The Top 10 Most Important Books of Canadian Military History

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Historians love books. We are trained to read them critically, to look for their flaws, and to mine them for our own better understanding of the past, but I’ve never met an historian who did not love books. I’ve never met an historian who did not get excited about ducking into a used book store to search for a rare copy to fill that list of “must haves” that are carried in one’s head, or jotted down on a tattered list in one’s wallet.

Historians also have their favourite books. We talk easily of the historiography, but there are those books that affected us, profoundly shaped our knowledge, and gave us a foundation upon which to push off in new directions. But how does one measure a favourite book, and then rank it against other key monographs? It is no easy task, and all of the ten military historians who agreed to be a part of this exercise admitted to the difficulty in compiling their lists of the most important books within the field of Canadian military history.

The ten historians were given little guidance on how to define “important,” other than a few brief suggestions that the books should have laid the foundation or framework of study for a field or subject matter; that the book added significant knowledge to our understanding of the past; that the book was innovative in its use of sources or methodology; and that the book has enduring value. Scope of vision, deep and varied use of archival sources, or quality of writing were other possible criteria for consideration. The criteria were there for the historians to mull over, but ultimately the selection was up to each of them. This list is about their most “important” 10 books, but each historian has offered some thoughts to preface their decisions.

There were some restrictions placed on the historians.

- Our historians were reminded to define military history broadly, from firing line to the home front, from the constructed memory of the war to gender studies, and everything in between and on the fringes.
- Official histories were out of contention. They have an unfair advantage in that they are written by teams, are constructed upon access to records that other historians usually do not have, and, almost by definition, are key foundational works on a particular subject. Such is certainly the case with the air force, navy, and army histories of the two world wars, many of which would be on these lists. However, while these works are excluded, other works by official historians writing in an academic capacity are not excluded.
- Charles Perry Stacey’s *Arms, Men and Governments* fell into a gray area, and there was a lively debate over whether it should be included. Since Stacey wrote *Arms, Men and Governments* in a civilian capacity (as a professor at the University of Toronto) and was not supported by the team of narrators like previous official histories, I decided that it should be included, even though, as one historian rightly argued, he had access to closed records that other historians of the time could not see for security reasons.
- Historians were instructed to keep their book selection to the field of Canadian military history. While there have been some very important works of military history written by Canadian historians, these are lists of Canadian history works. Authors like Tim Travers, Holger Herwig, or Dominick Graham have necessarily been excluded.
- Finally, historians were asked not to include their own books on their Top 10 list.

Qualifiers aside, I’m intrigued by the idea of how important books change over time for an historian. When I began my graduate studies that focused on Canada in the Great War, Desmond Morton’s *When Your Number’s Up* and Bill Rawling’s...
Surviving Trench Warfare were the most important books on my desk, constantly read and reread, opening up new avenues of thought and challenging previous assumption. Over time, new interests and new questions arose from wider reading, and while these two books would still likely be on my Top 10 list, I have recently been re-reading important works on the Second World War, and am amazed by J.L. Granatstein’s Canada’s War: The Politics of the Mackenzie King Government, 1939-1945, which for over thirty years has remained unsurpassed. What about the long histories of J.L. Granatstein and Marc Milner in their accounts of the Canadian Army and the Royal Canadian Navy? Both have relied heavily on previous scholarship, but the skill required to pull together the multiple strands of the army or navy over a century of conflict, to weave in battle, tactics, senior command, fighting and peacetime experiences, are marks of a brilliant study. Would I have selected Charles Stacey’s history on the 1759 siege and battle of Quebec or the recent book by Peter Macleod, Northern Armageddon, which owes much to Stacey’s groundbreaking work, but has built on it and, to my mind, surpassed it? Would I include the foundational book or the new authoritative one? The essential memoirs of combatants offer unparallel understanding into war, battle, peace, and the social environment of service personnel. How would I weigh them against a history of the same time period? More recent works like Jonathan Vance’s Death So Noble, Terry Copp’s Fields of Fire, and Jeff Keshen’s Saints, Sinners, and Soldiers are groundbreaking studies, carving out new fields, and each likely to spawn dozens of graduate theses over the coming years. How would I measure them against some of the groundbreaking studies of old, like Richard Preston’s Canada and “Imperial Defence,” George Stanley’s Canada’s Soldiers, Charles Stacey’s Canada and the British Army, Stephen Harris’s Canadian Brass, Carman Miller’s Painting the Map Red, or Desmond Morton’s Ministers and Generals, most of which have not been surpassed, only augmented by later studies. Luckily, as the editor of this piece, I need not pose the questions and not compile my own list. That hand-wringing task falls to our ten historians.

