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# Ypres: Canada's Legendary First World War Battles in Film

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## ABSTRACT

*The 1925 British film Ypres reenacted the three major battles of Ypres, including the Canadian experience in the Second and Third Battles of 1915 and 1917. Directed by Walter Summers and made by utilising archival footage from the war and First World War veterans to produce an authentic account of 'every detail, and the deathless glory won by the British forces.' The film's inclusion of Canadian fighting experiences at Ypres decentralised the British war narrative, showing that Canada contributed significantly to the cost of victory. Released in Canada in 1926, Ypres showed Canadian audiences that Canadian soldiers endured trauma at Ypres through its realistic portrayal of combat. Through its depiction of war, the creators of Ypres showcased to Canadian audiences that Canadian soldiers underwent the horrors of the First World War for victory, the very value Canada went to war for in 1914.*

## Introduction

During the First World War the market town of Ypres in Belgium was the site of three major battles. Although the Canadians did not fight at the 1914 First Battle of Ypres, they were present at the Second Battle in April 1915 and again at the Third Battle in 1917. During the latter engagement, the Canadians captured the village of Passchendaele, duly acquiring a reputation as an 'elite force.'<sup>1</sup> After the war, Canada's legendary contributions at Ypres were immortalised in the film production, *Ypres* (1925). This research note considers the contemporary significance – to Canadian audiences – of *Ypres*, a British-produced film which nonetheless figures prominently in Canadian war memory.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Tim Cook, *No Place to Run: The Canadian Corps and Gas Warfare in the First World War*, (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1999), p. 131.

<sup>2</sup>The film *Ypres* can be viewed online (with adverts) at <https://watch.plex.tv/en-GB/watch/movie/the-battle-of-ypres> . Accessed 21 February 2026.

Canada's memory of the First World War has drawn significant scholarly attention in recent years. Jonathan Vance has explored the cult of the 'service roll' – in which Canadian veterans were remembered for their service in the war.<sup>3</sup> Ian McKay and Jamie Swift have analysed the memory of the Battle of Vimy Ridge, tracing how it has changed over the decades from marking the mythological 'birth of a nation' to becoming a metaphorical depiction of the war's carnage and death.<sup>4</sup> Tim Cook has examined the memory of trench culture among Canadian soldiers, Jennifer Wellington explored the presentation of war artifacts in public displays to highlight Canadian participation in the fighting, and Rebecca Powell has revealed how Canadians during the 1920s and 1930s erected statues, plaques, memorial towers, and cenotaphs throughout the country and overseas to remember the dead.<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, the important role played by film in shaping the memory of the war, especially in Britain, has also drawn attention. For instance, Mark Connelly has analysed the work of the British Instructional Films Company (BIF), which produced several war re-enactment films in Britain during the 1920s, including, significantly, *Ypres*.<sup>6</sup> As Connelly demonstrates, movie theatres became a collective space of public commemoration when film audiences attended the screening of a BIF film<sup>7</sup>. Michael Paris has likewise examined the role of film during the war in promoting national opinions, while Emma Hanna has considered the war's place on British television, specifically in terms of commemoration.<sup>8</sup> Several filmic productions of the interwar period – such as *Shell*

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<sup>3</sup>Jonathan Vance, *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning, and the First World War*, (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997), p. 136.

<sup>4</sup>See Ian McKay and Jamie Swift, *The Vimy Trap Or, How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Great War*, (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2016).

<sup>5</sup>Tim Cook, *The Secret History of Soldiers: How Canadians Survived The Great War*, (Allen Lane: Toronto, 2018), pp. 5-8; Jennifer Wellington, 'Curating Dominion Narratives of the Great War' in *Curating the Great War*, eds. Paul Cornish and Nicholas J. Saunders, (Oxford: Routledge, 2023), p. 79; Rebecca Powell, 'Memory and Memorialization: How War Memorials Shape Historical Narratives of Canada's Role in Military Conflict,' BA Thesis. (The University of Victoria, 2018) pp. 6-7. <https://www.uvic.ca/humanities/history/assets/docs/Honours%20Thesis%20-%20Powell%20Rebecca%202018.pdf>. Accessed 21 February 2026.

<sup>6</sup>See Mark Connelly, *Celluloid War Memorials: The British Instructional Films Company and the Memory of the Great War*, (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2016).

<sup>7</sup>Connelly, *Celluloid War Memorials*.

<sup>8</sup>Michael Paris, Introduction in *The First World War and Popular Cinema: 1914 to the Present*, ed. Michael Paris, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), pp. 2-3; Emma Hanna, *The Great War on the Small Screen: Representing the First World War in Contemporary Britain*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), p. 1.

