

Robert Tait McKenzie – His Life and His Art

By Barrie Renwick FRCNA FCNRS

The following narrative together with its PowerPoint slide collection formed the presentation I made at the 2019 Calgary RCNA Convention Education Symposium. The superscript numerals appearing in the text are silent alerts to “enter” the (next) PowerPoint slide. Time required for this presentation – about 40 minutes. Permission to use this presentation is granted provided that my material is unaltered and the work is attributed.

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¹Robert Tait McKenzie – His Life and His Art

Our society respects those of its members who are outstanding contributors to the betterment of us all. We value the medical doctors, the educators, the authors, and artists whose influential high standards and leadership make our way of life enviable to others.

This session speaks of a Canadian who combined all of these attributes and pursued each of them to the fullest to the benefit of his fellow citizens. ²Dr. Robert Tait McKenzie (1867–1938) was a skilled surgeon, a physician, a long-time university professor, an author and a prolific sculptor. McKenzie had the unusual ability to successfully manage all these functions concurrently. What is more, his career was broad in scope; much of it took place in Canada and even more in the United States. He was, as well, a soldier with Britain’s Royal Army Medical Corps in English military hospitals during the First World War. McKenzie’s contribution to and his influence on those in his sphere was far reaching. His underlying passion, the health and physical ability of the human body, permeated each of the disciplines he practiced. His instructive methods and his artistic messages expanded the educational value of his efforts far beyond the confines of the classrooms where he taught.

Robert Tait McKenzie entered the world in 1867, third child of four offspring of William McKenzie and Catherine (Shiells) McKenzie. Both parents were Scots; his father was a Reverend in the Free Church of Scotland ³in Almonte, Ontario. When Tait was nine, his father died, and sympathetic parishioners helped to provide the fatherless family with needed living accommodation. This gesture instilled a feeling of ongoing social responsibility in the lad, a feeling he responded to often in adulthood.

Young Tait attended Almonte High School and later Lisgar Collegiate Institute, Ottawa. He advanced to enter ⁴McGill University in 1885, where, as an undergraduate, he excelled in several athletic sports. McKenzie ⁵ supported himself in gaining an education in medicine, and in his

senior year became an interne in the Montreal General Hospital. After graduating in 1892, he was instructor there in anatomy and was a specialist in orthopaedic surgery.

By 1894, McKenzie had a number of appointed responsibilities in the Department of Anatomy at McGill. During this time, McKenzie also developed an active medical practice in Montreal that, in 1897, led to his 15-month appointment as house physician to the ⁶Governor General of Canada, Lord Aberdeen and his family, a testament to Tait's medical capabilities. He was then age 30.

As a child, ⁷Tait had a special pal in Almonte, Jim Naismith, who became a life-long friend and a close professional colleague. The two attended McGill where, after his graduation, Dr. James Naismith became athletics director at the university, a post he eventually resigned to accept a teaching position in the US. Later, McKenzie gained that athletic directorship and expanded the position to encompass all physical training at the university. His primary interest now migrated from surgery to what became his permanent speciality: teaching Physical Education and Rehabilitation. McGill declared Tait its Medical Director of Physical Training, the first such appointment in Canada.

Biographies of McKenzie mention his early interest in art was to paint. Now at McGill, in his studies and teachings about physical exertion he replicated the different phases of extreme effort that dominated an ⁸athlete's facial expression during intense physical activity: effort; breathlessness; fatigue; exhaustion. ⁹These he captured in sculpted form for use as realistic references during his teaching sessions. With his expert knowledge of anatomy, from the beginning his modelling of human figures showed uncanny accuracy. These projects gave him pleasure and led to his many ¹⁰stirring figurines and plaques of athletes performing. ¹¹When his sculptures became known in conventional ¹²art circles, biographers mention that critics complimented his perfection in ¹³rendering the active human form, but they criticized ¹⁴the style of his work. Tait left McGill in early 1904 to advance his career. Before starting his new position, he went briefly to Europe for art study in an attempt to change what his critics had challenged. Even with the steps he took to overcome their comments, he still struggled to fully alter their opinions.

You may be wondering why his biographers say that critics of the time praised ¹⁵Tait's ability to express the anatomical features ¹⁶of subjects on his plaques and medals so realistically, yet they ¹⁷were dismissive of his "style" of art. The biographers don't explain. Although McKenzie's ¹⁸numismatic pieces had and continue to have enthusiastic supporters, ¹⁹among art connoisseurs the dominant athletic theme often limited the allure ²⁰of his work to specialists.

