

Version 1.0 | Last updated 08 January 2017

# Historiography 1918-Today (Canada)

By [Amy J. Shaw](#)

Canada's historiography of the First World War has tended to emphasize the war as a coming of age moment, with the exploits of soldiers engendering nationalism and greater independence from Britain. Particular emphasis has been placed on certain battles such as Vimy Ridge and those of the last "hundred days." Studies of the effects of the war at home have focused on the divide over conscription, the reactions and treatment of minorities, the degree to which the roles of women changed and the diversity of response across regions.

## Table of Contents

- [1 Introduction](#)
- [2 Battles and Conscription](#)
- [3 Home Front and Minorities](#)
- [4 Medical and Economic](#)
- [5 Memory](#)
- [6 Conclusion](#)
- [Notes](#)
- [Selected Bibliography](#)
- [Citation](#)

## 1. Introduction

Canada's historiography of the First World War has generally been marked by an understanding of the conflict as a coming of age event in which the war is seen as unifying and a means of breaking away from colonial status. The theme of transformation through war has been applied to several aspects of Canada's participation. As a consequence of this sense of growing to national maturity through the proving ground of the First World War, the narrative has generally tended to be heroic

and patriotic, emphasising unity, sacrifice and victory.<sup>[1]</sup>

Several themes in the First World War [historiography](#) of other countries have had little place here.

There is very little analysis of the lead-up to the war or of the idea of culpability in its outbreak.<sup>[2]</sup> The earliest works on the war were official histories. G.W.L Nicholson's *Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1918*, though it was not published until the 1960s, has been influential on much later writing.

[Tim Cook](#) discusses the difficult, fraught and lengthy process of writing official histories, some of which were never completed, in *Clio's Warriors: Canadian Historians and the Writing of the World Wars*.<sup>[3]</sup>

Biographies of prominent figures have also been a part of the historiography. Robert Craig Brown's biography of the prime minister during the war, *Robert Laird Borden: A Biography*, sheds light on [government](#) motivations and decision-making. [Arthur Currie \(1875-1933\)](#), the first Canadian commander of the unified Canadian Corps of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, is remembered as one of the ablest generals of the war. A.M.J. Hyatt's *General Sir Arthur Currie: A Military Biography*, is a key work here. Tim Cook's *The Madman and the Butcher* examines the war of reputations between Currie and Minister of Militia [Sam Hughes \(1853-1921\)](#), who has been remembered less fondly.<sup>[4]</sup>

## 2. Battles and Conscription

Canadian writing on the First World War has emphasised certain battles, in particular the battle of Vimy Ridge in 1917. Geoffrey Hayes, [Andrew Iarocci](#) and Mike Bechthold's study is important here, building on work by Breerton Greenhouse among others. Because of the pivotal place of the battle in the patriotic narrative of the war, there are a great many popular histories of this subject as well, such as Pierre Berton's *Vimy*. General histories of the war devote space to Canadian participation in the [Battle of Ypres](#) and Passchendaele as well and to the last "hundred days" when Canadians were particularly active. J.L. Granatstein and Desmond Morton's *Marching to Armageddon* is an important early study of the fighting overseas, and the first to integrate it with a discussion of actions and responses on the home front. In *When Your Number's Up* Morton addresses the war from the perspective of the soldiers fighting it, a vantage also taken by Tim Cook in his two-volume series *At the Sharp End* and *Shock Troops*, which examine the evolution of the Canadian fighting force in Europe.<sup>[5]</sup>

As in other countries involved in the First World War, conscription was a highly contested issue. J.L. Granatstein and J.M. Hitsman have addressed this topic in their longer-term history of [conscription in Canada](#). The measure, initiated partly by a sense that French-speaking Quebecers were not enlisting in sufficient numbers, was particularly unpopular in that province, and sharply divisive in terms of French-English relations. Elizabeth Armstrong addresses this in *The Crisis of Quebec*. The election of 1917, for which conscription was the main issue, was one of the most bitter in Canadian history. The draft was also protested by many farmers' groups and elements of labour.<sup>[6]</sup>

