



# CANADIANS AND THE MEMORY OF WORLD WAR I: ONE HUNDRED YEARS ON

## Los canadienses y el recuerdo de la Primera Guerra Mundial: cien años después

**Patrick H. Brennan**

University of Calgary  
Centre for Military and Strategic Studies  
E-mail: [brennan@ucalgary.ca](mailto:brennan@ucalgary.ca)



**Autores**

While a recent poll still showed forty per cent of Canadians did not know what role their country played in the conflict, memories of the Great War, real and manufactured, continue to shape Canadians' sense of themselves. As was the case during the war, the "two solitudes" – English- and French-speakers – see matters in profoundly different ways. The "birth of a nation" creation myth remains dogma for the Anglo majority, and ensures that awareness of the war – a "good" war despite the appalling loss of life – is entirely centered on its impact on Canadian identity. Equally parochially, for the *Québécois* the war is defined as their victimization – through conscription – by the colonial excesses of their fellow citizens. As well, at least among Anglophones, the war is invoked in debates about Canada's national and international identity, where advocates of "Warrior Canada" with its proud military history and tradition of robust defence of "freedom" appall and are in turn appalled by advocates of the "Peaceable Kingdom" interpretation. In these contemporary clashes of ideology, World War I constitutes a historical prop for both sides – a golden moment ennobled by the sacrifice, or a tragedy where one can respect the sacrifice but not the action or its purpose.



**Abstract**

Canada; World War I; national identity; militarism; remembrance  
*Canadá; Primera Guerra Mundial; identidad nacional; militarismo; recuerdo*



**Key words**

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**Fechas**

*Pese a los resultados de una encuesta reciente que mostraban que un cuarenta por ciento de los canadienses no conocían el papel que su país jugó en el conflicto, los recuerdos de la Gran Guerra, reales y fabricados, continúan dando forma a la percepción canadiense de sí misma. Tal y como sucedió durante la guerra, las «dos soledades» (los hablantes de inglés y de francés) ven las cosas de distinto modo. El mito de la creación «el nacimiento de una nación» se mantiene como dogma para la mayoría angloparlante, y asegura que el conocimiento de la guerra (una guerra «buena» a pesar de una atroz pérdida de vidas) se centra exclusivamente en su impacto sobre la identidad canadiense. Igualmente de miras estrechas a la guerra Quebequense que se define por su victimización (a través del servicio militar obligatorio) por los excesos coloniales de sus conciudadanos. Asimismo, al menos entre los angloparlantes, la guerra se invoca en los debates sobre la identidad nacional e internacional de Canadá, en los que los defensores de una «Canadá Guerrera» orgullosa de su historia militar y de la tradición de la defensa enérgica de la «libertad» horrorizan y a su vez se horrorizan de los defensores de la interpretación del «Reino Pacífico». Dentro de este contemporáneo conflicto de ideologías la Primera Guerra Mundial constituye un apoyo histórico para ambas partes –un momento dorado ennoblecido por el sacrificio o una tragedia en la que se puede respetar el sacrificio pero no el enfrentamiento o su utilidad.*



The legacy of the Great War, both real and manufactured, continues to shape Canadians' sense of themselves, but as was the case during the conflict itself, the "two solitudes" of English and French Canada see matters in distinctly different ways. The "birth of a nation" myth remains dogma among most of the Anglo majority, and ensures that awareness of the war – a "good" war despite the appalling loss of life – is almost entirely centered on its impact on Canadian identity. Yet this fails to resonate in Quebec. Instead, but with equal parochialism, *Québécois* see their forbearers as victims of the blind Anglo-imperialism of their fellow citizens. Additionally, at least among Anglophones, the war is also frequently invoked in the heated debates about Canada's contemporary national and international identity, where advocates of "Warrior Canada" with its proud military history and tradition of robustly defending "freedom" appall and are in turn appalled by advocates of the "Peaceable Kingdom" paradigm. In this ideological clash, the "lessons" of World War I constitute useful historical props for both sides – a golden moment ennobled by the sacrifice, or a tragedy where only the sacrifice is worthy of respect.

