

5-12-2016

## Writing a Canadian High School History of the Great War: Victoria High School: Challenges, Pitfalls, and Sources

Barry Gough

---

### Recommended Citation

Gough, Barry (2016) "Writing a Canadian High School History of the Great War: Victoria High School: Challenges, Pitfalls, and Sources," *Canadian Military History*: Vol. 25 : Iss. 1 , Article 13.  
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh/vol25/iss1/13>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Canadian Military History by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact [scholarscommons@wlu.ca](mailto:scholarscommons@wlu.ca).

# Writing a Canadian High School History of the Great War

## Victoria High School: Challenges, Pitfalls, and Sources

BARRY GOUGH

*Abstract: Contained in this article are suggestions on how to write a history of a Canadian high school and the First World War. Included in the discussion is the approach and methodology of the historian, the materials available for use, and knowledge of the background of Canada, the British Empire and the war “for King and Country.” It appeals for an understanding of war and of patriotism Canadian-style as of 1914-1918, as a war they fought and not the one we now think they fought or should have fought. It is an appeal for “sharp end” history. Attention is given to monuments of valour – rolls of honour, plaques, banners, stained glass, gravestones and markers, memorial trees and, above all, school records. The history should be a tribute to a youth now no longer with us. The history, when written, becomes its own memorial to their passing and sacrifice and may serve as an example for other such histories to be crafted. Lastly, it is a legacy to a grey generation of mothers, sisters and sweethearts who far from the searing battle line were also victims in this catastrophic eruption that forever changed Canada and, through what I call the Vimy Alchemy, made a nation in an age of dissolving empires. Above all, keep school records related to this war and to others. Years hence other historians will be grateful.*

FROM THE VERY moment that I commenced researching the history of Victoria High School with a view to writing how that school contributed to and suffered from the First World War, or Great War as it was then called, I realised I was treading new ground. I had

© Canadian Military History, 2016

no Canadian model to follow. I searched but could not find one. Accordingly, I was thrown back on my own resources. The following may provide help to others who aspire to tell a school's history of that war. These were founding years for our country, immensely important to the development of Canadian nationality and the heroic narrative, and, not least, for international recognition of our status among nations though part of the emerging Empire-Commonwealth.

In the end, as I will explain, I developed a schema that worked to my satisfaction and, happily, to that of the approving reading public. I fully recognise that other historians who choose to write a history of a war through the eyes of an institution or a professional body may face the same sorts of difficulties. For example, a society of land surveyors or a society of nurses may wish to write of their own contributions to a given conflict. In the course of my inquiries, for I spread my examination widely, I learned from discussions with surveyors and with nurses that they were interested in the "faces in the crowd;" that is to say, individuals and the stories of these individuals. Yes, they were interested in their professions at war, but they were particularly looking for members of their profession they could name or see in a photograph. They wanted individual stories to represent their institutional connections. This came as no surprise to me, and it accorded perfectly with my own viewpoint on the writing of history.

But running parallel with this is the urgent need to tell of the collectivity, or the group—the ties that bind, as it were. Each and every historian faces challenges presented by the dimensions and characteristics of the subject being address. Winston Churchill, statesman and historian, had it right when he said, "History with its flickering lamp stumbles along the trail of the past, trying to reconstruct its scenes, to revive its echoes, and kindle with pale gleams the passion of former days."<sup>1</sup> Writing such a school's history of the war may be a daunting task, but I found reassuring the certain perspective I had learned ever so many years ago as a post-graduate student. This was to the effect that "everyman is his own historian," and I use everyman in the generic sense here. The phrase comes from an important address on historical method and history generally by the Cornell University historian, Carl Becker. This will be found in *The American Historical Review*, 1932, and is his presidential address

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Max Hastings, *Finest Years: Churchill as Warlord, 1940-45* (London: Harper Press, 2009), xiii.

to that distinguished scholarly body, given at its annual meeting 1931.<sup>2</sup> A scholar known for stark realism and an historian credited with being far in advance of his time, Becker found fascinating how the historian can gather the facts, rely on memory, draw in evidence from various sources and above all, as his title suggests, articulate an historical treatise as the researcher/writer sees fit. In other words, the historian must create the design. And evidence drives the arguments. We can take heart from this affirming and reassuring advice.