### 3. Home Front and Minorities

The Canadian home front is a somewhat more recent area of scholarship. Aside from the divide over conscription, early work here emphasised a unified response of shared sacrifice. The more recent trends of local and regional studies offer insights into some of the commonalities of experience across a very large country and also address interesting divergences. Useful examples of this approach can be found in the work of Robert Rutherford, Ian Miller and John Herd Thompson.<sup>[7]</sup>

Along with regional diversity, the experience of the war was often shaped by ethnicity. Canada experienced a great deal of growth through immigration in the years just before the Great War. The diverse experiences of minorities, at home and fighting overseas, have thus also drawn attention. This includes examination of the experiences of and reactions to Canadians of “[enemy alien](#)” background as well as their [internment](#).<sup>[8]</sup> Internment took place under the auspices of the War Measures Act, which gave broad powers to the Canadian government, including that of censorship, as discussed by Jeffrey Keshen in *Propaganda and Censorship during Canada's Great War*.<sup>[9]</sup>

Recent scholarship by Katherine McGowan, [Timothy Winegard](#) and Robert Talbot among others, has discussed First Nations’ attitudes to and participation in the conflict. Much of this work challenges earlier presentations of a broad patriotic reaction and emphasizes the variety of First Nations’ responses and the degree to which, despite First Nations’ participation, unfair treatment persisted after the war.<sup>[10]</sup>

The experience of [Canadian women](#) is another recent addition to the historiography. Studies such as those of Susan Mann have focused on wartime [nursing](#) overseas and on the experiences of women’s paid work, especially in non-traditional occupations during the war.<sup>[11]</sup> The importance of voluntary and traditional work is an emerging focus. Transformation – the degree to which the war could be understood as a liberating event for Canadian women, many of whom received the franchise in 1917 – has also been a question addressed here, especially by Joan Sangster, as well as [Sarah Glassford](#) and [Amy Shaw](#).<sup>[12]</sup>

### 4. Medical and Economic

The ways in which medicine and the medical profession were affected by the First World War has been studied by several historians but more work on this topic is needed. Andrew MacPhail’s official history of the medical services was published soon after the war ended, though it has been met with a critical reception.<sup>[13]</sup> Susan Mann discusses the absence of an official history of nursing in her biography of the matron-in-chief of Canada’s overseas nursing service.<sup>[14]</sup> Mark Humphries’ study of the [influenza epidemic](#) examines provincial and municipal responses and its effect on the creation of a federal department of health. Esyllt Jones examines the epidemic with a local focus on Winnipeg and an analysis of its gender and class-based effects.<sup>[15]</sup>

Although the war brought significant and lasting changes to the Canadian economy, this is another area of scholarship in which there is room for growth. Michael Bliss's biography of [Joseph Flavelle \(1858-1939\)](#), *A Canadian Millionaire*, is useful here, as is his work on Canadian munitions production.<sup>[16]</sup> R.T. Naylor examines increasing government intervention in the economy and industrial and agricultural expansion in "The Canadian State, the Accumulation of Capital, and the Great War," and Douglas McCalla, among others, addresses the history of the war in terms of its place in longer term economic history.<sup>[17]</sup> Economic changes have also been analysed as part of regional histories, those studying [labour](#) and women's history, and are also discussed in general histories of the war, especially Brown and Cook's important *Canada 1896-1921: A Nation Transformed*. International approaches, such those in Alexander Anievas' *Capital, the State, and War* are also, of course, relevant.<sup>[18]</sup>

## 5. Memory

The place of the First World War in [Canadian memory](#) and identity is yet another area of study. [Jonathan Vance's](#) *Death So Noble* examines commemoration in its various forms and sees a tendency in Canada to continue older, more Victorian forms of mourning and commemorative practices which felt familiar and comforting in the face of the tremendous losses of the war. This analysis is somewhat at variance with the sharp break in language and ways of remembering noted by Paul Fussell. Mourad Djebabla has done important work on commemoration in Quebec and there are several interesting discussions of memorials and ceremonies of remembrance, including Alan Young's *'We Throw the Torch': Canadian Memorials of the Great War and the mythology of Heroic Sacrifice*.<sup>[19]</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

