

The Thin Raiment of the North Atlantic Triangle: Canada and the Decision for War, 1938-1939

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Abstract

This article examines the motives behind Canada's decision for war in 1939 and finds little evidence of a North Atlantic Triangle at work. "Canada chose war as a result of colonialism's legacy and in order to ensure its own internal harmony rather than following the neutrality of the United States", he writes. Canadian policy was influenced mainly by the need to reconcile the different outlooks of francophone and anglophone Canada rather than by the triangular relationship with Britain and the USA. The key diplomatic triangle was, in fact, Mackenzie King, his Quebec lieutenant, Ernest Lapointe, and O. D. Skelton, the Under Secretary of State for External Affairs. The Prime Minister was sentimentally attached to the British Empire whereas Skelton was very critical of British policy towards Europe and Lapointe was ready to resign if the attitude of Quebec was ignored. Brebner's concept of a North Atlantic Triangle "was barely apparent in the process leading to Canada's declaration of war in 1939 or at most other points in the twentieth century".

The concept of a North Atlantic triangle tying the destinies of the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada has held allure in various quarters but perhaps no more fully than among Canadian scholars who have used it to elevate their country's standing and prestige in international affairs. Even though John Bartlet Brebner, the originator of the triangle concept, suggested that the ramifications of the idea were expressed in a variety of ways other than in just politics, international historians more than others have pursued triangular implications, especially in relation to foreign affairs during the middle of the twentieth century.

The effervescence of scholarship based on the premise of a North Atlantic Triangle during the middle of the twentieth century was unsurprising since Brebner—even as child of the three democracies he wrote about—was especially

caught up in the possibilities for postwar co-operation in 1944 when Allied co-operation stood at its height and was about to emerge victorious in World War Two. As a cosmopolitan Canadian who had studied in Britain and spent most of his working life at Columbia University in New York City, Brebner did confess that the concept of a triangle had ended in a book that accorded more coverage to Canada than might otherwise have been expected.¹ North Atlantic Triangle was, to some extent, a verbal account that had already found photographic expression at the Quadrant Conference in Quebec City during 1943 with the picture published by the *Toronto Star*, one of Canada's largest daily newspapers.² This photograph showed Canadian Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King engaged in animated conversation while seated between American and British wartime leaders Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill. A North Atlantic triangle with Canada at the centre already seemed a concrete reality to many Canadians when Brebner's book was published.

As history is not a science, its theories need not be verifiable at every important point of observation, but historians still expect viable generalizations to hold true in a preponderance of cases over an indeterminate but otherwise healthily conceived span of time. The validity of Brebner's supposed triangle of the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, expounded so magnanimously in his 1945 book and capturing attention during the early years of the Cold War, found little resonance during the crucial years of 1938 and 1939 when Canada decided to join Britain's war while the United States stood apart from the conflict in Europe. Canada's vested interest in improving trade conditions on both fronts in order to balance its financial accounts did proceed amidst the depression's economic gloom, but reaching the decision for the country to go to war revealed how thin was the raiment of the North Atlantic triangle and how fulsome the legacy of colonialism over the mind of Canada's English-speaking peoples and their politicians.

The policies of the United States only entered the picture in Canada intermittently, causing pause among some French Canadians and interjecting discord between the prime minister and his chief advisor, O.D. Skelton, who also served as under secretary for External Affairs. More important—since French Canadians are a minority in the country's federal structures—was the North American orientation of the Québécois and the determination of French Canadians in Mackenzie King's Liberal cabinet not to repeat the horrors and divisions of World War One. Bi-nationalism rather than triangularism emerged as the chief characteristic during the circuitous route whereby the country eventually decided to support Britain through employing a separate declaration of war against Germany in 1939. King, and eventually the more nationalistic

Skelton, felt impelled to respond to the residual colonialism among English Canadians since a majority of the anglophone population at the onset of war were British immigrants or their descendants. Because American neutrality served as a beacon to some in Quebec, and the province was a Liberal bastion federally, the King cabinet could not hope to enter the war united unless the country's war aims were more circumscribed than during the 1914–18 conflict. Eventually King, his Quebec lieutenant Ernest Lapointe, and O.D. Skelton reached a series of accommodations that satisfied anglophone desire for war while initially carrying Quebec Liberal support. Canada chose war as a result of colonialism's legacy and in order to insure its own internal harmony rather than following the neutrality of the United States. The forces of the triangle complicated Canada's actions but bilateralism rather than tripartism dictated the outcome.

