

SOCIAL CLUB OR MARTIAL PURSUIT?

The BC Militia before the First World War

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IN THE YEARS BETWEEN the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) and the outbreak of the First World War, British Columbia experienced nearly three decades of rapid economic and demographic growth. The spirit of the age was one of optimism and progress, punctuated by not infrequent periods of social turmoil. Amid the railway-driven rise of Vancouver and the doubling of the provincial population in the first decade of the twentieth century,¹ British Columbia experienced more frequent labour disturbances than any other province in Canada, particularly in its coal mines and fisheries.² Chief among the concerns of historians studying this period has been the attempt to assess the consolidation of a previously fragile settler society into the self-confident province whose growth proceeded at such a remarkable pace prior to the First World War. Others have explored British Columbia's disproportionate contributions to that war, including the highest per capita rate of voluntary enlistment in Canada and the lowest rate of exemptions from conscription under the Military Service Act, 1917.³ Many British Columbians entered the First World War with an intense sense of patriotism and a belief that military service was an obligation of citizenship. My task in this article is to explain the dramatic expansion of the BC militia prior to the First World War. I identify this as a process initiated by an influx of settlers from the British Isles and eastern Canada, for whom a volunteer militia was a visible symbol of a community's coming of age, and carried forward after the Boer War

¹ Jean Barman, *The West beyond the West: A History of British Columbia*, 3rd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 146.

² *Ibid.*, 228.

³ On the rate of voluntary enlistment in British Columbia during the First World War, see Barman, *West beyond the West*, 213. On exemptions from conscription, see James Wood, *Militia Myths: Ideas of the Canadian Citizen Soldier, 1896-1921* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010), 247.

by rising international tensions in the decade before 1914. I explore the connections between the settler society and the military institutions of pre-war British Columbia, suggesting that these are essential to understanding the province's immense contributions to the war of 1914-18.⁴

From 1896 to 1914, the military establishment of British Columbia underwent an unprecedented expansion that cannot be understood apart from the changing social conditions of the province. Carried forward with the approval of military planners in Ottawa but perhaps better understood as a consequence of local enthusiasm and initiatives, by 1914 a growing interest in citizen soldiering had taken root in the southern regions of the province and had begun to acquire a local character. For reasons in some cases shared with the rest of the country but in other cases unique to British Columbia, the last years of peace saw the creation of new regiments in Vancouver and Victoria. As well, the Canadian militia system was extended to the interior of the province, well-appointed armouries and thousand-yard rifle ranges were built, and the militia benefitted from its perceptibly growing prominence in public life. Despite Ottawa's almost tangible indifference to British Columbia's defence and the unpopularity of the militia's strikebreaking duties among workers and citizen soldiers alike,⁵ from the 1890s onwards it is possible to discern a growing public enthusiasm for the creation of new regiments. In many respects, this enthusiasm might itself be considered the military counterpart of the optimism and spirit of progress that was affecting society and life in the province more generally in

⁴ Among the published histories of Victoria and Vancouver, coverage of the militia's role in BC communities is perhaps best described as fragmentary and limited mostly to the histories of individual regiments, most notably those by Professor Reginald Roy. Brief mentions of the Victoria militia may be found in Charles Lillard, *Seven Shillings a Year: The History of Vancouver Island* (Ganges, BC: Horsdal and Schubart, 1986), 179; and more extensively in Harry Gregson's *A History of Victoria, 1842-1970* (Victoria: Morris Printing, 1970), 82-86, 88. The militia of Vancouver is ably described by Peter N. Moogk with R.V. Stevenson in *Vancouver Defended: A History of the Men and Guns of the Lower Mainland Defences* (Surrey: Antonson Publishing, 1978); but is mentioned only briefly in connection with parades in Robert McDonald's *Making Vancouver: Class, Status, and Social Boundaries, 1863-1913* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1996), 33-35. Slightly more detail is provided in Alan Morely, *Vancouver: From Milltown to Metropolis*, 2nd ed. (Vancouver: Mitchell Press, 1969), 132-34.

⁵ On the militia's role during BC labour disturbances, see chapter 6 of Peter Guy Silverman, "A History of the Militia and Defences of British Columbia, 1871-1914" (MA thesis, University of British Columbia, 1956), 160-92. For the militia's involvement in other Canadian aid to civil power operations, see Desmond Morton, "Aid to the Civil Power: The Canadian Militia in Support of Social Order," *Canadian Historical Review* 51, 4 (1970): 407-25; and J.J.B. Pariseau, *Disorders, Strikes and Disasters: Military Aid to the Civil Power in Canada, 1867-1933* (Ottawa: Directorate of History and Heritage, National Defence Headquarters, 1973). Contemporary comments by militia officers on strikebreaking as a distasteful duty are found in "Comments," *Canadian Military Gazette* (hereafter *CMG*) 16, 19 (1 October 1901): 5.

these years, bringing with it the rise of cities, municipal boosterism, and rapid population growth.⁶ By 1914 the regiments it had brought into being became the nucleus around which British Columbia organized its initial contributions to the First World War. Given the province's disproportionate contributions to the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF), an exploration of the pre-war militia of British Columbia as a social and military institution may help to establish a connection between the province's great decades of progress and the costly sacrifices it made during the First World War.⁷

One remarkable aspect of this early twentieth-century military expansion is that it took place after decades of neglect, first by the colonial authorities and then by Ottawa. Of the three volunteer militia units in existence at the time of British Columbia's entry into Confederation, none was characterized by any degree of stability from its creation in the 1860s until the mid-1890s. Reasons for the tenuous existence of these units and the difficulty in maintaining their numbers may be found in the province's long history of relying on the Royal Navy for its defence, in British Columbia's physical isolation from Ottawa after 1871, and in the social conditions that prevailed during its first two decades as a Canadian province. Prior to Confederation, the military institutions of British Columbia revolved around the imperial naval station at Esquimalt and the intermittent emergencies that characterized its colonial existence. Only when facing the real or imagined threat of Aboriginal uprisings, Fenian raids, or the prospect of war with Russia or the United States did residents of Victoria or New Westminster show much interest in the militia. The New Westminster Volunteer Rifles was formed in 1863 and the Victoria Rifle Corps in the summer of 1864, both in response to

⁶ Martin Robin, *The Rush for Spoils: The Company Province, 1871-1933* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1972); John Douglas Belshaw, *Becoming BC: A Population History of British Columbia* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2009).

⁷ In recounting those aspects of the pre-war militia of British Columbia that were unique, it is important not to lose sight of those that were shared across the country and throughout the British Empire in this period. On the Canadian militia before the First World War, see James Wood's *Militia Myths*. On the amateur military forces of Britain, see *The Amateur Military Tradition, 1558-1945* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991), and other works by Professor Ian F.W. Beckett. For the United States, the works of Professor Russell F. Weigley and Marcus Cunliffe's *Soldiers and Civilians: The Martial Spirit in America, 1775-1865* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1969). Finally, perhaps the best examples of a shared culture of amateur military service would be found by comparing the history of the Canadian militia with the citizen forces of Australia, whose history is detailed in Craig Wilcox's *For Hearths and Homes: Citizen Soldiering in Australia, 1854-1945* (St. Leonards, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 1998). For one example of such a comparative approach to the history of Canada and Australia, see John C. Blaxland's *Strategic Cousins: Australian and Canadian Expeditionary Forces and the British and American Empires* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006).



Figure 1. Officers and men of a British Columbia militia regiment in 1914. During the First World War of 1914-18, British Columbia had the country's highest per capita rate of voluntary enlistment for overseas service. *Source:* City of Vancouver Archives, CVA 7-145.

tensions between Britain and the United States during the American Civil War. The third, the Seymour Artillery Company, was formed in New Westminster in 1866 as a sort of knee-jerk reaction to the Fenian raids taking place on the other side of the continent and warnings of related conspiracies in Victoria.⁸ During periods of alarm, men of these two communities not only enrolled in the militia but many also purchased uniforms at their own expense and took part in unpaid training with the limited quantities of guns, rifles, and ammunition that had been sent by the War Office. Once the crisis passed, however, interest quickly waned and the newly formed units usually fell into decline, ill-equipped and struggling to maintain recruitment. As with any volunteer militia, momentum could not be maintained without active community involvement, a situation that was made abundantly clear following British Columbia's entry into Confederation.

