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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

The Canadian composer-conductor Ernest MacMillan wrote *England, an Ode*, for chorus and orchestra, in a German prison camp in World War I, and was awarded a D.Mus. by Oxford University for it, in *absentia*. The score is examined alongside background documents, including MacMillan's unpublished memoirs, for its ambitious musical features, its conformity to the degree specifications, and the influences it suggests (MacMillan studied works by Debussy and Skryabin while incarcerated, and received advice from a fellow-prisoner, the composer Benjamin Dale). The choice of text, a decidedly imperialistic poem by A. C. Swinburne, is measured against MacMillan's later association with Canadian cultural nationalism.

ERNEST MACMILLAN AND *ENGLAND*

John Beckwith

In 1943, Sir Ernest MacMillan, the most accomplished Canadian musician of the first half of this century, sat for an oil portrait by the Toronto artist Kenneth Forbes, wearing his academic robes as a Doctor of Music of Oxford University (figure 1). The picture now hangs in the entrance to the opera theatre at the University of Toronto, named the MacMillan Theatre in tribute to his twenty-five years as dean of the University's music faculty. MacMillan never liked this picture and thought Forbes had been mainly interested in showing off, for example in his painterly treatment of the Jacquard weave on the gown. A detail (figure 2) shows this fine effect; but two other features stand out: MacMillan holds in his right hand the rolled-up score of a work by Bach from the old Bach-Gesellschaft edition (it is hard to imagine him, as a Bach lover and superb Bach exponent, handling it so roughly), and on the piano rack in the background rests the first page of MacMillan's major composition, the setting of Swinburne's poem *England, an Ode*, which earned him his degree at Oxford.

This article concerns *England* and the unusual circumstances surrounding its creation.¹ Among several decrees enacted at a meeting of academic authorities at Oxford in late October of 1917 was the following:

That notwithstanding the provisions of Statt.Tit.VI. Sect.III. §6. cl.9, the Assistant Registrar be authorized to receive a Musical Exercise for the Degree of Doctor of Music from ERNEST ALEXANDER CAMPBELL MACMILLAN, B.Mus., Non-Collegiate Student, now interned in enemy country, and that, if the Musical Exercise shall have been approved by the Examiners, he be permitted to supplicate for the Degree of Doctor of Music, provided that, in addition to the fees payable under the provisions of Statt.Tit.XIX. §3 and §6, he shall have paid to the University Chest through the Assistant Registrar the fee of three pounds and shall have satisfied the conditions of Statt.Tit.VI. Sect.III. §7. cl.7.²

MacMillan had obtained his Bachelor of Music degree from Oxford in 1911 at the age of seventeen. "Non-Collegiate" means he was an external candidate not attached to any of the Oxford colleges. In understated British fashion, and almost *en passant*, the decree notes that he is a prisoner of war in Germany.

¹ An earlier version of this article was read at the 1996 meeting of the Sonneck Society for American Music, Washington, D.C., 23 March 1996. My warmest thanks to the following for helping in its preparation: Elizabeth French and Kathleen McMorrow, Faculty of Music Library, University of Toronto; Cheryl Gillard, Music Division, National Library of Canada; Carl Morey and Ezra Schabas, Faculty of Music, University of Toronto; Adrian Schuman, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Toronto.

² *Oxford University Gazette*, 31 October 1917, 100.



Figure 1: Kenneth Forbes, oil portrait of Sir Ernest MacMillan (courtesy Faculty of Music, University of Toronto)

The decree permits MacMillan to submit his Exercise (that is, his compositional thesis) “notwithstanding” the usual examination requirement. According to paragraph 4 of the regulations, the extremely rigorous exam consisted of five separate written papers, namely:

- Harmony and Counterpoint in not more than eight parts.
- Double and Triple Counterpoint.
- Original Composition, including Fugue in not more than six parts.
- Instrumentation.
- Musical History.

The same paragraph provided that

The Examiners may at any time before the close of the Examination require the attendance of any Candidate for such further examination, whether oral or written, as they may think desirable ...³

³Oxford University, “Degrees in Music” statutes, regulations, 1917, 189.