To his critics, the art of the medal was to tell a story within the confines of a ²¹circular space or small rectangle and to achieve this through the established use of allegory, personification and the inclusion of the traditional symbols of art. The viewer "reads" these visuals, interprets them, and absorbs their meaning. That's the art experience. Much of McKenzie's ²²work was a

dramatic moment-in-time capturing the physical effort he idolized. His works are admirable, but critics often found them candid, lacking the ²³“who-what-why” tradition in telling a story. However, we’ll leave the connoisseurs to their ²⁴viewpoint. Perhaps McKenzie’s catchphrase “Joy of Effort” best expresses his intended message.

By September 1904, McKenzie had returned from Europe to become Professor of Physical Education and department head at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. Penn, as it’s fondly called, is the famous private Ivy League university established ²⁵in 1740, founded by Benjamin Franklin. The athletes Tait administered did their exercise, played their sports and reached their endurance on Penn’s Franklin Field, a physical battleground with Tait in charge. Franklin Field is home to the annual collegiate track and field event known as the Penn Relays. ²⁶RTM’s plaque with a nude-four-man relay team being awarded by Benjamin Franklin is the champions’ prize ²⁷the athletes compete to win.

McKenzie’s concentration now was on teaching and promoting physical education. Soon he began writing journal articles about the relationship of physical exercise to wellness. The value of his sculptural work was welcomed by Penn as a teaching aid and a promoter for physical training; in support, the institution gave him ²⁸space for his own art studio. By 1909, he was writing books on the subjects of exercise and health and on physical rehabilitation. The flow of written material from his teachings continued throughout his career. Certain of his many books became foundations for physical training programs at institutions and in the military. McKenzie thrived at Penn, the university prospered, and the students benefited.

In 1907 Tait met his future ²⁹wife, Ethel O’Neil, while on voyage to Europe. Ethel, of Irish lineage, was a poet and talented musician from Hamilton. Their attraction developed later that year into marriage, which took place in Dublin, Ireland; where after their wedding, they were guests of Lord and Lady Aberdeen whom Tait had ministered to as Governor General in Ottawa. Tait was 40, Ethel was 27. Ethel ³⁰McKenzie inspired and supported Tait, a loving companion during the next 30 years that he lived. They remained childless.

The summer Olympic Games from 1912 to 1948 included a sport called “art competition.” One of its events, “mixed sculpturing,” drew Tait. Confident from a successful European ³¹public exhibit of some of his work, he entered his *Joy of Effort* hurdlers, ³²among eight competitors in the 1912 Stockholm Games. Though his entry didn’t win, the piece, a large plaster medallion, still acclaimed his finest work, gained such admiration that the American section of the IOC ³³had a forty-six-inch cast-bronze copy installed on the outer wall of Stockholm’s stadium in commemoration of Sweden hosting these fifth Olympic Games. The king of Sweden later gave McKenzie a silver medal in recognition of his work and this contribution. That may have soothed his torment about missing an award medal (Ethel’s personal memoir records “his fuming and fussing”). Much later, ³⁴his five-foot diameter *Shield of Athletes* won Olympic bronze at the Los Angeles games in 1932. Years on, Tait emerged as the only Olympian to compete in art in all five Olympic Games of the era.

In 1914 McKenzie volunteered to serve overseas with the Canadian Army Medical Corps as a doctor treating the war wounded. He was left waiting. As war injuries to personnel escalated, Tait felt an urgency to help; he arranged leave from his duties, and in 1915 he sailed for England at his own expense. Frustrated with more bureaucratic delay at a Canadian recruiting depot there, he applied to Britain's ³⁵Royal Army Medical Corps where prompt acceptance came with a commission as a lieutenant. McKenzie asked to serve with its Physical Training Headquarters Staff, so initially he was sent for a course on physical education. On his arrival, the colonel in charge realized that Tait wrote the text books the course used as its basis. With that and a quick dismissal, Lieut. McKenzie was dispatched instead to inspect and report on conditions in training camps and in military hospitals. His reports uncovered shortcomings and offered solutions, which were put in place. This success and early recognition of his expertise helped gain him a promotion to the rank of major and elevated him to higher levels of responsibility.