After 1871, British Columbia's three volunteer formations were absorbed into the Canadian militia, a situation that did not effect any real improvement in their efficiency. Under the Canadian system, volunteers signed a contract to attend twelve days of annual training for a period of three years. Difficult as it was for the young men of a transitory population to commit to remaining in one place for three years, their pay for

⁸ Reginald H. Roy, "The Early Militia and Defence of British Columbia, 1871-1885," *British Columbia Historical Quarterly* 18, 1-2 (1954): 1-28.

undergoing this training was minuscule, particularly in comparison to the high civilian wages that were standard in the province.⁹ Further, it was a tradition among British and eastern Canadian militia forces that any pay the soldiers received was contributed to the unit's social activities, which, in the nineteenth century, ranged from cricket and bowling matches to formal balls, banquets, shooting competitions, and bicycle races. Owing to these factors, combined with governmental indifference to defence matters during the economic recession of the 1870s, British Columbia's already ill-equipped regiments simply fell into decline.

A brief resurgence of the Fenian scare in 1871 highlighted both the need for a militia and the province's complete lack of defences. The cause for this alarm was an anonymous letter to Lieutenant-Governor Joseph Trutch warning him that a group of disaffected Irishmen had acquired arms and were holding meetings in Victoria.¹⁰ Without sufficient rifles to arm even the volunteers who remained active, the *Victoria Colonist* questioned the usefulness of the Victoria Volunteer Rifles as the city's main line of defence: "It is problematical as to what extent it would be safe to rely upon this force as a means of repelling a Fenian invasion. If we are correctly informed that it has lapsed into a torpid state, it would perhaps be wisest not to count upon it at all as a means of defence."¹¹ Urgent requests to Ottawa for assistance met with no immediate response, aside from the unhurried dispatch of Colonel P. Robertson-Ross, adjutant-general of the Canadian militia. After a two-week visit, his report on the dilapidated state of the BC militia recommended the establishment of two rifle companies at Victoria; one each at Nanaimo, New Westminster, and Burrard Inlet; the reorganization of the Seymour Artillery Company; and a company of mounted riflemen to be formed in the isolated Kootenay district.¹² Pay would be the same fifty cents per day that prevailed throughout the Canadian militia, offering little incentive for volunteers to give up twelve days of work to take part in annual training.¹³ In any event, it was not until March 1873 that any of his suggestions were implemented, starting with the appointment of a

⁹ Silverman, "Militia and Defences," 95.

¹⁰ The Deputy Minister of Militia and Defence Papers include the complete correspondence between Lieutenant-Governor Trutch and Joseph Howe, MP, who was John A. Macdonald's secretary of state for the provinces. For the letter that caused this alarm, see "A Loyal Subject" to Lieutenant-Governor Joseph Trutch, 29 December 1871, Deputy Minister of Militia and Defence, Library and Archives Canada (hereafter LAC), Letters Received, No. 01424.

¹¹ *Victoria Colonist*, 4 January 1872.

¹² "Report on the State of the Militia of the Dominion of Canada for the Year 1872," *Sessional Papers*, 1873, vol. 9, p. 126. For a full account of the Robertson-Ross tour, see R.H. Roy, "The Colonel Goes West," *Canadian Army Journal* 8 (1954): 76-81.

¹³ Silverman, "Militia and Defences," 64.

former Okanagan gentleman farmer, Colonel Charles F. Houghton, MP, as deputy adjutant general of Military District II (British Columbia).¹⁴

While the Robertson-Ross report and the organization of a military district for the province were a start, the poor state of Dominion finances in the 1870s and 1880s meant that little could be accomplished in the long term. In fact, service in the militia during this period actually involved significant *expenditures* of time and money by its members. Officers, in particular, were required to purchase their own uniforms, often at a price of over three hundred dollars, and this was usually only the first in an ongoing list of expenses that attended the holding of commissioned rank. Many officers spent significant amounts in treating their soldiers to a drink at the end of a training night, and they were also held accountable for any horses or equipment that went missing during annual training camps.¹⁵ As for the enlisted men, drawing only fifty cents a day in a country where unskilled labourers could earn four times that amount meant the militia could offer little in the way of financial incentive. By 1880, Victoria was in possession of a three-battery Brigade of Garrison Artillery, London having persuaded Ottawa to share at least some of the cost of defending Esquimalt. Yet the *Militia Report* for 1880 makes it clear where much of the financial burden of maintaining the Victoria militia actually lay: “[The volunteers] established a school of arms in the battery and rented a building for this purpose, where lessons in broad sword, single stick, fencing and boxing are given one night in each week during the winter season. The necessary material for the school was imported from England, and the expense of purchase, as well as rent, fuel, and pay of instructors, etc., was provided by members of the

¹⁴ Captain Charles F. Houghton had arrived in the Okanagan Valley in 1863 after purchasing his discharge from the British Army’s 20th Regiment of Foot. His 364 hectare (900 acre) landholdings, acquired in part under the Military and Naval Settlers Act, 1863, became the nucleus of the Coldstream Ranch, which became famous under the ownership of Lord Aberdeen three decades later. See Margaret Ormsby, “Some Irish Figures in Colonial Days,” *British Columbia Historical Quarterly* 14 (1950): 76.

¹⁵ In the late 1890s, this practice of officers’ treating their soldiers to a drink at the end of a parade night became so common as to be almost obligatory, leading some to complain that men were being stirred to enlist by a promise that “the captain puts up the drinks.” See “‘Treating’ a Company,” *CMG* 12, 4 (15 February 1896): 16. See also the 1922 regimental history of the 31st BC Horse: “As a general rule the horses were hired by either the regimental commander or squadron leader from ranchers or Indians, and the owners of the horses looked to the militia officers for their money after each training. However, some troopers entered into a private hiring with owners of individual horses, and sometimes the naughty troopers neglected to hand over the government hire at the end of the training, and the man’s C[ommanding] O[fficer] had, perforce, to make good.” See Lieutenant Colonel C.L. Flick, *A Short History of the 31st British Columbia Horse* (Victoria: Reliable Press, 1922), 19.

Battery by general subscription.”¹⁶ The regiments in Victoria and New Westminster could be maintained at the expense of the volunteers for a few seasons, but, with the passing of the 1877-78 Anglo-Russian war scare, community interest in the militia once again declined, and, by 1881, the Victoria battery’s equipment was falling into disrepair: “There are no fences around the batteries and cattle range over the parapets and tramp them down, mischievous persons take out and throw away the quoins and tampions and fill the guns with sticks and stones.”¹⁷

Local defence and volunteer units continued on much the same course until the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway in November 1885, after which time the authorities in Ottawa looked not to the local militia but to the railway itself as a means of defending Canada’s west coast. Given both the recent expense of suppressing the Northwest Rebellion and the success of the railway in transporting thousands of militiamen from eastern Canada at the height of the emergency, Ottawa expressed little interest in devoting greater funds to the BC militia. When ranchers in the Okanagan Valley petitioned in 1884 and again in 1887 for the establishment of a mounted rifles regiment at Vernon, forwarding lists of names of those who were willing to serve, their requests were twice ignored.¹⁸ Volunteers were even to provide their own horses and saddles, and an Okanagan resident and graduate of the Royal Military College described them as follows: “the men of the country are, of necessity, at home in the saddle ... and a Winchester seems to be as common a companion as a pocket knife in Eastern Canada.”¹⁹ In the words of J.A. Mara, the local MP: “[men of the Okanagan are] so anxious to organize that I trust you will see your way clear to assist them and not dampen their military endeavour.”²⁰ Given the lack of other inducements, the willingness of Okanagan volunteers to raise a mounted regiment in the community at largely their own expense can only be read as indicating that they expected some returns on their investment – returns that might range from heightened social prestige for the volunteers to attracting

¹⁶ “Report on the State of the Militia of the Dominion of Canada for the Year 1880,” *Sessional Papers*, 1881, 67.

¹⁷ “Report on the State of the Militia of the Dominion of Canada for the Year 1881,” *Sessional Papers*, 1882, 62-63.

