

Canadian Military History

Volume 2 | Issue 2

Article 21

1-20-2012

Studying Canadian Military History

Desmond Morton
McGill University

Recommended Citation

Morton, Desmond (1993) "Studying Canadian Military History," *Canadian Military History*: Vol. 2: Iss. 2, Article 21.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh/vol2/iss2/21>

This Feature is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Canadian Military History by an authorized administrator of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

Studying Canadian Military History

Desmond Morton

B.D. Hunt and R.G. Haycock, eds. *Canada's Defence: Perspectives on Policy in the Twentieth Century*. Mississauga: Copp Clark Pitman, 1993. 274 pages. \$19.95.

Marc Milner, ed. *Canadian Military History: Selected Readings*. Mississauga: Copp Clark Pitman, 1993. 397 pages. \$19.95.

These days, thanks to Kinko and its competitors, most enterprising professors can provide their students with a bound collection of assigned readings and liberate themselves from the attention of copyright cops. Mass-enrolment courses like the Canadian History Survey or Western Civilization can even turn to well-designed collections with all the readings that a green teaching assistant or a fresh-fledged professor could ever need.

Thanks to Jack Granatstein, series editor for the New Canadian Readings series, Copp Clark Pitman has been persuaded to extend this privilege to a couple of subjects that normally gather anything but mass enrolments. One, compiled by Ron Haycock and the late Barry Hunt of the Royal Military College, focuses on Canadian defence policies since 1896. The other, on Canadian military history, has been compiled by Marc Milner, with his students at the University of New Brunswick as the obvious beneficiaries.

As part of a series, the two books are consciously complementary. Milner's book is appropriately preoccupied with fighting; Hunt and Haycock reserved their collection for the higher issues of war and national defence. Obviously their publisher expects and deserves adoptions by political scientists as well as history professors. Though they begin with Carman Miller's article on Sir Frederick Borden and militia reform after 1896, eight of the seventeen articles in the Hunt and Haycock collection and almost half the pages deal with events since 1945, though almost always in an historical context.

Canada's role in alliance politics is the dominant theme for six articles by, among others, Joel Sokolsky, Norman Hillmer, Joseph Jockel and the general editor of the series, Jack Granatstein. The planning and management of defence receives attention from Douglas Bland on defence white papers and the military bureaucracy, Harriet Critchley on civilianization and Steve Harris on interwar defence policy-making. Four articles, by Ron Haycock, Bob Bothwell, Dan Middlemiss and the late Rod Byers, deal with a topic sometimes overlooked, the politics and economics of Canada's defence industry. Surprisingly, there is not a single article on the conscription crises of either war, or on the recurrent problems of French-English relations and bilingualism in Canada's armed forces. Imagining that defence policy was of concern only to English-speaking Canadians has surely been a major problem for Canadian defence policy-makers. Despite the apparent success of official bilingualism in the Canadian Forces, the issues remain. It is unfortunate that a

book for classroom use should suffer a serious case of anglo-blinkerdom.

Of course anyone who has ever prepared a select reading list will know about difficult choices. Marc Milner eased his problem — and ducked some important history — by starting with the Northwest Rebellion of 1885. Ten of the twenty-one articles touch on the Second World War, five deal with the First World War, leaving three each for the pre-1914 and post-1945 periods. At least half the contributors, from George Stanley to Roger Sarty, including Milner himself, are alumni of the superb postgraduate school established by the late Colonel Charles Stacey in the Directorate of History. Stacey himself is represented by his cool, non-judgemental treatment of the Dieppe raid.

Other contributors include Farley Mowat, Alan Easton, Denis Whitaker, Murray Peden and that pawky but observant Scot, Private Donald Fraser of the 31st Battalion, Canadian Expeditionary Force. Students will learn a little from them of what wars are like to participants. Articles by Colonel Jack English on Operation TRACTABLE and by Terry Copp on battle exhaustion in Normandy help represent the harsher questions posed by historians of the post-Stacey era. The collection includes Peter Haydon's account of how the Royal Canadian Navy did its duty by its American allies during the Cuban missile crisis despite the wishes of Prime Minister John Diefenbaker. What pleasure Henri Bourassa would have found in the proof that navies serve their imperial masters, not national politicians. The final article by David Charters, "From October to Oka," is unique in either collection by focusing on events in Quebec.

Observant readers may discover that I am a contributor to both volumes. Since no one bothered to ask me or to invite the corrections ten or fifteen continued years of research might yield, I feel quite detached from both books. I will not, to my knowledge, share in the editors' royalties. My interest stems less from their unexceptional contents than from their significance as intellectual artifacts of our time.

Obviously the publishers have been persuaded to gamble that professors in the mid-nineties will forsake their inhibitions about teaching war and that orders for course adoptions will soon flow in. Are they right? Is military history ignored in Canadian universities?

By no means. Or not entirely. A few unscholarly hours with an assortment of university calendars revealed that the historical study of war has by no means been banned by academic Senates and peace-loving colleagues. Granted, the rations are small and reserved for the mature. The University of British Columbia calendar suggests that students must wait for a single 500-level reading course on the history of war. At the University of Alberta, where Canadian history since Confederation is divided in three parts, one is labelled "Canada, World War I to World War II." Canada's largest university, Toronto, offers three history courses of a military flavour out of 151 in the calendar. One covers American military history, another studies in war in the Middle Ages, and a third reveals "War and Society in the 20th Century." Varsity's suburban rival, York University, where Professor Granatstein can often be found,



goes Toronto one better: four of its 152 history offerings deal with aspects of war, though none in either university currently claim to deal with Canada's unique experience.