By any standard, Canada's military contribution to the British Empire war effort during the First World War was impressive. Between 1914 and 1918, the British colony of barely 8 million put 619,636 of its citizens in uniform (including 2,854 women who served as nurses), a remarkable 477,000 of these being volunteers. Some 424,000 served overseas, including 49,500 of the conscripts. Battle and other losses claimed 60,000, and another 138,000 suffered non-fatal but battle-related wounds (Nicholson, 1964).<sup>1</sup> Largely as a result of this contribution, the war marked a major turning point in Canadian history in other significant

1 The fatal casualty figures have continued to grow over time, especially in the last decade, as the 1,300-odd battle deaths of Newfoundland, a separate Dominion in 1914 but part of Canada since 1949, have been added, as well as nearly 1,400 killed in the British flying services plus various "other losses" not directly related to combat, so that the "official" total of Canada's Great War dead has now reached "over 66,000". For more information visit Veterans Affairs Canada, "Remembrance: the first world war" and Canadian War Museum, "The first world war".

ways. By 1919, when it signed the Versailles Treaty in its own right, Canada was well on its way to achieving full sovereignty within the now British Commonwealth, a transformation of the Empire it had played a major role in engineering. The consequences of the war-induced emergence of nascent “nationalism” in English-speaking Canada, however, were far from entirely positive. The decision to prosecute the war to the proverbial “last man and last dollar” in 1917-18, epitomised by the imposition of conscription, alienated the French-speaking minority as well as most other non-Anglo-Saxon elements who together comprised well over one-third of the Dominion’s population, and left tensions which bedeviled national politics (and national unity) for decades to come.<sup>2</sup> Thus, in a very real sense for Canada the blood-soaked years 1914-1918 deserved the title “The Great War”.

Despite having left such scars on the Canadian psyche, and profoundly influencing the nation since, a poll conducted in June 2014 by the online genealogical firm Ancestry.com revealed that 40 per cent of those surveyed did not know what role Canada had played in the conflict, one in twelve did not know we had participated at all, and nearly half were unaware that 2014 was the centenary of its outbreak.<sup>3</sup> Clearly any attempt to measure how the average Canadian “sees” the First World War in 2014 must be placed within that sobering context.

How then has the war been portrayed as a Canadian event to Canadians in recent years? Given that the feature film industry in English Canada, at least the part producing unabashedly Canadian dramas, is modest, the premiere of *Passchendaele* at the Toronto International Film Festival on 4 September 2008 was much anticipated. Paul Gross, who wrote, co-produced, directed and starred in the film, had promised to tell the story of the Great War’s impact on Canada, both at home and overseas. His own deep sense of the importance of the war in shaping his country – his grandfather had served in the trenches – had driven him to overcome all manner of obstacles in bringing the project to fruition. As Gross professed, “I believe strongly in the power that story telling has on our nation’s psyche [and] we need to find new ways to tell the stories of our proud military past.” But it was equally the “responsibility [of Canadian] audiences... to seek out stories in which we recognize [the] heroes as our own” (Gross, 2014, June 13).<sup>4</sup> At its essence a love story situated in Canada’s war, the attention to historical detail was painstaking. Reviewers were mixed, but few touched on Gross’s central effort to make Canadians feel more nationalistic by confronting their proud Great War history. Although it screened in mainstream theaters, and was extensively promoted, *Passchendaele* proved a commercial failure.

The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation had only a year earlier televised *The Great War* to coincide with the 90th anniversary of the Battle of Vimy Ridge and the rededication of the Vimy Memorial in April 2007. Produced in docu-drama format, and drawing heavily on “human interest” research, many of the “actors” in the four one-hour episodes were descendants of Canadian soldiers who had fought on the Western Front, and when possible retraced their steps. Both English- and French-language versions were produced. Writer-director Brian McKenna was gratified that *Radio-Canada* (the CBC’s French-language service) committed to the project, pointing out “that there were at least 15000 French-speaking Quebecers who volunteered to go to war” but their story of courage and sacrifice remained basically untold in Canada and particularly in Quebec. “I think [the descendants enlisted for the film] got excited about telling this

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2 For a comprehensive and balanced account of the war’s domestic impact, see Bothwell, Drummond and English.

3 For more information visit “Nearly half of Canadians unaware of country’s role in first world war: poll” (2014).

4 The film, the most expensive ever produced in Canada at C\$20 million, recouped C\$4.5 million at the box office.

story as well [namely] that we have to move beyond the old things that have divided us and find new things that we went through together that might unite us.” (“The CBC wants you!”, 2005).<sup>5</sup> Joel Ralph, one of the descendant-participants, later summed up his own feelings: “We realized, as we struggled to find our own meaning of the war, that Canada’s story was being passed on to a new generation of Canadians – scars, and all”.<sup>6</sup>

In recent decades, Canadian novelists have only occasionally touched on the Great War as a major theme in their works, a notable early exception being Timothy Findley’s *The Wars*, published in 1977. In 2001, Jane Urquhart’s *The Stone Carvers* deftly explored themes of loss and remembrance intertwined with the construction of the great national memorial to the missing atop Vimy Ridge. Four years later, Joseph Boyden’s *Three Day Road*, the riveting and tragic story of the dehumanising impact of the conflict, and Euro-Canadian society at home, on two Cree snipers, was loosely based on real-life events and rightfully became a Canadian best-seller. None of the three titles, however, contributed to any renewed pride in wartime Canadian achievements, instead grimly emphasising the “soldier-as-victim” wastefulness and tragedy of the whole enterprise.

