

Tim Cook. *The Fight For History: 75 Years of Forgetting, Remembering, and Remaking Canada's Second World War*. Toronto: Allen Lane, 2020. Pp. 472.

Tim Cook again shows his gifts for story telling and prodigious research in this study of how Canadians have remembered—or not—the country's enormous military effort in the Second World War. He describes the book as an exploration of “social memory”: “the constellation of thoughts, ideas, and key events that people create and embrace to make sense of their society. Often this involves forging an agreed-upon version of the past that resonates in the present” (pp. 4-5). It sounds a tall order. He is, however, uniquely qualified, having produced some ten previous books on Canada's military efforts in the world wars, two of which, *Clio's Warriors: Canadian Historians and the Writing of the World Wars* (2006) and *Vimy: The Battle and the Legend* (2017), directly bear on how the Canadian experience was recorded and remembered.

This is a substantial and comprehensive work. Chapter One summarises the war effort, in which 1.1 million men and women were in uniform: ten per cent of the population and some forty-two per cent of men aged eighteen to forty-five (p. 21). The warriors come home in Chapter Two. In Chapter Three those who fell overseas, the vast majority of the 45,000 war dead, are interred in Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemeteries close by the battlefields, a renewal of the policy established in 1917 with the founding of what was then the Imperial War Graves Commission. The story continues through to Chapter Seventeen, whose main topic is the completion of the new Canadian War Museum that opened in Ottawa in 2005.

Through much of the book, government policy and initiatives (or lack of initiative) and the activities of veterans and their organisations take centre stage, often in the form of emotionally charged controversies. These include the hard questions from veterans and the wider public about responsibility for the launching of the disastrous raid on Dieppe in August 1942 that have periodically flared up in the press and media and in popular and scholarly writing from that time until the present. During the early 1950s there was widespread opposition to the government's agreement to first reduce and then commute the prison sentence of war criminal Kurt Meyer, former commander of the 12th SS Division whose men had murdered Canadian prisoners of war in Normandy in 1944. During the 1960s

and 1970s academic writers and Quebec nationalists revisited the bitter question of military conscription as an example of oppression by Ottawa. The 1970s and 1980s saw the rise of the campaign by Japanese Canadians for redress for their removal from their homes and theft of their property in 1942. All the while survivors of the Canadian force sent on a hopeless mission to Hong Kong in 1941 who had endured torture and starvation in Japanese prison camps for three and a half years sought more adequate pensions and, with less success, an apology from Japan. So too Indigenous veterans and members of the Merchant Marine lobbied for the veterans' status and benefits they had never received.

The struggles over the past reached a climax during the 1990s when veterans mounted a series of vehement protests that seized national attention, including hearings in the Senate. The first was against the 1992 Canadian Broadcasting Corporation/National Film Board television series *The Valour and the Horror* which portrayed soldiers and airmen as the hapless victims of incompetent and possibly criminal leadership. Soon after, in 1994, the belated official history of the Royal Canadian Air Force drew ire for questioning the effectiveness of the Allied bombing of Germany, which had been the foremost role for Canadian airmen and who suffered the highest casualty rate in the armed forces. What seemed the crowning assault on the memory of veterans' service, again by a government agency, was a proposal from the national museums to rebuild the old, cramped and utterly inadequate Canadian War Museum to feature a Holocaust Memorial, a worthy project that however had little to do with operations by Canadian forces. The success of veterans in transforming the Holocaust memorial initiative into the construction of a large new museum dedicated to Canada's military history did not however bring an end to the fight for history. In 2007, veterans protested a text panel in the new museum that, like the official history, raised questions about the effectiveness of the Allied bombing of Germany. After a further round of heated debate, the museum mounted a revised text whose content had been negotiated with the veterans.

Several of the controversies over the legacy of the war became—and still are—media and academic *causes célèbres*, notably including the question of responsibility for the Hong Kong and Dieppe disasters, the treatment of Japanese Canadians and the intertwined issues of conscription and French-Canadian participation in the armed services.

Cook captures the existing literature and brings elements that are fresh, at least to me. And I must confess to not being a detached reviewer. I was on the staff of the War Museum from 1998 to 2003 (I headed the division in which the author worked when he started at the museum). Before that I was a member of the official histories team at the Department of National Defence and in both positions was a (thankfully) minor participant (a grey nameless bureaucrat) in some of the controversies.

The essence of the fight for history, however, was not the campaigns and disputes that flared into the media, but rather a struggle against forgetting. In this sense Cook tells a good news story. Canadians, and veterans in particular, were in 1945 determined to get on with their lives and had the means to do so in a booming economy. This was a contrast to the legacy of the First World War, a point the book makes in explaining why Canada's remembrance of the Second World War features memorials to the living, such as hockey rinks and schools named for veterans, rather than the prominent monuments of the previous generation. Those monuments were an effort to find meaning in the traumatic slaughter of 1914-18. The second major conflict within barely twenty short years did not come as such a shock and the naked aggression of a militarist regime made this, to use Cook's term, a "necessary war." That view was starkly confirmed when in 1945 the Allied ground forces closing on Germany discovered the horrors of the Holocaust. And in contrast to 1918 there was no ambiguity whatever about total and complete victory. The job was done.

