

Soldiers from the Farther North: A Research Note on Canadians in the Union Army in the American Civil War

Nicholas Blaine and Rebecca Mancuso*
Bowling Green State University

In 1896, Edward Dodds, a sergeant in the 21st New York Cavalry, received the Congressional Medal of Honor for his valorous service in the American Civil War. In the thick of fighting at a now little-known 1864 engagement at Ashby's Gap, Virginia, Dodds braved enemy fire to carry his wounded captain to safety. Clearly, Dodds was willing to risk his own life to save an esteemed commander, but what had motivated Dodds to enlist in the Union Army in the first place? Love of country and a sense of duty may not have been his strongest motives; Dodds was born in England and lived much of his young life in Ontario, Canada. Crossing the border at age eighteen, he enlisted for the 21st New York at Buffalo. At war's end, he returned to Canada to settle in Hope, Ontario, where he farmed and served as town clerk, and remained until his death in 1901.¹

* Nicholas Blaine is a University Fellow studying at the John Glenn School of Public Affairs at The Ohio State University. He has a current research interest in community development and assistance policy. Nicholas is an alumnus of Bowling Green State University where he received a Bachelor of Arts in History, Political Science, and Sociology.

Rebecca Mancuso is an Associate Professor in History at Bowling Green State University in Ohio, where she coordinates the Canadian Studies program. She received her PhD in history from McGill University. For 2013, she received the Fulbright Research Chair in History at the University of Calgary. Dr Mancuso can be reached at rmancus@bgsu.edu.

The American Civil War, as scholars have shown, had serious implications for Britain and certainly for Britain's North American territories, now Canada, which existed as a collection of colonies called British North America. This research note engages with existing scholarship to portray the American Civil War as a continental conflict, one in which the British territories could not remain impassive. Leadership in the Northern States, indignant about Southern secession and Britain's claim of neutrality, considered using its fully mobilised military to accrue additional lands to the north. For many of the British North American colonists, the violence to the south heightened anxieties regarding their own economic and political futures. It is well known, too, that the American Civil War played a role in the decision of several provinces to create a formal federation, the new Dominion of Canada.² What remains to be examined, however, is the question of why thousands of Canadians took up arms to fight on the side of the Union. Preliminary research reveals that various personal motivations and interpretations of the conflict's meaning drove Canadians to become involved in one of the largest wars in American – and Canadian – history.

What were the rationales of ordinary Canadians who joined the ranks of the Union Army during the Civil War? Existing literature tends to provide broad assertions about their involvement, while offering little substantiation. The letters, newspaper articles, memoirs, diaries and other writings in English located thus far can give voice to Civil War experiences from a British North American perspective, but finding primary sources on Canadian involvement in the war remains a challenge, and French language sources have been scarcely examined. Not everyone who joined from British North America fought for the reasons this paper presents, but the decisions outlined

here are reflective of an awareness of international relations and the ramifications of a major war taking place beyond the border of British North America.

Canadians' reasons for enlistment arose from webs of reasoning that drew them into the conflict. There is evidence that some were afraid of the Northern States' ambition to conquer Canada and accordingly joined in order to persuade the Union that British North America was not an enemy. Others simply wanted a good adventure and a job that paid them well. Some were frustrated by the endurance of slavery decades after the British Empire abolished the institution, and wanted to take part in efforts to eradicate it. Although the motivations behind enlisting with the Union were different for each soldier, the reasons we have uncovered can be categorised into four areas. British North Americans (some of whom, of course, were ethnically French) became involved out of fear of United States imperialism, for economic gain, for a desire for adventure, and to contribute toward the abolition of slavery. These reasons often intersected, and appear to have crossed regional, ethnic, and racial lines.

The large scale engagement of Canadians in the American Civil War took place despite Britain's stated position of neutrality in the conflict. The Imperial Government remained neutral largely in order to avoid a war with the Union over British North America.³ In previous conflicts British North Americans readily took up arms to fight in defence of their colonial rulers' interests as well as their own, such as during the War of 1812, but this was the first time numerous individuals engaged in a war without sanction from London.⁴ Estimates of the total number of soldiers involved vary widely from just over 21,000 to more than 55,000. Historian Robin Winks, who has written extensively on this question, has scrutinised the commonly cited estimate that 40,000 men ventured south to fight in America's war, showing that unsystematic recordkeeping

during the conflict prevents any certainty on the figure. What is clear is that many Canadians placed an important stake in a war fought on their doorstep. The thousands who did enlist is an indicator of the war's importance to British North America.