The initial accounts of Canada's entry into the Second World War were coloured not just by the fierce debates emanating from the 1930s, or postwar jubilation with victory, but also by abhorrence of appeasement, even though before Munich the term implied little more than policies of negotiating settlements to solve international disputes. To later historians further removed from the heat of battle, the King government's course of limited rearmament that began in 1936 seemed more reasonable. This historiography assumed that the war was a necessary evil and Canada's participation in it was a good thing.³ They ignored —if they knew—Quebec intellectual André Laurendeau's insight that viewed 'retrospectively we think of the 1939-1945 war as a global conflict; it became that. In 1939 it was European.'⁴

Events in Europe had deteriorated by early 1938 to the extent that William Lyon Mackenzie King said in cabinet that 'there seemed almost unanimous recognition of impossibility of our staying out [of war] if Britain goes in...'⁵ The roller coaster provided by developments within the next year and a quarter never really swayed King from this position even though his bald statement underestimated French-Canadian opposition to war and gave no indication of the prime minister's earnest desire to avoid military conflict. Convoluted rather than direct statements were one of King's strengths, especially in parliament and when speaking with the press. As the longest-serving prime minister in the history of Britain's empire and commonwealth, he was a politician fully capable of expounding contradictory positions outside the media glare in order to solicit discussions that ended in policies providing a larger compass than might otherwise have been secured. Montreal poet and constitutional lawyer Frank Scott summarized this capacity cynically as the ability to do nothing by

halves when they could be done by quarters. Social scientists came to describe such tendencies as part of processes directed at consensus building.

The position of French Canadians in cabinet was strong due to their influence in the Liberal party, but their voices were muffled outside Quebec affairs as a result of francophones being less than a third of the population. Since formal independence from Britain had only arrived in 1931 with the Statute of Westminster, sentimental ties to the United Kingdom remained strong and constitutional arrangements reinforced links among anglophones. Mackenzie King personally cherished ties to Britain as reflecting Canada's rich inheritance and his family's Scottish background. Oscar Skelton, in contrast, had made it his life's chief intellectual work, first at Queen's University in Kingston and after 1924 in the Canadian Civil Service, to promote an independent Canadian outlook and foreign policy that favoured neither the United Kingdom nor the United States. The Canadian response to the advent of war and its early involvement were heavily influenced by the three positions assumed by King, Lapointe, and Skelton.

Political circumstances made the Liberal government's position difficult. King's thoughts on the subject of war itself remained deeply equivocal, shifting with events and often differing behind the scenes from what he stated publicly. Four days prior to his admission that the country was likely to march with the United Kingdom, he had opposed establishing joint air training facilities with the British on the grounds that they would be 'contrary to Canadian policy of no commitments—would be taken as a visible and definite commitment to participation by Canadian personnel.' Further, he had maintained that 'any attempt to secure premature decision as to war action would split the country and make united action difficult.'⁶ This was also the message that King took to parliament on 24 May 1938 when he said that the government did not consider it to be 'in the interest of either Canada or of the Commonwealth to tender advice as to what policy the United Kingdom should adopt week by week, or become involved in British political disputes.'⁷

French Canadians were influential in the cabinet in the way George-Etienne Cartier had expected at the time he promoted the Confederation agreement. Since October of 1935 when Ernest Lapointe had threatened resignation if the government decided for military sanctions in the Italo-Ethiopian affair, the prime minister heeded the views of his Quebec lieutenant on foreign relations in order to avoid internal disruptions and insure the Liberal government in power. In studying the defence debates early in 1938, O.D. Skelton noted that it was 'interesting the clear and emphatic declarations of the French Ca-

nadian members that Canada is an American country and their endorsement of the idea that Canada should co-operate with the United States in this sphere.⁸ Throughout the year a sometimes panicky prime minister tried to satisfy hawks and doves within the government while attempting to hedge his bets in public pronouncements. Torn between francophone opposition to participation in another European war and increasing anglophone opinion in favour of following Britain, King told Winnipeg *Free Press* reporter Grant Dexter that foreign affairs threatened national unity more than anything else.⁹

During the crisis over Czechoslovakia in August and September of 1938 when King edged towards abandoning his previous public policy of no commitments, Ernest Lapointe restrained him. Skelton's role was to provide a steadying influence amid the conflicts, a position that forced him to mouth the views that held sway over the jittery prime minister at particular moments. The under secretary developed a three-pronged strategy. First he worked to prevent King from tipping his hand prematurely when it might do little good in terms of European affairs but jeopardize the government through antagonizing its French-Canadian representatives; secondly, he proposed to contain Canada's involvement through a limited programme that would be the least divisive by having some appeal to French Canadians; and, thirdly, he attempted to make the country's war effort into its own national project. Skelton was only one player but he provided the essential components that guided Mackenzie King in making 1939 different from 1914. 'I am working to keep us out of the war after the next,' Skelton told his wife Isabel.¹⁰

Canadian foreign affairs bureaucrats experienced intense frustration as they analysed conflicts unfolding that they were powerless to influence because King and Lapointe admitted no other course. Loring Christie had pinpointed the problem during the Italo-Ethiopian controversy in 1936 when he had written that as 'far as Canada's action is concerned, if Great Britain gets into the fight, it hardly matters a damn what policy London pursues in the meantime.... On this score about all a Canadian can do is await the shaping of the event and hope wits will be bright and cool enough to prevent disunity here on top of catastrophe elsewhere.' Typically, Hume Wrong configured the proposition more imaginatively in conjuring the Canadian presence at international conferences: 'Our delegate would have a name, even a photograph; a distinguished record, even an actual secretary—but he would have no corporal existence—and no one would ever notice that he wasn't there.'¹¹

