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Unrequited Faith

Recruiting the CEF 1914-1918

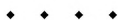
ROBERT CRAIG BROWN &
DONALD LOVERIDGE

Editor's Note: If there is one book that signalled sustained academic interest in the First World War's impact on Canada it was Craig Brown and Ramsay Cook, Canada 1896-1921: A Nation Transformed (Toronto 1974). When Professor Brown undertook the project he was already at work on his path-breaking biography of Sir Robert Borden, the wartime prime minister, and he also produced a series of papers that have similarly endured as foundational studies. Among them was an examination of conscription, from the perspective of the inefficiencies and then collapse of volunteer recruiting efforts of 1914-1917, that Professor Brown co-authored with PhD candidate Donald M. Loveridge. It appeared in a 1982 collection, edited by Professor Desmond Morton, that marked the burgeoning work by Canadian historians in military subjects, and is still a standard reference. The original publication had limited distribution, and we were delighted when Professor Brown agreed to its republication. It is reprinted here in its original form.

[Original introduction by Desmond Morton]: Few episodes in Canadian history left more lasting scars on national unity than the Conscription Crisis of 1917. Before the wartime government of Sir Robert Borden invoked the Military Service Act to keep the Canadian Corps up to strength, three years of recruiting campaigns had exhausted every appeal to pride, patriotism, escape and shame. Most historians have treated the recruiting campaigns as a mismanaged failure. Craig Brown and Donald Loveridge have taken a second look at efforts which drew half a million volunteers from a predominantly native born and rural population of less than eight million.

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In what is perhaps the first detailed, statistical analysis of Canadian recruiting for the Canadian Expeditionary Force during the First World War, Brown and Loveridge look closely at regional variations, the role of the old militia and new voluntary agencies and the factors which eventually drove the government to conscript men for overseas service.



ON THE MORNING of October 2, 1914 some thirty thousand Canadian soldiers found themselves crowded into thirty ships lying at anchor in Gaspé Basin, impatiently waiting the assembly of warships which would escort them to war. Those on deck soon spotted the imposing figure of Colonel Sam Hughes, Minister of Militia and Defence, in full uniform, proceeding in a launch from ship to ship. Colonel Sam, never one to miss an occasion for attention-grabbing, was passing out thick bundles of his farewell message to his boys. “Soldiers” the valedictory proudly proclaimed, “The world regards you as a marvel.”

By now the men of the First Contingent were all too familiar with Colonel Hughes’ penchant for exaggeration. Among them were hundreds of recent immigrants who had served in the British army. They, at least, knew that a few weeks of drill and rifle practice had not made the Canadians into the efficient fighting force they would one day be. The Minister’s message, the official historian of the Canadian Expeditionary Force records, was received “with mixed feelings.”¹

That did not matter to Hughes. His 900 word statement was intended for another, more important, audience. Carefully worked into the patriotic prose and inspirational verse was his account of the miracle of Valcartier; how he, not quite single handedly, had created a training camp on the sandy banks of Jacques Cartier River a few miles from Quebec City and assembled there the eager volunteers from the cities, towns and farms of Canada.

Within six weeks you were at your homes peaceful Canadian citizens.
Since then your training camp has been secured; three and a half miles of

¹ Colonel A. Fortescue Duguid, *Official History of the Canadian Forces in the Great War 1914–1919*, vol. 1, 104. See also Colonel G.W.L. Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914–1919*, 31.

rifle ranges—twice as long as any other in the world—were constructed; fences were removed; water of the purist quality was laid in miles of pipes; drainage was perfected; electric light was installed; crops were harvested; roads and bridges were built; Ordnance and Army Service Corps buildings were erected; railway sidings were laid down, woods were cleared; sanitation was perfected so that illness was practically unknown, and thirty-three thousand men were assembled from points some of them upwards of four thousand miles apart. You have been perfected in rifle shooting and today are as fine a body—Officers and Men—as ever faced a foe.²

Four years later, at 6:30 on the morning of November 11, Canadian Corps Headquarters was advised that all hostilities would cease at 11 a.m. At the appointed hour an unaccustomed, almost eerie quiet settled over the lines. The first moment of victory was a time for reflection. In England, a Canadian soldier, recuperating from his wounds, wrote that “the people are taking the good news very quietly. ... Nearly every family has lost someone, and a great many two or three sons.”³ And, despite the joyous celebrations that erupted from Halifax to Victoria a few hours later, so it must have been in the hundreds of thousands of Canadian families which had sent one or more of their boys to war.

So much had changed since Colonel Hughes had directed his launch to and fro in Gaspé Basin. His original contingent had grown into a Corps of four divisions and supporting arms, commanded, after June 1917, by a civilian soldier from Canada, Lt. General Sir Arthur W. Currie.⁴ Hughes himself was no longer Minister of Militia and Defence, having been fired by the Prime Minister, Sir Robert Borden, in November 1916. His Department was now run by Major General

² Cited, Duguid, *Official History*, Appendices, no. 149, 122–23. For other accounts of the chaos and the accomplishment of the training at Valcartier see Duguid, *Official History*, chs. 1–2, Nicholson, *CEF*, ch. II, and Robert Craig Brown, *Robert Laird Borden, A Biography, Vol. 2, 1914–1937*, 12–15.

³ Nicholson, *CEF*, 482–84; Metro Toronto Library, Baldwin Room, Neil Family Papers, “Harry” to “Dear Bros and Sisters,” November 10, 1918.

⁴ On Currie see H.M. Urquhart, *Arthur Currie: Biography of a Great Canadian* (Toronto, 1950); J.A. Swettenham, *To Seize the Victory: The Canadian Corps in World War I*, (Toronto, 1965); A.J.M. Hyatt, “Sir Arthur Currie and Conscript: A Soldier’s View,” *Canadian Historical Review*, L, 3, September, 1969, 285–96; and R. Craig Brown and Desmond Morton, “The Embarrassing Apotheosis of a ‘Great Canadian’: Sir Arthur Currie’s Personal Crisis in 1917,” *CHR*, LX, 1, March, 1979, 41–63.



