



Library and Archives Canada PA-000648

“FIGHT OR FARM”: CANADIAN FARMERS AND THE DILEMMA OF THE WAR EFFORT IN WORLD WAR I (1914-1918)

by Mourad Djebabla

Introduction

When Britain declared war on Germany on 4 August 1914, patriotic feeling ran high in Canadian cities, but rural Canada was less demonstrative. In the summer of 1914, farmers were busy with their harvests. But they were no less concerned with the conflict: it was their fields that would supply the soldiers overseas with food.

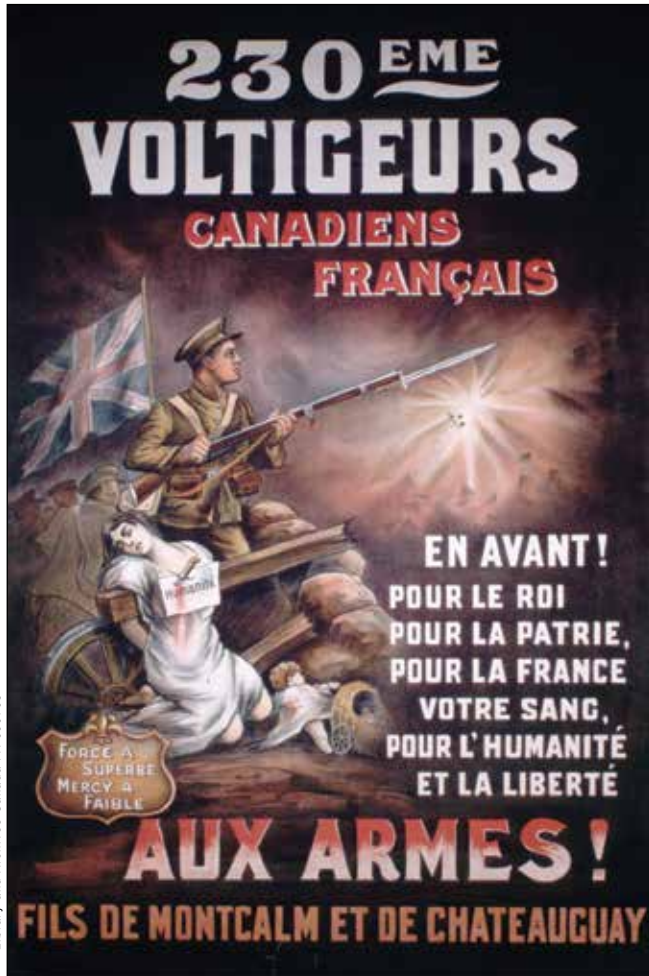
Canada was a dominion of the British Empire, and its colonial status meant that it was automatically involved in Britain's conflict. Canada became an active participant in the imperial war effort, working not only to meet Britain's military needs, but also to provide economic and food support. Before 1914, Canada was already an exporter of food to the British market.¹ Indeed, agriculture was the primary link between the Dominion and its mother country in peacetime.

The 'gifts' that Canada and each of its provinces made to Britain at the beginning of the war illustrate this: for example, one million sacks of flour were sent by the federal government, and another 500,000 sacks by Ontario, while Quebec contributed four million pounds of cheese.²

As the Allies' hopes for a short war faded after September 1914, the agricultural sector was mobilized, along with the rest of the economy.³ Britain had to exploit the resources of its

Mourad Djebabla, PhD, obtained his doctorate from the Université du Québec à Montréal in 2008. He specializes in Canadian military history of that period (1914–1918), with a particular interest in the situation in Canada and sociocultural perspectives on the conflict. In 2010, he completed a post-doctoral fellowship at McGill University, focusing his research on food production as part of the Canadian war effort during the First World War. Currently, he is an assistant professor in the Department of History at the Royal Military College of Canada.

colonies and dominions for its own benefit. Because of its geographical location, Canada, as well as the rest of North America, assumed a leading role in the effort to supply Britain, which was under pressure at the time from German submarine warfare. Given the situation, the Canadian government's policies of higher-than-usual food production from 1915 to 1918 encouraged farmers to continue to supply the domestic market, while also producing more goods to meet the demand from overseas.



Library and Archives Canada PA-000798

The British authorities wanted Canada to send both soldiers and food, and newspapers in rural Canada echoed the message that it was farmers' duty to produce bigger crops so that Canada would be able to meet Britain's needs. In October 1914, the newspaper *L'Éclaireur*, from the Beauce agricultural region south of Québec City, reprinted an excerpt from the Westminster Gazette in which the authorities in London made their expectations clear: "We are proud of the troops Canada is sending us, but we also expect wheat, which next year will be even more necessary for our national security [translation]."⁴ But from a rural point of view, the farmers' relationship to the war effort was not so simple. The problem was that it was difficult to know which duty was more pressing: stay in Canada and work the land to produce food, or, as recruiters were urging Canadian men to do, join the Canadian Expeditionary Force and fight in Europe?

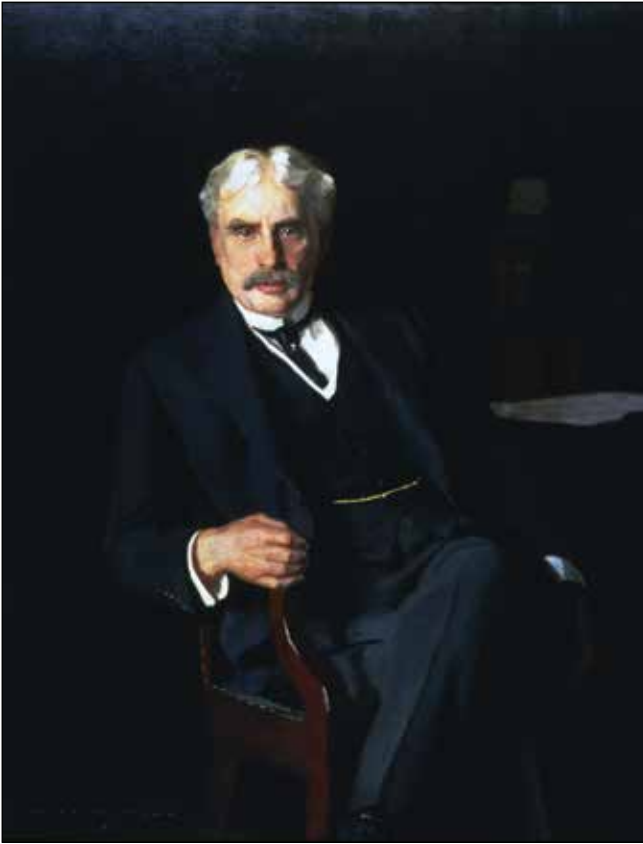
“Regional and cultural differences aside, Canadian farmers on the whole were not disposed to enlist...”



