

“D’ye Ken Sam Hughes?” and Two Other Songs from the Great War, 1914-1918

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During the first twenty years of this century, Sam Hughes had a dynamic influence on the Canadian scene. Who was this man? Born in Ontario in 1853, he had been a collegiate teacher and owner-editor of a weekly newspaper. From his teens he had been in the militia, beginning with the Fenian raids of 1870. He tried to join the Canadian contingent to the Boer War in 1899, but was turned down by the commander as a man who would not accept authority: he was neither a gentleman nor a professional soldier. He then made his way to South Africa as a civilian to join the British forces, serving with some distinction. Hughes believed Canadians should share the responsibilities and costs of the British Empire from which they received many benefits; but he saw Canada’s role in the Empire as one of active co-operation without subservience. Over a period of some two decades his pronouncements and actions embroiled him in a number of public controversies. It is not surprising then that his name occurs in two of three Canadian soldier’s songs remembered into the 1960s in Vancouver where they were collected from two veterans of World War I.

A Conservative member of Parliament from the 1890s and a militia colonel, Hughes had his greatest influence after the 1911 federal election. He was Minister of Militia and Defence in the Borden cabinet from 1911 to 1916, which placed him in a key position at the outbreak of World War I. His first years in office were dedicated to expanding Canada’s militia in the expectancy, shared by the government, that Germany would before long precipitate a war with Great Britain. When war came on August 4, 1914, Hughes with overwhelming energy and determination used his militia structure across the nation to enlist tens of thousands of volunteers to be assembled at one place and sent overseas as soon as possible. To this end Hughes performed the amazing feat of laying out and making habitable in a matter of days the giant Valcartier Camp near the city of Quebec. Amid the vast acreage of tents, the men were sorted out, outfitted, and partially trained. Proof to Hughes that his way of doing things worked was

that the First Contingent of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, numbering over 30,000 men, embarked for England seven weeks after war was declared.

Hughes discarded previous plans for mobilization and took complete charge. He swept aside a suggestion that the army be conscripted in the belief that voluntary service was a sound base for good morale. To build morale further, men who enlisted in the same place were to be kept together. Applying this principle on a national scale he saw himself leading a recruiting drive for reinforcements for a distinct Canadian fighting force. When he met Lord Kitchener, Britain’s Secretary of State for War, shortly after recruits arrived on England’s Salisbury Plain, Kitchener challenged this vision. Hughes’ reaction was crucial to the future of Canadian self-image. It also reveals much of Hughes’ personality. A Canadian officer present gave the following account:

Sir Sam marched up to Kitchener’s desk. When he arrived at the desk Kitchener spoke up quickly and in a very stern voice said, “Hughes, I see you have brought over a number of men from Canada: they are of course without training and this would apply to their officers; I have decided to divide them up among the British regiments; they will be of very little use to us as they are.” Sir Sam replied, “Sir, do I understand you to say that you are going to break up these Canadian regiments that came over? Why, it will kill recruiting in Canada.” Kitchener answered, “You have your orders, carry them out.” Sir Sam replied, “I’ll be damned if I will,” turned on his heel and marched out. (Duguid I: 126-127)

Hughes immediately moved to counter Kitchener’s stance. He cabled Canada’s Prime Minister Borden and met with Britain’s Prime Minister Asquith, with the result that Kitchener rescinded his order. Hughes’ action in effect created the Canadian army; the Canadian force, renamed The 1st Canadian Division, was intact when it arrived in France in mid-February, 1915. The intervening months had been spent in training.

Sam Hughes was a man of conviction; and, if men in high places found him inflexible, so did the volunteers. Valcartier Camp was Hughes' little kingdom, and in it he would allow no alcoholic drinks. He did not object to soldiers in line of battle receiving a tot of rum, but firmly withstood the protests of the men, who wanted beer available in a wet canteen. From 1893 the Canadian militia regulations had forbidden alcoholic drink in drill halls and field exercises. Hughes, a non-drinker and non-smoker, denounced officers of Canada's permanent force as boozing loafers and upheld the militia regulation unbendingly. Before the war, militiamen in Ontario sang a parody of "John Peel" with this chorus:

D'ye ken Sam Hughes, he's the foe of the
booze;
He's the real champion [cham-peen] of the wet
canteen
For the camp is dead, and we're sent to bed
So we won't have a head in the morning.
(Winter 72)

That could well have been the beginning of the "D'ye Ken Sam Hughes" heard a few years later on Salisbury Plain – and still after decades in British Columbia. At the Salisbury Plain encampment, after banning beer for some time, Hughes made one of his rare reversals and permitted wet canteens. Why? As the weeks and months dragged on, the men's discomfort owing to the persistent rain, deep mud and flooded tents, and their frustrations with ill-designed equipment, threatened the training program. These conditions resulted in the men drinking excessively on day pass to the neighbouring communities, on leave, and even without leave. Hughes' sanction of the wet canteens was a tactic to salvage sinking morale, if not the sinking tents.

