

10-17-2018

"Vimy: The Battle and the Legend (Book Review)" by Tim Cook

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Recommended Citation

Pasierbek, Katrina J. (2018) ""Vimy: The Battle and the Legend (Book Review)" by Tim Cook," *Canadian Military History*: Vol. 27 : Iss. 2 , Article 9.
Available at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh/vol27/iss2/9>

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Tim Cook. *Vimy: The Battle and the Legend*. Toronto: Allen Lane, 2017. Pp. 500.

Throughout the four years that have marked the centenary of the First World War, students and scholars of conflict and culture studies have been inundated with innovative research that has presented new scholarship on the so-called “war to end all wars.” Tim Cook, a prominent First World War historian at the Canadian War Museum, has contributed to this growing field a critical examination of the Vimy narrative, one which has a firm grasp on the present-day national consciousness of Canadians. His 2017 publication, *Vimy: The Battle and the Legend*, is organised to accomplish two specific goals. Beginning with a thorough analysis of the military operation that took place between 9 and 12 April 1917 and its significance within the larger Canadian war effort, Cook then shifts his focus to the one hundred years that have followed the battle. At the core of his analysis he unpacks the instrumental decisions and cultural events that have individually and collectively contributed to the construction of the postwar memory of Vimy. Today, the capture of Vimy Ridge is widely accepted as a formative nation-building moment in Canada’s history, and the central question of Cook’s research is why and how this has come to pass. This monograph is a meticulously researched piece of scholarship that can be described as a hybrid between new military history and a critique of the origins and evolution of one of Canada’s most celebrated national narratives.

Using traditional military sources and authoritative secondary literature, Cook’s study is grounded in an overview of the wartime events of 1914 to 1918. From the officers at the highest senior command to the infantry positioned in the frontline trenches, he presents the historical context of the larger Arras offensive, and the Canadian Expeditionary Force’s position within it during the spring of 1917. Throughout the book, Cook’s close attention to the lived experiences of war is revealed as he weaves in the voices of ordinary individuals that have been captured and preserved in archival letters, diaries, and memoirs. The vivid detail with which Cook writes of the advancing infantry under the hailstorm of the creeping barrage is unmatched in warfare and military studies. Readers must not forget that victory came at a cost, and while Canadians did indeed succeed in breaking through the heavily defended German position, Cook reminds his readers that the first day of the battle for Vimy Ridge

remains “the single bloodiest day in Canadian military history” (p. 113).

With an effortless transition into the postwar years, Cook’s analysis extends into the 1920s and 1930s to critically question how national commemorative efforts elevated a single military victory into a revered moment in Canadian history. One instrumental decision that Cook pays particular attention to was made by the Canadian Battlefields Memorials Commission (CBMC) to erect Toronto sculptor and architect Walter Allward’s memorial design atop the ridge. By doing so, Cook argues, the CBMC confirmed the importance of the April 1917 victory in the minds and memories of Canadians over that of the other battlefields located in France and Belgium. Furthermore, the addition of the 11,285 names of the fallen in France with no known grave further lent support to the memorial as a symbolic representation of a nation’s sacrifice, and one no longer limited to the lives lost during the four day fight for the ridge. During the Vimy Pilgrimage of July 1936, which climaxed with the unveiling of Allward’s memorial by King Edward VIII to a crowd of 6,200 Canadian pilgrims, the memory of Vimy was reimagined as a coming of age story. Vimy, during the summer of 1936, had become widely accepted as an “iconic, nation-changing event” to a generation that, just three short years later, would be at war once again (p. 272).

Continuing to investigate the complex deconstruction and reconstruction of the memory of Vimy beyond the interwar period, Cook presents his critical take on more contemporary events that have influenced the ways in which subsequent generations of Canadians have interpreted the memory of Vimy. This is where the strength of the book lies, as Cook reveals the multifaceted ways that the malleable notion of Vimy has been edited and reinvented, and stretched and adapted, throughout the twentieth century. Newspaper columns and magazine articles captured the rise of the popular peacekeeping narrative during the 1950s, while the 1967 cultural celebrations throughout Canada’s centennial year framed the fiftieth anniversary of Vimy in a new era of Canadian identity. Digital sources conveyed the re-emergence of Vimy during the first decade of the twenty-first century. The nuanced research and source materials that Cook has consulted to craft his monograph further demonstrate how entrenched the Vimy myth is in Canadian culture and national identity. While historians have previously examined the myths and memories that emerged from wartime Canada, Cook’s thoughtful attention to Vimy

has contributed a fresh perspective to the historiography of Canadian war and society. Accordingly, this monograph also joins the ranks of commemoration and culture studies that have effectively challenged readers, both scholars and members of the general public, to critically reflect upon the national myths and founding fables that have been, at times, far too easily accepted.¹

The symbolic epilogue of *Vimy: The Battle and the Legend* took place at the Canadian National Vimy Memorial on 9 April 2017. An estimated crowd of 25,000 Canadian students, pilgrims, elected government officials, and members of the Canadian Armed Forces congregated beneath the shadow of the Vimy Memorial to mark the one hundredth anniversary of the battle of Vimy Ridge. Throughout the First World War centennial anniversaries of 2014 to 2018, the memory of Vimy has been widely reaffirmed as a definitive moment in Canadian history. Accordingly, Cook's critical examination of the Vimy narrative over the past 100 years is quite timely, and arguably needed now more than ever before. His detailed research and thorough analysis of the battle, coupled with his thoughtful critique of the legend of Vimy Ridge, stands as a worthy tribute to the soldiers who fought to capture the ridge, and to the generations who have followed with their own interpretations of the legend of Vimy.

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¹ For a more focused examination of the battle for Vimy Ridge, see Geoffrey Hayes, Andrew Iarocci and Mike Bechthold, eds., *Vimy Ridge: A Canadian Reassessment* (Waterloo: Laurier Centre for Military Strategic and Disarmament Studies and Wilfrid Laurier Press, 2007). For further reading on the construction of a usable past, see Jonathan F. Vance, *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning, and the First World War* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1997).