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"The Embattled General: Sir Richard Turner and the First World War (Book Review)" by William F. Stewart

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William F. Stewart. *The Embattled General: Sir Richard Turner and the First World War*. Montreal/Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015. Pp. 374.

This book is long overdue, not because its author took too long to write it but because Canada's generals have been neglected in the growing historiography of the First World War, with the obvious exception of Arthur Currie. Certainly they are discussed in the standard works such as Tim Cook's two volumes on the army and other books, but why, a century later, are there no biographical studies of Watson, Lipsett, Loomis, Macdonell and the rest?

Happily, we now have a serious examination of Richard Turner, the second most important (but technically highest ranking) Canadian general in the war. Like the others, Turner has long been neglected but more than the others, he merited a biography because he was controversial. The outline of his story is well-known: as a wealthy businessman active in the prewar militia, he rose rapidly through the ranks because of his political connections, was given command of a brigade in 1914, then a division, and proves in both positions to be not up to the task, so he was shunted off to an administrative post in England where he could do no more harm.

But is this a fair summary in fact? William Stewart does not think so and he offers another view in this well-written and forcefully argued book, which originated as a doctoral dissertation at the University of Birmingham. Taking an innovative—at least in Canada—approach, he bases his assessment of Turner on the criteria used in the US army's leadership manual, modified to account for the different expectations and context of the First World War. Stewart also claims that he has based the book on the correspondence files of Major General John Carson, Sam Hughes' "Special Representative" in England, the personnel correspondence of the Overseas Ministry of Military Forces, and the extensive volumes on administration in England that "have been hitherto virtually untouched" (p. 5). He also claims to be the first historian to use Sir Edward Kemp's files "in almost their entirety" (p. 7).

Perhaps not surprisingly, Stewart concludes that Turner rates well by the criteria of the US army's leadership manual, although he does concede errors of judgment from time to time and acknowledges Turner's tendency to irascibility on occasion. He examines Turner's two major failures—at Second Ypres and St Eloi—in great detail

and demonstrates that both were very difficult complex situations, at the time and in retrospect. With regard to Second Ypres, he seems unnecessarily defensive. The simple reality was that both Turner and his troops were inexperienced in April 1915 and they found themselves in an appalling situation that was unprecedented even to experienced officers and men. Turner unquestionably made errors but he was receiving terse handwritten directives from his divisional general Edwin Alderson delivered by runner in the midst of a crisis, so it is arguable that he was not entirely at fault if he misunderstood them.

It is useful to recall that Currie, in the same situation, actually left his headquarters and went back to 27th Divisional headquarters to try to persuade General Thomas Snow that the situation was worse than he realised. Snow was appalled, and wanted him sacked for leaving the battle. Snow, it should be noted, had come close to being sacked in September 1914 for his performance in the early part of the war. If Currie had been removed from his command, the history of the Canadian Corps would probably have been much different from what it was. The point is that the revered Currie, like Turner, did not perform too well in his baptism of fire either. Nor did other officers such as the 15th Battalion's Lieutenant Colonel J.A. Currie, who completely collapsed. These men, for all their militia experience, had no real idea of what modern war was like. Some could not handle it, some could, and some were shaky at first but improved with experience.

Currie obviously improved with experience. Did Turner? His failure at St Eloi has consistently been cited to show that he did not, even though those who were there—and historians in retrospect—agree that St Eloi was an unmitigated disaster from start to finish in which Turner again had to use inexperienced troops to relieve exhausted British troops, fighting in water and mud that was waist-deep and worse. It was true that Turner and his staff misread photographs of the craters but so did British intelligence, and we all know that senior officers trying to command from behind the lines were almost always essentially out of touch in this war.

Stewart offers a spirited defence of Turner's performance in light of the extraordinary situation he faced at St Eloi but also argues that Turner was on a learning curve, noting that his division achieved the only success of the Somme offensive and the first Allied victory of the war when it captured Courcellette in September 1916. A couple of

months later he was appointed GOC of Canadian troops in England, ending his career as a field officer.

By the autumn of 1916 Borden recognized that the administration and training of the troops in England was being so badly mismanaged and that relations with British military authorities were so difficult, that action had to be taken. Displaying untypical creativity, he established the Ministry of Overseas Forces and appointed the solid and trusted Sir George Perley as minister. He then sacked Major General John Carson, Hughes' representative in London and appointed Turner to head the Canadian army in England and to advise Perley. This appointment has consistently been viewed as a demotion (although actually he was promoted) and Turner certainly would have preferred to remain in the field. That it was not a demotion is indicated by the fact that Byng first recommended Currie, his protégé, for the post. The appointment of Turner, while it removed a commanding officer about whom Byng had reservations, was a brilliant move because Perley needed an experienced combat general with strong administrative ability to advise him and take charge of the army in England. Borden completed the reorganization of the army's management by finally sacking Sam Hughes and replacing him with the competent Sir Edward Kemp.

Turner was a great success in England. Historians acknowledge that the Canadian Corps became an effective fighting force in 1917 and 1918. Describing the Canadian Corps in April as "a disorganized rabble," Denis Winter has argued that, by mid-1917, it had become "much the most effective unit in the BEF."¹ The credit for this transformation is usually given to Currie but he only became commanding officer of the Corps in June 1917. It is reasonable, therefore, to accept Stewart's assertion that Currie's successes in 1917 and 1918 were to some extent dependent on Turner's reorganization and reform of Canadian military administration in England.

Turner's record in England was impressive. He cleaned up "Hughes' bureaucratic labyrinth with sure handed professionalism," (p. 27) standardized and updated the infantry's training syllabus, sent home or to France a host of surplus officers, cleared out the log jam of reinforcements at the depot battalions, and mediated the medical corps' continual bickering. He worked well with Perley as his military advisor and, despite their rivalry until Currie was

¹ Denis Winter, *Haig's Command: A Reassessment* (London, 1991), 131.

appointed commanding officer of the Canadian Corps in the spring of 1917 and Currie's belief that Turner was undercutting him at army headquarters, Turner supported Currie on every major issue, most significantly on the issue of reducing the size of divisions in the spring of 1918 and the controversial break-up of the 5th Division.

Stewart has made a valuable contribution to our understanding not only of Richard Turner's career but also to the importance of the management of the army in England, and Turner's contribution to improving it, to the effectiveness of the Canadian Corps in the field. This takes nothing away from Currie's contribution but places it in context. Stewart makes the case that Turner's experience in the war "was unique ... in that it included senior command in both the combat arms and administration" (p. 3). It is further true that most publications on Canada's role in the war "have focused on the active front to the neglect of the essential role of training and administration in England, as well as support units in France and Belgium" (p. 5).

Historians will continue to debate whether he was incompetent as a field commander or just unlucky because he has been judged on the basis of two very difficult battles that took place early in the war, but somehow receives scant credit for the success at Courcellette. But a senior general with field experience was needed for the exceedingly important task in London and the choice of credible candidates was pretty much limited to Currie or Turner. Currie, as Stewart concedes, was a better field commander than Turner and had the full confidence of Haig, while Turner did not. The result was that a wise appointment appeared, at least to those who think wars are won only on the battlefield, to be a dismissal.

The tragedy is not that Turner was pulled from the field and given an administrative position in England, but that historians have too casually dismissed him as a failure and not appreciated that modern warfare depends on organization, training, and the making sure that those in the field have what they need. We are indebted to William Stewart for pointing this out in this well written and provocative book.

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