¹⁸ R.H. Roy, *Sinews of Steel: The History of the British Columbia Dragoons* (Kelowna: The Whizzbang Association, 1965), 4-6.

¹⁹ J.A. Coyrell to Lieutenant Colonel Holmes, 27 December 1887, Deputy Minister of Militia and Defence, LAC, Letters Received, No. 27503.

²⁰ J.P. Mara, MP, to Sir A.P. Caron, Minister of Militia and Defence, 27 December 1887, Deputy Minister of Militia and Defence, LAC, Letters Received, No. A807.

federal or private investment in the region.²¹ Despite repeated attempts by interior residents, however, by the early 1890s there was still no militia presence from Calgary to New Westminster. With the situation hardly any better in the Lower Mainland or Vancouver Island, the *Canadian Military Gazette* eulogized these well-intentioned efforts to expand the militia in British Columbia as follows: “In a country like this where the wages are so high it is a wonder we have a militia at all, as nothing is done to encourage military tastes.”²²

It was in Vancouver that the militia of British Columbia began its dramatic expansion in the two decades preceding the First World War. With the authorities in Ottawa content to rely on the CPR as the hinge of the province’s landward defences, residents of the growing city at its western terminus were becoming restless and increasingly dissatisfied with the absence of a local regiment. Since the city’s founding in 1886, Vancouver’s meteoric rise brought with it a tremendous degree of optimism for the city’s future. “Much of this enthusiasm,” Jean Barman notes, “had a strong boosterish quality, the residents recognizing that their own well-being was directly linked to Vancouver’s appeal to prospective settlers.”²³ With an eye to attracting these settlers, within five years Vancouver had cleared one hundred kilometres of streets, built schools, established a municipal water supply and city parks. “We cannot afford to stand still, progress is our watchword,” declared the *Vancouver News* in 1887: “if we desire others to make their homes with us, we must give them streets and sidewalks, water and light, sewage and protection from fire, schools and hospitals.”²⁴

It is against this background of civic pride and fevered boosterism that the city’s Dominion Day celebrations of 1889 should be considered. Within the next ten years, Vancouver was destined to displace Victoria as the economic centre of the province. And yet, while Victoria in the early 1890s was “made brightly picturesque by her soldiers,” who “marched through the streets, camped at Beacon Hill, held picnics and dances,”²⁵

²¹ A later example of this sort of “military boosterism” may be seen in the career of Major Herbert Wentworth Husband. After settling in the Okanagan in 1907, in 1910 Husband convinced the Vernon City Council to lease lands on Mission Hill to the Department of National Defence at no cost, correctly arguing that a militia camp on the site would prove to be a financial asset to the city. See Paul M. Koroscil, *The British Garden of Eden: Settlement History of the Okanagan Valley, British Columbia* (Burnaby: Department of Geography, Simon Fraser University, 2003), 166–67.

²² Columbian (pseudonym), “British Columbia,” *CMG* 3, 20 (17 November 1887): 159.

²³ Barman, *West beyond the West*, 116.

²⁴ *Vancouver News*, 29 March 1887.

²⁵ Douglas E. Harker, *The Dukes: The Story of the Men who have Served in Peace and War with the British Columbia Regiment (DCO), 1883–1973* (Vancouver: British Columbia Regiment, 1974), 14.

Vancouver's Dominion Day parades had to be "made bright" by citizen soldiers from the New Westminster artillery regiment.²⁶ With the local *Daily British Columbian* reporting a steady stream of applause for the visiting militiamen and their military fife-and-drum band along the entire parade route, Vancouver's lack of a local regiment was all the more keenly felt. Such parades were a key form of public entertainment throughout the Victorian era, and for the militia they provided officers and men with an opportunity to be seen in full dress uniforms – the scarlet red, navy blue, and rifle green tunics that were modelled after those of the British Army. For the volunteers, these visible links to the British Empire displayed their patriotism and social status before family, friends, and the wider community. For the community, establishing a volunteer militia regiment would serve as one more sign of progress, comparable to the streets, schools, and hospitals Vancouver was so relentlessly building in these years. Further, it would be difficult to overlook the note of envious sarcasm in a *Vancouver World* article in which the city was declared ready for a militia unit, the "Terminal City" being "as worthy of being trusted in a matter of that kind as Nanaimo."²⁷ In the words of the renowned British poet Rudyard Kipling, who visited Vancouver in 1889 and even bought property there: "All that Vancouver wants is a fat earthwork fort upon a hill – there are plenty of hills to choose from – a selection of big guns, a couple of regiments of infantry, and later a big arsenal ... It is not seemly to leave unprotected the head-end of a big railway."²⁸ But when no such regiment was forthcoming from the Ministry of Militia, a public meeting was held in 1892 decrying Ottawa's delay in authorizing a regiment for Vancouver.

As with other public meetings of its kind, organizers with some military experience outlined their proposals to potential recruits, who were asked to sign a petition indicating their willingness to serve and to also cast votes nominating officers for the new unit, usually the same individuals who had organized the meeting. Meanwhile, prominent members of the community were asked to lend some of their political "pull" to the proposals by writing letters to both federal and provincial levels of government. Upon gaining the support of the deputy adjutant general for the local military district, volunteers were then asked to

²⁶ "Dominion Day," *Daily British Columbian*, 2 July 1889. See also "Vancouver Celebration," *Daily British Columbian*, 5 July 1887.

²⁷ "Let Us Rejoice," *Vancouver World*, cited in Lieutenant Colonel F.A. Robertson, "5th (BC) Regiment Canadian Garrison Artillery and Early Defences of BC Coast," unpublished manuscript, 1925, 3. The author consulted a copy of this work held by the archives of the British Columbia Regiment.

²⁸ Rudyard Kipling, *From Sea to Sea and Other Sketches*, vol. 2 (London: Macmillan, 1900), 55-57.

sign the Service Roll, in this case in a ledger kept during the week in a tobacco store on Cambie Street. Upon completing the Service Roll, the two most common obstacles to the formation of a new regiment were gaining Ottawa's approval of the proposed officers and convincing the militia authorities to allocate the necessary funds. Officers elected at the public meetings were not always deemed acceptable in Ottawa, either for political reasons or for lack of qualifications. At the same time, the authorities in Ottawa might select their own candidates; however, in doing so, they needed to consider whether the officers they appointed would be accepted by the volunteers.²⁹ Usually an even greater concern in the early 1890s was the chronic shortage of defence funds as each new unit needed to be provided with arms, equipment, a drill hall, and pay for its twelve days of annual training. By 1893, however, Vancouver had already taken the initiative by constructing a \$40,000 parade square and hiring a drill instructor. A temporary drill hall was acquired in the Imperial Opera House and a rifle range was established in Central Park – all at the expense of Vancouver taxpayers who were eager to present their city as an attractive home for prospective settlers.

Upon receiving its authorization, Vancouver's No. 5 Battery, British Columbia Garrison of Artillery, held its first parade under the command of Major Thomas Owen Townley on 22 January 1894. Born of English parents in Newmarket, Ontario, Townley was a barrister who had much in common with the volunteers in his command.³⁰ Officers of the new regiment were all of British birth or descent, and, given the expense of holding commissioned rank in these years, it was only natural that they were drawn from the ranks of Vancouver's professionals, civil servants,

²⁹ Maintaining the confidence of volunteer soldiers was not an insignificant concern for militia officers in this period, and regiments in western Canada appear to have been particularly "democratic" in comparison to those in the east. For example, in 1899 Lieutenant Colonel Gregory of Victoria's 1st Battalion, 5th (BC) Regiment, Canadian Artillery, addressed rumours that he had lost his men's confidence by asking his soldiers to cast ballots. If sixteen voted against him, he would resign his commission. As it happened, however, this particular exercise in military democracy proved to be a little more than Gregory's officers were willing to accept. Instead of casting ballots, as the colonel had requested, his company commanders called the men onto the parade square and "requested that any man having any fault to find with Colonel Gregory should step forward from the ranks." Not surprisingly, no one did, and Gregory was thereby unanimously "re-elected" to the command of the 5th Regiment. See "Democracy and Discipline in British Columbia," *CMG* 14, 5 (7 March 1899): 16. For a discussion of the Canadian militia as an institution held together by the mutual consent of officers and men rather than a strict code of military discipline, see "Discipline," *CMG* 17, 18 (16 September 1902): 9; "Discipline and Dismissals," *CMG* 19, 17 (13 September 1904): 8; "Short Tempers, etc.," *CMG* 20, 3 (14 February 1905): 10; and "Are We Ready?" *CMG* 11, 8 (15 April 1896): 9, in which the author argues that "a volunteer force requires tact and popular officers."

