ALL QUIET ON THE CURRICULUM FRONT

ABSTRACT

The lack of history textbooks and other useful resources about World Wars I and II is of serious concern to the teaching community in Canada. "How do we explain that so much about the two great historical turning points of the 20th century is missing from Canadian education?" asks the author. In this article, Sam Allison compares our education system to that of the United States and Britain. He explores Canada's educational structure, as well as issues surrounding the student-teacher relationship and the role played by schools in supporting external programs and organizations.

There are so few Canadian high school history textbooks that it is relatively easy to summarize their coverage of World Wars I and II. The First and Second World Wars are taught only from a Canadian national point of view; there is no holistic approach that illustrates the international course of these conflicts. At the other end of the spectrum, local history and local people are not included in our war stories for schools. Conspicuous by their absence is the placing of Canada's important role within the world context of these conflicts, as well as that of local history within the Canadian context. In total war, everyone – even young people – played a role and every region contributed. What were these roles? Canadian textbooks don't tell us.

In addition, these Wars are confined, by in large, to the history courses. Other courses, such as literature and art, seldom acknowledge the existence of Canada in the World Wars. Canadian society has so few common memories about the World Wars, perhaps because the complete story of these wars is not told to children. Why is this? How do we explain that so much about the two great historical turning points of the 20th century is missing from Canadian education?

Ken Osborne once pointed out in this same magazine[1] that for over a century, Canadians have tried to create a common Canadian history curriculum and textbook. Section 91 of the old BNA Act, a hangover from the 19th century, centralizes educational power at the provincial level of authority. Indeed, Canada and Switzerland are the only western countries with no national Ministries of Education. Arguably, we have constitutionally killed off national Canadian history textbooks and curriculum. What are the consequences of this situation for historical memory? We can use a war metaphor to place the Canadian textbook and historical memory situation within the wider educational context.

In World War I, Newfoundlanders were not part of the Canadian Expeditionary Force and fought in an entirely independent regiment. Canada's present day Educational Forces are divided into different Provincial Units every bit as independent of each other as was the Newfoundland Regiment of World War I. Canadian schools cannot adopt curriculum and textbooks independent of provincial authority.

Provincial Education Forces are characterized by a centralized, top-down, organizational structure[2]. Teachers, like soldiers in the Canadian Expeditionary Force, are at the bottom of a long chain of command. In the Canadian Education Forces, teachers are regimented according to their province. In Quebec, the paid, permanent heads of school boards are called "Directors-General," as remote from their teachers as were Generals from their foot soldiers on the Western Front. We do have our equivalents to the great General, Arthur Currie, within the system; sadly though, the spirit of the notorious Sir Sam Hughes, Minister of Militia and Defense in World War I, haunts the posts of Ministers of Education. Perhaps 35 years in the classroom has made this writer biased, but the term "lions led by donkeys," used to describe the British Army from the Crimean War onwards, seems to be equally applicable to the Canadian education scene.

Teaching of history in the United States is not nearly so rigid, nor centralized, at the state level. Individual school boards, schools, and even teachers may choose a textbook and fashion a curriculum that cuts across state boundaries. The huge variety of textbooks in the United States reflects demographics and the freedom of publishers and teachers to cut across state lines in a way that publishers and teachers may not cut across provincial lines in Canada. Canadian teachers may no more "desert" to another curriculum or unapproved textbook than a Canadian soldier in World War I could discard

SAM ALLISON

Sam Allison has taught Canadian history for 35 years in Montreal area high schools. He has been a member of various Quebec Ministry of Education Provincial committees for the last 15 years and is VP of the Provincial Association of Social Studies Teachers. He is now teaching history and methodology in the Department of Education at McGill University.

his regiment and fight for a different allied force. Teachers who are "conscientious objectors" to the history curriculum of Provincial Educational Regiments are regarded in much the same light as were conscientious objectors in World War I. We may no more blame classroom teachers for deficiencies in the Canadian Educational system than we may blame Joe Canuck for creating the system of trench warfare.

The British textbook situation, like the American one, shows Canada in an unfavourable light. History is not a popular subject in British schools and is not compulsory after 14 years of age. In addition, Scotland, England, Northern Ireland, and Wales all have different curriculum, books and examinations. Contrary to popular Canadian wisdom, the British market for history books is every bit as fragmented as the Canadian market, and is often smaller than some provincial markets. Yet, the British have a huge number of textbooks, including some devoted solely to the World Wars. The British situation is not a consequence of demographics or of a standard curriculum. The British standardize only the age students take examinations – 16 and 18 years of age – and the length of time students study the subject – two years. In contrast, there is no standard age or standard course length for the study of Canadian history. Even within a province, schools may often study Canadian history in any of the three or four years of the secondary school experience.

