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Sydney F. Wise, 1924-2007

A Personal Recollection

W.A.B. Douglas

Sydney F. Wise, OC, M.A., LL.D., F.R.S.C., who died on 8 March 2007, was both an intellectual and a military historian. Growing up in Toronto between the two world wars, his father’s experiences in the Canadian Corps during the First World War, his lively interest in politics and sports, a consciousness of his family’s being rooted in the soil of what had been Upper Canada, and his decision to join the RCAF in 1942, all helped to develop his interest in these subjects. After demobilisation in 1945 – he had served as a pilot in Eastern Air Command, about which he had many tales to tell – he took advantage of veterans benefits and joined thousands of other ex-servicemen entering the University of Toronto. There he made lasting friendships with men who had been through various, often searing, wartime experiences, and graduated in 1949 with a gold medal in history from Victoria College. As a child of the depression, Syd was concerned with ensuring a secure job, and he spent the next academic year qualifying himself in library science. Armed with these qualifications, he began his academic career in 1950, having been accepted by the history department at the Royal Military College of Canada, where he came into contact with some of the remarkable scholars who had been persuaded to join the faculty when RMC reopened after the war.

In the history department he was closely involved with three historians in particular: G.F.G. Stanley, Richard A. Preston, and Ezio Cappadocia. In addition to his teaching duties he embarked on a Master’s program at Queen’s University, receiving his MA in 1953. It was in this period that he and Richard Preston began teaching the first general course in military history offered by RMC after the Second World War, and in 1956, after he had left the college to join the history department at Queen’s University, he and Dick Preston published a text based on their course. This book, Men in Arms: A History of Warfare and its Interrelationships with Western Society, came out in five editions, and the fifth edition, revised in 1991 by Syd Wise and Alex Roland of Duke University, is still in print. It really was one of the first examples of “new” military history, and it was adopted as the text for similar courses in several countries. One of Syd’s euphoric moments, (I know it was euphoric, because we were in England on a research trip to the Public Record Office then situated near Tring, outside London, and we celebrated with a magnificent dinner at the famous Bell restaurant in Stoke Mandeville), was when, in 1968, Field Marshal Montgomery of Alamein wrote that Men in Arms was one of only two books he found useful in preparing his own History of Warfare. (Tim Cook’s observation in his excellent book, Clio’s Warriors, is that “…perhaps [this] says a little about the importance of Men in Arms and a lot about Montgomery.” It is the sort of thing that Syd might have said himself.)

In 1966 C.P Stacey persuaded Syd to take over the position of official historian of the Canadian Armed Forces. Stacey, who came out of retirement to transform three separate service historical sections into one directorate of history, serving the newly integrated forces, wanted the historian who replaced him to write the official history of the RCAF, and he recruited Syd largely on the advice of Richard Preston. This was an unusual appointment. Although Syd had achieved a measure of international recognition for his work on Men in Arms, and had served as a pilot in the RCAF, his principal field had been Canadian pre-confederation intellectual history. His work on the conservative tradition in Upper Canada was ground-breaking, and it found expression in several important publications, principally

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Canada Views the United States: Nineteenth Century Political Attitudes (University of Washington Press, 1967), co-authored with Craig Brown, his editing of and introduction to Frances Bond Head's Narrative (McClelland and Stewart, 1969), and God's Peculiar Peoples, Essays on Political Culture in Nineteenth Century Canada, edited and introduced by A.B. Mckillop and Paul Romney (Carleton University Press, 1993). As the publication dates show, while engaged in the truly vast research involved in rescuing the history of the Canadians who served in the Royal Flying Corps, Royal Naval Air Service and Royal Air Force from 1914 to 1919, he had continued to work in the pre-confederation field.

The Directorate of History, when Syd Wise arrived in 1966, was still in its transitional period. Thanks to the efforts of Charles Stacey, it was on firm organizational ground. To keep the directorate free of interference from DND bureaucrats with their own vested interests, Stacey had insisted on direct access to the Chief of Defence Staff and the Minister of National Defence, and it was this arrangement that persuaded Syd to accept the appointment as Director of History. (That title, Syd once recounted with some relish, led Professor Maurice Careless of the University of Toronto to ask how he should refer to Syd were he ever promoted. Would it be “Master of Fate”?)