In the realm of popular non-fiction, the Canadian World War I experience has been featured in a number of recent titles. Sandra Gwyn’s *Tapestry of War: a Private View of Canadians in the Great War* (1992) touchingly wove the war’s shattering impact into the lives of a variety of middle and upper middle class Canadians and their friends, lovers and spouses, some of whom were serving in the trenches. Published a year earlier, David Macfarlane’s *The Danger Tree* was a similarly fashioned work of social history which poignantly detailed the story of his mother’s Newfoundland family, the Goodyears, through the first half of the twentieth century, an account which spent much time detailing their tribulations – including the loss of three sons – during the First World War. Most recently, on the cusp of the war’s centenary, novelist Michael Winter has chronicled the tragic journey of the Newfoundland Regiment in *Into the Blizzard: Walking the Fields of the Newfoundland Dead*. It is an unabashed portrayal of the pointless, criminal waste of lives, bearing no resemblance to the ritual rhetoric, now thoroughly Canadianised, which suffuses the official commemorations each year at the Beaumont-Hamel National Historic Site where the Newfoundlanders suffered crippling losses on the opening day of the Battle of the Somme.<sup>7</sup>

And what can be said of Canada’s remarkably small band of academic military historians? The last two decades have seen a renaissance in scholarly writing in English on both the military and home front aspects of Canada’s Great War experience, much of it revisionist or covering completely new ground.<sup>8</sup> The dominating figure, because of his ability to “popularise” his scholarship and thus make it accessible to a broad public, was Tim Cook at the Canadian War Museum. His superb two-volume account of the Canadian Corps, *At the Sharp End: Canadians Fighting in the Great War 1914-1916* (2007) and *Shock Troops: Canadians Fighting in the Great War 1917-1918* (2008), attracted a wide readership, in the process becoming the new “official”

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5 One of the novice thespians was Justin Trudeau, the son of the former prime minister and currently a MP and leader of the federal Liberal Party. His great-grandmother’s brother was killed in the trenches.

6 Originally quoted in *The Beaver*, April-May 2007.

7 For more information visit Hachard (2014).

8 In the forefront of these titles were Rawling (1992), Morton (1993, 2004) and Vance (1997).

story of the war's military side.<sup>9</sup> Cook earned a major national book award for *Shock Troops*, as he subsequently did for his overall body of work which was hailed for making Canadian Great War military history "more accessible, vivid and factual." As can be the case when scholars venture into the history-for-the-masses market, the quality of Cook's work was unfairly denigrated by some of his peers, but most disagreed, readily acknowledging the extraordinary contribution it had made to the enhancement of the public's awareness of their First World War military history.<sup>10</sup> With the centenary's approach, historians' expertise has been avidly sought (if not always accurately conveyed) by a Canadian media keen "to explain it all," a development likely to last until 2019.

Delivering the accepted version of World War I heroism was well received in the musical *Billy Bishop Goes to War*. First performed in Vancouver in 1978 and subsequently staged in every corner of the country, it was acclaimed by audiences and critics alike.<sup>11</sup> But challenging that "wisdom" has always elicited a fierce backlash, as evidenced when the National Film Board of Canada, an arm's length government agency with creative autonomy, released *The Kid Who Couldn't Miss* in 1982. Paul Cowan's feature-length film never claimed to be a biography of flying ace Billy Bishop, but merely an effort, part fact, part fiction, to show how a brash kid from small town Ontario could become a national icon. *The Kid Who Couldn't Miss* pointedly questioned some long-accepted claims about Bishop's intrepid feats in the skies over northern France, but with dubious "evidence" and much innuendo. Not surprisingly, the public were outraged that the taxpayers' money had been spent to slander one of the greatest Canadian war heroes. "The NFB's treatment of Canadian military history has been an international embarrassment," argued one outraged citizen whose critique made it to the NFB's own website.<sup>12</sup> Before the tempest subsided, the film had been investigated by the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, which lambasted its historical inaccuracies and hinted darkly at its intent, but only recommended that the film's packaging clearly label it as a "docu-drama" – doing more would have threatened freedom of expression, and regardless, as Senator Jean Le Moynes, who wrote the final report, confidently noted, "The *Kid Who Couldn't Miss*' will be forgotten long, long before the memory of Billy Bishop starts to fade" (Le Moynes, 1987).