Figure 2: Forbes, oil portrait of MacMillan (detail)

A small fee is to be paid and the completed Exercise (or thesis) deposited with the assistant registrar. Fine print in the statutes specifies the length and format of the Exercise, and the style in which the score is to be copied out.⁴

There was no such thing in 1914 as Canadian citizenship or a Canadian passport; Canadians were “British subjects.” A Canadian visitor to the Bayreuth Festival that summer, MacMillan was arrested at the outbreak of the War as an “enemy alien,” and he spent the next seven months in Nuremberg under restraint and, for part of that time, in a prison cell. In March 1915 he was transferred to Ruhleben (ironically, “life of rest”), a huge racetrack near Berlin that had been converted into a civilian prison camp, where he remained until

⁴I am grateful to Brian Trowell, Heather Professor of Music at Oxford, for sending me the relevant documents.

his release in late November of 1918. His life had already been an eventful one, as he recognized in the essay entitled "History of My Life," which he submitted to his modern-history professor at the University of Toronto at the age of eighteen.⁵ But the *Ruhleben* interlude—lasting more than three-and-a-half years—was unexpected and tough. As he told an interviewer many years later, he "didn't really understand how much a war could affect civilians. In those days one thought of war as something that happened to the other people."⁶ In no earlier European conflict, indeed, was non-military involvement of much concern.

Ruhleben was the largest of the many German camps in the War, housing a population of between three and five thousand British civilians, and reportage about it began accumulating in the first year of its existence. Inmates came from many different backgrounds and cultures. During the first few months there were crises and hardships—a near-riot, shortages of food and fuel; but at length a largely self-run society of considerable complexity took shape, some of whose political intricacies recall *The Lord of the Flies*. The arts were widely represented. A letter written from the camp by two professional musicians, the composer Benjamin Dale and the tenor and songwriter Frederick Keel, to the composer-conductor Sir Alexander Mackenzie appeared in the London press and in the journal *Musical Opinion* in early 1916. Forty-two musical internees are listed, with their ages; included are nine composers, eight singers, two conductors, six pianists, four violinists, two cellists, one flutist, two organists and eight "students." MacMillan, aged twenty-one, appears among the composers. Dale and Keel sketched for Mackenzie the musical life of the camp:

We keep our hands in by doing some teaching, ... a work of charity and benevolence, for we don't get any extra jam on our bread! We have formed a musical society, we have had some concerts and recitals. There is quite a good string quartet. There have been also some lectures on music, and in fact there is a course going on at present on modern musicians which is of so advanced a character that only a few can hope to keep up with it ... We musicians have built a shed in which we hope soon to get a piano ...⁷

One of the conductors was F. Charles Adler, whose later career took him to the United States. It was Adler who organized the first camp concert, on 5 December 1914 (before MacMillan's arrival); this was so well received that a continuing series of Sunday-night orchestral programs was established. At its height, there were performances of works as elaborate as the Verdi *Requiem* (with all-male chorus, of course). Inevitably, rivalries developed (one result of the formation of the "musical society" was that "Adler's monopoly [over programming] was broken"⁸), while some prisoners found the musical fare too highbrow (a correspondent to the camp newspaper refers to the musical leaders

⁵Ernest MacMillan, "History of My Life," unpublished essay, 1911 (MacMillan Collection, National Library of Canada).

⁶Radio interview with Tony Thomas in CBC Radio series "Assignment," 1957.

⁷"Notes on News," *Musical Opinion* 39, no. 460 (January 1916): 252.

⁸J. Davidson Ketchum, *Ruhleben: A Prison Camp Society* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), 203.

as “long-haired devils,” and asks, “Can nothing be done to muzzle these people?”⁹).