At the directorate Syd found that members of the naval, army and air force historical sections had come from three rather different cultures, and had varying scholarly qualifications. The core of the directorate was what had been the army historical section. Lieutenant-Colonel Don Goodspeed, who as senior historian in the new directorate had more than satisfied the stringent demands of Stacey, exercised rigorous intellectual supervision over the so-called narrators, who provided preliminary drafts for the official histories. Alice Sorby, a one-time colonel in the Canadian Women's Army Corps, ran a very efficient enquiries section, and Ted Russell, who had headed the naval historical section before integration, served as administrative officer. There was some tension and personality conflict among the heads of each section in the directorate, each of whom was uncomfortable with integration, but Syd worked hard to create a collegial atmosphere, and quickly won the confidence of his staff.

The official RCAF history was intended to fill the large gap in Canadian historiography left by the termination, after the war, of the proposed documented and multi-volume air force history that would have followed the popular series, The RCAF Overseas, produced by the wartime air force historical section. Stacey had begun to fill the gap in Arms, Men and Governments: The War Policies of Canada 1939-1945 (Queen's Printer, 1970), and hoped a full, well documented history of the RCAF would round out his discussions of Canadian air policies and problems during the Second World War. Syd entered into the work with tremendous enthusiasm. Originally Stacey had estimated that the First World War could be dealt with in a chapter or so, but as soon as Syd grasped the scope of Canadian participation in the air war he allocated an entire volume to that period. He obtained ministerial approval for a three-volume history of the RCAF, from the origins of military aviation to 1945, with provision for a fourth volume to bring the story up to integration of the armed forces.

The army historical section had been about the only graduate school for military historians in Canada in the years following the Second
World War. Syd carried on that tradition. With the departure of Stacey, and of historians who had worked for Stacey, like Desmond Morton, Jack Granatstein and Jack Hyatt, there was a need to bring some of the remaining historical officers up to speed in accepted scholarly practices, and to train newcomers who did not have the benefit of postgraduate work in history, so that historical research and writing emanating from the directorate continued to meet consistently high academic standards. Syd took up this task with a will. He held seminars on accepted procedure in the preparation of bibliographies and the use of consistent style, demanded that historical officers in the directorate follow such practices, and found in Goodspeed – whose own historical writing set a terrific example for young historians to follow – a willing instrument of his policy. The results of this effort can be seen in a steady improvement of preliminary narratives for the RCAF history and other historical reports (including my own) written between 1966 and 1973.

During Syd Wise’s tenure as Director he also recruited, on a competitive basis, historians with graduate training such as Norman Hillmer, Owen Cooke, and Brereton Greenhous. Syd actively encouraged historians on staff to publish their own work in refereed journals and books. One of the moments that brought him the most satisfaction was when Fred Hatch published *The Aerodrome of Democracy* shortly before Fred’s untimely death. And he was pleased when Jack Granatstein named the late J.M.Hitsman as his co-author for *Broken Promises*, the history of conscription in Canada.

By 1973 the directorate, “DHist” to those who used its resources, was looking more like a university history department than an obscure DND office, and Syd’s work with the Public Service Commission, forming the so-called peer promotion system, had brought similar consequences to all government departments recruiting and promoting historical researchers. At the same time, DHist was a tremendously lively place. Syd demanded a lot from his staff, encouraged constant exchange of ideas among them, and did not limit his interest to what was going on in the office. The daily coffee klatch became an institution, and we also enjoyed frequent social events together, lunches, dinners and barbecues. As well, Syd often allowed an afternoon for volunteer physical activity, rather like the navy’s “make and mend” routine, taking a long lunch hour to exercise at the gym at the Rockcliffe base, or to spend an hour or two cross-country skiing in the winter. There were not many “dull boys,” among those who served in DHist. Charles Stacey, as those who knew him might have imagined, tended to ‘harumph’ at these goings on, but there is no doubt that they brought the staff together.

