

Canada and the British Commonwealth in the Great War: an Historiographical Review

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For Canada, the past few years have been a world of anniversaries defined by war. The War of 1812 was selected by the Canadian government for special commemoration, as a means of stimulating national pride by recalling the nation's military exploits while highlighting, in particular, Canada's military traditions. The government hoped that \$30 million would help, and up to a point it did, with those who were already committed to the art of re-enactment. There was inevitably a certain anti-Americanism, muted, to be sure, by the passage of time: the antique uniforms worn by the many battlefield re-enactors helped place the anniversary in a comfortably remote and colourful past-remembering the violence without having to dwell on its victims, rendered mute and historically harmless by the passage of two hundred years. The public reaction was tepid, and probably disappointing to the government.

Now 2014 is upon us, and with it the hundredth anniversary of a much bigger war, one that was, until very recently, within living memory. The war directly engaged hundreds of thousands of Canadians in military service, cost billions of dollars – in the dollars of 1914-1918 – altered Canadian society and reshaped the country's politics. The War of 1812 left a few commemorative plinths, notably the monument to Sir Isaac Brock on the Niagara River, erected to honour a British general who fell while successfully defending Canada against American invaders. The monument was subsequently blown up by an American sympathizer, and a second one, more impressive, was then erected. Such monuments are necessarily restricted to eastern Canada, where the war was fought, but the country that fought the Great War extended from the Atlantic to the Pacific, and its soldiers fought at both ends of the Eurasian landmass, from the Somme to Vladivostok. The First World War left memorials all across Canada, as well as probably Canada's most impressive and most beautiful memorial, at Vimy Ridge, near Arras in northern France, commemorating the most striking victory by the Canadian Corps during the Great War, as it was called, in April 1917. As of this writing, none of these monuments has been blown up.

The celebrations between 2014 and 2018, or perhaps 2019, to include Canada's intervention against the Bolsheviks in northern Russia and Siberia, or maybe the Treaty of Versailles that ended the war, will rely on a fairly standard and accepted narrative of what happened during the war and its significance. This narrative has been long in the making, starting with the journalism of the war, official propaganda during the war, and official self-congratulation at war's end.

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The generally accepted story is that Canada responded to the call of democracy, international law, and the British Empire in August 1914, though not necessarily in that order. This is essentially the explanation that Canada's Prime Minister in 1914, Sir Robert Borden, gave to Parliament just after the outbreak of the war. Canada of course had no choice: as a dependent colony of the British Empire, it was bound by the British declaration of war on 4 August. Nevertheless, Borden wanted to ensure that the war was Canada's war, and was accepted as such. Canada and the Empire, Borden told Parliament, were fighting in defence of the rule of law and against German aggression. And soon enough, as stories of German atrocities at Louvain and elsewhere filtered out, and were amplified by British propaganda, faithfully repeated in Canada, it became a war fought against barbarism, and for civilization.

It would be a war fought in concert with the rest of the British Empire, and while in 1914 the British hoped for much, they were uncertain what, exactly, to expect.

Canada was an old and often troublesome colony. Since it was federated as a "dominion" (the term "kingdom" was explicitly discouraged as likely to offend the Americans) in 1867, and after British troops withdrawn in 1871, Canada was no longer a direct charge on the budget of the United Kingdom. It raised its own taxes and paid its own way. It did not seek and was not offered any role in formulating British foreign, defence or commercial policy. Its politicians preoccupied themselves with internal development – agricultural settlement and the exploitation of Canada's abundant resources – and received British immigrants by the boatload, and sacks of optimistic British money seeking a profitable home.

Canada supported the British war in South Africa (1899-1902) at the price of some hard feeling between English- and French-speaking Canadians. But South Africa was distant and its cost to Canada small, and the war did not permanently disturb Canada's political balance. It was nevertheless a precedent, and the precedent was recalled in 1914 when Britain embarked on another, much larger conflict – and expected Canadian aid. As far as defence was concerned, Canadians generally resisted British efforts to bring the Canadian military into the twentieth century in terms of arms and training. Canada's military was more an aspect of "ornamentalism" – designed largely for show, suitable for a large colony with no perceptible enemies and hence no serious military agenda.

Canada's mentality in 1914 was colonial in more ways than one. Canadian politicians regarded their country as under-developed, a receiver of investment and not a self-standing financial power. There was no Bank of Canada; currency was the province of the private banks; and economic policy was a matter of raising and lowering tariffs. An unsophisticated government was now faced with a very demanding war.

