

REVIEW ARTICLES

HENRY ROPER

Canada, War and Popular History

Marching as to War: Canada's Turbulent Years, 1899-1953. By Pierre Berton. Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2001. 632 pages. \$45.00.

On the Battlefields: Two World Wars That Shaped a Nation. Ed. Michael Benedict. Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2002. xiii, 412 pages. \$35.00.

Testaments of Honour: Personal Histories of Canada's War Veterans. Ed. Blake Heathcote. Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2002. xviii, 342 pages. \$45.00.

A Keen Soldier: The Execution of Second World War Private Harold Pringle. By Andrew Clark. Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 2002. 342 pages. \$35.95.

Sailors, Slackers and Blind Pigs: Halifax At War. By Stephen Kimber. Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2002. 342 pages. \$34.95.

IN THE AUTUMN OF 1922, Wilfrid Creighton, a freshman at Dalhousie, attended his first class in English, given by Archibald MacMechan, Munro professor and already a legendary figure. Eighty years later Creighton can recall verbatim MacMechan's introductory sentence. "War, it would seem," he declaimed, "is the chief occupation of mankind." He then went on to argue that this is due to the mistakes of the past being forgotten by succeeding generations. Presumably MacMechan felt called to ensure that this did not happen in the wake of the Great War that had ended four years earlier. Creighton remembers his own reaction: "You silly old goat, there isn't going to be another war."¹

¹Personal communication, 22 April 2003. G. W.I. Creighton (class of 1926) pursued a career in forestry after graduation from Dalhousie and the University of New

This incident is one small reminder of the impact of the 1914–1918 catastrophe. In the case of Canada, a country with a population of 8 million, 620,000 served in the army to fight for the British Empire. More than 61,000 were killed and 172,000 wounded. In 1914, when the British government declared war on the German Empire, Canada was automatically at war. Both in Quebec, where nationalists such as Henri Bourassa initially supported it, and in English Canada, where the war was greeted with enthusiasm, few considered the implications of this automatic and open-ended commitment to Britain. The received wisdom was that the war would be brief, if only because the economies of the various European countries could not withstand a protracted struggle. This prediction, like so many others offered up by ‘experts’ and other pundits during the twentieth century, rang hollow as ever-greater sacrifices were demanded of the peoples of the warring powers. By 1917 no interest, political or economic, gained by victory could possibly compensate for what had already been lost. Paradoxically, this had the effect of impelling both sides to fight to the end, come what may. Slogans such as the ‘war to end wars’ camouflaged the dreadful reality that neither side could stop without ‘victory’ because only ‘victory’ could give meaning to the slaughter that had already taken place, whether at Ypres, the Somme or Verdun. It is hardly surprising that under these circumstances populations underwent the brutalizing effects of hate-charged propaganda produced not only by hacks but by writers of the stature of Arnold Bennett, Rudyard Kipling and John Buchan.

Like so much in our history, Canada’s participation in the wars of the twentieth century is tinged by ambiguity. The years before 1914 marked the high point of the British Empire, or at least of the propaganda of Empire. English Canadians, with the exception of old-fashioned liberal anti-imperialists in the tradition of Goldwin Smith, considered the imperial connection as inseparable from their definition of themselves. In the words of Charles G.D. Roberts, as quoted by Pierre Berton, “The good Canadian national-

Brunswick. He was deputy minister of lands and forests, province of Nova Scotia, from 1949 to 1969. For the effect of World War I upon MacMechan, see Henry Roper, “Archibald MacMechan and the Writing of ‘The Halifax Disaster’,” in *Ground Zero*, ed. Alan Ruffman and Colin Howell (Halifax: Nimbus and the Gorsebrook Research Institute, 1994) 85–90.

ist first must be a good Imperialist" (24). English and French Canadians both supported the imperial tie, but for different reasons, and certainly with different degrees of warmth. War brought divisions to the surface, placing at odds the two founding peoples. It also radically accelerated the emergence of a Canadian nationhood divorced from Britain, a central theme of our history in the twentieth century and still ongoing today.

