

2015

"More Than a Mere Matter of Marching (Book Review)" edited by Sherry Bell, Steve Fulton, and Fred Habermehl

Zachary Kopin

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh>



Part of the [Military History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Zachary Kopin "'More Than a Mere Matter of Marching (Book Review)" edited by Sherry Bell, Steve Fulton, and Fred Habermehl." *Canadian Military History* 24, 2 (2015)

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.

More Than a Mere Matter of Marching. Sherry Bell, Steve Fulton, and Fred Habermehl Eds. Niagara: Ontario Genealogical Society, Niagara Peninsula Branch, 2015. Pp. 279.

One of the biggest problems of history has always been recovering the voices of those who did not have time to leave behind large collections of writings. Sometimes historians get lucky and the person in question either was the ancestor of or worked for someone important and, therefore, their writings were saved. Otherwise, the story of the individual member of society remains little more than a footnote to the history of the unnamed masses. Not only is this a problem for historians, but for genealogists as well. As those writing local histories know, the written record can only take one so far. *More Than a Mere Matter of Marching* attempts to solve this problem through an investigation of Canadian soldiers' roles in the War of 1812.

The title for the work comes from American President Thomas Jefferson's refrain that the acquisition of Canada, long a dream of many expansionists, by the United States would only be "a mere matter of marching." The book seeks to explain how Canada repulsed American forces during the War of 1812. It attempts to elucidate this story through tales of Canadian heroism by soldiers during the war as told by their descendants. The primary argument is clear: the intruders were sent packing thanks to the efforts of common workers who took up arms in defense of their country. This argument puts *More than a Mere Matter of Marching* in conversation with the large portion of Canadian historiography that interprets the war as an event that sent loose bands of settlers down a path to nationhood.

The Ontario Genealogical Society, Niagara Peninsula Branch's War of 1812 Commemorative Committee put *More Than a Mere Matter of Marching* together in an effort to encourage further research into the experiences of common soldiers during the conflict. Rather than a monograph, it is a collection of stories about the war. The book is comprised of sixty-five short, independently researched genealogical histories. Despite the geographically and economically similar straits of its principal actors, these stories yield diverse, often humorous, anecdotes about what the war meant to Canadians in real terms.

Unfortunately, the structure of *More Than a Mere Matter of Marching* has more than a few failings. It is arranged alphabetically

according to the surname of the individual or family covered. This means that chronologies between sections often do not connect. This organization makes the book best used for reference, but it is difficult to read cover to cover. Furthermore, each section has a separate author, which unfortunately leads to wide variance in style and tone, not to mention sourcing. Most troubling of all, however, is the editors' claims in the introduction that they "cannot take any responsibility" for the veracity of the stories included in the volume (p. 4). This makes building on what are essentially oral histories extremely difficult. As for a set of oral histories, however, this book has value. In the right situation, the provided stories, mostly due to the efforts of the editors to correct, qualify and make uniform in terms of Canadian service, could be tremendously helpful.

Not all is rotten in the province of Ontario. Sections of the text leave the reader in doubt as to the relevance of the historical actors to a book on the War of 1812. In others, however, the relationship of the ancestor to the conflict is clear. Whether by location or commission, some of the stories of the Canadian experience in the War of 1812 are extremely telling. One soldier was able to use his position in the army to save his farm from being destroyed by the retreating force, while others brought their knowledge of terrain to bear against the invading hordes. Several of the book's sections are thoroughly researched and richly appointed with charts and photographs. These serve to deepen the relevant portions. While the book has faults, there are many good things about it as well. After all, the editors intend the work to be a starting point that will encourage further study of the war. The book is potentially valuable as a work of its own, however. In the right hands, the evidence provided might make a usual story of the War of 1812 into an extraordinary one.

In the end, *More Than a Mere Matter of Marching* provides an example of both the positive and negative effects of crowd sourcing a text. The book itself is a compendium of Canadian stories about the War of 1812, something that is altogether a worthy effort. Separately, however, each recollection runs the gamut from well-researched history to an unnecessary recitation of genealogy to brief paragraphs that leave the reader in doubt as to whether or not the historical actors described had any relationship to the conflict at all. It is always surprising when an editor claims that he/she cannot vouch for the authenticity of a text that he/she has devoted time, labor and affixed his/her name. There is good reason for this: it undermines the work

from the outset. This book may interest anyone with a fascination for genealogy, Canadian history, American History, the War of 1812 or the imperial periphery. Ultimately, this collection of seemingly oral histories vacillates wildly between nationalist rhetoric, recitation of genealogy and well-written history, but the book serves its editor's intended purpose splendidly.

ZACHARY S. KOPIN, *INDEPENDENT RESEARCHER*

The Greatest Victory: Canada's One Hundred Days, 1918. J.L. Granatstein. Don Mills, Ontario: Oxford University Press, 2014. Pp. 216.

This is a fine piece of revisionist historiography.

The author made his objective explicit early on. His aim was nothing less than to change the popular perception of the Great War and of the role which Canadians played in it. More particularly, he wished to alter the popular perception that the victory at Vimy in April, 1917 was Canada's major achievement in the Great War (p. xii). He noted further that Vimy is, to a large extent, the only Great War operation most Canadians have heard of (p. xi) and, while not wishing to denigrate in any way, the enormous achievement of the Canadian Corps at Vimy, it was a victory of limited strategic significance and had little effect on the subsequent conduct and outcome of the war (p.xiii). *Au contraire*, argues Granatstein, the victories of the Hundred Days (August 1918 to November 1918) played a crucial role in the weakening, and eventual defeat, of the German army (p.xi). Granatstein builds his case carefully and meticulously, devoting a chapter to each of the important elements in the Hundred Days: the battle of Amiens of 8August 1918 (Ch 1); the breaking of the Drocourt-Queant line (Ch.3); crossing the Canal du Nord (Ch. 4) and finally, the capture of Mons (Ch. 5). Taking part in the capture of Mons meant that Canadians were involved in fighting on 10 and 11 November 1918. Indeed, Canadian soldiers were killed right up until 11:00 a.m. on 11 November 1918 when the Armistice came into effect. No less an authority than the Port Hope Evening Guide published a gross calumny of General Currie in which it was suggested that he had sacrificed the lives of Canadian soldiers right up to the end of the war in order to satisfy his personal ambitions. Currie was, thus,