

Duty to Dissent

*Henri Bourassa and
the First World War*

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Introduction

CANADA WAS AT A BREAKING POINT during the “old-fashioned” winter in the final month of 1917. Weather stations logged record low temperatures, and snow swept across the continent.¹ Amid the deep freeze, Canadians went to the polls to pass judgment on Sir Robert Borden’s wartime government. After more than three years of unrelenting industrialized warfare, the country was immersed in one of the most bitter electoral campaigns in its history. On the one side, Prime Minister Borden and a coalition of Conservatives and former Liberals sought to convince Canadians that the government had directed a successful war effort and that only the imposition of conscription could ensure its continued success. Sending more Canadian soldiers to the battlefronts of Europe was the only way to bring about victory in the ongoing world war. On the other side, Liberal leader Sir Wilfrid Laurier believed that there had to be a referendum on conscription to keep the country united during the increasingly fractious war. Borden’s Conservatives had failed to preserve the unity between French Canadians and English Canadians, and their short-sighted efforts to win the war could cost them the country born only half a century earlier. National unity was the only way to win the war, Laurier had reminded Borden during the debate on conscription six months earlier, a warning dismissed as typical political grandstanding.² But it was not a typical time for Canadians. The war had changed their country and the world – and not for the better. Millions had been killed, wounded, or traumatized, and there was no end in sight. It seemed as if any sacrifice could be justified. Amid such extremes, the “party-truce” declared at the outbreak of war in August 1914 was a distant memory as both sides accused the other of treason.

The election over conscription could be seen as a microcosm of the war itself. For Canadians immersed in the political turmoil, the life-and-death struggle in Europe was mirrored by a brutal and unforgiving election battle at home. The future was at stake, or so it seemed to those living

through the turmoil, as the fabric that held them together was ready to tear. The nation was cracking along familiar lines, split between French and English, conservative and liberal, imperialist and nationalist. Conscription in Quebec, historian Béatrice Richard wrote, was a matter of life and death for many young men that year and became an issue that would decide the life and death of the province.³ All believed that Canada's place in the world was changing, but they differed on what price they owed for that change. As the world fought over whether a German hegemony would emerge triumphant against an Anglo-Saxon one, conscription reflected the same fundamental question: who would shape the future of the world?

The war had transformed everything from daily life to the international balance of power, and it had left an indelible mark on Canada's government and people. Hundreds of thousands of Canadians had fought and continued to fight in the trenches of France and Belgium for a war of which the outcome remained uncertain. New government powers had expanded the state's role in private and public life. Although the enthusiasm that marked the beginning of the war in 1914 had subsided, the country could not escape the urgency that it demanded. Canada, like the rest of the world, had not had the time to adjust to the new reality of warfare between modern industrialized societies. Social schisms that predated the conflict were exacerbated, and the once familiar political playing field for Canadians was upended and shaken.

In the midst of this tumultuous election campaign and worldwide conflict, French Canadian nationalist Henri Bourassa advised readers of his newspaper *Le Devoir* that no party in Ottawa was worth trusting fully. He counselled French Canadians to reject Borden's conscription policy, but he admitted that Laurier was little better. The Liberal solution of a referendum on conscription still ignored the fundamental problems of the war. Neither Conservatives nor Liberals could claim to have the Canadian nation's best interests in mind, for they had mindfully discarded the careful considerations that had slowly improved the dominion since Confederation fifty years earlier. Bourassa instructed his readers on the great perils of the election, but eventually he caustically endorsed the Liberal leader after great deliberation:

The unionist program is the antithesis of everything we love, everything we believe, everything we want. It is the synthesis of everything we hate – men, ideas and trends – in both parties ... As determined opponents of the coalition ministry, its entire policy, and its staff, we accept Mr. Laurier's program

where it moves closer to our principles and ideas; we reject it wherever it virtually matches that of the ministry.⁴

Bourassa was clear that Laurier was the lesser of two evils. An English Canadian majority dictating the conduct of a British war posed a far greater threat to his native province of Quebec, the country, and Canadian society itself. French Canada could not afford to resign control over its fate in a world where old institutions were crumbling and those replacing them were not yet fully formed.

Bourassa feared English Canadians, many of whom continued to support – or at least accede to – a seemingly unlimited war effort. War supporters believed that victory in Europe outweighed the war’s growing cost and that Canadian soldiers necessarily protected the British Empire and their allies against the menace of a triumphant Germany. Only more men could prevent an ascendant Germany from stealing Canada’s and the British Empire’s places in the world. Against this certainty of belief, Bourassa stood in the national spotlight of 1917 and proclaimed his total opposition to the war. It marked him as a prominent voice but one in the wilderness away from Canada’s political metropole and out of step with the debate between Laurier and Borden that winter.