What would you choose as your Top 10 most “important” books? If you would like to share this with other readers, send your list to: <cmh@wlu.ca>. All Top 10 lists will be posted on the Laurier Centre’s website: <www.canadianmilitaryhistory.com>.

At one point, I thought I would try to compile a Top 10 list from the ten separate lists (through some sort of ranking and scoring system), but I dropped that idea after all of the historians remarked that their lists are intensely personal and consist of the books that mattered to them. The focus of the exercise changed, but at its most basic level, these lists are an indication of the rich historiography created by participants and historians of Canadian military history. These Top 10 lists could serve as the foundational reading list for MA or Ph.D. students about to engage in the broad field of Canadian military history. The lists are also a stark reminder that just because your local bookstore has only the latest published books, that often the classics of the field repay with each rereading. Desmond Morton subitled his list, “Ten books that made a military historian”; these are indeed the books that allow us all to be historians or historically-minded, and I would argue that these books have laid the foundation for understanding our collective past.
Every book on this list is excellent, so picking a #1 is almost pointless. But, if I had to select one title for the influence it had on me, it would be Jack Granatstein’s The Generals. I could have picked any number of Jack’s books for the list, but The Generals is the one that really ignited my interest in biography and set me to studying command and generalship, issues that have occupied me for the last decade or so. It also reminded me that personality in history matters, something that I think historians had forgotten in the decade or two before The Generals was published.

Second World War histories dominate my list, but I didn’t intend it that way. These books are fine examples for any military historian. C.P. Stacey’s Arms, Men, and Governments is a masterpiece that would serve any student of government policy well, no matter what the country or era. Jack English’s The Canadian Army and the Normandy Campaign paved the way for other in-depth operational histories like Shane Schreiber’s Shock Army of the British Empire and Terry Copp’s Fields of Fire. English’s work inspired numerous operational studies in the United States and the United Kingdom as well. Marc Milner’s North Atlantic Run would be at the top of any list of naval histories anywhere. And anyone wanting to understand the human dimension of war would do well to read the eleventh book on my list, Battle Exhaustion by Bill McAndrew and Terry Copp.

I have also benefited from the example of works in other eras. I still think Des Morton’s When Your Number’s Up is one of the most engaging and accessible social histories of soldiers ever written. Jonathan Vance’s Death So Noble on collective memory and the Great War is inspiring, both for the sophistication of its analysis and the beauty of its prose. Without Richard Preston’s Canada and “Imperial Defence,” people who work on Canadian defence policy would be lost, as would Canadian Army historians without Steve Harris’s Canadian Brass. Finally, with Shock Troops, Tim Cook showed us all how to combine operational and social history in a scholarly way – and still make it on the Maclean’s best-seller list.


Selecting my top ten books in Canadian military history has been a surprisingly difficult but no less delightful task. It has obliged me to identify (and sometimes rethink) those formative career influences which help explain my own approach to the study of Canada’s military past. My original “short list” contained about 25 books! Established some criteria against which to measure a given work’s impact. Accordingly, I have chosen books that influenced...
my understanding and perceptions of the past, that I continue to find innovative as interpretive models and pedagogical tools, that delivered, in scholarly or non-scholarly form, some essential knowledge on which to base further studies, that are wonderfully crafted, that moved me at a human level, or, as in the case of my top choice, proved a combination of all or some of these qualities. This has proven a very personal, even idiosyncratic exercise. In fact, beyond my first choice, I hesitate to rank the remaining nine; my seventh choice could easily have been my third, and vice versa. Moreover, my top-ten list is not set in stone: it will change with the emergence of new instant “classics” and according to my own changing judgments. The other point that flows from this concern is that the rankings are almost all completely arbitrary. I include substantial grounding in broader fields of study, with the 20th Century—which was (and is) what interested me. Thus, most of my Top 10 are relatively recent. I have included only one memoir of an ever-growing number of books, that by Murray Peden of his RCAF experiences. I believe that his is one of the great Second World War autobiographies, unfortunately too little known. I could just as readily have included George Blackburn’s wonderful trilogy on his experiences with the guns from 1939 to 1945, but frankly my list was already heavy on the army and too light on the air, so I regrettfully left him off.