Montreal Tramways Company car 508, being used as an information and recruiting point in Victoria Square, for the 148th Overseas Battalion ca. 1916. [Library and Archives Canada PA 164705]

S.C. Mewburn, a Liberal member of Borden's Union Government, and its staff had grown from 919 employees in 1914 to more than 5700 administrators, clerks and typists. Since Hughes' departure, many of them worked in a separate Ministry of Overseas Forces with headquarters in London.⁵ The voluntary recruiting that supported the CEF through the first years of the war had been replaced by conscription in 1917. On Armistice Day 105,016 conscripts were available for service of whom 96,379 were on strength and 47,509 had already proceeded overseas.⁶ One of Hughes' inspirations, a "Shell Committee" to act as an agency for British munitions contracts in Canada, had been undermined by scandal and replaced, late in 1915, by the Imperial Munitions Board, directed by businessman

⁵ On the Overseas Ministry see the fine history by Desmond Morton, of the Overseas Ministry and the CEF 1914–1920, (forthcoming, Toronto 1982).

⁶ Nicholson, *CEF*, Appendix "E," SSI. Colonel Nicholson's figure of 96,379 on strength includes 16,296 draftees on unexpired harvest or compassionate leave. On conscription and the implementation of the Military Service Act see, *inter alia*, J.L. Granatstein and J.M. Hitsman, *Broken Promises. A History of Conscription in Canada* (Toronto, 1977) chs. 1–3; Robert Craig Brown and Ramsay Cook, *Canada, 1896–1921. A Nation Transformed* (Toronto, 1974) ch. 13 and Brown, *Borden*, 2 chs. 8–10,

Sir Joseph Flavelle and employing thousands of men and women in munitions production.⁷

When Hughes issued his first chaotic call for troops the nation was in the midst of a sharpening depression. Manufacturers reported that their plants were operating at less than fifty percent of capacity. Local correspondents of the *Labour Gazette* detailed the news of young men on the move everywhere, going from town to town, looking for a job. By 1918 the munitions workers in Flavelle's factories were only a tiny fraction of an industrial army, working overtime in plants and mines, in a booming war economy. And Canada's farmers were producing and selling more agricultural products, at higher prices, than they ever had before. By 1917 there were serious shortages of manpower in the factories and on the farms of Canada, shortages as threatening to the war effort as the reinforcement crisis in the CEF which forced the passage of the Military Service Act.⁸

The manpower crisis had its roots in the hasty, unlimited commitments made by the Borden Government in August, 1914. The first was a decision to send whatever number of men were needed overseas to fight. Characteristically, Hughes announced in New York City on October 7, 1914, that "we could send enough men to add the finishing touches to Germany without assistance either from England or France."⁹ In Halifax in December Borden was more moderate but equally sanguine about his military manpower policy. Would, he was asked, the expeditionary force eventually reach 100,000 men? "I prefer to name no figure," he replied. "If the preservation of our Empire demands twice or thrice that number, we shall ask for them."¹⁰

That was easy to do in the winter of 1914-15. Borden, like his counterparts in London and Paris still anticipated a quick, decisive victory. And, up to that time, the countless hours he had spent trying to boost production in Canada with orders from the Allies for war material had yielded only disappointing results. The second

⁷ The history of the Imperial Minister's Board is described in David Carnegie, *The History of Munitions Supply in Canada 1914-1918* (New York, 1925) and in Michael Bliss's excellent biography, *A Canadian Millionaire: The Life and Business Times of Sir Joseph Flavelle, Bart., 1888-1939* (Toronto, 1978), chs. 10-13 and 15.

⁸ For a brief sketch of the Canadian economy during the Great War see Brown and Cook, *Canada, 1896-1921*, ch. 12.

⁹ Cited, J.C. Hopkins, ed., *Canadian Annual Review*, 1914, (Toronto, 1915), 217.

¹⁰ Cited, Brown, *Borden*, 2, 22.

commitment made in August, 1914, to seize the opportunities of war to revive the Canadian economy, remained an empty dream.

There was one more pledge that was easy to give in December, 1914. As Borden talked about raising men for the CEF, he observed that “Canada will answer the call as readily and as fully as its men [have] volunteered since August. There has not been, there will not be, compulsion or conscription.”¹¹

The commitments to raise as many men and produce as many goods as necessary never changed during the Great War. But, as the war dragged on, with such an appalling wastage of manpower, and as war production steadily increased, it became ever more difficult to recruit men for military-service. An examination of the administration of military manpower policy during the war and its relationship to the demand for labour in factories and on farms provides an interesting insight into the history of the CEF. It is not possible, in this short essay, to survey recruiting for all units of the CEF. Instead, we will analyse the recruiting of infantry battalions, the largest single portion of the Expeditionary Force. Unlike earlier discussions of this subject, our study will be based on the effective military force, i.e., the men shipped overseas, rather than on the men who enlisted for service, of whom tens of thousands were discharged in Canada for a variety of reasons.¹²



The raising of the First Contingent under the personal direction of Colonel Hughes was marked by confusion and chaos. Discarding a prepared plan of mobilization in the Military Districts across Canada, the Minister initially ordered each Local Militia unit commander to enrol men for a divisional contingent and send nominal rolls to Ottawa. There followed a flurry of amendments, additions and contrary instructions which confused and exasperated the local

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Colonel Duguid’s figures indicate that 616,557 enlisted in the CEF, either voluntarily or by compulsion. Of these, 421,510 or 68.4% served overseas. Some explanation of the difference may be found in remarks to the House of Commons by Sir Edward Kemp on July 6, 1917. He then explained that 76,000 of the 425,000 who had volunteered for service had been discharged in Canada. The largest groups discharged were medically unfit (33,887), absentees struck off (13,081) and men “not likely to become efficient” (5,345). Duguid, *Official History*, 51; *Canadian Annual Review*, 1917, 307, 311.

and District Officers as they tried to process the eager applicants for overseas service. Eventually 30,621 men, including 19,299 in 17 CEF infantry battalions and another 1071 in a separately organized battalion, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, found their way to the ships awaiting escort in Gaspe Basin.¹³

The men came from 130 Militia units from every region or Canada. Significantly, more than sixty percent were raised in urban areas and almost half of the men, 48.4%, came from western Canada where the effects of the depression were most severe. Another 31.3% came from heavily industrialized Ontario.¹⁴ Many of these soldiers were among the tens of thousands of unemployed men who had been looking for work in the summer of 1914. For them the army at least would provide shelter, clothing, food and \$1.10 a day. Even measured against the hazards of military life, that was better than the prospect of spending another bitter winter on the streets of Canada's cities.