Skelton shared this frustration, but in dialectical manner he set out to turn thesis and antithesis into synthesis. The European dictators were unpredictable,

he believed, noting that 'when you have two gentlemen loose in high places, one of whom imagines that he is a Roman Caesar and the other that he is an Aryan God, it is difficult to prophesy with any assurance.'¹² Hitler's annexation of Austria early in 1938 and the agitation over Czechoslovakia's Sudeten Germans led the under secretary to reflect further that the 'boa constrictor theory of Nazi progress seems to be overshadowed by the acquired momentum theory - to judge by the active recrudescence of Sudeten agitation and the steady heightening of their demands.' He was equally distressed to find Martin Nordegg, a family friend who had done work for External Affairs, at Ottawa's Rideau Club in June of 1938 'very full of his Vienna experiences, suicides, concentration camps, spying, degrading persecution.' Reading British military historian Liddell Hart and incorporating his view that the Soviet Union was the key to the success of British or French policy in eastern Europe, Skelton assessed the sacrifice of Czechoslovakia to Germany as defensible because there was little other alternative short of war, a conflict that might not be won. This view mirrored the judgments of the military chiefs of staff in Britain who concluded twice in 1938 that there was nothing effective that the United Kingdom and its allies could do in regard to Czechoslovakia other than defeat Germany itself.¹³

As the long first Czechoslovakia crisis unfolded from initial formation through to Chamberlain's three visits to Hitler in 1938, Mackenzie King was torn between heart and mind, wanting to answer his critics by adopting a stand supporting Britain but fully aware that such a position might disrupt the government. Inclining towards the former, he noted on 31 August that 'Skelton, who is for Canada keeping out of European conflicts as much as anyone, agrees that the Government could not, without suffering immediate defeat, adopt any such policy; that the country's sentiment would be strong for intervention and even for participation by a possible expeditionary force.'¹⁴ Yet at the same time the under secretary wanted any Canadian involvement in war to arrive through the actions of an independent country rather than invoking an outmoded colonialism to which King was attached. 'Whatever our sympathies with Germany's victims may be,' he tried to reassure an anxious prime minister on 11 September before Chamberlain's first visit to Germany, 'it is incredible that we would tamely accept the role cast for us by some overseas directors, namely, that every twenty years Canada should take part in a Central European war, sacrificing the lives of tens of thousands of her young men, bringing herself to the verge of bankruptcy, risking internal splits and disturbances.' Trying to forestall action by King until the outcome in Europe was known, he reminded the prime minister that while public opinion among the older segments of the population might favour Canada participating in a war, 'we are the safest

country in the world - as long as we mind our own business.' These views might be characterized as isolationist except that they were voiced within the context of that sentiment of colonialism that saw Canada marching again to war as she had of necessity to in 1914. They were intent on averting pre-emptive action by the prime minister.

King himself was coming to rule out neutrality, but his chief advisor watched its fortunes in the United States, Ireland, and South Africa. The idea may have held allure as a means to confirm the country's newly found place in the world and avoid the costly devastations of war that he had always detested, but as it was impractical, it was never advocated, only raised for policy makers to consider. Although Isabel Skelton was less equivocal in denouncing 'the wickedness of war and the makers of war,' her husband preferred to cut to the quick in piercing prevailing assumptions: 'The plain fact is that if we go into any European war it will be on grounds of racial sympathy with the United Kingdom,' Oscar told his wife.¹⁵ Such a situation was profoundly disturbing to any like himself 'who believes in self-government and its implications' since it made independence a chimera.¹⁶ Only grudgingly did the under secretary acknowledge the negation of his lifelong aspirations for a country free from its colonial past, but it was the price that democracy exacted and that he was willing to pay.

As Mackenzie King threshed about for a policy during the first Czechoslovakian crisis, his advisor counselled that premature disclosure to satisfy domestic critics would be without international significance. Skelton's position was reasonable because the British cabinet gave relatively minor consideration to the views of the Dominion governments during discussions about Czechoslovakia during the summer of 1938.¹⁷ When Chamberlain decided to open direct talks with Hitler, the Canadian prime minister was jubilant at the prospect of avoiding war. Skelton told him what he wanted to hear: 'It is a splendid stroke. Whatever the outcome the mere proposal ensures Chamberlain an honoured place in history.' Privately, Skelton was typically more sanguine, informing his family that 'Mr. Chamberlain's gamble remains a gamble.' When King thought a government statement supporting Chamberlain was necessary, Skelton was opposed. The prime minister 'has a good grasp of things and is less panicky than last week,' he wrote, 'but I'm still not quite sure we won't get into the war—before Britain does.'¹⁸

