

4-29-2019

## Review of "Canadians on the Somme, 1916: The Neglected Campaign" by William F. Stewart

Brian Douglas Tennyson

---

### Recommended Citation

Tennyson, Brian Douglas () "Review of "Canadians on the Somme, 1916: The Neglected Campaign" by William F. Stewart," *Canadian Military History*: Vol. 28 : Iss. 1 , Article 20.

Available at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh/vol28/iss1/20>

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](mailto:scholarscommons@wlu.ca).

William F. Stewart. *Canadians on the Somme, 1916: The Neglected Campaign*. Solihull, UK: Helion & Company, 2017. Pp. xvi + 376.

Much has been written about the Somme Offensive, most of it negative. The faulty planning, seemingly careless waste of lives and the stubborn persistence of its chief architect despite repeated failures and deteriorating conditions have made the very name "Somme" symbolic of the futility of the entire First World War and the incompetence and unmerited arrogance of the senior generals. Yet, even though it was the Canadian Expeditionary Force's first campaign and the longest and costliest with the exception of the Hundred Days Campaign in 1918, William F. Stewart believes that it has been neglected by Canadian historians.

It is true that there are no Canadian books among the extensive literature on the Somme other than those written about the destruction of the Newfoundland Regiment, but it has not been totally neglected. P.A. Errett's early account in *Canada and the Great War*, published in 1920, devoted eighty-four pages to it, but G.W.L. Nicholson's *Canadian Expeditionary Force* limited it to only forty pages. Tim Cook was more thorough in *At the Sharp End: Canadians Fighting the Great War*, giving it 128 pages.<sup>1</sup>

Even so, while acknowledging that Cook's book is "superb," Stewart argues that the Somme Offensive was so important to the Canadian Corps's development as an effective fighting force that it requires closer examination, an argument with which I have no doubt Cook would agree (p. 2). Stewart's goals, therefore, are to examine closely how the Canadian Corps fought on the Somme; to evaluate its performance by focusing on operations, tactics, and command control down to the battalion level; and to identify what, if anything, it learned from the experience and how it changed by the spring of 1917. In doing so, he explains why the Canadian Corps was assigned the responsibility for the assault on Vimy Ridge in April 1917, the

<sup>1</sup> P.A. Errett, "The Somme Offensive," in *Canada in the Great World War*, Vol. 4 (Toronto: United Publishers of Canada Limited, 1920), 10-94; G.W.L. Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1919* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1962), 160-200; and Tim Cook, *At the Sharp End: Canadians Fighting the Great War, 1914-1916* (Toronto: Viking Canada, 2007), 405-432. Errett's account is worth reading still because he was there with the 38th Battalion and was wounded during its attack on Desire Trench and Grandcourt on 18 November 1916.

first time that a Dominion corps was entrusted with a critical task on the first day of a key offensive on the Western Front.

Since the Canadian Corps's only real experience before Vimy was on the Somme, what had it done to be given this responsibility? In a nutshell, its officers had learned from the experience of the Somme, and this is the core of *Canadians on the Somme*. When the officers and men of the Canadian Corps joined the offensive in September 1916, they had little battle experience, with the exception of the 1st Division. Since the Corps was, for the most part, made up of citizen soldiers, not professionals, they had a lot to learn. Mistakes were made, planning and artillery support were generally inadequate, and the ability of senior officers far behind the front line to control operations once launched was almost nonexistent.

There were also leadership problems. The harsh truth was that some of the Corps's senior officers were incapable of providing effective leadership or adapting to modern warfare. The most notable cases, of course, were Edwin Alderson, the Corps commander, and Richard Turner, commander of the 2nd Division. Alderson was replaced by Julian Byng, a change that Stewart praises. On the other hand, as in his previous book *The Embattled General: Sir Richard Turner and the First World War* (2015), he is critical of Turner's removal, pointing out that Turner's 2nd Division "won the most clear-cut Canadian victory on the Somme [at Courcellette] while Arthur Currie's 1st Division had a mixed record" (p. 1). Despite appearances, as Stewart recognises, the removal of Turner was not a demotion: he was removed from a combat role, in which he did not perform well, and given the critically important task of training the Canadian troops in England and serving as the government's chief overseas military advisor, a role in which he excelled.

Byng, and later Currie, recognised the need for the Corps to learn from its successes and failures and to be willing to adopt new tactics and methods. One thing Currie learned was that the key to success was thorough preparation in all respects, and that included ensuring that officers down to the lowest level fully understood the objectives and their role in achieving them. This offset the inability of senior officers to control operations once begun and in effect enabled the Corps to fight on the platoon level, which proved to be very effective. Haig also learned something from the Somme experience: that citizen soldiers from the Dominions were as effective as, or even more effective than, British troops when properly trained and managed. This was

why he assigned the Canadian Corps the daunting task of capturing Vimy Ridge in the next offensive. There was, in other words, a direct connection between the Somme and Vimy.

It was not just the senior officers who learned from the Somme experience. So too did Prime Minister Robert Borden. The result was that Minister of Militia Sam Hughes was fired a month after Courcellette and Turner was sent to England to reorganise the training of Canadian troops there. Turner was the right man for the job and no one now doubts that the subsequent success of the Corps reflected not just Currie's skilful leadership in the field but Turner's improvements in training, and generally competent administration. Currie's success in the field in 1917 and 1918 owed much to the work Turner did in England, and he knew it. It was not coincidental that in the spring of 1917 Hughes's disruptive representative in England, John Carson, was fired and Turner was promoted to lieutenant general with a knighthood.

This is a valuable book, not so much because it tells us much that is new but because it provides a wealth of detail and analysis. It is intended for specialists, not casual readers or even undergraduate students because of the overwhelming level of detail and the density of the writing. Its thoroughness is displayed not just in its text but by the fact that it is accompanied by a separate booklet that contains thirty-six pages of maps. Inevitably, some will regret Stewart's treatment (or lack of treatment) of some battalions in some instances, but that is a minor quibble.

BRIAN DOUGLAS TENNYSON, *CAPE BRETON UNIVERSITY*