The other remarkable fact about the First Contingent was that sixty percent of its men had been born in the British Isles. Undoubtedly many of them had a more profound sense of the threat the war posed to the Empire than did young Canadians of military age. But unemployment also affected their decisions to enlist. Canada was a nation of immigrants and more than ten percent of the population came from the British Isles. A very large proportion of these British immigrants were single males of military age and this was especially true in the western provinces where the number and proportion of single British-born males far exceeded that in any of the

¹³ See Appendix "A" and Duguid, *Appendices*, no. 84, 51-53.

¹⁴ In this paper we are not using the contemporary Canada Census distinction between urban and non-urban populations. Instead, we use a much more limited definition of urban recruiting that developed from recruiting patterns from 1914 to 1917, distinguishing between battalions recruited exclusively in defined urban areas and those recruited over larger areas. So defined, our definition of urban includes Quebec City and Montreal in Quebec; Toronto, Hamilton and London in Ontario; Winnipeg and St. Boniface in Manitoba; Regina, Moose Jaw and Saskatoon in Saskatchewan; Calgary and Edmonton in Alberta; and Vancouver, New Westminster and Victoria in British Columbia. The pattern of recruiting is defined in the reports of the Inspectors General on the battalions raised and because no battalions were raised exclusively in urban areas in the Maritime region, all battalions from that region have been classified as non-urban. Obviously, however, this classification, which is necessary for consistent analysis, greatly undervalues the recruitment of men in urban areas across Canada.

eastern provinces.¹⁵ Unemployment, therefore, and a comparatively large number of single British-born males in the population, in large measure account for the extraordinary large contribution that the western provinces made to the manpower of the First Contingent and to the next phase of voluntary recruiting.

The second phase of voluntary recruiting, for First Contingent reinforcements and a second contingent, began before the first men had reached England. It was far more orderly than the first. Perhaps the chaos at Valcartier convinced Hughes that a more systematic approach was necessary; perhaps his absence in England, leaving the administration of his Department, in the more capable hands of Major-General W.G. Gwatkin, Chief of the General Staff, and Major-General Eugene Fiset, the Deputy Minister, explained the change. In any case, preliminary mobilization and training of recruits was delegated to the local militia units in the Military Districts.

Over the next eleven months, through September, 1915, seventy-one infantry battalions were authorized. Thirty-four of them not only recruited a full battalion but also sent one or more drafts of some 250 men overseas. Only two, the 70th from Essex, Kent, Lambton and Middlesex Counties in Ontario and the 57th from Quebec City, failed to send a full strength battalion overseas. Again the largest number of men came from western Canada, 41.4% of the total, closely followed by Ontario's contribution of 38.3%. Twelve percent of the men raised in the second phase of recruiting came from Quebec in four French and six English-speaking battalions. Eight percent of the men were recruited in the Maritime Provinces in six full strength battalions, two of which also sent extra drafts overseas.¹⁶

In the Quebec and western military districts a clear distinction between recruiting in urban and non-urban areas developed at the beginning of this period and it was beginning to emerge in Districts One and Two in Ontario by the end of the period. Seventy percent of the men raised in Quebec and sixty percent in the western provinces were enrolled in battalions which recruited exclusively in urban areas. In Ontario this type of recruiting did not begin until June 1915 and twenty percent of the 34,352 infantrymen sent overseas from the Province in this phase were raised in Toronto, Hamilton and London battalions.

¹⁵ See Tables I, II and III located in the Appendix at the end of the article. Also see 6th *Census of Canada, 1921*, Vol. 2, Table 24 and Table 25.

¹⁶ See Table IV located in the Appendix at the end of the article.

Figure 1: Battalion Recruiting Costs

Advertising	\$ 2,554
Dodgers, Letters, etc.	1,690
Street cars	464
Postage	220
Signs for depots, etc.	850
Office supplies, telephone, rent, etc.	930
Autos, repairs, etc.	656
Sundries	520
Brass & Bugle Bands	2,000
Two Field Kitchens	2,500
Misc.	1,000
TOTAL	\$ 13,384

This phase of recruiting also had its problems. Initial training was hindered by lack of equipment for several battalions. “The training of a unit cannot be pushed far when it has no equipment,” an Inspector-General reported of the 58th Battalion at Niagara-on-the-Lake. “1/3 of men have no clothing, 1/2 or more have no shirts. They are short of boots and have no ammunition.” Severe weather, winter quartering and the departure of local militia officers for overseas service further set back training schedules as did a serious outbreak of spinal meningitis in units at Toronto’s Canadian National Exhibition grounds and in Belleville in the winter of 1914–15. Beyond that, the militia officers training the raw recruits had to cope with major disciplinary problems. Three hundred men had to be discharged from the 25th and 130 from the 26th battalions in the Maritimes. In several Ontario units a ten percent wastage of manpower because of misconduct discharges was reported. The 41st, a singularly ill-fated Quebec battalion, had 88 NCO’s and other ranks absent without leave on the day the Inspector-General appeared.¹⁷

The other responsibility of the militia units, mobilization of recruits, was equally troublesome. Raising a battalion for overseas service was an expensive business and, apart from the equipment supplied—in due course!—by the Government of Canada, the costs had to be borne by the local units. One estimate came to more than \$13,000.¹⁸

¹⁷ RG 9, II, B5, vol. 5–7 (Inspectors-General Reports on CEF Battalions), Reports on Battalions 19–86. On the 41st Battalion see Desmond Morton, “The Short Unhappy Life of the 41st Battalion. CEF,” *Queen’s Quarterly*, LXXXI, Spring, 1974.

¹⁸ *Canadian Annual Review*, 1916, 308. See Figure 1.

Regimental funds were quickly dissipated and fund raising appeals had to be launched in the community to cover the costs of recruiting.