The First World War is an event which has received a great deal of attention from Canadian historians and which has an important place in Canadian popular memory. In spite of this there are many areas which still require examination, especially studies that go beyond a narrowly national focus and those which delve more deeply into the social and cultural aspects of the conflict and responses at home. The broadening of military history and collaboration between military, social, intellectual, cultural and gender historians has been fruitful and will continue to yield new insights into Canada's experience of the First World War. Studies of longer-term trends and comparisons with other countries will help us better understand the place of the war in Canadian history. As diversity, contestation and grief are recognized as responses to the war that are just as fundamental as patriotism and pride, we gain a more nuanced and mature understanding of the conflict and what it meant for Canadians.

Amy J. Shaw, University of Lethbridge

## Notes

1. ↑ Arthur Lower's portrayal of the war as bringing Canada "from colony to nation" is an influential exemplar of this trend. Lower, Arthur R. M.: *Colony to Nation: A History of Canada*, Toronto 1977. Mark Humphries has suggested that the largely uncritical narrative of Canadian participation on the battlefield is connected to a sense that the writing of war history is properly linked to commemorating and remembering the sacrifices of Canadian soldiers. See Humphries, Mark: *Between Commemoration and History: The Historiography of the Canadian Corps and Military Overseas*, in: *Canadian Historical Review* 95/3 (2014), pp. 384-397. See also Duguid, F.: *Canadians in Battle, 1915–1918*. In: *Report of the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association* 14 (1935).
2. ↑ Swettenham, John: *To Seize the Victory: The Canadian Corps in World War I*, Toronto 1965, p. x; Morton, Desmond / Granatstein, J.L.: *Marching to Armageddon: Canadians and the Great War, 1914–1919*, Toronto 1989, p. 1.
3. ↑ Nicholson, G.W.L.: *Canadian Expeditionary Force 1914-1919: The Official History of the Canadian Army in the First World War*, Ottawa 1962; Wise, S.F.: *Canadian Airmen and the First World War: The Official History of the Royal Canadian Air Force*, Toronto 1980; Cook, Tim: *Clio's Warriors: Canadian Historians and the Writing of the World Wars*, Vancouver 2006.
4. ↑ Hyatt, A.M.J.: *General Sir Arthur Currie: A Military Biography*, Toronto 1980; Dancocks, Daniel: *Sir Arthur Currie: A Biography*, Toronto 1985; Haycock, Ronald: *Sam Hughes: The Public Career of a Controversial Canadian, 1885-1916* Waterloo 1986; Cook, Tim: *The Madman and the Butcher: The Sensational Wars of Sam Hughes and Arthur Currie*, Toronto 2010.
5. ↑ Hayes, Geoffrey / Iarocci, Andrew / Bechthold, Mike (eds.): *Vimy Ridge: A Canadian Reassessment*, Waterloo 2007; Greenhouse, Breton / Harris, Breton: *Canada and the Battle of Vimy Ridge: 9-12 April, 1917*, Ottawa 1992; Labbé, Pierrick: *Review of Vimy Ridge: A Canadian Reassessment*, in: *Histoire sociale / Social History* 42/83 (2009), pp. 251-253. Berton, Pierre: *Vimy*, Toronto 1986; Morton, Desmond: *When Your Number's Up: The Canadian Soldier in the Great War*, Toronto 1993; Morton / Granatstein, *Marching to Armageddon* 1990; Cook, Tim: *At the Sharp End: Canadians Fighting the Great War, 1914-1916*, Toronto 2007; Cook, Tim: *Shock Troops: Canadians Fighting the Great War 1917-1918*, Toronto 2008.
6. ↑ Granatstein, J.L / Hitsman, J.M.: *Broken Promises: A History of Conscription in Canada*, Toronto 1977; Armstrong, Elizabeth: *The Crisis of Quebec*. Montreal 1976; Auger, Martin: *On the Brink of Civil War: The Canadian Government and the Suppression of the 1918 Quebec Easter Riots*, in: *Canadian Historical Review* 89/4 (2008), pp. 503-540; Shaw, Amy: *Crisis of Conscience: Conscientious Objection in Canada during the First World War*, Vancouver 2009; Kealey, Gregory S.: *State Repression of Labour and the Left in Canada, 1914–20: The Impact of the First World War*, in: *Canadian Historical Review* 73/ 3 (1992), pp. 281-314.
7. ↑ Wilson, Barbara: *Ontario and the First World War*. Toronto 1970; Thompson, John H.: *The Harvests of War: The Prairie West, 1914-1918*, Toronto 1979; Rutherford, Robert: *Hometown Horizons: Local Responses to Canada's Great War*, Vancouver 2004; Miller, Ian: *Our Glory & Our Grief: Torontonians and the Great War*, Toronto 2002; Pitsula, James Michael: *For All We Have and Are: Regina and the Experience of the Great War*, Winnipeg 2008.