Settling on adequate terminology to discuss British North Americans' involvement is challenging. Some soldiers, such as Donald Forbes, had immigrated to the US from Canada – was he Canadian or American? Moreover, Union officers did not have a uniform means of classifying French speaking recruits, and in many cases they did not even bother to try.⁵ Francophones from British North America referred to themselves as *Canadiens*, a term used since the French regime. Historians have revealed that many ethnically French individuals who enlisted came from families that had migrated to the United States, settling in the New England states.⁶ As Vincent Cheng has demonstrated, ethnicity can be in part self defined,⁷ thus many US-born Francophones identified as *Canadiens*, and English speaking immigrants from Canada as Canadians. For the purposes of this paper, both groups will be included in our definition of “Canadians.”

Fear of US Imperialism

Sources suggest the great irony that many Canadian recruits disliked or even feared the United States. In effect, many Canadians fought for the Union in spite of their distaste for American culture in order to pursue another goal: opposing a rise in US power. A common Union marching song arose early in the war: “Secession first he would put down/ Wholly and forever,/And afterwards from Britain's crown/ He Canada would sever.”⁸ Britain and Canada had repelled invasion attempts by the United States in the Revolutionary War and War of 1812, and the fear persisted that with the concept of Manifest Destiny as alive as ever, another invasion might be

attempted.⁹ Early in the war, it was rumoured that the North was likely to give up its efforts to take the South and would therefore attempt to capture British North America, a rumour reinforced by British North American newspapers.¹⁰ This general fear would later be a factor in Canada's Confederation, and appeared to push some soldiers to enlist into the Union in the hope that the US would view British North America in a positive light.

Did some of the early Canadian enlisted men fear that they would end up assisting with the invasion of their own country? It appears so. This fear led some to petition President Lincoln not to pursue this course of action.¹¹ Newton Wolverton, a sixteen year old Canadian who enlisted at the outset of the war, led a delegation of British North American Union soldiers who spoke to Lincoln, telling him that they did not enlist to fight Canada. Wolverton would continue to serve as an unofficial spokesperson on behalf of Canadians for the remainder of the war.¹² Although no substantial evidence exists that suggests Lincoln intended to follow through with an invasion plan, it was a likely motivator for additional Canadians to enlist in the war effort in the hopes of appeasing the Union.

There were detriments to joining American forces. The Imperial Government instated an empire wide Foreign Enlistment Act in 1818 that prohibited any citizens of the empire from enlisting to fight in a foreign war unless the empire took a side in the conflict.¹³ The policy was, however, only unevenly enforced in the Civil War. In times of high unemployment in Canada, provincial governments benefited from overlooking laws designed to insulate them from involvement in America's conflicts in order to provide an economic outlet for their people.¹⁴ Even though those who did participate in the conflict were breaking the law, British North American courts charged them only in several token incidents. One of these was the case of Colonel Arthur

Rankin. The colonel, characterised as a bizarre adventurer and showman by his biographers, took an unusually strong interest in the Civil War. This surveyor and owner of copper mines, Canadian military officer and creator of a Wild West touring act showed his moral outrage for slavery when helping an African American evade pursuers while on Lake Erie vessel in 1837.¹⁵ After the outbreak of the Civil War, Rankin envisioned creating a regiment comprised largely of Canadians to fight for the Northern cause. Once he had gained permission and a military commission from President Lincoln, Rankin set out to recruit Canadians, over a thousand if possible, for his lancer unit. Many Canadians expressed outrage at his acceptance of a foreign commission, and such a blatant breach of the Foreign Enlistment Act led to his arrest but no conviction. With Rankin forced to stop recruiting and give up his commission, “Rankin’s Lancers” were defunct by 1862.¹⁶