It is obviously important that Canadians understand the extent of their country's involvement in the major wars of the past century, the magnitude of the sacrifices made by their ancestors, and the impact of these conflicts on Canadian society. Pierre Berton's *Marching as to War: Canada's Turbulent Years, 1899-1953*, admirably fills the need for a solid popular history which provides the reader with a blend of coherent narrative, analysis of important military and political issues and well-chosen anecdotes. Academic historians have occasionally patronized Berton and no doubt some will criticize him on specific points; there is a vast and detailed literature on practically every aspect of Canada's military history and this is a popular work of synthesis. But as such it is excellent. It is not simply that as always he writes in a clear and readable style. He places Canada's military efforts within their social and political context, bringing grey personalities such as Sir Robert Borden to life.

Berton is no tub-thumper or drum and trumpet historian. He does not shy away from the racism endemic in Canadian society during the past century or from such shameful episodes as the internment of Japanese-Canadians during the Second World War. In addition, he keeps in view the importance of French Canada. His account, for example, of the conscription crisis of 1917, and of the behaviour of the Borden government to ensure a victory in the federal election of that year, shows his grasp of the dilemmas faced by both sides in the struggle, but also his willingness to make forceful judgements. Berton is of course opinionated, and some of his opinions are debatable, but they add to the enjoyment of reading what he has to say about personalities and events. At present there is much hand-wringing about Canadians' ignorance of their own history. A solid and readable book like this is of more value in improving this sorry situation than the production of any number of contrived and anachronistic "heritage minutes" on TV. Although the book does not have notes, there is a brief bibliographical essay, a useful bibliography and an index.

Canada's contributions to the wars of the twentieth century were not at the level of high policy. During the First World War, Prime Minister Robert Borden had to insist that Canadian soldiers be kept together and not used simply as British Army replacements. Despite the calling of the so-called "Imperial War Cabinet" between March and May, 1917, the war was directed exclusively by British political and military leaders, in particular Prime Minister David Lloyd George and Field Marshall Sir Douglas Haig. Although Canada had in effect become independent by 1939 and issued its own declaration of war a week after Britain's, its role in the conduct of grand strategy was again minimal during World War II. When Roosevelt and Churchill met at Quebec in 1943, Prime Minister Mackenzie King was present for photo sessions, but did not participate in the discussions.

With a minuscule permanent army of 3,000 prior to 1914, it is hardly surprising that the Canadian Expeditionary Force relied heavily on the British for leadership, and it was fortunate that on 9 April 1917 the Canadian Corps was led in the battle of Vimy Ridge by Sir Julian Byng, one of most able generals in the British Army. When he was promoted in June 1917 the Canadians for the first time were placed under the command of one of their own, Sir Arthur Currie. Currie's flabby, unmilitary appearance and stolid manner concealed nerves of steel as well as an outstanding mind. A militia officer and unsuccessful real estate dealer in Victoria before the war, he made his reputation in the carnage of France and Flanders while under the cloud of having embezzled regimental funds in 1914. Only when he was appointed Byng's successor was he able to borrow the money needed to save himself from exposure and disgrace. It is an indication of Pierre Berton's good sense that, although he does not avoid this embarrassing subject in his sketch of Currie's complex personality, he focuses upon what is important, his performance as a commander. Impassive and aloof, "old guts and garters" was less popular with the troops than Byng, who, although an aristocrat, had the knack of being able to communicate well with all ranks at the front. Both Byng and Currie did what they could to minimize the casualties that inevitably resulted from the unimaginative and callous battle plans formulated by the British high command under Haig's leadership.

