

Research Resources on Canada and the South African War

by CARMAN MILLER

From October 1899 until May 1902 about 7,368 men, mostly between twenty and forty years of age, left Canada to serve in the South African War. All of the men were volunteers. Some were professional soldiers, but most were amateur, citizen, "Saturday night" soldiers, drawn from the active militia or the North West Mounted Police; many possessed no previous military or police experience whatever, and all were quite unprepared for the ordeal which followed.

For almost three years the war in South Africa mesmerized Canadians at home. It occupied a central place in their private and public discourse. Voluntary groups solicited funds to entertain, insure, support, and reward the soldiers and assist their dependents, and later, perpetuate their memory in glass, bronze, marble, and stone. The war affected trade, transportation, industry, and fashion. It influenced Canadian literature, graphics, and music. It forged lifelong memories, associations, and friendships; and it brought injury, disease, bitterness, and death. Until overshadowed by the Great War, the South African War was for many Canadians the most significant public event of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, nearly ninety years after Canadian troops first landed at Cape Town, there is still no comprehensive study of Canada's participation in the South African War.¹ Nor have recent general accounts of the war provided more than a passing, and often inaccurate, reference to the Canadian contribution.²

In some respects, the neglect of the war has been more apparent than real. Canadian historians' obsession with French-English conflict, for example, has generated an extensive literature on the acrimonious public debate on the despatch of Canada's first contingent, and its attendant political consequences.³ Moreover many of the recent studies on the intellectual, social, and political character of the imperialist movement have focused directly on various aspects of the war.⁴ The growing number of books, articles, and theses on the post-confederation Canadian militia (including numerous regimental histories)⁵ have also examined the effect of the war upon the growth, development, and professionalization of the militia.⁶ Added to this literature are biographies of prominent South African veterans, in which a chapter or more is devoted to their subject's war record.⁷ There are also several articles on other aspects of the war.⁸ All of these works have extended our knowledge and understanding of the South African War and its impact on Canadian society. At the same time they make the absence of a full-scale history of Canada and the war an even more conspicuous deficiency.

A wealth of primary printed and archival material confronts the student of Canada's participation in the South African War. W.B. Kerr's review article in the *Canadian Historical Review* (December 1937) contains a partial list and assessment of the extensive contemporary Canadian periodical literature, memoirs, and accounts, British and Canadian, dealing with Canada's part in the war.⁹ The memoirs and published letters of the participants which were printed during and immediately after the war tend to be the most valuable, even if the letters are often highly selective and sometimes carefully edited. Memoirs published too long after camp life tend to lose their immediacy, their attention to detail, routine, and the camp perspective; and often become little more than a recitation of the obvious, the unusual, or a laundered version of events, marred by lapses of memory and embroidered through countless repetitions. A quantity of printed ephemera provide insight into the activities of the civilian population in support of the war. Sermons, pamphlets, souvenir booklets, programmes for patriotic benefit concerts, calendars, menus, music, poetry, handbills, and the reports of charitable works provide extensive information on the extent and character of the civilian reaction to the war.¹⁰