Moreover, after the Spring of 1915, when casualty lists became a daily feature in the press, the realization dawned that there was not going to be a decisive battle: the war was going to be long and difficult, and characterized by a shocking wastage of manpower at the Front. Now some members of the Militia and self-appointed spokesmen for the “better elements” in society banded together in Speakers Patriotic Leagues and Recruiting Leagues to assist the Militia’s recruiting efforts. But these organizations became increasingly outspoken in their criticism of Militia recruiting. The job of mobilization and training was too big and too expensive for the Militia to handle. Far more men were going to be needed to fight the Kaiser and a much greater and more efficient recruiting effort was necessary. The logic of the argument, some spokesmen added, was a mere centralized recruiting effort, more direct support from the Department of Militia and Defence, and a scheme of national registration to rationalize recruiting and, perhaps, as a prelude to conscription.¹⁹

The response from Ottawa was in exactly the opposite direction. Why not, the Government’s new recruiting policy seemed to ask, capitalize upon popular clamour for men by handing the responsibility for raising battalions over to these zealous patriots? In the fall of 1915 the Department announced that henceforth the local regiments of Militia would be bypassed in the recruiting effort and that individual citizens and communities would be authorized to raise battalions on their own if they would assume the costs of recruiting.

Given a direct role to play, the patriots, especially in the West and in Ontario, responded with unprecedented energy. 123,966 men, in 170 battalions, were sent overseas in the final phase of voluntary recruiting from October 1915 to October 1917. Sixty battalions, 33.9% of the total, were raised in the western provinces and another 75 battalions, 42.4% of the total, in Ontario. Far fewer men were recruited in the Maritimes and Quebec, but even in these regions the battalions organized, fifteen in the Maritimes and thirteen in

¹⁹ On the Speakers Patriotic League and related organizations see Barbara M. Wilson, editor, *Ontario and the First World War, 1914–18, A Collection of Documents*, (Toronto, 1977), xxix–xxxvii and 8–21 and R. Matthew Bray, “‘Fighting as an Ally’: The English-Canadian Patriotic Response to the Great War,” *CHR*, LXI, 2, June, 1980, 141–68.



Soldiers recruiting for the Canadians Buffs on Albert Street. Toronto, Ontario, 8 March 1916. [Library and Archives Canada PA 072528]

Quebec, exceeded the number recruited by the Local Militia units in the preceding phase.²⁰ At first glance this patriotic phase of recruiting, with the initiative in the hands of neither local nor central military authorities, appears to have been a triumphant vindication of voluntarism and local enthusiasm.

A closer look changes the perspective. 72,296 men, almost sixty percent of the total, were raised in the first three months of this two year period. Another thirty-eight percent were recruited in the next six months, following Sir Robert Borden's announcement on New Year's Day, 1916, that the authorized force level for the CEF had been raised to a half-million men. Then, from July 1916 to October 1917, a mere 2810 men were raised and sent overseas in infantry battalions. The last infantry battalion for CEF service, the 258th, was organized in Quebec in April 1917 by Colonel Pierre-Édouard Blondin, Postmaster General in Borden's Government. It embarked in October with 231 men. Blondin's experience was not unique. The last Maritime battalion, organized in August, 1916, sent 247 men overseas and the last western battalion, the 251st, raised in Winnipeg,

²⁰ In addition, seven special function Forestry and Railway battalions were raised nationally or in more than one region.

embarked with four officers and 168 other ranks.²¹ In short, in the final phase of voluntary recruiting, enthusiasm peaked in the last three months of 1915 and then quickly evaporated. Save for Blondin's effort, not a single infantry battalion was organized in the thirteen months from November 1916 to the first call up of conscripts in January, 1918.

What had happened? A large part of the problem can be attributed directly to the mode of recruiting authorized in the final phase. Lacking central organization and control, the citizens raising battalions engaged in ruinous competition for men. Three battalions were organized in Toronto in December, 1915, another in January 1916 and six more in February, 1916. In that same month at least six battalions were recruiting in Winnipeg and three in Edmonton. In the Militia phase of recruiting only two battalions, 2.8 per cent of the total, failed to recruit to full strength. In the patriotic phase, 120 battalions, 73.6 per cent of the total, were sent overseas at less than full strength and ten battalions, 6.1 per cent of the total, were disbanded. Even appeals to men to enlist in special identity battalions seldom worked. Thirty-eight such units, Highlanders, Sportsmen, Bantams, Chums, Pals, Frontiersmen and others, were organized in this phase. Ten of them, including five Highland battalions and one "Dry" battalion from Winnipeg, were raised to full strength. But six others had to be disbanded and the remainder were all under strength.

Unbridled competition had other devastating effects. As soon as men were raised by a battalion's organizers they were sent back to the streets to recruit their friends. Even the most elemental training suffered. The 240th was raised in Lanark and Renfrew Counties in June, 1916. In May, 1917 the Officer commanding Military District 3 wrote:

At the time this unit was formed, recruiting was not very brisk and consequently the efforts of all of the officers were devoted to securing men. As recruits were obtained they themselves were used as recruiting agents especially among their own acquaintances. Training, therefore, was not performed on any extensive scale. ... The Commanding Officer appeared to consider training of very secondary importance and he devoted much of his time to recruiting both for his own and Forestry Battalions.²²

The battalion was sent overseas two weeks later with 389 men.

²¹ Public Archives of Canada, RG 24, vols. 1344-54, File HQ 593-3-25.

²² PAC, RG 9, II BS, Vol. 7. (Inspector General's Reports).

Discipline suffered even more. The Inspectors General's reports tell a dismal tale. The 145th and 146th, both in training at Valcartier in the late summer of 1916, each lost a hundred or more men in five weeks between inspections. The 180th, an Ontario battalion, had 336 men away without leave when it was inspected and 300 men missed parade when the 199th, a Quebec battalion, was inspected. A western battalion, the 210th, recruited 1020 men, 732 were left when it was inspected; 152 had been discharged and 59 had deserted. Two months later, almost 300 more had disappeared. Only 500 officers and men embarked for overseas.²³ Understrength, poorly trained, lacking discipline the Inspectors General repeatedly recommended that battalions raised in this phase of recruiting be sent overseas as drafts to be amalgamated into previously organized battalions.

But an unorganized recruiting system and competition between battalions for men were not the only problems encountered by recruiters in the patriotic phase. By the winter of 1915–1916 the Government's plans for domestic war production were falling into place and there was a steadily rising demand for manpower in the agricultural and industrial sectors of the economy. An Inspector General noted that recruiting for the 232nd, a Saskatchewan battalion, had been "very poor." "The reason assigned, [was] not so much the scarcity of men in the country but to the demand for labour at an excessively high rate of wages."²⁴ This was true across rural Canada and especially in the west where wages for farm labour skyrocketed in the latter war years and elaborate schemes were developed to import agricultural workers from the United States.²⁵

It was no less true in Canada's cities where, as in the earlier phases of recruiting, the recruitment of men for the CEF was concentrated. By late 1915 war contracts were accumulating in ever increasing number; the Shell Committee had been replaced by an agency of the British Ministry of Munitions, the Imperial Munitions Board, and hundreds

²³ PAC, RG 9, II BS, vols. 5–7.

