

War Scenes
Across the
Canadian
Border

Stephen Leacock
1915

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Title: War Scenes Across the Canadian Border

Date of first publication: October, 1915

Author: Stephen Leacock

Date first posted: February 17, 2017

Date last updated: February 17, 2017

Faded Page eBook #20170219

This ebook was produced by: Alex White

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First published in *Vanity Fair*, October, 1915.

In Canada we are at war. Eighty thousand Canadian soldiers have crossed the ocean for the front. Some sixty-five thousand more are enlisted for Overseas Service and are training in military camps in Canada. At Valcartier beside Quebec, at Niagara and elsewhere there are wide tented cities of Canadian soldiers. The streets of our great towns are filled with men in khaki. Across the leading thoroughfares are broad white streamers that mark recruiting places,—for the fiftieth, the sixtieth, the one hundredth, and soon, no doubt, the one hundred and fiftieth battalion of the Expeditionary Force of the Dominion. About fifteen to twenty battalions,—an army division of forty thousand men,—are already on the fighting line. The others follow in a steady stream, that moves more strongly with every month and shows no ending. The regiments are filled as fast as their formation is announced. The mingled elements of which our Commonwealth is made up are reflected in them. There are French regiments from Old Canada speaking their own tongue, Highland regiments,—like that of Montreal, all honor to it, that fought at Langemarck,—troops of horse from the West, and Irish Rangers so called, after the Irish fashion, because they have never ranged and never been in Ireland. In single troop ships and in little fleets they move across the ocean. One great flotilla that sailed a year ago carrying the men of the first Valcartier camp was the largest military force that has ever, in all the world's history, crossed the Atlantic Ocean. The forces that sailed with Cortes or Pizarro, or that came under Burgoyne or Admiral Howe, do not compare with it.

All this is being done among us with but little parade or outward show. There is no need now for the tin glory of the militia camp. The people of Canada have reached the stage when their eyes can look through the mere pomp and circumstance of war and see the hard reality behind it. They have counted their dead. They are counting them every day with each fresh list of "casualties" that the telegraph brings from Ottawa. In the first year of the war Canada lost,—dead, wounded and missing,—10,870 men. From Halifax to Vancouver there is no village but has its name inscribed upon the roll of glory. You may see the record of it running in every country newspaper in Canada. "Killed in action in France, Such and Such a One, of Pleasant Vale, Ontario," with the battalion and the regimental number. There is in it all the humble pathos of personal obscurity lifted a moment to the light. Without the war this man might have been moving among the yellow sheaves of wheat to the clicking of the reaper in an August harvest field, in some lost corner of Ontario. There is much in it that will bear thinking of.

Yet with the growing losses and the increasing sternness of the conflict the recruiting and the mustering under arms move only the faster. There is no turning back. There is no thought of peace. As some one said, the other day: "There are no Jane Addamses, thank God, among our women." The spirit of Canada is rising to meet the danger as the sea bird rises before the blackening storm.

Canadian infantry in training. The straw hats, are merely for domestic use, being supplanted in actual service by regulation military caps

Those of us in Canada who can look back in retrospect for twenty-five or thirty years over the shifting surface of our politics, can see in what is happening the realization of our final destiny. In the past we scarcely knew what we were or what we meant to be; a "nation" seemed too large, a "colony" too small. In our debating societies young men argued the question "Shall Canada be Independent?" with such feeble warmth as they might; an imaginary tyranny was denounced with mimic rage; a benevolent chairman, perhaps, declared with a smile that the affirmative had won and Canada was declared "independent" with polite applause: after which the whole audience rose and sang "God Save the Queen" so lustily that "Independence" was blasted out of existence. But beyond the walls of the debating room independence never went.

Independence! What British people ever really wanted it? The full measure of independence needed by free men was acquired for the whole lot of us,—your people of the United States and our people of the British Dominions,—somewhere

about the time of the Magna Carta. Our ancestors obtained it by means of yew-tree bows and quarter-staffs and a few lusty cracks over the head given to upstart princes who misunderstood Saxon freedom. Your so-called War of Independence was not really independence at all. It was a row: a first class family row: it sticks in my mind, as a professor, that Benjamin Franklin said that before 1776 he "had heard no one speak of independence, either drunk or sober." But the quarrel,—chiefly through the stupidity of a German King,—was mismanaged and the two communities separated, each being just as independent as before, no more and no less. Since then they have run along side by side, each vastly superior, and each imitating the other. You copied our House of Commons. We stole your Senate. You invented a President, but in less than no time, we turned out the same article, imitated to a nicety, as a Prime Minister. Our separation is not so very great after all. And some day, I truly believe it, our diplomats will come together round a big table, fill themselves up with grape juice and, in the mad exhilaration of it, sign a compact that shall reunite America and England.

Small wonder then that with such a native kinship we in Canada often talked of annexation, or joining in with the United States. Every time in the last hundred years of history that we felt surly against England we spoke of annexation. There was a time (it was in 1849) when all the notables of Montreal signed a document asking for it. We might have had it, too, long ago, but for the attitude of the people of England. "Glorious," they said, "a grand idea." Cobden grew rhetorical about a great republic from the Polar seas to Mexico; Gladstone said farewell to us in Greek, and Disraeli called us millstones and began to untie us from his neck. This was more than we could stand. We stayed where we were.

But in any case annexation proved impossible on larger grounds. As a mere matter of kingship and high diplomacy it might have been arranged. But it ran against such higher realities as your tariff and ours, the price of hay in Cahoga county, your bacon and our butter. We didn't object to your institutions. We were afraid of your cattle on the hoof. These things are the bed rock of politics.

So we have stayed on in the British Empire, wondering what we were to be, till now suddenly, with the first shock of war, we know. That is the supreme meaning of the war to us. The rush to arms in Canada is the glad cry of a people that have found themselves.

We are free men, we in Canada, and our kinsfolk in Australia and South Africa. There is no compulsion on us. England has never asked, and never will, a single soldier or a single sovereign from the dominions overseas. And England now may draw from them, if need be, their men in thousands, their money in millions, till all are gone. This is the spirit of the British empire. We know now the full meaning of our motto *Imperium et Libertas*.

Let those who have ruled and misruled Germany these fifty years under the name of empire reflect upon it. Buckle yourself tight, O German officer, driving your Silesian peasants to the cannon mouth: clap down your pointed helmet on your skull and scowl your fiercest as you multiply your wanton deeds against the helpless. Empire you have, made as you wanted it, of Blood and Iron, but freedom, that should give it power and meaning, never.

This is the war of the free peoples against the peoples still in chains. England and France and Italy are free and answer to the people's will. Russia, in the very travail of the war, is born into democracy. In Germany and Austria and under the banner of the Turk, the old tyranny that mankind has fought since the first dawn of freedom stands for its last fight. Who, that believes in humanity or God, can doubt the end?

[End of War Scenes Across the Canadian Border, by Stephen Leacock]