

The Sackville Tribune Post

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Regents have power to save Memorial Library

Editor's note: the following is an open letter to the Regents of Mount Allison University and is published at the author's request.

Dear Regents,

I would like to make it absolutely clear why I am in opposition to the demolition of Mount Allison's Alumni Memorial Library.

I am a professor emeritus of fine arts and spent 29 years teaching in the department, 19 of those as head of the department, and am very aware of the need of the department to have proper facilities.

I fully support the idea of a fine and performing arts complex.

I was very keen on Jack Diamond's design that used the Memorial Library as the corner stone of such a complex.

I was shocked that this concept was laid aside and a decision made to destroy the Memorial Library. This cannot be allowed to happen.

I believe that there has been a lapse of the collective memory of both the regents and the administration of the university as the Alumni Memorial Library is, as its name clearly states, a memorial to alumni who died in war in the service of Canada.

This building was built largely with funds collected from the families and friends of the fallen of the Great War of 1914-18.

The building later was used to honour as well the dead of World War Two and Korea. The moving of plaques from the library to the new student centre does not magically de-sacralize the Memorial Library. The building is still the memorial.

In trying to fathom why the regents, the administration and many of my colleagues do not understand that it is clearly wrong to destroy a memorial to fallen war dead I have come to the conclusion that they are collectively too young to remember the great wars that took the lives of so many young Canadians. I, at 72, am barely old enough to remember World War Two.

I cannot think of a colleague in the present day faculty who is a veteran.

I enlisted in the American Army at the age of 17 in 1956. It seemed like a good idea at the time, but in retrospect it was likely not the brightest thing that I had ever done. I ended up serving all of 1957 and part of 1958, 16 months in all, in Korea as part of United Nations command drawing combat pay, but with very little actual combat.

I did, however, meet my first Canadians there along with troops from many nations. The three years I spent in the active army taught me that I really was too young to die and that my life lay ahead of me.

Those, mostly boys, whose names are on the plaques that were in the Memorial Library did not have that luxury.

They, like me, joined the army as boys and died as very young men. We can stand at Cenotaphs and repeat that they shall not grow old, but I have certainly enjoyed growing old at the expense of young men and women who didn't.

The other thing we in the Legion say at Cenotaphs is " We shall remember". The regents and the administration of Mount Allison are not remembering when they decide to destroy a memorial that was built to honour Mount Allison students who died for their country.

I wonder how many of these people who would demolish this library could walk through the cemeteries in France of Canadian, American and even German war dead

without deploring the wasting of so many, many young lives.

Indeed, many of the names of the war dead on the Mount Allison plaques have no graves as they were blown to bits in battlefields or went missing in bomber raids and, as the saying goes, their graves are known only to God. I cried in these cemeteries and thought that had I been born in 1926 rather than 1938 one of these graves could have been mine.

It is difficult to understand and share the grief the parents of the dead had in the fact that their sons would not be coming home. The Memorial Library was built to help with that grief and to tear the building down is to betray a sacred trust this university made to the heirs of these young lives.

A memorial cannot replace a child.

I lost my daughter to cancer on Christmas Day 2009 and there is nothing that can abide my grief. That will go with me to my grave, but if her memory were to be sullied by a careless action of an institution I would be furious, in particular, if I was told it was done to save money.

You the regents of Mount Allison have it in your power to save the Alumni Memorial Library.

Yes, you have to serve the needs of current Mount Allison fine arts and drama students, but those 160-plus names on the plaques were once Mount Allison students and they largely never had a proper life. If the option of keeping their memory alive is only about saving \$5 million - find it.

Each of those names is worth \$5 million. Finally, when we do build a new fine and performing arts complex let it be a building that will do this university proud and not just something we can afford that is functional, but that's another letter and another issue.

Virgil Hammock

Professor emeritus of fine arts and Sackville town councillor

Sackville, N.B.