

1999

The Quebec Tercentenary, 1908: Canada's First National Military Pageant

Mark Reid
Canadian War Museum

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh>



Part of the [Military History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Reid, Mark "The Quebec Tercentenary, 1908: Canada's First National Military Pageant." *Canadian Military History* 8, 2 (1999)

This Canadian War Museum Feature 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.

The Quebec Tercentenary, 1908

Canada's First National Military Pageant

Mark Reid

The Quebec Tercentenary celebrations of 1908 constituted one of the largest gatherings of military forces on Canadian soil before 1914, yet the affair has been largely eclipsed by the momentous events of the First World War. The recent donation to the Canadian War Museum of the scrapbooks of General Sir William Otter, however, have provided some information on the contemporary view of the Tercentenary as seen through the eyes of Canadian journalists. The 19 leather-bound folios, covering his entire military career, were compiled by his loyal wife "Molly," and contain a wealth of newspaper clippings, official programs and invitations. Every scrap and memento has been neatly trimmed and pasted before being carefully identified in her clear long-hand script.



would be required to provide ceremonial "tone" to the event.

Brigadier-General William D. Otter, CB assumed the duties of Chief of the General Staff on 1 April 1908 and almost immediately began planning the military's role in the Tercentenary celebrations. Unfortunately, the government had not yet made a firm commitment beyond vague promises and exploratory announcements that militia training might have to be sacrificed in order to cover the cost of mobilising an estimated 30,000 men for the event. Further suggestions that the men themselves might be required to serve without pay, in addition to having their unit's annual allotment reduced by 30 percent, met with angry snubs from privates and colonels alike.

The ostensible reason for the Quebec Tercentenary was to celebrate the anniversary of the arrival of Samuel de Champlain in 1608, but the real incentive for the military and civilian festivities was the prospect of welcoming dignitaries and an estimated 150,000 visitors to a "grand show" of nationalist and imperial celebration. His Royal Highness The Prince of Wales, later King George V, and Vice President Fairbanks of the United States were amongst the senior representatives expected, along with an assemblage of British and foreign warships. The focus of the event was to be the official establishment of the Plains of Abraham and the battlefield at Ste-Foye as national parks, a civilian effort that provided the catalyst for Parliament to form the National Battlefields Commission. An impending federal election, no doubt, gave impetus to the government's investment and it was soon clear that a large military presence

The *Hamilton Spectator* of 30 April launched an opening salvo with the headline "Local Regiments May Not Be At Quebec Celebration." What would later be called an investigative reporter visited the armouries of the 13th and 91st Regiments and wrote:

Military men and others who have followed the course pursued by the militia department at Ottawa, say that, while the department has long been noted for mismanagement and blunders, this is the worst yet....One of the officers characterised the regulations as about the nerviest thing the militia department had yet perpetrated on the militia.

Similar unrest was voiced throughout the press of eastern Canada where commanding officers of local regiments privately voiced their concerns over the government's parsimony. A deputation of officers from Toronto, who also claimed to



Maidens of New France rest before an Historical Pageant.

represent the views of the Montreal garrison, met with the Minister of Militia, Sir Frederick Borden, on 11 May, while the London *Advertiser* reported that plans were now being "subjected to extensive alterations in the direction of reduction." Two days later it was announced that militia summer training would proceed as usual, but that a mere 5,000 troops would be financed by the Department to participate in the Tercentenary. Borden cited the Battlefields Commission as being responsible for making arrangements for the troops at Quebec and further clouded the issue with reference to the difficulty in obtaining special trains during the peak immigration season. As a compromise solution it was a failure, and Colonel Sam Hughes berated the Minister with inflammatory questions in the House. Toronto's *Mail and Empire* trumpeted "NO MUSTER OF CANADA'S ARMY ON QUEBEC BATTLEFIELDS," while the Halifax *Herald's* headline of 19 May was "Extravagant As To Grafters But Parsimonious As To A Great National Demonstration." Readers of the latter were reminded that "Now, everybody must recognize, in the light of custom and existing fashions, that the military display must be looked to as the prime feature of all such celebrations."

