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Collections of the CWM: An historical resource

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The Canadian War Museum traces its origins back to a museum founded by a group of militia officers in Ottawa's Cartier Square Drill Hall in 1880. Although this museum eventually closed, much of its valuable collection was retained in storage, and later, amalgamated with the vast array of "War Trophies" brought back from the battlefields of the First World War. This formed the basis of the collection of a newly established Canadian War Museum, which first opened its doors in January 1942. The museum moved to its present quarters at 330 Sussex Drive, Ottawa, in 1967.¹

The CWM is mandated to collect, preserve, study and exhibit artifacts relating to the military history of Canada. Readers of this Journal will be most familiar with the exhibit portion of the mandate through visits to the galleries in our Sussex Drive building. They are probably less familiar with the collecting part of the mandate, however. This is unfortunate, for the collections of the CWM constitute a great resource which, it is probably fair to say, has been largely overlooked by the Canadian military history community in undertaking the numerous tasks in which its members have been involved.

Certainly artifacts are brought into the CWM's collection as symbols or icons of Canadian military endeavour, but also, it should be emphasized, because it is thought that they can tell us something about the nature of that endeavour. Or, as the New Brunswick material history scholar Greg Finley, has put it, "Correctly identified and carefully

interpreted, artifacts can serve the historian by existing as an additional category of evidence."² The intention then of this brief overview is to acquaint readers with the nature of the CWM's collections, and to alert them to its potential as a usable resource. (Artifacts can, of course, only be loaned to facilities which have proper security and environmental controls, but they are always available for study purposes at the CWM's storage building, Vimy House.)

Writers of military history are probably most familiar with archival materials. While the papers of the more celebrated Canadian

military figures would most likely be found in the National Archives or some other major repository, the CWM nonetheless holds the papers of W.D. Otter and Alan Macleod, V.C., as well as smaller collections of papers associated with figures such as Lawrence Buchan, A.W. Currie, R.E.W. Turner, V.C., and E.W.B. Morrison. The major collecting emphasis of the CWM's archives, however, and where we would hope to carve out a unique position in the field, is in the

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correspondence, diaries, logs, etc., of ordinary Canadian men and women caught up in war. Presently we have close to 350 collections of such manuscripts. Examples are the diaries of Grace Evelyn Macpherson, a First World War Volunteer Ambulance Driver; the letters written by Staff Sergeant Douglas Marr Brown to his mother while serving in Siberia, 1919-1921; and clandestine records concerning the ill-fated operations and subsequent captivity of the Canadian army's "C" Force at Hong Kong, 1941-1945, kept by the POWs themselves. The

collection will over time, it is hoped, become an indispensable stopping point for those interested in the social history of the Canadian military, and in the impact of war upon the lives of ordinary Canadians.

The CWM also has a photograph collection that researchers may find a useful supplement to the major holdings of the National Archives or DND. This consists of 17,000 individual photographs, approximately 600 photograph collections, and about 260 albums. While some of these are duplicates of official photographs found elsewhere, most are the personal photographs of service personnel, from the lowest rank to that of general. (The recently acquired photograph albums of W.D. Otter, for example, contain fascinating depictions of military activity dating back to the 1880s.) These photographs have, for the most part, been acquired over the years as parts of larger collections of personal effects, and inevitably a large number are of personalities. In many instances those shown are not identified, or are incompletely identified. These are nonetheless useful for information on uniforms and badges and, especially in the more panoramic scenes, for details of camp and barrack life.

Perhaps the portion of the CWM's collection that is best known and most frequently used outside the museum is the war art collection. It was initiated by Lord Beaverbrook during the First World War as part of his War Memorials scheme and rekindled during the Second World War as the Canadian War Records programme. At some 11,000 works, this is one of the world's major collections of war art. Many of Canada's important twentieth century artists are represented. However, only a very small portion of the collection is known, primarily the works in oil, and of those only a small number receive regular exposure. These include Alex Comfort's *The Hitler Line*, and Alex Colville's *Infantry Near Nijmegen*. The bulk of the collection in fact consists of works on paper and these have received nowhere near the same amount of attention. They may, indeed, be even more interesting from an artistic perspective, and are certainly so from a documentary one — a series of at least 70 watercolours by Will Ogilvie

consisting of scenes of the Italian campaign, arguably his best work, come to mind.

The art collection continues to grow. Recently the Museum acquired a work by the Group of Seven artist, A.J. Casson, depicting the manufacture of naval guns at the Massey-Harris plant in Brantford, Ontario — one of three war-related works that he completed, all of which are in the possession of the CWM. We are currently in the process of acquiring a set of 160 drawings and watercolours by the hitherto unknown professional artist, Austin Taylor, while he was serving as a sapper with the Royal Canadian Engineers in Chilliwack, B.C. and in Saint John, N.B. during the Second World War. These constitute a most valuable visual record of daily life in the barracks and camps of the home front during that conflict.

Military costume constitute the CWM's single largest collection. Our earliest piece is the uniform of Lieutenant Jeremiah French of the King's Royal Regiment of New York from the period of the Revolutionary War; perhaps our most celebrated is the coatee reputedly worn by Issac Brock when shot at Queenston Heights, complete with bullet hole.³ From the earliest periods through to the end of the nineteenth century our holdings are scattered — items of dress and associated gear being notoriously subject to disintegration over time. For the twentieth century, however, our holdings would enable researchers to trace the evolution of Canadian military dress and equipment in some detail from the period of the Boer War up to and including the numerous variants of the present day.

