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## Autobiography and Biography The Oxford Companion to Canadian Military History

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# Autobiography and Biography

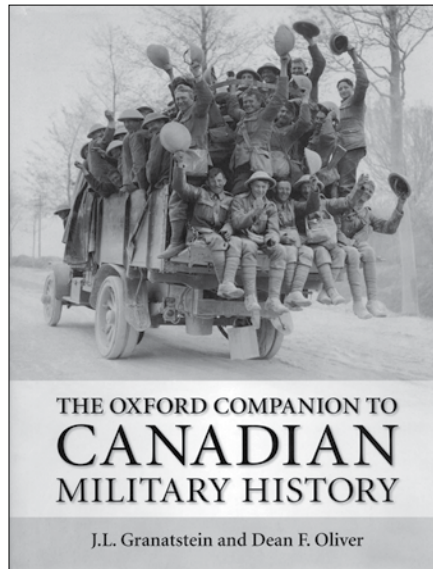
## The Oxford Companion to Canadian Military History

J.L. Granatstein and Dean F. Oliver

### CMH Editors' Introduction

The publication of The Oxford Companion to Canadian Military History last year was a milestone for military history studies in Canada. Its formidable size – 514 large-format pages with seven hundred or more entries, ranging from about 200 to about 3500 words – gives a sense of the depth and diversity of the field. The book is also a rich resource on the development of scholarship. In addition to their vast reading in the established literature,

**Abstract: History is a people's record. So, what do we know of the people – great and not-so-great, famous and not-so-much – who populate Canada's military past? The answer, based on any reasonable assessment of the material produced thus far, is precious little. Few soldiers have written their own tales and still fewer witnesses have drawn such subjects from obscurity into the mainstream narrative of the nation's past. The reasons are complex, and worthy of more detailed study in their own right. The results are depressingly self-evident: frustrating omissions; unchallenged mythologies; damning silences. The dual entries that follow also highlight obvious exceptions - gems of autobiography or interpretation, institutional achievements in research or publishing. The authors had current soldiers, stewards, and scholars unapologetically in mind. Who will tell your stories, if not you?**



*the authors have taken particular care to draw on the most recent books. Your editors suggested to the authors that they might reprint in this journal some of the innovative entries that bring fresh perspectives on older work and provide context for current scholarship. We are grateful to them for "making it so," graciously asking us to choose the articles, and providing further reflections on their work. We are also grateful to the publishers, Oxford University Press and the Canadian War Museum, for permission to reprint. The articles below are the first in a series that will appear from time to time.*

### Authors' Introduction

We had hoped that the *Companion* might actually be read - and therefore thought about and argued over. It would, of course, have more mundane purposes – trivia trope, course primer, paper weight – but we had envisaged, pompously no doubt, a whole more useful, more stimulating than the sum of its parts. More provocative too? Perhaps,

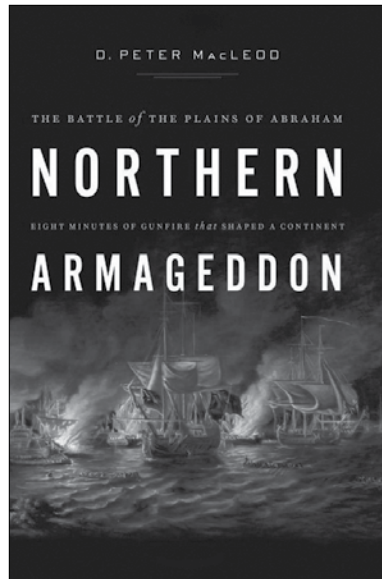
**Résumé : L'histoire constitue le dossier d'un peuple. Mais que savons-nous des individus – importants ou non, célèbres ou non – qui ont peuplé le passé militaire du Canada? Bien peu de choses si l'on se base sur une évaluation judicieuse du matériel produit jusqu'à maintenant. Rares sont les soldats qui ont écrit le récit de leurs actions et encore moins nombreux sont les témoins qui ont mis ces sujets au jour dans la littérature grand public relatant le passé du pays. Les raisons de ces déficiences sont complexes et dignes de susciter des études davantage détaillées. Quant aux résultats, ils vont de soi et sont consternants : omissions déplorables, mythes non contestés, silences accablants. Les deux ouvrages qui suivent constituent cependant des exceptions : ce sont des bijoux autobiographique ou d'interprétation, et des réalisations institutionnelles en recherche ou édition. Les auteurs avaient en tête de vrais soldats, responsables ou savants et ils ne s'en sont pas excusés. Qui racontera votre histoire si ce n'est pas vous?**