Twenty years after Cowan's film had appeared, Bishop's reputation came under scrutiny again, this time by an accomplished military historian until recently employed by the Directorate of History and Heritage of the Department of National Defence. In *The Making of Billy Bishop: the First World War Exploits of Billy Bishop, VC*, Brereton Greenhous argued, this time with substantial (if not categorical) evidence, that Bishop was a brave flyer but a bold liar who stretched the truth to advance his career, including fabricating the solo exploit that won him a Victoria Cross in 1917.<sup>13</sup> With a flurry of press releases and public statements, Second War veteran Cliff Chadderton, who had parlayed his leadership of the War Amputees of Canada into that of chief defender of Canada's military honour from scurrilous journalists, artists and

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9 For more information visit "Tim Cook (historian)". Dr. Cook also serves as an adjunct professor at Carleton University in Ottawa.

10 Granatstein, as cited in Medley (2014).

11 For more information visit Nygaard King (2013) and Gray (2010).

12 Available at <http://www.nfb.ca/film/the-kid-who-couldn't-miss>.

13 That Greenhous had raised many of the identical questions thirteen years earlier in *The Canadian Historical Review* (1989) and caused barely a ripple highlights the corrective reach of scholarly journals when it comes to popular history.

academics, leapt into the fray with a point-by-point refutation of Greenhous's arguments. The Royal Canadian Legion followed suit, but major newspapers were more moderate, offering only that the thesis was intriguing but unproven.<sup>14</sup>

In recent years, the output of Canadian artists, journalists and historians, both popular and scholarly, have helped to create and sustain widely held perceptions of the First World War, but their impact has been much augmented, indeed arguably dwarfed, by a series of national commemorative events presided over by the country's political leaders and given extended media coverage. May 2000, in what was the culmination of a long lobbying effort by the Royal Canadian Legion, witnessed the interment of the remains of a Canadian soldier "Known unto God" and purposefully chosen from the Vimy Ridge battlefield in the newly built Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at the National War Memorial in Ottawa before Prime Minister Jean Chrétien, assembled dignitaries and a crowd of 20,000. In the years since, the tomb has become the focal point of all commemorations held at the National War Memorial, including the November 11th Remembrance Day ceremony, the most recent of which drew 50,000 people.<sup>15</sup>

The following year, the Chrétien government announced a major restoration of the Vimy Memorial, which had fallen into serious disrepair. After the expenditure of C\$30 million, the memorial was re-dedicated by Prime Minister Stephen Harper and Queen Elizabeth II on 9 April 2007, the 90th anniversary of the most famous attack carried out by Canadian arms during World War I. The "Vimy myth" is central to English-Canadian memories of that war, and speaking on national television, it was equally central to the Prime Minister's comments. "Every nation has a creation story to tell," he solemnly intoned, and "the First World War and the Battle of Vimy Ridge are central to our country." Mr. Harper invoked the much quoted assessment of one of the participants, Alex Ross, then a battalion commander, that at Vimy he had seen Canada from the Atlantic to the Pacific on parade, and felt he was witnessing the birth of a nation.<sup>16</sup> The Prime Minister concluded with an imagined prayer of the Canadian soldiers who had died on the Ridge, but the content seemed to have contemporary applicability given that another generation of Canadian soldiers were then fighting and dying in Afghanistan – "I love my family, I love my comrades, I love my country, and I will defend their freedom till the end."<sup>17</sup> As a history teacher from a Toronto high school, who was accompanying his students to the ceremony, noted, "It's a sad reality that we go to war, but it's important that we remember Canadians who were fighting in a right-minded way to maintain our freedoms and our democracy." In the days that followed, well-attended public ceremonies marking the re-dedication were held across Canada – young children in Ottawa laid poppies on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty presided over a ceremony in Toronto at the recently opened Veterans' Memorial Wall on the provincial legislative grounds, and the Leader of the Official Opposition, Stéphane Dion, participated in a torch-light parade at Montreal's National Field of Honour ("Vimy part of Canada's 'creation story': PM", 2007).

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14 For more information visit Dieter (2002) and Chadderton (2002).

15 For more information visit the article "The Tomb", at the Veterans Affairs Canada Site; Black (2000) and "Unknown Soldier laid to rest at shrine to veterans" (2000).

16 In fact Ross uttered the comments at the 50th anniversary celebrations in 1967, by which time the birth-of-a-nation mythology was already well established.

17 For more information visit "Broadcast clip of Prime Minister Harper's speech at the Vimy Ridge memorial re-dedication". Indeed, simultaneous ceremonies were held by members of the Canadian forces serving in Afghanistan, as seen in "The PM speaks at Vimy".