²⁴ PAC, RG 9, II BS, vol. 7.

²⁵ See *The Agricultural Gazette of Canada*, III, 1916, 245–48, 351; 1917, 387–93, 493; and V, 1918, 864–67, 940–44 and *Eleventh Annual Report of the Department of Agriculture of the Province of Saskatchewan*, Regina, 1916. After the entry of the United States into the war in 1917 the supply of American farm labour was greatly restricted. As partial compensation for that, and for the movement of agrarian labourers into the industrial work force in Canada, a "Soldiers of the Soil" movement was organized in most provinces in 1917–1918.

of contracts for military supplies for the Canadian Government were being distributed by the War Purchasing Commission.²⁶ The result was a remarkable explosion of industrial activity in every region of Canada, accompanied by corresponding growth in other sectors of the economy from mining to transportation to finance.

Because government statisticians used different bases to measure the number of industrial workers employed before 1917, no reliable figures on the size of the industrial workforce are available for the early war years. But Department of Labour estimates of unemployment among unionized workers indicate unemployment of union workers was below the national average in Halifax, St. John, Toronto, Winnipeg, Regina, and Edmonton in at least seven of the eleven quarters from June 1916 to December 1918. Other indicators point to a similar trend. Between 1915 and 1917 the average rate of return on capital invested in manufacturing increased in every province; it doubled in Quebec, more than doubled in Nova Scotia and Ontario and almost tripled in Manitoba and Alberta. Using 1917 as a base year, value added to manufacturing increased more than 10 percent nationwide in 1918 and by 12 percent in Ontario and Saskatchewan, 16 per cent in New Brunswick and 35 per cent in British Columbia.²⁷ Crude as these indicators are, they strongly suggest that industrial production, and its consequent draw on manpower in the urban areas of Canada, rose sharply from 1916 on and cut deeply into the potential manpower supply for military service.

The organizers of infantry battalions, therefore, not only had to compete for men among themselves, but also with the factories and shops of Canada. Beyond that, as the Canadian Corps grew in size and responsibility, opportunities for enlistment in other branches of the service, many of them considerably less risky than the infantry, expanded greatly, as did recruiting activity for the British flying services, the Royal Naval Air Service and the Royal Flying Corps.²⁸ The result was a precipitate decline in enrolment in infantry

²⁶ See, for example, RG 14, D2, vol. 37, Sessional Paper 149, "Second Report of the War Purchasing Commission, Jan 1, 1917 to March 31, 1918" which lists the bidders for and the 2467 contracts awarded during that period.

²⁷ Calculated from quarterly reports in the *Labour Gazette*, 1916-1919 and from statistics on manufacturing in *Canada Year Book*, 1922-23, 415-16.

²⁸ See Gilbert N. Tucker, *The Naval Service of Canada* Vol.1, Ottawa, 1952 and S.F. Wise, *Canadian Airmen and the First World War; The Official History of the Royal Canadian Air Force* Vol. 1, Toronto, 1980.

battalions in urban areas, ending with the meagre contribution, after June, 1916, of 172 men from Winnipeg and 297 from Toronto.

Rural areas, where farmers were constantly badgered by the Government to increase their acreage and production did no better. The five non-urban battalions raised in Ontario after June 1916 contributed a total of 1124 men, the strength of a single battalion, to overseas service. In western Canada only one battalion, the 249th in Saskatchewan, was recruited after June 1916. In the following year it sent 550 men to Quebec for further training.²⁹

But, if the Government's military manpower and wartime production policies were working against each other, and if infantry recruiting had collapsed by the late spring of 1916, why did the Government wait for another year to introduce the Military Service Act? Many factors delayed the decision. The Government, for example, seems to have based its military manpower policy upon monthly enlistment figures which grossly understated the forthcoming infantry manpower crisis by taking no account of wastage through discharge or desertion during the training of men in Canada,³⁰ but even the use of embarkation rather than enlistment statistics could have been misleading. Because of the long period of time between the date when a battalion was recruited and it embarked, thousands of men recruited in late 1915 and early 1916 were only being sent overseas in late 1916 and early 1917. Thus, Borden and his colleagues could easily have concluded in the spring of 1917 that the infantry manpower crisis was less serious than, in fact, it was. Finally, as depressing as earlier casualty rates were, it was only in 1917 that the fully developed Corps, fighting as a complete unit, suffered casualties at a truly alarming rate.

Borden made the fateful decision to impose conscription during his trip home from the Imperial War Cabinet meetings in the late spring of 1917. At those meetings, and in private talks with Lloyd George and other members of the British Government, he had become privy, for the first time during the war, to the secret information and projections of the British on the duration of the war. Undoubtedly the sombre news influenced his decision. Even more was he influenced by the tragic spectacle of row upon row upon row of bedridden wounded Canadian boys in the hospitals he visited in France and Britain. His commitment to their cause and their sacrifice was total and

²⁹ PAC, RG 9, II BS, vol. 7.

³⁰ See footnote 12.



Cross raised to the memory of the 48th Battalion CEF. This cross was raised to protest the decision to disband the 48th Battalion (also called the 3rd Canadian Pioneer Battalion from January 1916) in April–May 1917, and disperse its personnel throughout the Canadian Corps. [Library and Archives Canada PA 005022]

unquestioning. He was answering the “call from the wounded,” “the men in the trenches and those who have fallen” he explained on May 18, 1917 when he announced that there would be conscription.³¹

The announcement touched off a furious debate in the House of Commons. The passage of the Military Service Act and the subsequent formation by Borden of a Union Government to implement it have been the subject of equally intense argument among politicians and historians ever since, as they have calculated the effects of conscription upon French-English relations, farmers, trade unions and the Liberal and Conservative Parties.

