

THE BOER WAR: ARMY, NATION AND EMPIRE

THE CRUCIBLE OF WAR: CANADIAN AND BRITISH TROOPS DURING THE BOER WAR Carman Miller

The graves of the 270 Canadian soldiers who died during the South African War are easily identifiable, even from a distance. Their large granite stones, with Canada inscribed on the top of their black facing and a large maple leaf below, stand out from among the simple wooden or iron crosses that mark the remains of the other soldiers who died in the service of British arms during the South African War. These memorials are the work of the Canadian South African Memorial Association, established in February 1902 to identify, mark and care for the graves of Canada's war dead. They speak eloquently of Canada's desire for distinctiveness within the imperial family, a desire that was enhanced by its soldiers' negative and positive relations with imperial troops.

Politicians and scholars have long seen war as a unifying force, especially in fragmented societies, an occasion to forge lasting memories and bonds of common experience. Certainly this was how the Mayor of Quebec City and later Premier of the province, EN Parent, viewed Canada's potential service in the South African War. In his farewell remarks to the men of Canada's first contingent of Canadian troops who embarked for South Africa from his city, he speculated that should the Canadian West 'ever cry out for separation from the East, the blood of lads from British Columbia, Quebec and the Maritime provinces will cry from kopje and veldt, we will be true to our past and remain united'.¹ Perhaps an even better example of the effect of war on national identity is the construction of contemporary Australian nationalism, a movement that owes much to Australian participation in imperial wars, not least of all the Anglo-Boer War where some Australians have characterised themselves as the scapegoats of Empire. Similarly Canadians' perception of their soldiers' service with imperial troops reinforced their self-consciousness and sense of difference within the Imperial family.

Although the Boer War did not create this sense of Canadian distinctiveness, it did enhance it. Indeed three decades or more before the war began, some English Canadian intellectuals had set out to reinforce and define the 49th parallel, to map a nation from the fashionable contemporary notions of race, environment and institutions.² In their Darwinian view Canada was a nation born and refined through struggle against nature, for borders, popular institutions and for a place within the Empire. It was a community bred from a Nordic environment, one that had climatically selected and refined particular European peoples. In Canada these peoples had been moulded by a British institutional heritage that framed their civil society, setting them apart from their lawless southern neighbours. Whether the country's British-American inhabitants had been formed more by their physical environment or their institutional heritage, and thereby were more American or British, remained an open and controversial subject. Most agreed, however, that whatever the British-American mix, Canada possessed a discernible identity within the British family.

They also determined to use Canada's participation in the South African War to assert that character and demand its recognition. In the words of Canada's Minister of Militia, Frederick Borden, Canada's participation in the South African War was nothing less than the voice of Canada announcing to the world that it was no longer a colony but a mature nation of the empire. Much of the contemporary pro-war press shared the Minister's aspirations. From the beginning they had insisted that Canadian troops fight as a unit under Canadian officers, a demand that Borden and his colleagues readily facilitated. Consequently within the constraints of its size, colonial status and modest contribution, the Minister made every effort to enhance the contingents' importance, extend its autonomy and affirm its Canadian character.

The Canadian Government named, organised and clothed its battalions to demonstrate their distinctiveness. They organised their volunteer soldiers into battalions under Canadian officers, rather than in companies and placed in British battalions as the British authorities had initially requested. The first two Canadian contingents were raised as temporary units' under the authority of the Canadian Militia Act and answered formally to Militia Headquarters in Ottawa. The first three Canadian military units that were despatched to South Africa, the Royal Canadian Regiment of Infantry, the Royal Canadian Dragoons and the Royal Canadian Field Artillery, were designated to retain a sentimental association with their namesakes of Canada's Permanent Militia. The first unit, the Royal Canadian Regiment of Infantry, was composed of eight companies, recruited regionally from the Atlantic to the Pacific. One of its companies was reserved for all of its francophone recruits, and was commanded by bilingual officers and non-commissioned officers.

Material distinctions were no less important. The Royal Canadians' brown canvas khaki uniforms, white helmets (later sensibly dyed coffee), heavy black boots, Sam Browne belts and Oliver equipment, as well as their small distinction of dress and kit and insignia, underscored their desire for differentiation. None was greeted by the men with greater pride than their Maple Leaf 'Canada' badge affixed to their helmet. Other units possessed comparable distinctions in name, dress and equipment. The Canadian Mounted Rifles had medal Canada badges on both of their shoulder straps, as well as small maple leaf badges worn on either side of their collars, and a large maple leaf on their service cap. During the war the Maple Leaf was employed in various contexts, to locate their campground and identify their group. Often it was crudely inscribed on a temporary monument marking the final resting place of a fallen comrade (long before it became the official mark of the Canadian South African Memorial Association). Indeed it was the Boer War that popularised the Maple Leaf as a national military symbol.