During his months of detention in Nuremberg, MacMillan the composer had completed three of the four movements of his String Quartet in C Minor. Curiously, there is no record of a tryout by the camp quartet. He had had virtually no experience in what was later to be his main musical vocation, conducting; but in retrospect Ruhlleben can be regarded as the forming crucible of his talent in that sphere. He led the orchestra in original satirical revues with titles such as *Don't Laugh* and *Legs and the Woman*, and is described in one account as the musical director of a camp cabaret known as the “Ruhlleben Hippodrome”¹⁰ (a wry reminder, perhaps, that the prisoners slept on straw in former horse-stalls). At the end of 1916 the camp theatrical and musical forces combined for a production of *The Mikado* which ran for three weeks. A cast photo (figure 3) depicts the venue, the former racetrack grandstand; the young musical director is in the centre of the second row. Obviously, the female roles were all taken by men.

MacMillan also directed classical repertoire, as one of eight musicians who took turns conducting the camp concerts.¹¹ His letters home reveal his growing realization that conducting was the musical task he had most aptitude for, and most enjoyed. Besides this, he was active as a lecturer: for example, he and Dale collaborated in a series on the Beethoven symphonies, illustrated with performances of these works for four-hand piano. He later contributed talks on Debussy and on modern Russian music.

Benjamin J. Dale, a professor at the Royal Academy of Music in London, was eight years older than MacMillan, and became a kind of graduate adviser to the aspiring composer. MacMillan called him “one of the best musicians I have ever known.”¹² Through the Prisoners-of War Education Committee, MacMillan applied for admission to the Oxford doctoral program, and started turning out, as he later recalled, “a fugue a day as well as numerous exercises,” and reading music history (mainly in German in books borrowed from Berlin libraries)—all this in preparation for the doctoral exam papers.¹³ In November he learned of the decision to waive these in his case. He composed his doctoral Exercise in the winter of 1917–18.¹⁴ Working conditions in the camp imposed difficulties, the main one being a lack of privacy. “I was able to secure [in the camp school] a ‘cubby-hole’ where I could work without interruption and also

⁹In *Ruhlleben Camp*, no. 6 (1915), quoted in Ketchum, *Ruhlleben*, 254.

¹⁰Joseph Powell and Francis Gribble, *The History of Ruhlleben* (London: W. Collins, 1919), 187.

¹¹Israel Cohen, *The Ruhlleben Prison Camp* (London: Methuen, 1917), 160.

¹²Ernest MacMillan, *Memoirs* (unpublished typescript, 1955–56, MacMillan Collection, National Library of Canada), chap. 4, p. 7.

¹³*Ibid.*, chap. 4, p. 12.

¹⁴In the *Memoirs* (chap. 4, p. 12), MacMillan states that he went on preparing for “the supplementary papers” after completing the Exercise, and did not learn of his exemption until later. Clearly, however, his memory was at fault here. See letter, 18 July 1918, quoted in Keith MacMillan, “Ernest MacMillan: The Ruhlleben Years,” in *Musical Canada: Words and Music Honouring Helmut Kallmann*, ed. John Beckwith and Frederick A. Hall (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 179.

Figure 3: The Ruhleben cast and orchestra for *The Mikado* (courtesy Music Division, National Library of Canada)



rent for an hour or so a day one of the [camp's] few practice piano studios ..."¹⁵ The completed Exercise is dated "15.4.18." In June he received word that it was accepted and he was granted the degree. The examiners were Sir Hugh Allen, Sir Walter Parratt, and Ernest Walker. His sister Dorothy wrote him a prophetic letter of congratulation: "Dear Doctor MacMillan—Oh the appalling dignity of it! I suppose you'll be a 'Sir' next."¹⁶

Paragraph 5 of the Oxford regulations states that the Doctor of Music Exercise

... must consist of an extended vocal work which requires from forty to sixty minutes for performance. It must contain at least one well-developed choral movement in eight real parts. The accompaniment must be for a full (modern) orchestra, and the work must be preceded by an overture in modern form (concert overture).¹⁷

