

The Reunion

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DURING the climax of our recent Bicentennial Year we were repeatedly reminded of the risks that our ancestors took in challenging the authority of the British Crown over the thirteen colonies. It is instructive, though, to consider occasionally the fact that a vast portion of this continent remains resolutely within the British Commonwealth, and, except for the French-speaking minority, seldom seems inclined to modify its status in the slightest degree.

I pondered the implications of this as I was returning to Toronto for a brief visit last spring. Ordinarily I find few pretexts for visiting Canada except once every five years, for the regimental reunions of the 48th Highlanders of Canada. This unit is not as well known to Americans, perhaps, as the Black Watch, of Montreal, nor is it as old as some others, having been founded in 1891.

It is a "regiment" in the British sense of that term, designating no specific number of battalions. At present it is made up of one active battalion, serving on a militia or reserve basis, similar to the reserve components of the United States forces. During World War I it contributed three battalions to the Canadian expeditionary forces. In September, 1939, the existing battalion was mobilized and promptly sent overseas as a component of the First Canadian Division, returning in October, 1945, after service in the Mediterranean theater and in northwest Europe. It was replaced after demobilization by the present battalion, in which many veterans continued to serve for several years. The 48th Highlanders are allied with the Gordon Highlanders, of the British Army.

The event that opened the official program of the Reunion was the formal change of command ceremony, held in the Moss Park Armoury on the evening of May 21. The command of the battalion was transferred to the new commanding officer, who received from his predecessor the symbolic dirk, which he will in turn carry until the end of his three-year term. These ceremonies naturally receive close scrutiny from former members of the unit, who would be disappointed to detect any deviation from the standards of precision that prevailed during their own periods of service. They would have to acknowledge this time that the color and the pageantry are still there. The 48th, one is told, is the only regiment in the Commonwealth that is still able to parade in the ceremonial scarlet doublets and feathered bonnets.

To be sure, these accoutrements are provided and maintained only by the Regiment itself, through the generous assistance of former officers and the families who for four generations have provided the leadership that has made its survival possible. The modern Canadian Army—or, more properly, the Canadian Armed Forces, since a drastic reorganization of a few years ago has almost eliminated all distinctions as to branch of service—ostensibly has little patience with individualism or tradition for its own sake. Even so, there are unmistakable signs that Ottawa is glad to look the other way if unit morale and functional efficiency are at stake. The fact that the 48th Highlanders have no difficulty in keeping their ranks filled at a time when voluntary service in a military force has never been

more unpopular in the Western world seems to indicate that something is working.

It is true that a few changes are hard to accept at first. The ostentatious manual of arms that the old Lee-Enfield rifle lent itself to so splendidly has had to be eliminated. The current rifle is a nondescript compromise arrived at in response to the exigencies of the combined NATO forces, but it is no doubt a more accurate and effective weapon than anything we ever saw. It is a shock also to find that the old distinctive hand salute, with the open palm facing outward, has been discarded in favor of the perfunctory gesture that has now become almost universal. Moreover, there are even a few women in the ranks.

Fortunately, some things never seem to change. The stirring, primitive appeal of the pipes has a near-psychedelic affect upon anyone who has ever marched behind them, and when the regimental march, "Highland Laddie," is sounded the reaction of the spectators is indescribable. The peculiar Highland pace remains unchanged, too, since the swing of the heavy kilt against the back of the knees would make any other stride impossible.

As is customary, following the ceremony the officers' mess was open for members and their guests. A person visiting this sanctuary for the first time would probably be astonished to see the floor carpeted with the regimental Davidson tartan, but he would be reassured that it is not considered disrespectful to walk on it. Otherwise the decor might have been duplicated in any imperial mess from Gibraltar to Singapore. One might have expected the portrait of the sovereign to be that of Victoria rather than Elizabeth the Second.

If a visitor is fortunate enough to be invited by a member of the sergeants' and warrant officers' mess he may enter that retreat also. In certain ways this is even more exclusive than the officers' mess, and I have known officers (not of the 48th, I hasten to add) who eventually had to become resigned to the fact that they would never be welcome in the sergeants' mess.

The scene of more informal reminiscing the next day was the memorial hall, which serves as the headquarters of the Old Comrades' As-

sociation of the Regiment. This organization, made up of former members of all ranks, owns and maintains an attractive three-story structure in downtown Toronto, dedicated to the perpetuation of regimental traditions and comradeship. The extent to which the Regiment, in an almost mystical sense, continues to serve as the focus of the social life of these veterans and their families is hard to appreciate. This is illustrated by a remark that I overheard when a sergeant announced his approaching marriage soon after the unit returned to Canada in the fall of 1945. A friend expressed surprise that he had chosen the girl in question, but he conceded approvingly: "At least he isn't marrying outside the Regiment."

They would be amused to hear themselves described as an "ethnic group," although it is true that the Scottish heritage, and perhaps a trace of clannish loyalty, are powerful cohesive forces. It might be added parenthetically that it is not entirely accurate to regard the British Empire, even at its zenith, as an essentially "English" enterprise. The term "Anglo-Saxon" has been overemphasized, to the neglect of the Celtic contribution to the partnership of the United Kingdom. The active role of the Scots in affairs of state as well as in military and commercial ventures has been continuous since the reign of James I. A perusal of the telephone directories of Toronto, Winnipeg, or Vancouver (as well as those of Sydney and Auckland) would confirm the fact that the Scots were the colonizers from the beginning.

