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"Three Cheers for Earl Haig" Canadian Veterans and the Visit of Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig to Canada in the Summer of 1925

John Scott

Historians who seek to understand the generation of Canadians who fought in the First World War are poorly served by the existing secondary sources. Generalizations derived from books like Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory*¹ together with the many critical accounts of the war on the western front are poor preparation for a study of Canadian reaction to the war during the struggle or in the postwar years.

One of the most common perceptions of the period is the belief, popularized by Fussell, that a strong sense of alienation developed between the ordinary soldier and his leaders. The work of Siegfried Sassoon and Robert Graves in popularizing this view is well known and Canadian historians have drawn upon Charles Harrison's *Generals Die in Bed*² to reinforce this argument.

The difficulty is that there is no evidence that the ordinary soldier shared their views and a good deal that points in the opposite direction. One event which more accurately captures the attitudes of Great War Veterans is the visit to Canada of Field Marshal Douglas Haig in the summer of 1925. Those who are used to the negative image of Haig presented by Liddell Hart, Alan Clark, Leon Wolff and Denis Winter and repeated by generations of journalists and historians will discover that a very different memory of the events on the western front was held by Canadian veterans in the 1920s.

* * * * *

When Haig visited Canada in 1925, he was acting in his official capacity as Grand President of the British Empire Service League (BESL). The League, which had been founded four years earlier in South Africa, was an effort to forge links between veterans scattered throughout the empire. The mission envisioned for the League was that it would encourage veteran unity, in an effort to better deal with the concrete problems facing its membership.³ The significance of Haig's role as an advocate and spokesman for veterans has often been ignored. The primary emphasis of his biographers, from the time of Liddell Hart in the late 1920s, has been to evaluate Haig's competency as a military leader. Although such an emphasis can be justified, it has resulted in Haig being characterized as a leader who cared little for the welfare of the soldiers under his command.⁴

Before turning to the reception given Haig, it is important to recognize the context within which the visit took place. Rather than constructing a unified front, the Canadian veterans movement developed as a series of fragmented organizations in the immediate post-war period. In recognizing this development as early as 1923, Earl Haig hoped that the decision to hold the BESL conference in Canada would act as a catalyst for unity. As Desmond Morton and Glenn Wright have noted, this aspect of Canadian history has largely remained, "an unwritten epilogue."⁵

With the outbreak of hostilities in 1914, the only Dominion organization for ex-servicemen consisted of the Army and Navy Veterans in



Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig leaving 3rd Canadian Divisional Headquarters, February 1918.

(NAC PA 2495)

Canada. This organization operated as a focal point for discussion and social activities, which reflected the peacetime conditions under which it was conceived. With the ever expanding volume of returned and disabled veterans arriving in Canada from the latter half of 1916, it became evident that both private and government structures were ill-equipped to meet the previously unimagined needs of these individuals. In response to these new challenges, 14 national

organizations and countless local associations came into existence, each claiming to represent the true interests of the veteran.⁶

In the Spring of 1917, 35 associations met in Winnipeg to create the Great War Veterans Association (GWVA). The charter granted to the organization highlighted the fact that it was to act in a non-partisan and non-political manner, representing the interests of all ex-servicemen, regardless of rank.⁷ In order to ensure a line of communication between the executive and its membership, the association published a monthly news magazine, *The Veteran*. Although the GWVA was to operate as the largest and most influential veterans' organization up to the time of amalgamation, it had to compete with 14 other national organizations of which the Grand Army of United Veterans and the Army and Navy Veterans were the most influential.⁸

With the end of hostilities, the rapid pace of demobilization increased the demands being placed on veterans' organizations. Rather than forging unity, the economic and social problems which accompanied the return to peacetime conditions acted to further fragment the groups. By 1922, an awareness had developed among the varied groups that fragmentation only served to weaken the veterans ability to influence government policy and obtain redress to grievances. As a result, 1922 saw the birth of the Dominion Veterans Alliance. Although the Alliance acted as a body of federation rather than amalgamation, it initially served the intended purpose of presenting a more united front at a time when decreasing financial resources were lessening their effectiveness.⁹

Although strides were made in such areas as medical care and veterans pensions, the continued existence of diverse organizations ensured that a united front could not develop. A clear expression of this division can be seen on the eve of Haig's visit, when a Special Senate Committee was formed to investigate allegations that the GWVA had misappropriated money from the Canteen and Disablement funds.¹⁰ As the reports of the committee's findings demonstrate, the testimony of other veterans groups had been instrumental in convincing the Senate of the misconduct of the GWVA executive.