Library and Archives Canada PA-000782

Discussion

From the beginning of the war in August 1914, the rural newspapers had been saying that farmers had the specific duty to support and nourish the soldiers. This contrasted with the urban press, which called for everyone to mobilize to support the Empire at the front.⁵ But people in farming communities, which had been losing residents through migration to the cities since the late-19th Century, took a dim view of the idea of serving at the front. On 13 August 1914, in response to a rumour circulating in the Beauce region that all the men would be sent off to the war, *L'Éclaireur* reassured its readers, saying that recruitment in Canada would be on a voluntary basis, and that the farmers' duty was to work the land.⁶ The federal Minister of Agriculture reassured farmers with his first Canada-wide food production campaign, "Patriotism and Production," in 1915. The campaign urged farmers to increase wheat production in Canada at any price to feed Britain, making them indispensable in the fields. But not everyone accepted that definition of the role of Canada's farmers—especially the military authorities, who had to (also at any price) find men to fill their battalions. Throughout the war, despite the federal Minister of Agriculture's annual food production policies, military recruiters were covering the length and breadth of the Canadian countryside. That pressure intensified as the federal government kept increas-



CWM 19710261-0393

Sir Robert Borden, 1918. Painting by Harrington Mann.

ing the numbers of fighting men it sought to recruit for the Canadian Expeditionary Force. After the first 30,000 volunteers in the summer of 1914, Prime Minister Robert Borden set further objectives on 29 October 1915 (250,000 men), and in January 1916, 500,000 men.⁷ Given the difficulty officers were having in filling their ranks from urban centres alone, more pressure was exerted on rural communities from 1915 onward.

Regional and cultural differences aside, Canadian farmers on the whole were not disposed to enlist: In 1916, they made up only 8.5 percent of volunteers.⁸ In total, from 1914 to 1918, out of the 600,000 men that constituted the Canadian Expeditionary Force, only 100,000 were farmers.⁹ The Montreal newspaper *La Presse* published a brochure, “Nos volontaires sous les armes” [Our volunteers in arms], that responded to accusations made by the urban Ontario press that Quebec was not doing its duty. *La Presse* pointed out that, unlike the Ontario population, the French-Canadian population in Quebec was mostly made up of farmers. But, like the farmers in Ontario or Saskatchewan, those in Quebec preferred to continue working the land and profit from the war while doing their ‘duty.’¹⁰

If a farmer enlisted, there would be serious consequences with respect to the

operation of his farm. On the other hand, city dwellers could easily be replaced at the factory or the store, often by women. If a young farmer wanted to enlist, he had to rent out his farm or entrust it to the care of a neighbour. That could have repercussions, as was revealed in a letter written by a Saskatchewan soldier who returned home from the front in the summer of 1918:

This place has been uncultivated since 1914; on joining the Army, August 1914, I obtained a promise from a neighbour to rent it during my absence, on the usual terms. He, however, failed to do so, without notifying me, then overseas, of this failure on his part; and on my return I find the place very considerably grown up with weeds.¹¹

There were also expenses involved in running a farm, and the farmers had to produce crops in order to pay their bills. To do that, they needed to stay at home. In the first Contingent of the Canadian Expeditionary Force in 1914, those who enlisted in large numbers were unemployed men from the cities, for whom going to war was a way to escape their situation, and British immigrants, who still felt a close connection with their mother country.¹²

Even with the federal “Patriotism and Production” campaign in full swing, the harvests of 1915 did not stop recruiters from visiting the countryside, as described in an article in the *Saskatoon Phoenix* about the raising of the 65th Battalion. The officer acknowledged the difficulty of recruiting at that time of year when everyone was working in the fields—half his battalion was on leave for the harvest¹³—but recruiting had to continue.¹⁴ Even *The Globe*, writing about the 1915 harvest in Ontario, recognized the negative effect that recruitment could have, given the labour shortage it caused.¹⁵



Library and Archives Canada PA-202406

British Prime Minister David Lloyd George and Canada's Minister of Militia Sam Hughes addressing Canadian troops,

Recruiting officers, who were focused upon filling the battalions, complained that farmers were not interested in supporting Canada's army. An officer in Simcoe County, Ontario, reported that he "... was surprised when at home the other day to learn that recruiting had practically come to an end in Barrie, and that no young men were offering for active service. (...) Are the young men afraid of hardship or of being shot? (...) Wake up boys!"¹⁶ The situation was the same in rural Saskatchewan, where recruiters were trying to find men for the 53rd Battalion.¹⁷ In the autumn of 1915, the Minister of Militia announced that from then on recruitment in rural areas would be carried out locally, not by the units trying to fill positions. That decision gave rise to the "rural battalions."¹⁸ Recruiting officers travelled through the Quebec and Ontario countryside by train in order to reach even the most remote farms.¹⁹ Among the rural units raised were the 178th Battalion, recruited in Quebec's Eastern Townships, and the 153rd Battalion, most of whose members were recruited in Guelph, Ontario, in 1916.²⁰ However, local recruiting did not produce the desired results, so on 15 August 1916, the federal government appointed recruiting directors in each military district. The intent was to put a better structure in place for recruitment, given the steady decline in the number of volunteers,²¹ from 32,705 in March 1916, to just 8675 in July of that year.²² In addition, from 1916 onward, pressure from patriotic associations intensified. But as the government continued to

