Living with the First World War, 1914-1919:
History as Personal Experience

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AS AN ACADEMIC historian, I could have pursued a variety of possibly fascinating topics. How about municipal sewers across the world and their impact on human longevity? Or domestic pets and the changing patterns of species acceptance since the 1800s? Instead, to the astonishment of some and through encouragement from others, I was attracted by what contemporaries described, with some justice, as “The Great War.” In my own life, its impact was easily surpassed by the Second World War. Canada entered that war precisely on my fourth birthday. My father, one of Canada’s few professional soldiers, promptly left Calgary for Edmonton to open recruiting. He told us much later that most of the early volunteers had been strongly advised by their parents to join the Medical Corps. In 1941, my dad went overseas with his regiment, leaving his wife and children to live with her parents in the affluent little village of Rothesay. My grandfather, Harry Frink, was a prosperous insurance agent in Saint John, New Brunswick, where his Loyalist New York ancestors had made their home. He celebrated their Loyalist roots. Shortly before D-Day, my dad wrote me what he imagined could be his last contact with his only son. Eventually he did return, though many in his armoured regiment did not. That letter helped me understand what war really means to its survivors and its victims. Seldom does it include grandeur or glory.

The First World War happened long before I was born, though its images, recorded in the wartime version of the Illustrated London News, filled a bookshelf that took up half the length of the hallway of our converted H-Hut home in postwar Regina. The volumes, wider than they were long, fed my mind with the patriotic poop needed to keep our King’s loyal subjects in a sacrificial mood.

The story I remember best about the war and my family belongs to my mother, a precocious preschooler in the summer of 1914. Her chores included fetching the family’s newspaper from the Kennedy House, Rothesay’s main boarding

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establishment. On August 4, 1914, she raced home to report the headlines: “War declared,” she announced, and then marvelled at how pleased the adults of her family seemed to be on learning what she thought was terrible news.

Most English-speaking Canadians seem to have shared that delight. Their French-speaking fellow-citizens tended to have a more negative response, though there were parades and crowds in the streets in Montreal and Quebec as well as, weather permitting, in Toronto, Winnipeg, Vancouver, and anywhere else where Canadians believed themselves to be British. War, after all, was a test of character, patriotism, and personal courage. If it cost money, it would certainly create jobs. A country with 15 per cent unemployment could not scorn a Canadian Contingent that offered 30,000 would-be soldiers at least $1.10 a day in pay, not to mention the jobs created to provide them with British-style uniforms with a few Canadian modifications.

Canadians (according to my chief mentor, George Francis Gilman Stanley) are an unmilitary people. In 1939, Stanley himself was hard at work on a book about Canada’s soldiers when the Second World War interfered. He would eventually finish the book after a war he spent overseas as deputy head under Colonel Charles Perry Stacey of the Canadian Army’s Historical Section. His work, Canada’s Soldiers, remains a core text for anyone interested in our wars, though it was probably not the book that pulled me into the surprisingly rich groves of military memories I found in my father’s library.

None was more influential than Charles Arkell Boulton’s Reminiscences of the North-West Rebellions. Boulton was a Torontonian, one of the family that created the Victorian mansion that now serves as a museum at the heart of the Art Gallery of Ontario. In 1858, the British decided to add a new 100th Regiment to their army and chose to recruit it in pre-Confederation Canada with Canada’s first Victoria Cross winner, Frederick Dunn, as its commanding officer. Boulton recruited enough volunteers to secure a commission as an ensign in the new regiment, and to share its early experiences in colonial service in Gibraltar and Malta. By 1870, he had resigned from the army and moved west to the tiny village of Winnipeg. When Louis Riel led local Métis to defy Canada’s purchase of the North West from the Hudson’s Bay Company, Boulton responded at once to Governor William Macdougall’s ill-advised call to resistance. Leading a force of loyal settlers, he was seized by the Métis and locked in a prison cell in Fort Garry.

Boulton was destined to share Thomas Scott’s fate until a visiting Sir Donald Smith warned Riel that Boulton was too socially prominent back in Ontario to be executed without reprisal. Ottawa would have to react. He made no such claim for a mere lower-class Irish immigrant like Scott. Fifteen years later, when Riel returned to Saskatchewan from his own exile in Montana, Boulton had become a Manitoba farmer. He rallied his rural neighbours to join a unit of Mounted Infantry. In the advance to Batoche, careful scouting by Boulton’s unit saved General Middleton’s Canadian militia from blundering into a Métis ambush at Fish Creek. Boulton went on to devise the survey system that allowed Manitoba to ignore its Native First Nations and to divide its vast unpopulated prairie into thousands of manageable homesteads. His reward was a senate seat while his Mounted Rifles
became a parent unit for my father’s wartime command, Winnipeg’s Fort Garry Horse. Boulton became a model of what a soldier could accomplish in his lifetime. His political engagements gave me a focus on the saga of Canada’s military-political relations.

I grew up as an army brat. When my father returned from the war, he was posted to Camp Borden, a large training base north of Toronto. He discovered that camp buildings were regularly vanishing without a trace. A military police officer took the initiative. An alert guard noted that heavily loaded trucks left the camp’s south entrance nightly. Discreetly pursued, the trucks faithfully followed Highway 7 west to London where they turned into a large construction yard to dump their cargo. The owner was a prominent business contractor who had solved the postwar shortage of building materials. My father’s report to his superiors put an end to the theft. No other action followed. The contractor, as he had realized, was a prominent Liberal, whose friends held power in Ottawa. Revealing the crime might not be a career-ending move; neither was it necessarily career-enhancing. Other postings followed—to Regina in the winter of 1947 and Winnipeg in 1949. The National Defence College in Kingston followed in 1953. That experience qualified him to head Canada’s Military Mission in Tokyo during the latter years of the Korean War.