Sam Hughes was the kind of man whose actions are excused with the comment: "Well, he gets things done!" The difficulty with him was that he sought only his own advice, and looked on all who criticized him as deficient in virtue, insight or experience. He was difficult to work with for he was erratic, acting at one time on long-held conviction, at another on impulse. Like many men of his time he saw no contradiction between acquitting his public responsibilities and giving his friends valuable military contracts without competitive bidding.

Numbers of these contracts were for unproven equipment. A notorious example was the combination trenching-spade-sniper's-shield designed and patented by one of Hughes' female secretaries. 25,000 of these contrivances – purchased at \$1.35 each – were scrapped for about a nickel apiece. When the First Contingent's boots came apart under the soaking of muddy fields and the pounding of paved roads, Hughes sent boot-style buckled overshoes to protect them – which were equally unsatisfactory. Before the men set off for France, they were issued standard Imperial (i.e. British) army boots. Another questionable item in the Canadian kit was the 'Oliver Equipment', a combination of leather belt and shoulder straps, fitted for carrying ammunition, water bottle, bayonet, and a heavy coat. The basic Oliver design had been controversial for years, but Hughes endorsed its use. Not only did the leather require special care, but some men found the straps unyielding, binding and cutting into them. The Canadians wanted it replaced with the webbing type then issued to the British army; that was made of a woven material which, wet or dry, more readily shaped itself to the wearer.

Of the four kit items lampooned in the song "D'ye Ken Sam Hughes?", the Ross rifle stirred the most controversy at high levels and the deepest feelings with the soldiers. From its first viewing in 1901 in Canada, where it was shortly to be manufactured, to its final rejection as a weapon in 1916, it was judged an excellent target rifle. But from first to last, its shell ejection and reloading mechanism had a tendency to jam. In 1901 Hughes, an able marksman, and the other consultants to the then Canadian Minister of Militia and Defence expressed their belief that the Ross rifle with a few modifications would be the ideal infantry weapon.

Before the war when Hughes was building up the militia, he said, "Give me one million men who can hit a target at five hundred yards, and we would not have a foe who could invade our country." Hughes' simplistic scheme of warfare gave immense importance to marksmanship, which is limited ultimately by the design of the rifle. With the "Ross rifle, Mark III", in their hands, Hughes thought, his volunteers would be invincible. But the rifle showed its weaknesses to the recruits at Valcartier and on Salisbury Plain. Its long barrel was awkward, its sights were too delicate, dirt interfered too easily with the mechanism, and rapid firing caused jamming

through overheating. A man occasionally had to turn his rifle round and, holding the barrel, kick the bolt loose with his foot. Hughes blamed the ammunition, not the gun. He contended the English-made shells were of irregular size and often contained too much explosive. However, in comparative tests the British Lee-Enfield rifle worked with all the ammunition. When the men were placed in the life-or-death situation of the muddy trenches of France, they showed what they really felt about their rifles. On the battlefields of Ypres and Festubert, over three thousand of them discarded the Ross in favour of Lee-Enfields found beside dead British soldiers. Although Sam Hughes maintained his faith in the weapon, the men had lost all confidence. In June, 1915, first without his knowledge and then over his protests, the 1st Canadian Division abandoned the Ross and were issued Lee-Enfields. The complete demise of the Ross rifle as an infantry weapon came the following year.

On the heels of the rejection of the Ross rifle came another humiliation for Hughes. A trusted friend whom he had appointed purchasing agent for ammunition was shown to have taken over \$200,000 as a kickback from an intermediary's commission on a ten million dollar contract. Sam Hughes was pressured to resign as Minister of Militia and Defence. A few days before his resignation was demanded, he made a speech to Toronto's Empire Club which showed how strongly he wanted Canada to stand on her own, and which, at the same time, directed attention away from shortcomings of his own administration.

