

THEN THERE WERE THREE

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Only three still walk among us.

The oldest are Lloyd Clemett and John Babcock at a 106 years of age. Percy Wilson is a sprightly 105. Each has led long and full lives as husbands and fathers and together have witnessed the sweep of a century of human history.

These three men share a distinction that sets them apart from other centigenarians. They are the last Canadian veterans of the Great War and constitute our only living link to the horrors and triumphs experienced by the half million Canadians who served under arms between 1914 and 1918.

Yet, to our national shame, the proud history these three men embody is fast fading from Canadians' shared memory.

As reported in today's *Globe and Mail*, barely a third of our fellow citizens can name the battle of Vimy Ridge as a key Canadian victory in the First World War, even when the answer is hinted at in the question. One in four respondents thought Douglas Macarthur, not Sir Arthur Currie, was a great Canadian general in World War One; a result that reveals a stunning lack of awareness of both chronology and nationality. Equally disconcerting, less than half of 18 to 24 year olds surveyed were familiar with Capitan John McRae's immortal (or maybe not) war poem, *In Flanders Fields*.

Why do we seem doomed to forget a war that is as important to understanding Canada's journey from colony to nation state as, say, the American Revolution is to the history of the United States?

From the Great War onwards, it has been the veterans, more than anyone else, who have ensured the country understood the link between our military heritage and hard-won nationhood. Through their once million-strong national associations, such as the Royal Canadian Legion, annual Vimy dinners, overseas pilgrimages, and unremitting volunteer work, veterans have kept the traditions of Remembrance alive in communities large and small.

Now, not only are the Great War veterans disappearing, but their sons and daughters who served in the Second World War are, on average, 86 years of age. Of these 200,000 veterans alive today, more than three hundred pass on each week; an attrition rate greater than during the War itself.

The difficult truth is that the entire history of Canada's participation in the wars of the 20th century, especially the Great War, is rapidly slipping out of the realm of lived experience and into the fuzzy world of second- and third-hand memories, to be passed along, or not, to the next generation.

A national gesture needs to be made to mark this watershed moment.

This November 11th, Stephen Harper should announce that the federal government will offer the family of the last Great War veteran resident in Canada a full State Funeral. For a nation in urgent need of renewing the commitment it made at the end of the Great War to "never forget", a State Funeral would allow Canadians to come together to honour those who died, and accept, on their behalf, the responsibility to keep their memories alive.

Detractors will say that State Funerals are only for Governors General and Prime Ministers, or that they are designed to commemorate the life of an individual and not an event such as the Great War.

I say let us for once cast off the usual Canadian timidity and understatement when it comes to celebrating our past. If there ever was a time for our nation to be bold and generous in the commemoration of our history, traditions, and values, surely the passing of our last Great War veteran is that moment.

The death of the last Great War veteran will be a litmus test for Canada.

Are we, in the final analysis, a mature country that understands the value of honouring the sacrifices made by past generations to secure for Canada the future we now enjoy? Or have we become a nation of amnesiacs all too ready to sweep the Great War and its legacy into the proverbial dustbin?

History will soon be our judge.

Rudyard Griffiths is the Executive Director of the Dominion Institute. Sign the Dominion Institute's petition for a State Funeral for the last Great War veteran at www.dominion.ca