³⁰ Harker, *Dukes*, 16-17.

and business families. Meanwhile, of the sixty-three non-commissioned members attending the first drill parade in 1893, only two did not have British surnames, with identifiably English names predominating.³¹ Historian Peter N. Moogk attributes the cultural uniformity of Vancouver's first regiment to the militia's holding special appeal for those who prided themselves on their British heritage: "This close association with the dominant social and economic group gave citizen soldiers prestige in the community and they enjoyed being referred to by their military rank."³² As for the prestige volunteers might have anticipated would accompany their service in the militia, by 1897 the city councils of both Vancouver and Victoria had proposed exempting serving militiamen from certain municipal taxes and jury duty.³³

By the spring of 1894 the new regiment was sufficiently well trained to risk its first public parade. While the *News-Advertiser* describes an event that was temporarily interrupted by two men – "probably under the influence" – who attempted to take command of the regiment,³⁴ such parades were necessary because they formed the basis of the militia's efforts to remain in the public eye. Though not especially useful for training purposes, parades generated local interest in the force and drew new recruits to its ranks. Of course, low pay ensured that poor attendance was a continuing problem, although one that might be partially overcome by the other social activities in which the militia engaged. For the City of Vancouver, the new No. 5 Battery was a symbol of progress that signalled the establishment of a settled British and Canadian society. For the men of No. 5 Battery, service in the militia was a source of pride that, even in the absence of good pay, offered tangible benefits, as indicated by the following public reminder in an 1897 military column of the *News-Advertiser*: "Every man who wishes to go to Victoria in June must turn out ... Those who shirk the drudgery of preparation cannot expect to take part in the excursion. There will be many people from Vancouver there

³¹ A complete nominal roll for this first parade may be found in a lengthy article on the regiment's founding by J.S. Matthews in the *Vancouver Daily Province*, 17 January 1914. By that year, Vancouver's first militia regiment had acquired a reputation for being "more English than the English," despite the numerous eastern Canadians to be found in its ranks.

³² Moogk and Stevenson, *Vancouver Defended*, 25.

³³ Efforts by the city councils of Vancouver and Victoria to exempt serving militiamen from the revenue tax are detailed in "11th Military District," *CMG* 12, 7 (1 April 1897): 4. That same year, Victoria City Council voted a sum of \$500 for the band of the local regiment to play music in the parks that summer. This was considered by the *Canadian Military Gazette* to be "a just recognition of the amount of pleasure which the Artillery Band has afforded the citizens in the past."

³⁴ "Battery Parade," *News-Advertiser* (Vancouver), 10 May 1894.

and the march past and ceremonial drill will be closely watched.”³⁵ For those willing to undergo this drudgery, service in the militia might be compared to membership in a unique social club, providing them with a chance to engage in martial training, attend summer camps, and take advantage of ample opportunities for camaraderie and drinking.

For example, in an era of otherwise limited opportunities for travel, frequent visits between cities helped the militia maintain enlistments. Such visits were typically combined with at least some practical training, such as the 24 May 1895 mock battle, or “sham fight,” in which militiamen from Vancouver and Victoria held Beacon Hill against an “attack” by Royal Navy “Bluejackets” from Esquimalt, or in 1899, when the Victoria Regiments came to the foot of Denman Street for a sham fight against their mainland counterparts.³⁶ Vancouver’s citizen soldiers even took part in the occasional visit across the US border, such as in the summer of 1898 when Lieutenant Colonel Edward Prior shouldered the expense of taking his entire regiment to Seattle for its Fourth of July celebrations.³⁷ With the Canadians arriving on the same day that Seattle received news of the Spanish defeat at Santiago, the trip is perhaps best described as both a victory parade and the occasion for much rejoicing as well as an expression of goodwill between neighbours. At a Seattle military banquet held in their honour, the visiting officers from Vancouver remember: “[the wine] flowed like water and the much-talked-of Anglo-American alliance was ratified by two score of Canadians and a half dozen loyal Americans who sat at the same table and drank as one nation, the healths of Queen Victoria and President McKinley.”³⁸

Beyond annual visits across the Strait of Georgia or the 49th Parallel, service in the militia also offered significant athletic and recreational opportunities to its members. In Victoria, the range of topics discussed

³⁵ “Military Matters,” *News-Advertiser* (Vancouver), 24 May 1897.

³⁶ The most detailed account of these regimental field days is provided in chapters 18 and 19 of Robertson’s unpublished history of the 5th (BC) Regiment Canadian Garrison Artillery. According to Robertson: “Trips were arranged, generally on Holidays, and field days or manoeuvres were staged either in Victoria or on the Mainland. These combined parades, which were enjoyed by all, resulted in the imparting of much useful military instruction and also in maintaining a lively spirit of friendly rivalry.” He describes the sham fight at the foot of Denman Street as follows: “The field battle was near the foot of Denman Street where a hill, defended by the two Vancouver Companies with one Victoria Company, under Captain Worsnop, was attacked by Bluejackets and Marines, one Victoria Company of the 5th Regiment, C.A., all under the command of Captain Hart-Dyke. The day was well enjoyed, although at the end of the proceedings the color of the uniforms could scarcely be discerned for dust and firewood fluff.”

³⁷ Harker, *Dukes*, 19.

³⁸ “Dead Past Is Forgotten,” *Vancouver Province*, 1898, J.R. Tite Fonds, City of Vancouver Archives (hereafter CVA).

in the 1897 meeting of the Recreation Committee of the 1st Battalion, 5th Regiment of Canadian Artillery, gives some indication of the unit's sports activities and the degree to which these had become part of the social life of the city:

“During this season the battalion football club (rugby) has done fairly well, having played six matches, winning three and losing three. Of these, two were lost to the Victoria club, which is one of the strongest in the province, and one to the Navy. The wins were from the Navy and YMCA ... The Battalion Cricket Club hold their annual meeting for reorganization next Saturday evening ... The officers have had a tennis court laid out in the hall and are using it for practice until such time as the outdoor courts are dry enough to use.”³⁹

In Vancouver, the local regiment was equally active but tended to engage in a decidedly less “English” program of sports, particularly after its 1899 reorganization as a rifle battalion and consequent designation as the 6th Regiment, Duke of Connaught's Own Rifles (DCOR):

After company drill, basketball practice will take place each Monday and Thursday, while Tuesday and Friday evenings will be given to the baseball enthusiasts. Lt. Sclater, Regimental Adjutant, has kindly presented a fine cup to be competed for by the exponents of baseball, while another will be provided for the champion basketball team, besides which each member of the winning teams will receive a medal to commemorate the victory. All members of the regiment who wish to take up fencing or boxing are asked to hand their names in to Sergeant-Major Heritage on or before December 29th. Competent instruction in this very important branch of a soldier's training will be provided. The committee is also arranging to install a billiard table and dry canteen, together with the very best papers and magazines from both this and the other side of the Atlantic.⁴⁰

³⁹ “11th Military District,” *CMG 12*, 7 (1 April 1897): 4. A very likely explanation of the predominance of “British” recreational activities in Vancouver Island militia units is suggested by John Boshier's recent study of the Island's imperial connections, which points to the large number of retired British Army officers arriving in the province during this period: “The British and Indian Armies affected Vancouver Island only a little less than did the Royal Navy. A few retired officers went out in the first two generations of settlers but most arrived after the South African War (1899-1902) and the Great War (1914-18). Throughout the first half of the twentieth century the Island bristled with soldiers, sailors, civil servants, tea planters and businessmen from tropical colonies as well as the mother country.” See John Boshier, “Vancouver Island in the Empire,” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 33, 3 (2005): 356-61.

⁴⁰ “Season's Programme Arranged by Recreation Committee of the Sixth DCOR,” n.d., J.R. Tite Fonds, CVA.