When the second round of the Hitler-Chamberlain talks began, Mackenzie King was again on edge wanting to make a declaration of support. Skelton was summoned and asked to call a cabinet meeting. 'I found him,' the advisor

noted on 23 September, 'in an exalted imperial cum democracy and freedom mood, very belligerent. He had come to take my view of Hitler, that the world had come to the crossroads, must decide whether men were to be ruled by reason or force, might or right, blood or persuasion, brute or God, matter or spirit, paganism or Christianity. No doubt where Canada would stand in such a crisis. Opinion in Canada and every country would rally against Germany.' To this outpouring Skelton advanced the counter arguments he knew were dear to a prime minister praying for peace: there 'was no reason Canada 5000 miles away should stick her neck out, that all the clichés of 1914 hadn't prevented Europe from being 1000% worse off after the victorious war than before, that there was no certainty that this would be a victorious war as U.S. and small nations were disgusted at British and French action and unwilling even to accept their promises and protestations, and in any event if war started force would take the place of reason in a week....' Both sides of the question had been exposed, but Skelton would increasingly turn his attention towards publicly defensible justifications for the country's entry into the conflict.

Mackenzie King emerged from cabinet at six o'clock on 23 September to report that T.A. Crerar, J.L. Ilsley, Norman Rogers, W.D. Euler, and J.E. Michaud 'all agreed that it was a war for reason and freedom that was coming.' Skelton still thought the European talks might maintain peace and avert Canadian involvement, but Ernest Lapointe was the all-important wild card away at the League of Nations. The prime minister sent a strongly worded telegram to his Quebec lieutenant in Geneva saying that in the event France and England went to war, 'Canada will not stand idly by and see modern civilization ruthlessly destroyed if we can by co-operation with others help save mankind from such a fate.'¹⁹ With the outcome of Chamberlain's initiatives still uncertain, Skelton was unsurprised by Lapointe's reply. 'Good old Ernest,' the under secretary noted of the return telegram, 'came across with an emphatic rejection of any pre-war statement—must adhere to pledges to parliament—premature action would destroy his influence for what might be essential to future action. Mr. King was surprised at his emphatic attitude, in view of [Chubby] Power's reports.' Mackenzie King was now caught between his determination that Canada stand by Britain and Lapointe's opposition.

Skelton knew where his superior stood better than King did himself, or at least what the prime minister was willing to acknowledge. 'As long as England is at peace Mr. King will keep us out of war,' Skelton admitted to his wife, 'but as soon as England goes to war he will lead us with all banners flying.'²⁰ The under secretary set out to ascertain the views of others in order to construct the path to arrive at the new policy. He had lunch with labour minister Nor-

man Rogers, known to be a moderate and a favourite of King's among the ministers, while Raoul Dandurand, who had found himself in the minority at the cabinet meeting, told him that his position in the event of war was 'limited liability - no expeditionary force.' On 25 September assignments were handed out at External Affairs: John Read was to prepare orders-in-council in case of a declaration of war; Laurent Beaudry to foresee contingencies relating to missions abroad; and Loring Christie 'to make suggestions for a 1938 limited Canada first method of carrying on our war effort if necessary.' Two days later, on 27 September, King was still reported on edge in cabinet from wanting to make a greater commitment to Chamberlain before the last round of talks resumed in Germany. Skelton and Christie drafted press statements which the prime minister rejected, but what he said eventually was interpreted by journalists as being in favour of intervention in Europe if necessary.

Since a determination had been made, Skelton applied himself to shaping the outcome. First he attempted to have the prime minister consider whether changes in defence policy that had been undertaken by the government were intended solely to improve the country's defences or whether King needed to prepare Canadian public opinion for action abroad. Then at a dinner on 27 September with the prime minister, Skelton outlined a policy summarizing various elements under discussion since 1936 to provide the position that the Liberals would eventually adopt. Skelton said he

defended the French Canadian attitude, really Canadian; said he [King] could avert serious consequences if [he] recognize[d] that while intellectuals and constitutionalists keen on the principle of no commitment will be antagonized, the great majority of people, Quebec habitants, Ontario farmers, who have boys of 20, will not object so long as their sons don't have to go; so point programme: (1) if war comes, our method and measure of participation will be based on facts of today, military and economic, and Canada's needs, not on precedents or mistakes of 1914; (2) we will consult our associates before deciding what to concentrate on—doubtless food and munition they'll want; (3) no probability of any mass expeditionary force; (4) a pledge this Gov't will not introduce conscription.

As he spoke Mackenzie King took notes, but when Skelton encountered Raoul Dandurand on his way home and reiterated his proposals, the senator 'said my 4 point programme w'd make it possible for them to fight in Quebec—otherwise c'dn't save a seat.'²¹ When King called governor general Lord Tweedsmuir in London towards the end of the British-German negotiations and asked

him to inform Chamberlain that he was not moving fast enough, Skelton reacted. The prime minister's action had been an attempt to pillory London, he informed King, and might result in him being told to light a fire under his friend Franklin Roosevelt who was dragging his feet during the crisis. 'The settlement, if it can be called a settlement,' Skelton wrote to Canadian high commissioner Vincent Massey, 'is not one which can bring pride or satisfaction to anyone in the civilized countries, but I certainly think it the lesser of the evils.'²² To younger diplomat Lester Pearson he maintained that 'I have always felt that the British Government attitude to Spain was as indefensible as its attitude to Czechoslovakia was defensible.'²³