Let us speak early on about the temporal scope of a school's history—1914 to 1918, with the aftermath years of remembrance and of memorials. Canada was then a country of about eight million people. The number of Canadian high schools that date from or before the era of the First World War cannot be many, and I have not determined how many were in existence when the guns of August went off. Some schools will have been amalgamated, others torn down. Already we have narrowed the possibilities, and even if there were thirty high schools in Canada at that time how many of them have their own archives or other repository of their records and memories?<sup>3</sup> But in every prominent city in Canada, and doubtless in every provincial capital, there is a high school that just might fit the criteria. My own high school was founded in 1876.<sup>4</sup> A century later, the School's Centennial Celebrations Committee, produced a fine history, written by former top scholar, Peter L. Smith, who became

<sup>2</sup> Carl Becker, "Everyman His Own Historian," *American Historical Review* 37, no. 2 (January, 1932), 221–236.

<sup>3</sup> I went in search of the archives of Kitchener and Waterloo Collegiate Institute, King Street, Kitchener, Ontario, and learned to my horror that records from that famous school had been kept in a dim and dark basement room but that had at some time there had been a flood and the records lost for all time.

<sup>4</sup> On the founding and early years of Victoria High School, see F. Henry Johnson, *John Jessop: Goldseeker and Educator, Founder of the British Columbia School System* (Vancouver: Mitchell Press, 1971), 125–136. The author was Professor of the History of Education at the University of British Columbia. See also Peter Smith, *Come Give a Cheer!* (cited in the text, above).



Members of the Victoria High School Boys' Debating Club en route to a competition at King Edward High School in Vancouver. [Victoria High School Archives]

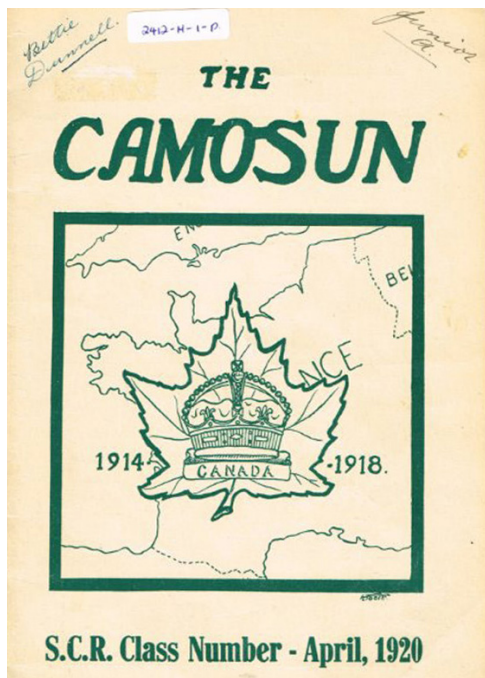
Professor of Classics, University of Victoria.<sup>5</sup> The current building (of handsome beaux arts design), which contains the war memorials, was opened officially on 1 May 1914 and is actually the fourth of the buildings that have housed our school since its inception. Victoria High School is the oldest publically funded and non-sectarian high school west of the Great Lakes.

Because of the unique nature of this school's history, I necessarily opened my history with a chapter that detailed its founding and its rise to prominence in the province. I called this chapter "The Long and Splendid Afternoon," and the chapter title speaks to the special circumstances that Victoria faced on the eve of the war. Because the

<sup>5</sup> Peter L. Smith, *Come Give a Cheer! One Hundred Years of Victoria High School, 1876-1976* (Victoria: Victoria High School Centennial Celebrations Committee, 1976). See pages 70-71 for aspects of World War One, including a photo of the Memorial Tablet, designed and executed by art teacher Earl W. Clarke, graduate of McMaster University, and himself Class Valedictorian at the school. Other photos are of Premier H.B. Brewster planting one of the memorial trees 20 April 1917, assisted by Cadet William McMichael, later principal Central Junior High School, and of the avenue of maples as of 1975 (no longer standing). Brewster's only son Raymond was killed in the war. These memorial trees were planted essentially to memorialise the fallen of the Second Battle of Ypres. The Battle of Vimy Ridge had just been fought and won. The Kitchener Memorial Oak was planted on 20 April 1917, the 5th British Columbia Artillery Band playing "Rule Britannia," and it is now a Victoria heritage tree.