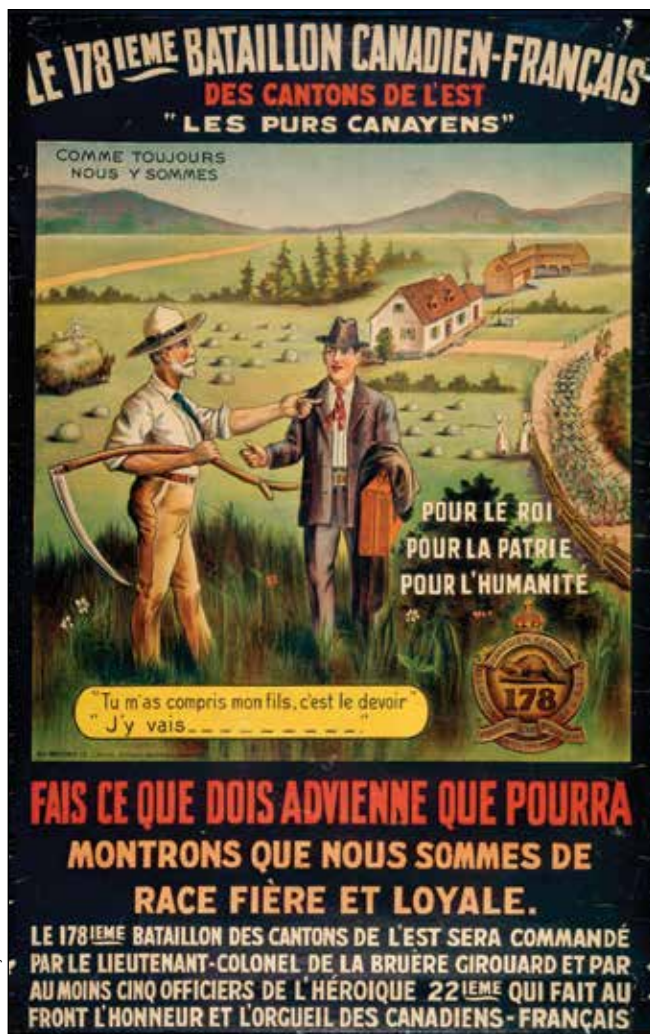
increase its recruiting targets for the Canadian Expeditionary Force, voices were raised in the financial sector, notably that of the president of Canadian Pacific, Lord Shaughnessy, who urged that the available agricultural workers be kept in Canada.²³ According to *The Globe*, the impact of recruitment upon the farm labour supply began to be felt in 1916. In rural areas, each new recruit meant one less person to help with the harvests, and that affected the quantity and quality of the crops produced.²⁴

The farmers' associations were pressuring the federal government to take that problem into consideration in its recruiting policy in order to ensure the success of the food production campaigns. For example, in February 1916, at the end of their second annual convention in Toronto, the United Farmers of Ontario passed a resolution, which they then published in rural Ontario newspapers. It emphasized the importance of farmers remaining in their fields to support the British war effort, and pointed out that recruitment was undermining that support.²⁵ In the West, at the annual convention of the Saskatchewan Grain Growers' Association in February 1916, association president J.H. Maharg gave a speech stating that the Empire needed food, and that it was the farmers' duty to produce it. Therefore, their place was in the fields. Maharg did not question the need for recruitment but, like the Ontario farmers,²⁶ he urged that sources of recruitment other than the rural population be found, in particular by mobilizing workers from industries that were deemed non-essential.²⁷

In July 1915, the Beauce newspaper *L'Éclairer* asserted that Canada had sent enough men to fight overseas, and that it was time to concentrate on supporting the war effort from Canada, with the same importance being placed upon agricultural production as upon munitions.²⁸ The paper's position was very similar to that of the English-Canadian farmers, and it echoed that of the French-Canadian nationalists, especially Henri Bourassa. Bourassa believed that, rather than draining itself of its life blood, Quebec could make an ample contribution to the war effort through its industries and agriculture. As early as September 1914, he warned the Canadian government of the dangers of sending farm labourers overseas.²⁹ In December 1914, Bourassa created controversy when he expressed that point of view in a speech in Toronto. At a time when that city's attention was focused upon recruitment, he argued that food production should take priority. His North American view of the contribution to the war in Europe was consistent with that of the farmers:

[O]n 17 December 1914, in the midst of an unrelenting uproar that lasted for an hour, Mr Bourassa read these words: "Just a few weeks ago, one of the most prominent newspapers in London, the Westminster Gazette, was obliged to remind us that we can better serve the mother country and the Empire by producing wheat than by raising soldiers," and a group of soldiers brandishing the Union Jack rushed the platform, forcibly interrupting the meeting.³⁰ [translation]

That approach was not well received in 1914, but it became unavoidable as the war continued. In Canada, as long as the agricultural war effort and efforts to recruit new units were car-



Library and Archives Canada PA-00779



Library and Archives Canada C-009092

Henri Bourassa in July 1917.

ried out simultaneously, there was an inconsistency. How could the federal government allow both campaigns to be pursued at the same time without establishing which should take priority? The problem would intensify and later culminate in the conscription crisis. Some farmers simply did not understand the positions taken by their federal and provincial governments, which were asking them to increase their production while simultaneously exhorting them to enlist.

The farmers justified their position with regard to recruiting by pointing to the federal government's policies, which instructed them to increase food production to support the Empire. They argued that those who stayed in Canada had a specific duty to fulfil in order to support the war effort. Indeed, the farmers could point to government publications from 1915–1916—especially the *Agricultural War Book* produced by the Ministry of Agriculture, which set objectives for them to reach—as support for their decision to stay in Canada. After all, the federal agricultural production campaigns depicted food as a weapon to be used in defeating the enemy. In Saskatchewan, during the 1916 federal food production campaign, “Production and Thrift,” the *Saskatoon Phoenix* related an incident in which farmers flatly refused to enlist, citing the Minister of Agriculture’s expectations of them.³¹

In the cities, that attitude was interpreted as proof that farmers were putting their own personal interests first while others were making sacrifices.³² R. Matthew Bray notes that in Ontario, the urban centres, which were the primary source of recruits, expected rural areas to do their fair share.³³ *The Globe* was a very early critic of the farmers’ reluctance to join the army.³⁴ In an article that appeared on 22 January 1915, the paper even called upon rural men to show more patriotism toward the Empire by donning a uniform: “Is rural Ontario losing its Imperial spirit? (...) Will the rural regiments allow the city regiments to put them to shame?”³⁵ Viewed from the cities, the apparent quiet of the countryside made it seem a world apart, disconnected from the fighting overseas. City dwellers may have resented what appeared to be farmers’ lesser involvement with the Canadian Expeditionary Force. The two perspectives were very different because people in the cities, who were being subjected to pressure from recruiters every day,³⁶ did not (or did not want to) understand the importance of food production, which was constantly being hammered home in the rural newspapers.

Rural people did not appreciate such accusations. On 22 August 1916, the *Canadian Military Gazette* published a letter from a farmer’s wife. She took issue with an article which had created the impression that farmers were disinclined to enlist because they preferred to profit from the war. In her opinion, accusing farmers of being profiteers belittled the genuine patriotism shown by farmers in the war effort, women’s work in the fields to compensate for the labour shortage, and the ‘vital’ needs of Great Britain, for which it was the farmers’ duty to meet.³⁷ Rural Ontarians may have been less demonstrative in their patriotism, but they were no less loyal to the Empire. From the rural point of view, the duty of farmers was to produce food, and that of the cities was to provide men to send to the front.³⁸ The mutual incomprehension between the farmers and the military authorities became even more pronounced when conscription became an issue.