Skelton had succeeded in managing Mackenzie King. As the prime minister later confessed that he had serious doubts about his ability to lead a united cabinet into war at the time of Munich, he was suitably appreciative for the steadying hand his chief advisor had provided in the viable plan suggested. 'No words can express what this country owes to Dr. Skelton,' King informed the press and said privately. 'His work during the recent crisis and the months leading up to it put a tremendous load upon him and upon us all.'²⁴ Yet even after the extended ordeal was over, the relief afforded by the European settlement did not deter the prime minister from wanting to appear resolute by bringing a motion in the House of Commons affirming the necessity of calling parliament before going to war. "'Christie looks on this as a huge joke,'" her husband told Isabel, 'and so does Oscar and so it is,' she thought.²⁵ Sharing the frustration rampant in his department, the under secretary composed a fable about the European dictators that he read at a dinner for Joseph Sirois.²⁶ Only laughter relieves the tension when events are out of control.

For both prime minister and advisor the ordeal over Czechoslovakia had been a harrowing experience that was relieved early in October by a three-week Caribbean cruise with stops at Jamaica and Bermuda. The vacation was designed to allow King to recuperate from back ailments and to assess a worsening international situation. Stopping in the United States to see King's former employer, Skelton declined attending church with the Rockefellers and the prime minister. That was a bad sign made worse when King, feted royally by British colonial officials in the West Indian colonies, contrasted their views of Canada's destiny in light of Roosevelt's recent declaration at Queen's University in August of 1938. The American president had extended 'assurance that the people of the United States would not stand idly by if domination of Canadian soil is threatened by any other empire.' In their discussion, Oscar Skelton affirmed that he was a Canadian pure and simple who 'did not feel the British connection meant anything except the possibility of being drawn into

European wars; the younger generation was all against it.²⁷ To King, this view was an expression of a little Canada cast drift from the mothering protection of the United Kingdom and her empire. He retorted that 'Canada by itself would be a prey to aggressor nations in a world such as we have today, and would develop more through the years. I did not like to be dependent on the U.S.,' as Skelton admitted the country was, because 'change of leaders there might lead to a vassalage so far as the Dominion was concerned. There was real freedom in the British Commonwealth of Nations, and a richer inheritance.'²⁸

The encounter revealed a key divide that Canadians continued to debate more generally for much of the century, but it also updated earlier differences between the two men in regard to Skelton's belief in independence and King's advocacy of autonomy within the British Commonwealth. The under secretary's formidable intellect aroused King's insecurities as well, reinforcing his need to distance himself in order to confirm his own position. The prime minister thought that his advisor's 'critical frame of mind' conveyed a 'materialistic "scientific"' outlook that found expression in 'a negative viewpoint and inferiority complex in so many things—a real antagonism towards monarchical institutions, and Britain, a sort of communist sympathy—lack of a larger view in reference to world affairs - an isolated Canada which I cannot accept. It told on me and him, and raised a sort of wall of separation between us.' Even two weeks later King was so rattled that he continued: 'He seeks to dominate one's thought, is intellectually arrogant in some respects. I had to assert myself to be free to control my own conduct in many relationships.' Oblivious to colonialism's skewering effects on his own outlook and struggling to affirm the determination of a leader, King then concluded in contradictory manner. Skelton was, he wrote, 'marvellously considerate and self-effacing, but I can see that I must control policy and be the judge of my own conduct in social and other affairs - to lead and not be controlled, while in other ways he is the best of Counsellors and guides.'²⁹ The entire episode recalls the description of King by Agnes Macphail, the country's first woman member of parliament, as a 'fat man full of words.'³⁰

After returning to Ottawa, the undersecretary had to attend to last minute details in regard to trade negotiations with the United States. Both King and Skelton found themselves in Washington on 17 November 1938 for the prime minister to sign the new agreements reached between Canada and the United States during negotiations that had also led to a US-UK accord. When talks had bogged down in the summer of 1938 Skelton had worried lest the country be squeezed between the two larger powers. Thinking about his employees, he was also concerned the cabinet be blamed for failure rather than the Canadian

negotiators. Such fears were averted when a break occurred leading to a successful outcome. In return for Canada and the United Kingdom each giving up some preferences in the other's markets, the Americans reduced tariffs on 129 Canadian imports, making Canada the biggest winner in the new trading arrangements.³¹

In December of 1938 the Cabinet decided to nearly double the military budget, but the opening of parliament in January prompted King to action. Quoting former prime minister Laurier's assertion that Canada was at war when Britain was at war since the country was liable to attack, he attempted to argue that Canadian involvement in such a conflict did not need to be debated. Since such contentions were a denial of dominion autonomy and offensive to French Canadians, a sharp-tongued Jack Pickersgill—who had been seconded from External Affairs to the prime minister's office—told King that the speech was appalling. As a new Czech crisis brewed, Skelton appraised the situation realistically: since the 'complacent forecast of the results [of the Hitler-Chamberlain talks by the British government] appears to be dubious, there had been quite a display of jitters. With all the incalculable factors loose in Europe, no one could say with assurance that the pessimistic forecast was without justification.³² War was likely and Canada would enter to assuage its anglophone population.