Moving every couple of years left me a somewhat fragmented education—three introductions to Latin but only three months of Algebra in Grade 10. Could I attend a school in Japan? Yes: the Canadian Academy, opened in 1913 as a school for Protestant missionaries’ children, had been destroyed by American bombers during the war, but under American mission auspices reopened in 1954 on Nagamine-yama, a hill overlooking Kobe. Built as a boys’ residence in the 1930s, Gloucester House sheltered male boarders, classrooms, a library, and an Ontario-based school curriculum as far as Grade 12. Tiny classes, veteran teachers, and a wholly international student body made it an ideal experience. I even had the enormous benefit of learning French from a teacher who spoke no English.

A problem remained. The Canadian Academy and its sponsors saw no need to move beyond Grade 12. If, as I hoped, I would go to the Royal Military College of Canada, I still needed Grade 13. My father was upset at my ambition. He had gone to RMC in 1919, experiencing such brutal hazing from his college senior class that he would never inflict such an experience on his son. However, there was an answer: my bilingual uncle, now in charge of Quebec Command, reminded his brother that a brand new College militaire royal (CMR) had opened at St-Jean-sur-Richelieu. Its Preparatory Year was the equivalent of Grade 13. In September, 1954, I flew from Tokyo to Montreal to start my military career.

CMR’s seniors were demanding, but they had been recruits themselves two years earlier. They respected their pledge to impose nothing on their recruits that they had not demanded of themselves. I learned early that mindless discipline had few supporters in French Canadian military units; officers had to think before they acted or subordinates would challenge their wisdom, often to offer a better idea.

When I finished CMR, I had changed. My dream of following my father into the Armoured Corps had vanished. Flat feet, a reality of my life, had caught up

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with me at St-Jean. I could not belong to a combat arm; I would have to spend my military life in the Army Service Corps, commanding cooks, clerks, and drivers. A few fine teachers had persuaded me that my academic specialty at Kingston should be English literature. In Kingston, that commitment faded fast. The head of RMC’s English Department had drowned that summer in a yachting accident. His colleagues were earnest, competent, and dull. Their colleagues in history and politics were relevant, lively, and so argumentative that they sometimes shared their differences in loud debates up and down RMC’s Memorial Staircase. History, hitherto an accumulation of boring facts, suddenly seemed irresistibly exciting.

In 1959, my final year, Ontario offered RMC the right to issue degrees to its graduates. For an honours degree, a research-based essay became a major new requirement. Stanley’s Canadian military history course provided a theme. In 1874, Macdonald’s government had decided that Canada’s risk of invasion by the United States might be reduced if a British general was appointed to command Canada’s militia. Britain duly provided a succession of eight senior officers, all of whom became Canadian major generals, held the post of General Officer Commanding, and reported to a civilian politician holding the title of Minister of Militia and Defence. Between 1874 and 1904, only the first general, Sir Edward Selby Smyth, completed his full term of office, perhaps because he diverted his mind from militia efficiency to arguing for a causeway between Labrador and Newfoundland.

After I won a Rhodes Scholarship in my graduating year at RMC, political-military issues for Canadians in England during the Great War became the topic of an essay I needed to qualify for an honours BA at Oxford. Canadian sources in England were scarce and usually irrelevant, but the British had enough political-military controversies to provide at least an adequate essay.

I returned to Canada in the summer of 1961 and reported to the Army Service Corps school at Camp Borden. My flat feet proved to be no obstacle to commanding as many as three recruit platoons, at a time when the Diefenbaker government was trying to fight unemployment by expanding the armed forces. My CMR-enhanced French allowed me to communicate with a high quota of francophones. After a year with recruits, I was promoted to captain and switched to officer training. A CMR friend, Jack Granatstein, proved a congenial colleague for this new adventure. Among other ordeals, we compelled aspiring officers to read a newspaper a day, a magazine a week, and a book every month. Some, afterwards, confessed that it was the toughest demand of the course.

In the summer of 1963, I was transferred to the Army Historical Section at National Defence Headquarters in Ottawa. My Oxford essay had alerted me to significant political-military conflict between the British and their Canadian allies, much of it circling around the Borden government’s Minister of Militia, Sir Sam Hughes, and both British and Canadian generals in command of the Canadian Expeditionary Force in France and England. The conflict led to the creation of a Ministry of the Overseas Military Forces of Canada (OMFC), based in London, to control both Canadian troops in Britain and, ideally, to exercise a cautious Canadian influence on the deployment of Canadian troops serving in Europe.
under British command. Writing a report on the topic built on my research into the political-military issues I had explored at Oxford. After Christmas, I was invited to write a report on the post-Confederation history of the Canadian militia as preparation for a Centennial volume by a senior colleague, Major Donald J. Goodspeed. This, in turn, built on my RMC thesis and annual Militia Department reports and resulted in a thumping 500-page report.

By 1964 I was close to completing five years of service. I had accepted a two-year extension as the price of taking up the Rhodes Scholarship. I might well have stayed in the army, but Oxford had confirmed my sympathies for the Labour side of politics. I had even travelled up to London to vote for a future McGill colleague, Professor Charles Taylor, as a delegate from Britain to the founding convention of the New Democratic Party, successor to the CCF.

During my years at Camp Borden, I had played a discreet role in getting David Lewis elected in York South, and his son Stephen had been persuaded that I could play a role in the Ontario party. His urging gained influence when he frequently rang me up in my Eastview apartment, long after midnight. In September 1964, I took off my uniform for what I believed would be the last time, moved to a basement apartment in Toronto, and reported for duty, but not at the party’s offices near Eglinton Avenue and Yonge Street. Instead, I was directed to the Danforth Avenue committee rooms of the NDP’s Riverdale constituency campaign for a September 10 provincial by-election. The NDP candidate was Jim Renwick, one of the few survivors of the British Columbia Regiment’s disastrous encounter with Kurt Meyer’s 12th SS Division in Normandy in 1944. Election day saw an impressive Renwick victory and proof that intensely coordinated canvassing, an imaginative sign campaign, and a hard-working candidate and his wife, Margaret, added up to Sir Arthur Currie’s one-word formula for victory: “thorough.”

