

## “By Reason of Age and Necessity”: Pension Claims of Veterans of the War in South Africa

Amy Shaw

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



Part of the [Canadian History Commons](#), [Military History Commons](#), and the [Social History Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Shaw, Amy "“By Reason of Age and Necessity”: Pension Claims of Veterans of the War in South Africa." Canadian Military History 32, 1 ()

This Article 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](mailto:scholarscommons@wlu.ca).

# "By Reason of Age and Necessity"

## Pension Claims of Veterans of the War in South Africa

AMY SHAW

*Abstract: Under the War Veterans Allowance Act (1930) some veterans of the War in South Africa (1899-1902) became eligible for support from the Canadian government. The terms of eligibility and the discourse around granting these pension allowances echo debates during the war itself, with a focus on the men's physicality and an ambiguity about the country's relations with the British Empire. The act required both military service and impecunity of the veterans it proposed to assist. The veterans' interactions with the government, asserting both need and earned reward, position the Act as a significant point of transition in the country's discourse about what supports citizens had a right to expect from their government.*

**I**N SEPTEMBER OF 1939, M.J.B. wrote to the Minster of Pensions and National Health:

Dear Sir,

Kindly excuse me for taking the liberty of writing to you. I saw in the Legionary about south [sic] African Vets getting a pension. I get 10 shillings a week from the British but I am sorry to state it is not enough to live on I am practically starving I am getting on for 68 years of age

2 ∴ “By Reason of Age and Necessity”

and I can't work I have a son 28 unemployed so you can tell how I am getting along so I will be very pleased if you could do something for me.<sup>1</sup>

Thirty-seven years after it ended, and at the close of a decade of financial depression that brought Canada to its knees, M.J.B. heard rumours that his service in the War in South Africa might offer him a lifeline out of penury. Passed in 1930, the War Veterans Allowance Act was intended to provide a maintenance allowance to war veterans who, by reason of age or physical or mental disability, were no longer capable of maintaining themselves.<sup>2</sup> The claims to it made by veterans such as B., and the government's response to them, offer insight into Canadian understandings of the responsibilities of the government to its citizens in the first half of the twentieth century, the country's changing relationship to Britain, and life in Canada in the last years of the Great Depression.

The War in South Africa, also called the Second Anglo-Boer War, was fought between the British Empire and the South African republics of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State between 1899 and 1902. Canada joined the other British dominions to assist the mother country in what was, incorrectly it turned out, assumed to be a short and fairly easy war, that would bring new land and resources more firmly into the British Empire. While the War in South Africa was a “little war”<sup>3</sup> quickly overshadowed by the greater mobilisation and carnage of the First World War, it was significant for Canada. This was the first time Canada sent troops overseas, and much of the discourse around it, including debates in French and English Canada about what was owed the mother country, can be seen as something of a template for the issues that shaped Canadian participation in the First World War. The same holds true of the process of granting pensions to those who had served.

<sup>1</sup> M.J.B., [no pension number], reel 209, Veterans Affairs Canada [VAC] pension files, Laurier Military History Archive [LMHA].

<sup>2</sup> “Two main statutes provide for financial benefits for Canada's armed forces veterans: the Pension Act, R.S.C. 1985, c. P-6, and the War Veterans Allowance Act, R.S.C. 1985, c. W-3. ... The War Veterans Allowance Act, first enacted in 1930, provides special income-support benefits to veterans in need.” David Goetz, Library of Parliament, Law and Government Division, “Bill C-61: Amendments to Veterans Benefits Legislation.” <https://publications.gc.ca/collections/Collection-R/LoPBdP/LS/c61-e.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Carman Miller, *Canada's Little War: Fighting for the British Empire in Southern Africa 1899-1902* (Toronto: Lorimer, 2003).

The discussion around who merited a pension and why offers insight into the values and anxieties of the day. The conversation around what the veterans were owed for their service took place in the vivid context of the Great Depression. This meant two different species of obligation were at play—the recompense for military service intended only for a specific and limited group of Canadians, and the wider social contract that no one in a society should face absolute, starvation-level poverty. In providing support on both grounds, the pensions offered veterans of the South African War in the 1930s and 1940s can be seen as a bridge between the ideology of the nineteenth century that offered only charity to the deserving poor and the universalism of the welfare state that came into being after the Second World War.

