the dual purpose of answering my unresolved questions about McKay while introducing students to the rigors of serious primary and even field research.

I had two general reservations, however. While I do not pander to students, I am mindful of their opinions, and for several reasons I was unsure how students would feel about the project. In *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning, and the First World War*, historian Jonathan Vance argues that, in the aftermath of the trenches, Canadians constructed a social memory of the Great War as a great crusade to save civilization from barbarism. All ambiguity about its causes and conduct and moral misgivings about Britain's own imperial affairs were, for a time at least, repressed.<sup>3</sup> My students, by contrast, belong to a generation of Canadians that feels no particular bonds to the British mother country and that is profoundly skeptical about patriotic justifications for armed conflict, especially those that attend Canada's more recent use of military force in the world, such as the post-9/11 invasion of Afghanistan.

For my second concern, I could assume that these students were interested in Canada's military history (it was the topic of the class, after all), but I also knew that they themselves probably would be, as historian C.P. Stacey once said of Canadians

---

<sup>1</sup>Western has several markers commemorating its war dead. The campus's most visible landmark, a tower built in the gothic Revival style, is itself a war memorial, dating from 1923. However, for a variety of reasons, no cenotaph for First World War dead appeared anywhere on campus until the 1980s. That cenotaph excluded McKay's name, for reasons that will become evident. A newer and complete marker was placed on campus while this essay was in progress.

<sup>2</sup>This remarkable resource came on line over a period of years, beginning in 1996. Names starting with "Mc" (very common in Canada) were the last to be made available. The papers, signed by all individuals who enlisted in the Canadian Expeditionary Force, can be searched at <http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/databases/cef/index-e.html>

<sup>3</sup>Jonathan F. Vance, *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning, and the First World War* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1997).

generally, “an unmilitary community.”<sup>4</sup> While more than 100,000 Canadians were killed in the World Wars—a calamitous total for a nation whose population was less than one-tenth that of the United States—fewer than 700 have lost their lives in military deployments since 1945 and fewer than 200 since the end of the Korean War. Today, Canada’s armed forces are small, and only a handful of my students over the years have served in uniform. Fewer still have been operationally deployed, and none have had parents or siblings die in war. How would they be disposed towards commemorating a soldier of a war whose moral justification seems far less certain today than it did ninety years ago?

As matters would have it, students were exhilarated by the opportunity. What aroused their interest was precisely the fact that McKay’s experience was so alien, so remote from their own. They signed on to the project without hesitation. I had one pedagogical reservation of my own remaining, however, that continued to worry me until the project came to a successful conclusion. There is nothing new in the claim that students learn best when they take an active role in their own education—it is the essence of the Socratic Method. But I approached the idea of group work with real trepidation. As any student will tell you, every study group has its hangers-on and there is the possibility of an improperly supervised group going badly astray in its efforts. For these reasons, Gerald Graff, author of one of my favorite books on teaching, *Clueless in Academe: How Schooling Obscures the Life of the Mind*, has described himself as so resistant to group-work that he plans to one day write an article entitled “Let’s *Not* Break Into Small Groups.”<sup>5</sup> I understood his concerns, but I had just read and been much influenced by two works on education that persuaded me to go forward with the plan despite my misgivings. The first was Kenneth Bruffee’s famous and controversial 1984 article on “Collaborative Learning and the ‘Conversation of Mankind.’” Bruffee argued powerfully that directed group learning replicates the way in which scholars themselves work, creating knowledge through a process of argument and disputation aimed at forging some sort of rough approximation of a consensus. “Collaborative learning,” Bruffee added, “provides a social context in which students can experience and practice the kinds of conversation valued by college teachers.”<sup>6</sup> While I am far too much of an empiricist to agree unreservedly with his central thesis—one very much in vogue among literary critics in the 1980s—that all knowledge is socially constructed

---

<sup>4</sup>C.P. Stacey, *Six Years of War: The Army in Canada, Britain, and the Pacific* (Ottawa: Queen’s Printers, 1955), 3. Stacey, an army officer and historian, wrote two of the three volumes of the official history of the Canadian Army in the Second World War.

<sup>5</sup>Gerald Graff, *Clueless in Academe: How Schooling Obscures the Life of the Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 179.

<sup>6</sup>Kenneth Bruffee, “Collaborative Learning and the ‘Conversation of Mankind’” *College English*, 46:7 (1984), 642.

within peer groups, I was intrigued by the pedagogical potential of giving students a problem to solve and setting them loose upon it.