On 26 January 1939, after receiving a secret cable from London raising alarming possibilities of an air attack on the United Kingdom, the prime minister was disturbed and could not sleep. After he read the British cable in cabinet the next day and defended his desire to affirm support for Britain, controversy raged for two hours. Ernest Lapointe again raised the spectre of resignation and urged delay in making a public statement. Skelton counselled the same when he and Mackenzie King's private secretary, Arnold Heeney, met with the prime minister shortly afterwards. King wanted a statement prepared, but during discussion the prime minister's convolutions were so great that the inexperienced Heeney became concerned 'to get the theory correctly stated.' They were the wrong words to use after Pickersgill's blunt criticism. According to Skelton, the prime minister maintained that if war occurred, 'Canada could not keep out, that a statement to that effect should be made in advance to prevent it being alleged that the Government had been dragged in or kicked in, that I (while the intelligentsia were known to be opposed to such a stand) was to draft a statement for consideration in Council, also trying to explain away the "lieben England" speech and trying to get an interpretation that Lapointe and [Quebec minister Chubby] Power would accept.'³³

The need for such a statement was obviated by Lapointe who shortly dropped in on Skelton to ask him to rein in the chief. When the under secretary demurred in light of the cabinet's position as presented to him, the minister said King was fooling himself about where he and fellow Quebec minister Arthur Cardin stood. Lapointe stressed that he had made it clear that 'whatever the Gov't as a whole agreed, individual members would have to decide what stand they would take and he had made no commitment on that point. He agreed it would be possible to stem the tide if it were made clear no expeditionary force were sent overseas.' When the minister of justice expressed the belief that if Canada joined in war it would be in support of the common Crown linking the two countries, Skelton objected, saying that the country 'could never get away from being dragged into every British war.' The under secretary suggested that activities in Ireland and South Africa belied such a position, with Lapointe responding that he wanted to explore neutrality further. Two weeks later Skelton assigned John Read to examine the legal ramifications of neutrality.³⁴ In a speech in Parliament on 31 March 1939, Lapointe shifted from his previous position and mounted an attack on the idea that Canada should remain neutral in an impending conflict. When J.T. Thorson, a Liberal M.P. from Manitoba, introduced a private member's bill declaring that Canada would only become a belligerent upon her government's declaration, an unnecessary autonomist proposal, Skelton said he concurred, but the bill died in debate.³⁵

With Hitler's seizure of the rest of Czechoslovakia in March of 1939, Britain and France extended guarantees for the territorial integrity of Poland, Romania, and Greece. This bold step was taken in the face of the views expressed by the British military chiefs of staff that the situation in regard to Poland did not differ from that concerning Czechoslovakia. As neither the United Kingdom nor its allies were able to afford direct military assistance to Poland by land, sea, or air, the chiefs of staff favoured an alliance with the Soviet Union. Strategist Basil Liddell Hart had identified the Soviet Union as critical to British policy in eastern Europe, but Chamberlain was hesitant to act lest such a move drive moderate Germans into Hitler's camp.

Oscar Skelton grew bitter over these developments. He knew that the guarantees moved Europe one step closer to a war that Canada would join but that might be easily lost. By June when rumours of an impending Russo-German non-aggression pact reached Ottawa, the under secretary could no longer contain his disgust with the disastrous turn in British policy. 'If Chamberlain really meant to stop aggression,' journalist Grant Dexter noted Skelton as saying, 'why didn't he do it last fall when there were decent countries to be protected. Why not have done it for Czecho [sic] - the finest little country in

Europe - or for the Spanish government which represented fine honest Spanish people[?] But having failed to do it then, why do it now for Poland and Rumania - the two worst countries in Europe [?].³⁶ In contrast, Mackenzie King's pro-British sentiments began to rise again, and he determined that he had 'made a mistake in letting myself be too controlled by the isolationist attitude in External Affairs.'³⁷

On 24 August, the day after the Nazi-Soviet pact was signed, 'the biggest fiasco in British history' Oscar Skelton called it, the under secretary prepared a statement of Canadian war policy predicated on the four-point program outlined in September of the previous year. King read the document to cabinet at a meeting where approval was given for nearly \$9 million in new military expenditures. The following day, when the Anglo-Polish treaty of mutual assistance was signed and a state of apprehended war was declared in Canada, Skelton analysed the conflict: 'The first casualty of this war has been Canada's claim for control over her own destinies. In spite of a quarter century of proclamation and achievement of equal and independent status, we have thus far been relegated to the role of a crown colony.'³⁸ Still, when the declaration of war was debated in parliament early in September, the Liberal party remained united and only one member of the House of Commons voted against entry into war.