The anecdotes exchanged within the privacy of the parlors of the memorial hall are always well worth waiting five years for between reunions, though I sometimes suspect that certain comrades have failing memories for details. I am disappointed to find, for instance, that hardly anyone ever seems willing to accept my version of that memorable Sunday afternoon before the Liri Valley campaign, when an indispensable "A" Company truck was left with three inches of the top of the cab visible above the surface of the Volturno River. For some reason they always seem to prefer the testimony of the two renegades who insisted at the time that the ferry was still operating.

Then there is the story of the regimental

sergeant-major who one dark night fell into an abandoned well in northern Italy. The sentry who was walking his post a few yards away could never comprehend the lack of official sympathy for his decision to take advantage of a superb opportunity to leave well enough alone.

At times the conversation shifts to less amusing topics. For the first time I heard references to a phenomenon that all of us had observed more than once. It was not unusual to see a soldier who would awaken with the unshakable conviction that he would not be alive by sundown. Even worse, he generally knew that we knew, but ordinarily no one discussed it, sensing that no consolation we might try to offer would be helpful.

The Reunion dinner, attended by more than five hundred veterans (from points as distant as Hong Kong and the United Kingdom), was held Saturday evening in the Armoury, with music provided by the combined military (*i.e.*, brass) and pipe bands. The traditional toasts were offered: to the Queen; to Our Colonel-in-Chief (a duplication, since Her Majesty accepted designation several years ago as the Regiment's Colonel-in-Chief); to Our Fallen Comrades; and to the Regiment. The toast to the Fallen Comrades was followed by "The Last Post" (counterpart of the American "Taps"), the regimental lament, "Flowers of the Forest," and "Reveille." An aura of dread seems to surround the melancholy "Flowers of the Forest." It is never rehearsed, is seldom spoken of, and is conspicuously absent from the several albums released by the pipes and drums a few years ago.

In a physical sense the activities of the final day, Sunday, were more strenuous. A surprisingly large representation reported to the area below the provincial parliament buildings, where ex-members fell in as a contingent representing the Old Comrades' Association. In mufti except for regimental ties and glengarries, we marched behind our own pipe band, provided by the Earl's Court Branch of the Royal Canadian Legion, following the active battalion to the north end of Queen's Park.

There both units assembled around the regimental cenotaph, a granite column bearing the twenty-one battle honors won by the 48th

since 1899, and dedicated to the dead of every conflict since the Boer War. At 11:00 a brief and impressively simple service of remembrance was offered by the wartime chaplain and his current successor. A wreath was deposited at the foot of the monument. As we heard "Flowers of the Forest" for the second time many of us were probably wondering how we happened to be present that day rather than having been numbered among the 84 officers (including two commanding officers) and 1,669 other ranks that the Regiment has left lying in, as Rupert Brooke expressed it, "some corner of a foreign field." Canada has followed the practice of burying its war dead as near as possible to the spot where they fell.

Next came a march down University Avenue and east on Queen Street to the Moss Park Armoury again. This is approximately two miles, and no one would have blamed participants with infirmities if they had accepted the transportation available for any one who preferred to drop out then. Remarkably few did so, and the formation still included a cross-section of several generations, with some from World War I. In the file next to me was an ex-captain alongside his grandson, a lieutenant. The father of the latter, a former regimental sergeant-major, was a few paces behind us.

The march gave me the first opportunity in several days to escape from the compulsion to engage in two or three endless conversations at once, and to reflect upon some of the events that had led to my affiliation with the 48th Highlanders. When I left Shreveport in June, 1941, for Ottawa—the only alternative would have been to join the Yankee Army—I had no reason to prefer one unit over any other. In 1943, finding myself detached from my own unit (the Stormont, Dundas and Glengarry Highlanders) in the United Kingdom and posted to the First Division, then serving in the British Eighth Army in Italy, I received the news that I was to be assigned to the 48th with some apprehension. Ostensibly the reassignment had been intended to allow me to return after three months' combat experience to my original unit before the invasion of Normandy. However, it was clear by then that the posting was to be permanent.

Among other Canadian units in Britain, before the departure of the 48th Highlanders for the landing in Sicily, they had been known as the "Dileas Boys." "Dileas," from the Gaelic regimental motto, "Dileas gu Brath" (Faithful unto Death), became a flexible term that summed up admirably any traits that envious rival units found objectionable. I had thought of them as dilettantes and snobs, and I was uncertain as to how an alien might be received. Except for the fact that a major later taught the pipers to play "Marching through Georgia" when I walked into the mess tent it never seemed to matter that I was an unknown newcomer.

C. S. Lewis must have been a subaltern in a regiment much like the 48th during World War I. In *Mere Christianity* he offers the wisest and most comforting analysis that I have ever read of the paradoxical moral issues that humanity has always had to face when dealing with the question of warfare. I had always been impressed by the gallantry and generosity of my comrades, even toward the enemy, and under the most trying circumstances. But it was not until many years later that I came to suspect that our adversaries also recognized this.

