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### Introduction

### War and Society in Modern Canada, 1914–1949

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# Introduction: War and Society in Modern Canada, 1914–1949

*Sam Allison and Jon Bradley*

John Donne famously said that ‘No man is an island’,<sup>1</sup> and this idea can be applied to countries as well, especially during a global conflict when ‘sides’ must be selected and alliances formed. Canada sent volunteers during the Second Boer War of 1899–1902 and, ever since then, has actively engaged in foreign wars. Canadian men earned a reputation in that war as effective fighters, while the women were regarded as exceptionally skilled nurses. These perceptions lasted through subsequent World Wars and are only one example of how war cemented Canada’s international image.

The five articles in this collection explore some of the impact that wars have had on Canadian life, and illustrate that the transformations generated by world conflicts are more profound than many Canadians usually realise. Each article highlights in different ways how wars fundamentally altered the country; alterations which are still ongoing.

Canadian – and Newfoundland, which was independent at the time – servicemen and women have paid a heavy price for their participation in wars since 1867, especially in the First and Second World Wars, with close to two million enlisted, more than 100,000 killed and over 200,000 wounded. As James Hiller graphically illustrates in our first article, Newfoundland was politically and economically devastated after the capture of Beaumont-Hamel (1 July–18 November 1916) in the Battle of the Somme, ultimately forcing it to surrender its independent status within the British Commonwealth and become part of Canada in 1949.<sup>2</sup>

Over the course of three wars – the First World War, Second World War and the Korean conflict – Canada’s enemies sought to change the world order while Canadians fought alongside their allies to preserve that world order. Yet, neither side managed to maintain its pre-war society, and the ripple effect from all three wars has not yet abated. For example,

the collapse in 1918 of the former Austro-Hungarian, German, Ottoman and Russian empires reverberates even today. The Balkans, Middle East and Ukraine are still hot spots. There is instability in places such as Hong Kong and Kashmir due to the collapse of the British Empire after 1945. North and South Korea remain at odds, while China threatens Japan and other countries. As for Britain, most of Ireland broke away after the First World War, and tensions persist between Éire and Northern Ireland.

Turning to divisions in North American society, the African-American migration from the rural South to the industrial North during the First World War resulted in large-scale race riots. During the Houston Race Riots of 1917, 19 black and white people were killed. A white mob attacked 63 black soldiers, who were then tried for defending themselves. Following the trials, 12 of the black soldiers were hanged and the rest imprisoned. Canada's French and English communities were deeply divided by the Conscription Crisis during the First and Second World Wars. Yet, contrary to much of modern Canadian thinking, French-English language divisions are less significant when compared to the geographical, economic and social divisions among both Canada's allies and its former enemies.

The post-war attitudes, values and even the language are often explained by the World Wars. 'Tanks', 'U-boats', 'no-man's-land' and 'fighter aces' appeared in the First World War, while 'sonar', 'jets', 'radar' and the 'A-bomb' arose during the Second World War. 'War brides' entered Canada and played a significant role in the worldwide 'baby boom'. Canadian social values changed dramatically. There was huge concern about population loss and the need to replace manpower. Consequently, in the 1920s, there was strong opposition to birth control, now (re)labelled as family planning. Yet, fertility among the poor was not encouraged. Ideas from eugenics, which first surfaced in the 1880s, advocated modifying the fertility of different categories of people. The Eugenics Movement (re)surfaced after the First World War, citing efforts to improve the 'quality' of a population whose officer class was devastated by war.

