

## EDITORIAL

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ONE HUNDRED YEARS AFTER the outbreak of the First World War, readers of this issue of *BC Studies* are offered a collection of articles dealing in various ways with the province's involvement in the conflict. Beginning with the disturbances at home that saw militia soldiers called in to restore order in the wake of the Nanaimo coal strikes on the eve of the war, the articles in this issue explore many facets of the war's impact on British Columbia, including changing notions of loyalty to Crown and Country, home-front culture, labour unrest, the rise of resentment towards German and Austrian immigrants and naturalized Canadians, the changing focus of recruitment campaigns, and the wartime experiences of nursing sisters, soldiers, and their officers, at home and at the front. These investigations make clear that British Columbians at war were motivated by several causes, from initial ideas about a crusade to defend God, King, and Empire; through personal commitments to serve; a sense of obligation to fellow soldiers; "carrying on" despite the horrors of the Western Front; and realizing the dream of returning home to British Columbia once the guns fell silent.

Daniel Schade sets the scene for British Columbia's entry into the First World War with his examination of the Canadian Militia's role during the Vancouver Island coal miners' strikes of 1913. After many disputes over hazardous work conditions, harsh company rule, and low pay over the previous forty years, miners in the Nanaimo area began a series of strikes and violent clashes with local police that led the acting premier of British Columbia, Attorney General William Bowser, to order two local magistrates to request the support of local militia units to restore order. These militiamen, part-time citizen soldiers, saw their role as the prevention of further violence between more than a thousand strikers and replacement workers in severely divided communities. Schade makes good use of the reflections of participants and local newspaper coverage in considering these events. He conveys a sense of the militiamen's pride in their efforts, especially on the night of 18 August 1913, when soldiers of Victoria's 88th Fusiliers and Vancouver's 6th Duke of Connaught's Own Rifles and 72nd Seaforth Highlanders effectively surrounded the hall where increasingly agitated strikers were organizing their next moves. The militia, outnumbered three to

one, broke up the meeting with rifles loaded and bayonets fixed, and took forty of the strike leaders into custody, destroying the momentum of the campaign. Present that evening was militia sergeant Wallace Chambers of Vancouver's Seaforth Highlanders, a young soldier featured in the review essay towards the end of this issue. His journal records the events of 18 August as a night of great excitement, and he notes that the militiamen who had served to restore civil order in Nanaimo in 1913 were also among the first to volunteer for overseas service when war broke out in Europe the following summer. Chambers sailed with the First Contingent as a lieutenant with the 16th Battalion, Canadian Expeditionary Force.

Schade's article foreshadows the enthusiasm that the people of British Columbia felt for war in support of the Empire. In his study of the rise of anti-Germanic feeling in British Columbia as the war progressed, Peter Moogk notes that the province's strong pre-war bond with Britain included a sense of cultural kinship between British and German values. Ties within the British royal family and respect for the accomplishments of thousands of German immigrants to British Columbia created a cultural bond that was tragically severed during the course of the war. The British connection grew ever stronger, while antagonism towards German or Austrian residents of the province – even those who had become naturalized citizens – increased and intensified as the war dragged on. The German invasion of neutral Belgium, the reported acts of barbarism, the introduction of chlorine gas at Ypres, the sinking of the *Lusitania*, Zeppelin raids over London, and unrestricted submarine warfare – each and every report of German barbarities brought renewed waves of anti-German persecution in British Columbia, including internment camps and the restrictive enforcement of the Wartime Elections Act. Like Moogk's paternal grandparents, who experienced the sharp end of this wartime resentment of all things German, my own maternal great-grandparents faced similar bitterness and persecution in Ontario. With the rise of anti-German sentiment during the war, they were financially ruined when the town council cancelled their mail contract and residents stopped doing business with a "German" laundry. Moogk explains that, although most British Columbians regarded measures taken against those of German or Austrian background as reasonable and justifiable, their application turned into harassment that was "increasingly harsh, punitive, and unselective."

An emerging sense of wartime identity is revealed in Chris Madsen's exploration of labour relations in the BC shipbuilding industry. During the war, representatives of unionized workers, the metal trades councils,

the six companies under contract, and the report of a royal commission pressed the Imperial Munitions Board to support wage increases for Victoria- and Vancouver-area shipyards to match those of American firms along the Pacific Coast. Few BC enterprises recognized that improved working conditions and higher wages would increase productivity and make a more effective contribution to the Allied war effort. Bitter conflict between labour and management ensued. Emboldened by the organization of powerful unions in the United States, Canadian workers brought ship production to a halt with a month-long strike. Coughlan and Sons of Vancouver settled, but, in May 1918, the uncompromising stance of the Imperial Munitions Board led to the largest strike in British Columbia during the war. The solution was uniquely Canadian: Prime Minister Borden sent Senator Gideon Robertson from Ottawa to mediate. Where the Imperial Munitions Board had failed to reconcile labour demands with the urgent need for merchant shipping to replace losses to German U-boats, Robertson was able to meet most of the strikers' demands within two weeks. In all, BC shipbuilders produced twenty-seven wooden ships and twelve steel cargo steamers in support of the Allied cause.