When the War in South Africa ended the Canadian government responded to its veterans in some ways that followed its usual postwar behaviour. As thanks for their service, the government did for the soldiers of the War in South Africa what it had done for those who were part of the War of 1812, the Fenian Raids and the Northwest Rebellion by offering them land to farm. Under the Volunteer Bounty Act of 1908, veterans of the War in South Africa were entitled to 320 acres. It was generally in areas whose agricultural potential was quite marginal, and veterans, despite the cowboy image they often tried to portray overseas, were seldom farmers or ranchers.<sup>4</sup> Most who took advantage of this option chose to take scrip of \$160 rather than the land itself, or sold it to speculators.<sup>5</sup> The Canadian government preferred land as recognition and recompense rather than money as it was a commodity in which the country was richer, and because farmers, independent and hardworking, were considered to be the ideal kind of citizen. Giving land instead of money, training, or other kinds of support after demobilisation was also a favoured option because it was deemed to encourage self-sufficiency. Manliness was tied firmly

<sup>4</sup> Carman Miller has shown that the soldiers tended to be urban, white-collar workers. Carman Miller, "A Preliminary Analysis of the Socio-economic Composition of Canada's South African War Contingents," *Social History/Histoire Sociale* 8, 16 (1975): 219-37.

<sup>5</sup> 2.3 million acres in Alberta and Saskatchewan were made available to 7,340 veterans. Only 657 of them "even tried to become settlers." 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), 100. The land grant applications are held by Library and Archives Canada, (RG 38, vols. 117 to 136, nos. 1 to 7370).

to the ability to support oneself and one's family financially. That a veteran continued to do so after the war, despite what trauma and losses might have made that more difficult, was vital. It was important to the well-being of the individual and his dependents, as well as the larger community given the perceived national importance of fostering robust masculinity in its citizens. Those in charge of integrating returned soldiers back into society were confident that it was key to the health of the whole country that the men get back on their own feet as quickly and with as little assistance as possible.

If it was the government's desire to save both money and the respectable, self-sufficient masculinity of Canadian veterans, the returned soldiers themselves have sometimes had other ideas. Veterans have often been at the forefront of shifts in understandings of citizenship and entitlement. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries military service was one of the few duties that government and community accepted as justifiable cause for welfare and support. But demobilised veterans could also be a force whose claims to recognition challenged political budgets and desires. Theda Skocpol has argued that in the United States the Union Army pension developed into a large social insurance program because Union Army veterans were a clearly identifiable and politically mobilised group.<sup>6</sup> Later, in 1934, the passage of the Economy Act in the United States, which severely cut veteran benefits, triggered a wave of political mobilisation among angry veterans that laid the foundations for organised New Deal dissent.<sup>7</sup> War veterans had a measure of public backing for their claims to support, but also, especially if they were numerous and organised, could effectively present their case as something closer to a demand than a plea.<sup>8</sup>

Canada's veterans of the War in South Africa though were not the soldiers of the American Union Army and had no such muscle to flex. They were comparatively few in number and not politically powerful. Around 7000 Canadians had enlisted to fight in South

<sup>6</sup> Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

<sup>7</sup> Stephen Oritz “The “New Deal” for Veterans: The Economy Act, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, and the Origins of New Deal Dissent” *The Journal of Military History* 70, 2 (2006): 415-38.

<sup>8</sup> The understanding of a pension as recompense for service and thus not charity is likely part of the reason for the dominance of “pension” over “allowance” in the language of these files.

Africa.<sup>9</sup> The ideals for which they fought were no longer ones that might rouse a population. While the British imperialism they went to war to support still resonated in Canada in the 1930s, it did so much more weakly than in its heyday. The more specific war aim of support for British expatriates living in South Africa was buried by time and the war's increasingly obvious connection to gaining control of the region's gold and diamond mines, which the Depression's cynicism and disenchantment with unfettered capitalism probably only exacerbated.<sup>10</sup>

While this group of returned soldiers was not a distinctive political force, the pension files do reveal some efforts at advocacy. Sara B., the widow of R.T.B., was first refused a pension on the grounds that these were only available to wives of First World War veterans.<sup>11</sup> She wrote to Prime Minister Mackenzie King directly, summing up her efforts and protesting, mildly, the logical inconsistencies of the decision against her.

I wrote and explained my husband R.T.B. C-2107 served in the South African Campaign and was informed that only widows of former members of the 1914-18 campaign were eligible. Would it not be possible to include those women (of which there cannot be many left) who stood by their husband who gave their health in an earlier campaign? We none of us I think will need the pension long and it would help to remove any feeling of encumbrance we must have who have not been provided for."<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> It is impossible to say precisely how many South African War veterans were in Canada in the 1930s and 1940s and eligible to claim the allowance. About 270 died during the war. More would have passed on in the intervening decades. Others left the country. The number of claimants was small. The Veterans Affairs Canada pension files included 253 South African War pension files. About eighty-five of these, however, were of First World War veterans who had service in South Africa.

<sup>10</sup> See Arthur Keppel-Jones, "A Test Case for Protection by the Mother Country"; John A. Hobson, "A Small Confederacy of International Mine Owners"; and J.S. Marais "The Threat of an Independent South Africa," in Theodore C. Caldwell ed., *The Anglo Boer War: Why was it Fought? Who was Responsible?* (Boston: D.C. Heath and Co. 1965).

<sup>11</sup> For more on pensions and First World War widows, see Lyndsay Rosenthal, "'Such an immoral creature': Widowed Women and the Board of Pension Commissioners," *Canadian Military History*, 32, 1 (2023).

