

Interview of Geoffrey Kelley by Alexandre Marceau

Sunday, March 11, 2019

Geoffrey Kelley was a member of the National Assembly of Quebec for Jacques-Cartier, from 1994 to 2018, representing the Quebec Liberal Party. He gave one of the plenary addresses at Bishop's University's Symposium to commemorate the centenary of World War One on November 9th 2018. This is a transcript of a later interview between Geoffrey Kelley and student intern Alexandre Marceau at the former's home in Montreal.

Alex: What is your relationship to Frederick G. Scott?

Geoffrey: My grandmother, Mary Scott, was F. G Scott's only daughter (of seven children) and eventually married Arthur Kelley, who, like Frederick, was also an Anglican minister. Mary and Arthur both met in Quebec City at St Matthew's church, which is right in the city and is no longer a church. It is now a public library. Arthur went there to take up his career as an Anglican minister and married the boss' daughter.

Alex: Since Frederick passed away eleven years before your birth, did you get to know Mary's siblings?

Geoffrey: Certainly, of the six sons, I knew four. Charles died at the turn of the 20th century when he was nine, and of the five remaining boys, there was Henry Hutton (Harry) Scott, who was killed in the First World War and whom I never knew but in story. So I knew the other four sons, William, Elton, Frank, and Arthur, in varying degrees and they were all characters. They also all talked a great deal about F. G Scott. My aunt, who's 97, still talks about him with great admiration and he really was the leader of the pack. He filled a room, everyone knew where he went, and he was a man of big energy. They conveyed that he had this sense of self-importance. A story my aunt always tells is when she was once visiting him in Quebec City and they were running late, so he phoned the train station and said "Hold the train my grand-daughter is coming!" In Winnipeg, where he went to support calls for improved working conditions during the post-war strike, the Police took him to the train station and said, "Don't come back." He stirred the pot. History has come down on his side. There was a project on the Plains of Abraham in Quebec City and he was one of the people fighting against the construction of residential and commercial industry to keep it a park. Like you, Frederick's grandchildren also got to know him through the memoir and his whole experience through the First World War. And at that point, in 1914, with six surviving children and his wife Amy Brooks, I just tried to imagine Frederick showing up at fifty-four years old and saying to them, "Oh, listen, I'm going off to the War."

Alex: I can also imagine how that must have been an interesting conversation. That's like my dad, giving me a call and saying, "Hey Alex, I'm going to take leave from work and go off to war. You should do the same – it is your duty."

Geoffrey: Exactly. “You look after things here dear, and I’ll go off to the War.” Now, of course everyone thought the war would end much more quickly than it did, but the memoir he left, *The Great War As I Saw It*, is a very compelling read about his experiences in the war and the anxieties that came along with its prolongation. It is very selective but certain themes come through in it, most particularly his devotion to the soldiers – not just the officers. He had a reputation as someone who was there for everyone and trying to make this horrible situation as liveable as possible, especially those people who needed faith – he had these impromptu altars to have church services. But, from what we’ve all read on the First World War, it sounds like hell on earth. So to have someone provide a little bit of help, or spiritual guidance in that terrible situation is quite a good story.

Alex: Isn’t it ironic that you mention his make-shift altar while today in the news, there was an article saying they discovered at Grace Church on-the-Hill, in Toronto, an old altar stone beneath the rector’s lamp with the inscription in purple crayon, “From the altar of La Neuve-Église, Belgium, 1915,” and the initials “F. G. S”? There are so many stories attached to these “war memorials.”

Geoffrey: Yes it is; especially since you drove down in this snow storm to talk to me about my grandfather (laughs). One of the most famous stories from that book which gets passed down in the family is his search for Harry’s body. It is quite a compelling read to wander through No-Man’s land, which at the best of times was always a dangerous thing, and with a flashlight hoping not to be seen from the other side of the lines, going through the mud and everything turned up, finally coming across a hand with a family ring on the finger. To be able to identify his son Harry’s body and being able to give him a proper burial – I think every human, regardless of culture, would agree that that’s a very compelling story. There is also the story where he supports the soldier until the moment of his execution for desertion by travelling over twenty miles in the rainy night from officer to officer. In all these battles to see someone get executed, where hundreds of people die during the day in battle, is poignant as it is; but the shift Frederick conjures in the memoir, draws on our own imagination and sympathy to imagine what war must have been like – always surrounded by a different version of death.