The second work—in retrospect the more influential of the two in terms of my thinking—was Sir Ken Robinson's study of creativity, *Out of Our Minds*. Robinson proposed that the process of cultivating creativity among students has three essential components. First, they must be encouraged to find the correct medium in which to express their creativity; second, they must be aided in the cultivation of the necessary skills to control the medium; and, third, they must be granted the freedom to experiment within the medium.<sup>7</sup> Helping students to build a skill-set and then use it in a creative manner is part of every teacher's job (or so I have always believed), but my first thought was that Robinson's principle of allowing students to "find the correct medium" for their interests would be difficult to apply, given the comparatively narrow requirements of the class project.

As I began to itemize the tasks that this biographical and commemorative undertaking would require, however, I was heartened to discover that there was far greater scope for students to explore their interests than I initially had believed. I wanted to ensure that every student had the opportunity to do both primary and secondary research, and I invited them to place particular emphasis on those avenues of research that most interested them. Some chose to examine old newspapers, others read histories and memoirs, while others were eager to clear some dust in local archives. There was also a considerable array of administrative work to do. For example, we needed to get permission to place a commemorative marker on campus, raise funds to pay for it, choose a proper location for it, and organize some sort of suitably dignified but also publicized ceremony. At first, I considered taking on these duties myself, but it occurred to me that such tasks, too, are part of every historian's job. Who among us can say that attending meetings, seeking permissions, and applying for funding is not an important part of being an historian? I was surprised to discover that two or three students were eager to take on these duties even though, as I cautioned them, they might very well involve more and perhaps even more difficult work than some other aspects of the project.

I subdivided students into small groups (usually two to four people) and assigned them, based on their own preferences, to such tasks as researching relevant secondary literature, searching local archives, including Western's own, for any trace of McKay's student life, researching local newspapers from the war era, locating and ordering McKay's service records (this proved surprisingly challenging), researching his family history and finding any living descendants, and undertaking the administrative tasks

---

<sup>7</sup>Ken Robinson, *Out of Our Minds: Learning to Be Creative* (Oxford: Capstone Publishing, 2001), 128-129. Instinctively, I had always tried to apply these principles when mentoring students through their essay-writing. Historians have the supreme luxury of working in a field whose disciplinary boundaries are very wide—nearly everything in the realm of human experience prior to the present is ripe for historical examination.

involved in commemorating him with a marker on campus. We also decided that, when the project was complete, we would write a short (four or five-page) biography of McKay and give it, along with all our research findings, to the university archives for use by future historians.

The group project was, of course, just one part of the class, which was otherwise a standard seminar course, devoted to weekly discussions of assigned readings, student presentations, and a handful of short lectures. In addition, every student had a major research paper to produce. I took a few minutes at the beginning of every class, however, to ask for reports on how the project was proceeding. The first breakthrough was the easiest. One student’s meticulous search on that most everyday of modern research tools, Google, revealed two important facts, gleaned from websites that had come on line since the last time I had searched for McKay’s name. First, McKay’s full name had been *Alfred Edwin* McKay. Second and most importantly, he had been an officer and a fighter pilot in Britain’s Royal Flying Corps (RFC).<sup>8</sup> This second discovery resolved two mysteries: the lack of a Canadian attestation paper—McKay had never served with the Canadian forces—and omission of his name from the campus cenotaph. The makers of the cenotaph apparently had neglected to check for students who had served with the armed forces of other nations.<sup>9</sup> This opened all manner of new avenues for investigation.

A second thing happened in the course of the weekly reports. The person I called “Captain McKay” students began to call “Eddie.” At first, I objected slightly at the informality of it, but I began to see that they rapidly were developing a genuine affinity for their research subject. I noted that there was a danger in biographers identifying too closely with their subjects. They replied that what drew them to the project in the first place was the fact that they were investigating a fellow student and that they always call fellow students by their first names. I decided to let this minor controversy pass—there were bigger ones forthcoming—and, in short order, I too started calling him “Eddie.”