Of course the television and press build-up to the centenary of World War I reached its Canadian apex on August 4th, the anniversary of Britain's (and therefore colonial Canada's) entry into the conflict. Speaking at the Canadian War Museum, Prime Minister Harper solemnly reminded Canadians that:

It is a time to remember and honour the sacrifices and tremendous achievements of the more than 650,000 brave Canadians and Newfoundlanders who left their families... to serve their King and country, as well as to preserve the universal values of freedom, peace and democracy that we hold most dear... The dedication, courage and determination demonstrated by our brave soldiers, sailors and airmen, who stood shoulder-to-shoulder with like-minded allies to fight for what they believed in, resulted in Canada emerging as a proud, victorious nation with newfound standing in the world... (Speech of Prime Minister Harper, 2014)

The Prime Minister went on to emphasise that "Canada, as a truly independent country, was forged in the fires of the Western Front" and that "our place at the [peace] table was not given to us [but] bought and paid for..." Then, in a none too subtle reference to the crisis in the Ukraine, a passionate issue in a country with 1.2 million citizens of Ukrainian descent, "our commitment to values has never wavered... and it is why today, we stand once again beside friends and allies whose sovereignty, whose territorial integrity – indeed, whose freedoms and existence – are still at risk" (Chase, 2014).

Beginning with the outpouring of publicity surrounding the 50th anniversary of D-Day in 1994, Canadians exhibited a steadily rising tide of interest in their military history, with World War I at the forefront as that war's centenary loomed ever closer. The aforementioned dedication of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in 2000 and re-dedication of the Vimy Memorial in 2007 were both examples of and contributed to this phenomenon, as was the extensive coverage awarded the passing of the last member of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, 109-year-old John Babcock, in 2010.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, the government's intention to honour him with a state funeral was only scotched when it became clear that having been too young to see combat, he had not wished to be singled out for any honours. The mass media, specialised interest groups and popular and scholarly historians have all attempted to satisfy as well as promote the growing interest, with the internet playing an ever more prominent role. Public access to documentation revealing the human side of Canada's World War I experience has greatly expanded. Library and Archives Canada undertook the digitisation of all the attestation (enlistment) papers of the Canadian Expeditionary Force with the result that records which had been the purview of dedicated genealogists and a handful of scholars were now open to anyone ("First world war – Canadian expeditionary force"). The launching of the Canadian Letters and Images Project by the History Department of Vancouver Island University (then Malaspina College) in 2000 has made available a rapidly expanding collection of correspondence and photographs portraying the country's war experience, the greatest part of it devoted to the Great War. It has been a treasure trove for students at all levels.<sup>19</sup> Veterans Affairs Canada created the Canadian Virtual War Memorial which provided a single comprehensive repository for digitally accessible information, including burial locations and photographic and other contributions from descendants, for all 118,000

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18 For more information read "Canada's last WWI veteran dies".

19 For more information visit *The Canadian letters and images project*. The history department of Western University (Ontario) became a participant in 2003.

Canadians killed in the service of Canada or the United Kingdom, including the largest group – those from World War I.<sup>20</sup> And when the long-awaited new facility for the Canadian War Museum was opened in 2005, the nearly 1000 paintings of the Canadian War Memorials Fund at last found an adequate display space. Perhaps more importantly, the ongoing digitisation of the art has ensured wide public access to this superb collection of World War I paintings.<sup>21</sup>

The advent of the centenary of World War I has led most governments of countries or colonies which participated in a significant way to draw up extensive commemorative programs. The actions of those arguably closest to Canada's experience – the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand – are illustrative. In the case of the United Kingdom, the government set aside £50 million plus substantial Heritage Lottery Fund moneys for large-scale national commemoration as well as for a broad range of local undertakings to “make this centenary a truly national moment in every community in our land” (“Funding available for local projects to remember the great war”, 2014). For its part the Australian government budgeted over AUS\$140 million for what has been officially dubbed “The Anzac Centenary,” and to supplement this even instituted a volunteer public subscription (with generous tax deductions), the Anzac Centenary Public Fund. Like the United Kingdom, the Australian program will blend major national commemorations with smaller local ones. As Prime Minister Tony Abbott reminded fellow Australians, the war “was in a sense the crucible that forged our nation [and] over the next four years we should remember... those who served and... celebrate what they gave to our country – the virtues, the ethos which inspires us to this day” (Abbott, 2013).<sup>22</sup> According to the Ministry of Culture and Health, New Zealand's commitment includes over NZ\$17 million from the government plus an additional NZ\$5 million in lottery support, again for a mix of both national and community undertakings commemorating the war's impact on the country and her people.