Alex: I isolated and re-read those two scenes many times and never understood why the latter was equally as poignant as the search for Harry. It must be the conscious anticipation of death which lies in heavy contrast to the unremitting un-announced deaths. Do you think these impacted his sons?

Geoffrey: Well when he came back from the war he went to the Winnipeg General Strike and tried very much to stand up for his boys’ rights, and I think is something that has echoed in his son Frank who became one of the founders of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), which became the NDP. Frank would have been more on the left side of Canadian Politics. His Regina Manifesto which was written in 1935 sets out a socialist vision for the future of Canada. It’s really quite a family.

Alex: Frank wrote the manifesto?

Geoff: Yes, well him and others. The CCF is something that F. R Scott was heavily involved in and he became the first NDP Party President in 1961. He was a Dean of Law at McGill, a constitutional expert, and a good friend of Pierre-Elliott Trudeau’s; so he had a distinguished career as a lawyer. And

many people credit F. R Scott with planting the idea of the Charter of Rights in Trudeau's mind. Canada needed in its constitution a Charter of Rights. But, like his father, Frank was also a poet, he wrote lots of poems. Contrarily, and as you know, the old arena at Bishop's is named after his eldest son William, who serves in the war and loses an eye; he ends up being the Chief Justice of the Quebec Superior Court. He was the establishment lawyer on one side, and F. R Scott was the radical and socialist; so there were two poles in the family.

Alex: The classic family divide! I wrote an essay last semester on two of F. R Scott's poems and I compared them to works by Frederick. Even in Frank's writing, it seems like he is rebelling or disassociating himself from his dad's values.

Geoff: Well, you know, it's also the change in generations. You've read F. G's poetry, and it's poetry from a Victorian age. It's self-confident, a God-fearing kind of age that is difficult for us today to read it and relate because two great wars have happened and all the subsequent social upheavals. It's a very different world and it's harder to understand F. G's view of the universe. F. R Scott's poetry, even though he was born over 100 years ago, he was a much more modern person and his work made quite a bit of a difference. You can still relate to his vision. F. G was a child of the 19C and very much reads like that. The war happens, and the whole modern period after the war is a much darker place because faith has been shaken, the British Empire has been shaken, millions of people lost their lives. So the optimism of F. G Scott ends up looking pretty naive after the First World War, where fate doesn't always work out and things aren't always that rosy. Even for F. G Scott, when the soldiers came back, they weren't all welcomed and many of them unemployed. The vision of the Empire that things were going well really is exploited in F. R Scott's poetry. I don't think Frank had the same level of faith as his father. The church still played a role, but it wasn't what it was for his father – there is quite a contrast there between the two. Frank is more a humanist and has more of a socialist approach to how things should be organized. F. G was a High Anglican minister and very much a man of faith.

Alex: I found that as well when I began reading his poetry on my own. It's harder to understand because of the time difference and value difference. I do think it quite important however to at least try and position yourself in the 19C to see how he approached the war. I tend to ask myself, perhaps naively as well: How could Canada produce half a million soldiers? Did these different views stand out to you when your uncles would talk about Frederick? When you were younger, could you tell your uncles had a different relationship to him?

Geoffrey: There was always that sort of split. William's world was very much establishment and becoming a judge in a high powered law firm, while Frank was into the radical politics and many people felt that it took McGill a long time before they made him the Dean of Law in 1961 due to his political views. Uncle Arthur is the one I knew best because we would go and visit their place in the summer. They had a place on the Lake and he was a notary. He was the least serious of the crowd. As the youngest you have a different kind of personality and he was quite a character. Elton returned to

Bishop's and taught in Divinity Hall, but he passed away when I was six so I didn't know him too well. Uncle Frank I got to know as I got older. He had a house in Westmount and when I was your age I would go over and have tea, talk to him about poetry, the constitution, and his writing. He was very distinguished and loved to talk – he had lots of stories to tell, but it was always cerebral. It wasn't someone you went to talk to about the Habs game.

