

Historica Canada Education Portal

Sam Hughes

Overview

This lesson is based on viewing the Sam Hughes biography from [The Canadians](#) series. Hughes was the controversial Minister of Militia during the First World War. There is still debate over whether Hughes was a visionary or an unstable bigot.

Aims

Students will develop critical thinking skills by examining the life and actions of Sir Sam Hughes, as well as the reactions to his opinions and policies. With individual or group activities, students are encouraged to draw conclusions and make comparisons between the issues that Hughes faced and current social and political issues.

Background

There are individuals who find almost universal acclaim as villains or heroes. There are others whose legacy is more ambiguous, but few are as enigmatic as Sir Sam Hughes. The question of who he was is not easily answered. He was a politician, a newspaper owner, a teacher, an author of textbooks, and a provincial school inspector. But it was as the

Minister of Militia that he left his mark across the country, building armouries and bases and as the man who took Canada into the First World War. In many ways he was a giant, but even those who know his life story best remain divided as to the real identity of Sir Sam.

Some scholars dismiss him as a madman and a bigot, even as there are others who consider him a central if underestimated figure in Canadian political history. This is not a new debate; his contemporaries were divided by the same question, was he simply an arrogant (possibly crazy) bigot or an effective politician with an important vision for Canada?

Whatever the answer to this puzzle, Hughes was a man trapped between centuries. He was born in 1853 and was never able to fully adapt to the changes that were on the horizon with the dawning twentieth century. A balanced assessment of his accomplishments is made difficult because of his association with the infamous Ross-Rifle. The Ross was the Canadian replacement for the British Lee-Enfield. Hughes had for years championed this superior weapon and finally won it a place as the official rifle of the Canadian forces. But the Ross gained a reputation for jamming in battle and hence for being responsible for the deaths of many Canadian soldiers.

Many of the problems that engaged Sir Sam during his lifetime are the same issues as those we find in today's media: French-English relations, the place of the military in Canadian life, Canada's place on the international stage, and free-trade with the US. Our understanding of today's problems is enriched by looking at how they were understood in an earlier point in history and in a different context.

In this hour-long program we explore the extraordinary life of an enigmatic and fascinating Canadian who manages to remain mysterious

even as we follow the debate that surrounded him through his life and continues down to this day.

Activities

Time Allowance: 1 - 4 hours

Procedures:

After viewing the video on Sam Hughes explore his life and times in more depth by completing the following activities:

Group Project

Divide your class into a maximum of 6 groups for this project. Each group will have a different task.

Group 1

Have students investigate the history and traditions of the Orangemen in Ontario. Then have them answer the following questions: Do you believe that some of Sam Hughes's attitudes and actions were influenced by his heritage? What are some specific examples of this influence?

Group 2

Hughes was in the Canadian militia since the age of 12. How do you think this influenced his view that there was a link between good citizenship and the militia? Research the history of the Volunteer Citizen Army in Canada.

Group 3

What were some of the views and attitudes of the Laurier Government

concerning the involvement of Canada in the war effort? Why do you think Laurier offered Hughes the Militia Portfolio?

Group 4

Research and write a short article about the life of Sam Hughes for the *Victoria Order*. Date the article 25 August 1921. Remember that this newspaper was once owned and run by Hughes. Discuss the reference to Hughes in the video as an "honest politician."

Group 5

Research and write a short article about the life of Sam Hughes for the *Ottawa Citizen*. Date the article 25 August 1921. Write it as a journalist who is critical of the Conservative Party.

Group 6

Research the Ross-Rifle and provide a drawing of the rifle and make a list of its characteristics, problems, and production history.

Consolidation: Have each group present their information to the rest of the class. The class could take notes during the presentations so that they have a good overview of the character of Sam Hughes and the time in which he lived.

Class Projects *(could also be undertaken in groups)*

1. Flow Chart

Prepare a large flow chart of the life of Sam Hughes. Include a timeline on the chart and indicate the history and major achievements of this famous Canadian. Include other major global events on the timeline that could have influenced his life and actions. At the end of the timeline

prepare a list of his achievements.

2. Critical Thinking

Investigate the activities of a current Minister in Parliament (i.e., Minister of Finance). Find newspaper articles about this figure and compile a resource file over a period of several weeks. Consolidate the information by making up a list of policies, actions, consequences, and public reaction.

Examine the political activities of Sam Hughes. Prepare a list of his policies, actions, consequences, and public reaction.

Consolidation: Compare the lists and determine whether there are any similarities between these two Ministers of Parliament. How did the public react to the policies of both figures?

Individual Projects

1. Prepare a list of Sam Hughes's accomplishments and a list of the scandals surrounding his political career based on information in the video. Write a short paper on why you believe Hughes was Knighted. Would you have supported this decision? Explain your position based on the facts contained in the video.

2. Research the military base Hughes set up at Valcartier. Read about and research the attitudes of French Canadians and Québec politicians concerning the involvement of Canada in the First World War. Do you think that the Valcartier base was a good decision, bad decision, or do you think it had both good and bad points? Support your views with facts.

Resources

[Sam Hughes Worksheet](#)

[Sir Samuel Hughes - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

[First World War – The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

[First World War Timeline – The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

[Canadian Expeditionary Force – The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

[Ross Rifle - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

Haycock, Ronald Graham. *Sam Hughes: The public career of a controversial Canadian, 1885-1916*. Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1986.

Morton, Desmond. *When your number's up: the Canadian soldier in the*

First World War. Toronto: Random House, 1993.

Nicholson, Colonel G.W.L. *Canadian Expeditionary Force 1914-1919.*
Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1962.