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The Road to the Cobourg Court Room

New Material from the Archives of the Canadian War Museum on the Sir Arthur Currie - Sir Sam Hughes Dispute, 1918-19

Barbara Wilson

The post-First World War dispute between Sir Sam Hughes, Minister of Militia and Defence from October 1911 to November 1916 and Sir Arthur Currie, General Officer Commanding the Canadian Corps from 9 June 1917 to the end of the war, must be one of the least dignified episodes in Canadian military history. Hughes, although very energetic, was also erratic and arbitrary and was fired by Prime Minister Sir Robert Borden for his inefficient administration of the Canadian military forces overseas.¹ Currie, on the other hand, led the Canadian Corps in a stunning series of successes: Hill 70, Passchendaele, Amiens, the Drocourt-Quéant Line, the Canal du Nord, and the final entry into the Belgian town of Mons on the last day of the war. He has, indeed, been viewed by historians as one of the war's most capable field commanders and, arguably, as Canada's greatest native-born military commander.²

Although Currie owed his initial appointment as a brigade commander at the start of the war to Hughes, the two men came eventually to clash on many issues. Possibly what rankled Hughes the most, however, was Currie's refusal, after becoming Corps commander, to appoint Hughes's son, Garnet, to command the 1st Canadian Division, the command of which which Currie himself had recently vacated. In place of Garnet Hughes, Currie, secured the appointment of Brigadier-General Archibald Macdonnell, who was more experienced and, in Currie's view, more able.³



Garnet Hughes had commanded a brigade in France until he was promoted to command the 5th Canadian Division as a major-general upon its formation in England in February 1917. Sir Sam Hughes had provided for the creation of this division, and even a later 6th, when he was Minister of Militia and Defence and he planned for it to take the field as a fighting formation with the Canadian Corps in France. Currie opposed this, as he believed that, at four divisions, the Canadian Corps had reached the size of maximum efficiency and sustainability. Currie's view prevailed and the 5th Division was broken up in February 1918, its personnel sent as reinforcements to units already at the front.⁴ This flaunting of Hughes's wishes, and probably especially the denial of a significant command to his son, led Hughes, possibly even before the war had ended, to begin a vitriolic campaign of denunciation against Currie. The corps commander was, he declared, a cowardly incompetent who had been frivolous with Canadian lives, particularly in the last Canadian action of the war, the entry into Mons.

Hughes made these attacks in Parliament, of which he remained a member until his death in 1921. Here, of course, he was protected by parliamentary privilege, which meant that Currie could take no action against him in the courts. But Currie, who left the army in July 1920 to become Principal of McGill University, continued to smart under the stigma of Hughes's attacks. Accordingly, when, in July 1927, the Port Hope

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Lieutenant-General Sir Arthur Currie,
Commander of the Canadian Corps,
1917-1918

newspaper, the *Evening Guide*, published an attack on him that was essentially a reiteration of Hughes's calumnies. Currie sued. The resulting highly publicized libel trial, which was held in Cobourg, Ontario, lasted from 16 April to 1 May 1928, and has been brilliantly dissected by Robert J. Sharpe in his book, *The Last Day, the Last Hour*. Currie won the judgement, but the award was small and the stress great, resulting in his suffering a complete nervous collapse soon afterwards. There can be no doubt that the trial's effects helped to hasten Currie's death at the age of 57 on 30 November 1933.⁵

The Archives of the Canadian War Museum hold a small collection of Currie's papers, given to it by Currie's son, Garner, in 1980. This collection contains some interesting letters relating to the above events that have not previously been seen by researchers and have not yet appeared in print. In particular, they cast some new and interesting light on Currie's reaction to Hughes's charges while Currie, still overseas in the army, was forced to stand by relatively helplessly as the attacks spewed forth in parliament. The correspondence reveals his sense of impotent rage both at the charges themselves and also at the failure of government to take a firm stand on his behalf. Their publication will help researchers to better understand why, six years later and against

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Sir Sam Hughes
Minister of Militia and Defence,
October 1911 to November 1916

the advice of many, Currie jumped at the chance to achieve redress when the attacks were made unambiguously in the public forum of the Port Hope newspaper.

