

Canadian Military History

Volume 27 | Issue 2

Article 4

10-17-2018

"Reluctant Warriors: Canadian Conscripts and the Great War (Book Reivew)" by Patrick Dennis

David Borys

Recommended Citation

Borys, David (2018) ""Reluctant Warriors: Canadian Conscripts and the Great War (Book Reivew)" by Patrick Dennis," *Canadian Military History*: Vol. 27 : Iss. 2 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh/vol27/iss2/4>

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.

Patrick Dennis. *Reluctant Warriors: Canadian Conscripts and the Great War*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2017. Pp. ix + 311.

Patrick Dennis in *Reluctant Warriors: Canadian Conscripts and the Great War* delivers an important contribution to the historiography of the Canadian First World War experience through a well-researched examination of the role that conscripted soldiers played in the Canadian Corps during the final year of the First World War. Dennis effectively challenges a false narrative that was created in the aftermath of that war—and one that sadly endured for too long—that downplayed and minimised the role of conscripted soldiers during the Hundred Days Campaign while often incorrectly labelling those that fought as under-trained and of low quality. Simply put, Dennis clearly shows that conscripted soldiers were in fact a crucial and integral part of the Canadian Corps' unprecedented success during its final offensive of the war, and without the steady supply of trained reinforcements the operational tempo that Sir Arthur Currie set for his corps would have been impossible.

Dennis begins his text with a discussion of the background to the conscription crisis and how the initial fervour for enlistment gave way to a steady decline in numbers as the Canadian Corps continued to engage the enemy on the Western Front. He briefly discusses the 1917 federal election and the ramifications of Prime Minister Borden's implementation of conscription. Dennis then proceeds to a discussion of the training received by the conscripts, which by all accounts was equal to that of volunteers, and explores the reaction of the volunteers to the arrival of conscripts into their units. While this reaction may have been widely negative at first, Dennis clearly shows that, once shots were fired, these conscripts were not only prepared for combat, but any reticence towards them by those that volunteered faded quickly.

The real essence of Dennis' study, however, comes with his examination of the Hundred Days Campaign, where he painstakingly illustrates the role played by conscript soldiers in the battles of that campaign. He effectively drives home two key ideas: first, that conscripts were an integral part of this offensive and secondly, the macabre reality of the constant drain on Canadian Corps manpower that plagued the formation during this period. There is no doubt, after reading Dennis' study, that conscripted soldiers were not only

crucial to the victories of the Canadian Corps but displayed as much bravery and skill as their volunteer brethren. Despite even Arthur Currie's complicity in perpetuating the post-war myth that conscript soldiers had little to no role in the Hundred Days Campaign, Dennis has been able to effectively challenge both Currie's position and the long-standing historiographical understanding.

One of the more fascinating themes to arise from Dennis' study, however, pertains to the command capabilities of Arthur Currie during the Hundred Days Campaign. Though not the ultimate objective of his work, Dennis highlights some fairly serious command errors made by Canada's legendary commander; errors that, Dennis intimates, were linked to the abundant availability of trained reinforcements because of conscription. On two key occasions in particular (the final day of the Second Battle of Arras in late August and the push to Cambrai in late September 1918), Dennis shows that Currie indeed drove his divisions too far, with the result being little added gain coupled with high casualties that in some cases removed the fighting power of certain battalions for the remainder of the war. As Dennis clearly states, "[u]nshackled from previous manpower constraints, Currie conducted a singular campaign of near continuous, large-scale, high-intensity operations, apparently without undue concern about shortfalls in trained replacements" (p. 230). This leads Dennis to further postulate that "the symbiotic relationship between the high costs of that success and an unprecedented flow of reinforcements is clearly one area of the Canadian campaign that demands further study" (p. 230). There is no question that Dennis has only just scratched the surface of this new historiographical direction. While Currie is rightly considered to be Canada's finest military commander, this book offers a preliminary insight into his command flaws that have been little discussed in the literature and would benefit from a more in-depth study.

Thus, Patrick Dennis provides an important addition to Canadian military history through his examination of Canada's reluctant warriors of the First World War. Dennis openly admits that this is not intended to be an exhaustive study of conscription nor even one about recruitment in the Canadian Expeditionary Force; it is nonetheless an important contribution to the growing canon of studies on this particular topic regarding the Canadian war experience. It nicely complements works by Jack Granatstein on the subject, even appearing to have induced Dr. Granatstein to

re-examine his previous assumptions about Canadian conscripts in 1918.¹ It also acts as a nice thematic pairing with Daniel Byers' book on conscription in the Second World War, *Zombie Army*.² While this reviewer believes a more fluid narrative approach would have produced an even stronger piece of work, as opposed to the multiple short-section format Dennis employs, this book certainly achieves its purpose. It is highly recommended for any scholar of Canadian military history, though for a general reading audience it would be a fitting read only after a thorough digestion of other key works on the Hundred Days Campaign (notably Shane Schreiber's *Shock Army of the British Empire*).³ Patrick Dennis has provided a well-researched study that should be an important part of any intellectual discussion on the Canadian First World War experience.

DAVID BORYS, *UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA*

¹ J.L. Granatstein and J. Mackay Hitsman, *Broken Promises: A History of Conscription in Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1977); and J.L. Granatstein, *The Greatest Victory: Canada's One Hundred Days, 1918* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2014).

² Daniel Byers, *Zombie Army: The Canadian Army and Conscription in the Second World War* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2016).

³ Shane Schreiber, *Shock Army of the British Empire* (St. Catherines: Vanwell, 2005).