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Researching Guy Simonds

J.L. Granatstein

Canadians have not been very interested in their military leaders. There is still no full modern study of Sir Arthur Currie, no critical study of Andy McNaughton, and no published biography of Harry Crerar. The publication of a full-scale biography of Guy Simonds (Dominick Graham, *The Price of Command: A Biography of General Guy Simonds*), certainly the Canadian army's best commander in the Second World War, therefore ought to be a cause for celebration. However, restrain your cheers. The book is inadequate in many ways, but this column will examine only Professor Graham's research.

What are the basic sources for a book on Simonds? There are the General's own papers, in the possession of his son, a collection that includes a draft memoir covering the years to 1939. There are files at the Royal Military College on his time there. There are the records of the Department of National Defence at the National Archives and at the Director General History, National Defence Headquarters, on his army career. There are records in Britain in the Imperial War Museum, the Public Record Office, the Liddell Hart Collection at King's College, University of London. And there are the personal papers in Canada and the U.K. of contemporary soldiers and politicians, as well as a substantial array of men and women, happily still extant, who can talk about Simonds' career from their differing perspectives. No surprises here, or at least there ought not to be any.

What is surprising is how Professor Graham approached his task. He had the Simonds Papers given to him to use as he would. Because he was commissioned to write his book by the Royal Canadian Artillery Association, he had

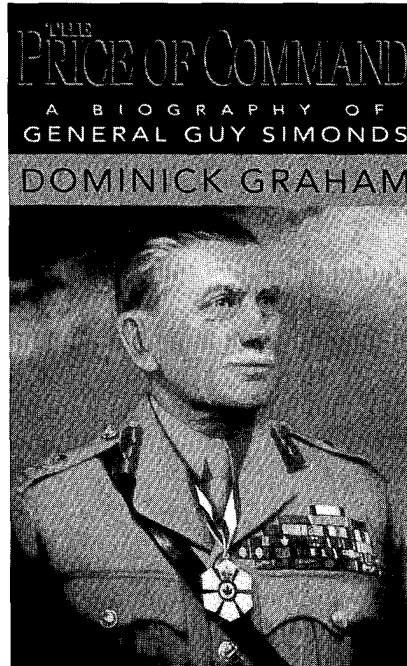
the support of that organization in tracking down Simonds' colleagues, friends, and acquaintances. Essential sources, apparently well employed. But what else did he use?

On the basis of the evidence presented in his rather spotty endnotes and bibliographic comment, very little. He seems to have neglected to visit the Royal Military College to check its files on Simonds' time as a cadet, a grievous omission because the Simonds' personal file is full of material on his and his family's financial plight during the four years he spent in Kingston. The Commandant, Major-General Sir Archibald Macdonnell, begged money on Simonds' behalf and found him summer employment, and the letters from Simonds' father are appalling in their weak self-justifications. Of this sad tale — which must have shaped Simonds' character in dramatic ways — we learn nothing in the biography beyond one single incorrect reference. How could a biography be written without checking the RMC files?

The DND records were used by Graham, but very cursorily: there is absolutely no evidence of systematic work on this huge collection. Anyone reading the bibliographical note and acknowledgements can be forgiven for assuming that Bill McAndrew, Jack English, and Reg Roy gave Graham material they had uncovered (as they have done for me, much to my great benefit) and that Simonds' biographer went little further into the voluminous DND files. Graham does not appear to have had as much assistance with the vast holdings of the Director General History, again an invaluable collection. Certainly he made no use of the Crerar files still held there on senior officers, another most important source.

The papers of Andy McNaughton in the National Archives, incredibly, do not seem to have been used at all; Crerar's papers there are only lightly touched while those of Generals Burns, Sansom, Penhale, Odlum, Pope, Vanier, etc., were never consulted. Not even Colonel G.W.L. Nicholson's files on the writing of the history of the Royal Canadian Artillery, a collection full of good, detailed comments by and about Simonds, were read. It goes without saying that collections outside of Ottawa apparently remained completely unexamined (e.g., George Pearkes and Harry Foster). Given Simonds' difficult relations with politicians, one might have expected that a few collections of political figures would have been read. No chance. The papers of Mackenzie King, full of information from Ralston, Crerar, Montgomery and others about Simonds, were not used (and Pickersgill's *The Mackenzie King Record* is not even listed in the bibliography), while the records of the Minister of National Defence, Colonel J.L. Ralston, were not consulted. For the postwar years, *mirabile dictu*, Defence Minister Brooke Claxton's papers in the National Archives were employed, and in these sections there is evidence in the endnotes (as there is not for most of the rest of the book) of interviewing.

The net result, regrettably, is simply inadequate, and no M.A. thesis done in this fashion would ever pass a Canadian university. My first (admittedly chauvinistic) reaction to this book — that in its ignorance of the Canadian sources it was peculiarly British in approach — proved incorrect. Unaccountably, given the importance of Simonds' relations with Montgomery, Leese, Dempsey and other British officers, no evident use has been made of British collections. None. Thus, unless he sent them to Simonds directly, we lose Monty's comments on Simonds from 1942 onwards, and we get nothing of what Oliver Leese or Liddell Hart had to say. Brooke's papers at



King's College and Dempsey's and Alexander's papers in the War Office records remain unread. I trust I may be forgiven if I say that this leaves me incredulous.

I am assured by friends for whose judgement I have great regard that Graham's book is excellent in its descriptions of Simonds as a commander in the field. If so that is the only area in which it can be judged a success. Unfortunately, the lack of research guarantees that this most important military figure has not been placed properly into either the military or political context in which he lived and worked and, given the fact that the

existence of this biography will likely block any attempts at such a study, this is a tragedy.

Does this shoddy research matter? To answer that question is, of course, to answer it. In his bibliographical note, Professor Graham talks sensibly about the weaknesses of the Simonds Papers, quite properly his main source. Then, throwing caution to the wind, he adds that he "may have given the reader the impression that he made bricks without straws." Oh, dear. *The Price of Command* suggests nothing so much as that the price of bricks was too high for Dominick Graham. Unfortunately his book is much more than a half-load short.

Dominick Graham. *The Price of Command: A Biography of General Guy Simonds*. Toronto: Stoddart, 1993. 345 pages. \$29.95.

The weaknesses of Jack Granatstein's own research are fully exposed to the public in *The Generals: The Canadian Senior Commanders in the Second World War*, published this September by Stoddart. An excerpt from *The Generals* may be found on page 57.