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Restoration of the Canadian War Memorials Paintings in the Senate Chamber

Danielle Allard

In February 1921 eight paintings commissioned by Lord Beaverbrook for the Canadian War Memorials Fund during the First World War were hung in the recently completed Senate Chamber on Parliament Hill in Ottawa. Among the largest paintings in the collection, Beaverbrook had originally intended them to hang in a War Memorial Art Gallery proposed for Ottawa which was never built. (See pp.XX.) Ranging in size from 2.7 x 3.6 m to 3.0 x 4.5 m, they have formed an imposing backdrop to the Senate's deliberations ever since the first meeting was held in the new Chamber on 14 February 1921. The eight paintings are; *The Watch on the Rhine (The Last Phase)* by Sir William Rothenstein; *A Mobile Veterinary Unit in France* by Algernon Talmage; *Arras, the Dead City* by James Kerr-Lawson; *On Leave* by Clare Atwood; *Canadian Railway Construction* by Leonard Richmond; *Returning to the Reconquered Land* by Sir George Clausen; *Landing of the First Canadian Division at Saint-Nazaire, 1915*, by Edgar Bundy; and *The Cloth Hall, Ypres* by James Kerr-Lawson.

In 1997, an examination of these paintings revealed serious signs of aging. Many years of dust accumulation had obscured their surfaces and dulled their colours. The assessment revealed cracks in the paint layers, embrittlement of the canvases, and warping of some of the support structures. Because the paintings are fixed to the east and west walls of the Senate Chamber at a height of approximately 7 meters, a routine condition assessment was a major undertaking.

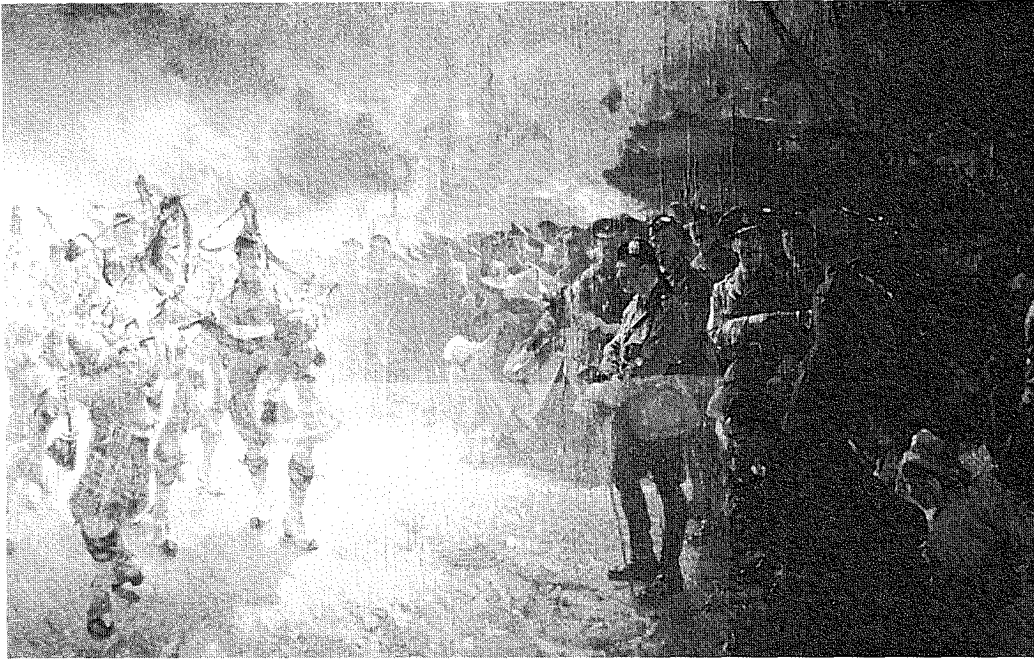


It is likely that the paintings were last treated in the 1960s when they were still under the custody of the National Gallery. This is suggested in a memorandum written by R.F. Wodehouse, Curator of War Collections, to Dr. Charles F. Comfort, then the Gallery Director. Dr. Nathan Stolow who was head of Conservation and Scientific

Research inspected the paintings and concluded that they were "in need of a thorough cleaning and revarnishing." He also noted a number of structural problems. Even though no documentation or treatment records were found, the actual condition of the paintings indicate that the National Gallery eventually proceeded with the work proposed.

The physical difficulty of treating the paintings was obvious, even in the 1960s. "Remedial measures will be costly and time consuming and will need close integration with the Parliamentary staff, as the work will need to be done in situ on the floor of the Chamber," Wodehouse noted in 1963. "The paintings themselves are too large to permit removal from the Chamber while still on their frames, and the scope of the task is outside the man power resources of the Conservation division of the Gallery."

In 1992, the Canadian War Museum, which took over custody of the paintings from the National Gallery in 1971, requested permission to re-examine the paintings but for several years no further action occurred. A letter from Senator Gildas L. Molgat to the Canadian War Museum revived the issue in February 1997, and resulted



Bundy's Landing of the First Canadian Division at Saint-Nazaire, 1915 (CN 8121), during surface cleaning. Notice the difference between the area that was cleaned in the top half and on the right side of the painting and the area that was not cleaned at the bottom left. Removal of the thick layer of dust saturates the colours (which appear darker) and brings up the details.

in a collaborative effort between the Senate, Public Works and Government Services Canada (PWGSC) and the Canadian War Museum. As in 1963, the Museum did not have the monetary or personnel resources to carry out such an extensive project on its own, but timing (impending 80th anniversary of the 1918 Armistice), circumstances (an on-going major renovation to the centre block of the Parliament Buildings), and the significance of the paintings within the Senate Chamber, were instrumental in bringing the project to fruition. PWGSC funded the project as part of the Building's renovations, while the Art Conservator of the Canadian War Museum provided the technical expertise and supervision. PWGSC approved funding in April 1998. A.E. Henry Enr., a firm of professional conservators, won the subsequent bidding competition.

The work had to be performed in the centre of the Senate Chamber, between 4 July and 28 August 1998, while the Senate was in recess. During this eight week period, the eight oversize paintings had to be taken down, examined, treated, photographed and reinstalled, allowing only one week per painting. PWGSC removed the furniture from the centre and one side of the Chamber, and the conservators established a temporary workshop. Throughout the summer, public tours of the Chamber continued, permitting visitors a unique opportunity to view the work in progress.

The paintings were in relatively good condition, given the fact that they have been

hanging in a non-climate-controlled environment for over 70 years. The restoration treatment performed was of a preventive nature, but it was critical in forestalling more extensive damage in the future. It mainly involved surface cleaning, stabilization, and provision of additional supports to prevent further cracking. Such a usually simple procedure was complicated by the sheer size of the paintings, the peculiar work space, and the severe time constraints.

The project team examined each painting carefully prior to treatment and performed tests to find an effective cleaning solution that would not also damage the original paint film. After treatment, Danka Services International professionally photographed the works.

The project was concluded successfully on time and within budget. The total cost for the restoration and professional photography was \$66,000. The rededication of the newly-restored paintings took place on 3 November 1998.

The Canadian War Museum would like to thank the Senate and Public Works and Government Services Canada for their involvement and valuable contributions to this project.

For more examples of the Senate works please see the outside cover and inside front cover.

Danielle Allard is Art Conservator at the Canadian War Museum.