The declaration of war was met with wild enthusiasm, and men rushed to the colours. Organized, or perhaps disorganized, by Borden's minister of National Defence, Sam Hughes, they embarked for Great Britain in October 1914, trained in England over the winter, and were thrown into the front lines in the second battle of Ypres in April 1915. There they withstood a German gas attack when allied troops on their flank ran away. Over the next few years the Canadian army, steadily augmented until

there were four divisions at the front, became more professional and much more formidable and, in the accounts sent back to Canada, much more heroic. At first under direct British command, it was organized as “the Canadian corps” and became one of the British army’s most effective formations. In the last two years of the war, under generals Sir Julian Byng (British) and Sir Arthur Currie (Canadian), the corps won victory after victory against the most formidable units of the German army.

This narrative was not without its spice. The Borden cabinet was a rather mixed bag, in terms of talent, and attention focused early on General (as he quickly became) Sir Samuel Hughes, knighted in 1915. (Hughes also believed that he merited the Victoria Cross, for exploits in the South African War; that honour, however, he did not get.) A frequent descriptor of Defence Minister Hughes, from his contemporaries, is “insane,” as in, “Hughes has the low cunning of the insane,” the view of Sir Joseph Flavelle, who was in charge of munitions production at the end of the war. Hughes stacked his department with his cronies, to whom he gave lucrative munitions contracts, and as minister looked after the career and promotion of his son, General Garnet Hughes. A whiff of corruption and nepotism enveloped Hughes and the Borden government, until Borden finally nerved himself to fire his obstreperous minister in 1916. All this would be manna from heaven to future historians.

Thus, while the Canadian Corps was fighting in France, the political consensus that had temporarily unified politicians behind the war effort was crumbling at home. The gulf was not only between Conservatives (Borden’s government) and Liberals (the official opposition under the former Prime Minister, Sir Wilfrid Laurier), but also between English and French-speaking Canadians, and it existed on other levels as well. After an initial burst of bipartisanship in 1914, the two parties resumed their customary political warfare – conducted through their provincial branches, for the most part. As a result, Conservative governments were defeated in province after province, leaving the federal party increasingly isolated. Laurier had every reason to believe that when the next federal election was called he would emerge, once again, as Canada’s Prime Minister. This provincial aspect of Canada’s wartime history has often been subordinated, or ignored, in favour of the broad national or international picture.

Because Canada was and is in the majority English-speaking, it is frequently thought (even by Canadians) to be Anglophone, pure and simple. Of course it was not. Francophone rights had been guaranteed and implemented as far back as the 1770s, just after the colony’s conquest by the British, and when the Canadian confederation was created in 1867, francophones became the majority in the province of Quebec – and a significant minority elsewhere. By 1914 Canada’s francophones had been separated from France for over 150 years, and the separation was profound. The disappearance of the French monarchy, the several revolutions, two Napoleonic empires, three French republics, and the struggles of the French Catholic church against modernization and secularism all stood between French Canadians and twentieth-century France. Though even some English-Canadians believed that their French compatriots would rally to the cause of the French ally, they did not. If

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French-Canadians had an overseas “patrie” in 1914, it was the Vatican, not the Third French Republic.

French-Canadians’ distant view of France contributed to the conflict between English- and French-speaking Canadians, centring on the very divisive question of military service. The incontrovertible fact was that many more English-speakers enlisted for military service than French-speakers. At the time, this was interpreted in English Canada to mean a higher grade of patriotism among English-Canadians than French; and in French Canada it was taken to mean that the English were devoted to empire over country.

So even while the war was on, an alternative narrative began to emerge, this time in French. Political dissonance took place against a manpower shortage in industry, agriculture, mines, forests, and of course the army, serious inflation, and an ill-advised attempt by the Conservative government of Ontario to suppress French schools in that province. It culminated in the extremely bitter and divisive federal election of December 1917, which saw an English-speaking coalition of Conservatives and dissident Liberals returned to power, with the promise to impose conscription to fill the depleted ranks of the army in France. Conscription was duly applied, the Canadian Corps performed splendidly in the final battles of 1918, and on 11 November 1918 it entered the Belgian city of Mons, where British forces had first engaged the Germans in 1914.

