

Introduction

Newfoundland and Labrador's First World War experience, and particularly the battle of Beaumont-Hamel, has grown into something of a foundation myth akin to Vimy Ridge and Gallipoli. While Newfoundland's identification as a distinct colony of the British Empire was really established in the nineteenth century, as we will see the First World War added new elements to that identity.

In particular I will discuss the postwar activities of the Great War Veterans' Association (GWVA), an influential lobby group representing the interests of the colony's ex-servicemen. Throughout its existence the GWVA sought to support and defend its members, aggressively lobbying the government to adopt the more generous Canadian pension scale over the British scale (a victory that was too much for the country's weak finances) and pressuring Newfoundland's small state apparatus to employ as many returned men as possible. But the GWVA was primarily concerned with remembrance, because it was in reminding the public of its great debt that veterans justified their sometimes contentious agenda and validated their suffering. Central to the GWVA's agenda, if not to its success, was the management of public remembrance, and that meant promoting and creating symbols of the war and the empire. I will argue that the GWVA's efforts strengthened Newfoundland's colonial identity (distinct from national identity) and its bonds with the British Empire. Moreover, by studying the GWVA we can better appreciate the hopes and fears and ideals of a colony emerging from total war, for while the GWVA sought to shape the public mood it was also an expression of it. Before discussing the GWVA, however, it is necessary to provide a detailed introduction to Newfoundland's First World War experience.

Newfoundland before the war

Newfoundland in 1914 was a country long removed from the experience of war, it was a place with a military past but without a military heritage. Indeed, as one early history of the conflict suggested, the colony was “as complete an example of unpreparedness and pacifism as could be found in the world.”¹ The last formal military unit stationed in Newfoundland, the St. John's Rifle Battalion, was disbanded in 1870 and never replaced. The continued presence of the Royal Navy made the maintenance of land-based military formations unnecessary, though the government was willing to support a naval reserve unit. During the war the fisherman of the reserve, “men who had spent their lives in small craft, in fogs and gales,”² would offer traditional seamanship to a modern steam and steel fleet that had lost those skills in the process of its mechanization. However, the Royal Navy's continued enforcement of treaty rights on the French Shore was deeply unpopular among Newfoundland fishermen, and in the pre-war years recruits were drawn largely from the Protestant northeast coast.³

In St. John's there were also a number of denominational youth groups that adopted military discipline, pageantry and values. These were the Anglican Church Lads Brigade, the Catholic Cadet Corps, the Methodist Guards and the Presbyterian Newfoundland Highlanders, and while these outfits would eventually yield a large number of volunteers, they were designed to better the city's youth and not to prepare them for Imperial war service.

Newfoundland's identification with the British Empire and its own sense of colonial identity

¹Quoted in: Mike O'Brien, “Out of a Clear Sky: The Mobilization of the Newfoundland Regiment, 1914-1915,” *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies* 2 (2007), 401-427. 401.

²*Among the Deep Sea Fishers*, July 1921, 49. Available on Memorial University Libraries Digital Archives.

³Bernard Ransom, “Nursery of Fighting Seamen? The Newfoundland Royal Naval Reserve 1901-1920.” *A Nations Navy: In quest of a naval identity*. Ed. Hadley, Huebert, Crickard. Montreal; Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996. 242.

was also tentative, at least outside of St. John's. In the remote fishing outharbours of the country there was little association with the empire or even to St. John's, with many rural Newfoundlanders lacking a formal education or familiarity with the world beyond the bay and headland.⁴ This was beginning to change by the late nineteenth century as the Newfoundland railway, the telegraph system and a modern fleet of steel hulled coastal steamers established more efficient links with the city. Nevertheless, before the war Newfoundland's relationship with the imperial system and its sense of colonial identity was largely expressed in the terms of the St. John's elite, prosperous lords of the cod fishery who enjoyed the money, education and leisure time to construct their own colonial narrative.

In elemental terms this narrative, codified by the lawyer and historian D.W. Prowse, emphasized loyalty to Crown and Empire above all else, while simultaneously cultivating an image of struggle and defiance against hostile external forces, be it West Country fish merchants, the French on the western shores, or imperial ministers in London. This historical interpretation helped explain Newfoundland's backwardness, while also offering the promise of a better future via the development of the country's rich resource potential.⁵ The drive for self-governance in the early nineteenth century, the confederation debate of the 1860s and the French Shore crisis of 1857 helped fashion that colonial identity, but it is not to be mistaken for nationalism or as being representative of the entire island.⁶ It would, however, fit neatly into Newfoundland's First World War experience, and as a consequence the Prowse interpretation of history and identity would be consolidated and popularized.