While the two party leaders argued over how to enact conscription as a path to victory, Bourassa alleged that it represented self-destruction on a national scale. He feared a country where so many of its citizens were willing to hurt its whole. Canadians’ approval of conscription demonstrated an insidious acceptance of militarism that could supersede Canada’s normal democratic culture. The journalist no longer saw any allowance in wartime Canada for his liberal nationalist values that enshrined the rights of the individual, adherence to law, and equality between French and English. Instead, conscription forced Canadians to fight in a war that they did not support. In the December election, Bourassa hoped that Laurier would win in order to protect the country against the “brigands” who threatened both its unity and its purpose.⁵ It was a holding action in stark contrast to the idealistic vision of a unified Canada that Bourassa had held when war had broken out. By 1917, he wished only to avoid greater fissures in Canadian unity, the breakdown of social order, and any further transformation of the Canadian dominion that he had known in 1914. His condemnation of the largely English Canadian Unionist Party was no surprise, nor was his reluctant support for Laurier, a man who, Bourassa had once alleged in the pages of *Le Devoir*, had betrayed

his liberal principles and the country. There were few options in the increasingly narrow political spectrum of Canada at war.

Bourassa's polemic during the harsh winter of 1917 reflected his experience of the war. From its outset, he had cautioned against the consequences of an overreaching war effort while promising his readers that he would conscientiously examine the issues of the war to provide a complete picture. His duty as self-appointed protector of the public good demanded that he resist the wave of popular enthusiasm found in newspapers across the country. When it became clear that the government had no interest in moderating its military and economic contributions, and as other Canadians refused to heed his warnings, he rejected participation entirely in January 1916. The following year Bourassa was the loudest voice against Prime Minister Borden's introduction of conscription. Facing a government that had no sympathy for French Canada and had ignored Bourassa's arguments for three years, the journalist urged his supporters to vote for Laurier's Liberals. Laurier still lost the election, since English Canada voted overwhelmingly for Borden's Unionist Party, but Quebec voted for Laurier. The country seemed to be irrevocably divided between the "two solitudes" of French and English.

It proved that Bourassa was right to worry that the pressures of wartime could split the seams of Canada's federation. Its French and English peoples separately avowed their ability to decide the country's direction as they accused the other side of disloyalty to the "true" Canadian nation during the 1917 election. To Bourassa, the division embodied the worst of the First World War's transformative intensity.

How did he reach that dismal point? It was a path mired in the upheaval of the First World War but one of his own choosing. Bourassa had long ago decided to stand against the wave and forge his own path in Canadian politics. The clearest distillation of the fire that fuelled Bourassa was the name of the vessel that carried his ideas to the public, *Le Devoir*. He explained his goal at the newspaper's founding in January 1910: to awaken Canadian citizens to a commitment to public duty, religious duty, national duty, and civic duty. In his first editorial, Bourassa wrote that "our ambition is limited to striving, as best we can, to do what we preach: the daily duty."⁶ The tagline attached to every issue of his newspaper encapsulated this mission: "Fais ce que dois!" (Do what you must!).⁷ His idealistic goals were somewhat undermined by his first editorial's belligerent title, "Before the Fight," as he prepared to enter a fierce political debate on the creation of a Canadian navy. From the beginning, Bourassa committed himself to public reflection without shying away from argumentative commentary.

His willingness to defy popular opinion was no less apparent in his writing during the First World War. As a result, Bourassa was rarely an innocent bystander to the country's discord. He extolled one-sided, uncompromising views of wartime Canada as much as his opponents did. Critics in English and French Canada accused him of treasonous disloyalty – to Canada or the nationalist movement that he had helped to create – and some repeatedly appealed to the government to censor his writing. Bourassa offered little to soothe their outrage. His inflexible stance denounced Canadians in favour of the war as immoral hypocrites, though they held their views as earnestly as he held his own. His opponents failed to convince him that political and social issues that predated the war had disappeared. Instead, Bourassa rejected their plea for new attitudes to confront Canada's role in the European conflict. To him, the Great War was an obstacle that required a reasoned response measured by Canadian interests and values. For better or for worse, he would stay loyal to his own principles, determined to do his duty for Canada as he understood it.

In this book, I provide a close examination of the wartime writings of Henri Bourassa, especially his articles in *Le Devoir*, with an emphasis on his understanding and analysis of international developments. I underline his Canadian perspective as part of an international discourse on the war, its impact on his unique vision of Canadian nationalism, and the force of his beliefs in shaping those views. Bourassa was a liberal who feared the rise of militarism, but he believed that the cure for the ills of war was the pope in Rome, not liberal society itself. The realm of mortal affairs was flawed without divine guidance, and the atrocity of the First World War proved that to Bourassa beyond doubt. As beneficial as liberalism was, it was merely a vessel for achieving humanity's benediction. Armed with his faith and political principles, Bourassa explored the domestic and international implications of the war with a uniquely liberal, Canadian, and Catholic perspective. That contradictory perspective makes him intriguing to a historian, especially since it is brought into sharp relief by the Great War. The war was a cataclysm undoing everything right in the world, at least in the eyes of Canada's most vocal dissenter.