My primary duty for the Ontario New Democrats was to manage a successful membership and finance campaign across the province, and I combined that with using Riverdale tactics to win a federal by-election for Max Saltsman in Waterloo South. The two victories made it easier to find new members and contributors across the province and, most often, in areas where the NDP could turn to a record of past CCF successes.

In retrospect, my NDP years in Toronto were among the busiest and happiest of my life. Why would I ever leave? One answer was that I could sense approaching burn-out. I knew that I could not do as good a job for the rest of my life. My army buddy, Jack Granatstein, had earned a PhD from Duke University and found work at Toronto’s brand new York University. An expanding NDP attracted fresh talent. My NDP salary, $10,000 a year, was based on the pay of an assistant professor at the University of Toronto. Perhaps that was where I should move my career, leaving my salary for any of the host of outstanding people. A Rhodes Scholarship can be held for three years; I had spent two years at Oxford and had one year left. I applied to Rhodes House and to the London School of Economics. Both accepted me. In September, I moved to London, found a room in West Kensington, and sought to resume a student life.
No doubt it was my fault, but the LSE was a bit of a disappointment. Political sociology seemed to be taught by clever Americans dodging the war in Vietnam. The heavy classics in the field had to be read and then, in the ensuing lecture, thoroughly demolished. I found a course on African armies and political power offered by the LSE’s sole surviving faculty Leftist, Ralph Miliband. He was fascinating, and the topic was, for me, completely original but also somewhat linked to the political-military struggles in a Confederated Canada’s early years. We met and talked. Why was anyone at my age still seeking a Master’s degree?

The question had occurred to me. Oxford offers an MA as a standard gift if a student manages to survive five post-BA years without serving a prison sentence. The nominal price was easily offset by a free lunch at Keble, my old Oxford college. My Oxford MA was my first formal academic convocation, and the net cost was a return fare from London’s Paddington Station. If I could add MA to my two BAs, did I really need an MSc in political sociology? Miliband knew the answer. Could he help me switch to a PhD programme? He certainly could, and he did. The LSE agreed.

Rhodes House did not. I was summoned to Oxford and summarily stripped of what remained of my scholarship. Briefly devastated, I managed to recall that I had saved most of both my army pay and my NDP wages. If I kept busy, I had more than enough savings to survive an LSE PhD programme, and I could even afford to marry Janet Smith, an ex-archivist and NDP organizer to whom I was engaged, unless she refused. She didn’t. The LSE’s PhD programme, like most of its British counterparts, did not involve an elaborate and time-consuming series of courses and exams. Essentially, I had two years to write a thesis acceptable to my supervisor, Dr. Kenneth Bourne, an expert on nineteenth-century American political-military relations. In a country where Canada stands well behind Australia in public profile, I could still benefit from Colonial Office archives to find out what the British thought about their generals and political-military relations in the senior Dominion. That topic, with a few minor variations, proved acceptable to the London School, and I set to work, moving back to Ottawa for a summer, partly to use the Public Archives and, after I married Jan, to spend our honeymoon at the Nova Scotia Archives, reading Dr. F. W. Borden’s papers and an MA thesis by a future chair and dean at McGill, Carman Miller.

I also benefited from a visit to Toronto to meet Frances Halpenny, then editorial director of the University of Toronto Press. I had planned a book, I claimed, that would fill the gap between Charles Stacey’s *Canada and the British Army* and the new series on Canada between the world wars launched by James Eayrs, both published by UTP. Ms. Halpenny was as warmly responsive as any publisher could possibly be with an unknown author. She made absolutely no promise to publish and warned me that any introductory chapter on theory would probably disappear from my ultimate book. In return for advice, I agreed to give UTP first refusal. I returned to London with Jan, who promptly found herself an editorial job with Haymarket Press. We settled into my single room on Gloucester Walk. My outline and early chapters persuaded Professor Bourne to suggest that I might do better with a topical rather than a chronological approach. I spent the next few
weeks re-typing my chapters and sent them off in their new structure. Professor Bourne wasted no time responding: perhaps my chronological approach had been more appropriate. History really is “one damned thing after another,” or perhaps one more damned general.

The defence took place at the LSE on an uncharacteristically steamy day in London’s mid-summer. As I recall, only Ken Bourne, a former All Souls professor from Oxford, and one other jury member appeared for the oral. I had wangled myself a leave-replacement job at the University of Ottawa for the fall on the promise that I would be a PhD by then. Would testing by such a small fraction of my board count? Professor Bourne reassured me, and I settled down to an unexpectedly agreeable morning. I returned to Canada with my books, notes, baggage, and an English Morris Minor on a Dutch freighter that landed me in Montreal. My possessions barely fitted in the car, and I headed for Ottawa. My thesis, carefully boxed, was mailed to Frances Halpenny and appeared, barely a year later, with illustrations and a well-designed cover and, as warned, lacking its theory chapter, under the title of Ministers and Generals: Politics and the Canadian Militia (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970). What more could I ask?

My Ottawa year turned out to be highly productive. The History Department was friendly and supportive. The university had provided a base for a new journal, Histoire sociale / Social History, and I invested in a new theme for my first post-doctoral publication (“French Canada and the Canadian Militia, 1868-1914,” Histoire sociale / Social History, vol. 3, June 1969, pp. 32-50). I also contributed an essay to Jean-Yves Gravel’s collected papers: “Le Canada français et la milice canadienne” in Le Canada français et la guerre (Montreal: Editions du Boreal-Express, 1974), pp. 23-46. Was it really so surprising that Quebec’s militia played so small a role in the First World War when leaders of the force in the rest of Canada had done little or nothing to respect Canada’s French-speaking minority? Despite my happy, productive, and congenial year in Ottawa, however, my career lay elsewhere. I had applied to the University of Toronto for an advertised history vacancy on its downtown campus. I was not their first choice. Should I return to a second competition for a vacancy on U of T’s new Mississauga campus, Erindale College? Part of the ordeal was sitting in an office downtown with the door open so that the elders of the department could have a look at me, without the risk of conversation. Whether it was “they” or the Erindale dean, somebody wanted me, and, in due course, Jan and I moved to Mississauga’s second condominium, a town house in a compound we could just afford.

