

Rod Macleod. *Sam Steele: A Biography*. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2018. Pp. 407.

Sir Sam Steele had a long and illustrious career, with Canadians perhaps recalling him primarily for his role during the Klondike Gold Rush. Yet Steele was present and often played a key role in many of the formative events of the Canadian nation: he paddled out to Winnipeg in 1870 with the Red River Expedition; he trotted across the prairies as one of the first members of the North-West Mounted Police (NWMP); he patrolled the dusty veldt in pursuit of elusive Boer commandos during the South African War; and he trained Canadian troops in England prior to their dispatch to the Western Front during the First World War. This, and so much more, Rod Macleod, a Professor Emeritus of History and Classics at the University of Alberta, weaves into a detailed and well-told narrative about Sam Steele.

If the purpose of a biography, besides describing the professional life of an individual, is to reveal their human side, Macleod handles this well. Most readers will be able to relate to Sam Steele's passions, worries and warts, whether they be loves, finances or vanities, all of which are evenly treated. His courtship and marriage to Marie (née Harwood), notable for both religious and political divides, is couched within the cultural context of the time. Marie's difficulties in maintaining the household and her forbearance at her husband's long absences would resonate with numerous modern military spouses. His finances, crippled by poor investments in mining ventures, were never on a solid foundation. They were a continual worry that was only calmed in his last years through the generosity of a wealthy benefactor. Steele, like many males, indulged his vanities and tried to maintain an appearance of youth and vigour well into his graying years. But Eugen Sandow's novel exercise regimen and hair dye could only do so much. Macleod reveals Steele as a human very much like the rest of us.

Steele had the moral authority, personal courage and drive to be successful in combat, in organising, and in training. He was highly successful under fire as the leader of Steele's Scouts during the North-West Rebellion (1885) and was equally successful as the commanding officer of Lord Strathcona's Horse (LDSH) in the South African War. Throughout his career he demonstrated a strong capability to organise forces from the ground up. This includes his readying

of NWMP elements for the Yukon, his overseeing the recruitment and preparation of the 1st Canadian Mounted Rifles and the LDSH for South Africa, and his assisting in mobilising the 1st and 2nd Canadian Divisions for deployment in the First World War. He was a meticulous and effective trainer throughout his career. This stretched from his earliest days of breaking horses on the prairies to coordinating divisional level training in England. Whatever challenge he faced, Steele threw himself into it whole heartedly. For instance, once he firmly decided to become a soldier upon leaving the South African Constabulary, he thoroughly studied his new vocation by reading Alfred Mahan, Colonel G.F.R. Henderson and other key military theorists. Steele's strengths, as well described by Macleod, made him an effective police officer and, subsequently, soldier.

Fundamentally, merit only gets one so far. Few individuals achieve greatness without politics affecting their advancement, and Steele was no exception. Though at times Steele seems to have shied away from claiming key top appointments, he was certainly calculating and ambitious enough to seek them, particularly the position of NWMP Commissioner. But politics and patronage were certainly the key determinants in who was selected for specific appointments. For instance, Steele was not the first choice for the Yukon but won out when the more politically acceptable candidates were not available. His acceptability to go to South Africa was only confirmed when he did not raise a controversy over the rude manner in which he had been summarily relieved of duty in the Yukon. He was on safer ground, despite the opinion of the pompous Robert Baden-Powell, getting an appointment to the South African Constabulary after he had lost the political battle to secure the NWMP Commissioner position. Like most senior officers in the First World War, he suffered somewhat due to the political machinations of the Minister of Militia, Sir Sam Hughes. Steele did not take the kind hint from Field Marshal Lord Kitchener that he was too old for front line service and was probably properly placed within the training establishment in England in Hughes's convoluted and inefficient command structure. Though Steele felt hard done by, he hardly suffered compared to what Lieutenant-General Sir Arthur Currie (the last commander of the Canadian Corps) and Sir Joseph Flavelle (the organiser of Canada's munition efforts through the Imperial Munitions Board) would endure in the aftermath of the war with both being sacrificed on the altar of political expediency. Though Steele trod a fine line for most of his

life in limiting the seeking of political favour, his maneuverings in his final years in England, particularly in supporting the disastrous Ross Rifle, led to him being sidelined. Alas, for many soldiers, it is easier to survive enemy rifle fire than political sniping.

Some minor contextual issues in this volume bear future research. First, there are a few points concerning the North-West Rebellion. Macleod recounts the initial attempts to establish the Indian pass system and how it was more formally imposed after the Rebellion. Despite the alleged banality of the administration of the Indian Department, it was largely a mechanism to ensure an individual's presence on the reserves during key agricultural work periods. Admittedly, the Vagrancy Act may have worked in lieu. Macleod notes that F. Laurie Baron wrote the only substantial article on the Indian pass system but with unfortunate and dubious claims as to its origins. The system probably drew from the pass system common in the military as many NWMP and Indian Department members had served in the military. Macleod was perhaps ungenerous to Inspector Francis Dickens who was a little quick to desert the indefensible Fort Pitt, a fort only in name. But with over two hundred and fifty warriors menacing the post, as Macleod recounts in *Prairie Fire* (1984), it is unclear what viable alternatives he had. An intrepid researcher into General Thomas Bland Strange's campaign might ask two more questions: why were the large fleeing Cree bands, nominally led by Big Bear, not more easily tracked by the Métis scouts? And, why are there so few trenches on Frenchman Butte compared to the number of Cree that supposedly held it?

Second, Macleod could have provided better context for Steele's work in South Africa. The LDSH were deployed during the guerrilla phase of the conflict. Mounted troops were desperately needed to harry and harass the elusive Boer commandos—a key technique in every counter-guerrilla campaign. Macleod describes what the LDSH did but not why. The deployment of the South African Constabulary posts in Steele's division could have been described more clearly. The posts typically encircled a key city, in this case Pretoria, and were integrated into the broader blockhouse system and the drives by mobile columns. The mobile columns, more properly, were employed in clearing the veldt. Finally, Macleod's comments on the concentration camp system are based on the nationalistic and biased views of Leopold Schultz. The camps were an obvious tragedy, but the Boers themselves bear blame for some of the problems: they could

have surrendered earlier, even after the Kitchener-Botha negotiations in early 1901; they could have wrecked fewer trains, the key supply mechanism; and they could have practiced better camp hygiene, an issue the Fawcett Commission fully explored. In Steele's autobiography, *Forty Years in Canada* (1915), he is decidedly unconcerned with the camps. Commenting on the camps was unnecessary to the unfolding narrative.

This is a fine work that sheds light on many important events in the early decades of Canada. There is impressive nuance and detail here which show the diligent effort and dedication of the author. This is a good introductory book for those unfamiliar with Sam Steele and key episodes of Canadian national history after Confederation. It is a useful volume for those exploring the early days of the NWMP or the founding campaigns of the Canadian military. It is a revealing story of a talented, dedicated Canadian who always strove to do his best for his country.

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