From the basic facts they had at the start, students accumulated a remarkable dossier on Eddie McKay. They uncovered his birth, student, and military service records, including copies of his extraordinary, hand-written after-action reports; they found dozens of local newspaper articles following his exploits overseas; over the Internet, they located his name on a marker dedicated to the missing at the Arras Flying Services Memorial in France. They contacted a retired Canadian Air Force historian who had compiled research in the 1950s on Canadian pilots; he owned and donated to them a photograph of Eddie in uniform, taken a week before his death. When they reached a dead-end in a search for his descendants, one student started telephoning

---

<sup>8</sup>In 1918, the Royal Flying Corps and the Royal Naval Air Service merged to form the Royal Air Force.

<sup>9</sup>Canada had no independent air force of its own until 1918. Prior to that time, most Canadians who flew served with the RFC.

McKays in her hometown phonebook and actually turned up some distant relatives. Meanwhile, other members of the group secured permission to place a marker for him on campus and raised the necessary funds to purchase a sizeable bronze plaque.

Here, in brief, is what students discovered. Alfred Edwin "Eddie" McKay, son of William and Mary McKay, was born near Stratford, Ontario, on December 27, 1892. He had a sister and three brothers, two of whom served overseas with the Canadian Army. After moving to London, Ontario, with his mother, Eddie enrolled as a student at Western. He was a star player in both hockey and rugby and helped lead both teams to national championships. In 1915, he declined the opportunity to take a commission in the Canadian Expeditionary Force and instead joined the Royal Flying Corps. He conducted his flight training at Wright Flying School in Augusta, Georgia. Assigned to the RFC's Number 24 Squadron, he seems to have mastered his craft in short order, surviving month after month at a time when a pilot's life expectancy was only a few weeks. In October 1916, we were astonished to learn, he took part in the ferocious dogfight in which Germany's leading ace, Oswald Boelcke, was killed in a collision with another German airplane. For this, Eddie became, for a brief time, internationally famous, although he personally declined to take any credit for the "kill." After a hiatus in Britain as commander of a training squadron, he returned to the front in October 1917 and became an "ace" (a pilot who scores more than five victories), but he was killed in action on the day after his twenty-fifth birthday.

One problem I faced throughout the year was creating an equitable distribution of labor. Some aspects of the project proved to be remarkably easy, others unexpectedly difficult. None of the students performed below expectations, but a few were so enthusiastic that sometimes they ended up taking on work assigned to groupmates. Consequently, I had to make a number of mid-course corrections, assigning new tasks to students or asking them to assist people faced with larger-than-anticipated difficulties. I also urged the enthusiasts to respect the fact that their classmates had marks to earn too, but I reflected that, if having to warn students about doing *too much* work was my biggest problem, things were probably going to turn out for the best. Nonetheless, evaluating students proved to be a difficult task. The project was worth only ten percent of their final grade. I had assigned this rather miserly amount owing to my initial reservations. In retrospect, given the effort that students expended, it should have been worth more. The remarkable thing, however, is that none of the students raised this just point themselves. For me, this confirmed what I had long suspected. Given interesting tasks to perform, students can find motivations to work apart from the necessity of earning high marks. This was evidenced further by the fact that several students continued to follow leads in the summer following the class as a personal hobby project and also by two developments that I had not foreseen. Two of the students quite spontaneously created a Wikipedia entry on Eddie, and, to

my astonishment, a Facebook group in his memory followed in short order. I am not aware of another First World War flying ace who earned this particular honor.<sup>10</sup>

Still, the question of *how* to assign a mark for each student troubled me. With essays, tests, and class presentations, we assign marks on the basis of the quality of results. In this case, however, a given student's research, through no fault of the student's own, might reveal nothing of significance. I knew that was an important lesson about the practice of history: Like prospectors, historians must sift through mounds of earth for a few nuggets of gold. But how would I go about marking a student's effort? I decided that each student would submit a short written report of his or her activities and also complete a form giving an assessment of the quality of the work performed by the other members of his or her sub-group. I realized that this had the potential to breed a degree of resentment (thankfully, it did not), but it would also help to root out any "hangers on" that I had missed. In addition, I made a point of accompanying each sub-group on one of the fieldwork trips in order to observe them at work.<sup>11</sup> Imperfect though this system was, I nonetheless believe that these three methods, when combined with the students' own oral reports, gave me a good basis on which to evaluate the quality of their work. The fact that I received no complaints about grades seems to suggest that I either marked softly or was on the right track.