Four "musts": but as to the text for the composition, it seems the choice, sacred or secular, is left up to the candidate. MacMillan, whose father was a Presbyterian minister with scholarly credentials in hymnology, might have been expected to select a sacred text, but he did not. Among secular sources, his previous and later tastes were always for elevated poetry of some metric complexity—John Milton, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and W. B. Yeats are among the poets he set. Algernon Charles Swinburne's *England, an Ode* fits this pattern. It consists of three sections, each containing seven three-line stanzas. The high-toned sentiments represent the strain of imperial patriotism that reached its apogee in A. C. Benson's "Land of Hope and Glory," as set by Edward Elgar in 1902. It contains self-satisfied lines such as "... the glory which was from the first upon England alone may endure to the last," and even boastful passages, for example:

France and Spain with their warrior train bowed down before her as thrall to king;
India knelt at her feet, and felt her sway more fruitful of life than spring.¹⁸

MacMillan deprecated in a letter that "as a rule my feelings towards Swinburne are cool,"¹⁹ but justified his choice as appropriate to the emotional climate of the War. He omitted the first of the excerpts just quoted, but did include the second. His setting embraces all seven stanzas of section 1 of the *Ode*, four stanzas from section 2, and three stanzas from section 3. The concern expressed by some of his associates that the exaggerated British fervour of the text might upset the German censors proved groundless.

The Overture is MacMillan's most ambitious orchestral movement, lasting slightly over ten minutes.²⁰ Godfrey Ridout's commentary calls this the best

¹⁵MacMillan, *Memoirs*, chap. 4, p. 12.

¹⁶25 June 1918, quoted in Keith MacMillan, "Ernest MacMillan: The Ruhleben Years," 180.

¹⁷Oxford University, "Degrees in Music" statutes, regulations, 1917, 189.

¹⁸Algernon Charles Swinburne, "England, an Ode" [1893], in *The Poems of Algernon Charles Swinburne* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1904), 6:186–90.

¹⁹20 July 1918, quoted in Keith MacMillan, "Ernest MacMillan: The Ruhleben Years," 179.

²⁰The Overture is included on the compact disc "Portrait: Sir Ernest MacMillan" (Analekta AN 2

part of *England*, and finds its chromatic harmonies “Straussian.”²¹ “Tristanesque” might be an equally apt term: a recurrent passage obliquely refers to the opening motive of the Wagner opera (example 1).



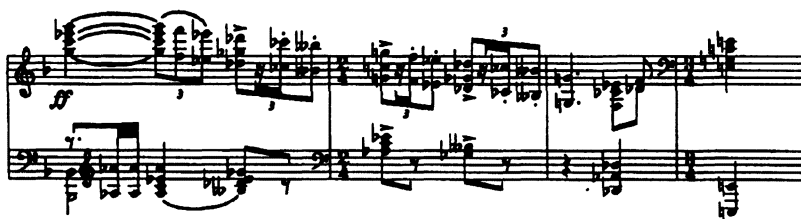
Example 1: MacMillan, *England*, Overture, letter T (“Tristanesque” reference derived from “tranquillo” secondary theme)

Whether derived from Wagner or from Strauss, the piece is organized around a fanfare-like main motive (example 2). There is a prevalence of half-diminished and augmented chords, and the continuity is both aggressive and propulsive: all but four of the first thirty-five bars feature downbeat dissonances.



Example 2: MacMillan, *England*, Overture, opening phrase

A two-octave downward whole-tone scale, leading out of one of the central climax points, may attest to MacMillan’s concurrent studies of Debussy (example 3).

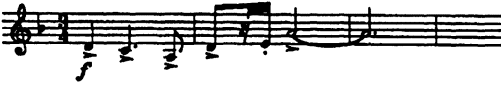


Example 3: MacMillan, *England*, Overture, 4 bars before letter N (whole-tone scale passage)

7804, 1993), as recorded in concert by the Toronto Symphony Orchestra and the Toronto Conservatory Choir conducted by the composer, 21 January 1941.

²¹ Godfrey Ridout, “Sir Ernest MacMillan: An Appraisal,” *Music across Canada* 1, no. 6 (July–August 1963): 30–34.

Part 1 introduces a new leading motive (example 4), and in the choral and baritone-solo passages which follow there are references to two elements from the Overture—the fanfare and a drum-tap motive.