<sup>12</sup> R.T.B., 105007, reel 332, VAC pension files, LMHA. She was later granted an allowance. That her original refusal, and later grant of the allowance were both in 1940, ten years after the act was passed, shows a lack of clarity about its provisions.

If the Boer War veterans were not a large group they could offer, perhaps, the benefits of being a small one. Their paucity of numbers and the men’s advancing years were argued by Sara B. as reasons for support. It was a comparatively gentle argument but it may have been effective, finding sympathetic counterpoint among those responsible for veterans’ affairs. Veterans of the War in South Africa and their widows (including, eventually, Sara B.) were included in the pension plan provided those of the First World War. Thirty-six years after the conflict’s end some of Canada’s veterans of the War in South Africa were able to draw on some government support.

The terminology needs some attention here. The War Veterans Allowance Act was technically an allowance and not a pension. However, the difference between the two was slight and often elided.<sup>13</sup> The act, as applied to the South African veterans, provided financial support based on age, need, and military service. Veterans tended to understand what they were requesting as a pension and government officials generally responded in kind. The discourse of the day treated this as a pension.

The grounds for which they could make a claim to this were strict and, interestingly, differed from that set out for First World War veterans. In a marked departure from those who had fought in the Great War, and also from participants in most earlier Canadian conflicts, those who had served in the War in South Africa did not have to prove a disability that had been caused by their service.<sup>14</sup> They had to prove instead unemployability; poverty and military service combined were the primary terms for receiving assistance. After a veteran, or sometimes their widow, inquired about pension availability, investigators were sent to assess their suitability for

<sup>13</sup> The terms still have similar and often overlapping meanings. The Government of Canada today uses “allowance” to refer to a pension given before the pension age is reached: “An Annual Allowance is an early retirement option. You can choose to receive a reduced monthly pension before you reach the normal retirement age.” Government of Canada, “Exploring Pension Benefit Options: Annual Allowance.” That the War Veterans Allowance was given based partly on age further obviates the distinction. <https://www.tpsgc-pwgsc.gc.ca/remuneration-compensation/services-pension-services/pension/video/5-3-eng.html>

<sup>14</sup> Robert Smol has shown that the pension provisions for service in the War of 1812 were broader than those put forward for the First World War, and indeed appear similar to the regulations put forward for South African War veterans. Robert Smol, “‘A more effectual provision’: Upper Canada’s Pension Legislation for Disabled Veterans of the War of 1812” *Esprit de Corps* 23, 3 (2016).

receiving support. The grounds according to which the assessors were meant to make their judgement were set out in a box at the top of the form: "The investigator should submit a clear concise and thorough report, and verify the following points in particular. Age – Financial and domestic status – Six month's residence in Canada prior to date of application – Prewar residence in case of Ex-Imperial or Allied veteran's[sic] – Apparent physical and mental condition – Veteran's industrial history and apparent employability – Particulars regarding Real Estate etc." Those who met the requirements could receive ten dollars a month for a single man's pension or twenty for one who was married. There was some flexibility in this, so that sometimes a married man might receive only ten or fifteen dollars if his need was not deemed quite serious enough and pensions that continued into the 1940s and 1950s were generally slightly higher.

The veterans of South Africa had different criteria to prove compared to their Great War counterparts partly because they were seen as having a somewhat different relationship to broader Canadian society. In a departure from the aims and discourse of First World War pensions, rehabilitation was not the goal. The concern so frequently expressed by officials, that providing support to First World War veterans would make them weak and lazy, was tempered towards South African veterans given their advanced age. South African veterans, mainly in their mid-sixties, were determined to be old enough to escape their society's concern. They could be assisted without the same goal of later usefulness. While somewhat erratic in practice, the general rule seemed to be that those over sixty had only the critical eye of the inspector to convince of their unemployability, while those under sixty also had to undergo a medical examination.

The inspectors' reports offer insight into the way their physicality had shaped these men's experience of war and citizenship. When the War in South Africa began, Canadians were excited about their soldiers' first foray onto the world stage, and paid particular attention to the men's fine physical appearance.<sup>15</sup> The soldiers were presented, by press and politicians and in their own memoirs, as the nation's finest specimens. They were described as "fine, strapping fellows,

<sup>15</sup> Amy Shaw, "The Boer War, Masculinity, And Citizenship in Canada, 1899–1902," in Patrizia Gentile and Jane Nicholas eds. *Contesting Bodies and Nation in Canadian History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013): 97–114.