Still, at times I worried slightly that students were putting too much work into the project at the expense of the rest of the course. But in fact, the class found that their firsthand exploration of Eddie McKay's life and career lent greater meaning to the rest of the course work. It helped, for example, to bring into sharper focus weekly readings about such matters as recruiting, the experience of combat, the social memory of war, and controversies over commemoration.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup>This marked my own initiation into this extraordinarily popular social networking website. I am now a moderator of the Eddie McKay Facebook group. While becoming acquainted with the site, I felt, for the first time (I am not yet forty) the "generation gap" between my students and myself. While the Eddie McKay group is an admirable effort—I was pleased to annotate the photographs the students posted—I derive no particular utility from Facebook generally. Perhaps my students one day can instruct *me* about what I'm missing.

<sup>11</sup>In one case, this proved remarkably gratifying. One student's father, a senior administrator in the local board of education, secured the class access to the records of some of the older schools in the region. I spent an evening with some students pouring through hundred-year-old attendance books in three of the city's oldest schools. On a subsequent trip, the students actually managed to locate McKay's high school attendance records.

<sup>12</sup>In Canada, these controversies have included arguments about the legitimacy of flying ace Billy Bishop's combat record and, most recently, our own version of the Smithsonian's "Enola Gay" dispute, which occurred when the Canadian War Museum mounted a controversial exhibition on Canadian participation in the Allied strategic bombing campaign.

The class project also served as an entry point into important debates about the philosophy of history and the historian's craft. Some students wondered if it was right to "privilege" Eddie over other students who fought in the wars. And why, for that matter, favor the memory of a soldier over, say, a miner or factory worker killed on the job while doing essential war work? Some asked if we should take pride at all in the accomplishments of a young man who killed other young men. Some took the argument to its logical extreme and asked whether we, as historians, had any business taking pride in the past at all. Moreover, they asked, if we can take pride in the past, are there matters about which we should feel guilt? Such issues were the subject of lengthy and, at times, rather heated (though never acrimonious) classroom debate. Many of these debates never approached resolution but that too was part of the lesson—that history's "lessons" are themselves often ambiguous and open to interpretation.

Another controversy emerged when we discovered that, like nearly a quarter of the half-million Canadians who served overseas, Eddie had contracted a venereal disease. We had a long discussion about whether or not this would be mentioned in the summary biography we intended to write. Some students thought that this potentially tarnishing fact ought to be kept secret. I reminded them of words that famous trouble making historian, A.J.P. Taylor, who wrote that "historians often dislike what happened or wish that it had happened differently. There is nothing they can do about it. They have to state the truth as they see it without worrying whether this shocks or confirms existing prejudices."<sup>13</sup> The students wondered, however, whether this particular truth was at all relevant, for surely not every detail of an historical figure's private life needed to be made known. I left it up to the students whether or not to include it in the short biography we intended to write, reminding them that, regardless of what they did, his medical history would be included in the files we turned over to the archives. They decided not to mention the illness in the biography since it seemed to have no impact on his public career. At any rate, they learned something about the difficulties biographers often face.

Some of the discoveries that the students made were of the purely practical kind, such as the fact that locating documents in archives is not as simple as looking it up on the computer, assuming that the archive has a computer at all. In addition, several students had never before experienced the "joys" of microfilm. (One, seeing a spool for the first time, asked me if it was some sort of "computer disk.") The students who ploughed through the microfilm also discovered the very thing that is both the bane and the bounty of research in old periodicals: When looking for one thing, researchers are positively waylaid by everything else. They returned to class with reams of political cartoons, old advertisements, and, thankfully, plenty of front-page news about Eddie McKay.

---

<sup>13</sup>A.J.P. Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War* (London: Penguin Books, 1964), 7. This quotation appears in the foreword to the Penguin edition.



Other students learned that old censuses are often unreliable and can even compound confusion. Was the “Albert Edward” McKay, son of Mary, listed in the 1901 census, the same as our Alfred Edwin McKay, son of Mary, listed in 1911? Moreover, what happens when two sources contradict one another on specific details? Two secondary sources, for instance, recorded that Eddie had been the recipient of the Military Cross, one of the most distinguished British military decorations. No mention was made of this in the local newspapers, however, nor was it recounted in the all-important *London Gazette* (now digitized and on line) where notices of British military promotions, awards, and decorations were announced. We decided it was safest to exclude mention of it from the bronze marker we placed on campus.