school was also the cradle of higher education in British Columbia, I took pains to give particular attention to its role in connection to Victoria College (the precursor of the University of Victoria). Unique in the college's connection with the school (they were housed together) was that the college launched the magazine *The Camosun* (the indigenous name for Victoria Harbour). This periodical became one of my main historical sources. The college was connected to McGill University, and granted first and second years of arts; the third year, the one leading to graduation, would be taken in Montreal. Because McGill was closely connected to Oxford University and the recently-established Rhodes Scholarships, I found here another connection and other archival prospects. In those years, Canadian high schools had very high aspirations for successful achievement in English literature, mathematics, French, Latin, Greek, history, the sciences, notably biology, chemistry and physics. Athletics were highly prized as part of the civic culture of the school. Debating societies, male and female, formed a central part of extracurricular activities, with inter-schools competitions highly developed. It might be imagined that Oxford played an indirect role in all of this, for the Oxford Union and the intercollegiate debating societies were strong there. In the case of Victoria High School, the mentor of debating, Arthur Yates, was a former Oxford debater, representing his college in competitions. He brought his enthusiasm for this to the school in the years before war's beginning. He was equally interested in developing rugby at the school, and he is one of the earliest reasons that Victoria became arguably the rugby capital of Canada. Today it is the national centre of rugby training. Dramatics were powerful forms of learning, and theatre a grand way of developing expression and teamwork. The leading male actors and directors were often the future leading soldiers at war.

Perhaps every high school of this era had some sort of newsletter or magazine. As stated, the school's magazine was *The Camosun*, and it was published by Victoria College, and continued without interruption by Victoria High School. It was student run, student edited, and student written; only the printing was done off campus. It contained gold in the attic. When I started reading its pages about the war (at home and abroad) I was like Ali Baba sitting before the great opening of treasures. For me as the researcher and writer, the various issues of this magazine were of essential importance in establishing the student ethos, the relationships of the teachers with the students, the nature



Memorial edition of *The Camosun*, April 1920. [Victoria High School Archives]

of social life, particulars on the debating club activities (both boys and girls), the relations of town and gown and activities of the Cadet Battalion. Much incidental information is to be found in this source, notably about individual students, male or female. The issues gave depth to what I was writing about, and they gave the student voice, or student voices, to the pain, the suffering, the loss, the welcome home and even the return to normal. I had not known that the school was closed on 11 November 1918 (Armistice Day), but in reading the next *Camosun* issue I learned the editor and staff had been shut out of the school on account of the building doors being locked shut; quarantine had been instituted because of the raging Spanish influenza. *The Camosun* staff carried on their work in some other location.

If the issues of *The Camosun* were my bread and butter, I was fortunate to be able to exploit local newspapers. Vital sources for the historian writing on this topic are local newspapers, and in the Victoria case the morning paper, *The Daily Colonist*, and the evening one, *The Victoria Times*. That the former was available to me in digital form helped immensely. Microfilms of both also exist, but the microfilm can be poor and scratched, and such photos as were printed

on newsprint are unlikely to be successfully reproduced in book form. In addition to these newspapers, various personal or family files came to my attention or were sought out. These add texture and provide the intensity of feeling that cannot be found in newspapers. I used many attestation papers of men who were in the Canadian Expeditionary Force (available from Library and Archives Canada), but I did not find them to be without error. Most contained only dry detail. The accompanying documents to individual attestation papers, when available, proved useful. I had been led to believe that the attestations would be like gold from the attic, and that I would be able to spin good tales of history from them. I found them largely only to be arid detail—important enough, you understand, for building a framework of an individual's experience of war—but confining unless enriched by details found elsewhere. Newspaper stories on the casualties of war make melancholy reading, and not an issue passed without some further sad reading for the historian.