Newfoundland at war

When Newfoundland entered the war with the rest of the British Empire there was surprisingly little debate over the nature of the colony's contribution. William Coaker, the powerful leader of the Fisherman's Protective Union, believed that the government should focus on expanding the naval reserve. Newfoundland, of course, could draw upon a deep reserve of skilled sailors, and the proposal had the added advantage of being largely financed by the British Admiralty. The St. John's elites, however, encouraged by limited industrialization and resource diversification (an apparent vindication of Prowse's narrative) was much more enthusiastic and ambitious. Lacking experience and the appropriate bureaucracy, the government passed control over the war effort over to an extra-parliamentary committee of (mostly wealthy) St. John's private citizens headed by Governor Davidson.⁷ The National Patriotic Association promptly determined that Newfoundland's flagship contribution to the war effort would be in the form of an infantry regiment that would bear its name, no easy task with a population of only 250,000 to draw upon, many of whom were fishermen needed in the trap boats through the summer season and unavailable for immediate recruitment. Though the Royal Newfoundland Regiment was closer in size to a battalion than to a regiment, the cost of raising, equipping, transporting, maintaining and demobilizing this unit would impose a heavy burden on the colony's finances. The cost in blood was also steep. The Newfoundland Regiment sustained heavy casualties at Monchy-le-Prieux, Cambrai, and the Hundred Days Offensive, and distinguished itself as the rear-guard during the evacuation of Gallipoli. Indeed, as PW Lackenbaur wrote, Gallipoli encouraged a "national mystique of dependability and success based on

⁴In one unconfirmed report, women drove their men into the woods upon the arrival of military pickets who were mistaken for Royal Navy press gangs! See O'Brien, "Out of a Clear Sky," 408.

⁵The realization of resource prosperity marked the culmination of Prowse's historical arc, effectively an 'end of history' achievement.

⁶For an excellent introduction to colonial identity in Newfoundland see James Hiller, "Robert Bond and the Pink, White and Green: Newfoundland nationalism in perspective," *Acadiensis* 2 (2007).

⁷Governor Davidson was "eager to live up to his announced intention of running Newfoundland as a crown colony and imposing his will in matters of home defence." Gerhard P. Bassler, *Vikings to U-Boats: The German Experience in Newfoundland* (Montreal; Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006), 140.

the ‘privileged’ position with which Newfoundlanders were tasked.”⁸

But Newfoundland’s “baptism in blood”⁹ came on the opening day of the July Drive, when the unit was practically obliterated on the Somme near the village of Beaumont Hamel. Of 810 men who went over the top that baleful day only 97 still stood to answer muster the following morning. The importance of Beaumont-Hamel to the strengthening of colonial identity in Newfoundland cannot be underestimated. Many communities lost members, and in St. John’s almost every street felt the loss.¹⁰ The defeat could not be seen as a strategic blunder and religious and imperial authorities sought to remind Newfoundlanders of their obligations to God and Empire, but the Beaumont Hamel commemorations would grow into a nexus of patriotic feeling. The triumphs and tragedies of the Regiment created a bond where there were only tenuous links before.

As historian Sean Cadigan wrote, elements of the Prowse interpretation of history and particularly “the notion of Newfoundland as the long-suffering but stolid cornerstone of empire, popular among members of the Newfoundland elite... transformed this nationalism into a mass phenomenon.”¹¹ While I believe that ‘nationalism’ is excessive, Cadigan is certainly correct in arguing that the elite interpretation of Newfoundland history gained in popularity. Newfoundlanders were again struggling against oppressive external actors and were again enduring hardship and sacrifice, but true to the narrative there was also promise of a brighter future.

During the war years Newfoundland enjoyed a sharp reversal in the fortunes of its fishery, foreign trade tripled and the government ran consistent surpluses. The general prosperity helped ease the pain of heavy losses and strengthened the belief that Newfoundland could expect a better future. While the loans used to finance the war would soon pile up in the millions, and the fishery would resume its decline with the re-emergence of European competitors, immediately after the conflict there were also reasons to be cautiously optimistic. Aircraft, a symbol of the new world just as the steamship once was, left St. John’s, Harbour Grace and Trepassy as they attempted trans-Atlantic crossings. Frozen fish was exported for the first time, and, most importantly, men and women both at home and returning from the war fronts “felt the need to renovate their society, to make it more just and humane.”¹² It is in this context of struggle and hope that I wish to discuss the Great War Veterans’ Association.

