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Speaking about the War of 1812: Reinterpreting History in the Rhetoric Surrounding Canada's Inter-War Diplomacy (1919–1939)

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Abstract

A remarkable feature of Canada's external relations in the years between the two world wars of the twentieth century is the extent to which Canada's conduct and speeches by its representatives on international affairs were dominated by imagery of North American harmony. Past clashes, most notably the War of 1812, or simply differences of views were forgotten or overlooked in the construction of a myth that served to justify inaction and the denial of commitments in imperial and world affairs. An aloof, unhelpful stance internationally was depicted more positively as a worthy example of peaceful attitudes and conduct. Thus, the inter-war period was dominated by rhetoric about 'the longest undefended border in the world,' '[more than a] century of peace in North America,' and the contrast between the 'New World' and the 'Old World' in world affairs. No Canadian speech in an international forum seemed complete without some variation on these themes and without an admonition to Europeans and other miscreants to settle disputes by conciliation, negotiation and arbitration – rather than resort to war – as was the tradition in relations between Canada and the United States. This paper deals with the development, application and effect in the inter-war period of the lessons supposedly drawn from the experience and especially the aftermath of the War of 1812.

For historians and other commentators, the rhetoric employed by Canadian politicians, statesmen and diplomats to articulate and defend

a distinct perspective on world affairs between the two world wars of the twentieth century has inspired fascination, bemusement and even condemnation for its complacent and self-satisfied tone, as well as for its misrepresentation of the past. Not for the last time, speech-writers and speakers seemed fonder of myth than of history. There was a profound and pervasive tendency to depict North America – and especially the relations between Canada and the United States – as different from Europe, with a questionable interpretation of the historical experience cited as evidence of that distinction. Most analysts have noted how this depiction of continental harmony was employed to justify a negative approach to international obligations. What has attracted less attention have been the specific content and the ultimate inspiration for this curious, repetitious and often sanctimonious flow of words. In various international settings, Canadian speakers aimed to correct what they regarded as the misguided and ultimately destructive behaviour of those leaders and nations with whom they assembled at conferences. To that end, Canada's relations with the United States were presented as a model for others to emulate. That these efforts at behavioural correction conspicuously failed does not lessen what we can learn about Canadian attitudes from a closer look at the circumstances and the texts of the pronouncements.

This paper will review several key speeches delivered on behalf of the Canadian government at significant international meetings between 1919 and 1939, then link these texts to persistent and often persuasive (at least for Canadians) myths about Canada's relations with the United States and especially about the supposed legacy of the War of 1812 and its aftermath. Thus, this commentary does not deal with that conflict, nor with the scholarly evaluation of it and its actual consequences. Instead, it examines how the past was viewed and arguably distorted through the lens of later politics and diplomacy. In other words, its focus is on the depiction of history and characterization of its meaning and significance by representatives of Canada at international gatherings, including imperial and international conferences as well as meetings of the League of Nations. In those distinctly non-academic settings, with little fear of contradiction by others in the audience more knowledgeable than themselves, Canadian politicians and diplomats attempted to posit 'lessons of the past' for the edification and improvement of their listeners. The period since the end of the War of 1812 was reinterpreted and presented as an instructive example for the rest of the world about how to get along with your neighbour. This notion of learning from the experience and consequences of an earlier war had been articulated

before the Great War, but it became even more resonant after that devastating conflict.

Some of the themes favoured by Canadian speech-writers and speakers in the 1920s and 1930s, which have often been attributed to an understandable revulsion following the colossal losses of the Great War, were actually anticipated by American, British and Canadian celebrants of the centenary of the War of 1812, before the first world war of the twentieth century had exacted its toll. As it turned out, many of the projects proposed for that commemoration were delayed or abandoned in response to contemporary circumstances.[2] Consequently, some of the intended themes received less attention than anticipated by the organizers, though seeds may have been planted then which possibly germinated a decade later. One difficulty for the celebrants was a perennial one – insufficient public and political interest to justify enough funds for the grander plans for the commemoration. More significantly, global tensions altered the context for the planned activities, though many still went forward. The celebration of the centenary of the War of 1812, which had been devised by many of the participants as a celebration of peace and of the effective use of arbitration to settle international disputes, came amid rising tensions in Europe, which would prompt the outbreak of the Great War two years later.

As for the North American context, the anniversary came after a decade of Anglo-American rapprochement and an overall settlement of most differences in relations between Canada and the United States. That harmonious trend seems even more remarkable when one considers that the twentieth century had begun inauspiciously with a serious clash over the boundary between Alaska and Canadian territory, with heated rhetoric on both sides of the border as Canadian and American politicians perceived advantages to be gained from adversarial nationalistic stances. Certainly the truculent political speeches during that episode did not convey any sense of continental understanding or harmony. After that seemingly ill-starred beginning, however, the remainder of the first decade of the century had witnessed a deliberate and remarkably effective 'clearing of the slate' with respect to Canadian-American disagreements. That American-initiated process culminated in the signature of the Boundary Waters Treaty and the creation of the International Joint Commission in 1909.[3] Questions that had been posed intermittently and inconclusively for years in bilateral relations were answered in practical and reasonable ways, to the satisfaction of leaders in both countries. By the end of this process, there were hardly

any noteworthy or consequential disputes outstanding between the two countries.

That decade was also one of unprecedented growth and prosperity for Canada. Those exceptional circumstances undoubtedly contributed to extraordinary national self-confidence, which was predictably reflected in the speeches and statements of politicians and pundits, who competed for the most outrageously optimistic forecasts of Canada's future. In comparison with some of those claims, Prime Minister Sir Wilfrid Laurier's opt-repeated assertion, with minor variations in phrasing, that the twentieth century 'would belong to Canada,' seems rather tentative and modest. Likely that positive frame of mind lessened chronic anxiety in the Dominion about fair treatment in dealings with the United States and made it easier to resolve continental issues.

Even so, the year before the centenary saw a very different mood prevailing north of the border.[4] Curiously, this arose in large part from a controversial effort to draw the countries even closer together economically. In 1911, on the eve of the commemoration, there had been an especially acrimonious general election in Canada marked by strident appeals to pro-imperial and anti-American sentiment. Patriotic fervour had been aroused in English Canada by the cautious response of Laurier's government to the Anglo-German naval crisis. Those concerns about loyalty were then compounded by a proposed deal for reciprocity in trade between Canada and the United States, which was seen by some as threatening Canada's sheltered manufacturing sector as well as the Dominion's ties to Britain.

Both sides in this contest raised fundamental issues of identity and loyalty in English-speaking Canada. Appeals by opponents of the trade deal for Canadians not to turn their backs on Britain found a receptive audience. Proponents had a harder time explaining why a prosperous Canada needed such a deal, though it was strongly supported by farmers, especially in western Canada. Unwise remarks by American politicians about the implications of the pact for Canada's future as a sovereign state had reawakened dormant fears of annexation and prompted effusions of pro-imperial 'patriotic' sentiment in English Canada. Thus, the cry of 'no truck nor trade with the Yankees' uttered by foes of reciprocity apparently struck a responsive chord. Moreover, much of the electorate was evidently anxious about any major shift in commercial policy when the country had experienced more than a decade of good fortune under the current regime – why mess with success? As for attitudes in Quebec, nationalists there opposed even the Liberal government's modest commitment to a Canadian navy as

an unwelcome and burdensome form of colonial tribute. To thwart that initiative, they were prepared to risk political collaboration with more imperially-minded Tories. This lethal combination of moods, which compounded the accumulated political liabilities from fifteen years in office, led to the defeat of Laurier's government, including the first, but not the last, loss in his constituency for a ministerial novice, William Lyon Mackenzie King, who learned his own lessons from this experience.[5]

As much as possible, celebrants of the centenary of the War of 1812, including the new Canadian prime minister, Robert Laird Borden, attempted to dampen down the anti-American tone which had been so evident in the election campaign and to draw more favourable lessons from their appreciation of past experience. Unfortunately, the atmosphere did not necessarily improve a great deal after the anniversary celebrations were over. The respective responses of the two countries to the outbreak of the Great War demonstrated the differences between the neighbours, not the commonalities. When the war began, with Canada automatically a belligerent as a member of the British Empire, American neutrality and pervasive rumours in Canada of espionage and sabotage by cross-border agents of German descent worsened popular attitudes and complicated relations between the countries.[6]

Eventual American entry into the war, as well as subsequent close collaboration, eased those tensions. Even so, there was some resentment in Canada when the late entrant in the war, the United States, opposed what Canadians believed was appropriate representation for their country at the Paris Peace Conference and membership in the League of Nations, that ill-fated product of the Treaty of Versailles.[7] Canadian pundits bitterly recalled that, for much of the war, as one put it, 'America counted her profits, while Canada buried her dead.'[8] In other words, the overall experience of the Great War did not necessarily bolster the positive continental developments and sympathetic attitudes that preceded it. However, it was soon evident that the longer-term trends in continental relations could not be reversed, or even stalled, by these differences. Instead, the political, economic and social factors that drew the countries together soon had an obvious impact on how Canadians defined and described their place in the world. Against the seemingly less favourable backdrop of developments surrounding the Great War, it is noteworthy to what extent the inter-war conduct of Canada and speeches by its representatives on international affairs were dominated by the appreciation of shared values and interests on both sides of the border.

Especially when speaking abroad, there was a marked tendency to convey an impression of idyllic harmony between the neighbours and to employ this image as proof of the moral superiority of North America (sometimes enlarged to the New World generally). Past clashes or seemingly primordial differences (such as arguments between Canadians and Americans over the superiority of their respective forms of government) were forgotten or overlooked in constructing and repeating a myth of shared beliefs and concerted actions. For some, that notion of North American distinctiveness ultimately served to justify inaction in the face of overseas crises – which were so clearly the fault of others – and the refusal of responsibilities or obligations in imperial as well as in world affairs. For most in English Canada, however, this sense of detachment, which was possible in quieter times, did not withstand the searing impact of the crises that preceded the outbreak of the Second World War and the perceived threat to the United Kingdom.

Even so, it is worthwhile to look more closely at the rhetoric of the inter-war years and its implications. In that setting, history was re-written – or simply misrepresented in speeches – to serve the current aims of the Canadian government and to excuse an inglorious if temporary retreat into a North American redoubt. In scholarship and popular discourse, the overwhelming emphasis was on the progressive development of better relations between Canada and the United States over the years. Tendencies which would later be seen more critically were often depicted favourably. Thus, the neglect of national defence by successive Canadian governments, which could more accurately be attributed to a combination of parsimony, complacency and war-weariness – compounded by a recognition of the military futility of protecting the country against its powerful neighbour – was now recast as evidence of longstanding continental harmony.[9] In fact, military expenditures had been scaled back to the point of dangerous neglect for fiscal reasons, as part of the overall effort to overcome the legacy of debt from a costly overseas war and later to deal with the costs of the Great Depression. That approach was made easier by a popular but misplaced faith in the efficacy of voluntary responses by civilian recruits to major crises rather than reliance on permanent forces for security. That 'militia myth' also owed its origins to an incomplete understanding of how the War of 1812 had been fought and decided.[10]

At the League of Nations and in other settings, including imperial conferences, Canadian representatives often presumed to speak as well for the absent Americans. At times, other delegates could be forgiven for wondering aloud for which country the Canadians spoke. In fact, at the

Imperial Conference of 1921, the truculent Australian prime minister, Billy Hughes, questioned whose policy the Canadian prime minister, Arthur Meighen, advocated – that of the British Empire or that of the United States.[11] For his part, Meighen contended that Canada's relations with the United States 'have no parallel anywhere between any British Dominion and any other country' and that they 'are in their very nature so vast and so vital to us that the control of those relations has become and must remain a matter incident to our autonomy.'[12] Consequently, Canada's stake in 'British-American friendship' was exceptional and its vulnerability in the event of a breach was much greater than that of Australia or any other part of the Empire and Commonwealth. In Meighen's reckoning, what had happened since the end of the War of 1812 vindicated this assessment and justified a dominant voice for Canada in shaping imperial relations with the Great Republic.[13] Hughes and others categorically rejected this assertion, but Meighen was unshaken in his belief.

As that exchange of views indicates, this stance transcended partisan divisions in Canada. After all, though the governments of King would be most closely identified with the articulation of a distinctly North American viewpoint, it was Meighen, not King, who first affirmed this distinction in an imperial setting. Within the context of the British Empire and Commonwealth, this positive continental outlook also reinforced a push for greater autonomy – constitutionally and diplomatically – for Canada.[14] That tendency was certainly more pronounced when the Liberals were in power. In light of the overall theme of this article, it is noteworthy that, when King first asserted Canada's separate diplomatic identity, he proposed renewal of the Rush-Bagot Agreement of 1817, which had limited naval armaments on the Great Lakes after the War of 1812, as a symbolic expression of continental concord as well as national autonomy. When that initiative went nowhere, King shifted his attention to coastal fisheries accords.[15]

In Geneva, this emphasis on North American harmony – and the presumption to speak also for the United States – provided a rationale for aloof or negative policies for Canada. That was evident as Canadian delegates endeavoured successively to delete, amend or 'interpret' the commitment to collective security expressed in article X of the covenant of the League of Nations. While other countries identified that provision as the key to the supranational authority and potential effectiveness and credibility of the new institution, as well as the protection of vulnerable smaller states, Canada regarded it as a dangerous liability. Canadian representatives were determined

to limit the obligations of Canada, which had less need of help from others.[16] However, that disengaged attitude was also noticeable in other evasions of responsibility for the security of those nations less favourably located. Whether in London or in Geneva – or in the safe confines of the House of Commons in Ottawa – this unhelpful posture was not presented as a denial of international commitments by the Canadian government. Instead, emphasis was placed on the absence of any threat to Canada; were others to follow its worthy example, so it was argued, their need for help would likewise be diminished and the world would undoubtedly be a better place.

Whatever the explanation or rationale, Canadian political and diplomatic rhetoric between the First and Second World Wars was dominated by a heady blend of complacency and sanctimony which contrasted the peace and harmony on the west side of the Atlantic (and the east side of the Pacific, though that shore was mentioned less often) with the dreadful and atavistic state of affairs on the opposite coast and further inland. Canadian speech-writers and speakers composed and rehearsed a few dominant themes on the subject of international relations, which were interwoven in texts and frequently repeated for the edification of their audiences.

One unifying idea, blame Europe, was present from the start. At the first assembly of the League of Nations in 1920, a Canadian delegate, Newton W. Rowell, pointedly remarked that 'it was European policy, European statesmanship, European ambition, that drenched this world with blood and from which we are still suffering and will suffer for generations.'[17] That terrible legacy of the Great War – and the belief that it was all Europe's fault – provided the immediate background for Canadian speeches on world affairs for the next two decades.

With some reliance on the mainstays of pithy commentary and public speeches – gross over-simplification and crass generalization – the following may be presented as a template for the prototypical speech by a Canadian representative in any international forum on world affairs from 1919 to 1939. With minor variations in tone and emphasis, it was employed by Liberal and Conservative speakers alike. Perhaps the most notorious theme – and certainly the one with the longest shelf life (though rarely heard lately, at least since the events of 11 September 2001) – was the boastful description of the Canadian-American frontier as 'the longest undefended border in the world.'[18] Another hardy perennial, with the specific phrasing adjusted periodically to take account of the passage of time, was the reference to '[more than] a century of peace in North America.' Associated with that notion

was the depiction of the Rush-Bagot Agreement as the oldest and most successful disarmament treaty in the world.

Probably the most popular – and arguably primordial – leit-motif in the limited repertoire of Canadian orators, however, was the vivid contrast in attitudes and conduct between the 'New World' and the 'Old World' in international relations, most evident in the clashes that prompted the Great War, with all of its devastating consequences. By implication – and sometimes more explicitly as a lesson to be learned – this difference in outlook and experience was attributed to the moral superiority of North America. As James Eayrs has noted, however, this 'moralizing' led not to 'engagement' or constructive leadership but to 'isolation' and denial of responsibility. As he put it so evocatively, evidently 'the first duty of the missionary was to stay out of the cannibal's pot.'[19] Words, not deeds, were what distinguished Canada and its delegates. No Canadian speech in an international forum was complete without these themes and without an accompanying admonition to Europeans and other wilful and unrepentant sinners to settle disputes by conciliation, negotiation and arbitration – not resort to war. In other words, they should follow the virtuous North American example. There were occasional bouts of originality in speech-writing and speaking, but those brief departures from the script did not usually contradict the basic messages. More often, these were differences in phraseology, not sentiment or belief. Let me illustrate this argument with a few major examples, then point out some flaws in the imagery so frequently presented.

One of the major initiatives after the Great War to assure peace in Europe was the Geneva Protocol (or Protocol for the Pacific Settlement of International Disputes). Perhaps the only memorable words ever uttered by Senator Raoul Dandurand, who often represented Canada with grace and quiet dignity at the League of Nations, came when he explained why Canada would not sign the protocol, though he insisted that the Canadian government and people wholeheartedly supported its aims. In his remarks, Dandurand compared the pact to an insurance policy against fire – as befits an uneasy and fundamentally conservative people, Canadians often think about insurance. In this metaphor, the obligations of signatories for collective security corresponded to the premiums levied to fund a group insurance policy. Dandurand then argued that Canada's risks were comparatively low, almost non-existent, so that it should not have to pay the same premium as others who were much more likely to need help. 'We live in a fire-proof house, far from inflammable materials,' he declaimed. For those few in his audience

who missed the key point, Dandurand reminded them that 'a vast ocean separates us from Europe,' otherwise known as the most likely source of conflagration.

Notwithstanding that brief flurry of originality, the rest of Dandurand's speech faithfully repeated the familiar nostrums. Thus, he highlighted the peaceful settlement of disputes between Canada and the United States, as well as the extent of disarmament in North America. Dandurand then tweaked the customary passage about the peaceful continent: 'Not only have we had a hundred years of peace on our borders, but we think in terms of peace, while Europe, an armed camp, thinks in terms of war.'[20] Somewhat unfairly, Dandurand's memorable phrase about a 'fireproof house' has earned him a reputation as a spokesman for isolationism. In fact, he was sympathetic to the goals of the league and of the protocol, but simply worried about the implications for Canada of an unlimited obligation to intervene abroad. King later confirmed that Canada would not sign the protocol, though he insisted that 'Canada should continue to give wholehearted support to the League of Nations,' a questionable reassurance at best, given Canada's track record and his own attitudes.[21]

King first spoke to the assembly of the league in September 1928, not long after he and other world leaders had renounced war as an instrument of national policy by signing the Multilateral Treaty for the Renunciation of War (Pact of Paris or Kellogg-Briand Pact). His speech in Geneva unsurprisingly included all of the requisite references to Canadian-American harmony. Indeed, the principal subject of his remarks to the assembly was the relationship between Canada and the United States. To the Canadian prime minister, as he informed his listeners, it was an exemplar and an application of the principles embodied in the recent accord. Thus, the more familiar 'century of peace' was rephrased as one hundred years of the renunciation of war between Canada and the United States. The phrase 'undefended frontier' was employed twice, and minor variations on it twice more. Both the Rush-Bagot Agreement and the International Joint Commission, those instruments of continental concord, were explained carefully and at length to an undoubtedly rapt audience. With more conviction than economic evidence (or forecasting ability), King also attributed his country's prosperity and fiscal soundness to the money saved by not spending 'a single dollar through fear of American aggression.' The finance minister of a disarmed Canada, King argued, found better ways to spend public funds and imposed a lesser burden on Canadian taxpayers than his counterparts elsewhere.[22]

Later, King described parliamentary endorsement of the Pact of Paris as simply approving 'a policy which, as regards Canada in its relations with the country to the south, has been in existence for more than a hundred years.'[23] In words that have been interpreted as cynical, King's closest adviser and the principal author of the prime minister's speeches, O. D. Skelton, described the treaty as a 'verbal flourish.' To his wife, he described it simply as a 'grand gesture.' No doubt with the prime minister's chronic worries about the risks of overseas entanglements in mind, Skelton suggested to King that it could do no harm to sign it, as it entailed no meaningful obligations and consequently was harmless.[24] In fact, any cynicism about the Kellogg-Briand Pact was borne out by events, as a higher proportion of signatories than non-signatories eventually fought in the Second World War. At the League Assembly in 1930, curiously, it was the French delegate, Aristide Briand, not the Canadian delegate, former prime minister Sir Robert Borden, who stressed Canada's advantageous location. Borden had scolded signatories of the Pact of Paris for continuing to rely on armaments for security. Briand pointedly noted that Canada was among 'the nations with nothing to fear, who live in a state of blissful well-being remote from danger' – not to praise the North American example but as a plea for better understanding from Canadians of justifiable French fears, particularly those inspired by the rise of the National Socialists in Germany.[25]

On occasion, Canadian delegates conceded that their country's peculiar advantages of geography, history and other circumstances made it inappropriate for them to preach to those less fortunate, as when Sir George Perley described Canada's favourable location when he spoke at the Disarmament Conference in Geneva in 1932. 'On the east and west we face the ocean; on the north, the arctic seas. On the south we have as our neighbour a great and friendly nation, with whom we have developed machinery for arbitration and conciliation, the successful functioning of which is causing the peaceful settlement of disputes between us (and we have many of them) to become a habit rather than an event.'[26] In fact, Perley's speech was also noteworthy for its omission of the hackneyed references to Canada's relations with the United States. 'We have been congratulated by all and sundry in Geneva,' one of his departmental advisers, Lester Pearson, reported, 'on the fact that it is the first Canadian deliverance for some years which has not mentioned one or all of "the hundred years," "the three thousand miles" or "the International Joint Commission."'[27]

Originality on the part of its representatives in Geneva, however, was not always valued by their superiors in Ottawa. In fact, initiatives by C. H. Cahan in 1932 and by W. A. Riddell in 1935 ensnared the Canadian government in controversy.[28] Curiously, Cahan's infamous intervention in the debate over Japan's conquest of Manchuria – when he seemed to question China's eligibility for membership of the league and therefore its worthiness for support from other members – still managed to include, on the recommendation of his official advisers, a suggestion of 'a permanent body on the lines of our International Joint Commission' to address differences between China and Japan.[29] For his part, Prime Minister R. B. Bennett was neither original nor controversial when he attended the league assembly in 1934, as he was stricken with influenza 'and took no significant part in the discussions.'[30]

In fact, silence on international questions was another way in which Canadian delegations avoided or limited Canada's commitments to the League of Nations and its members. Unfortunately for his subsequent career, Riddell did not keep quiet as the league deliberated over how to respond to a long-anticipated clash in October 1935. Riddell's pursuit of a bold policy of stronger sanctions against Italy over its invasion of Ethiopia, in the midst of a change of government in Canada and in apparent defiance of contrary instructions, ultimately prompted authorities in Ottawa to disavow his initiative.[31]

When King spoke to the League of Nations for the second and last time, in September 1936, he was less inclined than before to preach about the North American model. On the contrary, his speech acknowledged the extent to which Canada was favoured by geography and circumstances, especially when contrasted to the problematic situation in Europe. Perhaps because the familiar themes had been repeated so often by Canadian representatives, the standard references were made only indirectly, in considering the predicament of less fortunate European nations. 'We recognize the special conditions that face a great part of Europe, the crowded populations, the scores of dividing frontiers, the bitter memories which zealots of nationalism will not let die, the heritage of ancient privilege and of class division, the unrest resulting from the redrawing of political boundaries, and the upheaval in the social structure which the great war brought in its train,' King conceded. 'We recognize that we in Canada have been fortunate both in our neighbours and in our lack of neighbours, and we agree that we cannot reasonably expect our relations and our attitude to be wholly duplicated elsewhere.'

Even so, King deplored any resort to sanctions to enforce the will of the majority of league members and reaffirmed his support for

'a policy of non-interference in the domestic arrangements of other nations,' however much their conditions and prospects would likely be improved by following the example of North America. Canada was evidently satisfied with the status quo on its own continent, but it opposed its enforcement in Europe with the authority of the League of Nations. Moreover, its denial of the national implications of international collective security, as represented by commitments to the league, did not seem to constrain Canada and its representatives from advising the league and its members on how best to fulfil its purposes.[32] The stanza may have changed, but the chorus remained the same.

Other, less prominent, Canadian speakers played variations on these themes. What remained consistent was the extent to which the experience of the War of 1812 and the settlement of that conflict, as interpreted more than a century later, helped to shape a redefinition of North American exceptionalism and to justify caution and an attempt at disengagement from world affairs in this period. Indeed, academic surveys of the history of Canadian-American relations published between the wars also tended to stress 'the long heritage of unbroken peace between the two countries' and the 'undefended frontier' as themes.[33] Moreover, the greatest bilateral historical project – the Carnegie series on Canadian-American relations – was a celebration of continental inter-relationships and overall accord. That monumental and unprecedented undertaking demonstrated in multiple volumes the myriad inter-connections of the two countries as well as the gradual development and strengthening of shared experiences and a common outlook. In that context, the end of the War of 1812 had marked the beginning of a mutually beneficial era of peace and growth.

Even so, the close neighbours again responded differently to the renewed outbreak of hostilities in Europe in September 1939. That attests to the power of the other dominant force in Canada's external relations – its imperial ties. Patriotic sentiment in English Canada would not allow the Canadian government, whatever its doubts or preferences, to stay out of a major war in which Britain was involved. For all of the inter-war rhetoric about a distinctly North American outlook, Canadians still viewed the world in 1939 largely through the lens of British attitudes, policies, and commitments. A phrase from King's diary, which was later repeated in his speeches, summed up that reality. Canada must stand 'at the side of Britain' in a just cause, as he put it. As had been the case 25 years earlier, Canadians and their leaders reacted to overseas events very differently from their close neighbours.

As we have seen, the speeches of the inter-war period tended to focus not on the war itself – which has been interpreted very differently over the years – but on the peace that followed, with mythology favoured over history. Nearly sixty years ago, the great Canadian military historian, Colonel C. P. Stacey, who had earlier punctured the prevalent views with his doctoral thesis on the British army in North America, published a brief study of *The Undefended Border: Myth and Reality,* which noted, *inter alia,* the futile attempts to fortify the border and otherwise prepare for a future war. That ultimately led to the sensible conclusion that the task was impossible and that peaceful relations through diplomacy and settlement of differences was ultimately more likely to be effective and certainly would be much cheaper.

As Stacey pointed out, there were still significant tensions along the border after the Treaty of Ghent, most obviously during the American civil war and afterward, when the Fenian Brotherhood attempted to conquer Canada. There were also intermittent strains and ill-feeling, particularly where boundaries were uncertain or ill-defined, when exploitation of resources on land or at sea was subject to dispute over control and benefit, or when British and American interests and perspectives clashed on the wider world stage with local repercussions. Perhaps the most important lesson (one so often forgotten) to be learned from Stacey's analysis was simply about the risks associated with attempting to fit the past into a mould shaped by later biases and unhistorical judgments.[34] Notwithstanding such advice, the bicentennial proceedings have demonstrated once more that history has been viewed, some would contend distorted, by the lens of the present. Whatever the evidence or likely shelf-life of more recent reinterpretations, however, the inter-war speeches certainly demonstrated, perhaps conclusively, that myth has a greater popular appeal than history!

Notes

1 The views expressed in this article of the author, not those of the Government of Canada. The theme of this paper – commenting on a peculiar intersection of history and contemporary attitudes in speeches associated with international relations – may be blamed on the author's recent work, which has combined historical research and writing with contributions to ministerial and departmental speeches. That interest has been compounded by the Canadian government's recent emphasis on the War of 1812 in its statements and speeches. On the relationship between that preoccupation and the theme of this paper, see Hector Mackenzie, 'Memory, Myth and Rhetoric: the War of 1812 and Canada's Inter-War Diplomacy (1919–1939)' in *Canadian Issues / Thèmes canadiens* (Fall 2012): 22–5. The author would like to thank Dr. Tony McCulloch

and Dr. Phillip Buckner for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper, which lacked the current focus.

2 On this theme, see especially Michael Patrick Cullinane, 'The Power of Sentiment: Anglo-American Relations and the Celebrations of 100 Years of Peace' (forthcoming; copy of text provided by author). See also Elaine Young, 'The Centennial Celebration of the Battle of Lundy's Lane,' *Ontario History* CIV, 1 (Spring 2012): 3–20.

3 Peter Neary, 'Grey, Bryce, and the Settlement of Canadian-American differences, 1905–1911,' *Canadian Historical Review* XLIV, 4 (1968): 357–80; Robert Craig Brown and Ramsay Cook, *Canada 1896–1921, A Nation Transformed* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974), 26–48, 173–9.

4 As Dr. Dean Oliver of the Canadian War Museum noted in a conversation with the author, none of the major anniversaries of the War of 1812 have been especially auspicious: at the 50th in 1862, cross-border tensions during the Civil War neared their peak in the wake of the *Trent* affair; as mentioned in the text, the centennial witnessed a surge in anti-American sentiment in English Canada; as for the sesquicentennial in 1962, the difficult relations between the administration of John F. Kennedy and the government of John Diefenbaker worsened during the Cuban Missile Crisis, with a significant impact on the defeat of the Progressive Conservatives in the general election which followed.

5 Patrice Dutil and David MacKenzie, *Canada 1911: the Decisive Election that Shaped the Country* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2011); J. L. Granatstein, *Yankee go home? Canadians andanti-Americanism* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1996), 39–40, 54–66.

6 Norman Hillmer and J. L. Granatstein, *Empire to Umpire: Canada and the World into the Twenty-First Century* (Toronto: Thomson Nelson, 2008), 60; Barbara Wilson, ed., *Ontario and the First World War, 1914–1918: a collection of documents* (Toronto: Champlain Society for the Govmernment of Ontario/ University of Toronto Press, 1977), lxii. The arrest and conviction of a man from Detroit and a co-conspirator, both of German background, for 'planning to blow up factories and public buildings in Windsor and Walkerville' in mid-1915 lent some credence to such rumours.

7 Brown and Cook, *Canada 1896–1921,* 275–93; C. P. Stacey, *Canada and the Age of Conflict, A History of Canadian External Policies, Volume 1: 1867–1921* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1977), 227–35, 269–84, 304–17.

8 Hugh L. Keenleyside, *Canada and the United States: some aspects of the history of the Republic and the Dominion* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1929), 372 (paraphrasing prevalent attitudes in Canada between August 1914 and April 1917).

9 C. P. Stacey, *The Undefended Border: the Myth and the Reality* (Ottawa: Canadian Historical Association, 1953).

10 Stacey, *Canada and the Age of Conflict,* 1: 321–6.

11 Stacey, *Canada and the Age of Conflict,* 1: 342–3.

12 Extracts from Stenographic Notes of Meetings of Representatives of the United Kingdom, the Dominions and India, 1921 [quotations from Third Meeting, 21 June 1921, and from Sixth Meeting, 24 June 1921], *Documents on Canadian External Relations, Volume 3, 1919–1925,* ed. Lovell C. Clark (Ottawa: Department of External Affairs, 1970), 169, 171.

13 Ibid., 178 (from Ninth Meeting, 29 June 1921).

14 The development of Canadian autonomy is one of the principal themes in John Hilliker, *Canada's Department of External Affairs, Volume I, The Early Years, 1909–1946* (Montreal Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990). See also F. H. Soward, *The Department of External Affairs and Canadian Autonomy, 1899–1939* (Ottawa: Canadian Historical Association, 1956).

15 C. P. Stacey, *Canada and the Age of Conflict, A History of Canadian External Policies, Volume 2: 1921–1948, The Mackenzie King Era* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), 31–4.

16 Richard Veatch, *Canada and the League of Nations* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975); Stacey, *Canada and the Age of Conflict,* vol. 2.; Hector Mackenzie, 'Canada's Nationalist Internationalism: From the League of Nations to the United Nations,' in Norman Hillmer and Adam Chapnick, eds., *Canadas of the Mind: The Making and Unmaking of Canadian Nationalism in the Twentieth Century,* eds.

Norman Hillmer and Adam Chapnick (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007), 89–109.

18 See Hector Mackenzie, 'Defining and Defending a Place in the World: Canada's Vital Interests in International Affairs,' *Canadian Issues / Thèmes Canadiens* (September 2002): 31–5.

19 James Eayrs, *In Defence of Canada: From the Great War to the Great Depression* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964), 6.

20 Speech by Dandurand, 2 October 1924, in *Documents on Canadian Foreign Policy 1917–1939,* ed. Walter A. Riddell (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1962), 462–5.

21 Speech by W. L. M. King, 12 March 1925, in Riddell, *Documents,* 465–7.

22 Speech by King, 7 September 1928, in Riddell, *Documents,* 307–12.

23 Extracts, Speech by King, 19 February 1929, in Riddell, *Documents,* 469–76.

24 H. Blair Neatby, *William Lyon Mackenzie King, Volume 2, 1924–1932: The Lonely Heights* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963), 264; Stacey, *Mackenzie King Era,* 97–103. O. D. Skelton to Isabel Skelton, 28 August 1928, in *O. D. Skelton, The Work of the World, 1923–1941,* ed. Norman Hillmer (Montreal and Kingston: Champlain Society/McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013), 190; contrary to the impression conveyed in other sources, Hillmer, also the author of a forthcoming biography of Skelton, contends that Skelton was 'realistic, and hopeful' (22) about the Kellog-Briand Pact, with its worthy objective, as well as about the League, so that the interpretation of his aside as cynical misses the mark.

25 Veatch, *Canada and the League,* 62.

26 Speech by Perley, 13 February 1932, in Riddell, *Documents,* 495–7.

27 Delegation Secretary [Pearson] to Under-Secretary of State for External Affairs [Skelton], 15 February 1932, in *Documents on Canadian External Relations, Volume 5, 1931–1935,* ed. Alex I. Inglis (Ottawa: Department of External Affairs, 1973), 466–7. Stacey, *Canada and the Age of Conflict,* 2: 161.

28 On Canada's response to the Manchurian Crisis and to the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, see Veatch, *Canada and the League,* 115–25, 143–69; A. Mason, 'Canada and the Manchurian Crisis' and R. Bothwell and John English, 'The Riddell Incident' in *The In-Between Time: Canadian External Policy in the 1930s,* eds. Robert Bothwell and Norman Hillmer (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1975), 113–9, 122–34.

29 Veatch, *Canada and the League,* 51.

30 Veatch, *Canada and the League,* 135.

31 'The Ethiopian Crisis, 1935: the Canadian Government Repudiates Dr. Riddell's Initiative,' in *Historical Documents of Canada, Volume V, The Arts of War and Peace, 1914–1945,* ed. C. P. Stacey (Toronto: Macmillan, 1972), 512–3.

32 Speech by King, 29 September 1936, in Riddell, *Documents,* 314–21.

33 The quoted passage is from R. A. MacKay and E. B. Rogers, *Canada Looks Abroad* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1938), 124, and it refers to three recent surveys: Keenleyside, *Canada and the United States;* J. M. Callahan, *American Foreign Policy in Canadian Relations* (New York: Macmillan, 1937); and, P. E. Corbett, *The Settlement of Canadian-American Disputes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1937).

34 Stacey, *Undefended Border.*

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