It has become common in Canadian high schools for teachers of Canadian history of this conflict to have their students find the name of a person serving in the Canadian Expeditionary Force and then to track down the details and reconstruct the life of that warrior. I used this same technique in writing my book. War diaries of battalions and regiments can tell about action in the field. But these have to be located, and I have never seen a guide to them. Because so many Canadians fought in the Royal Naval Air Service and/or the Royal Flying Corps (later RAF) and many were also in British and imperial regiments I consulted many documents in The National Archives, Kew. Because some of our Victoria High School students were Rhodes Scholars, I tracked their records to Oxford and their respective colleges. And because many of the students went on to McGill University from Victoria College, the McGill Roll of Honour proved useful. So did the rolls of honour at Queen's University and the University of Toronto. The information gleaned is not extensive but is easily available on the web. Queen's University Archives, I found to my delight, had ancillary documentation and photographs for the individual soldier whose life I was searching out. Early on in the project I made known by various means that I was writing this history. I wanted to engage the public. To my delight and surprise various citizens who heard about my topic made contact with me of the Victoria High School Archives and provided help. I exploited several older histories of Victoria, some British Columbia biographical dictionaries or collections, and some



more recent histories of neighbourhoods of Victoria, notably Fairfield and Fernwood (where the school is situated). The City of Victoria Archives had some letters but not many, and the Archives of British Columbia, situated in Victoria, holds copies of some memoirs. The University of Victoria has a military section in its archives, and a wonderful one it is, but the oral history project as begun by Professor Reginald Roy interviewed mainly persons from the Second World War. No oral history seems to have been undertaken of First World War veterans save by that of the Canadian Broadcasting Company (CBC) when it came to the fiftieth anniversary of Vimy Ridge. Pierre Berton in his *Vimy*, an important book for bringing this evidence forward, used the transcripts of these recordings extensively.<sup>6</sup> At the end of the day, my key sources were issues of *The Camosun*, the local newspapers, the census reports and, not least, cemetery records. In the later category were the digitally-based Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemeteries.

In terms of technique, I would recommend anyone undertaking such a history to strike an advisory committee of persons with knowledge about and various talents in the following fields: local newspapers, Canadian military history especially regiments and battalions, and cemetery records. I would earnestly suggest getting the personal support of an archives assistant and record keeper who is experienced in local history and historical research methods. Nowadays so much is done by the web and on the Internet, so it is recommended that you have an expert in website development and communications. If a school archives exist this may be the golden load of offerings, though the material may well be a jumble of notes, clippings, and photos. More generally, it is advisable to have someone knowledgeable about school archives and school photos. If there is no school archives perhaps the local school board or district has an archives, and a look there may yield treasures. The local churches, if still in operation, will likely have tablets of honour and sacrifice. In the United Church of the locale you may well find that the Congregationalist plaque has been mounted later with that of the Presbyterian. Church Union occurred in 1925: some Presbyterian churches did not join the union, others did. So the researcher must take great care to make sure that all possible lists

<sup>6</sup> Pierre Berton, *Vimy* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986). Berton, at one time a student at Victoria College, then housed in Craigdarroch Castle, had not been a student at Victoria High School, and he seems not to have absorbed its ethos.



The Home Front: Victoria High School Victory Garden. [Victoria High School Archives]

have been covered in that town or city. I found that memorials in our Christ Church Cathedral in Victoria was as all inclusive as it could be in listing names on the Roll of Honour, and perhaps as many who had served and were members of the diocese were listed there, not just those who were on the lists of the parish. For the benefit of future researchers, in your book be sure to include a bibliography and also supply an index. Make sure teachers and librarians know about the project, and if they are interested they may be able to motivate students to take part in useful research and story telling. Studying the lives of individuals going to war can be a most rewarding experience in historical research. But look out for creative non-fiction enthusiasts here, for I have seen instances in which a teacher may well instruct the student to write up the war history of an individual soldier and then find that all sorts of non-verifiable detail has been added to fill out the story and provide colour. I am a great supporter of creative non-fiction, and was for fifteen years or more on the guiding committee for the Edna Staebler Prize in that line of writing, at Wilfrid Laurier University, but invariably the end results are not history or biography and are often escapes of fancy.

