

Tips on Writing a Canadian High School History of the Great War

by Barry Gough



Dr. Barry Gough speaking at Vic High Remembrance Day ceremony, 2012

The number of Canadian high schools that exist from the era of the First World War cannot be many, and I have not determined how many might still exist. Founded in 1876, Victoria High School is the oldest publicly funded high school in western Canada. The current building, the school's fourth, opened officially on 1 May 1914, only three months before the war erupted in Europe. Because of the unique nature of this school's history, I began with a chapter that detailed its founding and its rise

to prominence in British Columbia. This chapter title, “The Long and Splendid Afternoon,” speaks to the special circumstances that Victoria faced on the eve of the War. Vic High was also a cradle of higher education in the Province – in its first years Victoria College, precursor of the University of Victoria, was housed in the school. Unique in this connection was that Victoria College launched the magazine *The Camosun* (taken from the aboriginal name for Victoria Harbour). This periodical became one of the main historical sources for the book.

Perhaps every high school of this era had some sort of newsletter or magazine. For me the various issues of *The Camosun* were of essential importance in establishing the student ethos, the relationships of the teachers with the students, the nature of social life, particulars on the debating club activities (both boys and girls), the relations of town and gown, and activities of the Cadet Battalion. Much incidental information is to be found in this source, notably about individual students, male and female.

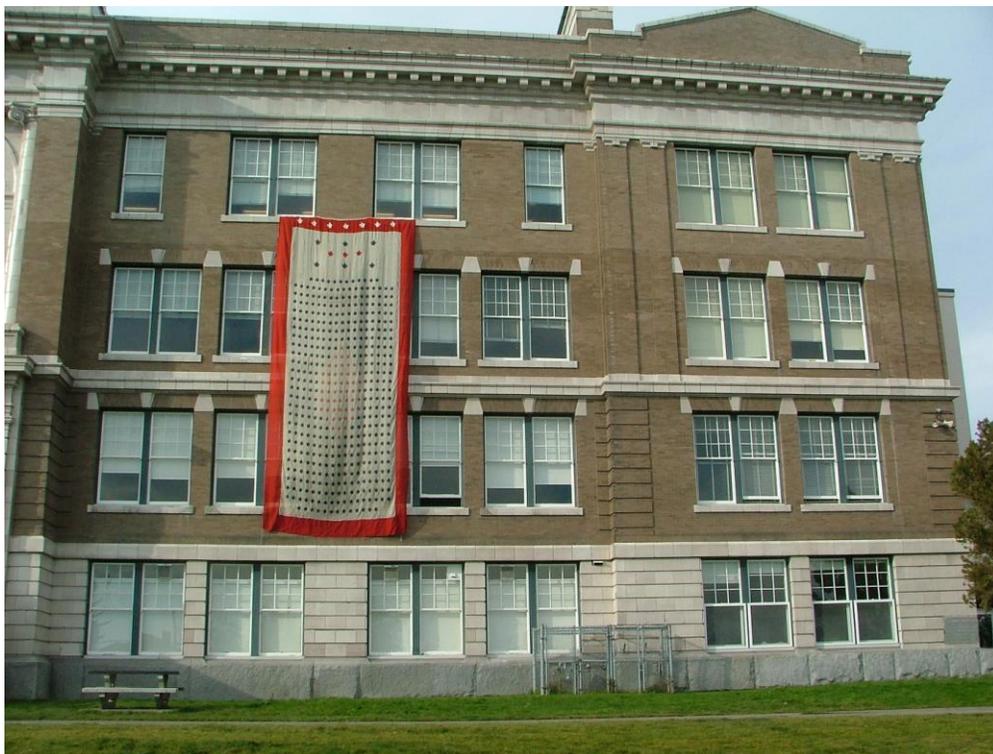
Equally important sources for the historian writing on this topic are local newspapers, in the Victoria case *The Daily Colonist* and *The Victoria Times*. That the former was available to me in digital form helped immensely. Microfilms of both also exist, but the microfilm can be poor and scratched, and such photos as were printed on newsprint are unlikely to reproduce successfully in book form. In addition to these newspapers, various personal or family files came to my attention or were sought out. These add texture and provide the intensity of feeling that cannot be found in newspapers. I used many Attestation Papers of men who were in the Canadian Expeditionary Force, but I did not find them to be without error. Most contained only dry detail. The accompanying documents, if available, proved useful. War diaries can tell about action in the field. Because so many Canadians fought in the Royal Naval Air Service and/or the Royal Flying Corps (later RAF) and many were also in British and Imperial regiments whose documents I consulted in The National Archives, Kew. Because some of our students were Rhodes Scholars, I tracked their records to Oxford and their respective colleges. And because many of

