Acadiensis

ACADIENSIS

Perpetual Centennial Project:
Twenty Years of the Documents on Canadian External Relations Series

David MacKenzie

Volume 20, numéro 1, autumn 1990

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad20_1re07

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Éditeur(s)

The Department of History of the University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0044-5851 (imprimé)
1712-7432 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer ce document

MacKenzie, D. (1990). Perpetual Centennial Project:: Twenty Years of the Documents on Canadian External Relations Series. *Acadiensis*, *20*(1), 264–274.

Collins book is a gripping work partly because people take precedence over institutions. It has become commonplace for historians to accept the return of the narrative to our discipline. The books reviewed indicate the reason. Those that are the most successful allow people centre stage. However, a stage is necessary and it is the social context that provides that stage. The best medical history combines the two. Some of the books reviewed here manage both; others do not. Unfortunately within the field of medical history there is simply no consensus about the nature of history. This is not surprising considering the vast array of people from other disciplines and walks of life who write it. History is perhaps one of the most approachable of fields. Although this is one of its strengths, many automatically assume that it is easy to write, which is not the case. What the books reviewed reveal is the variety of audiences for the history of medicine. With the possible exception of one or two, they were not written for academic readers, but for a limited non academic audience. Some were written for a wide popular audience. Does the writing of history change depending on the readership? From an examination of these books it is clear that it does. The question unanswered is whether it should.

WENDY MITCHINSON

The Perpetual Centennial Project: Twenty Years of the Documents on Canadian External Relations Series

"I REFER TO THE DESIRABLENESS OF establishing a more systematic mode of dealing with what I may term, for want of a better phrase, the *external affairs* of the Dominion. It is commonly supposed that such matters are now administered by the department of which I am the deputy head, but this is a misapprehension", wrote Joseph Pope in 1907. Pope, under secretary of state for external affairs, was concerned with the apparent confusion in government circles over the preparation and circulation of despatches dealing with foreign or imperial questions. Who was in charge of the country's imperial and foreign relations? Who was responsible for the paperwork? "The practical result of the system in vogue", he continued, "is that there does not exist to-day in any department a complete record of any of the correspondence to which I have alluded.... Even now, I am of opinion that it would be an extremely difficult task to construct from our official files anything approaching to a complete record of any of the international questions in which Canada has been concerned during the past

fifty years".[1]

As a remedy for such problems, Pope actively supported the creation of the Department of External Affairs (DEA) to act as that agency to gather and store the documents on external issues, and to serve as a channel of communication with other states. Almost 60 years later, as part of its 1967 centennial celebrations, the DEA decided to publish its documents so that the general public could have easier access to them too. Thus began the *Documents on Canadian External Relations* (*DCER*) series, which surveys Canadian external relations from the origins of the Department in 1909 through the Second World War to the beginning of the cold war in 1946. After 20 years and 11 volumes,[2] it is time to reflect on the series as a whole.

A number of different editors have been in charge of the volumes in the *DCER* series,[3] but with only slight variations the general purpose of the enterprise has remained constant. In the words of one editor:

> The volumes constitute the basic published record of the foreign policy and international relations of the Government of Canada. They are designed, within the confines of manageable space and size, to provide a comprehensive self-contained record of the major foreign policy decisions taken by the Government of Canada, and of the reasons for taking them, as well as of the major international events and trends affecting Canada, as evidenced mainly in the files of the Department of External Affairs.
>
> The documents selected are intended to illustrate the formulation and implementation of Canadian policy in the field of international relations. No documents will be omitted in order to gloss over or conceal what might in perspective be considered to be mistaken or misguided policies.[4]

Ramsay Cook's words (written nearly 20 years ago in a review of volumes 1 and 2) that "almost any research worker could suggest either alternative principles or alternative documents within the limits of the stated guidelines", still ring true today.[5] The problems and pitfalls of document selection are obvious and numerous,

1 "Memorandum from Under-Secretary of State to Civil Service Commissioners", 25 May 1907, *DCER*, volume 1, document 1, p. 1.

2 The most recent volume to appear in print is number 10, but it constitutes the 11th *DCER* volume, since volume 12 has already been published (1977).

