

Letters & Diaries of the Great War

Considering Historical Perspectives

A. Setting the Background

Prior to working with students to establish historical significance of this event, some background knowledge about Canada's role in World War I could be provided.

- History 30 curriculum : Unit 3 pages 316-323
https://www.edonline.sk.ca/bbcswebdav/library/curricula/English/Social_Studies/History_30_1997.pdf
- The Canadian Encyclopedia: First World War:
<http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/first-world-war-wwi/>
- Encyclopedia of Saskatchewan: World War 1 and Saskatchewan:
Included in this learning package, courtesy of University of Regina Press.
- Canadian War Museum: Canada and the First World War:
<http://www.warmuseum.ca/firstworldwar/>
- *Saskatchewan History: Great War Issue, Fall-Winter 2014, Vol. 66, No. 2*
- John Herd Thompson, *Harvests of War: The Prairie West 1914-1918* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1978).
- "From the Prairies to the Trenches" Great War video series produced by the Provincial Archives of Saskatchewan:
 - o Part 1: 1914: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pNZAjErJAuY>
 - o Part 2: 1915: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iaylaT5EZAM>
 - o Part 3: 1916: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U-Hb8nVNehw>
 - o Part 4: 1917: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EtMU2TciY40>

B. Review the criteria for appreciating historical perspective.

We can better understand the people of the past if we ...

- Remember there is a difference between current world views and those of earlier time periods.
- Avoid imposing present ideas on actors in the past.
- Know that the historical context helps establish perspective of people in the past.

- Take the perspective of historical actors, meaning we infer how those people felt based on evidence.
- Remember that different people have diverse perspectives on the same event.

Adapted from The Big Six Historical Thinking Concepts by Peter Seixas and Tom Morton (Nelson Education 2013)

C. Brainstorm different ways people in Canada were involved in supporting the war effort in World War I.

Students could consider involvement on the Western Front on the battlefields, on the oceans, in the air, nurses and hospitals and other similar efforts. They might also consider and mention home front support and involvement.

Ask students to think about who these people would have likely corresponded with. How did they record their experiences at the time and later? (Journals, letters, photographs, scrap books).

What might they have wanted to remember and share about their experience? What could they freely share? What was not allowed to be shared (censored)? What was not easy to share?

D. Prepare and distribute the student copies of the war letters and accompanying bibliographic notes from 4 different Saskatchewan participants in World War I for a *first reading*:

- **Victor N. Swanston**
 - Biographical notes and transcribed letters available in pdf learning package and online at http://www.saskarchives.com/Great_War
- **Gladys Matheson**
 - Biographical notes, plus original diary entries and reminiscence excerpts scanned and available online, at http://www.saskarchives.com/Great_War
- **Charles Douglas ('Dick') Richardson**
 - Biographical notes and transcribed letters available in pdf learning package and online at http://www.saskarchives.com/Great_War
- **James ('Jim') C. Aitchison**
 - Biographical notes and transcribed letters available in pdf learning package and online at http://www.saskarchives.com/Great_War; original letters scanned and available online only

Assign individual students (or small groups) ONE of the participants to study closely for this lesson.

For their first reading, ask them to read their package of letters and biographical overview to get a sense of who the person was and what their role in the war was. Ask them to **note a few things that were interesting** and **a few things that they were unsure or had questions about** and share these back in a partner think-pair-share or large group sharing experience.

E. Introduce the *Different Perspectives Graphic Organizer*. Using the 4 different sets of letters, identify 4 different perspectives of World War I that will be explored further in a second reading of the letters.

- Victor N. Swanston – Canadian born single man in his 30's
- Gladys Matheson– trained nursing sister helping wounded soldiers
- Charles Douglas ('Dick') Richardson – Canadian born single man, university educated, 24 when enlisted
- James ('Jim') C. Aitchison – recent immigrant to Canada from Scotland and dedicated husband and father of 7 young children in Saskatoon

Help students identify what the specific and unique **needs** and **concerns** might be for these participants as they complete the first sections of the organizer.

Read through the letters again, looking for specific **text references** that help illustrate the author's needs and concerns about the war and record it on the organizer.

F. Create a summary position and reaction statement about World War I that captures the historical perspective of the author of the letters.

Students will need to ***make inferences based on evidence provided in the letters*** to help them.

These statements can be written in first person as if it was the author speaking.

These can be recorded in the last section of the graphic organizer.

Different Perspectives organizer and teaching sequence adapted from Classroom Strategies for Interactive Learning. 3rd ed by Doug Buehl (International Reading Association, 2009).

Extension Tasks Related to Historical Perspective

- Respond to the letters with a series of letters back to the author. What would the other side of the conversation be? What would the author be hearing from those at home with whom they are in correspondence with? What different perspectives might they be hearing about how the Great War is impacting others at home?
- Assume that a letter (or personal journal) got through that was not censored. What might the author have shared that was reflective of what they were REALLY thinking and feeling? Write the letter or journal entries.