*Canadian Airmen and the First World War*, published by the University of Toronto Press in 1980, was, like so much of Syd’s work, a ground-breaking study, particularly because the methodology was so different from the usual official history. As he explained in the preface to the volume:

To reconstruct the 1914-18 air war from a Canadian perspective has been a task of some complexity. The starting point was the thousands of record cards compiled... in 1919 from records of the RAF and the Headquarters of the Overseas Military Forces of Canada in London. On each card was written the name of the airman, his rank, trade, decorations, place of origin in Canada (or place of enlistment), record of service and, occasionally, occupation prior to enlistment. This invaluable record was brought home to Canada and for many years found a
resting place in the Army Historical Section in Ottawa. The vicissitudes of time, the irrelevance of the card file to the work of the Section, and even the domestic habits of its members (if one is to judge from the coffee rings on some of the cards) resulted in many losses, particularly from the latter part of the alphabet.

Dr. Fred Hitchins, who served in the Air Historical Section during the Second World War, and took over the air force history section after the war, had by painstaking and accurate research filled many of the gaps in the collection, and Syd gave him full credit for this vital contribution. However, linking such biographical information to First World War aviation demanded examination of the massive collection of Air, Admiralty, War Office, Colonial Office and Cabinet records in the Public Record Office in England. Compiling a list of every RFC, RNAS and RAF unit, he instructed the historians on his staff to put, under each unit, the names of every Canadian known to have served there. It was a flexible research tool, constantly updated as new information flowed in, and revealed where Canadians had served in significant numbers. The records of such units were then copied, “…to ensure that the work of the whole unit, and not just of the Canadians in it, became clear in order to maintain a proper balance between the contributions of the Canadians and that of the unit as a whole.” A further complication was to define “Canadian,” at a period when immigration to and emigration from Canada was in full flow, but this became easier as these men began, by the end of 1916, to think of themselves as a distinct Canadian group in the flying services. Canadian Airmen and the First World War added significantly to the literature of First World War aviation, and was well received, particularly, as will be seen, in Australia.

For a number of years before going to Ottawa, Syd had been active, with other pre-confederation historians, in the Ontario Historical Society. He continued this activity, and from 1968 to 1968 served as President of the Society. He also took a keen interest in Canadian sporting activities. He had always taken part in athletics, had coached the basketball team at RMC in the 1950s, and was almost encyclopedic in his knowledge of the Canadian sporting scene. He undertook to collaborate with Doug Fisher (a close friend from university days) and the Canadian Olympic skier Nancy Green, on the book Canada’s Sporting Heroes: Their Life and Times, published in 1974.

In 1973 Syd had joined the history department at Carleton University as a full professor. He maintained a close connection with the Directorate of History, providing much wise counsel to his successor, and continuing to work on the manuscript of the official history. At Carleton, entering into university activities with customary enthusiasm, he was active in a wide range of endeavours. In 1973 he was elected President of the Canadian Historical Association, served as President of the Social Science and Research Council of Canada from 1974-5 and as Chairman of Ontario Heritage from 1980-1. He was Director of Carleton’s Institute of Canadian Studies from 1978 to 1981, and in that period, with John Clarke, produced Aspects of the Constitutional Debate. (Carleton University Press, Institute of Canadian Studies, Occasional Paper No.1, 1981). From 1984-6 he was Chairman of the Ontario Committee of Graduate Studies, and from 1985-6 was Chairman of the Canadian Association of Graduate Schools. He was Dean of Graduate Studies at Carleton from 1981 to 1990 and during his tenure, in the words of Carleton’s president and Vice-Chancellor, built “a partnership with the University of Ottawa by consolidating our graduate programs in all areas of science and engineering, thereby bringing together the strengths and specializations of the two universities.” Among his other contributions at Carleton he was active in selecting manuscripts for publication in the Carleton Library Series, and began courses in military history for undergraduates. He retired from Carleton in 1998 and was accorded the title of Distinguished Research Professor.

Syd never let any of this stop him from having fun. In 1985 he went to Australia as the first visiting fellow at the Australian War Memorial. To quote Professor Peter Dennis of the Australian Defence Force Academy, “given that the Director of the Memorial was then a retired Air Force officer, and that the Memorial had tended to emphasise the army to the detriment of the other two services, I suggested Syd, given his sterling work on the RCAF in the First World War, his own service record in the Second World War, and his general reputation as a military historian.” His keynote address at the War Memorial’s
annual historical conference “galvanized some members of the audience into thinking more actively about how Australian military history could be advanced,” writes Peter Dennis: “it also awakened in Syd a lasting interest in Australian military history.” Perhaps of equal importance, his Australian experience awakened in Syd a certain taste for Australian wine. “He could discourse at length on the qualities of a particular wine and vintage, and it was a sheer delight to be with him as he discovered a new wine-growing area and winemaker. As a host it was an added bonus that Syd insisted on taking away with him all the empty bottles (often very, very many), so that Verna could soak off the labels, which Syd then dried and mounted in an album, accompanied by drinking notes. By the time he left, I recall that he told me he had sampled well over 200 different wines, many, no doubt, in multiple bottles.