The country's healthy economy was itself partly a legacy of the First World War. Intentionally dull as Mackenzie King's wartime leadership may have been—Cook deftly explains the prime minister's overriding desire to avoid discord rather than to inspire—his government had learned the right lessons from the upheavals of 1918-19. The war economy was well managed from the beginning to avoid the crippling inflation and national debt of the First World War; comprehensive preparations for peacetime "reconstruction" began early in the conflict, including generous benefits to allow veterans to grasp new opportunities. In 1919, many veterans had made the bitter discovery that their sacrifice had done nothing to bring a new world, but in the late 1940s and 1950s it seemed to many that a brighter future had in fact dawned.

Canada in important ways had indeed left the past behind, because of the permanent military alliance reached with the United States in 1940 and the economic integration of the two countries' munitions production that began in 1941. The country's full participation in the explosive growth of US industrial production—Canada was no less an “arsenal of democracy”—laid the foundations for post-war prosperity. The further integration of the North American economies also marked a transition from historic ties to Britain to partnership with the new global superpower next door.

The difficulty with a focus on the future was that if Canadians did not commemorate their wartime achievements no one would. This is a central theme of the book. That realisation had burst upon Colonel C. P. Stacey, the army's official historian, as early as 1949 with the publication of some of the first memoirs that came flooding from American (and British) publishers. One of them was General Dwight Eisenhower's account of his wartime command, which had included the First Canadian Army, and the other Robert Sherwood's intimate and detailed account of President Franklin Roosevelt, Canada's great friend. “Canadians will be well advised to reflect upon the absence of their country from the pages of such books,” Stacey wrote. “It is a pity to have to spend one's life reminding the world of one's existence, but that seems to be what we Canadians are up against.”¹ So it proved. Cook chronicles how Canada's cautious wartime leaders and equally discreet generals mostly remained silent (E. L. M. Burns, *General Mud: Memoirs of Two Wars* is a rare exception and did not appear until 1970). Stacey, as Cook also relates here and in more detail in *Clio's Warriors*, had a tremendous struggle to produce the official history of the army. The full official histories of the navy and air force, cancelled as a cost saving measure in 1948, did not appear until 1986 to 1994 in the case of the air force and the early 2000s for the navy. The army histories were bestsellers and the equal of any in the world. Memoirs by soldiers, sailors and airmen were also among the finest produced anywhere—my favourites include Alan Easton's *50 North: An Atlantic Battleground* (1963) and Murray Peden's *A Thousand Shall Fall* (1979)—but again few in number. Canadians for the most part devoured the masses of war books of all kinds, television productions and films from the United States and Britain.

¹ “Harry Hopkins and General Eisenhower: Two War Books of First-Rate Importance,” *Canadian Army Journal* 3 (May 1949): 32.

Herein lies another of Cook's central themes. In the absence of fuller and wider knowledge of Canada's wartime effort, the disasters and instances of injustice have always tended to take centre stage, not least because such calamities as Dieppe and the political crises over conscription were hot news at the time and continue to resonate with popular media. Indeed, the producers of *The Valour and the Horror* had begun their careers as journalists. It is not surprising that they endeavoured to make films that were newsworthy on subjects that had long been controversial: the Hong Kong fiasco, the Operation Spring disaster in the Normandy campaign and the bombing of German cities.

Yet, as Cook explains in detail, the *Valour and the Horror* controversy proved to be the beginning of an upsurge of popular support for remembrance. That support ultimately brought the building of the new Canadian War Museum, a project the government had been able to dodge for decades. In fact, Canada had already in the 1970s and 1980s begun to share a growing interest in the world wars in many western countries as governments, under new access to information policies, began to open previously classified records and the realisation dawned that the last of the people who had lived through the First World War would soon depart. At that same time, as Second World War veterans reached retirement age and began to reflect on their lives, many who had previously given little thought to their legacy became ardent advocates for preserving the experiences and achievements of their generation. (The most inspiring part of my time at the defence department and the war museum was the generous support we received from veterans.) Remarkably, the upswing in interest reached into some Canadian universities. A few but influential senior scholars, among them Terry Copp of Wilfrid Laurier University and David Bercuson of the University of Calgary, initiated what became substantial programs of research and teaching, as did such young scholars as Marc Milner at the University of New Brunswick.

Cook, after recounting the emergence of sustained interest in the history of Canada's Second World War in the past thirty years, concludes with a reminder that only Canadians will promote the study and understanding of our story. "History is messy, tangled, and complex... It takes effort to understand, and its meaning changes from generation to generation. But we must push back against apathy and indifference" (p. 436). It is a timely call for the university community.

Margaret Macmillan, the distinguished historian and author of *War: How Conflict Shaped Us* (2020), recently posted a blog expressing dismay at the current decline of historical studies in general and, in particular, the retirement without replacement of many of the scholars who have promoted Canadian military history. “Do we really want citizens who have so little knowledge of how war helped to shape our values and societies and our world? Do we ever want another president asking, as Donald Trump did during a visit to the Pearl Harbor memorial: ‘What’s this all about? What’s this a tour of?’”²

ROGER SARTY, *WILFRID LAURIER UNIVERSITY*

² Margaret MacMillan, “If You Want Peace, Study War,” *Persuasion*, 11 January 2021, <https://www.persuasion.community/p/if-you-want-peace-study-war>.