but within careful, well-calibrated boundaries. We wrote several of the longer pieces, including those that follow, more as evaluations than as narratives: mini-essays, in other words, and not just extended entries. It seemed important to scan gaps, to acknowledge failures, to highlight excellence. Military history (and those who make it) could stand more humility and self-awareness than breathless amateurism, willful neglect, or selective memory have sometimes allowed; it could stand greater profile too, even centrality at times. How to temper one but spur the other? The *Companion* looked cautiously forward. Especially in its explorations of extant scholarship and its enthusiasm for critical depth, for honesty, for reinvention, it plotted actively and with delight its own impending obsolescence. We could always be wrong (and often were). But we did hope to be useful.

### Autobiography, Military

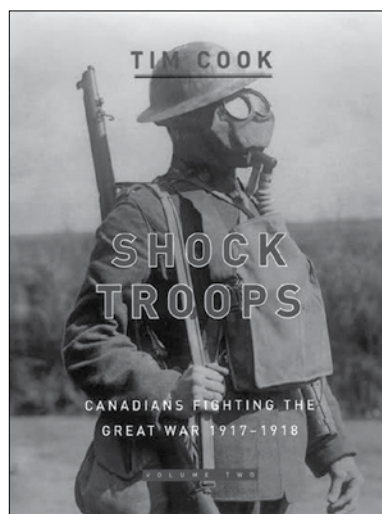
Few veterans in Canada have committed their memories to paper in any organized fashion. Fewer still have shaped their military experiences into epistolary cautions or explanations for the ages in the form of full-length autobiographies – stories of their lives and times, as opposed to snippets, letters, or fractured recollections of specific people, issues, or causes.

Of these latter, there are a great many indeed. Most colonial officers, whether French or British, and nearly all of those in the regular forces of the new Canada were literate, as were many of their troops. Hundreds created and circulated written accounts of their lives and experiences in some form or other; others were produced as letters or diaries or “true tales” by family members, descendants, or historians after the fact. Unpublished letters, diaries, and manuscripts are even



more numerous, but these can be of little help to the lay reader to whom, even in an age of digitized records and on-line documents, they often remain physically inaccessible and intellectually disjointed. When lacking the context and explanatory narrative that good autobiography usually provides, unpublished work waits for its discovery and contextualization by the spelunking of full-time historians, whether professional or amateur. Personal experience then speaks to posterity only through the medium of second-hand sages, with the authority of having been interpreted, edited, and nuanced by those who were not there.

