HOW OUR IMPULSE TO RECALL WAR HAS EBBED AND FLOWED OVER TIME

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In his recent study of history and popular memory, Paul Cohen, a historian of China, reflects upon how stories acquire particular meaning and strength in times of crisis. The stories of the Battle of Kosovo, Joan of Arc, and the fall of Masada drew upon historical events, but popular memory of Serbs, the French, and Jews adapted them to troubled later times, and Serbs, the French, and Jews used them to strengthen their sense of collectivity. The cavils of professional historians who, for example, argued that a previous battle was more militarily significant than the Battle of Kosovo in 1389 do not shatter or even pierce the "truths" of Kosovo enshrined in popular memory.[1] When times are troubled, popular memory turns towards stories that promise a positive outcome.

European wars deeply marked Canada's twentieth century, but official Canadian recognition of the wars was curiously delayed, haphazard, and regionally concentrated. The cenotaphs in the centres of small towns, the long bronze plaques in university residences listing those who died, and the Canadian Legion branches that served an important social purpose in places where the temperance spirit abided were found in cities whose residents were of English, Scotch, and Irish Protestant ancestry. But the war had divided Canada, left bitter memories, and Ottawa had no story to tell. The official history of World War I was much delayed and generally ignored while few artifacts of Canadian wars were publicly displayed. The extraordinary collection of war art that Lord Beaverbrook had commissioned in

1 Paul Cohen, The Power of Story in Moments of Crisis (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

the hope that it would find a place in town halls and public buildings across Canada remained largely in storage, although a few giant pieces adorned the somnolent Canadian Senate.

In 1967, the Canadian War Museum finally took independent physical form in the old Public Archives of Canada building on Sussex Drive. While the location was superb, the building was decrepit and fell far short of contemporary museology standards. The contrast between Canada's modest effort with the grandeur of Britain's Imperial War Museum and Australia's peerless War Memorial was striking. But Canada's wars added an acrid taste to the English Canadian liberal nationalist blend of the mid-sixties while Quebec nationalism recalled the wars as times of oppression and, of course, conscription.

Remembrance Day ceremonies and observance of silence at 11 a.m. on November 11th became increasingly irregular in the 1960s, and tales of valour were less frequently told. Increasingly, popular media stressed the horrors of war or the deep divisions that marked Canada in wartime. Vietnam, the first war fought on television, shattered the Cold War coalition between Canada and the United States and left deep scars on the North American alliance. Protests swelled beyond North American college campuses to affect deeply Canadian politics and the perception of war itself. "Make love not war" was not Pierre Trudeau's campaign slogan of 1968, but it lingered near the exuberance of Trudeaumania. Although Trudeau had publicly and vociferously opposed Canada's participation in World War II, attempts to raise the issue by outraged conservative columnists failed utterly. Radical Canadians turned to different stories. In Quebec, the Front de libération du Québec hailed *les patriotes* of 1837 while Montrealers and Torontonians enthusiastically cheered Harry Somers' 1967 opera Louis Riel as the Métis traitor became a tragic hero, the victim of John A. Macdonald's ambitions and eventually, in the statement on Manitoba's official website, "the Father of Manitoba."[2]

The metamorphosis of Riel paralleled the reimagining of Canada as a bilingual and multicultural nation with a distinct flag. The past confronted the future in 1964 when Prime Minister Lester Pearson, wearing his war service medals, presented the new flag before the Canadian Legion in Winnipeg and the veterans heartily booed Pearson's rejection of the Union Jack. Donald Creighton, Macdonald's biographer and a colleague of Pearson when they both taught in the University of Toronto History Department in the 1920s, told his wife that Pearson's action had left him "terribly depressed." Canada, he declared, had become "a wretched place" and he wished "he had lived elsewhere."[3]

The Legion and Creighton detested the "insipid" new flag that cast aside the Union Jack under which Canadians, including Pearson himself, had fought.

2 On the controversy over Trudeau's Both Riel and Gabriel Dumont were subjects of popular books of the period notably professional historian George Stanley's Louis Riel (1963) and celebrated writer George Woodcock's Gabriel Dumont: *The Métis and His Lost World* (1975).