During the last Hundred Days (actually 96) of the Great War, the Canadian Corps under Currie's command achieved one outstanding success after another. Between 8 August and 11 November 1918 it liberated 228 cities, towns, and villages and penetrated over 80 miles of enemy territory in five separate offensives: Amiens, Arras, Canal du Nord, Cambrai, and the drive through Valenciennes to Mons.⁶ The cost was high – some 42,000 casualties including, on the last day of the fighting, one dead and 15 wounded.⁷

Sir Sam Hughes had other views of these events, both with regard to the conduct of the campaign and to the casualty rate, that were extremely negative. On 4 March 1919, in a broad ranging discussion of the Canadian Corps that occupies 16 pages in *Hansard* he launched a bitter attack on Currie. Here, he read out a letter that he had written to Prime Minister Borden dated 1 October 1918 whilst the Canadians were advancing towards Cambrai (they did not enter the city itself until 7 October) wherein he sought to draw Borden's attentions to "the useless

massacre of our Canadian boys." "I have on other occasions," he continued in his letter,

drawn your attention to massacres at Lens, Passchendaele, etc. where the only apparent object was to glorify the General in command, and make it impossible, through butchery, to have a Fifth and Sixth Division and two Army Corp.

In the present case, however, around Cambrai, It seems simply a case of 'bull-head' and sending up our gallant lads against positions swarming with machine-guns, and without our boys being properly supported by tanks, or guns, to destroy these machine gun positions....

I have no details other than general and special reports, but I know the locality thoroughly and any General who would undertake to attack Cambrai by suburb or street fighting should be tried by court martial.

I think the time has arrived when you should assert yourself along positive lines, demand the removal of incompetents and have this needless slaughter – for I can call it nothing else – of our Canadian lads stopped.⁸

In fact, when they got there, the Canadians found that the Germans had abandoned Cambrai and there was no street fighting at all.

But it was the supposed waste of Canadian lives in the taking of Mons on 10-11 November that evoked his most bitter condemnations.

I have only this to say....Were I in authority, the officer who, four hours before the Armistice was signed, and although he had been notified beforehand that the Armistice was to begin at eleven o'clock, ordered the attack on Mons thus needlessly sacrificing the lives of Canadian soldiers, would be tried summarily by court martial and punished so far as the law would allow. There was no glory to be gained, and you cannot find one Canadian soldier returning from France who will not curse the name of the officer who ordered the attack on Mons.⁹

Although members were used to Hughes's tirades, they were especially shocked by this attack and worried about the possible effect on grieving families of his accusation that soldiers' lives were needlessly wasted. In fact, records were available at the time proving that only one soldier was killed and another 15 wounded on the last day of the war in Mons. Apparently, though, no one in parliament bothered to check into the matter at the time of Hughes's attack. (The dead soldier was the unfortunate Private George Lawrence Price of the 28th Battalion who, despite warnings from local citizens, stepped into an open street three minutes before the eleven o'clock armistice and was shot in the right breast by a German sniper. Medical personnel rushed to his aid but he died a few moments later, the last Canadian and possibly the last Allied fatality of the war.¹⁰)

Canadians in Cambrai, 9 October 1919. That the soldiers are moving so openly shows their lack of concern about enemy small arms fire, of which there was none, since the Germans had abandoned the town.



NAC PA 3270

NAC PA 3524



Currie, in front on a charger, takes the salute during the victory parade in Mons in the afternoon of 1 November. The Canadians had capture the town the previous night and morning, with casualties on the 11th numbering 1 dead and 15 wounded.