the students went on to McGill University from Victoria College, the McGill Roll of Honour proved useful, as did those of Queen's University and the University of Toronto. To my surprise and delight, various citizens who heard about my topic contacted me and provided help. I exploited several older histories of Victoria, some British Columbia biographical dictionaries and collections, and some more recent histories of neighbourhoods of Victoria, notably Fairfield and Fernwood (where the school is situated). The City of Victoria Archives had some letters, and the BC Archives holds copies of some memoirs. But at the end of the day, my key sources were issues of *The Camosun*, local newspapers, census reports, and, not least, cemetery records.

In terms of technique, I would recommend anyone undertaking such a history to strike an advisory committee of persons with various talents in the following fields: local newspapers, Canadian military history especially regiments and battalions, cemetery records, a personal archives assistant and record keeper, an expert in website development and communications, and someone knowledgeable about school archives and school photos. In your book be sure to include a bibliography and also supply an index. Make sure teachers and librarians know about the project, and if they are interested they may be able to motivate students to take part in useful research and storytelling. Studying the lives of individuals going to war can be a most rewarding experience for history students.

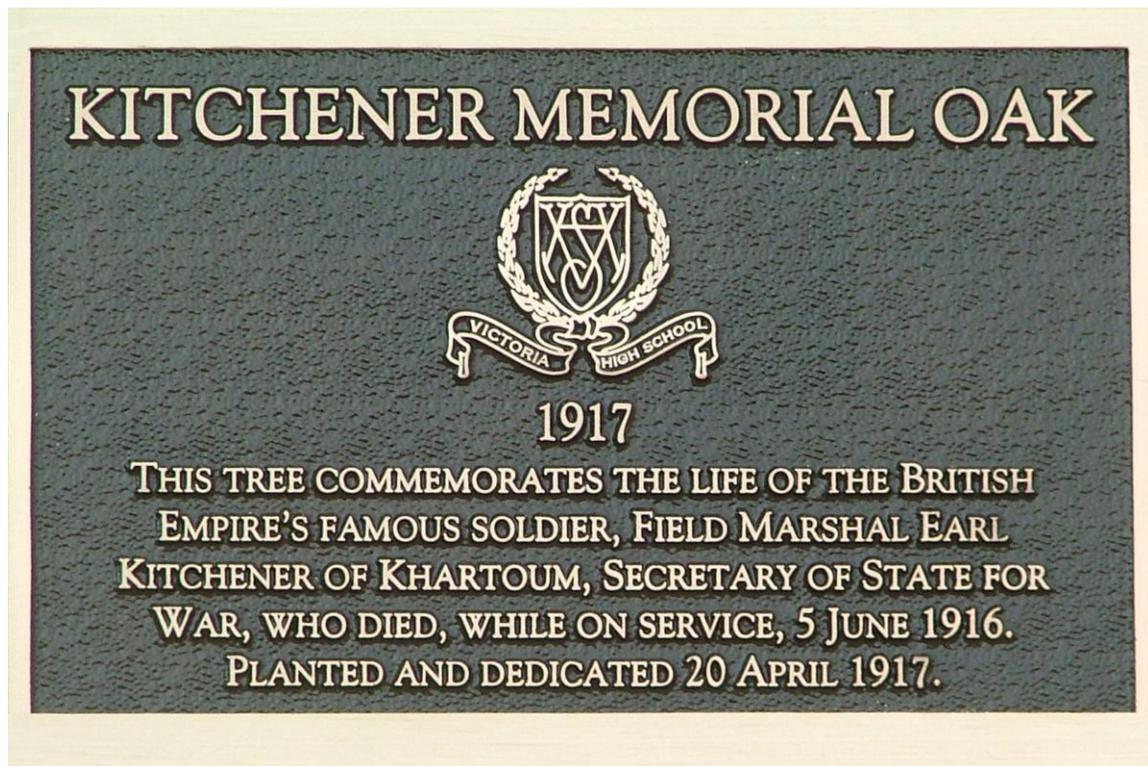
I recommend strongly that the historian tackling such a demanding subject as a Canadian high school in the Great War not try to write the history, even "mini-history," of every soldier, sailor and airman connected to the school (before or during the years of conflict). I selected some 22 persons around whom I could tell the essential story, seeking out a variety of "roles"—an ordinary seaman, a naval aviator, a general, leading officers and sergeants, and nurses. The other decision I made early on was to use a year-by-year structure. The result was that the years 1914, 1915, etc became the frame on which I could hang the various individual stories. I had to balance the length of the chapters, too. So 1914 featured the death