An indispensable source of information on the social, ethnic, and regional response to the war, and the activities of the Canadian troops in South Africa, are the newspapers. Until September 1900 the seven Canadian reporters in South Africa were R.E. Finn and S.C. Simonski of the *Montreal Herald*, W.R. Smith and W.H. White of the *Montreal Star*, C.F. Hamilton and J.A. Ewan of the *Toronto Globe*, and S.M. Brown — who later published his despatches under the title *With The Royal Canadians* (Toronto, 1900) — of the *Mail and Empire*. They accompanied the first two contingents, and all sent detailed reports of the Canadian troops' activities to their respective newspapers. Their reports, often written from the safe perspective of a base camp, are far from infallible. Stories were often inaccurate, biased, or garbled. Some were close to outright fabrications. For example, W. Richmond Smith's much-quoted story that the Strathcona's Horse had "covered themselves with Glory" and had done "a deed which will live in history" by blowing up a railway bridge at Komati Poort, effectively bottling up the Boers and cutting their communications with the sea, was totally untrue.¹¹ The daring "secret" mission, designed to achieve all of these objectives, was called off when the Boers got wind of the preparations. Other newspapers carried occasional letters and articles by the soldiers themselves. After careful editing these letters were often placed in local journals by the recipient, with neither the consent nor knowledge of the author. The most notorious example of this is the letters from Sam Hughes, the controversial Conservative Member of Parliament, who served briefly in South Africa and whose bombastic letters were published in the *Toronto Telegram* on 19 February and 2 and 19 April 1900. At least one newspaper, the *Hamilton Spectator*, featured a weekly newsletter from E.W.B. Morrison, a lieutenant in D Battery of the second contingent's Brigade Division of Field Artillery, who later revised and published his letters in his controversial book, *With The Guns In South Africa* (Hamilton, 1901). After September 1900 Canadian newspapers depended almost entirely on British or American despatches, or the occasional Canadian soldier's correspondence, on the progress of the war. Religious, labour, student, trade, regimental, and special interest journals should not be overlooked. The *Canadian Magazine* provides a particularly rich source of information.

Apart from the *Debates* of the House of Commons and Senate, and the federal and occasionally provincial *Statutes* describing the pay and compensation (including land grants) offered to the Canadian volunteers,¹² the most useful public printed records are

the Department of Militia and Defence's *Supplementary Report: Organization, Equipment, Despatch and Service of Canadian Contingents during the War in South Africa, 1899-1900* (Ottawa, 1901) and its *Further Supplementary Report: Organization, Equipment, Despatch and Service of Canadian Contingents during the War in South Africa, 1899-1902* (Ottawa, 1902). Not only do these volumes contain detailed descriptions of the organization, equipment, and despatch of all nine contingents as well as the work of the nursing sisters and the hospital unit, but a final report and assessment from the officer commanding each battalion, regiment, or battery on his unit's activities in South Africa, whether temporary units of the Canadian militia or the British army. The detail and accuracy of these reports depends upon the character of the commanding officer. Few reach the thoroughness of the report of Colonel Otter, the meticulous, conscientious commanding officer of Canada's first contingent, whose report included maps, battle sketches, statistical tables, the unit's daily diary, and a careful evaluation of the quality of his contingent's clothing and equipment. Some reports are very brief, selective, and incomplete, and not entirely accurate. Even in Otter's printed report, dates, times, and measurements conflict with those in his personal diary, letters, or other accounts. The most inaccurate is the report penned by Lieut.-Col. C.W. Drury, the officer commanding the Brigade Division of Field Artillery, whose Brigade Division never served as a unit in South Africa, but was scattered, largely consigned to the tedious line of communication duty.

The most useful sources of information on the Canadian contingents, however, are the public and private records in Canadian and British archival repositories. To the socio-military historian the 136 boxes of service files, containing an attestation paper, medical report, and service card for most of the Canadian volunteers, found in RG 38 at the National Archives of Canada, possess a mine of information on the social and physical character of the Canadian units and their service in the field, especially if read in conjunction with the medal registers found in RG 9 II A5 series.¹³ As Glenn Wright has pointed out, both series can be usefully exploited by persons other than military historians.¹⁴ The records of the Canadian South African Memorial Association (MG 28 I 8), established to mark the 244 graves of those who died of wounds or disease in South Africa, contain additional information on the men and their families. The single most important series of records on the Canadians in South Africa in the National Archives of Canada is RG 9 II A3, volumes 16-34, which contains extensive documentation on war accounts; casualties; nominal rolls; reports; and regimental, battalion, brigade, and battery daily diaries, orders, and correspondence. The records may be supplemented with the Department of Militia and Defence's South African War Payrolls (RG 9 II F7).