broad-shouldered, clean-limbed, and blue-eyed.”<sup>16</sup> Carman Miller shows that “the Canadian Press never tired of repeating the Cape Town papers’ glowing reports of the Canadians as ‘the finest body of men that has yet come here, except Her Majesty’s Guards. They have, as a rule, a light, springy, devil-may care sort of swagger.’”<sup>17</sup> The superior physique of the volunteers was evidence, at a time when eugenics was fairly broadly accepted, of the salubrious effects of British genetics and institutions combined with North America’s geographic and climatic rigours.<sup>18</sup> Because the war was Canada’s first overseas fighting experience, there was a clear sense that the soldiers were representing Canada, to the world and especially to Britain. Their physical appearance was evidence of Canada’s national qualities, sometimes quite explicitly so. The Canadian contingents were described as “the representatives of ideal Canadian manhood,” and the “pick of the nation’s sinew and brain.”<sup>19</sup>

To gain their pensions, veterans of the Anglo-Boer War again had to present their bodies for display, their success this time dependent upon a convincing performance of feebleness. The investigators, who were not medical professionals, assessed their subjects’ suitability on subjective grounds and in language that provides a counter to the wartime descriptions of their vitality. Many were described with “looks his age” or with the apparent, usually older, age they seemed. Seventy-year-old Charles B. was described as “a well-preserved man for his years. In good flesh, reads without glasses, tall, upright and agile, quite husky. Does not look much over 60 years.”<sup>20</sup> Some men were rejected because they did not seem sufficiently frail. Alexander H. was rejected on the dual bases of income and appearance, with the investigator’s final recommendation being: “Applicant is a well built broad shouldered man and he certainly looks as if he had quite

<sup>16</sup> S.M. Brown, *With the Royal Canadians* (Toronto: Publishers’ Syndicate, 1900), 6.

<sup>17</sup> Carman Miller, *Painting the Map Red: Canada and the South African War, 1899-1902* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 1993), 76.

<sup>18</sup> For the connections between Canadians’ nationalism and their imperialism at the time see Carl Berger, *The Sense of Power: Studies in the Ideas of Canadian Imperialism, 1867-1914* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971).

<sup>19</sup> T.G. Marquis, *Canada’s Sons on Kopje and Veldt* (Toronto: The Canada’s Sons Publishing Co., 1900), 71.

<sup>20</sup> The investigator’s assessment may have been overly optimistic as B. died three months after this description. Charles H.B., 30837, reel 323, VAC pension files, LMHA.

a few years work ahead of him, and ... I do not consider that he is in necessitive [sic] circumstances."<sup>21</sup>

Proving their need physically was only part of the requirements; the men also had to prove their status as veterans. In another signal difference from the way those who had fought in the First World War were treated, South African War veterans' required military service had strict and not always intuitive temporal boundaries. According to the pension files, these limitations were not obvious to many applicants, who had enlisted and travelled to South Africa, but arrived after the cessation of hostilities. These men were thus rejected as not having served in an "actual theatre of war." The confusion around this is another instance of how characteristics of the war were echoed in the provisions for veterans after it ended. The War in South Africa lacked clarity, at times, in terms of its status as an actual war. After the capitals of the Boer republics were taken by the British, the empire assumed that the war was all but ended. Lord Roberts, the commander of British forces, declared the war over in September of 1900. The fighting continued for another two years though, in guerilla rather than set piece fashion and with the Boer commandos now considered rebels rather than soldiers. The official peace, the Treaty of Vereeniging, did not come until 31 May 1902. Canadian soldiers, however, were still arriving in South Africa for several weeks before and after that date.

The rule to determine wartime service was that the soldiers had to have been on South African soil by 1 June 1902. The pension board followed this rule to the letter, so that many men were rejected who were on their ships waiting anchored in Table Bay at this time, or whose ships had waited there awhile before sailing to Durban.<sup>22</sup> Edward S.C. was denied a pension on these grounds and challenged his rejection, arguing that it was not his fault that it was not a theatre of war and that his intentions were clearly to serve in one.<sup>23</sup> For S.C., what the government should be recognising was the decision to enlist, with the pension the just reward for the burdens

<sup>21</sup> Alexander H., 26368, reel 951, VAC pension files, LMHA.

<sup>22</sup> This affected the 4th Regiment, A, B, C and D Squadrons and 3rd, 4th, 5th and 6th Canadian Mounted Rifles, who were all on ships anchored outside Cape Town when peace was declared. Letter from J.M. Butos to L.L. Bromley, 9 April 1948; letter from Marc A. LaVoie to J.L. Bromley, 23 April 1948. Fred T.C., [no pension number], reel 579, VAC Pension Files, LMHA.