In South Africa, as the loss and the wear and tear of war obliterated these material distinctions, Canadian soldiers became conscious of, and often sensitive to the social and national distinctions that separated them from their imperial comrades. They noted their differences of accent and expression, preferences for songs and sports, of attitudes and manners. Some of the Canadian units, such as the Strathcona's Horse (ironically half of whom were British born), under the command of the legendary Sam Steele of the Mounties, went out of their way to construct an image of themselves as quintessential western Canadian frontiersmen, fearless, versatile rough riders from the Plains, 'comparable to a Boer commando', somewhat indifferent to the more conventional rituals of warfare. Generally the Canadian volunteers preferred to serve in Canadian units and to be commanded by Canadian officers. And they displayed little tolerance for Canadians who aped British mannerisms.

In other ways too the war altered Canadian soldiers' perceptions of themselves and sharpened their sense of separateness. The British Army's initial difficulty dealing with the Boers' unorthodox methods of warfare challenged their confidence in British military leadership. Before the war Canadians had often been told by presumptuous British regulars, and their Canadian equivalents, that Canada's poorly trained citizen soldiers could scarcely conceive of standing by seasoned British regulars. But the Canadian troops who had fought at Liliefontein, Rietfontein and at Hart's River, and who had seen British regular units flee, leaving the Canadians alone to face overwhelming odds, developed other views of their comparative martial skills. And when Canadian militia men were reminded that armies required organisation and structure, many Canadian veterans remembered the British Army's failure to provide its men with an adequate food and water supply, and their pathetically inadequate medical service, dispensed according to rank and title rather than need. Indeed so confident had some Canadian soldiers become of their own combat skills that Lieutenant Richard Turner, one of the three Canadian Victoria Cross winners at Liliefontein, felt that the Canadians had 'taught the Regulars how to fight'.³ Soon after that same battle, Lieutenant EWB Morrison, another of Liliefontein's decorated veterans, spoke for many of his comrades, when he expressed the hope that Canadians would fight their next war under Canadian officer and 'in one division'.⁴ He and many others were to see and be part of that Division.

Many Canadians, aided and abetted by contemporary Darwinian social analysis, drew dubious though nonetheless significant conclusions from their observations. They blamed the slowness, lethargy and slovenliness of some British units on social and physical causes, on what was known as 'race' deterioration caused by urbanisation and industrialisation, and the British hidebound, class cursed commitment to form, red tape and 'five o'clock tea principles'. And they came to see their country as a classless 'land of hope for all who toil', that might serve a regenerative function within the Empire, even becoming the future seat of imperial greatness.⁵

Tensions between Canadian and imperial troops re-enforced Canadians' sense of distinctiveness. Tensions took various forms, from recreational competitions, verbal sparring and bar room brawls to more serious group confrontations. Some Canadian senior officers may even have encouraged these milder contests. For example, many men in the Strathcona's Horse were convinced that their commanding officer, Sam Steele, was proud of his men when the Canadians got the better of a brawl with their imperial comrades. Steele, a shrewd manager of men, who led a unit half of whom were British born, never ceased reminding his men that they were Canadians and that they were different. He seemed to regard contests with the imperials as a means of establishing borders, defining and re-enforcing differences and building morale.

Tensions and conflict between Canadian and British troops were not confined to the ranks. Many Canadian officers felt snubbed and ostracised by British officers who made them and other 'colonial' officers 'feel that they were only members of the mess by, sufferance'.⁶ Conflict between colonial and imperial officers, especially recently promoted, junior imperial officers of tenuous social standing, reached such levels that both Lord Roberts and Lord Kitchener issued confidential orders regretting the 'unfriendly spirit of regimental officers to members of HM colonial forces'.⁷

Occasionally tensions between Canadian soldiers and their imperial officers reached critical levels of misunderstanding. The most spectacular Canadian example of misunderstanding entailed two troops of Canadian constables and their British superiors in Baden-Powell's South African Constabulary, an incident that I have discussed in detail elsewhere.⁸ As an inducement to the recruitment of the 1200 Canadians who were raised in the late winter of 1901 to serve in the newly formed South African Constabulary, Canadian recruits had been led to believe that they would serve together as a unit, under the popular command of Sam Steele. But when they reached South Africa they learned, much to their chagrin, that they were to be broken up and grouped into twelve troops and placed in several of the Constabulary's four divisions, only one of which was commanded by Steele. Baden-Powell had intended to go much farther and split up the troops themselves, but he was dissuaded by the Canadian resistance and Steele's timely and authoritative intervention. It was not a good beginning; nor was it the end of misunderstanding.

