

Geoff Keelan. *Duty to Dissent: Henri Bourassa and the First World War*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2019. Pp. 273.

Duty to Dissent, the first book written by historian Geoff Keelan, assesses how the influential, passionate and deeply conservative ultramontane journalist Henri Bourassa viewed the war to end all wars as it happened. Bourassa, “the most important intellectual in Quebec,”¹ charted a tangled path from cautious supporter of Canada’s First World War effort to zealous advocate of international peace, giving a vital voice to francophone Quebec opinion throughout.

While the work is organised chronologically so that the reader may best assess the trajectory of the subject’s thinking, *Duty to Dissent* takes the conscription crisis, which in Bourassa’s view shattered the “compact” between English and French Canada (p. 153), as its starting point. This book is recommended for readers seeking a deeper understanding of Quebec during the First World War, as well as those wishing to explore Catholic conservative thought and the peace brokerage efforts of the Union of Democratic Control, Lord Lansdowne and Pope Benedict XV.

Keelan acknowledges that “[i]t is somewhat unusual for an English-speaking Canadian historian to offer a detailed study of a French Canadian nationalist” (p. 7), but, to the work’s abiding credit, it embraces the task. Keelan’s outsider lens, buttressed by flawless translations of his own which make Bourassa’s writings accessible to anglophone readers, gives a new and valuable perspective on his subject. While Bourassa is not the towering historiographical figure he once was, as evidenced by a selected bibliography heavily weighted towards publications from the 1970s or earlier, Keelan is boldly following in some huge footsteps.²

¹ Réal Bélanger, “BOURASSA, HENRI,” in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, Volume 18 (Toronto and Québec: University of Toronto Press and Presses de l’Université Laval, 2003), accessed 28 January 2022, http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/bourassa_henri_18E.html.

² See Robert Rumilly, *Henri Bourassa: La vie publique d’un grand Canadien* (Montréal: Éditions Chantecler, 1953); and Réal Bélanger, *Henri Bourassa: Le fascinat destin d’un homme libre (1868-1914)* (Québec: Presses de l’Université Laval, 2004). It will be intriguing to see how Keelan’s work influences the forthcoming second volume of Bélanger’s biography.

What might Canadian military historians find appealing about this work? The general contours of the story will be familiar, but the specific details—and Keelan’s in-depth and accessible analysis—will be new to many readers. There is no insight into Canadian soldiers fighting overseas, as Bourassa devoted scant attention to operations, but the book does test numerous overarching ideas about the conflict. For instance, the dominant narrative sees participation in the First World War as the birth of Canadian independence, but Bourassa did not need Vimy Ridge to understand that Canada was his only country. His is the most distinctly Canadian reaction to the war, a response hyperaware of the dangers of militarism—which in Bourassa’s trenchant opinion was both the real cause of the conflict and the reason its destruction persisted for so long.

Henri Bourassa was already established as the most prominent Canadian anti-imperialist before August 1914, a role fortified by his editorial control of *Le Devoir*, the Montreal daily newspaper he founded in 1910. Although *Le Devoir* had a contemporary subscription base of only 15,000, its status as French Quebec’s newspaper of record meant that Bourassa’s wartime editorials, which the book builds its wider analyses around, were read by those who mattered.

From the beginning, Bourassa dared to ask: how is the war in Canada’s national interest? *Duty to Dissent* provides a primer on Quebec’s unique response that covers the execution of Louis Riel, the Manitoba Schools Question, the South African War, the naval debates and Ontario’s Regulation 17. These events saw French language education systematically dismantled west of Quebec and *Canadien* opinions on international affairs marginalised, crucial context for Bourassa’s actions from 1914 to 1918.

The book’s examination of those actions emphasises stark polarisation. Imperialists embarking on a noble crusade insisted that Bourassa questioned the war, *prima facie*, because he was a francophone—and thus supposedly cowardly, disloyal and stupid—not because there were good reasons to oppose it. Bourassa responded in kind, even though likening Ontario to Prussia, decrying “the persecutors of Schleswig, Ukraine, and French Ontario!” (p. 81) and excoriating the “Toronto Huns” (p. 109) alienated his potential allies in English Canada.

At the core of Bourassa’s thinking was his fear that the war would reduce the country to a British vassal, destroying French Canada in the process. His wartime efforts on behalf of French language

education rights in Ontario, dismissed by anglophones as unworthy of discussion in the midst of global conflagration, only confirmed his worst suspicions. His cry that “[i]f equality and liberty were worth dying for in the trenches of Europe, then surely they were worth defending in Canada as well” (p. 79) presented an uncomfortable truth his fellow Canadians preferred to ignore.

Bourassa publicly renounced his support for the war in January 1916, an act that only prompted louder accusations of “treason” from English Canada. While he scored points in the public debate that followed with his cousin, Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry Captain Talbot Papineau, Bourassa could not understand the viewpoint from the trenches—nor did he want to because he believed the conflict to be morally wrong. A staunch ultramontanist, Bourassa also proselytised the appeals for peace made by Pope Benedict XV with an unflagging urgency that is a major focus of the book.

Indeed, the work stresses that Bourassa was more than a domestic commentator, that the breadth of his vision exceeded parochial Canadian concerns. In fact, until early 1917, his views were akin to those of the neutral American government. Given that Bourassa had been partly educated in the US, where he had perfected his fluent English, and regularly travelled there (he spent the fall and winter of 1916-17 in the country), *Duty to Dissent* devotes comparatively little attention to this similarity.

Keelan nevertheless skillfully charts how Bourassa grew ever more bitter as the killing continued, all while claiming that his country had egregiously lost its way. However, the March 1918 Quebec City riots essentially put an end to his wartime writing. The combination of the heavy hand of state censorship and his own horror at the breakdown of public order kept him mute as Canada teetered on the very brink of civil conflict. Without editorials to draw on, the work says little about the centrally important period when the war finally came to an end.

Overall, while *Duty to Dissent* does not hesitate to criticise its subject, it could certainly do more. Bourassa’s views on women were reactionary even for their time and place—a fierce enemy of women’s suffrage, the War Time Elections Act prompted some of his

most extreme vitriol³—to say nothing of his odious contemporary comments about Jews.⁴

Henri Bourassa doggedly carried out the foundational journalistic service of interrogating the righteousness of public sentiment. Although he was a sententious thinker terrified of change, that he found much to lament remains relevant for our collective understanding of the First World War. He wanted—and got—confrontation and his vigorous writing forced English Canada to be aware of French Canadian rights, the dangers of militarism and the value of peace. As *Duty to Dissent* makes clear, Henri Bourassa could be angrily denounced, but he could never be ignored.

ANDREW THEOBALD, *INDEPENDENT RESEARCHER*

³ See Susan Mann Trofimenkoff, “Henri Bourassa and ‘The Woman Question,’” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 10 (1975): 3-11.

⁴ See Pierre Anctil, *Le Devoir, les Juifs et l’immigration: de Bourassa à Laurendeau* (Québec: Institut Québécois de Recherche sur la Culture, 1988), 38-39; Pierre Anctil, *À chacun ses Juifs: 60 éditoriaux pour comprendre la position du Devoir à l’égard des Juifs, 1910-1947* (Sillery: Septentrion, 2014), 31-38; and Ira Robinson, *A History of Antisemitism in Canada* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2015), 50-53.