The evidence of representatives of other ex-soldier organizations was clear on the point that Mr. MacNeil's (Dominion Secretary) proper duty was to forward those checks to the treasurer of the Dominion Veterans Alliance, Captain H.A.H. Jones of Winnipeg, or to advise the members of the Dominion Veterans Alliance executive.¹¹

In the months preceding Haig's arrival, *The Veteran* clearly expressed admiration for the Field Marshal's role as a champion of veterans' rights. It was argued that he had put aside personal advantage to ensure that veterans issues were not only addressed, but that concrete government action was taken.¹² In evaluating the fragmented nature of the Canadian scene, the GWVA characterized Haig as a guiding force in the drive for comradeship and unity. When announcing the specifics of the BESL conference, a full page advertisement declared:

Canadian veterans will never have such an opportunity again to do honour to their great leader and to representatives of their comrades in other parts of the Empire.¹³

Such sentiments were further reinforced in a biographical sketch printed on the eve of Haig's arrival. Here the author stressed the Field Marshal's achievements both in peacetime and in war. As Commander-in-Chief of British and Dominion forces, Haig's role in bringing about final victory was viewed as decisive. Although acknowledging that few soldiers in the war had the opportunity for direct contact, it was noted that to the men who served under him, he was affectionately referred to as "Doug." At First Ypres, the author notes that although Haig's role as commander required that he remain in the rear, he did not hesitate to come forward:

On the darkest day when all seemed lost, down the Menin road galloped Haig and his smart escort of the 17th Lancers, shells falling thick about them, to encourage the faltering troops—for no other reason, the General's place being behind the line.¹⁴

In reflecting on Haig's wartime achievements, writers for *The Veteran* characterize Haig as a man who inspired "extraordinary affection" in all who met him.¹⁵

When the official visit commenced on 27 June 1925 at Quebec City, the *Montreal Star* reported that Haig made a "triumphal entry." The *Globe*

noted that following an official reception by provincial dignitaries, he was "cheered enthusiastically" by a crowd which included a large number of veterans.¹⁶ When Haig was given the opportunity to address the assembled crowd he began his speech in English, but concluded in French. In explaining the purpose of his visit, Haig stated:

I am here also as former commander-in-chief of the British armies in France during the war and have come to thank the people of Canada for having sent its sons across the sea to help the mother country in its great struggle for liberty, justice, civilization and all that we hold most dear.¹⁷

In concluding his address to the veterans Haig emphasized the need to foster comradeship and good will as the necessary ingredients for the creation of unity.

The significance of Haig's presence can be discerned from the decision of the GWVA to schedule its annual convention in Ottawa to coincide with the visit. The first order of business was a unity resolution which placed the membership and assets of the organization at the complete disposal of Haig, with the expressed intent of forming a single organization on the model of the British Legion. With Haig's Aide-de-Camp, Colonel Nagle, present, the Field Marshal was endowed with full powers to complete negotiations on behalf of the GWVA and to appoint a board of trustees to ensure implementation of the plan.¹⁸

On 28 June 1925, Haig arrived in Ottawa in preparation for the BESL conference scheduled to commence the following day. In examining the manner by which the event was reported, one can gain an insight into the perceived role of Haig as an official spokesman on behalf of veterans. The characterization of Haig by the staff reporter of the *Toronto Star*, was that of a man who had brought peace to Europe, and was now in a position to also bring peace between "warring veterans." The reception afforded Haig was from the outset characterized as warm and boisterous, with his entry into the city again being viewed as "triumphant." The overall tone of the reception seems to be best summed up with the description of the people's mood as reminiscent of a "miniature armistice day."¹⁹ In the view of the

reporter from the *Globe*, the feelings of both the veterans and the general public was one of admiration not alienation:

From the time the distinguished party stepped from their train at noon until their return to the Chateau Laurier after the function on Parliament Hill late in the afternoon, loud and hearty expression was given to the deep admiration of the people and the Canadian heroes who fought under him in France.²⁰

In evaluating the manner in which the visit was reported, it is apparent that the theme of celebration was not merely a product of the media. When Haig appeared on Parliament Hill he was greeted by a crowd that was estimated at close to 15,000. Haig emphasized the honour and valour by which Canadian forces had distinguished themselves while under his command. The reception given by the Canadian people was acknowledged as a demonstration of personal support, but also as a larger affirmation of the foundation upon which the war had been waged. In making specific reference to the role of assembled veterans Haig remarked:

We are celebrating together today the trials, the vicissitudes, the heroic efforts and sacrifices and the ultimate triumph of that great Imperial army to which every section of the Empire contributed the best and bravest of its manhood. We pay tribute anew to that sense of unity, of mutual loyalty and common allegiance which rallied the British Commonwealth of Nations as a single people to meet and overcome a common danger.²¹

Reports of the visit continually emphasized that Haig's contact with veterans was not confined to the presentation of speeches from the distance of a podium. Haig repeatedly took time to talk with veterans in face to face meetings. In describing one such scene, a staff reporter from the *Star* noted, "At each introduction the Field Marshal's face lit up with a smile. His hand clasp was hearty."²² When Haig enquired of a veteran whether he had been able to hear the speech given on Parliament Hill, he replied "Just a little bit of it sir, but we know it was all right."²³ When this same individual was later questioned about his impressions of the Field Marshal by a reporter from the *Evening Telegram*, he responded, "He's not one of those that lost all interest in the men as soon as the war was over."²⁴

The extent to which Haig's presence was interpreted by veterans as an expression of comradeship is further supported by reports of the BESL convention. When the issue of electing the league's Grand President came to the floor, a Canadian delegate rose before the audience and proclaimed, "There is only one name, that of our beloved Field Marshal."²⁵ The motion received unanimous support from all assembled veterans with the acclaim that:

The league is Lord Haig's child. He will go down to posterity not so much for his deeds as a great soldier, but for his work as a great humanitarian.²⁶

In closing the convention, Haig delivered a speech before an assembled crowd of some 3,000 veterans and dignitaries. Through the support of Canadian National Railways, the speech was also conveyed to a wider audience in the form of a radio broadcast. The significance of the speech was further magnified as the date coincided with the ninth anniversary of the Somme offensive. As a component of this gathering Haig was presented with the GWVA's resolution of unity, together with the organization's gavel and seal as symbols of this commitment. The president of the association then declared that as a consequence of informal meetings with other veterans' groups, he had received assurances that other national organizations supported amalgamation, and that they would be moving to hold conventions in support of this end. In replying Haig stated:

Old comrades, words are of no use to express my gratitude for this marvellous welcome. I love my old comrades and you can depend on me to do all I can to help those who want help. I can only say I thank you very much.²⁷

In summarizing the impact of the Field Marshal's presence, the reporter from the *Star* noted that there was nothing haughty in the manner with which Haig conducted himself. Neither veterans nor the Canadian public felt a sense of estrangement. Haig was rather seen as the embodiment of the spirit of comradeship to which he so strongly appealed:

He is assuredly the mildest man who ever led millions of men to field of battle. As one sees him in these intimate contacts with his fellows the conviction grows that he is a character of



"Chief Bull Head" (Field Marshal Haig) during his visit to the Calgary Stampede in July 1925.