There was also a high-political narrative to the war, on the imperial level, which at the time stressed that Canada’s huge contribution, 600,000 men and women enlisted or conscripted into the armed forces from a population of barely eight millions, had won Canada respect and consideration by the British government. The British adapted imperial institutions to a new reality in which the dominions, Canada, Newfoundland, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, plus the Indian Empire contributed massively to the sustenance of British power. Indeed by the end of the war it was impossible to imagine that power surviving intact without a dominion contribution. This was recognized by dominion (including Canadian) participation in an imperial cabinet, and as part of the British delegation to the Paris Peace Conference of 1919. So the war had enhanced Canadian pride and with it Canadian nationalism and also Canada’s status, not just in the Empire but as an autonomous entity, allowing it to move “From Colony to Nation” as the title of a later Canadian history textbook (written by a Great War veteran) had it. From this development a separate narrative flowed, related to but not the same as the military chronicle.

Directing the Canadian economy through the war was a matter of some mystery. Canada did have many of the raw materials that could be rendered into arms and ammunition, but its manufacturing industry was scattered, disconnected, and under-equipped for the task. Canadians were of course familiar with a system in which government paid, often exorbitantly, for public goods. After 1915 Canadian factories did begin munitions production, but it was organized on the principle of cronyism and patronage, and soon gave off a whiff of scandal. The scandal helped propel the Minister of Militia and Defence from office. Munitions production was taken out of

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the Canadian government's hands, and placed under the British Ministry of Munitions, through an Imperial Munitions Board (IMB) under a prominent Canadian millionaire, Sir Joseph Flavelle. (See Michael Bliss's excellent biography of Flavelle, *A Canadian Millionaire* (2nd ed., Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1992).

The IMB showed that Canada was still, in many respects, a large colony, accepting as part of the natural order that a large part of the Canadian economy should respond to a British-appointed authority, but there are areas in which the Canadian government also exerted itself. The government raised taxes, as it had to, and implemented an income tax, previously beyond the pale of practical politics. Without really understanding how or why, the government expanded the economy, inflated the currency, presided over a rise in prices, and tried, belatedly, to bring wages and prices under control. The cost of all this could be measured in dollars, but it was also measured in strikes and social disruption, and the rise of a radical trade-union movement that found real credibility in the distress of the working class in 1918-1919. Strikes, disorder and the fear of Bolshevism were products of the war just as much as shells and ships.

The war providentially ended before any further damage to Canada's political system could occur. In 1919 the troops returned home, the country sank into a sharp economic depression in 1920-1921, and life carried on. The records of Canada's overseas war were packed and sent home, and with the papers travelled a notable collection of war art from a group of official war artists – including some of Canada's best painters – which provided a visual representation of what the soldiers had endured.

Even at the time it was obvious that there were two widely held views of the war, one mainly held by English-speaking Canadians, and another by French, though there was increasingly an English-language component to the French version as the 1920s wore on and the excitement and passions of the war subsided.

Books and articles on Canada's war reflected many of the broader currents of interpretation of the war. There was of course the "lions led by donkeys" school, which found its target in the last commander of the Canadian Corps, General Sir Arthur Currie. First into the lists was the ex-minister of Defence, Sir Sam Hughes, who began denouncing Currie as early as 1918 while he, Hughes, was protected by parliamentary immunity against libel suits. When another writer in a small town newspaper repeated Hughes's charges, Currie sued, and the result was a sensational libel trial in 1928, at which Currie and many of the senior officers of the Canadian Corps appeared. Currie won his action, but the trial became yet another peg, along with Hughes's eccentricities, on which to hang the history of Canada's Great War.

It is a legal truism that the dead cannot sue, but it is also the case that the living can. Or if they do not sue, they can be ingenious in erecting caveats and obstacles to the writing of history. This fact helps to account for the painfully slow evolution of Canada's official military history of the war. Colonel A. Fortescue Duguid got the task of writing the history. His pace was deliberate – the first volume, covering 1914-1915,

