

Depuis août, les commémorations de la Grande Guerre ont débuté. En Grande-Bretagne et certains de ses anciens dominions, en France et en Allemagne, les activités officielles de commémoration se manifestent. Ceci, sans compter sur les différents documentaires proposés par les grands médias et la frénésie commémorative qui s'empare des différents médias sociaux. Je ne reviendrai pas en détail sur la place du Canada dans ce cycle de commémoration, mais il faut malheureusement constater l'inactivité du gouvernement canadien à ce sujet.<sup>1</sup> Heureusement, les nombreuses initiatives « privées », émanant des milieux universitaires et institutionnels, sans oublier les historiens amateurs, permettent de sauver la donne et de faire valoir, dans le contexte des commémorations de la Grande Guerre, une perspective canadienne.<sup>2</sup>

Malgré ce constat local, il faut souligner la qualité du travail de commémoration qui se fait ailleurs : en Australie<sup>3</sup>, en Nouvelle-Zélande<sup>4</sup>, en Afrique du Sud<sup>5</sup> et, naturellement, en Grande-Bretagne<sup>6</sup>, les activités de commémoration ont été préparées de longue date et proposent un programme commémoratif et éducatif exceptionnel. Leur volonté d'aborder la Grande Guerre de manière élargie est clairement affichée. L'expérience de ce terrible conflit dépasse alors la seule boue des tranchées, pour inclure dans la commémoration les militaires et les civils, les perspectives politiques, sociales, économiques et culturelles de l'expérience de guerre.

Dans ce contexte commémoratif, le travail mené en France se distingue et apparaît comme un modèle remarquable et unique. Il y a déjà dix ans, Antoine Prost et Jay Winter expliquaient que « [p]our l'essentiel, la guerre continue à être pensée dans le cadre national. Le premier adage qui régit l'historiographie est : « À chaque nation sa Grande Guerre » ». <sup>7</sup> Les échos de cette affirmation sont toujours justes pour les activités menées par la Grande-Bretagne et ses anciens dominions. Cependant, le modèle commémoratif officiel proposé en France échappe à cette perspective. C'est dans une volonté avouée de replacer les commémorations dans le caractère mondial du conflit que le gouvernement français a décidé, dès 2012, de fédérer les initiatives de commémoration dans une organisation portant le nom de « Mission centenaire ». <sup>8</sup> Outre la volonté d'appuyer les diverses initiatives de commémoration, cet organisme encadre scientifiquement les activités proposées au gouvernement. Le panel des historiens conseillant cette organisation est impressionnant. <sup>9</sup> Non seulement regroupe-t-il les plus grands spécialistes de l'histoire de la Grande Guerre, mais il représente les diverses tendances historiographiques du sujet. D'une certaine façon, cette pluralité historiographique reflète la volonté de la *Mission centenaire* d'aborder les commémorations dans une perspective scientifique et multinationale. Qui plus est, la *Mission centenaire* permet de mettre en contact les historiens de la Grande Guerre et les collectivités locales souhaitant organiser des activités commémoratives. À ce titre, certains objectifs fixés par l'organisme sont éloquentes :

« [c]oordonner et accompagner l'ensemble des initiatives publiques et privées mises en œuvre en France ou par la France à l'étranger dans le cadre du Centenaire, en

proposant notamment un « label Centenaire » et un programme officiel des principales manifestations organisées autour du Centenaire».

Également,

« [i]nformer le grand public sur les préparatifs du Centenaire et mettre en œuvre une politique de communication autour des principales manifestations organisées dans le cadre du Centenaire et assurer la diffusion des connaissances sur la Grande Guerre, notamment grâce à un portail de ressources numériques de référence. »<sup>10</sup>

Dès lors, la *Mission centenaire* n'adopte pas une perspective uniquement mémorielle, mais s'inscrit également dans une véritable démarche pédagogique. L'historien écossais Hew Strachan, qui est membre de la *Mission centenaire* et du comité consultatif des commémorations officielles du Royaume-Uni et d'Écosse, rappelle qu'il faut utiliser le centenaire de la Grande Guerre pour sortir des clichés existants sur ce conflit. Les commémorations doivent permettre au « grand public » et à la communauté historique de se rencontrer et participer conjointement à l'appropriation d'une nouvelle compréhension de ce terrible conflit et de ses conséquences.<sup>11</sup> Le centenaire de la Grande Guerre offre une un contexte de réceptivité unique pour les travaux des historiens travaillant sur cette période et la *Mission centenaire* propose un modèle exemplaire pour diffuser ces travaux à l'extérieur des réseaux académiques.