3 The editor(s) of volume 1 remains anonymous; the others are: R.A. MacKay (volume 2), Lovell Clark (volume 3), Alex Inglis (volumes 4 and 5), John Munro (volume 6), David Murray (volumes 7 and 8), John Hilliker (volumes 9 and 10), and Donald Page (volume 12).

4 *DCER*, volume 7, p. ix.

5 Ramsay Cook, "From Lord Grey to Lloyd George", *International Journal*, XXVI, 1 (Winter

and individual views and editorial partisanship can complicate matters further. The selection of each telegram, letter or memo is important, as is every omission, and the reader is forced to rely on the editor's judgement. Despite such self-evident assertions, however, one can still ask if this collection of documents can stand on its own merits.

A few general comments can be made at the outset. First of all, the volumes are substantial in size and weight, and a handsome maroon-colour with black stripes and gold lettering. Judging from the library copies I have seen (some more than two decades old), they seem to be produced to last. The price of each volume has escalated with time, not unexpectedly, but the most recent volume suggests that the DEA expects no general market for the series. Volume 1 sold for $10 in 1967; thirteen years later volume 9 sold for $15; more recently, the price of volume 10 (published in 1989) has skyrocketed to $84.75.

Second, in the early volumes no specific information is given on the location of each printed document — surely an unforgivable sin. Moreover, much material is included from non-DEA collections in the National Archives — from the Borden, King, Meighen, Skelton, Christie, and other papers. If the *DCER* series is to be used as a research tool, the archival location of each document is essential information. Thankfully, beginning with volume 7 the DEA file number is included with each entry; unfortunately, those entries from non-DEA files are listed with irritating simplicity as "King Papers PAC", and so on.

Third, the early practice of including a list of documents at the front of the book was dropped with volume 9. These lists, which give a brief description of the contents of each document, are a considerable aid to the researcher and make the task of location and review far easier. The removal of the lists — for quite valid reasons of economy and space — has made that task much greater. It has also forced the reader to rely more on the volume's index, the value of which varies greatly with each volume. It is an unfortunate loss indeed.

Finally, it is striking to see how few documents appear in French. All the editorial additions — the index, table of contents, introduction, footnotes, etc. — are in both official languages, but the documents themselves appear only in the language of origin, which, for all intents and purposes, means English. No doubt the government would mumble words of protest that financial restrictions prevent a full-scale translation, but beyond reducing the value of the collection for francophones, it underlines the extent to which the conduct of Canadian external affairs has been carried out in English and dominated by anglophone leaders. No wonder so many francophones became discouraged when seeking a career in the DEA.

1970-71), p. 186.

The first two volumes in the series cover the period from the creation of the DEA until the end of the First World War and the signing of the Treaty of Versailles. The documents (for the most part, inter-governmental telegrams and personal correspondence between Borden and other leaders, occasional quotes from House of Commons Debates, and the odd Order-in-Council) reflect the highlights of Canadian foreign policy, and focus more on decisions made rather than the bureaucratic process behind them. "In the main", the editor of volume 1 explains, "the communications chosen usually reflect a senior level of government consideration and decision. Accordingly, memoranda and letters written by officials are not included, except in those rare cases in which they constitute either the best or the only sources of information".[6] The judgement behind this decision can be questioned.

Volume 1 sets a pattern followed in other volumes, with seven chapters on such broad topics as the war, imperial relations, the fisheries and boundary questions, an excellent section on Asian immigration, and a chapter covering Canada's relations with other countries. In the section on the war, the reader can trace the government's steps as it gradually increased Canadian troop strength, and increasingly called for more British and allied purchases of Canadian food and supplies. Problems with the Shell Committee are detailed in full, as are the financial difficulties of Canada's war effort and the attempts to raise capital. Perhaps of more interest for students of the era are the increasing number of telegrams calling for information about the conduct of the war, and conversely, how little information Borden actually received. The steps leading to the creation of the Imperial War Cabinet are all here, but, oddly, the reader must turn to the Imperial Relations chapter — following a section on the 1909 Imperial Conference — to find the documents on the Imperial War Cabinet. On another level, the chapter dealing with relations with other countries serves as a reminder of the surprisingly few bonds Canada had with states other than the United States and Great Britain. There are a few brief dealings with Denmark, France, Japan, Germany, and a handful of other states, but little of significance. It is an interesting exercise to watch how this section expands — slowly at first — in subsequent volumes.

