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Provincial Patterns of Enlistment in the Canadian Expeditionary Force

Jonathan F. Vance

In Canada during the First World War, few topics provoked such heated discussion as enlistment figures. Especially when voluntary recruiting started to stall and pressure for conscription grew, determining if each province was putting its fair share of men into uniform became a matter of huge importance. Everyone, it seemed, had an opinion on where the men of the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) were coming from (or should be coming from), and most of them could muster the statistics to prove their argument. They lobbed figures around like Mills bombs, in the House of Commons, at recruiting meetings, in the pages of Canada's newspapers and magazines. Although the villain of the piece, as any good Anglo-Canadian knew, was Quebec, other provinces with supposedly lower enlistment rates did not escape the scrutiny of the pro-conscriptionists.

The advent of conscription in 1917 did little to soothe the bitterness and acrimony, although the successful conclusion of the war the following year had some calming influence. But before long, the critics were back at it, using whatever platform they could to argue that some provinces had not done their bit when the fate of the world hung in the balance. In the House of Commons, John Wesley Edwards, the fire-breathing MP from Frontenac in eastern Ontario, was fond of turning virtually any debate into a discussion of Quebec's failure to supply enough men in the nation's hour of need. In March 1919, for example, he used the occasion of the governor-general's throne speech to point out that Military District 5 (Quebec City) had the lowest number of enlistments of any military district in Canada, and that the entire constituency of Kamouraska polled only 15 soldier votes in the 1917 election. So that no one missed the point, he entered into the record

statistics for enlistment by province, arguing that Ontario and the west were forced to pick up the slack because Quebec and the Maritime provinces failed to put enough men into uniform.¹

At the same time, a few voices appealed for restraint. J. Castell Hopkins, the influential editor of the *Canadian Annual Review*, argued that enlistment figures could not be examined in a vacuum, and that socio-cultural factors had to be weighed.² Historian William H.C. Wood agreed, saying that the low enlistment rate in Quebec was linked to the high marriage rate in the province.³ Frank Carrel, the editor of the *Quebec Telegraph*, said that opposition to enlistment in Quebec was much exaggerated and argued that if all factors could be taken into consideration, the rates of enlistment across the country would show much less variance than most people assumed.⁴ There was one point, however, on which Hopkins, Wood, and Carrel, agreed with Edwards: the available statistics for enlistment by province were generally accurate.

In an effort to understand the shape of Canada's war effort (and perhaps to determine if there was indeed any truth to the charges that had been flying around), the Department of Militia and Defence undertook a massive accounting exercise after the war to gather data from the service records and produce a statistical profile of the CEF. For all its flaws, the study was an enormous achievement, for it distilled the service records of over 600,000 volunteers and conscripts into a series of tables that revealed, for example, how many Presbyterians were in the CEF, how many fisherman, and how many widowers.⁵ The study provided, apparently, the definitive statistical analysis of Canada's war effort in human terms.

Since then, historians have used the results, as well as other figures generated during the war, as the basis for analysis. They have been particularly interested in the provincial breakdown of enlistment statistics. One of the first calculations of enlistment by province was buried in the Sessional Papers of 1919. C.P. Stacey reprinted the figures in *Canada and the Age of Conflict* in 1977, but even before that, invidious distinctions between provinces had become a staple of the narrative of the First World War. In his 1944 history *Dominion of the North*, Donald Creighton noted that “the prairies [were] more eager than the Atlantic seaboard” when it came to enlistment.⁶ “Some 200,000 volunteers came from Ontario, but only some 50,000 from Quebec, and of these latter, large numbers were English-speaking,” wrote Arthur Lower two years later.⁷ In 1983, Christopher Sharpe produced the most sophisticated analysis yet attempted. His most important contribution, however, was in refining the population data to account for that proportion of the population that was not eligible for military service; his analysis, like all others, was based on the standard set of figures taken from the Sessional Papers and A.F. Duguid’s official history.

That the same arguments still prevail – as Margaret Conrad and Alvin Finkel put it in an example from a recent publication, “men in Ontario and the west were more likely to sign up than those from the Maritimes and Quebec”⁸ – suggests a tacit admission on the part of historians that Sharpe had provided statistical proof for what had long been the conventional wisdom. The provincial ranking was so widely accepted that attention has focussed, not on the ranking itself, but on why certain provinces appeared where they did in the hierarchy. The order was taken on faith; all that remained was to explain why some provinces contributed a large percentage of their eligible adult male population, while others contributed a smaller percentage.

