The Paradox of Conn Smythe: Hockey, Memory, and the Second World War

J. Andrew Ross
University of Western Ontario

In December 1951, the prominent Canadian weekly Saturday Night ran an article entitled “Conn Smythe: Light and Shadow.”1 It was unflattering and focussed on Smythe’s contradictory behaviour in the Second World War, noting that although Smythe himself had volunteered for combat—and did so at the advanced age of forty-six years no less—many fitter and younger men in his employ had seemingly spent the war years in the uniform of the Toronto Maple Leafs. “If he expected his Leafs to enlist with him, and was disappointed when very, very few of them did,” the authors contended, “he never showed it by word or deed.”2 They characterized his refusal to condemn “the lagging patriotism of his players” while at the same time putting his own life on the line as “the psychological paradox of Conn,” and concluded that he was simply selfish and blindly loyal to “anything which he himself has created or developed.”3

This kind of criticism is both understandable and also surprising: understandable because Smythe’s high public profile and strong, publicly voiced opinions made him an easy target and surprising because after the war there was a general reluctance to seriously question the wartime motivations and actions of individuals. The myth of “the good war,” in which every individual had done their duty, had begun to prevail in Canadian popular memory. Still, scholars such as Jeff Keshen have confronted the notion of the Second World War as “the good war,” noting that “in many ways the popular memory has sanitized and simplified a ‘complex and problematic event’ whose legacies for Canada were not just profound, but also contradictory.”4 Keshen describes a “not-so-good” war that was manifest in areas ranging from war profiteering, black markets, and moral decay to soldiers’ conduct, veteran reintegration, and most notably in “the suspicions millions had that their countrymen and -women were using the war for personal gain or pleasure.”5 When it came to Conn Smythe, the editors of Saturday Night were clearly still suspicious.

For a resolution of the paradox we must reexamine not only Smythe’s personal behaviour during the war, but also the context of war, business, and sport.6 Conn Smythe provides a compelling subject for such exploration. Like many other soldiers, citizens, and businessmen, Smythe was subject to the policies of war

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1 Ross is with the Department of History, University of Western Ontario, London, ON, Canada N6A 5C2.
engagement, but he was also atypical in the sense that he was able to use his influence to criticize and affect the policies themselves. Thus, his engagement was not wholly passive.

The tools of biography can highlight the individual as a convenient site for viewing wider social characteristics and conflicts. Individuals embroiled in social conflicts are often reduced to one-dimensional, class-based, political, or economic labels, but it is important to recognize that the incongruities, ambivalences, and dissonances that occurred within individuals themselves may be emblematic of broader social complexities. In addition, Smythe was able to display significant individual agency in the sense that even though he was subject to government control as a soldier, he was a prominent member of the Conservative Party and controlled a high-profile business (Maple Leaf Gardens) with significant cultural capital. As a result his opinions were faithfully reported in major newspapers and had a measurable impact on government decision making. Smythe’s forthrightness and his perceived conformity with ostensibly mainstream Canadian values mean that what he did, and what he thought and said about his behaviour, give us valuable insight into the mentality of Canadian wartime society in general, a mentality that was far from consistent and contained conflicts and apparent contradictions that may have seemed paradoxical in retrospect.

On September 1, 1939, Germany invaded Poland, prompting Great Britain and France to declare war. Canadian Prime Minister Mackenzie King arranged for parliament to convene in Ottawa for an emergency session to discuss the implications of the German attack. It took members of parliament three days to declare war, but by then most of the population had assumed that Canada would be drawn into the war. The governors of the National Hockey League certainly did.7 On September 7 several governors, including Smythe, held an emergency meeting of their own to discuss the situation in Europe and how it would affect their business in the fall.8 Deciding to continue on as usual, after the meeting, the president, Frank Calder, confirmed the league’s patriotic commitment. “We will just as in the last Great War, patriotically assist the government in every possible way. Any of our players who wish to volunteer will be assisted in doing so. We feel that a well-conducted sport will be of great benefit to the national morale in these days of worry and mental stress.”9 As a preemptive move against anticipated labour shortages, the seven clubs reduced player rosters from sixteen to fifteen men. Smythe arranged for Leaf players to take informal military training with the Toronto Scottish Regiment on mornings when the team was in town, incorporating it as part of the Leafs preseason training.

By mid-October, fears that hockey would lose its players and have to suspend proved unfounded. Only Bill Cowley of the Bruins had enlisted and, at age thirty-seven, there was little chance of his being called.10 The season started on schedule on November 2 and continued without interruption. That season, the only “war measure” taken by the league was a February 1940 charity game played at Madison Square Garden in New York between the New York Americans and the Detroit Red Wings, which raised several thousand dollars for Polish refugees.

Interest in the war waned with the lack of military action through the fall of 1939, and Canada settled back into what became known as the “phony” war. But soon enough, due to the collapse of the Anglo-French front and evacuation at Dunkirk in May and June of 1940, “the complacent attitude that had characterized