After the end of the 1914–18 war, Canada again allowed its armed forces to wither. The luck that allowed an unprepared and

unmilitary nation to produce a commander of Currie's stature did not strike again in the Second World War. Nevertheless, the propaganda machine, which had become all-pervasive with the transformation of communications between the two wars, demanded heroic leaders. It was unfortunate that Andrew McNaughton, Canada's candidate for this role as commander of the Canadian army in 1942–43, proved a military failure. His successor, H.D.G. Crerar, was both a colourless personality and a mediocre general, for whom Field Marshal Sir Bernard Montgomery, operational commander of land forces in Europe in 1944, had little patience. One of the articles in the collection *On the Battlefields: Two Wars That Shaped a Nation* is "General in Battle Dress," a hero-worshipping piece about McNaughton, written in February 1943 (244–57). *On the Battlefields* is an assortment of *Maclean's* magazine pieces on the two world wars, emphasizing human interest and attention-grabbing stories, with titles like "The Black Hole of Germany," "Canada's Fighting Airmen," "The Nightmare Convoy of the Atlantic," etc. The anthology provides an insight into what was being written at the time, but it would be useful if commentaries were included to provide historical context. Each article does have a brief follow-up paragraph but, to take the McNaughton profile as an example, it is not very informative to be told that "Andrew McNaughton was replaced as Commander of the Canadian Army by Lt. Gen. H.D.G. Crerar at the end of 1943." One can hardly expect a full-blown exposition, but some indication of the circumstances surrounding McNaughton's departure would be useful, as would an evaluation of this and other articles in *On the Battlefields* as examples of war-time propaganda.

Perhaps it is a good thing that there was no Canadian equivalent to Montgomery, Eisenhower, Patton or Rommel. Over one million Canadians served during World War II. By the end of the war, Canada had the third largest navy and the fifth largest air-force in the world, and over 100,000 were killed and wounded in the struggle. Our lack of larger-than-life military leaders should encourage Canadians to focus on the service given their country by people who were willing to disrupt their lives, and in many instances to suffer and die, to rid the world of the evil of national socialism. Blake Heathcote, the grandson of a soldier who served in both wars, had the excellent idea of interviewing a number of veterans of the 1939–45 war to preserve their stories for posterity.

Richard Gwyn, in his “Foreward” to the resulting book, *Testaments of Honour*, calls them the “Silent Generation” who, when they returned to civilian life, found it difficult to speak of their experiences, except perhaps to old comrades. Heathcote has attempted to overcome this silence for posterity by conducting over 150 interviews, using a scanner to create a complementary record from the photographs and other memorabilia of his subjects. The result as presented in this well-produced and illustrated volume is a series of dramatic monologues by twenty Canadian men and two women based on experiences during the Second World War. The stories they tell are fascinating, revealing in many cases extraordinary bravery, resourcefulness and endurance. The reader is drawn, to mention just a few examples, into the experience of prison camps, convoy duty in the North Atlantic, of soldiering in Europe on D day and after, and of being a Special Operations Executive (SOE) operative in Yugoslavia and Hungary. The best-known contributor, Alex Colville, gives a candid and amusing account of how he became a war artist (253–65). What shines forth in these accounts is the dignity and courage of people who for the most part were called from ordinary walks of life to perform extraordinary deeds. Blake Heathcote has created a ‘Testament of Honour’ project to continue the work of collecting these stories, and it is to be hoped that this will result in further volumes.

Not all Canadians rose to the demands of war. A case in point is Harold Pringle, the only Canadian serviceman to be executed during the Second World War. Andrew Clark has gone deeply into Pringle’s life and sad death, gaining access to correspondence preserved by his family, his military service records and other primary sources. He also interviewed many of those involved in Pringle’s trial, conviction and execution. The result is his interesting book, *A Keen Soldier: The Execution of Second World War Private Harold Pringle*, which is more wide-ranging than the title suggests. Clark gives the reader a picture of the discipline problems in the Canadian army between 1940 and 1943, when soldiers languished in Britain training for combat that seemed never to come. Pringle, brought up in a tightly-knit family in northern Ontario, went overseas with his father, who in 1941 was returned to Canada. Without paternal support, Pringle became incapable of keeping military discipline. He spent six months in military prison, the “glass house,” in England for being absent without leave (AWOL) in 1943.