There is only one problem with the figures on which these analyses have been based: they say nothing at all about the provincial origins of the men of the CEF. Every analysis relies on the data compiled by the Department of Militia and Defence immediately after the war. The department used a simple system (the Hollerith system) that collected information in 23 categories, including birthplace, age upon enlistment, religion, and

rank upon discharge. One piece of information was conspicuously absent: place of residence. The forms used by Militia and Defence at the beginning of the war did not ask recruits where they lived; only when the forms were revised in 1915 was a place of residence line added. When it came time to collect the statistical data at the end of the war, the department had no choice but to omit any accounting of place of residence. However, historians have failed to take note of this critical distinction. Perhaps assuming that one would enlist close to one’s home, they have used place of enlistment as a proxy for place of residence. The federal government in 1919, C.P. Stacey in 1977, and Christopher Sharpe in 1983 all used the same figures to tell us that some 54,000 men from Manitoba enlisted, but all the figures reveal is that some 54,000 men enlisted in Manitoba.

Furthermore, the division of Canada into military districts for administrative purposes makes accounting very difficult, as Stacey and Sharpe were careful to point out. It is not possible, for example, simply to add up the totals for MD1 (London), MD2 (Toronto), and MD3 (Kingston) to produce a figure for Ontario enlistments. MD3 took in four sparsely populated counties of western Quebec, while enlistments from northern Ontario were credited to MD10 (Winnipeg). Prince Edward Island was part of MD6 (Halifax), while the Yukon was part of MD11 (Victoria). Sharpe wrote in 1983 that such confusion was “irremediable”; it certainly was then, but it is not now.⁹ This research project is an effort to provide that remedy.

The majority of attestation papers (the forms completed by each soldier upon enlistment) are available on the Library and Archives Canada website, so it is a simple matter to collect the required information. Only the places of residence and enlistment will be used for this project, but other data will be collected in the database, including place of birth, address of next-of-kin, occupation, and literacy (other information, especially date of birth, religion, and previous military experience, is not sufficiently reliable to warrant collecting). In this way, the database can be used in the future by other scholars.

Research assistants will collect data on all volunteers and conscripts who were part of the CEF and compile a series of nominal

rolls, arranged by unit. Once the anomalies have been researched (the most significant being multiple enlistments – in such cases, it seems reasonable to use the first enlistment when counting place of residence), it is a matter of tallying the individuals from each unit who resided in each province and, using the excellent figures that Sharpe has produced for the male population in each province that was eligible for military service, determining the enlistment rate by province.

The project will provide a flexible research tool that can be used to test long-held assumptions, or provide new answers to old questions. For instance, the statistics have long revealed that there were many US-born men in the CEF – this was made clear in Militia and Defence's first statistical breakdown – but no effort has been made to establish the number of US residents in the CEF. In the table from the Sessional Papers of 1919, the enlistments from the nine provinces add up to 100 per cent of the national total; there is no place for a member of the CEF who resided outside of Canada at the time of enlistment. We have long assumed, based on anecdotal evidence, that such individuals existed, but no estimates have been made as to the size of the group. This project will provide the answer and, although it is far too early to conjecture, the trend is interesting. Of the sample so far (roughly 20,000 names have been fully processed), about 10 per cent of recruits listed themselves as US residents; many of these men were born in Canada or the British Isles, but there is a substantial number with no apparent connection to Canada. They are clustered in a few areas: the Niagara peninsula, Windsor and Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, Winnipeg and environs, and the lower mainland of British Columbia. The impact of this trend, should it persist, on the provincial rankings could be significant.

Manitoba, British Columbia, and Ontario sit atop the hierarchy, but where will they stand if we remove from the calculations tens of thousands of volunteers who did not reside in these provinces?

There are also two small but statistically significant groups that must be accounted for. One group consisted of non-Canadian residents who enlisted, primarily in Vancouver, Saint John, Halifax, and Sydney. Many of these men were apparently merchant seaman who were paid off at the end of a voyage and, rather than finding another ship, elected to join the CEF instead. Finally, there was a smaller, but still not insignificant group who listed themselves as having no fixed address (this does not include men who gave their residence as a hotel or YMCA, and who were also likely itinerant labourers). With a country that had a large mobile labour force, such as Canada, this is to be expected.

Quite apart from the enlistment of non-Canadian residents, the core of the study is an attempt to determine the degree to which place of enlistment can stand as proxy for place of residence. In short, do the statistics generated by Militia and Defence, and used by historians ever since, provide a reasonable approximation of the provincial origins of the men of the CEF?