Tait McKenzie served the RAMC in a series of wartime administrative positions to resolve England's military hospitals' struggles to treat and rehabilitate the increasing numbers of casualties. He wrote several detailed books on therapy treatment, prosthetics, and rehabilitative care for use in teaching how to efficiently make patients recover successfully. One particular book of his, *Reclaiming the Maimed a Handbook of Physical Therapy*, is worthy of mention because it includes his detailed instruction on how to create a facial prosthetic to disguise a horrific wound that has destroyed a patient's face to the extent that the person cannot appear in public. Tait himself pioneered this technique that employs great surgical skill, anatomical expertise, and perfection in sculptural ability. He developed this procedure himself, working with severely damaged faces of distraught patients in operatories and labs ³⁶in military hospitals for convalescents; these entities were under his authority as Medical Officer in Command of Heaton Park, Manchester, and as Inspector of War Office institutions for convalescents in Britain. Before the war ended, he was sent to North America to lecture and teach the treatment and rehabilitation of war wounded to American and Canadian military medical personnel who would be responsible for their own returning casualties. Following demobilization he lectured to medical groups before returning to Penn ³⁷and his other interests. By now he was middle aged.

In the post-war years ³⁸McKenzie's sculptural output flourished. ³⁹In 1920 he had the most successful exhibition ⁴⁰so far of his work. This was at the British Arts Society ⁴¹in London where he displayed sixty of his works ⁴²for a two-month showing. Critics and the press reacted ⁴³with an enthusiasm that captured the attention of some institutional committees ⁴⁴charged with planning war memorials to ⁴⁵commemorate their members who had served. One such was Cambridge University's, and that committee retained Tait to design its memorial, which he created as *Homecoming* a heroic-size British infantryman striding home in triumph. Another was for ⁴⁶*The Call 1914* central to Edinburgh's Scottish American War Memorial; its kilted Scottish soldier sits, looking ⁴⁷forth intently. McKenzie was commissioned for several other war memorials: a half-dozen in the US, one in Ottawa (1923) to commemorate ⁴⁸Lieutenant George

Baker, the only sitting MP killed in action, and others⁴⁹ in Almonte. His skillful work attracted similar commissions⁵⁰ for memorial statues of famous persons,⁵¹ *General James Wolfe*, Greenwich, UK, is a prime example. Such large-sized projects were complex and time consuming. His “The Call” itself took four years to complete. Art works like these expanded his oeuvre, in which the same skill repeated its success within the monuments, statues, figurines,⁵² plaques and medals he continued to create.⁵³ One endorsement he received from admirers of his athletic figurines was the sobriquet “Sculptor of Athletes.” His bas-relief plaques⁵⁴ and medals gained similar admiration. These pieces eventually totalled⁵⁵ more than 90, which included doctors, musicians, poets, writers, actors,⁵⁶ statesmen and a few children.

Tait’s RTM⁵⁷ monogram shows on several portrait medals⁵⁸ of this era. He often got called upon for medals—several to acknowledge academic colleagues and others for leaders of professional associations. And there was a special one⁵⁹ in 1936 for his close friend and fellow sculptor, John R. Sinnock. Sinnock an American and McKenzie a Canadian were fast friends with much in common; both were academics, well-travelled, and each had taught in American institutions; their main connection would have been their shared love of art: Both were listed sculptors. Sinnock, at that time was Chief Engraver of the US Mint; before that he had been a university art instructor. Each sculpted the other to create a medal. Sinnock’s medal of McKenzie and McKenzie’s medal of Sinnock form a pair made for mutual exchange, friend honouring friend. Their kinship lasted until McKenzie’s death in 1938. John R. Sinnock survived until 1947. Sinnock’s portrait of McKenzie re-appeared⁶⁰ some 30 years later to celebrate the centenary of Tait’s birth. It has also been used in connection with⁶¹ Olympic Games in Canada. Medallie Art & Mint has the right to that image as well as the rights to most of McKenzie’s designs for many of his athletic-themed plaques and medals. McKenzie’s designs re-appear from time-to-time in various sizes, used as obverses paired with alternative reverses for specific purposes. Tait’s originals were mostly uniface; the re-issues benefit the maker, but also provide us the opportunity of having an inexpensive copy.