This weakness in Canadian military literature, and its resulting

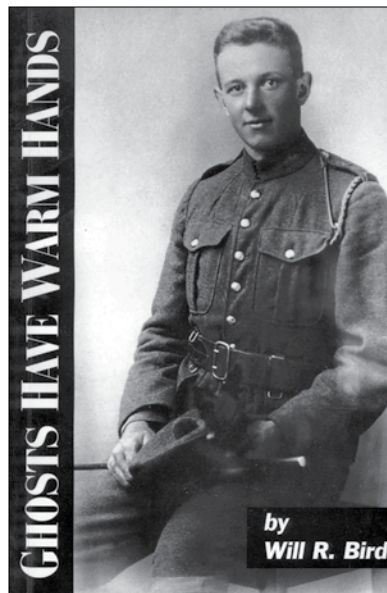


impact on knowledge and understanding of the military past, is more easily described than it is explained. The relative dearth of military autobiography is a substantial impoverishment to the exploration of leadership and operations, and leaves the personal record of wartime experience with frustrating gaps. Air and naval warfare, home defence, senior command in all periods, the Cold War, Korea, women in war, First Nations, and peacekeeping are among the most notable weaknesses. Memoirs, diaries, and collections of letters exist in abundance for the world wars, and in lesser but still quite substantial numbers for the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but rarely in published form, and – among older accounts – almost none remain in print. If the Northwest Rebellion of 1885 were taken as a case in point, key personalities either died before writing their own reflections on life and war (Louis Riel), were illiterate and spoke only through an interpreter (Gabriel Dumont), or left no autobiography at all, save campaign accounts of limited scope, as in the case of Sir Frederick Middleton, who commanded government forces and compiled his later notes from a series of military lectures. Sam Steele’s *Forty Years in Canada* is perhaps the best more or less comprehensive account of a soldier’s life from this era. Lesser examples abound, but few of lasting historical or literary value. George Denison – author, militia booster, and member of a prominent and influential Ontario family, as well as autobiographer – speaks of many things, of which one at least is military service.

D. Peter MacLeod’s definitive history of the battle of the Plains of Abraham at Quebec in 1759, *Northern Armageddon*, published in 2008, tells a similar tale from the previous century. MacLeod relies heavily on autobiographical material, but not on actual autobiography. Of

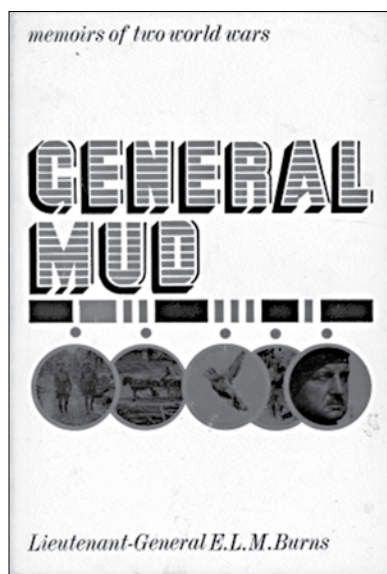
the scores of primary accounts he ferreted out from a decade or more of intensive primary research, most are unavailable to the casual student or history buff without access to a major archive. The journal of John Knox, for example, a captain in the 43rd Regiment of Foot, on which MacLeod relies extensively, often as his only witness, was published in 1769. Of the nearly five pages of published primary sources listed in his bibliography, few are real autobiographies in the sense of a post-hoc recitation and evaluation of the writer's life and times by the writer him (or her) self. The same is true of most accounts of the War of 1812, the rebellions of 1837–1838, the western campaigns of 1870 and 1885, and the South African War.

Reasonable hypotheses are not difficult to construct. A small Permanent Force and part-time militia produced few professional soldiers or men-of-letters in arms; the absence of major conflicts after 1814 provided little to write about in any case; and the market for military tales in underdeveloped, sparsely populated Canada hardly compared to that of London, Washington, or Paris. Adventure stories and celebratory biography were produced often and sold well, but to whom would Canadian military autobiography have appealed in the nineteenth century, when curious readers could have followed the lives of Napoleonic-era generals and admirals, the explosion of personal memoirs from the American Civil War, and, increasingly, historically tinged fiction, or the recollections of heroes from India, the Crimea, or the exotic battlefields of the Sudan? British literature was the mark of breeding, culture, and the well-read, not poorly produced Canadian tomes by minor local politicians or part-time farmer-soldiers. Canadian participation in the South African War produced a minor outpouring of breathless (and often self-serving)



personal accounts, of which W.E.B. Morrison's, a gunner and future general, is a memorable exception, but it nowhere matched the avalanche of British material.

World War I—longer, fiercer, and immeasurably more costly—was a far cry from any previous Canadian experience. It was Canada's first literary war, one in which official historians, painters, propagandists, and photographers documented the nation's great effort in arms, and from which came torrents of letters, memoirs, and diaries. Whether officially inspired or personally derived, the literature was vast, uneven, and achingly incomplete.