The allure of Bourassa's writing and the contradictions that shaped his ideas on the war are not lost on me. I cannot help but be drawn into the tone and style of his work. It is somewhat unusual for an English-speaking Canadian historian to offer a detailed study of a French Canadian nationalist, but Bourassa described the war in a way that I had never encountered

before, one that evoked its serious nature not only to him personally but for all of those involved. Unsurprisingly, this work emphasizes Bourassa over other sources of dissent in Canada and Quebec, a conscious choice that necessarily limits its scope, but it also speaks to the magnetism of his words even a century after he wrote them. There is a power in the way that he wrote and about what he wrote. Every editorial is steeped in the importance of the war years and what was at stake for Bourassa, for Canada, and for the world. I have also endeavoured to translate his words into English so that this book might be open to an audience in English Canada that often misses his most important work.⁸ Both French Canadians and English Canadians ought to have the opportunity to understand the emotional resonance of the world's first industrialized war in Canadian and Quebec society, even so far from the trench battles traditionally offered as the most traumatic part of the war. The intensity of the war years back in Canada is readily apparent in his writing of 1914–18.

Bourassa spoke for a small audience, but his prominence was projected onto a national stage by the power and emotion of his writing. Like many others around the globe, he recognized that the war was causing irrevocable changes to his world. His articles were more than just opinions on his times; they were appeals to join him in resisting the tidal forces at play. Pushing back against changes that seemed to be overwhelmingly powerful imbues Bourassa with a tenacity of spirit that one cannot help but admire.

These traits did not endear him to his opponents, who must have read his work with horror. To see Canada's most pre-eminent French Canadian nationalist rally against the war or, at least before 1916, critique it weekly, would only have confirmed what they had believed all along: French Canadians were not loyal to the British Empire and could not be trusted to support it. Bourassa was disloyal and thus had no right to make arguments against the war – not because he was wrong but because of who he was. The mistake of English Canadians in their appraisal of Bourassa, epitomized in the conscription crisis of 1917, was that they refused to accept that French Canada could have logical and rational reasons to oppose the war and the means of fighting it. There was no room to disagree within the same community, not even a shared language to express that disagreement. Instead, the alleged failure of French Canadians to enlist and their failure to vocally support the war like English Canadians did, were results of being French Canadian rather than being free-thinking individuals with a different worldview. The mere fact that Bourassa and

French Canadians like him were different from English Canadians culturally, religiously, or ideologically was enough to dismiss their words. This obsession with Bourassa's identity as a French Canadian, nationalist, and Catholic has subsequently coloured much of the historical work on Bourassa, as it did the contemporary reaction to his writing.

Bourassa elicited much attention from historians, even before his death in 1952. His prolific career and far-reaching influence mean that he has been included in general Canadian histories.⁹ Any textbook on Canadian history mentions him alongside Sir Wilfrid Laurier and Sir Robert Borden. A history of Quebec, or Canadian Catholicism, or Canadian nationalism, or the First and Second World Wars usually includes a discussion of Bourassa. The debates in which he engaged on the "solution" to the "problem" of French-English relations in Canada help to explain his prominence in Canadian history, but those debates led historians to critically examine his role as a domestic commentator first and foremost. As a result, the historical literature focused on Bourassa is unusually narrow. A few scholars have broken from this trend, but most consider him to have been an inward-looking French Canadian nationalist – a French Canadian actor, on a Canadian stage perhaps, but for French Canadian audiences alone.

Two contrasting views characterized early historical scholarship. One was Elizabeth Armstrong's *The Crisis of Quebec, 1914–1918*, published in 1937, the first major historical work to deal with French Canada during the war.¹⁰ Bourassa played a large role in her analysis of the province. Her view of him was ultimately negative, but she did not fail to acknowledge his influence. Describing him as a "mixture of sincere patriotism and demagoguery,"¹¹ though not a "narrow bigot or a fanatical partisan," Armstrong believed that his contemporaries viewed him as "a real Frenchman in the cultural rather than the political sense of the word, one who combined grace with courage, logic with wit and deep learning with eloquence."¹² This does not lessen the criticism that she levied against him. Armstrong condemned his rejection of Ottawa's wartime policy and glossed over the detailed analysis that Bourassa offered.

The rise of extreme nationalism in the 1930s heavily influenced Armstrong's conclusion that Bourassa was a dangerous domestic threat.¹³ In her words, he dreamed of a "French Canada as a proselytizing force ... [that would] bring the American continent back to the arms of Rome and to the glories of French civilization."¹⁴ Armstrong used the terms "passive" and "active" nationalism to describe Quebec and argued that the war saw a brief flare of active nationalism spurred on by Bourassa. As a result, she

treated him and his fellow *nationalistes* as anomalies in French Canada who preached moderation while breeding radical action. They were not representative of the true passive French Canadian nationalism. The “crisis of Quebec,” then, was not a conflict of language, or culture, or even loyalty; it was a crisis of nationalism without restraint advocated by Bourassa.¹⁵ He and his cohorts, she posited, could never live in harmony with English Canada. Instead, “[the] Nationalists were convinced that the great majority of French Canadians believed that Canada had done enough for the Dominion war effort and that their sole obligation was to fight for their own native country. To force them to fight against their innermost conviction was to make revolutionaries out of the population of Quebec.”¹⁶ For Armstrong, the only acceptable Canadian nationalism could not stray across the line between tradition and revolution. That would mean a denial of French Canada’s history. By pushing across it, the *nationalistes* became more than aberrant in her view; they became abhorrent. French Canadian nationalism must be inherently conservative, she argued, couched in the safety of survival at all costs to keep it well away from the modernized, horrific fanaticism of her time. Armstrong’s work was a shallow history in which Bourassa did not provide answers to political or cultural problems or react to unfolding events. He was a dangerous catalyst for French Canada but one without agency.

