COMMEMORATIONS AND MILITARY HISTORY IN CANADA

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Although Canada has no military heroes that are easily recognized by all or a unifying history, the country commemorates some military events, although not in such a feverish manner as it is sometimes done in other Western countries. As Pierre Nora said, commemorating is of course a way to avoid loosing our past[1]. But commemoration has its dangers, the past being revisited and sculpted by the present[2], a present which is often tainted by strong political influences and selective memories: pleasant memories are often exalted whereas unpleasant ones are swept under the rug.[3]

Throughout this year of 2015, the federal government is keeping busy preparing commemorative events for 2017, a year that will highlight, among others, the 100th anniversary of the Canadian deployment at Vimy and, most importantly, the 150th anniversary of the Canadian Confederation. Let's consider Vimy and what will likely be said about it; it constitutes the victory of the Canadian Corps operating for the first time with its four divisions during a major battle. But will the name of the British commander of the corps, Julian Byng, an extremely competent charismatic military leader, who was made Viscount Byng of Vimy by the King (a British victory?),and who then became Canada's Governor General in 1920, and whose

1 Nora, Pierre, "L'ère des commémorations", in *Les lieux de mémoire, Paris Gallimard* (Quarto), vol. 3, 1997, p. 4687.

2 Bernier, Serge, "Histoire et commémorations militaires — le cas canadien", in *Présentations de l'Académie des lettres et des sciences humaines*, vol. 54, Société royale du Canada, 2001, p. 184.

3 Ibid., p. 185.

involvement in Canadian politics was deemed inappropriate, be mentioned? And when Vimy is going to be discussed as being a founding moment for the Canadian nation, will there be someone there to ask "what nation(s) are we talking about"?

Will the events' organizers revisit every moment that surrounded the 1917 Military Service Act and its April 1918 aftermath, where civilians were killed by troops in Quebec during anti-conscription riots? What were these soldiers doing in Quebec City when they were urgently needed overseas? Will we talk about how the votes were tampered with during the elections of December 1917? Will we talk about how the victory at Vimy is directly linked to conscription, when volunteers were too scarce to replace sufficiently the losses — 10,602 lives were lost, including 3,600 which were killed in five days during that victorious battle? Will we discuss how the war was entrusted to a mentally unstable general until the end of 1916? Will the impact of the decisions made by this man, whose voice was heard until the end of the war and even after, be deemed worthy of a few lines during the official commemorations?

And what about the events that occurred during that year? Will there be time allowed to seriously consider, for example, one of the greatest collateral damages of the Great War that happened in 1917? Will we talk with appropriate seriousness of the terrible explosion that occurred in Halifax in December when a ship loaded with explosives and ammunition, an absolute disaster waiting to happen at sea, exploded in the harbor after a collision, killing nearly 2,000 people, injuring over 9,000 and obliterating much of the city? Will we be reminded that more than 7 million Canadians experienced the Great War without leaving the country, participating in the war effort in every way, including through the sacrifice of their loved ones drafted overseas?

This is the type of considerations that render the historian skeptical towards large scale commemorations. On the one hand, it is difficult to dismiss these necessary exercises of remembering history. But on the other hand, it is also hard to completely put the fact aside that a big part of history is omitted during these events and that only one interpretation will be retained, and not necessarily the most serious one.

Moreover, what are the military events that Canada should commemorate? Let's consider the battle of the Plains of Abraham of 1759. Do Canadians know that this fight, whose outcome had a decisive impact on shaping present-day Canada, is not officially recognized by the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada? This board, which, amongst other tasks, has been advising the government since 1919 on events that have marked and shaped the country, has selected the "Siege of Quebec" as a defining moment. One may recall that in 2009 a group of people wanted to reproduce the battle for its 250th anniversary, which resulted in heated debates, the failure of the enterprise and an engrossing book on the subject.[4] As for the 1760 Battle of Sainte-Foy,

4 Tremblay, Yves. *Plaines d'Abraham. Essai sur l'égo-mémoire des Québécois. Montréal,* Athéna Éditions, 2009. 248p.

a victorious battle for the French, but which was mainly fought as an honor issue, was hardly even mentioned in 2010 while it was strongly stressed in 1910.[5]

In 2012, the federal government embarked on a mission called the war of 1812, a moment in our history which a good part of the population, having limited historical knowledge, ignored almost everything about. Who was part of the organizing committee in this enterprise? Some federal officials whose independence of mind is, to say the least, questionable? We were reminded of some of the great British victories to which Canadians contributed. However, in view of the Ghent peace treaty (December 1814) and of what followed, notably that the British abandoned all inclination of confronting the Americans directly in North America, one may wonder who won. Can we really wonder why Maine extends so far north or why Alaska cuts so deep down south? Not to mention the clashes that were becoming increasingly difficult for the English between 1812 and 1814 during this so-called war of 1812: they lost a major battle around Lake Champlain in September 1814 and suffered a crushing defeat in Louisiana in January 1815, all the while the war was technically over, something the soldiers at the time didn't know.

During the 1812 history lesson, in which the government was closely involved, one important aspect was virtually not discussed. Canadian units can now write on their flag "Detroit" to signal the presence of militiamen that fought there in July 1812, which led the British to occupy the American city. However, the system of Canadian military distinctions only recognized, until then, notable moments that occurred after 1867. Since we can now connect battles that occurred before 1867 to current units (usually of the Reserve), why not also do it for indigenous and militiamen of Quebec, Trois-Rivières and Montreal who were involved in many victorious battles between 1608 and 1759? The Quebec Armoury, which is currently under renovation and whose military mission will more or less disappear, could be used for a while as a research center that could help us link these fighters of the past to units of the 21st century.

So, what is going to be done in 2017? It is difficult, if not impossible, in 2015, to determine what is planned by Veterans Affairs Canada and the Vimy Foundation for the occasion. Of course, there will be the official opening of the permanent interpretation center of the battle at Vimy in Vimy itself, but how many Canadians have had, have or will have the opportunity to visit this place during their lifetime? Who is part of the organizing committee of Vimy 2017? Where is it? If it exists, is it independent of all political interference? We know all too well how such an occasion for remembrance can easily become, first and foremost, an opportunity for many politicians to be seen. Competence is not lacking in the high Canadian public service, but independence of thought is. Why hasn't the organization of military and political celebrations for 2017 been entrusted to a totally independent committee that would have provided the government

5 On this topic, see Groulx, Patrice. "La commémoration de la bataille de Sainte-Foy, du discours de la loyauté à la 'fusion des races'", in *Revue de l'Amérique française*, vol. 55, numéro 21, été 2001, p. 45-83. The first part of the article elaborates on the issue of commemoration.

with a program of activities around a central theme whose purpose would be to mark our collective memory in a profound way? Canada is a country of immigration where the teaching of history, which is a provincial responsibility, is far from significant, even more so in regards to its military past. The few opportunities that arise to put this subject under appropriate scrutiny should not be missed. A common base of historical knowledge, however small it may be, is important, in this country as well as anywhere else in the world. Maybe is it already too late for 2017.