Example 4: MacMillan, *England*, Part 1, opening phrase

Part 1 concludes with a six-part fugue—one of the score's contrapuntal highlights. The subject (example 5) features a drop of a seventh, and the governing harmonies, while tonal, are unpredictable and unconventional.



Example 5: MacMillan, *England*, Part 1, letter W (fugal subject, announced by choral basses)

In a final stretto, five of the six voices overlap at distances of half a bar (example 6). (A detail: at the end of the stretto the bass line descends in a whole-tone scale, starting on F.) If MacMillan was concerned to impress the examiners here, he surely succeeded.

Example 6: MacMillan, *England*, Part 1, 5 bars after letter X (fugal stretto)

Example 6—Continued

Loud and bright as the dawn's,
 mu - sic, mu - sic rings, Loud and...
 glo - ry light - ens and mu - sic...
 in flight, Loud and bright as the dawn's,
 wings, her wings in flight, whence glo - ry light...
 glo - ry light - ens and mu - sic rings, Loud and...

Part 2 opens with an introduction marked “andante tranquillo” (example 7). Here, in marked contrast to Part 1, and especially to the Overture with its churning chromaticism, the lines are exclusively diatonic within the natural-minor scale (the first accidental occurs in bar 9); rhythm and metre are free, and phrase-lengths uneven; harmonies are all triads and diatonic seventh chords, sometimes with a Debussy- or Delius-like parallelism.

p *pp* *rit.*
ppp *dolce* *a tempo* *poco rit.* *a tempo* *ppp*

Example 7: MacMillan, *England*, Part 2, bars 1–17 (orchestra with solo soprano)

Example 7—Continued

Mu sic made of change and conquest glo-

*pp quasi
al lontano*

rit f

The downbeat rhythm in the tenth bar may give the mood a faintly Scottish flavor. A soprano solo sings of “Music,” and the introduction theme overlaps on the second syllable of the word. We find ourselves twenty-two bars into the movement before the first chromatic gestures. The women of the chorus take over from the soloist, and a four-part fugato leads to a climax which the composer treats as the main climax of the whole score. The subject (example 8) derives from the opening motive of Part 1, and the stirring optimism of the words drives towards multi-voiced choral phrases placed in sharp relief: “Come the world against her, England yet shall stand” (example 9).

All our..

All our past ac-claims our fu-ture, ac-claims our fu-ture:

Example 8: MacMillan, *England*, Part 2, 7 bars after letter G (fugato subject, basses)

Musical score for "England yet shall stand" by MacMillan. The score consists of four vocal staves (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) and a piano accompaniment. The lyrics are: "come the world a - gainst her, Eng - land yet shall stand." The music is marked with a forte (*ff*) dynamic. Performance instructions include *rit.* (ritardando) and *a tempo*. The piano part features complex textures with many beamed sixteenth notes and chords.

Example 9: MacMillan, *England*, Part 2, 4 bars after letter N

Part 3 rises to some strong climaxes also, and contains a lengthy section which probably well satisfied the rule calling for “eight real parts,” though based on a less striking subject than that of the six-part fugue in Part 1.

“England yet shall stand”—but MacMillan was a Canadian. Though living among Englishmen at Ruhleben, he made clear in his letters from the camp that

he felt his future career lay in his native Canada. He even reveals his vision for the development of Canadian musical life, and outlines ways in which he felt he could contribute to it. Much of that vision he was later to fulfill. His dual loyalty was more understandable in his generation than it would be today. A much-quoted saying by the principal architect of the Canadian Confederation, Sir John A. Macdonald, was “a British subject I was born and a British subject I shall die.” The British colonial connection reverberated as late as the 1940s: in my home town on Canada’s west coast, named after the British queen-empress, Victoria, I recall neighbouring families where the children were roused at five o’clock on Christmas morning and made to stand at attention while listening on short-wave radio to the annual greeting from King George. The first Canadian-born governor-general, Vincent Massey, may not have been appointed solely for his anglophilia, but he made no secret of it, while simultaneously proclaiming his Canadianism. He once wrote:

If it is sometimes said that the British connection is an evidence of “colonial subordination,” nothing could be further from the truth. The “colonial” point of view no longer exists as a factor in our national life and is held by no thinking Canadian.²²

Yet Massey’s government-sponsored blueprint for Canadian cultural development (the so-called “Massey Report,” 1951) held up the model of the British Council as a weapon against the inroads of U.S. mass entertainment. In the Canada Council, set up on that model in 1957, MacMillan served as a senior representative for music. His vision for Canada incorporated, if not quite the jingoistic pride of Swinburne, certainly a deep respect for the country’s British heritage. His acceptance of a knighthood in the mid-1930s—the only such honour in music to a Canadian—may have proved a burden to him in later years when such titles were regarded as anachronistic.

The reception history of *England* is odd and discontinuous. Within a year of MacMillan’s release from prison, the piano/vocal score was issued under the familiar buff cover by the London publisher Novello and Company (figure 4); the standard price of two shillings and sixpence was increased, because of shortages and inflation, to three shillings and sixpence. One of England’s finest choirs, the Sheffield Choral Union, under Henry (later Sir Henry) Coward, gave the premiere on 17 March 1921, and favorable reviews appeared in the local, national, and musical press. A month later (12 April), the Toronto Mendelssohn Choir and the Philadelphia Orchestra, led by Herbert A. Fricker, gave the first Canadian performance. Knowledge of the work’s origin as a university exercise influenced reviewers variously: where a writer in Sheffield thought the boldness of the score showed that musical academia had become more broadminded than in earlier times, a Toronto critic looked forward to the day when the composer would produce “some big colourful Canadian work, not written for a degree but torn out of national experience.”²³ MacMillan

²²Vincent Massey, *On Being Canadian* (Toronto: J. M. Dent & Sons (Canada), 1948), 19.

²³*Daily Telegraph*, Sheffield, 18 March 1921; *Star* (Toronto), 13 April 1921; both quoted in Ezra

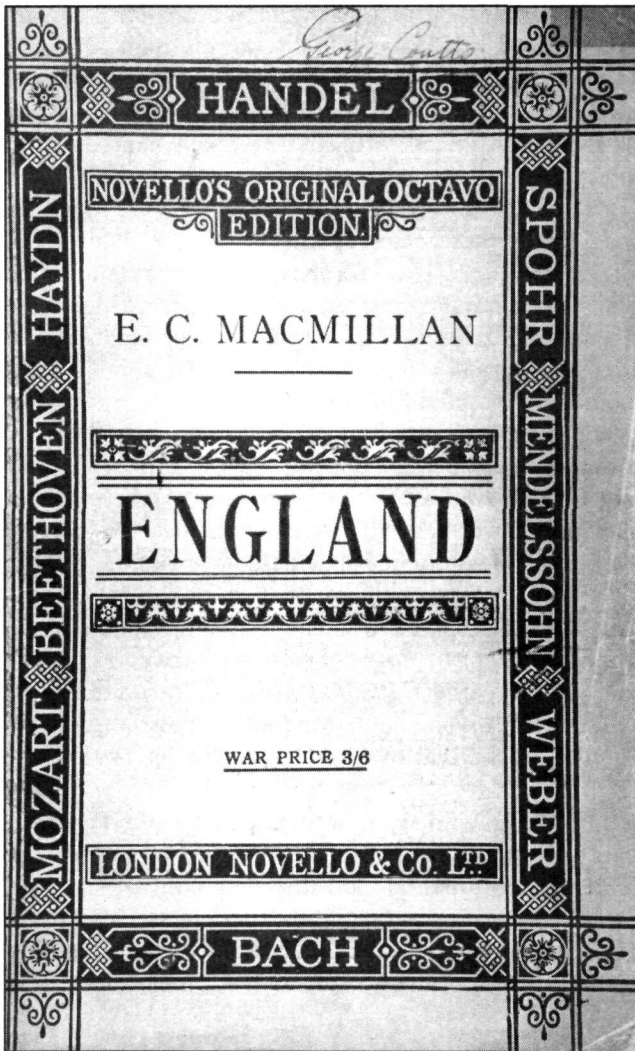


Figure 4: Cover design, *England*, in Novello's piano-vocal score (courtesy Faculty of Music Library, University of Toronto)