Syd was in his element in Australia, and he was invited back as a Visiting Professorial Fellow in the department of history in the University of New South Wales at the Australian Defence Force Academy in 1988. There he taught a course on the American Civil War, something that had captured his imagination many years before while at RMC, and with “The Army of the Cussewago,” a battlefield tramping group, of which more later, led by the Civil War historian Jay Luvaas, then teaching at Allegheny College in Meadville, Pennsylvania. There were two more trips to Australia, in 1996 and 1998. The former was a private visit, but it afforded an opportunity to give a paper for an Australian audience on “The Valour and the Horror.” “What came through to everyone” says Peter Dennis, “was Syd’s passionate defence of the RCAF, his belief in the integrity of the historical process, and his indignation that the film-makers had trampled on both. It was a riveting performance.”

In 1998 he took his last trip to be the keynote speaker at the annual Chief of Army’s Military History Conference in Canberra. “The theme of the conference was 1918: The Foundations of Victory, and Syd spoke on the great campaigns of that year, drawing on his emerging study of the Canadian Corps and his growing familiarity with the Australian side of the story. Here he was in his element: a sympathetic and interested audience, and an international gathering of scholars in the same field, many of whom Syd subsequently kept in close touch with.”

In 1992 Syd became involved with the Canadian Battle of Normandy Foundation, now known as the Canadian Battlefields Foundation. Hamilton Southam recruited him as a director, and he played a major part in selecting students for the annual battlefield tours that began in 1995. This was a project that caught his imagination, and led naturally to Hamilton Southam’s other project, the Valiants Foundation. Syd willingly accepted Mr Southam’s invitation to serve as vice-president of the Foundation, and to advise on the choice of people who would be recognised by a new memorial in Ottawa for their valorous contributions to the development of Canada from a colony to a strong independent nation. His presence at the board meetings of these two foundations revealed his wonderful administrative flair. He invariably found a way to the heart of a problem, identified it with his quiet wit, and as often as not proposed a sensible, and almost always simple, solution. Sadly, his final illness prevented him from attending the unveiling of the “Valiants” on 5 November 2006.

This was a remarkable career. Syd was always probing for new ideas, and always enjoying life to the fullest while engaged in that activity. His students, and those who came in contact with

him at conferences and in battlefield visits, knew him for his scholarly rigour and equally for the great care he had for their welfare. He went far out of his way to help friends and colleagues, and he always had a positive attitude on life. He was known among his battlefield tramping friends for the energy he expended exploring new territory, always far ahead of the main group, but always showing enormous interest in and concern for the people in that group. It is no surprise that he has given Carleton University, as one of his legacies, a graduate bursary.

In 1989 he was made a member of the Order of Canada for his teaching and heritage advocacy. In 2004 he received a promotion to Officer in the Order for his 50 years of teaching, writing and lecturing, and as the dean of military historians in Canada. He also received honorary degrees from the University of Guelph and Carleton University. To the very last he kept working on his final project, a study of Canadian Corps activities in 1918. The so-called “long vacation” between March and August 1918, he found, was no vacation at all. He wanted to record the extraordinary and successful raiding activity by the Canadian Corps in that period. It was characteristic that he worked without a break for the last two days of his life, and so unfortunate that he was unable to complete that project.

Syd is survived by his wife, Verna, whom he first met at school in the 1940s, his daughter Catherine, and sons Bruce and John, and by his brother Bruce. For all of us who have been subjected to his care and criticism, his constant friendship and wit will be sorely missed. If one were to frame an epitaph, I think we would agree that whatever the circumstances, even in the last and most difficult weeks of his life, he was always good company.

Alec Douglas succeeded Syd Wise as official historian of the Canadian armed forces in 1973, and retired in 1994. He is the author of Vol.II of the RCAF official history, and was the principal author for Volume II, parts 1 and 2 of the official operational history of the RCN in the Second World War.