Some facts are beyond dispute. Among the men of military age in Canada the response was overwhelmingly negative. Of the 401,882 Class I registrants, males aged 20 to 32 who were single or widowers with no children, no less than 93.7 per cent immediately applied for exemption. And tens of thousands more failed to register and became defaulters. The number of registrants who volunteered for service or reported by order in the initial phase of implementation of the Act was tiny, 4.5 per cent of registrants nationally, varying from 10.5 per cent in British Columbia to 1.6 per cent in Quebec. In every province

³¹ Brown, *Borden*, 2, chs. 7–10.

and region of Canada, not just in Quebec, it was evident that popular enthusiasm for military service had been bled dry.³²

Many advocates of conscription argued that a nationally directed compulsory military manpower policy was the only way to achieve a balanced allotment of military responsibilities between sectors of the economy and among regions of the country. Some, playing upon long-standing animosities between French and English Canada, and obsessed by Quebec's low rate of contribution to the voluntary recruiting effort,³³ went further to claim that the Military Service Act would, at last, force French Canadians to assume their share of the military burden. Driven by the passions of war, few were prepared to concede that demographic and historical factors went far to explain why Quebec (and, to a lesser extent the Maritime Provinces) had contributed comparatively fewer soldiers to the war effort than Ontario and the western provinces. As noted above, the voluntary recruiting system, at least in its first and second phases, was dependent upon the local militia units and was heavily biased in favour of recruiting single men. The significantly higher proportion of single males of military age, both native Canadians and British immigrants, in the West and in Ontario, and the deep roots of the militia in Ontario society help to account for the high rates of recruitment in both regions. By contrast, the proportion of males of military age who were married was well above the national average in Quebec and the Maritime Provinces and the militia exercised much less influence in the societies of the Maritime Provinces and had frittered away by neglect whatever modest attractions it had once had in French Canadian society.³⁴ The bias towards recruiting in urban areas also helps to explain why French Canadians failed to respond to the voluntary recruiting effort. Not only did the vast majority of French Canadians live outside the two largest cities of Quebec,³⁵ but only one quarter of the battalions recruited in the Montreal and

³² See Canada, House of Commons, Sessional Papers, 1919, no. 246, 86. Also see Table v located in the Appendix at the end of the article.

³³ Across Canada 12.33% of the military age group (males 15 to 44 years of age in 1911) had enlisted in infantry battalions and embarked for overseas service before the implementation of the Military Service Act. By region the rates were: Maritimes, 9.96%; Quebec, 4.69%; Ontario, 14.42% and Western Canada, 15.52%. See Table 1 located in the Appendix at the end of the article.

³⁴ See Morton, *Ministers and Generals, passim* and *Canada and War. A Military and Political History*, Toronto, 1981, chs. 1-2.

³⁵ See 5th *Census of Canada, 1911*, vol. 2, 357-65.

Quebec districts sought to attract French Canadian recruits.³⁶ In short, in the Maritime provinces, and even more so in Quebec, the smaller proportion of single males of military age in the population, a concentration on urban recruiting and a legacy of neglect of French Canadians in the Militia go far to account for the failure of men in those regions to respond to the voluntary recruiting effort.

Conscription did tend to balance out the military manpower contribution of the regions. Though still below the national average of 5.6 per cent of the military age group made available for service under the Military Service Act, Quebec's contribution of 5 per cent matched Ontario's 5.1 per cent and approximated the 5.5 per cent contribution from the Western Provinces.³⁷ But it was grudgingly given. The number of defaulters was exceedingly high, even when account is taken of confusion in the counting and classification of defaulters in the Hull office of Military District 3 and in Districts 4 and 5.³⁸ Only 1.6 per cent of Quebec's Class I registrants reported for service; 98 per cent applied for exemptions. And Appeal Tribunals rejected only 9.3 per cent of exemption claims as compared with 13 per cent in the Maritime and Western regions and 15 per cent in Ontario.³⁹

Too much, however, can be made of Quebec's, or French Canada's opposition to conscription, implying, as it does, that there was substantially more support for the Military Service Act in other regions of the country. That doubtless was true among the politicians supporting the Union Government and the voters in Ontario and Western Canada in the 1917 election. It certainly was not true among the Class I registrants in any region of the country. Among them, one broadly based group, the farmers of Canada, illustrates the point. In comparative terms they had been left alone during the voluntary phases of recruiting and they were no more willing to be coerced than they had been to be coaxed into military service. Promised exemptions

³⁶ In contrast, in New Brunswick, where recruiting was not concentrated in identifiable urban areas, five of the seven infantry battalions contained large numbers of Acadian recruits.

³⁷ See Table VI located in the Appendix at the end of the article.

³⁸ See Sessional Paper 246, 1919, 138-40; 145-48.

³⁹ See Table V located in the Appendix at the end of the article. It should not be assumed that reference to Quebec in this paragraph refers only to French-speaking Canadians living in the Province. The statistics available for administration of the MSA in Quebec do not differentiate between French and English speaking registrants. Moreover, the 98% rate of claims for exemptions indicates the unpopularity of conscription among all Class I registrants.

by the Unionist Government candidates in the 1917 election campaign, 97.4 per cent of the farmers who were Class 1 registrants applied for exemptions. Only 12.6 per cent of those claims were refused by the Tribunals established under the Military Service Act.⁴⁰

The Government's solicitous regard for agrarians apparently came to an abrupt end, however, when Sir Robert Borden announced the cancellation of all exemptions and the call up of all 20–22 year old Class 1 registrants in April, 1918. Farmers in every region of the country were outraged and charged that the exemption premise had been a cheap political trick. It mattered not that the call up was Borden's response to the roll back of Allied armies before the German spring offensive on the Western Front. A Nova Scotia farmer complained to his Member of Parliament that "this conscripting farmers is the worst slur on the conservative government yet."⁴¹ District registrars for the Military Service Act reported that the cancellation of exemptions was "generally unpalatable," "created a measure of consternation" and a "feeling of resentment" among farmers.⁴²

But the effect of the cancellation upon the farming community was, in fact, not as severe as it appeared. Registrars were instructed to take care to avoid conscripting hardship cases, to grant and renew harvest leaves, and to grant leaves of absence on compassionate grounds. More significant still, registrars were ordered "to call the men with urban addresses in priority to those living in country districts." Reflecting upon the effect of the cancellation in his final report, the registrar in Halifax "did not observe that the farming industry was seriously handicapped by this call, and the fishing industry was very slightly affected. Large industrial concerns in the mining and steel centres were more seriously affected."⁴³

The otherwise comprehensive report of the Director of the Military Service Act does not indicate how many young farmers were called for service as a result of Borden's announcement. But if we assume a constant proportion of 20–22 year old farmers to all 20–22 year olds with exemptions, 31.9 per cent, through the process of cancellation and calling up, then only 17,146 young farmers were

⁴⁰ See Table VII located in the Appendix at the end of the article.