My Histoire sociale article had led me past a lot of archival material that seemed to have been neglected or ignored. In 1898, Britain had drifted close to war with France in a crisis over an apparent French invasion of the Sudan. Sir Wilfrid Laurier had astonished his governor general, Lord Minto, by promising Canadian militia to occupy St-Pierre and Miquelon once the colonies had been captured by Britain (“Sir Wilfrid Laurier and the Use of Canadian Troops for Overseas Service,” Queen’s Quarterly, vol. 77, no. 1, Spring 1970, pp. 1-7). The promise proved unnecessary when the crisis passed, but the British Colonial
Office would not be hesitant to extract an official Canadian contingent when war broke out in South Africa in 1899, and even less so after Robert Borden offered 30,000 Canadians in 1914.

Mac Hitsman, a former senior colleague at the Army’s Directorate of History, invited me to look at another international gesture from pre-1914 Canada: sending a Canadian staff officer to report on the Russo-Japanese War in Manchuria in 1905. Recognizing that my colleagues seemed more impressed by articles in American academic journals, I chose Military Affairs, an American military history journal, for a brief report on Captain H. C. Thacker’s experiences (with J. M. Hitsman, “Canada’s first Military Attache,” Military Affairs, vol. 34, no. 3, October 1970, pp. 82-84).

In my work on ministers and generals, I had been impressed by Adolphe Caron, normally dismissed by Quebec historians as just another of John A. Macdonald’s odious patronneux. No doubt he helped taxpayers protect his County of Quebec constituency, but he also extracted Militia funds to launch a network of military schools in 1883 to serve the artillery, the infantry, and the cavalry. He also managed Militia Headquarters during the Métis Rebellion of 1885, no small feat given the logistical problems of maintaining 6,000 soldiers in a post-winter prairie desert, not to mention the regular throb of grumbling and complaint that militia colonels in the field felt entitled to address to their minister.

Two of the worst complainers were the MPs commanding French-Canadian battalions in the North-West, Lt. Colonel Amyot of the 9th Voltigeurs and Colonel Ouimet of the 65th Carabiniers de Montreal. I was fortunate to discover an unpublished parliamentary return of messages exchanged between Caron and his general officer commanding, Fred Middleton, not to mention Joseph Wrigley of the Hudson’s Bay Company and a rich collection of grumbling colonels I proposed to the Champlain Society that the Caron files deserved to appear in their documentary collection of primary materials on Canadian history and learned that a colleague, Reg Roy at the University of Victoria, had similar plans to publish an edited version of the files and had a graduate student hard at work on footnotes. We agreed to work as partners. Having by then published a book on the 1885 campaign (The Last War Drum: The North West Campaign of 1885 (Toronto and Ottawa: A. M. Hakkert and Canadian War Museum, 1972), I agreed to write a summary of the events as my share of the volume, emphasizing where the Caron telegrams helped us understand the issues Caron, his colleagues, and his generals had faced. The Champlain Society published it as the 47th in its series of historical documents (with R.H. Roy, Telegrams of the North-West Campaign of 1885 [Toronto: Champlain Society, vol. 47, 1972]).

This project was a long way from the Great War, but it allowed me to understand the alienation of military subordinates operating in a language they understood only imperfectly, among colleagues who had little or no sympathy for their plight. I had attempted to underline these issues in a couple of articles as I worked my way through Caron’s telegrams. One arose from an invitation by my friend, Jack Granatstein, to a conference called “Canada and War.” My paper was published as “French Canada and War, 1868-1917” in J. L. Granatstein and R. D. Cuff,

In 1974, I dutifully published a biography of my great-grandfather who had risen in rank from rifleman in the 2nd Queen’s Own Rifles to become the first Canadian-born general, slightly ahead of Sir Arthur Currie. Otter had shared Canada’s longest era of peace, although he had also participated in every significant Canadian battle during his career, from Ridgeway in 1866 to Cut Knife Hill in 1885 to Paardeberg in South Africa in 1899, where he had commanded the Royal Canadian Regiment. His scrapbooks filled so many of our book shelves that my wife pleaded with me for the space. By 1972, my teaching and publications were considered to have earned me tenure at the University of Toronto, a promotion to associate professor and a welcome increase in income. Having published whatever I had learned about the pre-war Canadian militia, I turned to the Great War. My old friend Barbara Wilson, military archivist at the National Archives of Canada, encouraged me to find a file on executions by firing squad in the Canadian Expeditionary Force. Allegedly confined to the Directorate of History, the file had been transferred to the Archives and then handed back to the Department of National Defence. I managed to track it down and was given access without further formality. I discovered that the document had largely been created to satisfy French-speaking members of parliament who had planned to complain about the disproportionate number of French Canadians who had faced execution. They had abandoned their cause, apparently when they discovered that Brigadier-General Thomas Tremblay had approved death sentences while he commanded the 22nd Battalion, Quebec’s famous “Vandoos.” I published my article in the *Queen’s Quarterly*, provoking a short-lived interest and allegations that I had gained improper access to a sensitive set of documents.

Politics remained the dominant perspective of my research on Canada and the Great War, as I stubbornly insisted on calling it. In 1917, Canadians had their first chance to vote for or against a governing coalition of pro-conscription Conservatives and Liberals. Soldiers overseas, with a deep personal stake in the issue, had been given the vote in 1915, over Liberal objections that, while their patriotism should be respected, most men in the ranks lacked the property qualification still demanded of Canadian voters. The Conservative majority easily overcame the objection, and it seemed certain that, in 1917, soldiers would return the favour by voting for the pro-conscription Unionists. But how would they be informed about the candidates in their Canadian constituencies? An even bigger problem was that many of the soldier-voters in the CEF had never had a Canadian residence. They had enlisted in England and had no residential identity. As a result, they could choose where in Canada they wished to vote, and both parties would doubtless tell them where their votes were most needed.

