

Notes for presentation to RHOMA, January 21, 2015

Alan Bowker: *A Time Such As There Never Was Before: Canada After the Great War*

What inspired you to write this book?

- During my PhD studies at Toronto in 60s and 70s I became fascinated with what Stephen Leacock called “a time such as there never was before”, the three years after the Great War.
- The war had been presented as a battle for civilization. Every sinew of society had been strained and the fault lines in a young country had been opened by the war. Victory would, of itself, bring about a brave new world. But different people had different visions and not all expectations could be met. Then in November 1918 the war which everyone expected to go on for years was suddenly over. There was bound to be drama and conflict as the country suddenly adjusted to peace, to conflicting expectations, and to the new world the war had created.
- Canada came of age as a nation on the world stage; 300,000 soldiers came home (60,000 never would); the Spanish flu killed as many people as the war; religious and moral beliefs were challenged; women became

citizens; labour and farmers revolted against the domination of eastern capitalism and Winnipeg endured a six-week General Strike; railways were nationalized and the country underwent economic transition and technological change; the new country sought, not entirely successfully, to define a more inclusive national identity.

- I left academe behind when I joined the foreign service in 1973. But this career, including six years in International Academic Relations, reinforced my conviction that Canadians need to know our history if we are to understand who we are and why our experience matters in the world.
- In 2005 I was lucky enough to be seconded to RMC to teach Canadian history, which is a compulsory course there, to young cadets who will, in their own way, be the face of Canada abroad.
- After re-immersing myself in the field, catching up on 30 years of research and new interpretations, I began serious work on this book in 2007, and carried on after retirement in 2008.

What were the challenges in writing?

1. Developing the architecture of the book. This is crucial – what story do you want to tell and how do the parts fit together? This book covers a very wide swath of territory, tells a complex story with sweeping social

movements and big ideas that all interrelate, and narrates a lot of dramatic events. I knew I needed to organize the book by themes but I also wanted to balance grand forces with the individual voices of a remarkable cast of Canadians, while at the same time conveying the reality that for the people of the time, struggling to cope with a world turned upside down, seeing things through the prism of their own class, region, ethnicity, and, gender, everything was happening at once and nothing was certain.

2. Finding a writing style that suits the audience and material. Like all of you I had done a lot of writing but now I had to find a new “voice” to tell this story in a readable, engaging way to general readers. Writers tell you that the best way to learn to write is to write so that is what I did. I worked hard on getting the opening chapter right and then used it as a benchmark as I researched and wrote the others. Once I had found a voice and could tell a story, I could discipline my writing in the thematic chapters, prune, focus, make each chapter more readable without sacrificing the shape or accuracy of the story as a whole. Needless to say, draft after draft! I suspect that I wrote well over a million words in draft to get the 130,000 that are in the text of the book.

3. The loneliness of the long distance runner. Once I had got started – which was hard enough – the realization soon set in that this would be a marathon not a sprint. I had edited two books of essays by Stephen Leacock but had never attempted anything of the magnitude of this project. I could not even seek advice and comment, much less approach a publisher, until I had a substantial amount of at least semi-finished product. It was not until 2011 that I felt able to ask some people who were experts in the field if they would read a chapter or two. I will name them because they made all the difference. Margaret MacMillan, Ramsay Cook, Adriaan de Hoog, Gerry Friesen, David Staines, Donald Smith, John Hilliker. Each not only made helpful suggestions, but they encouraged me by saying the work was good and I should continue. This was a turning point and I cannot emphasize enough what their encouragement meant to me.
4. Finding a publisher. Dundurn had published my book of Leacock essays in 2004. They were good people to work with and had since grown into a solid, medium-sized publisher (in fact, the largest Canadian-owned publisher). I knew they would produce a good product, well designed and well edited. They would also do some publicity and get the book distributed nation-wide – indeed they scored some coups like getting an

excerpt published in the *National Post*. They have provided constant assistance (like printing these attractive bookmarks), support and advice about, for example, how to market on social media. We signed a contract in the spring of 2013 and I spent the summer rewriting, and did a further rewrite in early 2014. In May and June the intensive editorial process and arduous final proof-reading took place and the book appeared in September 2014.

5. Book Design and cover. I gave a lot of thought to the book design, especially pictures. This is part of the architecture. Pictures tie ideas together, flesh them out, convey messages. I spent some weeks searching for pictures to head each chapter and portraits of key players. I had to get, at my own expense, high quality reproductions from archives across the country. Of particular importance was the cover, which would capture the essence of this book as well as attract the eye of the buyer. During our battlefield visit in 2008 my wife Carolyn had taken a picture of the brooding soldier, a statue that marks the battlefield at St. Julien Belgium, where the Canadians held off the first German gas attack of the war. The soldier stands guard with arms reversed, contemplating with melancholy the tragedy of the past and with resolution the uncertainty of the future. Dundurn took the picture and

made it into a great cover, which I will cunningly use now as an excuse to show you the book.

What advice would you give to RHOMA writers?

Some may wonder from what I have said why anyone would want to do serious writing of this magnitude. Certainly not for the money. But research and writing, even when it was not going well, was my “happy place”.

Whenever I would wonder why I was not on the golf course, I would ask myself: “could you live with yourself if you had this dream and simply didn’t do it because it was difficult?” Now I still can’t believe that it’s done, out there, that I can hold it in my hand, and sell it to you! Writing involves risks and tests your abilities to the utmost. You have to believe in yourself.

Everything won’t work the first time, or meet your expectations. But don’t give up.