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*Shocked* (1919), *Verdun: Visions of History* (1928), *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930) and *Journey's End* (1930) – have also drawn scrutiny.<sup>9</sup>

To date, however, the point of intersection between these two bodies of scholarship – that is, the role played by film specifically in Canadian memory of the conflict – has drawn relatively little focused attention. By examining the previously overlooked reception in Canada of the 1925 production *Ypres*, this research note offers something of a tentative corrective.

### **Ypres (1925): Origins and Production**

The British War Office supervised the creation of *Ypres*, which was produced by the British Instructional Films, a company that made several other films of a similar type and style, including the 1921 production *Battle of Jutland*.<sup>10</sup> The film was directed by Walter Summers and was intended to deliver a vision of 'every detail, and the deathless glory won by the British forces.'<sup>11</sup> To do this, the producers spent a few years researching for the film, and key scenes were shot at Aldershot with thousands of re-enactors, many of whom were veterans.<sup>12</sup> The makers of *Ypres* also included authentic

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<sup>9</sup>For more information on such war films, see Cameron Telch, 'Shell-Shocked: A Canadian Film About the Experience of Psychological Trauma in the Great War' *Journal of History* 59, no. 1 (2024): p. 82–87. <https://doi.org/10.3138/jh-2024-0008>; Ian Aitken, *European Film Theory and Cinema: A Critical Introduction*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020). Glen Jeansonne and David Luhrssen, *War on the Silver Screen: Shaping America's Perception of History*, (Nebraska: Potomac Books, 2014); Geoff Brown, *Silent to Sound: British Cinema in Transition*, (New Barnet: John Libbey Publishing, 2024).

<sup>10</sup>'Ypres' Film is True to Detail: Educational Picture at the Capitol, Splendid Musical Programme,' *The Calgary Daily Herald* (Calgary), April 6, 1926. p. 6 <https://www.newspapers.com/image/481627754/?match=1&terms=Ypres%20film>. Accessed 22 February 2026; 'Soul of British in this Picture: Ypres Film Monument to Empire's Heroes, Opens Today at Capitol Theatre,' *Free Press Evening Bulletin* (Winnipeg), April 24, 1926, p. 21. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/785286932/?match=1&terms=ypres%20film>. Accessed 22 February 2026; Connelly, *Celluloid War Memorials*.

<sup>11</sup>See Lawrence Napper, *The Great War in Popular British Cinema of the 1920s: Before Journey's End*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); 'Ypres' Film,' *The Calgary Daily Herald*, p.6.

<sup>12</sup>'New Film is Plain Tale of British Valor,' *Edmonton Journal* (Edmonton), April 3, 1926, p. 57. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/469070083/?match=1&terms=Ypres%20film>. Accessed 22 February 2026; G. C. 'Ypres' a Real War Movie.' *The Toronto Star* 171 [www.bjmh.org.uk](http://www.bjmh.org.uk)

footage from the war.<sup>13</sup> Originally produced as an eight-reel picture with different episodes to be shown in sequential order, the film took a year to manufacture.<sup>14</sup>

Various scenes highlighted the Canadian role in the fighting, including the Second Battle of Ypres – where the Canadians are shown bravely fighting against the Germans.<sup>15</sup> Ypres immortalised the actions of Lieutenant-Colonel Arthur Birchall at Second Ypres, who, despite being British-born, served with the Canadians and regrouped with his men, and of Victoria Cross recipient Canadian Lance-Corporal Fred Fisher, who protected Canadians as they retreated from the front lines during Second Ypres.<sup>16</sup> At the Battle of Passchendaele, Victoria Cross recipient Canadian Private Tommy Holmes seized a German pillbox, and Canadian foreign-born Victoria Cross recipient Lieutenant Robert Shankland defended the strategic objective of Bellevue Spur.<sup>17</sup> As such, while *Ypres* was produced by the BIF, the film's inclusion of the Canadians at Second and Third Ypres revealed to British audiences that the Canadians had played a significant role in the fighting. To this extent, *Ypres* complicated British memory of the war, emphasising that Canadians, too, suffered greatly for the final victory.<sup>18</sup>

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Weekly (Toronto), February 6, 1926, p. 28.

<https://www.newspapers.com/image/991332072/?match=1&terms=Ypres%20film>

<sup>13</sup>'New Film is Plain Tale,' *Edmonton Journal*, p. 57.

<sup>14</sup>G. C. 'Ypres,' *The Toronto Star Weekly*, 28; 'New Film is Plain Tale,' *Edmonton Journal*, p. 57.