In recent years, major secondary works, notably the award-winning volumes of Tim Cook, *At the Sharp End* (2007) and *Shock Troops* (2008), and reprint series like those from Vanwell Books in St. Catharines and CEF Books in Ottawa, have revisited or republished the best of these contributions, but of readable, reliable, or essential autobiography there remains remarkably little. Among the rank and file, Will Bird's several volumes stand out for their poignancy, sophistication, and raw emotion, but even Bird's unsurpassed *Ghosts Have Warm Hands* is more memoir than autobiography, leaving—as most such contributions do—the events of war dangling, and sometimes, disconnected from lives lived before and after the conflagrations they recount.

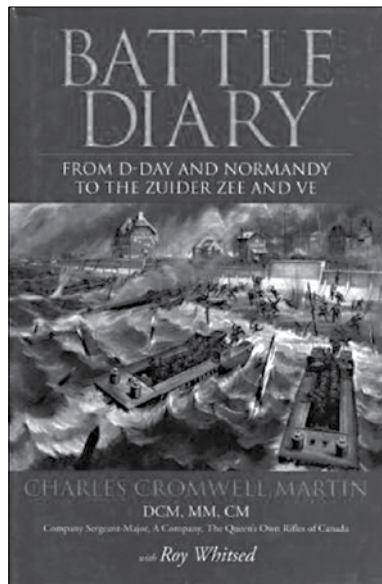
Senior officers from the Great War would write even less than the men they commanded, a welcome trait if one thought the horrors of that conflict fit only for interment with the millions of unfortunate dead, but a grand misfortune for the study of history and for the reputations of those who led Canadians so well for so long. Sir Arthur Currie, Canada's greatest general, left his battles and explanations to biographers who were more or less slow in coming; most of his senior comrades had even less to say. A handful, including E.L.M. Burns, would later write of their time in both world wars, but the commanders who fought Hitler would prove no less tongue-tied than those who bested the Kaiser.

General H.D.G. Crerar would not see even a biography for half a century. Guy Simonds, his principal subordinate and chief competitor, has seen venom, ridicule, and near-hagiography in published surveys of his service, but is waiting still for a modern biographer or editor to explain his brilliance and punctilio to modern officers and the reading public; his incomplete draft memoir remains unpublished. The rank and

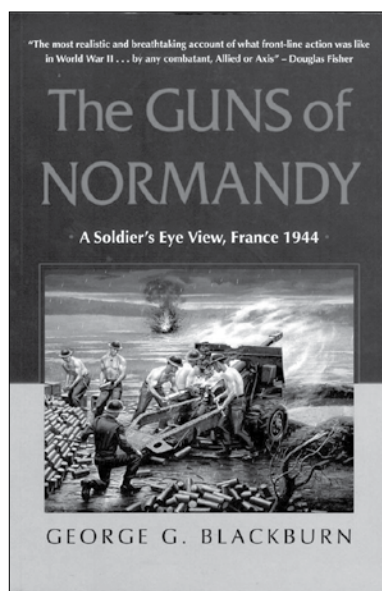
file were both more productive and more gripping. Volumes by Farley Mowat, George Blackburn, and Charlie Martin rank among the finest military memoirs in any country in any period.

Senior naval and air force officers were, if anything, even more reticent with the pen than army counterparts. World War II produced classic and compulsively readable accounts by Hal Lawrence, Alan Easton, James Lamb, and Murray Peden, but not one by a senior officer of any rank. Postwar work by official historians and Department of National Defence-funded think tanks have for many years been reconstructing personal narratives from scratch, publishing in collective biographies chapter-length accounts of the senior leaders who brought victory in 1945. Almost to a person, to most contemporary Canadians they are, sadly, a vast list of nobodies. Korea did no better, and if any non-military reader of this entry can name more than one autobiography from any armed service produced during the Cold War, it is a mark of rare alchemical brilliance indeed. Jean Victor Allard's essential autobiography is the best of a thin lot, and also one of the few French-speaking authors to have brought his story outside the barracks.