Again, it is far too early to draw any firm conclusions, but early indications are suggestive and some significant trends have begun to emerge. The figure for Manitoba, which headed Sharpe's list, seems to be inflated by large numbers of recruits who lived in the United States and northern Ontario. There appear to have been considerably more Quebec residents in the CEF than the number of enlistments in Quebec would suggest, because Ottawa drew men from the Gatineaus, while northern New Brunswick drew men from the Gaspé. The figures

for the Maritimes are the most jumbled, because the shorter distances meant that it was easy to enlist in a province where one did not live; indeed, the three Maritime provinces seem to have the highest proportion of recruits whose place of residence was in a different province than the place of enlistment.

The project should also shed light on other matters, such as the notion that the CEF was predominantly urban in composition. "The towns were readier than the countryside," observed Donald Creighton in 1957, an observation that has been repeated by many historians over the past 50 years.¹⁰ But we simply do not know whether volunteers were urban or rural, because we do not know where they came from. Have we assumed that most of them were *from* the cities because most of them enlisted *in* the cities? Furthermore, by cross-referencing the database with information in the 1911 census, it should be possible to understand the ethno-cultural composition of the CEF. In 1935, L.R. LaFlèche, then the deputy-minister of National Defence, advised historian Elizabeth Armstrong that it would never be possible to make "any precise, accurate or authentic statement as to the number of French Canadians who served" in the CEF.¹¹ Once this research is complete, it should be possible to make such a statement.

The project has many obstacles, not the least of which is determining the place of residence of the nearly 200,000 men who enlisted in the CEF before the revised attestation forms came into use.¹² This task is far from insurmountable, although it will demand an extraordinary amount of digging. Also, some records are missing, not only from the LAC database but from the CEF service record collection as a whole; although the number is not likely to be large, it will prove very difficult to capture these individuals and add them to the totals. Finally, it is even possible that, in the long run, the old errors will cancel each other out and leave us with a hierarchy that is substantially similar to the one that existed before.¹³

Still, the blocks in the road are far outweighed by the potential value of this research tool. For certain provinces to have been demonized for supposedly low levels of enlistment is unfortunate; for them to have been demonized on faulty evidence is doubly so. The project will

allow us to gain, for the first time, an accurate picture of the provincial origins of the Canadian Expeditionary Force. Only with an understanding of where the CEF came from can we begin to advance some firm conclusions about the social, cultural, and demographic character of Canada's contribution to the First World War.¹⁴

Notes

1. House of Commons, Debates, 6 March 1919, p.258.
2. J. Castell Hopkins, *Canada at War, 1914-1918: A Record of Heroism and Achievement* (New York: George H. Doran, 1919), pp.269, 294.
3. William H.C. Wood, *Behind the Scenes of Canadian War History* (Sackville, NB: The Argosy [Mount Allison University] 4/1 [June 1926]), p.42.
4. Frank Carrel, *Our French Canadian Friends: Address Delivered Before the Canadian Society of New York, February 1920* (Quebec: Telegraph Print, 1920), p.9.
5. See Desmond Morton, *When Your Number's Up: The Canadian Soldier in the First World War* (Toronto: Random House, 1993), appendix.
6. Donald Creighton, *Dominion of the North: A History of Canada* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1957 [1944]), p.448.
7. Arthur R.M. Lower, *Colony to Nation: A History of Canada*, 4th edition (Toronto: Longmans Canada, 1964 [1946]), p.470.
8. Margaret Conrad and Alvin Finkel, *Canada: A National History* (Toronto: Longman, 2003), p.364.
9. Christopher A. Sharpe, "Enlistment in the Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1918: A Regional Analysis," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 18 (1983-84), p.16.
10. Creighton, *Dominion of the North*, 448; see, for example, Robert Bothwell, Ian Drummond, and John English, *Canada 1900-1945* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), p.144.
11. Quoted in Elizabeth H. Armstrong, *The Crisis of Quebec, 1914-18* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1937), p.248.
12. I have relied here on Richard Holt, a doctoral candidate at the University of Western Ontario, for his knowledge of the enlistment process. His dissertation, on manning and reinforcing the CEF, will be the most in-depth analysis of this important subject.
13. The other part of the project, a statistical analysis of Canadians who served outside of the CEF, will be the subject of a future research note.
14. I am grateful to Tim Cook, Serge Durflinger, J.L. Granatstein, Richard Holt, Marc Milner, and Brent Wilson for their suggestions on the project.

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