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The Canadian War Museum's Online "Military History Research Centre"

Ken Reynolds

This note is the next instalment in a series of short pieces on Internet resources and tools available to researchers, writers and readers of Canadian military history. The author, Ken Reynolds, an historian with the Department of National Defence, also writes "The Cannon's Mouth" blog <www.cannonsmouth.ca>.

If you're planning to go to Ottawa to undertake research in Canadian military history, you really should consider visiting the Military History Research Centre (MHRC) at the Canadian War Museum (CWM). The centre incorporates the 413 shelf metres constituting the George Metcalf Archival Collection (archival documents, maps, audio material, etc., as well as some 65,000 images) and the 55,000 volumes of the Hartland Molson Library Collection. Although increasingly visited by military historians – especially those employed by the CWM itself – I think the collection is still under utilized by our community.

Naturally, researchers want to do their homework before they visit an archives. Therefore, this column will take a look at the options available online for someone wanting to know what is available in the CWM collection.

Start at the museum's website <www.warmuseum.ca>, then click on the CWM's portion of the splash page (you can also visit the parent Canadian Museum of Civilization website from here). The category "Explore" is situated in the centre of the subsequent page, and part

way down that page is "Library & Archives." Clicking on that link takes the visitor to the MHRC page. Here, the centre is described in some detail, opening hours are provided and contact information is given. If you have any questions about what you find on the website, contact the staff. My experiences with them have been fantastic.

There is a column on the left side of this page, one part of which is titled "Military History Research Centre." Before heading for the online catalogue, click on the "Finding Aids in the Military History Research Centre" link. At the moment, there are 30 finding aids listed on the page, ten of which are posted online as Adobe Acrobat (PDF) files. The remainder are only available on paper at the MHRC.

Back in the left column, clicking on the "Online Catalogue" link takes the visitor to the catalogue description page and some further options. The "Instructions on searching Gesica" file on this page is a very useful document to read before beginning your first search. GESICA is not the most intuitive search software you will ever see. It is somewhat antiquated by Web 2.0 standards, but

once you get accustomed to using it, it is very useful.

Clicking on "Search GESICA" will lead to the search engine's main page. Here the visitor is again offered several options. Please note, here you have the option of searching the library and archival collection of just the CWM or that of the Canadian Museum of Civilization or both. There is also a third main option, perched atop the list, called "New Acquisitions." The CWM collection is constantly growing and one of the difficulties for any researcher is the question of whether anything relevant has been received by a collection since they last visited some weeks, months or years ago. The new acquisitions lists aid the researcher by providing a list of material received in the past 40 days.

Meanwhile, back at the main search page, clicking on the "Archives (audio-visual, photographic & textual documents)" link under Canadian War Museum (as one possible example), takes the visitor to another page of options. Essentially, this list allows the researcher to expand or refine the search they would like to undertake, incorporating textual material, photographs, moving

The screenshot shows the website's header with the Canadian War Museum logo and navigation tabs: HOME, PLAN YOUR VISIT, WHAT'S ON, EXHIBITIONS, EXPLORE, INTERACT, EDUCATION. The main content area is titled 'MILITARY HISTORY RESEARCH CENTRE' and includes sections for 'GENERAL INFORMATION' and 'CONTACT INFORMATION'. The 'GENERAL INFORMATION' section describes the George Metcalf Archival Collection and the Hartland Molson Library Collection. The 'CONTACT INFORMATION' section provides the address, phone numbers, and email addresses for the Military History Research Centre.

be useful. Using the same keyword, “79th,” this search lists four different “79th”-related subject headings, including two descriptions for the 79th Armoured Division, and one each for the 79th Cameron Highlanders and the 79th Field Regiment. (Note, however, that the 79th Depot Battery, CFA, CEF, does not make the “browse” list – I’d recommend running searches in both the keyword and browse search categories).

Other refinements can be introduced to searches, including a few “advanced search” functions, but these simply augment the basics covered above. The search functions for the Canadian War Museum’s MHRC collection are extremely helpful, provide researchers with extensive information on the contents of the collection, and even make it possible for the visitor to have material waiting for them upon arrival at the CWM.

images or sound recordings, or simply by choosing the “Complete Collection.”

From here, there are two main types of searches based on, in my opinion, whether the researcher is looking for something specific, or whether they are less sure of their target subject’s description within the collection.

The “keyword search” function – what the viewer is looking at on the page – is straightforward and allows for some level of refinement within the results. In this example, if the visitor inputs “79th” as the keyword, a total of 46 records are shown, ranging from the British 79th Armoured Division to the 79th Cameron Highlanders of Canada to the 79th Depot Battery, CFA, CEF, and so on. Each record in this view provides a minimal amount of information, including title and call number. Clicking on an individual record leads to a much more descriptive view,

The screenshot shows a search interface with a sidebar on the left containing buttons for 'FRANÇAIS', 'START OVER', 'KEYWORD SEARCH', 'BROWSE SEARCH', 'PATRON FUNCTIONS', 'CONTACT US', 'HELP', and 'LOGOFF'. The main content area is titled 'SEARCH THE LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES' and includes a search bar, a 'Please Logoff to end your session' message, and a list of search results under 'New Acquisitions'. The results are organized into sections for the Canadian Museum of Civilization and the Canadian War Museum, with links to various collections and archives.

detailing the contents of the record.

If the researcher wishes to be less specific, or is uncertain as to how their subject might be catalogued in the CWM’s system, the button in the far left column, “Browse Search,” can

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