

Douglas E. Delaney. *The Imperial Army Project: Britain and the Land Forces of the Dominions and India, 1902-1945*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. 368.

How does a country build an army? Where do the major influences of the process originate? Are the prime motivators money, tradition or ease? In *The Imperial Army Project: Britain and the Land Forces of the Dominions and India, 1902-1945*, Douglas Delaney details how Britain, the dominions and India shaped their armies in the period beginning after the South African War through to the end of the Second World War. These constituent parts of the British Empire worked together through a period of political change to create national armies organised along similar lines.<sup>1</sup>

The level of interoperability achieved by the empire's armies is a crucial element of Delaney's work. He likens the 'imperial army project' to a military coalition of Lego pieces, different parts that fit together to create a cohesive whole yet still allowing the different pieces to look unique. This is an apt analogy to describe the British Empire's armies in the first half of the twentieth century. Motivations of the different dominions, India, and Britain are explored throughout the book. Delaney argues that Britain and the dominions had different motivations for participating in this process of army standardisation. Britain's need of imperial sources of manpower drove British interest, and the British War Office wanted imperial contingents "that were compatible with the British Army, predictable in terms of sizes and composition, and willing to take orders from Whitehall" (p. 32). For the dominions, Delaney contends that they had to organise their armies in some way, so the British Army was a good model as it saved money. India was far more reticent to conform to organisational standards beginning in the post-South African War period through to the period of rearmament in the 1930s. The hesitation was overcome by the British financial support to modernise the Indian Army.

Delaney's work occupies a unique position in the historiography about imperial defence relations. There are numerous other works on the development of the individual dominion's armies or about imperial coordination efforts during individual wars, but none have explored

<sup>1</sup> Empire is being used interchangeably with Commonwealth for this review as the Indian Army was examined and was not a dominion at any point during the timeline of the book.

the topic in the same method as Delaney. Also, the neglected area of inter-imperial military relations is well documented in *The Imperial Army Project*. Delaney highlights that Canadian historian Richard Preston wrote about “‘the illusion of an imperial military structure and an imperial army.’ This is an exaggeration based more on political and constitutional factors than military ones” (p. 163). Delaney is correct in his assessment. Politics often are the focus of other works on imperial relations while military connections, both personal and institutional relationships, receive little attention. Delaney, in contrast, gives them a proper examination. As Dominion politicians were willing to conform to equipment and training standardisation, they refused to give commitments for wartime contingencies prior to the outbreak of conflict. In contrast, military leaders throughout the empire wanted stronger bonds between the constituent parts during peace and war. Delaney highlights that politics was simply one of many factors influencing this process.

Delaney has developed a new framework to examine the success of imperial cooperation from 1902 to 1945, arguing that this project “can hardly be viewed as anything but a success” (p. 305). This interpretation is not new within the historiography. In a recent example of his work on the British Commonwealth in the Second World War, Iain Johnston-White argued the dominions were a critical part of the British victory in the war.<sup>2</sup> Delaney’s conclusions are not new but his approach to the topic certainly is.

The archival research conducted for this work is impressive. Sources were consulted across the British Commonwealth in the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, India and South Africa, a nation whose contribution to the world wars rarely receives an in-depth archival examination from non-South African historians. In addition, Delaney’s exploration of the historiography of imperial relations is a well drafted section of the book. He situates his book among the earlier works on the topic and explains how he builds off of their findings. Delaney cites John Darwin’s *The Empire Project* as an example of conceptualising the empire ‘system,’ although little of that work examines how imperial armies were raised and worked

<sup>2</sup> Iain E. Johnston-White *The British Commonwealth and Victory in the Second World War*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 7.

together. Delaney's title is a nod to Darwin's seminal work.<sup>3</sup> Richard Preston's *Canada and 'Imperial Defence'* was referred to as a model study of imperial relationships through the First World War, while historians Andrew Stewart's and Nicholas Mansergh's works surveyed Britain's cooperation with the dominions during the Second World War.<sup>4</sup> Delaney correctly asserts that "no one has adequately tackled how soldiers and statesman achieved the level of interoperability that the armies of the British Empire exhibited over the extended period of the two world wars" (p. 4). *The Imperial Army Project* has successfully fulfilled this void in the historiography.

It is always difficult to decide which elements to exclude when writing on the British Empire. Delaney's choice not to examine Ireland, as it was not independent in the First World War and was neutral in the Second World War, is a fair one. But the decision to omit Newfoundland on the grounds that their wartime contingents were never bigger than a regiment or battalion, leads one to question if Delaney's thesis holds true for units smaller than divisions. One cannot help thinking that examining Newfoundland's contribution to the world wars would have been an interesting exercise to see how far down the chain of command Delaney's thesis holds true. Newfoundland's omission does not detract from the overall work but offers questions as to the extent of the 'imperial army project.'

The Lego principle of interconnecting pieces was well supported with numerous examples. In the First World War, cooperation between Canadians and Australians before the battle of Amiens is a notable instance of this principle at work. Australian troops briefed Canadians about the battlefield's terrain, gathered intelligence and the objectives at Amiens. Canadian participation in the battle remained a secret thus they could not scout or man their positions ahead of time. An entire corps was slotted into the order of battle without major preparation, demonstrating the interconnectedness of the empire's armies. Delaney also notes that during the battle of

<sup>3</sup> John Darwin, *The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World System, 1830-1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Richard A. Preston, *Canada and 'Imperial Defence': A Study of the Origins of the British Commonwealth's Defence Organization, 1967-1919* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1967); Andrew Stewart, *Empire Lost: Britain, the Dominions and the Second World War* (London: Continuum, 2008); and Nicholas Mansergh, *A Survey of British Commonwealth Affairs: Problems of Wartime Co-operation and Post-war Change, 1939-1952* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958).

Amiens “Imperial artillery knew no national boundaries” (p. 161). The Canloan program of the Second World War, where Canadian officers served in British regiments is another example of the intra-empire sharing and cooperation. The program was a reversal of the First World War where large numbers of British officers served in dominion armies. Whatever form this exchange took, it demonstrated the interoperability of the British Empire’s armies.

Delaney highlights that knowledge did not just flow outwards from the British metropole to the dominions. Sharing of information went both ways. The Royal Military College in Kingston, Ontario was the model on which the Australian Royal Military College at Duntroon was based upon. This example of an inter-dominion exchange was an important element of this imperial process. Also, in the mid 1930s Britain created a course on staff duties for Territorial Army officers based on the Canadian Militia staff officer course. Information sharing benefitted both Britain and the dominions.

This work is valuable to academics and graduate students alike who study the British Empire’s military effort in the twentieth century. The focus on the integrated efforts of Britain, the dominions, and India are beneficial to those engaged in the study of imperial warfare, as previous works only focused on national armies on a broad scale or imperial efforts during a conflict. Studies on imperial interwar army development will also benefit from consulting this work.