8. † Kordan, Bohdan S.: *A Bare and Impolitic Right: Internment and Ukrainian-Canadian Redress*, Montreal 2004.
9. † Keshen, Jeffrey: *Propaganda and Censorship During Canada's Great War*. Edmonton 1996.
10. † Winegard, Timothy: *For King and Kanata: Canadian Indians and the First World War*, Winnipeg 2012; McGowan, Katharine A.: "Until We Receive Just Treatment": The Fight against Conscription in the Naas Agency, British Columbia, in: *BC Studies* 167 (2010), pp. 47-70; Talbot, Robert J.: "It would be best to leave us alone": First Nations Responses to the Canadian War Effort, 1914–18, in: *Journal of Canadian Studies* 45/1 (2011), pp. 90-120. See also Walker, James: *Race and Recruitment in World War I: Enlistment of Visible Minorities in the CEF*, in: *Canadian Historical Review* 70/1 (1989), pp. 1-26.
11. † Mann, Susan: *Margaret Macdonald: Imperial Daughter*, Montreal 2005; Mann, Susan (ed.): *The War Diary of Clare Gass, 1915-1918*. Montreal 2000; Ramkhalawassing, Ceta: *Women During the Great War*. In: Acton, Janice et. al. (eds.): *Women at Work, Ontario, 1850-1930*. Toronto 1974.
12. † Sangster, Joan: *Mobilizing Women for War*. In: David Mackenzie (ed.): *The First World War in Canada: Essays in Honour of Robert Craig Brown*, Toronto 2005; Glassford, Sarah / Shaw, Amy (eds.): *A Sisterhood of Suffering and Service: Women and Girls in Canada and Newfoundland during the First World War*, Vancouver 2012.
13. † McPhail, Andrew: *Official History of the Canadian Forces in the Great War, 1914-1919: The Medical Services*, Ottawa 1925. Some of the problems of tone, content and reception of the official history are discussed in Cook, *Clio's Warriors* 2006, pp. 55-56.
14. † Mann, Margaret Macdonald 2005, p. 183.
15. † Humphries, Mark Osborne: *The Last Plague: Spanish Influenza and the Politics of Public Health in Canada*, Toronto 2013; Jones, Esyllt: *Epidemic Encounters: Influenza, Society, and Culture in Canada 1918-1920*, Vancouver 2012.
16. † Bliss, Michael: *A Canadian Millionaire: The Life and Business Times of Sir Joseph Flavelle, 1858-1939*, Toronto 1978 and Bliss, Michael: "War Business as Usual: Canadian Munitions Production, 1914-1918" in Dreisziger, N.F. (ed.): *Mobilization for Total War*, Waterloo 1981. See also Greavette, Gordon: *The Shell Committee: A Study in Canadian Industrial Mobilization and Politics in War, Sept. 1914- Nov. 1915*, PhD dissertation, Wilfrid Laurier University 2013.
17. † R.T. Naylor, "The Canadian State, the Accumulation of Capital, and the Great War," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 16, 3-4(Fall-Winter 1981): pp 26-55; McCalla, Douglas: *The Economic Impact of the Great War*. In: Mackenzie, *Canada and the First World War* 2005.
18. † Brown, Robert Craig / Cook, Ramsay: *Canada 1896-1921: A Nation Transformed*, Toronto 2001. Anievas, Alexander: *Capital, the State, and War: Class Conflict and Geopolitics in the Thirty Years' Crisis, 1914-1945*, Ann Arbor 2014.
19. † Vance, Jonathan: *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning, and the First World War*, Vancouver 1997; Vance, Jonathan: *Remembering Armageddon*. In: Mackenzie, *The First World War in Canada* 2005; Paul Fussell: *The Great War and Modern Memory*, New York, 1975 ; Djebabla, Mourad: *Se souvenir de la Grande Guerre: la mémoire plurielle de 14–18 au Québec*, Montreal 2004; Young, Alan: "We Throw the Torch": Canadian Memorials of the Great War and the Mythology of Heroic Sacrifice, in: *Journal of Canadian Studies* 24/4 (1989/90), pp. 5-28.