Social tensions seemed to be at the root of the subsequent difficulties. Few of the Canadian constables came from the social class that Baden-Powell had hoped to recruit from 'all over the Empire', those experienced, well-bred, skilled horsemen and land hungry settlers, which he procured with little difficulty among the sons of the British gentry. While some of the Canadian Constables were South African veterans, others were urban shop hands and drifters; many were adventurers, wild, reckless and rowdy men, who had joined the unit in the dead of Winter, and were anxious to participate in the fighting. But few had any inclination or interest in settling into the more sedate, sedentary life of a constable in a quiet African town, much less of turning their hand to farming.

The social distinctions and tensions between the Canadians and the others were palpable from the beginning, though they were muted during the more mobile rough and tumble conditions of warfare. Baden-Powell had recognised the social difference at once. While he realised that in warfare the Canadians were hard working and 'brave to foolhardy in the field',⁹ he noticed their resistance to sedentary consignments; and on one occasion he had sensibly suggested trading his Canadian Constables for a comparable number of British Yeomanry who possessed the desired social credentials. The British authorities, however, had refused his request. Above all he worried about the Canadians' suitability for civilian police work once the war ended and they were consigned solely to the task for which they had been raised.

His worries were well founded. Much as Baden-Powell feared, once the war had ended and the Constabulary had been consigned to isolated, sedentary civilian employment, a serious crisis developed, precipitated by the need to reduce the size of the force. The cost conscious War Office had ordered the Constabulary authorities to reduce their numbers by some 40 per cent, an irresistible opportunity to monitor the force and weed out the 'rotters'. They determined, therefore, to reconstitute the civilian force along the lines originally envisaged by its founders, Alfred Milner, the British High Commissioner to South Africa, and Baden-Powell, the Constabulary's first Commanding Officer. In remodelling the force the authorities sought to retain only the steady, able, educated men who would give no offence to the Boer population so 'easily offended by the slightest impropriety in language and demeanour'.¹⁰ During this cleansing operation, the Canadians felt themselves to have been targeted, the victims of systemic discrimination, deception and the 'spiteful and petty tyranny of Imperial officers'.¹¹ And they reacted strongly.

The conflict came to a head in two of the Canadian troops, numbers 14 and 17, recruited respectively in Saint John, New Brunswick, and Montreal. During a rigorous tour of inspection a supercilious imperial career officer, recently promoted from the ranks, had reported that the interior economy of these two Canadian troops was especially unsatisfactory. Discipline was lax and the men displayed no deference to rank and hierarchy. Men were insubordinate, ignorant of rules and regulations, lacked initiative, were 'mutinous, dishonest and drunken'. Upon the receipt of this devastating report the Divisional Officer Commanding reprimanded the Canadian Captains commanding these two troops and ordered them to restore order at once. When the Canadian Captains failed to comply with these orders, they were curtly informed that they were to be replaced by imperial officers.

Their troops' response was immediate and 'mutinous'. At first the men petitioned their Divisional Commander, denouncing the proposed transfer, making clear that they would serve only under Canadian officers who 'understand the Canadian disposition'. When their petition was refused, all the troops' non-commissioned officers demanded permission to revert to the ranks. This tactic was no more successful. And on the day set for the transfer the constables simply left their posts without orders and went into town leaving 'the district without police' and obliging the sub-divisional commander to replace them with constables from other districts. A visit from the Sub-Divisional Commander only exacerbated the situation. His attempt to address the men at dinner ended in confusion. The men's behaviour became threatening. They refused his order to fall in for rifle inspection, and as the subdivisinal emissary was leaving the post 'shots were fired in the air'. At another post, the striking Canadian constables shot a government Cape cart 'into matchwood'. When the Sub-Divisional Commander sent an experienced superintendent to restore order he was greeted at the railway station and publicly hooted by the defiant constables.¹² The Sub-Divisional Commander had clearly lost control of the situation.

In response nine 'leaders' of the striking constables were arrested and sent for trial to Bloemfontein. A board of officers assembled but failed to extract evidence from this tightly knit group, none willing to implicate the other. In the end it was impossible to establish individual guilt and no charges could be laid. Nonetheless they and 24 others were discharged, most with no entry on their defaulters sheet, and some whose conduct was described as 'very good'.

They and over 100 other Canadian constables returned to Canada angrily and publicly claiming they had been the victims of national discrimination.¹³ Their complaints received a sympathetic hearing in the press. 'Canadians are not, nor does the public opinion of this country demand that Canadians become the lackeys of English officers', wrote one irate correspondent. 'A Canadian trooper is a fighting man, he is not a soldier.'¹⁴ When the issue was raised in the House of Commons, the Minister of Militia, Sir Frederick Borden, requested the British authorities to open an investigation, which they did, an investigation that predictably cleared the Imperial officers of all blame.¹⁵ Although this issue soon ceased to be a subject of public debate, the public exposure of the constables' grievances helped shape and re-enforced Canadians' view of Imperial officers and the society they were thought to represent.