Political and public opinion, especially among anglophones, coalesced in favour of Britain in 1938 and 1939. Canada attempted to further its economic relations within a North Atlantic triangular setting but moved in the direction of war in response to the legacy of colonialism present through the ancestry of the largest segment of its population. The pattern of responding to sentimental ties to Britain that has been charted in this paper among federal politicians and civil servants was also seen in a shift in public opinion more broadly, at least as far as a study of Ontario newspapers has discerned.³⁹ Concern at the top for American reaction to belligerency on the northern reaches of the United States was far removed from the need to have French and English Canadians move in tandem when one group was pulled more firmly towards supporting the United Kingdom.

The presence of a North Atlantic triangle in international history thereby emerges as peculiarly short lived. Despite a recent attempts to revive the idea for contemporary public policy and for history, the concept remains primarily as a Canadian conceit, except during World War Two and the years immediately following up to the early 1960s.⁴⁰ The photograph referred to at the beginning of this paper was really intended for Canadian publicity purposes by

placing the country's prime minister at the centre of the three wartime leaders. More common + and realistic + were images of the 1943 Quebec conference that pictured Roosevelt in the middle and Churchill and Mackenzie King on either side.⁴¹ The idea of a triangular relationship comes into better focus in this picture with the U.S. as central, but it should also be noted that a triangle itself had longer continuing substance in terms of twentieth-century trading patterns as a result of geographical proximity, the dominance of the English language, and similar business traditions. The United States and Canada each became the other's best trading partner in the years after World War Two.

John Bartlet Brebner's concept of a North Atlantic triangle grew out of a major publishing venture begun during the 1930s to examine the relations of Canada with the United States. Brebner typified the two countries as 'the Siamese Twins of North America.'⁴² Such a characterization excludes Mexico. It also detracts from Pierre Elliott Trudeau's more accurate description of the Canadian-American relationship as being akin to a mouse sleeping beside an elephant. The inordinate size and strength of the United States of America has always posed major issues for Canadians. Historically, the United States has generally been home to approximately ten times Canada's population and its economy wealthier by an even greater multiplier. Canada's culture is also divided according to its two major language groups, making anglophone Canadians similar to Australians in numbers. Canadians engage in bilateralism to seek economic advantage where they can, especially in relation to trading relations with the United States. They occasionally engage in tripartism when occasions warrant, but opinion polls show that they increasingly prefer Canada acting within a multilateralism that allows dual cultural expression and does not draw attention to its relative weakness in a world dominated by unilateralism and the actions of many larger nations. The triangle as full raiment enjoyed but brief existence in time. It was barely apparent in the process leading to Canada's declaration of war in 1939 or at most other points in the twentieth century,

Endnotes

- ¹ John Bartlet Brebner, *North Atlantic Triangle: The Interplay of Canada, the United States and Great Britain* (Carleton Library ed.; Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1966 [1945]), xxvi.
- ² Toronto Star, 18 August 1943, National Archives of Canada, PA - 183423.
- ³ Bruce Hutchison, *The Incredible Canadian: A Candid Portrait of Mackenzie King, his work, his times, his nation* (Toronto, 1953). James Eayrs, *In*

- Defence of Canada, vol. 2: Appeasement and Rearmament* (Toronto, 1965), 2: 54-70. C.P. Stacey, *Arms, Men and Governments—the War Policies of Canada 1939–1945* (Ottawa, 1970). H. Blair Neatby, *William Lyon Mackenzie King; A Political Biography, vol. 3, The Prism of Unity, 1933–1939* (Toronto, 1970). J.L. Granatstein and Robert Bothwell, "'A Self-Evident National Duty': Canadian Foreign Policy, 1935–1939," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 3 (1974/5), 212–33. J.L. Granatstein, *Canada's War: The Politics of the Mackenzie King Government, 1939–1945* (Toronto, 1975) and *The Ottawa Men: The Civil Service Mandarins, 1935–1957* (Toronto, 1982). Norman Hillmer, 'Defence and Ideology: The Anglo-Canadian Military "Alliance" in the 1930s,' *Canada's Defence: Perspectives on Policy in the Twentieth Century* ed. B. D. Hunt and R. G. Haycock (Toronto, 1993), 82–97. B.J.C. McKercher, 'World Power and Isolationism: The North Atlantic Triangle and the Crises of the 1930s,' *The North Atlantic Triangle in a Changing World: Anglo-American-Canadian Relations, 1902–1956*, ed. B.J.C. McKercher and Lawrence Aronsen (Toronto 1996), 110–46.
- ⁴ André Laurendeau, *La crise de la Conscription* (Montreal 1962), 36–7. (My translation).
- ⁵ Oscar Skelton diary, 16, 20 May 1938, O.D. Skelton Papers, Vol. 11, National Archives of Canada. Hereafter, OS diary and OSP.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 16 May 1938. King's account of his meeting with British High Commissioner Sir Francis Floud is provided in Eayrs, *In Defence of Canada*, 2: 92–3.
- ⁷ Quoted in Eayrs, *In Defence of Canada*, 2: 62.
- ⁸ Oscar Skelton, Defence debate notes, [March 1938], OSP 5.
- ⁹ See Patrick H. Brennan, *Reporting the Nation's Business: Press-Government Relations During the Liberal Years* (Toronto 1994), 20.
- ¹⁰ Isabel Skelton (IS) diary, 28 April 1942, in the possession of Kenneth Menzies, Guelph, Ontario.
- ¹¹ Quoted in Robert Bothwell and John English, "'Dirty Works at the Crossroads,'" *The In-Between Time: Canadian External Policy in the 1930s*, eds. Robert Bothwell and Norman Hillmer (Toronto, 1975). Lester Pearson to OS, 11 November 1937, OSP 4. Hume Wrong to OS, 28 June 1939, C3750: 237112, King Papers. Other correspondence by Pearson with the under secretary graphically portrays the feeling of frustration over Jewish refugees.
- ¹² OS to Lester Pearson, 14 April 1938, 14, Lester B. Pearson Papers. OS diary, 20 May, 2 June 1938.
- ¹³ C. Barnett, *The Collapse of British Power* (London, 1972), 508, 526.