In Britain, the Public Record Office's CO 42 series contain information on the organization, recruitment, and despatch of each contingent as well as occasional items on the experience or performance of Canadian troops. The WO 105 series, volumes 6-12, possesses reports and correspondence on some of the battles in which Canadian troops were employed.

Not all Canadian contingents are equally well served by extant archival records. The first contingent, the Royal Canadian Regiment of Infantry, is the most fully documented by public and private records as well as secondary studies. In contrast, the records of the Canadian contingent of the South African Constabulary are fragmentary at best. Their attestation papers are missing from the RG 38 series, and have not been located in Britain. Unfortunately most of the items on the activities of the South African Constabulary in the

CO 439 series' two-volume Register of Correspondence, 1902-08, have been "Destroyed by Statute." The lack of coordination and communication between British and Canadian archivists has resulted in the disappearance of much potentially valuable material and efforts are now required to save other materials of Canadian interest in British public care from being destroyed by statute. The CO 526 series, volume 3, however, contains much valuable information on the disposition of disgruntled Canadians in the Constabulary. Moreover the Baden-Powell Papers in the National Army Museum in London go a long way toward compensating for the loss of the Constabulary's records in the Public Record Office. Baden-Powell's daily diary and letter-books are full of references to the activities of the Canadians in his police force.

More important still is the large body of private papers, diaries, memoirs, and letters in various Canadian repositories. In these papers, the most comprehensive documentation on the war is found in the W.D. Otter and the S.B. Steele Papers. The Otter Papers, available on microfilm from the National Archives of Canada, contain daily diaries, weekly reports to and from the military authorities in Ottawa, fragments of memoirs and a systematic and informative correspondence between Otter and his very capable wife. The Steele Papers, held by the Glenbow Museum, possess a similar rich documentation on the organization and work of the Strathcona's Horse, in the form of the battalion's daily diary, regimental orders, and a regular correspondence with Lord Strathcona, the unit's concerned and influential patron.

Those who are interested in the material conditions, the routine, experiences, reactions, attitudes, health, and discipline of the common soldier will find ample material in the extensive and extant private papers of the participants, many of whom were prolific correspondents and diarists.¹⁵ A partial list of the available private papers is found in *The Union List of Manuscripts In Canadian Repositories*. Much of the available material is located in three repositories: the National Archives of Canada, the Glenbow Museum and the Provincial Archives of British Columbia. The National Archives' holdings were increased considerably during Hugh Robertson's research on his M.A. thesis, "The Royal Canadian Dragoons and the Anglo-Boer War, 1900" (University of Ottawa, 1982), when a newspaper advertisement calling for information on the Dragoons brought to light the existence of a large body of archival material. The Glenbow's collections owe everything to the foresight of Sheilagh Jameson who early recognized the value of Boer War records. The retirement of veterans in British Columbia explains in part the Boer War records in the Provincial Archives of British Columbia. Although these three institutions house the bulk of the relevant private records, other repositories, such as provincial and municipal archives (notably the Vancouver City Archives), museums (McCord Museum), and libraries (Metropolitan Toronto Library) ought not to be ignored.

The scarcity of primary printed and archival material, therefore, need not deter the student of Canada's participation in the South African War. Although the purpose of this article is to be suggestive, rather than definitive, it is clear that the student of Canada's part in the South African War possesses a rich mine of information, which would sustain a number of good studies, not only on the men themselves but on the war's effect upon Canadian society.