The GWVA and Newfoundland after the war

The organization that would eventually be known as the Great War Veterans Association was initially formed during the war as the Supplementary Association of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment, having as its mandate “the maintenance of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment at full strength and the crushing of the fighting machine of our enemies.” (Daily Star 1918-04-12, 2) However, the Supplementary Association also made a commitment to continue the Association after the war in an educational capacity. It was hoped that members could form a Veterans Association “which will have teachers and assist in the re-education of returned soldiers...” This early

⁸P.W. Lackenbaur, “War, Memory, and the Newfoundland Regiment at Gallipoli,” *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies* 2 (1999) 177-214. 182.

⁹Sean Cadigan, *Newfoundland and Labrador: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 188.

¹⁰The people of St. John’s, as Sean Cadigan wrote, “encountered death on a scale so massive it made even the [pre-war] sealing disasters pale by comparison.” *Newfoundland and Labrador*, 188.

¹¹Cadigan 188

¹²Patrick O’Flaherty, *Lost Country: The Rise and Fall of Newfoundland, 1843-1933* (Long Beach Press, 2005), 292.

decision to place education at the fore of their postwar ambitions indicates the veterans' changing perceptions of themselves and of Newfoundland in the modern world. They were better men and better women for serving abroad and seeing beyond "the narrowing influences" of the rural country. Above all it suggested that Newfoundland veterans were beginning to feel "the pressure to keep up with the changing world."¹³ A 1923 article in *The Veteran*, the official organ of the GWVA, opined that "Ex-Service men are more worldly and educated, an asset in that he brings a broader perception of politics to the franchise."¹⁴

Shortly before the end of war the Supplementary Association became the Great War Veterans' Association, with its laws and regulations established at a meeting on August 20th, 1918. The GWVA mandate promised to advance employment and educational opportunities for its members and secure a reasonable pension scheme from the government. Through the agency of the GWVA the veterans fulfilled their wartime ambition and lobbied hard and intelligently for veterans' rights. The adoption of the Canadian scale of pensions was perhaps the most significant achievement, won at the cost of the country's weak finances.

Central to the realization of the Association's agenda was the strengthening of patriotic sentiments "to constantly inculcate loyalty to Newfoundland and the Empire and unstinted service in their interests."¹⁵ While the GWVA was rightly determined to build a better world for its members, the sometimes burdensome demands made on the government had to be justified to the public and support maintained over the years. Managing public remembrance and building on Newfoundland's colonial heritage and association with empire would therefore become a major part of the GWVA's mandate.

The first Memorial Day ceremony was organized in St. John's by the National Patriotic Association, the committee responsible for the war effort, on July 1st 1917. The following year legislation was passed marking Memorial Day as an official day of remembrance and by 1919 a standard "programme of remembrance" had been established by the GWVA.¹⁶ Beginning in the churches, veterans and city brigades would parade to Bannerman Park where wreaths were laid before a temporary monument. The ceremonies concluded at Government House with a speech from Governor Sir Alexander Harris.¹⁷

The memorial in Bannerman Park was never meant to be the permanent site of remembrance, nor was the GWVA entirely absorbed in building a more traditional bronze and granite monument, at least not initially. Long before the construction of a Newfoundland war memorial began the Association pursued its wartime commitment to education by pushing for the erection of a memorial college, a post-secondary institution that would not only honour the colony's soldiers and sailors but offer educational opportunities that were non-existent before the war. This "academic monument," one source noted, fitted neatly with the prevailing attitude of post-war Newfoundland, one of cautious optimism going forward and a belief that the old conditions had been swept aside by four years of war.¹⁸ Significantly, a new college or university had been discussed before the war, after all, Nova

¹³O'Flaherty, *Lost Country*, 292.

¹⁴*The Veteran*, 3 (1923-1924), 20. Available on Memorial University Libraries Digital Archives.

¹⁵Robert Harding, "The Role of the Great War Veterans' Association of Newfoundland, 1918-1925." Unpublished Honours Dissertation, Memorial University, 2003. 14.

¹⁶Robert Harding, "Glorious Tragedy: Newfoundland's Cultural Memory of the Attack at Beaumont-Hamel, 1916-1925," *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies* 1 (2006) 3-40. 11.

¹⁷Robert Harding, "Glorious Tragedy," 11.

¹⁸Patrick O'Flaherty, "Lost Country," 293.

Scotia had five, but it took the war to push that ambition forward.¹⁹ With the support of government and a substantial grant from the Carnegie Corporation, Memorial University College was finally founded in September of 1925 with an initial enrolment of 57 students.