Despite his academic responsibilities and his artistic commitments Tait McKenzie gave others generous amounts of his time. He frequently lectured to groups interested in medical techniques, in physical training or in exercise and health. He was also keen to speak about a favourite professional pursuit: physical rehabilitation, getting the victim of accident or war injury recovered quickly. McKenzie continued to write books and articles for teaching purposes. What’s surprising is that he participated as well in an impressive number of associations related to his academic career. Records show he gave these entities active support through being in their administrative group or often as an organization’s head.⁶² All the while he remained associated with Penn University,⁶³ and he continued sculpting until his demise.⁶⁴ Throughout his lengthy career in the United States he remained a Canadian national.⁶⁵

Tait held a long-time admiration for the values of scouting. He was in the forefront forming the first Philadelphia Boy Scouts Chapter, in 1908. He knew Sir Robert Baden-Powell, Scouts founder, as a personal friend, and shared the Scouting values Baden-Powell instilled in youths:

physical, mental and moral wellbeing, and stability.⁶⁶ Fittingly, McKenzie created a statue for Philadelphia: *The Boy Scout*. When it was unveiled, gimlet eyed critics complained that Tait had altered the handle of the Scout's official axe⁶⁷ by adding a deer's hoof to the handle's end. He responded with a grin and the comment, "artistic licence." Small figurine copies⁶⁸ became and still are popular as scouting awards.

In his later years, RTM turned to his roots.⁶⁹ He acquired a stone grist mill built by a Scots pioneer in 1830⁷⁰ on a wooded riverside in Almonte, a building he'd played in as a child. Tait had it restored into a retreat and studio where he with Ethel accumulated his artistic creations of sketches, patterns and final models, for display. They called it the Mill of Kintail, and they headed there for respite whenever time away from Tait's hectic academic and artistic work permitted.

McKenzie received the Society of Medalists⁷¹ highest honour of respect for a sculptor, its request for him to design a medal for its series— #13 for issue in 1936. His contribution was *Strength and Speed*, a three-inch bronze, the obverse design a shot putter and the reverse four runners in line. This was one among what emerged as his last works. Doctor Robert Tait McKenzie, age 70, suffered an apparent heart attack and died suddenly April 28, 1938, in Philadelphia. He was buried there⁷² after the removal of his heart, which in respect of his wish was carried to Edinburgh and interred in Saint Cuthbert's Churchyard, in Princess Street Gardens, as near as possible to his poignant statue there:⁷³ *The Call 1914* in the Scottish American War Memorial.

Tait McKenzie's legacy lives on in many forms and in many places. For the interests of collectors and numismatists, in Canada many artifacts are displayed in⁷⁴ The Mill of Kintail, Almonte, a museum and conservation area. There are other associated items worth mention:

To support Olympic Games in Canada, Canada Post started a program⁷⁵ to release a games-themed postage stamp at advanced times leading to a year's games. Among its first issues, for the Montreal Summer Games in 1976, were two stamps: *The Sprinter* (track) and *The Plunger* (aquatics). Both stamps, by Alan Robb Fleming, were based on sculpture by Robert Tait McKenzie.

In Calgary's Olympic Skating Oval built for the⁷⁶ 1988 Winter Olympic Games *Brothers of the Wind*, a massive ten-by-three-foot bronze antique dominates at the main stair landing to the viewing floor. Tait's 1925 eight-skater masterpiece in this rare massive version is a splendid tribute to his genius and a fitting symbolic delight showcasing the sport in this building.

Local lore tells us this piece, from the original New York City Skating Club building, was rescued by a private collector when that building was demolished years ago. Calgary newspaper reports during the Oval's construction say the piece was obtained in 1986 from a private collector and donated anonymously for permanent installation in the project. The Oval's architect built it into the structure.

Tait McKenzie's life spanned the time from Confederation until the end of the Great Depression. His life story and his remarkable and diverse achievements are inspiring. Several biographies exist that detail his experiences. The following are three different biographers' renderings with the findings as each of them views him:

⁷⁷*Tait McKenzie a Sculptor of Youth* by Christopher Hussey

⁷⁸*The Joy of Effort* by Jean McGill

⁷⁹*R. Tait McKenzie the Sculptor of Athletes* by Andrew Kozar

For the researcher, The Penn University Records Center has the archival collection: *R. Tait (Robert Tait) McKenzie Papers 1880-1940*. The inventory records list 112 boxes that in total contain an extensive amount of material from the sixty-year time span.