Conséquemment, le travail mené en France et dans les pays anglo-saxons nous force à porter un jugement sévère sur l'inertie du gouvernement canadien dans le processus de commémoration actuel. Heureusement, de nombreux musées, associations historiques et groupes médiatiques ont choisi d'investir l'espace laissé vacant par le gouvernement canadien. Souhaitons que ces initiatives permettent de renouveler l'histoire de la Grande Guerre au Canada.

**Martin Laberge**

Secrétaire de langue française

<sup>1</sup> Voir à ce sujet le texte que j'ai déjà publié dans le *Bulletin*. Société historique du Canada, *Bulletin*, vol. 41, no 1, 2014, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> <http://centenaire.org/fr/canada>.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.awm.gov.au/1914-1918/centenary-logo/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www100.govt.nz/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.moth.org.za/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/topical-events/first-world-war-centenary>

<sup>7</sup> Antoine Prost et Jay Winter, *Penser la Grande Guerre. Un essai d'historiographie*, Paris, Seuil, 2004, p. 265.

<sup>8</sup> <http://centenaire.org/fr/la-mission/la-mission-du-centenaire>

<sup>9</sup> <http://centenaire.org/fr/espace-scientifique/le-conseil-scientifique-de-la-mission-du-centenaire>

<sup>10</sup> <http://centenaire.org/fr/la-mission/la-mission-du-centenaire>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/sponsored/travel/great-war-flanders/10968919/sir-hew-strachan-interview.html>



# On Anniversaries & Independence

Historians love anniversaries, and so do politicians – especially the big ‘ennials.’ For us, these big round numbers provide a nice excuse to reflect on some of the important moments in history. For governments past and present, anniversaries have presented an opportunity to use history to chart a course for the future. 2014 alone marks several important anniversaries, including the 200th anniversary of the end of the War of 1812 and the 150th anniversaries of the Charlottetown and Quebec Conferences that led to Confederation. Even more significant, perhaps, owing to both its Canadian and international dimensions, is the centenary of the beginning of the Great War. In the coming years we will doubtless hear about how Canadian battles like Vimy Ridge (1917) and the Last Hundred Days (1918) helped shape the course of the war and encouraged statesmen to assert a more prominent role for Canada on the international stage.

As Matthew Hayday points out in this fall’s *Bulletin*, the politicization of commemoration has become a hot topic among historians. Encouraging Canadians to learn more about this country’s military history and its Great War experiences is a good thing. It’s the myth making that worries me. It has become commonplace, for instance, to refer to the conflict in terms of a Canadian “war of independence.” Prime Minister Stephen Harper did just that while observing the 100th anniversary of the British declaration of war. “Canada as a truly independent country,” he declared, “was forged in the fires of the First World War.”<sup>1</sup>

Equating the war with independence is problematic for a number of reasons. First, it is not entirely accurate. Canada did *not* become independent over the course of the war – the last I checked, there was no spontaneous declaration of independence from the lofty heights of Vimy Ridge, nor from the far side of the Canal du Nord. Indeed, the very idea of distancing Canada from Britain would have seemed treasonous to many of the men in uniform. Did Canada’s role in the war instil pride and create a greater sense of confidence in the country? Certainly. Was fighting in a war *alongside* Britain necessary for Canada’s eventual achievement of independence? I highly doubt it. If anything, the

close coordination of the empire’s forces convinced some that imperial federation was finally at hand.

It is tempting to conclude that Canadians’ collective pride at their role in the Great War was the most important reason for the country’s post-war assertion of independence. I’m not so sure. Consider, for a moment, the cases of Australia and New Zealand. The role of these British Dominions in the Great War was just as significant as the role played by Canada, and it remains a tremendous source of pride today. And yet, after the war, both Australia and New Zealand proved reluctant to assume formal independence in foreign affairs. By contrast, the Dominions of Canada, South Africa and Ireland, where wartime participation had been more controversial among influential cultural groups that lacked a strong sentimental attachment to Britain, led the call for change. For them, independence in foreign affairs meant avoiding imperial imbroglios, rather than participating in them. These countries spearheaded the negotiations with Britain that resulted in the terms of independence set out in the Balfour Declaration of 1926 (formalized in the Statute of Westminster, 1931).

Why do we sometimes find it necessary to frame the winning of independence in military terms? Is it because we assume that this is somehow more legitimate, or that it will make history more interesting for the general public? It seems to me that the ‘Great War = Canada’s War of Independence’ equation implies that war provides the necessary means for the formation of a cohesive and united nationality. Without being “forged in fire,” as the prime minister puts it, into one smooth, sharp-edged and seamless object, the nation’s component parts remain just that – detached, undefined ingots lacking purpose. The imagery that is conjured up, of swords instead of ploughshares, suggests a readiness for future violence in asserting the nation’s worth. Gaining independence through heroic violence is somehow deemed more

Photos: (left) Canadian troops at Vimy, 1917. Credit: W.I. Castle/Library and Archives Canada/PA-001086 (right) William Lyon Mackenzie King and Ernest Lapointe.