The Unionists, as government, certainly seemed to have a huge advantage if soldiers massively favoured compelling fellow citizens to join the army. Thanks to Hughes, many senior officers were active Tories and veteran campaigners. The
overseas vote undoubtedly helped Sir Robert Borden’s government win a generous majority, but political commentators never seemed to have noticed that Quebec’s agent-general in Paris intervened to disallow soldier votes in his province, citing statute law. (See “Polling the Soldier Vote: The Overseas Campaign in the 1917 General Election,” Journal of Canadian Studies, vol. 12, no. 2, 1975, pp. 27-37.)

While George Stanley considered Canadians “unmilitary,” the years before the First World War were, perhaps, exceptional. Inspired by meagre federal funding from a provision in the Militia Act, Quebec’s Catholic colleges and high schools had sponsored cadet training as a cheaper alternative to building facilities for athletic competition. The idea spread slowly until, in the 1880s, Sam Hughes’s elder brother, James Lachlan Hughes, director of education for Toronto, persuaded trustees to let him establish cadet corps in the city’s high schools and, as an early feminist, extend them to students of both sexes. While cadet training had critics and holdouts, the bulk of Toronto’s citizens seemed to approve, and Hughes soon reassured critics that none of his school cadets had ever been summoned before a magistrate.

In 1909, Laurier’s Minister of Militia was Frederick Borden, a Nova Scotia doctor whose only son, a Harvard medical student, had been killed in the South African War. Borden enlisted Lord Strathcona’s wealth to promote cadet training for teachers and students in the schools of every Canadian province but Saskatchewan. The training was generally limited to sufficient drill for an annual review and inspection, as well as small-bore rifle shooting where suitable ranges could be found. Most Canadian-born volunteers for the CEF could look back on student days for their memories of how to “form fours” and how to salute teachers and prosperous citizens. Toronto’s James Hughes insisted that “ladies” be saluted too, with a slower, more graceful sweep of the hand. By 1912, a British approach to training university students to qualify as officers had spread to Canada. It was first adopted at McGill University where a few British officers were already busy persuading engineering students to qualify for commissions in the Royal Engineers (“The Cadet Movement in the Moment of Canadian Militarism, 1909-1914,” Journal of Canadian Studies, vol. 13, no. 3, Summer 1978, pp. 56-68).

Several generations of directors of the Army Historical Section had kept a set of documents carefully locked away in their desks. Gossip knew it as “The Clothing File,” and when someone in the steady rotation of directors forgot its significance and turned it over to the Public Archives of Canada, I was obviously eager to see what had been kept from us for so long. The answer was soon obvious to my senior colleague at Toronto and biographer of Sir Robert Borden, Craig Brown.

The file recorded transactions related to securing suitable Scottish regalia for Sir Arthur Currie’s last peacetime command: the 50th (Gordon) Highlanders of Victoria, BC. The regiment’s kilts had been ordered from the firm of Moore Taggart in Glasgow, a company sufficiently respected that its advertisements helped pay for the periodic Militia List. The kilts had been received while Currie was away in Nanaimo, supervising militia called out during a long and violent strike of coal miners. He had returned to Victoria to find that both property values
and his real estate business had collapsed, leaving him and his family bankrupt. As it happened, a government cheque for $10,000 arrived to cover the taxpayer’s share of the Moore-Taggart bill. The temptation to preserve his position and his financial reputation proved irresistible. Currie cashed the cheque and paid off his most exigent creditors. Within weeks, the Great War had begun and his second-in-command, Major Garnet Hughes, had persuaded his father, the minister, to appoint Colonel Currie to command one of the First Contingent’s three brigades.

Before he left, Currie sought help from prominent citizens in Victoria. In the depressed times, they had no help to give. Instead, they wished him well and he was soon on his way to the mobilization camp at Valcartier. The issue did not die. Moore Taggart had a sound Glaswegian stubbornness about money owed. The government was soon roughly aware of what had happened and did nothing. Neither did Currie. In June of 1917, everything came together. General Currie was knighted for his contribution to victory at Vimy Ridge and replaced Sir Julian Byng as the first Canadian-born commander of the Canadian Corps. The issue of $10,000 illegally converted to his own bank account came next.

Contrary to military law, Currie turned to a couple of his most affluent subordinates, extracted $5,000 from each, and sent it off to the latest colonel of the 50th Regiment. Meanwhile, Sir George Perley and Sir Edward Kemp, among the wealthiest members of the Borden cabinet and successive ministers of the Overseas Military Forces (OMFC), did not have to be told the appalling embarrassment Canada would face if its newest war hero were court martialed for theft and fraudulent conversion. Each provided $5,000 to pay off Currie’s debt. Meanwhile, unbeknown to him, Currie’s successor in Vancouver had taken Currie’s money and decamped to the United States. Thanks to the two ministers, Moore Taggart was finally paid and closed its books on the matter.

Currie’s reputation went on to sparkle with military achievements though, somehow, those who knew the details of his scandal held reservations. Meanwhile, Sam Hughes used his knowledge to blackmail Currie into appointing his son Garnet to command the 1st Division. At 2nd Ypres, Garnet had ignored the plight of his subordinate units, never stirring from his dugout while they were destroyed. Hughes’s son was simply not fit to command Canada’s best division. Hughes and Currie met in London and parted as vituperative enemies. This was a project I gratefully shared with Professor Brown, whose encyclopaedic knowledge of the period and its personalities added much to my understanding of both events and the governing values of the time (with R. C. Brown, “The Embarrassing Apotheosis of a ‘Great Canadian’: Sir Arthur Currie’s Personal Crisis in 1917,” Canadian Historical Review, vol. 60, no.1, March 1979, pp. 41-63).