Alex: Last summer, Claire and I went to the small isolated cabin on LakeMassawippi to see where he wrote. I guess he went there to think, write, and compose those cerebral thoughts that can get cluttered up in the city?

Geoff: Yeah. Well they all love nature, and particularly, Arthur and Frank who had places outside of the city. They loved to go fishing and walking through the woods, pretty much enjoying the Laurentian Shield, which happens to be one of F. R Scott's most famous poems. That part of our Geography and our Canadian landscape, they really enjoyed.

Alex: It seems like he reflects his father's outlook of nature in the memoir's early chapter "The Voyage to England," while leaving Quebec for the first time, where he describes that very shield in the light of the sunset as a melancholic transition to war in Europe. I have been going through some of their letters, and in the memoir maybe only four times he mentions being with his sons, when you would talk to your family, were there many more personal ties than in the memoir?

Geoff: Hard to say, I guess it's all in the McCord museum, but Harry wrote a lot to his mother and to his sister. I think there is quite a collection. Back in those days manliness was important. You probably wouldn't open up to your father in the same way you would open up to your sister. The trenches in the First World War were a very scary place. So certainly there was a lot of understandable and justifiable fear. I think he had some premonitions that this may not work out as many soldiers and officers did. I think you'll find, or in the family, more of Harry baring his soul (you'll find in those letters too), and it's hard to understand Frederick completely as he wandered up and down the front. Henry only did around 9 months, so they wouldn't actually have been together all that long. Getting together wasn't all that easy either.

Alex: Although Scott's narrative indeed made his travels seem somewhat easy compared to the common soldier, meeting up certainly seemed like a privilege. Turning from your personal relationship with your family and the memoir to the Bishop's War Symposium, did seeing posters of fellow Bishop's soldiers – three of your uncles – bring back certain memories or anecdotes in particular? How did you like them?

Geoffrey: One of the things I found very interesting about the symposium, is that in history books you often get into these big numbers of 65, 000 Canadians who died or five hundred thousand in uniforms. So in any of these instances when you can start putting names to these statistics it makes it far more meaningful. What I thought was so neat was that you were connecting with the Bishop's community, which was under one hundred students in that day, and so many of them go off to war. It makes it a much more personal experience. When you go across Canada through those small towns, and here I

think of Picton, Ontario, so many people from these small communities died and it's repeated all across the country. All those mothers and fathers who got a telegram saying, "We regret to inform you that your son is missing in action." And those poor people who also had to deliver all those telegrams.

Alex: I thought about that a lot – being a part of the postal service and delivering these messages. It was your role; your duty and contribution to the great War effort. Frederick too, who when soldiers were on their death bed, collected their last letters, dying words, and performed final rights service for them. Death is almost naturalized for them.

Geoffrey: It is. As males, if you were to think of the ones you went to highschool with, if half of them are killed, it is really astounding to try to imagine Canadian society at the time and the impact all of this would have. If you're talking about half a class being wiped out, and you think of the Newfoundland regiment at Beaumont-Hamel on July 1, 1916, there is a story of one family, four cousins, who all die within minutes of each other. So that's why even today in Newfoundland on July 1st it starts with a Remembrance Day ceremony and they celebrate Canada later on. It's an emotionally charged day because on that day in history, almost 800 soldiers went over the top in the Battle of the Somme, and only sixty nine return the call the next morning. Some were taken prisoners too. For a small community, to lose that many people on one day, it affected every family back home. So what I enjoyed about the symposium, and although it turns out my relatives were there, is this whole notion that beyond the statistics, these rough numbers, they are real men and women; real families torn apart. You know, everyone said that Harry Scott, the one who didn't come back, was in fact the really smart lawyer – so God only knows what would have happened.

Alex: It's interesting you point that out. When I was reading letters prior to Harry's departure, and knowing (thanks to hindsight) that Frederick eagerly expresses a desire to join the men in the trenches at the front, Harry always signs off with, "be careful, don't get too close to the front 'old man.'"