(Barrie concludes this presentation with his personal summary of his interest in McKenzie's life work, the contributions of the man to medical science, education, and to art. Barrie ends this summary with a heartfelt acknowledgement of how McKenzie's expertise benefited a close relative.)

I chanced on images of Tait McKenzie's sculpture more than fifty years ago and became captivated particularly by his large plaques. Long before the Internet, I read books about him and bought Kozar's biography of the man. I've never owned an early piece of his work, but I visit website displays of his art and when possible, I view his work on public show. Periodically, I trek to the Olympic Oval to absorb the magic of that massive bronze ⁸⁰ antique: *Brothers of the Wind*. I find McKenzie's sculptures emotive and his plaques and medals offer thought provoking beauty. To me, Tait McKenzie was a remarkable human being: a healer, a teacher and a sculptor; he contributed so much from these disciplines to the benefit of others.

What I find lamentable is, that today, Tait McKenzie seems unknown to many Canadians, especially the younger generation. Ask them to name a famous Canadian artist and they'll likely offer "A.Y. Jackson for his landscapes, or Joe Fafard for his cows." Perhaps this shortcoming is because ⁸¹RTM's career ran so long in the US, or because his sculpture is thought wedded to the Olympics, or because he's been gone 80 years. My hope is that I've re-introduced the man, his art and his achievements, to rekindle his memory.

In preparing this talk, I was drawn to McKenzie's achievements in the Royal Army Medical Corp. His books on rehabilitating wounded service personnel intrigued me as I paged through their illustrations of certain treatments. My father-in-law had been a twenty-two-year-old Canadian infantryman in the trenches of Pas-de-Calais, France, when he was wounded in 1918. He had emergency surgery behind the lines and was evacuated to England for further treatment and eventual rehabilitation in that very #13 Military Hospital in my slide presentation. I believe that hospital came under Major McKenzie's control and I know that what Dad told me about his treatment corresponded to McKenzie's book that I mentioned in my talk. Soldier Dad expected a

90 percent recovery from his trauma, though smaller bits of shrapnel escaped the removal process. Dr. McKenzie's rehabilitation method brought an earlier repatriation and eventual full recovery, although some shrapnel bits remained. There will have been a great many other battle-injured Allied forces personnel whose recovery under McKenzie's methods brought similar outcomes. Tait McKenzie's accomplishments in the practice of physical therapy were visionary; his work became the genesis of today's kinesiology, and now, many in that field regard Dr. McKenzie as the father of that science.

⁸²**Acknowledgement**

These fellow enthusiasts made suggestions and gave support during my time preparing this talk. I acknowledge their help, and I thank each of them for his contribution: Ron Cheek, Terry Wallace, and William Waychison.

