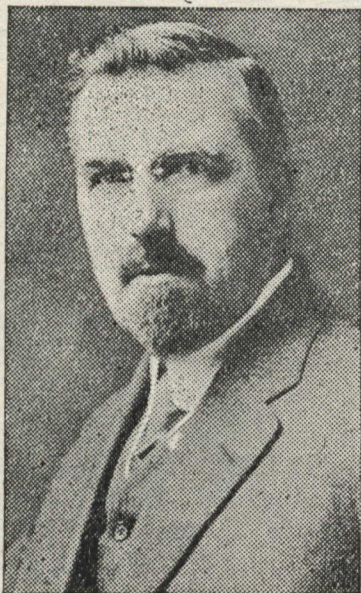


Books—and The Soldier

By John Ridington

From an address given before the "Pacific and North-West Library Conference"



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For more than four years Canada, for nigh two years the United States, have been at war. All national effort in both countries has been subordinated to one great and grim, one holy and impassioned determination—the survival, the unimpaired maintenance, the triumphant extension, of those principles of freedom embedded in the very foundations of democratic civilization. The Dominion has five hundred and fifty thousand men under arms, four hundred thousand of its sons overseas! It is these men—British and Americans—the living bulwark of human freedom, that constitute our new and high responsibilities. It is they who afford us new opportunities for service that are honorable privileges as well as plain, patriotic duties. These men have been taken from peaceful occupations, and trained and disciplined in the bloody business of war. In a few months, or years, the war will be over. These men will then return. Then, and before, many will be incapacitated for the occupations in which they were engaged before they went overseas; others, with new outlooks, will desire wider and better vocational training. It is hardly necessary to

state that the whole nation will do everything possible to mitigate the suffering of the disabled; patriotism and humanity alike demand this, and national gratitude will manifest itself, as of old, in pensions and soldiers' homes.

This is in itself a notable advance of the treatment given returned veterans in other days. The broken soldier of the Marlborough and Napoleonic wars, as shown us in Goldsmith's "Deserted Village," who wept o'er his wounds, and talked the night away with tales of sorrow, was little better than a beggar, and object of pity and charity. We live in days where no nation will content itself merely with physical care for its disabled veterans. Since the Crimean and Civil wars there has been an enormous expansion of the conception of public responsibility to a nation's representatives on its battle lines. Side by side with the wonderful developments in finance, commerce, industry, that have marked the past half century, has been a corresponding enlargement of the sense of public indebtedness to those who serve the state by the sacrifice of personal ease, and at hazard of their lives. The contrast between the sanitary, medical or commissariat departments of the armies of today and those of, say, the American Civil War, or even the Boer War, is not more startling or impressive than that existing between the ideas held by the ordinary citizen of the twentieth century, and those of his grandfather, as to the range, extent and nature of a state's indebtedness to its fighting men. Significant as is this fact, it is matched by another, equally vital and hopeful,—the general, almost universal, desire, the eager disposition, to acknowledge this obligation, and to meet it in the fullest and most generous way.

In the glad, good days to come, "when the war drum throbs no longer, and the battle-flags are furled," when we address ourselves, with gratitude, humility and courage, to an even greater task than that of winning the war, the rebuilding of our social and economic structures on bases not only of liberty but of righteousness, we shall be comforted with another phase of the problem of the returned soldier. There will then be millions of men coming home to this continent, the great majority of them in the prime of their physi-