Geoff: In 1914 people thought the war would be over by Christmas, but in 1916 you're far in the longer haul and you're starting to run out of volunteers until we get to the Conscriptioin crisis in 1917. So no one foresaw how long and how bloody the whole thing was going to be. The crippling losses lead me to the second point at the Symposium I had spoken about, which was a trip with my son ten years ago, who is now thirty-three and a little bit of a history buff. His introduction to it all was CBC's production called *The Great War* by the McKenna brothers. They found a dozen descendants of people who served during the First World War, and took them back to England, France, and Belgium to tour the battle sites. As a descendant of F. G Scott, my son got to go and had a really interesting time. They hired certain actors to play central characters. A distinguished officer named Talbot Papineau, who dies in Passchendaele, is played by Justin Trudeau. So it is very interesting. My son was so impressed that we decided to go back. We rented some bicycles in Brussels and biked all the way down to Ypres, Passchendaele, and St Julien. We saw the little bunker where John McCrae wrote "In Flanders Fields," and then bicycled across into France and went to Vimy Ridge. I think every Canadian should go. It's a pretty impressive monument. Just the logistics of winning that battle and going into the tunnels underground. It's a pretty spooky place.

[At this moment Judy, Geoffrey's wife, brings out photos of people re-enacting the soldiers in the trenches.]

There is the monument in St Julien to remember Canadian soldiers. The Vimy monument is in the town of Arras and opened in 1936. On it are the names of all the Canadian soldiers who were never found. One of my colleagues in the National Assembly, her grand-father was killed in the war about three weeks before Harry Scott, and his was one of the names when we visited Vimy Ridge, we were able to identify. It makes it much more personal when you can see that.

Alex: Well, if Frederick never found Harry's body, his name would have been on the monument.

Geoff: Yeah. After that, Greg and I biked down to Beaumont-Hamel and ended up in the French city of Albert, which is where Harry Scott's grave is.

Alex: Is that the same grave as featured in the picture with both Amy and Frederick side by side Harry?

Geoff: No, the grave was redone. The Commonwealth Graves Commission organized dozens and dozens of gravesites across Belgium and France. These are much more traditional with the white stones, roses, and the Maple Leaf on it. That's where he is buried now. He would have been re-buried in this small graveyard in Albert, which is around 50 km South of Vimy Ridge. We were gone about ten days and biked 600 km.

Alex: Did you guys bike by a lot of these cemeteries? And between them, was it all country-side?

Geoff: Yes, well it's quite built-up, but you know, there are remnants of the war everywhere. Ypres is the place where a lot of British people go and it has a Remembrance Day ceremony every night at 20h. They do the Last Post, the traffic stops out of respect, it's called the Menin Gate, and there is the big World War One museum. It's remarkable because as you go into Ypres you feel like you're in a medieval town.

Alex: Indeed, the reconstruction is quite amazing! I saw a picture from 1918 and there was literally nothing standing but rocks.

Geoff: Exactly. They rebuilt the church, church hall, the museum, everything. To give you an idea, we were there ninety-five years after the war ended and were in this lovely Bed and Breakfast on the outskirts of town. There was a big farmer's field behind it and the owner was telling us how every spring metal still comes up from the ground. And occasionally it is an unexploded bomb and they have to get a bomb squad in. Helmets, bayonets – all sorts of stuff is still emerging as the ground filters out and the stuff is uncovered. The owner was showing us bullets and all. When you bike it, you realize that the front was really quite narrow. You think of the Second World War which was fought all over Europe. However, in World War One, it was the line from the North Sea to Switzerland – a long scar. Although it moved back and forth a few kilometres, everything happened in that corridor. A ton of bombs, shells, bullets, and bodies are in a really concentrated area. There's the terrible French battle of

Verdun where hundreds of thousands of soldiers lost their lives. It's staggering. The British equivalent of Vimy Ridge is another monument called Thiépval, which has 70,000 names of British and South African soldiers whose bodies were never found. 70,000. You're sitting there and reading any English last name you can think of. Miles and miles of Smiths – it blows your mind really. You realize too that most of them were kids – all your age.