Education was advanced in other ways as well. Veterans were represented on the board of the Civil Re-Establishment Committee, an important part of the demobilization apparatus responsible for the short term needs of servicemen including education and vocational training. A Re-Establishment School was organized and by May 1920 had graduated nearly 400 returned men in general studies, navigation and surveying. Another 400 were trained at other newly formed vocational schools and thirty more were given grants to attend university.²⁰

Despite the early emphasis on education, more traditional war memorials were appearing in every town and city of the combatant nations. Monuments captured the public imagination in a way nothing else could, they allowed the “mythmakers” to consolidate Newfoundland’s wartime experience and sacrifice into “a commemorative package which Newfoundlanders could use to repay the debt which they owed their dead soldiers and veterans.”²¹

A war memorial would also act as a buffer against criticism directed against the war, imperial authorities and the government in St. John’s. Despite the best efforts of religious and political authorities during the war, rural Newfoundlanders began to perceive the conflict as another means by which the city elites could further their control over the outports.²² Large numbers of veterans were also left discontented by unfulfilled expectations and promises. A 1930 editorial that appeared in *The Telegram* despaired “The old order remained, more firmly entrenched than and more greedy. The new spirit stormed these trenches... in vain.”²³

The GWVA took a leading role in raising the necessary funding to build a Newfoundland war memorial. By the mid-1920s the GWVA had an effective monopoly over public remembrance which it used to cultivate Newfoundland’s colonial and imperial identity and secure the support of the public.²⁴ An important part of that effort was the GWVA’s official publication *The Veteran*, which printed poetry, fiction and branch and association news. In addition, the magazine ran war stories, mostly pertaining to the exploits of the regiment and naval reserve but also drawing upon Newfoundland’s more obscure military past. In effect, it sought to encourage the notion that Newfoundlanders were latent warriors waiting only for the call of empire to direct them. One essay, for example, titled ‘Newfoundland’s Ancient Forces,’ recounted the various regiments raised for colonial service against the United States and France. After the outbreak of war with America in 1812, one British official declared: “No British freeman ever experienced a more cordial glow of desire to assist their country...”²⁵

¹⁹Patrick O’Flaherty, “Lost Country,” 293.

²⁰Gerald W.L. Nicholson, *The Fighting Newfoundlander: a History of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment* (Montreal; Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2006), 512.

²¹Robert Harding, “Glorious Tragedy,” 13.

²²This is hardly surprising. Rural Newfoundlanders were suspicious that Water Street merchants were controlling prices and inflating the price of coal and creating artificial shortages of fishing gear. The merchants further agitated the outports by selling off most of Newfoundland’s steel hulled coastal steamers at lucrative wartime prices.

²³*The Telegram*, November 7 1930.

²⁴The government, often under intense pressure from the GWVA over matters of pensions and employment, was happy to grant the Association extensive control over remembrance activities in an effort to deflect critical attention.

²⁵H.W. LeMessurier, “Newfoundland’s Ancient Forces,” *The Veteran* 9 (1930), 33.

There is not enough time to explain with any justice the GWVA's long and often controversial efforts to raise the necessary funds and agree upon a satisfactory design. Suffice it to say that, owing largely to the GWVA's effective manipulation of public opinion, a National War Memorial was formally unveiled July 1st 1924 by Field Marshall Douglas Haig, whose presence was something of a coup for the Association, perhaps easing the humiliation suffered when Newfoundland was denied separate representation at Versailles. The new memorial, standing just above King's Beach where Sir Humphry Gilbert claimed Newfoundland in the first act of English overseas expansion, was a prominent new symbol of the country's colonial identity, a focal point of public remembrance, and a high profile reminder of the public's debt and obligation to veterans, country and empire.²⁶

The First World War was a watershed moment for Newfoundland as it was for all of the combatant nations, and though it did not create a sense of colonial identity all of its own, the war and the Great War Veterans' Association added new aspects to the country's "nationalist pantheon."²⁷ There were new symbols, in the form of the caribou, the National War Memorial, and the wider prevalence of the Union Jack which began to supplant the Pink, White and Green tricolour. There was also a new image, that of the 'Fighting Newfoundlander,' and with it the popularization of the stalwart narrative of struggle and loyalty to the empire that was, if anything, strengthened by the war. Finally, there was, at least briefly, a new sense of optimism and determination to keep pace with the modern world and to provide Newfoundlanders with a better standard of living, a new spirit in a new age.

²⁶The message of civic responsibility expressed by the war memorial is illustrated by Bishop Roche, who suggested a memorial would be built not "to appeal to the dead or to render their sleep more peaceful, but rather to inspire the living to better, higher and nobler lives." See Robert Harding, "The Role of the GWVA," 9.

²⁷James Hiller, "Robert Bond and the Pink, White and Green," 32.