Robert Rumilly, best known for his voluminous history of Quebec, expressed a more positive portrayal of Henri Bourassa in a biography of the nationalist leader.¹⁷ Almost hagiographic, the book essentially credited Bourassa with creating modern Quebec nationalism. It is a painstakingly detailed biography but contains little critical historical inquiry. Rumilly’s analysis of Bourassa’s role in opposing conscription is typical of his writing: “Bourassa developed a balanced thinking in a panicked world. He alone remained cold-blooded among the unleashing of passions.”¹⁸ Although offering incredible detail on his monthly accomplishments, there is no questioning of why Bourassa acted the way that he did. The instances of purple prose between quotations from him or the simple descriptions of what he was doing provide an invaluable narrative of his life but offer little analytical depth. Without investigating Bourassa’s motivations, Rumilly failed to take a key inquisitive step.

Born in 1897, Rumilly was a committed nationalist and wrote extensively on the history of French Canada from the 1930s to his death in 1983. Both personal experiences and ideological leanings obviously influenced his work on Bourassa. Rumilly was one of the founding members of the

French Canadian Academy, formed to combat the colonial influence of both Britain and France on Quebec society.¹⁹ He presented Bourassa as a heroic national figure in his monograph: “I know young French Canadians who, when the national situation seems discouraging to them, comfort themselves by thinking: ‘There was Bourassa! ...’ Thus Bourassa, the great Bourassa we have just lost, continues to protect us.”²⁰ The conclusion consoled French Canadians that Bourassa’s spirit would live on in a new generation. Rumilly’s history had the air of being incomplete and superficial, but Rumilly “rediscovered” Bourassa after his death and made him as captivating a figure to Quebec as he had been in life.²¹

The contrast between Armstrong and Rumilly in their depictions of Bourassa shaped the historians who followed them, particularly their views of his role during the First World War. In one, he was a dangerous instigator; in the other, he was a stalwart saviour of the *patrie*. Although they described both his positions and his actions, they minimized their analyses of his ideas and the war’s impacts on them. Instead, Bourassa was a simplified character cast in a predetermined role, more useful as an influential force on the known historical outcome than as an individual influenced by his experience. Written while Bourassa was still alive, both are more descriptive than historical, but they are key in comprehending the historiography on Bourassa marked by different understandings among French Canadian and English Canadian historians. Equally, they reveal the failure of literature that touches on Bourassa in the First World War. He was not simply a Quebec *nationaliste* discussing domestic issues but also a legitimate and powerful dissenter who discussed international events with the same clarity and fervour as Canadian ones.

Bourassa’s death in 1952 and the centenary of his birth in 1968 produced brief flurries of academic interest in his career.²² In English Canada, Bourassa was remade into a primarily pan-Canadian nationalist. Joseph Levitt’s *Henri Bourassa and the Golden Calf*, published in 1969, largely ignored the impact of the Great War, focusing instead on specific aspects of Bourassa’s career and the *nationaliste* program for Quebec.²³ By the 1970s, English-speaking historians had reclaimed Bourassa as an important predecessor to the bicultural and bilingual world of post-1967 Canada and its iconic prime minister, Pierre Elliott Trudeau. General histories, such as Robert Craig Brown and Ramsay Cook’s overview of early-twentieth-century Canadian history, *Canada 1896–1921: A Nation Transformed*, portray Bourassa prominently as an antagonist to English Canada and an important catalyst for the development of a modern Canadian identity.²⁴

Historians distilled Bourassa to his vision of a bilingual and bicultural Canada at the expense of his other views.

The works of Ramsay Cook throughout the 1960s and into the 1990s demonstrate the compelling nature of Bourassa's ideas on French and English Canada. In the midst of growing animosity between French Canadians and English Canadians, and as Quebec experienced the Quiet Revolution and a neo-nationalist separatist movement emerged, Cook published in 1966 *Canada and the French-Canadian Question*. Each chapter explored different elements of Quebec's history in Canada and its different forms of nationalism. Bourassa understandably played a large role in some chapters, mirrored in much of Cook's future work.²⁵ Cook compared the *nationaliste* Bourassa with his neo-nationalist descendants, such as René Lévesque and the Parti Québécois, as well as his "successors," epitomized in the bilingual and bicultural policies of the Liberal Party and Pierre Trudeau. Bourassa's antagonistic role during the war was minimized if not ignored. In another vein, Susan Mann offered several works on the history of Quebec to English Canadian audiences that mention Bourassa frequently. Mann's study of Quebec in the 1920s and the *Action française*²⁶ offers valuable insights into Bourassa's views on feminism and women, otherwise understudied in the literature.²⁷ Since the works of Mann and Cook, however, English Canadian scholarship on Bourassa stagnated.