But this is only one side of the story. There is, of course, another more indulgent side to the story of conflict between Canadian and Imperial officers, best illustrated by two incidents, one involving Australian troops. The first incident occurred in early October 1900, soon after the completion of the Lydenburgh campaign and the break-up of Lord Dundonald's Brigade. The Strathcona's Horse, which had been part of Dundonald's Brigade, had been ordered to proceed to Pretoria, to await a new assignment; many hoped their orders would be to return home. While they waited at Machadodorp for a train to Pretoria the men and officers camped on either side of the rail, unprotected from the rain and thunder, relaxed and in a celebratory mood. In the evening the officers had difficulty maintaining law and order among their restless men, and some made no effort to do so, especially after the departure for Pretoria of their Commanding Officer, Colonel Steele.

Damp, cold, bored, and anticipating their immediate release from service, the men wanted alcohol. The more entrepreneurial among their number resorted to a standard trick to secure their objective from the quartermaster's store, by forging Major Belcher's signature. In no time at all they became drunk, noisy and disorderly, shouting and firing their revolvers in the air. The British Provost Marshal together with a British Major and a couple of mounted police came by to investigate. As the Provost stooped over to examine a suspicious-looking, crude 'bivouac with a light in it and in which a sergeant and corporal were making merry with a water bottle full of rum', one of the Canadians came up from behind the Provost and 'fired his revolver close to each side of his head'. In the dark and confusion the culprit could not be detected.

The shaken Provost immediately instructed several companies of British infantry to surround the Canadian squadron and ordered the merry-makers out on parade. The Canadians were marched for several hours until they had sobered up. The next day the authorities investigated the affair but took no action since 'we were irregular troops and our Colonel was away'.¹⁶ Needless to say, this incident received no publicity back home.

The second incident entailed a more serious disturbance in Cape Town, in December 1900, as the men of Canada's second contingent (the Royal Canadian Dragoon, the Canadian Mounted Rifles and the Royal Canadian Field Artillery) waited to board a vessel for their return passage to Canada. In fact celebrations had begun soon after the two mounted units left Pretoria by rail. At Kronstad, while their officers were being entertained with a champagne dinner by the resident Irish officer, the men commandeered a carload of beer, and proceeded to become disorderly, despite the threats of their officers and the British authorities.

Things deteriorated in Cape Town where they were billeted at Maitland Camp with about 500 returning Australian troops. The day after the Canadians reached the Cape, as they were loading their personal baggage aboard the *Roslin Castle* and guarding their guns and equipment, they heard rumours of high-jinks in the town, and they requested leave to spend their last night in Cape Town. The Camp authorities sensibly denied their request, careful as they were to avoid trouble and to make certain that all men were present and accounted for when the ship sailed the following day. Although Maitland Camp was some four miles from the town, and guarded by armed British troops, the Canadians decided to go to town anyway. The Australians joined them, and 'over a thousand men walked out of camp and marched into Cape Town ... sore as hell', and determined 'to have a good time before they sailed'.¹⁷

Not all men escaped so easily. Officers, sentries and military police tried to stop them, and for some 'getting out was quite difficult'. One group hijacked a horse cab:

One of the men mounted the horse, another took the reins on the box, and the rest crowded in behind. Getting up speed they approached the sentries at the gate at a gallop. Being foot soldiers this 'cavalry' charge proved too much for them; and they were obliged to make way for the cab and its load.¹⁸

The men headed straight for the bars on Adderly Street. Some men had just entered their first bar, when a military order arrived to sell no drinks to anyone. The hotel management's attempts to explain the order to the thirsty soldiers who were crammed into the bar was not a

success. The men literally took things into their own hands. The bar was 'shot up in wild Western fashion. Pistol bullets shattered the chandeliers. Men tried to shoot their monograms into the big plate glass mirror ... Others vaulted the bar and worked as volunteer barmen'. Once they had exhausted that bar's resources they moved on to the Grand Hotel where the manager cleverly informed the men that he had no authority to sell liquor but nothing prevented him from giving it away, so long as they left his bar intact. The men accepted his hospitality, respected his request and left behind three Canadian hats full of gold sovereigns as a gratuity. News of free drinks at the Grand spread quickly and brought a crowd of potential customers, packed solid for two city blocks about the hotel. 'Traffic was stopped. The military police saw they couldn't do a thing with the mob, so they did not try.'¹⁹

But this was not only a Canadian riot. The Australians were also in town, on their way home and they had scores to settle with a 'Dutch paper' that had called them 'descendants of convicts'. The Australians had visited their accusers and 'had wrecked the plant and were now marching about the town looking for trouble in general'. The City police, incapable of containing the situation, called upon the military authorities. Soon 30 Cape Mounted Rifles arrived, 'supported by infantry patrols with fixed bayonets formed in line and drew their swords, then chose the most solid looking body of rioters, and advanced at a walk, broke into a trot, and finally a gallop. They used the flats and the backs of their swords and cracked many heads'.²⁰ That was all that was required. The mob broke up and the men found their way back to camp, carrying their casualties of the sword and bar.