Volume 2 is the shortest volume, and, perhaps, the best. It is barely 230 pages in length and devoted to a single topic: Canadian participation at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919. The document selection is good, the topic is coherent and complete, and the list of persons and synopsis of each document at the front eases the researcher's task. One does not find the full story of the Peace Conference here, only the Canadian story, and that from the point of view of the Canadians

6 *DCER*, volume 1, p. vii.

attending. Borden's uneasiness with Article X in the League Covenant (guaranteeing the territorial integrity of League members) is explained in full. And what is also evident is the degree to which Borden and his colleagues in Paris were on their own to make Canadian policy, and, conversely, how little input the small DEA had.

Volumes 3 and 4 cover the period from the signing of the peace settlement in 1919 to the end of the 1920s. The same formula for document selection as in earlier volumes was used, "except that a greater emphasis has been placed on the formulation of policy".[7] Some memoranda and more personal material have been included as a result, along with the ever-increasing correspondence with diplomatic and trade representatives abroad, as the Canadian consular service expanded. Broad topics are given extensive coverage: areas such as imperial relations, Canada's rather uncertain relationship with the fledgling League of Nations and other international organizations such as the Permanent Court on International Justice and Pan American Union. Of equal interest are the chapters dealing with Canadian-American relations in increasingly numerous trade, border and diplomatic fields. More specific events are given their due as well, including the appointment of a British high commissioner to Canada and a Canadian minister to Washington, the Washington Conference, the Imperial Conferences of 1923 and 1926, the 1929 Conference on the Operation of Dominion Legislation, and the other landmarks along the long bumpy road to Dominion status.

There is a dull sameness to most of these documents. For example, the Locarno Treaty (one of those landmarks) is dispensed with in a few brief telegrams in volume 3, none of which give any sense of either the importance or significance of the agreement to Canada. That Canadian policy was largely formulated inside Mackenzie King's head probably explains the absence of official documents, but their absence still leaves the reader unsatisfied. More aggravating, to find the Canadian government's official confirmation that it would not accept the obligations of the Locarno Treaty, the reader must turn to volume 4 (because the telegram was dated 8 January 1926) under the "Disarmament" section in the chapter entitled "Multilateral Arrangements". Such problems are not confined to the volumes covering the 1920s.

The 1930s are covered in two volumes, with volume 5 coinciding roughly with the Bennett years, ending in 1935 with the Riddell incident and the return of Mackenzie King to power. The editor (Alex Inglis) claims in his introduction that more happened in these years than historians have generally believed worthy of close scrutiny, and the documents bear out his claim. Here can be found the expected material: reams on imperial economic cooperation, Canada's

7 *Ibid.*, volume 4, p. ix.

participation in the League of Nations, general multilateral and bilateral international agreements, and lots of additional material on the less spectacular aspects of international affairs, particularly in that vast area of Canadian-American relations.

Likewise, volume 6 covers considerable ground, continuing the story of the expansion of Canadian legations abroad and the slow development of relations with countries other than the United States and the United Kingdom. The vital issues of the times are here, the coverage necessary though unspectacular: Munich is dispensed with in a few short polite telegrams and the long descent into war is catalogued with only rare glimpses into the thinking of those in charge of Canadian foreign policy. One longs for more documents that convey some sense of the times, of the deeper emotions of those involved in great matters of state. In one interesting and tantalizing memo on the Soviet-German non-aggression pact, for instance, O.D. Skelton blames British policy makers on all sides for the "greatest fiasco in British history".[8] Skelton's mood is angry and disillusioned; he realizes war is coming soon and that war would mean Canadian involvement. More such documents would greatly enhance this collection.

Other sections are devoted to trade questions, the development of civil aviation, the Pan American Union, and so on. Much here is mundane. The addition of the commonplace in the *DCER* series is a necessity if one hopes to achieve an accurate picture of Canadian external affairs, but, inevitably, it makes for some of the driest reading available in book stores. Only the dedicated scholar could wade through hefty chapters on water diversion or fishing disputes without distraction. And, given the chronological arrangement of the volumes and the lack of editorial comment or relief, each document comes across with equal force and significance despite the relative importance of the issue under consideration. The reader (at least this one) longs for selections from the King diaries to liven up the flow. Indeed, there are times when the King diaries (despite the obvious problems) may well give a more accurate picture of the conduct of Canadian external relations than the dusty memos and telegrams passing from legation to Ottawa.

Volumes 7 through 10 (and 11 when it is published) cover the years of the Second World War. Volume 7 (1939-41, part 1) deals with diplomatic relations (the exchange of high commissioners with Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Ireland, and the appointment of legations to Brazil and Argentina), the outbreak of the war, the defence of Greenland, the establishment of the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan and other imperial concerns, the collapse of France in 1940, and allied naval cooperation. It includes a good section on

8 Skelton memo, 22 August 1939, *ibid.*, volume 6, document 992, p. 1233.

imperial relations — with memos from King, Skelton and J.S. Macdonald — in which any thoughts of an imperial war cabinet were brushed aside. Almost half of part 2 (volume 8) is devoted to relations with the United States, and it includes long chapters on dealings with the governments-in-exile and relations with France and its possessions St. Pierre and Miquelon. The volume ends with a first class section on Japan and the deteriorating situation in the Far East. Central to the volume is the section on the 1940 Ogdensburg Declaration and the base-destroyer deal. Mackenzie King comes through in the role of mediator, trying hard to bring Roosevelt and Churchill together, and a clear connection between the destroyer deal and Ogdensburg emerges. In the middle of tense discussions between FDR and Churchill on the need for destroyers, "Mackenzie" is invited to meet the American President and the Ogdensburg Declaration — for the mutual defence of North America and the creation of the Permanent Joint Board on Defence — is produced.

Considering the far-reaching implications of the agreement, there was surprisingly little prior discussion in Canadian government circles. Surprising is perhaps the wrong word, for Mackenzie King was very much his own advisor in foreign affairs, and the documents (if only in their absence) quite rightly reflect this reality. But it is less satisfying for the reader, and, again, sections from the King diaries might be appropriate here, if only to give some sense of the drama of the situation. In addition, it might have been worthwhile to include some part of the lengthy document prepared in the Chateau Laurier at a July 1940 meeting of more than a dozen mandarins (including J.W. Pickersgill, R.B. Bryce, and J.R. Baldwin), politicians (Brooke Claxton and Paul Martin), businessmen and intellectuals (including F.R. Scott, Edgar Tarr, and R.G. Cavell) to consider "a startling new possibility: war on our shores".[9] The paper (dubbed the "Programme of Immediate Canadian Action") is described by Hugh Keenleyside in his memoirs, and was sent to the prime minister by Brooke Claxton, shortly before King left for Ogdensburg. It helps shed a little light on the "mind" of the Canadian bureaucratic elite before Ogdensburg, and shows that although King may have acted alone, he did not act without wide support, at least in some quarters.

Volume 9 is the functionalism volume. The rise of functionalism within the Department is catalogued as are the early attempts to apply the doctrine in a methodical way to international affairs. Here are excellent chapters on the beginnings of post-war planning — in trade, civil aviation and for the proposed United Nations. And, in addition to the regular chapters on imperial/Commonwealth relations and relations with other states, there are good sections on the

9 Hugh Keenleyside, *Memoirs of Hugh L. Keenleyside, volume 2, On the Bridge of Time* (Toronto, 1982), p. 49.

evolving financial relations with the United Kingdom that led to the wartime loans, and others on the raising of legations to embassy status. The Canadian-American chapters are particularly rewarding, with long sections covering several non-war issues (such as the fisheries, pelagic sealing, and border questions), in addition to wartime cooperation. The Alaska highway and Canol project sections are two of the most outstanding.

There are hundreds of documents on various war-related topics, naturally. Thanks to the editorial logic of beginning the 1942-43 volume with the bombing of Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941, the diplomatic intrigue over St. Pierre and Miquelon is cut in two, with volume 8 handling the relations with the Free French and the squabbling within the North Atlantic triangle, but it is left for volume 9 for the December 1941 Ottawa visit of Admiral Musilier, Commander-in-Chief of the Free French naval forces, and his subsequent raid on the islands on Christmas eve. The document selection is extensive, however, and includes Mackenzie King's message to Vincent Massey after he heard the news: "In view of circumstances of Free French occupation of St. Pierre today, do not send Christmas message to General de Gaulle".[10]

The functionalism theme of volume 9 is continued in volume 10, which contains almost 1,000 pages devoted to the conduct of the war and peace settlements in 1944-45. Included here are almost 200 pages of documents on financial relations with the UK, sections dealing with the relations of the Canadian forces with their allies and the Supreme Allied Command, prisoners of war, repatriation of Canadians abroad, refugees, and relief activities.[11] The focus is necessarily diplomatic; as the editor of an earlier volume points out, there is not sufficient space in these volumes even to begin touching on military questions. Thus the Normandy invasion is given limited coverage, with attention focusing on diplomatic concerns; for example, whether the Canadian forces should be mentioned specifically or submerged in an "allied" announcement of the invasion. A few months later, King, fretting over the need to introduce conscription, is writing Churchill asking how long the war will last and would Canadians be deeply involved in the fighting? Churchill would not bail King out from his manpower problems: fighting would continue for many months, Churchill replied, and yes, more troops — including Canadians — would be necessary.[12]

10 King to Massey, 24 December 1941, *DCER*, volume 9, document 1319, p. 1649.

11 Not included in this volume and saved for the future volume 11 (1944-45, part 2) are "the organization of the United Nations, atomic energy and other aspects of longer-term post-war planning, along with international organizations and conferences, the Commonwealth, and bilateral relations" (*DCER*, volume 10, p. xi).

12 High Commissioner in the UK to Dominion Secretary (message from King for Churchill), 22 October 1944; Churchill's response, 27 October 1944 and *DCER*, volume 10, document 330, p.

Volume 12, which covers 1946, is the first and only volume on the post war period. The first thing that strikes the reader is the evidence of the remarkable growth of the Department of External Affairs (producing the need for excellent charts on DEA organization and representatives abroad in the front and back of the book). By 1946 the number of DEA officers had quadrupled from 33 in 1939 to 132; the number of posts abroad had risen from 11 to 26. There were more people involved in the making of Canadian foreign policy. Canada had relations with more countries, while the process of policy formation had become more sophisticated, the issues more varied, and the actions of Canadian diplomats less merely reactive to outside events than in earlier times. The documents reflect these changes, and despite the obvious hurdles, volume 12 offers a wide and balanced selection, with chapters on the European and Japanese peace settlements, on atomic energy, civil aviation, international meetings and organizations, immigration and refugee policy, in addition to the more regular chapters on consular representation and relations with the Commonwealth, USA, and other states. Plus, there are more than 500 pages dealing with the United Nations. Clearly, far more has been left out than the 1277 printed documents — a pattern that no doubt will be repeated in subsequent volumes.

Throughout the series, as in any good encyclopedia or dictionary, the reader can always uncover some unknown (at least to the reader) bit of history. I was surprised to read of the March 1911 resolution of the Legislative Council of the Bahamas creating a joint commission to examine the benefits of joining the Canadian confederation.[13] The proposal never got off the ground, but the Bahamians were not the only ones with ideas for a greater confederation. In 1918, L.S. Amery discussed with Sir Robert Borden a proposal for the expansion of Canada to include Newfoundland and all the empire possessions in the Americas, hopefully as a way of improving Anglo-American relations. "My project", Amery noted, "would be the expansion of Canada into what would in fact be a Greater Dominion of British America including Newfoundland, the Bermudas, the West Indies, and even, if you liked to have them thrown in, the Falkland Islands". Borden's reply was polite: "The matter is one deserving of much consideration, and I am glad to have your views. I may add that it has already been discussed with the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom".[14] Were minutes taken from that conversation?

329, document 332, pp. 332-3. See documents 325-7, pp. 325-7, for a discussion of the invasion announcement.

13 13 March 1911, *ibid.*, volume 1, document 799, pp. 685-8.

14 Amery to Borden, 19 August 1918 and Borden to Amery, 4 September 1918, *ibid.*, documents 834-835, pp. 717-18.

Yet, what emerges from the series as a whole — despite the efforts of the editors to broaden their sources by including selections from non-DEA material — is very much the "official" side of Canadian external relations. Government decisions are rightly given full coverage, but the series is weaker on the policy-formation side of things. The peaks are there, but many of the valleys in Canadian external relations are travelled very quickly. One doubts the possibility of avoiding such problems in future volumes — the sheer volume of policy papers and memoranda ensures that only a slim percentage will see publication in *DCER* without a significant expansion of its mandate — but the fact remains and places serious limits on the value of the series.

Likewise, the question of context is always present. Any document collection, especially one based primarily on one source (and without the editorial guidance that an author provides), makes it next to impossible at times to assess the significance of various documents and specific events. It is, of course, important to get the Canadian point of view across (that is the purpose of the exercise) but students and scholars will have to look elsewhere to get any kind of perspective on the relative importance (or in the case of much here, the lack of importance) of the events covered in the *DCER* collection.

More than one *DCER* editor has encouraged or expressed the hope that the publication of these documents would stimulate further research in the area of Canadian international affairs. This hope has been realized to an extraordinary degree. Six volumes in the series had appeared by 1973, and since that date dozens of studies on Canadian external relations during the 1909-46 period have appeared: political studies of both wars, military studies, books on imperial relations and imperial economic policy, Canada and the League, immigration and refugee policy, Canadian-American relations, and numerous articles on subjects such as the Cahan incident, the Riddell incident, the various Imperial Conferences, Canada's entrance into the Second World War, the PJBD, defence production, the expansion of the Canadian consular service, relations with the Pan American Union, and so on. At the same time, countless memoirs and biographical studies of political leaders, mandarins and other influential players in Canadian international affairs have appeared in the last 15 years: biographies of Sir Robert Borden, Mackenzie King, C.D. Howe, Lester Pearson, Norman Robertson, J.W. Flavelle, and Vincent Massey; memoirs and diaries from Paul Martin, Pearson, Hugh Keenleyside, Charles Ritchie, and Escott Reid, to name a few.

While a great deal has been published since the early 1970s, it would be a mistake to credit the *DCER* series for this development. Still, more and more references to the *DCER* can be found in the footnotes of recently published works. Frequently the *DCER* is used by retired civil servants and politicians who turn to it not to unearth new information for their memoirs, but, more often, to confirm what they already believe and, quite likely, have already written. Why take an expensive trip to a far-off archives when the documents are

as close as the nearest library? Occasionally, however, a scholarly article appears based on *DCER* material and, inevitably, the author's use of sources must be questioned. Clearly, any scholar intent on doing serious research still must go to the original collections, not to mention going to other sources — at home and abroad.

The *DCER* series is attractive, accessible, and makes for interesting reading. It can serve as a useful research tool (within strict limits), and is extremely helpful for lecture preparation. And it is an excellent source for undergraduates' essay preparation and as a way of introducing them to the use of primary source material. The volumes are essentially complementary to other research; they must always be augmented by other studies that are based on a fuller investigation of Canadian and foreign archives. In a sense, then, the *DCER* may well best serve as a valuable set of companion volumes (à la the mammoth Winston Churchill biography) for a text on Canadian international affairs, such as C.P. Stacey's *Canada and the Age of Conflict.*

We can only hope that the DEA will continue to publish its documents — however slowly. It will be of great interest to see how the postwar decline in the role and influence of the ambassador and improvements in telecommunications will affect future volumes. With instant international communications, a growing preference for informal (and unwritten) meetings, personal diplomacy (what kind of documentary evidence can we expect for Trudeau's 1983 peace mission?), and a significant growth in overall international dealings, the burden and responsibilities on future editors will be enormous. How will they handle the growing role of the provinces in international affairs, or the birth of the *francophonie*, or summit diplomacy? Perhaps before the bicentennial in 2067 we will find out.

DAVID MACKENZIE