

"Paris 1919" Still more than relevant

by Jonathan Smith

On the afternoon of Friday, October 17th, Dr. Margaret MacMillan spoke to a packed house in the Duffy Amphitheater as part of the Frank MacKenna lecture series. Her talk was on the material covered in her newest and best-selling book, *Paris 1919*, which covers the six-month conference held in Paris at the end of the First World War.

The conference's purpose was to determine what the peace terms would be, and the effects they would have on the world. Dr. MacMillan, a professor of history at the University of Toronto and the current provost of Trinity College, gave an animated and riveting lecture on the subject. In addition, she discussed some of the background of the writing of the book.

The work has won such literary awards as the Samuel Johnson Prize, the PEN Hessell Tiltman prize, and the Duff Cooper Prize, and in addition was a finalist for the Westminster Medal in Military Literature. Aside from the excellent research and informative text, one of the book's biggest strengths is that it's a very exciting and fast-paced read in a genre that is unfortunately stereotyped as being dry and unappealing to those who aren't history buffs.

During the lecture, Dr. MacMillan said that, when she first started to think about the topic, it didn't generate much interest in a world that was still caught in the final years of the

Cold War. However, with the end of that period of high tension, problems and situations that had for years been "frozen" were suddenly once again active and prevalent. Although at first it would appear that such contemporary situations as the trouble in Bosnia over the last few years aren't related to anything in the past, Dr. MacMillan pointed out that historical examination reveals that many of the issues can be traced back to the problems and results of the 1919 conference.

She pointed out her belief that history does not repeat itself exactly, but rather things are connected and historical "echoes" exist.

I had the pleasure of sitting down with Dr. MacMillan following her talk and chatting with her about some of the issues in the book and her thoughts on some of the world problems that exist today. In regard to the belief of the leaders of the Paris conference that they could change the world, Dr. MacMillan feels that, while actual hubris may not have been a factor, they "may have gotten carried away with their own power".

An example that she points out is that of Woodrow Wilson, the president of the United States at the time, who thought, with some degree of arrogance, that he understood the ordinary people and spoke for them. However, she notes that such a feeling of power among the leaders was difficult to avoid, "because they were surrounded by people who thought they [the leaders] were powerful and important".

Although she does not think that history repeats itself, it "offers you warning signs". She does feel that history offers lessons that should be considered when dealing with certain circumstances such as the invasions of other countries or the rise of a "passionate force" such as nationalism or religious fundamentalism. To her, history "teaches you to be careful, to be wary and to ask questions", and that is where it most comes in handy.

If you don't know history, she reasons, "you're going to blunder, and make mistakes". In the case of the US-led invasion of Iraq, she points out that if the administration had taken the time to do their research rather than just assuming they knew enough and that they would be welcomed, "history might have told them everybody wasn't going to be glad to see them". History may not let one know everything, she says, but not paying attention to it "is like putting one hand over one eye; you're halving your possible vision".

One of the strongest points she made was that "peo-

ple use and abuse history constantly". With the Paris Peace conference, all different sorts of national groups appeared to make demands, but "chose their histories very selectively" and made all kinds of "very dubious historical claims". She says that, "history is about choosing what you put in and what you leave out" and that this still happens all the time, not only in hot spots such as the Middle East, but also in Canada.

I'd like to thank Dr. MacMillan for her thoughts and time, and in addition thank all the UPEI faculty and staff who made the interview possible. During our brief talk, Dr. MacMillan gave a very good sense of not only the book's subject matter, but also why the topic is still quite relevant to the present day. Perhaps that is the most important aspect of the work, particularly given what is going on around the world this very minute.

All in all, it was a very enlightening and entertaining experience.

English Society Coffee House

The English Society will be hosting a Coffee House Monday, Nov. 10 at Beanz Espresso Bar, 38 University Ave. Doors open at 7 p.m. Admission is free however there will be a donation box provided at the door.

Members of UPEI's English Faculty will read from their poetry and prose along with other distinguished guests and musical accompaniment.