French Canadian historians have discussed Bourassa more recently and in greater detail, often with greater interest and vigour than English Canadian historians. An article from René Durocher in 1971 focused exclusively on Bourassa's relationship with the Catholic Church during the war. He used Bourassa's correspondence to shed light on his disagreement with the church hierarchy, but he did not address other aspects of Bourassa's war experience.²⁸ Jean-Philippe Warren succeeded Durocher through an examination of Bourassa's ultramontanist, nationalism, and the position of the pope and could easily be read alongside some of the conclusions of this book.²⁹ Réal Bélanger's entry in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* furnished an in-depth study of Bourassa but understandably had to limit the journalist's role in the war to two paragraphs.³⁰ The entry was a preliminary version of Bélanger's two-volume biography of Bourassa. The first volume was published in 2013 and covers the years from his birth to the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, while the second volume is forthcoming. It is without a doubt the most comprehensive and detailed work on Bourassa since Rumilly.³¹ Bélanger explores Bourassa's upbringing and the first half of his political career while

including myriad other details throughout. Sylvie Lacombe's *La rencontre de deux peuples élus*, published in 2002, critically contrasts the religious nationalism of French Canada and the imperial nationalism of English Canada. Bourassa is the dominant figure used to analyze French Canada's "ambition nationale."³² Although her specific discussion of the First World War is brief, her analysis of the "hierarchical relationship" between Bourassa's liberal political beliefs and conservative religious ones, and her concluding summation of his religious nationalism, offer sophisticated scholarship on Bourassa.³³ Lacombe further examined his contradictory beliefs and their transformation during the war, which she argued had a radicalizing effect on him.³⁴ Yet, even as Lacombe deepened our understanding of French Canadian nationalism and Bourassa as a nationalist, her work underplayed his role as a Canadian intellectual and commentator in the midst of the First World War.

Some general intellectual histories of Quebec have addressed Bourassa's ideas more broadly, notably the work of Yvan Lamonde, and offer French-speaking audiences more insight into the intellectual context of Bourassa's analysis than is available to English-speaking audiences.³⁵ A few other French-language works on Bourassa have appeared as popular histories, while the literature on the history of *Le Devoir* touches on his formative role in creating the newspaper.³⁶ As in English Canadian works, Bourassa is a dominant figure in French Canadian history, and there are references to him in many studies of Quebec and the twentieth century.³⁷

This continuing focus by both French Canadians and English Canadians on his domestic role has hampered an all-encompassing historical study of Bourassa and diminished some of his most impressive writing on the Great War. Studies that touch on his thoughts during the war do so completely removed from the context of the events of the war. Since historians often focus on the domestic aspects of his editorials, it is understandable that they would not address his writing on the international aspects of the conflict. As a result, a reader of Canadian history has an incomplete picture of his life from 1914 to 1918. Few historians convey the exceptional nature of his reasoning and coherence on a wide variety of subjects during the turbulent war years. Bourassa was one of Canada's great wartime thinkers, and historians have not yet thoroughly examined the depth and breadth of his perspective.³⁸

In this book, then, I ask what can we discover if we step away from the confines of traditional literature separated by English Canadian and French Canadian identities? Or at least open those boxes a little? Certainly,

Bourassa evokes such a study. Although he identified himself as a French Canadian Catholic nationalist, his ideas about Canada and the war were not so easily categorized. They were not always in line with what other French Canadians, nationalists, or Catholics were thinking. They were sometimes diametrically opposed to the majoritarian views in his province and his country. Bourassa was not like other Canadians during the war; nor was he like other French Canadians, nationalists, and Catholics. There is no easy box into which we can place him, especially in the context of those war years.

“People do not ‘have’ ideas,” John Lukacs advises historians, “they choose them ... It may be important what ideas do to men, [but] it is often even more important what people do with their ideas.”³⁹ The process by which Bourassa chose his ideas (and the beliefs that he held as a result) was a long one. In this book, I deal with the second part of the advice from Lukacs: what Bourassa did with his ideas. I examine his actions during the Great War and focus on the commentary that he offered to Canadians – primarily French Canadians because of the language in which he most often wrote. His beliefs compelled him to offer his commentaries through his chosen medium, his newspaper *Le Devoir*, even during the worst of the war’s political maelstroms.