Sir Sam Hughes, Minister of Militia in the Borden government, 1911-1916.

Library and Archives Canada C-002468

The history of conscription in Canada has been depicted largely in terms of ethnic conflict, with an emphasis upon the opposition to the measure by French Canadians in Quebec. But it has also been characterized in terms of the position taken by rural Canada.³⁹ The Canadian government imposed conscription in response to international political events and the military situation on the Western Front. In 1917, the Allies were hard pressed, what with intense submarine warfare, the fall of the Eastern Front with Russia's surrender, the bloody defeat of the French-British offensive in the spring of 1917, heavy Canadian losses suffered during the taking of Vimy Ridge, and the Germans' determination to push through the Western Front before the massive arrival of American soldiers, which was expected after the United States entered the war in April.



French Canadian officers of the first French Canadian battalion to be formed under conscription, nearly all of whom went to the 22nd Battalion, the 'Vandoos.'

Meanwhile, the number of new Canadian recruits had been declining since as far back as 1915, and it was no longer sufficient to replace the soldiers being lost at the front. For example, in April 1917, after the Battle of Vimy Ridge, in spite of the loss of an estimated 13,477 men [fatal and non-fatal casualties ~ Ed.], there were only 5530 new volunteers.⁴⁰ In 1917, the Canadian Expeditionary Force suffered the loss of an estimated 129,890 men, but only 64,139 new soldiers were recruited.⁴¹

and English Canadians, made the debates on the issue more complex than Borden could have imagined.⁴³ The farmers believed that conscription would aggravate the problem caused by the pressure recruiting officers were putting on rural areas by depriving the countryside of the strong men needed for farm labour. Those concerns were expressed in the House of Commons by the farmers' representatives during the period of debates on the bill. On the second reading, Liberal Opposition Leader Wilfrid Laurier, who had strong support in the Prairies at the time, moved that a referendum be held, as had been done in Australia, but his motion was defeated. The Act was passed on third reading on 24 July 1917, and it came into effect on 29 August 1917.⁴⁴



Soldiers advancing across No-Man's-Land.

On 18 May 1917, four days after his return from the Imperial War Conference" in London, Robert Borden announced to Parliament that he intended to impose conscription to support the Canadian troops.⁴² The conscription bill was introduced on 11 June, and it gave rise to a long period of debate. Rural Canada's opposition to conscription, which went beyond a mere cultural opposition between French Canadians

The *Ottawa Citizen* accused the federal government of ignoring the need to conserve strength in Canada, if it was useful for industry or agriculture.⁴⁵ On the other hand, the urban press, which was close to the government, recognized the importance of conscription in view of the military situation, and it expressed confidence in the government's ability to distinguish between people who would be useful at home, and those who would be useful at the front.⁴⁶ The fiercest opponents of conscription were farmers and industrial workers, the groups that were reluctant to enlist. The issue had provoked demonstrations, often violent ones, by industrial labourers in urban and industrial centres, especially in Quebec and Ontario.⁴⁷ Farmers' resistance was generally less visible and less spectacular, but the rural newspapers expressed the same concerns. In farming communities, the main argument put forward against conscription was that it would interfere with farmers' ability to plant, cultivate and harvest their crops. To justify their opposition to conscription, the farmers maintained that it was not only in their own interest, but also consistent with the national and

supranational interest, for them to stay home and feed the troops of Great Britain and its allies. In response to those concerns, it was decided that the law would not go into effect in farming communities until mid-October, so that the farmers could finish harvesting their crops from the summer of 1917. Thus, the major impact of the legislation would be on the planting and harvests of 1918.

In order to show that it was not disregarding the importance of food production, the Canadian government, rather than exempt all farmers from conscription, decided that individual cases would be reviewed by exemption tribunals. Only the tribunals would decide on an exemption, based upon whether or not the farmer in question was recognized as being essential for carrying out the work on his land.⁴⁸ In 1917, 1387 local exemption tribunals were established. Each had two members: one designated by a Parliamentary selection committee, and the other by a judge from the county or district. Their decisions could be appealed to one of 195 appellate tribunals, which consisted of a judge appointed by the province's Chief Justice. Appellate tribunal decisions could be appealed one last time to the Central Appeal Tribunal, whose decision was final.⁴⁹

“The local exemption tribunals had to make their decisions based upon the conditions in their jurisdiction.”

indispensable to the local economy, and, by extension, the national economy.⁵⁰ Not only farmers, but also industrial and commercial workers could apply for exemptions.⁵¹ According to the federal authorities, in February 1918, the majority of exemptions were granted to farmers, while the majority of the appeals were from individuals who claimed that they could help with food production.⁵² According to the official figures, in 1918, out of the total of 161,981 farmers who applied for exemptions, only 20,449 were refused.⁵³ In 1917, out of a total of 404,395 men eligible for conscription under the Military Service Act, 380,510 requested exemptions, leaving only 24,000 conscripts available.⁵⁴ In all, by the end of 1917, 380,510 requests for exemptions had been made and 278,779 had been granted by the tribunals.⁵⁵

However, some of the tribunals' decisions were called into question. On the Prairies, farmers complained that some tribunals were refusing exemptions, even though the conscripts could not be spared from their farms.⁵⁶ Moreover, John Herd Thompson noted that English Canadians on the Prairies were irritated by the inflexibility of the tribunals' process for granting or refusing exemptions. It seemed to Westerners that the tribunals were not as harsh in French-Canadian districts, or in Quebec.⁵⁷

Farmers who did not obtain an exemption had to leave everything behind. On 6 January 1918, Saskatchewan's Minister of Agriculture wrote to the Minister of Militia to tell him that in his province, enforcement of the Military Service Act meant that many young farmers who were conscripted had to auction off their equipment and livestock. Taking an alarmist tone in order to emphasize the harmful effects of conscription on food production, the Minister of Agriculture warned that many fields would not be cultivated. However, the Minister of Militia merely replied that it was up to the exemption tribunals to judge each case.⁵⁸

On 13 October 1917, once the harvest was in, despite the disruption caused by the process of submitting applications to the exemption tribunals, the Class 1 conscripts (childless single men and widowers aged 20 to 34) were ordered to report to the military authorities no later than 10 November. The Minister of Militia asked for 25,000 conscripts initially, then another 10,000 per month.⁵⁹ It was not until 3 January 1918, after the federal election of 17 December 1917, that the first 20,000 conscripts were ordered to report to the armouries. Some refused to report, forcing the federal government to track them down.