The relative anonymity of the people who fought Canada's wars has little to do with their character and much to do with the social milieu from which citizen-armies sprang, and then fast returned. No serious military history was taught in Canada until well into the late twentieth century, no publishing houses aspired to disseminate it, and little funding was available for its study. Biography was widely dismissed in the academy as the study of dead white males; autobiography, as the self-serving inventions of the risible old characters themselves. A lingering anti-intellectual malaise permeated Canada's small peacetime



military, a quaint but acidic holdover from a century of militia fantasies, anti-professional bias, and actuarial prudence. There was no easy place for the thinking officer or the sharp-penned sailor, and few outlets for their works. Historian George Stanley was more right than wrong in calling Canadians an unmilitary people, at least as judged by its literary reflections on war, peace, and security and the recollections of those central to a military past. In the end, people as individuals decided, en masse, not to write, publish, or espouse, but the idea of "military autobiography" as a lucrative or necessary field would have been as



mildly foolish a proposition to most Canadian warriors in ages past as it might be to Toronto publishers in more recent days.

The miasma of post-Cold War conflicts into which Canadians have been drawn since 1989 has produced much civilian debate and little military elucidation. Three senior officers – Generals Roméo Dallaire, Lewis MacKenzie, and Rick Hillier – have authored excellent accounts of their years in service, a welcome break from the past silence of their peers, but no sailors or fliers still, and remarkably few of the rank and file. A historiography of Canada's military autobiography would be a grim, brief, and thankless read. In its absence, there are few biographies to fill important gaps, little certainty of the motivations and knowledge of key historical actors at critical junctures, and bigger challenges in reconstructing basic narratives from which greater, more analytical surveys can with confidence proceed. The field is not empty, but it is roomy enough for more.

## Biography, Military

Serious military biography in Canada is almost a contradiction in terms, although several recent monographs and the ongoing *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* (DCB), a project of unprecedented scholarship and vision, are important exceptions.

The relative weakness of military biographical study is not a question of primary records, although in many cases scholars have been stymied by access restrictions to personal papers, by the failure of many key figures to maintain diaries or autobiographical records, and by the logistical challenges of conducting research in a very large country with a very small number of sources of funding for military research. There is also little tradition in Canada

of training or instruction in the biographical arts, and little patience for it as an appropriate method of honing the research or writing skills of young graduate students. Recent biographies of H.D.G. Crerar and Bert Hoffmeister, both World War II generals, were doubly rare in having originated as doctoral projects and been concluded as readable tomes. One on Paul Triquet, VC, an equally valuable but less readable effort, represents the best and the worst of biographical publishing: a dedicated author pushing forward an important story, and the decline in editing standards and marketing support that all good stories nevertheless demand.

Simpler explanations for the weakness of Canadian military biography as a field might be the broader, and arguably parlous, state of military history itself, the difficulty of biography as a literary proposition, and the weak commercial market for personal military narrative. Political biography, economic biography, indeed any biography deemed by the academic establishment to be primarily the province of dead white males might all be said to suffer from similar afflictions. But no subset of the biographical field is potentially as tainted for granting committees or conference organizing teams as the lives of former warriors. A handful of military autobiographies have recently defied this stricture, but it is of note that a commercial press has published each one, a competent shadow author or editor has played an important role in every case, and each text has been torn from the headlines of the most recent war. Would any of them be marketable 20 or 30 years later as works of serious history instead of military journalism laced with polemics? It would be an exceedingly unlikely bet. The egregious prose and flip judgments of much military biographical work has not endeared the field to serious readers either: not all generals were

giants nor soldiers titans. In the ceaseless bleat of military historians – or of non-historians who write reams of historical doggerel unfazed by lack of skill – to be taken seriously by their peers, it would help at times simply to write better history, or to expose politely those who do not.