## Selected Bibliography

Armstrong, Elizabeth H.: **The crisis of Quebec, 1914-1918**, Toronto 1974: McClelland and Stewart.

Cook, Tim: **Clio's warriors. Canadian historians and the writing of the world wars**, Vancouver 2006: UBC Press.

Cook, Tim: **Shock troops. Canadians fighting the Great War, 1917-1918, volume 2**, Toronto 2008: Viking Canada.

Cook, Tim: **The madman and the butcher. The sensational wars of Sam Hughes and General Arthur Currie**, Toronto 2010: Allen Lane Canada.

Cook, Tim: **At the sharp end. Canadians fighting the Great War, 1914-1916, volume 1**, Toronto 2007: Viking Canada.

Djebabla-Brun, Mourad: **Se souvenir de la Grande Guerre. La mémoire plurielle de 14-18 au Québec**, Montréal 2004: VLB.

Granatstein, J. L. / Hitsman, J. Mackay: **Broken promises. A history of conscription in Canada**, Toronto 1977: Oxford University Press.

Greenhous, Brereton / Harris, Stephen John: **Canada and the Battle of Vimy Ridge, 9-12 April 1917**, Ottawa 1992: Dept. of National Defence, Directorate of History.

Hayes, Geoffrey / Bechthold, Michael / Iarocci, Andrew (eds.): **Vimy Ridge. A Canadian reassessment**, Waterloo 2007: Wilfrid Laurier University Press.

Keshen, Jeff: **Propaganda and censorship during Canada's Great War**, Edmonton 1996: University of Alberta Press.

Morton, Desmond: **When your number's up. The Canadian soldier in the First World War**, Toronto 1993: Random House of Canada.

Morton, Desmond / Granatstein, J. L.: **Marching to Armageddon. Canadians and the Great War, 1914-1919**, Toronto 1989: Lester & Orpen Dennys.

Nicholson, Gerald W. L.: **Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1919. Official history of the Canadian army in the First World War**, Ottawa 1962: R. Duhamel.

Rutherford, Robert Allen: **Hometown horizons. Local responses to Canada's Great War**, Vancouver 2004: UBC Press.

Shaw, Amy J. / Glassford, Sarah (eds.): **A sisterhood of suffering and service. Women and girls of Canada and Newfoundland during the First World War**, Vancouver; Toronto 2012: UBC Press.

Talbot, Robert J.: **'It would be best to leave us alone'. First Nations responses to the Canadian war effort, 1914-18**, in: Journal of Canadian Studies/Revue d'études canadiennes 45/1, 2011, pp. 90-120.

Thompson, John Herd: **The harvests of war. The Prairie West, 1914-1918**, 1978, McClelland and Stewart.

Vance, Jonathan F.: **Death so noble. Memory, meaning, and the First World War**, Vancouver 1997: UBC Press.

Walker, James: **Race and recruitment in World War I. Enlistment of visible minorities in the CEF**, in: Canadian Historical Review 70/1, March 1989, pp. 1-26.

Wise, S. F.: [Canadian airmen and the First World War](#), Toronto 1980: University of Toronto Press.

### Citation

Shaw, Amy J.: Historiography 1918-Today (Canada) , in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2014-10-08.

**DOI:** [10.15463/ie1418.10672](https://doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.10672).

### License

This text is licensed under: [CC by-NC-ND 3.0 Germany - Attribution, Non-commercial, No Derivative Works](#).