The farmers were becoming more and more discontented about not receiving a mass exemption. They had had great expectations of the tribunals, believing that they would recognize the role played by farmers in the war effort. Faced with these growing recriminations and the threat of lower production in 1918, as well as the federal election of December 1917, and the Allies' increasing difficulty in ensuring their food supply, the Canadian government had to take a position. On 12 October 1917, Robert Borden formed a Union govern-



Monseigneur Paul Bruchési, Archbishop of Montréal.

The local exemption tribunals had to make their decisions based upon the conditions in their jurisdiction. They could decide to keep an individual in Canada if he was deemed



Two Vandoos in the trenches, July 1916.

ment to emphasize the unity of the parties and the country in the pursuit of the war, particularly with respect to conscription. During the federal election campaign of November–December 1917, the federal government softened its position with regard to farmers. The federal Minister of Agriculture assured them that the government had no intention of taking men who had skills required for agricultural work out of the fields,⁶⁰ and on 24 November, General Mewburn, Minister of Militia, made a promise that calmed farmers. In a speech to rural voters in Dundas, Ontario, he announced that an exemption would be granted to all farmers' sons and experienced farm labourers so that they would be available for planting and harvest in 1918. He also promised to review any judgements refusing these people exemptions.⁶¹

In rural areas, his announcement was dubbed “the Mewburn promise.” From that moment on, the chairman of the Military Service Council instructed the exemption tribunals to take agricultural workers' situation into consideration.⁶² On 2 December 1917, the promise became law in the form of a decree that granted exemptions to young farmers and agricultural labourers.⁶³ The federal Minister of Agriculture dispatched representatives from his ministry into rural ridings to help agricultural workers file appeals and obtain exemptions.⁶⁴ For example, a young Ontario farmer, W.H. Rowntree, obtained his exemption from the appellate tribunal on 8 December 1917. That judgement became a precedent: it recognized that Rowntree had to stay on the farm

because he was the only person available to help his elderly father and younger brother cultivate 150 acres near Weston.⁶⁵ The judgment, delivered by Lyman P. Duff, a justice of the Supreme Court, was published in newspapers across Canada⁶⁶ under the authority of the Office of the Director of Public Information, the official Canadian propaganda organization set up in 1917. The publication of that judgment during the federal election was a communication strategy designed to show the Union government's concern for the farmers. It was a way of calming their discontent so that the rural vote would not go to Wilfrid Laurier's Liberals, who were campaigning against conscription. The Quebec vote may have been a lost cause for the Union government, but it had to make sure it won the rural English-Canadian vote, especially in Ontario and the Prairies, which generally supported the Liberals.

Exemptions enabled farmers to plan more calmly for the planting and harvest of 1918, knowing that their sons and hired men would be there to work side-by-side with them. In Ontario, the exemptions granted encouraged the farmers to increase their seeded acreage in the spring of 1918 to meet Britain's needs.⁶⁷ And in Quebec in February 1918, Le Saint-Laurent referred to the exemptions when urging farmers to produce more.⁶⁸ Unfortunately, military developments in 1918 that were unfavourable for the Allies, beginning with the Germans' Spring Offensive, changed the situation drastically.

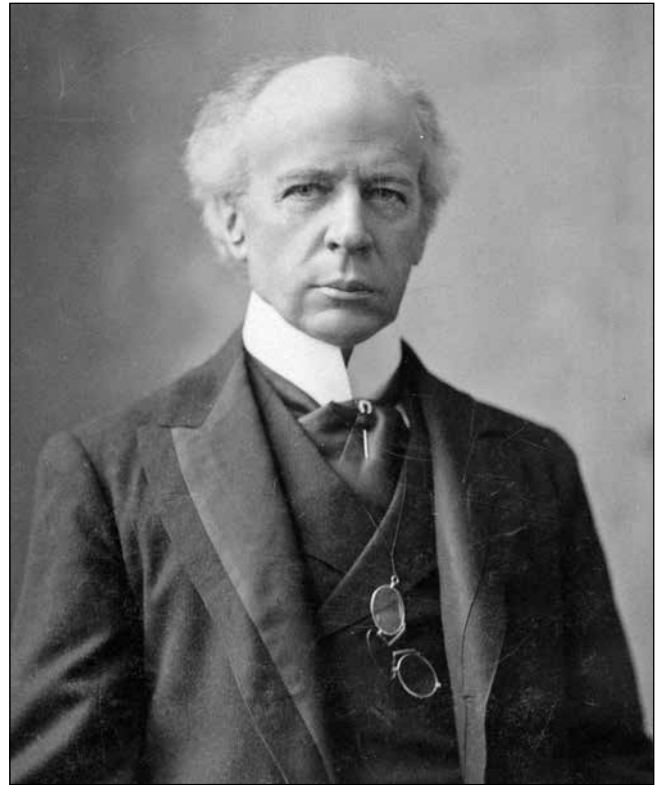


Anti-conscription parade in Victoria Square, Montréal, Quebec.

On 21 March 1918, the Germans broke through the French–British lines. In Europe, Canada’s Minister of Overseas Military Forces, A.E. Kemp, was worried about the dwindling numbers of reinforcements coming from Canada. On 27 March 1918, he sent the Minister of Militia a dispatch stating that he needed 15,000 reinforcements for the infantry and 200 for the cavalry, and that the men must leave England for the front by the end of April. But as the Military Service Act had not produced the required numbers of recruits, the Minister of Militia replied on 8 April, after the bloody riots in Quebec City, that the best he could do was to send 4900 conscripts overseas in April or early-May.⁶⁹

In response, Robert Borden decided to act. On 19 April 1918, he raised the issue in the House of Commons by presenting a ‘draft’ decree that highlighted the urgency of the situation on the Western Front, and provided for the lifting of the exemptions. The Prime Minister felt that he was justified in modifying the Military Service Act by decree before even discussing it in the House, because the normal legislative process would cause delays that would be unacceptable, given the military situation. He simply asked the members of Parliament to pass a motion recognizing the decree. Wilfrid Laurier rose to declare that the manœuvre was undemocratic and violated the rules of Parliamentary procedure.⁷⁰