Not all areas of military biography should be thought of in the same way. In some respects, the market, fed by an endless stream of enthusiastic and productive pens, is doing extremely well. A traditional emphasis on tales of frontier courage, military heroism, and patriotic sacrifice has



transformed Montcalm, Wolfe, Laura Secord, Tecumseh, Winnie the Pooh (originally a Canadian infantry mascot during World War I), John McCrae, and many other historical figures, real and imagined, into icons of Canadian military history. Collectively, powerful biographies of Canadian soldiers have also had an impact on the popular imagination, most notably in Pierre Berton's *Vimy*, a work less truthful, poignant, or inspiring than the personal histories on which it was based, but immensely successful nonetheless. Fiction – Timothy Findlay, Jack Hodgins, Alan Cumyn, and many others – has provided a small army of

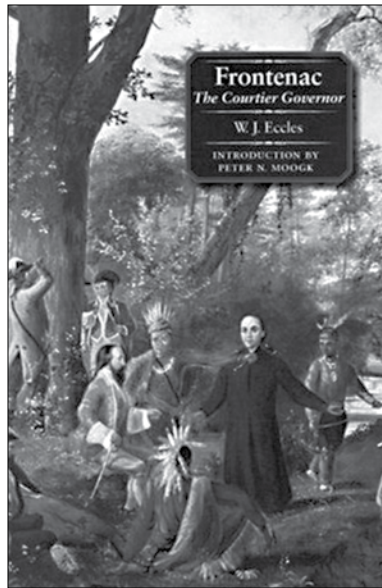
memorable figures in a variety of hues, as has children's or young adult literature, the focus of which tends to be on a young person or adult hero over-coming, rather stoically in most cases, the endless travails of war. Soldiers, including Montcalm and Wolfe, were part of a major renovation to the permanent gallery of the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Ottawa, which deals with historic personalities, while several recent television programs have elevated military biography to the popular reality show format, in one case following the descendants of former military personnel as they rediscovered the lives and wars of their ancestors.

Of scholarly biography, however, there remains little. The lives of the politically great – prime ministers, especially – have fared better, and from these it is often possible to contextualize the choices and parameters faced by men and women in uniform. Laurier still awaits a royal treatment, for example, but Macdonald, Borden, King, Diefenbaker, Pearson, and Trudeau, among the country's most influential leaders, have all been subject to expert scrutiny, as have many of their key lieutenants. Senior ministers and mandarins of World War II and the Pearson-Trudeau years have been especially well covered, with many senior bureaucrats, from defence ministers to clerks of the Privy Council, sometimes receiving monograph length treatments on their own. The great wars have fared better than those either before or since, though not as well as one might reasonably expect. Unlike American writing, which seems capable of nurturing a robust historiography on even the most hapless of regimental colonels, or British history, in which both illustrated nonsense and 500-page doorstoppers pour forth from wealthy popular presses in print runs in the tens of thousands, Canadian coverage has just scratched at the

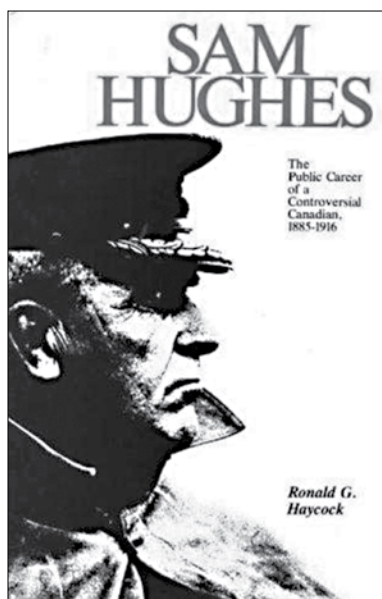
lives of senior officers and not much else.

Biography has accumulated slowly in the broad area of colonial warfare. Outside of battle studies and campaign accounts for the specialist market – many of them, especially those by Donald G. Graves and Carl Benn, excellent – the field is generally devoid of credible modern accounts. A 50-year-old volume on Count Frontenac by W.J. Eccles is still the class of its field, while *Louisburg Portraits* (1982), an award-winning work for young adults by popular historian Christopher Moore, is among the most insightful and enjoyable works of Canadian history. Wolfe has had several biographers, though few have exceeded the now-aged account in the *DCB* by the late C.P. Stacey. More writers have been interested in Wolfe's death, and depictions of same, than in his extraordinary life, imperial accounts of heroism and tragic loss having now fallen victim to Canadian political proprieties and the cardinal difficulty of remembering anything British in a country that is partly, and increasingly, not. Recent battle accounts have diminished his accomplishments in any case: in Peter MacLeod's version of the Quebec campaign, *Northern Armageddon*, he is noteworthy, in the continentally decisive clash of arms, as the doomed general who bungles least.