What is striking in this instance (as with the Machadodorp affair) is the British military authorities' indulgent response to the Cape Town riot. They initiated no extensive investigation nor did they make any effort to single out and punish the offenders and their leaders. Men who had failed to obtain leave were merely sentenced to seven days' detention, a meaningless punishment, given the number entailed and the fact that they were aboard ship. There is also a reference in Acting Captain REW Turner's diary that they 'paid for their spree like real men', perhaps by a voluntary fine or a collection to cover the property damages. Turner's light-hearted reference to the incident suggests that the military authorities had dismissed the event as youthful high spirits that had been readily contained, and that for political reasons (because they were colonial citizen soldiers) it would be unwise to pursue. Certainly the riot did nothing to quell the cordiality and enthusiasm of the official departure ceremonies for the Canadian and Australian troops. The British High Commissioner, Sir Alfred Milner, Lieutenant-General TWEF Forestier-Walker and the Mayor of Cape Town, Thomas Bell, lavished praise on the colonial troops and thanked them profusely for their service. The City's Mayor even promised a souvenir for each soldier that would be handed down with pride to their families for generations. The City's spectators were no less warm in their reception of the previous evening's happy rioters as they marched peacefully through their streets to their vessels.

These are not the only examples of the British authorities' consideration for and indulgence of colonial troops. Charges of looting, and breaches of regulations were often overlooked or dismissed, an indulgence that British regular troops may not have enjoyed. All were based on the British recognition of colonial difference, an expectation that invited and encouraged colonial response including abuse of the indulgence.

Encounters with Imperial troops offered other, more positive inducements for recognition and distinction. Indeed they seemed to have encouraged and expected regional difference. For example, Baden-Powell made 'Canada' the password the first night after the relief of Mafeking in recognition of the Royal Canadian Field Artillery's contribution toward its relief. And senior British officers invariably went out of their way to meet, greet and thank Canadian troops for their service, extend them every courtesy and accede to their reasonable requests. Lord Roberts himself insisted on inspecting and thanking the remnant of Canada's first contingent, The Royal Canadian Regiment of Infantry, before their departure from Pretoria; while in Bloemfontein General Kelly-Kenny and his staff, together with Major-General Robert Baden-Powell, turned out with a military band to meet their train, inspect and thank them.²¹ During these farewell ceremonies and on other similar occasions, Canadian officers and men were showered with flattery. Bands played Canadian tunes, such as 'Vive la Canadienne' and 'The

Maple Leaf Forever', and the troops were invited to sing Canadian songs.²² At Bloemfontein Baden-Powell had invited Canadians to join his newly formed South African Constabulary, whereupon one of 'the boys from D Company responded with a rendition of 'The Land of the Maple Is The Land for Me' , much to the amusement of all including Baden-Powell.²³ On other occasions British bands, bereft of Canadian melodies, played appropriate alternate tunes such as 'Cock o' the North'.²⁴ Canadian troops appreciated the recognition, thoughtfulness and understanding, relished the excessive flattery and endeavoured to fulfil their expectations.

The courtesy of senior British officers was not entirely altruistic. Acutely sensitive to the politics of Empire, some senior officers seemed to have paid particular attention to the bi-ethnic Senior Dominion. For them and for British politicians Canada's initial hesitant, controversial and somewhat tepid initial response to the war had been the cause of some concern, given the Dominion's contemporary imperial popularity and centrality,²⁵ and the British Government's desire to demonstrate the Empire's unity in adversity. Consequently they took the opportunity of the British victory at Paardeberg to give the Canadian troops an inordinate amount of credit for this significant and symbolic (on Majuba Day) victory. British politicians, press and artists picked up and embroidered the story of the final assault on General Piet Cronjé's laager, much to the initial embarrassment of some of the Canadian soldiers who realised that their final assault was not entirely heroic: after all three companies had fled after the first Boer fusillade. According to this convenient instant legend Britain's senior Dominion had avenged Majuba Hill, wiped out the stain of 19 years' standing, opened the road to victory, and demonstrated the solidarity of the Empire. One gloss on the story even claimed that 'few of this gallant company of Great Britain's defenders could speak English'.²⁶