As part of its function as a memorial to those who have served the country, the CWM accepts the medals of all Canadian veterans who care to leave them with us. Consequently we have a burgeoning collection, many sets containing gallantry awards, but many other consisting solely of campaign and/or service medals. Some of the highlights of the collection are the exquisitely engraved Louisbourg Gold Medal of 1758, the British Army Gold Medal awarded to Lieutenant-Colonel Charles de Salaberry for the Battle of Chateauguay, and a total of 18 Victoria Crosses, including those awarded to the First World War air aces W.A.

(Billy) Bishop, and W.G. Barker. Each medal in itself is symbolic of some act of military bravery or of services rendered. When the stories behind the medals are examined closely, however, larger issues concerning the nature of military heroism itself, the politics of medals awarding, and Canadian versus imperial identity, are raised — as becomes clear in a study that an historian on the staff of the CWM is presently undertaking.

As far as war's "sharp end," the CWM attempts to collect examples of all small arms used in Canada or by Canadians in war or a war-related situation. We also seek to collect significant pieces used by allies and by enemies which help to put those used by Canadians into context. In addition, weapons are acquired which may not have a specific reference to Canada but which represent major technological advances (eg. the Prussian "needle gun") and therefore have an impact upon the weapons used by Canadians. Thus at the CWM it is possible to undertake a fairly detailed examination of developments in the field of small arms over the last century or so, and dating back to the earliest periods of European discovery in so far as weapons were used specifically in Canada are concerned. (We have very few items related to pre-contact or indigenous peoples' warfare, although efforts are being made to improve this situation.)

Our artillery collection is fairly large but patchy, and one would not be able to trace lines of development with as much consistency as with the small arms collection. Examples of the much used 8-inch howitzer and 18-pounder field gun are the sole testaments that we have to the important role played by artillery in the First World War. From the Second, of specific Canadian relevance, we have examples of such standard pieces as the 17-pounder anti-tank gun and 25-pounder howitzer, and from the enemy side, the much feared German 88-mm gun in its dual purpose (ie. anti-tank and anti-aircraft) configuration. (Owing to the vagaries of early CWM collecting we also have a large collection of Second World War Soviet field guns. Although not critical to our mandate, these are nonetheless interesting.) From the earlier period we have a selection of smooth-

bore guns in various states of condition, and a number of Armstrong field pieces from the mid-nineteenth century. We have only one specimen from the rifled muzzle-loading era, but an interesting one — a 64-pounder, which is in fact a converted 32-pounder smooth bore.

The CWM also has a sizable collection of military vehicles which document in artifact form Canadian involvement in mobile warfare, whether in transport or in fighting vehicle format. Thus from the First World War we possess a rare example of the horse-drawn General Service Wagon, in excellent condition. In contrast, from the same war we have an example of a machine gun-bearing Auto Car of the Canadian Motor Machine Gun Brigade. One of our most prized pieces, this represents an early and significant Canadian initiative in applying the motor vehicle to this important and developing aspect of warfare. Such vehicles only really came into their own in the relatively fluid conditions characteristic of the war's last phase.

From the Second World War we have a representative sampling of Canadian Military Pattern vehicles, those ubiquitous workhorses of all the Commonwealth armies. Canadian contributions to the armoured side of that conflict are represented by a Ram tank, by a Valentine tank made at the Canadian Pacific's Angus shops in Montreal (which was sent to the Soviet Union and only recently excavated from a bog in the Ukraine into which it had sunk in 1943), and by a recently acquired Sexton self-propelled gun, fully restored and in running condition. We continue to maintain a look-out for a surviving example of the Guy Simonds inspired "Defrocked Priest" or "Kangaroo" armoured personnel carrier, one of the first versions of this type of vehicle anywhere, but so far with no success.

The CWM's collections are far richer than this rather brief survey indicates. Whole groups of artifacts have not even been touched upon — such as posters, military souvenirs, and technical equipment. It is hoped, however, that this tip-of-the-iceberg approach will serve to emphasize the CWM's importance as an underutilized source of information about our military past.

The CWM was described in a recent Task Force Report on military museums as "Canada's flagship military museum."⁴ This most certainly is true, but, compared with the resources that many other countries put into their national war museums — the Australian War Memorial, for example, has a staff and budget about five times the size of the CWM's — the CWM is a relatively minor player. (An examination of why this is so could result, one would think, in some very interesting insights into Canadian social, cultural, and political attitudes.) Still, despite rather limited resources the staff of the Canadian War Museum is doing the best it can to maintain exhibit galleries that bring Canadian military history to life, and collections that will be of long-term significance for those wishing to fully understand the nature of the Canadian military experience in all its aspects.

NOTES

1. See Bernard Pothier's account of the Museum's origins, "Hundred Years Canadian War Museum: The Road to What it is Now." *Canadian Defence Quarterly*. Volume 10, 1980, pp.36-42.
2. Greg Finley. "The Gothic Revival and the Victorian Church in New Brunswick: Towards a Strategy for Material Cultural Research." *Material Cultural Bulletin*. Volume 32, 1990. p.7.
3. See Ludwig Kosche. "Relics of Brock: An Investigation." *Archivaria*. Number 9, 1979-1980. pp.33-56, for a persuasive, but probably in the end not absolutely convincing, case that this was indeed the actual coat worn by Brock at the fatal moment.
4. *Task Force on Military History Collections in Canada*, G. Hamilton Southam and Denis Vaugeois, co-chairmen. (Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services Canada, 1991). p.26.

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This column marks the beginning of a regular contribution to *Canadian Military History* from the staff of the Canadian War Museum.