Thank you for attending.⁸³

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Robert Tait McKenzie

His Life and His Art



**Royal Canadian Numismatic Association
Education Symposium 2019**

Sculptor Tait McKenzie RCA



Almonte, Ontario, ca. 1900



McGill University ca. 1880



Doctor Tait McKenzie



Lord and Lady Aberdeen *en famille*



Tait McKenzie and Jim Naismith 1881



Masks of Facial Expression

Violent effort



Breathlessness



Masks of Facial Expression

Fatigue



Exhaustion



Modern Discus Thrower 1926



Relay Runner 1910



Sprinter 1902



Plunger 1925



Ice Bird 1925



Three Punters 1932-3



Society of Medalists 1936



Olympian *Lord Burghley* 1928



Skater 1900 plaster study



Brothers of the Wind 1925



ICAA Track and Field 1917



Three Punters 1932-3



ICAA Swimming 1929



ICAA Tennis 1929



Designs Adapted for Sports Awards

They are Swifter Than Eagles



USA 150th anniversary



Benjamin Franklin Franklin Institute Award



Penn University *Relay Carnival*



Penn University *Relay Carnival* gilt



Young Franklin by RTM



Ethel O'Neil

Plaque by RTM 1912



Photograph



Tait and Ethel ca. 1932



Joy of Effort

1912 design



revised design



Joy of Effort

1912 design



revised design



Joy of Effort – Stockholm 1912



Shield of Athletes – Los Angeles 1932



Major R.T. McKenzie RAMC



WW I #13 Canadian Military General Hospital Hastings, Sussex



Professor Tait McKenzie



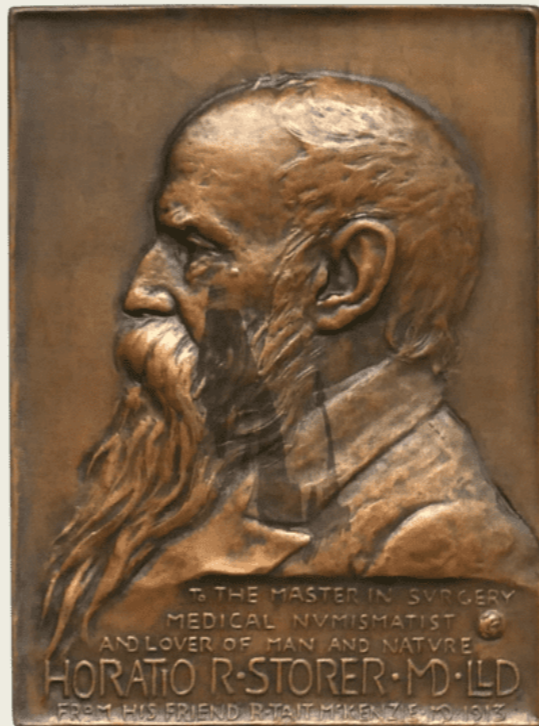
Thomas Ryburn Buchanan 1908



Emmeline Bedell 1909



Horatio R. Storer 1913



Archibald Lampman 1903



Walt Whitman 1919



American Legion School Award 1922

obverse



reverse



American Legion School Award 1925

obverse



reverse



The Call 1914



The Call 1914



Lieutenant George Baker MP 1923



The Volunteer – Almonte 1923



The Volunteer – Almonte, Ontario



General James Wolfe – Greenwich UK



The Fields Mathematics Medal 1934
portrait of Archimedes



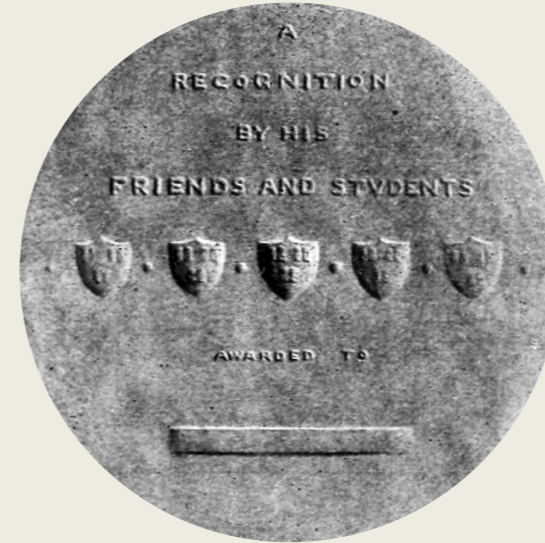
The Philadelphia Sketch Club Medal



Luther Halsey Gulick Medal



Dudley Allen Sargent Medal 1907
plaster models



Theatrical Actor
Forbes Robertson as Julius Caesar



**University of Buffalo
Charles R. Norton 1925**



Henry H. Donaldson - Neurologist
Lenape Club Presidential Medal 1917



R.Tait McKenzie · John R. Sinnock
friend honouring friend 1936



RTM

Centennial of His Birth - 1967



**RTM · The Canadian Olympic Committee,
Montreal Olympic Games 1976**



Walter Burns Saunders Memorial Medal
portrait of Florence Nightingale 1929



Man of Science
Sir Arthur Keith 1930



Poet of the Habitant
William Henry Drummond 1854–1907



Man of Letters
Christopher Hussey 1930 (RTM's biographer)