Above all, the students learned firsthand that historical accounts are always incomplete, and that historians’ conclusions necessarily tentative. Twenty students, working over a period of eight months, made many remarkable discoveries, but they were also left with many unanswered questions. It was sobering to them to discover that their collective efforts yielded a dossier only about an inch thick. I am always telling my students that historiography never ends; having been, for the first time, involved in its actual creation, they began to believe it.

On November 8, 2007, we placed a bronze marker commemorating Eddie McKay on a stone about thirty yards from the base of the gothic revival tower that serves as Western’s most recognizable symbol and, significantly, as the campus’s oldest war memorial. More than six months had passed since the class had ended, but nearly half of students were able to attend the ceremony. A subcommittee had chosen the location next to a very handsome maple tree, while the wording was arrived at by the consensus of the entire class. The rest of the class was scattered from Alberta to Africa (quite literally) and sent their best wishes.

Although Canada fought in the Boer War and the First and Second World Wars, was a founding member of NATO, fought in the Korean War, the Gulf in 1991, Kosovo in the late 1990s, and in Afghanistan since 2001, Canadians pride themselves on being “a nation of peacekeepers.” Remembrance Day services in Canada often take on a mildly apologetic tone, and on campuses they are made over to reflect the social and political concerns of the day. The students decided that our own ceremony would be strictly apolitical, focusing on Eddie as both a warrior and a victim of war. The ceremony was covered in local newspapers, on the radio, and subsequently by the most popular history magazine in Canada, *The Beaver*. We were also gratified to learn that the Western student council had heard about our efforts and used Eddie’s story as the centerpiece of their 2007 Remembrance Day campaign whose theme was “students who fought for students.” For a week or more, Eddie’s image could be seen on posters throughout the campus.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup>Remembrance Day is the British Commonwealth’s equivalent of Armistice Day in the United States.

"I have committed biography," a colleague once told me, acknowledging that for many people biography is an unfashionable kind of history. But it is also a very difficult kind of history, and one that must be handled with enormous care. Many of the students reported that the project was not only the most momentous undertaking of their undergraduate career but also the first that made them believe that their work had some purpose beyond fulfilling curriculum requirements. One student described the project as having "a lasting and profound impact" on her as she "learned how rewarding it is to take history into the public realm."<sup>15</sup> She went on to complete a master's degree in public history and credits the project with having aroused her interest in that field. Another, now a doctoral candidate and a teaching assistant, told me that he discusses Eddie when talking to his own students about the First World War. "Lecturing about Eddie made me realize that students are humans who respond to human stories," he told me.<sup>16</sup> This point, that the project had a "humanizing" impact on what the students had often considered a rather coldly social-scientific discipline, came up again and again in their feedback. No longer were they ambivalent about the death of someone who would be dead now anyway. Instead, they came to recognize what is often forgotten—that people are the essential subjects of historical study. As one student put it, projects of this kind "can encourage us to care deeply about others, whether they lived now or lived a hundred years ago."<sup>17</sup> I was particularly elated to hear feedback of this kind.

While I do not believe in activist or advocacy-based teaching, I do believe that a liberal arts education must be directed to some purpose other than simply producing a stream of graduates to fill teacher's colleges, law schools, and graduate programs. Neil Postman called the larger purposes of education "gods that serve," while the more secular-learning philosopher Anthony Grayling put it this way:

The aim of liberal education is to produce people who go on learning after their formal education has ceased; who think, and question, and know how to find answers when they need them. This is especially significant in the case of political and moral dilemmas in society, which will always occur and will always have to be negotiated afresh.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup>C. Everett, e-mail to the author, October 19, 2008.

<sup>16</sup>C. Miller, e-mail to the author, October 20, 2008.

<sup>17</sup>K. Gibb, e-mail to the author, October 24, 2008.

<sup>18</sup>Neil Postman, *The End of Education: Redefining the Value of School* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 59-87, and A.C. Grayling, *The Meaning of Things: Applying Philosophy to Life* (London: Phoenix, 2001), 158.

As historians, we justify our profession in terms of its social utility, on the grounds that people need to know history in order to be effective citizens. But the exigencies of academic success sometimes require us to devote the majority of our time to writing and publishing highly specialized works that are often of little interest to the general public. Students, too, can sometimes find their historical studies reduced to not much more than memorizing curriculum and producing essays for the sole purpose of generating marks. Carefully planned, organized, and overseen, group projects of this kind offer an opportunity for students to extend their studies beyond the classroom and the library, and even to receive public recognition for their efforts.