World War I and Saskatchewan

From August 4, 1914, when Britain's declaration of war brought Canada into World War I, two attitudes prevailed in Saskatchewan: one was a determination to defend all things British, and the second was an appreciation for jobs and wages which peace had not provided. Many of the first volunteer soldiers answered blood ties to the Empire: for example, of 68 Swift Current recruits in the first days of the war, 63 were British-born. But as seasonal work dried up later that fall, more volunteers came from other ethnic groups. Many unemployed responded to the \$1.10 per diem provided to soldiers, as unemployment had risen since the end of western railroad expansion in 1912. Saskatchewan politicians, clerics and journalists asked the federal government to expand the armed forces *faster* to absorb all the unemployed. Soldiers received a warm send-off from a populace excited by the prospect of a short war. Scrambling to enlist, some Saskatchewan soldiers served in regiments mobilized in other provinces. The Princess Patricia Light Infantry (the Pats), one of the first Canadian units to reach France in December 1914, recruited veterans from across the country who had "no attachment to any militia"; as they were experienced, they were sent to the front with much less training. So many men from the West enlisted with the Pats that they were often considered a prairie battalion by other units. Similarly, a rumour that Manitoba units would reach the fighting sooner prompted many Saskatchewan lads to join there.

Canada's military leadership re-shuffled all the units going overseas into numbered battalions. The 95th Saskatchewan (later Regina) Rifles and the 105 Fusiliers (later Saskatoon) both fought with the 11th Battalion of the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF), and in turn sent many reinforcements to the 5th Battalion CEF. The North Saskatchewan Regiment (later Prince Albert) and the South Saskatchewan Regiment (later Weyburn) also received their marching orders in the fall of 1914. Moose Jaw's 27th Light Horse was called in early 1915. After the initial mobilization, recruiters were simply given blocks of numbers to assign. CEF battalions like the 65th and 96th battalions, mobilized in Saskatoon in 1916, were recruited there. Later the 28th, 46th, 68th, 152nd and 195th battalions all mobilized men from Saskatchewan, but province of origin was not considered important. Although records of the Saskatchewan units can be confusing or non-existent, their war experience proved remarkably uniform. Assembled at Valcartier Camp near Quebec City, they embarked for Britain and a few months' further training before joining other Canadian units fighting in the trenches in Flanders. Here their war abbreviates to a list of famous battles: Ypres (April–May 1915), Festubert (May 1916), Mount Sorel (June 1916), the Somme (July–November 1916), Vimy Ridge (April 1917), Hill 70 (August 1917), Passchendaele (November 1917), Amiens (August 1918), and Valenciennes (November 1918).

The battle for Ypres, the gateway to the French ports of Calais and Dunkirk, demonstrated the mettle of 1st Canadian Division when they were first to encounter chlorine gas and suffer casualties. But the headlong daylight rushes against machine-gun pillboxes, adopted by military leaders on both sides, meant that every battle had high casualty rates. The daily course of trench warfare also took a large toll. At the Somme in 1916 (600,000 Allied casualties), three Canadian divisions suffered 2,600 casualties *before* the main onslaught began.

Eventually the Somme, where 24,029 men from the four divisions of the Canadian Corps died for six miles of No Man's Land, changed the country's recruitment policy. Even before conscription was introduced in August 1917, the army command began breaking up units in training to rush the soldiers forward as replacements at the front. The 196th Western Universities Battalion was one of the casualties of this change. Led by Walter C. Murray, president of the University of Saskatchewan, they sought to recruit and train a special soldier "of the university type"—that is,

British. Almost all male students were required to train, and as one student of agriculture explained to his mother: “They make you feel like two cents at the University if you don’t enlist.” The University of Saskatchewan outfitted some 200 men, but these efforts ceased after mid-1916 when the Brigade became replacements for other regiments. Another special unit, the 107th Battalion, mobilized many Aboriginal soldiers from Saskatchewan. Some of these Aboriginal units, with reputations for valour, were disbanded for fear they might be wiped out all at once.

By 1916, all Canadian infantry entered battle together as the Canadian Corps; after their hard-won victory at Vimy Ridge, they had one of their own as commander: General Arthur Currie. At home, however, divisions had deepened. Camps for “enemy aliens” opened across the prairies in October 1914 and eventually interned over 8,000—mostly Ukrainians (known as Ruthenians for that area of the Austro-Hungarian Empire). Along with conscientious objectors, Mennonites and Doukhobors, they were disenfranchised by the Wartime Elections Act of 1917, which included alien immigrants naturalized after 1902. Saskatchewan voted for the revamped Unity Government of Robert Borden in December 1917 largely out of support for conscription. However, the Military Services Act (August 1917), administrated by local committees, continued to exempt conscripts in Quebec, but drafted the farmers’ vital workers in Saskatchewan, where local committees were made up of, or influenced by, veterans. Farmers were further dismayed when agricultural exemptions were lifted in the spring of 1918 as German offensives produced even greater casualties.

Armistice on November 11, 1918, came as a surprise. A poor crop had signaled another hard year. Divisions over war and conscription, between English and French Canadians, between Empire and immigrant, would continue for years.

Scott Broad

Further Reading

Giesler, P. 1982. *Valour Remembered: Canada and the First World War*. Ottawa: Government of Canada Veterans Affairs; Martin, W.M. 1919. *What Saskatchewan Has Done in the Great War*. Regina: J.W. Reid Government Printer; Thompson, J.H. 1978. *The Harvests of War: The Prairie West, 1914–1918*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart.

©2007 University of Regina and Canadian Plains Research Center
Terms of Use located at: http://esask.uregina.ca/terms_of_use.html