In the wake of the seventieth anniversary of the war, what was its impact on Canada’s international status? Had the Canadian Corps won the status and significance of a national army? The hard answer was probably no. Its leaders, like Currie, had earned a measure of respect from their British superiors. Conscription allowed the Corps to fight and win costly battles in the last Hundred Days in France and Belgium, but, for the most part, Canadians were still as British as they had been in 1914. French Canada’s contribution was valiant but largely ignored

The Armistice caught an exhausted, war-battered Europe on the edge of winter. Shipping had suffered huge losses from Germany’s submarine war on the Atlantic. Demobilization could not come soon enough for almost any Allied soldier, but an Armistice was not peace but a cease-fire pending negotiations for a mutually acceptable settlement. That would not come for months. In England and France, frustrated Canadians blamed the British, their new American allies who demanded and could pay for early repatriation, and their own commanders for inevitable delays and uncertainties. Demobilization was marked by riots and disorder, some bloody and merciless. It seemed to me to deserve a fresh account, drawn from archival records that few had yet bothered to read. The result was “Kicking and Complaining: Demobilization Riots in the Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1918-1919,” Canadian Historical Review, vol. 61, no. 3, September 1980, pp. 334-360.

For many Canadian soldiers, the war did not end with a few days on the Atlantic, a landing in Halifax, a railway journey to a home town, and reacquaintance with family, friends, and neighbours. Canada was as close to bankruptcy in 1919 as it had ever been, and the 1917 election promise of “full re-establishment” had been made without adequate thought of the financial consequences. Policy and experience of pensioners and the war disabled became the subject of several articles and a book in the 1990s, one, at least, inspired by the discovery that the Royal Canadian Legion was so careless of its ancestry that bound volumes of The Veteran, organ of its the Legion’s predecessor The Great War Veterans’ Association, were used as door-stops (“Noblest and Best: Retraining Canada’s War Disabled, 1915-1923,” Journal of Canadian Studies, vol. 16, no. 3-4, Autumn-Winter 1981-1982, pp. 75-85, republished by Raymond B. Blake and Jeff Keshen, eds., Social Welfare Policy in Canada: Selected Readings [Toronto: Copp Clark, 1995], pp. 66-81; as will as Desmond Morton and Glenn Wright, “The Bonus Campaign, 1919-1921: Veterans and the Campaign for Re-Establishment,” Canadian Historical Review, vol. 64, no. 2, June 1983, pp. 147-167).

As a would-be pan-Canadian historian, I always found it appropriate to remind my fellow citizens that French Canada was a powerful participant in their country’s war efforts, if not always with enthusiasm. Barbara Wilson continued to push me toward records that otherwise I would easily have bypassed. One was the record of François-Xavier Maheux, a soldier who had reached South Africa in 1902, after the fighting was over. He had re-enlisted in an Eastern Ontario unit, the 21st Battalion, in 1915. Born and raised in the vicinity of Quebec City, he had earned his living as a logger in the Ottawa Valley, married an Aboriginal woman, and started a family by the time war came in 1914. Since his army pay and allowances surpassed what he could earn as a logger, he abandoned his employer and hurried to Ottawa to enlist. His wartime career saw him reach the
rank of sergeant, get infected with gonorrhoea on leave in London after his searing experience at Passchendaele, and serve in North Russia with the Murmansk expedition, since his venereal disease forced him to stay a full year on the far side of the Atlantic from his family. Maheux’s letters to his “poor wife” were an immense revelation to my students in the 1990s, utterly remote as they were from war and soldiering. Maheux expressed his passions and frustrations without benefit of grammar or syntax. He did not share his infidelity with his wife, but he did reveal some shocking realities of behaviour in battle. After the war he found work as a letter-carrier in Ottawa. In the Second World War, he joined again to guard prisoners-of-war until Canada Post required his services. I was honoured to be accepted in the first issue of Wilfrid Laurier University’s *Canadian Military History*: “A Canadian Soldier in the First World War: Sergeant François-Xavier Maheux,” *CMH*, vol. 1, nos. 1-2, Autumn 1992, pp. 79-89.

Academics in our age have been driven by the slightly misleading slogan of “publish or perish.” The error, if any, comes from the suspicion that one can actually do both. My groundwork with Frances Halpenny at the University of Toronto Press had allowed my doctoral dissertation to appear as a book within a year of its acceptance by the University of London as worthy of their doctorate. My account of the 1885 Campaign in the Northwest was published by a Canadian branch of the Dutch firm, A. M. Hakkert, managed by a U of T classicist Alan Samuel and his wife. They gave it the title *The Last War Drum: The North-West Campaign of 1885*. The accompanying book, shared with Professor Reg Roy and published under the supervision and format of Toronto’s Champlain Society, was labelled simply *Telegrams of the North-West Campaign of 1885*. Both titles respected the nomenclature established for the army’s Historical Section by Prime Minister Louis St-Laurent in a postwar memorandum. Was 1885 a rebellion or merely a violent assertion of Riel’s demand for negotiations?

Professionally, academic researchers are probably primarily judged by the originality of their articles and who chooses to publish them. Students and a wider public are more likely to notice a scholar’s published books since they are visible and represent some risk to the publisher that they will actually be bought. Remaindered books are an obvious net commercial loss. A remunerative benefit during my career was acceptance that an author should gain some financial benefit from readership at public libraries. A more direct benefit for me was being encouraged to write for the school market. Ken Pearson, senior editor at Grolier Canada, invited me to produce a series of books for Ontario students on topics in the Grade 7 and 8 history programme. *Rebellions in Canada* (Toronto: Grolier, 1979) was the first of several such books, followed by *Labour in Canada* (1982), *Years of Conflict, 1911-1921* (1983), *New France and War* (1983), and *Sieges of Quebec* (1984). Publishing texts for schools was a reminder that the minds of school children have many protectors. An old friend and contemporary at Keble College, David Pratt, had become a professor of education at Queen’s before he launched a campaign against old-fashioned and misguided words in Ontario’s officially recognized textbooks. Among the banned words was any reference to Louis Riel’s supporters as “Half Breeds.” I had understood that the term was
considered offensive and racist, but what was I to call the organization Sir John A. Macdonald established to inquire into the grievances Riel had promised to rectify, the Half Breeds’ Claims Commission? “Métis” applied to French-speaking people of mixed Aboriginal and European parents and, in the racist atmosphere of the time, it was not a term of flattery. However, circumlocutions were demanded and given.