<sup>15</sup>'Soul of British,' *Free Press Evening Bulletin*, p. 21.

<sup>16</sup>'Soul of British,' *Free Press Evening Bulletin*, p. 21.; 'Lieutenant Colonel Arthur Percival Dearman Birchall,' Passchendaele Archives,

<https://archives.passchendaele.be/en/soldier/4859>. Accessed 22 February 2026; John Boileau, 'Fred Fisher, VC.' *The Canadian Encyclopaedia*. Historica Canada. Article published December 15, 2017; Last Edited November 05, 2021.

<https://thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/fred-fisher-vc>. Accessed 3 March 2026.

<sup>17</sup>'Soul of British,' *Free Press Evening Bulletin*, p. 21; 'Private Thomas William Tommy Holmes VC Memorial Armoury,' Government of Canada.

<https://www.veterans.gc.ca/en/remembrance/memorials/canada/private-thomas-william-tommy-holmes-vc-memorial-armoury>. Accessed 22 February 2026; James Wood, 'Robert Shankland, VC' *The Canadian Encyclopaedia*. Historica Canada. Article published October 26, 2016; Last Edited November 05, 2021.

<https://thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/robert-shankland>. Accessed 22 February 2026.

<sup>18</sup>Tim Cook, *At the Sharp End: Canadians Fighting the Great War, 1914-1916*, (Vol. 1), (Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2007), p. 205; Tim Cook, *Lifesavers and Body Snatchers: Medical Care and the Struggle for Survival in the Great War*, (Toronto: Allen Lane, 2022), p. 339.

### **Ypres on the Silver Screen: Its reception in Canada**

The film was well received in Canada upon its 1926 release. According to one journalist at *The Vancouver Sun*, *Ypres* 'depicts more vividly than any other film yet shown the glories and the sombreness of war. It brings home to Canadian people what 'their boys' went through [at Second Ypres].'<sup>19</sup> *Ypres* depicted to Canadian audiences that Canadian soldiers fought bravely against overwhelming odds as they fought the German Army.<sup>20</sup> The film portrayed the 'great achievements' of Canadian soldiers who defended the frontlines.<sup>21</sup> In many ways, *Ypres* decentralised the British narrative of the war to bring attention to Canada's important contribution, which prevented fifty thousand Allied soldiers from being surrounded by the German Army.<sup>22</sup>

The film also showed that the Canadians were the unsung heroes at Passchendaele. *Ypres* informed Canadian viewers that '20 weary Canadians find themselves in possession of Belle Vue Spur, an arm of Passchendaele Ridge.'<sup>23</sup> The film reflected the reality that it was often the proven battle-hardened Canadians that the British called upon to capture significant objectives, including Passchendaele.<sup>24</sup> While *Ypres* showed that the Canadians were near the point of exhaustion at Belle Vue Spur, they still held onto their positions despite ongoing German artillery.<sup>25</sup> The film highlighted the fact that the capture of the Belle Vue Spur allowed the Canadians to make the final push onto the village of Passchendaele.<sup>26</sup>

*Ypres* reconstructed for Canadian audiences the horrors of the war. *Ypres* presented to Canadians a realistic reenactment as the film that shows how, during the Second Battle, 'respirators of a sort had been issued the day before, [to the men], but the deadly gas cloud chokes and blinds before they can be adjusted.'<sup>27</sup> The film thus

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<sup>19</sup>'Ypres, Film Real Thriller: Members of Military Institute See Private Showing,' *The Vancouver Sun* (Vancouver), March 8, 1926, p. 2.

<https://www.newspapers.com/image/490982462/?match=1&terms=Ypres%20film>.

Accessed 22 February 2026.

<sup>20</sup>*Ypres*, directed by Walter Summers (United Kingdom: British Instructional Films, 1925), [https://watch.plex.tv/watch/movie/the-battle-of-ypres?utm\\_content=5e164484fef2d4003e8a6f04&utm\\_medium=deeplink&utm\\_source=google-catalog](https://watch.plex.tv/watch/movie/the-battle-of-ypres?utm_content=5e164484fef2d4003e8a6f04&utm_medium=deeplink&utm_source=google-catalog). Accessed 22 February 2026.

<sup>21</sup>'Ypres,' Film Real Thriller,' *The Vancouver Sun*, p. 2. See Cook, *At the Sharp End* and *Lifefavers and Body Snatchers* for the Canadian experience at Second Ypres; *Ypres*.

<sup>22</sup>*Ypres*; Cook, *At the Sharp End*, p. 205.

<sup>23</sup>'The Canadians at Belle Vue Spur,' *Ypres*.