The government was pursuing two contradictory goals, to recruit more men and to increase food production, and it was becoming more and more difficult for Canada to persevere with its war effort on two fronts at once. Manpower was stretched to the limit, and the farmers did not understand the government’s priorities. As he had in 1917, Wilfrid Laurier pointed out the government’s apparent inconsistency.⁷¹ Throughout the war, the Canadian government was never truly able to manage the issue of farm labour in light of its objective of providing men for the Canadian Expeditionary Force.⁷² The lack of conscription for active Canadian labourers had its effect for the entire duration of the First World War, unlike the Second World War, where the lessons learned were incorporated into the National Resources Mobilization Act of 1940. Liberals representing farming provinces introduced two proposed amendments that would have preserved the exemptions, but they were defeated in the House.⁷³ On 20 April 1918, the exemptions granted in 1917 were lifted. Young farmers (ages 20 to 22) had been granted 72,825 exemptions; now 41,852 of them were lifted.⁷⁴ The impact was soon felt: in June 1918, 10,290 conscripts shipped out to Britain, then another 11,158 in July, and 13,977 in August. But the price was high.⁷⁵ The farmers regarded the lifting of the exemptions as a breach of the Union government’s election promise.⁷⁶



Sir Wilfrid Laurier, Prime Minister of Canada, 1896-1911.

In the East, the United Farmers of Ontario organized a march on Ottawa in May 1918. Quebec’s Minister of Agriculture, J.-E. Caron, asked to be part of the delegation.⁷⁷ On 14 May, members of the United Farmers of Ontario, representing Ontario, and the Comptoir coopératif de Montréal, representing Quebec,⁷⁸ assembled to meet with Robert Borden in Ottawa. The delegation was made up of 5000 farmers (3000 from Ontario and 2000 from Quebec). Despite the cultural ten-



Voting ‘up the line’ during the 1917 federal election. All Canadians engaged in military service were eligible to vote, and ninety percent of them did so for Sir Robert Borden’s Union government that ran a campaign based upon invoking conscription.

Library and Archives Canada C-001971

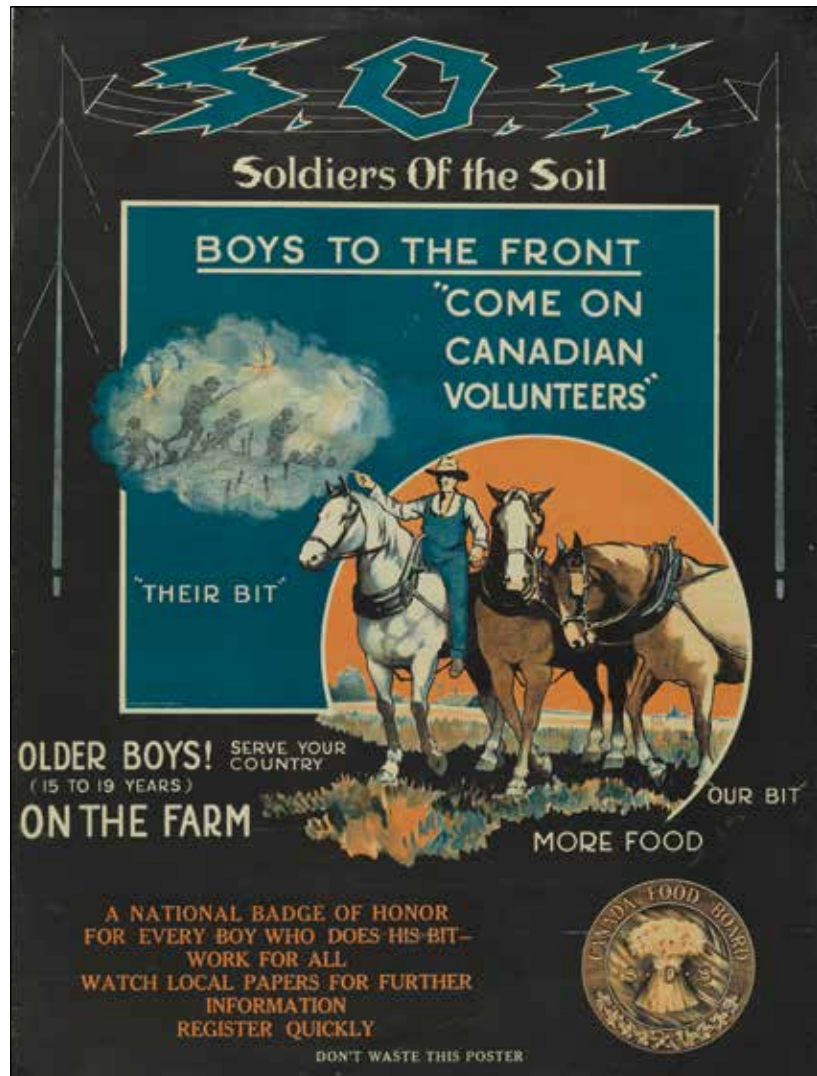
George Metcalf Archival Collection. CWM 19930013-610

sions of previous years over French schools in Ontario and over enlistment, the farmers from both provinces spoke with a single voice, warning the government about the effect the lifting of the exemptions would have on the 1918 harvests. For most of the farmers who participated, it was the first time they had openly questioned a federal government policy that they considered contrary to their interests.⁷⁹

The farmers met with Prime Minister Robert Borden, the federal Minister of Agriculture, the Minister of Militia, and the President of the Privy Council and the Vice-Chairman of the War Committee. In his memoirs, Robert Borden noted that the atmosphere of the meeting was extremely aggressive.⁸⁰ Four people, including J.-E. Caron, spoke on behalf of the farmers. The first was Manning Doherty from Malton, Ontario, who read the petition on which the farmers had gathered signatures at the Russell Theatre. He emphasized that the farmers were not in any way rebelling, but that they wanted to inform the government of the consequences of lifting the exemptions for food production and to make it known that they were disappointed that the promise to exempt them had been broken; they had lost confidence in the government. They had been able to increase their seeded acreage before the exemptions were lifted, but now they were facing a labour shortage that would cause Canadian food production to drop by at least 25 percent.⁸¹ To demonstrate their contribution to the war effort, the petition highlighted the paradox that the farmers had been encouraged to produce as much as possible from 1915 to 1917, but because of conscription, they were being prevented from doing so in 1918.⁸²

After the farmers aired their grievances, Robert Borden told them that the lifting of the exemptions had already been voted on, and that they would have to obey the law.⁸³ He reminded them that, for the time being, Canada's first duty was to send reinforcements to support the men at the front.⁸⁴ The farmers saw his position as disrespectful to them, in that Borden did not acknowledge the efforts they had made in previous years.⁸⁵ *Le Soleil* reported that, after their meeting with the Prime Minister, the farmers left angry and dissatisfied.⁸⁶