I recommend strongly that the historian tackling such a demanding subject as a Canadian high school in the Great War not try to write the history, even “mini-history,” of every soldier, sailor, and airman, or nurse, connected to the school (before or during the years of conflict). I selected about twenty two persons around which I could tell the essential story, seeking out a variety of “roles”—an ordinary seaman,

a naval aviator, a general, some of the leading officers and sergeants, and nurses. One of my key persons was a fellow too young to enlist. He was editor of *The Camosun* for a time, and then went on to become a famed journalist. His name is Bruce Hutchison, and he wrote a memoir *The Far Side of the Street*, which includes a section on his high school years. The other decision I made early on was to write the history of the war year by year. The result was that each year of the war became the frame or structure on which I could hang the various individual stories. I had to balance the length of the chapters, too. So 1914 featured the death of an Able Seaman Percy James and the inception of the Canadian Expeditionary Force. The Second Battle of Ypres was the essential item of 1915, and in this I could tell the story of the first Canadian officer to be killed in action: Lieutenant Herbert William Boggs. He too is from the school. By the time I got to 1918 I had been able to write all the essentials of the big battles: Somme, Vimy and Passchendaele. The crisis of the war was 1918, and then the road to victory—Amiens to Mons through the story of individuals connected to the school. The overall story line, I found to my huge relief, came to have a natural flow. As the story developed the underlying themes of the horror and heroism of war came forward. Into the narrative, too, I wove the general Canadian story of how Vimy became, as a form of alchemy, the forging of the nation.<sup>7</sup> In this regard, I paid little attention to Canadian national politics, and I concluded for a book of this length that there was no sense in going into the ins and outs of Canada's connection with the Imperial War Cabinet. What I sought out to do—and I think this important as a contribution to “sharp end” history—is to tell the personal stories of my selected individuals. That, I think, is the means of humanizing the story. I have always been interested in “the faces in the crowd.” This book allowed me to discuss so many remarkable persons.

Including the details of school memorials is central to any history of this or any other war. I looked and found all that I had hoped for—photos of those killed in action, the Memorial Tablet (listing the

<sup>7</sup> I read widely in the literature of the era (it is a world we now have irretrievably lost); I was very much taken by Ralph Allen's book on these years, *Ordeal by Fire: Canada, 1910–1945* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1961). Of all the books that have been written since, and they are many, I was particularly charmed by Sandra Gwyn, *Tapestry of War: A Private View of Canadians in the Great War* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1992), where I gathered hints of how the alchemy of Vimy began as the pivotal Canadian event of the war began to take hold on our collective historical consciousness.



A memorial service in 1920 featuring the nine-metre-high Banner of Honour and Sacrifice suspended from an upper window. [Victoria High School Archives]

names who paid the ultimate sacrifice), the Roll of Honour (which lists all those known to have enlisted or otherwise gone to war), the Banner of Sacrifice and Remembrance (a Canadian cultural icon which shows a maple leaf for all known to have gone to war and indicates by colour those who did not come home), the memorial trees, the stained glass Laurels of Victory and Sacrifice (a laurel wreath embracing two poppies and surrounding vhs), and a unique memorial tree (The Kitchener Memorial Oak). I was blessed to have so much in the material line to work with. I think it important in a school's history to write and interpret such memorials as these. The preservation of these treasured artifacts is important for the future of Canadian civilisation, for they tell how another age memorialised sacrifice and victory in the years immediately after the Armistice. Such artifacts do not exist at the school for the Second World War, save for a tablet of names of those killed and a Memorial Stadium: Track and Playing Field. I learned from reading in books about memory and monuments of valour that how societies memorialised the Second World War was quite different from how they memorialised the Great War. My school is a good example of this change of attitude and esthetics, and it is likely that other schools will demonstrate similar patterns.