<sup>24</sup>'The Canadians at Belle Vue Spur,' *Ypres*; Cook, *No Place to Run*, p. 125.

<sup>25</sup>'The Canadians at Belle Vue Spur,' *Ypres*.

<sup>26</sup>'The Canadians at Belle Vue Spur,' *Ypres*; Cook, *No Place to Run*, p. 131.

<sup>27</sup>'The Second Battle of Ypres,' *Ypres*.

conveyed to audiences that the fighting at Ypres was brutal, with tens of thousands of Allied and German soldiers becoming casualties during the fighting between 22 April and 25 May, 1915.<sup>28</sup> The *Edmonton Journal's* reference to the muddy trenches and artillery indicated that Canadian and Allied soldiers experienced a daily grind of attrition during the month-long battle and experienced hardships in terms of physical and psychological casualties.<sup>29</sup> One journalist at the *Saskatoon Phoenix*, similarly impressed by the film's depiction of the battle, wrote,

It will take about twenty years for the troops of the late war to master the words that are necessary to describe the gigantic inhuman mechanism of the great war. Let this picture Ypres serve in the meantime to record what words have not yet been found to record.<sup>30</sup>

As Clark suggested, *Ypres* informed all Canadians about the horrors of the war through the 'gun fodder' of young soldiers to emphasise that no virtue or glory can be found in war.<sup>31</sup>

While *Ypres* paid tribute to the living who endured the horrors of combat at Ypres, the film also served as a memorial to the soldiers who fought at Ypres: '*Ypres* is indeed a cenotaph in pictures, and the medium by which such hallowed memories could be so beautifully presented is deserving of national consideration.'<sup>32</sup> As expressed in the

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<sup>28</sup>'The Second Battle of Ypres,' *Ypres*. R. H. Roy and Richard Foot, 'Canada and the Second Battle of Ypres.' *The Canadian Encyclopaedia*. Historica Canada. Article published July 27, 2006; Last Edited December 4, 2018. <https://thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/battle-of-ypres>. Accessed 22 February 2026.

<sup>29</sup>'New Film is Plain Tale,' *Edmonton Journal*, p. 57; See Cook, *Lifesavers and Body Snatchers*; Mark Osborne Humphries, *A Weary Road: Shell Shock in the Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1918*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018).

<sup>30</sup>Gregory Clark, 'Deathless Story of Ypres Told in Remarkable Film,' *The Saskatoon Phoenix* (Saskatoon), May 8, 1926, p.14.

<https://www.newspapers.com/image/508239002/?match=1&terms=Ypres%20film>. Accessed 22 February 2026.

<sup>31</sup>Clark, 'Deathless Story,' *The Saskatoon Phoenix*, p. 14; *Ypres*; Cameron Telch, 'Forgotten Men: An International Comprehensive Documentary on Remembering the Horrors of the Great War,' *Canadian Journal for New Scholars in Education* 15, no. 2 (Fall 2024): 171-177.

<https://journalhosting.ucalgary.ca/index.php/cjnse/article/view/79877>. Accessed 22 February 2026.

<sup>32</sup>'British War Film Depicts Great Heroism in the War: Sincere Film of 'Ypres Glories' Worthy Monument to the Brave,' *The Calgary Daily Herald*, (Calgary), April 3, 1926, p.

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film, Ypres was a place where the Canadians reflected their bravery in defending the British Empire against the German Army.<sup>33</sup> One journalist at *The Calgary Daily Herald* even urged that the film must be shown throughout the British Empire, as the dead at Ypres had 'the soul of the Empire.'<sup>34</sup>

In general, *Ypres* was well received by mid-1920s Canadian audiences, as it was promoted nationally in Canadian newspapers.<sup>35</sup> One reporter, for example, described the atmosphere at the Casino Theatre in Halifax as 'an indescribable noise, practically continuous, except in the graver moments, accompanies each showing of the film; applause here, laughter there, a lot of humming [of] the old familiar war tunes.'<sup>36</sup> Some journalists observed that Canadians were profoundly impacted by the film and were proud to witness their Canadian heroes on the silver screen.<sup>37</sup> To audiences, ordinary Canadian soldiers, including 18-year-old Tommy Holmes of Owen Sound, Ontario, who struck a German pillbox at Passchendaele, and Bobby Shankland of Winnipeg, who held the front lines at Bellevue Spur against ongoing German counterattacks, were heroes for sacrificing and enduring so much hardship at Ypres.<sup>38</sup> Canadians even called *Ypres* 'the best war picture' for its true-to-life depiction of the war.<sup>39</sup> Some

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8. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/481627147/?match=1&terms=Ypres%20film>. Accessed 22 February 2026.