Regarding the above-mentioned activities, it is probably worth noting that Wednesday nights were also set aside as a general recreation night, and any members of the 6th Regiment who were still not sufficiently entertained and exercised were permitted to use the drill hall at any time it was not required for drill. Like the urban regiments of eastern Canada, militiamen of British Columbia could enjoy regimental sports and recreational activities as an inexpensive alternative to civilian athletic associations.⁴¹ In some cases, the militia's athletic activities were even combined with practical training, such as Vancouver's 1897 marching and firing competition in which the competitors carried rifles and equipment over an 11.2 kilometre course, followed immediately by a marksmanship competition. Members of the winning team "marched" the course at a running pace in one hour and eleven minutes, opened fire on their targets while still recovering from the run, and were presented with a silver cup before a gallery of admiring spectators.⁴²

Together with the personal influence of officers and the active social lives of the regiments themselves, church parades offered a third means by which a voluntary militia established links with the wider community. In March 1898, one such parade included nearly 150 volunteers, headed by two militia bands, who marched by way of Hastings and Granville streets to Christ Church, where Reverend Norman Tucker paid lip service to beating swords into ploughshares at some happy day in the future but devoted most of his sermon to international events and crises. "What a blind policy it would be," proclaimed the reverend, "not to stand prepared to defend the glorious possessions and magnificent inheritance which belong to the sons and citizens of Canada," particularly the "prosperity, greatness, and natural wealth" of British Columbia.⁴³ At another such church parade in 1899, the local regiment was described as "the pride of every Vancouverite that saw it." Despite its aging uniforms and equipment, and being housed in the drill shed – the former Imperial Opera House, by this time described as somewhat less than "imperial" or "operatic" in appearance – by God's grace and the "liberal contributions

⁴¹ On the social functions of eastern Canadian militia regiments in this period, see Carman Miller, "The Montreal Militia as a Social Institution before World War I," *Urban History Review* 19, 1 (June 1990): 57–64; and Mike O'Brien, "Manhood and the Militia Myth: Masculinity, Class and Militarism in Ontario, 1902–1914," *Labour/Le Travail* 42 (1998): 115–41. For anecdotal evidence of Vancouver militia regiments being composed primarily of eastern Canadians, see "Notes," *CMG* 13, 21 (6 November 1900): 10.

⁴² "News of the Service – 11th Military District," *CMG* 13, 1 (5 January 1898): 9. British Columbians likely adapted this idea of holding marching and firing competitions from a similar event developed in England by General Henry Evelyn Wood.

⁴³ "Military Parade: Large Muster at Sunday's Church Parade," *News-Advertiser* (Vancouver), 8 March 1898, J.R. Tite Fonds, cva.



Figure 2. View of Granville Street from the CPR Station as Vancouver welcomes soldiers returning from the Boer War. In the decade that followed, British Columbian veterans of the war in South Africa successfully pressured for the formation of new militia regiments in their province. *Source:* City of Vancouver Archives, Mil P31.

of officers and men” it was hoped that the battalion would continue to thrive.⁴⁴

While the growth of Vancouver and efforts to showcase its progress had created the momentum for the formation of a militia regiment in the city, Canadian participation in the Boer War of 1899-1902 generated

⁴⁴ “Matters Military,” *Vancouver Province*, 26 March 1899, J.R. Tite Fonds, cva.

even greater public interest in martial pursuits. This, in turn, led to a more practical direction to the militia's training efforts and set the stage for the creation of new regiments. As Margaret Ormsby notes in her history of British Columbia, "in no section of Canada was there greater martial ardour or more enthusiastic endorsement of the British cause." And, in a parade that included a "milk wagon bearing aloft the Union Jack and a pole on which was stuck a bloody boar's head, twenty-five Vancouver recruits marched through the crowded streets to depart amid a wild pandemonium of hats and canes in the air, and roar of shouts and cheers."⁴⁵ Greeted the following year by an equally tumultuous homecoming, veterans of the South African war were returning to a changed society. "British Columbia is British!" became a popular slogan in 1899, and, while the war was still in progress, the mining town of Oyster Harbour changed its name to Ladysmith in honour of a British victory in South Africa. With British Columbia sharing fully in the heightened martial enthusiasm that affected most of English Canada during the first decade of the new century,⁴⁶ the stage was set for a rapid expansion of the militia in the settled regions of the province. In the words of historian Michael Howard, what seemed particularly disturbing about the recent war in South Africa "was the probability, increasingly accepted during the first decade of the new century, that in the very near future the British fitness to survive would be put to the test by an adversary even stronger and better armed than the Boers."⁴⁷ For Canadians, participation in the conflict drew their attention to Britain's increasingly precarious position on the world stage and, particularly for those of British extraction, highlighted the Dominion's potential to assist the mother country in overseas conflicts.⁴⁸ While the BC militia continued to depend on community support in this period, a growing sense of militarism in Canada and its "Pacific Province" now permitted the force to become less dependent on purely social activities to encourage recruiting, thereby allowing a greater focus on practical training during the years preceding the outbreak of the First World War.

Although the expansion of the BC militia had certainly been under way before the Boer War, including the creation of a regiment in Van-

⁴⁵ Margaret A. Ormsby, *British Columbia: A History* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1958), 327–28.

⁴⁶ See Carl Berger, *The Sense of Power: Studies in the Ideas of Canadian Imperialism, 1867–1914* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970); and Carman Miller, *Painting the Map Red: Canada and the South African War, 1899–1902* (Montreal and Kingston: Canadian War Museum and McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993).

⁴⁷ Michael Howard, *The Lessons of History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 76.

⁴⁸ For the impact of the Boer War on Canadian military development, see Wood, *Militia Myths*, 80–114.

couver and the establishment in 1898 of independent rifle companies in the interior communities of Nelson, Kamloops, Kaslo, Revelstoke, and Rossland, the extent of the militia's purely social activities during this period should serve as a reminder of its institutional fragility. Vancouver had thrown its support behind the local regiment – and residents of the city clearly enjoyed a good parade – and yet these social activities and ceremonial functions tended to occupy an inordinate amount of time and attention. This was necessary because any regiment that neglected these functions did so at its own peril for, without such inducements, the soldiers of a voluntary militia would simply quit. Efforts to promote Vancouver and showcase its progress were one thing, but, in the absence of an attractive pay structure or a genuine degree of martial enthusiasm, the militia invariably had to depend on its social and recreational pursuits to maintain enlistments. From the Boer War onwards, however, rising militarism, particularly among British segments of BC communities, allowed the militia to become so firmly established that it was able to engage in more practical training without risking a fall-off in its numbers. In the early years of the new century, growing support was reflected in a fevered enthusiasm for marksmanship competitions in the Lower Mainland; the establishment of mounted rifle regiments in the interior; the creation of Highland and Irish formations in Vancouver and Victoria; the introduction of cadet training in the province's public schools; and, from 1911 to 1914, some of the most successful militia training manoeuvres that were seen in Canada before the First World War.

Even before the war in South Africa, British Columbia had been experiencing the same growing interest in marksmanship and shooting that could be found in eastern Canada and throughout the British Empire in the late nineteenth century. Smokeless powder and magazine-loading rifles were about to change the nature of war, to the extent that black powder rifles firing lead balls to over five hundred metres were soon being referred to by BC riflemen as “prehistoric weapons.”⁴⁹ Apparently, this was even the cause of some disappointment to the spectators of an 1899 Vancouver sham fight when “the smokeless powder, and the fighting line being under cover as much as possible, made it rather unreal to the uninitiated, who evidently expected the contending armies to meet and fight hand-to-hand in the middle of the bridge, and possibly fling a few of each other over the side.”⁵⁰ As disappointing as the absence of clouds of

⁴⁹ Major J.E. Matthews, “Birth and Progress of the BC Rifle Association,” *Vancouver Daily Province*, 21 July 1910.

⁵⁰ *News-Advertiser* (Vancouver), 1899, cited in Robertson, “5th BC Regiment,” chap. 19, p. 5.