Consequently most Senior British officers were very popular with the Canadian troops. The men and officers of the Strathcona's Horse had a great affection for General Redvers Buller, as they demonstrated during Lord Strathcona's official banquet for his battalion in London following the war, where the name of Buller evoked a particularly enthusiastic response. Earlier their Commanding Officer's request to give three cheers for Buller during an official inspection had been refused owing to the presence of Lord Roberts! The men and officers were incensed at this petty refusal and the utilised the banquet as an opportunity to remedy this slight and make clear their affection for Buller. Lord Dundonald's popularity among Canada's South African War veterans later led to his appointment as General Officer Commanding the Canadian Militia; though it did not assure its success. Canadians were equally impressed with Major-General Smith-Dorrien, who commanded three of the Canadian units at one time or another, and who led by flattery. These senior officers were not alone: Lord Roberts, General Baden-Powell, General HCO Plumber and Major-General Knox, enjoyed comparable reputations among Canadian troops for kindness, understanding and courtesy. The one, singular exception was Major-General ETH Hutton, whom the Canadians thoroughly and almost universally detested, a sentiment that the Australians may have shared; as he had served unsuccessfully in both countries before the war. But even his negative recognition, that Canadians were the worst thieves in the British Army (they had stolen his horse!) was an acknowledgement of their distinctiveness.

British senior officers, appreciative of the importance of local and regional identities in building regimental loyalty and esprit de corps, encouraged and reinforced their sense of distinctiveness. Their greetings and communications with Canadian troops, in language or music, invited Canadian troops to articulate a national persona within the Imperial family. Indeed British officers and popular writers such as Arthur Conan Doyle and Rudyard Kipling, anxious to demonstrate the diversity and utility of the Empire, provided language and character descriptions to articulate that difference. In speeches, official reports and stories they cast the colonial troops as youthful, courageous, resourceful, unorthodox and energetic. The Elgin Commission in 1903 described the Canadians and colonial troops as 'half soldiers by their upbringing', natural horsemen, observant scouts, whose officers share with their men mutual interests, and whose men are trained to think for themselves, with the result that they carry on should their leaders be killed'. The *Lancet* followed a similar line describing the Boers and colonials as physically larger, stronger, and more fit than the British Tommy , and 'man for man ... incomparably superior to our workers in London or Manchester or Glasgow'.²⁷

Canadians were particularly fond of Darwinian descriptions of their difference from Imperial troops. They delighted in characterisations of their men as 'taller and sturdier than infantry of the line-grim, solid men as straight as poplars', products of their Nordic environment, 'Lords of the Northland'.²⁸ It gave credence and authority to their sense of distinctiveness, and confirmed a generation and more of nationalistic rhetoric. These themes were taken up by Canadian soldiers and civilian writers during and after the war to fashion a more distinctive personality in war and peace.²⁹

Encouragement of colonial distinctiveness was not confined to individual senior British officers. It possessed an institutional embodiment in the British Army's regional and ethnic regimental system as represented by various Irish, Welsh and Scottish units. Consequently close association with British regiments invited imitation. While Canadian soldiers may have been critical of the quality of many British units (especially the City Imperial Volunteers), during the war Canadian soldiers developed deep respect and affection for a number of the Scottish and Irish units, including the Royal Irish, the Argyle Sutherlands, the Shropshire Light Infantry, the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry, and above all the Gordon Highlanders.

The Royal Canadian Regiment of Infantry, the Canadian Mounted Rifles and the Royal Canadian Dragoons all served with the Gordon Highlanders at one time or another, and they established a close rapport and friendship with this unit. The Gordons and the Royal Canadians had first met in Cape Town having arrived in South Africa at the same time. Subsequently they had been brigaded together and had camped and fought side by side all the way to Pretoria. During these months they had supported and assisted one another, raised tents and prepared meals when the other was returning from a difficult assignment. The Canadians possessed a great respect for the Gordons as men and as soldiers. For example, they were so impressed with the Gordons' performance during the battle at Doornkop, a battle that cost the Gordons 20 dead and 70 wounded, that the Canadians rose spontaneously as one man and cheered the Highlanders when they returned from the battle to camp, their pipes still sounding. According to one Canadian soldier it was 'the heartiest and most spontaneous thing' he had witnessed during the war.³⁰ The fraternal bonds of comradeship and respect forged during this conflict led to their linkage with Toronto's 48th Regiment Highlanders after the war.