Even though the government was not swayed, the march on Ottawa had some effect. On 25 May 1918, exemptions were granted to enable rural conscripts still stationed in Canada to help with the planting and harvests of 1918.⁸⁷ At harvest time, the Minister of Militia published an insert in rural newspapers to inform farmers that they could obtain leave for the 1918 harvest. He emphasized, however, that sending conscripts overseas was the higher priority.⁸⁸ Thus, it can be seen that the military authorities were not completely indifferent to the issue of food, and that Canadian politicians were well aware of the impact of conscription upon the harvests.⁸⁹



Soldiers of the Soil. The Canada Food Board issued this poster in a national appeal for farm labour. It asked boys aged 15 to 19 to volunteer their summers as "Soldiers of the Soil" on farms desperately short of labour. 22,385 'soldiers' would serve, replacing farm hands who had enlisted for military service.

Conclusion

The farmers did not carry out their threat to reduce the acreage cultivated in 1918. In fact, 42 million acres of Canadian land were cultivated in 1917, and that rose to 51 million acres in 1918. Despite their criticisms, Quebec and Ontario farmers met the objectives that had been set by the federal and provincial authorities: to increase the amount of cultivated land in Quebec by 600,000 acres, and in Ontario, by 1,000,000 acres. But despite the increase in cultivated land that had been achieved before the exemptions were lifted, the main consequence of conscription was that the harvests of 1918 were disastrous. Canada's production of wheat, which at the time was defined as a 'munition' to support the Allies, dropped from 233,742,850 bushels in 1917, to only 189,075,350 bushels in 1918.⁹⁰ Moreover, the loss of trust in the relationship between the government and the farmers of Canada would have an impact during the post-war period.

