

Canadian Military History

Volume 28 | Issue 1

Article 17

4-29-2019

Review of "The British Commonwealth and Victory in the Second World War" by Iain E. Johnston-White

Brad St. Croix

Recommended Citation

St. Croix, Brad () "Review of "The British Commonwealth and Victory in the Second World War" by Iain E. Johnston-White," *Canadian Military History*: Vol. 28 : Iss. 1 , Article 17.
Available at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh/vol28/iss1/17>

This Book Review 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 editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

Iain E. Johnston-White. *The British Commonwealth and Victory in the Second World War*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. Pp. 319.

It is often said that victory has a thousand fathers. The Allied victory of the Second World War is no exception to this adage. Some nations are given more credit than others for the ultimate defeat of the Axis powers, although myths inform some of these conclusions. The United States is credited due to its financial and industrial contributions, the Soviet Union because it largely destroyed the German Army while suffering an enormous loss of human life and finally the United Kingdom (UK) contributed major intelligence work along with its lone stand against Nazi Germany for an entire year. The lone stand myth of the United Kingdom has been challenged, however, mostly by historians from the former Dominions. Iain E. Johnston-White's *The British Commonwealth and Victory in the Second World War* explores the important part played by the British 'white' Dominions in the overall British victory. Canada's, New Zealand's, Australia's and South Africa's contributions are examined through four separate case studies: financial support for the UK, an aircrew training programme known as the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan (BCATP), oceanic shipping and the land war in North Africa.¹ The analysis focuses on the period from the fall of France in June 1940 to the summer of 1943 when the United States began to be fully mobilised and the Soviet Union began to push back the German advances. This period was selected as it was when the Dominions were the UK's most significant allies. The importance of the Dominions to victory frames this entire work.

Johnston-White contends that the British could not have won the war without the various forms of aid provided by the Dominions. Altruistic intentions were not the only reasons why the Dominions were eager to help Britain in its time of need. Johnston-White claims that, as demonstrated in each case study covered in his work, the Dominions' generosity was motivated by national interests and not simply a desire to support the British war effort. Due to the Dominions' support for the UK, the bonds of the Commonwealth began to weaken as the Dominions demonstrated that they could support themselves and not rely on Britain. Motivations for providing assistance and the aid itself are the key themes explored in this work.

¹ Ireland is excluded as it remained neutral throughout the war.

Johnston-White's argument gives a crucial role to the Dominions: "I seek to analyse the Dominions primarily in terms of the war effort they produced—emphasising its essential nature to the UK and therefore adding an important element to the understanding of British triumph in the Second World War" (p. 15).

Examples of aid, along with evidence to demonstrate self-interested intentions, are provided in each case study. Canada's Billion Dollar Gift to the British government was given so that arms made in Canada could be bought in Britain which in turn would help stimulate the Canadian economy. Before Lend-Lease was enacted by the American government, Canada supplied a large quantity of arms to the British armed forces. The South African government allowed use of its ports in exchange for the UK providing the resources to upgrade them. The Royal Navy needed these ports as the Mediterranean-Suez route was closed with Italian entry into the war and travelling around the Cape of Good Hope was the safest way to reach India and the Far East. Johnston-White states that Australia provided troops for the war in North Africa because they needed British protection in the Pacific, so any support given to British world power benefitted Australia. New Zealand supported the BCATP because of a pre-war plan to train New Zealander pilots in cooperation with the Royal Air Force (RAF). The New Zealand government wanted the resources that they already had invested in air training to be used. Johnston-White provides a good example of the contributions of the Commonwealth nations to the UK when examining the importance that all countries played in aircrew training. Comparison of the number of training schools in all the Dominions combined helps support the work's overall argument because the Dominions operated more schools than the UK at certain points in the war.

Exploring the Dominions together requires an explanation of their similarities and differences. One such area is the ethnic makeup of the Dominions. The presence of British settler-colonists in all of the Dominions is used as one of the reasons for their support of Britain during the war. Despite making this point, Johnston-White is right to point out the difficulties in some Dominions of maintaining popular support for the war. Not all the Dominions had homogenous British populations. For example, the Canadian French-speaking minority and the South African Afrikaners, who made up most of the white population, caused concern for their respective governments. Both countries needed to emphasise to their people the self-interested

elements of the aid given to the UK to keep public support for the war effort. New Zealand and Australia were less concerned about this issue as their populations were predominantly British and their populations mostly supported the aid given to the UK. This section shows that South Africa and Canada were more self-interested in their aid to the UK than Australia and New Zealand.

There are a few mistakes in the text that create confusion due to missing information. For example, Johnston-White states that the United States and Southern Rhodesia provided trained men for RAF duties and the supporting numbers are said to be in table 8.2 but there is no information about either country's role in this table (pp. 115-16). As Johnston-White relies heavily on statistics to make his arguments, this mistake raises some credibility concerns over accuracy in his findings.

Some of Johnston-White's arguments are stronger than others, with Canadian and South African contributions providing the most support for the overall thesis. Another positive element of this work is its focus on the Dominions and not on the UK. Dominion politics and opinions form the bulk of the evidence used. Johnston-White's approach to the British Empire in the Second World War is seldom employed in the historiography and it is done well here. British works often lump Dominion contributions into the British war effort while historians from the former Dominions tend to focus only on their country's war effort and ignore the efforts of the other Commonwealth nations in the war. A true Commonwealth-wide approach is rarely used and thus *The British Commonwealth and Victory in the Second World War* is a significant contribution to the historiography. Johnston-White uses a good blend of primary and secondary sources from each Dominion. Archives in all the Dominions were consulted, lending greater authority to the work. Government departmental documents were heavily used to show relations between government officials in the different countries and to provide statistical support for the arguments about Dominion aid.

Johnston-White claims his work is the first comprehensive study of the British Commonwealth in the Second World War but this is not the case, although it is one of few works on the topic. It is also not the first work to frame the weakening connections between the UK and the Dominions as part of the fall of the British Empire. Andrew Stewart explores both elements in *Empire Lost: Britain*,

the Dominions and the Second World War, published in 2008.² Stewart's timeline is much more extensive as it covers the entire war. Other vital differences exist between these two works. One of the most significant is their approach to the role of the Second World War and the Dominions' intentions behind their actions. Stewart argues that the Dominions supported the UK to maintain their autonomy and equality with the UK within the Commonwealth.³ Johnston-White puts forth the far more convincing argument that the Dominions acted in their own self-interest and not merely to maintain their independence. The debate on the nature of the British Commonwealth in the Second World War can be clearly seen when these works are compared. Johnston-White challenges most of the decolonisation literature and the role the war played in causing the collapse of the British Empire by arguing that a "de-dominionisation" process began before the war and the Dominions' actions during the conflict further accelerated the separation (p. v). However, this process is often ignored by historians of decolonisation. Johnston-White argues that those writing on the collapse of the British Empire need to understand the Second World War to better comprehend the process of decolonisation and the role of the Dominions in that process.

Reading *The British Commonwealth and Victory in the Second World War* would be more beneficial to those who are studying the decline of the British Empire than to those who want to learn about the Second World War. The strengths of the work lay in its insights into the relationships between the UK and the Dominions. Johnston-White is quite right to highlight that the Dominions do not receive as much attention as they should in understanding decolonisation and this work will help to rectify the omission.

BRAD ST.CROIX, *UNIVERSITY OF OTTAWA*

² Andrew Stewart, *Empire Lost: Britain, the Dominions and the Second World War* (London: Continuum, 2008).

³ Stewart, 162.