The opposition was not prepared to lose opportunity to attack the government. Joseph Read, the Liberal member for Prince, Prince Edward Island, was the next to speak after Hughes. He described the former minister's criticism as the most "terrible indictment of any government in this country" and proclaimed that "The hon. Gentleman will have to be replied to from his own side of the House, and from the front benches of his own side of the house."¹¹

Sir Robert Borden and the Minister of Overseas Military Forces of Canada, Sir Edward Kemp, were in Europe and no other members of the cabinet rose to Currie's defence. Whether they were intimidated by Hughes or remained silent because they knew any response to his rants would be futile is uncertain. Whatever the reason, the defence of Currie was left to private members. The first to speak was the relatively minor Unionist MP Richard Clive Cooper, member for South Vancouver, a former major with the 7th Battalion who had fought at 2nd Ypres and Messines before being invalided home with shell-shock. (After the election of October 1917, Borden's government, besides Conservatives, also included a large number of Liberal and Independent MPs pledged to a strong prosecution of the war effort. The government called itself "Unionist" and its members were referred to as "Unionists.")

Currie's principal defender, however, was formidable Lieutenant-Colonel Cyrus Peck, another Unionist MP, who had only recently returned from overseas where, in September 1918, he had won the Victoria Cross for his gallantry in the battle for the Drocourt-Quéant Line.¹² In his maiden speech in parliament on 14

March he took the opportunity to come to the defence of Currie, saying that he considered him

to be one of the great Canadians, and one of the great commanders we have had in this war....I hope that the Canadian Parliament and the Canadian people will reward and pay fitting tribute to Sir Arthur Currie and all those distinguished commanders who led us in the field.¹³

Meanwhile, Currie, who was still carrying out duties overseas, was being informed by friends in the House of Hughes's attacks. Their letters and copies of Currie's replies are amongst the collection of Currie papers at the Canadian War Museum. To Robert F. Green, the Conservative MP for Kootenay West in British Columbia, Currie wrote on 30 March:

Just now it appears that there are some (Canadians) who do not want to hear the truth about what the Corps did. They prefer to spend their time in uttering most malicious and vicious lies about matters concerning which they know very, very little. I am surprised that the House of Commons sat and listened to what it recently heard. Sam Hughes says I ordered the attack on Mons four hours before the Armistice was to come into effect, or at seven o'clock on the morning of November 11th. As a matter of fact I knew at five o'clock in the morning that Mons had been captured during the night. The casualties were very small indeed. But the most amazing statement is the one where he says I deliberately slaughtered the Canadians in order that the Fifth Division would have to be broken up to supply the necessary reinforcements. As his son commanded the Fifth Division, a Division created solely that his son might be made a Major General, discloses to everyone the reason for Sam's animosity. I did not think any constituency

Lieutenant-Colonel Cyrus Peck after being invested with his Victoria Cross, January 1919. Peck was one of Currie's biggest supporters.

in Canada would be content to have as its member a man who would do such a cowardly, mean and vicious thing, yet apparently that is what one must look for in politics, and that is why I never hope to enter public life.¹⁴

That same day, Currie wrote to Cyrus Peck to thank him for being such a "sturdy defender," asked him to send a copy of *Hansard* containing his speech, and solicited his "opinion of the view taken by Members of Parliament with reference to Hughes' [sic] speech." He also asked for Peck's advice on how he should

deal with the matter when I get out of khaki. Until that time comes, it seems to me that I must look to the Government for protection, yet I have not yet seen where any member of the Government has raised his voice above a whisper in my defence.¹⁵

Peck replied to Currie on 8 April, reporting that Hughes's speech

caused a considerable sensation, but I think that nearly everyone was quite disgusted. I was interviewed by the press and denied the unnecessary loss of life in Cambrai and Mons.