<sup>23</sup> Edward S.C., [no pension number], reel 565, VAC pension files, LMHA.

of citizenship that such a decision meant taking up. He protested the government's selection of a date after which South Africa was no longer a theatre of war as negating those individual decisions to serve. In treating the pension as a right based on the duties of citizenship he clearly intended to take up, S.C. was challenging the government's right to limit and define who deserved a pension, and for something closer to the social contract implied in the universalism of the welfare state. Frederick C. was rejected on these grounds and also protested, using the argument that such limitations were inconsistent with how pensions for Great War veterans worked, because they only needed to have gone to England, not to “an actual theatre of war.”<sup>24</sup>

Pension claimants also had to show evidence that they had lived in Canada for six months prior to enlistment in the War in South Africa, and returned to the country after. As people sometimes moved around both the country and the broader empire fairly widely in search of work this could be a difficult task. A.P.C.s' file, for example, includes documents from people attesting, nearly forty years later, that he had lived in Salmon Arm, British Columbia in 1900.<sup>25</sup> He was fortunate to find people who had known him there; not everyone could. Along with evidence of residence, veterans had to provide military service records, birth certificates, marriage certificates, and financial and health records. Gathering official paperwork was an extra expense for people living close to the bone, and dealing with government bureaucracy was often intimidating. Decades had passed since the war ended. People moved, memories failed, and the effort to gather affidavits that might stand in for official documents was equally cumbersome. There are incomplete files in these pension records, where inquiries do not lead to full investigations, that were likely sometimes stalled by the obstacle of obtaining the required proof.

The other key element veterans had to prove was their financial need. The investigators took their jobs seriously and the files offer detailed, if often subjective, insight into the applicants' living conditions. The discussion of the applicants' work history shows a

<sup>24</sup> Frederick C., [no pension number], reel 577, VAC pension files, LMHA. Other particularities of this war complicated these dates in other ways. Richard B.s' widow had some difficulties because her late husband served in the South African Constabulary which worked as something like a frontier police force in the years after the war. Richard T.B., 105007, reel 322, VAC pension files, LMHA.

<sup>25</sup> A.P.C., 100199, reel 571, VAC pension files, LMHA.

group of often peripatetic workers, moving about in search of work, or moving on after the failure of farms or small business. The stories and descriptions in the files make a strong case backing the arguments that were gathering steam in these years for a welfare state that supported its citizens at the end of their working lives. Emery G. was living in Lethbridge, Alberta when he applied for a pension, after an itinerant life traveling across the country in search of work. The assessor's summary of G.'s financial situation is grim.

He gets no disability pension, has no insurance, no Bonds, no Bank account, and no property except his carpentry tools. The last work he did ended in February 1947 [the report was made February 1948] ... G. has always been a carpenter, but can no longer follow that trade, chiefly because of his age. I doubt if he could obtain any work of any other nature.<sup>26</sup>

These men worked until their bodies gave out because the alternative was homelessness and starvation. Peter C.'s assessment described a long and varied working career, turning to sales after rheumatism affected his ability to do difficult physical labour. However even this was difficult for a man in his sixties. The report, in May 1938, said that C. "was let out of [his] last firm in 1932 – because of having been kept on, much over the age limit, they wished in their salesmen. Has not had any work since, only odd jobs, selling on commission during summer months. Nothing for the last two years." He had some relief from the Municipality of Calgary, but his assessor summed up that for this veteran "circumstances are indeed necessitous."<sup>27</sup> A consequence of this, and of the rules that required obvious unemployability for support, was that many of those in these files who did receive a pension only did so for a relatively short time, sometimes dying within weeks or months of receiving payment.

The investigators' reports show a society still in thrall to the Great Depression's deprivation. The assessments of their assets and living conditions describe heavily mortgaged farms or families crowded into a couple of poorly-ventilated rooms. The investigation into Allan C.'s application showed a family pooling scarce resources:

<sup>26</sup> Emery G., [no pension number], reel 327, VAC pension files, LMHA.

<sup>27</sup> Peter D.S.C., 18021, reel 1386, VAC pension files, LMHA. C., happily, lived into the 1950s.

12 ∴ “By Reason of Age and Necessity”

Maud, age 31, single, has been doing household duties since her mother died, appears in good health. Mary, age 28, married, one child age 5 husband (Patrick F.) a patient in County hospital since 1935. This daughter lives with veteran, works whenever some available, usually during the Fall season with Crosby’s Molasses Company... Andrew age 36, single, lives with veteran, employed with city on snow shoveling whenever some available. All contribute to the support of home when employed, otherwise the burden falls on veteran.<sup>28</sup>

For C.’s adult children, like the many who came of age during the Depression, unemployment was a significant obstacle to the usual markers of adulthood, such as setting up one’s own home.<sup>29</sup>

The pension records give insight, not just into the lives of the veterans of South Africa, but of their children and especially their wives. The partners and families of veterans were also assessed by the inspectors, who were looking for all sources of income and potential employment that might obviate their burden of care. William H. was better off than some applicants, as he owned the six-room house he lived in with his wife and teenage son, but they had two mortgages on it and had taken in three boarders. After noting this this inspector added, “Mrs. H. is a woman much younger than her husband, and capable of doing work if she can find it. At present she does ½ day’s work a week for the City of Toronto Asphalt Dept. for which she receives \$2.50 per week. This is the only income into the home.”<sup>30</sup> Amy H. took care of the house, her child, and her invalid husband. She cooked and cleaned for the boarders and worked outside of the home. In this heavy workload she was not especially distinctive. Women’s employment outside the home actually increased during the Great Depression, as it tended to be lower-paid. Many women also continued and extended their responsibility for the labour at home, including taking in boarders,

<sup>28</sup> Allan W.C., [no pension number], reel 478, VAC pension files, LMHA.

