

*Statue of Sir Robert Borden*

The Right Honourable Sir Robert Borden was born over one hundred years ago in the small rural community of Grand Pré, Nova Scotia, the native province of three of Canada's prime ministers. He is remembered particularly by us as Canada's prime minister during the first world war.

Much has been written about Canada's role in the first world war and no doubt much will be written in the future. This was one of the most critical periods of Canadian history. Much progress has been made since confederation in the development of a strong and united nation, but the national fabric has never faced such a severe test and none could tell if it could withstand the strains imposed upon it.

Canadians were fortunate in those trying years to have as their leader a man of unquestionable integrity, a high sense of duty, a thoroughly trained mind and an exceptional capacity for unremitting hard work. Whatever opinions might be advanced on the policies which he pursued, his personal qualities and particularly his honesty and sincerity of purpose in seeking to serve his country well were outstanding.

Under Sir Robert Borden's leadership Canada made a contribution to the first world war which won the praise and admiration of her allies. In addition to his leadership at home, Sir Robert played an active role in the imperial war cabinet in London. He strove throughout the war to ensure that Canada should have a voice in the formulation of allied policy rather than limit her role to supplying men and material. With a wide and statesmanlike view of this country's capacities and her future, he sought to encourage his fellow citizens to accept their new and inevitable responsibilities.

In 1919 Sir Robert Borden was our chief plenipotentiary delegate at the peace conference in Paris, and in 1920 he signed the treaty of Versailles as the representative of Canada on terms of equality with the representatives of the other allied nations. In the same year Canada was admitted as an original member of the league of nations.

Another of Sir Robert's accomplishments at about the same time was to secure for Canada the right to have a minister plenipotentiary in Washington accredited by the King and appointed on the advice of the Canadian cabinet. Such an appointment, however, was only made several years later. Sir Robert also suggested at the imperial war conference of 1918 that Canada should decide its own constitutional questions. This, as you know, was accomplished in the last few years.

[Mr. St. Laurent (Quebec East).]

In his book, "Canada in the Commonwealth", published after his retirement, he welcomed the definition of the relations of Great Britain and the dominion contained in the Balfour report as "autonomous communities within the British empire, equal in status, in no way subordinate one to another in any respect of their domestic or external affairs, though united by a common allegiance to the crown and freely associated as members of the British commonwealth of nations."

"The dominions having sought and gained the status of nationhood", Sir Robert wrote, "they cannot recede from assumption of its responsibilities." And in the last lines of his book Sir Robert Borden expressed his hope that this freedom within the unity of the commonwealth was "an earnest of what may yet be accomplished in an ever wider sphere. The league of the commonwealth may serve as an exemplar to the league of nations."

(Translation):

Sir Robert devoted himself to his work with such energy that even his own vast physical resources proved unequal to the task. He was obliged to retire in 1920. Fortunately, he soon recovered his good health, a fact which enabled him to continue his active life for a number of years afterwards. I had the pleasure of hearing him in 1929 when he spoke before the Canadian Bar Association in Quebec city. I well remember him and the words he spoke on that occasion. During the war it was believed in certain quarters that he did not understand those Canadians belonging to the French-speaking group, and that he had no real sympathy for them. It is perhaps for that reason that he availed himself of that opportunity to speak of the very origin of Canadian history in the heart of the province of Quebec, in that city which he called the "founding city" of Canada. When he had finished speaking, he had removed any doubts we may have had about his real sympathy for French-speaking Canadians. May I be allowed to quote the last sentences of his speech:

(Text):

On the whole there has been an honourable and wholesome co-operation of the two races in the upbuilding of Canadian institutions and in the development of the heritage with which Providence has endowed the Canadian nation. The pioneer races are and they always will be distinctive but in their origins they are much nearer to each other than either seems to imagine. It is desirable to emphasize their points of sympathy and contact rather than their divergences of temperament and outlook.