Peden is one of only two on my list (Pugsley being the other) that I do not know personally. That suggests how small the Canadian military history field has been and still is (or perhaps that my knowledge of it is terribly limited). Nonetheless, it startles me that the remaining eight writers are either co-authors, colleagues, friends, or former students, and that makes me question my own changing research interests and reconceptualization of Canada’s military and social-military history. The great C.P. Stacey’s *Arms, Men, and Governments* is a magisterial work of enormous historical significance. Virtually unequalled in our military historiography for breadth of coverage and insight of analysis, it remains a model of impeccable scholarly form, some essential knowledge on which to base further studies, that are wonderfully crafted, that moved me at a human level, or, as in the case of my top choice, proved a combination of all or some of these qualities.

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**J.L. Granatstein**

Dr. J.L. Granatstein attended CMR, RMC, Toronto and Duke Universities. He is the author of Canada’s War, Broken Promises, The Ottawa Men, How Britain’s Weakness Forced Canada into the Arms of the United States, The Generals, Canada’s Army, Who Killed the Canadian Military?, and other books. He was Director and CEO of the Canadian War Museum (1998-2000).

As an officer cadet at RMC, I was raised on the official Canadian Army histories of World War II and G.F.G. Stanley’s Canada’s Soldiers. As a student of Richard Preston, Charles Stacey, and Theodore Ropp in the 1950s and 1960s, I also received substantial grounding in broader fields of military history. But there was then, official history aside, very little researched and detailed Canadian material on the 20th Century—which was (and is) what interested me.


My choice of ten Canadian military histories is unashamedly influenced by their contribution to my own development as an historian: when I happened to read a particular book has in part determined my sense of its value or worth. My sense of their worth has also been influenced by the extent to which the book, for want of a better phrase, made me sit up and take notice. All of them are books I wish I had had the wit to write.
Dr. Andrew Iarocci is a research fellow at the Canadian War Museum, where he has also acted as Collections Manager, Transportation & Artillery. Iarocci is the author of Shoestring Soldiers: 1st Canadian Division at War, 1914-1915, and co-editor of Vimy Ridge: A Canadian Reassessment. He is now working on a new study of mechanization and logistics during the First World War. He has taught broadly in 20th century military history, and is currently an instructor in the War Studies program at the Royal Military College.

This exercise has been no small challenge. My choices on the upper end of the scale (Rawling, Morton, Vance) are so situated because they were highly influential in First World War studies during my student days. According to Tim Cook’s ground rules, official histories are not permitted on our lists. I can easily live with this restriction because the far reaching importance of A.F. Duguid’s and G.W.L. Nicholson’s respective works goes without saying. First World War historians surely will keep the official accounts close at hand for many years to come.

Ghosts Have Warm Hands was probably the first Great War memoir that I laid hands on (it was recommended by Professor Hyatt when I took his World Wars course in second year). In particular, Bird’s attention to detail resonated with my interest in material culture. Many of my own students have since been captivated by this durable story. Harold McGill’s memoir (only recently published) and James Pedley’s much earlier account each capture the complexities of the trench war experience from uniquely Canadian perspectives. And while neither officer imposed strict censorship on his writing, neither did McGill or Pedley seek to profit by attacking others’ reputations.