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appeared only in 1938. It was not a bad history, but it was prolix and, above all, it was late. (A. F. Duguid, [*Official History of the Canadian Forces in the Great War, 1914-1919, Vol I Parts I and II*](#); Ottawa, King's Printer, downloadable from the internet¹). By then some of the characters were safely dead, including Currie and Hughes. Duguid was then overtaken by events, namely the next war, though he apparently still cherished the hope that a second volume, and a third, and so on, would appear. But no minister in wartime was willing to budget the money, and after the Second World War it was more important and more urgent to write and publish that war's history. Only much later did Duguid's successor as official military historian, Colonel C. P. Stacey, authorize one of his staff, G. W. L. Nicholson, to produce a history of the Canadian Expeditionary Force (Ottawa, Duhamel, Queen's Printer and Controller of Stationery, 1964, [also downloadable from the internet](#)²). It was a straightforward narrative, well produced and with the excellent cartography that characterized the Canadian official military histories of the period. Nicholson's is still the best, most scholarly, and most reliable account of the Canadian army during the war, although its careful dryness has sometimes caused readers to wish that it could be superseded. The Royal Canadian Navy and the Royal Canadian Air Force (the latter not officially in existence until after 1918) also produced histories (notably Gilbert Tucker, *The Naval Service of Canada: Its Official History*, vol. 1, Ottawa, King's Printer, 1962), which were eventually replaced. The final history of Canadian aviation in the Great War was published in 1980: S. F. Wise, *Canadian Airmen and the First World War* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1980). Wise and his research and writing team in the historical section of the Department of National Defence produced what was intended to be the definitive history, and so it is, meeting high standards of research and interpretation. It is, moreover, integrated into international scholarship on the air war, so that it fits nicely into more general accounts of the Royal Flying Corps and the origins of the Royal Air Force; but it is also very long, and daunting to all but the most devoted reader.

Military history has evolved greatly in Canada over the last generation. Its centre, for a generation after the War, was the Historical Section of National Defence, run by A. F. Duguid's successor, Colonel C. P. Stacey. Several younger historians, like Desmond Morton and J. L. Granatstein, worked as junior officers under Stacey before taking university jobs, while continuing to publish in the area of military history. Nicholson was Stacey's immediate successor. Soon after Nicholson published his history of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, a historian at the Canadian War Museum, John Swettenham, published *To Seize the Victory* (Toronto, Ryerson Press, 1965), a well written and well crafted narrative of the Canadian Corps, containing a sharp and irreverent portrait of Sir Sam Hughes as well as an admiring depiction of the Canadian Corps artilleryman, Brigadier General Andrew McNaughton, who would later become chief of the general staff and Defence Minister in 1944-1945. Since 1992 research on the war has found a home in a specialized journal, *Canadian Military History*, edited by Roger Sarty (another alumnus of the Historical Section) at Wilfrid Laurier University. Initially on the margin of the Historical Section were historians at the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa, which under J. L. Granatstein in the late 1990s

¹ www.cmp-cpm.forces.gc.ca/dhh-dhp/his/oh-ho/detail-eng.asp?BfBookLang=1&BfId=43.

² <http://www.cmp-cpm.forces.gc.ca/dhh-dhp/his/oh-ho/detail-eng.asp?BfBookLang=1&BfId=22>.

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emerged as a major centre for research and writing in military history, including and perhaps especially the Great War.

The major figure among military historians of the First World War in Canada is Tim Cook, a historian at the War Museum, whose many books have centred on the subject. His principal work is a two-volume history of the war, *At the Sharp End: Canadians Fighting the Great War, 1914-1916* (Toronto, Viking Canada (Penguin Group), 2007) and *Shock Troops: Canadians Fighting the Great War, 1917-18* (Toronto, Viking Canada (Penguin Group), 2008). He also wrote *The Madman and the Butcher* (Allen Lane Canada, (Penguin Group), 2010), on the infamous Hughes-Currie libel dispute, and *Warlords: Borden, Mackenzie King and Canada's World Wars* (Allen Lane Canada, 2012), an ambitious book that does not entirely succeed in finding its subject. Cook also found time to write *Clio's Warriors: Canadian Historians and the Writing of the World Wars* (Vancouver, University of British Columbia Press, 2006). Andrew Iacocci has also written a very detailed and convincing examination of the record of the First Canadian Division, *Shoestring Soldiers: The 1st Canadian Division at War, 1914-1915* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2008), which does much to dispel accepted dogma – some of it contained in the standard narrative mentioned above. Iacocci's work marks an advance on previous approaches to Canadian military history. It is more dispassionate than Cook's work, whose more emotive and more overtly patriotic tone is designed to appeal to a broader audience. While not uncritical of the record of the Canadian army in France, Cook derives positive and inspirational lessons from their history.