Inevitably, a whirlwind of protest arose from the Battlefields Commission, Tercentenary

organisers, the Opposition, local businessmen, speculators, and militiamen who all saw "their" event dwindling into a cheap little affair. Under such pressure the Government caved in, and on 3 June announced that a total of 12,000 men would be despatched to Quebec. Within a week General Otter and his Staff had prepared movement orders, and sketched out the enormous logistical requirements of the greatly increased force. The recently-formed Canadian Army Service Corps would bear the brunt of this burden, and members began to arrive in Quebec in early July to prepare three separate camp sites, pitch tents, and build field kitchens.

In the end more than 13,000 Canadian troops, including 1,500 regulars and Royal Military College cadets, began to arrive by train on 19 July. In some cases the departure from their home towns had resembled a wartime send-off, and the *Toronto News* reported that "University Avenue was choked with people" who had gathered to watch 575 men of the Queen's Own Rifles, 350 of the Royal Grenadiers, and 350 from the 48th Highlanders march off. Reporters stretched the bounds of hyperbole to describe the "delirious grandeur" of the occasion, the manly bearing, and stern mien of their departing soldiers.

On arrival in Quebec City the men were billeted according to their home province and the largest corps, from Ontario, occupied tent lines at Savard Park. Units from Quebec and the Maritimes stayed across the St. Lawrence at Levis, while a more central location was allotted to the Permanent Force troops at Salaberry Park.

The Official Daily Programme of the Tercentenary, pasted in Otter's scrapbook, described the full range of entertainments prepared for visitors, and it may be well to note at this point that the Tercentenary was not an exclusively military event. The first day, Sunday, 19 July began with Church services throughout the city, followed by a ceremony at the foot of Champlain's statue by members of *L'Association Catholique de la Jeunesse Canadienne Francaise* who were, in the words of the Programme, "a body of young men sprung from the same hardy and refined race as Champlain himself" who honoured his memory by reciting his "works and virtues." Visitors were also invited

to view the four battleships and two cruisers of the Royal Navy, as well as the other capital ships of the French and United States navies.

Monday, 20 July saw the first appearance of a small army of re-enactors dressed as inhabitants of New France. Mounted Heralds and Men-of-the-Watch clattered throughout the city to sound their trumpets and announce the names of recently-arrived dignitaries or the events of the day. Tourists were encouraged to see the military camps around the city and were assured that it would be "an interesting sight to watch the erection of the vast camp which will be necessary to accommodate such a force."

Tuesday, 21 July witnessed the arrival of the "Official Guests of the Nation," an eclectic gathering of peers, politicians and representatives or descendants of the families of Champlain, General Wolfe, General Montcalm, General de Levis, Sir Guy Carleton, and a host of other Canadian historical figures. Guards of Honour and artillery salutes were, for the most part, provided by permanent force soldiers who were encamped close to the city's centre, and had had more time to prepare their camp.

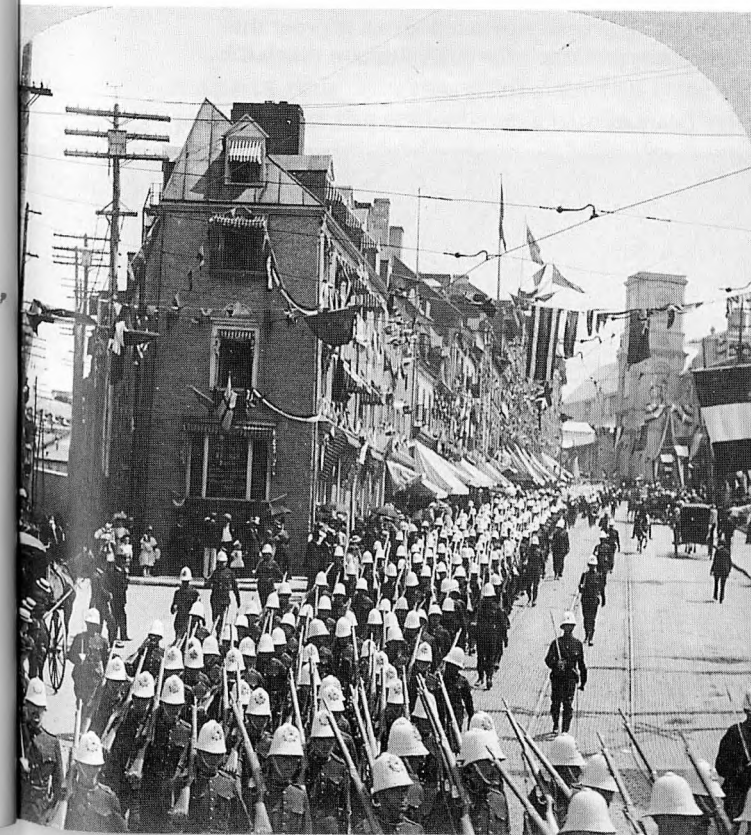
One of the highlights of the Tercentenary was the series of historical pageants which were performed throughout the city during the next

