



## Notable Canadian Monuments



### III.—The Miners' Monument at Springhill

BY REV. D. W. JOHNSON, M.A.

**S**HORTLY after the noon hour of Saturday, Feb. 21st, 1891, a rumor spread through the town of Springhill, Nova Scotia, that an explosion had taken place in the east slope of the coal mines in that place, and that some of the men had been hurt.

As no report had been heard above ground, it was hoped that the accident was not a serious one. But soon the appalling news filled the town that a terrific explosion had taken place, and that of the six hundred men and boys working in the connected east and west slopes, 150 were unaccounted for, and that many, if not all of them, must be dead. Men, women and children, practically the entire population, flocked to the mouth of the pit, for many of them had friends or relatives working in the mines.

Although the explosion took place in the east slope, the terrific concussion burst through the doors of the tunnel communicating with the west slope, and the deadly after-damp swept into it, carrying death by suffocation to many who had no warning of what had happened. Through this slope the work of rescuing the injured and recovering the bodies of the dead began immediately, and at six o'clock forty-four dead bodies and sixteen injured men had been brought to the surface.

The scenes at the pit-mouth were heartrending in the extreme, mothers and wives falling prostrate or shrieking, as they recognized the lifeless bodies of their husbands or sons. Those who had met death by suffocation from the deadly gas, at a distance from the explosion, had no marks upon them, and looked so natural, as if asleep, that their friends refused to believe them dead, and in some cases seized their forms in loved embrace, and besought them to speak to them.

As soon as it was possible to descend the east slope, heroic men volunteered to go down, at the peril of their lives. Through an atmosphere alarmingly impure with gas and coal dust and heated smoke, these heroes made their way, and even when fire was discovered in one of the bords, and another explosion might take place at any moment, they rested not in their efforts until the fire was extinguished, ventilation appliances partially restored, and it was made sure that no living comrade was in the mine needing rescue.

Some of the rescuers were overcome with gas and had to be hastily carried to the surface for resuscitation. One of the party, describing the condition of the mine, said: "Falls of stone and coal are everywhere, cars all blown to pieces, rails bent like hoops, and general destruction—very smoky, and dead men and boys lying in all directions."

All through the night the rescue work went on, and a never-to-be-forgotten Sunday morning dawned upon the terrible scene.

From all the surrounding villages and towns, and from distant mining centres in the province, many people had flocked to the stricken community, and notwithstanding a bitterly cold and sleety rain, which prevailed all day, thousands of people congregated about the works, whilst excitement continued as from time to time the body of some victim was brought up from the depths of the mine.

The bodies of those who were killed in the neighborhood of the explosion were horribly burned and mutilated, and no one who passed through the large carpenter shop, which was transformed into a great morgue, will ever forget the terrible sight.

So great was the excitement and grief, church services could not be conducted, but a more solemn sermon than ever came from human lips was being preached to the thousands that gathered about the pit's-mouth, by the circumstances which brought them together.

At nightfall, on Sunday, one hundred bodies had been recovered, and the search continued, night and day, for five days, until Thursday afternoon, when the last body, that of

Henry Swift, the underground manager, was recovered. The whole number killed outright was 121, and four of the injured having died, the total loss of human life was 125. Sixteen horses also perished in the mine.

The funerals began on Monday and continued till Friday. The gravediggers in the cemetery looked like an army burying their dead. The frost was deep in the ground, and the men, accustomed to the warm atmosphere of the mine, found it very difficult work to pierce the frosty earth and to endure the cold, but a booth was erected and refreshments and hot coffee were served to the toilers to enable them to continue the work.

To quote from Morrow's "Story of the Springhill Explosion": "Public arrangements were made for the burial of the dead, in order that stricken families might, in some measure, be relieved from care. The Baptist, Methodist and Presby-



MINERS' MONUMENT, AT SPRINGHILL, N.S.

Erected to commemorate the terrible mining disaster of 1891

terian ministers agreed to work together, and the bodies belonging to these denominations were taken to the Methodist church, as it was easy of access, being situated on the main street. The Episcopalians and Roman Catholics were taken to their respective churches, and funeral services were conducted by the clergy of each denomination in harmony with its mode of burial. A number of funerals were also conducted by the different societies to which the deceased had belonged. During the days in which the funerals continued business places were closed, and the whole town was shrouded in the deepest sorrow.

"It was at these funeral services in the Methodist church that the most heartrending scenes were witnessed. The greater number of the dead were taken from this place for interment. Here weeping friends assembled to mingle in