Emboldened by Wilfrid Laurier University’s Terry Copp and his promise to help, plus a pile of photos acquired from the decease of the venerable Labour Gazette, I was persuaded to share my version of Canada’s experience with trade unions in D. Morton and J. T. Copp, Working People: An Illustrated History of Canadian Labour (Ottawa: Deneau & Greenberg, 1980). It marched through several editions, but I soon lost Copp. He felt too Conservative to share my undisguised welcome for Labour’s backing of the NDP. I suspect that we were ideologically more at peace when I resumed teaching Canada’s military history and needed a one-volume textbook that reflected Canada’s experience in unifying its three fighting services. Canada and War: A Political and Military History appeared in 1979, through Butterworth, better known as a legal textbook publisher. Peace with Terry Copp was probably signified when a paper I had presented at RMC in a conference on divided loyalties in wartime was included in the conference proceedings: “The Limits of Loyalty: French-Canadian Officers in the First World War” in Edgar Denton III, ed., The Limits of Loyalty (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1980), pp. 81-97.

Textbook publishing was remunerative but a diversion from my primary academic interests. I had studied Canada’s control of its armed forces in the First World War, at least in England, and research at the LSE had given me a broader view of the British side of the issue. In 1982, I finally produced the book I felt the topic had long deserved: A Peculiar Kind of Politics: Canada’s Overseas Ministry in the First World War (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981). As a college principal, book research became a rather low priority. I had promised myself a “social” history look at Canadians in the Great War, and I had time to compile notes from research I had completed years before. The result was published by Random House in 1993 as When Your Number’s Up: The Canadian Soldier in the First World War (Toronto: Random House, 1993). When I moved to Montreal, I persuaded Andrée Laprise to publish a translation by her husband Pierre Desrosiers, which was entitled Billet pour le front. Histoire sociale des volontaires canadiens (1914-1919) (Montreal: Editions Athena, 2005).

One night in the following year, I was called by someone I knew only by reputation, Mel Hurtig. He was coming to Toronto and needed to explore a proposition with me. We met at a bar in the Park Plaza. The proposition was brief, clear, and bit stunning: I must write and he would publish a history of Canada one could buy at the Edmonton airport and finish by the time the plane reached Toronto and have learned all and anything one needed to know to understand the country. It was an immensely flattering invitation, and I was determined to accept. After all, I had been teaching a survey of Canada’s history every year since I had come to Erindale College. My lectures would be my notes. My childhood
had carried me across Canada and back again. I had studied its history in five very different provinces. The result, others will judge for themselves, but it has survived six editions in English and one each in Korean and Arabic: *A Short History of Canada* (Edmonton: Hurtig Limited, 1983; 1987); (McClelland & Stewart, 1994; 1997; 1999; 2001). If the *Short History* took my mind off Canada’s wars, Jack Granatstein brought me back with a fiftieth anniversary, profusely illustrated recollection of a campaign that my father’s letter had made acutely memorable. It also introduced me to a new publisher and some wonderful friends. Malcolm Lester and Louise Dennys were writers themselves and had turned to publishing to produce beautiful books. Jack’s leadership and my memories of battlefield tours led to *Bloody Victory: Canadians and the D-Day Campaign, 1944* (Toronto: Lester and Orpen, Dennys, 1984; revised ed., Lester Publishing, 1985). Mel Hurtig set the terms for my next book: a military history of Canada. The Butterworth book was the obvious base, but it had been confined to the Canadian military history textbook market, and my academic colleagues and their students had been diffident buyers. Hurtig promised much more. The result was *A Military History of Canada* (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1985). Sadly, Hurtig soon vanished from the publishing scene. My book survived, sustained by being a textbook for Canadian Forces promotion exams and by winning a French translation by Quebec publisher Denis Vaugeois. Translation and publication by Quebec’s former minister of culture was as good an advertisement as I could imagine. *A Military History* would pass through subsequent English editions with Hurtig in 1992 and Doug Gibson of McClelland & Stewart in 1999. A new French version was re-translated and published in 2007 as *Histoire militaire du Canada* by Andrée Laprise of Éditions Athena in Montreal.

In 1976, I had accepted the position of Vice-Principal Academic at Erindale College, having served for several years as Associate Dean for the Humanities. When Paul Fox retired in 1986, I succeeded him as Principal of the college, having inherited an institution shaped by a very wise, generous, and clear-eyed leader. At a time of crisis for the college and the university, Fox had the good sense to realize that the sole salvation for a remote and undervalued branch plant of the university was the community it directly served. It was a proposition I cheerfully adopted, though it demanded faithful attendance at the dinners and events where the community gathered. We were fortunate in the direct sympathy and support of Mississauga’s legendary mayor, Mrs. Hazel McCallion.

A further preoccupation was the physical decline of my beloved wife. Jan had been a juvenile diabetic at a time when health care was an enormous burden for her working-class parents. She had been determined to live a normal life and even insisted on working once our children were in school. Suddenly her life was severely limited—she suffered amputations of both her legs as a result of diabetes-related infections, and increasingly severe insulin reactions. We had rebuilt our home to meet her needs. As Principal, I had a house and an obligation to use it to entertain. My Vice-Principal, Roger Beck, understood my plight. He and his wife Janet took on the house and the inevitable social responsibilities that went with
It was a burden I cheerfully relinquished. Roger and Janet carried it with flair, elegance, and considerable ingenuity.

With so much help, and the encouragement of my wife and colleagues, I could combine academic administration with specific deadlines. I had studied the Canadian battles of the Great War, with much grateful dependence on Gerry Nicholson’s official history. The Armistice in November 1918 and the peace treaty signed at Versailles in 1919 did not end the war for most soldiers and their families. Even now, most Canadians barely recognize the psychiatric casualties of any war, and their governments are hardly more conscientious. In the Great War, even medical professionals suspected that shell-shock sufferers had invented their symptoms out of fear and cowardice. Veterans whose symptoms included spousal abuse and family violence risked forfeiting their pensions for other disabilities, losing their sole means of support. Working with Glenn Wright, then the archivist for the federal records of the Department of Veterans’ Affairs, then called the Department of Soldiers’ Civil Re-establishment (DSCR), reminded me that the history of Canadians in the war would last until the last veteran died a few years ago, and perhaps even longer.