himself conducted the work at the dedication of the MacMillan Theatre in 1964, one of his last public appearances. The University of Toronto Symphony Orchestra and choruses, led by Doreen Rao, performed it again in Toronto during the 1993 MacMillan centenary celebrations.²⁴

Schabas, *Sir Ernest MacMillan: The Importance of Being Canadian* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 48.

²⁴MacMillan's last performance of *England* included the Overture and Parts 1 and 2 only. The 1993 performance, similarly, consisted of the Overture, Part 1 (slightly abridged), and Part 2.

Carl Morey, instigator of that latest revival, has written of his long pursuit of the full score and parts for *England*.²⁵ I can add a postscript to his account: in mid-1995, Novello and Company retrieved a copy of the full score presumed lost. A fair ink copy in the hand of the publishers' staff copyist, this score includes emendations in MacMillan's hand, with a note: "I have pencilled in a few suggested changes and the parts have been altered accordingly. E. C. M." The note, undated, is written on memo-paper imprinted "Sir Ernest MacMillan." Clearly the composer made these changes after 1935, the date of his knighthood—perhaps for his January 1941 performances in the Toronto Symphony subscription series. That score has been added to the MacMillan Collection at the National Library of Canada, Ottawa. The Collection includes two other holograph full scores, a holograph piano-vocal score, and the composer's sketches. The two full scores are identical in content but one is a rotograph print, white on black. When MacMillan tried to get back what he called his "original MS.," in 1919, he was told it was "beyond recall," and "under the Bodleian rules ... cannot be removed from the University Archives"; the rotograph, made for him at that time, was "all that is available."²⁶ However, while at Ruhleben the composer had gone to the considerable labour of copying the whole thing out twice. The holograph piano-vocal score contains a few changes, and seems to have been prepared with the Novello publication in mind. In 1995 two substantial sections of *England* were reproduced as part of volume 18 in the anthology series *The Canadian Musical Heritage*.²⁷ The Toronto Mendelssohn Choir, the organization MacMillan conducted from 1942 to 1957, will present a full revival of *England* during its 1999–2000 season.

MacMillan had entered Ruhleben with aspirations as a composer. The main works of his prison years—the Quartet and *England*—were to remain the largest productions of his creative output. He left the camp with a firmed-up ambition, and with growth of personality and musical experience to back it up, as a conductor and musical leader. *England* remains a significant relic of his wartime rite of passage, and a classic of the Canadian choral repertoire.

Abstract

The Canadian composer-conductor Ernest MacMillan wrote *England, an Ode*, for chorus and orchestra, in a German prison camp in World War I, and was awarded a D.Mus. by Oxford University for it, *in absentia*. The score is examined alongside background documents, including MacMillan's unpublished memoirs, for its ambitious musical features, its conformity to the degree specifications, and the influences it suggests (MacMillan studied works by

²⁵ Carl Morey, "Letter from Canada," *Sonneck Society Bulletin* 19, no. 3 (fall 1994): 20–21.

²⁶ Frederick Hall, comptroller, Oxford University Press, letter to MacMillan, 18 June 1919 (MacMillan Collection, National Library of Canada).

²⁷ John Beckwith, ed., *The Canadian Musical Heritage/Le Patrimoine musical canadien*, vol. 18, "Oratorio and cantata excerpts/Extraits d'oratorios et de cantates" (Ottawa: Canadian Musical Heritage Society, 1995), 246–74.

Debussy and Skryabin while incarcerated, and received advice from a fellow-prisoner, the composer Benjamin Dale). The choice of text, a decidedly imperialistic poem by A. C. Swinburne, is measured against MacMillan's later association with Canadian cultural nationalism.