⁴¹ Provincial Archives of Nova Scotia, M.G. 2, E.N. Rhodes Papers, vol. 580, no. 8951, letter to Rhodes, May 9, 1918.

⁴² Sessional Paper no. 246, 1919, 139, 149, 136.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 132, 17, 136.

called up.⁴⁴ If we add farmers who reported for service and who had exemption claims denied to those whose exemptions were cancelled, 42,098 farmers, 25.3 per cent of farmers who registered, were called for service under the M.S.A. 71,363 non-farmers reported for service or had their exemptions denied or cancelled, 29.1 per cent of non-farmer registrants. In western Canada the bias towards farmers was much sharper. 23.3 per cent of western farmer registrants and 39.3 per cent of non-farmers were called for service.⁴⁵

Thus, if the administration of the Military Service Act tended to bring more balance into the manpower contributions of the regions of Canada, it was less effective in balancing the contribution of farmers and non-farmers to the military manpower effort. In fact, the more liberal policy toward farmers that existed during the voluntary recruiting period was codified in the regulations made under the Military Service Act both before and after the call up of the 20–22 age group. In part the favouritism of agrarians was accidental; voluntary recruiting tended to centre upon urban areas of high population density. In part it was a matter of design; ever increasing agricultural production for export was an essential component of the Government's war policy.

But so too was industrial production for the war effort and our examination of the recruiting of infantry reveals that the conflict between military manpower policy and industrial policy surfaced during the winter and early spring of 1915–1916, long before the agrarians raised their powerful protest against the Military Service Act. Indeed, given the patterns of voluntary recruiting, that conflict undermined the voluntary recruiting system and precipitated the conscription crisis.

The history of Canadian manpower policy in the Great War, climaxing in the conscription crisis, has been characterized by a distinguished military historian as a story of “broken promises.”⁴⁶ That it was; from Borden's 1914 pledge that there would be no conscription to the 1917 election promise to exempt farmers. Yet, from another perspective, it could just as convincingly be called a story of unrequited

⁴⁴ Total 20–22 with exemptions = 104,149; total 20–22 farmers with exemptions = 33,284 or 31.96%; total 20–22 exemptions cancelled = 65,610 (31.96% total = 17,146); Total 20–22 gp. Called for service = 53,649 (31.96% total = 17,146).

⁴⁵ Calculated from Tables VI and VII located in the Appendix at the end of the article.

⁴⁶ Granatstein and Hitsman, *Broken Promises*, chs. 1–3.



South African monument with recruiting sign. Toronto, Ontario, 1 September 1915. [Library and Archives Canada PA 071675]

faith: faith, initially, that the war would quickly end; faith that the patriotic response of the people of Canada would enable the country to send as many men as necessary to the Front and, at the same time, be a major supplier of war material; faith that even with an inadequate bureaucracy and little planning somehow, somehow, everything would come out right. Most especially, faith in the principle of voluntarism.

In the end, faith was not enough. Applied to the military manpower policy in an ever more decentralized system of voluntary recruiting, it was dashed by the duration of the war, the appalling wastage of men at the Front, and the Canadian Government's own wartime economic policies. But even when coercion became necessary, the legacy of faith in voluntarism tempered the coercive nature of the Military Service Act. Under the liberal exemptions policy in the Act, 86.8 per cent of all claims for exemption were allowed: only 28 per cent of all Class I registrants were called for military service.

Reflecting upon Borden's decision in 1916 to raise the authorized force level of the CEF to 500,000 men, Sir Thomas White, the Minister of Finance, wrote that "We simply went on faith, feeling instinctively that means could be found to enable us to carry it out."⁴⁷ That simple

⁴⁷ Cited, Brown, *Borden*, 2, 34.

confession spoke volumes about Canada's military manpower policy, from the guns of August to Armistice Day.



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

This paper was first written for the *Revue Internationale d'Historie Militaire*, No. 51, 1982, which was edited by Professor Desmond Morton, then a professor of history at the University of Toronto. **Robert Craig Brown**, professor of history at University of Toronto, who had recently completed his two-volume biography of Sir Robert Borden, joined **Donald Loveridge**, a doctoral candidate at University of Toronto who was preparing a thesis on early settlement patterns in Manitoba, to develop a statistical analysis of recruiting for the CEF during the First World War.

APPENDIX

Table 1: Military Age Groups
Male Population 15–44 Years Old in 1911

Province or Region	15-44 Male Population	% Total
PEI	19715	1
Nova Scotia	111184	5.9
New Brunswick	77904	4.1
Maritime Provinces	208803	11.1
Quebec	442703	23.4
Ontario	638079	33.9
Manitoba	132571	7
Saskatchewan	167608	8.9
Alberta	129444	6.9
British Columbia	162229	8.6
Western Canada	591852	31.3
CANADA	1888825	100

Source: *Canada Year Book*, 1913, 82-84.

Table II: Military Age Groups
Males 15 and Over – Canadian, British and Foreign Born in 1911

Province or Region	Number	% Canadian Born	% British Born	% Foreign Born
PEI	31370	96.68	2.61	0.7
Nova Scotia	166,870	89.27	7.58	3.17
New Brunswick	116626	92.8	4.35	2.84
Maritime Provinces	314866	91.32	5.88	2.81
Quebec	627002	89	5.46	5.54
Ontario	925948	71.42	19.42	9.16
Manitoba	172989	43.21	30.5	26.29
Saskatchewan	206,889	38.61	23.9	37.49
Alberta	162346	31.3	25.22	43.48
British Columbia	205657	28.78	34.59	36.62
Western Canada	747,881	35.38	28.65	35.96
CANADA	2623820	67.68	17.08	15.24

Source: *6th Census of Canada, 1921*, Vol. 2, Table 24, 118-19.