In August, 1958, I visited the British War Cemetery near Cattolica, Italy, to photograph the graves of many friends who had been killed during the approach to the Gothic Line and in the final assault. This small cemetery is in a picturesque natural amphitheater opposite the Castle of Gradara, the ancestral home of Francesca da Rimini. I was the only visitor that Sunday afternoon, but when I examined the register in the kiosk at the gate I found that dozens of Germans had signed in earlier that summer, far outnumbering those of any other nationality. The "Remarks" added alongside the signatures were invariably appropriate and respectful, but one comment, by a veteran from Heidelberg, was so striking that I still have it preserved in a pocket notebook: "We fought here against the fairest enemy. May God bless them all."

I would have to acknowledge, though, that some of us were also the recipients of chivalrous treatment. I recall waiting behind the battered remains of a farmhouse outside Riccione,

a few kilometers to the north, for the approach of a tall young man with a huge but benign German Shepherd. After an energetic salute he extended his hand and introduced himself as Leutnant Koeppel. He remarked, as one professional to another, "That was an excellent fight, but I can't understand why you held out so long." His 98th Infantry Division, he explained, had been in Italy only five days, after three years on the Russian front. "This is a gentlemen's war in Italy, compared to Russia," he added.

By the time we turned north again at our destination, to enter the Armoury from the rear, our column had shaken off the arthritic stiffness and other consequences of three more decades in that inhospitable climate, and with a little bit of imagination one could visualize the dusty parade ground at Piedimonte d'Alife. The active battalion was waiting inside, and there was an air of expectancy that we had already begun to dread. We halted, realigned our ranks, and waited for the commands that would initiate a maneuver that suddenly took on an overpowering symbolism. The battalion came to attention and presented arms as we marched past, with the band playing "The Boys of the Old Brigade." As we left the building again and waited for formal dismissal in the parking lot the finality of this ceremony could hardly have escaped any of us. It was 1976 again, and we were middle-aged civilians. At the next Reunion in 1981 the OCA contingent will inevitably be more compact.

The ceremonial phase of the Reunion was over, but we reentered the Armoury to resume our informal visits in the Messes. Somehow, though, we knew the rest of the day would be anticlimactic.

Obviously, after such a period of undiluted nostalgia it is painful to return to the real world. There is a trace of irony even in that phrase, for I doubt that any subsequent experiences have been more real to any of us than the memories of our service in that magnificent unit. Still, few of the institutions that represented reality to us then have survived intact. The Empire, even euphemized as the Commonwealth, is a shabby remnant, taken less and less seriously by the only elements that might have been able

to preserve it. One does not need to visit the United Kingdom to sense the weariness and cynicism that threaten to paralyze the British will.

Whether a similar disillusionment is to prevail in Canada is a question that a casual visitor would not be qualified to judge. Purely political questions are not discussed in the Mess, and the Canadian party system is difficult for a foreigner (or a Canadian) to comprehend. However, there is visible impatience with the curtailment of personal liberties that recent federal policies have brought about. Outside the Province of Quebec there is little support for the Trudeau government's attempts to ensure "equal rights" for the French-speaking minority. I doubt that the residents of Toronto, for example, condone discrimination against any group, but they ridicule the fiction that Canada as a whole is now, or ever will be, a bilingual country. They especially resent the punitive and costly campaign to force every article of commerce to bear a label or instructions in French as well as English.

The pettiness and vindictiveness of some of these bureaucratic edicts almost suggest that Ottawa has enthroned a horde of Stanley Pottingers, determined to force society into a rigid pattern, regardless of the wishes of the electorate. It is unfortunate that the French-Canadians as a class are sometimes assigned the blame for this. As in the United States, the role of the ubiquitous Left is transparent.

Likewise, as in this country, the more articulate elements of the intelligentsia are overwhelmingly liberal. This might have been anticipated, given the rapid expansion of the

Canadian system of higher education during the last twenty-five years. To staff the many new colleges and universities, their administrators, evidently no less inept than their counterparts anywhere else, turned to the obvious source: the graduate schools of the United States. The damage done by some of these recruits, particularly in the sensitive area of the social sciences, is incalculable. Several of my friends confided to me the experiences of their children who have studied under these iconoclasts, who are still determined to bring down the Establishment, on either side of the border.

It may be, then, that the principles embodied by the 48th Highlanders will ultimately be found to be as anachronistic as the uniforms that they have stubbornly retained for ceremonial functions, and that they are fated to accommodate themselves to reality, just as we seem about to discard the quaint notion that West Point should try to enforce an honor code. However, I am encouraged by these remarks extracted from a Message of Welcome that the new commanding officer of the 48th Highlanders, Lt. Col. R. J. Simmons, addressed to the returning veterans:

In the years ahead there will be people in public office who will discount the traditions and customs that we have fought for and no doubt deride us for being "old fashioned," but it is my ambition to maintain our heritage and continue to show other units that the lessons and good customs of the past lead to a better and more stable future.