In a cultural study of sentiment on the BC home front, Wayne Norton examines popular music produced locally during the Great War. Norton also detects a growing sense of Canadian pride during the war. Wartime music stressed loyalty, patriotism, and the superiority of British cultural values, and it often echoed the ubiquitous recruiting chants. Odes to the Union Jack were prominent in motivational songs written to inspire the home audience. As the war continued, the songs took on a more negative tone: against the Kaiser, against slackers, laments for fallen soldiers, and saddened dreams of sweethearts, parents, and home. By 1917, war fatigue was apparent, and songs no longer exhorted young men to arms. Like Moogk, Norton shows that the Great War came to be regarded as a moral struggle between Christian civilization and an evil Kaiser bent on world domination. Vigour and enthusiasm gave way to the hard realities of armed conflict. By 1918, the most popular BC-produced song was "My Own Dear Canada," which ignored the war in Europe and expressed a longing for the return of peace and simpler times. Artists on the home front were coming to view Canada, rather than the Empire, as "home" – a shift also discerned in Robert Taylor's analysis of wartime poetry, discussed in the review essay in this issue. The highly patriotic emphasis upon defending British civilization gave way to thoughts of individual survival and dreams of returning to a normal life after the war.

Arts, such as music, poetry, and literary prose, offer insight into the thinking of soldiers at war and their families on the home front. A more realistic and less heroic-patriotic tone in the later stages of the conflict can also be detected in the epistolary sources explored by Megan Robertson. She writes of forming an emotional attachment to her sources when reading soldier Harry Ralston's letters home. As she held the letters in her hands she felt a strong bond with Ralston and his fellow soldiers, men who were "not so different from you or me in their concern for family, friends, and their dream for a future." In Ralston's letters she found sobering accounts of life in the trenches and anxieties that were countered by his dreams of returning home to become a preacher after the war. The strain of war that weighed so heavily on this man can be seen in Harry's request to his wife that she burn all his letters written from January to September 1917 – the year of Vimy Ridge and Passchendaele. Robertson explains the trauma he faced at this time, including a two-week stay in the hospital, the knowledge that so many men in the company had been killed, and his fears upon learning that his younger brothers had recently enlisted. When Ralston's son Keith was interviewed by Robertson, he told her that the war had killed Harry as surely as if he had been shot by a bullet. Harry Ralston's dreams of becoming a minister never materialized. His return to civilian life brought new hardships and the struggle to support a young family.

In October 1914, the First Contingent of the Canadian Expeditionary Force departed for England in aid of the Empire. By 1916, when the 143rd (Bantam) Battalion was formed in British Columbia, men were going overseas to reinforce units decimated by heavy casualties during the Somme campaign. Sandra Sauer Ratch's photo essay illustrates the change in Canadian recruiting during this period. At the beginning of the war, men less than five feet, four inches in height were not considered suitable defenders of the realm. When skyrocketing casualty rates and high-paying home front jobs in industrial war production converged with Prime Minister Borden's early 1916 pledge to raise the Canadian army to a strength of 500,000 men, many barriers to enlistment based on race, health, intellectual capacity, and physique were lifted. Ratch's great-grandfather, at five foot one-and-a-half, did "his little bit and more" for his country, joining the 143rd Battalion and undergoing training at Sidney and Beacon Hill Park. In England this Bantams battalion was broken up and the soldiers transferred to other units. Ratch's great-grandfather was assigned to the 47th Battalion, comprised mostly of soldiers from New Westminster. He arrived in France shortly after the Battle of Vimy Ridge.

In concluding her article on epistolary memory, Megan Robertson expresses the hope that her reflections on the Ralston Fonds might contribute to an exchange among historians who have access to First World War letters from British Columbia. Themed issues such as this one depicting British Columbia's First World War as it was experienced at home and in the trenches have the potential to start conversations among scholars, authors, and, one hopes, among readers of *BC Studies*. Together, these articles contribute to our collective memory of a war that reshaped the province in profound ways, and special meaning and significance is gained from the personal and family connections found throughout.

*James Wood*