Rankin’s activities were part of a larger, troubling phenomenon as far as British and Canadian officials were concerned. Union military officers did not hesitate to cross the border into Canada to recruit, leaving the colonial governments resentful of such incursions and uncertain of how to respond. There was a general uneasiness in British North America regarding the phenomenon, especially as stories of unscrupulous practices of American recruiters emerged. In a practice called “crimping,” recruiters resorted to providing alcohol to young men, making false promises about compensation, or outright abduction.¹⁷ Victims of such coercion had little recourse once in the American forces. Recruiting activities north of the US border complicated Anglo-American relations, but did not spark serious incident.¹⁸

Crimping was not just an affront to individual British North Americans’ autonomy. British North America needed men to reinforce its own garrisons, which several colonies did after the Confederate attack on Fort Sumter,¹⁹ alarmed by growing instability south of the border.²⁰ In the

newspapers, talk of a need to defend BNA was viewed as a hostile stance by the Union.²¹ In recognising this, Roseltha Wolverton expressed support to her brother, a Union soldier from Canada, noting that she hoped Canada's attempt to defend itself would be seen as a means for "preventing instead of causing trouble."²² Thus, some Canadians saw joining the North as a means of protecting their homeland. Further research is needed to determine whether fear of invasion of Canada was a strong motivator for enlistment among Canadian men.

Wages

Earning a living wage in mid-nineteenth century Canada remained difficult for the working classes.²³ Historians have demonstrated that low wages and seasonal unemployment made already hard lives wretched.²⁴ Into the 1860s, thousands of Canadians crossed the border of the United States on a daily basis to work in New England factories, and even more lived in the US and sent money home.²⁵ Military service in the US offered another opportunity to make money. In the sources uncovered so far, wages and bonuses played a role in the choice of many Canadians to join the Union Army. In the recruiting campaign launched in southern Canada by Colonel Rankin, the rate of pay listed was \$13 per month for privates, with the promise of a \$100 bonus upon being discharged along with the possibility to earn more money through additional bonuses.²⁶ Although the Rankin campaign was unsuccessful in creating an all-Canadian unit, it likely drew thousands from Canada to fight in the conflict.²⁷

Joining the ranks of the Union offered a simple solution that in part accounted for the first wave of Canadians who joined the war. A few years into the conflict, Donald Forbes of Chippewa, Canada West, found himself in this position. He had travelled to New York in search of work, and

when the tailor he worked for went out of business due to wartime trade disruptions, he wrote to his mother in Canada noting that his only option was to enlist in the Union Army.²⁸ At the time, Forbes was desperately begging his parents to send him money. With the opportunity to make upwards of \$20 a week along with an ostensible \$300 signing bonus, the incentive to join was overwhelming. The number of Canadian immigrants was so sizable that many units contained Canadians, especially in New York. Some regiments were predominantly French speaking as the war began.²⁹

Forbes' letters provide valuable insight on why he enlisted. He often spoke of the money he earned; for example, he wrote to his mother on May 8, 1862, about how stressful he found military service, but still emphasised the amount of the money he earned at five specific points in his letter, drawing the focus away from the war and onto finances.³⁰ At the very least, fair compensation was likely an important factor leading Canadians to enlist.

One of the key factors that increased enlistments among British North Americans was a new policy in the Northern States that allowed foreign soldiers to take the place of Americans who were drafted into the Union army. When this policy was adopted in late 1863, Americans had the ability to buy their way out of the draft by finding a replacement soldier. Upon enlisting, this soldier would be paid a bonus by the person they were replacing and would receive their promised pay from the Union for their service.³¹ The benefits to Canadians were immense, especially considering the size of the enlistment bonus, often \$300. William Reeves, of London, Canada West (now Ontario), replaced a conscripted American in order to receive an enlistment bonus before serving for the remainder of the war. Reeves also demanded, and received, a US pension in

the 1920s for his military service.³² Another, Archibald Shotwell, left London to take the place of a wealthy Detroit resident.³³ There surely many others accepted the inducement.

This process was open to several types of abuse. Recruiters resorted to deception about pay and enlistment bonuses to entice Canadians. Although a poster could promise a large signing bonus, upon enlisting, the soldier could soon find out that he had been misled. As Forbes learned the hard way, not all the promises of the recruiters were kept. When he joined the military, he was promised a \$300 bonus for enlisting, but was only given \$100.³⁴ Despite this, the pay of \$22 per month was still enough of an incentive to Forbes not to desert even after realising he had been deceived. Desertion, of course, brought its own problems.

Some Canadians managed to turn a sizeable profit from the system rather than be swindled. Because of the considerable size of these bonuses, some Canadian soldiers were led to enlist, desert, then enlisted again at a later date to make more money.³⁵ Historian Claude Bélanger has shown that the absent without leave (AWOL) rate for Canadians was higher than for any other foreign group that fought in the US Civil War because, after receiving their signing bonus, it was relatively easy to return to their home country.³⁶ This practice, however, was the exception and not the rule as most Canadians maintained their position in the military. One extreme example appears in the diary of Rémi Tremblay, who admitted his willingness to leave one side of the war for the other in order to make more money. After deserting his Union regiment, he attempted to join up with Confederate forces to secure a bonus, but returned to his unit in the North to avoid a court martial.³⁷ The number of cases of successful re-enlistments was curbed early in the war as officials noted the problem. Union General H. B. Carrington, reporting this problem to the United States Government, saw fit to court martial and execute two Canadians who had enlisted three times.³⁸

The Union military was initially able to reach its recruitment quotas; thousands of enthusiastically enlisted for their own reasons early in the war. But as the conflict revealed its gruesome character, casualties were not so easily replaced. Americans deliberately looked north of the border, “unofficially” offering bounties to individuals who could bring Canadians into the Union army, against their will if necessary.³⁹ In one case, six Canadians wrote to the Governor General of British North America, Lord Monck, to ask for his intervention on behalf of a sixteen year old named Alfred Brossoit. Brossoit had been drinking with a Union recruiter who allegedly coerced him into signing up for a regiment while intoxicated.⁴⁰ Even though US law forbade the enlistment of foreign soldiers and the enlistment of soldiers who could not speak English, these laws were ignored as bounty sharing and the desperate need for recruits led US officials to take everyone and anyone they could find.⁴¹ However, it appears that these efforts were unsuccessful in recruiting large numbers into the Union ranks.

While Canadians would not likely have the devotion to fight for the US without compensation, it is unclear how much of a motivator wages were to the average Canadian soldier who enlisted in the war. In the same vein, it would be difficult to accept on its face that thousands of Canadians would risk their lives only for financial gain. Regardless, the promise of more money later in the war helped retention, particularly among foreign soldiers. Recruitment contracts into the Union forces expired after a few years of service, so soldiers had an incentive not to desert in order to re-enlist for a bonus if the war continued. Canadian soldier Thomas Moore explained that in his unit, any soldier who re-enlisted two years into the war would receive a \$1000 bonus, including \$400 that was paid up front.⁴² The opportunity for additional large bonuses helps to further explain why more Canadians did not enlist and then go AWOL at their first opportunity.

Adventure

As simple as it may sound, Canadians ventured into the War Between the States to seek out new experiences, believing the war to be a grand adventure worth joining. When Thomas Moore enlisted, he was only sixteen years old and sought to escape from tedium.⁴³ Unaware of the ravages that battle could mete out, Moore and his brother saw the conflict as an opportunity to alter the pace of life. The idea of marching into a foreign war without being ordered to by the British reflected a new found sense of independence, perhaps from their families, their small towns, or dull jobs.⁴⁴

Without any experience for comparison, young men did not fear the war but were enticed by travel and adventure. Like Moore, Donald Forbes wrote about his desire to see what the fighting might be like, claiming that he could not wait until he gained “a vast amount of experience” as a soldier.⁴⁵ In reality, the Civil War would prove to be horrendously bloody, but like many Americans, the Canadians romanticised war and enlisted believing the war would be short and without much bloodshed. Forbes had considered an enlistment in August of 1863 because the war was nearly “wound up,” but would his decision when the reality of the conditions became clear.⁴⁶ Although some Canadians possessed limited military experience, having served in volunteer militias, Canada had not experienced major engagements with heavy Canadian losses since the Seven Years War, leading to misconceptions about the life of a soldier. Alonzo Wolverton certainly did not expect the horrors he witnessed during his very first Civil War battle. He wrote to his sister that he had never seen such smoke like the fog of war he saw on the

battlefield. During the chaotic battle, he noted that “the only way we could tell when night came was by the stars.”⁴⁷

The sense of adventure, then, rarely lasted long. Rémi Tremblay, who joined the United States Regular Infantry at age sixteen, signed up “not for money but for glory.”⁴⁸ A year into the war, Tremblay deserted for several months to escape the dreadful fighting. Thomas Moore’s experience further illuminates some of the conditions that drove many Canadians to abandon their ranks. Moore, the youth who sought new adventures, described the rough conditions of the war after he reached his first encampment in Plattsburg, New York, bluntly as “mud, mud everywhere.”⁴⁹ Moore also revealed that early in the conflict, he felt homesick while with his unit. Moore’s memoirs suggest that a desire for adventure wore off most quickly after enlisting in the Union army.

Canadians’ everyday experience during the war did not vary a great deal from their American counterparts – they experienced the same intensity in battle as any American soldier. A. J. McDonald of Canada West served with distinction in fifteen of the bloodiest battles of the US Civil War, including the first battle of Fredericksburg, after which he was commissioned lieutenant, and Gettysburg.⁵⁰ He was reported to have been killed twice during the war, but would reunite with his unit shortly after each report. He is just one example to illustrate that Canadians were not limited to support roles, but rather experienced the war and all its horrors alongside the Americans.

Abolitionism

Though few historians have given it considerable attention, slavery had a long history in Canada. It was the case, however, that agriculture in British North America was characterised by small farms and thus never dependent on slave labor, ensuring that the institution would not become as widespread as in the United States.⁵¹ The British Empire enforced an end to the slave trade in 1833, with significant public support in both the British Isles and Canada.⁵²

The attitudes held by Canadians toward the Civil War were numerous and complex to say the least. Due to the perceived belligerence toward British North America from the United States, Canadian public opinion could be characterised as more anti-Northern than pro-Southern.⁵³ Bringing an end to slavery had some weight in this equation, as many Canadians saw the conflict in the same light as Henri Césaire Saint-Pierre, a soldier in the Seventy-sixth New York Regiment. Saint-Pierre explained that Canadians “were Christian soldiers fighting for a holy cause and like the crusaders of old.”⁵⁴ How many British North Americans saw an opportunity to hasten slavery’s end in the Confederacy by fighting for the Union army? Although soldiers certainly fought for this reason, identifying how many and what kind of soldier would do so is difficult for a number of reasons.

The call to end slavery served as a rallying point for Canadians sympathetic to the cause. Once the Union expressed the desire to end slavery in the South, some Canadians began to see the conflict as a crusade for freedom, rallying anti-slavery sympathisers to take up arms to abolish the institution.⁵⁵ Roseltha Wolverton, composing a letter after the assassination of President Lincoln, reflected on the accomplishments of all who fought with the Union. She wrote that the outpouring of grief in Canada regarding the President’s death “may be a means of binding the two nations

together in a common brotherhood.”⁵⁶ Those who fought in the war and their families recognised the contribution Canadians made toward fighting for a common ideological goal. By the end of the war, Roseltha’s brother Alonzo seemed to have a stronger connection with the rest of his unit and related to them as liberators and brothers in arms. Jean-Baptiste Rouillard survived the war and thus had the benefit of hindsight, but he asked at his regiment’s reunion in 1893, “What better justification of the presence of Franco-Americans in the United States could there be than to show that so many had fought for the cause of emancipation and liberty in the Civil War?”⁵⁷ The Canadian opinion toward the North improved once the Emancipation Proclamation was delivered. No longer was the Union just an imperial power trying to keep its land holdings under its control; rather, the North was now fighting for a cause that was “just and humane,” one that could be appreciated by all Canadians regardless of how they felt about the United States.⁵⁸