3 Creighton quoted in Donald Wright, "Donald Grant Creighton" in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography online* at: http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/creighton_donald_grant_20E.html. Accessed on August 2, 2015.

But in the bitter debate on the new flag, John Diefenbaker, the only other prime minister who had served in the military, alienated the French Canadians in his caucus and francophones more generally by his angry defence of Canada's British past. Diefenbaker's passion embarrassed his Progressive Conservative successors as they accepted the ruling Liberal Party's argument that the crisis of Canadian federalism created by the rise of Quebec separatism required new symbols and a different understanding of Canada's past.

The Canadian War Museum on Sussex Drive was a secondary stop for most Ottawa tourists, but it reflected the times when it added a major "peacekeeping" gallery in its limited space. In 1988, just before the Cold War's end, Brian Mulroney's Progressive Conservative government, which had strong Quebec representation, commissioned a peacekeeping monument also on Sussex Drive.[4] The celebration of peacekeeping came easily because, as Granatstein argues, the Canadian military, despite its tradition drenched in British battles, practices, and customs, adapted with remarkable ease to the bilingual and bicultural ways of late-twentieth century Canada and, with much private grumbling, to the notion that most of Canada's soldiers wore blue hats.[5]

The end of the Cold War, ironically, dealt a fatal blow to traditional peacekeeping and to the comfortable political assumptions about what Canada soldiers did and had done. Moreover, Canada had not been neutral in the Cold War and professional soldiers valued most Canada's membership in NATO and NORAD, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and North American Aerospace Defence Command. Moreover, the Department of National Defence maintained a directorate of history staffed by professional historians that produced a stream of publications on Canada's military history that complemented those produced by its allies in the two world wars. Frustrated by the absence of Canadian military historians at Canadian universities, the department shrewdly supported the creation of military study centres at Canadian universities, several of which were headed by historians. For the cost of a few minor weapons, the department received a massive return.

The Mulroney and Chrétien governments moved quickly to cash the peace dividend and defence spending plummeted with little public dissent. But as support for the contemporary military waned, interest in its more distant past increased. The military historians toiling in back offices at DND or the increasingly inadequate War Museum or the military studies centres. David Bercuson at the University of Calgary, Terry Copp at Wilfrid Laurier University, Mark Milner at the University of New Brunswick but, unexpectedly, the Cold War's end brought the bloodiest encounters since Korea for Canada's Army.

4 Paul Gough, "Peacekeeping, Peace, Memory: Reflections on the Peacekeeping Monument in Ottawa," Canadian Military History, Volume 11, Number 3 (Summer 2002), pp.65-74.

5 Granatstein wrote: "The resulting army was better reflection of the country's duality than almost any federal institution-indeed, better than any Canadian institution of any kind." J.L. Granatstein, Canada's Army: Waging War and Keeping the Peace (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 372.

Military history made few inroads in most Canadian academic history departments, but it flourished in a few and among popular historians as never before in the new millennium. The 1992 CBC series on World War II, *The Valour and the Horror*, which reflected the critiques of war so common in cinema and popular culture since Vietnam, aroused unexpected fury and even provoked a Senate inquiry. In 1998, Granatstein ferociously denounced it as a cause of the "death" of Canadian history.[6] In the same year, *Saving Private Ryan* reshaped American understanding of World War II as vicious but heroic. In its gruesome battle scenes, it explained why, in U.S. newsman Tom Brokaw's words, the wartime generation was the best. The Senate inquiry on the CBC series flowed directly into increasing demands for Canadian recognition of Canada's military past. In 1998, Granatstein went to Ottawa as the director of the Canadian War Museum. And in 2005, a magnificent new museum took form on Ottawa's LeBreton Flats, remembering what Canadians until very recently had largely forgotten.

Cohen argued that "troubled" times go to the past for "stories" that promise a "positive" ending. As the lives of those who had fought came near their end and their personal memory disappeared, there developed, within families and Western nations, a need for commemoration and, in a broader sense, for a sense of collectivity in a new millennium where Western dominance would ever more become "stories" of the past.

6 J.L.Granatstein, *Who Killed Canadian History* (Toronto: Harper Collins, 1998), 116-120. When I asked Granatstein why he thought that Canada became willing to build a new war museum, he answered, "*Saving Private Ryan*."