No less significantly, I must underscore the lasting influence of Terry Copp’s ground-breaking work on the Second World War, which he ventured into at a time when it was not especially fashionable to write about Canadian soldiers at war. From Terry’s work, I learned that historical interpretations, no matter how widely accepted, are rarely carved in stone. Neither is this list I suppose, but hard choices had to be made!

4. Terry Copp and Robert Vogel, Maple Leaf Route (five volumes) (Alma: Maple Leaf Route, 1983-88).

Dr. Peter MacLeod is the Pre-Confederation Historian at the Canadian War Museum and author of Northern Armageddon: The Battle of the Plains of Abraham/ La vérité sur la bataille des plaines d’Abraham and The Canadian Iroquois and the Seven Years’ War/Les Iroquois et la guerre de Sept Ans. He is currently writing a history of the Battle of Ste. Foy and the 1760 campaign.

Compiling this list, I was surprised to find myself drawn more to the classics than the cutting edge. (Even Le peuple, l’état, et la guerre was written 20 years ago). Then I realized the obvious, that however brilliant the latest books may be, it takes time for the classics to emerge.

Among these books, Eccles and Stacey are virtually tied for first place. Eccles broke Francis Parkman’s iron grip on Anglophone writing on New France; Stacey cut
away the mythology surrounding a crucial battle. Both historians not only produced fine works of their own, they cleared the way for historians taking a more scholarly approach to New France and the Seven Years' War.

Like Eccles and Stacey, each of the other books set new standards for writing in their fields, whether by writing for a popular readership (Stewart), producing general histories of wars that remain unsurpassed after decades in print (Frégault and Hitsman), taking account of Amerindian perspectives (Havard, Stonechild, Weiser, and Benn), or exploring topics that had never been addressed in such detail before (Pritchard and Dechêne).

Since it is difficult to establish the relative importance of, say, a good book on the War of 1812 and a good book on the War of the Austrian Succession, I have listed the works after Eccles and Stacey in alphabetical order.

1. William John Eccles, Frontenac, the Courrier Governor (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1989).

Marc Milner
Dr. Marc Milner is Director of the Brigadier Milton F Gregg VC Centre for the Study of War and Society at the University of New Brunswick. He is the author of numerous books, including North Atlantic Run: The Royal Canadian Navy and the Battle for the Convoys (1985); The U-Boat Hunters (1995), Corvettes of the Royal Canadian Navy (co-authored with Ken Macpherson in 1993), Canada's Navy: The First Century (1999), Battle of the Atlantic (2003), and D-Day to Caen: the North Shore Regiment and the Liberation of Europe (2007).

These are the top Canadian monographs which I know have influenced me. The top three I absorbed in high school, the next four as a university student, and the final three since joining the ranks of the profession. Stanley was an easy choice as number one. Not only was his the first scholarly survey of Canadian military history, but as my colleague Brent Wilson observed, Stanley’s description of Canadians as an “unmilitary people” who have not shied away from fighting defined the dominant paradigm of all modern Canadian military history. Most of my truly formative influences – official histories and “foreign” military writing – are specifically excluded from this exercise! This includes Gilbert Tucker and Joseph Schull's official histories of the RCN and Donald Macintyre's Battle of the Atlantic, all of which I read in high school and disliked even then. Bernard Fall’s Hell in a Very Small Place, written with the easy pen and immediacy of a journalist, an eye for human frailty and tragedy and the skill of an historian left an early lasting impression. Alexander McKee's Caen, Belfield and Essame's The Battle for Normandy, and a host of the “Pan Books: British Battles Series” (cheap paperbacks available at drugstores) filled my youth. This broad interest in general military history was nurtured by UNB's program, which has never been focused on Canadian military history.

2. Ross Munro, Gauntlets to Overlord: The Story of the Canadian Army (Toronto: Macmillan, 1945).

**Desmond Morton**

Born in Calgary in 1937, Des Morton attended schools across Canada, graduated from CMR, RMC, Oxford and the LSE, taught at the Universities of Ottawa, Toronto, and McGill, authored 40 books on Canadian military, political and labour history, was chosen a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, earned the Canadian Forces Decoration and was admitted to the Order of Canada.