That all has been quiet on the common Canadian History Front for over a century reflects a lack of co-ordination, and a flexibility and rigidity in all the wrong places. The absence of textbooks and deficiencies in teaching both World Wars is a consequence of the Canadian Educational Forces, nothing else. Standardizing both the age and course length of secondary school history would transform the learning of Canadian memories. However, there are more subtle consequences for generating historical memory that arise from the organizational structure of Canada's Educational Forces.

Firstly, our educational structure itself – small armies of provincial and school board "brass" – is arguably much more expensive than its American and British counterparts. Costs are surprisingly unexplored in Canada. While it is twenty five years since this author compared them in detail, the sheer cost of the structure itself is probably still far greater in Canada than in the other two countries. Per capita, Canada spends much the same on education overall as does the United States and Britain. However, it is probable that textbook spending is far lower. In turn, the lack of spending on Canadian textbooks partly explains their scarcity compared to the United States and Britain. How is it possible to have a school system without history textbooks? This is rather as though the Canadian Expeditionary Force fought without their Ross rifles. We can understand this situation when we turn to the second point, the relationships within the educational system.

The critical educational relationship in Canada is the province and the student, not the teacher and the student[3]. As with the Newfoundland Regiment of World War I, schools are centralized under provincial not local or national authority. Why is this relevant to history teaching? One consequence is that textbooks, important to the student-teacher relationship, are under funded. In addition, non-educational organizations, such as the CBC, NFB, and museums, co-ordinate their history programs with the various Provincial Education Commands, not with schools and teachers collectively.

The third point to consider is that Canadian schools assist and support Provincial Command, the CBC, NFB, museums and so on, with their programs. Canadian schools have to fit outside organizations every bit as much as they have to fit the central Provincial Educational organization. For example, it costs approximately $2,250 if schools want to use the much touted *Canada: a People's History* by the CBC. There is no way the BBC or PBS could do that with similarly important resources. Schools even had to pay for Statistics Canada material online until recently. The Canadian Educational Forces have to pay for their supplies from Crown corporations such as the CBC and NFB in much the same way the Canadian Expeditionary Force paid for their supplies from private corporations.

The reverse is true in Britain and the United States where many organizations such as the BBC, PBS, the Smithsonian, and the British Museum are expected to devote resources to schools. Obviously, national government spending plays a major role in every country. The point is, however, that the BBC, PBS and so on reinforce what goes on in actual classrooms, whereas Canadian classrooms are expected to reinforce what goes on in museums, the media, crown corporations and so on. While schools appear to be fairly uniform in Canada, the United States and Britain, they march to very different drummers within each society. School history in Canada is defined and shaped by organizations outside and above schools, whereas in the United States and Britain, school history defines and shapes what is done by external organizations.

Much of this is difficult to prove. There are endless resources for schools about the World Wars within Canadian organizations. However, resources meant for schools often do not "fit" the school curriculum. For example, no Canadian school can possibly devote the time available to watching the endless hours of CBC and NFB films on the wars available "for schools." The result is, teachers cannot possibly preview them, let alone actually buy them all, and so schools tend to omit them.

There are several other indicators of the different roles played by schools themselves within the national scheme of things. For instance, a Canadian Teacher's Conference displays a very different curriculum situation to its British and American equivalents. Canadian conference exhibits include very few actual history textbooks, but there are usually endless history materials issued by the federal and provincial governments, by school boards, by crown corporations and by private corporations. The reverse is true at American and British conferences. They have endless varieties of textbooks and no material whatsoever from national or state levels of government, and very little from their equivalents to our crown corporations.

The Internet further illustrates this point. Some sites, such as the Library and Archives Canada World War I site, Veterans Affairs Canada "Youth and Educators" section, and the Canadian War Museum's "Educational Services" are excellent[4]. However, many official web sites, such as the

one for Canada's largest province, Ontario, have absolutely no actual lessons about the World Wars. There are endless Canadian sites claiming to have lessons, but these are usually links to links. In addition, searches of teaching resources often result in Pearl Harbor not Vimy appearing as an example of a Canadian battle. Many Canadian and school board web sites are passport protected and not available to teachers in other jurisdictions.