Table III: Military Age Groups
Single Males 15 and Over – Canadian, British and Foreign Born in 1911

Province or Region	Number	% Canadian Born	% British Born	% Foreign Born
PEI	12952	97.79	0.67	1.54
Nova Scotia	72600	90.93	5.59	3.49
New Brunswick	50840	93.92	2.9	3.17
Maritime Provinces	136392	92.69	4.12	3.18
Quebec	287115	90.59	3.96	5.44
Ontario	380,689	75.1	16.29	8.61
Manitoba	82660	55.76	23.76	20.47
Saskatchewan	110505	44.92	18.93	36.14
Alberta	91174	37.51	21.34	41.16
British Columbia	84,492	39.17	32.77	28.09
Western Canada	368,831	44.19	23.78	32.03
CANADA	1175285	71.18	14.24	14.59

Source: *Ibid.*

Table 1v: Strength of Infantry Battalions Raised in Canada Before Military Service Act

Time period of Organization	Full plus one or more drafts	Full	Full to half strength	Less than half strength	Disbanded	
Aug - Sep 1914 First Contingent		16	1x			x 17th Battalion had sailing strength of 665. Duguid <i>Appendices</i> , #84, pp. 50-51.
17 Total Bns.						
Oct 14 - Sep 15	37	32	2			
71 Total Bns.						
Oct 15 - Dec 15		25	52	7	1	
85 Total Bns.						
Jan 16 - Jun 16	2*	13**	29***	21	7	+ Includes 5 special function battalions raised across Canada.
72 Total Bns. From Jul 16			3****	8	2	x Excludes 2 battalions raised for Siberia in 1918.
13 Total Bns.						+ Includes 2 special function battalions raised across Canada.
258 Total Bns.	39	86	87	36	10	

Source: Calculated from RG 24, vols. 1344-54, File HQS 93-3-25 (Embarkation Reports)

* Both special functions.

** Two special functions

*** One special function.

**** Two special functions.

Table V: Administration of the Military Service Act by Regions

Province	Requisitions & Exemptions claims			Reports for Service Voluntarily Order					Exemptions Refused			20-22 Class		
	Total Class 1	Exemptions Claimed		Rpts for Service Initially Signed	Minus Low Category	Rpts for Service	Rpts for Service as % Class 1	Exemptions Refused by Appeal Tribunals	As % of Claims	As % of Class 1	20-22 Exempted (Cancelled)	20-22 Called for Service	20-22 Called as % Class 1	20-22 Called as % of 10-11 Exempted
		Number	% of Class 1											
Maritimes	47019	43340	92.1	3679	1462	2217	4.72	6083	14.04	12.94	12,139 (78,19)	6534	13.9	52.83
Quebec	115602	113291	98	2311	423	1888	1.63	10691	9.44	9.25	43,290 (26,340)	20884	18.06	48.24
Ontario	124865	116092	92.9	8873	1157	7716	6.17	18649	16.06	14.92	29,468 (18,188)	15355	12.29	52.21
Western Canada	114296	103906	90.9	10390	3891	6499	5.69	14507	13.56	12.69	19,321 (13,263)	10876	9.52	56.32
CANADA	401882	376629	93.7	25253	6933	18320	4.5	49930	13.26	12.42	104,149 (65,610)	53649	13.3	51.51
Page	94	94	94	44	44	44		100			101 (116)	54		

Calculated from Sessional Paper 246, 1919.

Calculated from Sessional Paper 246, 1919.

Table VI: Infantry Manpower Made Available to CEF as % of 15-44 Age Group in 1911

Provinces	15-44 Age Group in 1991	1st Contingent		Militia Recruiting 10/15 - 1915		Patriotic Recruiting 10/15 - 1917		MSA		Total Made Available for CEF		Total Served in CEF			
		Number	% Age Gp	Number	% Age Gp	Number	% Age Gp	Number	% Age Gp	Number	% Age Gp	Number	% Age Gp		
Maritimes	208803	636	0.4	7472	3.6	12476	6	14778	7.1	10599	5.1	35562	17	31403	18
Quebec	442703	3064	0.7	10750	2.4	6968	1.6	22288	5	19650	4.3	43040	9.7	39832	9
Ontario	638709	6044	0.9	34376	5.4	51668	8.1	36276	5.1	27087	4.2	124764	19.5	119175	18.7
Western Provinces (x)	591652	9335	1.6	37105	6.3	46386	7.7	52446	5.5	26619	4.5	124272	20.9	118445	20
CANADA (+)	1888825	19299	1	89703	4.7	123866	6.6	105516++	5.6	96379++	5.1	337984	17.9	329347	17.4

x Includes bns raised inter-provincially 10/14-1917

+ Canada figures include seven nationally raised forestry and railway bns 1916 and 1917.

++ Nicholson figures, CEF, 551 which include those on harvest leave at armistice.

Table VII: Administration of the Military Service Act by Regions

Province	Farmers Reg'd	As % Reg'd	Exemptions Claimed	As % Farmers Reg'd	Allowed Medical	As % Farmers Claimed	Other Claims Allowed	As % Farmers Claimed	Claims Disallowed	As % Farmers Claimed	With Farm Exempt	20-22 Class				As % Total Reg'd	Benefits for Service	As % Farmers Reg'd	As % Total Reg'd
												As % Total Claim	As % Farmer Reg'd	As % Total Reg'd	As % Total Reg'd				
Manitoba	17012	86.2	14438	86.6	3837	23.3	1942	63.4	2179	13.3	2138	13	13	13	4.5	574	3.4	1.2	
Quebec	56947	32	36916	59.9	2834	7.7	26715	72.4	7267	18.7	13713	37.1	37.1	37.1	11.9	131	0.4	0.1	
Ontario	45706	86.6	40188	98.6	119.60	96.5	29627	65.8	3441	7.6	8786	19.5	19.5	19.2	7	648	1.4	0.5	
Prarie Provinces	64537	67.1	61089	95.6	7396	12	46836	75.9	7467	12.1	8562	13.9	13.3	13.3	8.9	2848	4.4	3	
Western Provinces	58319	88.2	62469	95.3	8234	13.9	47882	75.2	752	11.8	8647	13.6	13.9	13.9	7.6	3130	4.7	2.8	
Canada	166484	41.4	162081	97.4	26835	16.6	114677	70.8	20449	12.6	33284	20.5	19.9	19.9	8.3	4503	2.7	1.1	
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Calculated from Sessional Paper 246, 1919.

