

Farewell to Memorial Library 1914-1918

Just two weeks after the end of the Great War of 1914-1918 the Board of Regents of Mount Allison “heartily endorsed the proposition of erecting a Library Building as a War Memorial in honour of Mount Allison students who have made the supreme sacrifice in behalf of our country”. It should never have happened but this memorable heritage landmark has now vanished from the university landscape. “It was not 'simply' a cenotaph, it was an icon of an age, the physical expression of that responsibility to remember.”

“The Centre for the Arts will be constructed around the University’s historic Alumni Memorial Library building, mixing the traditional architecture of that landmark with exciting contemporary design.” That was the promise of the Jump Campaign to enrich the Mount Allison experience. But in 2009 a technocratic Administration ‘pursued with vigour’ the design of a new Centre for the Arts by retaining the services of an architectural firm insensitive to the historical and physical continuity of the campus. Then a ‘simply unrealistic 5 million dollars needed to retain the Memorial Library’ plan was fabricated to assure the removal of a perceived obstruction to their ‘unique, creative, and world class’ aspirations.

In May 2010 letters from concerned alumni began to appear in the local press questioning the rumour that the Administration was planning to demolish their beloved Memorial Library. Concept drawings for the proposed Arts Centre without the Memorial Library were discovered on the architect’s website. When reference to this was made in letters these images mysteriously vanished. With public interest mounting a press release was issued by the Administration in October 2010 confirming that planning of a new Arts Centre was proceeding based on the demolition of the Memorial Library.

In January 2011 a Committee was formed and a past Regent was the first of some 1700 alumni and friends to sign an online petition to ‘Save the Mount Allison Memorial Library’. On April 7th under the signatures of the President and Chair “an ‘open letter’ to alumni & friends of Mount Allison” was sent forth claiming ‘broad support on campus and in our community’, confirming the ‘simply unrealistic 5 million dollars’, and promising preliminary drawings for the proposed Arts Centre by the end of the month. At the Alumni AGM in May a motion was passed authorizing a request to the Board of Regents to receive a presentation from the Committee. Also in May, responding to an application from the Tantramar Heritage Trust, the Minister of Wellness Culture and Sport deemed the Memorial Library worthy of designation as a ‘Provincial Heritage Place’. A defiant Administration vehemently rejected this offer to cherish their heritage and ‘pursued with vigour’ an objection under the Act. Upon receiving notice in August of successfully pressuring the Minister to withdraw his ‘intention to designate’, the Administration proceeded with undue haste to prepare a tender call for the demolition of the Memorial Library. In a last ditch effort to save the Memorial Library the Committee petitioned the Courts on the question that Mount Allison had an obligation to maintain the Memorial Library to honour the trust that had been created with those who gave so

generously to build this memorial. The Committee questions the veracity of documents filed with the courts by the Administration. That application was rejected.

In September 2011 the independent student newspaper The Argosy carried a front page headline article claiming that in an August meeting with a representative of the Administration an offer had been proffered by a generous alumna for the 'simply unrealistic 5 million dollars' needed to retain the Memorial Library. A recalcitrant Administration rejected that offer on the spot stating it was 'more than just the money'. In reaction to this report, several emphatic and somewhat threatening letters were sent out by the Administration to selected alumni and others denying these facts. However the contract was awarded and sadly demolition commenced in October. It is now February 2012, some four months later, and the last remnants of this storied landmark have been trucked off to landfill. Ironically the Committee believes that the monies spent in the demolition of the Memorial Library would have been sufficient to make any necessary structural upgrades.

It is clear that the Administration has 'pursued with vigour' the destruction of the Memorial Library. In a suppression of academic freedom, faculty were instructed to not oppose the university plans. One observer noted: "The admin looks like it's not satisfied with tearing down historic buildings, it's trying to sanitize history too. An address within Mt A has been editing the Andrew Cobb entry on Wikipedia lately (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andrew_R._Cobb) to post a lot of complimentary things about the university's upkeep of the biology building and Centennial Hall. They've also been repeatedly trying to delete anything in the Memorial Library information that might make the university look bad." In a message received from an astute alumnus of the Class '44 this was noted: "If you go on the Mount A Web site and look at the U-Tube about the Library, you will see a deliberate attempt to make it look useless, littered and run-down, plus dreary music playing. Contrast that with the U-Tube about the Fine Arts Centre. There has been a vast plan to orchestrate a depreciation of the meaning of the building. I doubt if anything or anyone could have stopped it!"

The Save the Mount Allison Memorial Library Committee is disheartened that their efforts have ended in failure. But that is the reality and the Committee must be dissolved. A request will be made to present a final report to the Alumni AGM in May 2012 regarding the presentation to the Regents as approved by the 2011 AGM. In addition the Committee has identified three issues of importance that should be attended to by independent working groups: a suitable cenotaph, documentation of the Memorial Library story, and improvements in the governance of Mount Allison.

1 Mount Allison has an obligation to erect a suitable cenotaph to reaffirm its commitment to honour the response of the Mount Allison family to 'the most catastrophic event in the Canadian history'. The Alumnae and Alumni Societies and the Methodist Church determined "to erect a library as a memorial to the loyalty and heroism of Mount Allison men and women in the war" where names placed there will: "go down through the years cherished and revered by successive generations of grateful students". To paraphrase a prominent alumna's comments: "The Bricks and Mortar we 'do not'

forget!” We do not condone the unnecessary destruction of this cenotaph. “The value of the Memorial Library lay not simply in the names of the dead it honoured: it was a monument to a generation who asked the ultimate sacrifice of their friends and family. It was the physical expression of that responsibility to remember.”

2 The chronicles of the Memorial Library are rich and compelling. Erected as a War Memorial to honour the 73 Allisonians who sacrificed their lives in the Great War so that we can live in a land that is ‘glorious and free’, and an architectural treasure constructed of indigenous red Sackville sandstone designed by ‘one of Canada’s great architects’, the Memorial Library was an integral component of ‘the most beautiful campus’ in Canada. The story of the Memorial Library 1914-1918 must be documented for the Archives. The Committee will also encourage the publishing of an illustrated book hopefully to be completed for the centenary of the Great War to be made available for alumni as a memento.

3 It is clear to our Committee that the current governance has failed the Allisonian family. There are issues of accountability and respect that have not been suitably addressed in the saga of the Memorial Library including lack of transparency, failure of Regents to have any space between themselves and the Administration, failure of Alumni Board to ensure proper role for alumni in decision-making, a plethora of misleading communications, the disaster regarding lack of acknowledgements and responses, and limits to time served as a Regent. As a proud alumnus remarked: “Surely a university that recognizes its proud traditions will not turn its back on the opportunity to honour and capitalize on its heritage. If we cannot depend on our institutions of higher learning to be aware of and appreciate the worth of responsible heritage preservation, where shall we turn?” The governance of Mount Allison must not condone such ‘academic indifference’. To strive for excellence, without soul, is to seek mediocrity.

In conclusion, our Committee is grateful to the hundreds of alumni and friends who have travelled with us over the past year offering encouragement and words of support for our efforts. In the midst of administrative stonewalling, and anguish declared by alumni and friends alike, we have tried our best, with limited resources, to represent the feelings, insights, and memories of those who value both the past and future of Mount Allison.

We thank you for taking the journey with us,

Save the Mount Allison Memorial Library Committee

<http://argosy.mta.ca/index.php?q=article%2Ftruth-and-faith-justice-and-right#.TyRUiQJfSfE.email>

If any reader would like to participate in one of the suggested working groups, please drop us a note: mta.memorial.library@gmail.com