Boy Scout – Philadelphia USA



Axe Handle's "deer-foot" end



Boy Scout Award 1915



The Mill of Kintail, Almonte



The Mill of Kintail, Almonte



Society of Medalists No. 13

Obverse: *Strength*



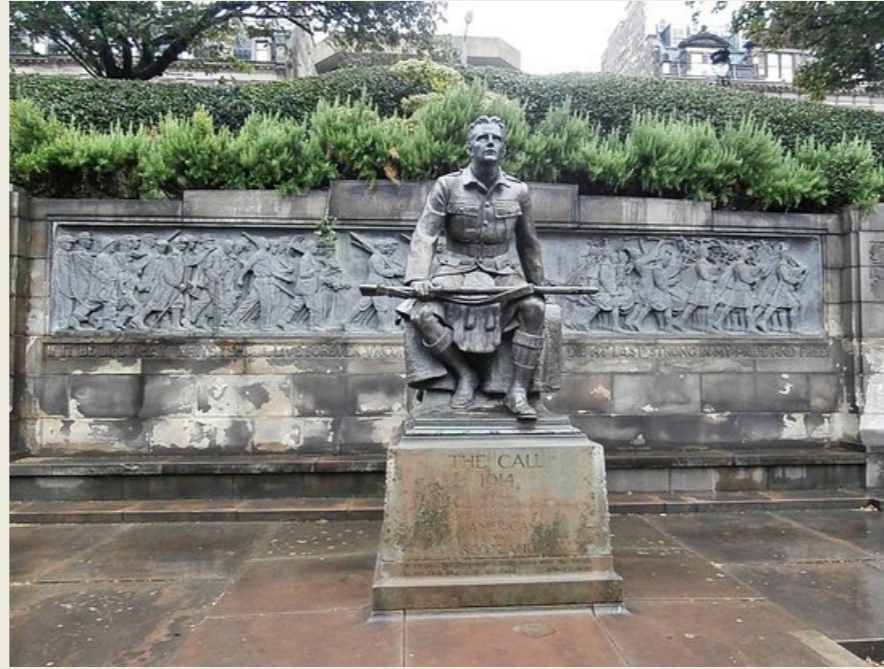
Reverse: *Speed*



Dr R.Tait McKenzie RIP – Philadelphia



Scottish American Memorial Princess Street Gardens, Edinburgh



The Mill of Kintail Museum, Almonte



Montreal Olympic Games 1976

Sprinter



Plunger



Brothers of the Wind

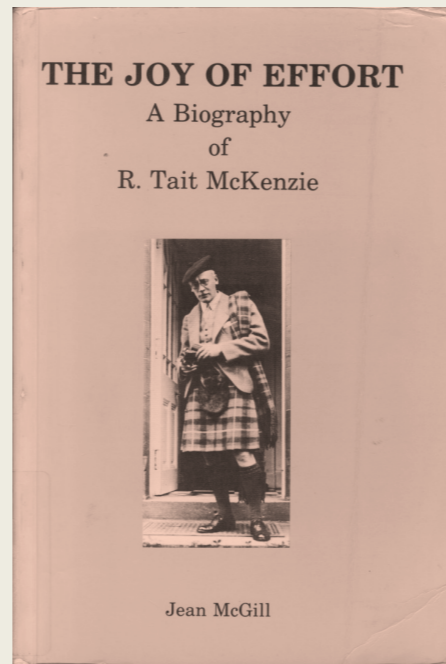


Olympic Skating Oval Calgary

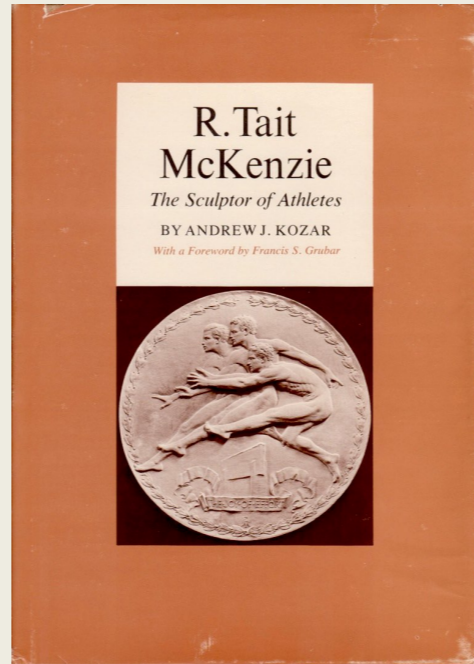
Tait McKenzie by Christopher Hussey



Joy of Effort by Jean S. McGill



R. Tait McKenzie by Andrew J. Kozar



Brothers of the Wind



Olympic Skating Oval Calgary

Robert Tait McKenzie 1867–1938



In appreciation

These fellow enthusiasts made suggestions and gave support during my time preparing this talk. I acknowledge their help, and I thank each of them for his contribution:

**Ron Cheek,
Terry Wallace,
William Waychison.**

Thank you for attending



**Education Symposium
Calgary 2019 RCNA Convention**