Alex: That's what's crazy for me. When I started digitizing The Mitre last year with Dr. Grogan, she gave me the 1940s. I immediately starting reading war letters from students to their friends or parents back home in Lennoxville. And then when I did World War One, I thought of having half your mates gone because of the war. And here I was, at Bishop's, reading about men who lined up in the Quad for military practice when I walk through frivolously.

Geoff: What I liked about Claire's project is putting faces to names. For the Vietnam war and the Iraq war, it is sort of in the abstract, but when you can trace the impact this had on families, people, those who survived, those who didn't, it helps you understand the human dimension of war and what terrible consequences war always brings with it.

Alex: That was the most common feedback students in the class gave about the project – actually understanding the human dimension of war and how World War One brought a new dimension of blood and death. And then, what it meant to actually go to the trenches, not do too much more the whole day, and then have all the action suddenly happen and within minutes hundreds of lives lost.

Geoff: Yeah. So that was a real fun trip we did together. We saw the "Brooding Soldier" in Saint Julien, which is just outside of Ypres. As opposed to sometimes triumphant monuments, this one is very pensive and thoughtful. Vimy Ridge is very mournful as well.

Alex: Did you do this trip after reading Scott's memoir The Great War As I Saw It? How old were you when you read it? Did your time reading this memoir change your perceptions or thoughts about it?

Geoff: I think I read it when I was your age. I grew up in the sixties around the Vietnam War, so it was already a controversial thing. Yes, the notion of World War Two was of good vs Evil, but the First World War was harder to cast quite in those terms. I think already by the 1960s as I was becoming aware of these things, people were aware of the terrific cost of the First World War. I don't know if Frederick enriched my understanding of the War because it was fought at a tremendous cost and it wasn't always that clear why it was fought – it was more ambiguous. There had been very powerful novels like *All Quiet on the Western Front* by the German writer Erich Maria Remarque that showed that the German soldiers themselves were just as scared and as young as the Allied soldiers. It's not that the Scott sons talked about the War all that often, but the book was there and we were all encouraged to read it. The lore was there and we knew that one of the Uncles had lost his life, in the same token that in the Second World War, William's son fails to get into the army due to poor eye sight, so he served in the Merchant Marines and he's torpedoed and loses his life March 11, 1943. There is a monument in Westmount, near Westmount City Hall, where Sherbrooke Street branches to Selwyn House School, you'll find there is a Richard Aird Scott on that monument. That was my father's

cousin; Frederick's grandson dies in the Second World War. My dad turned eighteen in 1943 but fortunately it ended before he saw the action. Judy's dad was a pilot in the Second World War. So it affected many Canadians and you grow up with these stories and a sense that most Canadian families have war stories and things to tell depending on the age and the generation.

Alex: Did you find that when you were biking across the front and you came to these small towns, that certain anecdotes from your family or memoir came up? Did you ever sort of stop on your bike, look around and think, 'Wow, this is where that battle happened?'

Geoff: Certainly. Greg got a better sense of it because for example, at the beginning of the memoir, there is a church service in Amesbury, so Greg got to go to that church and many of those small village churches haven't changed much in 100 years. Seeing Harry Scott's grave, knowing the back story, looking up and down this road where so many people died in the Battle of the Somme, obviously reading the memoir made things more emotional and this is where these things – ground zero – happened. On Salisbury Plain, if you remember, where on Christmas they have over 15, 000 soldiers, and seeing the bunker where "In Flanders Field" was written and knowing that in school all over Canada we have to memorize and get familiar with the poem. To see that spot, the plaque, and his story was moving. To actually see these battle sights, Vimy Ridge in France, but now almost "belonging" to Canada. You can now go under a tiny fraction of the dingy little tunnels, the graffiti that soldiers put on the wall, the battalion from Winnipeg, "I love Mary;" all these messages from these soldiers. As you said, war was that strange mixture between waiting and waiting in the mud and the cold, with the rats, for a morning of action where bodies and actions go spraying, and then it goes calm again for days, weeks, even a few months; it's a strange stop and go, stop and go. A lot of stop, and a little bit of go.

Alex: Well there are these long, almost meditative passages, where Frederick is walking around for miles and miles at night beneath the stars, but he describes it as the theatre, with its lights going up, the noises in the background. So you're removed from it, but you're only really about five miles from the action.