Other *DCB* accounts are equally strong, and the volumes, which now cover subjects who have died between the years 1000 and 1930, are the essential starting point for any serious biographical research on soldiers in this period. Most of them are by leading scholars and, while many could use an update, the consistent quality of the style, content, and bibliographical citations are unparalleled in any comparable work of collective biography. The on-line *L'Encyclopédie de l'histoire du Québec*, in contrast, is wildly unreliable – its Wolfe entry, for



instance, dates from 1915. Military biography from British North America, the Confederation period, and the Boer War fares little better than the more distant colonial past. The one essential volume spanning the period is Desmond Morton's *The Canadian General: Sir William Otter* (1974), a work that covers more territory in Canada's military past, from the Fenian Raids to the 1920s, than almost any other. *Ministers and Generals* (1971), a previous work by Morton, is not biography at all, but in charting the relationship between military and political figures in the first decades after Confederation, includes more biography than almost

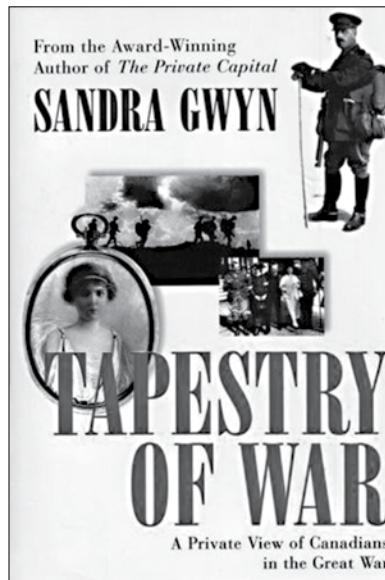


any other work dealing with this period.

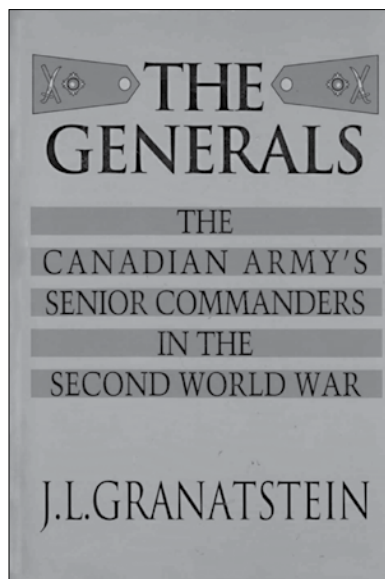
World War I is not much better served. Sir Arthur Currie, one of the war's great generals by any measure, wrote little himself but was much feted by others. The biography by A.M.J. Hyatt, which could use an overhaul and reprinting in light of intervening scholarship, remains a model of analysis, brevity, and scholarly impact nevertheless. John Swettenham's excellent three-volume epic on A.G.L. McNaughton is now 40 years old and Hyatt's opposite in terms of conciseness and crispness of narrative. Sir Julian Byng, who also commanded Canadians overseas, has a solid biography by Jeffery Williams. Ron Haycock studied Sir Sam Hughes, Borden's mercurial militia minister. Tim Cook, an award-winning historian who writes with a journalist's flare and a populist's skill, will soon review the Currie-Hughes relationship in an eagerly anticipated volume. Minor figures, including a few battalion commanders and brigadiers, have received occasional attention, often in the pages of *Canadian Military History*, a quarterly produced by Wilfrid Laurier University, or in the annual military history conference hosted by the same school each spring. Patrick Brennan of the University of Calgary has assembled impressive data on the full list of Canadian generals throughout World War I and presented his findings in several venues, but there is no monograph yet, as much as it is needed. Sandra Gwyn's social portrait of Ottawa at war, *Tapestry of War* (1992), will long remain the standard by which these things are judged. Such highpoints notwithstanding, the roster is short and the products thin from a highly literate country that sent nearly 700,000 of its citizens to war 90 years ago.