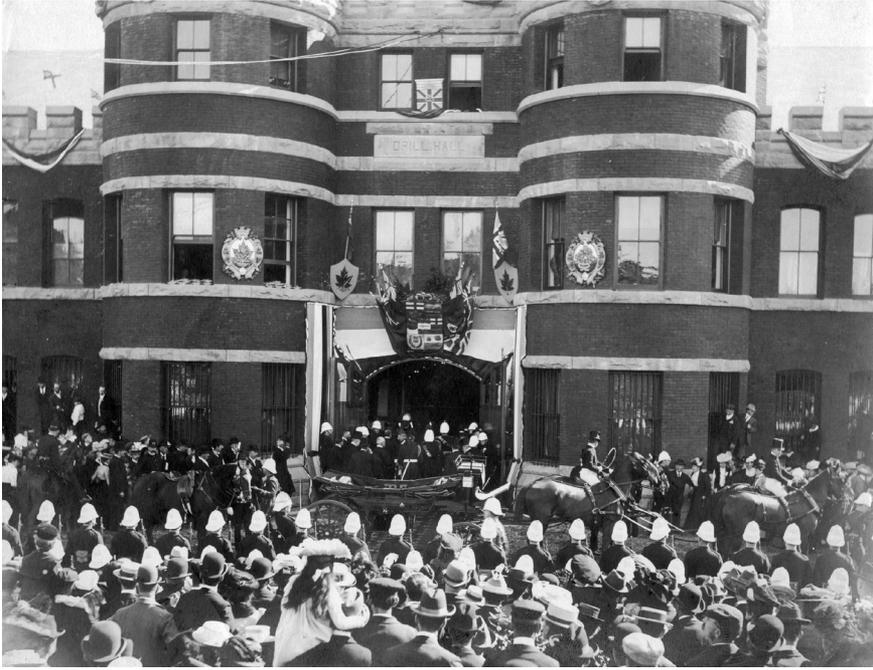


Figure 3. Vancouver's Beatty Street Drill Hall, home of the 6th Regiment, Duke of Connaught's Own Rifles, after its opening by the Duke and Duchess of Cornwall and York on 30 September 1901. *Source:* City of Vancouver Archives, Duke of C and Y P53.

white smoke may have been amid this nostalgia for gunpowder, modern rifles and propellants were on the verge of conferring a decided advantage on entrenched infantry armed with rifles capable of hitting massed targets at a range of 3.2 kilometres. From its inception in a meeting at the Victoria Mechanics Institute in 1874 and first competitions at Clover Point, the BC Rifle Association grew to include both militia and civilian members. From 1899 until the onset of the First World War, British Columbia was never without representation on the Canadian rifle team at the great Imperial competition at Bisley.⁵¹

Also in 1899, the same year that the new magazine-loading rifles allowed Boer farmers and store clerks to defend against many times their number of British regulars,⁵² Vancouver's artillery battery was converted to a rifle regiment and its members were soon caught up in the rising enthusiasm for marksmanship. Although this conversion to an infantry role was initially met with no small amount of kicking and screaming –

⁵¹ Robertson, "5th BC Regiment," chap. II, p. 9.

⁵² "Reverses in South Africa," *CMG* 15, 1 (2 January 1900): 10.

mostly on account of the officers' being required to purchase new dark green uniforms at a cost of \$350⁵³ – within five years the regiment was on its way towards gaining an international reputation for shooting. In 1904, Private Sam Perry of Vancouver's 6th Regiment, DCOR, won the prestigious King's Prize at Bisley. With the prize itself and other cash awards amounting to some \$5,000,⁵⁴ it should perhaps come as no surprise that Perry's win inspired a heated interest in competitive rifle shoots that persisted in British Columbia until the outbreak of war in 1914. By 1905, Vancouver schoolchildren were receiving instruction in the shooting gallery of the regiment's newly constructed drill hall. A sham fight gone terribly wrong in 1908 did nothing to cool Vancouver's enthusiasm for gunplay, even when live rounds were passed out instead of blanks and six volunteers were injured.⁵⁵ With federal funding made available to civilian rifle associations after 1901,⁵⁶ rifle competitions were shot in the local armouries, at outdoor ranges in Central Park and Richmond, and during visits to the United States. In 1913, Vancouver's Major William

⁵³ The 1899 reorganization of Vancouver's artillery regiment into a rifle battalion entailed significant financial hardship for its officers as they were required to spend between \$300 and \$500 purchasing their new uniforms. With Ottawa offering less than thirty dollars to offset the expense, these officers protested the decision in letters to the militia authorities and in the local newspapers. Among these complaints, the unit's commanding officer also objected to the waste of time and money such a conversion would entail: "An artillery man is a man of brains who thinks for himself, not a mere machine ... This change would deal inestimable injury to the unit's esprit de corps ... My officers would lose interest if there were no gun drill." Meanwhile, an anonymously authored poem in the *Vancouver News-Advertiser* of 6 August 1899 eulogized the loss of the old uniforms: "From the radiant brilliance of brass and blue / To the dull dead black of shoddy and glue, / The cheapest cloth of the uniform makers, / For the Sixth Battalion of Undertakers." The matter was fully covered in the local newspapers, and a collection of clippings is available in the J.R. Tite Fonds at the CVA. The regiment's reaction to these changes is perhaps best described in Harker, *Dukes*, 22-25.

⁵⁴ Harker, *Dukes*, 37.

⁵⁵ On 16 March 1908, a regimental training day took the form of a sham battle between "British" and "Boer" troops. Unfortunately, a recruit on the Boer side mistakenly distributed live ammunition to his side. As Harker explains in his history of the BC Regiment, "Suddenly it was apparent that the cries of the 'British' were remarkably lifelike." Thankfully, no one died, but six were wounded, and it was only through the cooperation of the local press with the unit's commanding officer that the affair was not more widely publicized. See Harker, *Dukes*, 41. Only one Vancouver daily newspaper reported the incident. See *Vancouver World*, 26 March 1908, and 28 March 1908.

⁵⁶ In 1901, Parliament voted to provide civilian clubs with rifles and supply them with ammunition at cost. In return, it was suggested that the civilian rifle clubs should be placed under the command of a militia officer and members immediately inducted into the militia in the event of a general mobilization. Canada's revised Militia Act, 1904, made the civilian rifle clubs an integral part of the country's defence organization. In the event of war, their members would be drafted into the active militia. See House of Commons, *Debates*, 29 May 1903, 3768-73; and "Military Estimates," *CMG* 28, 12 (16 June 1903): 16-17; William Beahen, "Filling Out the Skeleton: Paramilitary Support Groups, 1904-1914," *Canadian Defence Quarterly* 13, 4 (1984): 35-39; and Wood, *Militia Myths*, 111-14, 125-28.

Hart-McHarg won the world long-distance rifle championship at Camp Perry, Ohio, and was presented with a gold cup by Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany – an irony that was lost on few Vancouver residents in April 1915 when Hart-McHarg was killed while leading his regiment during the 2nd Battle of Ypres.

Another remarkable aspect of British Columbia's participation in the Boer War is the fact that, although a great majority of volunteers from the province fought overseas as members of the Canadian Mounted Rifles or the Lord Strathcona's Horse, the province itself had no militia cavalry or mounted rifles formations in 1899. Even as the importance of mounted rifles was being demonstrated on the South African veldt, where Boer mounted riflemen had inflicted a series of early defeats on the British Army in December 1899, Ottawa was receiving requests from several interior communities for the formation of mounted militia units. While ignored for the time being owing to a focus on expanding the defences of Esquimalt,⁵⁷ and with mounted units already established in the Prairies, the interior communities of New Denver, Vernon, and Cranbrook each requested the formation of a mounted rifles company, the latter noting that volunteers should be provided with western saddles, carbines, and khaki uniforms instead of the more conspicuous colours issued to British cavalry units.⁵⁸ As had been the case in Vancouver, pressure for an expanded militia presence was originating at the community level and was not being directed from Ottawa, whose neglect of Canada's westernmost province was already a common grievance for British Columbians and would remain so for decades to come.⁵⁹ When BC veterans returning from South Africa kept up this pressure after the war, in 1908 Vernon received authorization to raise the Okanagan Mounted Rifles, followed soon after by the raising of independent squadrons in Kamloops and the Nicola Valley. In the nearly twenty-five years since a mounted militia unit was first proposed in the interior, the Okanagan Valley and its growing population of gentlemen ranchers and well-heeled orchardists finally had the regiment to match their aspirations for the creation of a visibly British society.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Ronald Lovatt, "A History of the Militia Gunners of Victoria to 1956" (MA thesis, University of Victoria, 1974), 45-47; Silverman, "Militia and Defences," 134-39; and Roger Sarty, "Silent Sentry: A Military and Political History of Canadian Coast Defence, 1860-1945" (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 1982), 58-72.