The political history of the Great War was also long in coming. The wartime Prime Minister, Sir Robert Borden, spent years writing his memoirs, and expired before they were finally published in 1938, as edited by his nephew Henry: *Robert Laird Borden: His Memoirs* (London, Macmillan, 1938), in two volumes. The books gave Sir Robert an undeserved reputation for solemnity and tedium. They were eventually superseded by a concise and clearly written modern biography, by Robert Craig Brown: *Robert Laird Borden, A Biography* (Toronto, Macmillan, 1975 and 1980), which puts Borden into a needed context, rescues his reputation from his own *Memoirs*, and corrects Borden's own re-ordering and re-conception of what actually happened in his life. This is particularly important when it comes to Borden's views of Canada's place in the British Empire, for as Canada's constitutional position evolved in the 1920s and 1930s, so did Borden's views of what he himself had accomplished. Some of his reinterpretations were published in his *Canadian Constitutional Studies* (1922) and *Canada in the Commonwealth* (1929): they should be used with caution as representations of what had actually occurred ten years earlier. There are a number of other studies of Borden: a very odd book by Harold A. Wilson *The Imperial Policy of Sir Robert Borden* (Gainesville, University of Florida Press, 1966) which makes Borden more of an autonomist than he really was; John English, *Borden: His Life and World* (Toronto, McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1977), a judicious and well informed short summary, strong on the politics of the period; and Martin Thornton, *Sir Robert Borden: Canada in the Makers of the Modern World* series

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(London, Haus Publishing, 2010). The latter adds little to what we already know of Borden.

The relations of Canada with the British Empire are treated authoritatively in Philip Wigley, *Canada and the Transition to Commonwealth: British-Canadian Relations, 1917-1926* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1977 and subsequent editions). For the subject from the perspective of Sir Robert Borden's legal adviser, see Robert Bothwell, *Loring Christie and the Failure of Bureaucratic Imperialism* (New York, Garland Publishing, 1988). On Canada during the war more generally, see the essays in a collection edited by David Mackenzie, *Canada and the First World War: Essays in honour of Robert Craig Brown* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2005). There is a broader history in Jonathan Vance, *Maple Leaf Empire: Canada, Britain and Two World Wars* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012); its section on the First World War is fascinating in its details and anecdote, as well as its coverage of behind-the-lines activities.

The most influential and most prominent historian of the late 20th century to tackle the Great War period in Canada was Robert Craig Brown of the University of Toronto. Brown's focus was the Prime Minister, Sir Robert Borden, whose official biographer he was. Brown's biography of Borden has already been mentioned, but his work on Borden led him to reconsider and reinterpret the context of Canadian history in the 1910s, showing the progressive origins of Borden's political thought, related to both British and especially American models. The war necessitated the expansion of government and governmental activity in Canada. Borden was philosophically inclined to greater and more positive government activity even before the war, as Brown shows, and had no problems of principle in expanding the Canadian state as experience dictated after 1914. Warfare led ineluctably to welfare, in Mark Mazower's phrase, as it became evident that the price of Canada's total commitment to the war was more equitable treatment for Canadians.

One of Brown's most important contributions to the historiography of the First World War is an article he wrote in collaboration with one of his students, Donald Loveridge, "Unrequited Faith: Recruiting and the CEF, 1914-1918," (*Revue internationale d'histoire militaire*, 51, 1982) which examined the vexed question of military enlistment. They determined that Canadians born in Canada were a minority (about 42 per cent) of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, and that the surge of enlistments in 1914 came largely, though certainly not entirely, from British immigrants to Canada. (In the First Contingent of October 1914, 70 per cent were British-born.) Over the course of the war, British-born soldiers were nearly equal in numbers to the Canadian-born. From that perspective, the gap in rates of enlistment between English Canada and French Canada is not as large or as insurmountable as publicists and politicians during and after the war made out.

Desmond Morton, a historian trained as an army officer, expanded considerably on Brown and Loveridge's work, pointing out that in the first year or two of the Canadian Corps, the gulf between officers and enlisted men was not merely one of rank, but of birth, since the Canadian-born predominated in the officer corps, and British-born

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among the other ranks: *When Your Number's Up: the Canadian Soldier in the First World War* (Toronto, Random House of Canada, 1993). Morton also expanded on such subjects as military discipline and, inevitably, on the mutinies among impatient troops desperate to go home in 1919. Intended as a companion to *When Your Number's Up*, Morton published *Fight or Pay: Soldiers' Families during the Great War* (Vancouver, University of British Columbia Press, 2004), which clearly describes the Canadian Patriotic Fund's role in providing for the families left at home. Many of Morton's conclusions, particularly regarding the reintegration of veterans and the attitudes they faced upon returning home, are drawn from his earlier work with Glenn Wright (see Desmond Morton and Glenn Wright, *Winning the Second Battle: Canadian Veterans and the Return to Civilian Life, 1915-1930*, Toronto ; University of Toronto Press, 1987). For a useful account of the place of the soldier in society, see James Wood, *Militia Myths: Ideas of the Canadian Citizen Soldier, 1896-1921* (Vancouver, University of British Columbia Press, 2010).