Close association with regular units, especially those with strong regional and regimental identities, such as the Gordons, invited emulation; and most Canadian units readily met the challenge. The Royal Canadians' first response was to name their campsite at Graspan, Maple Leaf Camp. Other Canadian units responded similarly: the Royal Canadian Field Artillery named their earthworks at Rustenburg, Fort Canada, and its four bastions, Kingston, Toronto, Hamilton and Winnipeg. Whatever internal divisions plagued some of the Canadian units, within the imperial family they constructed, cultivated and projected a collective national persona designed to set them apart. In each unit a few officers and men rose to the occasion, to design a symbol, compose a slogan, render a patriotic song or verse descriptive of their difference. In South Africa some men first learned the words and music of, and to identify with national songs, such as 'The Land of the Maple' or 'The Maple Leaf Forever'; the latter became something of a national anthem. Men soon came to describe their motives for recruitment in similar, patriotic language: they had enlisted to 'hold up the Maple Leaf Forever'; and they had consoled themselves that if they died 't'will help the Maple Leaf to Live'.³¹

In other words, many Canadians who left Canada for South Africa as 'Sons of the Empire', returned 'Singing Their Own Canadian War Song'. In their patriotic lectures, stories and sermons about the war and reminiscences of their experiences, they constructed a national memory of the war that emphasised British military incompetence and failure, their mindless deference to class and social distinction, against which they compared their own energy, initiative, resourcefulness and freedom from constraints. Veterans began to believe their own rhetoric. As they gathered for their annual Paardeberg Day celebration, for years a patriotic anniversary (still religiously celebrated by the Royal Canadian Regiment of Infantry), the memories of their failures, their strife, conflict, death, disease and discouragement gave way to a more refined, heroic version of the war and how it was won.

No tale became more heroic than the Battle of Paardeberg. According to one fanciful account, the simple knowledge that the Canadians were in the trenches had filled the Boers with such fear that they were persuaded to surrender. Soldiers recounted how Boer prisoners had remarked: 'You are not men, you are devils. We can stand the shooting of the average British soldiers but you Canadians are regular fire eaters and know no fear ... It's easily seen now what nation is going to rule the world'.³²

During and after the war the civilian population re-echoed these refrains and applied them to civic society. In their view Paardeberg was 'a bold declaration of nationhood'. According to the Prime Minister it was a declaration 'to the world that a new power had arisen in the west'.³³ In the view of another commentator, Canadians had not 'rejoiced because Cronjé was defeated, but because their sons had become men in the eyes of the world'.³⁴ All expressed the fond wish that from the victory of Paardeberg would spring a new patriotism based on unity and purpose. While that aspiration remained unfulfilled, the war shaped a military institution that some historians suggest achieved part of that agenda during the First World War.

During and following the South African War, the organisation, funding and inauguration of an impressive number of monuments in all parts of the country provided countless opportunities to propagate this construction of the war and reinforce these images. The war led to the creation of the Boer War Veterans Association, the South African Veterans Mutual Protection Association, the Patriotic Fund, the Soldiers Wives League and the Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire, and the South African Memorial Association that institutionalised these memories. It supplied native heroes: Harold Borden, William Knisley, Bruce Carruthers, Edward Holland (the VC recipient after whom Holland Barracks in Ottawa was named), and REW Turner. It provided memorable heroic battles, such as Paardeberg, Lillfontein and Hart's River that called for remembrance and commemoration such as Paardeberg Day³⁵ (still celebrated by the Royal Canadian Regiment), and Lillfontein Day (still commemorated by the Royal Canadian Dragoons); and for a time Hart's River Day (celebrated by the Canadian Mounted Rifles). Units such as the Strathcona's Horse and the Canadian Mounted Rifles owed their creation to the war. Regular units that participated in the war adopted insignia and regimental marches inspired by the war,³⁶ and proudly paraded their battle honours, as did many of the militia units who contributed men to the war.

In response to this new sense of self-confidence and independence, Canadians insisted that Canadian militia officers command their own militia, that their defence policy and militia organisation reflect their needs and assumptions. They developed distinctive kit and equipment, including the notorious Ross Rifle. The Minister of Militia, backed by the Commons' militia lobby and public support, used the 'lessons' of the war to reform and reshape the Canadian Militia. He increased the Militia estimates, enlarged its establishment, raised its pay scales, re-equipped it with new rifles and artillery and purchased a large central training base at Petawawa. He introduced higher standards of training and promotion and more serviceable uniforms. During the war he had used the opportunity to test tents, transport and ambulance wagons, water carts, hospital equipment and supplies, some of Canadian design. After the war he established an Army Service Corps, an Army Medical Corps, an Army Dental Corps, a Corps of Signals, a Corps of Guides, an Ordnance Corps, a Veterinary Corps and a Pay Corps.

The war also affected military policy and planning. It gave credence to the proponents of the militia myth, those who preferred a trained citizenry to a professional, standing army, a preference that shaped the direction of post-war military reform and re-organisation. Borden's decision to create a decentralised, citizen army of sharpshooters, his attempts to secure a dependable Canadian supply of rifles and ammunition, his subsidisation of rifle clubs, and his encouragement of Cadet Corps, military training in schools, and later Baden-Powell's Boy Scouts, were all inspired by the 'lessons' of the Boer War. So too was Borden's insistence upon Canadian military autonomy and pragmatic, co-operative military imperialism rather than imperial integration, all policies that enjoyed wide popular support.