⁵⁸ Silverman, "Militia and Defences," 138-39.

⁵⁹ For an example of comparable BC sentiments during the Second World War, see Gwen Cash, *A Million Miles from Ottawa* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1942).

⁶⁰ On the aspirations of English settlers in the Okanagan to establish a conservative society modelled on their recollections of rural England, see Koroscil, *British Garden of Eden*; and



Figure 4. In 1908, residents of Vernon were authorized by Ottawa to raise the first mounted regiment in the province. Pictured here are some of the first members of the Okanagan Mounted Rifles, predecessors of today's British Columbia Dragoons. *Source:* Vernon Museum and Archives, Photo No. 2485.

The social activities of these newly formed interior regiments did vary somewhat from those on the coast, being directed more towards horse races and tent-pegging competitions in which riders would attempt to pull up horseshoe-shaped tent pegs with lances. However, the ethnic composition of the new regiments did not vary tremendously from the pattern set on Vancouver Island and the Lower Mainland.⁶¹ Judging from their names, all officers of both the Okanagan Mounted Rifles and the

Jason Patrick Bennett, "Apple of the Empire: Landscape and Imperial Identity in Turn-of-the-Century British Columbia," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 9 (1998): 63-92.

⁶¹ Reginald Roy's history of the regiment, for example, indicates that its social activities included fancy dress balls, "Cinderella dances," and turkey shoots. The most popular of these activities was the annual New Year's Eve Ball: "[It was] generally held at the Opera House. The Okanagan Mounted Rifles started this practice in 1908, and it was carried on every 31 December thereafter until the outbreak of the war. Within a few years, it became the most popular ball in Vernon, and in time became one of the social highlights of the year. The floor would be crowded, and the mixture of the ladies' gowns, uniforms and formal evening dress created a colourful effect." See Roy, *Sinews of Steel*, 18. In a 1910 *Vernon News* article, the regiment's New Year's Eve Ball is described as follows: "The decorations were decidedly of a military caste, the Union Jack, Canadian Ensign, etc., forming the backgrounds, while a particularly neat and attractive arrangement of swords, spears, bugles, spurs, etc., adorned the walls. Dancing was kept up until well into Saturday morning accompanied by the splendid orchestra of the Rifle Corps." See *Vernon News*, 6 January 1910.



Figure 5. Militia units at rest on the beach in 1914. Before the First World War, units from Vancouver frequently crossed the Strait of Georgia to conduct joint training exercises with their counterparts in Victoria. *Source:* City of Vancouver Archives, cVA 7-150.

independent squadron in the Nicola Valley appear to have been of British descent. At the same time, the squadron in Kamloops was said to be “very well horsed and boasted some of the finest riders in the world.” These “up-country cowboys” of the interior regiments attended annual camps of instruction wearing chaps and Stetsons, and the regimental march of the 31st BC Horse was sung to the tune of “The Farmer’s Boy.”⁶² In 1910, these volunteers demonstrated their sense of English propriety adapted to local conditions during a dance at Nicola’s Dryad Hotel, when some “enemies of law and order came up from Merritt with the avowed purpose of creating a scene.” After attempting to placate the rowdies by buying them several rounds of drinks, these persons were “returned to Merritt sadder and, it is to be hoped, wiser men – for they were soundly thrashed by the volunteer police of the squadron.”⁶³ At the same time, even among regiments that on occasion thought of themselves as “cowboys,” the militia remained a British institution in what Reginald Roy describes as an “age of confidence ... in the Okanagan, in British Columbia and in the Empire as a whole. Many of the men ... were recent immigrants from Great Britain or were first generation Canadians and were quite conscious of the imperial bond. Men still spoke of England as ‘home’

⁶² Flick, *Short History*, front matter and chap. 1.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 11-12.



Figure 6. View of the militia cavalry training camp at Okanagan Lake in 1909. For the gentlemen ranchers and orchardists of the Okanagan Valley, raising a militia regiment furthered their aspirations to create a visibly British society. Source: Okanagan Military Museum Archives, BCD-P-1123.

... Cricket received as much attention as baseball, and afternoon tea was still an institution not to be treated lightly.”⁶⁴

“British Columbia is British.” That had been the provincial legislature’s declaration on the eve of the Boer War, and so was the provincial militia insofar as the ethnicity of its members was concerned. While many officers and men had certainly made their way to the west coast by way of central Canada and the Prairies, the militia in these years remained a visibly British institution. By the end of the decade, it was even beginning to differentiate between separate branches of the British family when Vancouver formed its first Highland regiment. In 1908, the Gaelic Society of Vancouver undertook to organize and provide uniforms for what became the 72nd Seaforth Highlanders of Canada. When a series of public meetings succeeded in raising the substantial sum of \$25,000 for that purpose, the unit was authorized in 1910 under the command of Captain R.G. Edwards Leckie, a veteran of the Boer War. As with nearly all of the regiments being formed in these years, recollections of its founding contain a strong note of civic and ethnic pride: “Given a Scottish

⁶⁴ Roy, *Sinews of Steel*, 35.

and consequently a clannish element in the population of Vancouver; the presence among them of men not only of financial standing but of public spirit, and it is evident that the conditions are ripe for the formation of a Highland regiment, a military organization that should embody the soldierly ideas ... which have ever belonged to the wearer of a kilt."⁶⁵ As for the selection of officers, nationality was openly admitted to be a criterion, a close second behind military experience and qualifications. Although twelve of the new unit's officers had combat experience in South Africa and elsewhere, Canadians of Scottish extraction were given preference over those born in the Old Country. As for the men: "Twenty are Scottish Canadians, or Scottish by name. Five Canadians of Irish parentage but partially Scotch, four English, three of whom [are believed to be] partly Scotch."⁶⁶ Not to be outdone, in 1913 the 11th Regiment, Irish Fusiliers of Canada, formed under the command of Major George McSpadden, a friend of Militia Minister Sam Hughes. Like Hughes, McSpadden was an Orangeman, and, in perceiving Vancouver's need of an Irish regiment to offset the "wealthy" and "English" regiments of the city, it remained an unspoken rule of his regiment that no Irish Catholics need apply.⁶⁷ Similar developments prevailed in Victoria, where, in response to Lieutenant Colonel J.A. Hall's formation of the 88th Regiment, Victoria Fusiliers, representing the English segment of the community,⁶⁸ the "Scots of Victoria" determined that the next battalion raised in their community "would be a Highland unit representing the Scottish element there."⁶⁹ This battalion was authorized in 1913 as the 50th Regiment, Gordon Highlanders, and outfitted with uniforms and equipment at the expense of the Scottish community of Victoria.⁷⁰

From 1910 onwards, the tempo of militia training in British Columbia was visibly increasing – efforts that enjoyed wide support in the province owing to the rising tensions between Britain and Germany that would ultimately lead to war. In the meantime, with the expansion of cadet training programs throughout the Dominion under the auspices of the

⁶⁵ Bernard McEvoy and Captain A.H. Finlay, *History of the 72nd Battalion, Seaforth Highlanders of Canada* (Vancouver: Cowan and Brookhouse, 1920), xx.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁶⁷ On the founding of Vancouver's Irish regiment, see Henry Randolph Notman Clyne, *Vancouver's 29th: A Chronicle of the 29th in Flanders Fields* (Vancouver: Tobin's Tigers Association, 1964).

⁶⁸ Boulton to Rev. Errol Shilliday (St. Mary's Church), in *88th Regiment (Victoria Fusiliers) Collection*, Special Collections and Archives, University of Victoria.

⁶⁹ Hugh M. Urquhart, *Arthur Currie: The Biography of a Great Canadian* (Toronto: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1950), 29–30.

⁷⁰ For materials relating to the formation of a Scottish regiment in Victoria, see 16th Battalion (The Canadian Scottish) Fonds, Special Collections and Archives, University of Victoria.