For the first year of the war, Canada had practically no control of her forces overseas. The administration (was) managed by chief divisional officer commanding – an Imperial officer. Our transport, our rifles, our trucks, our harness, our saddles, our equipment, our shovels, our clothing, our wagons; those were all set aside and in many cases.....they were supplanted by inferior articles. (Duguid II: 155)

Hughes objected to this system, "objected to being treated as a Crown colony" (The Globe Nov.10, 1916). In his own way he reflected Canada's increasing sense of maturity; Canadian rejection of colonial status was analogous to 'coming of age'. To prove our adulthood, with Great Britain as a model, we had to have our own army equipped with our own manufactures. Hughes was

instrumental in giving us our army; it was in part his national feeling that would not let him admit the necessity of using those proven equipment designs, standardized for Imperial forces.

The 1st Canadian Division was put to the test in the battles of April and May, 1915. It held its positions under heavy attack, many thousands of its numbers dying in the fighting. The Canadians had stood comparison with the best trained armies of the world. Yet they had none of the trappings of nationhood. They had no distinct flag and would not have one for another fifty years. They wore Imperial uniforms, and almost nothing was left of their equipment to distinguish them; they looked like British soldiers. But when they sang, "We are, we are, we are Canadians," a kind of team chorus, they revealed a sense of pride and dignity, which came from knowing they were different but not inferior.

In the 1st Canadian Division there were over a thousand British Columbians. As already explained, they came from Sam Hughes' militia units. An example of how Hughes encouraged militia activity can be seen in the story of the Vernon Drill Hall. In 1908 the Vernon militia, mostly mounted horse, petitioned Ottawa for an armoury; but it was not until 1912, when Hughes was Minister of Militia, that one was built. Hughes got both popular support and government monies by portraying the drill hall as a kind of community hall. Since the building could be used by local clubs and for other social activities, and could be used as a rallying place in time of disaster, the municipality donated the site. As well as serving the militia, it would be a place for training cadets. This story with variations was repeated not only in British Columbia in such places as Chilliwack, Merrit, and North Vancouver, but in many places across the nation. To a generation of militiamen these drill halls were known as "Sam Hughes' Armouries".

In the summer of 1913, there were 2000 men of the British Columbia militia in camp near Vernon, the largest such camp held till that time. In the same year in the whole province there were, beside some 160 men on Vancouver Island, just two permanent force soldiers on the Ottawa payroll: one in Vancouver, the other in Vernon. The whole country with about 3000 men in the permanent force did not offer much in the way of a military career. Given these conditions it is noteworthy that

over 40,000 men from British Columbia served overseas before the Great War ended, about one in every four men of eligible age. Nearly one in three ended up in uniform. These ratios were higher than in some provinces and lower than in others. A significant influence on how many British Columbians volunteered was that over ninety per cent of the BC population at that time were Canadians of British ancestry or had immigrated from the British Isles.

In 1913-14 there were mixed feelings in British Columbia towards the militia. Militiamen from Victoria and Vancouver who had been sent in 1913 to the coal mining centers of Vancouver Island were scorned by a portion of the population, not for their personal behaviour but for representing the alliance between the coal owners and the McBride-Bowser government. This was the third time in the operation of the island's coal mines that the militia had been called out to maintain "law and order" in support of the owners' intransigent anti-union stand. In reaction, mothers wrote the newspapers saying they hoped no sons of theirs would ever wear a militia uniform.

Opposition to the militia was not limited to its 'scab herding', as its employment against the organized miners was called. To radical socialists, whose numbers in the British Columbia labour movement were significant, the militia was another tentacle of the economic imperialists who were bringing another war. Already committed to the class struggle, the socialists regarded working-men of one nation who fought working-men of another as dupes of competing ruling classes. When World War I came, they would not volunteer their services, and later they were among several minorities across Canada who opposed conscription.

Sam Hughes understood some of the implications of the 'new imperialism'; but instead of joining the socialists in denouncing the capitalist system as containing the seeds of war, he called for unity of one imperialist force against its challenger. In Vancouver on August 6, 1912, two years before the war, Hughes tried to rally support for Imperial defence in a speech:

War is closer than you dream; the great peril is Germany. Why? Because Germany must have colonies within a generation or she will begin to go down. She is building (battle)ships on borrowed money and must seek new

territory....Germany has to be taught...that Canada, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand are behind the Mother Country.
(Daily Province Aug.7, 1912: 14)

As the forecasted war went into its third year the earlier appeals to fight for "Empire, King, and Country" were played down. The realities of trench warfare; the horrors of gas attacks; the large numbers of killed, wounded and bereaved; the uncertain outcome of the conflict: all caused many people who had not done so before to question the virtue of war. To sustain morale and to maintain support, slogans stressed that the Great War was great because it was a "war to end militarism", a "war to end war".