Notes

- 1 The point was made by W.B. Kerr in his "Survey of the Literature on Canada's Participation in the South African War," *Canadian Historical Review* (December 1937) and by Desmond Morton, *The Canadian General: Sir William Otter* (Toronto, 1974), p. 369.
- 2 Rayne Kruger, *Good-Bye Dolly Gray* (Philadelphia, 1960), pp. 150, 368; Byron Farwell, *The Great Boer War* (Toronto, 1976), pp. 40, 144, 209, 271, 284, 374, 381, 417 and 444; Thomas Pakenham, *The Boer War* (London, 1979), pp. 249, 331, 339, 416, 469, 538 and 557; Denis Judd, *The Boer War* (London, 1979), pp. 27, 123, and 124; Peter Warwick, ed., *The South African War* (London, 1980), no reference.
3. Robert J.D. Page, *Imperialism and Canada 1895-1903* (Toronto, 1972); Norman Penlington, *Canada and Imperialism 1896-1899* (Toronto, 1965), chapters 16 and 17; Jean-Guy Pelletier, "Les Canadiens français et la guerre des Boer," thèse de Licence, Université Laval, 1963; Jean-Guy Pelletier, "La Presse Canadienne-Française Et La Guerre Des Boer," *Recherches Sociographiques* IV, no. 3 (décembre 1963); D.W. Williams, "Newspapers in Public Opinion in the South African War: A Note in a Western Canadian Setting," *Historia* (September 1975); Carman Miller, "English Canadian Opposition to the South African War as seen through the Press," *Canadian Historical Review*, LX, no. 4, (December 1974); Norman Penlington, "Canada's Entry Into The Boer War," M.A., University of Toronto, 1937; Aileen Barker, "Laurier, French Canada and the Boer War," M.A., University of British Columbia, 1959; Robert J. Bentley, "Attitudes in British Columbia toward Canadian Participation in the South African War," B.A. Essay, University of British Columbia, 1950; Goldwin Smith, *In The Court of History* (Toronto, 1902); Robert Page, *The Boer War and Canadian Imperialism*, The Canadian Historical Association, Historical Booklet No. 44 (Ottawa, 1987).
- 4 Sandra Gwyn, *The Private Capital* (Toronto, 1984), chapters 22-25; James I. Corcoran, "Henri Bourassa et la guerre sud africaine," *Revue d'Histoire de l'Amérique française* (juin, septembre et décembre, 1965); Angus Duncan Gilbert, "The Political Influence of Imperialist Thought in Canada, 1899-1923," Ph.D., University of Toronto, 1974; Robert J.D. Page, "The Impact of the Boer War on the Canadian General Election of 1900 in Ontario," M.A., Queen's University, 1964; Robert J.D. Page, "Canada and the Imperial Idea in the Boer War Years," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 5, No. 1 (February 1970).
- 5 For example, Larry Worthington, *"The Spur and the Sprocket": The Story of the Royal Canadian Dragoons* (Kitchener, 1967); Brereton Greenhous, *Dragoon: The Centennial History of the Royal Canadian Dragoons 1883-1983* (Belleville, 1983); G.W.L. Nicholson, *Canada's Nursing Sisters* (Toronto, 1975).
- 6 Richard A. Preston, *Canada and "Imperial Defense"* (Durham, 1967), chapter 9; Desmond Morton, *Ministers and Generals: Politics and the Canadian Militia 1868-1904* (Toronto, 1970); Charles-Marie Boissonnault, *Histoire politico-militaire des Canadiens-français (1763-1945)* (Montréal, 1967); R.C. MacLeod, *The NWMP and Law Enforcement 1873-1905* (Toronto, 1976); James Laxer, "French Canadian Newspapers and Imperial Defence, 1899-1914," M.A., Queen's University 1967; Stephen John Harris, "Canadian Brass: The Growth of the Canadian Military Profession 1860-1919," Ph.D., Duke University, 1979; James Arthur Mowbray, "Militiaman: A Comparative Study of the Evolution of the Organization in the Canadian and British Voluntary Citizen Military Forces 1896-1939," Ph.D., Duke University, 1975; William Beahen, "A Citizens' Army: The Growth and Development of the Canadian Militia, 1904 to 1914," Ph.D., University of Ottawa, 1979.
- 7 Ronald G. Haycock, *Sam Hughes: The Public Career of a Controversial Canadian, 1885-1916* (Waterloo, 1986), chapters 5 and 6; Desmond Morton, *The Canadian General: Sir William Otter* (Toronto, 1974), chapters on "Paardeberg" and "Pretoria".
- 8 Carman Miller, "Canada And The Boer War" in *Visual History of Canada* (Ottawa, 1978); Desmond Morton, *Canada At Paardeberg*, Canadian War Museum Canadian Battle Series No. 2 (Ottawa, 1986); Desmond Morton, "Colonel Otter and the First Canadian Contingent in South Africa, 1899-1900" in Michael Cross and Robert Bothwell, eds., *Policy by Other Means* (Toronto, 1972), pp. 97-120; Ronald Haycock, "The Proving Ground: Sam Hughes and the Boer War," *Journal of Canadian Studies* (Fall-Winter, 1981), pp. 14-25; Kenneth McKenzie, "Canada to Empire: The Canadian Postal Corps During the Boer War," *South Africa Philatelist* (September, 1977); Alice Sorby, "Peace Came To South Africa," *Canadian Army Journal*, 16, no. 2 (1962); Herbert Fairlie Wood, "Rearguard Action 1900," *The Legionary*, 38, no. 1 (June 1983).
- 9 There are a number of significant omissions in Kerr's list including the following: S.A. Denison, *Memoirs* (Toronto, 1927); G.S. Ryerson, *Looking Backward* (Toronto, 1923); Capt. Jack Randall, *I'm Alone* (Indianapolis, 1930); S.B. Steele, *Forty Years In Canada* (London, 1914); Hedley V. Mackinnon, *War Sketches* (Charlottetown, 1900), all books by Canadian veterans published before Kerr's article, as well as W.A. Griesbach's *I Remember* (Toronto, 1946), and Oscar C. Pelletier, *Mémoires Souvenirs de Famille*

