The McLarens of Thornhill: A Family Remembered

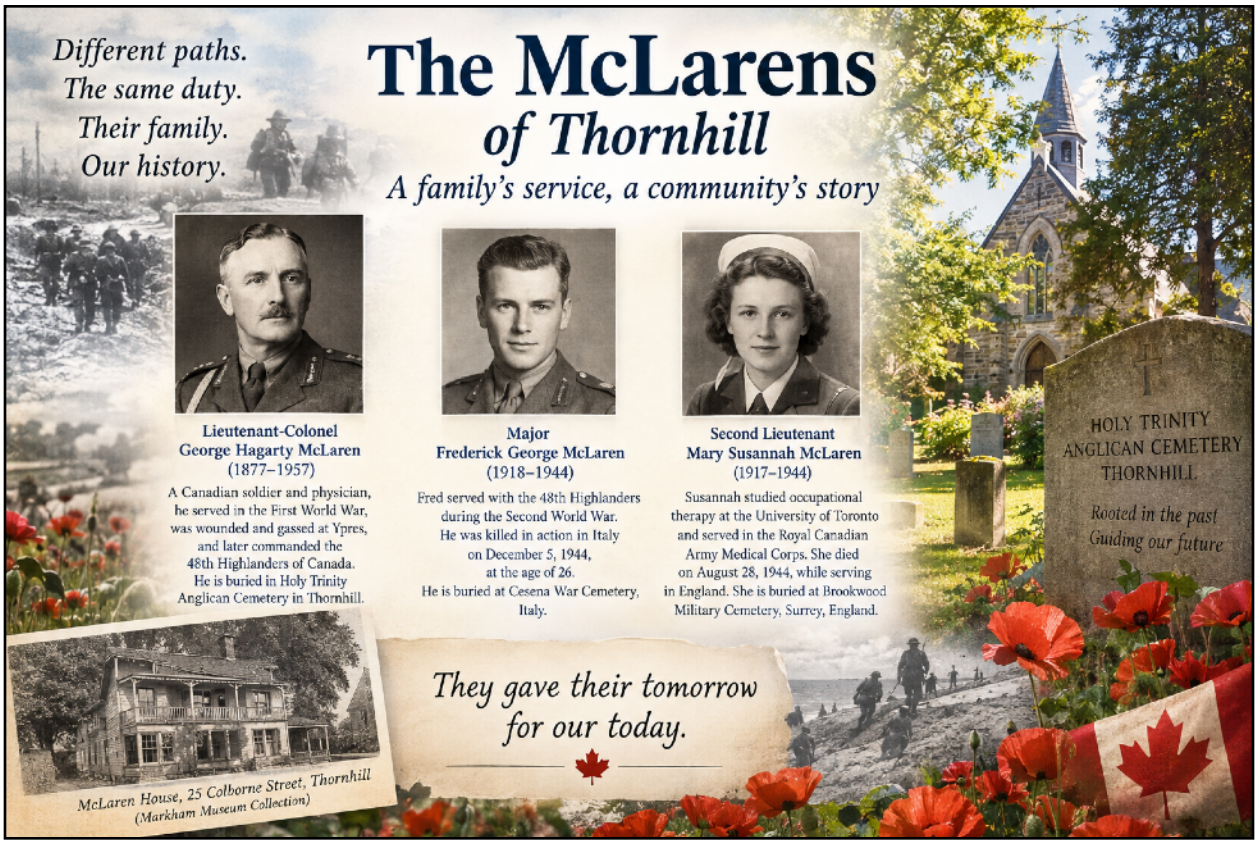


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A Thornhill family, two children lost in the Second World War, and a father buried in Holy Trinity Cemetery

A walk through Thornhill's historic "Holy Trinity Cemetery" can reveal stories that connect our local community with events far beyond Canada. One such story is that of the "McLaren family", whose name is part of Thornhill's history and whose family experienced the sacrifice of two children during the Second World War.

At the centre of the story is "Lieutenant-Colonel George Hagarty McLaren", a distinguished Canadian soldier and physician. Born in 1877, McLaren served in the First World War with the 15th Battalion and was badly wounded and gassed during the "Second Battle of Ypres" in 1915. He later became Commanding Officer of the "48th Highlanders of Canada", serving from 1928 to 1930. His wartime injuries eventually forced him to give up medical practice.

George and his wife, "Sarah Hamilton McLaren", had a son, "Major Frederick George McLaren", and a daughter, "Second Lieutenant Mary Susannah McLaren". Both followed their father into military service.

Their family was also connected with Thornhill. The Markham Museum's historical collection identifies a "McLaren house at 25 Colborne Street, Thornhill", adding another piece to the local family's story.

A brother and sister lost in 1944

“Frederick George McLaren”, known as Fred, served with the 48th Highlanders during the Second World War. He was killed in action in Italy on December 5, 1944, at the age of only 26. He is buried at “Cesena War Cemetery in Italy”.

His younger sister, “Mary Susannah McLaren”, chose a different form of military service. A graduate of the University of Toronto in occupational therapy, she enlisted in the “Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps” in 1943 and served with the 13 General Hospital in England.

Mary died on active service in England on August 28, 1944, aged 27. She is buried at “Brookwood Military Cemetery in Surrey, England”. Canada's Virtual War Memorial records her as the daughter of George Hagarty and Sarah Hamilton McLaren of Todmorden, Ontario.

Thus, within a few months in 1944, the McLaren family lost both a son and a daughter to the war.

The connection to Holy Trinity Cemetery

George Hagarty McLaren died in Toronto on January 7, 1957, aged 79. Unlike his son and daughter, whose graves are overseas, George was laid to rest here in Thornhill, in Holy Trinity Anglican Cemetery.

The cemetery itself is one of Thornhill's most important historic places. The original Holy Trinity church was built in 1829–1830, and the cemetery contains graves dating back to the early nineteenth century. Although the church building was moved to Brooke Street in 1950, the historic cemetery remained on its original Yonge Street site.

Today, the cemetery provides a tangible link between Thornhill's pioneer past and the twentieth-century history of Canada. Among its graves is that of a First World War veteran whose son and daughter later served in the Second World War.

A story worth remembering

The McLaren story is therefore more than a military story. It is a “Thornhill story”.

A father who survived the trenches of the First World War lies in a historic Thornhill cemetery. His son died fighting in Italy. His daughter died while serving in England. Their lives crossed three countries - Canada, England and Italy - but their family story comes back to Thornhill.

The next time we walk through “Holy Trinity Cemetery”, we might pause at the McLaren grave. Behind the name is a family, a military tradition, and two young Canadians whose futures were cut short in 1944.

Their names are part of Thornhill's history. Their sacrifice is part of Canada's history. And remembering them is part of ours.

Reference Sources: Veterans Affairs Canada, Canadian Virtual War Memorial; 48th Highlanders Museum; Holy Trinity Thornhill; Thornhill Historical Society; Markham Museum historical collection.* ([Veterans Affairs Canada][4])

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