CMJ

CWM Artefact Number 19890086-885

NOTES

1. David Dupont, *Une brève histoire de l'agriculture au Québec: De la conquête du sol à la mondialisation* (Québec City: Fides, 2009), p. 39.
2. Henry Borden, (ed.), Robert Laird Borden: His Memoirs, Vol. I (Toronto: MacMillan, 1938), p. 457; "Les cadeaux des provinces," in *Le Peuple*, 18 September 1914.
3. Eric Kocher-Marboeuf, "Campagnes," in *Inventaire de la Grande Guerre*, François Lagrange (ed.) (Paris: Universalis, 2005), p. 341.
4. "Le prochain devoir du Canada," in *L'Éclairer*, 23 October 1914.
5. Robert W. Trowbridge, "War Time Rural Discontent and the Rise of the United Farmers of Ontario, 1914-1919," M.A. dissertation, University of Waterloo, 1966, pp. 42-44.
6. "Aux cultivateurs," in *L'Éclairer*, 13 August 1914.
7. Borden, Robert Laird Borden: His Memoirs, pp. 513 and 528.
8. W.R. Young, "Conscription, Rural Depopulation, and the Farmers of Ontario, 1917-19," in *Canadian Historical Review*, Vol. 53, No. 3, 1972, p. 299.
9. J. Castell Hopkins, (ed.), *Canadian Annual Review*, 1918 (Toronto: CAR Limited, 1919), p. 509.
10. *Nos volontaires sous les armes* (Montreal: n.p., 1916[?]), pp. 32-35.
11. Letter from F.S. Murphy of North Battleford to the Minister of Agriculture, 10 August 1918, Fonds R-266, Saskatchewan Archives (Regina) (SAB-R).
12. Desmond Morton, *When Your Number's Up: The Canadian Soldier in the First World War* (Toronto: Random House of Canada, 1993), p. 278.
13. "Majority of the 65th Will Work in the Harvest," in *The Saskatoon Phoenix*, 14 August 1915.
14. "Recruiting is Still Active at Country Points," in *The Saskatoon Phoenix*, 14 August 1915.
15. "Will Not Take Over Canadian Wheat Crop," in *The Globe*, 12 July 1915.
16. "Are Barrie Young Men Unpatriotic?" in *Northern Advance*, 15 October 1914.
17. "Start Active Campaign to Get More Recruits," in *The Saskatoon Phoenix*, 12 May 1915.
18. "Rural System of Recruiting," in *The Ottawa Citizen*, 22 October 1915.
19. "Recruiting by Train for Grey Battalion," in *The Globe*, 6 January 1916; "First Recruiting Train to Run in Grey County," in *The Globe*, 3 January 1916.
20. Robert Rutherford (ed.), *Hometown Horizons: Local Responses to Canada's Great War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2004), pp. 84-85; Barbara M. Wilson, (ed.), *Ontario and the First World War, 1914-1918: A Collection of Documents* (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1977), p. xxxv.
21. Robert Craig Brown, (ed.), Robert Laird Borden: A Biography. Volume II: 1914-1937 (Toronto: MacMillan of Canada, 1980), p. 63.
22. Paul Maroney, "Recruiting the Canadian Expeditionary Force in Ontario, 1914-1918," Ph.D. dissertation, McGill University, 1991, p. 21.
23. "'We Must Go Slowly About Recruiting,' dit Lord Shaughnessy," in *Le Devoir*, 10 March 1916.
24. "The Farm Labor Problem and the Way Out," in *The Globe*, 9 February 1916.
25. "Rural Recruiting," in *The Farmer's Sun*, 9 February 1916; J. Castell Hopkins, (ed.), *Canadian Annual Review*, 1916 (Toronto: CAR Ltd, 1917), pp. 309-310.
26. Wilson, Ontario and the First World War, p. xxxvii.
27. "The Annual Address of the President of Saskatchewan Grain Growers' Association," in *The Prairie Farm and Home*, 23 February 1916.
28. "L'horizon est chargé," in *L'Éclairer*, 1 July 1915.
29. "Après la guerre, la famine," in *Le Devoir*, 2 September 1914.
30. "Les cultivateurs à Ottawa," 13 May 1918, in Joseph Édouard Caron, *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* (on-line).
31. "Production Campaign is Deterring Men," in *The Saskatoon Phoenix*, 29 May 1916.
32. J. Castell Hopkins, (ed.), *Canadian Annual Review*, 1915 (Toronto: CAR Ltd, 1916), pp. 216-217.
33. R. Matthew Bray, "'Fighting as an Ally': The English-Canadian Patriotic Response to the Great War," in *Canadian Historical Review*, Vol. 61, No. 2, 1980, p. 147.
34. "Rural Recruiting is Still Behind," in *The Globe*, 27 January 1915.
35. "Is Rural Ontario Lagging Behind?" in *The Globe*, 22 January 1915.
36. Mourad Djebabla, "La confrontation des civils québécois et ontariens à la Première Guerre mondiale, 1914-1918: les représentations de la guerre au Québec et en Ontario," PhD dissertation, Université du Québec à Montréal, 2008.
37. "The Other Side of the Case," in *The Canadian Military Gazette*, 22 August 1916.
38. David William Paterson, "Loyalty, Ontario and the First World War," MA dissertation, McGill University, 1986, p. 49.
39. Roger Graham, (ed.), *Arthur Meighen: A Biography*, Vol. I (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin and Company Limited, 1968), p. 193.
40. Mason Wade, (ed.), *The French Canadians, 1760-1945* (Toronto: MacMillan Company, 1956), p. 733.
41. Total Casualties during 1917, 19 April 1918, Fonds MG26, Borden Papers, Library and Archives Canada (LAC).
42. Borden, Robert Laird Borden: His Memoirs, pp. 698-769.
43. John English, (ed.), *Borden: His Life and World* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Limited, 1977), p. 141.
44. G.W.L. Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1919* (Ottawa: Roger Duhamel - Queen's Printer, 1962), p. 345.
45. "Food and Fighting," in *The Ottawa Citizen*, 22 May 1917.
46. See, for example, "Conscription at Last," in *The Morning Leader*, 19 May 1917; "Des hommes! ..." in *L'Événement*, 29 May 1917; "La conscription," in *L'Événement*, 4 June 1917; and "La conscription," in *L'Événement*, 12 June 1917.
47. Bernard Dansereau, "Le mouvement ouvrier montréalais et la crise de la conscription 1916-1918," M.A. diss., Université du Québec à Montréal, 1994; Wilson, ed., *Ontario and the First World War*, p. lv.
48. "Les agriculteurs ne sont pas exemptés," in *Le Devoir*, 11 July 1917.
49. Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force*, p. 347.
50. Trowbridge, p. 88.
51. Nicholson, p. 344.
52. J. Castell Hopkins, (ed.), *Canadian Annual Review*, 1918 (Toronto: CAR Ltd, 1919), p. 465.
53. *Ibid.*, p. 467.
54. J.L. Granatstein and J.M. Hitsman, (eds.), *Broken Promises. A History of Conscription in Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 85.
55. *Ibid.*
56. "Complaint That Bona Fide Farmers Have Been Refused Exemption Answered by Referring Stated Cases to T.M. Molloy," in *The Morning Leader*, 14 February 1918.
57. John Herd Thompson, (ed.), *The Harvests of War: The Prairie West, 1914-1918* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1978), p. 133.
58. *Ibid.*, p. 464.
59. Nicholson, p. 347.
- At the end of the war, on 11 November 1918, of the 100,000 conscripts that Borden had wanted to obtain through the Act, 99,951 had been provided to the Canadian Expeditionary Force. Of that number, only 24,132 served at the front in France.
60. Trowbridge, p. 100.
61. Notes for Addresses, Federal Elections, 1917, Fonds 6, William Hearst, Archives of Ontario; J. Castell Hopkins, in *Canadian Annual Review*, 1918 (Toronto: CAR Ltd, 1919), p. 464.
62. Trowbridge, p. 100.
63. J.L. Granatstein and J.M. Hitsman, p. 75.
64. "Agriculturists on Tribunals to Protect Farmers," in *The Montreal Daily Star*, 4 December 1917.
65. Trowbridge, p. 101.
66. "Final Appeal Judge Given Ruling on Exemption of Farmers," in *Farmer's Sun*, 12 December 1917; "Exemption is Granted Farmer by Judge Duff," in *The Morning Leader*, 7 December 1917; "La terre," in *L'Action catholique*, 8 January 1918.
67. Trowbridge, pp. 111, 114, and 117.
68. "Production! Production! Production!" in *Le Saint-Laurent*, 28 February 1918.
69. Nicholson, p. 348.
70. *Ibid.*, p. 350.
71. Canada, Official Report of the Debates of the House of Commons of the Dominion of Canada. First Session—Thirteenth Parliament. 8-9 George V, 1918, Vol. CXXXIII (Ottawa: J. de Labroquerie Taché, 1918), p. 943.
72. J.L. Granatstein, "Conscription in the Great War," in *Canada and the First World War*, David Mackenzie (ed.), (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), p. 65.
73. Canada, Official Report of the Debates of the House of Commons of the Dominion of Canada, Vol. CXXXII, pp. 963-964.
74. J. Castell Hopkins, (ed.), *Canadian Annual Review*, 1918 (Toronto: CAR Ltd, 1919), p. 467.
75. Nicholson, p. 350.
76. Robert Craig Brown, (ed.), *Robert Laird Borden*, p. 133.
77. Trowbridge, pp. 124-126.
78. "Les fermiers québécois se joignent aux Ontariens," in *Le Devoir*, 7 May 1918; "Appel à tous les cultivateurs," in *L'Événement*, 7 May 1918; "Appel à tous les cultivateurs," in *Le Peuple*, 10 May 1918.
79. Kerry A. Badgley, *Ringling in the Common Love of Good: The United Farmers of Ontario, 1914-1926* (Montreal: McGill University-Queen's University Press, 2000), p. 57.
80. Borden, Robert Laird Borden: His Memoirs, p. 802.
81. Trowbridge, pp. 126-138.
82. "La requête des fermiers du pays," in *Le Soleil*, 15 May 1918.
83. "Farmers Told No Relaxation of Military Service Possible," in *The Globe*, 15 May 1918.
84. "Protestation des fermiers," in *Le Patriote de l'Ouest*, 15 May 1918; "M. Borden désappointe les fermiers," in *Le Devoir*, 15 May 1918.
85. "La production supplantée par le soldat," in *Le Colon*, 16 May 1918.
86. "Les fermiers n'ont pas de succès à Ottawa," in *Le Soleil*, 15 May 1918.
87. *Des conscrits libérés pour l'agriculture*, in *Le Soleil*, 25 April 1918.
88. "Public Notice," in *The Wilkie Press*, 27 June 1918.
89. J. Castell Hopkins, (ed.), *Canadian Annual Review*, 1918 (Toronto: CAR Ltd, 1919), p. 465.
90. Canada, Minister of Trade and Commerce, *The Canada Year Book, 1918* (Ottawa: J. de Labroquerie Taché, 1919), p. xiii.