

Commemorative Plaques: Tracing McGill's History

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Significance

Commemorative plaques are often the only remnants of historical events or individuals. These historical markers inform an unknowing public of histories that may otherwise be lost. This survey provides an insight on who and what the University has chosen to commemorate, allowing for future research. On a more practical note, the project reveals each marker's condition and location. The more information the University has on the events and individuals memorialized in metal, the more this information can be disseminated to the public.

Methods

A survey sheet was devised in order to collect information, such as material, size, inscription, languages, and overall condition. Each plaque was photographed to capture its details and any damage, its inscription, and its location. Alongside the survey sheets, an excel spreadsheet was created to aggregate all of the plaques.

Plaques can be found throughout both of McGill's campuses, memorializing people and events. These plaques have never been systematically documented before now.

The Politics Behind Commemorative Plaques

Plaques are often regarded as undisputed tablets of truth. They are, in fact, one version among many of an event or an individual. Strong reactions or emotions associated with a specific event are catalysts for commemorative plaques. For example, the University erected many plaques on campus in 1919, dedicated to those who lost their lives during the Great War. Elements such as the plaque's location, language, and material can affect how the plaque is understood.

Where plaques are located can control how well certain information is disseminated. Likewise, the language written on a plaque limits certain audiences. Furthermore, a plaque's material affects how its information is interpreted. Certain materials, such as bronze and marble, suggest monumentality while others, such as plastic, do not.

The Visual Art Collection surveys the art on campus every two years to monitor condition. The plaque survey integrated well into the VAC's mandate. My internship also gave me the opportunity to package and move works, to give tours of the art on campus, and to photograph art pieces— all important aspects of maintaining an art collection.