- ¹⁴ King diary, 31 August 1938. OS diary, 16 May 1938. Quoted in C.P. Stacey, *Canada and the Age of Conflict: A History of External Policies* (Toronto, 1972), 2: 235 and Granatstein and Bothwell, "A Self-Evident National Duty," 221.
- ¹⁵ IS diary, 12 January 1942.
- ¹⁶ OS to Hume Wrong, 2 March 1939, 3, Hume Wrong Papers, NAC.
- ¹⁷ Barnett, *Collapse of British Power*, 519.
- ¹⁸ OS to IS, 14, 16 September 1938, OSP 5. OS to King, 14 September 1938, C: 3736: 217161, King Papers, NAC.
- ¹⁹ Telegram from King to the Canadian legation at the League of Nations, Geneva, 23 September 1938, OSP 5. OS diary, 23 September 1938. For Lapointe's more diplomatic wording, see Neatby, *William Lyon Mackenzie King*, 3: 291.
- ²⁰ IS diary, 24 September 1938. OS diary, 25 September 1938. See also Stacey, *Canada and the Age of Conflict*, 2: 264.
- ²¹ OS diary, 27 September 1938; King diary, 28 September 1938. IS to Sheila Menzies, 21 March 1948, Private Letters in the Positon of Kenneth Menzies, Guelph, Ontario, also referred to how the French-Canadian position weighed on Oscar Skelton's mind. See also OS, Draft statement in regard to war at the time of Munich conference, [1938], OSP 5.
- ²² OS to Massey, 8 October 1938, Massey Papers, University of Toronto Archives, Fisher Rare Book Library, Toronto, Ontario.
- ²³ OS to Lester Pearson, 6 February 1939, Vol. 14, Pearson Papers, NAC. See also DCER, 6: 1087-9 and OS to Lester Pearson, 6 February 1939, 14, Pearson Papers.
- ²⁴ *Financial Post*, 22 October 1938. King to Ernest Lapointe, 9 October 1938, C3735: 215229, King Papers.
- ²⁵ IS diary, 3, 4, 7 October 1938
- ²⁶ Skelton's satire is reprinted in *The In-Between Time*, eds. Bothwell and Hillmer, 163-4.
- ²⁷ DCER, 6: 607-9, including Skelton's interest in American neutrality in the event of European war.
- ²⁸ King diary, 24 October 1938.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 13 November 1938.
- ³⁰ Quoted in Doris French Shackleton, *Tommy Douglas* (Toronto 1975), 94.
- ³¹ Ian M. Drummond and Norman Hillmer, *Negotiating Freer Trade: The United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, and the Trade Agreements of 1938* (Waterloo, Ont., 1989), 162. Granatstein, *A Man of Influence*, 78.
- ³² OS to Lester Pearson, 6 February 1939, 14, Pearson Papers.

- ³³ OS diary, 2 February 1939. King diary, 27 January 1939.
- ³⁴ OS diary, 2, 15 February 1939.
- ³⁵ OS to Hume Wrong in DCER, 6: 1129-31.
- ³⁶ Quoted in John Hilliker, *Canada's Department of External Affairs. Vol. 1: The Early Years, 1909-1946* (Montreal, 1990), 210.
- ³⁷ Quoted in Granatstein, *The Ottawa Men*, 90. See also DCER, 6: 1087-9.
- ³⁸ DCER, 6: 1233. The war policy statement of 24 August is reprinted in Stacey, *Men, Arms, and Governments*, 9. OS, 'Canada and the Polish War: A Personal Note,' 25 August 1939, OSP 5, and the slightly different version in DCER, 6: 1247.
- ³⁹ Terry Copp, 'Ontario 1939: The Decision for War,' *Ontario History* 86 (1994), 269-78.
- ⁴⁰ David Haglund, *The North Atlantic Triangle Revisited: Canadian Grand Strategy at Century's End* (Toronto, 2000) and *The North Atlantic Triangle in a Changing World: Anglo-American-Canadian Relations, 1902-1956*, ed. McKercher and Aronsen.
- ⁴¹ For example, NAC C-014168, from the *Montreal Gazette*.
- ⁴² Brebner, *North Atlantic Triangle*, xxv.