ten days. The first performance was given on 21 July on the Plains of Abraham itself, and tickets to the Grand Stand cost \$1.00, \$1.50 or \$2.00. These theatrical confections purported to present the story of New France through a succession of parades and tableaux vivantes but, in reality, gave over 4,000 well-to-do locals the opportunity to adopt 17th century dress and participate in the festivities. The streets of the city were consequently ablaze with colour, further enlivened with the uniforms of militiamen bent on seeing the sights, and the feathered finery of swarthy Lower Town inhabitants who had been recruited to play "savages."

Earlier that day, Field Marshal Lord Roberts, who earlier had commanded the Canadians in the South African War, and in 1904 had retired as the last commander-in-chief of the British army, inspected the men of the Queen's Own Rifles, of whom he was Honourary Colonel, on the grounds of West Savard Camp. On the same day General Otter made an inspection tour of Savard and Levis camps and, according to one newspaper, "...did not receive a single complaint," a remarkable accomplishment considering the circumstances and personalities.

Wednesday, 22 July witnessed the arrival of His Royal Highness The Prince of Wales aboard HMS *Indomitable*, and amidst a flurry of artillery

Two views of Canadian Militia marching through the decorated streets of Quebec on their return from a rehearsal.



salutes and accompanying pomp he was conducted to the Citadel by a mounted escort. The militia units gave restricted leave to many of their members but their bands were in constant demand to "discourse sweet music."

Thursday, 23 July was spent indulging the Edwardian penchant for oratory with The Prince of Wales returning naval visits, receiving a Civic Address of Welcome from the Mayor, and listening to speeches from foreign representatives. The *Montreal Gazette* reported that "the ceremony ... was rather marred by the length of some of the addresses, Hon. Adelard Turgeon, who spoke as representing Canada, being the worst sinner in this respect." During the afternoon over 16,000 Canadian soldiers and visiting sailors staged a rehearsal for the next day's grand review. Afterwards, they marched through the streets of Quebec, providing a show for those who were unable to attend the actual parade. The evening closed with a State Dinner at the Citadel followed by a "Grand Illumination and Fireworks" by the combined fleets in the harbour and a pyrotechnical display at Levis. Royal appreciation of General Otter's service to the British Empire, in both Canada and South Africa, was marked when he was made a Companion of the Royal Victorian Order that evening.

The culmination of the Canadian Militia's participation in the Quebec Tercentenary was the Grand Naval and Military Review held on the Plains of Abraham on Friday, 24 July. Since before dawn, troops had marched or been ferried to the site and the grand stand and surrounding