In trying to understand Bourassa’s beliefs during the war, Mark Bevir’s *The Logic of the History of Ideas* offers some useful guidance. Unlike Canadian intellectual historians, who have largely ignored the “linguistic turn” in favour of the cultural one,⁴⁰ Bevir roots his book in the philosophical debate on the meaning of language and texts for historians.⁴¹ He describes the complex process of establishing an intellectual history of beliefs. It must put together what he calls a “spherical jigsaw” in which “each piece of the jigsaw, each belief, belongs where it does by virtue of the pieces around it. The puzzler completes the jigsaw by joining all the pieces together to form a single picture which then makes sense of each individual piece.”⁴² There is a growing literature that discusses Bevir’s approach.⁴³ His advice that “historians should assume that people meant what they said unless there is evidence to the contrary” has an appealing simplicity to it,⁴⁴ but critics have not accepted his emphasis on believing an individual’s words over an interpretation of their meaning with the benefit of hindsight.⁴⁵ It is clear that Bevir’s webs of beliefs might be a worthwhile method of writing intellectual history, but they must be balanced by understanding the context of an individual’s life and environment.⁴⁶ Examining individuals without

that context risks their objectivity and can overwhelm the factual foundation of academic writing. Attention to both allows historians to attempt to reconstruct accurately a “history of beliefs.”⁴⁷

One of Bevir’s conclusions is that by examining individuals who change or confirm their beliefs, we can examine what grants those individuals the agency of shaping their beliefs independent of an impersonal force or a model of history. This human element of history is at the core of José Miguel Sardica’s defence of historical biography in *Rethinking History* that responds to several decades of criticisms from historians who had discarded it as a parochial and exclusionary vision of the past.⁴⁸ Its value rests in its ability to reflect on larger questions of history while combining a more literary and communicable style focused through the history of a single life.⁴⁹ This utility is only reinforced when confronted with the “all too fragmented and liquid present day societies and intellectual structures [as] the writing of past lives becomes a sort of necessary connecting thread, providing human sense and moral lights to map regular lives and model inspirations to inform future options.”⁵⁰ Historical biography, though limited in scope, allows readers to immerse themselves in an individual’s view of the world that is entirely biased. Although this narrow view diminishes the scope of historical analysis, in return it provides an individual’s certainty about what was known and not known.

Thus, the following chapters are inspired by Bevir’s philosophy of intellectual history and Sardica’s affirmation of historical biography. They describe Bourassa’s web of beliefs about the First World War and the dilemmas that Bourassa encountered that transformed him – dilemmas such as equality between French Canadians and English Canadians, the pervasive influence of imperialism, and the necessity of a liberal Canadian nationalism altogether different from the nationalism advocated by English Canadians. Wartime dilemmas also pushed Bourassa to examine international issues that he previously ignored in favour of domestic concerns. He devoted many pages to peace proposals, such as the diplomatic efforts of Pope Benedict XV to end the conflict or President Woodrow Wilson’s neutrality and subsequent shaping of the peace accord that ended the war in 1918. Bourassa addressed events outside Canada such as the Easter Rising in Ireland in 1916, the American election in 1916, and the American entry into the war in 1917. Global affairs affected Canadians as they never had before, and Bourassa was one of the few voices in Canada who critically examined them as an active participant in national, continental, and transnational frameworks.⁵¹

Just as these global events changed the Canadian nation, so too did they affect Bourassa's ideas. His views on imperialism, French Canada and English Canada, religion, and international affairs informed his analyses of Canada's war experience. Each was the result of a long contemplative career, and the events of the war changed them. As we will see, the Bourassa who emerged from the war in 1918 was not the Bourassa who entered it in 1914. This simple and factual observation reveals nothing of his struggle to remain loyal to his beliefs; of the complex politics, desires, and fears of wartime Canada; or of the terrible power of modern war over the societies that fought it. Bourassa would know of these issues all too well by war's end, but in 1914 he carried none of those burdens.

I cannot fully describe in this book the life, beliefs, and times of Bourassa even within the short period of the First World War. There were many facets of his public life. Over the course of his prolific career, he wrote articles on political, economic, and social issues to a small but attentive audience. The sheer volume and variety of his work make it difficult to explore it in its entirety, and the war years were busy ones at home and abroad. The work published by Bourassa was understandably dense, so it is challenging for the historian to explain his influence on Canadians during the Great War. The polarized politics of wartime led Bourassa and his opponents to extremes, existing on the periphery of supporting or rejecting the war, often resorting to hyperbole if not outright intellectual dishonesty to assert their respective cases. Under the shadow of the Great War, Canadians treated solutions to old problems and new ones with an urgency that belied their complexity. The war did not initiate many of the issues that Bourassa raised; however, when cast in the light of a struggle for the survival of Canada and its European allies, debates on them became intensified.

I study the depth of Bourassa's public analysis and pay strict attention to chronology. The successes and failures of the home front, battlefield, and international diplomacy shaped the form, content, and tone of Bourassa's articles, with the understanding that his public work was attuned to an audience. Public commentary is reactionary in nature: writers commented on the events and issues of the war as it unfolded. It is impossible to consider newspapers as completely accurate pictures of their times; instead, they use constructed versions of events and considered opinions of journalists and present them to a public audience, and only rarely are they eyewitness accounts or personal views. News and editorials are indicative of opinions and biases, and an examination of Bourassa's public

editorials does not comprise a comprehensive exploration of his thoughts, only the views that Bourassa presented to the world. In some cases, I do not explore domestic topics as other historians have already examined them in detail. Ultimately, I follow Bourassa's war, and it is within the structure and pace of his public analysis that I examine Canada and the First World War. An unintended consequence of this analysis is that it offers a glimpse of the political and international news that would have confronted any close reader of Canadian newspapers during the war and *Le Devoir* in particular. Though this is not a political history, it offers an account of what was most important to politics of the day.