<sup>29</sup> For a study of coming of age at a time when the conventional markers of adulthood were often unattainable see “‘Being in your Twenties in the 1930s’: Masculinity and Liminality during the Great Depression,” in *Bringing Children and Youth into Canadian History: The Difference Kids Make*, Mona Gleason and Tamara Myers, eds, (Don Mills: Oxford, 2017), 156-69.

<sup>30</sup> William H., [no pension number], reel 546, VAC pension files, LMHA.

that helped keep families with unemployed breadwinners afloat.<sup>31</sup> The investigation into Frank S.'s pension claim noted the financial as well as emotional blow loss of a partner could mean. "Applicant's wife died one-and-a-half years ago and on her death he lost the business manager and help-mate."<sup>32</sup> The H. family's need turned out to be immaterial as their application was rejected on the grounds that William had arrived in South Africa too late.

Widows of Boer War veterans were also eligible for this allowance and assessed according to the same grounds of need and employability. John E.G. applied for a pension in 1938 and was accorded one on the grounds that he was "an invalid who will not be well enough to work at all, and is not expected to live long."<sup>33</sup> He did not, dying five days after the letter congratulating him on his successful claim was sent. After his death his widow applied for the pension to be continued. She faced a similar examination into her health, financial assets, and employability. The investigator wrote, in the paragraph headed "Physical: Widow, a small, grey haired lady, appears to be in failing health. It was noticed that she became physically distressed after climbing a flight of stairs in the home." Another widow, Gertrude G., took care of her daughter, crippled by polio, and stated that the pension would go toward the daughter's medical bills. Her financial situation however—partly because of support from a son—was seen as insufficiently dire and the claim was denied.<sup>34</sup>

The amount of official paperwork required of the applicants was daunting. The pension application required birth and marriage certificates, evidence of service in South Africa at the correct time, evidence of living in Canada before and after the war, financial statements proving income, and the value of any assets such as property or insurance. The applicants' efforts to present the inspectors with the evidence they required is also another of the ways that the War in South Africa marks a point of transition. The people requesting pensions were, generally, born in the 1870s. Faced with

<sup>31</sup> For women and work in Canada during the Great Depression see, Denyse Baillargeon, *Making Do: Women, Family, and Home in Montreal during the Great Depression* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1999); and Lara Campbell, *Respectable Citizens: Gender, Family, and Unemployment in Ontario's Great Depression* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).

<sup>32</sup> Frank D.S., 19884, reel 495, VAC pension files, LMHA.

<sup>33</sup> John E.G., 18244, reel 913, VAC pension files, LMHA.

<sup>34</sup> John E.G., 18244, reel 913, VAC pension files, LMHA.

bureaucrats who needed official forms they did what they could. But they also offered evidence according to the language of proof of the time in which they were raised. An inspector visited Addison C. in Norland, Ontario to assess his pension application. The report noted that the man could not produce a birth certificate but offered other forms of verification:

Also I would certify that I examined the Family Bible and would report that therein is recorded the marriage of Robert John C. and Emma Wakelin at Coccoconkon 16th of November, 1873 and also that the birth is recorded of their five children as follows ... I would certify that these entries were apparently all made at the same time and that as they were made in red and blue inks in a very ornamental hand it is not possible to judge how long ago they were made except that the general style of the writing is not modern and it would therefore appear that the entries were made some years ago.<sup>35</sup>

A few other applicants also offered the family bible as a record, and this, perhaps partly because of the recognition that the cost of obtaining official documentation for people who were struggling financially was prohibitive, was generally successful. Another way that older means of certification were sometimes sufficient, was in how the need for official paperwork could sometimes be overcome by familiarity. The investigation into Frank S.'s pension application states of the gaps in his form, “no documents available at time of investigation but applicant is known to Investigator.”<sup>36</sup> This was sufficient for the ministry and his pension was granted.

The investigator's assessment was key, and pension decisions nearly always followed their recommendation. They looked deeply into the most intimate aspects of their subjects' lives especially their health and financial situation. They seem across the board to have taken their job very seriously, with full paragraphs written for such apparently straightforward questions as “age.” The forensic detail is impressive and also almost entirely subjective. The investigator made statements about the veteran's status and background that

<sup>35</sup> Addason C., [no pension number], reel 683, VAC pension files, LMHA. William H. also was able to use a family bible as evidence of age. See William H., [no pension number], reel 546, VAC pension files, LMHA.

<sup>36</sup> Frank D.S., 19884, reel 495, VAC pension files, LMHA.

were partially tied to quantifiable evidence, but also quite qualitative aspects about how healthy or strong he thought an applicant looked, or what he felt seemed likely about the possibilities of their financial situation. The investigators had a great deal of power.