Another topic that had fascinated me since I had written about internment in Canada was the experience of Canadian prisoners of war, of whom large numbers had been captured at Ypres in 1915 and again at Mont Sorrel, a little more than a year later. Once again, Malcolm Lester proved most accommodating, publishing Silent Battle: Canadian Prisoners of War in Germany, 1914-1919 (Toronto: Lester Publishing, 1992). Our prisoners included civilian internees like the future conductor of the Toronto Symphony, Sir Ernest Macmillan, and others who had been studying in Germany when the war broke out as well as escapees who found refuge in the Netherlands.

Did military history include social history or, as often alleged, were social aspects of soldiering merely quietly ignored or suppressed? The charge led me to consider a book on the experiences of half a million Canadians who had found themselves engaged, even on the sidelines, in the most demanding war in Canada’s history. Its title borrowed a phrase expressing the fatalism that was a soldier’s chief protection against despair or mental collapse. When Your Number’s Up was intended as my last original work on the Great War and attempted to lead any reader, but particularly my university students, through unimaginable experiences as a soldier and a front-line campaigner.

By now, I was changing jobs. Janet died on September 1, 1990, my children were approaching university age, and Paul Fox had been adamant about the seven-year
term for Principal. He had quit on the dot, having prepared me for the succession: “If you haven’t done what you planned after seven years, there is probably a very good reason. Stop trying.” As ever, I believed that he was right. A wonderful new challenge suddenly beckoned. Quebec was heading for a second referendum on sovereignty. The Bronfman family had offered McGill University the funding for a 50-per-cent share of the cost of an Institute for the Study of Canada. Others were invited to apply for the directorship, but I had been the eventual choice. In 1994, I could leave Erindale with a building that had been badly needed and included an art gallery, an auditorium, and office and classroom space worthy of our social sciences, all thanks to the generosity of people and organizations in Mississauga, led by Ignat Kaneff, one of Mississauga’s greatest citizens and builders. Every day’s drive through the city reminded me now of the life I had shared with Jan and how she had gone. Montreal would be a different challenge and an opportunity to show Canadians what our partnership of two founding nations had done for both of them.

Meanwhile, I remembered that I had promised to write a social history of soldiers’ wives in the First World War. In the rush of changing jobs, I had forgotten why the records for such a study barely existed. I had spent years collecting soldiers’ letters, but, despite enquiries, almost nothing survived of the wives’ side of the correspondence. Soldiers were forbidden to carry such letters into the front lines because the enemy might capture them and judge home front morale on a wife’s complaints. And where could a soldier store such letters? Some put them in the top of their peaked caps. When rain fell, these precious memories turned to pulp.

Moving to Montreal was an unexpected bonus. Suddenly I had easy access to the McCord Museum archives, including the records of the Canadian Patriotic Fund, a social agency established by French Canadians to support the families of French Army conscripts, summoned home to resist the German invasion of their country. Canadian volunteers also left families to be supported by part of their pay, a meagre separation allowance. The Fonds patriotique struck Herbert Ames, an American-born boot and shoe manufacturer and Conservative MP for a Montreal constituency, as a sensible wartime charity to avoid the unpredictable cost of raising military pay scales. Helen Reid, one of McGill University’s first women students, was active in the Fund from the beginning. She argued strongly that beneficiaries would have to be closely monitored if donors were to maintain their generosity. Her insistence on regular home visits by ladies from Westmount and other wealthier neighbourhoods became a nation-wide feature of the Patriotic Fund and helped make it too unpopular to be revived in the Second World War except in a much diminished form.

My dream of a comprehensive social history of soldiers’ families during the Great War evolved into a study of a social agency. The University of British Columbia Press had become the publishing arm of the Canadian War Museum, and it accepted my manuscript as it evolved during my new role at McGill: Fight or Pay: Soldiers’ Families in the Great War (University of British Columbia Press, 2004). I also published some related articles in a Festschrift for my friend and

Many others have made decisive contributions to the history and understanding of war. I have never consciously strained to be original, except in some of the topics I was given a special opportunity to explore. Throughout my career, I have been encouraged, supported, and often guided by academic and archivist colleagues and by my students. Historical research can sometimes seem a lonely business, but, in the study of war, one has the hidden company of those who were risking and often giving their lives for their ideals and, more often, for the purposes of leaders who knew them not. My research and publishing have often strayed away from the Great War of 1914-1919. I have also been a labour historian, as well as a commentator on Canadian and Ontario politics and on the unpredictable and sometimes menacing role of nationalism in Canada’s public life. History, I have assured my long-suffering students, is another word for experience. If we cannot learn from experience, and the evidence that we can often seems almost transparently thin, we may well repeat our errors with doubly cruel consequences.

By 1939, the tragedies of 1914-1919 seemed to have been supplanted by the Great Depression of the 1930s. Still, as my father learned from the recruits he interviewed in Edmonton, Canadians did not all enter the new war with the blind allegiance so many had displayed in 1914. Nor did Canada end the war a bankrupted and profoundly divided country. Instead, we remember the postwar years as a time of unprecedented affluence. The 1951 decennial census reported an unprecedented reality: only a minority of Canadians now lived in poverty thanks to a series of wartime policies ranging from Unemployment Insurance to Family Allowances. Our postwar world lived in shuddering terror of the weapons of mass destruction Canadian scientists and Canadian uranium had helped to devise. Still, humanity managed to avoid a Third World War in large measure because no one who visited Hiroshima, as I had, could believe that civilization could possibly survive such weapons of war. Human beings may be slow learners, but we are not wholly unteachable.