My dad was one of Canada’s few professional soldiers when we went to war in 1939. He left me a small library of old books that had shaped his career. One was my first choice, a little brown book, fit for a battledress pocket, to be read by corporals and precocious boys of under ten years. No book I knew better summed up what we had learned in 1914-18. Battles are won by corporals, not generals. They win by being cunning and keeping their soldiers alive. Boulton’s book reflected Canada’s 19th century experience, from the 100th Regiment to Batoche, with the name of every 1885 veteran. Louis Riel believed it was safer to kill Tom Scott than this son of a FOOF or Fine Old Ontario Family. Maybe he was wrong. Boulton’s scouts saved Middleton’s army from Gabriel Dumont’s ambush at Fish Creek.

As a historian, I have strayed close to the Great War. The politics of history fascinate me, and drew me to Charles Stacey’s memoirs as much as to his official histories. During a year in Stacey’s directorate, I was educated by the wise and industrious John Swettenham. I had no braver colleague than the crippled Mac Hitsman. With his valiant example, what task of mine could be impossible or even difficult? We were all more industrious than our critics alleged, none more so than Jack Granatstein or Norm Hillmer.

My dad and my uncle never let me forget our peacetime indifference to Quebec and the resulting cost in wartime. That struggle was exemplified by many outstanding officers, none more than Thomas-Louis Tremblay and Jean-Victor Allard. At the end of my career, recording this issue dominates my agenda. I hope to do belated justice.
Il n’est pas facile de sélectionner les dix ouvrages les plus significatifs en histoire militaire du Canada car, en réalité, au moins trois Canadas militaires, aux enjeux et aux styles de guerre très différents, se sont succédé : celui de la Nouvelle-France, celui des colonies d’Amérique du Nord britannique et celui de la Confédération. Comment, par conséquent, comparer des ouvrages d’envergure équivalentes référant à des périodes ou à des thèmes aussi disparates ? J’ai donc choisi de classer les ouvrages choisis – que je considère à peu près ex-aequo – par période, sauf pour le no 1. Autre remarque: l’histoire militaire du Canada reste largement de tradition mâle et anglo-saxonne et intéresse peu les minorités culturelles ou de genre. Cependant le vent tourne et de nouvelles problématiques et approches sont en train de renouveler ce domaine. Aussi, ma bibliothèque idéale tentera-t-elle de restituer la dimension humaine de ces faits d’arme et du poids symbolique de ce fait d’arme et de son écho toujours actuel dans la mémoire collective au Québec. Ce faisant, MacLeod démontre que la mémoire peut-être aussi un enjeu des autres moyens.

1. Peter MacLeod, Northern Armageddon: The Battle of the Plains of Abraham (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 2009).
7. Jean Provencher, Québec sous la loi des mesures de guerre, 1918 (Montréal: les éditions du Boréal express, 1971).
Jonathan F. Vance


For me, “best” meant indispensable, foundational, essential – the books that all incoming graduate students are compelled to read, and that every undergraduate seminar must hear about ad nauseam. To confine the list to ten seemed almost criminal, as did the stricture that official histories must be excluded. My choices are admittedly idiosyncratic – is *Cinderella Army* really a better book than *Fields of Fire*, or *The U-Boat Hunters* than *North Atlantic Run*? Perhaps not, but in some cases it was just a phrase or two that was so pithy that it had to elevate the book above its fellows.

In the end, I opted to put Robert Sharpe’s *The Last Day, the Last Hour* at the top, because it continues to surprise me. When I first picked it up (on the recommendation of Jack Granatstein, I think), my hopes weren’t high – it sounded as interesting, I thought, as a history of conveyancing or quantity surveying. But this is a remarkably vivid book, engagingly written and featuring terrific portraits of the personalities involved. What’s more, it has some enormously important things to say about the enduring resonance of military history, and how much it mattered for the generation that lived through the Great War. Sharpe forced me to look at what happened on the battlefield from entirely different perspectives. The best thing a military historian can do once in a while is read military history that is not written by a military historian – this should be required reading for armchair generals everywhere.