The third of these Canadian songs from World War I, "We Are Sam Hughes' Army," is a slight re-shaping of one sung by British troops. In their most commonly sung version, the Britishers used the name of an English music hall comedian, Fred Karno; the Canadians used the familiar name of "Major-General, the Honourable Sir Sam Hughes" (knighted by George V personally in the summer of 1915.) How consciously the Canadian troops compared Hughes to the comedian, we do not know; but with their knowledge of how some of his decisions had brought them discomfort, pain and death, the song on their lips must have had sardonic overtones.

Regarding Hughes, historians, journalists, and politicians have tried to sum him up: Ralph Allen in *Ordeal by Fire* pictured him as "half heroic and half preposterous". Robert Borden in 1928 reflected that Hughes as a member of his government about half the time had been "reasonable" and "energetic", but for the other half he was "excitable" and "almost impossible to work with" when "his conduct and speech were (not) so eccentric as to justify the conclusion that his mind was unbalanced". The three songs presented here document with the immediacy of the living voice attitudes and feelings of the men who were most acutely affected by Hughes' administration – in that war where war itself came to be judged an ultimate obscenity.

Notes

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Nettleingham, F.T. *Tommy's Tunes*. London : 1917.

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D'ye Ken Sam Hughes?

D'ye ken Sam Hughes with his buck-le ov-er-shoes? He should
sell the Ross rif-les and buy us all can-oes, And
if he don't, we'll all go on the booze When we
land up in Lon-don in the morn-ing.

The musical score is written in 4/4 time with a treble clef. It consists of four staves of music. The lyrics are written below the notes. Chord symbols (C, G7, F) are placed above the notes to indicate the harmonic structure.

Sam Hughes' Army

We are Sam Hughes's Ar-my, We are his in-fant-ry. We
can-not shoot, we can-not fight - What earth-ly use are we? And
when we get to Ber-lin The Kais-er he will say, "Hoch,
hoch, hoch, hoch, What a blood-y rot-ten lot Are the men of the R.C.A.!"

The musical score is written in 4/4 time with a treble clef. It consists of four staves of music. The lyrics are written below the notes. Chord symbols (C, F, G, G7, Am, Dm) are placed above the notes to indicate the harmonic structure.

We Are, We Are. We Are Canadians!

Oh, we come from the east, and we come from the west - We
 are Ca-nucks, you see. We come from hill and we come from vale To
 fight for lib-er-ty, Gor-blim-ey! And now that we're here with the
 best of Brit-ish sons, We don't give a damn for the
 Kais-er or his sons - C-A-N-A-D-I-A-N-S We
 are, we are, we are Can-a-di-ans - Oh, Gor-blim-ey! What do you think of that?

“Hard, Hard Times” for the Mad Cow

Paddy Tutty and Terry Pugh wrote a western Canadian parody of the Newfoundland song “Hard, Hard Times” (itself a parody of an American song, which probably has its origins somewhere else) [*Bulletin* 18.2, p. 33]. They composed the song driving to a rally in protest of dismantling the Crowsnest Rate, a subsidy to the railroads for carrying prairie wheat to port (it was known locally as the “Crow”). The Crow was dismantled and as such has faded from memory, making the Crow verse in the Pugh & Tutty version more of an historical comment than the good piece of social commentary it was at the time. In keeping with the tradition, it seems appropriate to replace that verse with something more contemporary. And there’s no shortage of possibilities. In May 2003 one case of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), a.k.a. mad cow disease, was detected in Alberta. This prompted great consternation, based on events in Britain and

Europe, in which this disease was thought to jump the animal-human boundary when infected beef was consumed. It emerged in humans as the particularly vicious Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease. All kinds of sanctions were imposed and steps taken to contain the Alberta “out break.” As the political winds began to clear and ranchers started to recover a bit, Alberta’s intrepid premier, Ralph Klein, managed to stir things up pretty well. He was quoted in the press as saying the rancher who sold the cow would have done well to shoot it and bury it rather than bring the whole beef industry to its knees. Not a lot of help for ranchers in dire economic straits – but pretty good for a new verse:

And things they get worse as the ranchers avow
 Their herds get shut down because of mad cow
 A guy sold a sick heifer, a giant screw up
 Should listen to Ralph: “shoot, shovel, shut up”
 And it’s hard, hard times.

Tim Rogers