What of Canada? When the Harper government allocated C\$28 million on a range of commemorations for the 200th anniversary of the War of 1812, it was widely anticipated that much larger sums would be budgeted for the Great War centenary, but little more than fine rhetoric has been forthcoming from Ottawa. In practice, it appears that there is to be no special funding, but only what moneys can be spared from the already straitened budgets of the Department of National Defence, Heritage Canada and the Department of Veterans' Affairs Community Engagement Partnership Fund, and as of 2014 these commitments have been disappointingly modest indeed. So far, the largest grant earmarked is \$160000 to build, in partnership with the Memorial Museum Passchendaele, a Canadian Remembrance Trail in Belgium, proof, in the words of the Minister of Veterans Affairs, Julian Fantino (2014), who made the announcement in Ieper (Ypres), that Ottawa was committed “to ensure our military's brave stories of service, sacrifice, and heroism are told.”<sup>23</sup> Most grants awarded for exhibitions, the refurbishment of community memorials and the like in Canada have been for less than \$2500. As one of the country's pre-eminent military historians, J. L. Granatstein (2014), succinctly put it, both the proud achievements of the Canadian Corps and the profound impact of the war at home, even

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20 For a more comprehensive approach visit “Virtual war memorial”, from the *Veterans Affairs Canada*. In one of its most valuable features, the site permits users to link with the Commonwealth War Graves Commission website.

21 To access these photos visit “Canada and the first world war: Objects and photos”.

22 For more information visit “Anzac centenary”.

23 For details of the Canadian commemoration funding programs, see “Community engagement partnership fund” (*Veterans Affairs Canada*, 2014).

if not all of it was happy or unifying, deserved to be remembered by the country, to be talked about and learned from. “We really must remember the Great War properly,” he wrote in a widely circulated opinion piece, for “it was when Canada stood proudly on the world stage for the first time, and it would be a disgrace for the government to shortchange it.” Nevertheless, the reality is that public reaction to the Harper government’s parsimonious response to Great War commemoration has been muted. Given the criticism of the lavish funding allocated to mark the War of 1812 bicentennial, the ongoing political embarrassment over revelations Ottawa has failed to adequately fund the needs of current veterans, and plans to make tax cuts the centerpiece of their 2015 re-election bid, the Harper government seems to have concluded that remembering World War I with words is a safer political course than remembering it with dollars.

Any interest in matters Great War and commemorative are confined to English Canada, for whether one is a federalist or sovereigntist, there is no substantive debate in French Canada about the meaning of the Great War either to past or contemporary generations. It is accepted, with only rare exceptions among some of the former faction, that Quebec was a victim of rampant Anglo-Canadian imperialism, the culmination of decades of rising intolerance toward the minority. It is a matter of absolute certainty that conscription for overseas service, invoked by the Borden Unionist government in late 1917 after a bitter election campaign, was intended to marginalise Quebec’s role in the federation. English Canada, so it goes, was little interested in understanding the merit in French Canada’s principled opposition to a war that was a crusade on behalf of the British Empire and which threatened to bleed Canada white. Given the very low enlistment rates in Quebec from 1914 through 1917, there is little interest in the military side of the war, even among scholars. Instead the war is perceived entirely as a domestic matter, the source of long simmering discord with “Canada.” Any real interest in events 100 years past is likely to occur in 2017-18 with the anniversary of conscription and its at times violent aftermath. After all, conscription, and the war in general, were used as rallying points for the post-war nationalist movement. Given that nationalist movement’s continuing relevance, historical inquiry – popular and academic – “has become focused on the opposition movement and the surrounding controversies [during the war] rather than the voluntary contribution and sacrifice of French Canadians” (Harvie, 2014). Between 1919 and 2005, only five personal journals, memoirs or books on the soldier’s experience were published for francophone Quebec audiences. While the rest of Canada is awash with war-related commemorative ceremonies, conferences, exhibitions and book launches, Quebec remains largely silent. An exception is Carol Beaudry’s play *Liberté*, which is based on Michel Litalien’s 2011 book *Écrire sa Guerre: témoignages de soldats canadiens-français 1914-1918*. But it is the exception that surely proves the rule.

Although English-Canadian historians overwhelmingly acknowledge the serious wartime divisions even within the English-speaking community, the “birth of a nation” myth which quickly took root after 1918 remains the dominant paradigm linking the First World War to present-day Canada.<sup>24</sup> For a population coping with grievous loss, an explanation so inspirational gave purpose to that loss, indeed cloaked it in nobility. As we have seen, that conceptualisation of the Great War, whether in its pure form or modified to accept the realities of wartime disunity, now inspires the rhetoric of virtually all political leaders and the writings of legions of journalists, all authors of popular military history, and, at least in the modified form, a majority of scholars.

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24 The best study of post-world war I myth-making in English Canada remains Vance (1997). See especially chapter 8: “To found a country”.

