

PE Islanders in the Prospect of War

By Randy McDONALD

No one will be surprised when the Persian Gulf War Part II begins.

We can take it for granted that, in no more than a month's time, the United States will have begun attacking Iraq no matter whether or not it gets the approval of the United Nations Security Council. We can also take it for granted that given the huge technological gap between the United States' almost science-fictional military forces in the Persian Gulf and Iraq's sanctions-depleted military, the war will end with an American military victory.

Whether or not the United States will be able to effectively manage post-war Iraq is another question, but that doesn't really matter: What does matter is that the United States will find itself in charge of a country halfway around the world with a very troubled past, and that this will change everything.

Everything outside of Prince Edward Island, of course, at least for the time being. The Island has never had a very high foreign-policy profile, and more to the point, it has never had a military past, since Prince Edward Island has never been a contested frontier. There has never been any major conflict fought over the possession of Prince Edward Island, nothing that spurred the local population to prepare to take up arms, not since Prince Edward Island's conquest in the Seven Years War.

The worst that Islanders directly

suffered was the sacking of Charlottetown by dastardly American privateers back in 1775, but even then apart from the theft of "The Great Seal" and the Governor's property no harm was done: It wasn't as if Islanders ended up waging a bitter years-long guerrilla war against cruel Yankee overlords.

That isn't to say that Island society in the 19th century didn't have its fair share of disputes and problems. Look at the Mi'kmaq who lost their land;

look at the Catholics who didn't get the right to vote for decades; look at the Acadians who got pushed to the margins of Island life; look, for that matter, at the Irish and Scottish immigrants who got displaced by the Triple Revolution back home. Still, nothing gelled: The Belfast Riots were as violent as Island life got.

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And next to the War of American Independence, every other conflict--the War of 1812, the American Civil War, even the Fenian Raids--were minor scares. Sir Andrew MacPhail, writing in *The Master's*

Wife observed how all of the different wars of the 19th century--from the Battle of Waterloo to the Franco-Prussian War--were just background noise. And then, the First World War came:

Sir MacPhail wrote in *The Master's Wife* that "when the war of 1914 broke out, local opinion was calm. One neighbour was unmoved by the invasion of Belgium. He thought it 'a bad thing interfering in another man's business.' This was an affair between two neighbours. Another man was sure that 'war would make good prices,' and he recited his remembrance of the American Civil War. John Macqueen depended upon the Navy. He was certain the German ships would 'hide in the creeks.'"

Many casual observers of Island history don't know this, but even at the beginning of the First World War--before trench warfare, when Canadians (English Canadians, at least) could still enthusiastically rally behind the illusions of an all-conquering patriotism--Islanders were reluctant to sign up with the Canadian Expeditionary Force. There wasn't a large pool of unemployed urban males (a prime demographic for recruiters) since the Island didn't have a large urban population at all. There weren't plenty of British-born immigrants (another key population group) eager to rally to the defence of the Empire and the Mother Country, since immigration from Britain to the Island had stopped a half-century before 1914. There was a very large farming population in an economy where labour was a precious commodity, and there was even then a long and hon-

ourable tradition of the bored and under-employed young emigrating far away from the Island.

The Persian Gulf War Part II can never hope to claim, in the Canadian imagination, any more than a small fraction of the patriotism generated by the First World War. Not that it matters, since we live in an era where the Canadian armed forces have been almost entirely retooled to peacekeeping purposes, and when a distinct Canadian foreign policy has long since fallen by the wayside.

21st century Canada will be to the coming conflict what Prince Edward Island was a century ago to the First World War: A helpless bystander, far from the field of battle and from the councils of state where the future of a good chunk of the world will be decided. Our well-meaning claims to neutrality and our preference for a peaceful solution will mean as little as the opinions of any of MacPhail's neighbours. (And our hawks will migrate south: Look at David Frum, inventor of the Axis of Evil.)

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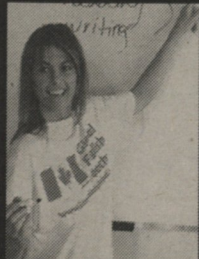
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