Pringle was sent to Italy upon his release in late 1943 or early 1944. After serving in combat, he again went AWOL in June, was arrested after three weeks in Rome, but managed to escape. He made his way back to Rome where he became part of the "Sailor Gang," a group of AWOL British, Canadian and American servicemen engaged in criminal activities. Clark is very interesting on war-time Rome, the "open city" brilliantly depicted in Roberto Rossellini's 1945 film of the same name. However, the chronology of Pringle's escape from military authorities, his life of crime in Rome, and the circumstances of the killing of which he was convicted, are difficult to follow. Part of the problem is Clark's technique of shifting backwards and forwards in time to tell the stories of the various gang members. Nevertheless, he creates a fascinating picture of a criminal sub-culture which exploited the needs of a city in a state of economic and social collapse by selling goods stolen from the allied forces. In December 1944 Pringle was captured, and later tried and convicted for the murder of one of the gang members. Although he was certainly present at the time of the killing, the question of ultimate responsibility remains unclear. Clark provides evidence that Pringle's conviction may have been a mistake. Furthermore, the decision to carry out his execution in June 1945 seems to have been driven by the need to maintain credibility with the British military authorities, who had already executed two members of the "Sailor Gang" for the killing.

Clark's view that "Harold Pringle deserves some vindication" (296), and a posthumous pardon, is open to question. Although the decision to execute Pringle is certainly questionable, it is hard to attribute victim status to a person who went AWOL and lived for months on the proceeds of crime when thousands of Canadians were in combat. The best case that can be made in his defence on the murder charge is not that he was clearly innocent but that his guilt does not pass the test of being beyond a reasonable doubt. At a more general level, attempts to reverse decisions taken long ago obscure our understanding of the past as they are inevitably based upon present-day assumptions about punishment, compassion and personal responsibility.

Clark presents the human side of Pringle's story in many interesting character sketches, making effective use of the brave and pathetic letters he wrote to his family. One is left with the impression that Pringle was not a vicious person, but a dependent

personality both weak and easily led. In more fortunate circumstances he might have come to a better end. Clark's extensive research is impressive, but it is unfortunate that he introduces descriptions of states of mind which he is in no position to know, as, for example, Pringle's thoughts before his execution. The author's presence is occasionally intrusive, but on balance the story of his search for the truth about Pringle gives the book an immediacy that adds to its accessibility as popular history.

A dreadful aspect of the Second World War was that the civilians of the warring powers were on the front lines as much as soldiers, sailors and airmen, except of course for the fortunate citizens of North America. Halifax, the most important port in the battle of the North Atlantic, came closer than any Canadian city to the immediate realities of war. How the city coped with the demands of its sudden and crucial importance to the allied war effort is the subject of Stephen Kimber's *Sailors, Slackers and Blind Pigs: Halifax at War*. Kimber has chosen to tell the story by focusing upon the lives of a number of individuals. The book is divided into chronological chapters beginning with the year 1939. The experiences of Kimber's protagonists, drawn from all classes in society, provide the framework for his presentation of the history of the war-time city, including its military role, the tensions created by a housing shortage with attendant rent gouging and the inadequate supply of drinking establishments and restaurants. Kimber's approach has obvious limitations as a technique for writing history, for important problems and issues are sketched and not developed, but he handles with great skill the problem of weaving together the disparate lives of his characters, making effective use of their stories for larger purposes. Examples of this are the in-depth profiles of two naval officers, Lieutenant-Commander (later Rear-Admiral) Desmond Piers and Rear-Admiral Leonard Murray, as ways of outlining the development of the Royal Canadian Navy throughout the war, from its dire condition in 1939 to its emergence as an effective fighting force. Kimber provides a gripping account of the VE riots of 1945, for which Admiral Murray was held responsible, analyzing his role in this sad denouement to Halifax's war with sensitivity and insight. Although Kimber's focus on human interest frequently leaves the reader wanting to know more about the various aspects of the social history of Halifax upon which he touches, his evocation of its war-time atmosphere is impressive. The book

is extensively researched and has a good index. This is an fine example of popular history and deserves the success it has had since its publication.