Writing on the 90th Anniversary of the Battle of Vimy Ridge, Professor Jonathan Vance explained step by step on how Vimy, in practice a substitute for World War I as a whole, had become the defining national symbol – the crucible of the nation – for so many Canadians. “The colony-to-nation via Vimy Ridge thesis may seem old fashioned,” he admitted, “but something very important did happen there, something more than just a victory in battle.” Then, referring to the hundreds of students who were going to participate in the upcoming rededication ceremony, he suggested that “as these young pilgrims read the names lining the walls of [the] monument, they could do worse than reflect that each is the name of a nation-builder” (Vance, 2007).<sup>25</sup> As part of the CBC’s coverage of the most recent Remembrance Day, anchorman Peter Mansbridge was privileged to tour one of the surviving tunnels at Vimy Ridge not open to the public, the chalk walls of which were covered with the graffiti of the young Canadian soldiers who huddled there on the eve of the Easter Monday morning attack. Many of the etchings spoke of an all-too-distant home – a fish for Nova Scotia, a canoe for northern Ontario, a field of wheat for the Prairies. “There is something incredibly poignant and emotional about places from our military past,” Mansbridge (2014) somberly reminded his viewers, but “what I saw [that day at Vimy] made me feel... perhaps more Canadian than I have ever felt.” Apparently unable to refrain from invoking at least a qualified acknowledgement of the national myth, he ended his report by noting that 9 April 1917 was, “say some, the moment we became a country.”<sup>26</sup>

Robert Fulford, one of the doyens of Canadian political journalism, did question the received wisdom. “The idea of a nation finding its destiny while fighting someone else’s war on the other side of the Atlantic has always seemed dubious to me,” he wrote pointedly in the *National Post* in 2000. While acknowledging that the war did stimulate the national spirit (at least among English Canadians), it “was the unmaking of Canada as much as it was the making...” But the sacrifice made it impossible to question the cause and we have not been able to “entertain for a moment the idea that it was wrong-headed and foolish, not just in execution but in purpose.” The piece elicited strong responses from a pair of prominent Canadian military historians, David Bercuson and Jonathan Vance, both of whom outlined the case in favour of the war having created a strong “national feeling”, not the full-blown “birth of a nation” argument but a close approximation of it, and one with positive postwar consequences. Respectful but unmoved, Fulford (2000, February 14) concluded that what was missing whenever the Great War’s place in Canadian history was debated was how we should be thinking about it today, free of pre-conceptions.<sup>27</sup> With what in hindsight seems the height of wishful thinking, he offered that in shaping the Canadian imagination, the “colony-to-nation via Flanders” thesis was “an idea with an interesting past but not much future.” (2000, February 14). Of course in Francophone Quebec, it never had a present let alone a future. There was never talk of Vimy Ridge or the First World War planting the seeds of Canadian “nationhood” and the recent commemorations of World War I-related anniversaries have caused barely a ripple there.<sup>28</sup> But even in one segment of English Canada, the idea of the Great War’s blood sacrifice being compensated for by “nation building” has never resonated, namely Newfoundland, then a Dominion in its own right. Accord-

25 The names of the roughly 11,000 Canadian soldiers who died in France but have no known graves are engraved on panels surrounding the Vimy memorial.

26 Ibid.

27 Vance’s riposte, “Turning point of a nation”, had appeared in the newspaper’s 12 February edition which is no longer available online.

28 For more information visit Martin (2011).

ding to David Macfarlane, the war cost Newfoundland its potential for independence, and “the century that carried on past the moments of [Newfoundland’s soldiers’] deaths... was largely a makeshift arrangement, cobbled around their constant, disastrous absence.”<sup>29</sup> Although loyal to their adopted country, few Newfoundlanders would dispute this grim assessment, rooted deeply, as it is, in their “national” memory.

There is another circumstance when World War I is contentiously invoked in present-day Canada, the debate about Canada’s contemporary self-image on the international stage. It is rooted in the Harper Conservative government’s conscious shift of both the style and substance of Canadian foreign policy from a middle-of-the-road consensus-building averse to even the hint of conflict to a more robust, even militarised, and certainly confrontational approach where allies were to be loyally embraced and enemies denounced, and is really a battle for Canada’s identity. In this ongoing battle for the nation’s “soul”, both sides have drawn on Canada’s military history, not the least her role in the Great War. Save Canada’s involvement in Afghanistan which resulted in the country’s greatest loss of military life since Korea, the Conservatives’ muscular approach to foreign policy has generally been more rhetorical than substantive, but opponents have still been appalled by what they consider an orchestrated attempt to subvert the traditions of the “Peaceable Kingdom” and replace their Canada with the Prime Minister’s “Warrior Nation”. In his speech commemorating Canada’s going to war in 1914, Harper began by pointing out that “this great conflict on the other side of an ocean need not have involved us,” avoiding for the moment a colonial status compelling us to follow Britain’s lead. “But then, as now,” he continued, “when our friends and the values we share with them are threatened, Canadians do not turn away.” He repeatedly emphasised links to the present for those who had “been here for generations or are newcomers to this land,” and quoted Prime Minister Robert Borden, who had told parliament in 1914 that Canada entered the fray “not for love of battle, nor for lust of conquest, not for greed of possessions, but for the cause of honour, to maintain solemn pledges, to uphold principles of liberty.” Harper closed by reminding his audience:

Monuments are not memories... but every time we take a stand to defend the values for which they fought and for which so many died, we remember their stories in the only way that really matters. We hold these values dear... justice and freedom, democracy and the rule of law, human rights and human dignity. For a century, these are the things for which our fellow citizens... have fought. And this is the ground on which we will always take our stand. (2014)

Everyone understood the references were as much a historical justification of Ottawa’s loud support for Ukraine, Israel, anti-Gaddafi Libyans, anti-Taliban Afghans and the victims of ISIS, to name several salient examples, as reverent acknowledgement of distant events.

The 2012 publication of Ian McKay’s and Jamie Swift’s *Warrior Nation: Rebranding Canada in an Age of Anxiety*, a polemical attack against the linking of Canada’s identity to war as well as other sins of the current administration, gave the simmering differences focus.<sup>30</sup> Canada’s involvement in World War I was dismissed by the authors as bloody folly engineered by Imperial interests at home and abroad, sad events which had deeply divided, indeed, wounded

*Save Canada’s involvement in Afghanistan which resulted in the country’s greatest loss of military life since Korea, the Conservatives’ muscular approach to foreign policy has generally been more rhetorical than substantive*

29 As quoted in Ashenburg (2014).

30 McKay was a history professor at Queen’s University, Swift a journalist.

the Canadian nation for generations.<sup>31</sup> Advertised as “a critical perspective on both Canada’s growing effort to portray itself as a militaristic ‘warrior nation’ and its exploitation of history in achieving this end,” the book was praised or damned, depending on the perspective.<sup>32</sup> Support emanated from “progressive” circles, namely politically left-of-center journalistic, academic and cultural figures, who welcomed “a much needed corrective to the new warrior scholarship” and a badly overdue “revisiting of Canada’s military history as a ‘sub-imperial’ military power of the Anglosphere.”<sup>33</sup> Opponents felt with equal passion that the book was a dangerous misreading of Canadian history. J. L. Granatstein, summarily dismissed as “the doyen of the new warrior historians” by McKay & Swift, (2012, August 11), responded that the country’s military past, starting with the Herculean effort of the Great War, was historical fact and had to be acknowledged. If in some respects it had been elaborated to mythic proportions, this was because the myths appealed to Canadians, but then the “peace-keeping nation” had also been elaborated into myth because it, too, appealed to the Canadian public, providing them a comfortable perch atop the moral high ground from which to observe their country’s place in the world. “Getting it right matters,” Granatstein (2012) concluded, “but surely it is critical to understand the difference between history and myth first.” In the centenary year, international affairs commentator Gwynne Dyer’s *Canada in the Great Power Game, 1914-2014* reached the bookstores. Apart from the sheer tragedy that followed from Canadian involvement, “the precedent created set the country on the road to participating in a great many future foreign wars” (Dyer, 2014). This sparring will surely go on, and Canada’s “memory” of World War I will continue to be part of it, though exactly how much the public listens to or absorbs the arguments and counter-arguments is far from clear.

In conclusion, there is, and can be, no single “national memory” of the First World War in Canada. Rather there are national memories, where “knowledge” of the war largely takes the form of competing myths. Of these competing myths the forging of Canada as a nation in the awful furnace of the Great War surely exerts the strongest pull for the English-Canadian majority; the centenary will surely strengthen that hold. For the *Québécois*, in contrast, a Canadian nation that *already* existed was crippled by the war and *Canadiens* were its principal Canadian victims, the latter point having a particular appeal to the sovereigntist element. Regardless, both the dominant English- and French-Canadian views are thoroughly inward looking, seeing the war only in terms of how it affected Canada. Within English-Canadian intellectual circles of both the political right and left, the Canadian legacy of World War I also provides historical sanction in the ongoing battle for the “national soul” pitting the proponents of “Warrior Canada” against advocates of the “Peaceable Kingdom.” As long as Canadians find the war useful in sustaining reassuring myths, it will remain a living part of rival national memories.

*There is, and can be, no single “national memory” of the First World War in Canada. Rather there are national memories, where “knowledge” of the war largely takes the form of competing myths*

31 The assessment is in chapters 1 and 3 of McKay & Swift (2012).

32 For more information read “*Warrior Nation* explores the ominous campaign to change Canada’s definition of itself, press release” (2012).

33 *Ibid.* The quotations were attributed to two political science professors, Sandra Whitworth (York University) and Francis Dupuis-Déri (Université de Québec à Montréal), respectively.

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