(NAC PA 48463)

rare gentleness. For once clothes do not make the man. Had he left his field marshals uniform at home his trip would have created just as many tributes of a public esteem which is beginning to border on affection.²⁸

In reflecting on the importance of Haig's visit, the editor of *The Veteran* again praised the Field Marshal's leadership in both time of war, and in peace. Through his efforts, seemingly insurmountable problems were overcome and replaced by the prospects of veteran unity:

Let us heed Field Marshal Haig's appeal without hesitation or delay. Let us get on with the task, so that the dawning of a new year will indicate a new era of unity and service for the veterans of Canada.²⁹

In concluding, the editor remarked "To Field Marshal Haig the veterans of Canada owe an especially deep debt of gratitude."³⁰

The reception given Haig by veterans was not confined to Ottawa. The reports of Haig's tour across Canada demonstrate that expressions of admiration were echoed in other Canadian cities. While in Winnipeg, Haig was given the opportunity to inspect a guard of honour consisting of both active soldiers and veterans. When the inspection was completed, the *Manitoba Free Press* noted that he was set with a "lusty" call of "Three Cheers for Earl Haig."³¹ A similar scene was repeated later the same day when Haig was greeted by veterans at the provincial legislature. Although Haig had intended to shake hands with all veterans, organizers soon realized that the size of the assembled crowd made such an act impossible. When Haig arrived in Hamilton on his return from Western Canada, the dominant emotion expressed by veterans was affection:

Those whom he had led to victory overseas turned out in full force to give affectionate greeting to their former commander: those

others who had tensely followed the progress of his armies through France proved that their enthusiasm for his generalship had not waned.³²

Haig's contact with veterans was not confined to those individuals who had survived the war without physical or emotional trauma. When visiting Toronto he took time to visit the Christie Street military hospital. And it is here perhaps most strongly of all, that the response of the disabled veterans fails to support a view that a sense of estrangement existed:

The enthusiasm displayed as the war commander of the British army passed through the wards left no uncertain impression of the loyalty, the confidence and the esteem in which the broken "boys of the old brigade" held the commander of those hectic days. The Field Marshal exemplified without reserve his characteristic sympathy with the maimed and bedridden.³³

Almost seven years after the signing of the armistice, the reception given Field Marshal Haig displayed no sense of alienation or detachment. In evaluating the language utilized by the popular press and *The Veteran*, images of honour, affection, loyalty and esteem were continually invoked. Throughout his Canadian tour, Haig interacted with veterans in a manner that in no way supports the view that an unbridgeable gap existed in either the individual or collective memory. Earl Haig's presence acted to reinforce ties of comradeship, and as a consequence, helped to pave the way for the emergence of the Canadian Legion.

6. *Ibid.* p.68.
7. *Canadian Annual Review*, 1917, pp.530-539.
8. Morton and Wright, pp.178-182.
9. *Ibid.* pp.182-188.
10. *Dominion of Canada: Debates of the Senate*, 13 May 1925, pp.243-246 & 19 June 1925, pp.592-606.
11. *The Toronto Daily Star*, 19 June 1925.
12. *The Veteran*, 24 January 1925.
13. *Ibid.*, 13 June 1925.
14. *Ibid.*, 27 June 1925.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *The Globe*, 29 June 1925.
17. *The Toronto Daily Star*, 27 June 1925.
18. *The Veteran*, 27 June 1925.
19. *The Toronto Daily Star*, 29 June 1925.
20. *The Globe*, 29 June 1925.
21. *Ibid.*, 29 June 1925.
22. *The Toronto Daily Star*, 29 June 1925.
23. *The Evening Telegram*, 29 June 1925.
24. *Ibid.*, 29 June 1925.
25. *The Toronto Daily Star*, 30 June 1925.
26. *Ibid.*, 30 June 1925.
27. *Ibid.*, 2 July 1925.
28. *Ibid.*, 2 July 1925.
29. *The Veteran*, 25 July 1925.
30. *Ibid.*, 25 July 1925.
31. *The Manitoba Free Press*, 7 July 1925.
32. *The Hamilton Spectator*, 25 July 1925.
33. *Ibid.*, 25 July 1925.

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Notes

1. Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975).
2. Charles Y. Harrison, *Generals Die in Bed* (New York: W. Morrow, 1930).
3. *Canadian Annual Review*, 1921, pp.228-231.
4. For a good critique of the historiographical debate see, E.K.G. Sixsaith, *Douglas Haig*. (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1976) pp.164-193, and Philip Warner, *Field Marshal Earl Haig*, (London: The Bodley Head, 1991) pp.266-287.
5. Desmond Morton and Glenn Wright, *Winning the Second Battle: Canadian Veterans and the Return to Civilian Life, 1915-1930* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987).