- et Recits* (Quebec, 1940). Kerr's periodical citations are also narrowly drawn from two periodicals, *The Canadian Magazine* and *The Canadian Defence Quarterly*, thereby omitting other useful references such as R.B. Blythe, "Reminiscences of the Boer War," *McGill University Magazine Annual* (1902); A.S. McCormick, "McGill in South Africa," *McGill University Magazine*, I, no. 2 (April 1902); John McCrae, "The Builders of Empire," *McGill University Magazine*, I, no. 1 (December 1901); and John C. Oland, "South Africa Jaunt," *Dalhousie Gazette* (December 1900), to suggest only a few other titles.
- 10 For example, [J. Douglas Borthwick], *Poems and Songs of the South African War* (Montreal, 1901); *Souvenir: British Boer War, The Empire's Commanders* (Charlottetown, 1900); *Official Souvenir Programme, Citizens Reception to the Returning Vancouver Contingent of the Royal Canadian Regiment From South Africa, December 31, 1900*; Rev. W.T. Herridge, *A Sermon Preached in St. Andrew's Church, Ottawa, to Strathcona Horse Previous To Their Departure for Service in South Africa, Sunday 11 March 1900* (Ottawa, 1900); *New Brunswick S.A. Contingent Fund Report Accounts 1899-1900* (Saint John, 1901); *Soldiers Wives League First Annual Report* (Montreal, 1901); *First Report of the Executive Committee of the Canadian Patriotic Fund Association to His Majesty the King* (Ottawa, 1902).
 - 11 Gaston Labat, *Le Livre d'Or* (Montréal, 1901), p. 23.
 - 12 Both Ontario and British Columbia offered their volunteers land grants.
 - 13 See Carman Miller, "A Preliminary Analysis of the Socio-Economic Composition of Canada's South African War Contingents," *Histoire Sociale/Social History*, 8, no. 5 (November 1975).
 - 14 Glenn T. Wright, "Serving the Empire: Canadians in South Africa, 1899-1902," *Families*, 21, no. 1 (1982).
 - 15 Carman Miller, "Chums In Arms: Comradeship Among Canada's South African War Soldiers," *Histoire Sociale/Social History*, 18, no. 36 (November 1986).