History curricula depend heavily on hiring choices and personal interests. Of 152 history courses and 31 seminars on offer at McGill in 1993, three relate to the study of war and a graduate course deals with civil-military relations. Without Robert Vogel and Carman Miller, would there be any? Would there be two courses on seapower at Wilfrid Laurier University without Barry Gough or any on warfare without Terry Copp? History students at Carleton this fall will be lucky enough to find half their course on "Topics in Canadian History" has been captured by Syd Wise to teach Canadian Military History.

From Victoria to Dalhousie, most Canadian universities tuck away a little potential opportunity to study war and society though only a few offer an immediate

market for Milner's book. Students seriously interested in their own country's military past have few choices. Unless they sign up with one of Canada's military colleges, they will have to find themselves in Calgary, Fredericton or, thanks to a mixture of co-operation and competition, at Queen's in Kingston.

In 1990, Professor John Mearsheimer warned that we might soon yearn for the peaceful, predictable days of the Cold War when both super-powers kept their clients under control. Who would argue with him? No sooner had the *annus mirabilis* of 1989 ended with the crashing concrete of the Berlin Wall and the rattle of gunfire in Bucharest than we were celebrating the post-Cold War in Croatia, Bosnia, the Persian Gulf, along the southern frontier of the unlamented Soviet Union and in the jungles of Cambodia.

Should we fight Serbs, the Khmer Rouge or the mercurial supporters of Mohammed Aidid? Do we run down our military professionals and hand peacekeeping responsibilities to the weekend warriors of Total Force? Do we remember, with Lord Macaulay's help, that ". . . those behind cried "Forward" /And those behind cried 'Back!'?"

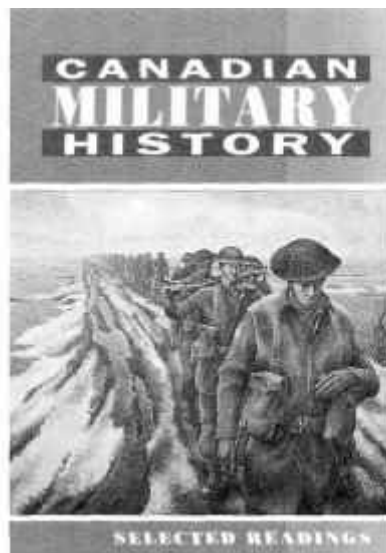
Canadians are as unmilitary a people as George Stanley once proclaimed. Their professors are not exceptional. By the 1970s, when most of the current crop was hired, "the idea of war as part of the mainstream of Canadian history had become anaethema to virtually all university programs" claims Milner. Military establishments, wrote Hunt and Haycock, "often seemed to be the neglected step-

child of public policy ..." Defence forces, confesses Professor Granatstein, are a Cinderella normally left in the scullery.

Readers of this journal may agree that the anaethema was always absurd. Canada was not immaculately conceived but born out of war. First nations fought each other long before white contact with an almost European savagery. With astonishing speed and ingenuity they adapted their tactics to battle with the European interlopers in a struggle that was by no means unequal and, in the first encounter with the Vikings, quite successful. Canada's independence in North America depended on wars that ended in 1763, 1783 and 1814, and on a British alliance that lasted well past Confederation. In turn, Canada's efforts to honour alliance commitments, legal and emotional, became the most dramatic and influential events of our twentieth century.

In *Canada and War*, I argue that, throughout Canada's existence, war has been a catalyst for every kind of political, social and economic change, from female suffrage in 1917 to post-1945 affluence. That conviction has grown with time and finds ample confirmation in both of these collections. What happened in Sarajevo in 1914 still shapes how Canadians respond to events in Sarajevo in 1993. If we are more sophisticated and labour-intensive in current procurement programs than we were when Sir Fred Borden adopted the Oliver equipment and the Ross rifle, the net effects seem rather similar. Military needs rank well behind the political needs of the hour. If history is another word for experience, could students be offered a richer lode?

History departments that would shrivel in shame if they could not offer students instruction in the Winnipeg General Strike or PC 1003 regard it as a luxury or even a perversion to explore the warlike setting from which both emerged. How many would recognize veterans of the CEF as a factor in establishing old-age pensions, family allowances and respectability for the "unmarried wife." In the two world wars of this century, close to a quarter of Canada's manpower enlisted cheerfully or otherwise. As a subset of the population, recruits were socialized, organized, bullied, bureaucratized and analyzed in ways that may make them a splendid frame for aspiring Cliometricians. Drafted, thousands of miles from home and exposed to temptation, terror and the unfamiliar, seldom have ordinary men and women had greater opportunity or need to express themselves. The normally silent are often amazingly articulate. Historians eager to expose students to the interpretation of original documents will find useful collections almost anywhere in Canada.



Military history is popular in Canada. Why else would marketing managers for the major book chains create entire sections of war books? In turn, why would publishers fill the shelves with books that are good, bad and awful? As a modest contributor to the stack, I cannot imagine a specialty with a more dependable and generous marketplace.

University courses are not the only way to help Canadians find out about their country's military past and its present significance. Indeed, I may be grateful that military history has largely been spared the suffocating academic embrace that has squeezed much of the excitement from labour history, women's history and most of the other young specialties of the past generation. By their work, Milner, Hunt and Haycock have helped make it easier for their colleagues who teach Canadian military history and defence policy. Those who sample the collections will discover that the field has drawn competent scholars with a variety of perspectives. Given half a chance, courses on military history draw encouraging numbers of enthusiastic, able students. Professors should have no trouble generating informed clashes of opinion and opportunities for locally-based primary research.

Desmond Morton is a Professor of History, University of Toronto and Principal of Erindale College, the University's Mississauga campus. He is the author of several books including *Marching to Armageddon: Canadians in the First World War*, (with J.L. Granatstein); and *A Military History of Canada*. Professor Morton is a Contributing Editor for *CMH*.