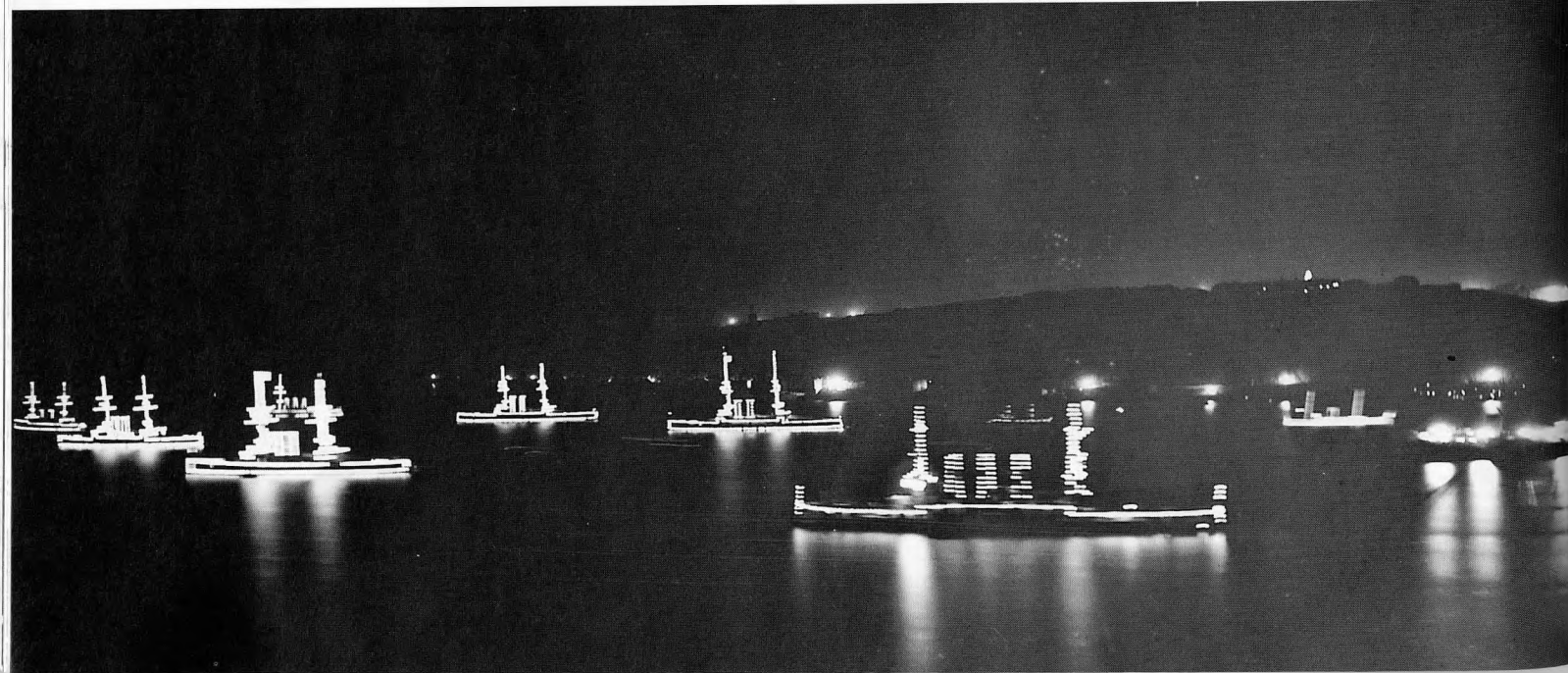
area were packed with expectant civilians. The scale and colour of the occasion can only be imagined by modern readers, whose experience of military pomp is generally limited to smaller and more drab affairs. A reporter from the *Toronto Globe* described the occasion in terms that would gladden the heart of a more modern proponent of federalism. "That past bitternesses are forgotten, and that the two races in Canada and the great neighbouring republic intend to go on together in peace, seemed to be the lessons of today's mammoth spectacle."

The troops arrived on the Plains of Abraham throughout the morning and were marshalled to their positions by mounted staff officers and guides. To help prevent troops succumbing to the extreme heat, water carts were discreetly placed behind the infantry and medical orderlies stood ready to remove any casualties. The Prince of Wales arrived at 10:30 am and, accompanied by Lord Roberts, inspected the long line of scarlet, blue, and green. Prophetically, the first band struck up "O, Canada," but it would be many decades, and two world wars, before it would achieve official status as the national anthem. Upon returning to the reviewing stand, the Prince dismounted and shook hands with Sir Wilfrid Laurier, Lady Laurier, Sir Frederick Borden, Lord Strathcona and several others before presenting a cheque with the words:

It affords me the greatest pleasure to hand over to your Excellency, the representative of the Crown in Canada, the sum of \$450,000 which... has been entrusted to me, in order that the historic battlefields of Quebec, on which the

The illuminated fleet off Quebec.

NAC PA 23830



Right: Canadian Highlanders give an "Eyes Right" on 24 July 1908.

Below right: British blue-jackets in sennet hats march past at the Grand Naval and Military Review.

two contending races won equal and imperishable glory, may be acquired for the people of the Dominion....