<sup>1</sup> *National Post*, 4 August 2014.

meaningful, more concrete, and more interesting than boring old negotiation and compromise.

Moreover, the equation also promotes a one-dimensional understanding of the war that *diminishes* its historical significance by failing to acknowledge that it meant different things to different people. As Steve Marti's article in this edition of the *Bulletin* suggests, there is an element of artifice to commemoration – in some ways it is unavoidable, even necessary, but sometimes it risks going too far. For many Francophone, Aboriginal and Ethno-Cultural Canadians, for the working class and for some Anglo-Canadians alive a century ago, commemorating the Great War as a war of emancipation would have been a very artificial imposition indeed.

The government made similar attempts to refashion the War of 1812 into an earlier war of independence that led directly to Confederation. As the prime minister put it, "The War [of 1812] helped establish our path toward becoming an independent and free country."<sup>2</sup> I somehow doubt that Canadian independence is what Isaac Brock and Tecumseh had in mind while fighting for the Empire and First Nations. The direct relationship between 1812 and independence becomes even more confused when one recalls that the independence movements of Upper and Lower Canada were quashed during the rebellions of 1837-1838, and that in 1849 disgruntled Tories called for American annexation and burned down the Canadian Parliament in their fury. And don't the Americans themselves like to call the War of 1812 their 'Second War of Independence'?

History is complicated and messy. Attempting to streamline it turns people off, hence the widespread skepticism that met the government's hyper-nationalistic commemoration of the War of 1812. The war *was* a seminal event in Canadian history, but it was not a war for independence – using that label robs it of its historical significance by turning it into cannon fodder for political caricature. With the unveiling this fall of the 1812 memorial on Parliament Hill and the 200th anniversary in December of the war's conclusion, it will be interesting to see if we hear more about Canada's first "war of independence."

Rather than having been "forged in fire," Canada's constitutional evolution was a gradual, decades long and (relatively) peaceful process. It was driven more by the political necessities of compromise and accommodation than by any desire to thump our chests on the international stage.

This brings me to another set of anniversaries this year – the sesquicentennials of the Charlottetown and Quebec Conferences of 1864. These conferences led more directly to the creation of a new "political nationality," as George-Étienne Cartier called it, than did any war. Confederation was itself the product of cross-cultural and political compromise – between Anglophones and

Francophones, Catholics and Protestants, Liberals and Conservatives, and between the colonies themselves. Confederation was not the moment of Canada's independence, but it was a necessary step toward the creation of a unified political entity with the means necessary to become a viable independent state in the twentieth century.

In a similar vein, Canada's achievement of *de facto* independence in 1926 was largely the result of cross-cultural compromise – an attempt by the interwar governments of Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King and Justice Minister Ernest Lapointe to strike a balance between Anglo-Canadians' sentimental ties with Britain and French Canadians' desire for Canada to chart its own course. "L'orientation de notre politique étrangère," Lapointe later explained, "est une phase du problème de l'unité nationale."<sup>3</sup> Observers agreed that the final step toward true independence would be for Canada to declare war or neutrality independently from Britain.<sup>4</sup> As time would tell, this final step would also be shaped more by the necessities of cross-cultural accommodation and the need to reflect both Anglo- and French-Canadian aspirations than by any apparent desire to prove the nation's worth on the battlefield.

*Canada did not have to fight a war to make the story of its constitutional evolution interesting. The very fact that Canadians found ways around having to fight a war of independence makes that history all the more compelling.*

Which brings me to another of this year's anniversaries – the 75th of the beginning of the Second World War. When Britain declared war against Germany on 3 September 1939, Australia and New Zealand entered simultaneously, taking for granted that when Britain was at war, they were also at war. Canada, South Africa and Ireland hesitated. Keenly aware of French-Canadian reservations about entering another world war, yet recognizing Anglo-Canadians' continued sentimental attachment to Britain, King and Lapointe insisted that Canada would remain neutral until the Canadian Parliament had made its own sovereign decision to enter the war, which it did a week later. This formal assertion of neutrality, however brief, was unprecedented in Canadian history. More than any battle, this political act – the result of negotiation and compromise – put Canadian independence into practice.

Canada did not have to fight a war to make the story of its constitutional evolution interesting. For me, the very fact that Canadians found ways *around* having to fight a war of independence makes that history all the more compelling.

**Robert Talbot**  
English-Language Secretary

<sup>2</sup> <http://1812.gc.ca/eng/1305743548294/1305743621243>

<sup>3</sup> *La Presse*, 1 April 1939.

<sup>4</sup> See Gustave Lanctot, *Le Canada d'Hier et Aujourd'hui* (Montréal, 1934), p.163.