<sup>33</sup>'British War Film,' *The Calgary Daily Herald*, p. 8; Cook, *At the Sharp End*, p. 204. Cameron Telch, 'Resilience Among Canadian Soldiers: Surviving and Enduring the Great War,' *The Journal of the Western Front Association*, no. 34 (June 2024): 42-45.

<sup>34</sup>'British War Film,' *The Calgary Daily Herald*, p. 8; Cook, *At the Sharp End*, pp. 205-206.

<sup>35</sup>See 'British War Film,' *The Calgary Daily Herald*, p. 6; 'Ypres, Film Real Thriller,' *The Vancouver Sun*, p. 2.; 'R.M.R. at Capitol: Westmount Regiment Invited to Witness Ypres Film,' *The Gazette* (Montreal), March 11, 1926, p.7.

<https://www.newspapers.com/image/419648274/?match=1&terms=ypres%20film>.

Accessed 22 February 2026; 'Crowds Seeing Great War Film: The Casino Presenting 'Ypres,' A Story of 'The Immortal Salient,' *The Evening Mail* (Halifax), May 12, 1926, p.11.

<https://www.newspapers.com/image/776660623/?match=1&terms=ypres%20film>.

Accessed 22 February 2026.

<sup>36</sup>'Crowds Seeing Great War Film,' *The Evening Mail*, p. 11.

<sup>37</sup>'Ypres' Grippled Another Big Crowd: Plain, Unvarnished Narrative of Four Years in The Salient,' *The Sault Daily Star*, (Sault St. Marie), May 12, 1926, p. 10.

<https://www.newspapers.com/image/735844472/?match=1&terms=Ypres%20film>.

Accessed 22 February 2026.

<sup>38</sup>'Ypres Grippled Another Big Crowd,' *The Sault Daily Star*, p. 10; Cook, *At the Sharp End*, p. 14, p. 182; Telch, 'Resilience Among Canadian Soldiers,' p. 43.

<sup>39</sup>'Ex-Service Men Interested in Film Ypres' *The Calgary Daily Herald*, (Calgary), April 6, 1926, p. 6.

Canadian newspapers advocated that Canadians should watch the film since it was emotionally compelling to watch Canada's soldiers fighting for King and Country on the battlefields of Ypres.<sup>40</sup>

Even as *Ypres* was praised nationally for its depiction of the Great War, not all Canadians were convinced. The President of the Toronto branch of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) argued that the film's makers could never recapture the actual horrors of the war.<sup>41</sup> The same commentator also criticised the creators of the film for pushing a war film onto Canadian audiences, especially at a time when Canadian families were still mourning their deceased loved ones.<sup>42</sup> The tone of the President's letter to the editor of the *Toronto Daily Star* revealed a concern that showing the film might undermine peace, especially as countries were rebuilding in the aftermath of the war.<sup>43</sup>

## Conclusion

Though a British produced film, *Ypres* is nonetheless important to Canadian memory of the conflict. The film – which is focused on the three major battles at Ypres and was released in Canada in 1926 – provided an important learning opportunity for many contemporary Canadian viewers, revealing the horrors of the war through the reenacted scenes of combat and death. Although not everyone supported the film's release, as this brief analysis has revealed most Canadians seem to have been proud to watch and thereby better appreciate the crucial contributions to the eventual victory achieved by their fellow citizens.

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<https://www.newspapers.com/image/481627754/?match=1&terms=Ypres%20film%3B%20audiences>. Accessed 22 February 2026.

<sup>40</sup>'Ypres' at the Regent Next Week, With The Mudlarks, a Jack Arthur Divertissement,' *The Toronto Daily Star* (Toronto), February 18, 1926, p. 8. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/930781765/?match=1&terms=Ypres%20film>. Accessed 22 February 2026; Cook, *At the Sharp End*, p. 38; *Ypres*.

<sup>41</sup>'The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom,' *The Toronto Daily Star* (Toronto), March 10, 1926, p. 6.

<https://www.newspapers.com/image/931163867/?match=1&terms=Ypres%20film>. Accessed 22 February 2026.

<sup>42</sup>'The Women's International,' *The Toronto Daily Star*, p. 6. For more information on how Canadians processed death after the war, see Tracey Nichole Iverson, 'An Empty Grave: Grief and Mourning on the Canadian Home Front in the First World War,' (Master's thesis, University of Calgary, 2021). Retrieved from <http://hdl.handle.net/1880/113860>. Accessed 22 February 2026.

<sup>43</sup>'The Women's International,' *The Toronto Daily Star*, p. 6.