

The Diaries of Sir Robert Borden

Sir Robert Laird Borden was the Prime Minister of Canada from October 1911 until July 1920, when he resigned due to health concerns. First elected to the House in 1896, Borden was the leader of the Conservative party from February 1901 until 1917, when he formed a Union Government.

Borden led Canada at a very unique juncture in the country's history. His diary provides valuable insight to his experience. During his tenure, Borden handled his share of scandals, including the railways, the naval question, munitions, anything to do with Sir Sam Hughes, and most notably, conscription, all while leading a country during the war.

Borden's political rise relied on a close group of barristers from the east coast. From his first days as a lawyer in Halifax, politicians surrounded Borden. He was good-friends with Charles Hibbert Tupper, son of Sir Charles Tupper, and regularly visited when presenting cases in Ottawa. One of Borden's legal partners, John Sparrow David Thompson, left practice he shared with Borden to become John A. MacDonal'd's minister of justice. Thompson asked Borden to join him as a deputy minister, but he declined the offer. Tupper would later succeed a resigning Mackenzie Bowell as Prime Minister, and asked Borden to run in Halifax. He did, but despite his success, he never showed a love for the political life. Borden's lack of interest in day-to-day politics, combined with his stoic nature, permeates every entry of his diary. The strain of such a life is clear in the diary. Often sick and on bed rest, Borden regularly decried his public life, and threatened to retire more than once.

Borden's diaries are not nearly as personal as historians might wish for, but they highlight themes and issues that he addressed on a regular basis, and provide insight to his approach. Borden, despite his years as a practicing lawyer, was not comfortable with debate or public speaking. He regularly documents the praise received for his addresses, and was quick to comment on the skills of others. His appreciation for the men who served was constant – he enjoyed the displays of strength and patriotism of regular parade.

More interesting, however, was Borden's handling of his caucus, particularly the members from Quebec. He constantly dealt with battling members, a situation that often ended with tears, and not from Borden. Notable too were the requests for patronage appointments that Borden had to manage. Keeping the peace in his caucus and his conservative supporters through appointments was a constant activity for Borden.

Surprising perhaps is the lack of commentary on the war. He was engaged in munitions work, recruitment, and lobbying for the involvement of the United States, but did not document much of the war itself. He quite regularly notes, "No war news

of importance.” Beyond his praise for the men in service, the war takes up surprisingly little room in his diary.

But that does not mean that this document is not helpful. Contained in these pages are Borden’s entries from 1912 to 1919.

There are three versions of the Borden diary, and each vary to a small degree. The original, held in Library and Archives Canada, is the only complete version. It’s held in the Sir Robert Borden Fonds, Volume 449. This volume is not available for public consultation.

In the original diary, Borden seems to have added additional pieces of paper, which might not have been attached, or became detached over the years. This means that when LAC microfilmed the diary, some of these entries were not included. Such is the case with Borden’s entry for February 3, 1916 when describing the Fire on Parliament Hill.

A second challenge with both the original diary and the microfilmed version is handwriting. In some places, is difficult even for those familiar with handwriting to read. This has inhibited access to the material for years.

The following diary is a digitized representation of the third version of the diary, a typed version, transcribed and held by the Archives. At the start of this project, few historians knew of this transcribed version. While it does overcome the challenge of Borden’s handwriting and the incomplete entries of the microfilmed version, it suffers from a unique set of shortcomings. The original transcriber made a number of choices in the document – the use of “&c” is not something that generally appears in Borden’s original diary, but is used with great frequency in the digitized version. While lists of the supplies Borden needed at Echo Lake, or a list of the types of fish he caught, or what was in bloom by the river on his Sunday walks, are not significant historical value, we cannot be certain what else the transcriber felt he or she could truncate. After typing the diary, the transcriber went back and wrote over typeface. What remains is blurred. In some cases I was able to identify the name, but in others, a question mark remains.

The process of digitization also has its own set of caveats. The OCR process, or optical character recognition, can also be tricky. R’s become E’s. D’s become B’s. While great effort has been taken with each entry, errors undoubtedly slipped through the editing process.

As this source is a transcription of a holding of the Library and Archives Canada, we ask you to cite it as such to maintain the integrity of the document, and acknowledge the provenance of the material. A microfilm version of the diary can be found in the Sir Robert Borden Fonds, microfilm reels C-1864, C-1867, C-1865, C-1866. The transcript can be found in volume 450. Volume 451 contains a photocopy. For more

information, [visit the descriptive record in Library and Archives Canada's online catalogue.](#)

While there are shortcomings, our hope is that the digitized version of Borden's diaries provides students of history and seasoned researchers access to this unique resource in Canadian history.

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