Canadian history is notoriously of interest mainly to Canadians, and that is true of Canada's Great War history as well. Nevertheless there has been some activity outside Canada, in a larger context. Non-Canadian scholars may naturally gravitate to the Canadian sections of the *Oxford History of the British Empire*, edited by William Roger Louis, as the most accessible and presumably the most authoritative version of Canada's imperial experiences, especially in the First World War. But it should also be used with caution. Robert Holland's essay, "The British Empire and the Great War, 1914-1918," in volume 4, *The Twentieth Century* (1999), contains several errors where Canada is concerned, for example, that General Currie was a professional soldier (he was a real estate agent). Jay Winter's three-volume edited collection, *The Cambridge History of the First World War* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014) contains an essay by Jennifer Keene on "North America," an unusual but not completely implausible coupling, and presumably there will be some mention of Canada in that and other parts of the book, but at the time of writing it is unclear what treatment it will receive.

All general histories of Canada have a section or sections on Canada during the Great War: these include Robert Bothwell, *The Penguin History of Canada* (Penguin Canada, 2007), and Robert Bothwell, Ian Drummond and John English, *Canada 1900-1945* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1990), in which Drummond, an economist, wrote the sections dealing with the Canadian economy during the war. Because of the paucity of published economic history on the period, Drummond's contributions to this book are especially useful. Also useful on the fiscal history of Canada during the war is J. Harvey Perry's unpromisingly titled *Taxes, Tariffs and Subsidies* in two volumes (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1955). It is a very clear account by a tax expert of how the government raised its money during the war.

On Borden's cabinet, there is an excellent and unsparing essay on Hughes by Robert Craig Brown in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* (available like all DCB biographies online), and there is also a full biography by Ronald G. Haycock, *Sam Hughes: the Public Career of a Controversial Canadian, 1885-1916* (Waterloo, WLU Press, 1986). There is a hilarious portrait of Hughes (and of other personalities and

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events) in some of the central volumes (vols. 19-23) of the *Histoire de la province de Québec* by the popular historian Robert Rumilly (Montréal-Éditions, 1940-69). Gossipy, biased and prolix, it is nevertheless based on interviews with contemporary witnesses. A companion biography in the *DCB* of Hughes' successor as Defence Minister, Sir Edward Kemp, by Robert Craig Brown and John Turley-Ewart, illuminates defence policy in the last two years of the war. All Borden's ministers can be found in the *DCB*, as well as the major opposition figures, especially Sir Wilfrid Laurier.

Laurier of course led the Liberal party in opposition to Borden's conscription policy in the federal election of 1917. The Borden government over time had alienated the French-Canadian population of Quebec, but conscription was the final blow to Borden's government so far as French-language Quebec was concerned. Laurier, who died in 1919, was the subject of an early but very thorough and competent biography by O. D. Skelton, a Queen's University academic and a stout admirer: *The Life and Letters of Sir Wilfrid Laurier*, 2 volumes (Toronto, Oxford University Press, 1921). It must be read in combination with Réal Bélanger's *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* essay on Laurier, lengthy, perceptive and very well founded. Laurier faced rivals on two fronts: Borden and his English-speaking supporters, and Henri Bourassa, a fervent French-Canadian nationalist, who threatened to undermine Laurier's position as chief of the opposition in Quebec. Bélanger, it is fair to say, writes from a neutral and scholarly perspective, though sympathetic to, and understanding of, both the *nationalistes* like Henri Bourassa and the more orthodox Liberals like Laurier.