I also intimated I would reply to Sam. It was several days before I could get on as other speakers bobbed up. Several of the Ministers egged me on to go after Sam. As a matter of fact Sam had the whole bunch so "buffaloed" and everybody seemed to be scared of him. On Apr 3rd I moved the adjournment of the House which meant that I was to speak the first thing on the following afternoon. The House was packed as well as the galleries. I got a very fine reception when I arose to speak from both sides and was able to draw the applause of both sides frequently during my speech.

As you will see I went after Sam hammer and tongs, and the poor old boy sat dumbfounded....

I really think that some of the ministers might have replied to him especially after I had spoken....

I may say that I received shoals of congratulations from every side of the House and from all over the country. Sam has said nothing since and has tamed down to a remarkable extent....

I really can't understand why a man such as he, who was considered a joke in the army, can be taken at all seriously by anyone.

I have no doubt now that a deliberate campaign of misrepresentation and falsehood was



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instituted against you and that the most untruthful statements were spread about in regard to yourself in a cold-blooded attempt to ruin your reputation.

However I am convinced that it will come to naught, and that it will rebound on those who started it.¹⁶

Currie replied to Peck on 25 April:

With you, I felt a disappointment that no member of the Government took issue with Sir Sam Hughes. I am looking forward to such action being taken by the Prime Minister on his return. I am still a servant of the Government, and naturally look to them for protection. I am not going to demand any Courts of Enquiry, but I would welcome any Court of Enquiry if the Government desire to have one.¹⁷

He also indicated that he was going to have a statement prepared relating to the casualties incurred since the beginning of 1916 which would "prove conclusively that in the last hundred days of the war our casualties were small."¹⁸

Meanwhile, Currie remained hopeful that someone in the government would come to his defence. As he wrote to the MP, J.K. Burnham on 6 May, in thanking him for a note of support:

I am not going to become involved in any quarrel with [Sir Sam Hughes], though I expect that some member of the Government will give the House some information which will prove how unjust,



Currie gives instructions to a couple of officers in field exercises, September 1917. This photo shows well his celebrated pear-shaped figure.

Brigade when the latter departed for England to take the command of the 5th Division. Griesbach had recently given a speech defending Currie at the Canadian Club in Toronto. Currie wrote to thank him on 8 July and added the following words of faint hope:

I do not know whether the Prime Minister or Kemp will have anything to say in the House of Commons. Kemp, you know, is already on the way there, and I understand that Borden should say something, as, up to the present, no Minister of the

Government, whose servant I am, has yet said a word in my defence. ... I believe that it is not a wise thing to prolong a controversy of this kind.²⁰

Sir Edward Kemp finally arrived back in the House on 12 May when he tabled the report of the Overseas Military Forces of Canada. In answering questions on the Report on 27 May he finally spoke out on the recent controversy. "General Currie," he said,

has made a high place for himself in history; he measures up to a proud standard as compared with other great generals of the war; he was ever considerate of the men under him and always exercised patience in dealing with problems which came before him.²¹

Kemp claimed that these words expressed his "unbounded confidence in General Currie." But in retrospect they seem rather guarded and muted as a description of the general who led Canadian troops to their greatest achievements in history and gained them plaudits as one of the most finely honed military formations on the Western Front. And no other member of the government even attempted to defend Currie from Hughes's charges. What explains their timidity is difficult to ascertain, unless, as Colonel Peck had charged, Hughes had them completely "buffaloed."

Hope remained that Prime Minister Sir Robert Borden, might rectify the situation once he

Left to right, Sir Sam Hughes, his son Garnet Hughes and Sir Sam's brother, St. Pierre Hughes.



unfair, uncalled for and contemptible his charges are.