Bourassa stands as one of the most intelligent figures willing to dissect the war for Canadians. A careful examination of his writing during the war connects him to an international dissident movement and reveals that he was more than just a domestic commentator. Bourassa presented a complex and detailed review of international events as well as his thoughts on them, reflecting his beliefs as a liberal nationalist, an ultramontane Catholic, and a French Canadian. Although he often advocated the same ideas as European dissenters, he remained firmly entrenched in a Canadian experience of the war. He was still a Canadian looking out to the world at war, willing to share what he thought of it even in the face of opposition, and above all he remained concerned with the future of his nation.

In [Chapter 1](#), I review Bourassa's life before the war. I introduce the major events that defined his career. From his entry into federal politics as a member of Wilfrid Laurier's Liberal Party in 1896, I trace Bourassa's growing dissatisfaction with Laurier's treatment of French Canada. Bourassa did not accept Laurier's moderate stance toward imperialist ideology, particularly when Laurier allowed volunteers to fight in the Boer War. Bourassa believed that Laurier's acquiescence to Britain's request for aid set a dangerous precedent that forever committed Canada to British foreign endeavours. The growing influence of imperialism on Canadian politics pushed Bourassa to look for other allies within his home province. As an influential member of the French Canadian *nationalistes*, he began his role as a non-partisan commentator on Canadian politics. He was deeply involved in national debates on a Canadian navy, the election of 1911, and the role of French Canadians in Confederation. I also explore the intellectual and historical contexts of Bourassa's career that subsequently shaped his response to the First World War.

I turn to the first months of the war in [Chapter 2](#). Bourassa initially supported Canadian involvement – asking for moderation and a limited

war effort – and ultimately affirmed that the war was worth fighting. I detail the responses of his English Canadian and French Canadian critics, for their hostility played a crucial role in isolating Bourassa from the rest of the country. In the last months of 1914, he alone critically examined the war for a national audience. Not even fellow nationalist J.S. Ewart was prepared to contravene the developing dominant Canadian narrative of the war. Bourassa presented to his readers a detailed exploration of the causes of the war, which according to him were not simply the defence of Belgium but also reflected British interests in Europe as well as Russian claims to Constantinople. He urged his fellow Canadians to approach the war in pursuit of Canadian – not British – goals. Although some commentators agreed that Bourassa had a right to express his views, his attempts to communicate his thoughts on the war to an audience in Ottawa nearly caused a riot in December 1914. The year ended with Bourassa realizing that English Canada cared little for the substance and tone of his arguments.

In [Chapter 3](#), I deal with Bourassa’s search in 1915 for other voices in the world that opposed the war. Bourassa reviewed the work of Britain’s anti-war group, the Union of Democratic Control, as well as the efforts of Pope Benedict XV to mediate the conflict. Events such as the Second Battle of Ypres and the sinking of the *Lusitania*, which convinced others of the necessity of the war, had little impact on the French Canadian journalist. Instead, he scorned the Canadian war effort, which only seemed to grow more extensive and encompassing. That December he published his first major book on the war, *Que devons-nous à l’Angleterre?* (What Do We Owe England?), which summarized his opposition to the conflict. Bourassa furnished a wide-ranging historical review of Canadian history to argue that Canada had no obligation to fight Britain’s war. Britain was obliged to defend Canada, but there was no reciprocal relationship. By unquestioningly approving Canada’s entry into the war, Bourassa believed, an “imperialist revolution” was taking place. Its transformation of the Canadian nation could not continue unimpeded, and Bourassa vowed to continue combatting its influence.

I explore in [Chapter 4](#) Bourassa’s growing dissent, epitomized in the correspondence with his cousin serving in the Canadian army, Talbot Mercer Papineau, in the summer of 1916. Bourassa had disavowed any support for the war in January at the annual celebration of the anniversary of *Le Devoir*. From that point onward, his writings became increasingly hostile to the forces supporting the war in both French and English Canada, including the Catholic episcopacy. He published another book, *Hier*,

aujourd'hui, demain (Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow), that repeated his arguments from December. Bourassa expanded his views on the nature of the imperialist revolution to include its influence on the Catholic hierarchy in Quebec. He also envisioned what the end of the war might look like, and he emphatically supported future independence from Britain. His half French Canadian and half American cousin, Papineau, had joined the Canadian forces in August 1914. His time in the trenches profoundly affected his political beliefs about the war, and he wrote to Bourassa urging him to change his views. Bourassa dismissed Papineau's arguments since they paid no attention to his deep exploration of the war from the previous months. Papineau lectured Bourassa about the meaning and significance of the war without any knowledge that Bourassa had already set out a contrary position in great detail.