The Prince then remounted his horse and took his post at the saluting point to observe the march past and take the salute. French sailors from the *Leon Gambetta* and *Admiral Aube* led the parade and were followed by a contingent of sailors and marines from the *USS New Hampshire*. Led by their mounted officers, the Royal Navy's contribution included six-pounder guns pulled by the men themselves. One reporter was moved to write "One has some hesitancy in making comparisons at such a time, but it may be permitted to say, without giving offence, that the British sailors seemed to be more solid, deeper of chest, broader across the shoulders than those of other nations here." A spontaneous cheer arose from the crowd as the naval contingents marched off, leaving the field clear for the Canadians.

For the next hour, the military forces of Canada rode and marched past the reviewing stand under the critical eye of numerous British and foreign military experts. Whilst the uneven ground did little to improve their drill, they performed well, and no untoward accidents occurred. Lord Roberts drew enthusiastic cheers when he detached himself from the Prince's entourage twice in order to march past with regiments of which he was Honourary Colonel, the Royal Canadian Artillery and the Queen's Own Rifles. Spectators applauded the small detachment of Royal North West Mounted Police, and the *London Daily Telegraph* of 25 July referred to them as "...a splendid corps, who seemed almost as popular as the bluejackets." Journalists excelled themselves in composing paeans of praise for the assemblage, and rivers

of ink were expended to praise the event as the epitome of imperial solidarity. In all fairness, there can be little doubt that the majority of participants, dressed in uniforms virtually identical to those of British troops, saw themselves in such a light but the presence of



NAC PA 24705



NAC PA 24773

scarlet-coated soldiers celebrating New France and its eventual military defeat must have aroused a sense of irony in a few spectators.

When the last troops had marched off the field a final piece of theatrical panache was delivered when two batteries of artillery galloped across the entire frontage of the crowd, then turned about to disappear in a cloud of dust amidst the delighted roar of a crowd that had spontaneously risen to its collective feet.

Although the Tercentenary celebrations continued for several more days, the troops were hurriedly returned to their homes in order to prevent any further expense. The Toronto regiments returned to their city by the next afternoon, after a 17-hour train ride, while troops from further west passed through with barely a pause to change locomotives.

To many participants the Tercentenary must have seemed like a brief bright interlude culminating in a single grand spectacle. A few souvenirs like photographs or exchanged cap badges were brought back as mementoes of the occasion, but there was little else tangible to remind men of the celebrations. The legacy of the Quebec Tercentenary, however, can still be discerned even after nearly a century. It was the first test of the new support services of the Canadian military and, without exception, they performed well. The General Staff had mobilised and transported the equivalent of a division on remarkably short notice, while the Canadian Army Service Corps sustained the entire force, providing a pound and a half of fresh-baked bread to each man every day, a quantity amounting to 56 tons. In addition, 90 tons of meat, ten tons of bacon, 35 tons of vegetables, six tons of cheese and many other foodstuffs were

prepared and delivered to different camps during the celebrations. The Medical services ensured that there were no fatalities, except for the accidental drowning of Private Stevenson of the 90th Winnipeg Regiment near St. Charles. Perhaps most important of all was the realization that it gave all participants, of belonging to a national army that could, and did, meet the requirement of the moment, modest though it may have been. Soldiers thrive on regimental allegiance, but the experience of a shared event like the Tercentenary brought out the best in competition and mutual respect. It could, perhaps, be argued that the success of the Quebec Tercentenary in 1908 was an essential preliminary exercise for the achievements at Valcartier a mere six years later, which, had it failed, would have had far-reaching consequences for the country and its subsequent sense of identity.

Bibliographic Note

This account is based in the main upon the following sources:

Otter Papers, Canadian War Museum.

Official Program of the Quebec Tercentenary.

Desmond Morton, *The Canadian General: Sir William Otter* (Toronto: Hakkert, 1974). This book provides a lively description of the actual parade and readers are recommended to read his chapter "Quebec, 1900-1908."

Arnold Warren, *Wait for the Waggon: The Story of the Royal Canadian Army Service Corps* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1961).

<p>Mark Reid is Exhibitions Planner at the Canadian War Museum.</p>