For quantity and quality of authentic history lessons online, School Britannia rules the e-waves every bit as decisively as Britannia ruled the sea waves of World War I. While there are many fine British sites, the Victoria Cross would probably go to "The Learning Curve," "Spartacus Educational," and "The Schools History Project." At a British history conference, this writer spoke to Mr. Tom O'Leary, an ex-history teacher who runs The Learning Curve for the British National Archives and Library. I asked him why there were so many good lessons on British sites. He gave a simple answer: We hire good teachers to write our web sites. Unlike Canadian sites "for schools" that are often written by consultants, academics, archivists, librarians, broadcasters, museumologists, and university students, British web sites are written by classroom teachers.

As a result, British web sites for schools often transmit a child's, rather than an adult's, view of war. For instance, on British web sites, the role of children in both wars is a prominent "hook" to generate interest in the wars. To illustrate this point, especially with younger high school students, teachers should not debate conscription of Farmer Brown in World War I. Rather, debate the right to conscript Farmer Brown's Clydesdale horse, Dobbin. After many years of debating this issue, no class run by this writer ever voted to allow the state to conscript horses for World War I. If one wishes to arouse emotion and emphasize the needless slaughter of WWI to children, one shows colour paintings of Dobbin, not Farmer Brown, dead on the battlefield.

As stated there are many differences between Canadian, British and American tactics to generate students' memories of war. Those other societies have child-centered strategies emanating from several types of organizations but centered upon school curriculum. Canada's education starts outside and above the classroom rather than with the child/teacher relationship. We have no overall curriculum and very little support in lesson form for our provincial curriculums. Canada, unlike the other two countries, has a very fragmented series of organizations outside schools, as well as a fragmented structure of education itself.

Lest readers doubt the enormous difference between Britain and Canada online, simply compare the BBC and CBC war web sites. The CBC site does not have an actual lesson about World War I, though it does have a section about the 22nd (Van Doos) Regiment in WWI online. The BBC has, of course, a massive number of lessons, and more importantly, very high quality lessons linked directly to school curriculums. Readers should realize though, that the CBC is one of the better Canadian sites, and that while the BBC site is a very good British site, there are several other superb British sites.

My point is, rather in the same way that no World War I private ever planned a battle, the actual classroom teachers in Canada usually have little to do with curriculum, textbooks and web sites, let alone films, exhibitions, or ceremonies involving the World Wars. It is not an accident that teachers are often omitted from critical educational decisions, but rather a consequence of the administrative structure of Canadian education[5]. Arguably, Canadian Provincial Education is as rigidly divided within each Regimental organization as they are divided from each other. The divorce between Educational Officers and teachers is very real but seldom discussed in Canada. While this essay has focused on wars, the divorce between provincially centralized schools and local neighbourhood history is also considerable.

Our Educational Force is remarkably old and retains curriculum equivalents to the Ross rifle, disliked by those in the Educational trenches. Much of the success of the Canadian Expeditionary Force was that it was remarkably young and exchanged its Canadian equipment for superior equipment such as the Lee Enfield rifle. In brief, Canada's Educational Forces have all of the vices but few of the virtues of the Expeditionary Force. This writer suggests that organizational relationships explain this situation. Sir Sam Hughes rules. General Currie and Joe Canuck in the Educational Trenches have little to say in the matter.

Changing times, but not metaphors, we can say that present day history teaching in Canada, the United States, and Britain bear much the same relationship to each other as do the present day armies of each country. While Canadian teachers, like Canadian soldiers, are characterized by a dogged loyalty to their society, this should not blind us to the poor equipment and support they actually have. Teachers do attack ignorance and try to promote memory of the World Wars as best they can. Canadian children may study the battle of Vimy Ridge, but the battle of Beaumont-Hamel characterizes the educational situation today. It is July 1st 1916 to the Newfoundland-like regiments of teachers and students in the Canadian Educational Forces who are trying to capture Historical Memory.

Endnotes

1 Osborne, Ken. "Teaching History in Canadian Schools: A Century of Debate." *Canadian Issues.* Oct/Nov 2001. p. 4-7

2 Frank MacKinnon. *The Politics of Education.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1968. p. 10

3 MacKinnon. p. 80

4 Veterans Affairs Canada, "Youth and Educators" section www.vac-acc.gc.ca & The Canadian War Museum www.warmuseum.ca "Educational Services"

5 MacKinnon. p. 29