As scholars have noted, the Catholic Church in Canada East (now Quebec) began to emphasise the contribution French Canada made to the effort to destroy slavery.⁵⁹ The Church made the claim that more than 60,000 French Canadians took part in the war to end slavery in North America; however, such a high number, as mentioned, is unfounded. If the Church did indeed push more Canadians into the conflict, this was not Church leaders’ intention. The Church took a strong position against the slavery, while tending to remain sympathetic to the South’s right to secede from the Union. While many clergy took advantage of the opportunity to explain how Canadian decisions to fight were moral and just, their point was to emphasise the death and destruction in order to discourage further Canadian involvement.⁶⁰ The numbers of casualties were also inflated by the church – leaders claimed 14,000 Canadian deaths – to scare their followers into remaining in their French-speaking homeland of Canada East.⁶¹ Even more surprisingly, it appears

that ordinary *Canadiens* still fought on behalf of the Union despite their political belief supporting the southern states' right to secede. The dynamics of Francophone Canadians in the war were clearly complex, and demand additional research. Belanger suspects that francophone names in regimental lists and US immigration documents were changed or misspelled to an extent to render such documents nearly useless.⁶² Attempts to locate additional source sets, such as letters and diaries, on both side of the border would be time well spent.

In an attempt to guide further research, we have placed rationales for Canadians' involvement in the Civil War into four main categories. We realise, however, that the choice to enlist was at its core highly individualistic. Many felt a need or calling to join and fight on behalf of the Union, and in many cases this calling came from deep personal feeling. An analysis of the reasons provided here should not lead historians to overlook the ways in which these soldiers were individuals making rational choices when they enlisted. Records suggest that Canadians who did participate in the war were for the most part not recent immigrants to British North America, but were typically third or even fourth generation Franco and Anglo North Americans.⁶³ It could be said that these individuals possessed a connection to British North American that ran several generations deep, which makes their choice seem even more purposeful and deliberate.

It can also be claimed that Imperial authorities, by *not* actively preventing citizens of British North America from entering the war, allowed Canada greater autonomy. This may constitute a fruitful research area for historians of the British Empire. While the empire had clear provisions against allowing her citizens to enter foreign wars without consent, British North America only enforced these provisions to a small extent. Various enforcement agencies did stop

those who blatantly violated this policy, such as Colonel Rankin in his attempt to form an all-Canadian unit, but on the whole British North America did very little to curtail the flow of citizens across the border. In essence, English speaking authorities looked the other way as thousands of citizens poured into the conflict. Comparing the reactions and the rhetoric of English and French voices in Canada would yield interesting results.

The opportunity for future study of the Canadian soldiers in the Civil War is expansive to say the least. Was the initial cohort of Canadians largely seeking immediate economic relief, viewing enlistment as an opportunity to receive steady pay? And as hostilities worsened, and the perceived threat of an invasion by the Union grew, did more Canadians join in the hopes that Canadian support might appease the North? We venture that an additional wave of Canadians with abolitionist sentiment entered the war after Lincoln had issued the Emancipation Proclamation to support slavery's end in North America, and finally, that throughout the conflict, the draw of adventure lured many younger, and often underage, Canadians into the Union ranks. The variation found among when the soldiers enlisted shows that Canadians were neither homogenous in their rationales and that certain factors mattered more than others depending on the person, making the choice to enlist with the Union a highly personal one. The four reasons which brought Canadians into the American Civil War discussed here did not all hold the same weight depending on the timing of one's enlistment; in other words, different waves of a Canadians entered the war for different reasons. These categories are surely not inclusive, but we hope to have established some foundational reasons for Canadian enlistments that historians can ponder as additional sources come to light.

Although this paper presented information from a few accounts, focusing specifically on a few of the more detailed collections, many more surely exist, scattered in local and family archives, that have not explored by historians. For many scholars, the lack of available sources and complex nature of the reasons for which these Canadians fought may have hindered research in this field.⁶⁴ Regarding the secondary sources, they tend to explore statistics on how many joined, along with detailed information on a few select incidents, such as the Fenian Raids or the *Trent* Affair. While certainly significant, they largely overlook why British North Americans would travel to the United States to fight on that nation's behalf.

The American Civil War was not solely fought by soldiers of the States, and while it was domestic fight in a practical sense, the international ramifications forever changed the face of Canada as a nation. The veterans of the war carried the memories and scars with them back to their homeland in British North America; H. W. Weber of the 16th Regiment, New York State Volunteer Infantry, proudly showed his friends until his death, "the bullet, fired from a Confederate rifle" that nearly cost him his life.⁶⁵ His scars are just a few that Canadian soldiers bore. The forces which shaped the course of North American history were brought into fruition by average citizens, including Canadians, who took up arms for reasons only they fully understood and that scholars can one day hope to fully understand.

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⁴ *Ibid.* 4.

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