Their assessments offer significant insight into aspects of the lives of these men and their families, but in these documents the voices of the pension applicants themselves only appear second-hand. The pension files, however, also sometimes include letters from those applying for government support based on their military service. These letters offer a valuable insight into the lives of these returned men, years after their war ended. One element they reveal is a lack of information, and a certain informal networking among veterans. The letters in the pension files often open with the statement that their authors had heard about the allowance from talk among other returned soldiers or in some other indirect way. Samuel L. heard about it in a newspaper and wrote to the War Veterans Allowance Board: "Dear Sir, Having seen a statement in the press lately that South African War Veterans were eligible for an allowance of so much per month I would like to know if this is correct as I am a veteran of the South African War."<sup>37</sup> The Canadian government, always concerned about cost, was not working hard to get this money to all returned soldiers who might need it. The onus was on the veteran to discover the program and gather the evidence needed to qualify for it.

The letters are also, more importantly, where the veterans articulate their claims to support. Often this is done in the language of charity, with the veterans or their widows, describing their financial destitution and poor health and making a plea for assistance. Edward C., after being rejected once, wrote again to the Department of Pensions:

Don't think me presumptuous but not having heard from you recently my circumstances compel me to write stating that a pension would be a Godsend, as being stone deaf I have not been able to obtain gainful employment since 1921. My deafness came on slowly after I returned from S Africa I was unfortunate enough to have enteric Fever three months of it in Pretoria General Hospital. I was able to get a small Chicken Ranch in 1930 on the instalment plan but during the depression I was foreclosed on, and have since been dependant on what

<sup>37</sup> Samuel L., 10090, reel 893, VAC pension files, LMHA.



16 ∴ *“By Resason of Age and Necessity”*

my Wife could earn but her health is such that she cannot stand the strain any longer as she is nearing sixty.<sup>38</sup>

Language apologising for presumption and describing how the writer’s need was in spite of strenuous efforts at self-sufficiency is common in the pension files. Expressing oneself in such a way followed older ways of thinking about what responsibility a government or community had to the impoverished in their midst. It is an echo of British poor laws, and of the means-tested old age pension Canada put forward in 1926. The inspectors were thorough in their attention to make sure that the veterans, who had once been lauded as the most upstanding men in the dominion, were not financial malingerers, attempting to game the system.

Pension as charity is a strong thread in the files, but some letters also show a significant shift in presenting it as an earned recognition, using language of rights rather than supplication. Herbert C.’s eyes were failing and he wrote the Minister of Pensions hoping for a free medical exam and treatment for them. That friends in veteran’s hospitals were receiving medical treatment seemed to offer precedent and some fair expectation to receive what they were getting. He was refused on the dual grounds of not having arrived in South Africa early enough and because he was not deemed sufficiently destitute. He wrote to the Minister of Pensions challenging his rejection: “Canada took credit in sending troops to South Africa. I answered my country’s call.” C. presented the pension and attendant supports of medical treatment as something he had a right to based on his military service. His letter was not an abject plea for charity, but an assertion that in not providing this the government was failing in its part of the social contract. The young men had volunteered when the country asked that of them, and in return they were due some financial care from Canada. A later, rather angrier, letter made the same case in more detail:

Once I was proud to be a Canadian soldier, we tried to make our regiment the best in Canada and we did so. I was proud to answer my country’s call and volunteer for services overseas for which our country

<sup>38</sup> Edward S.C., [no pension number], reel 565, VAC pension files, LMHA.

took credit by all Public men, surely times have changed when the Government of the day make fish of one and flesh of another.<sup>39</sup>

Herbert C. expressed entitlement for support and explicitly remonstrated against the unfairness of Canada generally, and its politicians specifically, taking credit for the loyalty to Britain and national military prowess that led to victory, while not supporting the veterans who made that happen.

Herbert C. was a retired civil servant, probably somewhat more at ease with writing and making his case to government officials than many other Anglo-Boer War veterans. In one of his letters, he also made the case that, in giving insufficient care to the men who had fought in that war, the government was going against the wishes of those who had made donations to support them. "There was a Canadian Patriotic fund," Herbert C. reminded, "millions of dollars, raised by public subscription for Canadian South African Troops. I know a good portion of this money was used for troops of the Great War." C. was partially correct in this, though somewhat off in scale. The Canadian Patriotic Fund was founded for the War in South Africa. It was the first government provision for the wives and families of those serving. It dissolved in 1914 with what was left of the donated money (\$771.22) going to the new Great War fund.<sup>40</sup>

In drawing attention to the unfairness of the money going to participants in the next war, Herbert C. was highlighting a potentially fraught relationship between the two conflicts, like an older sibling jealous of the resources lavished upon the younger. It was not an argument common in the pension letters, though it did come up. Writers, when they challenged decisions, did so on the basis of perceived inconsistencies but only rarely positioned themselves as rivals to the Great War veterans. There was perhaps a sense that the government's decision to offer support at all was linked to the visibility and emotional resonance of Great War veterans, and this was a hand it was better not to bite.