As to publishing, I fully recommend engaging a commercial publisher interested in local and Canadian history. Although some



Victoria High in 2010. [Barry Gough]

schools and alumni associations will want to self publish, my view is that this is best left to the professionals and to those who know the craft—editors, proof readers, layout specialists, indexers and more. The author has enough to do without trying to deal with an in-house publishing team. There is, too, always the problem of selling and warehousing books. That, too, is best done by persons in the business. If a commercial publisher will not take up the project then self-publish, self-advertise, and get the word out about the findings revealed in the text. And if the work is to be self-published be sure to get a good professional editor to go through the manuscript and edit as required, thereby avoiding duplications, ensuring that the sequencing of events described is correct, and, above all, bringing clarity to the text. I recommend a crested edition that can be sold almost exclusively to alumni, with a portion of revenue going to the alumni association or other worthy school cause. I also recommend a paperback edition that is more readily affordable. The book must be attractively priced, or it will lie unsold. I also recommend an electronic edition. (In the case of *From Classroom to Battlefield* all three—cased, paperback, and electronic editions have been issued, almost simultaneously). The fact that these were available just in time for Remembrance Day 2014 helped bring attention to the subject and to the school. Getting a committee of the school working on promotion of the book in advance of publication will build interest long in advance of the delivery of the precious book.

Some things to avoid: I would not trouble myself with the history of the various regiments, battalions and divisions as part of the general narrative, and for myself I found it best to put these into a comprehensive but short appendix. Also in the appendixes, list the names of all those who joined up and also list those who paid the ultimate sacrifice. It is not possible to give all the ranks that a certain soldier, sailor, or airman passed through from the time of enlistment; it will suffice to give the highest rank achieved. Be certain to include any medals of gallantry or bravery, and double check to make sure these particulars are correct and verifiable. Differentiate between gallantry and bravery medals on the one hand and service medals on the other. Watch for errors creeping in, particularly the misspelling of names of persons and places, especially in Belgium and France.

Taken all together, it is certain that every school's Great War history will be unique. I found this to be the case with mine. I did not know when I started the odyssey how I would deal with all the names and how I would deal not only with all the battles but also with all the aspects of remembrance. But I trusted to my instincts, and they did not fail me. I learned that historians of Canada and the First World War often write as if Canadians were fighting this war all alone. This was not so. The Canadian army was one of several British armies. In many instances, the Canadians were fighting under French general command (and the British were doing likewise). But one thing is sure: from the sacrifice of war the strange alchemy that brought our nation into existence—not only for ourselves but for how the world saw us—is the enduring result. And the roles of our teachers and students of yesterday, male and female, were all part of that process. Their stories deserve to be recounted.

Before closing, it is important to remember that a school's history is a form of public history, and that the author does not own the story—he or she is just renting it for a time, taking temporary possession, as it were. Early on the main local paper, *The Times Colonist* of Victoria gave welcome publicity to the project. That newspaper is a keen supporter of local history, an advocate for local stories and local writers. Thus, a few months before the book was to be launched a long story written by former columnist King Lee, a member of the board of the Victoria High School Alumni Association,

appeared in the magazine section of the paper.<sup>8</sup> This set the stage for a celebratory book launch held half a year later, in the school's library, on the occasion of the observance of Remembrance Day at the school, November 2014. Other means of announcing the project was a visual presentation I gave at the Canadian War Museum, on the memorial trees of the school, planted in April 1917. In these and other ways the story was being broadcast widely, so that when, on that happy day, the book appeared in print there was much pleasure in sharing features of a lost generation that we know only by distant memory—save for the honest and diligent digging that needs to be done by any aspiring or working historian.



#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Barry Gough** is the author of *From Classroom to Battlefield: Victoria High School and the First World War* (Victoria: Heritage House, 2014; hardback, paperback and e-book). He is a former University Research Professor, author of twenty books in Canadian, imperial, and naval history, and now Professor Emeritus at Wilfrid Laurier University. He is Chair, Victoria High School Alumni Association and Past President, British Columbia Historical Federation. He lives in Victoria.

<sup>8</sup> King Lee, "A History of Vic High—and the Horrors of War," *The Islander, Times Colonist* (Victoria), 4 May 2014, D8.