Robert Rumilly, mentioned above, wrote from a different standpoint – the “bleu” or conservative-nationalist. Unusually in Quebec historiography, or in Quebec intellectual life in general, Rumilly was a Frenchman, who in his native land was definitely on the right. In French Canada, he could not, initially, be choosy: his pen was for hire and in the 1930s the Liberals controlled the purse strings. After 1944, when the right-wing Union Nationale came to power, Rumilly found it possible to switch sides, and his published work after that date moves sharply to the *nationaliste*, anti-conscription theme. Rumilly's technique is not uncommon among non-academic historians: he combined a startling attention to detail with an inexhaustible fund of privileged gossip, most of which can be found nowhere else. He wrote an immense and practically unreadable biography of Bourassa *Henri Bourassa: la vie publique d'un grand Canadien* (Montréal, Chanteclerc, 1953). It nevertheless provides a wealth of detailed information. (Bélanger's forthcoming biography of Bourassa, the first in many years, will be essential reading; its themes are anticipated in his *DCB* essay on Bourassa.) The classic presentation of the English-French clash over conscription is Elizabeth Armstrong, *The Crisis of Quebec, 1914-1918* (1937 and subsequent editions: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1974). Armstrong, an American academic, worked for the US State Department in the Second World War, along with Mason Wade, who subsequently wrote his classic *The French-Canadians, 1760-1945* (The Macmillan Company, 1955), which includes an extended discussion of the political crisis of 1914-1918. More recent historians have extended and broadened the discussion, for example, Sylvie Lacombe, *La rencontre de deux*

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peuples élus : comparaison des ambitions nationale et impériale au Canada entre 1896 et 1920 (Presses de l'université de Laval, 2002), The politics of conscription and the other contentious issues of the war are covered in John English, *The Decline of Politics: The Conservatives and the Party System* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1977), which deals with the conscription issue and the division of the Liberal party, as well as the record of the Borden Conservatives.

The imposition of conscription provoked rioting in Quebec City and Montreal in the spring of 1918. On that issue, see Jean Provencher, *Québec sous la loi des mesures de guerre 1918* (Montréal, les Éditions du Boréal Express, 1971). There is also a view of the riots by a contemporary, the Liberal Member of Parliament Charles Gavan Power in his memoir, edited by Norman Ward, *A Party Politician* (Toronto, Macmillan, 1966). On the whole conscription issue, see J. L. Granatstein and J. M. Hitsman, *Broken Promises* (Toronto, Oxford University Press, 1977). Granatstein later revised the view he presented in this book. For a detailed examination of conscientious objection to the war, see *Crisis of Conscience: Conscientious Objection in Canada during the First World War* by Amy J. Shaw (Vancouver, University of British Columbia Press, 2008).

Canada was not the only place where conscription was a difficult political issue, and comparisons may be made with Ireland and Australia: on the comparison with Australia, see John Blaxland, *Strategic Cousins: Australian and Canadian Expeditionary Forces and the British and American Empires* (Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006). The comparison between Canada and Australia has also been made with respect to propaganda and government censorship. Jeff Keshen's excellent *Propaganda and Censorship during Canada's Great War* (Edmonton, University of Alberta Press, 1996) provides a detailed comparison, emphasizing the role of distance, nativism, and imperialist sentiment in shaping Canadian (and Australian) interpretations of the Great War, and the mythology of Vimy Ridge (or in the Australian case, Gallipoli).

The perception of the Great War as a defining moment in the creation of a Canadian nation has shaped scholars' understanding of the government's actions at home. If war was a nation-building experience, what role did the enemy aliens (both interned and not) play in its construction? For an initial study of internment in Western Canada, see Lubomyr Luciuk, *A Time for Atonement: Canada's First National Internment Operations and the Ukrainian Canadians, 1914-1920* (Kingston, Limestone Press, 1988). But its publication date should be noted, as it was published during a campaign for redress from the Ukrainian-Canadian community (along the lines of the redress accorded to Japanese-Canadians for their internment during World War II). Bohdan Kordan is similarly associated. Nevertheless, *Enemy Aliens, Prisoners of War: Internment in Canada during the Great War* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002) addresses the complexities of nation-building at home, as the Canadian government used enemy aliens as labourers in public construction projects.

At home, the war also placed pressure on women and children to prove their loyalty, contributing, in any way possible, to Canada's war. On the role of children, see Susan

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Fisher's *Boys and Girls in No Man's Land: English-Canadian Children and the First World War* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2011) for a clear look at the role of churches and schools in shaping the wartime narrative for children. The absence of French-Canadian experience from Fisher's work is a shortcoming, however, and is currently not addressed in English-language literature on the topic. A similar absence of French-Canadian experiences can be seen in the literature regarding women's roles in the war effort. Nevertheless, *A Sisterhood of Suffering and Service: Women and Girls of Canada and Newfoundland during the First World War* (Vancouver, UBC Press, 2012), edited by Amy J Shaw and Sarah Glassford, begins to account for the diverse contributions of women.

Changing gender roles and the emergence of new community organizations also occurred as a result of the Spanish influenza. Intrinsically linked with the Great War, as it was introduced by soldiers returning from the front, the pandemic of 1918-1919 forced the government and ordinary citizens to respond. On the federal government's response, and particularly its decision to set up a department of public health, see Mark O Humphries, *The Last Plague: Spanish Influenza and the Politics of Public Health in Canada* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2012). For a more detailed examination of the public's response to the Spanish influenza pandemic, see Magdi Fahrni and Esyllt Jones' edited volume *Epidemic Encounters: Influenza, Society and Culture in Canada, 1918-20* (Vancouver, University of British Columbia Press, 2012).

Along with biographies, military history, and the history of war more generally, are among the best selling and most popular subjects in Canadian historiography, as the commercial success of Tim Cook's First World War history attests. Curiously, although Cook's writing has many of the trappings of the "new" military history, featuring personal experiences, diaries, letters and so forth, it is in many respects retrogressive. It appeals to a robust Canadian nationalism, and it inflates "Canadian" accomplishments as building blocks of national identity and national pride. Scholars of other nations may find Cook's sense of proportion a little peculiar.

Of course, Canadian military history also has much in common with the military history of other countries. Virtually every regiment has its history, and the number of battalion histories is legion. Of the many biographies and autobiographies covering the early twentieth century, virtually none is without some reference to the Great War, an indication of how the conflict touched every part of Canada, and virtually every Canadian. Reference to most works on Canadian military history may be found in the careful and extensive bibliography by Owen A. Cooke, *The Canadian Military Experience, 1867-1995* (Canada. Dept. of National Defence. Directorate of History), N° 2.) 1997 in what is apparently its latest edition).

Despite the interest in and the salience of the subject, no common narrative of Canada's Great War has emerged. There is no getting around the fact that for generations the version of the war taught in Quebec is different from the version often accepted in the rest of the country. From that perspective, the war is something to be got over, explained, and perhaps buried. Even contemporary French-Canadian

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federalists flinch at the memory of conscription and the Quebec riots – a full-throated commemoration of the war thus cannot avoid the question, Whose war?

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Abstract

To date, there is no commonly accepted narrative regarding Canada's involvement in the First World War. Nevertheless, Canada's role in WWI has generated a rich and diverse literature. Considerable attention has been paid to the war's role in shaping the Canadian nation as a definitive moment in the country's evolution from a British colony. A strong military history has emerged, chronicling Canada's successes and failures on the battlefield as part of the nation's coming of age. As with other national historiographies regarding World War I, recent years have also seen a proliferation of social and cultural histories of the war, addressing topics like the nation's response to the outbreak of Spanish influenza and efforts to support soldiers and their families at home. Some comparative work has been pursued, contrasting Canada's war effort with those of other Commonwealth nations, although the opportunity remains to pursue this avenue further. The most significant gap remaining, however, is the disconnect between English Canada and French Canada's wartime experiences, as these remain two distinct topics in the historiography.

Keywords: British Commonwealth ; Canada; conscription crisis; French Canadians.

Résumé

Actuellement, il n'existe aucun récit unanimement partagé de l'engagement du Canada dans la Première Guerre mondiale. Pourtant le rôle du Canada dans le conflit a donné lieu à une littérature riche et variée. Les analyses se sont concentrées sur le rôle de la guerre – moment clé de l'émancipation du pays de son statut de colonie britannique – dans la fabrique de la Nation canadienne. Une puissante histoire militaire a rendu compte des succès et des échecs militaires sur les champs de bataille en les liant à l'avènement de la Nation. À l'instar des autres historiographies nationales sur la Première Guerre mondiale, l'histoire sociale et culturelle de la guerre a donné lieu récemment à de nombreux travaux, traitant de sujets tels que la réponse nationale à l'épidémie de grippe espagnole ou les efforts de soutien aux soldats et à leurs familles. Des études comparées mettent en regard l'effort de guerre canadien et celui des autres nations du Commonwealth, même si ce champ pionnier mériterait d'être davantage exploré. Il existe néanmoins un vrai enjeu, autour de l'existence de

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deux récits déconnectés et de deux thèmes distincts de l'historiographie, que sont les expériences de guerre du Canada anglais et du Canada français.

Mots clés : Empire britannique ; Commonwealth ; Canada ; crise de la conscription ; Canada français- Québécois.

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