<sup>39</sup> Herbert C., [no pension number], reel 682, VAC pension files, LMHA. That the word "pension" has stronger connotations of earned support than "allowance" is possibly part of the reason for its use among applicants.

<sup>40</sup> Miller, *Painting the Map Red*, 432; and Desmond Morton, *Fight or Pay: Soldiers' Families in the Great War* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2004), 56.

The veterans' letters also sometimes challenge the limitations on pension applicability in ways that drew attention to some of Canada's contradictions in its imperial relationship with Britain. Harry C. wrote emphasising his service and need, and challenging the limitations that restricted the allowance to those residents in Canada before enlistment:

I am writing to you regarding Pensions for ex-soldiers over 60 years of age. I served in the South African war, with the 1st Vol Batt Duke of Wellingtons West Riding Regt and am now 62 years of age and I cannot work no longer. I am Dependent on my Sons for a living I would be very pleased if you could give me any information how to go about getting this pension for soldiers over 60 years of age. I wrote to Calgary Vets Club and they told me I was not eligible as it was only for Canadians. Now I think I am a good Canadian when I have been here for 25 years (since spring 1912) and have raised my family 3 Boys here. So I fail to see where there should be any distinction made between Canadians & British Soldiers. We all fought for our King and Country. I was born in Halifax Yorkshire England. Hoping for an early reply.<sup>41</sup>

William C. wrote to the Minister of Pensions in similar terms, with assertions of age and poverty combined with frustration at the shifting terms of the country's sense of connection with and responsibility to the British Empire:

I am asking you, if I am entitled to the Burnt out Pension. I am a Emperial [sic]. I have been told that if I was a Canadian, I would had received the Pension. We were, and still under the same King's Flag. I am now 62 years old, and unemployed.<sup>42</sup>

When it broke out, the Anglo-Boer War had also made Canada's government uncomfortable because of its potential costs and what it might mean in terms of the country's relationship to Britain. Prime Minister Laurier had been hesitant to allow Canadian participation in the war partly because of the precedent that such an act might set, worrying that the country might then be dragged into more

<sup>41</sup> Harry C., [no pension number], reel 686, VAC pension files, LMHA.

<sup>42</sup> William C., [no pension number], reel 572, VAC pension files, LMHA. Several letters refer to it as the "Burnt Out Veterans Pension."

of Britain's colonial wars. He was also worried about the cost of the war. The Laurier administration decided to try to meet these obstacles by limiting the terms of what the government would provide. Volunteers could enlist and Canada would pay for equipping them and sending them to South Africa. After that they were to be paid and maintained by Britain, which also would bear the cost of shipping them home at the end of the conflict.<sup>43</sup> After the war, it was Britain that provided support to disabled Canadian veterans, but at infamously low rates. The concerns about cost and the complicated relationship with Britain were factors similarly shaping the Mackenzie King administration's decisions about support for South African veterans in the late 1930s. The government response to Anglo-Boer War veterans echoed and sometimes challenged several aspects of the patterns of the war itself. One of these was Canada's relationship to the United Kingdom. Support for the mother country during the conflict was mixed with desire for recognition of separate identity. This ambivalence, made more pointed by concern about money, continued into the pension process in the 1930s and 1940s.

Veterans tend to have a somewhat different relationship to the state than other citizens. Their claim to greater support from government and society is a collective one, based on having taken on greater risks and perhaps suffered greater losses than their fellow citizens, in the name of a larger social good. The pension cases for this war though, were treated on an individual, case by case basis, with participation in the collective military endeavour only part of what was required for government assistance. Success in making a pension claim was predicated both on the correct collective experience—being in a theatre of war together at the right time and under the right jurisdiction—and the correct individual experience—being impecunious and “unemployable.” In deciding to assist people based on the two pillars of their service and their need, the Canadian government was recognising obligation in a significant way that bridged rights and charity. The veterans' claims were sometimes couched in submissive language that emphasised need and in other times presented more assertive tones challenging governmental inconsistency or neglect. As such veterans bridged the social concerns embedded in the need-based old age pension of 1927, that the aged should not starve, with the universalist values of the Old Age Security

<sup>43</sup> Miller, *Painting the Map Red*, 48.

20 ∴ “By Reason of Age and Necessity”

Act in 1951, that all people over a certain age merited support, based on their contributions to society over their lives. They thus mark an important transition in perceptions of the protections Canadians might properly expect from their government.



#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Amy Shaw** is an Associate Professor of History at the University of Lethbridge. She is the author of *Crisis of Conscience: Conscientious Objectors in Canada during the First World War*, and co-editor of *A Sisterhood of Suffering and Service: Women and Girls of Canada and Newfoundland during the First World War* and *Making the Best of It: Women and Girls of Canada and Newfoundland during the Second World War*.