In [Chapter 5](#), I focus on Bourassa's examination of international issues. Bourassa affirmed support for the worldly perspective of Pope Benedict XV in August 1916 and studied the goals and plans of the Union of Democratic Control. In December, he detailed the peace proposal from Germany and the Allied response to it for his readers, asking that it be considered honestly if only because it held the possibility of ending the terrible conflict. Likewise, he supported President Wilson's request that the belligerent nations clearly explain their war aims. In the early months of 1917, the United States gradually became more involved in the war and eventually entered it that April. Bourassa, who often visited the United States at this time, offered a comprehensive perspective on American politics and why the country had entered the war after three years of neutrality. He analyzed these international events in far more depth than any other Canadian writer at the time. In his assessment, the failure to achieve peace and the American entry into the war further emphasized its futility and the growing threat of militarism.

I return in [Chapter 6](#) to the home front as Bourassa confronted Canada's enactment of conscription legislation in May 1917. Forced military service was an important element of a militarist society, and Bourassa opposed it at all costs. Prime Minister Borden's involvement in the Imperial War Cabinet, which nominally gave a voice to Canada in imperial affairs, was of little importance to Bourassa unless it was matched by a reasonable policy focused on Canada's national interests. The ineffectiveness of Borden's new role was clear when, on his return to Canada, Borden announced that there would be conscription. Bourassa warned that society could withstand only so much pressure before something broke. He

foresaw violence and unrest if conscription was imposed on people who could not express themselves democratically. The journalist denounced the lacklustre debate in the House of Commons when few federal politicians turned against the war that made conscription necessary. Violence in Montreal that summer confirmed Bourassa's fears.

In [Chapter 7](#), I cover the final months of Bourassa's commentary during the war. I analyze his reaction to Borden's election legislation in August and September 1917 as well as Borden's successful efforts to forge a coalition of Conservatives and Liberals in favour of conscription. Bourassa and Laurier reunited after almost two decades to oppose conscription, with both perceiving the dominance of English Canadians as a threat to Canada's national unity. If English Canadians controlled Parliament, then they could pass legislation without any concern for French Canadian views. After Borden won the election that December, Bourassa lamented the isolation of French Canada – isolated because it alone had remained loyal to the Canada of 1867, whereas the rest of the country had embraced militarism and total war. His writing became increasingly dissentious as he continued to hope for a peaceful end to the war. As men were called up for conscription in March 1918, riots broke out in Quebec. Bourassa urged calm, anxious that social unrest could turn into rebellion or revolution. The Easter Riots were quelled, but the federal government passed new censorship laws as a result. Bourassa voluntarily agreed to stop writing in *Le Devoir*; and his commentary effectively ceased from April 1918 to the end of the war.

By the war's end in 1918, Bourassa was not the same man as the one who had witnessed its beginning in 1914. His liberalism, once firmly entrenched in a classical British form, shifted as he aligned with the views of radical liberals and socialists in Britain opposed to the war – though perhaps he did not realize it. His nationalist dream of a Canadian identity that united French and English peoples seemed to be impossible after the crisis over conscription and the December 1917 election. His vision of a bilingual, bicultural, and liberal Canada that he had fostered for decades was dimmed. Bourassa emerged from the war doubting the capability of humanity to resolve the problems that plagued it. Instead, he turned toward his Catholic faith as the last bastion of rationality and hope for a broken world. It seemed to him that only the compassionate stance of Pope Benedict XV had survived the war uncorrupted. Elsewhere, the war's extreme sacrifices and the totality of the conflict left no space for moderation, sound judgment, or goodwill. Although Bourassa never set foot on the battlefields, his war was still a traumatic and haunting experience.

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Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: Duty to dissent : Henri Bourassa and the First World War / Geoff Keelan.

Names: Keelan, Geoff, author.

Description: Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20190156856 | Canadiana (ebook) 20190156864 |

ISBN 9780774838825 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780774838849 (PDF) |

ISBN 9780774838856 (EPUB) | ISBN 9780774838863 (Kindle)

Subjects: LCSH: Bourassa, Henri, 1868–1952 – Political and social views. |

LCSH: World War, 1914–1918 – Canada. | LCSH: World War, 1914–1918 –

Québec (Province) | LCSH: Journalists – Québec (Province) – Biography. |

LCSH: Politicians – Québec (Province) – Biography. | CSH: Canada – Politics

and government – 1911–1921. | LCSH: Canada – English-French relations –

History – 20th century. | LCSH: Devoir (Montréal, Québec) | LCGFT: Biographies.

Classification: LCC FC556.B68 K44 2019 | DDC 971.061/2092—dc23

Canada

UBC Press gratefully acknowledges the financial support for our publishing program of the Government of Canada (through the Canada Book Fund), the Canada Council for the Arts, and the British Columbia Arts Council.

This book has been published with the help of a grant from the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, through the Awards to Scholarly Publications Program, using funds provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Set in NewBaskerville and Galliard by Apex CoVantage, LLC

Copy editor: Dallas Harrison

Proofreader: Lauren Cross

Cover designer: Michel Vrana

UBC Press

The University of British Columbia

2029 West Mall

Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2

www.ubcpress.ca