Strathcona Trust, BC schoolchildren were also taking part in what hindsight shows to have been active preparations for war. Formed in 1901 on the occasion of a royal visit by the duke and duchess of Cornwall, by 1903 students and teachers of Vancouver's cadet corps were receiving drill instruction and were soon undergoing rifle training as well. In 1909, British Columbia became the second province after Nova Scotia to express an interest in making cadet training compulsory in its public schools, and, by 1911, the cost of ammunition for cadet rifle training was being borne by the local school boards.⁷¹ In 1909, the city's cadets accompanied Vancouver and New Westminster militia regiments to the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition in Seattle, where they were filmed in motion pictures, and, in 1912, sixty-five cadets of the 101st Vancouver High School Cadet Corps embarked on a trans-Pacific steamship for a five-month tour of Australia and New Zealand. Forty-five of those who took part in this trip later served in the CEF and two with the American Expeditionary Force. Of these, nine were killed overseas between 1914 and 1918.⁷²

By 1912, the militia of British Columbia was conducting training exercises that involved several regiments at a time throughout Military District II, demonstrating how far the force had come since the 1890s when social activities had absorbed most of its time. On 28 June 1912, a total of five hundred volunteers from Vancouver's 6th Regiment, DCOR, and the 72nd Highlanders crossed the Strait of Georgia to land in the Cowichan Valley. A route march that carried these "attackers" over the Malahat Road towards the Fort Rodd Hill batteries was observed by Victoria Boy Scouts camped amidst the densely wooded mountains. These "active youngsters, taking an intense interest in all that was going on," reported the invaders' progress to Lieutenant Colonel Arthur W. Currie of Victoria's 5th (BC) Regiment, Canadian Artillery – a unit that, on five occasions between 1907 and 1913, won the coveted Governor General's Cup for General Efficiency, open to all artillery units in Canada.⁷³ Six years later Currie would command the Canadian Corps during its final drive against the German Army on the Western Front, but, in 1912, his efforts were concentrated on directing the movements of Victoria militiamen, cadets, and even Boy Scouts in a massive "sham fight" that took place just outside Langford: "Outposts were real, and discipline excellent, and it is safe to say the training has been more valuable to all

⁷¹ "Minutes of Militia Conference, November 16-18, 1911," *Directorate of History and Heritage, Department of National Defence*, 500.009 (D29), 46-47.

⁷² Harker, *Dukes*, 382-83.

⁷³ Urquhart, *Arthur Currie*, 23.

who took part than any previous annual training ... No training in the future will be considered complete in the 11th M.D. that does not include work of this nature."⁷⁴ A realtor and insurance salesman by day, Currie is reported to have spent "nearly one hundred and fifty nights out of three hundred and sixty-five" at the armoury and, in 1914, he was appointed to command the newly organized 50th Gordon Highlanders.⁷⁵

In the interior as well, the newly formed mounted rifle squadrons, redesignated as the British Columbia Horse in 1911, attended annual training in camps at the foot of Nicola Lake; in Kamloops; on the shore of Lake Okanagan; and, from 1912 to 1914, on the plateau at Mission Hill just south of Vernon. To encourage the militia department to establish this site as the permanent annual district camp, Vernon's city council paid to have it furnished with water, electric lights, and a telephone line.⁷⁶ With the camp of 1912 overseen by Major A.C. Macdonnell, who would later command the 1st Canadian Division in France, and Major R.C. Holman, on exchange to Canada from the Australian Commonwealth Forces, the list of officers and men in attendance reads as though it were a nominal roll of soldiers who would later receive command appointments in the CEF or decorations for valour, several of them awarded posthumously. A notable example is provided by the community of Walhachin, which, with a total population of less than two hundred, sent some thirty volunteers to the camp of 1912, every one of whom was "an accomplished equestrian from years of polo, fox hunts, and racing."⁷⁷ Among these volunteers from Walhachin, Lieutenant Gordon Flowerdew, who attended the Vernon camp as a corporal, won the Victoria Cross and was killed in March of 1918 in one of the last cavalry charges of the First World War.⁷⁸ As for the instruction received at this camp, while the

⁷⁴ "Manoeuvres in the Eleventh Military District," *CMG* 27, 15 (13 August 1912): 8-9; and "Vancouver: An Interesting Bit of Field Work," *CMG* 27, 15 (13 August 1912): 5-6.

⁷⁵ Urquhart, *Arthur Currie*, 24, 30.

⁷⁶ *Vernon News*, 9 May 1912, 7.

⁷⁷ Keith Wood, "A Walhachin Index," *British Columbia Historical News* 33, 2 (2000): 19. See also Nelson Riis, "The Walhachin Myth: A Study in Settlement Abandonment," *BC Studies* 17 (1973): 20.

⁷⁸ A history of the 31st BC Horse makes special note of Walhachin's contributions to the pre-war camps and its record of recruiting during the Great War: "A feature of 1912 was the magnificent manner in which the little hamlet of Walhachin recruited for the 31st Regiment. Walhachin has, all told, a population of little more than 150 souls, yet some thirty troopers from the hamlet joined the muster at Vernon. In the subsequent war time, little Walhachin outdid all her peace efforts in the way of recruiting. The population of the Thompson River hamlet was, in August 1914, much the same as in 1912, yet 56 men from its small population fought for Britain." From Flick, *Short History*, 14. Lieutenant Flowerdew was one of fourteen British Columbians awarded the Victoria Cross during the First World War. See Ormsby, *British Columbia*, 402.



Figure 7. Wrestling on horseback at the militia summer training camp in Vernon, 1912. While still allowing opportunities for sport and camaraderie, by 1914 the training was described by one of the participants as being of an entirely practical nature, “as if we knew for certain that in a couple of months we should be on our way to the European battlefields.” *Source:* Okanagan Military Museum Archives, BCD-P-981c.

visitors were certainly well received and entertained by the community, there was a notable emphasis on practical training. As one participant recalled: “The field operations of the 1914 camp were as realistic as those German manoeuvres one used to read about with a kind of gasp in the years before the war. We had infantry, cavalry, machine guns and the service corps taking part in the training. We had night outpost schemes, attacks at dawn, and wide-circling cavalry movements, as if we knew for certain that in a couple of months we should be on our way to the European battlefields.”⁷⁹ At the Vernon camp of 1914, mounted rifles of the British Columbia Horse trained alongside the Seaforth Highlanders and 6th DCOR from Vancouver, as well as the Rocky Mountain Rangers of the interior, these forming some of the principal units contributing to the overseas battalions raised in British Columbia later that summer.

The First World War would prove to be unlike any conflict in world history, and it marked a turning point for every country that took a major part in it. If Canada was transformed by its participation in the conflict,

⁷⁹ Flick, *Short History*, 18.

just as heavily affected was the province that contributed a greater proportion of its young men than any other part of the Dominion. How British Columbians responded to the call to arms in 1914-18 and how they experienced that war were determined in large part by the military heritage of the province. Intended primarily as a study of the social institutions of the BC militia, this article shows the degree to which these regiments owed their existence to the two decades of progress and growing confidence that preceded the outbreak of the First World War. With the notable exception of the Boer War, this was a thriving era of peaceful development in which the establishment of new regiments was considered by the wider society as less a preparation for war than a symbol of British Columbia's progress.

Always dependent on links to the community, prior to the Boer War these regiments of the BC militia had little choice but to maintain an active schedule of social activities in order to maintain their numbers. Yet these regiments themselves remained British institutions, and amid the rising imperialism and military enthusiasm of BC society that began during the Boer War, citizen soldiers of the province were for more than a decade released from their dependence on social activities that were of little military utility. With the declining relations between the home country and Germany, they were finally able to conduct useful training. But no amount of marksmanship training, regimental manoeuvres, or indoctrination through cadet training could have fully prepared British Columbia for what lay ahead. Even the most thoroughly militarized societies of continental Europe experienced the horrors of trench warfare as a shock – in some cases, a fatal one. The conflict that began in 1914 may have looked nothing like the war British Columbians had anticipated, but, by 1918, it had changed the province forever. We would be remiss to overlook the social institutions of the province's pre-war militia as one of the foundations for how British Columbia weathered the storm of the First World War.