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Review of "The Empire on the Western Front: The British 62nd and Canadian 4th Divisions in Battle" by Geoffrey Jackson

Bradley Shoebottom

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Geoffrey Jackson. *The Empire on the Western Front: The British 62nd and Canadian 4th Divisions in Battle*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2019. Pp. 348.

While there are many divisional histories of the Western Front during the First World War, it is rare to find a comparative analysis between divisions within the British Empire. While academics such as Bill Rawlings, J. L. Granatstein and Shane Schreiber have attempted to contrast the outstanding battle performance of Dominion divisions against their British counterparts, their works lacked evidence from the British perspective.¹ More broadly, Canadian historians have focused on how the Canadian Corps' successes and unique aspects, such as its classless and largely volunteer composition, contributed to a national identity. Alternatively, British historians have noted the contribution of British leadership and technical assistance to the Canadian Corps as well as the "excessive" publicity Sir Max Aitken, the official Canadian War Reporter, garnered for "his" Canadians in the press (p. 5). But until now, no one has methodically compared specific Dominion and British divisions.

In *The Empire on the Western Front: The British 62nd and Canadian 4th Divisions in Battle*, Geoffrey Jackson compares the British 62nd Division with the Canadian 4th Infantry Division, not to explore which was more effective, but to better understand the context in which they operated. Jackson compares these divisions because of their similarities: both recruited in late 1915 and into 1916 as volunteer militia or territorial forces and separately participated in five major battles in late 1916 to 1918. In fact, Jackson argues that the 62nd and 4th were far more similar to each other than previously thought regarding their recruiting, training, doctrine, leadership and tactics and he contends that the 4th Division was no more effective than the 62nd in battle from these perspectives. Jackson also argues that the key differences between the divisions were the 4th's size, which was larger than the 62nd in 1918, and the fact that the 4th often had more time to prepare for engagements, resulting in a reputation for effectiveness.

¹ Bill Rawlings, *Surviving Trench Warfare: Technology and the Canadian Corps, 1914-1918* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992); Shane B. Schreiber, *Shock Army of the British Empire: The Canadian Corps in the Last 100 Days of the Great War* (Westport: Praeger, 1997); and J. L. Granatstein, *The Greatest Victory: Canada's One Hundred Days, 1918* (Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 2014).

By taking this comparative approach, he builds on the works of British historians Paddy Griffith, Gary Sheffield, Peter Simkins and Andy Simpson and the new generation of Canadian historians that take a broader and more critical approach to Canadian battle performance.² Jackson's comparative approach also provides a specific case study of the learning process in the British and Canadian divisions as discussed in Aimée Fox's *Learning to Fight: Military Innovation and Change in the British Army, 1914-1918*.³

The book's chapters examine each division during different periods of the war. The introduction, Chapter Two "First Months in the Line" and the conclusion provide a comparative analysis between the two divisions; whereas, the remaining chapters focus on each division separately at specific periods during the war, including how the divisions were raised, trained and led as well as their battle performance. Jackson also compares the divisions' participation in five engagements between the Battle of the Somme in 1916 and the end of the war by leveraging six factors for comparison: expectation for the division in each operation; the commanders and their command relationships; support available to the unit; the nature of the ground and weather; knowledge about the enemy and their capabilities; and how the division rebuilt after an operation. Jackson draws his analysis from Canadian, British and German records, including war diaries from a range of military hierarchies such as battalions, brigades and divisions. Further, Jackson uses the personal

² Paddy Griffith, *Battle Tactics of the Western Front: The British Army's Art of Attack, 1916-18* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); Paddy Griffith, *British Fighting Methods in the Great War* (London: F. Cass, 1996); G. D. Sheffield and Daniel Todman, eds., *Command and Control on the Western Front: The British Army's Experience, 1914-1918* (Staplehurst: Spellmount, 2007); Peter Simkins, *Kitchener's Army: The Raising of the New Armies 1914-1916* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2007); Andy Simpson, *Directing Operations: British Corps Command on the Western Front 1914-18* (Stroud: Spellmount, 2006); Tim Cook, *No Place to Run: The Canadian Corps and Gas Warfare in the First World War* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1999); Geoffrey Hayes, Michael Bechthold and Andrew Iarocci, eds., *Vimy Ridge: A Canadian Reassessment* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2007); Andrew Iarocci, *Shoestring Soldiers: The 1st Canadian Division at War, 1914-1915* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008); Kenneth Radley, *On the Dangerous Edge: British and Canadian Trench Raiding on the Western Front 1914-1918* (Solihull: Helion & Company Limited, 2019); and Douglas E. Delaney and Serge Marc Durflinger, eds., *Capturing Hill 70: Canada's Forgotten Battle of the First World War* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2019).

³ Aimée Fox, *Learning to Fight: Military Innovation and Change in the British Army, 1914-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

diaries of division commanders to illuminate command decisions and add a nuanced human element to the prosaic and often understated official war diaries (p. 8). Jackson's use of the War Office Stationery Service training pamphlets also shows how these frequent doctrinal and training updates provided more realistic training.

Jackson concludes that the 62nd and 4th used the same doctrine, training techniques and equipment and incorporated lessons learned equally well. Further, while the 4th lacked the pre-war professional officer and non-commissioned officer strength of the 62nd, and was comprised of lower middle-class recruits compared to the upper middle-class of the 62nd, these differing social compositions had little impact on battlefield performance. Both divisions had equally effective leadership and staff officer coordination despite the 4th having a militia officer as a commander. Where the divisions differed, Jackson explains, was in their deployment and usage. The 4th stayed within the Canadian Corps and never had its brigades loaned out, while the 62nd served in seven different corps and often had its brigades detached for service in other divisions. As such, the 4th's commander was more familiar with the personalities at the corps level than the 62nd with its various corps commanders and staff. For Jackson, this impacted the 62nd's ability to question orders, obtain clarifications or offer counter proposals when compared to the 4th's better rapport with the Canadian Corps. Additionally, for the last year of the war, the 4th Division was three battalions larger, meaning it could engage in longer battles. Jackson notes that the Canadian Corps was very effective in obtaining extra time for training and preparation for its battles, in part because they were set piece large scale limited objective attacks; in contrast, the 62nd was twice thrown into battle with very little preparation and were unsuccessful in those battles as a result. In essence, the 62nd had more structural constraints imposed upon it than did the 4th that reduced its effectiveness in battle.

This book proves invaluable to those interested in comparing the British home island divisions with Dominion units to understand if the latter, especially in a Canadian context, deserve the prominence they receive in the First World War literature. The author is commended for tackling two sets of "national" literatures to accomplish this long overdue transnational analysis.

BRADLEY SHOEBOTTOM, *UNIVERSITY OF NEW BRUNSWICK*