War and travel went together as increasing numbers of Canadians became men and women in motion. For the first time in their lives, many left the immediate confines of their home towns and villages. Hundreds of thousands of Canadians travelled the world with the armed forces. Interestingly, after the wars, Canadians emigrated westwards within Canada and south to the USA. Over one million immigrants came to Canada from abroad after 1918, while four million came after the Second World War. As Richard Pound notes in the second article, these many and various internal and external migrations forced changes upon the political and legal landscapes. New rights and responsibilities were codified in law and less relevant ones swept away.<sup>3</sup>

Farm workers moved from the countryside to work in city factories after the First World War. Women continued their hard socioeconomic climb into jobs previously held by men only. Discrimination against visible minorities, First Nations peoples and foreign nationals sometimes increased during and after the wars. Thousands of people (often Canadian citizens) were transferred into internment camps. Young women who preferred shop and factory work deserted the Canadian servant class which, as but one example, was never able to recover its pre-war numbers. As noted by Lindsay Allison in our third article, such youthful movement of young people dramatically increased the size of cities, diminished rural populations and foreshadowed the rise of new powerful municipally controlled centres of commerce, transportation and innovation.<sup>4</sup>

These huge post-war migrations, forged in global conflicts, fundamentally changed the Canadian mosaic. Evolving institutions reflected the new immigrants. For example, a Chinese hospital and the Jewish General Hospital appeared in Montreal in 1918 and 1934, respectively.

French Canadians in the First World War enlisted in approximately the same numbers as English Canadians, if British-born citizens are excluded. However, the personal letters of British-born Canadians indicate that they often saw enlistment as a cheap way of seeing their relatives, especially their grandparents. The approximately 100,000 Home Children in Canada often enlisted to find brothers, sisters or even fathers and mothers in Britain and Éire. Yet, the length and carnage of the First World War generally hindered enthusiasm for enlisting in the Second World War. In the fourth article, C. P. Champion's detailed analysis of the underfunded Canadian militia between the wars graphically illustrates how experience of past wars influenced contemporary decision-making and enabled Canada to rebuild its forces for the Second World War.<sup>5</sup>

Social consciousness changed after each of these conflicts and set in motion successive waves of alterations that shaped new futures. The post-war years from 1918 to the 1950s swept away all manner of social, political and economic realities, sometimes generating new discriminatory arrangements. Before the wars, society's influential individuals determined the nature of Canada and its provinces. After the wars, the state increasingly determined how Canadians should live, who should live there and how the wars should be remembered. Canada clothed, fed and provided medical care to several million servicemen and women. The warfare and welfare relationship to wounded servicemen and women gradually widened to include the welfare of the whole society.

Class consciousness had changed gradually into a moral consciousness about the wider society. The pre-First World War concept of charity for the 'deserving' and 'underserving' poor had evolved into a concern

for poverty as a problem for all of society. After the wars, it was thought that the Canadian and provincial states should assume more responsibility for their citizens, thus reducing the role of private charities. The Canadian Medicare System, a publicly funded health system championed by Saskatchewan's premier Tommy Douglas after the Second World War, was eventually embraced by the whole country.

In contrast, in the final article, Esther Delisle charts an often ignored dark period in Canadian – and more specifically Quebec – society.<sup>6</sup> Support for anti-Semitic fascism was coupled with a Catholicism that leaned towards Vichy France and its adherents. The author shows that even after the horrors of the Holocaust became common knowledge, this support continued.

Governments, along with private citizens, began an interest in commemorating these wars. Memorials such as Vimy Ridge and Newfoundland's Beaumont-Hamel in France were built, and pilgrims from Canada began visiting in their thousands. Many small towns erected plaques and statues to their fallen after 1918. In 1945 and 1952, names were often added to existing memorials. The idea of the commemorative poppy was inspired by the poetry of Colonel John McRae, a doctor at Montreal's Royal Victoria Hospital, who also commanded the McGill University Field Hospital in France during the First World War – 'In Flanders Fields' is one of the most quoted war poems.<sup>7</sup> Geographically, German names were eradicated from Canadian places. For example, the Ontario city of Berlin was renamed the city of Kitchener, after the British General Lord Kitchener. In Britain, the German Shepherd dog breed was renamed Alsatians, while the royal family, the House of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, renamed itself the House of Windsor.