World War II is better served. In addition to leading political figures such as Charles Power, C.D. Howe,

Ernest Lapointe, and James Gardiner, J.L. Granatstein's *The Generals* (1993) is the standard and often-cited text on the military side, a book that presented a collective biography of every general during the war. The research included the assembly of biographical files on subjects who had, quite literally, never been assessed in print before. With similar dossiers at the Directorate of History at the Department of National Defence, the manuscript collections at Library and Archives Canada, and the biographical files on officers, soldiers, and war artists maintained by the Canadian War Museum, are the starting points for biographical research in this period, just as the *DCB* would be for work on individuals before 1930. A handful of senior officers addressed themselves to posterity from among those who had served in this period, including Maurice Pope, George Kitching, and E.L.M. Burns, as well as a host of sailors, flyers, and soldiers in memoirs, collections of letters, and diaries. In addition to this rich vein of memoir material, and a thin skein of useful autobiography, a half-century of work by official historians has created important biographical files, financed biographical research, and woven individual narratives into a rich, subtle account of Canadians at war. Having completed work on the army's official history some years earlier, research in recent decades has concentrated especially on the navy and air force, spawning – in addition to monumental works of operational history – ongoing publications on command, leadership, and personality. *Warrior Chiefs* (2001), edited by Stephen Harris and Bernd Horn, included 17 biographical essays on both well-known and lesser-known figures. Raymond Brutinel, Jean Victor Allard, and Admiral Harold Grant received treatment, for example, along with Currie, Crerar, and General Roméo Dallaire.



A biography of H.D.G. Crerar finally arrived in 2007, but most of his senior colleagues are still waiting. A potential subject's earning a Victoria Cross or becoming a governor-general has helped to inspire writers (Reginald Roy on George Pearkes, or Robert Speaight on Georges Vanier), as has becoming a senior minister (David Bercuson on Brooke Claxton) or a prime minister (Pearson, Diefenbaker), but few other endorsements seem to work on discriminating authors. There are thrilling exceptions. Doug Delaney's biography of Bert Hoffmeister, *The Soldier's General* (2005), may be the best military biography of a Canadian soldier ever written;



Michael Whitby's edited work, *Commanding Canadians: The Second World War Diaries of A.F.C. Layard* (2005), would make a very good case as the finest ever written by, and about, a sailor who led Canadians. The University of British Columbia Press, Canada's leading publisher of serious military titles, produced both volumes in conjunction with the Canadian War Museum in a wide-ranging series called *Studies in Canadian Military History*. Tony Foster's *Meeting of the Generals* (1986) and Robert Calder's wonderful family narrative, *A Richer Dust* (2004), are examples of excellent books that deserve wider readership. There are very few reliable biographies of Canadian military figures since 1945, however – none of consequence on Korea, peacekeeping, or the Gulf War, and none (yet) on Afghanistan. Carol Off's *The Lion, the Fox and the Eagle* (2001), although seriously flawed, is one of a depressingly small handful to come even close.

Historian Desmond Morton wrote in 1992 that "perhaps it is a fair reflection of the falling esteem for biography and the low estate of senior officers and the sparsity of many of their papers that adequate biographies of Rear-Admiral Murray, Generals Crerar, Foulkes, and Simonds, and Air Marshals Edwards, McEwan, and Breadner are nowhere even on the horizon." In the nearly 20 years since, only Crerar from this list has received a comprehensive treatment, and Simonds a mildly entertaining hagiography (*The Price of Command* in 1994).

J.L. Granatstein has received the Order of Canada and the Pierre Berton Award, among other distinctions. He is the former director and CEO of the Canadian War Museum.

Dean F. Oliver is the director research and exhibitions at the Canadian War Museum. In 2010 he was made a Knight in the Order of Orange-Nassau by Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands.