

BROCK'S BANTER: Remembering Spirit

By Brock Weir

Last month, Governor General David Johnston alighted out of his limo, inspected the guard of honour, and dutifully walked under the portico of the Peace Tower, as he does every year, to read the Speech from the Throne.

Fully ensconced in the red chamber, the epicentre of so much speculation, controversy, and general resentment and anger in recent weeks, he surveyed the scene. His findings, of course, were not spontaneous. After all, everything in the Throne Speech is, as we all know, prepared well in advance and nothing left to chance.

What struck him ? or, rather the PMO ? were the murals so familiar to anyone who has ever seen inside the Senate Chamber, whether in person or from the comfort of our own living rooms, evoking the spirit and the sacrifice of the First World War. When I was in Grade 8, our school's two graduating classes took a poll of where we wanted to go for our final trip. Eventually the vote came down to either Quebec City or Ottawa. Ostensibly, we were told Ottawa was first past the post (although the reality is it was more than likely the most cost-effective option) and a couple of months later we were on the big, yellow bus bound for the Nation's Capital.

Walking up Parliament Hill and up the very steps the Governor General took last month was almost an otherworldly experience for me.

After getting bitten by the political bug at an oddly early age, it was almost too much to take in on one school trip. But, when our tour eventually wound its way down to the Senate, I was struck by the murals as well, and the fact they were completed while the final days of the war were still vivid memories, families who lost fathers, husbands, and sons still stinging from their loss. And, if your imagination was potent enough, you could almost catch the whiff of the conscription debates still wafting down the vaunted halls.

Our tour guide made quite the fuss about the artwork, underscoring their importance in memorialising ?The Great War.? Some snickered and made sarcastic, self-satisfied asides on the ?greatness? of war, leaving our unfortunate tour guide to sputter. She did her best to explain, but admittedly it does seem like a strange moniker considering the horrors that were to come. Few words, however, are adequate to encompass the upheaval such a thing was, something unlike anything the world had ever seen ? and nobody was immune to it. My own thoughts were back a few generations to my own family. For, as much as the Great War destroyed families, in its own peculiar way, it almost lay the foundation for my own.

Afterwards, I pondered the path my great-grandfather took as the youngest of multiple sons of a mildly prosperous general store owner in small town Ontario, and the uphill battle he must have fought to become a doctor in the lead-up to the war. I thought of the options he weighed, the fork in the road before him, before deciding to go off to the front well before conscription to tend to the wounded. What horrors did he see over there? Did he tend to friends? What went through his mind if he had to unsuccessfully tend, perhaps, someone he became close to on the overseas journey? How much of a factor did it contribute to the ill health that plagued him through much of his later life, before finally succumbing to a heart attack at the age of 39, vaguely classified as a casualty of war by the Federal Government, even though it was 10 years after the Armistice?

Then there was the matter of a young girl from an equally small, but slightly further flung Ontario town. As a young girl, she might have found inspiration reading stories about the Lady with the Lamp, propelling her on the path to become a nurse. With hospitals all around, what went through her mind when she decided to pack up and head over like so many other young women in the Empire, to ply her trade on the war fields of France?

Fate eventually brought these two together in the field, but what was the singular event where they met? Did they have a common drive and click over a shared sense of purpose? Evidently, there was something at work there as my grandfather came into the world with just two months ? less four days ? to go before the Armistice.

As these three leaves on my family tree turned gold and ruby and were blown away by the winter winds well before I was born, many of these questions are still unanswered. The fact I will never have all the missing pieces to this puzzle will continue to spark my imagination, and perhaps that is a silver lining. It is with this sense, however, I am very intrigued by the announcement of extensive celebrations to mark the 100th anniversary next August of the war breaking out.

The announcement was part of a larger celebratory theme of upcoming anniversaries, Commemorating the centennial of the outbreak of any war, let alone one which felled hundreds of thousands of Canadians, might seem like an odd thing to celebrate. Indeed, it is a difficult line to tread and justify, as British Prime Minister David Cameron recently found out, when he came under fire after comparing his Government's plans to a party not unlike the recent Diamond Jubilee.

But, perhaps rather than marking the dead when the anniversary comes around in 2014, it might be worth paying tribute to the collective spirit of these men and women, the pride and determination they had as they boarded their ships for the road less travelled, and what they ultimately hoped to achieve, with the knowledge they might have to pay the ultimate price.