Wars provoked a post-war concern for human rights during wartime. The *Llandovery Castle*, a Canadian hospital ship, was intentionally sunk by a German submarine in June 1918, killing 234 civilians. A lifeboat carrying surviving nurses was then machine-gunned and sunk. The Hague Convention of 1907, signed by Germany, had outlawed such intentional attacks on hospital ships, but the submarine captain, although found guilty, escaped justice. In sharp contrast, the Second World War Holocaust led to the Nuremberg trials and hangings of Nazi war criminals. In turn, John Humphrey, a McGill law professor, became Director of the Division of Human Rights in the United Nations and the principal drafter of the UN Declaration of Human Rights that emerged after 1945.

Much more than the Canadian flag changed after these wars. Constitutionally, the British Empire became the British Commonwealth in the early 1930s. Canada was now autonomous alongside Australia and New Zealand, first in the League of Nations, then in the United Nations

after the Second World War. Canada was no longer British North America, nor was it simply a northern United States as far as conflicts went. Canada carefully selected its wars and, for example, did not join Britain in invading Egypt in the Suez Crisis of 1956–7 and, significantly, did not join the United States in the Vietnam War in the 1960s and 1970s. More importantly, Canada's peacekeeping world role evolved.

Paraphrasing H. G. Wells in *The Sleeper Awakes* and Washington Irwin in *Rip Van Winkle*, a Canadian who went to sleep in 1914 and awakened in 1955 would be hard-pressed to recognise the country.<sup>8</sup> Canada had grown with the addition of Newfoundland; the population was mostly located in suburban areas; state-funded safety nets shielded the poor; all children were educated long past the age of 14; women, First Nations people and visible minorities had the vote and held high office; and medical treatment was available to all. For the most part, these societal evolutions developed directly from Canada's 50 years of war. As devastating as the conflicts were, positive change did indeed come to Canada. Wars are terrible events for all the people involved. Nevertheless, we might well ponder the compelling words of Cecil Day Lewis, writing during the Second World War: "That we who live by honest dreams/Defend the bad against the worse."<sup>9</sup>

## Note on contributors

**Sam Allison** was born in Scotland and emigrated to Montreal in 1968. Teaching secondary economics and history for many years on the 'south shore', he actively served on local school boards as well as Quebec Ministry of Education curriculum committees. For several years he was vice-president of the Quebec Association of Teachers of History. During his tenure as a senior history specialist, he contributed to numerous seminal curriculum publications, including *Elements of Our Past: An Outline Review of the History of Quebec and Canada* (1991). Following Sam's retirement from the high school classroom, he spent several years as a sessional lecturer teaching historical curriculum development with the Faculty of Education of McGill University. In 2016, he received the Gordon Atkinson Memorial Prize in Highland Military History for his book, *Drv'n by Fortune: The Scots March to Modernity in America, 1745–1812* (2015).

**Jon Bradley** initially trained as an elementary school teacher, but he has since taught social studies and/or Canadian history at every level of the public school and university landscape through to graduate studies. Over his years with the Faculty of Education of McGill University, he challenged his students to engage historiography and not blindly accept prevailing

dogma, be it historical or pedagogical. In parallel, he became an advocate for ‘boy learning’ and the plight of the male teacher in the contemporary educational landscape. Furthermore, he served on numerous curriculum committees at both the provincial and international levels, for example, receiving in 1997 the Service Key Award from Phi Delta Kappa International as well as the 2003 McGill University Faculty Appreciation Award. The author of numerous articles, book chapters, curriculum guides and newspaper opinion pieces, his most recent co-authored book is *Making Sense in Education: A Student’s Guide to Research and Writing* (2017, 2nd edn).

## Notes

- 1 Donne, *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*.
- 2 Hiller, ‘Canada, war and “independent Newfoundland”’.
- 3 Pound, ‘Canadian law between the wars’.
- 4 Allison, ‘Public infrastructure’.
- 5 Champion, ‘The “nation-in-arms”’.
- 6 Delisle, ‘Hidden in plain sight’.
- 7 McRae, ‘In Flanders Fields’.
- 8 Welles, *The Sleeper Awakes*; Irving, ‘Rip Van Winkle’.
- 9 Day-Lewis, ‘Where are the war poets?’

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