of an Able Seaman and the inception of the Canadian Expeditionary Force. 1915 had as its essential item the Second Battle of Ypres, and in this I could tell the story of the first Canadian officer to be killed in action – he too was from Vic High. By the time I got to 1918 I had been able to write all the essentials of the Somme, Vimy and Passchendaele. 1918 was the crisis of the War, and then the road to victory – Amiens to Mons. The story acquired a natural flow, and into it I wove the general Canadian story of how Vimy became the forging of the nation. In this regard, I paid little attention to Canadian national politics, and I concluded for a book of this length that there was no sense in going into details of Canada’s connection with the Imperial War Cabinet. What I sought to do – and I think this important as a contribution to “sharp end” history – is to tell the personal stories of my selected individuals. That, I think, is the means of humanizing the story. I have always been interested in “the faces in the crowd.” This book allowed me to discuss so many remarkable persons.



Vic High memorial banner with symbolic maple leaves

The present Vic High building contains some splendid memorials from the Great War: including the details of such memorials is central to any history such as this. I looked and found all that I had hoped for – photos of those killed in action, the Memorial Tablet (listing the names who paid the ultimate sacrifice), the Roll of Honour (which lists all those known to have enlisted or otherwise gone to war), the Banner of Sacrifice and Remembrance (a Canadian cultural icon which displays a maple leaf for all known to have gone to war and indicates by colour those who did not come home), the stained glass Laurels of Victory and Sacrifice (a laurel wreath embracing two poppies and surrounding VHS insignia), and memorial trees including the unique Kitchener Memorial Oak. I think it vital in a school's history to write and interpret such memorials. The preservation of these treasured artifacts is important for the future of Canadian civilization, for they tell how another age memorialized sacrifice and victory in the years immediately after the Armistice.



Plaque for Kitchener Memorial Oak on Vic High grounds

Such artifacts as these do not exist at the school for the Second World War, save for a tablet of names of those killed and a memorial stadium, track and playing field. I learned from reading in books about monuments of valour that how societies memorialized the Second World War was quite different from how they memorialized the Great War. Vic High provides a good example of this change of attitude and aesthetics, and it is likely that other schools will demonstrate similar patterns.

As to publishing, I fully recommend engaging a commercial publisher interested in local and Canadian history. Although some schools and alumni associations will want to self-publish, my view is that this is best left to the professionals and to those who know the craft – editors, proofreaders, layout specialists, indexers and more. The author has enough to do without trying to work with an in-house publishing team. There is, too, always the problem of selling and warehousing books. That, too, is best done by persons in the business. I recommend a crested edition that can be sold almost exclusively to Alumni, with a portion of revenue going to the Alumni Association or other worthy school cause. I also recommend a paperback edition that is more readily affordable. The book must be attractively priced, or it will lie unsold. I also recommend an e-edition. (In the case of *From Classroom to Battlefield* all three editions were issued almost simultaneously.) The fact that these were available just in time for Remembrance Day 2014 helped bring attention to the subject and to the school. Getting a committee of the school working on promoting the book in advance of publication will build interest long in advance of the delivery.

Some things to avoid: I would not trouble myself with the history of the various regiments, battalions and divisions as part of the general narrative, and for myself I found it best to put these into a comprehensive but short appendix. Also in the appendices, list the names of all those who joined up and also list those who paid the ultimate sacrifice. It is not possible to give all the ranks that a certain soldier, sailor or airman passed through: it will suffice to give the highest rank achieved. Be certain to include any medals of gallantry or bravery, and double check to make sure these

particulars are correct and verifiable. Watch for errors creeping in, particularly the misspelling of names of persons and places, especially in Belgium and France.

Taken all together, it is certain that every school's Great War history will be unique. I found this to be the case with mine. I did not know when I started the odyssey how I would deal with all the names or how I would deal not only with all the battles but also with all the aspects of remembrance. But I trusted to my instincts, and they did not fail me. I learned that historians of Canada and the First World War often write as if Canadians were fighting this war all alone. This was not so. The Canadian Army was one of several British Armies. In many instances, the Canadians were fighting under French general command (and the British were doing likewise!). But one thing is sure: from the sacrifice of war the strange alchemy that brought our nation into existence – not only for ourselves but also for how the world saw us – is the enduring result. And the roles of our teachers and students of yesterday, male and female, were all part of that process. Their stories deserve to be told.