In summary, then, the Boer War, Canada's first overseas war experience, became an important defining moment for the Canadian Militia. It was the crucible of the Canadian Army.

Endnotes

1. The Quebec *Chronicle*, 31 October 1899.
2. See Carl Berger, *The Sense of Power* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969).
3. REW Turner Papers, Diary, 20 July 1900, National Archives of Canada (hereinafter NAC).
4. EWB Morrison, *With The Guns in South Africa* (Hamilton: Spectator Print Co, 1901), 258, 290.
5. Jeanette Duncan, *The Imperialist*.
6. *The Globe*, 7 April 1902.
7. Confidential Memo, General Order 1329, 10 March 1902, WO 108/117, Public Record Office, Kew (hereinafter PRO).
8. Carman Miller, 'The Unhappy Warriors: Conflict and Nationality among Canadian Troops during the South African War', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 23: 1 (January 1995), 77-104.
9. Captain Charles Beer to ADSCO, E Division, 30 June 1903, Colonial Office, 526/3/24, PRO.
10. Pilkington to Chief Staff Officer, SAC, 24 July 1903, CO 526/3/24, PRO.
11. Mrs HS Massiah to the King, 21 October 1902, CO 526/3/24, PRO.
12. Petition to Colonel Pilkington, 30 September 1902, CO 526/3/24, PRO.
13. Altogether at least 720 of the 1208 Canadian Constables returned to Canada before the expiry of their service contract.
14. *Mail and Empire*, 11 April 1903.
15. *The Montreal Star*, 30 March 1903; *Mail and Empire*, 11 April 1903; Canada, House of Commons, *Debates*, 16 April 1903, 1027.
16. RP Rooke Papers, 'A Record from Memory', 26 April 1908, N AC.
17. Jack Randell, *I'm Alone* (Indianapolis: The Bobs-Merrill Co, 1931), 50-51.
18. WA Griesbach, *I Remember* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1946), 312.
19. Randell, *I'm Alone*, 51-53.
20. Griesbach, *I Remember*, 312.
21. J Kennedy Hill Papers, Diary, 25, 26 September 1900, NAC.
22. *Ibid*, 27 September 1900.
23. *Ibid*.
24. Carman Miller, *Painting The Map Red: Canada and the South African War, 1899-1902* (Montreal and Kingston: Canadian War Museum/McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993). 279.
25. See RG Moyles and D Owrarn, *Imperial Dreams and Colonial Realities: British Views of Canada, 1880-1914* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988).
26. Miller, *Painting The Map Red*, 110-12.
27. See John F Owen, 'The Military Forces of our Colonies', *The Fortnightly Review*, March 1900; Richard Jebb, *Studies in Colonial Nationalism* (London: Edward Arnold, 1905), 127; Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Great Boer War* (London: Smith, Elder & Co, 1903), 742; Rudyard Kipling, 'The Captive', *Traffics and Discoveries* (London: Macmillan, 1904); John Stirling, *The Colonials in South Africa, 1899-1902* (Edinburgh: W Blackwood & Sons, 1907).
28. SM Brown, *With The Royal Canadians* (Toronto: Publishers' Syndicate, 1900), 6; TG Marquis, *Canada's Sons on Kopje and Veldt* (Toronto: The Canada's Sons Publishing Co, 1900), 71; J Douglas Borthwick, *Poems and Songs of the South African War* (Montreal: Gazette Publishing Company, 1901), 125.
29. See, for example, Morrison, *With The Guns in South Africa*, 202.
30. W Hart-McHarg, *From Quebec To Pretoria with the Royal Canadian Regiment* (Toronto: W Briggs, 1902), 216.
31. Gaston Labat, *Le Livre d'Or* (Montreal: privately published, 1901), 128; Victor Odum Papers, vol 15, NAC; *Sentinel Review*, 28 August 1900.
32. *The Montreal Star*, 9 May 1900; Annie Mellish, *Our Boys Under Fire; or Maritime Volunteers in South Africa* (Charlottetown: privately published. 1900), 33; the quotation is attributed to a Colonel Notting of the Gordon Highlanders.
33. Canada, House of Commons *Debates*, Laurier, 13 March 1900, 1848.
34. Norman Patterson, 'The War and Canada', *Canadian Magazine*, July 1902, 204.
35. For a time imperialists attempted to make Paardeberg Day an imperial day of commemoration, initially celebrated in Australia as well. I owe this information to the kindness of Craig Wilcox.
36. The Royal Canadian Dragoons' regimental insignia consists of a springbok on a scroll; the Strathcona's Horse regimental march is 'Soldiers of the Queen'.