Sir Edward Kemp has left here two days ago for Ottawa, and is in a position to give facts to the House which ought to enlighten the members and the country generally on a good many points.¹⁹

In July Currie heard from his old colleague Major-General W.A. Griesbach, who had succeeded Garnet Hughes in command of 1st

Sir Arthur Currie walking towards the court room, April 1928.

returned from the Peace Conference then underway at Versailles in France. Doubtless Currie and his supporters waited expectantly as Borden rose to address the House on 7 July. "There has been a whisper [sic] of criticism," he declared,

that [Currie] was not sufficiently mindful of his duty to safeguard lives of those under under his command. In my judgement no criticism would be more unjust. ... No General at the front more fully realized that solemn duty [to avoid needless sacrifice of soldiers' lives] and during the last eighteen months there was no General whose judgement was more fully respected, none whose ability and thoroughness were more relied upon, than he who then commanded the Canadian Corps.²²

Although slightly more fulsome than Kemp's, even this support seems slightly half-hearted and underwhelming. As his correspondence with Peck, Griesbach, and others, shows, Currie expected much more and spoiled for a fight. The road to the Cobourg court room beckoned.

Notes

1. As thoroughly documented in Desmond Morton, *A Peculiar Kind of Politics: Canada's Overseas Ministry in the First World War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982).
2. See A.M.J. Hyatt, *General Sir Arthur Currie: A Military Biography* (Toronto: Canadian War Museum and University of Toronto Press, 1987); Daniel Dancocks, *Sir Arthur Currie: A Biography* (Toronto: Methuen, 1985). For an extremely positive appraisal of Currie from a non-Canadian, see Denis Winter, *Haig's Command: A Reassessment* (London: Penguin, 1991), pp.271-272. Winter states that Currie's capture of the Drocourt-Quéant Switch "remains one of the British army's single greatest achievements on the Western Front."
3. See Hyatt, *Currie*, p.70.
4. G.W.L. Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1919* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1962), pp.230-232.
5. Robert J. Sharpe, *The Last Day, the Last Hour: the Currie Libel Trial* (Agincourt, Ont.: Osgoode Society, 1988), pp.238-240, 244-246.
6. Hyatt, *Currie*, p.119.
7. In the Official history, Nicholson states that, "by First World War standards [these were] not excessive in the light of their task." Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force* p.460.
8. House of Commons Debates, 4 March 1919, p.219. This letter can be confusing, as it can be read to confer to the taking of Cambrai, which did not take place until a



City of Toronto Archives SC266 item13157

week later. It has to be seen as referring to the Cambrai campaign generally and to the expectation of future losses in street fighting.

9. *Ibid.* p.219.
10. Sharpe, *Last Day, Last Hour*, p.116.
11. House of Commons Debates, 4 March 1919, p.219.
12. Peck's decorations and medals are held by the Canadian War Museum.
13. House of Commons Debates, 14 March 1919 p.467.
14. Canadian War Museum 58A 1 62.1, Currie to R.F. Green, 30 March 1919.
15. *Ibid.* Currie to Lt. Col. Peck, 30 March 1919.
16. *Ibid.* Lt. Col. Peck to Currie, 8 April 1919.
17. *Ibid.* Currie to Peck, 25 April 1919.
18. *Ibid.* Currie to Peck, 25 April 1919. Possibly here Currie could be accused of exaggerating somewhat. While, as Nicholson has pointed out, these casualties by the standards of the time, may not have been excessive, they were still, with the Canadian Corps continuously on the offensive, the largest it experienced in a comparable amount of time on the Western Front. "Not excessive" or even "acceptable" perhaps, but arguably "small" was an injudicious choice of words.
19. *Ibid.* Currie to J.H. Burnham, 6 May 1919.
20. *Ibid.* Currie to Major-General W.A. Griesbach, 8 May 1919.
21. House of Commons Debates, 27 May 1919 p, 2856.
22. *Ibid.* 7 July 1919 p.4697.

Barbara Wilson, retired archivist from the National Archives of Canada, edited and wrote the introduction to *Ontario and the First World War: a Collection of Documents*, Champlain Society, 1977, and is the co-author, with C.P. Stacey, of *The Half-Million: the Canadians in Britain, 1939-1946*, Toronto, 1987. She presently volunteers in the Archives of the Canadian War Museum.