Geoff: Eventually he does get injured and a shell goes off, leaving the shrapnel in his legs.

Alex: Switching to religion and the post-war period we spoke of, it is not surprising that at some point in the family tree, one member would slowly move away. Is there still anyone working in the church?

Geoff: Well we started going to church but when it got to the sixties, we sort of just stopped. I was happy, at the age of eleven or twelve because I didn't need Sunday school on top of Monday to Friday, but I don't know what motivated that decision. My dad, later on in life before passing away, started going back and getting involved in the social mission of the church. There's the red-roof church down by Place-des-Arts that has a day centre for homeless people and dad would volunteer there at times. Mom was never really caught back into it again. There were all the controversies around Vietnam and some of the churches in the United-States were still segregated. I remember talking to my mom about

that and she could never really figure out how these “square Christian beliefs” would have a black only church or a white only church – she just said it didn’t make any sense.

Alex: I guess in your generation, with all of these forms of power being questioned and these social movements for change, I can imagine how having ties to the war can render an understanding and sort of empathy towards it, but you also understand its negative effects on a deeper level.

Geoff: Well even contemporarily, what everyone thinks about Iraq and things like this – nothing takes away from the individual bravery of these soldiers. One of the saddest things in the United-States is the Vietnam Memorial in Washington D. C. There are 55, 000 names on that wall and you go there at any time and there are still people putting down not just flowers, but a pack of smokes, or a can of beer, and they are still trying to connect with the names on the wall. Some of the people take a piece of paper and etch the name. You can see that even fifty years later people are left scarred. Here these soldiers went to Vietnam and when they came back, they were ostracized by some people, saying ‘it was a terrible war, why did you do that? Why did you go?’ It’s important to always distinguish and respect those people who go into those battles at society’s behest. We send them out there in our collective name and you always have to respect that. Thousands are dead, trillions of dollars are spent, and you can have a debate about whether the war itself is good or not, but the individual must be honoured. In one of the contemporary films that I think best represents these modern wars, *The Hurt Locker*, here you are and you’re eighteen years old, it’s 100 degrees outside and you’re walking with 40 pounds of gear on your back in the streets of Baghdad, where you don’t speak the language – and you’re terrified. I thought the director caught that moment so well. Talk about playing with your mind. It wasn’t the eighteen year old who chose to be there amongst explosive devices, where there may be a little kid playing in the corner with the trigger and can blow you up.

*Alex: Film gives you that objective reality where you can dive into the subjective. I would be interested to watch *The Great War*, the film your son went over to Europe for, because it takes all of the texts and poems that we know and in one frame articulates those manifestations.*

Geoff: They were saying one of the First World War songs has the title “Green Fields of France,” and it is a beautiful song about someone going over to France and dying. Don’t quote me on the numbers here, but I think Canada had seven or eight million people, and around half a million soldiers. Take the women out because it was mostly males, take the young children and older males out, the chunk of the male population between eighteen and forty, and half a million of them were in uniform. A ninth of them getkilled. Every circle of friends and family would have lost people. It is a staggering social consequence. Inevitably, the question is, “What was that all about?”

Alex: Especially in hindsight, we know that twenty years later the Second World War breaks out. Earlier you mentioned that every Canadian should go visit Vimy Ridge or some of these sights, why do you think it is even more important that we go now, especially since we don’t have any surviving veterans?

Geoff: Exactly that, because there are no living survivors and it is up to us to remember their sacrifices. I don't say it so that we convey raw patriotism, but the monuments are very solemn, not all very victorious and triumphant. It's more a feeling of, "wow, that was lousy and our vision of justice and freedom prevailed," but it's a subdued sort of thing. There are many small towns across Canada with a World War One memorial. Some of them have the Angel Wings and the triumphant signals, but many are solemn. These places took the time to remember the soldiers and it is interesting to see the different styles.

Alex: Well we have the small one in Lennoxville and it is very simple too. Geoff, thank you kindly for your time. I think one hundred years ago many people would know about your grand-father and I hope that the contemporary Bishop's community can learn as well. He seemed like quite the humorous character indeed!